# REIGNING CATS AND DOGS

# ANTZ

ADVENTUR-ES

## Reigning Cats and Dogs

An Anthro-Adventures Novel

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#### What is Anthro-Adventures?

Anthro Adventures is a family-friendly D20 RPG system created by Happy Gnome Publishing. The novel length work presented here tells a story that exists within that setting. If interested in further exploring the Anthro-Adventure's world, known as the Seven Realms of Layna, you can find additional resources on DrivethruRPG.com or at TJLantz.com.

### Chapter 1 Sadie Sablefur, Queenling of the Canine Kingdom

#### "Halt!"

*Ugh, what now?* Sadie shot the sergeant a long, dirty glare. She added just enough snarl to let him know she was serious. It was the third time he had stopped them in the past hour. Normally, she wouldn't have minded much, but after two weeks of trudging through the muck of the southern swamplands the delays were grating on her nerves. Total exhaustion and a few dozen swollen and itchy mosquito bites had stolen her usual smile. She just wanted to be done with this mission, back in her bed, and asleep for the better part of a month.

The caravan fell silent as the Wolf-kin warriors of the Alpha Squad — the soldiers assigned to escort Sadie to her meeting — closed ranks around her. They each raised their massive round shields, forming an impenetrable wall of metal and fur. Her bodyguard, Sir Barkley Strongpaw, raised an even larger kite shield above her head. Diamondtipped and formed from mithril, his shining aegis whisked away the scattered rays of afternoon sun that had managed to break through the tree canopy. A shiver ran down Sadie's spine as cold and darkness swept over her.

One minute went by. Then two. Then more.

A gust of wind whipped through their ranks, pushing up the crimson hemline of her dress. She quickly smoothed it down with an annoyed brush of her paw. She hated dresses. Growing up, all the other little girls talked about how dresses made them feel like a queenling. Well, she was a queenling, and the breath-stealing corsets and annoying lace ribbons just made her feel like a prisoner. She had spent her life locked away in the cell that was a noble girl's clothing, and the end of her sentence was nowhere in sight.

Finally, the sergeant let out two quick howls to indicate that all was clear. Sadie had never bothered to learn Howl-speech when she was a squire, and though she was picking up a little of it now, she regretted not being able to understand the nuances of the Alpha Squad's communication.

"This trip is going to take forever if we keep stopping," Sadie whispered to her bodyguard.

"It's better to be safe than dead, Queenling," Sir Barkley answered. Sadie cringed at his formal use of her title and bit her tongue to keep from snapping at him. This was an official mission, and, as the diplomat, she technically outranked him. He had to use her title, even if she hated it. For the next few weeks, there would be no Sadie Sablefur—just the Queenling of the Canine Kingdom, official representative of the interests of thousands of Canine citizens who hated her and waited anxiously for her to fail. Part of her burned to prove them wrong, to show them that despite her birth not being blessed by the House of Piety, that the Big Red God did support her divine right to rule.

The other part of her knew they were right. She was not blessed. She had no right to one day be Queen. She was nothing more than a fatherless mutt.

She sniffed back her emotions. Now was not the time to dwell. She had a simple mission to complete, and, despite her irritation at his formal nature, she appreciated that Barkley had accompanied her.

She had known Sir Barkley since she was born, and he was one of the few souls in the world who made her feel completely comfortable just being herself. When her mother insisted he come on the mission in case of trouble, she didn't even put up an argument. It was one of the first times she could remember *not* arguing with one of the Queen's suggestions.

Sadie wasn't sure what "trouble" her mother thought would occur. They were embarking on a simple trade mission, and the Felines hadn't shown any aggression toward the Canine Kingdom in two generations. The Queen was just being overly cautious, just as Barkley and the Alpha Squad were. Sadie wasn't the fragile piece of porcelain everyone believed her to be. She'd done her rotation in the House of Arms—she knew how to defend herself.

"I appreciate your concern, Sir Barkley." Sadie forced a smile. She was on this mission as a diplomat, so perhaps it was time to practice being diplomatic. "I just don't believe that the Cat-kin are going to attack us, not when they were the ones who initiated this trade meeting. I believe our time here is going to be very...bureaucratic." Sadie shot him a wry smile. The seasoned bodyguard had been around long enough to know that what she really meant by that was "boring."

Barkley chuckled. "I know this isn't the most exciting mission, Queenling. And I'm aware that your time in the House of Knowledge has not been"—he hesitated—"a good match for your personality. However, you must

remember that the Felines are a fractured people. Their clans are constantly maneuvering for more power. The Sparkpaws might control the Pharaoh's throne right now, and they might have been the ones to initiate the trade, but the other clans would be perfectly happy to see us dead. Especially if it meant they got to keep that satchel you're carrying as a prize."

Sadie smiled again as she patted the bag of carved onyx hanging at her hip. This trade was big-it would mean enough gold to provide the House of Piety with funds to run every orphanage in the city of Redwood for an entire year. Normally, the Canines would never sell this much onyx to one group. The stone was a component in several powerful necromancy spells, and use of it was heavily regulated by the Queen. If any other ruler had asked for the onyx, the Queen would have been much less likely to give the trade her approval. She had a longstanding trade relationship with the Pharaoh, though, and she believed him to be a moral and just leader. The onyx, he had explained in his letter, was needed in order for him to produce a set of crown jewels for the clan leaders—his nomarchs—in the gold and black color scheme of the Feline Federation. He hoped the gift would help unify and placate his people.

A Federation at peace, the Queen had always said, was good for all the realms of Layna.

"Do you understand why we must be so cautious?" Barkley asked.

Sadie nodded. He was being ridiculous by worrying so much, but she wasn't going to argue with him. All his years of loyal service had earned him the right to express an opinion, even the wrong one.

Sir Barkley had been her mother's Shield since her coronation two years before Sadie's birth. He had watched her grow from pup to squire to soon-to-be Red Knight once this mission was complete. He had stood vigil day and night for eighteen years. He treated her as if she were as important as the Queen herself. Sadie had never been very good at making friends, and she was never very close with her mother, but Sir Barkley helped make life a bit less lonely. He was always there when she needed to talk to someone. He knew her better than anyone else in the world did.

He recognized that her current position in the House of Knowledge was not the best match for her skills. She hated the fake smiles, the never-ending secrets, the hours of "mundane arcane" — that was what her peers called practicing cantrip spells, the simplest and most basic magic. She hated all of it.

But, as a squire of the Red Knights and heir to the throne, her duty was to spend time in each house learning the nuances of government: Knowledge, Piety, Law, and her favorite—Arms. Only through balance and understanding every aspect of the Canine Kingdom could she hope to become a strong leader. Once this mission was complete, she'd have accomplished all that she needed for promotion from squire to knight.

Not that she'd had a choice in the matter. She was always intended to be a knight and join the House of Piety, as every Queenling before her had done for a thousand years.

Every facet of her life had been mapped out since the day she'd been born in a litter of one. Her mother's only litter.

She sighed slightly as she reminded herself that it could have been worse — much worse. She could have been invalidated as heir, since her father — her mother would never tell her his name — hadn't been approved by the House of Piety as a mate for the Queen. Technically, her birth had not been blessed by the Big Red God, at least not according to law. She'd even heard rumors that the question of her legitimacy had almost caused a rebellion when she was a puppy — a nearly absurd notion in the strongly unified Canine Kingdom. Several powerful noble families had banded together and marched on the central keep in protest, screaming for a new heir, but her mother refused to give in to their demands. Instead, she spoke directly to the Big Red God, a right only the Queen maintained, and requested that he bless Sadie's life and position as heir. He listened and agreed to the Queen's request, then imparted his spiritual energy down from the celestial plane upon Sadie's tiny body.

If the rumors were to be believed, she had glowed with a faint red light for weeks afterward, an outward sign of the great miracle that had occurred.

Sadie had never really bought the story as she grew. It had been eighteen years since that so-called miracle, and she couldn't recall ever feeling blessed by the Big Red God again. Perhaps it was all a ruse by her mother to end the rebellion?

If that's what it was, it had certainly worked. No Canine would ever directly question the will of the Big Red God—that was heresy—but that didn't necessarily make life any easier for her. Even today, a few still called her by the nicknames she picked up as a puppy—The Miracle Pup, Lightchild, The Blessed One.

Some used the names to honor her, believing that she truly was chosen. Some used them to mock her, never accepting her right to be heir. But most simply called her nothing, instead choosing to keep their distance and cross the street when she walked through the city.

For a young Dog-kin girl who just wanted to be accepted, it was a terrible way to live.

#### "Halt!"

#### Not again.

Silence and darkness engulfed her once more as the Wolf-kin and Sir Barkley locked back into their phalanx formation. She growled, not loud enough to be heard, but enough to vent her frustration. If they encountered a threat, she wouldn't even be able to help. As a diplomat of the House of Knowledge, she wasn't permitted to carry any weapons. Well, she wasn't permitted to carry any *visible* weapons. She wasn't about to let any ridiculous bureaucratic nonsense keep her from being able to defend herself.

A deep, piercing howl erupted from the sergeant. It sounded starkly different than the "all clear" sign she'd begun to recognize. A few seconds later, a series of *thunks*  rang out—arrows bouncing off shields. They were under attack!

Sadie swung her head around, searching for information on the enemy, but she only saw streaks of black and gold armor darting past the small gaps in the shield wall. They wore the uniform of the Federation, but that meant nothing to Sadie. Every clan's warriors were required to wear that uniform as a show of unity and loyalty to the Pharaoh. No, she needed to get a glance at their collars. That's where they wore their signet that would identify which clan they belonged to. Then she would know who had the audacity to declare war on the Canine Kingdom.

A short howl pierced through the sounds of battle, followed by a grunt as the nine Wolf-kin thrust out their spears in a unified attack. She heard a shriek of agony as one of the spears found its mark.

Sadie reached inside her sleeve to check that her pistol was still secure in its hiding place. It wasn't much—it only held a single shot—but she wasn't about to go down without a fight.

Her heart pounded with fear and excitement. For the first time in weeks, she felt truly alive.

Her paw darted down to her side. The onyx was still safe.

For now.

"Ugh!" The grunt was barely noticeable, but it concerned her to hear a Wolf-kin releasing any indication of pain during battle. They hated to ever show any weakness, even injury.

The wall on her right side dropped away as the injured Wolf-kin soldier fell to the ground. Smoke rose from the fur on his leg, and the smell of burnt hair and flesh wafted up into Sadie's nostrils and made her gag.

He was back up and in his place in the formation within two rapid heartbeats. He favored his injured left leg, but not enough that anyone without training would notice.

In the split second the warrior had fallen, Sadie had finally seen the extent of their enemy. Close to a dozen Cat-kin warriors darted in and out of combat. They wielded long, curved swords and moved with impressive grace and quickness, always seeming to be a step ahead of the Alpha Squad's spears.

The two sides fought to a stalemate for several minutes, neither able to break through the defenses of their enemy. Sadie's heart raced with each dodged stab, blocked slice, and parried thrust. She'd never expected to see her honor guard come across warriors who could match their skill.

Wolf-kin Alpha Squads generally formed the vanguard of the Canine armies. Trained since pups to work together as a single unit, they formed a near impenetrable line of defense in combat. Throughout the ages, thousands of battles had been won without bloodshed simply because the enemy knew they'd never crack the Wolf-kin lines.

But this time was different. They were surrounded in enemy territory, reinforcements were a week's march north, and they had no way of knowing if more Cat-kin would soon arrive.

The Alpha Squad might be able to hold out for a few hours, or maybe even days, but there was nowhere for them to retreat. Nowhere to hide.

Sadie sighed as she ran through their options. Though Sir Barkley had years more experience than she did and significantly outranked her, her role as diplomat meant that she was in charge. The decision was hers, and surrender was the only option. The Alpha Squad was not going to like that—Wolf-kin didn't *ever* give up unless ordered to by a superior officer. Howl-speech didn't even have a word for retreat. A squire her age, and in her first battle, taking away their chance at glory after only a few minutes would put her at the very bottom of their list of favorite Dog-kin.

But it also meant they would be spared, and their lives were the most important thing she could protect. Even more so than the onyx. She ran her paw over the bag again, nervously checking to make sure it was secure. Not just because of the gems, but also because it held the one item she needed at the moment.

She threw open the metal latch and fished around inside the leather satchel, darting her fingers past the smooth, cold gems. She'd laughed when she first learned that it was included in the diplomat's standard gear, but now she understood why. Her fingers wrapped around a small flag, white as a cloud. She pulled it out and stared at the cloth entwined within her fingers. She hated the idea of surrender almost as much as the Wolf-kin did. Not fighting back just seemed wrong to her.

She closed her eyes and reached up, ready to signal for the rest of her party to lay down their weapons, when a noise grabbed her attention.

*Bamph*. She'd never heard anything like it before. It was soft, yet scary, and it left behind a small, black-cloaked

creature crouching just inches away from her. She fumbled for her gun as the creature reached a milky white paw toward her, its small, sharp claws inching toward her body.

The creature was quick, but so was Sadie. She jumped back as the pistol settled into her hand, and she struggled to keep her balance in the cramped melee.

She was a solid marksman, and had been shooting since she was a little girl. Barkley had presented her with her first gun—a gift for her sixth birthday—after he'd gone on a trip to Rodentia. She remembered the day fondly.

That being said, she'd also never actually shot a *living* thing. Or even tried to. Or used it in cramped quarters while a cloaked attacker tried to kill her, when a missed shot would surely hit one of her allies.

If anyone could have heard her, she'd be making jokes at that moment. Awkward jokes — terrible puns that caused everyone around her just a tidbit of pain in their funny bones. It was how she dealt with nervousness — her coping technique for situations that made her uncomfortable or overly excited. But the attacker had left her no time, and the battle was too loud. There would be no jokes today. No, this Cat-kin had got her tongue. Sadie smiled as her finger stopped shaking over the trigger.

She pulled it.

#### Bam!

The spark from the flint strike lit up her face, showing off a look of grit, determination, and just a pinch of enjoyment. The recoil from the weapon reverberated through her body, sending a wave of congratulations over every muscle. She had done it. She had shown everyone that she could defend herself. She was more than just a pampered queenling. She was a warrior.

Her attacker yelped in pain in a voice that was decidedly male. Smoke rose from the gun, mixing with the steam from the gaping wound in his shoulder to form a noxious cloud. Sadie lost sight of her target for a second until she felt his glowing white paw wrapping around her elbow. She struggled to wrench herself free, but his grip was too strong and his claws dug into her skin. She tried to scream for Sir Barkley, but as the Cat-kin activated his spell, the inches between her and the bodyguard might as well have been miles.

As they both disappeared, the white flag floated to the ground and lodged itself into a mud puddle. Surrender was no longer an option.

### Chapter 2 Sir Barkley Strongpaw, Shield of the Queen

"Sadie!" Sir Barkley's panicked voice blasted through the roar of battle. She was gone, vanished into thin air. Nothing was left but a shimmery outline where the Catkin's magic hadn't finished dissipating.

He frantically searched his field of vision, swiveling his head around so fast that a muscle in his neck spasmed, sending a wave of pain down his spine. He gritted his teeth and pushed through the pain.

Barkley hoped the spell had a limited enough range that she would still be visible, but the Wolf-kin blocked his sight in every direction. He needed to get out of the formation!

He took a step into the space that Sadie had just been occupying. Placing his paw upon the shoulder of Lyall, the Alpha Squad warrior who had been standing closest to Sadie, he yelled, "Open!" As he waited for Lyall to clear his zone to safely break formation, the smell of burnt flesh assaulted his senses. The warrior was injured. Sir Barkley clasped his paws together, closed his eyes, and silently begged the Big Red God for his blessing. As always, the Big Red God answered immediately, and a familiar power pulsed through Barkley's body. The old Canine paladin reached his paw back to Lyall's shoulder and let the energy course into the injured warrior.

To the untrained eye, there was no noticeable change in Lyall's behavior, but Barkley didn't have an untrained eye. After thirty-four years of service to the Red Knights, Barkley didn't have any untrained body parts left. He once joked that he had beaten a turtle in a duel using only his left big toe and his pancreas. Everyone believed him.

Barkley could see Lyall making quicker pivots and regaining his perfect balance. Even the odor of burnt flesh was lessening. Barkley's ability to heal—perhaps his greatest gift from the Big Red God—had worked perfectly, as it always did.

With his body now recovered, Lyall swung his massive round shield in an arc, breaking the wall formation for just enough time to give Barkley an opportunity to slip through it.

Barkley strengthened his grip on *Bash*, his diamondcoated kite shield, and *Smash*, his long-handled hammer. He'd had them since his transfer from the House of Arms to the House of Piety so many years ago—both the weapons and the promotion had been a gift from the Queen herself. Other than the Big Red God, they were the main reason he was still alive after so many battles.

He leapt past the reinvigorated Lyall, who closed ranks behind him in a swift, fluid motion and reformed the shield wall. Barkley didn't need to worry about leaving the Alpha Squad behind—they could defend themselves for days in their phalanx formation.

But where was Queenling Sadie? She was his responsibility, and he'd let her get snatched from right under his muzzle. He hadn't even noticed the attacker until she had shot him. How could he have been so oblivious? Had age dulled his senses more than he was willing to accept?

Barkley's pulse raced as anger at himself swelled and attacked him from the inside. "Queenling!" he screamed, but he heard nothing other than the grunts of Cat-kin soldiers as they desperately tried to break through the Alpha Squad's defenses. Was she too far away to hear him? Or maybe she was too injured to respond.

He took a deep breath, sniffing for her scent while willing his mind to block out the worst-case scenarios it was clamoring to create. A light scent of jasmine and chocolate remained in the air. It was Sadie's perfume—a unique blend of her two favorite scents that he'd given her as a present for her birthday a few years back. But the odor was weakening as it dissipated. She wasn't close.

If Sadie couldn't tell him where she was, he'd go through every single Cat-kin here until one of them could. He quickly found his first targets.

Three Cat-kin stood off to the side of the road with their swords drawn. They seemed to be coordinating another round of attacks.

As he moved to intercept them, Barkley realized just how careless he had been. The terrain had changed noticeably from what they had seen over the past week of marching: less vegetation lined the ground, fewer trees sprouted above their heads, and the leaves were tinted yellowish-brown, instead of the vibrant green they had seen for days. They were nearing the edge of the forest. By his estimate, in five miles they would have entered the Abyssinian Desert. An ambush there would have been impossible; the Cat-kin simply wouldn't have any place to hide.

He should have been more aware of the change in terrain. He should have been more careful with the Queenling's life. He'd let his guard down—the one thing he was sworn to never let happen. He was the Shield of the Queen. Protecting her and the Queenling was his job. Well, protecting the Queen was his job. The Queenling...that was different.

Barkley shook his head to clear his thoughts as he moved toward the trio of Cat-kin. Each one was dressed in black leather armor highlighted with golden studs. They carried quicksabres: short, curved blades that allowed them to attack with speed and ferocity. Even with their two realms at peace, Barkley had still fought many Cat-kin over the years. Their style of battle was always the same they were dangerously fast, their light armor ensured they didn't easily tire, and they loved magic. Whether it was burning their enemies with mage-fire or controlling their minds with devious enchantments, spells were the core of their military strategy.

As Barkley approached, the Cat-kin each murmured a spell and their blades lit up like tiny bonfires. They turned their attention to Barkley, two moving to flank while the third charged straight toward him.

He smiled. If there had been four of them, at least he might have broken a pant.

As the flaming quicksabres bounced harmlessly off Bash, he lowered Smash and swung in a half-circle along the ground with fifty percent of his might—no harder. He needed to give the Cat-kin time to jump over the strike.

And jump they did, their quick reflexes and strong legs sending them high up into the air and away from Barkley's dangerous hammer swing. As they dropped back to the ground, the Cat-kin instinctively let out low, steady purrs—they thought they had done well. Barkley choked back a smile. Nothing was better than fighting an enemy with an emotional response that couldn't be controlled. He had them right where he wanted them.

As he swung Bash in a vicious counter arc, this time with all of his might, the Cat-kin's purs suddenly evaporated. The bottom of the kite shield blasted through all three Cat-kin, and without the benefit of solid ground to help them absorb the blow, they were sent flying backward into three mangled heaps.

As Barkley swung his head from side to side, searching for either the Queenling or his next target, a deep horn trumpeted two short blasts, followed by a longer one.

The remaining Cat-kin, still trying to break through the Alpha Squad's defense, disengaged from the battle and began scattering in random directions. Two of Barkley's three foes struggled to their feet and wobbled into the forest; the other lay limp against the bark of an old willow.

"Don't pursue!" Barkley ordered.

The pattern of their retreat wasn't random. They were heading off in different directions, without overlap, signifying a planned maneuver. They were either leading Barkley and the Wolf-kin into a trap, or else they were ensuring that they couldn't be followed back to a preplanned meeting spot. It didn't matter, anyway. He had what he needed.

He sauntered over to the lone unconscious Cat-kin, reached inside his cloak, and pulled out a shiny pair of manacles. Placing Smash on the ground, Barkley used his free hand to lift the prisoner off the ground and slap the manacles on one wrist. He wrapped the Cat-kin's arm around the willow and closed the other side of the manacle on his other wrist, trapping his unconscious body against the tree.

Barkley took a deep breath, trying to find a way to release some of the anger trapped inside his heart. He hated asking for the Big Red God's gift while in such a state. He allowed a sense of calm to wash over him, and his muscles relaxed. He reached out and placed his hand on the prisoner's head, letting the energy transfer into the feline's body and heal his battle wounds.

The Cat-kin's yellow speckled eyes popped open. He struggled to flee, but the manacles locked him in place. He wasn't going anywhere.

Barkley stared him up and down without speaking. He was young, but his attack style had shown a high level of training difficult to achieve without years of dedication. His gray fur was well-groomed with few stray or untrimmed hairs. His black and gold armor was clean, polished, and fit his frame perfectly. All of these things informed Barkley's thoughts; however, the final detail caught his attention most. He glared at the prisoner's black leather collar. A small gold emblem engraved with a lightning-infused paw dangled from it—the sigil of the Sparkpaw, the Pharaoh's own clan.

He'd assumed if an attack were to come, it would be from one of the Sparkpaws' rivals—perhaps the Sandtails or the Nightrunners, but not from the Pharaoh himself. Why would a Cat-kin with a long reputation for peace suddenly want war? Barkley blinked hard as he cleared his thoughts and turned his attention back to the prisoner. He needed more information, and he needed it fast. What could this Cat-kin tell him? Barkley added up his prisoner's appearance in his head. Clean clothes, well-groomed, high level of training most likely a noble of some sort. Good. Nobles knew things, and they were usually happy to talk if it kept them hopeful they'd get to return to their privileged lives in one piece.

"Good morning," Barkley said with a small smile. He paused for a response, but none came.

"What's your name, friend?"

The Cat-kin spat at him, the saliva landing just below his right eye.

He slowly wiped it away with the back of his paw, drawing out the motion as long as he could.

"That really wasn't very nice. Here I am, just trying to be friendly and find out your name, and that's the response you give me?"

"And if I refuse?" The Cat-kin's voice was filled with disdain. "I know your rules, *Paladin*. You can't harm a prisoner. It's against the tenets of your god."

Knowledge of foreign religion — he was definitely a noble. A common soldier would never have known so much about Canine culture. Leaders didn't want their citizens to understand the enemy; they wanted them to hate the enemy. It was one of the things he respected most about the Queen—she wasn't like that. She had declared that all Canines must take a course on foreign cultures during their time as a squire. She believed that only through knowing and respecting the ideas that were central to your enemies' hearts could you forge a true and lasting peace. A lifetime of war sometimes made Barkley question the validity of her belief, but he stood by it. There was no point in war if the hope of one day achieving peace didn't exist.

Barkley smiled at the Cat-kin, a big, toothy grin shining with friendliness. "You are absolutely right, I can't harm you in any way. I see that you know our laws and our customs well. I would never even *consider* harming a prisoner under my command. *But*..."

"But what?" The Cat-kin hung on Barkley's words.

"Well, that ambush of yours really tired me out. I'm not a young pup anymore, and a nap sounds really, really good."

"Then go rest, old Dog, because you'll get nothing from me."

The Cat-kin laughed, believing he had the upper hand—exactly what Barkley wanted.

"The problem with that—for you, not me—is that it means I have to leave *him* in charge." Barkley pointed a few feet away, drawing the Cat-kin's gaze to the towering form of the Alpha Wolf Sergeant, who had quietly approached them. He was nearly twice the height of the Cat-kin, and several times his weight. His silver breastplate and helm shone in the scattered sunlight, and the sharp-toothed snarl on his face was enough to make even Barkley feel a bit uneasy.

"And," Barkley added, "as Sarge here is not a paladin by trade, he does not adhere to the same stringent rules as I do."

The prisoner's eyes bulged as Sarge took a few steps closer to the tree.

Barkley bit his tongue, the sharp pain keeping him from bursting out in laughter. Sarge packed an intimidating look, but he was as honorable and righteous as any paladin Barkley had ever met. He would find the very concept of harming a prisoner, or any creature outside of battle, absurd.

But the Cat-kin didn't know that.

Sarge took another step forward, twirling his spear like he was leading a Stickmess Day<sup>1</sup> parade and flexing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Stickmess is a Dog-kin holiday that celebrates the birth of the Big Red God and their historical roots as animals. Families come together to eat large meals and give each other gifts.

just enough muscle to make himself appear even more intimidating.

"Okay, okay," the prisoner relented. "Fine. I'll talk to you, Paladin. You can send your goon home."

"A wise decision. You can leave us, Sarge."

The Sarge let his snarl settle a bit, then reached out his massive paw and placed it on the Cat-kin's shoulder, squeezing just enough to make the prisoner cringe. His point made, he turned, nodded to Barkley, and headed back to his pack.

"Now that he's gone and it's just the two of us, what's your name?"

He took a deep breath. "Emril of Clan Sparkpaw."

"And you're from a noble family."

Emril nodded. "Cousin to the Pharaoh."

Barkley paused as Emril confirmed his relation to the Sparkpaw clan. Why would the Pharaoh order this? He was the one who offered the invitation to barter in the first place. It made no sense; why attack the Canine caravan on the road, instead of waiting until they arrived in Meowphas, the meeting site and Federation capital? Were the Cat-kin just trying to avoid paying for the onyx? Or

Additionally, each pup is given a stick to chew on and destroy as tribute to the bestial nature of their kindred ancestors.

was this all an elaborate ruse to kidnap the Queenling and start a war? The entire situation wasn't adding up in Barkley's head.

"Why did you attack us today? We entered your land under a banner of trade."

"I do as Pharaoh commands."

"And you have no idea why he commands it?"

"He wants the Queenling."

Barkley shook his head. He needed to be sure. He'd already requested the Big Red God's strength twice today and hated to impose, but this was important. He turned away from Emril, bowed his head, and whispered, "Lord, grant me the wisdom to know that which is true."

Barkley's mind cleared and his senses sharpened. He'd know if the Cat-kin was lying to him. "Okay, let's try this again," he said. "Why did you attack us?"

Emril looked nervous. "I do as the Pharaoh commands."

*The Cat-kin's eyes darted down and a line of hairs on his tail bristled. A lie.* 

"Why does he command it?"

"He wants the Queenling. The Canines are weak, and we welcome war with them." *A tiny crack in his voice, and a slight shake of his right leg. Another lie.* 

Barkley growled from frustration. "Emril, lie to me again and I will leave you here, tied to this tree, to contemplate your decisions. I hear the wild beasts are very hungry in this part of the world." Barkley might not be able to harm a prisoner, but the rules about intimidation were much less specific.

Emril swallowed hard and darted his head back and forth, as if looking for friends. It wasn't because he hoped for a rescue; no, his eyes held nothing but despair. Barkley had seen enough interrogations to know exactly what the Cat-kin was searching for. His glance was one born of shame, guilt, and selfishness. He wanted to make sure no one was around to hear him break, to listen as he betrayed his people. It was the same look other prisoners had given before revealing a secret far too big for them, one they never should have been trusted with in the first place.

"Fine, Paladin," Emril relented. "Fine. I'll tell you the truth, if you promise to let me go."

Barkley nodded. "You have my word as a divine warrior of the Big Red God."

Emril cleared his throat, choking back guilt like it was a hairball. "The Queenling should be fine. She's being held at the Pharaoh's...ugh." His head dropped down to the ground as a strong convulsion ripped through his entire body.

"What's wrong?" Barkley asked. "Who ordered the attack? Was it the Pharaoh? Where is the Queenling?" He grabbed Emril by the front of his armor and lifted him up so they were eye to eye.

Emril began to twist and contort in pain. His yellow eyes turned white and rolled back into his head. Blood began pouring from his nose, and every hair in his coat stood on end. Barkley stepped back. Negative energy radiated from Emril's body as the spell poured through him. The Cat-kin's skin and fur melted away in just a few agonizing seconds, leaving a steaming skeleton hanging limply from the tree. The magic was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

Barkley stared blankly at the skeleton. What had he gotten himself into? Emril's last statement was the only truth he had spoken. For now, the Queenling was safe, at least as far as Emril knew. She was being held at the Pharaoh's...something. That had to mean Meowphas, the Feline capital and the throne of the Pharaoh. Where else could he have been referring?
At that moment, though, Barkley was really only sure of one thing: he needed allies, and he needed them quickly.

## Chapter 3

### Grimoire,

## First Blade of the Sandtail Sword Dancers

Grim shimmied backward a few inches, regaining his balance as he appeared. Teleporting always disoriented him a bit more than most spells, especially when he took someone with him who wasn't cooperating.

The intense pain in his shoulder reminded him exactly how much the Queenling was not cooperating. He let go of her arm as he dropped to one knee and clutched the bullet wound.

As blood spurted over his paw, staining his alabaster fur a deep crimson, Grim realized just how stupid a move that was.

In the few seconds he had averted his eyes, she had reloaded her weapon and pointed it directly at his head.

Her hands were steady and her gaze was locked. She knew how to handle a firearm.

"Sand Biscuits," Grim whispered. Luckily his mother wasn't around to hear that. She hated when he used foul language. She also hated when his captives shot him, so she just would have been angry all around.

Grim mentally picked through the strategies he had learned from Master Brone, his dancing teacher, to combat the threat. He was quick, but he couldn't be positive he could draw his sword from its scabbard before her finger pulled the trigger. His magic wasn't reliable enough to incapacitate her—he'd let that aspect of his training fall to the wayside too often. Since both of those options were out, he needed to outthink her.

So he spun around, refusing to look at her.

It worked.

"What are you doing," she growled, instead of shooting him. "Face me!"

Grim stifled a smile. Just as he had planned, they had appeared in the center chamber of the Tomb of the First Pharaoh. She had no chance of escaping, or of anyone hearing her call for help. He had time to play on the Canines' greatest weakness, a ridiculous moral code they lived by called the Seven Tenets of the Big Red God.

"No, thank you," he said, still trying not to smile. "I'm fine with my back to you."

She took a quick step to his left. He swiveled, keeping her directly behind him.

"Why won't you face me?" she demanded.

Grim noticed that her words were drawn out and overemphasized—a sign that Sadie was annoyed and stalling as she looked for a new plan. She was flustered by his tactic. "Because, Queenling, if I turn around you'll shoot me. But, if I remember correctly, you Canines have a thing against harming creatures who pose you no threat. You'd never stoop so low as to shoot someone in the back who hadn't even drawn his weapon."

She howled with rage. "Turn around and draw your weapon so I can shoot you!" She darted right, and he countered. As a Sword Dancer, he could outmaneuver her all day long. She'd never see his face again, as long as he didn't want her to.

"Fine, we'll do this your way." Her voice quivered, betraying her nerves. "I'm *purr*fectly fine with that. Now, who are you?" She was clearly more comfortable shooting him than having a conversation.

Grim stopped. Purrfectly? Was the Queenling mocking him...poorly?

"My name is Grimoire, of Clan Sparkpaw." Grim slipped into character, ready to answer the Queenling's questions with nothing but falsehoods. His mother had made it very clear how important it was to maintain the ruse. For the plan to work, the Queenling had to think the Sparkpaw Clan had abducted her.

"Sparkpaw?" she snapped. "You invited me here! Why attack us? Why abduct me?"

"The onyx, Queenling. You didn't expect us to actually pay for it, did you?"

Even though she couldn't see his face, Grim bit his tongue to keep from smiling. Mother had made him practice this story for hours. He didn't expect to have to tell it at the wrong end of a pistol, but perhaps that just made him a bit more believable. The Queenling certainly wasn't going to question the words of a Cat-kin held at gunpoint.

"You committed an act of war against the Canine Kingdom for a bag of onyx? Sure, it's valuable, but it can't be worth starting a war over, especially since we were willing to make a fair trade."

"You don't understand, Queenling. We want the war. Come, bring your armies to the gates of Meowphas. With the onyx, the Pharaoh will be unstoppable."

Grim paused, relishing in the Queenling's stunned hesitation. He had her right where he wanted her. Time for the last bit of information, the most important secret for her to take back to her people.

"You know what onyx can do, Queenling. You know that it is the principal arcane component needed to raise an army of the dead. That bag of yours will provide us with enough disposable troops to bring this entire continent under our control."

Grim couldn't resist stealing a quick glance back over his shoulder. Sadie's jaw hung slack, and her eyes glimmered with green flecks of anger. "But...but...my mother said the Pharaoh could be trusted, that he was a just and moral leader. She said his intentions were pure."

Grim lost the battle to stifle his smile. Mother was right. Nothing would get under a Canine's skin like the thought of hordes of the undead roaming the land. They'd pack up their armies and march straight for the Pharaoh's stronghold at Meowphas. They would annihilate him and his Sparkpaw kin, leaving the Federation leadership weakened. Then, the time for the Sandtails to rise up and retake the throne would finally be upon them. And all because of a gullible Canine Queenling. How naïve did someone have to be to believe that the Pharaoh was going to raise the undead? No one in this world was crazy enough to do something so dangerous.

Grim chuckled, a mix of acting and actually enjoying his own ruse. "I'm sorry, Queenling, but it sounds like your mother was wrong."

"Then I guess it's a good thing that I'm the one with the gems and the gun, isn't it?" The quiver in the Queenling's voice disappeared, and a quick click indicated she had pulled back the hammer of the gun.

Grim gulped as a shiver of fear ran down his spine. Had his lie worked too well?

He spun back, pulling his sword from its scabbard in a single motion. He'd practiced deflecting arrows and rocks

with his blade many times; how much harder could it be to stop a bullet?

Before he found out the answer, the Queenling gasped and dropped to the floor. The pistol fell from her hand and clanked down beside her. He scampered to her side and kicked it away from her hand, just in case.

Grim exhaled, sheathed his sword again, and stared at the figures hiding in the shadowy corner of the dark stone room. "Took you two long enough to get here. Was there a lot of desert traffic?"

Two Cat-kin sauntered out of the darkness, their forms illuminated by the flickering light of a lit brazier behind them. Grim smiled as they approached. The first was Cleo, a small, smoke-furred female in a white and gold dress. Her paws glowed green as the remnants of the sleep spell she had cast on the Queenling dissipated. The young wizardress had been his closest friend since they were kits, and once again her skill with a timely spell had come in very handy.

Behind her stood his apprentice, Astyn, a large male with long black fur and piercing eyes the color of a ripe plum. As a member of the Sword Dancers, Astyn wore the armor of a dervish—brightly colored flowing silks, accented by a ringed skirt, hanging ribbons, and a matching fez hat. While his outfit didn't look like it provided any defense, once Sword Dancers began whirling into combat, the free-flowing cloth and distracting colors made them very difficult for enemies to pinpoint with an attack.

"Oh, we've been here the whole time," Cleo said. "We just wanted to see if the Dog-kin would kill you or not."

Astyn placed his large paw on Grim's shoulder and bowed his head in greeting. "Besides," the apprentice added, "we figured your mother could afford a resurrection spell if the Queenling was too trigger-happy."

Grim shook his head and sighed. He had really picked a couple of rancid sand biscuits for his closest friends, but he wouldn't trade them for the world.

"How long will she be out, Cleo?"

She bent down and checked the Queenling's pulse. "Ten minutes on an average Dog-kin. I'd say we've only got five with this feisty growler. Her heart rate's already speeding back up."

Grim nodded. "Astyn, tie her up and make sure she can't escape. Have food and water ready when she wakes. I want her treated like a guest, not a prisoner."

The large apprentice stared at him, his head cocked and one eyebrow raised. "Like a guest?"

"Yes. Well, like a guest you would tie up. The point is, treat her well. No value will be gained by harming the Queenling before she's 'rescued."" "Your will shall be done, My Glorious Commander." Astyn bowed deeply in faux mockery. Cleo joined him with a curtsy.

Yes, they might have been two rancid sand biscuits, but they were *his* two rancid sand biscuits.

"I need to get the onyx back to the Nomarch," Grim said, pulling his blood-covered paw away from his shoulder. He'd been able to push the pain from his mind and had almost forgotten about the wound—a result of the mental training a dervish went through—but now, as the adrenalin faded, the hole in his body screamed for a healing draught.

"I won't be more than a few hours. Cleo, if she becomes a problem, just tell her one of those stories about how you were top of the class at the university. That should put her back out for a few more hours."

Cleo playfully hissed at him as he collected the satchel of onyx and the pistol. He grabbed a small vial of blue liquid from his belt and chugged it. Though sweet at first, an acidic aftertaste made him shiver. The pain in his shoulder faded almost instantly. He might need to visit a surgeon later, if any of the bullet had lodged itself inside his body, but he'd be fine for a while.

He threw the satchel over his freshly-healed shoulder and holstered the gun inside the leather band of his belt before tapping the heels of his boots to initiate the teleport. He couldn't wait to tell his mother how well things had gone.

# Chapter 4 Sir Barkley Strongpaw, Shield of the Queen

Barkley slowed as the tree canopy became thick enough to block the sun, limiting his field of vision. After marching for twelve hours through the dense, unkempt swamp without rest, his legs ached and his body begged for sleep. This was his first time leaving the main road that led through the territory of the Herptile Hegemony—the realm of the Amphibian and Reptilian races. The path they now traveled—one couldn't defensibly call it a road—was littered with rotted, fallen trees and deep, warm puddles of tar-colored water. Each step as he slogged through the muck seemed harder than the last one. Barkley wasn't sure how much farther he could go without collapsing.

He briefly considered requesting the Big Red God's gift of healing to reinvigorate his body, but decided against it. If his plan didn't work, he was going to need every speck of divine energy that pulsed through his veins to have even the smallest chance of surviving this encounter. There was a reason the path was so overgrown—no one in their right mind traveled to a Hegemony city.

The Wolf-kin, on the other paw, looked as fresh as a pie on a windowsill. Did they ever tire?

He sniffed the air, relying on his keen nose to alert him to danger. He was not about to get ambushed twice on the same mission.

"It's not too late to change your mind, sir." Sarge's voice held a slight tremble, so minor that no other Canine in the kingdom would have picked up on it. But he'd known Sarge a long time, and Barkley recognized when he was nervous. If an Alpha Pack sergeant was starting to show fear, things were dire.

Barkley swallowed hard. Sarge was right to be apprehensive, but what choice did they have when the Queenling was in danger? "We can't turn back," he said. "It could be a month before Queen Emily Elizabeth is able to mobilize a force strong enough to march on the Feline capital. We don't have that amount of time. The Queenling needs help now, and this is our only chance of rescuing her."

Sarge nodded and stepped back into formation with the pack, leaving Barkley alone at the front. The Queenling had chosen not to bring any scouts. Undoubtedly, she believed the Alpha Squad was plenty of protection on a diplomatic mission. He knew it was the wrong call requesting a small contingent of Fox-kin scouts from the House of Knowledge would have given them a few more sets of eyes and ears. He should have overruled her and demanded she make the requisition. He knew better than to enter another realm—even one they had been at peace with for many years—without proper preparation. But he had stood by and let the mistake happen. He hadn't wanted to overstep his position during Sadie's first command. He was just happy the Queen had demanded he go on the mission, even though it was against protocol. As her Shield, he was never supposed to leave the Queen's residence without her.

The still waters off to the sides of the path smelled like rotten eggs, and the violent cacophony of bugs and small animals was deafening to his sensitive ears. As the flaming braziers of Hop, the Herptile capital, came into view, a slight sense of reprieve hit Barkley. At least he was finished walking for a little while. Now, though, the truly dangerous part would begin.

Poofs of extended flame erupted from the braziers every few seconds as tiny balls of swamp gas met flame. A shoddy bridge, lined with rotting wooden slates, led into the "city," which was, in reality, little more than a confusing collection of wood and straw, dome-topped hovels atop thick lumber stilts. Random gaps in the city layout showed the places where some buildings had collapsed into the water over time.

As he surveyed Hop, a particularly offensive swamp odor wafted past him, reminding Barkley of his first campaign. During a siege against the Rodentian city of Vermin, he had spent forty-six days outside, under constant bombardment from the Rodentian artillery. Forty-six days crouched in a trench. Forty-six days without a bath. Fortysix days wearing the same undergarments. The swamp odor smelled precisely like that.

"Stop," Sarge commanded.

They were being watched. Barkley knew that without question. A set of eyes had likely been locked on them from the moment they had stepped foot into Herptile territory. Watching and waiting was what the Brightskins—members of the Poison-Dart-Frog-kin race did best. While traveling through their land was acceptable—traders crossed through it every day approaching the throne of their warlord was a different story. One step too far and a poison dart would be sticking out of each of their necks. Poison didn't affect him another divine gift—but the Wolf-kin were susceptible to its effects.

Barkley stepped forward, holding his hands visibly in the air so that he looked like less of a threat—not that he actually was, since he could draw Smash and Bash in less time than it took a Brightskin to blink. (Which they did often, as it was required every time they swallowed.) "I am Sir Barkley," he announced loud enough for any hidden creatures around him to hear. "I am the Shield of the Queen and a paladin of the Red Knights. I seek audience with your warlord." He swiveled his neck back and forth, waiting for a response.

A dozen small Frog-kin appeared out of the swamp clouds, surrounding Sir Barkley and the Wolf-kin. He motioned to the Alpha Squad to lower their weapons. They weren't in danger. If a Brightskin wanted to harm you, then he'd never let you sense his presence.

The Brightskins were a myriad of striking colors golden yellows, neon blues, and blood reds—mixed with streaks of tar-like blackness. He was amazed that they could camouflage so easily into the forest when they were so vibrant and eye-catching standing in front of him.

The biggest one—about half of Barkley's size approached. He<sup>2</sup> was dressed in little more than a loin cloth and sported a face with piercings filled with rodent bones. His skin was mostly a shade of neon yellow that would make a daffodil jealous, which was in perfect contrast to the oil-colored splotches on his legs, arms, and face.

"The Warlord expects you," he said. "You may bring one member of your honor guard."

Barkley nodded to Sarge, who commanded his men to wait for their return.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Or possibly a she. It was almost impossible to tell the difference between the two Brightskin sexes, even amongst themselves. It tended to make for some very awkward first dates.

They followed two of the Brightskins over the rickety wooden entry bridge, careful to step over any missing planks. Every step tensed his muscles as the wood beneath him bowed and bent, threatening to snap and send them spiraling into the still darkness of the water beneath them.

Bugs the size of Barkley's fist dove toward him and nipped at his skin. He tried not to scratch at the welts or show that the bites were bothering him, but he failed to hide his discomfort from the yellow Brightskin. A moment later, a pink, whip-like tongue darted out of his mouth, grabbed the enormous insect, and pulled it in. A quick blink was followed by a long belch. As the odor of the Brightskin's rancid breath enveloped him, Barkley momentarily missed the smell of the swamp.

Two larger Frog-kin—Bullies: dark green, covered in warts, and a stark contrast to the small, smooth Brightskins—stood sentry at the end of the bridge in front of an open gap in a short, staked palisade. The yellow Brightskin spoke a few words in Croak, the language of the Herptile Hegemony. Although Barkley spoke several languages, he had never studied Croak in depth. He might be able to offer a passible greeting, but even that was iffy. He would likely just end up insulting the Frog-kin's grandmother instead of actually saying hello. This wasn't entirely his fault; Croak had only one word for saying hello, but 194 different options for insulting the elderly. After a brief discussion amongst themselves, the sentries moved aside and let Barkley and Sarge pass into the throne room.

No, Barkley wouldn't exactly call it a room—that would indicate it had a ceiling and complete walls. This place had neither. It was little more than a partition from the rest of the swamp, a barrier so that those on the outside understood their inferiority.

An elegant white marble throne stood in the middle of the room, clean, polished, and in stark contrast to the rest of the ambiance. Obviously, it had been stolen. The Bully he had come to see was sitting atop it.

"Welcome, Sir Barkley," she said, picking her teeth with the femur of what once might have been a wolf or a large dog. Using the bones of his animal-kindred<sup>3</sup> was meant to intimidate him, but Barkley was not so easily dismayed.

Barkley bowed. It was a deep, slow, and humble movement intended to feign respect in the best way he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The races of Layna generally refer to the animals they descended from as their "kindred," but never as their "kin," as this refers only to members of their race. Most races hold their kindred in higher regard than other animals. This can result in better treatment, refusal to use that animal as a labor or food source, and, in some cases, even spiritual devotion.

knew how. "Helda Hopblade, Grand Warlord of the Herptile Hegemony, I offer my humblest greetings."

Helda viciously tossed the bone across the room, smashing one of her Bully guards in the nose. He yelped in pain and surprise, but quickly regained his composure as Helda glared menacingly at him.

After a moment of silence, she swung her gaze back to Barkley, but kept the same intimidation-packed glare. "Cut the dragon droppings, Barkley Strongpaw. Why are you here? I seem to remember the last time we met you were very insistent that you would kill me if you ever saw me again. Oh, is that why you're here? Please say yes. I could use a little workout."

Anger seeped through Barkley's body. Smash and Bash were still in his hands, aching to strike out and crush her as his mind played through images of the last time he'd seen Helda Hopblade. It was the dead of winter, four years prior. She'd marched on the city of Redwood, raiding the towns and villages along the way, burning their grain silos and leaving death and destruction in her wake. The Canines, as they always did, retreated behind their walls to wait out the attack. Between malnutrition and disease, hundreds perished that winter. If it weren't for Helda, food and medicine would have flowed like normal, and many of those affected would still have been alive. For that, he would always hate her. But right now, he needed her help.

Rational thought fought back against his anger. If there was any real chance of him harming Helda, the Brightskins would have disarmed him and Sarge before allowing them to cross the bridge. She was Barkley's equal in battle, and was now surrounded by her strongest and most loyal supporters.

"I'm not here looking for a fight," Barkley said. "At least not one with you. I'm looking to hire you."

She cleared her throat, turned her head, and spit. A huge wad of thick mucus, almost the same color as her skin, landed inches from Barkley's boot. "You, a high and righteous paladin of the Big Red God, want to hire me, nothing more than a...How did you put it last time? Oh, I remember: a 'wart-covered scourge upon all that is good in the world?"

"And I still attest that you are. But sometimes there are worse enemies."

Barkley stood as tall as he could. Bullies respected only two things in life: power and honor. He had both.

Helda laughed. It was a deep, throaty sound that shook her whole body. "There is nothing in this world worse than me, Sir Barkley. I am the strongest warrior Layna has seen in a millennia."

"Perhaps, Helda. But not strong enough to sack Redwood. Not while I fought to defend her." Barkley stared directly at her as he reminded her of the failure. She had led raids against the southernmost Canine city on four separate occasions over the past decade, and each time the thick stone walls of Redwood had stood strong, as they had for a thousand years. The Canines had suffered, sometimes horrifically, but they always managed to endure and survive.

A glowing red ring around her eyes began to throb with each beat of her heart. Barkley watched as a mix of anger and lust for battle consumed her.

"You claim victory, Paladin? All you did was hide behind closed gates and high walls, while we raided your villages and razed them to the ground. I honored my Toad many times during that campaign."

Barkley did his best not to sigh. Being a paladin of the Big Red God meant respecting the religions of other races, even if he didn't agree with them. But the Frog-kin belief system irked him. All Frog-kin believed they had a personal deity inside their heads—called a Toad—that only they could interact with. They lived each day honoring their Toad by following the little voice's instructions, which usually meant conquering, plundering, and destroying their neighbors. It was a vile, selfish religion that didn't in any way aim to improve society's morality and happiness. Barkley hated it. "You say you honored your Toad, Warlord, and that may be true, but at the end of the day our walls stood tall, our treasures remained protected, and our citizens stayed safe. You could not defeat us, nor could we defeat you. We are equals, our battle unfinished."

Barkley inched his paw toward Smash. Questioning the warlord's military campaign was a gamble, but if he could get her to view him as an equal...

Helda smiled and let out a small but jovial chuckle.

"Then we shall call it a draw for now, Sir Barkley, and one that we will someday tip in our favor. But today is not that day. Today, perhaps we are business partners. Let us begin negotiations. Speak now of your intent and your payment."

Barkley let out a deep breath as the earlier tension faded from the room. He cleared his throat, relaxed his grip on his weapons, and let the words come to him. He'd practiced them in his mind non-stop as they marched, but would his offer be good enough?

"Our Queenling has been captured by the Pharaoh of the Sparkpaw Clan of the Feline Federation. They are a powerful enemy, and our numbers are small. We need a company of your strongest soldiers to best them on the battlefield while we mount a rescue operation."

Helda nodded. "The might of my warband is immeasurable. No Cat-kin would pose a threat."

"That is why I come to you. Help me return the Queenling, and the Canine Kingdom will gladly pay you a handsome sum. Say, fifty thousand gold pieces paid in Republic Crown<sup>4</sup> coinage?"

Helda's eyes lit up like a Fear of Jewli<sup>5</sup> fireworks display. Barkley didn't actually have the authority to offer that amount—or any amount, really—because he wasn't a member of the House of Knowledge, which oversaw trade and diplomacy. But Helda didn't know that, so he could worry about his little fib later. He was, after all, following the sixth tenet: *Thou shall protect his home, and those who live there, above all else*. He lived his life by those tenets, and the Big Red God had never before led him astray.

Helda looked to the sky and rubbed her chin as she pretended to ponder the amount. Finally, she turned back to him and said, "The offer is…acceptable. We will render the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Republic Crown Bank was Layna's most trusted and commonly used mint. Ninety percent of the coins in circulation had been created at its central reserve.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Fear of Jewli is a massive Canine holiday in which the House of Knowledge sets off an evening of intense arcane fireworks. After the citizens endure a terrifying evening of bombardment, they celebrate the fact that nothing, no matter how scary, can steal their independence as long as they stick together and trust their community. This has a practical application in that it prepares them, particularly the youngest members of society, for the prospects of a siege.

contract, assuming you provide the ink to sign." A few of her guards chuckled.

Barkley raised an eyebrow. "I didn't bring any ink, Warlord Helda."

"In the Hegemony, our contracts can only be signed with the ink of a swamp kraken, an eight-armed creature with the strength to turn your bones to dust. And it must be collected by a single representative of the hiring party. This guarantees the strength of any party we enter into an arrangement with and creates a sacred bond between our two sides that neither could breach without dire consequences."

"How dire?"

"A painful and humiliating death for the signer who reneges on the agreement."

Barkley slowly shook his head. The Herptiles were known for never—*ever*—backing out of a contract. The ink must contain some type of magical energy that forced both sides to either comply or perish. But the payment was a lie. He'd never be able to secure that amount of money from the treasury. Even if he survived collecting the ink from the swamp kraken, signing that contract meant he was signing his own death certificate.

But doing nothing meant he was signing Queenling Sadie's. There was never a true choice.

He straightened his shoulders and stared directly into Helda's cold blue eyes. "Where is the kraken?"

A chorus of cheers erupted from the Herptile guards, but all Barkley could hear was Sarge uttering words the Big Red God would never have approved of.

# Chapter 5 Ma'lí, Nomarch of the Sandtail Clan

"Welcome home, my son. I trust your mission was a complete success?" Ma'li smiled as the young white Catkin approached her.

"Everything went according to plan," Grim answered. "The Canines were taken by complete surprise and I was able to teleport the Queenling without too much issue. Cleo and Astyn are holding her now at the Tomb of the First Pharaoh, just as you planned."

"You've been injured." She moved closer to examine his shoulder, which was soaked in blood. His arm hung noticeably limp at his side.

"I'm fine. The Queenling was just a bit more dangerous than I had expected. I took a potion to knit the wound, but I think a piece of the bullet might still be lodged in there. I'll see the surgeon once the situation with the Queenling is resolved."

She nodded. "And you have the onyx?"

He offered her the satchel. Ma'li grabbed it and flipped open the cover. It was packed with shining gems that were dark as night and smooth as a newborn kitten's whiskers. "Excellent," she purred. "And please extend my pleasure to the rest of the Sword Dancers. Without their skill, our clan—and the world around us—would be in great danger. I assume they all made it out safely?"

"After the retreat horn was sounded, they split up to keep from being followed. They were instructed to meet at one of our camps and wait there for the order to return home. I can stop there before I go back to the Tomb—"

"No," Ma'li interrupted. "You've trained them well; they'll be fine without you for a few days. I need you to remain with the Queenling to ensure she is safe and doesn't escape."

Grim nodded. He was such a good, obedient child. Such a kind spirit. Guilt pulled on the Nomarch's heart as her mind flooded with memories of his childhood.

She gritted her fangs and willed away the thoughts. Nostalgia wasn't going to make her the next ruler of the Feline Federation.

"Us," hissed a voice inside her mind. "Make us the next ruler."

Yes, of course. Us.

Grim gazed at her with concern, dragging her attention away from her own thoughts. "I still can't believe that the Pharaoh was planning to commit such a heinous deed," Grim said. "He seemed so—" "This is why we needed to act quickly, my son. It is clear that the Pharaoh does not truly possess divine blood and is unworthy of our clan's support. Without the onyx, his ambition to rule the world is only delayed, not stopped. We need to find a more permanent solution."

One that ends with us sitting on the Pharaoh's throne. The familiar voice drifted around her thoughts, weaving itself into her words and emotions.

Ma'li twisted the gold band on the fourth finger of her left paw. The signet ring had been passed down among Sandtail leaders since Hyril, the First Pharaoh. Hyril had risen to his position by claiming to be the son of the Dawnbringer, the Goddess of light and life, of the very sun itself. His immense talent with magic was proof enough, and the Sandtails revered him as their chosen ruler.

Ma'li had that same talent in her body, and the same blood of the Dawnbringer in her veins. She had the divine right to rule the Federation, as Hyril had so many generations ago. And with his guidance, the throne would belong to the Sandtail Clan once again, for the first time since the First Pharaoh's death.

"Mother?" Grim asked.

Ma'li drove Hyril's voice away from her conscious thought, an act that was becoming harder to do every day. "My apologies, Grimoire. I must have drifted away in thought. What were you going to say?" "It's fine. It's late, I understand. Have you decided exactly when General Jeksus will be engaging in the rescue?"

The Nomarch rubbed her paws together. "Two days from now at sunup. And make sure the rescue appears realistic. I want the Queenling to return to her people with an amazing story about how the heroic Sandtail Clan saved her from the clutches of the evil Pharaoh and his Sparkpaw minions. Her belief that her life is truly in danger is central to my plan."

"Have no fears, Mother. It will be my greatest performance. By the time I'm done, the Queenling will be demanding that her kin enter into an alliance with us. Then, we'll have the support we need to oust that malevolent Pharaoh once and for all."

*If only you knew the truth, sweet little kitten.* Ma'li broke eye contact with Grim as she tried to figure out if the thought belonged to her or Hyril. Were their minds even separate anymore?

"You should head to the surgeon now," she said out loud, "and after that, go right to the tomb without any stops. And remember, at sunup two days from now, put on a good show before you retreat. I trust that won't be a problem for a showman such as yourself?"

Grim smiled and nodded, then turned to the exit and disappeared.

Ma'li sighed deeply. She hated lying to her son, but it was the only way the clan would ever take its rightful place. She was destined to be Pharaoh. The blood of the gods ran through her veins; in order to reach her destiny, sacrifices needed to be made. Even sacrifices of the only one left in her life that she truly loved.

"You can come out, General," she said, speaking to the corner of the room.

A large black Cat-kin emerged from the shadows. Although his fur was mangy from years of scarring and his left eye was permanently shut from injury, he stood proud and confidant before her.

"Are your soldiers ready, General Jeksus?"

"They are, Nomarch. But—and please forgive my questioning—are you sure this is the path you wish to take?"

A part of Ma'li wanted to say no, to squash the whole plan right then and there and command her general to stand down. But a much larger part of her wanted the throne. "It is the only path worth taking, General. The Sword Dancers are camped for the night and likely halfway through a barrel of nip as they celebrate the victory. My son suspects nothing."

"Then I shall carry out your orders to the best of my ability."

"One more thing, General."

"Yes, Nomarch?"

"Bring his body back to me. My son deserves a proper entombment."

For his sacrifice.

### Chapter 6

#### Grimoire,

### First Blade of the Sandtail Sword Dancers

Grim appeared fifty yards outside the Sword Dancer camp. No, it was not where his mother told him to go, but the teleport boots had just enough energy left for a quick detour before he headed back to the tomb for two days of boring guard duty. He certainly wouldn't hurt anyone by stopping to see his men and ensuring there was no trouble during their retreat. His mother just didn't understand the bond that existed between soldiers. They needed to see their commander in order to truly relish in their victory. He was pretty much their greatest hero.

He darted across the soft gold sand toward the camp with a determined and springy gait. He tried to contain himself, but he was also excited. Aside from being shot, the day had gone perfectly.

A strong gust of wind ruffled his fur. The sun had long set for the night, and the cool desert air sent chills racing up and down his spine. He had set up four secret camps after becoming First Blade, but this one was his favorite. Dunes surrounded it on all sides, making it almost impossible to detect from a distance and giving the sentries a line of sight ten miles long. It gave them a great advantage against anyone daring enough to try and mount an attack.

But where were the sentries? They should have been visible by now, and acknowledging his presence.

Their disappearance was peculiar, but Grim shrugged off his initial worries. Not a soul in the world outside of their order knew about this camp. It was a mistake—an oversight, yes—but perhaps he could avoid coming down too harshly on them. Tonight was, after all, a celebration, and Rispar, his lieutenant, had probably just forgotten to set a watch for the evening.

#### It was a night to celebrate...but where was the noise?

He expected to hear the usual post-victory singing, cheering, and general revelry, but as he crossed between two dunes and passed the outer circle of tents, he heard only light sobbing.

His Sword Dancers sat in a circle around a fire with their heads bowed. The largest—a gray with black stripes everyone called Ol' Rufus—was bawling like a kitten with a skinned knee. Rufus was the senior member of their order, and, at his advanced age, much quicker with a story than a blade. Grim was waiting for him to announce his retirement from active duty any day now so that Astyn could be initiated, but the old tomcat seemed uninclined to end his days as a warrior. "What's wrong?" Grim asked as he approached. Waltzing into the center of camp without anyone noticing him was disturbing, but he pushed the thought to the back of his mind. Now was not the time.

All nine of the Sword Dancers looked up at him, no one willing to speak. Suddenly, Grim realized: he only saw eight Cat-kin. Someone hadn't made it back. His gaze moved around the faces of his soldiers as he tried to figure out who was missing.

Rispar stood up. His second in command was the smallest Cat-kin in the order, but her unbridled charisma and inner strength more than made up for her size.

"Emril, Commander. Emril didn't make it home."

Grim took a deep breath. Emril was young, the last one initiated into the order only a year earlier. He had been Ol' Rufus's apprentice.

Grim nodded solemnly. It was a shame, certainly, but death was something they knew could occur when they joined the Order of the Sword Dancers. He weighed his words carefully before speaking.

"I understand your sorrow, but we should be celebrating his valor in combat as much as mourning his passing. He died in the service of his clan, and, as such, he died a hero fighting the enemy. We'll sing songs of his bravery and heroism." "No, Commander," Rispar continued, her voice barely audible. "We won't."

Grim stared at her with a furrowed brow. "Explain."

Rispar wiped the back of her paw across her eyes. "Emril was my retreat partner—we all had one, as you instructed. After I disengaged and scattered, I went to our designated meeting spot, but he wasn't there. I snuck back under cover toward the Canines. They had caught him, and it looked like they were in the middle of an interrogation."

"So the Canines killed him?" Grim asked.

"No, sir. I think...I think...the Nomarch did."

Grim bit his tongue to stop his initial reaction from flying out of his mouth. Rispar had just accused his mother, their clan leader, of murder. At best, it was heresy; at worst, treason. Rispar was young—and apparently stupid—but that was no excuse for such a wild claim.

"That's an awfully pointed statement to make, Rispar. I can chalk it up to your grief over Emril, but comments like that—"

"He burned from the inside out with wizards' fire until all that was left were his smoldering bones."

"That proves nothing."

"The Nomarch is the strongest sorceress in the clan, and she was the only one to cast a spell on us in weeks. She told us it would help our speed and accuracy in battle, but I felt no different than usual. I know you don't want to hear this, Commander, but we've been discussing the evidence for hours...and we think she hexed us."

Grim swallowed hard, choking back his words until his brain had a chance to review how they might be received by grieving warriors. "In the heat of battle," he said when he could finally speak again, "it's impossible to know where our skills end and where magical enhancement begins. It's quite possible the Nomarch's gifts were simply more subtle than expected and we were all too excited to notice."

He spoke with confidence, but as each word left his mouth, his mind was scouring his memory of the battle. He had also received his mother's blessing, and he couldn't recall feeling any stronger, faster, or more agile than usual. Despite what he'd said to Rispar, magic was rarely that subtle unless the caster deliberately tried to hide it.

Was mother *capable* of such a deadly enchantment, with a trigger to set it off? Yes. Magic had always been a natural gift for her. Skill was not the question here.

But why would she? And how? Questions floated through his mind. His mother had always been a kind, nurturing, and caring woman when he was young. But his father's death five years ago had changed her. As was tradition, she had claimed divine right and taken over the mantle of leadership. No one challenged her—her skill with magic was proof enough that the blood of the gods ran
through her. Since then, she'd become a different person cold, distant. But murderer? Of her own people? There was simply no way.

But if not her, then who else? The Canines weren't known for their ability with the arcane. Maybe if they had brought a Fox-kin, but they hadn't. Whoever cast the spell must have done it before the battle, with a contingency that it would go off when a certain event occurred. But what could have triggered the spell?

"Rispar, what was Emril saying before he died?"

Her gaze dropped to the sand. "I'd...I'd rather not say, Commander."

"Was he about to tell the Canines that we were Sandtails and *not* Sparkpaws? Was he about to break and reveal the mission secrets?"

"Yes, sir." She looked ashamed, as if she had defiled the memory of her dead brethren.

Grim stared past her as she answered, letting his gaze fall to the bright, flickering stars on the horizon. Five years ago, before his father died, he would have pulled his sword without hesitation and dueled anyone who accused his mother of murder. But a lot had changed in the five years since he had passed on to the next world. As much as Grim wanted to defend his mother, he couldn't. She had changed so much, had become so different. All she talked about was regaining the throne for the Sandtail Clan, but it was obvious she only wanted it for herself. Even her dealings with her own clan had become cruel—she'd been sentencing Cat-kin found guilty of committing even minor crimes to the labor force and, if they questioned her authority, to death.

No, he couldn't defend his mother, because he was pretty sure Rispar was right. She was the one to cast the spell on Emril, and likely on all of them. They knew too much, which made them a liability.

But one thing kept tugging at Grim. Surely his mother knew they would figure out her plan quickly. The Sword Dancers were known as much for their knowledge as for their combat performances. What did she expect would happen when they returned home?

Unless she didn't plan on any of us returning home.

Grim snapped to attention, drawing his sword as realization washed over him. He wasn't quick enough to intercept the arrow that suddenly flung from behind the tent before tunneling into Rispar's thigh. Her creamsiclecolored body dropped to the ground as she cried out in pain.

"Brothers," Grim screamed, swinging his scimitar in a wide arc. "It's time to dance!"

# Chapter 7 Sir Barkley Strongpaw, Shield of the Queen

Barkley growled with frustration as the Bully scribe slowly dragged the quill across the parchment, completing the contract they had negotiated. He would receive one warband of thirty Bully warriors, with twenty Hardback and Brightskin for support. He only needed to sign, but he couldn't without the kraken ink.

He was ready—the great swamp monster didn't scare him. His paladin training taught him to suppress all fear regarding his own well-being. He had always excelled at it. After twenty years standing guard at the Queen's side, he had learned to repress all of his emotions.

Today, though, was different. He felt like a child as fear gnawed at the distant reaches of his emotional defenses. Every once in a while, it snuck into his body, ripping through him like an out-of-control tornado.

He had no idea whether Sadie was even alive, or if this whole debacle had been for nothing. How could he have let someone kidnap the Queenling? Even if he could save her, would she ever forgive him? These questions and more tore at his mind, refusing to allow him to clear his thoughts. "This is for you." Helda handed him a small glass vial and a translucent rod attached to a string.

Barkley looked down at the items. "What's this?"

"The vial is to collect the ink. The other item is a light rod, made from the blood of the inferno fly—imagine a firefly, but much bigger. You'll need the light it holds, for the swamp is as dark as a Snake-kin's heart."

Barkley nodded and gently snapped the rod. Light glowed from within, illuminating the space in front of him several feet in all directions.

"Good?" she grunted.

"Brightest thing I've seen since I got here," he answered. "What else do I need to know about this swamp kraken?"

The warlord and her guards laughed—a deep, throaty chortle that sounded like they were each choking on a kazoo. Barkley flinched as his sensitive ears throbbed in complaint.

"Well, it likes taking long walks on the beach and singing love songs in the rain," she choked out, which was followed by more laughter from her underlings. "What do you think you need to know? It's a kraken; it's going to wrap its arms around you and try to eat you."

Barkley contemplated his next move. A soldier who went to war ignorant of his opponent's abilities rarely returned home. Bullies were excellent fighters, but they used the same recipe every time—apply one part ax and one part anger, then swing vigorously until dead. Tactics and strategies weren't their strong suit.

A loud cheer from across the bridge broke through his thoughts. Helda moved to investigate, followed closely by her entourage. Barkley quickened his pace to keep up.

A large circular crowd had gathered at the other end of the bridge. It was a mixed group of mostly Brightskins, Bullies, and Hardbacks, with the Alpha Squad filling in the rest.

Helda strode up to the crowd, picked a Brightskin up by the fat on the back of his neck, and flung him backward. He landed in the swamp with a plop. She motioned for Barkley to take the now-empty spot.

He moved forward into the open gap. At least she was chivalrous.

Inside the circle, battered, bruised, and bloodied, two gladiators were beating each other without mercy. The first was a Bully almost as big as Helda, and the other was Sarge.

Rage threatened to overtake Barkley. What was Sarge thinking? How could he threaten their mission and possibly further risk the Queenling's life?

Barkley opened his mouth to yell, to stop the fight so he could attempt to salvage the negotiations. Before any sound came out, Helda's massive green hand smashed down on his spaulders. She shook her head. The fight would continue.

Both warriors looked the worse for wear. The Bully's right eye was bruised black as a moonless night and swollen completely shut. His left arm, contorted and broken, hung limply at his side.

Sarge looked no better. Blood poured from his nose, matting the fur on his face and chest, and a cut above his eye seeped blood, begging for another strike that would open it up.

But they continued their battle, trading punches and insults like they were coins at a Republic Crown Bank. The Bully swung often, using his superior strength to batter down Sarge, who blocked and dodged the best he could. He wasn't able to avoid most of the blows, but he was quick enough to keep them from connecting with full force.

Barkley took a deep breath. Wolf-kin trained as team fighters, combat soldiers who worked in conjunction with others at all times. A one-on-one pit fight was not their specialty.

A green fist hit its mark, breaking open the gash above Sarge's eye.

Barkley clenched his fists as blood poured into Sarge's eye, knowing that the Wolf-kin could no longer see any movement coming from the left. He needed to concede; if he didn't, the Bully would kill him. He wouldn't, though. No Wolf-kin ever gave up in a fight. It simply wasn't in their nature. They prided themselves on endurance and outlasting the opponent, no matter how bad the odds against them. Sarge would accept death before admitting defeat.

Helda cheered and hooted, enjoying her soldier's impending victory. Barkley's nervousness over losing the contract faded. The impromptu altercation wasn't the diplomatic incident he thought it was. No, this was their culture. Barkley found it barbaric and brutal, but the creatures of the Hegemony believed such gladiatorial combat to be a show of strength, skill, and honor.

As that realization hit, questions flowed through Barkley's mind. What if Sarge lost? Would they believe the Canines to be weak and refuse to sign the agreement?

The Bully swung a mighty knockout blow from Sarge's blind side. Barkley watched, helpless. The air seemed to slow around him, and every inch of movement from the warrior's fist sent pangs of guilt shooting up and down his spine.

But Sarge was ready. He ducked, allowing the Bully's fist to glide straight over his head. Most of the crowd gasped, amazed by his reflexes. The Alpha Squad hollered and cheered on their commander as he popped up with a furious assault of quick punches to the Bully's exposed abdomen, stunning the exhausted Frog-kin before sending out a final spinning kick that sent him reeling backward. The crowd parted and let him fall, unconscious, into the swamp with an awkward splash. No one moved to fish him out.

The Wolf-kin cheered. The Bullies cursed. The Hardbacks and Brightskins applauded lightly and exchanged coins they had wagered.

Barkley rushed up to Sarge, who was leaning on one of his Alpha Pack brothers and barely able to stand.

"What were you thinking?" he snapped. Anger poured out of him, another emotion he had failed at suppressing today.

Sarge tried to speak, but instead lapsed into a fit of coughing. As Barkley struggled to find the words to chastise his friend, a Bully, smaller than any he'd ever seen, approached Sarge and held out a parchment.

"Can't believe you won," the Bully said. "I'm shocked, actually. But I'm a Frog-kin of my word. Here's the information I promised."

"What's that?" Barkley demanded, craning his neck to read the parchment.

Sarge smiled, letting the blood from his mouth drip to the floor. "That, Sir Barkley," Sarge coughed out feebly, "is everything you need to know to defeat the kraken."

# Chapter 8 Sadie Sablefur, Queenling of the Canine Kingdom

"How long do you plan on keeping me here?" Sadie knew the Cat-kin wouldn't give her a straight answer, but for the past hour she'd heard nothing but the small gray one humming the same three notes to herself over and over again. Sadie needed to hear her own voice just to break up the monotony.

mmm himmmm hmmm

The Cat-kin continued humming, now swaying slightly back and forth in time to the music.

"I demand to speak to your leader."

The humming stopped, and the gray stared at her. Her eyes were speckled with reds and golds in a mesmerizing display of fiery insanity.

"You know, I once ate a worm because he looked at me funny."

Sadie arched her eyebrows. "What? Worms? What are you talking about?"

"You know, most people don't think worms are a dangerous lot, but this one was different. You could see he had an agenda. It was me or him. I chose me."

"I don't have a clue what you are talking about."

A stifled laugh drifted over from the other side of the room. It came from her other captor, who was tall with long dark hair that made him look more like a Lion-kin with a bad dye job than a Cat-kin.

"Is it funny that I don't know what she's saying? Or that I'm being held against my will?" Sadie could feel her blood pressure rising. Her head ached, and her legs quivered. She wanted to rip off her captors' tiny furry heads.

If she could just free her hands from the binds, she could get in one quick shot before he had the chance to draw his blade...

"Neither is funny, actually," he said. "And don't mind Cleo. I don't think she even knows what she's saying sometimes. She had an accident at the Academy a few years back. Since then, sometimes she's fine, and sometimes, well...she talks about eating worms. But don't let the crazy stuff that comes out of her mouth fool ya. She could burn the wings off a fly at one hundred paces with one of her spells."

Sadie realized that nothing she said or did was going to have much effect on the gray Cat-kin. Instead, she

needed to focus her attention on the big one. He was willing to talk, which was at least a start.

"Well, then, can *you* tell me who's holding me against my will?"

He moved his hand to his collar and showed her a dangling gold medal engraved with a paw that was pulsing with electricity. Sadie recognized it as the mark of the Sparkpaw Clan.

"But your clan invited us here. Why attack us? We were supposed to have a peaceful trade conference."

Then, it hit her. The onyx was gone. It had been her responsibility to protect the bag and orchestrate the trade that would cover the orphanage costs, and she had failed. Miserably. If she couldn't even complete such a simple mission, how was she ever supposed to be the Queen? "Tell me why!" she growled as a fresh wave of anger crashed over her.

He just shrugged, pulled his sword, and began cleaning the blade with a rag. Cleo started humming again. Sadie growled. She hated being ignored.

It didn't matter. Even though she was angry and distracted, Sadie managed to remember her training. She might not have enjoyed much of her time in the House of Knowledge—diplomacy and magic weren't her bag of bones—but the House produced the Kingdom's spies, and spies learned useful skills. As she was speaking to her two guards, she had managed to shift her weight around several times, adjusting her position until her right paw was loose enough to slip out of the rope. Now she just needed a distraction, but unfortunately that was something she couldn't control herself.

#### Boom!

The entire building shook with the force of the explosion.

"What was that?" Astyn, the big Cat-kin, screamed.

"Avalanche!" Cleo declared with certainty.

"We live in a desert, Cleo!" he roared back.

"Sand avalanche!" she screamed back.

"I know what it was," Sadie said. As Astyn turned to look at her, the white-furred ball of her fist collided with his chin, knocking him backward and stunning him.

"Just the distraction I needed!" she yelled, bolting toward the open door and dodging a small ball of energy that flew from Cleo's hand. It missed her and crashed into the wall.

#### Boom!

Another explosion rocked the stone walls of the tomb, sending dust and debris flying everywhere. Sadie, choking from the lack of fresh air and feeling completely disoriented, picked a random direction and started running. She needed to get outside and find whoever was setting off those explosions. It seemed pretty clear to her—they were here to help.

## Chapter 9

### Grímoire,

## First Blade of the Sandtail Sword Dancers

All nine of them were on their feet with blades drawn before the full attack hit. They faced at least two dozen warriors dressed in black leather armor that was trimmed with gold—the uniform of Jeksus's army infantry.

Grim clenched his hands around his sword. He knew many of these Cat-kin personally—he'd even played with some of them as a child—so perhaps he could reason with them and show them that the Sword Dancers weren't the enemy.

No. That wouldn't work.

First, revealing any information to them could trigger his mother's disintegration spell, and dying was not in his plans for the day.

Second, the attackers had orders to follow. Orders that came straight from the Nomarch. Sandtail soldiers were trained to obey the Nomarch without question; they'd never listen to reason.

Grim wondered what she had told them about the Sword Dancers. Did she claim they were deserters, or traitors, or rebels? It didn't matter. They wouldn't believe a word he said, no matter how truthful. They would only listen to his blade.

"Dancers," he yelled. "Incapacitate, don't decapitate."

A chorus of "Yes, First Blade," flooded back. Good, their grief for their fallen brother hadn't overtaken them. That was a good sign.

Two attackers reached him. They carried the short swords and wooden shields that were standard issue for the Sandtail infantry squads. Grim smiled and laughed as he easily disarmed them before sending them off for a little catnap with a simple three-turn pirouette into a spinning roundhouse kick. Whoever chose to send basic infantry against the entire Sword Dancer corps was either really stupid or really arrogant.

That was Jeksus in a nutshell. The general had never seen the Dancers as anything more than acrobats and ballerinas who could do tricks with sharp objects in their hands. He didn't consider them real soldiers, despite their dozens of successful missions, and always commented on their lack of discipline. He probably expected half of them to be passed out around the fire after a few rounds of nip and a song or two.

And there was a chance they would have done just that, if Emril hadn't been murdered by mother. Perhaps, after a night of too much celebrating, they would all have been dead in their tents with their throats cut end to end. But Emril's death had kept them sober and awake. Perhaps tragedy sometimes brought blessings in disguise.

Grim dropped the third soldier with a vicious head butt, then took a second to let the sting in his own head fade. The rest of the Dancers moved through the oncoming attackers as if they were standing still, twisting, spinning, rolling, and diving as they rained blows to their enemies' heads. They were outnumbered four to one. No—Grim counted again—five to one, but their training and skill proved to be much more than Jeksus's soldiers could handle.

After less than five minutes, the Dancers had completely fended off the army's attack. Piles of unconscious Cat-kin bodies, each dressed in the Federation's black and gold uniforms, lay strewn across the sand. A few tried to run, but Rispar, the fastest among them and fueled by rage and mourning, chased them down like rabbits, ensuring that the Dancers would gain a small head start before reports of their victory reached the Nomarch. To his delight, it appeared that each of the Cat-kin they had dropped was still breathing. It made him proud that his soldiers had followed his request for restraint with their attacks. They understood that these infantry were pawns in the Nomarch's game, innocent clan-kin who didn't deserve to die. It would be a while before any of them regained consciousness, so the Dancers had some time to get moving. But the real question was, where would they go? His mother had likely branded them as outlaws, so returning to the city of Tigratine, the Sandtail's seat of power, wasn't a possibility. The other clans would be leery to take in a full fighting force, as they might think it a ruse, so asylum among other Cat-kin was also not an option.

The Lion-kin didn't accept outsiders into their prides. Nor would the Leopard-kin take them into the Herd. That was how the Federation worked. It was a realm in name and uniform only, as fractured as the femur of the soldier lying on the sand in front of him. Grim shivered—that Catkin was going to need a doctor.

The Dancers would have to leave the realm and search for sanctuary under the banner of a different realm. But who? The Herptiles didn't accept any but their own. The Avians hated all who couldn't fly. The Ruminants might, but they were nearing a civil war. The Canines, open to refugees, would have granted amnesty, but their lost Queenling raised too many questions.

The Queenling! Cleo and Astyn! If the Nomarch had planned to kill the Sword Dancers, were they also in danger?

"Rispar!"

She bounded over to him. A trickle of blood ran from her mouth, but there was no sign of abrasion.

"Rispar, organize the Dancers and take them over the border and into Republic territory. You should be able to barter for mounts from the Herd on your way. Once you're there, request asylum from the Queen in exchange for military service. They are worried about a rebellion from within, so they might be open to having a reputable mercenary force on the royal payroll. I'll try to meet you there."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the Tomb of the First Pharoah. If the Nomarch is behind this, Cleo, Astyn, and the Queenling are likely next on her list of targets."

Rispar drew her blade. "We'll come with you."

"I wish you could, but I only have enough energy left in the boots for one person to teleport. Besides, it's not safe for any of you to remain in Federation territory. Make haste to the Republic, and I'll send a message there as soon as I can."

Rispar nodded, accepting her superior's orders, but Grim could tell she didn't like them. She wasn't the type to run away from her home and hide. If she had it her way, she'd be marching up to the Nomarch and challenging her in front of the entire clan. "You're in charge until I return," Grim commanded. "Keep them safe."

He clicked his heals to activate the boots. His sword was drawn and he was ready for anything.

Chapter 10 Sir Barkley Strongpaw, Shield of the Queen

The water was colder than he expected, and it might have been a refreshing break from the oppressive heat and humidity of the swamp if he weren't heading toward a battle with a creature that could tear him into eight little pieces with a single motion.

He wasn't afraid. No, the Big Red God had expunged that emotion from him long ago. But he was uncomfortable. He couldn't remember ever having entered battle without his armor. Without Smash. Without Bash. He was alone and unarmed, except for a small dagger on his hip. It felt wrong, like he'd stepped out of his own skin.

The light rod, hanging on a string around his neck, illuminated his way as the unending blackness of the swamp threatened him from every angle. He took a deep breath and reviewed the information Sarge had fought so hard to procure.

Eight legs, two arms, and a bite that killed if it connected. The kraken was attracted to blood in the water. The monster would only eject the ink Barkley needed during a retreat, so he had to make the kraken fear for its life. It was the only way.

And he had only five minutes before he blacked out from lack of oxygen and eventually suffocated. He hadn't learned anything from the Big Red God to combat that eventuality. There was no time to waste. As he reached a depth where the pressure straddled the border between discomfort and pain, Barkley grabbed the dagger, turned over the blade, and ran it across the palm of his paw. Blood floated around him, creating a bright red cloud in the water.

He waited.

Ten seconds.

Twenty.

Thirty.

Nothing.

He had one chance. If he surfaced for air, the contract was null and void. He couldn't let that happen. Either he surfaced a winner, or he floated up a corpse.

A thrust of cold water rushed past his feet. Something was out there. He peered down, willing his eyes to pierce deeper through the water, but saw nothing. Never in his life did he have such a strong desire to be able to smell underwater. At least then he would have had a chance of detecting the creature before it was too—

Two thick arms, slippery and covered with strong suckers that immediately attached to his body, wrapped

around him. Barkley tried to break free of the creature's grip, but it was his strongest opponent to date.

The kraken's arms began to constrict his airways. He was forced to release the breath he had been holding, stealing precious seconds and causing his body to demand more air.

His lungs burned, his ribs warned that they intended to crack with sharp bursts of pain, and his vision, already limited, faded to little more than sparkles and flecks of light.

And then, for one moment, everything cleared. He floated eye to eye with the beast. Its huge, bulbous head; bright, blood-red eyes; and horrid, sharp-toothed maw locked onto him like he was the tastiest snack it had ever seen.

Its arms further constricted, sending bursts of pain through Barkley's chest as his ribs began to bend under the pressure.

He struggled to break free, to move his paw enough to use the dagger, but the kraken's strength was too powerful. His arms went numb, and the dagger fell from his paw. Silver light pulsated in front of his eyes, politely demanding oxygen.

The kraken reared back its head, lining up its teeth with Barkley's skull.

The bite kills.

Sarge's words drifted in and out of his mind, warning him through the fog.

But he was so tired. And it was so cold. If he just went to sleep, it would all be over...

"And the Queenling would be dead. Take care of your child, as I take care of mine."

The voice of the Big Red God whispered from the deepest recesses of his mind, willing him to snap out of his daze. Newfound energy pulsed through his body. His eyes popped wide open, his vision cleared, and, for a moment, he felt like he'd never need to take another breath.

The kraken sensed his revival and doubled its effort to crush him, squeezing harder and dragging him farther into the swamp's murky black depths. The creature would allow the water to add the last bits of pressure to snap Barkley like a twig.

"No," Barkley said, the words unintelligible under the water. "The Queenling needs me."

Barkley let out a piercing howl that shot through the swamp water and could be heard back on the shore. Twelve howls of encouragement echoed back—the Alpha Squad offering support.

It was nice, but unnecessary. The Big Red God had granted him the strength he needed to smite the vicious beast. He had no weapons. His arms were pinned to his sides. He had no idea how long the blessing would last.

He needed to use his head.

So he did.

Leaning back, Barkley snapped his skull forward with as much force as he could muster, cutting through the water like a Canine-forged battle ax through melted butter. And, like butter, the kraken's bulbous head exploded in a messy cloud of thick liquids.

The beast wasn't dead, but the injury was enough to fill the water with blood and ink as the kraken jetted away from Barkley as quickly as it could.

Once the kraken's arms released him, the Big Red God's blessing faded, leaving Barkley searching desperately for air. He closed his eyes, grabbed the vial from his belt, and passed it through the ink before paddling his way back up to the surface.

A pair of strong arms dragged Barkley from the water, and the last thing he saw before passing out was Sarge's battered face smiling down at him.

## Chapter 11

### Grimoire,

## First Blade of the Sandtail Sword Dancers

### Bmmph.

As he reappeared, the air around Grim swam with dust and debris. Though he couldn't see through the cloud, battle sounds echoed off the walls. He was too late. Jeksus had attacked.

"Duck!"

Without hesitation, Grim dropped to the floor half a moment before a cone of fire rushed over his body. Cleo, at least, was still in the fight.

"Cleo, we need vision."

He could hear her muttering the spell in the ancient words of magic. A strong breeze rushed through the room, clearing out the dust and debris just in time for Grim to see Astyn drop the last visible attacker. Six bodies lay strewn across the floor, none of them a Canine. The Queenling was gone.

"Where is she?" Grim jumped to his feet as he looked frantically around the room.

"She, uh, kinda got away." Astyn spoke softly and toed at the ground.

Grim shot him a look packed with annoyance. "Where did she go?"

Astyn pointed behind them. "South door, turned right and ran. Why are our own soldiers attacking us?"

"I'll explain later. First, we need to get the Queenling back. Whatever you do, don't talk to anyone about this mission...not even to each other."

Grim ran for the exit without waiting for a response. Astyn would follow his orders without question, and Cleo...well, his best hope was that she had forgotten enough about the mission that it wouldn't be a problem. He turned and began retracing the Queenling's footsteps. Seeing no sign of her, he stopped and listened closely. He could hear a scuffle that sounded like boots scraping the floor.

"Cleo, I need you to-"

Anticipating his request, she was already reading from an old scroll. A few seconds later, she pointed left. "That direction."

Grim smiled and nodded his thanks. It was good to have a wizardress for a friend.

He bolted down the corridor to the left, his blade ready to strike. A sharp scream indicated he was getting close. He turned another corner and found the Queenling pinned to the ground, violently struggling against two Sandtail soldiers. Blood dripped from a cut on the side of her head where they had struck her.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. No one was supposed to get hurt. Everything his mother said was a lie. There was no "rescue." She wasn't trying to form a friendship with the Canines by returning their Queenling. No, she was going to assassinate her and frame the Sparkpaws. And the onyx...she had all the onyx...was *she* really the one who planned on using it?

Anger began welling up inside him. Anger at his mother for her betrayal and treachery. Anger at himself for being so naïve. Anger at General Jeksus for being a complete sand biscuit.

Letting out a savage roar, he charged. As he closed the gap, the two soldiers turned away from their assault on the Queenling. Part of him wanted to kill them, to make this their final dance, but another part—a small, squeaky voice in the back of his head—told him no. They were Sandtail. His kin. They didn't know that the orders they were following were evil. They were just being good citizens. They were his adversary, but not his enemy.

As he broke through their defenses with a quick spin and feint, he twisted the grip on his blade and brought the hilt down in rapid succession—one to the top of a skull, and the second to a chin. Both Cat-kin dropped to the ground, unconscious. Perfect. "Are you all right?" Grim asked as he knelt down next to Sadie.

She looked terrified, clearly afraid he planned to kill her. But as she realized he meant her no harm, her demeanor instantly changed.

"Am I all right?" she snapped. "Seriously? Of course I'm not all right. Every single one of you crazy Cat-kin is trying to kill me! What's going on here?"

"Yeah, Grim," Cleo added as she caught up to the action. "What's going on?"

"I can't say right now, Queenling. But please know that you have my sincerest apology. If you can find it in your heart to trust us for a few minutes, I promise we'll get you out of here safely." He stood, sheathed his sword, and offered a hand to Sadie.

Cleo fixed him with the look she always gave him when she thought he was fibbing. "Can't say or won't say?"

"This time, it's definitely can't."

"I sure hope you have a good reason."

"Our flesh will melt away from our bones if we discuss it."

Cleo nodded. "That's a good reason. Flesh melting is worse than having fleas."

Grim ignored her observation. "Cleo, can you remove spell effects from us?"

"Maybe. Depends on the strength of the spell." She waved a glowing hand over Grim's head and closed her eyes to concentrate. "Oh, yeah, definitely a hidden spell on you. Strong magic and well concealed. I could try to purge it, but there's a good chance I'd set off the effect. Or it's possible you could turn into a basket of rancid fruit. It's really tough to tell sometimes. I mean, did I ever tell you about the time I turned my lab partner into a kumquat? It's a funny story. You see, I didn't even know what a kumquat was when we started—"

"Cleo," Grim snapped, "focus!"

"Oh, sorry. Right—killer spell about to burn off your flesh. Did it come from the Canines?"

"No, it's from the Nomarch. She cast it when she blessed us before we left on the mission. You and Astyn likely also have the hex, since you were both at the same briefing. We need a way to remove the magic without setting off the spell."

"The inner sanctum would do it, but it's gonna hurt."

Grim jumped up. "Cleo, I could kiss you."

"Please don't. You have a lot of blood on you that I don't believe is yours. It would be a very unhygienic kiss."

Sadie jumped up next to him, glaring down at the shorter Cat-kin. "Okay, that's as patient as I can be. Can one of you kidnappers explain to me what in the Big Red God is going on here?" Grim put his hands up in a please-calm-down motion. "Long story short, Queenling, no. We can't. Not right now. But if you trust me and follow us to the inner sanctum, I promise you I will tell you everything. I give you my word that I will get you out of here safely."

"You're holding me hostage, and I'm supposed to trust you?"

Grim drew his sword, twirled it in a wide arc, and swung it down at the Queenling.

Her manacles fell off as the sword sliced through them. She stared at Grim, unable to say a word. Grim forced back a smile—one of the first rules of Sword Dancing was to always leave your audience speechless. He'd accomplished that.

"You're no longer a hostage, and, if you wish, you're free to leave on your own. We won't follow. Or you can take your chances and come with us."

Another explosion erupted behind them, and the voices of several more Cat-kin echoed down the hall.

"Fine," Sadie said. "Lead the way."

Grim started running back toward the inner sanctum, two levels below where they had been holding Sadie. He darted around turns and leapt down stairs three at a time as he raced to his destination. Before training as a Sword Dancer, Grim had worked as a tomb guardian. It wasn't anything to brag about—mostly just a ceremonial position for young nobles—but it taught him the pyramid's layout like the back of his paw.

After a series of quick turns meant to confuse a possible tomb raider, they arrived at their destination only slightly winded.

A large gold door loomed in front of them. Grim grabbed the handle. Locked. He heard the scuttle of feet coming from the hall behind them.

"I need time," Grim demanded.

Cleo raised her paws in response and began slowly circling them through the air. The stones of the corridor began to spread out and grow, shifting together until a secure wall blocked them from their pursuers.

"That should buy us all the time you need," Cleo said.

## Boom.

Shards of rock poured down from the ceiling.

"On second thought," Cleo added, "I might be wrong about that."

# Chapter 12 Sadie Sablefur, Queenling of the Canine Kingdom

Her head was pounding from a blow she had taken in the scuffle with the two Cat-kin, the air was too thick with dust, and the wall was too thin to keep the attackers out for long.

She looked at the white Cat-kin called Grim. His fingers moved deftly, manipulating a set of lock-picking tools with the grace of a master thief. Cleo, the wizardress, flipped wildly through her spell book in search of an answer, while Astyn, the large, shaggy-haired one, gripped his sword in two hands and steadied himself in front of the wall, ready for it to fall.

Sadie didn't know what to do, or whether she could trust any of them. On one paw, these Cat-kin had attacked her caravan, kidnapped her against her will, and locked her in a tomb. On the other paw, they were risking their lives to make sure a different group didn't do the same. She couldn't pinpoint their reasoning, but she'd always been told to trust her instincts. The clerics told Sadie that a Canine's instincts were a gift from the Big Red God, and right now they were telling her that these three were not the real enemy.
A few minutes passed. Grim seemed to be having no luck opening the door, and the loud smashing of enemy weapons breaking down the wall set her teeth on edge. She needed to do something, and fast.

Then she saw it: a small metal glint on Grim's right side.

Everyone else was busy, distracted, unaware. She just had to make her move.

She lunged forward, snatching the metal object.

It felt good to be armed again, she thought as she pointed the gun at Grim.

"Whoa," he yelped. "Paws up, don't shoot!" He threw his arms in the air, and his tools tumbled to the ground. "I know you're confused, but once we get in that room and I can explain everything without fear of immediate death, I'm sure you'll see that this is all just a huge misunderstanding."

"Move," Sadie commanded. "You're taking too long." He wrinkled his brow, but took a step to his left. She fired.

The bullet erupted from the barrel and launched itself toward the door. It found its mark, drilling into the tiny keyhole that Grim had been unable to unlock and decimating the locking mechanism. She heard a pop, followed by a loud squeak as the door swung open toward them. Sadie beamed with pride. She'd never opened a door with a gun before.

Grim scowled at her. "I would have picked the lock in a few more seconds, and then we could have relocked it. Now it's completely worthless."

Sadie scowled back. "I didn't think about that part. Sorry, but you were taking too long!"

Sadie stepped back and stared at the open door. She wasn't keen on entering someone's eternal resting place. It wasn't specifically one of the Seven Tenets, but that didn't mean it felt right.

Astyn helped ease her concerns as he plowed into her back, shoving her through the entryway and into a large room filled with treasures and trinkets. A golden sarcophagus in the center was carved into the image of a black Cat-kin.

Grim and Astyn followed closely behind, each giving a little yelp upon entering. As soon as Cleo crossed the threshold, she screamed, began convulsing, and dropped to the ground.

"Cleo!" Grim screamed as he dropped down next to her limp body. "Astyn, get the door!"

Astyn scrambled to close the stone door, cutting off the noise of their pursuers as they finally smashed through Cleo's wall. Sadie's heart raced as she noticed Astyn grabbing the larger statues and pushing them in front of the door. She looked around the room, but found no other exits. Was there anywhere for her to go?

Seeing no other way out, she decided to help. She ran to a large bust of a particularly ugly Cat-kin and shimmied it over to the door. She worked alongside Astyn, moving heavy objects without a word shared between them. By the time they were done, all of the large objects that had littered the room—statues, a throne chair, a dozen or so chests filled with precious stones—were stacked against the door. The now-empty room revealed no trap doors or hidden levers. Nothing. They were stuck.

Sadie turned her attention to Grim, who was still cradling Cleo's body and gently trying to wake her.

"Is she...?" Sadie whispered.

"No, she's breathing fine. I think the purge just took a lot out of her."

"Purge?"

Grim rested Cleo's head on the stone floor, then stood up and gestured toward the sarcophagus. "This room is the final resting place of Hyril, the First Pharaoh. He was the leader of the Sandtails hundreds of years ago, and the first to unify the clans under the banner of a single leader. He was the most powerful sorcerer in our history and is considered by many to be the son of the Dawnbringer, Goddess of the sun. When he died, we believe that his spirit ascended to a place of rest with the gods, and we mummified his physical form in case he ever returned. The room is protected from magic to prevent grave robbers from teleporting into it. As soon as you cross through the door, you, your gear, everything is purged of all magical effects. Much of Cleo's magic is innate, so she seems to have passed out when she was purged. I think she'll be okay with a little bit of rest. I hope."

Sadie didn't have the slightest understanding of Cleo's condition. The House of Piety covered medicine, but it was much more about cuts and bruises and far less about magical comas. Regardless, Grim had a panicked look in his eyes and needed reassurance. "I'm sure she'll be fine," she said, flashing a smile that she hoped he couldn't tell was fake.

He nodded. "Building the wall and barricading the door bought us some time, but not enough. We need to find a way out of here."

"You don't know of any other exits? Why was it so important that we come here?"

Grim stopped looking around and peered directly into her eyes. He seemed...sad.

"Astyn, Cleo, and I were under a spell. I'm not sure of the exact details, but it seems like the spell would be triggered if we told anyone why we kidnapped you or who we are. I believe the purge cleared the spell and eliminated the immediate danger."

"How can you be sure?" Sadie asked.

"I'm speaking about it now, and I'm not dead."

"So you can now tell me what's going on while we look for another way out?"

"Yes. I believe you are owed the truth."

Sadie's ears perked up. Perhaps she was finally about to get some answers.

The white Cat-kin cleared his throat. "My real name is Grimoire Sandtail. I am the son of Ma'li, Nomarch of the Sandtail Clan. It was she who ordered the attack on you and your traveling caravan. She claimed that the onyx you carried was to be used for a nefarious purpose and that we needed to stop you."

"So you pretended to be Sparkpaws as a trick?"

He nodded. "Her plan involved you being rescued from this tomb by my clan and returned to your own kingdom. My mother said it would cement a friendship between our people and guarantee that you would never again trade with the Pharaoh."

"Then why are Cat-kin trying to kill me? Are they Sparkpaws or your people?"

"These warriors are not Sparkpaws; they come from the Sandtail Clan. They are my clan. The evidence seems to point to the entire situation being a plot from my mother. She may be trying to start a war so that she can retake the throne. I believe she is trying to kill you and frame the Pharaoh, leader of the Sparkpaws, so that the Canines will march on Meowphas, the capital."

"Does she have the military power to do that?"

"Our army is small, Queenling, but if your people march on Meowphas and lay siege to the Sparkpaws, we might be strong enough to sweep in and finish the job. To prevent that war, we need to get you home safely."

Sadie shook her head. "I'm not sure I get it. I've been taught that your clans are always vying for control of the Pharaoh's throne. Wouldn't you want your mother to take over? Why would you prevent it?"

Grim broke eye contact and remained silent for several moments before he continued, "My mother told me that the Pharaoh wanted to use onyx to raise an army of the undead and march across the Seven Realms of Layna. For years, I'd heard stories among my clan that he was a powerhungry despot who didn't possess even an ounce of a god's blood in his system. I believed the tales when I was small, but once I started training as a Sword Dancer, the tales I heard while traveling didn't match. Outside our land, he was regarded as a decent Cat-kin and a just ruler. When my mother told me about the onyx shipment and his intent to use it in necromancy, I believed her. But I've now found out that she tried to kill me and my men, and she controls every single gem in that satchel. What if the stories were true, but the names were mixed?"

"You think your mother is the one who intends to wake the dead?"

Grim nodded. "Sometimes magic corrupts the mind, and my mother has changed so much since my father passed away that she's barely recognizable. As soon as she slipped the signet of the First Pharaoh onto her finger, she became a different Cat-kin. She wants that throne more than anything. She wants it enough to kill her own son and manipulate a peaceful country into an aggressive war. Given that, I'm sure she wants it enough to raise an army of death."

Sadie's eyes widened as she tried to wrap her mind around the information Grim had given her. Could it be true? It sounded more like the plot of a bad adventure novel than anything that could happen in the Seven Realms. "Wow," Sadie said after a few moments, "I thought my mother was bad because she made me wear frilly dresses when I was little, but your mother is *way* worse."

Sadie grinned at her own joke. At first, Grim stared at her like she had just insulted his mother—which she had until slowly, from the edges of his mouth, a small grin appeared.

"Yeah," he answered. "I suppose she is the worst."

"So I guess I can't be too mad that you kidnapped me, considering you did think you were protecting the world from an undead *Cat*-astrophe." Sadie's grin broke into a full-fledged laugh. "Sorry, that was terrible! I make puns when I'm nervous, and I'd really like to get out of this tomb."

"There has to be a way out," Grim said with a frown. "All of the Pharaoh's tombs were built with a hidden exit known only to the Pharaoh and the head architect. And the architect was killed right after completion so he could never tell anyone."

"Was he stoned to death?"

Sadie tried to bite her tongue before the words came out, but it was too late. Terrible jokes had been her way of dealing with stress since she was a child. No one ever liked it, but she just couldn't seem to stop the puns from flying out of her mouth.

Grim smiled. "Let's find a way out of here before your humor kills someone."

Sadie's cheeks burned with embarrassment. She needed a distraction before another pun escaped her lips.

"There's old writing over here on the wall," Astyn interjected from across the room.

Sadie bounded over to the wall, happy that the attention was off of her. Grim followed.

The writing was a series of symbols, mostly pictures and lines that were unlike any written language she'd ever seen. "Can either of you read it?"

Astyn shook his head.

Grim bent down to examine the text. "It's ancient, but I studied these symbols during training. I can tell you what each symbol means, but together they look like gibberish."

"Part of learning to spin around and kill people is studying ancient languages?"

"The Sword Dancers are an eclectic order. While we are known for our unique fighting style, many of us come from backgrounds as scholars, priests, and students of the arcane arts. We try to keep our minds as sharp as our blades."

Sadie nodded. "Sounds much like our own Red Knights. They put a high emphasis on nurturing a varied skill set as one grows. Wait—" Sadie stopped and stared at the wall. Something about the stone bricks didn't seem right to her. "Could the symbols be a code?"

"I suppose, but nothing I've ever seen before. This tomb is almost eight hundred years old."

Sadie squatted down and shimmied right up to the wall. The gold-tinted stone bricks were all hand-chiseled into twelve-by-six blocks. It was a strong display of craftsmanship. Not as good as a Dog-kin master stonesmith could do, but whoever carved them wasn't embarrassing himself.

But something still looked off. Sadie brushed her finger over each brick, tracing the outline of each symbol and allowing the roughness of the limestone to tell its history.

"What are you doing?" Grim asked.

"Shhhh."

The stone's texture spoke to her. She found it.

"Read it in this order." She began pointing out each brick she wanted him to translate.

"Jars—Body—Key—Lift. Why am I only reading those stones?"

"Because they're different. Not from the same quarry. Both are carved from limestone, but these ones have a slightly higher quality with less impurity. The difference is subtle, unless you know what to look for."

"And how do you know this?"

"Cat-kin might know magic, but Dog-kin know stone. I spent half of my childhood inspecting quarries with my mother. You could say we had a *rocky* relationship." Sadie wasn't sure if that zinger was still due to nerves, or if she was now just trying to annoy him.

Grim rolled his eyes. "Okay, I trust you. And I have absolutely no other plan right now, so let's go with your

slightly-different-brick-is-sending-a-secret-message theory."

"Means a lot to hear that from my kidnapper." Sadie popped back up to her feet and rubbed the dust from her paws.

Grim sighed. "Are we not past that yet?"

"I'll let you know when we are. Anyway, what does Jars-Body-Key-Lift mean? Is it some kind of riddle?"

Grim ran his fingers through his whiskers and pursed his lips in thought. "No, not a riddle, but maybe simple instructions. Astyn, grab those big canisters!" He pointed to four large cylinder-shaped containers scattered around the room that were carved with intricate pictographs and resembled ceramic vases.

Astyn moved quickly around the room, following Grim's orders.

"Why do we need canisters?" Sadie asked.

"Because they're jars. Canopic jars, to be precise. When we mummify a body after death, we preserve the organs in these jars, in case they ever return to Layna and need them again."

"That's the most disgusting thing I've ever heard."

"Really, that is? Don't your people eat their own poop?"

"No!" she yelled, offended by the remark. "That's just you being speciesist. That would be like me asking you if you spend all day trying to kill and eat mice."

"That's how I spend most of my weekends."

Grim smiled at her, making it even harder for her to tell if he was kidding. A loud bang on the door interrupted the conversation.

"Grab the organs! We're running out of time."

Grim opened the lid of the first canopic jar, reached inside, and pulled out a liver. He shrugged. "I expected worse. Just kinda feels like stone."

"But where do we put it?" Sadie asked.

"Next word is 'body.' You don't think that means..."

"Well, it obviously isn't going inside our own bodies! It has to be his. Oh," she whimpered, "the Big Red God is not going to approve of this."

"Lucky for you, I'm not planning on telling him. Astyn, grab the other side."

With Astyn's help—and a lot of grunting—they were able to push the lid from the sarcophagus. The First Pharaoh's body lay before them, wrapped from head to toe in yellowing strips of linen cloth. Sadie expected to smell something horrid, or for a demon to pop out, or *something*, but it was just a plain old dead body.

Sadie looked at Grim. He was shaking.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm desecrating the physical body of the First Pharaoh, son of the Dawnbringer and the patron deity of our clan. So, no."

Grim placed the liver inside the body with care, then added the stomach, intestines, and lungs. He looked as if he were performing an intensive surgery.

As he inserted the last organ into the First Pharaoh's wrapped body, Sadie heard a click before a hidden compartment slid out from beside the head. A large golden skeleton key sat inside.

Grim lifted the key, careful not to disturb the body any more than he already had. "That only leaves the word 'lift.' What are we supposed to lift?"

Sadie swung her head back and forth, looking around the room. There was nothing left to lift—they had already moved everything.

Except one thing.

"Grim?" She swallowed. "I think it means that we need to lift the body out of the sarcophagus."

Though Grim looked like he'd rather be anywhere else in the world, he nodded. ''I'll get the head. Astyn, get the legs.''

"I can help," Sadie offered.

"No, this should be done by Sandtails." He handed Sadie the key.

Sadie understood. If things were reversed and they were moving the body of the Big Red God, she certainly wouldn't want strangers doing it.

"On three. One, two, lift!" The two Cat-kin lifted the body with ease, revealing a large keyhole directly underneath it. Sadie shoved the key into the hole and twisted. The sound of shifting gears overtook the noise of the enemies still banging on the doors. The sarcophagus spun ninety degrees until they were looking at a secret staircase.

With an awkward, remorseful silence, Astyn and Grim returned the First Pharaoh to his eternal resting place and replaced the golden lid. Astyn picked Cleo up onto his shoulder and motioned for Grim to lead the way down the staircase.

Sadie brought up the rear, turning to watch as the sarcophagus rotated back to its original position, completely concealing their escape route. Soon, she'd be free and on her way home.

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## Chapter 13 Ma'lí, Nomarch of the Sandtail Clan

"So, despite your assurances that all would go as planned, your soldiers failed to eliminate the Sword Dancers and the Queenling. And now you don't know where they went?"

"That is correct, Nomarch." General Jeksus bowed his head and kneeled before her while reporting his failure. Anger welled up deep inside her as she weighed her next steps. He had always been a loyal and competent ally, but he had underestimated his enemy. He had underestimated her son.

Kill him, he's incompetent.

"He's still useful," she whispered.

He didn't even bother to oversee the mission in person. He's worthless.

"I have a plan for him."

"Excuse me, Nomarch?"

Ma'li turned her attention from the voice of the First Pharaoh in her mind back to Jeksus. "I said, you're lucky I still have use for you in my plan. But fail me again, and that"—she pointed to his missing eye—"will be your good eye." "I understand, Nomarch. You have my sincerest apologies."

"I don't want apologies, General. I want an angry Canine Queen marching on the Sparkpaws over the death of her only child. If the Queenling makes it back north before the Canine army arrives, all of this will have been for naught."

"I will find her, Nomarch."

"No. Things changed when you allowed the Queenling and my son to escape. He's a smart one. By now, he'll have figured out my plan to pit the Canines against the Pharaoh before raising the dead from their battle to take the throne for myself. At the least, Grimoire will inform the Pharaoh of my plans and make sure the Queenling sends a message to her mother, telling the Queen to hold back her forces. Or, worse, the Queen will march and join the Pharaoh against us. The only option left is to move swiftly against Meowphas before Grimoire arrives there and warns them."

"Can we not just raise our own dead? We have several large graveyards that I'm sure would fill your army adequately."

"No, Jeksus. The ambling nature of a Cat-kin body raised as undead means it would be weeks, if not months, before we could gather a strong enough force to cross the desert. The Sparkpaw mages would have too much time to prepare and set defenses. The core of my plan was the element of surprise and to attack when they were already weak from battling the Canines."

Jeksus bowed his head. "I am truly sorry, Nomarch. I should have overseen the operation in person. I did not think that Grimoire would be such a worthy opponent. If there is anything I can do to rectify my mistake, please do not hesitate to ask it of me."

Ma'li grunted, saving her annoyance to be dealt with later. "I have another idea that may address our issue of mobility, yet still provide us with enough bodies to create an overwhelming army—the Rainbow Valley."

"Where the Leopard-kin bring the Herd beasts to die?"

"Exactly. The bodies of those animals would cross the desert significantly faster than a Cat-kin and provide us with a powerful means of sieging the Pharaoh's home city of Meowphas."

"The Leopard-kin will not care for that."

"By the time they find out, they won't be able to do a thing about it."

"And what of my soldiers, Nomarch?"

"Keep them far enough from the battle that they do not see me controlling the undead. Once the city has fallen, we'll move them in to 'protect' what remains standing and 'defeat' the last of my creations. The citizens of Meowphas will be so happy that we saved them that they'll beg for me to replace the Pharaoh. If he even survives the assault, of course."

"Very well, Nomarch. When shall we leave for the Rainbow Valley?"

"Now," she answered, grabbing the general by the shirt and casting a teleport spell.

There was no need to delay the time of Pharaoh Ma'li the First.

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The onyx shone in the moonlight like an eye staring at her through the darkness. It was just a gem, an inanimate object, but its potential as a component of powerful magic screamed to her senses.

The general stood behind her, watching the perimeter, but his efforts were needless. They were alone, surrounded by nothing but the bones of beasts dead for hundreds of years.

A cold breeze washed over Ma'li, sending a shiver down her spine and out through her tail, but she hardly noticed. Her attention was focused inward as she drew out the ancient incantations from her memory. No, not *her* memory. His memory. These were the First Pharaoh's spells. She was the privileged conduit of his magic, able to use his power for their gain.

The Nomarch wrapped her paw around the onyx, letting her magic surge into her fingers and surround the

gem. Energy chipped away at it, sending tiny dust particles into the air while the gems began to radiate with heat, singeing the fur on her paw. The spell was ready. Ma'li closed her eyes, remembering the arcane words that had first embedded themselves into her dreams long ago. She twisted the ring on her finger. "Soon," she whispered. "Soon we'll be where we belong."

Lightning erupted, lighting up the sky above them. A storm was approaching—a sign of great luck in the desert. The time had come.

She closed her eyes, allowing the magic that lived in her blood to mingle with the energy pouring out from the ring. Alone, she was powerful. Together, they were unstoppable—the two strongest sorcerers ever born to the Sandtail Clan mingling into one force.

A bolt of lightning slammed into the ground just a few feet in front of her, drawn by the magic coursing through her system. She threw back her head and laughed.

"Nomarch, are you all right?" the general asked, taking a step toward her.

Ignore him. He's not worth your attention.

"I agree," she cackled.

As the power swelled to a crescendo, she breathed deeply, pointed her paws at the graveyard, and released a series of powerful putrid green rays. She could feel the bodies awakening from their centuries-long slumber, craving only to do her will.

These are your children now.

The huge beasts clawed their way out of the ground. They represented dozens of species, formed of bone that was knitted back together through magic. Patches of rotting skin dripped from the bodies of the more recently deceased.

After a few minutes, hundreds of undead monsters stood before her, ready to conquer Layna.

"Follow me, my children," she yelled. "We have a throne to take. But first...kill the general."

Two skeletal tigers leapt upon the general before he could run. Another flash of lightning concealed his piercing screams of anguish. Ma'li heard him begging for mercy and crying for reprieve. He would get none, for he had failed her. If he could not serve her adequately in life, he would do so in death.

He rose again a moment later, and blood stained the ground below his feet as ripped flesh and tattered armor molded together in a gruesome uniform. His broken teeth chattered and his hollow eyes stared through her as he awaited her command.

Pride surged in Ma'li's heart as she inspected her creation.

"General Jeksus, welcome back. Now go to the tomb where the Queenling was kept and find their tracks. Hunt her down, kill her and my son, and bring their bodies back to me. If I thought the Canines would march to war over their Queenling's kidnapping, imagine their rage when her risen form leads my host against their very realm. The throne of the Pharaoh will be mine by sunup, and the rest of Layna will soon follow."

## Chapter 14 Sir Barkley Strongpaw, Shield of the Queen

Barkley struggled to keep up with the Herptile warband as they sped across the soft desert sand. He'd already asked the Big Red God to invigorate his body twice, just so he could maintain their insane pace. The Wolf-kin weren't struggling as much as he was; they had more endurance, but it was clear by the sound of light panting coming from each of them that they were being pushed to their limit. It had taken them three days to make it to Hop, the Herptile capital, but they would reach Meowphas in only one day, even though it was significantly farther into Federation territory.

As he worked to pick up the pace again, Barkley noticed that Helda looked downright giddy. She led the warband from the front, singing battle songs in Croak the entire way. Barkley was eager for battle, just so the sounds of the fighting would drown out her ear-grating voice.

Without warning, she stopped. As he caught up to the main group, Barkley saw the reason for the delay. Meowphas stood in front of them, a huge and majestic metropolis. The city's limestone fortifications—an outer wall and several dozen rectangular towers—and its major buildings were all painted a sparkling gold. In the midafternoon sun, the paint reflected a blinding light, making it difficult for Barkley to assess the exact strength of the city's defenses. It was an interesting defensive tactic.

He approached Helda, ready to discuss strategy. For the past twenty-four hours, he'd reviewed plan after plan, but he believed he had finally narrowed down their best options. As Helda relied on the element of surprise to lead a frontal assault, he and the Alpha Squad would infiltrate the city from the rear, find Sadie, and rescue her. Without knowledge of the Cat-kin's defenses or the city's layout, the plan was vague, but it was the best he had.

"Helda," he instructed, "take your warriors to the gates and begin an assault. We need to use the element of surprise to our greatest advantage."

"No," she answered calmly. "There is no surprise." "What? What do you mean?"

"I sent riders ahead to warn them of our arrival."

"You did what?!" Confusion and anger welled up inside Barkley, both vying to show themselves in his expression. Confusion won, but only by a hair.

"Fear is a stronger weapon than surprise. The Sparkpaw soldiers in Meowphas have been on their guard for the past day preparing defenses, evacuating the sick and elderly, and worrying about their families and themselves. I assure you that they did not sleep last night. My warriors can go for weeks without sleep, but Cat-kin need plenty of rest to perform well in battle."

Barkley gritted his teeth, trying to keep from growling in Helda's face. "They also had a day to plan for our arrival and teleport in reinforcements."

"We were already severely outnumbered. This will not be a battle won by numbers, but by intelligence."

"So what's your plan of attack?"

"The enemy is exhausted and scared. They expect a vicious assault, for us to crash over their walls and slaughter them. But this is not the plan. Instead, we wait. By nightfall they will desperately need sleep, so in order to rotate sentries they will reduce the guard from areas that are unlikely to be attacked. Then, you and your Wolf-kin will enter with the least resistance. If all goes well, you'll liberate your Queenling and we'll be back on our way to Hop with no casualties."

"But by warning them you've given them time to move the Queenling!"

"No, we haven't, because my Hardback priests have protected us from their mages' spying eyes. They don't know you ride with us. As far as they are aware, this is just a raid. I haven't looted Meowphas in years, but I guarantee you they still remember me—yet another reason fear is better than surprise. It brings back bad memories." Barkley nodded. He'd underestimated Helda's intelligence. She was more than just a ruthless, bloodthirsty warlord. She had a strong mind for tactics and psychological warfare. He could actually learn from her.

"Warlord!"

A red and black Brightskin frantically approached her, waving his arms to get her attention.

Helda snapped her head toward him and stared him down, freezing him in place. "Speak, underling."

"A great army approaches from the west."

"An army?" Barkley chimed in. "More Cat-kin? Sparkpaw reinforcements?"

"No. An army of beasts. Undead beasts—hulking mounds of rotting flesh and sun-bleached bones. There are hundreds of them. The sand shakes beneath their thunderous movement."

Realization washed over Barkley as if he were a small island in the path of a tidal wave. It was all a ruse—the attack, the kidnapping, the trade meeting. Someone had set them up in order to steal the onyx.

"Who leads the host?" Helda asked. Barkley meant to ask the same question, but shock rendered him too slow to speak.

"Ma'li Sandtail, Nomarch of the West."

"You're sure?" Helda asked.

"Yes, Warlord, I've done much reconnaissance against the Sandtails in my career. I know the Nomarch well. At their current pace, they will arrive in an hour."

"This changes everything," Barkley said. "We need to parley with the Pharaoh."

Helda nodded. "Let's hope I have not made him too afraid to open his gates."

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Barkley held the white flag high in the air as he, Sarge, and Helda approached the gates. Though none of them felt comfortable leaving their weapons behind, they did so in the interest of diplomacy. For the first time, Barkley was questioning if he had jumped to the wrong conclusion after interrogating the Cat-kin named Emril. Perhaps it wasn't the Pharaoh who had taken Sadie. Could the arrival of an undead army mean something bigger was at hand? Clearly the onyx had been used, and not by the Pharaoh.

The gates remained closed. Dozens of Cat-kin dotted the ramparts above their heads, holding knocked arrows pointed directly at them. One wrong move and they would become pin cushions.

"Present yourself," a sentry demanded.

"Sir Barkley Strongpaw, Shield of the Queen of the Canine Kingdom."

"Helda Hopblade, Grand Warlord of the Hegemony." "Sarge."

No response came. Anxiety built inside Barkley. Each wasted moment brought the undead host closer to Meowphas.

Finally, the gate split open barely wide enough for them to enter. Dozens of Sparkpaw soldiers with spears and swords in paw met them as they crossed into the city. Barkley took a deep breath, wishing Smash and Bash were still in his possession.

An older calico female, unarmed and dressed in flowing red robes, stepped forward and said, "I am Oohna, the Pharaoh's messenger. Please follow me."

Barkley questioned if he was doing the right thing. He was hoping to engage in diplomacy, but the large amount of weapons pointed at him made him start to feel like he had just given himself up as a prisoner.

They walked in silence past dozens of white-washed, mud-brick buildings toward the center of town. A few minutes later, they reached their destination: a four-tier palace built of high-quality limestone and surrounded by polished marble pillars. Around the grounds were a handful of small ponds filled with small leaping fish surrounded by tall palm trees that provided desperately needed shade. The pleasant aroma of lotus blossoms grew as they approached the six sentries guarding the front door. A nod from Oohna sent each guard back a step, opening a path for them to enter.

Oohna led them inside, up four flights of spiral stairs, through hallways covered in silk tapestries, and past dozens of additional guards. Finally, they entered the palace throne room. Barkley gasped as he gazed around the room.

It was exquisite. The buildings in the Canine Kingdom were constructed first for defense, second for functionality,

and third for beauty, but in this room aesthetics reigned supreme. Marble pillars of a shiny alabaster color lined the room and were surrounded by colorful ceramic floor vases filled with exotic plants and flowers. The vaulted ceiling was decorated with detailed portraits of the Cat-kin fighting off forces of evil: demons and devils, crazed beasts, and even other Feline races.

"Sir Barkley Strongpaw, Shield of the Queen," Oohna announced. "And companions."

The Pharaoh sat atop a throne carved from highquality marble and set on a dais that towered several feet above Sir Barkley. A row of guards clad with armor and spears stood stoically between them. Barkley knelt as a sign of courtesy.

The Pharaoh was smaller and far older than Barkley had expected. His fur, perhaps red at some point, was now a confusing mess of smoky white. He wore black robes that were trimmed in gold and seemed bigger than he was. He topped the ensemble with a large metallic headpiece that looked impossible to balance on top of his head, yet somehow he seemed to manage.

"Rise, Sir Barkley," he demanded. "If you have the audacity to bring an army to my gates, then I don't need your worthless show of respect."

"My offer of respect is genuine, Pharaoh. As is the apology I bring to you." "I've sat on this throne for thirty-seven years, Sir Barkley. Not once in that time has anyone brought along an army to apologize."

"Please, Pharaoh," he pleaded. "If I might have a chance to explain...I was part of a trade caravan heading to Meowphas to trade with you."

The Pharaoh slammed his golden staff on the floor, ending Barkley's sentence with a bang that resonated around the throne room. "Trade with me?" he asked, his voice loud and dripping with annoyance. "I've not requested any trade meetings with the Canine Kingdom."

"No, you haven't, but someone did so using your name and seal."

The Pharaoh didn't appear shocked, as Barkley had expected. Had his seal been stolen?

"Continue," he said. The annoyance had faded from his voice and was now replaced with a tinge of intrigue.

"We were attacked by a contingent of Cat-kin wearing the collars of the Sparkpaw Clan. During the course of the battle, our trade diplomat was kidnapped. She is also the heir to the throne, going by the title of Queenling Sadie Bristlefur."

"I hope you're not accusing me of ordering an attack on the Queenling."

Barkley let out an exasperated sigh. Truth was his only weapon, and he hoped it was sharp enough to pierce the Pharaoh's demeanor. "A few minutes ago, I was marching on your gates with every soldier I could muster with that very intent. But I just received new information that has led me to believe I've been tricked. I now suspect that the kidnapping was orchestrated by Nomarch Ma'li of the Sandtail Clan."

"Careful where you tread, Sir Barkley. The Nomarch and her clan have pledged their loyalty to my reign, and I will not see their good name sullied in my throne room without evidence. What proof do you bring of this accusation?"

"Our scouts report that she is marching toward Meowphas as we speak, in command of a host of risen dead."

"Dead?" he growled, jumping up from his throne with the spryness of a Cat-kin half his age. "That's impossible! There aren't enough spell components in the entire realm to raise a few skeletons, let alone an entire army. I outlawed necromancy myself when I first became Pharaoh—I had my soldiers collect every arcane component in our borders and lock it away in our vaults."

"We may have inadvertently changed that. The trade goods we were carrying consisted of forty pounds of the finest cut onyx in the Seven Realms."

"You idiots," he hissed. "Did you not know the dangerous uses of onyx?"

"In our defense, Pharaoh, we believed the onyx was for you. My Queen trusted your intentions and your reputation for morality."

The Pharaoh scoffed at the excuse. "Your Queen is not fit to lead if she cannot sniff out such an obvious trick."

Barkley's blood began to boil at the insult. He fought to control his anger, reminding himself that his fight wasn't with the Pharaoh. The Nomarch was his true foe, and he would need the Pharaoh's help to rescue Sadie. If she were even still alive.

Barkley lowered his head and dropped his gaze to the ground. "I have not come here to argue, Pharaoh, but to offer my apologies for my part in this affair. I have also come to request an alliance. Ma'li aims to conquer your city and take the throne by force—and she still holds the Queenling. I can offer you sixty of the finest warriors in the Seven Realms to help defend Meowphas if you will offer your assistance in rescuing the Queenling."

The Pharaoh chuckled, lightly at first, but it quickly transformed into a full-on guffaw.

"You bring *her* here," he said, pointing at Helda as his laughter dropped into a snarl, "and you think we'll give you entry through our walls? Do you know how many of my kin she has murdered? And for what, to appease the voices in her head? No. My archers and mages are already guarding the ramparts of the city. They'll bring down any threat long before it reaches our walls—and that includes Canines and Herptiles. As for your Queenling, I wish you the best of luck in retrieving her, but we will not be offering any kind of assistance."

Barkley raised his open paws. "Pharaoh, please. Without your walls, we'll be slaughtered—"

"Oohna, see them out." The Pharaoh turned his back to them. The conversation was over.

Barkley spun and stomped away, with Sarge close behind. He could hear Helda spitting at the Pharaoh's feet before following. He'd normally be disgusted by her gesture, but at that moment it just felt right.

"Tell me you have a new plan," he whispered as the Bully caught up to him. He kept his voice low enough that Sarge couldn't hear. The Wolf-kin had dropped back to protect their flanks just in case their "escort" turned ugly.

"I do," she muttered under her breath. "Today we will bring much honor to our Toads, and tomorrow we shall rest eternally."

"I was hoping for a plan that didn't end in our deaths."

Helda placed her massive green hand on Barkley's shoulder. "Just so you know, Paladin, death doesn't nullify our contract. Even if we all die, I still expect full payment. Failure to do so will result in the burden of the contract and the pain that entails—falling to your next of kin." Barkley glanced over at her. "I don't have a next of kin."

"Just because Bullies like to fight and pillage for a living doesn't mean we're stupid. Only a desperate father could make the same stupid decisions you have made over the past day—signing contracts you have no right to sign, fighting a creature that should have killed you, marching an army on the wrong enemy without your Queen's permission. Those are the actions of a terrified parent. I should know—nineteen of my own children are currently waiting outside these walls, and I would make the same stupid decisions for every one of them."

Barkley had no words. He'd never revealed his secret to anyone, nor had the Queen. Admitting it felt like the weight of a castle being lifted off his chest. The House of Piety hadn't chosen him as a worthy mate for the Queen, but the two of them had still chosen each other. Keeping the secret for so many years had been difficult, but it would be nothing compared to the exile he would face if the public found out he was Sadie's father.

"Helda," he said, straightening his newly unburdened shoulders and lifting his gaze to the approaching army on the horizon, "I believe I have one more stupid decision left in me."

She nodded. "Every parent does."
## Chapter 15 Sadie Sablefur, Queenling of the Canine Kingdom

After spending a day locked in the tomb, the sun's brightness shocked Sadie's eyes and limited her vision. Her sense of smell quickly adjusted to the fresh air, though, and it told her that they weren't yet safe from danger. At least a dozen Cat-kin lurked nearby—likely soldiers left outside to guard their rear flank.

"They don't see us," Grim said, either reading her mind or noticing her aggressively sniffing the air. "Stay low, but move quickly. We don't have time to cover our tracks, so we'll just have to hope we can put enough space between them and us before they realize we're no longer in the tomb."

Sadie nodded, and the group began hurrying east. The sand slowed their progress, and the lack of buildings and foliage made Sadie feel very exposed. Before too long, the soldiers were out of sight and smell and she was finally able to relax.

They moved at top speed for at least an hour, until Sadie finally had to motion for them to stop. She wasn't used to the heat and, despite her intense panting, was unable to cool down. She needed a break. "Do we have anything to drink?" she asked. "I don't think I can go any farther without water."

Grim grabbed a leather skin from his belt and handed it to her. "This is all we have. We left our supply back in the tomb, and this needs to last us until we hit the Knile River. That's the only reliable source of fresh, moving water in this area, and it's at least a day away."

She nodded. "Where are we headed?"

"North to the Ruminant Republic," Grim answered. "My order is waiting there for us. Once we meet up with them, we can escort you home through the eastern Redwoods. That's the safest route—it keeps us far from my mother's lands. The closest Ruminant city is Haggis, on the southern coast. Once we get there, we'll send a message to your mother letting her know you're safe."

"What about the onyx?" Sadie snapped. "If your mother is really going to use it to raise an army of undead soldiers, then we need to stop her!"

Grim stopped and looked her in the eye. "Queenling, there's nothing we can do. My mother is more powerful than anyone in the Federation, except the Pharaoh himself. If she has already used the onyx, no one will be able to stop her. Our best bet is to get you home and take refuge behind those giant city walls of yours. Perhaps we can wait out the undead scourge." Pain slammed against Sadie's heart as she realized what that meant. "But, Grim...if no one stops her, she'll march that army right through the Seven Realms, sacking every town and village along the way. Thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands, would die."

"Yes, but it's highly unlikely the Nomarch would be able to breach a Canine city, even with an undead host. The defenses are just too stout. If we can just get you home quickly enough to give your people enough time to prepare for a siege and take in refugees, they could protect so many lives and give the world some time to come up with an answer on how to defeat my mother."

Sadie seethed with anger. He was right. If they hid behind the walls, thousands would survive...but thousands wouldn't. She couldn't allow that. This was her fault. Her responsibility. Her mission. It was time she started making some decisions.

"No," she declared. "We're not going to the Republic."

"What?" Grim's voice rose up an octave. He clearly wasn't used to being overruled.

"I'm not going to sneak back home with my tail between my legs while an army of death sweeps across the continent and massacres all those innocent people."

Grim sighed. "Do you have a better idea?"

"We head to Meowphas—it's much closer. We warn the Sparkpaws and give them time to prepare. Then we send out birds calling for unity among your clans and asking for assistance from the other realms. If Layna doesn't work together, then life as we know it is destined to end. I'm not willing to allow that to happen without a fight."

Grim smiled. "I didn't expect you to be such a diplomat."

"Trust me, if I could just shoot your mother instead, I would. But I don't think that plan has much chance of working, now does it." Sadie had just taken a final swig from the waterskin when she smelled something noxious.

It was acidic and nauseating, and it reminded her of death.

She spun around to see what was causing the odor.

The creature stood only a few yards away, having snuck up on them by staying downwind. He was a Catkin—or at least he had been at some point—but his flesh was torn and rended from his skeleton, his eyes were glazed over and resembled carved white marble, and his mount was nothing more than a tiger's skeleton with teeth.

"General Jeksus?" Confusion laced Grim's every word. "Is that you?"

The answer came in the form of a leaping tiger. The rider swung his curved blade at Grim's head. Grim was

quick enough to pull his own blade, parry, and roll out of the way. Astyn drew his blade and charged toward the skeletal beast to help his master.

The Sword Dancers twirled, ducked, dodged, spun, and tumbled through the battle, connecting repeatedly with the general's bone body but never able to do any true damage. Sadie didn't know exactly what to do. She had her weapon in hand, ready to fire, but missing by even a few inches could mean hitting one of her allies. They were just too fast to pinpoint.

The general swung at them every time they neared and pounced around on the tiger. Though he tried to pin them down, their quickness and nimble moves kept them safe.

The safety didn't last long as Grim landed awkwardly and flung himself onto his back to avoid the general's attack. The general pounced, letting his tiger mount come down on top of Grim's arms.

Grim screamed in pain as the tiger's bone claws ripped into his flesh.

"Astyn!" Sadie screamed hysterically. "Help him!"

It was an unnecessary command, as Astyn had already launched into a charge, jumping high into the air and throwing all of his weight into the general, slamming both him and the tiger off of Grim's body.

As they slowed, the general locked his leg and pivoted so that he landed on top of Astyn. He spun his sword into an overhand grip and thrust the blade down into the apprentice's abdomen.

The Cat-kin screamed, a piercing howl that send a shiver down Sadie's spine and froze her in place. And then, just as quickly as it had happened, the sound stopped. The general pushed himself to his feet and faced Grim while the tiger rose and slowly circled behind him.

"Sadie, I could really use Cleo right now." Grim's voice trembled, terrifying her as much as the sound of Astyn's pained screams.

She dove to Cleo's body and shook her. "Wake up!" she shouted. "Wake up, we need you."

She fumbled through her brain for ideas until she landed on one. "Grim, I need water!"

Grim charged the general, swinging his blade in a wide arc while simultaneously ducking under the general's counterattack and tossing Sadie the waterskin.

She opened it and poured the rest of the cold water all over Cleo's face. They'd never survive the trip to Meowphas without water, but if they couldn't rouse the wizardress they would be dead anyway.

Cleo still didn't stir.

"Wake up," Sadie screamed again as she smashed her paw across the Cat-kin's face. Other than a few shallow breaths, Cleo remained completely still. Sadie growled and jumped back to her feet. She needed to do something on her own. She aimed her gun at the general's skeletal body, trying desperately to time his quick but jerky movements.

The tiger pounced again as the general attacked from a flanking position. Grim didn't have enough time to dodge both of them, so he moved toward the undead beast, opting to take the impact of its massive body over being decapitated by the general's blade. He went flying through the air and sprawling back into the sand. His sword flew out of his hands and landed ten yards in the opposite direction.

Sadie had one last chance. She pulled the trigger, and the world seemed to freeze around her. The bullet erupted from the muzzle and glided toward General Jeksus's chest, one of the few places on his body with noticeable flesh and, she assumed, organs. It hit him just between the third and fifth ribs. Kill shot!

Jeksus looked down as black ooze seeped from the wound. He touched his finger to the wound, swirling it around the thick, open hole. As Sadie watched in disbelief, the wound began to glow before knitting itself together.

Sadie's heart dropped. Her weapon was useless. This was the end.

She closed her eyes, mumbled a final prayer, and tried to remain calm as she waited for death. She'd lived a good

life—not great, but she tried to stick to the tenets. Perhaps she would soon join the Big Red God.

And then she heard it, faint at first and then louder as it moved closer. The cadence and rhythm was unfamiliar, but as the general's face was overcome with a look of despair, she knew that, for her, it was a song of joy. A grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. This was a battle hymn that was drifting into her pointed red ears, not a funeral march. Perhaps today was not the day to hear death's lullaby of eternal sleep.

Sadie flung open her eyes just in time to see a herd of camel barreling past her. Riding atop the camels were eight Cat-kin dressed in colorful flowing robes and whirling skirts. They rode until they reached the general, then leapt off their mounts, flipping and turning in the air as their swords repeatedly sliced into his risen body. Four Cat-kin surrounded the tiger while the others continued battling the general. A few moments later, Grim was back to his feet and racing to join his Sword Dancer brethren in battle.

Sadie watched, mesmerized by the Dancers' battle ballet. It reminded her of the masterful acrobats who performed in the town square during festivals. As a child, she had watched them perform from the towers of the inner keep and wished she could run away, join their troupe, and never again have to worry about being the heir to the kingdom. Their colorful garments whirled and twirled, twisted and turned until they became a single bouquet of brilliance. Their blades sliced and parried through feints and strikes so quick they were only visible as momentary glints in the sunlight.

Though a single strike from a Dancer did no damage, the blows continued raining down without pause, whittling away at torn flesh and solid bone until nothing remained. As the necromantic magic held together by the structure of their bodies faded, the general and his tiger burst into a decrepit cloud of dust that blocked all sight and scent.

When the air cleared enough for them to regain their senses, Grim sprinted over to Astyn's fallen body. The Dancers gathered in a circle around the two of them, and Sadie quickly followed.

Astyn's clothes were covered in blood, and he wasn't moving.

"Is he...?" a small orange Cat-kin whispered. Her pink and yellow Dancer robes were smeared in the general's viscous black "blood."

Grim placed his head on Astyn's chest and raised his hand for silence. After a few tense moments, he said, "He's still alive, but he's lost a lot of blood. Rispar, can you handle this?"

She knelt down and examined the wound. "No, it's beyond my skill as a healer. But if we could find a way to

stop the bleeding, I might be able to at least buy him some more time."

"Does anyone have a healing draught?" Grim asked.

The Dancers shook their heads. Sadie wasn't surprised—draughts were very expensive and highly volatile. Only the richest carried them around as they traveled. She had left her own at home in favor of Barkley's healing powers. Again, her lack of planning had left them up the creek without knowing how to doggypaddle.

As blood spurted out of Astyn's abdomen, Sadie racked her brain for an idea. None of them were prepared for travel—they had no sewing kits to care for the wound, and he would bleed out before they could get a fire hot enough to cauterize it.

But perhaps there was another way to help ...

"Move," she screamed at the Cat-kin as she pulled her weapon and strode toward Astyn. Bits and pieces of an idea floated around her mind as she pulled her gun and reloaded. She could hear the Dancers drawing their swords again, but it was too late. She had already pulled the trigger.

The bullet sailed over their heads as she bent down and placed the burning hot barrel of her gun over the wound, cauterizing it in a smoky barbeque of burnt flesh. As the Cat-kin realized what she was doing, they dove down and pinned Astyn to the ground in case the pain woke him.

He let out a few involuntary jerks and pained squeals, but drifted back into unconsciousness as Sadie finished her impromptu triage.

Grim placed his paw on her shoulder. "That was brilliant."

"We still need to get him to a healer—magical or medical. He needs someone with knowledge above and beyond shooting a gun and applying hot metal."

"Rispar," he said, nodding to the orange Cat-kin, who bent back down and ran her paws over Astyn's body. They glowed faintly.

"Bringer of Dawn," Rispar called out as she craned her neck to the sky. "Bathe our brother in your light." As the glow sprang from her paws and entered Astyn's body, the wound began to look cleaner and smaller. The few areas of his face that weren't covered in black fur darkened as blood flow increased throughout his body. He wasn't well, by any means, but between Sadie's creative medicine and Rispar's divine healing, they could at least move him.

She lingered a moment as she watched Rispar stand. She'd been around paladins her whole life—the House of Piety was filled with them—yet she'd never met one who wasn't dedicated to the Big Red God. She'd always been taught to respect other religions and the gods they worshipped, but part of her never really believed those other gods actually existed. Seeing Rispar's divine healing, virtually the same as Barkley's abilities, was mind-opening.

As the Sword Dancers collected their camels, Sadie noticed Grim looking at her.

"What?" she asked.

"You saved his life. Thank you."

Sadie felt flustered. She'd never been great at accepting praise.

"I was lucky."

Grim nodded and turned his attention back to Rispar. "How did you know we were here, and why didn't you follow my instructions and go to the Republic?"

Rispar brushed a stray orange hair out of her eye. "When we stopped for mounts, a Herdsman reported seeing an undead host marching across the desert toward Meowphas. We assumed you were in trouble, so we headed to the last place we knew you were going—the Tomb of the First Pharaoh. When we got there, we took care of some soldiers you left behind and then followed your tracks."

Grim removed a dark rag from his pocket and began wiping down his sword before sheathing it. "We need to reach Meowphas before my mother does. It's Astyn's only chance for survival." Rispar nodded, then motioned for the Dancers, who were finishing catching the last, and most obstinate, camel.

Sadie crossed her arms and stared at the weirdlooking, two-humped creature. She'd never ridden a camel, but she'd also never tried to stop a rampaging army of the undead. Perhaps this was just going to be a day of firsts.

# Chapter 16 Sir Barkley Strongpaw, Shield of the Queen

Barkley hadn't been in a real battle in several years. His role as Shield of the Queen usually kept him off the front lines, but he'd been present on enough battlefields over the years to know that he hated nothing more than the sense of anticipation before the attack. He was a patient Dog-kin by nature, but the thrill of battle tingled every nerve in his body. He craved the rush of combat, and waiting for it pained him. To distract himself, he surveyed his forces.

The Wolf-kin stood in formation behind him with not a fur out of place nor a weapon unpolished. They radiated calm, yet they maintained a permanent state of readiness that allowed them to respond to threats instinctively and instantly. They were the perfect fighting machine.

As a stark contrast, the Herptile forces were unorganized, dirty, and laughing and joking like they were at a party. He knew from experience that the Herptiles' brute, chaotic style of warfare was just as dangerous as the Wolf-kin's superior training, but watching them carrying on didn't inspire confidence in their chances at victory.

*If*, that is, they had enough of a chance of victory that it could even be calculated. Barkley counted sixty total

troops, but they had no walls to hide behind or artillery to thin the ranks of the oncoming charge. They had dug trenches in the sand, but that didn't provide enough protection to stop the assault.

The Meowphas defenders standing on the walls behind Barkley also put him on edge. They weren't enemies, per se, but neither were they allies. Once the melee began and the Cat-kin fired off a barrage of arrows and spells, he knew they would have little regard for which side they hit.

The Cat-kin were leaving his forces alone, for now, because the Pharaoh was clearly planning on using the Wolf-kin and the Herptile warband as a tarpit—a group of soldiers whose only job was to slow the advance of the enemy. They weren't expected to survive. Barkley had considered moving his troops out of the Cat-kin's firing range, but he knew that they ultimately needed those spells and arrows to thin the enemy's lines and prevent themselves from becoming completely overwhelmed.

"They're here," Sarge said as he sniffed the air. Wolfkin had even more finely-tuned senses than their Dog-kin relatives. If Sarge could smell the enemy, they were within a two-mile range. That only left a few minutes until they arrived.

"You understand the plan?" Barkley asked.

"Deliver the package," Sarge replied.

The sand beneath them began to shake and shift as the ferocious mounds of bone and rotting flesh appeared on the horizon.

Though Barkley's allies didn't show it, he could sense their mounting fear. None of them had seen opposition quite this intimidating staring back at them from across a battlefield. Barkley needed to do something.

He took a step forward, turned, and faced his "army"—a single Alpha Squad, several dozen deadly but disorganized Herptiles, and maybe a few hundred Cat-kin who looked as if they were about to turn their pants into portable litter boxes.

"Soldiers—Canines, Herptiles, and Felines—listen here," he called out to the crowd. "As we gaze across this field on an enemy unlike anything we've ever seen, I feel your fear. I understand it. A wise ally once taught me that fear can be your enemy's greatest weapon. It can exhaust you. It can destroy your ability to make rational decisions. It can run you through like an invisible sword."

He straightened his shoulders and lifted Smash up in the air. "But fear is at its strongest when you let it control you. So we must take that fear and wrangle it down deep inside ourselves. We must allow it to fuel us, not consume us. We must confront our fear and slay it before it destroys us. Now who is with me?" A raucous cheer erupted from all three parts of his army.

Barkley smiled. The wait was over. "CHARGE!"

# Chapter 17 Sadie Sablefur, Queenling of the Canine Kingdom

"We're too late," Sadie cried as they reached the top of the dune. The dust cloud ahead of them blocked the majority of the battle, but they could still see Ma'li's army devastating the Cat-kin defenses. Walls were crumbling and their defenders were screaming as the stone structures toppled down.

"Maybe not," Grim replied. "Mother might have an army, and she might be a powerful magic-user, but she's not unbeatable. She's never been in a battle, let alone led an army. She's left herself open in several areas." Grim pointed around the battlefield. "Look."

The cloud of sand-dust blocked much of the view, but it only covered a few hundred yards in front of Meowphas. Ma'li had all the creatures charging toward the front wall and main gates, ignoring secondary targets. While they were smashing through the strongest part of the Cat-kin defenses, the rest of the city was left untouched. More importantly, the defenders had clear paths to retreat and supply, meaning they would be able to continuously regroup and launch counterattacks. "I see it now," Sadie said. "She's directing the attacks against the same quadrant of the city."

"Exactly," Grim said, "which means that the Cat-kin can just fall back to the next line of defense, and they're also able to focus their protective spells in one area. The mages on the walls can whittle down the undead creatures by focusing on one at a time. But even more important—"

"She's left no rear guard!" Sadie interrupted excitedly. "We can sneak up on her behind her army!"

"She assumes the Cat-kin will stay inside the city as much as possible. She doesn't expect any type of counter, but look there—the Pharaoh sent out troops to meet them on the battlefield."

Sadie stared at the whirling, dusty melee happening in front of the battered main gate. It was tough to make out exactly what was going on, and the stench of death dulled her sense of smell...but she could tell that something was off.

A gust of wind cleared just enough of the dust for her to get a glimpse of the answer.

"Grim, I don't think those soldiers are from Meowphas..." she began, squinting against the wind.

"Eyes!" Grim yelled. An older Cat-kin moved his camel beside Grim and handed him a spyglass from his satchel. Grim peered through it for a few moments before handing it to Sadie. She pressed it to her eye, directing it toward the center of the dust cloud. The defenders in front of the gates were a mix of green bodies, flashes of bright colors, and brownshelled backs.

"Herptiles?" she asked in confusion.

"That's not all. Look left about twenty yards."

She raised the spyglass again and rotated her neck slightly. In front of her, charging through the battle like a Rodentian steam train, were Sir Barkley and the Alpha Squad.

Sadie's heart fluttered. They were still alive! "We need to help them. Now!"

Grim nodded. "Rispar, take the Dancers and head to the south side of the city, where there are no undead. Bring Astyn and Cleo to a healer."

"No healers!" Cleo snapped. She jumped down from the camel. "I'm fine." She walked over to them, stumbling and swaying like she had just been hit in the head with a brick.

"You don't look fine," Grim said.

"I'm as fine as a grain of sand. I can help!"

Grim stared at her for a moment before speaking. "Okay, you're with me. Rispar, the rest of you need to get Astyn help and then reinforce the city's defenses. If you see an opportunity, push a flank and keep the creatures funneling into the heart of Meowphas—that's where the resistance is strongest. If we can bottle them up and limit their momentum, it will buy us time and keep them from using their momentum to crash through the buildings and road blocks."

Sadie turned to Grim. A few hours ago, he was her kidnapper. Her enemy. Now, she was about to ride into battle at his side. Maybe diplomacy wasn't so boring, after all.

"What's our plan, Grim?" she asked.

"It's simple, Sadie. We're going to help your friend in the best way I know how."

"And that is?"

Grim drew his sword and pointed it in front of him. "We kill my mother."

# Chapter 18 Sir Barkley Strongpaw, Shield of the Queen

The beasts charged, rumbling across the desert and kicking up enough sand to block any vision within half a mile—exactly what Barkley hoped would happen.

"Charge!" Helda commanded to her own troops, leading her Bullies and Hardbacks into the fray.

The Wolf-kin surged forward, not like the single unit they were used to, but instead as a quick-moving band of nine, weaving in and out in an unpredictable pattern meant to confuse the limited intelligence of the undead creatures.

In the distance, a series of loud croaks rang out—the Brightskins signaling that they were in position to oversee the battlefield. Barkley just hoped that the Alpha Squad remembered the signals they had hastily thrown together.

Two more loud croaks sounded, followed by a short, high-pitched one. The Wolf-kin remembered perfectly much to Barkley's relief—and responded by moving twenty degrees to the left and narrowly avoiding the charge of an enormous tusked beast.

Several Cat-kin on the wall behind them opened fire. The roar of fireballs and arrows littering the battlefield made it difficult for Barkley to hear, but he was still able to zone in on the Brightskins' directions. Another series of croaks rang out, and the Wolf-kin moved ten more degrees to the left, avoiding the thrashing body of a particularly thick-boned undead—perhaps what had formerly been a hippo or a rhino during its life. Its lack of skin and scattered bones left Barkley unable to further narrow down its species.

Several more croaks sounded simultaneously, signaling multiple threats. Barkley swung his gaze around the battlefield, trying to figure out which warning to follow first. The cloud of sandy dust was still too thick to see more than a few feet, and his sense of smell was completely overwhelmed by the scent of rot hanging in the air. Before he could choose a direction, a dozen smaller skeletons poured through the lines—boars, likely, judging by their squat frames and short front tusks. Barkley had no time to get out of the way, so he threw up Bash and braced for impact. A howl from Sarge instructed the Alpha Squad to do the same.

A scream echoed as the boars plowed through the braced Wolf-kin, sending one flying backward. Another followed. Then a third.

One of the creatures slammed into Barkley, and the impact sent a vibration jolting through his body that was strong enough to cause his teeth to ache. But he remained standing as several of the beast's bones shattered on impact and began tumbling end over end into a pile as true death reclaimed its body.

"Forward!" Barkley screamed through the chaos. He was losing his squad, but he could do nothing other than continue pushing through the cloud of sand. He was almost past the main group of undead and nearing the Nomarch.

Two more low, deep croaks. Barkley and the remaining Wolf-kin turned back to the right. As they moved, the cloud around them began dissipating; the majority of the beasts had already charged past them in their quest to reach the city walls. They had made it through the gauntlet of undead. Now, the real work began.

Barkley took a moment to assess their situation. Sarge and three members of the Alpha Squad had made it past the enemy, leaving them with only half of their original force. Barkley would grieve later for his fallen comrades; right now, the fight was far from over. Peering across the desert, Barkley saw nothing to indicate a command center. Where was Ma'li Sandtail? If she was directing the creatures' attacks, she had to be close.

"Sarge, search around," he said. "But don't engage. We need Ma'li alive if we have any chance of finding out where she's holding the Queenling."

"That might need to wait a moment," Sarge said, pointing to the sky.

Barkley looked up to see six whelpling skeletons flying above them. The huge creatures—draconic in appearance, but simple animals by biology—circled over them like scavengers waiting for their meal to die. He backed away slowly, and the Wolf-kin followed his example as they formed a small circle where they could protect each other from a rear assault.

The whelplings began landing around them, trapping them inside a circle of their own.

The creatures reared back, letting out shrill, piercing shrieks while aggressively flapping their wings into the sand and sending it flying into Barkley's face.

He adjusted his grip on his weapons. He kept reassuring himself that he'd made it out of tougher spots than this, but as the whelplings took a few steps toward them he knew that was a lie. They were surrounded by a stronger enemy. Half of their fighting force was either dead or missing. They had no reinforcements, no cards he'd yet to play, no brilliant tricks up his sleeve. He was done.

A quick gust of air across his muzzle indicated a change in the direction of the wind. His senses, fully alert in the midst of the battle, registered a subtle scent wafting in—a deliciously floral beacon of hope.

Jasmine and chocolate.

He peered north, in the direction of the scent, but saw nothing other than sand stretching to the horizon. But that smell—it had to be...

Sadie was out there. He was sure of it.

A newfound strength surged through his body. He glared at the six whelplings, each moving lightly on its clawed feet and poised to attack. He smiled, no longer intimidated by them. He now possessed the two strongest weapons in a warrior's arsenal—hope, and a reason to fight.

"Down!" he screamed as the whelplings launched themselves toward his group. Sarge and the remaining Alpha Squad members dropped to the sand, willing to give up their defensive position without question at Barkley's command. That was the kind of trust forged through decades of loyalty and battle. It was time for him to repay that trust.

He loosened his grip on Smash, letting his paws drift lower on the handle and extending the reach as far as it would go. He covered as much of his body as he could with Bash, knowing that he needed to stave off their deadly talons as long as possible for this to work. And then he spun, whirling twice before the whelplings reached him. It was enough to generate the force he needed to send Smash sailing through the first whelpling, launching the massive beast a dozen yards back into a pile of shattered bone. The second to arrive fared no better as he continued swinging Smash wildly, connecting with the whelpling's skull and instantly making it one head shorter.

The four remaining whelplings pulled up, aborting their charge. They swiped at him with fanged jaws and cuspate talons, letting the superior reach of their long, thick bodies attack from beyond Smash's deadly whirlwind.

Barkley stopped, halting his momentum like a finely tuned athlete<sup>6</sup>. "Forward!" he commanded, launching himself toward the nearest whelpling. As the creature moved to defend itself from Barkley's attack, Sarge and the Wolf-kin popped up from the ground, moved in, and pounded the creature with a dizzying array of spear lunges and shield slams. It took only a few seconds for the five of them to bring down the third creature.

With numbers now on their side, and no longer being flanked, Barkley and the Alpha Squad charged head to head against the remaining three whelplings. The battle raged back and forth as the whelplings swiped and gnashed while Barkley and the Wolf-kin waited patiently behind

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Which, in fact, he was. Before accepting his commission as a Red Knight, Barkley was offered a contract by the Redwood Eleven, one of the premier professional pawsball teams in the Canine Kingdom. He turned it down, choosing service to the Kingdom over personal glory, fame, and wealth.

their massive shields, striking out quickly and accurately when opportunities arose.

As the minutes ticked by, Barkley's patience—a virtue he was once well known for—began to wane. The chocolate and jasmine scent was drifting away. By the time the battle was over, it could be gone forever.

He glanced at Sarge, who was locked in combat, and caught his eye. Sarge smiled and nodded. He smelled it, too.

"Go..." Sarge mouthed the word slowly and deliberately.

Barkley nodded. He took down the fourth whelpling with a final flurry of blows, rolled backward to disengage from combat, and took a long, deep breath. He closed his eyes, trying to trace the Queenling's perfume above the overwhelming smell of rot. Hints drifted toward him, unearthing years of memories—her birth, her first day at school, the day she left for her apprenticeship. He'd been there for her the whole time, even if she didn't know exactly *who* he was.

His eyes shot open. He had found the trail.

### Chapter 19

#### Grimoire,

### First Blade of the Sandtail Sword Dancers

"Well, it definitely appears we were wrong about my mother not leaving a rear guard."

"Sand Biscuits," Cleo whispered.

A slight shiver ran down Grim's spine. He'd been friends with Cleo since they were old enough to walk, and this was the first time he'd ever heard her swear. She was scared.

And she had every right to be. Cleo had been able to identify his mother's location with a spell, though it took several attempts to get around her defense against divinations. Mother was just a few minutes north, stationed at the Caves of Eternal Rest—a small area of raised rock faces used as tombs for the wealthy, non-noble citizens of Meowphas.

The good news: she was cornered inside those tombs.

The bad news: she had raised around fifty of the tombs' inhabitants to guard the entrance.

"Anyone have an idea how to get past them?" Grim asked.

Cleo pulled the spyglass from her belt, raised it to her eye, and studied the targets.

"These are not like the beasts the Nomarch raised. Look."

Grim accepted the spyglass from her, then braced his elbows in the sand and peered through it. The undead Catkin were mostly bone covered by tattered scraps of silk cloth, and they carried various weapons—swords, spears, bows. That wasn't strange—wealthy Cat-kin were always entombed with their belongings.

They were, however, talking to each other. And not just simple gestures or one-word grunting. They appeared to be deep in conversation.

Grim gulped. "They're sentient."

"The Nomarch is strong," Cleo said. "Raising mindless skeletons from animal remains is certainly within her realm of power...but this? This is a strength of magic beyond what is known in the Federation today. It has to be—"

"The Ring of the First Pharaoh," Grim finished. "It's not just affecting her mind. It's empowering her, too. How did I not see this sooner?"

"How do we stop her?" Sadie interjected.

"The Nomarch is highly intelligent in her own right, and whatever influence the ring is providing seems to be making her even savvier. We need to think inside the box."

"You mean outside the box," Sadie said, frowning at Cleo.

"No, I was thinking of mimes. Inside the box."

Grim shot her a confused look. "Mimes, Cleo? Are you sure you're okay?"

"I can occupy the majority of the *catdavers*—that's what I'm calling these things, you like it? Anyway, I can occupy them by constructing a box made of magical energy around them. Unless they have a spell-caster in their ranks as trained as I am, I should be able to buy you a few minutes, but it will likely drain me past the point where I can be useful for a while."

"If we can't defeat the Nomarch, we're as good as dead," Grim said. "Do it. Sadie, are you ready?"

Sadie drew her gun and gave it a once-over. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"Cleo, make them mimes."

Cleo jumped up from her spot in the sand and began uttering her focus words while swirling her paws in the air. Her eyes beamed out an intense orange glow that made Grim both want to look away and stare deep into her soul.

A few moments later, a commotion erupted from the entrance to the tombs as the catdavers realized they were trapped and began attempting to break down the invisible force surrounding them.

"Can they break out?" Grim asked.

"Not a chance," Cleo answered as she continued to move her paws around in a circle. "Now go! You only have a few minutes before the spell drops and they shred us all into blood-soaked scratching posts."

Grim leaned forward, gently touching his forehead to hers—a sign of thanks among the Sandtail Clan—before drawing his sword and bounding toward the tombs.

# Chapter 20 Sadie Sablefur, Queenling of the Canine Kingdom

Sadie flinched as she darted by the invisible box filled with catdavers. Logically, she knew they couldn't get to her, but each time they slammed against the unseen wall she expected them to pounce on top of her and rip her limbs straight off her body. Perhaps she'd seen one too many zombie plays at the theatre.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she and Grim entered the dark, rock-carved tomb, leaving the undead guards behind them.

Her fur stood on end as they moved farther inside and the chill of the tomb replaced the heat of the desert. The stone-carved décor and brisk temperature reminded her of home. Would she survive long enough to return to the Kingdom? Would she ever again watch the foamy waves crash against the Morehair Cliffs, or bask in the sheer size of the ancient trees of the Redwood Forest?

She slowed for a moment as another question overwhelmed her. Would she ever see her mother again? They'd never had the strongest relationship, but somewhere deep down she always assumed that one day it would change, that they would come to understand each other
better and accept that they were very different people. Had Sadie run out of time?

Grim stopped short and crouched down just inches before the hallway opened into a much larger cavern. She nearly fell over him as she continued walking.

"Shhh," he whispered, holding out a paw to stop her. "Pay attention."

He was right. She couldn't let her fear and anxiety distract her. She needed to focus.

The Nomarch stood no more than thirty feet in front of them. Her back faced them as she hummed a simple chant—*yo me mo*, *yo me mo*—over and over again. She seemed to be concentrating on a spell, trusting that her guards would keep the tomb from being compromised while she directed the assault on Meowphas with her magic.

Grim turned his head toward Sadie, locked eyes with her, and nodded. It was a simple gesture, but enough to tell her that it was time. He was there to kill his own mother, and she was there to support him. What had started weeks ago as her first diplomatic mission had now become so much more. Today, she was helping to save the world from disaster.

A warm strength unlike anything she'd ever experienced flowed over her. She wasn't like her mother. She wasn't destined to sit on a throne and make decisions about farm leases and parade floats and whatever other nonsense was presented to her. No, she was meant to be out in the world, doing things that truly mattered. Working for the people.

Grim leapt up, sword in hand, took three large steps, and then jumped at the unsuspecting Nomarch.

A bone-chilling, maniacal laugh erupted from her as she ended her spell and spun around, flicking her wrist toward the wall and sending Grim flying into the stone. He slumped to the ground, stunned by the force of the attack.

She stared down at Grim, hate carved into her face like a sculpture of evil. "So much for all that training, Grimoire. You should have studied the arcane arts, as I suggested. Another stupid decision on your part." Her voice made Sadie cringe; it was deep and harsh and unlike anything she'd ever heard coming from a Cat-kin.

Suddenly, the Nomarch turned her attention toward Sadie. "And what about you, Queenling? Do you dare to challenge me as well?"

Sadie stepped forward, her finger gently pulsing on the trigger of her gun. Her hand shook slightly, but at less than ten paces from her target she knew she wouldn't miss.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, unsure why she was apologizing to an insane Cat-kin trying to destroy the world. It just felt like the right thing to do before she killed someone. She pulled the trigger. The spark from the flint singed her fur, as it did every time she took a shot. Though only painful for a moment, it was enough to remind her of the power she held in her paw. The power to take a life.

The bullet hit the Nomarch in the center of her chest, burrowing through her body and causing blood to erupt like a long-dormant volcano finally waking.

Ma'li looked down at the gaping wound, then back up at Sadie.

"Not bad," she said with a nod. "I didn't expect a prim and proper little Queenling to have the gumption." The Nomarch waved her paw over her chest, and a black light knit the wound back together. "You didn't really think you could kill me, did you? I'd hate to think that Dog-kin are so naïve."

Sadie opened her mouth to respond, but she had no words. She was lost, stunned, confused. She'd made the same mistake again—rushing into a situation without being prepared. She had meant well. She had always meant well. But the old saying was true: *The road to the pound was paved with good intentions*<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> This old Dog-kin idiom refers to their belief that those who turned away from the teachings of the Big Red God could not spend eternal life in his realm. Instead, they went to a place called "the pound," where they were forced to wait in loneliness until their indiscretions had been paid.

"You may win today, Nomarch," she retorted, "but my kin will oppose you until their last breath. This is far from over."

"Perhaps," Ma'li answered. "But it's over for you." She pointed a long bony finger at Sadie and released a ray of green energy.

The ray connected with her chest, sending waves of excruciating pain throughout her body. Every muscle seemed to spasm, every bone seemed to shatter. Her skin burned and her blood boiled as she dropped to the floor. Death was coming, and it was angry.

"Noooo!"

The word echoed in her head, bouncing around her confused and disoriented mind. Who had spoken it?

And then, the pain ended as suddenly as it had begun. Her screams were replaced by a set of grunts and howls coming from a voice she knew, but had never heard speak in such a manner.

She opened her eyes. Sir Barkley stood above her, intercepting the Nomarch's assault. The necrotic energy now flowed from her to his shield, but Bash wasn't enough to stop it from harming him. The green light wrapped itself around the metal barricade, searching for life to extinguish, before darting to Sir Barkley's body, weaving itself around him and spreading inside his armor. His dark brown eyes, usually so kind and strong, begged for mercy. His thick gray beard—his singular point of vanity—was tangled, matted, and burning as the energy from the attack worked its way up to his head. His armor, always polished and fine, began to let off steam as the magic melted it—and, alongside it, him.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she watched the old paladin sacrifice himself for her. Years of memories of Barkley flooded her mind. He'd watched over her as long as she could remember. He taught her almost everything she knew: how to ride, how to shoot, how to treat others. He comforted her when she was overwhelmed by her position. He lifted her up when she failed. He celebrated with her when she was successful. He was her biggest supporter.

Understanding rushed through her. Suddenly, she knew why her mother had never told her anything about her father—because to reveal his name would have meant his exile. Barkley might have been one of the great warriors of the House of Piety, but he came from a common bloodline. He would never have been approved as a proper husband for the Queen.

So they hid their love from everyone. The Queen turned down the House of Piety's every choice for her marriage, and Barkley stood silently by her side throughout the years. All at once, the twenty years of quick glances and sideways smiles made sense.

Her fear, along with the last of the discomfort in her muscles, bones, and skin, faded and was replaced by newfound strength. Her gun was reloaded, yet she had no memory of her paws making the motions. The silver and brass weapon glowed with a bright red light. What was happening?

And then she saw him moving in the distance—a bounding, happy dog made of shimmering red light. He looked straight at her. As she stared back, her surroundings froze in time and complete understanding seeped into her mind.

The House of Piety may not have blessed her birth, but the Big Red God certainly had.

She was chosen, as her father had been before her.

The avatar of her god grinned at her and nodded before slowly fading away. Time resumed, and, with it, Barkley's screams.

Sadie popped up, lifted her glowing firearm, and pulled the trigger. If the spark caused her pain, she no longer felt it.

Like her first shot earlier, this one also found its mark, sinking directly into the Nomarch's chest. But this time, something was different. The Nomarch's green ray dissipated into nothingness, and she dropped to one knee. Blood poured from her wound—not the usual blood she would expect from a gunshot, but a thick, black liquid closer to tar.

Sadie loaded her weapon again and took aim at the Nomarch's head. Her conscience passed through a series of debates. Did she need to kill her? Was the Nomarch beyond her help? Was there any other way to end this scourge?

As her morality battled to define itself, a small white paw placed itself over the barrel and slowly lowered the gun.

"I'll take it from here," Grim said.

## Chapter 21

## Grimoire,

## First Blade of the Sandtail Sword Dancers

His mother dropped to her knee, clutching the spurting wound in her chest. The bullet glowed from inside her heart, battling the magical energy for control.

He took a step toward her.

"Stay back," she demanded, her voice higher and softer than before.

"Mother...?" Grim asked. Did her true mind even still exist somewhere in this shell of a Cat-kin?

"Stay away, Grimoire. I can't...I can't control him!"

"What can I do, Mother?"

"The bullet...the magic in the bullet...it's keeping him at bay." She coughed, as if she had a hairball, but only a spattering of blood came out of her mouth.

"How can I help you, Mother? How can I save you?"

"Grimoire...you can only save yourself. Kill me now, before the First Pharaoh regains control. It's the only way."

Grim strengthened his grip on his sword as he listened, almost afraid his weapon would attack without his permission. How could he do this? How could he kill his own mother?

There had to be another way.

"Do it now, Grimoire!" she begged.

Grim stared at the ring on her finger. That blasted piece of jewelry had stolen his mother from him and caused the death of hundreds—maybe even thousands—including his apprentice.

He moved his gaze to his mother's eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered before swinging his sword at her and slicing through the thin bones of her wrist. Her paw, with the ring still locked around her finger, dropped to the floor with a dull thud.

Ma'li smiled, her mind and body free at last. She mouthed, "Thank you," as she dropped to the ground and the divinely-infused bullet lodged in her heart, completing its task.

She was gone.

## Epílogue Ríspar the Dawndancer, Chaplaín of the Sandtaíl Sword Dancers

"How is everyone feeling today?" Rispar asked as she glided into the recovery room. Her patients looked well and seemed to be in good spirits.

"Much better, Rispar," Sir Barkley answered. "I'll be back in fighting shape in no time."

Sadie chuckled. "My father jests, Rispar. He can barely stand."

"In my defense, I did have my soul nearly disintegrated. I'd say it's a miracle I'm here at all. You can thank the Big Red God for that."

Rispar smiled at the old Dog-kin. She'd never known anyone else to survive that kind of spell from a sorceress as strong as the Nomarch. "How about you, Astyn?" she asked. "Any complications from the surgery?"

"Still a bit sore," Astyn said, rubbing his abdomen, "but the surgeon said I should recover my full strength in a few weeks."

"Good," Grim said from his seat in a nearby wicker chair. "Because we've voted, and you're going to be initiated as a full member of the Sword Dancers as soon as possible. We'll need you if we want to properly defend the Federation."

"Has there been no progress locating the Ring of the First Pharaoh?" Sadie asked.

Grim shook his head. "Cleo is following some leads, but it has yet to be found. As far as we can tell, severing the ring from the Nomarch's body cut the tie between her soul and the corrupted soul of the First Pharaoh, who still resides inside of it. The ring seems to have had a contingency upon it that guaranteed it would be teleported to a safe place if the link was ever disturbed."

"And the catdavers?" Grim asked.

"Most of the catdavers escaped. We're tracking their movements, but the news so far isn't good. It seems the ring, wherever it is, still possesses the ability to raise these creatures, though it cannot control them. They appear to have banded into small raiding groups and are under their own command."

Rispar could sense the mood of the room turning to dread. She forced a smile before continuing, "The good news is that the risen herd has been completely wiped out at this point. Once the Nomarch ceased having control over their actions, the defenders of Meowphas were able to eliminate that threat. The damage was severe, though. Thousands are dead, and the city is in ruins." "When I return home," Barkley said, "I will ask the Queen to send a contingent of the Kingdom's best masons to help rebuild the city." He shifted in his bed, cringing with every movement.

"I'm sure the Pharaoh will appreciate that," Rispar said. "As it is, the clean-up is going well. The Herptiles have been contracted to assist and, along with the remaining members of the Alpha Squad, have made great headway into getting the outer wall restored."

"That's good," Grim replied. "And as for the catdavers, the Sword Dancers will hunt them down once we're back at full strength. Together, we'll put an end to this nightmare once and for all."

Rispar glanced down at the floor. She hated to give Grim such grave news, especially so soon after his mother's death. "Commander, that might not be so easy. If the rumors are to be believed, the catdavers have begun searching out allies."

"Allies? From where?"

"The Cult of the Horned God."

"The Goat-kin rebels?" Barkley interjected.

Rispar nodded. "The Horned God represents death and destruction. The two groups have strong common ground."

"Then," Grim said, rising to his feet, "let us be very glad that we've survived this ordeal not only whole, but also with new friends and allies of our own. The future appears complicated, but we'll approach it with strength."

Sadie looked up at him and smiled. "It also sounds kinda fun."

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