

Chapter 2

father's Secret

Bravecat was situated in the royal stable of Libria, next to thoroughbred Kiroshan stallions. Beautiful and quick and usually fearless horses were unnerved by Bravecat's appearance. It was not pleasant being tied while a natural enemy could freely move about the stable. But Bravecat paid no heed to the horses. He lazily stretched across the hay and dozed.

When Lauren and Caitlin approached the stable, Caitlin stopped at the entrance. She looked at the unusual animal with awe and respect. She had once seen a similar cat, which a tamer had brought to court, but it had been the size of a court dog. This one was as big as a horse. A truly magnificent animal.

"Well? Do you wish to meet him or not?" Lauren said sharply and almost impolitely.

"Meet? What do you mean meet?" Caitlin was confused.

"How do you meet other people?" Lauren held herself back. Introducing this common girl with the unusual cat seemed like a needless waste of time to her.

"You mean to say he can speak?" Caitlin asked.

"Only with those he trusts."

"You think he will trust me?"

"I'm not certain. Probably not," Lauren said brusquely.

Caitlin patiently endured Lauren's antipathy. All her attention was focused on Bravecat. Aside from being bigger and stronger than any other animal Caitlin had seen so far, she was drawn to it, for reasons completely unclear to her.

Hearing the conversation between the women, Bravecat opened his eyes and yawned, revealing sharp teeth. He stood, stretched his front paws and approached Lauren. He put his head under her hand, at which she stroked his head. He then looked at Caitlin and approached her.

Lauren expected a vicious reaction from Bravecat, but it didn't come. It seemed he felt drawn to her as well, as though he recognized an innocent soul and goodness. He stretched his head towards her as well and when she touched him, he closed his eyes and began to purr like a cat.

"Amazing!" Lauren said, surprised. "He allows no one but Elesar and I to do that!"

"It really is amazing," Caitlin said in delight. To see, let alone touch a cat like this was an unforgettable experience for her.

"You really are a special little princess," Lauren told her and Caitlin immediately answered back,

"Don't call me that!" she said sharply.

"Oh-ho! The little princess has shown her dark side," Lauren joked, surprised by her reaction.

"I told you not to call me that!" Caitlin was now visibly angry.

"Calm yourself. Why does it matter so much to you?" asked Lauren. It seemed she tread where she shouldn't have with Caitlin.

"My father calls me that, but I hate it."

"Why do you not simply tell him that then?"

"I don't wish to hurt him," Caitlin stopped stroking Bravecat and turned towards the unicorns. Their beautiful snow white coats almost glowed. She petted them on the neck and continued, "My father always tells me that I'm his "little princess" and won't allow anyone to hurt me. As far as I can remember, he's called me that and watched my every move. I'm sick of it! I am eighteen years old and a grown-up! I want to make decisions for myself, I want to get what belongs to me on my own, and I want to be responsible for my own decisions."

Lauren listened to her carefully, while reclining against Bravecat's back. She looked into the cat's big eyes and sighed.

"So that is growing up!" she realized, "Men! What an odd race."

"What do you mean?" Caitlin asked.

"Men have special times in their lives when they stop being children and become adults. At least that's what Elesar told me."

"Are you saying that I am a grown woman and I need to stand up to my father?" Caitlin asked. It was as if she was looking for Lauren's approval for something she had wanted to do a long time now.

"Yes! I suppose. I don't know much about it," Lauren admitted and slumped her shoulders.

"How come? Aren't you my age, approximately?"

"Yes, thereabouts," Lauren looked at her, tilting her head to the side, "I am ninety-eight."

"How much?" Caitlin imagined she had heard wrong.

"You heard me full well! I am an Elf! My kind lives forever. Don't tell me you didn't know that."

"I... didn't. Well, I knew that Elves lived longer than Men, but not that they lived forever. How old is Elesar then?"

"It is different with him. He is a Half-Elf. Isn't it obvious?"

Caitlin just stood and absorbed her every word. Everything Lauren was saying was new to her.

"He is the offspring of a Man and an Elf. Some dislike people like him – half-breeds, but I think they're the best kind. They have the best of both races," Lauren said.

"A Half-Elf," Caitlin repeated, "Wondrous. And what is he to you?"

"You could say he is my uncle."

"What do you mean, you could say?" she wanted to know.

"We are not actually related. Elesar was a friend of my mother who had died while I was still a baby. He took care of me and my sisters, Fiona and Kalisa. The two of them are..."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a servant. She bowed humbly and said:

"My lady, his Majesty the king asks that your highness and the miss join lord Elesar and the king for a feast."

At the word feast, Bravecat stood up and sniffed the air.

"You aren't going anywhere. You weren't invited," Lauren told him and patted him on the back.

*

The rich ceremonial table spread across the middle of the hall was filled with fresh fruit, drink and meat. Scented candles flickered in the twilight that seeped into the court.

Hidden from view, court musicians quietly played. Their melody seemed to leave the walls of the hall and float in the air.

King Christian, the princess Caitlin and their guests, lord Elesar and Lauren were enjoying the feast.

The conversation and laughter lasted until a mention of the Great Battle. Christian sank back in his chair, looked into his wine goblet and lifted it towards Elesar, toasting.

"It has been a hundred years. It was truly a great battle."

"Indeed. And very difficult," Elesar replied and drained the wine.

Caitlin listened to their toast and was left surprised. She looked at her father in wonder and laughed:

"Father! I think you've had too much wine. You speak of that battle like you fought in it yourself."

"Of course I fought in it, child!" he rose and lifted his goblet again; "I remember it as though it was yesterday!"

"Didn't you say the battle was a hundred years ago?"

"Correct! I had reached my twenty fourth year then. I still hadn't reached the pinnacle of my strength," he said proudly and smiled.

Caitlin felt even more stunned.

"How is that possible?! It means you're now a hundred and twenty four years old! Explain it to me, father!" she said, upset.

Christian looked at her and realized what he had done. He fell silent and sank into his chair, hiding his red face with his palm.

Elesar had silently listened to their conversation. He sharply looked at his friend.

"Christian! You haven't told her?!"

"What? Told me what, father?!" Caitlin asked, already very upset. It was clear to her that her father was hiding something.

But Christian did not answer and merely looked away. He couldn't face Caitlin or Elesar.

"Your father and I," Elesar began, watching Christian, "fought in the Great Battle against the dark lord Kodran. He is now locked away in the dungeons of Everdark. With him fought a helper mage by the name of Bokani. He was very powerful? Almost as powerful as Kodran. During the course of battle, your father and his friend, king Nomack, confronted Bokani. Unfortunately, Nomack lost his life, but Christian managed to kill Bokani. According to mage law, the one to cut the mage's head off receives his powers. That is how your father gained Bokani's powers."

Caitlin looked at her father in disbelief.

"As you can imagine," Elesar continued, "Your father doesn't age like a normal Man, but like a mage. What he didn't tell you is that the powers of a mage are...hereditary," Elesar looked at Caitlin. Her whole world had been turned on its head.

"Why didn't you tell me father?!" she said through tears, "If you're a mage, what am I then?! Am I even human?!" Not even waiting for an answer, Caitlin ran out of the hall. Her whole life had changed in a moment. She didn't know if anything was the same. And she wasn't completely sure if she was ready for her father's answer.

Elesar quietly looked at Lauren and she ran after Caitlin, leaving him alone with Christian. He rose from his chair, went around the table and sat at its edge in front of Christian:

"Did you think she wouldn't notice her powers in time," he asked, pouring some wine for Christian.

"I knew it had to happen, but it never seemed to be the right moment," Christian's voice was heavy, "It's hard carrying that burden. I don't want my little princess to become a mage who can't control the powers that might lead to her ruin."

"Christian, she must learn to use her powers. Only then can she escape that madness you speak of."

"I understand. But I've already lost my wife and son. I don't want to lose her as well."

"Why would you have to lose her? Caitlin needs a good teacher who will teach her how to control her powers. And I know the best. He is called Zeron. The wisest of all mages. He will teach her to control her powers. With his guidance, she will grow up to be a normal queen or mage, whatever she decides. You know you must let her. With your permission I'll take her to him in Adazar."

"Adazar? No! That is too far. She's never been further than Kiroshan!" Christian stood up, disturbed.

"Christian, Caitlin is a grown woman! It's time she becomes independent. She must learn how to live without your constant help and supervision."

Christian stood quietly for some time, thinking about Elesar's words. He was not ready to leave his little daughter that quickly.

"You're right. I'm too protective. It's time to let her go. Elesar, you have my blessing to take her to Adazar."

The evening that had began in celebration and so much joy, turned into a night of excitement, discoveries and an unsure future. Christian had opened a new chapter in his life. All his wisdom and experience did not help him accept it without apprehension.

*

Lauren entered the princess' chambers and there she found Caitlin crying on her bed. She approached the edge and sat next to her. She wasn't sure what she should do. She'd never been somebody's shoulder to cry on. She had grown up by Elesar's side. He led her on travels and adventures, she didn't have time for problems like Caitlin's. Carefully, as though she were reaching towards a flame, she put her hand on the princess' shoulder.

"How could he have kept this from me?" Caitlin said through her tears, "What other secrets is he hiding from me?"

"I'm not sure, you should ask him that," wrong answer, Lauren thought and then quickly corrected herself, "But look on the bright side. Now you know you possess powers that could enable you access to a completely new and different world. You can use them to your gain or ruin. It depends on what you choose. My advice is to stop crying and decide what you will do with those powers. Learn to control them and use them for good purposes."

Caitlin stopped crying and sat up. She looked at Lauren tearfully, "But how will I do that?"

"That I do not know, but I know that there are those who do. They are mage-tutors."

"Mage-tutors?" Caitlin wiped away her tears.

"Yes! They're the best teachers and could surely teach you how to control your magic. They are very wise and can teach you many things. I'm certain that now the secret has been revealed your father and Elesar are talking about it. Whatever solution Elesar decides on, I believe it will be the right one. You will talk in the morning. Rest now. This was an exciting evening," Lauren moved to rise when Caitlin unexpectedly hugged her.

"Thank you, Lauren," she said quietly.

Lauren said nothing. She returned the hug and left her alone. Caitlin laid her head on the silk pillow and closed her eyes. Today had been filled with surprises. She took a deep breath and quickly fell asleep.

End of Chapter 02