

Chapter One

Chovani

I snapped hard and fast, missing her ankle by a hair.

Chovani leaped back, her twisted features frozen in a snarl of rage. “You’ll die, whelp,” she screeched. “You’ll die by inches, minutes. Every hour shall feel like a lifetime of agony and horror.”

She pointed her single index finger.

Agony exploded across my face. It felt as though a red-hot poker traced from my whiskers to just under my eye, burning the tender sensitive skin, crisping, scorching. I locked the impending scream deep within my throat, squeezing my eyes shut against the horrible pain. *I will never permit her the satisfaction*, I thought, my belly drawing tight, my paws twitching, trying to rise and slay. I clenched my jaws, not even permitting a snarl of defiance to emerge.

“Stay with it. Hang tough, my son.”

“Do as the old wolf says, boy,” Chovani crooned. “Oh, you’ll scream, you know, long and very loud. It’s just a matter of time.”

Another flaming poker drew a long line from my ribs, across my vulnerable flank, seeking the soft skin beneath my coat. I spasmed, jerking, unable to even flinch away as the odor of my own burnt flesh rose on the heels of the incredible wave of pain. Can one pass out from pain? I wished fervently that I could.

Darius didn’t speak, but my instincts suddenly did. *You have a magic she cannot touch.*

I may not be able to break her cables with magic. However, I could still change from wolf into man. That power no witch on this earth could control.

Shifting shape quickly, my man’s form was still bound to the cavern floor. However, the cables, once taut, now drooped, lax and loose. One swift motion freed my right hand. I reached for and found my human weapons. I could, and did, whip my dagger from its sheath. In a move faster than she dodged, I slashed the tendons behind her right knee. Hamstrung like a sheep, Chovani screamed and almost fell. She kept her balance and her upright stance with an effort.

Tossing the knife, I switched from holding the hilt to gripping the blade with my fingers. A single flick of my very strong wrist sent it hurtling through the near darkness. I aimed for her throat, but she flinched a millisecond before impact.

The blade buried itself into the soft flesh beneath her right collarbone.

Chovani screamed again, her jaws yawning wide, her head thrown back. I caught a quick flash of her tonsils, a vast gasp of her fetid breath. Her pale fingers clutched the hilt, fell away, crawled back and splayed across the growing bloodstain on her ragged, filthy gown. Grievously injured in two places, she staggered, bleeding, no doubt in as much pain as I was.

As my wolf body was so much larger than my human form, the cables all but lay limp

across my body. Still bound to the cavern floor, but with enough time and plenty of wriggling, I knew I could escape out from under their clinging grasp.

Chovani shrieked with a rage, a hate and a fury I'd never before found directed toward me. Discovering me on the verge of casting off her carefully designed trap, she advanced toward me, blood in her eye. She yanked my dagger from her thin chest and cast it, quivering, into the dirt at her feet. Pale, blood-stained fingers stretched toward me, reaching, grasping. My heart jolted in my chest, and a niggling of fear caressed my spine. If she regained control of me, I'd pay very dearly indeed for the injury I caused her. Far more than I already had.

I pushed up on the cables, scooting out from under their tight tension. Only my legs hung up. I kicked and scrambled, rolling over onto my hands and knees to make a quick dash for it. I glanced back.

Screeching with the fury of a thousand demented daemons, Feria blasted into her face.

"No!" Chovani cried, holding up her arms to shield her one remaining, vulnerable eye.

Her wings wide behind her like an avenging angel, Feria reared back, balancing on her lion hind legs and her tail. Eagle arms spread wide for balance and attack, she shrieked her challenge. She didn't wait for a response, but cut her left hand sideways from left to right in front of her.

Chovani ducked and rolled, all in the same motion.

As quickly as Chovani protected herself, Feria proved the faster.

Feria's talon, so adroit in drawing designs in the soil, slashed across Chovani's scarred features. Her single useful brown eye died under Feria's razor-blade talon.

Blinded, screaming in an inarticulate voice, Chovani stumbled back, away from me, trying in vain to mend her ripped eyeball with her fingers. Blood poured down her face in a red river, coated her hands, and wet her gown's neck.

Blind, in fury, Chovani blasted her magic toward Feria. A black mass exited her fingers, rushing toward my friend, enveloping the small cave. Though I tried to counter it with a blast of my own, it didn't even hiccup as it sped toward Feria.

Almost leisurely, Feria stepped aside.

Her stroke struck the far wall a rod from Feria's tail. Its impact sent a deluge of dark dirt, broken rock and splintered tree roots exploding outward with a low coughing roar. Loose soil cascaded over me in a wide shower, bits of rock hammering the ground around my body.

Unharméd, not even alarmed, Feria screeched again, swept her right talon crossways and slashed a deep cut across Chovani's mouth.

Her cheeks gaping wide in a bloody, horrid clown's grin, Chovani stumbled back, falling away. She clumsily stepped on her own gown and ripped it from her shoulders. The tatters fell away to reveal a nauseatingly pale, fish-belly white skin, bulging belly and sagging breasts.

Ripping a rag to stem the rapid flow of blood, Chovani stood all but naked, staunching her wounds. Blind, yet still a threat, she reached out a hand, a pointing finger, to mark my Feria.

"I'll kill you! You bitch, I'll kill you."

Without enough room to fly in, Feria answered Chovani's challenge with a screech of defiance: *kill me before I kill you.*

"So help me, I will," Chovani whispered.

Catch me first.

As I kicked in the dirt, casting off the binding cables, Feria spread her wings enough to leap into the air, her feathers brushing the far walls of the cave. Deftly avoiding yet another deadly blast of dark power, she used not her talons this time, but her clenched fist. She knocked Chovani into the rock and root wall. Chovani staggered under the impact, dazed and most definitely confused.

A jagged hole in the earthen cavern broke open on the heels of the resulting explosion. Unable to support the heavy soil and rocks above, the wall collapsed. Tumbling down in an avalanche, the terrain above fell into Chovani's hole, filling it rapidly.

The ground began to shake.

"Get out, boy. Get her out."

"Feria," I screamed, at last scuttling out from beneath the last of the clinging cables. "Up. Fly, you idiot, fly out of here."

Feria screeched as dirt slid down the walls to pile on the floor. Like the earthquake that sent Ly'Tana headlong into a raging river, the earth shook itself like an otter shakes water from its fur. Loose soil cascaded down in a dark avalanche, loose stones rolled downhill to plunge into the cavern.

I stood on two feet, feeling the floor undulate beneath me. "Get out," I yelled.

Feria screamed back: *What about you?*

"I'm right behind you! Just go."

Taking me at my word, Feria rose straight into the air, her wings slow and ponderous, working harder than ever to lift her heavy body higher. Unable to circle, no warm updrafts to grant her much needed lift, she struggled for every foot of height. Those valiant wings stroked up and down, sweeping loose dust and dirt into my eyes and ears, but I hardly cared. Her neck stretched to its limit, her eagle's green eyes slitted with effort, she climbed up and up, claiming the air as her own. Into the winter sunshine she flew, free and safe.

The illusion above must have vanished, for she circled over the rim, chirping anxiously, calling to me.

I hesitated, turning back.

"What? Get out of here, damn you."

Chovani struggled to regain her breath. Fresh blood covered her face, her small bosom. Blinded, in agony, she fought to rise, to wield her powers. At her weakest, her magic stilled, she failed to realize the bitter fangs of her vengeance were long drawn. I snatched up my dagger and shoved it into my belt. I could kill her with one swift sweep of my sword. I drew it.

"She's not for you. Go now."

"What do you mean? If I don't kill her now, everything we've worked for will be at risk."

"I know. But her death won't be at your hands."

"Don't be a fool, I can do this."

"My son, go. Go now."

I slammed my sword into its sheath with an oath. "This is a mistake, Darius."

"I'll not have you slay a helpless woman."

"She's not –"

"She's as helpless now as those whelps she murdered. Should you slay her now, evil shall walk forever at your side, boy. Trust me in this. Her stain shall not touch you. Not while I yet live and breathe, it won't."

"But –"

"Do as I say."

The earth tilted at a serious angle, all but knocking me to the floor. Feria screamed from on high, begging me to come out of this hellhole. Chovani's body rolled helplessly to one side as the ground rose up. I staggered, catching my balance, my arms pin wheeling.

"Go. The quake created a pathway."

I saw instantly what he meant. The dirt slid from above at a sharp angle, piling high with every undulation of the earthquake. Like a steep ramp, the soil and loose rocks lead upward into the blue sky and freedom. Human legs would work hard and yet still not manage the steep climb. Not before the entire cavern imploded, anyway.

Wolf legs might.

Changing forms, I raced up the ramp, the loose dirt clinging to my legs. Fighting for every inch, every foot, every lunging step, I rose upward, high and higher. Below me, the cavern walls fell inward, huge boulders and sharp tree roots cascaded down, filling the cave as water fills a deep well. If Chovani lived, surely she was buried under all that mess.

The loose soil dragged at me, pulling me backward into its clinging grip. Death lay within its clutches. I fought on, Feria's encouraging shrieks in my ears. My tongue lolled, panting, in effort.

Feria's sharp beak and feathered head and neck appeared against the deep winter blue sky, her wings half-furled behind her shoulders. Sliding backward, I dug my paws in, bunching my hindquarters. Just another – few – feet –

My paws seized hold of the cavern's rim the moment the cave below me fell away. My heavy wolf body swung out over empty space. Only my claws digging into solid mother earth kept me from my death's drop.

I risked a swift glance over my shoulder. There was no more cavern. The avalanche of dirt fell into the deepest black, an endless pit where not even the sound of stones striking bottom emerged. Should I lose my grip, I'd die before I hit whatever lay down there. No doubt my heart would give out completely before then.

My claws, dug deep into the cavern's rim, slid backward. My heart jolted within my chest. That slim grip I owned couldn't possibly hold my massive weight. In desperation, I let go with my right paw, hanging on dangerously, precariously with my left. In a huge reach, I found a new hold in solid earth with my right claws.

Not enough –

I changed forms in a blink. Human hands grabbed better than wolf toenails. I seized hold of a rock, grunting with effort, sweat stinging my eyes. Throwing out my left hand, I sought for a root, a rock, anything that I could use to inch my way forward, handhold by handhold, out of the gaping maw. My fingers dug down into soil, my fingernails peeling back. I bit my tongue

against a cry at the exquisite pain. My body, lighter than it was, was yet too heavy for my feeble grip.

The rock loosened. My left hand, digging furrows in the stony dirt, slid backward as gravity's clutches dragged at me.

Too late –

An eagle's talon swept down, grasping my right wrist in a savage grip.

Feria's golden beak and slitted green eyes bent down, a mere rod from my gasping face.

Angel's wings spread wide, Feria gasped with effort, her lion's muscular half taking on my incredible, impossible, weight. On three legs, Feria clawed and fought her way backward, dragging my arm with her.

My hand numb and my shoulder on fire, I gained a few inches, then a foot, then a serious rod of firm, if still quivering earth. Hitching my lower body sideways, I caught hold of the cave's rim with my right foot. Digging in deep, I thrust my body forward –

– and fell, sprawling, in an undignified heap at Feria's feet.

Releasing my wrist, she backed away, furling her wings. She squawked a weary question: *was I all right?*

"I'll let you know," I replied, panting, lying on my side. The agony of my fall, Chovani's torment, shunted into the background as Feria and I fought to escape, woke and flamed down my back and legs. My face and flank, burning anew and bleeding, screamed with the voice I refused to allow. I bit back a groan.

The ground continued to shake and tremble, heaving like my belly at the thought of that witch slaying and eating nine wolf infants. The trees about us shivered as great fissures broke among them, hurtling rocks and loose dirt into the air. A shattering roar split the tense silence.

"Well done, but keep moving. Her wrath isn't finished."

"Isn't she dead?"

"Don't be foolish, boy. Run like hell."

Scrambling to all four paws, I bolted, turning my head back over my shoulder. "Feria!" I howled. "Fly, fly!"

At my sudden and swift departure, Feria screamed and launched herself skyward. She mounted the wind, rising higher and higher, catching one of those wonderful, life-giving updrafts. Those mighty wings swept her up and past me, her beak angling down, her green eyes confused. She cut sideways to avoid slamming into a very tall pine, then swung back to wing low, just over me.

At least she's safe up there, I thought, running as hard as I could with my face and back half screeching as loud as Feria in one of her snits. Behind my leaping paws, the deep fissures breaking the earth apart followed at the speed of a galloping horse. Pines, firs, scrub oak, boulders, chipmunks, rabbits, those few deer I blew past before they might bolt, fell into the widening caverns below. A scavenging black bear yowled like a cat as it tumbled headlong into the dark depths.

Fire belched upward, licking the still living trees, setting alight the thorny bushes, deep green pine, firs, and late blossoms of dogwood and wild roses.

"Up the mountain. Hurry."

Heeding Darius' terse advice, I galloped up the eastern side of the mountain where the pigs, so very long ago, dined on acorns. Loose rocks tumbled out from behind my flying paws. Feria winged low over my head, calling, asking questions as I galloped up and up. I sailed over chunks of broken granite, dodged scrub trees, scuttled under the rocky overhang where Feria said the pigs feasted. With my back and legs praying for mercy, I ran on, ever up, scattering birds, deer and elk, and perhaps those very hogs Feria craved, before me. The crest loomed just ahead, nothing less than solid granite boulders, broken with stunted trees growing bravely amid them. I floundered up and through them, forced to a leaping walk, jumping from one huge boulder to another, climbing ever higher. Circling overhead, Feria called to me, but I ignored her for the moment.

The mountain's roots were deep, deep enough to withstand Chovani's temper tantrum. The mountain shivered, yet stood massive and unconcerned as the earthquake tried in vain to bring it to its mighty knees. Pausing, panting, I risked a glance behind and down.

The red-hot, flaming fissures ceased at the mountain's base. Their smoldering fires set alight dry thickets and downed deadwood. Green pine and lone stunted scrub oak denied the flames their meal, though they smoked aplenty. None but a few dead trees truly burned, while the rest endured the insult with equanimity.

Like the fingers of a hand spread wide, the cracks in the earth reached the mountain, seeking its heart. The mountain, unburnable, stood fast, unimpressed. Chovani, if it were indeed the witch's power and not simple chance, waved the white flag of defeat.

I watched from high above, the red-orange glow burning dully within the steep fissures. As though cooled by an unseen river, they faded at once and vanished. 'Twas as though the hand of someone unseen had splashed water on them, drowning their fury. Smoke and steam vented upward, and I heard a faint hissing from far below.

"You're safe now."

I collapsed on the rocks, gasping for breath, under the bright sunlight of midafternoon. "Gods, I hope so."

Chirping, clicking her beak, Feria landed beside me and furled her wings. Stepping delicately closer, she peered down and nudged my shoulder with her beak. Her next chirp rose on a question: *Is it over?*

"Yes," I groaned, hurting all with every nerve ending.

Feria hissed. *I can't understand you.*

I sighed and changed clothes. The pain didn't diminish one jot. Sitting up on the hard boulder, I clutched my arms over my aching ribs, my butt on the granite boulder screaming loud and clear. Blood dripped down my cheek, more pooling into my breeches from the flaming cut over my ribs and belly. My lower legs and ankles swelled under my boots, straining the hard leather. I dared not take them off, for I may not get them back on.

Sniffing, inquiring, Feria inspected me from my toes to my hair. She closely examined my face, her right talon flicking my hair away from my burn. Clicking her beak, she stroked her hand down my legs, a caress. Her green eyes glowed soft and concerned. She chirped: *I'm worried about you.*

I couldn't help but raise a grin. "No worries, lass. Nothing broken."

"You'll have to heal yourself."

"I know," I breathed, swiping blood from my chin. "In time. Right now I just want to rest a bit."

Feria crooned, her tone soothing and sweet, and I felt the last of my worries fall away. We were safe up here and Chovani, this time at least, tasted defeat yet again.

Grinning, I rubbed Feria's face with love and affection. "How did you find me down there?"

She proceeded to tell me all about it, with chirps, hisses, clicks and short screeches, her language flying right over my head. I supposed she'd just told me she used not just her sight, but her keen hearing and sense of smell to locate me under what appeared to be solid ground. No doubt she tested it, and discovered no ground at all, but a natural sinkhole in the earth. She heard Chovani speak, knew she trapped me, and learned what the witch planned for my future.

The rest, they say, is history.

"I owe you one, my girl," I said softly, my unburned cheek against hers.

Feria crooned again, her singsong voice lulling me toward sleep. I fought it off, not ready to succumb to its sweet temptations just yet. I had too many questions and too few answers.

I clasped my hand over her beak, stilling her. "Not now, baby girl. Later, all right?"

She huffed and nodded, pulling her beak from my grip.

"What do you need to know?"

"Will she try again?"

"I think not. She's fully blind now. Your knife stroke crippled her. In time, she'll heal, but nothing can replace her eyes or repair the damage to her leg. Greater yet, her powers that be are no doubt very disappointed in her."

"She's immortal then?"

"Not exactly. She can be killed, it's just terribly difficult to accomplish it. If her masters lose interest in her, or if she fails them, she'll no longer have their power to reinforce her own. When that time comes, she's as human and mortal, as, er, you."

"What the bleeding hell are witches?"

"Pay attention, there'll be a quiz later."

I sighed, biting off a choice expletive.

"Humans crave power, do they not?"

"I suppose."

"Your pal Brutal seeks to dominate the world, becoming the most powerful man its ever known."

"Get on with it. I'm bleeding."

"Some align with evil forces. Chovani is an excellent example. She sells her soul to the highest bidder, gains the next best thing to immortality. With her new power, fueled by evil, she romps across the world bringing evil with her."

"Influencing Metavas for instance?"

"Exactly. She commits evil wherever she can, yet seeks even more power from those who sold it to her. They may grant her demands, or they may call in their marker."

“So evil wins?”

“Don’t be absurd. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are witches who align themselves with good spirits. Again, they are but spirits in another dimension who love the world and seek to expand the good in it.”

I shut my eyes. “Angels?”

“Er, the term isn’t quite right, but might apply for this conversation. With the subtle power these witches are given, they strive to defeat evil.”

“Good witches, bad witches.”

“Indeed. There’s always a balance between good and evil. The Lords insist upon it.”

My energy level subsided at the same rate my pain rose.

I squinted into the sun. Late afternoon. Just enough time for Feria to hunt up some supper before cold dark set in. If she was lucky, she might obtain a pig or two.

“Go hunt,” I said, my voice thick. “While you’re gone I think I’ll see what I can do about Chovani’s little torments.”

Feria hissed, her ears flat.

“You worry too much. By the time you get back here, I’ll be sound asleep.”

Unwilling to leave me, but knowing she could do little to help, Feria paced slowly to the topmost granite boulder. A twisted tree the size of a tall rosebush brushed her massive shoulder as she spread her wings. She glanced back, peering under her white and brown feathers.

“I’m not hungry. Knock yourself out, girlfriend.”

She chirped a brief farewell.

Dropping off the boulder, she vanished from sight. I sighed, catching my breath on a sharp jab of pain over my back and ribs. Limping upright, I staggered a short length down, off the granite mountain top, to a huge pine tree whose branches started a rod or so up its trunk. The softer area under its thick, overhanging limbs offered a much nicer spot to rest and a shelter of sorts. I much preferred sleeping on dirt and pine needles than solid rock.

I wiped sluggish blood from my cheek. “The witch will die,” I said softly.

“One day.”

“Promise me.”

“My oath.”

“If you don’t, I will. Even if I have to come back from the grave.”

“When that happens, I’ll hold your coat.”

With night coming soon, and with it its bitter mountain cold, I changed into my wolf’s clothes. My pelt would protect me as I slept. I dropped into my trance, feeling my pain ebb, finding my calm center.

“Well, here goes nothing.”