



TIGER'S TAIL

By
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Chapter One

Selene stretched on the chaise lounge beside the pool to glance at the caller ID on her mobile phone. Seeing her mother's name, she elected to ignore the insistent chirp. Voicemail would pick up, and it had more patience for her mother's nagging than she did.

The phone finally stopped its annoying twitter, and she checked the time on its display, wishing she could afford a nicer phone than the freebie that came with her service contract. She'd really like one of those annoying ones that played radio quality music or demanded you answer it in celebrity voices. Unfortunately, when she'd chosen to leave home her parents had cut off her financial support.

But that didn't bother her. She found she liked standing on her own two feet. Independence was worth far more than a trust fund, and despite what her parents thought, being independent did not mean turning her back on her people.

"Selene!" a youthful voice piped.

She raised up on one arm and looked through the fence surrounding the pool of her small apartment complex to see a young boy waiving frantically at her. The large yellow school bus pulled away from the curve behind him with a loud screech of releasing brakes. "Hi Davy, how was school?"

The little boy hopped excitedly from one foot to the other. "It was great. I got an A on my math test."

"That's great," she replied with a wide grin. Standing, she wrapped her sarong around her waist and grabbed her bag. This news warranted a hug. On the sidewalk outside the fence, she dropped to one knee and wrapped the boy in a giant bear hug. "I'm so proud of you."

"Momma's gonna be real proud of me, too," he bragged.

"You bet she will. I sure am." She released him and stood back up. Davy had been struggling in school ever since the death of his father two years earlier.

"How proud?" he asked with an avaricious glint in his eye.

She couldn't resist the impish expression on his face. "I think I might have some cookie dough in the fridge."

"Chocolate chip?" he asked hopefully.

"Is there any other kind?"

They crossed the parking lot to her small, efficiency apartment. Selene unlocked the door, but paused with one foot over the threshold. Davy vibrated with excitement behind her. "Don't you have to take Midget out?"

"I can take her out after cookies," he hedged with worry in his features.

"Take her out now while I preheat the oven."

His face smoothed out, clearly relieved that his chores wouldn't postpone the promised cookies. "Can I bring Midget over after I take her out? I promise she'll be good."

"I don't think so, Davy. I'm not a big fan of dogs," she replied.

"You just need to give Midget a chance. She's very sweet," Davy bolted around the corner to his own apartment.

A shudder went through her. She knew Davy was bringing that creature into her home. His tender years prevented him from believing that anyone couldn't be blown over with adoration for his beloved pet, and Selene couldn't exactly explain her innate aversion to dogs. Or dogs' aversion to her.

At least Davy had a Chihuahua. Surely she could handle a dog that weighed a whopping three pounds.

She headed into the kitchenette and turned the oven on. While it heated, she pulled out a nonstick baking sheet from the drawer beneath it and a tub of cookie dough from the fridge. Locating a clean spoon in the dish drying rack beside the sink, she began to scoop balls of sticky dough onto the sheet.

The front door slammed open, and she heard the yipping bark of Midget. A glance over her shoulder revealed Davy holding the tiny terror in his arms. With effort, Selene refrained from hissing at her.

"I think Midget would like a cookie, too," Davy announced, moving to her side.

Selene wanted to back away from the boy and his pet, but made herself stay put. The dog weighed less than her purse.

And Selene was no domesticated house cat.

"Chocolate isn't good for dogs. It could cause a seizure."

"It's just a little bit of chocolate," he wheedled.

"She's just a little bit of a dog," Selene countered. "No chocolate for Midget."

He stuck his lower lip out, and Selene struggled not to laugh. Davy was adorable. But then, she'd always loved children. Contrary to her mother's belief, she had no intention of throwing away the opportunity to have children of her own. She just intended to be more than a broodmare, and that meant establishing her own life first.

She slid the dough-laden sheet into the oven and plucked the egg timer from its place on the counter. After setting the timer, she returned the tub to the fridge. With a smile, she turned to suggest that they sit at the table while they wait –

– and had a small dog shoved into her arms. Startled, she juggled Midget for a moment until she was able to get a better grip. The bug-eyed dog's nostrils flared and she vigorously sniffed at Selene. Tiny lips lifted in a snarl to reveal minuscule, sharp teeth. A growl rumbled in the small dog's chest.

Selene hastily dumped Midget back into Davy's arms. "I don't think Midget likes me."

Midget's growls increased and she barked at Selene, almost lunging from Davy's arms.

"Midget!" Davy scolded, tightening his hold. "I don't understand what's wrong with her. She likes everybody."

Fortunately the diminutive dog trying to attack her looked so ridiculous that it calmed her instincts. She reached over the snapping animal's head and ruffled Davy's hair. "I have that reaction with all dogs. Maybe you should run her home."

He bit his lip. "Yes ma'am. I'm so sorry. I don't know what's got into her."

"Don't worry about it," she reassured him and pulled the door open.

"I'll be right back," he promised and left the apartment, scolding Midget as he went.

Selene closed the door behind him and leaned against it, massaging her temples. She hadn't spent enough time in *Tigre* form if a stupid Chihuahua could raise her instincts. That was the one downside to being away from the Pride. She didn't have the ability to shift freely while living among the humans. The risk of discovery was too great.

She sighed. However restrictive, living with her family meant living on Pride land and the liberty not only to shift but to run freely without fear of discovery. There was nothing like running wild in her tiger form. Though she gained a great deal of weight and muscle mass when she shifted, she moved with a lighter step on paws than on foot. She loved the rhythm of running through the forests, especially at night beneath the silver glow of Mother Moon, with the wildness pounding in her blood.

Perhaps it was a good thing that she had given in to her mother's demands and agreed to attend the Pride celebration to welcome the alpha's new mate, the *Tigrine*.

Not that her mother was concerned about the physical effects of not shifting on her only daughter. The woman was far more interested in the number of eligible *Tigre* males who would be paying their respects to the alpha's mate.

A mischievous grin crossed Selene's face. On the chance that a potential mate would be attending, she had developed a secret weapon against the pheromones that would send her into heat. Her mother had seriously underestimated her daughter's resourcefulness.

Pleased with her ingenuity, Selene pushed away from the door and headed to the cabinets to get plates for the cookies and glasses for milk.

Chapter Two

The next morning, Selene realized she hadn't been quite as resourceful as she first thought. When she had decided to outwit nature, she had modified a pair of foam ear plugs to fit in her nose. They blocked all sense of smell and were invisible once she had them inserted. In her apartment they seemed like such a success. She had been unable to smell anything from vinegar to cauliflower.

Of course, in her apartment, she hadn't had to speak to anyone. She pressed her forehead against the bathroom mirror and let out a low groan.

At least it would have been a low groan if she hadn't already inserted the stupid nose plugs. Instead, it sounded like Mickey Mouse hiccupped.

She had two choices. She could turn tail and run or she could see this through and just try not to talk.

Her mother would *never* forgive her for ditching the *Tigrine's* welcome party. Smothering another groan--she didn't need the auditory reminder of her problem--Selene knew she had no choice but to bluster her way through this latest debacle of hers.

If she were human, she could just pretend she had a cold or allergies, but as a *Tigre* she wasn't subject to their frailties.

She briefly considered removing the plugs, but decided the risk was too great. With her luck the first person she'd run into would be the *Tigre* male destined to be her mate. The idea of an overbearing, overprotective man believing he had the right to dictate to her steeled her resolve, and Selene pulled back from the mirror.

Giving her appearance another once over, she tossed her head and straightened her spine. She could survive three days. Besides, if it turned out she already knew all the men present, she could remove the blasted things.

She strode confidently into her childhood bedroom and came to an abrupt stop. Gods help her, it was her mother.

"You aren't wearing *that* are you?" Belinda asked.

Selene stared at her elegant mother who sat on her bed looking resplendent in a red silk dress that draped around her full figure. A beautiful woman, her mother appeared much younger than her fifty-five years. She'd slicked her dark hair back into a smooth bun that hid the graying, and had a disapproving eyebrow cocked in her daughter's direction.

Selene ran a self-conscious hand along the blue blouse and charcoal slacks she had chosen for the day's festivities. Wary of her distinctive voice, she bit back an angry retort and opened her closet. Pretending to consider her choices, she waited.

"Is that all you brought," her mother gasped, clearly appalled by the meager selection hanging in the closet. "You can't possibly expect your mate to be impressed with a woman dressed in these *things*."

Selene turned eyes that she hoped were properly ashamed and apologetic on her

mother.

Belinda clucked her tongue in despair and rose from the bed. She crossed to the closet and pulled out a dress.

"Put this on. It's the best choice you brought. I swear you are determined to shame me. Didn't I teach you your importance to the future of our people? All my friends' daughters have found their mates and most are expecting new Pride members. I don't know what I did to deserve such disrespect from my only daughter. I guess I'm just a failure as a mother."

Selene shook her head in denial and hugged her mother before escaping to the bathroom with the dress her mother had chosen. Somehow she managed to not slam the door behind her. To hear her mother talk, she was a Victorian spinster rotting on the shelf rather than a twenty-seven year old, twenty-first century woman.

She pulled the nose plugs out. She'd have to reinsert them before they left for the party, but experience told Selene that her mother hadn't finished the martyr routine. Quickly, she stripped out of the stylish attire and slipped into the dress her mother had selected.

Returning to the bedroom, she bit back a sharp comment when her mother twirled an imperious finger, indicating that Selene turn around to display the dress.

Gritting her teeth, Selene made the obligatory circle.

"I suppose it will have to do," her mother groused. "I don't know why you do this to me. You delight in shaming me before the Pride."

"I am not trying to shame you," Selene responded, biting back a smart-ass suggestion involving a cross and a crown of thorns. "These clothes are brand new."

"It's not just the clothes," her mother pointed out.

Selene knew where this was going. She opened the closet and grabbed the shoes that matched the dress, wondering if she even needed to be present for the upcoming lecture. After all, she could recite it by heart.

"I thought the gods blessed me when I gave birth to a female *Tigre*. Daughters are so precious to our people. When I held you in my arms the first time, I thought I had made a valuable contribution to the future of our people. Instead, I gave birth to an ungrateful creature who doesn't care about the possible extinction we face."

Selene bit back a growl of frustration. Her mother's concern had nothing to do with the future of the Pride and everything to do with her perceived social status. It galled Belinda that she had not achieved the status of matriarch to a female line. Once Selene birthed her first child, Belinda's standing in the Pride would sky-rocket.

"I do care," Selene sighed as she slid into the strappy heels. No matter how many times they had this conversation, she'd never been able to make her mother understand her position. Belinda remained convinced that Selene avoided finding a mate for the sole purpose of thwarting her social ambitions.

"If you care, you will do your best to circulate at the party tonight. I cannot believe a *Tigre* of your age is still single."

"Male *Tigre* are often single at my age."

"Not by choice. And you are not male, no matter how hard you play at it."

"Wanting to be more than a broodmare does not mean I want to be male," Selene

said proud of the calm tone she managed.

"No? You insist on turning your back on the Pride and working with humans."

"Living in my own apartment and being a nurse does not mean I'm turning my back on the Pride."

Her mother sniffed in disdain. "Well, if you want to serve your Pride, make sure you mingle with all the unattached males. The goddess Bast surely will answer my prayers and bring your mate to you this weekend."

Selene tucked an errant lock of hair behind her ear. "I need to use the bathroom before we go."

"Well, hurry," her mother scolded, as though the dressing delay was Selene's fault. "We don't want to insult the alpha's new mate with our tardiness."

"Yes ma'am," Selene replied before ducking back into the bathroom to reinsert the plugs.

* * * *

Carrick propped a shoulder against the wall, swirled the amber liquid in the brandy glass, and surveyed the room from his position by the fireplace. Having just moved into the territory, he was new to this Pride and unfamiliar with its members.

Not that it really mattered. Had this been the Pride of his childhood, he still would have preferred the solitude he sought at the outskirts of the milling throng. He surreptitiously glanced at the clock on the mantel and calculated how much longer he had to stay before politely taking his leave. A solitary creature, Carrick disliked social gatherings, even those exclusively Pride.

His eyes swept the room again, a habit from his career as a Guardian. Guardians oversaw the security of the Pride. They handled the threats to the Pride whether from other shifters or the few fringe human groups that knew of his kind's existence and sought their destruction. They also oversaw the protection of the council members and their Pride's alpha.

At least they oversaw the protection from outside dangers. If a council member or alpha couldn't hold his own against an internal challenge, he didn't deserve a position of leadership.

He'd been honored when Damien had offered him the position of Man-at-Arms for this Pride. The promotion meant moving cross-country, but Damien's Pride had a reputation for being both progressive and prosperous, and Carrick had been suffocating in the ultra-conservative Pride he'd grown up in.

He watched his new Pride members circulate through the large living area and mentally catalogued their individual traits and interactions so he could identify future variations in behavior.

His eyes stopped in mid-sweep, arrested by a beautiful woman coming down the three steps to the sunken room.

She had a heart-shaped face etched with delicate features. High cheekbones and a slim nose gave her a classical appearance. Her smooth skin was tanned a golden bronze, and even from across the room, he could make out the vivid green of her almond shaped eyes. Waist-length, chestnut hair with golden highlights flowed around a slender frame. The ivory sundress dipped low in the front to reveal the upper curves of her ripe breasts.

Carrick's mouth went dry and his special senses flared to life. He sat the brandy snifter on the mantel. Staying on the circumference of the room, he circled slowly around to where the beauty greeted other Pride members. Standing silently behind her, he took a deep breath, inhaling her scent.

The intoxicating smell of honey and vanilla filled his senses and tightened his groin. A rush of triumph coursed through him. He'd found his mate. A wicked smile teased his lips and he stepped forward to introduce himself to the woman the gods had created just for him.

He eased his way into the small circle surrounding her, as she chuckled at something another female *Tigre* said. Her throaty laugh washed over him, leaving him with a sense of contentment he'd never before experienced, despite his rapidly growing arousal.

Her gaze fell on him, and he extended his hand politely. "I'm Carrick."

She placed her delicate hand in his larger one. He marveled at the smooth texture of her long, graceful fingers.

"Selene," she responded.

He visibly flinched. She sounded like she'd sucked in enough helium to keep the Hindenburg aloft.

"Pleased to meet you," he ground out, reluctantly letting her withdraw her hand.

She gifted him with an angelic smile and his heart rate increased. Carrick forgot her squeaky voice as he waited for her to demonstrate signs of the mating heat that his presence would trigger.

To his surprise, she appeared completely unmoved by his presence. Baffled, he waited as minutes ticked by and his mate remained unaffected by him.

Conversation flowed around them, but Carrick didn't hear a word of it. This female was *his*. He knew it in his bones. His instincts were never wrong.

Yet she stood next to him and remained completely indifferent. Her apathy grated against his skin, and he battled back the desire to grab her, shake her, and demand she acknowledge him as her mate. He craved her undivided attention and the public knowledge that she belonged to him.

Slowly, people began drifting away. Selene flashed him a polite, dismissive smile and wandered off, leaving him standing in her wake, flummoxed.

Chapter Three

Selene felt Carrick's eyes burning into her back as she left the living area. It took all she had not to break into a run. She stepped out onto the large, wraparound porch and took a deep, shuddering breath. She rested her hands on the thick, wooden rail and let the cool breeze wash across her face.

Carrick's presence had thrown her. Despite the nose plug, she'd still recognized him as her mate. She hadn't thrown him to the ground and tried to mount him like the Lone Ranger did Silver--not that she hadn't been tempted--so she assumed the plugs blocked his pheromones.

She had expected the plugs to either fail or keep her completely oblivious to her mate's presence. No one had told her that she'd be able to recognize her mate without scenting him, but she had no doubt about Carrick's relationship to her. Her skin fairly screamed with the currents of awareness dancing across her body.

The man was huge. Absolutely huge. At five-seven, she was unaccustomed to craning her neck to look up at men. Carrick had to be a solid foot taller than her. Unconsciously, she rubbed the back of her neck. How did short girls handle the neck strain?

It wasn't just his height. The man was built like a recruitment ad for the US Marine Corps! His broad shoulders tapered to a trim waist above powerful legs, and she had seen the delineation of each muscle in his thick arms. He even moved with a military bearing.

Her breathing thickened as she recalled the perfection of his body and face. The man was built like a Greek god. His brown eyes reminded her of liquid dark chocolate. His olive skin was darkly tanned, and his hair was a sun-lightened brown. Clearly the man spent a lot of time outdoors.

A strange combination of fight or flight pumped in her blood. Part of her wanted to run. To shift into her *Tigre* form and flee as fast as she could. She also wanted to find Carrick and yank the nose plugs free--though probably not in that order. Her body burned to submit to him, to feel his flesh against hers.

Hi-ho Silver! Away!

One of Davy's favorite jokes ran through her head. *Roses are red. Violets are blue. I'm schizophrenic ... and so am I.*

She clenched the smooth wood beneath her hands and let out a bitter laugh at the infantile joke. Great. Half-an-hour after meeting her mate, and she'd already suffered a major drop in IQ points.

A movement out of the corner of her eye startled her, and Selene turned to find a woman sitting in a rocker several feet away. She'd been so caught up in her thoughts, she hadn't realized she wasn't alone, something that would never have happened if she had her sense of smell.

"Are you alright?" the woman asked.

"Sure. Nothing a few years of intense psychotherapy won't fix," Selene responded.

The woman gave an amused chuckle. "I'd suggest you consider heavy drinking.

It's cheaper and a lot more fun."

A reluctant smile tugged at the corners of Selene's lips. "That's true."

The woman rose and crossed the porch, joining Selene at the rail. Despite her elegant bearing, the woman hitched her hip and half-sat, half-leaned against the wooden banister. "Want to talk about it? Maybe I can help. If not, I know where the liquor is."

Selene tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and studied the stranger. The woman was beautiful with long coppery, blonde hair and brilliant green eyes. Selene felt downright dowdy in comparison.

For a moment, Selene was tempted to confess all to this complete stranger, but she summoned up her self-control, slapped a crooked smile on her face, and said, "It's complicated."

The stranger cocked her head at Selene and gave a sympathetic nod. "Ah. Man troubles."

"That obvious, huh?"

A teasing smile crossed the beautiful woman's face. "Men. Can't live with them, can't open jars without them."

The odd comment startled a laugh out of Selene.

"That pretty much sums them up," she agreed, liking the woman more and more.

"For what it's worth, some of them are actually worth the effort. Just don't ever admit that to them."

"I won't. I'm Selene," she introduced herself.

Recognition dawned in the blonde's eyes, confusing Selene, until she said, "Ah, yes. The rebel."

Selene waited a beat, expecting an introduction in return. To her surprise, the woman didn't volunteer her identity. Finally, she replied, "I see my reputation precedes me."

She meant to sound amused, but she couldn't disguise her bitterness.

"I meant it as a compliment. Believe me, these patriarchal *Tigre* need some women to shake things up and drag them out of the dark ages."

The simple comment struck Selene momentarily speechless as a wave of gratitude washed over her. Never in all her years, had another *Tigre*--male or female--offered her any understanding. She'd always been the odd-one out. The troublemaker. The problem child.

The woman's casual statement struck a chord deep inside Selene, and tears pricked the back of her eyes. For the first time in her life, she didn't feel so alone.

Selene swallowed twice before managing to say, "Don't let anyone hear you say that, or they'll label you like they've labeled me."

"You mean as a strong independent woman in charge of her own life? By all means, let them label me like that." The stranger was completely serious. Her tone conveyed genuine admiration.

"Thanks," Selene replied. "And to think I didn't want to come this weekend."

The woman's eyebrows rose. "Then why did you?"

"Are you kidding? And risk insulting the alpha's new mate?"

The stranger rolled her eyes. "I wish more people had chosen to insult me. I feel

like a lab experiment under the microscope.”

Oh *shit*! This was the alpha's mate, Caitlyn. No wonder she hadn't introduced herself. She'd assumed that Selene had smelled the unmistakable metallic tang of her half-human blood.

Selene frantically replayed the conversation in her mind. She couldn't believe she'd treated the alpha's mate with such common familiarity. Could things possibly get any worse? She wanted to beat her head against the wooden railing.

Actually that wasn't such a bad idea. If she got lucky, maybe she could batter herself unconscious.

Faced with no other choice--her mother would never let her hear the end of it if she bashed herself insensible before the *Tigrine*--Selene blustered through the serious breach of etiquette.

“Actually, having so many--if not all--Pride members here demonstrates your power and rank in the Pride. It's a show of respect to both you and your mate. If any *Tigre* didn't attend without a valid reason, it would be an act of insubordination and prelude to a power struggle within the Pride.”

Caitlyn shook her head. “I don't think I will ever understand *Tigre* politics, positioning, and etiquette.”

Selene considered that.

“I suppose for someone raised with humans, it would seem strange. Much of it is instinct driven. Our tiger instincts never completely leave us, even when in human form. If you ever have any questions, I'll be happy to answer them for you,” she volunteered, surprising herself.

Brilliant move. What better way to maintain her independence from the Pride than to become the alpha female's advisor?

Selene gripped the wood beneath her hands tighter. Maybe instead of battering herself unconscious with the railing, she could use it to break her jaw. At least that way, she'd keep herself from saying anything else stupid.

Caitlyn pushed away from the railing. “Thanks. I suppose I should get back inside before I unintentionally insult someone with my absence.”

Selene nodded her agreement. She'd like to tell Caitlyn she was being paranoid. But she wasn't. For all their fierce pride, *Tigre* had surprisingly thin skin. An overlong absence could be viewed as a slight by the higher ranking Pride members.

“It was nice meeting you,” Selene said, sincerely.

Caitlyn flipped her hair over her shoulder and flashed a smile. “If you change your mind, remember I know where the liquor is.”

Caitlyn disappeared back into the party, leaving Selene to stare out over the landscape. While she wasn't less confused than she had been upon meeting Carrick, she felt a little lighter, realizing for the first time in her life, she had an ally in the Pride.

* * * *

Carrick, smoothly obtained his mate's lineage and then positioned himself closely to her sire. He quietly sipped on his drink and listened to the conversation flowing around him, trying to pick up something in the conversation or the man's manner that would give him insight into Selene's indifference.

Her father was strong. A member of the Pride's ruling council and personal advisor to Damien. Even more impressive, he acted as the Pride's diplomat when territorial conflicts between shifters arose.

Carrick gritted his teeth as the conversation revolved around economics. Once he discovered Selene was Hayden's daughter, he realized that she was also the rebel of the Pride. The female who had left the safety of the Pride to live and work among humans.

The thought had him swallowing a growl. The idea of his mate, unclaimed and living outside the protection of her immediate family, infuriated him. He'd seen first hand the dangers of the outside world, both with humans and other shifters.

Her blithe disregard for her own safety had him wanting to grab her and lock her in the basement. Preferably with him.

After half an hour, Carrick was forced to accept that no one was ill-bred enough to bring up the diplomat's rebel daughter. Gods knew he couldn't do it. An unattached male asking questions about an unattached female who had not responded to his pheromones would ensure he couldn't get within twenty-feet of her.

He couldn't risk it. He needed to be close enough for her to scent him again. Close enough to trigger the mating heat.

For the life of him, he couldn't understand her apathy. He knew--*knew*--with every fiber of his being that she was his. The fury at being unable to claim her had him fighting the change. Something all *Tigre* mastered at puberty.

She'd turned him into nothing more than a randy kit.

For a man of action and decision, floundering was a foreign experience, and he didn't like it. He excused himself politely, left his drink on a side table, and escaped into the early evening.

He needed a plan. He needed action. His mind raced.

Later that night, the Pride planned a run in *Tigre* form. A tradition when the alpha took a mate. The Pride followed the alpha's mate on a run beneath Mother Moon. Of course the new mate couldn't shift, so their following of the alpha would be symbolic of following her.

Caitlyn had actually suggested having the Pride follow her as she rode a dirt bike. The suggestion had been strenuously vetoed, not just by her mate, but by others present. No one wanted to run with the sound of an engine vibrating in their ultra-sensitive ears or the smell of burning fuel blocking the scent of the night air.

Carrick knew he would be able to get near Selene during the run. He had no doubt that he would easily find her. And while scents and appearances changed after the shift, she was *his*. He would know her.

On the downside, *Tigre* mates who met in shifted form didn't recognize one another. Pheromones altered with the shift and his presence wouldn't trigger the mating heat, but he could observe her. Get close to her. Just be with her.

Carrick snarled. He didn't like how just the idea of being near her altered his mood. The welling joy left him feeling ... vulnerable, an alien sensation he didn't care for.

It made him angry. Angry that he suffered in this vulnerable state while his mate merrily ignored his existence. Angry at the forced separation. Angry at the delay in

making her his.

She would his by the end of the weekend. He wouldn't stand for anything less.

On an upswing of confidence, Carrick spun and headed towards his simple home. He needed to prepare for the hunt.

Chapter Four

Selene stood in the grassy clearing, surrounded by the rest of the Pride. She let the sundress she wore slither to the ground, leaving her naked and barefoot. She tilted her head back and bathed her face in the light of the full moon.

A beautiful hunter's moon. A moon that seemed five times its normal size. It's rich, golden-orange called to the cat within her. Teasing it to awaken. To run beneath her light.

Around Selene, men and women of the Pride dropped to four padded paws as they shifted in preparation for the run. She itched to shift. It hurt to resist the call of the night while her brethren heeded it.

Trying to look casual rather than desperate, she stretched her palms towards the moon before linking her fingers together and bending forward in a gentle stretch. She couldn't afford to shift until after Carrick did, because she had to remove her nose plugs first.

She wasn't sure what shifting with the nose plugs in might do. The foam could wind up in her sinus cavities or eye sockets for all she knew. Even if she survived the shift without incident, gods only knew what would happen when she shifted back.

She tried to calm her rising agitation. Really, all she had to do was wait for Carrick to shift, but she didn't know where he was in the crowd. Just thinking about Carrick made her nipples harden to tight little points and her womb spasm. She hoped those around her attributed her physical response to the cool breeze blowing against her skin.

She glanced around at the figures weaving between the trees. The crush of people and tigers--her people--moving about.

Removing the plugs was going to be tricky. She couldn't afford to let anyone see her do it.

Her stomach clenched with fear rather than desire when the severity of her actions sunk in. Belatedly realizing she could be hauled before the council.

Unlike the human world, much of *Tigre* law derived from instinct rather than the written word. While her actions to date had been rebellious, she had not done anything that could be perceived as harmful to the Pride.

But this ... *Tigre* had founded their society on meeting the needs of both their forms. While most Pride members were wealthy and well-established, that human civility lay like a thin veneer over primal instincts, and the basest instinct was survival. Not just of oneself or family, but of their entire species. To impede that survival

She wrapped her arms around herself. She was denying a male *Tigre* his mate and while she only meant to delay her mating, the Council would see it as depriving the Pride of its next generation. And as a full-grown woman, she wouldn't get off with a slap on the wrist.

Guilt and shame battled with her fierce need for independence. The need to be more than an incubator.

Her thoughts turned to her parents, and while her mother's reaction to the situation would not be pleasant, the shame she imagined on her father's face had tears forming in her eyes.

Guilt finally overwhelmed her, and she stepped into the shadows behind a large tree. She glanced around desperately, making sure no one was paying attention to her and trying to see if Carrick was close.

She covered her nose with one hand and surreptitiously removed the plugs with the other. Not dignified, but at least it somewhat camouflaged her actions.

Once they were free, she held her breath and resisted the urge to physically pinch her nose closed. She dropped the plugs to the ground and as they fell, she began the change. Her muscles and ligaments began to extend and stretch as she took on the more flexible form of the cat.

Her short fingernails lengthened into sharp, retractable claws. Her spine cracked as displaced air pockets escaped while her bones realigned themselves. Her skin itched until the silken fur of the tiger broke through the skin, bringing relief--like scratching chicken pox.

She fell forward, thrown by the force of the change, but she landed gracefully on soft, padded paws. The satisfaction of swishing her tail eclipsed the discomfort of having it grow from her body.

Selene took a deep breath, reveling in the smells of the night around her. The rich, earthy smell of soil. The freshness of the wind blowing through the green leaves of the tree limbs above her. And the scent of smaller animals scurrying through the woods.

The scent of prey.

She opened her eyes, marveling anew at the difference of the world when seen through the eyes of a tiger. Her pupils dilated, letting in more light and giving her better night vision than a human could ever understand. In this form, she could see as well at midnight as she could on a sunlit day at noon.

The roar of her packmates around her echoed the satisfaction she felt in the wild, uninhibited form of the tiger. She'd lived among the humans too long, denying this essential part of herself. The wildness of nature pounded in her blood. She joined her packmates with a steady, predatory grace.

She took another deep breath and began to run in a slow, gentle lope after those who'd started the run. Her body lengthened and contracted as she slowly built speed. Finally, she covered the ground as fast as she could, lost in the elation of giving her true nature free rein.

She ran hard, unaware of the pair of eyes affixed on her form. The eyes of a very large tiger who carefully kept behind her.

They ran for miles, but it wasn't enough. Not for Selene. She'd denied her true self too long.

When the Pride turned to loop back to their clothing, she continued straight. Miles of Prideland stretched out before her, and she needed more than a short run.

Without breaking stride, she leapt over a fallen tree, side-stepped a sunken hole,

and unerringly found her footing--despite having left the defined path.

Another *Tigre* appeared beside her, slowing his pace to match hers. The *Tigre* appeared larger than anyone she knew, but she didn't stop to consider that. She couldn't. In tiger form for the first time in months, her animal nature drowned out her analytical thought process.

The presence of the other cat momentarily disconcerted her, but she found having another one of her kind along made the run all the sweeter. Now she didn't just revel in *her* nature, but *their* nature.

She hadn't realized how truly lonely she'd been, living outside the Pride.

Selene didn't recognize the male, but she wasn't surprised he had joined her. The males of the species were very protective of the females. Seeing her leave the pack, he wouldn't have hesitated to follow and protect her.

To her delight, he didn't try to herd her back to the pack or insist she follow him. He let her run free.

Exhilarated, she began to regain control of her tiger instincts as they approached a lake near the center of the Pridelands. Panting with exertion, she slowed her approach to the lake, coming to a stop on its banks, and lowering her head to take a drink of the sweet, pristine water.

The male appeared hardly winded, but then she knew she was out of shape. He stood several feet behind her, up the slight slope of the lake's bank, clearly scanning their surroundings.

Had she been in human form, she would have rolled her eyes. After all, they were in the middle of protected land. It wasn't like she was going to get shot, stuffed, and mounted if he took a drink of water, and he had to be thirsty.

Her thirst slaked, she lifted her head and shook the remaining water droplets from her muzzle. She padded back up to join the male *Tigre*.

To her surprise, the fur all along his back rippled, and he let out a menacing growl. His gaze fixed on a thicket of trees slightly further down the lake's bank. She moved to stand next to him, cautiously sniffing the air, but could detect no trace of a threat.

The male moved his body slightly in front of her, taking a protective stance. He began to walk backwards, forcing Selene towards the cluster of trees behind them. He swung his head towards her and fixed her with a look of warning. He tossed his head towards the cluster and turned back to face whatever had him alarmed.

His growls became more audible. His behavior alarmed her, and she turned to run for the safety of the forest, just as a shot rang out, whizzing so close to her that she could feel the heat of the bullet singe her fur.

Shocked, she froze. This was Prideland. This was safe. No one was supposed to be shooting at her here.

Her companion had no such hesitation. He spun around and butted her with his head, pushing her from behind.

Selene's brain kicked into gear and she ran as fast as she could. She passed the tree line and continued to run, blind to all but her fear. She ran with no thought of stopping.

To her surprise, the male moved beside her and began to nudge her body with his. He pulled ahead of her, clearly indicating she should stop, but she was in a full panic. She needed to get away. Someone was trying to kill them.

He caught the scruff of her neck between his powerful jaws, jerking her to a stop. And like all cats when grabbed by the scruff, her body went limp, paralyzed.

He dragged her down, and she found herself lying on her side, trembling. He dropped his larger body over hers, before releasing her neck, pinning her to the ground.

She felt his bones shift, and his skin seemed to writhe against her fur. In her panicked state, it took a moment for her to realize he was shifting, changing into human form.

The process took mere seconds, and before she could gather her wits to run, he had grabbed her scruff with both of his hands.

He leaned over into her line of vision, and Selene found herself staring into the rich, brown eyes of Carrick.

"Change," he ordered. "Do you understand?"

His grip lessened, and she struggled to free herself. She managed to get onto her belly and tried to get her legs beneath her.

He clung to her back, strong despite being in human form. He held on.

"They're poachers," he said. "Likely out here for deer. I don't know if that was a stray bullet or if they saw us and panicked, but they are after animals, not people. Change."

She froze in indecision. A stray bullet likely meant they were safe, and she wouldn't have to shift, but if they had been seen

Her heart thundered loudly in her ears. She'd have to take human form and be unprotected in the presence of her mate.

Who was already naked on top of her.

Another gunshot rang out. It sounded close, but she couldn't discern its direction.

"Change," he growled into her ear, and she realized she had no choice.

Damned if she did and damned if she didn't. At least if she did, she stood a chance of coming out of this alive.

Her decision made, she focused her energy and began the shift.

When she began the change, Carrick rose from her body and stood. His stance just as protective in this form as it had been in tiger form. His eyes swept the area, though he couldn't see as well as he could before.

Finishing the change, she lay panting on her side. Rocks and twigs pressed against her delicate skin and she winced as she scraped her thigh against the sharp side of a rock.

She glanced at Carrick, and he extended his hand without once lowering his eyes to hers. She took his hand and let him pull her to her feet.

"The lake," he said and began to run sure-footedly despite the darkness around them.

Selene stumbled, and he slowed his pace.

"We're going *back* to the lake?" she gasped, adrenaline pumping through her system.

He didn't answer. Selene unsuccessfully tried to extract her hand from his grip.

Brilliant. They were naked, in the middle of nowhere, being shot at, and running *towards* the gun. If they survived this, maybe tomorrow they could play with a downed live wire or drive a car 80 miles an hour into a brick wall with the airbags turned off.

They broke through the trees and Carrick continued to run into the open area between the line of trees and the lake.

What the *hell* was he doing?!

She finally wrenched her hand free and managed not to fall on her ass. She came to a complete stop atop the small rise. The ground before her sloped gently down about three feet to the lake.

Carrick didn't hesitate. He spun, grabbed her by the waist, and flung her out into the water.

She shrieked as cold water closed over her head. She came up sputtering and coughing to see Carrick wade into the water, until he was knee deep. He executed a shallow dive and stroked over to where she stood waist deep in the water.

The sound of voices and men running became more distinct as Carrick pulled beside her.

"I'm sorry," he told her.

Before she could respond, he pulled her body hard against his. He threaded his hand into her hair, yanked her head back and covered her mouth with his own.

She opened her mouth to protest, and he took advantage of the moment, his tongue sweeping inside to taste her.

At the touch of his tongue to hers, Selene forgot her protests and melted against the man's sculpted chest. His hands slid down to cup her buttocks, pulling her tighter to him, and all traces of rational thought fled as she surrendered to his mouth.

Chapter Five

Breaking the kiss and putting space, no matter how slight, between his body and Selene's was the hardest thing Carrick had ever done. Every atom in his being screamed in protest when he unwound her arms from his neck and moved to shield her nudity with his body.

Selene made an inarticulate sound of protest.

"Easy baby," he soothed under his breath.

Selene wrapped her arms around his waist, rubbing the hard little points of her nipples against the expanse of his back and the renewed desire to rip the jugulars from the poachers' throats had little to do with the earlier gunshots.

"Which way did they go?" a man's voice penetrated the sensual haze surrounding Carrick's mind.

He raised predatory eyes to study the three men approaching the lake. His nostrils flared and despite the potent aroma of his mate's arousal, he detected the scent of alcohol.

Great. These yahoos had to be three sheets to the wind for him to smell the alcohol with Selene so close. Had Selene not been present, he would have made short work of the fools who dared to invade Pridelands--but she was there and her safety came first.

And though it went against every instinct he had, Carrick intentionally drew the hunters' attention to him.

"What the fuck are you doing her?" he demanded. "This is a private preserve."

"I could ask you the same thing," a wide-eyed hunter shot back, his gaze flickering to Carrick and back to the woods before his mind registered what he'd seen, and his eyes returned to the naked couple in the lake.

"I'd think that was obvious. My girlfriend --" Carrick wanted to wince at using such a banal term to describe his mate -- and I wanted some privacy in the great outdoors."

One of the hunters, who couldn't have been more than twenty, stared unblinking at the naked couple in the water. "I'd want that too if my girlfriend looked like her."

Carrick growled beneath the frequency human ears could detect and reached behind himself to still Selene's movements.

The oldest man, the one Carrick took to be the leader of the small group, drew closer to the lake. He rested his shot gun barrel down beside his foot and leaned against it, fixing Carrick with a beady gaze. "You see two tigers run this way?"

Carrick forced a laugh. "Tigers? Man what have you been smoking?"

The youngest one took offense. "There were two tigers. You calling us liars?"

Carrick held up his hands in the universal sign of surrender. "I haven't seen any tigers. Did see a couple of red bear cubs come shooting out of the woods after I heard a car backfire." He paused and tried to look sheepish. "Guess that was you shooting. I

wasn't paying that much attention ... I was otherwise occupied."

"Red bear cubs?" the third man spoke for the first time.

Carrick lifted a negligent shoulder. He didn't even know if bears came in red. Hell, he had grown up on the beach. "I didn't pay much attention other than to realize they weren't interested in us."

"Where are your clothes?" the third man asked, clearly the most sober of the group.

"In the car," Selene replied. Her voice sounded normal, if somewhat breathy. Carrick sensed her fear and pride welled in him at her courage.

"You walked from your car to the lake with no clothes on?" the man prodded skeptically.

"There's no thrill if there's no risk," she shot back, and Carrick hid a smile at her feisty retort.

The group's leader raised his hand, effectively stopping his group from responding. The man lifted his gaze to stare past Carrick's left shoulder.

Carrick didn't have to turn to know what the man saw. A patrol vehicle was approaching along the dirt road to the south of lake, alerted by the poachers' gunshots.

"Let's get out of here," the leader barked, and the three men bolted.

Carrick watched them run northwest, before turning to wrap Selene in his arms. He watched as a four-wheel drive truck approached the edge of the lake. Reluctantly, he loosened his hold on Selene and began pulling her towards the vehicle.

The driver's door swung open and Tripp stepped out, still reporting their location on the hand-held walkie-talkie.

"Are you injured?" he called as they approached.

"No," Carrick shouted back and watched Tripp relay his response to headquarters.

When Carrick and Selene slogged their way out of the lake, Tripp was waiting with towels and robes from the truck's emergency response kit.

Carrick wrapped Selene in a towel and made sure she dried herself completely before accepting a towel for himself.

"Damien's called a meeting of the Pride Council to hear your report as soon as I get you back," Tripp warned him.

Carrick gritted his teeth and assisted his mate up into the truck. Damien's timing couldn't be worse. Council members didn't understand the concept of a brief meeting.

He followed Selene into the truck and pulled her tightly against him, gratified when she snuggled into his side and rested her head against his shoulder.

Tripp climbed into the driver's seat and glanced at Selene in the rear-view mirror. "I'll drop Carrick at the main house and then take you to your parents' house."

Carrick bristled in response. "Selene goes with me to the main house," he growled.

"They won't need her testimony. They'll have yours," Tripp reminded him.

"My mate stays with me," he bit out coldly, choosing to ignore the surprised look Tripp shot him.

Mentally cursing the job that forced him to delay sealing the bond with his mate, he took advantage of the ride to hold her tightly and savor the feel of her warm body in

his arms.

* * * *

Ironically, it was Caitlyn--a nonshifter--who suggested Selene would be more comfortable awaiting Carrick in *Tigre* form. Advice Selene gratefully took. As a recently mated woman, Caitlyn could no doubt understand her physical distress at the separation from Carrick better than anyone.

In addition to dulling the desperate need coursing through her body, it made talking to her mother impossible. Not that it stopped her mother from talking to her.

"Are you ovulating now?" her mother asked for the fourth time in a half an hour.

Caitlyn gave her a sympathetic look, and Selene closed her eyes, resting her muzzle on her paws.

"How long is this meeting going to last?" Belinda demanded of Caitlyn. "My daughter just found her mate. This affects the future of the Pride. Surely this is more important than some security meeting."

"Mrs. Patterson, these humans managed to enter our land without us knowing it. They shot at your daughter and her mate. This is a very serious situation that must be addressed as soon as possible," Caitlyn explained with the patience of a diplomat.

Her mother gave the dismissive sniff Selene knew so well. Caitlyn could douse Belinda with gasoline and light her on fire and it wouldn't distract the older woman from her focus.

"So is it your fertile time of the month?" she asked again, as though Selene had magically developed the ability to speak since the last time she'd asked the question.

And how many different ways could the woman couch the same question?

People often commented on her father's amazing patience. Then they met her mother, and the source of that patience became obvious. Still, over the years, he'd developed ways to deal with his wife.

Selene wished he hadn't had to attend the meeting with Carrick and could handle the aggravating woman.

She hadn't realized until they reached the main house that Carrick would have to stay for the whole meeting. When Tripp had mentioned Carrick's testimony, she had assumed that Carrick would be summoned before the Council to give his account then dismissed.

Instead, her mate was a member of the Council, and not just any member, but the Pride's Man-at-Arms. She'd been amazed to learn that someone so young held such a powerful position. While she had never doubted the intelligence that lurked in those deep brown eyes, she hadn't realized the extent of his accomplishments.

His success made her even more nervous about her situation.

"I can't believe this meeting couldn't wait until morning. Has it been about two weeks since you last started your period?"

That made six different ways of asking that very personal question in front of the new *Tigrine*.

"Mrs. Patterson, this meeting could take several hours. There's no need for you to stay. Why don't you return home? I'll wait with Selene."

While Selene appreciated Caitlyn's efforts on both their behalves, if she could

have spoken, she would have told her not to waste her time.

Belinda sucked in an offended breath. "I couldn't possibly abandon my baby at this critical point in her life. Why it is entirely possible that she could conceive my grandchild tonight, right Selene?"

Seven, Selene counted silently.

Caitlyn circled around Selene's prone form and opened a pair of cabinet doors to reveal a recessed bar. She poured a liberal amount of amber liquid into a glass. "I thought you'd need this before me," she intoned in a pitch too low for human ears--or human-form ears--to hear.

Selene swished her tail in sympathetic amusement. Her mother's ramblings could drive a deaf man to drink.

"Would you care for a drink, Mrs. Patterson?"

Selene could appreciate the desperation in Caitlyn's voice. She wasn't the first person to want Belinda Patterson to pass-out in a drunken stupor.

"I never touch the stuff," Belinda said haughtily. The woman's tone conveyed the self-congratulatory air of superiority at her alcohol abstention. Having long believed herself to be a paragon of feminine virtue, she eschewed any habit she perceived as masculine. That included drinking.

Caitlyn raised a brow at Belinda's arrogant tone, and the older woman blanched, suddenly remembering to whom she spoke.

Selene watched her mother slap a plastic, political smile on her face. "But you must call me Belinda. Mrs. Patterson is far too formal, don't you think?"

Caitlyn made a noncommittal noise that Belinda rewarded with a beaming smile, clearly taking it as an affirmative response.

Selene turned her attention to the door as Belinda crowded the *Tigrine*, no doubt intent on pursuing their 'friendship'.

Her mother's presence had done nothing to reassure Selene and everything to raise her anxiety. All her fears rose to choke her, her protestations of independence stripped away, leaving her bare and exposed.

The only thing separating her from her fate was a thick wooden door. And she silently cursed fate.

Oh sure, she'd heard the stories her whole life. The preachings on the superiority of the shifter breeds, most especially the way the gods had blessed them over the humans, giving them special senses to recognize their mates.

Unlike humans, *Tigre* didn't suffer the indignities of stumbling around searching for a lifemate, only to find themselves betrayed and suffering the agonies of divorce. *Tigre* instinct and physiology found the lifemates destined for them by the gods and divorce was taboo among their people.

But Selene had her doubts about the alleged happily-ever-after scenario. Hell, she'd grown up with Belinda. The woman was a self-centered, vapid shrew. To this day, Selene didn't understand why the gods had saddled such a woman on her mild-mannered, diplomatic, and intellectual father.

Never once had Hayden Patterson displayed anything other than love and devotion for his wife. Selene had never seen him frustrated or angry by the woman's

pettiness. She didn't know how her father did it. The man was a living saint.

She wasn't.

What if Carrick turned out to be a male version of her mother? Someone she had to endure for the rest of her life.

Worse. What if *she* turned out to be her mother? Someone the complete antithesis of Carrick? The lodestone around his neck?

Stomach churning, she winced at the loud creak of the hinges as the door swung open.

Damien exited the room first. He immediately caught his beautiful wife around the waist and swung her up in the air.

"Miss me?" he asked with a wolfish grin.

Caitlyn's answering smile had nothing to do with relief at being separated from Belinda.

The scene caused Selene's heart to break. The couple before her was every little girl's dream of fairytales and happily-ever-after.

Her father and Carrick emerged after what seemed like an eternity. Carrick had likely hung back to speak formally with her father. The old-fashioned gesture, a noble action on Carrick's part, touched Selene to the point that if she had been in human form, she'd have cried.

Carrick broke from her father's side and crossed the room to kneel beside her. He stroked the fur on her forehead, and she swallowed a satisfied purr.

"Are you ready to go home?" he asked softly.

Unable to help herself, she nudged his hand with head. He rewarded her with a sexy smile that had her shivering, even in *Tigre* form.

Carrick rose and to Selene's horror found himself face to face with Belinda.

"I'm delighted to welcome you to the family," Belinda trilled.

Panicking, Selene scrambled to her feet--paws--and insinuated herself between the two, leaning her body against Carrick's legs in what she hoped was a gentle encouragement to leave.

"I'd almost given up hope of ever finding Selene's mate," Belinda continued.

"I'm a fortunate man," Carrick said smoothly.

"Selene should consider herself fortunate to have such a strong mate who will take her willfulness in hand."

To her unending gratitude, her father appeared at his mate's side and tucked her hand firmly under his arm. "Belinda, we don't want to hold the young couple up."

Once again, Hayden had saved her from a potentially disastrous situation courtesy of his lifemate. Selene's stomach tightened with fear, but she made no protest when Carrick gestured towards the door.

He paused to gather the robe she'd worn from the chair on his way out the door. The kindly domestic action drove home the significant changes her life had suffered in the past four hours, and Selene wondered if it were possible to have a panic attack in *Tigre* form.

Chapter Six

Carrick winced as he viewed his home through the eyes of his new mate. Stark, white walls with little furniture. To their right, the living room had the most furniture with a sofa and coffee table situated before his new, large screen, state-of-the-art television. Boxes lined the walls throughout the cabin and Carrick worried about the impression his home gave his mate.

"I've only been here three weeks," he said, hoping to soften her opinion of his place. He flipped on the lights and led his new mate to the bedroom.

He dropped the robe he carried across the foot of his unmade bed. She hesitated in the doorway and Carrick wanted to smack himself in the forehead. Leading his mate--a complete stranger--directly to the bedroom without explanation could only lead her to one conclusion.

"I thought you might like some privacy to change," he told her, heading to the doorway. She stepped aside and let him pass. "I'll put some tea on."

He waited for her to enter the bedroom and pulled the door almost completely closed behind her. He headed to the kitchen, wiping damp palms on his jeans. What the hell was wrong with him? He was a trained soldier, a leader of elite forces. One small slip of a woman, shouldn't be able to tie him up in knots.

Slamming through cabinets, he finally located the kettle and set water to boil. Now all he had to was find some tea bags. He wondered if she took sugar with her tea. He wondered if he *had* sugar.

"Can I help?"

Startled, Carrick jerked upright, narrowly avoiding smashing his head against an open cabinet door. He smiled and turned to face her.

She looked stunning in the simple white robe, belted snugly around her slim waist. The color set off the bronze glow of her skin. He wanted to run his hands through the length of chestnut hair spilling around her.

The uncertainty in her green eyes checked his impulse to go to her and tugged uncomfortably at his heart.

His mind raced to find something to put her at ease. Dammit, someone needed to write rules of etiquette for this situation.

Carrick frowned, suddenly remembering their first conversation. "What happened to your voice?"

"There's nothing wrong with my voice," she sounded defensive.

"Not now," he agreed, locating a box of chamomile tea. "Earlier you sounded ...," he paused, looking for something more diplomatic than 'able to raise garage doors with a single syllable,' "... higher pitched."

She shrugged negligently, but her face flamed red. Even though his curiosity was peaked, Carrick let the subject drop. He'd get answers later. Right now, he was more

concerned with putting her at ease.

The kettle whistled loudly and Selene visibly jumped. Her reaction drove home his need to put her at ease. This was literally the first night of the rest of his life.

They had a short window of time before the mating heat overpowered her reason and he'd be damned if he didn't make the most of that time to set her at ease. "How do you take your tea?"

"With honey if you have any."

Aha! He had honey. Feeling inordinately pleased with being able to add honey to her tea, he dropped tea bags into two mismatched mugs and stirred in a small amount of honey.

He slid one of the mugs down the counter to her, keeping himself--and his pheromones--a respectable distance from her. No need to fan the fires.

"Thank you."

He watched her take a sip of the tea and found the expression she made when she realized the tea hadn't steeped absolutely adorable.

Leaning against the sink, Carrick crossed his ankles. Always one to tackle things head-on, he said, "Awkward, isn't it?"

Relief and a touch of humor lit her eyes and some of the tension eased from her shoulders.

"Yes," she agreed. "I suppose most couples don't have the adrenaline overload from being shot at to dull their reaction to each other."

He grinned. "Thank the gods for adrenaline. I'd hate to have faced the poachers while sealing our mating bond."

Selene blushed again and let out an embarrassed laugh. Carrick decided he enjoyed getting a rise out of his mate. Teasing her was going to be an enjoyable pastime over the next few decades.

He lifted his mug and gestured towards the living room. "Would you like to sit and talk for a bit?"

Until the fever takes over went unsaid.

* * * *

Selene settled herself on one side of the couch and watched Carrick's muscles ripple beneath his clothes. Selene had been unable to dress upon her return to the main house because her clothes had mysteriously gone missing. She didn't doubt her mother was the culprit, but she'd taken the clothes *before* she'd known about Carrick. Gods only knew what the woman had been thinking.

Turning to face her mate, she swallowed in an attempt to stave off the rising desire.

Carrick settled on the opposite end of the couch and draped his arm across the back. Selene watched the powerful muscles in his arms bunch and stretch, and her mouth went dry. She swallowed and glanced away, feeling self-conscious.

The panic she'd felt had abated somewhat when the large, imposing man had fumbled around his sparse kitchen trying to make her feel at ease.

"I have to return to the main house in the morning to start improving the security measures in place."

She glanced at him in surprise, uncertain how to respond. "You seem young to hold the position of Man-at-Arms."

Selene immediately wanted to call the words back. Wow. That was smooth. Nothing men liked more than to have their competence questioned.

A half-smile quirked his lips. The first natural expression to cross his face since they'd entered his home.

"I am young for the post, but I'm good at what I do," he said confidently. "Once the changes I intend to make are in place, you won't have to worry about trespassers on Pridelands."

Gods, she felt his voice along her skin, like a hot, velvet caress. She took a deep breath before she thought better of it. With the life-threatening situation behind her and transformed out of the protective *Tigre* form, nature was finally beginning to take control, if somewhat slowly.

"I just wanted to apologize for not being able to give you the Sequestration Week. If you'd like, once things settle down here, we can take a vacation somewhere."

It took a minute for her to get past the rich texture of his voice and focus on his words. His offer and apology demonstrated his concern for his new mate's feelings. Sequestration Week was a tradition where newly mated couples were released from all duties in order to get to know one another and indulge their new sexual relationship.

A courtship and honeymoon rolled into one.

Her cousin Alan had always called her 'Trouble'. She couldn't remember a single time he'd ever called her by her actual name, insisting if given the opportunity, she'd accidentally spin the earth the opposite direction on its axis.

She rubbed her forehead with a weary hand. She hadn't caused a rotational catastrophe--yet--but she had managed to screw up millennia old instinctual and biochemical responses. Apparently she could undo her people's evolution single handedly.

Her friends who had bonded recounted their first matings as a primal, erotic event that no woman should miss. The descriptions of their wild, uninhibited encounters had left her squirming with a discomfort that had nothing to do with embarrassment.

She glanced at the large man next to her--the one who was trying so hard to look unthreatening--and swallowed a bitter laugh. Briefly she considered the possibility that her exposure to Carrick while wearing the nose plugs had lessened the severity of the mating fever. Simon, one of the Pride's scientists would likely be fascinated by the theory.

Not that she'd ever tell him. She did have her pride, after all.

Whatever the slowdown in her response, her body had been slowly reacting to him since she'd shifted to human form while on the run. Her brief time in *Tigre* form while at the main house had paused the rising tide of desire, but not stemmed it. Shifting back in her mate's bedroom, she'd felt the force of his pheromones like a punch in the gut.

The awkwardness between them slowly melted away as Selene gave up fighting her reaction to the man next to her. Warmth rose in her core and radiated outwards to her limbs. The tension, caused by embarrassment, eased and a tension caused by anticipation took its place.

Carrick must have sensed her capitulation, because the tight lines on his face eased. He lifted his hand from the sofa and stroked the back of his fingers softly along her cheek, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

"I won't hurt you," he vowed in a passionate whisper that tugged at her heart.

She raised her eyes to meet the rich, chocolate gaze of her mate. The sincerity shining in them touched her deeply. "I never thought you would."

The gratitude and relief in his eyes surprised her. He was so incredibly handsome it took her a minute to process that others might find his size intimidating.

She found it arousing.

He leaned towards her slowly, carefully giving her time to pull away. She didn't.

His mouth touched hers with the barest brush of his lips, causing a ticklish sensation and leaving her aching for more. When she didn't pull back, he pressed his mouth more firmly against hers.

Carrick's lips felt smooth against her own. Somehow, she'd expected his mouth be hard and chapped. The softness seemed incongruous with his size, but incredibly provoking.

When he ran his tongue along the seam of her mouth, her lips parted of their own volition. To her delight, he tasted as good as he smelled. Like mint and pine and the raw wildness of a *Tigre* male.

Her bones dissolved at the first velvet stroke of his tongue, and he pulled her with ease along the length of the couch until she rested flush against his side. He twisted slightly, pushing her further into the softness of the sofa.

He let his mouth grow more demanding, communicating his desire for her as he increased the pressure of his lips and the speed of his tongue's thrusts into her mouth.

She couldn't contain a moan of desire and lifted her hands to thread through his hair. To her surprise, his hair was soft and slid through her fingers with a silky coolness that tickled.

A warm, male hand trailed calloused pads of fingers down the column of her throat, and her body responded. Her breasts felt so swollen, she found herself glad to be unconstrained by a bra.

She must have made a noise, some sound of distress at the thought, because Carrick pulled back and stared at her. His hand fell away from her throat and heavily-lidded eyes shone with concern.

Uncertain what words would reassure him with breaking the sensual enchantment bespelling her senses, she licked her lips and pulled his head back down to hers. She caressed his lower lip with her tongue before shyly kissing him. The low growl of pleasure issued from his throat emboldened her, and she put all the passion she felt into the kiss.

He responded with a violent passion, taking control of the kiss and drowning her in his passion. Despite the ardor she felt raging in him, the hand he raised to stroke her collarbone touched her with infinite gentleness.

The hand cupping the back of her neck moved up to tangle in her hair. He tugged until she tilted her head back, exposing the slim line of her throat.

An instinctual fear tickled the corners of her arousal. For an animal--a tiger--to

show throat meant displaying weakness or submission. Literally putting ones life at risk.

To her surprise, the sensation of being laid bare--metaphorically, anyway--before her mate intensified her arousal rather than reduced it.

His mouth trailed a wet path of fire down her neck, only pausing when he reached her rapid, fluttering pulse. He licked the delicate patch of skin over the pulse and then pulled back just enough to blow a hot breath across it.

The sensation raised chills along her arms, and she shivered when he gently took that skin between his teeth--giving her a bite before beginning to suckle in rhythm to her pulse.

The hand fell from her collarbone to trace the outer curve of her breast through the thin fabric of the robe. Her breast thrust upward, desperate for his elusive touch, her nipples tightening painfully in response.

Eyes squeezed shut, head thrown back, she took a desperate gasping breath that punched through the silence in the room.

"Easy, sweetheart," Carrick crooned, lifting his head, but continuing to caress her through the material. "We have all night," he added with a wicked smile.

Selene could feel the shyness in her return smile and sensed more than saw his amusement. Taking it as a challenge, she lifted her hand traced a slow path along her collarbone, then let her fingertips trail down the pale cleft between her breasts.

Her smile turned triumphant as his eyes followed her hand and the muscles of his body, pressed alongside her, tightened.

With obvious effort, he lifted his eyes back to hers. The fiery promise blazing in them caused heat to flood her stomach ... and lower.

"You like to tease, sweetheart?" he rumbled, before lowering his head to follow the same path as her hand. He released his grip on her hair and slid both hands behind her shoulder blades, pulling her chest towards his face as he buried his face between her breasts.

His mouth trailed a blazing path up the swell of her breast, nudging the fabric of the robe out of his way as he went. When he finally reached the puffy pad of her areola, he fisted the material of the robe in his hands, pulling the fabric towards her back and exposing a taught, pink nipple.

His tongue curled around the outside of the nipple in an erotic, velvet rasp. At some point, her hands had threaded through his hair again, and she clutched him to her breast.

He blew a cool stream of air across the straining peak, and she found herself begging, "Please."

He hesitated a nanosecond that felt like an eternity before finally drawing the aching tip into his mouth.

The sensation overwhelmed her. Even in her wildest fantasies, she hadn't imagined such a devastating feeling--the wet, moist heat of his mouth, the scrape of his teeth, the satisfied grunt of pleasure he gave

Unable to hold back, she gave a broken cry and felt her pussy spasm as tiny ripples of pleasure washed through her.

"Carrick," she half-groaned, half-gasped, arching against him.

The man released his grip on her robe and caressed her back in a soothing motion that felt almost as though he were petting her, praising her for responding to him.

"You're a responsive little thing, aren't you, sweetheart?" he asked, confirming her suspicions.

"Only in the right hands," she shot back, amused at his arrogance and reveling in the newly found joy of her sexuality.

Her quick response startled a laugh out of Carrick. "I see my mate isn't so shy after all."

Actually, she had spoken before her brain engaged, but decided to bluster through her embarrassment. She lifted her chin and gave him a haughty look. At least as haughty as a look could be while the deliverer shuddered with arousal.

To her disappointment, Carrick pulled away from her. Her distress must have shown on her face, because before she could pull up her robe to cover herself, he caressed her cheek.

She rubbed her face against his hand when he told her, "I'm not sealing my mating bond on a ratty old couch, and that's what's going to happen if I keep touching you out here."

"I wouldn't mind," she told him, extending her hand to pull him back down.

What the hell had gotten into her? Her mouth and body were acting independently of her brain. She should be protesting. Lamenting the loss of her freedom.

She should *not* be trying to inflame the very man who was taking all that she had worked for away from her.

Carrick ignored the inviting hand she had forgotten to retract and swept her into his arms.

Rational thought fled as her mind seized on the fact that the gorgeous man had actually *swept* her into his arms. Something elemental within her preened with feminine delight.

She wrapped her arms around Carrick's neck and snuggled against his chest, resting her head against his heart and listening to his steady--if somewhat elevated--heartbeat.

* * * *

Carrick held Selene cradled in his arms with a tenderness he hadn't known he could feel. Careful not to hurt or frighten her, he resisted his instinctual need to crush her to him and never let go.

His father had warned him of the reaction a mate caused in a male lucky enough to have one. From his earliest childhood, the importance of tempering primal bonding instincts had been drilled into him.

He just hadn't expected it to be so hard.

The need to stake his claim, to brand her as his so all would know to whom she belonged roared through him.

The only thing stopping him from throwing her to the floor and mounting her like an animal was the greater need to protect her from harm--both the physical harm he could inflict and the emotional harm, which he knew would be worse.

The bedroom door was pulled slightly closed and he shouldered it open,

manipulating his way in so not to bump the precious bundle in his arms.

He settled her gently in the center of the bed, wishing he'd at least bothered to make it before leaving that morning--but the last thing he'd expected was to bring home a mate.

Carrick made a mental note to submit an offering of thanks to the gods.

Stepping back, he surveyed his mate, who lay before him like an offering. His mouth went dry, while his cock grew impossibly harder. He hadn't been kidding about rutting inside her on the couch.

She lay before him, long and lean. Chestnut hair spilled around her, framing her golden beauty. The robe spilled open, revealing long, long legs. Legs capable of wrapping around a man twice. His gaze followed her form up to her firm, ripe breasts.

The belt knotted at her waist had shifted and the robe had slipped down her shoulders, leaving her chest completely uncovered. Her breasts were perfect. Paler than the rest of her skin, their rich firm curves called to him like a siren. Lush pink nipples stabbed upward, darkening with her growing arousal.

With effort, he dragged his gaze upward, away from the tempting peaks to her heart-shaped face. A rosy flush dusted her cheekbones and her emerald eyes glittered with desire. She licked her bow-shaped lips, and he moaned aloud.

The shy kitten had been replaced with a fiery vixen.

He pulled off his shirt before kneeling beside her on the bed. The mattress sagged beneath his weight, and with infinite care, he cupped her cheek with his hand.

"You'll let me know if you don't like something I do." It was a statement, not a question.

She breathed a soft yes and nodded with satisfaction.

Carrick stretched-out beside her and used the hand cupping her face to turn her towards him. To his delight, she lifted his mouth to his, and her hands came up to caress his chest. Her light touch set fire to his skin and he groaned into her mouth.

Her hands skimmed lightly down his sides, coming to rest at the waistband of his pants, pausing briefly before the tips of her fingers dipped beneath it. Reluctantly, he caught her hands and pulled them away from his body.

"If you keep touching me like that, I'm not going to last," he explained.

"But I like touching you," she told him a throaty voice full of sensual promise.

"Next time, sweetheart," he promised, studying her face carefully. "We have the rest of our lives to pleasure one another."

Whatever the delay in her response to his pheromones, it was gone now. The mating frenzy was kicking in with a vengeance if her glazed eyes were any indication.

Transferring both her wrists to one of his hands, he bent over her prone form and suckled a nipple. She quit trying to pull her wrists free and arched her back, thrusting her breast at him in a silent plea for more.

He happily obliged, sucking harder as his free hand drifted down to untie the belt of her robe and finally reveal her entire body to him.

To his frustration, he discovered the damn thing had become tightly knotted. He continued to worship her breasts with his mouth, surreptitiously using the time between breasts to glance down at the belt.

His patience--eclipsed by his burgeoning desire--grew short. Had his little mate intentionally tied the blasted thing into the Gordian knot?

After what seemed like hours to his overheated body, he gave up on the knot. Letting his razor sharp claws extend from his fingertips, he shredded the thin belt.

He released her nipple with a loud popping sound and pulled back to survey the delectable body laid out like a feast before him.

Carrick freed her wrists and used both hands to peel the robe from her body. He stopped her instinctual movement to cover herself with a vicious growl.

His eyes shifted, enhancing his vision. By all the gods and all their prophets her body splayed before him defined perfection. His gaze scanned high firm breasts crested with dusty peaks down a delicate ribcage to a slim waist.

He paused and took a shuddering breath before letting his gaze continue to the gentle flare of her hips and the apex of those incredibly long legs. He swallowed a breath--and almost his tongue--she'd waxed all the hair from her bikini area, leaving her feminine folds completely bare to his gaze.

Her naked flesh and inner thighs glistened with desire.

He couldn't have stopped himself from touching her if someone held a gun to his head. He gently traced a path to the top of her mound, forcing himself to watch her face for any sign of fear or discomfort.

Carrick cupped her softly, watching her eyes flutter shut with pleasure. With care, he slid his middle finger into her moist depths. She clenched against his invasion and he immediately knew she was a virgin. She was too tight for a man to have ever entered her.

He roared with primal satisfaction, and her eyes flew open. Alarm warred with desire in their green depths.

His thumb found her clit and began a slow, circular massage. Her head fell back and her hips arched against his hand in a rhythm older than time.

Carrick shifted, moving between her thighs and thrusting her legs further apart. Kneeling between her legs, he withdrew his finger and reveled in her cry of protest.

He slid his hands beneath the firm cheeks of her bottom and lifted her off the bed. He waited until her eyes fluttered opened and he snared her gaze with his own as he slowly lowered his mouth to the glistening flesh between her legs and gently scraped her teeth across her clit.

She screamed his name. He'd never heard a sweeter sound.

He pulled the sensitive nub of flesh into his mouth. She was so primed that he only laved his tongue against her a few seconds before she burst.

She came almost completely off the bed as she yelled her climax. He continued to gently suck as she slowly came down from her peak.

"Carrick," she pleaded, fisting the sheets in her hands.

"Yes, my mate?" he asked harshly, raising his head from his feast.

"Please," she begged. "I can't take anymore."

"Please what?" he asked, giving her clit a slow lick.

"I want to feel you inside me," she sobbed. "I want you to make me your mate."

Her body writhed and twisted before him. Odysseus had never faced such a siren.

Carrick swallowed hard and licked her cream from his lips. "There's no going back," he warned. "You're mine."

"I'm yours," she agreed and the cat inside him gave a satisfied purr.

He crawled up her body, carefully levering his weight from her. He came to rest above her, an arm braced on either side of her head.

"You want this," he snarled. Again, it wasn't a question.

"I want this," she agreed, shuddering as the head of his cock came to rest at the entrance of her channel.

"Then take me," he growled, thrusting hard into her.

A piercing cry tore from her lips and he stilled, halfway into her. A lone tear tracked down her cheek and had he not been partly lodged inside her tight, wet heat the sight would have unmanned him.

"Selene? Sweetheart?" he asked, worry making his voice harsher than he'd intended.

Green-eyes fluttered open, limpid pools of color in a face that was suddenly too pale. Clearly the pain had pierced the haze of the mating fever.

He felt like the lowest heel.

"Gods, I'm sorry," he told her. A few moments earlier, discovering he would be the man to take her maidenhead had roused a primitive joy within him. The reality of causing her pain--when he'd promised not to hurt her--tore at his heart.

She lifted a manicured hand to cup his face. "It had to be done," she reasoned, offering him forgiveness he did not feel he deserved.

Guilt swamped him. "There won't be any more pain. I'll never hurt you again," he vowed.

His beautiful mate lifted her other hand to her other cheek. Using her thumbs, she traced the arcs of his eyebrows. It was the most touching caress of his life.

To his relief, her eyes began to glaze with passion as the pain slowly faded.

"I'm glad it was you," she confessed on a whisper.

He dropped his head into the crook of her neck, joy at her declaration warring with the guilt he felt.

Carrick slid a hand between their bodies and began to gently thumb her clit as he nibbled on her neck. The fever returned with a vengeance at his touch. Her head fell back, exposing her slender throat and her hips arched against him.

With effort, he held himself still within her, determined not to move until all her pain had gone.

"Carrick, please," she sobbed as he increased pressure on her clit, rubbing it in firm circles. His cock was drenched with her desire, and only her untried state kept him from slipping deeper inside her.

It only took a few moments for her to explode. She came with a scream, her nails digging into his back. As she sobbed her pleasure, he thrust himself completely into her.

It took more effort than he thought, having never lain with a virgin before. Her inner muscles were swollen, and she was small and tight around him. He watched her face and to his relief, no discomfort showed on her face.

He braced his arms on either side of her body and waited for her to come down

from her high. His fists clenched in the sheets and his body strained with the effort of keeping still.

Her eyes finally rolled back down into their sockets and Carrick felt arrogantly pleased with her response to him.

Then his vixen wrapped her legs around his waist and purred, "I know we're not done yet."

He couldn't contain his smile, before his mouth swooped down to capture hers. He began to thrust slowly into her, careful not to hurt her. She groaned into his mouth and met him thrust for thrust.

"More," she demanded.

He complied. What else could he do?

He plunged harder and deeper, increasing his speed. It was all he could do to hold back his climax. The feel of her satin, inner walls clinging to him, trying to prevent his withdrawal as he stroked outward was the most incredible thing he'd ever felt.

But, he'd be damned if he'd take his pleasure without giving her hers.

He tore his mouth from hers and lowered his head to her breast, worshipping each perfect globe with his mouth. He alternated the speed of his thrusts, rotating his hips to grind against her pelvis--and more importantly, her clit.

She panted in short little gasps and he knew she was close. Using the pads of his first two fingers, he pressed hard against her and she cried out.

Her pussy spasmed around his cock, and he finally let himself come. He emptied himself into her with a roar, filling her womb with his seed.

Her nails bit into his back, and her cries echoed in his ears.

Unable to help himself he collapsed against her. She wrapped her arms around him and held him close. The peace he felt in her arms was damn near perfect.

Chapter Seven

A loud screeching yanked Selene from a sound sleep. Before her mind could engage, a large male body rolled across hers, knocking the breath from her body.

"Ooomph," she protested and struggled awake.

Cracking one bleary eye, she watched her mate smack at a bizarre looking device on the bedside table. Blessedly, the obnoxious screeching stopped.

Snagging the covers Carrick had taken during his roll, she fixed him with an evil glare.

"What is that?" she croaked irritably.

Carrick groaned and let his head drop over the side the bed.

"The alarm clock," he muttered.

She peered over his back at the strange looking device. "That's a clock?"

"It used to have a face, but I knocked that off a long time ago," he grumbled.

She pulled the sheet up over her breasts.

"Next time, *you* sleep next to that thing," she grumbled, snuggling back into the mattress.

"Sorry."

He didn't sound sorry, but that was fine with her. She'd kill herself if she'd wound up with a morning person for a mate.

Strike that. She'd kill *him*. She was too young to die.

She must have dozed off, because the next thing she knew, the mattress sagged beneath her mate's weight and the heavenly aroma of coffee teased her nose.

"I didn't know how you take your coffee," he told her, sitting a coffee mug, a carton of half-n-half, and a canister of sugar on the bedside table, shoving the 'clock' out of the way.

She cleared her throat to erase the sounds of sleep from her voice. "With cream and sugar."

Selene struggled to sit up, drawing the sheet up with her as her mate stirred her coffee for her. When she settled, propped against the pillow, he handed her the mug and she took a sip of the heavenly brew.

"I wanted to apologize again before I left," Carrick told her. "The last thing I want to do is leave my bride the first morning of our mated lives."

A warmth unrelated to the piping hot coffee curled in her stomach. "It's all right. The Pride's safety comes first."

"*Your* safety comes first," he responded, caressing her cheek.

"I'm not awake enough to flirt with you," she admitted bluntly.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Not a morning person either are you?"

She wrinkled her nose and grunted as she took another sip of her coffee. "Nope."

"I'm glad you don't sound like you did when I first heard you speak," he told her,

humor still crinkling the corners of his eyes.

"It was the nose filter that made me sound so strange," she responded and immediately could've bitten her tongue. Why the hell had she admitted that?

Damn coffee wasn't kicking in fast enough. She hoped to hell that he hadn't brought her decaf.

The humor left his face and his dark brows lowered.

"Nose filter?" he demanded.

Shit! Her mind blanked. On the plus side, she was now wide awake. Nothing like panic to make you alert.

"Selene?" he prompted, his voice harder than she'd ever heard it.

Shit! Shit! Shit! Her mind raced, desperate for an answer that would placate the man in front of her. She sent a silent pleas to the gods for assistance.

"Selene," he demanded. "Nose filter?"

So much for divine intervention. She tried for casual, giving a negligent shrug of one shoulder and adopting a dismissive tone. "I didn't think I was ready to settle down, so I wore nose plugs to the party."

If she had any hope he would take her admission well, the expression on his face when he shot to his feet destroyed it.

"You intentionally blocked your reaction to me?!" he thundered.

She winced. Now she had to deal with hurt male pride. Just what she needed before finishing her first cup of coffee.

"I didn't think I was ready to settle down yet," she repeated. "It had nothing to do with you."

His mouth actually fell open and he stared at her in silence for a solid seven seconds. She had a feeling she shouldn't have chosen that particular point to argue.

"Nothing to do with me?" he asked before roaring, "Nothing to do with me?!"

"Carrick..." she began.

"Why would I think your attempt to avoid our mating had anything to do with me?"

She suspected he did not actually expect her to answer his question and wisely kept silent.

"My mate is so desperate to avoid bonding with me that she wore nose filters to the *Tigrine's* celebration," he thundered.

"Carrick, I hadn't even met you when I decided to wear the nose plugs to the party," she pointed out reasonably. "It really had nothing to do with you."

He snorted. Then his eyes narrowed at her. "At what point did you realize that I was your mate? Before or after you removed the plugs?"

She hesitated a heartbeat. It was long enough to proclaim her guilt.

"I see. How unfortunate for you that we ran into those poachers and ruined all your well laid plans."

The sarcasm dripped from his words and landed like drops of acid rain on her heart. "I was drawn to you from the first time I laid eyes on you," she confessed. "And that scared me."

Unable to keep meeting his eyes, she lowered her gaze to her sheet-covered legs.

"You were afraid of me," he stated flatly.

"No!" The lack of emotion in his voice had her swallowing back tears. She sensed the idea of her being afraid of him struck him like a physical blow.

The cold mask that settled over his features told her as clearly as words that he didn't believe her.

She rose from the bed and his eyes roved over her form with a cold detachment so unlike the previous night's passion, it caused her physical pain. Selene grabbed the robe and shrugged into it, holding it closed when she realized the belt was little more than threads.

"I was *never* afraid of you," she stressed, moving to stand close to him. She reached out a hand laying it on his arm. "I was never afraid you'd hurt me or"

"But I did hurt you."

She felt her skin flush beet red at the memory. "My point is that I was afraid of who the gods would choose for me. What if you turned out to be someone I couldn't stand?"

His expression didn't change, but she *knew* her words had offended him. Maybe she should just search out a shovel--there had to be one in all those boxes--and go dig herself a hole. It would be faster than her current method.

"What if I were someone you couldn't stand?" she tried again.

A lone eyebrow arched above those fathomless eyes. "What if?" he asked pointedly.

She sucked in a breath and stepped back, her hand falling from his arm and tears pricking at her eyes. His allusion to not caring for her *hurt*.

"Carrick ...," she whispered.

"I've got to go to work," he told her, effectively cutting her off.

Determined not to let him see her cry, Selene couldn't risk speaking. She gave a curt nod.

"Have a good day, *Mate*," he said coldly, then turned on his heel and left without a backward glance.

She managed to wait until she heard the front door close before bursting into tears.

* * * *

She'd cried herself out and was just lying on the bed, staring at nothing, when the doorbell rang.

Reluctantly, she lifted her head and glanced at the 'clock' on the table. She squinted her eyes at it, but for the life of her, she couldn't make out the time.

The doorbell rang again, and as much as she wanted to stay in bed and yank the covers over her head, she forced herself to her feet and stumbled to the entry way. Without bothering to look through the peephole, she pulled the door open.

To her surprise, her father stood on the porch.

"I brought your suitcase," he told her and then studied her tear-stained face. "Are you upset that Carrick had to go to work today?"

The question was so ridiculous, it almost made her laugh. For a diplomat and savvy negotiator, her father had never understood women.

She forced a watery-smile. "No. I understand why he had to go. Thank you for bringing the suitcase."

Concern radiated from Hayden and Selene couldn't stop from throwing herself into his arms and sobbing into his shoulder. Her father dropped the suitcase and wrapped her in his arms, rocking her gently as she cried. The smell of pipe smoke and cinnamon reminded her of childhood and how her father could fix anything with a wink and a kiss.

When her sobs faded to hiccups, her father wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her into the house.

"Where's the bedroom?" he asked.

She indicated the hallway with a tilt of her head.

He pulled her to bedroom and sat the suitcase down. "You get dressed and come talk to me. Whatever it is, we'll fix it."

Clinging to that promise, Selene pulled on a pair of worn jeans and a blue shirt. As an after thought, she located a hairbrush and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. After splashing water on her face, she padded barefoot to the living room where her father sat in awe of Carrick's electronic heaven.

Selene curled up in one corner of the couch--the same corner she'd sat in the night before.

Her father placed the remote he'd been holding on the coffee table and joined her on the couch.

"What's wrong, baby?" he asked with such concern that tears filled her eyes.

"Oh, Dad. I've done something incredibly stupid," she confessed on a sob.

"I gathered as much," her father said kindly. "You only get this upset with yourself. Never with others."

She blotted her eyes with the back of her hand. Gods, was it only yesterday that she thought avoiding the mating bond was a good idea?

Feeling nauseated at the thought of not sharing her life Carrick, she wiped the back of her hand on her jeans.

"Selene," her father sounded vaguely amused.

She looked up to find him holding out a handkerchief. Embarrassed, she took it and blew her nose with a great deal of enthusiasm.

Hayden sat in silence and waited for her to gather her thoughts with that infinite patience of his.

Finally, she blurted out, "I made a pair of nose plugs to wear to the party so I wouldn't react if my mate was there."

To her surprise, her father threw his head back and roared with laughter. Nonplussed, Selene could do nothing but blink at her father's bizarre behavior.

Hayden's mirth finally slowed to chuckles. Taking in her bemused expression, he said, "Only you would be arrogant enough to try and defy the gods."

Disgruntled, she straightened her spine. He made her feel all of six years-old.

"I had good reason," she defended.

"Explain this good reason."

Not for the first time, she wished she'd inherited Hayden's diplomatic skills. She nibbled on her bottom lip while her father waited for her to think through her explanation.

"I feared I'd wind up bonded to someone I didn't like. Someone who'd try to control me, stifle me."

She intentionally left out any reference to her parents bond. She wasn't completely without tact.

"Child, I don't know where you get your ideas. The gods ordained nature to match us with our perfect mate. Take your mother and me," he said confidently.

She had been. "You and mom?"

Her father smiled at her indulgently. "I would never have had the courage to approach someone so beautiful and spirited in the manner of human courtship, and if I had never met her, I would never know how perfectly she complements me."

With effort, Selene kept her mouth from dropping open. She could feel the sincerity radiating from her father. For the first time in her adult life, she realized her father truly loved her mother.

Stumped, she could only manage, "Really?"

Her father's eyes became slightly unfocused with nostalgia. "I've always been the retiring type, and your mother is anything but."

Somehow, she managed to refrain from snorting.

Her father gave her a knowing look and continued, "I know the two of you have been oil and water since you hit puberty"

"Dad," she interrupted.

He waved a hand in the air, as though brushing away her objections. "The two of you have different priorities in life, but you both have the same indomitable spirit."

She wouldn't have chosen 'spirited' to describe her mother. 'Bitchy' fit the woman better.

"Dad" she tried again.

Her father shook his head and held up his hand. "Hear me out."

Irritated, she crossed her arms beneath her breasts and tried to look contemplative instead of insulted.

"As you get older, you become more accepting of your faults"

"I know I have faults," she protested.

He talked right over her, "– I now realize that I would never have accomplished anything in my life without your mother."

Selene bristled in loving defense. "That's not true! You are the smartest man in the Pride."

"Yes, I am," he replied without a trace of arrogance. "If it weren't for your mother's spirit and fire, I would have spent my life reading about life rather than living it."

She considered that. Her father always wore that absentminded professor air, but a sharp and attentive mind hid behind the façade.

Selene didn't doubt her mother's ability to light a fire under anyone's ass, but usually they used the smoke for cover to escape her.

"I know you and your mother are an explosive mix," he continued.

"Like nitro and glycerin," she quipped.

"Your goals and personality clash, but you have her fire and independence."

"Mom, independent?" she scoffed.

"Your mother cherishes tradition, but don't misunderstand. No one forces her to do so. No one could force your mother to conform to anything. Her mind is her own."

There was no doubting *that*. "I'd never looked at it that way."

"Without your mother balancing my reserved ways and my tempering her headstrong ones, neither of us would have achieved all we have. More importantly, we wouldn't have found the happiness our lives have brought."

His mention of happiness started the waterworks again. Though in all fairness, she was such a sap, his sincerity alone would have made her cry.

"But, I've ruined *everything*," she wailed. "He's so angry. He'll never forgive me."

She could hear how melodramatic she sounded, but damn it, it was true.

"Baby, the gods don't make mistakes. They ordained nature and compelled you to take the mate they designed for you."

"They also gave us free will, and I've run him off," she cried.

"I've watched your young man for the past three weeks. He's smart and talented. He's also surprisingly wise for his age. He'll forgive you."

She clung to her father's words like a drowning man to a piece of driftwood. "Do you think so?"

"You hurt his pride and you scared him. Men don't react well to either."

She mopped her eyes with the wet handkerchief. "I don't know what to do."

Her father smiled widely. "That's something I never thought I'd hear you say."

"Dad!"

"Baby, you are going to have to apologize. Soothe his ego and his fears. I promise he's feeling just as bad--as vulnerable--as you are."

"You really think he'll forgive me?"

"I guarantee it."

She gave him a wobbly smile. "Thanks, Dad."

Her father glanced at his watch.

"Do you need to go?"

"I can call and tell them I'm not coming. They'll survive without me."

Selene shook her head. "That's not necessary."

He looked skeptical. "It's not that important. Routine, really."

She rose, knowing it would prompt her gentlemanly father to do the same. "It's okay. I have some thinking I need to do."

"If you need me, I'll leave my cell phone on."

"Thanks, Dad," she replied, escorting him to the door.

Once he was gone, she leaned against it and considered her options.

Chapter Eight

Carrick paused with his hand on the doorknob and rested his forehead wearily against the cool wood of his front door.

He'd planned on making extensive changes to the Pride's outdated security systems, but as an outsider, he'd anticipated making the change slowly. He'd even drawn up a schedule of implementation.

He'd suspected the Guard would resent a stranger coming in and making significant changes to their ways--especially when the stranger was younger than most of them and held a position they'd been passed over for.

He'd been right.

He hadn't thought it could get much worse than fighting with his mate on the first morning of their lifebond. On that count, he'd been wrong. The day had been absolute hell.

Now, he stood outside his own home, scared to open the door. He desperately feared that Selene wouldn't be waiting for him inside. Feared she had left him.

Not that he could blame her.

He had severely overreacted that morning, but his mate's casual statement that she sought to avoid the bond he'd been seeking his entire adult life had ripped his soul in two.

He'd initially taken her comments as a personal attack. He was accustomed to women being afraid of him. Or, at least in the human world, viewing his size as an oddity to experience and share with friends.

Selene's passionate reaction to him, coupled with her complete lack of fear had been every dream come true. When she'd so casually dismissed their bond ... he'd lost it.

His father had drilled into him the fact that mating is hard, especially for the female. Her life changed most dramatically, integrating into the male's life and in some cases, even moving to a strange Pride.

Selene had deserved a mate who listened to her fears and concerns. One who could help ease her gently into her new life and reassure her of her happiness.

Instead, she had gotten a volatile male with a temper to match. One who thrust her concerns aside to focus on his.

Now, he stood outside his own home, too much of a coward to go in.

Calling himself a coward galvanized him, and he turned the doorknob. The door swung open on silent hinges and Carrick felt a burst of sarcastic pride. He had proven his bravery by opening an unlocked door.

He stepped cautiously into the house, afraid he'd find it empty.

An acrid odor burned his nose, and concerned, he followed the scent into the kitchen.

To his utter relief, he found his mate still in his home. She stood on a kitchen chair with a paintbrush in her hand, painting the room a robin's egg blue.

She obviously hadn't heard him come in and continued to work. Her face screwed up in concentration as she edged the top of the wall, careful not to get any paint on the white ceiling.

Carrick took advantage of her efforts to study her, drinking in the sight of his mate. Gods she was beautiful. She'd tied her hair up in a sloppy knot atop her head. Long tendrils had escaped to frame a face smeared with streaks of blue paint.

She wore a pair of shorts that were so short they only peaked out from the long shirt when she bent to dip the brush in the paint. Possessiveness and satisfaction slammed into him when he realized she wore one of his old button-down shirts.

Still, he hung back, uncertain how to approach her. He'd spent the whole day so focused on the fear that she'd left him, he hadn't considered what he'd say if she stayed.

A new concern ambushed him. What if she'd stayed out of obligation to the Pride rather than a desire to remain his mate? Suddenly discovering her motivation became his first priority.

"Selene ...," he began softly.

His mate let out a startled screech, the arm holding the brush jerked upward, spreading a streak of paint across the ceiling, and she toppled backwards off the chair.

He leaped across the room and, thanks to *Tigre* speed, managed to catch her.

His efforts resulted in the smack of a wet paintbrush to his face.

"You scared the hell out of me," she shrieked into his ear.

"I'm sorry ...," he tried.

"And what are you doing home so soon," she demanded, angrily.

"It's after eight," he said, bemused and gently stood her on her feet.

"It is?" she gasped, turning to look at the clock on the microwave.

"Selene ...," he started, only to be stopped by the sheen of tears in her eyes.

"I wanted to be finished before you got home," she confessed. "I thought it would be a nice surprise."

He glanced around the room. She'd finished three of the walls and he marveled at the difference. The kitchen appeared cozier, even with one wall unfinished. More like a home than just a place to live.

The fact that she'd wanted to surprise him by making his house a home touched him deeply.

"I am surprised," he told her, reaching out to stroke a blue smudge on her cheek.

"Do you like it?" she asked, vulnerability radiating from her.

"I love it," he reassured her.

A brilliant smile crossed her relieved face.

He took the brush from her hand and laid it on some newspapers spread across the kitchen table.

"I didn't think I'd find you in my home," he admitted.

She blushed. "I wasn't sure you'd come home."

Carrick couldn't stop himself from lifting a hand to her face. He traced a smudge of paint along her cheekbone. "I came home."

She smiled. "I noticed."

They stared at each other in awkward silence. Clearly a rift still lay between

them, and neither knew how to breach it.

Selene spoke first. "You might want to wash your face before the paint dries."

He reached up and touched the tacky substance on his nose.

"I thought you were trying to improve my appearance," he teased.

"I don't think that shade of blue is quite your color," she responded.

"Why don't I help you finish the wall, first?" he suggested.

His mate shook her head. "I've finished edging the wall, it won't take ten minutes for me to roll it. Besides, I like to finish what I start."

Carrick gave her a nod of acknowledgement and started down the hall towards the master bedroom and bath. He could admire and appreciate the need to take pride in a completed job.

He paused halfway down the hall. "I haven't had a chance to do much shopping since I got here, would you mind ordering a pizza for dinner?"

"Sounds good. I'm starving."

"Armando's is programmed in as speed-dial one," he suggested.

She rolled her eyes. "Only a man would program in a pizzeria before his family."

"Guilty as charged," he retorted, heading back towards the shower.

"What do you like on your pizza?" she called out.

"Anything but anchovies and pineapple."

Hope sang in his chest as he started the shower. The domesticity of coming home to his mate pleased him more than he'd believed possible. He still didn't know if she had stayed for the Pride or for their bonding, but she didn't appear to be martyring herself.

He made quick work of the shower, and with some elbow grease managed to get the blue paint off his face. After toweling himself off, he pulled on a pair of comfortable jeans that were so old they no longer had fabric over the knees. Eschewing shoes and a shirt, Carrick dragged a comb through his damp hair and headed back to the kitchen, anxious for another look at his mate.

She was finishing the wall, swiping the last vestiges of white away with a paint roller. He watched, amused, as she did a funny little jig at completion. She turned to drop the roller back in the pan and saw him standing in doorway. Her face turned a beet red.

"The room looks amazing," he complimented.

He meant it, too. The blinding white had gone, and even with the painter's tape still along the door jambs, the room had been transformed into a cozy place to share meals with a mate and later, a family.

"Thanks," Selene beamed with pride.

Admiring the room, he noticed the blue streak across the ceiling had disappeared. Still looking up, he asked, "How'd you get the blue off the ceiling?"

She gestured to a closed paint can. "I used a paper towel and dabbed it with primer."

He watched her drag a hand with blue-tipped fingers across her forehead. "Why don't you get a shower?"

"I need to clean up," she told him, looking at the drop cloths and newspapers scattered about the room.

"You painted. I should clean," he told her.

She looked surprised. "But I made the mess."

"Think of it as an equitable division in labor."

The surprise and gratitude in her eyes surprised him. Why should such a simple offer generate such a response? He reminded himself that the two of them needed to talk, and that much lay unresolved between them.

"If you're sure." She hesitated.

He gave an exaggerated eye roll and felt a thrill when she smiled. "I think I can handle picking up some newspaper without hurting myself."

"Thanks," she said quietly, heading back towards the master bath. She paused in the hallway to glance back at him. Her eyes lingered on his chest, and his nipples hardened as though she had physically stroked him. That lovely blush infused her face, and her eyes jerked to his face. "The pizza will be here in about twenty minutes."

She disappeared down the hall as though the hounds of the human's hell chased after her, only her innate dignity stopped her from breaking into a dead run.

He chuckled out loud once she was out of earshot. In his anger, he'd forgotten how much fun she was to embarrass. Carrick made quick work of cleaning. He disposed of the newspapers and folded the drop cloths.

After rinsing the brushes and storing the closed paint cans, he considered dinner. A glance at the clock told him it would arrive in about ten minutes. The kitchen might have looked a thousand times better, but it reeked to high heaven. They were not going to be able to eat in the room.

After a brief search, Carrick located his box of dishes in the foyer and pulled out two place settings. Selene was a lady, and the paper towels and paper plates he'd been using were unworthy of her. He rushed about quickly, setting two places on the coffee table. Tearing two paper towels from the roll, he used them as makeshift napkins, folding them beneath the silverware.

Pleased with his efforts, he closed the doors to the kitchen to contain the smell and turned on the overhead fans in the house. In the living room, he opened the windows to help diffuse the smell and breathed deeply of the night air that slipped into the room.

He wished he had candles or flowers or something to make the setting more romantic. Shoving a hand through his still slightly damp hair, he reminded himself that no matter what feelings the vixen he'd mated inspired in him, they needed to talk. Maybe a less than romantic setting was a good idea.

Studying the coffee table, he realized that he had forgotten glasses. He found them in the box next to the plates, just as the delivery boy pulled up.

Carrick saw the headlights and cursed, wondering if he had any cash. He dropped the glasses in the sink to be washed and pulled out his billfold.

The doorbell rang before he could get to it, which meant Selene would likely hurry out of the shower before he could finish setting the coffee table.

Pissed he yanked the door open to find a teenage *Tigre* standing on the porch holding the pizza box and a 2-liter Coke. Obviously, Selene had noticed the meager contents of his fridge. Now that he thought about it, he realized all he had to drink was beer and the Brita water pitcher--not counting teabags.

"I've got your pizza," the kid in the Armando's shirt said on a whisper of fear. Realizing he was scaring the hell out of the teen, Carrick forced his features to relax. "I can see that. I didn't know Damien let Pride teens work human jobs."

The kid shifted nervously on the porch. "He says its okay. We need to learn to live in a human dominated world early."

Carrick opened his wallet, thrilled to see several bills. He pulled out the cost of the pizza and drink along with a hefty tip for scaring the kid. "Damien's a smart man."

The kid grinned at the size of the tip. "Yes, sir, he is."

"Have a good night," Carrick said dismissively as he took the pizza from the kid's hands.

The kid cleared his throat. "Can I ask you a question?"

Carrick raised a brow. As frightened as the kid was of him, that took guts. "Of course."

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?" Carrick asked confused.

"That Selene's your mate."

"Yes," Carrick was confused by the kid's obvious curiosity.

The teen's shoulders slumped dejectedly. "That's what I heard. You're a lucky man."

Carrick forced himself not to smile. The kid had a serious crush on his mate. Not that he could blame the teen. Selene was one of a kind. "Yes, I am."

The kid nodded and sat the Coke on the porch, before turning and slouching back to his car with the Armando's sign ablaze atop it.

Grabbing the 2-liter, Carrick felt a flicker of sympathy for the kid. He remember his first crush. He also remembered the paralyzing fear that he would not be one of the *Tigre* males lucky enough to find a mate.

With a sigh, he returned to the kitchen to wash the glasses.

* * * *

Selene heard the doorbell and jumped three feet in the shower. She'd been imagining that Carrick had joined her, that his hands rather than her own moved in soap-slicked circles across her abdomen.

The fantasy had a noticeable physical response. Her nipples stood at attention beneath the frothy soap, and she could smell her own arousal over the clean fragrance of Ivory soap.

Embarrassed by her wanton response to her mate's mere presence in the house, Selene forced her mind to the present and away from her desires.

She finished her shower with a clinical detachment, concentrating on removing what trace of her arousal's scent she could. After turning off the shower and wrapping body and hair in clean towels, she searched out the clothes she had worn earlier in the day before deciding to paint the kitchen.

Dressed in the comfortable clothes, she pulled Carrick's comb through her wet hair. She'd wanted to unpack his boxes, but had decided he might not appreciate her rooting through his private effects. Thus the plan to paint the kitchen, which had taken far longer than she'd anticipated.

Not the actual painting, but she'd had no idea how many color choices she'd have at Home Materials. She'd finally broken down and called Caitlyn, something she'd never hear the end of if her mother got wind of it.

The *Tigrine* had been a godsend, joining her in the paint department and helping her pick the colors for the house. Though Selene had only bought paint and supplies for the kitchen, she and Caitlyn had planned out the color scheme for the whole house.

For those hours, Selene had managed to put aside her fears about her lifemate and pretend she was just another *Tigre* female taking care of her home.

She'd desperately wanted to show Carrick that she wanted to be his mate. That she hadn't rejected him, and while she had no intention of playing the Happy Homemaker for the rest of her life, Selene had been driven by *Tigre* instinct to improve his home.

Or maybe it was just female instinct to soothe a man in a domestic manner.

Selene decided to let her wet hair hang free and, screwing her courage to the sticking place, decide to confront her mate.

Chapter Nine

Selene was surprised to find Carrick pouring Coke into two ice-laden glasses in the kitchen.

"Did I hear the pizza man?" she asked.

"Pizza kid," Carrick responded with a smile that melted her heart.

She glanced around the kitchen, pleased to see he'd done a good job of cleaning up the mess she'd made. Her brow furrowed. "You didn't take the painter's tape down."

Well, that sounded bitchy. Her mother would be proud.

Fortunately, Carrick didn't seem to take her crass statement amiss. "You have to wait for the paint to dry, or you risk messing up that beautiful job you did."

She blushed with pleasure. Damn it. Tans were supposed to hide blushing, but by the amusement on Carrick's face, it wasn't.

"Thank you," she managed.

"I've set places at the coffee table," he told her. "I thought it might be better until the paint dries."

"Sounds good," she said without inflection, nerves rising at the idea of small talk with her mate.

She followed him into the living room and took what she was coming to think of as her side of the couch.

Carrick opened the pizza box and served her two slices before taking two for himself. They ate in a strained silence, while her mind raced for a neutral topic of conversation.

She lifted her pizza for another bite and watched as her mate surrendered his attempt to eat the deep dish, extra-cheese pizza with a fork, lifting the wedge to his mouth.

Selene watched him chew and considered asking him about his day, but the prosaic question with the chasm between them seemed cowardly.

Finally, Carrick broke the silence. "I apologize for losing my temper with you this morning. I'm ready to listen to your concerns, as I should have this morning."

Selene lowered her gaze to her plate. "I owe you an apology, too. I shouldn't have blurted out my stupidity like that."

Carrick gently cupped her chin and raised her eyes to his. "Your concerns are not stupid, but they do need to be addressed. Your happiness is my most important responsibility."

Her heart turned over, even as her mind protested that her happiness was his responsibility.

"Please, sweetheart," he said softly. "Tell me what worries you."

She sat her pizza back on the plate, her hunger disappearing with the knots forming in her stomach. Unable to meet his concerned gaze, she focused her eyes on the

plate before her. "I've never been what the Pride expects its females to be."

"What do you mean?"

She tucked a damp lock of hair behind her ear, more a nervous gesture than any need to get her hair out of her face. "I like being a nurse."

"I'm glad you like your job, but what does that have to do with being what the Pride expects?"

She couldn't stop herself from raising her face to his. "You don't mind that I like being a nurse?"

Confusion crossed his face. "Do you mind that I like being in security?"

"Security doesn't involve working with humans."

"Many *Tigre* work with humans," he pointed out.

"But how many of them are female?" she asked, though it pained her to do so.

Comprehension dawned in his eyes. "You were afraid a mate would object to your career."

"I was afraid a mate would object to *me*," she confessed.

"I don't follow."

She could read his confusion. "I love being a NICU nurse. I'm good at it"

"I don't doubt you are good at anything you set your mind to," Carrick interrupted.

Selene blushed with pleasure. No one had ever paid her such a genuine compliment before. "I was afraid a mate would have certain expectations ... expectations I couldn't meet."

"What do you mean?"

She looked away, embarrassed.

"Selene?" he demanded gently.

"I was afraid I wouldn't be what my mate--what you--wanted or needed. That I'd be a lodestone around your neck. Something you had to endure."

Carrick leaned back against the couch and studied her thoughtfully. "Or that I'd be a lodestone around *your* neck."

Damn, the man was perceptive. She hadn't wanted to say that. Had feared insulting him, but he'd seen clear into her soul.

"Maybe," she admitted softly.

He cupped her chin again, and raised her face. She kept her eyes cast down.

"Sweetheart, listen to me. I don't know who you thought I'd be, but let me tell you who I am. I'm the man that loves you. The man that will stand beside you come hell or high water. My happiness is tied to yours. If being a nurse makes you happy, then it makes me happy. If you want to live among the humans, then we will do so."

Her eyes shot to his as they filled with tears. "Do you mean that?"

He glared at her, offended. "Of course."

"What if I want to live here with you and keep working at the hospital in town?"

"Then we'll work it out," he told her.

Tears filled her eyes. She had never in her wildest dreams imagined that Carrick would support her choices. She'd dreamed that he would have tolerated them, but never this.

"Sweetheart?" he asked, his voice filled with concern, as he wiped her tears from her cheeks. "I want to make you happy, not sad."

"I am happy," she told him on a sob.

He didn't look like he believed her.

Suddenly finding words overrated, Selene crawled across the couch to rest against her mate's bare chest.

"Let me show you how happy," she breathed, pulling his mouth down for a kiss.

She'd thought she'd be the attacker that she'd make love to him, but once her tongue touched his, he turned aggressor, bearing her back on the couch, their dinner forgotten.

Selene clawed at his back as his mouth dropped to suck the peak of one breast into his mouth. "Carrick!"

"Tell me you want me mate," he growled, grinding his pelvis into hers.

"I always want you," she confessed a moment before he tore her favorite shirt from her body.

Oh well. She had a feeling this memory would more than make up for the loss.

Carrick's hands slid down to cup her breasts, lifting them to his mouth as he alternated between them, sucking their peaks deep into his mouth.

She could tell his needs were not as well contained as they had been the previous night. That was fine with her.

Selene slipped her hands between their bodies and struggled to unbutton his jeans, feeling a surge of triumph when the button slipped free and the zipper slid down of its own accord.

She raised her hands, skimming them along his chest, bringing them to rest at his shoulders where she pushed hard against him.

Surprised, Carrick lifted himself off her.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said.

Selene licked her lips. "You didn't."

She was a nurse and knew the physical body very well. There was something she'd heard fellow nursing students talk about, something she'd always wanted to try herself. She leaned forward to kiss his chest, pausing to lave his nipples, reveling in his groan of pleasure, before trailing kisses down his stomach.

When she reached the waistband of his pants, she shoved them down his hips, growling until he lifted his butt off the couch and let her kneel before him to pull them off.

She stripped his pants, leaving him gloriously nude before her. To her delight, the man went commando. Her gaze raked over his beautiful form, thinking Michelangelo couldn't have carved a more beautiful male form.

Still kneeling before him, her gaze lowered to his throbbing erection, watching it pulse with his heartbeat. Unable to resist, she reached out and wrapped a hand around his turgid length.

Carrick sucked in a loud breath. "Selene!"

She loosened her fist and stroked her hand up and down his length.

"Do you like that?" she asked, never taking her eyes from the purpling helmet of his cock.

"Squeeze harder," he bit out, and she smiled, enjoying the power she held over him.

"I could," she teased. "Or I could do this."

Without giving him time to process her intent, she lowered her mouth to the head of his cock and licked it like an ice cream cone before covering the head with her entire mouth and sucking it gently.

Carrick's roar of pleasure and bucking hips told her she was doing it right. She pulled her head back, and let his cock slide free with a loud popping sound, before lowering her attention to the shaft and laving it with her tongue.

She traced every ridge and vein, letting her free hand come up to squeeze his balls in a gentle massage.

Carrick's head arched back against the couch, "Sweetheart, you need to stop."

She ignored him, savoring the taste of him and covering the tip with her mouth again. He groaned as she began to bob her head up and down along his hard length. He was so large she couldn't take much of him in her mouth, so she fisted the rest of the length of him in rhythm to her sucks.

"Sweetheart, if you don't stop, I'm going to cum," he warned her, his hands reaching for her head.

She made a protesting noise when he tried to pull her mouth from him. Almost immediately, he went from trying to pull her away to trying to hold her to him.

Such action was unnecessary. Selene wanted him to cum in her mouth. She wanted to taste him and know that she alone had brought him to pleasure.

"I can't hold out much longer," he groaned.

Selene made an encouraging sound in throat and felt it vibrate down the length of him.

"Oh gods!" he shouted, and she felt the first pulse of his seed against the back of her throat. It tasted salty and reminded her of the sea.

She craved more. It wasn't the taste or the flavor, but the sense of power that made her want him with desperation.

He groaned as he continued to fill her mouth. She tried desperately to swallow the copious amounts of fluid, but felt some trickle from the sides of her mouth.

Carrick's cock pulsed a few more times, before he fell back onto the couch, spent. His softening cock slid from between her lips with a loud suctioning sound.

Some mischievous demon stopped her from wiping her mouth as she rose on her knees into his line of vision.

He growled, and his eyes shifted. She watched him wrestle with his primal instincts and was almost disappointed when he won.

But his eyes stayed shifted.

He reached out a finger and wiped the rivulets of semen running from the corners of her mouth. Then, he held the finger to her lips, those cat-eyes demanding she take it all.

Enjoying the dominance he displayed, Selene opened her mouth and sucked his finger clean. When she released him, he pulled her head down to rest in his lap beside his flaccid cock and stroked her hair, clearly praising her for a job well done.

A satisfied smile curved her lips and she rested against him.

She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the desire coursing through her. She reveled in the command she wielded over his large body.

Her heart was still racing when Carrick caught her under the arms and pulled her into his lap. She noted his eyes had returned to normal, a deep brown surrounding a circular pupil before he tucked her head under his chin. The sound of his harsh breathing and the feel of his rapid heartbeat testified to the pleasure she'd given him.

Carrick dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "I'm going to need a few minutes to make sure you didn't kill me, before I can see to your pleasure sweetheart."

Pride and female satisfaction swelled in her and she snuggled into his chest. "I'd hate to have killed you so early in our bonding."

Carrick's hands weren't idle as she savored being close to him. His large hand slid along her spine, causing her slowing heart rate to skip a beat before increasing its rate once again.

Selene let out a startled gasp as Carrick suddenly bore her backwards onto the couch, crushing her chest with his. Oddly, even though he was completely stretched out across her, she felt no weight on her legs.

Feeling fairly confident that she hadn't developed paralysis in the past several seconds, Selene lifted her head and looked over her mate's shoulder to see his shins propped on the far arm rest with his feet hanging out into space.

Selene burst out laughing.

"That's not the response a man wants when he's kissing his woman's neck," Carrick growled playfully.

"Poor baby," she teased. "Finding adequate sized furniture must be hell."

"Only when it makes my mate laugh at me," Carrick responded, before lowering his mouth to suck a nipple into his mouth.

Her toes curled into the fabric of the couch--literally curled. She'd always thought that was just a euphemism.

Gods! His tongue laved her breast as he continued to suck, and she felt her bones melt.

Her fingers threaded into his hair and tried to hold him to her breast. She made a sound of protest when he lifted his head to switch nipples.

His laughter penetrated her sensual haze, and she would have taken issue with him, but one naked leg insinuated itself between her thighs and her ability to speak flew out the window.

Carrick's deft hands made short work of her jeans, leaving her bare. Thank the stars she hadn't bothered with underwear.

The hard length of his cock slipped along the wet slit between her legs, and she groaned at the pleasant friction.

"I thought men needed half an hour," she groaned against the lips that lowered to kiss hers.

Carrick gave a painful laugh. "Those men weren't resting between your silky thighs."

Selene gave a throaty laugh and arched against him, rubbing his turgid length with

her moist heat.

Her mate dropped his other thigh between her legs with a loud groan she didn't think exaggerated.

"Sweetheart, I don't think I can wait much longer," he confessed.

Gods she hoped not.

"I'm ready when you are," she murmured, rubbing her wet folds against him.

Carrick dropped his head against her neck with an agonized moan, but his hand showed no hesitation as it slid between their joined bodies to fist his cock.

"Are you sure you're ready, sweetheart?" he asked, hesitating at her entrance.

Oh hell yes, she was sure. "Carrick, I want to feel you inside me."

Her mate didn't hesitate, shoving inside her with one decisive thrust.

"Then take me," he growled.

Selene felt a slight twinge of discomfort, but still arched against him.

Once completely insider her, Carrick's hand shifted upwards to her clit and began to rub it in rhythm to his thrusts. Time seemed to stand still and yet past too quickly as he alternated the speed and depth of his thrusts.

"You feel so good, sweetheart," he breathed and on those words, he burst.

"Carrick," she screamed, her pussy clamping hard on his cock.

He couldn't hold back. At her scream, he gave an excited shout and emptied himself into her.

The couple lay intertwined in each others arms a long time before sanity returned.

"I'm sorry I was so foolish," she whispered.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper."

"We're a sorry pair," Selene half-heartedly joked, too sated to put any effort into it.

"Maybe," Carrick allowed. "But we're going to make a go of this. Aren't we?"

His tone was authoritative, but she sensed his vulnerability. Cupping his cheeks in her hands, she tilted his head down and placed a tender kiss on his forehead.

"Yes, my love. We are going to make a go of it," she said, letting her heart shine in his eyes.

Carrick's face lit up. "I love you, too."

"Now get off me. I can't breathe."

The End