

## Deleted Scene: Seth learns a few things from the Cavers

Climbing both up and down was something that was best done in half transformation, the mid-stage between feline and man. Seth needed claws and pads with the jagged cliffs, narrow ledges and unstable formations. Rope harnesses worked well too.

The cavers, as they were called were separated into two groups, the scouts and the diggers. Scouts explored paths and tunnels, mapped sound areas from unstable ones and did menial work. If they weren't on rope, then they were most likely climbing through some narrow passageway or delivering supplies. The second group of cavers was the diggers; burly weres with massive builds who wielded hammers, shovels and pick axes with ease.

Len was the chief of the cavers in general. A pale giant of a man with shoulders that resembled a polar bear more than a snow leopard, he had slapped a bundle of rope in Seth's hands the moment he laid eyes on him.

Seth was placed with a climbing buddy, a slim young girl with short spiky hair, whose nickname was Spider. Len introduced her as one of his best scouts and assigned her to train him and basically baby sit him for the day.

It didn't bother Seth, the obvious disdain that Len showed towards him. Seth recalled seeing him in the gambling den the night before and knew that Len preferred to be among grittier men than he. The way that Len looked at him was full of doubt and a measure of smug contempt. If the look didn't verify then he muttered joke about city cats surely solidified it.

Bravado, the need to prove that Len didn't know a damn thing about him, spurred Seth through the first descent with Spider at his side. While he had never used rope, harnesses, cams or any other tool, Seth had never scaled down any serious rock formations. Still with Spider at his side, he held his own on the climb into particularly narrow tunnel.

Their job was simple one. As a team of diggers had already descended three-quarters of a mile into the earth earlier that morning, it was Seth and Spider who had to scale down with supplies. It was a chore for beginners and Spider even joked as such as they vaulted down with heavy canteens, sacks of sandwiches and jerky.

They took their time with Spider rambling about her first time climbing.

Seth didn't even feign attention, trying to find a foothold to help with his descent. Eyeing a ledge, no wider than a few centimeters, Seth placed a padded foot upon the stone and felt it give.

Spider gripped Seth's arm, before he could fall, held him with supernatural ease until he managed to calm down and find a better foot hold. "Easy there, wild cat. You may land on your feet but that won't help much with broken bones and I am not dragging your ass back topside."

He scowled, more in regards to the amount of added weight upon his back than to the act of climbing. "We're just a bunch of pack mules. Can't you send this stuff down my cart or baskets or something? This is insane."

Spider disagreed. "Not nearly as insane as what the diggers do. I couldn't stay in one place, just hacking away at rock all damn day. Besides we don't do this all the time. You're a newbie, so Len isn't going to put you into any tunnels. This is just some easy stuff to train new climbers and pass the time. And we *do* have baskets."

Giving the limber vixen a scowl of a look as she repelled off of the wall, Seth did the same, dropping down several feet. While it was possible to bounce down the walls on the security of the cam connections, exhaustion and stability played a major part in the task. Seth had never climbed down or up so far. Looking down proved futile, as even his night vision provided only a deep gray shadow of his destination. With no company but Spider, he wondered aloud, "So. How did you know you wanted this line of work? Or did Crnswar choose it for you?" Just saying the cat lord's name caused him to slip and bang his knee against the stone.

Spider reached out for him, but pulled her hand back as Seth steadied himself. "Lord Crnswar allows us to choose our own professions, our own caves when we're old enough, even our own mates."

"Are you as generous with him?" It was nothing he meant to say, at least not out loud.

"What?" Spider balked at his reference to a dream she could know nothing about.

Cursing himself, he tried a different route of questioning, one that implied a common curiosity rather than a vested interest. "Where is the Lordess?" That wasn't the right word. "The Lady of the Basti? Where is Crnswar's mate?"

Chuckling erupted into full throated laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"Bast *is* his mate." She said it very matter-of-factly, but the humor behind her words led him to believe that there were details she wasn't giving.

"Yeah, of course. But, does he...take real lovers," Seth queried further.

She shrugged, "I don't think he can. Word around the dens is..." Pausing to consider her words, she turned away, pretended to be noting her downward descent. "Well, some say that he's impotent."

*No way.* Seth had to swallow down his disbelief at the statement, as it seemed as absurd as saying that the cat lord was a eunuch. While he had never felt the true pressure of Crnswar's embrace, and definitely not the burn of his cock deep within him, Seth couldn't really find negation. "Really?"

"Really," Spider continued. "I mean there is no shortage of girls that would throw themselves at him — Hell, *I* would. Males like him too, but while he allows folk to share his cave once in a while — that's about it. A girlfriend of mine, Sabrina, well, she was soooo in love with Lord Crnswar and he allowed her into

his den. She was wined and dined. He has this rule: Whenever anyone stays with him, they are fed the top kibble, given soft furs, treated well. But the next day, when I asked her if there had been any action...Nada. It's weird."

The idea that others had been in his shoes, had been pampered with gourmet meals and had been allowed to share the Lord's cave was a sour one. Perhaps they shared the dreams as well, he thought. "Maybe she just wasn't his type."

Spider stopped along the wall, even as Seth hopped downwards. She looked down at him. "Well, have you gotten lucky?"

He tried to pretend as if he were surprised by the very insinuation. "Who me? No...No way."

"Don't look surprised. Males have shared his cave before so don't look at me like that. I've asked the elders and well they say that the Goddess holds his heart and that she will only give it to who she sees fit, but I don't buy it." Spider pushed off the wall, fell several feet below Seth and came back to the rock. "I think his true love is sleep."

"He does sleep a lot." Of that at least Seth was certain.

Descending down by several hundred more feet in silence, he was able to concentrate on repelling off of the wall, and on finding stable rock. He was even able to see the faint glimmer of light coming from the bottom of the tunnel. As jobs went, it wasn't a bad thing, being a pack animal on a rope and if anything he could at least add another skill to his repertoire. Not that he thought that it was Crnswar's intent was to enhance his thievery qualifications, but while he had been reconsidering theft as a line of work, he hadn't discovered what it was he would do for a living.

"So, you know Max, huh?"

Seth had just landed back on the wall, looking down at Spider, at least ten feet below him, the new topic caught him off guard. It was the one name he hadn't wanted to hear. Once again, he was back in the area of questioning what was known by others. Mathilda hadn't known much, but someone younger, more talkative like Spider could know a lot. Tentatively, he responded, "Yeah. He um...He's an acquaintance."

With eyes reflecting in the near-darkness, Spider showed her disbelief. "He's trouble is what he is."

He wasn't about to refute the statement, continuing downwards. He reached her level and stopped. He waited for her to move, to continue on but she held.

"A few years ago," she spoke. "Max started this big fuss with Lord Crnswar. He wanted to see the Heart – It's a sacred stone that allows the wielder to be able to visit the realm of Bast – So, Lord Crnswar tells him yes, because at that point it used to be on display for anyone to see it and touch it, but Max he tried to steal it. Big mess, bigger battle. Crnswar took the stone to a deep tunnel, and no one saw what happened but well, it's not seen at all anymore."

Seth worked the new information over in his head. Mathilda had certainly not told him that much. It was almost funny, but definitely an explanation for how Maximillian not only knew where the heart was located by why he had sent Seth in the first place. So Max was just as much of a determined fool as Seth was a naïve one. That was less and less of the question. Why Crnswar kept giving the Felia Thom the opportunity for damnation was another thing entirely. He just didn't get it. Hoping to probe Spider, he confessed, "You see, that's what I don't understand. Why is it that Lord Crnswar would even allow someone like Max to even come around?"

She chewed on her bottom lip as if the question baffled even her. "He just explained afterwards that no one was to retaliate. That what had happened between them was just between them. It was wild, because there were those that wanted to skin Max alive." And it looked like she was one of them. "But Lord Crnswar is like that and well, Max was really fucked up after Crnswar finished with him, but somehow they get along. He even gave a speech about accepting and dealing with our problems together." It was obvious that she didn't wholly buy the reason.

Seth definitely didn't understand it, but a picture was forming. Crnswar wanted to avoid negativity. It wasn't that he didn't have the propensity for hard-handed punishment but that he was wary of becoming something darker. If there was anyone who had probably tested Crnswar's reserve, it would have been Max. *Keep your friends close and keep your enemies closer*, he had once heard. "Well, that was really noble of him."

"Noble?" Spider chuckled, "Hah! It wasn't too noble when they brought Maximillian up that night. It was a wonder he even lived – limbs hanging on by just bone, gashes everywhere and covered in blood. Healing ability or no, he should have died from all his wounds! His accomplices – Well, they weren't seen again. No bodies, no bones, nothing!" She winced as if she could imagine what had happened to the missing gang. "Noble...maybe...but after... certainly not during..."

No, Crnswar enraged would surely have been a sight of horrendous proportions. Hell, his brothers looked menacingly lethal, but Seth was fairly certain that they did not act fully unless Crnswar commanded and then whoever was their target would surely meet a sticky end. Crnswar did not seem like the type that would idly stand by and watch violence. He seemed like the type that wanted to get involved, to unleash bloody savagery on the source of his anger. A master of restraint, Crnswar had become adept at appearing in control of his emotions, but it was a precarious balancing act and Seth had only caught glimpses of slips. Dreams.

Reality, he knew might not be so tame, even though tame was only a relative term.