

CHAPTER ONE

Great gold statues of fearsome cats guarded the Temple of Amun Ra, carvings that were said to take on lives of their own whenever a thief entered the treasure-laden tombs below. Whatever the truth of the tale, it was certain that Guardian warriors roamed the catacombs beneath the temple, mysterious males that the simple farmers of the nearby Valley both feared and envied. They had been summoned to protect, to pursue—and to hunt. For once a year, the Guardians claimed their price for the protection that they afforded to the Valley and its inhabitants—the right to hunt the Valley’s virgins for mates.

Miu’s knees were shaking so badly that she thought she’d have to drop on all fours and crawl up the broad limestone ramp that disappeared into the dark, cool depths of the temple. Heqet help her, she’d been sun-crazed to think she could pull off this job. The red rays of the late-afternoon sun blazed a heavy path across her shoulders.

She straightened and walked faster. She would do this. She had to do it.

Two massive pylons marked the temple entrance. A stonecutter had carved an elaborate depiction of two Cats shifting from Cat form to warrior form, their massive claws morphing into steel daggers that bit mercilessly into the thief the two beings had just run to ground. The thief looked backward in horror, his mouth frozen open in a soundless shriek. *You can do this*, Miu told herself. *You won't end up like him. Ninety-nine successes and you think this will be your first failure?* No, Heqet willing, she'd be in and out of the temple long before those lethal claws scored her shoulders. Before its feline guardians realized they'd let a thief wander loose in their midst.

The row of white-clad virgins in front of her stepped over the threshold and disappeared into the dark shadows of the interior. The woman next to her sobbed audibly, the small mounds of her breast heaving wildly beneath her silk robe—she was barely more than a girl, Miu realized with disgust. It figured that the Cat warriors would prefer children for mates. Of course, the woman on her other side was of a more calculating bent—she was rubbing the silk of her robe between a thumb and forefinger, assessing the quality of the weave while she ogled the statues of Cats that filled the room they had just entered.

The Cats were well over seven feet tall and carved from what looked like pure gold. Dark obsidian glittered from the slashes of their eyes. One of those, melted down and refashioned into a series of less memorable ornaments, would have kept Miu and her sister sheltered for months. A pity it wasn't possible. She took a second look—professional curiosity only, she assured herself—and forced herself to move away.

She wasn't here to steal seven-foot statuary.

She was here to steal something much smaller. A necklace. Made from silver and moonstones, and placed in a coffer some fifty years ago. It had other—special—properties, she'd been told, but those didn't matter. Just as it didn't matter that *she* wasn't the one who wanted the necklace. She'd do as she'd been ordered to do. Find the necklace, pocket it, and escape from the temple without being caught by one of the legendary Cat warriors. Then she would be home free. Literally.

Everything depended on finding the necklace.

And avoiding the temple's Guardians. She eyed the frieze again.

Frankly, she wasn't convinced that there was any such being as a Guardian. Warriors, yes. Undoubtedly, the temple's defenders kept watch over its fabled riches. But a special breed of Guardians who could change into deadly felines? No. The stories of the Cats and their annual Hunt for virgin mates were too outlandish to be true. What man would really send the unwed females of his family into a great stone monstrosity of a tomb, to be chased down by shape-shifting warriors on the prowl for mates?

Miu wondered if anyone were checking to see whether or not all the women being herded into the sanctuary were, in fact, virgins. Miu suspected there was more than one poseur in the lot, starting with the avaricious woman to her right. If that one hadn't lain with a man, Miu would do penance for a week.

Patting the trembling girl to her left, Miu did her best to blend in. "It will all be over soon," she promised, not knowing if she spoke the truth. But how could anybody with a conscience keep this child here?

The girl shot her a teary-eyed look and then frowned. “Do I know you?” she asked. Not so simple as she looked then.

Of course the girl didn’t. Having prepared for this eventuality, Miu lied smoothly and waited to see if the girl would accept her fabrication. “I’m from one of the outermost farms.”

Not looking convinced, the girl nodded and then returned to her weeping.

Miu slipped away in midsob. There was no point in being careless; if the girl decided that she really didn’t know Miu, she might complain—and there was always some male, somewhere, who was willing to entertain complaints. She shrugged. The Valley was inhabited by farmers with carefully tended fields, an isolated group who did not welcome strangers.

The yearly visit of the traders, who entered the Valley leading pack animals loaded with whatever the townspeople could not grow or make for themselves, had provided the perfect cover for Miu’s arrival. In the flurry of excitement generated by the traders, no one had noticed Miu slip away from the group. The following evening, no one had objected when she joined the procession of virgins trooping toward the temple for the Hunt.

Up until now, it had been easy.

The men herding the women into the temple stopped and retreated. Miu tried to look virginally distressed rather than desperate, as the temple priest appeared and launched into a long-winded address about the honor that would be paid to a select few of the assembled women.

A pontificating fool, she decided long minutes later,

who enjoyed the sound of his voice and the delicious echoes of the high-ceilinged chamber in which they waited. The rows of Cat statues stretched away on both sides of them, but she saw no guards, no weapons here inside the temple.

Still, she had the strangest sense of being watched. Then she happened to glance up at the galleries above. Heqet help her, the galleries were crowded with dark figures who almost tempted her to believe in the preposterous legends of the temple Guardians: impossibly tall, broad-shouldered males shrouded in long black robes, their hair bound back into disciplined queues that flowed halfway down their backs.

Her head shot around as she caught the priest’s last words. “. . . virgins, of course,” he declared. The man’s words felt like a slap across the face. Miu was not a virgin, but unless she missed her guess, neither were many of the other women. Now the priest moved on from his self-congratulatory words on their well-preserved virginity and explained how the Hunt would be conducted.

No woman had ever outrun the Cat lords, he assured them. Miu wanted to scoff, but she kept her expression blank and her eyes demurely cast down. “When the signal is given,” the priest said, “the hangings will be drawn back from these walls. You will each choose a tunnel and enter it. Run. You have a night’s span to reach the standing stones on the other side of the Valley. Any woman who makes it there is free to choose whether she wishes to remain with the Cat lords or to return to her own kind in the Valley.” The priest smiled with a false benevolence. “No woman who makes it to the standing stones will ever run again,

and the dowry provided to each of you by the Guardians will be hers to keep.”

Ah, yes. Money. A perfectly understandable explanation for why there were so many women in the room and why their families had offered them up for the Hunt. Without money in hand, scruples were a luxury most could not afford.

The priest eyed the assembled women sternly. “Of course, there is another possible end to the Hunt, when a hunter catches you as his mate.” The details of what happened then—the ritual taking of the girl’s virginity—had been a popular topic in the Valley’s taverns. The legend had a savagery about it that impressed even the visiting merchants, who had seen a great deal of the outside world. Once again, Miu had her doubts about the truth of the tales. The Cat warrior would bell his mate—and mark her as his so that he would always be able to find her? Poppycock. She didn’t know what *belling* was, but it was undoubtedly some romantic euphemism for a sex act.

The priest was concluding his speech now, and his final words brought her head up in disbelief.

“You’ll go, one by one, into the audience chamber and be examined by the Amun Ra,” he said. Interview with the lord high ruler of these Cat people? Not if Miu could help it. This Amun Ra would spot her for a phony and she’d end up like the thief on their ghoulish door frieze before she’d even had a chance to do any plundering of her own.

Decisive action was called for now.

Her voice brought the proceedings to a standstill. “No.”

The old priest just about choked. Red suffused his face and one of his acolytes had to rush over and pound him unceremoniously on the back. He stared balefully at her. “It’s not a choice for you to make, girl. The Amun Ra has spoken. He has made his wishes *quite* clear.” Apparently the wishes of his supreme high holiness trumped those of a mere female.

The priest tried to continue, but she cut him off. “Yes, yes”—she gestured toward the rows of feline statuary—“I realize that I’m merely prey for this charming Hunt of yours, but I never agreed to any examination. That kind of humiliation?” She shook her head. “Not what I signed up for.”

He stared at her, nonplussed. One or two of the women nearest her began to draw slowly away. Obviously no one had ever challenged the priest.

“I don’t see why you—or anyone else—needs to inspect me. Clearly”—she let one hand slide down the front of her robe, deliberately pressing the thin silk against the round, firm curves of her thighs—“I’ve got two legs that work perfectly well. I’ve sufficient wind to run. And I don’t”—she cocked an eyebrow at him just to see if that would set him off—“plan on getting caught.”

She waited to see if the males watching in the gallery would take the bait. They were hunters. They would revel in the challenge she had so blatantly issued. And, being men, she doubted that they would stop to wonder why she had issued such a crude challenge.

The priest made the mistake of arguing with her. “You agreed.” He pointed an accusing finger at her,

stalking toward her in a self-righteous swirl of expensive robes. “Your family took the dower. You came here.”

She smiled soothingly. There was no need to tell the man that she had simply ordered the appropriate clothing from a seamstress back in Shympolsk and then slipped into the ranks of the women marching toward the temple. No dower had been paid for her and no family had agreed to send her.

“And if some shifter decides that he can drag me off as his mate, he’ll need to catch me first.” The intense interest from the galleries above grew stronger. She could smell the heady scent of well-cured leather, masculine bodies, and a goodly amount of sexual interest pouring from the watchers above. It was a very good thing she had no intention of getting caught; she suspected that, legends or no legends, what those men took, they held. Under other circumstances, she would have applauded that sentiment.

The man who strode out of the darkest shadows of the chamber was as impossibly tall as the Hunters who crowded the gallery above, but he wore the black robes of a temple priest. His bare feet moved silently over the mosaic tiles with all the grace of a fighter. A match for her skills indeed. This one would be harder to fool. The deep cowl hid his face, but she could just make out firm lips set in a stern line.

He took her arm and she allowed him to steer her deeper into the cool, scented depths of the temple. “Come,” he said in a voice of liquid darkness. Behind her she could hear a muted roar. For a moment, it seemed as if the stone statues of the cats stirred, shimmering into eerie life.

Impossible.

They stepped into yet another high-ceilinged, cool room wreathed in smoky shadows. A lintel carved with unintelligible glyphs decorated the entrance and the walls were carefully pieced together from the vast limestone blocks that had been brought at some point in time from foreign quarries—no one in the Valley could remember how or when the temple had been constructed.

The man shoved the cowl back from his head with an impatient hand and she realized that he had more than just the build of a Guardian. He had the face of one as well. Three dark gold bars striped the left side of his face and black eyes regarded her unblinkingly. If what she’d been told was correct, those three bars meant her escort was none other than the Amun Ra, the temple’s leader and the first of several obstacles on her path toward the necklace.

He sprawled on the low divan that occupied the center of the room and, for the first time, she realized they were not alone. A stunningly lovely woman, wrapped only in a fragile, transparent silk chiton, reclined on the couch. She wore elaborate gold armbands on her upper arms, which chimed with a small shimmer of bells whenever she moved. Her eyes narrowed as she stared at Miu.

“Why have you brought this one here, my Lord?” She ran a small, caressing hand up the powerful bulge of muscle in his forearm. A red flush colored her cheeks and her eyes glittered feverishly. She looked, Miu decided, as if she wanted to consume the Amun Ra whole.

“She threatened chaos, love,” the Amun Ra replied

absentmindedly. He splayed one dark gold hand possessively against the woman's bare thigh, opening her to his gaze. And Miu's.

To her own disgust, Miu made a choked sound of amazement. The Valley dwellers might be simple farmers, but these people inside the temple were more sophisticated than she had ever dared dream of being.

"You wish to join our Hunt." Without dropping his hard gaze from Miu's, he spoke softly to the belled woman. "Spread your legs, my love, and show our guest what she may expect when she fails to escape from my Hunters. This is Halilah," he said, not taking his eyes from Miu's. "My lover for today."

The dark finger pressing into the bare flesh of the woman's sex aroused a throaty moan from his companion—and Miu's unexpected fascination. She should be angry or shocked or taking advantage of the couple's display to search the room for escape routes. Instead, she stared as mesmerized as a chicken before a snake, feeling an unfamiliar slick of wetness between her own thighs. The thin gold chain that circled the woman's waist dipped between her thighs and disappeared. Miu refused to pursue the thought. The woman did not merely wear the bells—she contained them. With every step she took, the small brass balls would remind her of the Cat that had captured and belled her. Small sparks of electric pleasure would chime in the moist delta between her thighs, building into a helpless ache that only the Cat could—and would—assuage.

"Belled," the Amun Ra said darkly. "Hunted. Taken. My hunters will track you through the passageways and they will show no mercy when they run

you to ground." He smiled coldly, but his fingers stroked his own mate's liquid flesh with a tender discipline. "You posed them a challenge and"—he frowned inquisitively—"you did so purposely. I would not have thought you the sort of woman to take part willingly in the Hunt."

"But I am." There was too much at stake not to convince him that this much was truth. "I merely prefer to play your games in my own way."

"It is not a game we play."

She knew that now, but the realization could not change her decision. She would not allow him to frighten her off with this dark passion.

The Amun Ra regarded her levelly and then made an imperious gesture with his fingers. The silk hangings covering the far wall fell in a soft whisper of impossibly expensive fabric. She counted at least a dozen dark passageways leading away from the audience chamber; the entire temple must be riddled with them.

"Choose," he said simply. "Choose. And run."

The Guardian standing in the shadows shook his head as the female sauntered toward one of the passageways and disappeared into the blackness. Strong, sensual, and cunning—all traits his Cat admired. And yet she was almost too confident to be one of the Hunt's usual runners. Too different from the other females he'd watched run over the years. "Who are you?" he asked under his breath.

For the first time in decades, he felt an intense interest in the outcome of the Hunt. If he had possessed even the slightest desire to take a mate, the tempting

feminine morsel that the temple had swallowed up would have been high on his list of candidates. He wanted to chase the honey-and-apples scent of her up the line of those surprisingly long legs. Bury himself in the creamy, gold-colored skin that had his Cat demanding to lick her from head to toe. Concentrating, of course, on all the creamy pink bits.

He suspected that she'd have a good many of those.

And that she would protest vociferously if he so much as laid a paw on her.

Persuading her to explore a little passion—with him—would have been intensely pleasurable. Unfortunately, she'd picked a passageway that was likely to drop her square in the middle of the Guardians' personal chambers. Most of the passageways led through that particular area; it made the Hunt simpler if the Guardians didn't have to spend hours combing the miles of dark, dusty passageways for lost females. One of his brothers would choose her and chase her; the next time he saw her, she'd be wearing another male's bells.

He knew, too, bone deep, that she was no match for either Guardian or Ifrit and yet she'd be throwing herself into the path of both in his temple. He didn't like the idea of her getting hurt. But that was wrong. He tested the thought warily. If she broke the rules of the temple, she wouldn't get any more than what she had coming to her. That shouldn't have bothered him. But it did.

He bit back the feral growl that threatened to erupt from his throat. He didn't want a mate. He shouldn't care who had her. Or who hurt her.

But he did, on a completely primal level. His little

interloper smelled like no female that had come from the Valley. She had an exotic, wild scent—and a purpose clearly at odds with that of the other, mate-hungry women around her. He wanted to know what that purpose was. He wanted *her*.

"She's no bride," he said to the man lounging on the divan. "She's up to something." His hard gaze was trained on the shadowy passageway where the female had disappeared. He swore he could still smell her scent.

"Perhaps." Amun Ra's air of sensual insouciance fell away as he smoothly rose from the divan. "Quite probably. And *that* is why I summoned you here."

Pulled him away from watching for signs of Ifrits. Fortunately for Amun Ra, Jafar was very good at what he did. His werecat senses let him see in the dark depths of the temple. They made him strong. Fast. A lethal welcoming committee of one for any Ifrit foolish enough to cross over from their realm to *his*.

He swallowed his displeasure at being called away from his post. Amun Ra would have had a good reason.

"You follow her." Amun Ra gestured after the fleeing female. "Track her. If any of my Guardians can find out what she's up to without his cock doing his thinking for him, it will be you."

True enough. It was an accepted fact. He didn't want any female. "The lower levels are unguarded," he growled. He wasn't going to leave those tunnels unattended, not with the recent uptick in Ifrit activity. Those bastards would seize the opportunity to cross over if they knew no Guardian was waiting for them.

"For a short while only, Jafar." The eyes of the Amun

Ra examined his Guardian. "One of the other Guardians can take your place for today. Once you've learned what she's up to, report back to me. And then you can return to your post."

Handing off his responsibilities didn't sit well at all. "I'm the best." He was.

Amun Ra smiled, but it was a smile that didn't quite reach his cold eyes. "Precisely. And I want my best following that female. She's your priority now, not the Ifrits. Keep her from getting loose in my temple. Find out what she's after. That's what I want you to do."

That's what he was *ordering* Jafar to do. "You want me to babysit this female?"

"Make sure she doesn't get lost; that's all I'm asking." Amun Ra's voice was cold. "Call it babysitting if you want, but you stick to her like a leech. I want to know where she goes, what she does."

"She's that important." He didn't protest again, but it burned him to know he was going to have to follow this female around.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Find out for me."

He didn't run errands. He was a Guardian, a warrior. He fought battles. He did *not* slink around the passageways like some spy. Amun Ra must have sensed his resentment, because he continued, "You do this because I'm telling you to. Because I say it's important. You don't call me on it. Understand?"

Jafar did. He didn't have to like it, but Amun Ra had given him his orders. Follow the female. Find out what she wanted. He only had one question. "You want me to kill her?" He would if he had to.

"No," Amun Ra said thoughtfully. "Not yet. Maybe she's not up to anything."

"And maybe she is." Her scent still teased Jafar. "You giving her the rope to hang herself?" He didn't wait for an answer, instead angling his larger frame into the passageway that had swallowed up the female runner. The sooner he completed his task, the sooner he could return to the Doorways. The sooner he could go back to taking care of the business that really mattered.

"Why not? Discover what she wants here. Be careful, my brother," the Amun Ra called after him, knowing laughter coloring his voice. "That one will run, Jafar—and run hard."

Didn't he know it? Too bad the Cat in him was intrigued.

If she were up to no good, he would bring her down. If she were in the market for a mate, she would find one. That possibility still teased him. She was pretty, for a human, impossibly *alive*, with a warmth that made him want to wrap himself around her. Her long, chestnut-colored hair had spilled about her shoulders in deceptively soft curls and waves. Her face was heart-shaped, the eyes demurely cast down so that the long lashes rested like the shadow of Thoth, the moon god, against her skin. She had looked sweet. Innocent. An unexpected smile creased his dark face. And she'd looked as if that pose of innocence were killing her.

Perhaps the little *femi was* looking for a mate. Perhaps she would be delightfully eager to be hunted.

Erotic images flooded his mind. He would enjoy the pleasures of mastering her. Already, his cock was thick and hard, demanding to be planted deep in her wet sex. It was just the summer heat, he told himself: the mindless mating frenzy that seized them all when the sun blazed relentlessly in the abovelands, beating

down on their stony world, heating it—and their blood—until they found temporary release with their sex partners.

Unfortunately, there were few sex partners below ground. Only those women the abovelanders had cast out or had marked for punishment. Or had sent to the Guardians for their Hunts. The Guardians had no females of their own, no hope for release from the burning heat that built remorselessly in them unless they found mates.

And now—completely unexpectedly—here was a female who called to him. One intended for the Hunt. A feral possession welled up in him. *His*. His mate. She could be.

Dropped in his lap as if by the gods themselves.

It was impossible. He knew as well as the Amun Ra that there was no female in his future. Not given his past.

“Good hunting,” called one of the other warriors as he passed. They glided smoothly out of the shadows, as drawn by the female’s presence as he was. He must find her first.

Loosing his senses, he let himself shimmer from man form into the sleek, muscled body of his hunting Cat. He would follow her. See what she was *really* up to in the temple.

He didn’t *have* to make her his mate.