



## TALES OF THE PRIDE: AWAKENING

...Jâden purred deep in his throat and rubbed the side of his face against the edge of the door. Ahhh. That felt good, but it wasn't enough. The scent of the female beckoned to him and he batted the door wider with his head and jumped from the cage. She stumbled backward and landed on the bed.

"Remember, no matter what your nose tells you, I'm not food. Got that?"

Her words made him want to smile.

He attempted to shift into his upright form. After a low buzzing in his ears, nothing happened. The effort only drained him. Jâden realized his body wasn't yet capable of transforming after the extended hibernation. No matter. He could wait. Now that he was safely in her possession, there was no reason to hurry, other than his strong instinct to mate with her.

Instinct he could control; he wasn't an animal.

Keeping his gaze focused on hers, he padded forward, stopping only when he reached her knees. He dipped his head and raised the edge of her gown, sniffing the exposed skin of her ankle. She shifted restlessly. "Don't bite my leg, all right? Nice kitty." She sounded all breathy. "Maybe I shouldn't have let you out yet." Her voice cracked on the last word. "Oh, Creator, you're a carnivore, aren't you?"

He heard the fear, but focused on the scent. This close to her, it was stronger. More pungent. Luxuriant. He nestled against her entire leg, lifting the gown with his head until he reached the bare skin of her knee.

"You *are* going to eat me, aren't you?"

She had no idea...

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BY

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TALES OF THE PRIDE: AWAKENING  
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*The entire Tales of the Pride series is  
dedicated to my fabulous critique partner (and best friend in crime)  
Alyssa Brooks, who kept asking me when I was going to  
write about a sexy, shapeshifting cat.  
And a huge thank you to my seventy-seven-year-young  
proofreader who told me she practically purred while reading  
this one and asked for more.*

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*Oridan System*

*Click. Click. Clickclickclick.*

The annoying pinchers of the nearby alien were too close to Lyra's head for comfort. Oh, Creator, she'd seen a lot of ugly species during her travels, but this one took the prize. She pushed her way through the bustling crowd until she found an empty place to stand, and focused on the next item being introduced on the auction block.

An auction handler herded four Mandurians through the door. Heavy chains clamped around their ankles slowed their progress, and Lyra felt her own ankles prickle in sympathy.

"Ladies, Gentlemen, and Holosigs," the auctioneer addressed the people in the audience, as well as those present via their holographic signatures displayed on the large screens surrounding the stage. "As today's brochure details, this next object is a real treat. Four *healthy*, very *sexual*, specimens in their prime." He gestured to the glistening

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nude azure bodies as they mounted the stage. “I ask you, have you *ever* seen a more beautiful set of Mandurians? Thanks to their current owner’s demise, this matched set, consisting of two females and two males, is *now* available to the highest bidder. Just *look* at— What? Excuse me.”

Lyra swayed on her feet and forced her eyes to stay open as the auctioneer interrupted his description of the pleasure slaves to confer with the employee who’d tapped him on the shoulder.

She’d been up three days straight, outrunning raiders on her last transport haul. Her little flyer was fast, but its defense system sucked. She had pulled into the guarded outpost, expecting to grab some sleep before her next scheduled run, and had heard about the auction.

She wished they’d get on with selling the Mandurians. According to the auction house brochure, the antique weapons component she’d been searching the galaxy for went on the block soon. If she hadn’t already been half dead on her feet, she might have been tempted to bid on the quartet herself. The stories she’d heard about the slave race were enough to deflower a celibate, but although having her own personal sex slaves might be fun for a while, Lyra preferred her sex on equal footing *and* with less players.

Her physical needs could wait, she reminded herself. Her weapons drive could not. Lyra was slowly upgrading every part of the vintage FlyerCraft she owned. It was her favorite thing, next to the imported Godiva Chocolates she’d discovered on her last run to Io, off Jupiter. Thinking of chocolate only made her mouth water...maybe she’d see what the outpost stocked *after* she won what she came for.

*Click! Clickclickclick.*

Obviously, she wasn’t the only one impatient for the auction to continue.

Forty-seven annoying clicks and eight drool-worthy thoughts of chocolate later, the auctioneer returned to the block, rubbing his hands

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together. “Oh, do I have *news* for you,” he said, almost cackling. “I have *just* been informed that a *pānthliōn* will be the last item auctioned today.”

Lyra’s exhaustion and chocolate-fixation evaporated faster than the particle blasts she’d dodged on the way in. A *pānthliōn*? Impossible.

Around her, the noise of the crowd swelled. She adjusted the knob on her Inter-Galactic Translator (IGT), trying to tune out the background noise, and listened intently. The man spoke using the Universal Trade Language, Engloni, a centuries-old mixture of English and Leroni. Most species understood UTL even without the aid of a translator, but the diverse tongues filling the pit made it impossible for her to hear without it.

Beaming, the auctioneer continued, “Yes, that’s *right*. A panth-*lee-on*,” the man enunciated the species of felid clearly, leaving no room for doubt. “Can you *believe* our amazing fortune, offering *this* in today’s auction? The animal is on its way from biolab this *very* moment, where the identity of the rare breed has *just* been confirmed. Settle down please,” he said, as the din from the crowd increased. “The *pānthliōn* will be here shortly. But now, we still have four *trained* sex slaves to sell. The bidding starts at...”

Ever since she’d arrived that afternoon on the Stexilian Outpost, thoughts of upgrading her weapons system had been paramount. But at this latest news, the idea of enhancing her current defenses flew out the air hatch. Who wanted to bid on antiquated flyer components when there was a *pānthliōn* cat about to be auctioned?

Prized for their pelts and reputed magical qualities, the great felids had disappeared over the past millennium, causing speculation that perhaps they never truly existed but were only products of galactic folklore. For as long as she could remember, Lyra had been fascinated with the fabled cats. She’d seen some of the other felid species in zoos and holoprograms, but never had she imagined seeing the famed



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pänthliön in person. Considered by many to be nothing more than myth, the mysterious breed had intrigued her more than any other feline. She especially wondered if the tales of their amazing cellular agility were true. Could they really take on more than one form?

The auctioneer continued the sale of the pleasure slaves amidst the crowd's excited rumblings, then he moved on to the other items. Maybe it was the anticipation, but it seemed he'd slowed down on purpose to build the excitement over the pänthliön. How long must it take to sell a 22nd century replicator, three Lycozian snarps, and a host of other junk from across the known galaxies?

The moment the pänthliön was wheeled out, Lyra knew the wait had been worth it. Angling for a better look at the exceptional cat, she fought her way through the crowd. No six-winged Vantarin was going to get in her way! She might be shorter than the average Ampurian female, but what she lacked in height, Lyra more than made up for in determination, and this was one view she was determined not to miss.

\* \* \*

Awareness returned slowly, creeping into Jâden's consciousness. His prone body was being steered along on some type of cart. He kept his eyes closed and sniffed lightly. No sense in letting them know he was awake. Remaining still, he sniffed again. A myriad of strong aromas assailed his nostrils. Almost all were unfamiliar.

So, he realized as his mind continued to sharpen after his long slumber, the pod transports *had* worked. Jâden, and all of his kind, had been transferred off Prîdöra before their dying sun had heated and expanded, rendering their planet uninhabitable. Never before had so many of the pods been activated in quick succession, and Jâden was relieved to have arrived intact. But *where* had he arrived, and how had his litter mates fared? More importantly, how had *he* fared?

As the contraption that held him rolled closer to its destination, harsh rumbles and high-pitched clicks grew in intensity, but he tuned

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them out, choosing to rely on his primary sense. Cautiously, Jâden sniffed again, attempting to catalog the new odors surrounding him, hopeful they might provide a clue about his location.

The very air he breathed was oppressive with greed and excitement. Lust underlaid both. Things he sensed, more than smelled, but the knowledge permeated his brain, nevertheless. Another sniff, and he noticed something else.

*A subtle hint of heaven.* His whiskers twitched and the fur along his back stood out. He inhaled deeply, seeking to identify the soft scent as arousal hit him hard and fast. Heat danced along his spine and he yearned to rise and stretch, but he resisted the impulse. Never give away an advantage. Feigning sleep was the only one he had at the moment.

When the cart came to a stop, he breathed again, drawing the unique fragrance past his muzzle and into his first lung, where he worked to process the scent and register the individual components he found so intriguing, before storing a micro-fragment of each particle in his second lung for future reference.

*Hmmm. Nectar of some sort, and...fruit. Citrus,* he thought, comforted by the recognition, yet still baffled. A hint of spice...a drop of musk. What could exude such a lush, rich perfume? And where could he get some, whatever it was?

A whiff. A pause, and then another, deeper whiff brought the aroma so far into his being that his cock stirred from the force of it. The scent triggered an overwhelmingly strong response in his recently slumbering body, and knowledge slammed into him as he finally identified the unmistakable scent of pheromones. *Female* pheromones.

Jâden opened his eyes a fraction and looked sideways through the bars of the cage, staring into the room of dissimilar beings. Many of the species huddled around him were completely foreign. Two legs, none...solid, amorphous...radiating beauty, reeking of filth. He easily

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dismissed each, until, without hesitation, Jâden followed his nose and zeroed in on the female whose signature pheromones called to the beast within him. He might have been flung halfway across the galaxy and separated from his kind, but there was no doubt.

The unknown female biped standing upright before him was the one he wanted for his eternal mate.

\* \* \*

He was positively magnificent.

The neon strobe lights lit the black metal cage that imprisoned the pänthliön. From the crowded pit of would-be bidders, Lyra studied the fawn-colored animal. His large pads, broad muzzle, and long, triangular ears were all edged in black. Bands of dark gray marked his face and chest, the deeper shade disappearing into his shorter, taupe fur. Gazing at him, she yearned to run her hand over his coat. Would it be as soft as it looked? Did it truly contain healing properties as she'd heard?

Despite her fascination with the cat, when the auctioneer tapped on the podium, she immediately adjusted the setting on her IGT and listened through the static as he touted the wonders of the animal.

"Ladies, Gentlemen, Holosigs, and everything else that joined us today, would you *just* look at this amazing specimen. The marvelous, *mysterious* pänthliön has come to life and is available, only *today*, to the highest bidder."

Lyra wondered if the auction house was aware that selling the great cats had been outlawed centuries ago. Maybe they truly didn't know. Most likely, they conveniently forgot, and were auctioning the pänthliön immediately, hoping to pocket the proceeds before the authorities heard about the animal and confiscated it. As far as Lyra was concerned, their disregard for the law was her gain. Simply staring at the mystical creature, she was about ready to give up Godiva for it as well.

"*Miraculously*, this male pänthliön appeared two phases ago on the

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far side of the outpost. Our on-site cyberzoologist has determined that the animal is currently in his hibernation cycle because he has yet to awaken, but there is no need for concern. I am assured that *this* specimen is as healthy as a horse. Just *look* at—”

Grumbling filled the air, interrupting the auctioneer. He raised his arms, motioning for silence and listened through his earphone. “What? The Vantarins don’t understand? What? *Horse*? Oh, just a little 20th century Earth humor. Moving on, would you *look* at this specimen...”

The auctioneer proceeded to extol the animal’s virtues. But Lyra was no longer listening. Her eyes were too busy taking in the sleek lines of the animal in repose. The sand dune colored pelt covered every part of his four-legged muscular body. Hibernating or simply asleep, he seemed to glow with vitality, all the way to his paws.

And he did have six toes! Just like she’d heard rumors of, the species was polydactyl. And to think, she was almost close enough to touch him!

His ear twitched and she leaned forward. Was he waking up? What color might his eyes be? She couldn’t wait to find out.

“Do I hear fourtanium? Fourtanium? Such a *paltry* sum, for such a *glorious* animal...”

Goodness. While she’d been ogling the big cat, the bidding had grown astronomically. Lyra held her hand up, joining in the auction, convinced the gorgeous animal would be worth every pence of the universal exchange he would cost.

Fortunately, exchange was something she had in abundance, thanks to her thriving transport business, Intergalactic Parcel Service. *Delivering Stellar Service Among the Stars* was her motto. In order to continue living up to it, she really should upgrade her weapons. The illegal raiding activity had become deplorable lately. She’d probably shoot herself tomorrow, after forgoing the opportunity to bid on what she originally came for, but a pānthliōn was even more rare than the

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vintage ChevySoft component, and she'd take a live cat over a hunk of bio-metal any day.

Suddenly, the animal's eyes opened the merest fraction. No one else seemed to notice, but Lyra gulped.

The giant felid was staring right at her.

\* \* \*

Silently, Jâden watched the female. Keeping his eyes narrowed to slits, he looked through the pulsating lights and admired the long pale hair that draped her entire length. When she nodded and raised her hand to someone behind him, the strands parted to reveal a shimmering iridescent gown that covered her petite figure.

Jâden wished he could meet her in his upright form, but he didn't have that luxury. Not yet, anyway. It would be a while before he could transform, and there wasn't room in the cage even if he could. For now, he'd have to content himself with projecting his thoughts. He only hoped she was evolved enough to perceive them.

*::You are beautiful.::*

She only smiled, a soft curve of her lips that made him long to press his own against them.

*::I would like for you to be mine.::*

No reaction, other than a slight grimace. This wasn't going well.

*::Will you take me home with you? Home.::*

Jâden growled low in his throat and looked at her more closely. His mental communication didn't appear to be working. If anything, the female seemed to be getting upset.

*::I'm yours. You're mine.::* He tried again, feeling helpless.

For once, he resented his felid form.

With a snarl, he shook his head and stood on all fours, hoping to regain her interest. He raised his tail in the air and arched his back into the most satisfying stretch imaginable.

The crowd gasped and shuffled back. All except the female whose

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luminous eyes widened as she stood her ground. A rumble built in his chest. Claws extended, he swiped at the bars holding him and roared, his fangs dripping with saliva as he reached out to the female.

\* \* \*

*Beautiful.* The pānthliōn was so very beautiful.

*Mine.* Lyra's mind swirled with possessive thoughts. She *had* to win him. He was meant to be hers and no one else's, but the Humans in the corner kept upping the amount. Lyra sighed. How much longer would she have to outbid these damn aliens?

*Home.* She had to take him home with her.

He deserved his freedom and she was willing to pay for it. But how high would the bidding go? Lyra thought she'd have no trouble affording him, but as much as she wanted the animal, she was fast approaching the limit of her purse. And she'd just remembered that credit vouchers weren't accepted in this part of the galaxy. Lyra bit her lip in frustration.

Attuned to the animal, she saw when he widened his eyes.

Green. Startling eyes of neon green bore into her soul.

*I'm yours,* they seemed to say. *You're mine.*

*Yes!* Her resolve firmed, and she raised her hand again, increasing her bid as excitement thrummed through her.

Suddenly, the great pānthliōn rose to his haunches and scraped the metal bars confining him. Lyra held her breath as the animal roared and batted at the cage.

A moment later, she almost danced with glee. At his show of force, the other bidders all dropped out, including one other species that she thought *ate* felids, thank the Creator. Through her translator, she heard murmurs of "too violent" and "feral." It looked like he would be hers after all. She smiled in satisfaction.

"Dectanium? Do I hear another bid?" The auctioneer looked through the crowd and nerves fluttered in Lyra's stomach. "No? Then,

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going *once*...going *twice*...Sold! To the lovely Ampurian with the wad of exchange!”

Elation sparked through her. She’d won!

But what in the universe did one feed a recently hibernating pānthliōn?

\* \* \*

It was time. Jāden pawed at the cage, then let out a whimper for good measure. Never let it be said a Prīdōrian male was too proud to beg. Not if it would get him what he wanted, which was in her bed.

“You want to prowl, don’t you?” The female looked around the interior of her ship. He had just been delivered into her safekeeping and he wanted out of this blasted cage. She had directed the auction handlers to deposit him in her sleeping quarters. That alone had made him purr.

The room was large, definitely meant for the ship’s ranking officer. But it was bland. Few adornments covered the sparse, boxy area, but that didn’t bother Jāden. Used to living simply, the only thing he cared about was the bed. And that was definitely large enough for both of them.

The past few minutes he’d studied the way she moved, how efficiently she prepared her ship to depart from the outpost, and how she couldn’t keep her gaze from straying to him regardless of her task. He’d decided he liked everything about her, from the way she looked and smelled, to how she sounded—especially when she commed a message in a language he hadn’t heard her use before. Full of melodic echoes she made with her tongue and throat, he loved hearing her speak this way much more than when she used UTL. Engloni might be efficient, but it grated on his eardrums. Conversely, the musical language he assumed was her native tongue tantalized the receptor filaments in his ears, captivating him.

Others of his kind had traveled among the stars in their upright

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form, seeking information and technology, so Jâden was familiar with many species, even though he hadn't interacted with them. But as a Protector, he had remained solely on Prîdöra until the recent evacuation. He'd come to terms with leaving his home, although he hadn't been pleased about it. Since awakening, and smelling the female, his guarded attitude about his future had changed. He could envision all manner of positive outcomes, especially depending upon how the next few hours proceeded.

But now, he simply stared at the lovely female who had control of his destiny. For the moment.

*::Let me out::*

"I know you want out of that cage." She approached him cautiously. Her pheromones called to him again, only this time there was an undercurrent of apprehension. Perhaps growling at the auction handlers when they loaded him onto her ship hadn't been a smart idea, but he had heard the two uprights talking about the female in very lustful terms, and he'd put a stop to that the quickest way he knew how.

He watched her hands curl into fists. If he could only convey his thoughts to her...

*::I won't hurt you::*

"I really want to touch your fur."

Where had that come from? She could pet him all over, but *after* he was out of the cage. *::Open the door. Use your hands::*

A nervous laugh escaped her lips. "I do have *two* hands. So, if the unthinkable happens and you bite one off, I'll still have the other, right?"

He wanted to hold her in his arms, to comfort her. Purring loudly, he looked at the latch securing the cage. Then he swung his gaze back to her. *::Open it::*

"You're not going to bite me, are you?" she asked, only partially in jest.



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He stared at her and lowered his eyelids, trying to look as nonthreatening as possible. Not an easy feat while beneath his coat, his heart beat furiously, pumping blood to every part of his body, preparing him. To transform soon. And to mate. Sex after hibernation was always intense, but in his upright form, and with this female, it would be explosive. If he handled this right.

He whimpered again, sounding as plaintive as he knew how.

Hesitating only slightly, her fingers fumbled with the cage's lock. Where had they gotten this thing? It looked positively ancient and was taking her an inordinate amount of time to open. Be patient, he reminded himself.

*Snap!* The lock released, and she gingerly unlatched the door. It swung wide with only a minor squeak.

*Freedom.*

Jâden purred deep in his throat and rubbed the side of his face against the edge of the door. Ahhh. That felt good, but it wasn't enough. The scent of the female beckoned to him and he batted the door wider with his head and jumped from the cage. She stumbled backward and landed on the bed.

"Remember, no matter what your nose tells you, I'm not food. Got that?"

Her words made him want to smile.

He attempted to shift into his upright form. After a low buzzing in his ears, nothing happened. The effort only drained him. Jâden realized his body wasn't yet capable of transforming after the extended hibernation. No matter. He could wait. Now that he was safely in her possession, there was no reason to hurry, other than his strong instinct to mate with her.

Instinct he could control; he wasn't an animal.

Keeping his gaze focused on hers, he padded forward, stopping only when he reached her knees. He dipped his head and raised the

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edge of her gown, sniffing the exposed skin of her ankle. She shifted restlessly. “Don’t bite my leg, all right? Nice kitty.” She sounded all breathy. “Maybe I shouldn’t have let you out yet.” Her voice cracked on the last word. “Oh, Creator, you’re a carnivore, aren’t you?”

He heard the fear, but focused on the scent. This close to her, it was stronger. More pungent. Luxuriant. He nestled against her entire leg, lifting the gown with his head until he reached the bare skin of her knee.

“You *are* going to eat me, aren’t you?”

She had no idea.

But that was for another time.

He released a soft mew of pleasure at the thought. *∴Do not be afraid.∴*

“I’m afraid I’ll wake up and this will be a dream. I can’t believe I’m sitting here with a pānthliōn’s head practically on my lap.” The words might have been casual, but her tone showed her stress.

Hoping to calm her, Jāden licked her knee.

Desire blasted through him at the taste. Her flavor appealed to him like none other he’d known. If everyone beyond Prīdōra tasted this way, his people didn’t know what they were missing.

She giggled, and he licked her knee again, purring loudly.

Tentatively, her hand touched the back of his head, then slid to his neck. His rumbled purrs increased in volume, and he surged into her touch, raising his head to look at her.

Fine silvery hair fell across her shoulders and pooled upon the mattress in a shimmering sea. Luminous burgundy eyes stared at him. They glowed brightly in her pale face. She was so unlike the females of his species...more delicate and fair than the pānthliōns he hunted with. She put him in mind of a dainty oceīcat, but never before had he wanted to mate with one of those.

The female scratched the back of his neck, and he rolled his eyes,

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enchanted. She knew just how to touch him, and he wished to the Kings he could transform *now*. He wanted to claim her as his mate in the true way of the uprights.

“You have the most exquisite eyes,” she said, digging her fingers deeper into his fur, exactly the way he liked it. He dipped his head so she could reach more of him, practically grinding his nose in her lap.

*::Thank you.::*

“You’re welcome.” She laughed, sounding embarrassed. “Heavens, it’s almost as if your eyes speak to me...here I am having a conversation with an animal. I think I’ve been spending way too much time in deep space.”

*::What is your name?::*

“I really need to name you, don’t I?” Her fingers slowed, and she stroked her hand over his coat, smoothing the individual strands.

His arousal increased at the gentle touch. His back legs shifted as the heaviness between them grew.

“*Lyra’s Really Expensive Cat* doesn’t quite do you justice, does it, boy?” She scratched the fur at the base of his ears, sending shivers along his coat.

Ahhh, *Lyra*. At least he’d gotten that from her. He rubbed his chin on her knee, enjoying the satiny feel of her gown against his fur.

*::Lyra. I desire you like no other.::*

“Oh, Creator, I’m getting turned on by a cat,” she muttered.

Jâden breathed in satisfaction, even though he already knew the truth of her words. The sharp scent of her arousal had been teasing his senses for a while. Drawn by her confession, he nuzzled closer to the juncture of her thighs, inhaling deeply.

She released his fur and squirmed away from him, scooting backward on the bed until she leaned against the headboard. “What have I gotten myself into?” she muttered, rubbing her face with her hands before peeking at him through her fingers.

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Fear had returned to her voice and countenance. The last thing he needed was for her to be uncomfortable with her responses to him. Not now, when things were going exactly the way he wanted them to. He just needed more time.

Jâden jumped on the bed with a soft thunk, causing the mattress to dip. He padded to her side and sank down, relaxing on all fours against her legs.

\* \* \*

Lyra breathed a sigh of relief when the giant cat flopped on the bed next to her. “Oh, you want to nap? I won’t wake in the middle of the night missing my fingers, will I?”

He just stared at her. Measured blinks from his startling green eyes marked the passage of time. The unusual color vacillated between bright glowing green and a sea of crystalline emeralds. His eyes were mesmerizing. Lyra thought she could look at them for an eternity. But she still wondered what to feed the animal.

“Are you hungry? Would you like me to see if the nourishinator can produce something you’d find palatable?”

His answer was to stand on all fours, circle, then curl into a ball and close his spectacular eyes. Low purrs emanated from his throat.

“Well...” She couldn’t decide whether to be amused or offended. Never before had a male in her bed fallen asleep so fast. Especially before doing anything that warranted exhaustion. Smiling to herself, she checked the bedside monitor, adjusted the ship’s speed, then stripped and climbed under the covers.

Despite her weariness, a strange awareness hummed through her, preventing sleep. It was as if on every microcosmic level, her body was primed...expectant...or something. But for what?

Lyra found it impossible to relax. The pānthliön’s purrs rumbled so softly she barely heard them, but the weight of his body tugged her toward the center of the mattress, making her fully cognizant of the fact

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that she shared her bed with a very large, very male, and very *furry* body. She kept having to remind herself of that last part.

“It’s a pity you aren’t a man,” she told him, wishing she had more sense than to get attached to a wild animal she had every intention of releasing once she returned home.

He only purred more loudly.

Slowly, her arm crept out from beneath the covers and traveled the short distance across the bed. Settling her hand upon his shoulder, Lyra sighed, determined to ignore the perplexing yearnings that plagued her.

“Goodnight, pānthliōn,” she whispered. “In the morning, I’ll figure out a name for you.”

\* \* \*

Sometime deep in the night, Jâden came instantly awake. Knowledge surged through him. He could shift now. He knew it with certainty.

Choosing not to—not quite yet—he slid from beneath Lyra’s hand and silently leapt to the floor, watching her. She rolled over and laid on her stomach, with her arm outstretched, touching the place where he’d been.

His body temperature spiked with the realization that, even in sleep, she reached for him. He padded to the foot of the bed and nosed his way under the covers, until his muzzle touched her bare feet. Eagerly, he crawled in, sniffing his way along the back of her legs and pausing when he encountered her thighs, which was a wondrous place to stop and savor.

For someone used to sleeping outside, the bedsheets felt oddly heavy on his head and back, and the glossy fabric was something he hadn’t encountered before. When she moved, and her legs parted slightly, the scent of her musky essence drove away every other thought. Nuzzling the crease between her leg and tailbone, Jâden hardened. He knew exactly how he wanted to take her. But not yet...

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Once he transformed, his senses would dull. Even though still superior to most species, he wouldn't be able to imprint her flavor on his brain with the same detailed clarity.

He placed his nose at the top of her tailbone, then slowly dragged it down between the center of her buttocks. When he reached the pinnacle of the delightful journey, he inhaled one last time. Her pheromones were even stronger now, and the scent of her heady arousal left him in no doubt that her body wanted this, too.

Easing his tongue from between parted lips, Jâden focused on restructuring each individual cell in his body, altering into his upright form. Electric tingles filled his entire being as his frame transformed. He exchanged his fur for skin, his four legs for two, and, most importantly, physical instinct for heartfelt emotion.

His newly transfigured hands angled Lyra's hips, and his fingers gently spread the sides of her bottom. Reveling in the experience, his tongue touched her core, which was dewy with her feminine essence. He licked the enticing moisture, grasping her thighs with his hands and gently pushing her legs apart so he could reach farther inside. The heady flavor poured over him as he swiped the inside of her channel. He swallowed, and breathed in the very heart of her, relishing each divine component. Sweeping the delicate folds of her labia with the tip of his tongue, Jâden smiled as the hint of citrus she exuded became stronger and permeated his being.

She sighed and snuggled into the bed, murmuring something he didn't recognize. Need thrummed through him, and he savored her taste one last time before crawling over her back until he reached her shoulders. He groaned at the warmth emanating from her delicate body. The skin covering him now was so very sensitive compared to his pānthliōn coat. Heat rose off her and practically singed him. Her own skin might appear cool as porcelain, but it felt like fire, and he was burning in response.

### *TALES OF THE PRIDE: AWAKENING*

A strand of her hair slid under his palm and he quickly wound it around his fingers. Here, he thought, *here* she was cool. Her hair felt like shimmering tinsel, the strands soft like petals from a mountain rose.

She said something else, and her bottom arched off the bed, pressing into his stomach.

His cock lurched forward, seeking shelter in her body, but Jâden held back. He brought his lips to her shoulder and kissed a path across her nape and up the side of her neck until he reached her ear. Speaking in Englioni, he whispered, "Are you awake, Lyra? Aware?"

"Ummm, hmmm," she mumbled.

"Is this what you want?"

Beneath his lips, she shivered. She moaned and shifted beneath him, raising her pelvis off the bed until his cock slipped between her legs. He shook from the effort it took to keep from plunging inside. "Lyra, speak to me. Is mating your choice?"

"Yes," she murmured into her pillow as her legs spread wide and she propped herself on her knees, bringing his cock to the entrance of her nether lips. "Get on with it, already. *Please*."

With a fierce growl, Jâden thrust into her tight channel almost savagely. She moaned her appreciation, and he lowered himself over her back. Pumping his hips ferociously, his teeth sunk into the skin of her shoulder. By the Kings, he'd never felt so primal, so elemental. His breathing came in harsh rasps. Between his teeth, he licked her skin and tasted blood. The reminder hit him hard. She wasn't one of his kind.

He gentled his raging thrusts and released her skin, bathing the area with healing saliva from his tongue.

Her hands grasped his fingers and squeezed. Beneath him, she rocked her hips, gyrating against his loins in a way that set him on fire. She whimpered, bucked her hips faster, and let out a mew of excitement. Jâden thought he'd go up in flames. His cock was ready to

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explode.

Pulling one hand away from her grasp, he reached under their joined bodies until his hand was wedged between the bed and her slick core. His fingers easily found the center of her sexual nerves, and he tantalized the area while plunging his shaft in and out of her feminine tunnel.

Almost out of his mind with passion, Jâden recalled himself just in time. Slipping his cock from her heat, he wedged it length-wise upon the crevice of her bottom. The weight of his body pressed his cock against the fleshy globes of her backside, which ground her pelvis into his hand.

Moving his fingers at a rapid-fire pace designed to heighten her pleasure, he stimulated her molten clit while his cock lurched along her buttocks. They both groaned. Lyra became frantic, swiveling her hips beneath his and grinding herself into his hand. His teeth found their way to her back, but he refrained from biting down, only placing them against her smooth skin while his hips continued to thrust.

A moan came from her, then a squeal. Then the most beautiful response to his touch...she flickered, her veins pulsing with pale burgundy lights as she came. Her essence gushed forth, flooding his hand.

Pure, male satisfaction roared through Jâden, and he pushed himself tighter into the crease of her bottom. Taking two deep breaths, then two more, he slowly stilled his thrusting hips. Mentally, he came, imagined bathing her womb with his seed. His hips jerked in response.

“Wonderful,” Lyra breathed beneath him.

He rolled to his side and cradled her form. Yes, wonderful, he thought, confident that tonight was only the beginning.

\* \* \*

The warning siren shrilled overhead, jerking Lyra out of a deep sleep.



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“Not again,” she muttered, stumbling from the bed to reset the faulty switch she’d intended to repair when she upgraded her weapons. So much for that plan.

She grabbed her gown and smiled at the pānthliōn that slept soundly, his furry body occupying over half the bed.

The noise level increased. Lyra put her hands over her ears and made her way to the ship’s command center, wincing twice. Good heavens, her feminine muscles twinged like they’d gone three rounds with a hologasmic program.

The piercing siren was almost unbearable. How could the giant cat sleep through this? Pulling on her gown, Lyra reached the com-center and hurried to the console. She bent to reset the switch and her inner thigh muscles screamed in protest. Visions of her delectable dream from the night before suddenly inundated her mind. No wonder she was still so tired. Instead of rejuvenating her body with sufficient delta waves, her brains had been busy creating, then activating, virtual fantasies around her wild desires.

Lyra chuckled and flicked the lever. The shrill noise didn’t abate. She juggled it again.

Kaboom! A sharp blast careened into the ship. The force knocked her off-balance and she crashed to the floor. Oh, Creator. The warning siren was for real!

This part of space was usually calm. Why was someone after her ship? She slammed her butt in the chair, flinching at the unexpected soreness between her thighs. Before the seat restraint automatically fastened, Lyra had disengaged the auto pilot and taken control of directing the flyer’s course.

“Come on...come on...” Her hands flew over the console, checking the size and configuration of the attacking ship, seeking to locate the source of the shot. “Evasive maneuvers, coming right—”

Boom! Another hit, and her flyer lurched in space, but stayed intact,

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thanks to the additional plating she'd installed last year.

"You rotten marauders. I'm not hauling anything this time," she said to the miniature screen depicting the strange spacecraft. Calling on all of her flight training, Lyra steered her flyer as it dipped and swerved, avoiding another direct hit as the bastards got off two more rounds. They were aiming for her engines, trying to disable the ship.

"Damn, but you're determined," she said, increasing her speed and performing a turn that would have done her flight instructor proud. "What in the known worlds are you after?"

"Perhaps they seek to commandeer my body."

At the unfamiliar voice, Lyra spun around in her chair. Shocked speechless, she just stared, devouring the amazing sight before her. Seven feet of ripped, tawny—nude!—male power dwarfed her com-center. Short, fawn-colored hair covered his head and comprised the neat beard accentuating his lean features.

But only one thing registered. The glittering emerald eyes.

"You're for *real*?" The place between her legs throbbed in remembrance as comprehension sunk in. *This* was her pānthliōn? "Oh, Creator."

The flyer pitched to the side a microsecond before an explosion echoed throughout the hull. Lyra whipped around, her hands automatically returning to steering the ship, while her mind swam with possibilities. And certainties.

"We had sex." Was that calm voice hers?

"Yes." He spoke next to her ear. At the sensation of his breath flowing over her skin, she forgot all about the annoying siren. "And I want more."

Heat cascaded through her at his words, and her body moistened, wanting more as well. She also wanted an explanation. A good one. No, make that a great one.

Intentionally, she swerved the flyer again, but the man stayed

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upright, barely moving even though he stood without safety restraints. *Surefooted as a cat*. She should have expected that.

“How may I assist your efforts?”

“By not distracting me. I may not be able to fight them off, but I can out-maneuver anything in deep space.”

With that, Lyra focused solely on outrunning the raiders, ignoring how her heart sang at the knowledge that at least some of the pānthliōn legends *were* true.

\* \* \*

Jâden reclined on the bed and watched from hooded eyes when Lyra returned to her sleeping quarters. He wasn't sure how she would react to him now that she'd flown them to the relative safety of a spaceport and docked for a sleep cycle.

“I would like to properly make your acquaintance, beautiful Lyra,” he said, standing. “I am Jâden, formerly of Prîdöra. Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier, but I was unable to assume my upright form until—”

“Last night.” Her burgundy eyes gleamed at him.

He inclined his head, saying nothing.

“Why are you here?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“Do you not remember? You bought me.”

She smiled at his response. “I have no desire to own you.”

He stepped forward, approaching her as carefully as he had in his Prîdorian form. “That is fortunate, for pānthliōns do not like to be owned.”

When he stood in front of her, she started to touch him, then hesitated. Her hand hovered between them, and she looked at him with such wonder he felt invincible, even though his planet would soon be destroyed. “I never intended to keep you,” she said. “After capturing images and recordings of the legendary pānthliōn, I was going to release you into the wilds.”

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He grasped her hand and placed her palm upon his rapidly-beating heart. “And if I choose not to be released?”

“You wish to stay?” A hint of the melodic sounds breezed through her words and her fingers curled into the fine hair covering his chest.

“Yes, with you.” He pressed her hand flat against his skin and skimmed it lower.

Her fingers splayed over the muscles of his stomach, causing them to tighten. “But how is it that you are in this part of space after so many centuries of absence? Until yesterday, I wasn’t even positive that your species existed.”

“Our world is no longer habitable. An impending supernova has rendered it unable to support life. Every Pridörian was endangered.” Unable to stop himself, Jâden stepped closer, brushed her shimmering hair over her shoulder, and cupped the pearlescent skin of her cheek.

Lyra tilted her head into his hand and spoke softly. “So you had to leave, to abandon your planet? How agonizing that must be. But how did you come to be at the Stexilian auction? Where are the others of your kind? Are they nearby?”

“We evacuated, transferring off-world and spreading throughout the known galaxies and the space-time continuum, hoping to further populate our species throughout history. I do not know whether I will see my fellow Pridörians again, but...”

Jâden struggled to hold on to his concentration and answer her questions, while inside, he yearned to know if he had found his home...with her. His thumb rubbed across her bottom lip and he confessed, “Lyra, your scent calls to me. Your unique beauty appeals to me on every level imaginable. I would like to give you my seed, with the hope of repopulating pānthliōns in this part of the galaxy. I would like for you to be my mate.”

Pleasure flared in her eyes, then faded. “But what if our species aren’t genetically compatible?”

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“I seem to recall that our bodies were *very* compatible last night.” His heart pounded faster. “May I claim you as mine?”

She blushed and the skin beneath his fingers heated as the soft pink color made her flesh more opaque. Her hands grasped his wrist. Pressing a kiss to his palm, she asked, “What about last night? If memory serves, we had the most amazing experience and you gave me such a rapturous release...haven’t you already claimed me? Did we not begin your repopulation efforts then?”

He shook his head, ready to roar to the universe that she was his, but knowing he didn’t have the right. Not yet. “I withheld my seed. When a pānthliōn male mates completely in our upright form, we mate for life. I would not ask for that type of commitment from you while your senses were muted by sleep.”

“I’m awake now.” Lyra leaned forward and licked his chin, causing the skin on his neck to quiver with awareness. Her hands went to his shoulders and dug into the muscles, kneading his flesh like she had his fur the day before. “*Jā-den*,” she spoke his name as if savoring the syllables upon her tongue, “I’ve been fascinated with the great felids since my youth, none more so than pānthliōns. Now that I finally have one, do you think I would be foolish enough to let you go?”

“Are you saying yes?” he asked, hardly daring to hope.

“Yes!”

Intoxicated by the euphoria that washed over him upon hearing her answer, Jāden growled and pulled his female to him, ready to taste her lips at long last. For a Protector who had never been off-world before, he’d certainly landed on his feet.

## LARISSA LYONS

After doing stints in community theater and stand-up, Larissa decided it was more fun putting words in *other* peoples' mouths and turned to writing. Her first erotic romance, *Written in the Stars*, was the winner of Liquid Silver Books' Capricorn Zodiac contest. Soon after, she could be found bouncing off the moon when her first *Tales of the Pride* story was chosen as a winner in Amber Quill's 2006 Heat Wave contest.

Larissa divides her time between working on her next sensual story and devouring chocolate covered peanuts, which she swears is good for the creative muse. Larissa's monthly ezine, *Wicked Escapes*, features free short stories, contest announcements, and her latest news. The current issue is always posted at [www.wickedescapesezine.com](http://www.wickedescapesezine.com).

Readers are invited to visit Larissa's web site at [www.larissalyons.com](http://www.larissalyons.com) and read about her attempts to work homemade brownies into a healthy diet.

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