

WINTER BORN



SHERRILYN
KENYON

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PROLOGUE

It was hard to find an all-powerful, mythical being in a crowd of thirty thousand.

Or at least it was in theory.

At the yearly Dragon*Con science fiction convention in Atlanta, Georgia, however, it was another story entirely. There were two Yodas and a Dragon Rider from Pern checking in at the hotel's front desk while a full regiment of Storm Troopers walked by. There were gods and goddesses, all manner of aliens, warriors, and ladies gathered there. Pandora had even seen the Wicked Witch of the West cruise by on her motorized broomstick.

Since she'd sat down ten minutes ago, Pandora had counted nine Gandalfs, and if she didn't miss her guess, there were at least two dozen elves, fairies, orcs, goblins, and assorted others gathered around, talking on cell phones, or smoking just outside the hotel doors.

And one mustn't forget the entire cabal of vampires and demons walking around handing out fliers for people to come to their room for a "blood party" and Buffy film fest.

Not to mention she'd already been invited twice to the Klingon Homeworld in Room 316 at the Hyatt Regency across the street. Meanwhile a group of supposedly

androgynous Borg men had tried to “assimilate” her as soon as she entered the lobby of the Marriott Marquis.

This had to be the strangest gathering she’d ever seen, and when given the fact that she was a Were-Panther who up until three days ago had lived solely among her own preternatural kind, that said something.

“I’m never going to find him,” she murmured to herself as an extremely tall, gorgeous Goth man stopped in front of her.

Good glory, the man was sinfully delectable!

And he was the last thing she needed to be staring at, yet she couldn’t seem to help herself. He was utterly compelling.

He wore a pair of dark sunglasses even inside the hotel while he scanned the motley crowd as if looking for someone. Something about the man commanded attention and respect. Of course, it didn’t help that her hormones were currently elevated by the change going on inside her as she came into full womanhood. Her entire body was humming from hormonal overload which, up until his appearance, she’d been keeping under very careful control.

Now she sizzled for a taste of him and it was all she could do to stay seated.

He had to be at least seven feet tall, augmented by the flame biker boots that added at least three inches to his height. He had long black hair that flowed around his broad shoulders, and wore an old, faded motorcycle jacket with a skull and crossbones painted on the back. The worst part was that he wore nothing underneath that jacket and every time he moved, she glimpsed more of his tanned, ripped body.

His black leather pants hugged a perfect bottom that would rival any of her Were brethren. Every part of her wanted to stand up, cross the small distance between them, and pull his tall, lean body against hers until the vicious, needful hunger in her blood was fully sated. But even as she felt that primal sexual hunger, the animal part of herself sensed an air of lethal danger from him.

He wasn’t the kind of man a woman approached without an invitation.

“Akri!”

The man turned as a woman around his age came running up to him. Cute as she could be, she was dressed like a demon, complete with a set of black wings that looked

spookily real as they twitched and flapped. Her skin was red and black, and her hair matched his. She even sported a pair of glowing red horns on her head. Her short purple skirt was flared and she wore a black leather bustier with three large silver buckles on the front. Black and purple striped leggings and a pair of six-inch platform combat boots completed her odd outfit.

The tall “demon” handed the man a credit card. “It’s broke again, akri,” she said, pouting around a pair of vampire-like fangs. “The man downstairs done said that the Simi can’t charge nothing else until I’m not over my limit no more. I don’t know what that means, but I don’t like it. Fix it, akri, or else I might eat him. The Simi gots needs and I needs my plastic to work.”

The man laughed as he took it from her and pulled out his wallet. He handed her three more credit cards.

The “demon” squealed in delight and pulled him into a hug. She put the credit cards into her coffin-shaped purse, then handed him a small shiny red nylon bag. “By the way, I boughts those for you before I broke my plastic. Since you don’t got your real hornays, these are some fake ones to tide you over until we go home.”

“Thanks, Sim,” he said in an incredibly deep, evocative voice as he took the bag from her.

She smiled, kissed his cheek, then dashed off into the crowd with her wings flapping behind her.

The man looked at Pandora then and gave her a half-grin that could only be called wicked, and yet it seemed somehow knowing. He inclined his head to her, then headed off after the woman who’d just left him.

Every instinct in her body told her to follow him, but she didn’t listen.

She was here to find the legendary Acheron Parthenopaeus—an ancient, immortal Atlantean her sister had hoped would help hide Pandora from those who were hunting her. Not chase after some hot, young human who looked stunning in leather.

Acheron was her last hope.

Unfortunately, neither she nor her sister had any idea what he looked like. All they knew was that he came to Dragon*Con every year with his daughter.

He was older than time and more powerful than any other of his kind. She scanned the older men in the crowd who were dressed as wizards, warriors, or other creatures, but none of them seemed to be particularly wise or powerful, nor were they with a daughter.

Just what would an eleven-thousand-year-old man look like anyway?

Sighing, Pandora stood up and went to the banister so that she could look down to the lower levels of the hotel and scan the crowd.

He had to be here.

But where? How could she find anyone in this thronging mass of people . . . er, aliens.

Chewing her lip, she debated where to go look for him. Suddenly, a tall man in an elegant black suit caught her eye. He wasn't particularly old, probably in his mid-thirties, but she sensed an unmistakable air of power from him.

Maybe he was the mysterious Acheron. And he was heading for the bank of elevators.

Pandora rushed after him, and barely made it before the door closed them inside the small compartment with a Renaissance drummer, a green-fleshed alien, and Darth Vader.

But that wasn't what made her heart stop. As she glanced out through the glass wall of the elevator, she saw four things that terrified her.

It was a group of devastatingly gorgeous men. The two shortest of the group were identical in looks and they had to be at least six feet four. They all had jet-black hair and were dressed in black Goth clothes.

The four men stood in a specific formation that she knew all too well, with their backs to each other as they scanned the crowd hungrily, intently, as if seeking something in particular. They were fierce. Animalistic.

It was as if they had literally caught wind of something, and in one heartbeat she knew what that something was.

Her.

“Oh no,” she said under her breath. By their build and beauty and actions, she would know their breed anywhere. No group of humans could be that handsome or that intense. Nor would any other species be so alerted by her scent.

They, like her, were Were-Panthers, and by the look of them, they were young and virile.

And she was in heat . . .

CHAPTER 1

Dante Pontis wasn’t the most patient of creatures. And his patience was quickly running out.

He’d been trapped in a limo from Hartsfield Airport to the hotel with his brothers, Mike and Leo, as they bitched and moaned over the fact that Dante had forced the two young panthers to fly coach from Minnesota to Atlanta while he and Romeo had simply “flashed” themselves here.

And all because the last time he and Romeo had psychically transported the twins somewhere, they had caused such a scene on arrival that they’d almost gotten busted by the humans.

Dragon*Con was far too crowded to take a chance on the four of them “appearing” before so many witnesses.

The key to Were-Hunter survival was to blend in with the humans, not scare the shit out of them.

“You know,” Romeo said to them, “you’re both lucky I wouldn’t let Dante trunk you and send you over in a cage. It’s what he wanted to do.”

“You dick,” Leo snarled at Dante as he raked him with a repugnant glare. At six feet four, the panther was still growing and would probably equal Dante’s height of six feet six in the next decade or so.

Leo and Mike were identical twins whom Dante had raised after their mother had abandoned them on their father’s doorstep. It was typical Were-Panther behavior. The

women would mate with the men, get pregnant, then leave the cubs for the men to raise while the women prowled around unfettered.

If the cubs were daughters, they would remain in the male dominated pack until puberty, which struck them around the age of twenty-four. Then all the “seasoning” female cubs would form their own group and leave to search for mates.

In the last two hundred years, Dante and Romeo had raised a large number of cubs, since their father was famous for dumping his litters on them and heading for the hills.

Like Dante, the twins had wavy black hair and tawny Italian skin when in human form.

Unlike him, they were only sixty years old, which in their life span made them practically children.

And they acted it.

It was time to either kill them or get away from them. Since Romeo was still rather bent over the fact that Dante had killed off their brother Salvatore for betraying them, Dante decided it would be best to get to his room before Leo and Mike joined Salvatore as skins on the wall at his club.

“I don’t understand why I have to share a room with Leo,” Mike snarled. “He snores.”

“I do not. Besides, you whistle when you sleep.”

“No I don’t.”

Dante passed an irritated look at Romeo. “Why are they here?”

“To get women,” Mike said.

Romeo ignored him. “You were afraid to leave them alone at the Inferno without me. The last time you did that, they damn near burned the place down.”

Dante expelled a disgusted breath. “And why can’t I kill them again?”

“You would miss them.”

Yeah, right. Dante snorted at that as he handed off the card key to Leo and Mike.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” Leo said as he examined it. “These aren’t concierge level.”

Dante gave him a bored stare.

“Are you concierge?” Leo asked Romeo.

“Yes.”

“Why aren’t we concierge?” Mike asked Dante.

Dante crossed his arms over his chest. “Because you’re unworthy.”

Mike opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, a trace of a scent washed over all three of them instantaneously.

Dante went rigid as every hormone in his body suddenly became activated and sizzled. Against his will, he found himself turning around and scanning the crowd in the hotel lobby.

He smelled a virgin pantheress in heat.

They all did.

The scent was unmistakable. It was warm and sweet. Feminine and innocent. Succulent. Inviting. And it made him salivate for a taste of her. His panther sight dimmed as it scanned the females present and detected none of his kind.

“Where is she?” Leo said, his voice ragged as if he were having a hard time holding himself back.

“Too many humans here to tell,” Mike said as he tilted his head back to sniff the air. “They have her scent moving in multiple directions.”

Dante passed a look to Romeo, who was staring up at the elevator. He turned to stare as well, and saw no one but Darth Vader.

“Did you see her?” he asked.

Romeo shook his head. “Sorry. I was mesmerized by the naked green alien.”

“Arrr,” Mike snarled. “You’re worthless, Romeo. What kind of panther gets fixed on an alien when there’s a virgin pantheress in heat?”

“A mated one,” Romeo shot back. “Unlike you losers, my hormones are contained.”

Dante sniffed and shook his head to clear it of her scent before his animal hormones relegated him to the same childish antics as his twin brothers. “Yeah, and I want to keep mine that way. Frick and Frack, you’re on panther patrol. Find her and keep her far away from me.”

Mike and Leo exchanged evil grins before they bolted into the crowd.

Dante rolled his eyes at their haste. There were times when they really were losers.

“Aren’t you the least bit interested?” Romeo asked as they headed for the elevators. “It’s not every day we run across a virgin panther.”

“Hell, no. I’ll stick to humans. The last thing I want is a mate who’ll cruise into my life once a year, screw my brains out for two days, then run off until she delivers my litter to me to raise without her. No offense, being you and Dad sucks and I’ve raised enough siblings to never want to raise my own young without the benefit of a mate.”

Romeo laughed. “Yeah, but for the record, it’s one helluva two days.”

Dante shook his head at him. “You can have it. I’d rather take my pleasure where and when I find it.”

He entered the elevator, then paused as he realized Romeo wasn’t joining him.

“I’ll catch you later,” he said.

“You sure?”

Romeo nodded.

“All right.” Dante got in and pushed the button for his floor. He stepped back against the glass and did his best to bring his body back under control.

But it was hard.

Every animal instinct he possessed demanded that he stalk this hotel until he located the female.

Since he was a Katagari Were-Hunter, the need to copulate with her was almost overwhelming. Katagaria were animals who could take human form, but at the end of the day, they were animals and not humans. Their animal half ran roughshod over their human sensibilities and it was the animal heart inside them that ruled them and their actions.

What he needed was some time in his room where he could take his animal form and put the female out of his mind.

He was old enough to be able to curtail his nature. To control it. He wasn’t about to let any woman have control over him.

Especially not a pantheress.

Pandora fumbled with her key card as she struggled to open her door.

What was she going to do? The man in her elevator wasn't Acheron. And those had been panther males down there. If they caught another whiff of her . . .

She was doomed. There was no way the animal inside her would refuse a virile male. She was in heat and the need to mate reigned supreme inside her. If any male came near her who her animal self sensed could possibly impregnate her, she would throw herself at him.

Around humans, that impulse was controllable. The chances of a human male being her mate were almost impossible. So the animal inside her might be curious and enticed, but it would stand down to her human rationale.

Around a Were-Panther, that animal need wouldn't listen to reason. It would pounce for a taste of the male.

She would have no control!

A shadow fell over her.

Pandora squeaked and jumped back as she looked up to see one of the men she'd seen downstairs. This close to him, she couldn't mistake his Panthiras attributes.

His scent was undeniable.

He was lean and powerful in human form. Deadly. His handsomeness would guarantee him any female who caught his interest . . . even her own feminine senses reacted to him, but not so much that she couldn't fight him.

Even more frightening than his innate feral masculinity, his scent was Katagaria—the animal branch of their species—while she was Arcadian, the human branch.

Letting go of her room card, she crouched to attack and was amazed that the animal inside her wasn't leaping out to mate with him.

"It's okay," he said quickly. "I've got good news and bad news for you."

"And that is?"

He held his hand up so that she could see the geometric mark on his palm. At least that explained why she could resist the urge to copulate with him. "I'm mated so you're completely safe from me."

Pandora still wasn't ready to trust him, but at least as a mated panther, he wouldn't be able to have sex with her. Once a Were-Panther male was mated, he was impotent around any female other than his "wife." "I take it that's the good news?"

He nodded.

"And the bad?"

"I'm here with three brothers who aren't."

She started to bolt.

"No, no," he said, reaching out to take her hand. He pulled back before he did. "Don't be afraid of me. I really mean you no harm, okay? I have ten daughters myself and I understand your fear."

She still wasn't ready to trust that he wouldn't take her to his brothers for their enjoyment. That was what the ones seeking her would do and she had no intention of becoming a community toy for every unmated male in their pack. "What do you want?"

"Believe it or not, I'm going to help you."

She chose not to believe that. At least not yet. "Why would you do that?"

"Because of my daughters," he said sincerely. "You're just a baby and I don't trust Leo or Mike not to hurt you. They wouldn't do it on purpose, but they're young too and not real good at holding back. No doubt they'd both pounce on you at once and who knows what they might inadvertently do."

And that was exactly what she was afraid of. "That's only two brothers. What of the third?"

"Dante's different. Honestly, you'd be lucky to find someone like him for your first. He's a selfish bastard who doesn't like to share much of anything with anyone and he'd make sure no one else touched you while you were with him."

But his brother was still an animal and she had no interest in taking a Katagari lover.

"Is that supposed to comfort me?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, but don't worry. Dante's a lot older than they are and, lucky for you, he doesn't want a mate. He plans to stay far away from you so I can keep him off you by simply telling him where you are."

Pandora calmed a degree. He was telling her the truth, she could sense it. One of the good things about being part animal was that she knew whenever someone was lying to her.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Thank you for your offer to help. I don’t want a Katagari to touch me.”

His nostrils flared at that.

She stiffened. “You said it yourself. You get carried away and you hurt us. My older sister was killed by a pack of Katagaria males who snapped her neck while attempting to mate with her when she was my age. I’m barely twenty-four. I don’t want to die. Not like that.”

That seemed to calm him down. He bent over and retrieved her card from the floor. “Get me something with your scent on it so I can spread it around and keep Leo and Mike away from you.”

Pandora nodded, then opened the door to her room. She went to her suitcase and pulled out the T-shirt she slept in.

“Do you know Acheron Parthenopaeus?” she asked as she handed it to him.

“Yes, why?”

“I was told to find him. My surviving sister said that he could help me get home again.”

The panther frowned at her. “I don’t understand. Why didn’t you go home on your own?”

She sighed as frustration filled her. How she wished it were that simple. If she were an older pantheress, she could easily find her own way home, but her kind didn’t get all their psychic abilities until after their first mating.

Even then her powers would have to be trained and honed so that she could wield them. That was something that could take decades, if not centuries, to master.

“I was kidnapped from the future by a group of Katagaria panthers and brought to this time period against my will. Unfortunately, my powers are just starting and I have no control over them or any way home on my own until I master them. The last thing I want is to overshoot my time period or end up with the dinosaurs.”

He looked at her suspiciously. “I still don’t understand why they took you. Why go to the future for a mate when there are plenty of packs here?”

She clenched her fists at that. “It’s some stupid pact my pack made with theirs. Since we seem to have an abundance of females, my pack agreed to sacrifice a number of females every generation from certain families so that the Katagaria panthers would leave the rest of the pack alone. Every time one of the winter born females in the chosen families starts to season, the same pack comes to our home and brings us to their time period to mate with them. They don’t want Katagaria females since they won’t stay and raise their young. They keep us instead and use us as slaves. My one surviving sister helped me to escape after they brought me here before they could induct me into their pack. She sent me to Atlanta to find Acheron. She said he could return me to my time period.”

“How does she know Acheron?”

Pandora ached at the thought that she would benefit from her sister’s misery. “Before she was mated to one of their males and had her own children, she was trying to escape their pack. One night, she overheard some of the Katagaria talking about a Dark-Hunter named Acheron, and after they went to sleep, she searched for him online. By the time she found out enough information to locate him, she was pregnant and couldn’t leave her children behind, so she gave her information to me once they brought me over.”

“Hell of a sister you have there.”

“Yes,” Pandora agreed. “She’s the best sister in the world and I would give anything if I could help her too.”

The panther stepped back with a sigh, then started for the door.

She took his arm to keep him from leaving as another thought occurred to her. “Could you help me get home?”

He shook his head. “My powers aren’t quite that strong. If I wanted to take anyone other than myself across time, I would have to wait for the full moon. The only one in my pack who could do it without waiting is Dante and if you get near him—”

“I’ll attack him for sex.”

He nodded.

Damn.

At least all wasn't lost though. "But you do know Acheron, right? Will he help me?"

"I don't know. He's strange sometimes and no one ever knows how he's going to react or what he's going to do or say. But you can always ask. The best thing is for you to stay here in your room where Mike and Leo hopefully can't find you—like I said, they're young and aren't as experienced at tracking prey. I'll spread your scent around to keep them off you. Once I've got them occupied, I'll bring Ash to you. Okay?"

It was more than okay. It was great. She'd never thought to find a Katagari male who could be so kind.

"Thank you." As he moved away, Pandora stopped him again. "Really, thank you."

He offered her a kind, fatherly smile and patted her hand. "Animals protect their own. I'm doing this to help my brothers as much as I'm doing it to help you. If they were to hurt you, they'd never forgive themselves, and I'd have to listen to them lament for eternity."

Releasing her, he moved to the door and left the room.

Pandora took a deep breath, and for the first time since she'd been stolen from her people, she began to relax a little.

Now all she had to do was stay put until he returned.

But that wasn't as easy as it would normally be. The female in her that was just entering womanhood was all too aware of the fact that there were three unmated panthers at the hotel.

That alien and new part of her wanted with a vengeance the mating ritual that would induct her into adulthood.

It craved it.

For an Arcadian, the ritual was simple. Had she stayed at home, she would have chosen an elder panther from her pack to gently introduce her to the animal side of herself. Once he unlocked her full powers by copulating with her, he would have taught her how to shift from human to panther and how to protect herself and use her newborn powers.

The Katagaria were completely different. She'd heard the horror stories directly from her sister Sefia. They took their nearas—virgin females who were cresting—and allowed every unmated male of the pack to have sex with her to see if she was the mate to one of them.

They would use her without mercy until all their males were fully sated.

Her sister Sefia had been one of the lucky ones. On the night they had deflowered her, Sefia had been mated to a Katagari panther who had then decided to keep her more as a pet than a mate.

Katagaria females left their mates once they were out of heat, and only returned whenever they were in season. If a male tried to mate with a Katagari female when she wasn't in heat, she would attack and possibly kill him.

Once their season passed, the Katagaria females left their males and stayed with their sisters to travel about until their next fertile cycle. If the female became pregnant, she'd birth her young among her sisters, and as soon as the cubs were weaned, she would take them to the father to raise.

Arcadian pantheresses were much more coveted since they were ruled by human hearts that wouldn't allow them to abandon their children until adulthood. Unlike their Katagaria cousins, the Arcadians stayed with their young and their mates. The male panthers didn't have to wait for an Arcadian female to go into heat. She would be receptive to her mate at any time.

The worst part was that a panther male couldn't rape a panther female when she was in heat. All he had to do was come near her and she would willingly accept him. It was nature and a pantheress had no control over her body at such times. It wouldn't listen to any reason or rationale.

She would beg him to fill her.

The shame of that would come later, after the mating was done. Then, the Arcadian pantheress would feel embarrassed that she had acted like an animal and not a human.

Pandora moaned low in her throat as her desire sparked again and coiled through her. Her breasts were heavy, her body hot and alive with need.

Go . . .

The command was overwhelming, but she refused to heed it. She was a human, not an animal.

The Katagari male would return with Acheron and she would be among her own kind again.

Then everything would be normal.

Dante couldn't get the fire out of his blood. The animal in him was awake and craving.

Needing.

One whiff should not have affected him this much, and yet as he drifted through the dense crowd of people pretending to be aliens and paranormal entities, he couldn't stop himself from trying to find her scent again.

It was all he could do to stay in human form and not revert to his true animal body.

The hunter wasn't listening to him.

Damn it!

He caught a glimpse of Acheron Parthenopaeus across the vendor booths. Oblivious to the humans who paused to gawk at his seven feet of height, the Atlantean Dark-Hunter was reading a Dark-Horse Grendel comic book.

Seeking the distraction of talking with a friend, Dante headed toward him.

"Ash," he said as he drew near. "You seem remarkably relaxed." Which was true. In all the centuries he'd known the man, Dante had never seen him so at ease.

Acheron looked up from his comic and inclined his head in greeting. "What can I say? This is one of the few places I can take Simi where she doesn't stand out. Hell, she actually looks normal here."

Dante laughed at that. Ash's pixielike demon seldom blended in anywhere. "Where is she?"

"Shopping like a demon."

Dante shook his head at the bad pun; knowing Simi, he figured it was probably quite true. "I tried to call your cell phone when we got in to see if you made it."

Ash immediately tensed as he put his comic down and pulled out another issue. "I turned it off on the day I got here."

“Really?” Dante asked, stunned by Ash’s confession. It wasn’t like him to be out of touch with his Dark-Hunter charges. “What if one of the Dark-Hunters needed you?”

Ash shrugged. “If they can’t survive alone for four days once a year, they deserve to die.”

Dante frowned. “That’s harsh, for you.”

He looked at him dryly. “Harsh? Tell you what, you take my phone and skim through the three thousand phone calls I get every day and night and see how harsh I am. I truly hate modern technology and phones in particular. I haven’t had a full four hours of sleep in over fifty years. ‘Ash, I broke a toenail, help me. Ash, my head hurts, what should I do?’ ”

Ash curled his lip in repugnance. “You know, I’ve never understood it. They make a deal with the devil herself and then expect me to bail them out of every minor scrape. Then when I show up to help them, they cop an attitude and tell me to blow. So if I’m selfish for wanting four days a year to be left alone, then I’m just a selfish bastard. Sue me.”

Wow, someone was cranky.

Dante took a step away from the Atlantean. “Well then, I’ll make sure I don’t bug you.”

Ash pulled out another plastic-covered comic from the long white box on the table. “You’re not bothering me, Dante. Really. I’m just trying to zen myself out of a bad mood. I made the mistake of turning on my phone ten minutes ago and I had four hundred and eighty-two messages waiting on voice mail. I had it on all of three seconds before it started ringing again. All I want is a little break and no damn phone for a few days.” He let out an aggravated breath. “Besides, I’m the one who told you to come.”

“Yeah, thanks. This is . . .”—he hesitated as a centaur pranced by on what appeared to be modified ski boots that looked eerily like hooves—“interesting.”

Ash smiled. “Yeah, just wait until you see the Ms. Klingon Beauty Pageant. It’s something else.”

Dante laughed. “I’ll bet. So what good bands should I check out for my club?”

Ash grabbed three Dark-Horse Tales of the Vampires comics and added them to his growing pile. “Last Dance is really good. They’re playing tonight, and Ghoultown

too. But the one band you have to see is the Cruxshadows. They're right up your alley and rule the Darkwave scene. The lead singer Rogue'll be over in the Hyatt later signing autographs at their booth. If you want, I can introduce you."

"That'd be great." The only reason Dante had come to Atlanta was because Acheron had assured him Dragon*Con was one of the best places to see several alternative bands so that he could hire them for gigs at his club in Minnesota.

Simi came running up to them with two male "Klingons" trailing behind her. "Akri? Can I go to the Klingon homeworld?"

Ash smiled at his demon. "Sure, just don't eat any of them."

The demon pouted. "But why not?"

"Because, Simi, they're not really Klingons. They're people pretending to be Klingons."

"Well, pooh, fine then. No eats. But I'm going to go now. Bye bye." She dashed off with the two young men.

Ash handed the comics to the vendor, then pulled out his wallet.

"Shouldn't you go do a head count on the homeworld population?" Dante asked.

"Nah. She'll do what I said . . ." Ash paused as if something occurred to him.

"Then again, I didn't tell her not to eat a Bajoran or Romulan. Damn." He paid for the comics. "You're right, I better go count."

Ash took a step away, then stopped. "By the way, you might want to head upstairs right now and check out your room."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Make sure it meets with your needs."

Dante frowned. "I've already been there."

"Go there again."

The animal in Dante picked up a weird scent from Acheron, but he wasn't sure what it was.

But as the Atlantean headed off, he felt an inexplicable pull to do what Acheron had suggested.

Dante headed out of the vendors' area, toward the escalator. He'd barely reached it when he smelled the pantheress again. He turned sharply to the left, expecting to see her.

She wasn't there.

Still, he was hard for her. Ready. The animal inside was growling for a taste of her body.

He headed up the escalator to escape the scent.

It seemed to grow stronger.

His head low, he scanned the crowd intently, but none of his people was there.

Closing his eyes, he sniffed the air. Her fragrance was subtle now. And it was . . .

He whirled around.

There was no woman there, only Romeo, and he reeked of the pantheress. Dante couldn't stop himself from sniffing Romeo, who immediately shoved him away.

"Man, you skeeve me when you do that. And don't do it in public. Someone might get the wrong idea about us."

He ignored his brother's reprimanding tone. "Where is she?" Dante demanded.

"Out of reach."

Her scent washed over him, even stronger than before. His body was raw. Needful. Every part of him craved her.

And it wasn't taking no for an answer.

"Where?" he growled.

Romeo shook his head.

But he didn't have to be told. Every hormone in his body sensed her. Against his will, Dante took off at a run as he cut through the crowd toward the elevator.

Without thought, he flashed himself from the lobby to the sixteenth floor.

The scent was even stronger here.

More desirable.

More intense.

Dante stalked his way down the hall until he found her door. He couldn't breathe as her scent filled his entire being. Leaning his head against the wood, he closed his eyes and fought the sudden urge to kick the door in.

That would probably scare her, and besides, he didn't want to have an audience for what he intended to do with her.

He knocked on the door with a clenched fist and waited until a small, petite brunette opened it. She had large, lavender eyes and long hair that curled around an oval face.

His breathing ragged, he stared at her, wanting her with every piece of him.

But for all his sexual hunger, he knew that it was now her move . . .

CHAPTER 2

Pandora couldn't breathe as she stared at the tall, sexy panther in her doorway. He embodied everything that was primal and male. His hands were braced on each side of the frame as he looked at her with an intensity so raw, it shook her. Masculine power and lethal grace bled from every pore of his magnificent body.

He had long black hair pulled back into a queue. His eyes were a clear blue that appeared almost colorless against his tanned skin and long midnight lashes. His face was elegantly carved and yet had a rugged quality that kept him from being pretty.

He was dressed in black jeans and a black poet's shirt. There was something timeless and old about him. Something that reached out to her and set her entire body on fire.

Without her invitation, he stepped into the room and bent his head so that he could rub his face against her hair.

Pandora gasped as that simple action sent chills all through her. His breath scorched her extra-sensitive skin, which wanted only to be touched by him. Her nipples hardened in expectation of what was to come.

"Gataki." He murmured the Greek word for "kitten" as he took a deep breath in her hair.

The human half of her wanted to shove him away from her. The animal part refused. It wanted only to cuddle with him. To rip his clothes off and know once and for all what it would be like to have sex with a male.

The door to her room slammed shut of its own volition.

Pandora circled around him, rubbing her body against his as she fought the urge to cry out in pleasure.

“Do you accept me?” he asked rhetorically. It was technically the woman who chose her lover, but when a female was this sexually aware of the male, there was really no way out.

All Pandora could do was nod. Her body would never allow her to deny him. He was too virile. Too consuming.

Too much of what she needed.

He turned on her with a fierce growl as he seized her for a scintillating kiss. Pandora moaned at the taste of him. No one had ever kissed her before. It was forbidden until her first cycle for any male to touch a female not related to him.

Ever since she’d been a teenager, she and her girlfriends had whispered about what they wanted for their first matings and who they would choose.

Pandora had expected Lucas to be her first. Almost four hundred years old, he was legendary among her people for his prowess and ability to teach a young pantheress her passion.

But his handsomeness paled in comparison to the dark stranger before her. This male tasted of wine and decadence. Of mystical, exotic power and knowledge.

His tongue swept against hers as her body heated to a fever pitch.

“Are you Dante?” she asked him as she nibbled his firm lips.

“Yes.”

Good. At least he wouldn’t share her. It was a small relief to know that.

“What is your name, gataki?”

“Pandora Kouti.”

He pulled back to smile at her.

“Pandora,” he purred as he buried his hands in her hair before inhaling the sensitive flesh of her neck, then licking it slowly. Teasingly. “And what surprises are you hiding from the world in your box, Pandora?”

She couldn’t answer as he continued to lick her skin. Her knees buckled. Only the strength of his arms around her kept her from falling.

Dante knew he should leave. He should flash himself into a cold shower somewhere.

But he couldn’t.

She was too hypnotic. Too tempting. The animal in him refused to leave until he’d tasted her.

And he would be her first. He could smell her innocent state.

That knowledge alone was enough to make him roar. He’d never taken a virgin before. For that matter, he’d rarely taken any woman of his own species. A pantheress was violent by nature. She had to be held down, and if a male wasn’t fast enough, he could be maimed or killed during mating.

Once an orgasm seized a pantheress, the ferocity of it would make her feral. She would turn on her lover with claws and teeth bared. In the case of a Katagari female, she’d turn immediately to her animal form and attack her lover.

The male had to be ready to pull back and flash to his animal form or he wouldn’t be able to defend himself from her surging hormonal and psychic overload.

It was a sobering thought.

Dante had never cared much for violent mating. He preferred to take his time pleasing his lover. To sample every single inch of her body at his leisure.

He’d always loved the taste of a woman. The scent of her. The feel of her soft limbs rubbing against his rougher ones. Always liked to hear the sounds of her ecstasy echoing in his ears as he brought her to climax over and over again.

And Pandora . . .

She would be unlike any lover he’d ever known. His first Arcadian.

His first virgin.

Kissing her deeply, he dissolved the clothes from their bodies so that there was nothing between his hands and her sweet, succulent flesh.

She shivered in his arms.

“It’s okay, gataki,” he said as he skimmed his hand down her supple back. “I won’t hurt you.”

His words seemed to make her panic. “You’re a Katagari male.”

He nibbled her shoulder, reveling in the taste of her soft, salty-sweet skin. She was truly de-cadent. A mouthwatering treat to sate the beast inside him.

“And I won’t hurt you,” he reiterated as he nibbled his way around her shoulder blade, down her back, and then around front so that he could taste her breast.

Pandora cried out the instant his mouth closed around her hard, sensitive nipple. Her body jerked and sizzled.

What was this? All she could think of was having him inside her. Of having all that hard, tawny skin lying over her as he showed her exactly what it meant to be loved by a man.

He was all sinewy muscle.

All strength. Power.

Wickedness.

And for the moment, he was all hers . . .

He pulled back from her with a growl before he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. She felt so dainty in his arms, so coveted.

The covers pulled themselves back so that he could set her in the center of it. Pandora’s nervousness returned as the chill of the covers brushed her fevered skin.

She’d waited a lifetime for this moment. What would happen to her? Would she be changed?

Would he?

Dante gave her a fierce, ragged kiss as he spread her arms out above her head. Two seconds later, something wrapped itself around her wrists and held them there.

“What are you doing?” she asked, even more ner-vous than before.

His gentle touch soothed her as he massaged her tense shoulders. “I want to make sure neither of us is hurt, gataki. You’ve never had an orgasm before and you have no idea what it’s going to do to you.”

“Will it hurt?”

He laughed at that as his large, masculine hand cupped her breast. “No, it won’t hurt at all.”

She wanted to believe him. The animal in her didn’t detect a lie so she relaxed. Dante might not be the man she would have chosen first, but he was proving to be gentle enough to soothe the human part of her.

He laid himself beside her so that he could study her body. He skimmed a callused hand over her breasts, then moved it lower so that he could toy with the short, crisp hairs at the juncture of her thighs.

She clenched her teeth as fire consumed her body. She ached for that hand to move lower. For it to caress the burning ache between her legs until she could think straight again.

“Tell me what you dream of, Pandora,” he said quietly as his thumb teased her sensitive nub.

She licked her lips as pleasure tore through her. But it did nothing to ebb the vicious bittersweet pain inside her.

Dante blew a fiery breath across her erect nipple. “How does an Arcadian take a male inside her body?”

“Don’t you know?”

He moved so that he was draped on top of her. She moaned at the delicious feel of his naked body pressing down on hers. In that moment, she wanted to see his hair unbound.

“Untie your hair,” she said.

The tie came loose immediately.

It was rare among the Arcadians to find a male so at ease with his psychic abilities. They were taught to hide them unless they were fighting their animal cousins.

Dante didn’t appear to have such hang-ups and she wondered if all Katagaria were like him.

“You are powerful, aren’t you?” she asked.

He nodded as he stared at her in a way that reminded her so much of a panther that it was almost scary.

Pandora watched his light eyes carefully, seeking any sign that he would turn feral on her and hurt her. “Are you going to devour me?”

His smile was wicked. “Until you beg me to stop.”

Dante leaned forward so that he could press his cheek to hers and savor the feel of her delicate skin. She was totally enjoyable.

With humans, he had to hide what he was from them. But Pandora knew exactly what he was and, unlike a Katagari female, she wasn’t fighting him. She responded to his caresses just as a human would. With delight and innocent trust.

It was refreshing and touched a foreign part of him deeply.

He wanted to please her in a way he’d never wanted to please anyone else.

Reaching down between them, he gently separated the tender folds of her body so that he could touch her intimately.

She cried out in ecstasy.

Her response delighted him. Dante used his powers to shield the sounds from escaping the room as he kissed his way down her body to where his hand played.

Pandora could barely think as she felt Dante spread her legs wide. It was as if every part of her was burning. Her head spun with pleasure.

And then she felt the most incredible thing of all. Dante’s mouth teasing her. Hissing, she threw her head back and arched her spine as his tongue worked incredible magic on her. He sank one long, lean finger deep inside her as his tongue continued to explore every tender fold with a thoroughness that was blinding in its intensity.

Dante couldn’t take his eyes off her as he watched her head rolling back and forth on the pillow. There was nothing a male of his species valued more than the taste of a virgin’s climax.

His kind was known to kill for the privilege of taking a virgin, and for the first time in his life, he understood that primal desire.

The revelation shocked him. He’d always told himself that a female wasn’t worth another panther’s life. But as he watched her innocent, unabashed reaction to his touch, he was no longer so sure.

There was no artifice in her response. She was reacting honestly to him. Openly. And he loved it.

When she came, crying out his name, he felt something deep inside him shatter with pride and satisfaction.

Dante held her hips still, expecting to have to pull away from her.

He didn't. She lacked the violent tendencies of his kind. Instead of attacking him, she stayed on the bed, panting and purring as she continued to let her climax flow.

Pandora wasn't sure what had just happened to her. But it had been incredible. Wonderful. And it left her wanting even more from him. She still felt her body spasming as Dante continued to stroke and tease until she was weak from it.

Her hands suddenly free, she reached down and sank her hand into his long, silken hair as he gently rolled her onto her stomach.

He lightly nipped her buttocks.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he placed a pillow underneath her stomach.

"I'm going to show you what it feels like to have a male inside you, Pandora."

She shivered at the erotic image that played through her mind of Dante thrusting against her. "Please don't break my neck."

He brushed her hair aside and placed a gentle kiss on her nape. "I would never hurt you, gataki."

She shivered at his whispered words.

He lifted one of her legs up, then drove himself deep inside her. Pandora cried out as he filled her to capacity. He was long and hard, and so deep that she couldn't draw a breath.

Never had she felt anything like his fullness inside her. Of the intimacy of him touching her in a place no one ever had before.

More than that, she felt something breaking as electrical energy surged through her. Every inch of her body sizzled and hummed.

Dante ground his teeth as pleasure tore through him. He'd never felt anything better than her tight, wet heat around him. It was all he could do not to thrust himself into her hard and furiously until he was fully sated.

But he didn't want to scare or hurt her in any way.

Holding himself up on one arm, he ran his tongue over the sensitive skin of her ear and breathed lightly into it. She shivered under him.

He smiled at that as he trailed his hand over her skin so that he could again sink his fingers down her swollen clit.

Pandora groaned at the sensation of his hand moving in time to his long, gentle strokes. No man, Arcadian or otherwise, could be more tender. She would never have believed this was possible from an animal.

Only this wasn't an animal who was holding her. He was more human than anyone she'd ever known.

And kind. There was no pain and she wondered if he were using his powers to heighten the pleasure his touch delivered. She only wished she knew enough about her new powers to return the favor to him.

He began moving slowly against her, then faster. Faster. And faster still.

Pandora gasped at the speed of his thrusts as they continued to crescendo. Growling from the pleasure of it, she rocked her hips against his, driving him in even deeper until it was all she could do not to scream.

Dante ground his teeth as she moved in sync with him. She was exquisitely demanding. And when she came again, he laughed until the sensation of her body gripping his sent him over the edge and he too climaxed.

He roared out loud as ecstasy tore through him with waves and waves of pleasure.

She collapsed under him an instant before she rolled over onto her back.

Expecting her to attack, Dante almost leaped from the bed. But she reached one tender arm up and wrapped it around his shoulders to hold him close to her.

The smile on her face warmed his heart. "Thank you," she breathed. "It's the first time in days that my body feels like it belongs to me again."

He inclined his head to her, then reached down to take her small hand into his so that he could plant a kiss on her knuckles. No wonder Katagaria males took Arcadian females. It was so nice to lie like this with her.

If she were Katagaria, he'd most likely be bleeding in the aftermath of their encounter. Instead, she toyed with his hair and stroked him.

At least until she groaned.

Dante smiled in anticipation. It was her cycle heating up again.

She purred as her hand tightened in his hair and she eagerly rubbed herself against him.

His body hardened again instantly.

He was as ready for her as she was for him. The animal in him could smell her need and it answered accordingly.

This was going to be a long afternoon and he was going to relish every part of it.

And every part of her . . .

Pandora lay quietly in bed while Dante showered in her bathroom. She should be horrified by how many hours they had spent in her bed. He had bent her in more positions than she would have thought possible.

And she had loved every one of them.

He was incredible . . . and extremely limber.

She was sated to a level that defied her imagination. Normally, a pantheress would need days for a male to satiate her.

But Dante had been so thorough, so exhausting, that she felt an incredible sense of peace.

Who would have thought it possible?

She heard the water turn off. A few seconds later, Dante returned to the bed with his hair damp and curling around his shoulders.

He was completely naked and unabashed about it. She stared in awe at that tawny body liberally dusted with short, black hairs.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

He gifted her with a smile that made her stomach flutter. “I would have felt better had you joined me for a bath.”

She blushed at that. He’d made the offer and she had declined, though why she couldn’t imagine. It wasn’t like he hadn’t caressed and studied every inch of her in the last few hours. But somehow the thought of showering with him had seemed too personal.

Too strange.

He lay down beside her and pulled her into his arms.

Pandora sighed contentedly. It was so nice to be held by him.

One minute he had a long, masculine arm draped over her waist, and in the next, it was the limb of a panther.

She bolted out of the bed with a shriek.

Dante flashed instantly back into human form. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Don't do the panther thing around me, okay? It really creeps me."

He frowned at her. "Why?"

"I . . . I just can't stand the sight of them."

He gave her a harsh, condemning stare that set her ire off. "You're one of us, baby. Get used to it."

She cringed at the thought. She was not in the same category as a Katagari female. They were crude and mean, and had no care whatsoever for anyone other than themselves.

"Oh, no I'm not," she said, growling the words at him. "I'm a human being, not an animal like you."

Dante narrowed his eyes at words that shouldn't hurt him and yet for some unfathomable reason did. He'd gone out of his way to be tender with her.

And what had it accomplished?

Not a damn thing except to have her disdain him over something he couldn't help any more than she could help being human.

There was nothing wrong with being a Katagari. He took a lot of pride in his heritage.

His kind was definitely superior to hers. At least they didn't lie, cheat, and steal for no reason.

Curling his lip, he climbed out of bed and flashed his clothes back on.

"Fine. Have a nice life."

Pandora jumped as he slammed out of her room.

"You too!" she called childishly, knowing he couldn't hear her.

What did she care anyway?

He was an animal. But as she headed for the bathroom, she missed the warm feeling she'd had when he held her. The sweet sound of her name on his lips as he carefully made love to her.

The way his tongue had stroked and soothed her.

Grinding her teeth, she forced the image away and went to shower. And as the water came on, she thought of Dante's brother who had yet to bring Acheron to her. He must have sent Dante to her instead.

How dare he!

She should have known better than to trust an animal. Why would one of them help her anyway?

Angry at both of them, and at herself for being so stupid as to trust them, Pandora regulated the water and started scrubbing with a vengeance.

Suddenly, the bathroom curtain was whisked open.

Pandora gasped as she spun about to find Dante standing there, blue eyes glaring at her.

"You never answered my question."

She sputtered at him. "Excuse me, I'm in the middle of a bath here."

"Yeah, I know, and I'll let you get back to it once you tell me why panthers bother you."

That was none of his business!

Tears burned in her eyes as her ordeal over the last two weeks overwhelmed her. Her unbalanced hormones didn't help matters any and neither did the fact that all she really wanted to do was go home.

Before she could stop herself, the truth came pouring out in wrenching sobs. "Because every time I see one of your people, you steal someone away from me whom I love and I hate all of you for it. Now your kind has taken me away from my home and my family so that I can either be a whore to the entire pack or a slave to one of you."

Dante felt an odd sensation in his chest as she started weeping. Not once in almost three hundred years had he felt such a sense of helplessness.

Such a desire to help someone.

“And what’s worse,” she said, her voice cracking, “I know I can’t really go home because they’ll just send me back here to the Katagaria pack that stole me. Panthers have taken everything from me. Even my virginity.”

Dante turned the water off with his thoughts and pulled a towel off the rack before wrapping it around her.

“I don’t know what I was thinking when I ran away,” she sobbed. “Acheron won’t help me. Why should he? And even if he wanted to, what could he really do?

Dark-Hunters can’t interfere in our business. I just wanted some hope. Something other than what is meant for me. I don’t want to be a panther whore. I just want to have my own life where no one hurts or uses me. Is that so wrong?”

“No, Pandora,” Dante said as he pulled her sodden body into his arms and held her tight. “It’s not wrong.”

He kissed the top of her head as he pulled another towel down to dry her hair.

Pandora hated herself for falling apart like this. She was normally calm and collected. But it was beyond her ability to cope now.

All she wanted was her life back. One day where she was again in charge of her body and her destiny.

One day of clarity.

What her people had done was wrong and she knew it. She hated all of them, Arcadian and Katagaria, for forcing this on her.

No woman should ever have her choice taken away from her.

She tried to stop crying as Dante rocked her gently in his arms. He was being much kinder than she deserved. Not even her own father would be so understanding of this breakdown. He’d never been the kind of man to tolerate emotional outbursts well and he’d trained all his daughters to suffer in silence.

Yet Dante didn’t say anything. He just held her quietly while she cried.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, stunned when the words came out of her mouth. It wasn’t like her to confide in someone and to admit that she was in over her head . . .

She couldn’t believe what she was doing.

Maybe it was because she didn’t know where else to turn.

Or maybe it was just after the time they had shared where he hadn't hurt her that she was willing to almost trust him with the truth of her situation and feelings.

"We'll figure something out for you," Dante said as he rubbed her back. "Don't worry."

"Why would you help me? Your brother said you were a selfish bastard."

He gave half a laugh at that. "I am selfish. I'm cold and vicious. I don't have any friends and I spend all my time looking for Arcadians who bother me so I can pick a fight and hurt them. Hell, I even killed my own brother when he sold my pack out to the Daimons. Truly, I am every bad thing you think of when you hear the term 'Katagaria.' "

And still he hadn't hurt her.

He gently laid his hand against her cold cheek to wipe away her tears. "Yet I don't want to see you cry."

She shivered at his hypnotic words.

"Get dressed, Pandora, and we'll go find something to eat and talk about what we can do to help you."

"Really?"

"Really."

She pulled him down so that she could give him a scorching kiss. "I'm sorry I called you an animal, Dante."

"It's okay. I am one."

No he wasn't. In that moment, he was her hero. Her champion. She would never insult anyone so kind.

As soon as she pulled on her jeans and a red shirt, he led her from the room, downstairs to the lobby that was packed with even more people than earlier.

"This is some party, huh?" she asked as she saw a group of four women dressed only in warning tape wrapped around their bodies surrounded by a group of Storm Troopers, cross the lobby.

"It's definitely something," he said, holding her hand as they passed a woman who was leading a man around on a leash.

"Do you come here often?"

He shook his head. "First time."

Before she could speak again, Pandora felt a vicious pain sear across her palm. Hissing, she jerked her hand back at the same time Dante started shaking his own hand as if he'd burned it.

Pandora frowned as a bad sense of foreboding went through her.

She looked at her hand and watched as an attractive geometrical design formed over her palm, confirming her worst fear.

She was mated.

And there was only one male it could be . . .

CHAPTER 3

Dante stared in horror at the sight of his mating mark.

No. This couldn't be real and it damn sure couldn't be happening. Not to him. He took Pandora's hand and held it up against his so that he could compare their palms.

There was no denying it. The marks were identical.

She was his.

Damn.

"You bastard!" she snarled angrily. "How could you be the one meant for me?"

"Excuse me?" Dante asked, baffled by her rage. If anyone had a right to be angry it was him. After all, he'd been minding his own business when she traipsed into his sensory circle. Had she just stayed put, neither one of them would be in this situation.

"In case you didn't notice, sweetheart, I'm not exactly thrilled by this either."

She glared at him for two seconds before she whirled on her heel and headed off into the crowd.

Part of him was tempted to let her go, but that wouldn't accomplish anything. Neither Katagaria nor Arcadian had any say in who the Fates chose as their mates. Any more than they knew when or where they'd find the one person who was designated for them.

The only way to find a mate was to sleep with him or her and to wait for the mark to appear.

Whenever it did, they only had three weeks to perform their mating ritual or they would spend the rest of their lives sterile. For a female, it wasn't such a bad thing since she could continue to have sex with any man who caught her attention; she just couldn't have children with any male other than her designated mate. But for a male . . .

It was worse than death. The male was left completely impotent until the day his mate died.

Dante shivered at the thought. Him, impotent? Those were two words that would never be said together.

He would die first.

He headed through the lobby in hot pursuit of his "mate."

Pandora was seething as she headed blindly through the crowd. All she wanted was to put some significant distance between her and Dante.

This was awful.

Terrible!

Wasn't it?

Most Arcadians dreamed of finding their mate as their first lover. That way, they wouldn't have to fear their prowling instinct, which would debase them as they hopped from male to male, trying to find the one who could breed with them.

It was a dream come true to find a mate so early and so easily. Most of her kind spent centuries looking. And many died without ever being mated at all.

Technically, she'd been lucky, and yet she was angry because she was bound to a Katagari male. Talk about jumping from the frying pan into the fire! This morning her worst fear was being enslaved to a Katagaria pack.

Now she was captured even more fully than before. If she left Dante, she would never be able to have children. He was the only one who could give her that.

"Damn these hormones," she snarled as more tears gathered in her eyes. It was hard to think straight.

Someone grabbed her from behind.

"Gotcha," a deep, masculine voice said in her ear.

It wasn't Dante.

The panther inside her roared to life, rejecting any male not her mate. She whirled about and struck without thought, making contact with the stranger's groin.

Doubling over, he hissed in pain. But before she could escape, another male took her arm.

She froze as she realized he was an exact, equally handsome copy of the man she had just racked.

"Leo." The lethal growl cut across the tense air and shivered down her spine. Dante's voice threatened violence and death. "Let go my mate, boy."

The panther holding her let go instantly and cursed. "You've got to be kidding me."

Dante shook his head as he joined them. "I wish I were." He scowled at the other male, who was still cupping himself. "You okay, Mikey?"

"Yeah," he said, grimacing as he forced himself to straighten. His face was still an awful shade of red and he was panting. "Just my luck that you would find a mate who is as pissy as you are."

"I take offense to that," Pandora said.

Mike gave her a menacing scowl. "And I take offense to my sudden need for testicle retrieval. You know, I would have liked to have fathered some children one day."

Leo laughed at his twin brother's discomfort. "I'm just glad you got to her first."

Mike curled his lip. "Shut up."

Dante rolled his eyes before introducing his brothers. "Pandora, meet my brothers, Leonardo and Michelangelo."

"Like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles?" she couldn't resist asking.

"Like the Renaissance painters," Leo snapped. He exchanged a snarl with his twin brother. "I seriously hate those damned turtles."

As if on cue, four people dressed as said turtles walked by and frowned at them.

"I swear the gods are mocking us," Mike said as he saw the green-foam-covered humans.

"I know the feeling," Pandora said, sighing. There were no better words to describe her present predicament.

She had no idea what kind of . . . creature the Fates had joined her to.

Then again, Dante wasn't the one acting so bizarrely. She was the one with hormonal overload poisoning. She honestly couldn't blame Dante if he started choking her.

She just wished she could be herself for a few hours so that she could sort through all this better.

"Well, I see all of you found her."

Pandora looked past Leo to see the first one of the brothers she'd met. Ironically, he was the only one whose name she didn't know.

"Shut up, Romeo," Leo said irritably. "Don't think we don't know it was you who spread her scent around this hotel to drive us crazy. You almost got me killed when I grabbed Simi by mistake and she pulled out a bottle of barbecue sauce to sprinkle on me. If Ash hadn't come up when he did, that damn demon would have gladly eaten me."

Romeo laughed for only an instant before he sobered. He sniffed the air.

"Oh shit," he breathed as he looked from her to Dante. "You're mated?"

"Yeah," Dante said. "Thanks, Romeo. Had you not had her scent all over you, I wouldn't have been able to pinpoint her so easily. I really appreciate the road map."

Pandora stiffened at Dante's sarcasm. "Thank you for making me feel really bad. You know, you could try and be a little more positive about this."

"True," Romeo said. "She is Arcadian and not nearly as likely to roam."

It was Pandora's turn to be "thrilled." "Just think, now all of you have a babysitter for your litters and someone a lot weaker to knock around whenever you get angry at your enemies."

All four of the panthers scowled at her.

"What are you talking about?" Dante asked.

"It's all you want me for, right?"

He looked at her aghast. "You're my mate, Pandora, not my servant. Anyone in my pack, including my brothers, who disrespects you disrespects me. And believe me, that's one thing no one will ever do."

The sincerity of that tore through her.

He really meant it.

Gratitude and happiness welled inside her, and for the first time since her father had handed her over to their enemies, she had some real, true hope. “Really?”

“You may be Arcadian,” Romeo said, “but you’re a member of our pack now and we’ll treat you as such.”

“But what of the children you told me about?” Pandora asked Romeo. “Won’t you make me watch them?”

“They’re my offspring,” Romeo said. “I’ve been raising cubs and siblings for more than three hundred years, even Dante. Why would that change now?”

But she had assumed . . .

“Who watches them while you’re gone?” she asked.

It was Mike who answered. “Our brother Gabriel and our cousin Angel.”

“Yeah,” Dante said. “They do fine with cubs. It’s Frick and Frack here who screw them up and get all of them into trouble.”

Mike gave him a droll stare. “I really wish you’d stop calling us that.”

“When you grow out of your awkward pubescent stage, I will.” Dante checked his watch. “That should be, what? Another fifty, sixty years?”

“We’re older than her,” Leo said, pointing to Pandora.

“Yeah, but she’s got something neither of you do.”

“And that is?”

Dante rubbed his eyes as if his head were beginning to hurt. “If you can’t see what she has that neither of you do, you, need even more help than I thought.”

Leo made a disgusted noise at him. “I’m not going to stand here and be insulted. Since I can’t touch your pantheress without losing a limb or my balls, I’m going to pursue something a little less dangerous.”

Dante and Romeo exchanged an amused look that was completely mischievous.

“Why don’t you try one of the filking rooms?” Dante asked. “I heard from Acheron that a lot of wild things go on in there. Women taking off their clothes. Wine being passed around to anyone who wants some.”

Both of the twins’ faces lighted up.

“That sounds good and dirty to me,” Mike said. “Perfect. Later.”

Pandora laughed as the twins bolted away from them. “You do realize that filking is just science fiction folk singing, right?”

Dante gave an evil laugh. “I know. I just wish I could be there when they realize it too.”

Romeo shook his head. “You are so mean to them. It’s a wonder they don’t kill you while you sleep.”

Dante scoffed. “Yeah, right. Those goofs are lucky I tolerate them.”

“And yet you do,” Pandora said, smiling at the knowledge. “Why is that, Dante?”

Romeo returned her smile. “Because my brother has a heart that he hates to own up to.”

“Shut up, Romeo.”

“She’s your mate, Dante. Be honest with her. Don’t let the past sour you for eternity. She’s not Bonita, you know?”

Dante growled and lunged for Romeo, who stepped back lightning fast.

“Later,” Romeo said before he left them.

“Bonita?” Pandora asked as soon as they were alone . . . or at least as alone as a couple in a crowd of thousands could be.

Dante didn’t answer. From his expression she could tell he was thinking of something very painful.

Her heart wrenched at the thought. Was she an old lover? “Who was she?”

He let out a long, tired breath before he answered. “She was the bonded mate to one of my older brothers, Donatello. He was the pack leader before me and he loved his mate more than his life.”

Pandora felt for the panther. “Let me guess. She betrayed him.”

“No,” he said to her surprise. “They were bonded together, and one night while she was home from her journeys, she lashed out at him while they were having sex and ripped into his jugular. They both died before he could get help.”

Pandora covered her mouth as she envisioned the horror. Once Were-Panthers bonded their life forces together, neither of them could live without the other. If one died, they both died.

How terrible that Bonita had killed them in one act of thoughtless passion.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Thanks," he said quietly. "It was a damn waste of two decent panthers." His gaze penetrated her. "It's why I never wanted a pantheress for a mate or even a lover. I don't want my cubs orphaned because I let my guard drop and left myself open to a female's attack."

"I would never rip at you."

"How do you know?"

"Well," she said as they started moving through the lobby, "right now I don't even know how to turn into a panther. So that alone makes you safe. I tried to do it a couple of days ago and all I got was a tail that was very hard to hide until I went to sleep and it left me."

Dante laughed, and though she ought to be offended that he was laughing at her misfortune, she wasn't. There was something about him that was truly charming.

"I've never heard of that happening before," he said.

"Stick around. All kinds of weird things have been happening to me lately."

He brushed the hair back from her face. "I think I might like to do that. If you don't mind."

For some reason, the thought warmed her. Dante was a lot of fun to be with.

When they weren't fighting.

"What do you expect of your mate, Dante?"

He shrugged, then put his arm around her as they cruised by the banquet tables that were lined with fliers and giveaway items. "Nothing more than any other panther, I guess. I expect you to come home when you're in season and leave when you're not."

It was too good to be true.

"You would let me leave if I wanted to?"

He frowned. "It's the nature of our species, Pandora. Why would I stop you?"

"But the other pack—"

"Ain't right in the head," he said, interrupting her. "There's something profoundly wrong with anyone who would try to get a panther to act against his or her nature. That's something I'd expect an Arcadian to do, not a Katagari."

She smiled up at him as she felt another hormonal surge go through her.

By the sudden feral look on Dante's face she could tell he sensed it too.

His arm tightened around her.

"Can we wait?" she asked quickly. "I don't want to rush mating with you again until we get a few things straight between us."

Even though sex with him would clear her head, her human heart wanted more between them than just a physical relationship. She wanted to know the human part of her mate.

"Such as?" Dante asked.

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "I know in my heart that committing myself to you is the best thing for both of us. It's probably the only thing since I no longer have a pack to shelter me. But the human in me wants to know you better before I take such a permanent step."

To her relief, he didn't try to balk or force her.

"What do you need from me?"

"Just be with me as a human for a little while and let me get to know you, okay?"

Dante nodded even though what he really wanted to do was take her back upstairs and give her what both their bodies craved.

But she was young and scared. This was a momentous step for both of them. Bonding was eternal and it wasn't something to be taken lightly.

True kindness to someone else was all but alien to him. He understood loyalty. Obligation.

But love and tenderness . . .

Panthers didn't dream of such things. They only understood immediate needs. The ones for food, shelter, sex.

Offspring.

And yet he wanted something more from her. Something deeper.

He wanted her acceptance.

Her touch.

It was stupid. What did he need with such things? He had money. Power. Magic.

He could force her to do anything he wanted her to. But it still wouldn't give him what he wanted.

Her heart.

Damn him for his human half.

Sighing, he led her toward the Marquis Steakhouse where they could get something to eat.

The night went by quickly as Pandora followed Dante around to various booths and concerts where alternative bands were displaying their wares and talents. Dante seemed to have a knack for finding really good performers who were excited about being offered money to play in his club in Minnesota.

“How long have you had your club?” she asked as he bought three CDs from a band called Emerald Rose who had been playing earlier outside the conference rooms at the Hyatt.

“Almost thirty years now.”

Wow, that was a long time. Dante looked good for a man who was more than two hundred years old.

Really good.

“And the humans don’t realize that you’re always there and that you never age?”

He shook his head. “When they leave the Inferno, we tamper with their minds a bit. Even if they come in every night, they never remember those of us who don’t age or change.”

“That must be nice. In my . . .” She hesitated to say “pack” since they had thrown her out. “In my world, we stay away from the humans as much as possible.”

“So what’s the future like where you live, anyway?”

“Not that much different from this. Haven’t you ever been?”

“Not since I was a cub. When I first got control of my time-travel powers, I hopped around quite a bit. But after a while, it got boring. Things and places changed, but the people didn’t. So I decided to stay with my pack in Minnesota and not worry about the past or the future.”

She would love to be able to time-jump like that. It was true freedom and that was one thing she’d never known.

“Can you teach me how to use my powers like that?” she asked.

“Of course.”

She smiled. None of her sisters who had been sent into this time period had been taught anything. The Katagaria hadn't allowed them to develop their powers for fear they would leave. Some of them had even been forced by the Katagaria to wear metriazo collars to ensure that none of them would ever be able to use their magic.

It was harsh and cruel.

"Is it hard to time-travel?" she asked.

"Not now, it's not for me. But I've had centuries to perfect my powers. When you first start it can be . . . surprising. Last time I left Leo and Mike at home, they time-jumped from Minnesota 2002 to the Aleutian Islands 1432 instead of New York 2065. It was a bitch trying to find them and get them home again."

"I'm surprised you went after them."

"Yeah, well, they annoy me, but I understand they're just cubs who will eventually grow up . . . probably to annoy me even more."

She laughed at his offbeat humor as they drifted through the strangely garbed crowd. She had to admit that Dante was a lot of fun once he got used to you and stopped being so feral and snarling.

"You do have a heart, don't you?"

"No, Pandora," he said, his blue eyes scorching her with their intensity. "I don't. I only have responsibility. And I have a shitload of it."

Maybe, but she wasn't quite so sure. For one thing the arm he had draped around her shoulders didn't say "burden," it said "protective."

And she wanted to pretend it said something even more. Something like friendship.

Maybe even love.

Dante paused at a dealer's display case. A tiny smile hovered at the edges of his lips as something caught his eye. He motioned for the dealer to come over.

"Can I help you?" the older woman asked as she approached them.

Dante pointed to something under the glass. "I'd like to see that."

Pandora didn't know what it was until the woman handed it to Dante and he turned toward her. She couldn't help laughing at the gold pendant in the form of a panther wrapped around a sapphire as he fastened it around her neck.

Pandora held the pendant in her hand so that she could examine it. “How unusual.”

“Yes, it is,” the woman said. “That’s a shaman designer I met out West. He takes vision quests and then makes a necklace based on what animal guides him. That one there he said was a panther that led him through a nightmare and saved him.”

How oddly apropos.

She looked up at Dante and smiled.

“I’ll take it,” Dante said, pulling out his wallet.

Pandora stared down at the exquisitely crafted piece while he paid. She was so warmed by the gesture, especially since Romeo had told her how selfish Dante was.

“Thank you,” she said when he returned to her side.

“My pleasure.”

Smiling even more, she lifted herself up on tiptoe and placed a chaste kiss to his cheek.

“You keep doing that,” he whispered in her ear, “and I’ll have you upstairs and naked in a heartbeat.”

An overwhelming wave of desire tore through her body. It was the pantheress in her that needed to feel him inside her. They’d done enough talking and the wild part of her personality now wanted appeasement too.

“I wouldn’t mind it one bit,” she whispered back.

That was all it took. One second they were in the crowd and the next, he’d pulled them off into an alcove where no one could see them and poofed them into a suite.

“Is this your room?” she asked as she glanced around the elegant accommodations.

“It’s our room,” he said as he stalked her like the hungry predator he was.

She stiffened at his tone. “Is that an order?”

“No, Pandora. But so long as we are mates, what is mine is yours.”

“You’re being strangely accommodating for a selfish panther Romeo said held no interest in a mate.”

Dante paused at that. It was true. He’d never wanted to be bound by anything, especially not a mate. Yet for some reason, he didn’t mind Pandora in the least.

“The Fates didn’t ask me who or what I wanted for my own.” He held her marked palm up for both of them to see. “But they have chosen you as mine and I take care of what belongs to me.”

“And if I don’t want to belong to you?”

“I can’t force you to mate with me, Pandora, you know that. You are free to leave my protection at any time and go wherever you want.”

Pandora swallowed at the thought. Yes, she could. But where would she go? The journey to Atlanta had been scary and fraught with the fear of having a pack find her and abuse her or the humans learning that she was a Were-Panther and locking her up.

Many ordinary things had baffled her.

How to buy a bus ticket. How to order food. Those things were all different in her time period. Everything there was done with universal credits. There was no money in her world. No fuel-burning vehicles.

The transports in her century were more akin to monorails and you paid your way with your palm print. Everything at home was automated and clinical.

She didn’t know how to survive in the current human world. Didn’t know how to use her powers.

It was terrifying here.

Except for Dante. He offered her more than anyone ever had. Protection and education.

He was her safety.

And he was her designated mate. Mating with a male was a physical act. It was the bonding ceremony that was emotional. She could easily mate and then have his protection.

Her heart would still belong solely to herself.

But if she refused to mate with Dante, he would have no reason to protect or educate her. And why would he? Her refusal would leave him impotent. Something she was sure wouldn’t endear her to him.

“You will give me total freedom without any limitations on it?” she asked.

“I know no other way.”

In that moment, she realized that she could learn to love this panther standing in front of her. He didn't have to give her anything. He could theoretically take anything from her that he wanted. The other panthers did.

If a woman wasn't mated to one of the Katagaria pack, they kept her anyway and used her as a whore for all of them.

But Dante offered her the world and asked for nothing in return. Nothing except a few words that would unite their physical bodies.

"And our children?" she asked him.

"We have a large nursery for them in Minnesota."

She cocked her head. "You realize they'll most likely be human and not cubs."

He looked perplexed by that. "Then I'll read Mr. Spock."

Pandora laughed. "He's the character from Star Trek, not the child expert. No wonder you're here."

He brushed the hair back from her face and gave her a sincere, heated look that melted her. "I will do whatever I have to to take care of them. I promise you. Human or cub, they will be protected as my offspring and they will have whatever they need to grow strong and healthy."

She pressed her marked palm against his. "Then I will mate with you, Dante Pontis."

Dante couldn't breathe as he stared down at her and those blessed words rang in his ears. He should be running for the door. But if he did that, he'd never have sex again.

Sex with only one woman. He was really paying the piper for all the years he'd been tormenting Romeo about being mated.

And yet he couldn't quite muster up true fear. Some hidden part of him liked the idea of Pandora being his.

Lacing his fingers with hers, he walked backward toward the bed, pulling her with him.

He used his powers to turn down the bed and strip their clothes from them before he lay on his back and pulled her over him.

The mating ritual was older than time. It was instinctive to their species and it would bind them for the rest of their lives. The only way to break it would be for one of

them to die. Whoever survived the union would then be free to try and find another mate . . . if there was another one out there.

It was extremely rare for any Were-Hunter, Katagaria or Arcadian, to find a second mate.

Pandora bit her lip in nervous trepidation. All her life, her thoughts and energy had been spent on worrying about the actual act of sex. Since she was promised to a Katagaria pack, she'd never really thought much about ritual mating.

Now she was almost scared as she tried to take Dante into her body. This was a lot more difficult than she would have guessed. Every time she tried to straddle him, his cock went astray.

Dante smiled gently. "Can I help?"

She nodded.

He shifted his hips, then guided her onto him. They both moaned in pleasure as her body took him in all the way to his hilt.

This was it. A man who ought to terrify and repulse her was about to become her mate.

She would have children with him and somehow they would bridge the differences between their cultures and personalities and become the sole physical comfort for each other.

If she had to have a Katagaria lover, she couldn't imagine a better panther to have as her own than Dante.

Pandora could barely think as she felt heat coming from their joined hands that held the mating mark. She moved against him slowly, then spoke the words that would unite them. "I accept you as you are, and I will always hold you close in my heart. I will walk beside you forever."

Dante watched her intently as he felt every inch of her body with his. He'd never thought to have a mate at all and had relegated himself to a future bereft of children. Now the thought of having his own cubs warmed him.

She was his.

A hot, demanding possessiveness unlike anything he'd ever known before tore through him as he watched her ride him slow and easy. Not feral like a pantheress.

Human and yet not. Who would have thought that Dante Pontis could be tamed by such a small creature? And yet her tender touch seared him with a humanity he wouldn't have thought possible.

The beast inside him was calm. No longer searching, it lay at peace as if she fit some part of him he'd never known was missing.

Smiling up at her, he cupped her face with his free hand and repeated the vow back to her.

Pandora moaned at the deepness of his voice until an unexpected pain sliced through her as her canine teeth started to grow.

Pandora hissed. This was the thirio, a need inside both their races that wanted them to bite each other and combine their life forces so that if one died, they both did.

Like the mating ritual itself, the choice of bonding was hers alone to make. Dante could never force it on her.

Nor did he ask it of her now.

True to his words, he left it entirely up to her and only watched her as she rode him.

Pandora kissed the hand that held his mark, then led it to her breast as her orgasm pierced her.

Dante couldn't breathe as his own climax blazed. He roared in satisfaction as his teeth finally began to recede.

It was done now. There was no going back.

They were joined, but not bonded.

Still, she was his.

He reached up to touch the necklace he'd bought for her. She looked beautiful naked in his arms. Her spent body was still wrapped around his.

"Pandora Pontis," he breathed. "Welcome to my pack." With that thought in mind, he pulled the small signet ring off his little finger, wished a spell onto it, then handed it to her.

Pandora studied the antique piece. It was beautiful, with gold filigree surrounding a large sapphire stone where an ornate "DP" was engraved. "What is this?"

“A homing beacon so that wherever you find yourself, you can always come back to me simply by thinking of me.”

She scowled at his words. “I don’t have those powers.”

“I know. It’s why I’m giving you the ring. The spell works from my powers and it’s unbreakable.”

Her lips trembled at his kindness. He’d really meant it when he said she had her freedom. Swallowing against the lump in her throat, she slid the ring onto her left hand. It was a perfect fit. “Thank you.”

He inclined his head to her, then pulled her lips to his so that he could give her a passionate kiss.

A bright flash filled the room.

Pandora pulled back with a cry as someone grabbed her from behind.

Two seconds later, all hell broke loose.

CHAPTER 4

Pandora cried out as she realized that eight panthers from the pack that had originally snatched her from her time period had suddenly appeared in Dante’s suite.

“How dare you run from us?” their tessera leader snarled as he slung her away from the bed and Dante, into the hands of two of his cronies.

Pandora fought their hold as Dante threw his hand out and blasted the man who had grabbed her. The leader recoiled into the wall, but came right back on his feet.

Dante crouched low, ready to pounce on them. “Don’t you dare touch her.”

The leader straightened to give Dante a murderous glare. “Stay out of this, panthiras. She belongs to us.”

Dante came off the bed with a snarl. “The hell you say.” He turned to panther form as he attacked.

With the exception of the two holding her, all the men in the room transformed into panthers to fight. Pandora cringed at the growls and roars as the animals slashed and clawed each other in a primal battle.

Terrified that they might hurt Dante, she bit the man to her right, then stomped the foot of the one to her left. They let go of her, then reached for her again.

She spun away from them. Clothes appeared instantly on her body.

“Run, gataki,” Dante said in her mind. “They won’t be able to find you in the crowd.”

The next thing she knew, she was downstairs in a women’s bathroom stall.

“Dammit, Dante!” she snarled as she left the stall and almost ran into a human woman dressed in an ornate burgundy and gold Renaissance gown who appeared to have just left the stall before her.

The woman gave her a fierce scowl that Pandora ignored as she brushed past her.

She had to get back upstairs with some reinforcements.

Dante couldn’t fight that many panthers on his own. They’d kill him.

Her heart hammering, she ran out of the bathroom to find herself inside a roomful of dealers. She scanned the booths hoping to find one of Dante’s brothers.

Instead her gaze landed on a medieval weapons booth that was lined with every kind of weapon imaginable.

Pandora headed for it. She skimmed through the weapons. They had poleaxes and swords, which would be too awkward for her. She had no idea how to skillfully wield one, and the daggers would force her to get too close to the panthers.

But the double-sided handaxe . . .

She seized it without hesitation, then closed her eyes, conjured up an image of Dante, and prayed his spell actually worked. Her head swam as she was whirled back into the room in the middle of the fight.

Pandora tightened her grip on the axe, then realized she wasn’t sure which panther was Dante.

Not until one attacked her. Assuming her mate wouldn’t do such a thing, she swung the axe with every ounce of strength she possessed.

It made contact with the beast’s shoulder.

The panther howled as he limped away.

“Pandora!” Dante snapped in her mind. “What are you doing?”

"I'm saving my mate," she said between clenched teeth as she went after another panther. "You're not Dante, are you?"

"I'm behind you."

"Good." She swung at the panther in front of her who dodged her first blow but was caught by her second one.

Before she could swing again, she found herself back in the handicapped bathroom stall, this time with two women who were trying to unlace a female Klingon costume.

They both gaped at her as they stared at her bloodied axe.

Too worried over her mate, Pandora paid them no attention.

"I'm getting tired of this!" she said, then wished herself back to Dante.

Dante cursed in her head as she reappeared in his room. "I'm going to take that damned ring from you."

A panther leaped at her.

Pandora started to swing, but caught herself as the panther flashed to Dante's naked, human form. He wrapped his arms around her and flashed her into her hotel room.

"Dante?" she said, her voice shaking as she realized he was covered in blood from the fighting. He looked terrible. There were bite wounds and scratches all over him.

Dante wanted to speak, but in truth it was taking way too much of his powers to assume human form while injured. His human body ached and throbbed.

He had to protect Pandora.

Closing his eyes, he summoned Romeo.

But no sooner had he sent out the call, than his human legs buckled.

"Dante?" Pandora asked as she pulled him into her arms.

He had no choice except to return to his panther's body.

To his surprise, she didn't release him or flee in fear of his animal form. She held him tight and stroked his fur.

He licked her chin, but couldn't muster any more strength. He was in way too much pain.

Pandora's heart stilled at the way Dante was acting. He had to be hurt badly to not even move.

A flash of light startled her. She reached for her axe, then hesitated as she saw Romeo in human form by the bed.

His gaze narrowed on her as he saw his brother's limp form and the bloody axe. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing. The other panthers came for me and I tried to help Dante fight them off."

Something hit the door, then flashed into the room. Romeo whirled as a panther rushed them.

Dante leaped out of her arms so fast that she shrieked. He went straight for the panther's throat as Romeo changed form.

Pandora grabbed the axe from the floor and scrambled to a corner.

One by one, four more panthers appeared in the room. There was no way to tell them apart as they fought with Romeo and Dante. Roars and growls echoed in her ears and the scent of blood filled her nostrils.

Two more panthers appeared.

How she wished she knew if they were friend or foe. All she could do was grip her axe and pray.

The one panther she thought was Dante appeared to maim the one he was fighting by snapping the hind leg of his opponent. A baleful whine filled the air as the panther evaporated from the room.

The victorious panther turned to another that was fighting with the two new panthers. With his powerful jaws, he grabbed it by the neck and slung it away from the two.

He charged the downed panther, using his shoulder to drive it farther away from her and from the other two who snapped behind him.

His enemy tried to claw at his head, but the panther ducked his head and bit into his opponent's throat.

The opponent became wild, thrashing before she heard something break. It went limp.

Two more panthers vanished instantly.

The remaining four turned on the one panther that had been left behind and cornered it. It roared fiercely, then poofed out as well.

Terrified of what that meant, Pandora tensed as the four panthers turned to face her.

She watched them, determined to fight to the bitter end as they stalked nearer.

Three of them fell back while the fourth approached her.

“Dante?” she asked hesitantly, hoping it was him.

He collapsed at her feet before he placed one large paw on her foot and licked her ankle.

She sobbed in relief as she slid down the wall to pull his head into her lap.

The other three flashed into Romeo, Leo, and Mike.

“How badly are you hurt?” Romeo asked the twins.

They were a bit scuffed up, with bruises and bloodied lips and noses, but weren’t hurt nearly as badly as Dante had been.

“We’re okay, thanks to Dante.”

Romeo approached her slowly.

“He’s unconscious,” she said quietly as she kept her hand on Dante’s ribs to make sure he was still breathing. “There were eight of them in the beginning. He fought them alone.”

“Dammit, Dante,” Romeo snarled as he picked the panther up in his arms. “Why didn’t you call us sooner?”

“Put him in my bed,” Pandora said, moving to pull back the covers.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

Romeo set him down, then ordered Leo to keep watch at the door in case the others came back.

“Mike,” he said to the other twin. “Go grab Acheron and tell him I need a favor.”

Pandora crawled into the bed beside Dante. Part of her was terrified to be so close to him in his animal state and yet the other part of her wanted only to comfort her mate.

She’d never been this close to a panther before. It was scary and yet not.

Somehow it seemed right to be here.

His black fur was so dark, it reminded her of midnight velvet. She carefully brushed the whiskers of his muzzle back, then sank her hand in the soft fur of his neck.

Even though she knew it was true, it was hard to believe this was the same gorgeous man who had made the tenderest love to her.

And he had risked his life to protect her.

Her heart swelled with joy and with something she thought might be the first stirrings of love. No one had ever protected her. Not like this.

Pandora placed her hand near one of the vicious bite wounds above Dante's shoulder. "Will he be okay?" she asked Romeo.

If she didn't know better, she'd swear she saw pride in his eyes as he watched her.

"He's had worse."

"Really?"

"Really."

Romeo reached out and took her left hand so that he could see Dante's ring. His grip tightened on her hand. "That belonged to our brother Donatello," he said quietly. "I've never known Dante to take it off."

"He put a spell on it so that I could come back to him any time I wanted to."

Romeo smiled at that. "You have no idea just what a completely unbelievable feat that was for him."

"No, I think I do know." It ranked right up there with her lying beside him right now when she was terrified of panthers. This wasn't something she would have done even a few hours ago—and now . . .

Now she accepted the fact that this was her eternal mate. And for the first time in her life, she was beginning to understand exactly what that really meant.

Someone knocked on the door.

Pandora jumped.

"Relax," Romeo said as he moved to answer it while Mike stood aside. "The bad guys don't knock."

Pandora frowned as Romeo let in Leo and the gorgeous Goth man she'd seen downstairs. Leo went to stand beside Mike while the Goth came toward the bed.

"Pandora," Romeo said, "meet Acheron Parthenopaeus."

Acheron inclined his head to her.

She gaped. “You’re the ancient Dark-Hunter?”

Acheron gave her that same wicked grin he had given her earlier. “The one and only.”

A weird ripple went through her. “You knew me downstairs when our gazes met, didn’t you?”

He nodded.

“If you knew I was looking for you, why didn’t you say something?”

His gaze went to Dante. “Because it wasn’t time for you to meet me yet.” He glanced to Romeo. “And it’s not time for you to lose another brother.”

Pandora watched as the wounds on Dante healed instantly.

Romeo smiled in relief. “What do we owe you for that, Ash?”

Acheron shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll call the favor in at a later date.”

Dante flashed into human form. He looked up at her with a tender expression that melted her.

“Ash,” he said, without looking at the Dark-Hunter. “Could I trade another favor for you to watch my mate for me while my brothers and I take care of something?”

“Absolutely.”

Dante placed one large, warm hand against her cheek, then chastely kissed the side of her face. He got up and gathered his brothers to him.

“We’ll be back in a minute.”

Before she could ask him where he was going, they vanished.

“What is he doing?” she asked Ash.

“Knowing Dante, I’m confident he’s going to guarantee that your ‘friends’ never return to threaten you or anyone from your pack again.”

It didn’t take Dante long to find the rogue pack of Katagaria panthers. They were camped in a small, isolated commune just outside of Charleston.

Ironically, they even had a sign up declaring the area a wildlife preserve.

With his three brothers behind him, he walked through the wooded area until he found the first panther he'd fought. The panther was lying wounded with a human woman tending him.

"Who leads this pack?" he asked the pair.

The panther didn't answer, but when the petite, blond woman did, Dante recognized a voice that was almost identical in tone, accent, and cadence to Pandora's. "Aristotle is the regis. He's sleeping over there." She pointed to a tree.

Dante inclined his head respectfully to her, then went to the tree to call down their leader.

Aristotle responded by only opening one bored eye. "Who are you?"

"Take human form when you address me, you bastard," Dante said harshly. "Or there won't be enough left of your pack to even start a new one."

The panther flashed into human form, then moved to stand before Dante in a stance that said he was ready to fight. He was four inches shorter than Dante and had short black hair that matched his black soulless eyes.

"Who the hell are you?" he snarled.

"Dante Pontis."

Aristotle's eyes widened as he took an immediate step back.

Dante's brutal, take-no-prisoners reputation was known far and wide, and it was respected or feared by all their kind.

"To what do I owe this honor?" Aristotle asked.

"A group of your strati tried to take my mate from me. Now I'm here for blood."

Aristotle sputtered. "There was some misunderstanding. My men went after an Arcadian whor—"

Dante slugged him before he could finish the insult. "Pandora Kouti-Pontis is my mate. If you speak of her with anything other than extreme reverence in your tone, you piss me off."

Aristotle turned pale. "I had no idea she belonged to you. Believe me."

"Now you do, and if I ever see any of you near her again, I'll end all your problems. Permanently."

Pandora was sitting in the Grandstand Lounge with Acheron, his daughter demon Simi, and two gods while they waited for Dante's return.

This had to be the oddest moment of her life. The demon was busy eating an extremely rare hamburger drenched in barbecue sauce while the gods and Acheron were telling Pandora stories about how they'd all met Dante.

Apparently her mate had quite a rambunctious club that catered to all manner of bizarre clientele. The gods and Acheron made routine visits there.

Zurvan, who went by the name Cas, was the ancient Persian god of time and space. He was the elegantly dressed man she had followed earlier toward the elevators, thinking he was Acheron.

Ariman—not to be confused with the Persian god Ariman—had been an ancient Phoenician god who had had the misfortune of visiting Atlantis at the time the continent was destroyed. He'd been in human form, trying to seduce a young woman, and as a result, he was now trapped in human form with no god powers except immortality.

He wasn't happy about it either.

"I really wish one of you would take mercy on me and fix me or kill me," Ariman said for the fifth time since he had joined them at their table.

Cas rolled his eyes, then turned toward Acheron. "I think we ought to banish him from our presence so we can't hear him bitch anymore."

Ash laughed.

"You're such—" Ariman's words broke off as he spotted the women who weren't wearing anything except warning tape. "Later." He bolted after the women.

Cas shook his head. "He is never going to learn, is he?"

Ash took a drink of beer before he responded. "Be grateful he doesn't. It gives us endless hours of amusement watching him screw his life up."

Cas snorted. "Considering how screwed up yours is, that says something."

"Let's not go there," Ash said, his eyes flashing red before they returned to their spooky swirling silver shade.

Sometimes it was very scary to hang out with supernatural beings.

"Pandora?"

She froze at the sound of a voice she never thought to hear again. Afraid she was hearing things, she turned to see her sister Sefia running up to her.

Pandora shot to her feet to throw her arms around her sister. Oh, it was too good to be real! “What are you doing here, Sef?”

“Your mate brought me,” she said as tears poured down her cheeks. “He made them let us all go. Now it’s up to us if we want to return to our mates or not.”

Pandora was stunned as she looked past her sister to see Dante and his brothers approaching at a much more sedate pace.

“Dante?” she asked as he stopped by her side.

He shrugged nonchalantly as if he hadn’t just given her the impossible. “It wasn’t right what they were doing to their females and I figured you’d rather travel with your own female kind than with mine.”

She still couldn’t believe he’d done this. He had formed a new pack of female panthers for her to roam with. “What about the pact they made with our pack?”

“It’s dissolved,” Dante said. “If they pull any more of your kin out of their time period, I’m going to send them a special welcoming committee.”

“Damn, Dante,” Cas said from behind her. “That’s harsh. Last time you turned your brothers loose on a pack, they left no male standing.”

“I know.” Dante looked back to her. “And so do they. Your sister and her friends are all safe now.”

Pandora threw her arms around his shoulders and held him close. “Thank you!”

He hugged her back, then kissed her gently.

Pandora turned back to Sefia as another thought occurred to her. “What about your children?”

“Their father is raising them, per Dante’s orders.” Sefia looked at Dante with glowing eyes. “Your mate took all of the women to La Costa and is paying for us to stay and be pampered there for as long as we like.”

“And we volunteered to guard them,” Mike said, indicating himself and Leo.

“Is that a good idea?” Pandora asked Dante. After all he and Romeo had said about the twins, she wasn’t sure whether having them as guards would be a help or a hindrance.

Dante's face mirrored her skepticism. "I personally don't think so, but Romeo talked me into it. There's a large number of the females who aren't mated."

"And Dante owes us big after the filking fiasco," Leo said irritably. "There weren't any naked women there, just some guy singing about Star Trek and Romulan brew. It really pissed us off."

Pandora had to stifle her laughter.

"Are you going to come with us?" Sefia asked.

Pandora felt a lot more torn than she should have. Spending time with her sister at a resort or staying with a Katagari panther at Dragon*Con . . .

There shouldn't be a choice.

So why did she feel this way?

"It's entirely up to you," Dante said quietly. "I told you I wouldn't interfere with your freedom."

"C'mon, Dora," Sefia said, taking her hand. "We're going to have a lot of fun."

Dante's face was completely stoic and yet she sensed his sadness.

"I'll be back soon," Pandora promised him.

He nodded.

"I'll take them upstairs to my room to flash them to the resort," Romeo said.

Dante didn't speak as he watched his brothers disappear into the crowd with Pandora and Sefia.

He'd done a good deed and now he knew why he hated doing good deeds.

They were painful.

What did he get out of it? Not a damn thing except a pain so profound that he felt as if something were shredding his heart.

"Here," Ash said, handing him a beer. "Have a seat."

Sighing, Dante took the beer and grabbed the chair where Pandora had been sitting on his arrival. "I did the right thing, right?"

"No," Simi said as she wiped barbecue sauce off her chin. "The panther woman didn't want you to leave her and now you made her go away. That was just stupid if you ask the Simi. Not that anyone ever does, 'cause if they did, then they would be smart. Some people are smart. But many, like you, are too stupid to ask me what I think. See?"

“It’s not that simple, Simi,” Dante said, wondering why he was trying to explain himself to a demon who had no understanding of human emotions or animal relationships. “She doesn’t want me to own her.”

“Well, the Simi doesn’t understand that. Owning’s not so bad. I own akri and he kind of fun.”

Dante arched a brow at Ash who didn’t bother to correct his demon.

Whatever. Those two were far beyond his understanding anyway.

“I’m telling you, Faith,” a woman said as she and a friend walked by them. “There’s a portal in the handicap stall downstairs that allows people to drop in from alternate universes. I was in there with Amanda helping her with her costume when this woman popped in, holding an axe. She immediately popped back out.”

Dante laughed at that, even though a fierce pain cut through him at the memory.

Only his pantheress would be so bold as to defy his orders.

“I better go pay for that axe before someone puts out an APB on my mate,” he said to Ash, Cas, and Simi.

But as he got up and headed down to the dealers’ room, he couldn’t squelch the need he felt to find Pandora and bring her back.

He wouldn’t do that to her.

Dante was nothing if not a panther of his word.

CHAPTER 5

Pandora spent two days in La Costa with her sister and the other females while Leo and Mike tutored them well on how to use their powers. They also tutored some of the unmated females on things she didn’t even want to think about.

But none of her newfound freedom made her happy.

In fact, the longer she stayed here, the more her heart ached. Every time her gaze fell to her marked hand, she thought about the panther she’d left behind.

No, she thought about the man. The one who had given her so much.

“How’s Dante doing?”

She paused outside the sliding glass door that led to Mike and Leo's room. The two panthers were in there alone and she wasn't sure which one was which. One of them was resting in a blue recliner, while the other appeared to have just ended a phone call.

That one tossed a cell phone to the dresser before he shrugged. "Romeo said he's still screwed up."

The one in the chair sighed heavily. "Yeah. I can't believe he didn't tell Pandora about his phobia."

"What phobia?" Pandora asked as she came through the door to confront them.

The twins looked at her sheepishly.

"It's not nice to eavesdrop," the one in front of the dresser said in a reprimanding tone.

She was in no mood to take that from him. "And it's not nice to talk about people either, but since you're talking about my mate, I'd like to know what you mean."

The twins exchanged a pained look.

"What do you think, Mike?" Leo was the one who'd had the cell phone.

Mike leaned back in his recliner as he silently debated for a few seconds more.

"Might as well tell her, I guess. I don't see what it would hurt."

Leo let out a loud breath before he spoke again.

He looked at her. "When Dante was a cub, he and his litter and a group of our cousins escaped their babysitter and went out prowling on their own. After a few hours, they got lost and one of the females with them got really scared because it was getting dark. She didn't want to try and find her way back until morning so Dante agreed to stay with her and keep her safe. Our brother Sal told Dante he'd be back with help and then led the others off."

Pandora frowned at his story. "Why would that make him phobic?"

"Because it was a cruel prank," Mike said bitterly. "As soon as Dante went to sleep, Tyla snuck out and they all headed back home without him. Dante woke up alone and had no idea what had happened to her or how to get home. He was terrified."

Pandora was appalled at how mean his siblings and cousins had been to leave him behind. A cub on its own could be picked up by humans and put in a zoo or, worse, killed by any adult wild animal that came across it.

“They left him there by himself for a solid week,” Leo continued with the story. “Every time someone asked about Dante, they made up some lie about where he was. When Donatello found out what they’d done, he went back to the woods to get him. He found Dante practically starved to death. He’d been living off scraps and having to keep predators away with no help. He was weak from exposure, but still he’d kept searching for Tyla, afraid something had happened to her.”

His face sad, Mike shook his head. “Romeo has always said that that was what made Dante so damned selfish. After they returned, Dante was freaky about ever running out of food or trying to help someone. He started hoarding things and turning on anyone who threatened him.”

Her heart ached for her mate. It must have been horrible for him to be afraid for his life while trying to find Tyla. And all because of a joke.

“I hope Donatello punished them for what they did.”

Mike sighed. “He did, but the damage had already been done. Like Acheron so often says, there are a lot of things in life that ‘sorry’ doesn’t fix and that was one of them.”

“Ever since then,” Leo said, “Dante can’t stand for anyone to leave him. He practically climbs the walls if he can’t account for his family.”

“That’s why he went to find you two when you were lost, isn’t it?” she asked.

Leo nodded. “His worst fear is to have someone he loves not be able to find their way home again.”

Tears filled her eyes as she looked down at the ring Dante had given her when they mated.

Now it all made perfect sense.

Why he didn’t want a wandering Katagari female for a mate . . .

Why he tolerated his brothers even when they drove him insane . . .

Why he had freed her sister and the other women to travel with her . . .

And why he had given her Donatello’s ring.

Closing her eyes, Pandora conjured up an image of Dante.

* * *

Dante was watching the acid metal band on a TV monitor. But his mind wasn't really on the act or the handouts and CDs on the table in front of him.

It was on the fact that he should never have let Pandora go.

You can't keep her . . .

He should have at least tried.

But at least she wasn't out there alone. He'd made sure that she would have her sister with her.

A warm hand touched his arm.

Grinding his teeth, Dante turned, ready to rebuff yet another woman coming on to him. He was really getting tired of telling them he wasn't interested.

But as he opened his mouth and his eyes focused on the beautiful face of his latest admirer, all thoughts scattered.

It couldn't be.

Not this soon.

"Pandora?"

"Hi," she said with a smile that made him feel suckerpunched. "I missed you."

This had to be a dream. His pantheress couldn't be back.

He wanted to tell her that he'd missed her too, but the words wouldn't come. All he could do was react.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her fiercely, letting her feel that every part of him wanted her never to leave him again.

Pandora laughed at his heated welcome. "I think you missed me too."

Dante left her lips to take a deep whiff of her hair so that he could memorize and savor it. "You have no idea."

Actually, she did. She hadn't doubted the twins before, but this thoroughly confirmed their story.

She nuzzled his neck, inhaling the warm spicy scent of his masculine skin. "Want to get naked?"

He laughed. "Yeah, but not here."

Pulling back from her, he took her hand and led her to a secluded corner so that he could flash them into his room.

They were both naked and in his bed three blinks later.

Dante couldn't breathe as he felt the impossible softness of Pandora lying beneath him.

Nothing felt better than her caresses. The fact that she was warm and welcoming. He slid himself inside her, and groaned at just how good she felt.

Pandora savored his hardness inside her and now more than ever she was glad she was human and not a real panther. Her Katagaria cousins only sought sex when they were in heat.

She could seek it anytime she wanted and she wanted Dante right now. Needed to feel his strong, powerful thrusts.

But the human in her wanted even more.

It wanted him with her forever.

"Will you bond with me, Dante?"

Dante froze as her whispered words went through him. "What?"

She held her marked palm up. "I don't ever want to leave you and I don't want to live without you. Not for one minute. Bond with me, Dante, so that neither one of us is ever abandoned again."

He took her hand into his and kissed her as love for her overwhelmed him.

He thrust against her hard and furiously as she repeated her vows to him and he returned them to her.

This time when his teeth grew, he pulled back to stare down at her an instant before he sank his fangs into her neck.

Pandora arched her back as the pain of his bite quickly turned to pleasure. Her head spinning, she sank her own teeth into his shoulder.

For that one instant in time, every thought and emotion Dante felt coursed through her.

Any doubt she'd ever had about him fled as she felt his love for her, and it ignited her own.

This was what was meant to be.

He was hers and she was his.

She cried out as she came in a fierce wave of pleasure. Dante's own growl of pleasure filled her ears.

Joined together, they drifted through the ribbons of ecstasy until they were fully drained and spent.

Dante collapsed on top of her and she cuddled him in her arms. "I love you, Dante," she breathed. "And I promise I'll never again leave you."

He smiled languidly as he stared at her. "I love you, too, Pandora, and anytime you want to leave, I'll gladly go with you."

EPILOGUE

In the Marriott's lobby, Dante stood off to the side with Acheron while everyone at the hotel was packing up to leave. All the Klingons, Storm Troopers, fairies, and so on were now in normal dress with only scattered parts of their costumes evident as, one by one, they returned to real life.

Dragon*Con was over.

Just like Ash had promised him a year ago when he told him to come to Atlanta, it had been a remarkable weekend that would stay with him forever.

"You knew Pandora would be here when you told me to come, didn't you?" he asked the Atlantean.

Ash shrugged. "There's always room for error, but yeah. I did."

"You're a scary SOB."

Ash laughed.

Dante felt Pandora's presence behind him.

Turning, he saw her and Simi coming over to them.

Simi was beaming as she carried a wide collection of bags. "I got my last bit of shopping done," she announced proudly. "You should be glad, Dante, your panther-woman don't buy much."

"You know you could have spent whatever you wanted," he said to Pandora.

“I know, but all I wanted was this.”

He frowned as she handed him a small wooden box. “What is it?”

“Open it and see. I bought it just for you.”

Dante opened it to find what appeared to be a bell-shaped necklace. “I don’t get it,” he said.

Pandora took the necklace out and placed it around his neck. “This is just in case you ever again have to fight someone else. Next time, I’ll know which panther you are and I won’t accidentally cut your head off. I plan on living a long, long life with you, Mr. Pontis. And no one, not even you, is going to stop me.”

-end-

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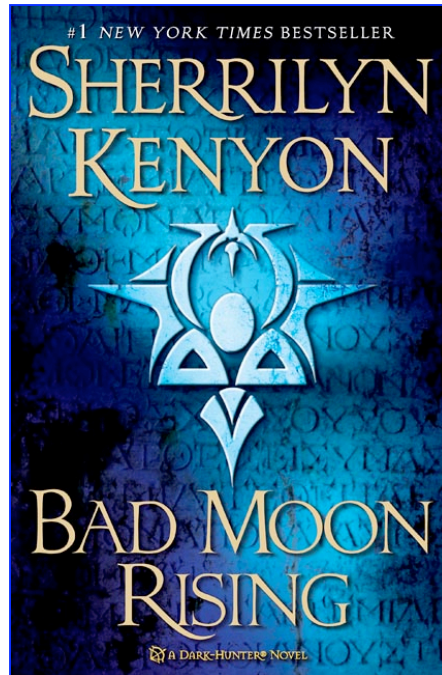
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