

Skinshifter

Book One of the Sylvan Cycle series

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Prologue

The Sphinx wondered if her death was imminent the moment the half-breed's uncanny magical signature roused her from a centuries-old sleep. The mage's abilities spoke of fireforger power steeped in the oldest of Sylvan bloodlines, but he also bore a Víchí's pointed teeth and ears. Even the fireforger's guttering yellow flame sprang from a hand adorned with the blackest of claws.

"How can a fireforger mage, even a weak one, harbor the corruption of the vampires within his blood?" she asked him. "Fireforgers are immune to the Asheken deadwalkers' Bites of Turning."

He watched her for a moment, anger warring against sorrow in his icy blue eyes. "I intend to find the one who is responsible for my family's brokenness, so that I may ask. Now let me pass."

The ancient magic compelled the Sphinx to obey all fireforgers' requests no matter what her own wishes were. With great uneasiness, the stone-skinned being lowered her massive body into the chasm that separated the continents. She crouched with her head level to the cliff on which the young mage stood and opened her great maw to allow him passage through the protective enchantments.

After he had walked across the width of her flinty tongue and onto the Northern Continent, the Sphinx noted the long gash winding down the half-breed's left arm from shoulder to wrist. The wound looked weeks old, but it still bled. The half-breed winced and shrugged the injured arm further into its sling as he walked along the road just beyond the Sphinx's Gape toward the Thornblood Sands encircling Blaecthull.

She puzzled about him long after his disappearance among the red dunes.

* * *

A fortnight passed before the Sphinx saw the half-breed again—this time with a healed but jagged scar adorning his left arm. The blood-spawn returned leading a company of three hundred deadwalkers including several scores of zombies, a squad of ghouls, and two platoons of dullahan. When she refused passage to both the deadwalkers and the half-breed, they drew their weapons against her. The iron blades were of little consequence, but the half-breed's own sunsilver swords proved far more deadly. She howled in fury as the burning blades cut hissing gashes through her hardened hide and pulled her head away from the road to expose the deep gorge that travelers faced without her presence.

The force of her voice slammed the deadwalkers onto their faces, yet the half-breed still stood his ground. Dark, leathery pinions unfolded out of his back as the fireforger traitor launched himself onto the winds. The huge Sphinx pumped her own feathery wings hard to meet him. Together they wheeled and dodged each other's attacks—performing a deadly aerial dance that only one could hope to win.

The Sphinx's fangs and claws slashed only air while the hybrid's fiery swords found their way through her stony skin again and again—driving her back toward the perch where she had kept her watch between the continents. When she finally collapsed to the sea-washed ground from the toll of her wounds, what remained of the Sphinx's once towering body now looked like the cracked cliffs around her. Her huge head drooped in shame as she felt her life seep away. Tears brimmed in the old guardian's eyes as she felt the protective enchantments dissolve. The fiendish troops marched across her exposed back onto the Southern Continent and on to war. With her failure, who now could protect the Sylvans from the murderous Asheken hordes?

Through the agony of her wounds, the Sphinx managed to raise herself into a reverent crouch and whispered the death prayer of Aribem: “Creator, I commit my soul to you in this, the end of my bodily existence. Pass what strength is left in my soul through my bones and on to others so that the pure may yet be saved from evil. Lo aideem.”

With her last word, the Sphinx felt energy radiate beyond her body and into the canyon around her. Her body shook in rhythm with the resulting quake and caused the last third of the deadwalker company to fall from the cliff to the jagged rocks below. A final howl escaped her broken maw as the last wave of power erupted from her soul and caused her body to collapse onto the fallen undead—crushing and burning them beneath her.

* * *

The griffin king Canuche roared awake with the Sphinx’s death cry. The ancient guardian’s magic had finally shattered the slumber enchantment over the old king’s soul and his stone-carved body sat motionless no longer. He smiled at his newfound freedom. Although he could not move his stone body from the foundation where it stood, the king could dreamdrift along the night winds once again. In his mind’s eye, Canuche saw the Sphinx’s dying memory of the Asheken invasion and knew he must warn the Sylvan mage leaders before all was lost.

The dreamdrifter’s first attempt to penetrate the guarded minds of the Ring of Sorcerers or any other mage on the Isle of Summons failed. The griffin king tried again to communicate his thoughts and again failed. After the seventh attempt, he grudgingly acknowledged that the distance between his stone-walled prison and the Isle of Summons was too great to cross. Disgruntled, the old king settled for brushing the minds of those mages nearest him with his own.

The Sphinx’s scream echoed through the dreams of many Sylvan sleepers, but only two others had jolted awake besides the griffin. Curious, he watched these two on the fringes of their respective minds until the dawn sun brought its reassuring light to their eyes. Both mages’ minds registered a depth of magic the old king had rarely seen in his existence. These two mages might prove quite valuable in the upcoming war against the Asheken deadwalkers—if they survived long enough to be properly trained.

The griffin wove a dreamdrifter’s Spell of Calling into the two young mages’ minds and prayed that it would be strong enough to penetrate their thoughts. If he could draw them to him quickly enough, they might yet escape the deadwalkers’ wrath.

“Creator, keep them!” Canuche whispered, even as his mind’s eye glimpsed the deadwalkers’ malignant darkness descending toward one of the nearest Sylvan villages. Without the Sphinx to protect them, the Feliconas Clan werecats had no way of thwarting the evil that would soon fall upon them.

Chapter I

From Metamorphosis to Massacre

The dewy grass whipped wet against Katja's hind flanks as she loped along the edge of the meadow. She sniffed the morning air. It was cool with the promise of rain and carried a faint stench like that of a sea-drenched corpse. Katja sneezed and then growled in the general direction of north. There was little hint of prey in the wind, hardly even a ground squirrel. That was an irritation. Katja needed to bring a large animal—perhaps a young buck—back to the den. She wanted to stalk and kill quickly before the storms came. The rain certainly would not spoil the meat, but being the proper werecat that she was, Katja hated being wet. After all, it could take hours to lick all of the tangles out of her golden fur after a good soaking, and that was such tedious work.

The werecat adjusted her leather loincloth around the base of her long prehensile tail and focused again on the task at paw. She slipped toward the stream at the other side of the meadow hoping to find larger prey drinking from its cool waters. Dropping onto all four paws, she slunk low along the tree line and peered through the tangled trailers of a vine-cloaked shrub—her round, tuft-tipped ears twitching at every sound.

Ah, success! A fat ram was drinking on the bank less than five body-lengths from her. Katja crept around the shrub and scaled the thick trunk of an ancient oak. She uncoiled a sinew rope from around her waist and, after fastening one end of the rope to a sturdy branch, she looped the other end deftly around the ram's curled horns. The ram bucked, but to no avail. The rope defied the erdeling beast's every escape effort.

Katja jumped down from the tree, landed softly on her back paws, and slowly circled the vulnerable ram from just outside of the slack of the rope. With an enraged bleat, the erdeling beast rushed her. Katja sidestepped its charge in time to attack as the rope snapped its head back. When the stunned beast fell against the ground, she rushed it. The werecat deftly broke its neck with her clawed forepaws before the ram had time to recuperate from the whiplash. She deftly sliced its jugular with one large, clawed forepaw and let the beast's blood drain into the leaves.

Smiling in satisfaction at the clean kill, she climbed into the tree to retrieve the rope and then wrapped its length around the ram's legs to make it easier to carry. She realized upon inspection that the rope was badly strained in one spot—too strained to hunt with again. She would have to make a new one, but that should not take long if one of her brothers could help with the project. Katja wished they were here now to help carry the ram back to the den, but tensions against the western werewolf clan were high now and so her brothers were on watch rounds. Although Katja was well within the safety of her clan's territory, the fact that she must hunt alone today bothered her more now than it had before she sniffed the uncanny stench. She had felt uneasy ever since the ground tremors had shaken her awake a few nights ago and this unnatural smell now made her apprehension even worse. The Feliconas Clan member warily eyed the north again before hefting the ram across her shoulders and bounding toward the safety of home.

* * *

“You are late,” Keepha snarled as Katja entered the den.

“It took time to track, kill, and carry home my quarry,” Katja shrugged. “If you want to whine, do so when I come home empty-pawed.”

Katja’s older sister narrowed her chestnut-colored eyes and growled in retort as she sniffed the carcass. “Well, at least the rain washed the fur clean.”

“Jierira, please don’t remind me,” Katja growled irritably. She set the ram down on the large, flat eating stone that jutted from the cave wall opposite the entrance and shook out her soggy fur. The action sent water droplets flying in every direction.

“Katja!” Keepha lunged at her youngest sibling. “Get out of the eating hole before I twist your ears off!”

Katja dodged with ease. “Fine, I’ll go dry off somewhere else.”

“Sniff out your brothers and bring them back with you to eat.”

“Very well. Please leave me some of the ram’s stronger tendons. I need to make a new rope.”

“Rippezahne to you and your silly ropes. Did the last one snap on you?”

“No, it held.” Katja tossed the rope to Keepha. “It’s too strained to be of much use on another hunt though.”

“Good, I’ll use it to tie down the carcass for our eat instead. Now, go hunt down your brothers!”

Without a reply, Katja sprang out of her birth den in search of Kayten and Kumos. Since the brothers were still on their watch-rounds, Katja had to sniff around for a time before she located either sibling’s scent. That only added to her irritation because her nose was beginning to lose some of its usual sensitivity thanks to the retched full moon. To add to her growing discomfort, her fur had begun to dry into a myriad of little coiled knots. Katja growled about not moving fast enough to avoid the afternoon shower.

She found both of her brothers doing more wrestling than watching. They were grappling at one of their favorite lookouts—a high ridge sliced out of the northern side of the mountain. She crouched and watched them a moment and then pounced into their fray.

“Katja, don’t do that! It’s rude to jump in on us when we’re in the middle of a match!”

Kayten panted.

“Angry that I startled you, sibbe?”

“We knew you were there the whole time. Didn’t we, Kumos?”

“Of course we did.” Kumos looked dubiously at his younger brother.

Katja’s lion-like face formed a look of contrived innocence. “What? You don’t prefer it when I approach on the leeward side of the wind? After all, what fun is slinking when my prey can smell me coming?”

Kayten grunted and changed the subject. “Did you catch some food?”

“I did. Keepha sent me to find you two. She wants all of us to come eat.” Katja surveyed the forest below them and froze. Perhaps it was some trick of the late day’s light, but she swore she saw a smoky haze drifting toward them from the northern horizon.

“Kumos, what is that?” She pointed a claw toward the haze.

“I’m unsure. We’ve seen it moving in the valley all day. Perhaps some beings are burning brush at the edge of the forest again.”

“A fire with smoke that blows against the wind?”

“They probably have a fireforger mage with them.”

“Even fireforgers don’t have the power necessary to fight nature’s laws like that; only members of the Ring of Sorcerers can perform such miracles.”

“Several mages then?” Kayten shrugged. “By their behavior, they aren’t a werewolf raiding party, so it doesn’t affect us. Why brood about it?”

“Have the clan scouts come back from our northern border yet?”

Kumos shook his head. “Not that I’ve been told. Why?”

She frowned “It’s just that I smelled something odd earlier today—the foul stench of something dead, but not. It was coming from the north.”

“Dead, but not? Lytzsibba, that makes no sense.”

Katja watched the smoke as it drifted lazily south in their direction and tried to articulate the nameless dread that she felt. “I know, but…”

“Do you smell it now?”

Katja slowly shook her head. With the sway of the full moon already dulling her senses, she couldn’t smell much of anything now, but she dared not tell Kumos that. Her siblings could never know what she was or what she became on nights like tonight. It was too dangerous for them and for her.

Kumos placed a paw on her shoulders. “If it troubles you so much, I’ll alert the village elders about the smoke on our way back to the den. Agreed?”

Katja nodded in relief.

“Come, let’s go!” Kayten grumbled. “I’m hungry enough to eat a basilisk.”

“I’m for that!” Kumos exclaimed. “I’ll race you both to the den!”

With that, he sprinted down the mountainside with the other two in close pursuit.

* * *

The evening’s eat left the four Escari siblings all content and lethargic. Gradually, each slipped off to the comfort of his or her separate den hole to think or sleep. When Katja reached her own hole, she tied a thick hide across the round entrance for privacy and then gathered what supplies she would need for the night. She slipped through a secret tunnel she had dug in the back of her den hole, and slunk across the ancient forest toward her hideaway.

The sun had almost set when she crawled inside and covered the entrance with a flat, lichen-encrusted stone. Unlike the sprawling stone den she shared with her siblings, this muddy hideaway was small and plain—its one entrance mostly concealed by thick brambles. The one room was dimly lit by an iridescent green moss that grew through a cleft between the west wall and ceiling. Its aroma masked the werecat’s changing scent. Through the crack above the moss, Katja watched as the last rays of hope dwindled into twilight.

As dusk turned to darkness and the full moon’s light finally won the heavens, Katja transformed. The feline’s physical journey to humanity was slow and excruciating. She lay on a pile of furs and did her best to endure the skinshift that so segregated her from others of her kin. Her beautiful fur, which was always the first to go, came out tuft by tuft, moment by moment, until all but the hair on the crown and back of her head was strewn across the cave floor. Her skin itched in a thousand places simultaneously, but she could never adequately scratch to relieve it because her clawed paws, which never altered until the end of her skinshift cycle, were of little use in such delicate work. Only after she had watched her golden fur slough off—leaving her shamefully exposed—did Katja’s eyes, round-tipped conical ears, and flat nose each lose most of their sensitivity. The sudden loss of sensation felt like being thrust into murky water.

When she finally did adjust to the vagueness of human senses, the worst of the metamorphosis occurred. Her fangs pushed themselves up into the gums of her maw so that only the mere tips were visible. Then the other teeth in her mouth flattened out to resemble those of a

human. She spit blood several times to clean her palate and the taste left her gagging. Her ears flattened into the skin at the top of her head so that she could not swivel them to listen, and then a new, more-wrinkled set emerged on the sides of her face near her neck. Her claws, which were naturally retractable, drew back into her digits and a layer of skin covered the openings from which they usually sprang. The bones and skin in her forepaws felt eerily like liquid as her stubby, clawed digits elongated into nail-tipped fingers. Strangely, the change in her forepaws was not as uncomfortable as the rest of the transformation; however, if Katja ever tried to flex her claws while in human form, the claws would cut through flesh and nail with their reemergence.

The metamorphosis was not perfect. Katja kept her prehensile tail—although it was hairless now—and her hind limbs and hind paws also never changed their contour. Her thumbs also did not change; they were opposable and constantly clawed in either state. Although her nose became more bulbous, most of her facial structure had never really changed. Nor did the color of her unusual eyes, which were always emerald green with golden rings encircling the round pupils.

The full moon sat in the center of the sky when Katja finally finished her skinshift. She curled up on the fur pallet and draped an extra hide over her suddenly chilled body. It might have been her overwhelming exhaustion, but she felt more defenseless than usual tonight. She knew she could still outrun most other living beings, even if she could not fight them in this frail human form. Yet even that knowledge was small comfort now.

Her former uneasiness had now grown into full-fledged terror, but of what? This fear was unnatural and raw. She felt a strong urge to sink into the rock behind her lest evil eyes somehow find her hiding hole. She searched the shadowy forest with every modicum of her maimed senses. She witnessed the world grow silent around her. The full moon's light was snuffed out as if it were no more than a candle flame. The world around her faded into utter darkness, and Katja remembered the horror of this blackness. She had seen its presence in corporeal form the day her parents had died...

*

That horrible memory had been made on a warm morning with the fields' flowers barely in bloom. Katja should have been with her parents because it was to be her first fishing lesson. The young catling, however, had forgotten her fishing spear and had to rush back to the den to retrieve it. The rocks fell as she was running back along the mountain path to meet her parents at their favorite fishing spot. She remembered seeing huge boulders of granite smash down the path several hundred body-lengths ahead of her.

Instinctively, she scrambled up a huge tree and edged her way along its limbs away from the mountainside, leaving her spear to be demolished by the stones rolling underneath her. Thankfully, the tree was situated on a rise beside the dirt road, which curved so that the boulders rolled down the slope away from it. When the rocks' riot had finally finished, she felt a foul presence slinking up the road toward her tree. She huddled against the rough bark and sniffed the wind. A horrible reek burned her nostrils and nauseated her to the point of fainting. Just before she lost consciousness, she saw a decrepit shadow creep to where her broken spear lay. It seemed to sniff the spear; it then raised its hooded head to look at the tree where she huddled. The putrid stench of the creature threatened to overpower her senses as it drew near her.

Distant shouts startled her. Katja looked to see her clan's village elders loping along the path toward her. The misshapen creature gave a gurgling hiss and fled into the forest beyond the path,

barely escaping discovery. Strong paws pulled the catling out of the branches and cradled her protectively, then. She gazed into the face of Kumos and knew by his eyes that something was terribly wrong.

“Thank the Creator you’re safe!”

“Where is Mother?”

Kumos shook his head, his eyes glistening. “I’m so sorry, Katja. Our parents couldn’t escape the rocks...they...they are dead.”

Katja’s stomach lurched. She tried to speak, but retched instead. Her heart and her head hurt so much. The world spun—its colors swirling into dizzying blackness, and then she had known nothing...

*

In the gloom of this unnatural night, Katja again smelled the stench she had smelled this morning and finally recognized it as the same shadowy scent of her youth. It was now strong enough for even her human nose to single out. Fear overpowered her as she realized that the shadowy being who had tried to kill her with the rockslide that had taken the lives of her parents was hunting her again tonight.

If it hunts me now that means...the village! If it finds the village, it will kill my family and clansmen trying to find me!

Katja kicked at the rock guarding the cave’s opening in desperation. *I have to get out!* She managed to roll the stone aside and scrambled through the entrance—badly scratching her face in the brambles. *The den! I have to get to the den!* She had to warn her siblings; she had to protect them. She knew now that their parents had died because of her. She could not let her siblings suffer the same fate!

Katja stumbled out into the open darkness and tried to find her way through the thick mountain forest. She could not see or smell all that well, but she could hear—partially. She listened as hackle-raising screeches and roars pierced the night. Her clansmen were dying. They were being slaughtered in their own sleeping furs! She struggled toward the sounds of those shrieks, then stumbled and fell.

She lifted her head and sniffed, smelling the horrid stench of death. It was coming closer. She felt so weak. She rose onto her hands and knees and tried to crawl away from that stench. In her blindness, she fell again. Then, she felt a rush of wind and felt powerful forepaws lock around her head. She tried to scream, but couldn’t. She fought the stranglehold around her head. Then something hard slammed into the base of her skull. The ground felt soft as her head sank against it and she knew no more.

* * *

“Katja, wake up! Please wake up!”

Katja warily opened her eyes and then squeezed them shut again as the painful light of day flooded into her vision. She struggled to lift her face from the furs on which she lay and winced.

“Don’t overdo it; you’re in pretty poor shape.”

“Kayten?” She twisted her throbbing head to look at her sibbe. He was sitting on his haunches, looking down at her with bloodshot amber eyes. Katja pushed herself into a stiff sitting position and then crawled into her brother’s arms. “Kayten, I had the most horrible nightmare...”

Katja was seldom in the habit of succumbing to such passionate outbursts because she, like most Feliconians, considered excessive emotionality a sign of weakness. This dream, however, had unnerved her beyond all rational decorum. Indeed Kayten would have normally pulled back from such an emotional display, but instead he cradled her close against his tawny chest.

When Katja pulled away to look at her brother, he held her paws gently in his own. It was then that she noticed that his furry forearms and chest were scratched and smeared with dirt and dried blood. She stared into his amber eyes and judged fear and sorrow to rule them. She then gazed at her own body. It was its usual feline shape, but it was peppered in cuts. Her shortened fur would need another two days to grow back to its normal length. Katja slowly raised a paw and felt the base of her head, hissing at the sharp pain that issued from the light touch.

Katja's breath caught sharply in her throat, "Kayten, it wasn't—"

"Real? Oh, yes, it was quite real."

Her brother's haunted eyes stared behind where she sat. Katja slowly turned to look behind her. What met her eyes smote her soul. Behind the two werecats lay the ransacked ruin of their village. The central meeting den had been leveled down to its stone foundation. The various dens dug into the sides of the hills were cloaked in red gore. Mangled bodies were strewn everywhere.

Katja saw kits and catlings she knew and loved lying in blank-eyed death beside their parents atop the crimson ground. Katja gaped at the carcasses of friends and mentors. The young and innocent had been annihilated along with the aged and wise. She shrieked when she saw her father's oldest friend. He had died at the entrance of his now-ruined den while fighting to protect his family—a pike still clutched in his paw. Behind the werecat's butchered body lay the mauled remains of his wife and daughter. Their eviscerated bodies already writhed with maggots.

Katja jerked her head around and shut her eyes against the horror, a soft moan escaping her maw.

"Did anyone else survive?" she asked in the barest whisper.

"No, we are the last living of our family and our clan." Tears streamed silently from Kayten's amber eyes.

For the first time in her life, Katja let loose the tears bulwarked inside of her since their parents' deaths. Her powerful shoulders heaved as she shrieked a wild screech that shook the mountain. Then she bowed her head to the ground and moaned in utter anguish. Kayten pulled her to him and rocked her gently as she sobbed into his fur. Together they sat amidst the carnage and wept for their clan and their family.

* * *

Burning the dead took Kayten and Katja several days. The whole process was agonizing work. Flies hovered in clouds above the corpses. The stench of death was so sickening that the Escari siblings had to tie cloths over their noses just to breathe. Because the village body count numbered close to two hundred, Kayten decided to move the dead Feliconians to the central amphitheater—the only place large enough to hold all of their kin. Once all of the corpses were laid along the amphitheater's dugout steps in their final resting poses, Katja and Kayten covered each body with cloth or hide, anointed it with herb oil, and set it aflame.

While moving and preparing the bodies, the siblings had noticed that every werecat had been maimed so that they had suffered intensely before death. The siblings thought this, at first, to be the work of some vengeful werewolves, but after looking closely at the cuts, they discovered that the slices were angled in the wrong way to be cut by werewolf claws. Instead the whole village had been mauled by far more dreadful creatures.

Village elders were among the worst of the mauled victims. These members were always lacerated in the same gruesome way: the abdomen slit open and the same portion of gut missing. Katja had heard of this horror before. According to the clan's historical archive, deadwalkers and dark mages would sometimes eat the entrails and brains of their victims in a magic rite used to gain the wisdom of their enemies.

From the claw cuts on the victims' abdomens and the shape and size of the paw prints left in the soil, Katja thought the attackers must be human. Yet these humans had long, curved claws on their back paws. The resulting print looked wholly unnatural and it caused Katja to suspect that deadwalkers might indeed be involved in the massacre. Katja's mind protested the thought that such monsters were once again hunting on Sylvan soil, but what else could it be? Not even werewolves would commit this kind of desecration!

Keepha and Kumos were the last to receive burial rites and, since they were close family, Kayten and Katja decided to bury them separate from those laid to rest in the stone-carved amphitheater.

As the siblings anointed their bodies, Katja remembered something. "Kayten, we need to bury our brother and sister with our parents."

"Katja, we cannot defile our parents' grave with the scent of their children's murder! Our parents died in peace. Our siblings died in war. You know that the oldest Sylvan Code forbids the mixing of the scent of murder with the scent of nature."

"I know what the Code states and I follow it. We cannot defile Sylvan soil with a new grave to rest a murder when the old grave rests murder already."

"Katja, what are you saying? You know that our parents were killed by a rockslide. Rockslides are not of murder; they are of nature."

"Do you smell this nauseating scent on our clansmen's bodies?"

Kayten slowly nodded.

"I have smelled this scent before."

In a hushed tone, Katja told Kayten about her memories of their parents' deaths and of the shadowy monster. When she finished, Kayten sat quietly. Finally, he said, "Katja, I think I may have unwittingly saved our lives."

"How's that?"

"What is the last event that you remember on the night of the massacre?"

Katja closed her eyes. "I remember crawling toward the shrieks of the dying. I kept thinking that I had to protect all of you. I knew I was what the monsters wanted and that they would kill until they found me. I remember crawling, then I remember forearms wrapped around my neck choking me and that horrible stench slinking toward me...then nothing."

"Those were my forearms."

"What!"

"I found the tunnel you dug out of your sleeping hole on the night of the massacre. I didn't bother telling the others about it; I just followed your scent as far as I could. I wanted to make sure you were safe." Kayten looked into the distance with troubled eyes before speaking again. "I was deep in the forest when darkness overtook the moon. I hid in fear of something I could not explain and felt evil pass by. Then, I heard the screeches from our village. I rushed toward the shrieks when I smelled a human female—at least, I thought she was human. I thought that she must be somehow connected with the attack so I decided to capture and question her. I then sniffed one of the monsters approaching and once more felt the fear I could not name.

“I needed to hide, so I knocked the human senseless and carried her to a tiny cave hideaway I found. The cave had your supplies in it, as well as blood-covered tufts of your fur. It looked like the human had tortured you, but the scent was too muddled to recognize.

“I covered every crack I could find, lest that rancid creature discover us inside the cave. There I waited until the next morning just after sunup to see if the world was right again. I tied up the human and searched the forest outside the cave. Then I saw the village...”

Katja’s shudder mirrored Kayten’s.

“I...I went back to the cave intent on making that human regret her involvement, but instead of the human I found you. I finally understood then that you and the human were one and the same, which explains why you are always mysteriously absent during the full phase of the moon.” He gazed at her in sadness. “Katja, just how long were you hoping to keep these little transformations a secret?”

Katja sat with her eyes downcast in naked shame. “For as long as I could. I couldn’t bear for any of you to think that I was a turncoat.”

Much to Katja’s surprise, Kayten gently pulled Katja’s head up so that she looked into his kind eyes. “How long have you been able to do this, lytsibba?”

“I’ve experienced full moon changes since I had roughly twelve winters of life,” she said.

“So you’ve been able to skinshift for almost six winters now?”

“Yes.”

“Strange that none of us ever noticed you slip away before.”

“I’ve done my best to hide my changes, though it’s been difficult because I become a little more *human*”—she spat the word—“with each cycle.”

“If certain elders knew what I can do, they would have banished me from the clan. Our family was broken enough, and I thought that if I could just hide my abilities long enough, we would come to know no more pain. I could not bear to be forced from my only home and family, but now it seems I have no choice.”

“How so?”

“Our clansmen’s murderers must have been looking for me. I don’t know why, but I feel that they hunted me for the same reason our clansmen would drive me away—because I’m a changeling.”

“Katja Kevrosa Escari, do not ever use that word! You are my sister, not some vile traitor. Besides, you being a skinshifter mage should not make a difference with a pack of murderers. Even if the beings that killed our clan were deadwalkers—Creator, keep us—I think it would take more than an untrained skinshifter to spark their interest.”

“Kayten, deadwalkers do not attack clans of the Sylvan Order on a whim—”

“I was using deadwalkers as an example! How can you even say that deadwalkers could ever roam Sylvan soil? They can’t go south into the Southern Continent except through the Sphinx’s Gape—which is closed to all except fireforgers. You know that, as well as I.”

“Yes, I know, but you have to admit there is something unusual about our clansmen’s lacerations, and you yourself agreed that the smell is unnatural.”

“Yes, but trolls give off similar odors,” Kayten remarked and sighed. “Either way, though, you and I are not safe here. We need to finish the ritual burning of our kin and leave as quickly as possible. We can seek refuge and peace with our cousin clan across the mountains; they should be able to protect us well against the assault of anything dangerous.”

“But not against deadwalkers,” Katja muttered. She turned back to Kayten. “We shall see. First, let us finish the ceremony for our siblings and lay our parents to rest beside them.”

“Agreed.”

* * *

Katja rose before the sun the next morning with the vile odor of the burning amphitheater hanging heavy in her nostrils. She watched the flickering flames that she and Kayten had set to consume their kin a long moment. With tears in her eyes, Katja scribbled a message into the dust beside Kayten’s sleeping figure, which translated: “Do not follow me. Seek our cousin clan.”

She then quickly gathered her supplies and slipped silently away from her home and her brother. The sun found her pouncing from rock to rock along the stream that ran near the village. She decided to follow the stream westward until it emptied its fill into Kings’ Lake in Crown Canyon. She stayed in the stream as much as she could to throw her brother—and anything else that tried to hunt her—off of her scent. Her sibbe had always tried to protect her, but now it was her turn to protect him. If the full moon once again betrayed Katja, any Sylvan beings that discovered her secret would also punish Kayten for knowingly bringing a skinshifter into their territory.

Katja refused to be thrust behind thick walls or be guarded fearfully by others night and day. That was not how a werecat—a Feliconian—should live. That was not how she could live. She was going to find a way to live her life fully and not fearfully.

She wanted peace and solitude and time to cope with the burden of a survivor’s grief. Without really knowing why, she felt that the abandoned territory of Crown Canyon might grant her that freedom. With these thoughts, Katja bounded her way into the pale new dawn.

Chapter II

Racing the Mist

Katja sat crouched upon a sun-dappled rock surveying the forest around her while licking excess flesh from her claws and spitting fresh feathers out of her fangs. This was the sixth scrawny bird she had devoured during the morning eat, yet she was still hungry. Where was a plump doe when she needed one?

She had traveled southwest along the stream that fed into Crown Canyon and Kings' Lake for three days now and she was growing impatient with herself for taking so long to get there. Of course, it was hard for her to run quickly across the hilly terrain, especially when she had to cover her tracks so carefully. She no longer worried about being discovered and coerced into custody by her overprotective brother. Now she had much worse troubles to fear—her clansmen's murderers were hunting her.

She had first caught their scent and felt their hostile presence tracking her two days ago while she was weaving along a forest path near the river. She still had no knowledge of how many enemies were tracking her, nor could she clearly see or hear them. She knew they were there because she felt their pestilent presence grow in her mind with each passing day and, despite her best efforts, she could not seem to throw them off her scent. She felt their presence mostly at night, but every so often she also caught their scent during daylight. The smell of musty decay overlapped with hints of water and salt had nearly overpowered her twice already on this journey.

Knowing ill intent was set against her by a nameless enemy sent Katja's already fragile mind down some dangerous treks of thought. She could not fight what she could not see, so she knew that the refuge of Crown Canyon was her only hope for survival. According to the Feliconas Clan tales, the canyon's Ring Spells kept all beings but the pure of heart from entering the ancient stronghold. For the sake of anyone else hunted by this evil, she hoped her clansmen had been right. For her own sake, she also hoped that she would somehow prove worthy enough to pass the spells' purity test.

Katja stood up cautiously and spit the remainder of the fuzzy feathers from between her fangs. She then hoisted her buckskin rucksack onto her back and began bounding from boulder to boulder downstream with the river once again. She tried to stay off the grassy bank lest broken leaf stems reveal her presence to trained eyes. The trek along the shallows was grueling work, but she welcomed the near constant splash of cold water on her furry toes because it helped keep her alert.

The werecat had not been able to sleep solidly since the Feliconas Clan Massacre. She had slept better with Kayten near her, but now that she was alone, she could not avoid meeting her clansmen's mangled bodies in the darkness of every dream. Out of desperation, Katja resorted to quick naps to avoid prolonged confrontations with her nightmares.

The dearth of sleep in combination with constant exertion and an inadequate food supply had heavily drained her energy. But there was no help for that now—not until she reached safety. She guessed that she needed no longer than a day or two to reach the canyon. Her strength should hold for that long—she hoped.

As she bounded across the boulders and fallen trees that wove a dry path above the swirling waters, Katja looked longingly at the arm-length trout swimming in the deeper pools beneath her.

She wished more than anything now that she had let Kumos teach her how to properly spearfish. She had refused to learn in the seasons since their parents' deaths.

She turned her eyes toward the horizon and tried to ignore the hungry protest of her stomach. Katja judged that the day's light was already one-fifth spent, so she decided to push her pace harder in anticipation of reaching the Crown Canyon foothills sometime after noon on the morrow.

* * *

At its zenith, the sun found Katja overlooking the stream from her perch upon a limestone outcropping roughly a standard spruce-length high. She had caught two fat hares during her forage around the base of the craggy hill. Their flesh was succulent and she ate every edible morsel with relish as she surveyed the landscape below her. The river curved just over the edge of the horizon to the southwest. She sniffed the wind, noting the high humidity and strong fragrances of water-loving plants filling the breeze.

Had she misjudged the distance to the canyon lake? The scents seemed to indicate such. Katja's hope sparked anew. She might be within the sanctity of the Crown Canyon before dark if she ran hard. She swallowed the last bite of meat from the second hare and quickly trimmed the animals' hides. She wrapped the furs around the rabbits' skulls so that she could use their brains to help tan the skins later. There was no sense in wasting perfectly good furs when she could so easily tie them to her rucksack for future use.

As she secured the hides and sack together with a length of sinew, the werecat sensed something sinister behind her and swiftly surveyed the spine of the hill toward the forest from whence she had come. A small, shadowy tendril of mist floated upwind along the gaps of the trees. Katja froze. The shifting wind was heavy with scents of rotting flesh, mold, and sea salt. She could feel the nameless fear emanate from the tendril as it slunk through the underbrush—hugging the shadows of the now-silent forest floor as it moved. She had been right; her clansmen's murderers were indeed hunting her.

Caution was pointless with the shadow so close. She sprinted as fast as she dared down the steep slope and rushed along the riverbank toward the southwest. The food and her fear fueled her limbs. She could hear the acceleration of the mountain stream's current; its tremendous speed seemed to match her own quickening heartbeat.

She felt her throat tighten and her tongue swell from lack of water, but she dared not stop to drink. Frightened birds fluttered from their perches and flew past her to escape the misty shadow stalking ever closer. Their speed made her suddenly wish for wings. Even at her fasted pace, she knew the shadow would overtake her, but what else could she do? The tendril's smell was rapidly growing into a nauseating stench. Katja felt her body weaken and the world swim before her from the lack of air coupled with the creature's scent.

Swimming? Katja looked toward the river. It was moving fast—faster than she. The flowing water was deep with few boulders, so swimming might work. The werecat had rarely practiced the skill because she hated being wet, but swimming seemed the only plausible escape.

Katja saw a fallen tree leaning far over the river ahead of her. It looked to be the best diving place available, so she ran with all remaining strength toward that dead tree even as the mist enveloped the world around her.

She reached the fallen trunk and clawed her way to its end. Then the darkness descended on her in full and she sensed nothing—not the water rushing beneath her, or the rough bark of the pine between her claws. Then the black of the world transformed into a landscape of grays which

contrasted entirely with the forest that had surrounded her before the inkiness had engulfed her vision.

Instead of looking deep brown, the pine log she perched upon now appeared as white as bleached bone. The gray grass swirled in ghostly rhythm with a thousand silent eddies of wind in which Katja's nose found no scents. The sky had dimmed from bright blue to deepest black and the water swirling beneath her carried the only color in the landscape: a deep bloody red.

Katja sat frozen in a half-perch on the end of the dead log, staring down its bleached length into the vile black eyes of her main hunter.

"Well, Little Katja, it has been a long time since I have seen you. I must say, you've grown into quite a comely female." The ghoul's voice was sickeningly pleasant, while its dead black eyes betrayed malicious hunger.

"Who are you, deadwalker?" Katja growled.

"I am called Curqak by my master. Mark the name well, for it will be the last you know while you are yet Unturned."

The deadwalker's hollow eyes threatened to engulf Katja's soul and she had to look away. Once she did, Katja recognized the scents of other deadwalkers and forced herself to search the shadows for enemies. Although she could see none, her eyes narrowed as one particular smell overpowered the others. Finally she understood the mixed scents of salty mist and fetid death that she had smelled in her village and while on the run.

"Tell me, Curqak, how did you manage to coerce a brolaghan into shielding you from the sun, and on land no less? Very impressive." Katja watched the ghoul's face soften with sudden surprise before hardening with hatred again. "Yes, I know his scent; I smell your allies' rotten stench, too. We both know full well that deadwalkers are not allowed on Sylvan soil, so how did you ever get through the Sphinx's Gape?"

"Well now, aren't you a clever *changeling*," the ghoul said the name slowly with a mirthless smirk lighting his sallow face. "The brolaghan has Turned into a revenant, so he is loyal to me. Don't waste your breath trying to persuade him to free you from his illusions. And don't irritate me with some other desperate escape attempt. My underlings completely encircle you, so either come to me without a quarrel or join your dead clansmen. Make your choice."

This ghoul knew she was a skinshifter? That meant that he must have tracked her purposely. If this were true, then her fears were correct—Katja was indeed responsible for her clansmen's deaths. The ghoul had hunted her, and now he would either kill her or Turn her into a deadwalker like him—or worse. She looked around her in desperation. Escape was impossible while the revenant monster shrouded reality and controlled the water beneath her.

"And what are you going to do with me?" Katja's eyes narrowed and her crouched stance stiffened into a defensive position. She needed to distract the ghoul for as long as possible while she searched for a way out of this disaster. Perhaps, if she could run at the ghoul she would have enough momentum to slice his throat. Nothing could completely destroy him except fireforger's flame or a sunsilver blade, but she might be able to throw him off balance and confuse his slow-witted counterparts long enough to break through their ranks. She recalled from her archive readings that deadwalker slaves were none-too-smart, so as long as there was not another ghoul—or worse a Víchí—slinking around the vicinity, she might have a chance. Even with such a chance, she still was not sure how to escape the revenant.

Curqak noticed her stance shift. "Now, now, no mischief. I have had a difficult enough time tracking you this far and I'll not lose any more days to your stubbornness. My master is not patient when he wants fresh blood and a changeling makes a fine meal," he cackled.

The werecat hissed. “And who do you call master, fiend?”

“Enough stalling! Come now or you’ll bleed slowly just like your brother!”

The ghoul’s smile was full of fang as he tossed a shred of leather toward her. She stared at it as it landed with a thump on the rough bark in front of her. It was covered in dried blood. She recognized the tooling as her brother’s own handiwork from the rucksack he had carried the last day she’d seen him. The blood smelled of him, too.

“No...Kayten!” Katja felt her mind’s defenses collapse at Curqak’s answering cackle. She gazed at him with renewed hatred. This monster had tortured her brother, likely preventing his soul from seeking the Dyvesé Realm upon death. She had tried to protect Kayten and had failed because of the claws of this worthless Asheken!

Something dangerous stirred inside of the Feliconian. Her sight blurred. Then a molten power surged through Katja’s soul and found shape through her voice.

Curqak was stalking closer now. “You have lived on borrowed time long enough—”

The roar of rage that thundered from the werecat’s throat cracked the false black sky. The ghoul howled in pain as if he had been stabbed with a smoldering hook. The other deadwalkers, some of whom had boldly moved toward the riverbank during the last of Curqak’s harangue, now cowered and covered their black-tipped ears. Even the revenant gave a windy shriek and lost its hold on the illusion. The revenant’s blanketing mist shredded and sunlight flowed back into the world. The deadwalkers all bolted into the underbrush, covering their blistering skin.

Before her enemies had time to recover, Katja took a deep breath and plunged into the swirling waters rushing past her log. She did not know if ghouls or sklaaven could swim, but she would rather find out later than perish on a dead tree now.

I am sorry, My Clansmen, for my part in your death, but I swear I will find a way to bring justice to our enemies. Katja cast the thought out as her body hit the cool water and prayed that the Creator would give her strength enough to avenge her loved ones soon.

She sank deep under the water and let the current sweep her away from her hunters. She dared not surface for breath until she was much further downstream, so she sustained herself by taking small gulps of air from the empty water bladder that she had in her rucksack. After swimming and drifting a while, Katja found an outcropping of stone perched just above the water and swam under it to catch her breath. She filled the bladder with air again and dove into the full current once more.

The second time she surfaced for air, Katja swam under an arm-sized lily pad growing in a shallow pond just off the main river channel. The werecat poked her nose out from underneath the lily pad to check her surroundings and sensed the faintest smell of dead flesh. She knew from clan stories that most deadwalkers feared moving water, so she expected them to stay on the riverbank searching for her paw prints when she left the river. This kept her relatively safe while underwater, but it also posed a problem in her escape. Katja knew she would have to hide in the stream much longer and hope that the revenant was too injured to come after her. Either way, the odds were set hard against her leaving the river before nightfall.

As Katja swam in the current and drew breath from the bladder, she stealthily wound her way around boulders and sandbanks. Although Katja’s roar had shredded the deadwalkers’ protective revenant shadow, she knew from the scents drifting across the water that they had regrouped and were hunting her once more. The werecat knew she would no longer be safe once night’s darkness descended—whether she was in water or on land.

To make matters worse, the river's current was accelerating, and that meant that she was getting much closer to the river's waterfall that fed into Kings' Lake. If she didn't leave the river now, Katja would drown.

The werecat swam desperately, trying to maneuver out of the swiftest pull from the current. The swirling waters slammed her against a boulder—adorning her side with a deep bruise—as she groped her way toward the left bank of the river. Finally she managed to make her way to where a grove of trees clung to a small, water-swept sandbar. Katja caught hold of two low-lying limbs as they skimmed the frothy water and used them to pull herself onto a sturdier third branch.

Sore and shaking, she climbed the branch to the tree's crown. As she nestled between the forking branches, she caught her heaving breath and ate the last of the dried meat from her sopping buckskin sack while searching the gathering gloom with wary eyes.

She watched the sun set slowly—its lingering light giving a bloody hue to the underbellies of plump purple clouds. In the opposite sky, ebony and indigo hues ruled Katja's eyes, punctuated by the pale piercing of night's first star. Somewhere in the distance, she heard a dove's mournful call upon the soft breeze. Its plaintive cry echoed her mood. As far as she had come, Katja still could not see the canyon and she had little time left.

Shadows already stretched across the ground and the wind was winding in cool whispers through the tangled trees surrounding the river. Katja traced the long shadows with her eyes and then turned to look at the northern length of the river. There, she felt rather than saw the canyon wall that was the barrier to her haven. She smelled water chafe against stone and lush green growth and heard the rushing flow of swirling water suddenly cascade into a long-forgotten chasm.

As she recognized these sensations, it seemed as if a painted veil were suddenly ripped away from her sight to reveal that the forest a spruce-score from her position was nothing more than an artful illusion. What she now saw was not endless forest but the majesty of the ancients' Crown Canyon. The rough-hewn granite towered above her, a gray colossus of jagged stone walls. Its height breached the clouds as if it wished to touch all the stars in the heavens.

Katja shuddered back from that immensity and squinted at the river. It swept down into the canyon mouth after straining through a series of rapids and then dropped sharply to fill the lake below with its frothy contents.

"Creator, give me strength!" Katja whispered to the night.

She ate the last morsel of meat and then carefully rose onto all four paws. She swayed, feeling the heavy ache of weariness grip her bones and muddy her wits. The charnel reek of her enemies wafted past her nose, then, and she was moving.

She crawled along a stout branch that twisted across another tree's bough and then hauled herself onto that bough. She followed the bough to the tree's crown and then hopped onto another neighboring limb. She bounded from limb to limb and tree to tree, following the tangled pattern of living wood toward the steep cliff walls. She dared not touch the ground again, lest one of Curqak's allies sniff out her scent trail and catch her. Even so, the water dripping off of her fur and her rucksack onto the leaves far below made her sick with worry.

Roughly half of a spruce-length away from the cliff's base, Katja discovered an odd break in the entangled trees. At closer inspection, she noticed that any branch growing near the break curled away from a certain spot as if flinching away from an invisible barrier. That barrier seemed to completely encircle the entire canyon, rising up between the grass blades and penetrating high into the dark dome of the night sky.

“Ring Spell,” she whispered.

Katja crawled the length of a limb close to the barrier and cautiously reached out one clawed forepaw. Her paw touched something seemingly solid and she felt an immediate shock of pain pour through her arm to the elbow. It felt as if her entire forearm had just grazed hot iron. She jerked her paw back with a surprised screech and immediately covered her maw with her paw. A quick search showed no enemies near her, but she knew that they had likely heard her startled cry. If the Ring Spells protecting the canyon would not allow her entry now, her last hope was of survival was gone!

“Please grant me refuge!” she whispered.

The werecat looked back at her arm. Instead of looking burned, her furry forearm was actually healed of all its cuts and bruises. She frowned and then gazed at the place her paw had touched. The print of her paw was outlined in rainbow hues swirling through midair. She watched the shimmering outline grow larger. Then the circle broke as if it was an iridescent bubble and a circular opening formed in the barrier large enough for her to walk through. What had existed as the center of the gap now streamed toward Katja as an iridescent walkway floating high above the ground.

Katja hesitated a moment. What if she fell? She was three body-lengths above the ground and this pathway smelled highly irregular. On the other paw, the deadwalkers would soon find her if she stayed here. So she must either step across this threshold of faith or stay here to fight and die alone.

A hackle-raising groan came from somewhere behind her and its sound sealed her decision. Katja’s hind paw touched the surface of the pathway and found it to be soft but resilient. She felt the same spasm of pain as she watched her paw sink into the walkway as if into fast-sand. Quickly she stepped onto the path with her other hind paw to try to steady the first. The pain subsided as she looked down at her body. All of her wounds were gone! Not only did the Ring Spells shielding the canyon repair her entire body, they seemed to test and purify her very soul. She felt a strange peace as the multihued path hardened under her paws and allowed her to walk on what would otherwise be mere air. She moved quickly across the gap and onto the outstretched limb of a tree hugging the base of the canyon wall on the other side.

Katja turned to see the walkway dissolve back into the iridescent opening and fill the breach in the barrier. An audible pop signaled the barrier’s invincibility once more. It closed not a moment too soon. A moment later, a deadly shadow crawled up the tree she had just vacated on the other side of the Ring Spells.

The deadwalker shifted its head from side to side, snuffing the air. The little werecat sat frozen in fear. Could he see her? She should be in perfect view from its perch in the tree. But as Katja watched its thoughtless eyes shift in their decrepit sockets, she realized that they seemed to slide off the barrier to look toward the forest on either side.

Katja watched the monster that was once a living being, noting differences in its body structure from those of the ghoul Curqak. While both deadwalkers had roughly the same reeking, dead-white skin, Curqak’s bulged tightly over powerful muscles. This deadwalker’s skin looked more like a tattered cloak covering bare bones and oozing organs. Its eyes were milky with barely a trace of rounded black pupil, while Curqak’s eyes boasted no white at all. Katja had seen dangerous intelligence steeped in those black eyes, while she saw none in this hunchback’s. This deadwalker seemed to possess neither wit nor will, and, as it shifted its body, Katja saw in horror that it possessed only misery. The monster’s back was covered with deep claw-marks, whiplashes, and bites.

The brute finally gave up its hunt and slowly clambered out of the tree to drop heavily onto the ground several body-lengths below it. Katja cringed at its awkward landing; the same jump would have earned her several broken bones. The deadwalker, however, seemed to feel no pain as it loped easily away in the direction of the river.

“Sklaaf,” she whispered the Felis word for slave.

This was no ordinary sklaaf either. It was a sklaaf der seele—a soul-slave, or zombie as humans called them. So the clan archive’s stories were true; the deadwalkers did enslave their own depraved kind.

Katja shuddered and turned to gaze toward the cliff’s base. The sheer granite walls seemed to allow nothing but the river to enter the canyon realm. She slunk over the tree branches drawing ever nearer to the area where the swirling water met the windswept wall.

She scaled a tall tree near the now-rocky banks of the river and noticed a partially-concealed outcropping of rock jutting out and up from the main cliff. Time and nature had worn superb footholds in the upper portion of the outcropping so that it resembled a steep staircase beginning about nine body-lengths above the ground. The staircase was hidden so well by the jutting rock on its outermost wall that Katja would have never seen it had she gazed upon it from ground level.

A semi-flattened stone platform had formed to one side of the stairway about two body-lengths below the branch where Katja perched. She took hold of a springy limb and jumped down onto the platform using the limb’s resistance to slow her decent.

The last of the sun’s golden rays were lost inside the pocket of the world as Katja began her ascent of the stairs. The now-moonlit pathway wound around the cliff and then severely twisted to encircle the cliff face above the rushing river. After another sharp turn, the trail led onward through a low stone archway carved from the side of the canyon’s wall and began a slow decent toward Kings’ Lake in Crown Canyon’s heart.

Katja trudged wincing down the escarpment. What cuts and bruises had healed during her entry through the protective barrier had now reappeared during the slick-stoned descent into the inner canyon. Her eyelids had grown heavy and even her ears drooped in exhaustion.

The werecat stumbled along the path until she saw a small ledge jutting away from it. The ledge widened into a stone shelf where a nest woven from sticks, vines, and feather down lay tucked away from the wind under a canopy of rock. The nest was twice the size of Katja’s torso. Katja stiffened. She sniffed the thin air and listened for any sign of the nest’s makers or other occupants. She heard no cries save the wind’s whispered whistling as it wound around the cliff. She smelled only stale scents of long-left harpies and decided to risk a closer investigation.

After sniffing every corner of the ledge and discovering no scented sign of anything living, Katja crept over to the nest and sank into its woven warmth. She curled into a furry ball, wrapped her now-dry hare pelts around her chest, and fell asleep in the next moment.

Far below the little werecat, the lake’s waves lapped gently on the dark sands of the shore. The night was brilliant with sacred constellations and the gibbous moon. The canyon itself was alive with the chatter of night creatures and the subtle hum of power from its protective Ring Spells.

For the first time since her clansmen’s deaths, Katja slept in peace. She dreamed of summer hunts and bountiful harvests and smelled the sweet scents of myriad flowers. Her mind’s eye watched small pixies flit from flower to flower on early-morning errands of petal and pollen gathering. The world, then, seemed warm and wonderful.

Then, upon the soft breezes of the canyon, the Feliconian heard a strong voice whisper tales of old kingdoms crumbled and of faraway threats drawing near and of faint hope flaring anew. Katja slept on in the womb of the rock as a long-forgotten griffin king wove his tales inside her mind. She listened until the sun once again brought morning light to her eyes and she awoke with no memory of Canuche's plea during her dreams.

Chapter III

A Visitor in Exile

The sun's warm rays shot through the craggy crown and found its target in Katja's sleepy eyes. She had slept soundly for the first time since the night of the massacre, but now the morning glare forced her to leave her dreams and once again face the stark reality of her situation. She was safe, but she was alone. Katja squinted down at the lake and wrinkled her nose. Among other things, she needed more food, fresh drinking water, a safer shelter, and a bath.

With a fang-revealing yawn, she stretched her body against the nest's interwoven twigs. Sleep had helped alleviate some soreness, but she still winced as she stowed her things in her still-damp rucksack. After a meager meal of dove, the werecat picked her way down the ridge toward the canyon's heart. The long trail down gave her time to consider her circumstances and decide what action to pursue.

Katja had to climb down the inner canyon wall before she could dress her wounds, because the only source of clean water inside the canyon was Kings' Lake. Although it took considerable time for her to descend, the journey proved fairly easy compared to the steep ascent along the outside path. The numerous pawholds and resting places along the inner wall suggested that the descending pathway had actually been manually cut from a more dangerous sheer cliff. She became even more suspicious of its unnatural origins when her descent led her close to the southwest waterfall that fed Kings' Lake.

Just above and behind the water's final plunge, Katja had spied the remnants of a land-bridge that had once spanned the gulf in the mountain wall cut through by the river. Katja had no way to judge its age from her present distance, but her mind smoldered with curiosity. From the way it was constructed, Katja guessed that its makers were dwarves—the original settlers of this place.

The werecat abandoned her hope for a better look when a misplaced paw sent rocks skittering down the narrow ridge to the beach far below. She would, however, keep watch for any sign of other beings. Centuries had passed after the Dwarven Plague had destroyed the dwarves living in this part of the world, so Katja had to assume that other brave souls would seek Crown Canyon's relative safety should the deadwalker attacks spread. With her brother gone, the werecat could rely on no one but herself for safety. The Ring Spells were designed mainly to keep ghouls, zombies, and other deadwalkers out of the canyon, but not other Sylvans like Katja. Therefore any other "purified" exiles living within the canyon would likely still be hostile to her, especially if they were trolls or werewolves. Yet here, she reminded herself, a skinshifter mage would be far less likely to endanger anyone else in hiding and that thought brought her some comfort.

Concerning more practical matters, she had one large problem—the canyon's most abundant prey lived underwater. Katja's escape from Curqak and his deadwalker underlings had proved that she was barely adequate as a swimmer. She had lived through the experience only because she had been able to drift with the stream's current rather than fight against it.

Being a poor swimmer and fisher meant she would have to scavenge on land much more often. This could pose a problem in the coming winter. However, she would deal with that concern after she found a defensible shelter; and finding such a shelter could wait until after she washed and dressed her wounds.

The werecat bathed in a shallow lake inlet semi-protected from the wind by a wall of boulders. She scrubbed herself with soapwort, donned her loincloth, and dressed her wounds with a paste made from some nearby daisy plants. After she had finished bandaging herself, Katja began hunting for shelter, hoping to find food along the way. She managed to kill a small goat and devoured its meat greedily as she searched the cliffs' sides.

By the sun's zenith, Katja had still found no suitable den. What she did find, however, was far more significant: a fresh trail of paw prints along the western side of the canyon valley. Katja was not alone.

The trail itself contained two sets of prints: one belonging to a four-pawed creature, the other belonging to a creature that walked upright like Katja. The paw prints, or more correctly hoof prints, had the round shape and dusty scent of horses' hooves; however, these prints were nearly four times the size of normal horse hooves. The other prints were tiny in comparison and so light that they barely bruised the marsh grass. The prints smelled like tanned cow hide, but were shaped like those of a human.

"It must wear leather coverings on its feet," Katja murmured.

Why was a human in Crown Canyon? Most humans preferred to live in the coastal kingdoms and settlements far to the west of Katja's home. The closest horse-riding humans were the humans of the western coastal kingdom of Tyglesea, who never ventured beyond their own kingdom's borders for fear of the wilder magic existing among members of the rest of the Sylvan Orders. A citizen of Vihous was more common this close to the western edge of the Nyghe sol Dyvesé mountain range, but in either case, the human had to be in some sort of desperate situation to ride this far from home without the company of others of its race. Perhaps it was a fellow exile or maybe a scout for a larger group.

Very rarely had Katja seen humans unless they were members of guided groups come to trade supplies with her clan's elders. She had not seen horses since she was a kit. Her curiosity stirred so strongly that she almost abandoned her hunt for a den. Finally, she decided to search the north side of the canyon for a shelter. This was where the prints seemed to lead, and Katja had every intention of keeping a close watch on this oddity.

When the sky held a quarter of her blue veil between the sun and the western line of the world, Katja finally found a suitable den. It was a place where time and rain had cut a grotto into the shadow of the larger mountains just northeast of the lake.

After digging out the excess silt, Katja wormed her way through the narrow mouth for a closer investigation. The cavern was three standard body-lengths deep with a ceiling that loomed two body-lengths tall at the deepest part of the cave. The entrance was a tight squeeze to be certain, but Katja was small enough to enter and exit it easily enough. She could also stand upright in most of the space, which was a nice improvement on her den hole at home.

Home... the very thought of it made her eyes ache with bitter tears. If only she had done more to warn everyone. Katja knew that the smoke she had seen with her brothers had meant danger, but when the clan elders ignored Kumos's report, she had stayed silent. Why had she stayed silent? Why had she not voiced her uneasiness?

"Because I, like everyone else, never expected deadwalkers to freely roam on Sylvan soil ever again," she hissed. "I did not recognize their scent until it was too late. If only I hadn't skinshifted, I could have done something, I could have saved someone..." Then she remembered Curqak's grotesque smile as he tossed Kayten's shredded rucksack to her.

She shook her head as she pulled the scrap of tooled leather from her rucksack. "It would not have mattered anyway. I'm no fireforger. I am one cursed being against hundreds of

monsters. I would have died too and then no one would have honored the dead. My humanness distracted Kayten long enough to save him, only for him to die when I abandoned him. It's my fault, all my fault for being what I am." Katja held her tear-streaked face in her sandy paws and shook as the memories of her loved ones and their murderers churned in her mind, her sorrow and anger threatening to drown her.

* * *

Katja gulped down water to both quench her thirst and temporarily drown her hunger. She would need food soon if she was to keep herself strong.

"It seems I'll forever be dominated by hunger," she muttered.

She sniffed again at the human's tracks, marking their freshness. She had hunted the human and horse since well before daybreak and her entire body was stiff from this latest mistreatment. Besides the one night in the nest, she still could not sink into anything deeper than a short nap because of her nightmares. Perhaps she would be able to rest better after she knew the human's purpose. At least staying curious kept her mind from drifting into the abyss of grief caused by the Asheken murderers.

Asheken, commonly called deadwalkers, had not roamed Sylvan soil since the Second War of Ages over three hundred years ago. To find them on the Southern Continent again was unthinkable. Katja felt her heart flutter and tried to swallow her panic. The Second War of Ages had begun with a Sylvan invasion of the cursed Northern Continent to destroy all Asheken and open the Northern Continent to Sylvan expansion. When the attempted purge had failed, Sylvans were mercilessly slaughtered or Turned into deadwalkers themselves. If the deadwalkers had not been betrayed by one of their own, all Sylvans would have surely been destroyed under the corruption of the deadwalkers' Víchí masters.

How was it that in both wars the actions of one being had changed the outcome? Blessed Aribem had ensured Sylvan victory in the First War of Ages when he called fire from beyond the physical Erde Realm to imbue the first Sylvans with the magic of fireforging. During the second war, the Víchí elder Calais had found redemption through a fireforger's flame and again became the mage Caleb. Caleb then helped the Sylvan mages and the ethereal Pyrekin to trap the Asheken hordes north of the Sphinx's Gape. Myriads of Sylvans had died. Even the Pyrekin races, who were basically eternal, had vanished back across the First Veil into the Wraith Realm. Now not even a dragon remained.

Katja shook her head and looked around her at one of the last surviving strongholds from the Second War of Ages. Crown Canyon was one of the few places left unclaimed by any particular Sylvan race out of respect of the long-dead dwarven mages whose spells still resided within and around it.

Katja sniffed the human's tracks again. By their freshness, the human and horse couldn't be far from her crouched position. Katja cautiously crept toward the rocks that broke the eastern lakeshore into a jagged cluster of intermingled sandbars and shallow pools. She peered around a large boulder and spied a canvas tent tucked away under the shadow of a narrow granite outcropping. A small campfire stood a few paces from the tent with an array of metal containers strewn in the sand around it. Two forked, wooden branches stood erect on either side of the fire pit with a straight branch running between them half of a body-length above the flames. The straight branch had been sharpened to a point on both ends; and, as Katja pondered the reason for this strange contraption, the answer presented itself with a small gasp.

Katja jerked her head in the direction of the noise and discovered a human youth's dark-blue eyes staring warily into her own. The lanky, auburn-haired female was sitting cross-legged atop a slightly submerged boulder four body-lengths away from Katja's crouched position. Katja cursed herself for not checking the direction of the breeze. This human had been downwind of her and Katja had had no chance of smelling her before she herself was discovered.

The two steadily regarded one another. While Katja had seen humans before, she doubted that the startled human had ever seen one of Katja's kin. As the wind shifted, the werecat discovered why. The human's clothing smelled of flowery perfumes and sea salt. Her chest-cover was the sort worn by a human male. Its deep-blue material was expertly woven and richly embroidered with the silver symbols of a sea bird flying with wings fully outstretched over a crossed double-bladed sword and axe. Katja's ears twitched. This garb was not of Vihous and neither was the pale-skinned human wearing it.

In her slightly shaking hand, the human held a whippy branch with a thin string tied to one end. The string trailed off into the water far beyond the human's boulder. As she scanned the three large, finned bodies splashing in the shallow pool near the human's feet, Katja realized that the human was using the branch and string instead of a spear to catch fish—and faring well, too. What an ingenious way to catch food without getting wet!

The human followed Katja's eyes to the fish.

“Un bon dia per a vostè, meva senyora. ¿Vols un peix?”

Katja's eyes swiveled back to the human's and judged cautious kindness in their depths.

The human paused and added, “¿Mai he vist un de la seva classe! ¿D'on vens? ¿Com es diu a si mateix? ¿Si més no menja peix?”

Katja finally realized this human's origins. The crest on her chest was from Tyglesea and the salty perfume of her clothes gave further proof of her kinship with that west-coast kingdom. Her dialect was one of formality and education. She must be someone of high status among her kin to have these sorts of manners. Why was she here?

The human looked imploringly at Katja and repeated the formal greeting.

“Sorry, sorry! Yes, I understand. I not take you hard-earned labor, but thank for the hospitality.” Katja spoke awkwardly, while stretching out her right paw with its pad up and bowing in formal salute. She had not spoken Tygyré since her days as a catling and her pronunciation proved raspy by comparison to this highborn's smooth diction. Both females winced slightly at Katja's accent, but the human smiled courteously and copied Katja's show of respect.

“Are you more comfortable with a language other than my own?” the human asked in Tygyré.

“I speak Felis and Shrÿde regularly.”

“I speak Shrÿde fairly fluently. Shall we try that instead?”

“Yes, please,” Katja agreed earnestly.

“Very well then,” she said in the trading language adopted from the faeryken. “My name is Lauraisha. I am, as you might have realized, a stranger in these parts.”

“I am Katja Kevrosa Escari, born of the Feliconas Clan of the Sylvan Order of werecats,” Katja said, matching the human's formal politeness. “May I ask what family and clan of the Tyglesean Human Order you represent?”

Her face fell as she replied, “I am of the House of Astrat'a.”

Katja felt her heart quicken in a mixture of fear, shock, and curiosity as she sank to her knees before the human. Small wonder that this human spoke like a highborn. Astrat'a was the

house from which Queen Manasa claimed her bloodline—therefore this human was of the highest noble birth outside actual Tyglesean royalty.

“Forgive my impertinence, Your Excellency!” Katja bowed her head in honor of the young noble and cursed herself for her impudent thoughts of stealing a fish. To Katja’s astonishment, however, the princess gave a shocked cry and implored the werecat to stand.

“Please, please do not bow to me! I act as no one’s superior, nor would I ask to be treated as such—and certainly not by someone so extraordinary!”

Katja regained her stance and, not knowing what to say, simply watched the human for a cue of how to proceed. Lauraisha apparently sensed her dismay and turned to pull hard upon the fishing stick in her hand. Katja heard several splashes as the noble stood and laboriously towed the string out of the water using a spool attached to the fishing stick. Katja watched as a fish writhed desperately against the line Lauraisha was winding. She finally caught hold of the perch, untangled the string and hook imbedded in the finned beast’s mouth, and wrapped it and the three others in a net.

“Well, I’d say that this plus the others should make a fine meal as well as left-overs for the two of us. I hope you like redfins.” Lauraisha added while tying the leftover string around her fishing stick.

Katja hesitated a moment as the human tossed the wriggling net onto her back. Did she really trust this human? No, but a highborn’s eat invitation was not to be refused no matter how strange the circumstances. Katja reluctantly picked up the fishing stick and followed the human toward the camp.

The whinny of a horse greeted Katja’s ears as she and the human approached. Its fearful snort caused Katja to halt.

“Forgive me, but I dare go no farther, Your Excellency.”

The noble stopped and frowned at her. “Call me Lauraisha. And why not?”

Katja bowed her head slightly in apology and explained that horses had an inherent fear of her kin. “Going near the horse would risk harm to it and to me if it becomes violent in its attempt to flee from me.”

“Oh, is that all!” the human laughed and then whistled thrice to the huge horse, which answered in a calmer whinny. “I strongly suggest that you do not get too close to him then—unless I’m with you, of course. He’s rather flighty, even by horse-standards, but he shouldn’t do anything daft while I’m nearby.” Lauraisha smiled at her companion before continuing toward the camp’s fire pit. She set the fish down beside a flat stone near the pit and pulled a knife from her belt. Slowly, she began cutting open one fish and peeling the flesh from its bones.

“What are you doing?” Katja asked in shock.

“Cleaning the fish, of course. I cannot properly cook them without stripping out the organs.”

“Cook?”

“Well, of course I cook my fish. I certainly wouldn’t eat them raw and whole.”

Katja stared at the giggling youth. Instead of eating a fish whole, she intended to burn it? What was wrong with her?

“Tell me that you at least save the fish eggs and brain.”

“Whatever for?”

“Flavor! If you’re going to burn perfectly good meat, at least add some spice to it!”

“Oh, that is what these are for.” Lauraisha drew several small tins out of a rucksack and handing one to Katja.

The werecat sniffed its contents before cocking her head at the human.

“Rosemary,” she answered cheerfully before pointing each of the other pouches and naming them in turn: thyme, sea salt, black pepper, sage, oregano, ginger, saffron, and sugar. “My older brother Saldis is absolutely fascinated with the arts of cooking and healing. These herbs and spices are from his own supply.”

“How kind of him to share them with you.”

“Indeed,” she replied and continued to prepare the fish for burning.

“If you don’t mind, I’d prefer that you didn’t discard your scraps and let me have them instead.”

“What will you do with them?” the human asked in genuine curiosity.

“Eat them.”

“Eat them? Well wouldn’t you rather have the filets of meat instead?”

“Perhaps, but you plan to burn that. Werocats do not eat burnt meat, or cooked meat...as you call it.”

“Werocats don’t cook their food? That is just strange.”

“Perhaps, but we consider your ‘cooking’ strange.”

Lauraisha laughed. “What an interesting dilemma! Well, then you must eat your fish your way and I shall have mine my way.”

“Fair enough, but I think my way is faster.” Katja retrieved Lauraisha’s scraps and another whole fish that the human offered and began devouring them.

“Perhaps, but mine still tastes better.” The human wrinkled her nose.

The females both laughed and then talked of various racial customs while the human used a lidded metal box to “bake” the first fish’s filets and the pole-contraption set over the fire to “grill” the other two. Each redfin was almost as long as Katja’s arm so the task of eating them was quite a challenge. Katja managed to consume all of the scraps plus her whole fish (except the bones, of course), but vowed not to eat again for at least two full days. The human fared far less well—having only consumed a fourth of the filets before leaning back in sweet defeat.

The midmorning eat gave way to a comfortable afternoon interlude in which the two conversed about various subjects, but most often about their different lifestyles. On the whole, Katja found the discussion quite freeing and relaxing. In Lauraisha, Katja found an avid communicator—willing to share and listen to experiences with equal enthusiasm. Lauraisha seemed kind and sincere in her intentions. The human also had an intriguing talent for picking up threads of conversational interest with her companion and edging away from those topics that might agitate the werocat.

Katja learned about Lauraisha’s family and about life in Tyglesean society. Lauraisha also talked about her passion for cooking and what herbs she had found useful in curing common ailments like cuts or coughs. Katja found it odd that a young female of noble birth would know such arbitrary things when most Tyglesean nobles would likely spend their time creating art or reciting prose and poetry. Lauraisha seemed quite unusual for a noble, but as Katja discovered more about the human’s family she began to understand why.

Like Katja, Lauraisha was the youngest in her family. She was barely fifteen winters of age and had spent much of her childhood learning boyhood games since her mother often left her in her four brothers’ care. Lauraisha had mainly learned her impressive hunting and fishing skills from the second-born brother Tryntin and the fourth-born brother, Sandor. From Saldis, the third-born brother, Lauraisha learned her love of cooking and some knowledge of healing. She understood love, compassion, and horsemanship from her eldest brother, Ashomocos, but knew nothing other than spiteful contempt from her only sister, Kyla.

Katja had the impression that Lauraisha lived somehow apart from the rest of her family, but whether the separation was physical or simply mental Katja could not guess. Katja also noticed that Lauraisha would not speak frankly about either father or mother. As for Katja's own family, the werecat gave enough details to satisfy her companion's curiosity, but otherwise sheltered the precious memories of her kin within herself.

As gilded sunlight began to fade into violet dusk, Katja politely took her leave of Lauraisha and traveled north under the waning light. Her sleep that night was fitful despite the relative joy she felt at meeting the human.

The werecat believed Lauraisha benign; however, Katja was troubled by the fact that the noble had avoided answering her questions regarding her presence in the canyon. She was quite sure that the human's flight from her home country was somehow due to her family, but Katja had no idea what they could have possibly done to estrange such a seemingly kind person.

As she curled upon the sweet rushes of her new bed, Katja found herself with more questions and answers about her strange new neighbor.

Why would one of noble blood flee from the comforts of home and hearth when the outside world was so much crueler? Living like royalty with servants bobbing around her ankles must be far better than having to catch and eat her own food, no matter what the human might say to the contrary. Katja had no reason to stay in the place of her childhood since there was nothing left but the ashes of the dead to keep her company. Lauraisha, however, had left behind at least seven family members, most of whom she dearly loved.

Why would a Tyglesean flee so far outside the borders of her own country and then exile herself in a place so steeped in ancient magic? Tygleseans, for the most part, hated magic. Ever since King Kaylor began his bloody rule, Tygleseans had tried to expel all magic and mages from within their borders. And yet one of their kin acted as if she had been drawn to the magic of the Ring Spells protecting Crown Canyon. It made no sense.

Katja stared into the indigo night beyond her new den's maw and frowned as a new question formed in her mind. Could Lauraisha be a mage? The werecat promised herself that she would watch the human to find the truth of the matter. Only then did she finally closed her weary eyes and let sleep overtake her...

*

Katja felt bright blades of green grass whipping wet past her furry flanks as she sprinted through their midst. The sun overhead was bright with warmth emanating through the thin clouds encircling its edge. She sniffed the rich air. It was alive with scents of salty sea, sand, grass, birds, fresh fruits, and seedling sap. She looked over the escarpment toward the sea. There was a storm closing fast over its boiling waters. The wind howled and shrieked as it bore bulging black clouds weeping angrily within its clutches. She ran for cover under a tree and flinched back as a bolt of white fire singed a barrier at her feet. The tree was struck to pieces by the lightning's blow and her only other choice was to dive for cover in an abandoned badger burrow.

She lunged toward its safely just as the sky's white wrath attacked again and found herself in a small cave with intricate symbols carved in a circle around its walls. As she watched, the symbols began to glow with the same fire that she had stepped through upon her entrance to Crown Canyon. The symbols lifted themselves off the stone walls and began to spin in the air around her, growing brighter and moving faster until they formed a solid ring with her as their center.

Suddenly the ground beneath her shook and an altar sprouted under her paws. A smooth green emerald blossomed in its center. She picked up the stone and held it close as the altar melted back into the floor and a voice called in the shadows before her.

“This is your future.”

She saw herself reflected in the stone’s silky surface, not as she was, but with a human’s head attached to her werecat body, a segmented black tail curving up from her backside, and a terrible fury haunting her glowing green eyes. The image faded away to be replaced with the likeness of a powerfully-built werewolf with azure-emerald eyes, standing fully erect on his back paws, with a huge double-bladed war axe covered in ancient runes held ready in his furry forepaws.

Next she knelt in a dark castle corridor with grand buttresses looming over her. A red carpet marked a path to a closed door. At her touch, the door creaked open to reveal a red carpeted room beyond with a full-length mirror standing in its ancient iron frame. Someone was inside the room with the mirror, but the doorframe blocked the being from her view.

“This is her past,” called the voice.

For a moment the mirror reflect only blackness, and then it seemed to be a window. Through its surface she spied a midnight storm breaking over a castle by the sea. She felt herself being sucked into the scene as a bolt of lightning struck a section of the castle’s battlements. Two horses bearing cloaked riders galloped wildly through the castle’s war-torn gates and out onto the castle clearing toward the sanctuary of the forest far in front of them.

Arrows arced from the unscathed section of battlements and rained down upon the racing fugitives. Three arrows struck one rider—a valet wearing the old royal Tyglesean coat of arms—and sent him tumbling to his death as the other rider wailed in anguish. The survivor’s hood snapped back in a gust of wind and Katja spied a human female who resembled Lauraisha in all features save nose shape, hair color, and eye hue.

“Arlis!” the human screamed as she escaped with both horses into the sheltering edge of trees.

“Time grows short!” the dream-voice called. “Come quickly before all is lost...”

*

Katja gasped awake. She wiped cold sweat from her brow and sensed the human across the lake do the same. Together they stared unseeing at their surroundings as the last remnant of dream faded from their shared vision. Their minds’ magical bond lasted only a moment after consciousness, and then it was as insubstantial as the mournful wind wailing just outside the werecat’s new den.

Meet the Author

Alycia Christine grew up near the dusty cotton fields of Lubbock, Texas, with a fearless mutt for a dog and a backyard trampoline that almost bounced her to the moon. She fell in love with fantasy and science fiction books when her father first read them to her at age ten. Her love of fiction writing blossomed during her time at Texas A&M University. Alycia's fiction has received wide praise for its unique characters and vivid storytelling. Her award-winning art photography has been featured in Times Square. When she isn't writing or shooting photos, Alycia enjoys long talks with her husband, drinking copious amounts of tea, and coaxing her skittish cat out from under the living room furniture. Find her at AlyciaChristine.com.

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