

An Apolcalypse Night Tale

Thicker Than Water

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This story is about what happens to Keller and some of the other Night World characters during the night when the Apocalypse finally comes about. You don't need to have read *Strange Fate* to understand it—which is a good thing since *Strange Fate* hasn't been published yet. Rating: all ages, a little gory.

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Part I

They're gone, and I'm left behind.

For the first time since I joined Circle Daybreak, I can't perform my duty. And my duty lately had been the most serious of my life—I'm last resort to Iliana Harman.

You don't understand some part of that? I don't mind explaining. It isn't as if I have anything else to do around here. Not now.

Iliana . . . well, I don't think there *is* an explanation for her. To look at her, as little as she is, and as fragile as she is—you certainly wouldn't think she'd be any good in a fight. But even if she looks like a Christmas angel ornament, she killed a dragon with her witchlight last year—a dragon in its true form—and saved my life.

Not that I'm anybody important. I'm Keller, one of Lord Thierry and Lady Hannah's foot soldiers. My first name? You really want to know that?

It's Raksha.

Oh, you like it?

It means "demon" and as Rudyard Kipling once said, it wasn't given to me as a compliment.

I hate it and never use it, myself, even if I have to admit it's most likely a good name for me. I'm guessing my mother gave it to me just before she dumped me in a parking lot as a baby. Stuck in my half-and-half form, I probably looked pretty damn demonic.

I'm a panther, by the way.

A shapeshifter, I should say. When I'm human I'm a girl with very long black hair and gray eyes, and I wear boots that go "click click" on the floor. That last is because I got sick and tired of hearing people scream when I turn up behind them. I can't help walking like a panther, and the only thing I hate more than screaming is bawling. I have sensitive hearing and—I'll admit it's a fault—I'm not very patient with cowards.

Which is why I didn't understand Iliana for so long. She's a crybaby and she screams if she sees a mouse. Even now, even knowing what she really is, sometimes I wonder if she should be in this business at all.

Circle Daybreak isn't for weaklings. It might be an organization to help humans get along better with the people of the Night World—the vampires and witches and shapeshifters and all the rest of our motley crew—but it's not exactly made up of model citizens, by definition. Half of us have a heritage that taught us that humans were prey to be eaten, and a lot of the other half have spent most of their lives trying to find and kill the evil demons. It's always been that way in the past, humans versus Night People.

Parasites, they called us. Animals. Murderers.

Vermin, we called them. Pests. Meat.



Maybe Thierry and Hannah shouldn't have tried to change it. But they meant it for the best; and for some people Daybreak is their only choice: their last refuge. What does a vampire do when he finds out that his soulmate is a human girl—maybe a vampire *hunter*? What does a Circle Midnight witch do when she's bound by a silver cord to a human boy?

The Night World has a flat rule about this: the sentence is death for all of them. Well, at least you can say for them that they're not wishy-washy.

There isn't much tolerance built into human societies either, though: not for anyone as different as we Night People are. Where would I have ended up if there had been no Daybreakers to take me in? In what circus or sanitarium? I can just see the posters: "See the amazing Cat Girl! But don't try to pet her; those fangs and claws are real!"

You may be able to understand why I'm a little bitter.

Circle Daybreak shelters anyone who's willing to give up the prejudices of the cruel past. From the age of three it's sheltered *me*. In return, I've been more than glad to give all my loyalty to its vision. It's the least I can do, right?

But now everything is different. The cruel past? Right now it looks as if the future is going to be infinitely worse.

If the dreams that that odd girl, Sarah Strange, told us about are genuine prophecies . . . we're doomed to a future darker than anything except complete extinction. No! Extinction would be better, more merciful.

But I can't take that in right now. It's as though my mind were blocked to it. All I can think about is Iliana's violet eyes looking at me as she gave me half of her Witch Child pendant. She knew that she was going to have to go to do the fighting of her life, not against one dragon but against dozens—hundreds—who knows how many.



And she knew that neither Galen or I would be going with her, even though we'd volunteered. Of course, if she'd had her choice about it, I'm sure she'd rather have had Galen. I think she's still in love with him, just a little bit. But she gave the pendant to me, because she knew I would need something when she was gone. And she knew what it was I would need, too. Something that would be a symbol of the tie between us, because the real ties were going to be cut.

That's the way she is, you see. All the ditzzy behavior and pettishness and whining; all that goes away when somebody around her is hurt. It *blows* away, and what's left is the Wild Power, the blue firewielder, Mistress of Air, the Witch Child. And then she fixes the hurt, whatever it is. I don't mean she's a healer. I mean she cares so much about the people around her, and so little about herself, that somehow she *fixes* things. She's been doing it since she was a toddler. She would lay down her life for a stranger—any stranger. Naïve? Yes. Annoying? Definitely. But somehow I love her for it.

And now she's gone and I can't protect her any longer. I want to scream, to curse.

Hardly part of my image, right? Good old Keller, never loses her cool.

I'm so hot I could scald anything I touch.

I found out that once she gave her brand new winter coat to some homeless person, and her mother was so mad that she wouldn't buy her a new one. So Iliana, who likes of all things to be in fashion, wore her old coat, a little too short in the sleeves, a little bit frayed, all winter long—and she wore it with a smile on her face. That was before Circle Daybreak found out who she was and took her away from her family, or should I say, took her whole family to live here, while she lay in cryogenic sleep most of the time, waiting.

Everybody loves her, of course. Even if they're too stupid to see all of her, all of what this miracle of a girl can be, they fall in love with the surface image: those violet eyes and the white-gold hair, and her childish prattling. I don't mind any of that. I have my own mate, my soulmate, and even if Galen is still a little bit in love with her, the silver cord doesn't lie, and we're happy together.

Galen is a leopard. But he's also Prince and Heir Apparent to all the shapeshifters in the world, and he's the most handsome and gentle prince that ever walked the earth, human or Nightworlder. I know I said I didn't like cowards, but if you think being gentle is the same thing—well, I feel sorry for you, and get out of my life. Please. Galen is braver than I am,

and he'd be a last resort for Iliana if they'd let him. But princes don't live just for themselves. They live—and set examples and policy—for everybody they rule over.

So I am . . . I was . . . the last resort, the only last resort for that miracle child. I'll bet you don't even know what a last resort is. I'll tell you.

Lowest down on the list, the ones with the lightest duties, are guardians. We have guardians here in Harmony, the town that Thierry and Hannah created after the millennium, when it turned out that all the prophecies had been wrong and the Apocalypse wasn't coming on schedule. I was eighteen then. I guess I'm getting on eighteen-and-a-half now. That's the way time goes in the Tower in Harmony, keeping everybody young and fresh in case the Apocalypse suddenly came after all.

And it did. It came with a vengeance and there wasn't a damn thing any of us could do about it . . .

But I was talking about guardians. Practically anybody can be a guardian. You just have to have a black belt in karate, similar qualifications in judo and kung fu or other martial arts; or the Powers of a vampire; or a witch commanding amber fire or higher, or be a shapeshifter who's proven by making enough kills that you can use lethal force to protect your "mark." Kiddy stuff.

Next comes bodyguard. A bodyguard has to have more skills, and has to be willing to take a silver bullet—or a pair of fangs—or a lethal spell for their mark. That's a bit above kiddy stuff. You have to be smart to be a bodyguard, because usually dying for your mark is not the optimal action. You're supposed to find a way to keep *them* alive.

After that is escort. Again, you have to be smarter, faster, more skilled than a bodyguard. And you have to know etiquette, too, in case your mark has to go into formal situations, like a grand ball given by Lord Thierry for the Solstice or something like that. It takes not just strength, or skill, but grace to be an escort. And you still have to be ready to take the bullet, of course.

And then finally there's the last resort. Maybe you have some idea of what that is, now. It's the thing that saves the target *when everything else has failed*. The absolute, last, final option.

That's what I am . . . what I was. Last resort to Iliana. I was supposed to protect her when all the guardians and bodyguards and escorts went down. At the last possible second I was the one she was supposed to count on.

And now she's gone and everywhere I look I see computer screens with pictures of the destruction of Paris. I think Paris was the last city they destroyed. Maybe it was just the last picturesque one.

San Francisco was the first. They know there's a Circle Daybreak enclave there.

The dragons, the Apocalypse have come at last. They're beating us hands down, destroying us city by city. Washington, D.C. went around the same time as Bethlehem and Tokyo.

Maybe I'm a little more in tune with it all now. I can feel something of the horror. And I can feel Galen holding me, holding me in one piece, because I can't remember the moment of her going without wanting to fly into a million shards.

I open my consciousness and his mind in turn unfolds like a landscape around me. We've been betrothed for six months of outside time . . . countless months the way this time-bound town reckons it. We haven't aged, but I should have matured. Why can't I open my mind to him in the same way? Even this is almost too much. He is making a paradise out of the landscape for me, bringing up every thought or word of love between us to create another flower *here*, a crystal waterfall *there*, a moon at least three times as large as the real one to glaze everything with silver.

In the face of utter disaster, he's trying to raise my spirits.

He's frightened, not of the disaster, but for me.

I look up at him. He looks, as always, like a prince out of a children's story, with dark gold hair and green-gold eyes as intense and radiant as any cat's. No boy should be so beautiful.

And now that he sees me watching him his eyes change; their pupils enlarging

hugely; a completely involuntary sign of helpless fascination, of love.

I pull him down and kiss him, enchanted by him as if I have as I have been so many times before. Galen wears his heart on the outside, but the inside is much more interesting. And it changed something inside me, when I met them both, to know that there was more than one being without an ounce of malice in their hearts.

I've kissed him too long, too well. I know what he wants now. But here is where our opposite natures betray us.

I'm a panther. In times of stress—and what greater stress could there be—I need to be alone. To hunt, if possible. If not, simply to pace, to run . . . I need to feel the wind rushing past me. I need to push myself until I'm physically exhausted or I'll turn on all I hold dear and (figuratively, fortunately) snap their heads off.

And I need to do it all alone.

Normally it's easy for one or the other of us to bend. And if you think it's always he who gives in you're wrong. He is slowly, I think, and gently taming me. I've found that sometimes the need to be alone, and to exercise can be very sweetly turned into a need to hold him more tightly, and more tightly still until we are both exhausted. I don't mind this form of unhurried, tender taming. Sometimes I need to be reminded that I am more than an animal—and a job.

Sometimes Galen goes with me when I want to hunt. But we're true beasts in our shapeshifted forms and it's hard to stay together. I think he feels guilty afterward, too. Our lovely town of Harmony has a paradise attached to it. That's what they used to be called in ancient Persia. A carefully planned park with miles of room to run, stocked with white-tailed deer and other prey animals from around the world. It's not just for shapeshifters. The vampires need to eat, too—sometimes they need to kill, as I do.

Are you afraid of me yet? You should be. If not for the ample stock of prey nearby I might come wandering into your neighborhood. Other big cats have snapped and paced into quiet streets in the glittering dusk or the misty morning. Joggers are tempting fate. Dog-walkers provide appetizer and entrée. There are usually no consequences because there is nothing left—no body—no evidence—no *habeas corpus*.

Be glad that if I want I can take down a wildebeest, here, in Virginia, in this magically hidden kingdom that shelters even the most savage, as long as humans aren't on the menu.

Right now, Galen is . . . pressing his suit, to use an old metaphor. But this is one of the times I can't be tamed. I *need* to run. I need the open air.

"I'm sorry. I can't. Not now."

Face buried in my hair, he gives me his whole heart, as usual. "I'm afraid it will be the last time."

I am wondering what it feels like to force yourself to lie still when shaking with the need to flee when he releases me. His face is wet, but he smiles and his golden-green eyes are blazing.

"Go," he whispers, with one last caress, dragging his fingers through my hair all the way from scalp to waist. Part of me is screaming, stay with him, moron. But his gaze is steady. "I'm not afraid anymore. I believe in Iliana and the others."

I stare at him. Sometimes I think he is a miracle, too.

I want to believe the way he does. I don't want to be able to imagine Iliana facing a huge dragon—an adult, fully grown, with wings spread and black fire gathering in its open mouth. I don't want to be Keller.

This time I let him kiss me. Then I whisper with all the fierce tenderness of which I am capable, "I'll come back to you. I believe in Iliana, too. Wait for me."

I'm a human being as well as a panther, so I can lie. I don't know what to believe. I don't see how she can succeed. But I won't betray her by putting it into words.

As for the rest, I know he'll wait. And that thought is sweet because it can be very good after waiting. And all the time I'm running alone I'll know that *is* waiting, in exquisite torment for me to come back to him.

I'm off the couch and then out the door at once.

There's only one elevator working and a crowd waiting to go up, to see their families. But I have priority because I work directly for Lord Thierry. I get into the elevator and feel

the acceleration, glad to have something to strain against when I could be straining against Galen. Am I an idiot?

Damn it, I *need* the sky and the grass.

I may need the taste of blood.

And the elevator goes up, taking me through time zones in this bizarre underground Tower that is the heart of the town. I watch the sweeping second hand of my watch as it goes faster and faster. I am leaving behind the depths where time is slowed to the gait of a crippled, ancient tortoise at the end of Archimedes' bridge. I am headed for the town where time only flows as slow as molasses. By the moment the elevator doors spring open I have already adjusted my body to the change.

Nobody moves out of my way fast enough, so I use my elbows. And then my heels are going clickety click and I am out of the building and almost running through town.

Only almost, though. I still have some dignity.

One problem with working in the underground Tower is the dress code. I can't wear shapeshifter hide jumpsuits all the time. A crisp white blouse, a pair of pressed trousers, and ankle boots—that's my usual garb. I can always change if I want to Change.

Except that this time I forgot.

Oh, well. I reach the paradise and quickly go through the procedures to get in. The keepers all know me. Once inside I find a handy tree, crooked and individual enough to remember, and I strip, putting all my clothes in a neat pile with my ankle boots on top.

I don't think anyone who sees those boots will mess with my clothing, no matter how enraptured they are in their animal form. I've done this before, seen werewolves sniff at the pile and run.

Before I shift my shape I take another look at the tree, a good common oak. That willow wand girl, Sarah, affected my senses much as it does. They said she was almost a dryad, the vampires and seers and Old Souls who can feel such things. To me, she felt like a mouse—but a mouse that was trying to be brave so desperately it had an undertone of lioness.

And what had she said? That she believed you could get energy from a tree by laying hands on it and give energy by embracing it.

Right now I am steaming with energy. I don't want to kill if I can possibly help it. Naked, I embrace the rough trunk, lay my cheek against a bole, and try to channel my energy out through my arms. I am perfectly still except my grappling with this wood. And then I feel it, a release of energy into the bark and through it, causing sap to race, and a simultaneous shock like lightning from my palms to the soles of my bare feet, resting on the trees knobby roots.

It feels . . . wonderful.

Now I need to shift.

All I need to do is to let go. There's no thinking involved. It's just like pulling one end of a bow-tied ribbon. I pull, once, hard, and my body springs free.

As always I force myself not to try to make the moment in between last longer. It's a moment when my whole body is *free*; weightless as a candle flame, shapeless as a gust of wind, except that today it's more like a forest fire or a tornado. For just a second I feel total release and then I am subject to gravity again and everything is changing. A glossy coat sprouts and covers my nakedness, a tail sprouts and gives me something to lash. My bones and muscles shift and I feel an exquisite *frisson* as my whiskers fly free. I fall forward and land, crouched on four delicate but heavy feet.

My whole world changes.

I see heat; I feel every object in the park with my entire body. I hear the noise of some small rodent digging frenetically just five feet behind me. I hear the wind. I look up and see the sky in different colors, none of them blue.

I can feel the low growl in my throat—a continuous rumbling sound.

I'm purring.

The wind is chasing clouds through a sky that has no end. And the wind brings the scent of three white tailed deer in the trees just east of me.

I crouch and leap and come down running.

And then there are no words. There are only sensations as I run and run, faster and faster, drawing energy from my terror, from my grief, from my love.

I don't expect anyone to understand that: that I express my love by running away. But I'm a panther. You'd understand and be damned grateful *if I expressed any feeling* by running away from you.

I won't try to pretend, though. Mostly I'm running because I need to run, on a raw physical level.

It's bliss.

Once again I feel almost weightless as powerful muscles propel me forward faster, faster, faster. My adrenaline is so high that it feels absolutely effortless. Each leap powers me into the next leap. It's like running on the Moon except for the speed. Trees fly by, the deer fly by, running from a predator that couldn't care less about them for the moment. The fence is directly in front of me; I've already run the full length of the paradise. I'm tempted to leap it; in this state I know I can do it. Instead I sheer off at the last minute, running beside the fence, racing it.

I run until I do feel the effort. Panthers are sprinters, not marathon runners. But I push myself and keep going. I can feel my heart pumping, sending blood into necessary muscles. The muscles begin to tire, to rebel. I won't let myself slow. This is what I've been waiting for.

I . . . can't keep up this pace.

But I do.

My heart pumps harder, harder still; my traitor breath whistles. My muscles try to knot, but I keep them stretched, keep them supple, not allowing a moment's slowing.

A hundred more yards. And a hundred more. And a hundred more.

And finally I blossom for myself, almost as I would have blossomed for Galen had I stayed back at the tower.

Second wind.

That's what they call it, and right now, with my beloved Mistress of Wind gone, I don't find the name as pedantic as I usually would. I *am* a second wind in this forest right now. As the endorphins finally flood my body I decide that I will not kill today. I've run the entire length of the fence anyway; I've circumnavigated the park and set every other living being inside it fleeing.

With my blood singing and my body exhausted I've achieved what I set out to. My brain, at last, doused in the endorphins and the weariness, lets go of the feeling that I'm going to start screaming and not ever be able to stop.

I let myself slow.

Now to go back to Galen. He deserves anything I have left.

My senses are sluggish, my sight dim. I almost run into the young man before I smell him.

I stop. Usually now it's a matter of tiptoeing delicately away with my tail between my legs, trying to look harmless and convince the person I've encountered that I'm not going to bite their arm off.

But this one is different. He's lamia, I smell: a family vampire. He's let himself age to a (to humans) sophisticated and probably attractive twenty four or five. He's single, though, no intimate smell of a mate on him. But under the overwhelming park smell of trees there is a touch of Lord Thierry and Lady Hannah. And he's vaguely familiar smelling. Undertones of paper and computer scent—plus the calfskin leather of a briefcase—and, ugh, alligator skin shoes. *And* watch strap.

If I were human I could identify him more easily by aura, but in my animal form the only aura I pick up is "does/doesn't like cats." All cats have it and know exactly who to rub up against. You guess which we pick.

But I know this man now. He's an attaché to Lord Thierry, picked up the last time Thierry went to the Los Angeles Circle Daybreak enclave. His name I can't access, not in my current state, but his identity is clear. We've had several talks about improving satellite communication between enclaves.

He's hungry, too. He's here for feeding, for bloodletting, but I've scared all the

critters away. He doesn't smell that upset.

He's clapping.

"Brava! It must be you, Keller. Only you would be training at a terrible time like this."

Why does he want to start this one-sided conversation with a lie? He knows it's me because vampires can smell almost as well as I can, and—this is the really obvious bit—I'm the only black panther here in the Harmony enclave. He smells of deceit.

I give a short snort, and leave him to interpret it. I turn away.

But he's crossed the distance between us and he is scratching behind my ears now.

Under other circumstances, and with someone else, I might encourage that. After such a good run I might even let them pet my forehead and chin. That's as far as it goes with petting me, except for Galen. I'm a one-man panther, and he's a one-panther guy.

Now, though, I don't have time for ear-scratching. I huff. He doesn't stop scratching. I growl.

Nobody could fail to get that message. Unlike my purring, my growl starts deep and sweeps into a buzz saw sound that usually sets people running.

But he keeps scratching. Why does he smell so strongly? It's overloading my senses, dulling them even further to everything around me.

My whiskers flicker across his hand and jerk back in revulsion.

I instinctively don't like him.

". . . when I saw you running round and round the park," he was saying. "You must be pretty tired, but you looked—magnificent. Glorious. You truly are a creature of the darkness. Everything in your way ran for cover. I have to say I almost ran away myself."

Another lie. Doesn't he know that even lamia smell different when they're trying to deceive? It takes a made vampire: one who's exchanged enough blood that they die and come back to confuse my nose. He's been running and sweating all right, but he's been *running after me*.

Idiot. Why?

"Keller, you're one of the few who can survive in the new world that's coming. I'd like to see you do that. Resume your human form and let's talk about it."

Like hell I'd resume a weaker form. But I'd come this way on purpose and I see something now that electrifies my senses and brings me out of the last of my endorphin haze and into the moment.

I've come back to the oak tree where I'd left my clothes in a neat pile. There is no neat pile now. There is no pile. There are shreds and tatters. Even my boots are ruined. And there are claw marks in the tree that I'd given energy to. The claw marks make almost vertical splits in the tree, far deeper than anything I could manage.

I take this in much faster than it takes to say it all. And then I *look* at Whitcombe, whose name I finally remember.

"Sorry about that," he chuckles, deep in his throat. "I had to find your insignia—such a tiny thing to swallow. I didn't want you calling anyone to interrupt us. And I don't think anyone will be coming, now. I don't smell anyone else, do you? At least no one else alive."

I have screwed up royally. Somewhere around here I can smell the keeper—dead. Not drained of blood, though. Dead of some massive injury. The sort a panther might be able to do—I can't be sure until I see him. My nose tries to find him while my brain races. It can't be a setup for murder because I'd hardly do that to my own clothes. Unless it's a really clever setup, taking that into account—assuming I'd ruin my clothes to divert suspicion.

Whitcomb's still chuckling, deep in his throat. And I am remembering what Sarah Strange had said about the future:

"The dragons let some vampires live. They run the Houses—the farms where they raise people for the dragons to eat. And the guards are mostly werewolves but there are a few other kinds of shapeshifters, too . . ."

But this is no vampire. And no vampire could have split that tree like that.

"Have you got an answer for me, little girl?" he asks, gutturally, and I wish that I had not just gone through a marathon. I channel energy to my back legs.

"Yes," I hear my idiot mouth say. "Let's see what you really look like, you *bastard*."
So he shows me.

Despite my smartass mouth my first thought is *impossible*. *Impossible* because I know Whitcombe, and this is really him, not some dragon imitation of him. *Impossible* because we can't have been infiltrated this deeply, for this long. *Impossible* because this horror simply couldn't be happening.

I've stood up to a dragon before. Along with my trained team of agents and Iliana, a Wild Power and the Witch Child. And Galen. And now, much as I hate to drag Galen into this, somebody's going to need to have a try at this thing once I'm gone. It won't take him long to dispose of me, and then there is the whole town for him to go through.

I *pull* on the silver cord, as hard as if I want to break it. I've never tried this before, only heard of it. Cheap, no frills long distance communication—I hope. I wouldn't have tried it for fun since that would have made a miracle—well, petty. And then I try to send a simple message, although I know I will never hear whether Galen got it or not.

Dragon, I think, knowing that that word will get through if anything can. *In the paradise*. And then, a little ashamed, *I loved you*.

It doesn't occur to me to say *help*. This isn't pride, I swear. It's just that I know I will be finished before *help* can arrive. It's a long way to the Tower.

And now in front of me like some recurrence of the nightmare when I'd faced the first dragon, is another one. Splitting Whitcombe's skin like a peach and rising out of it. More hideous than any dinosaur, and yet with dinosaur-like skin and a dinosaur's stance, it stands tall beside the ruined oak tree. Then it spreads its huge wings and the stars are blotted out and for a moment my heart goes sick and faint, just looking up at the sheer hellish size of it.

A trihorn. Wonderful. Since Sarah's helpful revelation that dragons lose their horns as they age rather than gaining them, I know that this beast is even more dangerous than the one I had faced before.

Do I wonder, for just an instant, whether I can run?

Part II

Yes.

The shame of admitting that is worse than fear. But, look, I may be a grunt, but I'm no idiot. It had made me an offer; for three beats of a hummingbird's wings I wonder if maybe it wants me enough that it won't destroy me and I can get out and come back with reinforcements.

But the second that the thought comes I throw it away. The dragon is laughing now, the deep bass laugh that I remember. The smell of it is overwhelming and I taste metal at the back of my throat. And I know I'm not going anywhere.

Well, figuratively I'm not. In real life the dragon's transformation has only taken a moment; my thoughts an instant longer. And now I am gathering my muscles under me, and now setting them free, and now I am racing up the oak tree, still sturdy enough to support me as I go straight up, and up, and up, and then I do a backwards somersault in the air and come down with claws out and jaws ready.

As I come down the dragon flinches away but I've already allowed for that in my calculations. I hit its hideous muzzle dead on and flip my body again because I know what I need to do.

Bite the horns off.

If it sounds impossible you don't know the strength of a panther's jaws. I can crush a wildebeest's spine with one snap. This won't be so easy, but like a bulldog I am known for my ability to hold on.

The dragon makes a guttural sound but doesn't scream. Its goal is the opposite of mine: it doesn't want to attract attention. I bite down hard, tasting its poisonous black blood, feeling cartilage and muscle crunch. And then I simply keep up the pressure, clamping my jaws tighter and tighter, hearing the wonderful sound of more things snapping and tearing as I shake my head violently without ever letting up on the strength of my bite.

The dragon scrabbles at me ineffectually with its relatively puny upper arms. It has

claws too, and I feel thin streaks of pain down my back as it rips flesh. Nothing to worry about.

This is the last time I will think that particular phrase.

The reason I need to bite the horns off is that this is the seat of the dragon's power. I am down to something steel-hard at the center of one horn when the dragon lets rip with that power-right down my throat.

Black fire. Generated in this vibrating horn to be channeled wherever necessary. Now lashing into me, burning my jaws, my throat, my internal organs. I can feel it crackle like lightning, making my fur stand on end all over my body.

Agony. Paralyzed, my body tries to fall off the dragon's face, into a cavernous mouth. But my jaws won't let go.

Enraged, the dragon tosses its head. I go flying, describe an arc in the air, and smash into the ground . . . hard.

I feel ribs break. In my mouth is the outer covering of the dragon's horn, an unimportant trophy that I spit out since the inner horn is still intact, smooth and hard and shining like ebony in the moonlight. I can see it as I feel the ground shake. The dragon is stepping toward me.

I give a panther's scream of pain and rage. Time to try again.

I drag my bruised body to its feet.

The beast in me wants to try the exact same method of attack. The human knows I have to get inventive.

My fear has been conquered. This is something the beast understands, even enjoys. A fight to the death. But again, the human interferes, and I still have plenty of room for terror for my . . . my loved ones, I guess you would call them.

This bastard is going to take a lot of killing.

In my mind's eye I see them all standing, all in danger. Galen first, of course. But Winfrith and Nissa-my longtime teammates, too. Lady Hannah. To know her is to pledge your life to her. No, she's gone, but Thierry, my liege lord is here. And Aradia, the blind seer, and oh my gods-Iliana's family.

They are all there in the town, her family. Her little brother, still a baby, still calling me "Kee-kee" for kitty. He is asleep now, safe in his bed. Either I get better, smarter, more deadly-and fast-or safe is the last thing he'll be.

From somewhere I find more speed. I race around the dragon, ignoring the charred feeling in my gut and the grinding of bone against bone in my chest. I start to leap over the huge tail, not mobile enough to lash like mine, and then I get an idea.

I turn at the last second and climb the dragon.

Just like a tree, up the tail and up the spine and up the head, while the creature tries to buck me off but Kee-kee has the two-inch-long claws of a were-panther, and I'm not going anywhere except over the flattened dome of skull and straight to the same horn I attacked before.

This time my jaws need to be stronger. They will be, I promise myself as I fly at the naked horn.

They are. I open them wide for the greatest striking power and then bite down as if I wished to drive my own fangs through the opposite sides of my mouth.

Big crunch and I feel the horn break in two. I swallow some black fire before the thing comes completely free, but then it's loose in my mouth and the fire has no power to harm me.

Not from *that* horn at least.

I know what will come next and it happens. The dragon tosses its head, trying to throw me off again. But just before the snap comes that should send me sailing off, I chomp on the next horn. My body whiplashes in the air, and I feel something else inside me tear just as the black fire comes roaring down my throat again.

And then it's just a long nightmare of burning and hurting and channeling all my power to my jaws, which are somehow still hanging on as my body flaps like a flag in a brisk wind. The monster is clawing me, taking strips off my already flayed back. And the black fire is . . . indescribable. But at last, somehow in the nightmare I hear the crack that means I've

severed horn number two.

Something gives way inside me then and I let myself be thrown off, to land this time in the jabbing, tearing branches of a tree before dropping like a stone. I wind up landing feet first, but off balance and it sends a hot shock up one leg that means I have broken bones there, too.

I don't have time to black out, yet it seems there is a little skip in the action. Now the dragon is looming over me, its black blood pattering around me like rain.

Its mouth opens, undoubtedly to finish roasting me alive. I know what I have to do-evade, find a tree, and leap to the attack . . . but my body is . . . sluggish. It doesn't seem to be obeying my commands.

In something like a dream, I fumble for the silver cord again. Come speedily, I send down it-haven't I done this before? *But use all caution. The beast is deadly.*

And, miraculously, I hear an answer.

We're here! the response comes-in a telepathic voice that I don't recognize-*for the Goddess's sake, lie still. Don't move.*

And then, in a kind of fever dream, I see the impossible. I see *myself*, in human form, launch upward off a ninja staff and toss a dozen shuriken-those deadly metal ninja stars-into one of the dragon's eyes.

My eyesight is understandably blurry at this point, but still, if I weren't sure I was crouched down here, I would swear I was up there. It isn't just the hair and clothing-I see my face in full moonlight. I see myself land lightly and sprint away, long black hair flying, crisp white shirt reflecting silver. The dragon, pawing at its face, turns toward my other self with a whining sound.

Now, Keller! Run away and then come back!

Somebody knows me inside and out. If they had just said "run away" I never would have moved at all.

And now there is another figure, compact and male, who does not use artificial weapons, but like me, his teeth and claws. He tears into the dragon's horn with his teeth and plunges his claws into the dragon's other eye, at the same time jolting it with kicks to the tender insides of its nostrils.

The dragon screams.

I have leaped, or rather launched myself and borne the impact somehow, into the shadow of another tree. The dragon is blind now, or almost. I gather myself for another horn.

Can you hear me? I call.

Yes. Are you well enough to attack? Go around back and we'll distract it.

It's a male voice-the vampire. But before we can put our plan into action, the beast changes tactics. It seems it no longer cares for secrecy. And it shows how little we understand these creatures.

With a roar that hurts my cat-ears, it turns and belches forth a huge stream of black fire from its mouth, swinging its head like a flamethrower, setting the paradise on fire.

Are you hurt? two telepathic voices ask me. I am too busy to say more than No!

I am in place and ready for the final assault. I am going to climb the dragon again.

I leap onto the tail and run up the backbone, forcing every step, because it knows me now, and it's trying to throw me off before I can get to the horn. Nothing on this earth could stop me, though, now that I've started. I sink my claws in deep, ignoring my wounds, ignoring my dizziness until at last I reach the summit of the head and open my jaws wide.

And then I hear what I've been waiting for.

Galen's voice. *Wait, Keller! Wait for us! We're all here!*

And the voice of Lord Thierry, who is a vampire, of course, ringing out over all the others in a tone not to be disobeyed: *Let her draw last blood! She deserves the honor!*

The very presence of them gives me new strength. I open my jaws to their widest and snap at the final horn as if I can win the war by severing it in one stroke. I can't do either, of course. And then there are more minutes of nightmare until I sense another cat running up behind me. The horn is hanging on by an iron thread now. I recognize the leopard as my soulmate and he leans against me, holding his body up with mine as with one last crunch the

horn falls severed to the ground.

The dragon bellows, shattering the night with the sound.

The others close in then with guns and steel-tipped arrows and all manner of weapons. But they wait. They wait for Galen to snatch a naked young woman off the back of the beast and leap to the ground. I'm only barely aware of this part, or of the dragon's last scream.

* * * * *

I'm in the Tower infirmary. I've just opened my eyes to the most beautiful sight in the world: my soulmate's face. My soulmate's uninjured face, except for a long cut along one cheek. I wonder why they've left that unhealed.

I make a hoarse sound, but he is already bringing a cup of water with a straw to my lips.

How do you feel? he asks, in tones of desperation held barely in check. This close, the cord is very taut and we have no trouble speaking.

Like a dragon ran over me, I answer. Smartass that I am.

According to Quinn's report, you ran over the dragon even though you were obviously-badly injured, he says and I know that he is modifying to "badly injured" the words "almost dead." I'm amazed to be alive myself.

Were there any other dragons? I ask. How badly were we compromised?

A few others, he admits. I don't see how it could have happened. Some of the-people-had been in Circle Daybreak for years. He adds because he knows me, and knows what I must be wondering, *There's nothing new about Iliana and the others.*

So we're still in the same situation.

Yes. But for now, he looks me up and down with something like anguished joy in his eyes, *at least we can say we're alive. The healers worked on you for twelve hours straight, you know. They took it in shifts. Even Winfrith insisted in helping with her witchfire. They're saying, only Keller. Of everyone still here, only Keller would take on a three-horned dragon alone.*

"Well," I croak, just to see how badly my voice is damaged, "only- Keller would be a charred or squashed piece of bloody flesh if Quinn and Rashel hadn't turned up when they did."

Galen doesn't get defensive. Instead he looks, smiling, beyond my right shoulder. I turn painfully in bed-this bad after twelve hours of healing work, eh? and see myself lying in an identical bed. John Quinn, his hands heavily bandaged, is sitting beside it.

Except that it's not me, of course. It's Rashel Jordan, Quinn's soulmate. This close I can see all the little differences that make us unique. I have gray eyes, she has green. My chin is a bit more triangular. Her hair is a little straighter and she tends to wear it back, held by a ninja band around her forehead. Still, I'm fascinated by all the little things that are the same. It's like looking into a slightly distorted mirror. Why have I never realized how much alike we are?

And of course, there is the insurmountable difference: I am of the Night World, a shapeshifter, a panther. I come from the darkness. She is from the Day World, a human, even if a human with extraordinary athletic skills.

The guys are looking smug. I'm not sure why, but I ignore it for the moment.

"Hey," I say to Rashel Jordan.

"Hi," she says, smiling a little.

"You were the first one to hear me?"

"Yes." She looks down. Although I've never seen her look anything but competent around the Tower, right now she seems to feel awkward.

"Then she told me," Quinn cuts in smoothly, "and she was just wild about it. She wouldn't stay and wait for help; she was frantic. So we headed for the park together. I guess we heard you because were just walking around town-Rashel didn't feel like sitting still."

She didn't, eh? Chalk up another likeness. But she, sensible girl, had taken her soulmate with her, and they obviously made a deadly hunting pair.

"Thank you for coming," I say as formally as possible, when I'm lying flat on my back,

and looking, I'm sure, like I've been pulled through a rat's ass. "Both of you were great."

"Oh, we were, were we?" Quinn says softly, watching me with his black-on-black eyes. "Well, you were looking pretty good yourself. Like a housecat attached to an elephant, maybe. And refusing to let go."

I nod in thanks. I don't blush. I'm curious to see the two of them together now that we're not fighting.

Everyone knows their story. Rashel became a vampire hunter at the age of five or six when good old Hunter Redfern-he was alive back then-killed her mother and her kiddy friend. She was one of the very best, hating all "parasites" . . . until she met Quinn. Then the soulmate principle worked its magic and she ended up falling in love with him, but that never stopped her from trying to kill him, too, until he'd promised to give up human blood and join Circle Daybreak with her.

And John Quinn had once, five hundred years ago, been Hunter Redfern's heir. He had a long and an evil reputation, but he was here to wipe it out, and I didn't see anything particularly evil about him. He wasn't big but he was incredibly fast and skilled. I am glad that he had just happened . . . somehow . . . to pick up my warning cry.

But he hadn't, had he? It just didn't make any sense. Quinn was the vampire. Rashel wasn't even a lost witch. How could she have picked me up first? Before Galen had?

"Anyway," I say, "may we hunt together soon." I struggle a little to get my right arm from under the sheets-it feels as if the shoulder has been dislocated-and hold my hand out to Rashel.

She takes it in a firm grip, realizes how weak I am, and gentles the hold. She squeezes. I squeeze back.

"May I just get a little background information from you two, which you couldn't give while you were both unconscious?" Galen says in his most formal, most princely manner. Quinn smiles-wickedly. I wonder what game they are playing. All my background information is in the Tower computers, and all Rashel's, too. And there is very little about me that Galen doesn't know by heart.

"What is your date of birth?" He looks at me first. Now I really wonder if he's gone nuts. He knows I don't know that and that I don't like to have to admit it.

I refuse to flush. "I don't know when it was, but probably in the middle of December, eighteen and a half years ago."

He turns to Rashel. "And yours?"

"December 11," she says slowly.

"Which makes you eighteen and a half, too."

"Well-yes."

Galen turns back to me, his voice gentling. "And you were raised by foster parents from the age of three because someone-you presume your mother-left you in a cardboard box stuck in your half panther, half human form."

I feel the urge to go into my full panther form. He knows I don't like talking about this under strangers.

Please, love. Just trust me, he thinks. His eyes are dark because their pupils are so wide. He's begging me.

I melt.

But I can't let these strangers see that. I take a deep breath, tear my eyes from his, and nod.

"And you-" Galen says to Rashel.

"Whoa," she says, letting go of my hand to hold her own up in a "stop" gesture. "All anybody needs to know is that I was raised by my mother, and I lost her in kindergarten."

"I'm sorry," Galen looks truly chastened, but he persists anyway. That's how my soulmate gets places most people only dream of. "I was just going to ask you, though, about your *father*. Do you know anything about him?"

"He was a Marine. He was killed before my mother and I don't really remember much of him."

"Rashel," Quinn says, in a voice I've never heard him use before. So tender. Barely audible.

Rashel Jordan looks at him, and I look at him, and I see him looking at her in a way I've never seen him *look before*. A way I wouldn't have thought him capable of looking. I have no idea of what their unspoken conversation might be, but I think she melts.

What I *know* is that she says in a quiet voice, "That's what I always thought, anyway. But when Quinn and I moved to Circle Daybreak I brought along a picture of my parents in a ceramic frame. Wouldn't you know, it got smashed. And inside I found a letter from my father to my mother. It seems he didn't die after all; he just left her."

"I've got the letter," Quinn pats his pocket and I can see that Rashel is shocked. "I went down and got it while you two were being healed. Can I read a bit of it to Galen and Keller?"

Rashel is looking at him wonderingly. Then she nods, with a little shrug. I can see her bracing herself to hear it, and bracing herself to see Quinn, normally so dexterous, fumble in his jacket pocket. Those bandages make him clumsy. At last he gets the letter out.

It's on distinctive paper

I swear, and then fall silent, thinking.

Quinn reads:

"Melisande,

You've put up with me and with them as well as any wife and mother could. But I know how you feel—even about me. I just don't know how to show you that it isn't true. I want to prove I could never hurt you—and yet I know I don't have the control I did before I went overseas. I know the fits are coming on me more and more often. I know the child frightens you. What can I do, darling, except take her away? Then you'll be an ordinary widow with an ordinary child. And I'll go back to my own people—if they'll have me, with our darling little misfit. At least I'll go until I can stand before you—always—as a man."

"It goes on," Quinn says in his soft, dark voice. "But I don't think you need to hear any more. It's clear that it was written by a very troubled man—or was he a man? What if it was written by a very troubled shapeshifter? 'I want to stand before you as a man' can have two meanings. Rashel always assumed that it had something to do with his disappearing and being dishonorably discharged by the Marines. But what if you simply take it literally? He wants to be able to stay human all the time and never give in to the urge to change . . . to hunt? And what about the child, the 'darling little misfit?'"

"That paper," I say. I've been forcing myself not to interrupt. "Please, may I see it?"

I say paper instead of letter because it's the paper itself I'm interested in. It's light blue and very stiff, almost glossy.

But when I see the handwriting my heart almost stops in my chest. It's familiar. Very familiar.

When I was dumped in the parking lot I had a torn scrap of paper with me, inscribed with my first name, Raksha, and these cheery sentiments:

People die . . .

Beauty fades . . .

Love changes . . .

And you will always be alone.

. . . all on a scrap of stiff blue paper, later worn almost to the texture of cloth. I had always assumed that it was my mother who had abandoned me, my shapeshifter mother who was disgusted that I, a full shapeshifter, couldn't hold one form or the other, but was stuck as a human toddler with panther ears and eyes and tail.

Now it seemed that every one of those assumptions was wrong.

I try to explain all this to Rashel without babbling. All right. I probably babble. Quinn looks at me in silent amusement; he's never seen me so animated, I'm sure. But it all seems so clear to me now.

"What if it was one of those early pairings? A couple that found they were soulmates, or just fell in love, and got married. The husband was a panther shapeshifter; the wife was human. They thought that love would conquer all, and that they could live together, and they had children—twins. Fraternal but still almost exactly alike. One twin was human but with almost superhuman reflexes. The other kid was a mess. Maybe even born in the half-and-half shape. Neighbors stare at the deformed child with pity and disgust—how can the

mother take that? And the father-he doesn't sound like a very stable character to me to start with. He's denying himself the outlet of shifting-ever-and that alone can drive shapeshifters crazy."

I can see tears welling up in Rashel's eyes. "My mother-when we would go to the zoo I would always want to see the lions and the tigers and the other big cats. And she would never take me or Timmy there. Timmy was my friend that . . ." She shakes her head hard. "Anyway, she would never take me to see them. She would buy me an extra big ice cream cone and popcorn and we would go to see the monkeys or the giraffes."

We are almost talking over each other by now. "But my father-think how bitter and sick he must have been to leave me that scrap of paper. Not to mention leaving me. I guess he just couldn't cope with a demon-baby."

"I think maybe they both did the best that they could," Galen puts in quietly. He looks almost like Iliana when he says it.

Quinn gives a cynical snort.

And somewhere, in between the two them, I think, is the truth.

Rashel says wonderingly, "I used to mark my vampire victims with a mark like cat's claws. That was my name, too, in the vampire hunter gangs I ran around with. 'Rashel the Cat.' I used to like to hear that Night People were afraid of the Cat. I don't remember where I got the name. It just seemed . . . suitable."

I say fretfully, "I wish I still had my piece of paper. I was going to burn it, but it disappeared on its own. And now there's no way to be sure, and there never will be."

"Oh, surely that's not true," Quinn says. "A simple blood test-we can even check your insignia."

"My insignia," I say haughtily, "is currently inside a dragon."

Looking a little sheepish, Galen feels in his pocket.

He looks even more shamefaced as he holds out a much-folded scrap of light blue paper. "I took it before you could burn it," he admits, catching my eye apologetically. I thought someday it might give us a clue about where you came from.

I look at him steadily, and with gratitude. "And you were right." *Thank you, Galen, I think. Thank you for everything.*

He flushes beautifully-and something occurs to me.

If he were still a little bit in love with Iliana wouldn't I have seen it? Wouldn't there be a closed door in his consciousness, something I couldn't see behind, a place I couldn't go?

But there never is.

He always just throws himself open completely.

There are many locked doors in my own consciousness-places even I don't want to see. But I resolve that next time-and I already promised him that there would be a next time-I will be more open.

"They're the same! They're identical!" Rashel is saying wonderingly, comparing the two pieces of paper in her hands. Of course they are. I smelled that and saw it as soon as Galen took my scrap out. Oh, they've been different places, and one is much more battered and handled, but the stock and the weave and the ink are, as Rashel says, identical.

"Then it really means," she raises her green eyes to mine almost shyly, "that I have shapeshifter blood in me. Panther blood."

"If it's anything to brag about," I say. "You can brag on it."

"And it really means," Rashel adds softly, "That we're sisters. Twin sisters."

I am surprised at the twinge I feel on hearing that.

I have a sister. A twin. My parents may be gone, but this girl in the other bed lay curled tight beside me for nine months in the womb. That's awfully close.

I wish I had known before the Apocalypse. I want Iliana to know Rashel as my sister. I want to know her myself, that way.

The pain of missing Iliana and not being able to protect her doesn't just go away because of this. But the closeness that I already feel for Rashel is balm to my heart.

"Do you think," Rashel is saying, "that it's really impossible for me to shapeshift? If I have the blood, do you think I could try to learn?"

She means will I try to teach her. Of course I will. I owe her my life, for one thing.

She smiles, a radiant smile that makes me involuntarily touch my own lips.

"Look, there are three things to be happy about," she says.

"There are?" I say.

"Yes. First of all we killed a dragon, and we're not even Wild Powers with the blue fire. I think that's a good sign. Second, we found out that we were sisters. And, third, we're still here."

She's right. We're still here in Harmony, compromised or not. Right here, right now, we're still alive.

That is a good thing, I think and look at Galen.

He must have gone through hell while the healers were working on me for twelve hours. I think I was just a bag of panther skin with broken bones and charred organs floating around inside.

Please don't talk like that, he begs, and I'm surprised at how glad I am that the silver cord is working this way. It was terrible, he goes on, but Rashel and John were good friends all that time. They wouldn't let a healer near them-sent anyone who had a drop of power left in to see to you.

John? I've never heard anyone call Quinn by his first name. Only Galen, I think. Only he can get past the thorniest, thickest armor to see what's underneath.

More than just a little like Iliana, I think.

He catches the thought and flushes more deeply still.

And then a voice just outside the door says, "All rise! All rise for Lord Thierry!"

I look up to see a very young herald, who is looking from me to Rashel-to my sister-flat on our backs in bed and covered in bandages. The guys are already on their feet and both of them are poised to jump if either of us should be stupid enough to try to move.

It's horribly undignified, though. I've never appeared before my liege lord like this, and I'd like to sit up at least.

A certain Quinn-ness has appeared in my soulmate's eyes, though. He locks gazes with me, wordlessly assuring me that he'll raise holy hell if I even ask to be propped up with another pillow.

I feel my gaze slide away. Maybe there are such things as lion tamers who use only their eyes to control their beasts. And maybe my sister and I haven't chosen such different mates, after all.

Instead I look at the young herald, who is looking as if she wished she were dead, and I hear behind her the doctor's opinion of asking either of us, and especially me, to twitch a finger.

Lord Thierry settles it by saying gently, "Let's just dispense with the formality, shall we?" He comes in, looking as gorgeous as ever with his moonlight colored hair pulled back into a ponytail and his dark, fathomless eyes taking in everything at once. He makes a slight bow to Galen, who merits this as prince of the shapeshifters, and then he makes a slight, eloquent gesture that clearly says, let's all sit down and talk like friends. When you're that many thousands of years old you learn to say a lot with a little movement.

He smiles and draws up his own chair. The herald hurries outside, stiff with horror.

There is something very sad about that smile that I recognize. It's not quite his smile from the days before he found Lady Hannah, but almost. Of course, I think. She's gone with Iliana, too. And he should know if anyone does that they're not coming back.

I have a realization that sends me flying bolt upright, bandaged hands scrabbling at my neck. Galen grabs for me, voicelessly crying out,

No, love, don't! At the same time Quinn makes a sound of surprise and concern, and my sister says, "Kel-I mean Raksh-I mean, Keller!"

"Here," Thierry says, still gently, because everything he does is gentle, but getting up hastily. "This is what you're looking for."

He puts into my bandaged hand Iliana's flower necklace.

I slump back, my muscles screaming, my eyes shut until I can make the tears go away. But they're tears of happiness. I hadn't taken the necklace off when I stripped because I knew it would still fit me in my panther form, and because-well, because I planned to never take it off. But after that fight . . .

"My lord!" I say. "You must have searched the entire paradise. How many people . . . " I can't say any more. I'm on the verge of bursting into tears like a baby.

"They were all volunteers," he says, and smiles. "They were very happy to do it for the hero of the day. The other two dragons took mobs of witches, I might add-and AK-47s. In the future-if there is any future-people will talk about today as the day that Keller killed a dragon."

I don't dare open my mouth to say a word. I might have mentioned before, I hate bawling. Especially if the person doing it is me.

Instead I look over at Rashel and Quinn, and then up at Galen, pleadingly.

He'd risen when Thierry got up, and now he makes a full bow to him, which he does very well, incidentally.

"We're honored and grateful beyond our ability to express," he says, expressing it perfectly. I relax a little, trusting him. "And, of course, it must be a day for John and Rashel, too . . ."

I definitely see Thierry's eyebrow quirk at the "John." I glance sideways at Quinn who is looking at my soulmate as if he wants to strangle him.

How many times did I want to strangle you, Iliana? I think fondly about my necklace's former owner.

"In any case," Thierry says, "I've come to thank you, formally and informally, for all the peoples' lives that you have saved. It won't be forgotten, as long as there is a Circle Daybreak left to remember it." He looks from Rashel, whose bandages still allow her to be recognizable and at me, wrapped from head to toe like a mummy.

"Not so much alike today," he says, and for a moment the sadness is almost gone from his smile. "But I'm sure you have a great deal to talk about, together."

Then he leans over and gently kisses me on the forehead.

How long has he known? Why didn't he say anything? My mind is racing as he turns and accords the same honor to my sister, under Quinn's watchful eye.

Maybe he wanted us to find out for ourselves.

Maybe he knew how much more it would mean to us that way.

I'll never know, I think as he turns to leave, pulling into his wake the doctor who wants to fuss over us again. The last words I hear from the doctor are, "I said you could talk to them for just a few minutes . . ."

There is a definite sense of letdown after Thierry has disappeared. Because I insist, Galen slips the flower necklace around my neck, where it looks, I'm sure, ridiculous, and makes me feel . . . well, almost as if Iliana were near.

I stare at the ceiling, thinking. I can feel Galen start to worry.

"It's interesting," says Quinn, who likes to make trouble. "We know you're twins, but we don't know which is the older sister."

"Oh, I am."

"I'm sure I am." The words come out simultaneously. We argue about it in a friendly, mock ferocious way. If my body wasn't still broken and healing we would be grappling in the same way kits do to establish dominance.

We're walking right on the edge now of despair and painfully gathered hope. At any moment dark wings may blot out the moonlight. But still something inside me is singing.

I'm Keller and I'm a panther. Well, half a panther and half human.

I'm a twin, too.

Raksha and Rashel. Or Rashel and Raksha. I'm just a grunt after all, without any real claim to priority.

Either way, it doesn't sound so bad at all.



The Beginning. . . .