

# Panther's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panther's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.

Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.

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## Chapter One

Tera sat at the table disgusted with the discussion that continued around her. They had been discussing policy for several candle marks already but had gotten little done. Her musing drifted over the past year. It had been a busy but wonderful year. Panther had slowly gotten the hang of shape shifting without stopping to unclot. She had done it when Tera had gotten hurt so knew it could be done, it just took a little more practice. Tera smiled softly as she glanced out the near window wondering what her mate was doing right now. The thread of connection between them had thickened into a strong bond. Not only did strong emotions pass between them but now focused words could also. They could still maintain their own space but a small nudge notified the other of wanted communication so they could "speak" to each other.

A slight mental pressure alerted Tera to her mate's presence. Tera concentrated briefly allowing her mental barriers to drop. *Yes love, what did you want?*

*So Amare, bored yet?* A thread of laughter ran through the question. Tera could picture the smile on her face as she passed the message.

*Stop, it's not funny. I swear these windbags like to hear their own voices too much. We should have wrapped this all up a candle mark ago; at least we got most of the policies in place last night. But much more of this and I can't promise anyone will leave this room alive.* Tera reinforced her complaint with an aura of disgust.

The sense of Panther's amusement increased. *So then it would be fine with you if I strolled in and retrieved you for a while?*

*Yes, Please get me out of here.* Tera was more than happy to be interrupted.

*I warn you love, I'm not quite myself.* That was Panther's way of letting her know that she had shifted. In the past year people around the manor had gotten used to seeing a large Panther roaming the halls. It was an unspoken fact that no one was to impede anything it wanted or keep it from anywhere it wanted to go. A select few knew what or rather who the panther really was. Tera's mother and sister were some of the few that did. After getting used to the fact they both thought it was rather neat. After all Aretina said it made even more sense that Potnia Theron had chosen Panther as a child of her blood.

*All right consider me warned.* Tera discreetly watched the door as she turned back to the meeting. She loved watching the reactions of people who had never seen Panter wandering around in her other self. She glanced at the rotund windbag filling the air now. Once things had gotten back to a more normal routine the merchants and leaders of the nearer community's had taken it upon themselves to raise the taxes of goods higher than they had already been. Tera and her people had taken strong exception. Most of them had quickly reversed their decision. A select few had opted not to hence this meeting taking place today. One of the most powerful merchants was this prattling idiot speaking now. If she had to listen to him anymore she was afraid she would start bleeding from her ears.

Tera decided to preserve everyone's remaining sanity and break in. Most of her people had an expression of being on the verge of murder to shut him up. "I do believe it was a concession for us to agree to arrange for a smaller tax on your imports for a further year don't ask for more than that" She watched entertained as his face flushed in anger and continued to get redder as his mouth worked soundlessly. "Might I remind you that I as Regent control everything within five hundred miles in every direction. That includes your city." She stated flatly. She hated to use that as a threat but some people only got the point when you finally had to use it.

A squawk erupted before he could speak more coherently. "But I think that we should receive more than that, after all most others bi passed you when your cousin raised taxes on goods." His gaze kept darting to her face. Tera could tell by the movements his eyes made exactly what he was looking at. The tattoo. She had found a lot of people did that. Especially if they knew what it represented. Tera knew with her spouse they out right stared not able to hide the fascination. She still marveled how Panter was able to tolerate it. Sometimes she could barely contain her own irritation.

Tera glimpsed her people stiffen out of the corner of her eye. Calmly picking up her wine glass, she leaned back in her seat. Tera took a sip as she regarded the angry man. She gently set the glass back onto the table with a dull clink. "My cousin" She said in a quiet tone with a bite. "Was a self centered, greedy, piece of slime who deserved everything he got. Any policies or agreements made by him have been revoked no matter the conditions made."

"That's not fair" He whined. Tera was hard pressed not to jump to her feet and slap the snot out of him.

"Would you rather I asked my Arm's Master to come in and enforce our ruling?" Tera bit the inside of her lip hard as she glimpsed the door softly open and a dark form enter the room. She saw the others notice and struggle to keep gleeful expressions off their faces. After their own encounters with the cat they loved watching others first impressions.

The man sucked in an abrupt intake of air. "No, that won't be necessary, the offer is more than satisfactory." He bowed hastily. Trying to placate her she was sure.

Tera kept her gaze fixed to his face wanting to see his reaction when he spotted Panter. A scream of fear echoed around the room as he finally noticed the new occupant. Of course the yowl that Panter let out as she past him might have had something to do with it. Everyone chuckled in

amusement as the man tried to jump onto the seat of his chair but tripped, tumbling to the floor instead. Panter sniffed at him then sneezed as she padded over to Tera's chair. *Gods, The man bathed in scent, I might not be able to smell anything after that!* Panter sent to Tera. She snorted heavily trying to clear the flowery scent from her sinuses. It didn't help much.

No one could figure out why Tera's shout of laughter seemed louder than most. Tera continued to grin as she watched the man haul himself to his feet keeping a wary eye on Panter as he did. Tera felt a heavy hand land on her left knee. She scratched the offered chin continuing around to the back of Panter's ears. She felt the contented rumble that caused. Tera glanced back at the wide-eyed sweaty man.

" I think our business is concluded. If there are no objections, I will call the meeting closed"

No objections were raised. Tera nodded. " Then I will see all of you later"

Tera stood, inclined her head to the others as they rose with her then exited the room with Panter close on her heels. Tera headed toward their residence intent on changing out of her formal clothing into something much more comfortable. Her laughter filled the hallway as Panter added her own suggestions of what would be suitable.

\* \* \*

A slim hand reined in the horse bringing it to a halt on the last rise overlooking the city below. A smile flashed in the shadowed depths created by the hooded cloak. It had taken a long time to reach this point in their journey. Pushing back the hood a face was revealed. Amber eyes glowed in a small face. They narrowed as they took in the flow of people going in and out of the large gates that formed one of the two entrances into the city. Other than a cursory glance by the two standing guards no real notice was paid to any of the visitors. A sudden commotion caught the woman's eye. A group of three horses were being prevented from exiting by the guards. The abrupt retreat by them both aroused her interest. As the horses continued towards her she made a hasty decision and turned her horse into the nearby trees. Halting just out of sight she resumed her watch. As the riders rode past she noticed one of them rapidly turn in her saddle. She frowned as the tattoo that was etched onto her face tugged at her mind. Something about it seemed familiar. The tall dark-skinned woman's gaze swept the tree line then seemed to suddenly freeze on the exact position she was sitting in. The watching woman caught her breath as a chill ran up her spine. There was no way anyone could have been aware someone was there...unless.

Suspicion raised its head. The information she had managed to accumulate did mention that the deserter had been a dark cousin. She still couldn't fathom how or why the few remaining families had been left to fend for themselves. She let out her breath as they continued on without the woman saying anything to her companions. Sliding off her horse, she elected to take a closer look. On foot...somewhat. Ground tying her mount she moved off into the trees. The horse snorted in alarm at the abrupt scent of a predator nearby. It finally calmed when nothing continued to move toward it.

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Panter shifted uneasily in her saddle. For a moment there she had the distinct feeling they were being watched. Unable to decipher any individual scents thanks to all the people that had recently passed through she had given up trying to trace it down. Panter met Alesia inquiring gaze with a shake of her head. Kneeing Donum she caught up with Tera then slowed down to ride side by side. She found herself constantly scanning the nearby woods.

Tera glanced over, watching as Panter studied the surrounding trees. "What's bothering you love?"

Panter shrugged. " I'm uncertain, for a moment there I could have sworn we were being watched. But now I'm not so sure"

Tera's brow furrowed. "This is the first time I've ever heard you say that"

" I know and thats what bother's me, something set my instincts off but I can't tell what it was" Panter hated being caught off guard especially when her Amare could be at risk. She was just grateful that the village had decided to relocate closer to Hawk's Peak since Tera had regained her regency. The council with full support of the people had gifted a large section of the nearby forest to the village. Some had opted to stay in the original village but most had moved to be closer to their leaders. Panter grinned wryly. Rena had chosen to stay in the old village so Tera allowed her to continue as her proxy.

To Helia and Eurayles astonishment Tera, agreeing with Panter's suggestion had asked them to act as proxy for them in the new village. Even though it was only a half days ride out, there would be little time for them to be able to go back and forth between both. Especially Tera.

They had accepted gratefully, unsure if they would be any good at it but willing to learn. They both were a bit relieved to be told that mistakes were expected. There was no way anyone could run a village of woman with out any.

Panter shifted in her saddle. The hair rose on the nape of her neck as they turned their horses to follow a faint trail leading into the tree line. As the shadows of the overhanging trees surrounded them a crack of a breaking stick made her freeze. Donum halted, responding to the sudden stiffness of her body. Alesia and Tera pulled their horses up. Tera reached over to touch her mate's arm.

"What's ...?" Tera's words faded off as she took in the look on Panter's face. She watched as Panter's eyes morphed. Something had to be seriously wrong. Panter silently handed over her reins as she slid form the horse. Their eyes met. *Something is out there. Watching. I'm going to find out what.* Tera bit her lip. *Be careful love, we'll meet you at the village.* She sent back. Panter smiled grimly then turned, disappearing into the trees.

Alesia spoke. "What's up?"

Tera nudged her horse into a trot. She wanted to get to the village in a hurry now. If something was bothering her mate that bad she didn't want to stay in the open any longer then necessary. The rapid thudding of hooves paced hers. Alesia moved up on her left, reaching over to snag Donum's reins from Tera's grip.

" I got em"

Tera smiled her thanks then turned her gaze back to the trail. " Panter thinks we have unexpected company"

Alesia shot her a startled glance. "Company, what company?" It bugged her when Panter knew something she didn't. Alesia shook her head. Of course she had abilities no one else had. So it wasn't a real surprise to be in the dark about what was going on. It was just one of those things you got used to.

"One she seems to object to, she's going to meet us at the village." Tera urged her horse faster just concentrating on the path ahead

The sound of hoof beats filled the silence as they headed for the near safety of the village. Constant scans of the surrounding area kept each of them tense as trees continued to flash by.

\* \* \*

Paws raised puffs of dust as they hit the earth. The large black form made it's way through the dense undergrowth. Halting at a large maple it sniffed at its base. The scent it had been following led deeper into the copse. She had backtracked to where she had first felt they had been watched and had followed it this far. Continuing to follow the trail left behind she noticed it was getting stronger, meaning she was also getting closer to what was leaving it. Pads hit the ground faster as she increased her speed. Breaking past some overgrown bushes she caught a flash out of the corner of her eye. Sliding to a halt in a spray of dirt, a powerful thrust of back legs had her running in a new direction.

Only being the chosen kept the long form in sight, the speed it reached almost exceeded hers. Eyes narrowed as the identity of the watcher came clear. Tan fur covered a small but lean body. Black spots spread in a scattered pattern over its coat. As its speed seemed to lessen, it angled its body in conjunction with a nearby tree trunk. It seemed to run straight up the side coming to halt on a large overhanging limb. Its ribcage heaved as it panted for breath after the sudden sprint. Skidding to a stop she gazed up at the treed animal. A small head with high set eyes bent to keep her in sight. White fur coated the throat and abdomen of the small cat. A tail ringed black with a white tuft flicked in irritation. Black marks surrounded the eyes flowing down to its mouth. The jaw opened in a hiss to reveal small sharp teeth. Eyes glinted in the sunlight that occasionally broke through the branches.

A sudden jerk rippled down the muscular form below when the small cat abruptly jumped to the ground. As soon as it hit the ground its body seemed to blur. Its body settled in to a form suddenly familiar to the other.

Opening its mouth with a snarl, it spoke. " I know it's you Traitor, face me!" Long nails topped the hands it gestured with.

Panter half shifted also. She noticed the start the other tried to cover up as she rose to tower above her. Panter circled her in a slow loop making the other continuously turn to keep her in sight. She didn't have an inkling what was going on but she wasn't about to let someone that had gifts like hers go. "Traitor?" She growled. " I don't even know you, how could I have betrayed you?" Panter spat. She had no idea what this woman meant.

The other roared in anger then leapt at Panter. The two forms collided as Panter went with the momentum. Rolling she brought her lower legs up kicking the other off. Regaining her feet, Panter shifted to full human form. Even with out her claws she knew that the other would be no real threat. At least to her. Panter out weighed the other by at least seventy pounds if not more. She knew that in height she was taller by a foot if not greater. When the other saw her in human form it halted its advance. In space of a breath an averaged height, lean but very naked woman faced her, hate still glinting deeply in amber eyes. " If you think that will stop me your very mistaken," the woman screamed.

Panter held up both hands. " I don't know what your talking about. I haven't betrayed anyone" she insisted.

Panter sighed resigned as the other made a move to resume the fight.

" I'm sorry, but I have little time for this, we'll need to continue it later"

A puzzled look appeared briefly on the approaching woman's face. It cleared as it saw the fist headed for her face. A loud crack echoed around the grove.

"God's" Panter shook out her right hand. " She may be a little thing but she sure has a hard head"

Panter bent, slung the unconscious woman over her shoulder then headed back to the horse that she had seen. By the look of her, that had to have been this woman's horse. Panter didn't think her mate would be pleased if she showed up with a naked woman in her arms.

\* \* \*

Tera dropped into the chair with a grunt. After the hard ride to the village her body was making its protests known. Her legs and thighs were killing her. The sound of footsteps alerted her of company before Helia and Eurayle followed Alesia into the room. Helia set the tray of refreshments onto the table before settling into the last open seat. No one spoke as drinks were passed around. Helia finally broke the brief silence. "Alesia said you had a problem on the way here?"

Tera sipped her cup of juice. "Panter said someone was watching us and decided to go see who it was." She laughed. "I almost feel sorry for whoever it might have been"

Helia frowned. "Your not worried?"

Tera sobered. "Believe me, I would know if something happened to Panter"

Helia glanced quickly at the tattoo on Tera's face. "You probably would," she admitted.

Eurayle broke in. "Anyway to the reason we asked you to come" She pulled a rolled dirt smeared parchment from her belt. "This came last night," she said as she pushed it across the table toward Tera. Picking it up, Tera unrolled it.

They all watched her face as she read. When her face paled then slowly grew flushed they knew what part she had reached. Tera crumpled the letter in her hand then slammed her fist on the table causing them to jump.

She leaned on the table with her head bowed for a time. "What is your take on this?" she asked finally tossing it onto the table. "Did you get the same idea that I did?"

Eurayle nodded. "Probably, we got a feeling whoever's been running these raids was unhappy with you taking over the regency."

Tera made a sound of agreement. "Yes, but why have they waited so long?"

"Maybe they weren't ready till now," Alesia volunteered.

Tera nodded. "More then likely, your right" she rubbed her forehead as she thought. "Who brought the note?"

"A soldier that had been posted at the village by Golven Mines" Helia supplied. "He's in the Healer's Quarters for right now, we had to remove an arrow from his side. He lost a lot of blood but should make it"

"Is there anyway I can talk to him now?"

"No, he hasn't regained consciousness' yet"

"We might need to transfer him to Hawk's Peak, if were going to figure any of this out we need information that he might have"

Alesia spoke up. "Do you want us to send out some scouts to see what they can find?"

Tera opened her mouth to reply when the question was answered for her.

"Split two squads, send them all in opposite directions, get as much knowledge as possible then have two people from each group sent back with the information. That way no matter what

happens someone will get the messages back."

They all jumped, then turned to see Panter silently slip into the room.

"Did we have company as you suspected?" Tera asked quietly.

Panter grabbed a goblet then took a moment to drink. "Yes, we did" she replied settling in a chair across from Tera. " In fact, I brought it back with me. I'm having Karis arrange some suitable quarters even now"

" Who was he?" Eurayle couldn't keep herself from asking. This unknown company Tera had spoken of had raised her curiosity.

"It was a she and I don't know" Panter shook her head puzzled. " But I could swear she was like me, different but still the same."

"Like you?" Tera's eyebrows rose. " You mean your gift?"

"Yeah, That's exactly what I mean, but since she's now our guest I might be able to find out more about her"

"**Arms Master**" the shout proceeded a young woman into the room. She skidded to a halt as her leaders gaze settled on her. She flushed then straightened.

" What's wrong, Karis?"

"The woman you brought in... she...well she" Karis trailed off not wanting to finish the sentence knowing that the response she got in return would not be good.

Panter's eyes narrowed. " She what?" the words left her mouth with a low growl.

"She got away" Karis said quickly just to get it over with.

Tera was speechless for a moment. " Got away, how could she have gotten away?" She opened her mouth to continue when Panter cut in.

"Amare, do you think someone could hold me?" Panter asked knowing the woman's escape was as much her fault as anyone. She wasn't used to thinking of someone else being like her.

" No, there's no way, they could never overpower you with your strength, at least not by themselves."

"Exactly and this woman has gifts like mine. They had no chance of holding her like a normal person."

" Can we get her back?"



"I don't think we'll need to hunt her down, she'll be back."

Tera frowned. "How are you so sure?"

Panther looked out the window. "Because she wants to kill me," she said tonelessly.

Shocked silence covered the room. Tera's sudden cry broke it. "Why?"

Panther met their gaze steadily. "For Living"

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### Chapter Two

Hate filled eyes watched the controlled chaos below from the relative safety of her perch in a large tree about fifty feet away. Lying flat against its limb allowed her coat to blend almost unseen against it. Her claws sank into the soft bark as she recalled the past few candle marks. Soon after being handed over to those women she had regained her senses. Acting as if she was still unconscious had allowed her to listen in on them, gaining her some new information. She had learned that the dark one went by the name Panther. By the tones in their voices she had gathered they actually respected her. She snorted in disgust. As if she was not someone who had betrayed her own people. Still it annoyed her to learn one such as this had a high station in this place. She smiled slyly. And a new mate too. This added dimension would make her quest much more interesting.

Her body tensed as the object of her thoughts appeared, her arm wrapped around the shoulders of a small blond. The midday sun glinted off the bands around their brows. They stopped just past the doorway talking together in low tones. She intently studied her enemy's mate. Short hair and

light eyes set into a face with a small nose and fine features combined with a toned body showed she was no dainty woman afraid of activity. It presented a pleasing picture. She could almost understand why she had been chosen as a suitable mate even if she was ungifted. The jingle of tack had the watcher and the women looking to the side as a large party of riders appeared. The woman Panter stepped up grasping the cheek strap of the lead horse. A fast discussion ensued coming to a conclusion after motions of agreements came from them all. A handful of rolled scrolls passed from the blond to Panter. She in turn passed them to their leader. Who handed each one a copy. Tucking the items in their saddlebags, they each inclined their heads respectfully and gestured to their separate groups. Eager to begin their mission, they kicked their horses into a trot.

Considering eyes followed their progress out the gate then returned to the remaining pair below. Her eyes narrowed as a kiss was exchanged before her target accepted the reins of her own horse. Settling into the saddle Panter moved toward the gate her team falling into formation behind her. The watcher decided to stay to watch awhile longer. She wanted to see what would happen next. This was going to be even more fun then it was tracking her down. After all a cat loves to play with its victims first. A glint in her eye promised trouble ahead.

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Panter's group rode hard to return to the city as quickly as it could. She had made arrangements for the injured man to be transferred to the infirmary at Hawk's Peak while she was still at the new village, as soon as humanly possible. He had not yet returned to consciousness. Hopefully by the time they returned he would be awake and could answer some questions. Impatience made her grit her teeth. The information that man had was needed desperately. If he was still not conscious she would have to talk to the healers about trying to revive him. She knew it might be unwise but little choice remained. Catching sight of Alesia from the corner of her eye, she turned her head as her friends horse moved up to her side. She smiled slightly at the inquiring look on her face knowing the questions that she had yet to ask. She had filled her friend in as the orders to be sent to the surrounding villages had been drawn up. They needed to warn as many people as possible of the raids being conducted in the region.

"This looks bad doesn't it?" Alesia broke the silence with the question everyone else wanted to ask.

Panter hesitated trying to find an easy way to say what she thought. Unfortunately she couldn't. She shook her head as she faced forward again. " Yea, its bad" her eyes narrowed in determination. "A lot of people are going to get hurt. Many more will end up dead if we don't do something about it."

"But were going to" Alesia knew that the kind of people her friends where as leaders would never stand by and watch if they could do anything about preventing it.

"Yes, we are. Especially since it seems its caused by someone who objects to Tera being regent"

"But Tera is nothing if not fair" Alesia protested.

Panther smiled at Alesia warmly. " She is, but you and I both know that greed is not interested in fair or unfair. Its only concern is in whatever's necessary to get what it wants."

"I know" Alesia gripped her reins harder. Why, when things finally were working almost smoothly between all the factions in and around Hawk's Peak after the past year, were things on the verge of another struggle. She just wished her friends could be happy and not in the middle of yet another fight.

Nothing else passed between them for the rest of the ride. Just as the sun started setting they rode past the guards at the main gate. No one tried to stop them this time. It seemed the guard from earlier had been hastily replaced after the others had failed to recognize the Regent and her Arms Master. The excuse that they had been new was not received as a valid one. It was taken as fact that it wouldn't happen again. Even if Tera had been amused by it, Panther hadn't been.

As they finally neared the manor Panther glimpsed a gathering of people waiting. She had sent a notice ahead requesting that everyone be prepared for a meeting when she returned. Pulling her horse to a halt, Panther dismounted handing the reins off to a waiting stable boy. The rest of her company dismounted as she met the eyes of her captains. Panther nodded at their silent inquiry. She watched as their features set in determination.

"Come, we have much to do in little time"

Panther led the way into the meeting room. She smiled slightly as she saw everything was indeed ready. Well lit with rolled parchments waiting at her place at the table, the other chairs had been occupied with anyone who might be necessary at a time like this. Some time ago she, Tera, Akil and Narna had pulled together a plan of action if anything close to this would occur. It was pleasing to see that it worked. Panther stopped by the table. Resting her hands on its surface she studied it as she took a moment to gather her thoughts. Silence enfolded the room like a shroud. Looking up Panther studied her team.

"I'm afraid the news I have is not pleasant," she stated.

No one spoke as they waited.

"Raids are terrorizing and destroying outlying providences in our region"

Even though they had been expecting this news, finally hearing it confirmed still shocked them. Voices rose as people tried to all speak at once. Seeing Panther flinch in pain at the noise Akil stepped in.

" That's enough, we'll never get anything done with all this noise"

Slowly it tapered off as everyone regained their seats and waited to see what would unfold.

Alesia sank in to seat at her left. Panter settled into her own seat with an internal sigh of relief, her ears were still ringing slightly from all the noise. If she had to chose one downfall in her gift that would be it. Enhanced hearing was great at times but right now it really sucked. When a chilled goblet was place by her right hand she glanced up, thanking the servant with a smile. The servant flushed at the attention and bowing slightly continued down the table serving the rest of the attending staff.

Pulling a piece of parchment from the stack that had been left Panter sat back in her chair absently twirling a reed pen through the fingers of her left hand. A habit she had unknowingly picked up from her mate. She looked toward the healer in charge of the infirmary. " Has our unexpected guest awoken yet?"

The healer nodded her graying head. " Yes, he has. I truly wasn't expecting him too with the seriousness of the injury but he did manage to talk to your captain before slipping back into sleep"

Panter was pleasantly surprised. " He did, that is good news. While we speak, how are the supply levels for the healers? Do we have all we might require?"

" We are fairly stocked, I have sent several of our apprentices to gather as many medicinal herbs as possible. They will be dried and stored. Bandages should be no problem; several large bolts of linen have been donated with more to come. I also have sent word to surrounding cities to send as many skilled healers to us as possible yet still maintaining their own healing facilities. I was unsure how many healers would be sent with the troops so I erred to the side of abundance. I hope that was appropriate?" Her plain features became almost beautiful as she smiled at the Arms Master.

Panter quirked a small grin. " Yes, you have done a commendable job in such short time. Please take our thanks back with you to your helpers. You may leave now, as I am sure there is still much to do"

Rising to her feet, the healer bowed slightly. " You are correct, many tasks are yet undone" At Panters nod she padded to the double doors that swung open at her approach. Her stocky form disappeared from their view as the doors closed.

Panter leaned forward in her seat. She fixed a steady gaze at both her captains. " Now if you could tell me what information we have, some type of plan could be in the making"

Narna stood moving to a large parchment that had been affixed to the wall. It showed Hawks peak and all land around it till it ran into the large body of water to the north. The one Panter had crossed just over a span of seasons ago. " Using the information given to us, we noted each incident on the map. So far no real pattern is emerging. One village will be destroyed then another will be attacked, subdued and possibly used as a base for food and supplies. It seems so random that trying to foretell where the next one will happen is almost impossible, you might do as well closing your eyes and randomly pointing."

Narna smiled slightly as a few chuckles arose from the group. " It seems that it's a rather large force. At some of the larger villages they swept in from all sides. Most likely preventing anyone from telling about the raid. In fact we were very fortunate, our informant played dead. He used his fellow soldiers as cover and luckily was missed. His village was one of the ones destroyed. Nothing was left. Neither human nor animal. So far a total of five territories have been assaulted, two being totally destroyed."

She stopped speaking as murmurs of shock started arising.

Panther studied the map, something nagging at her. She had seen something like this before. She shook her head frustrated when it wouldn't come to mind. She rose and headed toward Narna, who stepped back at her approach clearing the way to the map. There was Hawks Peak placed below the mountain range it derived its name from. To the east was Lanoris one that had been destroyed and home to their informant. It lay about two days hard travel from the ocean she had crossed. How that man had survived with that wound only the gods knew. It was more than fifteen days travel to Hawks Peak from there at a steady pace. Panther paused her brow furrowing as she unconsciously reached up to touch her tattoo. Maybe he did have a little help. Shrugging she directed her attention aback to the map. She would figure that out later.

Tylan lay close by about half days ride from Lanoris but it had just been subdued not destroyed. Farther to the northwest Hallen mines had been taken over and a small-unknown village had been destroyed. Even farther west was Doslan a coastline city based on fishery and trade. It had been beaten down and more likely used as a base of operation. It would offer plenty of food and with the coast at your back it would be harder for anyone thinking of retaliation.

" It looks to me as if we might be dealing with two separate groups. But more then likely they are working together. It's as if they're trying to hem us in" Panther mused aloud.

Akil cursed aloud as he took a closer look. A faint impression of a pattern was there. How in all the gods had they missed it? He glanced at Panther impressed by her insight. He was no slouch to military plans after all he had served for many years but someone with little back ground seeing it was almost astounding. "How did you figure that out?" he exclaimed.

Panther smiled grimly " It's almost the same tactic I would use, of course if it was me no one would have had the chance we have now. Defense of any kind would be a moot point"

No one could speak. Before the quiet could grow too long Panther returned to her seat. " Anyway we have that chance, so how are the preparations going?" she turned to Cenon. He had represented the common people last year before Tera had reclaimed the Regency. " Why don't we start with you Cenon, what do the weapon stores look like?" He would know to the letter since he helped make most of them.

The large blond stroked his bearded chin as he consulted his notes. " All the personal guards are fully equipped as are all our regular troops. We have had conscripts start to filter in slowly; your captains have put in requests for additional armor and weaponry for your female fighters." Canon paused. " I was told that most of them are archers, is that correct?"

Panther nodded. " Yes most of them are, some have a little skill in swordplay but the training they have is more useful as scouts and archers. The way they can disappear into the trees is amazing. They can also use their bows from horseback. Mounted they seem to be very deadly with their weapons. I have seen them in action, they almost always hit what they aim for."

Narna eyebrows rose in wonder. None of their soldiers could use a bow from horse back. There was too much of a risk of shooting your own horse if any sudden movements happened. Everyone knew being on horseback was anything but smooth. " Do they use crossbows?" she asked.

" No, they prefer using smaller compound bows. An arrow could go through a small tree at close range with one of those." Panther explained.

Canon marked his paper. " Then I would think armor made of toughened layered leather would be more appropriate for them. I'll get some of my workers on that, we'll make sure to have extra bows and plenty of arrows. How many can their quivers hold? " He inquired.

" About thirty I believe"

They all turned to the doorway at the sound of the voice. Tera stood in the doorway still dusty from her ride. Several of her warriors stood right behind her. They moved to take up posts by the door. Everyone including Panther rose to their feet and bowed slightly to their Regent. Tera started toward her mate. " Please sit everyone" Reaching Panther, Tera beckoned her to lean down. She claimed her lips in a soft kiss then stepped back. " Honey, don't bow to me, you are my co-regent and Arms Master. Besides I can't say I like seeing that." Tera requested softly.

Panther opened heavy eyes, licking the taste of her mate from her lips. " Very well amare if that is what you want" Her breath caught at the smile Tera gave her. She watched as Tera sank into the chair on her right. She had just said without a word that this meeting was Panters domain not hers. Panther retook her seat.

Clearing her throat, Panther directed her attention back to the matter at hand. " Thirty, I think it was Cenon"

Cenon noted the information. " How many will need outfitted?"

Tera interrupted before Panther could say anything. " About two hundred of my warriors wish to go. All are fully equipped but any extra arrows or bows will be more then welcome."

Cenon looked a bit shocked then recovered. " That will be no problem at all. I'll still need a final reckoning about how many other soldiers need arms, but for now I think things are well in hand."

" Stay for a while, we may be able to come up with a close estimate for you" Panther suggested. Cenon agreed and remained seated. " Hopefully, my captains have some answers for us?"

Akil took the list offered him by Narna. "Some of this is dependent on how many troops are left here."

" Whatever is necessary to make sure Tera is safe" Panter retorted.

Tera sat up straight in her chair. " If you think I'm staying here while you're out there, you best think again." Her tone of voice showed she meant what she just said.

Panter narrowed her eyes. " I want you safe, out there you wouldn't be!"

Everyone shifted in his or her seats a little uncomfortable about witnessing this argument. It would be hard to guess who would win, they were both very strong willed women.

"How do you think that, you know I can fight. Besides, you've been teaching me what you know since we got married. There's not much defense anyone can use against that style of fighting. You told me yourself I was a natural at it." Tera paused for breath then continued before Panter could form a response. "If something happened to you and I *knew* about it, you damn well know I would come find you, no matter what!" Tera stopped her tirade as she saw understanding finally dawn on Panter's face.

Panter was loath to let Tera go but knew she was right. With their connection it would be easier if they were together than to feel something and not understand what was causing it. " All right, but we need to talk some more about it later Amare" she said quietly.

Tera inclined her head but said nothing. For Panter to relent meant she truly did understand their dilemma but she didn't have to like it.

Everyone watching sighed with relief hoping no expression showed on their faces when Panter gestured for Akil to continue.

"Well since it seems our Regent will be accompanying us, that makes it a little easier," Akil said drolly catching the faint glint in Panter's eyes. "We will leave two hundred regular guard here plus the normal watch. That will be about three hundred bodies strong to protect Hawk Peak and its people. With all the gates barred, it should be very secure."

He paused to write on his paper these changes to the plan, and then continued.

" All the accipiter ala wish to go with you" He glanced to his Arms Master. The regents shared a look that ended with Tera nodding in agreement. " We've had a few additions to our ranks this past season so there are a hundred and twenty of us now. We will most likely split into two companies of sixty." He smiled at Panter's upraised eyebrow.

" I wasn't aware that many had joined"

" Well, there were more that wanted to but we had to cut it off somewhere" he laughed. " In fact

you know that group that likes to train with you?"

Panther nodded almost afraid to hear him finish the statement." The practice ring does seem rather full at times"

" Well, since they couldn't join us they took it upon themselves to form a different branch of the guard." He drew it out just to see the impatience on Panter's face.

" A different branch, how many wanted to join?"

"About another hundred or so" He loved the look of shock on her face. "We now have the Chosen's Elite"

Panther rubbed her forehead. " There's nothing I can do about it is there?" She tried to ignore Tera's snort of laughter. But she had a harder time trying to pretend Tera's hand didn't just slid onto her thigh. Trickle of warmth ran down her spine as it caressed her leg. In self-defense she had to grasp Tera's hand and entwine their fingers to regain a little of her control back.

" Sorry, no" Akil said " Anyway we have another hundred regular guard we'll be taking, plus fifty conscripts that have come in. We have other conscripts we will be picking up along the way, but I don't have a sure number to give you."

Panther drummed the fingers on her left hand on the table." Really, that's not bad, more than I thought anyway. I wasn't expecting that many of the village to go. That gives us about five hundred and seventy right?"

" Close to six companies, yes"

"Alright, I want as many on horseback as possible. We will need to move quickly to try to head this off before it gets worse than it is."

" The village will have an extra fifty or so left after we take ours out," Alesia said. " We do know of a herd that roams close to here that we may be able to take advantage of"

Panther smiled at her friend. "Good, that will help"

" With most of guard staying behind we'll be able to take their horses. So we'll need at least a hundred more horses for everyone to be able to ride." Narna stated.

" That's a workable number," Akil confirmed. " We'll see how many we can get from that herd Alesia told us about"

" I'll show you where I've seen them recently" Alesia volunteered.

" That's settled then. Does that help you out Cenon?" Panther questioned.



" It's better, I'll get with the captains to see who needs what but it does help a lot." He replied happily. It was one more thing soon to be off his list.

" You can leave if you wish" Panter offered. Cenon thanked her and hurried off to confer with his workers.

Panter rose to her feet letting go of Tera's hand. "Until we have more information from our scouts I believe we have done as much as we can to get ready. Akil and Narna, I want you to get everyone in the practice ring as much as possible without overdoing it. I want our people ready but rested when we leave, understand?"

Her captains stood and placing their hand over their chest saluted Panter then left to carry out her wishes. Everyone else followed their lead and left to attend to their own duties.

Tera's laughter rang out in the empty room at Panter's expression." You know they do that because they respect you love" she got out between giggles.

Panter groaned. "I know, but I don't think I'll ever get used to it" She took her mate's hand and led her off for a quick dinner. She had plans after that.

\* \* \*

Panter's eyes hooded as she watched her mate undress. Her fair skin beckoned to her and she was unable to stop herself from taking a taste.

She growled softly as the scent and flavor of her mate flooded her senses.

A gasp accompanied Tera's movement as she pressed back into her turning her head to the side to bare her neck even more. Panter lightly nipped her as she ran her hand down Tera's chest, stopping to cup her right breast. With her left hand she pulled her love's butt closer to her own pelvis. Rolling a nipple between her fingers, Panter pressed against Tera rhythmically. Panter's breath got harsher as her need for her mate rose.

Tera moaned before she pulled away, evading Panter's grasping hands.

" Wait love, lets get you out of these clothes"

Panter impatiently undressed almost tearing her clothing in the process. She could smell Tera's arousal as clear as her own and it made her frantic to get naked. Finally the last item dropped to the floor. She stood for a second relishing the look on Tera's face as she looked at her body. Impatience finally got the better of her and she stalked closer to Tera, growling sub vocally in her chest. Tera moved back until she suddenly hit the bed with the back of her thighs causing her to fall backwards onto it.

Tera cried out as Panter pounced on top of her careful to keep her full weight off. Tera wrapped her arms around her lover caressing the flexing back muscles she couldn't see causing Panter to groan in pleasure at her touch. Tera's breath caught in her throat as Panter moved down her body enveloping a nipple in her mouth. Heat streamed like fire from her nipple to her groin causing her to cry out at the sensations. Panter switched to the other breast pulling the nipple between her

teeth roughly before suckling. Tera raked her nails down Panter's back at the pleasure. Panter growled in response to the fleeting pain. She slid her hand down Tera's stomach, moaning when her fingers finally touched crisp dampness. Tera arched at the feeling of Panter's fingers silently begging for a fuller touch, she struggled for breath as Panter's finger slid halfway into her. She thrust her hips upward driving Panter's finger in deeper. "Please" she gasped "more". Tera moaned as two more fingers joined the first, filling her. Panter continued to suck at her breast while thrusting into her. Tera couldn't stop herself from moving her hips driving Panter even deeper into her. Slowly the feeling grew to be too much until she climaxed with a scream.

With the feeling still running rampant throughout her body, Tera pulled Panter's head from her breast and kissed her roughly. She could feel the heat coming off Panter's body as she growled. Tera's tongue traced Panter's mouth gently running over her prominent canines. She wrapped her tongue around one and gently sucked causing Panter to stop breathing for a moment till she pulled away from Tera. Panter's eyes glowed as she stared at her mate. Tera watched as they morphed. Pushing Panter onto her back Tera bit her on the curve of her shoulder. Not enough to draw blood but enough to mark her. Panter cried out at the sensations that caused. Tera moved down her body, stopping at her breasts to briefly tease before heading farther down at Panter's pleas. Lifting her head, Tera met Panter's hungry gaze. Panter reached out burying her hands into the scattered pillows before Tera lowered her head again. Panter's scent surrounded her making her mouth water for the taste of it. She slowly dragged her tongue over the thick liquid moaning as the flavor exploded in her mouth. She delved into her savoring the taste. Enveloping her clit with her lips she gently sank two fingers into Panter. Tera sucked as she eased her fingers in and out of Panter's depths. Slowly Panter's thigh muscles tightened, a sure sign she was close. Tera added a digit increasing her speed as she flicked her tongue repeatedly over Panter's clit. She could feel her mate tightening around her fingers. Suddenly Panter stiffened and shook, a cry strangling in her throat. Tera felt her pulsing around her fingers and suddenly sucked on her clit hard, sending Panter into another climax.

Ragged breathing filled the silence that followed. Tera slowly pulled out of Panter, causing her to gasp. After pressing a kiss to her stomach, Tera crawled up to lay in Panter's arms with her head on her chest. "I love you Panter," she whispered softly. Arms hugged her closer. "I love you Tera" Panter replied in a low growling tone. Nothing was said for a while.

"I still worry about you being involved in the fighting even with me there," Panter said worriedly. "If anything happened to you I..." A hand covered her lips before she could finish.

"I know, I feel the same way, but I think it's safer for us to be together than apart."

"I guess all we can do is be careful then" Panter knew that Tera wouldn't stay behind and truthfully Panter did feel a little better to have her in arms reach instead of worrying half the time. They would just have to deal with things as they came and hope for the best.

Tera murmured in agreement as she sank into sleep wrapped in Panter's embrace. Panter pressed a kiss to Tera's temple and followed her example.

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# Panther's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panther's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
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## Chapter Three

Panther sucked in a breath as the icy water hit her hot face and neck. Trickle of water ran down her chest as she reached for a cloth to dry off with. Looking up, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the small sink. She paused suddenly seeing herself as others did. Shoulder length black hair had been pulled back into a tail exposing her ears and neck. With it pulled back like it was, you could see the slightly pointed cast her ears had. Most people didn't see that though since her unusual eye color pulled their attention first and she had almost always left her hair down, but lately she had been pulling it back more. With all the sparring they've been doing it made sense to keep it back out of her face. Panther smiled, besides she had found that Tera liked it pulled back almost as much as when it was down so that had pretty much decided it. Those eyes were set in a face above high-planed cheekbones, a slender nose and a strong jaw line. A white tattoo ran from just above her right eye, down the side of her face to end at her jaw line. It stood out brilliantly against her dark skin tone.

Faint footsteps pulled her attention away from the mirror. Dropping her towel onto the edge of the sink, she turned to the door just before Alesia walked through it and dropped onto a nearby bench with a groan.

Panther bit back a grin. "How's it going out there?"

Alesia closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the wall behind her. "Not bad really, its just there's so MANY of them." She spread her arms outward to help convey her feelings.

" I know, but remember you wanted to help me with this" Panther chided lightly. Alesia had almost begged her to lend her assistance. She had to admit, if her friend hadn't offered already she would have asked. Alesia was one of the best fighters they had. As a scout she was almost as

good as Panter herself was.

" Your right I did, didn't I. Next time I volunteer for anything, remind me of this Ok?" Alesia raised her head and grinned wryly at Panter, laughter bright in her eyes.

" I will, I promise" Panter smiled at her before going serious. " I'm not sure if we'll be ready for this fight, but we don't have many choices"

Alesia rose, moving over to stand by Panter she tilted her head to meet her eyes." Panter my friend, we have no choice but this and you know it. The only other thing to do would be for Tera to step down from Regency and you know damn well that her people would never allow that no matter what." Alesia shook her head and sighed." Especially after this past year, people are really happy now and are willing to fight for it to stay that way"

Panter rested a hand on Alesia's shoulder. "Yes I know, but what a waste. A lot of people are going to get hurt, even killed over this. I just wish there was another option, but I can't find one"

Alesia covered the hand on her shoulder with hers. "You know, the longer I know you the more I see it. You really don't like to fight do you?"

Panter looked to the side for a moment then met Alesia eyes. " To fight just for the sake of fighting, no. To protect my friends, my family" She cast a meaningful look at her friend and hid a grin at the faint coloring that rose in Alesia face. Her face tightened as her eyes narrowed." And especially my mate, I wouldn't stop until breath was no longer in my body."

Alesia opened her mouth to say something, and then closed it when nothing came to mind. Silence drifted in the air for an instant. Alesia gently squeezed Panter's hand. " I feel the same way, Panter. You and Tera may be my leaders but you are first and foremost my family. That is more important than anything else." She smiled, nudging Panter to break the look of shock on her features. " Now lets get back to it, there's a lot more troops to sort through out there"

Panter laughed. " Unfortunately" She waved Alesia ahead of her. They passed through a wide hallway with multiple doors on either side then out the door standing at the end. Sounds of clashing metal immediately surrounded them. The door led to the sparring rings that dominated the back of the militia garrison. All three were in use as people honed their skills before the upcoming battle.

Panter stopped; leaning on a nearby pillar she folded her arms as she studied some of the fighters. She saw Alesia head over to a large grouping of female archers. The sounds of arrowheads hitting stuffed targets receded as Panter placed her full attention on a pair of fighters in the second ring. They were good, both of them. She kept watching as she spoke. " Akil, come here for a moment"

Footsteps thudded on the packed dirt before Akil appeared at her side.

" You called for me Arms Master?" He said mildly, holding in a snort of laughter as he caught the slight roll of her eyes in frustration.

" You know, I hate when you do that Akil"

" Yes I do, but its that or Co- Regent my friend. You are one of our leaders and you deserve the respect it affords you. Besides," Akil insisted. " The soldiers need to hear it, especially the conscripts. In battle they will need to follow the Arms Masters orders not their friend Panter. It could mean peoples lives if they wavered in following them. You know I'm right"

Panter paused in her objection. " You are" She would just have to get over it. After a year she should be used to it by now. " Anyway, what can you tell me about them?" She motioned to the men she had been watching.

Akil turned to watch the two men that had caught Panter's attention. One man was defending himself with a poleaxe against the other who was using a broad bladed sword that was curved at its end, which was also its broadest point. The thing that made it a little unusual was that the swordsman was using two blades at once. His smooth movements created a flashing net of silver around his body. His sparring partners weapon had been banded with metal to create a more battle worthy weapon. An axe head adorned on end but the other end was decked out with a sharp hook. Any wondering about that end, was quickly answered as he spun the pole around, hooked a blade of his opponent then with a twist pulled it from his grasp. Most would have lost the fight there but with a sword still in hand the sparring was far from over, the man swiftly pulled out a dagger all soldiers carried and continued the fight, using the small blade as if it was a shield.

" I can see why they caught your attention. The pole man is Kratus and the other is Farris."

Panter hummed in response as she watched them come to a draw. "Have they been training with the other soldiers?"

Akil frowned faintly. " Yes, but not many are skilled enough to be able to spare with them, why do you ask?"

Panter eyes narrowed a little. " I just felt like training a bit. Looks like I'll get some competition with these two" She reached over her right shoulder and adjusted the angle of her sword that was strapped on her back. She walked toward the center ring, and then halted. She turned. " I want these two in our group Akil" Panter resumed her move to the ring when suddenly a rush of fear mixed with anger assaulted her, causing her to misstep and stagger. She caught her balance and without a word took off in the direction of the manor, ignoring the rising voices behind her.

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A short time earlier.

Tera rubbed the back of her neck, hoping to get rid of at least a little of its stiffness. She had been hunched over her desk for most of the morning, trying to make sure she got as much done as possible before she had to leave. Standing, she stretched to help relieve the cramping in her

lower back from being in one position for so long. She closed her eyes relishing the slight breeze that drifted from the open window close behind her desk. She sat again sighing at the sight of her still full desk. A light tap on the door made her gladly put of the pile of paperwork aside for as long as possible.

" Its open"

The door opened revealing her mother and sister to be the visitors.

"I hope we're not intruding" Aretina said as they entered the room and each claimed a chair in front of Tera's desk. " I know you still have a lot to do"

Tera grimaced. "Unfortunately" she said unknowingly echoing her partner. She studied her mother for a moment. Even in her early fifty's she was still a stunning woman. Long blonde hair had been pulled into a bun on the back of her head. Green eyes sparkled in the light from the window. Few lines interfered with the smoothness of the skin on her face and neck, her features resembled Tera's own but on a far more delicate scale. Most people took her a face value, many realizing too late the brilliant mind it hid. Her slender form was once again clothed in bright colors. If there had to be one thing about her mother that was strange it was her preference of clothing.

A questioning voice broke into her thoughts. She blinked. " Sorry, what was that?"

Medan traded glances with her mother but refrained from saying what she wanted too at that time. " I asked what else needs done, anything we can help with?"

Aretina interrupted before she could respond. " Dear, do you think you should have that window open in these circumstances?" She worried about the risk to her elder daughter, even with Panter protecting her.

" Mother, I'm on the top floor what possibly could happen?" Tera was a bit put out with all the worrying people were doing. She was an adult after all; she could take care of herself. She was all ready to continue bitching when her sister and mother froze, eyes rounded in alarm.

" What's wrong with you..." Her voice trailed off as a voice suddenly rumbled by her ear.

" Could it be me?" it sneered. A form emerged from just behind her chair as Tera jerked to her feet. It came to a halt by the side of her desk. "Don't". She had just drawn a breath to shout for the guard when a blade glimmered in one hand as it suddenly was at her throat. " You're not the one I want but you're the one who can give it to me, don't make me hurt you" The woman's voice was interlaced with sounds that hit her ears peculiarly. As if this wasn't her normal language.

Tera released her breath as she studied her captor. An average woman with dark streaked tawny hair stood close by her. Tera drew a shaky breath as the knife was withdrawn. Tera's brow furrowed. Maybe not so average she pondered studying the leanly muscled form. She blinked as unusual eyes linked with hers. Amber.. That's what the color reminded her of. A deep orange

colored amber.

"Your the one Panter told me about" Tera was hesitant to say something but all of them standing here staring at each other sure wasn't going to do anything.

"Ah yes Panter...So the traitor mentioned me did she?" their visitor drawled acidly.

"Panter's not a traitor" Tera spat back. Her sudden anger momentarily eclipsing her awareness of the danger they were in.

"What would you call someone who left her people behind to die while she lived?" The woman roared back. It was truly a roar. The reverberations died as everyone stared at her in shock.

Chaos ensued as at the uproar two guards burst into the room, swords in hand. In a blur of motion, Tera was pulled back against the woman, the dagger once again at her throat.

"Stop, or I swear by the goddess I'll kill her" Being this close to her captive she got a better look at the marking by her right eye, something about it caused a roil of disquiet in the pit of her stomach. Not having the time to figure it out she shook the feeling off. She tightened her grip. "I mean it"

Her threat along with her grip on her hostage made the guards halt their forward motion. The man and woman exchanged glances and went one step further by dropping their swords. They hit the floor with a clatter that drew the abductors eyes as she stepped slightly away from her hostage to see giving them both an opening. In one fluid move they both drew the knives hidden on their lower backs and threw them.

For a second they had an idea it might have worked but in a motion faster than they could track she dodged both weapons, leaving them to land in the wall behind her instead. Now with both guards weaponless they had no choice but see what the woman wanted and try to think of some way to get their Regent away from her safely. They backed up with their hands raised to see what would happen next.

"That was a stupid move," The woman laughed. "But I'm impressed by your loyalty, too bad not everyone has it"

"I told you, Panter's not a traitor" Tera insisted trying to ignore the blade so close to her neck. She winced, feeling a burning, as it's sharp edge sliced past a layer of skin causing small beads of blood to trickle down from were it was pressed.

"You have no idea what happened to my people, how many could have survived if it wasn't for her turning her back on us" The woman hissed in rage. "I was sent here to make her pay for her cowardly act and by the goddess she'll pay in full, even if I have to start with you" Inwardly her conscious was screaming about her not involving innocents even if they weren't clan, but she tried to shove it down. She had to do what ever needed to be done to fulfill her mission. It was why she was here. The only reason she was here.

" Enough of this, I want her here now" The sudden calm that came over the woman scared them more than her rage did. The female guard edged to the door intent on retrieving her Arms Master. The woman jerked her head giving her permission to leave but she only moved when Tera met her eyes and motioned her to go with her own. They all watched as the guard slipped quickly out of the door.

" This better not take long," The woman growled in a low tone.

" It might be sooner than you think" Tera replied with a slight smile teasing her lips.

" What do you mean by that?" she demanded looking closely at her captive. She seemed to be almost unconcerned now that the guard had left.

"You'll see soon enough" Tera allowed. " What's your name?"

" Why?"

" Just wanted to know who was holding me captive, call it a little quirk of mine"

The woman bared her teeth in a smirk, unable to not be amused by the woman's daring. " I suppose that would be harmless enough, It's Thira"

"What is?" Tera asked puzzled. The guttural sound the woman made was odd.

The woman sighed. Even with the long journey she was still not used to these people. She had kept away from them as much as possible, trying not to speak. Some of the words were too hard for her to say; they felt unnatural in her mouth. She spoke again trying to be clearer. " My name it's Thira"

"Thira" Tera repeated. " I like it"

Thira grunted. Trying not to care if she did or not. She was just a tool to get what she wanted nothing more. Her attention on her own thoughts, she was caught suddenly caught off guard when a large dark hand reached from behind her and clamped down on her knife hand, pulling it away from her captives throat.

Thira winced as with a vicious twist she was relieved of her weapon. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted her former captive join the other two females in the room. The clatter of the knife being tossed to the side caught her attention. Then her own problems at hand got in her face. Literally.

"You bastard" was snarled at her as large hands headed for her own neck.

She used her natural speed to evade the grasp, intent on putting a little distance between them. Thira headed to the far side of the room unsure of her next move. Right now her purpose lay in



shambles at her feet. She narrowed her eyes at that thinking. She was at a crossroads. Did she forget her mission and plead for whatever mercy this cousin might offer or still try to finish the mission she had been sent with. Her personal honor demanded she finish what she was here to do, no matter the consequences.

As she flew by the knives still in the wall she grabbed one on the way past trying to ignore the feeling that she knew what one of those consequences might be. She spun around to meet the large shape headed toward her almost as rapidly. She tightened her grip on the knife then reconsidered. A shadow of movement ended with a thump as the knife reappeared in the wall next to its mate.

As her opponent got closer it seemed as if time slowed. She could see the fury in the gold eyes, the claws that now appeared on her hands. Thira extended her own innate weapons; even with her height being a big disadvantage she was sure could do a fair bit of damage before she died. All this happened in the time that it took to prepare herself and then dodge to the left of the larger woman. As her right hand headed towards her adversary's midsection, a small smirk twisted Thira's lips. Looks like I got her first she mused then suddenly it was as if she had slammed her fist into a rock wall as her hand hit a barrier. One she couldn't see. Thira felt pressure against her throat; she had been so intent on her own actions she had yet to realize that she was dead. Or would have been as her opponents claws had the same effect. None. If they had Thira knew her throat would have been torn out and her body would have been on the floor.

Using the next few steps to bleed off speed, Thira twisted. Panting for breath, she saw angry yet baffled eyes as the woman looked at her hands then met her own puzzled expression. Those eyes then moved to look behind her and Thira watched as she saw realization dawn. Before she could say anything a voice broke in.

"Stop" It demanded in dulcet tones. The power that resonated in that voice made the hair on Thira's neck stand up. The sight that she saw when she turned to face it made her go pale. A woman now sat in the desk chair. Thira swallowed hard. Make that a Goddess. The Goddess she herself worshiped. Thira's eyes widened as she now found out just why that tattoo seemed so familiar, the same one graced both sides of the face looking sadly at her. Thira's claws sheathed themselves as she looked away unable to face that look. Even that her back was to her enemy failed to worry her as she fought the feeling of doubt and unworthiness' that suddenly twisted inside her.

" Thira, you will not do this, I forbid it"

Thira jerked her head back around to stare at the Goddess. " What!" She tried to ignore the fact that she was arguing with her deity AND that she knew her name. " She deserted us when we needed her, clan died, is she not to pay for that?"

"I did no such thing," Panter yelled back. She faced Potnia Theron. " I swear it as you're chosen, I did no such thing" Panter insisted. She didn't know any other way to prove it then hope the Goddess knew it as the truth.

Potnia Theron cut Thira's vehement protests short. " I know," she said gently. " It was not your fault, even if you did know of it and stayed, the events that unfolded would not have changed" She hesitated then continued. "Except your own death would have been added to its toll" She sent a warm look to Tera at her gasp of horror. " That is why I sent you here, your meeting of your mate was no accident"

Panter stood unmoving as she tried to comprehend what she had just been told. A warm hand on her arm pulled her from her daze. Panter's body recognized the person before her senses did and pulled her mate into her embrace, allowing their bond to flow uninhibited. To think that this could never had been made her almost physically sick. She tightened her grasp till Tera had to complain before she loosened it again. She watched Thira closely, it seemed as if she was even more shocked then herself.

"But I was told that she deserted us, that it was her fault" Thira said quietly. "They sent me here to..." she trailed off as Potnia Theron shook her head.

" You were lied too, it was never her fault."

"Then how... what am I doing here if it's all been a lie?" Thira shouted, enraged that she had been duped then used.

The Goddess fixed Thira with a look till she calmed. " You, who have been so faithful to me cannot see it?" she asked. " You are not here by chance, anymore then Panter is"

Panter and Thira shouted at the same time. "What!!"

" Are you telling me that my..." Thira stopped for a second " Our people died just to get me here?"

"NO" the Goddess cried. "I used the circumstances of what happened to bring you here"

" But why am I here?" Thira asked.

"Panter will need your help, here, with this battle"

Tera spoke up. " But this is simply a struggle over the regency."

Potnia Theron waved a hand in dismissal of that fact. " It is much more involved then that"

"Then what is it?" Thira insisted. She was getting tired of not having any answers.

"Simply put, I do not know. Whoever is doing this has help, just as I help you"

Thira frowned. " Not to be disrespectful, but what has this to do with me?"

The Goddess glanced at Thira disapprovingly. " This is a battle that is not from one front but two, must you make it three?"

She stopped talking as the door opened. Akil and Narna ran into the room then slid to halt puzzled at the unusual gathering in front of them. "Is everything alright, we were told there was an intruder holding the Regent hostage"

Panter smirked. "Better late then never Akil, that was resolved a short time ago"

The captains joined Tera's mother and sister at the desk, not noticing the awed look on their faces. " So then who was it?" Akil asked then noticed a woman he had never seen before. " Was this her?" He stepped forward to grasp the woman's arm but stopped short when his hand closed over air.

" What the Hell!!" He blinked then noticed she had moved nearer to the Goddess. He moved to grab her again but stopped at Panter's laughter.

" You'll never catch her Akil, I barely can. Anyway don't bother, it's been found that it's just a big misunderstanding"

"Are you sure?" Akil questioned.

The Goddess smiled amused at the man. " As my chosen has said it was just a family problem"

Panter just stared, at a loss for words as Thira shouted " Family!!!?"

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## Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

### Chapter Four

Thira studied the bottom of her tankard intently; trying to ignore the stares she had been the occasional recipient of. She continued to ponder on what had happened a little earlier. After dropping her verbal bomb the Goddess had said little more before she had departed. To even think of being family in any way with Panter made her uneasy, she had thought of the woman as an enemy for a long time. Although it was true that before being sent here on her "mission" she had never known of her. Then again, she had been raised in an almost exclusive clan environment. Her first exposure to outsiders had been difficult at best. Being used to a more non verbal language had made it hard to understand and get along with others, so she tended to try to distance herself as much as possible. It was much easier then to try to fumble her way through and end up angering someone with her ignorance. Her incomprehension of humans had remained an ongoing problem. But following the slaughter of most of her village after it was inadvertently discovered; she had felt justified in turning that into a smoldering distrust.

"May I join you or would you rather be left alone?" A warm voice intruded on her musing. Thira was startled; someone had gotten close without her senses alerting her. She automatically started to tell them to leave her be as she looked up but it died unsaid on her lips when she met the dark eyes watching her. Thira paused then muttered her acceptance of the offered company. She watched quietly as the woman settled into the chair across from her. Auburn shoulder length hair was pulled back into a neat braid that was flipped back over a powerful shoulder as the woman sat back comfortably.

" Thira right, I'm Alesia" She leaned forward as she reached out her arm in greeting.

Thira's left eyebrow raised as she realized this woman was greeting her as someone would from her birthplace. She reluctantly reached out in reply. Her response to the feel of the smooth skin that encased the strong forearm didn't show on her face. Casually, she disengaged from the contact moving back into her own space. Her eyes flickered as she tried to disregard the warmth that lingered on her own arm.

Thira cleared her throat. " You must know Panter,"

Alesia smiled. " Yes, she's my friend. Actually it's more like family"

Inwardly Thira winced at that response. She obviously didn't know what had occurred earlier with her friend and her mate. If she did she wouldn't be here now. Or maybe she did know and was here for another reason. Thira carefully looked for weapons of some kind. She must have been a little too obvious about it when Alesia spoke.

" I know what your thinking about, and no I'm not here to even the score" Alesia grinned widely. " But if what I've been told is true, I doubt I would have a chance of doing that anyway. By the look of things, it was " Alesia laughed. "Besides as you know, weapons have to be left at the door anyway."

Thira studied Alesia as she waved over a waitperson and requested two platters. At her inquiry

Thira accepted another ale. It's light sweet taste was pleasant.

Alesia took a drink from her own mug and then looked at Thira intently.

" So how much like Panter are you?" she questioned in a low tone so their conversation wouldn't be overheard.

Thira body jerked in reflex at the abrupt inquiry. She had to consciously tramp down her fight or flight impulse. She chewed the inside of her lower lip as she considered how to respond. Thira's gut feeling prodded her to answer. Somehow she wanted to tell her. Silence dominated the table, it seemed even the server could feel the tension as she hurriedly put down their platters then left.

Alesia watched the shadows pass within the eyes in front of her. The flicker of movement as they morphed then returned to normal reinforced the story she had been told by Akil. She hadn't been able to talk with Panter long after that except to be told that since space was at a premium Thira was temporarily being housed at Raven's Claw. Curious she had decided to track her down and see her for herself. She had not expected the striking woman that sat tensely in front of her. They started to quietly eat. Alesia enjoyed the purring tones that interlaced Thira's words as she finally spoke.

" Like humans we are just as diverse" Thira pushed some vegetables aside on her platter as she searched for more of the meat. "Coloring, size" She glanced up with a wry smile " Temperament. I'm sure that Panter told you only the females are gifted?"

Alesia finished her mouthful of food, and then set her fork to the side. Taking a sip of ale she settled back with the cup in hand as she considered the question. " Yes, we have talked about that before. She told us the story of how it had all happened. That your Goddess made you in her image, to protect you when your ancestors first arrived in your homeland." She set her goblet back onto the table as she watched Thira drain the rest of hers in several deep swallows. " Let me guess, alcohol doesn't affect you either?"

Alesia caught her breath at the full smile she received in return, Thira's canines flashing as they caught the low light. She suddenly had a small idea what Tera was feeling when Panter did the same thing. Warmth settled low in her belly from her reaction to that smile, dangerous though it could be.

"No, not really we have to drink a lot before it would have any effect at all" Thira resumed eating as she watched her tablemate subtly. What she had told Alesia was true; everyone was different in some way. The gifts she had received while similar to Panter's, they weren't. Her senses were of course much more powerful than humans. Her sight was incredibly acute but her sense of smell was less developed than Panter's she was sure. Panter had tracked her effortlessly. But it was good enough to pick out Alesia's scent from all the others crowding the air around them. The light musky smell suddenly had Thira subvocally growling low in her chest. She hastily wrestled it under control. This was not acceptable at all. She barely understood humans as it was, to add an attraction to it was begging for trouble. For her. A passing server with a platter of drinks caught her eye. Fishing out a copper bit she timed it then swiftly reached out retrieving a drink and leaving the bit in its place. The server continued by unaware of what had just transpired.

Thira took a deep drink from her new cup of ale.

"By the Gods, that was incredible!"

Thira cautiously met Alesia's gaze. Expecting disgust and horror, she found instead awe and acceptance. Shocked, Thira was without words for an instant. " This doesn't bother you?"

Alesia frowned. " Of course not, why would it. Besides you're forgetting about Panter aren't you. If she doesn't bother me then why would you?"

Alesia changed the subject when Thira just nodded and seemed to be thinking about something.

"So your all about speed. How does that effect fighting in your human form?"

Thira blinked at the off hand comment. " It of course gives me an edge on the hand to hand fighting. At the height of my speed every thing seems to slow down giving me plenty of time to act. I can't keep it up forever as it can drain me of energy but I tend to recover fairly quickly."

Alesia shifted her weight forward resting her chin on her clasped hands. "What weapons do you use?"

"I prefer knives but if needed I have alternative weapons" Thira lifted a hand in explanation; relived when all Alesia did was nod and smile.

"I like the bow and sword myself, I'm not the best but I think I do alright"

Thira studied the play of muscles across Alesia's arms and shoulders. Somehow she got the idea she was much better then "alright". Thira wanted to test out that theory but decided to stay with a safer topic of discussion. " How did you meet Panter?" She pushed away her half eaten meal, settling back in her chair with the rest of her ale in hand.

Alesia was a bit startled by the abrupt change of subject but readily answered the question. " A unit of our rangers had been out scouting after a large cat had been sighted hanging around the perimeter of our village. One of them injured it; we found a fresh blood trail but no body. After reporting the sighting, Tera decided to follow it, the blood trail ended shortly after but enough ground cover had been disturbed to still be able to follow it somewhat."

Thira raised an eyebrow in faint admiration. " You must have had a very good tracker to still be able to follow so well"

Alesia flushed slightly. "I guess we did"

Something in the way Alesia evaded her eyes answered an unspoken suspicion. " It was you wasn't it?"

Alesia forced herself to meet Thira's intense gaze. " Yea, It was"

Thira's brow wrinkled in puzzlement. " Why not say it was you to begin with?"

Alesia shrugged. " Didn't think it mattered"

Thira wondered briefly why she was even having this conversation in the first place given how she tried to limit the contact with humans. What was it about this female that had her so intrigued, enough to ignore her base instincts. She pushed the worry aside for now and replied.

" It does, nothing is wrong with admitting your own abilities"

" I guess you have a point" Alesia shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "Anyway to continue the story" She was startled but enjoyed the accolade. " We followed the imprints for almost two days. It led to a small glade backing upon a range of hills. As we scouted the area nearby Rena was attacked."

"Rena?"

" She's was Tera's second of command in the village at the time"

" And now?"

"She remained in the village as Tera's proxy since a few of our people wanted to stay."

" So the village I followed Panter too is the new one I take it"

Alesia frowned as that reminded her of the scare Thira had caused.

" You know if it wasn't for Panter and Tera a lot of people would have made you pay for what you've done. Attempting to murder one of our rulers is payable with your life"

Thira stiffened, as the feelings that had been running rampant inside her froze then shattered. Her face hardened causing her high-planed cheekbones to stand out in relief. Eyes that had darkened to a near black locked with Alisa's. "As a HUMAN you have no concept of what happened. The Goddess herself said it was a FAMILY matter. You are nothing to me, so your laws mean nothing to me as well."

Thira's chair fell to the floor with a clatter as she shot to her feet. Alesia flinched at the cold look she received. A flash of movement signaled Thira's abrupt departure.

Alesia rested her head on a shaking hand. Tears suddenly burned the back of her eyes. She cursed herself for bring up the subject. She hadn't meant for it to come out like that, she had just wanted to warn Thira of how some of the people felt. Not Alesia herself. With Panter as a friend she did have a small inkling of what the real problem had been, and still was. Her chest tightened as she realized that the chance of getting to know Thira was probably gone. Rising from her seat she threw a handful of coins on the table, grabbed her weapons and headed for the manor to her quarters. Right now she just wanted to be alone for a while.

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Thira ran as if the hound of Hades were at her heels. Her throat burned with the effort of keeping her scream of despair inside. Using the advantage of the darkening evening she kept to the alleyways, making her way to the outer walls of the city. The buildings and crowds of people pressed in on her like an invisible weight. She needed to get out of here; she felt the rein on her animal self fraying, the threads snapping with the pressure one by one.

Alesia's words warred with the scent that still lingered in Thira's memory. She had felt pulled to Alesia but now it seemed that it was not the same with the other woman. For a few moments it had almost been like a connection of some kind had been there. But now... Thira reached the wall finally. Barely looking she took a chance no one was there and leapt. On the rim of the wall she paused then dropped over the side. Gaining the trees she pressed close to an oak trying to absorb the strength it inherently had. Thira mouth parted as she panted, drawing in the nearby smells that surrounded her. She pushed her forehead harder into the trees bark. A groan of pain echoed the shattered feeling inside as she finished her thought. But now she knew what she had felt was not real, only a fragment of a wish that she knew had died long ago. A time before her world had been torn apart, a time when she believed.

Moving away from the tree she stripped and hid her clothing under a bush next to the tree, finally allowing her animal side the freedom to surface. Lifting her head she gazed at the rising moon. The night was her true friend; it allowed her to roam free under its blanket of protection. It permitted her to be who she truly was without conjecture or scorn.

Bones moved under her skin as her body shifted. Fur flowed over her skin, claws emerged and her canines lengthened. Feline eyes glinted as the moons radiance shone down on the cat that now sat in the woman place. Thira hissed as her feelings once again centered onto Alesia. Even in this form she still felt the ache of being so wrong. Paws dug into the earth as she pushed herself using all the speed at her disposal. But no matter how fast she ran those words still echoed in her ears.

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Alesia sat in the dimness of her room looking out the window a drink clasped in hand. Her eyes didn't see the people roaming below her window or the city lights in the distance. Instead she only saw the look that came over Thira's face at her misspoken words. The shock and anger that had shone briefly on her features had been eclipsed by the coldness that had taken their place. Her biting words still stung. Thira had been right she was only human and not family of hers in any way. Even with Panter she really wasn't family in any meaning of the word. Just simply a friend. A close one granted but in no way kin.

Shaking her head Alesia lifted the goblet to her lips only to find it empty. She reached for the chilled bottle on the small table next to her chair and refilled it. Raising it to her lips she paused at the knock on her door. Alesia set the cup back on the table reluctantly; she wasn't in any mood for company of any kind. She emerged from her bedroom and stopped, as she considered not answering it. She stood in her main room in a quandary of indecision. Another knock made her



start towards the door then stop once again.

" Alesia, I know your there"

Alesia winced as she shut her eyes in resignation. Now there was no choice but to answer it. But for some reason she still didn't move.

"Alesia, open the door I can smell your here"

Steeling herself Alesia pulled the door open to reveal Panter's worried face.

" What do you want?" Alesia asked listlessly.

Panter's eyes narrowed as she studied Alesia's washed out features lingering on the obvious signs of tears.

"You didn't show for dinner or send back a reply with any of the stewards we sent to check on you. You didn't have to be there but some kind of response would have been much better then none at all."

Alesia bit her lower lip as she tried to keep it together for a bit longer. Never had she been emotional like this in anyway. To be like this was fraying her nerves but for some reason she couldn't stop it.

"Alesia" Panter tilted her head up gently with a finger. "What's wrong, I've never seen you this upset before?"

Alesia took a deep breath then forced herself to meet Panter's eyes. " It has to do with Thira"

She watched Panter's eyes flicker. Then continued. " We had a fight earlier"

"What!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Tera felt her mates presence even before she came through the door to their bedroom. She set aside her book as she took in the worried look on Panter's face. She restrained her questions until Panter joined her in bed with a sigh. Turning toward her she met her lips with her own, basking in the warmth of their bond for a brief time. Easing away she rested her head on Panter's chest feeling the rumble of a soft purr under her cheek. Tera let the silence drift before finally disturbing it.

" You were gone for awhile, anything wrong love?"

She felt her pillow halt in mid breath then continue. Pressing a kiss to Panter's breast she

prompted her again. " What's bothering you?"

"I went to see Alesia"

"Is everything alright, I was getting a bit concerned when she didn't show for dinner or send word?"

"I found her in her rooms"

Tera didn't reply knowing more was coming. By the way Panter tensed up just now probably not good.

"She was crying"

Tera raised her head to met Panter's troubled gaze. " Why?"

"Alesia went to Ravens Claw to see Thira. Curious about her I guess"

Tera smirked." Who wouldn't have been?"

Panter smiled faintly. " True" She sobered. " From what she said things seemed pretty good at first. But after awhile they started talking about how we met then it got bad."

"What happened?"

"They were talking about the old village when Thira asked if the new village was the one she had seen."

Tera winced. " I can almost imagine what happened next" She laid her head back down.

" Alesia brought up that if it wasn't for us people would have made her pay for attacking their regents. She said Thira got angry, said something about her being only human and in no way family so what she said meant nothing to her. Then she took off"

Tera brow creased. " That sounds pretty bad but why was Alesia crying?"

Panter slid her fingers through Tera's hair as she breathed in its scent. "Do you remember when we first saw each other?"

"Mmm.. Yes, I couldn't keep my eyes off you half the time and my hands to myself the other half."

Panter laughed quietly. " I know, but I liked it when you touched me. I had never let anyone close enough to do that. With you it just felt right"

" It did but why did you" Tera stopped short. " You think Thira and Alesia?"

" Could be mates" Panter finished. "I have a feeling by Alesia's reaction, they might be"

"That's good right?"

" Yes, if nothing happens to prevent it from forming but from the little Alesia told me that might just be happening. And to ignore a bonding can be devastating to them both"

" All they need to do is talk it out. It sounds like a big misunderstanding to me"

"Unfortunately when I sent someone to check in on Thira she was nowhere to be found."

Tera sat straight up. "Then we have to look for her"

Panter pulled Tera back down into her arms. " Amare, it's not up to us. If things are to be resolved they must be the ones to do so. All we can do is be there to support them if we can. Now sleep, there is much to do tomorrow"

Tera stayed awake awhile after Panter had fallen asleep just thinking of all the things that had happened since they had met. All of the small quarrels and disagreements they had meant little in comparison with what they had now. Everything that had happened had been worth it. Everything. Closing her eyes she relaxed further into Panter's arms, smiling as Panter hugged her closer in her sleep. The steady beating of her lover's heart lulled her swiftly into slumber.

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## Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
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Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

### Chapter Five

Panter tapped a pen on the table's edge as she listened idly to the final counts of all the supplies

that they would be taking with them. Her mind was still dwelling on last night's episode. Someone clearing their throat had her glancing up in bemusement. She hid her amusement at the look of impatience on Akil's face.

" Did you even hear what I just said?" he asked impatiently.

Panter thanked her Goddess silently when she could truthfully reply that she had. They had finally received some reports from the scouting parties she had sent out. For some reason the forces advancing on Hawk's Peak had slowed then abruptly stopped about ten days out. Even before this development their time had been growing short. Only with people working in shifts had they gotten to this point of readiness. As it was they would need to depart in less than a day to be far enough out to be an effective deterrent to the approaching army.

"You just said that the militia was sufficiently armored and we have managed to get enough horses to outfit our troops, correct?" she asked blandly.

Akil shuffled the papers in front of himself restlessly. " Correct, Arms Master" He relaxed when the smile broke the seriousness' of Panter's face. Sometimes he couldn't tell when she was jesting and when she wasn't.

"Good, are all the units assigned a healer and cook wagon?" Armies worked better with food in their stomach and having a healer goes without saying. With this being the first real battle she had ever orchestrated and the added stress of it dealing almost directly with her mate she was determined to be as ready as possible.

" Yes, also the two person shelters are being packed as we speak, are you certain you don't wish for the bonded to be put into different units?" Akil wasn't sure if keeping married couples together was a good idea.

Panter rose to her feet and moving to a window watched the controlled chaos below. "I understand why you're asking Akil," She turned and leaned back onto the windows sill. "As your not bonded yourself you might not realize how much more ferociously you will fight if there is danger to you or your partner."

The rest of the leaders in the room stilled as Akil's face flushed. " I might not be bonded but I am aware of how it is to want to protect what you cherish" he replied in a lower voice than normal.

"I apologize if I was out of line Akil, I meant no offence"

Akil shook his head. "I am not upset, you could not have known"

"Then you know that it is better for the bonded to be together, then to have their minds on what is happening to their spouse if they were placed in another unit. I need to have them focused on the enemy in front of them. Of the choices I believe this to be the better of the two." Panter could not willingly ask their people to do something she herself wouldn't do.

A murmur of agreement from the group seemed to reinforce Panter's words. Akil lowered his gaze then momentarily met Panter's. "As you wish Arms Master" With that the subject was dropped as they moved onto other more pressing matters.

\*\*\*\*\*

Thira's hand stilled on the top of the crate she had been about to load onto a supply wagon. Even with the mass of people around her finishing up the final preparations a familiar scent drew her attention. She caught herself as she automatically tried to search out its owner.

*No!! She reminded herself. She is just like the others .A human could never truly understand us. It is better to know that now then find it out too late.*

Thira shook her head as something inside whispered that Panter had a mate that understood; perhaps she had been too hasty. She growled in frustration as she grabbed the crate, lifting it with ease and shoving it on the wagon. Brushing her hands off she looked around; she needed to rid herself of this excess energy. Trying to keep her distance from Alesia was proving to be more difficult then she had imagined. Spotting two women struggling with a large barrel she walked over and offered her assistance.

She had been leery of working with these people but it was turning out to not be as bad as she had feared. Maybe with Panter around they had gotten used to someone being so different.

"May I help?"

Both women hesitated then step back. The younger one glanced at the other then smiled. "Sure, but its quite heavy" Their eyes widened as Thira effortlessly picked up the barrel moving to add it to the wagons burden.

"That was no problem, is there anything else?" Thira suppressed a laugh at the look on their faces. When she got no response, she tried again. " HEY"

The women jumped startled. The younger woman spoke up again. "Sorry, that was just something to see. Yes, we do have a few more things we could use your help with, if you would just follow us."

Thira smirked behind their backs as she trailed along behind. Maybe she wouldn't be as bored as she thought.

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Alesia mingled with fellow scouts as they headed toward the last meeting before their departure the next day. The units had been formed up last night and everyone had been notified of their positions. She was in charge of the scouting sections that were to join Panter's main group. She hadn't been really surprised, it seemed as if Panter wanted the best to help keep her spouse safe

from harm. Everybody was careful not to say, but was sure that Tera knew and had chosen to not say anything about it.

Alesia listened idly to the conversation but blocked out most of it. She had other things that were occupying her thoughts at the moment. They had for some time. She jerked to a halt as the group came to a sudden stop.

"Would you look at that hot piece of woman. She could keep me company anytime." One of the scouts exclaimed. Wolf whistles from the others seemed to support the sentiment.

Alesia glanced over at the form drawing such avid attention and winced. It was Thira. Any words she was about to say died when Thira took off her shirt and tossed it onto a nearby railing leaving her clad in only a breast wrap. Alesia watched in silence as she pulled her hair back into a loose tail and turned toward the two women she had been talking too. Murmurs of admiration echoed her feelings at the tattoo that traveled from her hairline, down her spine and disappeared below the waist of her pants. Spots of dark color in various sizes and shapes adorned the firm muscled skin of her back. Something in Alesia's gut told her that it wasn't any kind of "Tattoo".

When Thira glanced back and met Alesia's gaze in a cool stare, she knew it was time to go. "Come on lets go, we have a meeting to get to," she prompted. Her jaw tightened when she was ignored. "At your attention" she yelled. Alesia moved to the front as they automatically responded to the command. A tight-laced group now stood and awaited further orders from their superior.

"Now that the sightseeing is over, we have a fight that we need to get ready for " Alesia paused. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed that they had gained an attentive audience. "We don't have time to spend on dalliances with women." She immediately regretted what she said as she caught the small jerk Thira made before she turned and strode away. Alesia sighed. "All right, lets get moving," She shouted. Alesia fell into step as they moved off toward the manor. She would have time to worry about her big screw up later.

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Panther felt Tera's grip on her hand tighten as she reached out to shove open the door to Raven's Claw. They had decided to spend this last night before departure with close friends and what better place then said friends' inn. Good food and drink would help both of them and everyone else. She had sent someone to collect Alesia and Thira in case they had decided to ignore the request for their presence. Panther stopped before opening the door. Turning her head she glanced down.

"Are you all right Amare, we can just go home if you wish?" she offered.

Tera shook her head. "This is something we want....no... need to do. After tonight we won't have a chance like this in a long while."

Nodding in agreement Panter pushed the door open. Silence descended as they were recognized when they entered the establishment. No sound or movement came from any of the people seated in the room. Panter noticed many of the soldiers had a similar idea; at least half of the room was packed with them. A sudden voice broke the tension.

"At your Attention" was shouted from behind them.

Panter didn't need to turn to know that their summons had been abided by. The scrap and clatter of benches and chairs filled the air as the militia bolted to their feet. Their right arms crossed their chests with their open palm resting on their left shoulders. They all would stay in that position until they had been ordered to their ease.

Panter stifled a sigh. She noticed Tera had not moved to respond to the salute. Meaning that she was allowing the military leader to have the fuss of being in charge tonight. This would be the last night to just be Panter and Tera. Tomorrow they would cease to exist for some time. The Regent and The Arms Master would be all that was acknowledged by everyone concerned.

Panter saluted back to her soldiers. " At your ease" She watched them relax slightly in their presence. This wouldn't do, not tonight. She needed to fix it.

" For this one night, we are not your superiors. We are all just people spending the last chance for some time with the people that matter. Please return to your seats and continue your visits. Allow us to offer you a drink on the house." She raised a hand. " "But no more than a few drinks, anyone caught drunk will be punished severely. We can't afford to have anyone unable to fight." Panter smirked. " But still have fun" Laughter and cheers followed Panter as she made her way towards the bar. Panter broke into a smile upon seeing it manned by Zeva.

Glancing up Zeva snorted. "Figures it was you causing so much damn commotion"

"Hey now, that hurts my feelings" Panter protested feigning an injured look. It had been far too long between visits with Zeva and her family. They had been sorely missed.

Zeva looked unsure then shook her head. "Bull, you thrive on it and you know it. Admit it, things had gotten far to calm. You were chomping at the bit for a little action."

Panter leaned on the bars edge. Zeva turned away to arrange the free drinks as she pondered on what had been said. Panter frowned as she found that the words did ring true to some extent. In several ways she did need the thrill of the hunt so to speak. But that did not detract from the happiness she experienced with Tera in any way.

When Zeva rejoined her she admitted it. " You're right, there is a part of me that needs that chase. I don't think it is something that will ever go away."

Panter smiled when a voice accompanied the arm that slid around her waist. "That is something I hope truly never goes away, my love. "

Panter hugged the smaller body closer. " Really, why would you say that?"

"That is something that is part of you. If you tried to change that, you would change the person who I fell in love with. I'm not looking to tame you in any way."

Panter grinned. " In some ways you have." At Tera's worried look she pressed a soft kiss on her forehead in reassurance. " Only good ways Amare. I swear."  
Straightening to her full height she scanned the crowded room. " So where did our reluctant dinner partners go to?"

Panter allowed Tera to pull her into the crowd after a hasty exchange of words with Zeva.  
"They're at our regular table." Tera stated "It seemed a little too quiet when I came to find you."

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Alesia shifted in her seat. Just sitting across from Thira had her on edge. With the chill in the air from Thira's indifference it might as well have been the dead of winter. *Now that I think about it, winter might be slightly warmer* she mused. Just briefly meeting Thira's gaze made her want to shiver. No expression showed on her face or in her cold eyes. It was as if Alesia was not even a mildly interesting bug that just happened to be there. Alesia focused her attention back to the top of their table. She wished Panter and Tera hadn't insisted on her being here. She couldn't take this for much longer. She didn't realize that her hand had risen unconsciously to press at the ache in her chest. Since Alesia wasn't watching she missed the troubled look that crossed Thira's face only to disappear at the appearance of their friends.

Tera slid onto the bench next to Alesia. She met Panter's worried eyes as she sat down across from her beside Thira. Tera nodded faintly then spoke. "Thank you both for showing up. I thought it would be good to get together before everything starts happening tomorrow. I doubt there will be much idle time after we leave here." She smiled at Alesia, trying to lift the heavy air of tension surrounding them even slightly.

"Don't see where you gave a choice in the matter. Seeing how the message was delivered by your private guards." Thira snarled. The sound reeked with hostility. She went to say something else but a glare from Panter cut her short.

Tera met Thira's angry gaze. "If you don't want to be here, then leave."

Thira bolted to her feet. "I will" She started walking away then turned back. "I'm only here to honor my oath to the goddess not to make friends". From one instant to the next she was gone.

Tera pressed her lips together in vexation. She sighed, temporarily dismissing what happened. "What's going on Alesia?"

The server arriving with their food and drinks gave Alesia an extra few moments to consider what answer to give. She played with her fork and poked at her food as she thought. Taking a



deep drink of her ale, she savored the burn as it warmed her throat and chest. "My error has been compounding itself." She finally said.

Panter's eyebrows rose in puzzlement until Tera cleared up the ambiguous statement. "You mean what you said regarding what other people would have done about the attack on us?"

"Yes" Alesia pushed her uneaten food aside, pulling her goblet a little closer. "I'm sorry I just can't eat right now," she said in response to Tera's concerned look. "It just seems that anytime we see each other I do something to make things even worse. At this rate we might never get things straightened out between us." Alesia throat tightened as tears gathered. "Maybe it's better off as it is. She never would have trusted me anyway." Alesia rose from her seat. "I need to go, I'll see you both in the morning"

Silence followed her departure. Tera shook her head. "This is starting to worry me"

"I'm worried too, but there is nothing we can do that will help. I don't think they will let it affect the jobs they have to do." Panter reasoned.

"I hope not. I don't want either of them hurt or the gods forbid killed because of it"

Both of them set their worry aside as they concentrated of this last night alone together before going to war.

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Moonlight cast a faint glow, softly settling on the tearstains adorning the sleepers face. Faint whispers of sound preceded the bird that entered through the open window. Feathers rustled as it settled on a nearby chair back. The raven considered the sleeper for a moment before seeming to nod. The birds shape blurred then something new occupied the chair. The goddess's kind gaze now watched.

"My child has not been kind to you. Even one such as she is realizing this is not how things should be between you" Potnia Theron sighed. "She does live up to her name" she mused. "She is untamed. And proud lets not forget that"

The goddess rose. "As with my chosen, I do the same for you. What assistance I have is yours if you but ask" A gesture toward the bed and in a shimmer of light the bird departed the same way it had come. The goddess had one more thing to do before returning to her realm.

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Thira woke before first light. She wasn't surprised; this was how it had been for a while now. She had found herself jerking awake many times during the night till she was about to just stay up. She wasn't getting any rest anyway.

Shoving her blanket aside she got up and headed for the hand basin to wash up. Gritting her teeth at the sudden shock of cold water on her face and neck, Thira went to grab the towel hanging beside the basin and froze at the sight of her right arm. Time seemed to freeze as her mind struggled with the information her vision had seen. Thira grabbed a striker and lit a lamp, fumbling as her hands shook. The resulting light made what she had seen unmistakable. Clenching her hands into fists to try to stop the tremors, Thira closed her eyes in despair. How could this have happened? Why had this happened? What was she going to do now?

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A knock sounded on the door to their rooms as Tera and Panter finished dressing. Sliding her sword into its sheath resting on her back Panter opened the door. She smiled as she saw who it was.

"Alesia.... Why are you wearing.." Panter stopped as she took in the shocked look on her face. "What's wrong?" She exchanged a troubled glance with Tera as she came over to see what was going on.

Alesia bit her bottom lip. "I awoke this morning and found something had happened overnight. I'm not sure what it means or why it's there"

Tera frowned. "What do you mean it?"

Taking a deep breath, Alesia flipped the cloak covering her onto her right shoulder exposing her arm.

Tera jaw dropped in astonishment. "By the Gods what is that?"

Panter moved closer and examined Alesia's arm. Sometime during the night a tattoo running from Alesia's shoulder down to her wrist had appeared. As she absorbed the details she started to understand what it meant.

"Amare, come take a look at this and tell me what you see."

Moving closer Tera studied the drawing. "It looks just like..."

"Ours, yes it does just on a much larger scale" The vines and snakes wound their way around Alesia arm and ended by her wrist with the head of the last snake resting on the back of her hand.

Alesia flexed her hand and arm studying the tattoo as the muscles in her arm moved under her skin. "What do you think it means?"

Panter shrugged her shoulder. "I'm not sure but nothing in a bad way." She picked up her and

Tera's saddlebags. "Right now we don't have time to find out, lets get moving".

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The stamping of restless horses and the snap of the banners bearing the Regents emblem in the wind were the only sounds drifting in the early morning air. No one would have thought that over seven hundred fighters, most on horseback were amassed in the fields just outside the manor. The number of fighters had swelled as more villages in the area had sent assistance and supplies. Even with most of them bringing their own mounts, they had ended up with at least two hundred still on foot. But that was ok; ground troops would be a good advantage. Everyone straightened as the Regent and The Arms master approached on horseback.

Panther ran an eye over the troops. A short nod replaced the smile of satisfaction that wanted to appear on her lips. Standing in Donum's stirrups she addressed them. " Today we are riding out to meet a unknown force that has decided to try to lay claim to our homes and the people we are here to protect. Let's teach them that they just made a **huge** mistake."

A low roar of agreement cut through the air. The crash of swords beating on shields and the stamping of boots joined it in a mass of sound. An uplifted hand interrupted the elation. At a gesture from their military leader the unit commanders shouted their sections to attention. Panther and Tera nudged their horses forward followed by the Hawk's Wing and the Chosen's Elite as they took their place behind them. The rest of the companies fell into line. The rumble of wagon wheels accompanied the healers and cooking companies needed to support the militia.

The main thoroughfare had been cleared so the army could move unimpeded towards the main gates. Still the residents had found places to stand as they watched them depart. Shouts of thanks and encouragement followed them. Panther looked over as Tera nudged her. At her inquiring look Tera merely pointed towards her right side. Panther smiled as she spotted Zeva, Solaris and Falises watching them ride by. Panther saluted them, inclining her head as they all saluted back. Zeva had wanted to go also but Panther and Tera had gently reminded her that her family needed her here. She had been reluctant but agreed when Panther told her that she could help here as a reserve in case any of the fighting came to Hawk's Peak.

Reaching the main gates, they passed out on to the road that would start them on the first phase of their journey. A voice behind them lifted into a marching tune. The song built as more voices joined in.

The sun was at its zenith when they passed the faint trail to the new village. Tall trees cast fleeting shade as they rode past. Movement in the foliage had Panther tensing her hand reaching back to draw her sword. As shadows resolved into known shapes she relaxed. Rena and a group of around fifty warriors rode out to meet them.

"Not that I'm not glad to see you, but what are you doing up here?" Tera questioned surprise coloring her voice.

"We came to help" Rena said shortly. " Another village fell to them yesterday. I think its time to kick their ass back where they came from and out of our backyard"

Panter frowned at that news, but agreed with Rena's sentiment. "Glad your joining us, find a spot and we'll get moving."

She nudged Donum into a trot as they moved to join them. The companies increased their speed to match. The jingle of tack on her left had Panter glancing over to see Alesia moving up to ride at her side. Her russet colored battle gear resembled what most of the Amazon's were wearing. She was clad in a sleeveless tunic with brass chest plating stitched onto flexible leather that protected her front and back. Her leggings had shin and thigh guards that protected her lower limbs with knee length boots covering her feet. She wore a bracer on the inside of her left arm with a vambrace on her right to protect her forearm. A small shield hung off a hook on her saddle to use when she pulled the sword that rode on her left hip. A bow was slung across her chest along with a full quiver of arrows tipped with a square arrowhead tapering to a sharp point that would punch through armor fairly easily if you were a decent archer. Which she was. Her vambraces covered a portion of the tattoo now adorning her arm. Surprise had been the most common reaction from people seeing it on first sight.

Alesia rode silently at Panter's side her mind occupied. She hadn't seen Thira this morning but on inquiry had learned she was somewhere in one of the scouting companies that had peeled away to ride ahead. Her brows furrowed as a slight ache in her chest caused her to catch her breath. A voice pulled her away from her musing. "Sorry.. what was that?"

Panter's understanding gaze met hers. " Have you seen Thira yet?"

"Um... no I was told she went with the scouting units that went ahead. Why?"

Panter hesitated then continued. "I think things between you two might end up a little more difficult than they already are"

Alesia's eyes widened. "More than they already are?" she laughed in derision. "I can't think it could be worse than being loathed by someone you could..." She stopped in mid sentence afraid to finish.

"Love?" Panter finished gently.

Alesia hand rose to wipe away a tear that trickled down her left cheek. "Yeah" she said softly. "But why do you think it could be any worse?"

"Your tattoo"

"What about it?"

Panther reached out a hand and touched the marking. " It's like Tera's and mine" she reminded Alesia.

"So?"

"It's the Goddess mark remember, for children of her blood and their chosen mates."

"I'm not of her blood, but..." Alesia stopped as her mind finally put together what Panther was saying. "But Thira is". Her heart broke as she realized what Thira's reaction could be. Any chance she might have had just disappeared.

"She has the tattoo too doesn't she?" Alesia refused to look at Panther as she waited for an answer she already knew.

"Yes, I think so" came the compassionate reply.

Alesia choked back sobs that had risen in her throat. She evaded Panther's outstretched hand and kneeling her horse into an abrupt gallop, rode away from them to grieve her loss alone.

Panther watched her ride away. A hand taking hers made her look to the side to see Tera's sorrowful gaze. "It's not going to go well between them is it?"

Panther lifted Tera's hand pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "No, Amare it won't. I worry about them both. To deny something this strong and with the Goddess's obvious marking will be agonizing. If Thira continues to deny Alesia it might have grievous consequences."

"Do you think Thira is that cruel?"

"No, I think she's frightened at what could happen between them. We don't know what has happened in her past to make her react the way she has."

"If only she could realize the gift she's pushing away." Tera tightened her grip on her mate's hand. "It's something I could no longer live without."

"Nor I" Panther bent to meet Tera's lips in a soft kiss allowing their bond to encompass their awareness' for a moment. Straightening she beckoned Akil over.

"Yes Arms Master?"

"Please have two of your people follow Alesia. Keep an eye out but leave her space. Being this close to home it still should be safe enough."

"Is everything alright?" Akil asked concerned.

"As much as it can be"

Akil dropped back to the hawk's wing and spoke to the nearest unit. At his gesture two separated

and kicking their mounts into a gallop headed off into the direction Alesia had ridden.

Satisfied for now that things were as well as could be expected, Panter settled back into her saddle for the long ride ahead. She retained Tera's hand tenderly running her thumb over the back of her hand. For now her mind had to be on the army they were riding to meet.

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## Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
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### Chapter Six

Thira shifted into a more comfortable position on the branch she was resting on. She was high in a tree on the outer edge of their watch ring that enclosed the encamped army. They had been steadily on the move for the past three days. In that time she had made sure that she remained with the advance scouting parties. She had only seen Alesia briefly from afar once. But with her vision it was close enough to see what she had dreaded to find, Alesia did have the tattoo. For a time she had raged against what the Goddess had done but knew that it only made visible what had started happening that first meeting that seemed so long ago. It would have been so easy to just give into that. But a part of her still cringed from the idea of being that close to someone, especially a human. So for now she stayed away.

A slight rustle in the underbrush close by interrupted her reflection. She concentrated on the sound dismissing any natural noises that it could have been, coming to the conclusion that it was human. By it's heavy tread pattern, a male.

After a few more rustles and a snap of a dry branch a form emerged just beneath her perch. The dim moonlight from above shown on the man she had identified as a member of the militia. About to inquire concerning his business of being out this far, Thira stilled as more rustling came from the opposite direction. Another man emerged into the small clearing below her. Thira's eyes narrowed as she saw he didn't wear the markings of Tera's army.

*This is not good.* Thira reached around and slid one of her daggers free from the sheaths strapped onto her back. She waited till the man from their army had passed a piece of parchment to the other with a murmur of words. Silently she dropped down, taking them by surprise. With a smooth motion she slammed the butt of her blade into the temple of the militiaman, knocking him out then whirling to face the other. A scrap of steel accompanied the knife the other man drew. He was close to her height but outweighed her by at least a stone. She grinned as she savored the thought of a good fight, her blood pumping quicker at the excitement. She saw the man's eyes widen knowing he was close enough to see the flash of her canines as they caught the moonlight.

"What the Hades are you?" he rasped.

Thira laughed lightly. "Your worst nightmare" then she attacked.

The quickness of the attack made the soldier draw in a startled breath. A fortunate movement deflected the steel seeking his neck. Thira dropped back bearing in mind that he might hold information that they might need. Lunging forward she struck faster than a snake impacting his head with a hollow thwack. He dropped like a felled tree. Disappointed by the all too brief fight Thira stared at the two men lying at her feet. Bending she retrieved the parchment, tucking it into her belt. She kicked a nearby booted foot.

"Great, just great. Two of them and only one of me, they better appreciate this." Sliding her knife back into its scabbard with a click she reached down and grabbing an arm slung one man over a shoulder. Then reaching down and grabbing the others arm threw him over her other shoulder, settling them into place with a grunt. *Huh, not too bad, lighter then I thought they would be.* She headed back to the camp with a sigh, knowing this was going to draw unwanted attention. But she had little choice; they needed to know what was going on here.

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Alesia excused herself from the group gathered around the fire and headed towards her tent. Raised voices made her turn to see what the commotion was. A darkened shape came towards her at a steady pace. As it moved into the torchlight she caught her breath when she realized it was Thira. With some unexpected company. An eyebrow rose at seeing the two unconscious forms she carried casually over her shoulders. Alesia pursed her lips as she held back an involuntary smile momentarily forgetting about the rift between them. She knew she really shouldn't be so surprised. Alesia crossed over to meet her.

"What's with the company?" she inquired. Alesia wondered if she was going to get any response as Thira just stared at her in silence for an instant.

"Found one of ours giving away something to one of theirs" Thira replied tersely.

Alesia hid the flinch from the abrupt answer. "What!!" she ground out. "You did get it back?" She asked heading toward their leaders tent. Alesia winced she couldn't believe a question as

obtuse as that had just came out of her mouth.

"Passing a note like it was a love letter, figured Panter would want to know. And yeah I got it back" Thira said, sarcasm thickly coating her voice. Her brow furrowed as she tried to puzzle out how things had ended up like this. It was like she couldn't stop her reactions and what she was saying when she was anywhere near Alesia.

Alesia flushed and kept quiet. Tears burned in her eyes that she refused to let fall. That's all she needed for Thira to see, she didn't want her to know that she was having this strong of an effect on her. Reaching the tent, she ignored the two sentries posted at its opening and knocked on one of the poles that formed it. She stepped back as Panter stepped outside.

"Alesia, did you need something?" Panter spotted Thira with her burden. "What happened here?"

"Saw these two having a little private meeting. Seeing how one wasn't ours I thought you might want to talk to them," Thira explained.

"You're right I do" Panter's voice was grim. She held the tent flap back. "Bring them in" She moved aside as Thira squeezed through with her load.

Panter went to drop the flap then hesitated. "Do you want to join us?" She frowned faintly as distressed eyes met hers then dropped away.

"No, I'll be out here if you need anything" Alesia headed towards a nearby fire ring to wait. Being in the same area with Thira was harder on her nerves then she had imagined. Alesia cursed vehemently under her breath drawing several startled looks from passersby. The middle of a war was not a good place for this crap to happen. She resolved to make sure it didn't hinder the job she was assigned to complete.

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Thira carelessly dropped the two motionless forms onto the floor. She collected their weapons tossing them into a far corner, her mind on what she had seen and heard of the exchange between Panter and Alesia. Her gut churned in unease at the state things had become between them, knowing it was all her fault. Panter's sudden voice made her twitch in surprise.

"Are our friends awake yet?"

Thira booted an unmoving form in the side. "No, not yet. Might need a tad bit of encouragement" she reached over and grabbed a water skin hanging from the center pole, upending it over the two men's faces. She smirked as they sputtered to consciousness, struggling to get to their knees.

Panter ducked behind the panel that led into the second half of the large tent intent on retrieving her mate. She emerged a moment later followed by Tera in hastily thrown on clothing.

Tera brow creased as she saw the two damp men at her feet. She frowned as Thira kicked them



back onto the ground as they tried to stand. "What's going on here?" she asked looking toward Panter.

Panter gestured at Thira. "Thira found these two while on watch. She watched our man pass something"

Tera studied the men closely; lips' thinning in anger at the knowledge that a unit commander of her militia was conspiring with what was clearly an enemy soldier. Her cousin's insignia prominently splashed onto his chest armor.

"May I see what was being exchanged?"

Thira dug into her belt retrieving the ragged piece of parchment. "They were right under me when they did it" she said handing the missive to Tera.

Tera examined the note then passed it wordlessly to Panter to read. Panter growled low in her throat as she took in the information it held. She ignored the startled looks coming from the men. She crumpled it in her hand. "This was not good Amare, it was a fortunate thing that Thira was there to intercept this"

"I know" she replied giving Thira a grateful look, causing her to flush uncomfortably.

"So what going to happen with these pieces of shit?" Thira asked hoping to redirect the attention. "I think we should kill em and have done with it" She grinned as the men paled.

The enemy soldier started to bluster but stopped at the sight of the canines he had determined was just a reflection of the moonlight earlier. The sight of Thira's fangs up close almost made him piss himself.

Seeing the effect Thira had on the man, Panter gave a slight nod of her head allowing her to continue with the questioning.

Thira tapped a finger on her lower lip as she considered her next move. She reached down and hauled the militiaman to his feet by his neck. Bring him to eye level she tightened her grip making him choke slightly. He pried at her hand in panic as he felt the strength of her grip, his eyes widening when he was unable to make her let go. She loosened her grasp a little allowing him to draw in a ragged breath.

"Your going to inform me who else is a part of this besides you both" Thira narrowed her eyes as he attempted to shake his head. She squeezed as she lifted the man up. His eyes bulged as his face turned purple and his feet swung free from the floor. The tugging on her hand got weaker as he ran out of air.

A movement from the floor drew her attention as the other man started to get to his feet, but a rumble from Panter showing her own set of teeth made him hurriedly reseal himself.

Thira redirected her attention back to the man in her hand. Softly cursing under her breath at the dark color of his face she set him back on his feet and transferred her hold to his chest armor. She waited as he choked and gasped for air then shook him cruelly.

"Now are you going to tell me what I want to know or do we have to do this again?" She snarled.

"All right" he paused for a ragged breath. "It was I and two men from my unit. We gathered together all the information we could find about our troops. How many, it's strengths and its weakness. We just had to deliver it before we got too close to the other army."

"How did you arrange the meeting?" Tera asked.

Another hard shake got him to answer. "It was arranged before we left Hawk's Peak, they wanted the information by moonrise on the third day"

"We were being betrayed before we even left!?" Tera shouted in anger.

Panter rested a calming hand on Tera's shoulder. "They did not receive what they wanted Amare, remember that." She gave a gentle squeeze as Tera took a deep breath then nodded. "Now" Panter stepped closer to the man in Thira's firm grip. "Who was helping you?"

The man trembled as she moved closer but swallowed then obstinately lifted his chin. "I won't tell you"

Thira threw the man making him crash heavily into a nearby trunk. "Oh, I think you will" Thira purred then she half shifted.

The man screamed incoherently at the monster that had suddenly appeared in front of him. He scrambled trying to put space between them. He ran into Panter's booted leg making him look up to meet an inhuman gaze. He screamed again. "I'll tell you, I'll tell you," he babbled. He flinched as he looked over at Tera expecting her to be like the others. He saw the blond had remained normal but the hard gaze showed him she could be as ferocious as the rest of them. He looked tentatively toward the others finding only women watching him again.

"Dorias and Ranis they're the ones that helped. Fourth unit." He slumped to the ground knowing he had signed their death warrants just as he had his own. The only accepted punishment for sedition was immediate death.

A motion had Thira slipping out to find Alesia and gather some help to take the disloyal soldiers in custody.

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Murmurs arose at the screams that floated out of the leaders tent. Alesia was halfway there when Thira emerged from inside. Dark eyes met amber in unspoken communication. Alesia turned

walking at Thira's side back across to the fire.

Once there, Thira beckoned for a few soldiers to follow her. She gritted her teeth as they sent an inquiring glance to Alesia before following at her small nod. Thira noticed that Alesia continued at her side but chose not to comment.

"I take it they had some help?" Alesia asked quietly.

Thira grunted. "Two from the fourth unit. Dorias and Ranis"

Alesia gestured towards the right. "The fourth unit is camped over there" She remained quiet as they neared the tents that marked the start of the fourth units' area. She could almost feel the curious looks that followed their small group as they crossed over to the form of the lieutenant they could see standing by a fire, seeming to be in conference with a few of her men. As they neared the location she politely cleared her throat drawing the Lt's attention.

The Lt's eyes widened a little as she saluted wondering why the Arm's Masters right hand would want to talk to her. A feeling of dread filled her chest as she noticed the company her visitor had brought with her. "Sir, you require something of me?"

Alesia found that this was one time she was glad that Panter had dragged out a no longer used military rank and saddled her with it. The rank of Marshal was used for only the most trusted of the Arm's Masters people. But it had seemed that most of the time that rank had remained empty with the former heads of the military.

She returned the salute. "Lt. I'm looking for two men in your outfit" Alesia turned to Thira drawing her to the lieutenant's attention. She didn't miss the startlement that appeared on her face. "What were the two names again?"

Thira growled knowing what Alesia was playing at. She had to hide the smile that wanted to appear. "Dorias and Ranis"

The lieutenant's eyebrows rose. "This is Dorias and Ranis," she said gesturing to two of the men standing close by. "Can you tell me why you're looking for them?" She gasped as the two men bolted into a run. Before anyone else could react the race for freedom was already over. They lay facedown in the cloud of dust that had risen with the impact of their bodies hitting the earth. Thira had swiftly pounced on her quarry and the weight of her body had driven them down.

Alesia watched a moment as the rest of her people finally went into motion and secured the wrists of the men. Turning she quietly sympathized with the shocked woman. "They are being arrested for sedition, we caught the unit commander in the act of passing information and they were named as co-conspirators"

"The unit commander too?"

"Yes, I must get them to the Arms Master. Thank you for your assistance in the matter" Alesia saluted the Lt. and turned to go before the woman could react. Before they got out of earshot she

heard the Lt murmur, "It was my duty".

The group followed Alesia's lead and remained silent as they returned to the Regent's tent.

Thira watched as Panter and Tera discussed the situation. She looked out over the still sleeping camp, keeping one eye on the prisoners that were now all grouped together just outside the tent. Except for the sentries not many others had been aware of what had happened. Glancing at the moons position she knew it was still a number of hours till sunrise.

She turned her gaze to a far more pleasing view. Alesia stood close by talking to the militia that had accompanied them. A few had been selected to guard the prisoners until they could get a tribunal together later that morning. The prisoners were to be held in a nearby tent with a ring of guards surrounding it, even though the men would be shackled to posts that had been driven deep into the earth. A normal human would be unable to break free of the restraints.

A soft rumble vibrated her chest as she ran admiring eyes over the woman that she was drawn to. Sturdy legs molded into shapely thighs and hips, a leather chest plate blocked her view from assets she could see in her inner eye even if she couldn't see them now. The vambraces were gone leaving her tattoo in plain sight. Thira's teeth worried at the skin on the inside of her lower lip. She traced the drawing with her eyes; it was exactly like hers down to every detail. It disappeared under the leather strap at Alesia's shoulder. Pulling her gaze away she continued her pleasurable journey. She lingered on the dip from shoulder to neck; Thira licked her upper lip as she visualized her mouth on that spot. She could almost taste Alesia's scent as she drew it deep into her lungs. She blinked while she watched Alesia throat work as she swallowed. Following the curve of the neck as it formed into a firm jaw line she felt her fingers tingle wanting to trace the plane of cheekbone and arch of dark brows. She sucked in a startled breath as bottomless dark eyes met hers.

Thira lowered her eyes then glanced around. As she had drifted into her own world, everyone else had left. Only the two of them remained standing there. The scuff of nearing footsteps jerked her attention back. Alesia had taken the opportunity to move closer ending up right in front of her. Thira's nostrils flared as a surge of Alesia's scent washed over her, pushing Thira's control to the limit as she strained to rein in her base instinct to claim what she truly sought regardless of anything else.

Alesia held Thira's intent look. "I think we need to talk about this"

"I have no idea what your talking about" Thira took a step back trying to put a little space between them hoping it would help. Her eyes closed helplessly as Alesia followed her step by step. She groaned as her warm breath floated over her face as she spoke. Her eyes shot open again when she felt a hand seize her forearm.

"Your lying, even I can see it!!!" Alesia angry voice hit her like a slap.

"I can't...It can't happen!!!" Thira screamed, her control slipping. Eyes flashed bright as they morphed, her animal side trying to take over. Unlike Panter, Thira had lived more as clan than in

her human form. But the effort of trying to refuse what she knew deep inside she really wanted was causing her usually solid self-control to crumble.

"You're a coward!" Alesia spat back. She tensed as Thira froze at the taunt.

Thira growled as she jerked Alesia closer grasping her jaw in a hard grip. It was Alesia's turn to freeze at the unexpected movement. Her gasp went unheard as Thira's mouth claimed hers in a violent kiss. The bruising pressure eased, as it encountered no resistance. A brush of a tongue against a lower lip granted access. Thira moaned at the taste, her hands slid down grasping Alesia hips and pulling her tighter against her lower body, unconsciously kneading the skin under her fingers. She jerked back as she felt herself starting to lose control. The last time she had been in this position, she had ended up being hunted. She tore herself away from Alesia, panting rapidly as she tried to catch her breath. Burning eyes met dilated when Alesia's slowly opened. Thira moved backwards hastily as Alesia reached for her.

"Why did you stop?" The huskiness of Alesia voice caused a shudder to wrack Thira. She moved farther away clenching her hands to keep from pulling Alesia back against her. Thira could feel blood beginning to trickle from between her fingers knowing her claws had slashed her palms open, but not caring.

"I can't do this" Thira whispered, knowing Alesia had heard by the abrupt stiffening of her body. She could already hear the howl of despair clawing at her throat. An agony greater than anything she had known took up residence inside her. "Your human...I'm Clan...I've learned.." Thira didn't get any further as pain exploded across her face. An automatic snarl rose to her lips as she tensed to retaliate. She forced herself to relax knowing she deserved everything she was getting. She could tell that the power of Alesia's hit had broken her cheekbone. Thira watched as Alesia flexed the fingers on the hand she had hit her with. She stilled as their eyes met again. The coldness that emanated from Alesia's caused her soul to curl up and die. This was how it had to be. She knew that now. She just had to survive it, if she could.

"Your worse than a coward" Alesia said emotionlessly. "You're a fraud" Alesia turned and walked away leaving Thira alone with only her demons for solace.

Thira groaned in pain, not from her face but from the knowledge of what she had just lost. She ran her hand over her face deliberately pressing on her broken cheekbone. Wiping away the tears she been unaware of forming, Thira turned and ran for the darkness of the beckoning woods.

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Panther let the panel into their personal space drop back into place. She remained silent, neatly evading Tera as she paced knowing she was still mulling over what had just happened. She stripped off her clothing, dropping them carelessly on top of a nearby trunk. Nude she padded over to their bed and slipped underneath the soft furs covering it. Panther propped herself up on the pillows as she watched her mate pace.

"Amare" she said quietly.

Tera looked up to meet a warm gaze. "Yes?" She paused mid step. "Did you want something?"

Panther pulled back a section of bedding. "Your presence"

Tera's eyes lingered on the naked flesh that had been revealed. She kicked off her boots, wasting no time getting rid of the clothing that suddenly seemed to constricting. Joining Panther she gasped as bare skin met then melded with hers. She laid her head on the strong shoulder that was offered, sliding her left hand down a firm abdomen to finally still cupping Panthers left hip. She could hear the low purr that had started almost as soon as they touched. It stopped as Panther drew in a deep breath.

"It's bothering you isn't it?"

Frowning, she propped herself up on her elbow and regarded Panther. Golden eyes watched her calmly awaiting an answer. Dropping her gaze, she watched as her fingers caressed the skin under her hand. A large hand lightly covered hers stopping her movements. Releasing her hand a finger tipped her head up to meet concerned eyes.

"Isn't it?"

"Yes, even though I know what must be done it does bother me." She admitted reluctantly.

"We could have lost everything if Thira hadn't intercepted that information." Panther reminded her. "Doesn't that make you angry?" she asked knowing full well it did. The rage had practically crackled through their connection.

"Of course it does!" Tera stared in surprise at Panther not believing she had asked that.

"Then use that. Let it help you get through what you are required to do. As Regent you must pass the sentence. Only then can I step in and relieve you of the burden. It will be my duty to carry out the punishment." Panther stated resolutely.

"It doesn't trouble you at all?"

"No, for two reasons. One, this is war. Two and the most important, what they did put you in harms way and that is enough of a reason for me to kill them" She didn't admit that it had taken all her will not to have killed them earlier when they had been within reach.

Tera remained quiet then bent down and kissed Panther. Finally moving back she nodded. "Both good reasons. I think I'll be all right"

Panther threaded fingers through shaggy blond hair, pulling her back down. "Let tomorrow take care of itself" she whispered hoarsely, arousal burring her voice.

Lips met softly, tongues exploring the sweetness within. Tera moaned as hot silken skin slid over

hers. Her hands glided down Panter's sides stopping to grip sleek hips. Swollen lips moved from hers. Her senses spun as their positions were suddenly reversed, a rumbling purr vibrating the surface over her. Soft kisses moved over her jaw and down the side of her neck. She arched as sharp teeth nipped at the curve of her shoulder. A warm palm cupped her breast fingers rolling the nipple.

With a last gentle bite, Panter kissed her way down Tera's chest and claimed the firm nipple. She growled as she felt Tera claw at her back trying to pull her even closer. She moved to the other breast pulling the nipple deep into her mouth. The mix of suction and light bites had sweat breaking out on the body underneath hers. Panter released the nipple and licked the sweat from the hollow of Tera's throat. Panter moved up and lowered her head by Tera's ear.

"Turn over love" she breathed.

Tera lost no time in following the whispered request. Hands pulled her onto her hands and knees. Her own tightened on the covers beneath her as she felt wetness paint her hip. She gasped as lips moved down her back tracing her spine. More bites and kisses dotted her back; it had taken some time before Panter understood that the bites she had restrained herself from were pleasurable to Tera. She felt Panter start to move against her, the brush of fingers moving up the inside of her thigh had her breathing catching. Her upper body unconsciously lowered raising her hips higher. Long fingers stroked wetness then slipped into her hot depths. Tera's face twisted with pleasure as she braced herself, she pushed back against Panter's hand causing her strokes to go a little deeper. The sound and smell of lovemaking hung heavy in the air. Panter closed her eyes; letting her mouth fall open she scented the air small pants taking the aroma deep into her lungs.

Tera's hands twisted the covers as her fists tightened. Between the press of Panter's body and her own pleasure she was being dragged closer to the edge. Another finger was added at the beginning of the next stroke causing Tera to cry out at the sudden fullness. Panter used to weight of her own body to push even deeper into Tera's depths hitting a spot inside her that caused Tera to thrust against her even harder, making the return motion rub against Panter's clit. Her legs trembled; Panter threw her head back as the sparks of pleasure burned brighter and brighter. Tera's scream of release and the pulsing of her walls around Panter's buried fingers drove her into her own orgasm. One last thrust into Tera had her shaking with spasms then finally slumping limply over Tera's back. After a long moment Panter carefully pulled out then slid down to Tera's side pulling her into her embrace. Gentle kisses and words proceeded them into sleep.

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Thira had avoided the standing watch. Even with all their diligence they never saw the form that slipped passed the camp perimeter. She tried to ignore the memory of the scene she had just left. It had refused to stay behind following her like an apparition. Breaking into a sprint she fled moving blindly through the trees, not caring where she ended up. Only an unexpected branch colliding with her shoulder saved her from running full tilt into an encampment. Raised voices pulled her from the fog she had been immersed in. Quickly springing into the tree that had saved her she got out of sight just as a group broke through the surrounding brush.

"Did you catch where that racket came from?" one asked. He was a head taller than the others but a sight smellier. Thira wrinkled her nose as the wave of unwashed body flowed over her. This was one time having heightened senses sucked.

"Nah, I didn't hear nothin'" The shorter of the trio hawked and spat, scratching himself. "Ain't fair we got standin' watch when it wasn't our turn" he complained. The last man remained mute seeming not to really care one way or the other.

"Turgis nothings there, we was about to hit the sack when you pulled us out here"

Thira watched in amusement as Turgis and his buddies poked half-heartedly around the area. After a few more moments they gave up and headed back the way they had come, bitching the entire time.

Waiting till their footsteps faded away, Thira climbed cautiously further up into the tree. Easing out onto a high branch she laid flat against the large limb. She stared in the direction they had left in. Her vision altered, everything coming into sharper focus. A small clearing held a cluster of disordered tents. She could see her searchers splitting up and heading for their bedrolls. Even with two men per tent it seemed that this group only numbered about twelve. It looked like it may have been an advance party, more than possibly where their earlier visitor had come from. Thira deliberated on her options. She should go back and fill in Panter and the others on the situation. Her eyes narrowed as her mind shied away from that choice, she was sure to see Alesia if she did. Canines glinted as she smiled mockingly knowing that wasn't going to be her pick. She dropped out of the tree landing lightly on her feet. Keeping low she circled the camp, carefully placing her feet so there would be no warning of her presence. Sliding into the shadow of an oak she tracked the idle efforts of the sentry standing watch. She shook her head at the stupidity of some people; this would not take much energy from her to deal with.

Moving up behind him she grabbed his head breaking his neck with a swift twist, the only noise a small gasp of surprise. She just let him drop; letting his body lay where he died not taking the time to hide it. Quietly she continued to loop the camp easily dispatching two more sentries. Crouching low in the brush at the boundary of the camp she paused listening for any indication that she had been detected. No sound but the pop of a banked fire and the snores of sleeping men disturbed the air. Fixing her gaze on a nearby tent she slipped closer. Flat to the ground she focused her hearing on its interior. Slipping a knife free she carefully sliced the tent canvas warily looking in. Her pupils widened to take in as much light that was available allowing her to easily see into the dark interior. Two men lay asleep just across from her position. She slipped into the opening she had made, knowing she had to move quickly. Clamping her hand over a mouth she calmly slit his throat muffling any noise he might have made. She repeated the same motion with the second man, the strong scent of coppery blood filling the little space. Thira exited the tent the same way she had entered it. Moving to the next tent she repeated the same actions on the two men sleeping there. As Thira left and went around the tent she suddenly ran into some men that had not remained asleep. Everyone froze in startlement then shouting erupted.

Cursing, Thira grabbed another dagger from its scabbard. A blur of movement and two men



staggered in mid step then dropped with a gurgle, knives in their throats. The commotion had awakened the rest of the men drawing them to the fight. Pulling another blade she rushed them. A lucky kick connected with her upper body; briefly airborne she slammed into the earth hard losing her grip on the knife. Another kick connected with her broken cheekbone. Thira never felt her lip split or the snap of ribs breaking as pain filled her head. Forcing it back, she pushed off the ground rolling away to regain her feet. A red haze filled her vision as she locked her stare on the men rushing her. They never had a chance to react at the booming roar that filled the clearing. She ripped her way through their bodies leaving them laying gutted in a growing pool of blood in her wake. Thira stumbled and fell to her knees bewildered for a moment as to why till she felt the handle of the knife buried deep in her left side.

"Damn it"

Gritting her teeth Thira grasped hold of the hilt. A steady pull removed the knife, the bleeding increasing now that it was free. She had no choice, if she had traveled with it in her it would have continued to tear up her insides. It was better it was out. Getting to her feet was an unpleasant task all in its own, the blood loss slowly weakening her. With her healing capabilities she might not die but it sure was going to impair her. Walking back to the dead men she retrieved her daggers slipping them awkwardly into their sheaths with a hiss of pain. Spotting the one she had dropped Thira bent to recover it almost meeting the hard ground as her head swam. She about bit her tongue through as she clamped her jaw to hold back the yowl of agony from the pain that erupted at her stupidity. After the pain level became more manageable she ducked into the larger of the tents hoping she was correct in her assumption this would be their commanding officers quarters.

A satisfied grunt was her only sound when she saw the small table covered in paperwork. Gathering all she could find Thira shoved them haphazardly into her belt pouch. Scrounging she found some fairly clean clothe. Ripping it into strips she folded some into a pad and slipping it under her shirt pressed it firmly against the wound. Fumbling she got the other strips around herself to hold it in place. Stepping out of the tent, she ignored the still bodies as she moved back into the forest and headed slowly back to camp.

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## Panther's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
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## Chapter Seven

Panter looked out over the base camp. Most of the morning had been spent in preparation for the tribunal. The sides of the front half of their tent had been rolled up to allow the militia that wasn't on duty to witness the proceedings. She had sent for Thira but had been told that she wasn't in camp. She spotted Alisa heading toward the outposts.

"Alesia, can I talk to you?" Panter frowned as she noticed that Alesia hesitated before coming towards her. "What's wrong..." She stopped in mid sentence as she spotted the dark marks on both sides of Alesia's jaw line. "How did you get those bruises?" she growled.

Alesia touched her jaw gingerly. "It doesn't matter"

"The hell it doesn't, tell me who dared lay their hands on you that way!"

Alesia shook her head. "No, we have come to an understanding. Leave it alone."

Panter gritted her teeth as she figured out who the other part of "we" must have been. "It was Thira wasn't it?"

Alesia met Panter's angry gaze defiantly. "The argument included me also Panter, she's not the only one at fault." She looked away, remembering the fire that had erupted inside as Thira's mouth had claimed hers. She blinked back tears. Her mind turned to the look that was on Thira's face the last time she had seen her. "I'm not the only one who was left with marks on their face"

"What!"

"I confronted her. I wanted to talk about this thing between us, she didn't" Alesia rubbed her forehead. "I got angry and called her a coward" Alesia ignored the sound of astonishment Panter made. "She grabbed and kissed me, then suddenly shoved me away. She refused me because I was human and she wasn't." She swallowed as her chest tightened. "I got pissed and punched her as hard as I could"

Panter was almost shocked. "And your still standing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you happen to notice if her eyes changed at any time while this was happening?"

Alesia's brow furrowed as she thought back to the encounter. "Yeah they did, right before she grabbed me. Why?"

"Then she was acting on instinct. She wanted you but something must have happened before she met you that has her running scared. We don't really know much about her past."

Alesia paled. "She said she had learned" She stopped and covered her face in sudden despair.

"Learned what?" Panter gently inquired.

Alesia looked up. "That's just it, I don't know. I hit her before she could finish."

Panter nodded. "That proves it then"

"Proves what?" Alesia mind couldn't deal with much more of this.

"If someone had punched you. What would your reaction have been?"

"I would have ripped their throat out" Alesia eyes widened in understanding "But she didn't react at all. She just let me walk away untouched"

Panter grasped Alesia shoulder gently. "And in doing so showed how much she really does care"

Alesia clasped Panter's hand briefly then pulled away. "I've got to go find her." She broke into a run as she headed for the outskirts of the encampment.

Panter smiled. "Good luck, you'll need it" she called as she turned her attention back to the upcoming trial.

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Thira sat slumped against the foot of a tree trying to gather her strength to continue. She needed to get back to the camp. Her side had finally stopped bleeding but the weakness that was plaguing her let her know that the damage had been done. The sun had risen earlier, the light causing her to wince as it struck her sensitive eyes. She had been using her night vision to carefully make her way through the forest; she hadn't needed to add to her injuries by falling over anything. But it had been slow going. A rustle pulled her from her introspection. Stilling she closed her eyes and concentrated, using her other senses to try to find what had caught her attention. A faint breeze blew bringing her the scent of the intruder. She smiled wryly. She knew that scent, it seemed as if Alesia was looking for something. Her brow furrowed. Or maybe it was someone. She opened her eyes and stared at the underbrush on her left. The emerging form proved her memory correct, it was Alesia. She stayed silent watching as Alesia scanned the area then spotted her at the base of her tree.

"Thira!" Alesia started forward but halted as Thira's body tensed. "I'm only here to help, I... We got worried when no one could find you."

A slow blink was the only answer she got. As Alesia watched Thira shifted drawing her eyes to

the rust colored stain that darkened the tan leather of her tunic. It looked like blood. A lot of blood.

"Is that your blood?" she asked concerned, not really expecting a response.

Thira almost didn't answer. The memory of their last discussion still plagued her mind. She noticed the dark bruises marking her jaw that she had put there and wondered why Alesia had come out here to find her. Her own injury from that fight had already started healing. The sharp pain had settled into a dull throb as the bone knit together. Thira met brown eyes that no longer seemed to burn with the earlier hate and disgust. She smothered the faint spark of hope that tried to light at the sight.

"Yeah" she rasped. "I sort of found out where our visitor came from"

Alesia disregarded the flinch she caused as she rushed over to Thira. She reached out to check the severity of the injury but froze as her hand was grasped in a painful grip. Amber eyes blazed. Alesia forced herself to hold the gaze ignoring the grinding of the bones in her captive hand. "I'm only trying to help"

Thira snarled. "I don't need your help" She pushed Alesia's hand away and made herself stand, not showing any signs of the pain that rippled throughout her body at the abrupt motion.

Alesia said nothing, refusing to flex the hand that ached from the hard grip. She saw the first hesitant step before Thira moved smoothly into the trees heading towards the camp. If she hadn't seen it she would have thought that Thira was fine. She followed closely keeping a watchful eye on the woman in front of her just in case that rock hard facade developed a crack.

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Tera ducked into the healer's tent. Waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darker interior she grew aware of the silence dominating the space. Thira sat stone-faced, allowing the healer to clean and wrap her wound. The amount of blood still on her skin and the tunic lying beside her told Tera of the severity of the injury she had been dealt. Nearby movement caught her eye. Turning, she saw Alesia standing in an out of the way corner, arms folded across her chest keeping an eye on the proceedings. Moving over to join her Tera nodded and let the silence remain unbroken for a moment. Glancing over at Alesia she saw the hooded eyes and determined set to her mouth that she knew as signs that her stubbornness had surfaced. Tera hid a faint smile at the sight. Alesia was going to need every ounce of it she had to get inside Thira's defenses.

She heard Alesia sigh. "Here, this is something you should see." A blood stained pouch hung from the extended hand.

Taking it, Tera heard paper rustle from inside. "What's this?"

Alesia resumed her earlier position. "Thira located a camp a short ways from here. It seemed to

be where our new friend came from. She found these in what she assumed was his tent and grabbed them. She figured you might want them."

Surprise at the news kept Tera wordless for a time. "And the men in that camp, are they a worry?"

"No, Thira told me she took care of them" Alesia shook her head in disbelief. "There were a dozen men in that camp and she killed them all and it only took one of her to do it!" Alesia's hands tightened on her forearms. "But it isn't the killing that bothers me. It was the fact she got hurt doing it. If it hadn't been for me it never would have happened." She said bitterly furious with her actions that had led everything to this.

"Don't," Tera said firmly "Don't what if, it never helps. Things turned out as well as they could. We have information we need and she's alive. That's all that matters"

Alesia considered Tera's words and reluctantly conceded to her point. She couldn't change what had occurred. Just maybe she could keep it from happening again.

Tera watched Alesia's grip ease with approval. She diverted the focus of the conversation. "How is she?" she asked in a low tone. Knowing Thira had been listening to everything by the slight tilt of her head. Tera was appreciative when she remained quiet.

"Already healing, it was deep puncture in her left side. Anyone else would be dead by now."

Tera heard the slight hitch in her voice. Reaching over she grasped Alesia's hand making her break her protective posture. "Alesia, look at me" she waited till a hesitant gaze met hers. "We are both very lucky the ones we love are not like everyone else" in her peripheral vision she caught the twitch of an eavesdropper's head at the comment. Her grip tightened as the hand in hers tried to pull away. "You love her Alesia, acknowledge it and go on." She released her hold as Alesia stepped back, folding her arms back across her chest.

"I do love her," Alesia admitted. "I think I have since I first laid eyes on her. But she doesn't love me. So what would be the use of pretending things would ever be different then they are now?" Her head down she didn't see Thira jerk her head up and stare intently at her.

"Alesia, look at Thira" Tera urged knowing this one exposed moment would be the largest hurdle in their relationship.

The urgency in Tera's voice made Alesia unconsciously obey. The fire in the eyes that locked with hers made her breath catch. She watched them flicker as they morphed. Dropping her arms, she took a step back. Thira pushed the healer aside as she rose to her feet.

At Tera's gesture the healer quietly left the tent, Tera following close behind.

Thira approached Alesia with soundless steps. Nostrils flared as she inhaled her scent, relishing the combination of leather and her own personal aroma that covered her skin. Her eyes slit as she

growled low in her throat. Tilting her head she ran her eyes over the body standing tensely in front of her. She lingered on the hollow of Alesia neck before meeting her eyes. Thira was quietly impressed at the gaze that remained steady with hers. Again she saw none of the emotions that had colored their earlier fight. What she did see made her blood run hot. What had to be love lay fully exposed in those dark eyes. Thira didn't understand why Alesia was offering this but she knew that to keep trying to deny what lay in her own heart would be futile. Turning her back to that choice she stepped closer to Alesia.

"You love me?" she asked huskily. Their bodies brushed together as she leaned in to smell her hair. She heard the faint gasp as she whispered the question in her ear lips lightly brushing its edge.

"Yes" Alesia's voice lowered in pitch, as she grew more aware of the body so close to hers. Taking a chance she reached out and pulled Thira forward. She swallowed a groan of pleasure when she felt one of Thira's arms slide around her waist. She shivered as fingers ran up her forearm tracing the shifting muscles that moved just under the skin. The light rasp of sharp nails over her shoulders had the hair on the back of her neck rising in reaction. The hint of danger made the blood rush through her veins. She obeyed the light tug of the hand cupping the back of her head. Moving forward she met soft lips that parted pulling her into a deep kiss. Her eyes slipped closed as she accepted the invitation. She moaned in disappointment as she felt Thira start to move away. Alesia gasped as her eyes flew open at the touch of a tongue licking the hollow of her throat. With their bodies touching she could feel the rumble of enjoyment that Thira made at the action. A whisper snared Alesia's drifting awareness.

"I love you too"

Hearing what she never fathomed she ever would caused Alesia to clasp Thira tighter against herself. The sudden hiss of agony had her quickly loosening her grasp. A grimace of pain covered Thira's face as she stepped back.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you" Alesia started to turn away to hide the sudden tears in her eyes, cursing herself as she did. A hand on her arm stopped her.

"It was my fault. I wasn't thinking. I had forgotten about being hurt till you hugged me like that. Even with the pain it was more then worth it." Thira laughed hoping that Alesia would understand it was o.k. "I should be perfectly fine by tomorrow"

Alesia allowed herself be drawn closer. Fingers twined with her own in reassurance. The jarring to Thira's side allowed her to set aside the want of the earlier moment. "You heal that quickly?" she asked astonished.

"Fortunately, believe me I would have been dead several times over already if I couldn't" A dark look passed briefly over her face. Thira pushed back old memories preferring to focus on the here and now. " As long as I replace the blood that I've lost, I'll heal."

Alesia couldn't help reaching out and tracing the tattoo that had been fully exposed by the

removal of Thira's tunic. When the design ended at her shoulder she continued her exploration. With fingertips lightly touching the smooth skin below them she followed the graceful curve of a collarbone to stop just above Thira's breasts. Pressing her hand flat she could feel the rapid thudding of the heart beneath it. A hand covering hers claimed her attention.

"As enjoyable as that feels, now is not a good time for it." Thira said her voice full of regret.

"My head knows your right, unfortunately my body is trying to argue otherwise" Alesia smiled at the toothy smirk that she received. The canines that flashed not fazing her at all.

"Tell it only for a while." Thira got serious. "I need to get something to eat soon."

Alesia let Thira's hand go. Picking up the top that had been left she tossed it to her. "Put this on and we'll go take care of that problem right now."

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Walking with Thira to where the cook station had been set up, Alesia noticed the looks her companion was receiving. Normally they would have upset her but after what had just happened in the healer's tent, they didn't. A hand slipping into her own reinforced the feeling of contentment she had. She knew that if Thira was anything like Panter her choice of Alesia as her mate was unbreakable. Even the thought of that was still unbelievable to her. Reaching the counter that had been set up she looked over the small group of people ahead of them to try to see what had been made available for mid evening meal. Disappointed she refrained from saying anything when she felt the hand in hers let go. Noticing who had approached the counter people started moving out of the way. Seeing who was waiting a cook hurried over.

"Marshal, how may I be of service?" She asked with a slight bow.

Ignoring Thira's raised eyebrow Alesia moved closer. "Could you tell me what is being served for mid meal?"

The cook clasped her hands together in delight pleased to be the one serving one of the most powerful people next to the Regents. "We have some freshly caught white fish. I think we also have some rabbit left both prepared with leek and onion. To drink we have water or you may have a weak wine."

Alesia was about to answer when Thira whispered in her ear. "I need red meat." She said hastily. Alesia flushed at the startled look on the cooks face. "I mean do you have any fresh red meat available?"

"Well its highly unusual, but I do think we have some deer we were going to hold for the dinner that I could let you have some of." The cook didn't know what to make of the request but decided to shrug it off as a weird quirk of the Marshals. "But it hasn't been cooked yet" she warned.

At Thira's discreet nudge Alesia smiled disarmingly. "That's fine. If I could have a bowl of that

and a serving of the rabbit, I'll prepare it myself."

Shrugging the woman fetched the requested items placing them along with some flatware on a platter. "Anything to drink?"

Alesia picked up the platter. "No, thank you. I have something at my quarters." They exited to the rising hum of excited voices behind them.

They stayed quiet till they entered Alesia's tent. Placing the salver on a low table in front of several chairs, Alesia moved away to retrieve a flask dangling from the center pole. Stopping to grab two goblets she walked back over and settled next to Thira. Pouring some in each goblet she extended one to her companion. "I thought you might prefer this instead of what they had available"

Thira took a wary sip of the offered drink. She smiled as the slightly sweet taste of her favorite ale hit her taste buds. "Yes I do thank you" She saluted Alesia with the cup before taking another drink. Setting her drink aside she distributed the food making sure that Alesia ended up with most of the vegetables. Thira hesitated before she picked up the bowl of raw deer meat.

"I can cook that for you if you want me too?" Alesia offered.

Thira shook her head. " No, it's not that. My body needs this to help restore the blood I've lost. I was wondering if you would rather I eat somewhere else"

Alesia frowned. "Are you asking because you're eating raw meat?"

"Yes, I didn't want to make you uncomfortable"

Put her plate down Alesia turned to face her directly. " Thira, It won't make me uncomfortable. I know that you need certain things to remain healthy. I want to know these things if we are going to be together. It's my right to be able to help take care of you when you're hurt." She placed a lingering kiss on Thira's lips. Pulling away she resumed her meal. "Besides you have to remember you're not the only one of your kind that I know. I've seen Panter eat raw meat more than once since I've known her." She said with a slight grin.

Thira sighed shaking her head in bemusement. "I don't know why I keep forgetting that little fact" She picked up her bowl. "I'm glad that it doesn't bother you" She ate a chunk of meat. The light coopery taste of blood blending with the richness of the meat flooded her mouth. As she chewed a piece of linen appeared in her vision. Darting a questioning look at Alesia she chuckled as she mimed for her to wipe her chin. Thira followed her instructions and then concentrated on her meal.

Alesia finished first. Leaning back, she sipped her drink as she watched Thira finish her meal. You would almost think that given who she was she would be an untidy eater. But she wasn't, in fact it was quite the opposite.

She decided to bring up something that had been bothering her since it happened. "Why did you



drop my hand when we got to the counter?"

Thira remained quiet as she placed her bowl on the table then drained her goblet. She kept her eyes on the empty cup as she played with it restlessly.

"I guess I didn't want to embarrass you," She admitted softly. "I think people are realizing that I'm not as human as I look."

"Do you really think I give a damn what other people think!" Alesia slammed her goblet down. Getting up, she took the empty cup from Thira's hands tossing it onto the table. Dropping to her knees in front of her, she grasped her chin forcing her to meet her gaze. "I don't," she said steadily. "I love all of you Thira. Not just what other people see. I'm proud to be your mate, so please don't think that I'm in anyway ashamed of being seen with you." Leaning close, Alesia claimed Thira's mouth in a fierce kiss trying to reinforce what she had just said. She knew she had succeeded when she felt a hand grip the back of her head firmly as lips opened beneath hers, allowing her to deepen the kiss. Only the lack of air caused them to part, gasping.

Thira rested her head against Alesia's "Alright, It won't happen again I promise you" Every time she figured she knew what to expect Alesia surprised her. Just the fact she loved her was almost more then Thira could fathom.

A rap at the opening of the tent pulled their attention off each other. Alesia stayed where she was as she requested whoever was there to enter. A member of her unit stepped inside keeping her gaze fixed to the back wall in respect. "Marshal, you and your companions presence have been requested at the tribunal."

Alesia rose to her feet. She moved away giving Thira some space so she could get up. "The preparations are complete?"

"Yes Ma'am they are"

Alesia poured some water so they could freshen up. "Please let the Regents know we're on our way," She requested. "You're dismissed"

"Ma'am" The Amazon saluted and turning smartly exited the tent.

Thira joined her in washing up. "You know that this is just a formality Alesia" She brushed off her borrowed tunic. "They're all going to die"

"I know. They deserve to for what they did. I'm just worried about Tera. I think this is the first time she has ever had to sentence someone to death."

A feral grin appeared on Thira's face. "I think Panter has that part covered. I can only hope I get to help"

[Continued...](#)

# Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

## Chapter Eight

Anger hung like a thick haze over the crowd that had gathered to watch the trial that was about to finally begin. No voices broke the hush that fell as the shackled prisoners were brought in and led to their seats before the table the Regents would be seated at. Only the enemy soldier dared to hold his head high arrogance covering his face. One of the militia on duty stepped forward.

"This tribunal is now open. The Regent of Hawks Peak and her Arms Master sitting in judgment"

Low whispers filled the area as the rulers took their places. A look from Panter caused immediate silence to descend. At her nod Tera studied the documents lying in front of her.

"Unit commander Elek you have been accused of consorting with the enemy, of attempting to deliver sensitive information into their hands about our military forces. In short you are accused of treason. Do you have anything to plea at this time?"

Elek shook his head mutely refusing to glance up. His collaborators shifted uneasily beside him knowing they would be next.

Tera wrote on her notes briefly before turning her attention to the following item on the agenda. "Corporals Dorias and Ranis you have both been accused of collaborating with Unit commander Elek in treasonous activity's. Do either of you have anything to plea at this time?"

Again the prisoners refused to answer her inquiry. She noted it down then indicated that Panter could proceed in her questioning. Panter rose to her feet and walked over to stand in front of the accused. She had decided to start with Elek's conspirators knowing that anything they said would only further incriminate the commander.

"Corporal Dorias, surely you knew if you were caught that it wouldn't go well for you did you

not?" Panter stood completely relaxed as she questioned the man.

Dorias started to rise but was shoved back into his seat with a hard grip on the shoulder by a guard standing close by. His face turned red in anger as he struggled against his restraints. "Anything was better than being ruled by a sickening perverted animal lover!!" He shouted. The rest of his screaming was drowned out by the uproar his words caused.

No expression showed on Tera or Panter's faces. They had spoken together earlier about something like this happening so were prepared for it. At a gesture from Tera the ranting man was firmly gagged. Tera jumped to her feet. Slamming her fist on the tabletop she leveled a glare around the room. The din died out rapidly leaving utter calm in its wake.

"I will not allow this trial to become a spectacle. If you cannot restrain yourselves leave now. Any further outbursts will result in reprimand. This is your only warning" She resumed her seat then gathered together the papers that had scattered at her abrupt actions. Centering the stack in front of her she turned to the remaining corporal.

"Corporal Ranis is this also the basis for your activity's?" The composed expression on Tera's face didn't reveal that inside her guts were churning with tension.

Keeping his gagged comrade in mind, Ranis kept his answer brief. "It's not so much your choice of companions that is the reason even with it being aberrant. It's because you were made Regent the ones I loved were murdered. For that I wanted a hand in destroying you." The serene tone of voice he used made its impact that much more ominous.

Tera leaned forward in her chair to reinforce her own words. "Even if what you say is true, as a member of my military or citizen of Hawk's Peak that makes your dealings sedition and for that there is a price to pay"

Ranis paled as he started to take in that his life was truly forfeit. Before now it had seemed as if something like this could never have happened. They had been so confident that they would have remained undiscovered. It was Elek's ineptness that had gotten them apprehended. He couldn't even say it was worth it because the information had never gotten out. Their contact being thrown in chains beside them made that much clear. "But what about the Tort law?" he protested. He shifted then froze as the abrupt movement drew Panter's notice. He sat back, remaining motionless until her attention turned from him back to Tera. Ranis didn't understand that even if Panter wasn't watching him she was fully aware of his actions.

Tera was glad that she had brushed up on the laws. She could deal with this without seeming like an uninformed idiot. "The Tort law as a rule applies to murder, while true this has not happened the intent to cause it was there." Tera sat back. "In normal circumstances you could be exiled with the understanding that returning or repeating the crime would have the sentence of death placed upon you." She watched as Ranis tried to suppress a sneer. "However these are not normal circumstances. The law also covers and I quote." Tera pulled a piece of parchment from the stack. "When someone does harm upon you or to your property"

Tera set aside the parchment. Placing her folded hands on the tabletop she considered the men before her. The men from her militia were starting to look a little worried. The other still sat looking unconcerned with the proceedings. "Keeping in mind your own admissions of guilt and of being caught in the act. I will use the Tort law for my judgment but not in the way you assume. You tried to do harm upon me or rather us - The Regents and citizens of Hawk's Peak. And upon my property- The Domain of Hawks Peak and it's surrounding providences. We are in a state of war gentlemen; the only punishment for treason in this situation is death." Tera wrote her judgment on the awaiting forms. She found it unsettling that she had just passed such a final verdict.

The enemy fighter finally spoke up. "If you think killing me will solve your current plight your deluding yourself" He smirked. "When I failed to show last night my men had orders to attack this camp. I think that soon you'll have more trouble then you ever wanted"

Soft mutters of concern started to rise. A low chuckle filled the room. He watched as a woman strode brazenly up to the Regent and whispered in her ear. A nod had her standing abruptly in front of him. He started as he recognized the woman from the night before. He remembered how handily she had dispatched him and started to worry. The smile he was still trying to forget flashed as she began speaking.

"That threat you just made. You might want to forget it." Tera advised mockingly. "Their not gonna be coming, seems they got unexpectedly detained"

"You know nothing about it!" he spat.

"I think right now I know far more then you do." Thira held a hand up then raised one finger. "I know you had a base camp about a mile from here" She raised another finger. "I also know you only had a dozen men with you" Closing her hand into a fist she flipped up her middle finger. "I for sure know your pretty much screwed because I killed them all early this morning" Murmurs and smothered laughter from the people watching greeted her actions. She watched in amusement at the disbelief that flashed across his features.

He laughed snidely in response. "I don't believe you. It would take more then a few people to do that"

Thira pointed a finger tauntingly at him. "You clearly weren't listening, I said I killed them all" She tapped herself on the chest to emphasize her words.

"That's not possible. No human being could do that" He drew back a little as she stepped forward as if to confide something to him.

"You know, that's true" She caught his eyes with hers and allowed her own to shift. "But I never said I was human. Now did I?" Thira grinned as the man's brow beaded with sweat once what she revealed sank in. She winked as she turned and leisurely walked back to her place amongst the listeners.

Tera had watched the unfolding events with interest. Picking up a sheaf of bloodstained papers, she crinkled them bringing the man's awareness back to her. "I have papers here from your quarters in that camp. Instead of you gaining information on our troop strength we've gotten vital intelligence on yours."

The man stiffened in his chair. "You're lying," he accused hoping that what the other woman had told him was false.

Tera read off the top page. "You are Lieutenant Cadmus of the fourth contingent. At least that's what every document I have here says?" She arched an eyebrow skeptically. "It seems to match the name on the orders we found on your person."

Cadmus slumped as his hopes deflated. "Yes that's me" With no help coming there was nothing he could do. It had been unfortunate he had been caught by that 'woman' in the act. Her attack had been so sudden that he had been unable to flee.

Tera dropped the papers back on the table. She rested her chin on her interlaced fingers as she considered the only option. With the information obtained they now had definite places to focus their assaults. "Being an enemy of war your sentence will also be death." She declared. She signed the order and then stood. "I declare this tribunal closed. The guilty will be put to death on this day before dusk." Tera addressed the just sentenced men. "Chose your meals carefully," She advised. "They'll be your last." She beckoned to the waiting guards. "Let them see who they wish. But only under constant guard." She motioned for them to be taken away then dismissed the rest with a sense of relief. The last of the departing militia rolled the sides of the tent down as they exited, leaving the interior dim.

The presence at her back had her reaching a hand behind her. Fingers closed over hers pressing in a gesture of support. Warm breath brushed her ear. "Amare, you did well." Panter whispered softly.

"Did I?" Tera asked doubtfully. "Condemning four people to death should have been much harder then it was"

"Do you not think it was warranted in these circumstances?"

Tera turned and rested her head on Panter's shoulder feeling arms wrap around her in a secure hold. "Yes, but I fear it becoming an easy thing to do"

Panter pressed a kiss to Tera's forehead. "Does it bother you now?" She felt a nod against her chest. "Worry when it no longer does" A hand slipped behind her neck and she responded to the gentle pull, meeting soft lips in a deep kiss. For a while they allowed the warmth of their bond to wash away the outside world.

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Alesia leaned against a tree beside Thira. With it being close by the tent their prisoners were

being held in, they could watch the people that stood waiting to visit and still be able to stay out of the way. Grasping Thira's hand she played with her fingers tracing their length. "You know, I've noticed some small differences between you and Panter. Well" she grinned "in addition to the height"

Thira turned to her new mate. "Really?" Her interest in the comment increased as she watched Alesia flush in reaction to her sudden attention.

"What are they?"

"Your nails, they're unusual even with you being in your human shape" She lightly pressed a fingertip to one of the sharp points.

Thira flexed her free hand studying the ripple of muscle that played over its surface. Unlike Panter who had claws that sheathed themselves when not needed, hers remained out. Although shorter in length they were thicker than normal allowing them to be devastating when used as a weapon. "I suppose they are, what else have you seen?"

"Your tattoo" Alesia watched as Thira glanced at her arm and raised curious brows. She shook her head in response. "No, not that one. The one that runs along your spine. I saw it the day you were helping to pack that supply wagon" She sobered as she remembered the pain of watching Thira walk away; thinking her chance to know this woman that captivated her was gone. Alesia felt Thira pull away. Her heart plummeted fearing that she had messed things up between them all over again. Strong arms slid around her pressing her close to a firm body. Alesia's eyes slid shut in relief as her head nestled in the curve of Thira's neck.

"Alesia" Her name came out as a low growl from deep in Thira's throat. "What happened was in the past, leave it there." She lightly licked the nearby ear and felt Alesia tremble. "And just so you know that's not a tattoo. They're my markings. They spread when I shift."

Alesia lifted her head to meet Thira's gaze. "They do?" she asked intrigued as she tried to visualize Thira's other form. "I'd like to see that"

"You want to?" Thira was taken aback with the realization Alesia was truly willing to accept who she was. The one time she tried to be with someone, they had not been clan just like Alesia. She still bore the scarring from the wounds that had almost killed her when they had found out she wasn't human. She forced the memories back where they belonged and concentrated on the woman in her arms.

"Of course I do. You're my partner in whichever shape you're in. I think I should be familiar with one as well as the other" Alesia watched as a smile slowly spread across Thira's lips.

"Then you will" Thira kissed Alesia gently. "Soon, I promise"

Alesia grinned. Shifting in the light hold she settled with her back against Thira's upper chest. Hands slid around her hips to rest linked on her abdomen. "You know, you don't need to stay here with me. I'm not on duty but with the execution being soon I feel better keeping an eye on

everything."

"I'll remain here with you. I'm not required until dawn" Thira lowered her face next to Alesia's. "Besides having you inside my arms in public is fairly pleasing" she rumbled quietly. She rested her head on the tree trunk behind her watching the people pass by under hooded lids.

Alesia laid her hands on top of Thira's. "I enjoy it too" They stood that way for the remainder of their volunteer watch ignoring the occasional stare.

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Absolute silence enveloped the area that had been selected for the execution. Roughly a hundred of the militia were on hand to observe the proceedings. In response to Cadmus's threat the entire group had come fully armed. Orders had been issued to everyone not present to remain at the ready.

Thira stood with Alesia beside the Regents as the condemned were brought out and led toward posts that had been sunk deep into the ground. Measuring Six feet high by one foot in breadth they had taken four strong bodies to wrestle into place. As she watched Thira reached around and loosened several daggers in the harness she had donned before arriving. She'd gradually come to understand how essential Panter and Tera were to Alesia's well being. Not having any relationship with them herself was irrelevant. Alesia's happiness was the only thing that mattered to her.

When ropes were brought out to bind them in place, Cadmus spoke up.

"I see you have the guts to sentence us but not enough to execute us yourself" He spat in Tera's direction ignoring the archers that were waiting for the signal to proceed.

Thira saw Panter's fists tighten. Stepping into her path she placed a hand on her chest. Only they knew how much strength it took to keep Panter from moving towards the heckler. "I know you wish to defend Tera's honor," She dropped her hand. "However, I've seen enough to believe you would later regret your actions even with him being sentenced to death" She kept her face impassive while Panter searched her features intently then slowly gave her consent. Thira glanced over her shoulder to fix the positions of the men in her minds eye. She looked back at Panter. "But I won't"

Thira spun around reaching behind herself. A pair of blurred movements ended with loud thuds as the knives found their marks, burying themselves deeply into the wood behind the men. Death had come so quickly that not one man had been able to clutch at the steel that pierced his throat. Their bodies hung pinned in place until she walked over and retrieved her daggers with a sharp yank. She turned away indifferent as they dropped lifelessly to the earth. The stillness remained unbroken while everyone watched stunned as she departed.

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Alesia ducked into the tent. She had left almost immediately after Thira did. She hadn't been able to catch the brief exchange between her and Panter but had a fair idea what it entailed. She found Thira sitting in a chair with all her daggers but one on the table before her. The other she held in front of her as if studying it. She spoke before Alesia could ask anything.

"I've killed more humans with these knives than I care to recall" She mused aloud. "I became an assassin to survive long enough to get to Panter, after that it didn't matter so long as I fulfilled my oath." Thira wrapped her other hand around the blood-encrusted blade. She tightened her grip feeling the edge bite into her palm. Trickle of fresh blood ran down the hilt dripping onto her leg. "But I couldn't complete it. The goddess forbade me." She ignored Alesia's gasp of concern. Opening her hand she tossed the knife down and licked the blood off her wound. Thira watched as the edges of the injury began knitting back together.

She stayed quiet as Alesia knelt in front of her and cradled her injured hand in her own. "Was there nothing else you could do?"

Thira laughed mockingly. "No, I was an animal before the oath I'm still one now that it's gone. This is the longest I've ever maintained my human shape. I react and hunt as the beast I really am. Anyone in their right mind would stay away from me." Thira fully expected Alesia to end their relationship after what she had just seen a moment ago.

Alesia seized Thira's chin forcing her to look at her before she could resist. "Could you ever kill me, Panter or Tera and not care?"

"I don't have a connection with Panter or Tera. But no" she said in reply to the worried look she received. "I wouldn't harm them because they have a tie with you."

Alesia shifted her grip to lay a hand along Thira's jaw. "And me. Could you hurt me?" She insisted on getting an answer.

"Not without killing myself" Thira knew if anything happened to Alesia she would not care to live any longer. Before when they were not speaking it was merely painful, now it would be unbearable.

Alesia kissed Thira lingering until she got a response. "Then I must have lost my mind since I still love you" She said quietly.

"How can you?" Thira asked daunted by what was still being offered in spite of everything she had just revealed.

"Because I don't want to lose what we have together." Alesia got to her feet to pace while she talked unable to stay motionless. "I want what Panter and Tera have. The goddess herself has recognized us. Now that I've found you I absolutely refuse to let you go." She met Thira's shocked stare determinedly. "There's no way I can judge you like everyone else, your not. The appeal of your other self is as strong as the form your in now. I meant it when I said I wanted to know all of you."



Alesia was aware of the magnitude this moment held. She had to make Thira see that she would still be here no matter what the future held for them both. "You say that you react and hunt like the beast you are. The only things I have seen have been you protecting what you've deemed important. Even after we fought you protected all of us. You eliminated that enemy camp then retrieved information that was vital to our survival. By taking it upon yourself to carry out the execution you kept Panter from actions she would later have regretted." Alesia watched Thira intently. "Tell me what beast would do that."

"I killed for as little reason then because I was paid to." Thira was distressed. "I found it almost enjoyable. What kind of person finds murder fun?"

Alesia stopped. She didn't know how to answer her. Instead she posed another question. "How many women or children did you kill?" Alesia asked hoping it would make Thira recognize what she herself had previously figured out.

Thira rose swiftly to her feet. "I've never killed innocents!!" she roared not conscious why the issue had infuriated her just that it did.

"So its been only men?" Alesia controlled the involuntary response to recoil at Thira's actions.

"Weak prey would be effortless. There's no honor in defeating such easy quarry!" She snarled her eyes glowing with rage.

Alesia moved to Thira grabbing her shoulders. "Will you listen to yourself!! Yes, you were an assassin. Yes, you may have even found it enjoyable but at least you had a moral code of some kind that you followed. Can't you see that you've protected and defended those people you allow to get close to you?" She cupped her hands around the sides of Thira's jaw line. "With all the fighting and death that this war will cause. I can honestly say that I feel the safest with you." She didn't move as Thira's grabbed her wrists.

Thira searched Alesia eyes. She could see the love and conviction she heard clearly in her voice as she finished speaking. Releasing her hold she jerked Alesia closer, seizing her lips in a forceful kiss. Feeling hands leave her jaw, Thira moaned as fingernails suddenly dug into her back. She swallowed a growl when a thigh slid between her legs, pressing against the heat it found. Thira pulled away from bruised lips. "I need to feel your skin against me," She rasped hoarsely.

"I want that too" Alesia paused for breath. "Unfortunately" A light rap interrupted her explanation. She pressed another kiss to Thira's lips. "I ordered a bath to be brought. I thought you might like to get clean." Going to the entrance she held the flap back allowing the men to bring in the tub.

Thira was frustrated by the disruption but couldn't be upset by the reasoning. After the kind of day it had been a bath sounded good. She watched them unfold a bundle to reveal a large section of waterproofed leather. Lashed to wooden poles it set solidly on cross pieces placed at either

end. Although it was only big enough for one person it was still an ingenious design allowing for easy setup and breakdown. An assembly line had the tub rapidly filled. They departed leaving several hot buckets of water behind in case they were needed.

"Don't let the water get cold" Alesia searched through her belongings. "I get it after you and I detest bathing in cold water."

"To bad we can't bathe together" Regret laced Thira's voice as she watched the steam rise from the tub.

Alesia found what she had been looking for and joined Thira. Setting down the items she pressed herself against Thira's back, kissing her under an ear. Slipping her arms around her she played with a tie on Thira's shirt. "We will soon"

"Not soon enough" Thira forced herself to move away pulling her shirt off. As she removed her breast band she stilled when fingers ran down her back. Lips joined them kissing each marking they found. The breath caught in her throat at the intimate caress. "Alesia, you're not helping," she protested.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't stop myself. I think I just found one of my favorite spots." Alesia flushed at the unintentional play on words as Thira started laughing. "Stop, its not that funny." She complained weakly.

Thira turned smiling. "Yes it is. But I'll quit anyway." Tugging her pants off she stepped into tub, sighing in pleasure when the hot water surrounded her still aching body. "Help me get the bandage off" She leaned forward a little so Alesia could unwrap it. Her eyes narrowed as Alesia hands brushed her back and sides. Trickle of heat flared at the contact. Thira straightened as the last of the wrap came loose. "Thanks"

Alesia dropped the waterlogged fabric next to the tub. "Are you sure its alright to remove it so soon?"

Thira traced the thin red line that was the only sign she ever had the knife wound. "I'm already mostly healed just a little tenderness left."

Alesia came around so she could see. "I'm relieved. When I saw all that blood, I was terrified I'd lost you. Not that I had you to begin with" She joked as she attempted to lighten the abruptly somber atmosphere.

Catching her hand Thira drew her as close as the tub would permit. "You do now." She tapped Alesia lightly on the nose with a wet finger. "Now do you have something to wash with?"

Alesia wiped the water off with a laugh. "Here" she tossed Thira the cloth and soap she had brought over. "Hurry up the waters getting cold"

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Bathing finished and the tub removed Alesia settled onto the bed next to Thira. She moved into the offered embrace, her head pillowed comfortably on Thira's shoulder she laid her arm across her waist carefully avoiding the still tender area. "We have to meet Tera and Panter in their tent tomorrow morning to plan our next move." She smiled at the grunt of acknowledgement that was Thira's only response. Rising up a little she pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. With it being dark she missed the slight smirk that played briefly on Thira's lips.

Thira remained awake long after Alesia fell asleep cradled in her arms. She brooded on what had occurred and what she was going to do now. No matter what happened she knew she had to be with Alesia whatever the cost. Light from a passing sentry slipped for a moment through a slit in the entryway making Thira's eyes flash like mirrors as she blinked. Finally drowsy she slipped off to sleep hoping to get some rest before having to get up for her watch. What tomorrow would bring was anyone's guess.

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## Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

### Chapter Nine

Panter waited as everyone took their seats. With the information Thira had taken they were able to come up with a plan of action. She had ordered all high-ranking personnel to attend this meeting, going as far as to request that Alesia bring Thira with her even if she had no real standing. She rose to her feet as everyone settled into place at the table. Moving to the map that had been hung so everyone could see she faced the row of grim faces. "With the information we gained from the documents Thira brought back we have come up with a workable plan" Panter's face grew foreboding making various people shudder inside at the sight. "Everything said within this meeting is on a need to know basis. We will not tolerate a repeat of what we've just

experienced."

Sounds of agreement settled the matter for the interim. There were other precautions being taken but she would reveal them at a later date. "Akil how do we stand with troops?"

Akil sifted through the papers he had brought with him. "Ah, here it is" he muttered to himself. Glancing up he met Panter's inquiring gaze. "With the conscripts we've picked up as we passed and the ones still trickling in daily we are now at two thousand strong"

Surprised at the high tally no one spoke for a long moment. Thira barked out a laugh breaking the silence. "Hell it's not a scuffle anymore, now it's a brawl." Everyone joined in the laughter grateful for the tension reliever.

Panter folded her arms tapping her chin with a finger as she considered her plan. With the additional militia they would be able to carry out several options she had set aside when she found they didn't have the manpower to achieve it with. "Alright, lets go over what we know" Moving to the map she drew a line with her finger then stopped. "We are about here just south east of Hawk's Peak" Picking up a symbol of Tera's crest she pinned it to the map. "Here's the camp Thira discovered" she pinned another marker to the map this time in black. "Tylan is here along with Lanoris" she turned to the watching group. "What do you see?"

"That whoever's running their side of the war's an idiot," Thira said scornfully. "If their doing what I think they are it makes them more vulnerable to assault. Getting up she approached the chart. "I bet we'll find two more camps here and here," She pointed to the left and right of the encampment she had found.

Panter grinned. "I'd bet your right. Ultimately, I want to retake Tylan. After that is complete I'll let you know the plan as we go"

Akil frowned. "Isn't that going to make things rather difficult" He glanced at Tera to see if she had any input. She inclined her head toward Panter telling him without a sound to follow her orders. He nodded slightly then turned back to Panter knowing she had seen what he'd done by the glint that shone in her eye.

"The fewer people who know means less people to tell" Panter watched comprehension dawn on their faces, as they finally understood.

As Thira rejoined Alesia, Panter caught their attention. "So what do you think ready to go on a hunt?" She had to keep back a laugh at the eagerness that appeared on Thira's face.

"Yeah!!" Thira grabbed Alesia's hand pulling her towards the door. She stopped short as Alesia whispered something. "Uh, permission to leave?" She asked reluctantly. Thira didn't believe in a chain of command. It was simply quicker to skip all of it and do what needed done.

Panter turned her back trying to cover a grin. She waved at Tera to take care of it. Tera lifted a hand and shooed them away. "Go, just be cautious. Alesia take a unit with you and anything else

you might need." She and the rest of the group broke into laughter after they departed then settled back into the meeting.

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Thira crouched low in the brush as she scented the air around her. Alesia settled at her side quietly waiting until she was finished. It had taken the better part of the morning to get things arranged and to backtrack to the site Thira had discovered. As the going got more difficult it became almost impossible to remain on horseback. Leaving them behind it had taken another hour of travel to get them this far. A small crack behind them had Thira spinning around a dagger cocked back ready to throw. Thrusting the knife back in its sheath, she glared at the dolt who had inadvertently stepped on the stick. She made a zipping motion as the man started to apologize. He subsided waiting for the next order.

"Freaking moron, we should to have left them behind. We can handle it easier ourselves," She mumbled under her breath as she crouched back in her spot.

Alesia looked at her doubtfully. "You did it once and got lucky. There's no way we're trying that again. Besides that, you heard Tera tell us to take a unit along."

Thira grimaced. "I know, but couldn't we have brought all Amazons instead of making half militia?" She complained softly.

Alesia arched a brow. "Why?"

"They make too much noise, at this rate we'll be heard long before we get there" Thira was itching for some action. Dragging the militia along grated on her nerves. She stopped bitching as a soft sound caught her attention. A clasp on Alesia's shoulder alerted her to be prepared. Moving low to the ground Thira signaled to the watching amazons. She opened and closed her fist three times then pointing up spread her arms wide. A nod then without a word the squad split into groups of ten. Rapidly ascending the nearby trees they disbursed, concealing themselves in the thick canopies bows at the ready. A raised finger told the rest of the force to wait.

Easing back over to Alesia Thira grasped her arm. "I want you to take the militia and circle around." She rested a finger on Alesia's lips as she tried to speak. "We have no time. About two hundred yards ahead is the camp we've been searching for. I heard the clanking of a whole lot of steel. They might be readying themselves for that attack Cadmus was referring to." Thira eyes narrowed in pleasure. "I have a plan of sorts. When I signal hit them hard"

"What signal?" Alesia asked puzzled.

"You won't be able to miss it" Thira answered smirking. She kissed Alesia quickly. "Get going there's not much time left" She watched till Alesia disappeared from sight with her escort. Stepping into the nearby trees she blended with the dimness quickly fading from view.

Thira snuck up to the edge of the camp boundary hidden from sight by a large maple. She hadn't run into any sentries but then she wasn't expecting to with the camp busy with preparations. Counting, she could see that there were more soldiers here than in the last camp. Alesia was right but she wasn't about to admit it. Seeing them starting to ready the horses she decided not to wait any longer. Emerging into the clearing she stood with her hands on her hips watching the chaos surrounding her. Just as she was considering killing someone to get noticed somebody finally did.

At his shout all motion stopped. One of them stepped forward. "Who are you and what the fuck do you think your doing here?" She almost laughed when several men behind him attempted to appear menacing as they pulled out their weapons.

Refraining herself from rolling her eyes in disgust, Thira casually folded her arms palming the knives from the forearm sheaths Alesia had presented to her just before they left. When asked about the etching Alesia's only reply was she didn't want her to end up getting killed because no one could identify which side she was on. Thira asked nothing else as she strapped them on. A movement caught her eye. Allowing them to shift she blinked as the distant trees abruptly seemed a great deal closer. The leaves moved in the still air when the branch shook slightly. It was enough of a sign to recognize that the amazons were in position, she only hoped Alesia and her group were.

Shifting back Thira tilted her head. "Have you heard from Cadmus lately?" she asked casually.

The speaker for the group frowned. "Cadmus. No, but if we didn't he gave us the location of where he was meeting his contact. I imagine someplace close to there would be an enemy camp"

"Surprised you could think of that all by yourself" Thira said under her breath.

"Enough of this. Who are you before we just decide to kill you anyway."

"Does this answer your question?" Thira flung her knives just as the sentence ended taking the speaker and the man alongside him in the neck. As they dropped, Thira threw back her head letting out a booming roar. Pandemonium ruled as arrows rained down over the scrambling men. The archers had placed themselves in the shape of an inverted horseshoe with the center point anchored behind Thira's position.

Blood pumping in excitement Thira ran forward. Pulling two more daggers free, she met the oncoming charge. Sensing the arrows as they neared she darted swiftly from side to side. The humming of flight feathers steadily filled her ears as they flew past. Two more knives landed in the abdomens of the approaching enemy, leaving them behind to drop in ever widening pools of blood. A sword swung towards her as she drew closer to the nearest knot of men. Ducking to the side Thira slid behind another soldier hitting him in the side. The small bump of contact pushed him right into the path of the oncoming blade. The other man had no chance to react to the fact he'd just killed one of his own before a dagger slammed into his back.

Thira purred as she jerked her dagger free. She could feel her animal side struggling to break free of the human shell that was incasing it. Thira evaded another sword thrust to the stomach. Seizing his arm when he missed, she slammed her blade into his eye killing him instantaneously. Leaving the blade she extracted another from her harness. Giving in a little to her animalistic side she leapt onto the back of a soldier. Grabbing his head she twisted as she drove the knife into his breastbone. Leaping free of the falling body Thira yanked out two more daggers. She tightened her grip on the weapons as she faced the oncoming men. Just before they engaged a grin twisted her lips.

Throwing her last two knives she was momentarily unarmed. Feeling a rush of moving air at her back she automatically crouched. An axe flew overhead followed closely by the hand that held it. Grabbing it she yanked, hard.

Overbalanced the big man hit the ground but by sheer luck kept his grip on the axe at impact. Rising, he found his target staring at him with a sneer on her face. "What are you looking at bitch?" he yelled.

"A dead man" Thira suddenly twisted to the right.

He didn't get a chance to respond to the strange action before pain slammed unexpectedly into his chest. Looking down he saw two bolts had pierced him just below the collarbone. The last thing he would ever see was Thira waving goodbye as he hit the ground.

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Alesia drew her sword. Making small figure eights she loosened up her muscles, feeling her pulse rise as a sense of excitement flooded her. The militia surrounding her moved restlessly as they reacted to her agitation.

Just as Alesia was wondering if she had missed the signal somehow a deep roar tore through the clearing. Almost without thought she found herself plunging into the melee. The crash of a sword on hers jarred Alesia out of the fog she was in. Spitting into the grinning face of the man intent on stopping her she focused her attention on the fight. Running her blade down his she locked their hilts together. With a hard jerk she disarmed him. As he watched his sword land in the distance he neglected to pay attention to his opponent. It was the last mistake he would ever make as Alesia ran him through.

Taking a second Alesia scanned the vicinity for Thira. Spotting her she worked her way over, rapidly taking care of two more opponents as she went. Thira grinned cockily as she twirled the axe she held in one blood spattered hand. Seeing no signs of obvious injury Alesia relaxed a little as she sheathed her sword. It looked as if most of the fighting was already over. She watched as the amazons dropped from of their trees. They spread out to retrieve their arrows and dispatch what remained of the enemy. No one had given the command to capture prisoners.

"You seemed as if you've had fun" Alesia commented offhandedly.

Thira stiffened for a split second before relaxing. "Yeah, I did. Wasn't much of a challenge. It didn't seem to last long." She seemed mildly upset that it had ended so soon.

Alesia noticed that the vast majority of the body's sported arrows. "Looked as if your plan worked" she commented impressed. "You were right there was no way to miss your signal."

"Marshal" An amazon approached them. "What are your orders?"

"One moment" Alesia said. She pulled Thira to the side. "Do you want to take care of it or would you rather I did?" She didn't want her being dismissed by the troops as insignificant.

"Nah, go ahead. They might not like being ordered about by someone that's not their boss. Besides" The sunlight glimmered on bared canines as she smiled. "I'd rather just fight."

Alesia tightened her grip on the hand that rested in hers. "Alright. Do you want to stay with me?" She released Thira's hand reluctantly.

"Think I might poke through the tents, see what I find." Thira handed the axe to Alesia. "Get cleaned up a bit"

Alesia nodded. "I'll come find you when we're done here." She paused. "If that's ok?" she was pleased to see Thira happily agree with the plan. She watched as she walked away. Pulling herself back to the situation at hand Alesia turned back to the patiently waiting amazon.

"Do you have a count of how many of our own we lost?"

"No Marshal that is still being determined"

"When it's completed let me know" Alesia ordered. She was still uncomfortable with giving orders but figured she might as well get over it,

Panther had given this position as a symbol of trust. She was going to make damn sure it was never one she regretted. "I want the horses rounded up. Gather all the useful weapons and armor they'll be taken back with us. With all the new conscripts we'll need them. Same thing with any foodstuff you might find. If any tents are salvageable get them too. Use the horses as pack animals if you have to. Get a detail on a group burial for the dead. I don't want to draw all the predators in the area. Our dead are to be taken back with us. If there are any problems come find me." Alesia dismissed her.

The amazon saluted her respectfully then left. Just before she got out of earshot Alesia remembered something. "Captain" she called.

The captain halted. She jogged back over to Alesia. "Marshal, you wanted something?"

Alesia held out the axe. "Here's your first donation" She joked lightly.



Taking it the captain smiled faintly. "Thank you. With your permission I'll go relay the orders," She inquired.

Alesia nodded allowing her to depart. "Captain" she reminded her. "Speed is of the utmost importance right now. There's still another encampment we need to locate"

The amazon saluted and took off in a run intent on getting things completed as quickly as possible.

Alesia departed focused on her own mission. Finding Thira. The chore of cleaning up wouldn't be so bad in her company. Dodging the bodies left on the ground she went to start searching through the tents.

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Thira rummaged in an open crate. She had located what seemed to be the commander of this pitiful excuse of an army. She extracted a handful of papers from inside. About to toss them to the side to resume rummaging something on one caught her eye. Throwing the others aside she read it.

Her features hardened making her cheekbones more prominent. Cursing under her breath Thira crumpled it as she clenched her fists. She heard the rhythmic pattern of Alesia's steps as she approached the tent and bent to look inside.

"There you are" Alesia duck into the tent to join Thira. "What's wrong?" she asked when Thira failed to speak. Spotting the paper in her hand Alesia reached for it. She jerked back as Thira growled and tightened her hold on it.

Thira regretted her actions instantly. Quietly she loosened her grasp, offering the paper to Alesia. She closed her eyes briefly when Alesia flinched. Disappointed with herself she turned her back to Alesia as she read the letter. The news it contained would destroy their relationship. Thira knew what part she was at when Alesia gasped.

"By this time the problem should almost be resolved as I've sent one of my own people to kill her" Alesia read out loud. "He's talking about you isn't he Thira?"

Thira's chest ached with sorrow at the iciness that had entered Alesia tone of voice. She had known this would happen. The thin bond she had with her couldn't stand against the one Alesia had with the most important people in her life, Panter and Tera. She had foolishly ignored the slight chance that they wouldn't have learned this information. For a small moment she wished she had ended it on the night she had failed in her mission. Just before the knife would have entered her stomach something had stopped her. When the tattoo appeared she knew who had.

"You knew why I had come and who my target was," Thira reminded her. "The goddess intervened. She forbade me to hurt Panter. Truthfully, I think I would have died that day if she hadn't."

"Someone like you following a goddess's decree is kind of hard to believe" Alesia tried to hold onto her anger when she saw Thira's shoulders tighten in reaction then abruptly relax.

"You know, I can't even be angry about what you just said" Thira replied sadly. "With my being an assassin I shouldn't have anything to do with the Goddess. So why would I obey her?" She ignored the tears running down her face. "You wouldn't know by seeing me now but I used to be someone that was civilized. I followed the Goddess teachings reverently, I suppose I still do to an extent even now"

Alesia wished she had never read the damn letter. She hadn't been there when Tera had been held hostage and Panter attacked. She'd heard what had happened. After checking on her friends she went to see the woman who'd had the guts to take Panter on and live. Once she had seen Thira something had taken hold of her. Alesia ended up being so conflicted by everything that she shoved her feelings about what happened aside. Now after reading about it the anger unexpectedly flared up. After all that they had been through, after all Thira had done for them for her to treat her in this way was wrong. "Thira" Alesia crossed over to her. She cautiously placed her hands on her shoulders. She held her breath as Thira tensed at her touch. "I'm sorry. I think I know where all that anger came from. Yes, you came for Panter but I thank the gods every day that you stayed."

"Do you?" Thira asked guardedly. She had wondered several times why Alesia had never brought up her trying to kill her best friend. After awhile she didn't want to mention it for fear that this very thing might happen.

Alesia leaned her forehead against the nape of Thira's neck. "Yes" Alesia felt Thira relax a bit at her response. "I never dealt with my feelings about what happened between you and Panter. Once I saw you it seemed as if everything else ceased to matter."

"I know what you mean," Thira snorted. "Even when you infuriated me I still wondered who you were with and what you were doing," She sighed. "I was hoping this would never happen but I suppose it that was a foolish thing to wish for"

Alesia pressed a light kiss to Thira shoulder. " Probably, but then by not saying anything I was doing the same thing myself." Something occurred to her. "Who was the one that sent you to kill Panter?"

Thira pressed her lips together. What had happened was bad but she was unsure how what she said was going to affect them. "I was told it would be an act of retaliation for the ones that had died after she had left."

Alesia frowned. "I was already told that. Why are you reminding me about it?"

Thira pulled away as she turned to meet Alesia's puzzled gaze. "The man that sent me was my father," She said bluntly. She watched Alesia's eyes widen.

"Your what!!!" Alesia's blood seemed to freeze at the impact that statement made on her. Her mind whirled as the implications of what that could mean rose.

"My father." Thira repeated. "My own blood sent me on a one way mission. I doubt he expected me to live though the encounter with Panter."

Alesia nibbled her lower lip as she pondered on what she'd been told. "What do you want to do now?" She asked needing to know how they stood.

"About what?" Thira's eyes seemed to dim as she considered what Alesia was asking. She didn't know if it was the doubt of their relationship or of the standing she had in the fight hurt her more.

Alesia reached out pulling Thira against her. Wrapping her left arm around her waist she grasped her face with the other. Muted eyes met hers. The anguish in them caused her own to moisten. "NO" she said tightly. "I'm not talking about us. I would never allow anything to separate us like that. We might get angry with each other but I refuse to let something destroy our connection."

She found her arms full, as her independent partner seemed to suddenly crumple. Tears dripped on her skin while she shifted her grasp. Tightening her grip she slid her right arm behind the trembling shoulders. Kissing the head close to hers she discovered she was crying too. When she felt the shudders wracking Thira's frame ease she moved back a bit so she could see her face. Damp eyes looked at her as she wiped away the tracks they'd left. "Never worry that I don't love you Thira. There's nothing that could ever stop that." Alesia kissed her. She felt Thira's grip on her hips tighten when it flared with need. They ended the kiss just before they both ran out of air. They leaned their heads together as they rested allowing their pulses to calm down.

"Our timing seems to really suck with this" Thira remarked dryly.

Alesia laughed. "We'll eventually get it right" she promised. She cleared her throat as she straightened letting go of Thira as she did. She stayed silent as she watched Thira move restlessly around the tent. "What are we going to do about your father?" She paused as Thira halted her pacing. "If I understand it right he seems to be the one behind this war."

"He probably is, but I don't believe he's the only one involved. He would have never made the naive mistakes we've seen so far. Someone else is doing them." Frustrated, Thira clenched her hands into fists disregarding the pain that coated her palms. She tilted her head when Alesia's eyes seemed to brighten, as she seemed to come to a realization. "You've thought of something" she commented.

"I think I just might know who that other someone might be" Alesia replied. She made sure she tucked the letter away before moving to Thira's side. She took her hand this time pulling her towards the door. "Come on, we have a lot to do before we can fill Tera and Panter in on what we've found out." They exited the tent to try to help speed up the departure. One more camp still had to be found before they could head back.

[Continued...](#)

# Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
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## Chapter Ten

Panter awoke to a light tapping on the entry pole of their tent. Trying not to wake Tera she gently slid from their bed. They had only recently retired. The concern of how Alesia and Thira were doing keeping them up past the time they normally retired. Hastily donning clothes she padded to the entrance undisturbed with the darkness, her vision adapting to allow her to dodge anything in her path easily. She stepped outside hoping to keep any noise to a minimum. Panter frowned faintly upon seeing Akil patiently waiting. She remained silent as they moved slightly away from the tent to stand near a flickering torch.

"Akil, what has you here.." She checked the sky. "Right before dawn?" His response drove home the point that he wasn't here on a social call.

"Arms Master, the unit has been spotted returning but it seems to be a lot larger then upon leaving" He reported.

"Bigger then when they left?" Panter folded her arms. "Have you sent anyone out to check?"

"Yes, they haven't returned..." He paused as a horseman rode up. They waited as he dismounted approaching them on foot.

Saluting the soldier gave his report. "It's them sirs. Someone was coming in just as I met up with them."

"Did you see why the group seems to have doubled in size?" Akil asked.

The soldier smirked. "Looks like they not only beat the pants off them, they took everything they had too."

About to inquire further they paused, the noise from a commotion seemed to travel right to them.

Panter watched as men led strings of horses past. Nothing appeared unusual until she noticed a lot more horses were going past than expected. She stopped a passing man.

"The horses. Are they the returning units?"

"No Arms Master. I was told they're from the enemy camps" he replied.

"Have any idea where the Marshal is right now?"

"Last I saw her she was at the kitchens overseeing the storage of the foodstuffs they brought back"

Exchanging a glance with Akil she dismissed him. "Let's check on the Marshal shall we?" Panter asked.

A few minutes walk had them within view of the cooking area. Even more horses were being unloaded. Seeing Alesia she approached her. "Alesia" she called.

Alesia turned at hearing her name called. A smile brightened her face. "Panter, I'm glad to see you. I had hoped no one would wake you till a little later."

"I left orders to be notified when you came back in." Panter looked her over; her brow furrowed at seeing the bandage that encircled her left bicep. "You got hurt" Concern laced her voice.

Alesia touched the wrapping. "It's not bad. Would have been worse if Thira wasn't there." She thought back to the rage that had appeared on her partner's face at the near miss. If Thira hadn't tackled the man his blade would have sliced her neck instead of on the arm. He didn't live to regret picking the wrong person to engage in a fight.

"Then it's a good thing she went with you" Panter still had a few misgivings about Thira but her actions since their encounter had only been positive. With Alesia and her bonding perhaps she could finally disregard her concerns. "Where is she anyway?"

"Helping to unload the rest of what we brought back"

Panter shook her head in bemusement. "What did you bring back?" she asked. "Horses I know but how many?"

Alesia grinned. "Figured they couldn't use them anymore so it was a logical choice to take anything we might need. We relieved them of around two hundred I think. That's the last count we had"

Panter could see the fatigue on Alesia's face in spite of her upbeat attitude. "Dismiss your unit to their beds. You and Thira go too. We'll take care of everything else. Let's get together around midday and go over what happened. Sound good?"

Alesia was grateful. They had been on the move since they had first left. Fortunately the majority of the fighting had taken place earlier in the day so most of the time was spent cleaning up the mess, organizing what was to be brought back and traveling. "Yeah, I guess I'll see you both later then" She left heading for the last place she had seen Thira. She was more than happy to curl up in a soft bed with the person she loved. As far as she was concerned everything else could just wait.

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Tera twirled a pen in her fingers as she slouched in her chair watching the rest of the group. Only Alesia and Thira needed to join them so the meeting could begin. She straightened as they came into the room. A brief burst of activity gradually settled as everyone found their seats. Tera waited a moment before speaking. She cleared her throat drawing everyone's attention to her. "First, I'd like to say I'm happy that Alesia and Thira are back from their mission relatively unharmed" A chorus of agreement echoed her.

Alesia inclined her head in thanks while Thira remained motionless her head down as if thinking. Tera watched as Alesia reached over taking Thira's hand in her own. Tera worried when Thira failed to react at the touch.

"Alesia could you fill us in on what happened?" Tera decided to talk with Alesia after the meeting to find out what the problem could be.

Thira looked up as Alesia tapped her shoulder then stood to follow her to the map on the wall. She waited silently as Alesia spoke. "We came upon the first encampment about where Thira said it might be" She indicated the marker marking the probable location. Murmurs of astonishment interrupted her. When it stopped she continued. "It was an hours travel further on foot from the initial camp, we eventually had to leave the horses behind. It became too difficult to use them in the overgrowth. Thira heard them, as we got close. Seems they were getting ready to assault our camp."

"May I ask how Thira heard them?" asked Akil.

Thira spoke up for the first time. "I heard the distinctive ringing of metal on metal. Since it wasn't a naturally made sound I deduced it to be from the camp we were hunting for. We found it some two hundred yards from our position"

"How was it possible you could have heard a noise that originated so far away?" Akil pressed. He was somehow unable to take Thira at her word.

Thira stared at him, aware that everyone else was doing the same thing. "Because I am as far from natural as you can possibly get. You might want to remember that I have the same traits as Panter does," She drawled slowly hoping what she said would sink in. "Only a little different in some areas"

Akil subsided not asking any more questions, keeping his doubts to himself for the time being.

Alesia took the opening to continue. "Thira directed the Amazons into the trees requesting them to spread out around the encampment. It was decided to take the militia to the rear of the camp to prevent anyone from escaping. We were to charge the camp at Thira's signal." She could almost feel the restraint a number of the group used to stop from questioning her about allowing Thira to assume control of the battle plan.

Thira took over the story. "I slipped into the camp. They were getting prepared to depart. I verified that they were heading here"

"How did you get confirmation?" Tera asked curious of what method Thira would have used.

Thira shrugged. "I asked them" Shocked voices overwhelmed her own as she attempted to continue speaking.

A slam abruptly silenced them. Tera stood her hand resting on the thick book she had dropped onto the table. "Please let Thira finish before asking anymore questions" She requested. She motioned her to continue as she retook her seat.

"After that I killed the speaker and the man beside him. At my signal the amazons attacked bombarding them from the treetops. Alesia and the militia came from the rear as I ran towards the center of camp itself. I lost count of how many I killed before meeting up with Alesia. By then the fighting was pretty much over" Thira bared her teeth unconsciously as she recollected the fight.

Panter felt her muscles twitch at the sight. To her kind that could be taken as a challenge. Locking gazes while doing so could make it a threat. Without thinking she shifted position in her seat keeping Tera behind her and opening an avenue to the front of the room.

Narna had watched the interplay between everyone without a word. "How did you signal the attack?" she asked. She wondered as Thira glanced at Alesia in query. Seeing Alesia shrug then nod, she was unprepared when Thira threw back her head and roared. The sound made them all jump in alarm feeling the hair rise on the back of their necks in reaction.

Tera waved away the sentry's that rushed in at the uproar. She shook her finger at Narna as her own heartbeat settled back down. "You had to ask didn't you?" Surely she wasn't the only one who had figured out what type of signal Thira would have used. She exchanged a wry look with Panter.

Alesia grinned for a moment then resumed her report. "After the fighting I had the enemy's dead pit buried. We brought our own back here. I had everything we could possibly use brought back"

"Good idea we'll need to outfit the conscripts we've been getting in" Tera complemented her.

"Thanks" Alesia was pleased. It made her feel good that her efforts were being noticed. "Before

coming here we stopped for the final count of the spoils we'd brought back." She pulled a slip of paper from her pocket. "There were two hundred fifty horses. Three hundred and ten assorted arms. Around the same for armor" She looked up. "Barring some modifications to the emblems of course" A few chuckles circled the room. Alesia smirked then continued reading. "Food wise we retrieved five barrels of salted fish, two more of deer jerky, three of flour, and finally two crates of travel bread. There was more but it was spoiling so we disposed of it" She sobered. "We had six fatalities in the attacks we made"

Tera paused before speaking; she had expected a much higher death toll. The last years training seemed to be working as they hoped. Still the death of anyone under her command weighed on her. "Did you make sure to note their names?" At Alesia's confirmation she went on. "When we return any family of the fallen will receive a stipend. The amount will be at least half of their pay monthly." No one dared to object. The tone of finality in her voice prevented them from speaking. Tera broke the hush. "Was there anything else?"

Alesia hesitated before pulling out the dispatch that Thira had found. "We did find something else in the commanders quarters at the first camp. It seems there may be two separate people behind this war. This was sent to a person unknown to us at this time" She handed it to Panter reluctantly. She could feel Thira tensing beside her. Alesia hoped she was doing the right thing.

Panter's jaw tightened as she read the letter. Her insides roiled when she came to the part of the assassin that had been sent being from his own people. She raised hooded eyes to Thira's strained features. "You right?" A low rumble filled her chest at Thira's confirmation. Panter got to her feet. "Who sent you?" she spat furiously. Panter tensed when she saw her eyes shift. It could have been a reaction to stress or a preparation for an attack.

"My father" Thira replied attempting to keep her voice calm. She nearly failed to react when Panter leapt, her body morphing into half shift as she moved. Her speed saved her neck from being slashed open but Panter's claws still tore deeply into her left shoulder and across her upper torso. Thira hissed in pain as she shifted. She crouched in preparation to meet Panter's next charge. Thira snarled as she launched herself at her adversary.

Tera cried out at the sight of the two shapeshifters locked in combat. The surprised outcries from the gathering were barely heard over the growls and roars. The sentry's charged in drawing their swords at the sight of the fighting forms. "NO!!" Tera shouted. "Go back outside, make sure no one else enters," she commanded. A sharp look encouraged the uncertain men to abide by her orders. Tera recognized the terror on Alesia face. It wasn't for themselves but for their respective partners. A swiftly moving shape passed her then abruptly stumbled, resolving into a collapsing form. Tera took that opportunity to take action. She ran towards Panter. "Alesia" she shouted. "Protect her," she pointed at the unmoving body. Tera halted in front of Panter holding her arms wide. "Panter, don't do this," She pleaded. "Your reacting with your gut not your head" For an instant she thought Panter was going to go straight through her to get at Thira. Harsh breathing was her only response before altered eyes lowered to meet hers, she watched breathless as the oval pupils expanded. In the next instant Panter stood before her in human form.

Panter considered her blood-covered hands. "Your right" she said softly. Troubled eyes studied



Alesia with Thira. "I'm sorry, when I heard it was her father something inside just snapped" Panter turned back to Tera. "The thought that she might be still working with him and possibly using Alesia to that end enraged me" she admitted. It worried her a little that she had been more distressed with Alesia being taken advantage of then about who was behind the war. Then it dawned on her, she viewed her more as a member of her family then she did as just a friend. Now her reaction made a little more sense but it was far from being a good excuse for what just happened.

"I understand that, but surely you trust the goddess's own judgment? From what was said she knew Thira before all this ever started. I don't think you need to worry about it, from what I've seen the fact the goddess asked her to help us was enough of a reason for her to comply. Besides your apologizing to the wrong person," Tera advised. She turned to see how Alesia was doing. Tears welled in her own eyes as she watched her cry while holding Thira close. Turning to the watching assembly she spoke resolutely. "What happened here is not to be discussed with anyone. Is that clearly understood?" At the unvoiced indications of agreement she dismissed them after requesting a healer be sent.

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Alesia brushed streaked locks of hair away from Thira's face. Her fingers stilled, as a pattern seemed to emerge in the soft strands. Gathering a handful she saw a light design of spots had appeared in her hair. It teased the eye making it almost seem as if they weren't really there. Smoothing it back down she smiled faintly as it blended into the pelt that still covered Thira. Leaning down she pressed a kiss to her cheek, the fur felt like silk beneath her lips. A low groan leaked from Thira's lips. Alesia sat up. "Thira?" she whispered. "Come on love, wake up" she urged. The longer she remained unconscious the more anxious she became.

Lids flickered open, the blurred gaze trying to focus on the face close to hers. It sharpened as Thira remembered what happened. She tried to rise, gasping as razor-sharp pains lanced across her chest. Laying back down she panted trying to catch her breath. A cup touched her lips as she was carefully raised with an arm supporting her shoulders. "Drink this" Even phrased as a request the tone of command in Alesia's voice forbade her to argue. She sipped at the liquid grimacing at the slightly bitter taste. After several swallows the cup was removed and another substituted. When she hesitated a warm laugh tickled her ears. "Don't worry, its just water" She gratefully drank as much as she could before it was withdrawn. Pillows were gently tucked behind her so she wasn't lying flat. A hand returned to rest on her arm as she studied the room.

"Where am I?" Thira didn't recognize the room she was in.

"Panter and Tera's bedroom" Alesia could feel Thira's muscles tighten under her hand in response. "We couldn't take you anywhere else in your condition"

The hand stroking her arm caught her attention. She understood the cryptic response when she saw her arm. Raising her other hand towards her face Thira shut her eyes in dismay at what she felt. She was still in half shift. It hadn't dawned on her that her voice was more guttural then normal. Alesia's reaction to her altered form was as if nothing had changed. "This doesn't disgust

you?" she rasped huskily. Lowering her arm she clenched her hand in a fist as she waited for the scathing retort she was certain would come.

Warm lips pressed against her cheek. Startled she opened her eyes to see the loving gaze looking down at her. "I love you Thira. What else can I do to prove that?" Alesia watched fascinated as Thira's features regained their human contours only her eyes keeping their oval shaped pupils. The soft covering of fur remained. "You're not shifting fully back?" she asked after a moment when nothing else changed.

"I'm comfortable like this for now. Is that ok?"

Alesia ran her hand down the side of Thira's face. Even in this serious moment she couldn't keep the longing out of her voice. "More than ok"

Thira cupped the back of Alesia neck with her good hand gently pulling her closer. Just before their lips touched Panter and Tera walked in. She hesitated for a split second then ignored them as she kissed Alesia. The discomfort of her shoulder faded as trickles of heat played over her body. Her grip tightened when she swallowed a low moan. She released Alesia then laid back, her breathing quick as she tried to regain control of herself. The facts of being injured again along with the Regents being present were the only things keeping her from finally claiming her mate.

Thira studied Panter. Her attack wasn't totally unexpected. She actually would be more upset if it hadn't occurred. Thira was sure she would have done the same thing if she'd found herself in that position. She broke into the awkward stillness. "Why didn't you finish it?" She shifted her position against the pillows, wincing as the binding on her shoulder pulled. "I would have" Thira kept her features blank as she felt Alesia's grip on her arm squeeze in protest.

"When I heard that you were sent by your father..." Panter paused. "I don't know what pissed me off more, the idea you might be working against us or the thought of you using Alesia while you were doing it"

"She would never.." Alesia started to protest. She fell silent as Thira shook her head.

Tera broke in. "I told Panter that the goddess would never have requested you to aid us if she thought you were helping them." Moving closer she sat in the chair set close to the bed. "She knew you from before didn't she?"

Thira closed her eyes as she leaned back against the pillows. "A long time ago I was devoted to her teachings. Most people were. To have her so visible and real to us was a truly wondrous thing" Opening her eyes she fixed her gaze on the top of the tent. "You must understand I was born and raised in a clan only environment. I knew next to nothing about humans. I had never met one before" Her hand tightened on the sheet covering her. "That all changed shortly after my twentieth year" A hand curled around her fist gently loosing her grip then twining their fingers with hers. Rolling her head to the side she met a gaze full of compassion. "I used my human form a lot more than" Thira's eyes darkened with memories. "One night while I was away from

home I helped a young woman that had wandered into the woods and gotten lost" She licked her lips. A cup was quickly offered. She drank deeply. "Thanks" She said smiling briefly at Alesia.

"Anytime" Alesia replied. "Do you want to rest a bit more before continuing?"

Thira hesitated, almost saying yes. "No, its best if I finish it. I might not later." She turned her attention to the watching women. "I was ignorant; I started meeting her from time to time. Sometimes she would bring a little something to share on the walks we had together. I didn't know that her parents had gotten wind of what was going on," She laughed scornfully as she thought of how thick she had been then. "I failed to take into account that I wasn't a human being and she was. To me every sign said she loved me just as I did her. I foolishly revealed what I really was thinking that it wouldn't matter, that she would love me regardless of what I told her" Thira swallowed hard recollecting what happened next. "Her father and several others had followed her that day" she heard a slight gasp from beside her. "When she acted like she didn't understand I decided to show her. She got upset as I stripped but relaxed when I teased her about it"

Her jaw tightened. She forced herself to go on. "I shifted and started walking towards her. She screamed in horror, the expression of revulsion on her face devastated me. Her father heard the screams and came running. He arrived just as I was shifting back. All he saw was a monster that dared to threaten his daughter. Even with me being in human form and unarmed they attacked me. It was four against one. I was reluctant to use my claws against them thinking it all had to be a horrible mistake. That reluctance almost killed me; their fists and knives left me bleeding to death on the forest floor. One of the last things I remember is her coming up, spitting on me then kicking me in the head. That was the day I learned how treacherous humans beings were. I never trusted one again"

Tera had to clear her throat as she tried to speak past the tears. "How did you survive?"

Muted eyes studied the tear marks on her face. "The goddess showed up and healed the worst of my injuries. She took me back home and placed me back in my family's care. After that I turned from her teachings but the fact she had saved my life made me reluctant to fully abandon them. When she asked me to help you I couldn't refuse her" She glanced over at Alesia. "That I would find a human that accepted and loved me as much as Alesia does was unexpected" She shifted fully back to human. "It still astounds me at times" she admitted. She willingly accepted the kiss that was pressed to her lips.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," Panter said quietly. "I didn't live with any clan. I was raised with humans. My mother was the only one I really knew that was like me"

Thira was startled. "Your father was human?"

Panter frowned. "He wasn't my real father. My mother was pregnant with me before they met"

"So you don't know who your real father is?" Tera asked.

"No. My experience ended up being similar to Thira's. Someone saw my mother and I in the forest and realized what we really were. They informed my father who decided that anything unnatural as that needed to be destroyed. My mother was killed protecting me from the mob that came to slaughter us. I got away while they were involved in beating her to death. She had pleaded for me to run so I followed her last wish. I wandered the land for years after that trying to keep a low profile. I felt a constant pull to leave so after resisting it for as long as I could I finally gave in to it" Panter gazed at Tera affectionately. "That's when I found you"

Tera walked over to Panter, sliding her arms around her she nestled close to her side. "It saddens me that such horrible situations brought us all together" Strong arms embraced her, pulling her closer to the sturdy body she was leaning against. She breathed in the musky scent of her lover. To think she might never have had this was heartbreaking.

"So what happens now?" Thira needed to change the topic. Her nerves were frayed from what she had just revealed. Hopefully now that her secret was out the nightmares that had plagued her would stop. She may still distrust most humans but several of the ones she had met here seemed ok.

Panter hugged Tera then let her go. Crossing over to the side of the bed opposite to Alesia she kneeled putting herself on Thira's level. Tawny eyes considered her. Carefully she laid her hand on her forearm trying not to jar the injured shoulder. "I'm sorry I lost it like that. There was no excuse for it. I should have trusted that the goddess knew what she was doing. If anyone else knew what was truly in your heart she would have" Golden eyes remained steady as they were searched.

"I don't blame you for what you did. I would have probably done the same thing" Tera played with the sheet in agitation. Flashes from of the fight distracted her. "But I wouldn't have stopped" Her brow creased in puzzlement. "I don't remember much, why did you?"

Panter stood. "Stop you mean?" At Thira's nod she glanced at Tera then back to Thira. "Tera stopped me. She reminded me that the goddess was the one who asked you to help so she would know better than us if you were trustworthy"

Thira's eyebrow arched in disbelief as she compared their height difference, Tera's head only reached to Panter's chin. Tera was even taller than most women herself. Alesia was one of the few that were about the same height. To think Tera defended her against an enraged mate made her estimation of her go up a few notches. "Thank you" she said sincerely locking her gaze with Tera's. She blinked when Panter shifted uneasily. "What?" She asked looking at the Arms Master impatiently.

"I was taught that staring fixedly at someone was a threatening action"

Thira shook her head. "Not quite. That just means you have their full attention. Now if I did this" Thira's eyes grew brighter as they morphed and she drew back her upper lip fully exposing her fangs. A growling growl filled the room. As Panter tensed sliding closer to her mate Thira quit. Closing her eyes she shoved the memory that helped trigger the anger back. She sighed. "That

was a threat. Now do you understand the differences between the two?" she asked as she opened her eyes with them once again normal.

Panter nodded refraining herself from speaking. Seeing that had alarmed her. She had the feeling if Thira had really been fighting her; their tussle may have turned out quite differently.

Alesia spoke up. "I think Thira would rest more comfortably in our bed. Why don't we arrange that, then after she's had a bite to eat and a short rest we can continue our discussion" Her tender look lingered on Thira's drawn features. The fact she wasn't arguing supported her request.

"Good idea, I'm sure everyone needs a break right now" Tera crouched by the bed. "You should never have gotten hurt. Even though you said you understood that doesn't excuse it from occurring"

"I know but it'll be ok, luckily I heal fast" Thira didn't want them to keep apologizing. "Lets not mention it again alright?" She grinned. " Just consider it an injury from an unexpected battle"

Tera's look gentled. "All right" she got back on her feet. "Lets get you settled in your own bed then" She stepped back as Thira cautiously sat up with Alesia's aid.

Thira swung her legs over the side of the bed, gritting her teeth at the agony the movement set off. She bowed her head using her loose hair to cover her pain-wracked features as she panted for breath. Extending out her good arm she waited till Alesia gripped it with one hand and slid an arm around her back then holding her breath stood. She groaned, the nausea rising in her throat as her head swam from the change of position. "Give me a moment," she gasped, she stayed still hoping it would settle back down. She didn't want to make a fool of herself by puking on the Regent that still remained nearby. Her body relaxed a little as her stomach and head settled back down. "Alright, lets go. I need to lie back down" She declined any help but Alesia's. Moving slowly they exited the tent heading for their own quarters. A hush followed them as they made their way through the camp with the Regents following them attentively.

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# Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
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## Chapter Eleven

Alesia leaned on the pommel of her saddle as she looked out on the sea of moving humanity. The amount of travel time had been steadily increasing for the past several days, frequently picking up more new recruits along the way. The growing number of military had them scrambling at first for provisions but for some odd reason they kept running into herds of animals that shouldn't be in the area at this time in the season. They were careful to only take the animals that were unable to keep up with the herd due to age or injury; there was no need to wipe out an entire group to keep everyone fed. They'd had suspicions of divine help but couldn't swear by it. Most thanked the goddess for her assistance anyway. Thira had started sharing her beliefs with her lately introducing her to what she had tried to abandon so long ago. Alesia noticed that she seemed much calmer since she'd told them about what had happened to make her loathe humans so much. Panter had waited for as long as she possibly could before ordering the camp packed for travel. She'd left their tent as one of the last to be stored. Even with accelerated healing capabilities, Thira was still in extreme discomfort as they departed heading for Tylan.

Her eyes swept the area. The small rise she was on gave her a clear view of the troops along with the surrounding vicinity as they marched by. Her sharp eyes caught the sight of her partner riding along side Panter and Tera deep in conversation, their horses kept at a brisk walk. Clucking at her mount she kneed it into a trot. Alesia slipped between two units, she absentmindedly returned their salutes while carefully making her way over to join the women. Several smiles greeted her as she arrived at their side.

"Things look good for now," she reported. "Everyone's still moving at a decent pace. I think we'll be able to keep going till dusk at least if we eat in the saddle" She lifted a brow at Thira silently inquiring how she was holding out. A crinkle around her eyes let her know everything was fine. "So what were you talking about?" she inquired deftly pulling everyone's attention to her and away from Thira.

Panter tapped the hilt of her sword. "How I came into possession of this"

Alesia brow furrowed. "I thought you stole it from your family. Didn't you tell me the eldest male was supposed to have it?"

Panter rubbed the back of her neck. "Well, I kind of glossed over that a little. When I told you that only the male received it that wasn't quite the truth. When my mother met my" She ran her palm down the side of her chin, dropping her hand to her thigh. "I suppose you'd call him my Father but he wasn't my biological parent" Panter shrugged. "Anyway, my mother brought it with her, seems she actually had taken it with her when she's split from her clan. She never did tell me why she'd left just that there had been little choice at the time. Any information I have about anything dealing with the clan is second hand" She exchanged a long look with Thira then resumed her story. She ticked a few points off on her fingers. "She told me no males **ever**

received the goddess's gift, that the sword had a purpose but couldn't tell me what that was, she just knew without a doubt she needed to take it with her when she left. My "father" took a liking to it and decided it was no woman's weapon so took ownership of it immediately. She also said something I've never really understood"

"What was that?" Tera asked some of the lingering questions she'd had finally being answered.

"That it was easier to conceal one bird among many than to hide a snake among the rocks" Panter shrugged. "Never could figure out what it meant" No one spoke as they all mulled over the saying trying to figure out what it could possibly mean.

"Your mother was telling the truth when she said no males received the gift," Thira said breaking the silence. "I was surprised to hear that you were raised by mostly humans. Tell me, were there a lot of unusual incidents as you grew up?"

Panter's brows knit as she considered her past. "Now that you mention it, yea there were. I guess I was just a klutz"

Thira shook her head. "No, you really weren't. That's a normal course of growing up, particularly while we are trying to adapt to the increased strength we have. What might be a light blow to us might kill the person we hit unintentionally. It was a risk for you to grow up in that kind of environment, makes me wonder what your mother could possibly have been thinking to allow it"

"What makes clan surroundings any better?" Panter asked puzzled. Alesia and Tera leaned forward in their saddles interested in hearing the reply.

"First you're surrounded by your own kind. Elders would have been available to address any concerns you might have had. There would be others to help teach you how to use the gifts you had and assist you in the shifting process. Then you would have learned our history and been accepted by the goddess as one of her own far earlier in your life" Thira paused shifting in her saddle, being careful not to visibly wince as the ache flared up in her shoulder at the sudden movement. It was at the stage of healing that was mostly muscle pain as it knit itself back together.

Alesia broke in. "But wouldn't your father's still be human?"

Thira took a moment to retrieve her water container, taking her time she drank several mouthfuls of the cool liquid. Stopping the top she slung it back over its hook on the side of the saddle. "When we choose our mates regardless of the sex, the union must be blessed by the Goddess. With the blessing the spouse changes, they are no longer fully human. Their strength increases slightly along with their reaction time. This is only done to try to keep them from harm and to be better able to help defend the clan"

Tera met Panter's eyes surprised at what she'd just heard. "The goddess blessed our union" She turned to Thira "Did this happen to me also?"

"Is that when you received your markings?"

"Yes, we were told that they marked us as her chosen. She didn't say anything about me being changed in any other way"

Thira frowned. "Perhaps she thought she didn't need to. Had anything happened before you married that was unusual?"

Tera started to say no but paused. A small silence ensued as she met Panter's gaze as they both remembered something had happened.

"When you got kidnapped" Panter's nails bit into her palms as she remembered the fear that had enfolded her when Tera had been taken from their very bed.

Thira's stiffened in shock, the abrupt motion causing her horse to sidestep in response to the uncertain signal it received. "Kidnapped?"

"My cousin was afraid he would lose the title of Regent if I returned so he arranged to have us drugged. He planned to abduct me to make sure I wouldn't be in any position to be a threat"

"By killing you I would assume" Thira finished.

Tera nodded in agreement. "Yes, by killing me. We were staying in a room at Raven's Claw at the time"

Panter broke in. "They came through our bedroom window when they knew we had eaten and drank the food that had been left for us. The drug was strong enough to affect me; it slowed me down so I could only grab the last man that attempted to exit the room back through the window. We got enough information from him to find where Tera had been taken" Panter's voice was heavy with regret. "We'd just fully bonded when they took her from me"

Thira's head jerked back as if she'd just been slapped. "**What!!**" She stared at the Regents in horror. "They're lucky their drug affected you. If it hadn't you would have easily torn them apart. I'm sure you could feel the rage your mate being taken caused. If you'd been lucid anyone coming near her non the less actually touching her would have prompted an attack on your part"

Panter eyes grew dark as she remembered the absolute terror that had seized her when her mate was taken. That feeling had been swiftly overwhelmed by the burning rage that followed. The true animal side of her had longed to sink its claws into anyone remotely being part of the ones that had taken her partner. "Your right, I did feel as if I could have killed them all with no regrets at all"

Tera reached over and took Panter's hand in hers. "Everything turned out the way it was meant to. We're together and married, I'm happy with how my life has turned out so far"

Panter squeezed her hand carefully as her eyes caressed her face. "I thank the Goddess everyday



that she saved you for me. If you'd died, I don't think I'd be here today"

Tera and Alesia grew sober as they realized that what Panter said might have come to pass if the Goddess hadn't stepped in.

Thira watched the feelings flash across her companion's faces in puzzlement. "What do you mean if she'd died?" Her brows drew together. "What did the Goddess have to do with it?"

Tera turned back to Thira. "When Panter found me, my cousin went crazy"

"If he wasn't already," Alesia murmured. She quieted at the look she received from Tera.

"He stabbed me in the chest" She paused "I'm sorry I don't know anything about what happened until I woke up in the infirmary"

Thira looked over at Panter's still face. "What happened then?"

Panter bit her lower lip. "I watched Tera fall to the floor" Her eyes slid shut as she relived the moment her heart had abruptly stopped in her chest at the sight. "I wanted to kill him for that, I went right for his throat" Her voice trailed off as the memory of how his blood tasted suddenly flooded her mind.

Alesia picked up the story when she saw Panter was unable to continue.

"When Panter went for him she seemed to shift with every step she took. By the time she reached him she was in full shift. She" her voice cracked.

"She mauled him. I don't blame her at all, if I could've I'd have done the same thing" Her voice had risen slightly as she spoke, unconsciously trying to defend her friend from the judgments of others. "She turned from him and shifted back to human before she reached Tera. Seeing the agony on her face as she cradled her close, I knew instantly she was dead"

Panter broke in. "I pleaded with the Goddess to save her" she rubbed her thumb over the back of Tera's hand. "And she did. She used my body to heal her" She smiled faintly. "It hurt like hell. It was as if she was using my own gift of healing. I think she did, Tera healed remarkably fast after that. Far quicker than a normal human could ever do"

Thira's eyes widened a little. "Maybe that's why she never said anything. After you'd healed so quickly perhaps she thought that you understood that you'd already been changed"

Tera met Panter's gaze. "It makes sense" She smiled. "Suddenly I feel a lot more confident about this war we're being forced into"

Panter nodded. "I feel a little better about the situation too. But we're still going to be extremely careful in how things are done"

Thira grew quiet as she allowed her horse to drop back from the group. She watched Alesia as she continued to talk to the Regents. She envied her relationship with them; friends had proven

to be a source of unreliability to her at one time. The one true downfall of their clan was the way everyone seemed to vie for power in the pack. The constant battle for the alpha role in the clan was tiring, that was one of the main reasons she'd agreed so quickly to leave and go after the traitor. She studied the way Panter related to the others. She seemed sure of herself enough that there was no hint of trying to take control of the situation like their kind normally would.

Thira's eyes softened as she turned her gaze back to Alesia. Her hair had been pulled back into a braid again. She traced the way it draped over a strong shoulder and ended at the middle of her back. Her eyes slipped half closed as she remembered the smell of it as she buried her face into the silkiness of its length as they slept. Thira's unconsciously straightened in her saddle as her breathing grew more rapid. A low growl vibrated her chest as her gaze lingered over the form of her mate. The twinge of pain her movements caused was pushed dismissively from her awareness. She was so involved with watching Alesia she failed to see Panter start and turn in her saddle as she looked back towards her.

Panter noticed the way Thira was acting. When she moistened her bottom lip as she leaned forward in her saddle Panter knew what was going on. She moved closer to Tera. "I think we need to make it an early stop tonight while we are still relatively safe"

Tera turned with a surprised look. "Why, we're making good time. We could easily travel for another few miles"

Panter grinned faintly. "Take a look at Thira"

Tera glanced over her shoulder. She flushed, as she saw what Panter meant. She hastily considered several options. Tera kept a smile from forming on her lips as she turned to an unaware Alesia.

"We're going to make camp early tonight"

Alesia frowned and started to protest. It died off, as she understood the Regent was speaking not her friend Tera. "Yes, ma'am" She rode off to spread the word down the line and to set up the watches for the night.

Panter waved Tera on as she dropped back to talk to Thira. She remained silent, as Thira slowly grew aware of her presence next to her. Panter watched, as the intense look slowly cleared from Thira's amber eyes.

Thira clenched her jaw as she noticed Panter next to her, studying her as if she were an unusual specimen. "Did you want something?"

Panter tilted her head. "We're stopping early tonight" A corner of her mouth lifted as she met Thira's gaze head on. "It would be a good time to get any unresolved issues dealt with before we're in the middle of a battle" She nudged Donum into a canter to catch up with her own mate.

Thira's frowned as she pondered Panter's words. Her lips parted in a feral smile, as she

understood. Tonight, hurt or not she was determined to make Alesia her true mate. She'd been fighting the urge for far too long. She pulled her horse around and urged it into a fast trot to catch up with Alesia and see what could be done to hurry things along.

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Alesia ducked into their tent with their meal. She smiled as she saw Thira curled up comfortably on their bed. Her steps gradually came to a halt as she sat up to reveal that she was nude. Alesia's breath caught as she slowly traced the sleek muscled curves on display. She hastily set the bowls of food aside before she dropped them. Her knees weakened at the heated gaze that met hers. Alesia licked at suddenly dry lips. "Are you sure your healed enough for this?"

Thira eyes narrowed as she rose from the fur strewn bed surface. She moved noiselessly over to circle Alesia's rigid form. She leaned close and inhaled Alesia's scent with a surge of pleasure. Her mouth opened slightly to draw the odor deep into her lungs. "I think we've both waited long enough," She whispered softly. "Don't you?"

Alesia shuddered as Thira's breath hit the back of her neck. Her hands moved to her tunic and unloosened its bindings. Helpful hands relived her of the garment when it was finally removed. It seemed as if little time had past before she was standing naked in front of Thira. Alesia moaned as her back met firm smooth skin when Thira pulled her against her bare body. She leaned her head back as eager lips pressed against her neck, light nips making her moan in pleasure. She turned in Thira's arms and pulled her mouth to hers. Alesia tightened her grip on the back of Thira's head as their kiss deepened.

Thira's chest rumbled with a low-pitched growl as the feel and taste of Alesia flooded her senses. She pulled Alesia's hips into hers as her grip tightened. She forced herself to move back, the smoky look of passion in Alesia's dark eyes had her gasping as her control over herself weakened.

"Bed" she rasped. Thira moved them both over to the soft surface. Gently pushing Alesia flat she moved to hover over her prone body, relishing the fire that danced over her body as their skin brushed. Her body arched as her leg slipped between Alesia's. A moan leaked from her lips as Alesia nails dug in, pulling her hips closer. Wetness coated her thigh making her gasp; her lips parted exposing her fangs. Her nails gripped the furs beside Alesia's head in desperation as she lowered her head and met Alesia lips with hers. When the kiss ended she moved her lips to Alesia's neck pressing light nips and kisses down its length. She hissed as Alesia's leg pushed against her mound, the pleasure causing her to go still.

"Alesia" her name came out as a deep rumble.

Thira licked the gathering sweat from Alesia's throat. She pulled back a little and cupped a breast in one hand. Bending her head she circled the tip, she avoided the nipple entirely until Alesia pleaded for her to stop teasing. She nipped the nipple gently before sucking it into her mouth. She played with the other breast, squeezing its nipple between her fingers as she nursed at

Alesia's breast. She moved to the other breast making sure it wasn't neglected in any way.

Thira pressed openmouthed kisses against Alesia's quivering stomach. The smell of Alesia's wetness filled her awareness. The sweet scent of her made her mouth water for want of a taste. Hands gripped her head as she slid down between Alesia's legs. She pressed a kiss against Alesia's mound; she ignored the fingers pulling her hair as she took her first taste. Thira gripped Alesia's hips as she savored the feast before her. She let Alesia's hips go and dug her nails into the surface of the bed not wanting to hurt her mate by accidentally clawing her. She used her upper body weight to keep Alesia as still as possible. Thira drew her tongue up through the wetness lightly flicking Alesia's clit at the end of the stroke. She continued the motion, as Alesia's halting gasps got louder. She forced herself to pull away not wanting Alesia to come yet. Sliding back up over her sweat-covered body Thira seized her lips in a rough kiss.

Pulling Alesia's lower lip between her teeth Thira bit lightly, she groaned as Alesia's body surged up into hers in response to the faint pain. Licking the swollen lips Thira leaned back. Heavy lidded eyes met with her burning gaze. Pushing her hips into Alesia's, Thira's breath caught in her throat as their mounds met. Reaching between them Thira spread their lips, the next push causing their clits to brush together. Thira's upper body twisted as a rush of pleasure slammed into her at the movement. Her face reflected the desire she felt as her eyes slid shut. They quickly fell into a slow rhythm not wanting it to end too quickly. Hands gripped and slid on sweat slicked bodies as they moved together. Thira grasped the covers on either side of Alesia as she thrust herself against her. Her head dropped forward as the muscles stood out in vivid relief on her body as the effort to hold back her climax taxed her restraint.

She opened her eyes to watch Alesia beneath her. Alesia's lips were drawn back in pleasure as her body surged up to meet Thira's, her own muscles firm against her slick skin. The guttural cries of need that came from her lips arousing Thira even more. Thira's vision blurred then sharpened throwing everything into vivid relief.

"Alesia, come with me" she pleaded, not wanting to leave her mate behind.

"Thira, I..." Alesia's voice faded, as their movements grew frantic with need.

The growing pleasure grew too much and at last it snapped. Their release had them both arching and crying out. Thira's roar echoed throughout the tent as she came, her head thrown back. Her body shook in response to the weakness that clasped her afterward. She collapsed into Alesia's arms panting wearily. Thira purred at the kisses that were pressed against her temple. She forced herself to move so she could look at Alesia. Raising her hand she pushed the damp hair from Alesia's eyes. She followed her jaw line lightly with her fingertips as Alesia's breathing finally quieted.

"I love you" Thira whispered before pressing a tender kiss against swollen lips. She gently touched her lower lip. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" Her head lowered as sudden wetness filled her eyes at the thought of injuring her mate. "I'd never want..." A warm hand forced her to meet loving brown eyes.

"No, nothing you could do in our bed would upset me" Alesia drew Thira closer. Her grip tightened briefly as Thira's hip brushed against her. "In fact, the only thing that would upset me is if you stopped right now" Cat like eyes met hers in full understanding.

Heat rushed through Thira's body at the hungry gaze that met hers. Her lips parted and her fangs flashed in a wild grin. Her eyes narrowed as she scented the body beneath hers, the mix of their scents making her growl in satisfaction. She seized Alesia's lips in a deep kiss as she moved herself against her again. Awareness' of the outside world fled as they immersed themselves in each other's bodies.

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## Panther's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panther's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

### Chapter Twelve

Thira felt the branch flex beneath her feet as she moved farther out along the high limb. Settling into a crouch to maintain her balance she looked out through the thick branches to the town below. She watched as the torches on the wall guttered in the light breeze that had arose during the night, the men on the walkways keeping a sharp eye on the surrounding trees. She flexed her fingers on the limb, her claws gouging the bark beneath them easily. Thira studied the fresh axe marks on the wooden barricade; she could smell the fresh pitch that had oozed from the recently cut timbers. Her eyes glinted in the darkness that surrounded her. It had been built to defend from an attack outside its walls. But if someone could get inside it would be an easy way to breach their defenses.

Thira leaped from her perch to the next tree over. Her claws caught hold of the branch that rushed towards her. A few pieces of bark fell to the ground below her in a light rustle that the sound of the trees moving leaves covered up. In her new position she could look right past the walls into the town itself. Her eyes narrowed as she caught a flurry of movement out of the

corner of her eye. Her pupils widened to enhance the available light as her vision adjusted to pierce the shadows that hid the commotion. A young woman was being assaulted by one of the enemy soldiers. Her conscience warred with her as she moved instinctively to help, but the knowledge that her actions could expose their presence halted her in mid-motion as she drew a knife from her harness. Unhappy with the notion of doing absolutely nothing her gaze lighted on the stones scattered below her. While sliding her knife back into its sheath a plan came to mind making an evil grin bend her lips. A flurry of movement had her at the trees base grabbing several stones and returning to her spot.

Hefting one in her hand, she waited till an especially hard shove separated the man and his intended victim. She winged the stone with all her power, hearing with a sense of satisfaction the dull thwack that rose as it nailed him in the back of the head. He slid limply to the ground without a sound. The woman stood stunned for a moment before gathering her torn shirt together as she attempted to cover herself. She looked toward the direction the help had come from and with a small wave of thanks disappeared into the alley behind her.

After scouting around the perimeter of the walled town Thira slipped deeper into the woods. Full shifting she ran headed for their encampment they'd set up several miles from Tylan. Her blood raced through her veins in elation as she poured on the speed, her gait lengthened until she was at full stride her lean body moving in an almost effortless run as she neared her full pace. Thira savored the feeling of the cool wind as it whipped throughout her fur, as much as she had accepted being bonded to a human she cherished the sensation of freedom she had in this form.

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Panter looked up as Alesia burst into their tent. She shared a look of wariness with Tera before watching Alesia pace the length of the floor in agitation.

"Something wrong Alesia?"

Alesia stopped and stared at the canvas wall in front of her before turning to face her friends. "It's Thira, she's missing. I can't find her in the camp and no one can remember seeing her since this morning" Her brow furrowed. "You don't think she went to check out Tylan alone do you?" She rubbed her face in frustration. "What am I saying, of course she did"

Panter gestured Alesia to a seat. "Does that truly surprise you, you must bear in mind what she is"

Alesia slumped in her seat. "That she's essentially an assassin?" she thought of the speed and strength her partner had in abundance. "I know, but I forget that most of the time. The person she is with me is so gentle, so loving sometimes I don't understand why other people can't see that"

Tera smile was full of understanding. "I'm the same way about Panter"

There was simply a side of them that no one would ever see except for a select few.

Discordant shouting broke into their conversation. A rush of wind blew the tents entrance flaps

back. Their grab for weapons halted as they took in the sight of the sleek animal now standing in amongst their number. Panter waved off the wide-eyed guards that ducked into the tent.

"Thira" Alesia whispered as the big cat turned its considering gaze on her. She rose and moved closer to it as her eyes absorbed the spotted coat that covered the lean muscular frame. A black tipped tail flicked slowly as she knelt by its side. She gradually reached out to stroke its head. Alesia drew back a little in startlement as a rough tongue licked her hand. She allowed the exploration the cat was intent on doing as she sent Panter a questioning look.

Panter walked over then crouched as she extended a hand for the cat to sniff. Tera followed and mimicked her movements. "It's important that Thira knows your scent in this shape, while your scent is distinctive to her in human form, its much more complex to her while she's like this. That way no matter what form she's in she'll be able to find you, it won't make any difference how old any trace you left is"

They all moved back as the cat's form rippled. Alesia watched breathless at the transformation in front of her. In the space of a few breaths Thira was standing in front of them with a small smirk on her face. She was grateful for the lessons Panter had given her with shifting while remaining clothed. It was much simpler that way, trying to successfully explain away why a change of clothing was being carried in an animal's mouth was unlikely. Being naked in front of her mate was fine, but being that vulnerable in front of anyone else was unacceptable.

Thira approached her wordless mate and kissed her. Her eyes narrowed as Alesia pulled her closer. The time she'd been parted from her had been almost unbearable. Forcing herself to concentrate on her agenda had been the only way to push back the unease that arose from being away from Alesia's side. She eased back from Alesia a bit. "Later love, we have other things that need our attention" She was pleased at the reluctant nod she received in return. Alesia was finding it just as difficult as she did.

Giving Alesia a final hug she stepped back. Turning to the other two women in the room Thira approached the table and snagged a pen and parchment. Rapidly sketching she drew out the layout of Tylan. "The rear portion of the town backs onto the forest, however they made sure to clear a large section so anyone coming close to the new walls they built would be easily seen. The front is clear of any cover we might have wanted to take advantage of" She shoved the rough sketch towards Panter. "Most of anything we do will be fully visible"

Panter regarded the layout in front of her. "I have to admit war is not one of my better skill sets. So far we've been very lucky things have gone our way, its only going to be harder as we go on" She leaned back in her chair aware of Tera's quiet gaze watching her. Briefly the sense of responsibility that her position entailed weighed heavily on her shoulders. She turned a considering gaze on the woman standing in front of them. "Not to put a fine point on it Thira, but out of all of us you have the most knowledge in this particular area"

Thira pushed back the rush of anger and resentment that surged up. She had spent enough time in Panter's company to realize she was speaking factually. Her skills were in infiltration and assassination; she'd practiced it continually in her pursuit of Panter for the past several seasons.

"So you want to know what I'd do, is that right?" Thira sank into the chair next to Alesia.

Panter settled for a wordless nod of assent. She searched out a fresh sheet of parchment and readied her pen intent on taking notes of anything that could be helpful.

Thira grunted as she leaned back in her chair. Closing her eyes, she stilled as she brought what she'd seen at Tylan to mind. One of her talents was being able to immediately identify the weaknesses that were exploitable in almost any plan or defense. She opened her eyes briefly. "I assume you want to try to keep the killing at a minimum?" She wasn't surprised to see her guess was right as they agreed. Closing her eyes again, she went over what she'd seen. "Their defenses are arranged to bar an offensive attack. Whoever planned the layout was only thinking in that vein; they didn't consider anyone trying to come over its walls in small groups. While I was there I noticed that their guard spacing had been arranged too far apart" Thira smiled disdainfully. "Their commander must be an absolute fool, we'd need to go over the walls at night but it is definitely doable. However, we have to keep them occupied while we do so"

Tera noticed the gleam in Thira's gaze. "What's brewing in that mind of yours?"

Thira pulled the sketch back over and borrowed Panter's pen. She wrote a number of x's on the sheet. She started to label them as she laid out her idea. "We'd need to start out early tomorrow but I want to take about half the forces we have and position them here and here"

Panter started to see where she was going. "That way we have a sizable force but their not aware of just how many men we have" Her eyes grew dark as she reflected on the rising death toll of enemy spies and scouts that they'd disposed of on their way here. Thira had been vital many times in chasing them down as they'd tried to flee when found out. She'd also taken it upon herself to almost casually kill them after retrieving what information they could glean from them. Panter had to admit she was glad that Thira was on their side, to think of trying to fight against the almost exceptional talent that Thira had in planning strategies could be a little daunting.

"Right, we give them just what they expect to see. I'd prefer to move in tonight and suddenly be there when the sun rose but we don't have that kind of time. But the sight of us arriving and setting up camp almost on their doorstep should work just as well. I would like the leading edge of the camp to be a good two bow lengths out of the range of their bowmen. I didn't see any other projectile weaponry mounted anywhere on the walls so I think that should be enough of a barrier" Thira paused and tapped a nail on the area at the rear of the town. She looked up as a goblet was set close by her hand, sipping the cool water she found inside she smiled at Alesia, grateful of her thoughtfulness. "Two sections of amazons need to be posted in the trees at the back of the town. The trees encircle at least halfway around the entire place. With their compound bows they should be able to easily pick off the men on the walls. It should be unexpected; I only saw standard bows being used by them. Thinning their ranks will give us a greater advantage of being able to get inside without being seen"

"What will our other men do as this is occurring?" Tera asked.

"I'm hoping that us being right in front of them will be to much of a temptation and draw them



outside their own walls. We want it to look like we aren't expecting anything but still be ready for them when and if they try to attack. I'd prefer to keep two squads in hiding but there's simply no place around there that would serve. If we tried to hide them in the woods, by the time they came around to the front any element of surprise would be ruined, they'd see us coming long before we could get there" Thira glanced at the regents. "After that it's pretty much wait and see"

Tera looked over the battle plan. At her call a guard entered the room.

"Please have the following people come here immediately" She turned and retrieved the list they'd put together as they talked. "Captains Adelphos, Karsten and Basha" she glanced over at Thira. "Do you want the same amazons that went with you last time?"

"I'd prefer it actually if that's alright?" Thira didn't want to seem as if she was trying to take over by telling them who could and couldn't go.

Tera smiled. "Anything if it helps," She continued her request to the waiting guard. "Also send Amazon's Cherise and Jenno" She dismissed him and settled back with the others to wait.

Only a few moments had passed before the first of the requested people arrived. Tera motioned them to take a seat as the rest started filing in. Thira and Alesia moved to Panter and Tera side of the table so they could easily see the face of the captains.

Tera motioned for Panter to take charge of the discussion for the battle looming ahead. "Its your arena" she whispered. "Not mine" She held back a sudden laugh at Panter's brief expression of bemusement.

"Tomorrow our battle with our enemy continues. We are going to take back Tylan" Panter watched as the look in her subordinates eyes grew grave as the news sank in. If she had seen any hints of eagerness at the information she would have immediately removed them from their position. An eager person tended to lead their men straight to their deaths by charging in without first seeing what the lay of the land was.

"Thira has just returned from scouting the town so I'll let her fill you in on what she's seen and what our next movements will be" Panter motioned for Thira to take over the meeting.

All eyes went to Thira as she stood. Moving to the map behind the Regents position she started to layout the plan of action they'd come up with. Only time would tell if it was a sound one.

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Panter stood watching the walled town before her. The layout had been precisely what they'd been told by Thira. After the meeting, everyone had scrambled to assemble everything they'd need for the mission ahead. Out of over five thousand on hand troops they brought only around two thousand with them. Enough to show a strong presence but not enough to tip their hand by showing how many troops they had available.

A hard ride had them here just after mid day. After ordering for camp to be set up Panter had

taken advantage of the staged chaos to carefully slip away to take her own look at the objective before them. After a quick glance around she returned and made sure that her presence was very visible.

"How do you think it's going to go?" Tera asked as she appeared at her side.

Panther slipped an arm around Tera's shoulders and drew her closer. "The plan should work fairly well, at least on paper it does. We'll just have to see how it goes" Panther pressed a kiss to the top of her mate's head. She looked towards the woods to the left of the town's position where Alesia was hiding with the amazons. "Come, we have things that need seeing too" Panther turned and headed for the assembling campsite. She made sure Tera was at her side away from the wall just for her own peace of mind.

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Alesia sent the Amazons to scatter into the surrounding trees. At a call they would each pick off one of the men on the wall if possible. They'd try for disabling shots but if that wasn't feasible they were to kill them outright.

She started as Thira appeared suddenly at her side. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Thira smiled wickedly. "Perhaps" She didn't choose to elaborate on her answer. She considered it a need to know; right now there was no need. "The Amazons know what to do?"

Alesia nodded. "Of course, now it's just a matter of timing"

"Time we get in position then" Thira lead her to the tree she'd used when last here. It's dense growth would shield their presence relatively easily, since it was situated at the starting edge of the cleared area they'd need the cover as they watched the walls that loomed a mere bows length away from their location. She stepped back to allow Alesia to start her ascent before she followed. Thira watched the movement of the muscles beneath her mates skin as she climbed. She abruptly remembered how it felt to have that power moving beneath her. Thira bit back a gasp as her body tensed as it recollected the sensations that had swept over her. Her fists tightened as she dug her claws into the palms of her hands. The pain brought her back to focus on the problem at hand, now wasn't the time for distraction like this. Alesia whisper caught her wandering attention.

"Are you coming up?"

Thira cursed herself; she was determined to not be distracted like that again. That was a sure way to get herself and Alesia killed. Her eyes grew cold at the thought of loosing her mate; she'd die before she'd allow that to happen. She crouched then shot straight up; her jump took her easily halfway before she needed to dig her claws into the thick bark. She joined Alesia at the wide platform that the large branch's the tree was made of created.

Signaling Alesia to hold her position, Thira made her way further up the trunk to the crown of

the tree. From there she could easily see the completed camp that spread out in front of the town. Turning her gaze to the town she watched the mounting flurry of movement that had been set off at their arrival. A sneer spread across her face as her sharp ears caught rising voices as they screamed frantic orders at the men. Panic would help keep them off guard; their attack from the trees would remain a surprise. She frowned a bit as more men appeared on the walls then shrugged; the action wasn't totally unexpected it just gave them a few more targets to take care of. Thira knew that this battle would end up much bloodier than anyone wanted but it was unavoidable.

Making her way back down the trunk she rejoined Alesia. She accepted the slice of journey bread and jerky she was offered. "We have a few more hours till dusk so after our snack we'll need to start our harassment of them. They've added more people to the walls but it doesn't change our plan any" Thira munched on the food in the quiet that followed her announcement.

Alesia finished her small meal then dusted the crumbs off her fingers. Pulling the stopper out of the water skin she washed the grease off her hands from the jerky. Taking a deep drink, she offered the water to Thira who took a quick swallow before restoppering it and setting it aside.

"Ready?" she asked quietly.

Thira nodded as she watched Alesia string her bow in an effortless movement. Her eyes lingered on her biceps that rippled with the strength it needed to accomplish the act. Blinking, she looked away. Realizing that they'd left several quivers of arrows below she muttered an excuse and darted down to retrieve them. Just as her fingers touched them, a crack of a branch breaking caught her notice. Grabbing them, she rushed back up the trunk and passed them to Alesia. Holding a finger to her lips, she motioned they had company before pulling off her boots and carefully making her way back down. Digging her claws deeply into the bark she placed herself head first down the trunk. A ripple of movement flowed over her body as fur appeared. Her spotted coat would make blending in easier; her body tensed as rustling noises drifted up to her from below. A pair of men broke into the small space underneath the tree. Thira noticed the emblems on their chests were stitched on rather than embossed. Must be mercenaries she mused then her incisors flashed as a small grin played across her lips. Fair game.

"I don't know why we have to search out here again. There's no way anyone could get to us from here, we'd see them before they got halfway to our walls" One complained loudly.

"Shut the hell up, fool. If someone was around here you just alerted them to our presence" the other whispered in a menacing voice.

"Too late" Thira growled before pushing away from the trunk. Twisting in mid-air she landed facing them. Rising to her full height she relished the shock that flashed across their faces.

"Isn't that thing the one we were warned about?" the first man blurted before drawing his sword.

"Doesn't matter, get it" the other spat.

The two men rushed her simultaneously. The small hesitation in her actions almost got her spitted before she moved. She pushed the odd comment to the back of her mind as she fought. Catching one man by his sword's arm she yanked. Keeping the sharp edge of the sword facing away from her she spun him slamming his body against the trunk with a meaty thunk. A scarlet spray splashed across the trunk's surface as his head split open with the devastating force of the throw. His body slid down to rest limply at the base of the tree. She caught sight of the other man trying to flee while her attention was diverted from him.

"Oh no, you don't" she snarled as she pounced on the escaping man. She caught him in mid step; wanting to end it quickly she tore his throat open. She left his twitching body on the forest floor as she shifted back. She met Alesia's worried gaze when she climbed back to their perch. "I'm fine, I couldn't take the chance of them finding us"

Alesia caressed her cheek silently then switched the topic of conversation. "Better get our plan into motion now, shouldn't we" She moved to the spot she had chosen to shoot from. She felt the body of her partner join her; she glimpsed out of the corner of her eye that she held the quivers of arrows, leaving her to concentrate on her task. Throwing back her head Alesia let out the harsh cry of the hawk, the signal they'd agreed upon. Setting an arrow she drew her bowstring back at full draw. Selecting her man she let her arrow loose, it joined dozens of others as they streaked toward their targets. Bodies fell as the arrows found their marks, she accepted the next shaft and chose her next victim carefully. The afternoon waned as an almost constant curtain of arrows steadily picked off any man foolish enough to brave the walls.

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## Panther's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panther's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.

Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.

Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

### Chapter Thirteen

The screams of dying men filled the air as dusk faded into night. Panther shifted impatiently as the time to move grew closer. She had made her way over to Thira's position as darkness settled in.

Only the two of them would attempt to go over the wall. Between them there was a greater chance of success than with a larger group, the others would be forced to use climbing ropes, which created too much of a risk of being seen by the enemy. Panter tensed as the sound of light footfalls drifted to her ears, she relaxed as Thira emerged from the surrounding brush. Panter noticed the gleam of excitement in her eye. That along with the almost visual aura of restless energy surrounding her made the hair rise on the back of her neck.

"Ready to do this?" Thira asked. She had a hard time keeping the eager grin off her face. The rush of energy and power that surged through her veins made her feel as if she could take the enemy head on with no help at all.

Panter nodded silently, she couldn't blame Thira for the excitement she was feeling, she felt it too. The task ahead of them was a challenge that stirred the animal side of them both. To pit themselves against an unknown army was the height of foolishness but they had more going for them than a simple human would. She followed Thira to the chosen entry point.

Keeping close to the pools of darkness that the trees provided they readied themselves for a rush at the walls where the sentries that still survived were occupied with trying to evade the arrows that continued to speed towards them. They both poured on the speed as the opening they were waiting for arrived. Thira easily reached the safety of the wall before Panter, her burst of swiftness leaving Panter behind in mere seconds.

Thira waited patiently as she scanned the surrounding area continuously. It wouldn't do to be seen already. She felt Panter's presence before seeing her. Thira led her to the section of wall she had specifically chosen. It was the furthest point from the front gates, so had less guards in the area than the others. Shedding her boots, she tucked them in her belt at her back; she glimpsed Panter doing the same thing out of the corner of her eye.

Crouching they leapt for the rim of the towering barricade. About halfway up the strength of their leaps bled off. Sinking their claws into the soft wood they continued their rapid ascent. Bits of bark and debris fell as they hurried to reach the top. As they slipped over the edge and moved into the gloom that the flickering torches couldn't breach, voices rapidly neared their position. Their eyes met in silent communication as they both separated and moved even deeper into the concealing shadows.

Panter held her breath as the three men walked right past her position. She let the last man pass her before stirring; her arm accidentally brushed the wall causing a slight noise that caught the man's attention. Before he could alert the others or turn to investigate Panter moved. Grabbing him by the back of his neck she twisted, breaking his neck effortlessly. He died without making a sound. A strangled gasp had her looking in the direction Thira had gone. She easily made out her form as she stood with a man's neck in each hand, their feet dangling helplessly above the wooden walkway.

Thira watched the terror that spread on each man's face as they realized their dire predicament. Knowing that they were a liability they couldn't afford made her decision an easy one. Tightening her grip, she jerked her wrists sideways sharply, a muffled gurgle rose as their necks

snapped. Getting rid of the bodies was easy; she simply tossed them over the wall behind her. Muted thuds signaled when their bodies made impact with the ground below. Another followed closely as Panter did the same with hers. Leaving them lying in full sight would only alert the others to their presence. Three bodies without arrow wounds like the corpses that were scattered around them was too much of a risk.

They exchanged a quick glance and paused for the few seconds it took to don their footwear then continued. They followed the wall until it looped close to the roof of a nearby building. No one noticed the shadows that flowed overhead as they jump onto the rooftop. The torchlight didn't reach them here so they moved easily from building to building using them to get closer to the small building that more than likely enclosed the winch that opened and closed the gate.

Finally reaching the last building they studied the scene before them. Two men were stationed by the structures only entrance, fortunately they didn't seem to enthusiastic in the duty they were currently doing. With everyone's attention directed to the army camped just outside their walls there weren't many soldiers wandering around to impede their plan. There also weren't as many shadows to hide in but they had little choice but to continue.

Panter fell flat to the roofs surface as soon as they landed from their jump. Soft panting signaled Thira's arrival at her side. Crawling to the rim of the roof she peered over the edge cautiously. Her eyes narrowed as she smiled, they hadn't even glanced up. Panter looked over at Thira and signaled by pointing downward and moving her thumb slowly over her throat. She readied herself as Thira nodded shortly and joined her.

No one noticed as the two men were swiftly yanked upward, someone would've had to been right there to hear the stifled screams that abruptly cut off. A flicker of motion had Panter and Thira at the door then through.

"We need to blockade this door" Panter noticed the iron hooks on either side of the frame, there had to be something already her for that purpose. A dull glint of metal caught her eye behind a stack of barrels that had been stored there. "Thira, give me a hand"

Little time passed until they had unearthed a bar of thick steel. It slid into the hooks with harsh grate. It was a perfect fit. Panter felt better now that the door was secured while the next step of the plan was implemented. She joined Thira at the winch. Two sets of cranks were set opposite each other; it looked as if they needed to be operated at the same time to raise the gate. It seemed as if it normally needed several people to operate it, but both of them should be more than enough to do the job. Panter wrapped her hands around the crank handle nearest her while Thira moved to claim the other.

"Ready?"

Thira nodded. "When you are"

"Go" Panter heard the creak of the pulleys as they both threw their strength into raising the gate as quickly as possible. Groans echoed in the small space as the thick rope reluctantly began to

move. Once they got it moving, it didn't take as much power to keep in going. The cable dropped into a loose pile by their feet as the gate started to lift. Panter smirked as she heard the shouts of the frantic men as they finally realized what was happening. The door vibrated as the men hammered on it as they tried to break into the building attempting to halt what was happening.

The shouts suddenly grew louder. Panter could almost picture the looks on their faces as her militia started pouring through the opening. The rope stopped with a jerk as the knots at the end slipped into a set of hooks designed to keep the gate up until they were released.

Panter glanced at the door. She shook her head; going out that way wasn't a good idea, who knew how many soldiers were still outside that door.

"Panter" Thira pointed up to the opening that the cables ran through. Just to the left of it was a gap. More than likely it had been designed to allow fresh air into the building.

Panter carefully climbed up the hoist and stopped across from the opening. It was a decent size but not anywhere near big enough to squeeze through. She grasped the edge of the opening and pulled, a section easily broke off in her hand. A smile spread across her face, they had been in such a hurry to build their defenses they had done a pitiful job of it. She started to enlarge the hole, dropping handfuls of loose wood below her. In a short time it was big enough to squeeze through. Splinters of wood scraped against Panter's skin as she pushed her body through the rough gap. She almost got stuck as the hilt of her sword caught on an edge. A powerful jerk broke her free and she was able to gain the freedom of the rooftop. Panter looked around at the sea of bodies engaged in battle as Thira joined her.

Panter spotted Tera below her fighting against several men at once. They were causing her to retreat in front of them. She moved back until she encountered the wall of the building Panter was currently perched on. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed the smiles on the men's faces grow wider as they thought they had the woman right where they wanted her. Panter was happy to relieve them of that idea as she dropped down on them from above. Two went down under her weight as she grabbed the other, a quick twist had him dropping in a still mound at her feet.

"Panter" Tera took a quick moment to hug her partner before directing her attention to the fight brewing around them. "Shall we join back in?"

Panter drew her sword and readied herself as a man headed towards her. "Why not" Steel clashed as their blades met. She laughed at the surprise that flashed over his face as she effortlessly shoved him back. Panter's sword flashed in the sunlight as she spun it. She kicked out at another soldier that moved to intercept her. He crumpled into a limp heap as he slammed into the side of the building behind her. Panter snarled as the first man gathered his nerve and rushed her again.

"Wrong choice. You should of run when you had the chance"

She swept his sword to the side as he made a hasty lunge while he attempted to run her through. A small part of her felt a flicker of sympathy for the man as she dodged the pathetic assault and continued to play with him.

"I'll never run from a fight," He spat back brashly. "No man or woman will ever beat me". A droplet of sweat dripped off his chin as he spoke. He gripped his sword even tighter as he readied himself to attack her again.

Panther's eyebrow arched at the inane comment. The arrogant man was either a fool or an idiot. Anyway you looked at it, to her he was a walking dead man. She flashed her fangs in a wild grin.

"What about the other category?"

"Other?"

The soldier saw the gleam of her sharp teeth. He paled as what he was facing finally sank in. His efforts redoubled as he struggled to survive against the animal that sprang at him with fangs bared. His death loomed over him while wearing a very human face.

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Thira slashed open one throat as she sent a dagger into another's chest. Splashes of blood adorned her as she worked her way through the enemy clustered around her. She ducked as an axe flashed toward her head. The sharp blade whistled through the space that her neck had been in moments before. The danger only increased the surge of adrenaline that rushed through her veins. Thira used her speed in brief bursts, easily avoiding the blades that flickered toward her, leaving a trail of bodies behind her. A hand suddenly grabbed her arm and she spun to face the attack head on. She almost wasn't able to stop herself in time as her senses registered the presence of Alesia in front of her. The flash of fear that flooded her at the near miss made her heart race uncontrollably. She turned and used it to kick a determined soldier back. The strength of her kick slammed him into several others causing them all to hit the ground together in a limp pile. Seizing the moment that the small space of calm gave her Thira moved towards her mate. A spark of pride flared inside her as she watched Alesia take out several men. Thira could smell her scent as it drifted from her sweat slick skin. She moved closer to her and breathed it in deeply.

"Don't ever do that again"

Alesia shivered as warm air lightly brushed her neck and ear. She trembled at the low growl that made Thira's voice rough. "Do what again?"

"Grab me like that. I could have killed you before I realized who you were. Do you have any idea what that would do to me?" Her claws dug into her palms as she closed them into fists. The pain drew her back from the horror that flooded her mind at the thought. She would have literally died if Alesia were no longer there. Thira was extremely careful that Alesia never learned of that; she was frightened that knowledge of such a bond would drive her away. Thira bit back a curse. If she wanted to be honest about it, she thought Alesia would probably take off at just the suspicion of it.

Alesia reacted to the fear that laced Thira's voice. "I promise you, I won't do it again" She laid



her hand on her chest and felt how hard her heart was pounding. Alesia looked around as their small bubble of calm finally burst. "We'll talk about it more after we finish this" Thira nodded as Alesia engaged a man rushing at her.

They had pushed the enemy back toward the building that seemed to house their leader when Thira almost froze in mid swing as something familiar caught her attention. She ended her fight quickly and stared at the building in rising bewilderment.

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Panter smiled as they joined Alesia and Thira at the steps of the main building. After hours of fighting they had forced the occupying army to surrender. She had given orders for her militia to disarm and gather them in the towns' central square under heavy guard. Now they would need to figure out what to do with them all. "Is everyone all right?" She frowned when she got no response from the seemingly transfixed woman. Panter cocked an eyebrow at Alesia inquiringly. The worried look she received made her study Thira more closely. She was panting more rapidly than normal. They all jumped as she suddenly made a dash towards the entrance of the building in front of them.

"What the Hades is going on?" Tera asked.

"I'm not sure but lets follow her and find out" Panter replied.

They rushed after Thira their weapons at the ready. Shouts and screams from ahead made them run faster. Bodies started appearing regularly in the long hallway they were in. A quick check confirmed they were dead. They picked up the pace and finally burst into the large room at the end. They found Thira moving about the room restlessly while she snarled at a man cowering next to a throne like chair. She would stop frequently and snap questions at him angrily as she shook a bundle of cloth at him. He blubbered fearfully when she would gesture at him. They understood his terror when they recognized the red that glistened on her claws.

Alesia glanced around the room and saw a pitcher and bowl sitting on a small table in the corner. Dashing over she was relieved to see that it was still full of water. Pouring it into the bowl she grabbed a cloth that lay nearby and cautiously approached her partner.

"Thira" The sound of her name had her swinging around to stare at Alesia blankly. The look in her eye made Alesia even more concerned. "Thira!" she shouted. She was relieved when Thira blinked and seemed to recognize her again. "Give me the cloth and wash the blood off your hands" Alesia thought Thira wouldn't give up the cloth as her hand tightened on the item but smiled when she gave it to her reluctantly. She held the bowl as Thira washed the clear water gradually turning red as she did. Handing her the rag to dry her hands she gave the cloth back when she finished. She returned the bowl to the stand and then rejoined Thira. "What's with the cloth?"

Thira studied the cloth grasped tightly in her own hand. "I know who this belongs to" Thira shifted uneasily as she met the curious eyes of her mate. She dreaded telling them. Thira could

feel herself growing colder as her defenses came up. She braced herself for the scene that was sure to happen. "I recognized the scent. It caught my attention outside and it only grew stronger the further I came inside this building."

Panter and Tera drew closer as they peered at the scrap of white linen. A thin line of gold ran through the ragged edge. It seemed to be made of a high quality weave, which meant that it tended to be more expensive than most. Anyone not of noble blood or wealthy wouldn't be able to easily afford clothing made with cloth like that. Panter held out a hand. "May I?" She accepted the scrap and brought it to her nose. She sniffed it cautiously. A woody earthy scent tinged with a sharp edge flooded her senses. Her brow furrowed slightly and she raised her head to look intently at Thira. She smelled the linen again. Closing her eyes, Panter concentrated on the other scents in the room. She isolated all the ones she knew and disregarded them. She was about to dismiss Thira's when she stopped. Something about it bothered her. Opening her eyes, she stared at her silently. "Who does this belong to?" She had a suspicion but wasn't a hundred percent sure it was correct.

Thira's swallowed hard against the bile that rose in her throat. The look on Panter's face reminded her of the day she had admitted to having been personally sent by her own father to kill Panter. That had almost been the last day of her life. She'd finally given up any hope at that point. At this moment she wished Tera hadn't stopped Panter. The reaction from this could be even worse than that moment had been. Her instincts screamed at her to run but she felt like she was rooted in place. Thira's vision blurred then sharpened. The sharp tinged colors seemed to almost overwhelm her. Power surged through her body as she fought herself. A motion made Thira jerk her head to the side to see Alesia standing beside her. Thira gritted her teeth when she laid a hand on her forearm. Alesia's touch felt like it was burning her. The spot where she was holding her felt hot. Panter's voice battered her as she kept repeating the same question over and over intent on getting an answer. Thira suddenly screamed as the pressure that she felt finally became too much. She jerked away from her mate and faced Panter.

"My father!!" She shouted. "Are you happy now?" Her eyes brightened as they landed on Panter's face. "It's my father's and it's only a few days old. The only way that could be is if he's here," Thira panted hard in distress. She stiffened and shied away from Alesia as her hand rested briefly on her back. "He's part of the war that's trying to destroy you both. And it's my fault. Mine!!" Thira glanced at Alesia. The anger she saw in her eyes made her curl up and die inside. She choked off the howl of despair that clawed at her throat. Thira's chest grew tight with the pain that flooded her at the thought of the emptiness that loomed before her. She needed to get away from this new source of pain.

Things had happened so quickly that no one attempted to stop the fleeing form. Even if they'd tried there would have been no way they could have. In her haste to flee Thira had pushed herself to her fastest speed. The only things that showed the quickness of her passage were the fluttering of the wall hangings and the guttering of torchlight.

In the stillness that lingered behind Panter turned a considering gaze on the man still huddled in a motionless heap beside the chair. He looked up as she moved toward him. His eyes widened in renewed fright just before she seized hold of him. Pulling him close, she stared at him a hint of

rage filling her gaze. "Now if it's not too much of a bother, I think you have some information we might need" The threat in her voice didn't pass him by. Panter's face twisted in distaste. She held him further away from her as the sharp scent of urine suddenly hit her sensitive nose. He'd just pissed himself.

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# Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.

Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Alesia stared blankly at the tent wall while she lay curled up on their bed. She hugged Thira's pillow close to her chest trying to derive at least a little comfort from the soft object. She closed her eyes as she tried to push back the emptiness inside her that felt like it was growing more agonizing by the moment. Five days had passed since Thira had deserted them after the incident at Tylan. Tears burned in her eyes as she buried her nose in the pillow and inhaled her partner's scent. During the day she made sure to keep busy with the many tasks she was in charge of. But the nights were the worst. She had to face what felt like endless hours of unbearable loneliness before finally being able to drift off into a restless sleep that seemed to make her more tired than ever. Rumors had slowly surfaced that Thira had abandoned them and had been using her time here to gather information for the other side. Panter and Tera had dismissed them and made sure everyone knew that any further people found to be spreading such a story would be disciplined severely. Alesia choked back a sob the endless battle to do her job while trying to defend Thira's actions was gradually draining what strength she could summon up. A knock at the entrance of her quarters made her reluctantly raise her head. She pushed herself up and sat on the edge of the bed as she carefully laid Thira's pillow aside.

"Come in." Alesia held back a curse as Panter entered she didn't want to deal with anyone right now. "Arms Master, how may I be of service?" She watched the frown that flashed briefly over her friend's face as she rose to her feet. Just that small effort seemed to sap her of strength. These days she rose with a fair amount of energy but it fled her as the day wore on. At night she

collapsed into bed after forcing herself to eat food that tasted like it was a pile of ash in her mouth, nothing had any flavor anymore.

Panter gestured for her to retake her seat. "I thought you'd like to know about a report that just came in from the field. The scouts have been coming across small outposts that have been destroyed. It looks as if someone has taken it upon themselves to take out any enemy positions before we arrive." She hoped the information would help with the tension that had risen between them after Thira had left. The only contact they'd had with her since then had been in her roll of Marshal.

"Thira." Alesia breathed. Her heart pounded as she leaped back to her feet. Perhaps they had come across some sign of where Thira was. "Does anyone have any idea of where she is. Have they seen her?"

"We're not absolutely sure it's her." Panter didn't want her friend to get her hopes up too soon. She needed to make certain that the information was correct and they could track Thira down. The way Alesia had been acting recently worried her. Panter went as far as checking to see if she was eating and had found she was but sparingly, it was almost as if food made her ill. "You know trying to find her will be difficult if not impossible."

Alesia ignored Panter's comment. "Tomorrow I'm going out with the scouts. I want to see this for myself."

Taking in the stubborn look on her friend's face Panter sighed. "All right just be careful." She went to leave and glanced back to see that Alesia had already dismissed her presence. She'd curled up on her bed and was hugging a pillow close while burying her face against its surface.

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Tera looked up from her reports as Panter entered. "Everything alright?" She didn't even try to hide the worry that she knew could be clearly heard in her voice.

Panter's brow furrowed as she pulled her clothes off and slid into bed making sure that her sword was within reaching distance. "Alesia wants to go out with the scouting party tomorrow."

"Is that a good idea. You said that you didn't know how being apart like this would effect them since they've mated." Tera set her papers aside and joined Panter on their bed. She soaked in the warmth that encircled her as strong arms pulled her close. She rested her head on Panter's shoulder and wrapped an arm around her waist. "I couldn't even imagine the kind of pain she must be going through. If we separated I think it might kill me." She said honestly. The purring by her ear halted abruptly at the comment. She lifted her head to look at her partner. The golden eyes that met hers were shadowed by worry.

"That's what concerns me. If we both feel this way and we're together what does that say about Alesia and Thira?"

Shock flickered over Tera's face. "Your not saying.... Alesia's not going to die is she?"

"I don't honestly know. All we can do is watch and hope Thira shows up. The Goddess willing."

Tera settled back into Panters arms while her mind churned with images of what might occur if Thira never came back.

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Alesia tightened her grip on the reigns grasped in her left hand. She scanned the surrounding trees as they rode passed. They had found another encampment that had been destroyed. The claw marks that were left on a few of the nearby trees could have told her what happened even if she hadn't been uncannily aware of Thira's scent that drifted in the air around the scene. She'd almost left the rest of the scouts behind but forced herself to do her job. They needed any information they could scavenge from the wreckage. The rest of the militia was following them less then half days ride back.

Breaking out of the trees and into a meadow they kept an eye out for any signs that someone might have passed this way. Alesia pulled her horse to a halt and slid from the saddle. Crouching she ran her hand over the long grass pulling it to the side to see the soil underneath. Faint indentations in the soft earth showed something had walked through here within the last day or so. Luckily it had not rained recently so they were able to still see any tracks that might be around. Her brows rose as she leaned closer of the faint markings. Judging by the impressions what could only have been a large cat had come this way. Alesia heart started to pound with excitement. It had to be Thira. Now that they had found these perhaps they would have a better chance at being able to track her down.

Mounting her horse she rejoined her scouting party and passed on what she'd just found. Alesia had just gestured in the direction that it was likely Thira took when a group of men burst out of the trees she had indicated. At first her group wasn't noticed since the men were looking back over their shoulders as they rode straight towards them. Alesia drew her sword the rest of her party following suit quickly. Steel rang out in the still air pulling the men's attention to them.

Alesia flipped her sword so that the blade lay flat as it rested against her forearm. Muscles rippled as she tightened her grip. She urged her horse into a run toward them. A large mercenary broke off from the main group and headed directly for her. Metal clashed harshly as she deflected his blade to the side causing it to screech in protest as it ran down the length of hers. She was able to throw his balance off as she set herself then shoved, by using her sword as a shield she wasn't burdened like she would have been if she'd used the buckler that hung near her left leg. He fell as his horse reared in protest at the action and land on his back with a thud. She pulled her horse around then slid off. By the time she reached him he'd regained his feet. They exchanged a rapid series of blows. Alesia's mouth tightened grimly as she began to realize that with every strike they traded she was growing weaker and weaker. Another hard hit caused her sword to fly from her grasp. A swift backhand slammed her into the hard ground. Blood ran down her chin as her lip split from the harsh blow. Rough hands wrapped around her throat and tightened effectively cutting off her airway. Alesia arched her body desperately as she repeatedly

tried to unseat the man that straddled her body but was unable to throw him off. He laughed as she started to push at his shoulders futilely. Her vision began to tunnel as things started to grow dark. Her mind churned with fear as she silently begged for aid. Goddess please... help me. The thought of never seeing Thira again made her renew her struggle to survive. Alesia dimly felt a pulse of heat streak down her right arm. She vaguely heard screams and suddenly she could breath again. Alesia rubbed her throat with her left hand as she choked and wheezed trying to draw in some much needed oxygen.

Alesia searched the area and found the man a little further away. His body thrashed about uncontrollably as he convulsed several times then stilled. She heard a strange hissing sound and glanced down then froze in disbelief. A snake was coiled around her right arm. It's head turned and the eyes seemed to flicker with a faint intelligence when it met her gaze. A shiver ran down her back as it lowered itself and lay flat on her forearm with its head resting on the back of her hand. A haze shrouded its body and it seemed to melt right into her arm. Alesia eyes widened as she finally figured out why it had looked familiar. It was part of the tattoo that decorated her arm and shoulder. As her throat burned with each intake of air she took Alesia fervently thanked the Goddess for her timely intervention. The stillness that followed the unusual scene made Alesia look around. Both the enemy and her own people were staring at her with expressions of shock and amazement. Swords clattered to the ground as the men dropped their swords and stepped back from them. To fight someone that was blessed was foolish to the extreme.

Alesia rolled to her knees; she glanced up as hands tucked themselves under her elbows. She smiled faintly in thanks as two of her scouts helped her to her feet and back onto her horse. She accepted her sword that was held up to her and slid it back into its sheath. She leaned tiredly on the saddle horn and watched as the prisoner's weapons were gathered up and they were secured for the ride back. A prickling awareness' of being watched made her glance over in the direction the men had ridden from but she didn't see anything unusual. Alesia shook off the strange feeling as an after effect of what had just happened. She winced as she coughed grabbing her water skin she sipped gingerly and sighed in relief as the cool water soothed her raw throat. She rode towards the back of the group with a few of her people keeping a close eye on her as they traveled. Right now all she could do was worry about her partner and long for the softness of their bed. After all that happened she found herself deathly tired.

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Tera turned as someone shouted her name. She turned to see one of the Amazon commanders approaching at a run. She immediately started to be concerned by the paleness of her features.

"Dressa what is it?"

"It's the Marshal. Their unit was attacked while they were investigating one of the destroyed outposts. Sometime in the fighting that followed she was strangled by one of the enemy soldiers." She panted as she tried to catch her breath. Dressa had broken in to an abrupt sprint when she'd heard the news knowing that the Regent would want to hear about it right away.

Tera's heart dropped like a stone. "She's dead?" Tera knew how that information was going to

affect Panter but the thought of what might happen when Thira found out was heartbreaking.

"I'm sorry Sir, I misspoke." Dressa hastily tried to correct what was obviously a misunderstanding. "She's not dead. There was an attempt but it failed. But only by the grace of the Goddess."

Relief flooded Tera at the news. "What happened?"

"She was trying to get free but before anyone could render aid a flash of light enveloped her arm."

"The one with the tattoo?" Tera had a feeling she almost knew what was going to be said after that.

"Yes sir. Anyway the next thing anyone could see was a large snake coiled around her arm. It bit the man that was trying to kill her. He let her go but by that time it was too late. The snakes venom must have been extremely powerful because in the next instant he was dead."

Tera eyebrows rose in amazement. "She was very lucky indeed. Is she at the healers right now?"

"No sir, She insisted she was fine and choose to go to her own quarters to rest. Should we have made her stay?"

"No. I'm sure she'll be fine. I'll stop in and see her. Thank you for being so prompt with filling me in on the situation."

"I knew you would have wanted the information immediately when I heard it." A sense of pride filled her at the Regents gratitude. She saluted and left when she was dismissed. There were friends of hers that would want to know about what had happened.

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Torchlight flickered in the light breeze. It's radiance made little impact on the inky darkness that had fallen over the encampment. Standing watches never noticed the large shape that flickered from shadow to shadow in their midst. Burning eyes searched the area for a particular shelter in the ones that occupied the vicinity. They slid closed when it caught the scent it was searching for and greedily inhaled. Staying low it traced it to a nearby tent. Slipping inside it stilled as the sight of the form that lay sleeping in the bed filled its vision; it ignored the light from the torches outside that dimly lit the interior. In moments a human form had taken its place. Thira ran her eyes over her mates face sadly. Reaching out to gently touch the soft skin she'd longed to feel for the endless days that had passed she froze as her eyes landed on the dark bruises that encircled her throat. Her sight made them glow prominently against the tan of her skin. Her hand shook before she clenched into a fist as she silently raged at the sight. Thira swallowed hard against the bile that threatened to rise. She'd left because she was partly responsible for the war that had

broken out, that was killing hundreds if not thousands of people. But even when she'd left to try to stop it people were still dying because of her. Now it had spilled over and had almost killed the one she cared for most. Her shoulders slumped as the weight of her guilt increased at the knowledge of how close Alesia had come to dying. She dropped her hand and turned to leave not realizing that a pair of eyes were watching her every move.

"Where are you going?"

Thira stiffened at the whispered words but didn't turn around. She could feel Alesia's gaze burning on her back. "What happened to your neck?"

Alesia's hand rose to gingerly touch the tender bruising. "There was an altercation with a group of men earlier. I got disarmed and the man I was fighting thought a more hands on approach would be more fun."

Thira growled. She wanted to tear the man that had dared touch her mate into pieces. "Where is he?" A burst of energy washed away the exhaustion that had plagued her for the past few days.

"He's dead" Alesia ran her fingers down her arm as she remembered how the snake under her fingers had come to life. She directed a whisper of thanks to the Goddess again for her help.

Thira relaxed a little. "You killed him. Good, I was going to if you hadn't done it yourself."

"I'm not the one that killed him Thira." Alesia sat up to face her partner as she spun around an expression of disbelief on her face. She tried to hide how much effort it took to just sit up. Her muscles trembled in protest at the movement. She had just dropped into an uneasy sleep before something had awoken her to find she wasn't alone in her tent. She'd clutched the knife she had taken a habit of keeping under her pillow after Thira's absence and drawn in a deep breath to call for assistance when the dark shape had moved close enough so she could recognize Thira in her cat form. Letting go of the knife she stayed still to see what would unfold. When she'd turn to leave after being close enough to touch Alesia had spoken.

"Then what Amazon must I thank for saving your life?"

Alesia shook her head. "It wasn't an Amazon either."

Thira narrowed her eyes as an uncomfortable thought hit her. "It wasn't one of the militia was it?" If so she would have to take back the bit of distaste she'd had of them in the past after the episode with their ineptness.

"No, not them either." Alesia almost smiled even with the seriousness of the moment. The sight of Thira's uncertainty was endearing from someone who was normally sure of her actions.

"Actually it was only by the grace of the Goddess I survived that attack."

Every muscle in Thira's body went rigid in response. Her life without Alesia alive in it flashed past her minds eye. Even if they were no longer together she would be able to exist if she knew



that Alesia was still living somewhere. If she had died Thira would have been close behind her. She was still careful that Alesia would never find that out. "How?" she asked softly.

Alesia almost didn't catch quiet question. "One of the snakes in my tattoo came to life and bit him."

Thira closed her eyes as she thanked her Goddess for saving her mate. Your graciousness has saved the person most important to this unworthy one you selected to be one of your Chosen. I swear that I will end this war. My father will pay for what he has done if it takes my life to accomplish it.

Fingers wrapping around her arm broke her out of her thoughts. Alesia had reached out while she was distracted. Thira's looked down at the touch that seemed as if it was burning into her skin. She met Alesia's dark gaze as she was pulled towards the bed. She wanted to fight against it but she had no energy left to try.

Alesia lay down again as Thira curled up against her side. The tension that had thrummed through her body for so long finally started to let go. The clothing that she was wearing seemed suddenly constricting. As she moved to sit up a hand grasped the front of her shirt.

"Don't leave."

Alesia bent and gently kissed Thira on the lips at the softly growled protest. "I just want to get this shirt off." She pulled the shirt over her head and gasped as lips suddenly enclosed a nipple. Throwing it to the floor she looked down to meet glowing eyes. Cupping the back of Thira's head she fell back onto the bed. A shiver ran down her spine as sharp teeth bit lightly. Forcing her other hand to move she tugged at Thira's shirt. "Take it off."

Thira made herself move away for the small amount of time it took to strip her clothing off. The scent of her mate's arousal was driving her crazy. She knew they had a lot that needed discussed but the need to bond again after their separation was pulsing through her body insistently. Thira straddled Alesia and pressed herself against her firm abdomen. She purred at the pleasure that each movement of her hips created. Bending she licked up the pool of sweat that had started to gather in the hollow between Alesia's breasts. She moved onto the bruises that marred her partner's flesh. The fire that burned inside her rose a little higher each time Alesia moaned her name. Thira growled as she reclaimed a nipple. Her eyes closed in delight as nails ran through her hair and down her back. Nipping at the hardness she held in her lips she hissed as they dug into her skin. She moved to the other breast and greedily took it into her mouth. She ran her hands down slick skin as she suckled. Sliding her body to the side she ran a hand over firmly muscled thighs. A hand grasped hers and pressed it against the hot flesh between Alesia's legs. Thira moaned in regret. "I can't Alesia, my claws. I don't wish to hurt you."

The hand moved to her head and pressed down. Thira eagerly followed its direction. Settling into place she bent her head and breathed in Alesia's excitement. She ran her tongue through the sweet fluid that flowed from her opening. Pressing her face as close as possible she plunged her tongue into her. Thira tried to keep pace with Alesia's hip movement. Finally she threw an arm

over her hips to hold her down while she continued her motion. Alesia's gasps and cries had her digging her free hand into the bedding. A flood of liquid hit her lips as Alesia suddenly stiffened and shook. Thira eagerly licked up all that she could find before loosening her hold on Alesia's hips. She kissed her way up to lie beside her partner. Before she could say anything she was suddenly on her back.

Lips pressed against her throat briefly. Thira arched as teeth bit her at a sensitive spot at the juncture of her neck and shoulder. A hot tongue licked the mark before moving down. Thira bared her teeth as her nipple was sucked into Alesia's mouth. Sweat beaded on her skin as her need rose with each passing moment. Thira ran her palms down Alesia's back. She could feel the muscles that flexed with each movement that she made. Thira grasped Alesia's butt and spreading open her own thighs pulled Alesia against herself hard. "Please Alesia." She could hear the hunger in her own voice. "I need you."

Alesia pulled away from her breast. She felt a hand move between them. The next thrust had her gasping as their clits brushed together. Thira wrapped her legs around Alesia's hips so they could be as close as possible. Keeping one hand on Alesia's hip she moved the other to grasp her head. Pulling her head down she kissed her roughly. Thira opened her mouth to let Alesia in as their kiss deepened. Helpless whimpers caught in Thira's throat as she moved her hips faster. The heat inside her was burning hotter and hotter until she felt she wouldn't survive it. Tearing her mouth away she thrust her own palm into her mouth and bit down. Blood flooded her mouth as spasms shook her body. A strangled howl burst from her throat as pleasure surged through her. Darkness threatened to engulf her as her body finally stilled.

"Thira your hand."

She felt Alesia warmth leave her side then heard water being poured before a hand took hers and a cool cloth touch her skin. Opening her eyes Thira watched as the blood was cleaned off. The bite that adorned her palm was deep but it was already healing as they watched. Alesia turned and rinsed the cloth before it touched her lips. Thira reached up and took possession of the cloth. She wiped her face and handed it back. The taste of her own blood lingered in her mouth. "May I have some of that water?"

"Sure." Alesia poured some into a nearby mug and offered it to Thira. Her body still throbbed with the pleasure they had both experienced. She accepted the empty mug back and set it aside. Taking her place back in the bed she laid her head on Thira's shoulder while slipping an arm across her waist. She felt a kiss pressed against her head and hugged Thira in response. Silence drifted for a while before she broke it. "Why did you do that?"

Thira's breath caught in her throat. "Do what?"

"Bite yourself like that?"

Thira relaxed at the question. "I didn't want to bite you so I bit myself instead."

"Oh, I see." Alesia stayed quiet for a moment. "I didn't know you would do that."

Thira sighed. "Neither did I. It was a sudden urge and I did what I could to satisfy it so I wouldn't hurt you."

"I wouldn't have minded if you did bite me. In the heat of the moment it probably wouldn't have hurt." Alesia could tell by the sudden jerk Thira made that the comment had surprised her.

"I don't think I could do it. The thought of hurting you like that makes me uneasy." Thira didn't say that she would have wanted to die if she ever did something like that. She tried to keep the animal side of herself out of the bedroom as much as possible.

Alesia could tell by the tension she could feel in the body next to hers that the topic needed to be dropped. At least for right now. "It's alright. I'm just glad that you're finally back here with me. Now sleep, morning will come soon enough as it is." Tomorrow many things would have to be resolved. The most important was why Thira felt that she had to leave. As she drifted to sleep Alesia realized that the weakness that had haunted her while they were apart was slowly starting to disappear.

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## Panther's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panther's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.

Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.

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### Chapter Fifteen

Alesia woke with a start. The thought that last night had been only a dream haunted her until a warm body moved against hers. She closed her eyes in relief before opening them and looking to the side to see Thira pressed close to her. *Thank the Goddess*. She turned on her side to face her and studied her partner's sleeping features. Fine tremors ran over the surface of her skin and her ears seemed to twitch, as she stayed aware of her surrounding even while she was asleep. Noise from people passing made Alesia glance toward the entrance of her quarters while she laid a calming hand on her partner as the sound made her stir. She held her breath until it looked like

Thira had settled back into a deeper slumber. She studied the dark marks under her eyes with a faint frown of concern. Alesia sighed as tawny colored eyes flickered open and met hers in a silent stare.

"I was hoping you would sleep a little longer." She reached up and laid her hand along her partners jaw her fingers lightly caressing the soft skin of her cheek. "Did I wake you?"

Thira turned her head slightly and pressed a kiss on the palm cradling her face. "No, I was awake before you." She reached over and brushed under her eyes gently. "You could use a little more from the looks of these."

Alesia shook her head. "Actually I feel better now then I have in days." Unlike most mornings when she had been separated from Thira her body was fairly thrumming with energy. Reluctantly she pulled away and sat up on the side of the bed. Raising her arms over her head she stretched and let out a small groan of pleasure as her spine realigned itself with a soft crack. Alesia stiffened in surprise as a pair of warm lips kissed her on the small of her back. A hand curled around her right shoulder and pulled her back down to the beds surface. A pair of hooded eyes stared into hers as Thira hovered over her. "You know we still need to talk about what's happened."

Thira lowered her head until her lips brushed Alesia's. "I know. We will but not right at this moment." A rumbling growl escaped her as their lips pressed together. Her awareness' of the outside world narrowed until it centered only on the body that moved under hers. The need for her mate flaring in her veins took over as the heat between them rose. She willingly lost herself in the lovemaking that followed.

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Panther studied the map spread over the tabletop. The rampage that Thira had went on after leaving had done a great deal of damage to the opposing force aligned against them. She had decimated at least six outposts that they had found while killing several hundred soldiers, but knowing the extent of her skills Panther suspected that the actual total was much higher. The aftermath of the destruction showed that she'd been in a rage at the time. Panther tapped her finger on the mark denoting the farthest outpost. Several towns were in the same vicinity but she dismissed them as being too small and rendering them unimportant. Their population and resources were rather meager and would be of little interest to their foe. The only one of any significance would be Rantis. It boasted a thriving population that at last count ran into the thousands. It was close to the size of Hawks Peak but had yet to reach the importance or magnitude that the seat of power that it held with being the base of the Regents rule. She attributed the growth to being a half way point in the travels of many caravans of merchants and visitors that spread out from there to the far reaches of the rest of the providence.

Footsteps had her glancing over at the entrance of the tent. She smiled as Alesia ducked through the opening. The paleness that had her so worried yesterday was no longer apparent. Her smile broadened as the reason for its absence became evident when Thira's form entered next. "Alesia, Thira." She deliberately made no mention of the time Thira had been gone. Right now there were

much bigger priorities. She beckoned them closer. "We've laid out the camps that you took care of Thira." She rested a fingertip on Ranis. "The most likely place for them to hole up next would be here."

Thira glanced over the map and added a few more marks to it with the reed pen she'd took from beside the drawing. "Your right. I intercepted a group of soldiers headed that way." Her eyes flickered as she met their gaze. "They never made it." She tossed the pen back onto the tabletop as casually as she'd picked it up.

"I take it you were curious enough to check out their destination?" Alesia already knew the answer before she'd asked the question. She still had a bit of trouble accepting the sense of ease her partner had with killing. She took note of the extra marks Thira had added. They had almost doubled in number.

Thira tilted her head slightly as she caught the odd tone in her mates voice but brushed it off. "Of course, a large military unit had taken over that area. It seems to be a staging area of some kind. I had considered taking care of the problem myself but I assumed you'd want to know about it."

Panther kept her reaction to hearing that to herself. "How large?"

"Low estimate, fifteen lokkos. High maybe twice that."

Alesia rubbed a hand over her face in frustration at the news. "So we're talking about going against fifteen hundred to possibly three thousand troops in a relatively short amount of time. Can we even think of doing that with the troops we have?"

Panther shuffled through the stack of parchments on the table for the latest count of the troop strength. Pulling one from the pile she glanced at it while the others watched her face intently for a clue. "Right now with leaving two units back at Tylan we are just over thirty five hundred strong. We got lucky when we released the hold they had over the Tylan regular troops. That little trick of using family and friends as hostages seems a bit too familiar doesn't it Alesia?"

"Doran, that bastard. I was hoping he was dead."

Thira's eyebrows rose at the impressive snarl that Alesia let out. She could feel her eyes change as the feeling of anger rose inside her, when she finally understood what they were talking about. "He must be working with my father."

Panther nodded in agreement. "He would use any and all opportunity's to retake the Regency. For all we know his aims may have gotten larger then that now." She lifted the paper in her hand. "The numbers of both armies are a little to close for comfort if they do have the total we think they might. This is going to be hard fought."

They all turned as a shout sounded outside. Before they could react an Amazon burst into the tent. "Arms Master, the forward scouts have sent back a messenger." She moved out of the way for a dust-covered form to take her place in the doorway.

Worried brown eyes met theirs as she spoke. "An army from Rantis is on the march."

Panther crumpled the parchment in her hand. "It's heading?"

"Straight for us."

"Let them come."

Everyone turned sharply to stare at Thira. Even Panther felt a shiver trickle down her neck at the cold look that had settled in her eyes. Canines flashed in the light as a cruel smile twisted her lips as she spoke. "It'll be the last thing they'll ever do."

Panther narrowed her own eyes at the comment. "We have a fifty-fifty chance at best to pull this off. That's only if we have very few casualty's in this fight."

"They are going to fight us in territory that we know. That gives us the upper hand." Thira gestured around them. "We're also on a rise. They'll need to fight us uphill. We'll have the advantage of shooting down at them. Your archers are widely known to be the best at their craft and with their bodkin points they'll punch through any protective gear they might be wearing including plate armor. To get to us they'll have to come from across the open field ahead of us. There's no other way to attack except maybe through the forest that surrounds it and that will be far to dangerous for them to even attempt."

Panther relaxed a little at hearing that. She really didn't know much about war. Thira's experiences as an assassin would have exposed her to many forms of battle. It was no wonder she knew as much as she did. She turned back to the messenger. "What's the estimate on the time we have until they get here?"

"One day perhaps two. They do have some troops on horse back but most are on foot."

"That's not much but it'll have to do." Panther inclined her head in thanks. "You're dismissed." The woman respectfully saluted and withdrew along with her Amazon guide.

Panther went to the table and pulled out the map for the area they were camped at. Everyone gathered around her as she considered their options.

"If we conceal some units in the trees we'll be able to keep a steady rain of arrows coming down on them even if they happened to gain the top of the rise. But we need to keep them back at all costs or they'll overrun our base camp." She glanced up at Alesia. "Do we have enough bow men to be able to split them up and still be a viable force?"

Alesia nodded. "Easily. I'll make sure most of our best archers are assigned that way they'll be more then effective. I have a plan in mind for the rest that will be quite effective. It's something we practiced before setting out and we've kept it up since then."

"Good. With some troops on horseback it might be wise to have the pike men towards the front." Panther clenched her hands into fists. Sending people into battle to possibly die bothered her a

great deal.

Thira watched Panter silently. A light frown crossed her face when she noticed her frustration. "Their first charge will probably be the horsemen. Your militia is trained to fight from horse back correct?"

Alesia was the first to answer. "It's part of their training. Why?"

"From the information we've received the majority of their forces are on foot. If ours are mounted that will give us an edge they won't have. At least six units will work."

Panter saw where Thira was going with her comment. "So after we repel their first charge with the archers and pike men we send out our own horsemen."

Thira grinned with satisfaction at the plan. "With the sheer number of troops we have we'll simply run them down and crush them. The archers and foot soldiers will merely mop up the ones that get through." Her eyes glowed in anticipation. *It'll be a virtual blood bath.* She couldn't help it; the lust for the kill was a part of her that's why she'd taken to being an assassin so easily. She knew that it bothered Alesia but was thankful she didn't try to make her change what was only her essential nature.

"But will that work. There's not much to it." Panter didn't condone killing in anyway but she accepted it if it was in defense of her partner and the ones close to her. Even she couldn't deny that her other side was starting to stir with excitement at the thought of the conflict that was looming ahead of them.

"Simpler is sometimes the best plan you can have. Anything more invites discord and mistakes."

Panter slapped her hands on the table causing the others jump a little at the unexpected movement. "I suppose now that we have a plan we need to fill in the rest of them." She looked toward the door. "Sentry!"

The guard ducked into the room at her call. "Arms Master?"

"Please find the Regent and send her here. Tell her it's of great importance. Then gather all the amazon commanders and the militia captains. I want everyone here; there are no acceptable excuses. Do you understand?"

The look on Panter's face made the command clear to the guard. "Yes, Arms Master!"

"Dismissed." Panter waved him away absently as her thoughts moved back to the fight ahead. She was fervently hoping that what ever happened in the future they would be the ones to end up on top.

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Tera shifted her sword into a more comfortable position then test drew the blade to make sure the new location wouldn't impede her arm. Satisfied she looked over the militia that spread across the rise that led into the camp. Dust rose in small puffs as the horses stamped their feet restlessly as they stood idle. Their muscles quivered in their hindquarters as they tugged at their bits. Their whole bodies seemed to scream that they were ready for action. Tera turned her gaze to the nearby forest. The amazons had scattered throughout the trees with several hundred arrows each that had been rapidly fashioned in the past day, as they got ready for battle. Their concealment in the trees would be a surprise to the advancing army even if they were expecting an attack of that kind. The sheer number of arrows that were going to be launched would be significant, add that the amazons were handling the bows and it was going to be devastating to their ranks. Tera bounced on her toes to help settle her armor into place.

You'd think, as many times as she'd had to wear it over the past few months she'd be used to its weight by now.

"Nervous?"

Tera glanced up at her mate. She was decked out in most of her own armor; she'd declined to wear the heavier pieces, as they'd slow her down while she fought. Panter wore a thick leather breastplate that covered her front and back but left her arms free for easy movement. She wore her customary greaves with the emblem of her station. Leg protection overlaid her pants legs to her knee high boots. The hilt of her sword protruded over her left shoulder and twin daggers rested on each hip. She declined to wear anything more in protection despite Tera's worried pleadings.

"A little." Tera wrapped her hand around Panter's forearm. She could feel the faint tremors that ran through her body. "How are you doing?"

Panter smiled at her. She was aware that she'd felt the pent up excitement that thrummed in her veins. "Fine." She glanced over as her attention was caught by someone's approach. Panter nodded at Alesia and Thira as they stopped at her side and glanced over the gathered troops. Alesia was garbed in layered leather armor with her sword on her left hip and a bow over her right. Quarrels filled the quiver that rode over her right shoulder a strap ran diagonally across her chest to hold it in place. She wore similar greaves with her mark of station and had donned leg protection also. She moved her glance to Thira. An eyebrow rose at the lack of armor she was wearing. A simple leather breastplate was her only change from her normal attire of tunic and leggings. Daggers bristled from the knife harness strapped to her back. Hilts glinted on her hips and were also tucked into the sides of her boots. Panter kept the remark that struggled to part her lips to herself. She looked back at Alesia.

"Everything ready?"

"As much as it can be." Alesia looked out over the empty meadow below them. Flowers waved gracefully in the slight breeze that swept over them.

At this moment things were pristine in their simple beauty but she knew in a short time the blossoms would be ground under foot as two large armies struggled to be the one to survive. "I better go join my troops." She started to walk away from them but came to a halt after several



steps. Turning she approached her friends and embraced them both briefly. The sudden hugs startled them but they gladly hugged her close in response. She moved away after the embrace with Tera ended.

"I'll see you both later." Alesia was confident that she would indeed see two of the most important people in her life after this fight had ended. She turned her gaze to the third. Amber eyes watched her from an expressionless face. People would have thought that the person those eyes belonged to was as cold and unfeeling as she looked, but they could have never been more wrong. Alesia could clearly see the glint of worry that lurked deep inside those impassive orbs. She closed the distance between them and pulled her into her arms. Alesia pressed a kiss against still lips. She didn't think Thira was going to respond for a moment before the lips under hers softened and parted. Strong arms drew her closer as they kissed. Alesia opened her eyes to see the once blank eyes alive and full of heat as they looked down at her.

"Stay here with me." Thira insides twisted as she asked. She knew her mate couldn't ease her fear and stay beside her so she could keep her safe. Her position was far too important to be able to indulge her pathetic plea. Other things were more vital then what she wanted. Her eyes closed briefly as Alesia raised her hand and ran her fingers lightly over her jaw line.

"I can't."

Thira reached up and stilled the caressing digits. Clasping her fingers in her hand she moved it away from her face. "I know." She eased herself out of Alesia's encircling arms. She needed to prepare herself for the battle that would soon take place. Thira knew that she would not have been able to act freely and do whatever must be done if Alesia had been by her side so she was almost relived she wouldn't be there. Almost, she still worried about her mate but Alesia was an excellent fighter and she would be with the Amazons who she trusted more then any others. She would be fine. "Go, I know you have things that still must be done." Thira kissed her again and then pushed her away gently.

Alesia watched her for a moment then walked away. She was quickly engulfed in the bodies that surrounded them. Something clenched in Thira's chest as she disappeared from sight but her scent lingered for a while longer before gradually being covered up as many other scents continued to overlap it.

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Thira had taken refuge in the deep undergrowth that dominated the west side of the field. To her right the militia waited patiently for their opponents to show. The latest messenger had reported that they were only minutes away. She could already feel the slight shaking of the earth as the massive army marched toward them. By that alone she knew that their high estimate was the one that would face them. She was certain that Panter had grasped the same thing by now. She shifted farther back into the growth as she started hearing the stamp of feet marching in unison. Time seemed to pass by slowly before the glint of metal flickered from the spot she'd been watching intently. Row upon row of riders broke through the trees and rode into the clearing as

they'd expected them to do. Now if the rest of the plan was followed just as conveniently it would be over before the days ended.

Long moments passed as the rest of them filled up the lower end of the large meadow. Thira cursed under her breath as the reason for the long delay rumbled into sight. *Damn it.* Two medium sized horse drawn catapults stopped at the armies rear with their ammunition wagons close behind. *This changes every thing if we can't get rid of them quickly.* Thira's jaw tightened and she nodded as she made her decision. She'd take care of them. She had the speed to do it with. She would have to use all the power at her disposal and at her top velocity. It would drain her but there was no other way.

Her eyes moved to the front as the army gradually came to a halt. A smirk flickered across her lips as she realized they had stopped just outside the range of a bow. A normal bow, they obviously never studied their adversary like they had and found out that their bowmen didn't use normal bows like everyone else. A fact they found out in the next second as the air filled with whistling shafts. Several sections of them fell as the bodkin points punched through their armor like paper. Shocked gasps reached her ears, as they understood their predicament. There was nowhere in the field that was safe from the lethal missiles as they mercilessly rained down upon them. A shout had what was left of their horsemen springing into action. They rushed at full gallop toward the pike men that stood their ground at the onslaught. A number of horsemen fell from their galloping mounts as arrows continued to cut them down. The rider less horses slammed into several more causing them to unseat their riders and get trampled by the horses behind them.

Thira heard the screaming of injured and dying as the lines meet with a thundering crash. A roar rang throughout the meadow as their own horsemen went on the attack. An answering howl vibrated in her chest as she just kept herself from echoing the challenge. She focused on the job she'd assigned herself. The creak of tightening rope had her rising to her feet and drawing knives from her harness. She gripped them firmly as she drew a deep breath. Dirt flew up as she pushed off. By the time she'd hit two steps outside the tree line she was already at her top speed. If anyone had seen her they would have convinced themselves it had only been a trick of their sight as she'd disappeared in the very next instant.

The first pass had the horses attached to the catapults cut free and running off at the sudden sting of a slap on their flanks. The catapults listed forward as their stability was compromised at the loss of the horses. The next pass cut the ropes that drew down the arms. The boulders that filled them flew a short ways before crashing into their own men. The catapults then crashed down onto their sides. There was no way to use them now. Thira could feel herself tiring as time went on. The men that had been the crew for the catapults eyes widened as the cause of their misfortune ground briefly to a halt in front of them.

"Sorry boys, no more toys for you." she purred as she grinned at the astonishment on their faces. Her smile faltered as with screams of rage they pulled their weapons and attacked her. Her eyes narrowed as a bubble of delight filled her at the sudden change of plans. She kicked out and nailed one in the throat as she dodged the blade of an axe as it flew by her head. The sharp crack of breaking bone followed his body to the ground.

Thira caught a descending sword blade on her crossed blades. Strength flowed through her as her energy came flooding back. She shoved and sent the man stumbling backwards at the sudden move. A rapid step forward launched her into a spinning kick that slammed into his head. She turned back to the remaining two as his body fell. "Playtime's over." Thira watched passively as the two men fell when her daggers pierced their throats. She walked over and retrieved them. Her small section of isolated time started to collapse as the men turning to inspect why their own catapults were firing on them caught sight of her. A large number of them surged toward her.

"Shit." Thira braced herself. As the men got closer her vision started to gray out. Power surged through her body as her senses heightened. A roar broke free as she was surrounded. Her eyes glowed as she threw herself into battle. Thira never took into consideration the number of men that fell from her blades. A sudden sting along her back made her hiss in pain. She lashed out with her claws and sent several more bleeding to the ground. Thira knew she could be seriously hurt from the amount of warmth she could feel trickling down her back. She fought harder and finally cleared a path to the outside. She used the last of her strength to push herself into a run. She was gone in the briefest flicker of movement leaving behind a pile of dead men to prove that she'd been there.

Thira made it back to their camp just before the last of her energy flickered out. She fell forward but was caught just before she hit the ground.

"You took care of those catapults didn't you?" A wealth of admiration and understanding filled the voice asking the question.

Thira panted hoarsely as pain pulsed throughout her body from the strain of the run and her injury. "Yeah." She met Panter's gaze. The trust that glimmered in them made her catch her breath. She'd never worked to have the Regents trust in her she'd only cared for what Alesia thought. She hurt too much to ponder over the flicker of warmth she felt at seeing it. She froze with a hiss of pain as she tried to disentangle herself from Panter's hold. She closed her eyes at the stab of agony that flared in her back at the movement.

"Stop it, you'll only hurt yourself more if you fight me."

Thira's eyes flew open as she was picked up and cradled in Panter's arms.

"What do you think you're doing?" she rumbled. Outraged at the horror of the situation she unexpectedly found herself in.

"Taking you to the healers, now do me a favor and shut the hell up." Panter ignored the anger that radiated from the woman in her arms as she walked toward the healers tent. The sound of battle continued behind her. After she dropped off the burden in her arms she would seize the opportunity that Thira had given them by her altruistic act and end this fight as soon as possible.

[Continued...](#)

# Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

## Chapter Sixteen

Panter blocked a cut to her head from her opponent. Their swords scraped together as she locked the hilts to prevent him from taking another swing. Taking an easy way out she kned him in the groin as hard as she could causing him to loosen his grip and release his sword in reaction letting it fall to the ground below. While he was distracted by the intense pain from the blow Panter slammed the hilt of her sword into the side of his head. She started to turn as she sensed someone coming up behind her but before she could engage him one of her people stepped in and drew him off.

Panter took a moment to draw in a deep breath and grab a seconds rest. The fighting had been going full tilt all morning into the early evening. Once they had charged the enemy with their own horsemen it had become too dangerous to rely solely on the archers. The risk of hitting their own people was far to great to take that sort of chance. Alesia had taken several units to the outlying side of the enemy army and were still carefully picking them off one by one while they continued to move to prevent their position from being targeted and eliminated. She shook her sword hard to get rid of some of the blood that thickly coated its surface. A stumbling form drew her attention. Seeing an amazon on the way down she sprang at the figure that loomed above her. Grabbing the man around the neck she jerked it to the side sharply then let the limp form fall. Ignoring the body she reached down and pulled the woman back to her feet.

Panter bent over so her head was beside the woman's ear. "Are you all right?" She had to raise her voice slightly to be heard over the frenzied screaming that surrounded them.

The amazon sent her a grateful look that silently thanked her for her help as she nodded. She saluted quickly then plunged back into the fighting.

Hope she makes it through this. Panter thought as she engaged the nearest enemy. I wish we all could. But unfortunately I know that many of us won't. Forcing those kinds of thoughts from her mind she concentrated on the man that was doing his best to kill her. A grin bent her lips at the

challenge the fighter presented. Most of the ones she'd fought so far had been taken down to easily. It was about time someone tried to test her skills.

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Tera pulled her sword free from the man she'd just beaten. He fell as she engaged the one that promptly filled his spot. She ignored the slight ache building in her shoulders as she blocked his blow. Actual fighting impacted the muscles that were used more harshly than any practicing ever could. The power and force coming at you were stronger than what was used in training. They exchanged rapid blows as he tried to overpower her with brute force. She struggled to hide the surprise she felt as her defenses easily held up against the power she could feel colliding with her blade. A spark of delight lit in her gut as she remembered Thira's words about what gifts she'd received as Panter's mate. In day-to-day things it wasn't as apparent to her that anything had changed, but this seemed to prove it as fact. As their blades collided again she braced her feet and shoved him back as hard as she could. He staggered backwards several steps with a look of shock on his face. A grin spread across her face at the success of the move. Before the man could shift his blade out of the guard position Tera ran toward him with her sword held to the side. He was so intent on watching her blade she surprised him again as she jumped into the air and extended her leg in a snap kick that Panter had taught her. Her booted foot drove the blade of his own sword right into his face. Blood spurted as the flat of his blade crushed his nose. Unfortunately for him he didn't notice it as the shards from his broken nose penetrated his brain killing him.

Tera landed just behind the falling man's body. Seeing a knot of enemy fighters forming around several of her people she darted over to help. A hilt to the head dropped one of them while it also made the others aware of the new arrival. A sudden surge of strength washed through her body easily beating back the exhaustion that had started to trouble her. She tightened her grip on her sword as she drew several fighters away from the group. She narrowed her eyes at the look of glee that entered their eyes at the sight of who had assaulted them. Tera knew what they were thinking as they took in the band of gold that still encircled her forehead. As the leaders of Hawk's Peak she and Panter had kept on their badges of office in spite of the many requests that they be removed. Many were worried that if they didn't they'd be separated from the other fighters as people of special interest. But they had refused saying that to do so would be hiding from their responsibility. They considered it to be a cowardly act and that was something they both refused to do.

"Looks like that rumor of their leader staying out of the fighting was wrong." The ugly smile that twisted his lips spread to his companion as they watched Tera intently. "Good. Doesn't look like she'll be much of a challenge though. Don't interfere, I got this one."

Tera focused on the man who spoke ignoring his buddy as he nodded and stepped away moving back into the throng of bodies around them. The surrounding sounds faded as she watched his movements carefully. The small signals he sent told her that she wasn't facing any run-of-the-mill fighter. This was someone who took the craft of fighting very seriously. Before she'd met Panter there was no way she would have believed she could take someone like this out. But for the past year Panter had been teaching the kind style of sword fighting she knew adapting it to the long

sword that she preferred to use. To both their surprise she had grown rapidly proficient at it, learning at a far greater pace than they had originally believed she would. Lately in the practice bouts between them Tera had even bested Panter several times to her shock and delight. This fact calmed her as she readied herself for the fight before her. She caught the glimmer of a frown that past through his eyes as he responded to the unknown movements before attacking.

Tera met him in mid lunge. She swept her blade to the side taking his with it while driving them both down towards the ground. She reversed her swing and brought them both back up, successfully taking control away from him as he was forced to follow her movements or lose his weapon. She took the opening it brought her to drive her fist into his jaw, the grip of her pommel lending its weight to give her a harder punch than she would normally have. His head snapped to the side at the force of the blow. Tera dropped back her knuckles smarting from the hit. She flexed her fingers slightly as she tightened her grip on the hilt. Adrenaline rushed in her veins at the sight of him spitting blood to the side.

"Good one. But I bet you can't do that again." He bared his blood-streaked teeth at her. "You're about to die little girl."

"Don't try to intimidate me, it won't work. Better than you have tried and failed." She grinned at him hatefully. For a second everything seemed to slow down as she watched a bead of sweat form on his upper lip fall.

She moved her gaze to his and to her amazement saw fear flicker briefly in his eyes as he responded to something he'd seen on her face.

He roared and rushed her again. Tera felt power coil in her legs as she sprang skyward and tucked into a forward somersault. Halfway into the tumble she kicked out landing a blow to the back of his head that helped him in his forward momentum. A quick hand out was the only thing that saved him from plowing face first into the ground. She spun to face him again as soon as she landed. She saw the frustration start to show on his face and shook her head. Tera sighed as he charged her again. His emotions were making the attacks he used sloppy. She blocked his downward cut and drove her right knee into his ribcage. The dull snap of breaking bones met her ears as she shoved him away from her. The only sound he let out from the action was a harsh grunt. If this fight had not been in the middle of a war Tera would have let him go and just walked away. Regrettably it was and that was something she knew she couldn't do. She lifted a finger and beckoned him closer.

"Let's finish this farce of a fight." Tera knew that would anger him enough to be able to end this fight between them quickly. The bellow of anger he let out as he rushed her let her know she'd succeeded in her attempt.

She ignored his weapon as she slid to one knee and simply let him run himself through on her sword. Tera felt his warm blood gush out over her hands as she stood. Her body took on his weight briefly as he gasped, a harsh gurgle rose in his throat as she pulled up on her sword before pulling it away. She stepped back and silently watched as he came to the realization he was dying. She turned her back on him just as he reached out then heard the thud of his body hitting the ground behind her. She raised her sword up and stared at the blood that covered the pommel

and the hand that held it.

"It gets easier the more you do it, don't you think. Killing people I mean."

Tera stiffened at the sudden voice. It was one she had hoped she'd never hear again. She whirled around with her sword up and at the ready. She stared over her blade at the one person that had haunted her nightmares long after their last meeting. "What the hell are you doing here?"

The man who was the focus of her attention folded his arms as he watched her with an expression of pure contempt. "That's a foolish question. This is my army after all." His face twisted with hatred. "Besides that, I owe you for doing this to me!!" He touched the left side of his face as he spoke.

Tera's gaze flickered to the group of men that surrounded her cousin in a ring of protection. She struggled to hide the sense of dread that had hit her at his sudden appearance. She dropped the mental barrier that kept her separate from her partner. Panter I need you, it's Doran he's here. A feeling of rage battered her briefly before it abruptly cut off leaving her a bit unbalanced for a moment before she was able to push the sense of vertigo away. She moved her gaze back to Doran taking in the eye patch that now covered his left eye; the scars that accompanied it on that side of his face were horrendous. "You look pretty good for someone who's supposed to be dead."

"Luckily for me, that abomination of yours was more involved with you at the time. Too bad you couldn't have stayed dead." A snicker escaped him at the thought. "Oh well, I suppose that we can fix that unfortunate situation right now." He snapped his fingers at his men. "Kill her but make sure she suffers first."

Tera tightened her grip on her sword hilt as she watched the men unsheathe their weapons and start forward.

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Alesia watched as her arrow hit her target in the chest. She searched out the next one as she readied another arrow. She didn't flinch as a stray arrow that had been fired blindly in her general area sank deep into the tree trunk only a hand span from her head. She loosened her next arrow taking the enterprising archer in the throat effectively ending his lucky streak. The fighting below them became too congested with their own people to risk continuing their current assault. Without looking back she lifted a hand and circling over her head made a fist then pointed down at the enemy below them. After signaling she put her own bow away and dropped down from the limb she'd been perched on. She could hear the faint crackle of undergrowth as her squads followed her orders. Alesia met their serious faces as she confirmed that they were all present. She nodded as she drew her sword and led them out of the protective boarder of trees into the thick of the fight. They immediately spread out to bolster the assault that their comrades were in the midst of.

Alesia booted one in the stomach as she engaged another that rushed her eagerly. She grabbed his wrists as she blocked an overhead swing. Stepping in close she slammed a hard kick into his ribs. He coughed as the sudden move made him lose his breath with its force. She grinned as she kicked him again in the same spot then forcefully shoved him away from her. Involved in the pain that flared in his side he failed to react in time to prevent the blade that separated his head from his shoulders. Alesia caught her breath as she watched the headless body drop. She was still on the edges of the furious fighting so was still relatively safe to take this small bit of time to recover. Muffled drumming made her look to the side, her eyes widened at the sight of the mounted rider that thundered toward her. Her position had exposed her enough that it caused a lancer to take advantage of it. A spasm of fear at the sight of the oncoming weapon seemed to paralyze her as she watched her death come closer and closer. Her mind screamed at her to move but her body failed to follow any of its demands. Sorrow flooded her heart when the moment to act had passed and she didn't move. She tightened her grip on her sword hilt and raised it in a last ditch attempt of self-defense as she mourned their short partnership. Thira, I'm sorry. She fought not to close her eyes as the moment of her death came upon her.

A roar echoed over the field as a blur passed her and sprang at the oncoming horseman. The man abruptly disappeared as a body crashed into his, sweeping him from his saddle. They landed in a bone-jarring thud as the riderless horse veered from its path and rapidly fled. She watched in horror as two bodies struggled locked together in battle. One body was thrown free as a sharp crack sounded. Alesia took a rapid step forward as the form of her partner registered when she dragged herself back to her feet and headed for the waiting man. A knife blade caught the ebbing sunlight as she stalked toward him. Thira's face twisted with rage as she sprang at him with the blade upraised. Their bodies hit the ground again as they struggled for possession of the knife. Worry cut through the fear that had enveloped her, as the fight seemed to drag on much longer than it normally should have. Just as she was ready to make an attempt to intervene both bodies stopped struggling. Panic flooded her as neither one moved as she cautiously approached them. Just before her fingers touched Thira's shoulder she groaned slightly and started to stir. Alesia caught her form as it rose then almost fell again. She quickly glanced at the body that remained on the ground and spotted the dagger in its chest, the position of the blade indicating he had been stabbed in the heart. Alesia turned her attention back to the woman in her embrace. She tightened her arms around her grateful that she was alive and knew it was only because of the body pressed against hers. Her brow furrowed as her right hand encountered something wet on Thira's back. Raising her hand she gasped, her whole hand was covered in blood. Alesia abruptly found herself supporting all her mates' weight as the form in her arms went limp.

Taking a quick look around; she crouched slightly and gingerly slid Thira over her right shoulder. Standing she grunted in surprise at the heaviness of the still body. Moving as fast as she could Alesia moved them out of the battle that still seethed around them. The surrounding trees gave them a measure of protection so she could try and determine the extent of Thira's injury. Laying her down beneath a tree Alesia rolled her partially onto her front and gently pulled up her tunic to see the site of the wound better. She wondered briefly when Thira had removed her leather armor but dismissed it; it was a trivial thing she could hopefully find out about later. Right now the woman that she loved was hurt. Tearing a sleeve off her own shirt she dabbed the blood away. A deep slice ran close to her spine, blood welled up and trickled out over the surface



of her skin without showing any signs of stopping.

"Damn it." Alesia pressed the makeshift cloth to the wound hoping that the pressure would slow or even better stop the steady flow of blood. "What the hell happened?" Time slipped by slowly as she struggled to get the bleeding under control without any success. The growing paleness of Thira's features made her fearful that she would die and leave her all alone. At that thought the loneliness that had haunted her at Thira's absence gradually engulfed her and threatened to drag her back into the emptiness she'd once existed in. No sound came from her as she increased the pressure against her wound. Alesia's shoulders dropped as she started to quietly weep. Tears ran down her face, dripped off her chin and splattered against her hands and the spotted skin of her partners back. She wiped her face against her shoulder as she struggled to pull herself back together. Right now it seemed as if the only thing that could help would be to receive the power of healing from a god. Alesia stilled as that thought replayed in her mind while she studied the tattoo that decorated the skin of her right forearm and hand. Her gaze moved to the one that resided on Thira's arm. Or perhaps a Goddess would be willing to accept such a request from one of her chosen. Taking a deep breath at the chance she was taking Alesia closed her eyes as she called upon their guardian for the first time. My goddess your chosen is in moral peril and I know of nothing that I can do to help. Her life is in your hands to do with as you wish. Alesia remained silent as she waited for any indication that her plea had been heard. Only the yelling in the distance and the halting breath from the body at her side met her ears. A growing sense of desperation made her call out again. She's your chosen and yet you do nothing. We fight for you against an unknown enemy that you cannot reveal. For this I am to lose the one that is the holder of my heart? Anger flooded her at the injustice of it all. Why do all this if you will only abandon us when we need you the most?

Alesia knew that Thira's own healing could handle most mortal wounds but this one was especially severe and with being in the midst of fighting they did not have the time for her to heal on her own, if she could. She jerked in startlement as light bloomed in front of them. She bowed her head as the sight of Potnia Theron became visible. The jaguar and wolf that normally accompanied her settled at her feet to watch without a sound.

"You'd believe I would simply abandon any of my chosen?"

Alesia cringed as the angry words rang throughout the small grove they were in. She remained silent unsure if a response was required or even wanted. Her heart sank as she became aware of how foolish she'd been to anger a deity as she had.

The voice gentled. "Alesia look at me."

Alesia slowly raised her eyes to meet the goddesses own gentle blue. The harsh anger that she'd spoken with did not show in her gaze. The confusion she felt must have shown as the deity spoke again while a small smile appeared on her face.

"As much as I dislike when my chosen grovel to me, the way you raged at me was not acceptable either." The smile slipped from her face. "You'd do well to remember that in the future."

Shame flooded Alesia. No matter the reason she should not have raged against the one who had selected them as hers. "I will remember." She said softly. She looked at the ground as a sense of humiliation over took the shame.

Potnia Theron only nodded and did not speak of it any further. "I could heal Thira but I won't." She raised a finger to silence any protests that would have come from Alesia as she looked up in horror at her words. She pointed at Alesia as she continued to speak. "However, you will."

"But I can't heal her, don't you think I would have done it already if I could." Alesia knew she tread a fine line as she argued with the Goddess.

The smile that graced the deities face reassured her that she was not upset at the sharp words, if anything she seemed to be more than pleased.

Potnia Theron tapped a finger on her chin as she regarded Alesia. "Surely I told you?" She looked up at the branches that moved above her head as she thought. "No, No perhaps I didn't." Moving her gaze back to the woman kneeling on the ground in front of her she stroked the wolf lightly as it pressed against her leg. "You do know as a chosen you were bestowed certain gifts?"

"Yes, but I was told you only received them when we were blessed by you at our Handfasting." Alesia shifted in her spot as she worried that Thira would not survive during the discussion the goddess was obviously intent on having.

"Do not worry over your mate. The bleeding has stopped while I am here and she isn't in any danger of passing over." Potnia Theron had easily read the obvious worry that plagued her chosen.

Alesia respectfully bent her head in thanks.

"The handfasting is only a visual formality. The moment you consummated your bond the changes had already begun. By the time any marriage would have been preformed the gifts would already have been in effect." Potnia Theron walked over to Alesia and crouched down close alongside her ignoring the blood that started to soak into the edges of her gown. "Every gifting is different it relies on the strengths of each individual. With you besides the increase of strength and dexterity, I gave you the power of healing." She reached down and softly stroked the side of Thira's face. "With the way your mate plunges headlong into dangerous situations without thinking first I believed it was one of my better ideas." Pulling her hand back she placed a finger under Alesia's chin and lifted it so she could look into her dark eyes. Whatever she saw in them seemed to satisfy her. Rising to her feet she placed a hand on her shoulder then stepped back. "Place your hands on the wound."

Alesia gingerly covered the wound with her hands. She made her touch firmer at the Goddesses urging. Her insides roiled at the notion that this would never work.

"Dismiss your uncertainty Alesia or it won't." A thread of command laced the calming words. "Now it's fairly simple, visualize the injury knitting back together and it will."

Alesia seized upon her military training to calm her mind and concentrated. It was easy to picture the body under her hands as whole and healthy again. A surge of heat filled her startling her into opening her eyes. Her hands glowed slightly, the edges of the wound that she could see rapidly healed as she watched. By the time the glow had faded she was slumped over Thira as exhaustion ambushed her.

"Tired?" Potnia Theron touched her on the upper back. After a moment she crouched down as Thira started to stir. "Ah, welcome back untamed one."

Thira sat up hastily then paused as she felt the absence of the excruciating pain that she'd tried to desperately ignore. She turned grateful eyes to the powerful woman that studied her. "You healed me, thank." A gesture cut off her words.

"I did nothing. The one you need to thank is your mate, she healed you." She rested a hand briefly on her shoulder then stood and rejoined her animals. She watched the two embrace each other then regained their attention as she continued to speak. "Alesia, you must remember that any healing will drain you of strength. The power that you use will be severely taxing to your body as you're a mortal." The woman exuded a sense of amusement at the words. "Well, mostly anyway." She waved a hand at them as she started to fade away. "Now go your friends have need of you." A whisper echoed in the clearing as she disappeared. "Be cautious of the scarred one."

The two women who remained stood close together as the energy that the goddess had given them flowed throughout them. They wondered at the parting words but other things had to be taken care of before trying to puzzle it out.

Cupping Alesia's face in her hands Thira kissed her tenderly. "Thank you," A purr vibrated her chest as the kiss ended. "We must go but we'll speak of this later." She checked to see if the daggers still remained tucked into her boots. She'd been made to shed her harness by the healer when Panter had dropped her off to be seen too. She'd fled at the first bolt of fear that had slammed into her. At first she was unsure were it had come from until another slammed into her and she'd responded instinctively to it. The sight of the horseman had sent her into a rage but she didn't remember anything after she'd dragged him from his saddle. "Lets go."

They moved out of the trees at a run. Thira sped up a little when she noticed that Alesia was keeping up with her easily. A grin teased her lips as a light wind made her hair fly back. A feeling made her head for the rear of the fighting. The scene that met her eyes made her eyes slit as she snarled. A large group of men were stalking Tera as another laughed, a look of amusement vying with hedonistic delight covering his face. "There."

Alesia nodded as she drew her sword. "I see them."

They wasted no time in attacking the first ones that they reached. Out of the corner of her eye Thira saw Panter arrive with a group of her own militia. She snarled at the mercenary that faced her and gestured at him to attack. "Come on big boy lets see what you got." He was huge and packed with so much muscle Thira wondered briefly how he could possibly move.

"Kind of stupid to face me without a weapon. You're going to be too easy." He lunged at her, the axe he was holding slicing into the air where she'd been. He gaped at the empty space until the burning pain that ran across his left side sank in. The hand he pressed to it came back red with blood. "How the hell?" He turned to see the woman that was fighting him waving bloody nails at him.

"Not so unarmed now am I?" She bared her fangs at him as she stalked closer while he edged away.

"What the hell are you and why are you helping her?" He spat angrily. "She's a fake you should be fighting with us for the true Regent."

Thira laugh was filled with distain. "You wouldn't know the real Regent if they came up and kicked you in the ass."

"Ours has the backing of a Demi god so I think he would know the real one if he saw it."

"Demi god?" Thira stopped moving as the word hit her. She wanted to ask more about it but the questions would have to wait as the man continued his attack.

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Tera glimpsed the arrival of Thira and Alesia with a surge of relief. They immediately pulled several fighters away from the group that had started to surround her. She blocked a downward blow from her opponent as he swung widely. What they lacked in fighting skill they made up for with sheer brute force. Tera dug her heels in as she pushed him away. A trickle of sweat ran down her neck as she watched for his next move. Any other person fighting him would probably have been dead by now. But luckily I'm not one of them. She didn't move her eyes from her target when twin roars rang out. A smirk played on her lips as she watch him flinch at the primal sound. Knowing time was of the essence Tera changed her fighting style from defense to offense as she pressed her own attack. Their swords sang with the power of their swings as they furiously battled. Ducking another cut to her head Tera spun in a low circle and kicked out, driving a booted foot with all her strength into the mans gut. His breath exploded outwards with the force of the kick causing him to automatically drop his weapon as he moved his hands to the injured area. Tera seized the opening and finished him off quickly. She swung her blade at his now exposed neck. She turned and engaged the next mercenary she came upon leaving a headless corpse behind her.

The bloody fighting came to a rapid end as they finished off each man with finality. Tera glanced around when she failed to see her cousin. She spotted him trying to evade capture by attempting to blend into the fighting that still went on around them. "Thira would you grab him please?" She pointed in Doran's direction and hid a grin at the delight that appeared on her friends face as she went after him and dragged him back into the circle.

"One piece of shit as requested." Thira threw him down at Tera's feet and booted him in the side, a smile of enjoyment still on her face. "Anything else?"

"Yes, could you grab the nearest mercenary. I believe that my cousin would like to surrender to us." Tera glared down at the cowering figure at her feet. "Isn't that right Doran?" She followed Thira's example and booted him herself when he answered with just a whimper. "Isn't that correct?"

Doran yelled in pain at the kick. "Yes, we surrender."

Thira came back quickly dragging a struggling form behind her. Leaning down she grabbed him by the neck and pulled him to his feet effortlessly.

She accepted the horn that Alesia extended to her and thrust it into his face. "Here, you've surrendered. Sound it out so the others know."

The mercenary pushed it away. "We'd never surrender to you."

"Is that so?" Thira turned him so he could see his commander cowering at Tera's feet. "Looks like one to me, what do you think?"

The man paled at the sight. "Commander is this true?"

Doran didn't look up as he answered. "Yes, sound it out for the others."

The man slowly reached out and took the horn. He paused as he brought it to his lips then froze when a knife point dug into his neck.

"Just so you know, I'm aware of what a surrender signal is so don't try to play anything else, understand?" Thira dug the point in a little deeper to make sure he knew she was serious. She smirked as he swallowed hard then carefully nodded his understanding. "Good, now do it."

The clear notes of surrender sounded out over the meadow. The fighting slowly tapered off as the mercenary army grudgingly followed the command and gave up their weapons. The regents directed their people to make sure all weapons were seized and the enemy taken as prisoners. A rotating guard was set up to keep an eye on the forces that remained. Others went out onto the field and started the sad job of gathering all their fellow fighters that had dropped in battle.

While that was going on the four of them turned their attention to getting as much information as they could out of Doran.

[Continued...](#)

# Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.

Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.

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## Chapter 17

Tera supported her head; although she was drained after the afternoon of fighting she intently studied the reports spread out on the table in front of her. She massaged her forehead to try to relive a budding headache before scrubbing both hands over her face as she leaned back in her chair. Closing her eyes, she replayed the information she'd just read in her mind. Sighing in frustration she still took a moment to savor the slight breeze that blew through the public area of the opened tent.

"How are you holding up Amare?"

"Have you read the latest report Panter?" Tera turned her head and opened her eyes to see her partner standing beside the table and holding a full platter. She smiled fondly at the slightly exasperated look Panter sent at her answer. "A little tired, but I'll be fine." She shifted forward in her chair to study the contents of the platter that settled in front of her. "Thank you love, I was getting a bit hungry." Picking up a piece of flat bread she laid several slices of the offered meats and cheeses on it and rolled it up. Taking a healthy bite she chewed it slowly. She was amazed at the level of hunger that had stirred at the sight of the food. She nodded her thanks as Panter handed her a filled goblet. She took a drink to wash down her mouthful and was pleasantly surprised to find it was a wine with a light fruity aftertaste. "This is good. I don't remember us having anything like it, where did it come from?"

"From Doran's encampment. I sent several of the available squads to strip it of everything that was useful and dispose of the rest." She settled into the chair across from Tera and made her own meal from the tray. Silence fell over them both as they steadily depleted the food from the platter. Panter took a swallow from her own tankard before pulling the report that Tera had mentioned in front of herself and scanning it. "To answer your question, yes I have seen it why do you ask?"

Tera rose from her seat and leaning on the center post looked out at the militia that steadily moved past intent on their assignments that needed to be completed. She held off answering Panter and instead asked another question first. "Looking at the aftermath of the fight how would you say we did?"

Panter raised an eyebrow at the unexpected question but answered it without pause. "Number

wise I would have like it to be less but I think it came out well regardless of that." She leaned back in her chair and studied her partner closely. She could tell that something was bothering her but at the moment she didn't have any idea what it might be. "Doran lost over two thousand of his troops to our seven hundred. As much as I hate losing any lives at all, we did give them a sound ass kicking. But I don't believe that is what your really asking me, is it?"

"I suppose what I want to know is what do we do with Doran's remaining troops. We don't have the capability of taking care of that many prisoners of war." She walked back to the table and retook her seat.

Panter scratched the back of her neck as she considered the question carefully before answering it. "I'm not familiar in what your people do in situations like this but I can tell you what mine tend to do when this happens." She continued her train of thought when Tera nodded at the offer. "It's pretty straightforward really there's one of two choices, slavery or execution. Slavery to recoup any expenses that the war has accumulated and execution because at times it simply too risky to leave a defeated enemy at your backdoor."

Tera stared impassively at the tabletop as she rested her forehead against her folded hands and thought about what Panter just said. To her neither proposition was a real winner. She didn't believe in slavery and as Regent did not support or allow such a thing in her city or in her outlying providences. Anyone that was found to be in possession of slaves were heavily fined and the unpaid labor seized and either returned to the place of their birth or found a paying position somewhere else at their request. To be asked to go against this ingrained ideal was slightly appalling. At the same time to guard almost a thousand prisoners and still move onto the confrontation that still loomed before them at Doslan would draw their forces to thin. To her it was a losing situation and one that as Regent she had to decide what solution would work fairly quickly. Her head rose as an idea suddenly struck her. "I dislike either option strongly. But I might have just thought up a third option." She met Panter's inquisitive look as she leaned back in her seat. "The better part of Doran's forces consisted of mercenary's didn't it?"

"That and what seem to be soldier's from some of the settlements he had taken over, why?"

"Do you think that we could use them to fight for us. The added man power would help make up for some of the losses we just suffered."

Panter took some time to think about what Tera just said. The larger part of her wanted to say a flat out no, the idea that the very people that had been trying to kill them to turn and suddenly be on their side was almost to absurd to even consider. She started to voice that thought when she hesitated. There might be a way to make it work if their people were agreeable to the plan. Panter knew to request someone who had just lost comrades to fight alongside the one who could have killed them might be too much to ask. "I'm sure that the regular soldiers would be more then willing considering they were part of our forces before your cousin interfered. To my knowledge a fair wage and the promise of employment as long as they follow their orders would be more than reasonable. I suspect that if we ask them we'll probably find out that your cousin was up to his dirty little tricks again. The mercenaries on the other hand are most likely more interested in being paid then the cause they fight for. Offer a sufficient pay and they could also be persuaded

to join our side. But I believe that if they do, it would be a sensible suggestion that they have no positions that could possibly put them in command."

Tera tapped her fingers on the table. "That can be easily arranged. Hopefully it will make the group of people who declines our offer small enough that we could get them transported back to Hawk's Peak to stand trial without a problem. Although that would need to wait until our return, the charges will be more than adequate to keep them in custody until then no matter how long it is." She frowned. "But how do I ask our people to fight with someone that was once their enemy, no matter what the reason."

At her words Panter realized where the problem laid. Tera was trying to take full responsibility of a decision that was primarily hers as the martial leader. "Amare, you do understand that this is above all a military assessment. So it falls within my powers as your Arms Master?"

Tera gaze turned inward as she considered Panter's words. A slight smile touched her lips, as she understood what she was talking about. It was technically something that was out of the scope of her responsibilities. She did have to concur with whatever decision Panter came up with but didn't need to shoulder the whole burden of it. "And as Arm's Master do you think the idea is a viable one?"

"My gut for once agrees with Thira on this point and it says except for the settlement soldiers we should just kill them all and have done with it." Panter held up a hand as Tera started to speak. "However, I know that you wouldn't agree with something like that so I propose this. Gather them all together and let them decide it for themselves. Does that meet with your approval?"

"That seems fair. When do you want to do it?" Tera face saddened as she dwelled on the heartrending duty they still had to fulfill that day.

Panter sighed silently as she also considered the other matter that was being taken care of at this time. "Tomorrow, after we have sent off all the honored ones." Unable to bury all their dead effectively it had been decided on having two pyres instead. One was built separately for the Amazons and the militia as the amazons preferred to have their people honored independently as was their right as their own nation within the realm. The healers with the help of many volunteers had washed and wrapped the bodies as they were brought in from the battlefield after taking down their identities for their records. She looked up as movement caught her attention. She stood when Tera came around the table towards her. Panter glimpsed the tears that glimmered on her lashes as she took her into arms.

Tera burrowed thankfully into her partner's embrace as her emotions finally broke past the walls she'd erected. She wept for the family and friends of the people that had given their lives to help save the freedom and ideals that they had regained when she and Panter had taken over Regency. Most of the people had voiced their support and approval of the two women. Those that hadn't soon learned that they would never find the amount of freedom and opportunities they had there anywhere else. Her heart broke especially for the ones that had their partners killed while they remained behind. Tera knew that most would be following their loved ones quickly but only after their fight here was finished. "I can't imagine the pain their going through right now."



Panther tightened her embrace and buried her nose in Tera's hair as she gratefully inhaled her warm scent. Her voice broke as she responded. "I can." She pushed back the haunting memory of holding Tera's still body in her arms. "You don't understand how you can keep breathing after knowing that your heart has been ripped out of your body."

Tera pulled back a little and met Panther's anguished eyes. "That's right, you do know." Rising up on her toes she kissed her tenderly on the lips. A hand gripped the back of her head as she started to move back. A possessive mouth claimed hers again. Tera started at the unexpected action but moaned softly as she responded to the sudden passion. The slight concern that they were fully on display swiftly faded as the kiss deepened.

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Alesia checked to make sure the squads guarding the prisoners would be relieved soon for their dinner break before heading back to her tent. After Doran had surrendered Thira had needed to rest even after the healing as her body finally protested the strain it had been under. Alesia had seen that after a quick bath she was in the bed resting before she washed up herself and took care of the few nicks and scrapes she had acquired throughout the battle. She slowed as she moved past the cook station, the tempting odors that emanated from it awaking her hunger with a vengeance. Deciding to stop and grab them both something to eat she joined the line in front of the counter. She exchanged greetings with several others while they also waited to be served but declined any offers to cut to the front of the line. She reached the counter fairly quickly and studied the short list of choices available for dinner. The cooks had found themselves scrambling to pull a decent meal together after the abrupt ending of the earlier battle.

She requested a platter of meats and cheeses thinking a light meal would be a better idea after the physical exertion they had both gone through. Accepting the platter along with a full skin of water she turned to leave when the assistant cook spoke up.

"Ma'am, I was wondering." The woman stopped speaking as Alesia turned to look at her inquiringly.

"I'm sorry, you were saying?" Alesia stepped closer. She frowned slightly as the woman flushed and looked down at the covered bowl that she held in her hand but didn't continue with what she'd been about to say. "You wanted something?"

The cook swallowed hard before extending the bowl out to Alesia. "I thought your partner might need this. I heard she had gotten hurt earlier, is she alright now?" She looked up at Alesia tentatively as if uncertain what reaction she would receive from the Marshal.

Alesia set the platter aside before accepting the bowl. She could feel the curious eyes of the people that patiently waited behind her for their turn. She folded back an edge of the cloth and after a start of surprise smiled at the woman that was wringing her hands nervously in front of her. She recovered the bowl and set it gently on the platter before picking it up again. "Thank you, it will help her." She smiled at the woman warmly touched by the kindness of her actions.

"She's tired but she'll be all right by tomorrow." She nodded at her and then left.

Reaching their quarters she ducked inside and set her burden down on the table. Filling two goblets with water she went toward the low bed and for a moment just watched the woman that slept within its depths. Soft breathing slowed before sleep heavy eyes fluttered open as Thira sensed her presence.

"Are you joining me now?"

Alesia grinned at the question while she shivered inside at the soft growl that followed it. "Yes." She held out a hand to stop Thira as she reached out to drag her into the bed with her. "But we both need to eat something first." She ignored the slight pout that covered Thira's face at her refusal.

Alesia grabbed the extended hand and tugged her to her feet. "Come on, I can hear your stomach rumbling from here."

Thira grudgingly allowed herself to be pulled to her feet and followed her to the low table. Her footsteps quickened, as she smelled the odor of fresh meat. She drew the coopery scent in with a sense of pleasure. Her belly growled as her mouth started to water in anticipation of one of her favorite foods. Once more she thanked the goddess for finding a partner that did not object to the foods that she needed to remain healthy. "You got the meat." She sat down in her accustomed spot and retrieved the bowl from the platter. Uncovering it and letting the cloth drop onto the table, she chose a chunk of the succulent meat and popped it into her mouth. Thira savored the explosion of flavor as she chewed. Swallowing she looked up at her still standing partner. "Are you going to eat or not?"

Alesia settled beside her with a soft laugh. She made a meat roll while she watched the look of pleasure on Thira's face as she ate. They ate in companionable silence for a time. Finishing her roll she took a drink of water to wash it down. "Actually, I had forgotten to order it."

"Order what?" Thira licked her fingers clean as she looked up questionably.

"Your meat. One of the women at the cook tent stopped me before I left and gave it to me. She'd heard you'd gotten hurt and was wondering how you were doing." She prepared another meat roll as she talked. "I was surprised but it pleases me that nearly everyone has accepted you and Panter the way they have." She thought back to the uneasiness that had surrounded her mate every time she'd need to speak to another person besides their small group. Alesia knew that she might always retain a small part of herself that regarded humans as treacherous and untrustworthy but given the circumstances she felt it was more than understandable. She studied the food in her hands as she wondered how Thira could possibly put something like that aside. Unable to eat anymore she dropped the roll back onto the platter.

Thira studied her mate closely and caught the glint of sorrow in her dark eyes. Setting her empty bowl aside she shifted toward her partner. Cupping her cheek, she ran her thumb over the full lower lip. Thira's eyes became hooded when Alesia reacted to her action with a soft gasp. She pushed back the surge of want and focused on what she'd wanted to say. "I still have problems

trusting the majority of humans but you know that I will never include you with them, right?" She leaned over Alesia and drew in a deep breath. "That I will love you to my dying day?" After all the death that had surrounded them today she needed to get as close to her mate as she could.

Alesia closed her eyes as Thira's warm breath hit her throat. The moisture that had been in her mouth went straight between her legs at the sensation. A guttural moan escaped her when lips and teeth found the curve of her neck. Reaching up, she ran her fingers through the flow of soft hair that spread across her chest. She arched into her partner as fingers easily unfastened her tunic and slipped inside. Alesia shivered when nails ran up her stomach and ribs then cupped a breast in its hand. "Gods...I love you too." She moaned again in disappointment when the hand withdrew from its pleasurable actions.

"Bed." Thira picked Alesia up and carried her over to it. She laid her down then carefully stripped off her clothes. She brushed aside the shaking hands that tried to assist her with a soft "No". Gazing down on her partner, she ran her eyes over the firm body while she hastily shed her own clothing. Sliding onto the bed she moved over Alesia's body, her legs enclosing Alesia hips within them. Thira abruptly dug her nails into the bedding when Alesia grasped her hips and pushed up against her. A spasm shot through her as their mounds brushed each other with every movement. Her upper body bent back in reaction to the pleasure that ambushed her. Leaning forward she met every thrust from her partner, the ebb and flow of their bodies melding easily. The brush of a hand on her inner thigh made her eyes slide close at the sensation. At the next push her eyes shot open again when their clits met. Thira gradually increased the tempo while she leaned down and buried her lips in Alesia's neck. "I was trying to hold this off as long as I could." She husked.

Alesia arched into the hips that rhythmically pressed against hers. "I know." She whimpered as lips ran down her chest and encircled a nipple. Nails grazed her sides as hands moved to enclose her breasts in their firm grip. Sweat beaded on her skin as they moved together. The mounting pleasure of the hot mouth suckling at her breast vied with the increasing press of their hips as it blurred into a flood of sensations. She ran her hands over Thira's back feeling the muscles that shifted with each movement she made. Spasms of pleasure made her dig her nails into Thira's back causing her to release her breast as she cried out. Alesia writhed helplessly underneath her lover as she felt herself drawing closer and closer to the edge. "Please, take me."

Thira nostrils flared at the scent of Alesia's excitement. She felt the scratches that she'd left sting as sweat ran down her back. Even that pushed her arousal almost to its limit. She licked the dampened skin beneath her mouth before sitting back up. Thira shivered as she increased her thrusts the slickness of their wetness helping them to glide against each other smoothly. Thira growled as the urge to bite her mate flared up inside her. The more she struggled to ignore it the stronger it became. Alesia's husky pleadings made her blood burn even hotter. Bending she pressed a kiss against the curve of Alesia left shoulder. She jerked back as the pleasure suddenly mounted then with a rising howl she came hard. As the spasms ravaged her body she sank her fangs into Alesia's shoulder.

Alesia screamed at the abrupt pain but it faded quickly as her body shook. A final thrust propelled her over the edge and she convulsed in endless ripples of bliss. Alesia tightened her

hold on Thira as they came to rest in a sweaty embrace. She pressed a kiss to the sweat-dampened forehead that was just beneath her chin. "Thank you." Her voice was hoarse from the scream that felt like it'd been ripped from her. She could feel the throb of the bite Thira had given her but it didn't worry her, the ache was mixed with a faint feeling of pleasure that still ran throughout her body. She tightened her hold on the body that abruptly tried to rise. "No." She knew that Thira had just realized what she'd done. The strength she'd been given came in handy as she strained to keep Thira in her embrace. "Stop it, you're not going anywhere." She snapped.

Thira stopped struggling to get away but kept her face turned. The disgust she felt at her own actions made her want to scream. She'd sworn to herself that she would keep the animal part of herself from their bed but had failed. She could still taste the tang of Alesia blood in her mouth and she fought back the urge to throw up.

"Thira, I'm fine with it." Alesia lowered her voice as she spoke. Hoping that Thira would talk to her.

"I bit you!"

The self-loathing tone made Alesia wince. "I know, but it's all right. I'm not hurt."

Thira jerked her head around to stare at Alesia in disbelief. "I sank my fangs into you as if I was just an animal." Her face tightened as her eyes closed. "How does that make it all right?"

Alesia tightened her hold on her partner with one hand and grabbed her chin with the other. "Look at me." She demanded. Her chest tightened as watery eyes met hers reluctantly. "It doesn't surprise me it happened, if you'll remember I told you that if it did I wouldn't have objected to it. In fact now that it has, I truly hope that this is not the only time it does."

Thira's eyes widened in shock, she wasn't certain if she'd heard her partner correctly. "You want it to happen again?"

"Of course." Alesia pressed a brief kiss against her lips. "I want you, the real you. I don't want you always worrying about if it'll happen again. I would feel cheated if you weren't fully in the moment with me." Alesia grinned. "Besides, you didn't leave a mark on me." She had felt the bite mark healing as they'd talked.

"I didn't leave a mark?" Thira reached up and gently wiped the blood away from Alesia's shoulder. She sat up partway in shock when no mark met her eyes. She frowned then a crooked smirk crossed her lips as she met Alesia's gaze. "The healing power that the Goddess gifted you with."

Alesia nodded. "I guess it works for me too." She pulled Thira back into her arms. "Now that you know it won't hurt me, will you please let things happen without worrying about it?" she whispered.

Thira let a forceful kiss answer for her as she pressed her body firmly against the one underneath hers. She could feel a small part of her mind relax the diligent hold she had over herself. Thira growled as Alesia pulled her even closer. For the first time while they made love Thira was willing to just let it happen.

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Tera watched the others as they waited for the meeting to start. Her gaze moved to their unexpected quest as she quietly sat beside them. This morning had been heartbreaking as they lighted the pyres. The roaring flames had lit up the pre dawn sky like it was full light. She had cried silently as she watched. She'd clasped Panter's hand while Alesia had simply buried herself in Thira's arms as she'd sobbed, not afraid to show the sorrow she'd felt at the sacrifice the dead had made on their behalf. Panter's grief had shown plainly on her face. Thira's face had remained grim but if you paid close attention the sorrow she felt could be seen clearly in her amber eyes.

A gasp had broken into the solemn atmosphere. Tera had looked over to see Potnia Theron standing at her side. The Goddess had nodded at her then walked toward the pyres. The abrupt hush made the sound of the flames even louder. As the Goddess drew near, the crackling flames seemed to quiet itself at her approach. A gesture made the flames part like a curtain so she could enter. She laid a bundle of sweet grass on each pyre then turned and exited out between the still burning towers of flame. She returned to stand by Tera and watched silently as the fires gradually burnt themselves out. Once the flames had died out she turned to the watching mass and spoke. "I am here to help honor the ones who have fallen in battle this past eve. If it were truly in my power to prevent these deaths I would not have hesitated. However, that dominion is fully in the grasp of my brother and as he does not interfere in mine I cannot interfere in his. My heart is saddened at their deaths yet it is lightened by the knowledge that they have been well rewarded for their sacrifices." At her gesture the ashes shifted and a stalk rose from it's dark depths. It grew, quickly gaining size and mass as it went to abruptly stop at a great height. Leaves rapidly covered its crown and golden flowers burst into being. The surrounding air grew heavy with its sweet scent. "As a living reminder of the people who died here, this tree will forever bear its flowery burden. In the depths of the hottest summer and the coldest winter it will remain. Neither the claws of beast nor the blade of man will ever bring it down. This I promise you." She smiled sadly at the renewed weeping and with a nod in her chosen's direction headed toward the Regents tent and disappeared inside. After making sure that the remaining ashes were carefully buried they had joined the Goddess inside the tent.

Tera broke out of her thoughts as the rest of her military leaders steadily filed in and took a seat. She waited for a moment while they got settled then officially started the meeting. "I know that we will always morn the loss of our friends and loved ones. But now we must direct our attention to the danger that faces us now. We have beaten my cousin but Doslan will be an even greater threat then what we've just faced." Tera met each look steadily fully aware of the Goddess's silent figure sitting beside her. "As you know we accepted the surrender of almost a thousand prisoners yesterday. About half of them were militia from surrounding town that had been overrun by Doran's troops. We did verify that they had been forced to join his ranks and unwillingly fight for his side."

"Did they not kill some of their own people, how is it we can trust them to stay on our side and not go back at the first opportunity that shows up?"

Tera met the Amazon commander's furious look squarely. "If you knew that a loved one had a knife at their throat would you willingly walk away from them and let them die?" Tera shook her head. "I'm not so certain I could if it were me, but I would do my best to never kill someone I was fighting against if I possibly could." She watched the irate look slowly fade from the commander face. "I believe that's one of the reasons so few of our people were killed yesterday."

"And the other?"

The corner of Tera's mouth rose slightly at the commander attempt to have the last word. "I think my people are damn good fighters."

The Amazon grunted lightly in approval at the statement and subsided with a nod of satisfaction.

The Goddess slapped her hands together as she rose to her feet. "Now that we all agree that your forces can kick butt, there's something that has come to my attention."

"You mean about the Demi God?" Thira broke in. She shrugged at the looks of startled surprise she received. "What, one of the mercs last night said something about it, right before I handed him his ass." Thira turned to the Goddess. "That's what it's about, right?"

Potnia Theron looked at all of them with an expression of utter regret. "I'm afraid so." She sighed deeply before speaking again. "And it's partially my fault this is happening."

Thira and Panter had to hastily cover their ears at the uproar that suddenly filled the tent. They met each other's gaze and shook their heads in resignation at the commotion then winced in pain as it grew even louder. It was rapidly looking like it was going to end up being a long if painful day.

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## Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
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## Chapter 18

"Just what do you mean by it's partially your fault?" Panter couldn't believe that she was actually talking to a Goddess like this. Or even that the Goddess in question didn't look like she was going to take her to task for doing so. She wasn't sure if that made her more worried about what she was talking about or not.

No one dared to make a sound of any kind while they waited for Potnia Theron's reaction to the belligerent tone Panter had taken with her. A quiet sigh of relief filled the room when the Goddess replied without any sign of offense.

"It's something that I take no pride in. At the time, I blindly trusted that the feelings of my chosen were enough to judge her mate as being worthy of the gifts I bestowed on him. Regretfully, my choice not to look into his heart for his true intentions has caused untold suffering and death. If I had, I would have seen then the evil that had taken root there. Because of my carelessness, that malevolence has grown and at this moment is the sole reason for the war you are now fighting. Your cousin knows this as well."

"Wait." Tera shook her head in bewilderment. "Doran is greedy, narrow-minded and down right stupid but he's a weak hearted fool. He's certainly the type to take advantage of a situation but he'd never have the gall to fight us face to face like he has without some type of support."

"He does have backing." Thira's jaw clenched as she drew in a ragged breath. "Remember the letter Alesia gave you?"

Tera's eyes widened as she recalled the fight that had broken out in the aftermath of its discovery. "The one about."

Thira cut her off. "Yes, the one from my father saying he had sent his own offspring to take care of the problem." She laughed mockingly. "The same one who rather than killing her target was asked to join them instead." Thira glared at the Goddess that stood quietly in front them. "That's who your talking about isn't it?" She shouted. "My father is the one who truly wants this war to happen, right. He's the Demi God that merc was talking about?"

Everyone flinched as Thira yelled at the Goddess. They half expected her to retaliate in some way and they weren't disappointed. She seemed to grow in stature as she stared down the raging woman in front of her.

"You will hold your tongue!!" The command echoed throughout the tent. Fury had turned the normally kind azure eyes to hard crystals of ice.

They sat astonished that a simple sentence would have such a profound effect as Thira's mouth

snapped shut in mid rant and she slowly retreated to her seat. She stared at the floor and didn't acknowledge anyone in the room; even Alesia's comforting touch on her back was shrugged off.

Thira's mind was awash in confusion. Deep inside another type of war was raging. The awareness that the Goddess was speaking only the truth vied with the horror that she now knew for sure that the mission she'd been sent on was one she wasn't expected to come back home from. Her father had fully expected her to die in the attempt. She remembered the scene at her departure, she'd been so angry and eager to go after her target she hadn't noticed at the time his lack of emotion as she left. Nothing had been said to each other when the ship had set sail and they had parted company for what might have been the last time without a word. "But why would he send me to my death like that?"

Potnia Theron easily heard the muttered question. "Your father is far more interested in gaining power than in the lives of his children."

Thira hesitated before looking up at the Goddess. She relaxed somewhat when a tender gaze met hers. Tears stung her eyes as she glanced away, the realization that she'd been forgiven for her attack on the very one that had created her lineage was almost more than she could handle. Thira jerked her head back as what had been said finally registered. "What children. I'm the only one there is."

"You're the child from the second bonding, there was one other before he joined with your mother." The Goddess watched the puzzled expressions that crossed her chosen's faces. She was aware that what she said next would shake the very foundations that they had relied upon for so long.

Everyone's eyes widened with surprise. The watching military leaders wisely kept their mouths shut at the unexpected revelation. They understood what went on here in their presence was not to be spread about to anyone outside without explicit permission from the ones involved.

"How many more are there?" Thira wasn't sure if she was more upset at the news or pissed about it. She tried to ignore the small part of herself that was actually getting excited about hearing she had a sibling somewhere.

"To my actual knowledge only one, a sister a few years older than you."

Thira met the stunned gazes of her partner and the Regents. "An elder sister?" It took a minute for that to sink in before she spoke again. "Where can I find her?"

The Goddess broke out into a dazzling smile. "She's much closer than you would suspect." She met Thira's puzzled look then meaningfully glanced over toward where Panter was sitting.

Thira frowned at the odd gesture before a look of utter incredulity appeared on her face, as she finally figured it out. Her voice climbed to a shout as she sprang back to her feet. "Panter's my sister?"



Panther rose to her feet. She stared at the Goddess in disbelief before moving her gaze to Thira. There had to be some mistake. The only things that linked them were the similarity in height and the fact that they were both Clan, nothing else was even remotely the same. "How can that even be possible, I'm so dark and anyone can clearly see she isn't."

"When daughters are born they take the animal form of their mother. This is always directly passed down and never changes. You're a Black Panther just as your mother was and Thira takes after her own mother."

"Who's a Cheetah like me," Thira took a step closer to Panther. "So even if our father is the same it wouldn't matter since we only take after our mothers."

Panther could see the faint hope that shimmered deep in Thira's eyes. She had to admit if anyone was to be a sibling of hers, it seemed right that it be Thira. In the time they'd lived together she'd found that as upset as she sometimes got at Thira's actions, at their core it was simply fear that caused most of them. Thira did have honor, Panther recalled the way she'd willingly taken the deaths of the guilty upon herself instead of allowing her to, and the way that Thira had protected them without their knowledge despite the fact that she and Alesia had just bitterly fought. Panther broke out of her thoughts to see that hope abruptly flicker out in Thira's eyes before she turned back to her seat. She'd been so deep in thought that Thira had taken her lack of reaction as a rejection of her. Panther moved to her and rested a hand on her shoulder. She could feel the muscles beneath it flex in surprise. "So you're my little sister."

"Yeah, I guess I am." Thira wasn't sure what Panther was up to but a small glimmer of hope rose inside her again. She'd thought for sure that Panther wasn't going to accept it when she had turned away. Thira wasn't prepared for the sudden tug on her shoulder that caused her to spin around. A startled growl faded when she was pulled against her sister's chest as strong arms encircled her in a warm hug. Thira cautiously wrapped her arms around her sister's waist and smiled slightly when her touch wasn't rejected. She saw Tera smiling at them before she closed her eyes while she soaked in the warmth of the hug. Before they'd gotten together, Alesia had attempted to explain to her about the sense of caring that you could feel while in Panther's arms. But as she'd never had any basis to compare that to Thira hadn't been able to understand it at the time. Now she understood what Alesia meant. She reluctantly allowed Panther to end the embrace as she moved back. Warm hands rested on her shoulders while she watched her new sister study her intently.

"Amazing, I would never have suspected it." Panther broke into a grin as she felt the tension beneath her hands finally relax. She slipped an arm around Thira's shoulders as they turned to face Potnia Theron. Her smile broadened when she felt an arm slip around her waist. "So tell me, why does our father think he's a Demi God?"

"As much as this pleases me perhaps you should both sit, this may take a bit of time to explain."

A quick shuffling of chairs and they seated themselves. Panther and Thira sat together with their mates on either side. They were reluctant to abandon each other after just learning about their true relationship.

Thira looked over when Alesia's hand slipped onto her knee. She leaned over and kissed her. Her eyes closed and a soft purr of happiness escaped when she eagerly responded. "I'm sorry I pushed you away." Her eyes flickered back open as a hand cupped the side of her face.

"It's alright, I understand why you did it." Alesia brushed her thumb over Thira's lower lip. She fought back the sudden surge of lust that hit her when Thira drew it into her mouth while her tongue caressed it. She cleared her throat while gently pulling back her hand; she caught the wicked glint in Thira's eyes before she could hide it. "You little minx, you'll pay for that."

A smirk twisted Thira's lips as she restrained a laugh at her mate's expense. "Gladly." She slipped her hand over Alesia's and lightly squeezed it while they turn their attention back to the Goddess.

"Your father has taken the fact that the gifts he was blessed with when he joined with your mother was a divine sign that he was to be more than his chosen's mate. I believe when he found out he was stronger than an ordinary man it only reinforced that same idea."

"But don't all the partners of clan get gifted?" Tera started to see where this was headed.

"To some degree, yes they do. All get an increase of strength but there are times when it is more than that." Potnia Theron had hoped at one time that this story wouldn't need to be told.

"For instance?" Panter asked.

"Both of you and your partner's, are clan but only a very few get picked by me as my Chosen, hence the name. You are selected above all others and as such are an extension of my power. The gifts your mate's receive are greater than what is normally received. The strength that they now have will nearly rival your own, they are also far more agile than they once were which will aid them in their fighting. I'm sure you've already noticed such a difference?"

Alesia and Tera both nodded in agreement. They had seen a significant change in the quality of their skills. As their confidence had grown so too did their proficiency. That left their partner's free to aid everyone else instead of continually watching their backs in a fight.

"He did realize that all the other's had the same gifts didn't he?" Thira was getting a bad feeling about where this conversation was heading. She shifted in her seat as the sense of dread grew. She glanced over as a hand rested on her shoulder and clasped it soothingly. Thira met Panter's gaze and relaxed at the look of encouragement that she read in them.

"Yes, but you must understand that the gifts only increase what you already have. He was stronger than most already so he was only more so after the bonding. He took that as a fact of his divine right."

"All right, so why did my mother leave with me and not remain with him?" Panter was still missing a few pieces to this unusual puzzle her life had become.

"You must understand I was unaware of it at the time this was all happening, it was much later that I became cognizant of what happened. I found out then that she'd slowly grown aware of his obsession for power. He had begun to rage about how it was unfair that the women were the only ones that were blessed by me. He truly believed he should have received it also. When she became pregnant with you, he announced that if she had anything but a son he would slay it and simply try again. At the time, she didn't take what he had said seriously thinking he would learn to accept it as something that couldn't be changed. When she gave birth to you he'd attempted to carry out his oath and kill you. Weak though she was your mother easily overpowered him and left with you. You were only a few hours old when you both departed the village for the last time." The Goddess disliked telling her chosen the truth of her birth but knew the story had to be told. It was the moment that had forced her start to pay closer attention to the people she was responsible for instead of neglecting them as she'd had in the past. Before she could attempt to correct her error, the damage had been done and she could only watch the results. She'd had tried to help in small ways when she was able to. The only good thing that had come out of all that had been her taking the opportunity to gently guide them both here to ultimately meet their unique partners.

"Then she met the man who became my human father." Panter removed her hand from Thira's shoulder and clasped them together in her lap. "Who, when he found out what we were hiding from him, killed her and attempted to kill me."

"Yes." Sorrow filled eyes watched as Tera tried to comfort her partner.

"But my mother was still with him when I left. How did she not see that he was possessed with such a lust for power?" Thira rubbed her forehead; the frustration she was beginning to feel was slowly turning into a massive headache. "Although truth be told, I was more concerned with gaining his approval at the time and didn't realize it until now. If I look back the signs were surely there, I just either didn't see them or ignored them all together." Her hand clenched into a fist. "I could have prevented this all if I'd only seen what was right in front of me." She silently berated herself for not paying attention to everything that had been around her even if it included her blood relation.

The Goddess shook her head. "I suspect that by that time with his original gifts he'd gotten very good at concealing it. When Panter's mother left him, he simply moved to another village and tried again. That's when he met your mother Thira." She met their stares of disbelief with a sense of poignant self-irony. "I tend not to interfere in a bonding unless it affects one of my chosen. As your mother wasn't one of them, it wasn't imperative that I actually be present to bless the bonding. I didn't see any aura of evil in him so I didn't object to it and with the bonding automatically comes a certain amount of gifting."

Thira's mouth tightened as her brows furrowed. "Wait a minute, are you telling me he's been gifted twice?"

"Regrettably yes, if I had realized that he'd already been gifted he wouldn't have received another. That's why I'm so careful now, I don't want something like that happening again."

"You couldn't have just fixed it?"

Potnia Theron was already shaking her head before the question was finished. "No, a gifting cannot be removed once it has taken place. It's more to prevent other deity's from interfering with it than for me, but it holds the same purpose regardless of who gave it to you in the first place."

"So he became even more powerful. I take it that just reinforced his delusion?" Panter asked. The picture was getting clearer with every word the Goddess spoke.

"Just after Thira's departure he announced his status as a Demi God and started to gather his own worshipers among the humans. He knew that the clans would be a threat to his power so he began to systematically turn the human against them more and more. It started with just a word here and there but has steadily gotten worse. I've been protecting them as much as I can until now and will continue to do so, but the head needs to be removed from this viper that has struck at the very heart of the people that I cherish the most. In the quest for even more power he has followed Thira here confident that by now she's hunted down the one other person that could have stopped him from gaining influence over these people and that his daughter would have died in the fight, effectively taking care of the only other one that was a possible threat to him." The Goddess frowned. "It was dire enough that numerous clans have already been scattered from the utter intolerance that has started to spread in that region."

"But how did he even know to send Thira here in the first place?" That was something Tera had never understood, out of all the places Panter could have fled to how did he happen to guess the right one to send Thira to.

"Pure rumor." Thira answered. "We just followed the tale of a dark colored changeling that had escaped capture. Add that to a tall dark woman who had recently set sail to this land and it was easy to deduce that it was more than likely that they were both one and the same. So, I simply followed her here to end up in Hawk's Peak. You know the story from there."

"So it was like I drew you a map that led straight to me. That must have been helpful." Panter replied irony heavy in her voice.

Thira smirked. "Pretty much."

The laughter that broke out helped to relax the tension that had steadily built up during the serious discussion.

"So essentially, your telling us that you can't stop what he's doing because you would be interfering in some way?" Tera's query immediately caused the laughter to die out.

The merriness in the Goddess expression disappeared. "Yes, my hands in this instance are tied. There is very little I myself can do to prevent what is occurring from happening."

Thira's eyes narrowed as she figured it out at last. "But as your chosen we can. We'll just have to

prevent our own father from fulfilling his plans of conquering this land."

Potnia Theron's nod of agreement caused an immediate uproar as everyone tried to speak over each other. Once again, Thira and Panter clapped their hands over their ears to muffle the rising clamor. They exchanged a disbelieving glance with each other. This stuff just had to stop happening.

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Tera leaned back against the pillows with a small sigh of relief. With the emotional turmoil they'd gone through today she felt like she'd fought a war all by herself. She pulled the covers up to her waist and watched Panter stow her weapons and undress for bed. "I still can't believe that Thira's really your sister."

Panter paused then continued to remove the last of her clothes. "I know it's a little weird to think of her like that." Padding around the room, she extinguished the last of the lights before making her way back to the bed and climbing in beside Tera. "The way everything's come together as it has is a little disconcerting when you think about it."

"True, but even if it is, you've at least gained a sister out of it. Anyway you think about it, that has to be a plus." Tera smiled. She liked Thira's sass and the way she seemed so sure of herself, well with anything that had to do with fighting. Personal relationships, she needed a bit of practice with.

Panter pulled Tera into her arms and nuzzled her hair. The sweet smell helped to relax the coil of worry that had balled up in the pit of her stomach. "Hmm, I suppose your right."

Silence drifted over the room for a time before Tera broke it. "Are you worried about having to fight your father?" She waited quietly when she didn't receive an immediate answer. The surface she rested on rose as her partner breathed in deeply and then slowly released it.

"Worried, no not for me at any rate. Thira is the one that grew up with him, she's the one that it's going to bother." Panter tightened her arms around Tera. The man I knew as my father tried to kill me and did kill my mother. This other one that I've been told is my real father is simply a stranger that needs to be stopped."

"I'm concerned with how it's going to effect Thira." Tera closed her eyes and pressed closer to Panter's warmth.

"All we can do is watch out for her and do what needs to be done." Panter kissed the top of Tera's head. "Go to sleep tomorrow we need to arrange for the remaining prisoners to be taken back to Hawk's Peak."

"At least its only about a hundred or so instead of almost a thousand." Tera mumbled sleepily. She yawned tiredly as her body finally relaxed into sleep.

"True." A purr gradually rose in Panter's chest as the warmth of their embrace chased her into her dreams. The only sound that broke the stillness inside the tent was the muffled pace of the sentries on duty.

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## Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.  
Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.  
Email address: [thubbar2@insight.rr.com](mailto:thubbar2@insight.rr.com).- comments welcome.

### Chapter 19

Panter watched with a growing sense of disgust while Thira interrogated their prisoner. How this sniveling pile of crap was related to Tera was something she couldn't fathom. She leaned back in her seat; they had pulled Doran in for a chat first thing this morning. She glanced outside, it was almost noon, and what they had gotten from him wasn't enough to help them. Panter turned her attention back to the matter at hand when voices rose.

"C'mon, you've already lost so stop trying to hide things from us and just spit it out already!"

Thira moved closer to the man sweating in the chair. The stench of fear that wafted from his body made her upper lip curl, exposing an incisor. She slowly circled his chair as she considered her next move. She had to give the man some credit, he hadn't totally rolled over, even the info they did get had been of little value. Thira leaned over his shoulder while trying to keep her roiling stomach in check, with her heightened senses his body odor was offensive.

"All right then, let's start off easy. Your boss is at Doslan correct?"

Doran jumped as the low voice growled the query into his ear. For some reason the woman that was asking the questions made him more nervous than the dark woman that was studying him so closely. He cast a glance over toward his cousin to see her calmly tapping a pen on the table while idly watching what was going on in front of her. He jumped again as the woman behind him spoke once more.

"I asked you a question worm, it's in your best interests to answer it."

"Yes." He squeaked. Doran cleared his throat then tried again. "Yes, Yes he's at Doslan." A hand patted him on the shoulder like he was some sort of disobedient pet; he flinched as the nails on it caught his eye. The sharp claws that adorned it could just as easily rip into his flesh then take the time to ask him questions. He frowned a bit at the sight of them as suspicion started to raise its head.

"Very good." Thira squeezed his shoulder a bit harder then moved around to face him. "That wasn't so difficult now, was it?" She watched the hesitant headshake he gave with an impassive face. For a brief moment she wished Alesia was here but she'd needed to get their new recruits integrated into their ranks before they were pulled into another fight. She tapped a clawed fingertip against her lower lip. "Tell me about your ex leader Doran. I've been told he's a Demi God, is that true?" A twisted smile broke over their prisoner's face at the question.

"He is." Doran drew on the strength that flowed through him at the thought of the subject. "He told me he knew I was the true Regent and if I lent my army to him he would make sure I would take back my rightful position over the people of Hawk's Peak."

Thira snorted in amusement. "I find that unlikely considering the true Regents of Hawk's Peak are in this room." She replied while motioning to Tera and Panter.

Doran's face flushed red when what she'd said finally sank in. "Regents!" He moved to stand but was slammed back into his chair by the hand that grabbed his shoulder. He glared at his cousin while he panted heavily with rising anger. "It was bad enough that you actually trusted her but you married that abomination too?" Doran cleared his throat and spat toward Tera. "The only thing good enough for that kind of garbage is a quick death." Pain exploded across his face just as he finished. Blinking rapidly to clear the tears of pain that rose in his eyes he sucked in a breath as he was snatched from his seat. He could feel it when his feet left the floor, leaving him to dangle helplessly in midair in the harsh grip that held him by the collar of his shirt.

"Abomination is it?" Thira drew him closer to her and glared into his shocked eyes. "Last time I looked, we were a clan that had been blessed by the Goddess Portia Theron. So to me, our Goddess outranks your measly Demi God." She drew her lips back into a cruel smile that revealed both incisors. Thira let her eyes augment to help make her point clear.

Doran paled as he tried to pull back from the face that loomed over his. "You're one too?" He winced as he hit the floor when the woman threw him in the general direction of his chair. Shakily, he used the legs to pull himself back onto his feet and sat back down. Doran could almost feel their eyes burning into him. He glowered at Tera. "Surrounding yourself with them aren't you?" he spat bitterly.

Tera laid her pen carefully on the table. She suddenly felt sorry for him. "What happened to you Doran. The boy I remember was never like this, he eagerly explored the city and all its surrounding providences with me. He loved discovering new things and never judged people on

external appearances."

Doran sneered at her flowery feel good words. "He finally grew up into a man. I realized power was the only thing worth having and I wanted as much as I could get. So when you weren't there when your father died I seized the chance it presented and took over as Regent. After that it was simply the task to find then kill you so there wouldn't be anyone left to challenge my hold on Hawk's Peak."

Tera shook her head. "And this is where you ended up because of it." She felt sad for the loss of the boy she once knew, but she loathed the man he'd grown up to be.

"I ended up here because you couldn't stay dead when I killed you." he replied hotly.

Panther moved toward the smug man rapidly. "I will not allow you to speak to my mate like that again." She stopped in mid step as a hand pressed firmly against her chest. She gave her sister an inquiring look but was only answered by a small shake of her head. Panther would have vehemently protested but she could see the anger that burned in the eyes watching her and stepped back with a nod of assent.

Doran scoffed at her angry words. "Mate, that word certainly fits. My cousin is sleeping with an animal after all."

Thira walked over and studied the man in front of her. She forced down the need to rip his throat out but they wanted what information he had. "We're straying from our purpose. None of this matters and I'm finished playing your little games." Reaching out she grabbed his shoulder and dug her claws in. She smiled with contentment as he screamed in pain and the coppery scent of blood reached her nostrils. "You will tell us what we want to know or I will draw your death out for a *very* long time. And right now I'm in the mood to make it a mighty messy one."

Pain seemed to deflate Doran's veneer of arrogance. "Let go," He pleaded, "I'll tell you what you want to know I swear it. Just don't hurt me again"

Thira gradually released her hold on him then stepped back. "We'll see."  
She casually flicked the blood off her claws before continuing the questioning. Thira caught the chiding look Tera shot her at her thoughtless action and tilted her head in apology. "Your so called Demi god, what's his name?"

"Aniketos, the god of vengeance." Doran pressed a hand against his bloody shoulder to try to stop the slow trickles of blood that were running down his arm.

Thira frowned and shot a glance in Panther and Tera's direction. She shook her head at their questioning looks. That wasn't her father's name. But then again what would stop him from changing it to whatever he liked. "The unconquerable is it. Well to me, it seems as if we've been kicking his ass around so far. I believe he might want to consider about doing a name change soon." She exchanged a grim smile with her sister before bringing her gaze back to Doran. Her smile broadened at his defiant stare. "Be angry as much as you wish, but it won't change the fact



that we're handing your head back on a platter every time we meet." Thira's eyes went cold. "Are there plans for another attack anytime soon?"

Doran considered not answering then saw a clawed hand start to reach toward him from the corner of his eye. "No, he was confident that we would annihilate you with the forces he sent." He relaxed slightly when the hand withdrew.

"He won't question it when no one arrives back at Doslan?" Tera asked suddenly.

Doran slowly shook his head. "No, the one thing I know about for sure is that Aniketos won't care if every man he sends ends up dead. As long as the enemy dies with them, he'll consider it an acceptable cost of life. He gives me the impression that he cares more about that damn skin he takes with him everywhere he goes than the lives of my men."

Thira's eyes widened slightly at Doran comment while her stomach churned with sudden tension. "Skin?"

"As annoying as he is about it, I have to say it's a nice one. He let me touch it once and I've never felt fur softer than that before." Doran was so involved with the memory he didn't see the quick exchange of looks or Panter's step toward Thira that ended at the brisk shake of her head.

"Describe it." Thira demanded. She had a horrible feeling that she knew what he was going to say.

"It was a light tan color about this size." Doran held his arms out by his sides to help describe what he was talking about. He sucked in a quick breath as his injured shoulder protested the motion.

Thira started to relax a bit at the description even though the size he was talking about could have been an adult animal. The sense of relief vanished as he went on.

"What was a little unusual about it was that it had these dark marks on it. You just don't see anything like that around here." Even though he didn't know why the woman in front of him had suddenly turned so pale, the look of distress on her face pleased him.

"Like this?" Thira turned around and pulled up her top so he could see the spots that ran down her spine.

"Yeah, just like that." Doran smirked as he started to add it all together. "So it must have been one of your buddies huh?" He laughed. "That's one less waste of space we'll need to worry about."

Dropping her shirt, Thira twisted around and lunged straight for him. That someone was laughing about the source of the pain that had taken hold of her was too much. Thira snarled with fury when she was yanked back from her target.

"Thira, no!"

Doran jerked backwards at the abrupt attack. His face went white as clawed hands swiped just past his nose. His eyes went wide at the sight of the struggle that was going on in front of him. The muscles in the arms of the dark woman bulged with exertion as she tried to keep hold of the other woman who was trying to get free.

"Let me go, I'm going to kill that son of a bitch!" Thira briefly broke free from the arms that were wrapped around her waist. Just as she sprang at the cowering man, she was grabbed again.

"No Thira, we need him." Panter glared at Doran while he straightened back up with a smug look of disdain on his face. She felt a surge of satisfaction as the look disappeared at her next words. "For now." She pulled Thira against herself more securely when she felt the trembling that abruptly taken place of the mounting rage. Her own heart fell at the good possibility that Thira might indeed know the former owner of that pelt.

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Alesia turned rapidly at the sound of the rising clamor that sounded as if it was close by the tent. She'd just finished combining several of the companies to incorporate the new bodies that had switched to their side. Thankfully, most had been their own men that had been station in several of the smaller towns as guards, so it hadn't been too difficult to get the other militia to accept them into the squads where she placed them. She started toward the door to find out what was going on when Thira lunged through the opening and dived into her arms. Alesia could feel the tremors that shook the lean body pressed against hers and started to get upset.

"Thira, what's wrong. Why are you shaking so hard?" Alesia eased them both down onto the low couch and pulled her partner close. She felt the air from Thira's distressed panting beat against her throat. She allowed the silence that answered her to spread unbroken throughout their shelter. Alesia was confident that Thira would let her know what was wrong when she was ready so she was content to stay silent until then. Alesia repetitively ran her hand gently down Thira's back hoping that the rhythm of it would sooth her a little.

Gradually the tremors ebbed to an occasional few. When Thira moved to sit up and Alesia let her go. Distraught eyes reluctantly met hers. Alesia cupped the side of Thira's face in her hand. "Can you tell me what's wrong?" She watched in disappointment as Thira turned her gaze away from hers. "If there's anything I can do, you know I will."

Thira gnawed at her lower lip before answer her partner. "We found out that my father has been carrying a pelt with him." She looked back at Alesia to see a small crease start to appear between her brows. "He described it as being light tan with black spots."

"Just like you do when you're in your other form." Alesia hesitated before continuing. "Do you think that's what it is, another shape shifter?"

Thira slowly nodded. "That's the only reason I can think of that my father would have for

keeping it in his possession like he is" She took a deep breath. " I think I might know who it belonged to." Thira's eyes filled with tears as she considered the odds that she might be right.

Alesia gripped Thira's hand firmly, the look of sorrow that came over her face was heartbreaking. She started to get an idea of what Thira might say. "Who?"

"I think it's my mother."

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Alesia guided her horse to the side to allow a column of Amazons to ride by. She responded to the respectful salute they gave with a solemn nod. Less than a day had passed after Thira had told her of what went on in the discussion with Doran, that they'd started their march toward Doslan. Tera's cousin had been sent back to Hawk's Peak under heavy guard to await trial for treason and any other charges they could come up with until then. Alesia's mouth firmed, a sentence of death would be to good for him, and she wanted him to suffer as much as possible for what he'd done to Thira and the others. She touched her heels to her horse's sides and increased her speed. It would take them a few days at least to reach their goal; Alesia turned her gaze to the forest of trees that ran alongside their chosen route. Thira had needed some time alone after telling her and had slipped out of her arms and into the nearby woods. Alesia had spent a mostly sleepless night alone before forcing herself up and starting on the first of the many tasks that had needed to be completed before they'd left. She pushed aside the feeling of distress that arose at the thought of Thira distancing herself from her like she had.

Alesia was pulled from her thoughts as her horse snorted then sidestepped restlessly as the brush close by them rustled with movement. She gripped the hilt of her sword as she watched the source of the noise. Alesia tensed and half drew the blade as the noise steadily grew and the branches abruptly parted. A large spotted cat loped down the slight incline and settled into an effortless run beside her mount. Amber eyes locked with brown for a moment before she slid the blade back into the scabbard with a slight click. "You startled me." She smiled as the head close to her knee bumped against her leg in soundless apology. Luckily, her horse knew Thira's scent in this form and was calmly ignoring the powerful shape that was pacing alongside it. "Are you alright?"

A ripple passed over the long body before the cats' head seemed to nod in answer to her question. For a moment Alesia envied the connection Tera and Panter had. But she was grateful for the love she shared with her partner. She leaned over to the side and stroked Thira on her head between her ears. A rough tongue licked her hand in response to the affectionate touch. Alesia caught the sidelong looks the sight of the big cat beside her gathered. After all that happened lately most knew of the relationship she had with the shape shifter. If anything, it was as if they respected her more then they did before, now her orders were immediately acted upon instead of the slight hesitation that had seemed to be present before. For whatever reason Alesia was grateful that everything was settling into place, they had enough to worry about with the situation they were riding toward. Movement beside her attracted her attention, she watched with a renew sense of awe as her partner shifted to her human form. Barely a step was lost until Thira was running beside her on foot; she still kept pace with the trotting horse with no sign of strain.

"I shouldn't have left you like that last night." Thira remained surefooted even though her attention was more turned to Alesia than the ground passing below her feet. She could see the lingering unhappiness that her mate was trying to hide from her. She cursed herself silently; she'd pretty much pushed Alesia away at a time when she'd needed her the most. Thira took in her surroundings absently as she pondered over the huge mistake she'd made. She turned her head to look at Alesia. "Even with being together as long as we have, I reacted like I didn't have anyone there for me. I was a fool to believe that I could deal with this without you." She took a deep breath then braced herself for the response to what she'd say next. "Sometimes the knowledge of how much I need you scares me to death." Thira felt completely exposed after having said that. Even despite the fact that in the deepest part of her heart she knew Alesia loved her, it was still a scary moment for her. A rush of warmth hit her suddenly and her eyes widened slightly at the smile that appeared on Alesia's face. Thira had a hard time understanding why Alesia could be so forgiving to her, but right now, she was just grateful that she was.

Alesia held out her hand. "I need you just as much, but don't do that to me again, it felt as if you'd rejected me and I didn't like that feeling." When Thira reached up and twined her fingers together with hers, she gave their clasped hands a small tug. "Come up here with me I want you close for a while."

Thira smiled broadly. Taking a longer stride, she pushed off with her next step and landed neatly in the saddle behind Alesia. She smirked as the horse protested the abrupt action with a snort of alarm but quickly settled back into his pace. As Thira wrapped her arms around Alesia's waist, she felt a hand rest itself on her right leg. Thira caressed the firm stomach that lie under her fingers and felt the shiver that shook Alesia's frame. She buried her nose in Alesia's thick hair that for once lay loose over her broad shoulders. A low rumble rose in Thira's throat as the intoxicating scent of her mate wrapped itself around her. The rocking of the horse along with the brush of her pelvis against Alesia made her tighten her grip around her partner's waist. A surge of heat burst through her veins as tremors of pleasure unexpectedly seized her. Thira rested her head on Alesia's shoulder as she tried to gather her scattered senses back together. A chuckle broke free as she realized what had happened. A hand rubbed her thigh gently in response.

"Feeling better now?" Alesia knew exactly what had happened behind her. The growl that had drifted to her ears along with the motion against her hips had swiftly clued her in. A glance around had shown her that they were carefully being ignored by the troops that rode nearby. Right then she was grateful for their high sense of propriety. A smile bent her lips at the picture of what Thira's face looked like right now. As passionate as her partner was she wasn't the type to do things like this out in the open.

"Ah yeah, sorry about that." Thira lifted her head and looked to the side. An amazon that rode close by caught her eye and smiled at her. Thira raised an eyebrow in bemusement and shook her head. She turned her attention back to Alesia as her hand patted her leg in response.

"I'm just sorry I missed it." Alesia felt as much as heard the snort of laughter her comment brought. She turned the conversation to something a little more serious. "Do you think that pelt is really your mother?" Alesia held her breath not sure how Thira was going to take the change of

subject.

Thira was a bit startled at the abrupt change of topic but could understand why Alesia was asking. "I'm not sure, the thought of my father killing my mother and then... skinning her like that sickens me."

Alesia could easily understand that. The thought of the woman who had given her Thira being treated like that enraged her, and she'd never even met her. Alesia would regret never being able to meet her. To learn about how Thira was when she'd been a child would've been nice. She dismissed that small fantasy and turned her focus back to the conversation at hand. She laid a supportive hand on the ones that were wrapped around her waist. "Your father will pay for what he's done. Even if this war wasn't going on I would kill him just for taking your mother away from you."

As the utter silence behind her dragged on Alesia guided her horse out of the main artery of traffic and halted on the top of a ledge that jutted from the earth close by. She gazed down upon her unit as they continued to march on without them. They were swiftly replaced as company after company followed them. For a moment, the only sound that was heard was the dull thudding of hooves impacting the earth and the jingling of tack as the army continued to flow past.

"You would do that for me?" Thira's voice broke toward the end of the question as if she wasn't sure she should ask.

Alesia slid from the saddle and looked up at her partner. "Thira" Alesia paused then rested a hand on her thigh. The muscled leg flexed at the unexpected touch. "I would do that and more."

Thira glanced down at the fingers that were unconsciously caressing her leg. Reaching a hand out she covered them and weaved their fingers together. Tightening her grip, she studied the face that was looking up at her from below. Coffee colored eyes met hers intently so she could easily read the seriousness of her assertion. "Thank you." Thira could see the slight confusion that remark caused as Alesia's pupils expanded slightly.

"For what?" Alesia knew that her puzzlement at the comment showed on her face. Her eyes fluttered closed when Thira bent and trailed her hand down the side of her face. Her mouth went dry as she felt her breath waft over her lips while she spoke.

"For being here, for loving me as you do. For being willing to take retribution on my father for my sake." Thira couldn't stop herself from kissing the soft lips so close to hers. A purr rose in her throat as Alesia responded to her action with fervor. She reluctantly pulled away from the source of the passion that tried to suck her in with its powerful undertow. "I know I don't deserve you but I thank the Goddess for every moment that we're together."

Alesia opened her eyes and studied the striking face that hovered over her. She quietly traced the features of the woman who had become the center of her world. She'd never expected to have the silent hope that had slowly died inside herself to ever be realized. After she'd seen the happiness

Panter and Tera had together, the absolute closeness they'd been blessed with and the solidity of a bond that they'd absolutely known would last the rest of their lives she had grown envious but had tried her utmost to hide that from everyone. Then Thira had shown up and everything she'd finally accepted for her lot in life had rapidly spun out of control. She'd fought against the pull from her attraction to the feral woman as hard as she could thinking that there would never be a chance for them given Thira's loathing and mistrust of anyone human. The pain and anger that had passed between them only made the situation that much worse. Alesia could still clearly remember the moment it had all changed. She'd seen the naked expression of longing and need in the eyes that had stared at her and knew without a doubt that her own showed the same. "As do I."

Thira squeezed the hand enclosed in her own then released it. "We should go, we have a long day ahead of us if we want to arrive at Doslan in a reasonable amount of time." She slid back in the saddle a bit so Alesia could remount. "I have a looming appointment with my father when I get there." Her eyes grew brighter as she considered the response of her appearing suddenly in front of her father.

Alesia gathered the reins in her hands. Turning the horse, she kicked it into a gallop to catch up with her unit. "I believe what you meant to say was that we have a date with your father." She said knowing that her partner could hear her words clearly even with the wind that whipped by them. "Right?"

Thira's canines flashed as she smiled. "Yes, we do." Thira settled against Alesia's back and absorbed her heat with relish as they rode. She pushed her father out of mind for the moment and focused on the here and now.

Later was soon enough for everything to go belly up, she didn't want it to start any sooner then it needed too.

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## Panter's Pride: Hunted

by T. S. Hubbard

Disclaimer It's still mine. Note: [Panter's Pride](#) must be read first, as this is book 2.

Thanks to Thorie for volunteering to proofread yet another story.

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## Chapter 20

Panter looked down on the harbor below with a slight frown. Ignoring the sounds of the camp being set up behind her, she swept her gaze over the area again. She glanced to the side as someone joined her. "How are things going?"

Thira's brow furrowed as she took in the sight before her. "Everything's going fine." She said absently. "Is it just me or are things a little more dead down there than normal?"

Panter made a sound of agreement. "I was thinking the same thing. When I arrived here things were so busy it was hard to think with so much noise."

"Even when I got here it was certainly more active than this." Thira's pupils widened as she focused on the ships that were anchored in the bay bringing them into easy view. "Well that answers that question. The only ships down there are built for warfare, there isn't a single merchant ship in the bunch."

Panter almost envied Thira's gift of acuity. To have something like that would have been very helpful at times. She shrugged inwardly. There were some things she had that Thira didn't so she figured in the end things were about even. Panter turned her attention back to the matter at hand. "That would certainly keep anyone away." She studied her sister silently for a moment. "I'm sorry about your mother." She said quietly.

Thira stiffened at the remark. She had hoped that Panter wouldn't mention it but knew that eventually it would come up. "I'm not sure if it's her or not." She snapped back harshly. Thira realized that Panter didn't deserve the sharp tone she'd used but the ball of rage that had formed in her stomach at Doran's announcement refused to go away. "I need that pelt to be absolutely sure and my father is the only one that has it."

Panter started to say something then stopped. She'd been there when her own mother was killed so she knew without a doubt that she was gone. Thira on the other hand didn't have that, and most of the time the not knowing was worse. "Then we'll get it from him so you'll know for sure."

Thira met her sister's gaze but didn't comment. She turned back to the city beneath them to continue her scrutiny. Her gaze locked onto the large manor that hugged the cliff side to the west of the docks. A huge reinforced wall of stone surrounded it on all sides eventually meshing with the rock face itself. Lips slowly drew back in a sneer of amusement. Rocks were even easier to scale than wood; there were all kinds of helpful nooks and crannies to aid you in your endeavor. "He has to be there."

Panter studied the structure that had drawn Thira's attention. "Most likely." She dismissed the building for now and turned back to the ships that were moored in the harbor. "But first we need to take care of those ships."

"Do you want them sailable or would you rather they be scuttled?" Thira started to follow

Panter's line of thinking. If they took care of the ships now, no one would be able to flee once the attack got started. Sharp teeth flashed at that thought, especially her father.

Panter looked over the group of five ships. "Scuttle all of them except the one with the scarlet sails. Disable it, we might have use for it later." Something inside told her to hold on to one of them for some reason. It was an easy thing to do so she didn't bother mulling it over for long.

Thira arched a brow at the odd request but shrugged. "Consider it done."

Panter turned to thank Thira for her help but the space beside her was already empty. She bit back a laugh at the sight. When Thira was intent on getting something done, she certainly didn't waste any time. Panter shook her head in fond exasperation as she started toward the camp. She had to meet up with Tera and the others to begin planning their offensive.

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Claws scraped against stone as a lean form flattened itself against the rough surface when footsteps sounded from above their head. No sound was made as the man leaned out over the edge of the wall to search for the source of the odd noise before they withdrew and rejoined their waiting partner with a shrug and a mutter of nothing there.

Thira relaxed slightly as the footsteps faded away. She had been in almost the same position since dusk had fallen to time the guards that patrolled the walls. Enough of them had gone by to know there was a brief gap every second round they could take advantage of. She would much rather have gone in and taken care of her father on her own, but between the promise she had made to her partner and the persistence of her sister, she'd given her word she would wait until they all could be there with her.

A faint noise from below made her look down. Despite the inky darkness, she saw the beckoning gesture from Alesia. Making sure that the coast was clear above she descended as rapidly as she could. Long stalks of grass brushed against her bare ankles while she accepted a quick embrace from Alesia before turning to the others that were patiently waiting for her report. "There's a space of about a quarter of a candle mark that we can use to get in." She said softly. Thira caught the quick frown of worry that crossed Panter's face at the news. "I was up there for awhile and that's the absolute most we have so we'll have to be quick about it."

Panter nodded. "Alright then." Glancing up at the shadowed moon she calculated that the militia assigned to the ships should be taking care of them soon. Unfortunately, unlike Tylan, the trees that bordered the castle had been cut so far back that even with the amazons' bows they wouldn't be able to reach the top of the walls. They had decided instead to attempt to slip over the walls with a unit to support them. She tilted her head back and gazed up toward where the top of the wall would have been if it were light enough to see. In the pitch-blackness, it seemed to go on forever.

"We need to get moving." Thira quickly rechecked her knife harness for any loose blades that could possibly give them away if one fell. Turning to her partner, she adjusted the sword



strapped to her back to make sure it was secured. She turned back to the waiting group. "Check your gear before you begin your climb up, understand?" She didn't care if the Regents were standing there or not, she was going to make sure that no one was going to put them at risk by their stupidity. "I won't tolerate any mistakes."

A random beam of moonlight fell across Thira's face as she spoke. When it hit her eyes, the reflected glimmer they gave off caused a chill to run down the soldier's spines. They hastily checked their gear again without a word of protest.

Thira took the offered coils of rope and slung them across her body for easier climbing. Turning to face the rock wall, she took a deep breath and shook her hands out to help prevent them from cramping. Digging her nails into a seam just above her head, she pulled herself up. She dug in clawed feet as she ascended; she'd had to shift enough to use them to help so her body had ended up being covered in a thin pelt. Thira had received several startled looks before she'd attempted her first climb but nothing had been said aloud about it. She smiled as she remembered the expression on her mates face when she'd reached out to touch the fine layer of fur. She shook the memory away before it distracted her. Thira cursed under her breath as a piece of the wall unexpectedly broke off from underneath her feet. For a long horrifying moment, her full weight was supported by only one hand before she was able to grab hold of the wall again. Thira rested her head against the stone as she panted for breath; she wiped the film of sweat the fear had caused on her brow against her arm before she resumed climbing. Several moments later, she reached the top and stilled at the sound of approaching footsteps. A small stone crumbled from beneath her hand, a slight rattle rose as it bounced off the wall further down before disappearing below. Thira waited quietly hoping that the noise didn't draw the man's attention.

"What the Hades...what do you think your doing?" The man started straightening up while he spoke.

Thira cursed silently before reaching up and grabbing the man by the throat before he could call out an alarm. She dug in her claws hard, a gurgle escaped his mouth as blood cascaded down her arm and splashed across her face. Thira growled in disgust before yanking him over and tossing him away from her. She tried to make it far enough out that the body wouldn't hit anyone when it landed down below. She waited to make sure the coast was clear before pulling herself over the edge.

Thira took a quick look around then spotted two metal rings that had been set into the wall opposite her position. The soot that surrounded them easily identified them as torch holders but they were vacant now making them ideal for her purpose. She tugged on the rings to make sure they were secure before taking the coils of rope off. Tying one end of both ropes to them, she moved over to where she'd climbed up and dropped them down the side of the wall. A smile flickered over her lips as she heard the soft curse that drifted up from below; someone had been standing too close and had obviously gotten hit by the plummeting ropes. *Moron, never stand close to a wall when someone's above you.* Thira pulled her boots from beneath her belt. Shifting back to her human form she tugged them on then rested a hand on each rope, as they grew taut.

In moments, Panter had reached the top and joined her. Alesia and Tera swiftly followed behind.

They crouched down and attempted to stay out of the flickering torchlight that lit the walkways several feet down on either side. Time seemed to slow as they all waited with a burning sense of impatience for the rest of the group to join them. Once everyone was up, Thira moved to the wall the ropes were tied off to and glanced over its edge. No light broke the blackness below the interior wall. Rather than taking a chance going through the lighted areas to their destination she preferred to stay concealed as much as possible. Springing onto the top of the wall Thira pulled two daggers free, giving her mate a quick look she quirked a grin then leapt into the darkness below.

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Tera took a step forward as Thira disappeared. She exchanged a glance with Alesia and could see the worry that lined her face. Before she could say anything Panter interrupted her. "It's safe to drop the lines over the side now."

Tera turned to see Panter at the spot where Thira had jumped and watching the ground beneath it intently. She motioned for two of the militia to do as Panter asked then moved up beside her. "Did we have company?"

Panter nodded. "Thira took care of them." She didn't say anything for a moment then continued. "You know she does things that we could possibly never do ourselves."

"I know." Tera laid a hand on her partner's arm. She could feel the tension that fairly vibrated from her body. She knew that all her instincts were on a hair trigger and ready to pounce at the slightest provocation that came along next. "We owe her a great deal." Tera looked over as movement beside her caught her attention. Alesia had taken hold of one of the ropes and was in the process of lowering herself down the other side to the ground. "We'll talk about it later after all this is finally over with." Moving over she pulled herself onto the lip of the wall and grabbing a rope made her way down to join her friends.

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Thira grasped her partner's waist as she neared the ground. Moving them both to the side so the remaining members of their group could arrive she hugged her close. Even with her previous life of an assassin, there were times when all the killing bothered her. She knew logically most of it was the love of the hunt, it was a part of her nature that would never go away but there were moments when she wondered how Alesia could stay with someone whose whole being was saturated with the stench of blood. Letting Alesia go, she studied the bodies of the two men she'd killed then moved her gaze to their blood that still covered her hands. Thira lifted her head when arms slipped around her waist from behind.

"I love you." Alesia could tell where Thira's thoughts were heading when she stood there staring at her hands. "All of you Thira, no matter what happens I'll always be here for you." She pressed a kiss against the nearby shoulder and felt the muscles under her lips flex in startlement at her action.

Thira questioned her move even as she gripped the hands that rested on her abdomen. She relaxed inwardly when Alesia didn't abruptly pull away from her touch. At this moment she began to understand that Alesia knew full well who and what she was but had meant it when she said she'd be there for the rest of her life. It brought a subject up that she'd wanted to talk to her about but this wasn't the time or place for it. "I love you too." She tightened her grip then slipped free from Alesia's embrace to face her. "More then you'll ever know."

Alesia felt a flutter in the pit of her stomach at the words. She focused on the objective they were here for when the rest of their group descended. Alesia took Thira's boots when she offered then watched as she shifted and climbed back up the wall. Seconds later the ropes dropped into a pile and Thira was back down and pulling her boots back on. After hiding them in a likely spot, they continued to make their way across to the spot they'd hoped the gate room was located. Just before they reached it, flashes of light blossomed in the sky and they could hear the crackling of flames along with the smell of hot oil. Shouts of alarm drew running forms their way as the soldiers made their way toward the source of the blaze. She drew her sword as Panter and Thira forced the door open, they slipped into the unlocked room and shut the door just as pounding feet rounded the corner.

"Good, they have a drawbridge style system." Panter motioned her sister in the direction of one of the large ropes that ran into the room while she walked over to the other. "We need to cut them." She raised an eyebrow in surprise when Thira shook her head and stepped back from the cable. "What are you doing?"

"My weapons cannot cut something that large in one pass, it needs a sword and that's not something I'm proficient in." Thira beckoned her mate closer. "Alesia however is." She urged Alesia to take her position in front of the cable. Thira could see the hesitation in Alesia's eyes as she took her place. She gave her an encouraging look when their gazes briefly met.

"I'm ready." Alesia raised her sword and at Panter's signal slashed downward with all her strength.

The groan then snap of the cut cables echoed throughout the small building. The severed ropes rapidly slid out the holes cut into the side of the wall, a resounding crash rumbled outside as the gate collapsed without the restraining ropes to hold it back. Cries of alarm immediately rose then abruptly cut off into screams as the troops that had concealed themselves in the shadows below the walls started to pour through the opening.

"C'mon, let's go." Panter pushed her way to the door and opened it. Glancing around, she stepped out and waved the others through the gap.

Once everyone was out, she sent the unit to rejoin the main body that was now fighting its way inside the walls. They stayed silent as they made their way to the castle itself. Several soldiers attempted to impede their progress but were swiftly cut down.

As they entered the building, Thira froze in mid step when a familiar scent hit her. Anger flooded

her while she dashed down the dim hallway as she began tracing the trail to its source.

"Thira!" Panter growled with frustration. "Damn it, lets get a move on. The gods alone know what that stubborn woman is rushing headlong into." Rapid footsteps echoed down the corridor as the rest of them hastened to catch up with the fleeing woman.

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Heated words broke off when Thira unexpectedly appeared in the center of the throne room. The men involved stood in stunned silence until the tall form seated on the throne finally spoke.

"You should be dead." Fine clothing rustled as he rose to his feet then walked to the edge of the raised platform the throne rested on. The question was asked in an almost serene tone of voice.

"Disappointed father?" Thira's voice was full of venom. "Now isn't that just to bad."

The men standing at the bottom of the platforms steps murmured between them at her words. Several looked at the man above them in puzzlement while many others laid a wary hand on their weapons.

"Surprisingly, I'm not." He cocked his head while he skimmed her body with interest, stopping for a moment on the tattoo that decorated her arm then moving on. "So I take it you succeeded in your hunt for the traitor?"

Thira almost laughed. "No, actually I didn't." She glared at him. "I found out that she wasn't the reason why so many of my people died."

"Oh really?" A hand casually slid behind him as he spoke. "What reason might that be?" Just as the question ended, he threw something at Thira with his hidden hand.

Thira easily dodged the item her father had thrown at her. The knife clattered off the wall behind her while she turned her attention back to him. "Father, that was almost pitiful, surely you knew there was no chance of connecting with that pathetic throw."

Her father shrugged. "It can't hurt to try." He walked to his chair and ran a hand across it's back. "So tell me, did you come here just to say hello too your mother?" A malevolent smile split his face at her snarl of fury.

"You foul bastard." The ringing of drawn swords halted her rush toward the dais. "I don't believe you, that's not my mother."

Hateful laughter rang throughout the domed room at her words. "Oh but my dear daughter, it is. I made sure my men killed and skinned her like the sad pathetic animal she was before I departed our much-loved home." He ran a hand over the pelt while he spoke. He threw the skin at her feet. "Check for yourself."

Thira slowly reached down and picked up the pelt. Her hands shook slightly as she raised it to

her nose. The look of utter devastation that she wore on her face faded as she carefully scented it. *This isn't my mother!!* Thira checked it again to make sure before she looked up at her father with an expression of utter revulsion. She threw the skin back at him. It landed at one of the mercenary's feet that stood in front of her. "That isn't her."

"It is!!" he insisted as he gave his men a suspicious glance. The nervous shifting he saw didn't surprise him; the incompetent fools had messed up and were trying to hide it from him. That they would definitely pay for, they were disrespecting a god.

"I believe I would know that better than you would." She shouted back. "I'm the gifted one not you!!" Her father was on the verge of responding when Alesia and the others ran into the room with weapons drawn.

"Thira!!" Alesia ran to her partner and pulled her close. "Are you all right?" She stilled when she saw the skin lying on the floor. "Was that..?"

Thira gripped the hand in hers gently. "My mother...no it wasn't, I was just informing my dear old dad of that when you came in."

"Friends of yours Thira?"

Thira growled at his tone, it suddenly felt like she was being played with and she didn't like that feeling at all. "No, more than that, they're my family." She caught the low gasp that escaped her partner and the twin smiles that the others held back. Thira automatically moved closer to Alesia when her father shifted suddenly. She didn't want that piece of shit to even think about coming closer to her beloved mate.

"Family is it?" A low chuckle escaped him at that. "Shouldn't you introduce them to me then, seeing as how I'm your family too?"

Thira couldn't help but wonder what he was trying to pull but went with the odd request for now. "This is Alesia of Forest Glade, my mate." She caught the flare of surprise in his eyes that he tried to hide. She gestured to the others without taking her eyes off him. "They're Tera and Panter, the Regents of Hawk's Peak."

An oily smile moved across his face. "I take it Doran failed in his quest to retake the Regency." He shrugged. "Too bad, he would have been useful to me if he had, but never mind there are other ways to accomplish my goals without him." He looked the women in front of him over. "Your ink seems to be familiar to me somehow, tell me what's its meaning."

Panter's eyes narrowed at him. "They're marks of the chosen." She replied. "We've been accepted by the Goddess Potnia Theron as hers." She was taken aback by the hatred that flared in his eyes at her words.

"So you're both clan then?"

"Yes, I was born clan but I have partnered with a human." Panter was tiring with this game; she wanted his sham of interest to end.

"So your partners..." He stressed the word with obvious disgust. "They've been gifted?"

Thira cut in. "Yes, father they have, what's the purpose of this game of yours?" Her hand itched to grab a blade and end it here. "They're gifted and here's another surprise for you, Panter's my sister which makes her your daughter, much to our mutual disappointment and horror." Her body bristled with anger. "There, is the get to know you period done now, can we finally get on with it?"

He didn't appear surprised at her caustic words. He studied Panter for a moment. "You did seem familiar to me somehow." He exchanged a long look with the men below him. "It doesn't matter, I didn't want the daughter I have now so I'm not interested in gaining another one." He flicked a hand toward them dismissively as if they were mere insects he'd just noticed. "Kill them."

They all went on guard as the men moved toward them. That they had expected, what they weren't expecting was the bolts that rained down on them from above. Thira dodged them with ease and tried to keep them from hitting Alesia by knocking them out of the air as quickly as possible. A choked cry had her turning to see that in spite of her efforts a bolt had struck her partner in her left side. Bright red blood ran over Alesia's hand as she grasped it in response to the startling surge of pain. "Alesia!!!" Horror warred with the rage that filled her at the sight of her mate's injury.

Alesia held up a bloodied hand. "I'll be all right. Go; take care of those damned arrows before someone else gets hurt." She struggled to hide the pain just breathing was causing her, right now that wouldn't help either of them.

Thira's eyes brightened as she looked up and spotted the men that enclosed the upper level. Her father had kept them all occupied until his men got into position for the assault. A grudging spark of admiration at his tactic drowned in the dark hate that flooded her at Alesia being injured. She ran full tilt toward the wall as she evaded the occasional bolt that flew toward her. Not taking the time to kick off her boots, she used the energy that poured through her to claw her way to the top with just her hands. Stunned surprise registered on the face of the man she appeared in front of before it morphed into terror. She bared her teeth when she reached for him. Screams rang pleasantly in her ears as she tore through them without a single flicker of regret.

Flicking the blood from her claws, Thira looked down on the fighting below. Her sister was protecting Alesia while Tera was engaging several others. Her eyes moved to the figure of her father below as he avidly watched the fighting before him. Climbing up on the edge, she steadied herself before she pushed herself off in a leap aimed straight for her father with a roar. He glanced up just before they collided and batted her away. Stunned, she slammed into the wall behind them and slid to the floor. She was jerked to her feet before she could react to the unexpected turn of events.

"Fool, I'm a god. How could you even think that would work?" He backhanded her into the wall

again.

Thira spat blood from the split lip that had opened up at his hit. "You're not a god, you're insane."

"I'm Aniketos, the god of vengeance." His eyes glittered in manic glee as they both glared at each other with loathing.

"You're a mistake that our Goddess sent us to correct." She pushed herself off the wall to look him squarely in the eye. "One that I'm more than happy to resolve." Thira sprang at him and they tumbled to the floor in a struggling pile of desperation.

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Panther kicked another body away from her. A gasp of pain made her glance down at the body huddled next to her feet. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Alesia knew that she could heal herself if they could get the arrow out but now was not the time for that. She would just have to bear the waves of pain that surged through her at every jolt of movement. A roar pulled her attention toward the dais. Her eyes widened when she saw Thira get batted into the wall with a bone crunching thump. They narrowed in fury when she was pulled to her feet then slapped into the wall again. Alesia felt a surge of satisfaction when Thira jumped him and they struggled, falling down the stairs to the main floor as they fought.

Bodies landing beside her made her turn in startlement. The men's very dead eyes stared back at her blankly.

"Sorry." Panther pulled them away from her friend and tossed them further away. "Better?" She flashed a smile at Alesia's thankful look then glanced around. "Tera's got the last guy, except for Thira over there." They watched as blows were exchanged between the two without a hint of mercy from either one. "Look's like he was gifted more than normal if that's any indication." They both winced as a loud crack rang out and the man staggered back. "That sounded like it hurt."

Alesia murmured in agreement as she watched her partner in action. It was distracting her from the pain, which was a defiant bonus. She knew things were getting desperate when Thira seemed to flicker from place to place as the blows were exchanged more viciously. She was bringing her natural speed into play.

Tera walked up to them while wiping down her sword with a scrap of cloth then sliding it into its sheath with a click. "What's going on?" She crouched down next to Alesia. "You holding up alright?"

Alesia nodded. "It's not too bad, once we get the bolt out I'll be able to heal it."

"Thank the Goddess for your gift of healing or this could have been serious." Tera rested a hand

on Alesia's shoulder in comfort when she gasped as she shifted. "Here, lean against me." Tera sat against one of the many pillars that dotted the room and gestured for Panter to carefully move Alesia next to her. She cringed inwardly at the cry of pain that escaped Alesia as Panter picked her up then settled her down against her chest.

Alesia sighed in relief as the pain that had flared up settled down to a low throb. "Thanks, that helps." She felt a kiss pressed against her head as she watched the fight that still raged on. A different kind of warmth filled her at Tera's action. The simple sign that they cared for her as much as she did for them helped make the pain fade even more.

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Thira slammed a vicious kick against her father's head driving him back. *Stay down damn it!!!* She dodged the answering swing then darted in with several hits to his midsection. Her head jerked back as a fist collided with her cheekbone; she felt the sting of a cut just as blood started to trail down her face. Thira was attempting to simply subdue him as Panter had requested but it was looking like that option was not going to happen. On the next swing, she slashed out with her claws. She felt them rip through cloth then sink into soft flesh. Curling her fingers, she dug in then jerked her hand back. Bright scarlet drops sprayed across the floor in her wake. A guttural scream of agony filled the room. Coming to a halt, she stared impassively at the bleeding man that writhed on the floor where he'd dropped. Stepping closer, she kicked him over on his back so she could look him in the face as he died.

"Help me." He whimpered. A blood covered hand started to reach up toward her but fell as she backed away from him.

"You killed innocent people just to fulfill your lust for power and you want me to save your miserable pathetic life?" Thira's upper lip curled with distaste at his lack of remorse even now. "Die like the dog you are." She ignored his incoherent pleading until he finally fell silent then turned and walked away.

Worried eyes searched for her partner until Thira saw she was safe with the others. Kneeling beside her, she reached out and cupped the side of her face. "How are you doing?"

Alesia smiled back even though she'd heard the same question too many times lately. "I'm fine but I'll be even better once you get this bolt out of me." She frowned in concern as she saw the injuries Thira had received while fighting her father. Several cuts had been opened up; the worst of which was on her left cheek and brow. "Your hurt." Alesia lifted a hand toward Thira's battered face but it was gently restrained.

Surprise flickered across Thira's face at the request. "I'll be fine but are you sure you want me to be the one to take the arrow out?"

Alesia nodded. "I know you'll be as quick as you can and I trust you."



Thira pulled an unused blade from her harness. Slicing through the thick leather breastplate, she cut open the tunic beneath it to expose the wound.

Gently feeling around the shaft, she felt the hard lump of the arrowhead just beneath the skin. Looking up she met Alesia's pain filled gaze. "You got lucky, you're breastplate absorbed most of the force and it's pretty close to the surface so it won't be too difficult to remove."

Alesia clenched her teeth. For a relatively minor wound, it hurt like Hades. How Thira could act so detached about it when she'd had even worse injuries made her respect for her increase. "Get it out." She closed her eyes when Thira lifted the knife. She clenched her fists as the blade cut into her. Her body automatically tried to pull back from the source of pain, then she felt an arm wrap itself around her upper chest while a set of hands pinned her legs. A choked scream of agony escaped her as the pain increased. For a long moment, she hovered on the edge of oblivion but a voice pulled her back.

"Alesia, look at me."

Thira's blurry features cleared as Alesia blinked away the haziness and tears that had welled up. "Are you finished?"

Thira brushed a kiss across tear dampened lips. "It's out. Do your magic honey." She used a cloth torn from a mercenary cloak to dab away the blood. The corner of her mouth lifted in amusement as the edges of the wound knit itself flawlessly back together while she watched.

Alesia sighed as the pain ebbed away. Sitting up slowly, she smiled in relief then rose to her feet. Cool air hitting her bare chest made her groan. "Anyone have another shirt I can borrow?" Another top was held out by the time she finished her sentence. She accepted it but an eyebrow rose as Thira stood in front of her now shirtless. "You are not walking out dressed like that."

Tera and Panter laughed at the look on Thira's face at Alesia's comment. "I don't blame her." Tera said with a smile. "I wouldn't let Panter out like that either." Panter's laughter died off as she turned her head to stare at her wife. "What, I don't believe other people should have a free look at what I consider to be mine."

Silence lingered for a moment before Panter nodded. "Same for me." Her head tilted as she listened to something outside the room. "You might want to hurry with that covering Thira, we're going to have company real soon."

Thira had heard the commotion about the same time as her sister. In moments, a thick covering of fur spread across her body. She raised an eyebrow at Alesia. "Better?" A toothy smile flashed as she asked.

Alesia looked her over. No one would be able to see anything through the glossy fur that now covered Thira's body. Thira's features were more catlike but either way she was still attractive. Reaching out, she ran a hand down her arm. "I like it." She gave Thira a heated look, the soft growl she got in return made her shiver with anticipation. "Later, I promise." She pressed a kiss to her lips then reluctantly pulled away when members of their militia entered the room.

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The aroma of cooked food mingled in the room along with the murmur of voices and the sweet strains of music. It had taken several days after taking back Doslan to sort out the mess things had become. A suggestion from one of their captain had astounded the Regents in the meeting that had been called for to try and finalize the list of people that were going to be left in charge. They needed to find someone trustworthy to embody them as their new representative. They had turned to the person in question to see what their reaction to the suggestion would be.

Thira stared at the woman who had nominated her before glancing over at Alesia. Even if she'd considered accepting the position the look of distress on her partner's face would have effectively put a halt to it. Thira turned to face the table full of waiting people and shook her head. "No, absolutely not, my place is with Alesia and her place is with the Regents. You'll need to find someone else." She noticed that Alesia had relaxed at her words from the corner of her eye. Thira renewed her resolve to find time very soon to pull her aside for a talk. She allowed the chatter that arose at her refusal to go unheard as she considered the many ways their talk would end up. Thira pushed aside the lingering disquiet that haunted her at the way one ending could be.

Thira brought her mind back to the present as she swirled the wine in her cup before taking a sip. She frowned at the bitter after taste that followed. Setting the cup down she pushed it to the side, there was no way she was going to drink that. Looking around, she spotted a server close by and beckoned to her.

"You wished for something Ma'am?" The dark-haired girl knew exactly who this woman was and struggled to hide her nervousness from her.

Thira could smell the anxiety that rolled off the girl but didn't respond to it. After all that had happened it was expected that most if not all the people who were now aware of what she was would be hesitant to interact with her. In fact, the only ones who weren't were the amazons and the militia who had been around her from the start. "Do we have any ale around, I would much prefer it then drinking this swill." Thira smiled at the girl as she tried to make herself seem not so intimidating. She knew it hadn't worked when the girl stepped back from her.

"I'll...I'll see what I can find." She scurried away as fast as her legs could carry her. The sight of the fangs she'd seen when the woman smiled at her had made her want to run. She held back the welling of tears; her mother was joined to one of the militia that had met up with the main army back in Tylan. She knew that her other mother would be bitterly disappointed at her, she greatly respected the marshal's partner and had said she wanted to see if she could transfer back to Hawk's Peak when everything had been straightened out, which meant that she and her mother would be going also and she'd probably end up seeing more of the woman. She stiffened her resolve, she refused to allow herself to be scared, she'd just treat her as if she was anyone else and everything would be fine. Nodding to herself, she went into the kitchen to see if they had tapped a barrel of ale.

Thira picked at the food on her plate. The girl had successfully found her ale and had brought her a pitcher of it much to her delight. This time she had smiled at her shyly while she inquired if she needed anything else. At her refusal, she'd simply nodded then told her that if she did to let her know and she'd get it. Thira mused over the change that had come over the girl in so short a time then shrugged. If one less person feared her she didn't care how it happened just that it did.

She looked up when the music changed to a heavier beat. A grin quirked her lips while she watched most of the amazons present get up and go to the center of the room to dance. The stamp of feet and the sensuous movements of their bodies made Thira bite her lower lip as her gaze moved over to linger on the form of her mate that still sat next to her talking to Tera. When it seemed as if the conversation was nearing it's end Thira laid her hand on Alesia's shoulder to gain her attention.

"Did you need something Thira?" Alesia grew aware that the music had changed when she glanced over briefly at the dancers. She turned her eyes back to her partner as she patiently waited to hear what she'd wanted.

Thira took a deep breath then held out a hand. "Dance with me."

Alesia's eyes widened in delight at the husky request. "You're sure?" At the nod, she rose to her feet and took the hand held out to her. "It would be my pleasure to dance with you love."

Skirting the other dancers they found a spot then faced each other. Thira reached out and drew Alesia close as the heavy beat swirled around them. She drew in Alesia's scent while she slipped a thigh between her legs and pulled her tightly against her as they moved together. The movement caused her to utter a low growl at the feeling of her mate pressed so close to her. She felt Alesia's hands run over her back then settle on her hips as the beat got a little faster. Their movements were in perfect rhythm as they danced together. Thira pulled away despite Alesia protests and slid behind her. Pressing up against Alesia's back, she easily matched her partner's movements. The heat between them grew quickly as the dance went on.

Thira fought to focus on the woman cradled between her arms. The feeling of Alesia's body moving against hers had her wanting to mate. Thira shook her head. *NO!! Not mate, make love.* Just this one time she wanted to be more than the animal she was. Bending her head, Thira pressed a kiss against Alesia's neck. She swallowed another growl as Alesia bent her head back to rest on her shoulder exposing the skin of her neck and shoulder. Thira could barely hold herself back from tasting the satin skin that beckoned her. She brushed Alesia hair to the side and whispered in her ear. "Marry me."

Their dance almost ended as Alesia pulled away to stare at Thira in surprise. "Aren't we already mated?"

Thira nodded. "By clan law yes we are. But I wish to be by human law also." Her eyes grew dark at the thought that perhaps Alesia didn't wish to be married to her. The silence that grew between them reinforced her fear and she began to turn away. If she didn't wish to be with her then maybe it was time to end it. "I'm sorry. I'll go."

"NO!!" Alesia grabbed Thira's arm before she could leave. "Thira, look at me." Pain filled eyes met hers warily causing her own to tear up at the sight. "Yes, I'll marry you." She caressed the side of Thira's face and smiled at the happiness that rapidly over took the pain in her eyes. "I was just surprised, I wasn't expecting you to want that, but I'm glad you do." Alesia pulled Thira against her and kissed her. She groaned as Thira responded eagerly and seized control of the kiss. They ignored the people around them as the kiss deepened.

"Blessings on you both." Gasps from around them caused them to break the kiss to see what was going on.

Alesia exchanged a look with Thira at the sight of Portia Theron. "Thank you." People moved aside as the Regents approached them.

Panther inclined her head in respect. "As you can see the war is over."

"Yes, you all did well." She turned Thira. "I know it was hard but you did what needed to be done. In doing so you saved countless lives."

Thira met the Goddess's eyes steadily. "He was never my father to begin with. He was a man obsessed that needed to be stopped. It's as simple as that." Her eyes widened as the Goddess stepped forward and embraced her. The aroma of various animals and plants failed to cover Portia Theron's sweet scent.

"Still you did admirably." The goddess stepped back and held Thira at arms length as she studied her before nodding and letting her go. "Unfortunately, I'm here to ask for yet another boon from you."

They all exchanged looks before turning back to the watching Goddess.

"Which is?" Thira asked breaking into the silence that encompassed the entire room.

"I wish for you to go back and gather all the remaining clans together." She met Thira and Panther's shocked looks calmly. "It's far past the time my children should have returned home."

Thira didn't hesitate. "I'll go." Her mother was alive and she had to find her. This was the chance she needed.

Alesia rested a hand on her partner's shoulder. "Where she goes so do I"

Panther glanced at Tera and smiled at her nod of agreement. "As will we."

She smiled ruefully. "I guess it's a good thing we didn't sink that last boat, looks like we're going to need it after all." She called all her leaders together to figure out what they had to prepare for their trip across the sea.

Alesia and Thira followed the Regents out the door. The rest of the people could enjoy the rest of the banquet; right now, there were things that were far more important that required their

attention. Their hands met as they entered the room they used for conferences, perhaps before they left a small joining ceremony would be possible. Sitting down side by side at the table, they turned their attention to Panter as she called the meeting to order.