

Finnigan the Lionhearted

Mary T. Wagner



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Chapter Eight



THE LIONS' DEN

It wasn't hard to stay out of sight when we made our way inside. You couldn't possibly look at anything but the big cats lounging, napping, and in general just looking enormous and fearsome.

The big cats had all eyes on Finnigan, who had settled in to a cozy seat just outside a large cage containing a very large lion.

There was a shiny gold plate on the front of the cage that labeled this guy as “Nero.” Something about where the cage was positioned made it seem like he was “top cat.” Finnigan and Nero were deep in conversation already.

“Will you look at that,” said Leroy, his eyes big as buttons. “That is a **lot** of lions.”

Yes, it certainly was. I counted noses, and came up with three tigers, two jaguars, and a total of five lions. They all had paws like sledgehammers, and there were many white fangs on display as they gnawed on large bones and other enormous cat toys.

Finnigan looked absolutely star-struck. And why wouldn't he be? The big cats were legends to us all.

Leroy gave my ribs a dig and pointed to a spot just beyond Finnigan. Uh-oh.

Finnigan was not the only house cat in the tent. If you could call Finnigan a house cat at all. Well now we finally knew where Hector was. He had taken a seat just behind Finnigan, lurking off to the side but still in the circle of conversation. Trouble certainly came in twos.

On the other side of the bars, holding court, was an enormous lion that looked every inch as big and ferocious as the largest lions on the posters in the barn.

His nose was as wide as Finnigan's head. His mane looked like the pelt of a grizzly bear. His paws were the size of hams.

He scratched at his left ear with a hind foot attached to a leg that was as big and sturdy as a log. He winced, a face that scrunched his eyes and exposed his side, chewing teeth. Then he put the foot back down and resumed his Sphinx-like position of epic importance.

Nero glanced at us and wordlessly acknowledged us with an eyebrow shrug.

“And where are you both from?” Nero asked, speaking to Finnigan and Hector in a voice like a gravel truck at the bottom of a cave.

Finnigan sat up a little straighter. “I live in the Farnsworth Circus Museum here in town,” he said proudly.

“So you are a circus cat?” Nero asked with an amused twinkle in his eyes. Finnigan nodded enthusiastically.

“And what of you, my dour-faced

friend?” Nero turned his attention to Hector. “Are you also in the circus?”

“Hardly,” Hector sneered and spat. “I have a real **home**.”

“So you are a soft and pampered house cat, then,” Nero said with a slight sneer. “In such luxurious circumstances, it must be so...”

Hector narrowed his eyes and twitched his tail, expecting a compliment. “...**boring**,” Nero finished. Hector’s eyes widened at this put-down, but he wisely bit back a snappy comeback. I think he calculated roughly how far and how fast Nero could reach one of those giant paws through the metal bars.

“Kerchew!!” Leroy suddenly sneezed, and all eyes—Finnigan’s, Hector’s, Nero’s and those of a half dozen other big cats—were suddenly on us. We felt like bugs

under a magnifying glass.

Leroy waved nervously and cleared his throat. I didn't move a muscle. Or even a hair.

"Friends of yours?" Nero asked, shifting his gaze from Finnigan and Hector to Leroy and me, back and forth, back and forth.

"Oh yes," said Finnigan. "Family, in fact."

Leroy and I nodded wordlessly.

"They should be a meal," Hector said with a sneer.

"A meal, you say!" Nero laughed, a big, booming sound, then scratched his ear again and winced. "How can such a difference of opinion be between two creatures who are so alike?"

"We're not alike at all," Hector hissed. "This...**freak**...has turned his back on

what it means to be a cat.”

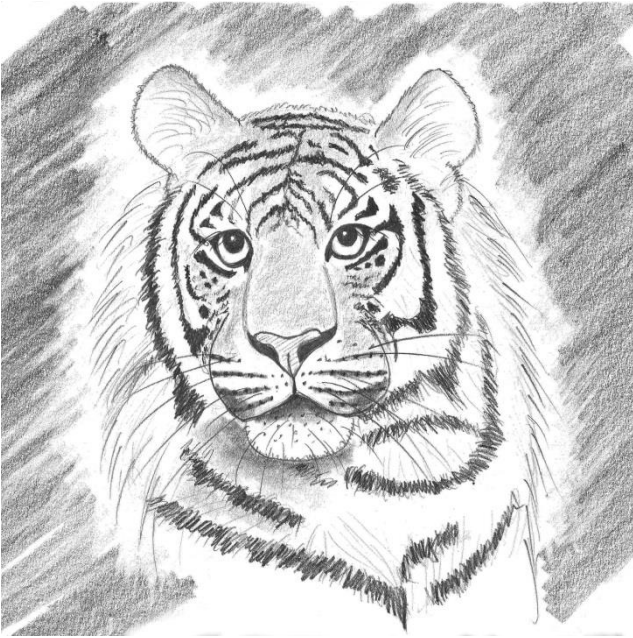
“Like us, do you think?” A pile of shadows came to life in the cage next to Nero’s. He spoke with a Russian accent.

Orange and black stripes rearranged themselves into a huge tiger who lurched closer to the conversation. He smoothed his long, white whiskers with a gigantic pink tongue. I wondered whether it was a habit or meant that he was hungry.

“Boris, my friend and brother,” Nero said, “I was wondering when you would join our philosophical conversation.”

Nero addressed Finnigan and Hector. “Boris is a Siberian Tiger,” he said. “His ancestors were feared throughout empires, and hunted by the Russian czars for sport. His ego can be a little inflated because of his pedigree, but you will not find a smarter or more learned

tiger in all of the circus kingdom.”



“That is so very true,” Boris nodded in agreement.

“And we were discussing the notion of being brothers ‘under the skin,’” Nero said. Both big cats fixed their gaze on Hector. “And how does this...brother...of yours stray from the path of the cat?”

“He doesn’t eat mice,” Hector spat. “He *lives* with them. He’s *friends* with them,” he added as though it was the worst insult he could think of.

Finnigan’s eyes narrowed and the tip of his tail started to jerk, a sure sign that this was getting under his skin.

Nero turned to him. “And what say you, my friend?” Then another scratch, another uncomfortable wince, another shake of that bear-like mane.

Leroy and I both edged closer to Finnigan, keeping him between us and Hector. The movement caught Nero’s eye.

Before Finnigan could speak, Leroy piped up, clearly caught up in the moment.

“Finnigan is in our family,” he said proudly. “He saved my life once...heck, more than once...and so we’re as close a

family as you'll ever find," he said. One thing you can say about Leroy, he wears his heart on his sleeve. If he wore sleeves.

"Did this rescue possibly involve our friend over there with the face pinched in unpleasantness?" Nero nodded at Hector.

"He should have been eaten long ago," Hector hissed angrily.

"I see," said Nero.

Finnigan smiled. "You step up for family," he said. "It's only natural!" I got a lump in my throat. Boy, we'd taught the kid well! Leroy looked from Finnigan and back to Nero.

"He is *really* brave, your honor," he said, and then proceeded to tell Nero the entire adventure. He started with how he'd been trying to balance on a cable between the house and the barn while carrying too many walnuts, and ended

with Finnigan flying through the air to snatch him from the jaws of doom while Hector and Godfrey waited hungrily below.

Hector looked as though his head was going to explode.

Nero scratched his ear again, and Boris edged closer to the front of his cage.

“So you think we are defined by what we eat,” Boris said. “That you are not a cat if you do not eat mice?”

Boris stared at Hector, but with all those stripes on his face, it was hard to read his expression.

Hector nodded. “Yes.” I thought I saw a corner of drool form on his skinny lips.

“And what about us?” Boris said with an undercurrent of challenge. He drew himself up to his full height, stripes echoing bamboo in a forest of lights and

shadows, warmth deceptively radiating off that soft fur.

Hector calculated the distance between Boris and himself, and inched backwards a little before answering.

“You should be the one to talk,” he sneered. “Look at what has become of you.”

Both Boris’ and Nero’s formidable eyebrows shot up at that.

“You look down on me for a life of comfort, but do you kill what you eat?” Hector continued. “Just look at where you live...in a box!”

“Watch yourself, my friend,” Boris said, “or I will use your skinny legs as toothpicks.” Hector backed up another step and reflexively looked over his shoulder. “We are not doing anything we do not want to do,” Boris added.

Hector rolled his eyes, but Boris pressed his point. “We play and work together, as a family. Our trainer—Miss Gloria—knows that any of us could eat her if we wished. But we are a team, and kindness goes a long way toward making that happen.”

“Kindness,” Hector spat the word out. “When are cats supposed to be kind? Your ‘kind’ is famous for being bloodthirsty and cruel.”

“Yes, it is true, we have earned our lofty reputations,” Boris said. “My great grandfather ate twenty peasants one summer just for sport. He was feared up and down the range of the Ural Mountains until the Cossacks finally caught him. His hide was on display for decades in the Winter Palace in Russia.”

“Oh don’t go claiming all the glory,”

Nero said. “If we’re going to keep score, my grandmother ate an entire village in the Nile delta. **And**, to her credit, she was never caught. But times have changed, my elegantly striped friend.”

Boris shook his head, a big cat’s version of a shrug. The stripes were like an optical illusion, and he seemed to disappear for just a second. I felt a little dizzy.

“Did you see that?” I reached over to nudge Leroy in the ribs, but my elbow met thin air.



Mary T. Wagner is an award-winning author, grandmother, and “cat mom” living in Wisconsin.

The idea for the Finnigan the Circus Cat stories was inspired by the combination of a real “rescue” kitten named Finnigan, and Mary’s daughter who is a circus aerialist! Like his fictional namesake, the real Finnigan grew up to have long legs and a very long tail, and loved to pounce.

“Going to the circus has always been such a family treat!” Mary said. Her very favorite circus acts are the big cats and the liberty horses. While she has not yet ridden an elephant, she actually **has** kissed a camel!