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She was so innocent when it came to lovemaking, and he couldn't wait to teach her...

“I need some time to recuperate, Riana. Although I assure you we will have each other at least once more.”

A thrill ran through Riana. They would be joined together in ecstasy again soon. “What will we do in the meantime?”

“We could explore one another. Men and women can enjoy more than just riding the man's cock.”

She was almost breathless with eagerness. Passion without sex? “Show me.”

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Daughter of J'Tar

Shay Lacy



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Daughter of J'Tar
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Prologue

It was so risqué to be nude, but no one knew it while Riana used her feline form. She romped through the forest, luxuriating in the freedom of running on four legs. She'd been imprisoned in that stiff dress for too long today, suffering through the torturous official ceremonies as Rubiya welcomed her mother's brother, the Prince of Mabrelle. He was her uncle, and his wife was her cousin. Riana didn't understand why a visit from relatives had to be so formal. Most days she took it for granted that one of her uncles was King of Mabrelle and another was Zanath, ruler of Rubiya. However, it was days like these she wished she wasn't of the royal houses. Anything had to be better than being royal, even being a servant.

She'd escaped at the first opportunity. Now she reveled in wearing only her gray on black Jaxtar fur. How did humans stand being only one shape? She'd go mad if she had to be a young woman all the time. Since she'd gotten older, it was a lot more boring to be human.

Riana sprinted faster, smelling the new spring growth in the forest, hearing bird song, and scenting small prey. She was sixteen and free. What more could a maiden ask?

She scented Jaxtar cat spoor and stopped to identify whose. It was the big alpha male, new this year to her adopted pack. He made her nervous with his dominating ways. The old alpha had finally figured out that she wasn't a permanent member of his pack, nor were her brothers or her father. Because she was female, he'd tried for years to keep her confined to the territory of the pack. But he'd finally learned that she would not be caged.

The new alpha had not yet learned that lesson.

She gave the pack territory a wide berth, not wanting to hassle with the alpha male today. She was free and wanted to stay that way.

Riana crossed over the northern border of Rubiya and continued on at an easy lope into the neighboring country of

Durrior. There were some wild Jaxtars here. She would run with them. Poachers hunted these woods, so she pricked her ears for human sounds.

The wet spoor of an unfamiliar Jaxtar marked the next tree. She jogged into the territory, wanting to run and play with another of her kind. A male appeared from the trees in front of her, growling, with its ruff standing up. She stopped and cocked her head, then sat down.

The male approached slowly, sniffing. Riana's only movement was to cock her ears. She made no threatening moves. A male wouldn't feel threatened by a female, but this one didn't know her gender yet. He stretched his neck, sniffed, and then came closer to examine her scent. She'd washed in the lake before she started her trek and knew no taint of human scent remained to frighten him away.

The male smelled her neck, and then moved slowly around to sniff her bottom. She hated this part because it outraged her human sensibilities. Males like her brothers took great pleasure in displaying their genitals. But she was a maiden, and what lay between her legs was private.

The male butted her with his head. He wanted her up off her rear. She stood and allowed him to explore her genitals with his wet nose. She quivered, wanting his exploration to be over.

Suddenly he mounted her and his erect penis probed between her legs. She leaped away from him, running fast. Because of her young age, she'd thought she would be safe from the Jaxtar desire to mate. But she'd forgotten it was mid-month and she was fertile. No male Jaxtar could resist a female in heat.

The male was half again as big as her and faster. He brought her down like the Jaxtar took down prey. He mounted her as soon as she stood. This time he sank his teeth into her neck to keep her under him while his penis found entry. She gave a Jaxtar scream of pain as the cat took her maidenhood. He pumped vigorously and filled her with seed.

Her sides heaved as she breathed. His hold on her neck was painful. He mated again, then a third time. She heard a

wet thud and suddenly the male's teeth let go of her neck as it screamed in pain.

She was off like a shot, running for her life. An arrow thudded into the tree next to her with a deadly sound. Poachers! Fear propelled her faster. Another arrow whizzed past her head, too close for her peace of mind. More than one! Her heart pumped blood and oxygen to her muscles. Her lungs dragged in more oxygen. What if they were mounted? She dare not look back. She needed all her energy to run.

Her paws barely touched the ground before they propelled her into the next stride. Seconds elapsed with only the sound of her tortured breathing filling her ears. Minutes passed. Dare she slow to check for pursuit?

In a hundred more yards, she circled a tight grove of birch trees and dared a glance behind her. Only empty forest greeted her anxious survey. She slowed to a run, dragging in needed air. Poachers in Durrior! They'd probably killed the male Jaxtar. She regretted the death of the large cat, despite what he'd done to her. He'd only followed his animal instincts, just as Riana tried to follow hers now.

Where was the Rubiyan border? She wouldn't feel safe until she reached it. A gnarled red oak looked familiar, but in her semi-frenzied state, she couldn't be sure. She kept running. There, that bent white pine with the big knot eight feet up, that was in Rubiyan territory. She breathed a sigh of relief. She was safe.

Riana needed to rest. Even as good a shape as she was in, she'd expended a lot of energy to avoid the poachers. Her muscles screamed and her lungs burned. She looked for a place with a layer of leaves or pine needles in which to lay down for awhile. She'd just spotted a potential place when a flash of black and gray darted out in front of her.

Her heart pounded madly in renewed fright. She began backing up before she recognized the big alpha male from her pack. She knew she should run, but it was the wrong move to make. Retreat showed weakness, and she never wanted to be in a position of weakness in his presence. In order to establish her independence from his rule, she had to stand firm.

He approached in a slow, gliding stalk. He was a large male in his prime. His black and gray fur held a healthy sheen. His muscles flowed sleekly under his skin. Riana did not want to admire him.

Mere feet from her, his ruff rose and a low growl emitted from deep in his throat. Riana's hackles rose. What was wrong? He'd known her for months and never expressed this type of aggression towards her before.

He bared his teeth and growled louder. A breeze blew over her, cooling her heated skin. And then she knew. She was upwind of the alpha and covered with the scent of the other male. Oh no!

The alpha continued to advance and she backed up. His nostrils flared. In a leap he was on her before she completed her turn. Riana scabbled in the grass trying to get out from under him. But he was twice her weight and half again her size, and she had run full speed for miles. He got between her legs, humping, and then penetrated her with his penis. Riana struggled while his firm cock moved in and out of her. When he spurted his semen, his hold loosened and she sprinted away from him.

But in only moments the alpha brought her down again. She fought him with her claws and teeth, but he mounted her and bit deeply into her neck. He thrust his big penis into her tender body. Over and over he mated, trying to fill her with his kits. It was all about survival of the species, she knew that. Often the last male to mate fathered the kits. And with this alpha, it was about domination. She was part of *his* pack, *his* possession. But she wanted none of it, not his kits nor his lordship.

The next time his hold loosened, she ran blindly as fast as she could. Her mind registered a rock wall in front of her. She followed it, hoping for ledges to climb. Several hundred yards along the rock wall became a dead end canyon. She searched desperately for an outlet, but the walls were sheer for twelve feet straight up. She turned to escape. The alpha blocked the entrance.

She backed into a corner. The large male approached and

she clawed at him. He pounced, getting his teeth into her neck. He dragged her a foot from the wall, then mounted and impaled her. She screamed a Jaxtar scream. She wanted it to be over. She wanted to be free of his probing body. She didn't want kits! He mated four times.

But she couldn't get free, not while she was in heat and the alpha wanted her pregnant and under his rule.

When her heat ended a day later, she knew she carried kits inside her. It was spring and felines mated in the spring. She had no one to blame but herself for her stupidity.

The alpha herded her towards his domain. She pretended submission until they reached a clearing, and then she ran for her life. She headed for civilization, someplace a real Jaxtar would never go. When she reached a partially tilled field, the alpha stopped following.

She scuttled home with her tail between her legs, alert for other Jaxtar cats. She didn't want to attract another male's attention. She stopped at the lake and immersed herself in the cold water to wash off what the alpha had done to her. She didn't change form, not wanting to feel his attentions on her human body. The cold water soothed her overworked genitals. She lay in the lake until her teeth chattered from the cold, then she shook off the water and continued her journey home.

What would her father say? He had an open mind about many things. He'd had to, to raise three part-feline children. He'd told her not to go near the males while she was in heat. But he hadn't told her what to do about kits if she made a mistake.

When she reached the edge of the forest behind the castle, she met a large male Jaxtar. She shied in fright, but the cat took human form and became her older brother Carabin with his long black braids, green eyes and bronze skin. He wore black trousers and a cream-colored shirt, although she knew his clothes were a magical illusion. She changed shape, becoming once more a young woman in a long blue dress. Her illusion of clothes protected her modesty when she shapeshifted.

The horror and pain of the past few days overwhelmed

her. Here was safety in the form of her beloved older brother. She fell into his arms crying.

Carabin held her tightly in his strong, eighteen-year-old arms. His black braids surrounded them in a private cocoon. “What happened to you?”

She raised welling eyes to his bright green ones. His face was blurred from her tears. “The alpha. I just wanted to play, Carabin. I forgot, and Father will be angry.”

He wiped the tears from her cheeks with the pads of his fingers. “What did he do?” He touched the bite mark on her neck and she winced. He raised sympathetic eyes to her.

“He made kits on me. I could not stop him. He held me with his teeth. What will I do? I will be ruined if I grow big with kits.”

Carabin squeezed her tightly. She pressed her cheek against his chest and smelled the familiar scent of brother and Jaxtar fur. His braids slid over her shoulder as he held her.

“We must tell Father. He will know what to do. You may not have kits inside you.”

“I do. It was the wrong time to go out in the forest. I can feel the kits.” She cried harder now that safety was at hand.

“Come with me. Father will not be angry. Shh, I am here now.” He helped her to her feet, tucked her head against his neck and began walking.

Riana knew they stayed in human form to give her time to compose herself. They walked up the ramp, and the blade-nosed guard let them in the thick wooden door of the castle. He gave them a quizzical look from light blue eyes.

Carabin asked, “Where is the J’Tar, my father?”

“He is with the Zanath, J’Tar Carabin. J’Tar Riana, we have been worried about you.”

“Thank you, Garwain.”

They walked down the tan stone corridor to the office where their father served as bodyguard and advisor to his brother Oberroth, Zanath of Rubiya. When Carabin opened the door, two similar bronze faces looked up. The Zanath sat at his claw-footed ebony desk. Their father, Curran, leaned a palm on the desk beside him.

Her father straightened and concern filled his green eyes. "Riana, where have you been?" He was dressed all in black as usual—silk tunic and trousers and leather boots.

"Father, Riana needs the healer," Carabin said.

Carabin urged her to sit on the settee on the side of the medium-sized room. Above her hung an intricate, multi-hued tapestry depicting hunting Jaxtars. One of the cats looked like the alpha. Her stomach clenched at the reminder.

Her father and uncle's anxious faces appeared next to Carabin's. Her father was an inch shorter than his brother, but full of coiled Jaxtar strength. Oberroth was broader across the shoulders and dressed in a bright gold and black tunic. He wore no sign to indicate he was the ruler of the country. The familial resemblance to Carabin was unmistakable and they had the same black braids as her brother.

Her father took her hand. "What happened?"

"I went out to play with the Jaxtars. I did not mean to do it, Father."

"Kits," Carabin explained, his voice very adult and serious. "The new alpha."

"Gods," their uncle exclaimed. He and Curran exchanged a look, and then he turned away, his black braids swinging, and yelled to the guards, "Get the healer."

Her father sat beside her. "Are you hurt, sweeting? He overpowered you?"

Her eyes filled with tears at his solicitous tone. She nodded. "I could not get loose. He had me for two days. Now I have his kits in me. Father, I am sorry."

"Shh, sweeting. You have suffered. I will not lay blame on your head and make you suffer more."

A brown-eyed, brown-haired man pushed between Carabin and her uncle. The healer, Blanath. He could help her. "What is wrong, J'Tar Riana?"

"She went out while she was in heat," her father explained. The healer paled. "The new alpha male in the Jaxtar pack mated her. She is carrying his kits."

Blanath stared at her wide-eyed. His usually calm, plain face creased with worry. "A human cannot carry kits. If her

body rejects them, they will abort naturally. We need do nothing but wait.”

“No, there is something else we can do.” The Zanath sat opposite her father and took her hand. He looked her straight in the eye with his intense blue gaze and softened his tone. “Riana, I want you to do something that you may think is hard. Remember how your brothers spent time in the wild so they would learn to be tough?”

Riana began to shake. She thought she knew where this was leading. She nodded. “When Sherrod was sixteen and Carabin was fourteen.”

Oberroth continued. “That is right. Did you ever wonder why your father and I did not send you out?”

“Because I was too young to go with them.”

He shook his head. “No, it was because you are female, the only female J'Tar there has ever been. We could not take the chance on what happened to you today.”

“But it happened anyway!”

“I know. I am very sorry it did. I am sorry the Jaxtar hurt you. But we can turn this into an opportunity for you, instead of a misfortune.”

“How?” It was hard to get the word out, but she already knew what he wanted.

“I want you to go live with the pack, birth the kits and raise them until they are weaned. This will be your hardening, like Sherrod and Carabin had theirs. And like your father had his, and our Uncle Bilek before him. Each J'Tar has this time to become a fierce protector. I worried about you because you were softer than your brothers, and I wondered how you would learn what the other J'Tars learned.”

“But they had each other during their time in the wild,” Riana objected.

“I was alone,” her father disagreed. “Uncle Bilek could not leave the Zanath. He prepared me as best he could, and then I tested myself in the wild. I learned how to protect Oberroth. I owed it to him to become fierce. Uncle Bilek did the same before me.”

“But I have not been prepared.” Her protest sounded weak

even to herself.

“You heard your brothers talk for weeks when they returned. You know what they experienced and how they handled everything that happened to them. They were only loosely associated with the pack, because they were young males. You are a female, a pregnant one. The alpha and the other males will protect you with their lives. So will the rest of the pack. Your time will be a bit easier than what your brothers went through.”

“But I do not want to birth kits!”

Oberroth squeezed her hand. “Riana, the kits you carry are innocent of any wrongdoing. If you purposely allow your body to abort them, you will have killed innocents just to make you feel better. J'Tars kill those who threaten Rubiya or the Zanath or his family. They do not take the lives of innocents.”

A tear slid down her cheek. “I am so afraid. Even more afraid than when the poachers chased me in Durrior yesterday.”

Her father stiffened beside her. “You crossed the border?”

Riana lowered her head, ashamed now of her careless behavior. “I wanted to find Jaxtars away from the alpha's territory.”

Her father squeezed her hand tight. “Riana, you could have been killed!”

“I know. The arrows came very close. They killed the Jaxtar I was with.”

Carabin knelt in front of her and laid a hand on her knee. His green eyes were shocked.

“Poachers are another reason I want you to learn how to take care of yourself,” Oberroth continued. “I want you to learn how to fight and how to kill. I do not want you to hesitate when you sense danger. I want your response to be instinctive. You are almost old enough to guard my family, but I need you to be ready when it is time to serve. I think you have things to learn before then, things your father and mother have not taught you because you are female. They loved you so much they did not want you to suffer hardship.”

Her father's green eyes stared into her uncle's blue ones. “It was not wrong to love her.”

Oberroth shook his head and his black braids swung. “No, love is never wrong. But to hold back tempering with a J’Tar can be fatal for more than just her.”

“You believe I failed you?” her father asked.

Oberroth reached across her and clasped her father’s arm. The love between the brothers had been strong all Riana’s life. She felt it between them now.

“You have never failed me, brother. You will not fail me in this. It is time for Riana’s tempering, as all previous J’Tars before her have done.”

“The kits?” her father asked.

The Zanath clasped Riana’s hand once more. “No one but those of us in this room need know you are pregnant, Riana. You can carry the kits to term in secret. When it is time to deliver them, you will not need a healer or midwife, because birth is natural in the wild. It will take two years from now until the kits are weaned. During that time you will live with the Jaxtar pack and they will protect you. No male will bother you like they did the past two days. The alpha will protect his own. And all the J’Tars will check on your progress, so you need not fear we have deserted you. You will not be alone.”

Riana swallowed. “Two years?”

Oberroth nodded. “It is longer than your brothers spent in the wild, but you must wait until the kits are weaned until you return. They must have every opportunity to survive in the wild, just as you will have. Do you agree to do this?”

She dropped her head. She didn’t want to do this, but her uncle was right. J’Tars did not kill innocents, and the kits inside her were there because of her irresponsibility. They had done nothing wrong, and she couldn’t deny them their lives. Poachers killed enough Jaxtars each year. She wouldn’t add to that number.

Riana nodded. Two years of exile instead of one. Her brothers had had each other... She looked into her father’s loving green eyes. Her father had been all alone, yet he had survived to become the Zanath’s bodyguard.

“I will go.”

Oberroth gusted a sigh. “Good. Carabin, go fetch your

mother.”

Carabin jumped to his feet and ran to the door. He flung it open and darted out into the hall, his black braids sailing out behind him.

“Riana, I ask you for one more favor.”

She already felt like she was being torn apart inside. She did not think she could handle anything else.

“I want the Aurekar to bind you in the Jaxtar form. I do not want you to forget and change form.”

“I would not do that!”

“I want to be sure. Your life and the kits’ lives may depend on it.”

She dreaded being caged in her Jaxtar form. How ironic that just yesterday she had felt the opposite.

“Riana?” her father urged. “Changing shape is natural for us. Have you ever resisted the urge to be your other half?”

No, she’d never resisted. Sometimes she even changed form in her sleep while she dreamed. The Zanath was right. It had to be done. “All right. Bind me.”

“Get the Aurekar,” the Zanath ordered the guard outside the door.

Her father put his arm around her. “Do not tell your mother about the kits, Riana. I will tell her later. Let this farewell be a happy one for both of you.”

As though her father’s words had conjured her, her mother strode through the door, followed by Carabin. Her sable hair, the same color as Riana’s, was braided in an intricate coronet around her head. She wore a bright blue dress in honor of her brother’s state visit. She was still slender, even after giving birth to three children. Her gaze went first to Curran and she smiled. Then her smile faded as she took in the males’ serious faces.

“What is going on? Has something happened?” She approached Curran and took hold of his hand.

“Love,” her father addressed her mother with that special note of affection in his voice. “Riana has decided she wants to spend time with the Jaxtar pack.”

“But I thought we discussed this and because she is

female..." Her mother's voice petered out as she stared at her mate.

Riana thought they held some private communion. They were mates, so perhaps they did.

"We will discuss this later," her father agreed, nodding. "It is best that Riana leave as soon as possible for the pack."

Her mother turned to Riana. Her hazel eyes were more green than gold. "Riana?"

Riana stood and threw herself into her mother's arms. "Momma."

Her mother held her tightly. "I wish I was a Jaxtar like your father and brothers. I missed Sherrod and Carabin when they went away. I will miss you, too. I love you."

Tears trickled down Riana's face. "I love you, too."

"Remember me telling you I spent a year in seclusion with my weapons master when I was a little older than you?" her mother asked. "My stepfather disapproved, but I knew what I wanted and knew what I had to do to get there. I trained hard every day and learned everything my master could teach me, and it made me a stronger woman." Her mother had been a bodyguard before she became the J'Tar's mate. She and Riana's father had trained all their children to be skilled in the use of weapons.

She gave Riana a comforting squeeze. "You will be a strong J'Tar, like your father and your brothers."

"Yes, I will be strong, like all of my family."

Her mother stroked Riana's hair. "I wish there was another way to make you strong, but a weapons master is not enough for a J'Tar."

"I wish that as well." But Riana knew there wasn't any other way, and she knew it was critical she become strong. She'd almost become the victim of the poachers, and she had become the victim of the two Jaxtars. What had happened to her was horrible, but it was due to her own immaturity. She had to grow up, and she knew that she would never do that in the loving arms of her family. They all loved her too much to turn her into the J'Tar she needed to be. She hated what her uncle was forcing her to do, but she admitted that he was right.

Carabin addressed their father. "Are you sure this is the right thing to do?"

"The Zanath commands and we serve. That is what J'Tars do," her father reminded them. "Some commands we do not understand, but the Zanath is wiser than us. I know from experience." He shared a look with his brother.

"The Zanath dictated I should have your mother as my wife. I did not want a wife."

Amara stepped closer to him, and her father wrapped his arm around her mother.

Carabin snorted with laughter.

"Your mother took the J'Tar as her mate and received her first child into her body. That was your brother Sherrod. Then came you, Carabin, and finally Riana. My life is fuller and richer with your mother in it. The Zanath was right." He kissed Amara with a passion that sizzled in the room.

Her parents still did things they might not want to do. Her mother's dress and hair were more ornate than the tan colors and braids she preferred because the Zanath said they should dress their best for Prince Bryal's visit. Riana knew her parents preferred she should stay where they could protect her, but because it was for the best, they were letting her go.

Riana turned toward the sound of running feet, and her stomach clenched with nerves. The Aurekar hurried into the room. He was a middle-aged man with light brown hair dressed in purple robes. The Zanath strode to the Aurekar and spoke quietly to him. The mage nodded.

Her father turned to Riana. "Change into the Jaxtar, sweeting. It is time for you to go."

Riana looked around at her family. Their eyes were full of sadness and love. Healer Blanath nodded his head in agreement. The Aurekar waited patiently. Everyone in this room, including the healer and mage, had had an apprenticeship to learn their trade. Her trade was keeping the ruling family alive so that Rubiya prospered in peace. She'd sworn a solemn oath at age five to follow in the J'Tar tradition which was seven generations old. She'd known what she was doing when she gave her oath to the Zanath. She'd known it would mean sacrifices. She

swallowed and changed into the Jaxtar before she could cry.

The Aurekar raised his arms to spell cast. She felt the aura of magic on her fur and knew herself bound.

Oberroth strode to her and laid his hand on her head. “I am proud of you for doing this. My J’Tars are my strong right arm.”

Her mother knelt and hugged her. “I love you, baby.”

Riana nuzzled her face.

Her father knelt next and wrapped her in his strong embrace. “I love you, little bit of my heart.”

She choked at the endearment he used for all his children.

His voice sounded husky as he continued. “Do as the Zanath commands. We are part Jaxtar for strength and speed to protect the Zanath and his family. We must be willing to kill if necessary. You must learn how to be a strong J’Tar. When this training is over, return to us as a mature woman and we will hold you in our arms again. Until then, your brothers and I will watch over you.”

Riana nodded, and he hugged her again. “Come. I will run with you all the way to the pack. The alpha will take care of you until you are human once again.”

Carabin knelt, hugged her tight and rubbed his face against hers.

Then her father changed into a Jaxtar, and she ran with him out of the castle as she had since she was a kit.

All she’d wanted was to be free and to be anything but royal. For the next two years, she would be neither.

One

Something about her caught Arkady's eye. The young woman with the sable braids paused by a green-veined marble pillar in the castle's great ballroom and became completely still mid-step. He waited for her to waver, but there wasn't a quiver in her body. She had perfect balance. *Unusual in a female so young.* Her stillness struck an answering cord in him.

She did not seem to fit at the wedding festivities. Her silky dress was painfully plain compared to those of the women around her. She wore no jewelry, no colored beads in her braids, no shiny metal belt. Her soft shoes were unadorned. Her knife belt was her only accoutrement, and the knife it held was no dainty eating implement. Hers was a wicked six-inch blade.

The young woman turned her head and looked unerringly at him, as though she'd known he was watching. Arkady was snared by bright green eyes that set a question to her parentage. Only J'Tar Curran and his children had eyes that color in Rubiya, but she could not be his child. Arkady had met both his sons. She couldn't be a bastard, not when the J'Tar and his mate were doubly bound together. There was no possibility in their relationship for unfaithfulness. So who was this girl, and why was she at the wedding of the J'Tar's oldest son Sherrod?

As she pinned Arkady with her gaze, he froze, his own stillness a match to hers. He enacted magic protections by instinct, even though there was no threat. Yet, she was dangerous. He could tell that from where he stood. There was a wildness about her he'd seen only in animals trapped in cages.

Her green eyes clouded and she looked away. She stepped forward, and the crowd in the ballroom swallowed her.

Arkady caught the sleeve of his master, healer Blanath. "Who was that young woman?" He nodded his head towards the pillar.

Blanath followed the direction of his nod, and then turned back with narrowed brown eyes. "That was J'Tar Riana. Stay

away from her. She is wild.”

Surprise and shock jolted through Arkady’s body. “J’Tar? There are no female J’Tars.”

“Riana is J’Tar. Youngest of J’Tar Curran’s children by his mate Amara. Servant to the Zanath and the Zanath’s children.” Blanath recited her lineage like a litany.

So the eye color bred true in the J’Tar line. It was an inane thought that bubbled out of the turbulent mess in Arkady’s brain. He controlled his racing pulse with difficulty. A female J’Tar! “But why have I never seen her before? I have been here more than a year.”

“By order of the Zanath, she ran with the wild Jaxtars for the past two years.” Blanath’s thoughts turned inward and his brows drew together at what he saw. His eyes filled with a pitying sadness. “She is almost completely feral now. She returned a few days ago, while you were tending to the villagers in the south.”

Arkady’s head snapped around to look for her. “But she is hardly more than a girl! What manner of cruelty would order a young girl to live as a wild animal?”

“She was the softest of the J’Tars, coddled by her parents too much because she was a girl. She needed hardening like the male J’Tars had received. The Zanath knew that. She must protect the Zanath’s line. Now she can kill almost anyone or anything.”

Blanath frowned as he continued. “I do not think the Zanath planned for her to go feral.”

“Two years in the wild will do that to the strongest of men. And she was just a girl.” Her brother Carabin was only twenty. That made her no older than nineteen. Arkady thought she was younger than that.

Blanath’s brown eyes hardened. “She is a woman fully grown, in every way. Stay away from her.”

“But perhaps she needs healing to make her less wild,” Arkady argued.

“No one can heal sorrow of the heart. Only time can heal that. And time will tame her.”

Blanath moved to his right to speak to people he knew,

but Arkady remained where he was. What sorrow of the heart could a young woman have? Surely not a love affair gone wrong, not for a J'Tar. He rubbed the circular scar over his heart, easing the ache that never completely disappeared. His was a sorrow of the heart. But a solution had just presented itself with bright green eyes.

Riana slipped in between her mother and father, and they wrapped their arms around her. She couldn't stop shaking. She leaned her head into the crook of her father's neck beneath his black braids. If this wasn't her oldest brother's wedding, she wouldn't stay here.

"It is all right, Riana." Her father's husky rumble soothed her. "You are safe here."

"Too many humans," she whispered, her own voice just as husky from disuse.

"Sherrod wanted you to be here for his marriage," her father said. "He planned the ceremony for when you would return. We did not know you would be this jittery."

"I am glad he waited, but there are so many people here and so much noise. It was not like this in the forest. If I could be a Jaxtar..."

"No. You will frighten the guests," her mother remonstrated gently. Her hazel eyes were more gold than green at the moment, full of happiness and pride. "Picture the moves for defense in your mind. They will bring calm to you."

"I would rather practice them. I have my knife with me," Riana hinted.

Her father laughed. "No, sweeting. We cannot leave the celebration to practice knife fighting, no matter how enjoyable it might be."

He shared an intimate look with her mother and Riana turned her head away. She felt their mate bond like heat on her skin. It enclosed them in a world of their own, with Riana on the outside. All her life she'd known her parents were a mated pair, biologically bound deeper than any marriage vow. It was the Jaxtar way to mate for life.

Yet, watching them now caused pain in her heart. There

would be no mate for her. There was no room for that kind of all-consuming love, not when she was filled with raw, gaping grief at the loss of her kits. They had left her to run wild until they found a pack of their own. She had loved them without reserve, but they had walked away one morning and hadn't come back. They hadn't loved her in return, hadn't been capable of it. No, she would be alone all her life.

She clutched her breasts. Her milk was drying up, but her breasts still ached. Only a few days ago she'd suckled her kits.

Her mother looked at her face, then down at her chest. Her face softened. "You are spotting, Riana. You had better change your dress and put thicker pads in the bodice of the next one. Call for the healer if you need him. He will understand."

Riana nodded and turned, but her mother's hand stopped her. "It will not last long, Riana. Mine did not after I finished suckling each of you."

"The shared pain of motherhood," she answered bitterly and whirled away. She sensed her mother's hurt, but she didn't turn back.

Once out of the ballroom she picked up her skirt and ran. But the bouncing of her milk-filled breasts was painful and she slowed to a walk again. She crossed her arms over them to stop the ache.

Climbing the steps to her room, Riana vowed not to return to the celebration. She loved her brother Sherrod, but she couldn't take any more tonight. In the hall where the sleeping quarters were, she stopped a servant, a gray-haired woman with a plain face.

"Would you find the healer, please? I am not feeling well. I will be in my room."

"Yes, J'Tar," the older woman said. She bowed and headed for the stairs.

Riana entered her room and closed the door. It was a small, spartan room, not the suite she'd grown up in. She didn't want remnants of her childhood to remind her every day of what she'd lost.

She pulled off her soiled gown, poured water into a bowl and soaked the bodice so the milk stains wouldn't set. She looked in the reflective glass as she prodded the dress in the water. Her breasts strained, the areoles and nipples were huge since childbirth. She couldn't pass as a maiden any more.

There was a knock at the door. "J'Tar?" It was the servant's voice. "I brought the healer."

"Just a moment." Riana threw on a dressing gown and tied it shut. "Come in."

The door opened and a young man entered. He had wavy dark hair with a white widow's peak and golden eyes. The servant stood in the hall behind him.

Riana clutched the lapels of her dressing gown tightly together.

"Who are you? You are not the healer."

"I am his apprentice, Arkady. The servant said you were unwell. How can I help you?" He rolled his words with a lilting accent she couldn't place. Not of Rubiya though.

He stepped toward her, and she growled in the back of her throat. He stopped and stiffened. "I am here to help you, J'Tar."

"I do not know you. Get out." She looked at the wide-eyed servant behind him. "I want Healer Blanath."

The woman wrung her hands. "But J'Tar, you said a healer. He is a healer."

"It is all right," Arkady said to the servant, his tone soothing. "The J'Tar surely remembers me from earlier?" The last was said to Riana.

Riana's eyes widened. He was the young man from the ballroom who'd stared at her so intently. He'd been standing beside Healer Blanath.

"He is my master. Let me help you, J'Tar Riana."

He knew her name, but they had not been introduced.

"My master told me who you were. The servant has work to do. Will you have her stand there in the hall?"

Riana addressed the older woman. "You may go." The woman bowed her head and moved off out of sight. Riana then looked at the man. "You may go, too. I do not need a healer."

Arkady closed the door with a soft *snick*. “Tell me what ails you.” He took a step towards her.

She took a step back. “Nothing ails me.”

He looked past her to the dress soaking in the basin. Then he looked at her. She couldn’t stop her arms from crossing across her breasts.

His eyes widened. “You are nursing! You have had a child.” He looked around the room, then back at her. “Where is it? Is it a boy or girl?”

“I have no child,” she gritted. His words stabbed her like knives, but he had no way to know that he was hurting her.

“Your robe is wet from milk. Shall I have the servant bring your child to you?”

“There is no child.” She bit off each word.

His eyes grew sympathetic. “Was it stillborn? You are quite young to have had a baby. Do you need herbs to stop the milk?”

“Yes,” she snarled.

He placed his herb satchel on the bed and pulled out packets, searching for what he wanted. “How long are you out of childbed?”

Riana bit her lip and refused to answer. When the silence lengthened, he looked up from his satchel. There was a question in his golden eyes. “J’Tar?”

“The herbs, please.” She covered both breasts with one arm and reached out the other hand to him.

He looked down her body, then back up to her eyes. She feared what knowledge he found there.

“You are slender to the point of unhealthiness. You have run with the Jaxtars for two years.”

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. How did he know these things? She’d never seen him before tonight.

“You birthed no baby, yet you have been nursing.” He studied her again. “Kits?”

She almost screamed her pain, but bit her lip to keep the sound in. She clutched her body tighter.

“When did you wean them?” he asked softly.

“Three days ago.” The words came out on a sigh.

“Ah. And today you are a human again after two years.

Do you miss your kits?"

"They left me." Her words were stark, like her life now.

"They were male?"

"Yes. It is the way of nature that male felines leave the pack to find a pack of their own."

"Did you love them?"

"They were kits, not children."

"You nursed them for over a year. You must have felt something for them."

"I had to raise them to maturity. I was part of their food source. I was their protection. I kept them warm in the winter. I taught them to survive." *I would have died for them.*

"You raised yourself to maturity as well. How did you become pregnant with kits? You must have been very young."

"What happened to me is not your business. It is the Zanath's business." Her tone was strained. No one was supposed to know. She was supposed to suffer this secret pain in silence.

"I see." He turned back to prowl his long fingers through his satchel until he had three packets laid out on the bed. He tucked the other packets away. "Do you know how to make a poultice?"

"Yes."

"Combine these two into a poultice. It will relieve the swelling and the ache." He handed her two packets, wrapping his warm fingers around her chilled ones. "Mix a spoonful of this one into water and drink it each day for the next four days. That will dry up the milk. Do you want me to make the poultices and apply them? I am a trained healer."

"No. Leave me." Riana felt ready to fall apart. She wanted him gone before that happened.

His eyes were fathomless, full of deep mystery. "If you ever want to talk about what happened to you..."

"I will not."

"Good night, J'Tar Riana." He opened the door, went through it and closed it behind him.

After he was gone, Riana threw herself onto the bed, turned her face into her pillow and sobbed out her sorrow. It wouldn't

help, only drain a little of it from her body so she could go on for a few more hours. Had she known losing her kits would hurt this much, she would not have agreed to the Zanath's plan.

Arkady leaned against the wall outside Riana's room and breathed deeply. He listened to the muffled sobs from inside and clenched his fists. The hurt coming off Riana was palpable. Pregnant at sixteen by a Jaxtar, she'd probably been overpowered by a larger male. But who had decided she should have the kits? The only one powerful enough to force her would be the Zanath. Blanath said the Zanath ordered her to run with the pack for the past two years. Was it so she could raise the kits until they were weaned? How cruel!

She'd been forced into motherhood and then her kits had abandoned her. They'd left her with aching arms, aching breasts and an aching heart. Sorrow of the heart, indeed.

Healing power moved through him, seeking release. If he could have touched her breasts he could have healed them. But she was wild. She wouldn't be touched, especially by a male. He would have to tame her.

He sighed and pressed his cheek against the cool stone. The questions that had plagued his current life had answers now. The reason he was a Jaxtar once more, yet trapped in a human body, lay crying on the other side of the wall. His mate. The gods had not forsaken him when he asked to live his final life as a Jaxtar or as J'Tar. They'd fashioned him to be Riana's mate. They'd given him healing power because Riana needed healing. They'd drawn him to Rubiya to fulfill the destiny they'd planned for him. His life would be sacrificed once more, this time to Riana. He wouldn't fight it, just as he hadn't fought death the first time.

It would take a lot of work to become her mate, but they could not be together any other way, not when he lived under the aegis of the gods. His erection burned with fierce arousal, pressing against his soft trousers. He needed to be one with Riana, to bury his cock deep within the depths of her body and let her claim his life as hers. He could hardly wait to give himself to her. Somehow she would make him a true Jaxtar

once more.

Memories surged through him, of him as a kit, suckling at his mother's teat. He longed to suckle Riana's breasts and taste mother's milk again. But he wasn't a kit anymore, hadn't been in many years. A lifetime ago. He rubbed the scar. Eight lifetimes ago. Before he was what he was now.

Arkady pushed away from the wall. Riana's breasts were not for him. Not yet. He sought Blanath in the ballroom and drew him into a quiet alcove.

"How did J'Tar Riana become pregnant with kits?" he asked bluntly.

Blanath's brown eyes widened. "Who told you that?"

"She did. She asked for the healer. Well?"

"Prurient interest, Arkady?" Blanath raised an eyebrow.

"No. That girl was badly hurt. I want to know how."

Blanath shook his head. "It is not your business."

"My business is healing," Arkady insisted.

"She is the business of the Zanath. Stay away from her."

Two

Riana knew who watched her—the healer’s apprentice, Arkady. She felt his eyes on her in the castle courtyard like an irritating itch and she hated it. Many people were leery of her now, and they should be. Many people stared at her when they saw her. They were curious, disturbed, afraid. She shrugged off their scrutiny as best she could, but she hated prying eyes. There was no freedom when other people spied on her every move. And she desperately needed freedom.

But *his* eyes never rested or wavered. Wherever she went around the castle or village, he seemed to be there. She didn’t know why he watched her. He just did. His gold eyes were patient and a little sad. Always there was some strange emotion in his gaze she couldn’t identify. It was strong and it made her quiver with trepidation.

And that made her angry. Who was he to judge her, if that was what he was doing, or to look at her in an acquisitive way? She was free and intended to stay that way. If he hoped to gain position or power through her, she’d make him sorry he aspired. He knew she wasn’t a maiden, so maybe he thought she would lie with anyone now. Well she wouldn’t—not ever—and he’d die trying.

Arkady stepped down from the stone staircase onto the cobblestones of the castle courtyard. For a moment his gold eyes reflected the sunlight like two bright orbs. Then he lowered his lids a little and the light diminished. He wore fawn brown tunic and trousers as though he wanted to camouflage himself in the courtyard.

“J’Tar Riana.” His voice was rough, more like the growl of a young Jaxtar cat.

“Be on your way, healer,” she warned him.

He advanced toward her slowly across the tan stone. “You can trust me. I am sworn to heal.”

“You are you a stranger.”

“I am no stranger, J’Tar.”

“You are to me. I have spoken to you twice, seen you little more times than that. I know nothing about you.”

“I will tell you anything you want to know. You have but to ask.”

“I am not interested in you. I want to be left alone.”

He cocked his head and a dark wavy lock fell over his forehead. “Just you and your anger? Or you and your grief?”

“Who are you to judge me?” she snapped.

“I do not judge you, Riana.” He moved closer to her. “How can I know what you have suffered? How can you know what I might have suffered?” There was a poignant note in his voice that called to her.

She hardened her heart against it. “Just so,” she agreed. “I say I need to be alone with my feelings.”

“I could heal you, Riana. You need not spend so long grieving.”

“I do not need healing!” she snapped. “I need time. Why should my time be shortened because you judge it less important?”

Arkady moved within touching distance. She tensed, should he try to touch her.

“Easy, J'Tar. You are safe with me.”

“You dare too much.”

“No, I dare what I must.” He reached a hand out to her.

Before he touched her, she changed into the Jaxtar. He would not try his wiles on her in this form. She snarled, warning him again.

“I am not afraid of the cat, J'Tar.” He knelt on the ground before her. Slowly, slowly he reached out his hand.

Riana snarled twice more. Why wasn't he afraid like most men? What did he hope to prove? She refused to run from him, and for some reason, she didn't just bite him, although instinct urged her to.

Arkady touched her fur. “Mark me if you must, J'Tar. I will not fight you. But I wish you would not.”

Damn him and his gentle ways. She did not want to be gentled. She wanted to roar her rage and pain. She wanted to shred things with her claws. She wanted others to hurt like she

did.

“Hurting others will not help you to feel better.”

Riana snapped her teeth at him. He reached out again slowly and stroked the fur on her face.

Trembling began deep inside her. Her storm could not be diminished by him. Her fire would not be doused.

“There will be peace for you, lady. I swear it.”

Riana jerked away from him and ran towards the line of trees that marked the forest edge behind the castle. How could *he* promise anything? He wasn't the Zanath, or a mage or anyone of consequence. He was only an apprentice.

When she looked back, Arkady still knelt on the tan cobblestones, as though he'd expected her to take a last look. He could not know her, just as she did not know him.

She snarled and ran between the trees.

Arkady watched her go and then sank to his hands and knees when she was out of sight. She did not recognize the power of his magic when he used it to send healing through his touch. It hadn't been much magic, but it had taken more energy than he'd thought it would to ease a little of her grief. She roiled with it like a hurricane off the coast of Mabrelle. It made her lash out in anger instead of accepting comfort from others.

She needed that sorrow drawn out like the poison it was. If he could touch her a little every day, he could heal that wound.

Arkady climbed to his feet and brushed off his knees. He walked around the castle and took the village road. Healing magic still coursed in his body, trying to get out, like waves crashing against the shore. The Jaxtar mate bond throbbed in him in counterpoint to the magic. It felt wonderful to feel it for the very first time. In his original Jaxtar form, he hadn't yet achieved maturity to claim a mate before a mage joined the cat with him in the J'Tar spell. The mage had lived a long life but had never taken a mate.

Then Arkady had lost his connection with the Jaxtar. The other lives he'd led—soldier, scholar, slave and more—those men forgot who he was inside. When and if they married, it

was for expediency. They did not seek a mate or feel the instinctive pull that Arkady felt for Riana. They made sterile unions because they forgot what Arkady could not—he was a Jaxtar. His mate must be a Jaxtar, too.

Around a bend in the dirt road the village houses appeared. A little child jumped off the stoop in front of her white cottage and ran to him.

“Healer Arkady, did you see the Zanath?” She fell into step beside him.

He looked down at the curly-haired ragamuffin with the dirty face. “No, Argine, I did not. The Zanath is a busy man. Besides, I did not go to the castle to see him.”

“Did you see any J'Tars?” Her piping voice was wistful.

“I saw J'Tar Riana.”

Her blue eyes opened wide. “Were you afraid?”

“No, I was not afraid and you should not be either.”

“But she snarls and runs away from people.”

“J'Tar Riana lived in the wild for two years. Did your parents not tell you the tale?” He wished someone had told *him* the tale.

The little girl scrunched her face. “To harden her. A J'Tar protects the Zanath and his family,” she recited.

“That is correct. But Riana was a young girl, not so much older than you. She had to live without her parents and the Zanath to protect her. She will stop snarling soon, when she gets used to humans again.”

“Truly?”

“Yes.”

The tot smiled, showing missing teeth. “Healer Blanath is looking for you.”

“Then I had better go to my master. Thank you, Argine.”

Arkady walked the length of the few houses to Blanath's cottage. The healer was in his garden picking herbs. He looked up as Arkady approached.

“You found them in the still room?”

“Yes, Master Blanath.” Arkady unhooked the pouch of herbs from his belt and handed it to the healer.

“Thanks, Arkady. You did not have any problems at the

castle?”

Arkady had a suspicion what his master meant. “What kind of problem?”

“J’Tar Riana is angry. She has snarled at a number of villagers.”

“She snarled at me too.” Arkady shrugged. “It did not frighten me.”

Blanath gave him a sharp look. “Where did you see Riana?”

“Oh,” Arkady said nonchalantly, “when I came out of the lower door of the castle. I do not think she wanted me there.”

“I am not sure what she wants, but until she is happy once more, we will take the brunt of her displeasure.”

“I know I could heal her if only she would let me close enough.”

Blanath gave him a disapproving look. “I told you to stay away from her. Do I need to make it an order?”

Arkady ducked his head in obeisance. “No, master.” There was no man’s order that could keep him from Riana, not when it was the gods’ fate that they be together.

Blanath threw an arm around Arkady’s shoulders. “You are a good apprentice, Arkady. Better than I was. You are a fine healer already. The position as healer here so close to the castle is the best one in Rubiya. Learn from me, obey me and heed my advice. You will be much happier that way.”

Arkady nodded, seemingly giving Blanath what he wanted. But when Arkady was alone once more, he examined the problem of Riana’s unhappiness. He could not make her less angry at her family. They hadn’t foreseen how she would feel about her kits; therefore, they had to deal with her wrath. It was up to them to obtain forgiveness.

But he could lessen her grief. Argine and Blanath had unwittingly given him the answer. Riana wanted her kits, but she couldn’t have them. She wanted someone to mold, love and teach. She would accept a human child of her own body in place of her kits, but someone would have to sire one on her.

Luckily for him, he could breed J’Tar on Riana while she was in her Jaxtar form. Not so lucky was her aversion to males.

He'd have to accustom her to him before he offered to give her a child. That would be difficult, but not impossible. He knew what she wanted now and guessed she would give up her aversion to men for a child.

A new generation of J'Tar would be born of his loins. Arkady felt almost giddy with the knowledge. He would have issue, a Jaxtar lover, and in time, a mate. All his prayers would be answered if he was patient and let the prize come to him.

Three

“Riana.” Her father called her name using an authoritative tone, one he used when he was the Zanath’s bodyguard. He’d never used that tone with her before, not even on *that* day.

Riana paused on the stone steps leading up to the main floor of the castle. She shuddered, remembering that time. Then anger consumed her. “Yes, J’Tar Curran?” She used her coldest voice and his given name, instead of calling him father.

There was a distinct pause as her father perhaps reorganized his thoughts, and Riana bemoaned the loss of her childhood here. Her childhood had been carefree, and she could not have felt more loved. But this man had helped to end all that. He’d backed the Zanath’s decision to send her to have her heart broken. A few days ago she’d been so happy to see him and her mother. Now she wanted to hurt him for putting her through this misery.

“Riana, you are frightening the villagers and the servants with your displeasure.”

She turned to face him. He was dressed in his usual black silk tunic and trousers. The jade beads in his braids matched his eyes. Her mother’s doing, probably. For the first time she noted the few white hairs that peppered his braids. When had he grown older? She hardened her heart.

“Am I to pretend a happiness I do not feel?”

“You are back home again. You have every reason to be happy.”

“And just like that the past two years are erased?”

“Not erased. Learned from. You are stronger than before. The Zanath is pleased.”

“Pleased,” she almost spat the word. “How wonderful that he is pleased at my expense.”

“Riana,” her father snapped. His green eyes were cold as winter. “You will not speak that way.”

Riana narrowed her eyes. “You have no authority over me.”

“I am your father.”

“I am of legal age to make my own decisions. I am no longer under your authority.”

His black brows pulled together. “I will always be your father.”

Regret and loss slashed her. More loss. How many more losses could she take and survive? “I am your equal now. Only one man can command me.”

Sadness tinged his eyes as he looked at her. “Then let us go to him.”

He tried to take hold of her arm, something he'd done all her life, but she wouldn't let him. She walked with her father down the wide hallway to the Zanath's office. Her uncle sat behind his desk studying some papers. Her cousin Bilek, the future Zanath, sat beside him. Her brother Carabin stood behind him in their father's customary bodyguard position.

Her uncle Oberroth lay down his quill and studied them as they approached. His blue eyes sharpened as he glanced from his brother to her.

“There is a problem?” the Zanath asked.

“Son,” her father addressed Carabin, “Please leave us. Bilek, you too.”

Carabin's young forehead furrowed as he looked at her. “Are you sure?”

“Go,” her father ordered.

Carabin walked out from behind the desk. He brushed past her, stroking her hand in support. The gesture made her throat tight with emotion. Her cousin gave her a curious look before he followed her brother out. The door shut behind them with a click.

“Does this have to do with the complaints I have begun to receive every day about Riana?” the Zanath asked.

“J'Tar Riana answers only to the Zanath now,” her father explained.

The Zanath steepled his fingers. “So you are emancipated from your parents?”

Riana lifted her chin. “Yes. I lived in the wild without them for two years.” Bitterness dripped from her words. “I learned too well how to be an adult.”

“This is the reason for your bad behavior around the castle and the village?” her uncle asked.

“Yes,” she spat the word. “I was exiled from the people I loved, forced to form attachments and depend on people who did not love me in return. My family moved on without me. My oldest brother fell in love while I was gone. I do not even know the woman he married. I never saw my mother. I think I have the right to be angry.”

“You may not take your anger out on servants and villagers. They are innocent. Your behavior is not what I expect of a J’Tar.”

Riana pointed to her chest. “Was I J’Tar for the past two years? You stripped that from me, too. You made me foresworn. Why should I pick up my duties once more when you treat the title so lightly?”

“Riana!” her father admonished.

The Zanath silenced his brother with a hand signal. “I explained to you why you had to go. You agreed with me and said you understood. You got the seasoning you needed to be a strong J’Tar. For a short time you got to experience the joy of motherhood...”

Riana saw her uncle through a red haze. “Do not speak of that to me!”

Her uncle’s eyes narrowed and he frowned. “You are angry about the kits?”

“They were mine!” The fierceness of her statement surprised even her.

“It is the nature of kits to mature and leave their mother. They are animals. You knew that would happen before you went to the pack.”

“Do not try to use logic on something you do not understand.”

“Ah, you formed an attachment to them. I did not foresee that.”

“Attachment,” she derided. “Such a small word to describe love.”

Her father tried to put his arm around her, but she shrugged it off. There was a storm inside her that spewed violence. She

didn't want to be gentled, didn't want his love or sympathy.

"Riana," the Zanath began in a gentler voice. "They were Jaxtar cats, not human children, not J'Tar. They felt no emotion for you."

"We love our dogs and horses. Why would you think I would not love my own offspring?"

A look of chagrin passed between her uncle and father. Damn them and their unthinking male minds. Her mother and aunt would have known and understood. Damn the males' quick decision-making that didn't wait for a woman's input. Her mother hadn't been far away. She might have warned them and Riana.

Riana yearned to go to her mother and bawl out her pain in loving arms. In fact, she turned slightly to do just that.

"Riana?"

Her father's voice brought reality crashing down once more. Her mother was innocent of wrongdoing. She'd suffered over their separation. She didn't need to suffer further by hearing her daughter's pain. Her mother could not change the past. Besides, first and foremost, her mother was her father's mate, half of him. There was no division between them. Her mother might sympathize, but she would stand with her father.

Her Aunt Raya shared a close relationship with the Zanath. If Riana spilled her pain to Raya, she would get a respite from her pain, but no satisfaction, no restitution, no vengeance, no justice.

"I will leave this place," she murmured. Perhaps she could go far away to pour out her grief to the wind until there was none left.

"No!" her father declared.

"J'Tar Riana, you must stay," the Zanath commanded. "Take refuge in your duties. Perhaps that will help you forget the past two years and reawaken old ties."

Riana looked from her uncle to her father. They were the two most powerful men in Rubiya, yet they didn't understand her needs. Only another mother who'd lost her child could feel what she felt. Yet her children still lived...

"As the Zanath commands," she said, bowing her head

with pretended obedience.

Riana turned and strode from the Zanath's office. She needed her children. She'd find them and bring them home. Why hadn't it occurred to her before? She changed shape and left the castle. She left grief and anger behind as she ran.

Arkady felt a spurt of warmth at the sight of the village. He kicked his heels gently into his horse. The placid gelding whinnied but obediently picked up the pace. After a week away, Arkady wanted his own cottage and bed, but more than that, he wanted to see Riana.

A little child let out a yell and several others took up the call. Two children ran towards the other end of the village. The first child ran towards him. Arkady sat up straighter in the saddle, alerted by the lookout. Normally, his comings and goings weren't of particular interest to anyone.

"Healer Arkady, Healer Blanath wants to see you right away," the young lad shouted.

Fear shot through Arkady and he kicked the horse into a trot. He'd been sent to a western village to help the healer there deal with an outbreak of a strange, virulent fever. Was that same fever here in the village and Blanath needed him?

Blanath came out of his cottage with the two children trailing him. The hem of his light blue tunic flapped as he strode quickly into the road.

"What is it?" Arkady asked, sliding off the horse to the ground. "What is wrong?"

"Did you see J'Tar Riana anywhere on your route?" Blanath studied his face with earnest intent.

Arkady frowned. "No, I have not seen her in over a week. Why?"

"She is missing. The Zanath does not know where she has gone. He sent word to keep an eye out for her."

Arkady tried to remain calm and not let his roiling emotions show on his face. "I understand the J'Tars run free. They run with the wild Jaxtars for days. Why is the Zanath worried? How long has she been gone?"

Blanath shook his head. "J'Tars do not normally run for

more than three days at a time. Riana has been gone almost a week. The last time a J'Tar went missing, it was Curran and he had been grievously wounded by poachers."

Arkady gripped the reins hard. The small pain in his hand helped him focus. "Does the Zanath have reason to believe she has been set upon by poachers?"

"No. Actually, she threatened to leave Rubiya."

Arkady's sight darkened for a moment. Pain like he'd never felt in any of his deaths gripped his heart. Riana gone? Sundered from his mate permanently? The gods would not be so cruel.

"Arkady, are you all right?" Blanath had hold of his arm.

Arkady found he was leaning most of his weight against the horse. He pushed away. "I am all right. I was lightheaded for a moment. It was the stress of thinking the fever had reached here and the villagers were in danger. It has passed."

"You push yourself too hard to please me. I could not have asked for a better apprentice."

Arkady looked at Blanath in pleased surprise. "Thank you, Master Blanath. You make it easy to learn." He steered the conversation carefully back to Riana. "Why does Riana's family think she might leave Rubiya?"

Blanath looked in the direction of the castle. "The Zanath spoke to her about frightening the villagers. During the argument that followed, she threatened to leave. The Zanath got her agreement to stay, but she left anyway. Her family has searched for her for days without success."

Arkady had a good idea what the argument had been about. He was glad Riana was getting her anger out, but to break her word to the Zanath? Had she gone somewhere to grieve in private, somewhere where she wouldn't snarl at other people? Where?

He had to find her. "Did they check the Jaxtar pack she ran with for two years?" Arkady asked.

"Yes, they looked there first, but Riana was not there."

"I will keep an eye out for her," Arkady promised. "Perhaps some things were said in anger that Riana needed to think over." He looked at the eager listening children around them and posed his next statement as vaguely as possible. "It is her

grief talking, master. Loss makes people angry. She is human as well as J'Tar, and very young.”

Blanath nodded. “Yes, I know about humans and angry words.” He chuckled. “I have treated the results of angry conflicts several times.” Then he sobered. “I forget that Riana is more than J'Tar. My first experience with J'Tars was Curran. He never showed emotion until the day he was forced to mate. I forget that his children had a mother's love to soften them and make them more human.”

A mother's love. The words echoed in Arkady's mind long after he'd tended to the horse, bathed, ate and sat by the fire with his book on herbs. Everything with Riana came back to the source of her pain and need.

Arkady should have refused his master's request to go west and stayed near Riana. He could have soothed her enough to make her want to remain with her family. But he could not have refused Blanath and kept his position as apprentice. Curse his lack of status. He was not a healer in his own right yet. Until he was, he must do as his master bade him.

Curse also that he was not yet Riana's mate. He could not be with her at all times, could not go after her, nor could he offer her the solace of his body and his bed. He was forced to watch her struggle and suffer with her pain. It was a torment to him as well as her to be separated, when a melding of their bodies would help heal them both.

As nightfall descended, he sat by the small fire in the hearth searching with his heart for his mate. The magic inside him had no spell to locate lost things, so it could not help. Why he thought he could find her by following the mate bond, he couldn't say. But trying was better than worrying that he would spend the rest of his life searching for her.

The late June night gave back nothing but the sound of crickets and a bullfrog in a far off pond courting a mate. Arkady empathized with the male, but the frog probably had more success than Arkady did.

For awhile, he simply let his erect cock protrude out of his loosened drawstring trousers, warming the flesh by the fire, as though to prepare it for his mate. He was always startled to

see a flesh-colored cock instead of the almost-black one he'd been born with as a Jaxtar. This cock was special, just as this lifetime was special—because both belonged to Riana. But when she did not come to claim it or him, he stroked the smooth skin gently. She would touch him gently at first, as any maiden would with her first man.

He squeezed it as she would when she tried to learn its shape and texture. She would surround the base of his cock in her fist and stroke up to the tip. He groaned softly. He stroked upwards again. She would want to see his reaction and hear the sounds he made. He groaned for her.

Arkady cupped his balls as he knew Riana would do. She would want to explore everything between his legs and he wanted her to. He weighed and caressed his testicles. Good heft. He smiled in the firelight. There was plenty of seed to give her children and for the times when they simply wanted to make love. There would be much of the latter.

His cock drew his attention once more. He stroked the warm flesh. Riana would like him to be warm for her. He'd prefer to warm himself inside her heated sheath, stoking the fires inside both of them. He stroked and squeezed simultaneously, simulating his thrusts inside her tight body. She was a woman of fire and passion, with a lusty Jaxtar nature. She'd enjoy riding him. His hand rubbed over his balls and back up his cock again.

He stroked faster. Lust. Yes, there would be plenty of that between them. How else could two Jaxtars and two mates feel about each other? Their joinings would be instinctive, raw and animalistic. A drop of fluid glistened on the tip of his cock, a precursor of pleasure to come.

Arkady rubbed harder and squeezed. Her inner muscles would clamp tightly around him. She was honed and strong from years as a Jaxtar. Her thighs would glove his hips tightly or help her to ride when she was on top. Yes, she'd want the power of being on top.

His orgasm burned through his cock and spurted out onto his fist, warm and viscous. He groaned long and low. It would be so good with Riana.

He looked down at his hand around his flesh-colored cock. Was there anything lonelier than doing this while he waited for his mate to come to him? How many more days would this be his only source of satisfaction?

An owl hooted in the night. Another lonely soul.

Over the next few days Arkady took long walks or rides. He told the villagers it was to gather wild herbs, but he also looked for signs of Riana. If she returned, likely she'd come this way.

On the fourth day he heard someone crying in the deep woods. He slid from his horse, tethered the reins on a tree branch and moved forward cautiously. He knew it was Riana before he saw her. His heart sang with joy. She'd returned!

Riana lay on the green grass surrounding a sheltered pond. Her shoulders heaved with sobs that sounded like they were torn from her. Her sable braids had come partially undone. Her blue dress did not move in the breeze, so he knew it to be an illusion. Her feet were bare. She must have just changed from her Jaxtar form.

He glided silently through the grass towards her. He did not want to give her the chance to flee. But he wasn't silent enough. Her head jerked up and suddenly he was spared by wet green eyes.

"Get away!" she snarled.

"No." He walked to her side, unfazed by her hisses and growls. He sat in the grass beside her. "Where have you been?"

Had he struck her, he didn't think he would have received a more surprised look. She sat up and turned to face the pond.

"Searching."

"For what?"

"My children." It was a breath of sound said with "I dare you" fierceness.

"They were kits, not children," he said gently.

She turned to face him. "They came out of my womb, part of me. Therefore, they are my children."

Arkady nodded. "Yes, that is true. But how did you expect to communicate with them?"

She opened her hands. "I do not know."

"How do you think you would recognize them?"

Riana stopped plucking blades of grass and glared at him. "I think I would know my own children."

He crooked a brow. "Would you?"

"I know my father and brothers in Jaxtar form."

"But they are J'Tars. Perhaps it is J'Tars that you recognize."

"You are just like *them!*" she cried, rising to her feet. "You think because they were kits I should not have loved them."

"No, you put words in my mouth, Riana. Do you not remember our conversation in your room the first night we met? You have every right to love your children, no matter what form they take. If you want to find them, I support your wish."

Riana deflated and sank back to the grass. Her green eyes held incredulity and hope.

Arkady explained in a gentle voice. "I asked questions because I wanted to make sure you had thought it through before you searched. Have you thought about how they will react when you find them? How will you feel if they do not want you in their lives? They are ruled by instinct, after all."

She spread her hands. The fingers were too slender and her cheeks were hollowed, her cheekbones prominent. Had she not stopped her search to eat these past ten days?

"I did not think before I left. I just ran. I wanted so badly to see them again."

Arkady nodded. "The heart is not logical in what it wants."

Sadness again masked her features. "My heart hurts."

"I understand. Mine does too."

Riana cocked her head to the side. The green of her eyes was fathomless as she studied him. "Why?"

He looked down at the green grass that echoed the color of her eyes. He chose his words carefully. "I can heal you, but you will not allow it. I ache with healing power. The gods gave me the gift, but you refuse it. So I hurt."

"I told you..." she began.

"Yes, that I could not judge the length of your grief. Would

it be less important if it hurt less?"

Her sable brows drew together and she pursed her lips. "You can do that?"

"Yes. Take my hand." Arkady held out his hand, palm up.

Riana stared at it like it was a snake. Her face clouded, and then her hand crept out toward his. He held his hand still, fighting the urge to grab her. Finally her fingertips touched his. He closed his fingers around hers. Magic arced from him to her. He threw back his head and gasped with pain. Healing magic swelled in him and pulsed across the connection.

Riana gasped and jerked her hand away. "That was magic!"

Arkady breathed in and out before answering. "Yes."

"Are you a mage?"

"No. I am a healer. Please, Riana, give me your hand." It took all his strength to contain the power as it blossomed inside him. It knew a direction now and it wanted out.

She held her hand close to her chest. "I do not like magic. People hurt you with magic." She meant when she was forced to remain a Jaxtar.

"I will not hurt you. My magic only heals. Please, it hurts. Let me touch you." He held out his hand again.

After a moment, Riana took hold once more. The magic tore out of him in a rush. He clenched her hand in a painful grip. It felt like an open wound gushing blood. Her jaw muscles bunched with strain. She was fighting it!

"Let it in, Riana."

The magic grew, amassing strength in the space between them. The air crackled with it. But Riana was a magical creature. Her aura of magic pulsed, protecting her.

Arkady yanked on her hand and pulled her into his embrace. His magic enveloped her. He was blinded by a bright flash that wasn't light before something slammed into his chest. Stars exploded in his brain.

He found himself on his back looking up into the blue sky. He rubbed his bruised chest as he tried to clear his befuddled mind. What had happened? The magic was quiescent once more, but he sensed some of it had returned to him.

Riana's frowning face appeared in his line of sight. "Are

you all right?"

"I..." Arkady cleared his throat. "I think so. What happened?"

"I think you are more of a mage than you know. Clearly you are untrained. I took some of your healing, but you sent too much too fast. My body refused the rest."

"I do not control the healing." Not where she was concerned. "The magic does as it wishes."

She ran her palms an inch above his body and frowned. "It is dormant now. How strange. How is it that no one knows you are magical?"

"It is buried deep within me most of the time." How did he explain that only the healing magic was his? The rest of the magic belonged to the mage who'd made him J'Tar. Arkady had no control over it. It simply resided within him like a memory, waiting for the mage to use it.

"You need training." She stood and tentatively offered him a hand up. He took hold and she pulled him to his feet. He was unsteady for a moment until his head cleared.

"Ask your master to train you. He may seek the Aurekar's advice on how to best direct your magic."

Arkady shook his head. "Do not tell my master I have magic."

"Why not? Rubiyans understand magic."

"Blanath will not understand me, and he may renounce me as his apprentice. I must have this position."

She frowned. "I do not understand."

"You have a...quest...that your family does not understand. My magic is like your quest. I must do as it bids, which is to be a healer in this village. I will keep your confidences. I ask that you do the same with mine."

Riana looked out over the pond, but Arkady had the feeling she didn't see the water. When she looked back at him, he knew without words he had her agreement.

"I will keep your secret."

He ran his hands through his hair to straighten it. "Did the healing help?"

She touched her chest over her heart. "Some."

“Come to me when you are ready for more. Or when you want to talk about your search.”

“My family will watch me closely now. I may not be able to get away to search.”

“Why keep it a secret? If they know where you are going and why, they may help you.”

“But they do not believe.” When she looked at him, the dark mask of sadness dimmed the green of her eyes.

“They may help you anyway. Then you will not be so alone.” As he was.

Riana studied him while she rebraided one of her sable braids. “I think you are more than you seem.”

“Much more,” he admitted.

Her slender fingers worked quickly to bind the hair of her second braid. “Are you dangerous?”

“Not in the way you mean.”

“You are a riddle.”

“There is an answer.” He waited for her to figure out she was the answer.

But Riana shied away. “Thank you,” she said instead.

“You are most welcome. I am here for you.”

She nodded, her sable braids dancing around her face. Then she changed into the gray and black Jaxtar and jogged off in the direction of the castle.

“I would give you all that I am,” he whispered to his future mate, “if you would but ask.”

Four

Riana was the embodiment of sorrow. Her shoulders bowed like a sapling in a strong wind. From the trees Arkady studied her as she sat alone on the hillside less than a mile from the castle and knew that her search for her children so far was futile. Her dark brown braids swayed in the spring breeze, the only part of her that seemed joyful. She moved her hands in front of her on the ground.

He'd observed her for weeks, in and around the castle and village. Every time he saw her he felt drawn to her. He needed to touch her, to be a part of her, to be one with her. He needed to claim her as his own, as his mate. His erection throbbed painfully. He'd had a hard-on for weeks. Riana had become an obsession.

Her hands stilled. "You can come out now, healer. You do not have to hide in the trees."

Arkady moved forward until he stood beside her. It was both better and worse to be in her presence. "May I sit?"

"I do not care what you do." Her voice was harsh with restrained violence.

He folded his body down to the ground easily and with little noise. He looked at her hands. They were clenched around something.

Arkady held out his palm to her. "May I see what you have?"

For a moment her jaw clenched, then her fists opened, releasing their contents onto the ground. He gathered up two round stones and studied them closely. They had score marks on them. He studied her face next, so outwardly emotionless.

"These belonged to your kits."

Her body jerked as though he'd struck her. Her chest heaved on a large breath. Her bottom lip quivered and then firmed.

Slowly he scooted towards her, needing to heal her pain. Healing power thwarted was power magnified. He was going

to explode with it. When he was a hand span away she turned wild green eyes to him. He froze. The Jaxtar in her was threatened.

He made his voice soothing. "You did not return to me for healing, Riana."

She pretended to misunderstand. "I am not ill."

"You are heartsick. Let me heal you." He needed to touch her in so many ways.

Her green eyes were desolate. "No one can heal me. No one can give me what I need, what I want."

Now was the time. He'd honed his pitch for weeks. He didn't think she'd reject it or him. "I can give you a human child. My child."

Her eyes flew wide. Emotions flickered too fast to read. "You dare!"

"My body can join with yours and place a child there when next you are fertile. Then in nine months you will have a babe to love. One who will not leave you."

Her fingers curved like claws near his face. "No male will take me like that again."

Carefully he placed his hands over hers. Some of the healing power slid into her. Most was blocked. She tugged on her hands, but he didn't release her. "For a baby, would you allow my body in yours?"

She looked away. Her body quivered with wanting. "You would chain me. You would try to claim me in front of my father and the Zanath. You would claim the child."

"I would claim the child. But not you. Not unless you wanted me of your own free will." *As I want you.*

Riana looked at him with slashes of angry red across her cheekbones. "You say that now..."

Arkady shook his head. "I will give you as many children as you want and never claim you, if that is your choice. You may come to me for my seed whenever you want. I will give it to no other. You may come to me for pleasure, if you learn to enjoy my touch. I will be faithful to you. But I will not claim you unless you ask it."

Her sleek sable brows drew together. "You would ask me

to keep you? Make you some kind of leman in the village?"

He laughed. "A leman? No, I have my position as apprentice to the healer. I will be healer here some day, Riana." He touched her hand and she jumped. "I want my children to know and love me as they will love you. I want to spend time with them, to play with them and talk to them. You will not prevent that? You will give me your word on it?"

"Yes. I would not separate a parent from his child." She did not speak the words *as mine were separated from me*, but she didn't have to. They floated in the air between them.

Arkady took a deep breath. "When can I give you a child?"

She looked wilder, as though she would jump up and run. "I cannot. It hurts."

"It will not hurt with me. Even though you are no longer a maiden, I will be gentle and prepare you first. I will not hurt you."

Riana stared at him, breathing fast. She drew in breath. "I will be fertile mid-week next week." The words practically ran together, they were spoken so quickly.

His heart jumped and then raced. Only days until he could claim his mate. "I will give you a child next week. Our first. There will be three or four to pull at your skirt and snuggle at your breast. You will quicken and grow round this year. You will nurse again within the year, I promise."

"How can you make such a promise? Sometimes people are not blessed with children."

"There is no gamble with me. I have children for you, and I will give you one next week."

"You will not tell anyone?" She looked so young and earnest.

Arkady answered with a vow. "No. This is our secret."

Five

Arkady wanted to have sex with her! Riana hadn't given him an answer, either yes or no. She couldn't decide even now, hours later. It was all she could think about, yet there seemed no resolution to her quandary. She'd walked down to the lake behind the castle because she could see the forest beyond the still water. The trees called to the Jaxtar in her and let her know freedom was only yards away if she needed it.

She shuddered, even though the July breeze was hot against her bare arms. The hair on her arms stood up. Sex meant being dominated, being held still while a male plundered the very depths of her vagina with his long, hard penis. It meant being entered again and again with force and determination while she was helpless to stop the painful probing.

Riana hated the helpless feeling, hated the male's superior strength, hated having someone else's will thrust upon her. For two years the alpha male of the pack had owned her. She was his concubine, although he didn't mate with her again. She wouldn't let him. He'd been temporarily satisfied to have sired kits on her and to have her under his control. Had she remained in the pack after her kits left, the alpha would have impregnated her again soon.

Now Arkady proposed to impregnate her, to hold her still under him while he found her womb and jetted his seed into it. Did males only think of procreation?

Riana picked up a handful of stones off the lake shore and tried to skip one across the water. It sank on the first bounce. Like Arkady would sink his flesh into her body. She tossed a second stone with unrestrained violence. Where it landed in the greenish-blue water, tiny rings rippled outwards. She would swell with Arkady's child, just as she had grown with the alpha's kits. She'd feel life inside her again as the tiny spark grew into a living, breathing baby.

A baby!

She threw a flat stone that skipped four times before it

sank. She would have a human child this time, maybe even a girl. Arkady would want a son, but she wanted a daughter. She wanted this pregnancy to be as different from the last one as possible.

So was she seriously considering Arkady's proposition? Riana threw the last stone. It skipped merrily along the top of the water six times before it sank. She wrapped her arms around her abdomen. Both her arms and her womb were empty. She'd enjoyed parts of mothering her kits, when she wasn't cold, hungry or afraid. Mothering a human baby would be so much easier. Her arms would hold a child again, this time one with language and more than instinct to rule its actions. A human child could love in return.

Riana knew all about love. Before her father and uncle had sent her away to have her heart torn asunder, she'd felt very much loved. She knew how to give that love to a child. She'd done her best to show her kits she loved them, but they hadn't understood. A new child would give her a second chance. He or she would redeem the last two years.

Yes, she would let Arkady have his way. She would stand perfectly still and let him do what he had to do. If it hurt like last time, she'd endure it to get pregnant. Then maybe when he was finished, she'd hurt him so she wasn't the only one who ached.

She smiled as she turned back towards the castle. She'd bite or scratch him and make it painful for him to sit down. Yes, that seemed an appropriate punishment for having to endure the probe of his manly part.

Riana sidled up to the side of the small wood building that was Arkady's house. It was the last house on the outskirts of the village that abutted the castle grounds. It was a short distance away from the nearest neighbor.

The dirt lane was empty at this hour of the night. Children slept in their beds. Farmers had long since finished work for the day. The tavern in the village was still open for business, but it and Arkady's house were the only buildings that were lit. Still, she hesitated in the shadow of his house.

Memories moved through her mind, creating little eddies of fear. Males hurt you when they mated. They left you raw and aching inside. They held you still while they probed inside and you received no pleasure in what they did. Her heart pounded. She shook as though in a strong wind.

But more memories poured over her. Pictures of a small mouth suckling at her teat, of a small furred face nuzzling hers, of warm little bodies crawling over her, running, playing, tumbling, growling playfully. A human child would be different. There would be no rolling and tumbling for years, but coos, then giggles would come in the first year of life. A baby.

She glided around to the back, stepping lightly through the herb garden. The back door was slightly ajar. The light from inside threw a beam across the garden. She stuck her nose in the crack. The inside smelled of wood smoke, incense and herbs. She pushed the door open wider and peered around the edge. It looked homey and clean. A large fire burned in the hearth.

Arkady sat in a chair by the fire with a book in his hand. A bed on the far wall had the sheets turned down, warming them by the heat of the fire. Her eyes snapped back to Arkady. He looked straight at her.

“Come in, Riana.”

She padded forward as he rose and put the book back on a shelf with many other books. He moved past her and she heard the door close and latch. She swallowed. He passed her again and stood in front of her.

“Will you not be human now, Riana?”

She didn’t know how to give herself as a human. She knew only how animals mated. She rubbed her body against his.

“So we are to begin like this? Very well.” He knelt in front of her and took her face in his hands. He rubbed the fur on her face, then her neck, then her back. This was pleasant. She turned for him to mount her. When he did nothing, she turned her head to stare at him.

“Am I to mount you now? I am a human. Do you think me ready that quickly? While you are a Jaxtar?” He smiled and

the skin around his eyes crinkled.

She looked at his crotch. His trousers gave no clue. The male Jaxtar had had no difficulty. She looked back up at his face.

“Would you like to see?” he offered.

Her eyes dropped to his lap again. His hands lowered to his waistband. He untied the drawstring and pushed his pants down. His penis was flesh colored, not the almost black of the Jaxtar. His was much smaller and looked...softer. She jerked her eyes back to his face.

“It needs to be firmer, Riana. You can help by becoming human.”

Perhaps he just thought it wouldn't work. She backed into his lap, onto his penis. She waited.

“Riana. I need to touch you. Will you allow that?”

She turned her head. His face was close. She nodded. He pushed her off his lap, then followed her forward and covered her as a Jaxtar would. His male flesh pressed into her female flesh. He rubbed his penis against her while his hands rubbed her belly and chest.

“Change,” he cajoled.

She pressed her loins against him, offering a quick end to this strange encounter. He continued to rub her chest in a stimulating way.

“Change,” he ordered.

His hands were on her breasts when she became human and she jerked as he squeezed them lightly. She groaned.

“That feels good, does it not?” His face pressed against her hair.

“Mm hmm,” she agreed. He slipped her nipples into the space between his fingers and rubbed them. Pleasure streaked to her loins. She groaned again. He rubbed harder. She wiggled her bottom against him.

“Hurry, come inside me,” she pleaded.

“Not yet. We just started.” His hands made her nipples so hungry and between her legs even hungrier.

“It aches. You said it would not hurt,” she complained.

“That is wanting, not hurting. And it feels good.”

“Oh, your hands!” Her nipples were on fire.

“Yes, my hands. I like your breasts. I want to suckle them.”

“Please, can you not just mount me? I am ready.”

“I want more than to mount you. I want you to enjoy my touch.”

“But...”

His hands moved up to caress the balls of her shoulders. Her chest heaved with breath and her breasts swelled and tightened. Arkady turned her to face him. His head lowered and he took a nipple in his mouth. Pleasure filled her chest and made a flash fire between her legs. It was so different from suckling a babe. He laved the nipple and sucked hard. She groaned, but she knew how to use her breasts this way. She held his head to her breast while he made her breathing increase. He moved to her other breast and she fed him her flesh eagerly.

“Mmm.” She was breathing too fast. Her heart beat too quickly.

She felt his hot maleness prodding her. She lay on her back, opened her legs and got his stiffened penis between them.

“Now,” she urged.

He laughed huskily. “If you insist.” He clasped her hips and held her still while he pushed inside her.

She panted. This felt different than she remembered. He pushed harder. Fullness. Aching. He thrust. Feeling assailed her, overwhelmed her. She pushed at his chest.

She’d changed before she knew it and her hands became claws. She scored him from mid chest to below his ribs. He cried out in pain, releasing her to clutch at his chest. She twisted away from him and became human again.

“I am sorry. I did not mean to do it!”

He stood and kicked off his trousers. His breath came too quickly. A trail of blood slid down his belly. His penis had become small again. There would be no baby tonight.

Riana stuffed her fist in her mouth, but the sob came out anyway. This night was a disaster. Arkady was hurt. She’d failed at human lovemaking. There would be no mate and no baby.

She changed form to stop the sobs. Her tail hung on the floor as she turned to go.

"Wait," he gasped. "We are not finished. I just need some herbs to stop the pain."

She became human again. "But you need a healer."

"I *am* a healer. I promised you a baby, Riana. This will not take long, and then we can start again." He pulled his herb satchel from a shelf and rooted through it with one bloody hand.

"I am no good at it," she moaned.

"You are just not ready to mate face to face. I will take you as a Jaxtar would. You liked everything else we did." He moved to the fire and poured herbs in a pot of water.

"Will you touch my breasts again?"

"Of course. You will want me to touch them when we mate." He applied the herbs to the deep scratches on his chest.

"Yes, I want that."

He washed his hands in the basin by the fire. Then he wrapped clean white bandages around his chest.

"That will help for awhile. Are you ready to try again?"

"If you are sure."

"Come to bed. The floor is hard."

Riana stood in front of him, surveying the damage she'd done to him. He'd probably be scarred. "I am very sorry."

"I should have been more careful. It was my fault." His hands lifted to cup her breasts. She rose on her toes to push into his hands. He flicked her nipples and she hummed her pleasure. When he thumbed her nipples, she closed her eyes to savor the experience. She felt him move and warm lips covered hers. She jumped, but his lips were full and moist. She kissed him back, at first tentatively, then with growing hunger.

One of his hands slid down her belly, past her mound to insert a finger between her legs. He rubbed the sensitive flesh there. She hummed into his mouth. He probed the area, until he found her clitoris and made her squirm. She tried to move away from his hand, but his finger rubbed her clit again and then applied pressure.

She cried out. He concentrated on rubbing her clit and the nipple of one breast. The pleasure streaked and pooled in her vagina and womb. It gathered strength. It grew. Her body tightened. The pleasure coalesced into bright stars in front of her eyes. She cried out, gasping as her body convulsed.

She was too weak to stand. Luckily, he guided her to the bed where he rolled her onto her belly.

“Come to me, Riana.” His voice lured her.

She climbed onto her hands and knees and backed to his firmly erect penis. His hands stroked her labia, making them swell and want. He rubbed her clitoris and the inside of her labia until they parted, and then he entered her. She gasped. This was Jaxtar mating, but he wasn't a Jaxtar. His penis was big and hot. She groaned.

“Take all of me,” he purred.

She was so hungry. When would she be full? She groaned again as he filled her.

“Ah, Riana. Will you accept me?”

“Yes, I am yours. Only yours.”

“Riana. This feels good.” He slid his hands to her breasts and she groaned. He moved inside her in a delicious glide. He slipped her nipples between his fingers again and rubbed in a highly stimulating way.

The pressure built. The tempo increased. She moved with him and on him. She couldn't get enough of him. There was too much of him. She couldn't take enough of him. She had to take more.

“Take me, all of me,” she begged. She gasped for breath. Her body had quickly reached pleasure saturation. “Take me, Arkady!” she screamed and gave herself to him. In the final moments she became the cat. He gave his seed to the Jaxtar and his shout to the rafters.

He panted above her, and then slid his hand to her belly to just above where they were joined. She waited, feeling the wetness inside her. It felt strange to have a human male inside her Jaxtar body. But her body accepted him, wanted him there no matter what form he was.

Finally he took his hand away. “It is done. We have our

first child.”

Her heart exploded with joy. He lifted her head and kissed her furred lips. Then he released her and looked into her eyes.

“Will you stay awhile with me?”

She nodded.

“Are you mine?” he asked. His face was close to hers.

She nodded. She belonged to him. Before this night was over she vowed that he would belong to her as well.

“Good. May I take you like this?” He covered her as a Jaxtar would.

She nodded again and wiggled her hips. Arkady remained hard inside her, his penis hot and pulsing with his heartbeat. Riana knew male Jaxtars stayed erect during a female’s heat, but she hadn’t known humans could manage the feat. He moved inside her.

“Later, I want to take you in your human form, face to face.” He groaned and ground deep.

Slowly he withdrew from her vagina, drawing the head of his cock across her sensitive tissues. When he was almost out, he began the slow glide back in again. This direction was much better. She lifted her hips so he could fit deeply inside her. She shuddered with delight when he was in fully.

“You like that, hm?” Arkady drawled.

He withdrew and thrust again, moving slowly to draw out the sensation. Riana wriggled her hips as he moved. She needed more. She needed the stimulation he’d given her during their last mating.

She growled her demand.

“Sometimes slow is good, too.” He pressed hard when he was deep in her core. “You must learn to enjoy getting there.”

Arkady held her hips and pressed as deep as he could. *That* felt good and she rumbled her pleasure. There was a little more force to the next thrust. His penetration went deeper. Riana clenched her vaginal muscles tight around his cock. She shuddered with delight.

“This is what you want, all of me.” Arkady ground his cock into her.

Riana wriggled her hips to take more of him. Arkady

withdrew and thrust again. She widened her legs to take him deeper.

“That is the way. Open yourself for my cock.”

He plunged inside. His cock caressed the walls of her vagina. It kissed her cervix. He thrust again. She pushed back against his hips. He groaned, sounding almost like a Jaxtar. She took all of him and still wanted more.

Riana caught his rhythm at last. As he withdrew, she pulled away from him. As he thrust, she rammed her body onto his cock. Heat built in her body. Tension coiled in that inner place where she knew orgasms came from.

But Arkady was right. As much as she wanted that sparkling cascade of pleasure, getting there felt so good. Now she knew why armsmen grappled desperately with serving women in shadowed nooks. Why her uncle Oberroth and Aunt Raya were still amorous after so many years together. Why her parents couldn't keep their hands off each other. Men and women wanted *this*, this sensual friction that licked flames of pleasure inside her vagina and up the length of Arkady's cock. Nothing in life could be as good as this. She never wanted it to end.

But it had to end. Arkady's thrusts came faster. Her body began to coil with increased tension. She received every thrust with joy. Hunger ate at her loins. They tingled. They tightened. They clenched and clenched.

Arkady's breath was audible. Hers came faster, too. There was roughness and urgency to his penetration. Riana reveled in his forcefulness. He plundered her depths. She almost sobbed, it felt so good. She couldn't give him enough of her body. He couldn't give her enough of his cock. He groaned as though he was in pain.

“Come for me, Riana,” he urged.

He plunged hard and she came with a flash fire of intense pleasure. It rolled over her in waves. She growled as her loins convulsed.

His cock jerked, filling her with his hot seed. He groaned long and loudly while he remained pressed hard to her core.

Then it was over, and all she could do was breathe. Arkady

pushed her to the bedding and climbed up next to her on the bed. He wrapped an arm and a leg over her.

“That was wonderful,” he gasped.

Riana turned in his arms, changing form as she did so.

“Hello.” His smile warmed her. His eyes were bright gold.

“That was marvelous,” she said.

“Yes, it was.” He reached out and ran a finger down her cheek.

His action made Riana feel funny inside. Suddenly this man of fire and passion was a man of tenderness. His flesh was warm where her legs tangled with his. Her chest was only inches from his. Her nipples peaked at the thought. She'd been in her father's and uncle's arms many times. Her father had held her when only the illusion of clothes separated them. But it had never felt like this. She wanted to rub her nipples in the sparse black hair on his chest. She wanted to kneel over him and caress all her flesh with his.

“What are you thinking?” he asked. He cupped her cheek.

Riana was not ready to share all of her thoughts. “I am ready for you to take me again.”

He chuckled low in his throat, a sexy sound that vibrated through her. “I am not up to it at the moment.”

“But you did it twice without stopping.”

“A man can do that the first few times when he wants a woman badly enough.”

“But not three times.” There was a note of disappointment in her voice and she winced.

“I need some time to recuperate, Riana. Although I assure you we will have each other at least once more.”

A thrill ran through Riana. They would be joined together in ecstasy again soon. “What will we do in the meantime?”

“We could explore one another. Men and women can enjoy more than just riding the man's cock.”

She was almost breathless with eagerness. Passion without sex? “Show me.”

“As you wish.”

Arkady caressed Riana's cheek with his palm. He ran a thumb across her lips and left them tingling. His hand moved

to the column of her throat and caressed slowly over her clavicle and downwards.

Riana knew his destination and craved it. Her nipples beaded. Her chest swelled outward with a breath. When his hand slid over her taut nipple, she drew in her breath.

“You can breathe, love,” he said. Humor laced his voice.

But his fingers were deadly serious as they surrounded her nipple and rubbed. Riana let go her breath, but took another deep one to push her breast toward him. His fondling was making her vagina moisten again.

“You can do this to me, Riana. A man’s nipples are just as sensitive.”

Riana reached out to Arkady’s firm chest. She found the little nipple. It beaded like hers. She rubbed it like he rubbed hers. She moaned her pleasure. He flicked his nail across the tip of her nipple. She did the same to him and made him inhale.

Arkady pushed her onto her back and followed her over. His warm breath bathed her nipple before he took it into his hot mouth. Riana groaned as he drew on it. Sensation streaked straight to her vagina. Her leg climbed his hip so that her slit was open to his penis. He pressed his softened cock to her labia. She moaned again.

His tongue lapped at her nipple. She dug her fingers into his hair and pressed him harder to her flesh. Each lick stroked between her legs. She squirmed under him.

Arkady took her other nipple into his mouth. His hand moved to the first nipple to rub it. Riana arched to him. Sensations were streaking into her vagina so fast, she could barely catch her breath.

She moaned. “Arkady, you are making me ache.”

“Umm, I love your breasts.” He blew across the wet tip.

Riana jerked in pleasant surprise. But Arkady quickly took the trembling breast into his mouth and sucked. His penis moved up and down her slit, increasing the moisture there, trebling her sensations. Her body coiled slowly towards orgasm.

She moved under him as though they were mating. She could not hold still. Her hips rose to his for penetration, even

though she knew he could not yet oblige her. His cock was still only semierect between them.

“I need you inside me,” she pleaded.

Arkady's hand left her breast and slid down to where she strained against him. He touched her clitoris and she almost came off the bed. He rubbed it, stroking hard and fast. His mouth was a constant suction on her nipple.

Orgasm claimed her swiftly and suddenly. She bucked against his firm body as her uterus spasmed. Her little cries echoed in the room.

Finally, he let her relax. She looked into heated golden eyes and wanted him with her next breath. “Your turn.”

Riana pushed at his shoulders until Arkady was over on his back. Then she straddled him and leaned over his chest. She lapped his small nipple. He inhaled. She nipped it with her teeth. He moaned. Her hand found his other nipple. As she rubbed her finger back and forth over it, she lapped quickly at his other nipple. He writhed under her.

His hands slid between them to tug at her nipples. She inhaled, but continued her torment. Then she changed sides and licked his other nipple.

Arkady groaned. “I have other parts where you can use your tongue.”

Riana sat up. His eyes were darkened with passion. His skin was taut over his cheekbones.

“Show me.”

But she didn't give him a chance. She leaned forward and licked his neck. He turned his head to give her greater access. She kissed under his chin, then up his neck to his ear.

“Show me,” she whispered.

Arkady laughed and gasped. “I would if you would let me have a turn.”

His hands caressed up her back. He urged her forward. When her breasts were level with his mouth, he sucked first one and then the other. Then he urged her over him.

His breath blew across her slit as she straddled his face. She felt oddly vulnerable as he held her hips. Then he touched his tongue to her folds and all thought flew from her mind.

When she would have jerked away in surprise, he held her over his mouth. His tongue traced the labial folds until it found her clitoris. There he licked until she moaned. Her vagina clenched and quivered as it prepared for orgasm.

Arkady ran his tongue down her slit and returned to her clit. He licked it over and over until she thought she'd go mad if she didn't come.

"Put your fingers here." His breath teased her slit. His tongue touched her clit.

Riana slid her fingers between her legs until they touched her clit and his tongue. He licked her fingertips.

"Rub like I did with my tongue. Put your other hand on your breast," he instructed.

Oh, this is naughty! Riana began to rub her own clit. It wasn't as stimulating as when Arkady touched it. Her other hand rubbed her nipple. Arkady's tongue explored the entrance to her vagina and then he plunged inside. Riana cried out at the pleasure. Her hands stopped moving for an instant. But as his tongue plunged in and out of her vagina, she rubbed hard on her body.

Riana felt clumsy at her own breasts, plucking first one and then the other nipple in her desperate need to ease their ache. She couldn't seem to get the right pressure on her clit. But as she rubbed, she felt the tension inside her build. She gasped and groaned. She thrust against Arkady's mouth. He plunged his tongue inside her.

And then she was climaxing.

She tugged hard on her nipple as her contractions claimed her. Orgasm felt so good. So good. She sagged when it was over.

"My turn." Arkady's voice was muffled by her body.

"Oh, yes," Riana agreed. She couldn't wait to do that to him.

Riana scrambled off him and crawled down to his groin. His penis was almost completely erect now, lying like a delectable dish against his lower belly. She scooped it eagerly into her hands. It was very warm, the skin smooth as silk. It jerked in her hands.

"I see you are almost ready for me," she said.

"Make me ready. Show me what you have learned."

Riana leaned over and ran her tongue up the length of his cock. It jerked and he moaned. He tasted salty. She licked him again and ran her tongue around the rim of the head.

Arkady's hips lifted. She peeked at him over his cock. His eyes glowed like molten gold. His cheeks were flushed with arousal. The bones underneath showed prominently through the skin. His mouth was open as he breathed loudly.

She sucked on the little fold of skin below the head, and then ran her tongue up over the head. This part of his cock was soft to the touch. It hadn't felt this soft inside her. It had felt like a battering ram. She sucked the head, and then took it fully into her mouth to suck all of his cock.

Arkady threw back his head. The cords in his neck stood out like tight ropes. His hands fisted in the sheet. Animal growls came from his throat. So that's how pleasure looked.

When her hands caressed his balls, he groaned. She molded his testicles. She sucked his cock from tip to base. He thrust into her mouth, lifting his hips to do so. Her caress extended to his tight butt, molding the warm, hairy globes. Her mouth slid up and down his cock.

As she quickened the pace of her sucking, he arched like a bow. Only his feet and shoulders touched the bed. His cock stuck out like a spike. She greedily tasted it, intent on giving him the same pleasure he'd given her. She wrenched cries from his drawn back lips. His hips thrust helplessly as she moved on him.

"No more!" he cried. "Mount me."

Riana wanted to see him come as he'd watched her. But she also wanted to be filled with him. She scrambled forward and sat astride his lap. As she lifted up, his hands were there to direct his cock into her vagina. She was so wet, he slid right into her, exactly where she wanted him to be.

"Ride me, Riana." His voice was a guttural command.

She used her leg muscles to rise to the head of his cock. Then she impaled herself. She sighed with relief and gave a little shudder of pleasure. Arkady cried out with his own

pleasure. She lifted and sank once more. He quivered under her. He was close to climax.

On her next impalement, she squeezed her vaginal muscles. Arkady groaned as though he were in pain. She impaled herself again and ground her vagina onto him. He cried out sharply.

Riana increased the tempo of her thrusts. Arkady's head thrashed back and forth against the sheets. His breath sounded tortured. A fine sheen of sweat covered him and darkened his hair. Riana's body was damp with sweat, but she didn't care. All that mattered was giving Arkady pleasure. He was vulnerable in his passion in a way that touched something inside her. He was completely enslaved to the movements of her body. As she thrust once more, he cried out helplessly. She loved seeing him like this.

Her orgasm caught her by surprise. She'd been completely focused on how powerful she felt in the primal act. She cried out with delight and a bit of disappointment that the moment had to end. As her contractions squeezed his cock, Arkady shouted his pleasure. He bared his teeth in a grimace. His chest arched. He emptied his seed into her in a hot rush. He looked beautiful.

When he lay back against the mattress, the look in Arkady's eyes was primal possession before he shuttered them. He lifted a hand to her face, his touch gentle once more.

"You are a swift learner."

Riana covered his hand with hers. "You are a good teacher, the motivation is excellent, and the rewards beyond imagining."

Arkady smiled, all satisfied male. "I will try harder next time."

A thrill ran through Riana. How could it be better than this? But he was promising another session of lovemaking.

"Will you let me hold you until I have recovered my strength?" he asked. There was an odd, tentative note in his voice.

Riana lay down on him and his arms came around her. She turned her cheek onto his shoulder. He gave a little murmur of contentment and his arms tightened. His heart beat strongly beneath her ear, pulsing life through him. He was warm with

animal heat. His skin smelled of musky male and sweat. The air around them reeked of sex and herbs.

Arkady was a strange man. Out of all the women in Rubiya, he had chosen her to make love to. Odder than that was how explosive they were together sexually. If ever there was a mismatch, it should have been them. But it felt right being here with him, so close a breath could not get between them.

Riana tensed. How many lovers had he practiced his skills on? Jealousy raised its ugly head.

"I have never experienced what we shared in all my twenty-four years," he murmured, as though she'd voiced her fears out loud.

She raised her head to look at him. His gold eyes were serious now. "I do not think you were a virgin."

"No, I was not. But those encounters pale compared to this, compared to you. There is no woman in the world like you."

His words warmed her, but her doubts came to the fore. "But how can that be? I am not even fully human."

Arkady shrugged. "Everything about you fills me with desire, including when you are the Jaxtar. Although I prefer the skin on this form." He caressed a hand down her back from her shoulders to her bottom. She arched against his touch like the cat she was.

"You should not like mating with a Jaxtar," she said.

"I do not think of the Jaxtar as an animal, but as you."

Arkady enfolded her in his arms and in rightness once more. She lay her head back down on his shoulder and allowed her curves to sink into his firm flesh. His penis was soft inside her still. She would enjoy this quiet interlude until it was time to rouse passion once more. The Jaxtar part of her wanted him again.

"Do not change yet," Arkady ordered. "Let me hold you like this for awhile."

Riana settled against him. If only things had been different, if she hadn't spent the last two years as she had. If she'd met him at sixteen when she was happy, they might have courted and married. She frowned. No, she wouldn't have looked twice

at a man then, and they certainly wouldn't have been lovers. How strange. Now that he was her lover, she couldn't imagine not being his lover. But she could only have been his lover if she'd gone through the pain of the last years.

Riana shook off the troubling thoughts. "Do not take too long to recover, Arkady. You have given me a hunger I need to feed."

Arkady laughed, sexy and low. "I will feed you, do not worry. Forever, if you wish it."

Arkady watched his mate slip away into the dawn, running silently on all fours. She carried J'Tar issue in her womb. He felt their bond pulling on him as she moved farther away. It would be hard to live apart from her now.

He felt lightheaded with happiness. Then he realized he felt pain, too. The healing herbs had worn off. His chest was a mess. His mate had marked him, as was her right to do so. But he needed Blanath's skill. He'd used so much magic getting Riana pregnant, healing her, putting protections on her, and binding her to him as his mate that he had no energy left to magically heal himself.

He removed the bandages and dressed, marveling that Riana was so sexually attuned to him. He'd been wild with wanting her and she couldn't seem to get enough of him. His body throbbed with the echo of being joined with her. She would attribute that echo to the sex act, not to their mate bond. When she finally learned of their bond, she would be ready to accept it and him into her life. It was enough for now to know that she was his permanently. She would live with him in time.

When he was decently clothed, he stumbled to Blanath's cottage at the other end of the village. He had used too much of himself tonight in too many ways. The doorframe helped keep him upright until Blanath opened the door. His shirt under his other hand grew wet and sticky with blood as it soaked through the thin material.

Blanath was in his robe, his hair tousled from sleep. He yawned. "Arkady, what brings you out this early?" Then his eyes widened.

Arkady held a bloody hand out to the healer. "I need your services." He lost his grip on the door frame. He felt himself falling forwards as he fainted in the doorway.

Six

Riana sank into her mattress and gratefully let her tension flow into the soft down. Castle inhabitants were used to J'Tars coming and going at all hours of the night. Still, Riana hadn't wanted to run into any of her family, not after what she and Arkady had done together. Her loins throbbed, reminding her of what they'd done. Four times she'd had him or he'd had her. She hadn't expected a night like this when he proposed getting her pregnant. She hadn't expected to enjoy the conception either. But she had, immensely. In fact, she wanted to go back and enjoy him again right now.

She'd only spent one night in his bed, yet already she missed his touch and his nearness. How could that be?

She carried the scent of his herbal poultice on her flesh. Arkady smelled of other healing herbs. His whole cottage had smelled pleasantly of herbs. The scent lingered in her hair. She brought a lock to her nose and inhaled. Arkady.

Riana wanted him here with her. She didn't want to sleep alone. Those hours in his arms had pushed away her sorrow.

She blinked. That deep, wounding hurt was gone. Was it due to the new life she carried? Her hand slid down her belly to her lower abdomen. She felt the magical spark that was J'Tar inside her. Her heart suffused with joy. She was going to have a baby. This child would be with her for years. Even when it was adult, it would still maintain ties with her.

Some of her joy spilled over onto Arkady. How had he known how to heal her? Few men would think to offer to father a child as he had done. He'd asked nothing for himself, although he had enjoyed the loving immensely. His face had reflected the ecstasy he felt many times. Those were the times he was beautiful.

It was so strange how comfortable she felt with him once they'd finished the first loving. Before that, she'd shaken with nerves. But afterwards, she'd let him do whatever he wanted to her, and he'd given her the same freedom. She'd studied

what he did to her, how he touched her and where, and did those things to him. Her cheeks burned as she recalled his cries of passion. He'd held nothing back.

She turned over on the sheet. She felt so empty without him inside her. It was so strange to feel that way because he was her first lover. They barely knew one another.

But it didn't feel like he was a stranger. She'd felt at peace with him once they'd been joined. What would it feel like to be mated? With Arkady? She wished she could ask her parents how it was accomplished. Her oldest brother must know, now that he was married. Although no one had said his wife was his mate, a J'Tar had to take a mate. The Jaxtar half of him or her needed to mate for life.

She and Arkady were lovers, not mates. Perhaps it was the love two people felt for each other that allowed the mate bond to root in both of them. Since she and Arkady didn't love each other, there would be no bond.

Would they love each other by the time he had given her three or four children? He'd said he would be faithful to her. She would not do the carnal things they'd done tonight with any other man. How could she and expect Arkady to continue fathering children on her? No, if she wanted loving, Arkady would give that to her.

She snuggled into her pillow. She missed him.

Arkady stiffened while every cell in his body came painfully alive at the nearness of his mate. He didn't need to see Riana to know she'd come to Blanath's cottage. He turned his head on the pillow at the sound of her voice. His heart rate sped up and his cock slowly swelled with wanting. He didn't know which throbbing was worse, the scratches on his chest or the arousal in his loins. He wanted her in his arms.

This first meeting would be difficult. He hadn't counted on seeing her so soon, and with his injuries he wasn't sure how much he could shield his feelings from prying eyes.

Blanath entered the doorway of the small bedroom that belonged to his son. Arkady had usurped the teen's room while he convalesced in the healer's home. His master's face was

lined with concern.

Then Arkady's attention was riveted to his mate as she glided into view. Riana wore a mustard yellow dress that reminded him of buttercups and fall leaves. It was a perfect color with her bronzed skin and sable braids. She was beautiful—summer and autumn all rolled into one. His heart felt like it would burst from his chest.

As he tried to rise, hot fire stabbed the gouges on his chest. He made a sound of pain.

Riana's green eyes darkened in sympathy and her lips pursed in a moue. "I am sorry I hurt you."

"It was my fault. I knew your history." His voice was thin as he breathed through the worst of the pain.

"No, I should be more careful around humans. Are you ill?" Her voice rose on the last word, as though she fought hysteria at the thought.

"No fever, just weakness. Blanath is taking good care of me." Arkady wanted to touch his mate. "You can come in the room. I do not bite." He held out his hand to her.

Riana looked wild, her eyes wide and frightened, like she would run from the room and the cottage with all haste. He didn't think it was his presence that caused her nervousness. She sidled into the room a ways.

Blanath's brown brows drew together, like he wondered if trapping a wild animal in this small room was a good idea. Maybe he was concerned that he would be the next recipient of Riana's claws. Arkady wished he could reassure the healer on that score, but that was his and Riana's secret.

Riana reached the bed. When Blanath was behind her, she allowed her hunger to shine through her bright eyes. It warmed Arkady all over, especially in his heart and cock. Her desire felt like the heat of the sun on a summer day.

"May I see your wounds?" she asked.

Arkady frowned. "I do not think you should. I know you feel badly about what happened. You do not have to torment yourself further."

"I want to see." She turned pleading eyes to Blanath. "Please, I need to know."

“We do not want to risk infection by uncovering the wounds, J'Tar Riana.”

“I must see for myself what I have done and that it is not a crippling injury.” There was both steel and regret in her tone.

“Very well. Wash your hands before you touch him.”

There was a pottery ewer and basin on the dresser. Both Blanath and Riana washed their hands and dried them on a towel. Arkady noted that Blanath moved carefully around Riana and kept his eyes on her.

The two of them advanced to the bed. Arkady had lowered the sheet and opened his shirt. Blanath carefully unwrapped the bandages. Arkady breathed slowly through his nose and open mouth. The healer's touch was gentle, yet the scratches were raw and deep. Any handling burned like fire.

“You are in a lot of pain,” Riana breathed.

“He will not take the stronger herbs that lessen pain,” Blanath explained.

“I cannot,” Arkady insisted. “I do not tolerate those herbs. They make me very ill.” He didn't add that they fogged his mind and made it difficult to remember which life he currently lived. He felt like he was suffocating when he took such herbs and hated the feeling of dying. It was something he'd experienced too many times already.

When the last bandage was removed, Riana gasped. Arkady knew the wounds looked terrible. They felt even worse.

“You will be scarred!” she exclaimed.

“Yes.” How could he dispute the truth? It was her right to mark him, and she'd done so.

Her eyes filled with tears. “I did not mean to do it.” She touched his chest beside one of the score marks.

She branded him with her touch and he gasped.

“Careful,” Blanath cautioned.

Riana jerked her hand back as though it burned. “I am sorry.”

How could he explain without mentioning their mate bond? The touch of his mate would always electrify him. He couldn't even explain that the same touch excited him beyond reason, not in front of Blanath.

“Your touch did not hurt, not there. I was surprised that you touched me, that is all.”

“I owe you a debt now. I must find some way to repay it.”

He knew she meant their baby. “You must become used to humans and their touch again. You must learn not to be afraid of them.”

He dared to touch her hand, and she snatched it away. She looked wild once more, and her chest heaved as she panted fast. Blanath’s eyes widened and he took a careful step away from her. Arkady knew her reaction was partly because they weren’t alone.

“Not every male means to harm you, J’Tar,” Arkady said in a soft voice.

“I am still wild, still Jaxtar.” Riana gestured to her body. “This form is not real to me yet.”

“I know.” He wished he could be a Jaxtar with her. She would readily accept him then, and they could begin their life together. He sighed. Who knew when she would accept his claim?

“I need to get fresh bandages and make another poultice.” Blanath looked at Riana. “You will not hurt him again?”

“No. It was a mistake, an accident.”

He nodded and left the room. Riana moved closer to the bed and Arkady reached again for her hand. She threaded her fingers through his.

“I cannot bear to see you lying there in pain,” she whispered.

“I will heal. Do not fret about me.”

She ate him up with her eyes. “I could barely sleep once I got to bed.”

He groaned softly and tightened his hand around hers. “I did not have that problem. I was unconscious.”

Riana leaned over him and stroked his face with her free hand. He leaned into her touch.

“I liked what we did,” she purred.

“Umm, so did I.” He nuzzled her palm.

“I would like to do it again.”

His heart took flight. “I am yours to do with as you please.”

“But you are here.” Frustration tinged her voice.

“I will return to my own cottage in a few days.”

“May I come to you then?”

“I am yours. Do with me as you wish.”

“But you are injured.” It sounded like she was asking permission to make love with him despite his injuries.

“I will lie in bed and let you work your wiles on me. You know what to do.”

Her face lit with eagerness. “Yes. You taught me well.”

“Come in the back door. I will leave the light off.”

“It seems so wanton.”

He felt a spurt of fear that she wouldn't come to him again. He shook his head. “I am yours. You are mine. What we do is not wanton. It is natural.”

She smiled. It was seductive and happy. “I felt our babe today. It is J'Tar, as you said.”

He smiled, and then it faded as he heard Blanath returning. He hated having to hide their relationship. “I gave all of myself to you. You understand, do you not?”

She cocked her head, listening. “The healer returns.” She sounded panicked. She leaned over him so that her sweet breath blew across his face. “I am lonely for you.” Swiftly she kissed him on the lips. It was deep and urgent, yet hardly enough to sustain him. She broke away just as quickly and jerked her hand from his. The separation was wrenching.

Riana took a step away from the bed. She looked wild, her eyes enormous as they darted around the small room. He felt shaken himself. When Blanath entered the room, she flattened against the dresser. He glanced at her and stilled, like an animal that has sighted a dangerous predator.

“I must go!” Riana fled past him through the doorway.

Blanath breathed a loud sigh when the front door of the cottage closed. “I told you she was wild.” He looked at Arkady's chest. “And dangerous.” He moved to the bed and began to spread soothing herbs on the scratches.

“She is very sorry. I do not believe she will hurt anyone else.”

“Perhaps I should speak to the Zanath about her.” Blanath's

brown brows drew together as he worked skillfully to cover the score marks.

“You want her punished for hurting me?”

“No. But he could make sure she is safe to be around humans. Perhaps the Aurekar has a spell to make her less wild.”

Arkady knew his loving would tame her. He needed to be in his own cottage so she had access to him. The more they loved, the safer she would be around others.

“She is still grieving over the loss of her kits,” Arkady explained. “She needs time to heal, not the Aurekar. Do not punish her that way.”

Blanath began wrapping the clean bandages around Arkady’s chest. “You are extremely generous when you will be scarred for life.”

“It is not the first scar I have received. Nor will it be my last.”

“Arkady, the scar over your heart, how did you survive such a mortal wound?”

“Magic.”

Blanath nodded. It was an explanation he understood in a country that used to make J’Tar by magic. The healer would not understand that Arkady had died when the arrow pierced his warrior’s heart and been born into his next life to begin all over again.

“I made a sleeping potion,” Blanath said. “Will you drink it?”

“Yes.” Arkady didn’t want to think about the days he’d have to wait until his mate came to him in the middle of the night. They would have stolen moments together, never able to walk together in the light of day where others could see them. That was the legacy of the Zanath’s edict that Riana birth her kits. Arkady and Riana would both suffer.

He took the cup and drank deeply. He would have relief. But what about Riana?

Riana had to obtain relief from the ceaseless need that wracked her body. She’d only had Arkady one night, but that one fabulous night had made her crave him. That craving wrung

her inside out. It started all her steps toward his cottage, it made it hard to think of anything but him. Him, him, always him.

If he'd had to stay one more day at the healer's house, she would have been forced to expose their secret so that she and Arkady could be together.

But Blanath had assisted Arkady home today, to her fierce relief. Arkady had walked under his own power, only having to rely on Blanath towards the end when his stamina ran out. Guilt twisted in her gut. Arkady had freely given himself to her, and she'd repaid him with pain.

It had been hard waiting for darkness to fall. She'd run long and hard this afternoon, trying to make the time fly faster. For the life of her, she could not have sat at some idle occupation today—not music, or sewing, or lessons of any kind.

Now her wait was over. Arkady was alone in his cottage and night had crept over the village under cover of a moonless sky.

Riana glided to his back door, through the pungent herbs in his garden. It reminded her of the first night she'd come to Arkady. That seemed so long ago, but it was her experience as a woman that made the Riana of several days ago seem much younger. Now she was a woman fully versed in the ways of loving.

She changed form, slowly opened the door and stepped into the warmth of his cottage. She closed the door and secured the latch before becoming a Jaxtar once more.

Firelight bathed Arkady in red and orange light where he lay sprawled on his back in slumber. It made his white widow's peak appear red and softened the angles of his sharp cheekbones. Riana stood beside his bed and studied him with relish. He looked younger while he slept. When he was awake, the expression in his eyes made him seem much older, as though he'd lived for a number of decades. But he was actually not much older than she was.

The white bandages stood out against his naked, tanned skin. His chest rose and fell with his deep breathing. The sheet

modestly covered him from the hips down, although there was an intriguing lump between his spread thighs.

Riana wanted to see that lump. She gripped the sheet with her teeth and pulled as she backed up. Slowly it slid off his body, uncovering his male flesh. His penis lay in a soft curved mound against his abdomen. All its power was dormant at the moment. She remembered he needed stimulation to grow hard as a rock.

She placed her front paws on the bed and carefully took his penis into her mouth. She ran her tongue over the springy flesh. He tasted slightly salty.

Arkady groaned as she continued to lick him. Then he stiffened and gasped, "Riana."

She had his entire penis in her mouth, sucking strongly. It filled and lengthened. His breathing grew rapid.

"Carefully, my love," he gasped.

She ignored his term of endearment, since they barely knew one another. But she ran her tongue around his cock as she sucked and he bowed off the bed.

"Riana!" His hands fisted in the sheet on either side of him.

She loved giving him this pleasure. The flesh on his cheeks formed tightly to the bones beneath. His lips were drawn back to display his grimace as he fought not to climax.

"No more," he begged.

But Riana felt he could take more. She stroked hard down the length of his cock.

He groaned deeply, like an animal in pain. "Take me inside of you. Please."

Riana held him for a moment longer on the apex of climax, and then let his cock slip from her mouth. She jumped up on the bed and stood astride Arkady. He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her fur.

"Will you take me, Riana? I do not have the strength to do more than lie under you."

Riana leaned down to rub her mouth over his. Arkady pulled her close and nuzzled her face. She placed her loins over his, rubbing the opening to her vagina against his penis.

Arkady slid a hand down her belly, grabbed his penis and aligned it to her opening. Riana impaled herself with his hot throbbing flesh. He groaned. She did too. It felt good to be filled with him again. There was rightness to it. She rose to the head of his cock. He inhaled. She sank down again. He sighed. They began a slow dance. His hips lifted a little as she sank down on him.

His hands gripped her face to his so his tongue could push into her mouth. She sucked on it as she took his cock fully into her vagina. Deep, deeper. She plunged her tongue into his mouth and tasted the sweetness inside. Something herbal to make him sleep? No, he would not have allowed Blanath to dose him when he knew she would come to him.

Arkady arched against her and groaned into her mouth. She increased the tempo. The slide of his slick cock worked her towards orgasm. She wanted him with her when she reached the precipice.

Hard and fast she worked herself on him. It wasn't enough. It would never be enough. Arkady gripped her fiercely, his rhythmic groans echoing the pulses of his cock as he emptied his seed inside her. She ground her loins against his and that was enough to send her spiraling into the heavens.

As she sank down onto his chest she took her human form once more. He wrapped his arms around her like iron chains.

"You are mine," he breathed.

"Yes. Did you like being bedded?" She kissed him and he held her still so he could devour her lips.

He was breathing hard when they broke apart. "I like what you did, yes."

"I liked doing it. Are you better?"

"Still weak, but doing better." He stroked his hand up and down her back.

"Good, because I have plans for you tonight." She nibbled his neck and moved her lips upward to nip his ear.

"I may not have the strength to do all we did last time," he warned.

"That is all right. I just need you inside me. I can do all the riding. Strange how that is."

He closed his eyes, hiding their golden light. “Umm, strange. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” She began to move on him with deliberate slowness. “It is almost like we have a connection.”

“Perhaps it is because you carry my child inside you. Umm, there, right there.”

She liked the feel of his penis inside her human body. She worked herself on him and reveled in his groans.

“I almost came to you last night,” she admitted.

The golden eyes opened. Fierce heat burned in them. “You would have had to claim me, Riana.”

“I know. That is why I did not come.”

He closed his eyes again and sighed. It sounded sad.

“You said you did not want more than this,” Riana accused.

“No, I said I would give you whatever you needed. You need this now. Perhaps later, in the years we spend together bearing our children, you will need something more. In the meantime, I am yours to do whatever you want with.”

Riana cocked her head to the side. She could not understand Arkady not demanding anything in return. “You are not like other men.”

His golden eyes opened once more. They held a nonsexual heat that warmed her clear through. She wanted him so much it hurt. But they’d just had sex, so how could just a look arouse her so much?

“You are not like other women, Riana,” Arkady said. His voice was slow and seductive. “You are J’Tar. You have a need to mate. I have no qualm with that.”

She sat up suddenly, driving his cock into her vagina. “What we do together is not mating. You are not my mate.”

“Hm.” He ran a caressing hand up her thigh to her hip. “My mistake. I feel very much claimed. Are you sure, Riana?”

“I would know if I had accepted you as my mate. I have not even asked you.”

“Oh, I did not know you had to ask. I thought a J’Tar just took you, like your father took your mother. He was a Jaxtar and could not speak when they became mates.”

“But they were in love,” Riana said. “Mother wanted to

marry father.”

“Why did they never marry?”

“Mother is the Jaxtar’s mate, bound to him in her very cells. They are also magically bound, so no wedding ceremony was necessary.”

“I would have thought her father the king would demand they marry.”

Riana shook her head. “She was mated. It could not be undone. Grandfather accepted father once he understood what was done. Why are you so interested in my parents?”

“I have heard the tales this past year and been curious. Since you became my lover, I wondered if you would make me your mate.”

“*No!*” She said it too forcefully, but fear prodded her. Her heart beat too fast and her mouth dried. A mate would cage her, take away her freedom. Hadn’t she just escaped one entrapment? No, she could not bear to have another dictate the boundaries of her life.

Riana became the Jaxtar. Her hips moved up and down Arkady’s slick cock, plunging him into her vagina over and over. But now *she* was stronger than him. She had nothing to fear as a Jaxtar. She could kill him with one strike. Her teeth gently took hold of his throat. He was a weak human.

“You would mark me again?” he whispered. “Or would you kill me, an innocent, just for daring to ask for your love?”

She thrust herself down on him so that his cock drove into the mouth of her womb. He cried out as he emptied his seed into her body. Afterward he trembled in her grasp. She noted he didn’t move, as though afraid to rend his own neck on her teeth. It wasn’t a feeling of power now to hold him prisoner this way. She felt sick.

Riana released him. Four tiny red puncture marks appeared on his throat. Her stomach roiled in disgust. She was a beast, not fit for human kindness, not fit to be called Arkady’s mate. Did she fear a cage so much that she would harm another just to avoid it?

She looked into Arkady’s eyes and found sadness in the golden depths. Was he hurt that she’d marked him or

disappointed in her because of it? Did he pity her? Her snarl echoed off the walls. She leaped from the bed and his warm body. She had to escape!

“Riana!” Arkady’s shout chased her into the blackness of the night.

Her family had looked at her that way before they sentenced her to two years of suffering and pain unimaginable when her kits left her. She would not give Arkady the same chance.

Seven

Three months later, Oberroth mentioned at dinner, “The King of Sarna wants an alliance.”

Oberroth’s and Curran’s families shared the head table in the great hall. Uncle Oberroth and Aunt Raya dined with their two youngest children, Bilek and Pierin. Riana’s father and mother sat close together, as usual. Her brothers Carabin and Sherrod were at the table, as well as Sherrod’s new wife Theline.

Riana looked up at the odd note in her uncle’s voice. Sarna was the mostly desert-like country to the south. If they needed foodstuffs or wood, why would Oberroth sound so odd?

“What type of alliance?” Raya asked.

Oberroth looked around the table. His expression gave nothing away. “Marriage.”

Riana stiffened. There were four unmarried young people at the table. Of course, she wasn’t really eligible.

“He has a...” Raya prompted.

“King Shafik Mourad has a son named Zaki. A young man of twenty-five.”

Riana paid attention to cutting her roast pheasant. Pierin was twenty-six, a match for the king’s son.

“Father,” Pierin called to Oberroth, “Ramar of Fostington village has expressed an interest in me.”

Riana’s head jerked up. That was news to *her*. Her cousin’s face was aglow, her brown eyes sparkling.

“Is this recent, Pierin?” Oberroth asked.

Pierin ducked her dark head in a very feminine way. Her long black hair framed her elegant neck. “I have seen him for years, when he travels with the harvest caravans, but he has rarely spoken to me. He is not very forward, Father.”

“Since you do not yet have a relationship with him, I would prefer you wait to begin one. We will invite King Mourad’s son to visit and see if the two of you are attracted.”

“But, Father, Ramar has waited so long to ask to court

me. He is very handsome. I would like to see if *we* are attracted!”

“Pierin, your sister fell madly in love with Prince Bryal of Mabrelle, and he was just as smitten with her. They are very happy together.”

“But I am not Saria, Father. Everyone loves her. How could Prince Bryal not? I am more studious. I like the study of plants, minerals, weather, stars and such. I like books.”

“Prince Zaki may be studious, too. And he may be more handsome than Ramar of Fostington. You will not know until he arrives.”

“Father.” Pierin glanced at Riana with an apologetic frown. “I am not the only potential wife here.”

“No!” Riana denied.

“I was getting to you, Riana,” her uncle said. “I would like this young man to have a choice of royal daughter.”

“I am *not* eligible,” Riana stated with force.

“You are not married. Therefore, you are eligible.”

“I will *not* marry.” Not when Arkady was her lover and would father her children. No husband would allow that to continue. “I will not go to a marriage bed with him!”

“Baby,” her mother said, “the marriage bed is nothing to fear, not when you love the man.”

Her father put his arm around her mother and Amara leaned into his embrace. Their marriage bed had been a deep stone pit in the cellar of the castle and her bridegroom had been a Jaxtar. They had been drugged and forced to mate.

“You were not afraid?” Riana asked.

Her mother looked at her father and smiled. “Not of the act of love. Just that your father was a Jaxtar for my first time with him. Your first time with a man will be nothing to fear, sweeting.”

Riana didn’t fear making love with Arkady. That was as easy and natural as breathing. She did fear being with any other man. No man could perform like Arkady could, nor would she let him. No other man would accept making love with both her and the Jaxtar. And she would not just make love as a human, just as her father did not.

In that way, she and Arkady were like her mother and father. Many mornings when she and her brothers woke their parents, they found their mother with the Jaxtar. Once when Riana was eight, she had gone to her parents' bedchamber after a nightmare and found the Jaxtar mating with her mother. She had watched for a moment, enthralled by her mother's expression of ecstasy. The Jaxtars in the pack mated openly, but because they had no expressions, Riana hadn't known mating was pleasurable.

When Riana reached puberty, she assumed she would have a Jaxtar lover like her mother did. She'd wanted one very much. Her experience with the alpha had soured her to Jaxtar lovers, but Arkady, strangely enough, felt like a Jaxtar. She did not want a human husband, especially not this son of a king.

"I will scratch his eyes out if he touches me," Riana threatened.

"Riana," her father chastised.

"Sweeting, you cannot do that," her mother said.

"You must not injure the heir of King Mourad," her uncle Oberroth said. "You must accord him the same treatment you would like to receive if you were a guest in his country."

"I do not go to Sarna to shop for a bull like you intend him to come and shop for a brood mare," Riana snapped. "Whether I want it or not, you would sell me into slavery for the second time in my life?"

"Riana!" her mother gasped.

"You will have a say in the alliance," Oberroth said.

"It appears not." Riana stood up from the bench.

"Sit down," her father commanded. "And hear what the Zanath has to say."

"No. I will search for my children. If I am to expend energy on a fruitless endeavor, I would rather do that." She stepped over the bench and headed out of the hall.

"Riana!" her mother's cry followed her from the room.

Riana changed form, shimmying out of her clothes in an alcove. A guard let her out the front door of the castle. She headed east at a lope. It was a direction she hadn't searched yet. She hoped the luck of the gods was with her today.

Arkady threw back his wet hair and stepped out from under the waterfall. If the falls weren't attached to a hot springs, he wouldn't be able to bathe this late in the year. He picked his way over stones to the shore, shivering as the cool autumn air touched his wet skin. When he glanced up, Riana sat on her haunches watching him. He'd sensed her there for the past few minutes. Her gaze leisurely perused his body, lingering on his soft cock, and then rose to meet his eyes. Hers burned with sexual hunger that warmed him inside.

"Did you enjoy watching me bathe?"

She nodded and bared her fangs in a parody of a smile.

"If you wanted me, you should have taken me while I was still warm." Arkady gestured to his flaccid penis, drawing her gaze down to warm him there. "As you can see, I cannot oblige you just yet, much as I would like to."

She rose to her feet and padded to him. He admired her sleek fur and svelte body. His mate. She looked up as though for permission. He nodded.

Riana opened her mouth over his cock and took him inside. He groaned as the hot heat of her mouth surrounded his cold flesh. She sucked and he groaned again.

"Warm me, love," he pleaded.

She moved her tongue and cheeks around his cock, squeezing him between her sharp fangs. If she nicked him now, he would welcome the pain.

Riana sucked strongly. Arkady sucked in his breath. His cock stiffened under her ministrations. She growled in her throat, that sound she made when she was claiming what was hers.

She worked the length of him in her mouth. Pleasure streaked into his balls and tingled up his spine. He thrust his hips and she allowed him to make love to her mouth. His cock lengthened and thickened. Fire burned in his loins.

Then she began to suck and didn't stop. Arkady drove his hands into the fur around her face and held her tight as she pushed him to the edge of orgasm. He was helpless in her mouth. Harsh cries of pleasure tore from his lips. Finally he

could take no more or be forced to give her his seed.

“Riana, take me.”

She released his aching cock and gently bit the flesh beside the base of it. The pain of her branding riveted his attention and stopped his imminent orgasm. She turned for him to mount. He knelt and was on her in an instant, sinking gratefully into her a second later. Warm, moist flesh encompassed his throbbing cock. His growl of satisfaction echoed hers.

“My love.” He thrust all the way inside her tight body.

Arkady sank into the Jaxtar part of his brain. He covered his mate and thrust wildly. He was cat. So was she. They were one. He made them more than one. She took him deep. He went deeper. Her cries became sharp, intense with need. His need grew and grew. He was desperate to give himself to her.

Suddenly she screamed a Jaxtar cry and her body tightened around his cock. Then she took him into herself. He gave and still she took more. He cried out, wishing he was truly Jaxtar so he could echo Riana's Jaxtar cry.

Then he no longer belonged in his body. Pleasure rocked through him in waves. He gave Riana all he was and more. Afterwards he leaned against her soft fur, spent and aching where she'd bitten him.

“Thank you, love. That warmed me quite spectacularly.” He rubbed his face in her fur. “You should not have bitten me there, though.”

She moved forward and his cock slipped out of her safe harbor. She turned and blew across his face. He knew she would bite him again. She would also take him again. It was in her eyes and when she brushed his lips with hers in an attempt at a kiss. Ownership. He gave himself up to it. She stuck her tongue in his mouth and he sucked on it. She stroked his tongue and sucked it in return. He couldn't get enough of her. She couldn't get enough of him. Her fur tickled his face. He found himself on his back with Riana over him. He gasped for breath. She nuzzled his cheek and licked his neck.

Arkady tried to prepare for what was coming, but the swift pain of puncture surprised him. At least his tunic would cover that part of his neck. She licked him there afterwards, so he

knew she wasn't done. Her wet tongue moved down his chest to his nipple. She licked the little nubbin with her rough tongue and made him writhe. His cock was hard as a spike once more. She bit his nipple and his cock jerked. He almost came with the pleasure-pain. There were beads of blood on the erect nub.

Her mouth moved down his belly, licking him and tickling him with her fur. Then she took his cock into her mouth once more. He spread his thighs open and groaned as she slid her mouth down on him several times. He arched his spine, thrusting his cock deep in her mouth. It felt so good. She released his cock and he flopped bonelessly to the earth. When she licked the location of the first bite, he didn't even tense. She moved to the other side of his cock, where he thought she'd bite him. But she licked his skin. She licked his cock with her big tongue. He quivered as pleasure seared through him.

Riana nudged him hard on the side of his hip. She wanted him over on his stomach.

Arkady obliged. Riana nudged his butt until he was up on his knees. Her wet tongue licked his balls. She stroked over his cock several times. He quivered and his cock jerked with pre-orgasm shocks. She took his heavy balls into her mouth and sucked. He cried out. His cock swelled and throbbed, demanding release.

The bite, when it came, was unexpected. She gently but firmly pricked the skin that attached his balls to his body. She sucked his balls at the same time and the pleasure/pain burned through his loins. He screamed and jettted semen into the grass, jerking helplessly against her mouth.

Riana continued to suck as aftershocks wracked his balls. He'd never experienced anything so wrenching in any of his lives. He rested on his forearms, panting hard, while she explored between his legs. Each touch of her tongue set flame to his oversensitized flesh. She licked his cock, his balls, the skin between his balls and anus, the flesh between his thighs. He'd thought only his cock and balls were sexual, but Riana's tongue taught him otherwise.

She surprised him yet again by mounting him. She licked

his neck and nuzzled him. He turned his head, offering his lips, and she brushed hers over his. She rubbed her fur against him in an erotic way.

“My love,” he murmured.

She nuzzled his neck and nipped him below the ear. She licked down his back, nipping as she went. By the time she reached his buttocks, he needed much more. He had an erection again, which surprised him. If she gave him a chance, he would use it.

Riana licked his butt in the center of one cheek.

“Careful, Riana. I must be able to ride.”

She licked up his spine in retaliation, Arkady shuddered with delight. She pushed him over and he rolled to his back. Then she attacked his cock with her mouth once more. He bucked against her and she straddled him. But her genitals were open for him and he took immediate advantage.

Arkady spread the fur aside and grabbed her hindquarters. He fastened his mouth to her vagina and sucked. Riana made a burble of surprise and changed shape. He thrust his tongue into her vagina and she moaned. She licked his cock and he moaned too.

He found her clitoris and sucked hard.

“Arkady!” She panted hard and bucked against his mouth. Her breasts pressed against his abdomen.

He thrust a finger into her vagina and she screamed. Instead of letting her go, he continued to suck and thrust until she cried out with a second orgasm. Her fingers were tight around his cock and balls. As she lowered her head to suck him again, he stopped her.

“Make love to me, Riana. Make me yours.”

She changed position and he helped ease her onto his cock.

“My love,” he sighed.

“Arkady.” Riana leaned down and kissed him.

He wrapped his arms around her smooth back. Her breasts rubbed his nipples as they moved. Their skin wanted to cling together. This human was his mate, too, the other half of his human soul.

“You seem human now,” she gasped.

“So do you.”

She thrust against his cock several times before she spoke again. “The last time we made love, you felt like a Jaxtar.”

He arched into her. “So did you.”

“Arkady!” she cried in frustration. She kissed him hard. “Before, you *were* a Jaxtar.”

He watched her rise and lower on his cock. Her breasts bobbed, begging for attention. But so did the question.

“Yes,” he admitted.

She sank down on him, her face taut with strain. “How?”

“It is a very long story and we are occupied. Shall I show you instead?” He thrust up into her welcoming wetness.

“Yesss.”

“Change shape.”

Riana became the Jaxtar and so did Arkady in his mind. Her eyes widened as Jaxtar mating took over. Two cats pressed together for conclusion. Arkady felt the mate bond crackling between them, but he knew Riana did not recognize it yet. They strained towards oneness. She used her greater strength to ride him hard. He took her deep.

Heat, friction, shortened breaths, no words, animal lust, pounding rhythm. And then cataclysm. One heart, one love, one whole.

There would never be another afternoon like this one.

“The Zanath proposed a marriage alliance with the prince of Sarna,” Riana told Arkady as they lay entwined in his cloak afterwards.

The tension in her body was palpable, the anger in her voice unexpected. Her reactions made him tense.

“With you?”

“With me or Pierin. He wants the prince to have a choice.”

Arkady swallowed. “What do you want?”

“I would like to marry a J’Tar some day, but I am related by blood to all the J’Tars.”

Arkady’s heart beat a crazy tattoo in his chest. She wanted a Jaxtar lover, which he was. She didn’t even realize what she had. But he might lose her to an arranged marriage before she

accepted she was his mate. She might not believe him now if he told her. Besides, at this time she still feared what she thought a mate bond represented—a lack of freedom.

“What about the rest of our children?”

“You will give them to me. I will hold you to your promise. I do not intend to become this prince’s prize. I cannot believe the Zanath even asked me to do it after all I have been through.”

Arkady threaded his fingers through hers. “You could have told him you are pregnant. That would make you ineligible for an alliance.”

“No.” She shook her head to enunciate the denial. “This baby is our secret until I can no longer hide it. Just as you are.”

“If you came directly from the castle, our secret may already be out. Your family may have followed you and seen what we did.”

“I did not come from the castle. I have been searching for my children for four days. I saw you on the way back and had to have you.”

He smiled at her. “And have me, and have me.”

Riana looked coy. “You did not complain.”

“I had no breath to do more than scream,” he said in a dry tone. “You found no sign of your kits?”

Her smile dimmed and he was saddened for her.

“No sign anywhere. I fear they may have left Rubiya, perhaps crossed the border into Durrior where there are poachers. My children might already be dead!” She clenched her fists tightly.

“No. The gods would not be so cruel. You will find them. You just have to trust the gods.”

“Trusting the gods is easy when I am with you. You make me feel so good that everything must be possible. It is when I have roamed for days without finding my kits that I lose faith.”

“If that is the case, I wish I could go with you.”

“My kits will not come near a human.”

“I know. I wish I was a Jaxtar.”

“So do I. You would not hurt me as the alpha did. I would ride your big black cock to ecstasy.”

Arkady crooked a brow. “What? I am not big enough for you as I am?”

“You are perfect for me. But I am part Jaxtar. I need my own kind.”

“You seem happy with me.”

“I am.”

“Then claim me and you will not have to let this prince court you.”

“No!” She stood in a rush. “I am not ready for any kind of cage, even a golden one.”

“If you feel that way, why did you mark me as you did today?”

“You have told me more than once that you are mine to use as I see fit. You needed to be reminded of your pledge.”

“You were extremely possessive.”

“You are *mine*. My lover. Only mine.”

“I *am* yours.” He stared at her, willing her to claim him, until she turned away.

Her fists clenched. “I cannot claim you. I will not until I am ready. I do not wish to discuss this any more.”

“Yes, J’Tar.”

When she looked at him, her green eyes snapped with anger. “You think to bind me to your will, but I will not let you. We will see who is stronger, you or I.” Riana changed into the Jaxtar and ran off into the forest.

Arkady wrapped his arms around his upraised knees and laid his head on them. His cock and balls ached from Riana’s bites and fierce riding. He shouldn’t have pushed her again. Very little of her wildness was tamed, and this search was making her temper edgy.

Oh gods, why did you not make me J’Tar for her? Riana needed another Jaxtar besides her family to help her search, one who could bolster her faith in the task. She needed her acknowledged mate to make her stronger and help protect her.

This was his path. Why was it so hard to walk it?

Eight

“Prince Zaki Samir Mourad of Sarna,” the guard intoned to the occupants of the Zanath’s office.

Riana craned around Carabin to see the prince. She’d avoided the castle until the very hour of his arrival so as not to have to think about the Zanath’s command. A swarthy-complexioned young man stepped into the Zanath’s office. His bearing was regal, his stride confident, the lift of his chin arrogant. His curly black hair framed a triangular face with wide-spaced dark brown eyes. He was a handsome man.

Riana hated him.

His guards followed him inside. They wore the brown and gold Sarnan livery. All the Sarnans wore the flowing, multilayered desert dress. The prince’s clothing and matching round cap were brightly patterned. He was putting on a display for them.

He stopped before the Zanath and gave a cursory nod. “I bring you greetings from my father, King Shafik Mourad, and hope for stronger ties between our two countries.” His accented intonation made the Rubiyan language sharper, but it was not unpleasant.

Oberroth stepped forward. In his midnight blue silk tunic, he was a perfect foil to the prince’s desert colors. In a strange land against the most powerful man of the country, the prince did not cower, simper or seem diminished. He stood toe to toe with Riana’s dominant uncle and accepted a handshake.

“Welcome to Rubiya, Prince Zaki. I, too, hope for an alliance. Sarna has been a good neighbor, and we would like friendly relations to continue.”

Zaki nodded. “Long have I heard stories of the J’Tars of Rubiya and wished to meet shapeshifters. We have djinn in Sarna, but that is not the same thing.”

“You will meet them. First, let me introduce the young women of my family.” Oberroth signaled Riana and Pierin forward.

Damn, she was to be paraded in the first minutes of the prince's arrival. Riana followed Pierin to her uncle's side.

Oberroth wrapped his arm around Pierin's shoulders. "My daughter, Pierin."

The prince took Pierin's slender bronzed fingers in his darker-complexioned hand and bowed his head over it. Pierin wore a fitted velvet dress of bright scarlet. With her long black hair, liquid brown eyes and bronzed skin, she was the embodiment of a fall princess. She was all graceful lines like her mother, a delicate beauty. Riana hoped the prince was smitten. She didn't see how he couldn't be. Next to Pierin, Riana had always thought she looked boyish.

Prince Zaki's eyes pulled at the corners, a controlled reaction. Good, at least he was reacting to Pierin.

"You are very beautiful," he said. His accent was thicker.

Riana controlled a strong desire to clap with glee.

Pierin lowered her lashes and raised them slowly. Riana had never seen her cousin be coy or flirtatious before.

"You are very handsome yourself, Prince Zaki."

He bowed his head once more.

Oberroth extended his hand toward Riana. She came slowly to him as Pierin stepped aside.

"This is my niece, Riana."

Riana saw the practiced smile before Zaki turned to her. Then his eyes widened and his real smile unfolded. His dark eyes heated. Her heart leaped into her throat. She'd seen that look on Arkady's face. Prince Zaki couldn't want *her*, not when he could have Pierin! She'd worn a moss green dress because the color was muted and she thought it unflattering to her coloring. He should not have found anything attractive about her.

He clasped her suddenly cold hand with his warm one. "You look like spring standing next to the princess."

She almost asked what princess before she realized he meant Pierin. A clever retort about this being her only clean dress remained unsaid as she saw the Zanath's pleased expression. He thought an alliance was a certainty. She decided she could act in a royal manner as the situation demanded.

“Thank you.” She tried to tug her hand away, but he wouldn't release it.

He studied her face. “You are much younger than I first thought.”

“Eighteen.” She tugged again.

Zaki smiled. “Old enough to wed.”

Riana jerked her hand away and backed into the shelter of Oberroth's arm. Her heart beat like a trapped thing, which was exactly what she felt. This foreigner meant to trap and cage her, meant to rob her of the freedom she'd just won. Only his cage wouldn't be temporary. It would be for life. She'd rarely see her family, just as her cousin Saria had infrequently traveled back to Rubiya since she married Prince Bryal of Mabrelle. Riana's own mother had rarely seen her home of Mabrelle, or her father the king, once she became Curran's mate. Riana didn't want a permanent banishment like that. J'Tars lived in Rubiya, not in neighboring countries. How could she serve the Zanath if she didn't live here? Did he feel service as a wife was enough for a J'Tar?

Riana slipped from Oberroth's grasp. When she looked at the Zanath, he'd begun to frown. She'd made oaths to him and his family, but for the second time in two years, he was trying to make a decision about her that would make her foresworn.

She lifted her chin. “I have duties to attend to.” She turned to the prince and with the right amount of regal dignity said, “Please excuse me.”

She fled the Zanath's office, past her father's look of disapproval and her mother's startled face.

Riana climbed to the parapet to pace the castle battlements. She would have become the Jaxtar and escaped to the countryside, but that would have made her delinquent in her duties. And her quarrel with the Zanath hinged on that point.

She wasn't surprised when the Zanath and her father climbed out of the trap door a little while later. They came to stand beside her.

“Do you want to explain what happened with the prince, Riana?” Oberroth asked.

“Am I really J'Tar?” She watched the tree limbs sway in

the light spring breeze.

“Of course you are.”

She turned to face the Zanath then. “Is it a title or does it mean more?”

His beaded braids clinked lightly as he turned his head. “You have a particular reason for asking, and it has to do with the prince.”

“Yes. What does my service entail, if I am J’Tar?”

“The J’Tars protect me and my family,” Oberroth answered.

“How can I do that from Sarna?”

Oberroth gestured to Curran. “Your father and brothers are here.”

“So I am expendable. Again.” Her words were bitter. “You sent me into the wild to train me, but now you do not intend to use me for what I am trained. I suffered for nothing.”

“Riana,” her father remonstrated.

“If Rubiya’s need is for a royal alliance, is your need greater?” Oberroth asked.

Riana poked her chest. “But I am J’Tar, not just any female. How can a J’Tar be worthwhile if she cannot serve as the gods intended? I have gifts no other woman has. You recognized those gifts by swearing me to your service *in this land*. I meant those oaths, even if you have not allowed me to honor them in the past few years.”

The Zanath looked out over his land. “I asked your father to take a wife...”

Riana made a slashing motion. “Not that story again. My case is not the same. My father is here by your side. He is not foresworn.”

“I am the heart of Rubiya, and your father protects me. But Rubiya herself needs protection and alliances can provide this. As J’Tar, you can solidify a safe border with Sarna. Our southern lands are thick with farmers. We need them to be safe and prosperous. Do you feel that is beyond the scope of your duties as J’Tar?”

Damn him for his logic. Put in that context, a marriage alliance was an honorable duty. She’d been steeped in honor

and duty since she was born. How could she tell him that she was not truly free to wed without divulging her secrets? She couldn't.

Duty dictated that she give the prince a chance. But what about honor? Was it honorable to lie, in this case a lie of omission?

"I will do my duty," she said.

Oberroth laid a hand on her forearm. "Is there nothing of pleasure or joy in this for you, Riana? Prince Zaki seems taken with you. You feared no man would want you, yet the prince does. He is a handsome young man, intelligent, well-mannered. He is not an ordeal to be endured."

She beseeched her father with her eyes. "It is too soon for me." And too late.

Curran's face softened with love. "You do not have to marry him immediately, sweeting. At your young age, a year or two of courtship is to be expected."

Riana brightened. In a year or two, the prince would give up and look elsewhere. She'd make sure he saw Pierin. She'd work towards that end diligently. "That may be enough time." Enough time to find her kits, birth Arkady's child and make herself an undesirable candidate in his eyes. Better that Zaki be the one to turn away from her than vice versa in her family's eyes.

"I forgot to tell you the news! The castle is abuzz with it. The prince of Sarna chose Riana," Blanath told Arkady, his tone dripping with disbelief. He laid labeled empty herb packets on his dining table in preparation for filling.

Arkady's hand froze on the pestle and he looked down the table at his master. He feared for a moment that his terror of losing Riana showed.

"You are shocked." Blanath nodded his head. He measured herbs into a packet and sealed it shut. "So am I. Pierin is so much lovelier than Riana, and so much more feminine. A mannered lady like her mother."

Arkady turned his attention to the leaves he was crushing with the pestle. He could argue passionately about how

feminine Riana was when they mated, how his body throbbed knowing she was his opposite half. Had he now lost the right to his own mate?

“Is it settled then? Has an alliance been made?” he asked.

“No, it could not be as easy as that. Riana left the room as soon as she met the prince. The servants said she looked wild. The Zanath and her father spoke to her. No one knows what was said, but Riana spent time with the prince later. I think the prince will have to tame her before an alliance can be made. I hear Sarna is a wild, sometimes harsh land. I hope it is wild enough to have forged a strong prince.”

Arkady used viscous jabs to crush the leaves. *He* was the only man who would tame her.

“Gently, Arkady. Do not destroy their potency.”

Arkady wished he could do violence to the prince as easily. He'd been a warrior. He remembered how to fight and kill, although in his current life he was more pacific. But he would do anything to protect his mate. He passed the bowl of crushed herbs to Blanath and pulled another bowl in front of him. He cleaned the pestle.

Would he cause a war to protect his mate? He froze with the pestle above the bowl. Would it come to war?

“What will happen if Riana cannot be tamed? What if the prince does not find a wife?”

“Riana knows her duty. Besides, the prince may yet find something about Pierin he likes. If those two do not fit, I believe the prince has female cousins. Bilek or Carabin would be candidates for them. But a link with royal blood on both sides would be strongest.” He carefully measured the herbs Arkady had just crushed and poured them into a packet.

Duty. Arkady knew all about duty. Was he not this man's apprentice, doing as he was bid? All his lives had seen service of some kind. Even his first life had harnessed him to the will of the mage. And in every one of his lives, especially this one, he served the gods.

The gods had dictated he should be the J'Tar's mate. He had to get Riana to admit their status. But she was still angry at him for pushing too hard and afraid of being confined by

anything, including words. He needed to spend more time with her, more than the prince.

Blanath took the bowl of crushed herbs from Arkady. "You have gone quiet, Arkady."

"I was just thinking about how duty has ruled my life."

"We all serve, even those with royal blood. I serve the Zanath and the people surrounding this village. As my apprentice, so do you."

Arkady concentrated on his work, carefully grinding the leaves against the side of the bowl. He'd never pledged service to the Zanath, or any other ruler. He had a master, yes, but no country owned his allegiance. How the oversight had been allowed, he didn't know. But it gave him greater freedom to maneuver with Riana. Blanath was the only one who could order his compliance, and the healer didn't know how much power he had.

There was urgent pounding on the door. Blanath wiped his hands on his stiff apron as he moved to open it. A wild-looking boy of about ten stood there, his cheeks pink from cold, his nose running. His brown hair was windblown into tufts.

"Healer Blanath, you must come. Midwife Saradorn has been injured. She says to tell you her hip is broken and the babies from the fertility rite are due. She cannot deliver them."

Blanath pulled the boy in closer to the fire and shut the door. "How many babies are due and when?"

"A dozen in our five villages over the next six weeks."

Blanath's brown eyebrows lifted almost to his hairline. He poured hot tea into a mug and handed it to the boy. "A successful ceremony, obviously. What is your name, boy?"

"Jaekel. My father is Joronus of West Unler village." The boy sipped his tea. "For two years we had little rain and the crop was poor. Papa said we must have a better crop, so even he and Mama participated in the rite and they are old. Papa says we have the blessing of the gods now. They have shown us with the child Mama carries. Papa wants another boy to help with the farm."

Blanath stroked his chin. "Six weeks. I do not wish to be

gone that long at this time. Arkady?”

Arkady's heart sank. He knew Blanath meant to send him away. He brushed off his hands and moved towards his master and the gangly youth. “Yes, master?”

Blanath put his hand on Arkady's shoulder. “Jaekel, this is my apprentice, Arkady. I will send him to tend to the birthings and to care for Saradorn. He is very skilled and has learned much under me.”

Arkady had to convince Blanath not to send him. “Master Blanath, are you sure you do not want to go yourself?”

Blanath shook his head. “You are ready for a long test on your own. Saradorn has been both healer and midwife since her husband, the last healer, died. The five villages she cares for are close together in southwest Rubiya, which makes it easy for one healer to cover them. I think Saradorn can teach you a few things while you are there. She has a special way with birthings that is almost magical. Tell her I asked for her to teach it to you.”

Blanath turned back to Jaekel. “Did someone help her set the bone?”

The boy shook his head. “We tried, healer, but it must be badly broken. The earth gave way under her and she fell. We have had a very wet spring. It will be good for the crops, father says.” He frowned, as though not sure how it could be bad for the healer, yet good for the crops.

“Where is she now?” Oberroth asked.

“We carried her to her cottage. She tried not to scream, but I could see it hurt her. She needs a healer. Can your apprentice come quickly?”

“Master Blanath, are you sure?” Arkady tried one last time.

“You will be fine. Hurry and pack your things. Jaekel and I will prepare your horse.”

Arkady nodded and left Blanath's cottage. Impotent rage and frustration harried him to his cottage. When he and Riana needed to be together the most, he was being sent away.

Duty. They both had it and it dictated that both do what they did not want to do. He hoped it was a test sent from the gods and that they would pass it. But he feared what the

separation would mean to them.

Jaekel's village's need was great. Their need outweighed his own. Duty. It was an ugly word today.

Nine

“I would like you to come to my palace,” Prince Zaki told Riana. “You would fit in perfectly there. I have two new pets my father gave me for my last birthday—a matched pair of Jaxtar cats with eyes the same shade of green as yours. You could walk them in the courtyard and be the darling of the court.”

Riana could not believe what she’d heard. Those cats had to be her kits! No true Jaxtar had green eyes!

Carabin had walked up to the table where they sat in the great hall. “Are you sure they have green eyes?”

“Exactly like Riana’s. It is unusual in a Jaxtar. That is why my father’s huntsmen captured them. They are the most unusual Jaxtars in the world.” He turned back to Riana. “You would look beautiful with the matching cats on leashes in front of you...”

He had her children on leashes! “On leashes!” Riana stood while the cold chill of her words changed to the burning rage of killer hatred.

“Riana,” Carabin warned.

“What is wrong?” Zaki asked. “I assure you they have been trained.”

Riana screamed and lunged for him. She made the change and her scream cascaded into a lethal snarl. She leaped easily over the tabletop, intent on killing him.

“Riana, no!” Carabin’s voice barely registered with her.

She knocked Zaki to the floor, overturning the bench he sat on with a loud thwack on the stone floor. She had her fangs sunk in his neck by the time Carabin grabbed her. Zaki screamed a high squeal of mortal fear.

Carabin pulled on her, preventing her from the fatal tear that would end Zaki’s shrieking life. Other shrill screams echoed in the stone hall. Riana knew only an instinctive bloodlust that needed to be sated.

“Riana, no. Do not kill him. He does not know what he

has done. He is innocent.”

She snarled and Zaki screamed louder. The acrid scent of urine filled her nostrils. The cretin had wet his pants! She hated him. She wanted to snuff out his miserable life.

Other hands pulled on her, and she snarled louder. She would not be robbed of her prey.

“Riana!” Her father’s voice was sharp with reproach.

“He has her kits,” Carabin explained in a tight voice as he tugged on her. “As pets.”

“Riana, let loose,” the Zanath ordered.

A strong arm wrapped around her throat and squeezed. She shook off whoever it was. This was justice and she would not be denied.

“Stop that wailing, boy, and tell her you will give her the cats,” Oberroth demanded.

The wailing subsided into sobs. “Anything. Just get it off me!”

Riana let loose with a snarl. Her family pulled her backwards while Zaki scooted away. He put a hand to his throat and then held it in front of him and stared at the blood on it. He let out a yelp.

Riana snarled, and his eyes widened in renewed fright. He backed farther away from her.

“Stop it, Riana,” Oberroth said. “The prince agrees to right the wrong.”

Riana still roiled inside with violence. The bloodlust was not yet satisfied. But she changed back into human form, only this time her illusion of clothes was the black silk tunic and trousers her father favored. They suited her mood of dealer of death.

“You are one of the shapechangers!” Zaki exclaimed. “But you are a girl. You have no tattoo like the J’Tars do. I thought your title was honorary!”

“I am a woman, not a girl, and you hold my children hostage.”

“The green-eyed cats are your...children?” He swallowed.

“Mine, not yours. You will send for them—*now*—or with the gods as my witnesses, I will kill you.”

“They are valuable animals.” He lifted his chin. “What will you give me in return?”

She snarled. He flinched and scooted backwards.

“No one on this earth can save you if you do not send for them. You will not live out the day. My family cannot protect you from my intention to see you dead.”

“I have not harmed them. They are well cared for.”

“Send a servitor with a message. Now.”

His brown eyes pleaded with Oberroth and her father, but for the first time since the day she conceived her kits, they backed her.

“I will get parchment and a quill,” Carabin said. His boot heels made no sound on the flagstones as he left the hall.

Her father closed his hands gently over her tight fist. “It will be all right, Riana.”

“I never pictured them captured, caged or leashed,” she said. “I thought they were free. His wrong against me can never be forgiven. Not ever. Do you understand my meaning?”

Oberroth answered from her other side. “You are withdrawn as a marriage candidate.”

“But she is not even a maiden,” Zaki complained. “I would not marry someone who has lain with another.”

Riana growled deep in her throat. Zaki’s eyes widened.

“I would not even think to marry someone who is cruel to Jaxtars, as you are. How dare you even come to Rubiya knowing that J’Tars live here. We are half Jaxtar and proud of it!”

Carabin returned and handed Zaki the quill and parchment. “Write.”

Zaki looked around at Riana’s family. Apparently seeing no softening there, he placed the parchment on his knee and scribbled a note. He handed it to one of his retainers. “Take this to my father with all haste. Return with my pet Jaxtars as soon as possible.”

The man looked around at the assembled group. “You are hurt, my prince. I should not leave you.”

“If you do not go, I will hurt him worse,” Riana promised.

“I will report this treatment to the king,” the man said

with a lift of his chin.

"You do that," Riana snapped. "And tell him what will happen if the Jaxtars are not returned to me. He jeopardizes his son's life."

The guard's brown eyes widened, then narrowed. "My king..."

A hand was laid firmly on Riana's shoulder. Oberroth's voice rang with authority.

"Tell King Shafik that Rubiya does not countenance the capture of Jaxtars. Explain that the green-eyed pair are Riana's children. She gave birth to them. It is possible they are part J'Tar that have never been taught to shapeshift to human form."

Riana gasped. Only Oberroth's hand on her shoulder kept her upright. Part human children? Less human than she was, but still human? It was an idea she had trouble grasping, but hope surged strongly in her breast.

"Humans, Zanath?" the guard asked.

"With Riana's green eyes, it is entirely possible. Once they are taught to shapechange, we will know for sure."

"Should I go with the guard to Sarna?" Carabin asked. "I can show them how to change shape."

"No." Oberroth shook his head and his black braids swung. "Let King Shafik Mourad show us his beliefs by his actions. Then we will know what kind of man he is and whether we want an alliance with him."

"My father is a good man," Zaki said.

"We will see." Oberroth faced the guard again. "Make haste."

The man nodded, looked at Zaki with a frown of concern, and then he hurried from the hall.

"Fetch the healer," Oberroth ordered to a guard at the door.

"They cannot be human," Zaki protested. "I would have known."

Oberroth ignored the prince and turned Riana to him. "Why did you not say their eyes were green?"

"I did not know! I do not see colors as a Jaxtar, just shades of black, white and gray. And the spell held me as a Jaxtar until my kits left me." Her last words were sharp with

accusation.

“I do not see colors either, sweeting,” her father said. “And I was always a Jaxtar around the kits.”

“Me, too,” Carabin chimed in. “I am so sorry.”

Riana began to shake with reaction. She’d located her kits. They would be with her within weeks. “I should go to Sarna and get them.”

“No!” Oberroth denied with force. “You have injured the king’s son.” He held up his hands to ward off her protest. “With provocation, I admit. But it is best for the king not to have a target for his anger. I know how I would feel if someone hurt my children.”

“That is exactly how I feel about mine!” Riana let him see her maternal possessiveness. “You dismissed my kits, thinking them animals. Now that you believe them part human, you elevate them to a higher status. But I cared all along. It does not matter to me that they are less human than I am. I am their mother.”

“I am sorry I handled the situation badly,” the Zanath offered.

Her proud uncle rarely made mistakes. For him to admit he had, in front of witnesses, brought tears of relief to her eyes. Her throat tightened. But some of her anger at her family uncoiled from around her heart. With her kits in her arms once more, maybe she could forgive them.

Healer Blanath arrived in the doorway, huffing like he had run.

“Healer, the prince has been injured,” Oberroth directed.

Blanath nodded and staggered over to Zaki. He knelt in front of the prince and gingerly touched the bloody wounds.

“These were made by a Jaxtar!” Blanath exclaimed.

“By Riana,” Oberroth said.

Blanath looked at her with huge, fearful eyes. Riana had had enough of the scene in the hall. She headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” her father asked.

“I will escort the Sarnan guard to the border. I think my presence will encourage haste. And it will take my mind off the waiting.”

“I will go with you,” Carabin called. He changed into his Jaxtar form.

Riana followed suit. Urgency rode her, along with a joy that made running seem like flying.

Ten

It had been seven weeks since Arkady had been with Riana, since Blanath had sent him to the southwestern village of West Unler. Arkady had delivered a dozen children in five villages in six weeks. During that time he'd also helped bring in the winter wheat, chopped wood, took care of the newborns and the villagers, tended the midwife's broken hip, and learned what healing she could teach him. He ached with physical exhaustion, yet that didn't even begin to measure up to the ache in his heart. He could not have left the poor villagers, but Riana could have come to him if she'd wanted to. She hadn't.

On his lonely, dispirited ride home, Arkady reflected on their time together since he had taken Riana as his mate. The late afternoon spring chill echoed the cold emptiness he felt inside. It had been nine long, almost unbearable months of suffering since he'd first met her, of which the last seven weeks alone were the worst. Had he believed in retribution for past discretions, then he would have long since repaid everyone he'd ever wronged in all his nine lives. Every day living without his mate was a punishment. When she was angry or afraid, weeks would go by without seeing her or hearing her voice, and he'd feel that he was dying inside. He wanted to die during those spans of time, only he'd take her with him into that abyss. Mates couldn't live without each other. He couldn't do that to his mate and child.

At the waterfall, Riana had sworn she'd teach him a lesson. So she'd left him alone in order to show him she was stronger than him. He had dared to ask to be claimed, to be bound to her publicly, and in doing so he'd awoken her fear of being caged. She equated the mate bond with a cage. She never gave him the chance to explain that as his mate she would always be free. She could not resist that bond, but she fought the pull as long as she could. He knew sometimes she watched him from the forest. The mate bond would throb with her nearness. But she wouldn't show herself. She was wilder now than when

she'd first returned because she wanted what she feared most.

All that kept him alive was their mating. She came to him every two or three weeks, skulking into his cottage, or waylaying him in the forest. She'd even taken him roughly once in the castle, with the servants only feet away, so that he had to remain silent. She took him fiercely, always in Jaxtar form. She thought she was punishing him by remaining a cat, but she was even more his mate in that form. Riana wrung climaxes from his body with merciless ease. His cottage echoed with his tortured cries as she pushed him to the brink but wouldn't let him fall over. It was her way of exerting power over him, to make him wait for fulfillment. She did not seem to realize that he had no power in their relationship. He was the J'Tar's mate. She possessed him.

Each time they were together she marked him with a small wound that did not scar, usually a bite, but it was her way of claiming him. She would not admit the mate bond, but she made sure he knew who he belonged to.

Each nocturnal visit left him boneless with satiation. But she still left him.

Now her seven weeks' desertion weighed on his heart as Arkady rode toward the village where he lived. He missed his mate with every fiber of his being, but apparently she didn't feel the same way. It was like he'd been exiled from her presence. Another punishment for loving her. And it seemed like he was in love alone. His shoulders sagged under the weight of that knowledge.

A rustling noise to his right caused his horse to shy. It took a second for Arkady to realize the throb in his heart was due to the nearness of his mate and not the loneliness he'd felt for weeks. She'd come! Gray and black spotted fur moved through the foliage.

"Riana!"

The cat stalked closer, looking wild. His horse pranced nervously, and then reared. Arkady lost his hold, tumbled out of his saddle and off the back of the horse. He landed on his butt in the dirt road. The landing jarred his spine all the way up to his jaw. His horse galloped away as the Jaxtar pounced

on him and knocked him flat. He threw an arm over his face as the large jaws dived at him. There was no telling how or where Riana would mark him in this wild mood. Her fangs grazed his throat. He tensed, but the furred lips caressed instead of biting. He relaxed and lowered his arm. Her lips came instantly to his and brushed them.

“Riana,” he purred.

This is what he’d missed with every breath he took. *This* was what he needed. He wrapped his arms around her silky body. She would not be restrained, however, and returned to taste his neck. He arched for her, enjoying her wet licks.

Riana crawled between his spread legs. Her mouth searched his chest and moved steadily lower. He sucked in his breath. Her face pushed into his groin, pressing erotically and nuzzling his cock. He jerked as her teeth grazed his waist. She tugged at the drawstrings of his pants.

“Wait, let me do it.”

But Arkady had to fight her for the pants. Riana wanted him bared. He had his penis half uncovered when she stuck her mouth into the opening of his trousers.

“Careful!” he hissed as she licked him. In her current desperation, she might even bite him someplace extremely delicate. He vividly remembered the last time.

Arkady arched under the assault of her rough tongue. He was too primed after so long without her. He might explode before they’d gone much further. Erotic pulses went directly into his balls with each lick. He groaned, clutching at her fur. He stiffened as she slowly took his cock into her mouth. It was heavenly.

“Riana!” he gasped when she applied sensual suction. He was going to explode.

She moved with speed and mounted him with the experience lately gained in his bed. She sank onto him as he rose up into her. He gritted his teeth to hold back his satisfaction as she took him hungrily into her tight, humid depths. The sense of belonging and rightness swelled in him. She growled deep in her throat with contentment.

Riana moved up and down on his turgid cock, taking him

deep into her body. He sensed a lessening of the wildness in her. Before she'd gotten his pants open, her movements had been jerky and desperate. Now she rode him smoothly, making the pleasure build inside him. When he thought he would explode, she stopped moving and began to lick his neck.

"Riana," he pleaded. He wanted completion.

She licked his ear, his cheek, and then suddenly his lips were on her human lips for the first time in four months. He closed his arms around his mate. She moved on him again and he thrust up into her. He planted his feet and pumped into her eager body. She clasped her inner muscles, pushing him over the edge of pleasure. He broke from her lips to shout. Her little groans mimicked the rhythm of her inner contractions as they stroked him and she achieved her own orgasm.

Then Riana collapsed onto him and he nuzzled her silky hair and the soft skin of her cheek. "That was a marvelous welcome home, although the fall from the horse hurt."

Riana kissed him. "I am glad it hurt. I was lonely. My arms were empty while you were gone."

Arkady kissed her back. "You knew where I went. You could have come to me there." He couldn't help the hurt that laced his voice. She'd left him alone for weeks.

"I did not know any such thing," she insisted.

"How could you not have known? Everyone knew."

She shook her head. "What was I to do, ask Blanath? No one spoke of your whereabouts to me. I did not know where you were."

His heart soared. She hadn't known! Now was the time to capitalize on her lack of knowledge. "If you did not leave me alone for weeks at a time, you would have known where I was. I did not mean to frighten you by mentioning mating, but have you not punished me for that mistake long enough?"

Her eyes slid to the side. "Perhaps."

Arkady cupped her face in his hands and forced her to look at him. "If you do not wish to claim me as your mate, then do not. Just know that I will welcome a claim when it comes."

"You seem sure I will claim you formally."

“I believe you will. You are very possessive of me and you need me badly.”

“Yes, I needed you. I always need you.” She leaned down and kissed him, a deep, satisfying kiss. When she raised her head, her pupils were black velvet orbs. “I am going to have you many times in the next few hours.”

Arkady raised an eyebrow. “Are you? Will it not depend on whether I can get hard that many times?” He arched a little under her, testing his readiness.

Riana wriggled on him, testing his strength. “You can get hard as often as I need you to. I am going to take you again.” She lifted from him and slid back down.

He sucked in his breath. “Ride me hard, Riana.”

She rose up on her knees. His hands went to her breasts. The nipples were taut buds declaring her desire. They stabbed into his palms as he rotated his hands over her breasts.

He looked into her slitted eyes as she increased the tempo. “Are you mine, Riana?”

“Yesss,” she purred as he filled her. “And you are mine.”

“Oh yes,” he panted as she slid down on him again. “I am all yours. Take me.”

He slid down into mindless pleasure as she changed once more into her Jaxtar form. His body throbbed hard with their mate bond. She called to the Jaxtar inside him, like to like. It was primitive, it was instinctive. He did not fight it.

Her fur rubbed his balls and lower abdomen with a sensuous brush. She leaned forward and nibbled his nipple. Each nip sent pleasure streaking to his groin. He moaned.

Riana was strong in her Jaxtar form. Her thrusts were hard, urging him up the incline towards orgasm. Her vaginal muscles clamped on his cock and offered the tightest sensual squeeze he'd ever experienced. She sank down on his body over and over, building the fire, building the tension, ratcheting the desire to a level of madness. She took and took and took. It seemed liked months' worth of built-up desire. He was wracked with the pleasure. He could not come fast enough, although he wished the loving could go on forever.

She finally drained his essence after an intense ride. He

lay dozing with the cat in the early twilight until her amorous exploration of his cock had him mounting her. He trapped her under his thrusting body, claiming the cat in this primitive way. She changed before he spilled his seed so that he could have her lips and breasts. In the aftermath, his body throbbed from hard use.

He nuzzled her neck. "We had better start walking if we hope to reach the village by nightfall."

"You can walk after what I have done to you?"

He laughed. "Just barely. What about you?"

"My Jaxtar body can take your most savage thrusts. I am glad I can be Jaxtar with you."

"Me too. I wish I could be Jaxtar with you."

"I feel as if you already are. It is so strange." Her face lit up. "I was so excited to see you again, I forgot to give you my news! We located my kits. They are prisoners in Sarna, pets of the prince. He has sent for them and they will arrive in weeks!"

"Riana, that is wonderful news!" He kissed her hard. The reason for her pain would soon be vanquished. Then maybe they could begin a life together.

"They have green eyes. The Zanath believes they may be part human. Human children!"

"It is hard to believe. But with green eyes it may be so."

She clutched him fiercely. "Soon I will have my children. That will bring me some peace. But I did not like you being gone. I was even more alone than when I lost my kits. Arkady, do not ever leave me."

"I will not leave you. I am yours permanently."

"Do not even leave me for a few days. I need you."

"You can go with me from now on," he promised. "It is going to be awhile until you can have your way with me again, and I would like the next time to be in a soft bed. Let us go home." He rose and drew her to her feet. He pulled up his trousers while she assumed the illusion of clothing.

Arkady took hold of her hand and started walking down the road to the village. "People are going to know we are lovers if you are not more careful. Then they will know I fathered your baby."

“I try to stay away, but I cannot. If you were a mage, I would say you put a spell on me.”

Arkady glanced quickly at her. Did she know?

She continued, “But you are not a mage. You are not even J’Tar, although you feel like it to me. Maybe I love you.”

He jerked and his heart beat far too fast. “Do you?”

“It feels like love. Would you mind if I loved you? Would you believe it is true?” Her face was earnest in the moonlight.

“I would not mind. I am yours, after all. Would you allow me to love you, too?”

Her eyes flew wide. “Would you? Do you?”

“I love you.”

She looked wild. She pulled her hand away from his and took a step to the side. “You promised not to claim me.”

“I have not done so. I offer my love freely. You do not have to take it if you do not want it. Just like I offer my body to you to take or not, whichever you choose. And even if you take my love without claiming me, I am still yours.”

“Truly? Your love is free?”

“I promised you, Riana. Take whatever you want from me. It is all free for the taking—my babies, my love, my body. It is all yours.”

She looked at him with her face radiant in the moonlight. “I do not think we will make it to your house.”

“Riana, I am not ready yet,” he teased.

“Do not worry. You will be by the time I am through with you.”

He let her drag him into the woods and in the moonlight Riana and the Jaxtar pleased him to ecstasy. He knew himself loved at last.

Eleven

“Father, you are going to have to talk to Riana about overeating. She is getting fat.” Carabin laughed, a youthful, carefree sound.

Curran stood by Carabin and his brother Oberroth on the castle parapet. They charted the path of the approaching carts that brought fresh meat and foodstuffs, and cords of wood. They would have to go down to the courtyard soon to meet the caravan. It was unusually warm for spring, so they’d dressed in lightweight clothing. The sun’s rays felt good after the long winter chill.

“She is just regaining the weight she lost while she was a Jaxtar,” Curran admonished his son.

Riana stood with her horse in the courtyard below. She fed the horse an apple, and then stroked its nose with affection. A breeze blew her brown braids against the horse, making it toss its head. She turned into the wind and her lightweight spring gown pressed to her body. Curran sucked in his breath. Oberroth clutched his arm.

“Riana is not fat. She is with child, a human child!” Oberroth exclaimed.

“Who would dare such a thing?” Curran demanded.

Carabin sputtered. “She has barely been civil since she returned home. She would not allow a male near her, let alone to touch her. It cannot be true.”

Oberroth gave the young man a scornful look. “I have seen enough pregnant females to know what I am looking at. Clearly a male has been very near her and done more than touch her. Her winter clothes must have hidden her condition until now.”

Curran’s mind whirled. “She is fairly far along, eight or nine months for a J’Tar baby. Amara carried Riana for ten months and Carabin for eleven. But Riana has only been back a little longer than that.”

“Has she shown interest in any man?” Oberroth asked. “Other than a cursory interest in the prince, and we know it is

not his child.”

Curran ran a hand over his face. “No, and now we know why she had no interest in the prince. The last man who tried to touch her was the healer, and he spent weeks recovering from the scratches.”

Oberroth turned to face him, his face stormy. “Why am I just now hearing about this? She attacked Blanath?”

“No, the apprentice. What is his name?”

“Arkady,” Carabin provided.

Oberroth’s brows furrowed in thought. “He is a quiet young man. Why did she attack him?”

“He said he frightened her somehow. Moved towards her too quickly or something,” Curran answered.

“He frightened Blanath, all bloody and fainting inside his front door,” Carabin added with gusto.

“Riana welcomed whoever it was. Otherwise, they would have ended up like Arkady and the prince.” Oberroth looked thoughtful again.

“I will demand his name, and he will marry her before the baby is born,” Curran thundered.

Oberroth placed a restraining hand on Curran’s arm. “Have you ever marked Amara?”

Curran tried to read his brother’s thoughts, but the sharp blue eyes gave nothing away. “You know I have. You have seen the bite marks.”

“Recently?”

“Always. She is my mate.”

“And she allows you to mark her, or is it accidental?”

“She welcomes it. Why this line of questioning?”

“One of the guards told me a strange tale yesterday, about someone he thought bore a Jaxtar mark. I thought nothing of it at the time. But in light of Riana’s condition...”

Curran sucked in his breath. “A male. Who?”

Oberroth’s eyes gleamed. “The apprentice, Arkady.”

Carabin gasped. “But she savaged him months ago.”

“Nine months ago,” Curran calculated. He remembered his first time mating with Amara and having to restrain his animal aggression so that she would not be savaged. In Riana’s

frame of mind, she would not have been as careful. But why would she have sex with any man, let alone Arkady?

"She does not act like half of a mated pair," Oberroth mused. "I saw how Amara was without you, brother."

"Riana is still too angry about her kits to act normally," Curran said. "But she will admit her relationship to him when we confront her."

Oberroth held Curran back once more with a hand on his arm. "The caravan is almost here. Use the time while we unload to calm yourself. We will speak to Riana after the farmers are gone. I have a plan."

Riana faced her father and the Zanath in the Zanath's office. Her mother, her brother Carabin, and her cousin Bilek sat wide-eyed on the settee on the side of the room. She'd known she couldn't hide her pregnancy any longer, so she'd flaunted it for all to see. This reckoning, although nerve-racking for her, was not a surprise. It was a surprise it hadn't come any sooner. All her searching for her kits, the miles she'd run, had kept her slender for months.

"I want the name of the man who got you with child," her father demanded.

She raised her chin. "No."

Her father rocked back on his heels. "You defy me?"

"In this I do."

"You must be married before the child is born."

"You are not married, Father."

His face reddened with anger. "I am mated to your mother and magically bound to her. That is much more than married. Name this man so that he can be bound to you."

"I will allow no man to claim or bind me. You seek to cage me once again. Do you plan to strip this baby from me too, so that once again my arms are empty and my breasts are aching with no child to nurse?"

Her father stumbled backward, his face white. The Zanath threw an arm around Curran's shoulders to support him. When Curran spoke, his voice was raw. "Is that what you felt when you returned to us?"

“Yes! I had nothing. No babies. They ran off and left me. They do not even remember me now. I lay over them all winter in the freezing cold, keeping them warm and alive while I shook with chill. I gave them what food I could kill while my belly ached with hunger. I watched over them night and day so predators would not kill them. I hardly slept from the moment they were born because their needs were so great. I was subservient to the alpha male so I would have a pack for my babies to grow up in. I gave them all the love in my heart, as is normal for a mother to do. And then I had nothing.” She opened her arms to show they were empty.

Carabin spoke into the stunned silence. “This man offered you a child.”

She turned to her brother. “Yes. He understood.”

“Who is he, Riana?” Oberroth demanded.

“You will know who he is when he claims my child after it is born.”

“We will know now.”

“No. He will not marry me. I have his word.”

“What?” her father thundered. “What kind of a man would make such a promise?”

“He will not claim me until it is what I want. But it is not what I want. And you cannot force me.”

Oberroth stood. His blue eyes were calculating. “Send for the Aurekar and both healers.”

Both healers? They couldn’t intend to hurt her. She gasped. Her family couldn’t know about her and Arkady. They’d been so careful to guard their secret.

The Aurekar arrived in minutes, his purple robes flowing around him.

“Find out the name of the father of Riana’s baby,” the Zanath instructed.

Riana feared discovery as the mage probed at her mind, but even that path was closed to the males of her family.

The mage wiped the sweat from his brow. “I cannot probe her thoughts. It is as if something prevents me. But I am the only mage in this part of the country.”

“Is it a magical protection?” Oberroth asked.

The mage stretched his neck and shoulders. "Yes."

"Riana is J'Tar, a magical creature. Perhaps it is her own magic."

The Aurekar stared at her intently, and Riana controlled the urge to flinch. He was a part of her worst memories.

"I cannot tell what it is, but no other mage has been to the castle in years."

The office door opened, admitting Blanath and Arkady. Riana glanced away quickly, only to snare Oberroth's keen gaze. *He knew!* But how?

"Arkady, come here," Oberroth said.

Arkady walked slowly toward the front of the room. When he was even with her, she locked gazes with him for an instant, and then quickly dropped her eyes. His golden eyes were peaceful and resolute.

"Do you need something, Zanath?" Arkady's tone was mild.

"Open your shirt and show us the wound the guards witnessed the day before yesterday."

"It is nothing, Zanath."

"I want to see it anyway."

Arkady just stood there, his face expressionless. Oberroth frowned and walked to Arkady. Riana's father followed behind him. Oberroth reached out and flicked back the open tunic collar to expose the wound on the side of Arkady's neck.

"It is a Jaxtar bite," Oberroth purred.

"I have seen them," Curran concurred.

"So did the guards who found you in the woods on the day your horse came back to the stable without you," Oberroth said. "They said you were half naked and it looked like you had just awoken. Who bit you?"

"A Jaxtar. They run wild in Rubiya." Arkady's tone was bland.

Oberroth pointed to the wound. "This is not meant to kill. This is a love bite."

Arkady said nothing, just stared at the Zanath with fathomless golden eyes.

"Are you the father of Riana's baby?"

Blanath gasped from the back of the room.

“Does she say that I am?” Arkady asked.

“She gave no name.”

“Then how could it be me?”

Oberroth’s black brows came together. “You are a deep one. Aurekar, probe his mind for the truth.” He stepped back to make room for the mage.

The mage stepped forward and raised his hands. Riana had a second to decide which action to take. She made a small movement.

“Do nothing,” Arkady whispered out of the side of his mouth.

The Aurekar’s face twisted as he worked his spell. But sweat beaded on his forehead and rolled down the side of his face. Riana could not believe it. He couldn’t work his magic on Arkady either! Finally, the mage lowered his arms.

“I cannot break through his protections. It is the same magic.”

“He is not a mage,” Oberroth denied. “He is a healer.”

“I think he is more than he seems,” the Aurekar said. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

Blanath came to stand beside Arkady. He stared long at Riana’s huge abdomen, and then looked at Arkady. On Blanath’s face was the dawning of realization. “Tell the Zanath what he wants to know, Arkady.”

“Are you ordering me, master?”

“Why do you not obey the Zanath?” Blanath asked.

“He has no power over me. I am not his subject.”

Oberroth looked crafty. “But your master does have power over you. Order him to speak, Blanath.”

“Tell him the truth, Arkady,” Blanath ordered.

“Say nothing,” Riana contradicted.

Arkady shut his mouth.

Oberroth’s eyes gleamed a bright blue. “He has another master.”

Oh, this is ridiculous. They would know the answer when she gave birth in about a month anyway. Riana reached out and laced her fingers through Arkady’s. He smiled at her and

then they both faced forward. Everyone watching stared at their joined hands.

“Arkady is mine,” Riana said defiantly.

Oberroth arched a brow. “Is that a formal claim? A J'Tar claim? A mate's claim?”

She lifted her chin. “What if it is?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Then you will marry him.”

“No,” Riana defied him.

“Why not?” her father demanded.

Riana said nothing.

“I do not need your agreement to bind you to him. Aurekar!” Oberroth called for the mage.

Twelve

The Aurekar came forward and raised his arms to spell cast, but Arkady took a step back and around him the air shimmered. Power moved through him, gathering like a storm. The Aurekar's eyes flew wide, and he faltered in the spell. An image of an old Jaxtar cat, silver around the muzzle, appeared in front of Arkady. Arkady had last seen his predecessor many years ago in a looking glass. He was a fearsome sight. In that moment when his guiding spirit protected him, he felt the ties to this land and its people like living taproots sunk deep in the ground.

Riana had changed form during the spell casting, and now a Jaxtar guarded Arkady's legs and faced the highest power of Rubiya.

Surprise and awe moved across the faces of Oberroth, Curran and the Aurekar. Riana's mother had come forward to cling to her mate. Riana had laid claim to the old feline's current incarnation. Arkady accepted the benediction of his ancestor and felt the magic around him dissipate.

The Aurekar walked towards him with eyes full of curious wonder. "You are no healer. What are you? A mage? That is the same magic I felt on both you and Riana."

"I am a healer now. I was a mage. The magic remained with me."

"Your magic is old, but you are not."

"I am not old in this lifetime."

Oberroth moved to the Aurekar's side. "You are J'Tar?"

"I was. Many years ago. In many ways I still am."

Riana changed form, and he slid his arm around her waist.

"Of our line?" Carabin asked.

"No. In a country far from here. I was born a Jaxtar. In this life, I am a Jaxtar in a human body." He looked at Riana as he spoke, and she nodded. Now she knew why he felt like a Jaxtar when they made love.

"But how?" Carabin asked. "You are a man. How can you

have been so many things?"

Arkady turned back to Riana's brother. "I have lived eight lives of the nine a Jaxtar is given. This is my last life before I go to the gods. I wanted to be J'Tar once more, but it was not the gods' plan for me. I am to be the J'Tar's mate, forever bound to her. I am to give myself to her and give her J'Tar children, as many as she wants. This is my fate. I am hers to command."

"But you will not marry her," her father argued.

"I do not need to marry my mate. We are already bound."

Curran's eyes widened. "Your mate?"

"For nine months now." He laced his fingers through Riana's. She squeezed his hand, acceptance of the mate bond. "Since our first time together, the night we conceived our child. It could be no other way."

Curran nodded. He had his arm around his own mate. "A J'Tar cannot sire heirs on a human woman any other way."

"Especially not a female J'Tar receiving a male J'Tar's first heir."

Riana looked at him in amazement. "You have sired no other human heirs?"

"No heirs at all. I am both Jaxtar and J'Tar. I cannot sire heirs on humans, only on a female at least as much Jaxtar as I am, a female J'Tar. That is why when I met you I knew I had to have you. The gods made me just for you and no other. I have been yours since that day." He drowned in the deep pools of her eyes, which held love only for him.

"Arkady." The Aurekar's voice broke through his emotional communion with Riana. He turned back to the mage. "Why do you not you use the Jaxtar form? You have the power."

"I cannot. I have tried. The gods prevent me."

"I could try to change you," the mage suggested.

Arkady looked to Riana for her opinion. He wanted to be Jaxtar again. He wanted to run with Riana and the J'Tar baby Riana carried in her womb. Riana nodded.

She stepped away from him. The others moved back.

The Aurekar raised his arms and the air around Arkady shimmered. Arkady braced his feet, feeling his own power

rise up to meet the Aurekar's. The space between him and the mage sparked as his magic fought the spell. His guiding spirit materialized and he felt it draw his essence from him. It gained substance as he felt himself diminish. The spirit was coming to life, instead of Arkady becoming a Jaxtar.

Dismay showed on the Aurekar's face, but Arkady's spirit was the stronger of the two mages. It gathered the Aurekar's magic and transformed it. The power of the spirit swelled. What was it doing?

A bright light flared around the spirit, then grew almost blinding. Arkady squinted against the brightness. He thought he saw two forms in the glare. Then there were two spheres of light. An old man stood in one, a young Jaxtar in the other. The Jaxtar looked at Arkady. His heart pounded hard in his chest. He thought he would burst with wanting. He reached his hand out to the cat and it walked forward to him until Arkady was included in its sphere of light.

Arkady dropped to his knees and enfolded the cat in his arms, so happy to be near it again. He looked at the man in the other sphere of light. It had been a long time since he'd seen the mage. A lifetime, in truth.

As Arkady's sphere brightened, the mage's sphere dimmed, but he smiled at Arkady and nodded. Arkady closed his eyes as light and heat surrounded him. He ran through the fields on all fours, answering the magical summons of the mage. But when he pushed through the door of the mage's house, it was Arkady the man standing there. Arkady the Jaxtar went to him and the two were joined as J'Tar.

Arkady opened his eyes. The spirit mage was gone, the bright light was gone and he had reclaimed the Jaxtar of his youth at last. He stood on all fours, feeling the strength of his Jaxtar form. Riana came to him with her eyes full of awe. She took his furred face between her hands and rubbed her nose against his. He changed to his human form once more, embraced her, and they turned to watch the others approach.

"What happened to the spell?" The Aurekar's voice was strained. "Who was that mage?"

"He was the mage who became J'Tar with me in my first

life. I became a part of him. You could not make me a Jaxtar while I remained a part of him.”

“The cat?”

“Was me before the mage. Is me again. I am no longer a part of the mage.” He wrapped his other arm around Riana’s waist. “I am a J'Tar.”

“Arkady?” Oberroth prodded.

Arkady turned and raised an eyebrow.

“You are J'Tar now. I ask you to reside with your mate, as is proper. A suite here in the castle will be made ready for you.”

Arkady looked at Riana. Her swelling belly was pressed against his side. She gave him a sweetly beckoning smile. His body grew warm. A slow smile spread across his face. Arkady and Riana could explore J'Tar possibilities now.

“Is that what you want, Riana?”

“Yes. Take me home.”

Arkady led her past her beaming family out the door of the Zanath’s office and into their new life together.

Epilogue

“They are coming! Riana, your kits are coming!”

Riana could no longer run in any form. She was weeks away from delivery and unwieldy with size. Arkady walked with her down the ramp of the castle. She trembled with excitement and trepidation. What if they didn’t remember her?

Her family surrounded her in a semicircle, although they stayed behind her so as not to interfere with her and the kits. Prince Zaki stood off to one side. She didn’t give him a second glance.

The wagon drew excruciatingly slowly towards her. And then it was in front of her and she dashed to her kits in their cages. Their green eyes were as bright as hers. They circled and backed away, wary, and they snarled at her through the bars. Disappointment almost crushed her heart. They didn’t know her.

“Change to the Jaxtar, my love,” Arkady whispered in her ear.

Of course! She changed at once and Arkady helped her jump onto the bed of the wagon. The kits watched her with intent eyes. She walked to their cages and let them smell her. One whined. He knew her!

The other looked into her eyes and she saw intelligence in them. She changed form. The cats jumped back from her and snarled. She changed to the Jaxtar once more. When they cautiously moved forward to smell her, she changed again.

Suddenly there was a human in one cage, half hidden by long black hair. She held her breath. The Jaxtar cat looked at his human brother. He sniffed at him through the bars. He looked at Riana again. Slowly the fur dissolved into long, tangled black hair. Their green eyes were tilted and slitted vertically like a cat’s. Their skin was much darker than Rubiyans’ bronze, almost a nut brown. Their arms and legs were gangly, as energetic six-year-old boys were wont to be. Their years as cats appeared to have aged them faster than

normal.

“Get them out of there,” Riana ordered in a strangled voice. People moved to do her bidding, but she only had eyes for her sons. Sons. Human sons.

Arkady rubbed her back in support. His love warmed her as almost nothing else could. Except her love for her children.

Riana swallowed to moisten her dry throat. “I am your mother.”