

A Lost Kitten

Chapter 1

Friday, the 15th of May, Year 2020
Sea-anan Empire, Sea Base Ten

John McCall peered through the glass of the cockpit. His preternatural senses were on high alert. He knew the location of every enemy vessel, including the path their shots took. His small, silver Starfighter swerved then spiraled upward. It made a sharp turnabout and returned fire at the alien vessel pursuing it. The enemy warship exploded. John felt avenged.

A blinding light suddenly enveloped that sector of space. Once it dimmed, John scanned the direction it came from. What he searched for was no longer there. An overwhelming sorrow consumed him. The space station, Sea Base Ten, was destroyed.

It was more than his latest creation that went up in flames. It was the knowledge that so many lives were lost. The inconceivable torture that innocent men, women, and children endured before they were savagely massacred would forever haunt him. John blinked rapidly so his tears would not distort his vision. How could this have happened? How could it be that such monsters existed?

John veered to dodge another attack. He retaliated on the enemy ships with a heartfelt vengeance. He was determined to hold the intruders back for as long as possible. The escaping ally Starships needed time to reach their maximum warp speed. John meant to give them that time.

He counted the Starfighters that assisted him. Only three out of seven hundred remained. Another bolt of intense pain shot through his chest. He vowed that if he survived the raid, he would locate the one who gave the order to attack Sea Base Ten. He would hunt down Daehog and kill him.

John's thoughts were interrupted when he spotted his brother Mathew sail his ship alongside their sister's ship. Mathew's anxious voice boomed over the helmet's communicator.

"Areo! You, Bobby, John, and I are the last four remaining. We need to lure the rest of these aircraft away from those Starships. Are you all right? Can you make it?"

John glanced at Areo's ship. His sister was badly injured. Yet Areo had refused to go to med lab. Instead, she had boarded a Starfighter to help them hold back the enemy. John was proud of her, but her injuries concerned him. She had lost a lot of blood.

"Let's show them what we Seacats are made of."

Areo's voice sounded strong and positive. It fortified John's determination and quelled his fears. His twin brother,

Bob, flew his Starfighter to the left of Areo. John positioned his ship above hers. For a moment, he considered how he and his brothers surrounded her. They were extremely protective of the women in their family. His heart filled with pride and love.

Mathew's voice sounded steadier. *"John, you flip. Bob, go left. I'll go right. Areo, down the middle. Break!"*

The ships' formation opened up like a flower. They executed the tactical maneuver flawlessly. Their feline ancestors would be proud of them, even if they were hybrids and considered an abomination by the Oceanan purebloods.

John spotted an enemy vessel swooping down on his little brother's ship. He jerked forward in his seat. "Mathew, look out! Above you!" he shouted.

Mathew's ship fell into a gyrating nosedive. Like the expert fighter pilot he was, Mathew recovered and glided his ship into position directly behind the warship, opening fire. It exploded into an array of shining lights.

John covered his face with his left hand. Bob's anxious voice expressed what he felt.

"That was a close one, bro. Stay frosty, will ya!"

"I hear you. Thanks, Piscean," replied Mathew, using John's codename.

John inhaled a deep breath and lowered his hand. "Thank me later, little brother. Stay alert." He caught sight of the last

White Star carrying civilians blasting into hyperdrive.

"That was the last ship, you guys," spoke Areo. "It's time we leave this nightmare."

"Alright then, pick your dance partners, people. Lead them in the direction opposite our fleeing ships," instructed John. "Lead them as far away as you can. Then, if possible, you know what to do with them. Afterwards, head immediately for Sea Base Five." He paused to gather his emotions.

He did not want to release his siblings from his side. As the eldest, he felt it was his job to watch over them, even though they were of age and excellent fighters. He loved them dearly, and he wanted no harm to befall them.

"Please, be careful. I love you."

"We love you, too, brother," replied Areo.

John left first. He glanced over his right shoulder. One of the larger battleships followed close behind him. He had hoped for two. He prayed his brothers had better luck than he did. He did not want his little sister dealing with two ships in her injured state.

#

Eight hours passed. John continued to fly through unexplored space. He pressed several knobs on the control panel. A star chart appeared on the small screen to the left of the dashboard. For the umpteenth time, he instructed the computer to

pinpoint his location on the map. It malfunctioned. Again.

John sighed and leaned his head back on the seat. He was clueless as to where he was. He sensed no planet nearby. He may or may not be in an area patrolled by one of their allies, the Space Guardians. He checked his gauges. His tank had plenty of fuel. He had to make a choice.

He decided to follow a straight path. Hopefully, he would find a place to land. He pushed forward on the accelerator. Within seconds, the ship was at warp ten and heading further into unknown regions.

#

After two days, John was extremely edgy and starving. He had been surviving on rations meant for short journeys. His large appetite made it difficult to endure the hunger. Only discipline kept him from eating all his provisions in one meal. And though he was part feline, John disliked having a tail. He did not have to look behind him to know the enemy still pursued him. They were determined to capture or destroy him, for he was a Seacat, an elite warrior of the Sea-anan Empire.

The feline empire was at the forefront in technology and had a tenacious, resilient, and exceptionally skilled military. No matter the rank, all the warriors upheld the law. Peace reigned in feline space. This was why the attack surprised them all. Who would want to destroy peace? Plus, no humanoid familiar

with the Imperial Warriors believed someone was powerful enough or foolish enough to challenge them.

When John learned that traitors were involved, he understood how the power hungry thug had succeeded. Daehog knew to conquer the dimension Guildhall he would have to destroy the only military force capable of stopping him. The Seacats.

John's sharp senses routinely scanned space. Unexpectedly, they sensed something other than the enemy ship. His thoughts of hunger vanished. John sat taller in his seat and focused harder to make certain. Yes, it was there. A planet. He quickly checked his fuel gauge. He had plenty of energy to make it.

John flipped his ship around and increased speed. He was not going to unleash the enemy's carnage on more innocent lives. He released a series of laser fire and homing missiles, each with specific destinations in mind—the main engines, the guns, and the bridge.

With persistence, he swerved and dove around the large warship, taking risks to hit his marks. Sparks erupted in the cockpit. John ignored the streams of smoke that sailed across his eyes. He refused to die until his desired outcome was achieved.

The darkness of space lit up, as did John's face. He had never been more proud of his brothers, Bob and Alan, or his sisters, Angelica and Flora. They had taken the best technology

of each known alien race and created a greater technology of their own.

With his tail vanquished, John quickly ran a diagnostic scan of his ship. He looked at the small monitor display screen and clenched his jaw. He was not happy. The enemy had managed to hit the fuselage. He was losing energy fast. John increased his speed and aimed for the distant planet, praying he could reach it before his energy ran out.

He reached the planet's atmosphere seconds before the fuel depleted. The ship's controls instantly shutdown. Luckily, the planet's gravity had hold of the ship and pulled it to the surface. John gripped the steering lever and struggled to keep the ship's nose up, and away from the mountains. Spotting a patch of even ground, he did his best to land the ship on it. The Starfighter skimmed the ground and bounced. It skidded, turned, and flipped several times before it came to a halt at the base of a mountain.

John opened his eyes and glanced around. He was relieved to have survived the crash. Through the smoke-filled cockpit, he could see the tinted glass in front was shattered, but it miraculously held together better than the dashboard that was compressed inward and pushed downward over his legs.

He unstrapped his seat belt and tried to move. His elation was short lived. A sharp pain pierced his rib cage and right

leg. His legs were pinned beneath the ship's controls. He closed his eyes and took several cleansing breaths. He had to concentrate on getting out of the ship, not on his pain.

John removed his helmet, then lifted his left arm. He was about to send out a Mayday signal via his wristguard but decided against it. The enemy, Daehog and his Dominion, might pick up the signal and attack the planet. He was on his own for now.

John bent forward and tried to pry his legs from beneath the dashboard. No use. He needed help. His sharp senses detected several life forces approaching. John readjusted his translator around his right ear, hoping the strangers were not more enemies. He was not in the best position to fend them off. He slipped his hand beneath the dashboard. He reached inside his right boot, found the hidden sheath, and pulled out his Shuto blade. Just in case.

A few miles away, a small herd of camel-like podidaes galloped across the dusty terrain. Upon their backs rode six alien merchants on their way to the planet's main trading post. One of the merchants had spotted the failing ship in the sky. The group had agreed to follow the ship and help the survivors.

Outside, the six alien merchants arrived. They hopped off their rides and scrambled over the wreckage. The cockpit's heavily tinted glass kept them from seeing inside. Two of the males slipped their fingerlike appendages underneath the broken

frame and pulled the hatch open. All six males peered down at John, who was shielding his face from the sun as he looked back at them.

#

John carefully leaned back on the pillow. He gingerly fingered the wrap around his bare torso and watched Dr. Yik wrap his broken leg securely in more of the same waterproof bandage.

The man resembled a bald, eight-foot human with the exception of a third, unblinking eye at the center of his forehead. It was that unblinking eye that had John on edge. It stared at him, while the other two eyes focused on his leg.

"Is that who you are?" asked the doctor in his native language.

The small translator hooked around John's ear deciphered the dialect and played it back in his ear. John noticed the doctor's third eye was regarding the insignia on his belt. He nodded. "I'm a Seacat," replied John into the mouthpiece. The small computer instantly converted his English words to the man's language and played it back through John's wristguards.

"I know the Seacats." The eye returned to John's face. "They are not like you. Their symbol is not like this one."

John looked at him quizzically. His people had never traveled this far into space. The grand opening of Sea Base Ten was supposed to be the next chapter in their lives. They would

have eventually explored the area had it not been for Daehog and his followers, the Dominion.

"What do you mean?"

"The *real* Seacats live on Oceanica. They come to Cerko to trade. They are felines." Dr. Yik lifted his head to look at John with all three eyes. "You are not one of them."

John wondered if the felines the doctor was speaking about were perhaps survivors from Oceana. It was a long shot, since Oceana had exploded eleven years ago. None of his warriors had ever found any survivors.

"What style of insignia did they wear?"

"Same colors. Round, not oval. Inner circle round, not slit."

John understood that the doctor meant the color and shape of his badge. The badge represented a feline's eye during dilation. His insignia was oval in shape, red on blue. The red dilated into a slit. It had a small black dot in the middle. Dr. Yik's round description meant there were Oceanan survivors.

Wow. "Well, I'm not from Oceanica. I'm from the Sea-anan Empire. I'm a different type of Seacat. When was the last time you saw these feline Seacats?"

"Four full moons ago. They trade for electronic parts and medical supplies." Dr. Yik stood. "These bandages come off in one full moon cycle, if you are healed."

John felt dwarfed lying next to the giant. "I don't plan on staying here for that long." Dr. Yik's three eyes stared at him without blinking. They made John feel like he was being analyzed. "I need to get back to the empire. Where can I obtain a ship?"

"Tavern in town. Merchants go there to trade over drinks." Dr. Yik walked to a wooden wall cabinet on the far right corner of the room. Unlike other tall humanoids who had the tendency to slouch, the doctor walked erect. "You are not strong enough to walk there." He opened the left panel and extracted a small vial from the top shelf.

John sat up and carefully lowered his leg. He reached for the retracted Maru staff he wore on his belt. He extended it to use the silver staff as a cane. The doctor stepped in front of him.

"This helps with pain." He held out the vial for John.

"I have no money to pay you." Still, the doctor insisted he take it. "Thank you. I will repay you. A Seacat always repays his debts."

Dr. Yik regarded John closely. He delayed in answering, which made John a bit anxious to escape his three piercing orbs.

"I know. Seacats are noble. I trust the Seacats. But you are different. Can I trust you?"

If he'd had more time, John would have told the good doctor

his trust was misplaced. Unfortunately, he had a war to return to.

"If you trust *those felines*, then you most certainly can trust me. You will be paid for your services with funds, not goods."

Dr. Yik blinked once. *Finally*, thought John.

"You think you can walk?" Two of Dr. Yik's eyes scanned John from head to toe. The third remained on his face. "I think you will fall down."

"I'll be all right. Just point me in the right direction."

John placed the vial in his shirt pocket. He then used his staff to balance as he followed the doctor to the front door. Moving was slow, but at least he was mobile. Outside, Dr. Yik pointed left. It was like looking at an old western town with the exception of steel buildings mixed in with wooden ones.

"Follow the signs." All three eyes focused on John. "If you can."

John pressed his lips together. He owed the doctor for his services, so he kept his remark to himself and started walking. He read the signs that hung outside each building. Some made him laugh; others were simply odd. He paused outside a large wooden building at the center of town. The sign read, Road Kill Bar and Inn. John shook his head.

He hobbled inside the building, following behind two

towering, snakelike aliens. Neither held the door for him. He smothered the growl that rose to his lips. He saw the bar was on his left. He sat on the closest barstool. To his right were two empty seats.

While he waited for the bartender to notice him, he looked around. The dim room was full of unfamiliar races. No doubt each one was from this side of space. Not many of them looked like they were from peaceful planets. John's preternatural senses stayed on high alert.

Fingering his translator, he returned his attention to the bar. He was startled to see two men with long, metallic-silver hair occupying the seats beside him; they had been empty just a moment ago. He had not seen the men approach, nor had his senses detected their presence until now. They seemed to have materialized out of the air.

The man closest to John glanced at him. He was thin in built and wore a silver chain around his head. The silver medallion in the center had a swirling wind pattern carved into it. The man's eyes were metallic silver with a speck of white light shining in the centers. A tattoo of dark swirling clouds surrounded his eyes. John nodded a greeting. The man returned his nod, then went back to speaking to his companion, who was of the same race.

The bartender finished serving another patron and turned in

John's direction. John inwardly groaned. The towering giant had three eyes like Dr. Yik. He moved toward John and the two men beside him. He spoke to the silver-haired men first, but his center eye focused on John.

As he prepared two drinks, he said, "New in town?"

John did not realize the giant was speaking to him until the man sitting beside him glanced his way. "Oh, sorry. I am."

The bartender placed a foaming drink in front of each silver-haired man. "Here you go. The usual. Got a name?"

Again, John was slow in responding. With two of the giant's eyes looking at the men and the center one focused on him, he could not tell who the giant was talking to. "Sorry. John McCall."

"Welcome to Cerko, John McCall. I am Navas."

John did his best not to visibly cringe as Navas scanned his body with that single eye. It seemed fixated on him.

"You saw Dr. Yik."

"I had an accident."

Like Dr. Yik, Navas stared at him without blinking. "What can I get you?"

"I was told I could find a merchant who deals in ships here. I need a ride off this planet, like, yesterday."

John waited for his reply. It seemed this cyclops race liked to take their time to answer questions. John was getting

antsy.

Navas's main two eyes glanced over John's right shoulder. The middle remained on John. "Far corner, on right. Merchant sells ships and other goods. Tell him Navas says you okay."

"Thank you."

Navas bowed his head and left to serve more drinks to his other customers. John rotated his stool. He scanned the dimly lit room and located the merchant Navas spoke of. He was sharing a drink with the two snakelike aliens who had entered before John.

The scaly, greenish gray reptiles had little black eyes, black oval patches on their leathery skin, a protruding jaw, and a flickering pale-gray forked tongue. They were one of the more dangerous-looking races in the bar. John was in no mood for a confrontation, so he waited until their conversation was over to approach the merchant. While he waited, he wondered what sort of products the snakes dealt in.

When they finally left, John stood and carefully limped his way to the ship merchant. The man had shoulder-length, jet-black hair. His flesh appeared bloodless and translucent. He was physically fit, contrary to most pudgy ship merchants John knew. His solid black eyes landed on John. John anticipated seeing vampiric fangs at the opening of his bluish lips.

John bowed his head. "Good afternoon," he spoke into the

translator's mouthpiece. "I was told you're a ship merchant. Navas said to tell you that I'm okay."

The vampire-like man leaned sideways to look around John, toward the bar. John turned around and saw Navas staring at them with all three eyes. Navas nodded. John's attention returned to the merchant, who gestured for John to have a seat.

The man sat forward in his seat. "I am Wanchai. How can I help you?"

John retracted his staff and clipped it to his belt. He was relieved to see no fangs, only gleaming white teeth. "I'm John McCall. I crash landed on Cerko yesterday. I'm from the Sea-anan Empire, and I need to get back there ASAP."

"What kind of ship?"

"A fast one."

"Is warp ten fast enough for you?"

"You don't have anything faster?" John was hoping there was a race amongst these new aliens who possessed a ship with faster speed than warp speed, similar to his people.

"There is nothing faster than warp ten."

John sighed. *Apparently not outside of my empire*, he thought. "There's one problem. I have no money."

"Then I have no ship."

"What?"

"I have no ship."

John stared at the fangless vampire, willing himself to stay calm. "Let me explain. A power hungry thug is invading my part of space. I need to get back to my empire and warn my people before they're attacked. I can't do that without a ship."

Wanchai sat back in his chair. He crossed his muscular arms over his broad chest. "No money. No ship."

John held out his hand. "You'll get your money. I promise you. As soon as I get back to the empire and warn my people."

"No."

"Lives are at stake here."

"Not my war. Not my problem."

His callousness angered John. "What do you mean 'not my problem'?"

"No money. No ship."

"I didn't actually get a chance to grab my wallet when we were attacked during the middle of the night."

"You should have."

John pressed his lips together and glanced at the sea of aliens. He needed that ship. Too many lives were at stake. He decided to try an approach he normally would not approve of.

"Have you ever heard of the Seacats?" A flash of interest crossed the alien's eyes. John tapped his insignia. "I'm a Seacat of the Sea-anan Empire."

"I have heard of the Seacats. You are not one of them."

John's eyebrows rose. "Excuse me."

"The Seacats are *cats*."

His words reminded John of what Dr. Yik's had said. "I'm a half-blood. My father is human, an Earthling."

"Good for you."

"Right." John was unsure if the alien was making fun of him. "How about that ship?"

"No money. No ship."

"No ship," said John at the same time as him. "How about a trade, then? Your ship for mine."

Wanchai thought about it. John figured the deal would interest him. His Seacats were new to this side of space. Therefore, no one possessed a Seacat vessel, even if it was banged up and parked behind Dr. Yik's office building.

"Agreed."

John released a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"On one condition."

Why did he think it would be that easy? "What's that?"

"I want the symbol on your pants, those bangles, and," he pointed to John's right ear, "that."

"My insignia, translator, and my wristguards! Are you crazy?"

"You have no funds. You crashed your ship. That is my

payment."

John did not hesitate. He had trained extremely hard to earn his badge. He was not giving it up. Nor was he going to take off his translator or wristguards. The bangles had not only a communication system built into its impervious metal but a tracking device. The Imperial Warriors not only used the bracelets as shields, but it was their link to each other.

More importantly, he was not about to hand over the Seacats' technology to a complete stranger. The Starfighter was a common vessel used throughout the empire. The alliance, composed of peaceful worlds, all shared that particular technology. He did not mind sharing that with outsiders. However, sharing the advanced technology created by his mother and siblings without signing a contract to secrecy was out of the question. If every nation was as advanced as the Seacats then the empire would lose its edge in the universe.

"Forget it. No deal."

"No deal," repeated Wanchai. He stood from the table and left the tavern.

John covered his face with his hands. What was he going to do next? It looked like he was going to spend another night on Cerko. His next step should be to locate a place to sleep. He unclipped his staff and extended it. Carefully standing up, he went to the bar to speak with Navas.

"Got ship?" asked Navas as he approached John.

"No money, no ship," replied John, sitting down. He rubbed his face. "It looks like I'll be staying for a while." He looked at Navas. Three eyes looked back at him. "Do you know where I can find the innkeeper? I'm going to need a room."

"And food."

"And food," repeated John. He expected Navas to answer his question. It was simple enough. However, Navas did not. He just stared. "Navas?"

"What is payment? No money, remember?"

"Maybe the innkeeper will let me work it off or something."

"Or something." Navas's middle eye switched its attention to the staff John had leaning against the bar. "You cannot walk, remember?"

John exhaled in frustration. "Fine. I'll give him my chain. It's pure gold. That's enough payment for room and board."

"Nice chain."

John saw all three eyes focusing on his neck. He swallowed. "Yeah." He eyed the giant carefully. "Where can I find the innkeeper?"

"I am innkeeper." Navas held out his huge hand. "I take payment now."

John hesitated. He regarded the outstretched hand. It could crush his head without trying. "Are you serious, or is this some

kind of joke? I have to warn you, I'm in no mood to play around."

"No joke. I own Road Kill. No chain, no room or food." He waited.

Gritting his teeth, John reached behind his neck and released the clasp to the chain his brother Alan had bought him two Christmases ago. "This had better be an awesome room." John placed the chain in the center of Navas's large palm.

"Room is clean." Navas's fingers closed around the chain. "Food is edible."

John watched him put the chain in his pocket. "Great," he said sarcastically. He hoped his brother would understand why he parted with the expensive gift.

"Follow me." Navas led John to a room upstairs.

John walked two steps into the room and stopped. He viewed the interior in one sweep. The room was the size of a closet. In front of him was a wooden single-sized bed flushed against the wall. It looked barely big enough for his little sister who was five foot four. He was six foot five. By the foot of the bed was a small desk that looked like it was made for a child. The tiny space was indeed clean, but not worth the chain.

John turned to Navas, glaring. Navas chuckled as he left.

Chapter 2

Three months passed, and John still found himself stranded on Cerko. Unfortunately, he was no closer to getting off the planet. So far, Cerko had escaped Daehog's attacks, which was why John refused to send a Mayday signal from his wristguards. Instead, he tried making deals with every ship merchant who entered the bar. But unless he agreed to throw in his insignia, translator, and wristguards, no one was interested in his broken ship. At least his leg and ribs had healed.

The price for room and board paid with his gold chain had run out. John now worked in the bar in exchange. It was a slow day. He wiped the bar with a clean rag. Thoughts of his family entered his mind. He prayed they were all right. Did he still have a home to return to? When would he ever go home?

A group of four aliens entered the tavern and paused at the doorway. John glanced at the men as they scanned the dark interior. They chose a table in the middle of the room and made themselves comfortable. Navas hurried over to take their orders. John continued cleaning the counter. Unless they were ship merchants, he was not interested.

He went to the sink and started washing the pile of dirty glasses. The appearance of the aliens who visited Road Kill no longer surprised him. This group was the least interesting-

looking to him; the men seemed to look more like Earthlings than John did.

Navas returned with their drink order. He placed the list on the counter next to John, so John could prepare the drinks while he went into the kitchen to make their lunch. John busied himself making the drinks, not noticing the odd looks the new arrivals sent his way.

The man sitting closest to the door whispered, "Are you feeling what I'm feeling?" His gaze landed on John.

The man sitting with his back to John replied, "We are all feeling what you are feeling, Samael."

"I wonder who he is?" said Samael. "Turn around and look at him, Bogdan. He looks like one of us."

"I saw him when we first entered," answered Bogdan, without turning around. "He's the reason why I wanted to enter here. I felt his presence while purchasing our supplies."

"Which is why you are the best Seeker amongst our race," spoke the male to Bogdan's left. "You are more sensitive to the Medlothian spell than the rest of us."

"Kirkus is right," said Samael. "How will you get him to come with us?"

Bogdan inhaled. "I have not thought of a way yet."

"I have a suggestion." The fourth male, Batronis, said. He sat across from Bogdan. His eyes followed John's movements.

"Yes?" Bogdan was open to any idea.

"He's new here. Ask Navas about him. That might give us insight into how to approach him."

"Good idea."

"If that does not work, we can always kidnap him," injected Kirkus, smiling.

The group laughed. They quieted down when John approached carrying a tray. They intently watched him serve the drinks. When they saw his belt buckle, their faces expressed the same emotion. Confusion.

"Will that be all?" asked John.

"Yes, thank you," replied Bogdan.

All four men watched John return to the bar.

Samael sat forward and cupped his drink. "It's a good thing he speaks Earthlish. I wonder who's destined to be his permanent mate."

Batronis lifted his drink to his lips. "We will not know until he returns with us to Surreal."

Kirkus stared at John. "I wonder if he can love someone outside his race." He drank from his mug.

"I want to know where he got that Seacat insignia," added Bogdan while tapping a fingernail on his glass. "He's no Seacat."

Samael sat straighter in his seat. "Here comes Navas with

our food. You can ask him, Bogdan."

Bogdan glanced over his left shoulder. As Navas served their lunch, Bogdan switched over to Navas's dialect and questioned him about the new help. He was pleased with what Navas told him. He was also surprised to hear that John was indeed a Seacat. Bogdan had his doubts. The Seacats he knew were felines.

In hushed tones, the men discussed what Navas revealed while they ate their lunch.

"There is only one thing left to do." Samael smiled, looking at Bogdan. "You are the lead Seeker here."

Bogdan swallowed the last of his lunch and wiped his mouth. "When will you become the lead Seeker?" He tossed his napkin on the table and stood.

"I'm in training, am I not?" Samael retorted, sitting back in his seat. "Besides, you are much better at leading than I am."

Bogdan rolled his eyes at his friend. He went to the bar and sat on a stool. While he waited for John to finish serving other customers, his thoughts drifted to his people, the Surrealans.

Twenty years ago, the Terrorshans went around enslaving planets. For those species more difficult to subdue, the Terrorshans used a molecular disruptor weapon to annihilate the

race. But thanks to Medlothian high priests, Bogdan's race, and many others, still existed. The priests saved the dying nations by casting powerful spells to keep the citizens from passing to the afterlife. The spells varied, but each allowed flexibility for the individual to retake their true form when their true love was found. As a Seeker, it was Bogdan's job to find a Surrealan's kindred spirit and take them to Surreal.

John glanced at him from the right end of the bar. Bogdan smiled. Somehow, he would take this man back to Surreal. He was determined to save another Surrealan life.

John walked up to him, adjusting his translator around his ear. "Can I get you something?" He cleaned the counter in front of Bogdan.

"No. But I can get you something."

John frowned at him. He had not noticed before that the man spoke Earthlish, the common language spreading through space.

"A ship."

John paused in his cleaning. "Excuse me?"

"My name is Bogdan Lear. Navas told me you are stranded. You are looking for a way off Cerko, correct?"

"That's right. I am."

"I want to help you."

John eyed Bogdan closer. "Why?"

Bogdan shrugged. "Because I'm a good guy."

"Yeah...right. Did Navas mention that I have no money?"

"I do not want your money."

John pressed his lips together. "I'm not giving up my insignia, translator, or wristguards, so forget it." He walked to the left end of the counter. He picked up several dirty mugs and carried them to the sink.

Bogdan watched him carefully. "I do not want your wristguards, insignia, or translator."

John paused in his washing.

"Navas said you were a Seacat. I know the Seacats. You are not like them."

John turned around. "No, I'm not. I'm not anything like them." He glared into Bogdan's eyes. "I'm a Seacat from the Sea-anan Empire."

"Where is that?"

"Not around here." John returned to his washing.

"My offer stands. That is, if you want to go home."

John slowed in his washing. "What's the catch?"

"No catch. I have to return to my planet first and unload my cargo. Then I'll be more than happy to fly you to your empire."

John faced him. He restrained his excitement. It could not be that easy. It never was. Fate was not kind to the McCalls. "That's it?"

Bogdan dipped his head once.

John's gaze narrowed. "How far is your planet?"

"Three lunar cycles from here."

John grimaced. "Three months. It figures."

"It's better than nothing."

"I want to go home now."

"Have you contacted your people?"

John's lips thinned. "If I had, I wouldn't need a ride home."

"Are you happy here?"

John looked at him as if he was crazy.

"I can take you home, Seacat. If you want."

John thought about it.

Bogdan shrugged. "It's up to you. I just thought you would prefer actively returning home to serving drinks while waiting to be rescued."

John glanced at the mug he held. "When is takeoff?"

"In three days. My companions and I have some things we need to purchase. Where are you staying?"

"Here," answered John.

"Then in three days time, I shall meet you here, Seacat."

Bogdan held out his hand.

John clasped his forearm and shook. "Thank you."

"You are welcome." Bogdan returned to his seat.

"Well, is he coming with us?" Samael eagerly asked.

Bogdan nodded. His companions shared a secretive smile.

#

Sunday, the 15th of November
Planet Surreal

John was anxious to exit the ship. The sooner they unloaded the cargo, the sooner he would be heading home. Bogdan reached for the keypad beside the door. It opened and the plank slowly extended.

John exited the ship two steps behind Bogdan. Halfway down the plank, he experienced an intense coldness that stopped him in his tracks. "Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

John embraced himself. "The temperature made a nosedive."

Bogdan shook his head. "I do not feel cold." He continued walking.

John shivered as he followed Bogdan. He noticed not many spaceships were docked where Bogdan had landed, which was outside of the city walls.

"Where is the rest of the fleet?"

Bogdan looked at the docked spaceships. He exhaled deeply.
"This is it."

"You're kidding." John scowled at him. "How many ships are there?"

"A hundred. Half are on assignment. This half remains to protect the planet."

John was stunned. How could there be only a hundred when his preternatural senses detected a large population behind the city walls?

"Why aren't there more ships?"

Bogdan explained while they made their way to the walls. "Our fleet was one of the largest in this part of space, but one day, we were attacked by a powerful force. They destroyed the fleet and nearly annihilated my race." He gestured to the docked ships. "This is what survived the attack. Without sufficient funds or valuable things to trade, we cannot get the materials needed to build more. Luckily, our mechanics can keep the ships running with the little funds we do have."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Bogdan led him to a high stone wall. They stopped in front of a pair of wooden doors. Bogdan waved to the guards in the tower. The oversize doors cracked open to allow them entry. John paused to glance around the enclosed city. He had expected to have to weave through a crowd. The number of life forces he had detected from outside did not match the handful of scattered beings he saw working at their posts.

He used his senses to scan the area. It was the same. It confused him, making him suspicious. Bogdan called his name.

John shivered, hugged himself tighter, and followed him. He found the mixture of spaceships and Middle Age technology an odd combination. He never considered the two occurring simultaneously. It saddened him to think this was what remained of an advanced civilization. Was this fate awaiting his empire?

"I take it you don't have much funds to rebuild your homes, either."

"I already told you. My race was almost annihilated."

"Sorry."

Bogdan led John to a medium-sized, sad-looking castle situated in the center of the run-down city. Again, John's senses told him there were many beings inside the deteriorating walls. After entering, he looked around and saw only a handful. This puzzled him. Were the natives hiding from him? Why? He was not a scary guy.

John shivered. Perhaps the frigid air was throwing his senses off. It had never happened before. Then again, he had never been this cold before.

A clean-shaven, dark-haired man around John's age entered the main corridor, calling the men's attention. He wore a tan shirt, brown pants, and dark brown boots. The clothes complimented his youthful, athletic form. Bogdan immediately bowed and introduced the young man as King Yudit. John bowed his respects.

"Please excuse me, Lord Yudit, but I must leave. I have cargo to unload."

"Did you manage to get everything I requested?"

"I did, and more."

"Excellent. Until later then," Yudit replied.

Bogdan looked at John. "I leave you in good hands. I will talk to you later."

"Good-bye," said John.

"Come with me to my office, Seacat. There we can speak privately."

John nodded.

On entering the office, Yudit pointed toward two high, wingback chairs and a small table situated in front of the fireplace. "Please, have a seat," he said. "Would you like some wine?"

"No, thank you." John sat in the chair nearest the door.

He fingered his shirt pocket, debating whether he should put on his translator or not. After spending three months with Bogdan and his friends, he had learned the few altered English words they used. Since Yudit was a Surrealan also, he should not have problems understanding him. So, he decided to leave his translator in his pocket.

The king sat in the second chair. He intently regarded John while he spoke. "I hope your trip to Surreal was comfortable."

"It was." John nodded. "It's a spacious ship. I'm sorry to hear what happened to the rest of them."

"Bogdan told you then."

"He did." John smoothed back his short hair. "I can relate. My empire is under attack as we speak."

"Is it really?"

John sadly nodded.

"Tell me about it."

John carefully eyed King Yudit. Did he really want to know? He felt the young king needed to be aware of the situation in space, so he explained what happened on Sea Base Ten.

"It was my siblings Mathew's and Areo's twentieth birthday, and the grand opening of the latest space station built in the Sea-anan Empire. All were invited. The space station overflowed with visitors. Many have never traveled so far from their homes. By midnight, most of Sea Base Ten was asleep, except for the night crew and a few aliens who decided to start the party early. Minutes after the first bombs made impact, my brother Alan rushed into my room shouting we've been breached. We ran to the nearest bedrooms intending to help our relatives. Most were already gone. We found a few fighting in another hallway..."

While John recounted the events, his mind returned to Sea Base Ten.

"The children!" Areo shouted while executing several lethal

kicks and punches. "We have to find the kittens and get them out of here!"

"We have to get *everyone* out of here!" corrected John. He grabbed his opponent by the head and jerked it to the right, breaking his neck. "We need to get our weapons and the Bracelets of Foresight!"

"We can't let the bracelets fall into enemy hands!" added their brother Eric while he shredded the throats of the three remaining enemies with his extended, razor-sharp claws.

For the moment, the wave of enemy troops had ceased.

Areo stood next to her sibling. "Who are they, Eric?" She angrily stared at the fallen men. "I've never seen their kind before?"

"Neither have I." He pointed to each in turn and said, "There are three different species working together."

"I don't care how many there are," commented John. "Spread out." He looked at his cousins then at his brothers. "Lynxanna, Narfez, you two head to the Weapons Chamber and get the bracelets. Eric, Bobby, the two of you get to Docking Bay. Get the civilians who don't have transportation aboard a White Star."

"Alan, Johnny, Hank, help the rest of the civilians get to their personal ships," Areo directed her remaining brothers. "John and I will head to the bridge. Good luck and stay frosty."

With a nod, they all parted.

Areo and John fought their way to the nearest elevator that led to the Control Room. John pressed the call button and the blood-smeared doors slid opened. Areo flinched. She turned her face, closed her eyes, and gripped the material above her heart.

John's hands closed into fists. "They're monsters," he hissed. With a heavy heart, he dragged the two decapitated corpses from the elevator.

"Don't forget their heads. *Please.*"

John noticed Areo did not look at the women. He gently lifted the heads and placed them beside the corpses. There was barely anything left of their carved bodies to identify them by. It was the same for all the victims—be it man, woman, or child.

During their short trip in the elevator, John watched his sister take a calming breath. She gagged, for the air was saturated with the stench of death.

"I think I'm going to be sick. I can't breathe." She held a trembling hand over her nose.

"I understand. But you have to concentrate. Don't let your senses overwhelm you. Control them."

"How can you stand it? I've never smelled so much death or evil."

"Neither have I, sis—"

"My entire body is tingling." She examined the goose bumps

on her arms. "There's an evil presence around us."

John placed a firm hand on her shoulder. "I understand, but remember we're Seacats. You need to focus. Too many lives depend on us."

She agreed as the doors reopened. A team of enemy forces spotted them exiting the elevator. Areo and John managed to push past them. Arriving at the Control Room, John reached out and slammed his fist against the door's entry pad.

He yelled his question before the doors were completely opened. "Captain, what's the status?"

The bridge was full of humanoids dressed in black one-piece uniforms with gray stripes on the shoulders, running in different directions, receiving and executing orders.

"Piscean! Princess! Thank God, the two of you are all right."

"What the hell happened?" John stood to the left of Captain Erickson, an Earthling. He glanced out the main oversized window at the one passenger Starfighters and larger White Stars that were engaging the intruding warships. The electromagnetic security grid that surrounded the perimeter of the station should have disintegrated any object that neared it before setting off the alarms. "How did they get this close without us knowing?"

"I was asking myself that same question. The only answer I

came up with is—"

"Captain Erickson! Enemy troops have entered the main engine room!" interjected Lieutenant Johnson from the station's main control panel.

"No, our life support systems! Our main power supply!" exclaimed Areo, seconds before the overhead lights began to flicker.

"Captain, if we lose power we won't be able to keep up our defense shields, or maintain life support. Our laser cannons and homing missiles are malfunctioning. Plus I'm detecting a—"

A brilliant light from outside filtered in through the window, interrupting the Lieutenant. The ripples of the explosion that rocked through the space station temporarily replaced thoughts of flickering lights and power failure. Everyone on the bridge was happy to see a White Star had succeeded in destroying one of the larger enemy vessels. The overhead lights flickered several times more then died.

"No," Areo whispered, releasing her tight grip on the railing.

"Switch to auxiliary! Relay power from the other three engine rooms! Bring those defense shields and life support back online!" shouted the captain to several aliens via the translator hooked around his left ear. "How many ships are left in Docking Bay? Have you reached Sea Base Nine? Has anyone

answered our Mayday signal?"

John respected that ability. It was why he had nominated Erickson to command Sea Base Ten. The person had to be trustworthy, strong, intelligent, and capable of taking charge of a space station large enough to hold a million people.

Erickson suddenly turned to Areo and said, "You need to get out of here."

"What? I'm not leaving until I know everyone is safely off the station."

Erickson did not bother arguing with her. He spoke to John instead. "Piscean, we need to get her out of here. I have a feeling they know she's here."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"How's that?" inquired John.

"The same way they got close to us in the first place. Traitors."

"Traitors!" John and Areo exclaimed in unison.

Erickson nodded. "How else could they have managed to get into Seacat territory without setting off the alarms? Why else would they target Sea Base Ten and not any of the other Bases, especially Sea Base Five, the Aligned Worlds headquarters?" Both men fixed their attention on Areo.

John faced the window. "He's right."

"I don't care if they know I'm here. I'm not leaving anyone

behind."

"Areo—"

"No!"

"The empire and the alliance depend on your survival," injected Erickson.

"I don't care! I won't and that's final!"

"Look who we have here," announced a familiar voice from the entranceway.

John turned around and saw his brother Mathew. His cousin Mike was with him. They held between them a battered, long-time friend, Mikkoa, from the planet Iguanidae.

"It seems Mikkoa has decided to turncoat on us," explained Mike.

"You were in charge of the Bridge a little while ago." The captain pointed an accusing finger at him. "It was you who turned off the security grid and the alarms."

"Him and several others," said Mike. "We've captured a few of his accomplices."

"I'm wondering why even bother?" Mathew snarled. "They're responsible for everyone who died today."

"Agree. But we're not savages like they are," replied John.

"They're not savages," corrected Areo. "They're monsters!" She glared at her new enemy. "Why did you do it? Why did you betray us?"

"They promised me riches beyond anything you can imagine," Mikkoa replied in a raspy voice through his translator.

"So that's it?" Areo yelled, stopping in front of him. "You fucked me over for a percentage! You bastard! Do you have any idea what you've done?" She pointed to the entrance. "Have you taken a good look out there? Have you seen all the mutilated bodies lying around? All those innocent men, women, and children your newfound buddies have raped and decapitated for no fucking good reason!"

John's hand landed on her shoulder. It would do no good for her to lose control. She was this team's leader. Everyone there needed guidance and assurance that she was still in control.

While she composed herself, John asked what was on everyone's mind. "Who are they, Mikkoa? Who do they work for? What do they want?"

"They call themselves the Dominion," replied Mikkoa with a sneer. "Three races united to serve one ruler, Daehog."

"Which are the races?" asked Captain Erickson.

"You have never heard of them. They are not from this part of the galaxy."

"Humor us," clipped Areo.

"The Ailatinegs. The Orions. And the Braqarians."

"I have never heard of them."

The new voice startled John. Blinking rapidly, he glanced

at his surroundings. He had forgotten where he was, with whom he was with. The nightmare he had escaped was still fresh in his mind, even though it had occurred six months ago.

"What does Daehog want?" continued Yudit.

"Daehog wants to rule this dimension, Guildhall, and all the other dimensions."

"All the others?"

John rubbed his face with both hands. "Areo's bracelets, the Bracelets of Foresight, can unlock portals to other dimensions," he answered. "I think Daehog intends to use the bracelets to enter these other dimensions so he can conquer them as well." He shook his head. "But that can't happen."

"Why not?"

"There's a spell on the bracelets. If anyone other than the rightful owner tries to put them on, the power within the bracelets will kill him."

"That *is* good news." Yudit paused before asking his next question. "Have you contacted your peepuhl?"

Peepuhl? He means people, thought John. "No." He showed Yudit his wristguards. "I can with these, but if I do, the Dominion will find me." He looked at Yudit. "Your planet barely survived one attack. I can't be the cause of your destruction. As much as it kills me, I'll wait for Bogdan to fly me to Sea Base Nine."

"Thank you," said Yudit. "Bogdan will be busy for a few days making certain his cargo is properly distributed." He stood from his seat. "In the meantime, please make yourself at home. I'll have a maid escort you to your quarters."

John thanked the king for his hospitality. Soon after he left the room, Yudit sent his soldiers on horseback to spread the news about the Seacat's arrival across the land. The women of the mist had to view the outlander. One of them was destined to be his permanent mate.

The moment John saw the bedroom had a fireplace situated at the foot of the bed, he asked to have someone start a fire. An older man with gray streaks throughout his once-black hair was quickly sent to his room with matches and logs. As he prepared the fire, John questioned him about where he might bathe. The man informed John that the natives of Surreal only hand-washed on a daily basis.

John was not happy. Because of his mixed heritage, he was born with special gifts. One gift in particular made it uncomfortable for him to breathe the longer he went without submerging in water. For now he would have to make due with submerging his face in the bowl of lukewarm water for ten minutes before cleansing himself with a towel barely larger than his hand.

John dropped the rag beside the basin filled with dirty

water and jumped underneath the covers naked. Even with a fire blazing in the hearth, he could not get warm, so he pulled the covers over his head. It was another restless night.

Chapter 3

The following afternoon, an excited Bogdan revealed that a grand feast was planned for the next evening in John's honor. Everyone was invited. John thought the party was unnecessary. Bogdan told him that King Yudit insisted. Not wanting to insult the king, John agreed to attend.

During the feast, Bogdan introduced John to several lords and ladies who resided in the castle. The number of people who attended the feast did not match up to what John's senses were telling him. He decided the cold was the culprit. He would not be able to rely on his senses during his stay on Surreal.

John was seated at the king's table, which was at the furthest end of the room from the entrance, raised on a wooden platform. Beside him sat a married couple who were indulging too much in alcohol. They giggled and flirted unabashedly with each other.

The middle-aged man turned to him, raised his wine goblet, and asked, "Would you like a drink?"

"No thanks," he replied.

John looked around the room. Plenty of oil lamps and candles lit the large area. It was a step back in time. The 'Great Hall', as Bogdan called it, was sectioned off into three parts by tall wooden pillars that supported the high timber

roof. In many areas, the stone walls and mortar were in need of repair. Narrow, elongated windows were scattered along the outer walls. The wooden shutters were wide open, allowing a slight breeze to enter. For the feast, the stone floor was swept, and the eight long wooden rectangular tables were covered with white linen.

A lovely young maiden appeared in front of John with a large kettle in her dainty hands. "Would you like some more tea?"

John smiled. "Yes. Thank you."

The young maiden peeked at John while she slowly poured the hot liquid into his metal mug. She had shoulder-length brown hair, pouty lips, and brown eyes. Her generous breasts and hips made her waistline appear tiny. She spotted him staring. She drew from her apron pocket a small bag of herbs. She intentionally tilted forward to give John a better view of her bosom as she placed the bag on the small dish next to the mug.

John smiled. He enjoyed when women flirted with him, especially the pretty ones. Being part feline had its privileges. He had a high libido and was more than willing to share it with a beautiful woman. The scent of lilac reached his nose. It was pleasant, but not his favorite scent. His gaze followed the young brunette across the table.

Jasira stopped by the hall entrance. She had decided at the

last minute to attend the gathering to please her parents. She was not keen on meeting another stranger and have him turn out not to be the one for her. Therefore, she had waited until she noticed the celebration was nearing its end to make an appearance.

Her attention was immediately drawn to the stranger who sat at the king's table. His aura was like a magnet, drawing her to him. She could not pull away. She approached him just as a maiden carrying a large kettle shifted sideways to serve the other guests. Jasira paused in front of him. He was handsome and powerfully built. What was it about him that called out to her? He seemed to radiate energy, strength—and something more.

Jasira intently studied his face, his eyes. He glanced at the married couple beside him. She watched him watch them. She saw it then. It was in his eyes. Sadness. She was compelled to move closer. She phased through the table and stood beside him. She was careful not to touch him.

The scent of vanilla reached John's nose seconds before warm air surrounded him. He was grateful for the respite from the cold and enjoyed it more than the food and drink. It was the first time since he had arrived that he felt warm.

John scanned the table in front of him, searching for the source of the vanilla fragrance. He found no new desserts that could be the cause. None of the empty platters was the source.

He looked at the maiden who had flirted with him. She was nearing his seat again. Perhaps it was she who smelled so good, and the lilac scent was from the many flowers decorating the room. As for the heat, John hoped it lasted. He hated the cold. He was more of a summer-all-year-round person.

He noticed King Yudit and Bogdan were speaking. At intervals, they paused to look at him intently. Were they talking about him?

"Do you see that?" asked Bogdan.

"Of course I do," Yudit whispered.

"It seems Jasira is the one."

Yudit nodded.

"We must now give her time to win his heart and trust." Bogdan looked at Yudit. "Any ideas? He is anxious to return to his empire, to war."

"You are a busy man," suggested Yudit. "You have packages to deliver, a permanent mate to visit." He turned to Bogdan. "Disappear."

"He will go to you then."

"Let him." Yudit stared at John. "I am the king. What can he do if I have no ships to spare? He will remain on Surreal until we are sure about their future."

"He may get restless and use his wristguards."

"I doubt it. He strikes me as a man of honor. He would not

condemn us to death." He glanced at Bogdan. "I will instruct the guards to remind our citizens to remain silent. No one must speak a word about the peepuhl of the mist. If he learns the solution to our problem, it would sever the mists' connection to the planet's core. We could lose them all." He returned to staring at John. "I will not allow that to happen."

Bogdan saw John staring back at them. "He is curious and observant. He will ask questions."

"Let him. Say nothing. I will deal with him. If I must, I will tell him what he needs to know."

After a while, their behavior made John feel so uncomfortable that he felt it was time to leave. He said goodnight to everyone at the table and thanked the king for an excellent feast. He tried not to rush as he headed to the door. Before exiting the large room, he glanced over his shoulder and spotted Yudit and Bogdan still watching him. What was going on? Did he do something that made them suspicious of his intent? Did he make a mistake coming here? He would have to tread carefully.

John walked along corridors lit by oil lamps. His feline genetics allowed him to see well in the dark, but they did not help him locate his room. He growled. He looked at the time on his wristguard. He had been walking in circles for fifteen minutes. He felt foolish doing it, but he stopped to ask a maid for directions.

He entered his room and found the maiden who had poured his tea at the celebration preparing a fire in the hearth at the foot of his bed. "Well, hello." He felinely approached her.

The maiden stood. "Hi." She smiled and nervously wiped her hands on her apron.

"What's your name?"

"Dena."

"Lovely name." Her cheeks turned pink. "I'm John." He reached for her hand and kissed it. "Nice to meet you."

Dena's cheeks darkened. She quickly returned to her work.

John sat on his bed. His gaze traveled over Dena's curves repeatedly while she prepared the fire. "Do you live here in the castle?"

"No. I live outside the kasuhl. My pairunts own the meat market in toun. I work here to earn extra money to help them and my siblings."

"How many siblings do you have?" He enjoyed listening to her sweet voice. It was a distraction from the cold. However, her strange words made it a little difficult to understand.

"I'm the eldest of five. I have three bruhders and one sisder." She finished her work and stood. Her eyes met his and stayed. "Where are you from?"

John sniffed the air. She did not smell like vanilla. Her scent was that of lilac. "I'm a Seacat from the Sea-anan

Empire."

"Where is that?"

"Far from here."

There was a knock at the door. A dark-haired man stood in the doorway. "Dena?"

"Yes?"

"Sir Ekin's tray of food is getting cold. It must be delivered immediately."

"Of course." The man left. Dena addressed John. "I must go. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"Same here." John's eyes followed her out. She closed the door.

John glanced at the fire Dena made. He shivered and placed another log into the flames; it did little to rid the room of the chill. Tired, he dunked his face in the water, but skipped the hand wash. He then swiftly removed his boots and clothes and jumped into bed naked. With the heavy quilt pulled all the way up to his nose, he settled in for the night. As he drifted off to sleep, he thought he detected the scent of vanilla filtering into the room.

Jasira phased through the closed door. She found John already in bed. She spotted his clothes on the bench. The thought of him naked beneath the sheets piqued her interest, but she remained where she stood, at the foot of the bed, and

watched John fall asleep.

Her attention remained on John for hours; finally, her curiosity got the best of her and she approached him. With a wave of her hand, the quilt and sheet lowered to John's knees, exposing the man underneath. She had never seen a more magnificent specimen of a warrior.

Her jaw tightened. Her heart spasmed. Her eyes filled with tears. Jasira desperately wished she was solid. She wished she could feel the steeliness of his sculptured body and the silkiness of his skin. It pained her that she would never know how any man felt. She was destined to remain a phantom until true love came her way. Only then would she become solid.

Jasira could not remember the color of her eyes or hair. She doubted she would ever see her reflection again. Unwilling to endure the torment of being near John any longer, she decided to leave—but not without touching him first. She knew she would not be able to feel anything. She was setting herself up for more pain, yet she could not help herself. The longing was the greatest she had ever felt.

Jasira reached for John's hair, expecting her fingers to go through him. Instead, they encountered a wispy resistance. Jasira gasped. She tentatively gathered a short lock between her forefinger and thumb. A tremor began in her chest as the soft sensations registered in her mind. It was impossible. She was

told the only person she would be able to touch was her kindred spirit. Did that mean John was him?

Hesitantly, Jasira reached for his handsome face. Again, she encountered solid mass. Her heart banged in her chest. John's skin was smooth and soft. Tears filled her eyes. This time, they were tears of joy. Overwhelmed by her discovery, Jasira re-covered John with a wave of her hand and floated out of his room through the nearest wall.

John woke up early the next morning, sleepy and moody. The quilt he used was not enough to keep him warm, even with the fire going. He swore he felt cold even in his dreams. The chill seemed to be in his bones. John got up from bed and quickly washed his face and body. He dressed in the warmest clothes he had. Fully dressed, he still shivered. He did his best to ignore his discomfort and left the room to explore.

From the castle's main entrance, John noticed that a lot of small homes and businesses were built within the stone wall. Yet not many people lived in the area. So who ran the businesses? And why was he the only one shivering? The few people he saw did not seem affected by the cold. He made a note to put on two layers of clothes tomorrow.

John climbed one side of the wall and looked out into the land beyond. He saw dry, cracked earth with scattered patches of greenery. The mountains in the distance reminded him of home,

making him homesick.

He climbed back down and passed each business and home a second time. He came across Dena's siblings playing outside. Their parents heard a male's voice and exited the small home to investigate. John greeted them with a good morning and told them he had met their eldest daughter at the castle. He could tell they were proud of her working at the castle. According to them, not many were allowed to do so.

He bid them farewell and continued with his exploration of the area. The need to know his surroundings was Basic Survival 101. He mentally mapped out the area and tried to commit each new face to memory.

John rubbed his arms in frustration. He did not understand why he felt so cold when it was a beautiful sunny day. At times, the cold would intensify. It was unlike anything he had experienced in the past. He shivered and continued walking.

He passed another two-room house. Like the others, it seemed unoccupied. He looked through a window beside the front door. The interior was clean and tidy. Apparently, he was wrong. Someone did live there. He opted to leave before he was labeled a Peeping Tom.

The sound of children's laughter drew his attention next door. The towering building looked like an old country church with faded white chipping paint. John noticed there were

children playing in the fenced backyard. He climbed the small porch and peeked through a front window. He saw rows of small tables with seats, two large desks at the front, and three large blackboards. It was not a church, but an empty classroom.

John leaned his head on the glass and thought of his family—his younger siblings in particular. He feared for their safety. It was the main reason why he desperately wanted to get back to the Sea-anan Empire. He needed to locate his family. He needed to know they were safe.

Desperate to get out of the cold, John tried the front door. It was open. He entered and closed the door behind him. The fragrance in the room placed a smirk on his face. He made his way down an aisle. The wearer of the perfume must have been there before him. Who was she? What did she look like? Was she as attractive as the scent?

John sat in the seat between the two teachers' desks. He compared the large room to those in his culture's past history. He felt like he had stepped back in time. The entire city had an Old World appearance, except for the sectioned-off area outside the walls that was designated for spaceships.

While he sat on the small bench, the coldness that plagued him gradually subsided to a cozy warmth that wrapped around him, as did the pervasive scent of vanilla. The warmth grew as a new sensation gripped him. It felt like someone was combing

her fingers through his hair.

John passed his fingers through his short hair. He rubbed his scalp. The sensation continued. He glanced around. There was no one in the classroom. He stared at the clean blackboards. He knew he should feel afraid, but strangely, the invisible fingers had a soothing affect on his tight nerves.

John closed his eyes and deeply inhaled the aura in the room. One by one, his coiled, aching muscles relaxed. Those magical fingers lowered to his shoulders, pressing into his muscles. His head dipped forward while they massaged the tension from his shoulders. John felt the stress leaving him—a first since the attack. He sat there enjoying the massage.

Jasira was beside herself with joy. She could not believe she was able to touch this beautiful man. To be given a mate was more than she had dared to hope for, but here he was. Solid and real. And extremely stressed, by the look on his face.

It was recess. Two teachers were outside with the class of sixty while Jasira remained indoors, preparing for the next lesson. When she had glanced up from her papers, she had been startled to see John's face by the window, peering into the room. She had watched him enter. She could see the strain on his handsome face. She wished she could speak to him, learn of his problems, ease his suffering. But for now, all she could do was try to ease his tension by massaging his shoulders.

She heard an odd sound. Jasira realized it was coming from John. She smiled. It seemed he enjoyed her touch. She leaned her hips against his back and placed more force behind her hands. The sound coming from John intensified.

He could not help himself. The purr escaped him. The feeling was enjoyable. There was a slight pressure and increased heat against his spine. It felt like a body. John again glanced behind him. No one was there. Weird, he thought.

Since the classroom was the only place he could find that was warm, he decided to stay for a while. Taking a deep breath, John placed his arms on the desk. He lowered his head onto his forearms.

The pressure on his spine indeed felt like a body—a woman's body. His purrs deepened. His thoughts drifted off to another place, a more pleasant place. A place where there was no war, only a beautiful woman massaging him.

Strong fingers traveled along his spine. John clenched his jaw and curved his back slightly, hoping to press her more firmly to him. If it were not for how soothed and relaxed he felt, he would think the classroom was haunted.

Ten stress-free minutes passed before his mind considered the possibility more seriously. His slow-paced heart picked up speed. His closed eyes opened. He stared at the wooden desk beneath his arms. He focused his senses on the pleasurable

feelings. It definitely felt like a small body was pressed against his back while small, strong hands rubbed and molded his shoulders and upper back. It felt real. Very, very real.

John jumped from his seat, knocking the bench over. It dropped onto its side, going through Jasira's legs. He whirled around, thinking there was actually someone behind him. He saw no one, only a large empty classroom. He scanned the room while he tried to calm his racing heart. It dawned on him that the massage had stopped. Something was not right.

Jasira looked at John with sadness. If only he could see her, then perhaps she would not have to see the fear in his eyes, placed there by her need to soothe him. Unexpectedly, John moved through her and hurried to the front doors.

Jasira watched her kindred soul exit her classroom without opening the door. She released a soft cry. She raced to the front doors, through them, and paused in the middle of the dirt road. She spotted John rushing toward the castle. How did he go through a solid door? He was not mist. She knew he was special, but this went beyond anything she had expected.

Jasira wanted to go after him. She understood why John ran off. She did not blame him. If their situations were reversed, she would have done the same. If only she could speak to him, she would explain everything. Unfortunately, she could not. The only thing she could do was be more careful. She did not want to

scare him away permanently. However, what she saw him do demanded answers. She knew of only one person who could uncover them. Herself.

John slowed his pace. That familiar cold erased all traces of the warmth he had found at the school. He peeked over his shoulder at the white building. There was definitely something odd with that place.

He bumped into something solid. "Bogdan, I'm sorry."

"That's okay. Are you all right?"

"Actually..." John said, looking at the school, "can you tell me if there's something I ought to know about that school?"

Bogdan regarded the school from where they stood. "Like what?"

"Like if a ghost resides there."

"A ghost?"

Bogdan suddenly looked guilty. "Yeah." John noticed the slight anxious movements he made from side to side.

"Why would you ask that?"

"Because it's an old building. A lot of old buildings have history and lingering specters. I wondered if this one has both."

"Well...that bilding has stood there for centuries as our houz of worship. And it is very special. It miraculously survived the war unscathed. That's why the king converted it

into a skool—a blessed haven for our youngsters to learn in. So it does have history.” Bogdan shook his head. “But no ghosts.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Where are you off to?”

John detected Bogdan was eager to change the subject. Could he be lying about the ghost? “Back to my room.” He rubbed his arms. “I’m freezing. Is Surreal normally this cold?”

“I wish there was a chill in the air.” Bogdan tugged on his collar. “It’s stifling hot today.”

John saw the beads of sweat pouring down Bogdan’s face. It made him pause before his next words. “Um...when are we leaving?”

“I have to take several packages to neighboring vilijez, which means several days of travel on horseback. When I return, we can prepare to leave. I have to go, John. I will talk to you later.”

“Bye.” John watched him hurry off.

Bogdan’s manner told John more than his words did. He was hiding something. What was it? The delay in departure had John on edge. Bogdan’s hollow excuses told him something was amiss. Plus, the stares Bogdan and King Yudit kept sending his way were suspicious. John no longer trusted them.

By next morning, John began to think that perhaps he had imagined what happened at the schoolhouse. However, King Yudit’s and Bogdan’s odd behaviors continued. During dinner that

Thursday, they stared at him yet again. John grew uncomfortable. Frustrated with what was happening, he left his dinner unfinished. That infamous McCall temper was steadily rising in him.

He found one of the housekeepers in the corridor wiping down a table and a vase. John's anger spurred his decision to give up the pretense that a hand towel wash was enough. It might work for Surrealans or for people in the olden days, but John needed to submerge his body in water if he was to keep his strength up. Plus, towel washing did not leave him feeling cleansed. Felines liked to keep themselves well-groomed.

He asked the middle-aged woman where he could take a shower. The maid confirmed that the citizens of Surreal took baths on a biweekly basis, and that John should have a washcloth and a basin in his room. John politely insisted that a hot bath be brought to his room. The woman promised to have a tub sent to his room as soon as the water was heated. John thanked her and left.

Dena arrived with five men. The men placed the copper tub they carried in front of the fireplace, then left. John stood beside the only window in the room. He watched Dena pour several buckets of steaming water into the tub. He found her attractive; her movements were graceful like a cat. The scent of lilac reached his nose. He looked at the bucket she placed by his bed.

Perhaps it could be one of the products she carried.

"Would you like me to scrub your back?"

John covered his surprise with a cough. "What did you say?"

"Would you like for me to scrub your back?"

With a side grin, he asked, "Do you normally do such things?"

"Yes."

That erased his smile. John immediately pictured Dena bathing other men. He wondered how many of those men she had slept with. Perhaps Dena knew a trick or two she could teach him. That placed a larger smile back on his face.

"Thanks," John said, "but there's no need." He read the disappointment on her face. He knew what would make her happy. "Would you like to have lunch with me on your day off?"

"I'm off Tuesdays and Wednesdays," Dena happily told him.

"Then next Tuesday it is." He escorted her to the door and watched her hurry down the corridor. There was a spring to her step.

John closed the door and made sure it was securely locked. He returned to the bed to remove his soiled clothes. He eagerly lowered into the hot water. A familiar wave of pure heat raced through his body as a membrane of skin developed between each of his fingers and toes. His senses grew sharper. He detected distant voices and smells inside and outside the castle. He kept

his eyes closed, for his sharper vision was more suited for seeing underwater.

John found it a bit difficult to breathe, so he leaned back against the tub and slipped his head underneath the steaming water. He remained there, inhaling deep, allowing the water's heat to seep into his bones. It succeeded in erasing the chill that resided there. A chill that even the blaze from the fireplace could not eradicate. It felt wonderful to be in his amphibian form. He felt stronger, healthier, and more at ease being in his second skin.

He wondered how Dena would react if he allowed her to see him transform. Undoubtedly, she would act like many before her who had never come across a McCall. She would have freaked out and viewed him as a monster. John sat up. He reached for the soap and began to wash.

Finished with his bath, John quickly patted his body dry and leapt under the covers. He lay on his back. Sleep eluded him, thanks to his worries on the war and the cold. He forced all thoughts from his mind, hoping that would allow him to fall asleep.

He noticed an increase in the room's temperature. At last, the fire was heating up the room. He detected the hint of vanilla in the air. He was determined to find the source tomorrow.

John knew when he was thoroughly dried, for he felt his body return to normal. It became uncomfortably hot under the heavy quilt. He lowered the blanket to his hips. He deeply inhaled the delicious fragrance in the air and allowed it to wash over him, relaxing him further.

Jasira stood above John. She indeed loved looking at his bare torso. Having felt no sensations for two decades, and knowing she would be able to feel him, she could not resist the temptation of familiarizing herself with his chiseled body. Therefore, she waited for the right moment.

When John seemed to have drifted off, she gently touched his cheek. The smoothness of his face made her smile. Her hands lowered to the muscles at his chest. Her eyes fluttered closed. John felt exactly how she believed he would. Hard. Solid. Completely masculine.

Since the night of the celebration, Jasira could not get John off her mind. Once she had overcome the shock of seeing him go through a solid door the day before, she tried to plan her next move. She thought it best to go slow. However, it was going to be difficult. John's good looks made her extremely impatient to feel again.

While she sat beside John, Jasira enjoyed the many peaks and valleys that made up his chest and stomach. His skin was warm to the touch. It placed tears in her eyes. She had

forgotten what warmth felt like. She traced each small muscle with her fingers. Lower and lower they went, pausing at his narrow hips, just above the quilt's edge.

Back up they traveled to repeat the journey. Jasira stared at John's face. She had wanted a permanent mate, any man. She had not been concerned with how he looked, as long as he was a man of honor and courageous. As she stared at John's perfect features, she was overjoyed at how handsome he was.

Jasira lowered her face to John's. She stayed in that position for a while, observing him. She was slow to recognize another sensation she had forgotten—smell. Jasira sniffed John. The scent of clean skin mixed with pine made her features crumble. It was the soap John had used in his bath. Now she understood what the others meant when they spoke about pine scent.

Closing her eyes, she placed her nose on John's cheek and drew his scent deeper into her lungs. Tears formed beneath her lowered lashes. She ordered herself not to lose control of her emotions again. It took concentration, but she managed to stay calm.

Her nose roamed over John's forehead, cheek, nose, and chin. Her hands returned to exploring his chest and stomach. Gradually, Jasira became aware of another feeling. It started in the center of her core and steadily increased the longer she

remained where she sat. This new feeling was powerful. It drowned out all reason. She lost track of where she was, of what she was doing. Jasira was being consumed by the feel and scent of her kindred soul.

John showed signs of waking up. Signs Jasira missed, for her eyes were glued to his plush lips. Without hesitating, she opened her mouth above his. Her tongue unhurriedly traced the outline of John's mouth. Her features grew dreamy. Greedy for more, Jasira plunged deep into a moist cavern where she was met by an eager mate.

John fought to remain asleep. If this was a dream, he did not want to wake up. He thought of the maiden, Dena. She must have snuck into his room and was trying to seduce him. Her lips were hungry, greedy for his. It was the hottest kiss he had ever experienced.

Fully awake, John growled into her passionate mouth and eagerly dueled with her seeking tongue. He was right. Dena was well experienced. Her roaming hands started a fire in John that quickly rose in potency. His mouth opened wider. His heart filled with joy at her enthusiastic response.

John detected a strong vanilla scent. Perhaps it was Dena's scent after all, and the lilac was from the products she carried with her. He inhaled. The vanilla mingled with a more arousing perfume. John drew both fragrances into his lungs. His soul

shivered with excitement, wanting more.

On a groan, John reached upward, intending to press those delicious lips closer. He jolted when his own hand slapped his face. He sat up in bed; going through Jasira's bent form. Jasira stood from her seat. She tried to slow down her breathing, as did John as he searched the quiet room.

Was it a dream? With a confused expression, John fingered his lips. It could not be. The kiss felt unbelievably real. He could still feel those warm, soft lips on his. He sniffed the air. The aroma of vanilla mixed with a woman's arousal was potent. It caused his soul to quiver with restrained need. He touched his chest. It burned from her explorations. His aroused body longed for more.

What was going on? How could it have been a dream? None of his dreams were ever that good. A woman must be in his room. John jumped off his bed and looked around. He found no one. He raced to the front door to inspect it. It was locked from the inside, just as he had left it. How was that possible?

He returned to his bed and sat on the mattress. He thought of the school, of the massage, of the feminine body pressed along his back. Had a ghost followed him to the castle?

John sniffed the air. The pleasant smells were fading. He shivered. The cold was returning. It helped to tame his throbbing need. He quickly placed another log in the fire and

jumped underneath the covers.

Maybe it was a dream. He sure hoped so. He did not want to believe a female ghost was haunting him. He had dealt with ghosts in the past. None of them were nice. The ghosts were extremely hostile, violent, and deadly. His team suffered severely before they managed to vanquish the ghosts. He hated ghosts and did not trust them.

John turned onto his side and raised the covers to his nose. Thinking more clearly, he thought of all his ghostly encounters. All the signs were the same. And not. There were auras, like his vanilla scent. When the ghosts appeared, the area became cold, unlike now, when it became warm. Those ghosts tried to kill him. This one erased his stress with a warm massage and made him forget the nightmare he was living with a magical kiss.

John felt his soul respond to the memory. *No! he barked at it. It's a ghost, not a real woman. I won't fall for its tricks. It's up to something. It wants me to lower my guard so it can strike. Well, it won't work. I've dealt with ghosts too many times to fall for it.*

John rubbed his face, feeling temporarily unhinged. What was he thinking? He was allowing his suspicions of Bogdan and Yudit to cloud his judgment. He was, after all, in an old castle. There were probably a dozen secret passageways behind

the walls. He must have a secret admirer who snuck in, kissed him, and ran out before he saw her. John inhaled deeply. That was it. No kissing ghost. Just a foolish young girl. And John believed he knew which girl it was.

Jasira exited through the castle doors. She arrived at the little house beside the school and entered through a sidewall. She immediately went to sit at the kitchen table. Groaning, Jasira placed her face in her hands and thought of John. His erection engraved itself in her mind. She had seen plenty of naked men, of all races, but none had awakened her need to mate before. How was she going to get through tomorrow's lessons? She would have to find a way.