

The book cover features a composite image. On the left, a shirtless man with light skin and short hair looks upwards and to the right. On the right, another shirtless man with dark skin and short hair looks directly at the viewer. In the lower right, a tiger's face is superimposed over the background. The title 'SAVAGE AWAKENINGS' is centered over the image, with 'SAVAGE' in white script and 'AWAKENINGS' in red serif.

SAVAGE
AWAKENINGS

The Lost Shifters Series Book 3

STEPHANI HECHT

An outcast among his own kind, Rat has always withdrawn from others and lived life by his own rules. Rejected and shunned so many times, he's resigned to the fact that he'll always be alone and almost convinces himself that he's happier that way. That all changes in one instant when he receives a call from a lost shifter named Keegan. Scared and on the run from Ravens, Keegan is in hiding and Rat knows if he doesn't go rescue the man, he'll be dead within hours.

What Rat doesn't expect though is to fall instantly in lust with the lost shifter as soon as they finally meet. That's the last thing either one of them needs or wants though. Not only is Keegan still adjusting to the fact he's a shifter, but there's also the fact he's the feline leader's younger brother. Which means the man is off limits. But as they face more danger and get closer, Rat knows he's powerless to fight his growing attraction to Keegan. Will Rat finally be able to let go of his past to embrace a future with his new lover, or will he forever be destined to live life alone?

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SAVAGE AWAKENINGS
LOST SHIFTER SERIES BOOK THREE

BY

STEPHANIE HECHT

DEDICATION

To Cody. Thanks for all you do for me.

CHAPTER ONE

Rat vowed to himself that he wouldn't tap out. No matter how much his arm screamed in agony thanks to the piece of shit puma shifter who had him in a classic wrestling pin. His other hand was pressed onto Rat's head, his fingers biting into the scalp hard enough to leave bruises. Rat tried to push up, just enough to get some air that didn't reek of vinyl, rubber, gym shoes and week-old sweat. That only made the Puma grunt as he smashed Rat's head down harder. He seemed to take sadistic pleasure in making Rat eat the faded blue mat in the training room.

Even though Rat was built, this guy still had fifty pounds on him and he wasn't shy about using it. He gave Rat's arm another vicious twist. It hurt like a mother fucker, but Rat held back the cry of agony. The Puma still must have sensed his pain though because he gave a mocking laugh even as his sweat dripped onto the back of Rat's neck.

"Gross, I've always heard you were a slob,

Antonio, but this is fucked up.”

That comment earned him another arm wrenching, this one so vicious Rat heard the bone pop. He held his breath waiting for the telltale snap that would let him know it had broke, but it never came. Looked like Antonio wasn't willing to take things that far. Public humiliation was one thing, actually breaking the limb of the feline leader's favorite computer tech was another. That still didn't mean that Antonio couldn't hurt him, though, and he was doing a damn good job of it. Rat, bit the inside of his cheek to hold back a yell as he tried to breathe through the pain.

No, Rat wouldn't give and cry *uncle* not even if his arm was ripped off and shoved down his throat.

“Come on, Rat, just give it up,” the over two hundred pounds of idiot on top of him urged.

Not going to happen. He'd die first.

“Antonio, I've told you a million times, I'm not going to fuck you no matter how many times you beg me *just to give it up*. By the way, that's a pretty lame pickup line, even for someone as desperate as you,” Rat goaded, knowing his mouth was the best weapon against this dumb-as-shit meat-head.

True to his norm, ol' Tony had to pause, while his pea sized brain worked out Rat's comment. “That's not what I meant,” he finally said, his voice uneasy and unsure.

Even though his arm felt like it was being torn in two, Rat rolled his eyes. God, this asshole took dumb to a whole new level. Rat raised his head enough to glance around the training room only to find they now had an audience. Several dozen feline shifters and a few Hawks were all standing around, watching the pathetic Cheetah getting his ass handed to him.

It may have been amusing had he not been said *Cheetah*.

"Besides, drooling all over me is not the way into my pants. I like dirty sex, not messy sex. Believe me when I say there's a big difference."

Rat realized that may have been one too many snarky comments when Antonio increased the pressure on the back of his head. He sucked in a breath as the mat ripped at the various piercings on his face. Soon the tangy, coppery scent of his own blood, slammed into his nostrils.

"Why are you even in here with the real soldiers?" Antonio sneered. "The last thing we need is to be wasting our time on a loser who can't hold his shift. Shit, you even look like a pansy freak. That whole Goth look may make the girls wet with appreciation, but to everyone else it just shows what a nancy you are. Go back to your little office and those stupid computers you like to pretend are important."

That comment stung even more than the beat

down, but Rat would stop breathing before he let it show. Instead, he allowed his body to go slack, like he was accepting defeat. As soon as he heard Antonio's triumphant chuckle, he knew he had him. The jerk let go of Rat's head...actually let go like some idiot, which gave Rat the out he'd been waiting for. Snapping his head back, Rat connected with the man's nose.

Even though the move made his arm hurt even more, as soon as he heard the Puma's howl of pain Rat knew it'd been worth it. If Antonio had been human the blow would have broken his nose, instead it just caused him a whole bunch of hurt. His grip let up enough for Rat to send his elbow back in a quick, hard jab.

This time something did break. A rib judging by the sounds of it. Rat followed it up with another head butt, surprised when he connected again since he didn't think Antonio would fall for the same trick twice.

Yep, definitely one of the dumber assholes around.

As soon as Antonio rolled off him, Rat sprang to his feet and looked down at his opponent. Even though his upbringing had taught him to always kick prey when he had it down, Rat didn't. Instead, he cocked his head to the side as he watched Antonio writhe around in pain.

"Looks like I win," he said in a cool voice.

"This doesn't prove anything you stupid freak,"

Antonio snarled. He cupped his hands to his nose, blood soon trickled between the cracks of his fingers.

Rat refused to let that remark hurt. He knew he was different. Not only did he not have any control of his animal form, but he'd taken great strides to make his human side unique too. While most of the shifters serving under Mitchell, wore their hair military length and dressed the part of soldiers, Rat refused to go along. He'd dyed his brown hair a dark black with blue highlights streaked through the spiked front. Add in his numerous piercings, the kohl around his eyes and his black nail polish and Rat was as far from regulation as one could get.

He even dressed differently. Refusing to wear the normal uniform of black fatigues, he modified his with baggy pants, chains and graphic, violent T-shirts. Sure, he wore boots, but his had heavy silver buckles running up the side and were most certainly not military issue.

"Well this freak just handed you your ass." Rat curled the corner of his lip up in aggression as he turned to leave.

The crowd was still there and he elbowed his way through. They'd wanted a show and they'd got one. Usually he'd shoot off a smartass comment, try to humor his way past the awkward situation. Today though he didn't feel up to it.

What he wanted was to get rip-roaring drunk and go lick his wounds.

He heaved a sigh, wincing as he rotated his arm. His own comforts would have to wait, because he did have a job to do. Even if it was one suited for a pansy ass.

The computer room was all the way across headquarters and Rat beat a fast path to it, not in the mood for small talk. Once an old factory that had been abandoned for years when the automakers had pulled out of Flint, Michigan, the felines had converted it into a state-of-the-art military operation.

The inside had been gutted and replaced with offices and enough high-tech gadgets to rival any human operation. Ironical since most of the money to run the place came from the human government. After years of hunting down and killing shifters, the politicians had realized just how valuable Rat's kind could be in certain situations. Shifters could move faster, think faster and most importantly—kill faster. All things they were now paid a crap-load for.

Since it was just after noon, the place was crowded, but he managed to avoid being social by keeping his head down. Once he reached the small room that served as his office, Rat locked the door behind him and let out a groan as he replayed the past hour in his head.

So not how he wanted his Monday to start. He shook it off though. He'd never been one to sit around and brood about his situation and damned if he was going to start now. What he needed to do was get back to work. That always helped him forget, if only for a few hours.

Sitting down in his beat-up office chair, he fired up one of the many computers then swiped his finger over the scanner before typing in his password. His office had once been neat, but now it'd taken on a cluttered look, thanks to all the extra hours he'd been putting in. Empty soda cans fought for space against crumpled chip bags and half-eaten candy bars. There was a couch on one side of the room, a blanket balled up on it, since he'd been sleeping there most nights.

God, speaking of slobs, he'd become one lately, that's for sure. At this rate, he'd end up on that TV show *Hoarders*. He'd have to clean up—later. First, he had to do this for Mitchell. Turning his attention to the computer, Rat got back to work. It took him just a few clicks to take him to the job that had been plaguing him for over two months.

The list.

Ever since it'd come into his possession, Rat had been living and breathing the damn thing. It contained the names and possible locations of two hundred and fifty three feline shifters who'd been taken over twenty years ago. Feline shifters that

needed tracking down and brought in before the Ravens found them first. That was the last thing any of them needed. While the Felines were on a find and rescue mission, the Ravens were on a seek and destroy.

Each day, each hour that passed meant that one of the felines on the list could be in mortal danger.

The worst part though, was the list was so much more than just a pile of names. It was the last hope for so many. The shifters had only been kids when they'd been ripped away from their homes. All of them had families who had never forgotten them. Loved ones who prayed for their safe return.

Currently the feline leader, Mitchell was off following up a lead on one of the missing. His family had been hit hard, losing four brothers. While they'd recently found one of them, three were still out there, Keegan, Andy and Joel.

Rat owed Mitchell, big time. When other coalition leaders had refused to take Rat in because of his defect, Mitchell had welcomed him without question. It had been the first act of kindness anyone had shown Rat in years and he felt a deep loyalty to the jaguar shifter. One that Rat would gladly give his life for.

Turning his full attention back to the list, Rat cursed softly under his breath. So many names. To make things worse, the locations that were listed

next to them were over twenty years old. Sure they were a start, but a lot of things could happen over two decades. People move, names change, all kinds of crap that made Rat's job harder.

His gaze honed in on one name in particular, Keegan. Of all of Mitchell's missing brothers, he was the closest to being found. Closest meaning they had his location narrowed down to two possibilities. Even now, they had teams out looking for the kid. Rat just hoped they found him before the Ravens did. Because if not, then the guy would be dead before he even knew what hit him.

* * * *

Someone was following him.

Keegan hitched his backpack higher on his shoulder as he cast a casual glance around the darkened street that ran in front of his apartment. Nothing seemed out of the norm. There were a smattering of people rushing to get inside out of the cool air. The silent buildings that made up the neighborhood looked as boring as always. All things he passed by every day. It should have soothed his nerves.

It didn't.

If anything, the hinky vibe grew stronger. His mind went on overload and started to quick fire details, as he searched for anything that could be

responsible for setting his nerves on edge. All he found were more dull details. A man to the left had on a blue striped shirt, the tag was sticking up in the back. A girl had on the same skirt that Jessica Simpson wore in Star Magazine. It'd been on page thirty-two of the September 15 issue, fourth picture down. Mrs. Kilson had left her door ajar again, this was the fourth time this week. She had three daughters, Jamie, Kelly and Megs, who was married to a *no good banker who was probably stealing money from his investors*.

"Stop it. Focus," he hissed under his breath. It was useless though. Born with an eidetic memory, he could no more shut off that part of his brain than he could stop breathing. All his life, he'd always been able to pick up little details, recall things with perfect clarity. Some called it a great gift. Now that it was interfering with his safety, he'd call it a curse.

What he needed to do was get his ass back to his apartment, where he could lock the door and hide under the covers of his bed. Not exactly the manliest of plans, but then again he'd be willing to lose a few macho points right now.

He breathed a sigh of relief when his door came into view. Just a few more steps and he could be inside, warm and safe. Hell, he'd probably even laugh about how skittish he'd been. He heaved his backpack up again, as he rushed forward.

A figure darted from the shadows and blocked his path. Keegan skidded to a halt right before he ran into the man. Well man was really understating things. The guy in front of him was a mountain. Dressed head to boot in black leather, from a long duster coat, to thick ass kickers, his pale face was partially obstructed by his long, thin dark hair. Even his eyes were black and they seemed to be glittering with menace. Keegan gulped as he flashed what he knew to be a nervous smile.

"Sorry, excuse me." He tried to step around the stranger, but the man darted to the side and blocked his path. Fear gave way to panic as Keegan caught the glimpse of a gun tucked under the man's coat.

"Where are you going, kitten?" the stranger asked, his thin lips curling up into a sneer.

Kitten? He'd been called all kinds of things in his life, honey bunny, pookie bear, puppy...hell, even chicken by one of his older lovers. He'd never been called kitten before.

"I'm sorry, you must have me confused for someone else." He took a step back, still staring wearily at the gun. Just his luck, too, the street had cleared of pedestrians, so Keegan now had to face this danger on his own. Even the Jessica Simpson wannabe had rabbited.

"I know exactly who you are, Keegan," the man

drew out his name slowly. He moved forward so quick that by the time Keegan knew danger was a'coming, the man had a hand around his throat.

Keegan tried to call out for help, but all that got out was a rattling noise, as all his air supply was cut off. He clawed with his hands, trying to get away, but he may as well have been tickling the guy for all his efforts. Finally, out of desperation, Keegan swung his backpack around, aiming for his attacker's head.

It worked. Thanks to the heavy law books he'd always been forced to lug around, it proved to be a damn good weapon. The man dropped him and Keegan fell to the ground. He immediately sprang to his feet and started to run back in the direction of the apartment.

He made it three steps before another assailant came out of nowhere and blocked his path. This one looked exactly like the first guy, right down to his bad emo haircut and leather fetish. Keegan whimpered softly as he changed direction, going to the right. A third guy came out and stopped his escape.

"Fuck," Keegan yelled as he backed up to the only escape path left him. When he connected with something solid his stomach clenched. Even without turning he knew it was another bad guy.

"Such language, kitten," the first one chastised as he rotated his arm. Keegan hoped it hurt like a

son-of-a-bitch.

"Stop calling me that," Keegan snapped, as the fear inside him was pushed aside by anger. Why something like that bothered him now of all times, didn't make sense, but then again neither did any of this.

"But that's what you are," another of the emo jerks chimed in. "A cute, little kitten that's just waiting to be stomped on."

Keegan curled his lip in disgust. *Kitten stomping, that's a new low.* Where in the hell were PETA and their red paint when he needed them?

The four attackers moved in closer, boxing him in. Keegan turned around in a slow circle, trying to find an opening to run through. His heart seized in horror when he realized there wasn't any.

"I have a little bit of money in my pocket. Just take it and go." Even as he made the offer, Keegan knew how futile it was. For some reason this group wanted something else. He also knew he wasn't going to like what that something was.

"We don't want your fucking cash, debit card or whatever else you got tucked away in your wallet," Number One snarled, confirming Keegan's suspicions. "We want you."

That made Keegan desperate enough to make a break for freedom. Running at Number Two because he was three inches shorter than the

others, Keegan tried to barrel his way through. It didn't come as much of a surprise when he didn't make it far. The attacker wrapped his arms around Keegan's waist and threw him down on the ground.

Keegan let out a grunt that was equal part shock and pain. The hard cement didn't give any as his spine slammed into it. He stared up, horrified and trapped, unable to defend himself as he saw the attacker bring his hand back. Something silver flashed in moonlight.

Knife!

Keegan closed his eyes, not wanting to see his own death. At the same moment, a loud animalistic snarl ripped through the air. He held back a cry of fear. If he was going to bite it, he'd be damned if he'd go out sobbing like some loser.

There was a brush of air as something jumped over his head, seconds before the heavy weight of his attacker left him. Keegan finally opened his eyes and nearly pissed when he saw what had saved him.

A tiger. A real, living breathing tiger. Here on the streets of Seattle. Keegan blinked several times to clear away what had to be a hallucination. Nope, the cat was still there. Huge, with bright orange fur and thick black stripes, it gazed back at him with an eerily intelligent expression.

It had its enormous paws on the chest of the

attacker, effectively pinning the man down. If Keegan didn't know better, he would have sworn the tiger smiled at him before it leaned down and sank its teeth into the man's throat.

Well, that took care of one of the bad guys, but that still left three. Keegan sprang to his feet, balling his fists up in anticipation of a fight. Since the tiger seemed willing to take on these dicks, it was only fitting that Keegan go down swinging too.

"Oh, little kitten, has some spunk," Number one laughed. "I like it better that way. It makes breaking them so much more fun."

Keegan didn't know what was worse, having to listen to this idiot's B-movie lines or hearing the screams from behind as the tiger chewed its way through Number Two.

"Hey, puddy tat, look what I can do." Number One gave one last skeevy grin before his body started to contort and pulsate. It wasn't any kind of normal movement that Keegan had ever witnessed, it was freakier, unreal and just plain gross. It only lasted a few seconds and then instead of a man, a huge black bird stood there.

Keegan let out a yell as his body grew numb with shock and fear. What in the fuck just happened? He slowly shook his head, refusing to believe what had obviously just occurred right before his eyes. No, he must be dreaming. Any

second now he'd wake up, safe and sound in his lumpy bed, with just his roommate's snores for company.

The tiger trotted up, acting more like a pet now than a wild, murderous beast. It even let out a loud purr, adding another are-you-fucking-kidding-me aspect to the past few minutes. Just as it reached Keegan's side, a bright light shimmered over it. Keegan blinked against the intensity of it, but seemed powerless to look away. Knowing his luck, a little winged pixie would be in its place and he didn't want to miss that.

Once it faded, though, Keegan saw the tiger had disappeared and a man stood there instead. Taller than even the attackers, he had white blond hair and the bluest eyes Keegan had ever seen. He also had the largest set of muscles too. Like the others, the man was dressed in black, but his pants were fatigues and looked almost like a military uniform. He gave Keegan a nod that probably was meant to be reassuring, but just made him look more like the *Terminator*. Especially when he pulled a gun from a holster strapped to his side and aimed it at the bird. Even though the weapon wasn't pointed at him, Keegan jumped to the side, his heart pounding so hard it actually hurt.

"Just a dream. Just a dream," he kept repeating in a strangled voice. His breaths were coming out ragged, the air burning his lungs.

"You touch him and I'll fucking kill you," the tiger-man yelled at the bird.

The other emo assailants all transformed into birds. Keegan let out a hysterical laugh as he said, "Of course, more birds. Sure, what else did I expect? I'm sure that pixie will be coming along any minute too."

The tiger-man turned to look at him. Judging by the expression on his face, he didn't think Keegan was too bright. Tiger jerked his head, "We need to make a run for it."

Keegan hesitated, torn between what to do. Make a run for it on his own and risk having the emo dudes kill him or go with the tiger and risk being kitty kibble. In the end it was an easy decision. Besides, his aunt had once told him he was a cat person.

"Okay." Keegan nodded to the tiger right before they started to run.

CHAPTER TWO

Even though night had fallen and most of the other shifters had left headquarters, Rat continued to work in his office. That had been the norm lately. Not that he was complaining since he enjoyed the quiet once everyone was gone.

He took a long sip of coffee, hardly tasting it as he continued to work leads on the list. At the same time, he monitored the numerous security cameras that Mitchell had installed.

While some would have thought the extra security was overboard, Rat more than understood his leader's paranoia. For months now they'd been dealing with a leak. It'd started small, a few missions they'd done for the human government had gone bad, shifters were hurt, a few even killed. For the longest time they'd just assumed it was some human who'd sold them out. Then when missions that only the shifters knew about started to go F.U.B.A.R. they had to face

their worst fear.

One of their own was betraying them.

Rat sighed as he looked over the monitors. All the screens held the same thing—nothing. It was just another boring night.

“Hello,” Rat said as he leaned closer to one of the monitors. A Hawk shifter had picked that moment to reenact the zombie dance from *Thriller*. This just went to show that sometimes the gods were good enough to give even a POS like Rat a gift. Grinning, he sat back to enjoy the performance. Since the Hawk had chosen the empty cafeteria for his impromptu performance, he no doubt thought he didn’t have any witnesses to his bad dance skills. And day’am they were bad. Rat grimaced as he slowly shook his head in disbelief. The guy really had no rhythm. He almost felt sorry for the idiot.

“How quickly they forget all about the surveillance.” Rat smiled as he made sure the camera was recording everything. Even though the Hawk had seemed to be a halfway decent guy the few times they’d talked, didn’t mean Rat wasn’t going to download the video and forward it to everyone he knew.

The main line started to ring and Rat gave the screen one last grin before he reached out to snag the phone. As he glanced down at the call ID, he frowned. What in the hell would his mother be

calling him for? The last time they talked had been when his parents had kicked his ass to the curb with yesterday's trash.

For a second, he debated not answering the damn thing. It's not like he owed her shit, but then the small part that still loved her refused to allow him to ignore her. With a heavy sigh, he flipped it open.

"Yes?" he said, curtly. If she'd been expecting a *hello* or *Mommy, you called!* then she'd lost her mind over the past few years.

"Rat," her answer was just as clipped.

The fact that she still refused to use the name she'd given him at birth twisted like a blade in his gut, but he told himself to get over it. It's not like he'd expected any different from her. "How'd you get this number?" He sure as hell hadn't given it to her.

"Mitchell gave it to me when he called me this afternoon."

Now that did shock Rat. Sitting up straighter, he asked, "Why would he call you?"

"He heard the news and thought you should know. He also decided I should be the one who told you," she replied simply, as if that should explain everything.

The problem was it didn't, if anything, it just made him more confused. "What news?" His heart skipped with dread as he suddenly realized

what it could be. There was no way the asshole would be letting her call the *disgrace in the family* unless he wasn't there to stop her anymore. "Oh, fuck," Rat breathed.

"Watch your language," she chastised.

"Sorry," his response came automatically, thanks to a childhood under her iron hard discipline. "How'd Dad die?" Since they were stronger and immune to human diseases, shifters tended to live hundreds of years, so his father should still be kicking and as mean as ever.

"You'll never believe it, some man shot him for sleeping with his wife," she hissed, sounding more outraged than sad.

Actually, Rat could believe it. Even as a kid he'd known his old man slept around. More than once he'd been his father's cover story. He couldn't remember how many zoo trips had ended up with him waiting in the car while Dad *visited with an old friend*.

"That must be causing a bit of a scandal," Rat observed dryly, knowing that's what she really cared about. His mother came from old money and in the Shifter society, that went back even further than the human world. So that made their snobbery that much bigger, too.

Of course, once upon a time Rat had fit right in with them so who was he to judge? Cue internal sarcasm.

"You should have seen it at the funeral. Everyone was staring as they talked about me behind my back," she huffed.

Rat stilled, his gut doing one slow flip. "You already had the funeral?"

"Yes, that was over a week ago," she replied breezily, obviously deciding that was old news already.

At that moment, Rat hated himself, despised his weaknesses. If he could, he'd go back to the training room and throw his own ass down on the mat. How could he have been such a fucking idiot? Yet again, he'd allowed something one of his parents did to get to him. His father's sneer echoed in Rat's mind, *Weak, useless and stupid. Looks like we got the trifecta of what a bad son can be.*

Rat didn't even bother asking why he hadn't been told about the funeral because he knew. God it hurt, but yeah, he was well aware of why he hadn't been welcome.

Because while his father's infidelity was an embarrassment, it still didn't hold a candle to the shame she felt over having a defective child.

"I hope you understand why I couldn't have you there," she rushed out. "Besides all your old friends would have just snubbed you. I didn't want to see you go through that."

"Your concern is touching."

"Rat—"

"Seriously, Ma. It's bringing a fucking tear to my eye," he kept his voice flat, vowing not to show one iota of emotion.

"You and your mouth. That's from hanging out with those soldiers. They've corrupted you."

"Actually it's usually the other way around."

"Look, I have to go. I just thought you should know about your father."

"No, you didn't. Mitchell was the one who thought I should be brought up to speed," Rat pointed out. "You would have been happy never to speak to me again." He wondered how Mitchell had even convinced her to make this call in the first place. Although, he'd learned from firsthand experience how persuasive the leader could be.

"That's not true. I love you," she argued softly.

"No, you love who I used to be. The preppy, good boy who was the perfect son. You hate the defective loser you got." Not waiting for her response or false denials, he flipped the phone shut and tossed it across his desk. Rubbing his face with his hands, he let out another curse that his mom wouldn't approve of.

His dad—dead. For so many years, Rat had hated the bastard. Even before he'd been kicked out, he'd seen the business end of his dad's fists way too many times for him to ever feel any tenderness toward the man.

So he should feel happy now. Even get up and

do the Snoopy Dance. Instead, he felt a big fat emptiness. Did that mean he was as cold and callous as his dad? Crap, he'd rather be dead himself than become a junior version of his father.

His phone started to ring again, making Rat jump in surprise. Muttering yet another curse, he had to dig around the trash on his desk for several minutes before he found it. It was the backup line of Seth, a tiger shifter who'd called in a few hours ago to report he'd found Keegan. Flipping it open, Rat said, "This had better good. I was busy."

Sure, that may be a lie, but knowing Seth, he'd see right through it. He'd make sure to ride Rat about it, too. Not that he minded, Seth was another one of the very few that Rat would call a friend and frankly Rat could use a good old-fashioned bullshit session to take his mind off his troubles.

"Hello?" a voice said from the other end.

Rat sat up straighter. He'd recognize Seth's cocky tone anywhere and this was definitely not it. "Who is this?" he demanded as he held the phone tighter.

"I hope I didn't do anything wrong," the caller continued, ignoring the question. "It's just Seth hasn't come back and he told me to use this number if I thought anything was wrong."

"Who. Is. This?" Rat repeated, dragging each word out for emphasis.

"I'm sure Seth has me confused with someone else. There's no way I can be what he thinks I am. I don't even like milk or tuna and catnip does nothing for me. One time I smoked some weed, but that was the closest I ever got and it made me sick," the voice was rambling now.

Rat noted how young the caller sounded and his stomach clenched as he realized just who it was and what'd happened. "Keegan?" he tried.

"Yeah, how'd you know?" Keegan seemed out of breath, but that probably had to do with the fact that he'd been talking so fast. "Who are you?"

"Rat. I serve under your brothers."

"I don't have any brothers. I was a single child," the exasperated way Keegan said that let Rat know he'd probably had the same argument with Seth already.

"Yes, you do have siblings, but we won't get into that now. I need you to relax and tell me what happened."

"Some guys that looked like they were from an emo rock group attacked me. Seth helped me escape and we took cover at a hotel. This morning Seth left to get food and he never came back."

Rat's stomach flipped as he looked outside at the dark sky. If what Keegan claimed was true, then it meant Seth had been missing for hours already. Rat had no doubt that they'd be coming for Keegan next. Which meant he had to get the

kid help and fast. "Where are you?" Rat asked.

"Seattle, Washington," Keegan recited the address and name of the hotel.

"Stay put and don't answer the door for anyone. Do you understand?" Rat ordered as he got up and started to stuff supplies into his duffle bag.

"How about to go to the vending machine? I'm kind of hungry?" Keegan's tone had a lost, scared edge to it.

Normally Rat would have seen it as whining, but for some reason now, it made him want to reach through the phone and embrace the guy. "I'll be there in a few hours. When I do, I'll make sure to get you something to eat. Until then, I want you to stay put."

"You're coming for me?" Keegan asked hopefully.

Rat looked down at his half-filled duffle, shocked to realize he'd been packing for a mission. A mission he had no right to go on. What was he doing? If Mitchell found out, he'd flip. What Rat should do is find someone who was cleared for duty to go on the rescue. Then he thought about the leak and realized he didn't know who he could trust anymore.

If Mitchell or someone from his family had been there, Rat would have gladly passed on the information. But they were all off searching for the

other lost shifters. That left Rat with only himself. He didn't dare let anyone else know where Keegan was.

"Yeah, I'm coming. You'll know it's me because I'll scratch on the door three times before I knock. Unless you hear that, I don't want you opening the door for anyone. Understand?"

"But what if —"

Rat cut him off, "Not anyone but me. I'm serious about this."

"Seth said they'd find me wherever I was. They're going to come back and I can't fight them alone."

"No they won't and you want to know why?"

"Why?" Keegan sounded broken.

Rat knew the guy didn't have much gas left. Shock was starting to settle in and then there was no telling what Keegan might do. Fear crept up Rat's back at the thought of Keegan going off half-cocked and making a break for it on his own. "Because I'm going to get to you first. I won't let them hurt you, I promise." As soon as Rat made that vow, panic set in. How was he, some loser who couldn't even hold his goddamn shift, going to help anyone?

Rat pushed it back because he knew he didn't have a choice. As soon as he'd heard Keegan's voice, asking for help, Rat knew that nothing could stop him from going to his aid.

* * * *

After he'd hung up, Keegan continued to clutch the phone, almost as if that could keep him safe until Rat arrived. He glanced at the door, debating not for the first time, whether or not he should just leave and go home. Not to the apartment, but rather to the large house he'd grown up in.

Again, he immediately dismissed that option. Not only had Seth told him the Ravens, as he'd called the bird-men, would follow him no matter where he went, but Keegan hadn't been able to stomach being at that place since his adoptive parents died.

He debated going to one of his few friends and asking them for help, but he dismissed that, too. The cops were out of the question as well. The last thing he was going to do was go to the police and tell them that a glowing tiger had saved him from several six-foot bird-men. That would earn him a one-way trip to the mental ward.

Been there, done that and he didn't want to repeat it.

So he'd have to sit like some helpless nancy, waiting for Rat.

Keegan went over to a pile of photographs that Seth had given him. While the tiger had brought them in order to show Keegan what his real family

looked like, there'd been one with Rat in it, too. Even though he could recall every detail perfectly, he still wanted to see the picture again. Almost as if seeing it with his external eyes made it more real.

He found it halfway down the stack. One of his brothers, Jacyn, was in some room that had several computers and monitors in it. Keegan glossed over the image of his brother and fixated on Rat.

Rat leaned back in his office chair, a knowing smirk on his full lips, like he was privy to some joke that nobody else got. His raven hair was spiky in the front and long on the sides so it swept around his jaw. Keegan squinted and noticed there were a few blue highlight streaks visible, too.

Everything about Rat seemed to project a great big *fuck you*. From the eyebrow and nose piercings to the ear plugs. He even had his middle fingers extended at the camera. While he wore the same uniform that Seth had, Rat had obviously added his own personal touches. There were chains on the pants and his black t-shirt had the image of some grunge band on it. While Keegan had never been attracted to the whole Goth look, on Rat it looked damn good. Keegan traced the image with his finger, going along the outline of Rat's body. Even though it was just a picture, he could tell the man had a great build.

Keegan groaned as his cock came to life, growing hard at the thought of Rat and how nice it'd feel to touch the man in person. Great, just what he needed to add to his troubles, him getting a boner for some guy he'd never met before. He started to toss the picture to the side, but was dismayed to find himself unable to let go of the connection to Rat. Hell, he still had the phone in his other hand, like he was some toddler clinging to his *woobey*.

With a grunt of self-disgust, Keegan sat back down on the bed and closed his eyes. That didn't help much though, thanks to his memory, he could still *see* every detail of that damn picture.

Keegan clutched the photo to his chest and said a silent prayer that Rat would get there soon. Not only was he terrified that the Ravens would find him, but Keegan wanted to see if Rat looked just as good in person.

* * * *

As soon as the plane landed, Rat rented a car, then started the short drive to the hotel. Along the way, he called Mitchell and let him know the situation. Just as expected, the leader was less than pleased.

"You mean to tell me that you waited this long to let me know that not only is my brother in danger, but one of my shifters is lost in action?"

Mitchell demanded harshly.

"Yes, until we know who's slipping information to the Ravens, I'm not saying jack inside headquarters," Rat replied unapologetically.

"So instead you go off on your own, without backup?" The question had just enough bite in it to let Rat know how pissed Mitchell was. "How'd you even get there so fast?"

"I had a Hawk fly me here in one of their planes." Rat brought a hand to his stomach. Just mentioning the flight made him feel sick all over again. To say that felines didn't like to be airborne would be an understatement.

"You are not flying Keegan back home. The last thing we need is for the Ravens to attack the plane while you two are in it."

"I agree which is why I already sent the Hawk back. He promised to grab some of his buddies and start a recon to see if they can pick up a lead on Seth. Meanwhile, I'll make sure Keegan gets home in one piece."

A long, awkward silence followed and Rat clutched the phone tight, knowing the doubts that must be swirling around Mitchell's head. Finally unable to stand it any longer, Rat blurted, "Look, I know I wouldn't be your first choice, but I'm all you've got right now. I may not be able to hold my shift, but I do know how to stay under the radar

long enough to get Keegan back home where he belongs. I won't fuck this up."

"Fine, just get him back as fast as possible. I'll send a team to meet you halfway," Mitchell said.

His voice was neutral so Rat wasn't sure if his leader was pissed or just resigned to the fact that his only choice was the freak who couldn't hold his shift. "With all due respect, sir, I don't think that would be a good idea," Rat ventured. With anyone else, he would have felt free to speak his mind and tell them to fuck it if they didn't like it. Things were different with Mitchell though, because Rat actually respected the Jaguar.

"Why not?" Mitchell asked.

"I don't think it was an accident that the Ravens found Keegan the same time we did. I think someone from inside tipped them off."

Mitchell cursed under his breath. "I hate to say it, but you're right. Especially since we have the list and the Ravens don't. They're shooting in the dark still, so there is no way in hell they should have known where Keegan was. How do you plan on getting him home?"

"I rented a car, using my personal credit card instead of one registered to Headquarters. I need you to let everyone think that you suspended me for insubordination. That way nobody will think anything of me being gone. I still have some contacts from before I came to the coalition. I

know they'll be willing to give me a hand and shelter us along the way." The sad thing was, Rat didn't think for one second anyone would doubt the cover story. His mouth had gotten him in trouble more times than not.

"Okay," Mitchell agreed, but he didn't sound totally convinced.

"Trust me," Rat implored, hating that the approval of his leader meant so much. Damn, it had been easier when it'd just been him against the world.

"I always have," Mitchell replied quickly.

Rat closed his eyes briefly. *If only that were true.* "Look, I'm pulling up to the hotel now. I'll call you once I know we're in a safe location. Will you be able to fly in a team to help the Hawks search for Seth?" Even though Rat knew there was no way in hell Mitchell would ever leave one of their own behind, he still needed to hear the reassurance. Seth was one of the few good guys Rat knew and it burned him to know that the Ravens had the Tiger and were doing God knows what to him.

"You know we never leave one of our own behind. Especially, someone who risked themselves to bring one of the lost shifters back."

Those words did a lot to soothe Rat. "Thanks, Mitchell. For everything."

"Same to you. Despite what you think, I could

never run things without you. So hurry up and get back before everything goes to shit."

Rat laughed. "Yes, sir." He disconnected the call, then pulled into a spot. The hotel was mid-range. Not too fancy, but not one of the pay-by-the-hour joints either. As Rat got out, he scanned the sky, looking for any signs of Ravens. It was early, so the sun was bright and he had to squint against the glare. He was relieved when he didn't see anything out of the norm.

It didn't take him long to find the room number Keegan had given him. As he promised, Rat scratched on the door three times, then knocked. While he waited for Keegan to answer, Rat gave himself an inner pep talk. *This will be a breeze. Just grab the kid, then get him back safe and unharmed. After that, maybe part of your debt to Mitchell will be repaid.*

There was a shuffle of movement on the other side, but the door didn't open.

"Rat, is that you?" Keegan called.

"Yeah, it's me. Let me in. It's safe." The door slowly swung open and as soon as Rat saw Keegan, he realized his mission was going to be a whole lot harder than he'd ever imagined.

CHAPTER THREE

Rat found himself at a complete loss for words for the first time in his life as he gazed at the young shifter in front of him. Keegan wasn't just good looking, he was fucking gorgeous. From his full, sensual lips to the soft curve of his cheekbones. Sure the guy looked a lot like his jaguar brothers with medium brown hair that had darker spots speckled throughout it, but he also had his own unique quality that instantly made desire shoot up Rat's spine.

Although he stood a few inches shorter than Rat, it was obvious Keegan had a nice set of muscles despite the baggy, navy blue sweatshirt he had on. The sleeves of the shirt hung down to the middle of his palms and had a hole in the wristbands for him to hook his thumbs through.

His faded jeans looked about two sizes too big and he finished his casual look with a pair of battered, black Converse high-tops. His bottom lip

was red like he'd been chewing on it and his amber eyes searched Rat's face hopefully.

All that made Rat again painfully aware of how attractive Keegan was, but it was something else that drew him in. It was the clear innocence on the younger man's face. Like he had yet to be jaded by all the crap life threw out.

"I wasn't sure if you'd really come," Keegan finally said, breaking the awkward silence.

"Of course I did, it's my job," Rat returned briskly, hoping that his arousal wasn't showing on his face. "We need to get moving before the Ravens find out Seth stashed you here."

"Okay, I gathered up his stuff." Keegan jerked his thumb at a couple of heavy duffle bags.

Rat went over to check the weapon situation. While he'd brought plenty of firepower with him, it wouldn't hurt to have extra. He frowned when he noted that the Tiger had almost been out of ammo.

Keegan must have caught on because he said, "Seth had gone to get supplies in addition to the food. He said he'd used most of it up when he fought the Ravens."

"Where's your stuff?" Rat glanced around the room, but only spotted one backpack.

Keegan blushed as he gave a slight shrug. "All I have is my books. I got attacked outside my apartment and Seth didn't think it would be safe

for me to go back to grab anything. If you just give me a ride, I could go buy some more."

"Do you have cash?" Rat hoisted the duffel bags over his shoulder, hardly noticing how heavy they were. Seth must have packed half the armory in there.

"I have my credit card." Keegan grabbed his backpack.

"No good. I don't know whether or not the Ravens are tracking your purchases. The last thing we need is to leave a trail for them."

"Do you think they could do that?" Keegan's eyes grew wide as he started to bite his bottom lip.

Rat had to resist the urge to go over there to really give him something to nibble on. *Focus, dumbass. This is a mission to save a lost shifter, not one for you to find a new fuck buddy.* "I don't know, but it's a risk I'm not willing to take." Rat had his hand on the door handle.

Keegan asked, "Could you do that? Track someone's purchases, I mean."

Rat stopped and slowly turned around.

A flush came over Keegan's face again as he stammered, "I just meant... In the picture I saw you in some computer room, so I assumed that must be part of your job or something."

"Yeah, I could do it," Rat admitted with just a tinge of cockiness. "I found you, didn't I?"

"Seth was the one who came to get me,"

Keegan hedged, clearly not wanting to insult Rat.

Oh, how cute. Not only is he a sweet, little thing, but he has manners, too. I wonder if that carries over to bed? If I fucked him, would he say please and thank you?

Rat closed his eyes as he told his inner perv to shut up. Keegan was just a kid for Christ's sake.

No, he's twenty-three. Just the right age to train.

Rat almost growled in frustration, why did that damn voice have to keep chiming in? This time he vowed that he'd ignore it no matter what. It'd gotten him in trouble plenty of times in the past, he'd be damned if he'd fuck up again.

All his good intentions vanished when Keegan came over and stood within inches of Rat. The young Jaguar smelled so good, a warm, vanilla scent that made Rat's cock stand up and pay attention.

"Seth may have been the one sent out to get you, but I was the one who figured out where you were," Rat explained between clenched teeth. God, he hadn't been this turned on in a long time. It didn't help matters that two perfectly good beds were just feet away.

"I'm glad you did. Those Ravens had me surrounded and Seth made it just in time."

The thought of Keegan being in danger made Rat's gut clench in dread. It had been so close, too, if Seth had only been one hour later... He cleared

his throat. "You ready? We need to get on the road and I can answer any questions you have then."

Keegan nodded before they locked up, then went out to the car. No sooner had Rat got the key in the ignition, then the questions started again.

"What kind of cat are you?"

Rat waited until he'd pulled out of the parking lot and was on the road before he answered, "What makes you think I'm a cat? Doesn't my nickname make you wonder at all?"

"No." Keegan shook his head as his gaze slowly traveled over Rat's body. "There is nothing rodent-like about you."

Rat sucked in a breath as he saw the unmistakable flare of desire in Keegan's eyes. He even licked his lips, like he was sizing Rat up for a meal. Rat shifted in his seat a bit, trying to ease some of the ache in his cock. This was going to be the longest road trip of his life. Gripping the wheel tight, he forced his gaze back to the road. "I'm a Cheetah," he said, his voice strained.

"Will you shift for me?"

"No, if you want a magic show, then go to Vegas," Rat snapped.

"So if you're a Cheetah does that mean you're quick?" Keegan's lips turned up into a mischievous grin.

"Only when it matters," Rat retorted automatically. As soon as the words slipped out,

he cringed. Now was not the time for his usual sexual innuendos.

* * * *

Keegan ducked his head to hide the fact he was blushing, yet again. He couldn't believe that he'd actually had the nerve to flirt with Rat. For all he knew the guy could take offense and slug him. Worse yet, he could tell his newly found brothers and sister that their long lost sib was gay. Keegan had already been rejected by some of his adoptive family and friends because of it, the last thing he wanted was a repeat performance. Keegan decided to divert the topic to a safer subject. "Why did my family give me up?"

"They never did. You were taken from them." Rat looked away from the road long enough to toss a confused look Keegan's way. "Didn't Seth explain everything to you?"

"He didn't get a chance."

"Did he at least tell you about the Ravens?"

"Just that they're all-round assholes who hate feline shifters. He also mentioned that they like to kill." Keegan shrugged with a casual indifference he didn't come anywhere close to having. As someone with a super memory and a genius IQ, it felt unsettling to not have all the answers for once.

"The war between us and the Ravens goes back

so far it predates recorded history. They can hold a grudge better than Paris Hilton and they're twice as mean."

Keegan chuckled at Rat's joke. It was so nice to be able to meet the guy in person, Keegan finally felt safe. Not even Seth had been able to put him at ease like this. Without being too obvious, Keegan took in a deep breath so he could drink in Rat's scent. It was earthy and rich, and just inhaling it warmed him from the inside out.

Rat looked so much better in person. The picture hadn't shown all of his attitude, or how his eyes lit up whenever he smiled. Nor had it projected how sexy Rat really was. Just watching the way his lips moved when he talked was enough to make Keegan hard.

"Have you heard a word I've said?" Rat demanded, his voice sharp with irritation.

Keegan started, realizing that Rat had been talking to him and he'd missed almost the entire conversation. Keegan's body grew numb with mortification. Great, just what he needed. To be caught ogling, like a dork. He was just one-step above a teen girl drooling over her favorite, sparkly vampire.

"Sorry, I haven't eaten anything and I have low blood sugar," Keegan bold-faced lied. Not about the not eating part, but being under the weather. He'd never been sick a day in his life. While other

kids had stayed home from school with colds and flu, Keegan had never missed one single day. Which had been just as well, his mother had never been the nurturing kind.

Rat shot him an irritated look as he pulled into a fast food place. Rather than going inside, they used the drive-thru. Once they were back on the road, and Keegan had a mouthful of burger, Rat delivered the next bombshell.

"Just so you know, shifters don't get low blood sugar," he said blandly.

Keegan nearly choked on his food. Swallowing, he gave a weak smile. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Rat echoed sarcastically. "We can't get any human diseases."

Keegan squirmed, realizing just how busted he was. "You don't say?"

"I do. You have such a sweet looking mouth, it's a shame to waste it on something like lying."

"Sorry," Keegan whispered. Even as he apologized though, a warm feeling went through him. Rat had actually complimented him. Sure, it had been in a backhanded kind of way, but Keegan would take it.

"Are you going to tell me what you were thinking when you drifted off?"

"Just how your picture didn't do you justice," Keegan confessed without going into too much detail.

"What picture?" Rat's brow creased in confusion.

"One of the things Seth managed to do before he disappeared was give me some photos of my birth family. You happened to be in one of them with Jacyn." A wave of jealousy went through Keegan as he thought about how at ease Jacyn and Rat had looked. Like they had a very close relationship. He couldn't help but wonder just how tight they were. "You were flipping off the camera in it," Keegan added, hoping to nudge Rat's memory.

"That doesn't help much. I tend to flip off just about everyone on a daily basis," Rat drawled.

Somehow Keegan didn't doubt that. Even though he'd just met Rat, he got the distinct feeling the Cheetah lived to annoy others. Keegan sighed before he went into explicit detail about the picture, down to what each of them had been wearing. He even recalled what had been on the computer monitor that had been positioned over Rat's shoulder. By the time Keegan had finished, Rat had a look of slack-jawed shock on his face.

"How in the hell did you remember all that?" Rat demanded.

"I have what some people call a photographic memory," Keegan admitted. Just what he needed to know, that even in the shifter world, he'd still be considered a freak.

"You mean an eidetic memory?" Rat cocked one pierced brow.

"Yes, that's it exactly." A pleasant thrill went through Keegan at how Rat immediately knew the proper name.

"That's kind of cool."

"If you can call being a walking party entertainer, cool." Keegan grimaced. "Usually when people find out, they look at me strangely with one breath and then the next they want me to perform like a trained dog for them."

"How about your adoptive parents?"

"They were the worst ones. Most of my childhood was wasted away as they dragged me from one place to another, showing off their little genius," Keegan snorted.

"That bad, huh?"

Keegan looked down at his half-eaten burger, suddenly not hungry anymore. Yeah, it had been really bad. So much so that it'd earned him two trips to the loony bin, but there was no way, he'd admit that to some tough, sexy guy. So Keegan went with a watered down version. "I guess not, I just would have liked to have had some time to be an actual kid is all. I guess I shouldn't be too ungrateful since they adopted me and went to the trouble of raising me. I just wish they had spent more time treating me as a kid instead of their newest toy."

"Would it help you to know that your real family has always missed you?"

"You don't have to say that just to make me feel better," Keegan protested, embarrassed that he'd dumped so much. Rat was on a mission to rescue him, not listen to him whine.

"I'm serious. Even after all these years, they still set a place for you and your two littermates at the table."

The word *littermates* still jarred Keegan even though one of the first things Seth had told him was that he was part of a litter of three. Having been an only child for so long, it was hard to wrap his mind around the fact that he had so many siblings. Part of him didn't know if he was ready for an instant family. Worse, he worried that they'd be disappointed when they finally met him. Going by Seth and Rat, most feline shifters were the strong, macho types who could take down anything that crossed them. Keegan on the other hand, couldn't fight if his life depended on it. "You never did get around to telling me how we got separated," Keegan croaked.

"A little over twenty years ago the Ravens mounted a mass attack on several feline homes. Their mission was to destroy everyone, women and children included." Rat's face took on a hard edge as he gripped the steering wheel so tight Keegan could hear his knuckles pop. "We lost a lot

of shifters that day, including your birth parents. When your house was attacked, Mitchell, Brent and Cassie were barely able to escape. For years they thought they'd lost you and your brothers."

"How did they find out we were still alive?" Keegan asked, his heart hammering. Could it really be possible that they'd never meant to give him away?

"Hawk shifters managed to rescue over two hundred and fifty children feline shifters. They flew them to safety. However, rather than giving them back to us, they wiped all the kid's memories clean, then dumped them into the human system."

"Why? It seems to me it would be easier and a lot less hassle just to give us back to our own kind." Keegan shook his head.

"The Hawks feared that if they gave the kids back to us, the Ravens would find out about it. At that time, the Hawks were allies with the Ravens, but they still feared their wrath and rightly so. A few years later, the Ravens nearly decimated the entire Hawk population."

"Why?" Horror washed over Keegan at the thought of so much bloodshed.

"Ravens don't need a reason to kill," Rat declared, viciously. "They enjoy hurting others. The good thing is the Hawks kept a list of the children's names. When your brother, Brent, took the Hawk leader as a mate, we were able to get the

one and only copy of it.”

“And I was on it,” Keegan surmised.

“Yes, you and your littermates. Your family was so happy to have proof that you were alive.” Rat smiled.

“So they really want us back?” Keegan tried hard to keep his voice casual, even though his heart was pounding. Oh, to have some place where he finally felt like he belonged.

“Are you kidding? You’re all they think about. Regardless of what you believe, you’re a feline and you should have never been taken in the first place. Once Mitchell found out you were alive, he hasn’t rested. All he thinks about is getting you and your brothers back home, where you belong.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Even though Keegan still had a slew of questions, one bugged him the most. “So Brent is mated with a Hawk. How did that happen?”

“Once we realized that we had a whole bunch of lost shifters and there was a link to the Hawks, Brent hunted Daniel down so we could get the list. They just clicked.”

Keegan stilled, a small spark of hope building in his chest. “Is Daniel a male?”

“Yeah, but it’s no big deal.” Rat shrugged. “Most felines are bisexual or gay so it’s normal. The only thing that raised eyebrows is the fact that Daniel is a Hawk. Jacyn’s mate is male, too, a black jaguar shifter named, Logan. Who is a pretty decent guy now that he doesn’t have that giant stick up his ass anymore.”

It was on the tip of Keegan’s tongue to ask Rat if he fell into the gay category. He held back though, not willing to push things that far—yet.

The hope did give way to a giddy happiness and his appetite returned. Finishing the burger in just three bites, he started in on the fries. "If I'm a Jaguar, then how come I haven't shifted yet?" he asked, between bites.

"You won't shift for another couple of years. You're still just a cub in our society." Rat flashed him a wicked grin.

"God, first with the kitten and now cub, I'm frigging twenty-three. With the way you talk, you'd think I was still in diapers," Keegan grouched, bugged more by the fact that Rat thought he was just a kid than anything else.

"Maybe not diapers, but I wouldn't mind seeing you in a bit of leather," Rat replied in a sly voice.

Desire ripped through Keegan as he thought about giving Rat exactly what he wanted. Crap, to get the Cheetah's attention, Keegan would be willing to wear a purple dinosaur costume. "Would you prefer the chaps to be assless?" Keegan countered.

Rat let out a bark of laughter. "Just when I think I get a handle on you, some smartass comment comes from your mouth and surprises me."

"I've been known to blurt out the wrong things from time to time," Keegan admitted as he took a drink of cola. He hadn't been able to sleep since the attack, so he needed a caffeine blast.

"You take after Brent that way, he's from the oldest litter. Now the way you bite your bottom lip when you're nervous, that's just like Jacyn."

"It still feels so strange that I have a sister and brothers. Not just one or two either, but a lot of them."

"That tends to happen when you have litters instead of single births," Rat drawled.

"How about you? Do you have any siblings?" Keegan regretted asking the question the instant he saw a dark look pass over Rat's face.

"I just had one littermate, a brother who died when our mother was giving birth to us. After that disaster, my parents didn't dare try for another."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pry." Keegan took another sip to hide his embarrassment at creating such an awkward situation.

"We need to get you a couple of changes of clothes. Do you have any preferences?" Rat said, switching the subject.

"No, anything will do." Keegan looked Rat's body up and down. "I don't think I'd fit into anything of yours since you're so much bigger than me. Compared to the rest of you, I'm just a scrawny dork."

Rat returned the assessing glance.

Keegan burned with lust. How could just one look make him so hot? God help him if Rat were to actually touch him. Keegan would probably

make a fool out of himself by instantly coming in his pants.

"You look plenty nice to me," Rat replied in a slow, seductive tone.

Desire shot through Keegan, making him burn in a good way. "Can I ask you one last question?"

"Go for it."

"Do you have a mate?" Keegan's heart raced as he waited for the answer. Even though he'd just met Rat, the thought of anyone else touching the Cheetah made him sick with jealousy.

"No." Rat had returned his attention to the road, making it more difficult to read his mood.

"If you did, would it be a guy?" Keegan finally dared to ask the big question that had been bouncing around his head since he'd first gazed at that photograph.

"Ah, that's two questions. You distinctly said only one," Rat chastised, but there was no real anger in his tone.

"Call it a bonus for all I've been through the past day."

"Do you really have to ask that? I think it's pretty obvious," Rat drawled.

Keegan thought about the way Rat had checked him out and the unmistakable interest he'd seen in the man's eyes. "Oh." Keegan caught himself biting his bottom lip and stopped.

"It doesn't matter though. I'm not the type to

settle down with just one lover. Besides, if I were to lay one paw on you, Mitchell would put my balls in a vise."

"Okay, sure," Keegan agreed. Inside though, he was giving a sly smile of his own. If he'd learned one thing in the past, it was that if he were persistent enough, he could get anyone in his bed. While he may be a freak, he did know how to turn on the charm. Not once had he failed to get someone he wanted.

And he'd be damned if Rat would be the first one who turned him down.

* * * *

Rat followed Keegan around the department store, trying hard not to get annoyed, all the while sneaking covert glances at the man's ass. When Keegan stopped to look through yet another rack, Rat had to work hard to hold back his sigh of impatience. While he didn't want to rush him, he knew they had to put some serious miles between them and the Ravens. "You only need enough for a couple days. Once we get home, I'm sure Cassie will take you out to get more," Rat said, finally losing his cool.

"I'm almost done, I just need to try these on first." Keegan held up an armful of clothes.

Rat pinched the bridge of his nose with his

thumb and forefinger. While Keegan could be adorable at times, this was certainly not one of them. He had to resist the urge to grab Keegan and drag his bratty ass out to the car. Then he caught Keegan hiding a sly smile and Rat realized the punk had been acting this way to get a rise out of him. Rat growled low in his throat. "Let's just go find the dressing room so we can get the hell out of here."

This time Keegan didn't even attempt to hide his grin. "Whatever you say, Rat."

Rat clenched his teeth together. How was it that Keegan managed to make one sentence sound so damn sexy. The way Keegan slowly drawled out his name made it seem like a sensual promise, instead of an agreement to obey an order.

This had to be some sick punishment from the gods. All his life Rat had jumped from bed to bed, fucking whoever he wanted. Not once had he thought twice about it. Now he had the one man who was off limits throwing himself at him like an eager cub in desperate need of a spanking and he couldn't take advantage of it.

Rat didn't say anything as he led the way to the dressing room. All the while, his mind continued to work over the problem that was Keegan. It wasn't as if Rat hadn't played around with Mitchell's kin before. There had been a one-night stand with Brent years ago and a recent not-so-

secret crush on Jacyn. Somehow, Rat had a feeling Mitchell wouldn't be so forgiving where Keegan was concerned. Not only was Keegan one of the babies of the family, but he hadn't even gone through his first shift.

That made him innocent, vulnerable and most definitely off limits.

Once they got to the dressing room, Rat noted the place looked deserted, he still checked all the rooms to make sure it was clear. He turned around to tell Keegan he could go in, only to find the man had stepped in behind him so close they were inches from touching.

Keegan tossed his armful of clothes into the room, obviously not bothered that they ended up in a messy pile in the center of the room. Reaching out, he hooked his fingers through the belt loops of Rat's pants and pulled him closer.

Even though Rat knew he should step back, then walk the other way, he remained rooted in place. The warmth of Keegan's body seeped through the layers of their clothes. It took all of Rat's self-control not to wrap his arms around Keegan and pull him in even closer. "You need to quit wasting time," Rat admonished, although his order sounded weak, even to his own ears.

"Then why don't you come in and help me?" Keegan tilted his face so his lips were temptingly close.

All Rat would have to do is dip his head slightly and he'd finally get to know what the Jaguar tasted like. "Stop playing games that you won't be able to finish," Rat warned. Since his rebuffs hadn't swayed Keegan, maybe some good old-fashioned fear would do the trick.

Keegan leaned forward so his lips were just inches from Rat's ear. "Who says I have to finish? It could all be about you. All you have to do is lean against the wall while I get down on my knees and really show you how good I am."

Yes, this had to be some cruel punishment from above. How else could Rat have found himself refusing a blowjob from someone as sweet as Keegan?

"Please," Keegan nearly whined. His hand drifted down to brush against Rat's aching cock. "I can feel that you want it as much as I do."

"Someone needs to teach you that we can't always let our cocks rule our lives." If someone had told Rat twenty-four hours ago that he'd utter such a sentence, he would have laughed in their face. Until now, his life had been *all about* answering the needs of his dick.

Keegan stepped back.

The snarky look in his eyes told Rat that he hadn't really won this round. After giving one more warning growl, Rat left to go out and wait by the entrance. Once they stopped for the night,

he'd lock himself in the bathroom and jack off. Maybe if he did it enough times, he'd finally get Keegan and his tight ass out of his system.

* * * *

Since Rat had settled into a bad mood, Keegan chose to nap for the next leg of the trip. Even though it had been fun pushing Rat's buttons, Keegan wasn't willing to press his luck.

The events from the past several hours had caught up with him, so Keegan slept hard. Not waking until Rat shook his shoulder. He stumbled blindly into the room and crashed, face first on the bed. Some part of his mind told him he should at least take off his shoes, but Keegan couldn't force himself to move enough to do even that.

It seemed like only minutes before Rat shook him on the shoulder again. "Time to get up."

Keegan blinked up at Rat. He had changed his clothes, although they were still black, big shocker there, and the fresh scent of soap revealed he'd showered. The darkness of the room told Keegan the sun hadn't come up. "Why so early?" He stretched as he let out a big yawn.

"The sooner we get on the road, the better. The Ravens are going to be tracking us and they won't be stopping to take coffee breaks."

Rat still stood over the bed so Keegan reached

up and used his finger to lightly trace the man's jaw. When Rat didn't immediately pull back, Keegan felt victorious. While he yearned to beg Rat to come to bed so they could keep each other warm, Keegan knew the man had a point.

The fact that they were running from giant birds would have sounded crazy if Keegan hadn't actually seen them for himself. *Everything* that had occurred in the past couple of days sounded insane. He was just an upstart lawyer, who didn't even have an office to practice out of for cripes sake. Not some character from a paranormal novel. "None of this seems real," he whispered. "Why me and why now?" Keegan jumped in shock when Rat leaned over and gave him a kiss on the brow.

"You can't change who you are. Believe me, I know that better than anyone."

The bitterness laced in that statement wasn't lost on Keegan. "Why do they call you Rat?"

"What makes you think that's not my real name?" Rat didn't seem offended by the question. Quite the opposite, he brushed his fingers through Keegan's hair.

"Like I said, you don't look like a rodent." Keegan briefly closed his eyes, savoring Rat's touch.

"My father gave me the name when I was twenty-five."

Keegan frowned, that would have been the age when Rat first shifted. What kind of father would give his son such a nickname? Judging by the tight lines of anger on Rat's face, it wasn't meant to be complimentary. "Why?" Keegan asked, brokenly. The thought of how painful that must have been to Rat was tearing him up inside.

"Because that's when he found out how defective his only son really is." Rat pulled back and walked over to the other side of the room. He turned away and started to stuff things into a duffel bag, in short, jerking motions.

Okay, obviously he'd decided it was time to end the conversation. Keegan decided not to push the father issue anymore at the moment. Frankly, he was shocked Rat had shared this much. Keegan got up and just as he reached the bathroom door, his curiosity got the better of him. Glancing back at Rat, he asked, "What's your real name?" A long pause followed his question. Keegan's gut flipped as he wondered if maybe he'd been too nosy.

Finally, Rat sighed, "Carson."

Keegan flipped that name around in his head. Yeah, he could see it suiting the Cheetah much better than Rat. "I like it," Keegan ventured.

"Nobody's called me by my birth name in years. When I first came to the coalition, Mitchell said he'd put a stop to the nickname, but I told him to leave it."

“What could make you possibly think you deserve to be ridiculed that way?” Keegan wanted to cross the room and wrap his arms around the man. Instead, he held back, knowing his comfort wouldn’t be accepted.

“When I left home I made a vow to myself that I wouldn’t shed that stupid name until I’d proven my worth.” Rat tensed, his back still to Keegan.

The way he had his hands balled into fists let Keegan know how much this topic hurt. “Well, from now on I’m calling you Carson so you better get used to it. When you risked yourself to come and save me, you more than proved your worth in my eyes.” Not waiting for a response, Keegan ducked into the bathroom.

CHAPTER FIVE

The rest of the day went quietly because Keegan spent most of it curled up in the backseat, sleeping. This turned out to be a blessing because it gave Rat time to think about the no-fucking-win situation that he was currently smack dab in the middle of.

He could no longer deny the truth to himself. He wanted Keegan—bad. More so than he'd ever wanted anyone, Jacyn included. It wasn't just for sex either, even though Keegan had made it perfectly clear that option was there for the taking.

No, it was something else. An attraction that Rat had never experienced before. It felt as if he'd been waiting all his life to meet Keegan and now that they were together, Rat didn't know if he had the strength to pull away. When the mission had first began, he'd protected Keegan because it had been his job. Now he guarded Keegan because Rat knew he'd be lost without the Jaguar.

His cell rang and Rat wasn't surprised to see Brent's name displayed on the screen. After glancing over his shoulder to check that Keegan still slept, Rat flipped it open. "Yes?"

"What, no smartass comment or sarcasm? Are you sick or drunk?" Brent asked with a snicker.

"Neither, Keegan is sleeping and I don't want to wake him up. With all that's going on, he's worn out."

"Is he okay?" Brent demanded, all the good humor gone.

"He's fine, just tired." Rat decided to change the subject to something safer. "Any leads on Seth?"

"Mitchell and I just got here. From what we can tell, the Ravens ambushed him right outside a sporting goods store. His car is still here."

Rat let out a low growl as rage burned in his gut. Over the years, he'd grown to respect Seth. The Tiger was one of the few that Rat would actually trust at his back. Not only was Seth a good soldier, but he had honor and integrity. Something that Rat knew the world had a low supply of. The thought of the man being at the mercy of some pieces of shit like the Ravens made Rat want to punch something. That could come later though. Right now, he had to focus on getting Keegan back to Flint.

"How close are you to home?" Brent asked,

bringing the topic back around to where Rat didn't want it.

"A couple of days," Rat paused. "Are you alone?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I just don't know who to trust anymore and I don't want to risk someone overhearing this conversation."

"You always were one paranoid bugger, but given what's been happening, I understand you being cautious this time."

"Thanks, I think." Rat cocked his head to the side.

"What's he like?" Brent's voice got rough.

Even though he hadn't called Keegan by name Rat knew that's who Brent asked about. "He's too smart for his own good and I literally mean that. He has a genius IQ and a near perfect memory. Even though he's only twenty-three, he's already a practicing attorney." Rat left off that Keegan also had the sweetest ass and a mouth just made for sucking. Somehow, he didn't think Brent would enjoy hearing that.

"Wow, so I guess if we ever play *Trivial Pursuit*, I should try to get him on my team," Brent mused.

Rat smiled at the thought of a bunch of feline shifters crowded around a table full of board games and snacks. "Have you ever even played *Trivial Pursuit*?"

"No, which means I'm going to need all the help I can get. I know for sure Cassie will cheat."

"How's that?"

"Because she's a dirty fighter and that's always the sign of a board game cheat," Brent declared with such certainty that one would think he was an expert in that area.

"You fight dirty, too," Rat accused with a small laugh.

"True, but I don't enjoy it. Cassie, on the other hand, takes sadistic pleasure in hurting others."

Now that Rat could agree with. At first glance, Cassie appeared to be a tiny, innocent thing, then she kicked you in the gut and all those preconceived opinions went out the window.

"I think you're really going to like Keegan," Rat said, as he cast another glance at the backseat. "He's got a twisted sense of humor and he's not afraid to stand up for himself."

"He must be great if you're singing his praises. You don't like anyone." There was a hint of suspicion in Brent's reply.

Enough that Rat knew he had to divert the topic again before he said something that revealed his true feelings. "I'll be taking him to Chris's den tonight." Rat braced for the reaction to that bombshell.

Brent didn't disappoint. "You're taking him to a den of Wolf shifters? Have you lost what little bit

of common sense you had?"

"I need to take him someplace where I can feel safe enough to crash for awhile." Rat had stayed up the entire previous night, too worried about an attack to even consider sleeping.

"And you think a pack of Wolf shifters are safe?" Brent yelled so loud it hurt Rat's ear.

"This den, yes. Chris and I go back a long ways. He and I ran together before I came to the coalition."

"Just because you guys used to be fuck buddies doesn't mean I'm willing to trust my brother to be around him.

"I never screwed Chris," Rat snapped. He cringed at how loud his denial came out, a quick look told him it hadn't roused Keegan though. In a much softer voice, Rat added, "Believe it or not, some shifters just like me for who I am."

"Shit, Rat. You know I didn't mean it like that," Brent actually sounded contrite. Maybe his Hawk mate was actually mellowing him out some.

"It'll be safe," Rat assured him, ignoring the half-ass apology. "I would never expose Keegan to anyone I thought was dangerous. He's too important." Rat winced, praying Brent didn't read too much into that declaration. Unfortunately, while the Jaguar may have mellowed, he hadn't grown stupid.

"Just how close are you and my brother

getting?"

"It's not what you think. He's my mission, nothing more," Rat lied. The minute Keegan had directed that doe-eyed, lust-filled look his way, things had gotten way too personal.

"Why don't I believe that?" Brent's tone had taken on a hard, dangerous edge.

"Because you came out of the womb a cynical asshole?" Rat reverted back to his usual snarky self. "Seriously, you can't watch *Dora the Explorer* without thinking Boots has ulterior motives."

"I mean it, Rat, keep your hands to yourself and your mind on the job you're supposed to be doing."

"Said the guy who came home from his last mission smelling like Hawk and cheap, backseat sex," Rat drawled.

"Daniel wasn't some lost twenty-three year old kid who hadn't gone through his first shift yet. You're way too old for Keegan," Brent countered.

It was on the tip of Rat's tongue to point out that since he was only twenty-eight himself, the age difference wasn't *that* big. He held back however, not wanting to add fuel to Brent's anger fire. "I'll keep my hands to myself." Even as Rat made that promise, he knew it was the second lie he'd told.

* * * *

Keegan slept deeply, but not so much so that he didn't come awake as soon as the car stopped moving. Sitting up, he saw that night had come and he realized he'd slept the day away. "Why didn't you wake me up sooner?" he asked Carson. That's how he thought of Rat now, because he'd meant it when he said he'd never call him by that horrible name again.

"You're much quieter asleep," Carson said, but the small smile playing on his lips, let Keegan know he didn't mean it. "We need to get out of the car for a minute."

Keegan yawned before he crawled out of the backseat and into the cool air. He frowned, confused. They were on a dirt road, the only things in sight were tall trees and the shadows from smaller foliage. "Where are we?"

"About a half mile from a den of Wolf shifters," Carson replied casually.

Keegan wasn't feeling quite so laid back. "Are you talking about guys who can turn into dogs? How many different types of shifters are there?"

"They turn into Wolves not, dogs. Make sure you remember that, too. If you call one of them a dog to their face, they'll take it as an insult," Carson warned as he shut the door and moved around the car so he could stand in front of Keegan.

Keegan became aware of how close they were. Things got even more intimate when Carson leaned forward and braced his arms on either side of Keegan's waist. Keegan stood still, afraid that if he moved or talked Carson would pull back. Instead, the Cheetah did the exact opposite, moving in even closer so he could run the side of his face against Keegan's neck.

A buildup of desire pooled in Keegan's stomach, slowly spreading out to the rest of his body. He moaned, rocking his hips forward as he savored the touch. Carson pulled back, then started to rub his cheek on the other side of Keegan's throat.

"Nice," Keegan hissed as his cock swelled to life, demanding the same attention his neck was getting. He bucked his hips again, desperately trying to grind against the man until Carson reached out and stilled him.

"Be good," he admonished.

"I can't, not when you're touching me that way," Keegan protested. He tried to move again and let out a whimper of frustration when Carson refused to let up his firm grip. His strong hands were on Keegan's hips, just inches from his cock. It was the sweetest torture.

One thing Carson hadn't done was restrict his arms and Keegan took full advantage of that. Splaying his fingers, he ran his palms up the broad

expanse of Carson's chest. The hard lines of his muscles and the way his warmth seeped through his black t-shirt, teased Keegan even more. This wasn't enough, he wanted them both naked and in a bed where they could spend hours learning each other's bodies. "What brought this on?" Keegan pinched one of Carson's nipples through the thin fabric of his shirt.

Carson jerked in response, a low groan rumbling in his chest. "I'm putting my scent on you so the Wolves think you belong to me," Carson explained, his fingers digging into Keegan's hips so hard there were sure to be bruises.

"But I do belong to you," Keegan replied matter-of-factly. Fisting one hand in Carson's shirt, he brought him in for a kiss.

At first, Carson was stiff, his mouth pressed together in a hard line. Keegan refused to be daunted. Flicking his tongue out, he slowly traced the outline of the Cheetah's lips. He knew he'd won when Carson let out a growl and took over possession of the kiss. Plunging his tongue inside Keegan's mouth, Carson slammed him against the car so hard it hurt a little.

Not that Keegan complained. He was so caught up in finally being able to taste Carson, the world could have imploded and he wouldn't have noticed. Keegan thrust his tongue out to tangle

with Carson's. The wild, spicy taste of the Cheetah invaded his senses, making his already jacked up body even harder with need. He became so lost in the kiss that when Carson broke it off, Keegan let out a moan of protest.

"You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" Carson snarled.

His eyes were bright with passion, his full lips swollen from the kiss and just enough menace in his expression to make Keegan shiver with anticipation. "Not when I see something that I want." Keegan allowed one of his hands to drift down. Ever so gently, he caressed Carson's cock. Damn, it felt so large, the heat of it calling to Keegan.

A flare of passion passed over Carson's eyes right before he grabbed Keegan roughly by the front of his shirt, then dragged him to the front of the car. Keegan had to work hard to keep up, his feet slipping on loose rocks a few times. Once they were there, Carson physically picked him up and tossed him on the hood of the car.

The grunt of pain had barely passed Keegan's lips before Carson was on top of him, their bodies pressed together in a perfect way.

"Oh God," Keegan cried out.

"Looks like you finally got your way, damn it," Carson said as he fisted his hands into Keegan's hair.

Before he could answer, Carson captured his mouth in a hard, demanding kiss. This time Carson didn't stop him when he thrust his hips up, the movement making their cocks rub against each other. Even through the thick layers of their pants, Keegan had never felt anything better. Grabbing onto Carson's shoulders for purchase, Keegan tilted his pelvis up again, moaning in delight.

In the back of his mind, he realized they were out in the open where someone could stumble on them at any moment. Carson's hand moved down and started to undo Keegan's jeans. As the sound of the zipper rasping down filled the air, all his worries went away.

Carson reached in and wrapped his fingers around Keegan's cock. He had several thick, silver rings on and Keegan gasped at the cold. Not that it felt uncomfortable, if anything, the contrast of the warmth from Carson's skin with the cool of the metal made for an even more intense experience.

He let out a whimper that got lost in the kiss. Carson responded by tightening his grip as he slowly started to fist Keegan's shaft. This time Keegan moaned, loud enough for it to carry through the night. Carson pulled back and smiled down at him, all the while continuing to stroke Keegan.

"Tell me how you really like it. Don't hold

back," he teased.

Keegan opened his mouth to answer and instead gasped when Carson rubbed his thumb over the tip of his erection. Smearing pre-cum around as a lubricant, Carson started to really work the shaft.

Dipping his head, until his lips hovered over Keegan's ear, Carson said, "You should see how you look right now. So perfectly fuckable that if we weren't so pressed for time, I'd already be buried up your ass."

"Please, do it," Keegan nearly sobbed as he dug his heels into the hood and started to fuck Carson's hand. There was a distinct *thud* as metal bent. They were probably leaving all kinds of interesting dents on the car, but they could worry about that later.

Carson started to lick and nuzzle the crook of Keegan's neck, the motion very feline-like. "You have no idea how close I finally am to giving in. You're so hot when you beg like that I don't think anyone could refuse you."

"I don't want anyone but you," Keegan declared fervently. It was true, too. Now that Carson had touched him, held him, Keegan knew no one else could ever compare.

"You probably say that to all the guys who give you a hand job." Carson used his teeth to scrape at the tender skin above Keegan's jugular vein.

For the first time in his life, the animal hidden deep in Keegan came to the forefront. Tilting his head to the side, he exposed his throat to Carson in a show of submission. Carson let out a pleased-sounding snarl before he sank his teeth into the spot where Keegan's shoulder met his neck.

Keegan let out a loud cry as pain mixed with passion in just the right way. A hard orgasm slammed into him, robbing him of breath as he released into Carson's hand. He shifted his gaze up to the night sky as he let the feeling of euphoria wash over his body.

"It's a good thing we did this with nobody around. You sure are a loud thing," Carson observed as he sat up, his knees straddling Keegan's thighs. Looking down at his wet, sticky hand, he added, "Messy, too."

"Sorry," Keegan rasped. He sucked in a breath when Carson's tongue came out to lazily lap up the cum. That motivated Keegan to finally move. Sitting up, he wrapped his fingers around Carson's wrist. Locking gazes with the man, Keegan added his tongue to the mix, slowly licking his own essence off Carson. Between the two of them, they got every drop off.

Carson groaned as he cupped the back of Keegan's head and brought him in for a kiss. This time it tasted salty, tangy, with just enough of a hint of blood to make Keegan wonder how hard

Carson had bit him.

Carson pulled back, but didn't let go. "When we get to the den, I want you to stick by my side and talk as little as possible. While I'm tight with the leader, Wolves have been known to be unpredictable."

"I'm not worried. I trust you to protect me," Keegan replied.

"I know you do and that scares me more than the Ravens or the Wolves," Carson said, his face setting in a grim expression.

CHAPTER SIX

When Carson had told him that the Wolves lived in a den, Keegan had expected a cave dwelling or at most, a rustic cabin. The last thing he'd dreamed of was a large building that looked like it had once been an upscale boarding school.

Before they could even go up the drive, their car was stopped by a pair of armed guards that looked huge enough to get into professional wrestling. They went on either side of the car and tapped on the glass, indicating that they wanted Keegan and Carson to roll the windows down.

As soon as Keegan's window was down, the strong scent of the Wolves invaded the car. It wasn't unpleasant, just a strong woodsy smell, but for some reason it still made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Holy shit, is that you, Rat?" the one by Keegan asked. Dressed in green camouflage from head to toe, he had a hat on, covering his chestnut brown

hair. A large assault rifle was hanging on his back, but Keegan was willing to bet this guy preferred to use his fists whenever he could. He just came across as a down and dirty type.

"His name is Carson," Keegan snapped. That got him a warning glare from Carson that clearly said, *no talking, remember?* Keegan pressed his lips together in a hard line as he simmered inside.

If the nickname Rat was supposed to be such an insult, than how could someone who claimed to be friends with Carson even think about using it? Just hearing it made Keegan want to vomit, then strike out at everyone who'd ever said it.

"You'll have to excuse him, Dean. He's new to our world." Carson smiled contritely.

Keegan bit the inside of his cheek to hold back a burst of angry words. How dare Carson apologize for him. If anyone should be doing it, it should be the dumb Wolf. He'd been the one who'd insulted Carson in the first place.

"Oh, look. Rat has himself a little, bitty toy," Dean drawled as he looked down his nose at Keegan.

"Lay off him," Carson warned in a hard voice. "Keegan is just very protective of me because I take such good care of him."

"I'll bet you do." Dean smirked, but it wasn't in a condescending manner, just a we-share-a-secret one.

Now the anger Keegan felt gave way to full-blown jealousy. He wished that he possessed some of the skills and muscles he'd seen in the other shifters. Just five minutes would be enough for him to get out of the car and beat that knowing grin off Dean's mug.

A low snarl filled the car and a jolt of shock went through Keegan as he realized it'd come from him. He even had his top lip curled up. Carson's hand shot out and grabbed Keegan by the shoulder. His fingers tightening in a warning squeeze.

"Like I said, new to our ways."

Dean made a big show of sniffing the air around Keegan. "Not so new. He reeks of your scent."

"Jealous?" Keegan goaded. That earned him another squeeze, this one hard enough to bring tears to his eyes.

"Maybe I am, cub. Everyone knows how good Rat is in the sack." Dean stepped back and hit the roof of the car. "You can go in now. Although you might want to teach your whelp some manners before he goes in front of our Alpha."

As soon as the windows were up, Carson turned on Keegan. "What part of *don't say a word* is unclear to you?"

"I'm sorry. I just don't like seeing them disrespect you like that," Keegan argued back.

"For someone who's supposed to be a genius, you sure can be dense at times."

That comment stung so much that Keegan actually winced. "You know what? Fuck you. Next time, I'll just sit there like your itty, bitty toy and keep my mouth shut." Keegan looked out the window, refusing to meet Carson's gaze. Despite his outburst, Keegan really wasn't angry. No, he was hurt. He'd be damned if he let Carson know that though.

There was a lengthy silence that finally ended when Carson sighed heavily. "Damn it, Keegan. Look at me."

Reluctantly, Keegan turned his head slightly.

Carson let out another sigh, before he reached out and grabbed Keegan's chin, forcing him to lock gazes. "Don't let what Dean said get to you," Carson implored softly, all the anger gone from his voice.

"I can't do this. I don't belong in this world." Keegan tried to jerk his head away, but Carson refused to let go.

"And you fit in with the humans so much better?" Carson raised his pierced brow, his face pensive.

"What's that supposed to mean? Of course I did." Keegan felt like he'd been kicked in the gut. Just how much of his past did they know about? It felt so unsettling and invasive, like he'd been

stripped bare.

"When we started to look for you, I did all kinds of research. I found dozens of newspaper and magazine articles of you growing up. The star genius competing in chess championships, graduating high school at fourteen, shit, they even had you do a game show once."

"Do you have some point that you're trying to make?" Keegan asked stiffly. *God, please don't ever let him find out about my time in the mental institutions.*

"Mitchell would have never done that to you. He would have loved and sheltered you, not put you on public display like some carnival sideshow freak." Carson fanned his thumb over Keegan's cheek.

"I had a very happy childhood," he argued. Maybe if he said it enough times, Carson would drop the conversation.

"Funny, you didn't look happy in those pictures."

"My parents were good and loved me in their own unique way." Keegan's chin was still trapped so he had to meet Carson's gaze. Even if he had wanted to lie, Keegan knew it would have been impossible. Not with the tender acceptance in Carson's eyes.

"How can you say they were good to you when they treated you like a prized show dog instead of

a son?"

"Well, they were all I had so it wasn't like I was going to complain. At least when I lived with them I didn't have to worry about six-foot birds attacking, or Wolf shifters sniffing me. The only good thing that came out of all this is I got to meet you. If it weren't for you holding me together, I think I would have fallen apart." Keegan clamped his lips together, mortified by what he'd just admitted. Just when he'd finally got the guy's attention, he'd probably put him off by coming off as some needy loser.

Carson leaned forward and kissed Keegan, their lips coming together in a soft, sensual caress. All too soon, the Cheetah pulled back and said, "What am I going to do with you?"

"I can think of a few things," Keegan replied as he deliberately let his gaze drift down to Carson's cock.

"I can't believe that I'm actually saying this, but get your mind out of the gutter." Carson smiled.

His lips looked so inviting that Keegan couldn't resist stealing another quick kiss. "I guess we should go inside before your friend starts to wonder where we are." Keegan sighed.

"Chris will just assume we're having some fun. I'm sure Dean called ahead and gave a report about how I'm here and that I'm not alone." Carson pulled back. "But you're right, we need to

go.”

As they were making their way up to the large building, Keegan asked, “I don’t suppose they’ll feed us? We haven’t eaten in forever.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. One thing Wolves love to do is food.”

Keegan rubbed his growling stomach as he hoped Carson was right. Right now, he could eat a Raven, feathers and all, he was so starved.

As soon as they reached the front door, it swung open and they were met by yet another pair of guards. This set wasn’t as chatty. One of them gave a tilt of his head, indicating that Carson and Keegan were to follow them.

The walk took a while and during that entire time, Keegan tried hard to take in everything without looking like he was gawking. Armed guards and electric fences aside, the place almost looked domesticated. Well, as domesticated as a huge pack of shifter Wolves living together could be. He wouldn’t exactly call it the Waltons, they were too rough around the edges for that, but not so much that they gave off a scary vibe either.

They passed shifters of various ages, some of them in uniform, but just as many in civilian clothing. A small group of children walked by, some of them whispering and giggling as they pointed at Carson and Keegan. When Keegan gave them a small wave, a couple of the younger girls

returned the gesture. Right before they were out of earshot, Keegan heard one of them exclaim, "I liked that kitty, he's cute."

Keegan couldn't be sure, but he could have sworn one of the too-cool-for-idle-chatter guards smiled a bit. They finally reached a large set of double doors that led into a gymnasium. Several shifters were training and working out. None of them spared the felines a glance. Probably not too concerned over a measly two kitties tromping around on their turf.

A tall, dark-haired male was yelling orders from the front of the gym. As soon as he spotted them, his face broke out into a huge grin as he jogged over.

"Do exactly what I do," Carson whispered out of the side of his mouth to Keegan.

As soon as the man got near them, Carson dropped on one knee and bent his head until the back of his neck was exposed. Keegan instantly recognized it as the position animals took in the wild when they wanted to recognize an Alpha. Keegan didn't hesitate, going down and copying Carson.

He held that position, even though every bit of his flight-or-fight instinct told him to get up and run away. Any minute now, he expected a strike to hit the vulnerable, exposed flesh. His breaths started to come out in heavy rasps as adrenaline

made his skin tingle.

Carson reached over and grabbed his hand, lacing their fingers together. Instantly, the anxiety started to ease from Keegan's body. He knew he could do this because he trusted Carson and the Cheetah would never put him in harm. He didn't even flinch when he felt the warm palm of the Wolf on his neck. He moved over to Carson and did the same thing.

Carson got up and gave Keegan's fingers a tug that let him know it was okay to stand. As soon as they were both on their feet, Carson let go of Keegan's hand so he could shake with the Wolf.

"Damn, Rat. It's been a long time since you graced us with your mangy hide," the man said before he gave Carson a hard hug that involved a lot of thumps on the back.

"Thank you for agreeing to give us shelter," Carson replied as they pulled back from each other.

A wave of hot jealousy surged through Keegan as he noticed just how friendly Carson and Chris were. He couldn't help but wonder if they'd been lovers at some point. With the fond way Chris gazed at the Cheetah, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say they'd been close at one time.

"You know I could never turn you away when you need help, you dumbass." Chris finally decided to grace Keegan with his attention. "So

you're Mitchell's brother?"

"That's what I've been told," Keegan drawled. That earned him an elbow in the ribs from Carson.

Chris studied him for several long seconds before giving a slow nod. "Yeah, I can see the resemblance between you and Brent. He's got a mouth on him, too. Come on, let's get you some food. If you want to survive in this world, you'll need to bulk up a bit."

Keegan had to grind his teeth together to hold back his scathing retort.

"He's perfect in my eyes," Carson replied, coming to his aid.

Keegan felt a heat come to his cheeks, but along with it came a warm feeling at Carson's compliment.

"Really?" Chris looked Keegan up and down, the expression on the Wolf's face clearly screaming he didn't agree with Carson.

Carson put an arm around Keegan. "Honey, why don't you tell Chris all the observations you made about his security?"

Keegan didn't know what shocked him more, the fact that Carson had called him honey or that he'd just given him free reign to talk. "You have a total of fifteen guards around the perimeter. Actually, fourteen and a half, since the shorter one on the east side is walking with a limp. I'm guessing he injured his right ankle not too long

ago."

"So what? Anyone who knows basic military tactics could spot that," Chris said blandly.

"The code to open the gate is 1892."

Chris's eyes narrowed dangerously. "How did you know that?"

"When Dean punched it in, I figured it out by the tones coming from the keypad."

Keegan then went on, giving a five-minute detailed description of every Wolf they encountered, getting specific he could even name the brand of shoes they wore. He decided to leave off some things though, knowing Chris wouldn't appreciate how Keegan had memorized each entrance and whether or not they were properly guarded. What he did say though, still made Chris slack-jawed with shock.

"You do know you're scary, right?" he asked, once Keegan had finished his monologue. Not waiting for an answer, he called over one of his men. "Take these two to the mess hall. Make sure you go straight there. Take the south hall since it's quicker. I don't want this cub to see more of the building than necessary. I also want you to tell Dean to change the code for the gate."

Keegan didn't take offense. Any good leader would take similar precautions.

Chris said, "Sorry, I don't mean to insult you or anything. I just can't have someone knowing all

our secrets.”

He was pleasantly surprised. “That’s okay, I’m used to it.” He shrugged.

Chris and Carson exchanged a look that Keegan couldn’t read before the shifter took them to get some food.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rat re-read the text message on his cell and cursed under his breath. This had to be the last thing he needed. And that said a lot, considering his list of oh-hell-no's was getting pretty damn long.

After dinner, he and Keegan had been shown to a room. One that only had a lone queen size bed. Rat's gut had clenched when he saw that not-quite large enough mattress mocking him. Keegan, on the other hand, had grinned wickedly. Rat didn't know if he wanted to strangle the punk or fuck him senseless.

It didn't help matters that Keegan had decided to take a shower. The bathroom was just feet away and even through the closed door, Rat could hear the water running. The thought of the sexy Jaguar being naked, wet and oh-so-close had Rat's cock stone hard with need.

That made him think about Keegan's cock and how nice it had felt in his hand. How the hard

muscles of the Jaguar's body had moved as he'd bucked up. The sweet sounds that had passed through his lips as Rat had jerked him off. Most of all, he remembered how nice Keegan had tasted. Not just his cum either, although that had been great, but his lips and the skin of his neck.

Damned if Keegan didn't chose that moment to come out. He wore a pair of sweat pants, but no top so Rat could see every inch of his tan chest. How could anyone think Keegan was too thin? Rat's gaze traveled over the lines of the Jaguar's stomach, the defined pecs and his broad shoulders. Sure, Keegan may be shorter than most shifters, but he was filled out in all the right places.

Even as Rat checked out that fine chest, a bead of water started to slowly trail down. He licked his lips, suddenly jealous of the drop because it got to caress all the areas that his fingers itched to touch.

Keegan, for his part, didn't seem to notice Rat sizing him up. "The bathroom is free if you need it."

Rat nodded, for the second time in his life short of smartass comebacks. He couldn't take his gaze off Keegan. Crap, even the way the guy's hair curled at the nape of his neck was a turn on. Rat still had his cell in his hand, that damn text message an annoyance. He tossed the phone onto the desk. There didn't seem to be any reason to get

Keegan all worried and telling him about the message would be a sure fire way to do that. It could wait until the morning. After Keegan had a good night's sleep under his belt.

Rat knew that was just an excuse though. What he really didn't want was for Keegan to be distracted while they fucked. And Rat had decided that would be exactly what was going to happen, within five minutes if he had his way.

"What side of the bed do you want?" Keegan asked with a crooked smile.

Instead of giving a direct answer, Rat crossed the room and placed his palms on either side of Keegan's face. Pinning the man against the wall, Rat captured his lips in a hot, possessive kiss.

Keegan let out a surprised gasp, his lips parting in an unintentional invitation that Rat took advantage of. Slipping his tongue inside, Rat savored the man's sweet taste. Gods, he'd been a fool to think he could stay away from this. Keegan was a temptation that just couldn't be denied.

The Jaguar's hands shot out and fisted in the hem of Rat's shirt. He inched the shirt up, just to the point above Rat's navel and stopped. Thrusting his tongue to meet Rat's, Keegan swayed forward so their bare stomachs brushed together.

"Promise me you won't stop this time. That we'll finish what we start," Keegan pleaded

between kisses.

After giving Keegan's lips one last lick, Rat pulled back. "No stopping. I don't think I'm going to be done with you and your tight ass until tomorrow morning." Dropping to his knees, he gazed up from under his lashes, "All I've been able to think about is the sweet sounds you make when you come. I wonder what kinds of noises you'll make while I suck your cock?"

"Damn," Keegan said, the word coming out as a sob.

"That's a start." Rat smiled as he jerked Keegan's sleep pants and underwear down so they pooled around his ankles.

Keegan helped, shaking one foot loose of his clothes so he could spread his legs out. His face was flush with desire, a slight sheen of sweat covering his tanned body as he gazed down with passion-glazed eyes.

Rat couldn't think of a time when he'd seen anything more erotic. The best part had to be Keegan's cock though. Thick, long and hard, it was just inches from Rat's lips. So close that all he had to do was flick his tongue out and he got to taste the pre-cum already leaking from the tip. Keegan let out a hoarse cry, his fingers reaching down to grab onto Rat's hair.

Rat smiled to himself. If Keegan got this vocal over one lick, how would he be once his cock

really got some attention? Deciding to find out, he parted his lips and slowly took Keegan in. His guy didn't disappoint, throwing his head back so hard it thumped into the wall, he yelled in pleasure.

"Oh God, Carson, that feels so good," Keegan cried.

The way Keegan said his name, almost like he was savoring every letter, made a shiver of appreciation go down Rat's spine. Since his first shift, nobody had ever called him by that. At first because they were reminding him of his place, then later because he refused to go by anything else. When Keegan used it though, it seemed so natural. It made Rat feel a connection that he'd never dared to allow with anyone else.

He closed his eyes, savoring the heavy sensation of Keegan's cock filling his mouth. It was so much better than he'd ever imagined, the sweet gasps the Jaguar let out, making it all the better. Sucking in, Rat pulled back, trailing his tongue along the sensitive vein running along the underside of Keegan's cock.

"More, please," Keegan begged, his eyelids fluttered closed, the long lashes fanning his cheeks.

So Rat gave him more, setting a rhythm that had Keegan moaning and thrusting his hips forward. Rat relaxed his throat, allowing Keegan to set the pace as he fucked his mouth.

"I'm sorry...I can't..." Keegan babbled before his cock pulsated, then shot off.

Rat moaned in satisfaction as Keegan's cum filled his mouth. He eagerly sucked him down, not wanting a single drop to go to waste. All the while, Keegan panted as he gently ran his fingers through Rat's hair.

After one final pass of his tongue, Rat stood and gave Keegan a hard kiss. "That was just the beginning, Cub. Get into bed. Now."

Keegan gave a frantic nod, before he kicked his clothes off the rest of the way. Climbing on the mattress, he went onto his back and propped himself up on his elbows. When they had first got into the room, Rat had pulled down the covers because even then he'd known they'd be using the bed for a whole lot more than sleeping.

"Carson. Please." Keegan licked his lips as his gaze grew hungry.

It made Rat's already hard cock, throb in need. "I love how you say my name," he finally admitted. He peeled off his shirt and tossed it aside. "The way you savor it like you can't get enough of it."

"That's how I feel about all of you, not just your name," Keegan replied. Already his cock had grown hard again, despite the fact that his earlier release still lingered in Rat's mouth.

Rat took off his pants, glad he'd thought earlier

to lose his boots. It made it so there wasn't any awkward struggling. He didn't want anything to delay him getting to Keegan. "Do you always see just the good in people?" Rat reached down and fisted his own cock, giving it a few tugs.

Keegan let out a small whimper as his eyes tracked the movement. "Just with you. Usually I'm the world's biggest cynic."

Keegan started to sit up, but stopped as Rat shook his head. That's all it took, the simplest of gestures and the Jaguar instantly obeyed, his amber-eyed gaze growing beseeching, trusting. It made Rat almost come on the spot. When would he learn not to be surprised by his man?

Now that sounded nice, too—*his* man. While Rat wanted nothing more than to get into that bed and fuck Keegan into submission, he also wanted to rub up against every inch of the Jaguar's body. To cover the man in his scent so that every feline male who came near would know Keegan belonged to him.

Keegan made a slight sound of distress. "Please, let me touch you. You're so hot, you're cock's so big. I need it."

"You're very impatient," Rat admonished as he continued to stroke his own cock, getting more pleasure out of the way Keegan watched him than by his hand rubbing against his shaft. "Someone needs to teach you some manners. Tame you."

"Is that an offer?" Keegan asked, his gaze still on Rat's erection.

"More of a challenge." Rat walked over to the end of the mattress, then got up. Putting one hand on either side of Keegan, he slowly crawled up the Jaguar's body, moving like the predator he was. Once they were flush against each other, Rat whispered in Keegan's ear. "You're going to obey me, aren't you?"

Keegan gulped loudly before he said, "Yes, Carson."

"No more losing your temper, just because you don't like someone or how they act. Nod, if you understand." He reached down and squeezed Keegan's hip.

Keegan sucked in a breath before he nodded. His chest heaved as he took in deep, rasping breaths. He licked his lips and Rat knew he was just itching to say something, but he obeyed and for once kept his comments to himself.

"And another thing," Rat continued as he gave Keegan's hip another pinch, "When we get to headquarters, I better not see you making fuck-me eyes at any other male, the way you do me. You know why?"

"Why?" Keegan croaked, his voice thick and hoarse.

"Because you belong to me." Rat licked at the crescent-shaped bruise left behind on Keegan's

throat where he'd bit him.

"I won't, I promise. You're the only one I could ever want," Keegan said fervently as he brought his arms up to embrace him.

God, how Rat wanted to believe him. Trust that once they got home and Keegan found out about his defect he'd still look at him the same way. Rat had never yearned for anything more. Giving Keegan's full lips another kiss, Rat reached over for the small bottle of lotion that he'd found in one of the drawers. It wasn't lube, but it would have to do since he didn't have any on him and it wasn't the kind of thing you could ask your host for.

"Oh, crap," Keegan groaned, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I don't have a condom."

"That's okay, we don't need one. Remember, what I told you? We don't get human diseases. That includes anything that can be transferred through sex," Rat assured.

"Oh," Keegan's brow crinkled.

Rat could almost see the wheels turning as his brain processed that latest piece of information.

"I've never taken it bareback before."

"Is that going to be okay?" Rat felt compelled to ask, even as he worried where he'd find a condom at this time of night.

Keegan's mouth curled up into a wicked grin. "Hell yeah. I've always wanted to know how it

feels.”

Rat returned the smile as he opened the tube of lotion and spread some on his fingers. The strong scent of apple blossom hit his nose, but like he’d said, beggars couldn’t be whiners. So they’d just have to deal with the girly smell.

He rubbed it around a bit, to get it warm before he sat back and spread Keegan’s legs out so his ass was exposed. Rimming Keegan’s hole a few times to make sure it was good and slick, Rat then slid in one finger.

Keegan groaned as he closed his eyes, his face a beautiful mask of passion. Rat found himself unable to look away, a strange sensation tugged at his chest as he realized how pure the expression was. In the past few years, Rat had taken many lovers, or rather quick fucks, and not one of them could even begin to compete with Keegan.

Rat added another finger, spreading them out so Keegan was stretched and ready. The last thing he wanted was for pain to take away from this encounter. He forced himself to be patient, slowly working his fingers in and out. It was hard though, Keegan felt so tight, so hot that Rat’s cock was nearly screaming for relief.

“Please...need your cock...now,” Keegan panted, doing that endearing stammering thing again.

Rat responded by curling his fingers so they

brushed against Keegan's sweet spot. The Jaguar's eyes flew open as he let out a cry of pleasure. "You keep being that loud, you'll have half the Wolf pack in here, checking to make sure we're okay."

"If you want me to shut up, then fuck me."

Rat didn't have it in him to deny Keegan this time. Taking his fingers out, he grabbed some more lotion, smearing it over his erection. Even though it felt cold, it did nothing to dampen his desire.

"We're both going to smell like the frigging cider mill," Keegan joked. His laugh was brought short by a gasp as Rat thrust into him.

Rat moaned as Keegan's ass gripped him like a fist. He paused a moment to give them both time to adjust before he started to fuck Keegan at a slow, sensual pace. Usually, Rat was content just to have a hard, fast screw, but with Keegan, he wanted to savor the moment, to enjoy every bit of pleasure. He reached between them to grab the man's cock, slowly stroking it in time to his thrusts.

"I'm not going to last long, Carson. It feels too good," Keegan declared, his hands darting out to grab Rat's shoulders.

"That's okay, babe. Come. We have all night to play."

"Oh God, thank you."

Rat smiled, only Keegan would remember to use his manners while having his ass screwed. He shifted position slightly, so his cock would rub against Keegan's sweet spot.

"Fuck!" Keegan yelled, his fingernails biting into Rat's shoulders so hard it was a wonder he didn't draw blood.

It took just a couple minutes and Keegan's body grew tight, right before his cum coated Rat's hand and their stomachs. Within seconds, Rat joined him, his own release filling Keegan's passage.

Afterward, he collapsed on top of Keegan, too out of breath to move. Keegan didn't complain. Instead, he lightly stroked Rat's back, his fingers giving the softest of caresses. Rat closed his eyes, savoring the touch. How nice it would be to have this every night. To be able to sleep with Keegan's body tucked tight to his chest. For the first time ever, Rat saw why felines chose to pick a mate. He could get used to this if he wasn't careful.

"Tell me we can do this again soon." Keegan sighed, in a satisfied way.

"All I need is ten minutes to recover," Rat murmured, nuzzling that bruise on Keegan's neck.

"Really?" Keegan's voice was pitched with interest.

"Really, I meant it when I said we have all night long." Rat meant to make every moment of it count, too.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Keegan woke up to the wonderful sensation of Carson running his fingers through his hair. Giving a hum of appreciation, Keegan kept his eyes closed as he savored the touch. Even though his back was pressed against Carson's chest, Keegan could sense the Cheetah gazing down at him. "Is it morning?" Keegan asked, opening his eyes. Since their room didn't have any windows, he couldn't tell. The light from the bathroom was on, casting a dim glow to the room.

"Yeah, it's just after six." Carson's lips feathered a path down Keegan's shoulder.

"How long of a drive until we're at Headquarters?" Keegan's gut clenched as he realized he soon would not only be confronted with his new feline shifter life, but he'd be meeting three siblings he didn't even remember.

"A few hours."

"Oh," Keegan answered for lack of anything

better to say.

"There's something I have to tell you before we get there. Not that you won't hear about it as soon as you walk through the door, but I'd rather it come straight from me," Carson said in a strained voice.

Keegan tensed. Was he about to tell him they couldn't continue to be together? That all this had just been a quick fuck and it was now over? "What?" he asked, his throat tight with worry.

"I can't hold my shift. That's why they call me Rat."

Relief mixed with a dash of confusion went through Keegan. Turing around so he could look at Carson, he slowly shook his head. "What do you mean, *can't hold your shift*?"

"It means when I'm in my Cheetah form, if I get too excited or scared, I slip into my human shape." Carson's eyes were filled with so much shame, so much self-hatred, that Keegan's heart broke.

"Why do you think I would care about that? You already know what a freak I am."

He reached up to cup Carson's cheek, but the Cheetah pulled back. Giving Keegan his back, he sat on the edge of the bed. With his elbows braced on his knees, head hung low, he looked so...defeated. Keegan had never been one for tears, but at that moment, his eyes grew moist. Getting up on his knees, he embraced Carson from

behind.

"You don't get it. Not being able to hold your shift makes you amongst the lowest of our kind," Carson argued, his voice rough with emotion.

"If that's true, than how come Mitchell made you one of his soldiers?" He ran his hands up and down Carson's shoulders in a comforting caress.

Carson gave a bitter laugh. "I run communications and work in the computer room. I don't go on any real missions."

"That's not true," Keegan argued. "He sent you to come rescue me, didn't he?"

"Not exactly. I kind of just went on my own without telling him." Carson raised his pierced brow.

"Oh." Keegan floundered, not knowing how to respond to that. Taking a deep breath, he shrugged, "It doesn't matter to me how you ended up here. I'm glad it was you who came for me. I know I would have lost it by now if it hadn't been for you."

"You're just saying that because you're grateful. *Anyone* would look good compared to the Ravens," Carson replied bitterly.

Keegan's mouth opened in shock. Didn't Carson realize how much he'd grown to care for him? That even though he was scared of going to live with the felines and meeting his family, he was *terrified* at the prospect of having to go even

one day without having Carson around?

One glance at the dejection stamped in Carson's eyes answered that. No, he didn't know. The bitch of it was Keegan couldn't speak those thoughts aloud either. Not without taking the risk that he'd find out Carson didn't return the feeling. They'd only known each other for a couple of days and while Keegan knew that he'd fallen hard for the Cheetah, he didn't hold out hope that Carson would become attached that quickly, too.

"Not true, Seth came first to save me and I never once wondered how he would be in bed," Keegan teased, hoping his light tone would cover the true scope of his emotions. "When I saw you though, I instantly got hard."

Carson smiled.

Keegan felt lighter, knowing he'd made the Cheetah feel at least a little better.

"Really? I hadn't notice," Carson drawled sarcastically.

"I usually don't fall for your type either," Keegan confessed as he fingered up one of the Cheetah's blue highlights. Even sleep tousled, Carson gave off the perfect Goth image. Though it had faded some, the dark liner still rimmed his eyes and he had all that silver jewelry on. Even the sweats he'd pulled on were black.

"Really? And what type do you usually fall for?" One corner of Carson's mouth turned up

into a smile.

"Honestly?" Keegan gave a sheepish shrug. "It usually is the Seth kind of guy that turns me on."

Carson let out a short laugh. "Oh, I just think you insulted me."

Turning around, he put a hand on Keegan's chest and gave a gentle shove. Keegan winced as his sore ass hit the mattress, not being able to hold in the, "Ouch."

"Are you okay?" Carson immediately sobered.

"Yeah, just feeling the effects from last night." Keegan grinned.

"Oh, babe, I am so sorry."

"Don't be, it's a nice kind of pain." Keegan reached out and pulled Carson down to him.

They exchanged an all-too-brief kiss before Carson pulled back again, his face troubled.

Keegan narrowed his eyes in return. "What now?"

"There is one small thing I haven't told you. Jacyn and Cassie are meeting us here today."

Keegan stilled as an icy whip of dread hit him. "My brother and sister are coming here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because Mitchell thinks it will be safer with more felines around protecting you," Carson explained patiently.

"When?" It wasn't lost on Keegan that he'd

been reduced to one-word sentences. And they called him a genius—ha!

“They should be here within the hour.” Now Carson looked worried, like maybe he suspected Keegan had gone crackers.

“Oh. I guess we should get showered and stuff then.” The last thing he wanted was to be smelling like a damn apple the first time he met his sister and brother.

“Don’t worry, they’re going to love you. If they don’t, we can always stick you in the computer room with me,” Carson said lightly as he brushed a stray lock of hair off Keegan’s forehead.

“Promise?” Keegan prodded, trying hard not to sound *too* needy. God knows he probably was coming off like a nancy whiner.

“Sure, us freaks have to stick together.” Carson dipped his head and sealed his promise with a hot kiss.

* * * *

“Let’s just grab Keegan and get out of this kennel from hell,” Jacyn bitched, making sure his voice was loud enough to carry over to the two goons *escorting* them to the mess hall.

“Be nice,” Cassie admonished, lightly popping him on the arm.

“That’s easy for you to say since you didn’t

have to go through a body search like I did." Jacyn let out a soft growl when one of the Wolves snickered. Really, who in the hell ever heard of a giggling dog? At least one that didn't have its own cartoon and mystery to solve.

"It wasn't that bad." Cassie ducked her head to the side, but not before he caught her grinning.

Jacyn stopped and stared at her, outrage making him stand there with his mouth open in shock. Did she just frigging laugh at him? Weren't littermates supposed to be all protective and supportive of one another? "I'll have you know they were very thorough," Jacyn snapped as he started walking again. Not only that, but after it was all over, they'd actually handed his weapons back, leaving him to wonder why he'd been frisked in the first place.

Cassie's giggles taunted him.

"Very. Thorough," he enunciated slowly so she got the point.

"You hear that, Wolves, you owe my brother dinner and a movie," she sang.

Great, now all three of them were openly laughing at him. "That's it, I'm telling Mitchell about how you've been sneaking out of Headquarters at all hours of the night," he threatened, knowing if she didn't fear his wrath, then she sure as hell did their older brother's.

She gasped, "You wouldn't?"

No, he wouldn't, but damned if he'd tell her that. Smiling, he refused to answer her.

They reached the wide doorway of the mess hall. It looked like almost every other cafeteria in the world—large, white and too bright. He scanned the room, trying to pick out who might be Keegan. Instead, he spotted Rat first.

The Cheetah was standing alone, his hand on a coffee pot, but he didn't seem all too interested in pouring. His gaze was directed at a table off to his right. While Jacyn would have thought Rat would be even more of his usual grumpy self from being surrounded by Wolves, he wasn't. In fact, he was actually smiling. What's more, he seemed happy and had the satisfied look one can only get from getting thoroughly fucked. Jacyn looked over himself to see who had Rat grinning like an idiot and when he realized who it was, his stomach dropped.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Cassie breathed, obviously coming to the same conclusion.

It was Keegan who Rat was making gaga eyes at. Though Jacyn had never met his younger brother, he'd have known him anywhere. Even though the Jaguar had the hood of his sweatshirt up, Jacyn could see he had so many of the same features the rest of the family did. From Cassie's stubborn chin to Mitchell's high cheekbones.

A large group of young female Wolves surrounded him, all of them vying for his attention. Keegan, for his part seemed to be right at home. Joking and laughing with his all girl posse. Cassie shot them a disgusted look before she marched over to Rat and punched him in the arm.

Rat flinched, nearly dropping the pot before he shot her a bored look and set it down. "God, what is it with Jaguars and their tempers? You make the Wolves look like the Cottonelle puppy."

That got him another punch. He hissed in pain as he shot a will-you-call-her-off look at Jacyn. "There is no way I'm helping you out with this one," Jacyn snapped.

"What did I do?" Rat threw his hands up in the air, a look of persecution on his face.

"From the looks you're shooting, I'd say you did Keegan," Jacyn said as he clenched his hands into tight fists.

Rat glanced away and refused to answer.

Jacyn felt hot rage course through his body. How could he do this? Rat was supposed to be his friend, someone he could count on. Yet the first chance he got, he totally betrayed their trust. "Don't you already have enough fuck toys? You had to add my little brother to the list?" Jacyn seethed.

"It's not like that," Rat protested softly.

At least the bastard had the decency to look guilty about what he'd done. "This was a rescue mission, not an opportunity for you to satisfy your dick." Jacyn shoved his fists into his pocket so he didn't give into temptation and start using them while they were still surrounded by a pack of Wolves.

"Yeah, because nobody's ever hooked up before while on a rescue mission," Rat drawled out in that annoying, sarcastic way of his.

"This is not the same as what happened with Logan and me. I can't even believe you'd compare the two." Jacyn fought to keep his voice down, not wanting to give the Wolves a show.

"Why not?" Rat challenged darkly.

Jacyn knew the Cheetah well enough to realize that he was getting good and pissed, too.

"For one thing Logan actually had real feelings for Jacyn," Cassie said, her cheeks pink with anger.

"And you don't think I'm capable of the same thing? Of actually wanting something long term with someone?"

"No." As soon as Jacyn blurted out that one damning word, he wanted it back. Shit, fuck, damn! Rat may be an asshole at times, but he was also one of the first shifters who Jacyn had grown close to. At a time when Jacyn had been at his lowest, it had been Rat who'd helped him through

it and this is how he repaid him?

Rat ran his tongue over his teeth as he slowly shook his head. "I thought I could at least count on you to have faith in me. All this time I deluded myself into thinking we were friends. Thanks a lot, Jacyn."

Slamming down the mug, Rat walked away from them.

Jacyn and Cassie stood there stupidly, like a pair of Deer shifters instead of felines as they watched him go over to Keegan's table.

Keegan gazed up with an adoring expression. Then Rat leaned down and said something into Keegan's ear that made him tense up. Turing his head, Keegan looked over at Jacyn and Cassie, the smile slowly fled his face as he sized them up like they were executioners.

"Yeah, really feeling the love," Jacyn said. This morning could not have gone more wrong. Getting violated by a couple of over-eager Wolves was low on any list of bad things and that alone showed how crappy things were.

"Would it make you feel better to know that I feel terrible over the way we handled Rat, too?" Cassie asked as she stared at Keegan.

Jacyn knew how she yearned to run over and throw her arms around her newly found brother. He could see the longing on her face as she drank in the sight of Keegan. "Why isn't he happy to see

us?" she asked in a small voice.

"Give him time to adjust. According to everything we dug up on him, Keegan was raised an only child and his parents have been dead for a few years now. It's probably a shock to find out he's not alone in the world anymore." At least Jacyn hoped that accounted for why Keegan continued to look at them like they were a couple of lepers.

"He acts like he hates us."

"I don't think so. He's not spitting or throwing rude gestures our way." Jacyn's joke fell flat, Cassie not even giving a hint of a smile. Sighing, he said, "Why don't we go over and introduce ourselves?"

CHAPTER NINE

Keegan nervously swallowed as he watched Jacyn and Cassie walk over to his table. Holy crap, Rat had never told him that his siblings would be in full uniform and armed to the teeth. They looked like they'd just walked off the set of an action movie.

Jacyn was tall, and while he wasn't a muscle head, he wasn't exactly skinny. He wore the same black fatigues that Seth had, right down to a patch on his left shoulder that had a bright yellow background with black claw marks in the center. There was a large gun strapped to each of his hips and a pair of swords on his back, the blades crossing each other to form an X.

Cassie was smaller, but no less scary. Her long hair was pulled back into a tight braid, although he could still see it was the same color as his. She had on black, too, the fabric molding to her athletic curves. While she didn't have a pair of

swords like Jacyn, she did have a set of daggers and a gun strapped to her body.

Keegan's gang of females scattered so quick they almost left a vapor trail and he felt a mad desire to join them. He even went so far as to start to get out of his seat before Carson's hand shot out and grabbed onto his shoulder, forcing him to stay in his chair.

"It'll be okay," Carson whispered. "Remember, they were the ones who started this whole search so that means they want you."

"They look so intense," Keegan confessed.

"That's just because they have to put on a show for the Wolves. Deep down, Cassie is a softy and Jacyn is such a pacifist, it's sickening."

Ooooookay...if that were true, then Keegan wasn't seeing it. Where he came from, pacifists didn't carry half an armory on their bodies. Nor did they look at people and snarl like Jacyn did when a male Wolf walked too close to Cassie.

Jacyn's threat carried through even across the noisy mess hall, "Touch her again and I'll feed you your own dick."

"I can see what you're talking about. It's a miracle the Peace Corps hasn't recruited him," Keegan said as he wondered if he'd have to take up sleeping with a gun under his pillow. Shit, if Jacyn was the nice one, Brent and Mitchell must be serial killers or something.

"You know you're getting to have a real smart mouth on you. I must be a bad influence." Carson put his hand on Keegan's knee and that helped with the nerves—some.

Jacyn and Cassie finally reached the table, their expressions blank as they pulled out the chairs opposite Keegan and sat down. For all the emotion they showed, they may have been looking at the price board at the dry cleaners. The urge to run away still felt strong and he took comfort in the fact that Carson remained by his side, his warm touch lending support. The tension got so thick Keegan thought he was going to cave.

Cassie's face crumpled for a moment, before she recovered. "I've been looking for you for over twenty years," she said, her voice cracking just a bit.

Since Keegan didn't know how to properly respond to that, he just went with, "Really?"

"Yes, I've always known you were alive. I still can't believe that you're really here though." She blinked several times as her eyes grew moist.

Her hand was on the table and Keegan surprised himself by reaching out to grab it. "I'm really here. See, you can feel me."

"And I'm never going to let you be taken away again," she vowed, a sad smile coming to her face.

It surprised him that her show of protectiveness didn't make him feel caged in. Not that he was

ready to embrace this whole family thing, but it didn't make him quite as anxious anymore. "Is there any word on Seth?" he asked. Even with everything that'd been going on, the Tiger had never been far from his mind. Keegan had more than a little bit of guilt weighing him down, too, since Seth had been caught while on a mission to protect him.

"Brent and Mitchell were able to extract him from where the Ravens had him," Jacyn responded.

Keegan wondered what they called Raven dwellings. Nests seemed appropriate, but surely not even they were that obvious. "How is he? Did they hurt him?"

Jacyn and Carson exchanged angry glances.

"Nobody ever survives an encounter with Ravens without feeling some pain," Carson said, his jaw clenched.

"The good news is that they were able to rescue him. As soon as he's stable enough, they're going to bring him back to the infirmary at Headquarters," Cassie added, she had looped her fingers through Keegan's and didn't seem inclined to let go anytime soon.

"We should be getting on the road, too. I'll go grab our stuff and meet you out by the car," Carson announced as he gave Keegan's leg a squeeze.

With that silent gesture, Carson was asking Keegan if he would be okay left alone with Cassie and Jacyn. Keegan didn't even try to hide the grin. It felt so damn good to finally have someone watching out for his interests. He gave Carson the slightest of nods and only then did the Cheetah get up. As he walked past, his fingers lightly grazed Keegan's cheek in a parting caress.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Keegan caught the way Jacyn tracked their interaction, a look of hard disapproval on his face. Keegan wondered why it bothered his brother so much. Anger twisted his gut as he wondered if it was because of the feline's fucked up notion that just because Carson had trouble holding his shift, he was defective and not worthy of finding happiness.

"Where did Rat park the rental car?" Jacyn asked.

At that hated nickname, the last of Keegan's self-control evaporated. "His name is Carson."

Both Jacyn and Cassie started at the harsh snap to his voice.

"You call him that?" Jacyn's eyes narrowed.

Keegan couldn't tell if he'd pissed the guy off. Not that he gave a damn. While he might not have been brave enough to stand up for himself, with Carson it was different. "Yes, I do and I expect everyone else to start doing it, too," Keegan was shocked when a low growl rumbled deep in his

own chest. Must be Carson's influence after all.

"How do you know that?" Jacyn demanded.

"A Magic Eight Ball told me," Keegan drawled in his best Carson-esk snarky tone.

"Keegan, just answer the question, please," Cassie soothed as she rubbed the pad of her thumb over his hand.

It was for her and her only that Keegan decided to cooperate. "I asked and he told."

A look of shock slowly spread over Jacyn's face, making his features softer. "That's something he rarely shares. He must trust you a lot."

Cassie scoffed. "Are you telling me that in a span of two days Ra...Carson grew close enough with our baby brother to confide something that big?" She shot an apologetic look at Keegan. "No offense, sweetie, but he's never been the sharing type."

"Maybe that's because nobody ever gave enough of a damn to try to get to know him better," Keegan pointed out, still glaring at Jacyn.

"Relax," Jacyn held his hands up peacefully, "Carson and I are really good friends. So you don't need to bite my head off and go all protective of him. Besides, Carson does a good job of taking care of his own beefs, so he doesn't need your help."

"Jacyn's right. Carson may not go out into the field, but that doesn't mean he can't handle

himself in a fight. Just the other day, he got into it with a feline and before it was over, the poor Puma had a broken nose and three cracked ribs," Cassie added.

Okay, the thought of Carson fighting should not have been such an instant hard on. Keegan discreetly shifted in his seat, praying that his erection wasn't noticeable. "I would have liked seeing him do that. I'll bet the jerk who lost was begging for the beat down."

"Why don't you take us to Carson's car?" Jacyn suggested. "We're going to get the rest of your junk out of it and take our car for the next leg. Chris has already promised to make sure yours gets back to the rental place."

Keegan nodded and they got up to go outside. On his way out, he put up his tray and dirty dishes, waving at the females who'd kept him company.

"You seem popular all over," Cassie observed as she cast a jaded look over at the girls.

Keegan shrugged. "I think they were just curious to see what a feline is like. Since I don't look as forbidding as the rest of you, they chose me."

"I look scary?" Jacyn asked, obviously very proud of the fact, judging by the huge grin on his face.

"To a teen girl you do. To the rest of us, you're

still a dork who pulls too far to the left when he fights." Cassie rolled her eyes.

"At least I can make something as simple as toast without the CDC issuing an alert," Jacyn countered quickly. The way Cassie laughed showed the lighthearted banter was a common occurrence between them.

"You're still just upset that your wimpy stomach couldn't handle my home brewed beer."

Keegan wrinkled his nose, wondering just how bad it'd been to make a shifter puke. Going by his own experience and what Carson had told him, their kind had guts of iron.

As they went out into the parking lot, Keegan zipped up his hoodie. While it still wasn't technically winter, the air had a bite to it and he could see his breath whenever he exhaled.

The lot had a few more cars in it than the previous day, but it didn't take Keegan any time to spot Carson's rental. Pointing it out, he said, "This one, way out in the back."

"Should've known it would be black," Cassie observed with a fond shake of her head.

Keegan silently agreed though, since that did seem to always be the Cheetah's color of choice, right down to his underwear. Keegan ducked his head so his sister wouldn't see the wicked grin he knew was on his lips. He hadn't been lying when he said the car was a ways out. It took them quite

a while to make the walk and during it, not one of them said a word. The tension had grown so thick that Keegan almost let out a relieved sigh when they reached their destination.

Before he'd left to go back to the room, Carson had given him the keys. Keegan pulled them out and was just getting ready to put them in the lock when Jacyn abruptly grabbed him by the back of the shirt and pulled him close.

Keegan opened his mouth to ask what in the hell was going on only to clamp it shut when the hairs on his arms stood on end. His body came to life as a shot of adrenaline went through it, his heart racing, his muscles tensing and his breath quickening. He didn't know how, but every instinct screamed that danger was nearby and there wouldn't be time to run.

Keegan lifted his head slightly, allowing the light breeze to pass over his face. As soon as an all too familiar scent hit him, his stomach clenched in dread. Rancid and foul, as if someone had left a carton of milk out to sour. After the attack at his apartment, he'd never forget that stench. "Ravens," he breathed, his voice shaky.

"Yes, and there's a ton of them." Cassie pulled out a gun that looked bigger than she was.

Jacyn gave Keegan a shove toward the car. "You and Cassie need to drive the fuck away from here. We'll meet you once it's safe."

Keegan shook his head, "Not without Carson. I won't leave him to face them alone."

"He won't be alone. He'll have me and a whole den of Wolves at his back."

Not nearly enough as far as Keegan was concerned. *He* needed to be there, he'd only met Jacyn a couple of minutes ago and he'd be damned if he'd trust a virtual stranger with something as important as Carson's safety.

"Rat can take care of himself," Cassie added, her voice tinged with annoyance.

"His. Name. Is. Carson," Keegan seethed. If Jacyn and Cassie were Carson's friends like they claimed, then they should have never called him Rat in the first place.

"Seriously? You're going to argue over that right now?" Jacyn still had a grip on Keegan's shirt and he gave it a good shake.

Keegan got an idea of how a dog toy must feel as he got tossed about.

"Jacyn! What's got into you?" Cassie chastised.

"Besides the fact that Keegan has no common sense and he's going to get himself killed? Nothing." Lowering his voice to a near growl, Jacyn ordered, "Get in the goddamn car. Now!"

Keegan brought his arm back, then threw the keys as hard as he could at the thick shrubbery that lined the back of the drive. The three of them watched, in stunned horror, as the keys seemed to

move in slow motion, as they flew further and further away before finally disappearing in a row of heavy bushes.

Jacyn recovered first. "Of all the stupid, self-centered, fucked up, dumbass, moronic, idiotic, selfish, bullheaded —"

"You forgot dumbass," Cassie interrupted.

"No, he got it in between *fucked up* and *moronic*," Keegan automatically corrected.

The sounds of several wings flapping together reached Keegan's ears. It sounded close, way too close. He scanned the sky, but there were so many clouds and large trees surrounding the building, visibility was crappy at best.

Jacyn took out one of his guns and handed it to Keegan. "Thanks to your little stunt, we won't have a chance to make a run for it. We're going to have to fight them off and hope the Wolves come out to help us."

"Cool, I've never held a gun before." Keegan started to turn the weapon around in his hands, wanting to memorize every notch and groove of it. When he looked down into the barrel, Jacyn reached out and took it back.

"On second thought, why don't you just stand behind me and let me handle the shooting."

Keegan was about to argue that he could handle himself when there was a loud crack before the car window behind him exploded. He jumped

as thousands of pebble-sized pieces of glass hit him.

Jacyn placed his body in front of Keegan's protectively before raising his weapon and training it on a line of trees a hundred yards away. "Shit, the Ravens have us in their sights and I can't even fucking see them. Why in the hell don't the Wolves keep the skyline clear like we do?"

"They never do because they like to run wild too much and the trees provide them with cover," Cassie answered.

She moved closer, as if she were trying to shield Keegan, too. He felt himself lose a few man points as he realized he was cowering behind a woman. A small one at that. He was short by shifter standards and she still only came up to his shoulder.

The flapping sound grew louder as the sky became filled with what had to be dozens of Ravens. If someone had told him a week ago that he'd be terrified of a bunch of black birds, he'd have scoffed at them. Now as he stared at the Ravens, he trembled. Huge and as dark as night, their claws were the size of his hand. Not only that, but their beaks looked capable of snapping off his arm. The most terrifying thing about them though was their eyes. Instead of the normal blank-eyed stare of their animal counterparts, the shifters gaze remained so human like, it was

unsettling.

Cassie and Jacyn started shooting. Although Keegan saw several Ravens get hit and go down, even someone as battle stupid as him knew they weren't going to be able to hold off the attackers for long. He cursed himself for throwing the keys. If he hadn't made that bonehead of a move, at least they could have taken cover in something. He started to mutter apologies even though he knew there was no way they could be heard over the sounds of the fight.

Several howls carried over the noise and Keegan almost sobbed in relief. Looking over at the den, his suspicions were confirmed. At least fifty wolves of various colors and sizes were running to help. Leading the pack was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. A lean, sleek Cheetah.

Carson!

Most people would run in the other direction if they saw a giant jungle cat coming at them, Keegan did the opposite. Shoving his way past Jacyn and Cassie, he started to make a desperate run to get to Carson.

Carson would save him. Carson would soothe him and take away the fear. Most of all, Carson would make him feel protected.

He could hear Jacyn and Cassie yelling at him to stay, but Keegan didn't even look back. All that

mattered to him was getting to his lover. In cat form, Carson was fast, not surprising since he was a cheetah. For every stride the wolves took, Carson took three.

They were so close now. Just a few more seconds and Keegan could finally touch Carson. Even though he knew only a crazy person would itch to embrace a full-grown and obviously agitated cheetah, that's what he'd do as soon as Carson got within reach. He stretched a hand out, his fingers searching.

A dark shadow fell over Keegan right before something slammed into him so hard all the air left his lungs in one painful whoosh. He went airborne, his legs scissoring in the air as he tried in vain to find the ground. A feline scream ripped through the air, the sound loud and angry right before Keegan slammed into something hard and cold.

He didn't know if it was a car or a dumpster that broke his fall, it could have been either one considering the amount of pain that surged through his body. He tried to look for Carson, but everything had become a blurry haze. Reaching out like a blind man, Keegan tried to stand, only to have his legs buckle under him. Landing on his ass, he heard another scream. This one shrill and feminine. Maybe Cassie. He opened his mouth to speak so he could assure everyone that he felt fine,

but then something else slammed into him again.

This blow seemed even worse than the previous one. Keegan felt one fleeting moment of panic and fear before he slipped into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER TEN

*I*t was hot, the smell of blood so strong, he tasted puke in the back of his throat. They were coming for him and there was no place for him to hide. Instead, he cowered in the bathroom, wedged between the toilet and sink.

He'd never felt so alone. He'd always had his littermates by his side, they even slept in the same bed. Except for tonight. He'd been sick so Cassie had let him crawl in bed with her. It had been such a treat, to have her all to himself for once. Now he didn't even have her. She'd gone off to get help and now he had nobody.

No, that wasn't true—he had his big brother. Mitchell had never let him down. He'd come find Keegan and then he'd make the bad guys pay for hurting the house.

That thought comforted Keegan until the high-pitched screams filled the air. Loud and scary, he tried to shut them out by clamping his hands over his ears. It didn't help though, he could still hear them.

"Mitchell!" Keegan cried as he tried to sit up. A

firm hand pressed onto his chest and held him in place.

"No, it's me. Although I must admit the fact that you mixed me up with him is disturbing in more ways than one," Carson drawled lazily.

"Carson?" Keegan blinked his eyes open, wincing against the brightness of the sunlight.

"Yes, babe, it's me." Carson gently caressed the side of Keegan's head.

The touch felt so comforting and soothing, given the headache that was coming into full force. "What happened?" he croaked. He looked around and realized he was crammed in the backseat of some strange car, his head on Carson's lap. Cassie sat in the driver's seat, while Jacyn occupied the passenger side. Jacyn turned around to look at him, his brown eyes full of concern.

"You got knocked out," Carson explained. "What were you thinking? Running at me like that. You made yourself one big target for the Ravens."

Keegan shook his head, not sure he could explain why he'd done it. Even if he could articulate it in words, he didn't think he'd feel comfortable enough to discuss it in front of Cassie and Jacyn. "I got scared and wasn't thinking right." He shot a glance at Jacyn. "Sorry I didn't listen to you."

"That's okay, I get the feeling the pain you're

suffering through right now is going to be punishment enough."

"How did we get away with our heads in one piece?" The last he'd recalled it had been them against a whole bunch of Ravens.

"The Wolves helped us take out most of the birds and then finished cleaning up while we made our escape," Cassie filled him in as she looked at him through the review mirror.

When he saw the worry in her eyes, Keegan felt a punch of guilt. She'd come all this way to help him and he'd repaid her by acting like some jerk. "Sorry, Cass-Cass," Keegan muttered.

She let out a gasp, the car jerking to the side momentarily before she brought it back on course. "What did you just say?"

"Sorry," Keegan said slowly, afraid he'd somehow insulted her more.

"Not that, you just called me..." she shook her head. "Forget it. Apology accepted, brat."

Since she didn't sound upset anymore, Keegan decided to let it rest for now. Right now his head and back hurt too much to think. It felt as if a whole flock of Ravens had danced on it while they wore stiletto high-heels. The car hit a bump and he couldn't hold in a low groan of pain.

"Is it that bad?" Jacyn asked, immediately picking up the sound. Turning to Cassie, he said, "Pull over here. I need to check his injuries out

better, plus we should eat."

Cassie nodded, pulling into a fast food place.

As soon as the usually overpowering stench of fried food hit him, Keegan's stomach growled hungrily. He wondered how long he'd been out of it. Despite the huge breakfast he'd eaten back at the den, he felt starved.

"We should probably make this quick and eat on the road," Carson suggested as he massaged Keegan's temples. "We don't know for sure if the Wolves managed to keep all the Ravens busy. There could be a couple of scouts still trailing us."

"I'll run in and grab the food while Jacyn looks Keegan over," Cassie volunteered. After taking their orders, she got out of the car, then ran into the restaurant.

Keegan was glad Carson didn't offer to go in with her. It felt so damn good to have the Cheetah's body pressed against his back. Carson continued to massage Keegan's temples, his fingers using just the right pressure so it helped with the ache, but didn't dig in too hard. A low rumbling bubbled from his own chest, making Keegan start. "Did I just...purr?"

Carson chuckled softly. "Yeah, but that's okay. It sounds adorable coming from you."

Keegan groaned, shutting his eyes against the embarrassment. "Great, I'm a cutie who loses his head in a battle and gets all bruised because a

giant bird uses him as a hacky sack.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. It’s not like you went through all the training we have to know how to react in a pressure situation.”

“I don’t know how to handle myself in any situation. Not unless it involves a chessboard or an academic competition,” Keegan sighed, still disgusted with himself and the way he’d reacted to everything since he’d met his brother and sister. Crap, had he really thrown the keys like he was some petulant brat having a hissy fit? He was lucky Jacyn had only shook him a little. Any other male probably would have gone for Keegan’s throat.

The back door on Keegan’s side of the car opened to show Jacyn with a large, neon-orange duffle bag over his shoulder. It seemed all overkill in Keegan’s opinion. Just give him some ice, a couple dozen pain pills and Carson to snuggle against and he’d be fine.

“Scoot this way and let me check out your back,” Jacyn crouched down so he was face level.

Keegan hesitated, knowing any kind of movement was going to hurt like hell. Maybe it would be better if he just stayed there and didn’t move. He’d certainly slept in worse places and as long as Carson stayed, he’d be happy. Eventually his injuries would get better. It just may take a couple of days.

"Go ahead and let him check you out," Carson urged. "He's a paramedic so he knows what he's doing."

"Really?" Keegan grunted without real interest. So Jacyn could fight and he was a rescuing hero, too, great all he was missing was his cape and mask to protect his secret identity. With a sigh, Keegan nodded consent since he knew he *really* couldn't just camp out in the backseat of Cassie's car until the bruises faded. He left the comfort of Carson's body and edged forward so his feet were hanging outside the door. Each movement brought on a fresh throb of pain. "What in the hell did I hit, a Sherman Tank?"

"No, a van. Although to be fair to you, you did get slammed into it twice," Jacyn replied as he unzipped his bag and grabbed an ice pack. "Take off your shirt."

Keegan moved to obey and hissed in pain the instant he tried to lift his arms.

"Here let me help," Carson offered.

Keegan allowed it. It felt so nice to let someone else to take control of his comfort for once. While his adoptive mother had never been abusive, she hadn't exactly been loving either. Born in a wealthy family, she'd always been more concerned about her image and social status than anything. To the point that sometimes Keegan felt as if he were just another one of her showcase

possessions, like her minks or artwork.

Carson slowly peeled off Keegan's shirt. Even though he bit his bottom lip to hold it back, a moan of pain still escaped. Between the two of them, they managed to get it off though. Carson let out a low hiss as he lightly ran a finger up Keegan's spine.

"Jacyn, I think we need to swap places so you can look at this."

They quickly moved and soon Carson was kneeling in front of Keegan. While he missed the warmth of his man behind him, being able to gaze into his face was a close second. Keegan tried to smile past the pain. "I didn't mean to cause so much trouble."

"Jesus," Jacyn cursed from behind him.

"How bad is it?" Keegan asked.

"I haven't seen this many shades of purple and green since Mardi Gras. You're one big bruise back here. We won't know for sure if anything is broken until we get back to headquarters and I can get some x-rays." There was a popping sound right before something cold was pressed against Keegan's back.

"That's freezing." He flinched, knowing how much a whiner he was coming off as. "Jacyn, I'm really sorry for my attitude back at the den. I should have just listened to you. Throwing the keys the way I did was really stupid and

immature.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. When I first found out who I really was, I took it about the same way you are.” Jacyn gingerly examined Keegan’s back, using his fingers to poke and prod.

“I keep forgetting you went through all this not too long ago.” Keegan leaned forward so his forehead was leaning against Carson’s shoulder. Breathing deep, he allowed the familiar scent of the man to soothe him.

“Yes, and he adjusted just fine, just like you will, babe,” Carson reassured Keegan. He ran his fingers through Keegan’s hair, the caress so nice it almost got another purr of appreciation.

“I don’t know,” Keegan argued. “I don’t think I’ll ever be any good in a fight, no matter how much training is thrown at me. Unless the felines need a walking computer or legal advice, I’m pretty much SOL.”

“You’ll do just fine. You have our family to show you the ropes and no one will dare give you grief for fear of Mitchell or Brent,” Jacyn said, still continuing with his exam.

“I’m more afraid of Cassie,” Carson laughed.

Keegan silently agreed. While she’d been nothing but nice to him, he had a sneaky suspicion she’d be hell if someone dared cross her. The next part, Carson whispered for Keegan’s ears only.

“You won’t just have your family either, Cub.”

"Until you realize how annoying I can be at times and dump my ass," Keegan only half-kidded back.

"Newsflash, I already know and I still want you." Carson's breath skated over the sensitive skin behind Keegan's ear.

Keegan moaned, but his time it wasn't from pain. Despite his injuries, his body came alive with arousal. "I want you, too."

"And I want you both to shut up," Jacyn grouched, but there was no real anger behind his voice. He started to move his examination to Keegan's ribs.

"Shit, your hands are cold," Keegan said as he jumped.

"Sorry, the ice bag. Does this hurt?"

When Jacyn touched an especially tender spot, Keegan jumped as he let out a sharp yelp of pain. "It may sting a bit," he admitted between clenched teeth.

Jacyn cursed under his breath. "I was afraid of that. I think you may have a couple of broken ribs."

"Great," Keegan rested his forehead back on Carson's shoulder. Even though he was tired, in pain and they weren't exactly alone, Keegan couldn't deny himself the comfort of the Cheetah's touch.

"Are you having any trouble breathing?" Jacyn

demanded.

Keegan inhaled deep, drinking in Carson's rich scent. "Nope, I'm fine."

"How about any dizziness?" Jacyn continued with the interrogation.

"No, I don't think I have internal bleeding," Keegan said, knowing where Jacyn's interrogation was headed.

"You take first aid or something?"

"I just read a book on it once." Keegan turned his face slightly so he could rub his cheek against Carson's neck.

"There's not much I can do for you until we get home besides give you some pain pills."

"That's fine. I usually have to take extra for them to work though." It had been that way most of his life. *Take two and call me in the morning* had never applied to him.

"That's because of our enhanced metabolism. I have something made just for felines. Trust me, one dose will knock you on your ass." Jacyn rummaged in the bag, pulling out a bottle. He handed two white pills and a bottle of water to Keegan.

Keegan took it, wincing as the meds stuck in his throat for a second. The damn things were huge. He took another swig of water before handing it back to Jacyn. "I need help getting my shirt back on so I can go inside. I have to visit the litter box."

Between Jacyn and Carson, they managed to slide the shirt back on without causing Keegan too much pain. He tried hard to hold back any groans, not wanting to look like an even bigger wimp.

"I'll go in and help you," Jacyn said.

Keegan shook his head. "I think I can manage taking a piss on my own, thanks for the offer though."

Jacyn narrowed his eyes as he pressed his lips together, but finally nodded.

Carson helped Keegan slid out of the car. For a second, a brief flash of panic hit Keegan when his feet first hit the ground. A strong surge of pain went through him, making him tremble. Grinding his teeth together, he managed to fight against it enough to stand. Those pills Jacyn gave him couldn't start working fast enough.

* * * *

Rat cursed under his breath as he watched Keegan practically limp to the building. Damn the Jaguar for being so proud. It was obvious by the stiff way he walked that he felt every step. "I'm giving his stubborn ass three minutes and then I'm going in to check on him, whether he likes it or not," Rat promised savagely. When Jacyn started to laugh, it didn't help to improve his mood. He slammed the car door shut and resisted the urge to punch the

vehicle to take the edge off his frustration. Rat curled his lip up in a snarl. "What in the fuck is so funny?"

"I never thought I see the day where someone could tie your dick in knots the way Keegan does," Jacyn said between gasps.

"Screw you." Rat shivered as a gust of cool air hit him. He frowned as he recalled that Keegan didn't have a coat on. The last thing Cub needed was to start shivering, that would only hurt his back more.

"Look at you. You're all worried about him right now. I can tell by the look on your face."

"Why are you getting a kick out of this all of the sudden? Back at the den, you acted like you wanted Keegan as far away from me as possible. Now, you find the situation funny?"

"That's before I saw how you act like a lovesick idiot around him."

"I do not," Rat protested.

"Please," Jacyn snorted. "You're two steps from ordering a candy gram for him and wearing matching sweaters."

"I think that's overstating things a little," Rat snapped.

"Are you going to try to tell me you don't love him?" Jacyn challenged as he opened the trunk and tossed the first aid kit back in.

Rat opened his mouth to deny it, but nothing

came out. Did he love Keegan? Then he thought back to the way he'd felt when he'd seen Keegan get taken down by the Raven. The way his insides had turned cold with horror as he watched the Jaguar's body grow limp. How he'd roared in denial as he saw Keegan hurt.

"No, I'm not going to try to deny it," Rat confessed in a tight voice. There was no way he could lie to himself or Jacyn. Somewhere along the past couple days, he'd done the one thing he'd thought he'd never be capable of. He'd fallen completely and hopelessly in love with someone. "Fuck!" Rat yelled, because that's what he was — well and truly fucked.

"Is being with my brother such a bad thing?" Jacyn asked, all his humor gone.

"Do you honestly think Mitchell is going to let anyone claim Keegan? Especially a defective Cheetah?"

"That's not fair to Mitchell. He's never held it against you," Jacyn pointed out.

"Letting me into his coalition is one thing. Allowing me to take one of his brothers as a mate is something entirely different."

"Would it make you feel better if I tell you I think Keegan cares for you, too?"

"No," Rat snarled before he paused and cast a sideways glance at Jacyn, "You really think so?"

"That stunt he pulled during the attack should

be enough proof. Most newbies would have been cowering inside the car, but not Keegan. He refused to leave without you. Then when he does see you, he runs toward you, despite the fact we were under fire.”

“All that proves is he’s dumb.” Rat shook his head, refusing to let himself hope too much. Sure, Keegan had been affectionate and eager in bed, but then so had countless others in Rat’s past. When it came time to become serious though, they’d all turned their backs on him. Why should he think Keegan would be any different?

Because in a time when he was scared and lost, he ran to me. Not his family or the pack of Wolves that were coming to his rescue – it was me who he wanted in his moment of need. When has anyone ever shown that much faith in me? Never!

Rat didn’t say any of this aloud to Jacyn. Already, in the past few minutes, he’d shared more about his emotions than his entire life combined. If they went any further with this conversation, then they may as well give it up and start braiding each other’s hair while they read *Tiger Beat Magazine*.

“I’m going to check up on him.” Rat didn’t even bother to wait for Jacyn’s reply. When he found the bathroom empty, save for Keegan, Rat felt a rush of relief. The last thing he felt like at the moment was having to tiptoe around human

witnesses. Keegan stood at the sink, washing his hands, he met Rat's gaze in the reflection of the mirror.

"Hey, Carson."

How was it that all Keegan had to do was say his birth name and Rat got instantly aroused? Screw that little blue pill. All he needed was to hear the way *Carson* rolled over Keegan's tongue, watch the pleasure on the man's face as he said it, and Rat got hard. "Hey, Keegan," he replied, trying for the same inflection. He knew he'd been at least partially successful when Keegan's gaze grew stormy with desire.

"Shit, you look so hot now." Keegan slowly licked his lips. He blatantly eyed Rat's body up and down. The glazed expression on his face, leaving no doubt to what he wanted. "If it wasn't for my damn injuries, I'd beg you to pin me against the wall and fuck me stupid.

"And if I didn't have to worry about someone coming in and catching us, I'd be on my knees in front of you, that sweet cock of yours in my mouth," Rat countered in a husky voice. He stepped closer so he could reach out and lightly brush the back of his fingers against the bulge in Keegan's pants.

"Damn," Keegan whimpered in that sexy way of his. Leaning forward, he started to rub his cheek against Rat's chest.

"Do you realize what you're doing?" Rat closed his eyes and savored the slightly sweet smell that was Keegan.

"Hopefully I'm turning you on as much as you do me. " Keegan tilted his head, his cheek making another pass.

Rat had never seen anything more sexy than the way Keegan's full lips were parted just right, how his long lashes seemed to brush against his high cheekbones. "You're giving into your animal instinct and marking me as yours. By rubbing against me like that, you're covering me with your scent. You keep this up and everyone at Headquarters is going to know exactly what we've been up to."

Not that they wouldn't anyway. With as much contact as he'd had with Keegan, they were both already drenched in each other's scent. It wasn't something that could be taken care of with a shower either. No matter what they did, they'd still carry around the smell of one another for days.

While that should have terrified Rat and made him worry about how others would react, instead it jacked his passion higher. With a low growl, he cupped the back of Keegan's head with one hand and gently tugged on the Jaguar's hair so his tender neck was exposed. Immediately, Rat took advantage, skimming his jaw against Keegan's

trembling flesh.

"I've never wanted anyone as much as I do you," Keegan moaned as he tilted his head back more.

"I feel the same way as you. I want you to remember that when we get back." Rat's biggest fear at that moment was some jerk would make sure Keegan knew all about his sexual history. Just not about how he hadn't exactly been a church boy, but about how he'd been with Brent and how close he'd been with Jacyn at one time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Keegan followed Cassie and Jacyn through the compound, trying hard not to come off as the gape-eyed newcomer that he was. It wasn't easy though. When they'd first pulled up to the old auto-factory on the edge of Flint, he'd been underwhelmed to say the least. Old, with faded paint and crumbling bricks, the place looked like it should have been condemned years ago. Once they got inside, he had to readjust his opinion.

The felines had a top-notch military set-up that would have made Jack Bauer drool with envy. Keegan's brain worked on quick fire, as it took mental snapshots of everything around him. The number of big screened monitors that lined both sides of the large open building, what those screens had on them. How many cubicles were on the right, how many on the left. The exact number of felines they passed as they walked through headquarters. Another, smaller part of him,

noticed that for all the military feel the place had, it didn't make the place come off as cold or clinical. If anything, the hardwood floors and warm brown décor kind of reminded him of a lawyer's office, one that just happened to have dozens of armed men and women running around.

Keegan almost felt like a superstar surrounded by his entourage with the way Jacyn, Cassie and Carson flanked him on all sides, like they were Secret Service or something. All the protective security seemed overkill to Keegan, since nobody hardly looked their way.

"My office is over there," Carson pointed to the last door on the left.

It was closed, no doubt locked and Keegan had a deep desire to see what the inside of Carson's private sanctum looked like. "You going to show it to me?" Keegan asked, his voice slightly slurred. Jacyn hadn't been lying when he said only two pain pills would be enough. While he wasn't exactly high, he didn't feel uptight either.

"How about we get you checked out at the infirmary first," Jacyn suggested, as he slowly shook his head, like he couldn't believe Keegan had forgot about his injuries and the attention they needed.

"I don't think I need to go. I feel great." Keegan gave an exaggerated shrug to show he had full

range of motion now.

"Just until the pain meds wear off and then you'll be wishing you were unconscious again," Jacyn replied dryly.

"It'll just take a few moments," Cassie assured him.

Ever since he'd woken up, she'd been completely mothering him, even going so far as to put the damn straw in his drink. It might have been annoying had a secret part of him not liked her fussing over him so much.

As they entered the infirmary, Keegan was shocked to see the housekeeping in this part of the building left a lot to be desired. Several beds were overturned, the sheets and mattresses shredded. A cart was on its side, all its contents strewn around like a giant medical piñata. One wall even had what looked like a large set of claw marks etched into the plaster.

"What in the hell happened?" Jacyn's mouth opened in shock as he turned a slow circle to take in all the damage.

"It doesn't always look this way?" Keegan blinked as he eyed up one of the few remaining intact beds. It would be heaven to lay down on it right now.

Jacyn turned on him. "No, it doesn't. Do you think we would work in the middle of a disaster area like this?" He gestured to the room, his face a

mask of aggravation.

"I've been in some ERs that look worse." Keegan shrugged as he continued to stare longingly at the bed again.

"We had a bit of an incident," a man said as he walked over to them. Tall and thin with short raven hair, he had the high cheekbones and skin tone of a Native American.

"Not, American, Canadian," Keegan mumbled, even in his drugged state he picked up on certain facial features that marked the man's heritage. He hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud until he caught all the confused expressions. "You're Cree. Right? That tribe came from Canada, not the States."

"That's correct. How did you know that?"

The man's face was a mixture of shock and suspicion, a reaction Keegan had gotten used to at a young age. "I—" he started, but Carson cut him off.

"—read a book. That's great to know, but you're kind of freaking Dr. Featherstone out a bit." Taking Keegan by the hand, Carson started to lead him to the bed.

Keegan gratefully went along, then crawled on the mattress. He settled on his stomach and snuggled into the paper-covered pillow. Even though it rustled loudly in his ear, he still let out a happy sigh. Jacyn hadn't been bullshitting when he said that drug would knock him on his ass.

While Jacyn gave Dr, Featherstone a rundown on what'd happened and the treatment given so far, Keegan reached out and grabbed Carson's hand again. He desperately wanted to go to sleep, but fought it, terrified that if he did, he'd wake up to find Carson gone. "Stay with me?" he asked. Okay, maybe he was a little high to voice that desire aloud. Normally his pride would have prevented him from doing so.

"Don't worry, Cub. They'd have to drag me out of here."

"Thanks and I don't just mean for staying either." Keegan clutched Carson's hand tighter. His chest was full of unspoken emotions. Over the past few days, the Cheetah had come to mean so much to him and Keegan knew that he'd never be able to survive in this life without Carson by his side. Not just to protect him and show him the ropes either. No, Keegan was madly in love with the man. While he may be high, he wasn't stoned enough to admit his true feelings out loud though. Instead, he kept his mouth shut and hoped the day would come soon that he'd be able to tell Carson the truth.

* * * *

Several hours later, Rat still sat by Keegan's bed. Even though he was tired, hungry and in

desperate need of a shower, he'd never even thought twice about leaving the Jaguar's side. Even though his stubbornness had earned him more than one glare from Doc as he snarled about *stupid Cheetahs getting in the way of the staff as they tried to treat the patient.*

After a thorough exam, a series of x-rays and a round of blood work, Keegan had finally drifted off to sleep. To be fair, the high-dose morphine drip probably helped a little. Rat still kept a firm grip on Keegan's hand, taking comfort in how his skin felt cool. Doc had warned that if a fever set in, then Keegan might be in trouble. It seemed as if he would pull through okay though.

Cassie came into the infirmary and quietly took the chair on the opposite side of the bed. "How's he doing?"

"Good, no sign of fever and Doc thinks Keegan will heal pretty quickly because of his feline DNA." If Keegan had been able to shift, the change in his body structure would have healed him instantly. Unless felines were too injured, as was the case with Seth, that's what they naturally did. But since Keegan was still two years away from his first shift, that option was out. So they were having to rely on a more human-like treatment. One that was way too slow in Rat's opinion. "Did you ever find out who trashed the infirmary?" Rat asked since he'd been too focused

on Keegan to find out for himself.

"It was a lion named Colby." She sighed heavily as she studied Keegan.

"Why doesn't that name sound familiar?" Rat searched his mind, trying to figure out who she was talking about.

"He's one of the lost shifters. Or I guess I should say, he *was* one."

"That's it." Rat snapped his fingers. "He's a lion, Thomas's little brother."

"Yes, that would be the one. He shifted for the first time and to say he didn't react well to it would be an understatement." Cassie cast her gaze over the room. While most everything had been picked up, the scratched wall and shredded mattresses still bore testimony to the chaos that had gone down.

Rat shook his head, confused. Something didn't make sense. "How is that possible? From what I remember, he's three years shy of shifting age."

"That's the question of the week. It seems the same thing happened yesterday, but this was with a feline that was raised by us and not the humans. From what I hear, that shifter lost it mentally, too. Both of them are locked up in the basement."

"As in the cages we have down there?" Rat felt a little sick as he wondered how all this must be affecting Thomas. He'd been so anxious to find his lost brother. He was probably going through hell,

having to see the kid locked up.

"I guess there wasn't a choice. Even though they're both back in their human forms, they're still acting wild and violent.

"Does Doc know what's bringing it on?" Rat held onto Keegan's hand tighter. Part of him wanted so much to take his Jaguar and run. Go some place where violence and war wasn't an everyday part of life. It would be so damn nice not to have to struggle for survival day in and day out. Maybe find a boring house, boring jobs, boring cars...hell, even a boring dog. One that didn't shift and talk back.

"No, Dr. Featherstone can't figure it out and it's really depressing him from what I hear."

That didn't surprise Rat. He'd know Doc forever and the feline had always been dedicated to his career. Almost to the point of obsession. He'd view this new development as a personal failure.

"Is that why they took so much blood from Keegan?" Rat sat straighter as fear ripped through his body.

"Probably." The pinched expression on Cassie's face echoed his own worries.

"Doc doesn't think the same thing could happen to him, does he?" By now, Rat had such a tight death grip on Keegan's hand, the man would have been wincing had he been awake.

Cassie scrubbed her hands over her face. "He doesn't know. All he could tell me is the blood work looked normal, but that doesn't tell us squat since we don't have pre-shifting samples from the other two felines."

Rat thought back to how tired Keegan had been, how he ate like a mule the entire trip. Both of which were signs felines had before their first shift. "What does Jacyn say about all this?"

"Nothing, which just shows how worried he is."

Rat nodded, knowing that when it came to family, his friend tended to get more quiet the more anxious he got. "Has anyone called Mitchell?"

"That's what I just got back from doing. He says that he and Brent are on their way back now. They should be here within the next couple of days."

"Did you tell him about me?" Rat didn't look up from Keegan as he asked the question.

"Yes, to say he was less than thrilled would be an understatement," she replied dryly.

"I'm not giving him up," Rat surprised himself by declaring. Once he said the words though, it was as if a heavy weight had been lifted. It felt good to no longer be lying to himself. Keegan was his and Rat would rip anyone apart who came between them.

"I already told Mitchell as much." She reached over and lightly brushed the hair back from Keegan's brow.

"You already knew." It was a statement, not a question. Rat had noticed how Cassie always seemed so in tune with her brothers' emotions, so it only made sense she'd be the same way with Keegan.

"All I had to do was see the way you two look at each other." She smiled, although it never quite reached her eyes. "The cocky, cynical, snarky pain-in-my-ass finally fell head over heels in love. Someone better fit Satan for ice skates because hell must have frozen over."

"Where do you come up with your lame comments?" Rat smiled, but he wasn't really feeling it. Not until they knew Keegan was fully healthy. While Rat had always fantasized about putting a lover in a cage for some fun and games, it had always been on his terms and not because his partner had lost his sanity.

"I watch way too much *Nickelodeon* on Friday nights." She ran her fingers down Keegan's back, her mouth turning down in a frown. "He could have been hurt so much worse. When I saw him take off running like that, I thought I was going to piss my pants."

Rat's lips twitched at her profanity. Cassie had a mouth that could put most of the male felines to

shame. "I didn't think I'd be able to get to him fast enough. How fucked up is that? A Cheetah needing to move quicker?"

"But you did get to him and you saved his life—again," her voice broke.

"I didn't get to him soon enough." Rat gave the bruises on Keegan's back a disgusted look.

"God, Carson, you need to give yourself a break every once in a while. At least long enough for you to realize how important you are to all of us."

Rat slowly turned his head to see if she was joking with him. "Did you just call me Carson?"

"Well, Keegan seemed so adamant about it, who am I to refuse?"

"Yes, because you're the poster child for cooperation," Rat drawled. "Shit, Cassie you could argue a politician into tears."

"Now there's some of the snarkiness I've grown to adore. Glad to see you haven't lost all your charm."

"You know what they say about Cheetahs. We got all the smoothness. Now it's Jaguars that have to struggle with the lack of social grace," he teased.

"Fuck you, Carson."

"See, now you've just gone and proven my point. Seriously, Cassie, your language makes even me blush sometimes," he tsked as he

mockingly shook his head.

"This coming from the smartass who sang a dirty version of Deck the Halls last Christmas." She gave a short laugh.

"I'll have you know Brent was the one who taught me the words."

"Yeah, but you were the one who sang it over the PA so all of Headquarters had to suffer through hearing it." She got a sly expression on her face. "You know what they say about Cheetahs?"

"No, but I have a sneaky suspicion you're about to fill me in."

"That they can't sing for shit."

"And there you go with the language again," he admonished.

Keegan stirred, his brow crinkling as if he were troubled.

Rat leaned in closer and saw the Jaguar's eyes were still closed. "You okay, Cub?"

Keegan's lips started to move, but it wasn't to answer Rat. It was as if Keegan was caught up in a dream or something. He strained his ears, trying to decipher what the Jaguar mumbles were, but all Rat picked up were a few scattered words, *fire*, *Mitchell*, *Mother...*

"Get Jacyn," Rat ordered Cassie.

She'd sprung to her feet, her eyes wide with concern. Giving him a curt nod, she raced off.

Keegan continued to move around, his thrashing growing wilder as he started to talk faster.

Rat rubbed his head and offered some words of comfort. Keegan's mutterings soon developed into some sort of singing. While Rat still couldn't figure out exactly what he was saying, the tune sounded vaguely familiar. Low and lilting, it had a soothing quality to it even though Keegan was way out of tune. Despite his anxiety, Rat smiled to himself. He'd have to remember never to ask Keegan to serenade him because the guy couldn't sing to save his life.

Cassie came back, Jacyn following closely behind.

While Rat knew he should step back to give the medic room to do the examination, he found himself unwilling to stop touching Keegan.

Jacyn didn't complain, instead being all business as he took vitals and checked Keegan's injuries out again. "Nothing looks out of the ordinary. His heart rate is elevated, but not by much." Jacyn's lips still pursed in worry.

Keegan's song grew louder, his bad voice getting worse.

Cassie sucked in a breath as her face grew so pale Rat could count her freckles from across the room. "What aren't you telling us, snickerdoodle?" Rat demanded, purposely

antagonizing her by using a nickname he knew damn well she hated.

"That's the song Mom used to sing to us before we went to bed every night." She swayed slightly, clutching at the bedrails for balance.

"So maybe his adoptive parents sang it to him." Jacyn shrugged as he looped his stethoscope back around his neck.

"From what little bit Keegan has said about them, I don't think so. Not unless she had a nanny or maid do it instead," Rat didn't try to keep the disgust from his voice. He, out of anybody, knew how it was to have a high-society mother that liked to leave it up to others to raise her child.

"Carson's right. There is no way his adoptive parents would have sung that to him." Cassie shook her head as she nibbled on her bottom lip hard.

Rat half-expected to see blood. "Come on, sugar cookie, what else is there?" Rat stilled as he gave Cassie a warning glare. While he really did like her, nothing was more important than Keegan's well-being.

"Mom made up that song just for us. So there is no way that anyone other than her could have sang it to him. He's remembering his past."

Both Jacyn and Rat stared at her, the room tense with fear and worry. The only sounds were the whirl of the machines, the distant voices of Felines

in other parts of HQ and Keegan's warbling.

"How is that possible? The Hawks wiped our memories right after they rescued us," Jacyn finally said. He stared intently down at Keegan, as if he were seeking the answers from his unconscious brother.

"I don't know, but it's not the first time he said something suspicious," Cassie replied.

"It's when we were in the car and he called you Cass-Cass," Rat piped in, suddenly remembering her tense reaction to the name.

"Yes." A sad, whimsical smile came across her face as she gazed down at Keegan. "That's what the triplets used to call me."

Now both Jacyn and Cassie were tossing around worried glances and for some reason, that got under Rat's skin. "What's the big deal? You're talking about a guy who could recite a book word for word after just flipping through the pages once. He's got a scary good memory so why should it be any different with his childhood. Maybe once he got around all of us, things started to click and he broke through whatever whammy the Hawks put on him."

When they still hesitated, even going so far as to share a look of fear, Rat really lost it. "This has nothing to do with what happened to the other two shifters," he nearly yelled. He winced when he saw Keegan jump. He realized his loud

argument must have woken the Jaguar up.

Keegan let out a soft moan and slowly opened his eyes. "Hey, Carson." Keegan smiled dreamily up at him.

All the anger instantly deserted Rat's body as he melted, yet again at the way Keegan said his name. "How are you feeling?" he asked, softly caressing Keegan's cheek. God, he didn't think he'd ever tire of touching his man.

"Actually, I'm doing a lot better. When can I get out of here?"

"Doc said as soon as you got up I could take out the IV and you could go to our apartment," Jacyn said, already ripping off the tape on Keegan's arm that was holding the IV catheter in place.

"So I'm going to be staying with you guys?" Keegan winced as Jacyn pulled the catheter out.

"Of course you are. All of the family lives there since Mitchell is the leader and always on duty. The other felines live off base though," Cassie replied simply, like the discussion was unneeded in her opinion.

Rat didn't miss the sidelong look of worry that Keegan gave him. It almost made him smile as he realized the Jaguar didn't want to be separated. Not that Rat would ever let that happen, but it felt good to know the feeling was mutual.

"Before you even ask, yes Carson can come, too." Cassie rolled her eyes.

Rat could tell she really wasn't annoyed.

"Although you two are on your own when Mitchell pitches a biscuit when he comes home."

"I'll go get some pizza for dinner and meet you back there," Jacyn offered. Leaning in close, he spoke in a loud stage whisper, "Keegan, you so owe me for not letting Cassie cook."

"Like I'd want to slave over a hot stove for you pieces of crap," Cassie shot back as she slowly extended her middle finger up at Jacyn.

Keegan let out a low chuckle, the sound warming Rat from the inside out. It was the first real smile he'd seen from the Jaguar since their encounter at the den. Granted, most of the time since then, Keegan had been in incredible pain, but Rat had known a lot of Keegan's stress had been due to meeting his family.

Keegan started to sit up.

Rat rushed to help him, putting one arm around the younger man's shoulders. When Keegan didn't wince in pain, it felt like a small victory.

"I'm not hurting anymore," Keegan said as if reading his mind. "Whatever Dr. Featherstone did helped. Plus, I've always been a real fast healer."

"I'm going to run home real quick and grab some clothes," Rat said. Actually calling his dump a *home* was a big stretch since it really was just a small apartment in one of the worst parts of Flint.

He'd never worried much about it though, since most of his time was spent in his office.

"Do you have to go? I'm sure you could borrow something from my brothers," Keegan's voice held just enough panic to make Rat need to comfort him.

Bending down, he pressed his lips against Keegan's. With a soft moan, Keegan relaxed, instantly parting his lips in a plea for more. Taking his time, Rat made the kiss a lingering one, thrusting his tongue forward, as he savored the feel of Keegan's urgent response. A tug of reluctance made him moan as he broke it off. "I think it's for the best that Mitchell doesn't come home to me wearing his clothes."

"Yeah, it'll be bad enough that he's already wearing your scent. No need to prod the angry Alpha even more." Cassie rolled her eyes.

"He's not going to be mad at you because of me, is he?" Keegan's eyes got wide with panic before his face abruptly turned hard. "If he tries to keep you away from me, then I'll leave and go live with you. I won't give you up."

Rat couldn't speak through the lump in his throat. Nobody—nobody had ever been willing to give up so much for his defective, lowly hide. Yet, Keegan hadn't hesitated one second. Unable to hold back, he pulled Keegan in for another kiss. This time Rat didn't hold back, hoping that every

caress, nip and lick projected how deep his feeling of love went for Keegan.

CHAPTER TWELVE

After the doctor came and gave Keegan's back and ribs one last look-over, he released him. By that time, it was just he and Cassie and she wasted no time in grabbing him by the hand and leading him through headquarters.

"Wait until you see our apartment, you're going to love it," she said with such enthusiasm that Keegan couldn't help but smile in response.

"I just hope it's big since you said Jacyn and Brent's mates live there, too." He stumbled along after her, trying hard to ignore the curious gazes being tossed their way by some of the other felines.

"It's huge, don't worry. You're going to love our brothers' mates, too. Logan is a black jaguar and he was the one who found Jacyn and brought him home. Daniel is Brent's chew toy. He's the leader of what's left of the Hawk shifters."

"Wait," Keegan tugged on her hand to get her

attention. "Everyone keeps saying the Hawks were the ones who took us in the first place. If so, then why is Brent making nice with their king? I still don't get that."

"They did it to save you guys so we forgave him for it. Daniel had been petitioning the elders of his group for years to let us know about the existence of the lost shifters and they'd always refused him. Once he met Brent, he finally went against them and that's how we got the list of who you all were."

Keegan nodded, only partially mollified as he let her lead the way again. "So the other two brothers from my litter were on the list?"

"Yes, we're following down leads on them, too. You were just a lot easier to find, thanks to all the media attention around you while you were growing up."

They'd reached the back of the building and she started up a narrow set of stairs that led to a door.

"What are their names," he paused, a hot flush coming to his face as he realized what a jackass he was for not asking this before. Shit, they were triplets, or something like that, so shouldn't he have this strong bond with them?

Thankfully, Cassie didn't call him out on it, instead giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Andy and Joel. Or at least, that's what their names used to be. We're finding out a lot of the

kids got new ones when they were adopted or put in foster care.”

“Not all of us were given to families?”

She frowned, her expression growing so sad Keegan wanted to hug her. “No, Jacyn grew up in a slew of different foster homes. While he doesn’t really talk much about it, I can tell not all of them were good to him.”

“Crap,” Keegan breathed. And here he whined about his childhood. At least he’d had *some* stability. It would seem Jacyn hadn’t even had that.

Her bottom lip trembled slightly.

That was Keegan’s undoing. Going up one step so they were nearly level, he wrapped his arms around her and did something he’d never done with anyone but Carson. He hugged her.

As sappy and girly as it sounded, as soon as she returned the embrace, it felt like he’d come home. Closing his eyes, he rested his cheek on the top of her head and allowed her to comfort him as much as he hoped he was her. He breathed in, allowing her scent to soothe him even further. Cinnamon and spice. Ever since he’d met her at the den, her scent had seemed vaguely familiar, as if he’d known it once, but the memory of what and where eluded him. Given that his only true talent was perfect recall, it frustrated him that this detail remained locked away. It made him wonder what

other memories had been stolen from him. "What were my real parents like?" he asked, still not pulling away from her.

"They were great and they loved you so damn much," she replied fiercely.

"Even my dad?"

"Of course he did. We were the world to him."

"I wish I could have known them," he confessed in a ragged whisper.

"You did, baby, you just don't remember."

Keegan closed his eyes against the pain. No, he didn't remember and that was beginning to be one of the biggest regrets of his life.

Keegan snuggled deeper under the blankets and pulled the pillow that Carson always used closer to his face, breathing in the Cheetah's scent. While they had spent the first two nights since Keegan's return together, this past one they'd been apart because Carson had some work to do in his office.

Keegan had wanted to go with him, but had been shot down. Despite the fact the bruises had faded away, Carson still insisted on treating Keegan like he was made of glass. It had been endearing at first, but had quickly grown old. It didn't exactly bolster Keegan's manhood to be treated like one of those ceramic angels from the Hallmark store.

A rustle of movement in the hallway brought Keegan out of his musings. A sly smile spread out over his face—Carson had come home. Even through the closed door, Keegan could detect the wild, dark scent that marked his man.

Instantly his cock swelled to life and Keegan had to palm it to ease the ache. That had been another thing that'd been driving him toward the edge. Ever since they'd been back, Carson hadn't touched him sexually. No hand-jobs, no sucking and, worst of all, no fucking. By now, Keegan was so frustrated and jacked up, he felt as if he was two seconds from lashing out at something.

The door opened, allowing a slice of light in, before Carson shut it and the room was once again plunged into darkness. Keegan briefly thought about throwing back the covers so his hard on would be evident. Even in the dark, Carson's feline vision would let him see it. Instead, he ended up pulling his hand away from his cock, not wanting to be caught jacking off like some needy loser.

"You're awake?" Carson said as he moved around the room, emptying his pockets, then gathering up a fresh change of clothes.

"Yeah, couldn't sleep without you," Keegan admitted.

"Well try to now. It's still early," Carson all but grunted before he went into the bathroom and

shut the door. A few seconds later, the sound of the shower reached Keegan's ears.

He laid in the dark, bristling at the rude dismissal Carson had just dished out. What gave him the right to order him around like he was some untrained puppy who needed a good slap on the nose? Keegan may be pre-shift, but that didn't mean he was some child. Maybe it was time he proved that point to Carson once and for all.

A wicked thrill went through him as he got out of bed and walked to the bathroom, stripping along the way. By the time he reached the door, he was completely naked, his erect cock already slick with pre-cum.

Since he wasn't feeling particularly mannerly, he pushed the door open without knocking. Carson was just a shadow, his form mostly hidden by the shower curtain. That didn't damper Keegan's desire though, if anything, it made it burn hotter.

"Keegan, is that you?" Carson asked, confusion clear in his voice.

Instead of answering directly, Keegan pulled back the curtain and stepped inside, the hot spray cascading over his back as he pinned Carson against the wall. "Shut up and fucking kiss me," he commanded in a near snarl.

An answering flare of passion went through Carson's eyes, but he didn't move.

Letting out a growl of frustration, Keegan took the task on himself, moving in for a kiss. Just as his lips were about to make contact, Carson put a hand on his chest and held him back. A whimper of protest clogged Keegan's throat as he strained to get closer.

"Is that any way to ask for something?" Carson demanded.

Beads of water clung to his face, some dripping down to leave a trail across his sculpted jaw and full lips. Keegan wanted to lick them away so bad that his tongue actually darted out of his mouth, like a hungry kitten seeking cream.

"Please, Carson. It's been so long since you touched me, fucked me. I can't stand it anymore. I'm sorry, I just need you so bad." Keegan knew he was babbling and coming off as desperate, but he *was* desperate.

For the longest time, Carson didn't say anything, his face an unreadable mask. Water from the shower slicked down his dark hair, making a stray lock fall against his forehead.

Keegan's fingers itched to reach out and brush it into place, but he didn't dare move until given permission. "Please," Keegan said in a hoarse whisper as he balled his hands into fists by his side.

"On your knees, now," Carson finally ordered in a steely voice.

Keegan bit his bottom lip to keep from smiling because he'd won. Falling to his knees, he gazed up from under his lashes at Carson. His lips were hovering just inches from the tip of the Cheetah's long cock. A pearl of pre-cum clung to the end, mocking Keegan.

"Let me show how sorry I am," Keegan pleaded as he slowly licked his lips. His own cock jerked when he caught the way Carson's passion-infused eyes tracked the movement.

Carson gave a curt nod.

Keegan didn't wait for further encouragement. Flicking his tongue out, he slowly swirled it around the head of Carson's erection. Keegan hummed in delight as that drop of cum finally slid into his mouth. Greedy for another taste, he speared the tip of his tongue into the slit of Carson's cock, trying to milk more out of him.

A low growl filled the shower stall before Carson's hand slammed into the back of Keegan's head. "Suck, don't play."

"Carson." Keegan pulled the name out slow and sensual, loving the reaction he got whenever he did so. Sure enough, Carson's breath hitched as a fresh wave of need passed over his sensual features.

With on final lick, Keegan parted his lips and wrapped them around the head of Carson's cock. The Cheetah let out a long hiss of pleasure as he

threw his head back. "That's it. Just like that. Fuck, I adore your mouth!"

God, Keegan loved it when he got Carson this worked up, this fast. Despite his cocky attitude, the Cheetah had erected this wall around him and never let anyone truly see him. When he let Keegan in like this, it was pure bliss.

He started to move his head up and down, setting a steady rhythm. Whilst he wanted to go slow and savor every inch of his feline, he doubted Carson would allow it. Especially once Carson fisted his hand in Keegan's hair none too gently.

"Nobody sucks dick as good as you," Carson said as he started to thrust his hips so his cock slid in and out of Keegan's lips.

A flare of jealousy went through Keegan at the thought of anyone sucking Carson off, be they good or bad. That made him determined to be more than just good, he silently vowed that by the time he was done with him, Carson would forget that anyone else had ever existed before this moment.

Grabbing Carson's hip with one hand, Keegan used the other to reach between the Cheetah's legs. Using his nails, Keegan lightly scratched Carson's balls, at the same time, sucking in deep as he pulled his lips back. When Carson let out a grunt of pleasure, Keegan took him in again,

relaxing his throat so every inch of the man's erection was buried in his mouth. At the same time, he gave Carson's sac a tight squeeze.

"Fuck...I can't hold it back anymore," Carson panted, right before his cock jerked in Keegan's mouth.

Keegan prepared himself, eager to taste the salty, tang of cum. At the last moment though, Carson tugged him back by the hair. Keegan whimpered in protest as the man's dick slipped free of his mouth. Still holding Keegan, Carson used his other hand to stroke himself a couple of times before he came, splashing hot semen on Keegan's face.

Keegan stuck his tongue out to catch it, but all he got was just a brief taste since most of it landed on his cheek. His own cock felt heavy and sore and he reached down to palm it only to have Carson give his hair another firm tug.

"Oh no you don't. You only come from my hand from here on out."

"Oh God." Keegan swallowed hard, the raw look of passion on Carson's face was almost enough to make him come without the aid of *anyone's* hand.

"Stand up for me, Cub." This time the order sounded more tender as it left Carson's lips.

I love you. I can't live without you. You're everything to me.

All were things Keegan desired to say, but he didn't dare. He'd been shunned all his life, people had pushed him away and even hated him. That had been okay, he'd learned to adapt, how to harden himself against the hurt, but if Carson did the same thing, Keegan knew he'd never survive the rejection. Standing on shaky feet, he held onto Carson's shoulders for support as they faced each other.

"Are you sure you're not in any pain?" His eyes narrowed in concern.

"Yes, I promise." Keegan swayed forward so his cock brushed against Carson. He wasn't sure whether that broke the *no self-gratification* rule or not, but he didn't get reprimanded.

Carson smiled darkly as he used his thumb to wipe some of the cum off Keegan's cheek. "Good, because I'm not going to take it easy on you."

"I hope you don't."

"I won't be entirely without mercy. Spread your legs so I can get you stretched for me."

Keegan obeyed, even going so far as to brace one foot on the edge of the tub. When Carson smiled in approval, a warmth of pleasure bloomed in Keegan's chest. How he'd come to love being on the receiving end of that look.

Using his cum-covered fingers, Carson reached between Keegan's legs and started to circle his hole. Keegan hissed in pleasure as his sensitive

ring of muscle clenched in anticipation. He was so lost in the way Carson's touch made him burn that he jumped at the first velvet caress of the Cheetah's tongue on his cheek. Slowly, Carson licked away the semen on Keegan's skin. All the while, he slid first one, then two fingers into Keegan's ass.

Once he'd finished cleaning Keegan's face, Carson whispered, "Put your legs around my waist."

Keegan immediately did as asked, knowing that Carson was more than strong enough to hold his weight. He'd seen the Cheetah in battle, watched the way his muscles rippled under his tan skin, too many times to doubt that Carson was anything but a weakling.

When he removed his fingers, Keegan almost cried out in protest, until Carson replaced them with the head of his cock. Then Keegan started to let out loud pleas that probably carried through the rest of the apartment.

"You're going to wake up everyone and then they'll know exactly what I'm doing to their baby brother," Carson admonished as he slowly inched his cock up Keegan's ass.

"I don't care. Just fuck me!" Keegan all but snarled as he dug his heels into the small of Carson's back.

"Wow, you're just getting louder. Maybe I'll

use a gag on you next time.”

It felt so frustrating, to be wild with passion while Carson remained calm, so Keegan decided to try to drive him to the edge, too. Baring his teeth, he bit the Cheetah hard on the shoulder. When the coppery taste of blood filled his mouth, Keegan knew he’d broken the skin.

Carson let out a loud snarl that would have terrified Keegan had it been anyone else. At first he thought that maybe he’d angered Carson or caused him pain. Then he realized it’d come from passion when Carson slammed him against the wall and started to fuck him so hard Keegan found it nearly impossible to breath.

“So tight, so damn hot,” Carson panted between thrusts.

Keegan mewled like some kind of idiot, but at that point, he found himself incapable of making any other sound. His cock was pinned between them, the friction of the moving bodies rubbing against it making white-hot lashes of pleasure dance up his spine.

After a couple more pounding thrusts, Keegan came with a loud, hoarse yell. It seemed to go on forever, as wave after wave of cum shot from his cock and coated their stomachs and chests. After a few seconds, Carson joined him, his eyelids fluttering shut as his cock released into Keegan’s ass.

Keegan let his legs slide to the ground, surprised that he was able to hold his own weight after such an intense orgasm. Carson grinned, his face so relaxed and satisfied that it caused a strange tug in Keegan's chest. "Why don't you officially move in with me?" he asked as he slowly trailed his finger down Carson's chest. Inside his heart was hammering in fear as he steeled himself for some hurt. Just a few moments ago, he'd promised himself that he wouldn't put himself out for rejection, yet he'd gone and done it first chance he got. *Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!*

"This place is crowded enough without adding me to the mix." Carson ran his fingers along the slope of Keegan's ass.

"You're already here every night, so what's the big deal?" Keegan felt as if his throat were closing in on him as a great big ball of pain clogged it.

"Me crashing here is one thing, actually dragging in all my crap is another." Carson reached over and cupped his chin, tilting Keegan's head up so their gazes were locked. "That doesn't mean I don't want to be with you though."

"Okay," Keegan gave a smile he didn't feel.

They quickly finished the shower and got dressed. When Carson climbed into the bed, Keegan hung back. "I'm not tired right now, so I think I'll go down and get some breakfast."

"Jesus, Cub, the sun isn't even up yet," Carson

grumbled, his eyes already closed.

"It's five in the morning. I think it's close enough." Slipping on a hoodie, Keegan left the room and made his way down the stairs. When he'd first seen his new home, Keegan had been pleased to find that it had the same décor as the main area of HQ. With hardwood floors and dark earthy toned walls and furniture, it soothed Keegan with its simplicity. Although, he wasn't too proud to admit his favorite part was the huge HD TV.

As he entered the kitchen, he pulled up short at the sight of two strange men sitting at the table. His gut clenched in fear and he'd actually taken a couple of steps back before he recognized them from the pictures Seth had given him.

Brent and Mitchell just had to come home now of all times. Please, don't let them have heard me screaming my head off a few minutes ago. Keegan searched their faces, hoping to find an answer to his concerns, but he got nothing. Even if he hadn't sent the photos, Keegan would have instantly pegged Mitchell from the whole I-am-the-alpha-don't-fuck-with-me vibe he had. Huge and muscular, his hair was cut shorter than Brent or Jacyn's. Dressed in faded blue jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt, he still managed to look full of authority as he studied Keegan.

Brent was thinner, but no less daunting. Even

though everyone had said the guy was laid back and funny, Keegan sure as hell didn't see it. With his closed features and flat eyes, he looked anything but friendly.

Then it hit Keegan. When they'd first gone to the den, the first thing Carson had done was formally acknowledge Chris as the Alpha, the same rules must apply to the felines. Moving forward, he went down on one knee in front of Mitchell before bowing his head and exposing the back of his neck. Several tense seconds passed as he waited for Mitchell to accept him. As the silence stretched, the tension in Keegan grew. What if Mitchell already found him lacking and was about ready to kick his scrawny ass to the curb?

"Mitchell, why is he bowing down to you like that?" Brent asked in a loud, exaggerated stage whisper.

"He's doing it out of respect," Mitchell replied in normal tones.

"You should tell him a fruit basket would go much further."

"Why don't you tell him? He's right here."

Keegan frowned, thrown by the oddball turn the conversation had taken. "Am I doing something wrong? Carson had me do this to the Alpha back at the den so I assumed it would be the same with you."

"Who's Carson?" Brent cocked his head to the side in a confused manner that Keegan thought would be more appropriate for a Wolf shifter.

"That's Rat's real name," Mitchell supplied.

Keegan decided it would be up to him to get the subject back on track. "I'm sorry if I did something wrong. I'm just learning all this and I still don't know everything. If you have any books that talk about your customs and rules, I'd be more than happy to read them so I don't insult you again."

"Get up, Keegan, you didn't do anything wrong," Mitchell said, his voice warm.

Keegan darted a glance up and felt a wave of relief when he saw the corners of the man's mouth curl up into a smile. Keegan scrambled to his feet before shoving his hands into the pockets of his hoodie to cover how bad the nerves were hitting him. "We didn't expect you guys until later today," he told them for lack of having anything more intelligent to say.

"Yeah, we kind of figured that out. Otherwise I don't think you would have been so loud a few minutes ago." Brent made a big show of rolling his eyes.

Mortified to the core, Keegan didn't have a response to that other than a sheepish, "Sorry."

Mitchell sighed heavily, but didn't seem that put off. "So I take it such means we have to get

used to having Carson around all the time now?"

Keegan didn't hesitate for a second, "Yes, sir, you will. He belongs to me." He waited for the angry outburst, but it never came.

Mitchell's mouth pulled up into a lazy smile. "I'll admit I wasn't thrilled about all this when I first heard about it, but Cassie called me last night and convinced me how much he means to you. Now that I've calmed down, I realize how lucky you are to have him to help ease you into everything. Carson is one of the best."

Keegan grinned, all the worry and fear of meeting his big brother gone. "Yes, he is."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Keegan shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position in the leather office chair he'd camped out in. On his lap was a heavy textbook that Doc Featherstone had lent him about the anatomy and physiology of the various feline breeds.

"Don't you ever read something light, like an erotica book or something?" Carson asked as he leaned back in his chair.

Keegan smiled, not looking up from his book. "I'm just trying to catch up. Even though I've been here nearly a month, I still feel like I'm two steps behind everyone all the time."

"Cut yourself some slack, we grew up around this stuff, you didn't," Carson reminded gently.

"True, but not everyone has to be in the spotlight all the time because their brother is the leader of the coalition." Not that Keegan minded too much. While he wasn't nearly as close to

Mitchell as he was to Jacyn and Brent, he still admired and liked the guy.

Carson pulled up the list again. "I hate to say this, but I'm getting sick of staring at this thing."

"Do you want me just to recite it for you off the top of my head?" Keegan asked, not bothering to hide his grin. After spending so much time in Carson's office, Keegan knew the thing beginning to end.

"Showoff," Carson grunted.

"Hey, at least you wouldn't have to stare at it anymore," Keegan pointed out with a chuckle.

"No, I'd have to hear it, which would be worse." Carson laughed.

"Just for that, I'm not getting you any coffee." Keegan stood and set the book on the desk.

"Even if I say pretty please?" Carson drawled in a like-that-would-ever-happen voice.

"Fine, do you want one?"

"Yes, with lots of sugar."

Keegan nodded before he left the office and headed for the cafeteria. The large room took up most of the center of Headquarters. Since it was lunchtime, the place was packed so it took Keegan a while to make his way through the line. As he stood at the counter, adding sugar and cream, a male feline he'd never met before came up and joined him.

Tall, but too blond and thin in Keegan's

opinion, he smiled, showing off a row of even white teeth. "Well, look who's been allowed out to play. I thought Rat was going to keep you locked away forever. It's not like him to be so selfish with his toys."

"Do I know you?" Keegan asked, feeling an instant dislike for the male.

"My name's Eddie." He held out his hand, but Keegan didn't take it. Eddie's eyes grew sharp with anger before he said, "I'm shocked Rat's kept you around for so long."

"His name is Carson and why are you so surprised?" Now Keegan understood why Carson got so cranky sometimes. He would, too, if he had to deal with idiots like this on a daily basis.

"Well, since you were third choice I didn't think he'd see you as anything more than a fuck buddy."

Keegan stilled one hand on a coffee stirrer. "Third choice? I don't follow."

"You mean nobody has ever told you? Brent and Rat used to be lovers."

A cool coil of dread settled in his gut, making his hands tremble. "You're crazy. They would have told me something that important."

"Really" Eddie cocked a brow, almost mockingly. "Are you so sure?"

No, he wasn't, but damn if he'd admit it. Instead of answering, Keegan asked a question of

his own, "So you're just telling me this out of the goodness of your heart?"

"Let's just say, you're not the first one Rat tried to use as a replacement."

"*Replacement? What's that supposed to mean?*" Keegan's heart pounded since he already had a sneaky suspicion. *No, no, no! Please, no. I should have known it was too good to be true.*

"Rat's never gotten over Brent dumping him. Ever since, he's been sleeping his way through the felines, trying to find someone who can match up."

The sleeping around part was true. Carson had confessed several times that he'd had more than his fair share of bed partners before he met Keegan. What he'd never shared is why he'd felt compelled to do that. The fact that it could be because of Brent made Keegan want to vomit. "So who was the second? You said I was third so there had to be a number two," Keegan said dully.

"Isn't that obvious? Jacyn. Rat fell for that guy, bad. I thought for sure Logan was going to end up murdering him before Rat finally got the message and backed off." Eddie shook his head sadly, like it just killed him to be having to deliver this news.

Keegan wasn't buying it though. Underneath all that regret, there was that little gleam of excitement. "It's not true," Keegan denied, even as he thought back to that picture and how close

Carson and Jacyn had looked in it.

"I guess I can't blame Rat. You do look so much like your brothers, he probably couldn't resist." Eddie slowly eyed Keegan up. "Plus, you got that whole cute, helpless thing going on that would make anyone hard. Hell, I'd do you and I usually prefer woman."

Keegan tossed down the stirrer. "I've got to go."

Coffee completely forgotten, Keegan practically ran back to Carson's office. Bursting inside, he didn't waste any time. "Is it true that you fucked Brent?"

Carson paused, his hand hovering over his keyboard. He had this whole oh-shit look on his face that let Keegan know Eddie hadn't been lying.

Keegan started to frantically shake his head. "No, fuck, no!"

"I didn't want you to find out like this," Carson said, confirming Keegan's nightmare come true.

"Find out what? That the man I thought I loved once had a relationship with my brother? You honestly think there could have been a good way of telling me that?" Keegan yelled, finally and completely giving into the hurt and anger. "Call me crazy, but I don't think they make a frigging card for that kind of situation."

"Keegan, sit down. Let's talk about this."

Carson stood and tried to reach out for him.

Keegan stepped back out of touching range. "You had your chance to talk about this before and you chose to keep your mouth shut instead. It makes me think he was right and you were just using me all along." Tears built up in his eyes and Keegan stubbornly blinked them away. He would not cry.

"Who's right?" Carson demanded suspiciously.

"And what went on between you and Jacyn?" Keegan continued on, ignoring Carson's question.

All the color drained from Carson's face. "Does that matter? All this happened before I met you."

"Did you screw him, too?" Keegan yelled in a broken voice. *Will not cry.*

"No, I promise all we did was kiss and it happened only once. Jacyn never wanted to be with anyone else but Logan. We're friends, that's all."

"But you had wished for more." It came out as a statement, not a question since Keegan could no longer ignore the cold hard truth sitting in front of him.

"I'm not going to deny it. I respect you too much for that," Carson said sadly.

Keegan let out a hard bark of laughter. "You respect me? Oh, that's rich. I was nothing but a third-round, pale replacement for who you really wanted."

"Cub, that's not true," Carson denied, vehemently as he shook his head.

"Really? Then why won't you really move in with me? Unless it's because I'm not who you wanted all along."

"That's not true, Keegan. You mean everything to me."

"No, Brent and Jacyn do, I'm just some toy you got to replace them, just like he said," Keegan raged.

"Who are you talking about?" Carson threw his hands up in disgust.

"Someone who finally had the guts enough to tell me the truth. The rest of the felines were probably having too much fun laughing at me behind my back to step forward and let me know what was really happening."

"So you're willing to believe this guy instead of me? I thought I meant more to you than that," Carson yelled back.

A part of Keegan knew the Cheetah had a point. Keegan should listen to his side of the story first, but a bigger part of him was hurt and that won out over reason. Letting out a roar of anger, Keegan punched the wall so hard he actually left a hole behind. It hurt like hell, but he welcomed the pain. Maybe if he ached enough on the outside, the sting on the inside would be less.

Shaking it away, he walked to the door. On his

way out, he paused long enough to say, "I never want to fucking see you again. So stay away from me, *Rat*." Slamming the door behind him, Keegan blazed a path to the apartment. If anyone spoke to him along the way, he didn't notice, too caught up in the pain that was ripping his chest apart.

He should have known better. Should have expected this all along. Nobody had ever wanted him just for himself and he'd foolishly allowed himself to forget that. It was a lesson he'd never disregard again. Stomping up the stairs, he went inside and was met with the last person he needed to see at that moment—Brent.

He was standing in the living room and as soon as he spotted Keegan, a look of concern passed his face. "Are you okay, buddy?"

"No, I'm not okay, I just found out about you and Rat," Keegan snarled as he balled his hands into fists.

"Keegan, I don't know what you heard, but there is no me and Rat. I have a mate, remember?"

But Keegan wasn't ready to listen to reason, letting out a roar, he charged. Brent put his hands up to defend himself, but Keegan still managed to tackle him. They crashed into a coffee table, the glass shattering under the weight of their bodies.

By some miracle, Keegan landed on top and he took full advantage of it, repeatedly punching Brent in the face. When his brother just took the

blows and didn't hit back, that only enraged Keegan more. "Hit me back, you fucker."

Brent did.

It was only one punch, but that's all it took, catching Keegan in the jaw and sending him flying across the room. Keegan hit the couch, his arm hitting the wood armrest. It hurt like a son-of-a-bitch, but he pushed it aside, getting to his feet.

Brent had got up, too.

A thrill went through Keegan when he saw blood dripping from his brother's nose.

Brent wiped it away impatiently. "Keegan, you don't want to do this," he implored.

"Funny, I think I do." Dimly, Keegan was aware that Mitchell and Cassie had come into the room and were yelling at him to stop, but he ignored them. All that mattered to him was getting to have the satisfaction of ripping Brent apart.

"Come and get it, kitten" Brent taunted.

Keegan snarled and launched himself at Brent again, only to be stopped this time by a strong pair of arms. He cursed and fought against the hold for several seconds before he even realized it was Mitchell. "Let me go," he yelled. Anger took over everything. His vision turned red as his blood boiled with the need to make someone—anyone hurt as bad as he did. "You would take his side, Mitchell," Keegan sneered. "I've always come last

with you."

"Oh god, Keegan, you really need to let up on the pity party," Brent said as he continued to wipe blood from his nose.

"That's easy for you to say, he didn't leave you behind that night!" Keegan screamed as he lost his final thread of control. "I sat there, hiding as I listened to them hurt Mom. All the while, I told myself that the Ravens wouldn't get me because my big brother, Mitchell, would come save the day. Only he never showed. Instead I had to cower there, alone, the only thing keeping me company, Mom's screams as she burned to death."

All three of them froze, staring at Keegan in abject horror. It became too much, letting out a cry of frustration, he walked out of the apartment. Vowing to himself that he'd never return. Let the Ravens get him. It couldn't be any worse than what he was going through now.

Keegan leaned against the railing of the loading dock and watched the traffic pass by on the distant highway. He didn't know how much time had passed since he'd stormed out of the apartment, but it'd been long enough for the sun to set.

He closed his eyes in embarrassment as he recalled his fit of anger and some of the hateful things he'd said to his family. Now that he'd

calmed down, he realized he never should have attacked Brent, let alone lashed out at Mitchell.

The worst thing about all of it was that Keegan didn't know where half the shit he'd yelled at Mitchell had come from. Even though the memories of that night were starting to come back, they were all so twisted and confused, he wasn't sure what'd really happened and what was just his imagination. He could have very well blamed Mitchell for something that really hadn't happened.

The door behind him opened and Keegan tensed when Cassie came out to join him. God, how could she even stand looking at him now, let alone seek him out? She didn't yell, didn't pass judgment, instead she came to stand next to him. Then she did something that made him finally cave and cry — she reached out and took his hand.

"It was never me Rat wanted. I loved him and I was nothing but a second choice," Keegan sobbed.

Cassie put her arms around him and he allowed himself to be pulled into her embrace as he broke down and really sobbed. She didn't say anything, but her presence was more than enough. She just wordlessly cooed to him as she rubbed his back.

"Well isn't this touching," a snide voice said, cutting into their moment.

Keegan pulled back and saw the guy from the

cafeteria. He stood casually against the now closed door as he put his hands in his pockets. Now that Keegan got a second glance at the jerk, he seemed way too cocky and a little bit skeezy.

"Eddie, what are you doing out here?" Cassie smiled fondly, making Keegan wonder how close she was to the guy.

"Well, I came to take Keegan, but today was my lucky day and I got you, too."

Before Keegan or Cassie could react to those words, Eddie pulled out a small dart gun. He fired it first at Cassie, hitting her in the neck. She let out a strangled cry before she went down, her eyes already closed. Keegan let out a snarl and started to attack, but was too slow. Eddie fired again and Keegan felt a pinch of pain in his arm.

Then he knew nothing but darkness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rat stared at the computer monitor, not really seeing anything because his mind kept going back to Keegan and the angry way they'd parted. He still couldn't believe that Keegan thought he'd picked him as a consolation prize. Didn't the idiot realize how much he loved him? Crap, Rat couldn't even get through a day anymore unless Keegan was by his side. The Jaguar meant everything to him. All the crushes, love affairs that Rat had in the past paled in comparison to the intense love he had for his man.

Maybe he doesn't know I love him because I'm too damn scared to tell him. That's the real reason I won't take the plunge and move in with him. Not because I don't want him, but for fear that I'll be totally open to the hurt of losing him if things don't work out.

Rat cursed aloud as he realized that his fear of being rejected may have very well lost him the one he cared about most. No, he couldn't allow that. He'd just found Keegan, damn if he was going to

let him go without a fight. Rat started to get out of his chair. He'd find Keegan and force him to listen to reason even if Rat had to lock him up in a cage to keep him from storming out again. He reached over to switch off his computer so he could leave and do that.

Brent rushed in. "I have something bad to tell you."

Rat's breath caught in his chest, painfully. Only one thing would make Brent come to him while this upset. Something had happened to Keegan.

* * * *

Keegan woke up and groaned in pain. Damn, he hurt everywhere. His head, his neck and even his back felt like he'd slept sitting up. After a couple more seconds of confused blinking, he realized that was because he *had* slept sitting up. Now why would he have done that?

Then the memories of the attack came back in a rush and Keegan sat up straighter, forcing himself to focus so he could take in his surroundings. He was in some garage of sorts, judging by the concrete floor and rough unfinished walls. It was empty except for a couple of dusty shelves and the metal folding chair his ass currently occupied. He tried to move only to find his arms were tied behind him with thick rope.

Panic set in as he realized Cassie was nowhere to be seen. He started to pull at the ropes, frantic to escape so he could go find her. Visions of what Eddie may be doing to her plagued Keegan as he fought with little success to get loose. Damn it! Where was MacGyver and his super escape skills when you needed him.

A small door to his side opened and Keegan realized the garage was attached to a house. Two Ravens came out and wordlessly untied him, then half-led, half-dragged him inside. Keegan went without too much of a fight, since he hoped they'd take him to wherever they were holding Cassie.

When they led him into a living room and he finally saw her, Keegan's heart broke. They had her tied to a chair similar to one he'd been in. Her head was slumped over, but all the bruises and cuts on her face were still visible. They stood out stark and angry against her way too pale skin.

Eddie was standing next to her, a cold smile on his lips as he slowly licked her blood from his knuckles. "She does taste yummy. You have no idea how long I've been waiting to do that."

Keegan tried to attack, but the two Ravens held him back. That didn't mean he couldn't still yell though. "How could you sell out your own kind? When Mitchell finds you, he's going to slowly rip you apart and I'm going to enjoy watching every second of it."

Eddie tsked as he came over and patted Keegan on the cheek. "Oh, kitten, it doesn't have to come to that. All I need is one little thing from you and I'll let you both go."

"What?" Keegan didn't even bother to mask the suspicion in his voice.

"The list, I need it."

"Why?" Keegan played dumb, hoping to bide some time so he could think of a way out of the mess he and Cassie were in.

"Because these nice gentlemen are willing to pay a shitload of money for it." Eddie gestured to the two Ravens.

Keegan wrinkled his nose. He could think of a lot of things to call the birds, none of which were nice or gentlemen. "What makes you think I can get it for you? Carson's the one who has it and he's back at HQ."

"Don't play me for a fool, we both know that list is also here." Eddie poked his finger into Keegan's temple, making him wince in pain. "I've heard all about you and that memory or yours. You remember what you had for lunch ten years ago so I don't think one small list should cause you any problems. Don't try and deny you saw it either. I know how often you camped out in Rat's office so you could sniff after that defective freak."

Keegan felt outraged at the insult tossed at Carson, but hid it. The last thing he or Cassie

needed was to make this already fucked up situation worse. "I have a great memory, but it's not a damn copy machine. I can only remember snippets of it," he lied because he knew two things for certain. One, if he gave up that list, then he and Cassie were as good as dead since they'd no longer be useful and two, he'd die before he betray his coalition.

"You better remember or else I'll make you watch as I cut your sister's fingers off one by one," Eddie threatened.

Keegan's inside curdled at the thought of Cassie in any more pain, but he didn't allow it to show. "Dude, I only met her a few weeks ago. Like I care what you do to her. Especially after the way my family and Rat played me for a fool. I want nothing more to do with them."

"Do you honestly think I'm going to believe that?" Eddie curled his lips up in disgust.

"Yes, I'm so sick of my new family I'm half-tempted to lead a group of Ravens into HQ myself, just so long as they promise to kill Brent and Jacyn first. You should have seen their faces when I confronted them about Rat. They had the nerve to laugh about it. Cassie thought it was hysterical, too. She called me a pathetic loser with daddy issues." Keegan silently prayed that Cassie was really out of it and not just playing possum. The last thing he wanted was for her to think he

really meant all the hateful things he'd just said.

"If that's the case, then why were you hugging her before I captured you?" Eddie remained suspicious.

Keegan could see a glimmer in the man's eyes that let him know he was starting to crack. Keegan shrugged. "I have to keep up appearances. Try and blend in with everyone else. I'm sure you know how it is?" Keegan had studied psychology and criminal behavior enough to know that Eddie was a classic sociopath and Keegan hoped to play on that to build a thin connection. Then maybe he could get the man to trust him enough to fall for his planned trick. Keegan pressed on, "It's too bad I can't remember it though. I would love to teach Rat a lesson for fucking with me. That list is his baby and it would be the perfect way to hurt him."

"Yes, it would," Eddie agreed.

Keegan knew he had him. "There is one way I could get the list for us." He drew out the word *us* trying to emphasize that Eddie needed him as an ally. "I'd be willing to help you get it. Providing of course, you give me a cut of the money. Enough for me to leave Mitchell's precious coalition."

"Done, but only if you can really get us the list." Eddie gave a wicked grin.

Chills ran down Keegan's spine. "You don't happen to have a laptop and internet here, do

you?" Keegan fought to keep his voice casual. He was so close now. The last thing he wanted was to blow it by coming off as too eager.

Eddie laughed. "Yes, we do. I'll get them set up right away."

* * * *

Rat hunched over his monitors as he re-watched the same surveillance footage for the hundredth time. He got the same result as all the other times, too—a big fat nothing. The area where they thought Keegan and Cassie had been taken had been the only area of HQ that didn't have a good camera angle. He could see Keegan go out, followed several hours later by Cassie and then Eddie. After that, it's as if the three of them had just vanished.

One thing Rat was certain of, Eddie was responsible for everything. Keegan finding out about Brent, the kidnapping, the leaks to the Ravens, all of it. That prick would pay for it, too. If he so much as gave Keegan a shaving cut, Rat would make the bastard slowly suffer before he died, too.

Rat got so caught up in his plans for vengeance, he almost missed it. A little blip on his computer that let him know somebody was hacking into the system. Pissed that someone would pick now of

all times to stomp in his sandbox, Rat watched for a while to see what the intruding prick wanted. As he realized what it was, his anger quickly slid away to joy. Keegan! Not only was he alive, but he was trying to tell Rat where to find him. Rat let out a whoop of joy before he called in Mitchell.

"What do you have?" Mitchell demanded as he came in, Brent following close behind.

"It's Keegan, he's hacked into the system," Rat said so excitably the words tripped over themselves.

"Can you track where he's at?" Mitchell asked, his face full of hope.

"On it," Rat announced, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

One of the monitors flickered and then a grainy image of Keegan came up on it.

"Did you do that?" Brent asked as he leaned forward for a better look.

"No, Keegan must have," Rat replied.

"He's trying to let us know the layout of where he's being kept. Damn, is he smart," Mitchell said proudly.

Rat squinted, trying to discern what the crappy feed was showing. His stomach lurched when he saw faint shadows of what could have been bruises on Keegan's face. He looked so scared and vulnerable as he stared into the camera that Rat had to breathe deep several times just to keep

steady. He couldn't lose it. Not until they got Keegan back. Then Rat planned on handcuffing the guy to him so he never got lost again.

"Where's Cassie?" Brent reached out and lightly touched the image of Keegan.

"I think that might be her behind him, but it's hard to tell," Mitchell replied.

Rat tore himself away from the screen and started going back to work at tracing the IP address Keegan was at. It only took him a couple of seconds and he had it. Writing it down on a paper, he said, "Let's go."

Brent's cry of outrage made Rat look back at the monitor. What he saw almost destroyed him. Eddie must have figured out Keegan had played him a fool or maybe it just simply was because he thought things were taking too long. Whatever the reason, he'd started to beat Keegan viciously. When the man took a handful of Keegan's hair and slammed his head onto the table in front of the monitor, Rat let out a loud growl. "He is so fucking dead. Promise me, Mitchell, if I fall and can't finish this, you'll make sure Eddie dies."

"You have my word," Mitchell vowed. "But we have another pressing problem."

"What can be worse than this?" Brent gestured to the monitor.

"Did you see the flash in Keegan's eyes? He's getting ready to shift."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rat, Jacyn, Logan, Mitchell and Brent all took their cat forms as they quietly approached the house. It was still dark outside so they didn't have to worry about being spotted by humans and it was easier to move around without being detected by other shifters.

Do you think Eddie knows we're coming? Jacyn asked, using the mental link all the felines shared while in their animal form.

He'd have to be a moron not to, Rat replied as he studied the house in hopes of seeing signs of life inside.

So since it's Eddie, he might not be anticipating our arrival, Brent sniffed at the air, his amber cat eyes glowing in the darkness.

Brent, Mitchell sighed. If it had been possible for a Jaguar to roll his eyes, Rat had no doubt their leader would be doing just that.

All I'm saying is Eddie isn't the brightest kid in the

class.

Almost as if to prove Brent's point, Eddie came out of the house and started to load up a car parked in the drive.

See? Stupid, Brent's telepathic voice sang.

If he could have, Rat would have smiled in agreement. The five felines trotted out of the shadows and surrounded the dumb-as-shit guy.

"Oh fuck," Eddie cried as he dropped a duffle bag. "Look, Mitchell, I can explain."

They didn't give him a chance. As one, they attacked the man. Rat went for the neck, biting through Eddie's windpipe so he couldn't call for help and alert the Ravens inside. The predator in Rat wanted to toy with Eddie and make him pay for his sins, instead he had to settle for a quick kill. Within seconds, the felines were done and Eddie was just a not-so-fond memory.

As they approached the house, loud screams of terror and gunfire erupted inside. Cursing inside his head, Rat moved faster, breaking through the door. Even though it couldn't have taken him ten seconds to get there, it was already over. Two dead Ravens were in a crumpled, bloody mess on the ground as a huge Jaguar pawed at them.

Keegan, you in there, Cub, Rat tried, using the mental link.

Keegan let out a loud warning snarl, his sharp teeth flashing, as he stepped back and placed his

body between them and Cassie. She remained tied to the chair, her head drooped and she didn't move at all as Keegan paced in front of her several times before he stopped to glare at Rat. The Jaguar's tail whipped back and forth as he crouched into the attack position.

Since the mental side of communication hadn't worked, Rat shifted into his human form so he could talk normally. "It's me, Cub. I'm here to help, not cause her anymore harm."

Keegan snarled, blood coating nose and sharp teeth. Mitchell and the others came in, shifting to their human forms as well. Jacyn tried to rush forward to help Cassie only to be brought up short by another warning snarl from Keegan.

"Keegan, stand down and let us help her," Mitchell ordered.

Keegan growled low in his throat.

"Mitchell, we don't have any choice," Jacyn said softly.

"What are you guys planning on doing?" Rat demand harshly.

Too late, he saw the dart gun in Brent's hand. Letting out a cry of denial, Rat jumped in front of Keegan just as Brent fired. The dart hit him in the thigh. The affects were immediate as he crumpled to the ground, the room already had fuzzy edges as it lazily spun around.

"You asshole," Rat slurred right before he

passed out.

When Rat woke up, it didn't come as a surprise that he was inside the basement jail of HQ. It hadn't been the first time he'd found himself in this situation. The only stunner was that he found himself on the *outside* of the cell. Sitting up, he groaned from a headache only a night of hard drinking or being on the wrong end of a tranquilizer gun can bring. He hissed in pain as he blinked against the way too bright light.

"Hey, you're awake."

The sound of Keegan's sweet voice, made Rat forget all about his pounding head. He turned and found the man staring back at him through the thick bars of a cage. Rat jumped to his feet then rushed over. "Why are you locked up?" He reached the bars and pressed up against them so his face was inches from Keegan's.

"They have to make sure I'm not a danger to anyone before they let me run lose in the building." Keegan blushed. "I kind of lost it back at the house."

"*Kind of?* You nibbled those two shifters like they were snacks," Brent snorted.

Rat finally noticed that he and Keegan weren't the only ones there. Jacyn, Brent, Mitchell and Cassie were all sitting on the floor, surrounding the cage as if to protect Keegan.

"Don't get me wrong," Brent added. "Those bird bastards deserved it."

"Then why is he locked up?" Rat thundered. "It's not his fault they kidnapped him. He just reacted on instinct and saved both himself and Cassie. You should be giving him a medal, not locking him up like he's some kind of criminal."

"We didn't have a choice. After what happened with the others, we can't take the risk. Even if he is my brother," Mitchell argued.

The dejected way he did so, let Rat know the guy wasn't any more happy about the situation than he was.

"It's not so bad. Doc Featherstone said it'll only be for a couple of days since I'm not showing the symptoms the other two had," Keegan explained, but his eyes took on a bleak, hollowed look.

"You're still upset. Why?" Rat reached through the bars and cupped Keegan's cheek.

"It's stupid, trust me," Keegan argued as the blush on his cheeks grew more intense.

"Tell me, sweetie," Rat urged. Straining through the bars, he gently stroked Keegan's cheek. "No more secrets between us, ever."

"When I was younger I started having flashbacks about the attack. I realize now that's because my memories were trying to break through. Back then though, my parents thought I'd lost it. So they committed me a couple of

times.”

“Ah, Cub. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Rat’s heart broke all over again. Then he realized that Keegan hadn’t just recently been remembering that night. His eidetic memory must have been fighting against the Hawk’s block for years. With the trauma Keegan had no doubt gone through, no wonder they thought he was going crazy.

“It’s not something I’m proud of, losing my marbles and having to be put into a padded room.”

“But you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know that now, but it still doesn’t make it easier for me to be locked up and helpless. It brings back so many memories.” Keegan smiled wryly.

“Stand back,” Rat ordered.

“Why? What are you doing?” Keegan asked as he took a couple backward steps.

“I’m coming in. If you have to stay in there for two days, I’m going to be damned if you do it alone.” Rat punched in the code on the control pad and the door clicked open. Going in, Rat slammed the door behind him and walked up to Keegan. Pulling him into a tight embrace, Rat savored being able to feel him without the bars separating them.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Keegan protested

as he rubbed his face against Rat's chest.

"Of course I did. I love you," Rat replied.

Keegan stiffened before he pulled back, a guarded expression on his face. "What was that?"

"I love you, Cub." Rat ignored the way his heart hammered in his chest as he made that confession. It scared the hell out of him, but he couldn't risk losing Keegan again.

"You've never said that before."

"I plan to make up for that by saying it at least ten times a day. That is if you still want me." Rat held his breath as he waited for the response.

Keegan smiled.

His look was so adoring it made Rat weak in the knees.

"Of course I want you. I love you, too, Carson."

The moment got interrupted as Daniel and Logan came in, both of them carrying pizza and drinks. After it had been passed around, they all settled into a comfortable conversation. Rat sat on the bed with his mate, Keegan's back pressed against his chest as they continued to cuddle and kiss at every opportunity.

"I can't believe you didn't notice one thing," Cassie said to Rat.

"What?" He braced himself for one of her usual teasing remarks, but got something else instead.

"Both times Keegan was in danger and you had to rescue him, you held your shift with no

problem.”

Rat paused, shocked to realize she was right. “I guess I just needed the right motivation.” He couldn’t think of a better one than Keegan either. He’d walk through hell and back for his mate. Keegan made him feel so whole, complete, that it should come as no surprise that he’d heal Rat on the inside as well as the out.

“So since we’re all calling you Carson now, do you want me to make sure the rest of the felines do, too?” Mitchell asked.

Rat paused as he gazed down into Keegan’s eyes, the pure love he saw there, made that answer an easy one. “Yes, tell them my name is Carson. Thanks to Keegan, I’m finally worthy of it.”

Keegan mouthed *I love you* right before he tipped his head up for a kiss.

As he returned it, Carson knew that Keegan hadn’t been the only one who’d found his way home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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