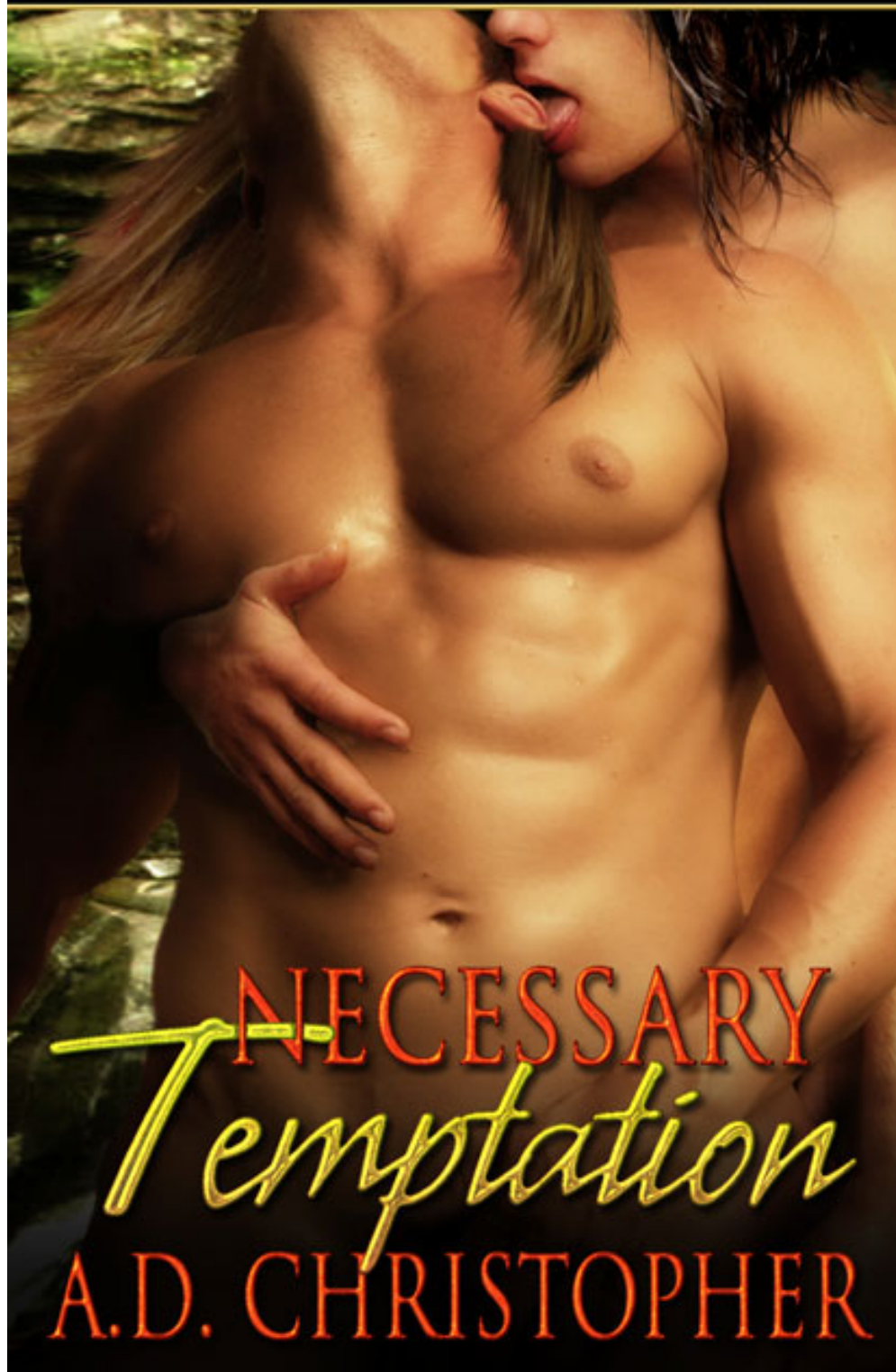


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Necessary Temptation

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NECESSARY TEMPTATION

A.D. Christopher

Chapter One

Ten years of stripping down and standing buck naked in front of over five hundred people was finally going to pay off.

Dawson Gray looked down at the man kneeling before him, nuzzling Gray's still-limp—thank you, gods—dick with his deep rose lips. He was an Asian member of the pride whose shifted form was a striking gray panther. His human form wasn't too shabby either, all muscle, smooth soft skin and a silky black braid that hung nearly to his waist.

At any other time, Gray would gladly have risen to the occasion and urged Simon's head down over his engorged length. But not tonight. Tonight the entire future of his family was on the line. He could not show interest in a potential male warrior-mate or he'd never get his chance to claim one of the pride's few females. It had taken him ten long years to reach the final stage of the mate-claiming test and he would not fail.

All he had to do was stand here on the softly lit stage and endure the fondling and stroking of two more men without getting a hard-on and he would be home free. Assuming, of course, that at least two of the ten men lined up beside him became aroused by one of the pride's indentured servants. There were only eight females presently of age to be mate-claimed and every man on this stage wanted one—badly—or they never would have managed to pass the annual tests administered from ages fifteen to twenty-five.

It took a lot of willpower for a fifteen-year-old kid to resist fucking an older tribe female sent to tempt him into losing his sanctity before mate-claiming. Of course, the women hadn't been allowed to touch. No matter how difficult the tests became year after year, touching had never been allowed. Only on this last night were the tempters

allowed to fondle your balls, stroke your cock, pour warmed oil over their bodies and hands and touch you everywhere you'd been dying to be touched.

Gods, Gray, don't lose control. You're almost there. Think of dead bunnies, fish entrails, your mother's bras hanging to dry in the shower.

The slight thickening brought on by his thoughts, as much as the oil Simon was smoothing between his butt cheeks, gradually faded. By the time Simon pressed a finger into Gray's anus, his cock was as limp as ever, but it had been close. Too close.

Thankfully, someone else must have gotten closer.

"Aaron Mitchell Payton, step forward. You and the Unfree Ezekial may descend the stage and await the running of the pride." The master of ceremony's voice rang out through the otherwise silent glen. A murmur of dismay swept through the crowd and Gray felt the last of his slight arousal vanish.

Aaron had fought under Gray's command in the pride war against the lions of San Francisco. He was a fierce man but also a gentle one and beloved by most of the pride. He had craved a female in his bed as much as any man on the stage, maybe even more. Gray had never seen Aaron take another man into the woods during the night of the full moon, never heard the whisper of a same-sex pairing where the tall, muscled redhead was concerned. Payton had genuinely craved female flesh above all others, longed to be paired to a woman for reasons other than rank or the increased status associated with having offspring.

Gray had been curious to know what it would be like to bed a woman, but he honestly couldn't imagine it would be much better than bedding a man, couldn't imagine a feeling more mind-blowing than sliding his cock into the heat of another man's mouth or feeling another's strong hand milking him of his seed. Gray suspected he could be happy with a warrior-mate and, if given the choice, wouldn't be standing on the stage tonight at all.

Being sexually attracted to other men wasn't something their pride looked down upon or thought was wrong in any way. No one cared that Gray had given and

received his share of hand jobs or blowjobs or that he seemed to enjoy it as much as the next Orion Pride male. Not many would have been disappointed if he'd chosen a warrior-mate instead of engaging in the female mate-claiming competition.

In fact, Gray suspected many would have secretly rejoiced.

Gray's family had led the Orion Pride of the Pacific Northwest for nearly a century. A Gray had been both Pride Head and president of the pride's import industry in Seattle for as long as anyone could remember. Grays ran the pride, and Grays made the rules, but Dawson knew it was only the Grays themselves who wanted things to remain that way. Lesser pride members craved a say in the running of the shape-shifting panther pride and the Unfree...well, the Unfree just wanted a say in anything.

That was why Simon was up here, doing his damndest to work Gray to erection. If he managed that task, then he would be allowed to take Gray into the woods tonight for the full moon festival. He'd have an entire night to work his magic on Gray's body and hopefully convince Gray to claim Simon as his warrior-mate. Being so claimed would not only relieve Simon of however many years of service were still left in his contract, but would elevate him to the same level as Pride-born, something he would never achieve otherwise, even if he managed to fulfill his years of service without becoming a casualty of war.

It wasn't a policy Gray himself supported and the knowledge of Simon's plight helped him keep his cock under control as much as anything else. It wasn't love or even lust that drove the other man. It was the soul-deep craving for freedom. A freedom Gray would be able to grant him when he was Pride Head and had the power to instigate a few much-needed changes in the Orion Pride.

"The time is up. Bring on the next group of Unfree warriors." The master of ceremony's voice cut the silence again, signaling that Simon and the other Unfree still on the stage should abandon their work. The exhaled breaths of the other Pride-born men being tested were audible as eager hands and mouths were pulled away.

It seemed Gray wasn't the only one having difficulty resisting temptation. But only one man had fallen, no matter how desperately they longed to respond to the handsome men attending them. It was telling of the ambition that drove them all, or of the ambition of the people who had "encouraged" them to submit to this testing in the first place. For his part, Gray knew his father would rip out his throat with his bare claws if Gray failed this test, if he failed to win a female mate and get her round with the next generation of Grays before the summer drew to a close.

No matter that Gray had four younger brothers, two of whom were already old enough to be involved in the mate-claiming tests at the eighteen- and twenty-one-year-old levels. Dawson was the eldest. It was *his* responsibility to lead the pride and to make sure no one forgot the Gray family were uber-alphas, one and all.

As the Unfree stood and descended the platform, Gray imagined he could feel the weight of his father's hard stare upon him, though he couldn't pick out the older man in crowd that filled the darkened woods. All he could make out were vague shapes, shadows that indicated where were-panthers of the Orion Pride—still in their human form until the moon reached its zenith—had spread blankets on the pine needles. Gray could smell the traditional cold salmon lox the older pride members had brought and the fried chicken buckets of the younger. Most everyone brought a picnic on the night of the pride's mate-claiming challenges. The event usually lasted a minimum of three hours, and appetites of all kinds ran high just before the time of the pride's monthly forced shift into their panther form.

The notion that it was odd to chow down while watching a dozen or more men of all ages be subjected to sexual torture was a human one, but it floated through Gray's mind all the same. He had been spending too many hours at the day job since the peace treaty went through with the San Fran were-lions. Sitting behind a desk, working deals with other non-were corporations and going to lunch with human business partners were taking a toll on him.

Good. It is time a measure of humanity made its way into our world.

Gray would never condone human prejudice or greed, but their respect for personal privacy was one he would like to see embraced by the Orion Pride. He wouldn't mind being naked in front of a thousand people, never mind the five hundred pride members he had known since birth. But he *did* mind having sexual encounters put out for public consumption. Sex was a private thing between the people involved. No matter that he was fifteenth generation pure were-panther, he knew that was one human opinion of his that would never change.

"The third round of Unfree may mount the platform with the exception of Unfree Ezekiel due to the elimination of Aaron."

The master of ceremony's voice cued that it was time to grit his teeth for the penultimate test. Almost there. Twenty more minutes, and two very public encounters with two other men and he'd be ready to mate-claim his woman. Their parents had already arranged the details of the claiming months ago, so there would be no battle for Melody's hand. If she chose him and he accepted her offer, none would dare challenge him, no matter that she was one of the loveliest and most well-liked young women in their pride. He was Dawson Gray, son of the Pride Head, and to challenge a Gray was very close to a death sentence.

The thought left a sour taste in his mouth.

Even more reason to hold strong, to take your father's place and effect change. To make this pride a place where true equality and –

Gray lost his train of thought faster than his little brother Darius scampered after a bowl of cream placed on the kitchen floor.

Gods, no, anyone but him.

His next Unfree tormentor stood before him, all six foot something of him naked as the day he was born, his tanned skin oiled to a high sheen that only emphasized the perfection of his muscled frame. Logan's chin-length dark blond hair hung wildly around his face, half covering his startlingly bright blue eyes. It looked as if he hadn't

bothered to preen before the testing, as if he hadn't cared to waste time prettying up for the Pride-born.

Thank gods. If he looked any better, there would be no chance of resisting.

It was as if Logan had somehow overheard Gray's unspoken thought, for he suddenly smiled, a wry twist of his full lips that alone was nearly enough to make Dawson thicker.

What in the hell was he going to do once Logan was allowed to touch, to tease, to taste?

Gray closed his eyes, forcing the image of the slightly shorter male from his mind. Logan. Gods, why did it have to be Logan? The man had haunted his dreams every night in the year since they returned from San Francisco. Until then, he'd just been another Unfree working the shit jobs at the pride's import factory that no Pride-born were-panther wanted to dirty their hands with. A gorgeous man, yes, but there were an abundance of gorgeous men among the pride, and Gray had never taken advantage of an Unfree sexually. They couldn't say "no" to a Pride-born and Gray wasn't into forced encounters.

But after he had seen Logan fight the were-lions like it was his own pride's territory he was defending, with a bravery that outshone every other man on the battlefield... Logan had become something more than an Unfree. He'd become an object of fascination. With Logan's body built for pleasure and his spirit as fierce and untamed as any he'd known, Gray found his thoughts turning to the other man far more often than they should. He'd dreamed of what it would be like to touch and to be touched in return, but never dared think those dreams would become a reality.

Now that it was actually going to happen...gods, how in the hell was he going to force his body to deny his attraction?

"The Unfree may begin. You have ten minutes."

"Ten whole minutes. Not nearly enough for all the things I want to do to you," Logan whispered under his breath as he circled slowly around in back of Gray.

Shit. Of all the things he could have said, that was the worst. *Want* to do. Things he *wanted* to do, not things he was forced to do. Now Gray didn't even have the element of force to cool his lust.

He took a deep breath and let it out, wishing he could rid himself of anxiety as easily. This was going to be pure hell. No matter that Logan might not find the time sufficient, Gray knew they were going to be the longest ten minutes of his life.

* * * * *

Logan circled slowly around the slightly taller man, his cock already rock hard and stretching nearly to his navel. He'd wanted this, longed for it for so gods damned long—to touch the untouchable Gray, the man destined to take over the Orion Pride. But no one dared, no one who hadn't been invited to run with him on the night of the full moon and certainly no Unfree slave.

Gray was untouchable, above them all, literally and in pride status. The man was next in line for Pride Head and—measuring at least six foot seven—towered over even Logan's own respectable six foot four. He was also built like a brick shithouse, with more muscle than any man had the right to carry around. Gray looked the picture of the mercenary for hire, but he was just as clever as he was immense, and had risen to the rank of commander in the pride armed forces in less than five years.

His were-panther form was just as intimidating, a huge, sleek creature with a chocolate coat that mimicked Gray's human hair. Hair he grew past his shoulders, that he'd worn tied back in a band at the base of his neck tonight. How many times had Logan dreamed about that hair flowing loose around him as Gray worked his thick cock into Logan's ass from behind?

Too many, too damned many, especially considering there was no hope of that ever happening. Pride-born weren't allowed penetrative sex until they were mate-claimed or warrior-mated, only blowjobs and hand jobs. The only way that lovely rod would ever shove inside him were if Gray claimed him as his own. As his mate.

A slave as warrior-mate to the pride's golden child. Not in a million years.

But he wasn't going to think about that right now. For at least the next ten minutes he had complete access to the mind-blowing Dawson Gray and he was going to take full advantage of every second. Starting with that hair.

Logan tugged the band from Dawson's hair, not missing the slight intake of breath from Gray as he did so. Whether he was outraged at the liberty Logan was taking or possibly aroused, Logan didn't let himself guess. If he thought too much about what Gray was thinking or feeling, he'd lose the balls to do this the right way, to show the other man just what he had to offer. It didn't matter that Gray would reject him no matter how he performed—pride demanded Logan make that rejection as difficult as possible.

Allowing his lust free reign, Logan buried his face at the nape of Gray's neck and inhaled his unique fragrance, a mix of evergreen and pure male that made him even harder. His cock throbbed with the urgent need to make contact with the man in front of him. Logan indulged the aching organ, pressing forward until his dick was cradled between the sexiest pair of round, hard ass muscles he'd ever seen. He groaned softly as Gray clenched around his cock and pressed in even tighter.

The added friction felt amazing and the oil the slave tenders had rubbed on his body eased his way as he began to thrust, slowly, sensuously, fucking the valley of Gray's ass even as his hands eased around the front of the other man. Logan smoothed across the rounded muscles of Gray's pectoral muscles first, kneading the rock-hard flesh, thumbing nipples that were drawn into tight points.

Hard, aching nipples that he pinched and teased as he continued to work behind Gray. Logan closed his eyes, imagining that Gray's response was due to more than the cool night air, that his body was responding to Logan's, that he felt the same wicked lust overwhelming his will to complete this challenge.

His balls drew up, tight and full, but Logan refused to give in to the urge to come on Gray's back. Not yet, not when he'd only just gotten started. He had at least eight

more minutes. Eight more minutes in the heaven that was being this close to Gray. Gods, it was even better than he'd dreamed it would be, better than he'd dared to imagine.

Logan's hands moved down, lower, stroking Gray's taut abdomen, outlining each muscle, communicating with his touch how he would treasure every inch of the man if he were chosen. Lower, lower still he teased, but not *that* low. He didn't want to risk coming in contact with Gray's limp dick and being forced to admit that this was a one-sided fantasy.

No, better to move elsewhere. Thanks to Gray's giant size, there was plenty of man to explore.

Logan moved his hands to the front of Gray's thighs, marveling again at how hard every inch of the future Pride Head was. And he had earned every bit of that muscle, on the battlefield and in training future warriors since the peace-treaty had been signed. He was an awe-inspiring fighter in both of his forms, and selfless when it came to protecting his men. *All* of his men, even the Unfree.

He would never forget watching Gray leap in front of a downed Unfree and slaughter the two were-lions who were trying to kill him. It was in that moment that lust had transformed into something more dangerous. Into respect, and as time wore on and he had more occasion to observe the behavior of Dawson Gray, into love.

Gods help him, it was true, he was in love with the man, couldn't think of anything in the world that would make him happier than having Dawson claim him, and being able to claim the other man in return.

Logan moved his hands back around Gray, trailing fingertips up and down the backs of his thighs, stopping just short of the buttocks he was still slowly fucking. He traced the line where leg became something more intimate, then used his thumb to spread the base of Gray's cheeks a bit wider. The oil that had transferred itself from Logan's cock to Gray's body made it easier to give in to the urge to take this encounter further than he'd ever planned.

Dawson shuddered as Logan breached his ass with his thumb, no gentle touch but a deep penetration, until Logan's thumb was completely encased in the other man's ass. Logan felt an answering tremor work through his own frame as he slowly, deliberately claimed Gray's ass with languid strokes. He was so damned close to coming simply from the unique thrill of being able to touch this man so intimately. If he even let himself imagine that Gray was enjoying this one third as much...

Faster, and faster, Logan increased his rhythm inside Gray even as he worked his cock between Gray's legs. The bulky muscles of the other man's thighs gave him the friction he needed to near the edge of release. Not to mention that the feel of the head of his cock butting into Gray's tightened ball sac was easily one of the best things he'd felt in—in ever.

Sweat ran down Logan's face as he wrapped one arm around Gray's waist, holding him still as he fucked his ass with his thumb, and his thighs with his cock. He buried his face in the fragrant spill of Dawson's hair once more, closing his eyes, wishing this moment could be just between the two of them. That the hand wrapped around Dawson's thick trunk could be wrapped around his cock, that he could bring his love to climax as he shot his seed between his legs. Or better yet, into the tight ass he was now pounding into with his thumb.

So close, and he could imagine Gray was right there with him, as near to bliss, as deeply in love, as ready to ask him for everything and demand it in return.

Dimly, above the fierce thudding of his own heart, Logan became aware of shocked gasps and whispers working their way through the crowd, and then of the sound of feedback as the master of ceremonies brought the microphone to his mouth.

"Dawson Mayer Gray, step forward, you and the Unfree Logan may descend the stage and await the running of the pride."

Logan heard the words, but it took a few moments for them to process, for the realization of what had happened to penetrate the red fog that had nearly consumed him. When his mind did make sense of what he had heard, he couldn't help himself—

he let the hand at Gray's waist move lower, to seek that which he hadn't imagined he would find.

But there it was, Gray's long, thick cock, hard and pulsing. It jumped lightly in Logan's hand, the silken skin coating all that rigid length seeming to heat several degrees in an instant. It was nearly enough to make Logan climax that very second, but he held back, forced his cock into submission and pulled away from Gray entirely.

He wouldn't come now, not when he was so close to living his most forbidden dream. He would wait until he and Gray were out in the woods, near the moment of shifting, when passions could scarcely be contained. Then he would make his move, would show Gray that he had everything to gain by claiming him as his warrior-mate. Then, and only then, would he allow himself to come, hopefully while Gray was buried to the hilt in Logan's ass, enjoying the first in what Logan prayed would be a lifetime of passionate nights spent together, running with their people toward a brighter future for their pride and themselves.

Chapter Two

Gray ran faster, his breath coming in hard, sharp gasps. If he ran fast enough, he could escape Logan, escape them all...escape the blood racing through his body and the need that still made his balls ache.

Above that need, a pain so sharp he couldn't believe it wasn't fatal cut into his heart. He'd failed. He'd failed to keep his desires in check, failed to control his body. He'd failed his Pride and his family. If it had been anyone but Logan, he could have done it, he was certain of that. But the tenderness in the way the slave touched him, the feel of Logan's iron-hard cock sliding so easily between his cheeks, the feel of his thick thumb working the tight ring of his ass...

He clenched his teeth and ran faster. If he could run into his change before Logan caught him, he might still have a chance. Once he changed, his passions would ease and animal instinct take over. The need to hunt and feed would overcome all other drives.

The rest of the pack was falling back now as the four other Pride-Unfree couples from the test disappeared into the trees. Almost there, he was almost there! His heart pounded in his chest, keeping time with the rhythm of his feet on the cold, hard earth. It sounded joyous in his ears. He could still be the next Pride Head if he kept himself from going any further with Logan. He was still Dawson Gray, the most feared warrior in all the —

That wasn't his heart. It was feet, the swift running feet of another man, and Gray's triumph turned to terror, turned to rage and something else he refused to admit as Logan's long arms reached around his waist and the other man's big body tackled him to the ground.

They tumbled together through the dry leaves, sharp twigs scratching Gray's body as he struggled to get away. This could not happen. No matter what he felt, no matter

that his traitorous cock was already thickening now that there were no crowds and prying eyes to deter it. Until he'd faced losing his position, he hadn't realized how much he depended upon his legacy to define himself. Without it, what was he? Who was he? He didn't know, and he was man enough to admit that frightened him.

"Get off me!" The words felt ripped from his throat. With the full moon almost at its zenith and the racing of his blood from the run he was having a hard time controlling himself.

"You're mine for the night, Lord Gray," Logan panted. "I claimed you."

"You claimed nothing." With his excellent night vision made even sharper by the proximity of the change, Gray could see Logan's face as clearly as he had on the stage. Those full lips, not smiling now but set in a pout that gave Gray the ridiculous urge to nibble at it. The straight, sharp nose, the strong bones and beautiful planes of his body.

Most of all his eyes, so full of passion. "You're wrong. I claimed you. I made your cock stand up—I made your breath come faster. You know it and so do I."

"The change—"

Logan's soft laugh seemed to echo in Gray's ears. "I never thought you were a coward, my lord," he said. "Why will you not admit what's between us?"

"Admit that the pressure of all those eyes on me grew to be too much? That the sight of my *bride-to-be* in the audience, watching me, aroused me?"

He'd hit his mark with that one. He saw it in Logan's eyes, heard it in the other man's sharp intake of breath. For one short, sharp moment he thought he'd won, and triumph and regret mixed equally in his breast.

But Logan was not so easily deterred. "If that is all it was," he said softly, "then let us see how you do before no one's eyes but mine."

Oh, no.

Logan's hand found Gray's calf and stroked it, making slow circles up to his knee, just past his knee. "When no one's hands but mine are here to touch you," he continued.

“When it is only my mouth you see, my voice you hear.” His hand crept up farther now, his fingertips just brushing against Gray’s sac. Gray gritted his teeth. He was hard as a rock, his cock swollen and burning. If he looked down, he knew he would see the liquid of his own desire pooling in the little cleft at his head.

And in another moment Logan would see it too, would touch him, and all would be lost. He could not allow that to happen.

“No!” he shouted, lashing out with his hands, giving the slave a mighty shove. With the change so close his muscles vibrated with extra strength, even a man as solid with muscle as Logan couldn’t help but fall back.

Gray twisted, trying to scramble to his feet, but that damnable speed he’d seen Logan exhibit in the past was still very much in evidence. Before he’d had a chance to move a step, Logan’s arms were around him again, his face pressed into the small of Gray’s back.

Gray struggled, fighting the hard muscles pinning him to the ground just as much as he fought his own desires. It was so hard to think, especially now when his lust was forcing the hunger of the change to focus in other areas. Areas below his waist.

If he shoved his elbow back, he might be able to hit Logan in the eye and loosen his grip. Then he could –

Logan’s fingers closed around Gray’s cock and squeezed. “Is this because of your bride-to-be, lord?” His breath heated Gray’s skin. He moved his hand slowly up, pinching the head of Gray’s cock, then back down. “Or is this because of my body pressed against yours? Because you want me as badly as I want you?”

Gray swallowed the groan that wanted to escape from his throat. “I don’t want you.”

“Your cock says you do.”

“Cocks don’t speak.”

Logan chuckled, the sound sending shivers up Gray's spine. "I believe yours is speaking now. Shall I listen more closely?"

He pulled Gray's cock to the side, holding it in a grip so tight it was just on the edge of painful. Deliciously so. Gray bit his lip as Logan kept pulling, forcing him onto his back.

"I believe it does have something to say," Logan continued. "Let's see."

His head started lowering, his dark blond hair swinging down to hide his face.

This was Gray's last chance. He dug his fingers into the other man's shoulders and pushed, but either the slave's skin was too slick with oil and sweat or his resolve simply was not strong enough or a combination of the two. Yes, he wanted to be Pride Head, wanted to claim his bride. But oh by the gods at this moment he wanted Logan's soft, wet mouth wrapped around his cock so badly he could hardly breathe. His hands slipped off Logan's shoulders as Logan leaned down all the way and sucked the head of Gray's cock between his lips.

Every nerve in Gray's body caught fire. His chest hitched as Logan worked his mouth down, farther down, until Gray's cock met resistance in the back of his throat.

Gray didn't feel the rough leaves making him itch anymore, didn't feel the cold earth against his back. All he felt, all he knew, was the heat of Logan's mouth, the friction of his tongue against his erection. "No," he managed to say, but he knew he didn't sound convincing.

Logan lifted his head, wrapping his fingers around the base of Gray's cock to keep it from slipping back against Gray's stomach. "Yes."

He didn't move slowly this time, his head pumping steadily up and down as he sucked hard. Gray's blood started rushing in time to his movements. He tried to keep his hips still but it was no use—they wanted to move, to force his cock deeper into the man's throat, all the way down to where Logan's heart beat and his spirit rested. He wanted to fuck his mouth, to fuck his body.

His head fell back and he had a dizzying glimpse of the full moon above them, its pale watery light illuminating their bodies there on the forest floor, before he looked down his body again. Logan's hair obscured his face, and that wasn't good enough. Gray wanted to see him, wanted to watch as the other man swallowed him whole.

He braced himself on his left hand and reached down with his right to gather Logan's hair in his fist, pulling it up. Logan's eyes were closed as he sucked, his mouth wide as he took Gray's thickness into his mouth. The sight made something inside Gray twist, made blood rush to his pelvis and his balls tighten. Just a few more minutes, just a few more minutes and he would explode.

And he would watch as Logan swallowed every last drop of his seed. Along with his chances to be Pride Head. If he let himself go that far with Logan, he knew he'd go ever further. He wouldn't stop until he fucked him, until he lost the sanctity that might still allow him to claim his bride if the other Pride-Unfree couples in the forest tonight consummated their attractions. There were only six men who had passed the test and eight women unmated. Melody could still be his. The future he'd counted on more than he'd known could still be a reality if he didn't allow foolish passion for an Unfree to ruin everything.

The knowledge, and the last shred of anger it called forth, made him pull Logan's hair tighter, tight enough that he knew it would have to hurt. He tugged up, lifting Logan's head so the slave's mouth only barely held him, then drove his head back down. Again he repeated the movement, forcing Logan to take all of him, forcing him into a fast, hard rhythm.

His legs were spread wide so Logan could kneel between them. He tore his gaze away from Logan's beautiful face sucking his cock to see the other man's ass, firm and round, raised in the air. He wanted that ass, wanted to drive himself deep into the tight muscled ring, wanted to feel Logan's cheeks slap against his groin as he fucked him hard and fast.

"Logan...Logan...ah..."

He growled, the feral beast in him wanting to come out but the need choking his body too much for it to do so, and yanked Logan's face away from his cock. Without thinking, he pulled him close, so that every slick, hot inch of the other man's body lay over his, and kissed him.

It was a kiss of hard mouths and harder bodies, of anger and passion fueled by the moon above and by Gray's despair as much as Logan's triumph. It was a kiss that fought a battle neither could ever win, for they were too equally matched in strength and temperament for either of them to ever emerge the victor. And somewhere along the way, as Logan's hands tangled themselves in Gray's hair and Gray's fingers cupped Logan's cheek, it became a kiss of pure heated desire.

Gray flipped Logan over, thrusting his hips forward as he did so. His cock slid easily over Logan's hot skin, and then, as the slave opened his legs and let Gray rest between them, over Logan's cock. The feel of the other man's softest skin against his own, still slick with saliva, made him shudder.

"Gray," Logan gasped, "Please...please take me..."

Gray growled again in reply, telling the slave in shifter language that he was no longer in control. He pulled his mouth away from Logan's and gave the other man two of his fingers instead, shoving them between Logan's soft lips and pulling them out dripping wet.

"I shall take you," he whispered. "I shall take you when I'm ready." He lowered his hand and used his wrist to shove Logan's right leg farther to the side, opening the slave's thighs wide enough for him to fit his wet fingers into the cleft of his ass. The puckered hole waiting there was just as tight as he'd imagined, and when he slipped his fingers inside it and Logan growled and arched his back a surge of triumph ran through Gray's body.

"Not so easy to resist, is it," he whispered, lowering his face to kiss Logan's throat, to take one hard nipple between his teeth and nibble it gently with teeth made extra

sharp by the moon. "Wait until it's my cock filling you, Logan, until I'm fucking you, and my hand is milking your cock until you explode. Is that what you want, slave?"

"Yes!" Logan cried, his fingers digging into the hard muscles of Gray's arms. His hips jerked and bucked, begging for more, and Gray's head buzzed with the desire to accommodate him.

Keeping his fingers buried in the man's ass, he lowered his head all the way until the beauty of Logan's cock stood proudly in front of him. He let his tongue dance over the swollen head, licking up the dribble of sticky-sweet pre-cum resting there.

"Gray, yes," Logan moaned, the moan turning into something both louder and wilder as Gray sucked the entire plump length of him into his mouth.

Had any man's cock ever tasted this good? There hadn't been many, but no, none of them ever were like this. None of them seemed to fit so perfectly in his mouth, stretching his jaw just enough—none of them were this soft and sweet against his tongue. He'd known, had known since the day he saw Logan fight those were-lions, that the slave was special. He'd never had any idea it would be like this.

He answered Logan's cry with his own soft moan, letting the sound vibrate in his mouth, and started moving his fingers in time with his head. Logan's groans and cries were music to his ears, mingling with the sounds of the forest that Gray's sensitive hearing picked up in the background. Somehow being here with Logan like this made him feel his true nature more strongly than he ever had, made the beast inside him want to roar with pleasure. He moved his head faster, taking Logan as deep as he could, letting him slip only a little bit back out before sucking him in again. He couldn't bear to have the other man's cock out of his mouth, couldn't bear the thought of pulling away.

"I'm going to come...oh please..." Logan's hips shifted helplessly beneath him. "Gray...Gray I'm going to come..."

Gray moved faster, harder and then Logan's cock swelled and jerked and flooded Gray's mouth with hot, salty-sweet cum. The flavor of it made his own cock twitch, wanting to come too, wanting them both to spill their seed together.

Quickly he took his mouth away, replacing it with his hand and pulling Logan onto his side so his seed shot out in spurts all over Gray's chest. He wanted to cover himself in it, the animal part of him strong enough now that he would let Logan mark him, that after he'd taken the slave's ass he would pull out and mark him too.

Feverishly, barely realizing what he was doing, he rubbed the sticky cum into his skin, over his skin, raising his hand to his lips and licking it off, while Logan's eyes grew wide watching him. Those eyes made him even hotter. He leaned back and reached down to touch his own cock, still hard and burning between his legs. He used his saliva and Logan's seed as a lubricant as he stroked himself, watching Logan's reaction, desperate to finally be inside him.

Logan couldn't believe his eyes, couldn't believe this was happening. Not only had he managed somehow to make Gray harden on stage, not only had he managed somehow to chase him down and catch him, but the next Pride Head was marking himself with Logan's scent, making his hard, flat chest slick with Logan's seed. His ass twitched and burned, needing to be filled, and in another minute Gray was going to make Logan's every wicked fantasy come true and fuck him.

"Turn over," Gray commanded, his slick, hot hands hard on Logan's hips as he urged Logan sideways, forcing him to lie face-down on the dry leaves. Already Logan's cock grew hard again, his ass tingling in anticipation. He'd never had a man inside him before, not this way. Fingers, yes, and tongues, sliding wetly over him, but he'd never been fucked, any more than he suspected Gray had actually fucked anyone. The knowledge that he would be his love's first, that they would enter this unknown territory together, made his heart swell.

Gray's hands were not gentle as he lifted Logan's hips and kicked Logan's legs apart with his knees. Logan started to lift his head, but Gray shoved him back down. "If

fucking is what you want, *slave*,” he said, his voice rough, “then fucking is what you’ll get.” His fingers, still slick with saliva and Logan’s seed, twisted into Logan’s ass, lubricating it, stretching it. Waves of pleasure rushed over him, mixed with pain as Gray shoved a third finger in and roughly started sliding them in and out.

“Please be gentle,” Logan managed to whisper, his voice almost lost in the bed of leaves his face was buried in. He didn’t really want gentleness. He wanted to be claimed, but fear was starting to replace some of his arousal, fear that was heightened when Gray gave a short, sharp bark of laughter behind him.

“Were you gentle with me,” he hissed, “when you destroyed my future on that stage?”

“My lord, I—”

His words turned into a panther’s roar as Gray took his wet fingers away and shoved the entire thick, hard length of his cock into Logan’s ass.

Dimly he heard Gray’s roar answer his own, but he hardly paid attention. Pain, sharp and profound, radiated from where Gray now tunneled his cock deeper, a pain that slowly turned into something else as Gray set a relentless pace.

Logan was falling apart, there was no way his body could hold together, shaking from the intensity of feelings as the other man fucked him hard. Gray’s balls slapped against his own, his muscled hips hitting Logan’s ass with every thrust. Logan’s cock grew harder, jerking, as Gray continued his onslaught.

“Gray...Gray...” the words came out as a moan, a desperate choking sound in the back of his throat. Logan’s hands clenched, grabbing handfuls of leaves and grass, desperately trying to find something to hold on to as he spiraled out of control.

Gray’s response was to smack him, hard, his palm making Logan’s ass sting. Logan cried out, his eyes open but unseeing. Gods, yes, this was what he wanted, to be taken, to be forced to submit, to have the man he loved lose control in the hot depths of his body.

He clenched the muscles of his ass, squeezing Gray tighter. Triumph swelled in his chest as Gray growled behind him, and moved even faster.

His cock burned, jutting stiffly away from the nest of blondish hair at its base. It demanded to be touched. Logan slid his arm down, reaching for it, only to have Gray slap his hand away.

"You wanted this." Gray's words hit his skin like darts. "You wanted a fucking from me. You're in my control now." His hard palms spread Logan's cheeks wide. Logan knew Gray was watching, was looking down to see his cock sliding in and out of Logan's ass. The idea excited him like nothing ever had. If only he could do the same, if only he could see Gray's beloved face as the other man pumped in and out of him. If only he could be the one doing the fucking, if only he could be the one making Gray lose control beneath him.

Logan moaned again. He shoved his hips backward, greedily begging Gray to thrust even harder. They moved so well together, so smoothly, as if their bodies had been made for each other...

Gray's hand closed around Logan's cock. "Yes! Gray, yes!"

Somehow Gray managed to move his hand in time with his thrusts, both going so fast Logan knew he was going to explode again. He'd never been able to come again so quickly. Hell, he'd never been able to get hard again so quickly, but this was different. This was the man he loved, and lights began exploding behind his eyes as Gray masturbated him past the rawness of his skin, past the pain of his already drained balls tightening again.

"Fuck me, Gray! Fuck me oh gods I'm gonna come again, Gray!"

Gray roared behind him, his cock swelling, stretching Logan's ass to the limit. Logan's cries turned to a wordless grunt, then a different sort of moan as Gray yanked his cock out of Logan's ass and removed his hand from Logan's cock. His seed spurted hot onto Logan's back. Logan managed to raise his head up enough to see the glory of Gray's face, his teeth already lengthening, his head thrown back in ecstasy as he moved

his hand quickly on his cock, milking every last precious drop of come out to decorate Logan's skin.

Logan hadn't come again, but the sight was almost enough to make him do so, the sight he'd never thought he would see. His future Pride Head and the man he cared about more than any other, with all of his defenses gone, allowing a lowly slave to see this most intimate moment. His heart wanted to explode. He'd done it. He'd seduced Dawson Gray.

But his triumph came with a frisson of fear as he realized seducing Gray may have been the easy part.

Getting the other man to admit that what lay between them was more than just the fevered needs of their two bodies would be much harder.

Chapter Three

The reality of what he'd done hit him hard and fast, forcing his shift into his panther form as surely as the power of the moon. Gray's cry of passion became the high-pitched scream of a giant cat as he began his transformation. Bones shifted, teeth elongated, fur grew where once there had been skin. The agony lasted for only a few moments and then there were paws where his hands and feet had been, and the scent of aroused feline in the air.

Mingled with the scent of Logan's cum still coating his body, it was nearly enough to make him erect again, despite the fact that he'd just come so hard he felt he'd lost a piece of his soul in the process.

Logan moved to his feet, holding on to his human form despite the demands of the moon. He was a strong-willed man, no matter that he'd taken all the anger Gray had forced at him as meekly as a submissive. In every other situation Dawson had ever observed Logan, he'd been far from subservient, so much so that it was easy to forget that he was an Unfree.

Then why did you all but brand him with a slave tattoo?

Gray had never called an Unfree a slave to his face, especially not while he violated his body. He'd been brutal with Logan, punishing him with their lovemaking when it should have been he himself who was punished. Dawson was the one who had failed to resist temptation. Logan was merely doing what any Unfree would do to try to free himself from bondage.

And perhaps that's why Gray was so angry. He didn't want to be just another Pride-born, a way out of slavery. He wanted to mean something to Logan, to be more than his "lord", to be his friend...and maybe more.

Gray forced himself to hold still as Logan reached down and ran a soft hand over the top of his head. He hadn't allowed himself to be petted in his animal form in he couldn't remember how long. Probably since he was not much more than a kitten, an eight year old like his youngest brother. But still, he tolerated the soft touch.

He owed Logan that much, though that was all he owed him. He would not claim the other man as his warrior-mate, even though a part of him ached to do exactly that. What they'd just shared had been one of the most powerful experiences of his life, but it had been a lie. No matter that Logan had climaxed and begged for Gray to take his pleasure from him with a sincerity that had seemed all too real. Logan wanted only one thing—his freedom. Gray was merely a means to an end.

"So much going on behind those kitty eyes," Logan said, fisting his hand in the loose skin at the nape of Gray's neck when he would have pulled away. With a power that surprised even him—who had seen Logan fight and knew his strength and ferocity—Logan pulled Gray's feline face close to his. "Do not doubt that I loved every minute of what we did together."

Gray snarled and lifted his large paws onto the other man's chest, allowing his claws to slip out and press into his still-human skin. It would be so easy to damage Logan in his present state, and they both knew it. But still, the other man only tightened his grip on Gray's nape until it became almost painful.

"And do not doubt that it will be your turn next, sweet Dawson." Logan's eyes shone with a feral heat that thickened Gray's cock immediately, even in his animal form. He had never responded to a human sexually while encased in the fur of the beast. It was shocking, enough so that he didn't resist when Logan pulled his panther face close enough for their very different mouths to nearly meet. "And do not doubt that it will be you begging for my cock in your ass. I will have that, your wild abandon and more, my love."

Before Gray could begin to wonder at his last words, Logan shoved him backward with such force that even with his cat's reflexes, Gray barely managed to land on his

feet. By the time he turned back to Logan with a low growl of warning rumbling in his throat, Logan had shifted.

The beautiful man was now a beautiful cat, a pale blond panther who looked nearly white in the moonlight. They were striking together, light and dark, a complimentary pair of powerful beasts who together would be unstoppable.

No, it wasn't going to happen. He couldn't allow himself to imagine him and Logan together, as something more than two men sharing a single night of passion. It was impossible. Gray had a destiny to fulfill. He had failed to withstand temptation entirely here in the woods and would not be granted a mate this year, but he could begin again, submit to another round of mate-claiming tests. Maybe by next year he would be ready, would have rid himself of the mad desire to be part of a warrior-mated pairing.

But even as a part of him insisted that to explore what he and Logan could be was lunacy, another part insisted that to refuse that exploration would be pure cowardice. A lunatic or a coward? If given the choice between the two, Gray knew which he would choose.

He had never been backed down from a challenge in his life. Was he ready to start now? No matter the price to be paid for refusing to slink away in fear?

Or could he conquer his desire for the other man as he had bested so many opponents in battle?

Stop thinking. I thought the point of our animal forms was to banish the endless considerations of man. Logan spoke into his mind, his voice a welcome intrusion. The other man was right. He didn't want to think, not now, not when the moon rode high and the freedom of the beast itched at his very soul.

To the water. Logan said, with what looked almost like a grin on his feline mouth. *I want to wash the smell of you from my body.*

Gray bristled. It hurt him more than he would ever admit to know the other man didn't relish the scent of their essences mixed together.

That way, once we're clean...we can start all over again. Logan brushed his furred nose against his own, then rubbed the full length of his body against Gray's. *Let me know if you'd like me to mount you before or after we shift back in the morning.*

With that challenge still ringing in Gray's ears, Logan turned and ran softly, swiftly toward the river at the edge of their pride's territory.

* * * * *

They swam for nearly an hour, leaping from the tops of the rock cliffs and crashing down into the cold river without the slightest grace, deliberately acting like kits not yet allowed out of the Pride territories without a keeper. Logan was high on the freedom of playing with Gray, of knowing that the man he loved hadn't turned and run when he'd claimed the right to mount him.

Best run faster than that.

Gray's voice sounded in his head a second before the slightly larger cat rammed into him from behind. The momentum sent them sailing off the edge of the cliff, together this time, in a tangle of fur and flashing claws before they both plunged beneath the water and turned to swim to shore. They'd swatted at each other more than once since the shift, drawing blood now and then, but the mock battles only heightened their desire. They'd both been rock hard since they'd left the clearing, despite the cold water and Logan could scarcely control the urge to mount the other man, to take the scruff of his neck between his teeth and bite down as he shoved his aching cock into his ass.

But he wanted Gray's first time to be as a man, wanted to take the time to prepare his rear entry, to ease his cock into the tight heat there so that Gray felt nothing but pleasure. He'd wait, wait until his lover opened for him, relaxed around the passionate invasion before he claimed him with the same rough, swift strokes Gray himself had used. He'd order Gray not to touch himself, force him to wait until Logan reached around and found Gray's thick cock and jerked him to release at the moment he shot his seed deep into his body.

Logan would not use his cum to mark Gray's skin, but to mark his insides, the place where he truly wanted to touch his lover.

Thinking of it made something inside him sing. He leaned over as they strolled together through the trees, brushing his damp body against Gray's, wishing he could tell the other man how he felt.

Gray gave a small, almost imperceptible purr. The sound made Logan's heart leap. Could Gray really feel the same way? Could the strongest, proudest member of the pride's royal family truly be willing to be his warrior-mate?

He was close to asking, steeling himself against the inevitable rejection, when the terrified, pained roar of a fellow panther echoed through the forest and drove all other thoughts from his head.

Beside him Gray went utterly still, his fur bristling. *What was that?*

I don't know. Where did it come from?

They waited together for another cry, their muscles tensed and ready to move. Logan's heart pounded. There hadn't been real danger in these woods in almost a year, since a truce had finally been negotiated between the panthers and the lions.

Had the truce been broken?

Before the next roar stopped, they were running, moving swiftly as a team, their smooth furred bodies twisting easily through the tree trunks and undergrowth. The forest that had a moment ago been so peaceful, the moon that had shone on their bodies as they played together, now seemed filled with danger. No panther made sounds like that unless it was close to death with pain.

Even knowing that fact, Logan was not prepared for the sight that greeted him as he and Gray entered a small clearing.

Unfree were beaten on occasion. It happened, though Logan wished fervently it did not. But he'd never seen anything like this.

His friend and fellow Unfree Jonas was chained, bound with silver, to a tree, his body twisting helplessly between panther and human forms. The silver kept him human even as the wounds on his bruised, blood-streaked body must be causing enough pain to force his change even without the full moon. Logan could not imagine the torture of staying in painful mid-change for more than a few moments, let alone as long as it seemed Jonas had been held.

Tears ran down the other man's shadowed cheeks, across features halted somewhere between man and beast. His body was furred all over, his legs those of his panther form, while his arms stayed human and his hands clenched and released, claws at the end of his human fingers marking his soft palms. The smell of his fear, of his blood and urine, clouded the air.

Next to him stood Tyler Rollins, the oldest son of the second most powerful family in the pride. In his hand was a silver blade, and his face was twisted with fury and what Logan recognized with a sickened thud as pleasure.

Logan had to fight not to look away. His body tensed with rage, wanting nothing more than to leap, to attack Tyler, to feel his skin rip beneath Logan's claws. For an Unfree to attack a Pride-born meant a death sentence. Logan wasn't sure at that moment if he cared.

It seemed like hours that he stood and stared, but in reality only a few seconds passed before he crouched, tensing, ready to leap.

No! Gray was too fast for him. Before Logan knew what was happening Gray surged forward, his large, smooth black body moving with deadly grace as he sank teeth and claws into Tyler and knocked him to the ground.

"Unlock him!" Gray's voice was muffled and indistinct, a roar more than a shout. It was extremely difficult to make human speech in panther form; very few pride members even attempted it, but there was no choice now. With Tyler still in human form, telepathic communication wasn't possible, and neither Gray nor Logan could

unlock Jonas in were form. Being a panther had its advantages, but the lack of opposable thumbs wasn't one of them.

"Lord Gray," Tyler gasped, obviously in pain. "The slave is a liar!"

In response Gray swiped at him again, scratching him across the chest. Blood oozed from the cuts. "Unlock him!"

"He is a slave, he's mine to do with what I—"

Gray bared his teeth and roared.

Tyler stood reluctantly, picking the keys up from the ground by Jonas' feet. Logan and Gray both watched, their bodies tense and low to the ground, ready to pounce. Gray growled, a menacing rumble, as Tyler inserted the key in one of the shackles.

Before he could turn that key, however, he changed, wheeling on Gray with his teeth bared.

Logan, free him! Gray shouted in his head, before he and Tyler collided.

Logan tensed. Every muscle in his body wanted to join the fight, to help Gray, but Jonas' shouts of pain were too agonizing to ignore. As quickly as he could, he reared up, placing his paws carefully on Jonas' trembling chest, and gripped the key with his teeth.

It was awkward, to say the very least. He wished desperately he could change back to his human form, even if only for a moment, but he couldn't. The moon had done its work, and he would not be able to resume human shape until sunrise.

His jaw ached as he fumbled with the tiny key, trying to move his head carefully and keep his claws retracted. From behind him came the sounds of battle, roars and howls and the rustle of leaves being kicked up by the frantic motions of the fighting cats. Finally he felt the key click and let go.

Jonas snatched his hand from the cuffs. "I can do the other one, I think...I think I have time," he managed to say.

Logan fell back and watched Jonas grip the key in his fur-covered hand. Quickly the other man inserted the key in the other lock and turned it, falling down, his body changing as he fell, pitiful mewling sounds coming from his throat.

Logan turned, his claws out, ready to help Gray. But then Jonas grabbed him, pulling him down. *Please Logan...please don't leave me. It hurts so bad...* The slave panther's breathing was labored, his whimpers terrible in Logan's ears Logan pulled him closer. Jonas had never been strong, had always been easily hurt and needy for approval. Now...as much as Logan hated to admit it, Gray didn't need him right now. Jonas did.

So he wrapped his body around the other Unfree's, and watched his lover fight for his life.

You have no right to do this! Tyler's mental voice was full of rage as the two panthers circled each other. Pain, sharp and clear, radiated through Gray's body from the wound in his shoulder, but he was too angry to care. Tyler and his family had been a thorn in the sides of the Grays for decades. This was the final straw.

You had no right to abuse the Unfree in such a fashion, he replied. *And I shall see that the Pride Head hears about this.*

The Pride Head! Tyler said scornfully. *As if he'll listen to you, when he sees you've failed to secure a female mate. Were the few minutes you spent buried in that slave's ass worth the loss of everything you've worked for your whole life?*

Gray's vision went red. It was nothing less than the truth, nothing less than what he'd been saying to himself, but hearing it come from another man...

He roared and leapt, his claws digging into Tyler's flanks, his teeth snapping for the other panther's neck but just missing as Tyler jerked his body to the side. His roar echoed in the clearing, and Gray leapt back as Tyler's teeth nipped at his tail.

He didn't pause, but turned and attacked again. Blood poured freely from his wounds, from Tyler's wounds, filling his nostrils with the spicy scent of fear and pain. The animal in him gloried in it.

Tyler's claws caught his ear, ripping it. Gray howled, finding Tyler's front leg and biting with all his strength. Tyler fell over and together they rolled across the clearing, biting and snapping, not stopping until they hit the solid rock wall of the cliffs.

Where was Logan? Why was he not helping?

Tyler must have had the same thought. *I see your little tempter has better things to do than come to your aid, Gray.*

I don't need aid. I could kill you now if I wished.

You would kill me for treating an Unfree as is my right to treat him? Better that you failed, then, and fucked your tempter. If this is the sort of weakness you show, the pride is better off without you.

That was enough for Gray. He leapt forward, too fast for Tyler to defend himself, and wrapped his teeth around Tyler's neck, tearing. Hot blood poured into his mouth, fueling his savage desire to hurt, to kill, to defend himself and his honor at all costs.

He hadn't intended to do this. He'd wanted only to force Tyler to give up. But he could not deny that in his panther form it was harder to fight the deadly urges filling his body, to fight the rage coursing through him at Tyler's words. Harder to control himself when his teeth wanted to rip and tear. He growled and shook his head, spraying blood across the clearing.

Gray! Gray, no! Logan's voice, clear and loud in his head, finally broke through the fog. *Stop! You have to stop!*

Tyler's body went limp, but Gray could still hear the panther's heart beating. He wasn't dead. He would live. Weres healed quickly.

Gray looked over to say something, to ask why Logan hadn't helped him, but what he saw made the words die.

Logan, wrapped around Jonas, cuddling the other Unfree like a child. Like a lover.

He knew the Unfree were as easily sexual with each other as the Pride-born. More so because there were no Unfree women. With their only chance for sexual release to be found in the arms of whatever Pride-born they managed to tempt—if they managed to tempt one—and the need to practice their skills to make the tempting possible, the Unfree cabins were often filled with naked male bodies, writhing together until the dawn.

But it had never occurred to him before that Logan must have participated. That Logan's horror at seeing Jonas tortured and chained might be more than simply what anyone would feel when a friend was hurt. That it might be what a lover would feel on seeing his love injured.

He'd been right. Logan saw him only as a chance to move up in the world, a chance to become a free warrior-mate. He hadn't cared that Gray could have been seriously injured fighting Tyler—why should he, when he'd already managed to convince Gray to fuck him?

Gray would have to prove to himself—and to Logan—that he was nobody's plaything. The final test could be in the morning. As long as he didn't let Logan slip that thick cock into his ass, as long as he managed to stop himself from begging the Unfree to do exactly that no matter what, he had a chance.

Chapter Four

Logan woke up with the sun warming his naked body. Beside him, but not touching, lay Gray. His eyes were still closed, and Logan propped himself up on his right arm to look at him.

The other man's nude body sprawled on the soft grass, impossibly gorgeous. Every curve, every flat, broad expanse made something deep inside Logan twist. Last night...last night he'd touched, tasted. Last night he'd had that stunning cock deep in his mouth, deep in his ass. The memory made him hard.

Gray made a soft sound and turned away, so now his broad, strong back faced Logan. His back...his ass, round and firm. Logan couldn't forget how it had felt cradling his cock on stage, or how the tightly muscled ring had clenched around his thumb.

So what had happened? They'd been having...well, they'd been having the best night of Logan's life. He'd never experienced passion like that or closeness like that either. He'd thought, for a few shining hours, that Gray might even come to love him back, in time. That he had a chance at claiming the only man who had ever made his heart ache as fiercely as his cock.

Seeing Gray fight Tyler to rescue Jonas had broken the last of Logan's defenses. He'd always known Gray was a good man, a man who deserved all the honor and fame he possessed. But no Pride-born had ever risked himself like that for an Unfree. If he'd had any doubts that Gray was worthy of his love and admiration, they'd faded away in that moment.

So why, then? Why had Gray been so distant in the last hours before sunrise? Why had he only grudgingly allowed Logan to lie down near him for a nap before the sunrise brought the return of their human forms? He'd barely spoken as they'd escorted

Jonas back to the Unfree quarters to wait for morning, and had grown even more uncommunicative after the wounded panther was tucked into bed with a warm blanket and a saucer of cream.

Logan shivered. Surely Gray couldn't have minded seeing him comfort Jonas. Gray knew most of the Unfree at least a little. Surely he knew how fragile Jonas was, how much Jonas had needed a warm body by his side as he tried to recover from the trauma inflicted on him.

There was only one way to find out.

Carefully, Logan reached out and placed his right hand on one of Gray's shoulder blades. "Gray?"

Nothing. He stroked his hand down, caressing the narrow curve of Gray's waist and the divot below his hips. "Gray?"

"Mmmph."

It didn't sound like an invitation or a purr of pleasure, but it didn't sound like a "Get away from me" either. Logan had no idea what Gray was like on waking, but he couldn't wait to learn. He wanted to know what Gray liked for breakfast, whether he slept in the nude, what paper he liked to read in the morning or if he was a morning news watcher. What kind of soap he used or beer he drank, how he spent his recreational hours...all the things a lover, a mate, would know without even thinking.

Logan scooted forward a little on the grass so he could reach around and caress Gray's chest. He was awake. Logan knew it from the stillness of the other man's body.

So why wasn't he turning around? Was he...no longer interested?

Logan wasn't about to let that happen. For him to be able to claim his right as a warrior-mate, truly claim it, Gray would have to let Logan inside him. If he wanted this man to be his for life—and he did, oh Gods how he did—he had only an hour or so to seduce him for good.

Not to mention that aside from any concern about freedom or love, just touching Gray's body like this made Logan so hard he thought he might explode. They were meant to be mated—every cell in his body resonated with that truth. Now all he had to do was convince one of the most stubborn men he'd ever met of that fact in the next sixty minutes. He'd faced more difficult challenges, but had never had so very much to lose.

That knowledge made his heart beat fast in his throat as his busy fingers found the hardened point of Gray's nipple and pinched it lightly, drawing a gasp from Gray. Logan smiled.

"Gray," he whispered, deciding to be bold, to pretend he hadn't noticed Gray's coldness before they fell asleep. "Wake up, sleepy head. I can think of better ways to spend this morning than passed out in the grass."

Pause. "I can not."

Logan bit his lip. Gray sounded cold, angry.

What kind of future could they truly have with each other if Gray hated him for stealing his birthright, for tempting him away from a female mate? Did he want to spend the next forty of fifty years with a man who loathed him?

Never mind that now. You know the rules. You tempted him and you caught him, and he's yours to tempt until the pride convenes again. It's your duty to tempt him, for the good of the pride.

And he cared about the good of the pride, about the positive impact the man in his arms could have on the future of their people...nearly as much as he cared about his own shot at happiness. Logan considered himself a good man, but he was no saint. It was selfishness as much as duty that demanded he slide his hand down Gray's chest, over those delightful muscles, until he found the soft hair at the base of Gray's hard cock.

And hard it was. Triumph surged through him. Gray may be angry, he may even be hurt, but he could not pretend he didn't want Logan.

Logan moved again until his chest fit snugly around Gray's back, until once again his cock rested between the hard mounds of Gray's ass. He closed his left hand around Gray's cock and gave a soft, gentle tug.

Gray's breath caught, but this time Logan was too aroused for triumph. He let his lips play along Gray's neck, then nipped the tender skin with his teeth.

"Stop, Logan."

"Oh, no. It's my duty to tempt you, remember? And believe me, Gray, I am not a man who believes in shirking my duties." He found a pearl of precum on Gray's tip and smoothed the liquid around and around, teasing the head of the other man's cock.

"Your duty." The words were spoken with such venom that Logan let go of Gray's cock and leaned away.

"My duty, yes...but one I was pleased to fulfill."

"So you could be free. So you can give your lover the perks of being a pride member's chosen."

"My—what?" Logan was thrown, despite the fact that he'd suspected something like this. "You're speaking of Jonas, I assume? You think he's my lover?"

"I couldn't care less if he is or isn't." Gray rolled onto his hands and knees and then sat back on his heels, the cold look on his face at complete odds with the hot length stretching up toward his navel.

"I care. He's not much more than a child, and a weak child at that. You think I get off on fucking men too fragile to care for themselves?" Logan let his anger show in his eyes.

"What gets you off isn't my concern. I will return to the—"

"It sure as hell is your concern," Logan said, closing the distance between himself and the other man and gripping him by the shoulders.

"Get your hands off me."

"No, I will not," Logan said, tensing his hands and holding Gray firm when he tried to pull away. "You loved every moment of what we did together last night, Gray, and there could be so much more. Don't throw it away because of completely misplaced jealousy."

"Jealousy?" Gray laughed, but the look in his eyes warned that Logan was playing with fire.

"There is nothing between Jonas and me, never has been, never will be."

"You think awfully well of yourself, don't you Logan?"

"No, I think awfully well of you," Logan said, gentling his touch, running his fingertips slowly down Gray's arms. It was time to show Gray who he truly was, time to ignore the boundaries placed upon his behavior by his Unfree status. If he would have this man for mate, Gray had to know that Logan was not a man who would back down from a fight if that was the only way to get through to his partner. "You're the only man I've ever wanted. I've fucked other men, I've cared for the friends I've lived with, fought with, but never felt anything like when you entered me last night."

Gray swallowed hard and closed his eyes, and Logan knew he was close, so close it made his throat ache and his voice thick when he spoke. "Let me show you, Gray. Let me love you."

Logan leaned in close to press a soft kiss to the side of the other man's neck even as his hands smoothed around to cup Gray's buttocks and pull him close. They were both on their knees and seemed more evenly matched in height than when they were standing. When their hips pressed more tightly together, Logan could feel every inch of Gray's rock-hard cock pulsing against his own arousal. The feeling took his breath away, made him moan against Gray's skin.

"When I am Pride Head, there will be changes made," Gray said, moving his hands to Logan's shoulders as if he would push him away, but not using the force it would take to do so. "The Unfree will have the same rights as the Pride-born at the culmination of their service."

"A wise and compassionate decision, I think." Logan rocked his hips slowly, luxuriating in the feel of the soft skin of their heated cocks sliding back and forth against one another. "You will win greater loyalty from the Unfree and the admiration of those pride members formerly displeased with your father's rule."

"You dare say that any have been displeased with my father?" Gray asked, a lightness in his tone that let Logan know he was teasing, but a bitterness there as well. The bitterness made him suspect the true reason for Gray's fierce resistance.

"Your father is a tyrant but not a completely unreasonable man. He will still be your father if you are warrior-mated, Gray." Logan pulled back to catch Gray's eyes, seeing the impact of his words on the other man.

"I'm not so certain of that," Gray said, vulnerability in his tone for the first time since they had run from the clearing together. "The Grays will require heirs if we seek to remain at the head of the Pride."

"You have brothers. The last hope of your line does not end with you."

"The eldest son has always mate-claimed. I would be the first to fail. I am...not sure what that will mean for my future," Gray said, making Logan doubt the validity of his earlier reassurance. The shame and anger mixing on Gray's face spoke more eloquently than his words. He feared he would lose his family's love and respect if he did not claim a female. In a Pride-born's world, family was the first loyalty and pride a close second.

If Gray was shunned by his loved ones, he would lose both, would effectively lose everything.

"Your service is nearly at an end, Logan. You will be free within a year or two. By then I will be Pride Head. You will have the same rights as a pride born," Gray continued, pulling away slightly, though not so far as to sever the connection between their aroused bodies.

"What are you saying?" Logan asked, unable to believe what he read in the stormy depths of Gray's eyes.

"Temptation is no longer your only way out. My seduction isn't required to ensure that you will one day soon be a free man with the rights of a pride born son." Gray's face was smooth and impassive, but Logan could feel the pain simmering beneath his words.

"Your seduction is required to fulfill my dreams," Logan said, cupping the other man's face with shaking hands, overcome to learn that Gray truly felt the same pull between them. He had to feel it – there was no other explanation for his words. "I am in love with you, Dawson Gray, have been for quite some time."

Gray's eyes widened, and slowly, piece by piece the wall he had built to keep Logan out crumbled. When he spoke again, his voice was as filled with emotion as Logan's own. "You speak truly."

"I do." Logan leaned close and pressed a soft kiss to the other man's mouth, that one simple touch filled with as much emotion as their fucking the night before.

Gods...their fucking. Logan had been mad to take Gray when he'd assumed passion was the only thing between them, but now...now he felt his body would explode if he didn't get inside his love in the next ten seconds.

"I may no longer be in line for Pride Head, I may –"

"I will stand by your side no matter what your position." Logan intensified the kiss, sweeping his tongue into Gray's mouth and moaning as the larger man opened to him without resistance.

"No, I may even be exiled if my worst fears are confirmed," Gray said, pulling back, his lips still shining and wet from their kiss. "I can not ask –"

"You don't have to ask. I would go with you, I would follow you to the ends of the earth, Gray." Logan gripped Gray's cock and stroked him hard, just once, up and down the engorged length. "You are mine, and I am yours. Can't you feel that truth every time we touch?"

Gray met his eyes for several long seconds, and then finally, with a deliberate movement that brought the desire surging within Logan near the breaking point, reached out and grasped Logan's cock in his hand as well. "I can."

"Gods, Gray, you don't know how long I've —"

Gray silenced him with soft fingers at his lips, fingers Logan suckled into his mouth without pausing to think. He was swiftly moving beyond thought, so filled with need to make love to the man in front of him that he didn't know how much longer he'd be able to form words.

"But I don't believe you speak truly," Gray said, playing with Logan's furiously swollen cock, teasing down his arousal to cup his balls and then moving behind to play about the tight ring of his ass. "I believe you are mine." His fingers pushed into Logan's ass and Logan moaned, eyes sliding closed, pre-cum leaking from his body at the bliss of feeling Gray's hands on him, in him, claiming him in the way Logan had hardly dared to dream. "As yet, however, I don't believe I am yours."

Logan's eyes flew open, and a wicked grin stretched across his face as he read the intention in Gray's tone.

"No, I believe you're correct, my lord," Logan said, sliding his hand down Gray's back until he found his lover's rear entry. "I don't believe you are mine, just yet."

"You don't have to name me as your lord," Gray said, his voice breathy as Logan penetrated him with first one finger and then two.

"You will always be my lord," Logan said. "From now until the day I leave this earth, a happy man for having spent my life with you."

They came together with more violence this time, rolling to the ground in a tumble of tangled arms and legs, furiously mating tongues, and eager hands. Logan felt his heart swell as profoundly as his cock, knowing in moments he would claim his lifemate, his love, and the only man who could ever own every part of him — body and soul.

Gray's head swam. How had it come to this so quickly? When he'd meant to resist, to prove to Logan that he was not the man for him and would never be his warrior-mate?

"Gods, I love you," Logan mumbled into his mouth, even as he moved his calloused hand faster, up and down Gray's cock.

That was why his defenses had crumbled to dust. The man loved him, truly and deeply, with all of his heart. Gray didn't know what he'd done to deserve the love of a man like Logan, a man as brave and gorgeous and strong as any he'd ever met, but he vowed to be worthy of him. From this moment on, there would be no holding back. Damn his father, damn the pride's expectations. He was going to walk into that clearing and claim Logan proudly, and deal with the fallout as best he could, with his warrior-mate by his side.

"I can't wait to be inside you." Logan's other hand worked slowly in and out of Gray's ass, preparing him with a gentleness and restraint that Dawson appreciated, though truly didn't need.

"Then get inside me. I'm ready, Logan, gods I'm ready. I want to feel you filling—"

"Not yet," Logan groaned, his cock twitching in Gray's hand. Dawson sped his strokes and Logan did the same until they were jerking each other with the same frenzied, relentless rhythm.

Dawson groaned, seconds away from coming but holding back with every bit of strength he possessed. He wouldn't come, not yet, not until Logan was inside him, shoving into his body, claiming him, cementing their commitment to each other beyond anyone's ability to reverse it.

But it was hard, so fucking hard with Logan's fingers inside him, his tongue busy in his mouth, his fist working Gray's cock with the perfect wicked pressure.

"If you don't fuck me soon, I'm going to go."

“Go, I want to watch you come.” Logan worked him a little more roughly, adding a third finger to the first two. “I want to spread your come on my cock, coat myself with it before I turn you over and —”

“Gods!” Dawson screamed out his pleasure as he shot himself into Logan’s hand, his balls emptying of their seed in hot streams that Logan used to do exactly what he’d said.

Gray lost the ability to breathe from the combined thrill of the orgasm rocketing through his body and watching Logan stroke his own cock until the long, thick length was glistening with Gray’s release. The other man’s face was twisted with the pleasure it gave him to coat himself in the evidence of Gray’s satisfaction, his bright blue eyes shining with fire.

“Turn over,” Logan demanded, his voice tight as he urged Gray over onto his belly in the grass. Gray went willingly, lifting his hips in the air to accommodate Logan’s entry.

His muscles quivered with the need to feel Logan taking him, the primal hunger coursing through him so powerful Gray feared it might force him to shift no matter that the pull of the moon was at its weakest. It was only his need to share this moment in his thinking, feeling, human form that allowed him to hold back, to stay a creature of skin, not fur, as Logan moved the head of his blunt cock between his cheeks.

Logan pulled him wide and pressed into his tight ring just the slightest bit, testing Gray’s body with a control Gray knew he would not have been able to manage. That knowledge, combined with his own fierce desire, made him buck back into his lover, forcing Logan’s thick cock into his ass to the hilt.

“Gray, gods, Gray, I didn’t want to hurt you,” Logan said, his pleasure evident in the trembling hands that stroked down Gray’s back to brace against the twin swells of his muscled buttocks.

“Then fuck me like you mean it,” Gray gasped, the feel of Logan filling him even better than he had dreamed it would be.

"Oh, I mean it." Logan drew back and slid slowly, sensuously back inside, and miraculously, Gray felt his cock begin to rise between his legs. It was damn near physically impossible after how hard he'd come, but if anyone could get a response from him so quickly, it would be Logan, his lover, his future mate.

Logan began to move faster, with demanding strokes that claimed Gray with every deep, thrilling penetration. It wasn't long before the flesh of his buttocks rippled with the speed and force of Logan's movements, until his flesh was slick with sweat and his cock fully engorged once more. The urgent sounds of their bodies coming together combined with shallow grunts Gray finally realized were coming from his own throat, seconds before Logan cried out, shooting his hot essence deep into Gray's welcoming body.

"Gray," Logan whispered in his ear after he had collapsed heavily on top of him, his cock still buried inside Gray's ass as it jerked and twitched, spilling the very last of the other man's seed.

"So now we have claimed each other properly," Gray said, arching back into Logan's softening cock as one hand reached back to stroke Logan's ass.

"We have. You've been thoroughly claimed." Logan trailed soft kisses down the back of Gray's neck, licking away beads of sweat with his rough tongue until Gray shivered beneath him. "All that remains to be done is to have my initials branded on this fine ass."

"Branded? You think so?" Gray laughed and rolled over, knocking Logan to the ground. He turned and straddled the other man before he could sit, trapping Logan's lightly furred legs beneath his own. "And how will I mark you? A tattoo perhaps, 'property of Gray' across the small of your back?"

"Or we could forget the brands and tattoos and you could just put that cock to good use," Logan said, his gaze hot as he lowered his eyes to Gray's thick erection. "I hate to see something like that go to waste."

It wasn't long before Gray was once again buried in Logan's body, fucking him with all the passion he hadn't dared to allow himself before this morning. And for a few moments, consumed by the bliss of being with the man he loved, Gray forgot about the challenges facing them when they returned to the clearing, forgot about his family, forgot about everything except Logan, the other half he hadn't ever thought he'd find.

Chapter Five

Between cowardice and lunacy...I choose lunacy.

It was still true, would always be true, but even with his body still tingling at the thought of the morning he'd spent, Gray couldn't help the tiny frisson of fear that swept through his body as he made his way through the clearing.

There was no going back, truly. Though he had showered thoroughly to make sure no scents would confuse the examiners, scent was far from important.

What mattered was testimony. Testimony and the physical exam.

The penalty for an Unfree to lie about the tempting was death. And for proof, a physical exam would be carried out if the Pride-born in question tried to deny a claiming.

In all the years Gray had watched the tempting, in all of the years he'd participated in the first rounds, no Unfree had ever been put to death.

Not that Gray would even consider denying the claim. He'd made up his mind. He loved Logan. Loved him so much he wished there was a way to simply bypass the questioning, take the other man into his arms, and show the world how he felt. Wished they could skip all of this and go get Logan's few belongings to bring to his cabin. Wished they were in that cabin now, and Logan's cock was in his mouth...

His entire body tightened at the thought.

A few feet away, Logan watched him. Gray gave him a tiny smile. Logan too was freshly showered, his blond hair still dark with water. His plain white t-shirt stretched tight across his powerful chest, his faded jeans clung to his lean hips and the swell of his beautiful ass. Logan was indeed a prize.

And he loved him. Logan actually loved him, enough to want him even if Gray's family disowned him, even if they were forced to leave the pride and set off on their own, trying to find a new pride that would accept them. Not an easy path, and one that would be marked with their blood as they tried to fight their way to belonging. That a man so close to gaining his freedom would be willing to do that for him...

He'd never felt love like that before.

Certainly not from his father, who now stood next to him, glowering.

"I trust you had no problem last night, Dawson," he said.

"No problems, Father. But I—"

"Gray!" It was Landon Rechaux, Melody's father, and beside him stood Melody, her pretty mouth curved in an inviting smile. She really was a lovely woman. Her auburn hair hung in loose waves down her back—her blue eyes sparkled. Once, Gray had looked forward to their union.

"Mr. Rechaux, Melody." Gray took a deep breath. How to begin? What to say?

"Gray, you don't have to say anything," Landon said, and Gray's shoulders started to relax. "There's no need to apologize to us for being tempted last night. It happens to the best of us. Why, even I, back at my testing, ended up in the woods for the night. His name was Morlin." Landon smiled. "He certainly tried his best with me, but the thought of Melody's mother gave me the strength I needed to resist. And she wasn't even as pretty as our girl here."

"I knew you'd be able to do it, Gray," Melody said.

"Of course he was able to." Gray's father gave his son another glare. "He knows how important it is to his family, to this whole pride. If he broke the tradition of generations in such a manner, he knows the price—"

"Let the Questioning begin." The voice came over the speakers. "All Unfree to the stage, please."

Gray hadn't dared to look at Logan while this awful conversation took place. Now he did, but only in time to catch a glimpse of his love's face before Logan turned and walked to the stage.

Logan had to have heard them. Landon had pitched his voice to such a level it was impossible for anyone not to, especially not with the sensitive hearing of the weres. His father had been a little quieter, but only a little. Gray felt the eyes of every pride member on him as the Unfree lined up before them.

He still chose courage...and Logan. But he couldn't help wishing, for that one moment, that he wasn't Dawson Meyer Gray, that he was instead just another Pride-born whose family would welcome their warrior-mate with as much pleasure as they would have welcomed a claimed mate.

* * * * *

Logan knew the rest of the Unfree were simply warm-ups to the big show, his own Questioning. There wasn't a single pride member in the crowd who didn't wait with bated breath to find out if he'd been successful, if he had in fact managed to penetrate Gray and claim him as his own.

That he had succeeded filled him with pride. That the consequences would be so damning to the man he loved filled him with pain.

He couldn't see Gray in the crowd now. The bright lights at the foot of the stage were unnecessary in the daytime but still lit to keep signals from being sent. It had happened before. Well before Logan came to the pride, a Pride-born had offered an Unfree money to lie. He'd been caught and forced to go through with the mating.

No, Logan was alone now, alone up here on the stage...with the words of Landon Rechaux and Upton Gray still ringing in his ears.

The words of the questioning, so familiar, rang in his ears as the first Unfree was questioned and proudly stated his tempting had been successful. Logan tried to take

heart from the Unfree's new warrior-mate stepping onto the stage to smile and take his hand.

It could be that way for us. Gray could climb up here, claim you again with a kiss, and you could both walk off together while the pride smiles and claps.

Even as the thought passed through his mind, he knew it wouldn't happen, couldn't happen. His words would be greeted with gasps, with jeers and laughs. His words would be greeted with anger from the Pride Head whose son had failed him and his family.

It was easy for Gray to say he loved him in the woods, with no one around. But hadn't it also been easy for Gray to tell him the night before that he'd ruined his life, destroyed his future?

Would Gray one day tire of him and grow to resent the man who had stolen his destiny? Would he maybe even learn to hate him, to wish for the death of his warrior-mate?

Gray had been raised to be Pride Head. He'd been raised to think of the entire pride, of his family, to expect the respect and power that came with that position.

Would he really be satisfied without it? With being an outcast?

Gray loves you. He said so.

And Logan believed it. Knew Gray loved him just as much as Logan loved Gray, which was more than he'd ever loved anything or anyone. Knew that when Gray said the words, there in the forest while the sun danced on their entwined bodies, he'd meant them with every fiber of his being.

But being out in the forest together was very different from being here in the pride together, in front of everyone.

He crossed his arms over his chest. Why was he even thinking this way? Gray loved him, and he loved Gray, and that was what mattered. They'd given themselves to each other. Gray said he wanted to be with him, and what Gray wanted...

A voice drifted over the lights. "Easy to be tempted on that stage, but a real man can fight off the sexiest slave in the forests..."

Upton Gray. Logan's jaw tensed. Gray, not a real man? Gray, who was the strongest, bravest, and best man Logan had ever met. Could he force Gray to listen to such lies for the rest of his life, force him to be less than everything that he was?

"Will the Unfree Logan step forward."

As if in a dream, Logan did. The lights blinded him. He couldn't see the crowd beyond, couldn't see Gray.

"Unfree Logan, did you catch Dawson Meyer Gray in the forest?"

"I did."

"Did you tempt Dawson Meyer Gray with your hands?"

"I did."

"Did Dawson Meyer Gray become aroused?"

Logan swallowed. "He did."

A murmur, quiet at first then growing louder, swept the audience. They were all talking, all...pleased. Logan heard it, felt it, though he couldn't make out their words.

Assholes. Why was this happening? Why did he feel like the world was ending, like the pride had a chance for something special, and so did he, but that Gray's life would be ruined?

"Unfree Logan, did Dawson Meyer Gray allow you to pleasure him orally?"

"He..." the word came out as a dry croak. The silence from the crowd was so tense, so expectant, that Logan had to fight the urge to scream. He cleared his throat.

"Unfree Logan, did Dawson Meyer Gray allow you to pleasure him orally?"

"He...he did not."

What? Why are you saying that?

His own thoughts assaulted him, but he knew—he knew why. Because he loved Gray. He couldn't ruin Gray's life, make him unhappy, jeopardize his future, because of that love.

Once Gray was mate-claimed, they could still be lovers. Down the road, once a little time had passed. It wasn't the solution Logan wanted. But it was the only one he could live with.

"Unfree Logan, did Dawson Meyer Gray pleasure you orally?"

"He did not."

"Did Dawson Meyer Gray enter your body with any part of his?"

"He did not." His voice was clear now. The sick feeling in his stomach—his desperate hope that Gray would know why he was lying and would understand, made him ache and made his eyes burn—but his conviction was strong.

"Did you enter Dawson Meyer Gray's body with any part of yours?"

"I did not."

"Unfree Logan, has Dawson Meyer Gray offered you anything in exchange for your testimony?"

"He has not."

"Are you telling the truth before the pride?"

"I am, sir."

He was going to be sick. He was going to throw up, right here on the stage, in front of everyone.

He'd denied Gray, denied the words they'd spoken and the promises they'd made and the passion and love between them.

Denied them all, and as the Questioner excused him and he left the stage, he couldn't help but glance over to where the Gray family stood. Upton had his hand on Gray's shoulders while Melody Rechaux grinned and kissed him on the cheek.

But Gray watched Logan, and in his eyes burned with something Logan couldn't identify.

He turned his head and left the clearing as fast as he could.

* * * * *

Why had he done it?

All through the banquet that followed, Gray couldn't stop thinking about it. Logan had lied—why had Logan lied? Why had he denied Gray, denied what Gray thought they meant to each other?

He'd never loved before. Not like that. He'd never bared his heart to another person in such a deep way...and the love and openness he'd given had been handed back to him like a used tissue.

He'd thought he knew Logan. Now he wondered what had been lies and what, if anything, had been true.

Worse, he wondered what Logan's motives were. Was this a ploy? Some kind of plan to blackmail Gray? The fact that he'd allowed Logan to claim him in the forest meant he was forever tainted if anyone discovered the truth. He would be exiled. That was far more certain than it would be if he'd been warrior-mated.

"Gray, you seem so quiet," Melody said. Her arm on his was a whisper of silk as she reached across him to grab the wine bottle.

"Just thinking." He took the bottle from her and poured, embarrassed to be caught neglecting her. After all...she was his mate now, or would be the next day. Tonight he would claim her as his. Tomorrow the ceremony would be performed. His father and hers had been planning it for months.

Would Logan be at the ceremony? Would...would he allow it to take place?

The Grays had been in power for centuries, and in those centuries they'd gained many enemies. Was Logan in the service of one of them? Had some other family offered him money to disgrace Gray? Because a public truth at the Questioning was one thing.

A secret coming out later...a lie allowed to stand...it could be devastating to everyone, not just Gray.

But what was the point of telling the truth if Logan didn't want him? He'd allowed Logan inside him. If he hadn't, he could stand for testing again next year. Any other form of sexual behavior could be erased, forgotten. Only that one act, that single act that had brought Gray the deepest pleasure and happiness he'd ever experienced in his life, could also damn him to a life of loneliness. With no mate at all he could not lead the pride.

"Is something wrong?" Melody leaned close to him. The flowery scent of her hair, the soft, clean scent of her skin filled his nose.

"Sorry." How could he sit and talk to her when his entire life might be ending? How could he claim her knowing that if the truth was uncovered, she would be hurt?

Of course, after time proved she was not pregnant she could find another, easily. Women were too scarce for her life to be ruined as his would be.

"Do you want to go now?"

He didn't, not really. But neither did he want to sit here while everyone grinned at him as if he was a hero, while his father kept wanting to talk to him about plans for when Gray was running the pride.

So he nodded and ignored the jokes of the others as Melody took his hand and they left the table.

At first he didn't know where they were going. He'd been so distracted, his head so filled with thoughts of Logan that it hadn't even occurred to him she had more in mind than simply a walk.

"Melody..." he started, but her lips touched his neck, his cheek, and he stopped.

"Gray...I've waited for so long..." she whispered, her hands sliding across his chest, down to his waist. "Don't make me wait any longer."

Gods, could he do this? Could he make love to this woman, make her his mate while he knew deep down it was Logan he loved? That instead of her luscious breasts, he yearned for the hard planes of Logan's chest? That he —

She kissed his mouth, hard, her soft lips beneath his promising untold delights. Against his will he groaned and gripped her upper arms in his hands. Yes, he wanted Logan, loved Logan. But hadn't he always wanted Melody too? Hadn't he spent his entire life expecting to make her his one day?

Her tongue slipped between his teeth. Instinctively he met it with his own, opening his mouth to her. Her arms circled his neck, pulling his head down to hers. She was so tiny, so different from Logan who was only a few inches shorter than Gray.

He hadn't thought it was possible to be aroused by someone else after what had happened the night before. But he was. His cock thickened in his jeans. It was impossible not to hold her, not to pull her closer, not to want her. She was warm and lovely, and he cared about her. He could do this. He *would* do this. No matter that a voice inside his head still screamed at him to push her away, to —

She pulled away, staring up at him with blue eyes filled with a sudden knowledge. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

Chapter Six

Logan dropped onto his narrow bed with a sigh. It was over. Over. He'd done it—though he still wasn't sure it was the right thing to do—and now here he was, alone again.

Alone but knowing for the first time in his life what he was missing by being alone.

Great job, Logan. You really know how to fuck up your life, don't you?

Three hours ago he'd had everything. Now he had nothing. Not even the comfort of remembering those hours—those erotic, thrilling, romantic hours—he'd spent with Gray because the memory made his heart ache.

Instead of lying here on his narrow, hard little bed, he should be in Gray's bed. Taking Gray's cock into his mouth while Gray's thick fingers probed his ass. Turning Gray over so he could suck him at the same time until they both exploded...

Great, now he was hard as well as heartsore.

He wanted to make the memories go away but they refused. Taking a long walk hadn't helped. Reminding himself again and again of why he'd lied hadn't helped, either. And he couldn't stop seeing Gray's face as Logan left the clearing. He'd looked...broken.

Yet Gray hadn't come after him. Hadn't spoken, hadn't said anything at all. And here they were, three hours on, and he knew the Gray family feast had to have ended. Gray was alone now in his cabin with Melody. Was he touching her, kissing her? Was he burying that thick, long cock inside her, making her cry out and twist her lovely body beneath him?

He could hardly blame Gray for going with her, for accepting what Logan had done. How could he? Gray knew the facts of their lives just as well as Logan did, even more so.

No, it was better this way. Better for everyone. And in two years Logan would earn his freedom. Two years wasn't such a long time.

He'd forget Gray. Forget the scent of his hair, the feel of his skin. The taste of his mouth and body. The way his hard hands circled Logan's cock...

"Damn it," he cursed. He would never be able to think clearly with a hard-on stiff enough to break glass.

Knowing it wouldn't help the memories, but desperate to try anyway, Logan slid his hands down his chest, down the muscles of his stomach. His cock moved under his jeans as he undid the button and lowered the zipper.

How many times had he done this and thought of Gray? Hundreds. Hundreds of times he'd taken his cock in his hand and stroked it. Hundreds of times he'd let his other hand reach down to fondle his balls.

He gritted his teeth and moved his hand a little faster. Let the memories come. Let them mingle in his head with the fantasies he'd always had and been unable to act out. He pictured himself waking up in the morning with Gray's hand around his cock, smiling drowsily as Gray lowered his head to take him into his mouth. His breath hissed.

Stupid confining jeans. Hastily he shucked them off, wanting to spread his legs wider, to imagine Gray's broad shoulders between them and the other man's tongue sliding along the crease between his inner thigh and sac. The hand that moved faster on his cock wanted to entwine itself in Gray's long, fragrant hair.

His hips jerked forward as he sped up even more. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he imagined that, once he had come he would have somehow erased Gray's memory, that one solitary orgasm might help to push the previous night's events further back in his mind. To make them as unreal as the images now in his head, of working together, of spending long days walking and talking and exercising until the sweat poured off their bodies, then tumbling to the ground and touching, licking, sucking...

He twisted his hand, his wrist a blur. He was almost there, almost there—his balls were tight and heavy. His cock swelled and heat rushed to his pelvis. This was it—if he could get away from the image of Gray for just one second, he wouldn't hear the other man's wonderful voice—

"Why did you do it?"

Okay, that wasn't what Gray said in Logan's fantasy. So that must mean—

He turned his head. Gray stood in the doorway.

Gray did his best to keep his mind on the questions he'd come here to ask, on the truth he'd come to find, but...damn if that wasn't fucking hard staring down at Logan. The other man's blond hair was dry now and spread out on the pillow, his nude form sprawled across his narrow bed, and his thick, nearly purple cock gripped tightly in his own hand. He looked good enough to eat, and despite his recent meal, Gray found that he was very, *very* hungry.

"What are you doing here?" Logan swallowed with obvious effort and pulled his hand slowly away from his cock. But when he moved to sit, Gray stopped him with a hand.

"Don't," he said, moving slowly across the small room. Logan's section of Cabin Five was neat, immaculate and revealed nothing about the man himself. There were no pictures, no totems, no pride coat of arms honoring the pride he had belonged to before he became Unfree, nothing that would give a clue to who Logan really was.

Was he the passionate lover who had claimed Gray's heart? Or was he a traitor? Was he a man in love, sacrificing himself as Melody had claimed, or was he simply biding his time, waiting to expose Gray and ruin him more completely than their warrior-mating ever could have managed?

"Shouldn't you be with your future bride?" Logan asked, a spark of emotion in his eyes that looked like...hope?

Damn, but it was so hard to be sure. So hard to know what was real and what the product of Gray's own frustrated heart.

"Surely Melody requires your presence?"

"Perhaps I have already bedded her," Gray said casually, watching the other man out of the corner of his eyes as he wandered farther into the room. "Perhaps we have finished, and I have marked her with my seed, with my scent. Melody, for all you know, could already be pregnant with my child."

A muscle in Logan's jaw leapt and Gray watched as his hands balled into fists at his side. The man didn't look happy, not happy at all.

And that made Gray quite pleased indeed.

"You smell of her. Her scent lingers on your skin," Logan noted, obviously trying to keep his tone even, but Gray could feel the tension simmering beneath his words.

"Like flowers."

"Yes." His jaw was even tighter, as if he would grind his teeth down to nubs.

"And the ocean, just after a rain." Gray crouched slowly down beside where Logan still lay on his bed, obediently remaining in his position as Gray had commanded. Dawson smiled to himself at the thought and ran an idle hand down the bedding near Logan's ribs, grin broadening as the other man's chest contracted and his breath rushed from his body.

"Her skin was so very, very soft," Gray added in a husky voice. "And her lips like brushed velvet when she —"

"You have come here to torture me then?" Logan asked, vaulting into a seated position, a black look darkening his handsome features. "To rub my face in your newfound happiness?"

"Would that be torture, Logan? To learn that I was happy?" Gray watched Logan's features, a relief almost too profound to be believed blossoming in his chest as he saw the warring emotions in his lover's eyes.

"No...I would be glad of your happiness," Logan said, his head dropping in defeat, sending a wave of golden hair falling across his face.

"But would it make *you* happy?" Gray asked, holding his breath as he reached out and drove his fingers through Logan's hair, revealing Logan's shocked features a second before Gray fisted his hand in the other man's hair in a primal show of ownership. "Tell me the truth, man. Do not ever lie to me again, not if you value your life."

"You do not frighten me." Logan met Gray's stare, desire and confusion mixing in his blue eyes.

"I do not? And why is that?"

"Because I know you would never hurt me," Logan whispered, the words sure though his tone was still uncertain.

"Are you certain of that?" Gray strengthened his hold on Logan's hair, drawing a slight wince from the other man, but also a bead of cum from the head of his engorged cock. Damn that cock was fucking lovely, and did some lovely fucking. Gray was going to enjoy just how lovely, as soon as he made certain Logan still felt the pull between them, the inexplicable...rightness that would be Dawson and Logan. "After how you have wounded me, you assume I will not seek retribution?"

Logan's eyes widened, and Gray thought he saw the hint of tears shining in those stunning depths. A second later, however, he smiled, a grin of such fierce, genuine pleasure that any doubts Gray had harbored vanished in its glow.

"No, I hope that you will seek the proper retribution." Logan shifted slowly onto his knees, as Gray stood beside the bed. "I should be punished severely for doubting you."

"For doubting us," Gray corrected, his breath hissing through his teeth as he pulled Logan closer to his groin and Logan nuzzled Gray's throbbing erection through the thick fabric of his jeans.

"It won't happen again." Logan reached up and slowly, deliberately worked open the button of Gray's fly. The sound of the zipper sliding down, freeing his cock to his lover's eager mouth was, without a doubt, one of the sweetest sounds Gray had ever heard.

"You can be certain it won't. I won't have my warrior-mate deciding what is best for me," Gray said, releasing his hold on Logan's hair and smoothing a hand down to cup his cheek.

Logan's eyes flew to meet his own. "Then you mean—"

"Melody saw our love and wishes us happiness." Gray returned Logan's sudden smile. "She swears she will speak out on our behalf if our fathers seek to punish me for choosing a warrior-mated union."

"She is a wise woman," Logan said as he tugged Gray's jeans lower on his hips. "Wiser than you or I, for certain."

"My mother always told me pride females were the savior of our species," Gray teased, his words turning to a groan as Logan leaned forward and flicked his tongue over the tip of his straining shaft.

"I can't wait to meet her, to give her my thanks for raising such a fine example of a man." He emphasized his last four words with swift flicks of his tongue around the tip of Gray's arousal, quickly urging Dawson to reclaim his hold in the other man's hair. He couldn't handle teasing right now—he needed to claim Logan, to be claimed in return, to banish the despair of the past few hours with the ecstasy they found in each other's arms.

"What would you have of me, my lord?" Logan asked, tilting his eyes up to meet Dawson's, though he relaxed the muscles of his neck into Gray's control, making it clear he would follow wherever Gray would lead.

"I would have you suck me." Gray pulled Logan's face within centimeters of the heated skin of the head, nearly losing his control when Logan opened his lips with a moan. The desire in the other man's eyes, the flush of arousal on his cheeks, they

weren't something that could be faked. Any more than Gray could fake the passion that made his cock leak at the very thought of pulling those full lips down over his length.

"Do you want to suck me?" Gray asked, gripping Logan's hair harder until he cried out, a low guttural sound of raw need that was all the response Gray required.

Dawson groaned into the quiet of the small room as he pulled Logan's mouth to his cock. The other man parted his lips and suckled him eagerly inside, relaxing the muscles in his throat to take every inch of Gray, an action that nearly made Dawson go inside him with the first thrust.

But then Logan moaned, a hungry vibration that buzzed into Dawson's swollen sac and snapped the last of his control. With savage, almost ruthless thrusts, he fucked Logan's hot mouth, his balls tight and heavy, making bruising contact with Logan's face. The other man took every bit of him, open and willing, sucking and laving him, as if he could survive without air, thrive on Gray's cock alone.

It swiftly became too much. The slick sounds of his lover's mouth, the feel of Logan's strong hands as Logan gripped his ass and braced himself against Gray's thrusts, the silk of Logan's hair as Gray guided his mouth down over his cock, faster, and harder, and faster, and —

"Logan!" Gray called out his name as he shot his seed into his lover's mouth, in fierce, scalding spurts. "Gods..."

Dawson felt as if his knees would buckle from the pleasure of his release, not to mention the wicked sight of Logan's jaw working, eyes closed, drinking down Gray's cum with a relish that made Gray feel like the luckiest man in the world. Finally, when Logan had drained his cock of every last bit of essence, he pulled away and lifted his eyes to Gray's, tongue flicking out over his bottom lip as if to savor every last bit of Dawson.

"Have I served my penance, love?" Logan's voice was raw, the evidence of Gray's savage claiming of his mouth clear in every husky word.

"For now," Gray panted, letting his fingers slide from Logan's hair, suddenly too weak to maintain his hold.

"Good." Logan reached out and before Gray could brace himself had spun him in a circle, reversing their position until it was Gray who lay sprawled on the bed, and Logan who stood looking down at him. "Now it's my turn."

Logan crouched and drew a bottle of oil from beneath the bed, popping the top open with a slow sensuality that made Gray's spent balls ache.

"Your turn? For what?" Gray asked, leaning back on his elbows, the puckered flesh of his ass tingling as he watched Logan squeeze the oil onto his palms and fist his own cock, up and down, up and down, until that thick, swollen length glistened in the dim light.

"To fuck you," he said. "Roll over. Show me my ass."

There was nothing submissive in his tone or his eyes, and Gray marveled that such a man existed. A man who could take the lead as well as follow, who could admit his faults but still command respect, who could abandon himself to passion, then turn right around and demand equal abandon from his lover. And even more amazing, that man was going to be Gray's for the rest of his life.

"Now, Gray. Don't make me ask again."

"And what if I do? What will be the consequence?" Gray asked, the hint of a smile curling his lips even as his breath sped with desire.

"Then I will wrestle you to the ground and take my ass without preparing you. I'll just drive my cock in and ride you until you scream," Logan said, leaning down to whisper the words inches from Gray's lips.

"This is a threat?" Gray asked, his cock rising from between his legs once more at the mere thought of what Logan promised.

Logan laughed, a short bark of sound that made his cinnamon-scented breath puff across Gray's face. Cinnamon. Cinnamon and spice. Gods help him but Gray knew it would trump flowers for him any day.

"You're a sick fuck, Dawson Gray," Logan said, the words surprisingly tender.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Logan closed the distance between their lips and kissed him with a slow, thorough passion that Gray felt down between his legs and just about everywhere else before he pulled away. "And I love you."

"I love you too."

"And I'm not afraid of any challenge we will face, as long as you're by my side."

"I feel the same," Gray said, lifting a hand and running his fingers through Logan's hair.

"Good," Logan said, then smiled. "Now are you going to present my ass, or am I going to have to fight you for a fuck?"

"I think I'll make it easy for you...this time," Gray said, moving with deliberate slowness to the edge of the bed before rolling onto his stomach and sliding his knees down to the floor. He spread his legs and arched his hips before turning to look over his shoulder and felt another surge of white-hot lust flow through his body as he saw the way Logan was looking at him.

With love, and lust, and hunger, and awe, and...every emotion Gray had ever dreamed of seeing on another person's face. Of seeing on *this* man's face.

Logan dropped to his knees with a groan and spread Gray's cheeks with trembling hands. Despite his hard words, there was still that aching gentleness as Logan guided his cock to Gray's opening and pressed the thick, blunt head of his arousal inside.

Gray kept watch on the other man's face as his eyes slid closed with pleasure, a look of bliss on his face that was humbling. In that moment, as Logan surged slowly,

sensuously forward to fill him completely, Gray was certain that they would triumph over any adversity. With a love such as theirs, there was no way that they could fail.

"Gods, Gray, you feel so good," Logan moaned, holding still deep inside him, his cock seeming to thicken amazingly further, stretching Gray wider than he'd been stretched before.

He sucked in a deep breath, and felt more blood flow down to his own cock, but vowed he wouldn't go until it was his turn to have Logan on his knees before him. "Then fuck me, Logan. Fuck your ass."

"It is my ass," Logan said, pulling out and thrusting back in with a sharp stab of his hips, making Gray gasp, then groan in frustration as he held still within him once more.

"It *is*. Now show me you know what to do with it," he said, meeting Logan's eyes over his shoulder, and smiling at the love he saw there.

"Oh, I know what to do with it."

"Prove it."

And Logan did, fucking him until he lost himself inside Gray with a primal roar that was one part human, one part were, and all parts the cry of a man in the grips of a lifetime passion, and a lifetime love.

About the Author

A.D. Christopher came back to his love of writing after ten years as a florist and wedding planner. A love of romance, combined with a passion for...passion inspired him to pen tales of strong, powerful men and the alpha males who love them. A.D. is lucky to have many gay friends as well as straight friends who know how to act gay in public.

He welcomes mail from readers and is thrilled to be writing for Ellora's Cave.

A.D. welcomes comments from readers. You can find his website and email address on his author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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