



Canis **Royal 03** Groomfight

By

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GROOMFIGHT

Chapter 1

PrinceShakar was the queen's own child, which was why he missed all the excitement. Unlike his brothers,Shakar could not get enough of his mother's world, and the only way to get there from the SandLands was through stories.

As a child he had heard about The Hitchcock, The Chubby Checker, Chocolate Sodas, the Dirty Stinking Commies, and the king of the land, Eisenhower. When Princess Lois came, she regaled him with tales of Those Bastards in Payroll and the World Wide Web, marvelous updates to a world he had come to love as much as his own.

In short, becauseShakar was his mother's son, he spent quite a bit of his time wishing he was somewhere else.

Thus, hunting trips.He could never get to his mother's world by hunting, of course, but it helped to get out of CastleRoyale for a fewsunrounds .

In fact, if he had not been his mother's son, he would not have missed the dark travelers and Anne's great cleverness, her mating ceremony, his trip, the farm, the Groomfight, and Rica.

He owed his mother everything.

Chapter 2

He had almost caught up with the herd of toans, and supposed it was time for the kill. Although he doubted he would, in fact, cull; his father had taught him never to kill unless he was hungry. He was tracking the toans to keep in practice, and out of boredom.

He sniffed some offal, judging it to be from just that morn, and thought, *How I wish I were anywhere, anywhere but here*, and then fell.

This was startling, to put it mildly, and he instinctively shifted back to his two-legged form. He had fallen, somehow, *through* the sand, and was surrounded by golden light, so bright it made his eyes water, and he fell and fell, and thought, *See now, you have your wish and are you not sorry?*

He landed with a tooth-rattling thud and knew no more.

He awoke and found himself looking up into a glorious face, a smiling *kumkoss*-colored beauty with the biggest, darkest eyes he had ever seen.

"Wellhiya," she said. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," he replied, dazzled.

"Are you sure? That was quite a fall. From the sky, if you don't mind my pointing that out."

"I am well."

"Glad to hear it, bud! You think you can sit up?"

"No." It occurred to him that his head was pillowed on her soft sweet lap, and he had no urge to move. Ever.

"Okay, take your time, get your wind back." She brushed his hair out of his eyes, her full bosom actually blocking the sun for a moment. "Ihaveta say, you gave me quite a shock! Not to mention you almost landed on me."

"I ask forgiveness."

"Don't worry about it," she said cheerfully. "I have quick reflexes. And it livened up what was looking to be a dull morning. D'youwant something cool to drink?"

He could have thirsted on her, gazed upon her forever, but after watching his brother woo Lois, knew better than to blurt out such a thing. Although it was the tradition to explain openly about feelings the moment they were discovered, it tended to startle Earthers .

"I am fine." And he was. Her oval face was framed by wings of dark hair streaked with silver, and she had a small nose and chin, and the proud cheekbones of a queen. Her voice was low, almost throaty, and her fingers as she stroked his forehead were cool.

"I'm Frederica Callanbra , but you can call me Rica."

"I am Shakar , Prince of the S—"

"The Sand Lands , right?"

"How did you know that?" he asked, so startled he sat up.

She was kneeling beside him, and he saw she was wearing shortclamdiggers , only to her knees, a plain sky-colored work shirt, and nothing on her feet, which were dirty. It was quite a bit cooler there than his home, he noticed, and there were a great many trees, casting shade over them. He could smell domestic animals and vegetation. Quite a bit of it, more than he had ever smelled in one place at once.

Never mind sky-colored shirt, he thought, glancing up. The sky here is a different color. How beautiful it is I

"My mother told me about the Sand Lands ," she explained, smoothing an errant strand of dark hair behind her ear.

"My mother told me about here," he said excitedly. "About clamdiggers and sodas and all the many costumes you all wear. She came from here."

"Well, my mom came from *there* ." They sat in the dirt and smiled at each other. "Prince, eh? You're a long way from home."

"I am glad to be here," he said with perfect truth. In addition to trees as tall as the castle, there was a lush green covering on the ground. "My mother was a good queen and a good mate but she did miss her home. She told me about grass and oak trees and... farms?"

She gave him an odd look. "I work the land, sure. But I'm here by myself. If you're looking for a settlement, the nearest one is a day's ride from here."

"I am not looking for a settlement."

"You seem to be feeling better. Want to come in for something to drink?"

"Yes, I would like that."

"Nice and easy," she replied, extending a hand to help him up, not that he needed assistance. And not that he was about to refuse her touch. "You okay? You feel dizzy or anything?"

He did not know "dizzy" but forgot about it as he stood to his full height... and realized she was as tall as

he was. Such a thing had never happened to him before. The tallest woman at the palace had come up to his throat. "You are large," he replied, very surprised, then flushed as blood surged to his face. Fool! A terrible thing to say to a female. "I meant to say, you are very big. Ah..."

She laughed. And did not seem offended! "My dad was even bigger... a whole head taller than me. My mom was the shrimp in the family. And may I say, that's quite a way with words you've got there."

He laughed, too, relieved and a little surprised at how quickly she put him at ease. Rica was quite a woman.

Chapter 3

"This is very good," he said, draining his third cup. "What is it?"

"It's just milk from the animals. You probably saw them outside."

"And you are here all alone?"

"Yeppers. There was a—a plague, I guess you'd call it, and my folks got exposed when they were getting supplies. We called it the Five-Minute Flu, because you had about five minutes to make your peace and then you choked to death on your own snot." Rica said this to the amazing stranger with perfect calm, though ten years later, the memory still hurt. No chance to say good-bye; the last thing she'd said to her mother had been, "Don't forget to bring back sugar."

"By the time I came after them to see what was holding them up, everybody who was gonna catch it had caught it, and... well. I figure being a hybrid helped me fight off the disease. I've never been sick a day in my life." She sighed. "Poor Mama and Dad."

The prince blinked at her. She had time to marvel at his eyes—she had never seen eyes the color of grass before—when he asked, "You have stayed out here alone?"

"Well, there's work to be done. What was I going to do, abandon the family home to... what? Go find strangers? And eventually, the town settled again. We're like the *old* Colonists, you know, the ones who came to America? We get the shit kicked out of us, but we always bounce back. Besides," she added matter-of-factly, "where was I going to go? I didn't have any—I mean, like I said, there's always work to be done."

"You remind me a bit of my sibling-by-mating, Lois. She also is from here and—and is brave with her words."

Rica laughed. She'd never heard it put so tactfully before. "Yeah, brave with my words, yeppers, that's me. So, listen, how are we going to get you back?"

"Back?"

"Well, sure. Did a—I don't know, a spell or something—did that go wrong back home? Or do you have machines that toss people all over the galaxy and one of those went wrong? How'd you end up here?"

"I do not know," PrinceShakar replied. He didn't look even a tiny bit troubled. "What matters is that I am here now."

"Ooooookay."

"I must earn my keep," he told her earnestly. "I cannot lounge about your family home eating and drinking. I must help you."

"Oh, uh, that's not really—I mean, you're a prince. You—"

"—must not let others take all the work on their own shoulders," he finished firmly.

"Well..." She was weakening. Although he was fascinating to look at and talk to—she hadn't seen skin that color since her mother died—there was always work to be done. And he looked strong. A little on the small side, but strong. "I guess there are a few things... if you don't mind..."

He set his cup down with a decisive thump. "I do not mind. Please show me what is to be done."

"If this was an eighties movie," she said, grinning, "there'd be a musical montage of us working together and bonding right about now."

"Beg pardon, what?"

"Never mind. Let's go, Prince."

"Shakar."

"PrinceShakar ."

"No, onlyShakar ."

"Gotcha."

"You are *strong*," she commented several hours later. "I've never seen anyone pick up a full-grown barnyard animal before. I thought I was in pretty good shape, but you..."

"It seemed the best way to get her into the barren so she could be with her young one."

"Barn."

"Yes." He looked her over and she almost blushed—the expression in his eyes was admiring and even a little—"You are strong also. Many of our females are strong, but I do not know if they could tend to a holding this size on their own. Lois is not strong at all," he added thoughtfully, "but her courage makes up for it."

She shut the gate and bound it closed with the thick rope. No roaming animals tonight, thank goodness!

"Yeah, I know how that goes... my mom was much stronger than my dad. It didn't bother him, though. They used to tease each other about it. She'd pretend that the way to decide who would get a chore would be to arm wrestle, and of course she would always win, and—"

"Arm wrestle?"

"Yeppers, it's when you—uh, here." She stepped closer to the gate. "Here. Put your arm up like this... yeah, rest your elbow on the top... okay, and then I do like this... and now we—
owwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww, stopsqueezing! That's not how you do this."

"I apologize," he said, his tanned face coloring to his eyebrows.

She pulled her hand out of his grip and inspected the mashed fingers. "Okay, new rule, no more asking guys who fell out of the sky to arm wrestle. Lucky for you I'm—what do you call it—I can use both hands just as well."

"Why would you not?" he asked.

"Oh, I guess everybody from the SandLands is—ambidextrous! Got it. I was afraid it would be on the tip of my tongue all day."

"You had fear it would *what*?"

"Never mind. Yeah, come to think of it, my mom could use either hand..." She shook herself. "Okay, back to business. Now *carefully* wrap your fingers around mine... yes, like that... and now we each try to push the other person's arm over. *Get* that other hand *down*, not like that, that's cheating."

"Many apologies." He was inspecting their joined hands with interest. "Now what do we do?"

"Okay, now... go!"

She strained and even grunted, and to her surprise his arm actually went over a couple of centimeters, when she realized...

"How long should the game last?"

"Oh, for the love of... will you just push my arm over already? Ow!" She glared while he looked guilty. "Fine, great, good work. Give me my hand back, I want to make sure I still have five fingers."

He didn't give her her hand back. If anything, his grip tightened. "I should not play that game again," he told her soberly. "I would never want to cause harm to your hand or—or any other place."

Uh? "Uh... that's okay, Shakar. It was just for fun." He looked so earnest, so sweet, so sexily sweaty (it had been a long afternoon), she couldn't think of what to say. Was this real? Sure, she was a homesteader, a colonist, and she was used to odd things happening, but they were usually *bad* odd things. Not godlike gorgeous fellow dropping from the sky and being sweet and helpful things.

"You know what?" she said at last, because he was entirely too close... kissing close, if that didn't sound too absurd. "You want to cool off?"

He blinked. "Cool off?"

Chapter 4

"This... is... *wonderful* !" he bellowed as he launched himself from the old rope and landed with an enormous splash in the middle of the largest outdoor bathing area he had ever seen.

She laughed as he paddled around her like a puppy, and splashed him when he got too near. "Told you. This is just the thing after working on the place all day."

"The water is so odd... it smells different."

"Well, I guess. You're not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy."

"No, and I suppose the Lion and the Scarecrow are lingering nearby as well."

"I hope not. How'd you know—oh, your mama told you."

"She told me many things." He dived under the cool water, which smelled a great deal like the grass, peeped at her bare legs, then resurfaced. "She also mentioned Negroes. I think that is fascinating. Everyone has the same-colored skin at home. It is quite dull."

"Oh, *is that* what she mentioned." Rica laughed again. Shakar loved the sound. It was like the gurgling of a child, innocent and sweet. "And catch up, fool, it's not Negroes. And it's not African-Americans anymore, either. It's colonists. Smallc."

"Smallc -letter," he repeated obediently. "I do not understand why others of your kind were cruel because your skin was darker. I would like to have skin the color of akumkoss," he added wistfully. "It would make hunting much easier."

"No it wouldn't." She shook her head, and water droplets flew from her hair. "Your skin is the color of the sand back home, right? You're perfectly evolved to hunt there. But as to understanding the whole issue... you got a year or two for me to explain it to you?"

"A year?"

"Sunround," she corrected herself.

"Oh, yes! I have many of those."

She gave him another odd look. "Well, I was only kidding. That shit was a long time ago, excuse my language, and it doesn't really matter anymore. We've been in the majority for a long time."

"So have I," he said cheerfully.

"I'll bet, Prince."

"Thus, we are perfectly..." Mated, he had been about to say, but was wary of frightening her. "...suited," he adjusted.

"Think so, *Prince*?"

He splashed her, and her laughter changed to choking. She suddenly disappeared and, while he blinked water out of his eyes, felt a tug on his leg and then he was the one gurgling and coughing out odd-tasting water.

"You are sly," he told her when she resurfaced.

"Keep it in mind, Prince. Don't spit, that's nasty."

"I do apologize. The water is different."

"Different, yuck, or different, hmmm?"

"It does not taste bad," he assured her, "just different."

"Oh. Well, I love this little man-made lake. It's always so refreshing. I look forward to jumping in all day."

"Do you bathe here?"

"No, there's a head back at the house, with soap and everything. I just come out here to get cool."

"At home—"

"You've got those big bathing pools inside, right? Do you even have lakes or ponds?"

He thought and thought, and finally said, "Just the sea. There is the sand, only the sand, and then suddenly there is the sea. Only the sea."

"Ooooooooookay. Sounds like a dream vacation spot."

"I will never see it again," he said, dismissing his birth planet with a wave of his hand. "It does not matter. It is lakes and ponds I must get used to, and soap and heads."

"And Negroes," she added dryly. "Don't forget those."

"Colonists with a small *c* -letter," he said obediently.

She had been swimming away, shaking her head, but at that she abruptly turned and swam back to his side. They treaded water, facing each other.

"Wait a minute, you're serious? What are you talking about, never see it again? How come? Did they send you away? I can't imagine you did something *that* bad."

"No, I was not sent away. I wished to come here. I have always wished to come here. And finally, my wish was granted. It happens at home, only the other way... people from your world fall into ours."

Except not only the other way," he added, correcting himself, "because your dam came *here* ."

"Well, yeah. It's kind of funny, it was exactly like this—Dad was working on the farm, and Mom fell out of no place and landed right in the pile of ma—never mind, the point is, she was surprised to be here, but she never..." Rica trailed off, troubled. "She never wanted to go back," she finished.

"That is how it is." Still, his heart cramped at the thought of never seeing his good father or brothers again, or Lois, or the small ones she would bear Damon.

"Well, it doesn't have to be."

"Yes," he assured her, "it does."

"Does not! I mean, just because my mama never wanted to go back doesn't mean she couldn't. Dad built her the machine and everything."

"What?" And again, "What?"

"Hello, how do you think we got here? He was an engineer way back in the day, and after she told him about the SandLands, he went into town, talked to the Elder, brought back part of the machine, modified it, and Mama could go back home whenever she wanted. Theoretically, I mean. She never wanted to go." Rica thought about that a moment. "I think that's part of the reason Mama settled in so well. Part of the reason Dad built the thing in the first place. She knew she could have gone back anytime, and that made her never want to go back. I bet he was counting on that. He was a smart guy, my dad."

"Your father was a—a builder?"

"An engineer, yeah."

"And he made a MASH-een that could send someone to the SandLands?"

"Muh-SHEEN, and yeah, he did."

Shakar was gaping at her. She could practically count all his teeth. "When you were alone all this time, why did you never go visit the home of your dam?"

Rica shrugged. "I don't know. Mama never wanted to go back. So I couldn't think of a good enough reason to leave here and go someplace that Mom disliked so much, she never looked back."

"Buh—wh—b—"

"Maybe you should get out of the water and lie down," she said, concerned. "You look kind of weird."

He had swum to her and was holding on to her shoulders. "You have never used it? Not even to settle your mind? Never put it in motion even if you yourself did not journey?"

"No, I—oh, I get where you're going. No, I didn't push any buttons for fun. Whatever's making people pop out of nowhere, it's not Dad's machine. Maybe it's a residual effect," she added thoughtfully. "Something about the traveling... the ships... maybe it tore a—a thin spot or whatever between our planets. Making it easier to go back and forth—or maybe someone, somewhere, built the same thing my dad did, and he or she is pushing buttons for fun. Also, your fingers are digging into my shoulders."

"Forgive." He abruptly released her. "I was just... taken by surprise. I did not realize..." He trailed off. "I did not realize..."

"But that's good news, Shakar. You can go home whenever you want. Probably. I mean, nobody's tested it, but my dad knew his shit. And I've maintained the machine; he did it every week, and after he died, I made damn sure I did it every week."

"You know this machine?"

"I know all the machines on this place. It's the advantage of being a single girl." She smiled.

"I guess... you are correct. It is good news. I had thought..."

"Well, do you want to go back right now? We can dry off and I'll show you where I keep—"

"No," he said, seeming to come to a sudden decision. "I do not want to go back right now." Then he gripped her shoulders again, pulled her to him, and kissed her wet mouth.

"I knew skinny-dipping was going to get me into trouble," she murmured, looping her arms around his neck and kissing him back.

Chapter 5

She had wrapped her legs around his waist, hoping they wouldn't drown (but such a way to go!), and Shakar supported them easily in the cool water. Consumed with curiosity, she reached down and found him, hot and pressing against her palm and like rough silk in the water.

"Not to kill the mood or anything," she said, nibbling on his throat, "but my parents died when I was fourteen."

"I am very sorry," he replied, cupping her bottom.

"Thanks, but what I meant was, I've never done this before."

"No?"

"I've been really busy the last ten years," she said defensively. "I never quite got around to going to town to lose my virginity. To buy feed, sure. But not the other. Anyway, my point is, if you don't want to do this—"

"No."

"—too damned bad. I've waited long enough." She paused and realized what he'd said. "Oh, no? Good. I mean... let's just say, I'm a big believer in signs, and when a great-looking guy falls out of the sky and is

nice and gorgeous and sweet and great-looking, I'm gonna jump him."

"As you wish."

"No offense."

"I am not offended."

"Are you laughing at me?" she asked suspiciously.

"Oh, no, Rica, that would be very disrespectful."

"Hahaha .Shut up and kiss me."

He obliged, which she found delightful. The water was like cool silk against her and he was like hot silk, and everything was fine. She touched him again and again, half wondering if he would disappear in the same flash of light that had brought him.

His hands were all over her, his mouth was all over her, and soon enough she was climbing him like she used to climb the biggest tree in the orchard. He stopped her with his hands and easily lifted her out of the water, laying her on the bank.

"It is easier the first time to not be in water," he told her, and then dipped his head and sucked the moisture from her nipples.

"Whatever you say," she groaned. His head moved lower and lower, his tongue flickering out to caress her navel, hermons ,her sweet inner folds. She had thought she was ready for him before, but the terrible need that swamped her was a new thing, a huge thing.

He carefully spread her wide for him and started to ease inside her, and she was clumsy in her eagerness—God, it felt like she had been waiting*forever*—but he stopped suddenly, just as it had started to become painful. He wriggled back down until he was licking and kissing her between her thighs again, until she was clawing at his back. Until that sweet dark heat she had previously only been able to bring to herself was coursing through her, spreading out from her stomach in dizzying, delicious warmth.

He entered her while she was still vibrating and this time there was no discomfort, only sweet friction—she'd never known friction could be so glorious. She had to give voice to it and her hoarse screams forced the birds to give wing, and it seemed for a moment she was spiraling up with them, flying with them, andshe never, never wanted that moment to end .

Chapter 6

*Sixty-eight*sunrounds later...

"The rabbit," Rica announced, "is dead."

Shakar, who had just come in from watering the cattle, looked surprised. "What is a rabbit? Do you require a new one?"

"It's a smallish brown and white—never mind, look, I'm pregnant."

"You are... with child?" A slow smile of delight was spreading over his face. "Truly?"

"Yeah."

"But how do you—I admit this is a very mysterious thing, a woman-thing."

"There's nothing mysterious about peeing on a stick—not that we do it that way anymore. I haven't had any flow since you came here, so I put a few things together and sent a blood sample to Central. You're—happy?" She realized she had been holding her breath, and let it out with such a woosh she was momentarily dizzy. "That's great." "Great" sounded inadequate, so she added, "Reallyreally great. I wasn't sure what you would think. I don't know what to think."

"But that is wonderful!" He had started to sit down, but then jumped up and prowled around the room. "Onlythink, a new prince or princess!"

"*Will* the baby be a prince or princess?" she asked quietly. "I thought you had turned away from all of that."

He stopped in mid-pace. "I did not turn away from being my father's son... only from being home."

"Uh-huh."

He came to her and put his big hand on her stomach. "How will you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Have the baby. You cannot do it here on the farm alone, with only me to help you. I am not knowledgeable in such things."

"No, I guess we'd have to go into town. We'd wait until it was close to my time and I guess we'd..." She trailed off, troubled. It was the exact problem that had been worrying her. "I could get Daran to watch the animals for me... heck, his family has been angling to get their hands on this place for a generation."

Shakar was silent. She bore the silence for a minute or two, then asked, "Why don't you say what's on your mind? You want to go back."

Still he said nothing.

"Come on, Shakar. You miss the Sand Lands."

"I think... I think it was you I wanted," he said, almost apologetically. "I thought, all this time, it was a place I wanted. But it was only you. I do not mean that I dislike your home."

She grinned at him. "I'm not offended, Shakar. That's probably the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me. But we have a little problem. And it's gonna be a big problem, soon enough. A blessing, as my mama

would have said. But a complicated one. Got any ideas?"

He hesitated.

She said, "Better spit it out and get it over with."

"I do not wish you to birth the child here, alone save for me."

"Gotcha."

"I do not wish you to spend your last days of confinement in the town, away from both our homes."

"Uh-huh."

He paused again. "I would wish for Good King Sekal to see his son-by-his-son."

"So: The bottom line is you want to go home."

"Yes. I want to go home. But also, you should not give up your home to please me."

"Give up? Shakar, we can go back and forth whenever we want. Probably. Assuming the machine hasn't popped a screw loose or something."

"It seems... unnatural. To use a machine to go back and forth."

"I should have known you'd be a technophobe," she teased. "Look, I know you're used to magic portals just opening up out of nowhere, but I'm telling you, this way is better."

"It is not dangerous in any way?"

"Let's put it this way: My dad loaded that thing with so many fail-safes, if everything's not exactly right, we just won't go anywhere. We won't be like Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly*. Never mind. It's safe, Shakar. I'd never risk you or the baby if I wasn't totally sure."

"Hmmm..."

"Why not visit the home place, make nice with the future grandpa, all that good stuff? I can let Daran have a plot or two in exchange for watching the place while we're gone." *Why am I trying to talk him into this?* she asked herself. *Because I don't want to have the baby alone on a farm with Just a prince to help me. That's why.*

"It seems," he said, giving her a warm look, "that you have thought of everything."

"I'm pretty bright like that," she replied, and leaned over to kiss him. His response was enthusiastic, to say the least, and after a moment she heard the plates crashing to the floor and felt herself bend over as they both hit the table.

"Good in theory," she groaned as his hands were busy opening her shirt, baring her for his mouth, his hands. "But hell on the back."

"As you wish," he said, and picked her up (it still amazed her that he could do that), and hurried down

the hall into the small bedroom. They fell to the bed together, his mouth on her breasts, teasing her nipples, pulling on them with his lips.

"I reallyreally*really* love it when you do that," she sighed, stroking his coarse hair.

"I reallyreallyreally love to do it. You taste... wonderful.Wonderful, Rica."

Wonderful, Rica, she thought, helping him help her out of her clothes. She had lost count of the number of times he had said that in the past weeks. And she thought he was pretty wonderful, too. He was like a dream come true, falling out of the sky and into her life, her love, her prince.

She grasped his pulsing cock, gently squeezed, and his tongue swept past her teeth. They nibbled and kissed and she raised her knees for him, felt him slide inside her with a sweetness that left her amazed every time—it was as if they had been made for each other.Corny, but true.

"Oh, Rica..."

"I love you," she told him. And telling him was the same as it had been the first time: amazing, awe-inspiring.

"And I, you, my own."

She braced herself,then wriggled until she was on top of him, the way she liked, the way they both liked. Her breasts hung down for his mouth like exotic fruit, and he gobbled at them and sucked and licked, while she rode him to orgasm, until they were both spent.

"Okay," she said, straightening from her father's machine, the thing he had built to please her mother, and keep her mother. "Everything looks good. Stand over here. Pretend you're in one of those old episodes of *Star Trek*. Never mind," she added as he opened his mouth to ask the inevitable question. "Just stand there on the pads. I'll program it to toss us in thirty seconds."

"Toss?"

"It's just slang. Don't worry, you won't feel a thing.Probably." She fiddled with the controls, thinking that anyone but her father's daughter would have been lost. Her father had been almost ridiculously smart, and so he had built a machine that he understood. The fact that anyone who didn't hold a doctorate in spatial dynamics would be lost had likely never occurred to him.

But she had practically been weaned on this machine. Her earliest memory was of toddling out to the barn carrying tools for her father.

"It seems very strange to me,"Shakar commented. "You are a credit to me."

"That didn't sound*too* smug. What do you mean, credit?" She went to stand beside him.

"You are beautiful*and* wise*and* self-sustaining*and* with child*and* kind *and* charming."

"I've got it all, baby," she joked, covering how embarrassed and thrilled she was, and the machine tossed them.

Chapter 7

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, *no* !"

"Lois, dear, it's *my* wedding."

"Mom, this isn't a wedding, okay? The king waving his hand over you and pronouncing you 'mated' isn't a wedding."

"Well, hon , he's the one in charge. If we were in England and the queen pronounced you married, wouldn't you believe her?"

"Look, I didn't have a wedding, okay? And Anne didn't, but by God, you're gonna. You're *gonna* ."

Gladys gave her daughter a look. "The older you get, the more like your father you get."

Lois grinned. "No need to be nasty."

"So you're saying you'd like the white dress and an organ and finger food?"

"I'll settle for vows."

Gladys crossed her arms over her chest and, for a split second, looked exactly like Lois starting to get in a temper. "When you're my age, sunshine, you don't even need the damned vows."

"Don't be stubborn," Lois coaxed.

"Look who's talking!"

"Well, whose fault is that?"

"I think we just decided it was your father's fault. And where's Damon? He would probably take my side."

"That big chicken is trying to stay out of this. So's the king. I guess they're waiting to see what we decide."

"What I decide, dear."

"Aw, c'mon, Mom. Don't you want a proper wedding? You and Dad had a justice of the peace."

"Well, we had to," Gladys said reasonably. "You came along five months later."

"Not even any flowers!"

"They aggravate my hay fever. That's why I love this desert climate. So dry."

"So's an oven." Lois was mustering the perfect argument to bend her mother to her will when she heard the sound of galloping feet and suddenly Shakar burst into the sunroom, dragging a tall, big-boned, dark-skinned woman by one hand.

"Oh, hey," Lois said. "Welcome back. You're a little out of the loop, so let me bring you up to date. Anne and Maltese—"

"My woman is with child," Shakar burst out. "I fell into her world and swam in a pond and fed large animals."

"Okayyyyyy," Lois said. "I guess *I'm* out of the loop."

"Lois, where is the good king my father?"

"Oh, he's cowering in the halls somewhere. And don't think of him as the good king. Think of him as my new stepfather."

Sekal blinked at that, then said, "I wish to present Frederica Callenbra, of Callenbra Hold. Rica, this is my sister-by-mating, the good princess Lois, and her dam, soon-to-be-queen Gladys."

"Soon to be queen," Gladys mused, shaking Rica's large hand. "Queen. I hadn't... I've been so caught up in everything else... and Sekal asking me... I hadn't thought... hadn't realized..."

"Nice to meet you," Rica said. Lois was finding it hard to look away—Rica was easily the tallest woman she'd ever met, and with some real meat on her bones, not an emaciated supermodel type. Striking bone structure. And a manner that was almost... what? Dignified, she decided. "I've heard a lot about you."

"You're going to have a baby, then?" Gladys asked. "Congratulations!"

"Yes, we have much joy, we will find the king and there will be... Gladys, you should not be surprised. Did you not know? My father wanted you for his mate from the moment he gazed upon you."

"I did know," she replied steadily. "But I don't know anything about being queen. I'm just an office manager. I mean, I was back home."

"Better you than me," Lois said. "And if you can run an office full of accountants without committing double homicide, you can probably help Sekal run a kingdom."

"Sounds reasonable," Rica agreed.

"After a proper wedding ceremony," Lois added.

"Oh, hush up," she-who-would-soon-be-queen said.

"My king, may I present Frederica Callenbra, of Callenbra Hold. Rica, this is the good king, my sire."

"It's nice to meet you, sir."

The king looked confused. "I thought you were a-hunting," he said.

"Sir, I deeply regret any worry I caused you when I vanished ere these many—"

"But you have only been gone threesunrounds," the king replied.

"Daysunrounds or yearssunrounds?" Lois muttered to Damon. They had come to the throne room to be officially presented to Shakar's woman, and Maltese was standing on the king's other side. Anne was in another meeting with the lost ones, still hard at work deciphering the language. As her work was considered more important than mere socializing, however official, she had been left undisturbed. "I still don't get that."

"Days," Damon muttered back.

Meanwhile, Shakar was sputtering. "Three... no, sire, I have been gone almost an entire..." He trailed off. "I have been with Rica for some time. We only now came back. And—"

"I'm guessing time runs on a different track back home," Rica said. "It's been... what? A couple of days here? Not quite? But you were with me over two months. Long enough for us to... you know."

"I am certain I would have fretted, my son, if you had been gone longer," the king assured him.

"But as it is, we pretty much didn't notice," Lois added. "Sorry."

"Then if you had no worry, I did not miss—"

"Ah," the king said. "So you do remember."

"But, my king, I have found my mate."

"And I am sure she is very fine," the king said, giving Rica a warm smile, "but in fact, you—"

"It does not matter if I am here or not here," Shakar interrupted. "I have a mate."

"In fact, my son, you—"

"I will not allow this."

"Son—"

"I will not."

"Shakar."

"Father, that is my last word on it."

"Prince Shakar."

Shakar's teeth came together with an audible click and Lois's eyes went wide. Gladys went to the king's

side- and whispered in his ear, and after a long moment Sekal nodded.

"She-who-will-be-my-mate wishes your m—wishes to hear Rica speak on this."

"Sir?" Rica said, looking startled.

"My son the good prince who has no manners is your mate?"

"Well... yes, sir. I mean..." She looked over at Shakar, whose golden skin was decidedly flushed. "Nothing official ever happened, but in the last couple of months it was just the two of us on my farm and we fell in love. I came with him today because he wanted to see you. All of you," she added, looking around the large room. "He missed all of you."

"The important thing to keep in mind," Lois joked, trying to lighten the tension, "is that we didn't miss him."

"The reason I ask, Rica, is because my son had responsibilities when he left. When he was gone for... a couple of months. And those responsibilities remain."

"He's already married, isn't he? It's something awful like that, or you two wouldn't be so upset."

"No, he is free to take a mate. And they are free to take him. You see, when the Bridefight was scheduled not long ago, we decided to also have a Groomfight. My youngest son the good prince was free at the time and seemed to welcome the idea. He has always..." The king shook his head. "What I am saying is this: In two sunrises, females from all over the Sandlands will come, and they will come for one reason—to battle for the hand of Shakar."

Chapter 8

"So!"

"Rica..."

"Were you saving it for a surprise?"

"It is not the way you—"

"*Do not* be telling me it's not what I think, buddy-boy. Not unless you want to have a black eye at your own Groomfight."

"There will be no Groomfight, because I have a mate. This is what I was trying to explain to my father. I will not participate. We will leave," he finished, looking almost as desolate as he sounded, "and it will not affect us."

"Not *affect* us? Are you blind, or just crazy? It's affecting us right now! And there will be no running

away. You can get that straight right now." Rica whipped off her yellow work shirt—thank all the gods she had a small tee underneath—and flung it at the small stool in the corner. "We're going to stay here and take *your* medicine."

"Rica, you cannot fight pure—"

"Oh, here we get down to it. I can't fight a purebred. I know what a Bridefight is, my mama told me all about it, how sometimes the princes take mates that way. I never heard of a Groomfight, though."

"When he saw how happy Damon was with his mate," Shakar said dully, "my father and Lois—"

"Don't blame this on *me*," Lois protested. "All I said was maybe the girls could get a chance to fight for the guy they wanted. Next thing I know, you're all set up for *The Dating Game*, SandLands style. If you didn't want to do it, you had plenty of time to put a stop to it."

"I know," Shakar said miserably.

They were in yet another small room off the grand throne room, and Rica was glad. She would have felt weird chewing Shakar a new one in such a grand room. And in front of so many people. But this one was a little more to her taste, and she didn't mind that Damon and Lois had followed them. She kind of liked Lois.

She wasn't sure how she felt about the king. And Gladys, the older lady, had suddenly begged for his assistance in writing her vows, whatever that meant, and off they had gone. Which was probably good, since it gave her time to ream out her boyfriend

(husband?)

and recover from the surprises of the last ten minutes.

"Let's get back to this other thing. I can't fight pure-breds? Pure SandLands girls, is that right?"

"No, you cannot." Shakar refused to be shamed, which was annoying. His voice was very firm as he continued. "I believe we have already established that you are a fine female in every way, but there are some things even you cannot do. And the baby must be safe. At all times, the baby must be safe."

"Too bad we didn't hide out long enough, huh?" She knew she sounded cruel; she *felt* cruel and didn't care. "That's what it was all about, wasn't it? All that shit about finding yourself. You were hiding from the Groomfight. And once you figured it was long over, then all of a sudden you're hot to see home and Dad again."

"That is not—"

"Don't you get it, Shakar? It's not even that you didn't tell me about the Groomfight—that's bad enough—it's that you hid, you *hid away* from your job."

"I have no defense," he said after a long silence.

"Well," Lois began, then stopped. "That's really all I had. I, uh, I'm sure it's not as bad as it—uh—"

"I require your assistance, Lois," Damon said suddenly, startling them all. He'd been so quiet Rica had

forgotten he was there. "In another room. Not in this room."

"Right. Well, I'm here to serve. We'll—we've got to go. I'm sure this will all—we've got to go."

"You might as well take him with you," Rica said. "I'm done with him for now."

"Rica..."

"As you wish, good lady," Damon said, and then he grabbed Shakar by the scruff of the neck, as if he were a big blond naughty puppy, and literally hauled him away.

Rica almost smiled.

"Damon, remove your hands from me *atoncmmmlpphh!*"

"Like that? Is that gonna work for you?" Lois asked him. Damon had slid him into the wall like a big tiddlywink ... it was really sort of funny.

"I have sufficient troubles," Shakar retorted, standing and straightening his hair—which was a mess, to put it mildly—"without you being cross as well."

"That is unfortunate, my good brother, because you've earned this scolding—possibly a beating as well—and you will accept it as a man does, as opposed to cringing and hiding behind a woman."

"Dude: What were you *thinking*? Hey, it's great that you found a girl, she seems really—well, great. But cripes, what a mess you've landed her in!"

"She is in no mess, because there will be no fight."

"It sounds to me like there is. Rica doesn't seem to be the type to just take off. Of course, you've known her longer. About two months longer, is that right?"

"I wasn't hiding," Shakar said woodenly. "I really did leave to hunt. The rest was... wonderful chance. It is true, I stayed with Rica and missed the Groomfight—thought I missed the Groomfight—but it was because I was happy with her."

"Uh-huh." Lois was skeptical, but the guy looked like a whipped hound already, so she tried to ease up. "Your dad seems kind of mad."

"And if Rica does not fight, he will get much more mad," Damon said.

"Then he will get much more mad, because Rica *will not fight*."

"Well, it's not to the death or anything, right?"

"The baby must not be harmed. And Rica was not birthed here. She is from your world," he said, nodding at Lois.

"Oh, I get it. She doesn't do the Puma thing. Yeah, it doesn't seem like it'd be a fair fight. But I think a

pregnant woman knows what she can and can't—"

"It is worse than that," Damon said. "I begin to see Shakar's problem. It is not just that Rica could be harmed... she will not win. And the winner will be Shakar's mate. Not Rica."

"Right now, that suits me fine," Rica snapped, but Lois saw the almost imperceptible spasm of pain that crossed her face.

"What are you doing here? We left so you could have some privacy."

"Well, I couldn't hang around in there all day, could I?"

"Okay, okay, everybody just try to calm down. Stuff doesn't have to happen right this second, does it? Rica, let's find you a room. You can get yourself sorted out, maybe rest up, and then we can go kick Shakar's ass some more. Right? I mean, standing around like this... it's cathartic as all get-out, but we're not getting much *done*, see what I mean?"

"I'd love to see a bedroom," Rica said, sounding so surprised and grateful, Lois was embarrassed she hadn't thought of it sooner.

Chapter 9

"... And... and that's just how I feel, Sekal ."

"It will be as you wish, my Gladys."

"I'm sure it sounds very very dumb to you, but... did you just say it was okay?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"You may have as many vows as you wish. I also will recite as many as you require. In fact, I must apologize: I did not consider your traditions when—"

"Never mind about that, Sekal . If where I came from was so great, I'd probably still be there, right? I'm just so surprised you—I mean, you don't have to do vows, I thought they were kind of silly myself, but Lois wouldn't let up, and—and—"

"It is little enough, and it pleases you." He smiled at her, his large lavender eyes—Damon's eyes—seeming to sparkle. She had never seen such eyes in her life, and had thought she would never be used to them. But she was. It was almost frightening how quickly she had gotten used to them. "I would do much to please you, Gladys."

Oh that is so much nicer than "Move over, Wide Load." "Thank you, Sekal . I feel the exact same

way."

"Do you think sufficient time has elapsed?"

"Beg pardon?"

"For the children to scatter and plot strategies. *That's* why you dragged me out of the throne room this morning, yes?"

Gladys could feel her face heat up, but managed to smile back. "Yes, I guess you caught me."

"Your concern for a prince who is not yet yours-by-mating greatly warms me, Gladys. You will make a fine queen and a fine dam to my children. Even if the prince is behaving like adar —like someone who does not know how to behave in matters of honor."

"She's pregnant, Sekal," she said soberly. "And they're in love. It changes things. It changes... everything, I guess. Don't you remember what it was like?"

Sekal shook his head. "I am an old man."

"That's not true at all."

"Only a future mate could say such a thing and not be telling a false tale," he teased.

She ignored that. "Besides, you just said—you said you'd do a lot to make me happy. Well, where in the world do you think Shakar gets it from? Not only is he trying to keep Rica happy, he's got the baby to think about. He's willing to make you mad and risk—I don't know—exile? I guess some pretty terrible things happen if he doesn't let her fight."

"Yes," he agreed and looked, for a moment, like the old man he had claimed to be. She found it more shocking than the fact that she had to think up marriage vows to keep him distracted. Gladys never thought of herself as old, but she wasn't exactly a puppy anymore. And Sekal had grown children, too. Neither of them were kids, that was for darned sure. But somehow, to her he had always looked strong and beautiful and... and timeless. Kingly. "Some pretty terrible things."

"Well, maybe we can head back and talk about it. I'm sure we can all figure something out. I'm sure Shakar will remember his manners and I'm sure you'll watch your temper."

"Will I, my Gladys?"

"You'd better." But she smiled to take the sternness out of her words.

Rica had been in her mother's land about, she figured, six hours, counting travel time from the jump-off point. And one thing her mother had never mentioned was, the pillows weren't stuffed with feathers.

Rica didn't know *what* they were stuffed with, but they looked like shiny black beads... except they were soft. She'd been in the middle of a real circuit-clearing temper tantrum when she realized. *What was that stuff, anyway?*

She picked up a bead and examined it. Part of her knew exactly what she was doing: she had a big problem she didn't want to face, so her mind was casting around for things that she could face. Like pillows without feathers.

She squeezed a bead. It squished, but didn't make any noise or squirt—thank goodness. She'd been half afraid the thing had been stuffed with beetles... that's what they looked like, beetles without legs, except squishy. It was—

"Rica, dear? May we come in?"

It was that Gladys. The king's sweetie. And she said "we" so Rica figured the king was with her. Good. She tossed the bead over her shoulder, crossed to the doorway, and held the curtain back.

"Hello. Come on in. It's your room, anyway," she added dryly, and the king smiled at her. Why... he looked just like Shakar when he smiled, all open and boyish. He had a downright pleasant face, come to think of it. And those eyes were really something. Small wonder Gladys looked at him like she looked at a rock star. "I made all the servants go away, but I could get you—"

"You need not be in our service, Rica. We came to be sure your needs are being met. And I must beg your forgiveness for what happened earlier. It seems my son did not inherit his stubbornness, pride, temper, or poor reaction to surprise from his mother." Sekal quirked an eyebrow at Gladys. "Or so it has been shown to me."

"Sir, I appreciate you and your lady coming by to make nice, but if there's been a screwup here, we all know it's not *your* screwup." *And what's the deal with your pillows?* she wanted to add, but managed to stop herself in time.

"Ah... yes. About that. Rica, I would beg you to never think I wish any harm to befall you, but—"

"You don't have to explain, King Sekal. Your son made a promise and then tried to get out of it. I imagine it's doubly bad if you're a prince and you try to shirk duty."

"Yes," he said simply. "It is doubly bad."

"But see, the thing is—I'm glad you came by, because I want to make sure we're all clear—the thing is, when I get over being mad at the big cabbage-head, I'm going to want to be with him. After I beat him severely. Possibly more than once. So I better fight. What I mean to say is, I'm *going* to fight."

"Dear, are you sure—"

Sekal cut her off, and Rica could see how that surprised Gladys. The old guy must feel pretty strongly about what was coming. "Rica, this is how I know you are already my daughter-by-mating. You do not 'shirk.' I am filled with pride to hear you speak thusly. But I must not set aside my concern for the new princeling —"

"Or princessling," Gladys added.

"Yes. Do I understand correctly, your dam was from my land?"

"Yes, sir. She fell through a thin spot and mated with my dad, and they had me."

"Then perhaps you know a bit of what would be required of you at a Groomfight . It is not to the death, of course, but you would have to physically triumph over those whose dams and sires came from here, and that I fear—"

"Sekal," she interrupted—and now *he* looked surprised. She figured not a lot of people cut off the king. "Can I tell you something? You and Gladys? Something secret?"

Chapter 10

Shakar took a deep breath and paused outside the room where his family was breaking the fast. He had—how did Lois put it? "Screwed the pooch," that was it, that was the term for an error—several errors—of abysmal judgment. His father thought he was a coward, and worse, Rica thought he was a coward. Worse even than that, his baby was in danger.

He had not honestly gone to Rica's world—not that he had had much say in where he went, or ended up—to avoid the Groomfight , but once there, he could not leave the woman he had searched for his entire life. He should have explained to Rica that they missed—he thought they missed—the event, which would have been personally embarrassing for his father, among other things.

His surprise to find he was mistaken was matched only by his horror when he realized that, in due accordance with tradition, Rica would have to fight.

Well. She would not fight, and that was how it must be. If it meant banishment, exile from the hot sands and cool purple sky he loved, then so be it.

He flung the curtain aside and strode in manfully, ready to repair the damage he had wrought through carelessness. Rica should not pay the price for his mistakes; he would see to that, at least.

"—and then splat! Out of the sky he comes. Almost on top of me, thanks very much."

"Truly?" The king, Shakar was amazed to see, was hanging on Rica's every word, as were Damon, Maltese, Maltese's woman, Lois, and Gladys.

"Yeah, but he can haul *alot* of wood, so he sort of redeemed himself. You know, until lately," she added in a mutter.

"You've got to have another one of these jobbies," Lois said, passing Rica a plate overloaded with ghannas . "They're like a cross between a pear and a strawberry, except five times as sweet. And juicy! They gave you a bunch of napkins, right?"

"Lois, I'm stuffed. I'm gonna pop like a squished grape if you keep feeding me."

"Well, you gotta feed the baby. And one thing about this place—they don't have sunscreen but the food rocks."

Anne swallowed then cleared her throat. "When are you due, Rica?"

"I've got a long ways to go, Loo . I—"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but my name is Anne, despite what you've heard. Loo is—" She cut her gaze to the left, where Maltese was grinning at his plate and finishing the last of his meal. "—a private nickname. But you were saying about your due date..."

"As best as I can figure—"

"I have come," Shakar declared, "to make amends with all."

They looked at him, Maltese still chewing. Shakar knew from a lifetime of experience that only the threat of war would keep Maltese from breaking his fast in the morning and possibly not even that—hadn't Lois said something about a fight with the dark travelers?

"Oh," Rica said after a silence that seemed, to him, to take a very long time to be broken. "It's you."

"Yes, it is I. I must—"

"You must sit down and eat, dear," his future mother-by-mating said gently. "Have you eaten a thing since you got back? You must be starving."

He glanced at Gladys, possibly the only member of the family who did not wish him dead, and found a smile. "As a matter of fact, I am most hungry. But that is not why I—"

"Then sit down, dumb-ass," Lois told him. "Before Rica eats it all."

"Oh, I like *that* . Here you've been jamming all this food down my throat like someone was paying you by the hour—"

"Ah, the good old days. Minimum wage, no benefits."

He sat. "I do not think you are understanding my purpose here this morning. I—"

"Was a total big loser," Lois said, "and you shouldn't forgive me, but if you *do* forgive me, I'll make it up to you with gobs of oral sex."

Gladys and Anne blushed to their hairlines; Rica laughed out loud. It was a fine sound and almost distracted him.

"—have my father's temper and, occasionally, his poor manners, but I am not a bad man."

"Father—my king—"

"In case you haven't figured it out—my God, boy, you're slow—"

"No," Gladys said. "Just stubborn." Somehow, when she said it, it did not seem like a matter to take offense over. In fact, it seemed as if all of them had decided not to take offense, which was beyond belief, because—

"Look, you screwed up, and I'm not saying I got over my mad-on, because I'm still pretty pissed. But we've all got jobs to do, and we'll do them, and we'll go on from there."

"Jobs to do?" Rica was right; he was slow. His father must have gone to her and tried to explain his position, and she of course explained that she would—"No, Rica! No! You must not fight! You—"

"Shakar—"

"No! I forbid it! We will leave *at once*. We will not return whilst this hangs over our heads. We—"

"—will be exiled?" Rica asked quietly. She had folded her fingers together to make a tent and now rested her chin on the top of the tent. She did not smell angry, only tired. "You'll lose everything, Shakar. Everything."

"Not everything," he replied.

"My son, sit down." His father had come to him, had hurried to his side, and Shakar was surprised to find himself on his feet; he must have leapt up when he shouted. He allowed his father to press him into a seat and accepted his pattings. "I was foolish not to see this for what it was last sunround. I assumed the worst and did you a sorry turn. But now listen: Rica has a stronger grasp, in this, than you do. She must do this for you, for the baby, and for herself. By doing this, she wins her mate rightfully, and secures a home for her infant. And word is spreading. *Think*, my good son. Everyone is talking about the strong dark mate you returned with; your care for her wellness is obvious. Who will risk the wrath of a prince? I am certain they will 'put on a show,' as my Gladys says, and then it will be over."

"But I can't—she can't—Sire, I cannot allow this thing." Rica looked at him from the other end of the long table.

She popped a *quoss* in her mouth and said, "Honey, what makes you think any of this is up to you?"

Chapter 11

"Maybe this is a silly question," Gladys began.

"O my Gladys, I doubt that."

"Wait 'til you hear the question," Lois suggested.

"But why can't we just cancel the Groomfight?"

"Cancel?"

"You know... send everyone home? Tell them the prince got married while he was—uh—abroad, and there's no point to it, and thanks for coming, and then they can go."

"I was wondering the same thing," Anne commented. "But I imagine there is a deeply ingrained cultural—"

"Cancel means to say you will be a host and then *not be* a host?" Sekal looked as horrified as Rica had ever seen him, and since the king had been having a rough week, that was pretty bad. "To invite people—females—from across the land, and then when they arrive after a long journey, say there will be no fight, that they came for nothing, and they must go home without even the honor of open combat?"

"Okay, okay, calm down, Sekal." Lois flapped her hands at him. "Your pills? See, I knew it wasn't going to be that easy. *Nothing in my new life is easy.*"

"I'm sorry we're such a burden," Anne said.

"I never thought about how difficult all this must be for you," Rica added.

"Aw, bite me, both of you. You're the sisters-in-law from hell, I swear. Nope, the only thing for it is for Rica to go down there and kick some major ass. *All* the ass, in fact." Lois looked a little anxious. "You've got a plan, right, Rica? Or at least a gun? Right? You're not just going down there for the sake of pride to get your ass kicked? There's a plan?"

"It will be fine," Rica assured her, which was a bit of a lie—she had no idea if it would be fine or not. But she would try. She would be her father's daughter and give it everything she had.

And she would be her mother's daughter as well.

"Where's Shakar? I mean, I know he's not exactly thrilled about this—"

"Oh, he'll be along," Lois said cheerfully. "He's tied up right now."

Rica frowned. "You mean in a meeting? A prince thing? Well, if it keeps his mind off—"

"No, I mean tied up. With rope. Except these guys don't use rope, it's like some kind of living—never mind."

"Maybe you'd better start over."

"Okay. Damon and Maltese were up at first light and set a trap, literally set a trap, and I guess he's been trying to get out of it so he can stop you from taking his medicine. Or something like that." Lois cocked her head, listening. "Oh, okay. He's almost out. They're all in their puma forms—you've seen Shakar's big cat, right? Right. Well, your mom could probably do it, too."

"If your mother could do it," Anne began, "isn't it possible that—"

"Hello, talking here!"

"There are times when I loathe you," Anne told her, "so much."

"*Anyway*, your disgraced sweetie will be here any second. Just in time to introduce himself to the crowd." Lois moved to the window and peeked out. "How many women would you say are down there, anyway? Boy, just think, all of 'em want to have hot monkey love with Shakar."

"How could they want him?" Anne exclaimed, also taking a peek. "They don't even know him."

"Oh, honey, you've never seen a picture of Prince William, have you? Never mind. Rica knows what I'm talking about."

"Who?" Rica asked.

"You know. Pr—"

"Rica." "The king stepped into the room. "It is time. Are you ready?"

"Sure. Let's get it over with." She tried to smile and, after a moment, succeeded. "Once I get down there and in the middle of it, I won't be nervous anymore."

"That is how it is," the king assured her. "If you cannot flee, you must fight, and if you must fight, your dread departs."

"Someone should cross-stitch that on a pillow," Lois said.

"I'll get right on that," she replied, and allowed him to lead her to the lower level.

To the Groomfight .

Chapter 12

"It is an honor for me to see how many of you wish to participate," the king was saying. . . Lois couldn't *believe* how much Sekal was droning. *Get on with it, Chrissake* . Rica was probably a nervous wreck, ready to spew even if she didn't have morning sickness. "It is an honor," King Droney McDrone continued, "in light of this, our newest celebration, the Groomfight ."

"I hope nobody on this balcony is thinking this is my fault," Lois said sharply.

"Oh no, why would we think that? It's not like you planted the idea in his head after the thing with Damon. Don't let your elastic conscience give you a moment of trouble," her mom said, in that deadly sweet/sarcastic tone Lois knew so well.

"—our son, the good Prince Shakar !"

Cheers. Waves. Feminine shrieks. It was like a Beatles reunion down there.

"I protest this and insist that all you good ladies immediately—whggglllfff!"

"Whoops, he's down again." Lois observed Damon and Maltese tackle their youngest brother, bearing him momentarily out of sight. She had a glimpse of Shakar's foot flying up and then disappearing as he was borne off of his chair. "Poor guy. He really needs to just accept what's going on."

"Yes, dear, you're the exact right person to give that particular piece of advice for this particular occasion."

"Moooooommmmm..."*It's just as unacceptable to throttle your mom here as it is back home. It's just as unacceptable to throttle your mom here as it is back home. It's just*—"Whoops, here we go." Looked like things were (finally) starting up down below.

There was already a line forming on the opposite end of the arena; man, those chickies were itching to take a crack at Rica. There was an awful lot of whispering and meaningful looks, too. Lois wondered if the gossip—that Shakar was already married, so take it easy on the little woman—might backfire: *There's the ho that stole our man*.

She heard a crash from Shakar's general direction—nuts, she'd thought all the breakables had been removed from the general area. She didn't bother to look; she kept her eyes on the arena floor, where—there! The first challenger had transformed into... it looked like a small leopard, all spotty and sleek and, frankly, more than a match for Rica with her two legs and bare, vulnerable skin.

"Barbaric," was Anne's comment. "And not just the fighting. She doesn't seem to mind being unclothed in front of all these people. I guess that's something. I know I couldn't do it."

"Being naked is the least of her problems," Lois said, eyeing the competition.

"I agree. At least give her a weapon. Possibly six."

"Seems like there's a plan, though," Lois said. "Sekal's a little too relaxed, get me?"

"Mmmm."

Sekal was saying something—probably "Please don't kill my daughter-in-law"—but she lost it in the roar of the crowd. The little leopard started circling Rica, almost lazily.

And then...

"What on God's earth?" Anne gasped, but of course, they weren't on God's earth, this was another place entirely, and Rica...

Rica was a panther. A large, muscular, sleek panther of deepest black, a panther who left prints in the sand that were far, far bigger than Lois's hand, a panther whose muscles moved like velvet beneath the fur. Lois caught movement out of the corner of her eye and saw Damon, Maltese, and Shakar, all with their arms wrapped around each other (awwwww), all gaping at the enormous jungle animal Rica had become. She was... she was so... she was...

"My God, she's gi-normous! Well, sure—shit, Rica's a big girl, too, it makes sense—thanks for telling us so we wouldn't worry or anything!" Lois bawled down to the arena. "I mean, it might be considered, I dunno, *important information to share*, but shit, what do I know?"

"I'd say we have just deduced the plan," Anne said.

"Oh, please, look at that girl. She could eat all of them and still have room for lunch. This fight's over."

In fact, it did seem like Rica's transformation to her other form—her mother's gift, as it were—had made a powerful impression on the other participants. The small leopard had gone from lazy circles to wary backpedaling.

Rica popped back to her two-legged form. "Oh, come on," she said, and laughed a little. "There's gotta be one of you whodoesn't mind having a spat."

"It's not just the color—though it's striking, and I've never seen anybody else here with fur like that. It's her size... she must be a head taller, at least, than all these other women. So, correspondingly, her animal form—puma? Panther? Well, it seems that—"

"Yeah, yeah, it's all a rich mystery just waiting for you to figure out. *Oooh*, there goes Shakar—he either knocked our husbands out or they let him go. Wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall down there right now?"

"Now, I know you're mad—*oof!*" She fought for breath as he hugged her hard enough to make her gasp. "Okay, okay. Yes, I'm fine. And I know I should have told you. But to be fair, there were quite a few things you left out of our engrossing dialogue. So I figure, this squares us up. Now, it's not that I'm embarrassed or ashamed or anything, but only my mom and I could do that, and it kind of freaked Dad out, so I sort of got used to it being a private thing, and after they died, it was *areally* private thing, and there never seemed a good time to bring it up, and then with the baby and all—"

"Oh, Rica," Shakar said into her hair, squeezing her like she was—well, like she was a black shiny thing that should have been a feather but wasn't. "I'm so glad you're safe. Both of you."

"Yeah, well, Lois is right, you're a dumb-ass," she laughed, squeezing back. "I think part of the reason I didn't tell you is because I was waiting for you to figure it out. Didn't you tell me your mother was from my world? *You're* all half-breeds, too."

"Yes, but my good father is the king. Kings are different. They can do many things ordinary men can't." Shakar said it with total confidence, and Rica decided to save that one for another day.

Chapter 13

"...And to treat her honorably and gently through all mysunrounds. This I so vow," the king added. "It is my vow."

Dead silence. Then Gladys said, "I don't know why I keep expecting a minister to appear out of nowhere and run this thing... now please say, man and wife."

"Man and wife," the king repeated obediently.

"Okay, now we're married."

"There, was that so friggin' hard?" Lois asked. "*Thankyou.*"

"Two weddings!" Gladys cried, and gave the king a loud smack right on the mouth. He looked surprised, but happy. "One right after the other... though I s'pose they were already married. Er, were they?"

"No one can say we're not married now," Rica said, reaching up and squeezing Shakar's hand, which had been hovering protectively over her shoulder since she'd left the arena. "Wasn't that part of the point?"

"It was a splendid surprise," the king said.

"Oh, yes," the queen added. "I thought it was impressive when you did that in your room when it was just the three of us, but to see it out on the floor like that in front of all those other girls..."

"Who got even paler." Rica smirked. "If that's possible."

"Attempt to be less smug in victory," Anne advised.

"You showed the king and queen?" Shakar asked, sounding wounded.

"Well, if you'd been there, I would have shown you, too. But you stayed away. All night long."

"I thought... I had brought disgrace upon us. I felt you would not welcome me to your bed."

"Well, see what happens when you stay out of the bedroom. You miss all kinds of things."

"There wasn't much of a fight, though," Lois said. "So, canceling it would have been a huge breach of honor, but all of them chickening out and not fighting wasn't?"

"There were a couple of dustups," Rica said. "Couple of them wanted to try their chops. It was fine. Nobody got hurt. Well, *I* didn't get hurt."

"And—I'm *not quite* done bitching and moaning yet, Rica, sorry—and the dark travelers, the devils, the horrible evil awful things, they turned out to be grumpy brunettes with speech impediments. Meanwhile, Rica's black—I'm not the only one who noticed, right? And her cat form is black—naturally. And everyone's all, *oooooh*, that's so different it's cool. I mean, what is *with* you people?"

"I think any culture seems different and strange when you look at it from the outside. We would have difficulty explaining our society to our husbands, don't you think?"

"Well, at least Rica's from the same place as Mom and me. But how can you not know who Prince William is?" she joked.

"I've heard of *King* William, of course."

"Sure, sure, K—one more time?"

"Well, you know. The British royal family kept their titles but lost their money years and years ago, but in the history books, King William did a lot for England after his grandmother—"

"Whoa. Whoa. Whoa." Lois turned to Shakar. "I thought you said you went to my world. Her farm in my

world."

"I did. What is wrong?"

Lois turned back to Rica. "Your farm on Earth."

Rica laughed. "Of course not on Earth. Nobody can afford to live on Earth anymore."

"Uh-huh. This farm—barn animals, right?"

"Sure. You know, like krakens and bo'swill and, Idunno, someshrepen... animals you'd find on any farm, I guess."

"On any farm in the Twilight Zone! But... you can't be an alien, your slang... contractions... Anne says most languages don't evolve anywhere near the same way, so the chances that you'd be an alien who could speak perfectly accented English and who—"

"I was born on the farm," Rica said, mystified—why did Lois look so oddly at her? "Of course, I'm not from Earth, but my grandparents were. They helped build the ships... that's why we call ourselves colonists. We explored and made new homes for ourselves."

"So that place is not where my mother was from?" Shakar, thank goodness, was taking this a lot better than Lois was. It had never occurred to Rica... she assumed he... well, frankly, she did a stupid thing and assumed he knew things he couldn't possibly know. So who was the dumb-ass now? "Well, it is a very nice farm and I wish to go back."

"And now we can. We can go back and forth, like we planned."

"Wait a minute here, let's try to stay on track. So... Anne's from the past... the forties. And Mom and I are from the present. But you... you're from the future." Lois was walking around her admiringly. "No wonder you're so tall! Ah, but ultimately cool, as anyone whose parents were from Earth must be." She stopped prowling around Rica, which was something of a relief. "That makes you think, though, doesn't it? You guys all found the perfect wife... mate... and we're all from different times and one of us is from a totally different planet. I mean, what are the chances?"

"Well, my father built this machine that can move between worlds—"

"Of course he did, *of course* he did, he's some kind of supergenius from the future!"

"Um," Rica began.

"He probably built invisibility rays and flying cars, too. Did he have agi-normous head?"

"Not that I ever noticed. So, Shakar, in all the excitement I never got a tour of this place." She seized his elbow and started to propel him out of the room.

"I guess the party's over," Anne said, sounding amused.

"I bet *he did* have agi-normous head. How can I get her to tell me?"

"All this excitement. My! It's much more interesting here than in Cottage Grove."

"Do not fear, Gladys. It is quiet here," the king—her new husband—assured her. "For many sunrounds, nothing happens."

"Oh. Well, that's good. At my age I like a little peace and quiet." They were in the king's sumptuous quarters, standing beside the window and looking out into the darkening Sandlands. Her home now. Odd how a girl born and bred in Minnesota could find comfort in the heat of a strange desert, under an odd sun.

"Your age, my Gladys? You are not so old."

"After the last couple of months, I feel old," she admitted.

"I like your smile marks," Sekar said, putting a big hand on her face and then tracing her laugh lines. "I like that you have seen many things. You will tell me many things?"

"I'll tell you whatever you want."

"Will you tell me that you cherish me?"

"I don't think we should base this marriage on lies," she teased, but when he didn't smile back, she said, "I do cherish you. I think you're wonderful. I—I didn't like my last husband. I like you a lot."

"Your first mate, with all respect, sounds like a fool."

"He wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer," she admitted, "but back then, beggars couldn't be choosers. I was in trouble and he—"

"I do not wish to spend our first night as mates speaking of old mates."

"Me either." In a sudden fit of daring, she leaned forward and kissed him, half-waiting to be

("Susan Sarandon is older than you and her ass is in a helluva lot better shape.")

rebuffed. To her delight, not only did he kiss her back, but his strong arms came up and around her, cradling her. Making her feel safe. Cherished.

"Oh, Sekal," she whispered, staring into his wise purple eyes. "You're wonderful."

"I am only as you see me, my queen." He kissed her again, more urgently, and she tugged on his robes as they fell on the bed together.

"Forget it, Damon."

"But, my Lois—"

"No. I can't do it when I know my mom is somewhere else in the palace doing it."

"But it is one of the queen's duties to mate with—"

"Stop, *stop* !"

"But—"

"No way, Damon. Any other night but tonight."

"Oh, Lois."

"Sorry, pal."

He sighed. "Will morning never come?"

She laughed. "Cry me a river, Damon."

Rica stretched. "It serves me right, assuming you knew where you were."

"It serves me right, then, also. But it does not matter, Rica, truly. I thought I sought my mother's world, but as I have said, it was you I truly sought."

"Aw." She tightened her grip on his hand. "You keep talking like that, you'll make me forget I'm still pissed at you."

"And I at you, Rica. It was still a foolish risk."

"Are you kidding? Did you see all those scrawny little white girls? And their scrawny little kitty shapes? My grandma could have taken 'em."

"Perhaps that is so but I found the morning quite... aggravating."

"Race you back to the farm."

"Well, no, Rica, but soon? I confess," he added, pulling her to him, "I miss our privacy. It was our place."

"This can be, too. My folks could only have one world, and it sounds like your mama couldn't run off and leave this place without a queen. But we're luckier: we've got both worlds. Your home, full of family and fun and the people you love, and my home, with the animals and the work and the space. All that space..." She sighed, thinking of her home. Their home. Someday to be her baby's home... that, and the SandLands, where he or she would be a member of the royal family. But time enough to work all that out later.

"And the lake that was made by men," he added. "Do not forget that."

"Forget it? Honey, I've been trying to figure out how to bring it up. You know, it'd be really easy to design one. Then we just gotta get it built. Then—"

He stopped her with a kiss. "Then we will do many things and you will build many things to honor your father. But as for now..." He scooped her up easily enough, though he nearly whacked her head against the door frame. "... I never did see your room."

"It's the second star to the left," she sighed, enjoying the sensation of being carried. "And straight on 'til morning."

"What?"

"It's the doorway at the end of this hall." She wriggled free and he nearly dropped her. She looked up at him, laughing. "Race you."
