

**THE
SPANISH GATEKEEPER**

BOOK III

Og'yre War

a science fiction fantasy

by

Bernard Dukas



Kaladar Books ♦ San Francisco

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THIS BOOK BORROWS IN SMALL PART ON ACTUAL PERSONAGES AND EVENTS
FROM THE CLOSING YEARS OF THE 19TH CENTURY. IN EVERY OTHER RESPECT
IT IS A WORK OF FICTION AND A PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION.

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Chapter 4

Shipwrecked

Bonifacia found herself in the drink, howling storm clouds blackening the midday sky in all directions and powerful waves crashing over her. She gasped for breath, but only managed to swallow more water. The salt stung her eyes and made her stomach lurch. It took a moment to absorb who or what was preventing her from being pulled down altogether, but there was no doubting the source of the matted fur between her fingers. Having lost all feeling in her right arm, she kicked with her legs and feet to help Panka along. *But to where?* She cried out through the tempest for her crewmates. There was no response, no reply.

For hours, they treaded through the churning waters. Then came the familiar and heartening sound of breakers. The feel of coarse sand beneath her chest had the same effect as a candlesnuffer, putting out her lights.

Bonifacia awoke on a beach in the early morning hours, the storm having fled with the night and the sea lapping quietly at her feet. There was no sign of anyone else up or down the strand, save a few washed up remnants from the *Gaita*. What fate befell Pasuana and the *Consequence*, she could not tell. Stone cold and wet to the bone, she shook involuntarily, her head throbbing so badly she could actually hear the blood coursing through her ears.

Panka lay at her side with a blood encrusted gash across one hip and another across the bridge of her nose. Bonifacia worried at whatever other injuries the cat might have sustained, but was relieved to see the animal's chest rise and fall in a steady reassuring rhythm.

Shelter was Bonifacia's first instinct. In the effort to raise herself up, she quickly realized that her right arm would not cooperate. She could barely move her fingers. Even so, she managed to drag herself to her feet and stumble the distance to a line of trees facing the shore. Tearing a strip of cloth from her blouse and employing sturdy creepers, Bonifacia lashed together some fallen limbs to create a travois. Praying the contraption would hold together, she returned to the water's edge and gently rolled Panka onto the crude sled. She then dragged the cat back to the wood using her shoulder and one good arm. It was an indication of just how exhausted the animal was that Panka went along without complaint.

Bonifacia rested a moment and then went off in search of anything that might ease their situation. Her scouring revealed a freshwater rill from which she greedily drank her fill. Using a sharp rock to cut away a portion of her leggings, she draped the cloth beneath some broad leaves and filled the container with water. Returning to the wood, she nestled the makeshift basin into the ground next to Panka. Despite her strident urgings, the cat steadfastly refused to help itself.

"Come Panka," she pleaded. "You must drink." The distressing memory of Henrik's horse flashed through her mind. The situations were too alike for comfort. She folded her arm around the enormous feline and gently nudged her closer to the dish.

Slowly and with great effort, Panka raised her head. Bonifacia heaved a sigh of relief at the sound of the cat's lapping tongue. Worn out from even this minor effort, Bonifacia curled up next to the cat and drifted off to sleep, her mind running over confused images aboard the *Gaita* before it went down. She awoke some hours later to the echo of youthful voices and laughter.

Tumbling over the low embankment, she waited for their approach. Two Gwellem, unquestionably siblings, walked along the beach returning from an evidently successful day of crabbing. Bonifacia stepped out from the trees, but on catching sight of her they cried out in unison, dropped their traps, and ran for their lives.

"Hoy! Don't run away!" shouted Bonifacia. "I didn't mean to startle you. Come back!"

But there was no stopping them. They were soon out of sight and earshot.

Bonifacia fell to her knees. It had taken all her strength to forestall them. "Don't run away," she muttered feebly, then crawled back to lay beside Panka.

"Over here, Pa," came a young voice. "A Weshnut. I saw her!"

"Both of you, stay behind me," ordered another, distinctly adult voice. "No tellin' what's up."

Bonifacia stirred herself awake.

A man dressed in simple country clothes stood in front of the children she'd encountered on the beach. He brandished a fishing spear in her direction. The older of the two boys spied the cat. "Pa! Watch out! She's got a lion!"

"That's my cat, Panka," replied Bonifacia. "She's badly injured. She'd never hurt you, anyway, not unless you tried to stick her with that thing." Bonifacia indicated the weapon, pointed at her chest. "My ship foundered in the storm. I'm not armed and I'm not here to harm anyone."

"You're a pirate!" retorted the younger boy. "A Weshnut pirate!"

Bonifacia laughed weakly, but it hurt her ribs. "You're not Veldan, are you?" she queried.

"Veldan?" exclaimed the man. "Nooo, we're Hemstot."

Bonifacia sighed. "The storm must have driven us much farther than I thought."

"I'd say," said the man. "You look like you need some tending. We'll take you along. It's not too far. That is, if you promise to behave? On your word now."

"On my word," replied Bonifacia. "But you must help Panka."

He regarded the cat suspiciously. "You sure, that animal won't bite?"

"Absolutely."

"All right," he said finally. "I hope it will tolerate my back."

"I've got a rig," noted Bonifacia, indicating the travois.

"The ground's too rough for that. Won't hold up." He propped his weapon against a tree and knelt down beside

Panka. The children gently lifted the big feline up and over his shoulders, then helped their father to his feet. "Ah. She's a heavy beast. Sim, give the Weshnut woman a hand. Mind she doesn't fall over. And Dwimmer, fetch that spear. There's a good lad."

They trudged along the water for a short distance and then turned inland along a narrow track. The boys, having picked up the traps they dropped earlier, walked ahead chatting excitedly, glancing back every once in a while to gaze in wonderment at Bonifacia and their father with the big cat strung across his shoulders. It wasn't even a quarter-league to their cottage, but the inland shore was indeed very rugged and neither the Gwellem with his burden, nor Bonifacia, were inclined to push the pace.

When they reached the cottage the boys ran together up to the door. "Ma! Ma! Come quick! Da's got a lion and captured a pirate!"

The cottage door opened and a woman in a quilted apron stepped out. She scuffed the younger boy on the back of the head and then looked up. "Horwin?" Her eyes went wide as saucers. "Dwimmer, fix a doss in the shippen for the creature, and be smart about it. And put that spear down. Sim, go help your father."

The older boy, *Sim*, helped lift Panka from off his father's shoulders, as the woman, who was evidently the fellow's wife, looked on in stunned silence. Freed from the weight, Horwin stretched his back and then gestured toward Bonifacia.

"Her ship went down in the storm, she says. I think her arm may be hurt too. She's soaked through and hasn't had a bite to eat, I'll wager. Can you see to her, Maz?"

There was no mistaking the troubled look on her face. "She has no brows, Horwin."

"I'm no danger to you," interjected Bonifacia. "Truly."

The woman's expression did not alter. She hesitated and then motioned for Bonifacia to follow her into the house. Her husband, ready to tag along, was promptly turned aside. "We can take it from here, thank you, Horwin."

Directing Bonifacia toward a large high backed chair, she continued out the back door and into the summer kitchen, returning a short time later. "The soup will be up in just a min-

ute. I've got some dry clothes 'might fit you.'" She left the room once more, heading up a set of creaky stairs and returning with an armful of clothing. "Something here should do."

"This is very kind of you," said Bonifacia, sorting through the pile. Finding a few suitable items, she started to undress, handing her sea soaked clothes to Maz. There was no disguising her shirtsleeve, clotted thick with blood.

"Get those clothes on and then let me have a look at that."

Bonifacia obliged, baring her right arm. The coarse thread Tamæra had used to sew her up had torn away. The wound, which had been healing so well, had reopened, the surrounding flesh swollen and discolored. Maz looked alarmed, got up and walked to the front door. She opened it a head's width and hollered out, "Sim!"

"Yeah, Ma?"

"Run over to old woman Heblin's place. Tell her come quick, bring her patch kit. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Ma."

She closed the door. "It needs sewing up. Heblin will be here soon." Maz pulled a chair up next to her and dabbed at the gash with a clean cotton cloth, then wrapped it with a loose bandage. "I'll go get that broth."

Bonifacia spooned back the soup while they waited for the neighbor to arrive. There was a lively rap on the door and a short, thin, wire-haired woman entered.

"This is Heblin," said Maz. "Heblin, our guest needs some mending."

The old Gwellem trundled over to Bonifacia and settled into the chair vacated by her host. She unwrapped the wound and examined it. Bonifacia flinched slightly at the touch of her ice cold fingers. Heblin raised a curious brow and looked into Bonifacia's eyes, her wrinkled face too close for comfort. "Maz, fix the woman a tankard of your strongest while I wash up and get things ready."

Bonifacia sniffed at the cider and decided it was worth the risk. She downed it in a few gulps. Heblin passed her a length of kindling to bite on and set to work with practiced hands. The tears rolled down Bonifacia's cheeks as Heblin's needle passed in and out of her arm, but she kept quiet and did not faint.

"All finished," declared Heblin. "I'll fix a proper poultice to go over that. Maz, I believe I'll have a nip of that cider as well, if you don't mind." She fetched her a tumbler and Heblin studied the contents before speaking. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, that wound was caused by a blade."

"An Og'yre's halberd," replied Bonifacia.

They both turned to look at her. "Og'yre?" exclaimed Maz, clearly shocked.

"May I have a little more cider please?" asked Bonifacia. Maz obliged, topping up her cup.

There was another short knock on the door and Horwin peaked inside before entering. "Oh, hullo Heblin. Got your sewing kit with you, eh? I think that cat could use a stitch or two." He helped himself to a tot of cider. "What's that I heard comin' in? Somethin' about Og'yre?"

"She says she was stabbed in the arm by an Og'yre," said Maz, gesturing toward Bonifacia.

"The Eternal have mercy! Do such creatures really exist?" wondered Horwin aloud. "I thought they was children's stories."

It was Heblin that answered. "My Nelrin served in the last Og'yre war. They're real enough."

"I'd forgotten he wasn't from Hemsto," remarked Maz. "Orn was it?"

"No, Kaladar."

"Ah."

"What happened to your brows?" asked Heblin, over her cup.

The cider hit Bonifacia full force. "I never had any," she replied, her head spinning.

"Never had any?!" exclaimed Horwin.

"I think I'd better lie down," suggested Bonifacia, trying not to pass out mid-sentence.

"She needs some proper rest," said Maz. "Horwin, fix a cot by the fire."

The rest was a blur. Bonifacia awoke the next morning on a bed set for her in the living room. The smell of smoked fish and loblolly filled the room. She could hear soft voices coming from the open door to the summer kitchen.

She lifted herself up and found that Panka was lying on the floor next to her. The cat stirred at her feet, rubbing the top of

its head against Bonifacia's leg. Someone, Heblin presumably, had sewn up the gash on Panka's hip and cleaned the wound across her nose. "Good girl," said Bonifacia, scratching Panka behind the ears.

She got to her feet and realized for the first time that her own arm had been poulticed and bandaged. She went out to the kitchen with Panka limping at her heels.

"Ah. You're about," said Maz. "Shall I fix you something? Tea maybe?" She seemed a good deal more relaxed than the day before, but guardedly so.

The siblings, Dwimmer and Sim, sat at the table, their mouths agape, breakfast scones raised half-way to their lips.

"That would be very nice. Thank you," replied Bonifacia, sitting herself across the table from the boys. Panka settled at her feet. "I'm sorry about Panka. I hope she was no trouble?"

"Your lion was out the shed like a shot this morning, the moment I opened the door. Scared the livin' daylights out of me." Maz wrinkled her brow. "Seems tame enough though. Obviously adores you."

"I've never seen her harm a soul," remarked Bonifacia, doing her best to reassure the woman.

Maz set about fixing Bonifacia a plate and a pot of tea. "What's your name?" she asked as she worked.

"Bonifacia. Most call me Bonnie."

"That's a pretty name. Are you feeling any better Bonnie?"

"Yes. A good deal better." Maz set the food down before her. "I really can't thank you enough. *All of you*. You've been so very kind."

"You'd have done the same, I'm sure," replied Maz.

Old memories of Henrik and Gemesh enslaved for trespassing on Weshnut soil came flooding back. "Yes," said Bonifacia. "Certainly." She picked slowly at her food, still feeling a little queasy after her ordeal.

Horwin arrived and joined them at the breakfast table, greeting Dwimmer and Sim with a tender tug of their brows. "Good morning," he said, cheerfully. "I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Bonnie," she replied.

"Good morning, Bonnie." His expression turned suddenly very business-like. "Gathered a number of Bergin folk to

search the coast in both directions after you went ta sleep. Recovered seven corpses. All from your wreck, I presume. Thought you should know.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ll keep searchin’ as time permits. Ya never know. In the meantime, you should speak up if anything special needs doin’ with those remains. We’ve no experience wi’ Weshnut ways.”

Bonifacia nodded in appreciation.

“I see your kitten is makin’ a fine recovery,” he remarked.

“Yes, she is.”

“Why don’t you have brows?” interrupted the younger boy, no longer able to contain himself.

“Dwimmer, mind your manners,” admonished Maz.

“That’s all right,” said Bonifacia. “I get that all the time. I don’t have brows because I’m not like you. I’m an off-worlder.”

The boys looked at her wide-eyed. Even Horwin and Maz froze in the middle of what they were doing to stare dumb-founded at her.

“If you look up into the night sky past Creto and Porfan,” continued Bonifacia, “at one of those points of light. That’s where I come from.”

Maz and Horwin glanced furtively at one another.

“The Empress Xhôn commanded a wizard to fetch me and my cousin Peter from our world through an ancient portal. Well, something like that. It was all a mistake. They mistook Peter for someone else.”

“The empress?!” cried the boys.

“That’s enough stories for one morning,” interrupted Maz. “Finish your breakfast and run along. There’s chores need tending.”

“Awe, Ma!”

“Do as your mother says,” said Bonifacia, “and maybe she’ll allow me some time this evening to tell you the whole story.”

There was no denying Bonifacia stood at a crossroads now. Her powerful link to the Weshnut was broken by circumstance. She could find her way back and pick up where she left off, *or* she could plot a new course for herself. The possibility rattled around in her head. Somehow the opportunity to tell her story to these good-natured strangers felt right—an unforeseen chance to think things through.

The boys looked hopefully at their mother. "Can she, Ma?"

Maz let out a long breath. "We'll see. Now run along."

Dwimmer and Sim departed the summer kitchen with a spring in their step, arguing over who would get to feed Panka. Maz turned to face Bonifacia, her face flush.

"I wasn't making any of that up," said Bonifacia, preempting the woman. "I'd really like to tell you my story. I think I owe you that much."

Maz rolled her eyes. Horwin, who'd been sitting silently through this exchange, spoke up. "Personally, I'd like to hear what she has to say, Maz." He raised both hands in the air—a gesture of exasperation. "All we ever get is bits and pieces, an' most of that handed down willy-nilly, you might say. The world is a strange place outside this part of Hemsto. I hear tell of wars and Og'yre. No one here 'bouts, 'cept maybe old woman Heblin, would believe Og'yre really exist. Bonnie has seen somethin' of the world, I'll wager. Maybe she can put us to rights."

Maz gazed doubtfully at Bonifacia. "She's Weshnut, Horwin. They're cruel folk as a rule, present company excepted, I'm sure. I don't want her fillin' our young'ins heads with a lot of nonsense about *The Mother*. It's blasphemous. Anyhow, why should you care about other's troubles? The less we know about such things, the better off we are."

"You needn't worry about my singing the praises of Nabia," reassured Bonifacia.

Horwin shook his head from side to side. "I think you're wrong, Maz. If war is comin', I want to know the whys and wherefores."

Maz crooked her mouth to one side. "War? Very well, Horwin. Have it your way. But remember what I said about The Mother. I'll stand for none of it." She looked straight at Bonifacia, scanning her face for confirmation.

Horwin smiled. He plainly loved Maz and did not enjoy arguing with her.

The isolated hamlet where the family lived was nothing more than a few very humble cottages clustered a million leagues from the nearest town, or so it seemed to Bonifacia. She appeared to be the only one to have survived the sinking of her ship. She had no transportation, no money, no way to commu-

nicate her situation to Weshnut authorities, let alone the correct faction. Moreover, her arm was in a very bad state. If infection set in, she knew she would very likely lose it, or her life. With nothing else to do, she decided to sit back, get to know these people and help out where she could while she waited to mend. It was a welcome opening, in any case, to ponder her predicament.

Bonifacia found herself a comfortable tree to sit under, while absentmindedly grooming Panka. That afternoon Heblin came by to check on her poultice. With nothing else to offer in the way of compensation, Bonifacia abruptly kissed the old granny on the cheek.

“Oye!” cried the woman in surprise, like a cat that’d just had its tail stepped on. She raised her walking stick to fend off any further attacks. Realizing how ridiculous her reaction must have seemed, the old woman began to laugh and slowly lowered her preposterous weapon. Her cackle filled the air and Bonifacia laughed right along with her.

After the evening prayer circle, Dwimmer and Sim grabbed Bonifacia impatiently by the wrist, directing her into the tall chair near the fire, Panka stretched tranquilly at her side.

She had barely settled into her seat when the boys began to pelt her with questions. “You must start at the beginning,” insisted Sim. “Is it true? You came through one of the wizard’s doorways? How was that?”

“Did you meet her? Empress Xhôn?” interjected Dwimmer. “They say she had the face of a wolf!”

“Give the woman a chance to speak,” admonished Horwin.

“You’ve never seen an Ulfair?” prompted Bonifacia.

“Never!” cried Dwimmer and Sim in unison.

So Bonifacia began at the beginning, telling them all about how her cousin Peter would come to visit her every summer and how a butterfly had led them to the portal in the meadow. How an akritar named Henrik had scooped her off her horse and rode away with her tucked under his arm. How a little man in a red hat offered her a hole in the ground to escape a fearsome Og’yre.

Horwin, Dwimmer, Sim and even Maz listened in fascination as she wove her tale, stirring up many long forgotten memories.

She only got as far as the day she was captured by the Og'yre, when Maz exclaimed, "My goodness, how late it is! We've clearly lost our heads. Now off to bed young Gwellem. Bonnie needs her rest and so do you!"

The following day Horwin caught up with her as she sat under her usual tree reading a borrowed book. "We found another body this morning, rest her soul...and something else," said Horwin, looking very grave. "Off Bergin Spit. Mixed up with a lot of flotsam."

Bonifacia sat up. "What did you find?" she asked.

"Sim is carrying it up. A handsome little sea chest."

A short while later, Sim all in a sweat, plopped the chest down on the grass in front of Bonifacia. It was her chest all right, a present from the crew of the *Bluefin*. Slightly battered and a little worse for wear, but still beautiful.

"That's my box, off the *Gaita*," she admitted. "Have you opened it?" she asked tentatively.

"Aye," said Horwin.

"Then you know what's inside?" she asked, knowing full well the answer.

"Aye."

"My arm is no good," said Bonifacia. "Can you open it for me?"

Horwin nodded to Sim, and the boy opened the well-sealed trunk. It contained her dress uniform, a ship's journal, spyglass and one or two other nautical instruments obtained over the years. But most importantly, it held Bartle's silver orb. She smiled, feeling both joy and sadness at the sight of it. "May I have that?" she asked, pointing toward the unusual object. Sim passed it to her, eyes filled with curiosity.

She held the orb tightly in her one good hand. "Thank you," said Bonifacia. She stared at Horwin and Sim with a lump in her throat. "You salvaged the box from the sea. By rights it's all yours now."

Their faces grew unexpectedly long, even a little frightened.

"You've overlooked something," said Horwin, grim faced.

"Didn't you hear me? I said it's *all* yours," repeated Bonifacia.

"But, Bonnie," stammered Horwin. "You can't mean that? There's a kingdom's worth of coin in there!"

He was right. The box contained a pouch brimming with the proceeds from years of successful pirating, as well as monies advanced from the samkan's treasury to fund her mission to Veldan.

"You could have taken the whole box without ever telling me you'd found it."

"But it's not ours to take," replied Horwin. "It doesn't belong to us."

"I should like to keep the chest, if you don't mind," responded Bonifacia, "and a few other personal items."

"You must have got knocked on the head when you fell overboard!" exclaimed Horwin.

"If that's so, you'd better hide that gold before I come to my senses," she replied. "Take it, and put it someplace safe."

"Pa?" pleaded Sim, torn and confused.

"Do as she says, *but* put half aside for Bonnie, whether she wants it or not. When she's fully mended and ready to move on, she may find a need for it."

Sim took the pouch and ran off. Nothing more was said of it.

As promised, each evening Bonifacia told the boys a little more about her adventures, and each day her audience grew as word spread. By the end of the week, she found herself sitting under the tree with Panka surrounded by three dozen members of the tiny hamlet. Twice she had to run through her tale from the beginning to satisfy those who'd missed hearing it the first or second time around. And it wasn't just the children come to listen, adults too.

Now and again they would interrupt her tale to seek clarification on one point or another, or to voice feelings of shock or indignation. "Scurrilous!" they shouted when she told them how Tomner and Lianne planned to betray Henrik and herself to the Duke of Menom. "Outrageous!" they cried when they heard how Cashmena fired on the victorious thralls. If any of her audience doubted her story about coming through the portal, no one chose to express it.

Although Bonifacia possessed only second-hand knowledge of some of the events she described, the villagers listened with rapt attention to her tale of the fall of Piernot, the padishah's great deception, the samkan's quarrel with the Fwytta, and how

Hemsto had seized Meflis, the wily Duke of Camstol in due course tricking their grand principal out of Bakus Mara.

They grew apprehensive upon hearing her account of the growing threat posed by the Og'yre. *And rightfully so*, thought Bonifacia. She told them how the Fwytta had deliberately roused the Og'yre queen from her long slumber. How Queen Zyd then raised an army behind the backs of her Fwytta allies, eventually turning on them and overrunning the Weshnut mainland. Emboldened by their great victory, the Og'yre poured down from their secret places in the Untold Mountains, sweeping across the realm of the bootless emperor, Borganin I, and laying waste to Kaladar.

"The old padishah has sent reinforcements to Taixûs, preparing for the day that he must also confront the Og'yre...but there are dark rumors."

"What sort of rumors?" they demanded to know.

"Rumors that the Madærgal have renewed their ancient alliance with the Og'yre and that they now march together on the field of battle."

"Madærgal!" they cried. "The lizard people of the forest!"

"Did you hear that? The Madærgal are coming! And Og'yre too!"

This last bit of information elicited terrified shrieks and howls of despair. Bonifacia quickly realized she'd stepped too far. She'd burdened these poor wretches with her own uncertainties, and to what end? Her own amusement? She tried at once to allay their fears. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. It's only rumors. I have no proof the Madærgal have done any such thing, and we all know how powerful the Padishah of Stônar is. I'm sure he will deal with Queen Zyd, and the Madærgal, before they get very much farther."

Bonifacia went to sleep that night angry at herself for having so disturbed these kind and generous people. She'd succeeded in entertaining them with exciting tales of her adventures and stories of faraway places, but had gone and ruined it all by filling their minds with doubts and uncertainties to match her own. She could have kicked herself for her thoughtlessness.

But she suffered no recrimination. The little community continued to tolerate this strange outlander from beyond the seas and even treat her like an honored guest. Bonifacia could

hardly fathom the reason why. Her arm was mending nicely thanks to Heblin's skilled ministrations. After several weeks, she'd gained enough control of her right hand to help mend nets and scrub pots each morning next to Maz. Sim was unmistakably smitten with her. To the rest of the family she'd become a kind of interesting fixture that lent some color to their otherwise uncomplicated lives, not quite a sister or a daughter.

Bonifacia was sitting quietly under the tree one afternoon when two armed men on horseback rode down the narrow lane to the cottage, a riderless horse in tow. She understood without asking what they'd come for. Without being prompted, she stood up and walked over to meet them at the cottage door, Panka as always at her side.

The pair watched her approach with barely concealed surprise.

"Keep a grip on that animal," commanded the evidently senior Gwellem. He glanced anxiously at Panka. "Are you the one they call Bonnie?"

"Yes," she replied, "and who might you be?"

"Yors, of the Hemstot Akrit, Wheldar District Garrison. I have orders to take you into custody."

Maz and Dwimmer came out of the cottage. "What's this all about?" demanded Maz, pulling off her apron.

"We've come to take this person into custody," repeated Yors.

"You can't!" shouted Dwimmer.

Maz laid a hand on the boy's shoulder to quiet him. "What has she done?" asked Maz.

"She entered Hemsto without leave. There is a protective edit against Weshnut."

"She is here through no fault of her own," retorted Maz. "She was marooned and has been mending in our care. Bonnie is no danger to anyone in Wheldar or Hemsto."

"That may be, but orders are orders. She is to be transported to Tagra for interrogation." He shrugged, "Look, we've had a long ride to get here. Do you suppose you could spare some fresh bread and a bowl of hot broth?"

Maz looked abashed. "Of course," she said. "Where are my manners? Dwimmer, see to the akritars' horses. Come inside. I'll fix you something to eat."

Bonifacia followed the frontier guards inside the cottage. "How did you know I was here?" she asked as they set themselves on either side of the table.

"Word travels," explained Yors. "One of your Bergin hamlet folk told a passing peddler, who told an innkeeper, who told my comrade Beegor here." He pointed to the akritar sitting across from him. "We didn't know what, if anything, to do about it, so we sent a dispatch to headquarters. A letter came back with orders for us to investigate and if a Weshnut was found, to send her on to Tagra for questioning."

Maz laid bowls of soup, cheese and bread in front of the akritars. They thanked her and tucked in greedily. A few moments later, Horwin arrived, alerted by Dwimmer. There was a ruckus outside the door behind him.

"What's that?" asked Yors. He stood up and strode to the cottage door. A sizable crowd had quickly gathered outside.

"The better part of the village," explained Horwin. "They're here to let you know they're not pleased. Not pleased at all."

Yors knitted his brow, then stepped past Horwin and out the front door. He clucked his tongue uneasily at the sight of the gathering crowd and spoke. "Now look," he said, "no one is going to harm the Weshnut woman. We're taking her to Tagra, is all, for questioning. They just want to know why she's here."

There were skeptical shouts from the little mob. "I promise," said Yors. "Nothing will happen to her if she hasn't broken any laws."

"We know you Yors," came a voice out of the crowd. "Anything happens to Bonnie and we'll have your head!"

He wiped his mouth. "That's fine. You needn't worry. Now all of you, go home. Go back to your business."

He stepped back into the cottage and glared at Bonifacia. "Get your things together," he said, "and pack some food for yourself."

"I'll take care of her needs," volunteered Maz, shuffling off to the summer kitchen.

A short time later, Bonifacia watched as Horwin and Sim readied the spare horse, strapping her sea chest up behind the saddle. "Thank you," said Bonifacia, yet again. "You'd best keep your distance from Panka for a while. A little corn meal and boiled fish will settle her down, I hope."

There simply was no arguing with the akritar about Panka. They were not, under any circumstances, going to allow the big cat to accompany them to Tagra. The feline clearly sensed something was up and not to her liking. That became abundantly clear when she took an uncharacteristic swipe at Sim. Having no choice, Sim and Bonifacia wrestled the animal down and tied her up in the shippen.

Bonifacia nearly hugged the life from Panka. The cat whined, whimpered and roared all at once as she stepped away.

“Don’t you worry. I’ll take good care of her,” reassured Dwimmer.

“I know you will,” smiled Bonifacia encouragingly.

“Let’s go,” prodded Yors.

A small group of well-wishers were there to see Bonifacia off. With a nod of appreciation to Horwin and Maz, a hug for Dwimmer and Sim, she turned her horse and rode off beside Yors and Beegor.