

## ~ Panther's Pride ~

by T. S. Hubbard

I would like to thank my sister for helping to keep the run on sentences and the misspelling's down to a dull roar.

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Panther sucked in a breath as her shift pulled at her wounded shoulder. Wiping the rain off her face she grabbed her last cloth torn from her cloak and pressed it to her wound. She cast a look around her, so far no one had followed her, and the false trails she had made seem to have worked. Right now a dry warm place would have been very welcome, it had been a long while since she was welcome around any ones fire. That thought caused her to remember her home. She could not believe her own family, her own clan had cast her out had exiled her for being different, for being unclean. Panther knew she was different but she considered it a blessing not a curse.

A crack of a stick breaking caught her attention, she knew better then to not be aware of her surroundings. A tang drifted on the air, it was a bit stronger then the rest but not by much. She had smelled it before but where would not come to mind. Panthers rose from her seat under a water-laden tree and faded back into an over hang of a cliff just behind her. Three figures emerged from the trees into the small clearing. With the rain coming down so hard it was difficult to see anything. Lifting her head and taking a deep breath she was able to sort through the scents and realized that they were three women. The sharp trace of metal she smelled said they were also armed. She watched silently as they started to scout the area. One of the women found the tree she had been crouched under and picked up the rag that had been on her shoulder. Damn, she knew better then to leave that laying there what was wrong with her.

"Tera, over here, look, this blood is still fresh whoever is hurt is around somewhere close".

Panther noticed the woman Tera had light hair and eyes as she neared where Panther was concealed. She could not help but be wary of these women. They could be like the ones from her home, welcoming until they found she was different and then the words and abuse flew. Many times she had barely escaped with her life. The woman who had found the cloth drew her attention, it was the woman who had shot her two days ago!. As the woman who wounded her grew closer to where she was hiding Panther let loose the rein she had on her anger, she would pay. Lunging forward she could feel the changes start and tried to control them as she collided with the woman. Screams erupted as she struggled with her and tried to pummel her face. She wanted to get revenge for nearly getting killed by her. The woman braced her feet and suddenly Panther found herself airborne. She crashed into a tree trunk and fell to the ground aflame in pain. Hearing the heavy sound of rushing feet she looked up with a snarl contorting her face, if she was going to die it was going to be on her own two feet. Rising she turned to face the women

running toward her. The woman she had attacked ran toward with her sword drawn and raised. Panter rushed her and ducked the swing at her head; tackling her she slashed at her with her right hand. Cry's exploded and Panter was once again launched away from her body. Another woman ran toward her with a hoisted sword preparing to skewer her with it.

"HALT"

The woman stopped in her tracks as she responded to the yelled command. The pale haired woman came forward, pausing when Panter raised her upper lip and snarled. "Where not here to harm you, we found a blood trail two days back and have been following you ever since".

Tera pulled back briefly when the dark woman snarled at them, for just a moment she could have sworn she saw fangs but quickly dispelled that idea. She was after all just a woman. Stepping forward again she slowly extended her hands.

"Please no more fighting we just wanted to help, why did you attack one of my people?"

Looking up the woman cocked her head and met her gaze full on; she had the most mesmerizing golden eyes. Shaking her head Tera paid more attention to the words she said.

"The female was the one who attacked me two days ago, I only want payment for the hurt inflicted".

Tera turned as her second started protesting.

"I never harmed her, the only thing I hunted two days ago was that animal that was wandering around the camp and it defiantly wasn't human".

Tera turned back to the woman "What my second says is true, but it seems that what you have spoken is also true, since you are both wounded I would say that payment is rendered wouldn't you?"

She watched as the woman fully stood and blinked in amazement at the height difference. She was at least six feet if not more. Fully rooted to her place she didn't move as the other woman came toward her. Noticing the restlessness of her people she once more paid mind to her.

"Yes, what you say is acceptable I will no longer hunt your second. What is a second?"

Tera smiled "She is my second of command over my peoples defenses, my warriors I guess you might say" "Please tell me your name if we are to assist you, I can't keep calling you she now can I?"

The dark woman quirked a lip slightly "I suppose not, my name is Panter of the Vestran," she stated with an odd tilt to her head.

Tera stepped back slightly "Vestran?" "Isn't that a land across the waters to the north. How did

you end up over here?"

Panter looked away " I would rather not reply to your question right now I do not know you enough to tell you such things."

"I suppose you are right I am Tera Hander of Hawks Peak, please let us tend to your shoulder and accompany us to our camp."

Panter was unsure what to make of the woman walking ahead of her. The aid to her hurts was appreciated but anyone not knowing of her "condition" would have done the same. She would just have to watch and see what unfolded in the time spent in their company.

Suddenly the slight change in the breezes direction caught her awareness. The female Tera had also told her that only women were under her command and in her village, but the salty sweat she detected was not of them it was of males and now her sensitive ears also picked up heavy breathing and the cling of metal.

Silently she moved up beside Tera. " There is trouble ahead and to the left, there are males and they lie in wait." Tera paused "You know this for certain?" Panter nodded.

Tera gathered her women around and issued hurried orders and turned back to Panter but before she could say anything Panter stopped her.

"Do not worry I am not unarmed, I can take care of myself"

Tera nodded and went with her second.

Panter waited as they moved out of her sight around the bend then pulled her awareness to the matter at hand. Following her senses she preceded into the trees and traced down the males waiting grouped in low brush by the trail. Pausing she concentrated and let a feral grin cross her face as she watched her hands, long wicked claws had formed and she knew from experience they were very deadly weapons. Quickly she climbed a tree that curved over the group and skimmed to a limb overhead. Throwing back her head she roared with delight and dropped into the middle of a sudden mass confusion below.

Chaos rained as she slashed from left to right a bright fountain of red following her movements. Men screaming in agony were music to her ears. Spinning in the flow of her motion she failed to notice a bright blade in time as it slashed downward. Pain blossomed across her chest, she bellowed in agony and ripped outward toward the source of hurt. Blood cascaded over her skin as the man who caused her agony fell at her feet. She heard the other female fighters crash through the brush and join the battle; Panter looked up and glimpsed Tera fighting towards her before the wound took her senses and caused her to fall into the pool of darkness that opened before her.

Tera heard a roar just before she and her women burst into the clearing. She almost stopped in astonishment at the sight of Panter dropping down into the group of men;

she heard screams and shouting erupt almost immediately. Tera continued into the fight and blocking a blow coming towards her head she lost track of Panther for the moment. The scuffle was swiftly over and as she caught her breath she looked around for Panther. Spotting her lying beside one of the many bodies that were scattered around she went to her and gasped as she noticed her hands. It was no wonder Panther said she was not unarmed; the claws her hands sported were no small weapons.

Instinctively she moved to shield her from the others sight, she could not explain why she just knew she must. Tera silently watched as Panter's hands slowly resumed their normal form, just as it was completed Rena approached with the healing kit and stated looking over Panter's injuries. Rena opened Panter's tunic and wiped off the blood that pooled on her stomach, the blade had caught her just under her breasts between there and her abdomen. It wasn't too deep but enough to warrant a few stitches that Rena swiftly put in. Just as she finished Panter started to stir, opening her eyes she quickly sat up and flinched as the movement pulled the stitches. Panter drew in a breath at the jab of pain that went through her lower chest, sliding her fingertips under her tunic she touched fabric and understood what had happened. Standing she looked around and noticed all the bodies laying around. The other women went from each one searching their bodies for any important items that might have been left.

A slight clearing of someone's throat pulled her attention back, glancing to her left she realized that both Tera and Rena stood at her side. Rena gestured out to the clearing.

"That was one hell of a fight the guys you fought really got torn up, what weapon were you using to cause that?"

Rena stiffened slightly as she realized that she had failed to take that into consideration when she had used her "gift". Some people would normally ask questions and now she was caught with no answers.

"Here, I think you dropped this"

Panther and Tera's eyes met. She could only see calmness and trust in those light blue eyes. Looking down she saw a curved dagger laying in her palm, reaching out she grasped the handle and removed it. It was a type that would explain the wounds on the men.

"Yes I guess I did, thanks"

Somehow she knew that the conversation would not go any farther than that.

"Do you know who these men are and why they were laying in wait?"

Before Tera could reply one of her people came up and handed her something. She watched Tera's jaw clench and take a deep breath before she looked up her eyes stormy.

"Yes, my cousin"

It had been a quiet two days following the attack. They had waited for a day before continuing

on their way back to the village so that the wounded could rest a bit before traveling. Tera glanced back and glimpsed Panter staying toward the rear of their group. She wasn't sure if she was doing that to stay out of the way or as a protective measure. She had seemed a bit on edge since the incident. Tera was still wondering about her and what she had seen during the fight. She knew that the woman was a mystery and more than likely not one to be solved quickly or maybe even safely. She did know one thing though; no matter what Panter was hiding from them all she wasn't going to make it a problem or an issue. Just the bit of time they had been together made her more interested in getting to know her better.

A call rang out. Tera pulled her attention back to her surroundings; they had neared the village border. At a gesture one of the sentinels raised a horn and sounded the response. Women dropped from the trees and emerged from the wooded growth from both sides of the trail lowering their weapons as they did. Seeing Tera they joyfully greeted her and joined the group as they neared the gates blocking the access to their village. Sentries posted at the walkways above the gates shouted down for them to be opened. The opening gates revealed a widespread gathering of dwellings arranged in a circular pattern with her home on the last circle to the rear of the village. The stables and armory with its practice fields were to the far right and the Barracks and assorted town businesses to the left. It was a well-protected community.

At the sound of her name being shouted in delight Tera turned and was immediately engulfed in a full contact hug. Pulling back she smiled down into bright blue eyes.

"Sis I didn't think you would be back quite yet" she leaned down and brushed her lips against her sisters cheek and pulled her back briefly into a tight embrace.

'So tell me what's been going on while you've been off and about" Her sister eyed her uneasily as the smile on her face dimmed slightly.

Tera's smile faded in concern "We can talk a little later, now there's someone I want you to meet. Clasping her hand she pulled her sister toward Panter.

Medan allowed Tera to pull her towards a group of her warriors that were standing grouped together over by the armory. As they neared, they parted and allowed her to see a dark skinned figure kneeling next to the weapons master. They seemed to be arguing about something. Getting closer words started coming clear.

"You must be crazy, there's nothing wrong with this blade!"

A low voice calmly replied, " There is a flaw in the metal, anyone using this sword would soon be defeated because of weakness of the blade"

Medan watched as her sister stepped forward and raised her hands. Silence Descended as the women became aware of her presence.

'What is going on here?"

The smith turned and Medan suppressed a start when the dark figure stood and stepped out from under the armory overhang needing to duck slightly as she did. By the goddess she had never seen anyone so tall or so.... Feral before, she knew without a doubt this was one person no one in his or her right mind would play with. The smith gestured contemptibly to the dark one.

" This person in her learned opinion says that one of the best blades crafted is inferior".

Medan returned her focus to the other woman. Her sister turned towards her.

"Medan I would like you to meet Panter of the Vestran, she aided us in a slight scuffle a few days ago."

Medan extended her hand and jerked slightly when her lower arm was engulfed in a large hand. She quickly caught on and clasped Panter's lower arm also. "I am honored to be acknowledged" was softly spoken in low tones and Panter stepped back pulling into her own space.

Panter stepped back after the greeting. The small boned woman seemed likeable at first glance but she knew from experience the mind that could hide behind such facades. She would not extend such trust again. The lesson had already been taught fully enough to be learned well. She did not need another schooling. Panter pulled back her awareness at the sound of her name. Tera seemed slightly distracted; it must have been the female who had greeted her so. ...Energetically that was the cause.

Panter's eyes narrowed slightly as she glanced over to the small fair-haired woman. Raised voices once again claimed her attention. The weapons master still seemed angry from being told that the weapon she currently held was flawed. Anyone could clearly see that, couldn't they? When Tera took the weapon and extended it to her she took it and again looked at the blade. Yes there was the slight crack running across the center. Any great pressure would cause it to fracture and snap in two.

"I will resolve this matter"

At that announcement silence descended as all their attention focused on her. Grasping the hilt in her left hand she grasped the blade in her right, she applied pressure, with a creak and a loud snap the sword broke and shards of metal erupted and flew skyward. Raising the pieces she turned to the slack mouthed smith and emotionlessly dropped the pieces at her feet.

Panter stepped back and silently removed herself from the hushed cluster. Picking up her pack she moved off and retreated to the practice field to watch and stay out of everyone's way. She got the feeling that she once again made herself out to be different and knew that problems could soon raise their head. She tightened her lips she should never had agreed to stay on as Tera put it, too many things might happen. Especially if she naturally used her gifts one too many times. She had unconsciously done so before and it always ended up bad...real bad. She leaned on the railing surrounding the practice field and watched the women practicing within. They weren't too bad but they needed more work. Her head rose slightly and cocked to the left as she caught sounds of approaching footsteps; she had already caught the scent before

even hearing the steps. She knew who was there before any words were spoken.

'You know that's not the best way to make friends. She's not very happy to be proven wrong. Especially in such a way.'

Panther turned and faced Rena, Tera's second." She would just join a long line of those who are not".

"Well anyway I'm to show you a place to stay, the main barracks are full right now but we have a small secondary one close to them where you can settle. There will be a few others there but they shouldn't get in your way."

Panther grabbed her pack and followed Rena to her lodgings.

It had been a busy two days since she had arrived here. Panther was starting to chafe at being around so many with nowhere to go.

She waited till it was dark and many had retired before she emerged from her barracks. The surrounding area was very dark. That didn't faze her she could see better at night then most could at the light of day. Silently she wove her way through building hugging the shadows and neatly evading any of the standing watches. Many had no idea how close she came to them as she made her way past. Finally she reached the wall surrounding the village. The women on the wall had not reached this area yet on their walk. Looking up she judged the height and backing up a few paces she ran forward and just before reaching the base of the wall leapt straight up. Without a whisper of sound she disappeared over the wall.

Panther breathed in the calming sounds of the forest as she leaned against a tree. No one knew she was gone and they wouldn't know when she returned, she was sure. She dropped into a crouch and concentrated. First warmth and then a feeling of bones and muscles pulling as they shifted. When the sensations ended she opened her eyes again. She stretched and moaned in pleasure as power rolled through out her body. The sound came out a deep purr and she smiled, sharp fangs flashed in the dim light. Feeling hunger she set off at a good run to find a meal. The moons beams flickered on dark fur as it left the clearing.

The next day arose warm and bright. Today was the day that she would be in the ring with the other warriors. They wanted to know what she could do. Panther smirked; if they only knew they would probably run screaming.

Arriving at the practice field she noticed the group of women in the middle of the ring, from the conversation she could hear they all wanted to be the first one to best her. Shrugging she unwrapped the bundle she had brought with her. Sunlight glimmered off a sword just a hair smaller then a broad sword. This was the one thing she had been able to leave with when she had left home. This sword had been handed down through the family to the eldest of the men born to the clan. Her family must be insane with anger when realizing that it left when she did, but to her mind she was the eldest so rightfully it was hers, so she took it.

The sword was all but art; by some fluke of fate the decorations engraved onto it was a true reflection of who she was. The blade emerged from the open mouth of a large cat, the handle and guards resembling the rest of the animals body with the tail winding its way around the handle to allow grip when wet. Many people would not use this weapon for you had to use it two-handed; unlike many she had the strength to be able to use it one-handed.

Glancing up she notice that it had been finally decided who was first. A blonde almost as tall as she and almost as built stepped forward casually, going through sword drills as she waited.

Panther rose to her feet and entered the ring; murmurings began immediately upon spotting her weapon .The other women laughed.

"What a two handed weapon? This will be short and sweet".

Panther arched an eyebrow and curled her lip.

"Never assume, it might kill you"

The woman continued to laugh as her friends sang out encouragements.

" That's what they all say, "she stated as they started to circle one another.

Panther ducked as a wild swing flew above her head. Not even close. Sliding to her left she turned and blocked a blow that was aimed for her back. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the disbelief on the other faces as time went on and she easily continued to fight using the blade one handed. Anyone who fought knew how much upper body power that took. Getting a bit bored she casually swept the other sword to the side and twisted causing the woman to loss her grip and thus disarming her.

Panther held the tip steady at her throat.

"Yield, it is not bad to loose to one who has more skill"

The woman nodded and silently stepped aside. None came to take her place. Wordlessly time passed till yelling pulled their attention away.

There was a commotion at the trees that were running on the edge of the field. With her sight Panther could easily see what the problem was. One of the women training had gotten entangled and was in danger of falling. Dropping her sword she took off. At the moment no one could get to her, the others training were scattered among the other trees. This tree was huge and no one could easily get up there to give aid. As she got a little closer her gaze sharpened, OH GODS ITS TERA her mind yelled in panic. That fact caused her to lengthen her stride. Seeing her slip made her run faster, faster then one was able too, but she didn't care right now. With Tera's grip failing she didn't hesitate. Panther was thankful that she had come barefoot. She allowed her body to sift



partially to give her what she needed, never pausing when she reached the base of the tree. Pushing by the ones gathered below she dug her fingers and toes into the bark and clawed her way up to Tera.

Tera cursed again as her grip slipped. This was not good; she just had to pick the biggest tree didn't she. Hearing the shouts below she risked a quick glance. The women were staring across the field in amazement. Wondering what could possibly be more important right now she looked too and saw a sight no one would ever believe. A woman's form ran toward them at a fast clip, a very fast clip. As her grip slipped again she caught herself and sucked in a breath as the woman's speed almost doubled, she was almost a blur moving toward the tree. Pulling her attention away she tried to keep from slipping but she wasn't sure how much longer she could hold on. A sound that caused the hair on her neck to rise floated from below; a slight shudder shook the tree almost causing her to lose her grip. Sounds of bark tearing and pulling away drifted to her ears

.  
"Tera"

Turning her head she was startled to see Panther, her eyes widened in shock and a little fear when she saw her hands. Once again claws had emerged from the tips of her fingers and as Panther shifted nearer she also noticed her feet had changed also, the claws there just as lethal as the ones her hands sported, something else was different about them but that thought left as she saw her eyes, HER EYES. They were still golden in color but the pupils were now vertical slits, looking into those were a little peculiar but not uncomfortable she found. When Panther reached out she automatically jerked away and ended up in the way of her claws. A line of fire crossed her cheek she sucked in a breath in pain.

"Damn I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you"

Tera shook her head "No it's not your fault, it's mine"

Panther moved closer brushing against her; she could smell the musky scent that clung to her skin.

"Ease onto my back"

Meeting her eyes again she obeyed the softly spoken words when a husky "please" followed. Wrapping her arms around her shoulders she just went along for the ride as Panther made her way down the tree. When her feet hit dirt a glance passed between them and then Panther was gone, moving with a grace and speed no one could ever hope to match.

Tera turned as her second ran up to her.

"Your hurt, what did that unnatural thing do to you?"

Tera protested but it fell upon deaf ears as with a yell her people gave chase.

Panther ran as fast as she could, aware of the uproar she had left behind her. She could hear it. Blinking back tears that welled up she turned to avoid the women running toward her. Somehow

they had already been informed of what happened and seemed to want to cut her off.

Cutting across the field she jumped over the railing enclosing the training yard. Barely slowing she swiped up her sword and headed toward the nearest wall. If she could reach it she would have a better chance in the surrounding forest. Risking a glance over her shoulder she noticed she had a large lead due mostly to the speed she was able to reach. She flinched, as an arrow flew by her shoulder. Obviously it wasn't not far enough. Suddenly she stumbled and allowed her body to flow into a forward roll and rising back to her feet cursed at the pain in her calf. Someone got lucky; she pushed on ignoring the stream of blood. Finally she reached the wall and gritting her teeth she summoned enough strength to jump over and faded into the nearby trees.

Branches snagged and tore at her as she fled through the trees keeping abreast of the pursuing women. Panter swore under her breath as she ran, she needed to lose her followers soon to take care of her injury. Glancing around she caught sight of a large tree. Really it was two trees twisted and merged into one, creating a flat base she could just see in the thick growth. It was perfect; a lofty secured place that she could easily reach yet others would not be able too. Quickly she ascended and lying flat, watched as her hunters slowly came into view. The trackers really impressed her, she knew as a rule she barely left a trail if any and to get this far they really had to be good.

" I thought you had the trail, so where is the animal!"

" Rena, I told you there really is no trail, I've been guessing half the time to get this far."

"Besides you know Tera told us to let her alone, what happened was not her fault, she would have fallen if not for her."

"Did you truly see it?" "The claws it had did not say human to me, and the marks on Teras face were no small thing either, she may not do anything about it but by the gods I will!"

"Rena, I really think you should reconsider, if Tera finds out your going against her orders you'll be in a world of trouble".

Rena turned and got into the other woman's face, "If your not going to do something about it then I will."

"I refuse to hunt a person who has done nothing but help us since we met up with her" the tracker shook her head " No way am I helping you, if I find her I'm taking her back to see Tera as ordered."

Rena flushed in fury "Fine, I'll do it myself, I won't be back until I find it."

Panter watched amused as Rena stomped off. She waited as her footsteps faded and she could no longer hear her. The rest of the trackers were still walking around below looking for any sign of her tracks.

She decided to go back and see what Tera wanted, that was a female that intrigued her. Panter

dropped down from the tree causing the trackers to scream in fear till they realized whom it was.

A hush fell over the crowd gathered around Tera's dwelling as Panter and the trackers approached. They all stepped back to give her room to reach the door. Pushing back the cloth she entered the room.

Blinking as her eyes adjusted she looked around and spotted Tera sitting on a low couch placed by the fireplace toward the center of the dwelling.

Clearing her throat she smiled slightly as Tera jumped before turning to meet her gaze.

Panter winced, when she spotted the cuts on Tera's face.

"You wished to see me Tera?"

"Yes, I'm sorry my people acted the way they have it was unacceptable. You only helped and in return you were attacked" Tera's expression made it plain how she thought of that subject.

"It's happened before. But let's not dwell on something in the past. You said that you wanted my help before all this happened. Tell me about that"

Panter was uncomfortable with having what happened brought up; she did not want to have to explain who she really was quite yet. She liked it here and did not want to leave so soon.

"Are you hungry? I'll get us something to eat if you are"

Panter almost smiled then frowned to herself that was very much unlike her to do that. What was different about this woman that caused her to want to lower her guard when she was around her? She pulled herself back to the conversation at hand when she heard a slight clearing of someone's throat.

"I would like to break my fast, thank you"

Tera went to the door and leaned out, after speaking to someone she came back in and settled back down across from Panter.

"It will be here soon"

"How to explain what's going on can be very difficult but I will try to make it as simple as possible"

Panter gestured for her to continue.

"In my family the eldest gets to inherit when the head of the family dies. I have a cousin that is a few months younger than I am.

When my father died the estate was to go to me but as I was away at the time and did not know

what happened, by the time I returned my cousin had stepped in and had taken the inheritance.'

Panther was confused " I thought you were the eldest how did it happen he took something that was yours and not his?"

Tera shook her head " Unfortunately there is a time limit of 6 months and I was gone for much longer, so he took over"

"Is there any way that you can get it returned to you?"

Tera looked down at the floor and then looked to Panther " Only one way, by force of arms"

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by T. S. Hubbard

I would like to thank my sister for helping to keep the run on sentences and the misspelling's down to a dull roar.

Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

### Chapter 2

Panther leaned back against the tree. She had wandered over to the large maple that towered over the practice ring. Watching as women hurried back and forth to wherever their destination was, she noticed many giving her a large berth as they came close. Many others smiled and nodded a greeting as they went by. It seemed as if the village was cut in half in how people felt about what they had seen.

She knew how Tera felt about it; she had made it clear last night.

*"So, can I ask about you now?"*

*Panther suddenly felt unsure" what do you want to know?"*

*'Umm, what can you tell me about what happened?"*

*Panther bit her bottom lip" Oh, about the tree? Why does it really matter?"*

*Tera looked suddenly disappointed " Well no, not really, but I wish you would"*

*She realized that Panther might be nervous about what happened.*

*It wasn't everyday that someone like her showed up Tera smiled to herself in fact make that never.*

*'I understand if your worried about how I feel about it, I know I would be."*

*Panther briefly grinned and stopped when Tera suddenly stepped back.*

*"What did you do that for?" she asked upset.*

*Tera moved closer to her "I'm sorry but when you smiled I saw, she paused and then just said it outright "Are your teeth pointed?"*

*"Well, yeah actually its just my eyeteeth" she opened her mouth so Tera could see.*

*" They are a little longer and sharper but most people don't notice, especially since I don't say much."*

*"Oh, wow" Tera settled down comfortably closer to Panther "So tell me about it"*

*"All right if you really want to know, I come from the north as you had said before, but it really surprised me when you knew about Vestran since it's pretty small."*

*Tera nodded "Well really, the only way I know about it is through some of the dealings my father was involved with, but I don't know much about it."*

*She shook her head 'But I'm interrupting, please continue"*

*Panther glanced over toward her and saw she has Tera's full attention.*

*'Any way Vestran is really a small city-state that lies at the base of a mountain range called Arms of Getrain."*

*"The only ways to and from Vestran is thorough a break in the mountains to the south where you pass by Morkon city or across the mountains to the west to a opening called the Path of Solace."*

*"Most of the time anyone taking that path never returned."*

*Panther rose to her feet needing the movement to release some tension*

*"But I know you really want to know about me right?" She turned and looked at Tera.*

*Tera nodded.*

*Panter rubbed her hand over her face. This was going to be hard and it could get very iffy if Tera's reaction was bad, she was risking a lot but something told her to continue.*

*"In my family, what I am called is chanrejshap" when she said this word Tera noticed it was a guttural sound " or loosely defined one who changes"*

*"From what I do know it is only the female of the line that has this "gift" no male has ever shown it. Unfortunately anyone who has been found to have it, has been killed, it's not seen has something good."*

*"My mother had the gift and when she realized so did I she was quick to teach me how to hide it"*

*Tera was shocked "Your own mother wanted you to hide what you were?"*

*Panter was pleased that Tera would rise to her defense like that but was careful not to show it.*

*"You don't understand she was showing me how to protect myself, she didn't want me harmed, she taught me who I was and how to use my gifts, in fact it was only in giving her own life that she protected mine"*

*Panter sat back down exhausted by the stress of being so open.*

*Tera got up and moved to sit by Panther carefully laying her hand on her forearm.*

*"Gave her own life?"*

*Panter turned her head "They found out and planned on killing me, but my mother tipped me off, even with her help and with both of us shifting, she got killed and I barely got away."*

*"It took me moons of traveling, almost a year but I arrived here about 1 moon before we met."*

*Tera smiled gently "I'm glad we did"*

*"Hey"*

*Panter looked up as someone blocked the light and stood over her. Only by severely controlling her reaction was she able to stop herself when she saw who it was.*

*"Tera, you should know better than to startle me like that" Panther shook her finger at her as she rose to her feet. She stifled a grin at the look on Tera's face when she realized what she had done.*

*"Oh gods, you're right, I'm sorry about that"*

Panter smiled at her crookedly "If I hadn't controlled myself, I think you would be more than sorry, I could have really hurt you".

"I know, anyway moving on, how is the new clothing?" "They fit o.k?"

As Tera asked she looked for herself, Panter had on a tunic of dark leather, the cropped sleeves exposing her thickly muscled arms and shoulders; it was a brown that shaded into a deeper chocolate. It hugged her waist and stomach as it made its way down to end just as it reached her upper thighs. A thick belt encircled her waist, a gold handled dagger hung by her left side. A Pair of light tan leggings embraced strong legs and were tucked into calf high boots, completing the look.

"Yes their fine, quite comfortable, thank you"

"I was wondering if you would like to eat with me?" Tera gestured toward the small establishment that was nearby.

"I would like that," answered Panter pleasantly surprised that Tera was seeking her out for company.

As they entered Panter had to duck slightly to clear the lintel of the doorway.

Straightening she looked around as the sound of chatter was briefly muted as people realized who entered, but it quickly resumed.

Grabbing an empty table, Panter made sure that her back was to the wall. She hated feeling vulnerable. A back made a wonderful target.

After their order was taken Tera leaned toward Panter "So what are your plans Panter, any idea what you want to do?"

Startled by the sudden question Panter paused "I really hadn't thought about it, I was hoping that maybe I would be able to stay here awhile"

Tera was happy to hear that, she wanted to get to know Panter better, not only was she fascinating as a person she was something special all together.

"That would be great, I really wanted to get to know you better, maybe spend more time getting to know each other better?"

Panter met her eyes and saw nothing but honesty in them "I would like that too"

After lunch they both went outside the gates to the nearby stream to talk a little more.

The sentries wanted to send someone with them but Tera had refused pointing out that she was as safe with Panter as she would be with an entire group of guards.

Faced with that true point they had no option but to agree.

Settling on a large rock bordering the stream Tera looked at Panter " Could you share a little more about your abilities with me?" "Out here we should be fairly concealed"

Panter rubbed the back of her neck " I guess I could, I'm taking a big chance here with you"

Tera nodded "I know but really what harm could I do?"

"You could expose me"

"Panter, after what most people have seen your secret isn't to secret."

Panter paced "Yeah, that's true but there's more to it than what you've seen"

Tera got up and put her hand on Panter's arm "I know, but you can trust me."

She reached up and brushed a lock of hair back from her forehead.

Panter caught her wrist "I can see that, that's why I'm willing to show you."

"As you've already seen, I can do what I call a partial shift, like at the tree with you.

"It allows me to retain my form but still gives me use of most of my abilities."

"If I need to conserve energy I am able to do a full shift, that also helps if I need to be

In a situation that I am unable to have food or shelter readily available."

"I would be able to still survive relatively easily."

Tera was intrigued "Could you show me?"

"Sure, I guess" Panter concentrated and watched as her hands rippled and changed shape. When all movement stopped, she could flex her fingers and claws emerged and retracted.

She stepped toward Tera to show her, she was amazed when she reached over and touched her hand, and gently ran her fingers across the exposed claws.

"That's unreal, so whenever you need something you just concentrate and your able to half shift to use it?"

Panter glanced over "Well to a point, like when I need my claws, I have to change my hands also



to make it work. I just can't have claws it won't work like that."

"Oh I see, what other things can you use during a half shift?"

"Well my hearing is more sensitive then yours, but I can't improve it by half shifting.

"Strength wise I'm stronger and speed wise like running, as you've already seen"

She grinned at Tera while saying it.

"True, you were very fast"

"Any way, I can improve my eye sight a little in a half shift but it's pretty good normally already."

"Other than that to be able to use most of my skills I need to full shift."

Panther almost held her breath as she waited for what she knew was coming.

"Could you full shift so I can see?"

There it was, the question she had been dreading, but for some odd reason it didn't bother her as much as she thought it might. Maybe it was because somehow she knew that Tera would never expose her or harm her in any way.

"Yeah, I guess I could for a quick minute."

Turning her back she quickly removed her clothing, smirking to herself when she heard the gasp behind her. "Sorry but I can't shift while clothed"

Tera started to speak but had to stop and clear her throat when her voice came out choked.

*Oh my gods if her front looks as good as her back it might kill me* she thought.

"It's no problem, you just caught me off guard that's all"

She paused for a moment to gather herself " Please continue"

Tera watched as Panther crouched down and concentrated, suddenly her form started to contract and in some places lengthen. Dark fur flowed over her engulfing her body. Her

Face shifted and a muzzle emerged and ears withdrew into her scalp. It seemed in under a minute a large black cat was sitting in front of her and watching for her reaction.

She could hardly take it all in, if someone had told her that this cat and Panther were one and the same she would have thought they were insane. But seeing is believing, and she defiantly saw

this.

The cat stood up and slowly approached her, the tip of its tail slowly flicking from side to side. It extended its neck and sniffed in her direction. She knew that they had to reacquaint themselves when she was in this form so that her scent was known. She stretched out her arm keeping her hand palm down as to show she meant no harm.

She had to bite her bottom lip to keep from giggling when the whiskers tickled as the cat nuzzled her hand. She laughed when a tongue swiped across her hand and wrist. A shove from the cat sent her back to land on her butt and she ended up laughing harder as a tongue went up her neck and into her ear. A deep purr vibrated her inner ear.

Tera grabbed the fur on both sides of the cat's head "Ok ok, stop your going to make me wet myself laughing so hard."

Within moments the cat was gone and her hands were on both sides of Panter's face.

"I'm sorry are you going to be ok?"

Tera removed her hands and wiped off the side of her face. "Yeah, I'll be fine."

"That was really something to see Panter, if I hadn't seen it I wouldn't have believed it"

"It didn't bother you did it, I wouldn't have wanted to frighten you."

"No, it didn't bother me at all, don't worry your secret is safe with me." Tera grasped Panter's hand "Come on, we should be getting back, it's getting late and I have a meeting to attend."

"But first for everyone's peace of mind, please put your clothes back on"

*Or I might go nuts, I was right the front is even better than the back"*

\* \* \*

Rena pushed through the brush; she was still infuriated about what had happened.

How could Tera not be upset about what had transpired?

After all she got hurt when that "thing" went up the tree after her.

Rena suddenly stopped in her tracks, *went up the tree after her*, oh gods it had most likely saved Tera's life. Now what was she going to do, she didn't in anyway like, she winced, Panter but she owed her for helping Tera.

She would have to abide by Tera's decision but it was going to grate, bad.

Rena turned around and headed back, she might make it just before dusk if she hurried.

*Tera was going to kick her ass she just knew it.*

\* \* \*

A hand pushed the door ajar so the person could listen in. They held their breath as voices were raised inside the room.

"I don't care what it takes I want my cousin taken care of, I'm not risking her coming back here and trying to take it back"

"But my Lord I have received missives that 2 of the 3 troops we have sent out have been decimated. Any that survived barely made it back and from the reports I've received she has gotten help of some kind, but it's not clear on what it is."

"I want it done, send more out, do what you need to, offer a reward for gods sake but get it done"

Glass shattered near the door causing the person to withdraw into the shadows of the archway going onto the balcony nearby.

Light spilled out as the door was opened and two men emerged. One was dark haired and slim and had the look of a soldier who had been in service for half a lifetime. The other came to his chin and just looking at the sneer on his face and the twist of his lip you knew he was a cruel and heartless man. His clothes were gaudy, having been chosen for their price not their comfort.

Once they had swept by in a disgusting cloud of perfume that caused the hiding person to stifle a gag, they were able to emerge.

They need to get this information to Tera, and fast.

*Ok I sent a message off last week; it's a week ride but can be done in 3 days if the horses are pushed. I just might be able to get it there before anything might happen.*

They rushed to get the note off as quickly as possible, lucky for them that a few people were leaving at the same time.

Two things done at once, they knew that it would be in safe hands till it arrived at its destination.

\* \* \*

Panther leaned back in her chair cradling a mug of port in her hands. Glancing out the window that was by her head she noticed it was closing on dusk, which meant that Tera had been shut up in a meeting for about 4 candle marks. Hopefully they would be taking a break soon.

Panther looked toward the door, as it slammed open.

*Great she's back* shot through her mind when she saw Rena standing in the doorway.

She watched her look around the room and then suddenly zero in on her.

Rena's eyes narrowed as she hesitated and then she strode over to Panther's table.

"Can I sit?" she asked abruptly.

Panther raised an eyebrow then gestured to a chair "It's free"

Rena nodded and sat down, signaling for a drink, she waited until it was put down and left before she looked at Panther again.

"Look, I'm not going to play around, I want you to know I appreciate what you did saving Tera but I don't like what you are and I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you."

Panther had a touch of respect for someone so honest.

"I only have Tera's well-being in mind, nothing else" *sure lie to yourself why don't you,*

Panther shook her head "Really, that's all"

Rena locked eyes with Panther *yeah, she's telling the truth, I can deal with this*

"As long as we have an understanding, I think we'll get along."

"I'm never going to accept you, but for Tera we can make it work."

Panther was so involved with dealing with Rena that the hand that squeezed her shoulder almost made her jump but then she caught the person's scent and involuntarily smiled.

"Hey, got room for one more?" Tera teased.

"I think we can find room for one more"

Panther noticed that Rena was unhappy with the affection Tera seemed to be showing her.

That might cause some problems.

Tera settled down and ordered them all meals even though from the looks of things they both seemed to be on a liquid diet, taking in the mugs scattered across the tabletop.

"Rena, I see your back, did you find what you were looking for?"

Rena glanced over at Panther " No, not really but I don't think its a problem I didn't"

" So how was the meeting, I'm sorry I took so long, did I miss anything important?"

Tera stopped smiling and looked at Rena" Everything's important"

\* \* \*

Panther lay listening to the fire burn down, it was late but she wasn't really ready to sleep.

If she concentrated she could hear the soft snores coming from the other room.

After dinner, Tera had decided that it might be best if she stayed with her instead of in the barracks. Last night there had been stressful and she had been unable to relax.

At least here she would be able to rest a bit.

She shifted around trying to get comfortable, her bed was a low couch adjacent to the fire, off to the right was the entrance to Tera's bedroom.

That caused her thoughts to drift to her *come on admit it she's got your interest and you know it. You love thinking about her, about the delicate area on the side of her neck just under her ear. About the way she smells and the way she tasted when you licked her neck.*

Panther shifted uncomfortably aware of just how much of her interest Tera held.

Only by forcing herself to relax was she finally able to drift off.

[Continued...](#)

## ~ Panter's Pride ~

by T. S. Hubbard

I would like to thank my sister for helping to keep the run on sentences and the misspelling's down to a dull roar.

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### Chapter 3

It had been several days since Tera had spent any time with Panter. She had seen her briefly between meetings and her many responsibilities with running the village. Panter had told her between weapon practices and helping out the trackers and also lending a hand bringing in supplies her time was pretty full too. It seemed that a lot of people wanted to test their metal against her. Unfortunately for them not many succeeded.

"Tera"

Pulled from her thoughts, Tera turned to see one of her trackers running toward her.

"This just came" she extended a rolled parchment and waited to see if there would be a reply.

Unrolling it, she read.

*T*

*I am writing to inform you that one day following the time you get this, a group of your supporters will be nearly there. There have been a few problems but none of real consequence. But there has been a feeling of being watched, might I advise you send someone to meet the incoming people.*

*If any news is overheard I will send off a notice the regular way.*

*Yours in subterfuge,*

*E*

Folding up the note she asked where Rena was.

" I think she's over at the practice field"

Tera thanked her and headed to the field, as she neared she saw a large gathering of women. The yelling and cheering echoed over the area.

Making her way to the railing enclosing the ring she shook her head in disbelief when she realized who was sparring...again.

Sparks flew as the swords clashed and slid down their length.

Panther pushed off and circling to her right, she stepped back and waited holding her sword above her head with her left hand on the hilt.

Rena swept her sword toward her in a downswing; Panther brought her sword down and brushed her blade aside.

Rena parried, lowered her sword and shifted her right leg forward, Panther mirrored her position and when Rena was just ready to move Panther came toward her. When she tried to dodge, Panther advanced, laid her sword across her chest slid her leg between hers and pushing her knee against Rena's forced her down.

Rena let her hilt go, signaling her surrender.

Panther got up and reaching down, helped Rena to her feet.

"Your pretty good Rena, you might want to watch rushing things that's how I caught you this time."

Rena stopped dusting herself off " In my own defense, I have to say you have been using moves no one has ever seen around here"

Panther shrugged " Can't help that, it was the way I was taught"

Sheathing her sword in the scabbard she ran her hand over it. It was new, when Tera had found out that she just wrapped her sword in cloth she had insisted on providing her a proper sheath.

Luckily Panther had been able to talk her into a rather plain one, telling her that having a fancy one made it seem gaudy with the sword hilt already being decorated the way it was.

Turning she saw Tera talking to Rena. Not wanting to intrude, she waited till Tera waved her over before approaching.

Panther felt a brief touch on her arm. She had noticed that Tera had that habit whenever they were together. A quick touch as if to reassure herself that Panther was there. She found she didn't mind them.

Tera explained to Panther what she had just revealed to Rena.

"So, we need to go out and meet them on the last 6 leagues or so. It will give us a chance to see if anyone is following or not."

"If it's true then it needs taken care of"

"Rena, I want you and 6 others to go meet them, see what's going on". "I wish I could go with you but there are things needing done here."

Panther hesitated briefly, " I would like to go and help if I could"

Tera was startled; it wasn't something she had expected.

" Are you sure?"

Panther nodded "Yes, I'm sure, if I stay here then I need to help in anyway I can"

\* \* \*

Panther patted her horses' neck, after all the preparations were made they had all realized Panther didn't have a horse. It had been quickly addressed.

She had accompanied Tera to the stable to see what was available.

Luckily they had just brought some horses in. Tera just said pick one.

After choosing one they got it saddled. Exchanging a long look, Tera and Panther went back to the group and they parted company.

Panther didn't know it, but she had gotten an exceptional horse. Called an Andalusian, it had a long neck with a thick mane. They were strong with a short back and broad quarters and a low set tail. They were agile, had good endurance, and were very intelligent.

It was a little over 16 hands high, which was good with Panther being so tall.  
It was a glossy black with a white blaze down its forehead.

Tera had said that since she needed it she might as well keep it, everyone here had to have a horse.

Panther had been so overwhelmed she had been unable to say anything. She had never received a gift such as this before. All she could do was smile.

To Tera the smile that Panther had sent her had been payment enough.

Panther had decided on a name, really it had been easy. She called her formosus donum-or beautiful gift. She would call her Donum for short.

She heard hoof beats coming up on her right side. It was the tracker that had defended her to Rena. The rider drew even and for a while they rode side by side in silence.

Eventually the rider broke the peace. " I just want you to know, you have a friend here if you



would like one"

Panther looked over in surprise " I could always use a friend, I did want to thank you for what you did with Rena."

The rider shook her head " I only did what was right, no thanks needed."

"Well then, what's my new friends name?"

The tracker laughed and leaning closer extended her arm in greeting.  
" My name is Alesia, friend Panther"

Panther clasped Alesia arm. " Care to ride with me Alesia?"

"Don't mind if I do."

Their laughter drew the others attention and Alesia beckoned two over.

As they neared Alesia told Panther " These are friends of mine and are like minded, so if you would like you can increase your friends twofold."

Alesia greeted her friends then introduced them to Panther.

" This is Helia" pointing to an average sized woman with fiery hair.

" And this is Eurayle" motioning to the dark haired woman smiling at them both.

Panther exchanged greetings with them both. They had the same honest eyes that Alesia had. To a person like Panther having friends were rare commodities. To have someone actually seeking her friendship was a miracle.

Helia and Eurayle joined them as they continued on. They talked and laughed as they got to know each other better. Panther found she liked these friends of hers.

As night fell it was decided to stop for the day. A camp was quickly set up.

They all picked a spot close to the fire to bed down. Dinner was rations they had brought with them.

Panthers small group arranged themselves on one side of the fire, Rena and the women that seemed to follow her stayed to the other side. It became obvious that an unspoken picking of sides had happened. She hoped that didn't bode for future problems.

A sentry rotation was established each taking a two hour stint.

Panther had the last two hours before dawn.

Quiet settled over the encampment as women found their beds and fell asleep.

Panther checked the area thoroughly before finding her own blankets and eventually drifting off to sleep, the crackling of the fire following into her dreams.

\* \* \*

Morning found them already on the move. They traveled in silence now looking for any signs of a group heading their way. It was just after a mid day meal eaten in the saddle when a faint trail of dust rising into the air was seen.

As they had decided earlier Panter's group and Rena's group split up.

Panter headed west and Rena east coming in from two directions just in case something was wrong.

After riding for half a candle mark in a gradual circle, jingling tack caught Panter's notice. She gestured for Alesia and the others to dismount as she slid off her horse. Ground tying them they followed her as she slipped closer to the sound.

A few moments later they stopped, they had found what they were looking for.

A ragtag collection of individuals slowly tramped past them. It consisted of ten men, eight women two who were elderly and 3 children.

Panter sent Helia back to retrieve the horses and stepped out with Alesia and Eurayle to intercept the group.

" Hold please"

Women screamed, in response the children cried out and the men drew blades.

Maybe that wasn't a good idea she thought. Panter and the others threw their hands up to show they meant no harm.

Alesia stepped forward, stopping when a few of the men shifted.

" We were sent by Tera Hander of Hawks Peak to escort you back to her."

Murmurs greeted this statement then one of the men stepped forward.

"Sorry about that, we've been a bit edgy." "We've had the feeling of someone watching us for last few days, but haven't seen anything."

Panter looked over as hoof beats sounded. 'Looks like the rest of our group Has arrived."

With her back to the others she partially shifted to see more clearly. She stiffened it wasn't Rena and the others. A troop of at least thirty men was headed their way.

Quickly shifting back, she spun around to the others as Helia emerged through the trees with the horses.

Leaping forward and pulling her sword from the scabbard hooked to the saddle she yelled out " Women and children to the trees, all others prepare, we have incoming."

Alesia urged the ones not fighting into the trees. Grabbing her sword she and the others moved to stand beside Panter " It's not Rena and the others?"

"No, it's the problem Tera was warned about"

The ground shook as thundering horses approached, just before the troop reached them Rena and the other three women burst through the trees, turning their horses and cutting some of the men off. The ring of steel soon filled the air.

Within moments the rest of the men were upon them.

Panther stopped a descending blade; grabbing his arm she yanked him from the saddle. As he hit the ground a quick thrust took care of him. One down.

Another pull removed one more from horseback. He regained his footing before Panther could strike. He swung toward her left arm, Panther slipped to the left under his sword and struck at his right arm. He back stepped causing her swing to miss.

Holding his sword in front he relentlessly moved toward her. Panther held her sword downward to her right and moving her right foot outward dodged his advance. He ended up passing her and Panther struck him from behind.

That wasn't really fair but it works she mentally noted but had to quickly move on. Alesia was trying to fight two at once and seemed to be struggling. She managed to down one but ended up having her back turned to the other. The

Fighter tried to take advantage of the situation and raised his sword for a strike to her neck. As soon as Panther reached them she ran him through. Pulling her weapon free she tugged Alesia around.

"Quickly back to back, it's harder for them to get a clear shot at you that way."

A glance around showed they were about even in numbers now. More fighters surrounded them and Panther was too busy to think for quite a while.

When finally no more men came to take the place of the fallen, Panther relaxed a little and looked around.

Bodies laid everywhere; moans from the injured were plentiful.

Panther motioned to Alesia " Lets see how we held up"

Moving among the bodies she found that they had lost one of the women that had been with Rena. She found Helia and Eurayle, they had come out of it pretty well

Only having a few shallow cuts between them.

Alesia come up and told Panther of finding a high-ranking officer still alive, if for the moment.

" It's a good chance to see if we can get some information about what they've been up to."

Asking the others to start gathering up weapons and supplies from the downed men and to load them into the wagons. Panther then followed Alesia to the man; he had crawled farther into the trees. It gave the women decent cover to talk to him without watching eyes.

Panther turned to Alesia " I need to ask you, how clearly did you see me at the tree?"

Alesia met Panther's eyes " Clearly, in fact you looked right at me."

" Any problems with what you saw?"

"No, none at all, friends always keep confidences."

Panther nodded and walked over to the moaning man. Squatting down she grasped his chin making him meet her eyes.

" I only have one question I want an answer to." " What is your boss up to concerning Tera Hander?"

Spitting in her face he answered, " I have nothing to tell you dog, I won't tell you a thing."

Wiping the spittle off her face Panther sneered, " You have one last chance, tell me or you will regret not doing it before."

When he refused to answer her she decided to prompt him a little. Holding her right hand up to his face she said, " Watch"

The man paled as he watched her hand change and when she flexed her fingers making her claws emerge a sudden stench of ammonia filled the air. He had wet himself in fear.

" Deus Defend ere" he whimpered his face paling to a ghostly white.

" Now are you going to tell me or are you going to push me a little more?"

Panther grinned at him and by the sob he let out knew he had seen her teeth.

" I'll tell you" licking dry lips he continued, "all I know is that he has put a large reward on her head and every slime crawling is out looking for her"

"That's it, nothing more?" Panther leaned closer to make sure he was aware of her seriousness.

He nodded frantically. " That's all"

Shifting back she regained her feet. Moving toward Alesia she rested her hand on her shoulder. " Thanks friend"

Alesia smiled " No problem, so what do we do with him" pointing at the sorry pile. "Want me to finish him off?"

Panther considered what he had told her " No, leave him, let him dwell on it."

Leaving the trees they moved toward their comrades finding that the hurt had been helped and the dead were being taken care of. Two of the men from the People fleeing to Tera had been killed also. Panther shook her head too many people dead fighting over a piece of land, she didn't understand it.

[Continued...](#)

[T. S. Hubbard's scrolls](#)  
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~ Panther's Pride ~  
by T. S. Hubbard

I would like to thank my sister for helping to keep the run on sentences and the misspelling's down to a dull roar.

Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

#### CHAPTER 4

Several days had passed since Panther and Rena had returned with the refugees. Upon hearing the information they had gathered, she immediately called a meeting with all her elders and her seconds. Panther was pleased when Tera asked her to join them.

Tera motioned Panther off to the side while they waited for the others to show up.

Panther smiled to herself as Tera hand came to rest on her arm.

" Hey, I've missed being able to spend time with you, it seems that everything's been happening lately."

"I've missed it too"

Going with her first instinct Panther leaned closer and brushed her cheek against Tera's. Pulling away she saw the smile light up Tera's face.

Tera moved forward and melted into Panther, resting her head on Panter's chest.

Panther nuzzled into Tera's hair contently. They remained that way quietly till voices and people entering the room pulled them from each other.

Looking over Panter's eyes met an angry Rena's gaze. She followed Rena's progress to the table where she jerked out a chair and flung herself into it.

" I think their ready for you"

Tilting her head and gazing at Panther Tera replied, " Yes, but maybe I'm not"

Stepping back she turned and looked at all of them watching her. Smiles were intermixed with frowns.

Moving to the table she sat, asking with a wave for Panter to sit by her right side causing Rena to have to move over.

" I called you all here to figure out what we need to do in response to the scuffle a few days past."

Rena leaned forward "Scuffle?" " That was a all-out attack on us and the people we are trying to help, it was no scuffle"

Tera glared at Rena " Maybe your right, but I would rather think of it as that then believe my own cousin wants a war."

Panter frowned *not wanting to think that way is a problem. If that happens you might as well roll over and show your belly. It was over. They win.*

Raised voices pull her from her thoughts. Rena's face was red and looking at Tera it seemed she was close to boiling over. This couldn't continue, if it did there was no way they could work together and get things done. From the elders expressions they had the same thought.

Panter slapped her hand onto the table startling the two women from their heated debate.

" Tera I'm sorry, but on this point Rena is correct, you need to face that your cousin wants you taken care of".

Tera sank back into her seat " But I'm not doing anything to him"

Panter shook her head " But you are a threat, to him it seems it's all about power and with you around his is precarious at best" " He wants to eliminate the competition."

Tera rubbed her forehead. A headache was starting and from what it looked like it was going to be a long day. " O.k. so what are we going to do about it?"

After hours of debate and plans made and unmade it was decided that Tera, Panter, Helia, Eurayle and Alesia would go to Hawk's Peak to find out what was going on. Rena would stay here and with the help of the Elders complete the second half of the plan. Ending the meeting Tera and Panter went for a late dinner at the Tavern.

In the midst of their meal Panter spoke up " Can you tell me why you decided on the group we're taking?"

Tera grinned " Wondered when you were going to ask me that."

" It's simple really, you trust them and I know I can trust you."

Panther's eyes widened " That's why?"

" Yep that's why, you being who you are would have a better idea of who was trust worthy and who wasn't right?"

A corner of Panther's mouth quirked up " Yeah, you're right."

Tera nodded once " Good, now finish we have things to do"

\* \* \*

Dust rose as hooves met the earth in a rumble. Occasionally a squeak from weathered tack joined it. The journey had officially begun.

As the sun beat down, sweat glistened on the rider's faces. But for a long period of time no words were spoken. Too many minds were dwelling on what was to come for any idle chatter.

At midday they broke for a meal. Ground tying the mounts they gathered under a large group of trees a short distance from a small stream. The coolness the shade provided was a welcome relief from the heat.

Panther and Tera claimed one and the others staked out another.

Panther took a mouthful of water from her water skin then voiced a thought that she had been mulling over. " Do we need to press this hard?" " Wouldn't it be better if we took our time a little"

Tera stopped chewing for a moment and swallowed " We don't want him to have too much time to plan" " Why do you say that?"

Panther raised her hand " I just meant that riding in this way draws attention, but if you traveled at night not only is it cooler but it provides cover."

Tera looked sky ward for a moment in self-exasperation " So they don't know we know, your right." " You tried to tell me that in the meeting too didn't you?"

" Well yes, but at least you know now right?"

Tera reached over and ruffled her hair " Right, so who gets to tell the others about it and unsaddle the horses till later?"

Panther looked over and catching Alesia's eye nodded. Alesia spoke briefly and the women rose and went to tend the horses.

" There, all taken care of" Panther said with a small glint in her eye.

Tera poked Panther in the side " You knew that was going to happen, didn't you?"  
Panther jumped at the poke " I suspected it, so I just gave Alesia a heads up."

" So now what?"

" We take a nap, remember we travel at night now."

Panther stretched out comfortably, she was not surprised when Tera's head ended up on her shoulder. Wrapping her arm around her she settled down for a short sleep. One of the other women would take first watch.

It was two days into their traveling when setting up camp that Tera decided she needed to take care of a small problem.

Just off to the side she built a fire and put a small pot of water on to boil. Rummaging in her saddlebag she withdrew a pouch and a mortar and pestle of dark wood.

" Hey, what are you up to?" Panther seated herself nearby to watch her.

" I thought it might be a good idea if I disguised my looks a bit, light hair is kind of obvious around here." Tera pulled some herbs from the pouch and started grinding them into a fine powder.

"Really, why is that?"

Tera added more herbs and started grinding again. " Actually its more that my family line has more blonds than anything." " There are non-blonds of course but that's from marrying into other family lines, mostly for political reasons"

Panther ran her hand through her hair " Your family marries for only political reasons?"

"Mostly, my father didn't but he was one of very few people who married for love not power"

Tera poured the ground herbs into a small wooden bowl then turned toward Panther " Could you reach into my saddlebag and get the small red pouch out please?"

Panther sorted through the bags inside and withdrew the red one " Here you are"

"Thanks" Tera opened the bag and tossed a small palm full of leaves into the boiling water. Panther eased closer " So what's the plan?"

" I'm going to dye my hair so I can blend in easier" Tera checked the water and gave it a quick stir, checking the color. It was almost ready.

Panther tried to picture Tera with a different hair color. It wasn't working.

"What are you going to use?"

Tera gave the pot another stir " I'm using henna leaves but since I don't want to be a redhead, I'm



adding a dark tea to make it a shade of brown, it will take a few applications but it should work"

Tera took the pot off the fire and set it aside to cool. Now she needed to ask Panther to do something for her.

"Panter, I need you to do something for me" Tera palmed a small knife.

Panther gave her a curious look " Ok what do you want me to do?"

Extending the knife she replied, " Cut my hair"

Panther's mouth dropped open " Cut your hair!" She couldn't believe what her ears had heard "Why?"

Tera laughed " It's easier to color shorter, besides I don't have enough dye to do my hair this long". She ran her hand through her shoulder length hair.  
" Don't worry it'll grow back"

Panther took the knife and eased behind Tera. She hesitated a moment " Are you sure?" Getting an affirmative she gently gathered the back of Tera's hair and started cutting. A few moments later Tera's hair was shorn close to her head with the back just reaching to the middle of her neck. It left her with bangs she could push back that would blend in with the rest of her hair.

"There all done" Panther was startled by how young Tera looked with her hair that way. You would never have known she was the same person.

" Great" Tera pulled the pot and bowl towards her and started adding them together. It made a fairly thick paste. Turning she passed it to Panther. " Here I'll need some help can you smooth this into my hair?" Then she remembered something. " Sorry but it tends to stain your hands a little while using it"

Taking the bowl Panther said " Sure". Scooping some onto her fingers she started running it throughout Tera's hair. " But I don't think it will matter if it stains my hands or not" A long pause ensued and then Tera started laughing.

" I didn't think of that," she admitted casting a glance at Panther's leg laying along side hers. She reached over and ran her fingers over the dark toned skin. She felt a small shiver pass over Panther's body as she did. Leaving her hand on Panthers leg and closing her eyes she savored the feel of fingers caressing her scalp. She had to admit she was really "in like" with Panther. She wondered what her next move should be; she wanted this to be something serious.

"Almost done" Panther passed the rest of the dye into Tera's hair. Even with all this gunk in it she marveled how soft it was. "Ok, that's all of it". Panther felt warmth where Tera's hand was still on her leg. It felt good, almost had a feeling of rightness to it. She halted her movements for a brief moment. Someone was coming up behind her. She caught their scent and smiled, it was Alesia and with... she inhaled again... rabbit one of her favorites. She started when a finger tapped her

knee.

" Something wrong?" Tera whispered.

" Oh, no it's just Alesia" Panter raised her voice " Trying to sneak up on me again Alesia, that better be for me."

Alesia came around Panter and extended two steaming trenchers " No I'm not and yes it is".

Tera took both trenchers " Thanks, and yes what is?"

Alesia smiled and ducked Panter's lazy swat as she left to wash her hands.

" The rabbit, so may I ask why you look like you've been mud wrestling?"

Tera grinned " I'm dying my hair a darker color, it'll need washed out soon".

Alesia shook her head " It looks good short from what I can see, so how are you and Panter getting along?" she asked arching an eyebrow suggestively.

Tera's eyes rounded " That obvious is it?"

" Not really, so how's it going?"

Tera set the trenchers down by her hip " What do you think of Panter, Alesia?"

Alesia quickly sobered " I think she is a gifted woman, anyone lucky enough to catch her will have someone that will always be by her side, she is very upfront and honest about how she feels about things"

" She may not be forthcoming but once she trusts you, you have a firm friend "

Tera's eyes glistened " That's how I think too". She cleared her throat as Panter appeared. When she settled by her side Tera passed over a trencher.

"Thanks" Panter dug in. She was famished. " Alesia grab yours and join us, Tell the others to get over here too, we're all friends"

Alesia took off and gathered everyone up and they moved over with Panter and Tera. Exchanging greetings they all settled into eating their dinner.

" Eww" Tera set her trencher aside she was done for now.

"What?" Panter looked over.

" My rabbits not done, it's sort of raw" Tera shuddered in distaste.

Alesia extended her hand " Here let me have it, I'll put it back on the fire".

Panther intercepted Tera's food "No I'll take it, here have mine"

Tera took Panther's food " Are you sure, it's really not done"

Panther tore the rabbit into pieces " Yeah, I like it better this way, I guess I'm just an animal at heart" Silence reined until she looked up and smirked at them. Then laughter echoed around the campsite.

\* \* \*

Panther awoke early. Feeling a weight on her chest she opened her eyes and looked down her front. She smiled. Tera had moved in the night and once again ended up using her as a pillow. Panther looked over at the rest of the sleeping women. They had some time till they needed to rise to eat and get ready to continue their travel. They had reckoned about one more day till they reached the borders of Hawks Peak then the last leg of the journey would be more dangerous. They had been lucky so far and been able to avoid bounty hunters and the like since they traveled at dark and most had already bed down.

Sensing Tera awakening she shifted her gaze and watched her wake up. First Tera moaned and then the wiggling began. Panther bit her lip; having Tera doing that was distracting and also very pleasing at the same time. Trying to regain her mental and emotional balance Panther grasped Tera and lifted, moving her to the side so she could get up. Starting to walk away quietly Panther started when Tera spoke.

" Where are you going?"

Swinging around Panther squatted and brushed Tera's bangs back from her eyes.

" I'm going to hunt something down for breakfast or rather dinner" looking at the deepening dusk  
" want to join me?"

Tera's eyes lit up "Yes!" She had been joining her for the past few evenings and had enjoyed it immensely. She scrambled up, swiftly rolled up their bedrolls and stacked them. Brushing her hand over her hair and grabbing a carry bag she met Panther by the edge of the thickening trees. " I need to let them know we're going"

Panther caught her hand " I already did, see"

Tera laughed seeing Alesia hand pop up and wave as she lay with her back to them. " Great, let's go" She tugged Panther into the trees.

Winding their way past trees they continued to hold hands. They walked in silence. Tera stopped and leaned back onto a nearby tree. She tugged on their joined hands pulling Panther closer.

" Panther, I need to say something that's been on my mind for a while"

Panther got apprehensive about what she might say. " Go ahead, I'm listening"

Tera noticed Panther start fidgeting and realized what was happening. " No"  
She raised their clasped hands and pressed a kiss into the back of one of Panther's. "This is a good thing, at least I hope so"

Panther calmed " I think it might be"

Tera swallowed hard and continued " We've been getting close since you came into my life"  
Panther nodded and gestured for her to continue " I would like for us to get closer, to have a serious relationship"

Panther was stunned " You want a relationship with me?"

Tera got upset " You don't?"

Panther worked fast to change that assumption " No, I do but I wasn't sure you would."

"Why not, you have so much to offer?" Tera asked seriously.

Panther shook her head in self-doubt " I didn't think you would want a partner who was less than human."

Tera got mad " You think I'm like that, I love that part of you as much as I love the human in you." " I couldn't love one without the other and I wouldn't try, that is what makes you who you are" She stopped abruptly as she comprehended what she just said.

Panther pulled Tera into her arms " You love me?"

Tera hugged Panther as hard as she could. " Yes"

Panther looked down and met tear filled eyes. " Good, That makes it easy."

Wiping tears from her cheek Tera looked puzzled " Makes what easy?"

" For me to admit that I love you too."

Leaning down Panther gently laid her lips on Tera's and the surrounding noises faded as they kissed.

\* \* \*

Alesia made sure that everything but the basic was packed and loaded onto the packhorse they had brought with them. They had decided that carrying extra weight on the riding horses was not a smart move. More weight equaled less speed. They need all that they could get.

Hearing rustling behind her she turned reaching for her sword. She relaxed upon seeing Tera emerge from the trees.

" Hey, good hunting?" Alesia inquired.

Tera nodded and raised a finger asking her to hold a moment; She looked into the trees and beckoned. When nothing happened she walked back into the trees.

Alesia wondered what was going on.

A few minutes later Tera reemerged and turning to the trees beckoned again.

Alesia stiffened in shock as a large black cat emerged. It was huge.

The panther walked up to Tera and rubbed against her legs. Tera laughed and rubbed behind its ears. The cat closed its eye's in bliss at the scratching.

Then Alesia got a big clue " That's Panter isn't it?"

Tera grinned and nodded " Sure is"

Alesia was awed " I knew she was gifted but I didn't think it was like this"

She wanted to approach but hesitated " Can I come nearer?"

Tera looked at the cat and Alesia could swear it was laughing as it opened its mouth in a large yawn.

Tera motioned her over " Sure, It's still Panter she knows you're her friend."

Alesia walked over and stilled when the panther looked over at her. Sniffing the air panther moved closer. She felt whiskers brushed her right hand and then the wet swipe of a tongue. Looking down Alesia met golden eyes watching her. Smiling she rubbed the large head even with her waist. She laughed as the panther leaned against her legs purring.

Hearing gasps Alesia glanced to the side, it was Helia and Eurayle.

Alesia waved at them " Its o.k."

" But what... how.... where did that come from?" Helia asked pointed at the cat.

Tera approached and the panther moved to sit at her feet, watching them.

" That, is Panter" Tera stated.

Shock spread over Helia and Eurayle's faces.

" That's Panter, really?" Eurayle questioned.

" Sure is" Alesia replied.

Helia and Eurayle's eyes met then looked at the panther. Golden eyes met brown and gray. They smiled.

"Cool" Helia stated. Eurayle agreed with a nod.

Eurayle paused and then asked, " Do you think we can...pet her?"

The panther got up and padded over. They both gently ran their hand over it's head and back. They brightened when a deep purr rumbled in the cat's chest.

Alesia turned to Tera " What made her change, is she going to change back when we depart?"

Tera felt fur brush her legs " She changes at will and she felt like she needed too stretch her legs a bit, after awhile she gets edgy and this is a way of reliving that."

" Besides being part of who she really is"

The women took it as a normal statement and started on getting a meal together.

They needed to leave soon.

Tera helped out, aware of eyes following her every move. Anytime she looked over Panter was watching. It made her feel safe. Everything was great in her life.... except for the problem with her cousin. But she had a feeling with Panter by her side it would be a problem that won't be one long.

[Continued...](#)

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## ~ Panter's Pride ~

by T. S. Hubbard

I would like to thank my sister for helping to keep the run on sentences and the misspelling's down to a dull roar.

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## CHAPTER 5

The group halted at the last rise overlooking Hawk's Peak. It was just past dawn. The last few days of travel had been stressful. They had run into two separate groups of men looking for Tera. With her hair length and color changed, the scar on her left cheek from the incident with the tree and wearing nondescript clothing they had managed to pass her off as just another traveler. One group went on their way; the other wanted to play a little which they had taken offence too. Panther hadn't been with them at the moment or so Tera had thought. She had realized how wrong she had been when the man reaching to grab her had been knocked off his horse ending up on the ground with an outraged Panther on top of him. Of course all that the man saw was a large black cat and fangs flashing in his face. He had screamed and passed out in fear. All the others had immediately halted their rush toward the other women. They had ended up being trussed up to trees and left. What happened to them was for other travelers to decide. A note had been pinned to the leaders chest detailing why they were in this position. The women had roared with laughter as they rode off.

Smiling and shaking her head in amusement at the memory, Tera turned in her saddle to meet Panter's eyes. Panther had regained her human form soon after the incident causing Alesia to slap her hand over her eyes so quickly she almost punched herself in the face. Tera had snorted in laughter and handed Panther her clothing. Pulling them on Panther walked over and smacked Alesia on the back.

" Don't worry Alesia, I'm sure it's nothing you haven't seen before"

Alesia cautiously removed her hand. Seeing Panther was dressed she punched her in the arm.  
"Maybe, but I'm not taking a chance Tera wouldn't kill me"

Tera said nothing to the charge just smiled and walked back to her horse.

A jingling noise pulled Tera's attention back to the present.

They were on the main trade road into Hawk's Peak. A line of trade wagons were approaching their position. They guided the horses to the side so the wagons could pass. It seemed that business was good, at least from what they could see.

Panther leaned over " It seems pretty busy"

" I forgot that it was the summer festival, but it should have ended already"

A passing merchant overheard Tera and beckoned her over.

Tera guided her horse nearer to the wagon " Can I help you?"

The man spoke guiding the team of horses pulling the wagon as he did " I heard the festival almost didn't happen, it seems the lord of Hawk's Peak didn't want any strange people in town in such a large group, so it ended up starting this week"

Tera was shocked " But Hawk's Peak survives on trade and travelers doesn't it?"  
She asked playing dumb. She knew it did as a fact. It was its lifeblood.

The man nodded " Sure does, man has to be real nervous about someone to put their holdings in that much trouble, you think?"

Tera hoped her face didn't show how pleased she was on hearing that news.  
" He sure does, thank you for the news."

The merchant smiled " Have a good festival"

" You also" Tera answered.

Tera joined the others on the roadside.

She told them of what she had learned.

" Sounds like the man's a little nervous about something" Panter remarked drolly.  
" Wonder what that could be?"

The others shot her a look and burst out laughing.

" I wouldn't know" Tera replied.

They eased back into the flow of wagons making for the main gate into Hawk's Peak. As they got nearer the progression slowed to a stop. Being closer to the edge of the group Tera leaned farther out to see what was holding them up. Guards were speaking to each merchant and checking a parchment, she watched as words were exchanged. One merchant gestured about and his face turning red with anger as he shouted. The guard talking to him pointed at him, said something and then pointed away from gate. The merchants' shoulders slumped as he replied. His hand moved to his waist, an exchange was made and the guard stepped back and waved him on.

Tera moved back " That was interesting"

Alesia shot her a glance " What's up?"

Tera's brow furrowed " Looks like a check is being made of who enters Hawk's Peak"

" A check!" Panter barked, " Should we leave the line and enter another way?"



Tera shook her head " No, it's not a problem, don't worry, I made arrangements if this was going to happen."

Panther met Tera's eyes questionably. Tera smiled back reassuringly " It's fine"

Panther looked over at Alesia and the others. Messages were passed back and forth wordlessly. The women reached down and made sure their weapons were in easy reach, just in case.

In a few moments they were next.

"Reason for coming to Hawk's Peak" asked the guard as he approached.

Tera spoke before the others could " Festival and visitation"

" Name please" As the guard flipped to a new piece of parchment Tera caught a glimpse of a sketch of her face with the words apprehend for questioning blazoned across the top. Tera held her breath as the guard scrutinized her; she released it as his gaze moved on to the others. The changes had worked! .

The guards' gaze returned to her as he waited for the information.

" Amara of Blazon Falls late of Hawk's Peak" she offered.

She caught the brief look of puzzlement cross her friends face but it disappeared before the guard could see it.

" Name of people being visited" he responded.

" Zeva of Hawk's Peak, owner of Ravens Claw, second cousin" she replied

The guard noted it then extended his hand " Papers please"

Tera reached into her hip pouch and withdrew a many-folded paper. Handing it over she waited patiently as he looked it over. The official seal attached seemed to satisfy him and he returned it. He marked his list.

" You may pass, are these others with you?"

" Yes"

He turned to the others " Names please"

" Alesia of Forest Glade" Alesia announced.

" Helia of Harbor Cove". He turned his gaze to the next woman " Eurayle of the Kalor Clan" He stared at the next one. He hadn't seen anyone so dark before. He cleared his throat as he noticed the look he was receiving from her.

" Name ...p.. please" he stuttered.

"Panter of the Vestran" she stated.

The guard shook his head " Never heard of it"

The woman smiled " Not many have, it's across the waters to the north"  
He nodded and wrote her name down under visitation

He returned to the first woman " That will be four coppers please"

" Four coppers, we have to pay to enter?"  
The guard wagged his fingers impatiently. " New tax, pay or leave your choice"

Tera reached into her money purse and handed over the money with out any more fuss. She just wanted to get away from the guards. The longer they were here the bigger the chance something might happen. The money was of little consequence.

He pocketed the money. " Thank you, you all may pass, Happy Festival"

They offered the same back and calmly proceeded on even though they all wanted to take off to get out of sight. Questions were on the tip of Panter's tongue but she restrained them till they got to a safer place.

As they moved through the streets they had to slow their progress down to a crawl, as people were rushing about to get ready for festival. From what information they heard it didn't officially start until mid-day of the next day but much had to be done before then. From the people thronging the streets it was going to be a big one this year. More people equaled more profits.

After a small span of time Tera led them to a side street just off the main thoroughfare. She halted in front of a medium sized building. Panter saw a tabard sign swinging overhead announcing it as Ravens Claw. So that part really existed she mused. This should be something to see. Two stable hands ran up and relieved them of the horses promising to brush down and feed them. They removed their saddlebags and weapons allowing the boys to take them.

Tera turned to the others " Here I am known as Amara except to a very few who I trust, please be careful of using my real name here o.k.?"

The others made no comments indicating their understanding. They followed Tera into the dim room. It had a faint dingy appearance but seemed that it was kept as clean as possible. A slight overcast of smoke clung to the broad beams that crisscrossed the ceiling. Directly across from the entrance stairs to the left of a large bar area allowed access to sleeping areas above. A door behind the bar seemed to lead to the cooking area. A wide mantled stone fireplace dominated the eating space on the right hand side. Long rough-hewn tables and benches were scattered aimlessly about. It looked to be able to hold at least thirty people on a good day. A door closing

caused them to look over at the bar. A woman about middling height with light coloring had come from the back. An expression of surprise crossed her features when she looked up and saw them standing there.

"May I be of service?" she inquired.

Tera moved to the bar " I'm looking for lodgings for five please, do you have any rooms still available"

The woman chewed on her lip as she thought " I'm not sure let me look, this close to festival we're almost always full up". Reaching under the bar she pulled out a ledger and paged through it. A smile formed on her lips. " We do have two small rooms left, real plain, they normally don't rent out much will that be o.k. We can give you a good deal for them."

" They're fine, we don't need anything fancy"

" How long will you all be staying?"

"Till the end of Festival at least, will that be a problem?"

"Not at all, are you going to require meals also, the cooking here is pretty good. I should know since I have to eat it." She grinned at the laughter.

"Yes please, I'm not sure how many will be required but we will eat here most of the time I'm sure" Tera held back another smile. The woman hadn't recognized her. They had been friends of hers for years, her and her bond mate. That convinced Tera that her looks had changed enough to prevent most of their troubles for now.

" How does three silver eagles sound, for lodging and meals for a week"

" For five people, sounds like your not charging enough" Tera protested.

" No that's a good deal" the woman responded.

" More like a good steal" Tera handed over the money. Now for the tricky part of the situation. " Is Zeva around?" She felt her stomach clench as she asked.

Puzzlement appeared on the woman's face " Yes, do you have business with her?"

" Of a type, could you get her please?" Tera was getting a little nervous. A movement behind her eased the concerns a little. Panter was standing close. She wanted to get this done before someone else came in.

The woman went into the back. Tera turned briefly to face her friends. They seemed a little on edge but that kept them aware of everything around them. Noises from behind caused her to turn. A tall woman followed the other into the room. Blue eyes

sought her out. They narrowed slightly when she wasn't recognized. Tera moved to meet her across the bar top. Resting her hands on it she leaned on it a bit.

" You wanted to speak with me?"

" In a way, I just wanted to know how Falises aunt was"

A hand landed on hers and squeezed. " Falise has no aunt, who are you?"

As Tera let out a small gasp of pain, a large hand engulfed Zeva's wrist.

" Let her go or lose it" was growled ominously.

Zeva winced as her wrist bones ground together. Gods, what a grip. She met the eyes of the dark woman towering behind Tera. She flinched inwardly at the deadly stare she was receiving.

" Let her go" was growled again and the pain increased. With a cry she let go of the other woman's hand. Zeva grabbed her arm to try to relieve some of the pain. Her bond mate took her hand and gently looked it over during which she shot angry looks at the dark woman.

" Look, I don't know you, so maybe you need to go now" was all she said

Tera pulled her right sleeve of her tunic up exposing a small tattoo. It was of a bird's claw grasping a hawk feather. " You might know me now"

A gasp escaped the woman and she pulled her right sleeve up revealing a tattoo that matched. She started to reach over and grasp Tera's chin but a look over her head stopped that move. She decided to move the meeting to someplace a little less public. She beckoned the others to follow and lead them through the back door that opened onto a corridor. The smells indicated the kitchen was off to the right side. Farther down the hall branched off and three doors stood closed. Opening the first one they entered a small office. When everyone was in Zeva closed the door and leaned back on it. A happy smile spread on her face.

" Tera, we've missed you"

Tera moved forward and embraced Zeva. " I've missed both of you too"

" Sorry about your hand, is it o.k. Panther can be very protective sometimes"

Zeva flexed her hand. Already the pain was receding. " It's fine, I can't complain about someone who has your best interests in mind." " I would have done the same" She inclined her head as she met Panther's gaze. Panther returned the salute.

The other woman hugged Tera too placing a kiss on her cheek. Tera gave returned it. " Saleris it's great to see you, have you kept Zeva out of anymore trouble?"

Saleris grinned "As if anyone can, so whose your friends?"

Tera introduced everyone, filling her friends in on what had happened so far. Well almost everything. She certainly didn't say anything about Panther's other self. That might be a little much right now, besides that was Panther's secret to tell not hers.

Zeva stretched " Well, how about you all check out your rooms and then meet us in the kitchen. We have to get stuff ready for Festival."

" Sounds good, see you in a bit" Tera led the others back out to the front and up the stairs to their rooms. It was decided before she opened her mouth that she and Panther could take one and the others would share.

" You don't have to do that"

" No problem, Zeva going to send up an extra sleeping mat so no one will be sleeping on the floor. Besides you two need some privacy together." Alesia winked at Tera when she finished. Helia and Eurayle held in a laugh at the look on Tera's face.

Tera flushed pink. Being teased was new to her, but she didn't mind. Having friends who could feel safe doing that was nice. When she had lived here, as Tera Regent Heir of Hawk's Peak no one had felt safe doing that. It was nice to be just a normal person sometimes.

Panther opened their door and gestured for Tera to precede her inside. The room was small just as Saleris had said. Any other time Tera had stayed here she had stayed down in a room close to her friends. She had rarely been a paying guest.

Tera set her saddlebag on the bed that dominated the room. Clean bedclothes covered it, they were a little worn but serviceable. A small table holding a washbasin and jug resided to the left of the door in a corner. A window to the right of the bed opened onto the street allowing the early morning light in. Panther stashed their weapons in the corner. The knives they wore would be enough.

Tera sat on the bed looking around " Well, it is small I can say that"

Panther smirked " Feeling a little unsure Tera, I can sleep on the floor if you want?"

" No that's not what I meant at all, just that there won't be much room. After all we can't say you are of diminutive stature can we?" Tera held back a smile at Panther's expression at her comment.

" Are you complaining that I'm too tall?" Panther pounced on Tera causing them to roll around in the bed as she tried to tickle her. Shrieks of laughter alerted her that she had succeeded in her task.

" Stop, I can't take it anymore" Tera managed to gasp out in-between laughing fits.

Seeing her red faced Panther backed off allowing her to catch her breath. She loved it that they could play this way together. It was a way of being able to get closer to Tera. She still couldn't

believe that they were a couple. She knew Tera hadn't taken her nature into consideration. They needed to have a talk about it very soon, before it went on to the next stage. If they continued and then Tera decided it wasn't what she wanted, it could mean problems of the worst sort for Panther.

Tera shoved Panther " Come on we better get back downstairs"

Panther sighed to herself disappointed that their play had to end so soon. Tera got up extending a hand and making a big show of trying to pull her up off the bed. Rising, Panther shook her head in amusement as she followed her out the door.

Entering the kitchen Tera saw that the others had beaten them down and been put to work. Helia and Eurayle were sitting over a large pot peeling roots and potatoes. Alesia was at the table cutting up vegetables. Definitely not something they expected when volunteering to help Tera, but they were taking it in good humor.

" About time you got down here" Zeva stated grinning at the flush of pink that covered Tera's face at the needle. She snorted in laughter when Tera stuck out her tongue and plopped down on the bench at the table. Panther joined her, a bit more gracefully.

" Tera, child it's been far to long"

Tera turned to see an older woman moving toward her. Kindly gray eyes sparkled in a soft round face. A blue wrap enclosed her slightly plump body. She was a woman that children loved to cuddle up too. She had known her for many seasons.

" Alma" Tera jumped up and rushed to hug her. She was enclosed in a cinnamon scented embrace. She still smelled as she always had. Like she had just finished baking. " I've missed you"

Alma released her, pulling back to have a closer look at her. " You look so different. Then again it's not like you can walk in how you normally look anyway, can you"

Tera smiled " No, it's not"

Alma patted her on the back " I've met your other friends. So who's this beautiful woman your keeping company with?"

" This is Panther of the Vestran." Tera introduced proudly.

Panther inclined her head to Alma respectfully " I am glad to meet you"

Alma clapped her hands in delight " So respectful, you have a good one here child"

" I like to think so"

" Well I must get back to the morning bread. It won't finish itself for noon meal"

Alma hugged Tera once more then moved off to complete her duties. Half way across she stopped " Oh remember you promised to go riding with Zeva and Saleris's little one when you were back" After receiving Tera's agreement she continued on.

Saleris chuckled " Wait till Falise hears that. After all fifteen seasons' is no longer a child as she says."

They all roared in laughter.

Tera turned her attention back to Zeva. " Fill me in on what's been happening around here. What's with the new taxes?"

Zeva smiled died away " You mean what has your worthless, no good, slimy, greedy little bastard of a cousin done now?"

Tera's flinched at the venom in her friends' voice. She closed her eyes and sighed shaking her head. " What has Doran done?"

Zeva ticked off each point forcefully on her fingers. "Offered a reward so every no good scum around would be hunting you. Has a troop of mercenary's that are at his beck and call, if they want it they take it. Paying for it never crosses their mind"

She paused for a breath and continued.

" Raised taxes on imported items. Most merchants detour around us now so it's harder to get supplies in; when we do they cost more. Anything that can be squeezed to make more money is regardless of how it harms other people."

As Zeva drew another breath to continue Saleris stepped in.

" It's been bad enough that there have been rumors of rebellion. The people want you back. He took what was yours. You have always been known as a fair minded person and the people love you"

" Rumors or fact" Everyone turned to Panter. Her comment wasn't expected.

Zeva had the grace to look a little guilty. She fidgeted rubbing the side of her nose. Tera remembered she did that when she didn't want to admit something.

" Zeva, spill it" Tera said firmly. Her tone indicated that she had best speak up.

" It's not necessarily a rumor" She snuck a glance at Tera.

" A Revolt has been planned for quite a while. Not long after you left really."

Tera rubbed her face briskly " You know I don't want that. I want to regain regency myself; I don't want people to get hurt if I fail"

" People think the risk is worth it"

" I don't, when is this supposed to happen?"

Zeva started to speak but was interrupted. " At the end of Festival"

Zeva stared at Panter in shock " How did you know that?"

Panter shrugged " When's the best and easiest time to gather that many people in one place without it being suspicious.... Festival" She fixed a look on Zeva then turned to Tera " Your friend there" she pointed behind her with her thumb " Is one of the leaders"

Tera jerked around. Zeva's jaw had dropped and she was speechless. That's all the confirmation Tera needed.

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## ~ Panther's Pride ~

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer: Unless you're in my head this story is all mine.

Comment: This story has been running around in my head for the past four years begging to be written. I'm glad I have finally given in to the urge. Thanks for all the people who have sent me emails and kept me writing.

Thanks to Thorie my copy editor she has been more of a support in my writing then she knows.

Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com)..

### CHAPTER 6

Panter started awake. She stilled, listening for what had awakened her. **Thud**. There it was again. Laughter sounded just outside their door. Movement against her chest made her look down. Tera stirred in her sleep a frown marring her forehead. Panter eased out of the bed halting in mid-motion when Tera murmured. Reaching out she seized Panter's pillow. Pulling it to her she slid back into her dreams. Panter got dressed. **Thud**. More laughter bellowed from the hallway. She



moved quickly to the door hoping to stop it before it woke Tera up. She needed all the sleep she could get. Traveling here had been stressful. Tera hadn't been able to sleep well but she had never complained. Actually being on edge all that time had taken a lot out of them all. Loud voices just outside had her jerking the door open; sliding through the opening she pulled the door shut behind her.

Two men were slouched against the wall. By the smell they had been "relaxing" for quite some time. Hearing the door close they turned to see Panter emerge. The way their eyes lit with glee forewarned Panter of coming trouble.

" Hey, check out the long drink of water," slurred one. He stumbled forward and rested a meaty hand on her arm. The other man gave her a drunken leer and moved to join them.

Panter placed a palm on his chest. A well-placed look pinned the other in mid step. He halted his advance, leaning up against the wall. Wiping his nose on his sleeve he sneered at Panter who noticed while doing so he was careful to keep a safe distance.

" Might give ya a little fight there Tulare"

Tulare hawked and spat on the floor at Panter's feet. " I like em when they struggle a bit"

" I'm the wrong woman to play with" Panter shoved, pushing him back a few steps so she could move away from the door. Having more room to maneuver wouldn't hurt either.

" I don't think so. What I want, I get" Tulare swung a clumsy right at Panter. Blocking it, she stepped forward bringing a fist into his stomach. He bent over as the air left his lungs in a rush. Footsteps alerting her, she kicked back. His friend flew back landing farther down the hall with a thud. He didn't move. She grabbed Tulare around the neck with one hand and lifted slightly. Tulare's eyes widened as his feet left the floor. He clawed at the hand around his throat trying to pry it loose as he choked. It didn't budge. He frantically gave a quick look at the set face so close to his. No strain showed as she held his full weight up.

" This time you don't." she locked eyes with him. When sweat started beading on his forehead she set him back down. " Get your friend, I think you both will need other lodging's for Festival don't you."

Tulare nervously nodded as he scrambled over and tugged his friend to his feet. Panter followed them both down the stairs. Reaching the bottom she saw Zeva occupied at the bar. Zeva glanced up; puzzlement crossed her face upon seeing Panter closely watching the drunken men moving toward the front entrance.

" Zeva, do you know of a place that might still have rooms?"

"I think The Boar three streets over might have some available space. They tend to fill up last"

Panter relayed the information and then stepped out the door watching as they staggered down

the street. Panter turned and went back into the inn. She was relieved it had gone as smoothly as it did. She hoped Tera was still sleeping.

" Problem I should know about?" Zeva questioned.

" It's taken care of " she replied shortly.

Panter made her way over to the bar. The room was filling up for evening meal. She ignored the startled looks she was receiving. People would get used to seeing her; she hoped. Panter joined Zeva behind the bar. She would lend a hand with the customers massing up around the bar.

" Gimme a drink woman"

Panter poured ale into a mug. " That's one copper"

" I wanna run a tab," the man protested

" Sorry no tabs during Festival, owners rule. Pay or no drink"

After making sure to get a copper from the grumbling man she allowed him to take the drink. The next few minutes remained busy as the women waiting tables continued requesting drinks. When it finally died down and they could take a breather Zeva leaned on the bar alongside Panter. They watched the people eating and talking. With festival tomorrow the tables were filling fast. Panter couldn't fathom how Zeva and Saleris did it.

" Is it always like this at festival?"

" All seven days of it, the money we earn is what will get us past the winter. At least if this holds up the entire span of festival." Zeva rested an elbow on the bar resting her chin in palm of her hand." So, what was the escort for earlier?"

" Some drunks loitering in the hall, I was afraid they would wake Tera"

" They were in the hallway?" Zeva was a bit confused.

" Yes, their laughter woke me up"

" Was your door open?"

Panter raised an eyebrow " Nooo...why?"

" The walls are 2 inches thick, the door is made of oak and at least an inch thick, you shouldn't have heard anything." Zeva couldn't think of any way Panter would have been able to hear noise in the hall. Even if the men were right outside the door they would need to be right on it to hear anything at all. Certainly not enough to rouse someone.

" I see..." Panther shook her head " anyway I went out and they decided to get a little frisky. I told them I wasn't interested but they wanted to push the subject. After making sure they understood I meant it, we all came to the conclusion that they should get dwellings elsewhere."

" Really?" Zeva stopped trying to puzzle out what happened and thought for a moment. "Would you be interested in helping to keep the troublemaker's out during the day?"

" There are things that I would need to do during the evening's hours"

" If you did after noon meal to just after evening meal you would have the rest of the evening free... sound good?"

" Sounds fine, I'll be glad to help anyway I can" Panther was just happy to have something to do. Just sitting around made her antsy.

Raised voices caught Panther notice. They stood out amongst all the other people that were laughing and talking. Two men in the corner were fighting. Panther tilted her head slightly to catch what was being said. Zeva spotted the movement and watched Panther curiously. She wondered what was going on.

One man stood, leaning toward the other threateningly. The other man abruptly rose shoving his chair back with a clatter. The first man shoved the other causing him to trip over the chair, sending him slamming into the table next to theirs. Dishes, drinks and other customers ended up on the floor. Before the other man could regain his feet, Panther was over at the table they occupied.

" I think you need to leave, after you pay for the damage," she ordered harshly.

" Leave off bitch" he shrugged off the hand on his shoulder.

" This is over" grabbing his shoulder she dug in her fingers as she spun him to face her.

" Get your hands off...me" he trailed off upon realizing with his height he had to look up.... way up to meet her angry gaze. He paled, as he comprehended his error.

" What's the problem here?" Panther demanded.

Swallowing to try to help his dry mouth he pointed at the man pulling himself to his feet. " He owes me money and refuses to pay"

" And this is the way to make sure you get it back, by attacking him and damaging other peoples property?" She barked menacingly.

He flinched " No it wasn't, I guess I lost my temper"

" Your temper tantrum just cost you more money then he probably owed you"

Zeva bustled over; halting at Panter's side she rested her hands angrily on her hips. " All this is going to cost you at least one silver" She extended her hand.

" Due now please"

He blanched and reaching into his money pouch withdrew the funds and paid her.

" Thank you, now I think for the rest of the week you and your friends need to find somewhere else to eat, don't you" Zeva stated.

The man's friends protested. He shook his head. " But we have rooms here for the entire festival"

Zeva brow furrowed " That is a problem"

" Not really" Panter interrupted.

"What do you mean?"

" If they are staying here then it will be easier to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"But how?" Zeva couldn't figure out what point Panter was trying to make.

" Have him work to keep miscreants from causing problems when I can't"

" Would you agree to this?" Zeva watched as he thought for a moment.

" Yes I agree, having to deal with other peoples anger might help me learn to keep mine under control" They shook on it. The friends left heading back up to their rooms.

Zeva went over to the other table. Offering to replace their meals and not charging them for it and the one that was ruined mollified the angry customers. Panter righted the overturned table and chairs. Waitress's scurried over with cloths to clean up the spilled food and drink. Voices rose as people returned to their own meals.

Panter and Zeva resumed their spots behind the bar.

" Want to tell me how you noticed those men fighting?"

" I heard them"

"In amongst all the other noise you heard them. They were in the far corner. How could you hear that?"

Panter dropped her head then turned to look at Zeva. " Good ears?" She smiled at her wryly.

" No ones ears are that good"

" Hers are" They turned startled. Tera stood behind them. Involved in the discussion Panter had not heard her approach. Panter smiled when Tera moved over and cuddled into her side. It felt good having someone that wanted to be with her like this. She was hooked on this woman. Panter relaxed content by her nearness.

"What do you mean hers are?"

Tera shook her head " We'll have to talk about this later in private"

Zeva frowned. " All right, I'm going to check how things are going with Solaris in the kitchen." She left the front, leaving Tera and Panter in charge of the bar.

"Where are Alesia and the others?"

" In the back helping Solaris"

They both chuckled. " Not what they came here to do that's for sure" Tera joked.

" Sure wasn't"

Tera sobered " What happened while I was sleeping?"

Panter filled her in on the events that had transpired. " I hope it's all right that I accepted the job, I didn't think it would interfere with our plans."

" No its fine, might keep you out of trouble." She flashed to what she had just been told. " Or maybe not"

" Hey, it's not my fault"

Tera hugged her firmly. " Of course it's not" She buried her face in Panter's shoulder to hide the laugh that wanted to erupt.

Panter pressed a kiss to the top of Tera's head, inhaling her scent deep into her lungs. They definitely need to talk soon. Very soon. Something slammed down on top of the bar. They parted as Panter pivoted to face the cause of the interruption.

A grungy group of men lounged on the bar. She was quick to notice that the other customers had quieted and were shooting nervous glances over to them. Weapons were slung haphazardly over their bodies. It was clear the request that weapons be hung on the racks near the door meant nothing to them. Panter came to the conclusion that these must be some of the merc's hired by Tera's cousin. He needed to buy a better class of men, but one does tend to hire in their own level of mentality. In other words it takes one to know one. He obviously preferred to use brute strength to get what he wanted. They could be the most dangerous kind of animal. But they could be outsmarted.

" You wanted something?"

" Yeah some drinks and food, now" the apparent leader snarled. " If you can tear yourself away from your pretty little whore. I'm willing to take her off your hands if you want"

Panter clamped down on her automatic reaction to such an attack, she longed to reach out and rip out his throat. A low growl started in the back of her throat. A warm hand laid itself on the small of her back. She choked it off, swallowing hard. The rage was a hard pit in the middle of her stomach.

" I don't think so, she's my bond mate so resist it " she bit off. Panther felt the small jerk of surprise that the others didn't detect. She met his eyes dead on. His pupils dilated then he blinked and slightly backed off. He could tell she meant business. He shrugged to cover up his unease. For a brief moment he thought her eyes looked funny but dismissed it as a trick of the light.

"That's too bad, not really to my taste anyway. I like them with a little more meat on the bone."

" If you'll find someplace to sit the drink and food will be out in a moment." The smaller woman offered.

The men started to protest. The leader caught the look on Panther's face and nodding shoving his men toward the back of the room where some tables were free. He didn't dare do their normal routine of ousting people from their own tables so they could sit where they wanted. He had a feeling what might transpire wouldn't be in his own best interest. He made a mental note to let his commander know about this incident as he moved to join his men.

" If you do want to get rid of her I might reconsider" He tossed over his shoulder just to have the last word.

Panther clenched her hands into fists below the bar top. She dropped her head abruptly as her vision grayed out. That was a sure sign that her eyes had changed.

" Are you alright?" Tera grasped one of Panther's hands in concern. Her eyebrows shot up in shock when she felt a light gloss of fur under her fingers. Uh oh she needed to get Panther into the back quickly. Gesturing for one of the waitresses to take over she tugged on Panther's hand tugging her toward the door to the kitchen and office.

Panther allowed herself to be pulled along making sure to keep her head down. She heard the clatter of pots as they passed by the kitchen. She caught voices as Tera opened the office door and entered. Panther followed her inside. From the voices raised in question she could tell the gang was all here. Great she really didn't want to do this now but it seemed she had little choice in the matter.

" Hey, what's up Tera everything alright out front?"

"We had a small incident"

" Are you o.k.?" Zeva rose to her feet ready to go up front if she needed to. She waved Solaris back into her seat at the desk when she stood to join her.

" Yes fine, a group of Doran's thugs came in and wanted to start problems but everything is fine now" Tera motioned for her to retake her own seat.

" So why are you back here for, a break?"

Well, Panter needed a moment she got upset when the leader decided to hit on me" she explained.

"She had to come all the way back here to calm down?" Zeva wasn't sure what was going on.

" It was better then scaring off your customers"

"What would scare off my customers?"

"This might" was growled out in a low gravelly tone. Panter looked up catching Zeva off guard. Their eyes locked for a brief moment. Zeva gaped in shock. Solaris screamed. Her eyes were the eyes of an animal. Zeva shot to her feet, grabbing Solaris she shoved her behind her in a protective motion. The others didn't miss it.

" No it's o.k. calm down" Tera was disappointed by this reflex action. She had hoped it wouldn't be a problem for her friends.

" She's a demon," Solaris gasped out. She ducked back behind Zeva when Panter looked back toward her.

Alexia and the others refuted that in a loud protest of voices. It rose to a clamor as they all tried to speak over each other.

"All right enough" Tera screamed. Silence descended as the others paused in mid breath.

Zeva frowned; she chewed her lip as she considered this new information. Meeting Panter's eyes again she expected to see an animal but her eyes had regained their human look. She relaxed a bit and had Solaris retake her chair. She didn't comment when Solaris pulled her seat closer to her own.

"Maybe if I explained a little it might help" Panter offered softly.

Zeva inclined her head in agreement and leaned back to listen to what she might have to say.

Panter settled into a small couch with Tera curled beside her, her head resting on her shoulder.

" Have you heard of the Gods' Chosen People?" she asked.

" That's a myth isn't it?" A questioning glance from her mate prompted her to retell it. " I believe it's about a group of people that wandered the lands before it was ever settled. Back in the days when the gods' wars with each other to be the only one worshiped caused death to wander too freely. It was said that a few of the gods were tired of the constant fighting and left preferring to find other lands that they might preside over. They each took a small group of the people devoted to them when they left. Here after many years of struggle the gods decided that a small share of the power was better then none so they stopped the fighting. Every once in a while a smaller power struggle arises but they won't allow the wars to happen again it cost them all too much. That's all I know"

Panter was surprised " Most don't know that much"

" I like myth's and stories"

" Wherever you got the story from has gotten it correct. One of the Traveling gods had chosen my land of birth. She was powerful in her own way but tended to be peaceful. The people she had taken with her were her favorites. The land that confronted them was wild and teemed with danger. Many people where dead within two moons from the animals that lived there. This upset the goddess greatly. She gathered the few that remained: mostly women and children and gave them a gift. It was a gift that belonged only to the females of her chosen since she to was female. It was a reflection of her so they knew that she was always with them. With this gift they survived and prospered. But only by hiding it did they not cause themselves to be annihilated by people who thought them to be demons. As they did not know of the new god that now resided in the land. I am a descendent of these women."

Zeva was intrigued. By the shifting of Solaris body she could tell she was to.

" So can you tell us what this gift is?"

" Tera and the others already know of it, but were not aware of the story"

" Tera you knew?"

Tera played with the long fingers of the hand she was holding. " Of course I did, I love Panter for who she is, the gift is just part of it. Plus I know I couldn't be in safer hands."

Panter grasped Tera's chin and pressed a small kiss to her lips ignoring the snickers coming from Alesia and the others. She'd get even with them later.

" So can you tell us?" Zeva prompted.

" This must be kept to yourself, if the right people found out my life might be forfeit."

" I swear on Tera's friendship it will go no further" she replied honestly. Solaris echoed the pledge.



"I'm a, what did you call it in your language Tera?"

"A shape shifter" she filled in.

"Yes, a shape shifter my human shape is only one of my forms"

"Can you show us the other?" Solaris pleaded. This was getting exciting.

"Well, I have to disrobe to show you the full form but I think I could do a half shift to give you an idea." Tera nodded in agreement. Panther disrobing in front of other people wasn't something high on her list of wanting people to see.

Panther rose from her seat, concentrated briefly and shifted.

Zeva and Solaris gasped as Panthers body changed. Glossy black fur spread faster then the eye could see over her body. Her face and ears reformed. Her body weight shifted as her legs changed, causing her to list forward so she stood on back paws. The size she reached compared to her human form was impressive. A normal sized animal she wasn't. When the shifting stopped they pulled their eyes up to meet Panthers. The slit pupils of a cat met theirs. Panther lifted a hand and extended her claws.

"They look sharp" Solaris remarked.

"They are" Panthers voice replied. From the looks she was getting from the others Zeva came to the conclusion they didn't know Panther could speak in this form. It was guttural but understandable. They watched as Panther shifted back to her normal form. She rejoined Tera on the couch.

Zeva turned and looked at Tera." Now I understand what you meant last night when you said you wanted to do this yourself and you have friends that could help."

"Even if Panther wasn't gifted I do not want the people to revolt"

"But we want to help"

"Why don't you gather the leaders in a meeting and listen to what they have to say. You never know, you might be able to let them help and still not involve the rest of the populace." Panther tossed out.

Tera pondered what Panther had said. That might be the answer to something that had been bugging her lately. "Could you arrange for them to be here later tonight?"

Zeva grinned "Sure can I'll get right on it" She pushed herself to the feet and started toward the door. Pausing by Panther she gripped her shoulder in a friendly clasp." I think Tera is very lucky to have someone like you on her side. In more ways then one." She smirked at Tera then darted out the door. She had arrangements to make.

" Are you ready to go back out front?"

Panther hopped to her feet, She tugged Tera up to join her. " Sure let's go. We might have missed some fun"

Tera poked her in the chest" You just like playing with us humans" she joked.

Panther wore an outraged look." Hey I'm human too"

For a moment Tera was worried Panther was angry till she caught that glint in her eye. " You smart butt, come on we have work to do" The rest of the group laughed and followed them up front.

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## ~ Panther's Pride ~

by T. S. Hubbard

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### **CHAPTER 7**

Panther sat with her eyes closed enjoying the breeze as it flowed over her body. She was perched in an ancient oak that Zeva's family had kept. Preferring to build around it rather than have it removed. The tree had thanked them by providing future generations shade and coolness beneath it's canopy. The width of the trunk was larger then a grown mans arm span. The lowest most branches higher then her height with one arm upraised. Of course it presented no challenge for her to scale, the reward being a height greater then the surrounding buildings and a private retreat. Being situated in the central courtyard of the Raven's Claw beside the kitchen and its two

storage areas meant she could watch the coming and going of it's people with out notice. The encroaching darkness of night provided it's own shelter. Right now however that was not her purpose. Blocking out the sounds that intruded, Panter's thoughts drifted without direction. A short time passed till she once again opened her eyes and lowered her head.

" Natus Mater please be with me in this time of conflict and discord. I am unsure of the action needed to resolve it"

Panter felt the bracing breeze ease then halt. The sensation of a hand on her shoulder but no identifying scent startled her. In the next breath it ended and nature resumed its hold. She was left unsure of what had just happened. Placing it into the back of her mind for later deliberation Panter climbed higher till she could see over the courtyard wall and watch the travelers below as they went about their evening. A group of five men standing across from the inn's entrance claimed her attention. The unlikely assortment and the glances they cast over to the entrance gave her an idea of their purpose. They were likely the others planning the revolt. She had better rejoin Tera.

Panter made her way down to the lowest branch then jumped; landing lightly she crossed over to the kitchen entrance and went in. Voices rose in greeting as she traversed the floor. Panter slowed to a stop upon seeing Solaris. She was hard at work filling the orders coming in from the common room, even though eve mealtime was passed hence Panter being off duty people still needed to eat regardless of time. Panter joined her at the table that resided beside the stove and ovens for this purpose. She cocked an ear at the request being made and snagging a bowl helped Solaris catch up. In a short time it died down enough that Panter could speak without being overhead.

" I believe the others have arrived"

Solaris gave her a blank look " Others"

" Yes, others you know" Panter caught her eyes " The other's"

Solaris turned red as what was said finally made sense. " Oh, sorry this hush hush stuff is hard to keep up with sometimes"

Turning Solaris beckoned a worker over to take her place. " Let's go, they might be at the room already"

Instead of leaving the kitchen and entering the hallway leading towards their office they backtracked Panter's path. Bypassing the first storage area they halted at the second. Opening it they entered. Faint light greeted them. Moving among the stored items they came upon a door set back in the far corner. In the deep shadows unless you knew it was there it would have been missed. Solaris pulled open the door, they walked into a small room where a table and a number of chairs were the only things present.

No one else had arrived as of yet so they both claimed a seat and settled down to wait. Few moments passed till the door opened allowing the group of men Panter had seen in followed

closely by Zeva and Tera.

Tera snagged the chair next to Panter and watched as the others chose their seats. She motioned Zeva to start the meeting.

" Thank you for agreeing to this meeting"

Resigned murmurs greeted this statement.

" I have called us together to inform you that I have received word from Tera "

A sandy haired man jumped to his feet " Finally, has she agreed that this is the time to revolt. Everything is about ready"

Zeva shook her head " No Cenon, she was pleased to hear that the people felt the way they do but once again said she was going to take care of it herself"

The man slammed his hands down " Doesn't she realize we want to help?"

" She's worried about people getting hurt, she doesn't want innocent blood spilled, not anymore then already has"

" But it's worth it" he protested angrily.

"She doesn't think so, but she has sent someone to help, she might be willing to let some of you to lend help" She turned toward Tera " This is Amara of Blazon Falls "

Tera rose and inclined her head in greeting " Zeva's right I might end up calling for your assistance in this matter. Please tell me who you are" Zeva had already filled her in but she had found if you allowed people some room it tended to get them to agree to more things easier.

The sandy haired man sat back down " My names Cenon, I'm the local blacksmith, I'm representing the common peoples feeling on this matter"

Panter was careful to watch the mannerisms and body language of the men. Small cues could signal if they were speaking the truth. Sort of like perfume sweating could signal apprehension.

A sharp featured, fancy dressed man spoke next " I am Gyes of House Demos, I am here to speak for the noble blood."

Tera just restrained herself from rolling her eyes. The nobles were only involved because their pockets were affected. But they might come in handy some way. She hadn't an idea of how yet at the moment.

She turned to look at the next man at the table. Black hair flowed over his shoulders and came to a rest just below his shoulder blades. Green eyes were fixed upon her as if he were committing her features to memory. The way he sat rigidly in his seat reminded her of the way most of the

guardsmen she had met unconsciously conducted themselves. She fought back a smile as she watched her old friend try to pretend he didn't know her.

" I am the proxy for the guardsmen who are loyal to regent Tera, you can call me Akil"

Tera made a slight bow of respect in his direction. " I thank you in her place, she knows that you take great risk on her behalf"

A brief smile graced his harsh features. " We do it because she is the rightful ruler, also because we respect her"

Tera really wished at that instant she could just be the friend he knew but now was not the time. She had to remember the goal and find some way to thank them all later.

The next man rose to his feet. The clothes he wore outdid the nobles in garishness. Tera almost didn't need an introduction. His florid round face indicated he lacked for little in the way of food or comfort. If the people he stood in place for resembled him in any way she was unsure of any uses they could hold.

" The Heads of the Guilds has sent me as a stand in for their interests in this situation. I am Jenö"

The stout man that followed simply stood and announced himself " I'm Attis, I am here for the Merchants" He retook his seat.

" On Tera's behalf I thank you all for being here. Plans are still being finalized; the roles you will play in them are not fixed at this present time. Please do me the honor of returning here at this same time in two days"

Voices in protest and anger rose quickly till Panter sprang to her feet. They trailed off into silence in response to the cold glare they were subject to.

" If you would rather not abide by Amara's decision in this matter." Panter paused "May I remind you that she represents Regent Tera" The group shifted in their seats in discomfort. " Then you may leave and not return.

If you truly want to help you will do as Amara asks"

After passing glances back and forth they all rose and nodding exited talking amongst themselves. Panter and the others followed them out.

Returning to the common room Panter looked over at the man who took her place after eve meal. He shook his head at her questioning look. It seemed word had passed about the Ravens Claw being a safe place to come and eat. The room was still full and more people were trying to enter. Luckily Solaris had the idea to have people start sitting at the bar as an overflow measure. As long as the bar was, it allowed them to retain some space at the end to still make drinks. People were being gracious about leaving as soon as they had supped. Solaria and Zeva were ecstatic about the money flowing in. At this rate they would not have to worry about winter.

One of the waitresses's approached. " A woman was searching for you while you all were gone. Since you weren't here she gave me a note to be handed to you or Amara" She extended a folded note.

Taking it Panter thanked her. Walking over to a far corner table she joined Tera and the others as they sat and shared some liquid refreshment. Panter could deal with having a few; the day had been nerve-racking in many ways. Claiming a pint for herself she drank deeply. The light sweet flavor of the beer was pleasing. A few would sit quite well. Not that she had to worry, she had found that one very useful effect of her gift was that she didn't get drunk no matter how much she imbibed. Tera slid closer to her placing a hand on her thigh. Sliding the note over Panter dropped a kiss on her cheek. She ignored the watching Zeva and Solaris.

" This came for you while we were in the meeting"

Breaking the seal Tera read it quickly. She seemed pleased at the contents.

" Things seem to be progressing smoothly" Tera gave the note to Panter to read.

Things have been arranged as you requested. Our people are scattered throughout the city in various taverns. I was able to acquire lodgings for two others and myself at Raven's claw. It seems there were some rooms recently vacated. I am checking on the others to make sure no problems have arisen. I will return momentarily.

Rena

" Not the highest thing on my list to hear" Panter remarked dryly. She was not looking forward to being stuck in the same lodgings with someone who really rather she not be there. Panter knew of Rena's feelings about Tera, it wasn't a well keep secret if you really paid attention. She had to admit that Rena did a fairly good job trying to cover it up. Even Tera hadn't realized Rena was in love with her. Things sure weren't going to be boring from here on out.

"Panter, promise me you won't let Rena get to you. I know that she does her best to provoke you. I'll talk to her about it if you would like me too."

" No, I rather you wouldn't. Besides I don't think she could do anything I can't handle"

" Your right, I'll leave it to you then" Tera smirked as the thought of Rena trying to overpower Panter danced in her head. There was no way that was ever going to happen.

"Everything ok Amara?" Zeva inquired.

" Yes, just fine, things are moving forward as they should. Some people I was expecting have arrived. In fact, some of them seem to have taken a few rooms here that had been vacated recently"

" Good, if you need anything let us know. Come Solaris, we better get back to it."

Zeva and Solaris gathered the mugs and left heading for the kitchen.

" Panter, I wanted to ask you a favor"

Panter leaned back in her chair laying her arm on the back of Tera's.

" What favor?"

"Zeva pulled me aside before the meeting, she was hoping she could be involved in the  
"action"."

Panter's brow furrowed " Has she ever fought with a weapon before?"

Tera sighed " It's been years since she's welded a weapon of any kind. She was once a member of the guardsmen. That's how she and I meet and became friends."

" With so little time to practice I wouldn't want Zeva to use an edged weapon. What would she say about using a staff instead?"

" If I'm remembering correctly she used to be very proficient with it. I don't see any problems with that. Nor would she I believe"

" I'll get with her to work out a schedule for practice"

Leaning over Tera thanked her with a kiss. They stayed absorbed in each other till Panter's senses set off an internal alarm.

"Seems someone wants our attention," She murmured in Tera's ear.

They both glanced up; it was Aeson the man who took over from Panter. He kept back from the table until Panter beckoned him closer.

" Sorry to interrupt, but this just came for you" He handed Tera a small piece of sealed parchment.

"Thank you Aeson"

Aeson bowed and left.

Tera laughed " You know he only does that because I'm with you"

Panter just stared at Tera for a minute then shook her head.

"So what's up with that?" Panter gestured at the note Tera was holding onto.

" Let's see"

Opening the note a smile graced her features, as she read further it started to fade. Finishing the note she passed it to Panter.

Amara,

Happiness is mine to see you. But joy is not enclosed in this note that I pen. I am putting ink to paper to forewarn you that a member in the meeting just held is not what they seem. I am unsure at this point who that is so be on the watch for any who seem too agreeable. Know that the accipiter ala stands at the ready. These eyes hope to view you again soon. I feel more at ease since you have so careful a watcher.

With fondness,  
Akil

" Kind of wordy isn't he?" Panter joked.

"He can be yes, he wanted to be a poet but his parents decided that he was going to be a guardsmen instead. But it certainly does comes out in his writing."

"What is this accipiter ala that he mentions?"

"They are or rather were my personal guards. Many I've known since I was young. Some I handpicked myself"

"So who chose to call them the hawks wing?"

" They decided on that name amongst themselves"

" How many do they number?"

Tera pondered for a second adding them up in her head " There were three rotations of about thirty I think"

Panter was shocked "You had" she had a loss of words " nonaginata as your personal guard?"

" Nonaginata. Oh, you mean ninety?" Tera turned scarlet in embarrassment " Well, they only do a rotation of two weeks at a time, any other time they were at the barracks keeping up with training. One week out of every two months they had free. To return home or spend as they liked"

" That makes sense, having a short rest between being on duty fulltime is a good idea. It keeps you more alert" Panter felt more at ease knowing they had backup. " There's something else that's concerning me "



"What's that?"

"Akil said that someone in the meeting was a fraud, right?"

"Yes he did, why?"

Panther checked the room. " What if they decided to check out just who Amara of Blazon Falls was. What kind of problems you might pose to them?"

" I fully expect them to"

" But she doesn't really exist!"

Tera bit her lip holding back a chuckle at the exasperation on Panther's face. " Ah, but she does."

A blank look met that announcement, taking pity on her Tera elaborated.

" As a youth I chafed at the amount of responsibility forced onto my shoulders. I decided that I needed time of my own to do with as I pleased."

Tera crossed her arms, leaning back in her seat.

" So I took some time for myself. I chose a few of my most trusted friends to go with me, Akil among them. We dressed in common clothing and traveled around the territory for weeks at a time. As long as I kept sending word back to my family, it didn't really matter when I returned as long as I did."

"So how did Amara come to be?"

Tera held a finger up " I'm getting there."

Panther settled in for what seemed to be a long story.

" On one of my trips, we joined a small group of people looking for a nice piece of free land to settle. Knowing of a place, I led them to it and helped them get organized. I got to know a middle aged couple who had no real family. I stopped by, checking in on them every so often. Once I found some ruffians that had moved in hassling them because no one was around to protect them. My people took care of that problem quickly"

" I had known them for a few years by then so I mentioned that if they had family to help provide for them they would have a measure of the protection they needed. Of course they said they had no one to do such a thing, so I asked if it would offend them if I did. The story passed around was that I was a niece of theirs from a son that had left long ago, cutting them out of his life. Amara being the name I already used was convenient to apply. When I returned here papers were drawn up secretly and a provision sent to them every three months. It still is being send to this day. So to anyone asking questions I do exist"

Panther rubbed her forehead" Teach me to ask a question like that again"

As Tera started to speak an increase of noise pulled their attention toward the front. It was Rena and her buddies. They were causing a commotion as they tried to ditch in front of others to get drinks from the bar. Causing trouble already she mused. Her interest in the scene increased as Panter got to her feet and headed toward them.

@ @ @

" Move it old man" Rena shoved people out of her way to get the drinks she and her friends wanted.

" Wait your turn," an old lady protested as she was pushed aside.

" I don't think I want to, you old hag"

The growing silence behind her didn't catch her attention. People parted in front of her. Taking advantage of it Rena moved in.

" Hey girl, three drinks and don't be lazy about it."

As she waited for the ale the absolute quiet suddenly claimed her notice. Turning she caught sight of Panter standing close behind with her arms crossed, a feral look on her face. Rena stiffened. She lifted her upper lip in distaste. " Something you want?"

" Oh, not me. But I think that someone else just might"

Panter allowed a smirk to show as the realization that Tera had witnessed her attitude dawned on her. " Get your hard earned drinks" she stressed drolly " and follow me".

Gathering the ale up, Rena and the other two women followed Panter to the table. Settling into a seat Rena almost didn't recognize the woman sitting across from her if it wasn't for the scar on her cheek and her eyes.

Rena directed her gaze down at her hands at the frosty look she was getting from Tera.

" In what way do you think acting like an absolute bitch, helps us?" Tera spat.

Rena flinched " It doesn't" she muttered.

"Then why do it?"

Rena shrugged, knowing she was acting like a child but somehow unable to stop herself. She felt that it was Panter's fault anyway. She loved Tera; she wasn't going to let some half-breed take what she wanted. She would find some way to make it happen.

" Rena, I asked you to come and help. You agreed. I refuse to waste my time babysitting some

snot nosed brat"

Rena flushed in anger. " I came to help"

Tera gentled her look " Then please, drink your refreshments and eat, then go and sleep. We have much to do tomorrow"

Rena agreed. She moved over to another freed table. Her friends apologized to Tera and went to join her.

" You can be some piece of ice, amare"

Tera stuck her tongue out at Panter " If needed, what's amare mean?"

" It means love, it's fine with you isn't it"

Tera gazed lovingly into golden eyes. " It's more then fine"

Panter cleared her throat " Good, may I see Akil's note again?"

Tera blinked lost for a moment at the sudden question. " Sure" She tossed it over.

Picking it up, Panter brought it to her nose and sniffed. She drew the scents in. They were layered upon each other but she easily picked out Akil's. It was a strong smoky odor that stood out above the rest.

" What are you up too?"

Panter flipped it back onto the table. " I'm going hunting "

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## ~ Panter's Pride ~

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer: Unless you're in my head this story is all mine.

Comment: This story has been running around in my head for the past four years begging to be written. I'm glad I have finally given in to the urge. Thanks for all the people who have sent me

emails and kept me writing.

Thanks to Thorie my copy editor she has been more of a support in my writing then she knows.

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## **Chapter 8**

Darkness enveloped the figure that moved untiring among the twisting streets. Eyes glinted with the thrill of the hunt. With most of the city anticipating Festival starting the next day, many had already retired to their homes or lodgings. Freedom from watching eyes allowed talents to be used, abet carefully. Chasing down Akil's path was proving to be more difficult then expected. Overlaying scents had obliterated the trail more then once. Time was wasted as she backtracked and found it again. Finally the scents thinned out to a handful, so it was no trouble to pick up speed. It ended up leading to a row of buildings that were situated just inside the inner protective wall surrounding the personal quarters of the regent. Stilling herself she listened carefully. Faint voices alerted her to guards standing nearby. Moving away from the voices she halted when she could no longer hear them. With her hearing that meant she was far enough away not to draw attention. The walls away from the main gate were unfinished creating a surface that was easily scaled. Once over Panter made her way to the nearest structure. Moonlight glinting off something on the ground caused her to freeze in mid step. Panic surged in Panter's veins till she found that it was an object not a person. A small grouping of trees nearby gave her a handy place to look over the area.

What she saw gave her pause. Someone had enveloped the building with some type of traps. It looked like they wanted to know when they had company. That wasn't enough to deter her. Determined Panter climbed higher into the tree, the amount of space between it and the roof was large. A normal person had no hope of spanning that distance. Luckily for her she was not a normal person. Half-shifting she crouched then leapt. For a brief moment Panter hung suspended above the earth then the roof rushed up to meet her. She landed with a faint thud. Moving to the edge of the roof Panter dug in her claws, she lowered herself to the open window below. Murmurs of conversation wafted out. Peering in, she glimpsed Akil standing among a small group of guards gesturing as he spoke. Listening, she gathered that these were part of Tera's personal guard. Satisfied, but on full alert in case things didn't go as planned Panter moved back to the rooftop. Shifting back she crept to the other end.

Akil listened as his fellows spoke among themselves. They were excited about Tera's return. The past two years had been difficult. As former personal guards they had been under suspicion by the new Regent. He was unable to disband the Hawk's wing for he was sure that they would immediately join Tera. He decided to let them remain but assigned them to be used as common guards, splitting them up to make it easier to keep an eye on them. The only time they were all together was upon returning to their barracks; even then they were kept under watch. Luckily for them after two years of nothing to see the guards had gotten lax, giving them windows of opportunity to leave and not get spotted. That was how he had gotten to the meeting earlier.

" Akil, you mentioned that Tera had someone with her?"

Akil turned his attention to the speaker. Narna had been with the wing for almost as long as he had. They had both joined the guards at an early age, her about fifteen summers, him about seventeen. About three years into service they had caught the young Tera's eye and had been drafted into her Personal guard. That had been twelve summers ago.

" Yes, I had never seen her before"

"Are you sure you just don't remember her?"

Akil gave Narna a sarcastic look. " Believe me, I would have to be blind not too"

"Why do you say that?"

The rest of the group listened intently. For Akil not to know was unheard of. It seemed that he knew everything that was going on. Also who was doing it.

" She was 6 feet tall or more, golden eyes and skin the color of ebony. I think I would remember someone like that"

Narna's jaw dropped. She had never in her life seen anyone with that description. Most people around this area were dark from sun exposure at the most. There were some that were almost as dark but not many. But at Festival there would be more then usual so it wouldn't be too blatant.

" I believe you would to"

A voice coming out from the darkness made them all jump. No noises had warned them of anyone's approach. They had set up ways of being alerted to intruders. Even the outrage of other guards blundering into them was no deterrent enough to stop them from using them. A shape dropped down from the roof overhang. It straightened from it's crouch and moved toward them coming into the light. Gasps arose as they realized what Akil said had been true.

Akil snapped out of it quicker then the others. After all he had already seen her.

"Why didn't we hear you?"

Panter gave them a cocky smile. " You mean all your little traps." She pointed up at the ceiling. " You don't set them off when you travel above the ground"

"But the nearest tree is more then twelve feet away from this building"

Panter shrugged in an offhand manner " Not so great a distance. Anyway, I didn't come here to talk about that"

"Then what are you here for?"

"I wanted to see the Hawk's wing for myself. If Tera's life also depends on you I wanted to make sure that you all could handle it."

Anger and outrage poured through Akil in response to the statement. "Who are you to question our worth?" he queried through gritted teeth. He had to restrain himself from accompanying it with action.

Panther paused she hadn't meant to cause such a reaction. "I apologize that was worded incorrectly, I wanted to be sure that you were ready for what was to come. I mean no disrespect to The Hawk's Wing"

"We have always been ready at the first sign from Regent Tera that she was returning. Who are you to judge?" Akil was still angry but listening.

"She's my beloved" Panther admitted a smile gracing her features.

Shock settled over the group. For Tera to join with someone in her position meant a life long commitment. Unlike many of her family, she did not barter lives as monetary goods or use them as political ploys. So joining with someone signified a deep love. Akil wondered if this woman knew of that.

Akil calmed fully down. "Then I understand, you may reassure Tera that we stand at the ready"

Panther stretched out an arm. Akil swiftly followed suit. Claspng forearms they accepted each other's commitment to Tera's safety. Swiftly, Panther moved out the doorway. She abruptly halted; she had almost forgotten something, turning back to Akil she reached into her hip pouch. Withdrawing a small roll of Parchment she tossed it to him. Akil hastily caught it before it hit the floor.

"Tera wanted me to give that to you" Panther said hurriedly she needed to get back to the inn before anyone noticed she had left.

Akil nodded and watched her leave. Leaping upward, they heard her land with a faint thud and then nothing. Opening the note Akil read then turned to the others.

"Tera wants to speak to me again tomorrow at eve meal. Narna, you will accompany me, she's asked for you also"

Narna smiled. "Alright. I'll be ready"

Voices rose in excitement as they discussed what had just occurred. They talked till late then finally turned in for what sleep they could manage.

A shadow moved across the roofline. Faint scratching could be heard as a form leaned over the

peak and lightly dropped to the lower roof. Moving noiselessly to a shuttered window it reached up, opening the shutter outward it froze as it squeaked. Waiting it listened for movement from within, hearing nothing it resumed. The form then pulled itself up and flowed over the windowsill, carefully closing the shutters behind it.

" Are you finished sneaking around?" A flint sparked, lighting a wick. Soft light enveloped the room highlighting a bemused Panther.

" I didn't want to disturb you"

" So sneaking in someone's window won't disturb them?"

" All right, I didn't want anyone else to know I was out"

Tera smirked " That's what I thought" She pulled back the covers " Now it's late come to bed"

Panther started pulling off clothing " You don't want to talk about what happened?"

"Did you give Akil my note?"

"Yes"

" Then later, now come, get in bed."

Panther slid in next to Tera sighing as warm skin melded into hers.

" Now sleep" Soft lips touched hers briefly then with a faint breath the light was extinguished and a soft body cuddled into hers. Panther purred in pleasure as warmth enfolded them. They drifted into sleep.

The clatter of dishes filled the kitchen as the workers prepared for the noon meal to be served in a few hours. Raven's Claw only served morning meals to lodgers not the general public. It cut down on the amount of work needed giving them the time to prepare for the busy day. The day had dawned crisp and clear but already was warming up. A perfect start to Festival. In a short time the streets would be filled with travelers and entertainers of all kinds.

Tera made her way through the busy kitchen. Voices from outside drew her into the courtyard. She found Solaris, her daughter Falises and the others watching Panther and Zeva with her first sparring match. She joined them. Rena with her group lounged in a far corner. They whispered, laughing among themselves as they shot glances toward the activity. Tera beckoned Helia over as a sudden idea bloomed. She whispered in her ear. Helia nodded then left. Panther and Zeva spoke for a brief moment then squared off.

The staffs they both held were made of ash, just over eight feet long. They stood about four feet apart, staffs in their right hands, held between the forefinger and thumb, elbow slightly bent with

the point to the ground and in line with the toe of their right foot. They bent their left knee till they were centered over their instep. The right knee bent and pressed well back, the body ending up perpendicular. They brought their staffs across their bodies seizing them with their left hands. The back of their hands to the front as high as their left shoulders. The back of the hand upward. Panter nodded in satisfaction when Zeva showed that she knew the engage stance. You certainly didn't use it in battle but it was important to know the correct positions of staff fighting. Stepping out and raising her lower hand as high as her chin Panter suddenly struck with the upper end of her staff to the right side of Zeva's head. She heard the gasps the flurry of movement caused from the watching group. Zeva moved her upper hand quickly to the right bringing her staff up and just clear of her shoulder to receive the blow on the upper part of her staff.

"Good, that's it, don't try to think too much, it gets in the way. React to it. Remember, your body still knows what it learned. You just haven't used it for a while." Panter encouraged.

Panter struck at Zeva legs. With a clack her stroke was deflected sending it off at an angle. Zeva returned it in kind, pressing in hard and increasing speed. Her stroke headed for Panter's legs. Panter took the easy way out by leaping up causing the staff to pass beneath her feet. Most people didn't do that; it was tricky to do and the timing was critical. One misstep and a solid blow could cause some serious damage. Panter grinned at the look on Zeva's face as she landed out of harms way. Bouncing on the balls of her feet with excess energy she twirled the staff in her left hand.

" Hey, that's not fair. Most people don't do stuff like that" Zeva protested.

" Always expect the unexpected. That way your never surprised" Panter retorted.

They continued the lesson, halting every so often for Panter to correct some small mistake that had been made. Soon Zeva was able to keep up a steady exchange of blows. Now that things were coming back to her she was gaining in confidence. The few near tags on Panter got her cocky. As a series of moves caused Panter to briefly turn her back, Zeva took the advantage presented to her. The whistle of the moving staff alerted Panter to the danger. Dropping flat with her weight resting on her palms and toes she allowed the staff to pass harmlessly overhead. Pushing off the ground Panter flipped back onto her feet, reaching out she caught the staff on the back swing yanking it out of Zeva's grasp. The sudden anger of her face made Zeva tense. Panter forced herself to calm down. It wasn't Zeva's fault that she had followed what she had said. To the letter, ironically.

" While in combat that would be a good move, please try to remember that I'm on your side" Panter smiled to remove the sting of the words.

" I'm sorry, I got carried away"

" Luckily we have time to work on that, I think now would be a good time to stop, don't you?"

Zeva took back the staff Panter offered her. " Yes, I think your right" She hurried to join her mate on the sidelines. She took a seat beside her to catch her breath. She



hadn't had this much exercise for some time. She had the sense that it wouldn't stay like that for long. She settled back to see what Tera had planned for Panter. She had seen Helia depart after a whispered conference with Tera.

"Anybody else want to spar while I'm warmed up?"

A large snort of laughter rose from the group huddled together in the corner. Tera glanced over an incensed look on her face. The group immediately went silent in response.

"I think you all need to find something more beneficial to do with your time, don't you?" Panter declared.

Tera intervened quickly as Rena red-faced with anger was about to respond. "Why don't you all go out, find something to do. It's a nice day."

Still fuming with anger at the imagined slight, Rena lead her friends back into the inn. She smiled as she pondered on ways to get back at Panter. Things would soon be getting more interesting.

Tera rose joining Panter in the middle of the courtyard. She took the staff out of Panter's hand twirling it a few times to get the balance. She studied Panter with a glimmer in her eye.

Panter moved back a little to give her more room. "Do you want to spar with me too?" In the time that they had known each other she hadn't been able to see Tera fight. The last time they were in a fight together Panter had been in a midst of a large group and Tera had been on the outer fringe.

"With a staff no, that's not my weapon of choice" Tera waved Helia over; exchanging the staff for the scabbards she offered the largest to Panter. "This is" She unsheathed the weapon. The long sword that emerged was finely honed. The etchings on the blade teased the eye, the longer you looked the clearer it became. A hawk frozen in mid dive graced its face. It was a beautiful weapon.

Panter drew her own weapon, its own beauty a thing to behold. She spun the sword one handed to loosen up and regain the feel of its balance.

Resting the blade on one shoulder she look over at Tera "Are you sure amare?"

"Quite sure love, I know you will take care. But I want a challenge, you got me" Tera pointed at Panter, knowing by the look on her face she had been caught thinking of going easy on her.

"I got you"

They circled slowly, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Getting tired of waiting, Tera went on the attack. She lunged forward bringing her blade down aiming for Panter's mid section. With a twist of her wrist Panter hit Tera's sword to the side, reversing her swing she struck at Tera's right arm. Blocking it, Tera back stepped then assumed a waiting stance

watching for Panter's next move. Panter decided to tempt Tera by just watching her and not making an offensive move. She circled Tera causing her to follow to keep her in line of sight. After a moment Tera stepped forward, Panter copied her. As Tera swung Panter struck at her wrists careful to pull it at the last moment tapping her lightly. Time passed as they sparred.

Blades clashed; each moment Tera was sure she had Panter she evaded her, leaving a tap from her sword as a memento. Arm, leg then side all felt the mark. Panter smiled, Tera was really good, most people would have gotten hit more than she had. Tera pushed herself, speeding her movements up. She caught the look of surprise on Panter's face. Tera managed to get past her defenses scoring a fair number of hits in retaliation. Slowing as her energy waned her blade was deflected more and more easily. Panter saw the disgruntled look that passed over Tera's face. She stopped the practice.

"What's wrong?"

"It's the moves you use, I have never seen most of them before, so it's difficult to defend against, even offensive moves are a problem."

"I know but it gives me an edge that most likely will help us. There is not enough time to teach you "

Tera sighed in regret. Panter was right. "But you will teach me?"

Walking over Panter encircled Tera's shoulders with her arm. "Yes, you are very good, most people wouldn't have lasted as long as you did" Panter squeezed her in a brief hug. "Or have tagged me either."

Tera flushed, she didn't want to admit how much Panter's opinion mattered. "Thanks" She needed to change the subject. "I'm hungry, would you join me for a small snack?"

Panter took the change of subject without comment. "Sure, I could use a bit of something" She picked up the sheaths handing Tera hers. She sheathed her sword. "Let's go get something to eat"

Panter passed off the drink she had prepared. The hum of conversation flowed around the room. It was still full from the eve meal. Business remained brisk; the word of mouth about the Raven's Claw was still being passed on to newcomers. Any fights about to be brought to life quickly stalled when it gained her attention. The ones causing it found themselves out in the streets in mere moments. As more people came in, Panter found that a good number of them had injuries of some kind. On the verge of asking one of them how they had been injured she was interrupted when Tera joined her.

"Hey, how are you doing out here?"

"It's been pretty calm, how did the meeting go?" Panter had been disappointed that she wouldn't

be able to be with Tera as she met with Rena and the other warriors from the village to relay the plans they had decided on.

" Fine I think, they're getting a little antsy so I gave them permission to enjoy the festival but to keep their eyes and ears open" Tera looked around the room spotting the multiple injured in little time. " What's with all the bandages?"

" I'm not sure, I was about to ask one of them what happened when you showed up"

Tera laughed " You better let me, you might intimidate them to much"

Panter shook her head as she watch Tera saunter over to a group of people gathered around the latest injuries that had just walked through the door. They glanced up at her greeting with welcoming smiles. She was pulled into the conversation, emerging after long moments immersed in discussion. Panter watched her laugh as she bid them good day, returning to the bar. A sober expression settled over Tera's face when her back was turned to the group. Rejoining Panter she pondered what she had just been told. Tera knew if she told Panter what she had learned that she would want to do something about it. But honesty was the most important thing a couple could have. Drawing a deep breath Tera readied herself.

" So what did they say?" Panter asked fighting impatience at the long moment of quiet that had enveloped Tera. It must be serious for her to not want to tell her. Panter braced herself for the news.

" It seems that a fighting arena has been set up. A pair of gauntlets are being offered as the prize plus fifty drogons of gold. They told me that the man they have to beat is huge, almost as tall as you, thickly muscled. Basically a walking mountain. In the three years they've been coming to festival no one has beaten him."

Panter frowned. It looked like too many people had been hurt to just be an innocent contest, something was wrong. " Why are so many hurt?"

" This is the part that so bad; it seems he likes to hurt anyone who dares to fight him"

" What weapons are used?"

" None, it's hand to hand, to make it more fair they say. A lot of people don't know how to use them"

Tera could see Panter making the decision as she watched. " You want to fight him, don't you?"

Panter was almost surprised Tera picked up on that. But then she had always been able to read her. " I want to stop him yes"

Tera hesitated then just admitted it "Panter, I would rather you didn't get involved"

Panter's brow knit. " Why not, he needs to be stopped. He's hurting people."

" True, but they were willing participants. They knew that it was a risk, but did it anyway"

Scowling Panter had to concede to Tera's point " Your right, but if he had hurt you or our friends like that, I wouldn't hesitate to stop him"

Hugging her close Tera didn't respond. She was conscious of Panter's protective streak. Not that it was in anyway bad, just highly sensitive.

Akil made his way over to a just freed up table. Settling in his chair he signaled for food and drink for two as Narna claimed the chair across from him. They chose not to speak as they waited for their meals. Akil noticed Narna's eyes widen at something just past him. He had a feeling he knew what she had seen.

" What's wrong Narna?"

" Our late night visitor just came in from the back with a dark haired woman."

Akil turned to look. " I see" he watched as Panter stopped at the bar to talk to a man that seemed to be stationed there as he scanned the room for trouble. Tera saw him, smiled, and then headed his way. He turned back to face Narna. This was going to be good.

" May I join you?"

Narna glanced up, not recognizing the form over her she replied rudely.

" Go away, we're expecting important company" she looked the woman up and down " Your not it".

Akil stifled a smile at Tera's raised eyebrow. That was something new. Remembering Panter's habit of doing that made it difficult for him not to laugh aloud.

Narna watched askance as the woman settled in to one of the free chairs. She shot Akil a questioning look. He just shrugged back seemingly unconcerned. As she studied the woman comfortably reclined in the chair something nagged at her. She had seen this woman before but where wouldn't come to her.

" Akil, it's nice to see you again"

Akil beamed back. Happy to have his friend back " It's been too long"

Narna was confused. Akil certainly seemed to know her. The chair being pulled back next to her snagged her attention. The dark woman... Panter was it... was joining them. She slid a drink to the other woman then settled into the chair.

Akil decided to take pity on Narna. " Is it safe to talk here?"

" Yes, Panter has arranged privacy to be guaranteed"

A grunt accompanied the ironic look Panter shot the dark haired woman.  
Now Narna was really confused. What was going on?

" Good" Akil turned to Narna. " Narna, under all this dye and short hair and with a very nice tan if I may say, is Tera."

Narna's jaw dropped. "Tera?" she squeaked. She cleared her throat. Looking closer she saw it really was her. " I'm sorry for the attitude, I was getting a little anxious"

" That wasn't the way to deal with it"

" I know, your right, it won't happen again"

Nothing was said as the food was delivered. Panter had also arranged for food for herself and Tera. Conversation was suspended as they all ate. After the dishes were cleared they all got down to business. Reaching into her pouch Tera withdrew a roll of parchment. Unrolling it revealed a set of detailed drawings of Hawk's Peak and surrounding areas. Red marks dotted the surface. One of the marks was situated over the area where the festival was being held. Well, where the booths were anyway.

"The marks represent areas we want to draw attention from the men working for my cousin. We need to thin them out as much as possible"

Akil looked over the drawing noting the placement of the marked areas. It was very well thought out. They were scattered all throughout the city. The men would be unable to keep clear communication with one another. It would be an easy task to crush any resistance.

" So it would be a total of five different areas they would need to respond to, correct?"  
"Yes, that's right"

Tera pointed at the area describing what she, with Panter's help had planned. " In a staggered sequence our people placed in these positions will start trouble. At first it will only be two, the others concealing themselves about the area. When Doran's people respond, they will sweep in from all sides and take care of them. Simple but effective." She looked up catching their gaze. " Our people will be trying to disable them. I will be having them carrying restraints to use. I want them taken care of but not killed unless there is no other choice" The look on her face made it crystal clear that she meant every word she had just uttered.

Akil nodded, grasping her point but still pleased by the plan. " The Hawk's wing would like to assist you in this"

Tera was concerned. " How would we tell you apart from the others. I know you all but the

others don't. I'm afraid that one of you might get hurt".

Akil tried to keep a serious expression on his face " I don't think that will be a problem"

Everyone looked at him, except Narna who knew what he was about to say. She looked on watching to see what Tera's reaction would be. She had no idea that it had been done.

Tera studied Akil, noting the smile playing across his features.  
" What are you talking about Akil?"

Akil pushed up his sleeve baring his upper left arm. Tera gasped then slowly reached out, tracing the tattoo that was revealed with a finger. It was a hawk frozen in mid-flight its wings wrapping around his bicep.

"When?" her voice broke as tears hovered in her eyes, on the brink of falling.

" We decided to after you were forced to leave, it was a show of solidarity among the accipiter ala. A way of saying no matter who we were forced to serve we are first and always yours."

Tera showed her gratitude to her friends by enclosing them in a brief embrace. " I have no words to adequately say what I feel right now"

Silence hovered for a minute as Tera gathered herself together.  
Turning to face the others she caught the warm look Panter directed toward her. She returned it then regarded the others.

"While that helps on one hand, what about the others that aren't in my guard, how do we tell them apart from the rest?"

The others stayed silent each trying to think of a way to solve their problem. Panter waited for a minute to see if anyone would come up with anything. When nothing was forthcoming she spoke up.

" Why don't you do a version of the same thing?"

A puzzled look turned into one of understanding. Akil was quick to speak up." A lot of people would never want to have a tattoo it's too permanent"

" True, but it could always be temporary"

Akil was bemused. " How?"

" Use henna, it doesn't last long but is very visible to others"

Akil smiled " Great idea, we could use a impression of a hawks head to show allegiance to Regent Tera" Everyone laughed at Tera's expression of resignation knowing that to protest it

wouldn't go anywhere.

Falises panting up to the table intruded into the discussion. " Tera, Panther, you need to go back to the office something's happened." She exclaimed.

Rising to her feet as Falises pulled at her arm, Tera's concern grew. Falises would never act like this unless something really was wrong. " All right, I'm coming!" She followed the young girl into the back, Panther close behind. The others were following at their heels.

Shoving the door open Tera halted abruptly upon seeing the bloody forms sprawled on the couch. Rena glanced up at the sound of the opening door. Blood trailed down her face bisecting the bruise forming on her right cheek. Cuts dotted her arms; she cradled her left one close to her body, any slight movement causing her to softly whimper in pain.

Blood appeared as generously on the other two women. Zeva was in the process of strapping a wrist on one as Solaris cleaned a long cut on the arm of the second.

" What happened to all of you?" Tera moved over to let Panther in.

" We all decided to try to win those gauntlets at the Festival. Rena was the first to go." The dark haired one stated.

" You tried to win the gauntlets?" Tera echoed in disbelief.

" Yeah, Rena was doing real good till he tripped her. He put his foot against her shoulder then twisted her arm. She managed to signal her forfeit of the match but he was going to keep after her." She lifted her chin proudly " So we jumped in to help, it took a bit but we got her out of there. We came straight back here"

Tera glanced over at Panther. No expression appeared on her set face.

After taking in all the activity Panther moved to kneel next to Rena. Stretching out a hand to her she halted as Rena tried to shift away freezing as pain flared. Eyes met, a silent battle surging between them. After a small moment Rena glanced to the side allowing Panther to examine her shoulder.

" It's dislocated" Gentle fingers prodded searching out the angle it had been forced out of joint. " I can fix it but it will hurt like Hades when I do"

" Do it" Rena stated bracing herself against the pain.

Before Rena had a chance to change her mind Panther slid her left arm behind her shoulder, grasping her other arm she jerked it, slightly twisting it at the same time. A cry of pain accompanied the loud pop of the joint sliding back in place. Panther caught Rena as she passed out. She laid her gingerly back down on the couch, rising to her feet Panther fixed a look on the watching Tera " I think that lines been crossed"

Panter stalked out the door, Tera close behind knowing that there was no way to stop her.

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~ Panther's Pride ~  
by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer: Unless you're in my head this story is all mine.

Comment: This story has been running around in my head for the past four years begging to be written. I'm glad I have finally given in to the urge. Thanks for all the people who have sent me emails and kept me writing.

Thanks to Thorie my copy editor she has been more of a support in my writing then she knows.

Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).

## Chapter 9

Two forms tucked into a darkened corner looked on as Panther charged out of the back heading for the front door. They chuckled when Tera raced to keep up. People scattered to let them pass, the door slamming shut in their wake. Anyone bothering to look at the watching pair recognized the menace on their faces. The ones who did hurriedly turned their attention somewhere else not wanting to get involved. What they had seen bode ill for someone else.

"It looks as if our little ruse has worked, now remember I want you to pull the man in charge of the fight to the side. Get him to have his fighter take care of our problem for us" The voice softly ordered. The information given to them had been sketchy but the order was clear. The pair was a problem that needed taken care of. Why not take care of what seemed to be the strongest first; it would further weaken the other to be easily disposed of at a later date.

"What if he doesn't want to do it?" the other voice rejoined. The low growl to it made it clear that they were close to the breaking point of patience.

"Do what you have to. Make it worth their while. Besides I heard that the big brute likes to inflict pain, this would be just a little more fun for him."

A bag clinked onto the table heavy with funds. " Here, this will help things along, our mutual



friends have generously provided it for us" a twisted smirk accompanied the remark.

Picking it up the other form stood, tucking it in a pouch they turned and left following the same route the others had taken. They would need to hurry to catch up.

The remaining figure laughed as they picked up a mug of ale. A quick drink and they would have to return to their duties before questions arose about their absence. Controlling a revolt was such a full time job.

Tera panted as she struggled to keep Panther in sight. She was no slouch when it came to running but this was pushing close to the limit of her stamina. Dodging a group of people standing in the middle of the road she wished she were able to weave through crowds as easily as Panther. She slipped passed moving people as if they were stationary rocks and she was water. Knowing where Panther was going to end up helped of course, but she wanted to get there before anything happened. This was definitely a time her official status would have come in handy. Too bad she was unable to put it in use at the moment.

Panther scanned the sheaf of stained parchment the harried man had pushed toward her, waving away any forthcoming questions. Broken down, it simply read that they were not responsible for any injuries whether it be small or as final as your accidental death. Typical for games like this. Panther took the offered quill and signed off. After giving it back, she turned to see Tera leaning over breathing hard with her hands resting on her knees. Sweat glistened on her face. Panther frowned. She didn't want Tera here but knew that it would be pointless to ask her to go back to the inn. Turning to a nearby vender she purchased a cool fruit drink. Taking it over she silently offered it. Tera pressed it against her forehead for a brief moment before taking a deep drink. A pause for another breath then she finished the drink off, setting the cup down on an available surface.

"Are you alright?" Panther asked concerned

"Yes" Tera paused to draw in a deep breath "I'll be fine" She scowled at Panther. Seeing Panther glance down then to the side, Tera knew she was being unfair. She more than likely would have done the same. But taking off like that had concerned her. "I'm sorry Panther, I just wish you hadn't taken off like that"

Panther drew Tera to her. She felt her relax against her body. "I know, I was reacting, not thinking"

Pressing a kiss against Panther's collarbone Tera smiled when she felt her breathing halt for a moment then raggedly resume. Resting her cheek on her chest she felt a hard surface beneath her shirt but said nothing. "Did you sign up?" Tera heard the answer as a soft rumble.

"Yes, it's already done"

Tera bit her lip. "When are you up?"

" Two people are ahead of me, want to go watch my opponent in action?"

Tera bent her head back to see Panter's face. Aureate eyes drew her in. A finger gently traced the planes of her face. Sunlight faded to dark as a head bent, soft lips caressed hers. Tera's fingers clenched, tangling the ties in the neck of Panter's tunic. She moaned in disappointment as the kiss ended.

" Don't stop yet," Tera pleaded. She slid her hand behind Panter's neck trying to pull in back down to her. She moistened her lips in anticipation. The action drew Panter's eyes, tempting her to give in. She struggled against the raging want to claim Tera as fully hers. This wasn't the place to give into that need. Not yet.

"Amare, I can't, this must wait for a later time. Then I promise I will not stop you.... or myself"

Tera wanted to argue the point but words failed her as their eyes met. Panter's eyes had changed. Lips parted, allowing Tera to glimpse her canines. A reminder that with Panter crossing that line from loves to lovers would come with a whole new array of mysteries. She couldn't wait. But she would.... For now.

"Your right, so how about we check out your competition instead."

Creating a path to the ring was difficult. Even Panter's greater height barely made a difference. Suddenly people peeled off to the side creating space, the cause of which soon came into sight. Two men carried the latest fighter away from the ring. The form failed to move. Glances met, one filling with worry, the other with anger and determination. They cut through the opening before it closed back up, securing them a decent view of the fighter clad in worn leather armor standing in the middle of the arena with folded arms, a smug look on his battered face. He was a large heavily muscled man, which meant part of the tale proved to be true. By the look of the body that had been carried away the other part seemed to prove true also.

" The next competitor may now enter the ring" rang out from the sideline.

A portly man dressed in flowing robes bright with color stepped into the ring urging a slight man in padded leather armor to the center of the arena.

He then waddled over to the towering behemoth motioning for him to lean down. A fast whispered conversation ensued resulting in a wide smile revealing stained teeth, a few which were missing. The fat man returned to the sidelines as the big fighter scanned the crowd stopping then lingering on Panter's form. He stared at her for a moment then turned his attention to the nervous sweating man facing him.

"What was that all about?" Tera pressed closer to Panter as the crowd shoved each other to get a better look at the action.

" I'm not sure, but I did notice that fat one talking to someone when I arrived. I couldn't see the other's face; his back was toward me. Something is wrong but I don't know what it is" Panter didn't want to reveal what she had heard in the fast exchange between the two in the ring. This

was going to be a fight to the death. Whose was unknown.

The crowd shouted in excitement when with a roar accompanied by a fist to the face the fight began. The small man hit the ground hard, dust rising around him from the force of the fall. Pulled up, he screamed grabbing at the fingers entwined in his hair. Thrashing around frantically he tried to regain his footing. A sudden movement and he was airborne. Once again he met the earth forcefully. Unable to move for a brief moment cost him dearly when a kick slammed into his ribs. The force of the kick picked him up, moving him a full foot away from where he started. An audible crunch signaled the collapsing of his ribcage.

The crowd hushed in shock at the viciousness of the act. Blood was spit up, as the man laid facedown gasping for breath. His outstretched hand pounded for attention showing the symbol of forfeit. A simple hand face down called for mercy. A mercy requested that was callously denied when a foot came smashing down onto the back of his neck. A horrible snap filled the air cutting off a cry of pain in mid-scream. His hand twitched once then stilled forever. The other fighter shouted in triumph, clearly heard over the shroud of silence that enclosed the arena. He stood arms upraised over his opponents' body like an animal over a fresh kill.

The short vicious fight left Panter wordless but even more enraged at the worthless waste of life. Killing for pleasure was one of the lowest things someone could do. Anyone that did was something less than human. One more reason she had to stop this farce. Even she made sure there was no other choice before killing someone. Sensing a look directed at her she glanced down. Tera's eyes met hers; a growing silence encompassed them. Words were unnecessary. Worry and comfort passed between them in a circle of quiet communication. Panter sank into warm pools of blue.

" The next fighter make ready, Gronoth awaits you in the ring" was called out.

Panter pulled free of Tera's gaze. For a moment the outside world had ceased to exist. She bent down leaving a light kiss on Tera's lips before moving toward the arena. Stopping at the edge, Panter pulled her top off leaving her clad only in a dark red leather breastplate. It was fashioned to leave her mobility unhampered. It covered her chest then wrapped around to protect her kidneys but left most of her upper back bare. Two thick straps came up then buckled holding it in place. It was only basic protection but good enough for unarmed combat. Panter gave her tunic to a silent Tera.

Two men came out; each grabbed a leg of the dead fighter then dragged him out of the playing field. Handing over her belt knife with her money purse Panter stepped into the ring. Walking to the center she stopped, crossed her arms and waited. Whispers ran throughout the crowd as they wondered whom this stranger might be. Her opponent stamped into the center to face her. Panter shifted into a fighter's ready stance. He was taller than almost all the others, but he was still a tad shorter than her. He seemed to smirk, as he looked her over, flexing his bulky muscles as if to make a point.

" Are you sure you want to do this?" Alcohol fumes made her eyes water as he breathed in her face while asking his inane question.

Panther narrowed her eyes. " More than sure. You might say I can't wait"

Gronoth grinned giving her a good view of his discolored teeth. The look in his eyes warned her right before a sharp left looped toward her face. Panther slid into a crouch allowing the punch to flow harmlessly overhead. She punched forward with both arms, hands palm out impacting his solar plexus hard, driving the air from his lungs. Gronoth automatically bent over from the blow as Panther was rising giving her an opening to slam her right elbow into his jaw driving his head to the side. She moved away giving herself room to react to any move he might make.

Gronoth coughed then spat blood. It covered his bottom lip running down to his chin. He glared at Panther " You made me loose a tooth, I'm going to kill you for that"

Panther snorted " And for no other reason right?"

He looked startled for a moment. " None that matter now" Rushing forward he swung out once again. Panther moved to the left evading his strike. As his momentum caused him to pass her she tripped him. He collided with the ground with a resounding thud. Clouds of dust rose. The people watching laughed at the sight out of reflex. By the way Gronoth's face turned red as he pulled himself up he didn't find it funny. He moved faster then his bulk would seem to allow. He returned the favor by hammering a right fist into her stomach. Panther winced as her body reacted to the punch by leaning over. Gronoth took that opportunity to try to apply a headlock. Panther reacted quickly to the danger by hitting him hard in the groin repeatedly till he let go. She moved out of range as soon as he did. She rubbed her neck to relive the feeling of the chokehold. That had been way too close.

" You bitch, you made your last mistake" The stakes increased as he pulled a dagger from his right boot.

As Gronoth lunged, time seemed to slow, giving Panther plenty of time to grab the wrist holding the knife. Stepping into his body she applied pressure to his elbow joint forcing him to go up on his toes. Flipping him over her shoulder she stripped the knife from his hand as it was automatically released. A sickening pop accompanied the scream of pain as he hit the ground. He laid still for a moment then dragged himself back to his feet. The angle of his right arm made it clear what had happened. Gronoth made sure to retreat as far away from Panther as he could, whimpering every time his arm moved.

Panther got a small measure of satisfaction that she had caused him pain instead of him hurting others. The crowd rumbled angrily at this change of events. Panther wondered what would be done to the people who arranged this event since a weapon had been pulled. A look to the side answered that question. Seeing a small group of Tera's people in an official capacity Akil at it head. Akil made a small motion saying the matter would be taken care of. Panther turned her attention back to the arena.

The fat man hurried into the ring as fast as he could. " We have a winner, we have a winner" he shouted as loud as possible to make sure the crowd heard it.

The crowd started cheering as what he was yelling sank in.

Coming over, he pushed a large leather bag into her hands along with a wrapped parcel. " Here, now go"

Panther accepted the items but snagged his wrist as he tried to turn away.  
" I think we need to talk"

He tried to pull away from her but stopped as the pressure increased on his wrist to painful proportions. " What about?" he whined. Panther concealed her distaste at his cowering.

" A certain arrangement made that was harmful to myself. I want to know who facilitated it"

He paled as he realized she knew all about it. " I don't know who he was, he just gave me a purse of money after I agreed then left. He was just an ordinary person. One you might see but never really pay attention to"

Panther grinned, " I believe you should hand that money over since it was my neck that was being paid for" If she had the purse there was a chance it could lead her to the person who had arranged this.

" But I ... " A longer look past the smile into her eyes stopped him. Wordlessly he dug into one of the many pouches hanging on his belt.  
After he handed the money over Panther released him to retreat over to his hurt fighter. She let him get halfway over before speaking.

"Wait, I have something for you"

He came back toward her hesitantly " What do you want?"

" I thought your fighter might want his knife back, give him a message for me will you?"

The fat man nodded as he wiped sweat off his upper lip. He took the knife gingerly between two fingers.

Panther's face went rigid. " Tell him he tries that again with anyone, I'll make sure he goes to Hades with extreme prejudice. Got that?" She bared her teeth in a vicious grin. " Because the people he fought knowingly took that chance, is the only reason I didn't tear him apart"

He blanched before hastily nodding. Offering a quick bow he then scurried away holding the knife away from him like it was a contagious disease.

She walked over and rejoined Tera. A crushing hug said more than words ever could. Wrapping an arm around Tera's shoulder they made their way through the crowd. It was made easier as they parted to let them past, a few bravely reaching out to pat her shoulders and arms in

congratulations.

"That scared me Panther" Tera whispered.

Panther pulled her closer. " For a moment there, it scared me too."

" Here, take these" She handed the heavy bags of money over. " I want to see these gauntlets everyone was willing to die for"

They both slowed to a crawling walk as Panther unwrapped the bundle. Panther whistled in admiration as the glint of metal appeared. Exposed to their sight were wrist guards made from the finest quality leather available. Buttery tan in color and supple to the touch even with the thickness needed to offer the wearer some protection. They had been padded on the inside with a light layer of wool to help absorb moisture. An oval of metal had been inlayed onto the top of both. They were blank awaiting the whims of the winner if they were so inclined. A glyph of a hawk in flight was etched into the leather where the top rested against the forearm. A broken arrow was grasped in each claw. They were beautiful.

" What does the etching mean?"

Tera briefly traced one with a finger. " It's the mark of the regents champion" Her brow furrowed. " See how the hawk only carries the fletched part of the arrows?"

Looking closer Panther did. " Yes"

" I don't know how or why but this is my personal mark, every one in my family has a variation"

" So I'm your champion?" Panther smiled at this quirk of fate.

"In more ways then one. But this concerns me. You wearing these marks lets others know who you stand with and against."

" Let them, it saves me from needing to say it aloud."

They stopped walking, their eyes meeting for a quiet moment. The love for each other shined brightly within. Tera almost cried at what she saw. She would never question Panter's commitment to her again

" Here let me" Tera picked up one, wordlessly requesting Panther to extend one of her arms.

Panther held an arm out. Tera slid the guard on using the lacing on the back to snug them up till Panther nodded her approval at the fit. She repeated the same actions with the second. Tera rested her hand on the wrist guard after adjusting it.

" To think people were willing to get badly hurt for these and a sack of money." She shook her head in bewilderment. " Have things gotten this bad since I've been gone?"

Panther rested her hand on Tera's. " We'll make it better"

" Will we?"

" I promise you, we will"

Continuing toward Raven's Claw. Panther kept eye out for trouble. It seemed that anyone thinking about doing anything caught a glimpse of the gauntlets and reconsidered. They were making a statement already.

Upon entering the inn, conversing patrons stopped in mid sentence at their appearance. Silence draped itself over the room. It ended as someone finally spoke.

" About damn time that lummoX got what was coming to him. You hurt one of us, you hurt family. We won't tolerate that laying down."

Shouts of agreement echoed around the room. It took that announcement to realize that they all knew whom Tera really was. It said in plain words that they were HER people. The support shocked her. Tera's raked the room with a look. All the people present had kept coming back since she had first arrived at Raven's Claw. All she could do was accept that they were going to help whether she wanted it or not. With a nod Tera accepted their terms.

Together they retreated to the back, leaving an air of celebration behind them.

The opening of the office door made the group within glance up. Zeva, Solaris and the rest were ranged about the desk discussing what had happened. Rena and her buddies looked as if decorated with the abundance of bandages that had been applied. Rena arm had been strapped to her chest to allow her abused shoulder a chance to heal.

" I was wondering if you both would be coming back anytime soon, after leaving in such a rush," Zeva stated. " So what have you been doing?"

" Panther decided to make her own bid for the gauntlets" Tera answered slyly. She wanted them to figure it out themselves. After all Panther was standing right next to her in said gauntlets. Lets see if they were observant enough to catch it.

" So did she change her mind when she saw who she had to fight" Solaris queried.

" No"

"But there's not a mark on her surely she didn't fight"

" Not only did I fight him but I won" Panther had to fight down a want to brag a little. It would cheapen the accomplishment. She raised her arms to show the gauntlets.

Surprise then delight appeared on their friends' faces. They all tried talking at once. All the questions thrown toward her blurred into a hum of inconsistent noise that became undecipherable.

" Quiet please, one at a time" she roared.

Questions cut off in mid word. Breathing was the only audible sound until Rena spoke.

" Why did you fight him, for the prize?"

Panther turned to face her squarely. Looking her straight in the eye she replied. " No, I did it because he was hurting my friends, my family"

After a brief pause Rena smiled at her warmly. " That's what I thought"  
Something in what had happened made Rena alter her personal opinion about Panther. If she would give her another chance maybe they could become friends. Stranger things had already happened she thought wryly.

The door opened again startling them. Swiftly as possible they swung around to see who was framed in the doorway.

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## ~ Panther's Pride ~

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer: Unless you're in my head this story is all mine.

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Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).

### Chapter 10

Framed in the door stood Akil with Narna. The quickness of Panther's movements, along with the



others made them jump back in pure reflex.

It took a long moment before everyone's pulse rates got back to normal from the sudden start. No one noticed that Panter wasn't in the same position anymore.

Tera slumped down onto a chair with her hand on her chest. " Please don't ever do that again, you almost scared us to death" The others agreed in a varying chorus of protests.

Akil laughed, " Sorry, we didn't mean to do that but it does prove out a point. You couldn't have done anything to us with the time you had when we came in. If anyone had bad intentions, you wouldn't have had a chance. Admit it, we had the jump on you." He was happy to have this chance to bring up a factor that had been worrisome to him for some time.

"Are you absolutely sure about that?" was growled softly right behind him. One hand of razor sharp claws appeared in his line of sight while the other gently tapped the back of his neck making an unspoken point. Akil held extremely still. He was shocked at the speed and absolute soundless approach she had made. It was clear anyone who tried to do any surprise move like the one they had inadvertently done would not have lived more then a single step over the threshold. That raised his already high opinion of her.

"Point taken," he muttered just loud enough to be heard by the others. He heaved a sigh of relief as the hand pulled back out of sight. Barely a second pasted till Panter walked around him joining Tera by her chair, perching comfortably on the arm.

He glanced behind him to see what had happened to Narna and found her plastered up against the wall. " Why didn't you help me out?"

Narna started to speak then coughed to clear her dry throat. " You didn't see the set of teeth she flashed at me, I wasn't about to give her a reason to use them." She chuckled. " Damn, I'm glad she's on our side. I 'd hate to come up against something like that in a fight."

After a shared laugh they all settled in to talk. Every available surface was put to use. Soon a group of ten was as comfortable as possible.

"So what happened to... Gronoth I think it was?" Tera inquired. Every eye turned to Akil awaiting his response full of curiosity.

" He and his sponsor were taken into custody for violation of running an event without proper papers. It seems that they were using paperwork from the last time here. I'm not sure why that wasn't caught before. More then likely a few silver eagles exchanged hands. Even though people signed knowing full well the risk of entering the contest, too many deaths occurred to be fully accidental."

" Anyone could have told you that!" Rena spat. Her shoulder throbbed, constantly reminding her of the contest she had barely got out of alive if not for her friends.

Akil nodded " I know, unfortunately at that time not enough had happened to allow us to act

upon."

"What!" Tera pounded her fist on the table in front of her in frustration. "Nothing was done when it was first complained about?"

"No, sadly we no longer have that option since your cousin took control"

Narna lifted her hands in helplessness. " There's not much we can do and not get caught, we still need to be able to keep our positions to help when you take back regency. Regrettably some things happen that we are unable to prevent"

"I understand, but it's not right others had to die before any action was taken" Tera stated. The state things had gotten to frustrated her to the point of wanting to murder her cousin with her own bare hands.

" Hopefully, we can change that" Panter wanted to try to calm everyone down a little before things got out of hand. She turned her attention back to Akil." So what's going to happen to them?"

Akil watched Zeva get up, heading for the door. He would wait till she left before responding.

" I'll be right back, I think we need some refreshments, this could take a while" A murmur of appreciation followed her out the door. Akil found himself the center of attention again.

" As I've said, because people went into this knowingly makes it that much more difficult to do anything about it. But after his last fight.." He paused shooting Panter a glance, receiving a smile full of teeth back.

" They made the wise decision that they need to leave. We made a few veiled suggestions that it would be a good idea that any money they had accumulated would be better off going to the families of the people he had killed. As you can imagine there wasn't any protests raised against it"

" I want this added to the money to be passed out" Panter tossed the prize money she had received onto the low table that rested in front of Akil.

"What's this?"

"The prize money from the fight. Those family's need it more the I ever would." She pulled the other bag from her belt. " Here this too"

She pulled the lacing loose, upending the bag. Loose silver mixed with gold and a few copper pieces spilled out covering the other bag and pooling on the sides. " I'm keeping the bag. I have another use for it."

"Where's the other money from?" Rena asked curious about why the bag was kept but unwilling to voice her question aloud. She didn't think they're newly found comrades could bear that yet.

" From someone who wanted Panter dead" Tera answered tersely. Thinking about what had

happened made her enraged. " Gronoth was paid off to arrange a" accident" sometime during their fight".

"If we had known of that, we would not have been so willing to allow them to leave." Akil turned to Panter. "Do you want them arrested for the attempt?"

"No, I want them gone. Besides I left him with something to remember me by" That comment left anyone who hadn't been present bemused. Questioning looks were directed toward them.

Narna chuckled " You mean his dislocated elbow, that was some move you did." She gestured expansively. " You moved so fast it was over before anyone truly realized what had happened."

Rena and her friends gaped in shock. Grumbles of disappointment rose from having missed all the action. From what they had all seen her do before, they knew it had to have been an impressive sight. They didn't yet realize the factor they had been in the culmination of the fight.

Akil spoke up. " Not only that, you also separated his shoulder at the same time, at a very bad angle. They were given permission to stop briefly at a healer on the way to the town guard. I have it on good authority that even if it does heal correctly there's no way he will be able to regain much mobility. So he won't be hurting any more people like that again"

Panter frowned. " I wasn't meaning to do so much damage, but when he pulled that knife I knew it had to end quickly."

"He pulled a knife?" The opening of the door stopped Rena in mid word. Zeva edged in holding a full platter in her arms. Panter hopped up, relieving Zeva of the load. Tera pushed the money to the side making room for the tray. They all helped themselves to drinks and sandwiches.

" Thanks Zeva, this was a good idea, I'm famished" Tera bit into her meal hungrily.

"No problem. I figured when we got to talking it might be a good idea to have a little food. Who knows when we might finish."

The conversation lasted late into the evening. Concerns about what would happen now that it was known Tera was here and the attempts at someone trying to stop her raged. Almost everyone wanted her to leave before something happened. The point of letting them take back her regency because it was safer was brought up too many times to count. That was finally dropped as an option when Panter stood to let them know the only way Tera was leaving was by force and they had to go through her first. The subject was quickly changed. Plans about the coming revolt took its place in short time. They adjourned the meeting after the inn served its final meals then closed for the night. They all headed off their separate ways agreeing to meet the next day to implement the remaining plans. Time was growing short.

Tera followed Panter into the room bumping into her when she suddenly stopped short her hand resting on the door. She watched warily as Panter slowly opened it and scanned the room feeling

the tension that ran through her body. She breathed a sigh of relief when Panter's body relaxed.

" What is it?"

" Someone was in our room, it seems they left us a little something" Panter pointed to the lone table in the room. Residing on its surface was a bowl of fruit, next to that rested a platter of cheese and bread along with two plates. A clay jug with two goblets rounded out the assembly.

" Oh" Slipping around Panter, Tera went to the table plucking a note out that was tucked in-between two bunches of grapes. A smile emerged as she read it. " This is from the kitchen staff"

Panter quirked an eyebrow, bemused. " Is this an normal thing?" she asking closing the door.

" Yes, it has happened before when I stayed here. Remember most of the people here have known me for a long time. Would you like something?"

Tera asking plucking a grape and popping it into her mouth. She hummed in enjoyment as it burst flooding her mouth with flavor. " Their really sweet"

" Not right now, I need to get out of this armor before anything else. Maybe later"

" How did you know someone had been in the room?"

Panter smirked. " I smelled the hot wax from the candles"

" Great nose, among other things" Tera flirted back blatantly.

Panthers raised an eyebrow. The look in her eyes changed minutely. Maybe now would be the time their relationship changed.

Tera leaned back on the table watching Panter start to undress. First the greaves were removed then set gently aside. Next off was her shirt. The ache that had been gnawing at her belly grew as Panter's ebony skin was exposed to her loving eyes. Pushing off the table, Tera stepped up to her just as her breastplate was removed. Warm fingers met hotter skin as Tera took her time running them over the contours and valleys of her beautiful back. She trailed her fingers around Panter's ribs, tracing the ripple of muscle to the ridges of her flat abdomen. Pressing a soft kiss in-between her shoulder blades she smiled to herself at the gasp it caused.

" You know things will change if this continues don't you?" Panter rasped.

" I know"

Panter turned in Tera's arms. They ended up holding each other. Tera took the opportunity to press a kiss against the top of Panter's breast. A gentle finger touched her under the chin urging her to look up. " I'm not sure you do amare"

Reaching up Tera grasped Panter's hand. Lifting it to her mouth she kissed it then held it to her

chest. " Then tell me"

" With my nature" Panther smiled crookedly " if we do this it's permanent. We will be mates in the strongest sense. There will be no going back. I would more then likely tend to get overprotective at times. That would be more instinct then true thought since I know you're more then capable of taking care of yourself"

Tera tightened her grip on Panter's hand. " That's doesn't sound so bad. I love you Panther. I want to be with you in all ways possible"

Panther's smile faded somewhat. " I love you too Tera. But what worries me is what might happen that I don't know about. With such a risk I've... She looked away a moment then met Tera's questioning look. " Never been with anyone"

Tera refrained from asking anything. The look on her face said what she thought. The gift being given stunned her but touched something deep in her at the same time. Pulling back out of Panther's arms she ended the discussion for good by pulling her own shirt off. Her alert ears picked up Panther's sound of surprise then the deep rumble that emanated from her throat. Eager hands joined her in helping her disrobe.

Hot kisses rained across Tera's skin as she was pressed back onto the bed. Heated skin left hers momentarily as Panther stripped off the rest of her own clothes, rejoining Tera quickly. Soft lips met hers as hands ran over her skin fingertips lightly pressing as if memorizing the feel of her body.

Hands tightened briefly on her hips. Sharp teeth gently caught her lower lip before traveling down over her neck. Tera caught her breath when an eager tongue and lips covered her nipple. Tera pressed Panther's head closer to her breast wordlessly encouraging her on. Streamers of warmth coursed through her veins, enclosing her body in a blanket of sultry want. A halt in the pleasure prompted her to open eyes. Glancing down, Tera met Panther's eyes as she moved up her body. Golden eyes burned full of heat, changing as their gazes locked.

" Are you sure, last chance?"

" Yes" Tera reclaimed Panther's mouth roughly. Hands gripped her firmly. A part of her mind registered the prick of claws gently biting into her skin. The small pain melded into the pleasure she was feeling and was deftly ignored. A quick motion and her front was pressed into the mattress. A nip at the base of her neck startled her for a moment. A tongue laved the mark a second later soothing the spot. Panther's breath flowed past her ear a soft constant growl interlaced within it. Tera grasped the bedding, twisting it in her hands as passionate kisses interspersed with gentle bites flowed down her spine. The pleasure seemed to suddenly double in volume.

" Turn over" It took a second to interpret the request; Panther's voice had gotten so thick with desire it was difficult to understand at first. Tera quickly complied.

Wet heat touched her thigh as Panther moved against it. Tera raised her leg to help. Groans of

pleasure leaked out between Panter's tightened lips. The muscles in her arms stood in vivid relief as they held her weight above Tera. Sounds of similar pleasure erupted from Tera's lips as long fingers contacted her loins. Whisper light touches teased her till she gasped out protests. Breathing halted as Panter's finger slipped into her. One became two as her request. They both moved in flawless rhythm as they responded to their bodies' insistent commands. It was as if they had always been together. The burn became hotter and hotter till with a roar with both body and voices pleasure overwhelmed them. So much that both felt darkness overcome them as they lost their senses for a short time.

Panther skin prickled in awareness of motion from a nearby body as she rose from the depths of the sleep she had succumbed to. Raising heavy lids she spotted Tera busy over beside the table. Remembered passion flared briefly as she watched the sway of the bare body on view before her.

Tera jumped as Panther spoke " Amare, what are you doing?"

Tera turned to look at her a piece of cheese grasped in one hand. She chewed the bite in her mouth. She swallowed as she took in the picture of Panther reclined against the pillows the tops of her breasts just visible over the sheet. It gave her a few pleasant ideas. A glint in Panther's eye along with a smile alerted her that nothing had been said for a space of time. For a second there she thought she had heard Panther make a similar comment but her lips hadn't moved. Must have been wishful thinking.

" Got a little hungry, want some?" She gathered up two mugs and the plate she had prepared bringing them to the bed. Handing them to Panther she reclaimed her space. Pressing a kiss to the corner of Panther's mouth in thanks for the mug handed back to her she nibbled on the bread and cheeses while she watched Panther sniff the goblet in hand then take a drink.

" That's cute"

Panther looked up. " What's cute?"

"The way you do that, you know, smell the goblet"

Panther shook her head as she snagged a piece of cheese for herself. "Thanks, I think" she ducked the playful swat Tera launched at her head.

" Hey!"

" Be good" Tera shook her finger at her. Smiling when Panther bared her teeth and snapped at it. She took a deep drink of her ale. How lucky was it that the kitchen staff had remembered Panther and her own fondness of it.

Halfway into the snack they found themselves almost lethargic with tiredness. Panther's instinct kicked into high gear too late to prevent the additive she realized had been added to their drinks from taking effect.

Tera collapse onto the bed alarmed her but she found herself unable to react, no amount of effort

produced enough movement to be helpful.

The drugs effect on her system wasn't sufficient to knock her totally out. It did make her aware of the flurry of activity that sprang up when blurred forms entered their room via the window. She was paralyzed both by the drug and in horror as she grasped the intentions of the forms. Reinforced by the fact that she felt Tera's limp form being pulled from the bed. Rage swept over her at the sight of the fondling along with crass remarks about Tera.

The anger neutralized the drug sufficiently for her to lunge, grabbing hold of the last man making his way back over the sill. He screamed in pain as claws dug in dragging him back into the room. He knew he was on his own as the sounds the men helping him made as they took off with their burden. The cry of pain turned into a howl of fear as he met the inhuman eyes of his attacker. The sounds of rending flesh overtook his hearing. Feeling blood running down his torso, he grabbed his knife fighting back the best he could. Struggling to block the increasing agony of the wounds that had been inflicted he slashed out wildly scoring a hit on the attacking form. It made little difference. Pounding at the room's door trickled into his awareness'. Then suddenly the room was filled with people and the woman dragged away from him. She struggled against the restraining arms almost breaking free till more people grabbed hold of her. He slumped whimpering in the corner below the window as they turned their questions to the woman.

"Panter... calm down. Tell us what happened. Where's Tera?" Helia asked.

The roar of pain accompanied the hiss of rage when Panter stared at the bloody form by the window answered them.

"They took her...they took what was mine!!!" Panter's base instinct had taken over. She tried to renew her assault against the one responsible.

It took all their combined strength to hold Panter back. Two grabbed him dragging him off toward the office to get him temporarily out of her sight as the rest became aware of Panter's state of undress. That clued them into what had transpired earlier with Tera. They realized that any plans made had literally gone out the window.

"We'll get her back" Alesia grabbed Panter's face in both hands forcing her to look at her. "I swear we will"

Panter's body shuddered in response. She grasped for control over her own body's instincts pushing it back so she could think clearly. For a long second she wondered if she could. As the others felt her relax, the grip on her slowly loosened but they remained ready just in case. Eurayle wordlessly handed over Panter's clothing. They all turned away momentarily to give her a bit of privacy. Not that anyone hadn't all seen what there was to see.

"I'm ok for now. We need to talk to the man I grabbed." A sudden fear hit her. "I didn't kill him did I?" Panter looked to Alesia for an answer.

She shook her head. "He was still breathing when he was dragged downstairs" Alesia headed for

the open door " Lets go see, they took him to the office" She was almost knocked over as Panther rushed passed her.

Alesia and the others shared a look then took off at a run. Just in case.

Reaching the office they saw Akil standing in the front of prisoner holding up a hand toward Panther. Any time she moved to reach the man Akil moved to block her progress.

" Just wait, let me try to get him to talk"

Panther snarled menacingly " We don't have the time. Who knows what's happening to Tera"

" Let me try"

Panther growled but relented for the moment. If he didn't get answers she would. She felt a hand on her shoulder. Panther didn't need to turn to know it was Alesia. She had become family to her as the others had. But she was a little closer to her more like a sister. Panther covered the hand gripping it firmly in thanks. She watched Akil bend to speak to the man. A headshake was all he received to his questions. He spoke to him again but was ignored.

Akil stepped over to Panther. " He won't talk" He waved a hand in the mans direction, smiling grimly " All yours" The look that came over Panthers face bode ill for the unwilling man.

Panther moved fast before anyone had a chance of reconsidering. Not that they would have really stopped her if she didn't want them to. Well maybe if they had enough people like upstairs. Stopping in front of the man she waited till he looked up. She watched as he squared his shoulders trying to main an air of unconcern and bravado. He flinched back in reflex as she sank down into a quick crouch bringing her face into his line of sight.

" You will answer my questions" Panther stated threateningly. " Or else"

" Or else what" he sneered. He hadn't yet realized his attacker and this *woman* were one and the same.

" I finish what I started" Panther was finished with these games. Her mate was in danger and they had a fair idea where she was but needed this piece of filth to confirm it. To make her point crystal clear she fully half shifted.

Screams of terror tore the throat of the man as he came face to face with the animal that had mauled him upstairs. It was something out of a nightmare. It was made increasing worse when he heard the thing speak.

" WHERE IS SHE, I WON'T ASK A SECOND TIME!!"

Seeing the man was whimpering in genuine fear Panther shifted back.

She heard her friends halt their advance towards her, stepping back to see what would transpire next.



"Tell me and you will be detained but no further harm will be bestowed. Do not and I will find someone else to ask after I leave your corpse to cool in the nearest available cesspool."

In her land only the lowest scum were not returned to their families for burial. It prevented you from a final rest, to roam forever as unwanted. No one wanted that.

The man babbled incoherently till Panter grabbed his face making him meet her eyes. " Now say it again slowly," she demanded.

" She was taken to the regent. Something was said about quality time with family. I'm not sure what that meant but by the tone, nothing good."

"Where is she being held in the hall" Akil stepped forward as he asked impatient with so little information. Commotion behind him diverted his attention. Narna had responded to his summons after he had found that Tera had been taken. It had been pure luck that he had not headed back to his barracks yet. He had been sharing a last drink with Zeva and Solaris in the office just below Panter and Tera's room.

" In the lower cell I think, there had been a lot of activity in that area recently. That's all I know, I swear. I was just suppose to deliver her to him."

" Who else has been helping you? I know you didn't drug our drinks yourself" Panter hadn't smelled his scent before now. So someone lent a hand in this.

The man hesitated but spoke up as he saw the look she leveled at him.

"It was someone from the kitchen"

"Who?"

"Lesteis I think was the name"

Panter shot a look at Zeva and Solaris who had been quietly watching.  
Zeva mouth thinned " The bread boy, he's been with us for about 2 moons"

Akil beckoned Narna over. They whispered hastily, Narna nodding then slipping back out the door. They no longer had any more time to plan. It was time to finally act.

Panter sprang up. Energy was surging through her body. She longed to cut the tether on herself. " I am done waiting. I'm going after Tera" The expression on her face dared anyone to protest. " Alesia I want you and the rest of the women with me." She answered the question before Zeva could open her mouth to ask " Yes, Zeva you too" She hesitated as her gaze rested on Rena. " I won't ask you to come with us injured but I will not stop you either. It's your call."

Rena flexed the hand on her hurt arm. " I might not be able to use this arm but I can still use a sword." One of the other women stepped forward "I'll keep an eye out for her"

Panter met Rena's eyes. For a period nothing was said. " All right"  
Reaching out Panter accepted her sword from Eurayles outstretched hand.

Akil turned to Panter" Go, we'll Take care of everything else"

" Let's go" Panter ran out the door. The others could worry about keeping up.

[Continued...](#)

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## ~ Panther's Pride ~

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer: Unless you're in my head this story is all mine.

Comment: This story has been running around in my head for the past four years begging to be written. I'm glad I have finally given in to the urge. Thanks for all the people who have sent me emails and kept me writing.

Thanks to Thorie my copy editor she has been more of a support in my writing then she knows.

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### Chapter 11

Alesia panted as she tried to keep up with Panter. Damn she was fleet footed. She could hear the others struggling to even keep *them* in sight.

They finally got a small rest when Panter ground to a halt just outside the wall surrounding the entrance to the manor, really more like a palace that was attached to the opposite end of the regents quarters. It housed the current regents extended family (none of which were in residence), the offices that helped enforce the laws and keep the city thriving. Unaware to most cells had been built by their most current ruler below their very feet. It was there they were sure to find Tera.

They huddled together as Panter scoped out the area. They wouldn't be able to breeze through the breach spanning the outer and inner walls before reaching their goal. It seemed that they were expecting company as the standing watch had been doubled. More frequent passes of the roaming guards were also present. Many had hounds. It was going to be a hard won task to get past them but little choice was given.

Panther handed Alesia her broadsword. It would be easier, even quicker to use her abilities instead. " Here, strap this to your back. I want to be able to use both hands".

Alesia knew a reply wasn't expected so she simply strapped the sword on. Besides it would give her a little needed protection.

Quickly but carefully they moved down the wall to where a junction in the supporting barrier appeared. Panther went into a deep crouch. Using the spring provided by her powerful thigh muscles she launched herself into the air to lightly land on its wide lip. She used the surrounding darkness to good effect. Luckily for them the moon was shrouded in dense clouds tonight. Giving them a period of time for freer movements. A hand gesture had someone digging into one of the packs of supplies hurriedly thrown together. Soon a rope was tossed up. Panther pulled everyone up by hand one by one then lowered them to the other side to wait. It was just one more thing that made them aware she was something other than human. She was someone they would all willingly follow wherever she led. They just had yet to let her in on that fact.

A snap of a twig stilled them all. Panther was suddenly there, concentrating on a patch of blackness just out of their range of sight. A blur of motion signaled her departure. Silence loomed. Just as they were about to head in the same direction, Panther reappeared. With some company. Two of the watchdogs tagged after her. By their behavior it was clear they had a new alpha in the pack. Panther shrugged at the looks she received.

" Why turn down good help?" she muttered back. She jerked her head to the right. " I made a little hole in the guard pattern, lets take advantage while it's still there"

Gripping their weapons a little firmer they followed close behind. Keeping to the dark shadowed corners they made their way to the inner wall of the compound. After a few near misses with the remaining guard Panther decided to take care of the problem. She quickly backtracked and started with the first one she came across. Binding him tightly, she stowed him in a convenient corner to sleep off the clout to the head he had received. In short time three more joined him. It meant less people to worry about later.

Alesia gave Panther a long-suffering look when she reappeared.

" What?" Panther protested sharply. They needed to keep moving.

" Can we help or not?"

" That's why you're here isn't it?"

" That's what we thought. So stop leaving us behind. WE can't protect your back if it's not with us!"

Panther looked suddenly chagrined. She had been leaving them with out a thought. "Sorry. I'll try not to do that again, but we need to keep moving"

They didn't waste anymore time trying to find a place to cross over the inner wall in secrecy. This time they went straight for the gate. A shout signaled that they had been sighted. In response five other guards plus two other hounds joined him at the gate. In moments they clashed.

The hounds that were with Panter herded the other dogs off to the side keeping them in check with threatening barks and growls.

Panter grabbed the descending sword arm of a guard. Kneeing him hard in the gut she stripped the sword from his hand. She took him out with his own hilt to the head. An approaching form made her spin to the right to stop a blade heading for her neck. She growled in frustration. Baring her teeth at the swordsman, she dropped finesse and went for effect. He flinched at the sight but continued to engage her. The blade in her hand sparked at the impact from his weapon. He was doing his best to take her out. She grinned at the surge of power that coursed in her veins at the challenge.

With a twist of her wrist she locked the hilt of her borrowed sword with his, preventing him from disengaging. The sudden halt threw him off stride giving Panter a chance to step in to deliver a stunning blow to his chin from her left fist. The force of the hit knocked him out, his limp body hitting the ground with a thud. The stillness permeating the air made her look up. The others had handily taken care of their own assailants. They were simply waiting for her to finish. A snap of her fingers called her dogs over. They bounded over eagerly. The other dogs edged closer on their bellies timidly wagging their tails.

Panter shook her head. *I can't believe this. A cat an alpha over a pack of dogs.* A quick pat of the head had them on their paws eagerly nosing her hands. Snorting sounds had her darting a look over to the watching group. Hands were clamped over their mouths trying to hold back the sounds of laughter. Reverting back to childhood for a second Panter stuck out her tongue then turned toward the manor.

Reminded of their purpose a serious mood dropped down on them like a stone. They had to get Tera. As they made their way closer to the building, Panter's sensitive ears caught sound. She concentrated, bringing it to the forefront of her attention. A scrape followed close on the heels of a creak then the faint rush of an indrawn breath. Her senses flared in alarm. Panter threw up a hand halting the group in mid stride.

"What is it?" Rena whispered. She hushed at the rapid hand motion she got in answer.

A twang signaled a release. Tightening her focus even more she followed the ripples of motion the projectile made as it passed through the air. The pattern of its flight narrowed to the point of ending at just where Rena stood. In a flash of movement Panter launched herself at Rena. The abrupt collision sent Rena into the ground hard, jarring her shoulder painfully.

"Uh.... what the Hades was that...for?" Rena gasped.

The stunned question was answered as the tree just beyond her sprouted two feathered projectiles. That made it clear that the threat was now doubled. There were two archers, not just the one she had heard draw his bow. Someone had been ready and waiting. It had been just a fluke that they had both aimed for the same target. She wasn't about to give them another chance.

Knowing time was of the essence Panther sprang to her feet. In the few seconds the attack had taken she had been able to narrow down its source. It was the low roof catty-cornered to the door they had been originally headed for. She took off toward it. Thinking quickly she grabbed Alesia in mid stride. Alesia yelped in surprise as she was abruptly lifted off her feet.

"Go with it, I need your help" was growled softly in her ear.

Alesia just held on as she was effortlessly carried by Panther at a dead run. The closer they came to the roof the more speed that was called into play giving the archers a target they would be unable to nail down. She started noticing subtle differences at first in Panther's form then they started to speed up. The length of her stride got a bit longer as her legs lengthened. Her skin turned darker as fine fur started to appear. By the time they had reached their destination she had fully half shifted. It was strange at first to be so close to Panther when she was like this, but the warmth and intelligence that was in the look that met her stare reminded her of the person she had grown so close to. Alesia smiled.

"Let's get 'em Panther"

Crouching down Panther used the massive muscles in her legs to propel her and Alesia to the top of the roof. Their sudden appearance caused chaos.

Two swipes shattered the bows each man had just readied. The arrows flew a short way then fell, the amount of pull not enough to propel them more than a few feet. Alesia body slammed into one as Panther took the easiest way to resolve the conflict. A short vicious arc tore out his throat. Blood gushed in a scarlet spray as his lifeless body collapsed onto the rooftop. Alesia solved her own crisis in nearly the same manner. A fast thrust of a dagger between her opponents' ribs ended her fight. Another body slid limply to the tiled surface. Blood slowly pooled around them as their adversaries turned departing the same way they had arrived.

In the time it took Panther and Alesia to reach the ground they had already heard the sounds of battle. Just as the rest of the group had reached the building, attackers had overwhelmed them. Panther's blood burned. While they had been lenient with the regular guard they had not with the hired mercenaries like the ones that had been on the roof. How convenient some had gathered together, it would be much easier to take care of them this way. With a roar, that Alesia to some surprise echoed fairly well, they attacked spreading death around them in a wide swath.

Using her speed Panther evaded every sword cut coming toward her. Knocking a sword to the side she took a small moment to snap the wielder's neck before moving on. She didn't kill every one she faced. Most she disabled by breaking legs or arms. She wanted to make sure they were out of commission yet still around for whatever punishment Tera gave out. In her peripheral vision Panther saw a merc behind Rena with his sword upraised. Rena was doing an able job but her injury had left her vulnerable. Before Panther could react two of her hounds solved the dilemma.

He screamed as they attacked dragging him to the ground. The scream gurgled to silence. The hounds left his body. One to find another victim, the other at Panter's signal stayed behind to protect Rena's back.

In short time the fighting stopped. It had turned out just short of being a massacre. Most of their enemies were dead except for the ones Panter had disabled. It seemed that no one else had pulled any punches. One of their own had been badly injured. One of Rena's friends had taken a sword in the gut. Panter sent her back with two others to get her to a healer's attention as quickly as possible. They shouldn't run into any problems following the same path back they had taken when coming in. With the exception of the outer wall, of course. That now left Panter with their core group of five.

She was wondering if it would be enough when voices made everyone turn to look behind them. Panter's mouth quirked into a small grin at the sight of the small cluster of people heading for their position. She had half been expecting them to arrive earlier than now.

Akil ground to a halt upon seeing Panter's amused look. At least he thought it was, it was hard to tell when she was half shifted. As he watched Panter resumed her human form. Yes, no doubt now he was being laughed at.

"What!" he protested. Looking to the side showed Narna just as amused.

Panter shook her head "Nothing. Nice to see you, now let's go" her tone left no room for argument. It was clear who was in charge of this rescue no matter anyone else's position of authority.

They had no other encounters as they approached it from the rear.

The stillness worried them more than seeing all the guards. Somehow Alesia and Helia reached the open door before Panter could. With one covering each direction they slipped inside. Everyone sucked in a deep breath holding it. The expected sounds of battle didn't appear. Helia stuck her head back outside.

"No ones around. This part of the hall is clear"

They all sighed in relief. But worried frowns tugged at their faces. It was getting a little too easy. Even the most inexperienced persons instincts would have been jumping up and down while waving a red flag. This was definitely leading to one big trap. But they had no choice but to walk right into it. Panter left the dogs on guard outside the door. They would insure that no further threat would come from this direction.

The first sensations Tera noticed were a pounding head, dry mouth and an acute sense of nausea. The second was her movements being hampered. She seemed to be tied to something but she wasn't sure what. A sudden rush of emotion hammered into her head. Rage, Fear and a kind of animalistic joy had her head spinning. She struggled to keep her own senses separate enough to concentrate. *Please stop I can't think* she screamed silently. The rush of sensations cut off

abruptly leaving her feeling limp and wrung out. Approaching footsteps had her stilling her movements, waiting to see what might happen.

"Wakey wakey" A voice cajoled. The footsteps halted in front of her.

"I know you're awake bitch!" a sudden cuff to the side of her head had her eyes shooting open in shock. Unfortunately to the form in front of her it also jolted her nausea, causing her to suddenly retch. On him. Her cousin. Doran. If she hadn't felt so sick at that second she might have laughed at the expression of shocked disgust on his face.

Silence loomed when she had finally calmed her stomach. Pain pulsed along her jaw from the hit. Doran raised a hand to hit her again then thought better of it. He snapped his fingers. A grimy man stepped into the room.

"Watch her. I'll return momentarily." Doran was out of the room briefly. He returned garbed in a set of clothes more garish than the set he had changed out of. She had to admit silently that they made him seem more piggish than he actually was.

"How are our friends doing?" Venom laced his words.

The man wiped his brow. "Well..." he trailed off. A glare from cold eyes spurred him on. "We've been unable to stop them so far. There has also been word that many of our men and supplies in the city have been routed."

"What by who?" Doran exclaimed. All his plans were being ruined. It was that bitch's entire fault he knew it. He would make sure she paid for it.

"From the information I have it's her old personal guard"

"I knew I should have just killed them instead of trying to make them useful. But surely there are not so many that they can spoil my plans?" Doran muttered to himself.

Loud laughter made him look over to his prisoner. She hung helpless in her bonds with tears rolling down her face. Mirth racked her frame.

"Stop laughing!!" Quickly moving to her he backhanded Tera across the face again. The laughter cut off abruptly. Blood trailed down her chin from her split lip.

Lifting her head Tera boldly matched his stare. Spitting to clear her mouth she grinned "You don't get it do you, It's your own fault this is happening. Didn't you think the people would have finally stood up and said enough to your tyranny? My loyal friends are only a small part of the force that is taking yours apart bit by bit"

Enraged Doran pulled his dagger. Pressing the point to her throat he pressed gently. The sharp pain caused Tera to flinch and hold still.

"Maybe I should just eliminate their cause for rebellion," He giggled madness interlacing his words. "What do you think?"

" I think it wouldn't matter, they would still revolt"

"Let's put that to the test shall we?" Doran press the dagger against her throat a little harder. Her gasp of pain caused him to smile with pleasure.

A commotion in the hall pulled his attention. He cut Tera's bonds as he straightened pulling Tera up against his chest as some of his men ran into the room shoving the door closed behind them then latching it. They fanned out in the available space trying to ensure there was enough room to fight in if needed.

"What's going on out there?" he demanded.

One of his men answered not bothering to take his eyes of the door.

" We have company"

Cry's and shouts echoed down the corridor. Blades rang as the battle ensued. He could hear doors being kicked open as it moved towards them.

Shocked voices shouted. It seemed his hold over the regular guard had been terminated as hostages members of their family were freed. That plus well placed threats had assured their loyalty till now. Well he could fix that later after this hassle was taken care of. Soft footsteps approached the door then stopped. The latch rattled as it was tried. Suddenly the door shook as a heavy force slammed against it from the other side. Dirt shook loose then drifted to the floor from the pounding.

Doran gripped the knife tighter making sure to keep Tera pressed against him. He was fairly certain no one would be able to break down this door. It was made to withstand five full-grown men. This was the cell in which his most important " guests" were kept.

" No one will get through that door," Doran said smugly.

Sufficient time had passed for the drug to clear Tera's system. Throwing up earlier had speeded up the cleansing of her body. With a clear head she was able to assess her situation. Right now she knew there was little chance to make her escape. Alive anyway. The knife pressing against her jugular guaranteed that. As she looked for alternatives a surge of emotion bombarded her. Tera was quick to realize they weren't hers they were from someone else. How was that possible? Her mind cast back to what happened a little earlier. The heady mix of emotions then was exactly the same as now. With a shock Tera figured it out. **It was Panther**. She was sure of it; it had to be.

" Some how I think they will," Tera said, just before with a roar the door caved in, splinters of wood exploding outwards with the sheer force used.

They flew like knives. One opponent dropped a large splinter lodged in his throat. Lucky Tera and her cousin were far enough back that no slivers reached them. Before the dust could settle Panther was in the room tailed by Akil and the rest. Battle surrounded her as Panther focused only on one person.



Panther locked eyes with Tera. The intense feelings passing between them reinforced Tera's answer. This must have been one of Panther's unknown consequences of their relationship. As Panther took a step toward her Doran's arm tightened around her the knife drawing blood as it was pushed harder against the thin skin of her neck.

"I'd back off if you want her to stay alive" Doran smirk " For a while anyway" He paused. " Or maybe not"

Panther froze in mid step. Her mind warred with her instincts. She wanted Tera safe while her inner self wanted to tear the man to pieces for daring to threaten her mate. In the space of a few heartbeats the decision was torn from her grasp as in a flash of motion Doran plunged the knife in Tera's chest. She heard him laughing as her eyes followed the slow motion of Tera's body slumping to the floor. Silence lay like a shroud over the room till Panther released her hold on the leash that she had used to reign herself in.

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Akil turned from his last opponent in time to see Tera stabbed. He froze in shock at the sight. A roar shook the room as Panther lunged toward Doran. His shock doubled as she changed from moment to moment. First human, then half shift, then to his astonishment a large black panther.

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Pure rage encompassed Panther as she lunged. She could feel herself changing. In a blink of an eye she was on Doran. Lashing out with her right paw she caught him just above his left eye and raked downwards. Panther could feel the tearing of the skin and muscle as her claws moved down his face leaving in its passing ruin. Agonized screams filled her ears. Her body slammed into his as she sank her teeth into his right shoulder mauling him. A hard shake silenced his screams. Dropping him she turned moving back to her mate. Panther ignored everyone else. As she got closer they all moved away from Tera giving her room. Between steps she shifted back to her human form to end up kneeling beside Tera.

Shaking Panther pulled Tera into her arms. She pulled the knife from her body throwing it violently across the room. No movement came from the still form. Clutching her to her chest Panther felt tears drip from her chin falling into Tera's hair. This couldn't be happening to find her then lose her like this. Panther threw her head back and roared her anguish. No one knew but that cry had been heard all the way into town. The pain laced within it affecting all those who heard.

*Naturas Mater please no, not so soon and not like this.* Panther cried silently. *I need her she's my world. I'm nothing but a shell without her.*

Her world funneled to seeing her hand caressing Tera's face. Absolute quiet blanketed the room. Slowly almost without Panther's awareness' her body filled with warmth. The impression of a hand resting on her shoulder broke her out of the fog she was in. But her senses told her clearly no one was there. She started as a voice whispered in her head. *Child of my blood, Heart of my heart, I gift you this wish. May you fulfill the promise of your destiny. Allow me to work through you.* Panther felt the love that emanated from those words. She willingly gave up control of her

body to her goddess.

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Alesia heart ached with sorrow for her friend. Not only had Panter lost her mate, she herself had lost a beloved friend. She did not know if Panter could survive this. She had an idea she probably wouldn't. Alesia's attention was yanked from her thoughts when Panter moved. She watched as Panter sliced open Tera's shirt with a nail. Out of the corner of her eye Alesia noticed everyone else stiffen. Shifting her gaze back to Panter she saw her slide a hand over the deep wound on Tera's chest. Panter's eyes slid closed. The faint glow emanating from her hand caused Alesia to doubt her own sight for an instant. Suddenly Panter's eyes shot open, her face twisting in agony. Her pupils had morphed to feline. Alesia could hear the scream that caught in her throat unable to be fully voiced. Panter slumped over as the glow dissipated.

Stillness loomed till a ragged breath abruptly broke it. Panter's glad cry spurred them all into furious movement as the unbelievable fact that Tera was breathing sank in. Panter rose to her feet refusing to let anyone take her from her arms. She moved as quickly as possible to get Tera the help she needed. Panter whispered her thanks repeatedly to the goddess as she covered the distance in long strides. Everyone else tried to keep up as best they could.

No notice was paid to the body of Tera's attacker that remained behind. No one was there to see two figures slip in, retrieve it then hurriedly leave.

[To Be Continued...](#)

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## ~ Panther's Pride ~

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer: Unless you're in my head this story is all mine.

Comment: This story has been running around in my head for the past four years begging to be written. I'm glad I have finally given in to the urge. Thanks for all the people who have sent me emails and kept me writing.

Thanks to Thorie my copy editor she has been more of a support in my writing than she knows.

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## Chapter 12

Panther sat perched on the third floor balcony railing looking out over the grounds toward the town. A full moon had passed since Tera had gotten hurt. Panther flinched; the memory of the emptiness that had opened beneath her feet when Tera had died was almost too much to bear. Shaking it off she returned her attention to the sight lying out before her. Tera stood below talking to some of the people that assisted with her duties and one other woman Panther hadn't seen before. Panther mused on that fact for a moment, most if not all people with as serious an injury as she had sustained would still be healing. It seemed that one of the side benefits to being healed was she now recuperated at an amazing rate. In two handfuls of days she was back on her feet. The healers were still in shock over it. Only Panther herself healed faster. A wound like Tera's would have taken about four days to fully mend. That was far better then thinking what the alternatives could have been, almost had been. She frowned, the only real problem that surfaced from that incident was when Akil returned with the news that all was being put back to order except one thing. Doran's body was missing. No trace of it could be found; he had just disappeared. Panther scowled *not without help he didn't* she thought to herself. It was a worry that took up permanent residence in the back of her mind.

Tugging her right gauntlet into a more comfortable position, Panther's movements stilled as she considered it's recent addition. The blank metal plate had been changed. It now boasted an engraving that matched the one on her left wrist. Crossed swords pommels down with a crown resting in the opening between its blades now adorned it. When things finally got sorted out after regaining Tera's Regency. It was discovered that the original leader of the Regent's military had been disposed of and a mercenary leader put in his place. Panther had to admit Doran had set up a pretty good system but hadn't taken into account how many people had remained loyal to Tera. Tracing the etching with a finger, Panther thought back about how she had ended up with it.

*They had gathered in the planning chamber that was attached to the main room where all regent business was conducted. After everyone had taken a seat, Akil ran through the list of positions that remained empty after the final cleanup was completed. Many slots were quickly filled but one seemed to be harder to fill then others. The position of Arms Master. The leader of the whole military forces. There had been few people left with enough experience needed to fill the position. Akil and Narna had politely turned down the offer preferring instead to accept the openings of Captains in Tera's Personal guard. After much bickering and discussion Alesia had come up with a suggestion.*

*Turning to Tera she posed a question. " You need someone that is trustworthy in this job, correct?"*

*Tera had nodded. "Yes, I need someone that I know will always give me the truth no matter what that is, good or bad. That I have absolute trust in."*

*Alesia made a sound of agreement " And who of all people do you have that kind of trust in?"*

*At that point Panther knew what Alesia was up to. She mentally threw up her hands but no one watching her would have known what she had been thinking. She had focused her awareness'*

*back on the conversation that was going on.*

*Tera smiled "Panter of course"*

*Alesia made an over to you gesture. "Then may I present to you the ideal person for Arms Master."*

*A roar of voices rose as everyone tried to speak at once.*

An inner source prompted her to pay attention. Directing her sight back to where Tera was standing she met her gaze. Teeth flashed in the sunlight then a hand rose beckoning her. Panter watched the people turn to stare up at her, to far away to clearly see whom Tera was signaling to. Panter grinned then stood. She considered her choices then shrugged deciding to take the shortest route. Over the railing. She heard one of the women with Tera scream but still was able to hear Tera's laugh at her stunt. She landed in a deep crouch her legs absorbing the shock of the impact. Straightening, she brushed off her tunic then sauntered over to Tera.

Panter smiled cordially to the group then directed her attention to her mate. "You wanted me amare?" she bent placing a soft kiss on her lips. She breathed in Tera's scent with pleasure. She could smell her own scent entwined with Tera's own. Her animal instincts reveled in it. But it would never be admitted to anyone. It smacked of ownership. Something she knew Tera wouldn't handle real well.

Tera flushed faintly. "Yes, show off" she paused to gather her scattered thinking, "I know you've been busy, but I wanted you to meet the priestess that is going to do our handfasting" Tera could still not believe it was truly going to happen. Panter had asked as soon as she had awakened from her healing sleep. It had taken a moment for her sleep-fogged brain to puzzle out the question. But seeing disappointment on Panter's face at her lack of answer jolted her brain into motion. At her enthusiastic yes Panter had pulled her into a hug. Very gently of course.

Panter turned to face the tall dark-haired woman at the front of the small group. She must have been the one that screamed. Panter laughed silently her eyes were still big in shock. Panter nodded to her. "I am honored by your presence"

The woman smiled faintly then inclined her head. "I thank you for your invitation" her rigid posture indicated a woman that immersed herself in decorum.

Tera moved closer sliding her arm around Panter's waist. Panter's arm automatically encircled Tera's shoulders. "I know you normally would rather wait till you had gotten to know us a little and meditated to seek approval of the gods but this is an unusual circumstance and that will not be needed." Tera informed the priestess flatly. Any marriage into the royal house had to be accepted by the gods. At least one. Tera wasn't sure when this practice started but it ended up

being a hindrance at times.

The priestess seemed at a loss for words. Then found her voice "What might this occurrence be?" Her tone of voice made her doubt clear.

Panther stepped in. "I think a change of venue is order, don't you think Tera?" Out in the open was not the place for such a delicate conversation.

Tera closed her mouth on her reaction to being doubted. " Yes, that seems to be the way to help resolve this issue" She gestured to the small group " Please, follow me" She led them into the main room set aside for any meetings dealing with the regency and all its decisions therein. A long oak table surrounded by ten massive chairs dominated the room.

Tera seated herself comfortably on the long tabletop. She chewed delicately on her lower lip as she pondered the situation. How to prove the point without exposing Panther's dual nature was going to be. ...Sticky. She sighed. Bluntly it was going to be hard as Hades. She exchanged a quick look with Panther. She could feel the stress that was strumming in Panther's body by the knots taking residence in the pit of her own stomach. This connection with her love was trying at times like this but definitely worth it.

The priestess seated herself in a nearby chair, folded her hands together and gazed at Tera patiently awaiting answers.

Panther watched the woman's face. She seemed to be on the level. A true intermediary for the goddess and her worshipers. She was still searching for a way to prove her case when the priestess's eyes rolled back into her head as she went suddenly limp in her seat. Tera's minister of accounts jumped up grabbing hold of her before she could slide off the chair onto the floor. She supported her weight till Panther took over. Panther had just picked up the priestess to take her to the healers when she opened her eyes staring right into Panthers golden eyes with an expression of total awe.

" She said you were the child of her Heart... of her blood" she whispered stunned by what had just happened. She flushed as she became aware of how Panther was standing there casually holding her in her arms. " I'm fine now, you may let me down"

Panther quirked a slight grin as she set her back onto her feet. " As you wish"

Tera brow furrowed " What was it you just said?" She hesitated for a second " What is your name, thinking of you as just the priestess is getting old fast"

The Priestess was taken aback a bit then smiled " It's Aniaise" She turned to face them more directly, aware of the others in the room listening eagerly. "Portia Theron has claimed you as a child of her blood" Her face shone with delight. " Never in my knowledge has this ever happened before"

" Who claimed me?" Aniasse's smile faded at the blank look on Panter's face.

" Portia Theron" At her shrug Aniasse tried again. " Mistress of animals, Lady of wild things" she continued naming the goddess's lesser names.

Tera spoke up " Is she also known as Mistress of wild beasts?" At Aniasse's nod of confirmation Tera turned to Panter. " She has sway over nature and animals does that remind you of someone?" She hid her smile at Panter sudden realization of what was being told her.

" Your speaking of Natures Mater are you not?"

Aniasse was puzzled " Natures Mater what does that mean?"

Panter puzzled over the translation for a second. "Um... it means roughly Natures Mother...I think. That is how the goddess is known from where I am from"

Aniasse nodded. "Yes, that would most likely be the same goddess." She returned her attention to them. " As you have said this is a different circumstance then most." She bowed deeply to them both " I would be honored to do your joining ceremony"

Panter broke in before they could get involved with the planning.

"Tera, I must leave this in your hands. There are many things in town that I have to oversee." She had to hide a smile at the pout of disappointment that briefly appeared on Tera's face.

"Your going to make sure things are ready at Raven's Claw for tomorrow?" They had decided to hold the ceremony there instead of at the manor. It was because of the people that Tera had regained her position. To have it at the manor smacked of lording your position. That was something Tera would never do.

" Yes, that among others" Panter bent intent on making the kiss brief but Tera had other ideas. She took control of the kiss pulling Panter into a short but intense exchange. She finally let Panter go when the silence in the room became deafening. A quick look had everyone immediately absorbed in the grain pattern of the tabletop.

Tera laughed quietly. " Go love, I'll see you later. But remember, my mother and sister should arrive later today." After Tera awoke from her healing a missive had been sent to them telling of what had happened and included the news of the upcoming joining. Knowing that it would take some time for their return Tera had continued with her own planning of the event.

Panter smiled, nodded to the others in the room then took her leave. She ducked out the door heading for the stables to retrieve Donum.

Panter handed off her reins to the stable boy. She entered Raven's Claw intent on finding Alesia.

She had given her a list of things she had need of for the handfasting. They had arranged to meet here. Blinking to adjust her sight after the sunlight from outside she found Alesia sitting at the bar chatting up a woman. *Looks like Zeva was able to get more help like she had wanted* she mused. The last two days of festival had grown even larger as it was combined with the celebration of Tera regaining her regency. Not that she or any of her people had seen much of it, there had been too much cleanup needing to be done to secure Tera's standing.

In a good mood Panther decided to play a little. She quietly walked up behind Alesia shaking her head and holding a finger to her lips when the other woman glanced up at the flash of movement. Stopping, Panther folded her arms being careful to arrange her features into a mask of anger.

**"Alesia, What do you think your doing. Isn't there things you need to take care of?"** She barked. Panther almost lost it when Alesia shot straight up from her seat, almost falling when she tried turning in the same motion. Alesia grabbed the bar barely catching herself before she impacted the floor. She scrambled to her feet then stood frozen in an alert stance in front of Panther.

" Arms Master, all tasks are completed."

Panther couldn't hold back her laughter any longer. She laughed so hard she almost pulled a muscle in her chest. The bewildered expression on Alesia's face slowly grew to one of enlightenment as she figured out what Panther did.

" You ass, how could you do that to me?" Alesia had to laugh it was funny. Of course, it would have been funnier if it had happened to someone else. Not her.

Panther held up her hand as she tried to regain control of herself. After a few minutes she cleared her throat. " Sorry, but I couldn't resist it" Panther said in an apologetic tone. " You said that you got all the things we need?"

Alesia decided to let this one go. " Yes, everything's being set up in the courtyard like you asked."

Panther smiled " Good, did you check with the jeweler about the ring?"

"Yes, I have it here." Reaching into her belt purse she withdrew an object laying it in Panthers outstretched hand. " It really turned out well"

The ring glimmered in the light. It was gold, spanning about an inch wide. A jeweler had been found willing to do unusual custom work. A Eighth inch channel had been made around the circumference of the ring in the middle expanding to the diameter of the top. It created a circle interlocking a circle. Symbolizing lasting unity. Inlaid into the channels was a rare mineral of brown, amber and gold tones. It gave the illusion of looking into an eye of an animal. Tera had seen the mineral once before and had remarked on it as something that she had wished she had purchased when the chance had been present. Unknown to her that mineral was easily obtained from Panthers homeland and she in a strange coincidence had brought some with her when she

left. Panter hoped that Tera would find the ring acceptable.

"It turned out better than I had hoped" Panter tucked it into her own Money purse for safekeeping. "How are the plans coming along?"

"Everything is almost in readiness, come take a look"

Panter followed Alesia. They had just gotten around the bars countertop when the front door slammed open. A young guardsman stood panting for breath in the opening as he glanced around the inn. As his eye caught Panter's form he straightened up then approached her. Halting, then standing in a rigid stance he spoke.

"Arms Master, I have been sent by the Regent to inform you that the guests you have been waiting for have arrived. She also requests that if possible you return at your earliest convenience". He finished recounting his message then waited for any return reply.

Panter's breathing stopped for the barest moment, then resumed. She was in no way ready to meet Tera's mother. But it seemed that no other choice had been offered so there was little she could do about it. She returned her attention to the man in front of her.

"Please tell the Regent I am returning immediately"

The guardsman nodded, made a short bow then slipped out the door.

Turning to Alesia, Panter apologized. "I'm sorry, I need to get back as you heard. Thank you for helping us with all this. It means a lot."

Alesia rested a hand on Panter's shoulder. "No problem, don't worry everything will be ready for tomorrow." She smiled. "It's my pleasure to help, I'm honored you would entrust this to me". Alesia started a little when Panter reached out and drew her into a brief hug. Alesia was aware of the strength in the body that was so close to hers. Then that fled her mind as the warmth of embrace enfolded her. It ended too soon but Alesia saw the smile that graced Panter's face as they separated.

"You are much more to me Alesia than a friend, you are family" She husked in a low voice. Clearing her throat of the emotion that was trying to block it, Panter was pleased at the look of wonder that came over Alesia's features.

"Family, you think of me as that?" Alesia asked in awe. She knew she had felt that way but was unaware Panter had felt the same. A warm feeling took up residence in her heart. To have a family was something Alesia knew precious little of but had always wanted.

"Indeed I do, now I must go meet the rest of our new family. It should be an interesting meeting" Panter said wryly. She gave Alesia's shoulder a brief clasp then exited the inn heading for Donum and then to her amare.



\* \* \*

Aretina watched fondly as both her daughters embraced on the manors front steps. Her family had been torn apart by this business with the regency. She sighed wearily. But she did understand the reasoning behind the upheaval. Doran had wrested control away from Tera in an unfortunate takeover when she had been absent. Aretina knew if she herself had been here she could have briefly stepped into the role to hold it for her daughter. A little known law allowed the spouse of the departed regent the power to take over the position if wished. Aretina knew herself well enough to know that was a position she did not want fulltime. But, she knew that Tera would do well in it.

The pounding of hoof beats made Aretina look toward the front gates. Someone on horse back was drawing near at a quick clip. As they got nearer, Aretina's eyes widened slightly in surprise. A tall dark skinned woman on a Black horse with a white blaze marking its forehead came to a sliding halt before the grouping. She had never seen someone who was so dark before. When the woman dismounted, tossing her reins to an approaching stable boy it became clear that she was unusual in both height and skin color. She stifled a laugh at the look on the woman's face as her older daughter ran up and leapt into her arms. She was caught and held easily. Hmmm, Aretina pondered she's very strong too. She had a feeling she would be meeting a unique individual.

She stayed back until they had finished with their greeting. Then stepped forward to introduce herself.

"Since my oldest child is so busy with other things, let me introduce myself. I'm Aretina and you are?"

Panther quickly set Tera back onto her feet then dusted her hands off. " I am Panther of the Vestran." She extended her arm in greeting. Adapting with little hesitation when Aretina grasped her hand instead of her forearm. Panther tended to forget that many people did not greet each other in that way. Just one more thing to get use to.

" Vestran, that name seems familiar to me somehow" Aretina tapped a fingertip on her lower lip as she pondered where she had heard it before.

" Father had some small dealings with them just before he died" informed Medan. She remembered the proposed agreement crossing her desk. Something about minerals or was it jewels. She shrugged. She'd figure it out later.

" Ah, yes it was some sort of dealings about rocks or something" she waved a hand about. " Never mind that now" Aretina pushed a blond lock behind her ear. " So Tera tell me how the both of you came to be together and no skipping of details," She pointed at her daughter to reinforce her words. " I know you, you like to smooth things over"

"Well" Tera started to say but was fortunately interrupted by an attendant informing them that dinner would be ready in a candle mark.

Aretina frowned at the intrusion. " I suppose we best clean up before then" She beckoned them to follow. " Let us get presentable. I know I desperately need to bathe after the long journey to arrive back home"

A pointed look was directed at Panter and Tera. " We'll get back to our discussion after dinner". Aretina left with Medan following closely behind.

Tera met Panter's gaze. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize mother would be like this." She sighed. " But you must admit suddenly dumping our joining on her is bound to raise some questions she will want answers to"

Panter pressed a kiss to Tera's lips then drew back. " I know, It was just sudden that's all" A frown bent her lips. " Do you think we should let your mother and sister know of the special circumstances?" An arched eyebrow accompanied the inquiry.

Tera considered a moment then shook her head " Not now, but we will have to tell them sooner or later" She tugged at Panter's hand. " Come on I don't know about you but I'm starving"

Panter groaned. " When aren't you?" she said under her breath.

A sharp smack to her shoulder made her yelp. " I heard that, Oh large one" Tera shouted with laughter as she chased Panter through the doorway and toward their chambers.

Soldiers and attendants shook their heads smiling as they passed. It was good to hear life ringing through the halls again. It had been silent for far too long.

\* \* \*

After checking on the next day's arrangements one last time, Panter pushed open the door leading into the study. A clink drew her attention to one of the tall windows running along the length of the room. Tera was perched on the bench seat extending from one of the windows. The sound had come from her nails tapping the goblet that resided in one hand. The closing of the door alerted Tera of her presence.

"Is everything in readiness for tomorrow?" Tera inquired.

Panter crossed over snagging the goblet from Tera's hand, sipping briefly. She swirled the wine as she considered the question. Mentally scanning the list in her head, Panter nodded. "I believe so"

Tera nibbled her lip then cast a sidelong glance to Panter. Smiling ironically, Tera posed a query. Are you sure you want to get into this after tomorrow morning things will get a lot more

complicated, last chance to change your mind.

Setting the goblet aside, Panter pulled Tera up into her arms pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I think I can handle it there's nothing that could make me leave" Eyes filling with tears lifted to connect with hers. Tera slid a hand behind Panter's neck to draw her into a kiss that rapidly grew impassioned.

\* \* \*

Medan accompanied her mother to the study to meet with her sister. She had been remembering when she had seen Panter the first time at the village before leaving to return to her mother. She had a sense then that something like this would occur. Medan nodded absently as Aretina waxed on about the joining enthusiastically. She had a feeling now that Tera was joining shortly her mother would be turning unwanted attention to her own state of affairs. Or lack of them.

Entering the room they found Panter and Tera in a heated embrace. Both had gotten about halfway to the pair when the sound of Aretina's words broke threw alerting Panter that they were no longer alone. She spun around to confront them as she shoved Tera behind her in a reflex movement.

Stepping back hastily, Medan halted in mid step as it dawned on her something about Panter was different. Her mother's exclamation of surprise reinforced it. Panter's eyes had changed. It should have freaked her out she knew but somehow it just seemed .... Normal. For Panter anyway. Medan sank onto a nearby seat to watch what would unfold. She noticed Panter's shoulders slump as her eyes slid closed. Medan nodded approvingly as Panter's spine suddenly straightened and she met Aretina's look square on. *That's right Panter, Fight for what you want.*

Tera slid in front of her mate. She casually leaned back against Panter's chest. "Mother, I think there's some things you should be aware of" she said in an offhand manner interrupting Aretina's flow of words. " Maybe we should all sit down" Tera waited while everyone sat then claimed her spot by Panter curling up close by her side. She interrupted her mother offhandedly.

" How much do you know about the Gods and what they represent?"

Aretina was taken aback by the question for a second. " Quite a bit I think why do you ask?" She directed a look at her younger daughter who just shrugged also a little bemused by the question.

" Have you wondered which god accepted our match to be joined?" Tera knew full well that she did, surprised by how her mother hadn't asked yet.

"Well yes I have. So who was it?"

" Do you know of the Goddess Portia Theron?"

"Portia Theron...let me think," Aretina brightened as the information she wanted came to mind. "She's the nature Goddess isn't she, Mistress of wild beasts or some such thing?" Aretina paused as a considering gaze focused on Panter.

"Let me start at the beginning it might make more sense that way." Tera shifted closer to her love. An arm tightened briefly in encouragement. "We had been scouting the area for a few days when..."

The night passed rapidly as the story unfolded. Halting periodically for questions along with sips from her goblet for a dry mouth.

\* \* \*

The day dawned clear and bright. The household was in an uproar of excitement. A morning joining threw Aretina into a tizzy but Tera and Panter had insisted both wanting to throw an afternoon feast. Opening the Raven's Claw to the public. A large number of Pigs had been butchered and pit cooked for the reception. They had commissioned surrounding bakery's to produce a large variety of pastries and sweets. Volunteers had shown up willing to help with food preparations but declined payment for their services preferring to offer it as a kind of gift instead. The people had been swept up in the elation of the celebration. They were happy to see their kind leader back and happy.

Two candle marks before midday everyone gathered in the courtyard dressed in their best to witness the joining. The gates leading into the area had been thrown wide so the rest of the populace could see. A large circle had been maintained around the group at the insistence of Akil and Panter.

Akil for security, Panter knowing that the pressure of so many people around her could send her into a frenzy.

A small alter had been erected in front of the giant oak. A green embroidered cloth with hand stitched motifs of plants and animals around the borders had been draped over its surface. Two candles rested on the top representing the presence of the Gods and Goddess's. Positioned on the west corner was the wedding chalice. The gold of its surface shone bright in the morning sun. In its east corner rested six cords. North held two rings. Finally in the south resided a large white candle. Resting by the candle lay two thin headbands, one in silver, the other gold.

Dressed in flowing robes of the same green as the alter cloth Aniasa stood before it waiting for the couple to approach. The crowd quieted as Tera appeared escorted by her mother and sister. She was clothed in drapes of white and hints of similar green. The dress left her upper arms bare, fitting snugly down her torso before flowing freely around her calves. A pair of soft boots dyed green covered her feet. Her hair shone with blond highlights where the coloring was wearing off. She cut a beautiful figure as she came to a halt in front of the priestess. Tera turned to watch her partner's approach.

Faint gasps arose as Panter stepped from the inn's doorway. Alesia stepped in front of her leading

the way to the altar. She wore a tunic and breeches of soft white leather with matching boots. The color of it against her skin tone was dramatic. A belt enclosed her waist holding her gold handled dagger. Gold armbands wrapped around her biceps. She had decided to leave off wearing her gauntlets preferring to have her lower arms bare instead. Panter's gaze remained on Tera as she went toward her.

Stopping beside her Panter reached out to hold Tera's hands in hers. They turned toward Aniasa as one.

Aniasa looked out on the people. "These women joined in love have found a common desire to make their bond a matter of record so all would know and witness lending them their support. Each person who witnesses this union creates a part of the structure that strengthens the bonds of love these two share. In token that this joining is not casual I ask that some family member speak for you"

Aretina stepped forward. "I, speaking as Tera's mother, declare that Panter shall henceforth be welcomed into our community of family and friends. May our love strengthen the bond that exists between them"

Aniasa smiled. "I accept your pledge. Who speaks for the woman Panter?"

Alesia stepped forward having been asked to speak for Panter. Before she could say a word another voice rose.

"I speak as my chosen's family," Gasps of startlement came from behind the crowd around the gated entrance. Swiftly they pressed back to the sides creating a path for the approaching woman. There was no doubt the woman was a Goddess. The faint light surrounding her in an aura of power let no one make such a mistake. If not for that the company that paced her steps clued everyone in. A large black wolf was on her right. A jaguar strolled by her left. She was dressed in deep blue and green robes, etchings of vines and snakes started at her temples on both sides and flowed down her face ending at the bottom of each cheek. She came to a stop by the altar regarding Panter and Tera with a loving gaze. Her green eyes moved from them when Aniasa dropped to one knee followed by everyone else.

"Please rise, this is not my day, it is my chosen's. I knew her family couldn't speak for her so I decided as she is a child of my blood, I shall" A murmur rose faintly at that pronouncement but faded as the Goddess's gaze swept the crowd. "Make no mistake, I claim her. As such, that claim also extends to her beloved" She turned to Aniasa. "If you would permit me, I would like to finish the joining ceremony"

Aniasa bowed low "I am most honored" She stepped aside allowing her to take her place before the couple.

The goddess looked out to the people gathered. "All began in love, all seek to return to love. Love is the law, the teacher of wisdom and patience, and the great reveler of mysteries. With full awareness know that within this circle you declare your intent not only to friends and family but also to a higher power" She smiled as she made a short gesture to herself. "Do you both still seek

to enter this union?"

Panter and Tera spoke as one " Yes, we still seek to enter"

The goddess continued. " In the past it was believed that the soul shared characteristics with all things Devine. It was assigned virtues with the cardinal directions. East, South, North, West. Gifts of the East, communication of heart, mind and body, fresh each day with the rising of the sun. Gifts of the south, Warmth of hearth and home. Heat of the hearts passion the light to dispel all darkness. Gifts of the West, The deepness of the lake, excitement of the river, cleansing of the rain, the encompassing passion of the sea. Gifts of the North, a firm foundation on which to build. The fertility of the fields to enrich your lives. A stable home to which to return" She paused." These gifts emphasize things that will allow you to build a happy union but they are *only tools*. Tools, which you must use together in order to create what you both seek. I bid you look into each others eyes."

" Panter, will you cause her Pain?"

Panter nodded. " I may"

" Is that your Intent?"

"No"

"Tera, will you cause her pain?"

"I may"

"Is that your intent?"

" No"

The Goddess looked at them both " Will you share your pain and seek to ease it?"

"Yes" They both answered firmly grasping each other's hand tightly.

"And so the binding is made. Please raise your joined hands."  
The first cord was gently wrapped around their hands.

" Will you share your laughter?"

"We will"

"Will you look for the brightness and positive in each other?"

"We will"

"So the binding is made" Another cord joined the first.

She turned to Panter. " Will you burden her?"

"I may"

"Is that your intent?"

"No"

She turned back to Tera. "Will you burden Her?"

" I may"

" Is that your intent?"

"No"

"Will you share so your love will grow?"

"Yes"

"So the binding is made" A third cord enwrapped their hands.

"Will you dream together to create new reality's and hope?"

"Yes, We will"

"So the binding is made" A fourth cord joined the others.

"Will you take the heat of anger and use it to temper the strength of your bond?"

"We will"

"So the binding is made. A fifth cord was added.

"Do you honor each other?"

"Yes"

"Will you ever seek to break such honor?"

"We shall never do so" was spoken firmly by both.

"So the binding is made" The Goddess tied all the cords together." The knots of this binding are not made by these cords but by your own vows. Either of you may drop the cords, for you hold

in your own hands the making of or breaking of this union." She removed the cords still tied together and laid them on the altar.

She reached over picking up the rings." You have chosen to accompany your vows with tangible representations. This will represent the power your heart has in your life." She then spoke aloud for all to hear. **"This bond I draw between you: that though you are parted in mind or in body, there will be a call in the core of you, one to the other, that nothing and no one else will answer to"**

Tera gasped upon seeing her ring. Panter smiled then lifting her hand pressed a kiss upon it. Panter glanced admiringly at her own ring. A wide silver band with Tera's emblem rested on her own finger.

The goddess reached over picking up the chalice. "By drinking from this chalice you show the strength of your dedication"

Panter and Tera drank deeply then handed the chalice back to the Goddess. She returned it to the altar then picked up the headbands.

"This band represents another calling that your love has in her life. As Regent she is bound to her people as you are now bound to each other."

Portia Theron set the gold band around Tera's head then turned to Panter. " As her mate you also are bound to her and her people" She placed the silver band around Panter's head. " You may now kiss your beloved"

Panter and Tera kissed then glanced back to the goddess.

The Goddess paused " If you would allow me I would like to also symbolize my acceptance of your bond and also mark you both as chosen by me"

Panter met Tera's glance. A slight nod answered her questioning gaze. "We would be honored" A start was the only thing that revealed her surprise as the Goddess pressed a kiss to her forehead. She did the same to Tera then came back to Panter. A gentle finger traced around her right eye. A feeling of warmth followed her finger's path. The slight widening of Tera's gaze caused a slight prickle of concern. The indrawn breath of the people nearby reinforced the feeling.

Panter put her hand to her face as the goddess moved over to Tera repeating the same action. She couldn't feel anything different. She watched fascinated as she saw what had happened. The same pattern decorating Portia Theron's face was replicated on Tera's face in dark ink but only on the one side. Finished The Goddess stepped back. " Blessing's on your union my chosen, if you ever need me I will be near." The animals gathered close then they all faded from sight.

Silence reigned till Tera's mother wiped tears from her cheeks. " My baby's married" she choked out. The crowd erupted in cheering as flowers were thrown over the blushing couple. Panter pulled Tera close tracing the tattoo by her eye. When Tera reached up to hers she muttered. " So what does it look like?"



Tera laughed, " Like the goddess's except since black wouldn't show against your skin it's white instead."

Panther head jerked back. "White!" She shook her head. " Guess I can't do anything about it now huh?"

"Nope, Things will defiantly get interesting now." Tera leaned into Panthers chest. "Not that its not already," She said giving Panther a heated look. She was reward by Panthers eyes changing briefly in response.

"Behave" Panther growled. The resonance rumbled deep in her throat and chest.

Tera opened her mouth for a rejoinder when they were both swept up in the celebration. A lingering look between the two promised that after the reception would be more then interesting too.

\* \* \*

About that same time a figure embarked on a journey with revenge the only thoughts prominent in their head. The rage would keep them warm on the long journey that loomed ahead.

\* \* \*

Panther and Tera's story continues in: [Panther's Pride- Hunted](#)