

THE HEALER'S SHIFTER



Seitka kept running, leaping from tree branch to tree branch as fast as she could. She didn't know who was chasing her, but they were taunting her, telling her they would capture her and what they would do to her. They were telling her she couldn't escape. Her heart was racing, her breath deep and rapid. How could she have been so stupid? Why did she not listen to her brother? All she wanted was some horehound for the children, to ease their cough. She could have used a drop of whiskey and honey, but she liked the horehound better, for children. She had wandered further from her village than she had thought and had become confused as to which path to take to head back home.

Suddenly, she was accosted by a pack of wildcats from the enemy camp. Cearul was their leader, and his name fit him perfectly. He was a fierce fighter. Even her brother, Colin, tried to stay out of his way. While in human form, Cearul was very handsome—big and strong. But after spending any time with him, a person would know something was not right with him. He liked to fight and to hurt others. It gave him pleasure to see others in pain.

When he was in animal form, he was vicious, always rolling the younger kits, snapping at them until they left the food alone and

wandered off hungry. He was always this way, Seitka had heard, a bully to the younger and weaker cats. That is how he ruled, by fear.

Seitka immediately took to the trees as she was faster as an animal. She was smaller and sleeker. They chased her further from safety and closer to their camp. She knew her situation was hopeless. She had just come into heat for the first time yesterday. Her brother had warned her to stay in their home as any male could smell her, and she was so pretty, it was almost impossible for any male cat to resist her.

Suddenly, she was knocked to the ground from behind. She rolled, her belly in the air and her throat an easy target, but that is not what any of the males were thinking of.

Five huge, black, wild male cats circled her, each wanting a turn to mate her, whether she was willing or not.

She screeched her displeasure loud enough to be heard for a mile or more. Hissing, she came to her feet, ready to do battle for her virtue. She was promised to another. Her back hunched and her hair stood up as she backed up cautiously, taking swipes with her sharp claws, snapping with her small but sharp teeth at any who dared to reach for her.

A large cat emerged from the forest, and as he entered the circle, he growled his warning to all the other cats. They quickly dispersed, not wanting to anger their leader.

Cearul looked at Seitka with lust in his eyes. He quickly turned, holding out his hand to her.

Against her better judgment, she, too, turned, slapping his hand away.

"Why do you and yours chase me?" she angrily asked, anger shining in her eyes. She was, after all, the leader of their pack's sister. "Colin will not be happy you have chased and harassed his sister."

Cearul laughed. "You are in heat, little healer. I know of you, and I am not afraid of your brother. Colin means little chieftain, and so he is. I am much stronger and a better chieftain. You will be mine."

"I am promised to Daniel; you know this. He will kill you if you touch me."

Again, Cearul laughed as he replied, "I am not afraid of Daniel, either. Come with me willingly or not, but you *will* come with me, and I *will* mate with you, tonight."

Seitka turned to flee, but it was too late. Cearul grabbed her from behind and quickly flung her over his shoulder, carrying her easily to his home. She screamed and beat on his back with her fists. She tried to change back to cat form, but he had her legs, making it impossible. He was so big and she was so small that it was no match.

He kicked in the door to his hut and, with an evil growl, sent everyone out. He took her straight to his bedroom and tossed her on the bed. Seitka scrambled to get off of it to run, but he was on top of her immediately. Grabbing her wrists, he tied her tightly to the bed frame. While she was tied, it was impossible for her to change.

He laughed evilly before he began to tease her nipples, gently suckling and then pulling them with his teeth. He could smell her heat; it crazed his senses, driving him on. He worked his way slowly down her body, putting first one and then two fingers into her pussy, stretching her. He could feel her body betraying her, feel her tightening inside. He knew she had no idea what was happening to her. His lust grew to a fiery pitch. His hatred of the Tabby Clan and his lust combined to seal her doom.

She was fighting for control, to save her pride and her dignity. She was promised to Daniel. But it was a losing battle. She was in heat, and she had very little control over her body. It responded to the wonderful things he was doing, and he knew it. Her body twisted and squirmed trying to ease the tension; it begged for something. She didn't know what, but she needed it, whatever it was. She screamed in frustration, angry with herself and hating Cearul for doing this to her. Ashamed that her body was reacting, and she could do nothing to stop it, that she was betraying a man

she had loved since childhood. She was tied and helpless to make Cearul stop.

He continued tormenting her until she cried in sorrow for what she was about to lose. He rubbed her clit and then circled it, her juices making his fingers slick. He rubbed faster and harder, smiling down at her as he watched her eyes, quickly sending her over the top. She came apart, screaming as he laughed.

"You are a slut; Daniel will be happy to know before he marries you." He continued teasing her body, bringing her to a climax over and over until she couldn't fight anymore. He roughly and cruelly entered her, making sure he put his kit in her belly, with no thought now to her pleasure, only his. His revenge was sweet. She would carry his kit.

She was so ashamed of her body and her actions. She had betrayed her intended and would carry another's kitten. Daniel would banish her, and her brother would be so disappointed. If only she had listened to him.

Cearul was cruelly laughing at her and the shame she felt. "Now, little wild cat, you will marry me, and we will take over your clan. I will rule both clans with an iron paw. Think of all the power I will have."

Sobbing uncontrollably, Seitka managed to scream out her misery. A long, soulful, agonized animal screech, the pain in her voice evident.

The other cats in the tribe had changed before they returned, and they sadly shook their heads. The females pitied her.

"No, I will never marry you; let me go." She struggled mightily, but the ropes were too tight.

Again, Cearul laughed cruelly. "Don't you know, little spitfire, the more you cry and fight, the more I love it." With that, he back-handed her and began her beating. He beat her mercilessly until she fell unconscious.

Late into the night, when all the men had left to hunt, a small woman entered the bedroom quietly.

Seitka was just waking, moaning at the pain throughout her body.

"Shh, little one. Don't wake anyone. Shh." The woman untied her hands and helped her sit up, giving her something to drink. "It is willow bark tea. You must drink it, so you can run. The men have just left; you will have time to make it home if you hurry. They will not return until dawn. Please be as quiet as you can. If Cearul finds out it is I who let you go, he will kill me."

Seitka turned to the young woman, her voice raspy as she said, "Come with me; I will see you protected."

The woman looked at Seitka with hope in her eyes. "Really, you will take me with you? I promise I will do whatever you ask. I will help you escape, but we must hurry and be very quiet. I know where the men are going hunting. Quickly now, turn, so you heal faster and we can move quicker."

"What is your name?" Seitka whispered as she stiffly moved off the bed, swallowing the moan that threatened. She was in terrible pain from the beating.

"Aibreann. I was born in April, you see. Now, let us go. I will go out first to make absolutely sure everyone is asleep or gone. I will let you know when it is safe for you to follow."

Aibreann silently opened the door. Seeing nothing but darkness, she signaled to Seitka. She changed, as did Seitka, and away they scampered out of the village into the forest, headed toward home.



COLIN

Colin had become the chieftain of the village at a very young age. Their father was killed in a fight, leaving him to provide for his mother and Seitka. Their mother followed their father soon after. The love of her life was gone when he passed, and she had no will

to live. Colin then brought in a housekeeper, a woman in her mid-forties, to watch over Seitka and help her learn to be a woman and to keep the home.

Ciara was a Godsend for the young chieftain. Being shapeshifters, they didn't do a lot of cooking, but they had to keep up appearances in order to keep their secret. Colin entertained occasionally and was respected by all the villagers, whether they were of his clan or not. He was admired by all his neighbors and friends. All of Colin's clan of shapeshifters were valued and well liked by everyone in the village, also. It was a matter of safety for all the clan to blend in with the humans and to not let their secret be known. Colin had worked hard and, along with the rest of the clan, had plenty of money and was held in high regard. The clan shared in the wealth and prosperity. Colin made sure no one in the clan went without necessities. The handicapped and elderly were taken care of. The widows and children had food and clothing and warmth. Everyone was educated and found a profession as they grew up.

Ciara had reminded Colin that when Seitka turned eighteen, she would go into heat and would need to be protected. Ciara had already talked to Seitka about what to expect and the dangers.

If Colin had a weakness, it was his beautiful sister. She was the opposite of him. He was big and muscled, while she was small and sleek. He was respected for his authority, and she was always a little mischievous. Where his fur was rough, hers was smooth as silk. She was next in line to be the leader, unless Colin married and had a son. The problem was everyone knew Colin doted on his sister and spoiled her. Colin knew his sister wanted to become a healer, and he indulged her. Letting the village healer instruct her, Seitka became a very good healer of the animals as well as humans. She was very intelligent, but she had a soft heart. The death of an infant would cause her to mourn for days. The death of an animal would make her cry every time. If any in the village had a need, she would bring it to her brother. Everyone knew they could give her a sob

story and she would give them all her money. She would give away her mittens or scarf in the winter, even though she knew she would be frozen or risk frostbite by the time she got home. She was too innocent and trusting.

Colin knew she would not make a good leader. She just would not be capable of making the hard decisions that had to be made from time to time. He had discussed this with Seitka, and she agreed to marry Daniel.

Daniel had been his best friend and his second in command for years. He was very intelligent and strong. He would make a very good leader. He was firm but fair in all things.

Colin knew Daniel didn't love Seitka, but he hoped it would grow. He knew Seitka loved Daniel, long ago. She followed them around when she was very young, inviting a scolding from Daniel just for the attention. How many times had Daniel looked at him in frustration?

Colin also had visions of the future in his dreams. His dreams had saved the lives of himself and his clan, many times.

Ciara saw the signs of Seitka's "coming out" days before Colin noticed. She was a little higher strung than normal, itchy, short tempered, not her usual sweet-tempered self.

Colin had instructed her to stay inside in order to protect her. He should have known his sister would not take well to instructions. She never did. She always fought having to obey.

She demanded to be let out, so she could wander through the forest for herbs she needed for the children who had colds. For once, he put his foot down and, in his most authoritative voice, commanded her to stay inside.