

Chapter One

Introducing Teo, a Boy

Perhaps Teo couldn't change his shape in real life, but in his mind he certainly could. As he shimmied down the rocky crevice, he was heroic Bella Kanto, Gladiator and Champion of the distant city of Tabat. Frozen stone rasped against the leather and wool clothing he wore, but to him it was Gladiator's armor, clinking as Bella climbed down to unimaginable dangers in order to rescue ...

No, not to rescue—to explore some place no Human, Beast, nor anyone from his village had ever ventured into before, he decided as he emerged into the icicle-choked crevice that opened to the cliff's face. He would be like the hero of his favorite penny-wides, someone who opened new paths.

Those penny-wides were the thing that Teo loved best about shipments from Tabat, so far away on the southern coast. Crates came up the Northstretch River on the steamboats or in wagons pulled by oxen or great goats—crates whose contents were kept in place with crumpled newsprint, discarded penny-wides, smudged columns of black type detailing adventures, scandals, intrigues of

the heroes of Tabat, primarily the Gladiators, the heroes whose ritual fights determined the fate of the city while teaching the stories of the Gods.

Gladiators. No other figures so glamorous, so perilous, so ephemeral, so suitable for stories with long narratives that included step-by-step swordplay, rescues, and escapes, and detailed conversations from courtiers and courtesans.

He harvested them whenever the crates were unpacked, pulling wads from between vials of medicines and other glassware; tins of foods that would never be found here in the north, soft-lily root and peppers soaked in vinegar; small round cans of coffee beans and bricks of pungent tea. Glass bottles of amber and black liquor, smaller sizes of perfume in red and blue and cat's-eye emerald. And once a cardboard box filled with the coin-sized mirrors folks used to chase away ghosts, enough to last his village for another generation.

And always two jars, one of high-quality black ink and a smaller one of red for Neorn, who acted as the village scribe, along with paper suitable for witnessed declarations. When the Trader left, he or she would carry with them a sheaf of such documents, copies to be filed with the Ducal offices back in Tabat.

Teo thought that they must have an entire drawer full of his village's papers by now. Which was important. It let them masquerade as Human and kept the Duke from sending up troops to exterminate them for being Shifters. They'd maintained the subterfuge ever since Explorers first came across them, almost a hundred years ago now.

It staggered him to think there might be a drawer for every Human settlement, maybe entire cabinets for larger cities. The world was so much larger than his tiny village, so full of wonderful, exciting things that surely room after room must be employed to track them. And none of those wonderful things could be found here, except in the pages of the penny-wides, which arrived out of order, often with gaps that his imagination was forced to supply. Most of them came from Spinner Press, orange pages edged with blue, and concerned the adventures of Tabat's premier Gladiator, Bella Kanto.

Bella Kanto, who'd visited the Old Continent and killed two sorcerers there; who'd ridden a wild Dragon and brought it to live

in the Duke's menagerie; and who'd fought foes ranging from the Fish-folk of the Southern Isles, with their poisonous barbed wrists and elbows, to an entire Centaur Tribe bent on keeping her from approaching their village.

Bella Kanto, whose love life was a constant array of nobility, warriors, and conjurers of either gender, who was forever giving up people for their own good, and leading what seemed to be a star-crossed but thoroughly enjoyable existence.

At fourteen, Teo's knowledge of sex had been well informed by observing animals, but his ideas of how it all worked with people, the flirting and wooing and such, still mystified him.

But not Bella. She was gallant, she was brave, she was dashing. She was everything a hero should be. The smudged pictures, steel-cut and rendered in broad lines, showed a beautiful face as narrow as an axe blade, a smile inevitably twisting one side of her mouth.

Bella Kanto, once a Beast Trainer's apprentice, who'd come to the all-female Gladiatorial School, the Brides of Steel, a year too old to be admitted, but who then had fought so well that the school was forced to take her, who had risen rapidly through their ranks until she was the Foremost Gladiator in Tabat, the one chosen to fight for Winter each year. Winter had been slow to release its grasp on the world for the last nineteen years, and the reason was Bella Kanto, who won the ceremonial battle with Spring each year.

Teo had crept out early this morning, saying he was going to check snares, but the truth was he wanted to daydream, and that was best done in an undisturbed spot. A chance to watch the rising sun, to witness the world go pale grey, then violet, then gold and lavender, sumptuous as silk embroidery, was a bonus.

Teo had found the shelter of the cliff long ago while hunting, trying to escape the pitying eyes of the village. He could never hope to match the hunting prowess of the other early teens, certainly, but he could try, at least. And sometimes that attempt yielded unexpected results, like this hideaway that was, as far as he knew, his and his alone.

To reach this open nook, you wiggled down through a chimney that seemed to go into the very face of the cliff. Depending on the time of year, it was slick with ice or thickly overgrown with brambles. It looked out south, and when all three moons were in

the sky—tiny purple Toj, vast red Hijae, and Selene, the white moon—you could watch them and wonder if the Moon Priests were right, that their movements predicted everything that would happen.

And everything that had happened.

Was it the moons' fault he couldn't change his shape, run in animal form, the way the rest of the village could? It wasn't fair that he couldn't change, but he'd come to accept that, to live with it the way old Fyorl lived with his missing foot, which he claimed a bear had bitten off but which was, according to Teo's mother, the consequence of being too drunk to clean flea bites when they festered. She said when it had gotten infected the Moon Priest visiting the village had cut it off.

And now another Moon Priest was here, treating someone else.

Teo's mind skittered away from thoughts of the Priest's presence. The solid rock against his back, he slitted his eyelids and tried to force himself back into his daydream.

The white moon was a thin arc, hollowed out with Winter hunger, thin as his sister's face, which kept replacing the black and white image of Bella Kanto. Elya was sick. Elya, Teo's little sister, alive in a way the sister who had been his Shadow Twin never had been. Elya, with big green eyes and a quick laugh, who loved the little animals he carved for her. Elya, who had never rejected him in the way others had for not being able to shapeshift.

She knew he was special, after all. They all did, even if they didn't always remember it. He'd been born with a Shadow Twin. He was the only person in the whole village who could say that, and he was the only person who'd had a Twin that any of them had ever encountered.

The thought didn't make him any warmer. Watery sunlight sifted down on the rock around him, which opened itself to the air, forming a ledge on which he could crouch. The breakfast he'd brought, two withered apples, sat on the stone beside him. From here the river's loop was visible, and he waited, hoping to catch sight of a puff of smoke that might signal the passage of a trade boat.

When he'd left that morning his mother had barely acknowledged his departure. She crouched by Elya's bed, watching her daughter's face as though willing her to keep breathing.

He wiped tears from his face with the back of a skinny hand, ashamed of them. *The Gods take who they will, when they will.* That was what the Moon Priest had said when he first looked at Elya. Who could resist the Gods? Not Teo, that was for certain.

And then they had chased him from the room in order to confer.

He wished he had magic. What would his life have been like if his Twin had drawn breath after the womb? History said that men and women with living Shadow Twins to assist them went on to do marvelous things. Verranzo and his Shadow Twin had each founded an entire city: Verranzo had created Verranzo's New City, far to the east on the coast, and his Shadow Twin (female, as Teo's had been, for a Shadow Twin always took the opposite gender of its sibling) had gone south with the Duke of Tabat and helped found a city in his name.

Teo's Shadow Twin had died at birth and would not do marvelous things. She would not draw on any of a Twin's reputed powers: to extend life or augment magical abilities. Verranzo's Twin had been able to tame creatures with her voice alone. Teo's was dead, and with her any chance of specialness deriving from her existence was gone.

Far below, snow swans flew across the river in a glitter of wings. He'd snared one last year. His father had beaten him because you never knew when a creature like that, a swan or eagle or wolf, might be a fellow Shifter or Beast, and exempt from being hunted or trapped accordingly.

His swan had not been intelligent, so it had been just an animal, not a Beast. But it had been angry when he'd freed it as Da had ordered. It beat at him with club-like wings as strong as Da's fist, and its head darted at his face and hands like a snake, hissing and clacking its bill.

He cut it loose and it waddled away, then leaped up against the sky, its wings driving it upward, frosted with red moonlight. It honked derisively at Teo, poor bruised Teo, who couldn't shift and therefore couldn't tell what was or wasn't a fellow Beast.

If he'd been Human, he would have been famous, might have been taken to Tabat to serve the latest generation of Dukes. But he was a Shifter, even if a failed one, and Humans hated Shifters, even