

Seizka the Beastsoul

The Story of Iskat and Prince Falu

A Thirnavar Story

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Chapter 1

Fury

Fury. Rage. Anger so deep Iskat could no longer remember what had caused it. His cell was little more than a hollow hacked from rough stone. An iron-bound door sealed the only exit, solid and windowless, with a thin smear of dim light creeping beneath it. He did not remember being brought there. He did not remember why he was imprisoned. His knuckles were split, scarred, and crusted with blood; some of it was fresh. His ribs showed starkly beneath his skin, as though he had been fed too little for far too long. The nails of his hands and feet were dirty and cracked, and cuts, bruises, and half-healed scars covered him. Every breath pulled at something injured inside his chest.

The pain should have cleared his thoughts. It did not. It only fed the anger. Iskat pressed his ear toward the door. He heard nothing; no footsteps, no breathing, no scrape of armor or distant murmur of voices. There might have been no living thing beyond the stone. He reached inward and called to his twinned spirit.

Nothing answered. For a moment the anger broke. That had never happened before. Not once in all the life he could remember. The spirit had always been there, sometimes quiet, sometimes reluctant, sometimes furious in its own right, but always there. Iskat called again, harder this time, and received only silence.

A pain throbbed at the base of his skull. He raised one battered hand to his neck and found cold metal beneath his fingers. A band encircled his throat, fitted close enough to press against every swallow. He clawed at it, finding no clasp, no chain, no gap where he might wedge his nails.

How had he not noticed it before? His breathing quickened. The darkness seemed to contract around him. He did not know where he was, how long he had been there, or what had happened to the other half of himself.

He knew only the anger, the collar, and the certainty that somewhere beyond the iron door someone had done this to him.

Chapter 2

The Prince's Prize

Prince Falu bin Gallish had spent years obtaining Iskat and nearly as long enjoying the rewards. Falu was Darista royalty, eleventh in line to the throne of Dracart: close enough to the crown for every privilege of birth, distant enough that he needed accomplishments of his own if he wanted anyone to remember his name. He was intelligent, wealthy, barely thirty, and accustomed to seeing expense as a problem that could be solved with enough patience. Capturing the wild shifter from the southern badlands had cost him a fortune, several hunting expeditions, dead men, lost animals, and years of effort. Iskat had finally been taken already badly wounded, dragged north in irons, and fitted with a collar designed to suppress the twinned spirit that made him so dangerous.

The arena made the expense worthwhile. When the collar was weakened, the ragged man became a massive two-headed tundrabeast, all coarse fur, crushing jaws, claws, and terrible speed. Falu's handlers called it his beast. The crowds called it his monster. Falu called it his prize.

For nearly two years no noble's champion had come close to defeating it. Armored killers entered the pit laughing at the thin wildman standing barefoot in the sand, expecting either a savage man or an oversized animal. Then the gates closed, the controls were released, and the beast emerged. Men who had killed across half the kingdom learned fear while Falu watched from his private gallery. Prestige followed. Wealth followed. Invitations came from nobles who had once neglected to remember which distant prince Falu was. Wagers grew. Every broken champion made Falu more famous.

Then Iskat began to weaken. Falu noticed before anyone else. The shoulders were narrower, the ribs clearer. Bruises remained longer. Cuts that once vanished quickly stayed angry and open. In the last match the beast had taken too long to rise after being driven into the sand. It had still won, but that was not the point. Sooner or later a rival would notice the decline and send someone capable of exploiting it. Falu's legend would die in the pit before thousands of delighted witnesses.

He would not allow that. He went beneath the arena with the physician, the keeper, and two guards. The keeper explained that Iskat would drink when thirst forced him, but he would not eat. Bread, broth, fruit, raw meat, cooked meat, milk, sweetened wine: all refused. Attempts to force food into the man had ended with vomiting, choking, violence, or food passing through him almost untouched.

"How long?" The keeper hesitated. "Not entirely refused, Highness. At first he ate a little. Then less. These last twelve days, nothing."

Falu's anger was cold. "My fortune is rotting behind that door, and you waited twelve days to tell me?" "He has done this before. Two days, perhaps three. We thought his appetite would return." "You do not think where my property is concerned. You observe. You report. You obey." A heavy impact shook the iron-bound door. Both guards reached for weapons. A second blow came, harder than the first, followed by a voice raw from thirst and disuse.

"Give it back." The physician looked toward Falu. "Give what back?" Inside the cell Iskat dragged bloody knuckles across iron. "My other half." Falu considered that for only a few breaths.

"Feed him. Release the beast until it eats. When it is finished, activate the controls again." The others looked at him as though he were mad. Falu saw the looks. "Did none of you hear him? The man does not need food. The other half does. Do it." A narrow panel opened near the bottom of the door. A haunch of raw meat was pushed through on a pole, and the panel slammed shut. The physician disengaged the control.

Inside, Iskat screamed. The change was fast, violent, and hideous even to men who had witnessed it before. Bones shifted with wet cracks, skin pulled and thickened, hair erupted across limbs and back, hands spread into heavy clawed paws, teeth lengthened, and a second neck forced itself into being beside the first. Within moments the starving man was gone and a huge two-headed tundrabeast filled the cell.

Falu smiled. His prize. The beast fell upon the meat. Bone cracked between its jaws. Flesh, gristle, marrow, and sinew vanished in ravenous bites. More food came. The beast devoured that too, then more again, until the roaring slowed and hunger ceased to be the only thing inside its skull.

Falu turned to the attendants. "Feed it until it refuses another bite. Then wait one full day before restoring the collar. If it breaks the door, keep it alive. Activate the controls if it escapes."

One guard swallowed. "And if the controls fail?" Falu looked at the trembling iron door. "Then try very hard not to damage my champion."

Chapter 3

The Other Half

The beast ate until hunger finally loosened its hold. At first there had been nothing else. Meat. Bone. Blood. More. One head pinned the food while the other tore it apart, both snapping at each other when starvation overwhelmed even the instincts of the pride. The feeding panel opened and closed. The keeper learned quickly to use hooks instead of hands.

Then appetite became satiation, and satiation made room for thought. A cage. Not a den. Not shelter. A cage. The beast began to pace. The cell was too small for more than a few heavy steps before it had to turn. One head watched the light beneath the door while the other tested walls and iron. Its thoughts were not Iskat's clean human reasoning. The twin nature dulled that part of him in the full shape and heightened the wilder mind: threat, hunger, territory, escape, blood. Yet fragments remained.

What had the captor said? Feed it until... One day. Something after one day. Restore the collar. The band remained around both necks, buried beneath fur and flesh. The beast clawed at it until skin tore and sparks of pain flashed through both skulls. No clasp. No weakness.

Rage rose. Break it. Bite it. Kill. Run. Then a different idea came, half instinct and half memory from the man buried within. Draw them close. The beast found a jagged length of bone among the scraps, pinned it, and bit hard enough to cut the inside of one mouth. Blood flooded over its tongue. It bit again, then lurched to the door and coughed blood across the feeding panel. It gagged, retched, forced its breathing into fast, shallow wheezes, pushed the bloody bone toward the opening, then collapsed onto its side.

Sick. Hurt. Dying. Prey. Footsteps stopped outside. "What happened?" "Bone. It swallowed bone." "It is bait." Another wet cough painted the lower door red. "Get the physician." The beast lay still while men argued beyond the iron. The physician arrived, listened to the false breathing, examined the blood-smeared bone through the panel, and finally demanded that the door be opened enough to look inside. The keeper objected. The physician reminded him that Prince Falu had ordered the creature kept alive.

Fear of the prince overcame fear of the beast. Bolts scraped back. The bar lifted. A retaining chain was fixed so the door could open only a narrow distance. Light spilled across the floor. The physician leaned through the gap with a lamp while the keeper crowded behind him.

Now. The beast exploded from the floor. One head seized the physician and ripped him into the doorway. The other snapped through the gap at the keeper. Blood sheeted across the iron. Men shouted. The beast slammed its full weight into the door. The chain held once, then stone cracked around its anchor. On the third impact the anchor tore from the wall and the door burst outward.

The corridor became terror. The beast came through low and fast, too large for the passage and too quick for the men inside it. A fallen guard disappeared beneath the door. Another reached for the control housing and was opened from shoulder to hip before his fingers found the key. A spear drove into the beast's side; one head crushed the shaft while the other closed on the wielder's neck.

Run. That thought cut through the blood. The beast tore along the corridor toward stairs and light. Behind it someone reached another control. The collar pulsed. Pain struck through both minds. One foreleg folded. Fur withdrew in bloody clumps before rage forced it back. Another pulse came, harder. One head began to collapse inward.

No. Run. The beast struck a barred gate at the top of the stairs. Iron bent. It struck again. The lock tore free and the gate burst outward into a preparation chamber crowded with attendants, ropes, weapon racks, and frightened servants. It smashed through them, found the arena passage, and erupted into sunlight.

Thousands of voices became one scream. A match had been underway. Two fighters stood frozen in the sand. The crowd rose around the pit. Above them, on the royal gallery, Falu had reached the arena before his prize.

The prince stood beside the fixed control apparatus. "Again," he ordered. Pain swallowed the world. The beast crashed into the sand. One head collapsed against the other. Fur pulled backward into skin, then surged out again as the wild spirit fought. One of the arena fighters saw opportunity and charged with a spear. The point entered the beast's shoulder.

Rage won. The attacker was flung across the pit and struck the wall beneath Falu's balcony. The crowd broke for the exits. The beast ran for the wall. Another control pulse hit before it reached the stone. Its legs failed. One head vanished halfway, flesh folding inward with a terrible grinding of bone. Human hands appeared where paws had been. Iskat clawed at the arena wall, reached the lower seating, and began climbing through screaming spectators while guards thrust spears downward.

For a few moments he was neither man nor beast, too large to be one and too weak to be the other. He crawled toward an archway beyond which lay a street and open sky.

A weighted net dropped over him. Hooks caught around the collar. Men pulled from three directions. Iskat cut two ropes with emerging claws, dragged himself closer to the arch, and smelled horses, rain on stone, smoke from cookfires, a world beyond the arena.

Then the collar pulsed again. Everything stopped. Iskat struck the ground in human form, naked, bleeding, thin enough that the net cords sank between his ribs. His hand stretched toward sunlight beyond the arch.

One pace too far. Boots surrounded him. "Do not kill him," Falu ordered. "Secure the collar. Bind his hands separately." The prince crouched just beyond reach. His calm had cracked; sweat stood at his temples and his breathing came too quickly, but calculation had already returned.

"You nearly did it," he said. Iskat's fingers scraped stone. Falu followed his gaze to the street. "So close." The collar pulsed again, and darkness took him.

Chapter 4

Learning Together

The first escape taught Iskat something the arena had concealed for years. The beast was not enough. Strength had broken the cell, torn through guards, crossed the arena, and carried him within a pace of freedom. Then the collar had found the division between man and spirit and ripped them apart. Rage spent everything at once and left Iskat helpless beneath a net.

When he woke, Falu had changed the cell. The new chamber was larger because it had to hold more restraints. Rings were sunk deep into stone. Chains ran to an iron harness around Iskat's body. Food came only after a barred partition was secured. The collar was weakened, the beast emerged, it ate under restraint, and the controls were restored before anyone entered again.

Falu had learned. So had Iskat. At night, when the collar held and his thoughts were his own, Iskat pressed his face to the stone and whispered inward. I am here. Nothing. I am not the cage. Still nothing. He pictured snow beneath moonlight, wind bending long grass, the scent of winter coming down from the tall rocks. Something shifted beneath his anger, not a voice but a pressure, a second awareness touching his own before disappearing.

You are not the cage either. The first attempt at joining themselves came during feeding. The controls weakened, bones cracked, and the tundrabeast rose beneath the harness. Iskat held on. For one breath he saw through both sets of eyes, heard through four ears, tasted blood with two mouths. The flood of sensation overwhelmed him. The beast felt the man inside and panicked, one head snapping at the chains while the other bit its own shoulder as if trying to tear away the intruder. The collar restored order by force.

Falu watched from above. "Something changed," the physician said. "It hesitated," Falu answered. The second attempt began with surrender. Iskat did not command. When the beast rose he opened himself to its instincts: hunger, threat, territory, pain. The beast wanted the guards. Iskat offered the meat instead. It turned toward the food.

A small victory. For nearly half an hour it ate without throwing itself against the chains. Falu noticed that too. "Reduce the feed," he ordered. "It thinks more clearly when satiated. Keep it hungry enough to fight." That night Iskat shook with rage, and the beast shook with him. For the first time their anger was not directed at each other.

Both hated Falu. That common ground became the beginning of language. The beast did not understand plans in words. It understood images, scents, impulses, remembered paths. Iskat learned to show rather than tell. A closed fist meant hold. An open road meant run. Blood ahead meant danger waiting. Falu's face meant collar. The low sun meant south.

The beast gave Iskat things in return: the tremor of a foot before the step landed, the scent of fear before a hand reached for a weapon, the feel of open space beyond a wall through air moving under a door. Most importantly, they discovered that the collar worked best when it could force itself between them. When man and beast fought for control, the magic tore them apart easily. When one buried the other completely, the suppressed half became helpless. When both remained distinct and moved together, the collar had no clean division to seize.

It still hurt. It still worked. But it needed time. Falu eventually returned Iskat to the arena. Rumors had spread during the weeks of absence, and a prince whose reputation rested on an

unbeatable champion could not allow people to believe the beast was dying. The opponent was an ogre-blooded mercenary with three assistants, nets, and a long hooked polearm.

The controls weakened. Together. The transformation came, and this time Iskat did not drown. The beast rose around him while the man settled within it. Two minds faced the same direction.

The crowd roared. The beast wanted to charge. Iskat wanted to study. They circled. A net came. They ducked. One head caught its trailing rope and pulled the thrower into another fighter. The mercenary lunged with the hook. Iskat saw the angle; the beast felt the air move. They twisted together, caught the shaft, dragged her close, and stopped with jaws around her throat.

Kill. Wait. The woman froze. Iskat looked toward Falu. The prince had risen. His expression changed because he finally understood the difference between rage and choice. Falu reached for the controls. Now. The beast released the woman and ran for the service gate. They remembered the route from the failed escape. Guards scattered. The collar pulsed. Pain struck, but the beast did not vanish.

Together. Another pulse. One head began to shrink. Together. They reached an outer chamber and found a heavy gate Falu had added after the first escape. The beast struck it once, twice, then a sustained collar burn drove Iskat and spirit apart before they could break through. Guards came with nets and hooked poles.

The third attempt failed. But the collar had required three pulses and sustained power to stop them. That night Falu came to the cell alone except for guards beyond the outer gate. "You understand me," he said. Iskat remained against the wall, wrists chained high. "You have always understood more than they believed." Silence. Falu crouched. "You were magnificent today." Iskat lifted his eyes. "There you are." Falu spoke almost respectfully, which made him easier to hate. "Before you, I was another distant prince in a long line. Before me, you were a wild thing no one beyond your hills would ever have known existed."

"Home." The word tore Iskat's dry throat. Falu's eyes sharpened. "Your home lies south?" Iskat realized too late that he had given him something. Falu smiled faintly. "You are learning caution. Good. Intelligence makes victory more interesting." After that Falu reinforced everything. Portable control rods went to the captain, the chief keeper, and the prince himself. New barriers divided the passages. The beast was kept hungry.

Iskat and his twinned spirit kept learning anyway. Falu had spent years teaching them violence. Now captivity was teaching them cooperation.

Chapter 5

The Fourth Attempt

The fourth attempt began during the Festival of Nine Victories. Falu arranged a grand contest to end all rumors that his champion had weakened. Nobles came from across Dracart, foreign envoys filled shaded galleries, and the purses were larger than anything previously offered. The beast would face six opponents in succession.

Iskat intended it to be the last arena Falu ever put him in. Before the gate opened he healed what injuries he could with the old druid blessings the collar had not erased so much as buried. He remembered them only in fragments, but his hands remembered. Then he held his strength back.

The first opponent died quickly. The second came with a net crew and left with a broken leg. The third was an armored desert lion. The fourth and fifth were men. By the sixth match Iskat's blood covered the sand and the crowd chanted Falu's name.

The final champion was a royal guard captain with a heavy spear and a shield built to withstand the beast's charge. He expected exhaustion. Iskat gave it to him. The beast staggered. One head hung low. A rear leg dragged. The captain advanced and drove the spear between shoulder and chest.

The beast collapsed. The arena thundered with disbelief. Falu stood. "Hold!" The prince triggered the collar. Nothing obvious happened. He triggered it again. The beast remained motionless. Falu knew better than the crowd. Suspicion overcame triumph. He sent the physician forward with guards. The old man knelt beside one head, held a polished plate under its nostrils, then leaned closer. Iskat counted heartbeats. One. Two. Three. The physician touched the collar. Now. The beast rose. One head flung the physician aside while the other took the nearest guard by the armor. Iskat twisted away from the royal captain's spear, broke the shaft, and ran.

Not toward the service gate. Toward Falu's balcony. The prince understood too late. The beast leaped. Claws found carved stone. It climbed the arena face in three brutal bounds and came over the rail among nobles and guards. People scattered. Falu stood beside the fixed control housing and activated it.

Pain struck through both minds. Together. Falu turned the control higher. One head began to fold inward. Together. Iskat charged the apparatus. Falu stepped away. The beast hit the housing with both forepaws. Metal buckled, runes shattered, and the mechanism burst in sparks.

For one glorious instant there was no pressure at all. The twinned spirit opened fully. Iskat and the beast roared together. They turned toward Falu. The prince drew his portable control rod and triggered it. Pain returned, smaller and sharper. Close. The portable rod needed distance no greater than a few dozen paces. Iskat lunged and nearly reached him before another pulse buckled the beast's forelegs. The prince stepped backward. Distance. They turned away from him and plunged through the nobles' gallery instead. The beast smashed through screens, tables, and awnings, then broke an outer wall and fell two levels through a market canopy into the street. Bells rang behind them. Horns answered from the palace quarter. People fled in every direction.

South. They ran. A mounted guard raised a control rod in a market lane. The collar struck, dropping their hind legs. Iskat changed direction, charged, tore the rod from the man's hand, and crushed it between their jaws.

Another pulse came from farther behind. Weaker. They drove toward the southern gate while bolts struck their back and flanks. The gate was already closing. Guards formed a line between the narrowing doors.

The beast lowered both heads. Spears struck. One shattered. Another entered the shoulder. They hit the shield line, scattered men, and reached the gate just as the opening became narrower than their ribs. Stone scraped one side, iron tore fur from the other.

For one heartbeat they were wedged. Riders closed behind them. Push. Iskat gathered everything left in him. The beast answered. The doors groaned. They burst through. Fields opened ahead, then irrigation channels, low settlements, and beyond them the desert. Falu came personally. He had thrown aside court dress for light armor and rode among the pursuit on a pale horse. His own control rod was in his hand.

The chase crossed the cultivated outskirts. Falu triggered the collar whenever he came close enough. Each pulse hurt less as distance opened, but the horses were faster on level ground.

Iskat veered into fields and broken irrigation country. Riders spread to surround him. One came alongside with a hooked chain meant for the collar. The beast caught the chain, pulled, and threw the rider from the saddle.

Ahead, dry ground became broken ridges. Falu drew close enough for Iskat to see his face. "You cannot survive out there!" the prince shouted. Iskat remembered snow. Home. Falu raised the rod. Iskat turned suddenly and charged. The prince had expected flight. His horse tried to wheel away, but one tundrabeast head struck the animal's shoulder. Horse and rider went down separately. Falu rolled and came up still gripping the control.

The beast stood over him. For a moment both heads stared down at the man who had taken them, starved them, displayed them, and called their suffering glory.

Kill. Yes. But riders were closing. Falu's thumb moved toward the control. One forepaw came down on the rod. Metal broke. The prince looked up. Iskat wanted him to understand the choice. Not mercy. Time. They turned and ran. The riders followed another mile, then another. The city diminished behind them. A final collar pulse came faintly across the distance, then another weaker still.

Then nothing. The desert opened. The beast slowed among red rocks and finally collapsed. The transformation came by choice this time, fur withdrawing, limbs shortening, the second head folding gently into the first. Iskat lay naked beneath the sun, bleeding and exhausted.

The collar remained around his neck. But the twinned spirit remained with him. He placed a hand against the iron band. "We will break it." The answer came as an image of metal crushed against stone. South and east, beyond the badlands, snow shone on the tall rocks. Home.

Chapter 6

The Valley

Freedom frightened Iskat because he could taste it. Every mile from Dracart made it more real. The wind touched his skin without passing through bars. The collar was silent. The twinned spirit moved beside his own thoughts. Soon he could see the mountains clearly enough to pick out white along their highest ridges.

That made him push too hard. His feet split against hot stone. Old wounds reopened. Twice the world narrowed into a bright tunnel with darkness at its edges. The beast pushed when the man weakened; the man pushed when the beast wanted to stop.

Home. Do not stop. Falu will come. By late day Iskat could no longer tell whether the pounding he heard was his own heart or pursuing horses. He climbed a low ridge and stopped.

Below lay a broad hollow where scrub gathered around a shallow depression in the stone. Tundrabeasts. Seven that he could see, perhaps more. Healthy adults. Young. One enormous male near the center. Not his pride. The beast inside him surged. Threat. The animals had already scented him. Heads rose. One female stood. The great male stepped forward, both heads fixed on Iskat.

Stand. No. Fight. No. The wild half hated the answer. If they fought now, they died. Perhaps they killed one, perhaps two, but Iskat's body was already near collapse. Even victory would leave them bleeding in open country with Falu behind them.

Not our pride, Iskat pressed into the bond. Not our land. We do not want their females. We do not want their young. We pass.

The beast resisted. Submit. NO. Today we bow so we live to reach home. The answer came back less fierce. If they attack? Fight. Agreed. Iskat let enough of the twinned spirit surface that the pride could smell what he was. He lowered himself, not onto his back, never that, but head down and eyes turned aside.

The great male approached. The beast screamed inside him to rise first. Iskat stayed low. The male smelled the collar, the blood, the iron, the city. A scarred female approached and stopped beyond striking distance. She knew the scent of men.

The great male struck Iskat hard enough to roll him across the stones. Kill. No. Iskat spat blood, lowered his head again, and waited. The male rumbled, turned away, and the matter was settled. The pride did not welcome Iskat. They allowed him to exist. That was enough. He crawled to the edge of the hollow, drank from a muddy seep after the pride had finished, and slept beneath a shelf of stone. Seven powerful bodies occupied the valley around him. A mounted patrol might hunt one wounded tundrabeast. It would think twice before entering the ground of a full pride.

Near nightfall Iskat heard hoofbeats. The first pursuit appeared on the ridge: perhaps ten riders. They stopped as soon as they saw the animals below. The great male stood and roared. Horses shied. The riders argued. One voice carried clearly enough for Iskat to hear: "The prince wants the beast alive."

Another answered, "Then the prince can come fetch it." When the great male advanced, the riders withdrew. One fool loosed a crossbow bolt. Three tundrabeasts charged the ridge and the mounted men fled in earnest.

The pride pursued only far enough to defend its ground. Iskat slept. For two days he rested, ate scraps after the pride fed, drank, and allowed his body to recover. The beast hated eating last but eventually understood the arithmetic.

Not our pride. Not our land. Live. Then a larger column came from the north. Falu rode with it. The prince did not attack the valley. That frightened Iskat more than foolish courage would have. Falu dismounted on the ridge beside his chief tracker and studied the pride through a glass. "How many?" "Seven certain. Possibly more." "And mine?" "His trail enters the hollow." Falu looked at him. "Enters." "Yes, Highness." "You did not say it leaves." "We have not found where." One officer suggested driving the animals off. Falu barely looked at him. "We are not hunting tundrabeasts. Circle the hollow. Stay outside their ground. Find where his trail leaves. No arrows, no shouting, no attempts to frighten them. Anyone who starts a fight without my order may finish it without my help."

The prince spent hours doing almost nothing. His trackers worked around the valley. Riders established distant observation points. Water was distributed. Horses rested.

Falu turned Iskat's refuge into a cage without entering it. Late in the day he tested the collar from the ridge. One pulse. Nothing. He stepped closer. Another. A faint pressure brushed the back of Iskat's mind. The beast surged. Collar. Stay down. Falu watched the pride for any reaction, then advanced until the great male stood. He triggered the rod again. The pressure strengthened. Then Falu stepped backward. It faded. Range. He had learned the distance at which the collar became useful without risking a single man. By sunset Falu placed riders southeast, toward the mountains, and others south and west. He expected Iskat to run for home.

The beast wanted to do exactly that. Home. They are waiting there. Home there. Yes. Then go there. Iskat pushed an image through the bond: themselves running southeast, riders already ahead, the collar burning, men closing from both sides.

Then another image: west, away from home, an obvious trail, darkness, a wide circle, then southeast again after the hunters followed the lie.

The beast recoiled. Away from home. For a little while. Wrong way. Yes. Waste. So we live. At last the beast understood. Make him chase wrong. Yes. After dark, Iskat left the valley westward. He made the trail obvious enough to be believed.

Chapter 7

The Wrong Trail

Iskat did not intend merely to mislead Falu's trackers. If he found them alone and could be certain none escaped, he would kill them.

The beast approved immediately. They traveled west and gradually angled south, breaking scrub and displacing stones, leaving just enough sign for experienced men to believe a tired fugitive had failed to hide himself completely. Before dawn Iskat heard horses ahead and dropped behind a low ridge.

Four riders. Trackers. They moved carefully. One dismounted to examine the ground while the others watched the surrounding slopes. Competent men.

The beast wanted to charge. Not yet. Iskat shifted fully and waited until all four entered a narrow wash with poor exits. Now. The tundra-beast came off the ridge with astonishing speed. One head drove horse and rider into stone. The second struck another animal broadside. A third rider fled and died before he could reach open ground. The fourth threw himself behind a boulder and drew a control rod.

The collar struck. Pain ran through both minds. Together. The tracker pressed the rod again, expecting the beast to collapse. It did not. For one fatal heartbeat he stared. Then one head reached around the rock. Silence returned. Four dead. No witness. Iskat changed back and searched them. Water first. Dried meat. A cloak. A knife. Sandals that nearly fit. A compass. Waxed tablets marked with trails. He smashed the control rod against stone.

Then he built another lie. Two horses were driven west and released. A third was led southwest across softer ground, equipment scattered to suggest survivors fleeing after an attack. Iskat dragged two bodies west far enough to mark the direction with blood and concealed the others poorly, as though whoever had done it had lacked time.

The message was not simply Iskat went west. That would be too obvious. The message was that something had happened here, survivors fled west-southwest, and the quarry might have followed them.

A tangent. Then Iskat shifted again, circled south for miles, crossed broad wind-scoured stone where tracks became almost meaningless, and finally turned southeast.

Home. They ran. The land rose. Sand gave way to hard black stone, narrow cuts, broken shelves, and gullies where horses would slow and wagons would eventually stop altogether. Iskat chose the worst ground he could find. Sharp rock. Steep climbs. Ravines wide enough for a tundra-beast but awkward for a mounted line.

Once he climbed a slope so broken that even he nearly abandoned it. At the top he looked back across empty country. No dust. No riders. The tall rocks no longer floated on the horizon. They filled it. The beast tasted snow in the wind. Home. The collar remained. That had to end before Falu came close again. Iskat no longer needed a locksmith. He needed weight. A smith's hammer. A mason's mallet. Something heavy enough to trap the collar against stone and break it. The dead fields began at the foothills: abandoned terraces, collapsed stone huts, dry channels choked with thorn, the remains of farms that had once depended on mountain runoff. Goblin

sign appeared everywhere. Hearyzd goblins were notoriously uncivil and they hated tundrabeasts with good reason.

The beast suggested the obvious solution. Kill little one. Take hammer. Only if we have to. Easier. Then twenty come. Kill twenty. Then a hundred. The beast went quiet. Exactly. Iskat shifted to human form and searched ruins instead. The first hut contained nothing useful. The second had been stripped bare. In the third he found a rusted sickle and threw it aside. A blade might cut flesh; the collar needed impact.

He found an old forge built partly into a hillside. There were corroded tongs, chain, a shattered anvil stone, and one hammer head eaten too badly by rust to trust. Then, beneath collapsed roof beams, his knee scraped wood.

A handle. He dug it free. The iron head was heavy, one face flat, the other rounded from years of work. A smith's hammer. Perfect. The beast surged with satisfaction. Break. Yes.

Chapter 8

The Collar

Iskat found a block of dark mountain stone near the ruined forge and tested it until he was certain it would not split or roll. Then he lay on his side and pressed the collar against the edge.

One bad blow could crush his throat. The beast did not care. Break. We do this right. He shifted the angle, raised the hammer with both hands, and struck. Iron rang against stone. Pain exploded through his neck. The collar dented. Again. The second blow made the old forge echo. A crack appeared along one edge. Again. Sparks jumped beneath his cheek. The band split. For one heartbeat nothing happened. Then the broken collar sprang apart and fell onto the stone floor. Iskat stared at it. No pressure. No waiting pain. No invisible hand poised inside his mind.

The twinned spirit surged, not with rage but with wild, savage joy. Iskat seized the broken collar and hurled it across the forge. Then he shifted, pinned it beneath one paw, and crushed it until the thing that had divided them for years was only twisted scrap.

The beast wanted to leave immediately. Iskat sat down instead. A memory had returned. Moonlight. A hand pressed to an injury. Words spoken beneath open sky. The old druid blessing flowing through flesh. He stared at his bloody fingers. "I am an idiot." The beast did not understand. For weeks Iskat had treated wounds like an animal because the collar had left the man half-coherent whenever it suppressed the twinned spirit. Falu had reduced him to exactly what the arena required: something that fought when released and suffered when restrained.

But Iskat had been a druid before the arena. He remembered the moon. Not every face or lesson returned cleanly, but his hands knew what to do. He placed one palm against the worst wound along his side and called on the old blessing.

This time something answered. Warmth spread beneath his hand. Torn tissue tightened. Bleeding stopped. The ache beneath his ribs eased enough that breathing no longer stabbed.

Iskat laughed. It hurt. He laughed anyway. Do again, the beast urged. "Yes." He did not waste everything. That lesson returned too. Strength was finite. Magic was finite. He healed what threatened travel, cleaned wounds, drank, ate, and rested while ordinary flesh and supernatural vitality worked together.

By the time he stood he was still scarred, thin, and exhausted, but no longer collapsing. More memories returned with coherence. He had been taken around the time when his druid training was already mature enough for the full tundrabeast bond, but the rage had only begun. The arena had built the rest. Years of killing had hardened fury into discipline. Falu had not captured the fighter Iskat had become.

The prince had made him. Iskat picked up the goblin smith's hammer. The mountains stood close now. He could have gone home and never looked north again. The beast showed him Falu's face. Kill. Iskat looked back toward Dracart. For once the answer was immediate. Yes. Not yet. Heal first. Choose ground. Make him come. Then Falu.

Chapter 9

The Prince's Sword

Iskat did not turn toward Dracart. Revenge would come to him if he prepared the ground properly. Falu was still following. The foothills had swallowed the open desert into dead fields, dry washes, broken terraces, and narrow cuts where horses could travel only slowly. Goblin sign became common: little cairns, cords beneath dust, crude marks scratched into stone, tracks vanishing into holes that looked too small to matter.

The beast disliked their smell. Iskat needed their anger. He still carried what he had taken from Falu's four dead trackers: belts, buckles, clothing, the good knife, bits of tack carrying Dracarti horse scent. He used the old druid blessing that hid his passage and moved through the dead fields until he found a place goblins were actively using.

He deliberately disturbed a snare. Then he waited. Three goblins came. They were small, filthy, careful creatures in patched hides. One had a short bow, one a chopping blade, the third a little iron-headed hammer at his belt.

They found the disturbed trap and spread out. Too clever. Iskat attacked first. He killed the bowman with a Dracarti knife, broke the second goblin's neck against a wall, and caught the third in the dry channel before it escaped. The beast approved too eagerly.

No guilt came. The goblins would have killed him if they could, and their deaths could buy something more useful than remorse. Iskat built the lie carefully. The Dracarti knife remained in one body. A dead tracker's belt went beside another. He broke a goblin arrow through a scrap of Dracarti cloth, stamped the ground with stolen boots, dragged bodies enough to confuse direction, then left signs leading toward the route Falu would most likely use.

The goblins would find their dead. They would smell men. They would decide the rest themselves. By the following afternoon the first shrill goblin horn cried through the cliffs. Others answered. Falu arrived the next day. The prince had fewer horses now and no wagons with the forward group. Men led tired mounts through the worst ground. He still had guards, trackers, servants, archers, and enough control rods to be dangerous.

Falu himself wore a polished breastplate worked with gold along the edges and the ornate sword he had carried in the arena.

Iskat watched from the rocks. The beast remembered the sword. Falu had worn it while watching them kill for him. The prince dismounted beside the first dead goblin and examined the Dracarti knife. "That is Harun's," a tracker said. "Did the goblins kill him?" "No, Highness. Harun died north of here." Falu looked toward the surrounding rocks. Someone whispered, "The beast." Falu's expression hardened. "Move back. We are being invited somewhere." Smart. Too late. The first goblin arrow struck a horse. Others followed from different elevations. A guard went down clutching his neck. Stones rolled from above. Goblins appeared between rocks, fired, vanished, then reappeared elsewhere. Their horns multiplied until the ravine seemed full of them.

Falu tried to withdraw in formation. He abandoned panicked horses rather than let them break the line, shifted archers to cover the heights, and moved toward wider ground.

He was intelligent. That was why Iskat had never expected the goblins to kill him. They only needed to make him reachable. Iskat circled the fighting under his remaining concealment. A wounded Dracarti crawled within a few paces of him. Iskat stepped over the man.

Falu. Only Falu. He healed the last wound worth spending magic on, ate, drank, then called another old blessing into his legs. Longstrider settled subtly through muscle and tendon.

By late afternoon Falu had been forced into a broken terrace beneath an abandoned stone farmhouse. Perhaps a dozen men remained close around him. Goblins could not easily overrun the position, but the Dracarti could not withdraw through the narrow cuts without arrows falling from both sides.

Iskat stepped onto a ridge in human form. Falu saw him. For a moment the battle disappeared between them. "There you are," the prince said. Iskat looked at the breastplate. He remembered the collar tightening. He remembered waking unable to hear the other half of himself. He remembered starving because the beast could eat and the man could not. The druid words came easily. Heat Metal. Falu jerked as though struck. His hand slapped against the breastplate and recoiled with burned fingers. "Get it off!" His attendants did not understand until the heat intensified.

The fitted armor had been made by a master. It was not something a man could throw aside quickly. A servant burned his own hands on the straps.

Iskat called the heat again. Falu fell to one knee. Smoke curled from beneath the edges. The sound he made pleased Iskat more than expected. "Like the collar," Iskat said. Falu looked up. He heard. That mattered. Another surge of heat. Falu reached for the portable control rod at his belt. Even burning. Even now. He aimed it at Iskat and triggered it. Nothing happened. Again. Nothing. Falu stared at the bare, scarred throat where the collar should have been. Fear reached him at last. Iskat let the heat die. For an instant Falu sagged in relief. Then Iskat changed.

Bones shifted. Fur spread. The second neck and head tore into being. The tundrabeast stood on the ridge and looked down at the prince.

The beast wanted blood. The man agreed. Rage came. Then Frenzy. Iskat left the ridge. Longstrider carried them down faster than the guards expected. One man stepped forward with a spear; the beast struck him aside without closing its jaws. Another drove a blade into their shoulder.

Ignore. Falu. A guard caught one muzzle with a polearm. The beast seized the shaft and ripped it away. Another man grabbed at their flank and was thrown into the farmhouse wall.

Falu drew his ornate sword. He knew how to use it. The prince stepped aside from the first rush and cut deeply into one foreleg. He retreated behind the broken wall while guards closed around him.

For perhaps half a minute Falu fought well. It changed nothing. Iskat had endured years for this. He crashed through the guards. One head took a shield and the arm behind it. The other drove through the opening. Falu thrust. The sword entered Iskat's shoulder. Iskat kept coming. The prince tried to release the weapon. Too late. One set of jaws closed around the breastplate, the armor becoming a handle. Iskat lifted him from the ground. Falu struck at them with both hands, shouting something neither half cared to understand. The second head closed over him.

The frenzy ended the matter quickly. When Iskat released what remained, Prince Falu bin Gallish did not move. The beast stood over him breathing hard. A goblin arrow struck their flank. Time to leave. Then Iskat saw the sword. It lay beside Falu's hand, blood on its fine steel, gold worked through the guard, deep red stones at the pommel. His. The beast understood trophies. The human half understood value. Iskat tore the belt and scabbard free. Falu's purse came with it and split partly open, spilling gold across the stones. Something else gleamed beneath the burned cloak: a princely chain and seal.

Take. Not because Iskat wanted riches. Because useful things could come from riches, and because Falu's sword was proof of something no storyteller could alter.

We won. A surviving guard rushed toward them, saw his prince dead and the two-headed beast standing over the body with Falu's sword in one mouth, and stopped.

He chose to live. So did Iskat. The tundrabeast bounded away into the broken fields while goblins and Dracarti continued killing one another behind him. He did not care who won.

Chapter 10

Falu's Folly

Enough of Falu's expedition survived that Dracart eventually learned the essential truth. The goblins had created the battlefield, but Iskat had killed the prince. Wagons, replacement animals, servants, and reserve men had been left behind as the country became too rough. Some guards escaped the ambush. Others hid until the goblins lost interest and then reached the rear party. Their accounts disagreed about numbers, routes, and who died where, but the important pieces matched.

They had seen Iskat appear as a man. They had seen Falu's breastplate become burning hot. They had seen the escaped shifter become the famous two-headed tundrabeast. They had seen Falu trigger the control rod and receive nothing. They had seen Iskat ignore easier targets and drive directly toward the prince. They had seen Falu die. What no witness could prove was how much of the goblin attack Iskat had arranged. Falu's dead scouts' equipment had appeared among goblin corpses. One tracker remembered Falu himself saying, "We are being invited somewhere." Among the Darista elite the accepted reconstruction became that the beast had somehow exploited the Hearyzd goblins to create his opportunity.

The formal account was more restrained. Prince Falu bin Gallish died during an expedition into the southern country after an escaped dangerous beast. His party was attacked by goblins. Falu was killed in the fighting.

Every word was true. The city preferred the better story. The prince chased his monster into the mountains. The monster raised the goblins against him, burned him alive inside golden armor, killed him, took his sword, and vanished toward the snow.

Within a few years the details became impossible. Falu's breastplate melted onto his body. Iskat commanded whole warrens. The beast carried the prince's severed head into the mountains. None of that mattered. The core survived.

Falu's own prize killed him. His father mourned him and was furious with him in equal measure. Falu had not been an idiot. That was what made the death difficult to accept. He had recognized the warnings. His champion weakened. The beast escaped. The first pursuit turned back rather than assault a tundrabeast pride. Falu followed personally. He learned that Iskat could think. He tested the collar and discovered its range. His trackers died. Their equipment appeared among dead goblins. Falu himself recognized that someone was laying a trap.

He continued anyway. His father eventually said to one relative, "He knew. That is what I cannot forgive him for. The boy knew." Calls for a punitive expedition followed. Younger kin wanted the goblins punished, the beast hunted, the sword recovered. Falu's father refused to send another prince and hundreds of men into the southern mountains chasing the pride that had already killed one son.

If the beast remained in the mountains, leave it there. That was not forgiveness. It was arithmetic. Falu's former rivals adjusted quickly. For two years nobles had sent prized champions into his arena and lost. Some had lost fortunes in wagers; others had lost retainers they valued. While Falu lived, every defeat increased his prestige. After he died beneath the same jaws, those old humiliations became easier to bear.

Of course our champion lost. The damned thing killed Falu himself. Years later the jokes became sharper. Falu defeated everyone in the arena except his own champion. Falu's greatest victory was the beast that killed him. The missing sword became a legend of its own. Everyone who knew Falu knew the ornate weapon. His body was eventually recovered, stripped by battle and scavengers, but the sword was gone. So were some coins, gems, and the princely chain.

The sword mattered most. On the southern trade routes Falu's death became a cautionary tale told to ambitious young nobles, bounty hunters, and travelers convinced that money and preparation made them masters of bad country.

"Falu had better horses." "Falu had more men." "So did Falu." The lesson was not cowardice. Falu had been brave, prepared, wealthy, intelligent, and correctly informed. He simply could not let go. Eventually "chasing Falu's beast" stopped meaning Iskat specifically. It meant that the original objective was gone, the cost exceeded its value, and a man was continuing only because admitting loss had become more painful than the danger ahead.

The desert did not care how much he had paid to reach it. The mountains did not care who his father was. Falu was remembered as the intelligent man who knew better and went anyway.

Chapter 11

Seizka

Iskat returned to his pride. That had been the reason for every mile south, every wound endured, every moment he had refused to collapse when his body begged him to stop.

Home was not merely the mountains. It was them. He smelled the pride before he saw them, and recognition struck both halves at once. Old scents remained beneath newer ones: animals he remembered, territories marked before he had been taken, sleeping places beneath stone where generations had sheltered from winter storms. Some scents were missing. Those absences hurt. Others had changed with age. There were young he had never known.

Then came the deep old scent beneath them all. Grulldgn. Iskat began running. He crossed the last ridge in his humanoid shape because after years of being forced to become the beast, the choice mattered. Below, the pride moved through the dying light.

Almost nothing had changed. Everything had changed. One female carried a scar she had not possessed before. A young male that had barely been grown when Iskat disappeared now stood broad across the shoulders. Two scents he searched for remained absent no matter how often he breathed.

Dead. The land took its share. Then Grulldgn rose from beneath a shelf of stone. Age had not made him beautiful. It had made him worse. Scars crossed scars. One ear ended raggedly. The left side of one muzzle bore a pale seam nearly from nostril to jaw. An old wound had knotted one shoulder without weakening it enough to matter. There were marks Iskat remembered and others acquired while he had been gone.

Grulldgn had fought nearly everything that lived in these lands. Nothing had felled him. Both heads lifted. The pride smelled Iskat. The man-scent was wrong: iron, cities, strange blood, old captivity. Beneath it remained something older. Seizka. The beast came forward willingly. Bones shifted. Fur spread. The second head emerged, and for the first time since the collar broke Iskat transformed for no reason except that he wanted to.

The pride erupted around him. They rushed, smelled, shoved, snapped, circled, and tested. One female struck him hard enough to turn him sideways and then pressed both muzzles against his neck, breathing where pale collar scars hid beneath fur.

Grulldgn approached last. He smelled Iskat for a long time. Iskat lowered himself slightly. Not submission. Recognition. Grulldgn struck him across the shoulder. Hard. The beast inside Iskat wanted to answer. Iskat did not stop it. They struck Grulldgn back. The old leader staggered half a pace, recovered, and gave the deep rolling sound Iskat's human throat could never reproduce correctly.

Grulldgn. The old male turned away. The matter was settled. Iskat was home. Two years of captivity had changed him more than they had changed the land. The badlands south of Dracart remained broken shelves of stone, long sweeps of scrub, dry washes that became murderous rivers when rain fell far away, and miles of rough country where a horse could see its destination half a day before reaching it. Men called the land empty.

It was not. It was indifferent to men. Iskat found peace in that. The city had taught him to associate peace with stillness: doors locked, spaces controlled, guards standing quietly, food arriving at prescribed hours. That had never been peace. It had been restraint.

Here the night was full of teeth. Something might kill you at water. Goblin hunters might find your trail. A storm might bury the high passes. A wound could rot. A stronger predator might come down hungry from the mountains.

None of that made the land cruel. Cruelty required choice. The land simply was. Nature could not be civilized. Those who lived here accepted that and wanted no other bargain. Iskat did not lead the pride. That belonged to Grulldgn. The old male chose when they moved, where they hunted, which challenges required blood, and which could be endured. His scars were not ornaments. They were the record of decisions that had kept him walking.

Iskat's place was something else. To the Araq he had always been Seizka. The title was older than Dracart, older than the arena, older than the scars around his neck. They knew the strange shifter who walked as a man among beasts that could kill a dozen men in moments, disappeared into their midst as one of them, then emerged again on two legs carrying herbs, tools, and thoughts no tundrabeast needed.

He was the pride's shaman, not its shepherd. He did not prevent death. He prevented waste. A torn flank that should heal was cleaned before it festered. Difficult births that need not kill the mother were helped. Poisoned water was abandoned before sickness spread. Injured hunters recovered often enough to hunt again. Iskat could use tools no tundrabeast could make and blessings no tundrabeast needed to name.

Fewer died. The pride became unusually large because more of Grulldgn's own survived. The Araq noticed, as they noticed almost everything. They did not fear Seizka because he gave them no reason to. He did not raid their camps, take their animals, claim their wells, or turn the pride against travelers who had made no affront. An Araq rider encountering Iskat in the scrub gave him the practical respect due another hunter's boundaries.

Dracart understood none of this. Those searching for Falu's beast sought reports of a maddened two-headed monster: slaughtered caravans, huge tracks, terrified villages, something obvious enough to hunt.

They would never find Iskat that way. Seizka walked as a man. The Lost Sword of Prince Falu remained hidden. Iskat had no desire to wield it. Despite his shifter nature, when serious violence came he preferred the full tundrabeast, teeth and claws, rage and frenzy. Falu's sword was not a weapon to him. It was a trophy, a reminder that he and his other half had won.

Using it would only bring wrath down upon the pride. So Iskat wrapped the sword and scabbard against damp, carried them with the remaining royal valuables into difficult ground within the pridelands, and concealed them beneath stone where only he could readily recover them. The sword might remain there forever.

The coins and gems were different. Those could become things. Halwik of the Bloody Hand found Iskat almost a year after his return. He came alone on a sandy daudir whose hide matched the scrub so closely that Iskat smelled the mount before he clearly saw it. Halwik did not enter the pride's ground. He stopped beside a dry wash and waited.

That courtesy mattered. Iskat approached in his unshifted form. Halwik looked him over without ceremony. His eyes paused briefly at the pale scars around Iskat's neck and moved on. He had known Iskat before.

That made explanations unnecessary. "Did you kill Prince Falu?" "We did." Halwik studied him. "Why?" Iskat told him. Not every detail. Enough. The capture. The collar. The pit. The starvation. The years of fights. The escape. Falu's refusal to stop. The goblins. The breastplate. The failed control rod. Falu beneath their jaws.

Halwik interrupted only once. "You heated the armor while he wore it?" "Yes." A faint movement touched the Araq's face. When Iskat finished, Halwik nodded. "It is good to have you back, Seizka." The words struck deeper than Iskat expected. Falu had called him champion, beast, prize, property. Halwik simply called him what he had always been. "Do not tell them where," Iskat said. "Who?" "Anyone. The debt is paid. Whether Falu's kin accepts that or not. None need know where the pride roams." Halwik nodded toward the mountains. "And the sword?" Iskat looked at him.

Halwik gave a small laugh. "Then I did not ask." That was the bargain. No oath. No ceremony. No coin. Later Halwik carried Falu's necklace, seal, coins, and gems north into Aarakiel. He claimed he had found them in the badlands near the Deadlands and the foothills. Traders asked immediately about the sword.

There was no sword, Halwik told them. He was adamant. They believed him more readily because he was Araq. A fine weapon would interest an Araq far more than loose coin or decorative stones; if Halwik openly sold the gold and swore there had been no blade, most merchants saw little reason to imagine he had secretly discarded the most desirable object.

The Lost Sword remained lost. Halwik converted part of the wealth into things that mattered: a custom saddle for his daudir, perhaps carrying a small practical enchantment; sound packs and harness; a good anvil; smith's tools; cooking pots; needles, cordage, repair materials, salt, medicines, durable containers, and other necessities difficult to make in the badlands. He kept his traditional Araq weapons. Expensive outsider steel held little appeal merely because it was expensive.

Money was stored usefulness. He spent it. Halwik also kept a generous share. When he returned to the pridelands with supplies, he told Iskat. "There was considerably more." Iskat tested the edge of a new tool. "How much?" Halwik named a sum that would have made a city merchant sit upright. "And I kept part." A grunt. "A large part." Iskat found the sack he had been looking for, opened it, and touched the coarse salt inside. Halwik waited. "You understand I kept quite a lot of your money?" Iskat looked at him as though the question were strange. "You brought what I asked for."

"Yes." "Then it worked." Halwik's expression became almost amused. Iskat closed the sack. "Bring more salt next time." Years passed. The pride hunted. Young were born. Some died. Old wounds accumulated. Grulldgn continued to walk until the land itself decided otherwise, and no story from Dracart could change that. Seizka sometimes crossed the scrub as a man, sometimes moved beneath the moon with two heads and the pride around him.

Outlanders did not know the fate of Iskat. Why would they? The story they possessed ended with Falu dead, his sword missing, and his beast vanished toward the tall rocks. The rest belonged to the land. There were no walls around Iskat's home. No gates. No laws written over its

entrance. There was hunger there, blood, winter, birth, age, and death. He loved the pride because they were mortal. He loved the land because it belonged to no one. He loved its peace because the peace was not safety.

It was freedom. The wind moved through the scrub. Grulldgn's pride climbed toward the evening hunting grounds, powerful bodies passing almost silently through country that would exhaust a mounted patrol before midday.

Seizka followed. Sometimes as a man. Sometimes as a beast. Never again as anyone's prize.