

## ***PART ONE***

### ***Chapter 1 KATIA ALONE***

Katia moved her head and groaned as bright sunlight stabbed at her eyes. She put up one arm to shield her face, then opened her eyes again cautiously and raised herself on her elbows. Where was she? The last thing she remembered was falling into the darkness of Quequere's portal when Those of the Serpent were attacking her and her companions in the Peneration foothills.

She stared around her. No sign of any attackers. No sign of anyone. Davred! The word formed instinctively on her lips, then died. Her husband was nowhere to be seen, nor were any of her other companions. She tried to cast her senses out around her as Herra did, but only a meaningless jumble of sensation echoed back at her. She hadn't the Elder Sister's sure Gift for sensing the nearby presence of human life.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on Davred. Him alone she could sense at a distance. After a moment, she breathed a sigh of relief. He was a long way away, she knew not where, but he was alive, and he could sense her. Their ability to mindlink was very rudimentary as yet, though Herra said it would improve gradually. And if the Elder Sister said that, then it would come true. Herra was a very special person, even for an Elder Sister of the Sisterhood.

As Katia looked around again, an involuntary shiver of fear ran down her spine. She was alone with no idea where she was. She concentrated first on controlling her breathing and through it, her fear. Sisters of the God were trained not to give way to panic in times of trouble. She ran through a quick discipline of self control and felt her fear lifting, though apprehension still sat within her. How could it not, in such a

situation?

After a moment or two, she sat up properly and stared around. She was proud to be a Sister, proud to be one of those who now called themselves the Kindred of the God. She had been *chosen* to serve the God at the age of fourteen and now, seven years later, she was a full Sister, wife of Davred, who'd come down from the satellite as the Manifestation of their Brother the God. Wherever she was now, whatever happened to her, she would continue to follow the Quest of her Kindred, continue to struggle against Those of the Serpent, who had spread their evil ways across the Twelve Claims, mesmerising their followers with drugged incense and hypnotic rituals, and dealing out death to those who opposed their cruel ways.

And, she told herself firmly, she would find her husband Davred again, and her sons Alaran and Erlic, whatever it took, wherever they were. Only death would stop her. She raised her eyes and endorsed this vow with the traditional words, 'So do I swear. Let the sun by day and the three moons by night bear witness to my oath.'

Then she turned her attention back to her own predicament. To one side of her stretched the rippled surface of a sunlit pool. Behind her a stand of tall trees sighed in the breeze which wafted the faint earthy scents of the deep forest towards her. As she moved her head incautiously, the world wavered around her for a moment, then settled into a steadier focus. Passing through portals left you disoriented, but the weakness was fading more quickly this time than it had done before.

She and her eight companions had been travelling through the rocky foothills of Peneron when they fell into a trap set by Those of the Serpent. Surrounded by so many enemies using new tricks against them, they'd been in desperate straits. Then Quequere,

the strange crystalline creature they'd met in the Sandrims, had opened a portal in the rocks to save them. But where had Quequere brought her? And where were the rest of her companions? This wasn't Peneron, nor was it wildwoods terrain. It was a forest, and it had required regular passage by human feet to make the small hard-beaten path that wound alongside the pool.

She studied the foliage around her. Not the High Alder. She'd have recognised the forests of her birthplace instantly. The scents here were not quite the same and the vegetation was different in many small ways.

As she started to rise to her feet, there was a distant crashing sound in the undergrowth. She glanced quickly from side to side. Nowhere to hide this close to the water. As she took a step, she stumbled and looked down. She had forgotten that she was still wearing this voluminous dark robe, an ugly thing which covered her from neck to ankles. Those of the Serpent insisted on women dressing modestly, but such clothing was ridiculous in a mild climate, and uncomfortable, too. All her female companions had had to dress in the same way to avoid drawing attention to themselves as they travelled through the Twelve Claims.

She sighed and turned in the direction of the noise. As a Sister of the God, she should have been wearing a soft blue robe and headband, but now that the shadow of the Serpent lay across the land, to show that one was a Sister was to invite a slow painful death in one of the Shrines of the Serpent. The Initiates there specialised in pain, even inflicting it willingly upon themselves. They were insane, their souls rotten with discord madness. Even to be near one of them made her shudder.

Everything seemed to be happening slowly, as if she were in a dream. The crashing

sounds were very close now. She stood with her back to a tree, ready to deal as best she could with whatever came. The bushes erupted outwards and a large woman brandishing a naked sword burst into view.

‘Quinna!’ Katia sagged against the tree in relief.

‘Bust my guts! I was afraid we’d all got separated when we passed through that portal.’ Quinna turned to face the way she had come. ‘Something’s following me. This is the first space clear enough to swing a sword that I’ve found in this damned forest. Keep out of my way.’ She hefted the sword in her right hand, slipped the dagger from her belt into her left hand, and stood poised for action.

She was taller than Katia, who was reckoned tall by most people’s standards. Quinna was also massive, especially when seen next to Katia’s slenderness, and her bare arms and legs were as muscular as any man’s. She was clad in minimal fighting gear, brief tunic and tight knee-length breeches, with soft leather sandals laced up her strong calves. The very way she held her weapons proclaimed her expertise.

In spite of the danger, Katia couldn’t help smiling. ‘What’s happened to your robe, Quinna?’

‘I stuffed the cursed thing into some bushes. Back in the Sandrims we had more sense than to wear things that flap around your ankles and trip you up if you try to move quickly. Women from the Twelve Claims must be stupid to put up with those robes. No one can fight properly in a long skirt. Good thing I had my sword and dagger with me when we fell into that portal, eh? It was another portal, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes. Herra shouted Quequere’s name before we passed through it, so he must have created it. I didn’t know he could do that.’

‘Shh! Here it comes!’ Quinna rocked gently to and fro, ready to lunge in any direction.

Again the undergrowth thrashed around, heralding the arrival of someone who was either too strong to care about possible enemies, or too foolish to think of such things. Katia stepped back out of reach of Quinna’s sword and gathered her inner forces together. She hated fighting, hated violence of any kind, but you didn’t give in to the evil that now stalked the Twelve Claims. ‘*Brother, watch over us!*’ she murmured.

Both women sighed with audible relief as the undergrowth burst apart to reveal a slender youth whose hair was a startling silver-gilt in colour and whose eyes gleamed silver-grey in a face striking for both its beauty and its alienness.

‘Erlic!’ Katia moved towards her son. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m not hurt, but someone’s following me. Several people. Can we find somewhere to hide?’ Like his mother, like the delect who had planted him in her womb, Erlic loathed violence.

Quinna rumbled in annoyance, then decided that with two companions so unskilled at fighting, discretion was the better part of valour. ‘Let’s go that way.’ She pointed to the right, where a rocky outcrop rose from the edge of pool. ‘There may be some shelter behind the rocks, a cave even, if we’re really lucky. Keep away from the sand at the edge of the water, though. It’ll show our footprints.’ Without waiting for a response, she led the way briskly through the undergrowth and round towards the rocks.

Katia followed, a smile on her face again. Although this forest was different from those near her home, it was similar enough for her to know how to move in it and she hadn’t needed telling to avoid making footprints. But Quinna had automatically taken command. Back in the Sandrims, where the Kindred had first met her, she’d been one of

the leaders of her people, a noted swordswoman. Now she'd brought that sword to aid their quest.

Erlic strode along behind the two women. 'There's a cave in the rocks, Mother. I can sense it.'

Katia nodded. She, too, could sense the cave. Strange how Erlic seemed to have inherited some traits from her, but also seemed like a changeling at times, so different was he from Alaran, his twin. In his looks Erlic resembled neither her nor his father Davred. She stole a glance at him. The same old dilemma. Was he her son or not? She knew that she hadn't conceived twins. Any Sister could control her own body well enough to be sure of that. But after going through one of the deleff's portals during their flight from Temple Tenebrak, she'd found that the one son she'd conceived had been transformed into two.

How had the deleff done that to her? She'd fretted about it until her sons were born, for all Herra's reassurances. But from the moment she took him in her arms, it hadn't mattered. However Erlic had been conceived, he was the son of her body and she loved him dearly.

He stopped abruptly as they neared the tall dark crevice. 'It's not empty. There's something inside it. An animal, I think.' Then he began to smile. 'It's Nim.'

Quinna looked at Katia. 'Shall I go first, just to be sure?'

Katia shook her head. 'No. If Nim's in there, nothing else will be.'

She moved forward confidently.

A loud purr came from the cave and a large head poked out of the cleft.

'Nim!' Katia moved to lean her head against the tawny fur of the shoulder that was on

a level with her own. She stroked the huge cliff cat and a rough tongue rasped over her cheek.

‘Hey, let’s get inside,’ said Quinna, giving her a nudge. ‘They’re not far behind.’

Katia led Nim inside the cave again and Erlic followed. Quinna stayed near the entrance, hidden by the shadows but able to see anyone who approached. Even as they all settled into position, three men came into view, moving with the confidence of hunters who know their own terrain and feel themselves in charge there.

Nim rumbled in her throat and Katia shushed her.

‘Are they of the Serpent?’ Quinna whispered.

Katia concentrated, sending out her consciousness to test the strangers. At this short distance, she could just manage to gain some impression of them. ‘I can sense no taint. They are not initiates, or even committed to the Serpent, I think.’

‘Want me to go out and speak to them?’

Katia frowned, trying to sense the correct path to take in this bewildering new situation. Were any of their other companions nearby? She’d already sensed that her husband was far away. Where in the Twelve Claims had Quequere’s portal thrown them all? ‘I think we should wait until we know more about where we are. Let’s try to find the others before we do anything.’

Quinna nodded. ‘All right. That makes sense.’

Erlic came to stand next to his mother and stare through the shadows of the entrance. ‘What if Nim stuck her head out? Might they be afraid and run away?’

Katia shook her head. ‘No, they’d be more likely to try to capture her, I think. They look like hunters to me and most hunters can’t resist trying to trap an animal of a sort

they haven't seen before. I've never heard of cliff cats in the Twelve Claims, only in the Sandrims. Let me try to plant wards just in front of the entrance. That might turn them away.' She had to concentrate hard because this was one of her developing Gifts. She'd worked on it a little with Herra, but hadn't had much chance to practise while they were fleeing across the strange lands beyond the Twelve Claims.

The air in front of the cleft in the rock began to flicker slightly and the three men paused.

'I don't think we need to hang around here,' one of them said. 'It must just have been a wild rock nerid.'

Katia concentrated hard. She had no great Gift for Compulsions, but she might just be able to nudge one of them into action.

'I'm getting hungry,' a dark-haired man said. 'Let's finish here and get back to town.'

As they turned and walked away, Katia leaned for a moment against the roughness of the rocky wall. Using her powers before she was fully recovered from the disorientation of the portal was difficult.

'Not men of evil,' said Erlic thoughtfully. 'But not of the Kindred, either. Where do you think we are, Mother?' For all that he seemed almost a man grown, he spoke and gazed at her with the directness of a small child, and he had a child's confidence that she'd know the answers to his questions. While the Kindred were travelling through the lands of the deleff, far to the west of the Twelve Claims, Katia's twin sons and Carryn's daughter Lerina had grown overnight from babyhood into youth, with the help of the great trees which controlled the mysterious Tanglewoods. The three young people were now a strange mixture of child and near adult.

‘Let’s look for the others first,’ said Quinna. ‘There’s safety in numbers and I’d like to make sure Benjan’s safe.’ The two of them had been lovers ever since the Kindred reached the Sandrims, and Quinna had left her people mainly to be with him.

Katia’s expression grew sad. ‘I’ve tried to sense Davred. I can tell he’s alive, but that’s all. I think he must be a very long way away from here. The others might not be nearby, either. We three were together as we entered the portal, walking between the two wagons. Remember? Perhaps each group has ended up somewhere different.’

‘I hope not, but I’m afraid you’re right.’ Quinna scowled around her. ‘It must be useful, that mindlinking stuff. I wish me an’ Benjan could manage it. I’d surely like to know he’s safe.’

Katia nodded. The mindlinking had its disadvantages, too. She and Davred were so closely bonded, so attuned to one another, that she felt now as if half of herself was missing. No matter that Davred was a citizen of the Galactic Confederation and came from another planet far across the sky. That made no difference to her. He was her husband and soul-mate, and they’d not been parted for more than a day or two since his arrival on the planet Sunrise nearly three years previously.

He’d fled down from the satellite to escape Robler, when his Exec Officer had decided that Davred was too obsessed by the Sisterhood’s Quest for Peace and Wisdom and had tried to send him back to Confex Central for reassignment. Katia shuddered at the thought of Robler, who seemed a harsh bitter man to her. Twice he’d tried to drag her husband back to the satellite by force, but thanks to the deleft he’d failed.

It was strange, but Robler now seemed tainted with the same evil as Those of the Serpent. Discord was everywhere, it seemed, even on the satellite and other worlds

Davred had told her about. She blinked and realised her son was speaking to her.

‘Alaran is safe, too, Mother,’ Erlic said. ‘I can tell that. But he’s a long way away from here.’ He shivered. ‘I don’t like to be so far away from him. It feels wrong.’

‘He’ll be missing you, too.’ Katia laid a tentative hand on his shoulder. Erlic didn’t always welcome others touching him. This time his hand came up briefly to squeeze hers. His skin never felt warm to the touch, always cool and dry.

‘Not as much as I miss him, mother. Alaran gets on well with everyone. He draws love to him. People sense that I’m different.’ Erlic looked at Katia. ‘I *am* different, aren’t I?’

‘Yes. But I don’t love you any less because of that. You’re still my son.’

He nodded, accepting that, and drew her hand up to his cheek for a moment, staring at her with those sad, wise, silver-crystal eyes.

When neither of them spoke, Quinna voiced her own worries. ‘We’d better search the area near the pool, I think, to check that there aren’t any other surprises waiting for us. And I suppose I’d better find that cursed robe again, as well, in case we meet someone.’

Katia smiled. She remembered what a fuss Quinna had made when first presented with a long dark robe to wear. Benjan had roared with laughter and teased his partner unmercifully as she practised walking and fighting in skirts. Best not to think of those golden months of respite beyond the Fireflats in the settlement called Outpost. ‘It would be sensible to get the robe and put it on again, Quinna. You’ll offend people if they see you dressed like that.’

Quinna pulled a face. ‘I’ll fetch it, but I’m not putting the stupid thing on until I have to.’

By the time dusk started to cast long shadows through the forest, they'd come to the conclusion that none of the others was within reach. They'd circled the area, stopping often to listen, and although they didn't dare call out, Katia was sure that she'd have heard if there'd been anyone moving around nearby. The hunters had walked quietly, men used to the forest, but it had still been easy for both her and Quinna to hear them coming. Their Kindred weren't forest-trained and some of them would have made a lot more noise than the hunters. When she listened, however, she could only hear natural sounds, the same sounds as had echoed through her solitary childhood with her grandfather in the High Alder - the fluting calls of the birds, the almost subliminal humming of a myriad insects and the soft whispering noises of foliage rustling in the breeze.

She felt no sense of danger from the wildlife. In the Twelve Claims there were no predators to threatened people. The largest creatures of the forest in the High Alder were lenrils, and they only attacked people who provoked them. Danger on her world came from the other humans, not from the wildlife. There were a few dangerous plants, but most of them had been eradicated over the long centuries of settlement.

'I think we'd better make some sort of camp,' Quinna said as the sky darkened and the first of the three moons winked down at them through a light cloud cover. 'And we'll need to find something proper to eat as well. My guts think I've wrung them out and hung them up to dry.'

Katia found some nuts and fruit, which wasn't Quinna's idea of a real meal. The swordswoman usually ate hugely to fuel her large body, and relished the meat Katia never touched. Quinna didn't grumble at the meagre fare, but she did eat every scrap

that was left with an apologetic grimace. 'Got to feed my muscles,' she said, flexing her biceps. 'Never know when you might need to defend yourself in strange territory.'

An hour later, they settled down to sleep in the cave, with fronds and large leaves to keep them warm and soften the hard ground. As the hours passed, they huddled together for warmth, because although Katia could control her body temperature, the others had only minimal skills. This must be somewhere up in the high reaches, she decided as she watched through the cave entrance the setting of the second moon. It didn't get as cool as this at night in the foothills and on the plains.

They were all awake by the time dawnlight gilded the water of the pool and they rose at once. Washing was no problem, but Katia grimaced as she put her damp underclothes back on. 'We're very short of the necessities of life here. We could have tried to catch some fish, but I've nothing with which to make a line or hook. It'll have to be nuts and fruit again, Quinna, I'm afraid.'

'It's not your fault. How about we go in the direction those men took yesterday? We can see how big their town is and we might even be able to pick up one or two useful items.' She flashed a broad grin at Katia as she said that.

'I don't approve of stealing.'

'Needs must, if it's for our survival.'

'It'll take a while for the deleff to find us,' said Erlic. 'We shall have to be careful until then.'

Both women stopped in their tracks and stared at him.

'What deleff?' demanded Quinna.

'The ones that are coming to get us.'

Katia felt a shiver run down her spine. This was one of the times when her son felt very alien. 'How do you know that, Erlic?'

He shrugged. 'I just do. They're coming through the wildwoods, but it'll take them a few days to reach us because there aren't any portals near here. This is quite a new region, only settled recently.'

Katia stared at him. 'We must be in one of the far northern claims, then. Which one?'

He shrugged. 'I don't know.'

Quinna shook her head. 'Damned if I can understand those deleff of yours, lad.'

Erlic gave her one of his enigmatic smiles and began walking again.

Quinna exchanged glances with Katia and rolled her eyes in exasperation. No one really understood the deleff. Herra talked of the huge older deleff being 'in alignment' with the planet and speculated about whether they were alive or dead, but even the Elder Sister didn't really understand them, or the SS'Habi, the large spider-creatures who served them so devotedly.

Katia couldn't help wondering what was happening to all her companions now. And Davred, especially Davred. It'd been such a struggle for them all to get back from the Lands of Nowhere to the Twelve Claims. Now, if everyone was scattered across the land, how would they continue with their quest? Hard enough with twelve of them, so much harder with only two or three.

'You know, lad,' Quinna said, when Erlic kept obstinately silent, 'I don't know how those deleff of yours expect us to find a way to defeat Those of the Serpent if they won't even help us to stay together.' But even that got no response from him, so she stopped trying to get more information.

The three of them followed the hunters' tracks, with Nim criss-crossing their trail, vanishing in and out of the forest on business of her own. Where the woodland thinned, they found a small town, which sprawled across some flat land near a small river.

'Damn me, I'd not like to live in such a crowded place!' exclaimed Quinna, who'd lived a semi-nomadic existence before she met the Kindred. 'How do people keep track of what's happening? How do they defend themselves in such an open place?'

'They don't,' said Katia. 'How can they? Until recently, there was nothing to defend themselves against. We've had many centuries of peace in the Twelve Claims.'

'No wonder Those of the Serpent were able to do what they wanted, then,' Quinna shook her head, muttering to herself in amazement at the sight of the small town. 'You'd grown soft.'

That was what Herra said, Katia thought. The Elder Sister now believed you had to fight back against evil, not just avoid it, a huge change in behaviour for the Kindred. She stared at the town. It wasn't a large place, but there were more houses than she could count, and others must be hidden among the trees, for smoke was rising in the distance as well as from the central cluster of dwellings. The place bore every sign of being a prosperous trade centre, with a broad, well-travelled track leading into it and no visible defences. Unfortunately for them, the town also contained a very prominent Shrine of the Serpent, with its huge black and silver flags waving above the rooftops on their tall poles.

'I thought you said the shrine in Tenebrak had black and gold flags.' Quinna had a quick eye for details.

'It does. It's the main shrine of the claim. The others have silver and black.' Katia

shivered. 'We can't go into that town! Look at the size of that Shrine. It's a really big one for such a small place. There must be a lot of very devout Serpent worshippers living here.' Her face twisted suddenly into a grimace of pain and she gasped aloud.

'What's the matter?' demanded Quinna immediately. 'Aren't you feeling well?'

Katia struggled to keep her breathing even. 'It's not me. There's a child in that town, a very sick child.' All healers developed this ability to sense severe pain and need for their services from a distance. Only with a few healers, like Herra, did that ability extend to sensing the presence of human life in general. Still, it was unusual to feel the pain so strongly from so far away. It must be a child with promise to cast waves of anguish so far.

'You must go and heal the child, Mother,' said Erlic, whose face was also drawn with pain. 'You can't leave it in such agony.'

'Can you feel it, too?' demanded Quinna, looking from one to the other.

'Oh, yes. I can always feel pain.' His silver eyes had shadowed into dark grey and his lips were a thin line of control, but his whole body was radiating tension and distress.

'Well, I'm damned if I can feel anything!' She stared at the town in bafflement. 'And I don't care how sick that child is. We can't afford to do any healings. You told me yourself, Katia, that Those of the Serpent kill Sister Healers on sight.'

'I'm not a proper Sister Healer. I'm just starting to develop my healing skills.' The continuing emanations of pain made Katia catch her breath again. 'And I can't walk away and leave a child to die when it could be saved - a gifted child at that. I just can't, Quinna.'

'But you'll be running head first into danger.' Quinna glared at Katia, wondering

whether she should try to drag the younger woman away by force.

‘Maybe I can pretend to heal the child with herbs.’ But Katia didn’t sound confident. ‘The best thing would be for me to go into the town alone. That way, you two will be able to escape if anything goes wrong.’

‘No. I’ll come with you as well,’ said Erlic.

‘I don’t think you should.’

‘I must, mother. I *know* that.’

Katia stared at him, eyes narrowed, then shook her head. Who was she to stop someone from following their fated path. After a minute, she said slowly, ‘I have an idea. We could pretend you’re a simpleton, lacking the wit to live a normal life. Do you think you could do that, Erlic? Pretend not to understand folk. Don’t speak much, and whimper if anyone comes too near you?’

‘What good will that do?’ demanded Quinna.

‘I can say we’re wandering folk, because of my idiot son. That’s quite credible. If I say I’m a herbwoman, they may just let me look at the sick child, especially if I can manage to put a small Compulsion on someone. And they don’t allow simpletons into the shrines, so Erlic will be safe from that. They say the Serpent doesn’t like people who aren’t normal in the head.’

‘What is normal?’ said Erlic softly.

Katia shook her head. ‘Who knows? We of the Sisterhood would certainly not presume to judge that being different is wrong.’

Quinna looked thoughtfully at the pair of them. ‘They’ll never believe he’s your son, Katia. I have trouble believing it myself, sometimes. You don’t look nearly old enough to

be his mother.'

Katia stared at Erlic. 'You're right. I'll say he's my brother, instead. Can you pretend to be my brother, Erlic?'

He seemed to be listening to other voices as well as hers, for his eyes had taken on a distant look. 'Yes. I'll call you Katia and cling to your skirts like this.' His face twisted suddenly into blankness and he suited his actions to the words, stumbling to her side and clutching the dark cloth of her gown.

'Good lad!' Quinna gave him a hearty buffet on the shoulder.

'Very good, Erlic. Exactly right.' Katia turned to their companion. 'Don't come into town with us, Quinna. There's no reason for you to risk your life. Stay out of sight in the forest and keep Nim with you. I'll try to get away before nightfall or send Erlic out of town with a message. We can pretend he has to gather some more herbs for me.'

Quinna nodded. 'I'll see if I can pick up any useful bits and pieces, while I'm at it.'

'Stealing?' Katia's voice was suddenly sharp.

'Nothing that folk will miss; nothing that will upset them too much; and I'll take nothing from poorfolk. But our need is desperate, you must admit that.' Quinna laid a large hand on Katia's shoulder. 'Are you sure you have to do this?'

'I'm very sure. That child will die without help. I couldn't abandon it. Even to ease its passing from this life would be worth the doing. Now, let's gather a few herbs before we go into town, Erlic. We need to look the part.'

When they were ready, Quinna hid behind some bushes and watched them. Katia was walking hesitantly, as if unsure of her welcome, and Erlic was stumbling along behind her, his beautiful face blank and somehow twisted into ugliness. Quinna shook her head.

Who would have thought Erlic could be such a good actor? '*Brother look down,*' she murmured. 'Don't let us lose Katia. We need her special Gifts.'

Almost as an afterthought she added, 'And look after the lad, too. He's a nice lad, whether the deieff made him or not. He doesn't deserve to die.'

Then she set out to see what she could pick up. Katia might not approve of stealing, but Quinna had no such qualms. The prime rule in life where she came from was to look after yourself. It couldn't be that much different here. People were people, wherever you went. She'd already found that out.