

Cat Scratched!

"In a word, WOW!"
-Romantic Times

DARA JOY

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DEATH BY PLOOT PLOOT

THAT FAMILIAR TOUCH

WILDCAT ARROWS

IN KIRKPATRICK'S WOODS

MY ONE

KNIGHT OF A TRILLION STARS

TONIGHT OR NEVER

REJAR

MINE TO TAKE

TASTE OF THE DEVIL

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After dark, all cats are leopards.

--Native American Proverb 7

He is my brilliant hunter.

He anticipates my every move.

He knows what I will do, how I will react before I, myself, know.

He is a master predator.

And I am his prey.

I am being watched. No, not watched—

Tracked!

A *night claw* takes flight as she slips behind a thick tree. Her heart pounds as she tries to catch her breath without making a sound.

The old forest both helps and hinders her flight. Whatever aid it lends her—it also affords *him*. He is too wise in the ways of nature not to use every advantage as he tracks her down.

She remembers these trees from her youth: great big shadowy hulks. They reside deep in her memory. There is something beautiful yet ominous about them. They shield, and they hide. They also cloak and deceive. They will take no sides.

Whatever they afford her, they will afford him. Her shelter is his blind. Her camouflage, his discernment. Moon rays flitter through the dense foliage. Beams of bright, almost powdery light, penetrate the gloom like an attack of light spears from above.

How long has he been chasing her?

Forever.

She wipes the dampness off her brow with the back of her arm. She must not linger too long. The full moon illuminates a meandering path through the woods. Perhaps it leads to a clearing, or even to a nearby village? He plays with her now—coming up fast behind, and falling back just as quickly. He is careful to never get too close. To never physically touch her.

Terrified—yet strangely exhilarated—she runs even faster. He continues his strange dance of coming to the verge of conquering, then abruptly retreating. The blood rushes to her ears, pounding a thunderous rhythm as his shadow briefly looms over hers on the path.

Unbidden, an ancient ritual twists inside her thoughts. Strange words, whose source she does not know. *I will place my shadow on you.* . .

N'taga, she whispers brokenly. Shadow dance. But, how does she know this? What does it mean? A low, pleased sound ripples through her, making her nerve-endings tingle. A faint rustling behind her—!

A simple forest dweller. . . *Or him?* He is the kind that can be upon you before you blink. She must move now!

Taking a deep breath, she dashes along the path, zigzagging through the undergrowth and fallen limbs, jumping over tree stumps.

Never breaking her stride.

With her renewed flight, she hears him coming up on her. *Faster* . He makes his silent passage through the forest have sound. Just to let her know that he is there. As far or as close as he alone desires.

She hears the light padding of his footsteps behind her and her heart rushes to her throat. *Too close!* He is too close. A slight incline appears suddenly before her, and she has but a moment to tuck her legs up under her and roll with the fall that is unavoidable.

It could be worse. Her descent is cushioned by dead leaves and the soft ground. She continues to roll with the momentum. Without stopping in her headlong flight, she springs out of the coil directly into full run. The sudden descent did not slow her pursuer down. He is closer than before. She takes a chance and glances over her shoulder. . .

But, he hides himself well, dashing behind an outcropping. Suddenly, thick clouds block off the moonlight. She is in complete darkness! She wills herself not to panic, but her traitorous breaths are coming in gasps.

She knows he can hear her.

She is forced to slow down lest she slam into a tree. *Something wooshes by* . It is all she can do not to scream. *Am I lost already?*

Just as suddenly the clouds are gone. But, the clear night will take no prisoners.

Thinking quickly she dives beneath a *meeyori* bush. He is too near. *Too near*. Slowly, she peeks through the branches. A fat moon ray lights an angular swath, intersecting a wide trunk near the edge of the tree line.

The edge of the tree line!

I am almost home, free.

If only she could make it to the edge of the forest. . . The moon is rising above the field that lies just beyond the woods. *If only*—

A bare, muscular arm is silhouetted in front of the silvery moon, along with a sculptured, masculine hand that has long, tapered fingers. *The raised tips of claws glint against the backdrop of that full moon as he stretches those fingers like weapons—then curls them into a symbolic fist.* His message is clear.

He will not let her reach the fields. He intends to capture her.

Moaning softly, she makes one last mad dash for freedom.

With his final message delivered, he chases her down in earnest and she immediately realizes that he had merely been toying with her before. His fast footfalls strike hard and true. *And sure.*

Though she continues to zigzag in the hopes of throwing him off her trail, he does not waver in his steadfast pursuit. She can hear his breaths—measured and even, despite his exertion.

In a last attempt, she finds a renewed burst of speed. His hot breath teases the back of her neck. The tree line is so close. . . !

But not close enough.

With one graceful move, he leaps forward, catching his prey fast.

Powerful arms encircle her waist from behind. A cool, wintry scent bathes her.

They fall forward onto the leaf-cushioned ground. Her heart pounds madly in her chest.

The heavy, masculine weight keeps her immobilized even as she attempts to struggle against it. Then she feels something even heavier and *harder* press against her. She freezes in place.

The same hand that was haloed by the moon sweeps the long strands of hair off the back of her neck, its claws scraping softly along the vulnerable skin. She is not sure why, but she knows that this gesture is most significant. Her defeat is imminent.

"Wait!" she gasps, spent, but still not willing to give in. Moist, warm breath caresses her ear. Then the flick of a hot tongue.

"No," he simply says.

The voice is deep and silky smooth. It is the kind of voice that holds its own power.

He presses his nose into the crook of her neck and deeply inhales. A low, menacing *growl* reverberates along the dampened skin of her throat, causing her entire body to shiver. It is a warning.

No. *A claiming.*

His arms tighten around her waist, bringing her backside up and into him.

"*Captured,*" he whispers softly.

Then sharp teeth clamp fiercely on the back of her neck. Holding her in place. *For him .*

She *throbs* everywhere. Her lungs, her heart, her ears, between her legs. Her breaths come out in ragged spurts; a fever swirls through her loins. Fury, flight, and. . .*longing?* . . . churn within her.

The strange feelings merge, confusing her into an odd lassitude. The way prey becomes immobile right before—*No! He cannot take me so easily!* She cries out and thrashes. Perhaps against her own deepest desires.

And then, he *moves into* her. Pressing, sliding, *commanding* . She is impaled. *Taken* by his sensual wildness. His sultry perfection.

And now she is his. Forever.

She shot up in bed, still breathing erratically from the strange nightmare. Her hand covered her heart. The dream was just a dark fantasy, yet the *thump thump thump* against her palm was very real.

It was only a vivid dream, she realized, trying to relax. *Yet, the cool scent of a wintery forest still seemed to blanket her. . .*

Planet Zillian, nonpartisan belt, 5187 m.u.

He was a difficult cat.

And in human form, far more dangerous.

The tracker watched the man from a safe distance. In this line of work, one could never be too careful. A silken mane trailed down his broad back.

Wind caressed the long black strands. The tracker noticed they were tipped with lustrous gold by his waist. In the rare desert breeze, the gleaming locks flowed about him with a unique vitality.

Breathtaking!

The tracker had never seen one with hair like that. He would fetch a fortune in the forbidden markets—if he lived to reach them.

The tracker slipped behind a fruit stall in the busy marketplace and continued to carefully observe the target. The silhouette of his face was visible; and the brief glimpse enough to discern the arresting, sensual features of the shapeshifter.

Extraordinary!

The man's eyes were tilted slightly at the corners. Even at this distance, the tracker could tell that they were two different colors. Clear blue and gold. Each rimmed in thick, dark lashes.

Spellbinding, to be sure.

Were their individual colors significant? The tracker had always wondered about that.. .

Counter to his exceptional appearance, the man was simply dressed in the rudimentary garb of desert travelers. Woven, sand-colored *tracas* and tunic were partially covered by a cloak made of the same sturdy traveler's material. A braided cloth sash wrapped about his middle, crisscrossing several times. Yet, there were no weapons secured at the trim waistline to call further attention to him. No *visible* weapons that is.

The tracker was well aware that he did not need them. Despite his plain garb, his tall form stood out. No matter how hard a shapeshifter tried to conceal himself, his feline traits were often difficult to hide.

As if aware of this, he moved quickly and effortlessly through the crowded plaza with the lethal grace and dexterity his kind were known for.

In no time at all, the tracker again lost sight of him. She clenched her fists. It had been difficult enough to get this close to him! So, the Familiar had sensed that he was being tracked after all?

This cat was very good.

It was a royal decree.

He had to return to M'yan.

The King of All Familiar, Gian Ren, had ordered his people home.

It was for their own protection. War had broken out, and the enemy was everywhere, looking to capture, enslave, or kill his kind.

Or to sell them.

He wondered if their ultimate goal were the entire destruction of his species!

Salair Ner clenched his fists in anger.

He was a wanderer. He sought to adventure wherever and whenever he desired. Not quite feral, he was undoubtedly on this side of it, having an untamed disposition, a solitary nature, and an acute dislike for most authority. Thus, he had been close to defying his king's wishes. Yet, he was also the son of a clan leader, and as such, underneath it all, he understood what it meant to be loyal. His father maintained an ultimate respect for Gian Ren. Because of that, Salair Ner would no more disrespect his king, than his own sire.

So he was headed home.

And like every other Familiar caught in the politics of the times, he knew that his personal freedom to roam about would soon be greatly curtailed.

But, the king's decree wasn't the only reason he was headed back to M'yan. He was soon to enter his third incarnation. He would need a priestess. *Soon.*

Salair was irritated—and so raw—that he took a moment to *snarl* . Loudly.

Several passers-by jumped and gave the dangerous looking traveler a wide berth. Shape-shifting felines were unpredictable at best. When a cat growled, it was always wise to let it be.

Oblivious to the sudden path that opened up around him in the crowded square, Salair strode resolutely to the eastern wall of the town. There were two Tunnel points on *Zillian*. One led to a rather direct route to his home planet; the other, to somewhere *else*.

The choice was obvious.

So, why did he switch at the last moment and step through portal in the wrong direction?

Planet Teno, non-Alliance territory

Once Salair had taken the Tunnel to this world—and questioned his sanity for doing so—he immediately used his special senses to lead him to the next gate out. Hopefully, he could find another link back without having to go out of his way too much. Tunnel points were sometimes in one direction only. *Blame the House of Sages who decide these things for no reason any mundane could figure!* Luck being what is was—he could not go back through. The problem was, he was not sure his special senses were leading him *anywhere*. He seemed to be trekking aimlessly through rural backwoods at this point. The scenery provided pleasant surroundings, but he was not aiming for a pleasure walk.

A light wind lifted the edges of his cloak, bringing to his attention the warmth of the night in these moonlit fields. He threw back the hood and swept the heavy cloak off. The

breeze immediately caressed the long locks of his hair in an almost loving gesture, sending the lengthy strands adrift in the night wind.

He paused a moment to gather his bearings.

It was late in the evening on this planet. Surrounded by rolling hills, and tall grasses, it seemed he was in the middle of nowhere. There were no villages in sight. He did not even know the name of the planet he was on. But, he didn't have to, necessarily.

The Familiar generally relied more on their own senses than anything else. Maps were never as accurate as a Familiar's internal sense of direction.

On one side in the distance, rolling hills half-circled the field. Behind him was forest. In front of him, silvery moon rays skipped across the clear waters of a small pond whose banks were surrounded by reed like plants.

Bending down, he broke off a pod from the top of the nearest plant. Idly, he crushed the shell between his fingers, mildly surprised when a rich, thick substance emerged, covering his hands.

The creamy liquid emitted a soothing, sweet fragrance. He rubbed the viscous cream between his fingers, marveling at its texture. His senses told him the fluid was harmless; he wondered if the locales used the pods for perfumes?

Too tired to ponder the minor mystery—one of but a myriad for a traveler—he wiped his hands off on the grass and gazed up at the night sky. It was a sultry evening. Almost overly warm.

The cooling water of the pond lapped against the banks. It was a good enough invitation for him.

His thrumming, raw senses could use a good dunking. He stripped off his clothes to take a quick bath. But, how could he be quick in such a place? The surroundings were so utterly peaceful and welcoming to him.

Flipping onto his back, with his hair streaming around him in the water, he floated across the surface of the pond as he lazily watched the brilliant stars above. It was easy for a Familiar to get distracted by nature. Salair knew he would have to move on soon, but perhaps he could rest in this spot for a while? It seemed safe enough; and he was sure he would find no better place to stop and rest on his journey.

The gentle waters soothed some of his fever, rocking him into a pleasant lull. He drifted off into a light doze.

He awoke the next morning beside the bank of the pond.

It had been the first full night's sleep he had had in many a day. He glanced up at the sky. It was way past sunrise. Best to be moving on.

He quickly donned his *tracas*, cinching the pants at his lean waist with the braided cord. *Faint sounds of singing carried on wind.* . .

Salair's ears twitched. He scrunched his shoulders. It was almost painful. Someone was humming a happy tune. *Discordantly.*

Curious, he padded barefoot to the edge of the forest. The sound was coming from just past the copse of trees. Grabbing his boots and the rest of his clothes, he slipped through the forest to investigate; because Familiars and cats are unhealthily curious. He felt *something* pulling him in that direction.

Moving with a preternatural stealth, he silently slipped through the foliage until he was very close to the source of disharmonious clatter. The pulling feeling he had experienced was stronger now.

Still concealed by the dense vegetation, he carefully separated the leafy vines that were obstructing his view. As he watched silently, his dual-colored eyes narrowed ominously.

He did not expect this. Not ever.

Awaiting him in the next field over was his destiny. Unexpected and untimely.

And decidedly. . .*odd* .

Was it a mistake of cosmic proportions?

This was his woman?

Familiars sensed their mates, so there could be no mistake. And yet. . .

There *seemed* to be a mistake!

She was the exact opposite of him. In every way. Where he was lean, sculptured muscle, she was round, soft curves. Where he was intense and ever alert, she faced the world with an open smile, relaxed and composed. He lived to roam the universe. She appeared content in her own garden. With a sinking feeling, Salair knew without a doubt that she was the kind of Familiar that liked to be about her home.

Cozy, and affectionate. Happiest when surrounded by everything and everyone she loved.

She was certainly *not* going to approve of *him*. Even within his own clan—and a rather ferocious bunch they were—he was known as 'the lone one'. Although. . . He was not a complete loner like some. Salair was not feral, and he did enjoy engaging females—even if he would sooner *scratch* than *purr*.

It was his nature to be aloof, and he protected his surrounding space always. (His father had once told him that he was one of those Familiars who would be soft to only one person. The one he would love above all others. Salair had scoffed at that, incapable of imagining himself taming down for anyone.)

He had always expected his chosen mate—should he actually end up with one—to be as he. Adventurous, stalking on the wild side, and living life on the edge of breath, every waking moment of every day.

He would never simply 'settle in'. He loved to explore too much.

How was this to work?

As his mind raced variations on the improbable situation, he took a moment to really study the scene before him. The little cottage had been built in the middle of the small woodland clearing. *She* sat on a log in front with a big, round clay bowl nestled on her ample lap.

Despite the distance, he could clearly hear her contented *purrs* between notes of her song.

The fact that she could not carry a tune did not stop her from humming that striated song as she happily shucked native vegetation. Her pearly cheeks were stained with a light red blush.

Very sweet-looking, he acknowledged to himself as he noted her pink lips and light brown hair. There was something about the way she looked that was. . . *Comforting?* Salair grit his teeth. He did not do “comforting”. As he continued to observe her, a small elderly *Dundee* stuck her wizened head out the door and called out a warning not to stay in the sun too long. Dundee were not overly fond of sunlight, preferring to stay indoors most of the day. They were not a native species to this planet, so Salair was somewhat surprised to see one here. They were not great travelers.

"Snowflake!" The Dundee called to the Familiar woman.

"It is too warm in the sun. Come inside soon or you will shrivel up!"

Snowflake? Salair's lips pressed together. What kind of name was that for a proper Familiar? His nostrils flared in annoyance. *It sounds like a pet's name.* The Familiar, or Snowflake, as she was called, laughed gaily at the old Dundee. "Please do not tell me you believe that nonsense? Sunlight has to be good for you!"

"How you know?" The Dundee snapped back, fat lower lip jutting out. "I know plenty person get charred up all bad in sun. Make themselves roasted meal for others, if not careful."

Snowflake almost doubled over in laughter. "Are you saying that I am cooking myself up to serve myself as a meal to some hapless passerby?"

Salair arched his eyebrows.

"*Hmf* ! You no so smart as you used to be, Kitten feet. You be sorry when you the banquet." Proper warning given, the Dundee flounced back inside the cottage.

Grinning at the ridiculous assertions, Snowflake raised her face to the warm rays of the sun.

"What I tell you? Kitten feet stew!" came the voice from the window just before the shutters slammed shut. Snowflake snorted. The Dundee were generally the kindest, gentlest, people on the planet.

Except when it came to their odd superstitions. How they ever got the gumption to leave their home planet in the first place, she never figured out. Now, her real parents had been seasoned travelers. She could not recall a time when they were not exploring. It was unusual for Familiar families to travel with a child in tow, but they had loved it.

Some of her memories, however, were not that pleasant, though. . .

She was glad the two elderly Dundee had taken the chance to emigrate to *Teno*. Without them, what would have happened to her?

She would probably not be alive.

After the incident that took her parents, they had found her wandering, disoriented in the woods. They had raised her as their own.

She was so happy here in—*A frisson of awareness trickled down her spine*. She froze.

Salair Ner had honed in on her with unwavering clarity. As a marksman does his target.

For a brief time, he considered the choices available to him—giving the greatest weight to what would be best for her. Ganakari had declared war on the Familiar; Karpon's minions would not be far behind. They might already be searching for him. A beautiful Familiar woman would just be an added bonus for them.

In addition, he was fast approaching his Incarnation. He had observed the gentle rise and fall of her breathing as she went about her chore. His dual-colored eyes flashed with sudden hunger. If he mated her now, he would not need a priestess.

She could ease him through it.

In the end, there was only one course of action. He could not leave her behind. She was definitely coming with him.

But first, he would need to make her his.

Snowflake had ceased smiling and stared straight in Salair's direction.

There was but a moment for him to realize that she had one eye of gold and one of brown before she called out.

"I know you are out there," she addressed the woods.

"You do not have to hide. I will not hurt you." Salair blinked. Her hurt *him*? He grinned at the absurd idea. Although, he was surprised that she had sensed him from such a distance. It seemed she had exceptionally acute senses. Always a plus.

Naturally bold, Salair brushed aside the concealing vines and stepped into the clearing. "I am Salair Ner, Son of the Northern Hunter," he proclaimed his identity and heritage to her.

At the sound of the deep masculine voice, Snowflake's brow furrowed. "Do we know each other?" Salair took note of the attractive blush across her cheekbones. The creamy skin with its mid-morning flush beckoned to him like a new treat to discover. He looked forward to *tasting* that treat.

"We do not know each other. . . And, yet, we do know each other."

She snorted, then smiled. "A riddle on such a fine day as this?"

He liked her voice. In fact, he thought he could come to *love* that voice. Light and soft and somewhat melodic. Very soothing. . . When she was not singing.

Again, it occurred to him that she was the opposite of what he usually sought out in a female. Throaty, sultry tones were his normal preference.

On closer inspection, her generous curves were perfectly rounded. Hair that he had originally dismissed as rather dull for a Familiar's was actually subtly intriguing with many, albeit slight, variances of hue amongst the strands. Her features, not sensually beautiful at first glance, held a pleasantness that correlated with warm, loving embraces and . . . *home*.

Uncomfortable with that thought, Salair shook off the unwelcome image.

He just was not that kind of cat.

He was a wanderer, a lover, and an adventurer. Occasionally, he caused trouble. He liked his sex hot and fast—or hot and slow.

But never *tender* .

He was not a tender sort of lover. He lived wild, loved wild, and always moved on. This woman—he could tell just from looking—was not that kind.

How had this happened? He wondered again. She was his mate; there was no uncertainty. The signals his special senses were receiving left no doubt of it. It was confusing to him. They simply did not seem to "go" together.

Should he trust his instincts or his perceptions? Instinct was always wiser. He remembered the recent words spoken by a trader in the marketplace on Zillian.

' . . . Familiars rely on their senses; do they not? I am envious. It seems a most beneficial advantage in these turbulent times. If I had better instincts, my friend, I never would have left to go on this wretched journey in the first place. No one is trading or purchasing in this sour economy!'

Having liked the trader, he had bartered his *krilli* sash for the plain cloth one he now wore. In exchange, the trader had happily pointed out the smoothest route to the Tunnel Portals.

Perhaps the friendly trader was right? He should not question his Familiar senses. They had served him well throughout his lifetime.

Unlike some other species, the Familiar believed in getting to know their mates first through the physical act of love. He should simply trigger the mating response and let nature take its course.

It was his responsibility as a male.

As Salair was preparing for his next, momentous step, Snowflake felt a sudden *tickle* course down her spine. It was not alarm. She always trusted her feelings and this strange visitor felt very. . . *comfortable* to her. She suddenly felt wonderfully relaxed.

Without hesitation, she instantly *engaged* the shapeshifter by flashing him a wide smile. "So, Salair Ner, Son of the Northern Hunter, are you to explain your enigmatic statement—or am I left to wonder at its meaning?"

Salair observed her welcoming smile with surprise. He had not triggered her yet. *Something* must have escaped unbidden, though, as the woman was suddenly very predisposed towards him.

His dual-colored eyes flashed with a mixture of wary puzzlement. "Why are you called Snowflake?" Her hand went to her throat. "You—you know my name?"

He nodded to the cabin, indicating the Dundee who had called out to her earlier. She didn't seem to know what he meant for she simply stared at him vacantly, waiting for further explanation. "The Dundee who called out to you before."

"Oh, of course," she smiled softly. "It is Snow, actually. That Dundee is the only one who still calls me Snowflake. She hates when I sit in the sun."

"Our people love to be in the sun. Does she not know this?"

"*Our* people?"

A line furrowed Salair's smooth forehead. "Yes, our people. The Familiar."

She grinned. "Ah. I had my suspicions, but I was not sure." The strange frisson she had felt must have been the excitement of finally meeting one of her own kind again. Salair was shocked by her statement. "You did not—*You do not know your own people?*"

"Well, of course, I remember bits and pieces, but I was very young when I lost my parents to. . . " She paused.

"Well, when they were lost."

"I apologize for my rudeness." There was genuine regret in his voice for bringing up what must be a troubling subject for her.

"It was many years ago. I was fortunate that the Dundee and her companion took me in."

"And it is good that I have found you now. It is very dangerous for our kind these days."

Snow bit her lip. "I have heard a few rumors. That Familiar are being hunted down in large sections of the galaxy. Is it really true?"

He nodded. "It is true."

"I am sorry to hear that. Are you in danger here on *Teno*?"

"Perhaps. I spied a tracker on the last planet; I am almost sure I was tagged."

"Then I am sorry we will not have much time to get to know one another better. You are the first of my people I have met since I was a child. Can you at least share the evening meal with us?"

"No. We should leave as soon as possible." Snow sat up straight. "*We?*"

"Yes, Snow, you must come with me to M'yan. The King of All Familiar, Gian Ren, has called his subjects home."

"Not me! I am not part of that world, Salair Ner."

"You are part of it, whether you desire it, or not. It is who you are. Do you think the slavers will stop to ask whether you are any different because the Dundee have' taken you in'? They will look at you and know the truth."

"What do you mean?" Her smooth forehead furrowed in confusion.

He gave her a strange look. "Your eyes, of course. You must come with me, Snow. We cannot tarry here long." She stood up, knocking the clay bowl to the ground; its contents spilling everywhere. "Do not be foolish, Familiar! I am not leaving my home. We may be

of the same people, but you are a stranger to me. I have no intention of going with you. And it is unkind of you to insult my eyes."

Insult her eyes? He had done no such thing. This was becoming more complicated than he ever dreamed; the woman did not even know her people! Did she not realize that Familiar had dual-colored eyes? Obviously, she had no idea of the danger she was in. If he hadn't come upon her, someone from the village would have eventually revealed her presence here. It was a miracle she had not been taken already.

He let out a long sigh and held his hand out to her. Snow's instincts came alive. Talk of leaving made her shy away from him. She wanted no part of it. It had always been safe for her with the Dundee.

Staggering back from him, she raised her hand as if to ward him off. Not reach for his outstretched fingers.

"Stop," was all she could gasp. She turned to flee back to the safety and security of her cottage—And promptly tripped over the bowl she had overturned. Salair bent a knee to help her. Familiars were never clumsy. If the situation had not been so dire, it would almost be humorous.

He gently guided her back onto the log. "Why are you—" But he could no longer speak.

He had realized in that moment that she was quite blind.

Blind?!

How can a Familiar be blind? Did she not know she could heal herself during transformation? How long had she been like this? Why was she hiding?

A hundred questions hit him at once.

Yet, curiously, the first one he eventually asked her was,

"Why do you run from me?" From that moment on, he stayed by her side.

"Your constant talk of danger frightens me." Snow nervously plucked at the coarse fabric of her garment as she sat atop the log. It was late in the day, and a version of this conversation had taken place three times already. They had talked of many things—but whenever he brought this subject back up, she backed off.

He frowned.

He was not making much headway with her and it was getting late.

The creaking of a shutter told Salair that the Dundee was watching them closely from inside the house. Earlier, she had brought out a meal for them on a tray—all the while throwing him suspicious glances from under a boney brow. The Dundee was distrustful of him, and he supposed she had every right to be.

Sighing, Salair took Snow's hands in his. Soon, he would drape this woman in the finest *krilli* cloths. He could not wait to see her garbed in the traditional *jatal-riaz*. For now, he placed a fragrant flower on her lap as a small gift, and kneeled down beside her.

"Know you not who I am to you?" Snow swallowed nervously. "I know that we are of the same people. I know that we are both Familiar. In that regard, I feel a kinship to you, Salair Ner. How could I not? You are the first of my people I have met since I was a young girl. I am happy you have come this way on your journey and that I have had a chance to make your acquaintance. I have long wondered what meeting one of my. . . Well, what it would be like. May I share something with you?"

"Please."

She stood up and paced the yard. Dusk was upon them; a few stars began to twinkle in the evening sky. He stood as well.

"There are times when I have felt outside of things here. It is hard to explain. It is not as if I do not belong, but. . ."

"It is not as if you belong, either." She nodded. "But-but not because I was made to feel that way! The Dundee have been most kind to me and—" His fingertip touched her lips to stop her. "You need not continue; I understand." He lightly stroked her lip with the edge of his finger. "Tell me, Snow, what do you remember of your own people?"

She smiled suddenly. "I do remember my parents—my real parents. They loved to laugh. We traveled continually and had so many adventures! My father was very tall and powerful. At least to a child's eyes. And my mother was so beautiful. . ."

"Like her daughter." His hand cupped her cheek. She turned her face away from him. "Am. . . Am I like that?" She certainly never felt that way. Salair sighed. Clearly her life had kept her sheltered from many things. She knew so little, it appeared. "You are a fine female Familiar."

"Oh." He had not said she was pretty, though. Snow sometimes wondered if she were actually displeasing, since she had often been kept removed from others. She suddenly wondered what *he* looked like.

"What color is your skin?"

"My skin tone is a blend of your eye colors, *Soft cat* . Golden tan."

"And what color are your eyes, Salair Ner?"

"One is the color of deep water—that if you could *see*, you would know." He prodded her for a reaction.

"Icy, then," she shot back, thinking his comment somewhat rude.

"That depends on the observer. A traveler, overly warm from her journey might come upon such a pond of water and find it honestly refreshing."

"Or uncomfortably chilled."

"Perhaps," he conceded, knowing full well how others often perceived him. Those who knew him not.

"And what of your other eye? Did you not say Familiars have two differently colored eyes?"

"We do. My dual-colored eyes denote that I am pure Familiar. *Like you*. It is golden, Snow, like the sun's rays." He tugged her hair. "*Like you*" The smile was in his voice, and she picked up on his teasing.

"May I feel your face?" she asked quietly.

He did not respond in words; he just lifted her hands to his face. Snow's gentle touch pleased him into a soft *purr*. Snow felt *exact* features. She wasn't sure what that meant. Was he handsome? Dull? Average? His features felt. . . Somehow right. A clearly drawn nose, longish lashes over eyes that tipped up slightly at the corners, high cheekbones, lips that were so soft to the feel, yet so firm. Her brow furrowed. "Are you typical of our kind?" He snorted, and she could discern the slow smile riding his words. "There is not a male Familiar alive who would consider himself *typical*, Snow, but—*I am just an average male* ." He paused, then added softly, "You need not feel uncomfortable around me."

She nodded. "They whisper in the village that Familiar males are extraordinary in certain ways" She hesitated, charmingly. "Is this true?"

He captured the tip of her finger between his teeth.

"Perhaps, you can tell me that . . . later." This man had such a wondrous scent! He smelled of the forest, of wintry trees, cool spices, and brisk, clear wind. The fragrance was very enticing.

And somewhat. . . recognizable. . .

Her brow furrowed. "What does your other form look like?"

"I am black with gold-tipped fur."

"Oh." She paused as she tried to imagine the unique combination with his eye colors." Ahhh, nice."

"What of you?"

She looked down. "I do not know."

"No one has told you—or you do not remember?" he asked sharply. He already suspected that she did not metamorphose into her other form.

"A little of both, I suppose. I was such a young child. . ."

"You know, Snow, you may have family still on M'yan." Her entire body stiffened defensively. "I do not. It was only my parents. I apologize if I have given you the wrong impression, but I have no wish to seek lost' family'."

"You are surely part of a clan; why would you not seek out your people?" He watched her reaction carefully.

"I have no desire to do such a thing. I am quite happy here. This is my home. Why would I ever leave it?" Such an attitude was completely alien to Salair who lived to explore. It was a mystery to him that she could actually be content to close every door to the outside. There was an entire universe out there for her! A full life. She did not have to deny herself and her culture to be content.

It would be different if she had chosen this life initially—but she had not. She was content, not because she felt at peace with her life but because she *feared* anything changing her life for the worse. She seemed terrified of possible loss. Understandable, he supposed, considering that something terrible had happened to her at such a young age. Nonetheless, he could not let this stand. He intended to *prod* her along first; then *pull* if necessary.

And not just for their own desires to be fulfilled. Their king had ordered them home. He reminded her of it.

"Again, you are aware that our king has ordered his subjects home?"

"Yes, as you have said, but this decree has naught to do with me. I am not one of Gian Ren's subjects." Salair shook his head. It appeared that Snow was blessed with the stubborn / contrary obtuseness that many female Familiars shared. They often refused *just to refuse*. The trait could be charming and irritating at the same time.

It took a Familiar male, strong in his person, equally stubborn, and fixed upon his goal to deal with such a female. It was a wonder to Salair that one such as Krue, a Charl knight, had been able to actually mate with a Familiar woman named Suleila.

Then again, Krue was a legendary knight, and thus seemed to be more than up to the task. For his recompense, Suleila had gifted him with their halfling son Rejar, who, in turn, gave *all* the Charl naught but sleepless nights for years.

Salair grinned.

Thankfully that would not be happening to him. As a Familiar male, he would decide about doing the gifting. And if his children were anything like him, they would surely be adventurers.

His thoughts brought him back to the present conundrum, and his step faltered. *He had a clueless mate.* Not a good sign for the reality of these future children.

Shaking off the troubling thought, he tried to reach her yet again. The ever-present danger of pursuit, the difficulties facing them on the coming journey, and his upcoming Incarnation weighed heavily on him.

He could wait no longer.

"*Know you not who I am to you?*" he repeated as he somewhat cornered her by a tree.

"That is the second time you have asked me that this eve." Somewhat aggrieved, she placed a hand against his chest when she almost tripped over him.

As he steadied her his nails ran lightly down her arm, leaving pleasing tingles in their wake.

Snow shivered. She smiled up at him. "What was that?"

"Just a tiny scratch, *Softcat*," he purred with a lilting smile in his voice. Some Familiars were experts in the art of erotic touch. He looked down at her with veiled eyes. "They say once you have been *love-scratched* by a Familiar, you will long for his touch forever."

She scoffed. "Legends are romantic, but hardly believable."

"Perhaps, very soon, you can test that out," he whispered in a *purrrrr* next to her lips.

Snow's mouth dropped open at his innuendo. "You—you cannot be serious?"

"Come swim with me in the pond."

"I—" His brisk scent suddenly covered her and she could no longer finish whatever she had been about to say. She should just refuse his invitation, but she would be lying if she did not admit at least to herself that she had wondered in the past what it might be like to be kissed by a Familiar man. The stories of her people—of their sensual natures—were always intriguing to her. She, for one, had never felt particularly motivated by such things. Perhaps she was a faulty version of a Familiar? Perhaps this was her chance to find out?

Her hesitation was his answer. He took her hand and quickly led her through the forest.

Moonlight brightened his path through the dense woods to the secluded pond where the night before he had floated his thoughts and slept on the gentle ripples of fate. The air

smelled of night. Damp, rich, and at rest. Snow inhaled an image of the forest through its scents. Sweet, night-blooming flowers, the slightly sharp tangy fragrance that the crushed grass released beneath their feet, the night air humid from the nearby pond—each sense swirled over her like ribbons on the wind.

Salair bent down at the water's edge to snap off one of the pod's at the tip of a swaying reed. He crushed the seed, and the milky liquid slid down his palm and between his fingers. Its alluring, heady scent filled the air, but Snow thought it was no match for the Familiar's own savory scent. She had always believed that stories of the intoxicating scent of the male Familiar were just that—stories.

Now she knew better. By Aiyah, his scent it was *irresistible* !

Snow sniffed the air delicately. Seemingly at the crushed pod.

They both knew differently, though.

"So, you have discovered our *lallax* plant. It is quite alluring, is it not?"

"It is," he drawled. "Do you have any practical use for it?"

"Yes. We use it in cooking. The flavor adds a unique, almost addictive taste to our sauces that is much sought after by those who favor such culinary things."

"Perhaps it has more interesting qualities. . ." Her brow furrowed. "Like what?"

"We shall see," he answered enigmatically. Snow was not sure she was comfortable hearing such a cryptic tone coming from a Familiar. She was sure it presaged getting a good *'scratching'*. She suddenly remembered her mother saying: *'Always beware of any male who is also a cat. For no matter his outward demeanor, he will always act true to his nature. Even more so at night.'*

According to her mother females were always sweet and perfect. (This always caused her father to growl and laugh simultaneously.) Salair's true nature was feline—and even a female Familiar would do best to never forget it in his presence.

Such men might purr, but 'capturing' was never far from their minds.

As if to give credence to her thoughts, she heard the distinct rustling of garments being removed. She inhaled, then exhaled. "Why do you remove your raiment, Salair Ner?"

"I remove my clothing because you will want to touch me, Snow."

Said so reasonably! "And why would I want to do that?"

"Well, I am about to give you untold pleasure. For such an experience—you will surely crave touch." Before she could even think of a response to that, his hands gently skimmed her shoulders, undoing the clasps of her robe. Her garment obediently rustled to the ground for him. The only sound in the still night was the soft intake of her breath.

"You are very beautiful." The Familiar's throaty voice sounded husky to her ears. As if his words themselves were *purrs* . No wonder they were considered experts at seduction!

She was not surprised by this man's actions; he was only being true to his nature. It would be more of an oddity if he did not attempt such a seduction. So. . .

What could it hurt to explore a little with him? Such an opportunity would likely not come again for her. Taking her hand again, he led her into the cool water. He seemed to sense her curiosity and her hesitancy.

"You are shy to. . .*swim* with me?" He carefully brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. The graceful touch was expert.

"You are the first Familiar I have met on this planet. I am more curious than anything else, Salair. In fact, it is something I suddenly have an outrageous curiosity for; although I am not sure I can explain it. Mayhap, you are my only opportunity to *swim* at night."

"Ah, so you would use the hand of your own kind to kill your beast?" he paraphrased a well-known Familiar saying. She laughed, remembering the old motto. It was a happy note that echoed through the woods, making him smile.

He glanced at her from beneath veiled eyes. "There is another saying. . ."

"And what is that?" She grinned.

"The hand that slays your beast *owns* your beast. . ."

She chuckled. "I hardly think I am in any danger from that."

"It is because you are at ease with me." She grinned. "Perhaps I am, and—" She stopped abruptly.

"And?" he prodded.

"It is well known that Familiar men adore women to the point of distraction. I hardly think you are any danger to me or my beast. Whatever that is."

"There are many types of danger," he intoned in a voice that sent shivers up her spine.

"For others. Not for me."

"Why do you think that?" he drawled as he methodically backed her into a more secluded corner of the pond.

"I have nothing to lose," she whispered.

"We all have something to lose, *Softcat*."

Ready to prove his point, his mating scent thickened the air. It *drenched* her, elevating her desire to couple with him. A male Familiar's discrete mating scent was a powerful aphrodisiac. Snow could now attest to the truth of that. Salair's exotic scent was a cool breeze winding seductively through snow-kissed trees.

Like an icy sting of fresh air on a snowy day, it awakened her passion. How ironic that an intrinsic part of his attractive scent evoked a vision of her name. . . As if he were the force that quietly flowed through her.

Like a silent storm and its snow.

Salair cupped his hands together, filling them with water. Raising his arms, he slowly let the cool liquid slide down his forearms to drip onto her breasts.

The continuous flow of droplets sluiced over the rounded globes, branching and spreading out in its path back to the pond. The silvery moon rays illuminated each perfect pear-shape and set the droplets to glow as they cascaded over the mounds and dripped off the dusky tips. Salair began to *purr* low in his throat as he watched the sensuous display. Not for the first time he rued the fact that she herself could not witness her own exquisite beauty. Especially on this night.

Her long hair spread across the surface of the pond, floating around her like a lustrous cloak. Even wet, it was remarkably luxuriant. A thick swath clung to her breasts, across her stomach, and draped enticingly over her right hip. Her long, pale lashes glowed with droplets of the sparkling water beads.

Snow's damp skin appeared almost translucent in the night. The cool water produced a perfect crest on the dusky nipples that stood at attention as the liquid caressed and cascaded over them.

She moaned gently at the fluid sensations of the cool water.

"They say that losing one sense can greatly accent the others," he murmured softly as he observed her strong reaction.

"Is that possible?" she wondered.

He quietly scooped up another handful of water, sending it tumbling over her. "Did you know that Familiars can accentuate their senses at will?"

She blinked, startled. "No, I had no idea. Then this intense *feeling* . . . is normal?"

He smiled crookedly. *For one about to be mated, yes.* "That is hard to say, *Softcat* . I would like to think I could gift you with all manner of these "intense feelings" if you would consent to allow it. And. . . that such gifts could be bestowed whether you had your sight or not."

Her hand came up and clasped his wrist. "What do you mean?"

"You set yourself apart too much, Snow. I shall give you pleasure, and I can assure you that this pleasure will not be hindered in any way by that which hinders you." Her face flamed. The man was rather blunt. "What makes you think I would welcome such intimacies?" She had meant to allow him a few kisses and caresses—nothing more.

Snow's words struck a warning to him, so his focus narrowed. The flicker of his eyelid was the only indication that his senses had picked up a disturbing revelation. *She was untouched* .

Completely uninitiated.

How could that be for a mature Familiar woman?! It was unfathomable.

What kind of a life did she lead in this place? How much did she really know of herself and her people? No Familiar woman was ever meant to live as life such as this. Salair Ner, calm on the outside, feverishly wondered what he would do with such a woman? He was a man who lived for heated pleasure; he was a sophisticated lover who looked for the same in his partners. In all his years of experience, he had never lain with an untouched woman. Not that he could not figure it out quick enough, he supposed.

After all, he had a certain expertise.

While the knowledge had momentarily shocked him, he did not want to put more importance on it than it warranted. Her state was more the result of the life she had been forced to lead, rather than anything else. More important, her untouched state clearly spoke to him of how estranged she was from her race—of which she had been denied the company of, along with her true nature. All of that would be rectified soon.

He gladly would see to it.

At first, he had not been sure about this turn of events. But, the more time he spent in her company, the more his instincts told him that he would have no other. It was strange the way the mating rituals worked for his kind. . .

Yet they were always *true* .

Salair realized with total clarity that he utterly *wanted* this woman. Forever.

As his alone.

And she wondered what made him expect such intimacies from her?

She was about to find out.

"You ask what makes me think so?" He lifted her fingers to his lips. "This tells me, Snow." He suckled on the tips, slowly letting his teeth scrape against the ultra-sensitive skin. It was her first introduction to his expertise. The scraping touch was perfectly pressured.

A *frisson* skirted up her spine.

Snow gasped and tried to pull out of his grip. He held her fast.

"Discerning such disclosures from a female are second nature to me."

Snow was not sure she liked being 'discerned'. It was rather perfunctory when one came right down to it. She lifted her chin defiantly. "I am not a simple rhyme that one picks up and instantly guesses the meaning to." He looped a wet section of hair behind her shoulder.

"How boring if you were," he strangely conceded.

"Perhaps I agreed to this swim a bit prematurely. You seem to be a man who expects these arrangements. Especially from women who live rather lonely lives in the far woods, on out of the main gate planets. Mayhap, I should make you wait for your—"

His laugh was full and rich. "I need not wait, Snow. I already claimed you the instant we met."

"*Claimed me?*" She could not believe what she was hearing. She had not agreed to *that*. What kind of a weird race did she come from that a man would leap to such a conclusion?!

"The moon is high in the sky behind us, lengthening our shadows." Salair watched as his longer shadow covered hers. "I have already placed my soul upon you."

Her mouth parted in shock. "What-What did you say?" Her dream flashed through her mind. It must be coincidence!

"*N'taga*. Shadow dance. You are mine to take, Snow. And I intend to make it so this very eve." She began to bristle at his audacity. "I see. I should have been suspicious from the first. The way you just walked up and introduced yourself as if you had every right to— Wait a moment. . . ! So the female has no choice in the matter according to you?"

He sighed. "It is not about choice. It is about *mating* ." Even as she fumed at his boldness, strong, muscular arms came about her waist, pulling her towards him. "It is the rule of life."

"Such rules do not apply to me, Salair Ner! I do not live my life as a Familiar woman."

He scoffed at that nonsense. "You cannot dismiss nature. You *are* Familiar, and you will soon see that the rituals very much apply to you. I *am* going to mate you, Snow." His tone was firm and altogether resolute.

And he was through talking about it.

His clasp was like an iron torque around her middle, embracing, sheltering—yet, still *capturing*. She could sense it. She heard him snap off another lallax pod and then felt the

scented oil as he trickled it over each pointed nipple. Before she could speak, his mouth swiftly captured one fragrant bud as it bobbed just above the waterline. The pull of those firm masculine lips was like hot satin on her. Scalding, yet silky smooth.

Unapologetically, he suckled the delicious lallax right from her breasts. Then his own scent began to mingle with hers. Preparing her for him. Luring her to him. Snow could hardly breathe. She tingled from head to toe with intense *desire* for him.

Palms to her sides, the Familiar lifted her out of the water. He seemed to favor the position for he immediately locked her in a tighter embrace, keeping her still as his lips captured her. He drew and drew upon the sensitive peaks, tugging and playing with each distended nipple until she thought she'd go mad.

When her hands sank into his hair and clenched, he *growled* in the back of his throat.

It was the most wildly sensual thing she had ever heard. Her fingers shakily tangled into the long strands. "Salair," she breathed. "I am—"

He triggered the mating response.

A sudden breeze shot across the pond, but it did not cool her fevered skin. Why was she suddenly so hot? Her entire body prickled with need! For his touch.

His kiss.

His body.

Snow tried again. "I am—" She swallowed, but could no longer speak.

"You are what?" he whispered as he kissed up her neck and tugged on her earlobe.

"I-I do not know anymore." And she truly didn't. All she could think of was the touch of his lips, the feel of his wide, warm palms pressed against her back as he held her tight to him. The plushness of his skin. The hard impact of his muscular frame as he embraced her. His luscious scent. That *cool* wintry forest. That crisp excitement of awakened life. .

His luscious scent.

His luscious scent.

His luscious scent.

Covering her. Entangling her. Filling her!

What was happening? Snow blinked and tried to regain herself. It was as if she were sinking into a vat of a heady brew. She wanted him with every breath she took. What would he do to her next? she wondered, shakily. He began *by simply licking* her nipple. As if he were lapping up a bowl of creamy lallax. Over and over. In long, even flicks of his tongue.

Each hot rasp sent her spiraling. She was lost to this man's expertise!

Why had no one warned her what Familiars were truly like? Her heart began to pound in her chest, a steady, strong beat of escalating desire. Shivers ran down her arms and to her toes.

Under the water, the tip of his manhood bobbed against her inner thigh.

It momentarily brought her to her senses.

Snow placed her palms against Salair's naked chest in an attempt to find her breath. And her sanity. "I think you—I think you still misunderstand the situation, Salair Ner. I will bathe with you in this pond, but after—" She thought about the delicious waves of enticement rolling off him and decided it would be foolish to send him away. Who knew when, if ever, this chance would arise for her again? "Mayhap, I *might* share a bed with you this eve. But, I have no intentions of mating anyone. My life is quite settled."

"Predictable," he supplied too helpfully, as he continued with the licking.

She pursed her lips. "Ordered," she shot back.

"Safe," he countered and bit down lightly.

"*Oh!* Whatever. In any case, I do not need a—" His finger curled under the edge of her chin. She could feel him bending closer to her. *He must be quite tall*, she realized with a gulp.

"Snow," he murmured in a husky kind of voice that she had never heard *any* man use before. Tiny bumps rose on her skin. She swallowed as she waited to hear what he would say next.

It was not what she expected.

"This Familiar takes you," he kissed the corner of her mouth.

"But—"

His finger across her lips silenced her.

"And he discards all others.

This Familiar will give himself only to you—And no other. This Familiar unites with you now forever.

For him there is no other."

And then, he repeated his words in the ancient Familiar tongue:

"Salair Ner K'Tea

Ei mahana ne Tuan

Salair Ner K'mea sut la

Ei ra Tuan

Salair Ner litna K'shintauk rehan

A jhan vri re Tuan"

Salair's hands cupped her head, and she could feel him lowering toward her for a kiss. *A mating kiss?* Snow blinked. Where had that thought come from? Was he really mating her?

He could not be!

She opened her mouth to forestall him, but he was already there.

In the traditional manner, his lips covered hers to take what was his. To capture. To seize...

And to gift.

Although playful at times, Familiar males were dead serious when it came to mating. They never veered from their intended path, nor allowed themselves to be swayed from the actions that they were bound to take. Which was why one could never be too careful, should one lie down with one.

A cat always knows where he will land.

Snow's lovely eyes widened at the touch of those masterful lips.

Smooth yet hard, determined yet pliable. They covered her much like his scent, alluring and enticing. They pierced every defense.

Gasping, she clutched at his shoulders. Then grabbed harder when she realized she could not breathe!

Applying a proper mating kiss, Salair Ner took it all. Drained the last breath from her.

Snow did what most mates of Familiar's do when they are given their mating kiss. She panicked and tried to get away.

He *growled* low in his throat. Part warning and part pleasure that the proper response was being given to him as he firmly, utterly placed his mating seal upon her.

Not until the fight in her had petered away and she became faint did he react.

He returned breath. . . But it was not hers. Symbolically giving her his life with his breath, the hunter was captured along with his prey.

Their lives were now forever joined.

When she exhaled, he would inhale. Thus they were attuned.

His arms dropped to her waist, and he brushed his mouth over her face to speak low in her ear.

"You are mine, Snow. This is a fact. Though you have not lived much of your life as a Familiar, I vow that will change." His sharp teeth nipped at her ear, causing her to shiver—even as her blood was thickening in anticipation of the physical mating they would soon share.

She trembled in his arms.

Her instincts told her there would be no escaping this man. He was not like the others; she could not hide away from him as she had always done, staying safe and content in her cozy home.

He was one of her own kind.

There was a feral quality to him now.

It had galled Salair that his mate did not seem to appreciate their rituals. What others longed for, she had too easily cast aside. He did not think she actually understood or sensed the depth of passion that their race harbored. Or why they were so sought out in the galaxy. The reason so many wanted to “own” them.

He would have to teach her what it meant to truly be Familiar.

Leave no doubt in her mind who and what she truly was.

Picking her up in his arms, he carried her to the edge of the pond. Snow clutched his long hair between her fingers.

"Wh-where are we going?"

"Not far, and yet, a long way," he replied cryptically. He followed her down into the tall grasses, coming over her in a seamless motion.

His desire for her was thick and hot.

It pounded in his veins, seeking a place inside her. He so wanted to take her wildly and roughly, as most first joinings were—but he knew that was not to be with their first time.

He needed to be careful with her.

Nevertheless, he would not hold back his passion. It just was not in him.

But, Salair would give her a banquet of the senses. Snow would remember this joining since he could gift her with this particular experience in this particular way but once.

Snow put a hand to her fevered forehead. Her head was spinning! Her heart pounded. Her breath—or was that his breath? – came in short gasps. The skin on her legs itched. *In anticipation for his touch.*

That searing touch!

She almost moaned aloud.

He paused, going completely still over her. Watching her, she knew.

And it was that heated regard that she could *feel* on her that suddenly made her growl in her throat.

Snow blinked.

Had that feral sound just come from her? Had he just caused her to make such a wild sound?

The low *purr* that rumbled from his chest was her answer. The cat's sensual nature. Never to be toyed with, she knew. Yes, she had made that wild cry.

And the male had responded to it.

As he pressed down on her full length, she felt every hard angle of him. His skin was smooth and warm, yet rock hard under the deceptively alluring cover.

His muscular arm encircled her waist, sliding lower to lift her closer to him. His other hand swept back the damp tendrils of hair that clung to her neck.

Tugging her head back, he exposed her arched throat.

A soft nicker warned her to stay put.

He exhaled shallowly, the faint stream of air liltng against her throat as he came in to claim his prize. She was his mating treasure—and he was about to stake his claim.

Holding her immobile, his tongue swept up the side of her neck. Short, flicking licks. A quick taste before the main meal.

Snow shivered at the utter sensuality of the dominating act.

When he reached the underside of her ear, he captured the small lobe between his lips, letting the skin slide against his teeth. Just enough to elicit a soft groan from her. He surprised her by taking a quick, sharp nip.

"Oh!"

Salair chuckled softly. It was just one of a myriad of bites he had perfected. *The Satin Sting*. Male Familiars often prided themselves on their inventive variation and use of the sexual bite. Apparently, Snow did not know this. He looked forward to revealing his other range of gifts. After all, he had enthusiastically spent the span of two incarnations perfecting them. To put it bluntly and without overstating, he was *pinpoint* good.

However, there was a danger for him.

The closer he came to a certain spot on her neck, the more he was apt to lose the control he was forced to maintain for her in this first of matings. Normally, when Familiars joined, it was a wild pairing from the start. Due to Snow's untouched state, however, he would have to rein in some of his fire lest he risk injuring her.

It would not be easy.

Already, he was in the throws of the mating trance. His breathing was deepening as his blood thickened in his veins. His special senses were starting to open completely to her in preparation for the bonding. Snow was melting into him in a way he had never experienced before in love-making. It was extraordinary.

He closed his eyes to concentrate on the rich sensations flowing through him. He could hear her shallows breaths—mimicking the sound of caught prey—increasing as she unconsciously began to compliment his slowed-down cadence.

Aligning her life to his breath. . .

Beautiful. It was beautiful. With that, his mouth covered hers again. Only this time Snow would learn that there was more than depth to a Familiar's kiss.

Salair's tongue stroked fluidly inside. There was *something* he did that made her whole body quake with desire!

Blindly, Snow clutched his upper arms, seeking an anchor to the impossible sensations this man was evoking in her. *Simply with his tongue.*

Unbidden, in the back of her mind, she wondered what else he could do with such a skill?
A blush rose to color her cheeks.

{So shy, my Soft cat?} He sent her the thought. The tips of his fingers skimmed under the fall of hair at the back of her neck. Over a spot so sensitive that she immediately reared up, arching against him.

She gasped for breath, at once recognizing another advantage to a Familiar's telepathic gift of sending thoughts out to others. It could be used as an erotic tool during lovemaking *{You are quite expert at this, Salair Ner.}* A *rrrr* rumbled through his muscular chest. *{Well, I am quite fond of 'this', as you put it.}* She shivered as his fingertips lightly skimmed up and down the back of her arms, accentuating the experience. Then the man *purred* deeply into her mouth. A long vibration that made her tremble to her toes. Pleasure strokes escalated throughout her body, pulsing and building. He plunged his tongue inside her, but it was—He was doing—What was he doing??? A *pleased-purr* vibrated through her own throat, surprising her.

{So.}

{So?}

{You are Familiar, after al .} With that he swirled that blazing tongue inside her mouth in such a way as to make waves of pleasure tingles sweep through her, building and building, until she thought she might scratch him up. . . Just so he would. . .

Snow's back arched up off the ground as she reached her first peak; the pulsing ripples dancing over and over her. When she could catch her breath again, she blinked. Had he actually brought her to release?

With just his kiss?

Well, she had experienced something extraordinary; what else could it be?

Her body fought to find some normalcy after the strange onslaught. Familiar males could do such a thing? She had no idea. What else could they—She did not have time to ponder the male Familiar dilemma.

Salair immediately gathered her limp body closer to him, and whispered something in her ear before gently flipping her over onto her stomach.

Into the grass.

Snow tried to turn, cantilevering up on her elbows. The male Familiar held her down securely.

"Salair, whatever are you doing? I want to touch you." He had been right about that—she did want to touch him

"You will, *Softcat* . But not now."

Snow frowned. What did that mean?

"Know you nothing of our mating rituals?" His deep voice rasped right behind her left ear.

"There-there are *more* rituals?" She was not sure she liked the sound of that. Certainly, nothing was coming to her instinctively as to what he—It could not be what she was thinking. . . Could it?

"By *Aiyah* , Salair, you are not actually—You do not really mean to follow the traditional ways of—You cannot be serious!"

He laughed, low and sensual. "We males take great pride in following the ways of our kind, Snow. To be a Familiar's mate, you need first *betaken* like a Familiar's mate."

No way. No No No.

Snow began to struggle in earnest as she fully comprehended what he was saying. She had no intention of letting her first encounter with a man to be like that! It was *untamed* .

"Salair, I have changed my mind!"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, really. And when did you actually entertain this, Kittenfeet? Hmm?" She stopped squirming under him for a second. *Kittenfeet?* Come to think on it, she did not anticipate any of this. She certainly did not seek it. *How is it then that I am laying face down on the ground with a powerful Familiar draped over me from head to toe, pressing into the curve of my back with more than his good looks?* Her nostrils flared. So, this was how it was done! It was already too late. He had mated her! His kind would never be dissuaded at this point.

Or any point, she ruefully acknowledged.

Once they sensed their mates, it was all over. There was no way Salair would stop now.

But he did stop. For a brief moment.

"What are you so apprehensive about?" He whispered coaxingly. "I will give you intense satisfaction, *Softcat*." He paused, then added truthfully, "Eventually." That was all Snow had to hear. Shocking herself, she hissed and tried to scratch her way free.

Salair's hold on her was firm.

What was more, she had inflicted absolutely no damage on him.

She was caught, lying beneath him and at his mercy. *By Aiyah!* Familiar males were entirely too irksome when they mated! And Salair Ner seemed most serious. During their prior conversations, it seemed as though he might be swayed to a few things.

Now it appeared he was resolved in his path. Snow did not think she could talk him out of this position. But she did try.

"I think we will have more enjoyment another way." She tempted him with a sweet voice.

Fortunately, she did not see the flash of a grin behind her.

"That may be. . ." He gave her a moment of hope before he came in for the kill. "Yet, we will never know." His finger quickly tested the moisture between her legs. Snow's mouth opened in shock, but nothing surfaced in response. Probably because he was insinuating his knee directly between her clenched thighs.

He wasted no more time. He simply slid the swath of her hair aside, and sharply clamped down on the back of her neck with his *teeth*.

Then he *pressed* between her nether lips. Snow was not happy with the position. She thrashed. He held her still, barely embedded in her lush folds. In her sweet liquid.

It had been hard for him to stop his forward momentum, but he had no desire to hurt her. When she tried to buck him off, a cautionary growl near her ear was all the warning she got.

It was enough.

The Familiar first mating position was instinctually male dominant. And so it had been for their people since the beginning of time. He was embedded in her—just past the portal. And although she had no one to compare him to, she was sure he was rather large.

A tiny tear cascaded down her cheek.

He tenderly licked it away.

"The discomfort will subside shortly. Then you will see how this Familiar will make you cry with pleasure. Never pain again, *my Softcat*." With that he sharply nipped her ear, then soothed the spot with a gentle sweep of his tongue. The acute sting of his bite took her mind off the burning for a moment—which was, no doubt, his intention. Feeling her inner muscles ease slightly around him, Salair did not stroke, but *bore down* against her inner walls, sliding ever so slightly forward as he did so. The tender inner muscles immediately clamped around him. Rich, viscous fluid coated him anew. She might be sore, but his Softcat wanted him.

He swallowed the groan rising in his throat. The feel of being inside her! Surely, this mating thing was underrated, for had he known how good this would be, he would have searched for his mate from the day he reached his adulthood. His member throbbed inside her.

His fingers intertwined tightly over hers.

Snow could feel him bear down inside her. It was somewhat enjoyable, but not enough to override the stinging discomfort.

The tip of his member came right up against the shield of skin blocking his way. Experimentally, Salair tapped against it.

He was a full-blooded, strong male in his prime—but her whimper almost brought him down. Between his difficult, snug fit in her, and the firm, tight walls, he knew that this was not going to be so easy.

Wrapping his arms tightly around her waist, he lifted her up and back into him as he *drove* downward. A ragged cry issued from Snow.

The metallic smell of blood assailed his nostrils. He thought he might be able to help her, so he sharply bit the back of her neck once more, locking her in place. Only this time he *enhanced* lightly.

Snow moaned aloud. Pleasure played with her pain.

"What-what do you do, Salair?"

{Males have the ability to enhance the sexual act. I thought if I gave you a slight taste of enhancement, the discomfort would subside.}

Her eyes went wide. "I did not know males could do that. I have never heard the villagers speak of it; nor even boast of it in the taverns—as the men are wont to do."

{That is because men cannot. Only male Familiars have such gifts.}

"Is that why the slavers seek you out? And why the males fetch such high prices at the auctions?"

{It is one reason.} He answered rather cryptically. She wondered what other reasons there could be. "Ah, Salair, what did you mean by as *light* taste?" His answer was a low laugh followed by a short burst of *true* enhancement.

Snow's fingers clenched the grass as she screamed, her yells of ecstasy echoing through the trees. Several startled forest creatures took flight. But, her muscles did ease around him and he could sink further into her.

She was still reeling when he casually said, "I should have thought of that before."

So, he slid fully into her as he fully *enhanced*. Her wet arousal cushioned his swift passage. Her pleasure-screams soon cascaded around him like an unending waterfall. Unimpeded, he began to move in the moisture-drenched passage. Thrusting deeper and deeper, all the while sending her waves of unrelenting *enhancement*. Salair was never a subtle man when it came to love play. Truthfully, he did not go easy on her.

But he did please her.

Until she screamed his name. Begged for release. Cried out her fulfillment.

Only then did she release her own feline nature—And finally called him her beloved Familiar mate.

Salair sensed a non-threatening presence looming over him.

As sleeping cats are wont to do, he lifted his eyelids slowly.

The Dundee that he had seen by the cottage was staring at him. Her wise, old eyes were apparently judging him as he slept with his mate in his arms.

His mate.

His glance drifted over to Snow who was fast asleep in his arms.

Not wanting to wake her up, he nodded his head to indicate her sleeping form before sending his thoughts into the Dundee's mind.

{What is it that you seek from me?}

She rocked on her flat, wide heels and continued to observe him carefully through steady eyes. Respecting his wishes to not wake Snow, she spoke with him using *hiss-words*; a magickal technique perfected by her kind. *Hiss-words* allowed spoken words to be heard only at the ear of the intended recipient. Salair knew for a fact that the Charl wizards had been trying to obtain that craft for years but it eluded their best efforts.

"You have come to take our daughter away from us." The words floated gently next to his ear.

Daughter? So, he had been wrong when he had viewed that scene in the glade. Snow, apparently, was more than a pet to her. This Dundee had probably saved his mate's life. For that he owed her much.

Many would have sold a Familiar girl off to obtain the enormous amount of clarified stones she would fetch. For that kind act alone, he would be respectful. But, he had no intention of misleading the Dundee as to what he would do. Snow was his now. She belonged to him. The responsibility of protecting her was his and his alone.

He did not mince words.

{Yes. I will take her from you.}

The old Dundee let out a long sigh, then slowly sat her bulky body next to him, sinking into the tall grass. She gazed out at the rippling pond. It was several moments before she spoke. "This will make us very sad." The word 'sad' floated an especially long time by his

ear. Salair looked down, a line marring his normally smooth forehead. *{I am sorry for that.}*

The Dundee exhaled heavily, making sure the Familiar *felt* the weight of his actions on her. Then she said, "You are welcome to stay. With us, Familiar?"

There was a hopeful tone in her words. Dundee were reclusive, yet kind people. It had not been his intention to hurt anyone. It was Salair's turn to sigh.

{I thank you, but I cannot. I must return to my home world—and with due haste.}

"So you will leave our Snowflake?" Although outwardly calm, the Dundee squeezed a fistful of grass, and then ripped at it.

Salair took pity on her. She was upset.

{Snow can no longer remain with you; it is too dangerous for her. Sooner or later, others may find her, and they will take her away. Not back to her people, as I will. . . But to a life of terrible hardship. If you care for her, you would not want this to happen.}

"What makes you think she would not be safe with us? We are a simple people, living a simple life, far from the ambitions of others. She is a sweet being, happy and pleased with her life. Perhaps, it is not right for you to take that from her."

{Perhaps not. Yet, it is what I must do.} The Dundee stared across the pond. After some time passed she finally said, "Sometimes a simple life is best." Salair countered. *{When has living a simple life ever protected those from the ones that would seize power over them?}* The Dundee smiled slightly. "For one not Dundee, you are somewhat wise. Mayhap, Snowflake could have more. . . on your world?"

She wanted reassurance that Snow would be well-cared for.

{Much more.}

She nodded. "Best you leave quickly. I have just returned from the village; there is a tracker asking questions in the square about a tall Familiar who has gold-tipped hair. I am thinking that tracker hunts you. Does she not?" Salair's brow knit. *{A female tracker?}* The Dundee nodded.

A tracker who was female was very unusual. Furthermore, this one was highly skilled; he had barely caught a sense of her tracking him—and he was exceptionally skilled. He could not afford to underestimate her. Trackers were always scouts; there was no telling how many followed behind.

He glanced down at his mate. She was especially vulnerable. His arms tightened around her. *{Neither one of us is safe here. As soon as she learns of Snow, she will come for her as well.}*

"Then take her now. Do not tarry any longer." The Dundee gave a rather sad sounding snort. "She is always slow to awaken to her senses in the morning."

Salair grinned. *{Is she?}*

The Dundee chuckled as she rose. "Especially so for a feline."

{You will be safe?}

She waved away his concern and tossed him a sack of food. "Fresh from the early morn market. For your journey." He knew how much Dundee disliked going about in the sunlight. He thanked her. *{Tell me, why did you name her Snowflake?}*

"No. No name her." The words floated to him. "She told us."

A thoughtful expression crossed his handsome features.

"When the time is right, tell her we will miss her." He nodded, but she was already hobbling away.

Snow felt a toe in her side.

"Wake up, *Kittenfeet* . We are leaving."

"Go with two cloaks and a wizard's dance," she mumbled incoherently and turned onto her side. The toe wiggled into her waist, moving to just under her rib. "*Snow, wake up now,*" said the firm voice.

She burrowed her forehead into the crook of her arm and actually hissed at him. It was not as if she weren't stiff and sore in places she had not realized one *could* be stiff and sore.

She was positive the direct cause of every one of those 'pings' tormenting her was *him* .

"You are my least favored person at the moment. Go away! I am not moving for another day and a half," she grouched.

"As you wish." Salair grabbed her wrist and ankle, and tossed her over his broad shoulders. Like one might a traveling cloak.

That woke her up.

"What the—?" The tilting sensation surprised her. She soon realized that the forest seemed to be rushing past them. She frowned. That could not be. No, she was the one rushing past the trees! Salair Ner had tossed her over his shoulders and he—*By Aiyah, the man was moving!*

He navigated through the trees at a lightening-fast clip. *Away from her home .*

"Stop! You are going in the wrong direction, Salair!"

{Am I?}

What was he doing? She did not realize she had spoken out loud until he answered her.

{I am taking you to M'yan.}

To M'yan? That was it; no discussion? Simply, because he had mated her? What arrogance! She scratched his back.

"I think not."

A slow grin spread across Salair's face. She was feline, indeed. "So, *now* you are the cat?" he teased.

"I have told you before, I do not wish to return to M'yan!"

"That is unfortunate since we *are* returning." As far as this stray cat was concerned—it was time to *scat*.

But all did not go as he had planned.

Once Snow realized that he truly meant to take her from her protected home, she fought with all of her strength to forestall him. She banged her fists against him, twisting upon his shoulders as she kicked and scratched.

It was to no avail.

Male Familiars, once resolute, were unmovable. And besides, they were used to their mates carrying on thus. It was part of the female feline nature. He was pleased it was starting to show itself more and more. But, when her energy wore down and the pitiful sobs came his heart was torn.

He tried to soothe her; he understood all too well that he was removing her from everything she knew and loved. Snow had found safety and comfort on Teno. To the point that the refuge was not just a safe harbor—it was a place she could hide away.

Some Familiars were wont to travel and some adored the comforts of home. That was not the issue. Snow had to leave this planet. Not just for her safety; but for her ultimate well-being.

She had never recovered from her wounds the night her parents were lost to her. Nor would she if she remained hidden away.

She had forgotten who she was; where she came from. Most importantly, she forgot how to *be* Familiar. It saddened him.

She could no longer metamorphose into her other form. So she had lived her life cut off from everyone and everything. Including herself.

A life of small parameters.

And even in that she had made herself happy. It was her nature. He could see that—she *was* sweet-natured. Snow had not become "lost". Events had been enacted upon her and she made a place for herself to survive in. She had found a way to live.

His hand stroked her leg. "You are in danger, *Softcat* . We must go where it is safe. Do not be sad. It will be better—much better—for you on M'yan."

"I do not wish to leave my home, Salair." Her soft sobs pierced him. A tear splashed on the hand that was still stroking her. "You can be my mate on Teno." What else could she do? he asked himself. She was terrified, and she was *blind*. He came into her life to remove her from all she knew and loved.

After their incredible night together, he realized how much he already loved her. So, then, how could he be the cause of this pain to her?

She was his own Softcat.

He would have to keep close to his heart that her kindness would eventually allow her to forgive him. It was all that he had.

There was no other path in this situation.

He tried to raise his own flagging spirits by telling himself she would understand it all soon.

"There is no more discussion of this, Snow. We will soon be on M'Yan."

Even as his voice was strong with determination, a tear escaped the corner of his eye. Had his clansmen been there to witness it, they never would have believed it. Salair Ner going *tame* ? The Familiar who lived for wild adventure and who was just this side of rogue?

Salair resolutely shook off the painful emotions. He must be strong now—for both of their sakes.

It was a horrible journey.

It had taken him eight days to find his way back to M'yan through safe Tunnel points. Snow cried every night. Her pitiful sobs constantly tore at him. She would not speak with him for much of the day.

Salair did not make love to her again on the journey—respectful of her mood and cautious of triggering the Incarnation too soon. Already, his temper was growing short and, at odd times, he was experiencing the wracking tremors of the pre-onset stage.

While some of the symptoms varied from male to male, the general process was the same. Only his iron will, and determination staved it off. Soon, though that would not be enough.

No matter how strong the Familiar, he could not hold back nature's transformation forever.

At several locations, the locals gaped at them. A powerful shapeshifter carrying a beautiful, but sad woman on his back was not a usual sight.

As expected, no one interfered.

No one would be foolish enough to come between a Familiar and his woman. Most preferred to live. Salair had already stepped through the final gate on Aviara that led directly to his home world and was now making his way north to his clan's territory. He had not seen his kinsmen in a very long time, and was surprised to find he had missed them.

He snarled softly, not sure he liked that emotion. He was not the kind of feline who felt sadness when he was not around others. How had mating changed him? Had he been melted by Snow?

Snow, mistaking his snarl for a danger warning, tightened her muscles in his hold.

Salair instantly relaxed. "I apologize. I was thinking of something that—" He decided he did not wish to explain those thoughts to her so said instead, "You will have a beautiful new home soon that you will never have to leave, if that is your wish."

Snow delicately sniffed the air.

It was humid and heavy with the smell of exotic flowers. For some reason, the fragrance evoked the *sultriness* that she had shared with Salair the one time they had mated. The scent was quite intoxicating, but she would not tell him that.

"It does not smell like home," she said in quiet defiance.

"It will," he assured her. "I vow it to you."

He would not reach his village before the incarnation was upon him.

They were almost home.

He could smell the spicy *lingra* and *soutra* herbs—so beloved by his people—that grew only in the northern continent of M'Yan.

Narrowing his clear eyes against the setting sun, he scanned the flowing, lavender waters of the river *A jain* as it flowed past a rocky promontory where they had stopped to rest.

Strangely, Snow had ceased resisting him when they entered the Familiar world. He noticed her hesitation when her senses took in the sounds and scents of her childhood home.

Was she already remembering that which she had forgotten?

This *washer* world. Her people. She had seemed strangely thoughtful since then. He no longer carried her, guiding her by hand was enough. Occasionally, he called out a warning to her, such as: 'there is a stone in front of you,' or, 'step up onto the ledge'. Snow's natural abilities came to the fore as her innate dexterity allowed her to navigate the land with a lithe nimbleness that was unusual in a sightless person. As they traveled along in quiet companionship (due to his firm guidance and her pliant grace), they seemed to flow naturally into one another. Their movements were attuned. So it generally was with mated Familiars.

And the longer they were mated, the more connected they would become.

Thus, it was not truly a surprise when Snow remarked casually, "How long have you been in this kind of pain?" Salair—who had been doing his best to conceal the sharp spasms that were coming at closer and stronger intervals—saw no reason to continue his subterfuge. In any event, he could not keep the knowledge of the Incarnation from her much longer.

Especially since she would be a rather major part of it. Best he get it out in the open.

He only prayed she had some knowledge of it. It would be difficult to have to explain it as if she were not one of his kind.

Those kind of digressions were unheard of—full knowledge of Incarnation was kept strictly within his people. For the first time he wondered how Gian Ren had

'explained' the Incarnation to the *tajan*, Jenise. . . Well, he must have done a good job of it for Salair had heard she was already impregnated by their king. And *that* could only occur during Incarnation. It had worked out very well for them and the *tajan* was not even Familiar. She was Frensi. It should not be as difficult for Snow, who was born of their kind.

Like most of his people, Salair was a great believer in nature. Since Snow was a Familiar mate, instinctively, she should be drawn to him at this time.

Despite what she knew, she would feel *driven* to help him.

"It is the Incarnation," he answered her truthfully. "It is coming swiftly upon me."

She cocked her head to the side. "Incarnation? What is that?"

An intense tremor rocked him, making him double over. Snow called out in alarm. "Salair!" Despite her not wanting to return to M'yan, she definitely cared for this man. She knew without a doubt that he had always been her intended mate. Yes, she cared for him a great deal. . .

She just wanted to kill him as well.

But. . . only sometimes just lately.

And *only* a little.

"I do not know whether I can hold off much longer. I had hoped to reach my village before we—" he paused as the tremor doubled back on him, making him grind his teeth.

"However, I fear that is not to be." Despite the fact that this was to be a third Incarnation for him, it seemed one did not get used to the burning contractions. The spasms actually seemed *more* intense this time. He scanned the rocky ledges noting several platforms leading up past a high waterfall. Halfway up, there appeared to be a Travelers Cave. The entrance was partially covered with vines of night-blooming *tasmin*. Travelers Caves were scattered throughout M'Yan and were usually well-stocked with necessities. Their king, Gian Ren, took good care of his people; Salair had heard that the caves had never been so well-tended.

He quickly made his decision to stay there for the coming night.

As they entered the dim interior, several banked fires and wall torches roared to life, no doubt under the guidance of the Wizards of the Charl. Such spells often made good livelihoods for lesser mages, who went about performing such services for reasonable fees. Several bags of preserved foods and *systale* gourds were strewn about. The gourds were used on many worlds for porting water and other liquids. On a higher ledge, fluffy, fragrant *bali* leaves were stuffed into the cloth-covered bedding.

The small cavern was divided into two levels. A hot spring at the top flowed over into a lavender waterfall that fed a smaller pond below. The tinkling sound of rushing water bubbling over rocks was soothing to Snow, but not to her sense-heightened mate, who felt every sound as a scrape along his skin.

"There is a pool for bathing. Someone has left us food and other supplies. We will stay the night here . . ." He hesitated, then added, "Or, perhaps, many nights."

"Many nights?" That sounded strange to her. "I thought you were anxious to return to your home?"

"*Our* home, Snow. And, yes, I am; although I am not sure why."

"You wish to see your family?"

His brow furrowed. "Perhaps." But was that the real reason? Had he missed his father, after all? He had not seen the old *xathu* for years.

His mother had died when he was still a babe. Salair had not wanted to get mired up in ruling the clan. As soon as he had reached the age of roaming, he had left his home.

He had always marveled that his father had the stamina to stay in one place long enough to *own* it. Such had never been for the likes of Salair, who lived to see a different sunrise each day.

Yet, he loved his father.

Even if they did argue constantly.

Sometimes it was just that way with two males in their prime.

"I am looking forward to seeing my home again, but—" Another strong tremor shook him. This time he could not hold back the groan that escaped his lips. Alarmed, Snow squeezed his arm. "Salair, is this part the Incarnation you spoke of?"

"Yes. Do you not remember any tales of it?"

"No, I do not."

Mayhap she had been too young to learn of it at the time of her parent's accident. He sighed as he realized he would have to explain it to her. "You have heard that Familiar males are always at their peak of vitality?"

"Yes." She worried her lip. "Some say it is quite a good trait."

Despite his discomfit, he chuckled. "Some do say that."

"That has something to do with this Incarnation?"

"Yes. When a male Familiar reaches his peak level of vitality—somewhere between the ages of thirty and forty standard years—he undergoes a process of rejuvenation that allows him to maintain the height of his physical perfection. And so it is throughout most of his adult life. During this time span, he will undergo nine Incarnations—each lasting a span of ten years—in which he rejuvenates to his peak level. A physical level of perfected stamina. These are a Familiar's productive years. Males can thus explore all aspects of physical pleasure during these years of Incarnation."

"They are very fortunate then," she remarked wryly. He gave her a side look. She had quite a subtle sense of wit. He decided it was best to continue over that remark. And best he do it with a *lot* of tact. He took her hands in his as he kneeled before her.

"Snow, we have not had the opportunity to, ah, meld like ordinary mates. We have been together just once. . . And, yet, I have no choice but to ask you to now allow me to lead you into something much deeper. If I had a choice, I would do this differently—but I do not. I know you do not understand these things yet, and so I am asking you to trust me."

"Trust you in what way?"

"Familiar mates explore the deepest levels of their sensuality. . ." He crossed his eyes, shook his head back and forth at his own ineptitude, then tried again. "There is a process. . . The Incarnation can allow us to achieve these levels."

Snow did not have a clue what the man was getting at!

She cocked her head to the side and crossed her arms over her chest. "What are you talking about?"

The puzzled look she gave him would have been endearing if the situation were not fast becoming dire.

"Our sensual natures. Ah, through a detailed act, allow us to release a spiritual aspect—" By Aiyah, explanations had never been his strong suit! He faltered for words. Bravely, he tried once more. "When we make love, there are certain energies that arise. . . "

A dimple popped into her cheek. Is that what this was about? "So I noticed, Salair Ner." He snorted and nodded. "Very well. I am not good at explaining such things. The thing is such—when the female's energy rises, then so does the male's." She laughed outright. "I have heard it is so with many beings. Although *some* more than others. *Perhaps*." He ignored her. "Once there is harmony—"

"During?"

"During. Then the two can enter into what is known as the tiers of the Incarnation ceremony. It is what we call the *Nine Hundred Strokes To Love* "

Now it was her turn to snort. "Not actually, though?" He gave her his most patient tone. "Yes, really." She brushed back her hair with a nervous touch. Her brief humor was suddenly gone. "Continue."

"As the energy levels rise between them. . . *us* . . . we can both reach our higher levels—"

"Salair, you keep saying levels. What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Every time the female reaches her peak, her energy transfers to the male. . . fueling him. . . So to speak." She was definitely wary now. "What do you mean by *every* time?"

She could feel him staring at her. "The Incarnation can go on for days, *Softcat* . The male must withhold his release even as the female—"

"You must be jesting!" she gasped. "It is too unbelievable!"

He could not help but chuckle. "These are our ways. *Your* ways." He made his voice roll with sensual *purr*. "It is most enjoyable; I assure you."

"Well, you would say so, would you not?" He laughed. "I might—but I think I can get you to concur with my assessment," he murmured softly. Abruptly, a severe contraction wracked his body. For several moments, Salair's breathing was erratic while he tried to hold the pain at bay. *He was waiting too long.*

Snow's palm gently cupped the side of his face. "What can I do to help you? I do not want you to suffer so." She was consenting to the Incarnation! *At last.*

"You have just done it, *Softcat* ," he murmured, turning into her touch to kiss her palm. "I will remember your kindness long after the last stars of M'yan flicker and fade into time."

It was a lovely thing to say, and the deep sentiment was not lost on Snow. Salair did not strike her as a man who went out of his way to be charming.

Consequently, his words were all the more meaningful to her.

Familiar men liked to gift their mates.

They usually made it a habit to leave small 'prizes' for the female where she would least expect it. Colorful ribbons, an exotic feather, a rare necklace. Under a pillow, in the bath, or anywhere it would surprise. It was a way to win favor.

Salair suspected that the trait harkened back to their other form. Most felines were aloof, yet, on occasion they inexplicably adored leaving various fetching little 'kills' for someone they fondly associated with.

Due to their circumstances, he had not been able to do very much on their journey. Though she would not speak with him for much of the time, he still tried. A soft leaf for her to touch, an odd-shaped stone to feel, a curled shell to listen to.

Familiar males in the throes of Incarnation had the ability to gift their mates with new life; they could turn back time for their mates. It was a secret they kept among themselves for obvious reasons.

Sometimes the chance for a child arose out of the escalating spiritual and physical energies. If such an occasion should develop, Salair was of the mind that it was too soon for them to go down that path. However, when he reached the final level, he knew what he really wanted to do for her. . . It would be dangerous. More so for him than her. He was confident that should it all go wrong, he could at least keep her safe.

He did not care about the risk. He was willing to sacrifice himself for this one special gift.

It was something he and he alone could do for her. A testament of his belief in her.

His complete commitment to them as mates. Salair knew he often was like a feral Familiar; his untamed essence in that regard had come across to her, he was sure. He did not envision himself staying around a hearth with her. They would have to discuss that later.

Still, she had mated with him. She had agreed to undergo Incarnation with him.

If all went well, he could bestow on her a special affirmation of his vow. *Do not let my rough ways concern you, Softcat, I will be here for you in all ways.*

Silently, he removed her clothing and then his own. He took her hand and led her into the small pool. When he stopped in front of the waterfall, Snow felt something bounce off her shoulder. A small splash followed. Startled, she jumped, clutching Salair's arm.

"What is it?" she gulped, her imagination running to strange furry little cave dwellers.

Her mate chuckled. "It is just a *tasmin* flower, Snow. There are vines heavy with buds crossing the entire ceiling of the cavern." His teeth captured her lower lip for a fast nip. "Like you, they are quite beautiful."

Flushing from his compliment, she delicately sniffed the air.

"They are starting to open." Most strains of *tasmin* bloomed only when the sun went down.

"Yes, night is falling. I can see three stars in the twilight sky beyond the entrance to the cavern." Faraway sounds of animals stirring with the close of day reached both their ears. In its way, soothing.

A light breeze wafted through the cavern.

Snow smiled. "It seems you have found a lovely spot, Salair."

He raised her hand to his lips. "I could have chosen any spot, for every part of M'yan has its own beauty." His warm tongue slipped between her fingers, sliding back and forth in a playful manner that electrified her senses. It did not seem as if he were referring solely to M'yan. The male shapeshifter drew her to him; his mouth covered hers in a sizzling kiss. He stepped back, bringing them slightly under the spray of the waterfall. As the buds flowered along with nightfall, the heavy blooms dropped off the vines. Cascading blooms floated over the falls and over them.

The moist petals caressed Snow's skin with their sweet, exotic fragrance.

Yet, not as exotic as Salair's sexual fragrance. His addictive scent mingled with the heady perfume, bathing her in a multi-layered mix as enigmatic as the man who held her in his arms.

The backs of his fingers stroked up and down her naked back as he continued to kiss her languidly, dipping his tongue into her mouth over and over to sample her sweetness.

It was a perfect kiss.

A kiss of lovers on the night wind of rising passion.

His knuckles made small circles on her back; his thumbs pressing gently, then more firmly into the pliant skin. Fingertips slipped around her sides and skimmed down her waist with just a hint of nail.

Snow shivered at the pleasing sensations.

His was a light touch that evoked much impact. The male Familiar's mastery of touch, of taste, and of other, special senses exclusive to them, was making itself evident. It had been a perfect *scratch*.

Snow was hyper-sensitive to that kind of touch. Her nerve endings were acutely sharp. She was his perfect foil.

{You do that rather well, husband.}

He broke off from her lips, nuzzling his mouth along her jaw line to her ear. *She had called him husband. "Do I, Softcat?"* he murmured aloud.

Of course, he must know he did; it was in every caress and embrace. The man seemed to know just the exact amount of *friction* to apply to arouse. His scratches never left a raised mark! Even when he varied the intensity of the scrape of his nails against her skin.

His palms dipped under the water, and his wet fingertips meandered softly up the back of her thighs. The flittering touch made her entire body shiver with pleasure. She felt his fingers hook around the inside of her knee, grazing inside the tender crease as he seamlessly lifted her leg over his hip.

Her arms went around his neck to steady herself, her nose brushing his collarbone. She loved the strong column of his throat! So masculine.

Salair ran his thumbnail back and forth along the line of her upper thigh. With a faint smile, his mouth latched onto the curve of her throat. He suckled gently—and gently bit her—catching the skin between his teeth in a bite known as the *Kitten's Kiss*. A tempting, *purrr* let her know he was just beginning.

It was a kindling sound, so different from her own contented purr. Familiars lived in the moment of their sensuality; reveled in their sexuality. And took their life's breath from the very act of giving and receiving pleasure. There were no other beings like them in this regard in the universe.

As Salair moved his hand lower, Snow felt the pond water gently *lap* at the area between her legs that he had widened when he positioned her. The small, cool crests were augmented with every splash, causing ripples of pleasure to wave seductively along her nether lips. She could feel her own juices begin to flow apace with the lapping water. Salair felt it as well. A long *trrrrrrr* brushed her collarbone and echoed down her spine.

Smoothly, he moved over her chest, his tongue mapping out a sensual adventure. When he reached her breast, he fastened on the taut bud and suckled, drawing with a languid pace—until she moaned at the back of her throat. His tugging actions and the single light *scratch* on the underside of the knee that wrapped at his waist, drew a direct line of vibration right to her center core. She exhaled on a long, sighing moan.

As Snow noted, he was in no hurry. His steady ministrations were built one upon the other. Neither ceasing, nor augmenting. Just driving her mad with want.

She caressed his shoulders and ran her own nails down his taut chest in an attempt to move him along. Salair would neither be sped up, nor slowed down. In his own time, he deviated to her other breast—in much the same manner. Which made Snow clutch his head to her in perfect frustration.

Her hands sank into the luxurious strands of his dampened hair. The wet-tipped locks clung like lovers to her forearms. She tugged at the vibrant hanks by yanking her arms towards herself.

Salair's lashes swept against her cheeks as he blinked. *Just once*. She had surprised him. She was rewarded with a rather sexy *hiss* .

"You wish to lead this Incarnation?" he drawled in sexual challenge. Clearly, he was not amused.

"I do not see why not," she quipped, irrationally annoyed at the painstaking pleasure he insisted on giving her. "If it will move you along, I would be glad to. I never knew a man could be so slow!"

A sensual laugh was his first response. "The Incarnation is nine tiers. The expertise in the act is to pace oneself. But do not fret overly much, *Softcat* . I assure you, I will more than make up for it in the end."

Instantly, she felt his silken lips kissing and suckling down the centerline of her torso. His tongue teasingly dipped into her navel to swirl one way, then counter. Each tingling sweep left a path of humming nerve-endings in its wake.

And then, he went lower still. . .

Unhurried, Salair casually dangled her leg over his shoulder as he dipped into the water that lapped at her juncture. One of his hands clasped her inner thigh. He used his other hand to spread her nether lips.

It took a moment for Snow to realize that he had completely opened her up to him. Her breath exited her mouth in a short burst as she discerned what he was about to do. Was this really part of the Incarnation? As before, he waited for just the right moment. Until the cool water rose up and lapped against the tender lips.

Exciting the delicate tissue.

Only when the water started to ebb did he replace it with the hot lap of his mouth. Snow cried out at the incredible contrast of sensation. He licked the length of her opening, over and over, with long, dewy swipes of his tongue—Pausing occasionally to ever so gently *scratch* the delicate rim with his thumb nails.

The reaction was so intense, Snow did not know whether to squirm out of his embrace or dive into it. She suspected she was kind of. . . *mewing* . Salair's tongue curled around a hardened bud—which thus far, she had not even known she possessed—exactly as his thumbnails rasped the *inner* edge of her nether lips. The sharp point of his eye tooth *grazed* over the swollen nub. Snow jolted in his arms; a choking cry escaped her lips. Salair whispered something against her, and built upon his admirable technique by inserting a tapered finger into the slick canal. As he continued his method of long laps amid specialized scratches, he slightly curled his finger inside her and rubbed along the inner passage at a spot that immediately made Snow heartily peak with a scream. The undulating tremors traveled down the length of his finger and right through Salair's own body. He groaned aloud.

The bulbous tip of his member jutted against her leg. Still, he did not change his methods.

He simply began on her anew. Only this time, he pressed the flat of his hand down on her stomach while his finger tapped inside and pressed upward. All the while his mouth worked on her, *licking up* every drop of her dewy moisture. The cool water also lapped her in gradual waves—a torturous counterpoint to his hot deeds.

"I-I do not think I can take much more, Salair," she whimpered, clutching at his broad shoulders. His husky voice vibrated against the tender skin. "Yet, I am only beginning, *Softcat*. Mayhap I am not *fast* enough for you. . ." He gently bit her.

Snow gave a little shriek. Only a Familiar would dare bite a woman *there*— and so perfectly.

She knew Salair was goading her for her earlier comment; she felt him grin against her mons.

"Somehow, you will have to bear my *unfocused* technique." Whereupon, he set about his task with a renewed fervor, if that was possible. Snow became rather loud.

Just when she was close to—to—almost—He suddenly veered his attention to a vulnerable spot on her inner thigh, running his satiny lips over the sensitive area. *His finger still worked inside her.* The throbbing was almost pain! She begged, *begged* him for release.

Salair paused, ceasing all motion.

Snow sobbed; her bunched fists pounded his shoulder.

"Why do you stop?" she cried. "The Incarnation will soon be over!"

A deep chuckle resonated against her thigh. *{We have not even started the Incarnation, Snow.}* He had just considered this preliminary love play; he was preparing her for what was to come.

"*What?!*" Snow tried to gather her thoughts. It was not easy, considering.

"I vow it is true." He had the nerve to grin against her leg.

Then he made her wait several moments more.

Until she almost screamed from frustration.

But, he was waiting until the water lapped against her; cool and wet. Whereupon, he slowly, slowly leaned in and blew *hot* breath against her core.

She tumbled over the edge immediately into a multi cascading release. Snow literally sagged into his arms as he lifted her out of the water—And right *onto* him.

Bracing his forearms under her legs, he impaled her full and hard. He had positioned them directly under the waterfall. Her arms naturally slid around his neck. Their mouths joined in a feverish kiss.

His first penetration was strong.

"*Now it begins, Softcat . . .*"

With those words, he began the first tier of Incarnation, the depth of his strokes varying in an ancient incremental pattern.

Eight shallow, one deep.

The movements were highly stimulating. Snow's instincts took over as she fell naturally into the age-old rhythm. She could feel her tight inner walls hugging him with each thrust. Reluctant to release him. Hesitant to take him in entirely. It was an erotic muscular reflex of the stroking pattern, seemingly designed to drive the male mad.

Salair closed his eyes as he instinctually plunged deep in the stroke-rhythm of Incarnation. Then, he pulled back until the rim of his thick erection tugged at the edge of her opening from the inside, teasing against the snug fit. When he bore down eight

shallow, the shorter motions quickened Snow for longer penetration. The pattern repeated over and over until their energies entwined and rose together to the next level.

In this manner, he effortlessly brought her to the second tier.

Seven strokes shallow. Two deep.

Snow almost relaxed into the repetitive cadence, the slow building torture, when Salair shifted their position. He twisted about with her in his arms, resting back against a rock ledge under the falls. With his weight balanced, he cupped her bottom and lifted her, sliding her up and down his shaft in the same measured manner.

Snow soon became impatient and tried to speed up her movements on him, but he held her firm to the ancient tempo.

{No. Like this. You must let me lead this dance, my impatient cat.}

She nipped his square chin. "Who said I was impatient?" she responded in a breathy voice. "I am simply trying to get you to—*Oh!*"

He ran his nails lightly over her extended nipples. It was the kind of *scratch* that was guaranteed to elicit a certain reaction during the second tier. Snow arched back, clutching his shoulders, her long hair trailing into the swirling water. She immediately crested, the surging release slamming into her. The intense contractions surprised her, throwing her completely off stride.

But Salair remained steadfast. His thrusts, true and on the mark. Snow wondered at the man's ironclad stamina. She would soon learn that a Familiar's endurance was legendary.

Salair was very experienced—as her contractions began to subside he seamlessly led her into the third tier. *Six shallow. Three deep.*

Snow's heartbeat suddenly sped up. Her skin flushed red. A sultry beat seemed to spread through her entire body.

As if her blood itself were replaced by warm spice. It was a strange magick. Instead of wanting him less after each crest, she wanted him *more*. His beat picked up, and the rite took on a trance-like quality. Even following the proscribed patterns, Salair was *wilder*. He flipped her position, dropping her legs from around his waist, turning her toward the rocky ledge.

"Bend forward," he snarled. He bit her shoulder sharply and wedged his thigh between hers, swiftly embedding himself in her hot channel. Without once losing his pacing. *That* was expertise.

But, it was a bit alarming.

Snow started to wonder if it were possible for a male to go feral during the Incarnation.

Salair's forearms came over hers on the ledge, hemming her in.

Without a pause, he tossed her long hair over his own shoulders—and clamped down the back of her neck with his teeth. He sank into her with *three deep thrusts*. The long, embedding strokes almost lifted her off her feet.

"Salair!"

His hand pressed against her lower stomach pulling her snug to him as he stroked *six shallow*. The deep thrusts were devastating—but the shallow motions made her entire body burn with fire as his manhood pumped back and forth in the half-strokes that were designed to ignite. *And, oh, they did*. Snow let out a ragged cry.

"Push back into me," he prompted, clasping her in a scalding grip.

"Yes."

When she did, a low rumble thrummed through his chest in a deep, satisfied *purrrrrrr*. He rewarded her by grazing her thighs with a *scratch* that levied intermittent pressure points along each sensitive receptor. In response, her slick juices drenched him with a thick, satiny rain.

He growled uninhibitedly.

And released the cat inside.

It has been said that felines are mysterious hunters; that they are extraordinarily sensuous creatures who live for the thrill of the experience. . . And all of this would be true. But for Salair Ner—who often lived on this wild side, and often tasted unleashed pleasures—this did not begin to define him. He was a man who gave and received without apology. He was in his *third* Incarnation. He had seen and experienced much.

So when his full cat-self released upon Snow, she was quite unprepared for the sheer *intensity* of it. Salair *bit, coaxed, growled, hissed, and purred* his way at her. He found a hundred ways to *pleasure-scratch* without breaking skin—Then he found a hundred more. He surged in and out, commanding her to do things she had not even dared to fantasize about.

And she did them for him.

Snow did not shrink from his spontaneity; she embraced it.

She had found her "other" self and she held on fast. He had found his match, and he held on fast. When they reached the fifth tier, Snow was as mindless as he.

She was aware they had reached the seventh tier only by the elemental rhythm of his thrusts. *He was seven deep and two shallow.*

She could not seem to catch any breath. . .!

He turned her yet again.

How many positions had he taken her in? She had lost count.

How much time had passed? She had no idea.

Her back was to the outcropping now. He kissed her hard and fast, then tossed her legs over his shoulders, taking a moment to run his white teeth over the arch of her foot. His nails skimmed across the other arch simultaneously. Snow whimpered in ecstasy, but the truth of the matter was that she was getting tired. Unlike other Familiar women, she had not had much experience before undergoing the Incarnation with her mate.

Salair sensed her energy levels were starting to decrease. He bit the back of her heel sharply. It was a trick to spur his female's lagging spirits with a rallying nudge. It seemed to work, for she immediately took offense.

"What was that for?!" She asked him an annoyed expression.

(Ah, she lives.) He prodded her, rather unwisely.

"Is that a fact? And who do you think has been engaged with you, step by step, suffering through your—"

{Suffering?}

"Hmph!"

He nipped her bottom lip, then suckled enticingly at the spot.

{How arrogant you males are! There is nothing a Familiar male can give that I cannot also match.}

"I am glad to hear that, *Softcat*," he teased in a smoky whisper. *Then he enhanced.*

Snow reared up on the balls of her feet and screamed at the vibrational sensation.

{Salair!}

"Did you not just say you could take anything I could give?" He sent her another strong jolt.

"Please! Please!"

His teasing had a method. They were about to enter the final tiers. He thought it best to give her a preparatory introduction to it. For no matter her pleas, they could not stop now.

He was at his most vulnerable.

The Incarnation was a ceremony of sheer resilience and endurance that led to gifted renewal. Once the final process was engaged and the metamorphosis had begun, if Salair stopped for any reason he might not survive. There could be no holding back.

Snow's strong contractions could send him over—something he could not allow to happen. It was crucial that he not release until he had crested the ninth and final tier. He rolled with her onto the rocky ledge under the falls. When they finally entered the ninth tier, both were breathing erratically. Now the final phase began in earnest. Nine strokes *long*.

Nine stokes *deep*.

Nine *surges* of enhancement. He pounded into her with his full power and drive. Snow gasped as the real force of the surges hit her, her fingernails making red lines down his back. "Salair," she choked out weakly, next to his ear. "It is too much. . ." She needed his help. Salair arched his back, fused his mouth to hers and *hissed* into her throat, giving her the last of his depleted energy as his life's breath. Tiny pulses of light began to circle them as the vital levels rose to incredible heights. Salair knew that if he were to do what he had planned, it would have to be now. It would be extremely risky.

Nevertheless, he believed that the potential reward far outweighed the risk. The light pulses encircling them would continue to amass in number and frequency until Incarnation was achieved. At that point in time, the male would encompass his mate in his pure energy state.

During certain Incarnations, a Familiar could take his mate with him through the change and he could gift her with renewal. Turn back time itself for her for an entire decade. But, Salair wanted to give Snow with something more. . . The injuries she had suffered at such a young age had made her forget how to change into her cat self. She had no way of even conceptualizing it. Without the ability to witness another shapeshifter metamorphose, she was forever denied the knowledge of what it meant to be Familiar. She was cruelly denied so much of her true nature!

Salair prayed that if he were strong enough he might—*might!* – be able to not just incarnate with her but briefly transform her to her energy state along with him. It would have to occur at the exact moment he, himself, incarnated. At the very precipice of change. When she coalesced from this energy state back to human form. . . He was the only one who could do this for her. Salair had never heard of such a thing being done. There would be no danger to her; but if he failed, he would likely dissolve into thin air and be no more.

It was strange how it had come to this. He had always been a carefree loner. Now he was willing to sacrifice everything. It was the way of Familiar conviction, he realized. On a hunch, he had turned and taken a different Tunnel point. *In one moment, life happens.*

As he kept his pace up, he sent her a message. Just in case. He had to speak aloud to conserve his remaining reserves of strength as all his energy went into the act itself. It was a prayer, and a plea to the one he belonged to above all others. "Snow, have faith in

me," he whispered hoarsely. *Did Salair just say something?* Snow couldn't be sure; she was too caught up in what was happening to them both. As his sexual energies rose higher, photons of light streamed from his core. Although Snow could not see the rays of light, she could feel the pulses gathering in strength as they swept around their locked forms. Parts of Salair were humming—*throbbing*—reminding her of. . . Something from the past?

Then the pulses jumped to her and she could feel her own body humming!

It became louder and louder. The beats were faster and faster. Salair maintained his unrelenting rhythm of *nine long, nine deep, every stroke enhanced*. The act kept building and building, seeming to go on forever! She was lost in the trance of it: breathless and breathy, loved and loving.

Suddenly, Salair released a magnificent burst of energy, simultaneously releasing his long withheld climax. They both cried out as the full impact struck them. While Salair's seed flowed endlessly into her, he seized her lips with his own in a blinding flash of—Light?!

How could there be light?

Something strange was happening. . . Snow felt her body rise and float and stretch out on the wind. Then just as quickly snap back. Rapid images swept through her mind. The only thing she could feel was Salair. Only it was not Salair exactly.

Her mate seemed to brush against her like a cloud of pulsing light. So beautiful. She could stay like this with him forever!

She slammed hard against a male chest. Salair was panting, his body violently shaking in the aftermath.

Snow lifted a wobbly hand to her forehead, not sure what had just happened.

Then she heard his voice. That deep, enchanting voice that never failed to send shivers down her spine.

"You did not remember how to transform and thus could not change into your other self. I have shown you how to metamorphose, *Softcat*."

She blinked, not believing what she was experiencing—!

"Salair, what have you done?" she whispered shakily. *She could see.*

Gold-tipped black hair wafted over a broad, muscular chest to a trim, taut waist. . . Skin, golden tan, and smooth as *silk* . . . Perfectly shaped hands and powerful forearms. . . Suddenly, she felt oddly shy. She looked down at her lap. "You did this for me?"

"Yes, and I would do so again." He paused as he sensed her shyness. "*Kittenfeet*."

Hesitatingly, she looked up.

Gorgeous blue and gold eyes glittered down on her from an exquisitely handsome face. The perfect, masculine lips that kissed her, and bit her, and cajoled her, were tilted up beguilingly at the corners.

This Familiar was average?

Anything but.

Her Salair Ner was impossibly beautiful!

He had teased her and then tricked her. Like a proper cat should.

Smiling back at him, she lifted her chin proudly and *purred* .

Snow discovered many things since coming to M'yan. Everyday was a new adventure.

Salair had been welcomed in his father's manor. Everyone was so very glad to see him. And because she was his mate, they were just as happy to see her. It was as if *she* had journeyed from them for years!

Snow could no stop looking at everything around her. But, most of all she could not stop staring at her new mate. He was so incredibly beautiful.

Salair had also located her mother's family. They lived amongst the Southern clans and were anxious to visit her in the summer.

They had told Salair her name was Neyalah.

She still did not remember it, but she liked it. More often, Salair called her Snow. Or he rolled his *purr* when calling her *Softcat* . Occasionally, he resorted to Kittenfeet, which always made her smile since it made her think of the Dundee, whom she missed. It was his way of reminding her that she could be all three and to trust her own instincts. Once, in private, his father had said to her, "My son is rough; his ways are brusque, yet his heart has always been true. Despite his snarling ways, he will give you all that is within his power to give—and more, if he can. He always cares more than he lets on. Although rough around the edges, he is an honorable son. He is not a charmer; yet those who come to truly know him, love him. Always remember that." She was coming to know him well.

There were many reasons to love Salair Ner, but one stood out above all others to her.

It was not that he taught her how to regain control over her nature. (Although that was a wondrous gift.) Or the incredible risk he took for her. (Which she would never forget.) It was his unwavering faith in the instincts of his people, *of being feline* that gave him the resolve to see it through. Those steadfast beliefs made him know her as his true mate. Belief and instinct.

It was what made the cat always land on his feet.

Today they were going to journey to Aviara.

Yaniff, the venerable Charl sage had requested a visit from them. It was an odd invitation, but one did not question a summons from the most powerful wizard in the Alliance.

"Tell me your dream about that day, Neyalah." The wizard Yaniff sat with his guests at the scarred wooden table near the fireplace. "The day you lost your parents."

He is being diplomatic, Snow realized. The old wizard was a kindly sort. He did not want to say: the day your parents were murdered.

And he had said *dream* not memory.

The subtlety of his words bespoke knowledge. He *knew* about her dreams. What else did he know?

When Salair and her had first entered the small cottage, Yaniff had greeted them warmly and then served them cups of heated *mir*. A favored drink amongst wizards; it was a relaxing, pleasant libation—probably sought out by mages to soothe pangs about the havoc the Charl often caused. They were all wielders of magick, but their supplicants were also warrior-knights. The combination was sure to cause a certain *excitement* on occasion.

One of his students was sitting by a window in the corner of the cottage with an opened scroll on his lap. He was muttering incantations to himself.

Every time he uttered a certain phrase, the scroll would indignantly snap shut on him. He would then have to wrestle the parchment to pry it back open. It did not seem to be an easy task.

The student suddenly looked up and smiled seductively at her. Snow was shocked to discover that he was Familiar.

"Half-Familiar," he murmured as he arched a brow and confronted the scroll with an evil look. Stubbornly, he repeated the same incantation. The scroll snapped shut on his finger. He growled at it.

Snow took a step back. How had he known—?

"Ah," Yaniff bustled over with a glint in his eye. "I see you have met my student, Rejar." He threw the halfling a pointed look. "As you can see, he is but a poor apprentice. He cannot even master a simple incantation of complex wizardry." The old mage laced his

fingers over his belly and looked down glumly. "Alas, I am aged and frail, and must take these sad opportunities to teach wherever I can these days."

A derisive snort came from behind the scroll. "I warn you both not to believe a thing that old man says." Snow was surprised that such a magnificent wizard lived so simply, considering his status. Surely, it was by choice. The power in the room was vast; she could *feel* that. Familiars loved being around wizards for that reason. They could feel their power.

"I am afraid I do not remember much, Yaniff." Snow answered his earlier question. "The dream is always the same. Someone calls to me, and I see it is my mother. She is telling me we are leaving this place, and I suddenly realize I am still a child. And I have seen this place before. . . We are on the edge of a small town my father has taken us to on our travels. He has told me we shall return to our home later, but first he must visit someone. My mother is unhappy with something, and my parents briefly disagree about what they want the person they are visiting to do. . ." She sagged in her chair. "I am sorry; that is all there is."

"Would you let me try to help you remember?" Yaniff asked her.

"Well, if you think you—"

Salair leaned forward protectively. "And do what exactly, wizard?" His dual-colored eyes narrowed ominously. Yaniff observed her mate with rather a bemused expression, Snow thought. Truthfully, what did Salair think he could do against a seventh-level mage? She rolled her eyes. *Male felines*.

She put her hand on his arm. "He will do what he needs to do, Salair. Do not be so foolish; he has no intention of harming me." She smiled charmingly at the wizard. "I am correct, am I not?"

"Most correct." Yaniff winked at her.

"Very well, then." Salair agreed, but crossed his arms over his chest. Just. In. Case.

Snow rolled her eyes again. Sometimes she wondered if Familiar men did not *anticipate* something going wrong because they so looked forward to it.

"Good." Yaniff nodded. He waved his arm in front of her forehead.

"What do I have to—"

"It is already done. Now, Neyalah. *Tell me of that day.* "

And that was all it took. Once Yaniff used *wizard-voice* on her, she began relating her memory with perfect clarity.

'She will be in danger,'

'No, this will keep her safe. Trust me.'

My father leans down and kisses my mother, something he likes to do. They take me inside the hut and a wizened, old woman stares at me until I am uncomfortable. She raises her light-shrouded fingers, and I realize she is a caster of spells. I am frightened, but my father's hand on my back reassures me.

He pushes me towards her and she catches me in her intense focus. Then she mumbles strange words, and the glowing light streams around me faster and faster until suddenly I feel a snap-like sensation and it all stops.

Yet, I know I am not the same.

I can feel it.

Later that night we head to the Tunnel point that will eventually take us back to M'Yan. Before we can leave, we are beset by bandits. I am pushed aside as my father defends us.

My father tells me to run!

'Go back home to M'Yan and get someone to help you find the Charl wizard named Yaniff. He is their finest wizard. Tell him "snowflake" and he will know what to do. Remember, Neyalah, snowflake.'

Snowflake. . .

Snowflake. . .

I start to run but not quickly enough. I see the bandits kill my father. . . Then my mother! I run through the woods towards the small village we had visited earlier. The bandits chase me, but a caravan comes by, and they run off. As I am running I trip and fall on an outcropping, hitting my head on the stone. My vision is blurring as an elder Dundee leans over me.

{Snowflake.}I send the thought to her. {Snowflake. . .!}

And then, everything goes dark.

When I wake up, I cannot see. I am told my name is Snowflake. It seems right.

It seems like something my father might call me. . .

Everything is so dark!"

Salair's hand squeezing her shoulder brought her out of her deep reverie.

Yaniff spoke with her. "My thanks to you, Neyalah. I know that was unpleasant for you."

She nodded, surreptitiously wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

"May I yet ask you another favor?" The wizard's eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled encouragingly at her.

"You may ask me anything, Yaniff; you have given memories back to me."

"Could you metamorphose for me?"

She bit her lip, hesitating. Then looked up at her mate who was standing behind her. Familiars did not shapeshift in front of others.

Salair pierced Yaniff with an assessing look, finally coming to a conclusion. "It is all right. He knows of our ways."

Yaniff patted her hand. "I have seen Familiars metamorphose many times." At that news, she brightened. If others had done so, then he was greatly trusted by their people. She quickly transformed in front of the old wizard, turning into her cat self.

Before Yaniff sat a sweet-faced tan cat with brown and gold eyes.

Salair smiled at the little feline fondly. "I assumed she would be a white cat because of her name, but, do you see?" He pointed to her fur. "She has a snowflake marking on her left side." Bending, he put his hand out and the cat padded up to him with a purr and brushed against his fingers. Yaniff raised his eyebrows as he examined the white spot of fur. "This is not a snowflake—it is an impressed hexagram. I have seen this before; it is a seal for wise magick."

"A seal?"

Yaniff nodded. "Observe." He picked up his staff, and a soft stream of light flowed from the old sage to the tip of the staff. The wizard circled the glowing wand over the marking. It began to illuminate.

The snowflake wavered right before Salair's dual-colored eyes. Floating above the marking was a strange image.

"What is it?" he whispered.

Neyalah meowed her own question.

"Hmm. It is an orange ring with a unique imprint. . ."

"Do you know what it signifies?"

Yaniff recalled Gian Ren telling him what he had seen when he had been held captive in the Ganakari dungeons.

". . .It was a faint glimpse of an orange ring with an unusual design. . ."

So, all those years ago, Neyalah's father had discovered something of vital importance—and had then tried to make sure that the message got back to a young Familiar king. He must have known they were in danger so he had the image ensorceled under a marking on his little daughter's fur. Then he had instructed her to remember 'snowflake' as a codeword. The bandits Neyalah mentioned were more likely assassins. After her loss and injury, she remembered the word—but that was all. The message, unfortunately, never reached taj Gian.

"I believe it was a warning to a new king." Yaniff turned to Neyalah. "May I ask you something?"

The air in front of them both shimmered and Neyalah stood behind her mate.

Yaniff politely turned his back on her naked state. Not so his student, who playfully craned his neck to get a better view. The embarrassed old wizard—who was rapidly turning a shade of bright red—*harrumphed* and yanked his disrespectful apprentice back around by the collar. The halfling Familiar managed to flash Neyalah a grin. Neyalah hid her snort of laughter behind her hand. It was humorous to see the most powerful wizard on Aviara blush so. Rejar had bated the old master perfectly.

"What is it, Charl?"

Salair handed her his cloak and motioned for Yaniff to turnaround again.

Yaniff took her hand. "Tell me, do you remember what planet you were on when this spell was placed upon you?"

"I-I do not. I am sorry."

He gently squeezed her hand. "Try. It is very important."

"I-I just. . ."

"*Picture* it in your mind," he coaxed her. And suddenly she remembered the small town and the little hut with the old woman. . .

Yaniff's eyes became cloudy as he saw as well. Then his eyes cleared and in them was knowledge.

"Thank you, Neyalah, you have done well."

Yaniff sat in his window seat and gazed out of the mullioned windows at the darkening sky. His thoughts were on what had transpired that day long ago. If Neyalah had not fallen and struck her head, Gian Ren might not have been taken prisoner on Ganakari. If that had not happened, he might not have met his mate Jenise at that time, and Gian would have been unaware of the danger to his people of the drug they had used on him. The Tunnel to M'yan might not have been sealed. . .

Gian's son might not be ready to be born--!The ramifications of those events not happening gave even an old wizard, learned in the ways of pattern magick a headache.

Neyalah, by the strangest of circumstances, may well have saved her people by doing. . . nothing. Yaniff chuckled at the irony.

By hiding herself away, she had brought about destiny.

"What amuses you, Yaniff?" Rejar stood in front of the fire and stretched. He would be heading home shortly. Bojo, Yaniff's winged companion opened one eye on his mantle perch and gave the halfling Familiar a fussy stare. The poor companion was exhausted from always having to keep one eye trained on Krue's mischievous son.

"I was just thinking that the name Neyalah in the Familiar tongue means 'bringer of destiny'."

Not having a clue where the old wizard's thoughts were going, Rejar cocked his head to the side. "And you find this humorous for some reason?"

"I do."

Rejar gave the wizard a quizzical look.

"Have you ever heard the expression that one can laugh with tears in the eyes?"

Rejar shook his head no.

"Well, my boy, here is your real lesson for today. Wizards often laugh with such tears."

Rejar thought about his master's words, for once becoming quite serious. "Mayhap they do. But, is it not worse to weep with laughter?"

Yaniff's black eyes gleamed. *The Sorrow of Inversion*. There was understanding in this student's words! Understanding and vision. . . And a hint of the great wizard to come.

"It is perspective, Rejar. Still, you are right. It is much worse."

"And there are worse things than such tears." That caught Yaniff's attention. He turned from the darkening view and stared at his student with eyes blacker than the blackest night. "Meaning?"

Rejar smiled mysteriously. "I, myself, was thinking of destiny today."

Yaniff stilled. "And what did you ponder so heavily—when you were supposed to be studying your spell craft?"

As he passed the wizard on his way out, he handed him a *krilli* sash. "I was thinking how often destiny hangs on a single ragged thread."

The door closed softly behind him.

Yaniff lifted his eyebrow and placed the belt back on the wooden shelf. "We had best keep a closer eye on that one, eh, Bojo?"

Bojo gave a deep sigh of agreement. Followed by a round of heavy snores. Destiny might hang on a thread. . . But, a good nap in the late afternoon, on the mantle of a warm fireplace, was this day's happy fate for a beloved winged-companion.

Yaniff shook his head and smiled fondly at his sleepy friend.

Then he sat at his wooden table, lit a candle at the coming darkness, and opened an ancient tome of arcane spells. To never rest was the *chosen* fate of old wizards who ponder the Matrix of Destiny.

As the days followed one after the other, it was a surprise to some that the Familiar, Salair, was often found curled up with Neyalah in front of the hearth.

There were ideal mates.

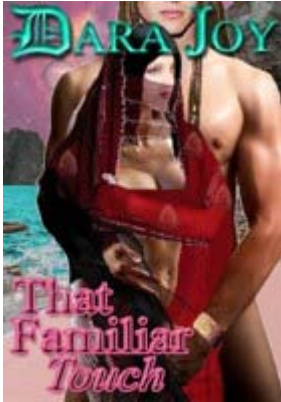
She was healed and whole. And happy.

Just as Salair had promised.

His inclination to roam had been replaced with an unbound heart—

Unbound and forever wild in Snow's welcoming embrace.

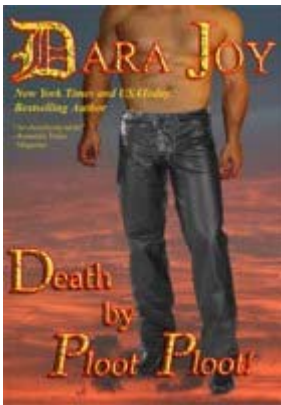
And that, as any wizard knows, is magick at its best.



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Have fun visiting with Lorgin and Deana, their family, friends, and Familiars, and see just what is going on in the MOD universe in this hilarious, spicy, heart-warming story that advances the storyline of the Matrix of Destiny universe. (To be read with a cup or two of mir, a sense of humor. Misty eye and pot-holders optional.)



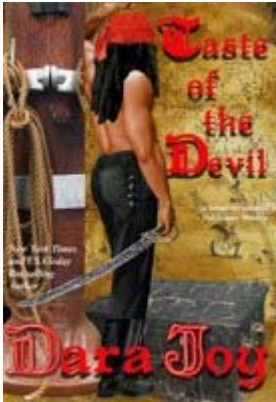
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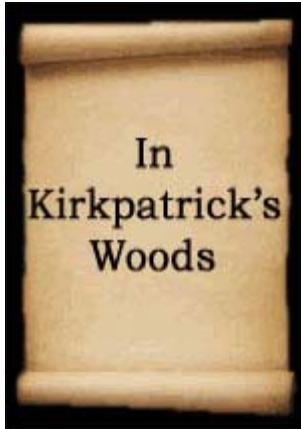
Avast ye, mateys!

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Everyone wants to get their hands on the devilishly handsome tracker Wildcat Arrows! With twenty-nine corporate syndicates after his hide, he disappears on a mining colony. Crew member Lucky Red now must command her captain's beloved ship the Sugarbabe, in his stead. Left to fend for herself with no one at her side except her faithful companions Spindrift and the silent Clugot, she is ill prepared to handle a drop-dead gorgeous pleasure android who demands to become part of the crew. The wacky mis?ts streak across the galaxy on a madcap adventure in search of their captain. Unfortunately, the handsome space pirate has been shanghaied by a lusty female warrior.



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An instant classic and all-time fan favorite, MY ONE is the beautiful story of Trystan, a space traveller who has never known physical love and Lois, his soon-to-be-Earthgirl lover. You will love this heartfelt tale of endless love, bound by neither time nor space, with its knockout ending.



When Dara Joy wrote her breakout book, she not only introduced multiple heroes (magical warrior knights) in a highly evocative, erotic storyline, she also introduced to the romance readers a species known as the Familiar, a beautiful, sensual race of feline shapeshifters. Her reinvention of the romance crossover went on to receive countless awards, and stayed on bestseller lists for over a decade. A classic.