

Dara Joy - Matrix 04

KATHY



calibre 0.9.16

THAT FAMILIAR TOUCH

Those who will play with cats must expect to get scratched.

-Miguel de Cervantes

ONE

Planet M'yan, Familiar homeworld, 5187 m.u.

"He cannot stop me from leaving!"

Soosha was so angry she could feel the hair on the back of her head lifting. The signal usually was a warning that a full-scale battle was on its way. "Who is he to tell me what to do?"

"*He* is the King of All Familiar." H'riar sighed deeply. It was a weary, drawn-out exhalation. This was the fifth time he had had this 'discussion' with his brother's daughter!

On occasion, the girl could be as stubborn as her older brother, Brygar.

Unfortunately, this was such an occasion.

He sighed again, shaking his head.

H'riar had always thought Soosha the sweetest and prettiest of his family's kits, with her smoky black hair, aqua /gold eyes, engagingly inquisitive features and happy disposition. Normally she was the most even tempered among the entire family.

Except when her fur was rubbed the wrong way.

Then, beware!

"Yes, Soosha, he *can* stop you." H'riar reiterated that for the eleventh time.

The Familiar girl began to pace. Another bad sign.

"He is being unreasonable! I will be perfectly fine."

"Taj Gian disagrees." Recently, their king had recalled all Familiar back to their homeworld of M'yan, forbidding any off-planet travel.

Even trips to Aviara were curtailed.

Of course, he had done this for their safety. Karpon, the despotic ruler of Ganakari, had declared an all out war on the Familiar. He was systematically hunting them down and enslaving them.

Unfortunately, their people were considered by most to be a beautiful and sensual species- thus they brought very high prices on the auction block. Their extraordinary abilities in the art of pleasure-giving had seen to that.

H'riar knew that his people's gift of shapeshifting made them endlessly fascinating to others; for Familiar walked in two forms- that of man and cat.

But with this innate ability also came a vital sense of individuality.

His People refused to be contained or controlled. Regardless of the source.

Thus H'riar's current dilemma.

It had not set well with the King to issue such a proclamation. Yet taj Gian knew that, above all, he had to protect his people.

At first H'riar had not been sure about the course of action Gian was determined to take, but as the King's advisor, or *utal*, he came to understand and agree with Gian's decision.

Soosha did not see it the same way.

As a strong-willed female coming into her prime, she had other ideas. Being related to a king sometimes had its advantages. Soosha was under the erroneous impression that taj Gian's decree could not possibly include her.

H'riar, like every other male member of the family, had always been charmed by her beguiling ways. The fact that she was the youngest female in the family simply added to the winsome equation.

In other words, she was used to getting her way.

H'riar tried once more to make her understand.

"He is not being unreasonable, Soosha; he is trying to protect our people."

"Do you think someone will get the better of me? I can take care of myself, I assure you!" Her nostrils flared in a charming display of feline temperament.

H'riar tried not to smile. She was young and inexperienced in the ways of other worlds. Her bravado came from untried youth.

But it would not do to tell her that.

Soothing was by far the best tactic with an outraged Familiar woman. That is, unless your intention was to rile one up- which was always interesting under the right circumstances.

He smiled fondly at a memory of just such an incident with his own mate....

Soosha's howl of outrage snapped him back to the present.

"I have come of age! It is my time to travel on adventures, H'riar. I have waited my whole life for this! It is unreasonable!"

To be fair, she was not the only one to have such sentiments. Many of their youth were tugging at the restrictions taj Gian had been forced to place on all of them. Although the people understood his reasoning and accepted it, the closing of the secret Tunnel on M'yan had been difficult for everyone.

They were a people who lived for adventure. No Familiar could stand a cage- even a cage as vast as an entire planet. Truly, it was the *idea* of being told 'not to' that made them 'want to' all the more.

This was the nature of any cat.

H'riar acknowledged to himself that they often were an infuriating, yet engaging people.

"I am deeply sorry that your coming of age has to be so confined. Yes, you will not be able to experience all that others have in the past, but, Soosha, there are things off world of which you have no comprehension. Terrible things. Your safety is too important to us. Please understand."

Now it was Soosha's turn to sigh. "Please try to understand *me*, H'riar; this is not simply a coming of age whim to adventure. My whole life I have dreamt of exploring other worlds! Other beings. I want to see how others live. How they think. I know it is unusual for a woman to want to go adventuring so afar, but I am not afraid to take this chance in order to experience new things. I should be allowed to decide for myself!"

H'riar rubbed his forehead. How could he get through to her? She would not be able to understand the depths of cruelty she could encounter. On M'yan she had known only love and compassion. Male familiars were very protective of their mates and families. And for good reason. The universe was an especially dangerous place for them.

"Most of these beings you wish to meet do not think as we do; they not share our beliefs or even care about them. Did you know that in the Far Reaches there are beings who survive solely by dealing in the trading of captive beings? Familiars are highly prized by them."

Soosha paled but held her ground. "I have heard of this, H'riar. But it is males they seek. I would not be in danger."

"It is males they seek because they have not easily encountered any of our females. Would you risk being captured and sold like a piece of krilli cloth? Forced to do things so horrible you cannot even imagine?"

Soosha swallowed. Such a fate held little appeal. Still, she could not give up her dream.

"That would not happen to me. Furthermore, if our males are willing to take such a risk to adventure then I should be allowed to do the same. Besides, it is uncommon for Familiars to be taken. Our men have a way of escaping, do they not?"

"That has been changing. Furthermore, you know that the Familiar male is a born predator, Soosha. He has ways of protecting himself that you do not."

That gave her pause. While their females had some predator in them, they were not like the males in that regard. A cornered male was a sight to behold! If he was in the right mood, he would stand his ground and fight no matter how many he faced.

Still, females could often outthink their enemies; she was not about to give up her lifelong dream.

"What you say may be true, H'riar, but I have different ways. Ways that are stronger - in some areas - than a male's."

Do we men not know that! H'riar could not decide whether to smile at the charming girl or frown at her stubbornness.

"Nonetheless, my little Soosha, this discussion is pointless. Your brother would never agree to it and Taj Gian has sealed the Tunnel. He has commanded us *all* to remain planetside. You will not be going anywhere until the situation on Ganakari is cleared and their leader Karpon has answered for his crimes against us."

"But that could take years!" The girl wailed.

"So it could. Thus you will have plenty of time to enjoy your native land. Perhaps you will even mate?"

Her lip stuck out mutinously. "I will not mate before I adventure!"

"You are too young to realize that mating can be an adventure in itself." He winked at her. "I must get back to the royal abode, Soosha. I hope my visit has soothed your anxiety. Now that you understand that your wish to travel is impossible, perhaps you would like to come to the palace in a few days for a visit? Jenise would appreciate your company and Gian will not stop the men from showering you in gifts."

Soosha nostrils flared slightly at the innocuous suggestion, but she wished H'riar a good day and thanked him for coming.

Discussion over, the *utal* quickly took his leave.

Soosha plopped onto the nearest floor cushion.

H'riar actually thinks he can pet me into compliance! She snorted delicately as she stretched

across the silken fabric. *Come to the palace!* What did she care of gifts from hopeful, vying males?

The whole thing bored her. And while she was very fond of the *tajan*, Jenise, she did not wish to waste away her time in the royal abode. She had exploring to do- and she was going to do it!

But how?

She bit her lip.

Since Gian had sealed the secret Tunnel, the only other Tunnel on M'yan led directly to Aviara. That Tunnel was heavily guarded on both sides: the Charl knights protected the entrance on the Aviaran side, and the clans rotated their best men to guard the entrance on M'yan.

No one was allowed through without official approval.

Hmm. Unlike the secret Tunnel that had been sealed, the other Tunnel connected to the great Hall of Tunnels on Aviara. . . .

Although she did not want to be on Aviara, perhaps she might be able to slip away once inside the vast Hall of Tunnels and from there link to another world?

Once she was off Aviara, her journey would be assured. She need only take additional Tunnel jumps from that point.

Of course, it would be best to hide her course by going through several Tunnels so she could not be easily tracked.

It might actually work, she reasoned.

But how could she get to Aviara without official permission? Would there be a way to get through the Tunnel gate undetected?

She didn't know, but she was going to find out.

Running up to her chambers, she quickly grabbed a pouch of clarified stones and one of her colorful sashes. She tucked the stones into a secret pocket hidden within the waistband, before wrapping the band around her waist.

Then she twirled a green hooded cloak over her loose *jatal-riaz*. The flowing, filmy material of the *atal-riaz* had been expertly wrapped around her thirty-nine times, then tied off in the traditional way. The cool krilli cloth draped her body, moving as sensuously as she did. Just the feel of the silken fabric rubbing against her skin made her purr.

Familiar males would often stop whatever they were doing just to watch the beautiful, graceful vision of a woman as she passed by in *her jatal-riaz*.

The simple green cloak was nowhere near as extravagant as the other ones she had and it made

her sad to have to wear it on such a momentous occasion; but its plain lines would not draw extra attention to her.

Soosha gave a little mournful mew. Like most Familiar, she loved to preen in beautiful things; however, hidden beneath this traveler's cloak, she would easily be mistaken for a member of a trading caravan.

As long as she did not look anyone directly in the eye.

The distinctive dual-colored eyes of her kind would immediately give her away- so she would have to be very careful.

Soosha stuck her head out the door to make sure no one was about to witness her slip away. Her eyes widened at the sight of a very old man walking up the hill to their family home. He was leaning heavily on a wizard's staff.

Yaniff.

What was that old Charl doing here? And why had he chosen this of all times to visit?!

The seventh level mystic would know in an instant what she was planning! She twitched her ears. What should she do....!

She held her breath as Yaniff suddenly veered from the path he had been following and changed direction to head towards the royal abode.

Soosha let out a huge sigh of relief.

He must have been looking for H'riar and realized that the King's advisor was already on his way back to Gian.

Now that the path was clear, she quickly dashed out of the house and into the shelter of the surrounding vegetation.

A satisfied smile licked her lips.

Nothing was so delightful as darting out of a door as if someone might stop you at any given moment. Soosha was not sure why that felt so good - *it just did*.

With a happy laugh she swatted some leaves on the branch of a bush as she sprinted past.

Taking a shortcut through the dense foliage would help her avoid running into anyone; although Familiars did not have a tendency to stick to pathways. Especially if they could get into mischief along an alternate route.

Her people were known to spend hours happily engaged in intense distraction. After all, who knew what interesting things one might find along any journey?

Today, Soosha forced herself to remain focused on her goal. The flowers around the lagoon would not distract her. Today, she was the hunter!

And the portal near the royal abode was her quarry.

Very soon her new journeys would begin.

They had been calling her.

Calling...

TWO

Planet Spoltam, ruling city of Aghni

Daxan Sahain viewed the city before him from the comfort and strength of his white stone balcony.

The lofty plateau effectively delineated him as a sophisticated member of the ruling class of Spoltam.

He slowly raised his face to the sky.

The bright sunlight- a constant daily event in this city- glinted off white marble roofs, stone pillars, and towering porticos. The warming rays skipped across the crystal clear turquoise waters of the bay of Aghni like a Spoltam signal torch shining a lighted path to the beauty of their city.

At night, moonlight did much the same; but instead of gold, silver shimmered on the city streets.

Thus, day and night, the city appeared as a glittering jewel perched high on the edge of the Prionian Sea.

Centuries ago, it had been designed by their best architects to be the privileged nexus of Spoltam.

Below him, on the streets, citizens and travelers alike bustled through the market stalls, shops, and plazas. Some busily haggling for items. Others gossiping over the finest imported libations.

In this city, almost every luxury in the known universe could be had- for a price. It was a good place to live if you were the *right* kind of Spoltam citizen.

For himself, Daxan enjoyed a very fine life in Aghni.

His large home, replete with servants who were ready to do his bidding, day or night, testified to his eminent place in society. His table was always full, his bed never empty.

As a scholar, he was afforded the most pleasurable existence. Scholars were literally worshipped on Spoltam, a planet that professed to value knowledge above all.

When one was decreed a scholar by the Aghni tribunal, doors opened. People listened. Invitations never stopped coming to one's door.

Yes, he had a very comfortable life.

The corners of his sensual mouth curved up ever so slightly. *An interesting life, indeed.*

He bent over the stone railing and idly watched a pretty young maiden make her way to the marketplace, basket in hand.

He was not as interested as he should have been.

Lately, there had been *something* niggling at him.

What it was he could not say.

He only knew that it kept him up through the hours of night and nagged at him through the hours of day. Scholars were often plagued by obscure conundrums that needed to be solved; yet, Daxan knew that was not the reason for his odd affliction.

This irritation was almost *cajoling* him.

Thus far, he had been able to contain the feeling so it had not interfered with his work. But if that changed, he would be forced to take drastic action.

Strange, but the prospect saddened him.

Still, he knew what he had to do.

His golden eyes scanned the horizon. Even now he could feel its strange lure.

Calling. . . Always calling. . . .

THREE

She had done it!

Soosha looked around in disbelief. The strange alien city was gleaming in the bright sunlight!

Just waiting for a Familiar to explore!

The plan had gone almost too smoothly, she had made the jump from M'yan to the Aviaran Hall of Tunnels with ridiculous ease. Attaching herself to a group of Aviaran delegates and their families, she had slipped effortlessly through the portal.

It had not been as simple on Aviara; but nothing she could not handle.

At first she had been overwhelmed by the Hall of Tunnels. The great gaping maws stretched on and on, in what seemed like an endless fractal of choices.

At one point, someone did try to question her and a Charl knight had called out. Alarmed, she had dashed directly into the first Tunnel on her right. The knight who had called out ordered her to stop, but she charged on and through the portal before he could stop her!

There was no clue as to what she would find on the other side, so Soosha thought it was all rather brave of her.

Now she stared wide-eyed at the stone city before her. The white buildings were so bright they almost hurt her eyes.

People bustled back and forth- some on the backs of strange animals. Soosha felt sorry for the animals who had to bear such a heavy burden. It did not seem right to her.

At first glance, some of the people did not seem very friendly, either.

On M'yan everyone was greeted with a happy smile. Here, several people- and they did look much like her in form- sneered as they passed by. As though they thought themselves somehow better than her.

An agitated group of men walked by carrying scrolls. By the way they flailed them about, they seemed to be discussing whatever was written in the tightly rolled documents. They paid little attention to where they were going; they noticed only each other and the documents they were waving in their hands. Soosha thought they would surely tumble over one another at any moment.

Which could prove very entertaining.

Her eyes gleamed in anticipation.

But the men somehow made it through the causeway, turning the corner in a flurry of jabbing elbows.

Disappointed, Soosha turned away.

Across the roadway, a woman and two children were bringing food to a man who had been tied up and forced to stand in the sun.

Soosha had never seen anything like that before.

"He will learn his lesson now!" An old woman muttered behind her. Soosha's Aviaran translator device worked perfectly; she understood every word the woman spoke.

"How can he learn his lesson if he is tied up to roast in the sun?" Soosha asked her, earnestly.

The woman clicked her tongue and gave her a sour face for an answer. "Impertinent commoner!" she sneered, then moved on.

What had the man done to be treated so? Soosha's brow furrowed. The sight deeply upset her.

She scanned the city square.

A large fountain bubbled in the center. Off to the right several men in similar dress milled about, looking for something to do. They were not knights but they had the look of fighting men.

In another area, a man was kicking his mount repeatedly until the beast let out a wail of pain. The dejected animal could not defend itself against the viscous onslaught.

This is terrible! Without thinking Soosha ran over to help the poor beast.

"You there, girl, get away! What do you think you are doing?"

"You are hurting her! Why do you whip her so?" she cried out.

"Are you mad? Get back to your master!" The man brought the tip of his lash smartly down on her shoulder.

Soosha gasped. More in shock than in pain.

"I said get back!" The lash stung her again.

Outrage overcame all else; she flung back her hood and hissed angrily.

The man instantly reared back in fright. "What the-?"

Then his eyes widened in conjecture. His expression immediately turned to one of greed.

Ah, Soosha, look what you have done now. This does not look so good for you. She waited to see what the man would do, hoping he wouldn't - He called out to the group of men dressed in uniforms who were standing around the central fountain. "Guards! Seize her! She has stolen my ring!"

The guards' smiles died on their faces as one by one they turned to stare at her. Time froze as it sunk into their collective minds what the man had said. Now they had something *to do*.

As one, the previously bored guards began running towards her. Several seemed to be brandishing some kind of weapon!

Soosha blinked for a fraction of a second before coming to an important conclusion: *Run!*

Realizing she might have made in a mistake in choosing this particular world to explore, she sprinted through the square, then dashed into a marketplace where several stalls had been set up for traders.

Not stopping to think, she careened past a rapid blur of clothing items, a table displaying glinting weapons, baskets of fresh baked goods (they smelled enticing but she had no idea what they were and was not about to stop to find out); she was in full run. . . until she sideswiped a stall piled high with boxes of strange, speckled fruits.

The jarring action caused the stall tenting to warble.

A pole, which hadn't been securely tied, came loose; it crashed into a tray sending the tray and its contents skyward.

Large, round fruits were rolling everywhere!

Two of them bounced onto the baked goods table, flattening half of the merchant's items in one stampeding pass.

He let out a wail of outrage.

At his scream, a beast similar to the one she had been trying to help, stomped a fat, round paw down (despite everyone screaming for him not to) right on to one of the runaway fruits.

A tremendous stench filled the air.

A huge groan from the bystanders overtook the clacking noise of the rushing guards and the din of the marketplace gone wild.

Everyone began running then simply to get away from that horrific smell!

Why would they even sell something like THAT? Soosha wondered as she continued to dash in and around stalls, dodging her pursuers.

She was starting to enjoy herself in the chase. Soosha, like others of her kind, loved to be chased. Even more than that, she loved not getting caught!

Unless she *decided* it might be fun to be caught.

Although. . . it might not be good to be chased in this way. Her pursuers might not have her sense of humor.

"Stop, thief!" Her false accuser was still in hot pursuit. His jowls slapped against his red neck as he chugged after her. She swore the flabby pouches grew with each footfall.

Soosha had no doubt that when she hissed at him, he began to wonder if she could possibly be a female from the highly sought after and endlessly talked about feline race of shapeshifters.

Just the *idea* had sent him after her.

She had not raised her eyes to him, so he could not know for certain. If she could elude him, he might convince himself that his speculation was merely a maddened thought on an overly warm midday. She dashed forward at full speed.

Daxan had entered the marketplace in a distracted mood.

That *unsettled* feeling had come back.

It seemed to intensify as he entered the stalls. And it irritated him.

He could not chance any distractions! His current work was too crucial to be waylaid by some obscure *thing* that was plaguing him. As a scholar. He frowned as a commotion roared up near the center fountain.

Seven guards were giving chase to a female cloaked in a green cape!

Amazed, he watched the woman rapidly dash between the stalls then leap on top of a tarp. Fleet of foot and fancy free.

Over the din of commotion, he heard her. . . *delighted laughter?*

As if she were actually enjoying causing the calamity.

His golden eyes narrowed.

By the blood of Aiyah, do not let this be happening...!

Even as he uttered his heartfelt entreaty, he was forced to recognize that, indeed, it was happening.

And now it had fallen upon him to control it.

Pivoting around, he disappeared like a mist into the maze of alleyways which bordered the marketplace.

Soundless. Deadly.

Two of the guards that had split off to come at her from opposing directions, rushed Soosha from either side.

She grinned.

Surely, they have got to be jesting; such a tactic would fetch nothing but air!

Laughing as she agilely leapt over several boxes, she ran fleetly across the top of a tarp over a merchant's stall. *This foolish pursuit could actually become enjoyable!*

Swinging down, she plopped onto a cage of some cawing, winged beasts. They seemed to be cheering her on.

With one swipe, she kicked out at the latch, releasing the squawking, fussing prisoners, who took up the challenge like miniature feathered Charl. They boldly jumped directly into the path of everything coming headlong towards them and her.

It was a beautiful sight to behold!

And she would have gotten away too - If a strong hand hadn't suddenly shot out of nowhere and clasped her wrist to yank her smartly into an alleyway.

Before she had a chance to recoup, a voice as silky as the fabric of her jatal-riaz murmured low in her ear. "Do you have any idea what the penalty is for stealing from a highborn?"

Soosha tried to catch her breath as she looked up into the face of her decisive captor.

She confronted masculine features of perfect angles and hardened edges. Golden, serious eyes framed by thick, ebony lashes; and firm lips tilted with sensual secrets that begged to be bitten into release.

At such a tempting masculine display, Soosha's own lips parted in unconscious response.

The man's hair fell far below his shoulders; the strands were twisted from scalp to ends into long, handsome locks that were woven-bound throughout by black leather laces. Beaded coils hung at the ends.

His hair color matched his eyes. . .and yet, its true tone was difficult to tell in the weave of his hair. She suspected the strong sun of lightening some of the strands; for the golden color shaded from dark to light.

He was beautiful.

And since she came from a race that produced males of staggering beauty, that was saying much.

Perhaps she should tell her female friends of this place?

Still, he had no right to stop her. "How do you know I do not know the laws here?"

His golden eyes-quite beautiful, really, even though they were both the same color- hardened into sharp flints of disapproval.

Soosha rather liked that, too. Such a stern expression could only be an invitation to play!

"If you did know our laws, you would not have stolen from that Cezarim."

"I have not stolen from him. He speaks falsely!"

"And who do you think the guards will believe? A wealthy townsman from a seasoned family or you, an off lander?"

Soosha looked to the right to avoid answering the question directly. On M'yan, the feline tactic was called *shinar y shinjii*, which roughly boiled down to: *I do not hear you because I choose not to*.

The stubborn ploy had no effect on him whatsoever. Her captor's austere expression did not waver.

His grip on her arm remained firm.

"Allow me to enlighten you, visitor. Spoltam does not abide criminals. We have little crime here because most offenses are viewed equally in this land and, thus, are punished in the same fashion." He paused to let his next word have its effect. "Death."

"*Death?*" Soosha gasped, suitably impressed. "But I have only just arrived!"

Daxan tried not to smile at the charming response. It was not easy under the circumstances. "So, should we give you more time, then, to cause real trouble and be executed?"

Her mouth dropped open. "I..."

"Why have you come here?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" She gazed straight at his chest. Well, it was partially bared and right in front of her. She could not help it. Broad and muscular, smooth golden skin like the finest. . .

Daxan frowned. The woman was not focusing on his warning. He lifted her chin with his forefinger. Pushing back the hood of her cloak, he stared at her face.

Delightfully distracted by his overwhelming masculinity, Soosha gazed up at him in return.

Daxan lips parted slightly as he examined her features. The woman was exquisite! Her beauty held the promise of steaming nights and playful, teasing days.

Yet it was her eyes that promised *much* more. One blue and one gold, slightly tilted, they held liquid, exotic promise.

They were arresting.

Daxan tried to exhale slowly. This was a Familiar woman! *How had she come to be on Spoltam*
?

He glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one had seen her.

Quickly, he lifted the hood back up over her face. "It would be best if you are not seen. There have been some Oberion slavers in the marketplace of late."

So he had already discovered her secret. At times, Familiars, like all felines, could be distracted by the oddest things. But then their males had the uncanny ability to *focus* on something or someone to the exclusion of all else. Taj Gian never became distracted and her brother-What did this man just say?

Soosha sucked in her breath as his words replayed in her mind. *Slavers?* Her nostrils flared in anger. "Why do you allow it?" She personally accused him.

"I do not allow it. Or disallow it. It has nothing to do with me."

She snorted in disgust. "A typical response! When they come for you, then it will have to do with you, hmm?"

Daxan said nothing; he just watched her intently.

The man had the disarming stare of a very knowledgeable man. Soosha did not like that one bit. She tugged at her arm to free it.

He held fast.

She was close to a snarl. "What is this horrible planet? I need to know its name so I will be sure to not come here again!"

This time the edges of his lips did curl up. "It is called Spoltam and if you think this a harsh place, you have not traveled much. Spoltam prides itself on being the most civilized of worlds."

"*Civilized?* You condone executing someone simply because a wealthy man from one of your older families claims she has stolen a trinket. You call that civilized?"

"I did not say I condone it. I am merely explaining our way of life to you lest you find yourself in a position to be executed on a daily basis."

She rubbed her chin. "I am not sure there is humor in that."

A line of amusement carved into his cheek. "One would not think so. Spoltam's elder families do have control-especially over this city. You would do well to remember that as well. Aghni is our main city of scholarly pursuit. While it is true our citizenry is categorized- and you may think some of us have undue privilege over others- you must understand that it is the scholars who keep the Blessed Knowledge of Spoltam alive. Scholars devote all their time to study so they can spread the word of Sense to all."

"Yes, I have already seen the sense of your scholars. There is a man tied up in the square, left to

stand broiling in the sun! I was told it was so he could learn his 'lesson'."

"He is a servant who disobeyed his master."

"Oh, well then, never mind." She slammed the toe of her boot into the dirt. "Of course he does not matter. What am I thinking? Oh, and where is the nearest portal off of this disgusting world?"

A flash of white teeth in the briefest of smiles let her know he was truly amused by her. "What is your name?" he drawled as he released her arm.

Soosha lifted her chin. "I do not I think I shall tell you."

Daxan crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh, I think you shall."

"I think not. Just point me towards the nearest Tunnel and I shall leave this wretched place forthwith."

"You are not returning to M'yan?"

Soosha faltered. He knew of her homeworld? She was not sure, but she did not think many outsiders knew much of her homeworld. Or that it was called M'yan.

The least that was said about her world and her people, the better.

"No, I am a traveler." That felt good to say, even if her journey had only just begun.

"Did not your King order all Familiar home?"

"How do you know that?" The admission slipped out and it was too late to call it back.

"I am known to several High Guild members on Aviara. The Alliance hopes to entice Spoltam into their fold, so I am kept apprised of everything that might affect us."

"Who are you?"

"I am called Daxan Sahain and you have not answered my question."

She shrugged.

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Let me guess. You want to adventure, so you defied the royal decree?"

Soosha responded with the *shinar y shinjii*.

"You are not planning on going to M'yan, are you?" It was more statement than question.

"No. I told you, I am a traveler."

"*Mmm*. Yes, you have journeyed all the way from M'yan to Spoltam - where you have been for, perhaps, a few moments."

"How did you know that?" She swore under her breath as she realized he had tricked her again into giving him more information! Soosha wondered where he was headed with this interrogation!

She did not have to wait long to find out.

"*I* am taking you home."

That said, the tall man clasped her wrist and started striding through the maze of alleyways. Hauling her along behind him.

"*Wait!* What are you doing?" Soosha tried to dig in her heels and pull her hand free at the same time.

Against the strength of such a man it was useless. Her boot heels left deep furrows in the dirt as she was dragged along.

"I cannot take you back to your people now; nor can I, in good conscience, let you venture into sure danger. You will remain in my home until I am able to return you to your family- no doubt they are ill with worry over you."

He continued tugging her along.

"You have no right to do this!"

"I am trying to help you. Believe me, the Tunnel to the next world is one *you* particularly would not welcome; although they would welcome you with ropes and chains. Ganakari links directly to Spoltam, you foolish girl, and if you know not what place that is, then you are truly naive."

"I have not heard of this Ganakari!"

"So I thought. Your family protects you against the horrors Familiars face off world. Ganakari is where your king was recently imprisoned. *And* it is where they amass an army to hunt down those like you."

He picked up his pace.

Soosha had no intention of going with this stranger! For all she knew, *he* could be a slaver.

Furthermore, he was wrong.

She knew of the plight of her people.

Soosha sighed. She also knew that her elder brother, Brygar, had a tendency to shield her. Familiar males were ridiculously protective over their family members. While she had known that taj

Gian had been captured and had executed a daring escape, she had never been told the name of the planet he had been held captive on.

But that had naught to do with this stranger. "Stop this! I am not a child seeking your protection! Let me go!"

"Be quiet! You are putting us both at risk! I do not wish to have to plea for you if that Cezarim finds us."

Soosha disagreed. She began to fight in earnest.

Not one to quibble, Daxan stooped down, placed a broad shoulder against her midsection and tossed her over his back.

Familiar females did not take well to being handled without their consent.

Soosha proceeded to claw and scratch his back. In such a state, the females of her kind were tempests of fury. Most would have dropped her and ran for their lives at the outset of the fit.

This man did not so much as miss a step.

Is he made of stone? Soosha was furious. "I am not your concern! Let me go!"

"Oh, you are my concern, all right, and I have no intention of letting you go." With those cryptic words, he smartly slapped her behind with the flat of his hand.

Whap!

Soosha could not believe he would have the audacity to do such a thing! After all, she was almost a member of the royal family. How dare he!

Daxan ignored her yells of outrage and kept walking.

Three things occurred to Soosha simultaneously as she bit a chunk of the man's back.

The first two made her spitting mad. The third gave her pause.

First, she believed herself extremely ill-fortuned to have come upon someone straightaway on this world who felt duty-bound to 'safeguard' her.

Second, she did not think she was going to talk, cajole, or otherwise sweeten this man into releasing her until he heard otherwise from her family; or from *taj* Gian himself. She had seen *that* in his golden eyes. All of a sudden, she wondered just how angry *taj* Gian was going to be over this escapade? She had disobeyed a directive from her king. ..

And finally - and this was without a doubt the worst of the three revelations - this non-Familiar, unreasonable stranger... seemed to be. . .

Her mate.

By the blood of Aiyah! Familiars always had the innate ability to sense these things; unfortunately, she had discovered the disturbing fact a fraction of a moment *after* she had sunk her teeth into the muscular curvature of his back.

The bite had not been a love nip.

Not even close to a love nip.

Soosha did not think her actions would particularly endear her to this Spoltam stranger, who would know nothing of Familiar ways.

She shrugged fatalistically. One must do what one must do. She bit him again. Harder.

At the sharp sting of her teeth, Daxan sucked in his breath then let it out in a *whoosh*.

Soosha waited to see what he would do. She knew what a Familiar man would do- either growl or bite her back. Maybe both.

And not necessarily with displeasure.

Daxan Sahain did neither.

His step barely faltered as he marched along with her bobbing on his shoulder. "If you do that one more time," he cautioned in a low voice, "you will regret it."

She tended to believe him. As a warning, his tone was fairly potent. And there was something about him that told her that he never cautioned idly.

Soosha's brow knit in puzzlement.

She only knew the ways of Familiar men - who could be very formidable when irked. She knew absolutely nothing about Spoltam males.

Do they growl when they are angry or aroused? Do they purr when they are feeling very sensual or content?

And why ever was she a match to *him*?

Familiars rarely mated outside their species. She was not sure how she felt about this sudden change in her life.

The man was certainly comely, yes, but she was not seasoned enough to mate. Surely she needed more time to play about? Of course she did!

Moreover, why was she sensing him when it was usually the male that first triggered the response

in the female?

The only Familiar woman she knew of that had mated outside of their people was Rejar's mother, Suleila. What could she recall about that mating.. .?

Suleila had said that it was Krue who relentlessly pursued her. Soosha was not sure, but it had sounded as if Suleila had no idea Krue was to be her mate, at least not at first.

Familiar mating ritual was very complex; Soosha did not pretend to understand its intricacies.

She shrugged fatalistically in the philosophical way of her kind. The Familiar gesture said, 'it is upon me now, so I will deal with it now'.

She froze mid-shrug.

Oh no! He will not be able to gift me with the 900 strokes to love!

Soosha eyes widened at such a distressing thought. From what she had heard, *that* was a lot for a woman to give up!

On the other hand. . . mayhap Spoltam men had their own delights to share?

The idea immediately perked her up.

What if this Spoltam male does not wish to mate with me? Soosha worried her lip. He was not Familiar; he would not know he was to be her lifelong companion.

Should she tell him?

At the moment, it did not seem as if he would embrace the news. Especially since she had just bitten a chunk of his back.

Mayhap she should wait a while before informing him they were to spend the rest of their lives together?

And that he must be true to her forever. Just like a Familiar man.

Yes, she would give him a little time to learn of her; then he would have to mate her.

Feline in temperament, it never dawned on Soosha that the man would not cherish her. A Familiar's attitude could often be summed up as: "I have decided to be in your presence; of course you must adore me!"

Having thought through her present dilemma, Soosha relaxed against the man's broad shoulders. "You can let me down now; I have decided to go with you to your home." She made her voice sound especially sweet.

Daxan arched his eyebrow. "Just like that, hmm? Had a change of heart, have you?" He did not let up his hold on her for an instant.

"Yes, actually I have. Your words have sense and if I am a guest in your home, I will have a better chance of learning of your people. It is the reason I am traveling, after all.

Now that I have calmed down, I see the benefit in what you suggest. Since you are well known to the High Guild-and my senses tell me you speak the truth- I no longer have qualms about going with you. You may release me."

There. It was a good proclamation. And reasonable, too. Soosha could have purred at her own fine sense; humility not being an attribute of her kind.

"I think not, my lady Familiar."

She could not believe her dainty little ears. "Wh-what did you say?"

"I believe you heard me correctly- but allow me to explain: I do not like being ordered about. I have even less liking for being told what I will and will not do. You have made your declaration; I am having trouble trusting in your words."

The line of her back arched up as her integrity as impugned. "That is ridiculous! Familiars do not lie!"

"Keep your voice down!" he hissed. "Do you wish others to know of you as well? Have you no sense of the danger?"

Her arm sliced the air, dismissing his concerns. "Adventuring is always fraught with danger. That is what makes it so delightful."

"Mmmm. You are either very naive or very foolish." He rested his chin against the back of her upper thigh. The skin was remarkably smooth; it was all he could do not to nuzzle against it. "I am wagering it is both."

Her nostrils flared at the insult. This Spoltami man was quite vexing!

Sometimes that can be a good thing, Soosha...

She thought about it. Familiar woman generally loved complexity in their males. She just was not sure she liked the trait in *him*. After all, he was not Familiar!

He had no right to be so vexing.

It might be better all around if he was not so difficult. Generally speaking, she could charm a bowl of calan stew from a starving man. This man, however, might be somewhat more difficult to manage.

...

As if to prove her assessment, Daxan choose that moment to suddenly bite *her* on the thigh.

Soosha's mouth dropped open at the sharp, sensual sting of his teeth.

The hot nip sent shivers up her leg.

Other women might be offended by what this man had done; she admired him for it. His reaction hinted that he might be a passionate lover and that pleased her.

Still, she needed to set her boundaries. Her kinswoman, Suleila, had once instructed her on these important matters of life. 'Begin as you mean to go on,' Suleila had told her.

Of course, later Soosha had found out that it had actually been Suleila's mate, Krue, who had impressed such wisdom on Suleila.

No matter. Good advice was good advice.

"You go too far Daxan Sahain." Even to her own ears her protest was rather tepid.

Daxan smiled slowly. "No, my lovely Familiar woman, *I reciprocate*."

With that warning, he skirted past a side gate of a stone-walled dwelling. Soosha barely had a glimpse of a small garden before they went through an arched stone doorway. The plantings were quite colorful in this area; she would have enjoyed investigating their interesting scents but he did not stop.

Inside, the floor was a tumbled mixture of polished stones.

Through an open doorway, Soosha got a brief glance of someone cooking as they passed. A rather rounded *Zot*. Soosha had heard that *Zots* were native to the planet Zarrain. They were highly sought after as cooks, but they were extremely sensitive about the responsibilities of properly feeding those they served.

This one was swinging both snout and tail in syncopated rhythm as he clattered several pots about in blissful preparation of a meal.

Daxan whisked her past several additional open chambers and then up a wide stairway. Jouncing her all the way.

The dwelling seemed rather large to her. "Is this entire dwelling your home?" Familiars were known for being overly, sometimes inappropriately, inquisitive.

She could feel Daxan smile against her thigh. "Yes."

"What will your family think of you bringing me home like this?" Soosha already knew he was not mated, she was referring to his blood relatives.

"My family does not reside here."

His response perplexed her. Familiar families loved to live together- every day brought plenty of opportunity for squabbles! What would life be without the friction of your family to irk you along? Who better to annoy than your closest loved ones?

"You do not live with your family?" Her tone was so endearingly concerned that his hand involuntarily caressed the curve of her backside.

"Spoltam adults live in their own domiciles. Families grow out and apart."

Soosha was horrified. "But-but how could you live without those you love around you? Who is there to share your happiness and woes? Where do you find someone to fight with that you know will have to forgive you? *Who do you irritate?!?*"

Her shocked, innocent inquiries were exceedingly humorous to him.

He chuckled. "We can always find someone to bother, I assure you. As for our lives, Spoltami believe in the sanctity of the individual. True originality and development can only be achieved when all familial influences are removed."

Soosha was thunderstruck. "That is not right! Familiars are very independent-"

"So I have heard."

"Yet we put great faith in our families."

Daxan shrugged. "It is a different viewpoint."

"Do you not see your parents? Your brothers and sisters?" She could not imagine such a thing.

He seemed to reflect on that for a moment. "Of course we do. We have festivals and visits. But our day to day lives are kept separate."

"And you enjoy this?"

He paused. "It is the way it is."

She was to learn that was a typical Spoltam reply.

Nonetheless, Soosha let him know exactly how it was going to be with them. "Well, my family will always be a part of my life!"

He gave her an odd look. Then tried to explain further. "Our perspective is different from yours. Spoltami put much store in knowledge. A man must study his entire life. Some of us achieve what is called "exalted thinking." We become sanctioned scholars. That is our highest aim."

Such a dispassionate objective was totally alien to her way of thinking. "What good is this knowledge without a foundation of loving support?"

Daxan opened his mouth to reply but nothing came out.

Her simple question was not so simple. He was impressed with her natural acuity. "I will have to think of a reply to that one."

"You do that." She grinned in a gamin way. Teasing. Alluring. *Catlike*.

They continued down a long hallway and through a wide arch which led directly into a massive sleeping chamber.

Daxan deposited her there, flinging her upright with a *whoosh!*

"I have something I must attend to. I will be back after the sun sets. In the meantime, the servants will bring you whatever you wish."

"Very well."

"Since you trust me well enough to come willingly to my home, perhaps you can tell me your name?"

She bit her lip as she weighed his request.

Not because she was not going to tell him.

Sometimes, for no discernible reason at all, Familiars hesitated. They were always instinctually, careful.

"Soosha." She finally relented. "It is Soosha."

"Hmmm. . ." He seemed to consider her name. "It suits you."

"How so?"

"I must go." He left before she had a chance to ask any more questions, closing thick wooden doors behind him.

A *click* indicated he had locked them.

So he bid her trust him, yet did not trust her! Soosha was actually more irritated with the locked doors than with the issue of trust. Familiars hated to be confined.

She tried to will herself not to pace.

Mayhap she could distract herself by threshing out the room? A healthy dose of curiosity never

killed the cat, for information always wooed her back!

Soosha chuckled as she set out to explore the area.

FOUR

Planet Aviara, House of Sages, High Guild

"I believe that concludes our affairs for today."

The wizard Gelfan, current leader of the High Guild, attempted to put an end to another long, torturous meeting in the House of Sages.

The meeting had been a typical one in that not much was actually accomplished.

The Guild seemed to be achieving less and less as time went by.

Perhaps, Yaniff thought, I am being unfair? Matters just seem to take longer these days.

The House of Sages, always rife with endless discussions, ponderings, musings, and bickering, seemed especially ineffective of late. Yaniff wondered why it had come to this. In any case, they were not done for today.

Not nearly done.

"Not yet, Gelfan." Yaniff leaned forward in his chair.

Some of the wizards had already begun to rise from their seats. With Yaniff's words, a general creaking ensued as old bones wearily retook their chairs. Whenever Yaniff spoke, it was known throughout the High Guild that more was coming.

He was a seventh-level mystic- there was no telling *how much more* was coming.

Grumbled murmurings filled the hall.

The sounds of old, responsible wizards in weighty debate were identifiable and predictable.

They were a resigned lot.

Bojo, Yaniff's winged-companion, chortled gleefully.

Yaniff, tried not to smile as he stroked Bojo's feathers in acknowledgment. Yes, they were a predictable bunch of old 'coots', as Adeeann would often say.

Gelfan, a shrewd, perceptive manipulator, raised his brow as if he had mistakenly overlooked this last bit of a problem.

Yaniff knew better.

These days, he watched Gelfan most carefully.

"Ah, yes. The matter of that Familiar girl. . . What was her name again?"

Gelfan had not forgotten her name. Nor the situation. "Soosha." Yaniff replied succinctly.

"Ah, yes, Soosha. I understand she has taken it upon herself to 'run off M'yan. I hardly see where this is a matter of concern to the High Guild, Yaniff. If this young woman decided to go against her king and put herself in jeopardy, it is really none of our concern."

Yaniff raised his eyebrow. "Then perhaps it is *you* who will tell that to her brother who now awaits our decision outside this very chamber?"

Several of the wizards snickered.

They *all* were quite aware that the robust Familiar was beyond the closed doors of the High Guild chamber. They had been subjected to his constant pacing and grumbling since their meeting began at midday. It was early eve and the man was still out there stomping and, every now and then, vocally letting them all know of his presence.

His select choice of words were attention-getting, to say the least.

Gelfan frowned, waving his hand in dismissal. "Yes, we all know the man is outside the chamber."

Yaniff felt a duty to the distressed Familiar. "Since he learned of his sister's whereabouts on Spoltam, all manner of thoughts go through his head. You should not make light of his concern, Gelfan."

Gelfan showed no remorse at his harsh judgement. "I understand that this brother, *Brygar*, is quite a brash, impatient man. Some say he has the temperament of a *xathu*."

Several of the wizards chuckled at the apt description. Even now they could hear the man bellowing out in the hall.

Gelfan could be most charming when he wanted to be. *Such charm is always dangerous*. Yaniff acknowledged that the wizard could become a serious concern...

He pulled himself up out of his chair, leaning heavily on his staff. Some statements required a little higher vantage point.

Especially in this chamber.

"It is true that Brygar can roar on occasion; at times, he is a most daring, impulsive Familiar- but his heart is true.

He worries over his sister. Knowing what captured Familiars endure, does anyone blame him?"

Yaniff's chastising words instantly sobered up the chamber. Ernak, a kindly old mystic, nodded his head in agreement. "Their situation is most dreadful."

Gelfan sighed loudly. "Yes, of course it is dreadful, *however*, let us not confuse the issue with over-sentimentality. We all know the situation of the Familiar. This esteemed council has oft acknowledged our agreement to aid them. Yet this particular incident has been brought about by one girl who took it upon herself to disobey a direct order of their king, Gian Ren. What is more, the brother, Brygar, is insisting that he accompany any Charl warrior we might choose to send. If we decide to send a Charl. And I might add, he is *demanding* that we do so."

Gelfan paused to let his piercing stare capture each member. The knifelike expression clearly conveyed that the Familiar's behavior toward such a revered body as the House of Sages was sheer audacity.

Yaniff watched the scene unfold before him, silent as a stone.

Gelfan continued his speech. "I say we let it be. With his rash behavior, this Familiar is likely to cause a planetary incident that we can ill afford. The ruling council on Spoltam, the Reign, will take immediate offense to what they will perceive as his instinctual, emotional feline temperament."

Wolthanth, one of the wisest wizards in the High Guild, disagreed. "You are wrong, Gelfan. Brygar will undoubtedly go after his sister with or without our aid. Best it be with our aid- if only to have some control over him."

Yaniff nodded to Wolthanth to thank him for his support. Gelfan was not known for his strong advocacy of the Familiar. The feline race had no champion in him. Yaniff well remembered that Gelfan had not been happy to discover that Rejar, the half-Familiar son of Krue, had in fact, inherited prophetic Charl powers.

Rejar's first act as a newly indoctrinated Charl had been to align Gelfan's house to him by accepting his Cearix. It had been a shrewd maneuver and Yaniff had later commended his student for it. In time, Rejar would learn to read that dagger's 'truth'.

Yaniff sighed. It was unfortunate that when the Familiar needed the guiding hand of the Sages the most, a man such as Gelfan led the High Guild. His powers of persuasion were strong. He could turn many of the Sages; and they would cast their votes with him.

Zsysz, the newest member of the House of Sages interrupted the path of Yaniff's thoughts with his first *interesting* comment.

"Excuse me, but, how does Spoltam stand on the issue of Ganakari?"

Yaniff raised his eyebrows. Mayhap he had passed over Zysyz too soon? Mayhap there was yet a future ally here...

With the proper underpinning, of course.

Gelfan, somewhat surprised at Zysyz astute question, answered. "Spoltam shares a Tunnel annex point with Ganakari. The Spoltami, with their highly developed systems of lucid reasoning, naturally feel that the Familiar, a race that relies heavily on instinct and emotion, are somewhat inferior."

Yaniff noted Gelfan's use of the word 'naturally'. Bojo brushed the edge of his beak lightly against Yaniff's earlobe.

"They are biased, but not overtly hostile to the race as a whole. So far, they have not joined into a pact with Ganakari. Although, that could change at any time. Which makes this situation all the more delicate."

Yaniff corrected Gelfan's glossed over summary. "They do allow slavers access to their planet."

Several of the wizards frowned disapprovingly.

Wolthanth stroked his chin. "I have always wondered how the Spoltami manage to allow their lucid' reasoning to condone such a thing; yet, it seems they are equally enamored of *privilege*."

"They are not part of the Alliance," Gelfan shot back. Slavers were strictly forbidden in the Alliance. "If we ever hope to bring them into the Alliance then we need tread carefully."

"This is a crucial balance." Ernak added the obvious- but in a wise-sounding voice.

Yaniff groaned inwardly. Ernak was an extremely kind wizard who did not have the heart for decisive action.

"Spoltam favors us." Gelfan pressed his point. "Let it be known that their scholars spend much time interpreting adages from the House of Sages."

Wolthanth winked at the table. "Yes, I have heard that a Spoltami scholar can cheerfully spend years interpreting a single sentence of Charl *mystic-chatter*. Knights, our quest for obscurity is well met!"

Despite the seriousness of the situation, they all laughed. Even Bojo cawed.

Immediately, a deep voice bellowed outside and the complaint reached them clearly in the council chamber-right through wooden doors that were almost as dense as the tree trunks in the Towering Forests. "*Laughing?! They laugh while my sister languishes on a pretentious planet of kiss-slavers!*"

Many of the wizards raised their brows.

Yaniff winced. *He helps not his cause.*

He knew his assessment was correct when Brygar's tirade against 'overly prudent, dawdling wizards' rose to new heights. *"I dare not ask myself how long it takes them to relieve themselves, for surely they must discuss the function for hours before finding the proper direction to do so!"*

Several of the Sages began to frown. Deeply.

Yaniff saw the time was upon him. He quickly stepped forward to divert their concerns and lead them to the cause.

"Wolthanth is right; let us have some control over the incident. By carefully choosing an emissary from the Charl, we will remain in command. The key is to send someone to Spoltam who will not only find Soosha, but who will also be more than capable of *tempering* Brygar. Thus we will master the situation. I call for a first vote."

It was a brilliant tactical maneuver, coming at such a time in the daily deliberations. Late in the day, nearing the evening meal.

The words 'temper', 'master' and 'control', served up all at once, was a dish any wizard could chew on. Especially if it hastened the meeting. (Thus, the process of how some mystical decisions are ultimately rendered is revealed: Old men do not favor late evening meals.)

Most of the mystics quickly spoke in assent, giving Yaniff the quorum he needed to proceed.

Gelfan had cautiously remained neutral.

"Have you someone in mind, Yaniff?" Ernak patted his stomach as it growled.

Yaniff smiled crookedly; Ernak's mind was more involved with pondering what choices he would be having for his meal than the subject at hand.

Bojo stretched his wings, refolding them neatly. That done, the winged companion started to snore. *Loudly.*

Yaniff shook his shoulder to wake Bojo up. *Am I the only one ever concerned with the fate of the universe?*

Bojo opened one eye.

It drifted shut again.

Yaniff snorted to himself. And boldly continued.

With all the aplomb of a seventh-level wizard who is very much concerned with the fate of the universe, he put forward an option. "As it happens, I do have someone in mind."

"Who would have guessed?" Gelfan muttered- but loudly enough for everyone to hear.

"What say you, Gelfan?" Yaniff purposely cupped his ear. "I did not quite hear you." Oh, he was being very bad. And, yes, he was enjoying it.

His rise in mood emanated to his winged-companion, who awoke and gave Gelfan a sharp-toothed grin.

It irritated Gelfan immensely.

For some reason companions generally took great delight in irking other wizards. Their expressions said: *See what you do not have? Me. Why? Because I chose a better wizard.* Companions were notoriously *wizardproud*.

Yaniff equitably concluded that there had to be some reason for enduring these sessions. If not irritating Gelfan, then what?

Gelfan was not happy with either of them; he glared at Yaniff for calling him out. So he yelled down the table. In wizard-boom.

"I BOW TO YOUR GREAT AGE AND SHALL BE SURE TO SPEAK UP FOR YOU, YANIFF. WHO IS THIS SUPREMELY HALLOWED CHARL; ONE WHO CAN KEEP SUCH A FAMILIAR IN LINE?"

Several of the mystics cupped their ears, wincing, their mugs of *mir* clattering across the wooden table with the vibration of his voice.

Yaniff was unfazed. He retook his seat. "Ah! I believe these disintegrating, worthless ears can hear footsteps approaching at this very moment."

The doors to the chamber suddenly crashed open with a deafening *bang!* Boot heels clicked an angry staccato across the stone floor.

"What mean you, Yaniff, to summon me here like some Charl supplicant to do your bidding!" Traed ta'al Krue confronted the room, glowering at the entire House of Sages.

Since the scowl was accompanied by an irritated toss of waist-length dark hair; as well as the sparking, flashing eyes of a high level mystical-warrior in his prime. . . it was rather effective.

Several Sages actually sat back in their seats.

Yaniff chuckled. *The lad cannot help the drama that follows him.* "He calls it upon himself, does he not, Bojo?"

The winged-companion squawked back in reply.

Yaniff's eyes, darker than the darkest night, glowed with mischief. "Ah, but how can I not?" He

ruffled Bojo's feathers.

If Traed's unruly entrance was not enough to unsettle the venerable House of Sages, the snarling, angry, mountain of a Familiar that followed in the Aviaran's wake certainly proved sufficient.

The man continued to roar as he came into the room.

His litany of complaints were much louder now that the thick wooden doors were not between him and the Sages. Ernak and Zysyz groaned and slid down into their chairs.

Others on the chamber held the same sentiment.

"Not him!"

"Do not let that bothersome Familiar in here!"

"By Aiyah! Close the door quickly! We have been hearing his tirade all day!"

Clearly the Familiar was not a popular "guest".

The wizards' pleas were roundly ignored by the tall, dark Aviaran glowering before them. Traed's focus, however, was purely on Yaniff.

The one who had called him.

The one who always managed to embroil him in one scheme after another!

It was a mystery to Traed how this was done as he was not even a Charl supplicant.

"I see you have received my message, Traed."

If fury had a name, it would have been Traed ta'al Krue. The normally stoical Aviaran flashed warning signals with every part of his body.

Palms flat on the council table, he bent towards Yaniff. "I have oft told you," he gritted out in a deadly soft voice, "I will not be treated as a Charl supplicant. I am not here to do your bidding."

Yaniff could not have been more pleased. With his own words, Traed had just bound himself to the task at hand.

Although he did not know it.

Yet.

To a wizard, the Sages gaped at Traed, utterly aghast. Such insolence! To a high-level mystic? The lad needed some discipline!

To these Sages, Traed was an unknown commodity. They were uncomfortable with his lack of

proper training; they questioned his dark heritage. Some feared his unschooled power.

If they were opposed to Yaniff before, they would side with him now. Traed's lack of respect had always been disquieting. Such an insult could never go unremarked.

Yaniff's knowing expression gave Traed pause. He had seen that expression before - right after the door to the snare shut tight.

Instantly he realized his mistake.

His green eyes narrowed ominously. "It will not work," he murmured to Yaniff.

"It already has."

"*Cease all this Charl blather and tell me what is to be done about my sister!!*" The huge, snarling, extremely handsome Familiar roared to the group at large. His eyes were an unusual combination - lavender and aqua. If one were to look close, one might ask how such soothing colors came to one who roared so fiercely.

Yaniff tried not to laugh. Yet, the events unfolding before him were extremely humorous.

"What does he rave about?" Traed nodded over his shoulder.

"There is a Familiar girl on the planet Spoltam. She left M'yan without permission, going against Gian's orders. This is her brother, Brygar. You will accompany him to Spoltam and see to the matter."

Traed's eyes narrowed to slits. "Oh, will I?"

"Yes, you will."

Traed cocked one eyebrow.

Yaniff grinned. "Taj Gian thanks you in advance for all of the Familiar people on M'yan, which is, if you recall, by royal decree, your *second* home. And there is the matter of the House of Lodarres - or should I say the honor of the House of Lodarres, Traed *ta'al Krue*."

Traed's nostrils flared.

But he remained silent.

"Finally, some action!" Brygar threw up his hands. "Would that I were not bleeding to death out there as I waited, for I surely would be missing three of my incarnations!"

Treads leveled a cool look of dismissal at the disruptive Familiar, but his aggressive stance had changed slightly. He exhaled a disgusted gust of air.

The entire situation was clear to him.

Yes, he was caught.

"You are a crafty old-"

With a feigned, pained expression, Yaniff shook his finger back and forth. "Ah-ah-ah."

Traed was unmoved. "You brought Gian into this knowing I am honor-bound not to refuse him!"

"Not so. Gian was already involved. He made you a member of his extended family when you saved both his life and the life of his *tajan*, Jenise. In addition, you are now a *recognized* son of Krue, a great Charl warrior."

"Occurrences which I suspect you also had much to do with, Yaniff."

"You cannot refuse this request."

Brygar was through with waiting. "Are we to leave, Charl, or stand here exchanging pleasantries all eve? Let us be off at once!"

Traed's jaw pulsed. He did not even look at the annoying Familiar.

He did glare at Yaniff though.

And the glare said it all.

Traed would never be able to abide Brygar, let alone take a journey with him. The Aviaran was a solitary man, quiet and watchful in his way. Ever remote.

Brygar would surely drive him mad.

Yaniff chuckled, further infuriating the younger man. Traed's hand drifted over to the light saber at his waist.

Yaniff's eyes twinkled merrily. He made a wager with himself as to how long it would be before the two of them were at each other's throats. To help them along, his next words were a simple spice to steam the "throttle-stew."

"Your level head will keep him out of trouble, Traed."

And where had Traed heard that before? Ah, yes, just before Yaniff sent him off to Ree-Gen-Cee Eng-Land after Rejar. *That* escapade had resulted in him exposing his powers to the Guild!

Traed glared at Yaniff.

Gelfan, bored with the entire situation- and also hungry for his evening meal- decided to put an end to it. "Traed ta'al Krue, the Guild decrees that you will go to Spoltam and bring back this Familiar girl to M'yan."

Traed met Yaniff's eyes. That was not exactly what Yaniff had said.

"Thus you see why I always choose you, Traed," Yaniff murmured approvingly. "You have yet to disappoint me."

"Mayhap I should work harder at it."

"Somehow, each time, I think you do," Yaniff wisely rejoined.

Traed looked at him, caught speechless and yet. . . not without words.

"Enough! I am leaving with or without you, Charl!" Brygar was already storming out of the High Guild.

"You will owe me much for this one, Yaniff," Traed gritted out.

Yaniff nodded. "Go after him now, before he causes a galaxian war."

"I do not think one Familiar can do such a thing."

"No?" Yaniff's lips twitched. "Then you know not your Familiars."

Traed exhaled noisily, then turned to follow the brash Familiar.

Yaniff grinned wickedly. "All in all, a good turn, eh, Bojo? Already they are like the best of companions."

Bojo nipped Yaniff's earlobe.

Sharply.

A wizard's laughter is a beautiful thing to behold.

If you should ever hear it—

Either laugh with him or run quickly for cover.

FIVE

By the time Tread caught up with Brygar, he was already at the Hall of Tunnels.

And he was in his cat form.

There was no mistaking that great stomping animal with his shock of black hair and his lavender

and aqua eyes-

The cat was even snarling to himself as he raced along!

Worse, the foolhardy Familiar was about to storm through the *wrong* Tunnel.

Traed shouted a warning. "No!"

Too late.

Without stopping, Brygar barreled forward and sprang through the portal.

Traed winced.

Of all worlds to pick- why did the fool have to pick that one? Brygar had stormed headlong onto Mollock, affectionately referred to by all as 'the mud hub'.

By Aiyah, what a dolt!

He had no choice now but to go after him.

Traed gritted his teeth and plunged through the gateway. He detested mud!

Almost as much as he detested quests.

He tumbled onto the plane of Mollock, sliding hip-deep into an endless sea of sucking mud. He took the opportunity to curse the House of Sages in twenty-two languages.

If Traed had known that the Sages had neglected to inform him that Brygar was notorious on M'yan for being a Familiar who lacked *any* sense of direction. . . he would have cursed them in forty-two languages.

Especially since the affliction never seemed to stop the stubborn feline.

Indeed, the obstinate Familiar simply ignored all those who told him he could not find his way back to his own toes on a perfectly clear day.

Who had ever heard of a Familiar with no internal sense of direction?

Certainly not Brygar.

SIX

Yaniff made his way back to his cottage in the forest.

It had been an eventful day.

Halfway home, he paused on the wooded path to peer at the upper branches of a nanyat tree.

Lying across one of the limbs, basking in the shade of the thick, dark fronds, was his student, Rejar ta'al Krue.

His *tenth* level student. Half-Aviaran and half-Familiar, he was unique in every way. No other child had ever been born of Familiar and Charl, save him. Some said his conception was miraculous. His father, Krue, however, maintained that it was just good love play.

Of course, depending on the amount of mischief his younger son caused, Krue had also claimed that Rejar was love play gone astray.

Whatever the cause of his existence, it was widely acknowledged that Rejar had a way of burrowing into people's hearts.

The scamp was well-loved by many.

A light breeze billowed the full sleeves of the pale blue shirt Rejar wore. The loose garment laced at the wrist and neck. His black *tracas* fit snugly over his lean hips and waist; the black breeches were tied and laced up the front.

The lad spends too much time undoing all of those laces; his raiment mirrors his outer nature exactly, Yaniff rued. Sleek, sinuous and utterly sensual. He was the outcome of a mixed bloodline; and yet, it was the Familiar traits that were most apparent. The cat in him was strong.

Even black leather boots seemed sleeker on him than on other men.

Ah, but he is so much more. . .

Rejar was stretched out on his side, head propped up by the palm of his hand. One long leg was casually bent at the knee. His boot heel tapped a slow staccato on the wooden branch.

He gazed languidly down at Yaniff with an inscrutable expression.

"Taking a nap, are we?" Yaniff leaned against his staff as he stared up at his student.

"It is such a beautiful day, how could I resist?" Rejar's blue and gold eyes held sparks of mischief.

"Mmmm."

Rejar chuckled at Yaniff's flat reply. "You have sent Traed on another journey."

It was not a question.

Yaniff took a moment to study his student. His Familiar blood allowed him to shield his thoughts.

At times, Rejar could even withhold his thoughts from Yaniff. The ability- a powerful asset - could quickly become a liability. Yaniff was most careful with Rejar's unfolding.

"And how do you know this?"

Rejar grinned. "I happened to be in the Hall of Tunnels when I observed him chasing down a huge black cat- that looked strangely like the Familiar Brygar. I could only think of one reason *our* Traed would do such a thing. . ." He wagged his finger at the wizard. "*You* are up to your tricks, Yaniff."

Sharp as ever, he is.

"Hmph! And what were you doing in the Hall of Tunnels? I distinctly remember leaving you with a rather large tome of *Curious Tinctures* that you were to study."

Rejar coughed. "And it was very scintillating, I assure you; however, there was a most beautiful piece of Krilli cloth that I had seen at the sacri yesterday and I thought Lilac would look most beguiling in such a material, so I-"

Yaniff banged his staff. "You are mated and still you squander yourself! I do not know how it is possible!"

Rejar threw back his head and laughed. "Unlike you, old man, I have not forgotten the pleasures of the day." Rejar winked at his master. "And there can be endless pleasures in a day, Yaniff."

Yaniff just shook his head and rolled his eyes. Rejar had always been a trial to him. There was something about the lad that made him want to throttle him yet clap him on the back at the same time.

"I should send you to the Sky Lands to dwell among the barren, stormy cliffs for a season. I vow you will learn much about the joys of the day there, Rejar."

He did not respond as most students would have. He laughed. "Your threat is empty."

"Why do you say this?"

"I say this because if I were to go there *you* would go as well. You would never let an entire season go by without reprimanding me, Yaniff. It took too long for me to agree to become your student for you to let such opportunities slip by."

Yaniff shook his finger at him. "Scamp."

"That being so, I do not think you wish to subject your old bones to a season in the cold, damp Sky Lands." Rejar craftily viewed the wizard from beneath spiky, black lashes. "Am I not right?"

Yaniff harumphed and crossed his arms over his chest.

Grinning, Rejar turned onto his back and lazily swatted a large nanyat frond. "Yaniff. . . tell me what makes Traed a master of the blade."

Yaniff gazed shrewdly up at his student. *Excellent, Rejar. Your indolent appearance belies your true intent.* It was a remarkable foray into subtle wizardry for one so young.

Rejar had not been fetching silken fabric for his wife; he had stepped out to investigate matters on his own. The impressive initiative earned the student the key to the next door.

His question would be answered.

"Have you ever seen Traed in a life and death battle, Rejar?"

"I have seen him fight, yes."

"That is not the same thing."

"Explain, Yaniff."

"When Traed is in a duel, he never flinches - not even when a death blow may be imminent. He never gives up. He fights with the ardor of a man who *cherishes* life. Every moment of it."

"Are you sure you speak of Traed? I have seen him put himself directly in the path of danger without regard for his being."

"I have witnessed this as well. But I assure you, he holds all life dear. Even his own - though he recognizes it not. Still, he will willingly fight to the death. A man who embraces such conflict, whose skill is masterful, is difficult to best in any fight. He goes in with nothing *and* everything to lose. You see, Traed never fights to survive - *he fights to live*. Do you understand?"

"Yes, master. I understand."

"Good. Then know this: Traed has had powerful motivators. In battle, his terrible losses have served to strengthen his arm."

"But do they strengthen *him*? He constantly battles himself and the darkness he imagines dwells inside. In the end, this can only break him. . ." Rejar's brow furrowed. "Or... make him *invincible*."

Yaniff started, but would not reply. The old wizard was not often surprised. For a moment he had been caught off-guard by the younger man's incredible acuity.

Rejar thought Yaniff's reaction telling. "Perhaps I venture into a place you do not wish me to go?"

"Perhaps you would like to think that." "Do you believe it is my destiny to master the blade, Yaniff?"

Ah, we get to the real matter at last! He worries over his destiny. Yaniff sighed. *And well he should. . .*

"You have the reflexes and skill to become a legendary bladesman. Already you have shown great

promise. It remains to be seen whether your *will* carries you to those levels."

"If all you have told me is so, what losses shall then guide *my* arm, Yaniff?"

"The hand that wields the perfect blade is guided by many things. It is how the blade is fashioned that tells the tale. You have gifts that are yet to be revealed."

"Then tell me no more. Your prophecy hangs over my head like a Cearix that has two edges of one truth; and it concerns me night and day. I already have more "gifts" than I can or want to deal with."

"From your own mouth you state the quest. You must learn to *embody* these gifts, Rejar. Willingly. They must be embraced right to your heart - or all of your training will be for naught. Do you understand what I say?"

"Yes, I understand your words and I will try to do as you say. I put all of my trust in you, Yaniff."

"Good. Then you have learned well the lesson for this day."

Rejar's lips parted; the old wizard got him again! "You *knew* I would follow you?"

Yaniff shook his head. "No. As always, I left the decision up to you, Rejar. You chose the path and, thus, your lesson."

"I see."

"Come down." Yaniff motioned him with his hand. "The day is nearing its close and the evening draws nigh."

Rejar agilely hopped off the tree limb, landing next to his teacher.

"Suleila has made calan stew for you, Rejar."

The dark-haired man grinned broadly. "I vow I have a taste for it!"

"I know - which is why I happened to mention it to her earlier today."

Rejar was surprised, yet moved by the thoughtful deed.

"You cannot hide everything from me." The wizard kindly clapped him on the back.

"Did you say everything?" Rejar scoffed. "I can hide nothing from you!"

Yaniff chuckled as they strolled through the forest to the house of Krue. "Since you have been but a boy, I have always known when your belly whines for calan stew."

"My belly never whines - it purrs beseechingly." Two dimples kissed Rejar's cheeks.

"I vow I have a taste for the stew myself," Yaniff whispered as they walked the path. "It was all I

could think of in the House of Sages today."

Rejar leveled a bland look at Yaniff. "Of that, I am not so sure."

Bojo squawked agreement as he swooped along beside them. Some winged-companions were quite fond of calan stew.

And others just liked to stir the pot.

SEVEN

Planet Spoltam, City of Aghni

Daxan rested his burning forehead against the cool, smooth stone of a pillar.

Her fragrance is that of the illumia night flower. . . .

His favorite scent. The heady blooms favored the moist air surrounding bodies of water and the silvery glow on moon shine.

Daxan walked outside onto one of the open-air passages that encompassed adjoining sections of the estate. The stone hallways served several purposes; they cooled down the rooms at night by allowing air to circulate freely, while the airy rooms were extensions to the indoor living areas.

This particular passage was perched against a high cliff overlooking the sea. Several chairs, tables, and sleeping couches dotted the length of it. Gauzy curtains delineated separate areas as they fluttered in the gentle wind.

Daxan trusted that the early evening breezes would cool him down. So far, they were only serving to remind him of the feathery caress of her silken tresses as they drifted down his back.

He took a deep breath.

Above him, the sky was a swirling scape of pinks and golds. Stars were beginning to light up the tinted sky; they sparkled above the port city like a carpet of magickal jewels.

Sunsets in Aghni were highly regarded. Even off-landers came to witness the spectacle.

This night, Daxan barely took note of it.

His thoughts were on the Familiar woman who was now under his protection. *Soosha*. The word meant 'a sweet presence' in one of the languages he had studied. Yes, it suited her. Her presence had filled his home; the luscious scent of illumia was clinging to him still.

Earlier, when he had first caught sight of her leaping merrily on to the stalls of the marketplace, he had been thoroughly entranced. Her lovely laugh was so playful!

But when he looked into those dual-colored eyes his heart began to pound. At once, his blood thickened and his loins responded with a strong quickening.

Oh, he had tried to control his reaction- he was a man who had much experience with women.

It mattered not where she was concerned.

His body came alive for her.

Nevertheless, he was presently dealing with a serious matter; he could not afford to become entailed. Despite her ample charms, he doubted he would have involved himself further in the situation. Except.. .

She was a Familiar woman.

Impossible to believe, yet here she was.

And she had placed herself in grave danger.

It was apparent that she had no real idea of the kind of peril that awaited her.

He did.

He knew what horrors could befall her should she be captured by the Oberions. Daxan was vehemently opposed to allowing the slave traders access to Spoltam.

Unfortunately, he was in the minority with that opinion.

That being the case, he could not leave her unprotected.

It was more than just that, though.

He was *drawn* to her.

From the instant he had gazed into those beguiling aqua and gold eyes, he had wanted to experience all manner of pleasure with her.

It was an irresistible desire.

If he took her, would she bite and claw him.. . or sweetly mewl for him to do more? Would she scream his name when he brought her to release.. . or softly call it in rising passion? Would she overflow for him while he licked up all of that beautiful fragrance... ?

He could do all of those things. And by the look of her, she could as well.

The question was what was he going to do about it?

Duty before pleasure.

That was the Spoltam way.

He would send her back to M'yan untouched by his hands and that would be the end of it.

A vision of satiny skin flashed across his mind. The downy touch of her floor-length hair as it glided over his shoulders and back. The lilting sound of her voice. The lush firmness of her thighs and backside.

Daxan was suddenly not sure he would be following the Spoltam way.

Rumors of Familiar beauty were not rumors. This traveler, with her sweet gamin face and sensual form, was utterly captivating. There was no sense in denying that she intrigued him.

What kind of woman left the safety of her home-world to venture forth into the unknown? Despite the fact that she was forbidden to do so by her King?

An adventuresome one.

While the males of her species traveled extensively, it was rumored that the females did not. From what he knew, very few actually left their homeworld. He had heard that most preferred to stay on M'yan.

No doubt causing trouble.

When they did travel, their males were often seen accompanying them, safeguarding them from the slavers who attempted to capture them at any cost.

Of course, conditions were much worse now.

There were rumors that Oberion slavers were even infiltrating some of the outlying Alliance planets, operating in hidden ways.

Still, he understood the Familiar desire for adventure. While the Spoltami concentrated their focus on scholarly pursuits, he had always had a taste for risk.

This predilection for experiencing the unknown manifested itself in many ways.

Some of them highly interesting to the women on this planet.

There were some special techniques in the art of loveplay that he had acquired that were considered unorthodox.

Of course, some skills one must simply be born with. . . It was said that Familiars possessed

pleasure skills so refined that with a simple touch they could have their partners shivering with longing.

Daxan wondered if this woman could actually make him, a 'well-seasoned' male, tremble with such a desire.

Despite the fact that he was a decisive, energetic lover, no one had ever claimed his control. He was too focused to relinquish that amount of power.

The High Guild of Aviara had already been informed of her whereabouts. He had seen to that. Until someone arrived. . .

Time with her could be wisely spent.

Since she was anxious to explore, mayhap, she would not mind exploring him? She had said she wished to learn of other peoples.

His white teeth flashed a rather sensual smile.

Perhaps he could interest her in what *he* had to offer? Pleasure could be a fine gift for adventurers to give each other. If his guest was willing to be adventuresome, he would make sure she would not forget him when she returned to M'yan.

In fact, he would ensure that her thoughts of him would *be fragrant* with the pleasing memories of her short time on Spoltam.

It soothed a man to know that a woman remembered him fondly.

He grinned, saluting the prospect of risk - without which many men and women would never get together.

By the blood of Aiyah, I am a philosopher as well as a scholar!

He snorted and stretched his muscles. In the setting sun.

EIGHT

Planet Mollock

"We come not a moment too soon, Charl! What kind of a world do they let my sister languish on?"

Brygar, in his human form, stared at the soggy plains and gray skies of Mollock with the disdainful expression of a cat that is expected to step in, well, mud.

Traed, slipping twice, finally reached the irksome Familiar, who was standing on the only dry spot on the plain. A large boulder.

With his hands on his hips, no less.

"Where is she, Charl? I see nothing here!"

Traed ground his teeth together. "That is because she is not here. Did you not hear me call out to you to halt?"

Brygar shrugged. "Of course I did. What is your point?"

Traed took a deep breath and tried to maintain his calm. He was known as a patient man. An utterly calm man.

Restrained.

Then why did his low voice sound as if it was through *gharta* shells?

"If you heard me why did you not stop?"

"I saw no reason to. There has been enough tarrying already! Now, where is she?"

Traed spoke slowly so the dolt would hear his words. "She. . . is. . . not. . . here."

"WHAT? What trickery is this? Do the Sages think that-"

Traed put up his hand to stop the spectacular tirade. "The Sages have naught to do with it. *You* jumped the wrong Tunnel. This is not the right world, you fool!"

Brygar's mouth opened to deliver a scathing reply - but Traed's words finally sunk in. "Wrong world?" He looked down with a combination of curiosity and contempt.

As if the land insulted him by its presence beneath his feet.

"Is she not on Spoltam?"

Traed closed his eyes. *Give me strength.* "Yes, but this is not Spoltam. We are on Mollock."

"Hmmm." Brygar crossed his arms over his massive chest. "The information posted inside the Hall of Tunnels must be in error. You should tell them to fix it, Charl. There is no telling how many travelers they have led astray."

Traed gave him an arch look. "I can tell you exactly how many, Familiar. *None.* The information is not in error. *You* took a wrong turn in the Hall."

Brygar snorted at the ridiculous statement. "Impossible. I am a Familiar. Need I say more?"

Traed just stared at the large man.

Brygar frowned. "Since your people have led us to the wrong place, let us go back through the Tunnel to the correct portal."

Traed pinched the bridge of his nose. "Allow me to explain further. There is *no* Tunnel point to return to at this point. We must now slog through endless expanses of mire to the next Tunnel portal, which, for your interest, is several days journey from here."

Brygar growled at that news. *Walk through mud for days?* He did not care for the opinion at all- and thus decided to ignore it. *Shinar y shinji*. "This is not acceptable, Charl."

Traed nostrils flared as he exhaled. *Familiars!* "If you had not rushed off into the wrong Tunnel, we would not be here discussing this."

"And if you had not tarried so long arguing with all those old wizards, we would have been there already!"

At that precise moment a mudworm slithered over Traed's boot. Mollock mudworms made zorphs seem rather comely by comparison.

He had *had* enough!

His light saber cleared his belt. In the blink of an eye, the weapon was a hairsbreadth from Brygar's throat.

"Let us get one thing straight- I am not a Charl. I am here at Yaniff and taj Gian's behest. Not the House of Sages." His voice dropped to an ominous pitch. "Do not call me Charl again."

Standing stock-still, Brygar watched Traed with the heavy-lidded expression of a cat just waiting for a fight.

"Actually, there are two things we need get straight, Charl-who-is-not-Charl."

With narrowed eyes, Traed motioned with the cutting edge of the blade against the man's throat. So skilled was his hand, that he did not even nick the skin. A warning more deadly for the deftness of it.

"And what is this second matter you refer to?" The monotonous tone of Traed's voice implied that he was not the least bit interested in the response.

Brygar cocked his head to the side, boldly tempting fate and a slit throat. "If you ever point that weapon at me again, I will rip your heart out."

Traed quirked an eyebrow.

Instead of standing down, he actually seemed to be weighing the choice. "You are giving me

incentive, Familiar."

Brygar's lavender and aqua eyes flashed with interest and perhaps a glimmer of amusement. "I will give you all the incentive you need *later*. First, we need find my sister. Let us be on our journey. I can always rip your heart out after she is safe at home on M'yan. Can we make this portal without supplies?"

"No. It is too far." Traed retracted the blade, returning it to his waist. "There should be some mud huts along the way that serve as trading posts for travelers."

"I hope you have something to trade, Aviaran. For I do not."

Traed started slogging a trail in the direction of the setting sun. With every step, the bog grabbed his boots, sucking them back into the mire. *Revolting*.

"Actually, I do have something to trade." Brygar gave Traed a sideways glance as he caught up to him.

"And what, pray tell, is that?"

"You."

Brygar let out a roar of laughter.

Although. . . he was not entirely sure the Aviaran was jesting.

By the odd lights in the sparking jade eyes. Mayhap, he was not.

NINE

Planet Spoltam, City of Aghni

Daxan rapped softly on the chamber door before entering the room. If his guest was resting, he would leave without waking her.

She was standing near the open balcony. The pink sky of early evening surrounded her in a blushing halo.

He noted that she had changed into one of the gowns he had sent up earlier, along with some other items he thought she would enjoy. The crisp, rustling fabric was a melange of Spoltam colors; its design mirrored the natural beauty of the planet. Pinks, purples, deep blues, shades of gold.

The exquisite fabric suited her perfectly.

Daxan had seen highborn women wear similar gowns in Aghni, yet none looked as lovely as this Familiar woman.

Her hair hung down past her knees like an ebony cloak.

He noticed that she had woven multicolored Aghni pearl necklaces through the tresses. The criss-crossing strands of jewels formed a shimmering net over the glossy black locks.

He had heard that no other species had hair like the Familiar. He had always wondered about that. Seeing such exquisite beauty left him no doubt of it.

The *texture* set it apart.

The locks flowed over her like liquid, shimmering clouds. He knew from firsthand experience that those tresses felt even better than they looked.

He imagined the strands wrapped around his body as he made love to her. He felt the locks sliding between his thighs. Entwining his groin and buttocks as he slid languorously into her dewy heat. . .

Desire slammed through his loins.

Soosha turned away from the balcony view. "Did you want something?"

You. Daxan's lids lowered to mask his desire. "I have sent a messenger to Aviara. I am certain someone will be sent to fetch you before long."

Her lovely expression began to fade. "I wish you had not done that, Daxan Sahain."

"It needed to be done. Surely you must see this?"

"I had hopes that you would understand me."

"I do understand you. I hope that you will, in turn, understand that I have responsibilities."

She pursed her lips. No, she did not understand; but the deed was realized. There was nothing to be done for it now. "You need not lock the door, Daxan Sahain; I have told you I will stay willingly."

It was hard for him to say this, but say it he must. "How do I know I can trust you?"

The hurt look on her face almost undid him. He stepped forward to retract his words, but she spoke before he had the chance.

"If you knew anything about the Familiar, you would know that we do not lie."

"Ah. Well, I have heard your kind does speak the truth. . . and can be very creative with the *interpretation* of the words they speak."

She gave him an indignant sniff. "Where have you heard this?"

He gave her a knowing look, but would explain no further.

He is rather captivating. Soosha flushed under his steady regard. "I have given you my pledge. It should be enough."

"And so it is. Your door shall remain unlocked."

Her countenance brightened immediately. He was not such a difficult man, after all!

"Should you have a change of heart, though, remember that you have given your word. Remember also that I do have the ear of the House of Sages. I am sure you would not wish to be known throughout Aviara as a Familiar who does not keep her word."

Soosha frowned. Mayhap she was mad- he was an extremely difficult man! He just hid it well beneath his demeanor of stately manners!

Still, she wanted to sample his lips. They curved in a most beguiling way. As if they withheld delightful secrets.

And everyone knew there was nothing as beguiling to a Familiar as the possibility of secrets.

Sometimes lips spoke without speaking.

Her lips could speak silently, too. Soosha's eyes flashed with mischief. *Trm-m-m-m*, she purred. Hands clasped behind her back, she stepped up on to the balls of her feet. The pose was considered very fetching on M'yan. It said that she wished to *play*.

Daxan blinked. Did he just read her correctly? What had caused this sudden shift in mood? She was rather. . . engaging.

"Are you... " He cleared his throat. "Are you hungry?"

Her grin was pure gamin. "Yes-s-s-s," she lengthened the word into something else entirely.

Daxan arched a brow. "Mmm. Good." He held out his arm to her.

She cocked her head to the side. "You wish me to gnaw on this?"

He laughed. "No, my sweet traveler ; I am going to take you on a new journey. I think you will like it."

"With such a promise, how could I refuse?" Smiling, she looped her arm around his. His skin had the warmth of sand toasting on the shore.

She had a vision of lying upon him by the sea as the cool water washed over them both. Except he

would be hotter than the sand beneath them.

Much hotter.

TEN

Planet Mollock, somewhere between Tunnels

They still had not found the Tunnelpoint!

The frequent showers made yet another appearance. Heavy clouds opened upon Traed ta'al Krue as he was attempting to pull his boot free from a knee-deep pit.

The tall Aviaran gazed up at the sky, expression *brewing*.

Water sluiced down on him without the slightest hint of mercy, pouring through his hair and over his skin.

In the blink of an eye he was sopping wet.

In front of him, a mudslicer jumped into the air a few feet, and dived back into the slog.

Delightful.

If he did not drown in this sea of slime, the mudslicers would soon be more than happy to bore into his drenched flesh for a satisfying meal!

Next to him, the Familiar irritant viewed the vista with a haughty expression of distaste that only he could muster. "Is the entire planet like this?"

Water dripped off of Traed's lashes. The leather thong tying his hair back gave way from the downpour. A lock of the waist-length mass streamed over his forehead to hang in front of his face.

He gave Brygar such a fulminating glare of disgust that a lesser Familiar- or one who had more sense- might have fled in terror.

Brygar simply crossed his arms over his massive chest.

"Well, Charl-who-is-no-Charl, do you not answer a simple question?"

This is why cats need nine lives. Not taking his burning eyes off the irritating Familiar, Traed wiped the mud from his mouth with the back of his hand. He attempted to toss the sodden hair out of his face.

Twice.

Each time it squished back, slapping cold and wet against his nose.

Normally, Traed was a very patient man. After one day in Brygar's company, however, he was prepared to run the Familiar through.

His eyes began to spark. Dangerously so.

When he spoke it was in a ominously soft voice. "You are determined to find that out, Familiar; I am sure."

Brygar snorted. "What is that to mean?"

Traed's jade eyes ignited like verdant kindling. "It means that if you take one more wrong turn, we might very well see if the entire planet is like this!"

Brygar growled softly. "Dare you imply that *I* have led us astray?"

Traed crossed his arms over his chest, mirroring Brygar's stance. The two faced each other like a stubborn set of bookends.

"I am not implying it. I have clearly stated it."

Brygar's nostrils flared. "I have heard that Aviarans have but one form. Is this so?"

Traed gave him a measured glance.

"Pity to waste yours by insulting me."

"There is a difference between insult and fact. Best you learn it, Familiar."

"Your blade will not help you should I decide to *teach* you a lesson. Best you learn that, knight." Brygar sent a wad of mud flying into Traed's forehead.

The fool had the audacity to grin about it.

"We shall see." Traed extended his lightsaber, inviting Brygar to come and get some of it by cupping the fingers of his outstretched palm; he then motioned - not once but twice - with the tips of his curled fingers.

It gave Brygar pause.

The serious Aviaran was too confident. A brash Familiar he might be... but he was no fool.

He stroked his chin. "Mayhap, Charl-who-is-no-Charl, you intend to use some of that Charl-that-is-not-Charl ability to best me?"

"Mayhap I do not *need* it to best you."

Brygar laughed at his arrogance. Familiars could always appreciate brazen attitudes. Even in the midst of heated battle.

Brygar rubbed the back of his neck. If he had been in cat form, the fur along the crest of his back would have been standing straight up since they had started out on the journey.

This Aviaran was rubbing him the wrong way.

No reason he should not return the favor.

Brygar wagged a finger at the knight. "Remember, first we find my sister, *then* I rip your heart out. Agreed?"

Traed shook his head, returning his lightsaber to his belt. "Not hardly. First, you will agree to follow me and not take it upon yourself to 'find' the Tunnel for us again. Mayhap then we will have a chance to find your sister before I grow as old as Yaniff!"

"We even argue as to what we should argue about! It is impossible!" Brygar threw up his hands. "Fine. If it will get us moving again, *you* take us to the Tunnel."

"You are finally showing some sense. Follow me."

Traed took one step forward and was immediately sucked into a chest-deep mud pit.

SSSSssurrrrrthwwivwuckl

Brygar arched a brow. "An odd way to find a Tunnel, to be sure. Do you wish me to follow you into that pit, Charl-who-is-no-Charl?"

The look Traed threw him was best left un-interpreted. He attempted to get out of the muck hole.

The ooze sucked him right back in.

Brygar sauntered over as if he had not a care in the world. Bending down on one knee, he made a great show of observing the situation.

Finally, he offered a bit of wisdom. "A Familiar would never fall into such a trap."

Traed threw him a murderous look.

Unfazed, Brygar continued to be helpful. "Our special senses tell us when to correct our movements before it is too late."

"Be silent! I am trying to think."

"I am simply saying that-"

Ignoring him, Traed tried once more to get out. The slime held him fast.

Brygar yawned. Purposely. "Do you, perchance, need a hand up?"

"Not from you. I will get out on my own."

Brygar shrugged and stood. "Suit yourself. I cannot tarry with you any longer; I have a sister to find." With that, the Familiar turned - *in the wrong direction, of course* - and strutted off.

Traed was flummoxed. "You would leave me here to rot, Familiar?"

Brygar stopped and spoke over his shoulder. "Do you wish my help?"

It was the wrong thing to ask this particular Aviaran. "I have told you, I can get out on my own."

Brygar- who never could claim patience as a virtue-turned and began walking swiftly towards Traed. "*Argh!* You are the most stubborn, irritating Charl I have ever-"

SSSssssurrrrrthwwwuckl

Traed pinched the bridge of his nose. "Did you not say Familiars would never fall into such traps?"

"Be silent! I am trying to think."

Traed gave him an ironic look. "Take your time."

ELEVEN

Planet Spoltam, City of Aghni

The moon silvered the pink sand beneath Soosha's feet as she walked along the shoreline with Daxan Sahain at her side.

Before they left, he had stopped by the kitchens to pick up a vine basket that his *Zot* cook had packed with a meal. The snaggle-toothed, long-snouted *Zot* had informed Daxan, '*I gave you much tasty food. Much exotic flavors. Much delight. But bring this Zot back his favorite basket!*'

Daxan had thanked him for his efforts and promised to return the woven container. *Zots* took their responsibilities and their possessions seriously.

Soosha had heard that if you wanted one to work for you, you had to respect their idiosyncratic

ways. It was universally considered a small price to pay for such excellent service.

For the first time, Soosha took careful note of Daxan's raiment. His feet were now bare but he had donned a sleeveless white tunic that was belted snugly at his lean waist. Black leather *tracas* molded his thighs like a second skin, making it evident that his legs and buttocks were pure honed muscle.

Were all scholars so fit? The man was built more like a knight than one who spends his time studying scrolls.

She had observed that many Spoltami men dressed in such a way- and it did seem most comfortable- but none looked as he did. Daxan Sahain had a rare quality; Soosha called it the warm, 'stroking-aura'.

When Soosha sensed a man with that quality, she liked to go into his arms and feel them come tight about her. Daxan's *stroking-aura* reminded her of the satisfaction of lazy days spent stretching in the sun- and the perfectly heated passion that was sure to follow.

To a Familiar, this was an extremely desirable trait.

In fact, the quality could cause a female Familiar to turn into a purring mass of 'I will do anything you want'.

So Soosha already ached for him to pet her all night.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the cool, refreshing air of Spoltam. The scents were different from M'yan - but no less enticing.

Above them, the sky had darkened to the deepest purple. Silvery stars skipped across the sky in broad spiraling arcs, twinkling through passing mists of pale lavender clouds. A few bands of pink still remained at the horizon, emphasizing the contrast of the multiple striations.

Truly, it was the most beautiful sunset she had ever seen!

Earlier, the light blue of day sky had slowly feathered into bands of pink, aqua, lavender, blue- each tint intensifying as night met day.

Later, darker hues entwined with the swirling blushes of pastels. It reminded Soosha of new lovers blending in a caress; their individual beauty merging into a greater sum, a greater brilliance.

Gradually the sky melded into true twilight.

Daxan told her that Aghni was well-known for its extended dusk. "Off-landers often visit solely to witness this splendor."

"I believe it."

Prior to coming to Spoltam, Soosha could not imagine any place as wonderful as M'yan. Yet, in its

own way Spoltam was just as resplendent.

Oh, how she wished she could continue to travel! Her heart longed for it. But she was not alone in thinking this; every Familiar on M'yan felt the same way.

Including the King, Gian Ren.

To be safe from slavers, they were forced to make slaves of themselves! For the first time she truly understood the depths of Gian's ruling and the reasons why he had been forced to do it. *Better to choose your own line of control than have others choose for you.*

At least on M'yan they maintained command of their options.

With this new insight Soosha gained the utmost respect for the strength that it must have taken to issue such a proclamation. Gian Ren was truly a great king.

But would M'yan cease being a haven for them? A cage is a cage no matter the size. A constricted Familiar could never be a free Familiar.

Such thoughts depressed her.

Tonight was not a night for such thoughts! This might be the only night she had to convince the man walking beside her that he was meant to be with her forever.

It was much to expect from one eve.

It was much to expect from this man.

If she could not woo him to her way of thinking, she would spend her whole life missing him. Every man's face she saw, every lover she took, would not ease that feeling.

Because Daxan was for her.

If he was Familiar, he would then be subject to the same unhappy fate. Since he was not, she had no way of knowing if he would be affected by her in this deeper way.

Soosha squared her shoulders, ready to take on the seemingly impossible task. Familiar woman could be fierce in many ways.

Some of them obvious and some not so obvious.

Soosha's strength was in seizing the chance. She had always believed that those who sit and say they might have done it, never really knew. She had to *know*.

It would be up to her to make these precious moments with Daxan Sahain count.

The Spoltam sea rushed to the shore in a chortling gurgle of motion. Under the dance of moonrays,

the pale green waters were impossibly clear. Laughing, Soosha lifted her skirts to keep them dry as the cool water rushed over her bare feet.

It felt so good to be free!

Daxan grinned at her, his white teeth flashing in the gloaming. "I have always liked the nights in Aghni best. There is an enchanted quality, is there not?"

"Yes! I love it! It is so beautiful!" The sea rushed out again in a gurgling froth of white-aqua spray.

"When I first came to Aghni I spent many a night walking the shoreline. Feeling the still warm sand between my toes, the cool water intermittently greeting me."

Soosha's brow furrowed. "You are not from here?"

"I am not originally from Aghni, no. But my family is an old one and they supported me in my decision to come here."

"Ah, yes. The Spoltami way you have told me about. Are they very far away?"

His lids hooded. "Yes."

"And do you not miss them?"

"I do."

"Then why-"

He reached out and swept a strand of hair off of her cheek. He stared into her eyes. "Because, Soosha, sometimes there is a calling."

Calling? Recently, she had felt a similar feeling. It was why she had left M'yan. "I think I understand."

"It seems these things will come when they will come." The corners of his lips lifted in a self-effacing grin. "I never believed that before. I do now."

Soosha studied the man before her. The man who was to be her mate. He was something of a puzzle. *Had he somehow felt the mating pull?*

No, that was ridiculous.

Unless.. . Spoltami could also sense their mates.

"Do you - how do Spoltami mate?" The question was blurted out before Soosha had a chance to think of how odd it might sound.

Caught off guard by her blunt inquiry, Daxan gave her a peculiar look. "I am not sure what you are asking me, sweet adventurer." His golden hair lifted past his shoulders with the breeze as he tried to figure out her question.

Soosha stuck her big toe in a clump of wet sand and flung the moist little load directly onto the arch of his foot. "I am asking if your people... you know... *mate*."

Daxan was a master at deciphering reactions. Often words alone were not enough to tell the entire tale. She had flung the sand at the arch of his foot for a reason.

His returning smile was a slow, sensual one. "We mate all the time," he replied. "Sometimes several times in one night."

Soosha snorted. "No. I mean a permanent mating. Is that the custom here?"

"Not always. We sometimes have a series of various connections."

Her brow furrowed. "How long do these connections last?"

"As long as the people who are involved wish them to last."

Soosha wondered if he was referring to play partners. That concept was not foreign to her. Familiars often enjoyed many partners before they mated. However, once mated, they engaged with their mates and no other.

Soosha was not sure she understood the Spoltam way.

As they passed a red spiky plant, Daxan snapped off a thin stalk and placed it between his lips.

Soosha smiled to herself. Worlds apart, yet males still liked to play with blades of plants!

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "What is mating like where you are from?"

Soosha had a dilemma.

She had no doubt that her older brother would be showing up soon to drag her home. Brygar was just *that* way.

What was more he was sure to cause a ruckus; the man always roared first and purred later. She bit her lip as she played out the coming spectacle in her mind. By Aiyah, it would not be pleasant!

Sometimes Brygar needed to be scratched for his own good.

She loved her brother but he was an intractable handful of stubborn male! He was a huge Familiar with jet black hair and the unusual combination of pale lavender/ pale aqua eyes. In his cat form he looked exactly the way one might imagine; and he considered whatever household he entered, *owned*.

To say he would make her situation difficult would be an understatement.

Chances were that even if by some miracle Daxan accepted their mating situation, he would not readily accept her impossible brother.

She was confident that would change, given enough time. Brygar was a potent force to deal with, but everyone eventually came to love him.

Or at least put up with him for short periods of time.

And as lovely as this planet was to look at, she was not at all enamored of its society. Surely even a Spoltami mate would understand and agree with that viewpoint?

After all, she was the female and he must please her!

That was what the women of M'yan expected. . . *and always got*. It was unthinkable not to have an impossible sense of entitlement!

The idea that Daxan would not want to leave his home never took hold in her mind. He *would* come with her.

On the other hand, until the man was ready to do so, she could not simply grab a hank of his golden beaded hair and drag him back to M'yan.

Although the idea did hold great appeal.

He was a comely male.

Unfortunately, she was working without a guide; it was not as if females of her species chose non-Familiar mates every day! Soosha had to figure out how to go about actually joining with him.

Perhaps, she should begin by enticing him into partaking of a few of their rituals?

Yes, then part of her problem would be solved!

He was still waiting for her answer about Familiar mating. She did not want to scare him away by telling him that they were to be mated; however, if she did this carefully, he could act out the ritual for himself.

"We do not speak of our mating to anyone. It is a personal matter for Familiar alone."

"Now you have made me curious."

That was good. "Mmm. As a scholar, I imagine you would have great interest in the process?"

"Indeed I do." He paused. "Strictly as a scholar, mind you."

That was bad. Soosha's shoulders slumped.

Daxan scratched his jaw as he watched her through lowered lids. "I have heard the act is shrouded in secrecy. Rumors abound. Some say you Familiar mate for *days* on end. There are those who fantasize what that could possibly entail. . . if it is true?"

Soosha perked up. *Now we are getting somewhere, Daxan Sahain!* She eagerly leaned forward.

Too eagerly.

Seemingly embarrassed, he cleared his throat noisily. "I am not one of them, of course."

"Of course." She mentally threw her hands up in the air.

This was impossible! A Familiar man would have already been pressed behind her! Hot. Hard.

And ready.

Growling into her throat as he showed her just why he was the man chosen for her...

Yes, a Familiar man would already be licking her from her nape to the back of her heels!

And that would simply be his introductory greeting. His full introduction might be a week in the making.

Soosha flattened her lips into what was definitely a frustrated grimace.

Daxan gave her a sidelong look. "Yet, I would like to know more, Soosha. Can you not tell me anything?"

At last. "Like so many things, it depends upon our mood..."

"Spoken like a true feline." His dimpled grin was truly engaging. And altogether seductive.

"But who leads the dance here?" she mumbled.

"Hmm?" He blinked slowly, spiky black lashes fanning beautiful golden eyes. *Secretive* golden eyes.

"Which one is your dwelling?" Soosha scanned the top of the cliff wall. Large estates dotted the rocky promontory.

Daxan came up behind her, placing his large hands firmly on her shoulders. He pivoted her position slightly, then pulled her back, close against him.

Very close.

Soosha could feel the pulsing heat of him right through the thin gown she was wearing. A brisk,

wonderful scent emanated from his tunic. The fragrance hit her like the waves hit the shore. Forceful. Exotic. Lush. It evoked sea winds and enigmatic, faraway places.

His servants must wash his raiment in Spoltam spices.

The aromatic fragrance was spellbinding! She would have to bring some back to M'yan with her. "What is this wondrous scent in your clothing, Daxan?"

He shifted his focus from the cliffs to glance lazily down at her. His perfectly shaped mouth parted slightly and his eyes seemed to cloud over. "Do you like it?" His voice rolled in his throat with a husky ripple.

"Oh, yes. I would like to purchase a large quantity in your *sacri* to bring back with me."

"Would you?" His low chuckle reverberated against her back. The warm breath that followed skittered along her nape, enervating the nerve endings.

Strange, but his stance almost mirrored her earlier thoughts; he was right behind her, just as she had fantasized. "Why do you find my request so humorous? Do these spiced oils have some hidden meaning for your people?"

"Shhh."

Unwittingly, she did shut her eyes as he spoke softly in her ear- *in that husky voice*. The low tone sent scalding chills through her. "Do you see that small dwelling next to the outcropping?"

"Y-yes." She eased back against him.

"I can purchase some scents there for you but I do not think they will match; I am told mine is a special blend."

She was disappointed. If she could not replicate the same scent, she was not particularly interested. "Oh. Never mind, then. I thank you anyway."

"Soosha, I am willing to give you as much of my fragrance as you desire."

"But. . . I would not want to take this special blend from you, Daxan."

"You need but ask and it is yours. Whenever you want. To return the favor, perhaps you can tell me something about this mating ritual you Familiar have. . ."

Are his lips nibbling my throat? Soosha blinked. The touch was so gentle, so perfect, she unconsciously purred. "Ah, I see; you are teasing me for the sake of your knowledge."

"I am teasing you?" His deep voice was hoarse. "Are you sure that is the way it is?" A warm mouth slid down the back of her neck, sending chills of desire up her spine.

It appeared her Spoltami was able to carry certain things along just fine.

Yet there was a delicious torment to this slow game she played. Female Familiars took great pleasure in making their males *work* for their attention.

The feline in her did not want to make it too easy for him.

A small mew-like sound, only made by female Familiars and their cat-selves, issued her lips. It was a cross between a sigh and a cry.

The small utterance signified a myriad of emotions which roughly boiled down to: *'We know we are going to end up doing this but I am certainly not going to let you know I know it.'*

The unconscious utterance made Daxan's lips widen into a grin against the back of her neck. His sweet breath teased at her sensitized skin.

Strange, but her body already recognized this man. Recognized and wanted him.

It all came down to him. Every caress she was seeking. Every kiss her lips craved. Every stroke of touch.

The thrusts of his body that she ached to feel. . .

For a Familiar the mating moment was perfectly clear. All others did not matter.

It would only ever be Daxan.

Soosha was so curious about him! She wanted to know everything. She longed to explore his layers.

Yet, there was one question that plagued her above all others. How did she know he was to be her mate when she had not been triggered by the male response first?

Was there something about Spoltami males that triggered the response? If so what did it mean?

Daxan's open mouth slid over her shoulder, a hint of teeth scraping the apex of the curve.

Soosha sucked in her breath. That particular spot was a very sensitive one for a Familiar woman. *Did he somehow know that or was it happenstance?*

Probably a coincidence.

Or a fortunate deed.

Or. . . perhaps, Spoltami men were very interesting indeed.

"Tell me, what is wrong with a passion for knowledge, my beautiful Familiar?"

"The pursuit of knowledge to the exclusion of all else can blind one to life's true passions. "

"Do you think I am imperceptive?" He laved the skin behind her ear with a light flick of his tongue. Then he gave her the tiniest of bites on the very rim of her lobe.

She shivered. "I have not yet decided what you are."

"We all hold mysteries. I do not 'explain' myself to anyone."

"Never say that to a Familiar. We are curious by nature and your words lure me into finding out more about you."

He chuckled. "I look forward to the attempt."

Although Daxan leveled out his breathing, hot puffs of air feathered her skin as his pulse rate increased. Before she knew it, strong arms were around her, pulling her tight up against him.

Well, Spoltami men hide treasure beneath their tunics. The hefty stone-like bulge that pressed against her buttocks left no doubt of that. Apparently a cool scholar could burn like fire when passion took control of his mind.

Interesting.

"You must be hungry," he whispered.

Oh yes, she was. Only not for food.

Soosha took a deep breath. She had to steady herself! Remember that he was different; that his ways were different. This act must be done in a specific manner.

And not as a fast coupling, either.

What she had in mind was hours upon hours of unrelenting passion.

The poor man had no idea what was in store for him.

Taking another deep breath, she forced herself to a calmer state. It was not easy; she was wet with desire. Briefly she wondered if she could take him quickly at first, here on the beach under the stars...

No!

Not with him. Not the first time.

The first time they came together must be in the traditional Familiar mating stance!

So. .. how was she to get him to do that?

There had to be a way!

"This is a good spot."

At first she thought he meant on her throat, but then realized he had thrown the vine basket onto a nearby outcropping of rock that jutted out into the water.

Nimble jumping onto the rocky ledge, Daxan held his hand out for her. "Lift your skirts to make the jump. I believe you will like it up here."

As she reached out for his hand, she noticed a bronze cuff on his forearm just below the elbow. Stretched taut over his skin, the cuff complimented his golden skin, accentuating the sinews and carved muscles of his arm.

The intricate armband was woven with hundreds of thin metallic threads! The complex pattern reminded Soosha of the patterns that Aviaran men wove with ribbons into their wives' hair.

She wondered if the adornment had any significance other than ornamental?

Probably an ancient Spoltam warning regarding their large speckled fruit.

Her nose twitched as she thought about it.

After helping her up onto the ledge, Daxan sat down and sifted through the vine basket.

Soosha took the opportunity to examine the rocky promontory they were on, noting that a partial wall to her right effectively blocked some of the wind, as well as the houses on the high cliff. Down below, the Spoltam sea frothed onto pink sand; above her, the crisp night sky winked with sparkling stars that seemed to have countless stories to tell!

The secluded place Daxan had chosen was utterly intoxicating.

All of her senses were responding to its charm.

The location could not be more perfect for what she had in mind. The wind would ignite Daxan's passion, the rolling sea would cover his cries of ecstasy.

"We can have our feast here." Daxan was staring at her, not the food. And the sensual tone of his voice suggested that he also had a different kind of sustenance in mind.

Which was good.

He had finally given her the perfect means to carry out a proper Familiar mating.

Familiars always put high value on the physical. Like others of her kind, Soosha believed that intimacy should always come first, so that whatever remained could follow naturally. For Soosha, mated lovemaking was a spiritual awakening, a closeness, and a renewal that could only come about through the sexual act.

As Soosha thought about the intimacies she would soon be sharing with this handsome man- who was all but a stranger- a flush rose to her cheeks and her aqua and gold eyes dilated with desire.

Daxan smiled slowly. He had no trouble reading her expression. Grabbing a small pouch from the vine basket, he rose from his seat to stand next to her.

He handed her a small leather covered bottle. "Try this; I think you will like it."

Soosha opened the flask and took an experimental, wary sniff. Most Familiars were very particular about what they consumed. They never took anyone's word for how good it was; they had to sniff for themselves first.

The cautious trait was deeply ingrained in their makeup.

Probably for good reason.

It took a hunter to know that there was always the thinnest of lines between hunter and hunted. Situations could turn quickly.

"What is it?" she asked warily.

"An elixir made from a large, speckled Spoltam fruit. It is called *Nightfall*. The drink is very popular with both Spoltami and visitors, alike. You will find it served in all of the taverns here."

Soosha sniffed at the *Nightfall* again. It could not be made from that awful-smelling fruit! It could not. The scent had changed into something utterly alluring. "Um, what does it taste like?"

"Indescribable. You will have to find out for yourself." He held the vial up to her lips. "Drink."

She cautiously took a sip. The spicy blend was somewhat thick; it slid down her throat in a smooth wash. "Mmmm, that was quite re-"

Her eyes opened wide as the elixir bounded back with a strong punch. "*Oh!*"

He laughed at her reaction. "I should have warned you--it has tooth."

"There is nothing wrong with a little teeth," she purred seductively, licking a droplet off her lips. "Every now and then," she whispered. The tip of her pink tongue delicately dabbed at the sweet spot.

Daxan watched her through the lowered veil of his lashes. "So you like some bite. . . occasionally?" he murmured drily.

"At the right time, it can be the perfect stimulant." She gave him a guileless look- as if they had only been discussing the elixir. "Do you export it? I would love to bring such an exotic taste home with me." Oh, she was being quite naughty!

But Soosha could not help herself. She was true to her feline sisters!

"First, you want my fragrance," his voice was a husky whisper, "Then my *Nightfall*. I best be careful what else I introduce you to, Soosha. It seems you want to take everything home with you."

She smiled secretively. "We familiar do like to carry the odd prize back every now and again."

"So I have heard." Daxan rested back against the rock wall. "To answer your question, we do not export our Nightfall. There is a rumor that the potency does not last long once it is produced; so it must be imbibed within an evening. This means this very potent brew must be consumed at the one time. That makes it a popular tavern choice. Off-Landers think fondly of us by remembering the experience and, thus, come more often to visit. " He gave her a wink as he raised the bottle to his lips. "Good for profits, you see."

She tapped the side of her forehead with her index finger. "Smart Spoltami."

"We are a clever people." He took a healthy swig of the strong drink.

"But are you wise?"

He swirled the bottle in his hand as he mulled over her question. "*That* is a complex question. Do you think we are wise?"

"I do not know. It seems to me in some things, perhaps. Yet, there might be room for more studying." She gave him a gamin grin.

"Wisely put, my Familiar friend."

"You agree with me?" This surprised her; he seemed to have such a high regard for his people's level of knowledge.

Daxan rubbed the back of his neck under the heavy fall of his hair. Soosha thought his gesture very sensual. "I suppose Spoltam is not as perfect as we would like to believe."

That was an subtle statement if she ever heard one. "It is very different from my home planet."

"I suspect it is."

"Perhaps one day you would like to see our M'yan?" She watched him, expectantly. Few were issued such an invitation; M'yan was a protected haven.

His golden eyes locked with hers. "I would love to visit your world." His hand reached up and cupped the side of her face. "They say it is intoxicating. . . Like its people."

Soosha sighed wistfully and looked down. Just thinking about her beautiful home made her miss it.

Raising her eyes to his, she suddenly became aware of the way he was staring at her. *Like he wanted to drink her until he drowned.*

"Yes," she breathed. "Intoxicating."

Daxan placed the elixir vial on the rocky ledge behind her. His free arm smoothly encircled her waist, bringing her to him. He watched her. Silently. Mysteriously.

The wind gently ruffled his hair. Silvery moonlight reflected off of lambent golden eyes.

What is he thinking behind those amber shields?

Soosha realized his features were not defined by perfection, but by angular strokes of masculine synergy.

He was capturing her.

Daxan Sahain, you are most compelling.

Right then and there, she decided to do away with the preliminaries. "I would like to make love to you."

"I know."

There was that slightly wicked tilt to the edges of his lips. The man was matching her step for step!

She arched her brow. "Perhaps Spoltam men are wiser than I have given them credit for after all?"

"I would not judge most Spoltami by me, my honeyed savager of market stalls."

Her lips curled into a grin. His apt description of the frantic chase through the Spoltam *sacri* made her laugh.

He laughed with her.

Bending his head close to hers, he hugged her in his arms. Daxan's *stroke-aurea* was just as she imagined; only better. It was like being embraced by rays of sunlight. Warm, appeasing, purrrrr-fect.

His sweet breath, laden with the spices of *Nightfall*, caressed her lips. His mouth-that delectable, firm mouth-was so close!

Yet their lips did not touch.

It was said on M'yan that a male's true skill in the art of pleasure was to be found in the "tips". Of his tongue. Of his fingers. Of his member.

As a general rule, Soosha believed the adage undoubtedly true. But there was much to be said for other skills.

Anticipation was also an art.

As Daxan stared deeply into her eyes, his measured exhales teasing at her mouth, Soosha instinctively knew that he was a man who could wield anticipation with the deadly precision of a Charl lightblade.

He *was* playing with her.

And she rather liked it.

Daxan brought her closer, clasping her to him. His fingers splayed across the sleek cloth of her gown. The *tips* of his fingers pressed into her flesh as he slowly caressed the material over her smooth thighs and buttocks.

Clenching his fist, Daxan easily lifted the gown. The cool night air kissed her stroke-warmed skin.

His bare arm pressed into her bare thigh, the flat of his hands gliding across her buttocks in a smooth caress. Back and forth- he massaged the soft material against her skin, bunching it in his fists; his knuckles strumming the curve of a rounded cheek...

Then his nails skittered down the back of her thigh. Scoring just enough to tingle and not scratch. Teasingly, he pressed his face into the side of her neck.

Soosha's breath caught in her throat. *What was he doing?* Would he actually *bite* her?

Still not touching her with his lips, Daxan inhaled her scent, then blew a steady stream of cool air along her collarbone.

Tiny bumps of anticipation rose up on her skin.

Gathering her gown in both hands, Daxan repeated his actions, bunching the material, massaging her with the silken cloth, rubbing it against her flushed skin, and finally, alternating his motions with the tips of his fingers, bringing bare skin in contact with bare skin.

The hardened *tips* of Soosha's breasts jutted against the thin cloth of the gown.

Daxan dipped his head. His hands cupped her buttocks with the bunched cloth; the *tips* of his coiled , beaded hair teased across those sensitized nubs, sliding back and forth.

Then, suddenly his mouth was there.

Scalding directly through the fabric, fastening on the pebbled crest. He suckled with strength and he was not gentle.

Soosha's reaction was so intense that she jumped in his arms.

Daxan murmured low in his throat. The rumble of satisfaction reminded Soosha of male pleasure-purring.

How she loved *that* sound!

Soon the cloth became moistened from his mouth, sticking to her breasts. When he removed his pliant lips, the wet spot became instantly cooled from the night breeze.

He blew hot breath across the jutting peak.

The feeling was exquisite! Soosha moaned as she opened her senses to experience every sensation.

He repeated his ministrations to her other breast.

Drawing on the firm peak through the silky cloth, he exhaled a scorching wave of breath, following up on the action with a cool stream of air. All the while his hands massaged and caressed her buttocks and upper thighs.

Oh, he was good. *So good.*

Agilely, he dropped to his knees before her.

His open mouth slid down the center line of her midriff, over her stomach directly to the juncture between her legs. Daxan was so smooth, his actions so fluid, that Soosha acquired a new appreciation of the Spoltam male.

She was soon to 'appreciate' him even more.

Palms flattened against her buttocks, he drew her right against his mouth. He had her trapped in a scalding love embrace that allowed no room for escape. Soosha's nails dug into his shoulders.

He *was* surprising her!

The tip of his tongue flicked the centerline of her nether lips, softly stabbing at the fabric. *Scalding hot.* His tongue slipped between the covered folds, tasting her 'nightfall' as it seeped right through the material.

Daxan made Soosha flow and flow and the cloth became drenched with her dewy moisture.

His white teeth pulled the material taut over her mound- adding just the *right* pressure. Trapped by his hands, Soosha thrashed beneath his mouth and almost clawed at his back.

A wave crested the lower edge of the rocky promontory and a spray of cool sea water sluiced over them both.

Daxan's shoulders and back were drenched and the water dripped off of him directly onto her nether lips. Soosha was burning and shivering at the same time. Wet *and wet*.

Daxan was just hot.

His tongue flicked into her folds- but he did not touch the one place that throbbed and ached for his touch!

His fingernails scored the back of her thighs exactly as the edge of his teeth scraped against the cleft of her mound.

He suckled her then. Strong. And he was not gentle.

Soosha arched up, moaning; she cried out words in the secret Familiar tongue that she was glad he could not understand. She spoke of his expert touch; the sleek, perfect way he moved his mouth on her; and of how much she wanted him inside her . . . She told him he could lead this first dance- because he must; but she also warned him that she would be coming for him in every way. . . She begged for her release, then she *demand*ed it. ... She promised him he would soon tremble for her.

Soosha's fingers clasped Daxan's shoulders, and she could feel the Spoltami man *shaking* with desire.

He briefly paused to stare up at her through a thick crescent of ebony lashes. Again, that low sound rumbled in his chest. His golden eyes glittered with an almost *wild* intent.

Daxan's inflamed reaction gave her pause.

Had she misjudged the men of Spoltam? What if their cool, scholarly exteriors hid something raw beneath the surface? Come to think on it. . . what did she actually know of these people?

Nothing.

Soosha swallowed nervously.

"Um... are your people..."

But she never got to finish her question.

Daxan drew up the edge of her gown and before she could even move his mouth was directly on

her. Devouring her with unbridled passion.

Soosha threw back her head, crying out with ecstasy at the incredible sensation!

"I see there are elixirs even more potent and more rare than Nightfall," he whispered hoarsely, the vibration of his deep voice making her quiver.

Right then, he mastered her with his lips and mouth.

Dipping his tongue inside her, Daxan drank of her elixir as if he could not taste enough. He flicked and laved and suckled until Soosha could take no more.

She arched up on the tips of her toes; and throwing back her head, she screamed her release to the sea and the sky.

Daxan did not stop.

Even as she poured over him, peaking again and again, he did not stop.

She became dizzy with it; but he kept getting more and more of her, bringing her to impossible heights. He knew exactly how much she could give and, until he was sure she had given it *to him*, he would not cease.

Only when she sagged against him, utterly spent, did he relent.

He caught her with one arm as he stood, tugging the gown over her head in one fluid motion.

Still holding her, he tossed his own tunic and breeches aside as well. Then he rested back against the wall of stones, holding her in his arms; clasped tight to his hot, naked skin.

The cuffed armband- his only adornment now- made its presence felt with a cool slide under her breasts. His erect manhood jutted betwixt her thighs; the hard rod seemed as if it was encloaked in the finest *krilli*. Silky smooth.

Soosha's eyelids fluttered open, the pupils still hazy from spent passion.

Daxan cupped her face. His strong fingers threaded her hair; sifting through the wondrous length. "It is true, is it not?" He drawled; his voice rough with desire.

"Wh-what is true?" Soosha was still trying to catch her breath.

"The rumor that Familiar women have a special taste all their own? A nectar that can drive any man wild."

Soosha's face flamed. "I would not know."

Daxan gave her an odd look. "You-"

"I have only been with my kind, Daxan; and they seem to like us well enough." She blushed. "This is my first journey off M'yan. Our men do not like us to travel unprotected."

He seemed to think about that. "I can understand why. You put yourself at great risk, Soosha."

She shrugged philosophically. "Life is a risk."

"True, but there are many kinds of risk. Will you now tell me how Familiars mate? If you will but share a small portion of this knowledge with me, I vow I will not tell anyone."

Soosha bit her lip. "Is it just for the knowledge, then?"

He shook his head. "No. I want to experience some of the intensity of this passion as well. It is something that I have felt calling to me. . . Something I think I have been missing. Sometimes knowledge is not enough; we need passion to fire our quest for learning."

This she could understand. Though she doubted he *truly* did.

Of course she would share the knowledge with him.

She was meant to.

His asking had made the task that much easier. She only hoped he would still understand when all was said and done.

"Very well. I shall share our customs with you."

His smoky gaze was so complacent, that it almost gave her pause.

She glanced down the length of him. His nude body was male perfection. Perfectly proportioned muscles and sinews honed to the peak of flawlessness.

He was so beautiful that he could match any male on her world.

Undoubtedly, there were things that Spoltam males did that she could learn and experience. "Daxan, perhaps later you will share the Spoltami way with me?"

The smile that shaped his lips was close to being predatory. His finger lifted her chin, forcing her to look up at him. "Do you think you are ready to accept this new knowledge, sweet adventurer?"

Soosha bristled at the question, squaring her shoulders. "Is this not why I have come here, after all?"

As soon as she said it, Soosha realized that it *was* the reason she had come to Spoltam. Her journey here had not been an accident. Spoltam had called to her because her mating had called to her.

If she had stayed on M'yan and followed Gian's wishes, she would not have found Daxan.

But would the King listen to that justification when the time came to go before him and answer for what she had done?

"Then you begin, my lady visitor." Daxan accepted her words and opened the way for her.

"Very well. First, we Familiar like to commence with a . . . um . . . a . . . declaration of . . . of-" She was not sure how to say this.

"Of the sensual promises you are going to deliver?" he supplied helpfully.

"Exactly."

He motioned with his hand. "Proceed."

"Fine. Um, since you have no knowledge of the secret Familiar tongue you will not understand the phrases ..."

"I am hoping your actions will be all the translation I need," he drawled.

Soosha colored. "They will," she promised. He had no idea that in Familiar society it was the male that did the taking and the promising.

Which suited their females just fine.

It was not easy to round up a male Familiar. Once their vows were made; they could not be broken.

"Now repeat after me. 'Daxan Sahain K'tea'." She spoke the oath in her mind as well. *This Familiar takes you.*

"Daxan Sa'ain K'tea." he repeated after her.

"Ei mahana ne Tuan." she continued. *And discards all others.*

"Daxan Sa'ain K'mea sut la." *This Familiar will give himself only to you .*

"Ei ra Tuan." *And no other.*

"Daxan Sa'ain litna K'shintaук rehan." *This Familiar unites with you now forever.*

"A jhan vri re Tuan." *For him there is no other.*

While he spoke the words, he closed his eyes as if he were trying to put meaning to them.

When he finished speaking, he opened them. The golden orbs were clouded over.

"Now what do we do?" he whispered huskily. His breaths were slow and methodical, as if he were purposely holding himself back.

But that did not make sense.

Holding himself back from what?

Soosha hesitated. Normally, this was the part of the ceremony where the male would seize his mate's breath in a kiss of searing possession. He would take her breath inside him, making it his, combining it with his own, blending them as one.

Then he would return his breath to her; and her breath would be his, always.

Truly, it was not a favorite part of the ceremony for the female.

Most struggled against it.

It suddenly dawned on Soosha that Daxan would not be able to complete the last part of the ceremony! Why had she not thought of that before? What was she to do now?

Mayhap in this situation, his oath would be sufficient?

She had never found out what Krue and Suleila had done, so she had no idea. Knowing Krue though, he had probably taken Suleila to wife under Charl mystical law.

"Well?"

"Um... You must now act out your words."

His deep voice rolled off his tongue. "I am willing. How do I do that?"

"You must stand behind me-"

Daxan grinned slowly. Sensually. "I am liking this already." He moved behind her as she faced the rock wall. "The view is certainly spectacular." He pinched her buttock.

Soosha gasped and jumped at the same time. "Be serious, Daxan Sahain! I am showing you a time-honored ritual!"

"Of course. My apologies. Please continue."

"Well, now you must. . .that is, we prefer.. .um.. .."

"I think I already did that." He grinned.

"You are not amusing, you know."

"Mmmm. Perhaps I missed the *translation*."

Soosha ignored his teasing. This was not so easy to instruct as she had thought. She had never realized how odd their customs were until they had to be taught to someone. *Out loud.*

"I . . .um. . .ah.. .well, you have to.. .ah.. ."

"Are you trying to tell me to enter you from behind?" Daxan's wry tone did not help.

"I . . .well. . . ." Soosha flushed. "There is a bit more to it than that."

"Really? I would not have thought so."

She heard the smile in his words. "This is serious! Do not make sport of me."

"I would not."

But she knew the Spoltami was highly amused. How did she tell this scholar the next part? He would flee back to his stone house and slam the doors tight!

"What else is there, *my kitten?*"

"When you are ready to. . .to. . .proceed, you must, well, bite the back of my neck at the same time you come inside."

A cough burst out of his mouth. "*Bite the back of your neck?*" His voice sounded aghast, but behind her, he looked up at the sky, dimples curving his cheeks. "What do you mean? You want me to simply nibble lightly along your throat?"

"No! I mean the male must sharply bite, well, actually, clamp his teeth-"

This was extremely awkward.

The ritual sounded entirely strange when spoken aloud in such a manner. What would he think of her people? They would seem savage to him!

"Let us forget this. I see it is not a good idea." She made to move away.

"Oh, I think it is an excellent idea." He quickly pressed against her from behind, nudging her thighs apart. Capturing her within his hold.

Apparently his swollen shaft thought it was a excellent idea as well; a droplet of moisture trickled onto the curve of her buttock.

The man was aroused; but would he actually be able to perform the traditional mating?

"Daxan, I do not think you fully understa-"

"I believe I can get the way of it, Soosha." He whispered softly into her ear as he swept her hair to

one side, over her shoulder.

Before she could say anything else, he entwined his fingers with hers and stretched his arm out against the rock wall. The *tip* of his shaft teased the crevice of her buttocks. The *tip* of his tongue swirled around the folds of her ear.

His moist breath was hot on the back of her neck. It sent shivers of desire through her.

"Now you probably should-"

Instead of waiting for further instructions, Daxan Sahain did *exactly* as he was meant to do; he sharply bit the back of her neck and thrust into her in one swift, powerful stroke that would have done any male Familiar proud.

"Daxan!"

"Mmmmmm-hmmmm." His hot mouth swept along her throat, kissing and nipping as he held her fast in the mating embrace.

There, he remained imbedded in her, standing firm and marking his time. His uneven, rough breaths cascaded over her back like warm sand clouds.

Behind them, the moon rose high in the evening sky. The rays of light silhouetted them against the rocks, locked in the age-old Familiar joining stance.

"N'taga," Soosha breathed. *You have placed your shadow on me.*

Daxan whispered raggedly in her ear. "Look, Soosha, our shadows are blending on the rock face."

"Yes, I see them. We Familiar have a name for it; we call it Shadow Dance. It is. . . well, it is something special to us."

"Soosha."

"What is it, Daxan?" She started to turn but he began sliding in her. Long strokes, deep.

Soosha groaned and purred at the same time. "Do - do you need me to tell you what to do next?"

"Not unless you wish to." He grinned and nipped her shoulder.

Releasing her hands, he caught at the locks of her hair and unclasped one of the long strands of Aghni pearls. He tossed the long tresses over his own shoulders. The silken mass glided down his naked back, causing him to moan. It felt even better than he remembered.

His hips ground into her with a circular motion as he looped the pearl strand around both of their waists, and then threaded it through her legs.

"What do you do with the pearls in-"

"You will see."

And see, she did.

He lashed the ends of the cording around his wrists. With every thrust, he drew the pearls over the front of her mound, tugging them one by one across her nether lips.

Soosha threw back her head and cried out with the exquisite torture. She had no idea how inventive Spoltami males were!

Daxan continually changed the tempo of his strokes, from long measured thrusts to faster tugs of the pearls. When he suddenly *flexed* sharply inside her, Soosha tumbled over the edge yet again.

But this time he felt the contractions all along the length of his embedded member. They captured him in the most sensual embrace of all.

His voice became as raw as his passion. "As you are bound by these pearls, Soosha, so, too, am I."

She thought he referred to the manner in which he had wrapped them together. It was inspired; he had cleverly bound them in such a way as to wring the utmost pleasure out of the situation. Every time she moved, the strand did to him what he was doing to her.

Daxan groaned as she suddenly tightened her thighs on him. Still keeping hold of the pearls, he grabbed the vial of *NightFall*. Instead of drinking it, he poured it over her breasts. The thick, tangy juice flowed to the peaks of her breasts and dripped off the tips.

He massaged the elixir into the rosy skin with his palms.

The rubbing action intermittently pulled the pearl strand taut against them both, adding to their mutual pleasure. All the while, he moved in her, never relinquishing his steady tempo.

Immediately, the *Nightfall* began to sizzle her nerve endings. Her breasts throbbed with unbearable pressure!

As if he knew how heightened her senses were becoming, Daxan looped the pearls around the tips of her breasts and gently drew the strand back and forth.

The pearls hit her in seven pleasure points at once.

Soosha's breath choked in her throat.

Daxan cupped her breasts in his palms and roughly flicked her nipples with his thumbs.

Again the man had her rearing up on her toes as he indulged her pleasure. The waves tumbled

rapidly over one another as she peaked in his arms.

But Daxan Sahain was not finished yet.

Picking up the *Nightfall* once again, he splashed some into his cupped palms. Soosha had an idea what he planned to do.

She also had an idea that *Nightfall* was more than just a Spoltami liquor. Her mate had brought a pleasure potion along with their meal. Very intriguing. ..

Even though she had been expecting it, when he cupped his hand over her mound to let the rich elixir seep against her, she was not prepared for the devastating effect. *The Nightfall burned its way into her, setting off explosion after explosion!*

It was as if she throbbed everywhere!

It was too much even for a Familiar woman. Soosha screamed and scratched at him as peak after peak came to her - and yet she wanted more of the feeling. More of him.

Daxan clasped her hips tightly, and began to thrust in earnest. Swiftly and powerfully. As he stroked, some of the burning *Nightfall* juices rode with him into her canal, instantly inflaming them both- almost unendurably.

Another spray of sea water crested the cliff, drenching them in a cool slap of water.

It was good that they were in a secluded spot for they both yelled out their ecstasy.

Daxan became wild as the *Nightfall* mixed with Soosha's own, distinctive moisture. The normal effect of the female Familiar's secretions seemed to treble and his released passion turned feral.

He could hold back no longer.

Daxan bit her shoulder and flipped them both around so he was slanting back against the stone wall and she faced forward while they stood. His palms at the sides of her waist moved her up and down. He guided her onto his shaft, then maneuvered her to ride him in this rather unusual way.

It was an inspired position. Soosha was surprised by his clever resourcefulness. Her buttocks pressed against his groin and, in turn, he pressed into her in ways that allowed a surfeit of new sensations.

He was sexually creative.

Moreover, the Spotami male did not seem to be tiring in the least! In fact, Daxan came to his first peak, crossed over it with clenched teeth and a husky tremor of satisfaction, and kept on going.

Soosha could not have been happier.

The males of Spoltam gained much respect from her. Mayhap she would not have to hold herself back this eve?

Her Spoltami scholar was keeping up with her sigh for sigh.

And so he did for the entire night.

On the rocks. Off the rocks. As the sea crashed into the shore. As the stars flickered through the sea mist. They took each other in a turbulent exchange and their wild cries mixed with the Aghni night.

By the time Daxan carried Soosha back to his dwelling on the cliffside, most of his beaded hair coils had come undone and his armband had long since been ripped off in the throes of passion.

Marveling at their uninhibited encounter, he tossed the cuff into the Zot vine basket, and looped it over his wrist. Then he scooped a listless Soosha into his arms.

Albeit pleasing, dawn in Aghni was nowhere near as spectacular as the dusk. Yet to Daxan Sahain, a man who had just spent the night exploring Familiar sensuality, this daybreak was the most spectacular he had ever seen.

He brought Soosha to his chamber, securely deposited her in his enormous bed, climbed in beside her, and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Nestled with her safe in his arms- cozy between the krilli coverlet and the soft, fluffy bedding- Daxan's sated slumber was pure bliss.

TWELVE

Soosha awoke to the pleasant sensation of a male pressing solidly against her.

She smiled. So Daxan Sahain liked to cuddle?

Another surprise.

Last night, his lovemaking had been erotic and supremely fulfilling. For a man who was not Familiar, he was very, very inventive.

There was *something* in the way he touched her. ..

In the way he took her.

Something she could not identify.

Muted light streaked through the room from the open balcony doors. The sun already traveled low

in the sky; it was well past midday. Soosha could tell by the cadence of Daxan's breathing that he was waking up.

With that realization came an unaccountable shyness.

Soosha was suddenly not sure what she would say to the man. Last night they had both become wild. Would the scholar regret his uninhibited actions in the light of day?

Worse, what would he say when he found out she had actually mated him? *Good morrow, Soosha, you have such a witty sense of humor?* By Aiyah, she did not think he would say that.

The covers rustled and there he was- leaning over her with a lazy, sated smile on his handsome face.

Daxan's long hair had come completely undone. The mass spread across his naked shoulders in a glorious swath of amber.

The tousled strands flowed like liquid gold!

Freed now from the confines of the beaded coils, his hair revealed its true complexity- not one shade of color. . . *but thousands.*

The myriad tones interwove every strand like gilded bands of molten sunlight.

Hair like that should never be confined, she immediately concluded. The style he normally wore, although attractive, concealed its radiant beauty.

Soosha could not stop staring at it.

Truly, his hair was extraordinary for a-

The oddest sensation seeped into her. Warily, she glanced up at his features.

Two different colored eyes glinted down at her. Soosha's breathing stopped. One eye was sea green, the other sun gold! She could not believe it - He was a Familiar!

And a stunningly beautiful one at that.

"You - you tricked me, Daxan Sahain!"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He gave her with a very catlike smile. *{ "Why do you think? }* He mouthed the words silently as he sent the thought to her mind.

An alluring scent immediately covered her. It was the same enthralling fragrance she had mistaken

earlier for Aghni spices in his clothing. Her nostrils flared as she remembered his words: *'I am told mine is a special blend...'*

It was special; true enough. It was the seductive scent of a male Familiar!

Soosha pursed her lips in anger. Oh, he had not lied; there was simply another meaning to his words! Yes, he was one of their males, all right! Cunning. Artful. *Dangerous*.

He had hid himself so well. A true hunter, to be sure. Oh, but he had deceived her in every way!

Her heart sank. Who was he really? Did she even know his true name? And why was he on Spoltam, when all Familiar were recalled to M'yan? Was he a male who had gone feral?

Soosha swallowed. As a young girl she had heard terrifying stories of such males; they were a wild breed. Unconditionally wild. She had heard warnings: if she should have the misfortune to cross one she should never let her guard down. Never.

Soosha needed to get away from him before he truly sealed their fate! He *had* triggered her mating response!

At the moment, the only thing she could think of to do was bolt. She began to struggle in his embrace.

Daxan held her fast.

As he examined her features, she easily recognised the low, rumbling sounds he made- it *was* pleasure-purring! She swallowed. He was opening his sensual senses to her.

His eyes were already dilating!

Soosha pressed her palms against the broad chest in an attempt to push him away from her.

It had no effect whatsoever.

The dance was over and he was going to take his prize. Rolling on top, Daxan captured her face between his hands and seized her mouth.

Claimed it.

His true feline persona was unmasked along with the untamed passion of her race. Of the males.

He *purred* down her throat as he staked his mating rights.

Her struggles were in earnest now.

It was a natural feminine reaction to a strong male predator. In the mating ritual, some Familiars stalked and hunted their unwary mates. The male usually triggered the response in the female, and

some males liked to control that trigger. A Familiar would pursue his woman as if she was the only prey that counted. And he would adore doing it. It was called a T'kan. *A love hunt.*

As the saying goes, it was not for everyone.

Other races, such as the Spoltami, would never understand that aspect of Familiar mating.

Soosha did. But her understanding would not help her with Daxan. Her frantic exertions were nothing to his strength of will. Lips, velvety in texture, iron in determination, parted over her mouth.

Daxan was going to take what was his.

He captured her breath.

Inhaled completely to draw it down deep inside him. He seized everything.

The room began to spin and darken. Still Soosha tried to break away from his iron grip. Her balled fists pounded his chest.

In matters of mating, males were not inclined to be swayed. Daxan Sahain would not relent. She had come to take him and now *he* was taking her.

Soosha was on the very edge of losing consciousness.

Then he sent breath back to her! Just as ritual demanded. He blew into her mouth, filling her lungs with air, with renewed life.

His life.

And she greedily took it. She sucked in his gift of life.

From this point on, every breath she took would be his. In turn, with every breath she exhaled, she would give him renewal. In this way, they were mystically connected as one.

She was fastened to him forever.

Daxan had bound her to him for all eternity.

THIRTEEN

"Why did you not tell me?"

Soosha wasted no time confronting her new husband. She was hurt, confused, bewildered, and not a little apprehensive. He had deceived her. Could she ever trust him?

She would have to - he was her mate.

Daxan flung his glistening hair back over his shoulders. The more one stared at the gleaming mass, the more dazzling it became, Soosha realized. Since he was no longer hiding his true appearance from her, his beauty was spectacular.

What an exquisite Familiar male!

It amazed Soosha that he had been able to tone down such stunning features. She acknowledged that in his guise as a Spoltami, he had been exceedingly handsome. *But now*

His expressive green and gold eyes were still hazy from the exchange of breath they had just shared. "I hoped you would come to your senses and return to M'yan, Soosha. Word has been sent to me that your brother is on his way here this very moment. You would do well to realize how perfectly you have complicated the issue."

"Issue? What issue" She blinked, not sure what he was referring to. "You mean our mating?"

"That is exactly what I mean."

Soosha snarled, truly angry. "How dare you! You refer to your mating as an issue!"

Resting on his side of the bed, Daxan watched her, fascinated. A full-blown storm was developing right in front of him. The female cat came forth, hissing.

"I do not know which is worse! That you refer to our mating as an issue- or that you would send your mate away! What kind of a man are you?"

He clasped her shoulders. "The kind who would keep his wife alive!"

The loud crash of a door being kicked open- and the even louder roar of something *big* charging into the hallway below- made both Daxan and Soosha freeze.

Soosha clasped her handsome Familiar to her. She was still outraged at his deception, but he was, well, familiar.

"What is it?" she gasped in fright. "Do you think it is that awful man from the *sacri*?"

Daxan's brow furrowed. "I do not know; it sounds like a *xathu* beast has been set loose in my doorway."

In a single agile motion, he sprung off both her and the bed, unveiling the true, fluid movements of his race.

He grabbed a robe and his cuff, donning both as he strode to the door. More than anything else, Daxan's sleek, predatory stride revealed to Soosha exactly what he was. No male moved like a

Familiar male.

With every step, his lithe, sensual nature was revealed.

But who was he? And what was he doing on Spoltam? Soosha recognized that the situation was strange, to say the least.

For one, she had not been thinking of mating. If she had not come to Spoltam, her mating might not have occurred for months or even years.

Which brought up a second point. This man had also ignored the King's decree. He had either left M'yan after Gian Ren had the secret Tunnel sealed; or he had not obeyed the King's order to return home.

Either way, her husband was an outlaw.

Was he a rogue Familiar as well?

She bit her lip. He did not seem wild or uncontrollable-at least not any more wild or uncontrollable than most of their males.

What was more, he had not harmed her.

Just the opposite. He had protected her by bringing her into the safety of his home.

Of course, now she knew the true reason behind his actions. He had felt the Calling. Then he had sensed her. It probably was why he had come into the marketplace in the first place. To protect his mate.

As soon as he met her, he had actively triggered her.

Yet how had Daxan disguised himself? Soosha had never heard of a Familiar being able to do such a thing. Their unique dual-colored eyes always gave them away to others.

She was sure it had something to do with the cuff he wore on his forearm. *Where did he obtain it and just how much of an outlaw is he?*

Daxan had not wanted her to know he was Familiar until after the bond was sealed and they were mated.

That realization did not give her a comforting feeling.

Soosha put a hand to her throbbing forehead, rubbing the sore spot at the center. Such thoughts made one's head ache!

One thing was certain, as wild as Daxan had been the previous night- he was no where near as wild as he could have been. She knew that the surface of the man's stamina had not even been

scratched.

So to speak.

He had held back in the very throes of the mating stance! Soosha did not want to even speculate at the capacity for sexual control such a man wielded.

Although she was sure he was going to enlighten her.

The terrified bleat of a Zot rent the air.

It was followed by the muffled thud of something heavy being hurled against an interior wall.

"Did you not know that Familiars dine on Zots? Now out of my way; I am coming in! I suggest that you get your master at once - for I am about to tear his abode apart and he might wish to witness the deed!"

Soosha's eyes widened. Brygar!

Her irascible brother was causing his usual mayhem! How had he found her so fast? The man could not track the path of a slime-oozing *zorph* through a dry sand bed!

Her thoughts were halted by another voice. One she was beginning to recognize with every pore of her body.

Except it sounded somewhat different. The smooth, mellow voice of Daxan Sahain was lowered to an ominous level - one he had never used with her. The commanding tone shocked her.

"No need to call me, I am here. Go back to the kitchens, *Zot*."

"B-b-but Master Sahain-"

"I said go back to the kitchens. I will handle this."

Soosha listened to see what would transpire next.

FOURTEEN

The meticulous *Zot* did not need to be told again.

He scurried through a door at the end of the hall, his tail swishing madly behind him.

Daxan leveled an icy look at his uninvited guest.

Said guest cared not a whit.

He squared his wide shoulders, threw back his head, and proclaimed in a proud voice, "I am Brygar from the Fifth Clan of the Familiar! You have my sister and I demand you release her at once!"

Daxan's amused snort could be heard all the way up the stairs.

It was certainly not the reaction Brygar expected.

"I know who you are, Brygar of the Fifth Clan."

"Well, I do not know *you*, Spoltami, and if you do not hand over my sister to me swiftly, it will soon be of no consequence who you *were*."

"Always charge in roaring, hmm, Brygar? You should learn that clandestine entry serves better on occasion."

"I have tried to council him thus. It is, I vow, pointless." A second man entered the house from the street. He had the tall, authoritative mien of a Charl warrior.

Daxan arched his brow. What was this warrior-knight doing with the Familiar Brygar? He had no wish to bring the Charl into this! Especially a Charl who looked as deadly as this green-eyed man. The Aviaran was not in battle stance, yet, the sparks danced in his eyes.

He is powerful.

Despite the potential danger, strong mystical forces were a pleasing balm to any Familiar. Pleasing and dangerous. Familiar were always drawn to that combination. Throughout time, the Familiar aligned themselves to the wizards of Aviara for just that reason.

His power might explain why Brygar traveled with the Charl, Daxan reasoned; but it did not explain the Chart's presence.

"Brygar, your sister did not tell me she had a Charl warrior, as well as a Familiar who thinks he has two sets *of kani*, as her champions."

Traed corrected him immediately. "I am not a Charl."

Daxan was surprised. "You have the ability but not the sanction?" He was not positive, but the man's power level felt like it might be well past the fifth tier. Daxan had never heard of an Aviaran of such power who was not of the Charl. He was curious as to how such a situation was allowed to stand. From what he knew, the High Guild was very fussy about *those* kinds of things.

Traed ignored the man's question and in typical Traed' fashion simply stared ahead, stone-faced.

"You see what I deal with?" Brygar, disgusted with Traed's reserve, muttered to himself as he tried to peer into the shadows of the hallway to get a better view of their 'host'. "But you are half

right, stranger; I do have two sets *of kani*. "

Traed quirked an eyebrow at Brygar.

He had learned over the past few days that the Familiar had a bating sense of humor. Brygar seemed to thrive on outrageous declarations.

Brygar glanced at Traed and said in mock seriousness, "Had you not heard, Charl-who-is-no-Charl? The extra set comes from Spoltami men who apparently have none. Their men lose them with their passionless logic." He turned back to Daxan. "Now *who* are you? Come out of the shadows that we might see who we are to kill!"

We? Traed gave Brygar another sidelong glance that held a wealth of meaning. Killing an unarmed man in his robe in his own home seemed a tad extreme to Traed.

Although, in certain circumstances, the idea could have appeal. . . . He glanced again at Brygar, only this time, his look was speculative. Perhaps if the man wearing the robe was also the man who boasted of two sets of kani?

Yes, that would be acceptable for him.

He shrugged off the fantasy. Reluctantly. "You have heard of attempting diplomacy first; have you not, Brygar?"

The Familiar grinned wickedly. "Truth be told, I care not for that method." He circled his arm through the air. Shinar y shinjii. "Thus it has no meaning for me."

"This does not surprise me." It was apparent that Brygar never willingly met a term he did not like. Clearly, this situation was going to get worse before it got better. Traed crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the door frame.

Or what was left of the door frame after Brygar.

Sometimes there was naught to do but watch as foolishness unfolded. He sighed, then inquired of Daxan, "Have you had your midday meal yet?"

"My midday meal?" Daxan blinked. Were they both mad?

"You see, I feel better killing men before they have their midday meal. It seems uncharitable to end a man's life after he has dined. The meal makes the opponent sluggish. There is not as much fight in him."

Although the man spoke in a perfectly serious tone, the Aviaran's green eyes flashed ever so slightly in what could only be called dark humor.

"Thus if you have had your midday meal," the Aviaran went on, "I will probably wait until the morrow to slay you."

"Then I have definitely partaken of my midday meal." Daxan moved out of the shadowed alcove.

For once Brygar was speechless.

But it did not last long.

"*YOU!*"

Daxan's lips curled upward; he inclined his head in greeting. "I had no idea Familiar were so well-endowed, Brygar. My esteemed respects to your clan. Or ... have you made off with all of their *kani* as well?"

"What are you doing here!" Brygar fumed and turned from Daxan to Traed. "What is he doing here?"

As if Traed should know.

Not moving from his post against the frame, Traed simply shrugged his shoulders. He had no clue and was not inclined to delve into it further.

Unless, of course, he had to.

Daxan motioned to Traed. "Come inside and close the door behind you before you alert the entire city of Aghni to your presence. "

Traed moved off the frame and attempted to close the door. After a few tries, the panel listed to the side but stayed in place.

"How did you two get here without being noticed?" Daxan narrowed his eyes. "Or did you?"

"Let me simply say that Brygar was moving very quickly. You may fill in that depiction on your own. I do not believe anyone took special note of him."

Daxan switched his attention fully to the tall Aviaran. "And you are?"

"Traed ta'al Krue." The Spoltami's amber eyes widened in recognition. He was familiar with some part of the name. It was not surprising to Traed. Krue was a well known Charl knight, and Traed, a legendary bladesman.

"Do not be so sure he was not spotted. The slavers are never seen, yet they are everywhere."

Traed nodded, thanking the stranger for the warning. By his sentiments, the man clearly was no threat to Brygar or his sister. It did not seem he wished them any harm. He addressed Brygar. "Do you mind telling me who our 'host' is since you seem to recognize him?"

"His name is Daxan Sa'ain and he is well-known to the family of Gian Ren. The man turned rogue and left M'yan-right after the Feast of Wizards, as I recall."

Traed listened carefully to Brygar's words. The Feast of Wizards was a Familiar celebration that honored the House of Sages. Every year, the entire High Guild of Aviara attended.

He turned and studied Daxan carefully.

Though few knew it - like his old master, Yaniff - Traed possessed the Sight. He focused on the ornate cuff around Daxan's forearm.

An Aviaran device of extraordinary skill.

The woven design was complex. Only a high level mystic would have the ability to conjure those kind of energy patterns. It was a rare, difficult bind to achieve, for it shielded truth. To do so, the spell had to continually warp the fundamental reality that surrounded the wearer.

The device would require regular 'feeding' by the wizard who created it.

Only a handful of wizards had the ability to conjure such a device.

Even less could sustain its continual drain.

Traed thought such devices were strictly controlled by the High Guild. In the wrong hands- or for the wrong purposes - stasis spells could prove disastrous.

So who had had given it to the Familiar?

He walked over to Daxan and lifted the man's forearm by the cuff. Arcs of twisting energy streamers flowed from Traed's hand to the armband, and Daxan's eyes revealed their true dual colors.

"Interesting." Traed murmured. "Might I ask who gave you this?"

Daxan met Traed's gaze but would not answer.

Traed was not surprised. He let go of the device. Once more the Familiar's green/amber eyes cloaked. "Should I bother to ask what are you doing on Spoltam or am I wasting my time on that as well?"

Daxan remained silent.

"I thought as much; however, I must insist that you-

"He is an outlaw!" Brygar came forward. "There is no telling what mischief he is into! For all we know he could be working with Oberion slavers. *Where is Soosha?*"

"I am here, Brygar!" His sister's sweet voice floated down to the hall from above the stairwell. She peeked over the balcony at the men, her long black hair streaming over the railing like a gleaming ebony waterfall.

All three men paused in unison to enjoy the sight of such a beautiful girl.

Daxan almost purred as he remembered her silken hair twining around him. Its perfect scent. The sensuous ropes had held him to her exactly as he had imagined. He had been bound to her last eve in so many enticing ways.

He planned on getting most creative with that hair in the future. That was, if he lived to see M'yan again.

"Come down at once, Soosha! We need return home. We can discuss this foolish escapade of yours later."

Apparently, Brygar was not going to waste a moment getting her back to M'yan! Soosha felt like scratching him silly. *Foolish, thick-skulled brother!*

"That is not possible, Brygar." Soosha sprinted the rest of the way down the stairs, her movements like a feather in the wind.

Brygar crossed his arms over his chest; he tapped his booted foot. "And why is it not possible?"

"Just a moment." Traed interrupted them both. "I need first hear more about why this man is wearing an Aviaran device-"

"Because we are *mated*, dear brother."

For Brygar, the news was too terrible to comprehend. "*What?!*" He roared, looking rapidly back and forth between the two of them.

There was no denying the satisfied aura surrounding that renegade, Daxan.

And, if he was truthful, his sister, as well.

Brygar chose to ignore that last part; much in the same way as he ignored the concept of diplomacy. If Soosha excelled at *shinar y shinjii*, then Brygar was its master. If something did not please him, he did his best to disregard it.

"*Not him!* Do not tell me it is so! Soosha, he has gone rogue! And besides, he has always made my mane stand on end. I do not like him!"

Soosha raised her chin and snarled back at her brother. "Then it is fortunate that *you* are not mated to him! You will accept him in our clan, dear brother, for he will be returning to live with us in our home!"

Daxan raised his brows, then rubbed his hand over his face as he listened to the siblings of squabble over him.

"You are an outlaw?" Traed asked hopefully.

"No."

The Aviaran's nostrils flared with annoyance and acute boredom.

But brother and sister were not paying them any mind; they were too busy having their own conversation.

Soosha scoffed at her brother's ridiculous reasoning. "It matters not if he is a rogue; he is still my mate!"

Daxan started to smile at her for standing by him- until she added, "The scoundrel will be returning to M'yan with us! You had best learn to call him brother."

Brygar was openmouthed with horror.

Traed thought the expression suited him. Furthermore, it rendered him *silent*.

Daxan, however, had something to say about it. "No, I will not."

Neither brother or sister heard him.

Traed watched them all with a dangerous gleam in his eye. He could be at home at this moment, doing something useful. Like trimming the claws of his *phfiztger*. Surely that had more merit than this? How had he come to be here?

Ah, Yes. *Yaniff*.

"He cannot come!" Brygar threw his hands up in the air. "He is an outlaw!"

"That is not the reason." Daxan tried to interrupt but got nowhere.

"Pfft!" Soosha waved her hand in front of Brygar's nose. "Then Gian Ren will have to make him *not* be an outlaw!"

"Gian!" Brygar bellowed. "You will be lucky if the King does not expel you after what you have done!"

At this point Daxan motioned for Traed to take a seat. The battle showed no signs of abating.

The two of them sat down across from each other.

Traed calmly watched brother and sister snarl, roar, hiss, bellow, and screech at each other. "And to think I believed the House of Sages mad when they sent me with him," he murmured thoughtfully. "Now I am not so sure. He is a menace all by himself."

Daxan smiled. "I have heard of your 'relationship' with the High Guild. It must annoy you greatly to think they might be right- even one time."

Traed's head whipped back to Daxan. Like all Familiars, this one never let the opportunity to irk go by. Traed's jade eyes glittered.

Daxan chuckled.

"So, Daxan Sahain, you cultivate for *taj* Gian and who else?"

The smile died on the Familiar's face. "You are very cunning for an Aviaran."

"Thus Yaniff sends me on these *important* journeys."

The man definitely had a subtle wit. Daxan lifted his hands palms up as if to indicate '*what can I say?*'

"As I see it, the King sent you to Spoltam to infiltrate these people and ascertain what, if any, threat level there is to M'yan."

"You begin to impress me, Charl."

"Therefore you left M'yan as a rogue Familiar to avoid suspicion."

Daxan winked.

"From what I have gathered you have been on Spoltam some time."

Daxan's reply was somewhat hesitant. "Yes."

Traed nodded. "Interesting."

Behind them an urn flew through the air, missing Brygar and sailing to within a hair's width of Traed's right ear.

Without missing a beat, he smoothly released his light blade and pulverized the pottery an instant before it would have shattered against the side of his head.

His weapon was retracted and back in his waistband before the first shards even hit the carpeted floor.

He calmly continued his conversation as if nothing untoward had occurred. "The armband you are wearing is quite complex. I have never seen one like it before. There are few who have the power to nurture such an intricate weave. Tell me who gave it to you."

Daxan sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers under his chin. "You know, you have the reflexes of a Familiar; it is quite extraordinary."

Traed was never a man to be sidetracked. Especially by an observation. He swung the lightblade around to Daxan's throat in a heartbeat. "With most weapons accuracy is more important."

Daxan did not even blink. "You would not want to do that, my friend," he said quietly.

"And why is that?"

"For one, I would kill you before your blade sliced into my skin."

Traed arched a brow. "So you all say. What is the other reason?"

"If you should manage to best me, you would then have to deal with *Soosha*." Daxan grinned broadly at the Aviaran.

His wise words gave Traed pause.

The female Familiar did not seem to listen to reason when it came to doing other than what *she* wanted. She was much like the brother. It would be foolish to provoke her. He glanced over his shoulder.

At that moment Soosha was holding her clawed hand in front of her brother's face, threatening to scratch him senseless. Traed arched his left eyebrow.

Daxan knew that the Aviaran could deal very well with Soosha- if he had to. But would he *want* to? That was another matter, entirely.

Despite the terrible threat of "Soosha unbound", the green-eyed man kept the blade securely at his throat. Daxan was impressed. "Of course there is my new brother Brygar and his two sets of kani to consider..."

Traed's eyelash flickered. Once.

Daxan snorted. He *is* finding this humorous. "At least he is not part of your family. Imagine my shock when I came down the stairs."

"I am not sure he is not part of my family- and that is what worries me," Traed quipped back.

Daxan threw back his head and roared with laughter.

Traed retracted his blade. But he remembered what Brygar had said: "*He went rogue just before the Feast of Wizards...*"

The connection did not seem coincidence and Traed needed to know the truth. It was his nature to always come back to that piece of the puzzle that would not fit. "Was Yaniff the one who gave the cuff to you?"

Daxan stared at him for long moments before speaking. "It is so important for you to know?"

"Yes."

"You believe it was Yaniff?"

"Yes."

"Does he concern you?"

Traed thought before he answered. "Concern is not the right word."

"Hmmm." Daxan crossed his ankle over his knee. "Gian has oft told me that most times it is better not to know the workings of mystics; for with such knowledge can come heartbreak and sorrow."

"I would rather sit with those companions than dine on deception."

"My senses tell me that you do sit with those companions, knight. Frequently."

Traed revealed nothing.

Daxan sighed. Charl were a breed apart. Even when they claimed not to be Charl. He would not get under this knight's skin; the man would never reveal anything he did not want revealed. "Very well, I will tell you this, but be forewarned. It may indeed sorrow your heart."

Traed steeled himself. "Go on."

Daxan fingered the intricate weavings in the cuff. "Look not to Yaniff in this."

Traed fully expected to hear the seventh-level mystic named as the conjurer. And now his heart was full of sorrow- just as the Familiar had predicted.

His suspicion had done Yaniff a disservice.

The old master meant more to him than he could ever say. When he was a child and ignored by the Guild and most of the Aviaran familial lines, Yaniff had taken him on as student. Later, he defied The House of Sages, claiming him as a son.

Charl ways ran deep. To this day he had never been able to truly refuse any request the old mystic made of him. The crafty wizard always managed to ensnare him in his schemes.

Yet. .. if it was not Yaniff, than who was it?

There were only a handful in the High Guild with that kind of power. The creation of such a device would have taken months and would have severely depleted the conjurer during its creation. Not to mention the continual drain of its maintenance.

Mayhap Yaniff did not create the cuff, a voice whispered to him. Mayhap Yaniff instructed someone to make it. . .

Questions. Always more questions!

Traed was not sure why the answers were so important; he just knew that they were.

Daxan carefully watched the play of thoughts cross Traed's features. Only a Familiar would have been able to discern the slightest change of mood; this Aviaran was a master at keeping his emotions hidden.

There was more here than Daxan cared to explore-but, then, he was not Charl. He had enough on his own to deal with. He attempted to lighten the topic. "Of course, to make the chronicle clear, Traed ta'al Krue, Familiar do not actually have two sets of-

Traed put his hand up. "That is more knowledge than I require."

The room behind them suddenly became still.

Traed turned around in his seat - just to see if the two had finally killed each other off and he could go home.

He viewed the scene before him in amazement. Brother and sister were hugging each other *and* smiling.

Apparently after the snarling and hissing were done, all was then forgotten. The two of them were beaming like a happy pair of tuned crystals.

Traed sighed stoically.

Brygar, grinning a cheery, white-toothed smile, announced to the room at large: "My sister and I are in agreement! The rogue who has no pride will come home with us!"

Daxan immediately stood. "No. I am not going back to M'yan."

Soosha ran over to him, the smile dying on her face. "But Daxan, you must. . ." She trailed off, not quite sure what to say to convince this man who knew her in body but had yet to learn her fully in mind.

"*Soosha.*" Daxan cupped her cheek with his palm. "I am here at Gian Ren's behest. I cannot leave."

"You - you mean you are not an outlaw after all?"

He shook his head, then dipped down to let his lips lightly caress hers. "No," he breathed. "I am trying to help our people. The Tunnel between Spoltam and Ganakari breeds danger for us. Should Spoltam join forces with their *Tunnel-match*, Ganakari, our people will be in even more danger and so will the Alliance. I must remain on Spoltam, Soosha."

Soosha bit her lip and cast her eyes down. "For how long, husband?"

His hands clasped hers, bringing them to his lips. Already he was in love with her. Already he felt

the pain of their parting.

He would die a little each day without her beside him.

But his people needed him and they all would have to sacrifice to survive. "Until such time that Spoltam either enters the Alliance or turns against us. There is no other way. I am the eyes and ears of the royal house."

"Then I will stay with you, Daxan Sa'ain."

Her offer came as a shock to him. He knew she was not overly fond of this world- and with good reason. She had almost been hunted down and enslaved moments after her arrival.

Right then, he saw the qualities in her that he had always yearned for in a mate. In truth, he had been wild for her from the moment he had first spotted her leaping from stall to stall in the marketplace, causing pandemonium wherever she went.

Laughing all the while.

Her laugh would carry him to any sacrifice. Because the sound of that laughter, so pure, so free, so joyous, represented everything a Familiar should fight to preserve.

He had been forced to contain his heart. His wife did not know him yet as he truly was- she did not know that he would lick the tip of her ear just to see her smile.

Or that he cried in secret when his thoughts strayed to his lost family.

But there would come a time when they would all be free again and his children would play under the light of many different suns.

{Are you sure about this, Soosha?} He. sent his thought privately to her.

{Yes. I will stay with you, Daxan.}

{It will be dangerous.}

{I am a Familiar; I thrive on danger.}

He looked at her with pride. *{You will have to stay hidden. My armband will not work on you.}*

{No trips to the sacri?}

His cheeks curved. *{No. Especially not the sacri.}*

{Not even once?} She asked, beguiling him in the way of her kind.

{Not even once. Think you I would lose you to the slavers?} His tongue slipped teasingly

between her fingers.

{You can always say I am your Familiar love slave.}

He paused to stare up at her over their joined hands. *{They would be more apt to believe the reverse is true.}*

Soosha sucked in her breath at his revealing expression. The honed, intelligent features enthralled her. This man who was her mate was an enigma. Cunning, yet methodical. Sensual, yet controlled. In the darkest hours of night, he was as untamed as any Familiar. . . yet he was an incredibly sensitive lover.

There were things that Daxan did to her, things that she had never. . .

Her heart pounded as she looked into his eyes. She knew in that moment that they would find so much passion, so much love together. They were complete opposites but they were exactly matched.

He was her adventure!

Without hesitation she turned to her brother. "I have decided to remain here on Spoltam with my husband."

Brygar stared at his sister, dumbfounded.

Traed silently counted the moments for the statement to hit the big Familiar's brain. *One. Two. Thr-*

"You cannot remain here! It is too dangerous. I will not allow it!"

Since Brygar's stubbornness seemed in no danger of taking a journey on the path to enlightenment, Traed picked up a thick tome lying on the table by his chair. It mattered not that he did not read Spoltami.

At the rate Brygar processed acceptance, Traed acknowledged he should become a scholar in the language.

He propped his legs on the opposite chair and crossed his booted feet.

Daxan was not as patient as the Aviaran. He stepped forward to face the dark-haired Familiar, nose-to-nose.

"It may interest you to know that I agree with you; Spoltam is dangerous for her. I believe she should return to M'yan. Nevertheless, Soosha has made her decision and I must respect it. Your sister will remain on Spoltam with me. Best you accept it now to avoid problems later. And know this as well, Brygar.. . I will never take orders from *you*."

Not the most soothing declaration to state to *this* particular Familiar, Traed concluded. He opened

the first page of the book.

As expected, Brygar's brow lowered ominously. "*Really*. And whose house will you enter when you return to M'yan? Hmmm? You have none of your own, as I recall. It is *my* clan that will bring you in, if we-that means *I*- so choose."

A muscle in Daxan's jaw ticked. It was true; he had no close family remaining. They had been among the first of the Familiars to disappear. Perhaps, like him, they had always chosen the most dangerous, most remote places to explore?

He had vowed to revenge their loss, which was one reason he was Gian's eyes and ears in the most dangerous of missions.

Still, a Familiar with no clan was little more than a renegade. Such Familiars were called Loners and they were considered dangerous, for they often had allegiance only to themselves.

Brygar's words hurt Daxan more than the brash Familiar knew or probably ever intended.

"Then I will start my own house. There is still some of the clan left. . ."

Brygar found out what he had been seeking. Daxan had some spit. And that pleased him. "You will do no such thing. You will come to my house where you *will* belong and you will like it!"

Daxan's stance relaxed. "Very well then."

Brawl averted. Traed reclined in his chair, booted feet extended, arms crossed over his chest. He closed his eyes. The journey with Brygar had been a ceaseless sprint in every which direction. Traed refused to remember what they had gone through to get free of the mud bog on Mollock; the Familiar's lack of directional sense seemed to be compensated with a never-ending supply of vigor.

"Your sister will be helping your people, Brygar. Under those circumstances, *taj* Gian will most likely overlook her transgressions. " Traed laced his fingers behind his neck and stretched out. "Her flight from M'yan might have been inevitable. She was destined to mate Daxan. Even a king cannot stand between that."

Brygar thumped his own forehead. "By Aiyah, the Charl-who-is-not-Charl is correct! How, oh, how, could I have not seen this?" He snorted derisively.

Traed opened one eye. "Never ask for my advice again, Familiar."

"I do not recall asking for it this time."

"Due to your witless nature, I have been allowing you free reign with a certain level of irritation. You are close to using up your allotment." Traed closed his eyes again.

Brygar nudged his sister. "Look, Soosha, he meditates like a Charl."

Still relaxed, Traed's hand went to his waistband. His fingers slowly tapped the hilt of his lightsaber in warning.

Soosha slapped her brother on the arm for goading the solemn Aviaran. The man's jade eyes sparked with strong power. If he did not wish to be called Charl, then so be it. There was no telling what he was capable of doing should her brother annoy him one time too many.

Soosha worried her lip. The handsome knight was a bit forbidding; albeit somewhat fascinating. His power level was one of the strongest she had ever felt.

She had heard tales of Charl lovers - of how they sparked when they made love and their desire ran hot. She observed the seemingly relaxed stance of this knight. His posture did not fool her. If attacked, he would have his blade slicing the air in an instant.

As a woman, she could not help but wonder what this cool Aviaran would be like when he disrobed in the dark and his awesome power truly unlocked. What unruly passions would he unleash?

By the look of him, more than most would be able to handle.

FIFTEEN

Brygar proclaimed that he would remain with Soosha long enough to assure himself that his sister was being accorded all of the comforts that *he* deemed worthy of her.

In other words, he would insure that the "Spoltami" treated Soosha to any and every luxury she desired.

Which meant whatever *he* desired.

To say that Daxan Sa'ain's mettle was put to the test was an understatement.

Brygar's constant demands drove the golden-haired Familiar to the brink of madness.

Traed could not understand Brygar's view of the situation. Brygar continued to refer to Daxan as the "Spoltami" (to Daxan's face, no less, which irritated the man no end). Traed suspected that Brygar would forever refer to Daxan thus.

Never mind that the man was Familiar.

To Brygar, it mattered not. Shinar y shinjii.

"Your brother drives me mad."

Daxan's lips feathered the side of Soosha's throat.

"Must we talk of him now?" Soosha winked at her stunning husband as she rubbed her hipbones against the ripple of muscle on his abdomen. His skin was velvety smooth; the muscles beneath, solid.

Once again, his glorious mane was confined in twisted coils. The beaded ends wandered over her collarbone, leaving scores of tingling caresses in their wake.

As much as Soosha loved his hair unbound, there was something to be said for these coils too. Last eve, he had shown her some of interesting uses for them she would not have thought possible.

The heat rose inside her just thinking about it.

Daxan had started to introduce to his true brand of pleasure. Sensually, he was devastating. There was a commanding, intense quality to him that turned incendiary when he was with her.

From her own experience, she knew that every Familiar had a unique expertise with lovemaking. The resultant experience was always memorable.

But Daxan. . . ! Well, *he* was tuned just to her. She *loved* the way he stroked her!

"When are we to discuss him, then?" Daxan rubbed his chin across the top of her head. "He keeps me in his sights every minute of the day! Do not let his relaxed bearing fool you, Soosha. Should I happen to stroll out onto one of the balconies- there he is! Lounging on chair as if he had always been there!"

Soosha put her hand over her mouth and giggled.

"Laugh not. When I go into the kitchens, he is leaning against a wall, pretending to watch the kitchen *Zot* prepare the meal."

Soosha rolled her eyes. "Surely you are imagining this, Daxan?"

"Am I? This morning when I left our chamber to go downstairs, he was in the hallway."

"So? Perhaps he was leaving his chamber as well?"

"He was lounging across the portal of our door."

Soosha scratched her chin. "Was it a sunny place? He likes to do that in the-"

"Soosha."

"There is naught I can do, Daxan! He is the leader of our clan and..."

Daxan's nostrils flared. His head bent until their noses touched. "And what?"

"He is my brother." She shrugged.

"Mmmm." Daxan rubbed his nose along the tip of hers. "Would you not at least allow me to knock him over the head? Just for a few days. . . I promise he will enjoy the rest."

Soosha smiled as his rigid member pressed between her thighs. Her husband was annoyed- but not distracted from his main goal. A true Familiar.

"You will come to love him; you will see."

"Of *that* I need to be convinced." His teeth captured her lower lip in a Familiar love bite known as the *kitten's kiss*. Then he quickly licked the tip of her ear. His lips twitched with amusement at the sound of her laughter.

Soosha's catlike expression danced with invitation. *{Oh, I am very good at convincing, husband.}*

Daxan growled, accepting her challenge. *{Let us see how good you truly are then.}*

Soosha was more than happy to show him. agreement: she was most excellent at convincing.

Soon, he was even shouting his opinion. If not his agreement.

To the walls. To the ceiling. To the flooring.

And, oddly enough, to the center column in the room.

SIXTEEN

Traed was more than ready to return to Aviara.

Unfortunately, he had yet to convince that irritating dolt to depart!

It seemed that once the huge Familiar 'took' to a place, he settled himself in and would not be budged!

Finally- after they had been on Spoltam for several days- Soosha slapped her 'paw' down.

"Brother, I think it best you return to M'yan."

Brygar did not even glance up from the gooey delicacy he was eating. "Mmmm. And why is that, Soosha?"

"My husband claims that he will be forced to kill you if you remain one more day."

Brygar paused briefly before taking another bite of the Spoltami confection. "Does he?" He licked the edge of his finger. Slowly. Deliberately.

"Yes, *I do*." Daxan padded into the room.

Traed noted that their host's eyes were narrowed to slits of boiling anger. If the man had been Aviaran, he surely would have been sparking.

Which meant this might become interesting.

By Aiyah, Traed rued, *if only I could place a wager*. . . !

"The time has come for you to leave, Brygar."

"For what reason do you so speak?"

Brygar seemed to view the world with a dense lens. Traed raised his eyebrows and then sat back to watch the entertaining situation unfold.

"For one, you are putting my house in danger each day you remain."

"Hmm..." Unconcerned, Brygar took another chomp of the sticky sweet. "And the other reason?"

"I have acceded to your every demand, your every whim, for days. You are running my household into exhaustion! What is more, you watch me day and night. *I cannot take a breath without you*. I have had enough of it!

"Ahhhh!" Brygar put the confection down. "Finally the cat shows *claw*. If this so bothers you, why have you allowed it?

"Because you are Soosha's brother! I wish to please her. But I find I can no longer allow this to go on!"

Brygar nodded slowly. "Good. THAT is what I was waiting for." He stood to his full height, towering over everyone in the room.

Soosha gasped.

Daxan faced Brygar, every muscle bunched to spring.

Traed watched and waited; his hand close to his lightblade. Yaniff would not look kindly upon him if these two tore each other to pieces. A great pity, to be certain.

Surprising everyone, Brygar suddenly threw back his head and roared with laughter. "You care enough for her that you have allowed me to command your house; and still you are man enough to slit my throat!"

He spread his large, muscular arms wide and clapped Daxan inside a strangle hold. Almost lifting the other Familiar off his feet. "A good balance!"

Daxan was too stunned to move.

Not that he could if he wanted to.

"Ha!" Brygar turned to Soosha. "You see? He treasures me like a brother already!"

"Let go of me, you fool!"

Soosha's eyes filled with tears of happiness. "Oh, Brygar, how could he not love you?"

That was when Traed ta'al Krue decided that one could never fully understand the feline race.

One could only deal with them.

And so, all was well.

Until, that is, they left for the Tunnels.

Daxan had recommended they use a more obscure Tunnel point than the one they had arrived in.

For safety sake, he urged them to use one of the Tunnels in a village a day's journey from Aghni. The small village was used by many trading caravans as it avoided the congestion of Aghni. In addition, the small village was a triconduit, connected to three different Tunnels- all unmonitored by the Charl.

Daxan had given explicit instructions.

The first Tunnel connected to a way point which led directly to Aviara.

The second Tunnel led to Ganakari. To be avoided at all costs.

The third, to an even more dangerous place, best left unexplored.

Traed and Brygar found the village easy enough and the journey along the seashore had been almost pleasant. Indeed, Traed had only been forced to threaten Brygar with mortal injury but a handful of times.

That ended when they reached the bluff that signified the Tunnelpoints.

Brygar counted the Tunnel entrances from left to right instead of right to left, as Daxan had instructed.

Of course, the brash Familiar immediately pivoted to vault into the wrong Tunnel.

Traed could not believe it. *He would not do this again!* He would not.

"Halt, Brygar! That is not the right-"

Too late.

It took Traed several moments- as he stood rooted in front of the pulsating maw - to duly comprehend that his erstwhile traveling companion had blithely entered a doorway to a world they had been warned was 'best left unexplored'.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head from side to side.

Well, there was no hope for it.

If he did not bring the Familiar back, Yaniff would never let him hear the end of it.

And he supposed Gian Ren might have something to say as well.

Why is it that every family has one Brygar?

Nothing was as dangerous as entering an unmonitored Tunnelpoint! He ground his teeth. *Ah, the joy of the quest.*

There was no telling what would greet him on the other side.

Drawing his light saber from his waistband, he carefully stepped into the Tunnel.

What greeted him was a swift, strong blow to the head. He was immediately knocked unconscious.

SEVENTEEN

Traed came awake to the annoying sight of Brygar.

"I will kill you, Familiar." He rasped, then groaned as his own voice set off waves of pain in his head. "As soon as I can stand, you are finished."

Since Traed had been threatening to kill him on a regular basis since they had set out, Brygar was not too concerned. Except. . . the Aviaran rather looked as though he *meant* it this time.

"You will need to stand in line, Charl warrior." Brygar nodded to the other beings surrounding him.

As he became fully alert, Traed realized that the Familiar was chained to a rough post in the ground. Six Oberion slavers stood guard over him.

Traed stood up slowly, unsteady on his feet. His head was pounding from the viscous blow. He assumed his ears were ringing as well - until he realized he was dragging his own chains with him.

His shirt, his lightsaber, and his cape were gone; presumably stolen along with the leather thong that tied back his hair. He was surprised they had left him his *tracas* and boots.

There were dampening fields around Tunnel points; he probably would not be able to use any of his power to get them back. *A perfect ending to this foolish journey!*

Several hanks of hair fell into his eyes, annoying him. It mirrored the situation on Mollock - only without the constant deluge and scintillating scenery.

He tried to toss the hair out of his face; his mind endeavoring to comprehend the absurdity of what had occurred. Mayhap if he told Brygar to leap into danger, the dolt would hesitate? *By the blood of Aiyah*, did he never think to look before he reacted?

{IT SEEMS WE HAVE WALKED INTO A TRAP, CHARL-WHO-IS-NO-CHARL!}

Traed actually grimaced in pain. Now, on top of everything else, the *bellow-breath* was in his head!

And he could not even send his thoughts without roaring! Traed's injured skull pounded unmercifully.

He grabbed the sides of his head in agony. "Cease this clamor at once!"

{It seems we have walked into a trap, Charl-who-is-no-Charl.}

The man was a dimwit.

"Again I hear 'we'." He deadpanned back to the Familiar.

One of the slavers gave Traed a curious look, wondering what he was talking about. "Who do you speak to?"

Traed looked at the slaver and slowly widened his eyes. As if the blow to his head had jiggled his brains. "Do you not see it?"

"Nagor Bati-s-s-s!" The slaver spit on the ground and quickly looked away. Like the desert nomads of Zarrain, Oberions were notoriously superstitious. Madness made them uneasy.

Considering this was Traed, one of the most staid, logical, rational warriors-knights on Aviara, the concept was rather humorous to Brygar. The Familiar roared with laughter.

His chains were immediately, painfully tightened by the guards.

His laughter quickly turned into a snarl.

"So, you are a Charl warrior. . ." One of the others spoke. He was completely enshrouded in clothing; Traed could not see his face clearly. "I thought as much and so took the necessary precautions to subdue you."

Traed glanced at Brygar; he had purposely given them the impression that he was a Charl warrior. The Familiar might have no sense of direction but- as Traed was beginning to learn - Brygar was crafty.

And more astute than he ever let on.

The leader scurried over to Traed. "I want no trouble with you, Charl. The guards begin to realize they have attacked a warrior-knight. *Bad reflux*. We do not seek that kind of fortune."

Traed went silent. Like all excellent warriors, he had the patience to listen first. Early on, Yaniff had trained him thus: ". . . *listen down to the the grains of sand, Traed, then sift the granules through your mind to see what stays behind*. . ."

So he waited and filtered. And learned more than he would have thought possible.

"We have paid a Spoltam beggar to come through the Tunnel to release you once we are gone." The Oberion grinned, showing a black maw of rotted teeth. "To show our good will to the Alliance."

Traed gave the leader a piercing look. "Mayhap, you should show your good will by releasing both of us now."

"I am afraid that is not possible. You see, we have plans for your robust, handsome friend. By the markings on his inner thigh, he is in his prime. He has a long life ahead of him. A long life of *service* to the Oberion empire."

Traed ignored the leader and turned to Brygar. "You allowed them to look at your inner thigh?"

Brygar shrugged. "It is obvious their males need something to aspire to."

The chains were yanked tighter. Brygar hissed. Like all Familiar, he hated the tether more than the pain.

He was soon to hate other things.

One of the guards grabbed Brygar by the hair, yanking his head back. He tried to force a thick fluid down the Familiar's throat. Brygar struggled in earnest now.

The huge Familiar almost succeeded in knocking over all six of the guards.

But the Oberion elixir need not be swallowed to be effective. A few droplets seeped into his skin. It was enough to weaken him.

Eventually they were able to wrestle him down and pour the rest of the drug down his throat.

The sight of it infuriated Traed, who had always detested injustice of any kind. He closed his eyes and tried to draw the power to him, but it was useless. The dampening fields were too strong.

Brygar tried to focus on Traed as his eyes clouded over from the drug. "Do not come looking for me, Charl!"

Traed paused and quirked his brow. "You still think to tell me what to do, Familiar?"

Brygar delivered a challenging grin. *{Ah, but I just did.}*

Mayhap Brygar really did have two sets of *kani*.

Traed smiled slightly as he realized that the drug they used was not the drug that had been given to Gian Ren. That one blocked a Familiar's special senses entirely.

Brygar was still able to send his thoughts. *And he was letting Traed know.*

What was more, considering the amount they had given him, the huge Familiar was not as drugged as he should have been.

Brygar would be no easy adversary for these slavers.

There would come a time when he would stubbornly fight. Probably to the death.

Traed called out to him. "Try not to get yourself killed until I have found you."

{I had no idea you cared, Charl-who-is-no-Charl.}

Traed shrugged, "It is a simple matter. If you are to be killed, then I reserve the pleasure."

Brygar let out a bark of laughter then became more serious than Traed had ever seen him.

His lavender and aqua eyes met Traed's squarely. Sincerely. *{Do not take too long, friend.}*

Traed nodded curtly. "You have my word on it."

Assured, Brygar grinned tauntingly up at his captors as he was dragged off. "What say you we play a game of *catch-and-kill* before the journey starts?"

The slaver on his right clubbed him on the head, knocking him out.

Traed grimaced. Best he find the brash Familiar quickly before the man irritated his captors into slaughtering him.

The Oberion leader spoke. "Consider him dead to all who knew him, Charl, for once we Oberions take him into our worlds, he will be lost forever. He will disappear. If you have a notion of liberating

him, you would do well to forget it. He is our *property* from this day forward. We do not relinquish what we own."

Traed was not concerned with the Oberion's advice. "Actually, I am trying to decide which will come first.. ."

" And what is that?"

"Finding him or finding *you*."

Traed had a great effect on the Oberion, for he shook with fear. "You would do better to remember that Charl are not openly welcomed in the Oberion Empire. We have no wish to upset such a renowned group, of course; yet, you must ask yourself what example a Charl might set, coming into our worlds, uninvited, to force his ways upon us."

"I will take my chances." Traed promised in a low murmur, close to the slaver's face.

The Oberion paled. "Th-there are those planets, non-Alliance members, who would not look kindly upon such actions. They may think twice about joining your Alliance. There could be repercussions. Sides could be chosen.... Who can say what would happen?"

Certainly not Traed. He stared mutely at the Oberion leader.

"And all over one loud-speaking Familiar. You may look upon this advice as a favor, knight. We Oberions look out for our friends the Charl by sparing them this potential, disastrous embarrassment."

In a flash, Traed became keenly focused on the Oberion's chatter, but not for the alarm it held.

It was Yanijfs forewarning that overlapped the Oberion's prattle. Just a wizard's words-Ever simple. Ever insightful. "Go after him now," his old master had said. "Before he causes a galaxian war. . ."

EIGHTEEN

As promised, a Spoltami beggar arrived to release Traed shortly after the slavers left, dragging an unconscious Brygar with them.

Traed made his way back to Aviara, his mind heavy with the events that had transpired.

It was no surprise that Soosha had not returned with him.

By his silence, Yaniff had hinted such might be the case.

Traed was becoming an expert on understanding Yaniff. The true reason he had been sent on this journey was very clear as well. It had never been for Soosha.

It had always been for Brygar.

"Go after him now," his old master had said. "Before he causes a galaxian war. . . "

Yaniff had covertly charged him as Chin t'se leau to the huge Familiar. By Aviaran law, Traed was now bound to be the Familiar's watchman.

Once again, the old Sage had ensnared him in his magician's game and he was caught by his honor.

The wizard had delivered him by his own promise!

He was honor bound now to find and rescue Brygar, the Familiar. From what Yaniff hinted, there was much at stake.

But where did he start?

Before the Oberions left, Traed overheard the leader instruct one of his group, '*. . . Sell this one to Muklak Kargigion's tribe. That Oberion will know how to handle him. Kargigion will break him just enough to get top price for him.*'

But Traed knew that Brygar was not a man to be easily broken. Not that Familiar. He would never give in.

And so, the leader of the Fifth Clan of Familiar undoubtedly would be put to the lash and worse.

Still, there was one thing the Oberion slaver did not count on when he had left Traed, still shackled, to await the Spoltam beggar. While he might have been bound physically; he could still roam.

The Sight was not always dampened by the fields around Tunnels.

In this instance, he had been able to "see" the group up until the time they entered the next Tunnel point.

So Traed had a starting point for his search and woe to Muklak Kargigion when he found him!

But first, he need return to Aviara to apprise the House of Sages of the situation. He would confront Yaniff; after which, he would go for Brygar.

For that was the way the tale was to be written.

By Aiyah.

Yaniff set a warm cup of mir on the table in front of Traed.

"It is a pitiful thing, a Familiar with no sense of direction." He sat across from the tall Aviaran.

"You might have mentioned that to me *before* I left on your venture." Traed lifted the cup to his lips and sipped the fragrant brew.

Yaniff's eyes, darker than the darkest night, twinkled with mirth. "And be accused of boring you?"

Traed gave the mystic his customary stony response.

Yet Yaniff's words rang in his head. It was a sad fact that people were often praised and condemned for their differences.

Often the *same* differences at that.

After due contemplation, he arched his brow. *Can truth, itself, be an unfolding paradox?*

"You are an intriguing student, Traed."

"I am not your student."

"Ah." Yaniff glanced up to the rafters at Bojo's sudden squawk. "Yes, you are right; that is for another day." He poured them both a second cup of *mir*. "I take it Brygar has followed his usual path and now finds himself in danger?"

Traed nodded. "Grave danger."

The old sage clucked his tongue. "Truly a predicament." He sipped his drink and waited for Traed to speak.

"You expect me to find him, do you not?"

Yaniff shrugged. "Whatever you wish, *student-who-is-no-student*."

Traed's jaw ticked. "Do not play your games with me. The man has been captured by slavers! He will suffer greatly. You would never leave such an abomination *alone*."

Yaniff took another slow sip of his drink. "It has naught to do with me. I do not owe the man anything. . ." He glanced slyly up at Traed. "*Do you?*"

Yes, he did.

He had promised Brygar he would rescue him. He was the Familiar's sworn protector!

As well Yaniff knew.

What was more, with this oath, he had taken on the mien of a Charl knight. Throughout time, Charl and Familiar shared a special bond. Wizards protected their Familiars and Familiars were their

instruments.

But the bond went deeper.

The tie between them was mystical in nature, for both were enjoined by the power wielded so expertly by the Charl knights.

Yaniff stared at Traed knowingly.

Traed placed his palms flat on the table and leaned forward. "Do not gaze upon me like that."

"Like what?" Yaniff set his drink down and picked up an ancient book of spells that was lying on the table. He began to peruse the Grimmoire, absentmindedly.

"Will you answer my next question?"

"Yes."

"Could you have prevented this?"

The lines on Yaniff's face deepened. "No."

Traed's chair scrapped the wooden floor as he rose. "Why do I let this happen?"

There is nothing quite like the chafing sting of an old wizard's chuckle.

Traed's nostrils flared with annoyance. "Tell the Guild I go not for them. I go because I am bound by my oath."

"We both know it is because you have no heart, Traed."

The solemn Aviaran's cheekbones darkened to bronze. "Enough! Leave me be, wizard!" He stormed out of the cottage, slamming the door behind him.

Yaniff lifted his arm and Bojo flew from the rafters to perch on his shoulder. The old wizard softly stroked the downy feathers of his beloved winged companion.

"Never, Traed," he whispered aloud as Bojo cooed in ecstasy. *"Never."*

NINETEEN

Daxan led Soosha to one of their favorite spots on top of the cliff behind their home.

When they reached the summit, he rested against the rock wall, drawing her back against him.

Much as they had done from the first.

His strong arms encircled her waist as both watched the play of moonlight flickering across the Spoltam sea.

This was their favorite time of day. Night.

They could be themselves on this cliff, away from the watchful eyes of Aghni natives. Daxan's chin nudged along Soosha's shoulder in a tender caress.

With every moment that passed, with each word he spoke, with every kiss, every touch- Soosha loved him more and more.

Oh, how she loved him!

He was like the glittering sea before them. Exotically beautiful on the surface, intricate and fathomless beneath.

With each encounter, Daxan revealed more of himself to her. Although he had never done so in the past, he was not afraid to share himself fully. Deeply.

He gave her everything.

She responded with no less.

Soosha thought back to the day when she had made her choice to defy a king and seek adventure.

She had found her adventure.

The days on Spoltam were not easy. She had to remain confined within the walls of the estate, most often covered. Even though Daxan trusted his servants, Soosha had to remember to always cast her eyes down when speaking to them.

Still, she would make the same choice today. Daxan was helping their people to survive and she was there equally by his side.

To be truthful, it was not all bad.

There were the wondrous sunsets of Spoltam; as well a constant supply of *Nightfall* to enjoy.

There were evenings like this one, where the beauty of the sky, the stars, and the sea forever etched into her senses; like the warm, arms holding safe.

Holding her with love.

And there was Daxan; her one, true match.

Yes, she had made the best choice.

Because when she was with him, everything was right.

TWENTY

Yaniff made his way through the woods to the House of Sages.

It was a pleasant journey.

A slight breeze was in the air, the sun was shining, and the joyful songs of sylvan creatures filled the forest.

With each jaunty step, he swung a distinctive token back and forth.

Arriving at the House of Sages, he sought out one of its members. He found his mark dozing by a fountain in the inner court.

Gently, he shook the old man awake.

"Urrrrmm?" The wizard Ernak rubbed his eyelids. "Is it time for the evening meal, then?"

Yaniff smiled softly. "Not yet, old friend. I woke you because I have a gift for you."

The kindly mystic's eyes popped wide with delight; he was clearly charmed by the surprise. *"For me?"*

Another wizard might have been more inquisitive about such a gift. Ernak was not a complex thinker; and, thus, had never mastered the art of exquisite wizardry.

He had, however, mastered the art of happiness.

No small feat, Yaniff acknowledged to himself. On some days, Ernak was truly an inspiration. *Is it his simplicity that allows him to find happiness? Or is he just a simple man?*

No matter.

Rare was the wizard, indeed, who had peace of mind and a light heart.

Ernak examined his gift, gasping with joy. "A *Zot* basket! Why, I have always wanted one of these! They are very difficult to come by, you know; *Zots* hate to part with them. To what do I owe this wondrous pleasure, Yaniff?"

Yaniff clapped him on the back. "There are often days that trouble me, Ernak; yet, when I look at

you, so at peace, it gives me hope that the perspective of the world can always change. It simply depends on the view. Thus, I wanted to thank you for being you, my friend. Just for being you."

Ernak gave him an endearing, bashful smile, clearly stunned by this unwarranted praise from the most revered mystic on Aviara. "I do not know what to say. . . "

""Pfft!" Yaniff waved his gratitude away. "The wise man knows when to be silent."

Ernak chuckled. "I confess I am often at a lack for words so I must be very wise indeed."

Yaniff glanced covertly around the courtyard, then lowered his tone to a conspiratorial whisper. "I will share a secret with you, Ernak."

"What is it?" Ernak whispered back, leaning in towards

Yaniff with eyes expectantly wide.

"Sometimes it is better to remain silent than to say anything at all. You would be surprised how many are willing to interpret silence as weighty thinking."

"Really?"

"Yes, so you see there is no need to thank me. I will simply interpret your loss of words as the ponderous silence of gratitude befitting a wise Sage!" Yaniff grinned slyly at him.

Ernak stroked his chin. "I never thought of silence in such a way before. .."

"Fascinating, is it not?"

"Hmmm... yes. Yes, it is..."

"Perhaps when next the High Guild sits in chamber, you will see for yourself its remarkable power?"

Ernak took to the suggestion at once. He nodded enthusiastically. "Mayhap I will!"

Yaniff clapped him on the back as they left the courtyard together.

And so, when next the House of Sages convened, a mysterious stalemate occurred. . .

With six Sages against and six Sages approving, the deciding vote remained steadfastly silent.

Throughout the meeting, it was remarked that the gentle wizard Ernak was strangely aloof.

Affecting the pose of the deep thinker, his eyes stared fixedly at the far stone wall. It was as if he contemplated the very grains of mortar that held, not simply the wall, but the entire universe in place¹.

He would not speak.

Frustrating both sides.

Half of the wizards argued that the fate of the universe was at stake by not voting! The other half maintained that the continuum had nothing what-so-ever to do with the vote!

Regardless, the vote had to be postponed, so no action was taken. Thirteen ballots must be cast for a decision to be valid. It was Aviaran law.

Ernak's unprecedented silence baffled his peers.

All, that is, save one.

If a few Sages questioned the satisfied sparkle in that wizard's eye, none dared voice it. Moreover, if the subject of the proposed ruling just happened to be a student of that mystic. It might be coincidence.

Wizards were a very pragmatic lot. Especially old wizards.

And while there had been no decision; the day had not been completely wasted.

No, never wasted.

For there is always contemplation of the evening meal to soften the pitiless rigors of a mystic's life.

And to those who wonder if wizards waste time pondering such trivialities—

They pass along this assurance: "Assortment is, after all, our business."

Epilogue

The Silver Forest, Planet Ganakari

Deep in the Sylvan Woods, where trees are dense and leaves form a thick sheltering blanket, stands a simple cottage.

Inside the hut, a rickety bed has been moved as close to the flames of a midday fire as safety will allow. On that bed lies a huddled, nameless mass of *something* barely alive.

The day is not a cold one, yet even under the piles of ragged blankets that have been heaped upon the bed, what lies beneath shivers uncontrollably.

So far, nothing has risen from the ashes of the flames; whatever lies here sinks further into the cold desolation of its own destruction.

Outside, an old woman slowly gathers sticks of firewood from the forest floor. She pauses a moment to lean against a tree.

This woman has a great gift of healing; however, this task might be beyond her talents. Each day that passes, wounds stitch, but darkness grows.

Although no sound comes from inside the hut, she knows that her strange guest is suffering untold torment. Since the day she found him - more dead than alive - he has vocalized only once.

She will never forget that sound; an anguish that will mark her for the rest of her days. The wrenching cry of utter agony that tore from the depths of his soul was the audible stain of torment.

He had been tossed onto a refuse pile behind Lord Karpon's keep with the other used goods and garbage. The guards had left him for dead for good reason. They had been long in finishing him.

He should be dead.

She had never seen a man live with such injuries!

His will to survive was strong. He must be young, just entering his prime...

Mores the pity.

After the one outburst, he remained silent. *Silent as the forest before the storm hits.*

Better he screamed out his pain.

Many a day she rode by Karpon's keep - especially when the storerooms were cleaned out. *Useful things could often be found; if one were willing to risk looking for them.* On that particular day she had found a man who was barely alive; a man who had been tossed out like castle refuse.

She wonders how useful he will ultimately prove to be.

On her last trip to the keep - while her guest remained in the hut, shuddering on the bed - she had inadvertently come across some of the palace guards. Karpon's men were cruel and she always tried to avoid them.

As expected, they taunted her, throwing mud just for their sport; laughing as she tried to quickly turn her cart around.

The *safir* beast who pulled the cart pivoted smartly away at her command but the guards still attempted to knock her from her seat. Thankfully, they only used clumps of mud. In the past, they had thrown stones.

As she fled, she noted that both guards were sporting long streamers of what looked to be *hair*. The strands had been knotted to their waistbands.

The locks were not ordinary hair.

The skeins were like nothing she had ever seen before. Silky, long, luxurious. ..

The color was most unusual, as well.

Her guest had come to her nearly scalped; his head bleeding and raw. In the weeks since he had been in the hut, small tufts of hair had started to grow back. The color was so uniquely beautiful that, even now, with its cropped length, it took her breath away.

There could be no other match for *that* hair.

It was the very same strands that the burly guards wore fastened to their waists as a perverted prize. A token of degradation.

They had taken unnatural delight in his destruction!

She swallows down the bile that rises in her throat as the recent memory surfaces. *It must be Familiar hair!* Nothing is said to be as beautiful. *Could he possibly be... ?*

Familiars had dual colored eyes. On a few occasions, her guest had tried to open his, but one remained scarred shut.

He probably will never be able to open it.

She wonders if he will ever speak again. *If he can bring himself to speak again.*

Each day she asks him his name; yet each day he remains silent.

The odd thing is that in spite of all of his scars and all his wounds, there are still hints of exceptional *comeliness* to him. It is in the elegant shape of his hands. His impressive height. His overall stature. The glimpses of hair regrowth.

The lush shape of his lips.

In time, most of his physical injuries will heal. But will *he* heal?

The wounds that are visible - horrible though they are -are not as horrible as the wounds the man received to his soul.

She sighs and wipes the sweat from her brow. Would her forest be enough to heal him? She clutches her healing herbs in a tight grip. The pain of such destruction never lessens!

She knows that first hand.

A tear slips down her weathered cheek.

It pains to see such natural beauty - rare enough on *all* worlds - so blithely destroyed.

On a certain level, this old woman can well appreciate *the concept* of Familiar beauty. It depicts a connection to nature's promise that life, ultimately, is a holy, perfect thing. The natural beauty of the Familiar race is intrinsically a gift of the wild.

But like a light-blade, it comes with two edges.

It reminds some of everything they hope life will encompass: the grace, the splendor, the sensual. Yet, to others, it is a blatant declaration of all they will never have.

Throughout the planets, Familiars were sought after for as many reasons as there were stars in the sky.

And all of these myriad reasons mattered not to these shapeshifters. Steadfastly, they followed paths they alone chose; reminding all - by their very way of life - that true resplendence lies not in their appearance, but in the freedom of their souls.

It is a difficult route for any race to maintain in these troubled times, the old woman acknowledges. She prays she can heal this wounded man for only then will he be free in life to make his own choices.

But. . . how do you heal a man from wounds you can not see?

The loss of the Familiar known as Dariq is greatly mourned on the planet M'yan.

He was a well-loved member of the Mist. A youth on his first adventure. He had held much promise.

But there are many victims these days. Victims of slavers and of Karpon.

The King ordered all Familiar home. The King believes Dariq dead.

No Charl has sensed him. No one will be sent to look for him.

There will be no incarnations for this Familiar. No love. No mate.

Still in his youth, he had not had time to make his true mark upon his people.

Sadly, in time, his name and his existence will fade away much like ink on an ancient page. His memory will be lost inside the complex framework of the life-death struggle all Familiar face.

Nevertheless, the day would come when Dariq's people would surely know his name again.

And the wrath that will come with it.

XX'VX'V'X'X'XX'N'V'VXX'VX'XXX'V'X'V

SPECIAL FEATURES

DELETED SCENES

Soosha's palms slid down her gown.

"My thanks to you for lending me this beautiful gown. It is very rich to the touch." She grinned at him like a cat that has found a particularly comfortable and pleasing coverlet to claim.

The reaction charmed him. "It is yours to keep."

Soosha gasped. "No, I could not!" She bit her lip then peeked up at him. "Could I?"

She was very engaging.

"Yes, you can." Daxan grinned at her, showcasing two dimples.

Of course she wanted the gown. And of course she would end up having it- all the while entrancing him as she got her way.

"Well, if I *must*." Her laugh was the kind that made one want to laugh with her.

Her laughter almost made him *beg* to know her.

He was wearing a sleeveless white tunic that was belted snugly at his waist.

His feet were bare.

Most Spoltami men dressed in such a way. It seemed most comfortable. For some reason it reminded Soosha of lazy days spent stretching contentedly in the sun.

His golden skin made the contrast *purr-able*.

Daxan Sahain had a quality she had seen in but a few men. She always called it "the warm, stroking touch". When she looked at a man like him, she wanted to go into his arms and feel them come about her. A sultry warmth that would comfort and arouse always went with such a touch.

It was unfortunate for this Spoltam man that female Familiars loved to tease- because Soosha saw no reason to change her behavior.

In fact there might be the thrill of danger in teasing.

Reason enough for her.

When a male challenged her, Soosha considered it an invitation to go ahead and 'try it'. Familiar's often made turnabout decisions; especially at times when others would never act in such a manner. Generally speaking, Familiar behavior was impossible to predict.

In addition to this, they were highly skilled at interpreting their opponents.

It surprised Soosha that this Spoltam male's reactions were so difficult to decipher. He was a worthy match.

Daxan walked out on the balcony.

Leaning on the railing, he scrutinized at the city below. For an instant, Soosha sensed that he viewed the city like a man wanting out. His eyelids were half-closed and there was a dissatisfied look on his face.

As if he were forced to wait upon a particularly slow-moving prey.

Why would he feel that way about his own people?

Mayhap he did not approve of the Spoltam ways as much as he wanted her to believe?

"All of Aghni is at your feet, my lady Familiar." His tone was droll. "You should come outside and get a better view of it."

"Are you not concerned your neighbors will see a strange woman in your home?"

He gave her a slanted look. The edges of his lips curled. "That would not be such an unusual occurrence," he assured her.

Soosha arched her brows. At least he was honest. "I see." She joined him on the balcony, standing beside him at the railing.

Familiar males generally loved to bite, although, a few preferred licking.

Some favored both.

In the throes of passion, her mate was partial to sliding his chin against her cheek in a nudge-caress. And he was definitely a biter.

Mastering of the Familiar love bite was considered an art form.

There were countless techniques and styles; all designed for one purpose- to bring forth the highest peaks of pleasure. The ancient skill had few "regal masters".

There were rumors that her brother, Brygar, was one of those elite masters, endowed with a legendary skill for the sensual bite. At least, that is what she had once overheard from a group of gossiping females attending the same festival as her.

But women had always said strange things about her brother. One had even claimed that he became as addictive as spun honey.

Her brother?

If these women saw his impossible, stubborn male/cat ways, they would think differently!

Yaniff had the Sight.

There were those in the chamber who wondered what level of Sight he had actually attained.