

CAPTIVE MOON

Chapter 1

The sweet stench of rotting flesh on the breeze assaulted Antoine's nose, even before the buzzing of flies reached his ears.

"We are nearly at the site, Herr Monier. We are fortunate that it was cold last night. The carcasses have apparently been here for several days. The smell isn't nearly as bad as it could be."

Antoine stepped over a log hidden under the melting slush, and stopped just short of a clearing. He could see uniformed officers and even a few members of... the *harbor patrol*? — taking photographs and measurements under the towering beech trees outside of Stuttgart, Germany. The sun was about to crest the top of the nearest peak, but the shadow of the full moon still lingered on the opposite horizon. The gentle, sultry pull reached for the animal under his skin. His senses were still intensified by the invisible magic that played over his body. Any other time, the forest scents would be too intense to remain near prey long. But the death smell of fellow predators that permeated the valley stilled his natural urges.

The uniformed officer behind, the weighty tang of his blood sausage and porridge breakfast still hovering on his breath, couldn't smell the log under the snow as Antoine had. He tripped and dropped hands-first against a tree.

Antoine stopped, his nose sorting out the history of what had happened here. He caught Simon's scent and knew he was dead. The two year old tiger had been one of Antoine's favorites. A stab of pain and sadness rushed through him. *And I failed him. What sort of Rex can't protect one of his own cats?*

Kommissar Reiner turned and raised one bushy brow, which disappeared under the brim of his cap. "Herr Monier? Are you well? We do not have to continue if you do not wish." The man's English was heavily accented, but far better than his French.

Antoine squared his shoulders and tucked a few loose strands of long blond hair behind one ear. *If Simon could endure his fate, then I can stand witness.* "I'm fine, Kommissar. Please show me the animals."

He entered the clearing and could only stare in shock and rage at the carnage. Big cats of every description lay in bloody, decaying heaps around the edges of a make-shift slaughterhouse. Bits of flesh, black with slow-moving flies, were splattered haphazardly over the ground.

Officers wearing masks and gloves photographed the area. Crows watched down from the branches overhead. Their raucous caws, combined with the constant buzzing, set Antoine's nerves on a knife edge. Thankfully, the scent of fear and pain from the animals' final moments had dissipated. He wasn't sure how he would have responded to that.

"We believe the poachers were trafficking in tiger organs for the Far East black market. But we are not sure about the other great cats. Perhaps they could not find enough tigers to meet the demand."

Perhaps. But there's more here than meets the eye. A Sazi was here. I can definitely smell an injured female were-tiger. While Antoine's nose wasn't nearly as sensitive as his twin's, the

female shapeshifter who had been in this clearing had left her mark. *Sandalwood and tiger musk, with a hint of patchouli.* A quick sniff. *No, she's not among the dead. She was taken from here, very much alive.*

He'd identified as much as he could with his nose. Now his eyes quickly began to take in details. Fiona and the rest of the council would want to know everything he saw, heard and smelled. If necessary, one of the Sazi seers could touch his mind and describe it at the meeting.

"Were you able to apprehend any of the poachers, Kommissar? How did you come to find this place?"

One of the police officers, looking a bit green around the gills, approached Reiner as they carefully skirted the bloody makeshift tables. He removed red-stained latex gloves before saluting. He waited silently for permission to speak.

The Kommissar was going to ignore Hermann in favor of Herr Monier—their annoying, high-profile visitor, but one look at the officer's face dissuaded him. He made a small motion of his hand. "One moment, Herr Monier." Antoine's nodded politely and wandered a short distance away.

Was ist los, Hermann? Reiner lowered his voice and turned his back on the visitor, but he couldn't know that it didn't matter. Antoine's supernatural senses would have been able to hear a conversation back inside the squad car.

Ich habe gerade Nachricht erhalten von Dietrich and Shapland, Kommissar. Sie sind ein wenig nervös wegen des Tigers auf dem Revier. Sie haben Zweifel, ob der Kaefig haelt. Sollen sie das Tier betaeuben?

Antoine stiffened while struggling to appear not to understand:

"I have just received a report from Dietrich and Shapland, Inspector. They are nervous about the tiger at the station. They are worried that the cage will not hold it. Should they tranquilize the animal?"

It was so much easier to eavesdrop when the police believed he didn't speak German. Playing the part of the haughty Frenchman had been a useful idea. But the Inspector's words dropped with the weight of lead. *They had a tiger at the station? Could it be the female Sazi? If they tranquilize her and the moon sets... Merde!*

Das waere ratsam! Wir müssen den Antrag stellen, um das Tier zu entsorgen. Bitte bring meine Nachricht zu Dietrich. Er hat die Lizenz für die Tranquelizer!

Again, Antoine wandered around the far edge of the scene, being careful to take in every word with his supernatural hearing. "Yes, that would be wise. We'll have to file the proper paperwork to dispose of the animal. Please relay my instruction to Dietrich. He is qualified with the tranquilizers."

Putain! What to do now? This could easily become a diplomatic incident. He began to tap his fingers on the front of his designer slacks. Who should he call? He wasn't qualified to handle this. But he knew of no were-tigers to contact in Germany, or any other species of were-cats, for that matter. *No, I need proof that the cat is Sazi—*

The Kommissar's voice, louder now, startled him. "Herr Monier, I am sorry for the interruption. What was your question?"

It was hardly a plan — reckless and bold. The council would never approve. Antoine took a deep breath and spoke quickly so he wouldn't lose his nerve. "I was asking about the cats. These all appear to be male. There are no female cats here. Where have you put *those* bodies?"

The Kommissar frowned, taken aback. His eyebrows knitted into a single formidable line across his forehead. “Female? But no – you distinctly said you lost a *male* cat. It is in my report.”

Antoine rose to his full six feet plus height and crossed his arms over his chest. He pushed the tiniest bit of his magic toward the other man. A shudder passed over the Kommissar. It was a risk, and it could go badly. Humans seldom reacted well to powerful Sazi, and those in authority sometimes treated them as threat. He would hate to wind up behind bars himself. “Non! I most certainly did *not* say it was a male. My lost tiger is *female* – mother to a pair of cubs who will die without her. Why on earth else would I get up at such an ungodly hour to follow you through a forest to see . . . this?” He swept his arm out wide, and set his face in tight, angry lines.

Without a word, the inspector stepped over to one of the men and grabbed a clipboard. He stalked back to his former position and turned the clipboard so that Antoine could see it. The powerful scent of his anger filled the air. *It does smell a bit like burning coffee. How very strange I’ve never noticed before.* He fought not to sneeze.

“You see, Herr Monier? It distinctly says *male* in my repor— ”

Antoine waved his hand airily in the general direction of the clipboard without bothering to look. He knew full well what it said, but that didn’t matter. “Your report doesn’t interest me, Kommissar Reiner. Whoever took the details was mistaken. I am missing a *female*. Do you have a female tiger for me to view or not?”

Reiner looked at his report again and frowned deeply. *The report says male. But I am to “cooperate.” “It’s a diplomatic courtesy,” they told me. He says a female was lost. There is a female, but she has been especially difficult to handle.* A oddly amusing thought crept into Kommissar Reiner’s mind. *There would be less paperwork to fill out if the Frenchman took the cat. Wilhelma Zoo has not yet opened — Perhaps the tiger and our guest deserve each other.*

“Very well, Herr Monier, if you would like to see a female tiger, we were able to rescue one. It is at our station house, awaiting transport to Wilhelma Zoo. If you can *identify* this cat as yours, you are free to take it.”

Antoine frowned. “*Identify* it? What would you consider identification? I certainly don’t brand or tattoo my cats.”

Reiner shrugged. “You said it was nursing. That should be obvious, at the very least. But any particular feature you remember — a missing claw, or damaged ear. A distinguishing feature that *we* can verify before *you* see the cat.”

The words were very clear and seemingly innocent. But Antoine understood the inspector perfectly. Now he would just have to decide how to make good on his puffery. How in the world would he be able to positively identify a cat he’d never seen? *Well, Fiona always said I was the creative one in the family . . .*

Antoine turned on his heel and started back to his van, shaking the snow from his designer slacks after each step. Over his shoulder he shouted, “As you wish, Kommissar. I will meet you there and we will collect *my* cat.”

Tahira woke to heat burning her skin. She tried to lift her front leg, but the drug still

coursing through her made it difficult. Again she pushed against the door of the wire cage. It was weakening; bending outward, but she struggled against unconsciousness with each attempt. At least she'd been able to remove the dart quickly and had only pretended to be unconscious until the men left. But she'd never tried to hold her form beyond dawn, and it was already long past. Sunlight was slowly crawling up the wall, throwing shadows of herself, and her prison, across the floor.

I can't pass out. I must hold my animal form or they'll kill me. Well, they or her family. It hardly mattered which. She drew in a painful breath, snarled lightly, and searched ever more desperately for the weakening moon magic. Every muscle screamed in agony and she could feel her bones straining to break and reform to human. The heat was unbearable and she looked longingly at the bowl of water just a few feet away. *But I don't dare move. If I concentrate on anything but holding this form, I'll lose control. I've risked us all with my recklessness. Rabi wouldn't have wanted this, no matter what his fate.*

She scanned the room again for the hundredth time since she'd been brought here. There must be *something* she could use to free herself. If only the cage wasn't wire mesh. With bars, she could turn human and slide between them to free herself. If she was at full strength, she could easily break open the door, but the drugs from the policemen, combined with whatever her *original* captors had given her made that impossible. She could barely open her mouth enough to pant to cool herself.

Why had she planned this so stealthily that *nobody* knew where she was? If she had just told Grandmother, or Uncle Umar, they would have supported her. It was only stubbornness that had caused Grandfather to refuse to send a rescue party for Rabi in the first place. Apparently, she had inherited that stubbornness.

She readjusted her paw and winced. The light tingling under her fur was turning into prickling — stinging pinpoints as though thousands of tiny ants were crawling and biting every inch of her body. The heat was increasing too. The constant whir of the exhaust fan buzzed in her ear. An abrupt crunching, grating sound sounded directly overhead. She jumped when two sharp metallic slams echoed through the room. She recognized the noises. She must be in a basement and the parking lot was directly above her. Voices now, in that harsh language that she didn't recognize. She wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. What was she going to do?

<Hallo, Tiger. Was ist lhr Name?>

Tahira looked up and around. Nobody was in the room. She glanced at the barred window, but the sunshine was blinding to her sensitive eyes. The language was the same as she was hearing outside the door, but she didn't understand where it was coming from. Was there a microphone in the room?

<Parlez-vous le français, le Tigre de Madame ?>

Was that French? Tahira shook her massive head. If she was starting to talk to herself in delirium, shouldn't she at least be able to understand the language? She growled again, and a startled yipe followed when her jaw snapped. It was starting. She couldn't hold it off anymore. She was going to change right here in front of witnesses and her family would be hunted like rabbits and slaughtered.

*<Do you speak **English**, tiger? We're running out of time!>*

For heaven's sake! The voice *was* in her head! There was a distinct American accent to

his words and relief flowed through her. She tried to think of what to say. Well, not quite *say*. She thought the words in her mind. <Uhm, yes — I speak English. Where are you? **Who** are you?>

<Merde! At last! My name is Antoine and I'm in the outer room. Listen to me carefully. You are Sazi, correct?>

Her head raised in unconscious reaction and she roared loud and long. <I am NOT Sazi! I am Tahira of Hayalet Kabile!>

The guards in the outer room with Antoine jumped with the tiger's roar.. *Hayalet Kabile*. Where had he heard that phrase before? *Hayal . . . Oh for the love of—* How could he forget? It was just mentioned at the last council meeting. The Hayalet Kabile were known as the "Ghost Tribe." The were-tigers that lived along the Turkish/Iranian borderlands had declined to attend the great meeting of shapeshifters all those centuries ago. They were mentioned at the Sazi council meeting because Ahmad had brought along a clipping from the Discovery Channel website that said there had been a sighting of a supposedly "extinct" species of tiger, the Caspian, just last fall. The annoying were-cobra, representative for the snakes, had asked what *Antoine* intended to do about it, since the Caspians were well known to be shifters, and he was the representative for the cats.

But the Hayalet Sahip, or head of the tribe, had refused an invitation to talk. Now there was one in the next room. Based on the roar of pain, she wouldn't be able to hold her form much longer. She was about to break the primary rule of both the Sazi and the Hayalet cultures. What a diplomatic nightmare!

"Merde!" he whispered harshly.

"Did you say something, Herr Monier?" Kommissar Reiner said, his mouth curled slightly in disdain. "Are you ready to make your identification of *your* cat?"

Antoine drummed his fingers on the table sharply. If he could only talk to the tiger — make her understand what was at stake... *Yes, perhaps*. He turned fast and reached for the doorknob, startling the inspector. "One moment, Kommissar. I've forgotten... my... uh, I'll be right back!"

He raced outside and pressed outward quickly with his waning magic. The tiger was directly under him.

<Tahira, please listen to me. We don't have much time.>

No response. But he could smell her fear, just behind the bars of the window.

<Tahira of the Hayalet Kabile. I am Antoine Monier of the Sazi. Will you please speak to me? You are in great danger.>

Another roar, powerful and haughty. <You need not worry about me, Sazi. I will end my own life before the humans see me in my day form.>

<This doesn't have to happen, Tahira. I can help you. I've convinced the police that you're one of **my** tigers. But I need your cooperation..>

A snort of derision, but hope was replacing the fear. <And who are you that you believe you can **own** a tiger?>

Antoine walked out toward the van. A pair of pigeons pecking at gravel exploded into the

air just as he reached the door. He managed to stop himself from unconsciously leaping into the air after them. *<It's a complicated story, Tahira. But I and my cats entertain in shows all over the world. One of my tigers, Simon, was killed in the woods where you were held. But I have another Bengal named Babette. She just had kittens. I've convinced them that you are Babette.>*

Her voice sounded suspicious but intrigued. *<But even a human can tell the difference between a nursing and non-nursing tiger. Uhm . . . can't they?>*

Antoine opened the van door and reached inside to grab a clipboard. He flipped his long braid back before swinging the door closed. He smiled and paced quickly along the edge of the carefully cleared walkway, expanding on his daring plan. *<I don't know many humans who are willing to get close enough to check. But I'm an alpha, and have excellent illusion abilities. It would help if you have any other identifying marks — perhaps ones that the officers have already seen? I promise that once the police have released you and are no longer watching, I will get you back to your Kabile — your tribe.>*

Her soft alto was sad. *<I will be dead to them. I'm already an outsider. I disappeared without permission, trying to save my brother. But I didn't find him, and now I have bargained with a Sazi. I will be exiled . . . or killed.>*

I have bargained with a Sazi! She planned to cooperate. Thank heavens. A crunch of gravel behind him said another vehicle was arriving. He turned to see the occupants. Several of the members of the team from the forest were returning and he was out of time. <So you will allow me to assist you? The moon magic is nearly gone, but my power can hold you in form — if you'll allow me to. But I need something to identify you.>

<I . . . you can hold someone past the dawn? But only sahibs hold that much power! Still . . . if you believe you can—I am missing part of my left ear.>

Curious. What could have damaged a Saz—a shapeshifter enough... A touch on Antoine's shoulder made him jump. Annoying that he hadn't heard or smelled the inspector walk up behind him. Distractions could be costly at this stage. "Herr Monier? Are you quite ready? The zoo is now open and if the cat is not yours, we must make a call to them."

"Yes, of course, inspector. Sorry for the delay." As he followed the inspector through the door, he threw a burst of magic ahead of him. He felt it penetrate the steel door in front of him and cover the tiger in the cage. The illusion was subtle, but he had to cast it broadly. Even Tahira would be able to see it when the time came. But he felt her shifting stop.

"Are you ready to identify *your* tiger, Herr Monier?"

"Of course." He thrust the clipboard toward the inspector with feigned annoyance. "These are the customs forms for my animals. I thought you would want to see that I do indeed have a female Bengal with kittens."

Kommissar Reiner was surprised, but pleased that the Frenchman was being cooperative. He glanced through the bill of lading and confirmed that the entertainer had several different species of cats, in both genders. And yes — there was a female Bengal, but— "There are no identifying features mentioned on this form."

Antoine forced his voice into a slightly condescending tone. "No, there are not, Kommissar Reiner. As you can see, there is nowhere on the form to insert them. It might be something to consider mentioning to the appropriate department. But, Babette— my female— is missing a piece of her left ear. And, as I said, she recently gave birth and is nursing."

He stared blankly at a print of a famous painting on the wall as the Kommissar questioned his men. No, they didn't notice whether the cat was nursing. That would require far too intimate of contact. Even the dart didn't put the cat completely under. Yes, there was part of the left ear missing. It was in the report. Antoine suppressed a smile as the inspector reviewed the form.

The Kommissar smelled disappointed to find the written note about the defective ear on the paper, but he dutifully cleared his throat and removed a large ring of keys from his pocket. "It appears we *are* in possession of your tiger, Herr Monier. But I would like to see for myself that the cat is nursing. Tigers often fight in the wild and in captivity, so a damaged ear is not terribly—"

"Uncommon?" asked Antoine, with a sly smile. *He really doesn't want to let me win. But I already have. Thank God.* He concentrated on Babette and the cubs, let the memory of watching her nurse fill him until it was fixed in his mind. He felt for Tahira in the next room and let his magic bleed outward, blur the image of her belly until it matched the one in his mind. He shivered as the magic tied them together. He could almost see her in his mind now.

Reiner raised his brows. "Indeed." He swung open the steel door on oiled hinges and held it open so that Antoine could enter first. The negative pressure fan that kept the parking lot exhaust from filling the room assaulted Antoine's ears and he wondered how Tahira had managed to stay sane.

He stepped inside and got his first look at the woman, the tiger, he was helping. Her wide golden eyes looked startled as she inspected her chest and stomach. A burst of surprised scent quickly disappeared into the fan's flow. Antoine followed the stare and he swore under his breath. He'd said it himself! She was a *Caspian* tiger, and that particular subspecies has a mane similar to a lion's with *long belly fur*.

Before the Kommissar could get past him to see, Antoine concentrated carefully and blended the memory with the reality, like melting photographs into a single image.

He could see her surprise as her body betrayed her eyes. It was only when she ran her own nose over her fur that the illusion was dispelled. She froze when he spoke into her mind again.

<You will need to greet me as though we are friends, and—> His next words sounded quite embarrassed. *<Well . . . I will also — and I do apologize . . . but I will have to touch your stomach to prove to the inspector that you are nursing.>*

Tahira started at the statement and immediately looked up. She felt her heartbeat race when she finally saw her benefactor. He was incredibly handsome, slender and fit. His blond hair was slicked back from his face, and the confident green-gold eyes grabbed her attention. He was so very young looking! Could he really be a sahip at such an age?

Then she looked more carefully. No, perhaps not so young. His heart-shaped jaw did bear a small golden beard, just covering his chin, and small wrinkles at the corners of his eyes made him at least in his late twenties. The eyes sparkled when he continued. *<I normally wouldn't ask—>*, came his voice, *<But I don't think the Kommissar will believe you are mine otherwise.>*

What he suggested did make sense. But he would have to put his hands on her naked chest. The form didn't matter, and he very well knew it! She would have frowned in her human form because he didn't seem too upset by the idea, either. But as a tiger all she could do was

glare and pull back her lips in displeasure.

But one glance at the officer with him, the Kommissar, put the matter to rest. The narrow face was cold and his dark eyes serious and suspicious. There would be no discussion about the issue. He would have to see the evidence for himself, just as her Father would. Nobody else's word would do. But then a thought occurred to her. She hated that the words came out sounding a bit desperate.

<If I am supposed to be a performing cat in your show, shouldn't I be able to obey commands? Couldn't you instruct me to roll over, or something like that?>

She was a little annoyed at his chuckle. No doubt she smelled distinctly of embarrassment and fear. But his reply was polite and professional.

<Is there room in there? I am quite certain that the Kommissar will not let you out of the cage, but I don't want to make you uncomfortable.>

Tahira looked around and realized the Sazi was correct. There was barely room to stand and no room to make a full turn. If she tried to roll onto her back, she would be stuck there. *<No, I suppose there isn't. But do only what you must—I warn you!>*

He dipped his head slightly into a bow and remained serious, but his scent said something else entirely. He was amused at her discomfort. *<As you wish, my lady.>* He walked toward the cage with Reiner at his heels. She could hear his heart pound as he got closer, and she struggled against an increasing pressure that made her bones ache. She felt an uncomfortable pop, and realized that her bones were trying to reform. Why did it seem more difficult for him to keep her in form the closer he got?

“So, Herr Monier. Is this your cat? Can you prove your claim?”

Tahira watched the man— Antoine, was it?— offer a patronizing smile to the officer. “Of course she is.” He turned to her and with complete confidence on his face, said, “Babette, are you all right, girl?” He stepped forward and reached past the cage grate to stroke her face. His hand was soft and gentle and smelled strongly of fur, along with a wonderful cologne that reminded her of freshly mown grass. She tried to offer a look that might appear adoring to the uniformed inspector. He was watching the interaction carefully, but not stepping too close to the cage. She rubbed her face against Antoine's hand as a house cat would and made soft kitten sounds. Hopefully, the officer would have no concept of proper greeting methods.

“Come now, Babette. I'll take you home to your cubs. Can you show the nice officer your belly? That's my girl.” He turned to the Kommissar. “It's perfectly all right, Kommissar Reiner. You can step closer. Babette wouldn't hurt a fly. You wanted to see evidence of nursing, and you can't do it from back there.”

Tahira struggled to remain completely passive while Antoine removed his hand from the cage and eased it through a lower square. He very carefully placed his flat palm on her side and let it remain there motionless as the inspector nervously stepped forward. The inspector reeked of fear, though he tried to hide the fact. She tried to fix her mind on the tangy scent of terror, remembering the tall grass that slid past her body as she stalked the old, limping deer. But her last hunt dissolved abruptly as Antoine ran a slow hand along her side and flank.

“You see, Kommissar? Here and . . . here.”

His touch made her skin tingle. She'd never felt the touch of so powerful a sahip, and presumed that the tingling was an after-effect of his magic. But when his fingers slid through the

fur of her belly, she suddenly knew better. It was magic, all right, but of a whole different kind.

Don't think about how good it feels. There's too much at stake. Rabi is counting on me. Rabi is countin— But her body wouldn't cooperate with her brain. Her stomach, and as parts lower, clenched as his fingers skimmed along her fur. She closed her eyes and a small growl of pleasure slipped out. But just when she had decided to let herself revel in his touch, it stopped. Her eyes flew open in time to see the two men stepping toward the door. She hadn't realized that his hair was long. A wheat-colored braid hung almost to his belt. *What kind of cat is he?*

Antoine turned to her and winked. If she was in human form, she would have blushed.

<We'll be right back. I appreciate your cooperation. We should be out of here in a few minutes.>

"There is some paperwork for you to sign, Herr Monier," said Reiner as they closed the door. His voice sounded much friendlier. No less professional, but the tone and tenor were relaxed.

A few minutes later, she heard their voices again — this time in the parking lot above. "And you are certain that this van will hold the tiger, Herr Monier?" The man called Reiner must be inspecting the Sazi's vehicle, because she heard the squeaking of car springs, and then rattling metal.

"Without question, Kommissar," Antoine replied confidently. "We use this van frequently to transport our cats, and it has been inspected and approved by your government on numerous occasions. I do have the paperwork, if you wish to see it."

Reiner responded without a hint of worry. "No, I see no need. It is obvious that the cat knows and trusts you. It was quite calm when you entered the room and handled it. It reacted *completely* differently with my men."

Antoine laughed. "I don't doubt you! She is quite stressed right now. She needs to return to her cubs and have a meal and some quiet."

But shock filled her as Antoine stepped back into the room holding a *collar and leash*. *<I am not a pet to follow along after you, Sazi!>*

For the first time, he narrowed his eyes and dropped his head into a defensive position. Here then was the true sahip showing through. He fully expected to be obeyed without question. His gold and green eyes burned bright with intensity and a burst of magic hit her hard enough to sting each and every hair on her body. The words that seared into her head were terse and angry. *<No, you are not a pet. What you are is a dangerous wild animal, and these men are afraid of you! They have guns and there are more of them than I can reasonably defend you against. I would suggest that you keep your annoyance to yourself and allow me to get you to safety. I can't hold your form indefinitely, you know.>*

Both his tone and the truth of his statement made heat rise to her face. But her parents, her grandparents — they all said that the Sazi would use any excuse to subdue the Kabile, to subjugate them and turn them into shadows of humans with no free will. Yet, Antoine seemed to be trying to help. Or was he merely afraid to be found out himself?

There was no way to tell, but in freedom there is power. So she lowered her eyes when the cage door was opened and allowed the collar to be placed around her neck. When Antoine pulled on the leash she stepped out the cage and followed him through the police station. But then she saw the man who had kicked her head through the cage so the other could inject the

drug. A snarl rose from her chest without warning. It was met with a sharp tug on the collar and another burst of biting magic.

Tahira fought down her anger. There was no time. *I should be thankful that I'm getting out of this alive so I can find Rabi.*

The guards followed them out to the van with hands on weapons, remaining until the rear doors were safely shut and locked. Tahira took a deep breath. The van was filled with scent of other cats, large and small, some shapeshifters and some wild cats. But it smelled of comfort and peace, rather than anger or fear. The cats who had passed through this van were content. It was a shock. She'd heard horror stories about the treatment of cats in circuses and shows, and even worse stories about the sadistic Sazi.

A wave of relief made Tahira sigh as the police station grew smaller in the rear window. She jumped and turned as something lightly struck the back of her head. A cream colored silken shirt lay at her feet.

"I'm about to change you back. I thought you might want to cover yourself."

She looked up at the sound of his voice and caught sight of his eyes in the rear view mirror. The annoyance in his eyes matched his scent.

"I'm sorry for snarling back there, but—"

Antoine turned angry eyes back to the road. The very American accent in her voice was a worry. "It doesn't matter *why*. You nearly ruined your own escape. If you were Sazi, I would be forced to . . . but no, that doesn't matter right now." With a thought, he released the flow of magic, and forcibly ignored the scream of pain as she shifted back to human form. She must be *quite* young to still scream.

There was a shuffling of fabric against skin and when he glanced back again, a fully grown, stunning woman was finishing buttoning the silk shirt. It stretched tight over the generous swell of her chest. She tucked slim, permanently tanned legs under her so she could raise to her knees. Thankfully, the shirt tails were long enough to cover everything, but Antoine found that he had to force a very appreciative gaze back to his driving. He wished he could ignore her enticing scent as easily.

He cleared his throat, and fought the customary attraction to a beautiful woman. "I . . . ahem, I expected you to be . . . *younger*, Tahira."

She half-crawled to the grating so she could see him as they talked. She dropped to a sitting position next to the grate, feet tight against her thighs. When he glanced in the mirror again, he couldn't stop his eyes from opening wide at what he saw. Without planning to, he laughed out loud. She was looking down, and her hair spilled over her face and shoulders. Wide portions of her hair were colored the bright russet of her namesake animal.

"You have . . . *stripes*."

Tahira looked up with shock on her face and immediately pulled her hair back and tucked it in the neck of her shirt while blushing furiously. Her scent was hot embarrassment and anger and she wouldn't meet his eyes in the mirror. "I'll dye it immediately when we reach a town. I swear. Please don't look badly on the kabile for my defect."

The smile dropped from his face. *Defect? Why on earth—*

He softened his voice, let the amusement drop from it completely. "I don't consider them

a *defect*, Tahira. I've simply never seen them appear before in human form. They're really quite lovely — as are you, by the way. Who told you they were a flaw?"

After a few moments of silence, where her scent was a mingling of emotions that included being worried and flattered, she responded. "Oh. Um . . . I . . . *thank you*. But in our tribe, they're looked down on as being low-caste — nearly as bad as a *sifena*, a halfling that must change on every night of the moon. Anything that would be noticed by townsfolk on casual inspection is a danger. If I lived with my grandparents, I would probably be put down for these stupid orange hairs. But since I turned late in life — I only had my first change at twenty, they're hoping it will pass. But it's been two years . . . Normally, I dye my hair during the moon. That's really easy at home in California. It's harder here in Turkey. I wear a head scarf a lot of the time to cover my hair, even though I'm not Muslim."

"What do you mean, Turke— " Antoine saw her face in the mirror and noticed a large bruise that covered one eye and stained her cheekbone an angry red. He turned his head to confirm what he saw and exclaimed, "*Merde!* What happened to your face?"

She rose up to look in the mirror, which brought a grimace and a gentle probing with one finger. "It *does* look bad, doesn't it? That's why I snarled at that guard. He kicked me in the face through the cage."

Antoine's hands clutched the steering wheel until his knuckles were white and the plastic creaked in protest. Fury boiled inside him. The thought of someone — "He *kicked* you? *Pauvre con!* Why didn't you tell me at the station? I could easily have *discovered* it when I examined you and had him disciplined."

Tahira shrugged and sat down, carefully smoothing the fabric to cover her thighs. "What good would that do? Even if you'd made an accusation, they'd just claim that the men who'd captured me had done it." She pushed against her ribs and felt an answering twinge of pain. "And they did plenty — you just can't see the bruises anymore. Besides, I'll heal."

A shadow of a smile passed over his face. Their cultures may be very different, but they were also much alike.

She sighed and looked out the window through the grating. "I'm just hoping to get back to the village by nightfall. I'm not very good at directing people there when it's dark. Grammy must be beside herself. I've been gone since before dawn."

Antoine nodded. Ah, yes. Back to the subject at hand. "Where do you think you are, Tahira? Do you know what day this is?" He asked the words calmly, without any emotion attached, but wasn't surprised when she regarded him suspiciously.

"It's Friday, which—" She wrinkled her brow, and her face in the mirror grew more worried by the second. ". . . is a holiday in Turkey, and the police station shouldn't be open. The police weren't speaking Turkish, either."

"No, it wouldn't and they weren't," Antoine agreed. He decided she needed to figure this out for herself before he intervened.

She looked out the window as another building flashed by. "Van is the closest city of this size, but the architecture is wrong."

A car ahead braked to avoid a small animal and the rear end skidded on the icy road before moving forward again. Antoine took his foot off the gas pedal in response. They slowed several kilometers an hour to a more appropriate speed. Yes, they would both *survive* an

accident, but why risk one?

He listened to Tahira mumbling under her breath. Her scent was a blending of panic and worry that made his jaw clench. “Damn! I should have paid more attention in class. Franco? Grecian?”

“Baroque, mostly,” Antoine offered. “A bit of Bauhaus in a few buildings.” He decided to take the bull by the proverbial horns. “We’re in Stuttgart, Germany, Tahira. And it’s Thursday.”

Tahira slumped against the expanded metal grating with a dropped jaw. It took two tries before she could get words out of her mouth, and even then they were a coarse whisper. “But . . . I was captured on Friday, and it was the first night of the moon. It’s nearly Thanksgiving back in the States. It can’t . . . the moon can’t last for a whole week, can it?”

Antoine sighed heavily and felt his shoulders slump. If she really had lost her brother, there would be no hope of finding a trail after this long. He hated to tell her, but better now than later. “It’s nearly Christmas, Tahira. My troupe and I were just about to return to America for the holiday. Can you remember *anything* about your captivity? Anything at all?”

“A *month*? But I couldn’t have been a prisoner for a full month! What about Rabi?” She wiped sudden tears away with an angry hand. He could tell she was trying hard, but her chin quivered and her fists clenched as she fought to control her emotions. And there was no hiding her scent.

Antoine’s voice was soft and gentle. “I’m so very sorry, Tahira. I hope your brother is still alive. When we get back to the show, you’re welcome to full use of my satellite phone or the internet to make some calls.”

The next curve brought the old tunnel into sight in the far distance. They were only a dozen miles from their camp. While Antoine had planned to stay near the auditorium where the show had been performed, the hotels were all sold out from a second convention, and they would have had to split the troupe. That was bad for morale of the cats. So, they had obtained a special permit to set up the living trailers and an animal exercise tent in a field on the outskirts of the city.

He tried to ignore Tahira’s wracking sobs in the back of the van. The reality of her situation had sunk home and there was little that could be done for the moment. By the time they arrived—

A light caught his attention and he flicked his eyes to the driver’s side mirror. There was a police car on their tail and the blue lights were flashing. Well, perhaps it wasn’t for him. He slowed and moved toward the edge of the road to give it room to pass. But there wasn’t much room to move. The plows had been busy and the towering pile of ice covered dirty snow could easily take off his side mirror. But the police car also slowed and moved to the side. *Merde!* What now?

“Take off the shirt, Tahira!”

He said it harshly enough to stem her tears and look up in shock. “What?”

Antoine applied his foot to the brake – just enough to show compliance, but still stall for time. “The police are behind us again. They will be expecting a tiger, and I happen to like the shirt you’re wearing.”

She turned and looked out the tinted rear window. “Oh!” She hurried to obey, not even noticing that he would see her naked.

But his eyes were only on the police. He pulled the car over and sent a powerful burst of magic into the back of the van. “I’m sorry, but this is going to hurt.”

He had to watch to make sure that the timing was right. She grunted, but didn’t scream as raw energy ripped across her body, literally *pulling* the tiger inside to the surface. Bones broke and fur flowed like a waterfall over sharp rocks. It was over in seconds, leaving her panting and shaking on the carpet before the van had even come to a complete halt. He kept feeding power into her, until she roared in protest. He was surprised when a shock of fear scent flowed from the back. But there was no time to ease her fears.

Antoine rolled down the window and forced a smile onto his face. It was difficult. The strain of keeping her in animal form seemed to be increasing. He could feel sweat paint his brow and start to roll down his temple.

“*Guten tag*. Is there a problem, officer?”

Tahira fought back a growl, and he noticed. It was the same man she’d growled at in the station — the who had kicked her. The officer noticed the tiger’s complete attention. He unconsciously backed away from the window a half-step. “You forgot to sign a document, Herr Monier. All of the documents *must* be signed.”

Antoine bit back his first response. He couldn’t afford to give the officer any reason to detain him further. He couldn’t understand why it was so difficult to hold Tahira’s form. It hadn’t been like this earlier, but the more power he gave, the more she required. It was quickly draining him. His eyes were growing unfocused as he stared at the paper and the spot where the gloved finger pointed. He nearly dropped the pen from limp fingers while signing, and the German noticed.

“Are you well, Herr Monier? You look very pale suddenly. Should I follow you to your camp?”

Antoine’s mouth felt dry and hot, and he had to lick his tongue over chapped lips. He managed a small smile and nodded. “I’m merely tired. I was up late performing and had little sleep before I received the call from your Kommissar.” He pointed at the tunnel mouth. “But our camp is just on the other side of the mountain. So there’s no problem. I appreciate the offer, but I don’t believe I need an escort.”

The officer wasn’t buying it. Tahira must have seen his indecision, because she suddenly threw herself against the side window and let out a vicious roar, making the entire van rock. The officer blanched and stepped back in alarm. It was enough of a distraction. His eyes moved quickly between the large tiger and Antoine’s pale face. “Very well, then, Herr Monier. I will leave you and your cat to make your way back.”

Another roar and a powerful leap against the rear grate as the officer returned to his car made him drop the clipboard and scramble to pick it up. Antoine rolled up the window. “His reaction alone tells his guilt. That one is all muscle, with an intellect rivaled only by garden tools. His Kommissar wouldn’t have been so easily distracted.”

A dark chuckle that ended with an animal snarl came from deep within his chest. Tahira regarded him with a sideways glance. “Don’t worry. I have few ideas to *thank him* for his treatment of you.” Antoine stepped on the gas and quickly increased the distance between the two cars. “And now I think it’s time for you to turn human again.”

He threw a wave of power and waited for the change to occur.

But it didn't. Instead, the heat began to increase, so quickly that his head began to pound. He started breathing painfully, and noticed that Tahira was as well.

"Why aren't I changing?" Her speaking voice in animal form was nearly an octave deeper than when human. There was a delicious dark snarl at the end of each word.

"I don't know. Something is wrong. But just a few more miles—"

By the time the tunnel loomed in front of them, Antoine was having a hard time keeping the car on the road. *Just a few more minutes. But why can't I stop my magic?* Sweat was pouring freely down his face, stinging his eyes with salt. He heard Tahira collapse to the carpet and begin to pant heavily from exhaustion.

He leaned forward on the steering wheel to keep himself upright. His magic, his very life force, was being sucked away, and he didn't know why. Already spots of grey and white were edging his vision.

The darkness ahead seemed to stretch out, the light at the end narrowing to a pinpoint that disappeared into an inky blackness the headlights couldn't pierce. What in the name of —?

Twin red slits appeared above him and a gasp choked his throat as the eyes blinked and became the red irises of a giant snake. They were driving right into its maw! Antoine turned the wheel frantically, and slammed on the brake. He heard a distant scream and tearing metal, as though he was underwater.

Bone-jarring pain now in his shoulder, his leg, the side of his head.

More images passed in front of his eyes. He fought, as he always did, but the shimmering reflections entered him, filled him, and he couldn't turn away: A veiled woman dressed in black and gold, moved in a slow, sultry dance to music he couldn't hear; men and women chained to rocks, screamed and shriveled into husks of paper-thin flesh that stretched thin over twisted animal bones; the press of lips against his that tasted of cherry jam and sandalwood. A hole appeared in a stone cliff covered with brush; water, and a need to breathe so strong it seared his lungs. Blinding pain in his chest seemed to flay the skin from his bones from the inside out; and through it all, the eyes — those fiery eyes that his heart knew would burn his world to ash if he didn't intervene.

The images rushed forward; enveloping him in sparkling power, before everything disappeared into blackness.

Chapter 2

“Are you certain that you wish to meet with these men, my lord? I can complete the transaction without your involvement.”

The steady drip of water from the mineral stalactite against the cave floor punctuated the seconds while Nasil waited for a reply. The quiet murmur of chanting from the next chamber seemed to take on the beat of the droplets.

A deep chuckle made Nasil shiver in the cool dampness. The measured voice when his master replied held a note of amusement that didn't bode well for the interaction. “No, Nasil. I believe that I would like to meet these men. I always prefer to personally deal with those who *fail me*.”

The words became a whip and Nasil flinched as though struck. He dropped to his knees on the smooth stone and bowed low at the feet of his seated master. “Their failure is mine, my lord. I did not think it necessary to be specific as to the tiger we sought. I didn't realize that there was another tig—”

Nasil heard movement but held his place. He was born to serve this man — trained to take whatever punishment was determined. He would honor his calling regardless of his fate. His heart quickened when the rustle of cloth stopped next to his head, but he didn't move.

The voice was pleased, and he breathed a silent sigh of relief. “The scent of your fear, and your quiet acceptance of my judgment move me, Nasil. You have served me well for many centuries. This small defeat will not reverse your lifetime of service in my eyes. You did *exactly* as I instructed, so the fault is mine—”

A clatter of rocks in the distant tunnel stopped them both. The baritone lowered to a whisper. “Stand at my side once more, Nasil. We will greet these . . . *poachers* as one, as we always have.”

“As you command, my lord Sargon.” He raised to his feet after the other man had seated himself. Nasil stepped behind the rock where Sargon reclined on a cushion.

The ammonia scent of panic was almost visible as the chanting grew louder beyond the curve of the cave, but wasn't enough to cover the rattling of the chains as the subject struggled to free herself. The press of magic seemed to fill the room in a wave and then flow back out in a rush with the power of a tsunami. Nasil struggled to keep his feet as the tide rushed past him, pulling his own magic through his very pores. His skin began to ache, then burn as more power was drained. Even Sargon was affected by the magic drain, but Nasil noted that a slow smile was curling his master's lip.

Perhaps they had finally succeeded. Perhaps —

A piercing scream filled Nasil's ears and made him flinch involuntarily. Sargon stood and turned his attention to the flickering torch light that illuminated the other chamber. The scent of his anticipation, his joy brought pleasure to Nasil's heart. But then the scream abruptly cut off and his master frowned in the silence.

“What was that?” came a male voice from the darkness ahead to their left. “Was that a scream?”

“So what if it was?” another man replied in a bass rumble. “None of our concern. Hey,

there's a light ahead. Maybe we're finally reached the end of this stinkin' cave."

The first voice, a thready alto, quavered a bit. "Let's just get our money and get out of here, Alan. Getting tigers is one thing, but I don't like this. It feels like a set-up."

Nasil saw the men first, and stepped toward them. Sargon didn't turn to the arrival of the poachers. He continued to watch the torch, waiting for any sign. A woman appeared from the lit chamber, followed by a huge black man with a long dreadlocks and a bare chest. Nasil stepped back so Sargon could approach them.

When the poachers rounded the final bend, Nasil held up a hand to stop them where they stood. The tall, stocky poacher who had been identified as Alan started to open his mouth to say something, but stopped when Nasil moved forward like lightning and flexed a hand around the man's throat tight enough to silence him.

"Be quiet or *die!*" He let some of his remaining power flow toward the men, and hissed the words into the poachers' faces so his master would not be interrupted. The men glanced at each other nervously but obeyed. Nasil took a few moments to check the men for weapons with his free hand. The fools had honored their bargain. Each was unarmed save for a small knife.

Sargon stepped forward until he was within inches from the woman. The metallic scent of blood hung heavy in the air. "Dr. Portes? What went wrong *this* time?"

The tiny Guademalan woman shook her head and wiped the smear of red covering her hands against the front of her smock. Nasil noted that the thin poacher paled a bit at the look of . . . *annoyance* on the woman's face.

"The same as happened *last* time, my lord. She was not the one. We had hoped to expand her abilities through the ritual. But the power consumed her."

Sargon's voice was calm and soft, which Nasil knew was when he was at his most dangerous. "Is she still alive?"

The harsh laugh from the black man was quickly eaten by the cave, just as the scream had been. It was as though the cave itself fed on their presence. No echoes would reach the outside world.

"She is *not*," he replied harshly. "She was torn apart before the ritual completed. I told yo—"

Sargon had the African pinned high against the wall, his neck held at a painful angle, before he could complete the word. The flow of magic was stifling and it was all Nasil could do to keep the poachers from bolting from sheer terror. The scent of their fear was powerful enough to bring a disturbing gleam to Rachel Portes' eyes.

"You do not tell *me* anything, Zuberi. You are here only at my sufferance, and you will hold your tongue or I will turn you over to the doctor for an *appetizer*. Do you understand?"

Nasil was pleased to see the nearly living fear in Zuberi's eyes. He *should* be very afraid. He nodded with what little movement Sargon allowed him.

Sargon released his hand and his magic and Zuberi dropped unceremoniously to the floor. Were it not for the human poachers present, Nasil knew that Sargon would have used only his magic to punish the man, so as not to soil his royal hands with the likes of a *cat*.

Dr. Portes stepped forward quietly. "The room should be cleaned before the next attempt, my lord."

Sargon held up his hand and she fell silent. "In a moment, Doctor. Let me first greet my

guests. Nasil, release them and bring them before me.”

Nasil led Alan and his friend to where Sargon once again rested on his pillows.

Alan rubbed the red marks on his throat and pointed a long black metal flashlight menacingly at Nasil. “You and me, buddy. When this is done, we’re going to go rounds for that little stunt.”

Nasil doubted that *he* would be given that honor, but smiled the tiniest bit and nodded to the fool.

“So,” the man strutted forward toward the master. “You’re Sargon, huh? Well, you got your tiger. Now we get our money.”

Sargon’s face lit up with a broad smile. “I’m afraid that you’re very confused. I do *not* have my tiger, so you get no money.”

The thin man with the ferret-like face finally got over his fear enough to smell angry. “Whoa! You wanted a tiger, and we got you *three* tigers. Don’t jack us around, asshole.”

He started to step forward aggressively, but stopped when Nasil was suddenly in front of them, blocking the path to his master.

Alan stared him down, despite the scent of fear and twitching of his eye muscles. “Me and Mickey worked our butts off to get those tigers and we’re taking our money, even if we have to take it off your dead bodies.”

When Sargon stood and put a hand on Nasil’s shoulder, he stepped back with a bow. The master’s voice began light. “There’s no need to argue, gentlemen. While I can *assure* you that you did not deliver my tiger, I’m certain we can work something out. The error was mine. I did not tell you the *specific* tiger we wished you to deliver. You did actually capture her, but then *left her* to be discovered by the authorities. *I was not pleased.*”

His voice had dropped nearly an octave during the speech and ended with enough scorn to cut through the anger of the men. They watched the tall olive skinned man with nervous eyes as he stepped closer and closer. Sargon let his angry magic leak out until it was a suffocating cloud that the men wanted to run screaming from.

But just when they were ready to bolt back into the blackness of the cave in terror, Nasil was surprised to see Sargon stop and smile.

“But, as I said, gentlemen — we can work this out.” He reached into the pocket of his tailored slacks and removed a leather bag tied with a strip of rawhide. He held it up for the men to see and shook it. The richly toned clinking inside made the men’s eyes light up greedily. “In this bag are gold coins equal to *half* the money you negotiated with Nasil.”

The pair looked at each other. “Hey!” Alan nearly shouted.

Sargon raised his hand in a seemingly placating manner. “Never fear, gentlemen. The gold coins inside this bag are very old and *very* rare. While the actual value as a *metal* are indeed half, the value as *antiquities* might be double what you anticipated — with a little work on your part to find the right buyer.”

Alan gave a knowing smile. “So for leaving the fourth tiger for the Germans to find, we have to pad shoe leather to get all of our money, huh?”

Sargon raised one brow. “Precisely.”

The ferret faced man named Mickey looked suspicious. “I want to *see* the coins first. I know a little bit about gold.”

“As you wish.” Sargon tossed the bag to the ferret faced man. “But I would be very cautious not to get your finger oil on the coins.”

The poacher waved away the comment. “Yeah, yeah. I know.” He loosened the leather thong carefully and eased one of the coins into view, using the leather top of the bag to hold it. He stepped closer to the torch and squinted as he turned the captured coin to see the reverse.

“So, whatcha think, Mickey?” Alan asked as Sargon returned to his cushions with a small smile.

Mickey let out a slow whistle and looked excitedly at Alan. “Man! Either this is the best damn forgery I’ve ever seen, or this coin is an honest to fucking God Spanish doubloon. This freaking bag might be worth a *fortune*.”

Sargon raised his hands and leaned back. “As I said.”

Sargon took the moment to stand and walk over to Mickey. He licked his palm slightly while the other man wasn’t looking. “Do we, as you say, *have a deal*?” He held out his palm to Mickey, who was almost too busy staring at the coins in the bag to notice. But when Sargon cleared his throat, he looked up and the dry heat scent of embarrassment found Nasil’s nose.

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” He shook Sargon’s hand and then returned his attention to the coins.

“And you, Mr., er — *Alan*?” The tall man was shaking his head, little movements that betrayed the fact that his instinct was telling him something completely different than what he was hearing. But he finally shook Sargon’s hand.

“Then our business is at an end. You may go.” The look on Sargon’s face made Alan turn back more than once as they stepped into the cave.

Nasil smiled quietly as Sargon released Rachel and Zuberi, before the poachers had reached the end of the torchlight.

Sargon raised his voice and called out to the poachers. “Oh! And gentlemen? One more minor detail.”

They stopped and turned around. The beams of the powerful flashlights hurt Nasil’s eyes, but he wanted to see the looks on their faces so he squinted and kept watching.

Nasil could see the growing concern on Alan’s face at Sargon’s smile. How little these foolish humans understood their kind.

“Yeah? What else?”

Nasil felt a burst of power tingle his skin as Rachel readied herself to transform into her animal form.

The low chuckle from his master tightened Nasil’s throat again as Rachel stepped forward. Sargon ran a slow hand down her leg. His voice was soft, but Nasil knew it would carry to the men’s ears, because he had their full attention. “The poison that is now seeping into your palms will be beginning to affect you soon. In about thirty minutes, you’ll be completely blind.”

The two men stared at their palms in abject horror and began to rub them frantically against the fabric of their pants. Mickey dropped his flashlight and scrambled to recover it, all while keeping their total attention on Sargon.

“If you make it to the entrance of the cave, the gold is yours to keep. Of course, you’ll be sightless, but what is that small detail to a millionaire?” Sargon stood and stepped to the torch. He pulled it from the holder in the wall and ran his hand through the fire until the flame glowed green from both his magic, and the venom still on his palm. He carried the torch back to the

cushion.

The poachers were slowly backing away, trying to keep from stumbling but wanting to make sure they heard every word. “You’re insane, Sargon! We’ll go to the cops! You’ll wind up in prison for the rest of your life.”

Nasil chuckled and Sargon let out a laugh of fierce joy. “Prisons have crumbled to dust around my feet, while I still remain, gentlemen. You should probably leave now. I believe that Nasil timed the journey from here to there at twenty-two minutes — if you *run*.”

Sargon looked at them with the cold, unfeeling eyes of a snake. But the pair *truly* understood the nature of their *deal* when Rachel completed her transformation. The sudden horror on their faces was worth the pain in Nasil’s head from the flashlight and green fire.

“But I don’t believe it will be a problem for you to beat Nasil’s time, since the lovely Dr. Portes will be chasing you. I wouldn’t suggest you let her catch you. I’ve heard she’s quite a . . . handful. I’ll be magnanimous and give you to the count of ten. One — ”

With a rush of air that sounded quite a bit like a scream, Alan and Mickey turned and ran at full speed into the darkness of the cave. “Two . . . three . . . oh, to the devil with it — *ten*.” Sargon stroked his hand again down her leg, one of the many that surrounded his cushions. “Bring back the gold, if you would, my love.” He put his lips close to her mandibles and licked a drop of poison from her fang, while the spider leaned into him. He shuddered briefly as the venom burned his lips and tongue. He ran his teeth over the small hole it cut into them.

“Ssshall I allow them to reach the light, my lord?”

Sargon smiled, but there was no emotion in his eyes. “Consider them a reward for your efforts with the ritual. You must be quite drained. Do with them what you will.”

The nearly silent scuttling of her feet against the stone as she started the chase unnerved Nasil.

“My lord Sargon?” Zubari’s voice was small and quiet from the wall where he still remained.

“Yes, Zubari?”

“I do not wish to seem too bold, my lord, but the poachers failed.”

Sargon sighed and turned to the big Swahilian. “They did indeed, Zubari. And I suppose you are hoping that I will allow your plan to proceed?”

Zubari dropped to his knees in front of Sargon’s pillow and remained prostrate. His words were slightly muffled by the stone touching his lips. “I believe it’s a good plan, my lord. I will not fail you as they did.”

Nasil watched sweat form on the broad dark back as Sargon pondered the situation. “I will give you a chance — but only *one* chance. Bring her to me before the next full moon rises and you will have repaid your debt to me. Now, if you’re quick you may join Rachel in the feast.”

Zubari raised his head with a smile. He kissed Sargon’s slipped foot before melting into the darkness of the cave in a blur.

Nasil waited until Zubari was out of earshot before he stepped to Sargon’s side. “I believe it unwise to trust them.”

“I know you do, Nasil. But Rachel Portes excites me as no woman ever has, and Zubari has undeniable skill for this particular venture. He has reason to bear a grudge against the Monier

clan so all eyes will point to him and the fools will not even *look* further. Besides, they're both expendable."

Nasil acknowledged the fact with a dip of his head. "But their kind are untrustworthy—"

A man's scream from the darkness was swallowed by the sacred cave, and another followed in seconds.

Sargon chuckled. "Yes, Nasil. Aren't we all?"

