

Uplifted

Gita awoke with a start as Nané jumped onto the bed. The morning sun was already streaming through the gap between her thick linen curtains, and almost immediately the room was too hot.

“Good morning,” Gita said, as the cat curled its body sinuously around her hand and began to purr. “I suppose you’re wanting some food, hmm?” She began to stroke Nané’s head, the little ginger-brown cat rising to meet her hand with every stroke. Fine hairs began to fall away onto the thin blanket, and Gita curled her lip. “Ugh, you’re moulting.”

Already, Gita could hear the sounds of the large manor building getting ready for the day, and she slid out of bed and drew back the curtain. Blinding sunlight filled the room, and Gita shaded her eyes to look out. On the long gravelled path that lead to the gates, and in the town beyond, a thin line of people were coming and going, some carrying food, others decoration.

“The Duke!” Gita scratched Nané behind the ears as the cat rubbed up against her. “Today’s the day!”

Quickly, Gita donned a simple white dress and slipped out of her room. Nané lead the way down to the kitchen, which was bustling with activity. Gita breathed deeply; rich aromas of roasting poultry, meat sizzling with fat, chopped herbs, thick gravies and soups all combined in a most delicious way, and her stomach groaned. In amongst the regular kitchen staff were several women and a man, their clothes thicker and bleached a harsh white. Gita

watched as they seemed to get into everyone's way, obviously unsure where things were but still wanting to seem busy, and she could see irritation writ large on the faces of several of the regulars.

"Little missy, this isn't a good place to be today." Gita looked over at the speaker, Queen Anne, and smiled. The head cook was huge, like an unassailable tower, and the young girl quickly grabbed her into a hug, breathing in the woman's floury scent.

"I'm just looking for some breakfast, Anne," Gita said.

Queen Anne snorted and grabbed an apple off a platter as it passed her, the servant bowing under the weight. She tossed it to Gita. "Here. There'll be plenty enough in a few short hours, little missy. If these damned cuckoos will let me get to giving the instructions." She huffed. "Think they can invade my nest and order us around like we're not all servants."

"What about Nané?"

The Queen fixed her with a look. "That little pest has helped herself plenty already. Been in here and stolen off with a few fat morsels earlier. You're lucky we're not serving roast cat today!"

"Nané!" Gita said, looking down at the cat with mock indignation. The cat just stared back, then started to lick one paw. Gita picked her up and cradled her. "Sorry, Anne, I'll take her away."

"You see that you do," Anne said, and with that she was away, barking orders. Gita backed out of the kitchen, chewing on the apple. Nané, wriggling mightily, squirmed out of her grip just as they got into the banqueting hall.

That, too was a scene of organised chaos. Two long tables had been arranged, set out with the expensive metal cutlery and large flower arrangements. The servants here weren't ones that Gita knew. Their black jackets and crisp white shirts marked them out as being different, special somehow. One of them looked over at her, one eyebrow raised, then turned his attention back to the cutlery he was checking for smears. Gita matched the expression with an impish grin as she began to move between two of the tables, finishing off the last bites of her apple. As she approached the far end, she put one hand over the table and made a kissing noise. Immediately, Nané jumped up onto the table. The servant stiffened, still holding a knife in one gloved hand.

"That... *animal* needs to be out of the hall," he said, his voice nasal and thin. "Little girl, please get rid of it."

"She's just investigating," Gita said, her eyes wide. "Is that wrong?"

“Remove it, or I’ll remove you,” the servant said.

Gita narrowed her eyes and plonked her apple core onto a spotlessly clean plate. “I’m the Count’s daughter, and the Duke’s niece, and I’m not going anywhere.” She prowled closer, aware that Nané was doing the same thing along the table. “If I wanted, I could have my father throw you out. Or I could tell the Duke that you were mean to me.” She grinned.

The servant blanched, his eyes wide, and Gita took another step forward.

“Gita! That is enough!”

Gita froze and hunched her shoulders. Her father’s voice boomed around the hall, and she turned as he marched up to her. “Yes, father?”

“Don’t you ‘yes father’ me,” the Count said, running a hand through his thinning grey hair. “Whatever his station, this man is a guest here, and you will show him the proper courtesies, please.” He paused, cocking his head and raising an eyebrow. “You’re being a brat, dear. Conduct unbecoming a count’s daughter.”

Gita looked down. “Sorry, father.” She turned and muttered an apology to the servant.

“So he can hear it, Gita,” the Count said, the warning tone back in his voice.

Gita turned and gave a short bow. “My apologies, sir. I was in the wrong. Please continue as you were, in service to my father and to the Duke.” She leaned onto the table and wrapped her arms around Nané, who had been investigating one of the floral arrangements.

“Attend me please, Gita,” the Count said, turning and walking back down the hall. With Nané still in her arms, Gita followed, until they were outside in the bright morning air. The front of the manor hours, normally flat and dull, was a riot of bunting and flowers, and two large flags saluted the front door. Both were edged in gold, the cat’s-paw symbol emblazoned in brown across them. As soon as they were outside, Nané jumped out of Gita’s arms and began to move towards the neatly-kept lawns to the left of the pathway, her head and tail low as she hunted.

They came to a stop, the Count surveying the manor and everyone moving around it. “You’re an adult now, Gita. Fourteen years old, and you need to act like it. Today’s an important day for you. For us both.”

Gita sighed. “But... what if she’s not good enough? What if the chemick says she can’t be uplifted?”

“Then you get to keep your childhood friend as she is now, and I will be able to see you grow up first-hand.” The Count laid his hand on her shoulder, giving a gentle smile. “I know you want to join the Duke’s guard. I... can’t say that I’m completely happy at the idea of my little girl leaving her home, training to be a soldier. With the way things are at the moment, the war... these are dangerous times.” He squeezed her shoulder. “But I also want you to be happy, and if this is truly what you want, then you have my full support.”

“You don’t want me to become a soldier?”

“That’s not what I said,” the Count replied. “Think about how you feel today. If Nané passes inspection, she can be uplifted and your whole life will change. Mine too. If she doesn’t, then things will continue on differently. Either way, it’s a father’s duty... a father’s privilege, even, to ensure his child’s happiness. There are many sacrifices a father should be prepared to make to ensure that.” He hugged her close. “Your mother would feel the same.”

Gita turned her head as he held her, watching Nané chasing a butterfly. So much was tied up in that small animal, she thought, a constant companion for three years now. There wasn’t enough brain between those furry ears that flicked this way and that to understand her place in the world. *At least for now.*

“The servants that Uncle Benedict sent, they don’t treat our staff like equals,” Gita said, drawing back from her father. “It’s not fair.”

“They’re not equal, at least in their eyes,” he said. “To us, they’re all servants. We know ours well, and Benedict’s not at all. But to them, there’s as much difference between a Duke’s servant and a Count’s as there is between a Duke and a Count - family or not.”

“Queen Anne’s not having a good time in the kitchen.”

“I’ll go and have a talk with the Duke’s butler,” the Count said. “You’ll need to get used to calling him that, you know.”

“Duke Gyb?” Gita wrinkled her nose. “It’s so formal!”

“He doesn’t play favourites. He’ll treat you like any other applicant. Now then. You’ve got about an hour to be ready. Go on!”

Gita nodded. “Nané!” she called, and the cat’s head swung round, half a butterfly wing sticking out of its mouth. Its whiskers and nose were covered in wing dust, and Gita scowled as her father chuckled.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said, and walked back into the house.

An hour later, Gita stood outside the large doors into the hall, trying to slow her breathing. The white dress was gone, replaced

by a red velvet one. It was too heavy in the heat, but the Duke was the second most important visitor they could receive and everyone would be in their best clothes, Gita knew. Nané sat purring next to her, a small lead attached to a collar, brushed to within an inch of her life.

“You’re still moulting,” Gita muttered, sweeping a few more stray hairs away. “Can’t you just stop?”

Nané looked up, uncomprehending, and Gita clicked her tongue. They had watched together from a high window as the Duke’s entourage came up the gravel driveway. The soldiers had looked ragged, some wearing damaged armour, and there were injured in a wagon towards the back. Their heads were high, though, proud, and the dozen or so cat mounts trotted with leonine grace, tails high.

The door opened, and Gita walked in, moving up the rows to join her father near the top of the hall. Most of the people sat at the table were well known to her; people from the town, anyone with any sort of social status at all, and more than a few of them smiled encouragingly at her as she passed. Duke Gyb, a tall, barrel-chested man, was sat at the head of the left hand table, her father relegated to seat to his right. To the left of the Duke sat a thin man in a robe that might have been white once, but now was smeared with browns, reds and a greasy yellow. Gita stopped five paces from the Duke, bowed, and kept her eyes firmly down.

“Ah, she’s grown well,” he said. “You’ve got a strong daughter there, Matteo.”

“Thank you, your grace,” her father said. “She’s my pride and joy.”

“Her mother, through and through.” The Duke rose from his chair and walked around to stand in front of Gita. “So, you’re the young lady who wants to join my guard.”

“Yes, your grace,” Gita said. She let her eyes travel up his fine clothes, maroon tunic cinched with a belt set with a huge cat’s-eye jewel that seemed to stare back at her, and up to his face.

“Well, if your animal can be uplifted, as is our tradition, then of course it will be so,” the Duke said. “Often people join the soldiery because they are forced to, or they feel that no other opportunities are available to them; it will be a pleasure to have someone training who wants to be there!” He looked around the hall. “There are three others, I believe, who are prepared to have their animals inspected. Let them come forth and represent Meadowdown.”

Gita looked round curiously. Tómas, the candlemaker’s son, was

one of those that stood, his calico girlcat in his broad arms. Two other girls, both of them from different farms in the area, also rose and came forward. Their cats trotted next to them - they could have been twins, both tabby cats with green eyes.

They stood in line, and the moment stretched. Gita fought the temptation to look back at the rest of the villagers.

The Duke nodded approvingly. "You breed them well here, Matteo," he said, and the Count smiled.

"I'm afraid I can't take the credit for those three," he said. A ripple of laughter echoed around the room, quickly smothered.

"Fair enough," the Duke said, and motioned towards the man in the stained robe. "Chemick Bole, if you please."

The chemick rose and moved around to stand in front of the children. Up close, Gita realised he was older than he appeared; crow's feet tugged at his eyes and the wrinkles on his forehead were deep. Each cat was subjected to a thorough examination, their joints checked, eyes, teeth, tongue. He held them up and listened to their stomachs, massaged their abdomens and checked their ears. He muttered to himself as he worked. "Good strong canines... claws, one two three four and a dewclaw, all good... some faecal matter here, feels fine, yes..."

As his blunt fingers reached for Nané, Gita found herself clenching her fist around the lead. The chemick smiled, his eyes almost disappearing into his wrinkles as he did so.

"So concerned? Good, good. A strong bond now means a powerful partnership after the uplift." Gita nodded, and let her hand relax, the leash dropping to the ground. She held her breath as Nané was turned this way and that, wincing inwardly as a few stray hairs drifted away. Would that be a reason for him to fail her? Then it was over, and he passed the cat back to her. "Good, good. A strong one." Gita grinned and hugged the struggling Nané to her chest.

The chemick turned to the Duke. "They are all within norms, your grace. Some small joint weakness developing in the calico one, but nothing that won't be fixed during the uplifting."

The Duke smiled and spread his hands, and Gita looked past him to the Count. A complex expression was on his face, one she'd never seen before, and it was like a bucket of water thrown onto the fire of her excitement. Then his face cleared, and he smiled proudly.

"These four have made the choice to take up arms in service to their duke, and so shall it be." A great cheer went up behind her,

and Gita turned in surprise as the Duke continued. "Let us feast and celebrate as they begin their path of service!"

The large doors were flung open and servants began to boil out carrying great platters of food. As chatter began to buzz, Gita looked at the other three.

"We did it," she said, and grinned again. "We're going to be Guards!"

They grinned at each other shyly and then quickly headed back to their seats. As Gita sat down at her father's side, she caught his low rumbling voice, and bent her head slightly to listen.

"You were attacked on the way in."

"Nothing we couldn't handle," the Duke replied.

"Lizards?"

"No. Boars."

Her father sucked a breath in. "Bandits?"

"We were supposed to think so. They didn't wear a duke's mark."

"They don't need to. Sanglier... so he's taking advantage of the war in the south to make his own moves."

The Duke gave a small shrug. "If they were after dust, they were too early. Talking of which, how much have you got for us?"

"Same as usual. The vein shows no sign of giving out, don't worry." Gita's father smiled, but she could hear the strain in his voice. "Meadowdown will be of use to the Duchy for years to come."

"It's in the best hands." There was a pause, both men sipping from goblets of wine. "Enough," Duke Gyb said finally. "We have a celebration to preside over, not two old men talking war." Gita flicked her eyes up, but both men were staring out over the assembled villagers.

The hall echoed with emptiness in the dawn light, just the Duke, his chemick, her father and the young recruits standing in the huge space. Gita held tightly to the handle of her wicker carry-case, hoping that Nané would settle down soon.

The Duke smiled. "So, you're the four I'll be taking back with me. Understand that now, you're equals." Gita met his eyes, and his stare seemed to linger for a moment on her. "Just four new soldiers. You're taking with you very little, to symbolise that. Each of you is bringing simple, practical clothing, your wits, your first names and your animals. Let's have those names."

He looked at the boy, whose freckled face was beetroot red.

“Tómas,” he said, “and the cat’s name is Meryl.”

“Eve,” the first of the farm girls said, “with Ash.”

“Celeste,” the second said, “with Olivia.”

“Gita, with Nané.”

The Duke nodded. “Know that each of your cats may choose to follow that name, or may choose their own, just as you are choosing to follow a different path to those who live in this village. Take up your bags and say your goodbyes. The wagons leave in ten minutes.”

Gita hung back as the other three picked up their bags and all but ran out of the hall. Nané was still moving restlessly inside the small wicker carry case, the wood rattling as she turned around, and Gita knelt to comfort her.

Her father spoke quietly to the Duke. “Take care of her, Ben,” he said. “She’s all I’ve got after...”

The Duke nodded. “Don’t worry, Matty. All four of them, like they’re my own flesh and blood.” He looked over at Gita and nodded. “If she’s up to the task, she’ll make you proud. The dust all ready to go?”

“Aye. Take care of that too.”

With a nod, the Duke turned and walked away. Gita looked at her father, suddenly aware that she might never see him again. She widened her eyes as tears stung them, and her lips moved as she search for something to say. He opened his arms, sweeping her into a hug. His scent surrounded her, warm and homely, a hundred little impressions as she tried to pin every last detail in her mind. The feeling of his clothing. The muscles of his arms. His smooth voice as he comforted her.

“Now then, you wanted this, my dear,” he said. “Do us proud.”

“Yes, father,” Gita said, speaking around the tears that made damp patches on his tunic. She stepped back and wiped her eyes. “I will.”

Hand in hand, they walked out of the hall and down the short corridor to the front door. A servant was removing the flags by the door, furling them ready for stowing. There were two wagons now, one of them little more than carriage with the roof taken off, filled with supplies; the other of held over a dozen iron-banded crates.

Gita pointed. “The dust?”

Her father nodded. “Aye. Dangerous stuff; I planned to involve you more in the details as you grew older, so that one day you could run the mines yourself. But now...” he smiled. “A different path awaits you.” He walked her over to the other wagon. “This is

how you'll get to Feldwick," he said.

Gita frowned. "No roof? What if it rains?"

Her father chuckled. "A guard-in-training, worried about a little water falling from the sky? Don't let the Duke hear you complain about that, or he's like to rethink his decision."

Gita frowned, nodding. "I understand. I'll come home as soon as I'm allowed, father."

"And I'll be waiting for you. Be safe, my dear."

They embraced once more, and all too soon Gita climbed onto the wagon. There was space under the wooden bench for Nané's carrier, and almost as soon as she had sat down the other three candidates were climbing up and joining her. She didn't dare look them in the eye.

"All ready?" the Duke asked, coming round the side of the wagon, head level with the top of the wagon. Startled, Gita looked up straight into the deep amber eyes of his mount, peering at her over the wagon's side, and Gita couldn't help but stare in wonderment. However often she'd seen an uplifted animal, it never failed to stir the same feelings of awe in her. The Duke's cat was of immense proportions, its tail lashing back and forth, but unlike most others immense canines curved down from its jaw - the mark of the Duke's own family mounts. It stared at her, every bit as intensely as the Duke had.

More soldiers riding their own giant cats fell into ranks either side of the coaches and wagon. Several breeds were represented, from longhair to short, from tabby to pure white, each one looking curiously at the four children.

"Then let us be away," the Duke said. "Four days ride separate us from Feldwick."

The man driving the wagon cracked his whip, and the donkeys began their slow trot. As she began to move away from the only home she'd ever known, she turned and waved desperately at her father, distantly realising that the others were doing the same. They waved as the wagons moved through the black metal gates and, rather than turning into the village, carried on along the high road that led west.

Gita settled back into her seat, looking around at the others. One of the farm girls, Eve, was sobbing quietly, while Celeste's face seemed to be carved out of stone. Tómas was staring down at the wooden floor of the wagon. Like her, they were dressed in linen shirts, and thick trousers tucked into sturdy boots.

Vainly, Gita cast around for something to say, but nothing

seemed appropriate, and the sounds of the wheels crunching on dirt, and the donkey's steady pace, filled the silence.

As the rolling green hills slowly flattened, and forest appeared on the horizon the others turned this way and that, but Gita watched the soldiers instead, men and women astride their mounts. Each one wore the uniform of the Duke's guards, the gold pawprint marking them as higher in rank than the common soldiers. They used no reins, unlike the donkeys that Gita had ridden around the estate. Instead, they held on to small handles attached to their saddles, leaving one hand free to rest on their thigh, not too far from the hilts of their swords. They didn't smile, and Gita sat up a little straighter, aware she was being watched.

As the sun reached the horizon, the donkeys were reined in and the caravan slowed. One of the soldiers rode round to the wagon. His hair was tightly cropped, and a deep scar cut a crooked line from his right eye down to his mouth.

"I'm Sergeant Stubbs. We're stopping here for the night," he said. "Feed and water your pets, and let them perform their toilet. If you're smart, you'll let them mingle with the mounts, and you'll want to find a place to bed down under the wagon." He looked at them for a moment expectantly, and Gita frowned. Was he waiting for something?

"You're new recruits, so I'll let it slide this once. When I say something, the response is 'Yes, Sergeant'. Clear?"

"Yes, Sergeant," Gita said, hearing the others echo her.

"Hm. You learn other things that quick, you'll do fine. Get yourselves sorted. There's a bag with some food leftover from yesterday's meal in the front there. Take only what you need; it's got to last until we get to the Duke's castle."

"Yes, Sergeant," they chorused again, but he was already riding away. His mount, a sleek black hunter with white paws, had its tail high, the very end flicking gently.

She pulled out the carry case and opened it. Nané looked out at her unhappily.

"Oh, I know, little one," Gita said, opening the case. "I've spent all day in the wagon too. Don't worry, we'll be there soon."

"You can't mother it, you know," Tómas said. He'd already gotten his cat out and was feeding it something from his pocket, the small cat looking slightly incongruous in his large hands. "Not if you're going to be a guard."

"I'm not mothering Nané," Gita said. "Just... caring for her."

"Whatever you want to call it." Tómas shrugged. "I'm going to

go find where the mounts are sleeping this evening. They can take better care of Meryl than I can, I reckon.”

Gita frowned, but followed him as he jumped down from the wagon. The soldiers were already making a camp, sharing round trail rations - things that looked like dried beef and fish, hard bread, fruit and nuts. Tents were being pitched, surrounding a slightly larger one for the Duke. Gita followed Tómas around to an area a dozen metres away, where the mounts gathered in a group. They were grooming themselves, working at flattened fur where the saddles had lay, and more than one was scratching in the dirt to squat a little way from the main group.

No sooner were they in sight than all the uplifted cats stopped what they were doing and turned to watch them. Gita clutched Nané tighter, staring into eyes that seemed to glow in the twilight. Slightly larger and at the head of the group sat the Duke’s fear-some companion, and Gita stuttered to a stop under the force of its stare.

Tómas’ bravado seemed to have dried up as the silence stretched. Then he held out his cat. “Um,” he said. “Brought my cat to... to learn from you.”

The sabre-tooth’s eyes flicked to Gita, and she felt her mouth go dry.

This is a duke’s animal, she thought. As much difference between a soldier’s animal and a duke’s as between the ranks themselves. She bowed deeply, and placed Nané down on the ground.

“I’ve also brought my cat, Nané, to learn from you.” Gita swallowed. “Please take care of her.”

The sabre-tooth inclined its head to Gita, a shallower bow, and one of the other mounts came over. It sniffed at the two cats, then prodded them into the group with a paw. Then, as if that was a signal, all the cats went back to what they had been doing.

“I think we’ve been dismissed,” Gita hissed at Tómas, and the two of them backed away.

When they returned to the wagon, Eve was crying again. Gita swung herself back up into the wagon and sat opposite the girl.

“Hey,” she said, and Eve looked up. She was taller than Gita, even hunched up as she was, and strands of her brown hair were sticking to her reddened cheeks.

Gita frowned. *What would my father say?* “You need to sort this out, Eve. We’re all in this together, but do you see us crying about it?” Eve sniffed and shook her head. “Well then. What sort

of Duke's Guard would you be if you take a few minutes to have a cry at every little thing?"

"You can't... can't speak to me like that now," Eve said, and Gita saw some of the embarrassment and fear turn to anger. *Good, but be careful*, her father said in her mind.

"Then start acting like it," Gita said, and even Celeste and Tómas looked up sharply at the tone in her voice. "We're trying to prove we're equals with those soldiers out there; not with each other. So show them you're up to it. Make your family proud." She softened her tone and put a hand on Eve's knee. "We're a team, now, the four of us and our cats. We've all got to step up and prove we're good enough."

Eve stared at her, and for a moment Gita wondered if she'd judged it wrong. Then the farm girl nodded.

"Right," Gita said. "Start by taking your cats over to the clowder."

"What's a clowder?"

Gita stared at her for a moment, then smiled. "Group of cats. Where the mounts are, over there." Eve nodded and slid off the wagon, her cat clutched in her arms. Eve gave Gita a grateful smile and followed her.

Tómas dragged what looked like a bedroll off the wagon and crawled under it. A moment later he was back out, foraging for food in the bags. "You're quick to take command," he said.

"I—"

"No, don't get me wrong. I'm not criticising. She clearly needed it. Just remember you're not higher than anyone else here. We're right at the bottom of the chain, compared to this lot."

"I haven't forgotten." Gita frowned as the sturdy young man considered her.

"Bit of advice? Careful on the words you use. Clowder. Who uses that? No one born with the name Farmer or Wicke, that's for sure. Maybe the Count's daughter, with her books and that." He was still watching her, his expression neutral, and Gita felt the blush rising up her cheeks. "Not sayin' I know how to fit in best, or anything like that. Just seems like, if we're a team, the less differences between us, the better."

Gita let out a strangled "thanks" and grabbed her own bedroll. As she crawled under the wagon, she scowled. He was right, of course. "Stupid," she muttered, cross with what he'd said, that he'd said it at all, what she'd said, *everything*.

Don't be a brat, her father's voice echoed, and Gita took a deep,

calming breath. By the time she crawled out of the shadow of the wagon, Tómas was eating some of the rations as if nothing had happened, and when he tossed the bag at her she came and sat down next to him in the dirt, nodding her thanks.

“I’m going to find out what they’re doing,” Gita said.

It was their third and final night on the road, and they were lying on their bedrolls under the wagon.

“I wouldn’t,” Tómas said, but Celeste’s eyes widened like two coppers.

“What if it’s... forbidden?”

Gita shrugged. “Then someone would have told us it was forbidden. And if it is, and they haven’t told us, we’ll just say we didn’t know. But I want to know what they’re doing. Every morning she comes back all cocksure, like she’s been out mousing.”

Celeste frowned, then nodded. “If you’re going to spy on the mounts, I’m coming too.”

“It’s not spying. Just... observing,” Gita said, then stuffed a piece of apple into her mouth. As she chewed, she wondered what they would see. The uplifted animals couldn’t talk, could they? Perhaps they did, and humans just didn’t see it. Were they actually training, or just being together?

Guards were posted, one man and one mount at the north and south, but there wasn’t a real sense of danger. They were moving through the Duke’s fief now, only half a day’s ride from the castle, and there was a good deal of buoyant chatter from the guards. As the sun set, the glow of small fires took over, and one of the soldiers produced a bottle to hand round.

Gita lay on her back, the dark wooden base of the wagon scant inches from her nose, and listened to the merry-making. A few quiet songs were sung, and then stories were told in murmured voices, too quiet to hear the details. The smell of woodsmoke was quickly whisked away in a chill breeze that swept under the wagon, but despite the cold Gita found it hard to keep her eyes open. Nothing about the hard ground, thin blanket or lack of Nané at her side should have lulled her to sleep, but she must have done, for when she next opened her eyes the camp was cold and quiet.

Muttering an oath, Gita wriggled out from beneath the wagon and stood up, looking carefully all around. The guards were still at their posts, but every tent was dark.

Celeste came awake with a start when Gita nudged her shoulder, her skin pale in the moonlight.

“Sh,” Gita said, and motioned with her hand. “Come on.”

Celeste nodded and began to wriggle out, but as she did so there came a moan. Gita winced. In her sleep, Eve had wrapped her arm around Celeste.

“Move her arm,” Gita whispered.

“I can’t,” Celeste hissed back, as Eve’s breathing quickened slightly. “She’s waking up.”

Gita huffed. “Roll to the side, maybe?”

But it was useless. Eve’s eyes fluttered open, and after a moment to focus she gasped.

“Why are you awake? What’s going on?”

Gita put her finger to her lips, but it was too late. She’d spoken loud enough that Tómas sat up suddenly. There was a resounding thunk, and then a stream of cursewords as he clutched at his head.

Gritting her teeth, Gita put her hands out flat. “All of you, shut up a moment,” she said. “Celeste and I were going to look at the mounts and check on our cats, ok? You two can just go back to sleep.”

Tómas checked his hand to see if there was blood. “God above,” he muttered. “I thought we were being attacked.” He looked from one to the other. “Might as well come with you.”

“We can’t all just parade over there,” Gita said, as Celeste crawled out. “Fine. Eve, what about you?”

The girl shook her head, her curls bouncing.

“Come on, Eve,” Celeste said. “It’ll be interesting.”

Gita narrowed her eyes. “If you don’t, you’ll be here on your own.” Eve’s hand flew to her mouth as her eyes opened impossibly wide.

Thirty seconds later, the four of them were sneaking past the Duke’s tent and away from the camp. The whole world looked different in the dark, but it wasn’t difficult to make their way to a small boulder that marked the beginning of where the mounts had bedded down for the night. A half-moon was riding in the sky, and Gita found herself filled with energy, adrenaline coursing through her. They knelt by the boulder, the long grass at their feet swishing in the wind, and peered down onto the group of uplifted animals.

Several of them were laying down, their backs forming silvery-grey mounds on the grassland, but in the centre were four large uplifted cats. In front of them, sat staring into their eyes, were the four pets.

“Are they... talking?” Tómas whispered.

“...Their mouths aren’t moving,” Gita replied. “Can’t tell.”

There was clearly some communication going on between them, though, and the four children watched for several minutes hoping that something would happen.

“Quiet night,” a voice said right behind Gita. She gasped and turned around, flattening herself against the stone, the others following a moment later. It was the Duke, in a loose shirt and trousers.

“Your grace, I-“

He waved a hand. “No matter. There’s no rule about being out and about in the camp at night, though all the soldiers here know they have most of another day’s travel to do. They get their sleep whenever they can.” He came to stand next to them, looking over the sleeping mounts. “No, I was awakened when what sounded like a herd of elephants tramped past my tent, and you know how sudden the urge to piss can be when you’re woken up.”

Gita took another long look at where Nané was staring into the green eyes of a huge black mount. “What are they doing?”

“Learning. Think of it this way. You’re watching the soldiers, listening, learning. They’re doing the same. We’re safe enough now we’re deeper into my lands, though.” The Duke stretched and his mouth twisted into a crooked grin. “Good thing it was me that found you, I suspect. Sergeant Stubbs would probably have had you whipped a couple of times, just to drive the point home that he’s in charge.”

“But... you won’t, your grace?”

He raised his eyebrow, finally meeting Gita’s gaze full on. “I don’t need to prove that I’m in charge, recruit.”

She shivered. The Duke gestured back towards the wagon. “I’d head back now, if I were you. Long way to go tomorrow still.”

The four of them bowed and scuttled off in the direction he’d pointed.

“That was a big fat waste of time,” Tómas muttered as they clambered back under the wagon. “They ain’t doing anything out there. Just staring.”

“It answered a question,” Gita said.

“The Duke scares me,” Eve whispered, the first full sentence she’d said to Gita. “He looks nice. But underneath it...”

Gita nodded. “Underneath it, he’s a leader. Father used to describe him being like a fist in a velvet glove.”

There was only silence, and a few minutes later Gita felt herself drifting off again. The haunting image of the four mounts staring at the cats, like statues, was the last thing she thought about before

sleep took her.

Grey cloud loomed over the city ahead. The castle at its centre, crouching on the peak of a man-made hill, was surrounded by a large stone wall coated thickly with ivy, while the buildings sprawled in every direction.

As they passed along the winding road that led to the castle, people scattered to the left and right. A market was in full swing along the sides of the street, people bustling backwards and forwards, and the sounds of traders and haggling swelled beyond anything the town children had encountered before. There weren't just loaves of hard, black bread, or ragged pieces of undyed linen cloth, either; fine silks from distant lands, a butcher's table laden with meat and buzzing with flies, even a scribe's stand with books for sale.

Some children, chattering and laughing, ran alongside the carriage until one of the soldiers shooed them away. And everywhere, small cats, lazing, walking, fighting over the territory. Groups of them sat on street corners, tolerating each other somehow. There was a golden-coated one on top of the large inn they passed, looking down imperiously, and even as they watched it sprang from gutter to the branches of a tree in the inn's rear garden, pouncing down and out of sight. Several of the children clutched small cats as well.

"They look so thin," Eve whispered.

"The children or the cats?" Gita asked.

Eve didn't answer; many of the children were wearing threadbare clothing, little more than rags, and their eyes had a hollow look to them. The cats they clutched fared little better, scratching at fleas and with bald patches interspersed with clumps of matted knotty fur.

"Do they not care for the children here?" Tómas said quietly.

"Maybe they're orphans," Celeste said.

"I'm an orphan," Tómas said. "Count Matteo arranged for a place for me. There's plenty of couples that want children that can't have them, he said." His voice was light, but his shoulders were hunched and his brow was furrowed. "Doesn't seem right."

The children scattered immediately when Sergeant Stubbs took a step towards them, one hand on the short sword at his waist. Tómas sat back in his seat before Stubbs could turn around and see them.

The procession headed out of the town and into a wooden

fenced area. The path continued up towards the castle's stone walls, but this area was filled with soldiers and mounts training. To one side, a group of men and women were in a loose circle, surrounding two others stripped to the waist. One was a woman, a tight bandage across her chest and another netting her hair into a tight braid, and the other was a man, his blond hair shaved almost to nothing. They were wrestling, their skin shining with sweat, and as Gita watched the man went down in a cloud of dust. There was a cheer from the other man, and then a new challenger was in the ring. Further up, a long area was cordoned off by rope barriers, and inside there were soldiers on their mounts wielding bows and arrows.

"That's what I want to do," Celeste said wistfully. "Duke Gyb's got the best archers in the world."

Tómas huffed. "I hear Purkoy's are better. Good enough that they say the King's afraid of them, in case his owls ever get shot down."

As they watched, the men and women trotted around in a circle, taking turns to fire arrows at distant targets. They were good, Gita saw immediately. All the arrows sank in to the centre or nearby, easily enough to damage an opponent.

Then the wagon passed beyond the wooden wall and up the short exposed path to the castle's stone wall.

As they pulled into the courtyard, a man came out of the large double doors, riding boots clacking on the steps. He was dressed in a red tunic and brown hose, brown hair longer than any Gita had seen on a man.

"Welcome home, father," he called, as the Duke dismounted. He spread his arms, and the two men embraced.

"It's good to be home, Michel. So, the castle didn't fall down while I was gone?"

"As you can see, still standing. There are some messages; one's from the King."

"I'll take them in my study." Duke Gyb turned and pointed at the wagon. "New recruits; four, from Meadowdown."

"How is Uncle Matteo?"

The Duke shrugged. "He's fine, as ever. I fear, though, that his halls will be a little quieter now." At Michel's raised eyebrow, the Duke crooked a finger at Gita. Like a bird caught in a cat's gaze, she suddenly felt exposed as she walked forwards and bowed.

"This is Count Matteo's daughter, Gita. One of the recruits."

Michel stared at her, appraising her. "I'm sure she'll do fine."

Sergeant Stubbs?"

The man walked forward and saluted. "Sir?"

"Find these four quarters. Together, I think. The usual regimen while their cats are being uplifted."

Michel couldn't have been more than twenty and Gita looked to the Duke, but he had already turned away. Stubbs merely saluted and gestured to her.

"Follow me." He led them away from the courtyard. They went around the side of the castle, and as soon as they moved into the shadow it was noticeably chillier. Gita risked a look back at the wagon, seeing men already removing bags and boxes from it. Another wagon, this one containing the heavy yellowdust crates, was being pulled up alongside ready for offloading.

"Sergeant Stubbs, sir?"

"What is it?"

"We don't have our cats, sir."

"They're not your responsibility now, recruit. They're in the hands of the Chemick now."

His words struck Gita like a blow. Now? Without saying good-bye? She stumbled, feeling a part of herself tearing away as she lost sight of the wagon. Next to her, she heard Celeste gasp and looked at her, fighting past the lump in her throat.

Stubbs led them past several small wooden doors, each one marked with a different chalk symbol: cat's eyes, tail, a fang. Finally he stopped in front of an unmarked one and stood to one side, gesturing they should go in. The room was dark and smelled of body odour and hay, and as her eyes adjusted to the sliver of light coming in between the shutters, Gita could see that there were only four bed pallets in the room.

"Waste in the bucket," Stubbs said, pointing to the receptacle hidden in the corner. "Empty it into the gutter outside with the rest of the waste. Dinner is served from the mess hall when the bell is rung; breakfast the same, but you get lunch on the permission of your training instructor." He bared his teeth into something approaching a smile. "That's me."

They filed back out of the room and Stubbs closed the door, reaching into his pocket as he did so. He brought out a little piece of chalk, then paused. "Four little kitty-cat claws, I think," he said, and scrawled a rough curve, pointed at one end. He gestured to the other doors. "There are a few new recruits that sleep behind each of those doors, and a few with a bit more experience. Don't piss them off, or they'll make your life hell. As far as they're concerned,

you're useless. As far as I'm concerned, you're less than that until you prove otherwise."

He led them back out into the sun and pointed to a few other doorways, and Gita quickly found herself losing track as he rattled off directions. "Mess hall. Latrines for soldiers; not for recruits. Stay out of there if you value your skin. Quartermaster; go there to get a uniform. Armoury; same thing, for weapons. And that one," he said, coming to a stop in front of a large door marked with a pestle and mortar, "that one is where your little pets are. That's the Chemick's quarters."

"Can we go in?" Tómas said.

"I wouldn't." Stubbs spat on the ground in disgust. "You're as like to get a noseful of stink and blinding dust in the eyes than to see anything useful. What's in there is Chemick business, and only they know the secrets. They say that the Chemicks lose their hair and nails as they muck around with the yellowdust, and that to breathe it in is death." He watched the recruits carefully to see what effect his words were having, and Gita stared back at him, refusing to give him the pleasure.

He shrugged. "You've got a few hours today to explore, though I'd steer clear of the other soldiers. Go down into the town. Make use of your energy. It's the last you'll have for at least the next month, while your animals make it through the uplifting." With that, he turned and stalked off, quickly lost in the comings and goings of soldiers all over the courtyard.

"What an arsehole," Tómas muttered, and Celeste giggled. Gita bit back a grin.

"Yes, well, we'd better get used to following his instructions," she said. "I want to survive the next month." She looked down at herself; her travel clothes were coated in smears of dirt and dust, and she turned her nose up. "But first, clothes. And a wash."

The four of them changed into their uniforms in the little room. There was no space for modesty, and after four days on the road they were used to being in each others' personal space, but Gita still turned her back, blushing for no reason she could place, as the other three casually stripped off.

"Let's go and see the soldiers in the field," Celeste said as they walked back out, and Gita let her lead them towards the path down to the training area. The uniform felt odd, scratchy and stiff, but as they began to pass people from the town dressed in their ordinary clothes, she realised they were all walking a little taller,

more confidently.

Tómas pointed to where a large knot of men and women, most of them wearing heavy green jackets over their shirts, were standing around one of the archery areas. As they came around to an open area, Gita could see a bald woman in the middle, wearing a jacket decorated with gold braid. She was astride a massive mount, its fur and tail much longer than those they'd seen before, the colour of baked clay.

"I know who that is," Celeste said. "Da used to tell stories about when he was in the army. That's Faye Foxglove."

Gita shook her head. "Should I have heard of her?"

Tómas and Eve both shot her a look. "You've seriously never heard of Major Foxglove?" he said. Gita shrugged, and he nodded towards the soldier. "She's the best, basically. Said that she killed three lizardfolk with a single arrow; punched right through them. And even her mount's legendary. She's called Fara; they say she rode fifty miles in a single day to get the message about the battle of Harg's Hollow to the Duke's command post."

As Gita watched, the woman ran her hand over her stubbled head and nodded to a man stood nearby. "Pull."

He bent down and picked up several large disks made of some sort of leather stretched over a metal ring. He threw them up in the air one after another, so that they hung for a moment as round as the moon, and in that instant Major Foxglove struck. She pulled her bow up, arrows clutched in her draw hand, and one by one calmly shot each of the disks. The metal rings fell to the ground, neat holes through the centre of each piece of leather, and the major snorted. "Too easy." She pointed to several of the men. "Move those dummies further apart."

Two large straw mannequins were moved into position as the metal rings were retrieved, and the chatter in the crowd dimmed slightly as the major wheeled her mount into position. "Fara. Kill."

Her mount bared its fangs and sprang forward, massive paws swallowing the distance to the dummies in less time than it took for Gita to draw breath. As she watched, the disks were flung into the air again and, at the same moment as Fara disembowelled one dummy and took the head off the other, Major Foxglove shot each of the rings out of the air. Several of the soldiers clapped and cheered as the mount trotted back, and the major slid off her back. "Good girl," she murmured, tickling the giant animal between its ears.

"Those claws must be as long as my hands," Tómas muttered,

awe-struck. “Look at the dummies. They’re destroyed.”

The headless one had a piece of splintered wood sticking out of its neck-hole, and the other one had three enormous tears in its sackcloth stomach, pieces of hay still sliding out onto the ground. Gita watched the major walking away from the group, her mount next to her, and sighed.

“I would give anything to be that good,” she said.

“You will be,” Eve replied. “We all will be.”

“What’s this,” a rough voice said. “Kittens, by the look of ‘em.”

Gita looked round and realised, with a sinking heart, that they surrounded by a tight little semicircle of other young soldiers. Several of them loomed over her, and the one that had spoken sneered. She seemed huge under her tunic, but clearly there was muscle under the fat, and she carried herself like a seasoned soldier already. Her brunette hair was cropped short around her face, which was twisted in disgust.

“Not kittens. Mice,” she said.

A few of the other soldiers chuckled, and one of them said, “You tell ‘em, Fi.”

“We’re from Meadowdown,” Gita said, trying to stop her voice from squeaking.

“We’re from Meadowdown,” the young woman mocked, twisting the words. “I hear Meadowdown’s got a good trade going in whores.”

“Your mum from Meadowdown, is she?” Tómas said mildly. Fi’s face froze for a moment as she processed what Tómas had said, and then an ugly purple flush began to creep up her neck. The other soldiers laughed, more than one with a harsh edge to it.

“You little cocksucker,” Fi said, “You’ll pay for that.” She drew her fist back with a growl. Gita brought her own fists up, feeling her stomach clench.

“That’s enough.” The command, strident, came from behind the all-concealing wall of soldiers pressing around them. The crowd parted, and Gita could see Major Foxglove standing next to her mount. “Fi, you having to pick on kittens again to get your kicks?”

Fi bared her teeth, but stood to attention nonetheless. “No sir. Just introducing myself to my new team-mates.”

Belatedly, Gita realised everyone else had stood up straight, and nudged Tómas, who was still holding his balled fists up. They jerked upright as the major looked at them.

“Well, it seems like they know who you are now, Fi. No one could miss that breath.” There were some chuckles from the crowd

around them. “But the Duke needs soldiers, not punching bags. Now, if you’ve got nothing better to do than haze recruits who’ve been in the uniform five minutes, you can go run a dozen laps of the training ground.” There was a pause, and then she looked around, wide-eyed. “Now.”

Fi looked down at Tómas, her eyes promising violence, and then jogged off towards the outer wall. The major looked around. “All of you,” she said sharply. With much grumbling, the soldiers that had been surrounding them set off after Tor, leaving just the four of them looking at Major Foxglove.

“First day?”

Gita nodded.

“It doesn’t get any easier. You’re in the Duke’s Guard now, learning to be the best from the best. Everything that happens is a learning opportunity. What did you learn here?”

“Not to piss off people twice my size,” Tómas said, adding, “sir,” after a moment’s thought.

“It’s a start. How about ‘Don’t engage in something until you’re trained to handle it’? You got any combat training?” They shook their heads. “Then just accept that and seek situations where your natural skills come to the fore. Or how about ‘When the Major says everyone does a dozen laps of the training ground, that means everyone in earshot’?” She stared at them, one eyebrow raised, and her emerald eyes seemed to bore into Gita.

Celeste was the first to react, setting off at a respectable speed towards the outer edge of the training area. Tómas and Eve followed.

“Oh!” Gita said, then gave a short bow. “My apologies, sir.”

The major’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t apologise, especially when you’ve done nothing wrong. No time for that. Just do it, soldier.”

Gita began to run, aware that she was being watched. “Just do what you’re told first time, next time,” she heard the major shout after her, and then the world shrank down to the path in front of her, and the warm heat in her muscles as she settled into the jog.

“So much for walking the town,” she panted, and Tómas nodded, already too out-of-breath to respond.

“Wake up, skanks,” a harsh voice shouted. Gita’s eye snapped open. The same as every morning, the huge silhouette of the Sergeant stood framed in the doorway. With barely a groan, Gita scrambled to her feet and stood by her pallet.

“Ten minutes to muster, uniforms on. It’s inspection day. -

Payday, if that means anything to you scroungers.” With that, Stubbs was gone, leaving the door open to reveal an icy rain lashing down.

Tómas groaned. “Not sure how much more of this I can take.” He began to pull his clothes on, every movement dripping with lethargy.

Gita shrugged and grabbed her own coarse trousers. “That’s after just a week. You think this is bad, wait ’till they start expecting more from us.”

“Yeah... but what have we learned so far?” he grouched. “How to run, how to do squats and stretches. How to wrestle, punch... not even hide nor hair of a bow or a sword yet.”

Gita shook her head, but it was Celeste that answered. “We’re learning to take orders and follow them, dimwit.” She slugged him on the shoulder, hard. “Besides, I don’t remember you being so sad about that wrestling. Seem to recall you was top of the pile.”

Tómas grinned at that. He was thicker set than most of the boys his age, and his longer reach meant he’d picked up their hand-to-hand fighting lessons quickly. Gita’s forearms, however, were a mass of bruises as she tried - and failed - to hold off boys and girls much larger than her.

“Get good or go home,” Tómas said, and Gita groaned at Sergeant Stubbs’ favourite saying.

The rain was as cold as it had looked, and all four of them were instantly soaked as they walked towards the parade ground. “Shitty day for an inspection,” Celeste muttered. Gita could only nod as her hair slowly soaked through, turning into sodden rat-tails.

Their unit of twenty stood in lines of eight, a gap at the end of the back line standing open for them. Gita took her place at the end and stood to attention, eyes forward. The entire unit was silent, still, and as the urgency of being ready faded, Gita stared at the back of the girl in front of her’s head. There hadn’t really been time to think, she realised. The week had flown by under a deluge of training that matched the pouring rain in intensity.

What was the name of the girl in front? Gita narrowed her eyes and stared, trying to unravel her identity from her tight ginger ponytail, but there had been almost no chance to get to know any of the other kittens - what the other soldiers mockingly shouted at them - apart from Fi and her crew.

She was there, at the end of the line, just visible in Gita’s peripheral vision. Pork, the others called her; not to her face, of

course, but word got around. Two nights previously, Gita had just been drifting off to sleep when the door to their little hovel crashed open.

“What’s this,” a rough female voice had said. “Four little kittens? Four little worms, more like.”

Gita had sat bolt upright, Tómas half struggling to his feet. “What the hell-“

In two strides, the girl who had spoken was across the room. She punched Tómas in the mouth and he fell backwards. A sneering boy, thin and bald, had walked in with a flaming torch then, and Gita recognised the girl who had tried to start the fight on the field.

“Whatcha think, Ollie? They worth much?”

The boy shook his head. “Naw. Burn ‘em, I say. They ain’t barely worth the torch.”

Gita shot a look at Tómas, who was sat leaning against the wall rubbing his jaw, and slowly rose to her feet. “Why are you doing this?”

“Worm’s got a tongue,” Pork had said, then lurched forward, fingers outstretched. Gita ducked away, tried to use some of the techniques they’d already been taught, but she was too slow, too inexperienced, and the room was too small. She howled as Pork yanked on her hair and snarled in her face.

“You heard, the other day,” she said. “I’m-“

“I know who you are.” Tómas wiped away a smear of blood from his mouth. “You’re Pork.”

The big girl’s face creased in rage, flushing purple. “No one calls me that,” she screamed, letting go of Gita and swinging around to aim a backhand at Tómas. He was ready, hands up to block it, but she bulled forward and slammed him bodily into the wall. He fell, and she kicked him once, twice, in the stomach. “No one!”

The girl stood up, took a breath and walked to the door, as Eve rushed to Tómas’ side. Her expression had gone oddly calm, as if the past ten seconds hadn’t happened. “I’m Fi, and if you want to live to see the dawn, you’ll pay me dues.”

Celeste looked up. “What dues?”

“When you get your coppers at the end of each week, two come to me, or you end up like him. Or worse.” She stepped backwards, out of the door, and Gita could see that there were another two people stood outside. “Come on. There’s a foul smell in that room.” The boy with the torch had spat on the ground, then left with the others.

She'd not even acknowledged them in the two days since, barely even looked at them, and somehow that was worse.

Is everyone here out to get us, Gita thought idly. Her train of thought was broken as the large double doors that lead into the castle swung open, allowing the Duke out into the rain.

"Attention!" Sergeant Stubbs screamed, taking his place on the end of the front row. "Green Division for your inspection, *sah*."

"Very good," the Duke said, the smallest smile touching his lips as he nodded to the man. He began to walk along the front row, speaking quietly to each of the soldiers. He worked his way to the end, then into Gita's row.

"Told you before, Sergeant, this young lady needs to lose weight," the Duke said, standing in front of Pork.

"Yessir," Stubbs said. "She gets the same rations as anyone else."

"Work her harder."

"Yessir," Stubbs said again, and Gita watched as the back of Pork's neck turned bright red. Embarrassment or anger? Gita resolved to stay away from the girl, whichever it was.

As he came closer, Gita could hear the Duke's words as he moved from person to person, a nervous-looking Stubbs shadowing him. "Managed to hit the target yet? Well, keep trying." The next. "Hear you're one of the fastest runners we've got. Good. We need scouts and messengers, people who can run with their mounts to keep them from tiring too easily." The next. "You're beginning training with your mount. Congratulations. I look forward to hearing good things about your mounted combat."

Then he stood in front of Gita. She looked up at him.

"Enjoying your first week?"

Gita nodded. "Yes, your grace."

"Good. Sergeant Stubbs tells me you need to work on your wrestling. That hand-to-hand training is important." He frowned. "You get stuck out there without a weapon, you'll want to be able to put someone down just the same way."

"Thank you, your grace," Gita said, inclining her head in a short bow as he moved on to Tómas. Stubbs gave her a dirty look, then moved on with the Duke to Tómas.

"Nasty bruise on your face there," the Duke said.

"Training exercise," Stubbs said quickly. "Didn't block quick enough."

The Duke put his finger under Tómas' chin and moved his head this way and that. "Seems like whoever was training with him needs to learn control, Sergeant. No point in fielding soldiers that

have been beaten half to death by our own side. See that this doesn't happen again."

Stubbs looked like he was ready to explode, but he let out a strangled "Yessir," and they moved on.

Gita found her eye drawn to the smaller set of doors off to one side, the ones slightly blackened and painted in pitch to preserve them. The Chemick's laboratory. She felt a pang of heartache; Nané was in there somewhere, having who-knew-what done to her as she was uplifted.

The Duke walked back around to the front to address them all. "Some of you have your mounts already. Some are still waiting. Raise your hand if you can tell me the greatest asset to your career as a soldier, and your ability to fight with and ride your mount?"

A few hands went up, and Gita bent her head to listen. "Teamwork," one of the young men said. The Duke nodded.

"Yes. Teamwork. You are a unit; just as you and your mount are a unit, each of you relies on the other people in your division to back them up, to support them. Each of you is like a brick in this castle's walls." The Duke pointed up at the tower. Gita raised her eyes to the sky. The clouds were almost as dark as the stone.

"If one brick comes loose, or crumbles, the strength of this wall is lost," the Duke was saying. "If two bricks come loose, the whole thing could come tumbling down." He lowered his hand and scanned the crowd, meeting everyone's eyes. "Don't be that brick."

He nodded to Stubbs, who took out a small purse and began counting coppers into each soldier's hand. The Duke carried on talking. "You who are formally inducted into my army, let this money be yours. Guard it well. Each coin represents a token of esteem. Those who are given more, take it as the encouragement it is intended to be. Those who receive less... take it as a warning in kind." He smiled grimly, watching as Stubbs worked his way back and forth along the line. When he got to the back line, Gita held her hands out hopefully, and four thin coppers tumbled into her hands from his pouch.

When he'd made his way back to the front of the line, Stubbs nodded to the Duke. "All done, sir."

The Duke nodded. "Very good. Train them hard today." His lips quirked into a dry smile. "We don't get weather this perfect every day."

Stubbs saluted in return and, as soon as the Duke had gone inside, turned with a scowl. "Right, you lot. Get those coppers away. Those with mounts, present yourself to the training

grounds.” About two thirds of the soldiers saluted and marched off in the direction of the stables, leaving six - Tómas, Eve, Gita and Celeste, Pork, and a boy who had arrived just that morning. He looked miserable, stick-thin and short even compared to Gita. The Sergeant grinned evilly at them. “We’re goin’ for a run.”

Gita looked doubtfully down at the sodden ground, huge puddles beginning to gather, but stowed the coppers into her shoe and fell in with the others. The run led them out of the castle gates, then straight out towards the edge of the training area, along the wall. It wasn’t long before Tómas matched his speed to hers on one side, Eve on the other. For his short stature, the new boy was out in front, Pork not far behind him. *She’s fast, too*, Gita thought. *Somehow*.

“New boy,” Tómas said.

Eve gave a short laugh. “We were new. Now he is. Luis, I think.”

“Where’s Celeste?” Tómas puffed.

“She can’t take... the pace...” Eve said. She let out an exasperated noise. “If I have to do any more... press-ups because she can’t... keep the pace...”

“Said by someone who couldn’t keep her eyes dry when she got here,” Gita said, only half in jest. Eve frowned, too puffed out to reply. Every pace sloshed, and before long their boots were caked in mud. The muscles in Gita’s legs began to ache, then hurt, every step lifting twice or three times the normal weight. Gita snatched a look back; sure enough, Celeste was having even more trouble.

Slowing slightly, Gita let Celeste catch up. As the girl drew alongside, Gita swung around behind her to get her attention, moving to the other side.

“Come on,” she said. “You aren’t seriously going to let Stubbs get the better of us, are you?”

“...No,” Celeste said, but Gita could see real exhaustion on her face. Deep circles lined her eyes and she was paler than milk. “I just... I’m tired. All this rain... not much of a runner. My skin’s rubbed raw.” She sounded defeated.

Gita nodded. “Mine too. These tunics aren’t great when it’s wet. But that’s not important now. We’ve got to get up there with the rest of them. What would your mount say?”

“I don’t know,” Celeste said, and Gita realised that the girl was actually crying. Her tears flowed into the slackening rain, but her voice cracked as she spoke. “I’ve not seen Olivia since we got here. I don’t even know if she’s alive! What if-“

“Don’t say it,” Gita ordered. “You think I’m not missing Nané?”

Of course I am. But I've got to be strong, and she has to as well."

The rain slowed, then dribbled to a stop, and Gita paused to look up at the sky. The sun began to break through the clouds. "Look," she said. "Even the weather's taking it easy on us." She shaded her eyes and looked ahead. "Now, everyone else has stopped up ahead. We need to get there, or Stubbs will tan our hides."

They ran, finding energy for the final sprint. "We need... to see them..." Celeste said as she ran.

"Our cats?" Gita said. "Can't. Stubbs will kill us."

"Tonight," Celeste said, and then they were too close to the group to talk. Gita bent over, heaving air into her lungs, but when she looked up it was straight into Celeste's stare.

"Too much standin' around," Stubbs roared, breaking the moment. "God's seen fit to bless us with some sunshine; form up, two teams. We're going to have ourselves a little war-game."

Focus on the task at hand, Gita heard her father's voice say. She stared at Celeste a moment, longer, then trotted over to where her line was forming.

Pork came for her dues while they ate.

The mess hall buzzed with chatter, soldiers and officers alike eating a thick meaty stew with bread. Gita took her bowl and moved to an empty space on the end of one of the benches, next to Eve. Tómas and Celeste sat on the other side.

"So," Celeste said, then broke off as her eyes widened.

Tómas raised an eyebrow. "So? So what?" Then he followed her gaze, and bared his teeth.

"So what, you little shits," Pork said, as Gita whipped her head round. She was far too close, and her cronies were behind her. "So I'm going to sit here. That's what."

She plonked herself down on the bench next to Eve and grabbed at the young woman's bowl. She pulled out a big chunk of meat from the stew and held it up.

"This looks better'n the stuff I had in my bowl," she said, and threw it into her mouth. "Tastes better, too." She shrugged and tossed the bowl back down. "So where's my dues, scrag?"

Tómas looked down at his food. "Ain't givin' you nothin'," he mumbled.

"Really? Huh," Pork said. "There was me thinking it wasn't much of a choice. See, that bruise on your face, that was like a little warning. Next time, I'll do a much more thorough job. Nothin' broken, mind. Don't want the Duke getting suspicious. I get your

dues this week, or I make you hurt. That's a pretty good deal, I think. Two coppers pays you protection. From me."

Gita looked around the room, hoping that someone else was watching, that Sergeant Stubbs had come in, but there was no-one. It was as if they were the eye of a storm, totally cut off from the events around them.

Tómas shook his head. "Ain't doing it. Nothin' you can do about it. If you beat me, how d'you think the Duke will take it, knowing that one of his soldiers is beatin' on the others?"

Pork laughed. "He don't care. Didn't you see how the good sergeant jumped in today? 'Training accident', oh, that's a tale that never gets old. But," she said, leaning forward, "here's the thing. You don't pay this week. Maybe I beat you. Maybe I don't. Next week, you don't pay me. I pay a little visit to the Chemick's laboratory, and... well, let's just say that not all animals make it through their uplifting."

Gita stared, mouth suddenly dry.

"You don't care about the animals. You can't even ride one. Pork."

There was a deathly silence, and Gita watched the anger crawling across Pork's face, red spots appearing on her cheeks at Tómas' words. The rage submerged, covered over by a calm facade that was, in some ways, scarier. "Ain't my cat at risk here, is it?"

There was a tinkle, then another. Celeste and Eve had their coins out, two coppers each, and Pork swept them away into the recesses of her trousers. "See," she said, tone light, "these two little bitches have it worked out. You two, though. You obviously're the ones who don't care about the animals. You're willing to let me send a message over a couple of coppers."

Gita shook her head. "You can't do this, Fi. I'm taking this to Sergeant Stubbs. It's theft."

Pork grinned. "Try it. If I don't have two coppers in my hand by sunup tomorrow, you're going to find it very much more difficult to get through tomorrow with all your bones intact." She got up. "And next week, we won't have this chat. I'll get my coppers, or you'll be walking the lonely road back home, mountless."

She walked away, and the sounds of other conversations began to leak back into Gita's world. Eve grabbed her shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing," she hissed. "She threatened to kill our cats!"

"She's a bully," Tómas said, his face stormy. "Don't give in to bullies."

“I don’t want to get hurt, and I don’t want Ash getting hurt either! He’s defenceless right now.”

Gita shook her head. “There’s something I don’t get though. It takes a month to uplift our pets, right? Three more weeks to go for us. Four for that new kid... Luis?”

Tómas frowned. “What’s your point?”

“Pork’s been here six months... how come she was running with us earlier? She should already have a mount, and be training with us.” She looked from one face to another. “She’s threatening our mounts, but what’s happened to hers?”

It was dark in their tiny room, and Gita could hear Tómas snoring gently as they lay on their straw pallets. Her body ached, but for some reason thoughts buzzed round her mind like bees around a flower, and sleep eluded her.

She rolled over onto her side, trying not to think about Nané. Right about this time of night, she’d come in from hunting and snuggle into the sheets back at her father’s estate, purring gently. Her fur would be warm and smell of dust and sunshine. She put her hand under the ragged pillow she’d made out of her tunic and a little extra hay, feeling the cold circles of the coins she’d secreted there.

“Gita. You’re awake.”

Celeste’s voice, little more than a whisper, ghosted out of the darkness. Gita didn’t move, willing her to stop talking. “I know you are. I’m going to go out now. I need to see Olivia, or... I need to see her. Don’t you want to see Nané?”

Gita sat up, squinting in the near darkness. Only a sliver of moonlight crept in through the cracks around door. “If Stubbs finds out, he’ll kill you. Really kill you.”

“I’m still going.”

Gita squeezed her eyes shut, hearing Celeste’s own straw mattress rustle as she got up. The door opened, more light spilling in, and Gita scowled.

“Wait,” she hissed, as the door started to close. It opened a crack, and Celeste’s worried face looked back at her. “I’ll come too.”

Celeste smiled, and Gita realised that it might have been the first time she’d seen the girl properly smile all week. Gita slipped on a pair of shoes and moved through the door, out into the night. It was cold, and Gita hugged her simple cotton shift to herself.

“This is really not a good idea,” Gita muttered.

“Go back, then,” Celeste replied, and Gita looked at her sharply. There was a note of command in her voice; she walked surely through the darkness, not looking back.

“You really care about your mount, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. Don’t you?” They were at the parade grounds now; deep shadows lined the edges, the moon mostly hidden behind an overcast sky. A few paces separate them from the Chemick’s laboratory when Gita heard the sound.

Footsteps. Coming their way. Boots. *A guard.*

She lurched forward and grabbed Celeste. “Someone’s coming,” she hissed.

The girl looked left and right, but there was no easy place to hide. The sound was coming from the closest entranceway to the parade grounds, and the soft orange glow of a shuttered lantern was coming with it. “In there,” Celeste said, pointing at the door to the laboratory.

“What? No! I thought we were just... looking in the window or something!” Ignoring her, Celeste grabbed Gita’s wrist and pulled her towards the door, lifting the latch. Silently, the door swung open just enough to admit them, and then Celeste shoved Gita inside, followed her in to the darkness, pulling the door shut. At the last moment, she slowed the door and it closed with barely a sound.

The smell of the place hit Gita like a hammer, a sharp smell of unwashed flesh, bodily waste and a deeper, sickly-sweet, scent that she recognised. All the mine workers had smelled like this, their clothes forever imprinted with the smell of yellowdust. Breathing shallowly through her mouth to avoid gagging, Gita pressed her ear up against the door, hearing the footsteps coming closer. Her heart pounded in time with them. Was it Pork? Had she come to do whatever it was she had threatened? Was it the Chemick, come to check on the mounts? Her father would be devastated if she were caught; what had possessed her to come out here? Panic rippled through her, forcing her breathing into short pants.

With a crunch of gravel, the boots stopped outside the door.

Gita’s eyes began to adjust to the almost-darkness in the laboratory, and she looked across at Celeste’s fear-wide eyes.

There was the sound of a grunt, then liquid splashing onto the ground. It seemed to go on for a long time, and Gita willed her heart to slow.

He finished, and a moment later they heard his footsteps getting further away, and then, in the silence, Gita slumped against the

door. The relief was almost palpable. "That was..." she whispered.

"Yeah," Celeste said. She let out a sort of breathy giggle as the tension began to leak out of her, and Gita covered her mouth to prevent her own laughter from bubbling out. Instead, she clambered to her feet and looked around the shadowy room.

There was a small amount of light coming in from around shuttered windows, and she could see that it was much bigger than it looked from outside. A long bench filled the middle area, its surface covered with tools and bowls. Each wall was lined with cages, their doors made of tightly-woven metal mesh. Taking care not to disturb anything, Gita crept up to the nearest cage.

Most of it was cast in shadow, but she could see a small bowl of food and another of water. She leaned her hand flat on the wire mesh, letting it dig slightly into her hand, and screwed her eyes up. Something was glimmering in the deep darkness of the cage, two tiny orbs of light.

Something hissed quietly and, quick as a snake striking, whatever was in the cage lurched forward, battering its tiny body against the door. Gita yelped and jumped back as its claws scraped down the wire, trying to get to her.

Its fur had fallen out in huge clumps and bloody weals blossomed all along its limbs, which seemed at once wasted and possessed of a kind of elastic strength. Its claws were long and curved, no longer fitting neatly away into the pads of its feet, and it swished a whip-thin tail angrily. Huge warty growths covered its head, distorting its features.

"Oh, my god," Gita heard Celeste say from behind her. "Olivia..."

There was a tiny paper sign, neat handwriting confirming Celeste's suspicion, and as if in answer the animal in the next cage - Paula, the label said - began to yowl, a keening noise with lower tones that he shouldn't have been able to produce. The sound spread to the next cage, and the next, a rising chorus of pain and fear that grew steadily deeper.

"We have to go," Gita all-but shouted over the cacophony. "Someone will come! The noise-!"

Celeste nodded, unable to take her eyes from Olivia. Gita grabbed at her shoulder, jerking her towards the door, then moved back to the door. Opening it a crack, she looked out. No one. "Come on, Celeste. Celeste?"

Celeste wasn't there. She was stood at the cage still, her fingers scrabbling at the lock. "It's ok," she muttered. "It'll be ok, shh, calm down..."

Gita dashed over and slapped a hand down over Celeste's, the noise setting off a new round of screaming from the trapped animals. "What are you doing? We have to go!"

"I can't leave her here like this," Celeste said, tears streaming down her cheeks. "She's so ill, look at her!"

"It's the uplifting," Gita said. "Nané is here somewhere, and she probably looks the same." She swallowed past a lump in her throat. "I... I trust the Chemick."

"Why? You trust someone who you don't know?" Celeste tried to prise Gita's hand away from hers. "I'm taking Olivia and I'm leaving."

"If you do that, Olivia will die," a new voice said, and both girls looked round in surprise. A stooped man in robes was standing quietly behind them, looking on.

"Chemick Bole," Gita said, forcing her gaze down to the ground. "This isn't what it looks like."

"Isn't it?" He shook his head. "It looks to me like two recruits care just a little too much about their *pets* to allow them to become *mounds*. Girl, if you take that cat away from here before I have completed my work on it, it will die."

"But he looks so..."

"Decrepit? Diseased? Like she's dying?" The Chemick nodded. "Of course she does. She is dying. And, to forestall what you're about to say, that is completely normal. If her will is strong, and she wants to survive, then she will. And if she doesn't, then she will be reborn into another body, one stronger than before. Only by daily ministrations of yellowdust will she unlock her full potential, but you will kill Olivia with kindness if you take her away."

Celeste let her hand drop at last from the cage door. "But—"

The Chemick moved between them to check the lock. "Your parents let you come here. They let you flourish on your own, away from their gaze. The least you can do is let your mounts have the same privilege." His dusty voice wheezed into a small laugh. "Now go, back to your room, before someone else comes to find out what the unholy racket was."

Gita looked up at him. "You mean we're not... in trouble?"

"As if you're the first recruits to sneak in here. We'd lock the door if we wanted to keep people out." He shook his head, but a small smile touched his lips. "Bugger off, and let an old man rest."

Gita bowed and grabbed Celeste's wrist again, but the farm girl resisted. "Wait. Someone threatened Olivia."

The Chemick's eyebrow arched. "Ah, the true reason you're here

at last. Miss Fi, I'm assuming. You're not the first, and you won't be the last." He shrugged. "You're going to have to deal with your personal issues yourself. Anything I say will only make it worse. But know this; in the six months she's been here, no animals in my care have been harmed."

Gita shook her head. "That just means everyone's paid her off."

He shrugged expansively, a half-smile on his face that could have meant anything. Celeste bowed. "Thank you," she said, and then she finally allowed Gita to wrench her out onto the parade ground.

As they rushed back out into the windy night air, Gita looked back one last time, but it was impossible to tell where Nané might be. Somewhere, in there, surely.

Tears blurred her passage back to their tiny stone cell as urgency gave way to relief, and for a long time she and Celeste held hands in the darkness, each taking comfort in that small contact.

The next morning the wind had died, and a strange stillness seemed to hover over the entire town.

"I can't believe you did that," Eve muttered as they broke open their small black rolls. "And without telling me."

"You'd have tried to stop us," Celeste said. "You can't afford to be caught, anyway; you're too busy trying to catch the eye of that tall boy, the one with the northern forest cat." She tutted.

"I am not!" Eve said, and the two descended into bickering as they went to get their own breakfast.

Tómas nudged Gita with his elbow as they sat down.

"Did you see...?"

"Not yours, not Nané," Gita replied. "Only Olivia and one called Paula. And... I'm not sure you'd want to see them." She shuddered, playing with the little chunk of bread, then put it back down on the table. "If she's ok, I'll see her again, and if she's not... I suppose I'll remember her as - as..." She tailed off, and after a moment Tómas put a hand on her shoulder.

Pork chose that moment to sit down opposite them. "How touching," she said. Gita looked up sharply, but Eve and Celeste were nowhere to be seen.

Her voice was low, threatening. "Got my money?"

Tómas shook his head, already balling his fists up. "You ain't ever gettin' nothin' out of me," he said.

Gita leaned forward slightly, lowering her voice. "Fi, where is your mount?"

Pork's neck and cheeks flushed deep red, her eyes narrowing. "What?"

"Your mount. You've been here six months. You'd be with the militia down in the town if you didn't have one at all, but you're up here in the King's guard. So where is it?"

There was a moment's silence. Gita tried to keep her expression straight, though the pure menace roiling off Pork was enough to curdle her stomach.

Pork looked to one side, then turned slitted eyes back to Gita. "What the hell do you care, worm?"

"Because we're supposed to be a team, Fi, like the Duke said yesterday. And because when we get our mounts—"

Faster than Gita was ready for, Pork's hand shot out and grabbed a fistful of the girl's tunic, hauling her effortlessly over the table. "Don't ever talk to me again," she bawled in Gita's face, then shoved her back down. The area around them fell silent as the two-dozen or so soldiers nearby turned to watch the commotion, the rest of the room lost in the dull roar of chatter. Rubbing at her chest, Gita spotted Sergeant Stubbs, bread and a cup of watered-down beer in hand, surging to his feet despite being clear across the other side of the room.

Pork seemed to realise that she had witnesses. She bared her teeth and stormed out, pushing her way past several men and woman to get to the door. Stubbs moved to intercept her, but she shoved past him, almost knocking him from his feet.

Tómas sank slowly back into his seat, stony expression on his face. "You ok?"

"I'm fine," Gita said, though she could already feel the dull ache of a bruise above her right breast. She scooted along the bench until she was next to one of the guards who had been close enough to hear everything. "Excuse me?"

"Mm?"

"What just happened there with Sergeant Stubbs and Fi?"

The soldier grinned, showing her blackened teeth, and the man next to her sniggered. "Little father-daughter disagreement, I reckon," she said, and laughed. "That's what happens when you let 'em disrespect you. Don't wanna have none myself, ain't that the truth."

"You'd have to find a man willin' to look at you for more than a second," the man next to her said, and Gita was quickly forgotten as they began trading insults. She slid back over to Tómas and repeated what she'd been told.

He nodded. "Makes sense."

"How so?"

"How else would she be able to get away with stuff like that?" He shrugged. "What do you think is up with her, though? Something to do with her mount."

"I think..." Gita bit her lip. "I think her mount died during its uplifting."

They sat in silence for a moment, and then the bell began to ring for morning muster. Quickly, Tómas gulped down the rest of his bread and pointed at Gita's untouched portion.

"You eating that now?"

She pushed it towards him. "Here."

He shook his head. "I meant, put it in your pocket. Never know when you're going to need it." She nodded and stowed the roll away in her pocket, joining the streaming mass of soldiers. Some headed straight for the training ground, where Gita knew that the mounts would already be gathering.

The bell kept ringing, and Gita suddenly realised that soldiers were running, that someone was out towards the training ground, and she nudged Tómas. Together the two of them broke into a run, arriving at the parade grounds square half a minute later. Most of the unit was there, a few more falling in as Gita took her own place, but all around the square soldiers were moving with dire purpose.

"What's going on?" Gita hissed. Tómas shrugged, then nodded his head towards Sergeant Stubbs, who had just come out from the castle's main door. Cold worry had fused his expression into something hard.

"This city is currently under attack from a force of Sanglier boars - not a big one, but enough. They apparently snuck the animals into the city inside wagons. Those with mounts, get to them and defend them. If you're attacked, do something about it. Follow the lead of your mounted training officer." Stubbs strode towards the back while most of the unit scurried off, leaving the four of them and Luis. "The rest of you, arm yourself, armour yourself, stay here in this square. Your task is to defend the Chemick's laboratory in case of-" He broke off, staring round at them. "Where's Fi?"

Gita stared forwards, not wanting to draw Stubbs' attention. *Fi's not answered muster*, she thought.

Stubbs swore, then pointed at the Chemick's door. "Guard that, you little bastards, or don't. If those boar-loving Sanglier get this

far we're all dead anyway." With that, he turned and jogged off in the direction of the sleeping cells without a backwards glance.

Gita watched him go, and for a moment the five of them stood in the square without moving.

Eve was the first one to speak. "What's wrong with him?"

"Fi's his daughter," Gita said, frowning. "I can't believe he's just gone off and left us, though. The Duke's going to be pissed."

Tómas walked over to the Chemick's door and closed it firmly. "Well, he told us to defend right here. Time to do something with our training." He pointed to a weapons rack off to one side. "Get something from there and come here in front of this door, I guess."

Eve and Celeste both selected short swords, the only weapon they'd had any formal training in, while Tómas grabbed himself a long spear. Taller than he was, it nevertheless looked like he was comfortable with it. It wasn't until Gita had picked up a small hand-axe, the haft heavy in her hand, that she realised one of their number was still stood stock-still in the middle of the square.

She approached the newest recruit, axe held loosely in her hand, and moved so that she crossed in front of his gaze. He was staring straight in front and trembling like a newborn kitten.

"Hey," she said. "It's Luis, isn't it?"

"Y-yes," he blurted out, voice high-pitched and quavering.

"Listen, Luis... how old are you?"

"Fifteen," he said. He was sweating, though it wasn't hot enough, and Gita folded her arms. His eyes flicked to hers. "...thirteen," he said after a moment.

He lied about his age, Gita realised. *Or he ran away to join the army.* She shook her head. It wasn't important. "Right. Got a cat in there?" She grabbed him by the shoulders and started to steer him over to the Chemick's door.

Luis nodded. "Paula," he said after a second's stuttering.

"Well, you're going to stand on that doorstep right there, right in front of the door, and you're going to help us protect Paula. You worked with a sword before?" Luis shook his head. "Me either, much, but you heard the Sergeant. Try this." She placed the axe she was holding into his limp grasp and grabbed herself another from the rack. "Stick with us, Luis. It'll be fine."

Gita looked up to see Tómas, Eve and Celeste staring at her. "What?"

Celeste shrugged and looked away. "Just... what you said there made more sense than what the sergeant said."

Taking her place in their little line, Gita scowled. *You're equals!*

Not their leader.

“Not sayin’ that’s a bad thing, mind,” Celeste said after a moment. “Think we all needed a little bit of sense.”

Ten minutes went by, each one more silent than the last one. The sounds of soldiers mustering faded away, the bells stopped their pealing, and Gita began to wonder if there had been some sort of mistake. More minutes went by, and then Tómas put his head to one side. “Listen,” he said. “Hear that?”

Faintly, on the edge of the slight breeze drifting in from the training grounds, the sound of swords clashing and the roar of mounts could be heard.

Luis ran a trembling hand through his short dark hair. “What do we do?”

“Nothing. We stay here and do what we’ve been ordered,” Gita said, allowing a little of the sharpness into her voice that she’d heard Stubbs using. The sounds of the battle came closer, and individual sounds started to burst out of the *mélange*. There, the roar of a giant cat; here, the bellowing squeal of a boar, far deeper than anything wild; men and women shouting, dying.

The sound of trotters clapping on stone echoed down a cobbled passageways leading to the parade ground, and Gita tightened her grip on the axe’s handle. It suddenly seemed like a poor choice, just a rough metal head with an unpolished wooden handle, but there was no time to change now. Maybe she could hook a sword out of the way or something. Her legs began to shake as adrenaline finally worked its way down her body, and she had to fight down the urge to run, to find the privy, *anything* other than hold position there.

The clapping sound grew louder, and Gita felt the reassuring presence of the others as they all stepped slightly closer together. A furious black shape burst around the corner and into the square, resolving itself into a boar twice size of a donkey. Riderless, it huffed and snorted as it turned around, scanning the square with flat yellow eyes that seemed too small for its head. It turned, and Gita could see the shaft of a spear stuck in its side, the stream of blood dripping down its coarse black hair. Its tusks were like two ivory swords emerging from the blood-red gash of its mouth.

“What do we do?” hissed Eve.

“Our job,” Tómas said roughly, advancing in a fighting crouch, spear out just like they’d been trained. The boar saw him move and its brow creased in a human-like frown. It crouched slightly, ready to spring forwards, and Gita realised that unless she did

something it would charge the boy.

She took a step forward, and then a scream rent the air, causing every head to turn to the side. Tómas was the first to recover, stabbing forwards; there was a wet sound as he sank the spear into the boar's belly. The huge beast bucked, kicking its legs up and round, bringing the butt of the spear still embedded in its body around and catching Tómas in the face. Even over the sound of the boar's dying screams, shrill and seemingly endless, they all heard the crunch as Tómas flew backwards, skidding across the dusty ground to lay in a crumpled heap, unmoving.

"Tómas! No!" With a clatter, Eve threw down her sword and ran over to the rag doll body. She turned him over as the others got to him. His face was a bloody mess, his eyes closed, and his chest was rising only shallowly. Behind her, she heard the sound of Luis vomiting.

Celeste clutched at Gita's arm. "That scream; it was a woman, or a girl. And we still don't know where Fi is."

Gita nodded and put a hand on Eve's shoulder. "Stay here and look after Tómas, Eve. We'll be right back." She looked over at Luis, still stood trembling on the steps, flecks of vomit on his tunic. "Don't move."

He stared at her, fear and trust mingled in his eyes, and she closed her eyes, drawing in a breath that did nothing to steady her.

"Come on," she said, and Celeste fell in behind her as they jogged in the direction of the scream.

They didn't have far to go; the cry rang out again, more an angry yell this time than anything, from the sleeping cells. Gita put her head down, her breathing ragged from fear rather than exertion, and focused on running. They dashed around the corner and skidded to a halt. There, filling the whole space between the row of cells and the castle wall, stood an enormous boar. Gita could only see its haunches, the immense barrel-like body, thick black hair covered in dust. Its saddle was crooked, as if the rider had been thrown or torn down, and its hindquarters were stained with mud or worse. It was eating something, blunt teeth ripping into a bloody pile of oddly-coloured skin and flesh. *Not Fi, please*, Gita thought.

"It can't turn," Celeste hissed as they slowly advanced on it, weapons held ready.

Gita nodded. "Mind its trotters, then." She held her breath, then charged forward, screaming. With a lurch, she brought the axe down on the boar's fleshy flank.

It screamed back at her and bucked upright, kicking out, but Gita had already flattened herself against the wall. Celeste, a second behind her, stabbed straight into the boar, just under the stubby tail. As she brought the sword back for a second thrust, blood gouted from the wound, spattering onto the cobbles.

“Back!” Gita yelled, as the boar kicked out again. Its hoof slammed into Celeste's thigh, throwing her backwards, and Gita's eyes widened. *Not her too!* With a yell, she channelled all her anger into swinging the axe round into the boar's legs, collapsing one of them. Swinging wildly, she brought the axe down again and again, careless of her target; flank, back, leg, stomach. Blood spurted up, thick warm droplets that spattered onto her face and stained her tunic.

At some point, the boar's back legs gave up, sinking down, and Gita grabbed handfuls of coarse hair, slick with blood. She straddled it and raised the axe high. With one final burst of energy, she swung it down and buried the axe-head between the boar's eyes. The shock of the impact vibrated the handle out of her hand.

Panting, she wiped her eyes and looked around. A groan from up ahead and off to one side drew her gaze, and she saw the crumpled form of Fi on her back ahead, clutching at her stomach. Gita looked back. Behind the boar's steaming corpse, Celeste was on her hands and knees. She looked up and met Gita's eyes, her face white. “I'm fine. Check on Fi.”

“I thought-“

“I know. It's fine,” Celeste said, clambering to her feet. She lost her balance and leaned on the wall, then gave a sickly grin. “See?”

Gita slid off the boar's back, giving its head a wide berth. Its grisly meal revealed itself to be the tattered remains of an over-large black cat, its legs were misshapen and its spine curved in an unnatural way. A suspicion began to form in Gita's mind as she knelt next to Fi.

“Are you ok?”

The girl's eyes opened wide and she let go of her side, grabbing at Gita's arm with her bloody hand. “The boar-!”

“It's dead,” Gita said, pressing her shoulders back down. “How badly are you wounded?”

“Just a... scratch,” Fi said, relaxing backwards. “It caught me by surprise.”

“Why weren't you with everyone else?”

Fi stared at Gita, and for a moment she expected the same acerbic response as usual. Then all the tension seemed to go out of

her, and she closed her eyes again. “After you... after we... spoke, I came here. And then the alarm, I couldn’t just leave him. You were right, you know. I don’t have a mount.” She wiped her face and sniffed heavily. “But I did have a cat.”

“Your cat didn’t make it through uplifting, did it?” Gita tugged at the sleeve of her tunic until it tore off, then ripped the fabric down the seam. She began to pack the shallow wound with the fabric, then tugged at her other sleeve.

“No. Shadow tried, but the Chemick said that some animals just don’t take to the dust like others. When it was over, Shadow’s back was broken, curved, and he couldn’t walk. Could barely feed himself. Father said it was the Chimera’s will, that I should put him out of his misery, but... I couldn’t.”

“I need you sat up against the wall,” Gita said. As she began to wind the fabric around Fi’s waist, holding the wadded-up cotton in place, she kept her eyes down, focused on the work.

“I didn’t realise that there was an attack. Heard the bell, but... Shadow was crying, trying to stop me from going. And I couldn’t leave him.” Her voice cracked, and Gita felt her cheeks burning as she realised tears were running down the older girl’s cheek. “I heard the sounds of the battle and came outside, and that... boar was there. It saw me and charged. And then Shadow was there in front of it.” She brought her hands up to her eyes as if trying to stem the flow. “I don’t know how he got there. He’s dead, isn’t he?”

Gita nodded. “I’m sorry.”

Fi wiped her eyes and sighed. “He saved my life,” she said. Her face was a mask of blood and dirt, smeared with clear trails where she had been crying, and she frowned. “So did you.”

“You’re part of my team, Fi. I don’t like you, but I don’t want you dead.”

They held each other’s gaze for a moment more, and then Fi hung her head. Feeling like she’d pulled every muscle in her body at once, Gita clambered to her feet as Celeste tottered over.

“Listen,” Gita said. “We’re going to get back to the main square. Tómas is wounded. Can you walk?”

In answer, Fi rolled over onto all fours, letting out a little squeak of pain. After a moment, she brought one foot up, then the other, leaning heavily on the wall. She looked back at Gita and nodded.

“Come on then.” She nodded towards the boar, blocking the way they’d come. “We’ll have to go the long way round.”

As they arrived back at the parade grounds, the door to the Chemick’s laboratory was open, and the others were nowhere to be

seen. Fi was leaning heavily on Gita, both of them breathing heavily.

Celeste ran over to the steps and inside, emerging again a moment later. "They're in here," she called.

"Just a little further," Gita murmured, more for herself than for Fi. They staggered into through the door, to where it was cool and dark, and Gita lowered Fi into the waiting chair. Celeste had her hand on Eve's shoulder, both of them stood at the long bench, watching Chemick Bole work. Tómas lay on the bench.

As Gita joined them, she watched the Chemick's quick hands. He was in the final stages of cleaning the gash on Tómas' head, dripping water onto it until the wound was free of dirt. Then he picked up a curved needle, threaded it with black thread and held its point in the light of one of the many candles that lined the bench.

"Your friend will be fine," the old man said, "as long as he awakens soon. The longer he sleeps, the harder it will be. As soon as we can, we'll get him to a proper healer." He began to sew the wound closed, making quick and decisive strokes with the needle. Eve turned and buried her face in Celeste's shoulder.

Gita looked around. "Where's Luis?"

"Getting water," the Chemick said. He paused, and cocked his head to one side. "Battle's over."

Moving to the door, Gita stuck her head out and held her breath. The sound of metal clashing on metal had stopped; instead, there were cheers drifting in on the breeze.

"We won," she murmured, and closed her eyes. The rough wood of the door pressed into her cheek as she leaned heavily. "We won."

Slowly, Gita let herself slide down to the ground as her strength deserted her.

Soldiers drifted back into the castle in ones and twos, then larger groups, until finally Duke Benedict strode into the square at the head of a knot of generals and captains. He walked past Gita's small group, still sat on the steps to the Chemick's laboratory in a kind of daze, and paused, holding a hand up to silence the people around him.

"Gita?"

She dragged herself to her feet and gave a ragged salute, hearing Fi and Celeste also stand up behind her, Luis a fraction of a second later. "Sir..."

His gaze roved over the others. "At ease. What are you doing here? Where's Sergeant Stubbs?" His eyes narrowed as he took in the dust and blood on their clothes, the exhaustion that felt like grains of sand in her eyes. "You were in the fight? I will have his head if he's put raw recruits in unnecessary danger. Particularly-"

"There was a boar," Gita said, "here in the town. "Sergeant Stubbs..." She looked over at Fi, but the young woman was looking down, resigned. "Sergeant Stubbs went to lead it off, but it came back. He was brave, sir, and we were lucky to have killed the boar."

"You killed it..." The Duke's eyes widened, and Gita tried not to notice Fi's head jerking up at the lie. "Interesting. Well done, Gita. And the rest of you, I assume. Well done. Any injuries?"

"Tómas. But the chemick took care of us, sir."

"Took a boar down, hmm. You're done for now - I think you've earned some recuperation time, and I want the other member of your little troupe awake. Tomorrow, back to training, but we're going to see about some more specialised work after your mounts are up and running." Again, he took all their faces in, then nodded sharply. "Dismissed."

Gita saluted again, and the Duke was gone, his advisors once again shouting for his attention.

Fi's hand came down on Gita's shoulder, but when she whipped around the young woman was smiling. "Thank you. For not dropping my father in any more trouble than he already is."

"Go and find him," Gita said. "Sort this out. We'll be waiting when you come back."

Fi nodded, then jogged off towards the castle gates and out towards the town.

Gita looked at Celeste, the Luis. "Better get some rest."

Celeste shook her head. "I'm checking on Tómas first."

Without waiting for Gita's answer, she turned and opened the door to the Chemick's workshop, going straight in, and Gita followed a moment later, Luis at her heels.

The Chemick was at his workbench, and as they came in he held a bony finger to his lips. "Hush. Your friend is sleeping - a natural sleep this time. He'll be fine in the morning." He nodded to the door. "Close that. I wanted to show you two something. Young man, wait here, if you will?"

Luis shut the door behind himself, and the Chemick picked up the lantern from his table, taking it down through the corridors lined with cages. He led Gita and Celeste between the smallest cages, where newly-recruited animals lay, towards the bigger ones

at the back. He gestured to one of the cages.

“I moved them this morning, both of them. I thought you might like to see the difference a day makes.”

He held the lantern up and Gita stared into the cage, at the shape within. The cat that sat in the centre, seeming far too small for the space, had bald patches and strange growths, its limbs gangly and too-long, but it was sat upright. It was fully ten seconds before Gita realised she was staring at Nané, half-grown, and that the cat was staring back at her with an almost humanlike intensity. Her eyes had a strong yellow tint that seemed to be lit from within.

A hand slipped into Gita’s, and she looked over to see Celeste looking into the next cage. Olivia was likewise sat there, awake and alert, and Gita squeezed Celeste’s hand as she felt tears gather in her eyes.

“They’ve entered a period of developing consciousness,” Chemick Bole said quietly. “They’re waking up, if you will, from the dream of being animals. They can’t really understand you, but they have the same sort of awareness that a human newborn might have.” His face wrinkled into a smile. “Growth is a funny thing. Some people mature faster than others. Some develop physically before they ever do mentally, and some... some change, even overnight.”

He fell quiet, and as the two young women stared into the yellowing eyes of their mounts, they heard him shuffle away into the darkness, leaving them with the lantern.