

The Land of Miu

Book 1 of The Land of Miu Series

Second Edition

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Dedication

For Barry

A believer in magic

Chapter One

“Mummy, there’s a dragon sitting on our veranda,” called Emma from the front steps.

Sitting in a sunny alcove near the kitchen, twelve year old Kate Dawson rolled her eyes and looked up at her mother.

Jacqui Dawson continued to spread chocolate icing over the top of a freshly baked cake. Kate returned her gaze to the book in her lap, ignoring her half-sister’s outburst. She only managed to read a couple of words when her mother’s voice interrupted.

“Emma’s only five, Kate.”

Kate remained silent. The warmth of the sun through the window making her feel sleepy, she watched her mother sprinkle finely chopped almonds across the top of the cake. Their eyes met. She knew what was coming before her mother spoke.

“Please go and see what she’s talking about.”

Kate sighed and snapped the book shut. “Mum, do I have to? It will only be something stupid.”

Her mum raised an eyebrow. “Yes, you do.”

Kate wanted to slam the book onto the low table beside her and storm out, but she knew that reaction would only get her into trouble. Instead, she let the book slip into the crease of the soft cushions and walked out calmly.

Outside, Emma sat on the top step with one hand pressed over her mouth. The other hand clasped one of their two kittens, Jasper, tightly in her lap. Kate looked around and saw nothing to indicate a dragon was anywhere near. The shrubs were tall and green, not squashed into the dirt as would be expected if a dragon came to visit. The flowers smelt sweet, the opposite of what she suspected the odour of a dragon would be like. Kate wasn’t surprised by either of these things. She didn’t expect to find a dragon, just like she didn’t expect to see half the things her little sister claimed to see.

Kate stood with her hands on her hips. “Where’s the dragon, Emma?”

Emma bobbed up and down, obviously trying to be quiet. Jasper meowed as he tried to free himself from the little girl’s clutches. “Shh, you’ll scare it away.”

Kate wasn’t sure if Emma was talking to her or the cat.

Emma pointed at the rocks in the garden, a huge smile lighting up her face. “It’s right there, sunbaking.”

Taking a step closer, Kate squatted down in time to see the long, scaly tail of a tiny lizard disappear behind a rock.

“Oh, you scared it,” Emma said, a pout taking the place of the smile. Jasper leapt out of Emma’s arms and ran into the ferns to hide with his sister, Sophie.

Kate shook her head. “It’s only a lizard, Emma. Not a dragon.” Anger bubbled up inside her. When would Emma stop telling these stupid stories? “You shouldn’t make things up all the time. It’s annoying. I was trying to read.”

“What’s all the shouting about? What’s going on with my girls?” a deep voice called from the driveway.

“Daddy!”

Emma jumped onto the grass and ran into her father’s arms, while Kate sighed once again.

“Where’s my hug?” Joe Dawson picked Emma up and swung her around, making Emma scream with delight. She threw her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek hard against his. Their blond hair mingled, indistinguishable. Laughing, he walked up the steps and held his free hand out to Kate. “Do I get a hug from my big girl too?”

Oh, please!

Turning away, Kate rushed inside, grabbed her book and fled to the back yard.

Rectangular in shape, visitors always commented on the mysterious landscaping. No one could see the back fence from the house, even though the block wasn't very big. Shrubs and flowers had been strategically placed to provide areas of privacy.

Kate crossed the grassed area where sheets flapped gently on the clothes line. She walked through a gap in the shrubs and sat on a bench overlooking a rock and flower garden. A wooden well took pride of place in the centre of the garden. The well was tiny, no bigger than a potted plant, but Joe had promised to build a large, brick well when he had time.

Kate stared at the array of flowers surrounding the well and sighed with contentment. This was one of her favourite spots. The other being her bedroom, which was the only place she could find solitude. She opened the book and read.

Ten minutes later, Kate's mum appeared, carrying a basket of folded, clean washing. "Kate?"

"Yes?" Kate closed her book again.

Her mum put the basket down and sat beside her on the bench. "Your dad told me what happened when he got home from work. He's worried about you."

"He's not my dad."

"Kate!" They stared at each other for a moment. "Joe adopted you. He loves you and I won't have you being disrespectful."

Kate turned her gaze back to the colourful garden and remained silent.

"He tries so hard to include you, Kate, and to love you. I hate seeing you brush him aside like you do. And after all these years ... it isn't fair."

Kate allowed herself to be pulled into an embrace. "We both love you." Her mother's voice sounded croaky. Kate felt a lump come to her own throat. "We just want everyone to be happy."

It had been such a long time since they had hugged each other. Kate buried her face into her mum's neck, sweet perfume filling her nostrils, soft blond hair tickling her arms. For a moment, Kate almost believed it was possible to let the feelings she had go. The sound of footsteps, and the squeal of her half-sister, evaporated the moment.

Emma crawled up onto the bench between them, forcing mother and daughter apart.

"What's up?" asked Emma, looking up into Kate's face.

"Nothing."

"Are you crying?"

"No," Kate said through gritted teeth.

Their mother stood and held out a hand to Emma. "Come on, you can help me with dinner. Kate wants to be left alone for a while."

With another loud squeal, Emma pushed herself off the bench and grabbed her mother's hand. "Can I put the fancy shakers out? I love those shakers so much because they look like soldiers. Sometimes, I pretend they talk to me."

"Yes, you can. Come along." Bending to pick up the basket of washing, she turned and winked at Kate. "I'll call you when dinner is ready."

"Joe, I don't know what to do."

Kate paused at the living room door. Her mother sounded upset. Maybe she should return to her room and come back later.

"Calm down, Jacqui. Kate doesn't have to call me 'Dad' if she doesn't want to. I understand. 'Joe' is better than 'Mr Dawson'. I'd hate it if she called me that."

"But it's been almost seven years since we were married. I thought she would have

accepted you by now.”

Kate wanted to turn around and walk away. She knew eavesdropping was wrong.

“I will always love Kate like she’s my own. When she’s older she’ll know that, but pressuring her now will make things worse.”

“I feel caught in the middle,” came her mother’s soft reply. “I love you both.”

“I know that, and so does Kate. Stop worrying.” A pause followed and then Joe added, “As I always say, ‘Life is experience, but you can’t have experience until you have life’.”

Kate returned to her bedroom. She looked around the room, everything was neat and tidy. Everything belonged to her. She touched the gold framed photograph of her biological father and then touched the long strands of her own hair, which had fallen forward over her shoulder. It was thick and dark, just like her father’s. Almost black. Sadness filled her. He had died when she was only a baby, so she had no memories of him. She wished she had at least one.

On Friday afternoon, Kate arrived home from school to find the house quiet. No one was home, but Kate wasn’t worried. She was old enough to be on her own. She was *twelve*.

Sophie and Jasper, the two tabby kittens, played in the backyard. Kate remembered the morning her mother had opened the front door to find them sitting on the door step, looking frightened and hungry. That was only three months ago and already the whole family loved them both dearly.

Kate never tired of watching them chase each other—tumbling, jumping, racing and play fighting, but sometimes they got rough with each other. She couldn’t help but laugh at how serious they looked then. Their little faces had many expressions and their eyes were so mysterious. Kate loved cat’s eyes.

This afternoon was no exception.

Kate sat on the bench and felt something brush against her legs. She looked down to find Jasper staring up at her.

Kate patted her lap. “Come on then.”

Jasper sprang up onto her lap and started purring. Kate scratched his ears and stroked his back. He rolled over, stretching out one paw to gently touch her face. Kate laughed and rubbed his belly. “You’re a lovely cat.”

Meow.

She looked at the little well to find Sophie sitting regally beside it. “Do you want a cuddle too, Sophie?”

Meow.

Jasper jumped down and ran into the flower garden. Kate could see his green eyes looking at her, but he refused to come out when she called him.

Kate’s gaze returned to Sophie. The kitten stared at her. Kate couldn’t pull her gaze away. Sophie stood, her tiny white paws dainty in the lush green of the garden. Tail straight up in the air, the kitten walked slowly towards Kate and stopped two strides away. She sat in that regal position again, her long tail wrapping itself around her paws.

Meow.

“What’s wrong, Sophie?”

Jasper crept out of the garden and walked over to sit beside Sophie. Two sets of green, mysterious eyes stared at her. They were only babies, so why did she see knowledge behind those eyes?

The spell was broken when Emma rushed out the back door. “Kate, we’ve been to the park. It was such good fun. You should come with me and Mummy next time.”

Jasper jumped high into the air and dove into the safety of the shrubs and flowers. Sophie shot Emma one disgusted look and followed her brother. Mysterious eyes once again nothing more than cat's eyes.

"There's no need to shout, Emma," said Kate. "You scared the kittens."

Emma covered her mouth with her hands for a moment and looked at the two sets of eyes staring at her. "Oh, I didn't mean to. I'm sorry, little kitties. Come and play with Emma. Come on."

The kittens turned and ran farther down the garden.

"Emma, tell me about the park," said Kate, trying to distract her sister.

Emma climbed up onto the bench beside Kate. "It was wonderful fun," she said with a grin. "Mummy pushed me on a swing, and then I pretended I was a monkey until my arms were sore." She showed Kate her sore arms. "Then I rode a butterfly into outer space. That was the best fun of all."

"Emma, don't be silly."

"It was a butterfly on a big spring," said Emma. "It rocks all over the place. I was pretending. It's lots of fun to pretend."

"I know," replied Kate.

Emma nodded her head, the excitement plain on her face.

"I'm going inside now. Coming?"

Emma slid off the bench. "No, I'm going butterfly hunting."

After dinner, Kate grabbed her book and returned to the alcove to read. Everyone was watching television. Kate thought she'd get a few minutes peace. She was wrong.

"What are you doing, Kate?" asked Emma.

"Reading."

"What's it about?"

Kate sighed. "It's about a princess who runs away to live with some dragons because she wasn't happy at home."

"Oh." Emma pressed her nose against the glass and peered out into the dark night. "Where are Jasper and Sophie?"

Kate looked out at the stars. "I don't know. They usually want to come in by now and sit with Joe while he watches TV."

"Or run up the curtains to make Mummy mad," said Emma with a giggle.

"Yeah, that too." Kate couldn't stop the grin that spread over her face.

"Did they run away from home too? Like the princess in your story?"

"Don't worry, they'll be back soon," said Kate. "They're probably hunting for mice."

"No, I mean when they came here. When they were really little." Emma held out her hand. "Remember when they could both sit in Daddy's hand?"

"Yes, they were little, but kittens don't stay with their mothers as long as humans do," said Kate, looking down at her book. "Why are you asking all these questions?"

Emma didn't smile. Her eyes were wide and her face pale. "I think the kittens are in trouble. I heard them talking today and they said a meanie by the name of Min was after them."

"Emma, stop making things up." Kate swung her legs from under her and pushed her feet into her slippers. Her fingers turned white as she clasped the book tightly.

"I'm not," said Emma. She shook her head. "When I went butterfly hunting I heard them under that big rock down near the fence. They didn't hear me 'cause I was quiet as a mouse, but I heard everything they said."

Kate stared into Emma's eyes. The little girl looked sincere, but Kate knew better. "Cats don't talk."

"Our kitties do," said Emma. "Jasper said Min will find them soon and he wanted to run away. I don't want them to run away. I love them so much."

Kate groaned. All she wanted to do was read her book, not listen to Emma make up tall-tales about their tiny kittens. When would she grow up?

"Emma, you're being silly," said Kate, rolling her eyes. "I don't have time ..."

Emma spun around and reached for Kate's hand. "I'm not pretending, Kate."

The knot in Kate's stomach grew tighter.

"They are in big, big trouble," said Emma, releasing Kate's hand to throw her arms wide to indicate how much trouble she thought the kittens were in. "Min is coming for them and he's going to kill Sophie."

"That's enough!" Kate stood and walked half way across the room. "I'm sick of the stories you make up and I'm going to my room."

"Kate ..."

"My room is out of bounds to you, Emma," said Kate, ignoring Emma's plea. "I don't want you following me and I don't want to hear any more about talking cats."

"But Kate, Min is going to kill Sophie," called Emma. "We have to help them."

Chapter Two

Kate awoke with a start. It was still dark outside, but the red digits on her clock radio told her that the sun would soon be rising.

Something had woken her, but she wasn't sure what it was. Then she heard a noise and she knew it wasn't the first time she'd heard that sound that morning.

It was the yowl and screech of a cat. It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. *Yowwwl.*

They had to be right outside her bedroom window. Kate turned over. A dark shadow of a person stood beside her bed. Kate's breath caught in her throat. Her heart pounded. She sprang into a sitting position.

A whimper.

"Emma?"

Silence.

Kate reached towards her lamp, the dim glow shone on Emma's tears. Two large eyes stared at her.

"What's wrong?" asked Kate. "Why are you crying?"

"The kitties need our help," said Emma, wiping the tears from her face with both hands. "I told you Min was after them."

Kate threw the blankets back. "It's all right, Emma. All cats fight with other cats." She grabbed a tissue and wiped her little sister's face. "Cats hunt at night and get themselves into all sorts of trouble. Did you know that? That's why Mum likes them to come inside at night."

Emma shook her head. "Doesn't matter. You heard them. Min's here. I know it."

Breathing a soft sigh, Kate left the bed and took hold of Emma's hand. They walked across to the window and Kate flung back the curtains. "Here. Kneel on the table so you can see," she said to Emma, lifting her up.

It was dark outside, but the bright moon gave off enough light to see by. Everywhere was quiet and still. Everyone was asleep. Below the window, standing in the shrubs, was a black kitten with gold eyes. Opposite it stood a small, shaggy white cat. They couldn't see its eyes because it had its back to them.

The black cat's head was low to the ground. It looked like it was about to attack the white cat, but then it saw the girls and looked up.

The white cat leapt through a gap in the shrubs and ran away.

Gold eyes stared up at the girls. Emma moved closer to Kate, who quickly put her arm around the little girl's shoulders.

"See, it's not the kittens," said Kate in a whisper. "It's two strays."

"I don't like that black cat. It looks mean," said Emma in a quiet voice.

The cat turned, ran through the shrubs and disappeared over the fence.

Kate pulled the curtains closed, blocking out the world. "Well, it's gone," she said. "We can go back to bed now."

She lifted Emma off the table and put her down on the carpet.

"I can't sleep." Fresh tears spilled down Emma's face. "I want Sophie and Jasper to come home."

Kate looked around the room. What was she going to do? How could she get Emma back to bed? Then she had an idea.

"Why don't you climb into my bed," she announced. "We can pretend we're having a slumber party. You will enjoy that."

The tears stopped. "What about the kitties?"

“After breakfast I’ll help you find them,” said Kate. “We’ll bring them home and make sure they eat well, and then we’ll play with them so they know we still love them. How does that sound?”

“Okay.”

The girls climbed into bed, and Kate turned out the light. It was still warm between the sheets and her eyes began to close.

Yowwwwl.

A moment later there was another screech and something crashed to the ground.

“Sophie!” Emma jumped out of the bed and ran to the window. “Sophie is out there, Kate. We have to help her. Please help her. That black cat must be Min. He’s going to get her.”

Kate rushed to the window in time to see the black cat pounce on a small tabby kitten. It was Sophie. Jasper shot out from a hidden place, his claws slashing the air, a growl deep in his throat. The black cat released Sophie and rolled away. Jasper jumped at the other cat’s throat, but was swiped to one side with a clawed paw.

Kate grabbed the window latch and threw the window open. Pressing her face to the flyscreen, she hissed. “Psss.”

The cats rolled to their feet, their bellies close to the ground, neither’s eyes leaving the other.

“Psss. Get out of here,” yelled Kate. “Psss.”

The black cat looked from Sophie to Kate, and then scooted away, leaving the kittens cowering in the dimness.

Emma left the window and ran to the bedroom door. “Come on, Kate. We have to let them in before that mean cat comes back.”

Kate listened to her sister run down the hallway, and then turned to look out the open window. Sophie and Jasper stared at her. Sophie gave her a haunting look before she turned and ran away. Jasper followed.

In the distance, Kate saw the first rays of the sun turning the horizon a brilliant shade of crimson. She closed the window and returned to bed.

Within fifteen minutes, the sun would be up, but it was still early and Kate wanted to go back to sleep. The warmth of the sheets did nothing to help her relax. Her eyes refused to close.

She turned her back to the window, and forced her eyes shut, but it didn’t make any difference. She kept hearing Emma’s frightened voice and seeing the kittens in a replay of the fight she had witnessed.

Finally, she sat up and strained to hear what Emma was doing. Had she let the kittens in and returned to her bedroom? Was she sitting with them in the enclosed back veranda, where their beds were kept, giving them cuddles? Then other thoughts pushed the earlier ones out and Kate’s stomach did a somersault. What if the kittens didn’t come in? Would Emma wander off looking for them?

“Oh, she’s such a pain,” said Kate. She threw the blankets off her and put on her slippers again. Grabbing the dressing gown from the end of the bed, she pulled it on and left the room.

Emma’s bedroom door was wide open, but the room was empty. Kate walked past her mum’s room. The door was closed and it was quiet inside. Her mum and Joe would still be asleep. The lounge room was cold, and the kitchen had lots of shadowy nooks which made it spooky. Then she stepped out onto the enclosed veranda.

It was empty. There was no Emma and no kittens, and the screen door swung back and forth in the early morning breeze.

Kate groaned. Emma had left the house in order to find the kittens. Kate went cold, her stomach tightened, her palms went clammy.

Standing on the top step, Kate peered out into the garden. “Emma?”

Beyond the row of shrubs, a blinding blue light appeared in the shape of an upside down triangle.

“What—”

“Sophie, Jasper, come back.” It was Emma’s voice.

“Emma!” Kate ran down the steps and along the garden path. She ran around the bushes that blocked the bench and the well from view of the house, and stopped in her tracks.

The bright blue light came from the well. It shimmered, casting a blue haze over the entire area. The bench looked different, as did the trees and flowers, but it was the well that caught Kate’s attention. Gone was the small wooden well her mother had brought home from a market. In its place was a huge, brick well, covered in moss and ivy. A thick, coarse rope held a bucket high above the circular opening. White flowers cascaded from the wooden roof, yet the shimmering blue light streamed bright around the edge of the roof into the sky.

Kate stood mesmerised for a second. Then she saw Emma.

The little girl climbed over the side of the well.

“Emma?” called Kate. “What are you doing? Get away from there!”

Emma ignored her. She lowered herself into the well and disappeared.

“Emma.” Kate ran across the grass, the early morning dew soaking into her slippers.

“Emma!”

The bright light receded, not reaching so high into the sky. Kate hesitated. The light became dimmer and dimmer, lower and lower.

“Emma!” Kate screamed. Where was her mother? Where was Joe? She needed their help. She screamed again then ran the short distance and peered over the side of the well.

A rope ladder dangled into the dimming light, but she could see nothing below.

She looked up. The light no longer touched the wooden roof. It looked much smaller, the beautiful flowers gone.

Kate climbed onto the brick wall and looked at the ladder. There was almost no blue in the light now. It reached only a foot above Kate’s head.

Decision made, Kate lowered herself onto the rope ladder. Down a step, and then another step. The light quickly followed her. Down two more steps.

The light snapped off.

Kate held the rope tightly, fear washing over her entire body.

It was completely dark.

Chapter Three

No light.

Kate waited for her eyes to adjust, but nothing happened. She looked up, but the circular entrance had disappeared. The early morning light had gone. She held the rope ladder until her fingers tingled and her legs wobbled.

“What’s going on?” She looked up again, then down into the darkness below. She climbed the ladder and reached up with an outstretched hand. Solid rock.

Kate groaned. Down was her only option.

Laughter.

“Emma?”

The laughter echoed off the walls, filtering up the well from far below, filling Kate with hope. Shaking, she gingerly lowered one foot until she felt support under her soft slipper. She lowered the other foot and moved down another rung. Moving slowly and carefully, she continued down, down, down.

Unaware of the passing of time, not knowing how far she had gone, Kate’s focus remained on the rope. She tried to ignore her sore hands and aching feet. Emma managed to move down the ladder and so would she.

How long had it been since she heard the laughter? There were no more sounds to guide her, to comfort her. Often Kate paused and looked up, but she couldn’t face the long climb back the way she had come. Besides, retracing her steps would only lead her back to a dead end. She needed to rest and, most of all, she needed to find Emma.

Her concentration lapsed and she slipped.

One hand left the rope, and her fingers scraped the stone wall. The unseen graze throbbed. Snatching her hand back, a light sticky substance covered her palm. Blood? No, it was something else. A cobweb. How big was the spider that made the web? Was it deadly? Kate pictured giant spiders as big as the tunnel she was in, with long hairy legs and a multitude of ugly black eyes. Her scream bounced off the walls and faded away. The rope shook violently.

“Don’t be silly. They don’t exist. Stay calm.” Kate cursed her vivid imagination. She had to remain rational.

“Kate?” called Emma from a distance. “Is that you?”

Relieved, Kate forced herself not to cry. She pushed the thought of man-eating spiders out of her mind. “Emma? I’m on the rope ladder. Stay where you are. I’m coming to get you.”

No reply.

With renewed energy, Kate continued her long descent, one rung at a time. Then, a dim light edged its way in. Her eyes finally picked out the shape of the rock walls and the ladder. Finally, her foot found solid ground. Terrified to let go of the life line to the world above, Kate held onto the rope firmly with one hand and turned around. Trembling, her legs weak, she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw solid light in the distance.

“Emma?”

The light flickered as someone moved about, then another light bounced towards her, growing bigger and bigger by the second. With it came the echo of running feet, and finally Emma’s smiling face as she came to a stop in front of Kate. One hand held a flaming torch above her head.

Horrified, Kate took the wooden torch from Emma’s grasp and looked at it for a second.

“You could have burned yourself. Where’d you get this?”

Emma pointed to the distant light. “Over there,” she said, her breathe came in short gasps. “You took forever coming down here. Sophie said you would because you came the long way, but I didn’t believe her.”

“Emma, don’t start ...” Kate let the reprimand fade away as she looked down at Emma’s face.

Kate looked in the direction of the light, and then at the flaming torch in her hand. “Oh, I see. We must be in a mine shaft.” The tension in her aching joints dispersed. “The workers will get us out of here. We’ll be home in time for breakfast.”

She dropped to her knees, threw her free arm around Emma and pulled the little girl against her. “I’m so glad you’re all right. I was worried.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” asked Emma, wiggling away from her.

Kate looked at Emma. The little girl’s eyes were big and round with excitement. Her pink pyjamas were dirty and she wore nothing on her feet. The white band holding her long, blond hair up in a pony tail had loosened, allowing stray strands of hair to fall into her face and around her shoulders.

“I don’t know,” Kate whispered, not feeling as confident as she should. “I don’t know what’s going on, but we’ll be home soon.”

Emma grinned and grabbed Kate’s hand. “Come on then. Sophie and Jasper will tell you lots of stuff.”

“The kittens?”

“Yes,” said Emma.

Kate held the torch above their heads. The light lit up the path ahead of them. She allowed Emma to take her towards the light. The miners would be shocked to see them. As they drew nearer, Kate’s stomach twisted with nerves. Would the miners be friendly? What was waiting for them? What was happening? She looked over her shoulder once, but the darkness behind them forced her forward.

A moment before they saw the source of the light, which was hidden behind a large boulder of stone, Kate stopped walking. She considered turning back, returning to the ladder and climbing up into the darkness. She wanted so desperately to hear her mother’s voice calling out to her, even Joe’s voice, because she knew she’d be safe with either of them. She reminded herself that the ladder lead nowhere. She squeezed Emma’s hand and stepped around the boulder.

“This doesn’t look like a mine shaft to me,” said Kate. She placed the torch on a rock beside her, straightened and looked around.

In the centre of a small, rock clearing was a stone dais. The raised platform looked out of place. The tall flames of a fire, set in the stone at the edge of the platform, licked the air. Flickering shadows of light danced upon the rugged walls and ceiling. Beside the dais was a stone slab with half a dozen wooden torches, like the one she had been holding, lying on it. Except these ones were not lit.

Sophie sat on the slab. With her back arched, and her long tail curled around to cover her paws, Sophie’s eyes regarded Kate with interest.

Kate swallowed and looked away.

Jasper, darker in colour and slightly larger in build, sat on top of a large boulder behind Sophie. Jasper’s green eyes darted from Kate to the opening behind her and back again. His ears twitched from side to side as if he was listening for something in the distance.

“You were right, Sophie. She must have come the longest way,” said Emma. “But here she is. What do we do now?”

The kittens didn’t move.

Nerves were making Kate’s hands sweat, her dressing gown felt heavy and hot. She stared

at the kittens for a moment, and then tried to speak. Her throat had gone dry and croaky. She coughed and tried again.

“Emma, this is silly,” said Kate. “Cats don’t talk. I can’t believe we’re down here. We have to go home. Mum and Joe will be worried.”

Kate stepped away from the kittens and the dais, and pulled gently on Emma’s hand. The little girl refused to budge.

“We can’t go back that way,” said Emma, her voice calm.

“Why not? We have to find a way out of here.”

“Because—” began Emma.

“There is no exit that way,” a male’s voice interrupted. “And, it is dangerous. You must come with us.”

Kate jumped back, her heel scraping on the boulder behind her. Her eyes locked with Jasper’s. She stared at him in disbelief, and fascination. The voice, which was deeper than she imagined for such a small cat, had come from him.

“We are being purr-pursued,” said Jasper.

Kate watched his tiny mouth form the words.

“If you do not come with us, you will be captured by Min,” continued Jasper.

“Min will not leave witnesses,” finished Sophie.

Kate was speechless.

“See, Kate, I told you the kitties could talk,” said Emma.

Kate looked down at Emma and found a huge smile covering the little girl’s face. Kate tried to smile too, but found it difficult.

She stared at the kittens. “What’s going on? Who are you? Why did you come to live with us? Why would Min care about us? What are you talking about?” The questions tumbled from Kate.

Jasper jumped from the boulder and darted past Kate. He disappeared down the tunnel she had come down with Emma.

Sophie looked briefly in Jasper’s direction, and then turned her gaze back to Kate. “You ask too many questions. We have no time now, but the tunnels are long and confusing. You will get lost if you go off on your own. You must come with us.”

Meow.

The sound came from the tunnel. For a fleeting moment, Kate thought she was daydreaming. She thought she had imagined all the events from the time she had left her bedroom until now. Sophie’s mysterious eyes put an end to that notion. When she looked into those cat’s eyes, she knew what was happening was real and things were only going to get worse.

And they did.

Jasper bounded into the clearing and pounced back up onto the boulder. He sniffed the air and crouched with his belly low to the rock, but he didn’t settle himself into a sitting position. He was ready for flight. “We must leave ... now!”

Sophie turned, jumped from the slab onto the stone floor and ran across the small clearing. Jasper waited on the boulder. His ears and whiskers twitched.

“Move!” said Jasper. “Min approaches. There is not much time.”

Kate peered at Jasper for a second, and then her eyes found Sophie waiting in the opening of a tunnel.

“Come on, Kate,” said Emma, pulling her in Sophie’s direction.

Kate snatched up the lit torch. As they passed Jasper, he leapt to the ground behind them and followed.

Chapter Four

Slippers were not suitable footwear for a person rushing down cramped tunnels. Especially fluffy slippers with open backs and thin soles. They refused to stay where they belonged—on the feet—and caused the wearer an endless amount of pain and frustration.

In fact, Kate found herself cursing them every time she slipped over and fell to her knees. Why hadn't she put on her joggers? They would have been ideal for this situation, but how was she to know that she would end up in an underground cave, on the run? If she had known, she would have thought to get dressed too.

Finally, with her knees scraped and bruised, she kicked the soft slippers off in disgust.

"I'll end up breaking a leg wearing those things," she said to Emma, who was bare footed and coping quite well.

"You must not leave them behind," said Sophie. "Min will know you are with us if you do."

"And we do not want that," added Jasper.

Kate snatched the slippers up and pushed them into her dressing gown pocket. "There. I'm ready to keep going. Where are we going anyway? And who is Min?"

"This way," said Sophie, and she darted down another dark tunnel.

Kate groaned. That was one way to answer a question without really giving a reply.

They continued on. She tried to remember the route they had taken so far, but it was no good. The tunnels twisted and turned in every direction. She was lost. She and Emma were at the mercy of the kittens, and Kate wasn't happy about that one bit.

"Ow!"

Kate looked up in time to see Emma drop to the ground.

"Emma?" Kate rushed to her sister. "What's wrong?"

"I hit my toe on a rock. It hurts bad. I want m-mummy." Emma started to cry.

Kate pulled her little sister against her and gave her a hug. "Don't cry. Mum and Joe will come for us."

"How will they know where to look?"

I wish I knew, Emma.

The two girls stared at each other. More tears spilled down Emma's dirty face.

"Show me your foot," said Kate, moving the torch in front of them.

Emma, her chin on her knee and both hands wrapped around her sore foot, pulled her hands away and wiggled her toes.

"It's not bleeding," said Kate. "Can you walk?"

"Hurry," said Jasper. "Min is not far behind us."

"She's hurt," said Kate, her eyes narrowing. "She needs—"

A loud explosion caused the ground to shake and loose dirt to shower on them from above. Emma screamed.

"She needs to be moving," said Jasper. His green eyes searched Kate's face, and then he looked at Emma. "I know she hurts, but if Min catches either of you—"

"Come quickly," interrupted Sophie. "The next cavern is just around the next bend in the tunnel. We can rest there. It will be safe."

Kate looked at Emma. "Do you want me to carry you?"

"It hurts, but I'm a big girl," said Emma with a grin. "Daddy always tells me that."

Emma was right. Joe often praised them both.

"Purr-please," whispered Jasper.

The girls rose to their feet. With one quick glance over her shoulder, Kate hurried Emma

down the tunnel.

A moment later, they stepped into another cavern. Twice the size of the previous one, rocks and boulders lay strewn across the floor. A high, jagged ceiling loomed over them, making Kate nervous. What if another section of rock fell? In the middle of the tumble of stone stood another dais, the flames reaching high into the air.

“Are they always lit?” she asked Jasper.

Kate watched the flames dancing in Jasper’s eyes.

“They are called Fire Wells,” he said. “They use an energy which lies deep within the earth.” He pounced onto the closest boulder, leapt to a higher rock, then jumped across a wide gap and landed on a flat platform. “The dais was built around the opening to the Fire Well. Long ago, our people used to use these places to worship, and draw on the Power.” He paused. “Now we have other ways of obtaining the Power.” Head low, he walked lazily along the platform and pressed his little orange nose onto something Kate couldn’t see.

Boom!

Kate and Emma jumped.

They turned around. A thick stone door slammed shut and a heavy wooden bar fell into place. The door could not be opened from either side without the bar being removed first.

“A door? In a tunnel?” Kate looked up at Jasper. “What is this place? Who is Min? Why are we being chased?”

“We will not linger here for long,” said Jasper from the platform above the door. “Min will have to go a long way back and around, through many other tunnels, to find his way to the other entrance, but this will give us an advantage.”

“Where’s Sophie?” asked Emma.

“I am here.”

Kate and Emma turned around and gasped. Standing before them was a young girl, but she was no ordinary girl—she was cat-like.

The girl stood eye level with Kate, and she looked to be about the same age too. They stared at one another. Kate could not deny seeing that same mysterious look she had always seen in Sophie’s eyes, and those eyes were still the eyes of a cat. Long-slit pupils surrounded by the colour of emerald above a flat, orange cat-nose. A pair of pointed ears twitched on top of her furry head. However, no fur could be seen on the lower half of her face and beneath the cat-nose a human mouth smiled at them. It was the strangest sight.

Kate glanced at Emma and found the little girl’s eyes gleaming in awe. Her mouth hung open and she stood perfectly still.

Kate’s attention turned to Jasper. He sat quietly at the base of a rock. Was he grinning at her? Kate quickly returned her gaze to Sophie.

“I don’t know what to say,” said Kate. “Who are you?”

Sophie continued to smile. “My real name is Alara, but I want to thank you for purr-picking such a beautiful name for me. I love the name Sophie, but now that I am in my true form, you must call me by my true name.”

Alara turned and walked gracefully away. A strip of the silver-tipped, light-grey fur covering the top half of her face also ran down the back of her neck and disappeared into the top of the leather jerkin hugging her body. Yet her arms appeared to be free of fur and she had hands and fingers instead of paws.

Jasper sprang up and trotted after Alara, his nose almost touching the knee-high boots she wore.

Kate and Emma followed.

“Sophie, why have you got fur?” asked Emma.

Kate shot her a look, and shook her head, but it was too late. Alara stopped walking and turned to face them.

“Alara, you must call me Alara,” said Alara. She smiled. “I am not human.”

Silence.

Alara looked at Jasper. “You must change now.”

“Are you a cat?” asked Emma.

Alara laughed. “No, I am not a cat.”

Kate watched Jasper carefully.

“I am one of the purr-people of Miu,” continued Alara. “Miu consists of two cities. Manu, the city we are from, in the west and Bakhu in the east. We have lived in these underground tunnels for centuries. We avoid contact with humans normally, but these are special circumstances.”

Jasper walked towards a horseshoe shaped arch. Kate hadn’t noticed it before. It looked like someone had turned it upside down and wedged it between the stone wall and a large boulder to keep it in place. Apart from the shape, there was nothing spectacular about it.

“We have adopted the customs of many cultures over the generations,” said Alara, “and there are many we have rejected too.”

Jasper stopped. He turned his head and caught Kate’s gaze. With a flick of his tail, he ran through the arch and disappeared behind the boulder.

All talk stopped.

Kate leaned to one side, trying to see through the arch, but she saw only shadows. Her heart pounded in her chest.

A moment later, a boy stepped around the opposite side of the boulder. His pale green eyes caught Kate’s gaze for a split second, then he quickly lowered them to the ground. The fur on his head was midnight-grey with ginger tips. Like Alara, he wore leather breeches tucked into knee-high black boots. His jerkin was thick leather too. As he walked towards them, he pushed a sling into his belt, and Kate could see the tip of a stone axe strapped to his back.

“How did you change shape?” she asked Jasper.

He refused to meet her gaze. He set about adjusting and readjusting the tie that laced the front of his jerkin. “When the arch is activated, it enables us to shape shift.”

“You can turn yourselves into other creatures too?” asked Kate, amazed.

He looked up. “No. Only a cat.”

“Oh.”

“What’s your real name then?” asked Emma.

“Siptah,” replied Jasper.

An awkward silence followed.

Kate was the first to find her voice. “Who are you? Why were you our kittens in the first place?”

“Does this mean you won’t be our kittens anymore?” asked Emma, the smile fading from her face.

Alara looked at Emma and nodded. “Come,” she said. “Come and rest for a short while. We will tell you more.”

Kate and Emma followed Alara away from the arch. Kate stared at Alara’s back, wondering if a tail was hidden somewhere in those loose breeches. It didn’t look like it.

“We can sit here,” announced Alara.

They filed into an area where the scattered rocks were small enough to sit on. Once seated, Alara knelt beside Emma and inspected her foot.

Kate looked at Siptah and was surprised to find him carrying a spear with a stone arrow bound to the end. Everything was getting weirder by the minute.

“Siptah,” said Alara, “can you bring some wrappings?”

Siptah leaned the spear against a boulder and headed back the way they had come.

Alara sat on a rock opposite Kate. “The wrappings will protect your feet.”

Kate nodded and Emma remained silent.

“I am Alara, daughter of King Wosret, next in line for the throne,” said Alara, her voice soft and matter-of-fact.

“Sophie’s a princess, Kate,” said Emma with excitement. “A real princess.”

“So it seems,” replied Kate. “Now we must listen, so that she can tell us what’s happening.”

“My father heard of a threat to kill me. He was not sure whom he could trust so he sent me away until it was safe to return.”

“Why us?” asked Kate.

“Your mother’s well is placed on top of a portal. It has not been used in many decades. In fact, not since the humans settled in the area. We needed somewhere remote. My father thought it would be safer. As far as I know, no one knew of our whereabouts, yet a messenger arrived yesterday morning and told me that my father has ... been murdered.”

Kate felt the colour drain from her face. Murdered? Why did Alara look so calm?

Siptah returned with the wrappings. He knelt in front of Emma and set about using the thin leather to wrap each of her feet. He then wrapped and folded a second piece of leather around the first, with leather cord to hold it in place.

“Murdered?” asked Kate. “Who would do that?”

“Min, I suspect,” replied Alara. “He has betrayed us all, even his own father.”

A deep-throated growl escaped Siptah’s lips.

Kate glanced at him in time to see him roll his eyes and shake his head.

Alara’s tiny nose twitched, but she ignored Siptah. “My uncle is loyal. However, with my father murdered, and me missing, it would open the way for Min—my cousin—to take the throne. I have no siblings.”

Kate looked at Siptah. “I thought Jasper ... I mean Siptah was your brother.”

Colour crept over Siptah’s face, but his eyes remained focused on the wrappings.

Alara grinned. “No, Siptah is my bodyguard.”

“Your bodyguard?” Kate laughed. “He’s only a boy. Your father should have sent a man to protect you.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, Kate wished she could retract them. Warmth washed over her face and neck, her palms became clammy, and a small groan escaped her lips. “I’m sorry, Siptah,” she said. “I didn’t mean ...”

His big, sad eyes locked with hers and the words froze in her mouth. A moment later he lowered his head and mumbled, “I am not worthy.”

He shifted his position and fumbled with the wrappings in his hands until Kate lifted her foot towards him. She bent and tried to look at his face. “I’m sorry, Siptah.”

“Siptah’s father is my father’s bodyguard. He is a good man and an excellent purr-protector,” said Alara. “My father would have sent him with me, but the purr-people of Miu cannot shape shift once they reach their thirteenth year. As we did not know who we could trust, and as Siptah is a guard-in-training, it was decided that he was our only choice.”

Kate looked down at Siptah only to find him staring up at her. She wanted to reassure him somehow, but instead, she returned her gaze to Alara.

“If I do not return to take the throne before dawn after the next full moon, Min will receive the crown,” finished Alara.

“When is the next full moon?” asked Kate.

“Tonight.”

Chapter Five

“That’s a long time,” said Emma. She climbed to her feet and looked down at the foot wraps, a big grin lighting up her tear stained face. “These are cool. Can I keep them when we go home?”

Alara inclined her head.

“Purr-princess, we must be on our way,” said Siptah, reaching for his spear.

Alara stood, her eyes forlorn, but her hand steady when she held it out and took a second spear from Siptah.

“Yes, I suppose we must hurry home too,” said Kate. She took hold of Emma’s hand and turned to look at the barred entrance. “Can you help me lift the bar, Siptah?”

Siptah shook his head. “N-no, you must not. It is dangerous.”

Kate looked at him. “You said that Min would have to go back and around to come through the other entrance, which means there is no danger for us.”

“He will have someone guarding the door,” replied Siptah.

It was Kate’s turn to shake her head. “We have to go home. There are four of us and only one of them. We can knock him out or something.”

“Kate, we do not know how many there will be,” said Alara. “Anyway, you cannot go that way as you cannot get home without our help. You must come with us to Manu.”

Emma tugged on Kate’s hand. “Can we, Kate? I want to see where they live. Can we go with them? Please.”

Kate squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. It was too hard. How was she supposed to make decisions if everyone went against her? “We can’t,” she whispered, trying to curb her frustration. “We have to go home.”

She wanted to go home. Home was peaceful and quiet. Home was safe. At home, she had her mum and Joe to protect her, to make decisions for her.

“Kate,” said Alara, “the only way for you to get home is to come with us. The way back will not take you to where you want to go. When I receive the crown, I will send you home.”

“And what if you don’t receive the crown?” The words tumbled out of Kate’s mouth in a rush. Her free hand was clenched in a fist. “What if Min gets the crown? What happens then?”

Alara and Siptah exchanged looks.

“Besides, you used my mother’s well before, why can’t you use it again?” asked Kate.

“Cat’s whiskers have a certain power in Miu,” said Alara.

Kate stared at Alara’s face. She didn’t have whiskers.

“They are rare in Manu, and probably in Bakhu too, I am not sure,” continued Alara. “With them we can do a number of things—including travelling through portals.”

Kate leaned forward to say something, but Alara didn’t allow her to speak.

“However,” Alara said quickly, “we only had two whiskers and we have used them both, but we will find another way.”

“There is another way. Right there—”

“What was that?” Alara interrupted, holding up a hand for silence.

“What? I didn’t hear anything,” replied Kate.

“Shh.”

Kate looked at Siptah, then Alara, who half turned to look over her shoulder.

“Siptah?” Alara raised her spear.

“Purr-princess, we were wrong,” said Siptah. “Min foresaw our movements. He comes through the purr-passage.”

“Kate?” Emma’s grip on Kate’s hand tightened.

“What do you mean? Where’s the passage?” asked Kate, ignoring Emma’s whimpers.

“It is over there,” replied Siptah. “He didn’t follow us down the other purr-passage, but he did send someone to follow us. He anticipated our movements. He knew we would bar the door. He tricked us into believing he was following us, so that we thought we had time to rest. We gave him the time he needed to come the other way.”

Kate turned to look in the direction Siptah had indicated. She saw a natural cave entrance. There was no thick door, or heavy bar, to protect them. Light bobbed up and down from the movement of several torches.

“Run!” shouted Siptah.

They turned and ran, Siptah leading the way. Kate pulled Emma along, praying her sister wouldn’t fall over. She could hear Alara’s boots crunching on the stone behind them.

Too late.

A blast of light shot past their heads, hitting the wall beside the tunnel exit. Shards of stone flew into the air and shot in every direction.

Ducking, Siptah darted to one side, turned and grabbed Kate’s dressing gown. With one almighty yank, she felt him pull her towards him before he shoved her and Emma behind a boulder.

“They have a wizling with them,” said Siptah. “Stay there.”

“What’s a wizling?” asked Kate. Shielding her head with her free arm, she crouched down beside Emma.

“A wizard-in-training,” replied Siptah, looking across the cavern.

“A wizard,” chorused Kate and Emma.

Kate followed Siptah’s gaze. Halfway across the cavern stood a teenage Miuan. The black fur on the top of his head was disarrayed by a circlet of gold. In his left hand he carried a long, white bone. His mouth twisted into a frightening smile and he raised the bone.

Two more young Miuans filed into the cavern and two cats jumped onto boulders on either side of the group. Pacing back and forth, their heads low and their tails whipping the air, they hissed in Kate’s direction.

Kate’s heart raced. Those gold eyes. She had seen them before, only recently. They belonged to the black cat from under her bedroom window.

With a grunt, Siptah threw his spear. The tip shattered on impact with the boulder, only a hand’s width in front of the black cat. Siptah snarled and rushed towards the Miuan wearing the circlet, pulling the stone axe over his shoulder as he ran. Alara was quick to follow, a long-bladed dagger grasped tightly in one hand, the spear in the other.

Before they covered half the distance, a loud bang stopped them in their tracks. Something shot into the air.

Emma whimpered. Her body trembled violently. “Kate?”

Kate looked down at her and saw large tears welling in even larger eyes. She put her arm around her sister’s shoulders and pulled her small, shaking body tightly against hers.

Kate looked back at the centre of the cavern, and gasped. A thick cloud of dust swirled above the group’s heads. Formless, at first, it began to thicken. A solid mass with two tentacles ... no, it couldn’t be tentacles. Kate plainly saw one end form into an arrowhead point. It whipped the air. Long and curved, another dark mass appeared at the end of the other tentacle. Two dark, twirling holes turned bright red. Smoke gushed out of the end.

Kate gasped. A dragon.

Bright red eyes glared at Alara and Siptah. Saliva oozed through large, razor sharp teeth. Bringing its head closer, the mouth opened and ...

Thud.

The dragon disappeared.

At first, Kate wasn’t sure what had happened, but when she looked at her new-found

friends, she saw the leather sling in Siptah's hand.

"Djal, you will have to do better than that," said Alara.

"He is unable to, Purr-princess," added Siptah, pushing the sling back into the top of his breeches. He picked up his axe, his attention moving away from the wizling to one of the cats.

"Min, you coward," said Siptah. "You need so many, when we are so few."

The black scraggy cat hissed, jumped off the boulder, and landed out of view. The other cat followed. A moment later, two boys stepped forward. One of them looked at Alara. "Cousin," he said with a nod, his fingers lacing the red cord in the front of his jerkin together, "I will have the crown."

"I think not," replied Alara.

"We will see." Min grinned. His gold eyes glistened.

Emma started crying. "I'm scared," she mumbled.

Kate kissed the top of her head. "We have to be quiet," she said, straining to see what was about to happen. "We'll be all right, but you must do exactly as I say. Can you do that?"

Emma nodded.

"Good girl."

Kate swallowed. It was important that Emma thought Kate felt confident even though Kate knew differently.

At that moment, Min jumped forward and swung his axe at Siptah. The clash of hard wood and stone echoed around the cavern. Each boy deflected the other's strike, both grunting with the effort. They swung again.

Djal remained perfectly still, his eyes shut, the bone poised. Everyone, but Kate, ignored him.

Alara had problems of her own. Three teenage Miuans spread out before her in an arc. All three stepped forward with barbed spear points aimed at her waist. Kate hoped Alara remembered the rock behind her. She had little room to back away. But what else could she do? It was one against three.

Struck with fear, Kate stared helplessly at Alara.

Then, leaning back on her right leg, Alara swung her left leg in a wide arc hitting two of her assailants in the jaw. They staggered back. One hit his head against the rock behind him, and blood spurted from his nose to cover the front of his thick leather tunic. He moaned in agony.

Feet firmly back on the ground, Alara quickly twisted around and managed to block the swing of the third Miuan's spear. Within seconds, she had him stumbling backwards across the cavern.

Kate breathed a sigh of relief. She had never imagined that a princess could be so nimble and quick.

Alara and Siptah continued to fight Min and his henchmen. Yet Kate's attention was drawn back to the boy they called Djal. He wasn't wearing the leather tunics the others wore. He wore a cloak.

As the energy increased, it gushed through his body and clothing, lifting the ends of the cloak until it looked like he had wings. Underneath the cloak, his clothes clung tightly to his body. Ripples of energy flowed through his small frame. The bone shook in his outstretched hand.

Kate stared at the wizling. What was he doing? Why was it taking him so long to do anything? His concentration intensified. Kate saw beads of sweat rolling down his temples.

Alara jumped into Kate's line of vision. The point of the spear thrust at her came to a halt where her stomach had been a moment earlier. Kate gasped and rose to her feet. She couldn't just hide behind a rock. Alara and Siptah were out-numbered, they needed help. One of them would be hurt if something wasn't done. Kate moved a step closer, and then she hesitated. What could she do to help?

A flash of light ran around the circlet of gold upon Djal's head. Kate watched in amazement as the light moved swiftly around and around. The intensity quickened, faster and faster, brighter and brighter ...

Kate ran forward two steps. "Watch out. Djal is—"

Siptah instantly turned and kicked Djal in the thigh, and received a blow from the side of Min's axe as a consequence. He fell to his knees.

Djal staggered, blinking his eyes in surprise. The circlet fell to one side. He reached up to push it back in place, but yanked his hand away with a yell. The pulsing light burst into the air, striking the cavern roof with tremendous force. A shower of dust and splintered rock fell on the Miuans below.

For a moment, Kate lost sight of everyone.

"Kate!" Siptah roared through the dust. "To the tunnel. Now!"

Kate hesitated. Where was Emma? She didn't remember letting go of her hand. It was too difficult to see anything, even her sister, who should be standing by her side. For a split second, she panicked.

"Emma!"

"Kate?" said Emma, her hand touching Kate's waist.

"Hold onto my dressing gown and come with me."

The two girls stumbled through the blinding dust. They moved over the uneven ground, their hands scraping against rock.

"Run, Emma," said Kate, her voice nothing more than a croak. *Where's the exit? Please ... let this be the right way?* Her throat hurt. They ran on. Kate found the tug on her dressing gown almost comforting.

In the tunnel, their vision clearing now, they kept running.

Two heartbeats later, a loud crack forced them to dive to the ground and cover their heads. The light vanished altogether as the rock above the cave entrance crumbled to the ground.

Chapter Six

Bewildered, Kate stared at the tiny particles of light passing through the gaps in the fallen rocks.

Alara and Siptah are trapped on the other side. Now what are we going to do?

She sighed and turned to look around, but the light wasn't strong enough to see by.

"Emma? Where are you?" she called.

"I'm here," came Emma's just audible reply.

Kate followed the voice, tripping on loose pebbles and falling to her knees. Realisation hit her. She and Emma were alone. She took a deep breath, and on her hands and knees, she edged her way forward until one hand found Emma's foot.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?" Kate pulled her sister into her arms and held her tight.

"I tore my pyjamas."

"That doesn't matter. Come on, stand up," said Kate, helping Emma to her feet. "You're not inju—"

A stone clattered across the ground.

Alarmed, Kate pushed herself up onto her feet. She grabbed Emma's hand and pulled her farther down the tunnel, her fingertips gliding along the wall to guide them.

"Kate? Emma?" It was Siptah. "Why are you running away from me?"

Kate let the breath leave her body. "Thank heavens. I thought you were on the other side of the cave in. I thought we'd have to find our own way. I didn't know what we were going to do."

"We were right here all the time," he said.

"Alara is with you then?"

"Of course." He sounded surprised. "She's right here. What's wrong, can't you see her?"

"No. I can't see anything," replied Kate.

"I can see you," he said, his voice matter-of-fact. "I think the wind was knocked out of Alara."

Kate was confused for a moment, then she realised why Siptah could see them but they couldn't see him. "Aw, you have cat's eyes. You can see much better in the dark than we can."

Suddenly a figure moved into the tiny beams of light. Kate jumped, surprised that she had been looking in the wrong spot altogether. The two shadows grew larger as the princess and her bodyguard walked along the tunnel towards them.

"We can see quite well when there is a light source," said Siptah, "but in complete darkness, we are just like you."

Kate nodded. "We need a torch."

"We don't have one," replied Siptah. "We must leave here now."

"But ..." Kate didn't finish her protest. Why bother? They didn't have a torch and there was no point complaining about it.

"The tunnel is narrow. It will be difficult to guide you." Alara spoke in short gasps.

Kate heard the princess try to clear her throat.

"Hold out your arms," Alara continued. "We will move slowly, and the tunnel walls will help guide your feet. We will tell you when there is an obstacle in your purr-path."

Kate wasn't sure how much time had passed. Her arms ached from holding them out at

right angles to her body, her fingertips were sore. She had dust in her eyes, up her nose and down her throat. She needed a drink.

No one had said a word for ages. She supposed they would be concentrating on where they put their feet, but realised that only she and Emma had difficulties in the darkness.

She hated every moment of it.

It was all very well following the kittens—she shook her head reminding herself they were not kittens—following the Miuan princess and her bodyguard, she corrected herself, farther into the ... where were they, anyway? In a mountain? Under the ground? Kate didn't know, but she had a feeling that they weren't where she imagined them to be. The thought didn't make sense to Kate. She shook her head again. One thing she couldn't shake away was the feeling that the farther they walked, the farther away from home they would be. It was insane to continue this journey, but what was she going to do about it?

Kate stepped on a loose stone. Her foot slid sideways, but her body refused to move as quickly. A deep groan gushed up from the pit of her stomach. Her right shoulder scraped against the rough surface of the wall. Her feet left the ground and scuffed the opposite wall. The ground rushed up to meet her. The side of her head bounced off the hard stone.

“Kate!” Emma yelled.

Stunned, Kate lay still. She could hear movement around her. A hand grabbed her unscathed shoulder. Warm breath touched her cheek as someone leaned over her.

“I think she will be fine,” said Alara. “Nothing is broken.”

“I will carry her,” announced Siptah.

Kate wanted to say no. She didn't want to be carried, but the words were stuck in her mouth. Siptah bent over her, easing her up into his arms with the help of Alara. Emma was crying.

“The tunnel is wider now,” said Alara. “Emma, take my hand.”

More shuffling.

“We will lead the way,” said Alara. “Kate will be fine with Siptah. It is not far to the next cavern. We will find torches there. Everything will be fine.”

Kate let her face fall against Siptah's chest. She found the pounding of his heart reassuring. The side of her head ached ...

The name echoed inside her brain, the voice muffled and distant. Why did they keep repeating her name? Why couldn't they let her sleep? She was dreaming about the kittens turning into people and walking blindly through a tunnel. Such a strange dream, so real.

“She's coming to.”

Droplets of water fell onto her lips. Parting them, she welcomed the cool liquid onto her tongue.

She struggled to open her eyes. She blinked when she saw Alara kneeling over her and Siptah standing at the princess's shoulder.

Emma's face appeared, her eyes bright. “Alara said you passed out. Is that like sleeping?”

“A bit.” Kate looked at Alara. “Did I faint?”

Alara nodded.

“Yep,” replied Emma, with a big grin. “Siptah carried you all the way to this cavern.” She lifted her head and pointed at something out of Kate's view. “See, we have light now.”

“I can see.” Kate closed her eyes. Her head ached. “Was I out for long?”

“No,” said Alara. “We were almost here.”

Kate reached up to touch the tender lump on the side of her head. She felt terrible. Her head hurt, her arms ached, and the taste of bile touched the back of her throat. She swallowed a few

times to try to force it back down.

She opened her eyes and looked at Siptah. "Thank you."

Siptah's expression didn't change. He lowered his eyes. "I will prepare to leave," he said to Alara. "And I need to fasten a new arrow head onto my spear. It will not take long."

"Can I help?" Emma was on her feet in an instant. She ran after Siptah, the sleeve of her pyjama top hanging by a few threads.

Leave? Kate groaned. She wasn't ready to leave. She needed more time.

Kate watched Alara rummage through a pack. Where had that come from? The princess removed a worn leather pouch. "This will help," she said, dabbing an oily substance to the side of Kate's head, and then spreading some more on the shoulder wound.

Kate's eyes watered. "Eek! The smell is terrible."

Alara smiled. "Only for a moment, then you will start feeling better."

"Where do you get the ingredients for medicines? I haven't seen a plant or animal since I got here."

"These tunnels and caverns are no longer used by my purr-people," replied Alara, placing the pouch back in the pack. "However, we have use of many fertile caverns. We also live close to a number of openings to the world above, where we keep livestock and grow crops. We have access to everything we need."

"Oh." Kate didn't understand, but she didn't have the energy to ask questions.

"Drink this." Alara lifted Kate's head and tipped another leather pouch towards her. Kate took one small mouthful and spat it out.

"Kate, what is wrong?" asked Alara. "It is only water."

"Sorry, I have a terrible taste in my mouth," replied Kate. "I'll have a drink now, please."

She swallowed a mouthful, but couldn't manage any more. It made her feel sick in the stomach.

"Thank you," said Kate, when Alara lowered her to the ground.

"We must go soon," said Alara, replacing the cap on the pouch, "but I fear you are not well enough."

I'm not. "I'll be fine. Just give me a minute."

A minute was all she got.

Siptah and Alara were eager to be on their way. They helped her up. Kate grabbed Siptah's arm as the cavern spun. Weak kneed, she took a deep breath and hoped the contents of her stomach stayed down. She tried to focus on something, anything. She took a quick look around the cavern.

It was identical to the last one, just a different shape and size. Rocks covered the ground. A platform lay in ruins in the middle of the cavern. A stone well, with a roaring fire reaching angrily for the ceiling, the Fire Well, the only relic remaining.

"Look, Kate," said Emma, jumping up and down. "Siptah has given me an important job to do." Emma spun around to show Kate the pack strapped to her shoulders. "It's got important stuff in it."

Kate tried to smile, but found it difficult. "Where did the packs come from?" she asked, stalling for time.

"We hid them here before we left, for our return trip," replied Siptah. He held her arm securely. "Can you walk? Or—"

"Yes," replied Kate quickly. She didn't want to be carried again. It made her feel stupid and embarrassed. Taking a step forward, she turned slowly and forced the smile to her lips, but that's as far as it went. It didn't reach her eyes and Siptah frowned at her suspiciously.

"Ready?" Alara adjusted her own pack.

Kate looked at Siptah. As he leaned forward she saw that he, too, wore a pack. He dropped a leather pouch filled with water into the spare pocket of her dressing gown.

“What’s in them?” she asked as they walked across the cavern.

“Food, mainly, some ointments, spare foot wraps, just things we might need along the way,” said Alara.

The bright light radiating from the stone well disappeared when they entered the tunnel. Kate sighed with relief as Siptah and Alara each held a blazing torch. A strong, musty smell filled her nostrils. She heard water dripping in the distance.

Travelling through tunnels was much easier with light to help them. Siptah set the pace. Kate knew he could have walked faster, but he was thinking of her. She felt guilty about that.

The pain soon subsided. The nausea stopped.

They stopped to rest a couple of times, but only for a few minutes. Alara spread more ointment on Kate’s wounds.

After the third stop, Kate noticed that Emma no longer wore the backpack she had been entrusted with. Siptah carried it instead. Emma began to tire, her chatter at the beginning of the journey becoming less frequent. Their pace slowed even more.

Finally, Alara stopped beside a huge boulder and told them it was time to eat. Kate’s stomach grumbled with anticipation. She found herself wondering what time it might be. Was it noon? Or was it in the middle of the night? How many hours had passed? She had no way of knowing, because her watch sat on her bedside table at home.

“Here, eat this,” said Siptah, handing her a cloth with small pieces of dried meat inside.

There was no smell, but it looked like strips of beef. She bit a tiny piece off one corner and a salty flavour filled her mouth. She closed her eyes and relished in the taste, enjoying every mouthful. She ate several strips. The salt awoke her thirst, so she drank deeply from the pouch she had been given earlier.

“Ah!” Emma screamed. “What’s that?”

Water splashed over Kate’s face as she jerked the pouch away to see what had happened.

A black and orange spider, the size of Emma’s hand, appeared from behind the boulder and crawled towards the group. It reared up, ready to strike, showing long, deadly fangs. Its multi-lensed eyes bulged out from the sides of its head, staring at them.

Emma scrambled to her feet and kicked the spider.

“No! Do not do that,” Siptah yelled.

On her knees in an instant, Kate reached over and pulled her little sister backwards. It was too late. The large furry body was squashed against the tunnel wall.

“It’s OK, she killed it,” said Kate. “Is it poisonous?”

Siptah and Alara glanced at the dead spider, then up and down the tunnel. They grabbed the packs and their spears.

“No, it is territorial and lives in purr-packs,” said Siptah. “That was a baby. We have to get out of here.”

“No way. That’s not a baby,” said Kate. “Look at the size of it.”

“And it’s dead,” announced Emma. “I killed it.”

“Believe me. It is a baby.”

They scrambled down the tunnel.

“Oh, no, it is too late. She already knows,” said Alara.

“Who?”

“The mother ...” The fear in Alara’s voice made Kate look over her shoulder.

A fat, furry spider, the size of a bear, blocked the tunnel behind them.

Chapter Seven

“... and she is not happy,” said Alara.

Kate stared at the giant spider in horror. Never in her twelve years had she seen a spider this big. It was unnatural. Eight furry legs stretched across the width of the tunnel. Four pairs of beady eyes glared at them from a small head, the large sack-like abdomen at the back almost touched the tunnel roof.

Yet it was the enormous fangs that terrified Kate the most. They were huge and easily as thick as Kate’s wrist.

Someone grabbed her dressing gown and dragged her backwards.

“Come *on*, Kate,” urged Siptah.

The urgency in his voice broke the spell. Kate turned and ran. She noticed that Alara and Emma were already a good distance ahead of them. They turned a corner and for a moment Kate could still see a dim light from their torch. Then it was gone.

A chilling hiss almost made Kate fall over. It came from the spider. Kate looked over her shoulder to find the spider’s body vibrating, and the black and orange bristles on its legs rubbing together. The hissing got louder and louder.

Kate’s heart raced.

Siptah shoved her forward. “Run, Kate. It is going to attack,” he shouted. “Run ... faster.” He struggled to breath and talk. “We ... have to ... reach ... the next ... cavern.” A pause. “Not her ... territory.”

Kate tried to run faster. Her breath came in short gasps. Her heartbeat went wild. The foot wraps allowed her feet to grip the surface, but her muscles strained under the effort. She battered her hands against the walls trying to keep her body upright. Yet her legs refused to go any faster.

The hissing stopped. There was an awful moment of silence, and then a loud scurrying sound filled Kate’s ears. Something scraped against the walls.

She could hear Siptah’s heavy breathing. She could feel his presence right behind her. It helped to spur her on. They ran along the tunnel.

The scurrying and scraping grew louder. Louder. It gained on them.

“Run!”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “I can’t.”

“You must.”

Her chest tightened. She needed air in her lungs. She gasped. A pain stabbed at her side. Siptah’s boots pounded on the ground behind her. The torch barely gave off enough light.

Siptah grunted.

Kate stopped and looked back, one hand resting on the cold stone beside her to keep herself steady. The huge spider was right behind Siptah. Its fangs dripped with venom. Clawed segments reached out to grab him, but he was too fast. He clambered to his feet, and pushed Kate into motion. They continued to run.

Suddenly the tunnel opened out into another cavern. She caught sight of the torch as it flew past her and landed amongst a cluster of rocks.

Kate stopped and spun around, gasping for breath.

With the light from yet another Fire Well, Siptah no longer needed the torch. But he did need a free hand for a more important object - his axe. He turned to face the spider.

“No!” Kate doubled over in pain. “No, Siptah. Don’t.”

The spider reared up, towering over Siptah. He thrust his spear and then raced forward. The spear fell short of its mark.

A grey mass of what looked like vomit spurted out of the fangs. Venom. Siptah jumped to one side, grabbed the spear from the ground and threw it again. This time, it penetrated a segment of leg. Siptah twisted around and ran at the spider again. He yanked the spear free and retreated.

The spider's hiss vibrated around the walls of the cavern. It turned its back on Siptah.

Hope filled Kate. Maybe it was going to leave ...

Silver webbing shot out of the tip of the oversized abdomen, landing on top of Siptah. He fell to the ground with a loud groan.

Kate stood paralysed for only a second before looking over her shoulder. Siptah needed help. What was she supposed to do? Where was Alara?

Alara ran towards them, her face dark and angry, like thunder. The crease between those mysterious eyes showed determination.

Kate turned back to look at Siptah.

The spider's abdomen flicked the silver substance to one side. It clung to the wall of the cave. Within seconds a small web began to form. As the web tightened, Siptah was drawn towards it and wrapped in a mesh of silver threads.

"Siptah!" both Kate and Alara shouted at the same time.

Alara raced past Kate and pushed her dagger into the spider's abdomen sack. The spider hissed, flicked its rear end again and knocked Alara off her feet.

Kate watched, then turned and ran to the discarded torch. Stabbing a giant creature like that wasn't proving to be effective, they needed something more. They needed flames and smoke.

She grabbed the torch, swung around and ran towards the Fire Well. Once there, she bent over and ripped the end of her dressing gown away. She remembered Joe burning an old dressing gown once. The fumes stunk and that's what she hoped for now.

Shielding her face, she held the torch into the Fire Well. The intense heat worried her, so she quickly pulled it out again. The flame raged with heat.

She ran back to the spider. Alara was busy trying to cut Siptah free. The thick, sticky threads would not separate. A silk cocoon almost completely covered Siptah.

Kate pushed her fear aside and quickly covered the end of the torch with the strip of dressing gown. At first, the flames died down. Kate's heart sank, but before she could retreat, the material caught alight and the flame flared up again brighter than before and then changed colour. The hiss of the spider was met with another kind of hiss—the material sizzling.

Kate touched the torch to the silver thread on the cave wall. The web broke. Siptah and Alara tumbled to the ground. Kate ignored them and turned towards the spider instead. The flame, the heat and the smell drove the spider back. Then, when Kate thought her plan wasn't going to work, the spider jumped into the tunnel and raced away.

Kate grinned. "It worked."

As a deterrent, Kate placed the torch in the entrance of the tunnel before returning to Siptah and Alara. Surprised, Kate found the princess's arm moulded into the cocoon.

"Good work, Kate. You will have to cut us both free."

"What with?" asked Kate, looking around the ground for something to use.

"Unfortunately, my dagger is inside the web," replied Alara. "You will have to use the axe."

Kate picked up the axe. It was heavier than she expected. The sharp edge of the axe broke into the slimy, sticky web, but Kate had to pull the stuff off Alara with her hands.

Soon Alara was free, and she was able to help Kate disentangle Siptah. Once the last of the silver threads were pulled away, he blinked and looked up at them both.

"You took long enough."

Despite everything, Kate laughed.

They helped Siptah to his feet. He looked a sorry sight with his clothing oozing with slime

and a mass of tangled fur clumped together above large eyes.

“We must rest,” announced Alara.

“What? Here? Are you nuts? What if the spider comes back?” asked Kate.

“I doubt that it will. This is not within its territory. We will sleep for a few hours and, just to be sure, we will ensure the torch is alight in the entrance.”

Sleep here? It seems dangerous to me. Thoughts tumbled around Kate’s head. Is it night? Have we been gone all day? Are Mum and Joe looking for us?

“Emma?” called Kate, turning to look around the cavern. “Where are you? It’s safe to come out now.”

Silence.

“Emma?” Kate looked at Alara. “Where is she?”

“I told her to stay hidden over there.” Alara pointed towards the next exit, and then walked in that direction.

Kate followed her. Maybe Emma was too scared to come out. Maybe she’d fallen asleep.

“I left her here.” Alara stared into the gap between the rocks and the wall.

Kate stared into the gap also. A sense of dread overwhelmed her.

Emma was gone.

Chapter Eight

“Emma! Emma!”

They searched the cavern twice, but Emma was nowhere to be found. Defeated, Kate stood beside the boulder where her sister should have been crouching. She stared at the empty gap, mental pictures flashed through her mind.

Joe taking Kate to the hospital, when she was seven, to see her new baby sister. Emma muttering Kate’s name for the first time. The big, excited eyes and huge smile over last year’s Christmas present, wrapped in paper Emma had made herself - there had been so much glitter stuck to everything that Mum had complained for weeks.

“Kate! I found something.”

Snapping back to reality, Kate turned to look at Siptah. He stood in the entrance of the tunnel they would use to leave the cavern. He held a red strip of thin leather.

“This belongs to Min. He has taken Emma.”

Alara sank to the ground. “This is my fault.”

Ignoring her, Kate walked over to Siptah and took the piece of leather from his grasp. “Are you sure this is Min’s?”

“I am sure.”

“It is from the front of his tunic,” added Alara. “I should have known he would do this. Why did I not stop and think?”

“It is not your fault, Purr-princess,” said Siptah. “You warned me from the start that we should not get close to the humans, that it would be dangerous for us and them. You told me to be more aloof, like ...”

Siptah stopped talking. Alara turned to look at him. “Say it. Like me.”

Kate straightened up and pushed her palms over her face. “None of that matters. We have to get Emma back. We have to get her back now. Where would Min have taken her?”

Alara and Siptah looked at each other, but neither of them replied.

“Tell me. Where?”

Alara shrugged. “I do not know where, but it will be in one of the many caverns.”

Kate groaned. “Tell me why ... why did he take her?”

“Because he knows it will stop us going straight back to Manu.” Alara removed her pack and placed it in her lap.

Kate stared at the pack, then at Alara. “What are you doing? You’re not still thinking of stopping here are you?”

The princess nodded. “We have to sleep.”

“No,” yelled Kate, her voice sounded strange, even to her own ears. “We can’t stop. They might be close by. We have to go after them now.”

Siptah stepped forward. “She is right. There is a better chance of catching up with them if we leave immediately.”

Alara looked sad and uncertain for only a moment. “Very well.”

They left a torch burning in the tunnel entrance leading back to the spider. Alara and Siptah agreed that it was unlikely that the spider would return, but Kate wasn’t taking any chances.

Armed with a torch and a pack each, they left the cavern and continued their journey. All thoughts of returning home had left Kate’s mind. Her only priority now was finding Emma.

Some time later Siptah stopped at a fork in the tunnel.

“Which way would they have gone?” asked Kate.

Alara and Siptah pointed at the tunnel to the left. “That way.”

“How do you know?”

“The other tunnel leads away from the city and Min must return in time to claim the throne,” replied Alara.

They continued on.

The farther they walked, the harder it became. Kate was tired and she knew her companions were too. Yet every time she considered stopping, Emma’s face popped up in her mind, and Kate was more determined than ever to continue on.

“Kate, we have to rest,” said Siptah.

“We can’t. Emma needs us to help her.”

“If we continue, someone will get hurt,” replied Siptah.

Kate shook her head. She needed to sit down as much as they did, but what if those few short minutes meant the difference between finding Emma and not finding her?

“If we do not rest, we will not be able to think straight,” said Siptah. “We need clear minds so that we can rescue Emma.”

A sob escaped from Kate. “We can’t stop. All this is my fault. If I hadn’t let her go to let the kittens—”

She stopped abruptly and looked at Siptah. The torch light brought out the ginger in his grey fur and reflected in his green eyes, which were big and sad. He seemed human, but he wasn’t. She kept forgetting that this boy was the kitten she loved so much. She looked down at the ground between their feet.

“Kate, I—”

She didn’t want to hear what he had to say. She pushed passed him and started running along the tunnel.

“Kate?”

She ran, down one tunnel then another. She ran blindly because she could see little through the tears that filled her eyes.

“Kate!”

Why had the kittens come to their house? It wasn’t fair. Her family had taken them in and loved them. Kate had loved them. She had held Jasper in her arms and cuddled him. If she had known he was really a boy, and that he knew what was being said, things would have been different. She had shared so many secrets with the tiny, tabby kitten. She felt betrayed.

“Kate, come back.”

Kate heard the desperation in Siptah’s voice.

All her disappointments in life rose to the surface. All the hurts. The feelings of being left out of the circle of love in her family. Being on the outside looking in. The resentment that Joe wasn’t really her father. The anger that her own father had died when she was a baby, leaving her with nothing—not even memories. All the things that had festered inside her over the years, making her feel miserable.

Kate sobbed and continued running.

“Kate! You are going the wrong way!”

She faltered. The ground tilted. She fell forward, the torch flying out of her hand and rolling away from her. Away, away and then ...

The torch disappeared over the edge of the rock path. Kate screamed as she slid along the ground after it. Her hands groped for something, anything, to stop her.

There was nothing to grab.

Her heart in her mouth, she tumbled face first over the edge of the chasm. Fear stifled the scream lodged in her throat.

Chapter Nine

Kate's right hand closed around an exposed root. The rest of her body continued to fall, her shoulder jolted painfully as she came to an abrupt stop, right way up. Dangling by one hand, Kate tried to ignore the pain in her shoulder.

She held on tightly. Heartbeat pounding, her breath came in quick, short gasps. She stared up into the darkness in horror. She didn't have the strength, and couldn't draw in a deep enough breath, to call out.

Through the thin, leather wraps, her toes pawed at the ledge as they desperately tried to find a piece of rock to stand on to take the weight off her straining shoulder.

Stale air drifted up from the blackness beneath her. She knew that it was a long drop to the bottom. Her fingers tightened their grip as her body started to tremble.

Siptah.

Her right foot found support. She tried to steady herself, but as she put more weight on the rock, it gave way. She jerked down. The hollow sound of the rock's fall, as it bounced off boulders below her, sent chills up her spine. Her fingers threatened to break off as an animal groan worked its way up from her chest.

"Kate?"

"Siptah." Her voice struggled up her wind pipe. The air felt trapped in her lungs. Her fingers ached. "Help me."

"Siptah!" called Alara. "Over here."

Kate heard scuffling noises and a dim light appeared overhead. The fingers on her left hand found a rock ledge to cling to.

"Down here!"

The light grew brighter. Two heads appeared over the edge of the chasm.

"Kate!" Siptah's eyes were enormous. He stared down at her for a second, and then withdrew.

"Kate, remain still," said Alara, leaning over the edge and reaching down to her. Her hand stopped a foot above Kate's outstretched right hand. "We will get you up."

Kate's fingers began to straighten. She willed them to hold tight. She stared up at Alara's face. They held each other's gaze for the longest moment.

"Siptah," Alara said without breaking eye contact with Kate, "she is beyond my reach. We need rope."

"I have rope," Siptah replied. "I have secured it to a boulder. Lower me down so I can grab Kate. Then you have to pull us up. Can you do that?"

Alara broke eye contact and rose to talk to Siptah.

"I ... no, I cannot ..." said Alara. "You are stronger, you should lower me."

Kate's heart sank. *Hurry.*

"No," came Siptah's reply. "You are not strong enough to hold Kate's weight. You must lower me down there."

"But ..."

"We do not have time to argue. I will wrap the rope around here and you will be able to hold both of us."

Please hurry.

"There," said Siptah, "that should do it."

Rope fell from above into the chasm, its length stopping beside Kate's chest. The looped end of the rope wiggled for a moment. The light overhead dimmed. Kate looked up to find Siptah easing himself over the edge of the chasm. No one spoke.

Face first, he came lower and lower. Kate saw Alara above him, her back pressed against his legs. Siptah's hands reached for Kate. She stared up at his face.

"Grab my hand," he said as he came closer. His legs still weighed down by Alara.

Kate looked at his hands. They were too far away. Her stomach fluttered. Her hands shook. "I can't."

"You must," said Siptah. "There is a loop for your foot too."

She couldn't move. She didn't have the strength to explain to Siptah that the rope wasn't long enough. "I can't," she whispered.

There was nothing in his face to tell her what he was thinking. He stretched his hands farther. "Alara, a little more."

Their faces came closer together. His hands reached out and grabbed her wrists. Kate's fingers ached as she forced them to close around his wrists.

Siptah jolted downwards. Alara gasped. Kate stifled a scream.

"It is all right," called Alara. "You are secure."

"Purr-put your foot into the loop," said Siptah before he shouted over his shoulder, "Quickly, Alara, pull us up."

Kate stared at the loop and remained silent. She would have to trust Siptah's strength to hold her. Her body dangled for a moment, and her shoulder hit the stone wall of the chasm. They jerked upwards.

Alara groaned and they jerked upwards again. She groaned again. Siptah was already more than half way over the edge again.

Kate felt another set of hands on her. She panicked, and then she saw Alara's face beside Siptah's. A moment later, she was dragged over the edge of the chasm and placed face down in the dirt. Siptah and Alara panted heavily beside her.

Kate lifted her head.

The middle of the rope, connecting Alara and Siptah, twisted around two boulders. Kate could see the indentation of Alara's heels in the dirt where she had pressed her feet against one of the boulders, using it for leverage just moments beforehand. Alara and Siptah were sprawled out beside Kate, exhausted. Kate lowered her head and closed her eyes, grateful to be alive.

A few minutes later, Siptah insisted they rest before continuing on. Kate didn't have the strength to argue. Battered and bruised, they moved away from the chasm, but they didn't go far. They settled down in the tunnel, amongst fallen rocks and rested.

Kate found sleep quickly.

The murmur of voices woke her. She lifted her head to find Siptah and Alara sitting side by side, deep in conversation.

"It does not matter, Siptah," said Alara. "I am still scared."

"Purr-princess, your father has spent many years purr-preparing you for the throne."

Alara shrugged. "I know what needs to be done, but I fear I am unable to rule the purr-people."

Siptah turned to look at her, but lowered his eyes quickly. "You? Scared?" He shook his head. "I never thought that of you."

"Why? I am flesh and blood, just like you, just like everyone."

"I suppose. You always seem so confident."

Alara laughed. "That is purr-part of the training."

Kate climbed to her feet and joined them. She ached all over, but it was her throat that needed attending to first.

“Ah, you are awake,” said Alara.

Kate smiled and reached for the leather pouch filled with water. “Did I sleep long?”

“Not long,” replied Alara. “An hour at most.”

Kate allowed several mouthfuls of water to wash away the dust, then lowered the leather skin and sat down. “Thank you for saving me. I don’t think I could have held on for much longer.”

Alara rose to her feet. “I am glad it is over. Excuse me.”

Kate watched the princess walk away. Alara was the future queen of Miu and for the first time Kate saw Alara in a different light.

“She is too young to be a queen,” Kate said to Siptah.

“She will have a regent until she comes of age.”

“How old is that?”

“Thirteen.”

Kate stared in silence at the corner where Alara had disappeared around. Thirteen! Kate knew she wouldn’t be ready to rule a land when she turned thirteen in a few months. No wonder Alara was scared.

“Why did you run from me, Kate?” asked Siptah.

She felt her face grow hot. Her fingers played with the cord hanging from the water pouch.

“I ...” she shrugged, “I was embarrassed.”

“Why?”

This time she wouldn’t run away. Not after what happened last time. This time she would face the issue head on, but she found she could not look him in the face.

“Because, as a kitten, I told you all my secrets ... I never thought anything of it, at the time, but ... if I’d known you were really a boy, I wouldn’t have shared as much.”

Silence.

She had shared her inner most feelings and thoughts, things she had never said to another person before. She wanted to look at him, but if she found him smiling, she didn’t know what she would do. Curiosity got the better of her. She looked up.

Siptah looked devastated. He stared at the pack in his crossed legs. Then their eyes met.

“I am sorry. Alara told me to stay away from the family. Not to get attached. But you must understand that as kittens, we could not help but act as kittens do. I knew I should be detached. Alara was always warning me, but she found it so much easier than I did. I think that was because of her training. I wanted to purr-play, chase things, hunt, and be purr-patted. Just like a normal kitten.”

Another silence.

“I truly am sorry,” he whispered.

To Kate’s relief, Alara returned. The princess looked at them strangely, then bent and picked up her pack. “We should be going now that we have had a sleep.”

“Yes. Emma will be scared,” replied Kate, gathering her things and climbing to her feet. “We have to help her. Which way do we go?”

Siptah adjusted the axe on his back then pushed two fingers into a small pocket at his waist. “I found this,” he said, holding up an ornament of a purple cat with gold eyes.

“Oh!”

Alara’s gasp made Kate’s heart beat faster. “What is it?” Kate asked Siptah.

“It is the protector of the Antechamber.”

“I don’t understand,” said Kate.

“Min has left us a clue,” said Siptah. “He has taken Emma to the Antechamber.”

“But why?” asked Alara. “Why would he risk letting me get so close to claiming the throne? It makes no sense.”

“The door from the Antechamber to the Court has been barred for years. There is no access

that way so he must have something planned.”

“What?”

Siptah shrugged. “I do not know, but it will be dangerous. Of that, I am sure.”

Chapter Ten

“Is it far?” Tired, Kate’s mind filled with terrifying images of Emma being held captive. Would Min harm Emma? Anger swept through Kate. Emma was just a little girl. She couldn’t defend herself. A moment later Kate’s anger melted and fear filled her belly. Min was horrible and shrewd. Could Alara and Jasper beat him?

“Far enough,” replied Alara, who walked a few paces ahead of Kate.

Kate lowered her head and pushed her doubts away. Alara and Siptah had tried to warn Kate to be cautious, and she had already learned how badly things could go when she rushed into things. For Emma’s sake, they had to think before they took action. Kate looked deep inside herself for some confidence and determination.

“We will be there in an hour or so,” added Siptah.

Kate glanced over her shoulder, at Siptah, walking quietly behind her. In a sense she felt trapped, but that was her mind running away with her again. Siptah was right, she had to stop thinking about what had happened in the past and move on, look ahead. She had to stop dwelling and start planning.

“There are only five of them,” she said aloud. “We can handle that.” If only she could make herself believe her own words.

“We do not know how many more will be waiting in the Antechamber,” said Siptah. “Besides, they have a wizling remember.”

Kate didn’t want to hear things like that, but Siptah was right again. It was better to be prepared. She sighed.

“I need a weapon.”

“No you do not,” said Alara. The princess stopped and turned to look at Kate. “You will not enter the Antechamber. It is too dangerous. Siptah and I will rescue Emma. You will wait in the tunnel.”

“I’ll do no such thing!”

The two girls glared at each other.

“Emma is my sister, and I will not sit back and watch. I can help.”

“How?”

Kate swallowed and looked down at the ground between their feet. “I don’t know, but I’m helping you get Emma out of there.”

Siptah stepped up behind her. She felt his presence before she felt his hand on her shoulder. “We will assess the situation when we arrive at the Antechamber. You will help if that gives us the advantage.”

Kate felt the warmth rising up her neck to settle in her cheeks. Neither of them believed she would be useful. She clenched her fists tightly, her fingernails biting into her palms, but she said nothing.

They continued walking. A short time later they stopped to rest.

“I have seen that scowl on your face before,” said Siptah.

Kate remained silent.

“When Joe talks to you, you look like that,” Siptah added. “Angry. Defiant. What did he do to make you hate him?”

Kate looked up. “Hate him?”

Siptah nodded. “I saw the hate every day. He must have done something terrible. What was it?”

Kate stared at the strips of meat in her hand. Did she hate Joe? She thought she did, but why? What had he done apart from marry her mother? There must be another reason she

disliked him so much. There had to be.

“Kate?”

She shrugged. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why? Was it that bad?”

No.

“Or is it because he is not your real father, and you resent him for that?”

Silence.

“Joe is a good man. I think you are too hard on him,” added Alara.

Kate felt a lump form in her throat. “I told you, I don’t want to talk about it.”

She climbed to her feet and walked away. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Where are you going?” asked Siptah.

“Oh, you know ...” Kate lowered her voice and squeezed her knees together. “I need to ... go.”

Siptah grinned and nodded.

Kate hurried along the tunnel and around the first bend. Out of sight of her companions, she stopped and sank to the ground. Propping the torch up beside her, she dropped her face into her hands and tried to push the anger away. She couldn’t. It was too hard. Did she really hate Joe? Was she being deliberately mean to him? Her mother’s smiling face popped up in her mind. Her mum was happy and Joe was the reason. He showered her with love and affection. He did the same with Emma, and the only reason he didn’t do it with Kate was because she wouldn’t allow him to.

“Kate? Are you all right?” Alara called from the resting place.

“Yes.” Kate got up and dusted herself off. “I’m on my way back now.”

As she approached them, she forced a smile. “Ah, that’s better. Are we ready to go?”

Alara nodded and led the way.

Soon clean air filled Kate’s nostrils and a soft breeze whipped at her hair. “Where’s that coming from?”

“You will see,” replied Alara.

“Yes, you are in for a treat,” added Siptah.

Moments later, they left the tunnels and walked into something that made Kate stop and catch her breath. Moonlight shone through an enormous opening in the cavern roof. Twinkling stars announced a mild night. The hoot of an owl sent something scurrying away into the shadows.

“Where are we? This is beautiful.” Kate sighed with wonder.

“We are standing in the basin of a volcano,” said Siptah.

“What!” Kate turned to look at him. “No way.”

A huge grin spread across his face. He nodded and his eyes sparkled.

“It is true,” said Alara. “The volcano is extinct, of course, and has been for thousands of years so you do not have to worry about an eruption. Did you not realise that we have been travelling through lava tunnels?”

Kate was speechless. She shook her head.

Alara smiled. “Not all of them, just the more recent tunnels.”

They stood in silence for a moment inspecting the scene before them. Rectangular shaped buildings, up to four stories high, stood crowded together. The small cut out windows and skinny entrances held no glass or doors. Wooden ladders thrown against the sides of the buildings lead to flat rooves, many overgrown with foliage. Originally made with stone blocks and smeared with something thick that resembled cement, Kate noticed that with time the outer casing was slowly eroding away leaving an untidy, mottled effect.

“This is incredible.”

“This place was once a thriving community called Pueblos. Our ancestors used to live here

before we moved to Manu,” said Alara as she walked around a circular object on the ground in front of them. “This is a kiva.”

Kate followed Alara. The light from the torches, and the moon, enabled her to see the opening in the middle. She laughed. “It looks like an upside down saucer.”

Siptah grinned. “That hole is the door. To get into the room, you would have to use a ladder. There are several of these rooms around the basin. We are told they were used for religious ceremonies.”

They moved up four narrow steps and onto the next level.

“How long has it been here?” asked Kate.

“A thousand years or more,” said Alara.

A worn path took them through the maze of buildings. Kate was tempted to go inside and look around one of them, but knew that this was not the time.

Kate spotted another kiva and behind it stood a life-sized stone statue with beady eyes.

“We believe that is the founder of Pueblos,” said Siptah, as if he could read her mind.

Kate smiled. “Why is the place empty?”

“A sickness took many lives. The survivors moved away from the basin and started afresh elsewhere. Scrolls from that time are still—” Alara stopped abruptly.

“Purr-princess?” Siptah rushed forward. He stared into the shadows, searching for intruders. “What is wrong?”

The light danced in the tears that welled in Alara’s eyes. “I was going to say the scrolls are still in my father’s purr-possession, but I suppose they are in my care now. If I claim the throne in time, that is.”

Silence.

“I’m so sorry, Alara,” said Kate, placing one arm around the princess’s shoulder and hugging her.

“Thank you,” said Alara. She pushed her hands over her tear streaked cheeks. “Come. We must stop dawdling. We have allowed ourselves to become distracted.”

With that, their pace quickened and the idle chatter stopped. Minutes later they reached the opposite side of the basin. Kate turned to take a final look at Pueblos before stepping into another tunnel.

“We must leave the torches here,” whispered Siptah, propping his torch against the tunnel wall. “The Antechamber is not far.”

“Won’t they be expecting us?” asked Kate, placing her torch beside Siptah’s. “If they are smart, they will have the tunnel guarded.”

“That is true,” replied Alara, “but we are not in the tunnel they will be guarding.”

“What do you mean?”

“We took longer to get here because we have come a different way.” Siptah grinned. “We will be able to observe them and make a plan.”

Alara nodded. “Surprise is on our side.”

Leaving their packs with the torches, the companions crept along the tunnel. Kate saw the light from the cavern before they reached the bend. When they edged their way around the bend, Kate dropped to her knees as the flickering light reached them.

“Shh!” Siptah held one finger to his lips and motioned that she should stand up.

Kate stood and realised that although she heard voices, no Miuan could be seen. She followed Siptah and Alara to the edge of the tunnel, suddenly aware that the noises she heard were not level with them, they were below them. They stood in a concealed tunnel entrance high above the cavern floor.

Siptah touched his lips with his finger again, indicating that they should say nothing. Alara gestured to Siptah then moved away to peer over the edge of a high stone barrier. Siptah turned and looked in the other direction.

Kate stood quietly looking at the stone platform. It looked man-made ... Miuan made. Questions filled her mind. If the Miuan made this, why didn't Min know it was here? If he did know of its existence, then maybe they were walking into a trap. If he didn't, how would they get down to the cavern floor in order to rescue Emma? And ... if they were cats, why couldn't Min smell them as they approached?

Kate gingerly walked across the small platform to stand between Alara and Siptah. The high barrier, made from natural rock and stone, prevented them from falling over the edge, and hid them from the people below.

Below, she saw Min pacing back and forth beside a huge stone Fire Well. He gazed intently at the ground.

The wizling stood quietly nearby, in his usual stance; the white bone held in front of him, his head tilted to one side.

Min stopped pacing and spun around to glare at the wizling. "Well, do you see them?"

The wizling lifted one hand.

"No! No!" Min threw something into the flames. Sparks flashed and shot up into the air before everything returned to normal. "How did you gain your robes? You are useless."

"Let the boy work, Min," a voice demanded. "You must learn to curb your impatience and let your wizard do his job."

Kate strained to see the last speaker. A tall, heavy man walked into view wearing a long, black cape. A soft gasp escaped Alara's lips. Siptah reached for his axe, but stopped before he actually removed it.

"He is no wizard," said Min. "He is only a wizling and not a very good one at that."

Siptah grabbed Kate's arm and pulled her away from the barrier.

"He will be, if you allow him time," said the stranger.

Siptah pushed Kate and Alara into the tunnel. They moved away from the cavern, and the voices, as quickly and as quietly as they could.

When they reached their belongings, Kate turned to Alara. "Who was that Miuan? You recognised him."

"I should have known," replied Alara.

"My father never trusted him," interrupted Siptah.

Alara's face softened and she gripped Siptah's arm. "Your father is a good judge of character, Siptah. I did not want to believe it was purr-possible, but of course, it makes sense."

"Who is he?" asked Kate again.

"He is Min's father, my Uncle Hebeny," replied Alara.

"And he is the one who murdered the king," added Siptah.

Chapter Eleven

“You do not know that for sure, Siptah.”

“Yes, I do. Why do you insist on purr-protecting him?” Siptah glared at Alara.

Kate wrung her hands as her gaze shifted repeatedly between her two companions.

“He has always been nice to me,” replied Alara.

“Of course he has.” Siptah knelt down. “He knows you will tell him things if you trust him. He has been using you.”

For a moment, Kate thought Alara was going to say something nasty as the princess’s eyes narrowed, her jaw dropped open and her orange nose twitched. But Alara remained quiet. Her gaze fell to the ground at her feet. “I know you are right.”

Siptah looked up at her. “He and Min have been purr-plotting against you and your father the whole time. I know it.”

Alara nodded, but said nothing.

Siptah straightened up. “You two must stay here. I am going back to the cavern to find out what their purr-plan is.”

“Are you sure, Siptah?”

“Yes,” Siptah said to Alara. “They have been purr-plotting this for years. When you left it gave them the purr-perfect opportunity. The purr-people think you have abandoned them. Min and his father killed your father, and now they must kill you before you enter Manu and reach the court.”

Alara sat in silence.

Siptah looked at Kate. “You and Emma are not a concern to them. However, they will use you both to get to the purr-princess.”

“Use us?” Kate shifted her back to a more comfortable position.

Siptah nodded. “As bait.”

Silence. Kate stared at the rock wall, numb. This could mean that if she rescued Emma, they would be allowed to return home. But ... it might also mean that Min would kill them both if his need for them disappeared.

“What about the wizling?” Kate asked a moment later.

“Djal?” Alara tutted and waved her hand dismissively. “It will be years before he is a real wizard. He is not good at his craft. We do not have to worry about him.”

Kate remembered the power oozing around Djal’s circlet and the damage to the tunnel entrance. Anyone who could do those things was dangerous. “I disagree,” said Kate.

Alara and Siptah stared at her.

Kate swallowed. “He made a dragon! He blasted half a cave away! From what I’ve seen, he’s got a lot of power. Granted he can’t use it affectively, but he is powerful enough to spoil anything we might plan. We can’t discount what he can do.”

Siptah pressed his fingertips together as he thought. “She is right. We must be prepared for whatever he might throw at us.”

“And this is something that’s been niggling at me for a while. Won’t they be able to smell us coming?” asked Kate.

Siptah looked amused, but Alara was not impressed. “We are not cats.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you,” said Kate. “It’s just that you have cat’s noses, so I thought—”

“We are not cats,” Alara said again. “Our smell is only a little more acute than yours.”

“How long do we have?” Kate asked, wanting to change the subject. With no sun or moon to guide her, she had no idea what the time was.

“Four hours, at most,” replied Siptah.

“Min will be getting desperate then,” said Kate. “How does he know you will come for Emma? Isn’t it possible that you might abandon her for the crown?”

Alara shook her head, her eyes grew large. “I would never do that!”

“I’m not saying you would,” replied Kate, “but if the Antechamber door is no longer used, then I assume there is another way into Manu.”

Alara and Siptah stared at her.

“And if that’s true,” Kate continued, “then isn’t it possible that you would go straight home and get help from Siptah’s father?” Kate hesitated for a second. “With help you could easily overcome Min and his father.”

Silence fell over the companions. Kate’s hands went clammy, a nerve in her neck twitched. She stared at two pairs of green cat’s eyes, the black slits wide. All colour drained from their faces. Finally, Alara pulled her gaze away and turned to look at Siptah.

“She is right,” she said in a small voice. “I did not think of that. I have failed. I do not deserve the throne. I would make a terrible queen.”

Siptah’s gaze penetrated Kate’s for a second longer, then he turned to Alara. He reached out and covered her hand with his. “Purr-princess, it is not you who failed. It is I. I am the guard.” His voice sounded raspy. “I should have thought of that myself. This is unforgivable.”

Kate sat still for a moment or two. This wasn’t turning out the way she had thought. A future queen and her bodyguard had made a vital mistake. She looked at them and her heart sank. They were only twelve years old, just like her. Words that Joe often said rang in her mind, *Life is experience, but you can’t have experience until you have life*. She finally understood what it meant.

“Alara, Siptah,” said Kate. She waited until they looked at her. “We’ve all made mistakes today. Mine was allowing Emma to let the kittens in ...” Kate noticed the small grin flash across Siptah’s face “... on her own. I should have gone with her and then none of this would have happened.”

“If it makes you feel better, I didn’t think of the other door thing until just now.” She allowed her lips to curl up in a small smile. “We won’t make the same mistakes in the future, but right now we have time to fix this, so don’t get bogged down by doubt.”

She reached over and placed her hand on top of Siptah’s and Alara’s.

“We’ll do this together,” she said and squeezed their hands.

Kate weighed the dagger in her palm. It was nothing to look at. There was no fancy handle or elaborate engraving. It was plain, light and small. In fact, it was really, really small, and that worried Kate the most, but Siptah had no other weapon to offer her.

One day ago, Kate would never have believed she’d be in this situation. Now she knew she would do anything to rescue Emma and keep herself and her sister safe.

“Wait.” Siptah turned back and rushed over to the torches.

“Siptah, we cannot take those,” said Alara. “We will be seen.”

Siptah crunched the end of the torch into the dirt at his feet, smothering the flame. He turned the torch over and stared at the burnt end for a moment, then pushed it into a crevice of the stone wall. Putting all his weight against it, the burnt end snapped off.

Kate looked over her shoulder towards the cavern, half expecting the noise to alert Min, but nothing happened and her heart beat returned to normal.

Siptah pushed the end onto the ground again, kicking dirt over the tip. "That should be fine now," he said, turning towards Kate. "I have broken off the hot purr-part. The end is warm, but it will not burn you."

Kate held the dead torch in her hands. Being solid wood it pleased her, yet it wasn't too long to be cumbersome. She smiled her thanks to Siptah. "This is much better."

He nodded. "Be careful."

Kate's stomach lurched. "I will."

"Come," said Alara. "We must go now."

They walked along the tunnel in silence. They had a plan, now they just had to make it work. Kate looked at Siptah striding confidently at the front of the line. Axe strapped to his back, sling secure at his waist, spear in his hand, it was the first time she had seen him looking confident and determined.

They stepped out onto the stone platform, and paused for a moment. It had been agreed that they would not speak once they entered the cavern. Siptah touched Kate's arm. He pointed to her right and she saw a gap between the boulders, screening the platform and the stone floor. Kate moved to the gap and looked through it, knowing what to expect because they had been over the plan several times.

She sat on the edge of the gap, dangling her legs over the side, and looked at Alara and Siptah.

Siptah lowered his rope over the opposite side of the platform. He readied himself, then nodded to Alara and looked at Kate. Their eyes held each other's gaze for a moment before he dropped out of sight.

Kate looked up at Alara. Both girls' mouths twisted in a half grin, and Kate pushed herself into the gap.

She dropped lightly onto the stone beneath the opening. Kate knew what to do, but doubt made her hesitate for a second. It was all up to her now. Siptah would do what he could to keep Min and the others away from Emma, but only Kate could free her sister.

It had been agreed that Alara was the key to their success and she must not be captured. If this happened, all their lives would be at risk.

Kate found the slope that would take her down to the cavern floor. It was narrower than she imagined. Her dressing gown got caught on the ragged edges of rock, but she pulled it free, and continued on her way.

Voices filtered through to her, but she tried to ignore them. She couldn't allow herself to be distracted, not now, but Min's voice grated on her nerves and his words filtered through.

"Father, it is getting late. They should be here already. Perhaps they went straight to court."

"The entrance is guarded. They will not make it through the doors," replied Min's father. "My men will drag their bodies here, if necessary."

Upon hearing the older man's voice, chills ran up Kate's spine.

"Is there another way into the court?" asked Min.

"None. You know that."

Kate was level with the voices when she found the small hole she needed to crawl through to enter the cavern. Her heart hammered in her chest. She swallowed the nerves bubbling in the pit of her stomach and thought of nothing but the rescue.

On her hands and knees, the dead torch beneath the palm of her hand, Kate bent forward and peered through the hole. Nothing. She inched forward and took another peek. Still nothing. Siptah had made her promise that if anyone stood nearby, she would abort the plan and return to wait with Alara.

She took a deep breath and leaned into the hole. Her gaze quickly took in everything. She exhaled. Just more rocks and dirt, it was safe to proceed.

She eased herself through the hole, dragging the dead torch with her. Inside the cavern at

last, Kate threw herself flat on the ground. A guard stood some distance away with his back to her.

Kate's temples pounded with anxiety. She lifted her head and peered at the guard. He hadn't moved. Scrambling to her feet, she picked up the torch and stepped over the low rocks surrounding her and quickly ran for cover. Once safely behind the larger boulders, Kate remembered to breathe. She looked up at the platform.

From inside the cavern, it appeared to be the location of a massive cave-in many years before—nothing but a pile of rocks. No one would guess what was behind the mound. Kate could see the top of Alara's face. Their eyes met for a second and then Alara was gone to signal Siptah.

Kate pressed her back against the boulder as she crept to the opposite end. She cautiously peeped around the edge and quickly scanned the cavern.

There was no platform in the cavern. The fire roared within a circular stone well, which had been built in the middle of the cavern. The area around the well was free from rocks and pebbles. Kate got the impression the Antechamber was used often. However, stone debris cluttered the edge of the cavern. It was everywhere, making Kate's journey across the cavern dangerous.

She could hear the crackling fire, but could see only the edge of the well. The voices told Kate that Min and his father were on the far side, near the entrance. On the near side of the well smaller rocks had been placed in a semi-circle, for sitting on, near a high mound of boulders with a heavy, wooden table in front of it. It resembled a meeting place. In the middle of this semi-circle sat Emma. Her sister's arms were pulled back and tied to a stake. She sat crossed legged in the dirt. Kate blinked. Emma stared directly at her.

Kate raised a finger to her lips. She wanted to ask if anyone was watching, but knew she couldn't. Tightening her grip on the torch, she pushed her body away from the boulder. She edged her way across the uneven ground, avoiding the loose pebbles. Now was not the time to make a noise. She turned to look in the direction of the well.

A black cape appeared. Kate froze. It was Djal. He seemed to be in deep concentration as he stood unmoving in front of the tunnel entrance. She swallowed the terror that threatened to overwhelm her before continuing to pick her way across the clearing.

Min stomped into sight. Kate caught her breath. His loud tones echoed off the cavern walls distorting what he said to his father, Hebany. Kate ran to the next boulder and hid. Pressed against the cold rock, she wiped the sweat from her forehead then strained to see around the edge of the boulder.

The Fire Well was in full view now. Min and Hebany paced on the other side of it, ignoring Djal. Their words meant nothing to Kate. Her heart suddenly leapt into her mouth when she spotted the first guard she had seen when she had crawled through the hole. She couldn't see his face, but the boots were clear, and so were the axe in his hand and the dagger in his belt.

Kate turned away. She ran behind the boulders that surrounded Emma and past the blocked door to the court. She would approach her sister from behind.

Djal, Min and Hebany were in full view. She crouched down and crawled into the area where Emma sat, making sure she stayed in the shadows of the boulders.

She paused and looked at Djal. He had not moved, but Min and Hebany had disappeared from sight. Suddenly, the guard stepped into view. Kate's body clenched as she tried not to move.

The guard watched Min as Kate's mind frantically searched for a way to reach Emma without the guard seeing them. A movement to the guard's right caught Kate's eye. Siptah!

The guard glanced at Emma. His eyes widened when he spotted Kate. His hand dropped to the dagger at his waist as Siptah cracked him over the head with the blunt end of his axe. As the guard fell, Siptah caught him and dragged him out of sight.

Kate wasted no time. She crawled to Emma and whispered, "Say nothing. When I get you free, crawl this way and follow me as quickly as you can. You must be very quiet."

Emma's body shook, but she nodded.

Kate grabbed the bindings holding Emma's wrists. There were several large knots. She pulled the dagger from her dressing gown pocket and slid the blade between her sister's skin and the knots. Using a sawing motion, she pulled upwards. After several attempts, the bindings broke. Emma immediately fell forward and started crawling.

"The girl!"

The voice echoed around the cavern. Kate gasped and looked over her shoulder.

Djal glared at her through the flames, the white bone pointing at her. "The girl escapes!"

Chapter Twelve

Kate scrambled to her feet, her dressing gown twisting around her legs. She yanked the fleecy material out of the way and ran.

Emma screamed.

Kate stopped and turned to find her sister standing motionless a few steps behind her.

“Come on!” Kate reached back, gripped Emma’s shoulder and pulled the younger girl towards her. “Run!”

They ran around the boulder and Emma veered towards the door to the court.

“Forget that door! Go to the right,” said Kate. She could hear shouting, but she couldn’t tell which way Min and his crew were approaching.

Emma and Kate squeezed through the narrow gap between the boulders and the cavern wall. Strands of her dark hair clung to Kate’s face. Her skin crawled, her heart raced. She prayed they would reach the other end before Min found them.

“I see them!”

Her heart jumped into her mouth at the sound of Min’s voice. There wasn’t time to look over her shoulder. It was enough to know that he was behind them.

They pushed on. The narrow gap widened. Loose stones appeared and Kate knew they would soon be running across the clearing where everyone could see them.

Emma fell, landing with a crunch.

“Hold this.” Kate thrust the torch into Emma’s hands and then scooped her up into her arms and continued running as fast as she could.

Light flashed. The wall beside her exploded. Kate staggered sideways and fell. Emma cried out. The torch bounced on the ground and rolled away. Dust clouded Kate’s vision and she tasted grit in her throat. She gulped for air.

“Get her!” It was Min’s voice.

Scrambling to her feet, Kate scooped Emma off the ground again and ran. Stones moved under her leather wrapped feet. Emma whimpered in her arms.

“My arm hurts,” Emma murmured into her chest.

Kate ignored her. Escape was her first priority and she could see their destination. Once they reached the next set of boulders, the hole in the wall wasn’t far. She wanted to rub the grit from her eyes, but couldn’t. Everything swayed gently, even the boulders she raced towards.

Gold eyes glared at her. Min.

The dark shape she thought was a boulder turned out to be Min. He had doubled back and now he stood foreboding in front of them. A guard stood beside him. A hand grabbed her upper arm, forcing her to stop, fingers dug deep into her flesh. Emma’s weight had taken its toll. Kate’s arms arched. In the next instant, she was pulled sideways and pushed to a crouching position. Emma lay cradled in her lap.

Min towered over them, an axe in one hand and a spear in the other.

“Where is Alara?” Min glared down at her, the black slits in his eyes narrowing.

Kate glared at Min.

“The purr-princess. Where is she?”

Kate looked towards the well. Djal had returned to his concentration stance. Hebany stood motionless, watching his son, a deep frown on his face.

The blunt end of Min’s spear prodded Kate’s shoulder. “How did you get in here?” Min looked around the cavern. His flat, furry nose twitched. “There has to be another entrance.”

Emma twisted in Kate’s lap. A thick, sticky substance clung to Kate’s fingers. Blood! She

looked down to find her sister clutching her elbow. Blood smeared the fabric of Emma's loose pyjama sleeve and Kate's dressing gown, but Kate knew it wasn't life threatening. She reached for the sleeve and ripped it off, then looked up at Min.

"I was already in here when you arrived." She quickly wrapped the sleeve around the graze on Emma's arm. She grabbed her sister's free hand, forcing the tiny fingers to spread over the loose ends, tucking the arm close to Emma's small body.

"I do not believe you. Where is she? Tell me now, or I will kill the little girl."

Min made a sudden movement towards them, a low growl twisting his lips and revealing uneven teeth. Kate jerked backwards.

"Kate?" Emma cried.

A movement caught Kate's eye. A dark shadow rose from the boulders, near the cavern wall, out of sight from the well.

Kate struggled to stand up. "It's true."

The Miuan holding Kate tightened his grip and pushed her back down. "Hey, stay there."

Kate looked up. Intense green eyes stared at her for a second and then Siptah raised his axe and swung.

Kate pushed Emma to her feet.

"Behind you!" Kate's captor yelled.

Min ducked to one side, turned and counter attacked Siptah.

Twisting around, Kate rammed her entire body weight against the guard holding her. He toppled forward, falling over Kate's shoulder and landed heavily on the ground.

Kate heard Hebany scream orders to the other two guards. "No one is to enter or leave this cavern. Djal, what do you see?"

If Djal answered, Kate didn't hear his words.

Kate's attacker jumped to his feet and rushed towards her. Kate drew her dagger and thrust. The blade skated across the guard's leather armour, unable to pierce the hide. The Miuan slammed into her, knocking her to the ground. His hands found Kate's throat and she struggled for air. His fetid breath washed over her as she clawed at his hands, desperate to free herself. Her vision blurred and began to fade.

A burst of pain bloomed in her ribs. The guard lay slumped across her, unmoving. Kate struggled free from the unconscious body and stood on wobbly legs, frantically searching out Emma. She was safe.

Kate looked around for her rescuer. Siptah still grappled with Min, but behind them a figure stood behind a boulder, a sling dangling in one hand. Alara.

Alara stared at Emma. One long finger beckoned Emma, drawing her closer and closer.

Go to her, Emma, thought Kate. *Hurry.* She gave Emma a little push.

"I see her," shouted Djal, his voice high pitched and unbelieving. "I see the princess!"

Emma ran to Alara. The princess grabbed Emma's hand and hurried her away to safety. Kate breathed a sigh of relief.

"She is ..." Djal turned around. "She is ..." he pointed "she is over there somewhere. I could not ..." His eyes focused. "By the Goddess, I lost the image, but I know she is in the cavern."

Hebany stepped towards Min and Siptah.

"No, to the right," said Djal.

Kate's mouth dried. If they found the second entrance, Alara and Emma would be doomed.

Kate spun to the empty gap that she and Emma had used to get here. "Alara! Go the other way. He's coming!" Kate kept her face anxious, hoping Hebany would fall for her ruse. Relief swept through her when he bolted towards the gap.

Unexpectedly, Hebany turned toward Kate. A large hand reached out and grabbed her. Kate eyed the dagger in the dirt. She couldn't reach it. Weaponless, she looked around the cavern, searching for help. She caught a glimpse of Siptah and Min. Both had cuts and bruises. Both

had discarded their weapons and now fought with fists. Clapsed together, they rolled out of sight.

Hebany pulled Kate across the clearing to the well. He swung her roughly around and pushed her back against the stone. The flames in the well roared behind her. The heat bit into the back of her head and enveloped her.

“Alara.” Hebany’s voice was deep and masterful. “Come out from your hiding place, or I will push this human into the fire.”

“No!” Kate struggled. She found strength she never knew she possessed, but still it wasn’t enough. Hebany’s dull gold eyes penetrated hers.

He means it.

Could she smell her hair being singed? Her heart pounded. She struggled against him and kicked his shins, but Hebany stood fast, his huge hand holding her in place.

“I am losing my purr-patience,” said Hebany.

Kate’s eyes watered. Flashes of light swirled around Djal’s golden circlet.

“Stop!” Siptah stepped into view.

For the second time, Kate felt fingers squeeze her throat. Hebany’s grip was powerful. The air trapped in her body, but an instant later the pressure released.

“Siptah, bring Alara to me. I *will* kill the human.”

Djal released his power. A spark flashed across the cavern. Boulders exploded into tiny pieces.

Siptah dropped to the ground, covering his head. Hebany fell backwards, forcing Kate down with him. Her back scraped against the stone edge of the well. Her knees hit the dirt with force. The grip around her neck disappeared.

On her feet in a heartbeat, Kate jumped over the dazed Miuan and ran towards Siptah, who had already climbed to his feet.

“Djal, you idiot!” roared Hebany from the ground.

Siptah grabbed Kate’s hand and pulled her along behind him. They raced into the cover of the boulders, hearing footsteps close behind them.

“Find the purr-princess and kill her,” yelled Hebany. “Kill all of them!”

Rounding a corner, they ran into Alara.

“Where’s Emma?” asked Kate.

“Safe.” Alara’s eyes indicated the top of the mound.

“Come. We must flee,” said Siptah. He pushed them along the path. “We will have to go through the entrance.”

“It is too late for that.” Min stepped out in front of them. “You must all die. Here and now, but the purr-princess goes first.”

Min’s gold eyes glinted. He raised his spear and hurled it at Alara.

“No!” Kate and Siptah yelled in unison.

Kate pushed Alara to one side. Sharp pain exploded in her thigh. Her breath caught in her bruised throat and she fell to the ground.

Pain. So much pain. Kate closed her eyes. Voices echoed around her. Hands tilted her backwards and pressed against her thigh. Flashes of light. Screaming. Darkness.

Chapter Thirteen

The darkness lightened into grey as Kate struggled back to consciousness. She tried to force her eyes to open. She moved and felt her chest tighten. Pain shot down her leg. Her hand reached out, her fingers closing around something solid. The spear.

“Kate, you are losing blood,” Siptah whispered in her ear. “Keep still.”

Kate realised the pressure on her chest was Siptah’s arms holding her close. She allowed herself to lean back against him and look around. How much time had passed? A minute? Five minutes? Longer? Little had changed. Maybe it was mere seconds.

Alara stood in front of Kate, her only weapon a sling. Min and one of his henchmen advanced towards her.

“Your death will be quick, but not necessarily purr-painless,” said Min.

Alara remained silent and rigid, her sling ready.

“Get it over with, Min,” said Hebany. He and a guard advanced from the rear. “You have a crown to claim.”

Kate glanced up at Siptah. He looked different somehow, older.

“You will never get the crown,” Alara said to Min. “Never!”

“I have to help the purr-princess,” Siptah whispered to Kate. “This will not be our resting purr-place. Not without a fight.”

Unable to speak, Kate nodded.

Min laughed. “Strong words—”

“Min!” Hebany shouted. “Get on with it.”

Siptah lowered Kate’s head to the cavern floor, and joined Alara. Side by side they awaited the onslaught. When it came, Kate could only moan and shut her eyes, but she could not shut out the pain.

“Pr-Aa!” Djal’s shout was loud, his voice surprised and terrified.

Kate’s eyes fluttered open. Siptah had overpowered Min, who lay face down in the dirt with one arm twisted savagely up his back. Alara struggled with her assailant.

A deep, haunting noise sounded. It started out as a low groan and built up to a steady pitch, much like a horn. A stern command followed and, although Kate couldn’t see what was happening, she knew many Miuans had charged into the cavern by the rumble vibrating through the ground.

Hebany turned and tried to flee. Min struggled to gain his freedom, but Siptah drove his knee into Min’s back, forcing him to remain on the ground. The guard holding Alara in a headlock shoved her to one side and ran. She fell to the ground beside Kate.

“Pr-Aa!” Djal shouted again.

“Take him!” A deep voice roared. “Strip him of his circlet and take him away.”

“No, no, purr-please no ...” Djal’s voice faded.

Kate trembled with pain. She looked into Alara’s mysterious eyes and found the princess smiling at her.

Alara reached out and touched her face. “It is over. That is Siptah’s father. Everything will be fine now.”

A tear dripped from the corner of Kate’s eye into the rubble. She slid back into darkness.

Kate heard voices. Her head felt foggy, her body relaxed. She couldn’t force her eyes to open. She listened momentarily then drifted off into a deep sleep.

Kate opened her eyes and looked around. The chamber was large, with no windows and only one door, which stood ajar. Colourful drawings had been painted directly onto the stone walls. On examination, they seemed to tell a cryptic story. Two flaming torches were the only source of light, but Kate could see places for more torches if the need arose.

She turned her head to the right and smiled. Emma lay asleep in a bed not far away. The bed, perfectly shaped for the body, had an elevated head, which meant no pillow was required, and a dip where the backside would rest. Two dozen or so thick, soft cushions were used instead of a mattress and a tan fur took the place of a blanket.

Kate looked at her own bed and found that it was the same as Emma's. Soft and comfortable, she felt warm and safe. Beside the bed, a jug of water sat atop a low table. Parched, Kate leaned towards the jug, but her fingers couldn't reach it and she didn't feel like moving.

Lowering her eyes, she looked down at her injured leg, but could see nothing because of the fur blanket. The spear had been removed. She wondered why there was no pain. A warm sensation quivered up and down her leg. The longer she lay awake, the less she noticed it.

Kate wondered how long it would be before she could walk. She had to get Emma home. Mum would be frantic by now.

"Ah, you are awake."

Startled, Kate jolted upright and was, yet again, surprised by the lack of pain in her leg. Glancing at the door, she found Alara and Siptah walking towards her.

"You have slept for hours," said Siptah, his smile reassuring. He wore a clean tunic and had replaced the leather boots with soft leather wraps. His wounds had been cleansed and bandaged.

"I feel much better," replied Kate.

Siptah reached for the jug, poured water into a wooden mug and handed it to her. Kate swallowed a few mouthfuls of cool water and then smiled.

"Thank you, Siptah." She turned to Alara. "Did you make it back in time?"

The princess wore a long, flowing gown. Glitter laced the grey fur on the top of her head. Many rows of tiny coloured beads and jewels, almost the width of her shoulders, lay against her bodice. "Yes—"

The door swung open. A skinny Miuan, a servant in a short white tunic, hurried into the room followed by an elderly, plump Miuan male. The elderly Miuan, leaning heavily on a cane, made his way across the chamber. The servant closed the door, knelt down and waited quietly.

Fur of pure white, the elderly Miuan's eyes glistened and his smile was broad and welcoming.

Kate turned to look at Alara and Siptah.

Alara's face beamed. Eyes bright, her smile wide, she clasped her hands to her chest and then rushed forward to throw her arms around the old man's neck.

"Careful, my girl. Careful," the old Miuan said in feigned anger. "You cannot do that every time you see me."

"I cannot help it. It is just—"

"Hush." The old Miuan looked from Alara, to Siptah, to Kate. "You must introduce me to your guest."

The Miuan came closer, Alara clutched his arm, the smile never leaving her face. As they came level to Kate's bed, Siptah suddenly bent forward in a low bow. Kate caught her breath, her eyes darting among the three of them.

“Kate, this is my father, King Wosret,” announced Alara.

Kate had never heard Alara speak with such excitement and pride.

“As you can see,” said Alara, “my father was not murdered. I was so relieved when Siptah’s father took me to him. His leg has been badly injured, but he is recovering quickly.”

“My age hinders my healing,” added King Wosret.

Kate swallowed and her eyes met the king’s.

“Well, yes, it was unfortunate that my daughter was told of my death. I did not believe news would reach her so quickly. We,” he looked at Siptah and smiled, “your father and I, that is, suspected foul purr-play for many long months and set about making our own purr-plans.

“First, I removed my daughter from the Pr-Aa,” seeing Kate’s confused look, he added, “the Great House, and then we waited. When the attack came I had advance warning and was able to safeguard myself.” He looked down at his leg and shrugged. “I did not expect this wound, but I think it made my death more believable. There was a lot of blood.”

King Wosret grinned.

“However, Siptah’s father was unable to get the attacker to speak the name of the betrayer,” the king continued. “Even though we knew it was my obnoxious brother and his wretched son, we had no proof.”

“So what did you do?” asked Kate.

“We sat back and waited until they got desperate enough to do something daring and stupid.”

“With the king thought to be murdered, Min announced that he planned to take the throne by the full moon, if the purr-princess did not return to claim it,” added Siptah.

King Wosret nodded. “It is a custom from centuries ago.”

“Your Majesty,” said Siptah, “I do not understand who sent the messenger then. It was not you, you have already admitted that, and why would Min do such a thing?”

King Wosret turned to look at his daughter. “Your maid is loyal to you, I can attest to that. She believed me to be dead, and she sent her brother to warn you.” He turned back to Siptah. “Min found out and followed him. We knew nothing of these events until it was too late.”

King Wosret stepped forward and patted Kate’s shoulder. “Unfortunately, we did not foresee you and your darling little sister getting dragged into our troubles. My deepest apologies.”

Kate opened her mouth to say something but didn’t know what to say so shut it again. A warm flush of embarrassment crept over her face.

“Kate?”

They all turned to look across the chamber. Emma sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes.

“Yes, Emma,” replied Kate.

“Kate!” Emma jumped off the side of the bed and ran across the chamber. She stopped beside the bed, her face changed from a smile to a frown. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

“Kate, I thought you were dead.” The words tumbled from Emma’s mouth in a rush. “I was crying and scared and everything. I thought you’d left me here on my own and I’d never, ever see you again.”

To Kate’s surprise, Emma punched her on the arm. She stared at her sister’s face and saw worry and concern.

King Wosret broke the silence that followed with a small cough. “Kate, your sister refused to leave your side while the healer was seeing to you.”

“Kate, the healer used the Power to heal your wound,” said Siptah quickly. “You will not even know how bad it was ...”

The look on King Wosret’s face stopped Siptah saying more.

“As I was saying,” the king said. “She sat with you for a long time. It was only when she fell asleep that we were able to put her to bed, where she belonged. She looks up to you.”

It was a simple statement but it had a deep meaning behind it. Deep within Kate something stirred, something changed. Her mind felt lightened of her previous torments and doubts. She had discovered a part of herself that she didn't know existed.

Kate looked at Emma. “I'm sorry. I've been a mean big sister, but that will change from this moment on. I promise. I love you, Emma.”

“I know.” Emma plonked her elbows onto the cushions beside Kate. “Did you know they cut off animal's legs to make this bed?”

“No, they didn't,” said Kate. She turned to look at Siptah. “Did you?”

“No, the wood is carved in the shape of large bull's legs,” replied Siptah with a grin.

The Miuan's laughed. It was good to hear the deep, throaty laugh of King Wosret. It was infectious and before long Emma and Kate were laughing too.

“When our guests are ready, bring them to my chamber and I will use the sceptre to send them home,” said King Wosret, a few minutes later.

“Father, before you go,” said Alara. She turned to look at Siptah, patted his arm and smiled. Then she turned back to her father. “I want you to step up Siptah's training. I officially announce that I want him to be my personal bodyguard.”

Siptah's mouth dropped open. His eyes widened with astonishment.

“Excellent choice, my daughter,” said King Wosret. “He will learn from his father. There is no better.” The king placed his hand on Siptah's shoulder. “I know my daughter will be safe in your hands.”

The king removed his hand and Siptah bowed. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Everyone watched the king limp across the chamber. The servant scrambled to his feet and quickly opened the door for King Wosret. They left the chamber, leaving Kate and Emma alone with Alara and Siptah.

The awkward silence was broken by Emma clapping her hands and jumping up and down. “Siptah's going to be a bodyguard. I can't wait to tell Mummy.”

Alara shared a smile with Siptah and then turned to Kate. “Come on, get up. It is time for you and Emma to go home.”

Chapter Fourteen

In daylight, the blue light radiating from the well didn't look half as bright, and didn't reach anywhere near as high in the sky, as it did at night. The stone well wasn't as big and frightening either. The light snapped off, leaving the unremarkable imitation well in its place.

Kate and Emma stared in silence at the little well. Their hands clasped, each girl lost in her own thoughts. The events of the past twenty-six hours seemed unbelievable, surreal.

Squeezing Emma's hand gently, Kate broke the silence. "It's over, Emma. We're home."

"And we'll never see Alara and Siptah again." Emma's voice choked with the loss that both girls felt.

Kate looked at her sister, and found tears rolling down her sister's face. The truth was like lead in Kate's stomach and the lump rose to her throat again. Saying goodbye to Alara and Siptah had been one of the hardest, and saddest, moments of her life. She wanted to say that they might, one day, see each other again but she knew she'd be fibbing. Kate bid her friends a final, silent farewell.

Emma touched something beneath her pyjama top.

"What's that you've got there?" asked Kate.

Emma pulled out a small wooden trinket on a length of cord that had been placed around her neck. "King Wosret gave it to me. He said I shouldn't show everyone because they might ask questions, but I can keep it forever to remind me of Miu."

Kate stared at the trinket. "That was nice of him."

"I remembered to say thank you," replied Emma.

Kate smiled and they stood quietly for a moment longer.

"Are you hungry?" Kate tried to sound happy and positive. "Let's go inside."

The girls turned and walked towards the house. As they drew closer, excitement started to bubble in Kate's stomach. This was the start of a new day, but it was also the start of a new life. By the time they reached the steps leading up to the back door, Kate's smile was genuine. She was happy.

The door burst open.

"Kate! Emma!" Their mum ran down the steps. "Where have you been? I've been so worried."

Joe followed close behind.

Bursting into tears, and without waiting for a reply, their mum grabbed hold of a daughter in each arm and pulled both of them tightly against her body. She sobbed.

Kate felt a hand stroke her hair. She looked up at Joe's unshaven face. Blood-shot eyes smiled down at her.

"Where have you been?" repeated Joe. The tender smile turned into a look of concern as his gaze slid over their ripped and dirty garments. "Are you all right? Nobody hurt you, did they?"

Kate shook her head.

After a few minutes, Joe coaxed his wife to release the girls. "Jacqui, calm down and let them tell us where they've been."

"There was a big cat fight at dawn yesterday—" said Kate.

"We went into tunnels and were chased by cats that were really people," interrupted Emma. "I was scared. I got kidnapped and everything."

"Emma, this isn't the time for one of your stories," said her mother.

"Mum, she's not telling a story," said Kate. "What she's saying is true, but we should tell you everything that happened, from the beginning."

Their mum and Joe looked at their leather wrapped feet and exchanged looks.

“You must be starving,” said their mum. “How do you like the sound of pancakes for breakfast?”

“Yay! I love pancakes so much,” replied Emma, hugging her mum. “Can we have maple syrup and cream? And lots of strawberries? Do we have strawberries?”

“You can have whatever you want.”

“I’ll phone the police and let them know you’ve been found. And while you’re eating your breakfast you can tell us everything,” added Joe.

Emma reached up and took her mother’s hand.

Kate turned to Joe. He ran his hand through his messy, blond hair and looked down at her. His mouth quivered, but he didn’t say anything.

Kate reached for his hand. “Come on, Dad, we’ve got the most incredible story to tell you.”

About the Author

Born within the sound of the Bow bells in London, Karen Lee Field was seven when her parents decided to move to the “Lucky Country” and settle in Sydney, Australia.

Karen enjoys escaping to fantasy worlds—places where her sometimes ordinary life is transformed into an exciting adventure.

The storyline for *Cat’s Eyes* originated from a dream, which has been included in the book as the scene where Emma overhears the kittens talking in the backyard, while she is hunting for butterflies. The dream awakened a world which Karen felt compelled to write about.

She lives in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, with her family and growing number of pets.

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The King’s Riddle **Book 2 of The Land of Miu Series**

by Karen Lee Field

Princess Alara burst into the chamber. “Our fathers have been kidnapped!”

Siptah held his balance and continued to swing the axe as he had been taught. Slow, deliberate movements his father had told him. It would build strength in his arms and legs, and stamina overall.

He glanced at Alara. Serious emerald eyes peered out of the silver-tipped grey fur covering the top half of her face. Little rosy spots coloured the flawless skin on the bottom half. “What are you talking about? I saw my father a few hours ago.”

The princess paced around the large, stone chamber. The end of her green gown fluttering around her leather wrapped feet. “Is your mother here?” she asked, craning her neck to see into the bedchambers.

Siptah grinned as waves of scarlet brightened her servant’s face. Too slow to catch the door and stop it from slamming behind her, the servant looked disgruntled at his mistress before quickly lowering himself to the floor to wait for the next time she might have need of his assistance. Princess Alara hated servants doing everything for her and Siptah knew that the poor servant didn’t know if he was coming or going most of the time.

“No, she is out,” replied Siptah, following through with his next movement, the axe

unwavering in his hand. “Did you want to see her?”

“It does not matter. We will have to deal with this ourselves.”

Siptah sighed and straightened up. He rested the axe against the wall and turned his full attention to Alara, knowing his training session had come to a premature end. “Deal with what exactly, Alara?”

“Father promised to meet with me an hour ago,” said Alara.

“That does not mean they have been kidnapped.”

He watched Alara’s little cat-nose twitch with annoyance. “I know, Siptah. Stop being awkward.”

“Sorry.” He lowered his head and hoped she didn’t notice the grin on his face. “Why do you think someone has taken them?”

“Because ...” Alara walked towards him.

Siptah instantly looked up.

The princess walked straight and tall, the black-slit pupils of her eyes growing large.

“... the bird Zuberi has been training these past few months just dropped this into my lap.”

Alara held up a small piece of coarse, red material.

Siptah felt the colour drain from his face. He reached for the material and rolled it gently between his fingertips. “My father would never use this as a test for the bird,” he said. “And in the past he has always sent the bird directly to me.”

“I know.”

“This can only mean one thing.” Siptah paused for a moment. “Something has happened to King Wosret and my father.”

Alara tutted. “That is what I have been trying to tell you.”

Siptah stared at the material fragment, remembering his father’s words just before he left the chamber that morning. “Complete your training session on your own today, Son. The king wants me to go with him to check something out.”

“What?”

“I do not know, but I will be back in a few hours.” His father had walked to the door before pausing to add, “I will take the bird. Watch for him. He needs plenty of practice if—”

“Siptah! You are not listening to me!”

“I am.” Siptah forced his gaze onto the princess. She wasn’t happy. Her glare told him that, but when she stood with her hands on her hips, he knew he was in deep trouble. He sighed again.

“As I was saying,” said Alara, removing her hands from her hips, she commenced her constant pacing again, oblivious to the colourful paintings decorating the walls behind her. “Zuberi sent the bird to me because he knew that would alert us to their predicament.”

“Did the king tell you where he was going?”

Alara shook her head. “No, but I know they left Manu.”

Siptah groaned. “In that case, they could be anywhere in Miu. Where do we start looking?”

Alara stopped pacing and turned to look at him. “I know exactly where we will look. In father’s chambers.”

Horrified, Siptah gasped. “No way. They have only been gone a short while. They could return at any minute. In fact, I am sure they will.” Siptah held up the material. “This is probably a mistake. I am not searching your father’s things.”

“A mistake? Your father is the best bodyguard my father has ever known. Zuberi does not make mistakes,” Alara replied. She grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the door. Her servant rose and quickly pulled the door open.

A lump formed in Siptah’s throat. Alara was right. His father did not make mistakes. He sent the bird to Alara for a reason. The king needed help.

“Hurry!”

Siptah followed Alara along the halls of Manu, the western city of Miu. It was the middle of the day, yet torchlight lit their way. The figures painted directly onto the stone walls seemed to dance in the mysterious lighting. The city never saw sunlight, but the occupants of Manu didn't give that fact much heed. They had lived within the mountain for many, many years.

Alara stopped outside the entrance to her father's chambers.

"No," said Siptah, "we cannot do this. It is wrong."

"My father, the king, is missing and we have to find him," replied Alara. "Where is the wrongness in looking for something that will tell us where he and Zuberi have gone?"

Siptah shook his head. "It feels wrong. He is my king. I should not take part in this."

"Oh, forget it." Alara turned to the door.

Her servant rushed to open it for her.

"You can stay out here," she said to the servant. As she passed through the opened door, she said over her shoulder, "Siptah, you must come inside with me. Do not worry. I will do the searching."

King Wosret's chambers were exquisite. Siptah stood on the threshold staring at the rich interior as if it was the first time he had stepped through the door. It wasn't, of course. Siptah had spent many hours playing boisterously with Alara in these chambers—running, jumping, hiding, chasing, screaming with joy—as if he were the king's son, instead of the son of the king's bodyguard. When had he become self-conscious?

Siptah walked into the large sitting area. Large woven rugs covered the floor beneath the chunky, wooden chairs. Twelve Miuans could be seated at once, with plenty of room for more chairs to be dragged into the room if required. Siptah remained standing. His stomach churned over and over. He and Alara should not be in the chamber without the king's knowledge or presence.

Alara stood still for only a moment, considering, before she turned and walked into the next chamber—the king's bedchamber.

Siptah's face grew hot as he watched Alara's movements. She walked passed the four poster bed. The dark green curtains had been pulled back and Siptah had a clear view of the many cushions King Wosret slept on.

"There has got to be something here," said Alara, almost to herself.

"The desk would be the best place to look."

Alara spun on her leather wrapped heel and made her way to the desk piled with parchments and scrolls. The minutes ticked by as she rummaged through everything.

Nervous, Siptah looked over his shoulder at the door, half expecting the king to burst into the chamber in a terrible fury. A soft groan escaped Siptah's lips. Hurry, Alara!

"There is nothing here," said Alara with a sigh.

"Are you sure?"

"Take a look for yourself."

Without thinking, Siptah stepped through the arch into the king's bedchamber and walked to the table. He pushed parchments aside and searched beneath the scrolls. Nothing. He looked up at the princess. "What are we looking for?"

"A clue," she replied. "Anything to tell us where they might have gone." She turned to look around the chamber. "Search the other desk in the sitting room. I will check Father's gold box."

Siptah swallowed. The gold box held King Wosret's most important papers. It was forbidden for anyone to look inside. "I hope we are not jumping to conclusions."

Alara rolled her eyes and walked away. "I will take full responsibility."

The desk in the sitting room held leather bound books and maps. Siptah had seen the king and his father sitting at this table on many occasions. The map on the top showed the lava

tunnels in the lower regions of the mountain. Siptah picked up the map.

At that moment, the door burst open.

“What are you doing?” A deep voice bellowed across the room.

Siptah gulped. He had been caught going through the king’s things. A disgrace to himself and his family, he would be exiled from Manu, possibly even the whole of Miu. He dropped the map and spun around, his heart in his mouth.

“Well?”

Councillor Najja’s ruddy face puffed up with rage. Brown blotches showed through the orange and white fur on the top of his head. The councillor was not born in Manu. He originally came from the eastern city, Bakhu, which accounted for the white undertones to his fur, instead of the deep grey that he and Alara shared.

The councillor glared at Siptah. “What are you doing in here? Answer me!”

“It is not ... I have not ... Alara is ...” Siptah stumbled over his words.

“I never would have believed it of you,” said Councillor Najja, wiping his hands down the front of his thin tunic. “Zuberi’s son ... a spy!”

“No! You are wrong.” Siptah’s throat went dry.

“I catch you going through the king’s things. You cannot deny it.”

“Will you call the king’s daughter a spy also, Councillor?” Alara stepped through the arch from the bedchamber.

The councillor’s face flushed again. His orange eyes passed quickly between the princess and her new bodyguard-in-training.

“I thought not,” said Alara before the councillor could reply. “My father is missing. We are trying to find out where he and Zuberi went today.”

“Missing?” the councillor laughed and shook his head. “He took Zuberi on an errand. They will be back by supper.”

“But he said he would meet with me this afternoon, and has not,” replied Alara.

“I suppose something more important came up. These things do happen, you know.” Once again his gaze shifted from Alara to Siptah. “Now, leave these chambers immediately.”

Siptah exchanged a look with Alara. He expected her to complain, but when she didn’t he was relieved. The councillor was probably right, but, then again, what about the bird and the piece of red material? Siptah knew full well that it was an urgent alert from his father.

Alara crossed the room, a delicate smile spreading across her face. “We have not found anything and were about to leave anyway.”

Siptah felt her hand close around his arm as she pulled him towards the door. The councillor stepped back to let them pass.

In the hallway, the servant walking several paces behind them, Alara leaned close to Siptah’s ear. “I found a clue.”

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