

Chapter 1

Friday, the 15th of May, Year 2020
Oceanica

On the plush, emerald planet of Oceanica, the cool morning air still carried along its currents the burning scent of fragrant wood and prayers for peace from the night before.

Oceanica was once a lawless planet. Rivalries between barbarous and civilized villages resulted in periodic pillaging for food and goods for bartering. The young children were kidnapped and forced to work in enemy fields. Anyone who stood up against these raiding tribes was slaughtered.

Those behind the prayers believed their creator had answered in the form of powerful felines who had arrived on a warship three years prior. There were noticeable changes in the level of chaos outside their villages. Peace was no longer a myth, but something that could be obtained in time if they worked together with the aliens. Therefore, hopeful eyes looked skyward, anticipating the arrival of the feline fleet that would announce a permanent change to their warlike planet.

To the alien cats already there, the crisp morning air reminded them of their dismal situation. Their homeworld, Oceana, had been an aquamarine, watery planet with a universal humid climate, plentiful resources for food and shelter, and one intelligent life form.

Unfortunately, in the course of a week, a series of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tidal waves had assaulted their beloved planet. Many felines were killed in the devastation before leading scientists discovered that Oceana had slipped from its orbit and was on a collision course with its sun. It could not be saved. The race's only chance of survival was to leave the security of the peaceful world they knew and to embark on a journey filled with aliens and uncertainties.

The feline nation was proud and strong. They had never experienced adversities or defeat in battle. Because of this, they believed themselves to be a superior race and viewed aliens as beneath them; having them as new neighbors made no difference. Admitting any shortcomings or seeking aid or associations with these aliens was never an option. They had survived the last three years only because the new feline king, Sev, understood that survival depended on altering their traditional way of life.

Luckily, Sev was intelligent enough to welcome the aliens into their midst. At his insistence, his warriors, the Seacats, had learned how to produce crops and make tailored clothing. They, in turn, passed the knowledge on to their citizens.

Despite these dramatic lifestyle changes, the Oceanan laws remained the same. One in particular stated that the feline nation must remain pure. Anyone who broke this law would be stripped of all possessions and wealth and banished from their homeland. The story behind the creation of this law was highlighted and marked by a ribbon within the covers of the ancient royal law book located in the castle's library.

Dawn's first rays crept along the forest's dewy canopy toward the newly constructed silver castle. Its location was on the plateau of a high mountain. From the main control room, the king kept a watchful eye upon all those who resided in his new pride lands and on any vessels that wandered too close to the planet uninvited.

The Seacats within awoke to the sounds of birds chirping and flapping their wings. Inch by inch, the sun's rays made their way over the intimidating architecture and penetrated the glass ceiling of the king's bedroom.

Bathed in golden warmth, Sev's aroused form increased in temperature. His dream was unbelievable. For the past two months, he had dreamt of being held by sensual arms and of kissing soft petal lips. While he enjoyed the feel of his dream lover's small, solid frame beneath his, Sev caressed her tight feminine curves. Her eagerness fueled his passion. Slowly, his lips traveled over her face to the curve of her neck. The taste of her was unlike anything he knew of in the real realm.

Sev loved to possess her. It was like being possessed. If he had ever felt happier or more at ease than when he was with her, he could not recall it. Perhaps he would feel differently if he could remember his life before boarding the *Emerald Tiger*. But, alas, those memories were lost to him. For now, in his dream lover's arms was where Sev longed to be. It was a place he never wanted to leave when the night ended. And letting her go each morning was getting harder.

Sev wondered who she could be. The woman never manifested completely. She had neither a face nor a body. It was like making love to a ghost. He knew she was there by the sweetness of her scent, the satiny feel of her skin, the sultry taste of her lips, and her throaty groans of pleasure.

She left Sev each morning with an ache to return to her phantom embrace. He longed to know who she was. The only change since the dreams had started was in the intensity of their passion. Their couplings never failed to leave him panting and itching for more. Sev grabbed his lover's long strands in his hands while his body raced toward the most desired results of the dream. He smoothed back her hair from her forehead. Suddenly, the ecstasy on his face changed to confusion. Her skin felt wet and sticky. Sev paused in his attack on her body and examined his right hand. His rampant heartbeat stopped.

His senses were slow to register the metallic scent in the air or the red liquid smeared on his palm and fingers. *Blood?* He smelled it then. An acrid stench of decaying flesh permeated the air, causing him to gag. *Death!*

The young lion shielded his mate with his body and scanned his surroundings. He would allow no one to harm her. Crimson blood splattered everything in the room. Sev's eyes grew. His heart pounded in his chest. Where did all the blood come from? He immediately rose to his knees, expelling himself from his lover's form. He grabbed her wrist and was about to pull her from his bed when the hairs on his nape stood upright. He paused.

Sev's gaze traveled down to his chest and thighs. To his horror, his torso was painted in red. A numbing chill entered his core. He forced his attention back to the female in his bed. His breath left him. For the first time, he saw his lover's slender form. Blood bathed it completely.

Death ensnared his soul when Sev realized the blood seeped from deep gashes on her body. He shook his head in denial. She was his lover. His mate. She was the only female who had shared his body. His bed. His dreams.

"No!" Sev's eyes shot wide open. His breathing was ragged. He stared, unfocused, at the morning sky for a few minutes before he forced himself to sit up in bed.

His body shivered. Sev pulled his knees to his chest and placed his sweat-covered face in his shaking hands. His lungs felt like they were on fire. A sad ache took hold of his heart.

What had happened? Why was she killed? How could a moment in heaven turn into a horrible nightmare? What did it all mean?

Sea Base Ten **Sea-anan Empire**

In another sector of space, a silver Starfighter swerved before spiraling downward. It glided through space more smoothly than an ordinary Starship, and its enhanced computer system made it superior in accuracy. It made a sharp turnabout and returned fire at the alien vessel pursuing it.

Areo McCall squinted through the left side window of the cockpit, at the exploding enemy warship. She felt satisfied. A blinding light suddenly enveloped that sector of space. Once it dimmed, she scanned the area it came from. What she searched for was no longer there. An overwhelming sorrow consumed her at the destruction of space station Sea Base Ten.

So many men and women had been lost. The inconceivable tortures those innocent children endured before they were slaughtered would forever torment her. Areo blinked rapidly so her tears would not distort her vision. How could it have happened? How could it be that *her* warriors would turn their backs on peace?

Areo veered and dodged another attack. "This is for all those innocent babies," she said, retaliating on the enemy ship with a heartfelt vengeance.

She glanced at her multiple injuries. Without medical attention, she would eventually die. Already, light-headedness from loss of blood was upon her. However, being a Seacat descendant, she gritted her teeth, bore the pain, and forged onward.

Areo counted the Starfighters that assisted her. Only three out of seven hundred remained. Another bolt of intense pain seared her soul. Areo swore the one who gave the order to attack Sea Base Ten would pay with his life.

Her train of thought was broken when her twin brother, Mathew, sailed his ship alongside hers on the right. His anxious voice boomed through her helmet's communicator.

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

Areo glanced at her brother's ship and hoped her voice would sound strong and positive. "Let's show them what we Seacats are made of."

Bob's Starfighter pulled up beside her on the left. John flew above her. Her dear brothers surrounded her. They always protected her. Her heart filled with love for them.

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

The ships 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 those of pureblood.

Areo spotted an enemy vessel swooping down on her twin brother's ship. Her heart thumped in her chest. She opened her mouth to warn him, but nothing came out.

"Mathew, look out! Above you!" shouted her eldest brother, John, into his helmet's communicator.

With little time to spare, Areo watched Mathew's ship swiftly evade the incoming laser missiles by entering a gyrating nosedive. He turned his ship about like the expert fighter pilot he was and glided into position directly behind the vessel, opening fire. The warship exploded into an array of bright lights. Areo released her breath.

Bob's anxious words expressed what she felt. *"That was a close one, bro. Stay frosty, will ya!"*

"I hear you, Sparky. Thanks, Piscean," replied Mathew, using Bob's and John's code names.

"Thank me later, little brother. Stay alert," returned John. Areo spotted the final White Star carrying civilians disappearing into the darkness of space. "That was the last ship, you guys. It's time we leave this nightmare."

"All right then, pick a dance partner, people. Lead them in the opposite direction from our fleeing ships," instructed John. *"Lead them as far away as you can. Then, if possible, you know what to do with them. Afterward, head immediately for Sea Base Five."*

The airwaves went silent. Areo could tell he was trying not to cry.

"Please, be careful you three. I love you."

Areo's heart twisted in pain at her brother's whispered words. Theirs was a close-knit family where blood was not the only connection.

"We love you too, brother," she replied for herself and her two siblings.

She nervously bit her bottom lip and watched John's Starfighter fly away. Only one of the enemy battleships followed him. Bob said his good-bye and was next to fly off. Mathew's sigh of relief brought her attention back to the situation at hand.

"Good. Only one decided to follow him. That leaves three for us, sis."

Areo did not answer. She was running a diagnostic scan on her ship. The results appeared on the dashboard's small monitor. She punched in several buttons to recheck what she saw. Her lips thinned. The ship was in perfect working condition. Its only issue was that it lacked the fuel needed to reach Sea Base Five, located seven and a half months away.

Mathew's worried voice boomed inside her helmet. *"Areo? Areo! Is everything all right?"*

"Huh? Oh...yeah. Everything is fine." I guess the maintenance crew didn't get a chance to refuel this ship. It figures.

She sighed and looked out the window. She saw no reason to worry her twin. Mathew had enough to concern himself with. He smoothly aligned his ship beside her. It reminded Areo of a graceful bird of prey.

"OK, then. Let's divide these three and head back to the Aligned Worlds headquarters. We need to notify the alliance about Daehog and his plans. There's no time to waste. You go down and I'll go up. And, Areo, I love you. Be careful out there."

Areo's fingers tightened around the steering lever. "I love you too, Mathew. Onssa bless and good luck."

They broke, and their ships sliced through the twinkling stars. Areo whispered a prayer to her god, Onssa. As her ship came full circle, she searched for her brother's vessel. Only one ship pursued her twin. In her opinion, Mathew was a fantastic pilot, but in a small ship against a huge warship, his odds were better if he had only one to deal with.

Her shoulders slouched. Knowing her odds were zero to none, Areo pushed the accelerator lever higher and zoomed forward. She led her enemies in a merry game of follow the leader with no clue where she was headed. It did not matter; she knew she would not be returning home. However, she did care about dodging her enemies' fire long enough to lure them out of Sea-anan territory.

An explosion of light went off near the right side of the cockpit. The vibrations caused the ship to shake.

“Blast it!” Areo’s lips pulled back. *OK, then, we need to take this up a notch.* She accelerated to maximum warp speed.

Her pursuers seemed to have lost interest. Set on making them hate her as much as she hated them, Areo turned her ship around and gave them a reason to fight. She released a barrage of laser fire and homing missiles, each with a specific destination—the main engines, the guns, and the bridge. She swerved and dove between the two warships. She was the fly they could not swat. Her desired outcome came after several passes.

The darkness of space lit up when one of the ships exploded. Areo’s blood-smeared face glowed. She had never been more proud of her brothers Bob and Alan or her sisters Angelica and Flora. They had taken the best technology of each known alien race, made dramatic improvements to it, and had created a superior technology of their own.

Areo saw the remaining ship picking up speed. She quickly turned her ship around and headed straight into the unknown.

“ ” ”

Areo jolted awake. It was getting harder for her to stay conscious. She tried to check the time, but her vision was blurry. She blinked several times and squinted again at the digital display. For two days, she had flown her ship in a straight path. Areo leaned her head back on the headrest and closed her eyes. She wondered why she had bothered to do so. She had never traveled to this part of space. Therefore, it made no difference in which direction she went. She would still be where she was now. Lost.

There was a heavy weight at her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe. She believed the end was close. A distant beep called her attention. Areo forced her eyes to focus on the monitor as a map appeared on the screen. She first saw a small red blinking light at the bottom of the screen, indicating an enemy ship. Then a yellow light appeared in the upper left-hand corner. The long-range scanners had detected a planet nearby.

Areo made her choice immediately. In all honesty, she had no choice. She was a Seacat, expected to fight until the death. This sort of tenacity was what made the Seacats fearsome warriors. And even though her bloodline was impure, Areo still considered herself a Seacat.

With her target locked in her ship’s computer, Areo changed direction and began her assault. This time it was harder. Longer. It was difficult to concentrate with the cobwebs in her head, and impossible to see clearly with her failing eyesight. Luckily, being born of mixed heritage had its privileges like preternatural senses. Areo utilized hers and managed to destroy the enemy ship.

Once the deed was done, Areo turned her ship around and headed for the alien planet. Within two hours, she could see the green orb in the distance. Her engines began to sputter. She shut them down and sent a Mayday signal. She prayed the planet’s inhabitants were friendly, for she did not want her body blasted out of the sky.

On the planet’s surface, Sev was sitting in the control room in front of a giant, blank monitor. His thoughts were not on his citizens or on the planet’s safety. Two days had passed since his wretched nightmare, and he could not get it out of his mind. His phantom lover had not returned since that morning. His heart ached for her. His body longed for hers. Each night his soul searched for hers and cried out in anguish when it could not find its mate.

It was difficult to believe the emptiness he felt since her disappearance. It had never occurred to Sev how much he had looked forward to seeing her, to being with her, until she was gone.

He covered his face while his cruel mind relived joyful walks through a park, picnics on a beach, and flights through the heavens on a Starship. It all seemed so real. Sev had awakened many times feeling unsure if the life he led in his dreams was the real realm and the world without her was in fact the false one.

Sev's stomach tightened at the possibility of never again experiencing those intimate moments. At the same time, he feared for his sanity. How could a person become so attached to a faceless being? He knew of no woman who could arouse such devotion in him. Many had tried, but he had never felt inclined to pursue any courtship. He was set on waiting for the right feline to become his queen. He had never guessed that 'the one' would be a ghostly creation of his imagination.

A familiar loud roar ended those hurtful memories. The Sword of Power was alerting him of a Seacat in danger. Sev leapt from his seat and ran to the weapons chamber without saying a word to those in the control room. He knew they would use the computers to locate the Seacat in trouble.

The Seacats kept their armaments secured behind a locked door. The enormous weapons room, located on the sixth level of the ten-story castle, had no decorations and was painted in blue, red, and gold. Once inside, it took Sev two minutes to reach his weapon if he was running.

The sword, placed on an elegantly carved wooden stand, lay in the center of the room under a bright spotlight. Its handle was made of the purest gold. A large sapphire was situated in the center, near the blade. The gem was magically altered to display a feline's dilated red iris with a small black dot in the center. The blade itself was made of white gold and magically reinforced to be indestructible. The sheath, also of white gold, was studded with priceless jewels.

Sev wrapped his fingers around the cool, smooth handle and raised the mystical sword before his eyes. "Sword of Power, let me see what is there to be seen."

The round pupil began to shift in form. At first, there was nothing but a black and red swirling column of mist surrounded by royal blue. Soon, shiny objects materialized. Sev recognized them to be stars. Shortly after, a small spacecraft was visible. It drifted just outside Oceanica's gravisphere. Painted onto its silver side was a deep-blue elongated circle surrounding a red oval with a black dot in the center.

The sword's eye took him in for a closer inspection. The outline of someone slouched over in the cockpit caught his full attention. The sound of the alarms overhead startled him. Sev dashed out of the armory and headed back to the control room on the seventh floor.

Upon reentering the room, the margay who sat at the main controls updated him. "Whatever the sword picked up triggered the motion detectors we placed in sector four."

"Someone's in trouble out there. Can you get a visual?"

"Afraid not, they are too far," answered Miko. "Our scanners do indicate that the ship is drifting toward Oceanica and should be within range in thirty minutes."

Sev faced the blank screen. The image he had seen within the cat's eye demanded a speedy response.

"Miko, a Mayday signal is being sent. I believe it is from the ship in question," informed Uma, a fellow Seacat. She tried to home in on the signal, turning knobs and flipping switches on her communication panel. She pressed her earpiece closer to her ear.

"A distress signal?" Sev asked a bit confused. "But the sword showed that the being on board was unconscious."

"Not any longer. Listen." Uma switched the signal over to the main speakers.

Everyone in the room listened in earnest to the weak, barely audible voice. It was obvious the woman was in severe pain and extremely frightened. Sev's gut tightened at the sound of it. A long pause followed, then the woman started up again.

Sev could not stay idle. "Theo, prepare the *Feliner* for immediate liftoff."

"Right." Theo jumped from his seat and made use of his cheetah speed.

"Uma, find Serena and prepare your lab. There's no telling how severe her injuries may be."

The tigress stood from her place at communications and headed for med lab.

Sev remained next to Miko. He quietly listened in as the margay answered the distress call. There was no reply from the woman, so Miko tried again.

"Oceanica replying to Starfighter Seven. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you."

Sev released his held breath and quickly snatched the receiver from Miko's grasp. "This is Sev. I'm on my way. You need to hold on. Understand?" He turned to his friend when the woman did not respond. "I repeat. We have your location. You need to hold on. Please acknowledge." She did not. "Can you hear me, Starfighter Seven?"

"Did you say...Sev?"

Her voice sounded small and fragile over the speakers. Sev feared that if he delayed any longer, she would die. "Yes."

"Oren's son, Sev?"

Sev shared a questioning look with Miko. "That's correct," he spoke into the receiver. "Listen. There's no time for this. You need medical attention. I'm on my way." Miko caught the receiver Sev threw at his head. "Keep her awake," he commanded.

When the castle plans were being drawn up, Sev and Theo had insisted it be large enough to accommodate all the Seacats and servants who would one day live with them. But as he ran through its many corridors and up two flights of stairs at full speed, Sev regretted the enormousness of his home.

He burst through the doors out onto the docking bay. The roof was wide open and the engines on the small cruiser were fired up and ready to go. He boarded the *Feliner* from the rear and closed the door. Theo sped off to sector four as Sev dropped into the seat beside him. Theo piloted the ship with one hand and plotted the spacecraft's coordinates into the computer banks with the other.

Sev remained quiet during the trip, pondering the woman's words. He stared out the window, leaning his elbow on the frame and fingering the spot between his nose and upper lip.

How did she know my sire's name? Did she have feline features? The sword's image was unclear. Her ship did have an altered design of our insignia, so she must be a cat.

"Once we get there, I will activate the claw so we can tow the ship back," spoke Theo.

"There's no time for that. We have to get her back to the castle first. We'll concern ourselves with her ship later."

"But if we do not grab a hold of the ship now, we might not reach it again before it enters Oceanica's gravisphere."

"So what?" Sev replied gruffly. "Contact the castle and have Miko use the tractor beam to guide it safely down. We can't afford to lose any more time." He searched outside the window for the crippled ship. It was eerie to see the spacecraft drifting, tilted to one side. Nothing about it spoke of life.

Sev headed to the lower part of the *Feliner* to put on his space suit. He secured his sword belt around his waist, then went to the door and pressed a button on the adjacent pad. A loud hiss confirmed the doors locked in place.

Sev jammed his white helmet on. With the quick press of a button, he activated the oxygen pressure actuator on his suit. He rushed to the opposite wall, to the recessed computer panel, and swiftly adjusted the atmospheric pressure within the sealed room.

Located in the center of the room was a circular floor hatch. Sev tilted his head up and located the steel rings directly above it. He latched his safety tether onto one of the rings and switched on the helmet's microphone. "Testing. Testing. One. Two. Theo, can you hear me?"

"I hear you loud and clear."

"OK. Position the *Feliner* above the ship so I can retrieve the *woman*."

"Affirmative." Once the *Feliner* was in place, Theo gave the go-ahead.

The round door opened with a soft hiss. The dead ship was directly below him, rotating to the side. Sev's lips thinned. Everything about the strange ship made his stomach knot up, but he jumped without hesitation, landing on one side of the glass-encased cockpit. It was then that he noticed the pilot had lost consciousness. Her motionless body was slumped forward in her seat.

Sev pulled the Sword of Power from its sheath. It began to vibrate with energy. A dazzling white glow emanated from the blade. It grew brighter than the stars that glittered around him. Sev took aim and burned a large circle in the safety glass. He kicked in the severed piece, then shielded his face when it exploded outward.

There was no time to waste on checking for a pulse, so Sev swiftly cut the seatbelt with one clean slice of his sword and lifted the small woman into his arms. His sights made contact with her bloody clothes. His dream entered his mind, but he pushed it aside. A quick press of the retract button on his belt caused his safety tether to pull them aboard the *Feliner*.

Sev carefully placed the woman on the floor beside the hatch and wildly spun the wheel that seals it. "OK, Theo, get us back to the castle fast!" He unhooked himself from the overhead rings and readjusted the room's atmosphere before kneeling next to the unconscious woman.

He threw his helmet and hers over to the side. Sev's anxiety grew as he took in her delicate features smeared with blood. He unzipped her space suit and parted the sides. The black jumpsuit underneath was torn and soaked in blood. Sev swallowed and reached for the right side of her neck. Several long seconds passed before he detected a faint pulse. He released his held breath.

Sev did not like to see anyone die. He knew this woman's death would cause someone terrible pain. She was someone's daughter, someone's sister, perhaps even someone's wife. What if she was a mother? Her child would lose someone irreplaceable. Moreover, she was young. She had her entire life ahead of her.

He resolved to do everything in his power to save the little female. He lifted his left arm and pressed a button on the small pad built into his wristguard.

"Theo!"

"Theo here."

"How far are we from the castle?"

"E.T.A. five minutes."

"Shorten it! She's near death! Have Uma ready to act the second we touch ground."

"Sev, we are already at full speed."

"Do it!"

At last, the ship touched solid ground. Sev lifted the woman and held her close to his heart, unaware that his white space suit turned a bright red. Her ashen complexion and lightweight concerned him. While he waited for Theo to open the door, he studied the delicate curves of her face. They seemed familiar to him. He searched his memory for any recollection of her, but all he found was a dark void.

The ship's door finally opened. Sev hurried down the gangplank and was relieved to see Uma waiting with a stretcher a few feet away.

"Uma, she's barely holding on." As he placed the woman on the portable bed, a peculiar sensation of handing his life over into Uma's care flooded his being.

The red-and-black-striped tigress felt for a pulse and then requested assistance in transporting the female to med lab. With Serena's help, she rapidly examined the woman. Theo left to take his shift in the control room. Sev could not think of a more important place to be at; therefore, he remained alone in the corridors, leaning against a wall, deep in thought.

The woman's injuries had immediately reminded him of his nightmare. Had the dream been a forewarning? If so, then that meant the ghost was this woman. In his dream, she was also his lover. Did that mean she would become his lover in this realm as well? Was that why he felt as if he knew her?

Sev pushed his fingers through his dark brown hair and released a long breath. He had no answers. None of it made any sense to him. He was not known for having the ability to receive or interpret visions. Besides, the woman had no feline features, which meant she was not a cat. So how did the sword know she was in danger if she was not a Seacat? Was there more to the Sword of Power that he was unaware of? Possibly, since he was still uncovering its secrets. He shook his head. What did it all mean?

Uma exited the room twenty minutes later. In three long strides, Sev stood in front of her. "How is she? Is she going to be all right?"

There was sadness in the tigress's light-green eyes. "I am afraid there is nothing I can do for her. It will not be long now."

Uma's words left Sev feeling numb. Without saying a word, he went around Uma and entered the room, which hosted twelve wooden beds lined against opposite walls, six to a side. He looked left and saw the woman on the furthest bed from the door. He hurried to her side.

Uma had cleansed the female. Her youth was now more apparent. It pained Sev to see how fragile and innocent she appeared on the oversize foam mattress. In a kind gesture, he clasped her left hand in his. An unexpected jolt of electricity raced up his arm. Yet, it paled in comparison to the shock his heart endured when the female's dark eyes popped open and met his gaze.

Sev watched her take in his features. Her mouth moved, but he heard nothing; his focus was on her scent. The acrid stench of blood no longer overpowered it. Sev recognized it in a heartbeat. It belonged to her—the faceless female from his dreams.

His eyes rounded. "No," he whispered. The dream could not be a warning. If it was, then she was meant to be his mate. His body began to tremble. He could not lose his own mate.

"You're not Sev?"

Having his hand released snapped Sev out of his momentary panic. "What?" He retook her hand. "What did you say?"

No one heard the doors to med lab open or noticed the older cougar who had slipped inside. All attention was on the couple.

"Are you Sev?"

Sev read the pleading in her eyes. "I'm Sev." He inched closer. "Lord of Oceanica. What's your name?"

The woman closed her eyes and began to cry. Sev was instantly worried. Feeling out of his element, he called to Uma for help, but the tigress did not move from her spot.

"I'm Areo." The woman sniffed. "Areo McCall."

"Areo," Sev murmured. He finally had her name.

"Sev, thank Onssa I've found you. I've finally found you." Her lids fluttered. "Now...now I can die in peace." Her voice tapered off.

"No! Areo!" Sev grabbed her shoulders and roughly shook her. "Areo, don't die on me! Do you hear me? Don't you die on me! Do something!" he shouted to Uma, who stood three beds away.

"There is nothing else I can do. She was badly beaten and has lost too much blood."

"You can't just let her die!"

"I am sorry, Sev. I wish there was something else I could do." Uma's eyes lowered in shame.

"No," Sev whimpered. "Not again." He caressed her pale cheek. "Dear Onssa, please, not again."

"Sev, use the sword."

Sev, Uma, and a leopardess named Serena turned to face the Seacat who had quietly entered the lab.

"What?"

"The Sword of Power," repeated the cougar. "Use it on her."

"The sword? Why?"

"You know how powerful it is. You have seen and used its magic. You also know that it's the source of the Seacats' true strength."

"Yes, I know all that, Jugar. But—"

"What you don't know is that it can heal a Seacat if used properly," informed Jugar.

Sev frowned. "She's not a Seacat."

He shrugged. "Then you won't hurt her if you use it on her. Either way, she has nothing to lose."

"Nothing to lose?" Sev's voice rose in anger. "She's dying!"

"And she'll be dead if you keep arguing with me!" shouted Jugar. "Now use the sword before it's too late!"

The cougar was presently the eldest Seacat at the castle, and well respected. The younger cats often sought him out for advice and guidance, but at that moment, he made no sense to anyone. Especially not to Sev, who wanted desperately to save Areo's life. But Sev figured that Jugar knew much due to his years, so he decided to place his faith in his longtime friend.

Sev moved a step backward, raised his weapon, and took aim at the tiny figure on the bed. Drawing in a deep breath, he forced his body to relax. He focused his energy on the sword's power and the sword responded, purring with energy. Its blade ignited into a bright-white glow. A large beam of light shot forth from the tip straight into Areo's form. Her entire body was soon encased in a white glow.

Time passed eerily slow as everyone waited anxiously. Jugar paused beside Sev and placed his left hand on his leader's shoulder. "That should be enough," he said in a tense voice.

The sword's purr gradually subsided. Sev lowered his arm to his side and slowly approached the bed.

Chapter 2

Sev stared out from the ninth-story window to the dockyard next door, where Areo's ship hung from one corner of the ceiling. He was unsure how the Sword of Power had saved her. Jugar refused to answer any of his questions. That had been a month ago.

Areo looked so small in the large bed. Sev silently made his way to her side and sat down gently beside her. She had lost weight, and her pallid complexion worried him. He was not used to seeing anyone with this coloration, except for Angel—but he had the genetics of a snow leopard.

Sev traced her left cheek with his forefinger. He became aware of what he was doing and smiled. "This can't be good."

He could not be near Areo without touching her. To feel her softness and smell her sweetness was like a mother's soft kiss on her child's wound. It soothed him, reassured him of her presence. Sev lowered his head to a mere inch from Areo's and slowly inhaled her fragrance. A warm, sultry feeling flowed over him, and his tensed muscles relaxed.

Instinctively, he placed a kiss on the tip of her nose. "Come back to me, please." He overheard the bedroom door slide open. He turned to see who walked in. Sev withdrew from his front pants pocket a small translator device and hooked it around his left ear so he could understand his little Feron friend.

"Female open eyes?"

Sev's shoulders drooped. "No. I don't know how much longer I can handle this, Fern. It's been a month, and she hasn't made a movement other than to draw breath. Uma and Serena have been seeing to her needs, and making sure she doesn't develop bed sores."

The four-and-a-half-foot alien wobbled closer to the bed. The bedside lamp made his huge, unblinking eyes glisten. "I sorry," he said. "Come eat. Sev no eat long time."

"I know. I don't have much of an appetite." Sev stared longingly at Areo. "I just wish she would wake up. Then maybe everything would start making sense."

"No eat. No do duties. Female no open eyes faster. All watch female, yes? Say when female's eyes open. Sev no stay."

"I understand, Fern." Sev took his time to stand. He stretched his back, and gracefully walked toward the window. He felt Fern's black orbs follow his every move. "I seem unable to pull myself away from her side."

He knew the furry black alien disapproved. Everyone in the castle had voiced discontent at seeing him in such low spirits. They knew him to be a caring cat, but they all felt he was taking his worry a bit too far.

They were all concerned for the woman, yes, but no one had stopped living life because of Areo. Sev's neglecting of his royal duties and responsibilities was taking its toll on everyone except for Jugar, who seemed to understand. Jugar himself visited Areo three times a day, but even he did not stop completing his chores.

Sev watched Angel, Theo, and Miko try to repair Areo's Starfighter. They were stumped by the technology and material used to create the vessel. It was a real surprise when Miko, who was mechanically gifted, had admitted that even he was perplexed.

So many questions needed answers, like how could the Sword of Power save the life of someone who was not a Seacat? He suspected that Jugar had the answers, but he was not talking. What was he hiding?

His growl almost caused him to miss the soft moan coming from the bed. His eyes widened. He was too paralyzed to move. Areo was stirring. She was moaning. *She was waking up.*

Sev spotted Fern moving to aid her. “No!” he shouted.

Startled, Fern scooted away from the bed as if it would burn him if he got too close. He paused by the doorway, ready to bolt from the room at the first sign of Sev raising his voice again.

Sev rushed to Areo’s side, not wanting Fern to be the first being she saw when she opened her eyes. He realized this was the reason he had never left her side. Eagerly, he watched Areo’s lids tentatively open.

“How...how do you feel?” he managed to ask.

“Like I’ve been steamrolled,” she answered, scrutinizing her surroundings. “Where am I?”

“You’re in a private room in Medical Wing C. Are you in much pain? I can have my friend give you some medication.”

Areo rose onto her elbows. “How did I get here?”

Sev’s first impression of her was strength. A normal being would be too weak to turnover, let alone sit up without assistance. “What are you doing? You can’t sit up yet.” He clasped her shoulders and tried to coax her back down. “You just woke from a monthlong sleep.”

“What? A month!” She gave him an incredulous look.

“That’s correct.” Sev tightened his grip. “Now please, lie down.”

“My ship! Where’s my ship?”

Sev frowned. *Her ship?* The panic-stricken gleam in her eyes tugged at his soft side. He dropped his voice to what he hoped was a soothing tone. “Relax. It’s in the dockyard. My friends are trying to repair it for you.”

“The dockyard? Where is that?”

He gave her an apologetic grin. “Outside your window. I’m afraid you don’t have much of a view from this side of the castle.”

“I see.” She allowed him to lay her gently back on the pillow.

Sev spotted her brown eyes skirting over his physique. He hoped she found him attractive. Their eyes met and held. Sev felt an intense heat gradually replace a chill he was unaware he had in his core. How could a nonfeline have this affect on him? He saw color creeping onto her cheeks. The smile he had lost at the death of his ghost lover easily reappeared.

“Ahem.” Areo cleared her throat as her focus fell to the blankets. “Has anyone tried to find me yet?”

“You mean those from your homeworld?”

Her eyes snapped up to his. “My homeworld?”

Her perplexed expression made Sev more curious about her, but he did not get the chance to ask her any questions.

“Uh...yes,” she said, regarding him more closely. “My world. My people.” *That’s weird. Sev is acting like he doesn’t know me. But that’s impossible? We haven’t been separated for that long. He couldn’t have forgotten me.*

“No, I’m afraid not.” He straightened out her bedsheets. “That’s all right. You may remain here for as long as you desire. There is plenty of space. We’d all be happy to have you.”

Should I ask him if he remembers me? “Thanks.” She watched him fix her sheets. *No, it’s best if he did forget me.* She swallowed past the lump that formed in her throat. *At least I know he’s alive.* “But...I can’t stay.”

Sev stopped what he was doing. He clearly read grief on her face. Was she unhappy with the prospect of leaving or staying? “What?”

“I have to get back.”

“Back? Back where?”

“To my people. My home.”

Sev felt his heart spasm. He did not want her to leave. He just got her back. “Why?” he asked without thinking. “I mean...I have so many questions, I don’t know where to begin.”

Nor was he sure he wanted to hear the answers any longer. What if he learned that she did not find him attractive enough to want to stay and get to know him? He had no recollection of felines mating with aliens. Perhaps his nation was considered hideous with their pointy ears, skin pigmentation and markings. Or worse, what if she was already paired?

“But I can’t bombard you with my inquiries right now. Relax and let me get you something to eat. How does that sound?”

As if on cue, her stomach growled. Loudly. They both started to laugh.

“That sounds pretty good to us.”

Sev looked at her curiously. “Us?”

She patted her growling stomach and smiled. “Me and my tummy.”

Sev felt his heart skip a beat at her beautiful smile. He had come close to never seeing such loveliness. He glanced to the left and spotted Fern quietly observing them. It was then he remembered he still had his translator on and activated.

“Fern, before you leave, can you please tell Serena to send us some breakfast. We’re famished.”

“Yes,” replied Fern. He stepped closer to the door. It automatically opened and he left.

“May I brush my teeth first?” asked Areo.

“Yes, of course.” Sev stood from her side. “I’ll be right back. Don’t move. I’ll take care of everything.”

The door to her chambers closed with a swoosh.

Areo stared at the door. *I can’t believe it. He did forget me.* She thought of her family. For years, they had tried to create a rift between her and Sev, but had never succeeded. *It seems you’ll be getting what you wanted after all.* She closed her eyes against the forming tears. *My Sev is gone.*

“ ” ”

Sev had thought that with Areo being awake and her strength returning, he could just pick up where his dream had left off. When he had tried to touch her intimately, she had leapt away from his touch as if he had cut her. Since then, she avoided being too close to him, or alone with him. He quickly learned that a dream was not an extension of reality. He would have to restrain his physical longings and allow Areo time to get to know him. The very thought made him growl in impatience.

After three days of feeling cooped up in an undersized castle, Sev decided he needed distance from Areo. He headed to Limbo’s Lookout. He used his time there to be brought up to

speed on what had taken place on Oceanica since Areo's arrival. It could have been done at the castle, but he was unable to concentrate with Areo's scent flowing throughout the lair.

Two days later, Sev dreamt of tidal waves, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. He dreamt that the sword had been ineffective, and that he had held Areo in his arms as she died. The loss he felt was greater than ever before. Yet at the same time, it felt eerily familiar. So much so, that by the following morning, he could no longer endure being away from Areo. He boarded his personal ship, *Whiskers*, and hightailed it back to his home.

Sev left his vehicle on the lawn and entered through the front doors. He tilted his head back and sniffed the air. He smiled. He knew exactly where to go. Areo's scent emanated from the nearest council chamber on the second floor.

The doors slid open. The plain room was twenty by twenty square feet of silver steel. It contained an oval table and ten chairs, all made of solid cherrywood. Areo was leaning out the double window and fingering a small pouch she had tied around her tiny waist. Sev paused to observe the many expressions that flitted across her fine features. He figured she was admiring the countryside and made a mental note to take her sightseeing.

Today, Areo wore a tan-colored halter top and a knee-length wraparound skirt he had bartered for at a nearby village. Areo's dark-brown hair flowed in soft ringlets to the back of her knees. She was shorter than Uma and Serena in stature—only five foot five—and looked to weigh about 125 pounds.

Serena was reluctant to break patient confidentiality, but Sev had no qualms about using his authority to his advantage. The leopardess caved in and sung like a canary, telling him everything from Areo's date of birth to the severity of her injuries. He was also informed of exactly where each wound was located. Every time Sev thought about Areo's suffering, he grew enraged.

He admired the way the sun shone off Areo's features. She possessed a round face with thick, dark eyebrows, rosebud lips, and a petite, celestial nose. Her eyes were soft brown and had a slight, upward curve at the outer corners. She was stunning. Sev could remain there all day staring at her, inhaling her scent that the gentle wind unselfishly shared with him.

"Great. Just great," she grumbled.

"What is?"

Areo yelped and slapped a hand over her heart. "Jeezum, you scared me. I didn't even hear you come in." She left the window and made her way to him, moving catlike.

She approved the snug fit of Sev's black pants. He wore his dark-purple shirt open in the front, with the ends tucked into the waist. His impressive musculature left no doubt he was a powerful man, and his comportment showed that he held a position of importance. Sev looked very much the part of king. And like all felines, he looked human. The difference was in his tawny complexion, catlike eyes, and pointy ears.

Areo recognized the sword Sev wore at his left side. She had grown up seeing it daily. Only then, it had been worn on different hips. A string of questions filled her head. It was time to get them answered, but she would have to tread carefully. She cannot reveal who she was. To do so would be like opening Pandora's Box. She was already in the middle of one war. She did not want to start a second war with her childhood crush in the middle of it.

"Where have you been?"

Sev frowned at her. "At Limbo's Lookout. Didn't my cats tell you?"

Areo folded her arms. Standing only two steps away from Sev, she had to tilt her head back to meet his coppery stare. "No. Jugar is still in town overseeing the new construction, and

the others are not very chatty with me. I wish they had. Then I wouldn't have looked like a fool searching for you," she snapped.

"How strange. I told them to keep an eye on you. To make certain you rested and ate properly, and to inform you that I would return from Limbo's Lookout in a few weeks."

"Yeah, well...they left that last bit of information out when I asked." Areo stepped back several paces. Sev's scent was overwhelming—too powerful for her to deal with at close range.

"I apologize. I'm at a loss as to why they didn't tell you. Are you feeling well? You look stronger."

Areo bit back a growl. "That's because I'm angry and frustrated."

"Why?"

His confusion annoyed her even more. Areo placed her fists on her hips. "Because I need some questions answered, and everyone keeps telling me that I have to speak to you about them. And guess what? You're nowhere to be found!"

Sev stared at her. "Again, forgive me. I am here now. I didn't think you would miss me so soon," he teased with a smile.

"Hmph." Areo was in no mood to play. She turned her back to him and crossed her arms under her breasts. Her right foot tapped on the wooden floor.

"I really am sorry, Areo. How about we sit down? You can ask me all the questions you'd like."

Areo peeked over her right shoulder and saw Sev pointing to the council table. She stomped over to the nearest chair and plopped down. She pretended to stare at her interlaced fingers when she was actually watching Sev's every move.

Sev took the seat at the head of the table and openly stared at her. Areo fought the urge to finger the tingling spots left behind by his heated gaze. She was relieved, yet also disappointed, when he looked away.

"So...what is on your mind?" It was Areo's turn to focus on him. "Well, the others had said this is not your homeworld. They weren't comfortable talking about it to me." She shrugged. "Maybe because I'm not one of you. But I still would like to know what happened."

"I see." Sev regarded the Oceanan symbol at the center of the table while he spoke. "Our homeworld was Oceana, located far away from here. It had slipped out of her orbit and drifted in the direction of her sun. Consequently, she was caught by its gravitational pull and they eventually collided."

"I see." Areo averted her eyes. *So typical of the feline race*, she thought, her indignation rising quickly. *Still, I expected Sev to know better. Uncle Challen never taught him to be pretentious.* "So you took it upon yourself to change this planet's name and call it your own. That was quite *arrogant* of you, don't you think?"

Sev shifted in his seat. "No," he replied. His face took on a more stern expression. "When I arrived, this untamed planet didn't have a name. With the consent of the civilized natives, I christened her Oceanica."

"I see." Skeptical, Areo searched his eyes for the truth. "They were actually all for this?"

Sev sat straighter. "Yes, they were."

Areo responded with a respectful nod. After all, Oren's death made Sev the new king. "Are the cats in the castle the only ones here on Oceanica?"

"No. There are thirty clans residing here. Hopefully, there are many more on the way."

"Only thirty?"

The number broke Areo's heart. She could not keep her feelings from showing on her face. She held no love for the Oceanan race, but she did not wish for their annihilation. The hard lines around Sev's mouth softened, as did his voice.

"For now. I'm sure more escaped Oceana's destruction. You see, our fleet was only capable of flying on warp speed three, so we do not expect them for another two years. We are optimistic, and we keep a diligent watch over the stars for them."

"I see. How many Seacats reside at the castle?"

"A total of seven, including myself. Several more choose to live with their families in the nearby villages."

"That's all?"

"For now, as I said before. More will come. I'm sure of it."

His optimism and strength touched her soul. Areo lowered her gaze to the table. Sev's stare was more intense than she remembered. In their youth, she had been the bolder of the two. Now she found herself being the one to shy away.

"How long have you been living here?"

"Almost three years."

Her eyes met his in a hurry. "Three years! Where were you living before that?" Belatedly, she caught herself and lowered her voice several notches as she tried to cover-up her slip. "I mean, how old were you when Oceana collided with her sun?"

Sev regarded her from behind half-lowered lids. "Eleven."

"So you were eleven when she exploded. And you lived here for three years. Where did you live during the years prior to arriving here?"

Sev's lids lowered further.

"Sev?"

"That's a long story."

Areo glanced around the room. "I don't see myself going anywhere. Do you have a place to be?"

She caught sight of his jaw muscles tightening. Apparently, he did not want to relive his past. Her heart went out to him, but she had to know what had happened after she was taken away.

Sev sat forward and laced his fingers. "I was eleven when I was told I had to leave my home. There was an emergency evacuation of the entire planet. There was chaos everywhere. The Seacats did their best to maintain order. They made sure everyone was assigned to a Starship. I was in my chambers asleep when the leading Seacat burst into my room. Challen saved my life by dragging me aboard my sire's ship, the *Emerald Tiger*."

The regretful look on his handsome face caused Areo's heart to ache.

"Unfortunately, while Challen aided me, my sire was left unassisted. He was killed during an earthquake. It was just one of the many disasters plaguing Oceana. During our liftoff, I saw that other ships were able to escape. That's how I know that many are still in transit. The *Emerald Tiger* was the fastest ship in our fleet, the only one capable of flying at warp speed five, which was why we arrived first. While we were on board, Jugar studied the star charts and found this planet to be the nearest livable one to Oceana."

At Sev's disclosure, Areo's anger flared. *Uncle Jugar, how could you?* Her fingers curled into fists.

"He relayed the information to the fleet to ensure they weren't left to wander in space. It was a great distance to travel, and we didn't have enough food on board to sustain life for that

duration.” He shrugged. “Since there was no place along the way to obtain more food, we had no choice but to use our life-support capsules and enter a cold sleep while traveling at top warp speed for the entire trip. So, Jugar plotted the shortest course to this planet, and we all went to sleep after that.”

Areo could not believe her ears. “For eight years!”

The beautiful golden giant nodded sadly.

“Dear God! You mean to tell me that you slept for eight years without waking up?”

Again, he nodded.

Areo was flabbergasted. She could not believe it. *Well, that explains where he’s been for the last eleven years.* A new question occurred to her. “But...what about Challen? What happened to him? If he was with you aboard the *Emerald Tiger*, then he should be here.”

Sev lowered his eyes and said in a hushed tone, “Challen died. He was killed trying to return to his mate and kittens.”

Areo’s pain was instant and overwhelming. In an effort to keep control, she squeezed her eyes tightly shut, but her tears could not be corralled. The floodgates burst open.

Sev rushed to her side. “Areo, are you all right? Why are you crying?”

Areo shook her head negatively, unable to respond. She could not tell him the truth that her beloved uncle had died trying to keep them apart. It was best to leave Sev in the dark. Ten minutes passed before she was able to stop the tears from falling and excuse herself. She left Sev in the council room and went to her room.

“ ” ”

Back in her room in Medical Wing C, Areo faced her window with swollen, unfocused eyes. Her mind was turned inward, replaying her conversation with Sev.

Sev had spent his teen years asleep. He had missed the thrill of living through the most impressionable time of his life. It was when children explored and experimented that they discovered truths and gained the knowledge necessary to help them become the mature beings they were meant to be. Sev never had that chance. Those important years of his life were gone; he could never go back in time to live them. The thought pained her.

Areo leaned her forehead and palms against the glass. Her sights cleared once the tears fell. It took a moment for her to register that the docking bay, like the entire castle, had gray, steel walls. “How ugly.” She sniffled.

The door to her room opened. Jugar entered unannounced and stopped by her bed. “Are you all right?”

She regarded the dear face. Jugar looked the same as he had on Oceana eleven years ago. He wore a pair of smoky-gray pants, perfectly pressed, a white flowing shirt tucked neatly into the waist, and well-polished, black, calf-high boots. His light-gray eyes were a startling contrast to his tawny skin and dark, shoulder-length hair.

“You guys need to put up some drywall in this place. I feel like I’m in a sardine can.” The imagery reminded Areo of a coffin, and she suddenly felt angry at seeing the cougar without Challen by his side. “Which reminds me...” She walked up to him. Poking her finger into his chest, she asked, “Why the bloody hell are you here while Uncle Challen is dead!”

Jugar’s head jerked back. “Well, excuse me for living.”

"You know very well what I mean!" she snapped, her fists flying to her hips. "What the bloody hell happened to Challen? Where in the blazes were you? Weren't you supposed to be his shadow?"

Jugar's light-gray eyes turned dead. "Don't you dare insinuate anything!" He stepped forward menacingly. "I would have gladly given my life for that cat. I loved him like a brother!" He growled at her.

Tears sprung to her eyes. Areo knew he spoke the truth. Her anger was inappropriate. "I'm sorry, Uncle." She swiped at a tear, sniffed, then hugged herself. "I'm sorry. Tell me what happened."

"We were aboveground at Oren's castle, preparing the *Emerald Tiger* for liftoff," he started. "Everything was falling apart around us. Challen had received news from Lance that you'd snuck away with Sev—again. The two of you had returned to Catlantis. He was enraged. He had hoped his family was on board his ship the *Star Gazer*. So, we went after you." He gave her a knowing smirk. "I don't have to remind you how we found the two of you, do I?"

"Just get on with it!"

Jugar laughed. "So, you *do* remember."

"I'm not the one who was asleep for eight years and forgot everyone!"

He bowed his head, knowing very well what she meant.

"Why is he the only one who can't remember?"

"I'm not sure," answered Jugar. "He was examined from head to toe. There is nothing wrong with him. Yet he can't remember part of his childhood." The gleam in his eyes changed. "And you are forbidden to refresh his memory. We *do not* want a repeat of what happened on Oceana. Understood?" he reminded her firmly.

Areo knew her uncle was talking about the last attack on her family that had almost ended with her father and godfather being killed and all the females raped, had it not been for her brothers, male cousins, and their superior fighting skills.

She unwillingly nodded. She desperately wanted Sev to remember their life together, the love they once shared. Alas, her uncle was right. Sev was now the king and she could not complicate his life by rekindling their love.

"Go on, please," she encouraged, wanting to know more.

"After he snatched you out of there, Challen threw you into my arms and ordered me to take you to our ship the *Star Gazer*. He then grabbed Sev and left. After I returned to the castle to meet up with Challen, I was told where Challen disappeared to by a dying King Oren."

Dread crept over Areo as she listened to the answers to her long-held questions. Her legs felt weak; she needed to sit down. Jugar followed her to the bed and sat beside her.

"When I finally found Challen, he was exiting the *Emerald Tiger* and had an odd look on his face. He instructed me to stay on board the *Emerald Tiger* and keep guard over Sev. I naturally protested when he told me he was returning to the *Star Gazer*. You cannot imagine how I felt when I saw he no longer wore his sword at his hip."

Areo gave him a puzzled look. "Why does Sev have it?"

"I asked Challen about it. He said there was no time to discuss it. He had hoped we would both make it so he could explain everything to me." His voice softened. "But in case he couldn't, he told me the kitten inside would. When I questioned Sev, he told me that he had angrily confronted Challen. He had managed to grab a hold of Challen's sword, and it came alive with power."

Areo was stunned. "The Sword of Power chose Sev as its new keeper?"

"I didn't believe it either until Sev showed me."

"I don't understand. Challen's blood doesn't flow in him."

Jugar shook his head. "I have no answers, Areo. All I can say is that before Challen left, he made me promise that if anything should happen to him, to tell Carol Ann and his kittens that he loved them with all his heart. And to his entire clan, to say that he would always be with them in spirit."

Areo tried to be strong, but her love for Challen and Carol Ann had grown during their absence. The pain of losing them was still raw. She covered her face with her hands and cried. She willingly leaned into Jugar when he pulled her into his strong embrace.

"How did it happen?" she asked minutes later.

"The sword displayed a gigantic tidal wave engulfing the city of Felidae."

Areo felt an immense sorrow swallow up her soul. She placed her head against Jugar's chest and sobbed. She cried for everyone who had died, especially Challen and Carol Ann. And she cried for everyone who had suffered, including Sev.

The bell rang. "Come in," called Jugar.

Sev paused with one foot inside the private room. His eyes swooped over the couple once, and an intense emotion overtook him. He emitted a soft growl.

"What's wrong?" asked Jugar.

"I was about to ask you the same thing." He sent another challenge, but Jugar made no move to release Areo. Sev clenched his fists and asked, "What are you doing here? I thought you were in town building homes for our citizens."

"I was, but I came to see Areo."

"For what reason?"

"That's between Areo and me."

Sev jolted to attention. "I think you'd better leave. Now."

Areo lifted her head from Jugar's chest and looked at Sev.

Unperturbed, Jugar addressed Areo. "I have to go, but if you want, we can talk later."

Areo placed her palm against his cheek. "Be careful, please."

Jugar smiled in response.

With fury swirling inside him, Sev hissed at Jugar's departing back. The instant the doors closed, he pounced on Areo with questions.

"What was that all about? Why were you in his arms? What were the two of you talking about? Well, answer me!" he hollered, not giving her time to string together a reply.

Surprised by his behavior, Areo simply stared at him for a moment. "What's gotten into you?"

Sev took a few angry steps in her direction. "What do you mean, what's gotten into me?"

Areo leaned backward, away from him. The fear that leapt into her eyes did not sit well with him. Areo being afraid of him was the last thing he wanted, so he tried to calm down.

"Why was he here?" he tried again.

"He told you. He came to see me."

"Why?"

"Because I had to speak with him."

"About what?" Sev bit out through gritted teeth.

Areo wiped her cheeks. "Nothing."

"Nothing? Nothing!" He loomed over her. "Oh no, I most certainly think there was something going on in here."

This time Areo stood her ground. She stood from the bed. "Like what?"

"Like...you tell me."

"I already told you. We had something to discuss."

"Something that can only be discussed with Jugar?"

She nodded.

Sev angrily scratched his head. He was at a loss. Why did finding Areo in another male's embrace make him feel like strangling someone, namely Jugar? "How interesting. A complete stranger is creating and exchanging secrets with one of my Seacats."

"It's not like that—"

"Then why not clarify it for me?"

Areo took a long breath. "Because, Sev, you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"I can't. I'm sorry." She bowed her head.

"You can't, or you won't?"

"Both," she mumbled.

Sev was disappointed and angry at Areo's response. He could not bear to be around her any longer. Without saying another word, he spun on his heels and left the room, leaving Areo to cry alone.