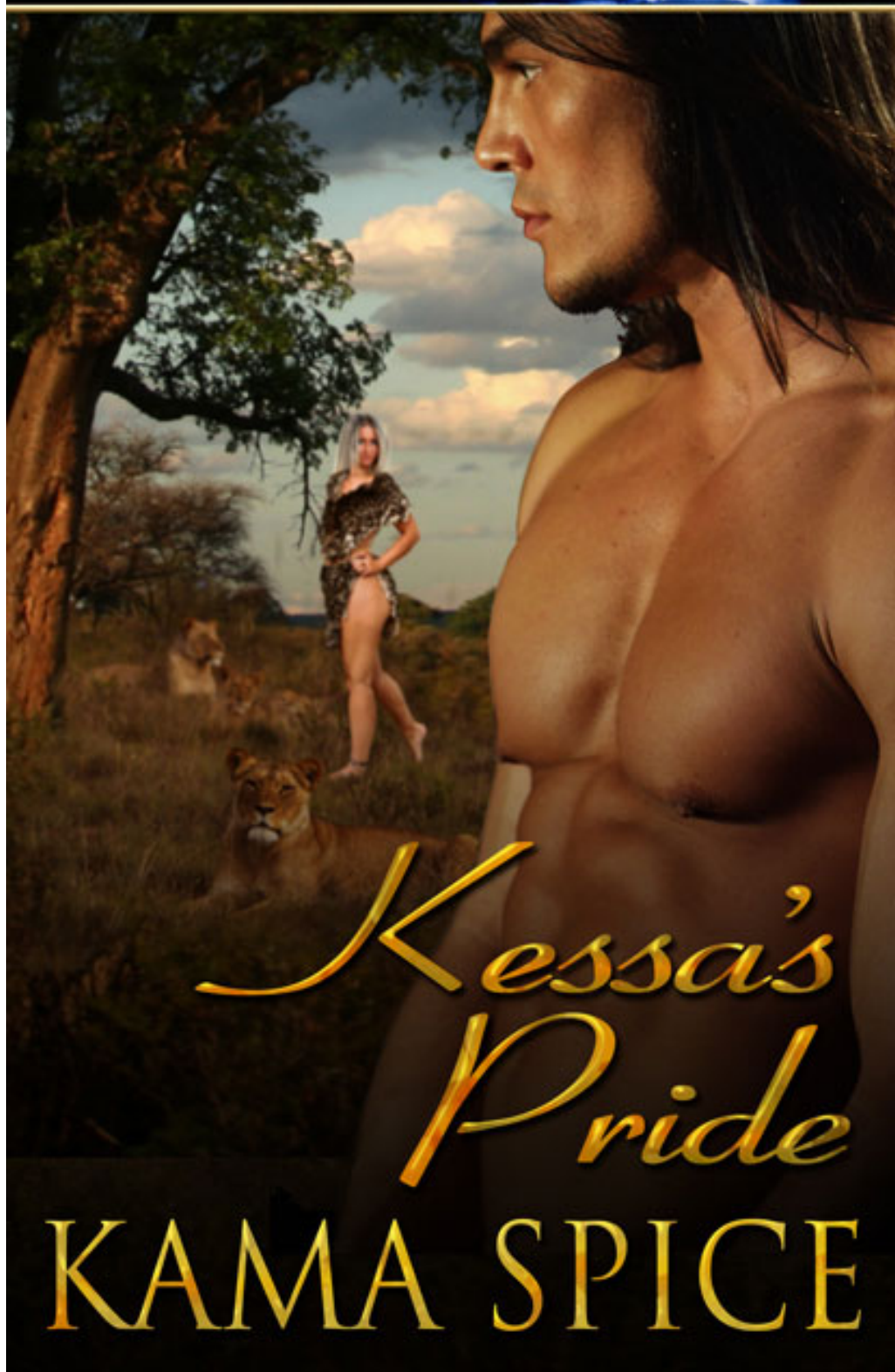


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



## **Kessa's Pride**

### *Kama Spice*

Valren Nimhah grew up hearing stories of Kessa Liah of the Silver lineage — one of the most powerful females in over a hundred years. As Leader King, he knew he would have to bring her back. She has risked the safety of the pride by living among humans. Besides, he was in heat and needed a powerful mate. What he hadn't bargained for was how easily Kessa would drive him to the brink of madness, blinding him with savage desire.

Kessa Liah has managed to subdue her animal urges while living among humans. But after the death of her human mate, a Leader King finds her and promises to bring her back to everything she's left behind. When he sends two males and a female to remind her of what a real cat in heat is like, she is powerless to resist. The familiar scent of Lith'han sex sends her into a frenzy. If this is how her body responds to ordinary pride members, resisting the lust of an alpha male will be almost impossible.

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[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Kessa's Pride

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# ***KESSA'S PRIDE***

**Kama Spice**

## Chapter One

Kessa turned her back quickly to the window she had been staring out. The open plains spread out in that square frame, with the mountains and woods just off in the distance. Those mountains had been calling to her more insistently, more urgently in the past couple of months. And as usual, she shoved the urge down—the call of those jagged peaks, daring her to run over their sides with the sun licking her skin and the sound of the wind, the rushes, the birds, all thrumming a primal rhythm in her bones.

It was the reason she and Sher had moved out here to the “back of beyond”, as her children called it. Where the nearest neighbor was miles away and they could live a simple life with a well on their property, a small vegetable patch, a little greenhouse, and solar panels instead of electricity.

She was proud she had been able to quell the natural urges that simmered to the surface every now and then so she could live a quiet, human life with Sher. But even in the years they were together, Kessa knew *they* were looking for her. They were getting closer than ever in all the years she had been away. There were times she would be outside, tending to the vegetable patch or drawing water from the well, when she would stop. And there it would be. The scent of her kind. They were never close enough for her to worry too much, but she could sense them. And if she could sense them, she knew they could sense *her*.

At first, she dismissed it as being all in her imagination. After all, how could the other Lith’hah be in these parts? It was too far south, for one. And for another, there were no Mun’hai trees. The very thought of the Mun’hai leaf and berry made her mouth water. But, again, Kessa pushed the thought aside quickly. She was happy here. Sher had worked hard to build a beautiful home for them, and they had reared their two children together.

She never thought she would want to rear young, but being with Sher had made her want things she never thought she could desire—things like love, stability, a calm, easy existence with a family. Somewhere to belong. The children had allowed her to have that, a little clan she and Sher had created.

But now the children were gone. Off building their own lives, living in loud, bustling cities. And Sher...her beloved Sher was gone. His illness had taken everything out of her. Those eighteen months had been the hardest on her and the children. The urge to snap back to her true self was at its strongest, and the children would give her curious looks when her resolve faltered, even a little bit—sometimes resulting in a faint sheen of silver hair on her face. It would immediately vanish when she came to her senses, but there were a few close calls.

How she kept her true self concealed from those closest to her was one of Kessa's greatest and most secret sources of pride. She was of the Silver Lith'hah lineage, one of the most powerful clans in the Northern Territories. And she was one of the most powerful females to enter the clan in ages. Her birth had been cause for a great celebration that had lasted many weeks. But that was almost seventy years ago.

Before she left her kind, vowing never to return. She had found a small town, landed a waitressing job and met Sher, one of the gentlest, kindest, rarest types of human males. He was almost the perfect blend of masculine and feminine energies. They lived together for a couple of years before getting married and having two children, a boy and a girl.

It had been a simple, quiet, content existence. After his death, she had continued living in the home Sher had built for them, far away from the town. She had wanted to cocoon herself in his memory. The house reminded her of his arms when they wrapped around her, the way his biceps bulged and his penis hardened against her softly rounded ass.

The image of their sex flashed across her mind and she gripped the back of a chair. She strode purposely away from the window and walked into the bathroom. Kessa

turned on the faucet full blast. Stripping quickly, she stepped into the stream of water, cupping her breasts and allowing the stream to hit her coffee-colored nipples straight on. A moan escaped her lips and she leaned against the back of the shower stall, pinching the nipples gently and remembering Sher's mouth on them. His teeth grazing the tips and sending flames leaping through her legs to her clit.

She reached down to feel the wetness she knew was already there and slipped two fingers into her pussy, sliding the juice up and over her clit. Her entire body quivered as she continued to stroke herself to orgasm, pulling and tugging more fervently on her nipples while stroking her clit until she was screaming Sher's name and her body writhed in ecstasy.

When she was finished, she lovingly lathered herself the way Sher used to, paying close attention to the folds and hollows of her skin, and wrapped an oversized towel around her body. Then she padded into the living room, sank down to the sofa and had a good, long, sobbing cry.

This had become a ritual for the past nine months. The nine months that Sher had been gone. She knew if any of her pride members could see her now, they would view her as pathetic. She was a Lith'han of the finest lineage and having such a response to a human would have been cause for extreme scorn, at the very least, from her pride members. But she didn't care. This was one of the many reasons she had left.

Her son had been urging her to see a therapist for grief counseling. She wanted to laugh. What would she tell them? That she was one of those mythic creatures humans always told stories about—like mermaids and unicorns? That she was a descendant of the now-extinct saber-toothed cats and could live for several hundred years? That she had run away from her pride, and now didn't know where she would go?

She sighed and wiped her face clear of the salty tears, letting the towel slowly unravel and fall to the floor. Suddenly, something like an electric current raced up her spine. She closed her eyes, raised her chin and opened her senses. Yes, there was someone outside. Someone who felt strangely familiar. She snapped her lids open and

stepped clear away from the windows. But not before catching a movement in the distance. She stole closer to the curtains, making sure to keep in their shadows, and peered outside. Sure enough, there, just outside the fence of their property, was a large, golden-brown male Lith'han. He had been watching her the entire time.

Quickly, she pulled a sweatshirt over her head and slipped on a pair of shorts. Thrusting her feet into a pair of cowboy boots, she threw open the door. She would not allow the Lith'hah to barge into her life now. She wanted to live the rest of her centuries out on the simple farm she and Sher had built. She had worked too hard to find some quiet and peace—to live amongst the more civilized of humans—undetected and happy. For the most part. Or at least content. Certainly happier than she was when she ran with the Lith'hah.

The Lith'hah, with their flesh-eating ways and utter disregard for Life, had felt corrosive to her when she was a young girl. Some of the more aggressive ones had come far too close for comfort a few times before her mother had chased them away. When they were in heat, almost nothing could get in their way and they didn't care who or what they ravaged.

*Beasts*, she thought in disgust as she took long strides toward the Lith'han who now calmly lounged under the large tree just outside their property. The sweatshirt was scratchy and rubbed against her bare nipples, sending warmth between her legs. She knew this male would smell the heat of sex and cursed herself for not putting on a bra. But then, depending on how long he had been watching, he would have smelled her heat from the shower.

"What do you want?" she demanded when she reached the fence.

The Lith'han on the other side eyed her calmly for a moment before standing and changing shape. Kessa watched him stretch and elongate into a magnificent man. The last to go was his mane, which was replaced with long, shiny black hair that reached the middle of his naked waist.



Kessa drew in a sharp breath. This was no ordinary Lith'han. He was obviously an alpha, and was more than likely the Leader King of his pride, or maybe even an entire community of prides.

He came toward her.

Kessa resisted the urge to take a step back and instead rooted her feet more solidly to the ground.

He raised his hand to her silver-streaked hair—a characteristic unique to her lineage, and the one thing that did not change in the transformation from Lith'han to human form, regardless of what age she shaped herself into.

She recoiled from his touch.

A small smile played on his mouth, but he retracted his hand and leaned against the fence, staring into her eyes. "My senses have been tingling for the past few moons," he said. His voice was rich, with just the faintest hint of a growl left from his transformation. "I was far north when I first sensed you. I had no choice but to follow." He stopped to chuckle softly. "I would never have imagined that one of us could have made it this far south."

Kessa prickled. He was no different than any other Lith'han. "I am not one of you," she hissed. "I will never live among such barbaric, filthy vermin the likes of the Lith'hah. Now leave my property at once, or I will have you hunted, stuffed and hung over one of these farmers' fireplaces."

His face hardened, but his body stayed relaxed. Slowly he rose to his full height, his head a good foot or more above hers. The man was massive.

Before she knew what was happening, he put a hand behind her neck and pulled her up against his hard, naked body. His other hand reached down, between her legs. Without thinking, she arched her body, straining against the fence and raised her face to his.

He chuckled softly again, brushing his lips against her cheek. “No. You are definitely a Lith’han, darling,” he mumbled before releasing her just as suddenly as he’d pulled her to him.

Kessa’s face burned. It had been decades since she’d been this close to one of her own—the last time was when she was eighteen and on the cusp of her Awakening. Lith’hah awakened to their bodies between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. Awakening snuck up on them, and when it hit, it hit hard, with a good few weeks in heat. Those going through their Awakenings were closely monitored and carefully tended. It could be a painful entry into adulthood.

Kessa grimaced at the memory of having to go through her own Awakening alone and in the woods, stumbling through with no guidance, no careful monitoring. Those weeks were painfully branded into her brain. Through some miracle, she managed to get through those weeks without hurting herself or anyone else. But when it was over, she knew with more certainty than ever that she would never, *ever* return to the Lith’hah.

But here he was now—a Leader King zeroing in on her and threatening all the stability she had managed to create. His familiar, feral scent made her body respond to this male instinctively. He was an alpha and there was something primitive in her that was programmed to respond to him.

“You’re one of our more powerful females,” he said, taking a step back. “I grew up hearing stories of you—Kessa of the Silver lineage; the one who left. It takes an uncommon amount of strength to suppress your urges the way you have, Kessa. You’ve gone undetected for a long time. But you belong to us.”

Kessa willed her pulse to slow down. “I belong to *me*,” she said quietly but firmly.

His eyes twinkled before he turned away. “I’ve come to reclaim you. I’ve been searching for you for a long time, Kessa. Every so often I’d catch a whiff of you, but it never stayed long enough for me to pinpoint,” he said over his shoulder. “I will go and

prepare the community for your arrival. Say whatever goodbyes you must. I shall return in the next moon."

Before she could respond, he transformed back into his lionlike shape and leapt smoothly out of sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kessa stormed through the house, banging doors and shoving furniture out of her way. "For decades I've been living a free life, away from the Lith'hah, and now he thinks he can just stroll on in and say, *'I've come to reclaim you'?!'*"

She stopped at the framed picture of Sher on the wall by the stairs and traced his face. "Never," she swore, "I will never go back there."

She bounded up the stairs and into the master bedroom where she and her husband of thirty years had spent hours upon hours making sweet love. The hot tub set next to a giant, single-pane, floor-to-ceiling window especially sent heat flooding through her limbs. But the emptiness of the house pressed into her and she collapsed onto the large, king-sized bed.

What was she going to do? She had to come up with a plan, obviously. The Lith'hah could not be outrun. They had to be outsmarted. She had managed it once and she could surely do it again...couldn't she? Last time, she knew enough to go south. She knew she could go where other Lith'hah would never survive.

Her plan had been to live on the edges—coming in for the leaves and fruit of the critical Mun'hai tree and then dashing back, far enough from the edge so the Lith'hah couldn't reach her. She roamed for a good twenty years in the woods, learning to survive on her own. Whenever she became lonely or needed some company, she would find a small town and transform herself into a stunning young human female and stay as long as she could without arousing suspicion. She made some friends during her stays in various small towns throughout the southern regions, but she could never

allow anyone to get too close. Always, inevitably, there would be questions – Where are you from? Where is your family? Why do you always take off into the woods?

But slowly she discovered she could go longer and longer without the leaves and fruit of the Mun'hai. She was adapting to her new environment. She had heard that it was a trait unique to the Silver line – adapting to almost any environment, regardless how severe. If that was what was happening now, she was thrilled. It meant she could finally be free. She didn't have to steal into the Territories under cover of night to get enough of the life-sustaining fruit to last her for months.

She went farther and farther south, though not quite as far as the Southern Sands, until she was sure no Lith'han would ever dare venture so far away from the sacred tree.

And yet, here he was. Smooth and lithe and...determined. Her heart beat faster as she recalled the feeling of being pressed against his chest, his lips murmuring against her cheek. Everything in her body coiled around one word – *Danger*.

She stood and paced for several minutes. She would have to run. Out of this house and far, far away from her only home. The only place she had experienced the tenderness of love. Human love, yes, but love nonetheless. Her children were dear to her – they were all she had left of Sher.

She dialed her son Tinan's number. Voice mail. She hung up and tried her daughter Tiannelle.

"Hello?"

Kessa was relieved to hear the honey warmth of her daughter's voice. "Hi, sweetheart, it's Mom."

"Hi, Mom...Roonan, stop that!"

Kessa waited while Tiannelle dealt with her toddler son.

"Sorry, Mom. What's up?"

"Honey, I...I've received a job offer in...in a small town off the border of the Southern Sands."

There some rustling on the other line then, "Wow, so far? Are you going to take it?"

"Yes, I've...decided to take it. I think it will be good for me, especially..."

"Absolutely," Tiannelle said. "Tinan and I have been telling you to go back to your life after Dad died. I think it's great, Mom. You should totally do it."

"I—I may not be in contact very much for a while, sweetheart."

"I know, Mom," her daughter answered quietly. "We haven't really had much contact as it is."

Kessa's chest tightened. She knew the girl had always longed to be closer to her. Kessa had allowed her body to conceive in human form because she wanted to have a family with Sher. Or so she'd thought at the time. What she'd really wanted was safety. Stability. Comfort. She had done her best with Tinan and Tiannelle, guiding them and encouraging them...supporting them. But she knew there was always something missing for them. As there was for her. *You can't give what you don't have*, she thought.

Kessa turned back to the task at hand. She may not have had the warmth that was characteristic of some human mothers, but she certainly had the fierce urge to protect her offspring—an urge that was wired into her genetic coding. If anyone—human or otherwise—threatened her young, she would have quite literally torn them apart. She was relieved that the children would be completely safe. No doctor or human instrument could detect the subtle differences between the blood of her children and those with full human bloodlines.

"I'm sorry, baby," she whispered. Of course she was referring to far more than her daughter would ever know.

Tiannelle sighed as she called to her son again. When she came back, she asked, "Did you tell Tinan yet?"

"I tried calling, but his voice mail picked up. Would you tell him, Nell? I...I've got to move rather quickly and I was hoping he would take care of the house."

There was a heavy sadness on the line. Kessa knew it was all the years of yearning. The unspoken words between them, and all of Kessa's secrets and lies, no matter how well-intentioned they were.

Now she was immensely grateful the Lith'han gene passed only through mating when both partners were in Lith'han form, allowing sexual interaction in human form without fear of diluting the line or mutating it. That, together with the fact Lith'hah females were always in control of reproduction—menstruating only four times a year and conceiving only when the female opened her channels through a process of ritual and ceremony—were no doubt protective mechanisms the Lith'hah had evolved over centuries to ensure survival. Ones that Kessa now considered tremendous blessings. She had remembered witnessing these rituals from her childhood and it had taken several tries before she got them right, but when she did, Tiannelle was finally conceived. Sher had been overjoyed.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I will come back to see you both as soon as I can, sweetheart."

There was a pause on the other end before Tiannelle spoke again. "Okay, Mom," she said quietly. "I'll tell Tinan to check on the house...you take care of yourself."

Kessa breathed in deep to keep her voice from wavering. "I will, love. You too."

She hung up and looked around her home. The home where she had healed, had learned to love, to welcome pleasures of the flesh and seek joy again.

While she lived with Sher, she had aged herself, carefully matching his pace. He had aged gracefully, with few wrinkles and just a faint sprinkling of gray here and there. But now he was gone. The first and only male—human or Lith'han—to open her heart and cradle it. To prod her tenderly to be less afraid, to show her how rich and good this never-ending life could be.

She would not ever return to the disgusting ways of the Lith'hah. She grabbed a backpack and shoved a few essentials in it—a brush, toothbrush, mirror, change of clothes—items that only humans had use for.

She knew she would have to change into her Lith'han form. Something she hadn't done in the decades with Sher out of fear of sparking some sort of longing, some sort of desire to live among Lith'hah, and questioning her decisions. But now she had no choice. If Kessa was to stand any chance at all of surviving in those deep woods, she couldn't do it in human form. But at some point, she hoped to make it out into a town or a city, somewhere farther out of the reach of her kind, and start again. The thought of starting again filled her with an almost unbearable emptiness. This long, long life was a curse. She was grateful her children would not suffer the same endless expanse of time—within which all sorts of suffering could repeat itself—all sorts of loss could echo, time and time again, throughout the years.

“Oh, get over it,” she told herself sternly. “If you want to live among the humans, you might as well get used to this emptiness.”

The sun was beginning to set as she headed out the door. She grabbed one of her warmest jackets and walked into the darkening woods, knowing she would need to be several miles in before making the change.

## **Chapter Two**

Kessa ran as fast as she could in her human form. But even as she resisted the change, her hide toughened over the more-frail human skin. Her legs became tight with corded muscle and her hair grew thick, becoming closer and closer to the full mane of her Lith'han form. She opened her senses and knew that, with the exception of small woodland animals and the occasional snake in her path, she was alone. She was relieved to pick up no hunters close-by.

As she gained distance between the home she had shared with Sher and their children, a dull, aching emptiness filled her. She finally gave in to the urge that was coursing through her now – urgently pulsing through her limbs – and almost howled in relief when she placed her large, padded paws on the earth.

The smells and sounds of the woods filled her, inside and out, and she remembered how wonderful it was to feel as if the entirety of Nature flowed through her body. She loved not knowing where she ended and the rest of Nature began. She reveled in the strength and speed of her legs, the sharpness of her hearing and the sense of smell that alerted her to any form of danger, near or far. She glanced at the glittering silver of her fur and remembered what a magnificent creature she was in her Lith'han form. Her eyes, in their natural Lith'han form, were silver-gray, black-rimmed, and slanted up in the corners. Her nose and mouth were always lined with black and her paws had small specks of black dotted through.

A pang shot through her chest as she thought of how often she had wanted to share this part of herself with Sher. He never asked many questions, even when she knew he wanted to, when she was struggling most with her instinctive Lith'hah nature, but she knew it would have been too risky. Kessa had heard tales circulated among the humans—cautionary fairy tales of the mythical and elusive catlike creatures in the



mountainous Northern Territories. When she was a child, she remembered the elders whispering about one or two Lith'hah who had been captured and their cruel mistreatment at the hands of the humans.

Kessa shuddered at the memory of what the Lith'hah kings had done to those humans. She knew what they were doing was necessary for the safety of all Lith'hah, but it seemed abominable to her, nevertheless.

Her skin tingled with the sense there were humans near. She slowed her pace to determine which direction they were coming from and where they were headed. Knowing a human's movements ahead of the time they made them could be a matter of life and death for a lone Lith'hah.

When she zeroed in on the scent, she discovered that they were young, in their early twenties—a male and a female, and they weren't headed anywhere. They were just under ten miles or so, directly ahead.

She continued as she was but slowed considerably, taking care to move more quietly. Her plan was to silently slip past them, but she paused when she was just beyond their sight.

The smell of sex hung thick in the air. She felt heat spread through her legs and remembered that this was how it was for Lith'hah. The urge to mate was immediate and very intense. For most of her kind, it was all but uncontrollable. She had been impressed by the restraint of the male who had been outside her home. Most male Lith'hah in his position would simply have taken her, right there, without bothering with words or explanations.

But now, the heat from the couple just a few feet away overtook her. She took a deep breath and willed herself to keep moving, but her body would not cooperate. She gritted her teeth and climbed into the thick branches of a tree. From there, she saw the couple. They had a tent up and were both naked on a fully open sleeping bag next to a smoldering fire.

Their bodies had a glow about them from the moonlight. Kessa watched as the young man hooked the woman's legs over his shoulders and buried his face between her thighs. The woman moaned, and the sound slid straight through Kessa's entire body. She knew she wouldn't make it through this and her instinct wouldn't allow her to walk away.

She climbed down the tree and began to mold herself back into her human form. The soft moans on the other side of the brush made her tremble, but she willed her fingers to grow long and slender, and then she used them to quickly shape her face into a younger version of the woman she had been earlier—the woman Sher had met all those years ago.

She put on the clothes she had stuffed into her backpack but left it leaning against the tree. Then she shuffled around to create some forewarning noise before appearing in the couple's view.

They were both sitting up when she emerged from the brush, the young woman, a redhead, was covering her breasts with her hands and had a corner of the sleeping bag pulled up to cover the soft, light mound between her legs. The man was in front of her, holding a hand over his penis.

Kessa was surprised at how frightened they seemed but noticed they relaxed a little when they saw she was simply a young woman. Kessa wondered if perhaps they had thought she was a hunter? She saw that the small splotches of pink, which had dotted the young woman's face, were beginning to slowly fade.

"Oh!" Kessa said, feigning surprise and embarrassment. "I'm so sorry! I sometimes come deep into the woods to...never mind. I'm so sorry for interrupting..." Her eyes raked over the bodies in front of her.

The young man's penis was shrinking, but his hand relaxed, barely covering anything at all.

The woman caught Kessa staring brazenly at them both and smiled, dropping her arms and the corner of the sleeping bag she had been clutching.

Kessa's clit tightened.

Her friend, watching the exchange between the women, put one arm around his girlfriend and slowly stroked his now-hardening cock. "That's all right," he drawled, "no harm done. Do you live close-by?"

Kessa shook her head, unable to take her eyes away from his hand, which was now making long, smooth strokes. She moaned quietly.

The solidly built redhead turned to him and brought his head down to one of her taut, pink nipples. "Would you like to watch?" she asked Kessa softly.

Kessa walked over to the edge of their sleeping bag and tore off her shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra, so her breasts spilled forward. She pulled her pants off and tossed them aside, kneeling in front of the couple, who now seemed completely at ease.

The woman squeezed her breasts together and her mate took both nipples deep into his mouth. He kept an eye on Kessa as he sucked, and continued to stroke himself.

Kessa reached down to place a finger in her pussy. It slipped in easily. She was drenched.

The young woman watched Kessa with heavy-lidded eyes then threw her head back and groaned. "Suck harder," she said, pressing the man's head against her nipples and slipping her fingers into her vulva.

Kessa squeezed her own nipples as she watched.

He sucked harder as the woman ground her hand deeper into her pussy. She brought one knee up and Kessa could see the glistening pink and purple folds as the woman stroked her clit.

Kessa moaned and moved to kneel between the two. She put her mouth on the woman's pussy and firmly but gently slipped her fingers out, stroking with her tongue where the redhead's fingers had been. She slid two fingers inside the woman and took the man's cock in her other hand.

The man pressed against her hand, moaning as she stroked him. The woman arched her back as her mate sucked her nipples. Kessa continued to thrust her tongue and fingers against the woman's hot, dripping pussy.

Kessa could feel her own pussy becoming wetter. The pain between her legs was almost unbearable. She continued to stroke the woman but turned to put the man's cock in her mouth. He groaned, letting the nipples fall out.

Kessa slid her lips up and down his shaft a couple of times before stopping to push him onto his back. She then pulled his girlfriend against her body, kissing her full on the mouth. The woman's nipples pressed against Kessa's as Kessa guided her backward onto the man's body.

Once the woman was lying with her back against his chest, Kessa took his cock and slid it into his girlfriend's wet pussy as he draped his arms around his mate and began kneading her breasts. His cock slipped in easily and the woman arched back, taking him in as deeply as she could.

Kessa rolled them both onto their sides and they willingly obliged. The man thrust himself into his mate as they built into a rhythm, and Kessa quickly put her head between the woman's legs, maneuvering herself into the classic sixty-nine position, and guiding the woman's mouth toward her now-tight and throbbing clit.

She shuddered when the young woman's mouth took her clit, sliding it in and out. She thrust her fingers into Kessa's pussy in time with the man's rhythm.

Kessa watched his cock slip in and out as she sucked on the redhead's clit. Kessa's body began to writhe as the woman continued to suck on her clit, all the while thrusting her slender fingers deep into Kessa.

Kessa moaned as the thrusting grew faster and deeper.

The woman exploded first, convulsing against Kessa and shoving her fingers deep inside her while she sucked greedily at the folds of her vulva and clit. Kessa knew she was close too but held back for just another minute...

The man stiffened and let out a cry as he came.

Kessa finally gave in and let the orgasm course through her body.

The woman held on to Kessa as she came and then gently let go as Kessa's writhing slowed.

They all lay exactly as they were for several minutes before Kessa slowly pulled away and sat up. "My name is Kessa."

The woman smiled shyly. "I'm Melanie, and this is William."

Kessa realized for the first time that William was black. Light enough to pass for white, but still black. And in this part of the territories, these two could face death for being together, even in this day and age. Now she understood why they were so deep in the woods and why they'd been so afraid when she burst upon them.

William gently pulled himself out of his girlfriend and sat up. "Why are you out so late in the woods by yourself, Kessa?"

Kessa shrugged. Covering things up had become second nature to her over the past few decades. "I live nearby and often go for late-night strolls. I've never seen you here," she said, turning the tables and putting them in the spotlight.

They looked at each other and smiled. "We don't usually do this," Melanie said. "But tonight we were celebrating our anniversary." She reached for William's hand and laced her fingers through his.

"Congratulations," Kessa said warmly. "You make a lovely couple."

William looked at her curiously. "Whereabouts did you say you lived again?"

She nodded her head toward the mountains. "Just over in that direction."

He nodded but kept looking at her. "You've got the strangest eyes..."

Kessa suddenly realized that in her haste to change into human form, she had left her silver Lith'han eyes intact. She kept her face expressionless. "I've heard that before," she calmly.

He continued to stare. "My grandmother used to tell us stories about these lion-people way up in the Northern Territories. She said they could become human or

animal whenever they wanted, and they all had eyes the color of gems...they'd come and mate with humans then feast on their flesh."

Kessa forced herself to chuckle. "You have no idea how many times I've heard about the lion-people whenever someone looks at my eyes."

He stared for just a moment longer before looking down in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. It's a silly myth, I know..."

Melanie shook her head and smiled. "William is a romantic. He wants to believe all the old myths and fairy tales are real."

"That's okay," Kessa said smoothly. "These eyes run in my family. My grandmother had them and hers before her." She grinned. "When the sun's out, they look plain old hazel."

William grinned too. "Would you like to spend the night with us? We've got plenty of room."

Melanie stifled a yawn and stretched out on the sleeping bag. "I'm kind of beat," she said, and then sheepishly added, "we drank a little ale this evening."

*So that was why their skin looked like it was glowing,* Kessa thought. She was tired herself from all that running. And now her body wanted nothing more than to nuzzle up with these two warm bodies for a few hours before continuing on her journey.

"Thanks," she said. "I'd love to stay."

She lay down next to Melanie as William cradled her from behind. And with the woman sandwiched between them, Kessa fell into a deep sleep.

When she woke, she was lying alone. She looked over, and about a foot away were William and Melanie, limbs entwined and in deep sleep. She wanted to roll over and lay against them again, but there was something in the air that made her skin crawl.

She rose quickly and quietly from the sleeping bag, slipping back to where her backpack was. Taking a quick peek to make sure the couple was sound asleep, she

allowed herself to change fluidly into her Lith'han form. She grabbed her backpack in her mouth and let her senses open.

*Lith'hah.* There was a group of them barely three miles away. But how? How could they get this far south—so far from the Mun'hai tree? A mixture of terror and nausea washed through her limbs. The couple.

She knew the Lith'hah were looking for her. She had to steer them far away from Melanie and William. But by now they had surely sensed all three of them. Particularly the scent of sex. And they had, no doubt, increased their speed and sense of urgency as the scent of sex flowed through them.

She opened up again and knew that they were close. Two males and a female. She also knew that the king who had come to her house earlier was not among them. Who were these Lith'hah? And why were they after her? Were they members of the king's pride?

No time to ponder questions now. She changed quickly back into human form and dropped the backpack against the tree. She turned to walk back through the brush when she slammed against William.

"I knew it," he said softly.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asked, her heart thudding against her chest. She had been so focused on the Lith'hah that she'd missed the scent of William walking up to her. She was furious with herself. How could she be so careless?

"I *knew* it," he repeated, this time with a trace of excitement in his voice.

"William," she said, firmly. "You and Melanie are in great danger. There is a group of...of l-lion-people headed straight in our direction and they aren't friendly."

His expression changed. "What kind of danger?"

"Just grab your things and start moving that way," Kessa said, pointing left. "I'm going to run in the opposite direction so I can lead them away from you. They're after me; they don't want you."

“Why are they after you?”

She gritted her teeth in exasperation and tore through the brush. “Melanie,” she said, shaking the woman’s shoulder. “Get up, honey. You and William have to hurry and get the hell out of here. You’re in danger.”

Kessa went about gathering the couple’s things and shoved them at William. She spoke low so Melanie wouldn’t hear but loud enough that William couldn’t miss the urgency of her words. “All the stories your grandmother told you were true. If you want to keep Melanie safe – *run*.”

He widened his eyes and stumbled back. He grabbed Melanie’s arm and began dragging her in the direction Kessa had pointed to.

Melanie tripped over a large, protruding tree root, her voice growing increasingly alarmed. “What’s going on? William, what is it?”

When they were out of sight, Kessa changed quickly into her Lith’han form and, leaving her backpack where it was against the tree, ran with all her strength in the opposite direction of William and Melanie.



## **Chapter Three**

She ran until the muscles in her legs felt as if they were shredding off the bone. But she wouldn't stop—couldn't stop—until she had put significant distance between herself and the three Lith'hah after her.

While she ran, she had opened her senses to find out more about the Lith'hah on her trail. The female in the pack was faster and had navigated them very close to the campsite by the time Kessa sprinted away. That made sense since females were far superior in tracking abilities.

Kessa knew it had been a close call. She could only imagine what the three Lith'hah would have done to William and Melanie. A chill ran through her at the thought, and she ran faster, away from the two humans who had so warmly, willingly invited her in.

Kessa could feel them slowing, their scent falling farther and farther behind. She was grateful for the few hours of rest she'd had at the campsite. Even though the pack had clearly been moving closer as she spent those exquisite hours with William and Melanie, and while the three of them slept, it had given Kessa the rest and fortitude to outrun them now. The three Lith'hah were tired and hungry. She was sure of that. If they had traveled down from the Northern Territories with the Leader King, then set chase after her, they were a long way from home. Had the Leader King sensed that she'd bolted? The only possible explanation for these three to have reached her so soon after he left was that he'd picked up on her movement south and sent members of his tracking party after her. She knew she was taking a gamble leaving so soon, but she'd wanted to give herself lots of time to get as far away as possible. Now she wondered if her gamble had backfired.

When she no longer picked up the scent of the other Lith'hah, she allowed herself to slow. She followed the scent of water to a shallow, burbling stream and lay down to drink. The water tasted cold and sweet after running for so long.

Once her thirst was quenched, she took stock of her surroundings. She was at the foot of a small mountain with an abundance of berry bushes growing all along its side. Kessa molded herself back into her human form and quickly began gathering berries. The dull ache in her belly reminded her she had not eaten in almost twenty-four hours.

She ate as she picked berries off the branches then took as many as she could carry up the side of the mountain. She had seen a small ledge perfect for sitting and headed straight for it.

When she reached the ledge, she saw that it led back into a small cave. She set the berries down, sharpened her eyesight and opened her senses. She looked up at the carvings on the cave walls. They were etchings depicting various different sexual positions in exquisite detail. She ran her hand over one that showed a man entering a woman from behind and felt her vulva tighten.

"What amazing creatures these humans are," she thought. "At times they seem almost afraid and ashamed of their own sex, and then this...art, showing the sacred beauty of people making love in all its myriad forms."

She walked to the other side to get a closer look at images of women and men masturbating, men stroking one another's penises, men and women going down on one another. "It's magnificent," she breathed. She wondered when the etchings might've been carved and how those humans might've found this small cave, deep in the mountains and woods near the Southern Sands.

She sat down and ate her berries, still taking in and marveling at the details of the images. When she had eaten enough, she stretched out on the floor of the cave and thought she'd take a quick nap before moving on again.

*The images of the cave leapt to life. All around Kessa were women and men in ecstasy. Bodies and limbs flowing into one another, gasps and moans and heat. The cave was incredibly hot.*

*Kessa felt tongues on her. They slid, wet and hot, up her thighs, stroking the lips of her vulva, nudging her nipples to full erection. She let out a low moan and opened her legs wider so the tongue on her pussy could enter. She wanted to take it in as deep as it would go.*

*All around her was the beauty of the cave people – intricate, elaborate, stunningly beautiful. Dancing and leaping in sexual bliss.*

*One of the tongues became a mouth, sucking on both her nipples at once – just as William had done with Melanie, and the tongue in her pussy slid smoothly in and out. Something – someone? – rolled her over onto her side as another tongue began to lick her ass.*

*The cave became hotter and hotter as she groaned and opened her body. The tongues plunged into her, moist and hot, while her nipples were sucked and she exploded with a scream.*

Kessa awoke, jolted by the orgasm that still rocked her body. When she opened her eyes, she found herself staring into the ruby-red eyes of a male Lith'han.

She struggled to sit up and scramble backward, but the three of them were on her. Within minutes, they had her bound at the wrists and ankles. They were in their human forms, still holding her down.

The other male, a striped-auburn Lith'han, smiled. "And you thought you'd lost us."

The female who had held Kessa's arms purred, "Your tracking is off after so many years of not using it, lovely." She traced a fingertip over Kessa's nipple, sending shock waves throughout her body. "We took to the water and you thought you'd outrun us. A little rusty, huh?" She grinned and winked. "But your beauty does live up to the legend."

The lean, auburn Lith'han sidled up next to her body. "Such a shame we are forbidden to play with you," he said. "I would have loved to enter your hot *wima*."

Kessa bristled at the Lith'hah word for pussy. She hadn't heard it in so long, and to hear it now from a male who knew nothing about her, nor cared to, was enough to make her fume.

Ruby Eyes smiled without warmth or humor. "I know what you mean," he said. "But she's off-limits, Malvar. The Leader King gave strict orders."

Kessa knew resistance at that point was futile. It was time to gather as much information as she could. If she stood any chance of escaping at all, she would need to know as much as she could find out.

She looked calmly at Ruby Eyes. "The Leader King sent you?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "You *have* been gone a long time, haven't you?" He stood and walked to the other side of the cave where he crouched and began popping berries into his mouth. "The Leader King," he said, "seems to want to keep you for himself." His voice tremored with obvious pleasure.

"But he said he wasn't coming back until the next moon!" she countered.

The female reached over to rake her fingers through Kessa's hair. "We weren't far when he found you. We'd set up a small camp in the woods, a short distance from the closest Mun'hai tree. At first His Majesty meant to take you with us, but he worried that your sudden disappearance might alarm your humans."

"So, he gave you time to tie up loose ends," Ruby Eyes said, flicking a glance at her. "But of course you took advantage of his kindness. Silver Lith'hah always fancy themselves above the law."

The female laughed. "You're just jealous." Then she turned to Kessa. "I grew up hearing about you—the powerful Silver Lith'han who left everything to live among the humans."

"You thought I was a traitor, no doubt," Kessa said dryly.

She shrugged. "The Council tried to keep things quiet. They didn't want word spreading among the prides that a member had successfully bailed. I suppose they

didn't want anyone else following suit whenever they were unhappy or felt adventurous."

"Hardly," Ruby Eyes said, giving the female a quelling look. "No Lith'han in their right mind would leave the pridelands. The Council didn't want word getting around because they were afraid Lith'hah might hunt her down themselves...save the humans the trouble." He looked directly at Kessa. "The Leader King had to convince everyone you would be best brought back *alive*."

Kessa narrowed her eyes. "Is that so?" she said, looking at the others to see if this was true. Did other Lith'hah despise her enough to want to kill her? Is this what she was walking into—a public flaying of sorts?

Malvar shifted uncomfortably. "Not everyone feels that way," he said, avoiding Ruby Eyes. "Clearly, the Leader King feels she deserves another chance. And there are many other Lith'hah who agree."

"Enough chatting," Ruby Eyes growled. "We've got a long journey ahead. Malvar, get a small fire going. Nyongah will take the first watch."

Kessa wondered if she might be able to make a break for it if they all fell asleep at the same time.

As if reading her mind, the female—Nyongah—said, "You'll not slip away again, I promise you—the king would have our heads. Best for you to rest now. In a few days you'll be His Majesty's concern."

Kessa held her rage. There was no point arguing or railing against these three. They were simply following the king's orders. They looked as if they wanted to be here as much as she did. "I am exhausted," she conceded.

She slept lightly that night, and all the others as they made their way toward the Northern Territories. Back to the land Kessa had fled from, disgusted and appalled, and had vowed never to return to.

\* \* \* \* \*

The journey was far longer than she remembered. She had avoided any of the routes leading to the Northern Territories for so long she had almost forgotten how lovely the landscape was. The eagles screeched above and the scents of the Southern Sands drifted away, replaced with the more pungent, earthy smells of pine, eucalyptus and redwood.

Malvar kept a steady pace in his cat form. She felt his muscles sliding underneath her naked bottom, and each time she leaned forward just so, pressing against his warmth, a thrill would course through her, making her slightly heady.

She had spent years telling herself that the lovemaking of humans was enough to satisfy her. That Sher, dear, kind, sexy Sher, could be enough for a Lith'hah like her. But she had watched Malvar and Nyongah make love last night as Ruby Eyes took his shift outside the cave. They knew she hadn't been asleep and didn't seem to mind her audience at all. The way her body had coiled in desire, wanting to explode in release...that was something she could only experience with other Lith'hah. The scents of true Lith'hah bonding, the murmured Lith'hah endearments...human lovemaking simply paled in comparison. That seemed to be an inescapable fact now, no matter how much she wanted to deny it.

Before she realized what she was doing, she began rolling back and forth on Malvar's back, building a slow and steady rhythm. She was savoring the luscious current shooting throughout her body when one sentence from Ruby Eyes stopped her cold.

"Those humans you were with would make lovely play toys. How selfish of you to keep them to yourself, Silver."

Kessa's spine went rigid. "The name is Kessa. And those humans are far away now," she said through tight lips.

He narrowed his eyes. "Yes. You made sure of that, didn't you?"

Kessa clamped her mouth shut. It was one thing to be ambivalent about humans and to use them for sexual pleasure but quite another to fall in love with them, to live

among them and treat them as equals, as if they were Lith'hah. To protect humans at the *expense* of Lith'hah would mark her as a traitor of the worst kind.

The Lith'hah circulated stories regularly about the murderous nature of humans – what they did to animals, to the lands, to one another.

Ruby Eyes reached a hand toward her breast and, reacting completely from instinct, she blocked him, grabbed his arm and swung him off Nyongah's back.

Malvar roared with amusement as he and Nyongah stopped to wait for Ruby Eyes to climb back onto the female.

The larger male growled, his eyes becoming slits, and brought his face to within an inch of Kessa's. "Listen, Silver. You do not impress me. Our *Leader King* may have wanted to bring you – the legendary Silver Kessa – back since he was a young male, but I –" he looked her up and down, letting his sentence dangle unfinished. "You do not impress me," he repeated.

Kessa stared back at him, unflinching, though her heart was racing. "Well," she said, her drawl concealing the tremor of fear in her chest, "the feeling is mutual then."

She saw a flicker of violent rage darken his eyes for the briefest of moments before he turned his attention back to the path.

In a voice that chilled her to the bone, he said, "Let us move faster and bring this journey to a quick end."

\* \* \* \* \*

After the full three-day journey, they arrived in the pridelands in the dark, with only the light of a fingernail moon in the skies. The central fire was smoldering and a few of the Lith'hah were passed out around it. No doubt exhausted from a night of wild abandon, Kessa thought with disdain. Why couldn't they contain themselves? she wondered in disgust. This was precisely the sort of thing she abhorred about her own – their utter lack of self-control as they allowed bodily needs to obliterate any iota of common sense and decency.

Ruby Eyes dismounted, pulling Kessa off Malvar. Nyongah and Malvar stretched out into their human forms.

Nyongah yawned. "I'm beat," she said, leaning over to kiss both Malvar and Ruby Eyes. "Straight to the den for me."

Malvar began to speak, "I'll take Kessa..."

"No," Ruby Eyes interrupted. "I will take the Silver legend to our Leader King. I am his next-in-command after all."

Malvar pursed his lips, nodded to Kessa then walked briskly away.

Ruby Eyes grabbed Kessa's still-bound wrists and pulled her up the side of the mountain, to the Leader's King's den.

When they arrived, a young, svelte female was at the entrance. "I shall announce you," she said with a shy smile.

She scurried inside, and after a few minutes, came back to get them.

Ruby Eyes pulled Kessa along as if she were a mule. Rage and indignation fired in her belly. She had never been treated in such an inhumane manner in her life! And this poor excuse of a Lith'han had the audacity to call humans "primitive".

She stumbled into the den behind Ruby Eyes and, for the first time since her interaction with him just outside her property, she saw the Leader King.

He was still magnificent. He was in his human form and stood several inches taller than Ruby Eyes. His dark skin glistened with a faint sheen of perspiration. Her stomach clenched as she allowed her eyes to follow the chiseled plates of his chest, his arms, and down...

But his voice broke through her trance. She almost sighed in relief. Just being in this Lith'han's presence was intoxicating. She saw that his eyes had darkened in anger.

"Why is she still bound?" he boomed.

Ruby Eyes looked squarely at the taller man. "We feared she may try to run away again, Your Majesty."



"And the three of you were afraid you wouldn't be able to catch up to *one* female Lith'han?" the king said, his eyes flashing.

"She's not to be trusted," Ruby Eyes said with unconcealed contempt. "She had her pleasure with a human couple—letting them go—before we were able to capture her."

Now the king's mouth turned up in one corner. His eyes danced with amusement as he nodded. "Fine. Darthian, you have done your task well. Take leave and rest."

Ruby Eyes—Darthian—flicked one last look of contempt her way before turning and walking out of the den.

## **Chapter Four**

The young female who had announced their arrival walked shyly to the Leader King. "Shall I stay?" she asked hopefully.

He grinned down affectionately. "You've done well, Risa," he said. He looked up at Kessa. "But I have some other matters to attend to."

She didn't move for a couple of minutes, and Kessa knew the young woman was waiting for a kiss or some other form of goodbye a lover expects. But the king didn't pick up on it and she skulked away in disappointment, casting a look of unmasked envy over her shoulder at Kessa.

Now Kessa was alone with the Leader King, in his den. And she was still bound in vines. If it had been the ridiculous rope the humans used, she would have broken free long ago. But the vines were impossible to break, tear apart or gnaw through.

"I rather like the fact you're bound," he said quietly, walking a slow circle around her.

Kessa felt her face heat. She avoided his eyes. Looking into them could mean the end of her resolve. As it was, his presence, his scent, the heat from his body and the smell of sex in his den was like a drug. It was taking every ounce of strength she had not to lean against that chest and melt into his arms—something she guessed he was quite used to from the females around him.

He slid his fingers through her hair and grabbed a fistful of it close to her scalp. He tugged her head back gently but firmly enough that her eyes snapped up to meet his.

She gasped as flecks of gold and amber danced in his eyes. She felt the heat from his breath against her cheek and closed her eyes. Her body ached for his hands. Her breasts heaved with the effort of breathing with him so near.

He quickly unbound her wrists, put her arms behind her back and bound them again.

She looked up in surprise. "Why—?"

"You ran. You've lived among humans, putting all Lith'hah in danger. You will stay here, under guard. You belong to me now," he said softly. He lifted her up and carried her easily to his bed—a pile of soft skins and furs on the floor. He laid her down. "I am your Leader King, Kessa of the Silver lineage, and you will abide by the laws of my pride as my pride abides by the laws of the Council."

The mist of intoxication lifted. "I do not belong to you," she said, scrambling away. "I was brought here against my will. I will not abide by anyone's laws but my own!"

He laughed, pulling her back easily so she was lying alongside his naked body. "If you are good at what you do, Kessa," he murmured against her neck, "you may work your way up to becoming my primary female."

She pulled away, but his hand had begun to travel along her thigh and up the side of her body, stopping just underneath her breast. "I have no desire to become your primary female," she said, mustering as much fire as she could.

He leaned back on his elbow. A small smile played on his lips. "No desire at all?" he asked. The teasing in his voice fueled her rage, but the fingertip that started at the top of her mound and was tracing a straight line up her stomach turned that rage into a quiver.

Her nipples tightened as his finger circled their circumference. His long, black hair brushed against her skin, sending shivers throughout her entire body. She saw the desire in his eyes and felt his erection against her hip. Her breathing was shallow and fast.

*Remember he's the Leader King of a pride! she screamed in her head. Remember what he wants you to be! What he's asking of you!*

But all she could focus on was what her body was asking of him right now. She bent the leg lying next to his body and pressed herself against him.

"I think there's some desire there, Kessa Lyah," he said, his voice husky.

She was taken aback by the term of respect used for women born to her line. She had heard it as a young female, used to address the powerful females around her, but never addressed to her. She had fled the pridelands before her initiation into full Lyah status. But she had always considered herself a Lyah, with or without ceremony...it was her birthright.

She looked up at him now, wondering if perhaps there was more to this male than she wanted to believe. Her body was painfully taut. Everything in her wanted to unite with this Lith'han. She pressed herself against him again, more urgently.

He reached behind her, unbound her wrists, but put her hands above her head, holding them in place with one of his large hands. He hovered over her as her body rose to meet his.

Kessa wanted nothing more in that moment than to feel the length of him against her, but he remained infuriatingly out of reach.

Holding her hands securely above her head, he sank onto his elbows and looked into her eyes. "Tell me, Kessa Lyah," he said, his voice thick with arousal, "of your desire."

Kessa noticed all the amusement had vanished from his eyes. In its place was unbound desire.

His eyes traveled down the curve of her neck to her breasts. "I am done playing with you, enchantress that you are."

"Then you should have let me be," Kessa whispered. "My life was fine before you entered it."

His eyes narrowed. "*Your* life may have been fine," he said, "but the longer you remained among the humans, the higher the risk for the entire Lith'hah line." He reached between her legs and slipped one large, rough finger into her wetness.

Kessa gasped.

"You have eyes like glass, Kessa Lyah," he said softly. "Or is that only when you are struggling against your deep inner nature?"

Kessa arched her pelvis up, straining against his hand. The ache was unbearable as he slowly, deliberately stroked her clit with his thumb. She wanted him to stop as intensely as she wanted him to continue.

She saw him watching her, his eyes intent and focused. And she knew her own eyes were heavy-lidded and her lips half parted as she panted. The air in the den was becoming thick with heat and Kessa was finding it harder to breathe.

Abruptly, he slipped his finger out and moved off her, once again lying on his side next to her.

She groaned.

"Tell me what you desire," he said again.

Kessa squeezed her eyes shut. She searched desperately for something solid to grasp. Something—anything—she could hang on to that would stop the dizzying intoxication she was experiencing. Yet, even with her body ready to burst, she could not say that she wanted him. Because a part of her did not. A part of her wanted none of this. Never wanted to be here in the first place. His words still rang in her ears. "*You will stay here, under guard.*" Like a prisoner.

Tears of frustration stung her eyes.

"I am Valren," he said, "your Leader King." He leaned down to kiss her mouth. His lips were warm and soft, and his kiss was tender. "I will not take you in part, Kessa Lyah. When I take you, it will be the whole of you."

He kissed her one more time before releasing her. Then he stood and walked out into the night.

Kessa turned over, waiting for her heart to stop racing, and wondered how on earth she was going to get out of this one. She knew there were Lith'hah stationed outside the den. She had heard Valren talking to the two males he'd commanded to stand guard.

She thought about going outside and seducing one or both of them. It would be easy, she thought with disdain. But she didn't want that. The heat of the king's hands was still on her skin. And her skin had come alive in a way she never knew it could.

Because she fled the pridelands just as her Awakening had begun, she had never made love with one of her own. She knew it would be a far more intense experience with another Lith'hah simply because she knew her drives. It was a difficult truth to admit while she was with Sher. It had been lovely, and she had adored him with all her heart. But there was always something missing.

And now she wanted the king's hands on her with a fervor that scared her.

Damn him! What gave him the right to drag her away from her life? A heaviness settled in the pit of her stomach as she remembered that with Sher and the children gone, it wasn't much of a life anymore.

She turned onto her stomach and pressed her face into the skins. An image of the Leader King's shoulders dipping into his biceps flashed through her mind as she breathed in his scent, still lingering on the bed of skins. Those Lith'hah outside would be no match for the intensity she had just experienced. She pulled one breast up toward her mouth and licked the nipple. A shiver raced up her spine as she closed her eyes and imagined that it was Valren's tongue. She slipped her finger into the wetness between her legs and gasped as the image of his face resurfaced. She came quickly, her cries muffled against the hides beneath her.

Kessa knew she was in trouble. If she stayed, she could easily fall into the depths of no return with this Leader King. He was used to having whatever he wanted, *whomever* he wanted. The longer she stayed, the harder it would be to fight his magnetic pull. She knew females were programmed to respond to alpha males in a pride, but this...this was different. He had zeroed in on her and was staking his claim. She would have to fight harder if she wanted to be rid of him.

There was no choice but to wait and watch for the first opportunity to escape and take it.

\* \* \* \* \*

That opportunity did not come soon. For the rise and fall of an entire moon, Kessa watched the day-to-day goings-on of Valren's pride. She had to admit, albeit begrudgingly, that he ran his pride well. The Council laws were upheld and strictly reinforced. There was amicable trade with other prides in the Territories, and food and water was plentiful.

She noticed that the females in this pride were particularly skilled trackers and hunters. Some of the males assisted with the hunting while others protected the pride from roaming Independents—males who had broken away from their pride of origin to wander on their own. Often these males, after the first year or two of being alone, went in search of other prides to conquer. They went after the Leader King of a pride, killed him then killed any potential heirs so as to claim the pride for themselves.

All Leader Kings had to be sure they were surrounded by generals they trusted. Generals who would guard and protect the pride from Independents, humans—should they ever reach that far into the Northern Territories—and the larger predators that lived in the Extreme North.

Valren seemed to have good systems in place and his pride—close to fifty members strong, from Kessa's quick calculations—was devoted to him. All except for Ruby Eyes, who she now knew was named Darthian. There was something about him that simply oozed malintent. Why Valren couldn't, or wouldn't, see it was beyond her.

But it was no concern of hers, really. She planned to run at the earliest opportunity. Then, what he saw or didn't see was his problem. In the meantime, all her energy and efforts had to remain focused on keeping herself from falling over the edge of the cliff that was in Valren's eyes. Being confined to his den was driving her mad. She knew it was intentional—he was bent on breaking her resolve. But he underestimated her. Kessa Lyah was not one to be easily broken.

She smiled, recognizing how easily that name now meshed with her image of herself. It was a good feeling. As if she was living up to her lineage and doing her

foremothers proud. Being back in the pridelands had awakened something within her. Something she hadn't even known was there. Every so often, as she listened to the sounds of the Lith'hah below, or caught the faint, warm laughter exchanged between females, she felt a gnawing pang inside – an urge to seek out other Silver females.

Obviously, that would never come to pass the way things were now. Each night, Valren came to lie by her side, both of them fully naked as the fire smoldered near the mouth of the den. The guards remained outside, a constant reminder of her prisoner status.

One time, Valren brought two men into the den. "May I introduce," he said, turning to Kessa, "Kulim and his mate Varsha?"

Kessa inclined her head in greeting, wondering what on earth Valren was up to.

"Kulim and Varsha are two of my most trusted protectors. I've asked them to join us this evening."

"Join us for what?" Kessa asked, her voice laced with suspicion.

Valren smiled. "I thought your memory might need a bit of refresher on Lith'hah ways of bonding."

Kessa bristled. "And what exactly does that mean?"

"Relax," he said. Kessa thought she detected a hint of irritability in his voice. "No one will force you to do anything you do not want."

"Seduction is a form of coercion," Kessa stated coldly.

He turned from her in annoyance. "Kulim, Varsha, please – help yourselves to the bark brew," he said, pointing to the table with the earthenware pitcher. "Get settled on the skins and make yourselves at home."

Both men bowed slightly at the waist and poured themselves cups of bark brew.

"Thank you once again, Your Majesty, for sharing your evening with us," the one called Kulim said.



Kessa noticed he had a scar going down the side of his left rib cage. "And what exactly did His Majesty invite you to share?" she asked.

Varsha, with the obsidian eyes, looked at her in surprise. "Why, bonding of course."

"Of course," Kessa repeated. She shot of look pure disgust at Valren.

He simply lowered himself onto a stool, leaned back and lifted one corner of his mouth in a lazy smile. "It is part of my obligation as a monarch."

Varsha held the pitcher up and turned to Kessa. "Shall I pour a cup for you?"

Kessa shook her head.

"I'll have one," Valren said.

Varsha poured the king a cup and the three men toasted. "To an evening of bonding," the two protectors said, glancing at one another and then the king.

He smiled and nodded. "To an evening of bonding."

Kessa forced herself to calm down. Inside, she was seething. How dare he bring these men in to "bond" in the den? What was he trying to prove?

As the bark brew took effect, the protectors became more affectionate with one another. Kulim nibbled on Varsha's ear while sliding his fingers along the more-slender man's thighs.

Kessa was mesmerized at the sight. They were both magnificent males, to be sure, and their love for one another was evident, even if one were blind. Kulim's murmured endearments were full of devotion as he caressed the skin of his lover.

Varsha moaned, sliding down onto the skins and pulling Kulim down onto him for a passionate kiss.

Kessa licked her lips—which had suddenly gone dry. She knew she couldn't turn away. If this was some sort of "lesson" Valren was teaching her about Lith'hah "ways", she was not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her squirm. She flicked a quick

look toward him and noticed that he had moved farther into the shadows of the den. But she felt his eyes on her. He was watching her carefully.

Kessa turned back to the men on the skins in front of her. Kulim was stroking Varsha's penis while kissing him deeply.

Varsha pulled away from their kiss and looked at Kessa. "Would you care to join us?"

Kessa felt her clit tighten and her nipples pucker in arousal. She knew the king was watching her, waiting for her answer. She struggled to keep her voice steady. "Thank you, but no," she said, amazed at how calm she managed to sound.

Varsha turned to the king. "And you, Your Majesty?"

She felt Valren's gaze lift from her for a second. "Continue in your pleasure," he said.

Kessa heard the arousal in his voice. The image of his erect penis flitted through her mind and heat shot through her pussy and thighs. Immediately, she shoved the image aside. *Stop it*, she told herself sternly. *This is another of his ploys to break your resolve and have you under his control. Show him you will not bend to his will!*

Kulim had slid down to take Varsha's cock into his mouth.

Kessa's breath grew ragged as Varsha's moans filled the den. She wanted to close her eyes, tear out of the den—anything to get away from how desperate she was for release. How badly she wanted nothing more than to climb on top of Valren and slide him into her aching, wet pussy.

But she didn't dare. Any sign that she was uncomfortable, that she couldn't handle the bonding display in front of her was a sign of defeat. It would prove to that arrogant SOB that he was right. That she did, indeed, need a "reminder" of who she actually was.

But she couldn't escape the fact she was riveted by the glow of absolute, pure love between the couple on the skins in front of her and their unabashed lovemaking. They

seemed completely oblivious to the presence of others in the den—so wrapped up they were in the bond they were creating. The magic they are weaving, Kessa thought in wonder.

Kessa was acutely aware of Valren's sharp and unwavering gaze as she watched the men reach orgasm. First Kulim then Varsha, exploding and shuddering against one another, each holding the other as they crested the waves of bliss they had both worked to create.

Kessa's eyes stung as the beauty of their bonding grew like a mist in the den, filling her, surrounding her and enveloping her in a kind of embrace. She was vibrating like a tuning fork, her skin tingling and alive. She wanted to cradle the couple while her own body pulsed on high.

The men unfurled and Varsha slid up to nuzzle against Kulim, placing small, light kisses along his chest and neck, then a long, tender kiss on his mate's lips before turning to smile at Kessa and Valren.

"Thank you for bearing witness to our love," he said. His voice was satisfied, rich, full. "If there is anything at all we can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask."

Again Kessa felt Valren's eyes on her, waiting for her to answer first.

She didn't trust her voice this time, so she simply shook her head.

She felt Valren's gaze lift from her and saw him lean his head back. "Thank you for sharing your bonding with us," he said. "You are free to take leave when you wish."

The men stood up slowly. Kessa could almost see a bond of strong golden threads linking them, connecting them in both body and spirit, and an intense longing filled her.

"May we take a cup of bark brew with us?" Kulim asked.

Valren nodded. "Take one each."

Kulim poured two cups of brew and handed one to Varsha. Then they both bowed low to Valren, who nodded. They turned and inclined their heads to Kessa and she returned the farewell.

After the couple had left, Valren came to lie next to Kessa. "I'll find a way to get to you yet, Silver Lyah."

"I had forgotten how fixated Lith'hah are on sex," she said, though she knew—had witnessed for herself—what Varsha and Kulim had created was far more than just sex.

He raised an eyebrow. The certainty behind his words infuriated her. "You didn't forget. You suppressed your natural urges."

"And how would you know of my urges?" she shot back.

One corner of his mouth kicked up. "You are a Lith'han, darling. You can deny it 'til your final day, but you can't change it. Sex among Lith'hah is precious and revered. It is a path to deeper connection and bonding. It's not shameful or meant to be hidden...perhaps you've forgotten *that* during your time among the humans?"

"Really." She clenched her jaw but kept her voice even. "Is that what all this was—a lesson? Do I look like a child in need of schooling?"

He gave her a lazy smile while his eyes raked over her body. "Not at all."

Fingers of fire raced up Kessa's entire body.

"But I am a Leader King," he continued. "My pride members are precious to me. I treasure every single one of them for their devotion. Kulim and Varsha requested an evening with me. Bonding with my constituents—those who are willing and desire it—is a way for me to connect with them, to make myself accessible and to maintain their loyalty. After all," he said, closing his eyes as the smile lingered on his lips, "I am not yet paired with a Queen...and I heard no objections from either of those men," he drawled. "Nor from you."

"And why didn't you join them?" she asked.

"Under any other circumstances I would have. But I was taking my lead from you," he said, watching her carefully. "A shame you were too afraid of your own desire to participate."

Kessa narrowed her eyes as rage simmered through her limbs. She knew he was goading her—forcing a rise out of her. She watched the smug, content expression on Valren's face, and before she knew it, she was sitting up on her knees, spreading them so he could see the pink and purple of her vulva.

His eyes snapped open at her sudden movement.

"That was quite a show, Your Majesty," she purred. She ran her hands through her silver-streaked hair then cupped her breasts. "Very entertaining indeed."

She began to knead her breasts, keeping her eyes fixed on his as he had done just minutes before. There was a moment of satisfaction when she saw he was becoming hard, but that was quickly replaced with an engulfing desire that almost frightened her. She was playing with fire, she knew it. But she had to show him he couldn't mess with her. She was not one of his "constituents". That he didn't wield the same power over her.

She closed her eyes halfway and squeezed her nipples. Slowly, she reached down between her legs. Her clit was wet and engorged as her fingers slid over it. She pressed against her hand and fixed her eyes on him. Gone was the lazy, smug expression. In its place was an unrestrained hunger that threw her off. She breathed in his scent and felt herself slip into a different space. She struggled to bring herself back, but the scent was dizzying. *Snap out of it, Kessa*, she admonished. She fought to regulate her breathing as she reached out to touch his erection, taking him firmly in her hand. She circled his shaft with slender fingers and slid her hand down, watching a muscle at his jaw jump.

*Good*, she thought when he dropped his head back and groaned.

But in a flash he was up, holding her wrists in an iron grip. "What is this game you play, Kessa Lyah?" he said through clenched teeth.

Her voice was quiet, belying the fury underneath. “Not unlike the games *you* play, Your Majesty.”

He narrowed his eyes and brought his mouth down hard on hers.

Kessa hesitated for only a brief moment before parting her lips, giving in to the hunger that coursed through her body. She arched against him, snaking her arms around his neck and holding on for dear life.

He crushed her body against his, pressing her up against the wall as his kiss became less angry and more urgent. He cupped her buttocks in his hands, lifting her as she draped her legs around his waist.

Kessa struggled to stay afloat as rage collided with a deep yearning she had never felt before. She battled the waves of desire in an effort to maintain even a tiny modicum of control, but she knew she was drowning.

He stopped kissing her just as abruptly as he’d begun and held her against him with one arm, placing his other palm against the rock surface. She felt the pounding of his heart against her own as he breathed deeply and she realized she was trembling like a wet kitten.

Without looking at her, Valren slowly placed her back on the skins. Then he stood and cursed loudly into the den, changing quickly into his Lith’han form before slipping into the night.

That was the last time she tried toying with Valren’s—and her own—emotions and desires. It was a dangerous game and that one brief encounter left a scorching imprint. She noticed too that the Leader King began to keep an almost informal distance from her after that. He had another bed of skins brought in and slept on the other side of the den. He allowed her to roam the grounds unaccompanied, but always watched by at least two guards. And he let her be.

Her initial appearance among the pride members was awkward and uncomfortable. A hush fell over the Lith’hah as they turned to watch her descend from the Leader

King's den. Some of the females whispered to one another and Kessa caught snippets of, "That's her!" and "She's not as impressive as I'd thought she'd be." Those were mixed with others. "She's every bit as lovely as the stories!" and "Now I see why the king's all worked up."

The males stared at her brazenly, sending signals of lustful interest. Kessa kept her eyes straight ahead, speaking with no one until Nyongah tapped her on the shoulder.

"Kessa Lyah," she said, enveloping Kessa in a warm hug. "I'm glad to see you among us."

Malvar strode up behind Nyongah and embraced Kessa as well. "Would you care for company as you make your rounds?"

Kessa nodded in relief. "I would indeed."

The three of them made their way through the stares and whispers of the pride, heading toward the more lush area near the mountain lake and the stream leading down to it from the heights.

Kessa was happy to be away from the prying eyes of the pride, and glad not to hear the whispers and murmurs behind her back as she walked past. But she was surprised there was less hostility than she had imagined. She sensed mistrust, but that was to be expected. She was a stranger, after all. She also sensed harmless curiosity and admiration.

The elders were the kindest. Every so often, an elder female would trek up the mountain to bring Kessa a basket of Mun'hai berries or a vessel of cooked food. "You belong here, Kessa Lyah," one had said, tilting Kessa's chin up. "The pridelands need you. It is time for a change."

Kessa didn't ask what the elder had meant by that, but she gradually began to loosen up. She went down to join the pride more and more as she was welcomed. She began to partake in ceremonies and rituals—naming ceremonies for children, initiation ceremonies for newly Awakened Lith'hah.

She struggled with the sadness and longing that would wash over her at the loss of her own Awakening rituals, and the Lyah ceremony she was entitled to by right. All water under the bridge now, she thought. No use pining for something that was long gone, never to return.

For the rise and fall of yet another moon, she wandered the grounds, chatting with the pride, listening to the females tell tales of their tracking adventures, and playfully chasing the little ones through the trees.

She reveled in being able to shift back and forth from her Lith'han form to human whenever she wanted. And while she longed for the calm, uneventful stability of the human life she'd left behind, living here, amongst her own kind, brought back memories from her early days. She had carried only the painful memories all this time, but now, the lighter, more joyful memories began to surface. She recalled how she would run around as a young Lith'han, chased by playful elders in the sun. They would race up trees and leap off boulders into the stream below, coming up with wriggling fish in their jaws. If they ate the meat in human form, they would cook it, but if they stayed as Lith'hah, they ate it fresh.

She allowed the silver of her mane to become full, and when she shifted to human form, she allowed her body to become full and curvy, without clearing away any of what the humans considered to be imperfections.

She realized with a start that her life here, among the Lith'hah, had become very similar to the life she had been living in her home with Sher. She was alone, she was fairly independent, and—with the exception of Valren's almost unbearable presence in the den at night, and the awareness that Darthian's ruby eyes followed her wherever she went—she was content. She almost forgot why she was waiting for a chance to escape.

Until one night, when all the reasons she had run away to begin with, came howling back.



## **Chapter Five**

Kessa had been dreading it, but now it was here—a Night of Revelry. One of the four in each lunar calendar year. The stars had aligned in one of the most auspicious formations, according to the elders, and a great celebration had been planned. The daylight hours of the week leading up to it were spent preparing the bonfire, getting meat ready for those who wished to celebrate in human form and keeping it fresh for those who wished to celebrate as Lith'hah.

Structures were built on the grounds for privacy for those who wanted it, and circles were set up for observers. And for the very young Lith'hah, celebrations were only during daylight hours. At night, the little ones were put to bed in dens far away from the raucous goings-on of the adults.

Nights of Revelry were always celebrations to the fullest. Ecstasy in all its forms was revered, and there were offerings of gratitude to the Ancients. The Ancients had written that the beauty of what was seen was simply a minute sampling of the vast beauty which remained hidden, undetected by the senses of mere mortals. As a result, the Lith'hah of the past calculated four Nights throughout the year, based on the movements of the stars, to honor the physical as a manifestation of all that is unseen.

As a young female, Kessa had delighted in the Nights. She and her playmates would zip around the grounds in their excitement and exhaust themselves before the evening hours when the adults held their secret nighttime activities.

But when she was on the verge of her sexual Awakening, not quite there yet, though curious, she and two of her playmates let their curiosity get the better of them. They snuck out of their dens while the little ones slept and crept up to the periphery of the adult activities.

What they saw held them riveted in their hiding place in the trees. The adults were too occupied to notice the too-young Lith'hah crouching behind the boulders, in the shadows. Besides, the music, laughter, moans and growls were too loud for anyone to have heard the youngsters.

Kessa and her playmates knew things were happening inside and outside their bodies. They were hot—hotter than the cold night air warranted—and their bodies had become taut in way they were unfamiliar with. They had always been taught that there were certain adult pleasures not appropriate for children—bark brew, the ceremonial Barlo weed, and pleasures of the flesh were just a few. But what was coursing through their bodies now was like swinging from a branch and not knowing where one would land. It was thrilling but terrifying at the same time.

That was when it happened. The three had been so engrossed in what they were witnessing that they never heard the larger Lith'hah male approaching. Kessa was caught and held just as she heard her playmates yell, "Run!"

Kessa spent years after that trying to erase the memory, the smells of that night, the feel of that male's arms holding her down. She had run shortly after. Her Awakening was sullied by that experience. The male had been an Independent who'd joined the celebration, and he left right after. But Kessa was forever changed.

That was when she fled. She couldn't get far enough away from the smells of Barlo weed and bark brew. The sounds of Lith'hah moaning as they writhed in sexual pleasure under the stars.

She had healed herself while living amongst the humans. Come to care for them, love them, carry their young in her womb even. With them, she had learned to honor her body and soul again as a unit. She was largely to credit for that, she thought now. He was so gentle and careful those nights that she froze when he touched her a certain way. And he would bring her back from the memory with the soothing rise and fall of his soft voice. How she missed him!

Kessa knew preparations for this Night were the reason she was on edge. When there was just about a week left before the Revelry, she woke to her own screams, drenched in sweat and thrashing in Valren's arms.

She vaguely remembered seeing his face above hers, scouring her features in concern. When she remembered where she was, and that she was now a grown woman—safe and able to defend herself—she had settled back into an exhausted sleep.

He never mentioned it, but every so often, she caught him watching her as if he were peering into a murky pond. And just two or three nights before the Revelry, she had turned over in the middle of the night to find him sleeping soundly next to her. She had simply nuzzled up next to him and fallen back asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nyongah's excitement was palpable as she tied the structure together with vine. "This is one of my favorite stations," she said, her eyes glinting mischievously.

Malvar laughed. "Of course it is—you like having your ass spanked. I've seen it in your eyes when you've watched others on previous Nights."

Kessa smiled at the two. She reached up with both arms and tightened a knot on the structure. She'd considered staying in the den all week, but boredom got the better of her. She came down to watch the preparations and somehow found herself helping Malvar and Nyongah.

She looked at the structure. It was large enough to hold the largest of their males securely in place if he wanted to be spanked or otherwise sexually titillated, and that, Kessa knew, was exactly what this structure was for. She surveyed the rest of the structures on the field and gritted her teeth, forcing herself not to go back to that other Night, years ago. She reminded herself that all of this would come down after the Revelry and there would be no lingering evidence left behind. With any luck, she would simply sleep through the entire ordeal.

Nyongah swaggered up to Kessa, slid her hands along the older woman's sides, and cupped her breasts. "I also like giving the spankings, Kessa Lyah." Her breath came in warm puffs against Kessa's cheek.

"She's done a lot more than watch too," Malvar said.

Kessa saw that Malvar's penis had hardened as he watched them. "I've no doubt," she said, raising an eyebrow as she leisurely finished the knot. She allowed the other woman's hands to stay where they were. "Versatility is always a good thing," she said before smiling and moving away.

She fought the urge to stay and join them both. Much to her dismay, Kessa found herself thinking like a Lith'han—wanting to accept consensual sex with other members almost as a way of saying hello, of bonding and connecting, and sniffing out the other's essence. But she was above that, she reminded herself.

Though she had successfully managed to avoid sexual contact with other pride members, Kessa knew, as much as she railed against the urges, that she wanted Valren. The thought of his golden eyes, the red hues that shimmered just beneath the bronze of his skin, his hair flying behind him as he leapt in his Lith'han form, made her stop and catch her breath. Her hands yearned to explore the hard plates of his chest and brush over the smattering of curly hairs in between them whenever he was near, but she dared not touch him.

She was beginning to relax a little with the pride now. On more than one occasion, she found herself wondering how her experience of this pride and the Lith'hah in her memories could be so drastically different. There was certainly a lot of unabashed sexuality, but where were all the other horrific things she'd remembered about Lith'hah? This pride seemed like a rather quiet and peaceful one compared to what she recalled. And Valren—he was hardly the barbaric brute she'd imagined when she first met him, particularly when he was listening attentively to the concerns of his members. It was clear he was as devoted to them as they were to him.

The day of the Revelry, Kessa walked through the grounds, smiling at the young Lith'hah prancing and leaping in excitement as they were led through games and rituals and ate special treats made especially for the day. But her stride was purposeful as she headed to the dens that were being set up for the youngsters for the Night.

She knew the guards were keeping a close eye on her, though their orders were to let her wander freely. The only thing she was not allowed to do was escape. And since she hadn't tried to in all this time, the guards were relaxed and friendly.

She shifted into Lith'hah form and broke into a fast but loose run so she would get to the dens faster. The guards were close behind but left her enough room to enjoy the run.

When she arrived, she was satisfied the dens for the little ones were far enough away from the adult activities. Even a strong, young Lith'han male would tire easily with the distance, likely giving up before he reached the adult festivities. She shifted into her human form and carefully surveyed the dens, making sure the perimeter was secured.

A twig snapped behind her and she spun around to face Valren.

"Were you following me?" she asked, covering her surprise. She had not seen him or sensed him nearby.

He laughed. "Don't look so surprised. This *is* my pride. It's my job to monitor the grounds."

She nodded, swallowing hard. Her throat had suddenly become parched. She felt somehow exposed in her mission to ensure the safety of the little ones.

He came up behind her, so close that she felt the brush of his breath on her bare shoulder. "And you, Kessa Lyah? Why are you here?"

There was tenderness in his voice that made her legs feel like water. She turned to look into his face to make sure she hadn't imagined it. His face was soft with something like concern ringing the edges of his sharp, gemstone eyes.

She took a step back. "The same. I wanted to make sure the young ones are safe tonight."

He searched her face for a few minutes before turning to look at the dens. "You speak in your sleep, Kessa Lyah," he said softly. He turned to look at her again. "Or should I say, you shout in your sleep?"

Kessa drew in a sharp breath. "Is that so? What...what do I say?"

He shook his head and turned back to the dens. "Usually just the word 'No' repeated many times. Sometimes quietly but often loudly."

Kessa bit her bottom lip. "We all have those dreams."

"Yes, perhaps we do," he said, walking up the mountain to get a closer look at the dens.

The dens were in caves, deep inside the mountain. Valren went left, and Kessa decided to inspect the ones on the right. There were large boulders set up at the entrance to keep predators away. On the ground were thorned branches the young ones could leap over but snakes could not slither through.

Kessa walked in and out of them all, examining each carefully – always aware that Valren was close by, doing the same. She placed additional boulders where needed and arranged the thorny branches to more effectively keep out serpents.

When she arrived at the final den, she leaped over the branches and walked deep into the den where the young ones would sleep. She surveyed the beds for the little ones, and the larger one for the pre-Awakened Lith'han who would keep watch. Then, just as she turned to walk out the door, a large, black-and-brown-dappled cobra rose up in front of her and fanned its hood.

Kessa froze. She was in human form and knew the slightest movement could cause the serpent to strike. She must have woken it as she moved things about. She dared not move a single muscle or utter a peep. She'd seen what cobra venom could do to Lith'hah muscles in a matter of seconds. A bite from a cobra meant certain, painful death.

*Think, Kessa, think.* But, no matter how desperately she searched, her mind was a blank. Oh, where were those blasted guards now? She knew they'd gone once they saw Valren. Not too far, but far enough to give him privacy with her. And she could not pick up Valren's presence anywhere.

She opened her senses. This cobra was angry as hell – a mother who had lost two of her eggs to the cleanup efforts of Lith'hah preparing for tonight. Kessa's heart pounded as she realized that no one would know that she was in this cave, facing death while ensuring the protection of young Lith'hah who were not even of her pride of origin.

A rivulet of perspiration wriggle down her breastbone and pooled in her navel as she faced off with the snake. It was only a matter of time before she got too tired and moved, even the tiniest fraction. The slightest indication of movement and the cobra would sink its fangs into her muscle.

She was struggling to keep herself from panicking when a shadow leaped silently into the cave. The cobra swung around, ready to strike, but before it could, Valren swatted it down with one giant paw and clamped it just beneath its head, twisting until the serpent lay motionless. He changed back into human form, lifted the snake and tossed it outside in the open for a passing eagle or some other animal to feast on.

Kessa brought a hand to her mouth and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath to steady the trembling of her hands. When she opened her eyes, his face was within inches of hers.

## Chapter Six

"I sensed your fear," he said, putting his hands in her hair and pulling her toward him. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. This time she did not struggle with her urges. She leaned against his bare chest and allowed herself the relief. It was a close call. Kessa was not afraid of death, but that was not how she wanted to die. She did not trust herself to speak. She wanted to say thank-you or *something*, but no words came. "I..."

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her body against his.

Kessa could feel the rhythm of his heart against her face. She pulled back with every intention of stepping away and walking out of the den. But her body would not cooperate. She put her hands on his chest and ran her fingers through the slight smattering of hair. Her fingertips slid down his rib cage.

Valren drew in a sharp breath.

Kessa regained her senses and took a step back. She blinked quickly to shake herself out of the daze. "I'm sorry..."

He reached up and caressed her cheek with the back of one hand. "Don't apologize."

She looked up at him, wanting more than anything to step into the safety he seemed to offer, the warmth. *But he is Lith'hah*, she reminded herself. Sooner or later they all show their true colors.

Kessa saw his eyes holding steady on her face, but he stayed where he was, hands clasped behind his back. She dug her fingernails into her palms as she walked past him and into the sunlight.



Once outside, she took a couple of long, deep breaths before she heard him come up behind her. "Shall we walk?" he asked.

She turned to him in surprise then looked away, considering it. "Sure," she shrugged. "Why not?"

"Indeed," he said, taking a few steps down the mountain then turning to wait for her to join him.

She fell into step beside him as they walked a few minutes in silence.

"I've been watching your interactions with the pride," he said finally.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Really," she said, walking a few paces before answering. "Well, I've been watching yours as well."

He laughed. "I'm not at all surprised."

"Well? What have you seen?"

He looked ahead thoughtfully before answering. "You win people's hearts easily. The elders are all quite taken with you and lobby quite ceaselessly on your behalf. The little ones adore you."

"Mmm," she said, weighing his words. "There are some who still don't trust me. And the females...the young males..."

"The females want to *be* you while the young males want to possess you. And yes, there are those who are not as forgiving. But they are few and far between."

She cocked her head to look up at him, shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun. "And what do you make of all that, Your Majesty?"

He shrugged. "Simply that, despite all the years you were away, you still don't fail to live up to your lineage."

Kessa felt a warmth stir in her belly from his obvious compliment.

"When I first set out to bring you back, I did it to fulfill a young man's desire."

She looked at him. "And what was that?"

He stared thoughtfully ahead for a moment. "We all heard about you—the Silver who fled. Elders around me spoke often of how you would not survive. How you would surely be found and tortured, or studied in some human laboratory. But I could *feel* you. I felt as if I had some sort of connection with you..."

Kessa raised her eyebrows. "What kind of connection?"

He trained his eyes on hers. "I'm not sure. But something pulled me to you. One elder said it was destiny."

"Destiny?" Kessa said wryly. "Then why did I never 'feel' you?"

He pursed his lips. "You were too busy turning away from everything you are."

Kessa fumed. "I know exactly who *I* am. It's the Lith'hah that have turned away from everything *they* are."

"The *Lith'hah*?" he asked in confusion.

"Yes," she said. "My mother told me stories of a peaceful Lith'hah. Of the way Lith'hah were when our numbers were larger and there were fewer humans. When we were not feared by the humans and hunted. When we didn't have to hide."

His expression had changed and Kessa knew she had his full attention. "So many Lith'han have succumbed to the predatory, destructive parts of their natures," she said. "We've forgotten to live harmoniously with our surroundings."

He knit his brows. "We do live in harmony with our surroundings. It's the humans who destroy —"

"No," she said. "I mean, yes—they do have destructive tendencies, but we are far more powerful than they. None of us should be roaming the woods and harming the innocent. We fight in self-defense, no?"

He raised an eyebrow, giving her a silent, thoughtful nod.

"Then why do we maul them?" Her voice was almost a whisper now. "Why do we show them the same disregard they show us? Do we fear them?"

"We do not fear them," he said with just a hint of anger. "We protect ourselves from them. Have you forgotten the stories of slaughter of our kind at the hands of greedy humans?"

"I have not forgotten," she said. She had heard the history passed down from her mother and in daily lessons when she was young. Grim stories of humans butchering entire clans of Lith'hah until pride after pride had been wiped out—the young, the elders, the females and males.

She couldn't undo those stories. She couldn't erase history, but she knew too that there were innocents among the humans who'd been unlucky enough to be in the woods, unaware they were too close to Lith'hah territory. Humans who were good and kind. She thought of Sher, her children, and all the humans she had met in her years away from the pridelands.

It dawned on her that he was a Leader King with the power to make changes. If she could convince him to make harming humans – unless in self-defense – illegal...

She touched his arm lightly and looked into his eyes. "But they are not all like that," she said.

"Just as we are not all how you have painted us in your imagination," he said quietly.

She dropped her arm. "Perhaps you're right," she said. Changing a Lith'han's views about humans would take time, she realized. Hers had only changed because she had lived among them, shared meals, laughs and beds with them. And that, only because she had nowhere else to go and had been desperately lonely.

When she looked at his face, she saw surprise. "I expected more of a fight."

She laughed. "Don't look so shocked. It's true," she conceded, "I've been wondering myself, lately, if it's your pride who is different from what I remember, or if it is my own memories that are skewed."

He shook his head. "You never fail to surprise me, Kessa Lyah," he said. There was warmth in his voice. "I've come to enjoy listening to your unusual perspectives on just about everything. You see life and the pridelands and the Lith'hah from unique angles."

He stopped and faced her. "You make me see things in new ways."

Kessa's breath caught in her throat at the unconcealed honesty in his statement. "Well, I certainly hope that's a good thing," she said, trying to keep her voice light.

He smiled. "That's a very good thing."

They walked quietly for a few moments before he spoke again. "You seem quite at home here now."

She kept her eyes on the ground in front of her. "Then why do you still keep me under guard?" she asked, matching his tone.

He looked at her in surprise. "I can't have you running away again. It would look bad in the eyes of the Council."

"Do you think I'd still run away, given how 'at home' I seem to be?"

One corner of his mouth lifted into a half smile. "I'm no fool, Kessa Lyah."

She grinned. "No, I suppose you're not." She walked a few paces before turning to him again. "But what if I decided to run right now?"

He swiveled his head slowly to look at her. "You wouldn't get very far."

"How can you be so sure?" she teased. "The reason Silver females have made suitable matches for Leader Kings, generals and Council members is that our speed and strength are at a level competitive with most male Lith'hah."

He smiled. "So I've heard."

She stopped and placed a hand on her hip. "Would you care to test it?"

He stopped a pace ahead of her. His eyes twinkled with amusement. "What did you have in mind?"

She smiled and bit her bottom lip. "Let me run." She watched his face as he took in her words. "And see if you can catch up."

He threw his head back and laughed. "I'm twice your size," he said, his voice rich with laughter. "I'll overtake you before you've even warmed up."

"Prove it," Kessa said, already shifting into her Lith'han form.

He stared at her. "You're serious, aren't you?"

She crouched on the ground, muscles poised to spring into action.

He shook his head in amazement. "Fine," he said before beginning the transformation into his cat shape. "I'll even give you a head start."

Kessa roared and took off.

She ran with the excitement and abandon of a child playing tag. It felt good to push her limbs, to strain against the edge of what was physically possible. The wind rippled through her fur as she raced up the side of a mountain, making sure to keep her senses open for the Leader King.

He wasn't far behind so she didn't allow herself to slow down. She leaped from boulder to boulder, picking up the scent of a rushing stream nearby, Mun'hai trees to her left, and scurrying creatures underbrush. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she realized that the distance between herself and Valren had not decreased. She knew she would tire soon. She was hungry and hadn't eaten since morning, and the noonday sun in the Northern Territories rained down like spears onto her back. Most Lith'hah took to the shade at this time, napping or cooling off in a stream. And here she was, running at full speed in a child's game of tag.

Laughter rumbled in her belly. Yes, perhaps it was silly. But it was fun.

All at once, Kessa skidded to a halt. A foot or so in front of her, the land fell away into a sheer cliff. She hadn't been paying attention to where she was going—enjoying herself too much. She looked across the chasm and gauged whether she could make the leap to the other side. The only other route would be all the way around, to a part of the decline she could scramble down, across the rushing current below, and up the other side.

Too long, she decided. She knew Valren was closer and she had to act fast. She moved back several paces, ran and took to the air. She heard his roar after she'd leapt, and realized too late that the precipice on the other side was much farther than she'd calculated.

She landed on the other side with her front paws on solid land while her hind legs clawed at the sheer rock face. She looked down at the long drop. *Don't panic*, she told herself sternly as she struggled to gain a foothold against the mountainside.

Finally, the tip of her right paw snagged on something. A branch? A root? An indent in the rock? Kessa didn't care. She dug her claws in and heaved herself up just as Valren landed softly alongside her.

Her limbs were trembling with the exertion, the heat, so little to eat. But she felt triumphant, glorious.

Valren roared, his eyes full of concern.

Kessa used the moment to regain her composure. Then her eyes glinted mischievously and she took off again, running alongside the edge of the cliff. She found the narrow path she'd seen from the other side—just wide enough for one Lith'han to scramble down, and quickly ducked onto it.

Valren was close on her heels as she half ran, half slipped down the slope, stopping only when she got to the flat, rocky bank. She went immediately to the edge of the water to take several long sips. But before she knew it, Valren was on top of her. Together, they went tumbling and rolling to the ground.

When they stopped, he was above her, pinning her down.

Her chest heaved as she watched him change into his human form and stand. She changed shape too but remained on the ground.

She grinned up at him. "You never caught me."

"I just did!" he said, his face incredulous.

She shook her head. "I *let* you catch me." Her eyes twinkled. "But only because you are the Leader King...and only this time."

He laughed as she heaved herself up and walked to the edge of the water.

Kessa noticed it was calmer in this one spot. A pile of stones had lodged together to form a small wall, creating a calm pool in the middle of the rushing current. She plunged in.

When she came up, she looked for Valren on the bank, but he had disappeared. The water was cold and wonderful on her skin and she dipped back under.

This time when she came up, she noticed two neat piles of Mun'hai berries on the bank. She smiled.

An arm encircled her waist from behind.

Kessa gasped.

"It's me," Valren said gently.

She relaxed against him. But even in the frigid water, she was keenly aware of his chest and abdomen behind her, curving against her back as his legs treaded water.

She turned around to face him. They gazed quietly at one another for a moment.

*It's as if we're seeing one another for the first time,* Kessa marveled. She swam closer to him, wrapping her legs around his waist.

He continued to tread water easily, even with her added weight.

Kessa leaned forward to place a light kiss on his lips. Then she unwrapped her legs, swam back to the bank and waited for him in the sun.

She sat on a large, flat rock and watched him emerge, rivulets of water streaming down his chest and legs. He pulled his hair back behind his head and wrung it out, letting it drop behind his back again like a heavy curtain.

He crouched in front of her. "Kessa," he said, "I want to make love with you."

Kessa struggled to keep her breathing even.

He looked into her eyes. "I know I could easily have your body. But I want more." He reached behind her and placed one palm against the middle of her back, pulling her close. "You are unlike any female I've ever met. You follow the voice that most of us forget to heed. When it says run, you run. When it says slow...you listen."

Kessa stared at him.

"Even among the Silver Lith'hah, you are unique, Kessa Lyah," he continued softly. "Not a single female has dared to leave the Territories. And you not only left, you did it as you were falling into your Awakening."

Kessa tensed.

He pulled her against him, massaging her scalp with the fingertips of his free hand until she relaxed again. "I first came to claim you out of a desire to possess you. You were the rare Silver who slipped through our fingers—you would be an admirable prize." He brushed his lips against her shoulder and murmured, "But I never bargained for the fact you would claim so much more of me..."

Any words she might think up vaporized before making it out of her mouth. Without thinking, she raked her fingers through his still-damp hair.

He lowered her back onto the warm rock and hovered above her, placing his hands on either side of her body. "You tell me, Kessa Lyah," he said quietly, "what shall we do now?"

The sincerity of his words draped around her like warm syrup. She had never seen this side of him before. Had it always been there? Had she missed it because he was always the Leader King in the presence of others? Or had she simply failed to notice it because she didn't *want* to see it?

She pulled him down, pressing her lips against his for a deep kiss. He lowered himself onto her, sliding his hands along the sides of her body. His lips grazed her cheek, traveling down her neck to the hollow where it met her shoulder, and to her breasts. He teased one nipple taut by tugging gently with his fingers while placing his mouth over the other.



Kessa moaned, pressing herself against him as he flicked her nipple with his tongue then sucked it gently until it was puckered and hard. When he finally let it slip out of his mouth, his other hand took over, rolling and squeezing the beaded tip while his mouth moved down over her belly. His kisses left paths of fire as he made his way to her vulva.

"Oh God," Kessa breathed, digging her fingers into his shoulders. She knew her clit was engorged and wet. She could feel it, tight and pulsing, begging for his mouth as he hooked her legs over his shoulders.

He slid his tongue over it once, sending shock waves through her. She arched her hips against him. "Please," she whispered.

His hands continued to work their magic on her breasts, kneading and squeezing the puckered points between his fingers. When he took her clit between his lips and sucked on it, Kessa gasped, tightening her legs against him.

In one quick, fluid motion, he moved back up, kissing her full and deep on the mouth. Kessa wrapped her arms around his neck as he positioned himself above her, guiding him into her hot, wet opening. He slipped in with a moan, burying his face in her neck.

"Yes!" Kessa gasped as he began to move in smooth, controlled strokes.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and looked fiercely into his eyes. "Go deeper," she pleaded. "Faster."

His eyes darkened as he obliged, pounding faster and deeper.

Kessa cupped one of her breasts and brought his head down to her nipple. He immediately took it fully into his mouth and sucked hard. She groaned, pressing his face against her and arching up to meet him at each stroke.

She shuddered and exploded, crying out and clinging to him as she whirled in the vortex they had created. He moved his mouth to hers, swallowing her screams as he kissed her, his arms holding her firmly while she came. Her orgasm rocked her to the

core as she surfed its waves, allowing herself to be carried along in the safety of his embrace.

He ground deeper and harder into her pussy. He threw his head back and moaned, arching his body against her as it convulsed with the force of his own orgasm.

Kessa kept her legs wrapped around his waist, savoring the feel of his body, the taste of his mouth. Being with him was beyond anything she could ever have imagined. And she knew that everything she had feared—that she would now be unable to walk away—was true. She had never before reached these heights with anyone, human or Lith'hah.

Staying inside her, he rolled over, pulling the length of her body close until his heartbeat slowed back to its resting pace. "Kessa Lyah," he said dreamily, running his fingers along her spine. "Stay with me."

She snapped her eyes up to look into his. They were imploring, open, vulnerable.

She thought about her freedom, about not wanting to stay among a people whose ways she did not agree with. Although her days here had been comfortable and she had found some contentment—and now *this*—she knew it was only a matter of time before the Lith'hah showed their true colors.

She looked away as her chest tightened.

He inhaled deeply, releasing her from his embrace and rolling onto his back.

Kessa sensed his disappointment and frustration. She wished there was something she could say that would allow them to hold on to the sweetness of the moment, but there was nothing. Nothing that wouldn't compromise her own freedom and independence.

After a few moments of silence, he sat up. "We should go back. I have other business to tend to, and we both need to prepare for the evening's festivities."

Kessa sat up slowly. "I'll not be participating in the evening's events," she said softly.

He looked at her in surprise. "But it's in honor —"

"I know what it is," she said, interrupting him. "But I will not participate." Her words were calm but firm.

He paused a moment before stating, "I'm sure you have your reasons, but it will be good for you. Even if it is for an hour at the beginning."

Kessa shook her head. "No."

He stood, reaching a hand out to help her up.

Kessa took his hand. When she stood, he pulled her against him. "Sometimes we must face our fears head-on, Kessa Lyah," he said softly. He looked away for a moment before stating, "You're not going to like this, but as your Leader King, I order you to participate in tonight's Revelry."

Kessa pushed away from him. "Excuse me?"

He watched her evenly but said nothing.

"You can't *order* me to attend," she said, her voice trembling with rage.

"You and I both know that I can," he said. "And I have."

He walked over to one pile of berries and grabbed a handful in each hand. "I am going to give the dens one last look before inspecting the grounds for tonight. I expect you to return to the den and begin your preparations." He came back to where she stood and grazed his lips against hers.

Kessa shrunk back, aghast.

He gave her a lopsided smile. "Don't even think of running, my sweet," he drawled. "My generals, though they keep a respectful distance at all times, are never far."

Kessa drew in a sharp breath and looked around. She saw no one, but she didn't doubt him. Before she could formulate any kind of response, he shifted into his Lith'hah form and ran in long, graceful strides toward the dens.

Kessa walked to the berries and popped a handful into her mouth. But she could barely eat. She was furious.

What nerve! How could he change from tender and caring one minute, to an order-giving authoritarian the next? She walked slowly back to the dens. Everything inside her was a jumble of emotions. On one hand, she had just experienced the best lovemaking in her life. And she had felt something for him. Something unfamiliar and unsettling, but each time she focused her attention on it, it flitted away.

On the other hand...how *dare* he order her around as if she were a child?! She wanted nothing more than to block out the evening. She didn't mind roaming about the grounds during the day with the little ones and everyone going about their work. At night, especially during a Night of Revelry, she did not want to be among the drinking, smoking Lith'hah.

But he had "ordered" her to be there. And, as with everything else he ordered, Kessa knew she had no choice. She would be forced to participate, whether she wanted to or not. Rage burned through her as she made her way back to the den. She wondered how one body could hold so many contradictory thoughts and emotions at the same time.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the sun dipped on the horizon, the bonfire was lit. The first scent of Barlo weed, which was lit only on these types of occasions, wafted up to the den as the guards came in to lead Kessa down to the grounds. Kessa shot daggers at them. She had held on to a faint hope that they would not come. That the king would come to his senses.

But no such luck. She trudged toward the fire with the guards flanking her, and saw that all the females were sitting in a circle, dipping brushes into small jars of silver, gold and ochre heatpaint. They pulled the brushes slowly and skillfully over the skin of the female they were preparing, drawing elaborate, ornate designs and patterns over

one another. Kessa watched, riveted. She had forgotten about this part of the Night. Some of the women looked up, acknowledging her and smiling.

Kessa forced herself to smile back as the guards led her to a seat set aside especially for her. Outside the circle of females were males in both human and Lith'hah form. Valren sat on a throne outside the circle but was placed up on several flat stones so he presided over the evening's events. From where he sat, he had a clear view of Kessa.

One of the females began drawing curves and vines on Kessa's left arm while another female took her right arm. The heatpaint set her skin on fire, sending a tingling sensation through to her very core.

Kessa watched a large, very-rounded female moan and writhe on the ground as another female caressed her thighs and several others painted her body. Outside the circle, two males in Lith'hah form were circling one another. The smell of bark brew and Barlo weed was thick in the air.

Kessa felt her throat tighten. The air was heavy and she fought to get enough into her lungs.

The larger of the males raised himself on his hind legs and Kessa got a good view of his enormous, rock-hard cock. She was unable to tear her eyes away. It had been a long time since she had seen Lith'hah in union.

She felt Valren's eyes on her as the females continued brushing heatpaint over her breasts and hips. Kessa closed her eyes against the heady mixture of Barlo and heatpaint.

When she opened her eyes, she saw Valren motioning someone over. She turned to see a buxom female gliding toward him. The female positioned herself between his legs and lowered herself until she knelt before his thick, hard cock.

When she took him into her mouth, Kessa tore away from the circle of women. She transformed into her Lith'hah shape and ran before anyone else registered what was happening. She didn't know where she was going, but she had to get as far away from the grounds – and the Revelry – as fast as she could.

She ran to the stream. The sound of the burbling water soothed her, and that was what she needed most right now.

It wasn't long before she heard the heavy fall of paws behind her. She changed back into her human form and turned to face her pursuers. Valren came into view first, slowing and shifting form when he saw her. The two guards who had escorted her earlier were right behind him, also shifting when they saw the king transform.

Valren stared at her, his face set with deep, hard lines. He turned his head slightly and addressed the guards. "Leave us. Go back to the grounds and tell everyone to carry on...all is well."

They bowed and backed away, shifting and turning back.

"Do you mind telling me what that little display was about?" he rumbled.

She looked at him coldly. "I told you I didn't want to be there."

He took one quick stride toward her. "And I told you it was an order."

She could see the rage in his eyes, simmering just beneath the surface. But she didn't care. Her eyes flashed. "I'm not going back there. You'll have to kill me."

"I could carry you back quite easily," he said.

"You would have a hell of a fight on your hands."

She saw the muscle at his jaw jump.

"What is it," he asked, "about a night of such beauty and celebration that disgusts you so? Do you believe you are so much better than your roots? Lith'hah have been celebrating the senses for millennia. It's reverence for the sacred gifts from the stars—the capacity to *feel*, Kessa. To feel emotions, to feel pain, to experience sublime physical, sensual pleasure, whether it be food or sex, or..."

"I know all that," she yelled. "I heard it all throughout my early years! How *sacred* the Lith'hah consider the body—how *wonderful* a Night of Revelry is and what a *blessing* Awakening is! It's bullshit," she spat out. "No one wants to look at the truth—that all

this freedom and celebration can put the most vulnerable of our members in danger! That young females are violated on nights like these all the—" She clamped her mouth shut, realizing she'd said too much. She turned quickly to the sound of the water, taking deep breaths to calm the trembling of her bottom lip. But she had caught the shock on his face before she turned away.

For several moments there was no sound but the melodic burbling of water as the stream flowed past. Kessa looked up at the moon shining its buttery light onto the revelers in the distance.

She heard him come up behind her. Then the heat of his hands as he placed them on her shoulders. He turned her around to face him.

She didn't fight him. All resistance had left her body and she was exhausted.

He tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes. "Those kinds of violations are crimes against all that is sacred," he whispered, "and all Lith'hah laws—laws that align with Nature and the Great Forces. Crimes like those are punishable by death." A kind of violent rage rippled beneath his skin. "Who hurt you?" he demanded quietly.

Kessa looked away, her voice faint. "An Independent...long gone."

He let her go, clenching and unclenching his fists, and paced the ground.

Kessa walked to a log and sat down heavily. She pressed her fingertips to her temples, watching the play of moonlight on the water as it danced over stones and pebbles. She reached her hand into the cool stream, bringing her now-cooled palm to her forehead. It was out, she realized. The secret she had held all these years was now uttered into the night, with a witness no less, and there was no undoing it. She began to shiver uncontrollably.

Valren sat next to her, straddling the log, and pulled her into his arms. "We are not all like that," he said gently. "I know it must have been...devastating to endure an attempt to quash such a vital and tender part of yourself...but most Lith'hah view sexuality as a divine gift." He trailed off as if at a loss.

"There will always be those who don't value what is precious," he continued, "even within my own pride, I must keep a sharp eye out for violators of The Laws, but..." He paused again, as if he was searching for words.

"It's Nights like these," Kessa said. Her voice was heavy with remembered pain. "It was on a Night that I, that he..." she stopped to gather her words. "The Nights create this environment that allows wild abandon and no accountability. That and the views the Lith'hah hold."

"No," he said emphatically. "Nights of Revelry celebrate and honor the senses. Some may try to mar this truth, sully it, perhaps even destroy it. But that does not alter the simple fact the body is a hallowed treasure...to be cherished and revered, Kessa Lyah." He tightened his arms around her. "It makes me want to go back to my pride—to join the members in exalting this thing of great beauty that we've been entrusted with." He cupped her face with his hands and turned her toward him. "Join me. I will stay by your side every minute of tonight."

She started to shake her head, but he bent his head and gingerly kissed her lips. "You will not be made to do anything you do not want," he said against her lips. "And if it becomes entirely unbearable, you are free to return to the den."

He lifted her onto his thighs.

Kessa wrapped her legs around him, her heart rate speeding up a notch.

"Do you feel this?" he asked, holding her close. "This is not wrong. It is not shameful, nor a violation. I am a Lith'hah, like you, Kessa, and I honor this deeply. I want to honor it with you. The young ones are safe—we made sure of that this morning, you remember. Come with me."

Kessa felt his erection against her, setting her pulse racing. "Okay," she said after a moment. She chewed her bottom lip. "But I leave when I want to."

He stood, still holding her in his arms and kissed her deeply before pulling back and leaning his forehead against hers. "You are free to leave when you want," he said quietly, setting her down.



He took her hand and they walked toward the stations Nyongah had been setting up earlier that day.

There were small fires around this part of the grounds. Most revelers were lost in what they were doing, but some looked up to watch their Leader King circle the grounds, hand firmly wrapped around Kessa's. She saw a few raised eyebrows and some members leaning into one another's ears to whisper.

The stars were bright above and the moon continued to shine down on the Night's activities. Kessa's belly felt like a clenched fist, but she forced herself to breathe and take it all in. One couple was making good use of the spanking station. Kessa felt her skin heat involuntarily as she watched them. But then she caught the whiff of bark brew and tensed.

As if sensing her struggle, Valren pulled her close, massaging her back. "Stay here," he said quietly. "Don't flit away."

Kessa pulled herself up tall and set her jaw. He was right. The young ones were safe. Everyone around her was engaging in what they wanted to be involved in. She was a grown Lith'han who could defend not only herself but others if need be.

She gripped his hand and gave a nod. "I'll be fine," she said. "Let's go."

He smiled. "You lead the way."

They walked around, watching couples and groups in a variety of positions, engaged in blissful unions and in various states of ecstasy. Kessa felt her body open as heat spread throughout her limbs.

She paused at a spanking station, watching the couple with interest. The male's face was flushed with pleasure as his partner struck him then lovingly caressed his bottom. She looked up at Valren.

He walked to the station, picked up a length of vine and raised his eyebrows.

Kessa was a jumble of emotions, but one thing was clear — she was becoming deeply aroused. She walked toward Valren.

He pulled her against him and brought his mouth down on hers while expertly and efficiently raising her arms and tying her wrists together. Never moving his mouth from hers, he secured the vine to the hook above.

Kessa pulled back. "Wait—"

He paused immediately, searching her face. "Do you want to stop?"

Kessa closed her eyes, breathing in his scent, and shook her head. "No," she whispered.

She saw him gesture to someone behind her, but before she could turn to look, Kessa felt a light smack on her ass. It caught her by surprise and she thrust her hips forward, pressing them into Valren's cock. He held her gaze, his eyes questioning, and she nodded to let him know it was okay.

On the next smack, Valren slipped his shaft into her wet pussy, groaning as she ground against him. Kessa felt Valren lean against her and, in an instant, she was sandwiched between the smacker—another male—and Valren. Kessa felt the male behind her press his cock against her back. He cupped her breasts from behind, lifting them to the king's lips. Kessa gasped as Valren took both of her nipples into his mouth.

He untied the vines with one hand, holding Kessa against him with the other. The male who'd been behind her seemed to vanish. Valren lowered them both to the ground, pulled out and turned her around so she was on all fours. He entered her from behind, bracing himself with one arm as he reached around her to stroke her clit with his other hand.

Kessa's breasts swung as his sac slapped against her ass and her clit was swollen as he slid over it in small circles. She felt herself lifted to dizzying heights, losing herself in the sensations that washed over her. And through it all, there was Valren. Kessa knew she could only be here, experiencing this because of him, and something unexpectedly intense flooded through her. She gasped and closed her eyes as everything seemed to fall away and meld together. Thoughts, sensations, emotions—all became one.

She felt two more sets of hands on her, cupping her breasts and tugging on her nipples. One nipple was taken into a warm mouth while the other was squeezed and teased, driving her into a state of frenzy.

She kept her eyes closed, allowing herself to flow in this rushing current, allowing it to take her breath away. Someone else locked their mouth on hers—a woman—and Kessa hungrily took her tongue. There were hands and mouths everywhere. She didn't care who they belonged to as long as Valren's hands held firm on her hips, his cock stroking in and out in a steady rhythm.

She spread her legs wider as a tongue flicked her clit, sending her to the sheer brink of madness. She slammed back against Valren, wanting to feel him deep inside her, wanting to swallow all of him.

When the first wave of her orgasm coursed through her, she pulled away from the mouth that was kissing her and took great gulps of air as she screamed into the night.

Valren gripped her hips tighter as she cried out in raw pleasure.

He pumped faster until she felt his body stiffen and he rammed into her one more time, touching her soul from the inside.

He pulled her up so her back was against him. Her body was limp with release as she melted against his chest.

Kessa was distinctly aware that they were now alone. All the hands and mouths had gone. She opened her eyes, gradually letting the sights and sounds drift back to her. But everything seemed more vibrant, amplified. Slowly, Valren lowered her onto the soft grass, spooning her until they fell into a deep, satisfied sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Several hours later, Kessa bolted upright at the sound of a bone-chilling shriek. She wondered if she'd had another nightmare. It was still dark and the Night was still in full swing. There were bodies around her with limbs entwined and satisfied smiles on the faces of lovers. She looked around for Valren, but he was nowhere to be found.

There it was again.

She was on her feet in a flash and moving toward the source of the sound. When the bonfire came into view, she saw that most of the pride had congregated in one spot by the fire. Some were laughing and pointing. Others, in Lith'hah form, circled two crouching figures.

She heard a female near her say, "Looks like Darthian found a play toy."

She heard another scream and her heart began pounding furiously in her chest. Where was Valren?

She started to run toward the bonfire, but before she got even close to the outside circle of observers, the guards who'd been watching her sprang into action. They grabbed her arms and pulled her back.

"What are you doing? Let me go at once!"

The one holding her left arm shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said, "we're under strict orders to make sure you don't go near the bonfire at this time."

It was as if a flame shot up Kessa's spine. Her eyes narrowed into slits. "Under orders from *whom*?" she hissed.

The guards looked at one another. Finally, the one on her right spoke. "General Darthian."

Kessa nodded and let her arms go limp until the guards felt comfortable enough to let her go.

She turned and walked back a few steps, gauging how far the guards were from her. Another scream vibrated through her. She clenched her fists, and when she felt there was enough distance between her and the guards, she began to shift into her Lith'han form.

The guards moved quickly. They shifted into Lith'hah form and gave chase. Kessa ran fast. She climbed up a Mun'hai tree and waited for the guards to near.

When they were close enough, Kessa leaped onto them, sending them both tumbling backward. The screams from the bonfire zinged through her body like shock waves and Kessa tossed the smaller of the guards to one side as she wrestled with the other until she had him subdued. Her Silver instincts took over. She pressed on the point in his spine that would put him to sleep for several hours then she turned to the other one. He crouched low, ready to pounce on her. But she was larger in her Lith'han form and leaped first. He rolled backward with the force of her movement, and she took a swipe at his face, leaving three jagged lines across his temple and forehead. Then she sank her incisors into his shoulder and rolled him over, pressing a paw into the same point on his spine.

When his body went slack, she turned and raced back toward the screams. When she got to the bonfire, she was horrified at what she saw. There, crouching by the fire, in the center of a ring of drunken and smoke-dazed Lith'hah in both forms, were William and Melanie.

## Chapter Seven

Kessa roared as she tore through the Lith'hah to reach the humans. Already, Melanie had a gash across her breasts, and William's arms and back were bruising.

*Barbaric vermin.* She roared again and the ring of Lith'hah began to move slowly back, most of them shocked clear out of their stupor.

But Darthian, who was in human form, grabbed Melanie and swung her around to face Kessa, holding the girl's arms firmly behind her back. "Ah, the Silver princess. I believe you're familiar with our entertainment for the evening?" He sneered at the couple. "I searched far and wide to find these two. How could I ever forget the scent of the three of you the day our tracking party found you? I knew you would appreciate the effort." He gave her a mocking smile.

William stared at Kessa. There was a terror in his eyes that tore at her. She knew it well. She shifted back to human form and though she was an older version of the woman they'd met in the woods, both William and Melanie recognized her at once.

Melanie cried out as Darthian tightened his grip on her.

"Let her go," Kessa said. Her voice was deadly calm.

A hush fell over the pride members around the fire.

"Let her go?" Darthian repeated. He sounded amused. "Why would we do that? It's a Night of Revelry. We are making offerings to the Ancients. These two fine human specimens," he said, twisting Melanie's face toward him and kissing her on the mouth, "are my humble offerings."

The voice of an elder rose from the back of the crowd. "Offerings are to be of food and wine only, Darthian—not animals or humans."

Darthian didn't take his eyes off Kessa. "Shut up, old man. Humans are a threat to Lith'hah. It is our right to defend ourselves and our pride from any human menace."

Kessa felt a wave of nausea wash over her. She swallowed hard and ground her teeth. "Let them go, Darthian," she said, "or I will kill you and make an offering of my own." Where the hell is Valren? she wondered again.

There were gasps from the Lith'hah. Threatening another member of the pride held serious consequences, never mind that the other member was a general of the Leader King.

But Kessa couldn't care less. She would rather die than stand here and watch these degenerates humiliate and maul two innocent souls for no reason. "How could these two be threats?" she asked. "You said yourself that you went in search of them, Darthian." She spat out his name like a curse.

Three or four Lith'hah males and a couple of females changed into their Lith'hah forms and silently moved to stand behind Darthian.

He laughed. "What does it matter? They were in the woods, too close to the Territories for comfort." He gave her a humorless smile. "Will you fight us all for these humans, Silver princess?"

Kessa moved her body between William and the general. William moved closer to her. Without saying anything more, she changed into her Lith'hah form and readied herself for battle.

Darthian flung Melanie aside and she scrambled behind Kessa, clinging to William.  
"Enough."

It was one calm word, but it stopped everyone in their tracks.

Valren walked out of the shadows. His jaw was tight and rage flared in his eyes.

Kessa changed back, relief flooding through her.

"This is a sacred night," he said quietly. "Put the humans in the holding cages. No one is to go near them without my permission. Continue with the festivities as you were."

"No!" Kessa said, whipping her head around to face Valren.

Again, gasps and whispers rippled through the pride. Kessa heard them all.

"She dared challenge the Leader King's orders?"

"Just who does she think she is?"

Kessa saw a mixture of surprise and anger beneath the surface of Valren's quiet gaze and smooth voice. "No?"

Darthian laughed. "With all due respect, Your Majesty...we all know you harbor a certain fondness for our newest member, but perhaps you've been too lenient? She fails to show the proper respect for a Leader King."

Valren turned his laser eyes toward Darthian. "Do you question my decisions?" His tone was lethal.

Darthian sobered. "I am simply inquiring, *my lord*, whether your affection for the Silver Lith'han might be clouding your judgment...as our Leader King."

A murmur ran through the crowd.

"Could be..."

"It's true, she has been coddled..."

"I *knew* she was not to be trusted!"

Darthian seemed bolstered by their words. He continued. "The combination of your affection for the Silver princess and her affection for humans," he wrinkled his nose in disdain, "would surely drive the Lith'hah to extinction."

There were nods and shouts of agreement.

Kessa saw the fire raging in Valren's eyes.

She fumed. "You are all out of your goddamn minds. What will drive us to extinction is leaving human remains in the woods for their loved ones to stumble upon."



What will put us in jeopardy are Lith'hah sightings in human territories and humans disappearing without a trace. Whether these acts are committed by lone Independents or bona-fide pride members, they leave the Lith'hah vulnerable to angry, grieving humans seeking vengeance for those they loved." She turned to Darthian. "Do you believe, even as drunk as you are, that your instincts could possibly be as sharp as when you are sober? Do you think no one saw you and whoever your sidekicks were as you dragged these two through the woods?"

Darthian narrowed his eyes. "No one saw us," he hissed. "And if they had, humans are too dull-witted to believe their own eyes. They must create myths and legends to explain what they do not understand and convince themselves that what they *know* to be true is not."

Kessa raised her eyebrows. "Really." She looked at William, who stood shivering behind her. "William," she said softly, "tell these fools the stories you grew up hearing about Lith'hah."

He looked at her uncertainly. She nodded her encouragement and he began recounting the stories his grandmother had told him. About the splendid creatures who sometimes would wander too far south, away from their natural habitat and the tree that sustained them. "She said that she once saw one as he lay dying. He was gorgeous, but the light was fading in his 'gemstone eyes'. She stayed with him, kept him warm, but he went quietly that evening, she said..." His voice became less and less afraid as he spoke, and Melanie jumped in every now with what she'd heard.

"She said they meant no harm, but that they didn't trust us..." William said sadly.

Melanie interjected. "But some of them—ahem, some of *you*...took people into the woods to have sex then the people would be found torn apart, limb by limb..." Her eyes clouded over in terror.

"My grandmother said that she'd known some of you—personally—and that if a human stayed loyal and discreet, never revealing anything, they—you—would trade with us and offer protection." William continued to describe the Lith'hah his

grandmother had interacted with, the time she rode a male almost all the way up to the territories, and what she observed about him along the way. “My grandmother was of the Itubo people,” he added. “We were outsiders in the Southern Sands anyway, and her people saw things people of the Southern Sands never saw or never believed they’d seen.”

When the two finished their stories, there was a stunned silence among the Lith’hah. Even the Leader King’s anger seemed to abate as he absorbed just how much the humans knew about Lith’hah behavior, appearance and habits.

“Ancients!” someone cried. “If they fear us, they shall try to kill us—I’ve seen them do it—even among their own!”

“Our very safety is at risk,” someone else said.

Another voice spoke up from the back. “Perhaps we need to find a better way to live among the humans.”

An older voice said, “Kessa Lyah of the Silver lineage has spoken the truth. She has been returned to us by the Ancients—to show us a new path.”

Darthian snarled. “This is *outrageous*. She certainly shall show us a new path—straight to our deaths!” He looked around at the faces of the pride then at Valren. “We have laws,” he said, his eyes becoming red slits. “The Council has laws against what she has done tonight—on a Night of Revelry, no less! And it is your job, *Your Majesty*, to enforce those laws.” Then he spun around and stormed off with several of his supporters following close behind.

Valren leveled her with a gaze. “You will return at once to the den.” Then he flicked a glance at the guards who’d staggered back from where she’d left them unconscious. “Clearly, I am the only one capable of keeping watch over you.”

He turned to the others. “The humans will be caged tonight until I decide otherwise. The rest of you, go back to your festivities.”

The crowd moved away, murmuring various opinions amongst themselves. Eventually the music started up again and the drums beat back to life. Barlo weed was lit and bark brew poured freely. But the tone of the Night was more subdued.

Malvar and Nyongah tied the couple with vines and took them to separate holding cages as Valren grabbed Kessa's hand and headed up to his den.

He finally spoke when they were clearly out of earshot of any revelers. "You cannot address me like that among the members of the pride," he said through clenched teeth.

She looked at him in dismay. "Address you like *what*?" she asked. "Like an equal?"

He stopped and threw his head back in frustration. "Yes—you are not an equal. If we were all equals, we would have no need for Leader Kings and Council members. You should know that, Kessa. You are a Silver Lith'han—no other female is a match for your speed and strength."

They continued up the mountainside, no longer hand in hand. "Where were you?" she asked. "How could they have gotten as far as they did? Why weren't you there to stop them?"

His face clouded with rage. "I was checking on the young ones and their pre-Awakened guardians! After speaking with you and...I couldn't rest without being assured all was well."

Kessa was speechless. She hadn't realized her words had made such an impact on him.

When they reached the den, Valren walked straight to the food and drink table set for them, poured himself a cup of bark brew and downed it all completely before turning to her.

"Do you know what you have done?" he asked quietly.

She stood tall and looked him squarely in the eye. "I couldn't stand by and watch them hurt those humans."

"Who are they to you?" he said, his voice strained.

"They are *alive*," she shot back. "Tonight we celebrate Life, do we not? How can you care so much for the safety of Lith'hah—young and old—and not even remotely give a damn about others who are just as vulnerable?"

She saw the muscle at his jaw tighten. "You attacked the guards, you threatened my general..."

"Your general is an asshole."

"You protected humans...*humans*—who have caused so much damage to our line throughout the ages, who have torn apart or blasted through our lands in search of whatever metal or mineral they deem valuable at the time—at the expense of Lith'hah!" he roared.

"I would rather die than watch them be killed while I stand by and do nothing!"

He took two long strides, grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Do you not understand at *all*?" He searched her face. "Now I must mete out your punishment to the satisfaction of the pride members, including my generals and the Council!" He let her go abruptly and moved to a small leather stool. "The Council will ask for your death." He sat down heavily and rubbed his temples.

"Let them," she said softly.

He snapped his head up.

"What are my options? I stay here, imprisoned against my will, watching this sort of cruel debauchery...or I run for the rest of my life."

She saw something flash across his face—pain? And instantly regretted her words.

"*Ancients*," he cursed, standing again.

"Let me speak to the Council," Kessa said.

He whirled around. "Do you think they would listen to anything you have to say?" His eyes flashed. "You ran away, lived among humans—risked someone finding out what you are. You could have ended up in human hands with your body dissected

while they sent search parties into the Northern Territories to claim us as trophies or annihilate all of us!"

"Then why did you bring me back?" She struggled to keep her voice steady. "Why didn't you leave me be? I was happy! I'd managed to keep my secret for decades, even from my children!"

He moved close and grabbed her arm. His fingers dug into her flesh and she gasped in pain.

"I had no choice," he growled.

Kessa's eyes stung as she watched him thunder off.

## Chapter Eight

This time he stationed three guards outside the den. Kessa knew she had to get out. She couldn't breathe anymore. This place was suffocating her. She had to run, get as far away from the Northern Territories as she could. But she would not be able to fight three guards—who were now wielding weapons.

Kessa paced the floor of the den. And there was the matter of the humans. Kessa would not leave the grounds without the humans. She knew they would never release them now. William and Melanie had seen too much. They would be killed for sure unless she figured out a way for all of them to escape.

She stopped and crouched as regret and doubt crept into her thoughts. She was to blame for those two being here. If she had not stopped that night for the few sweet hours of their company, they would have been left alone.

But then Darthian, or another Lith'han who was drunk on power, would have found someone else. If it wasn't William and Melanie, it would have been another two unsuspecting, horrified innocents who had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

She walked to the food table and looked at the vats of food that had been carried up for this Night. There were two barrels of bark brew and several rolls of the potent Barlo weed. Kessa considered ingesting all of it herself, but that wouldn't do William and Melanie any good.

And then she had an idea.

She rolled the barrels toward the opening of the den and slid them out to the ledge.

The guards immediately took up their arms.

She held up her hands. "I'm not doing anything," she said quickly. "Just wanted to offer you diligent guards some brew. We have so much...I would hate to see it go to

waste." Then she stretched her arms above her head. "It is a lovely night," she purred, brushing her fingers against her nipples. They puckered into stiff buds as she ran her hands down her belly and cupped her soft mound.

The guards, all males, had lowered their weapons as they intently watched her hands.

"I'll go back inside and enjoy the rest of it," she said, kneading the full flesh of her ass as she swished back through the leather curtain.

She listened carefully, just inside the entrance. "The king will skin us alive if we touch that brew," one of them said.

"But it's a Night of Revelry!" said another.

"I suppose a sip couldn't hurt," said the third. "Just to toast the Ancients."

"Who knows, maybe she'll come back outside if she needs something," one of them said in a lowered voice.

"What I wouldn't give to dip into her *wima*."

Kessa bristled but forced herself to remain calm. She could sense from their heat that they were becoming aroused. It was working. Now if they would just...

"I'm going to dip into the bark brew, at least."

Bingo.

After a few moments, she heard the conversation flow as freely as the bark brew. She quickly grabbed all of the Barlo weed—a solid one-year supply for at least ten people—and lit it up, placing it just on the other side of the curtain so most of it wafted out to the guards and not back into the den.

She grabbed a filmy fabric from the table and wrapped it around her mouth and nose like a mask. She knew she would still become slightly heady and buzzed, but it was worth it if it helped her escape. She would find a Mun'hai tree and chew on the leaves to bring her down again.

"Ah, she's lit up the Barlo," laughed one of the guards.

“She must be rubbing that gorgeous body all over...”

They were slurring their words and Kessa knew she could probably chance a peek. She ducked her head out and saw that they were sitting on the ledge, their legs dangling over the edge. One was lying back with an arm covering his eyes, his other hand stroking himself. The other two were locked in a kiss, their hands groping one another.

All three had their backs to her. She wondered if she should wait until they were all deeply engaged with each other, but she worried about leaving William and Melanie down there much longer. As it was, the Barlo weed was weaving its way through her limbs and opening all of senses wide. She felt like a live wire, on hyperalert. She watched one of the gropers lean down and take the other male’s long shaft into his mouth. Her clit tightened and she knew she had to leave *now*.

She slipped out of the den and into the night.

She searched immediately for the Mun’hai tree near the grounds. Her senses were dulled, but soon she sensed it and headed straight for it. When she reached its thick roots jutting out of the ground, she crouched low to get to its branches. She stayed in the shadows and plucked a few leaves, shoving them hungrily into her mouth. She chewed quickly, hoping they would work their magic right away.

Slowly, she came back to her full senses. She opened up and learned that almost all of the Lith’hah were in various states of euphoria. Kessa looked at the scene. She scoured the grounds for signs of Valren, but saw him nowhere. She felt as if a hand were squeezing her heart, making it hard for her to breathe as she remembered his parting sentence. “*I had no choice.*” Just when she had opened to him! He came looking for her because he was ordered to.

She shoved those thoughts aside, ignoring the emptiness that suddenly threatened to engulf her. She made sure to stay in the shadows, downwind of the Lith’hah, so none would catch her scent as she made her way to the cages. She scolded herself, *Well, what*



*did you think? That he loved you?* She swallowed bitter laughter. This was not the time to be thinking of him. He was not worth her time or energy.

When she saw one of the guards move away from his seat and wander to the other end of the structure, she moved out of the shadows.

Melanie spotted her first. Her eyes widened as Kessa held a finger to her lips. Melanie nodded, shooting a furtive glance at the guards then signaled to William. He looked over, caught sight of Kessa, and his face lit up with hope.

Kessa tested the cage structure. In Lith'hah form, any of her kind could easily snap the thick branches that made up each cage. But humans would not have the strength. She shifted quickly into Lith'hah form and, as quickly and quietly as she could, she snapped the branches of first one cage then the other, creating openings just large enough for Melanie and William to pass through.

She turned and crouched, offering her back and they climbed on. William in front, grabbing fistfuls of her wild silver mane, and Melanie behind him—holding on to her beloved for dear life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kessa ran through the early morning hours and into the next evening. She ran with all her might until she was well out of the Northern Territories before slowing down. She knew William and Melanie needed to eat, and they all needed to sleep, but she had been determined to gain distance from the border.

They would be safer on ground that was unfamiliar to the Lith'hah. When they finally stopped, Kessa was jittery. She shifted into her human form so they could sit together and eat.

"They've sent a search party after us by now," she said.

"Do you know if they're near?" Melanie asked anxiously.

Kessa shook her head. "I don't sense any. But if they're traveling through water, I will not pick up their scent." She stood. "We must keep moving."

William pointed to her leg. "You're hurt!"

She looked down at her swollen ankle. She had jumped off a boulder and landed on it wrong. "It's just a sprain. It will go away."

"That is not just a sprain," he insisted.

Kessa pursed her lips in impatience. "We *must* keep moving," she said firmly. "If they catch us now, they will tear all of us apart, limb by limb."

William fell silent while Melanie covered her face and sobbed softly.

Kessa crouched down and cupped the girl's face. "If we keep moving, by tomorrow morning I will have you safe and sound in a town I know. It's called Mystic Springs and it is in a remote, warm corner of the Southern Sands. The Lith'hah will not venture that far — not even the daring ones."

Melanie wiped her tears with the back of her hand and looked at William. "Will they...how are they with—"

"It is a wonderful little town," Kessa reassured her. "It's one of the few I discovered during my travels that has been untouched by the madness that abounds in human society." She looked at the two of them with fondness. "You two will be very happy there, and you will be embraced as a couple."

Melanie's face brightened. "Thank you," she whispered.

William hugged her tightly and turned to Kessa. "We can live together freely? Out in the open?"

"Yes," she said. "We will rest in shifts. You two sleep now then, when you wake, I will take a quick nap. And then we must travel southwest without stopping again."

\* \* \* \* \*

When they arrived at the outer edges of the town of Mystic Springs, Kessa shifted into human form in case anyone happened upon them without her sensing their arrival.

She pointed the couple to the town's tailor. "Look through his castoffs," she said, "there will be something you can use to cover yourselves until you figure out what to do next."

William reached for her first, holding her against him for a long time, unabashedly letting the tears roll down his face. "You are magic," he whispered as he let go. "Pure magic."

Melanie hugged Kessa for just as long as William had. "You said the Lith'hah don't come this far south, right?"

Kessa nodded. "It is too hot and there are no Muh'hai trees for hundreds of miles."

"But what about for you?" William asked.

She shrugged. "It's something to do with my lineage. We are a highly adaptable line." She grinned through the pain in her ankle. "Stronger and faster too. And, according to the elders, we are in direct communication with the stars."

Melanie took Kessa's hands and held them tightly. "Then stay with us," she implored. "You would be safe here and you would be with us."

Kessa smiled then leaned forward and kissed the girl on her forehead. "Tempting, but I must move on, my sweet." She took a step back and looked at them both, committing their features to memory. "Rest assured, however, that I will return as often as I can."

She opened her senses and scanned the town's activity. Calm. Serene. "Now go," she said, prodding them forward.

They turned and waved several times before the trees swallowed them.

Then Kessa turned and hobbled back into the woods.

Her ankle was in bad shape, but she had not allowed herself to stop and tend to it until now. She made her way to a stream and dipped it under the ice-cold water for as long as she could handle.

If she could find the proper herbs, she would make an herbal cast for herself and it would mend quickly. In this condition, Kessa knew she would not get very far.

She headed deeper into the woods, combing the ground for the weeds and herbs she would need to heal her ankle. But with each step, her ankle worsened. Within an hour, Kessa's temperature spiked. She was running a fever and bouts of nausea had her retching whatever herbs she struggled to eat.

She began to lose her sense of direction and wandered whichever way she happened to be facing until she could go on no longer. Then she sat, leaning heavily against the trunk of a fat, coarse-barked tree and blacked out.

## Chapter Nine

She was being carried somewhere, on a stretcher. By whom? Humans? The sun was searing at high noon, blinding her. The world faded out again.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was nighttime and they were in the woods now. She heard voices. Voices of men? There were blankets piled on top of her but still she shivered. A small, nocturnal rodent scampered over her legs. She tried to ask for water, but the effort was too taxing.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the stretcher again. They were going up a mountainside. An eagle screeched overhead. This must be a dream. *Or have I died?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Kessa awoke to the smells of food cooking. It was dark and she was in...Valren's den!

She tried to throw off the covers, screaming and thrashing until two large hands held her down and another injected her arm with something that stung as it seeped into her muscle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her eyes felt heavy as she pried them open. She looked groggily around at her surroundings. As soon as she remembered where she was, she began struggling.

"Easy." Valren's voice sent chills through her as he held her down and tightened the blankets around her body.

She was in a healing cocoon. Herbs had been placed all over her body and were kept in place with heavy blankets. The heat from her body released the healing properties in the herbs and the blankets kept her from moving around and exhausting herself.

Which she had managed to do anyway with all the struggling. "Don't touch me," she hissed.

He winced but moved away. "You were half-dead when I found you."

"You should have left me to die."

His eyes hardened as he turned and walked out of the den.

Kessa caught a movement out the corner of her eye. It was one of the elders, sifting through a basket of freshly picked herbs. "He ran to the Southern Sands to find you," she said.

"Yes," Kessa said bitterly, "I believe it. No doubt he's eager to deliver my punishment."

The elder shook her head but said nothing more. Instead, she hummed softly as she worked.

Kessa allowed the sound of humming to lull her back to sleep. Just as she was drifting off, she realized the song the elder was humming was a lullaby from her childhood.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she awoke again, it was dark. The blankets had been removed and in their place was a light sheet. She felt better than she had in what felt like weeks.

Valren stirred next to her and she sat up too fast. Her head throbbed and she had to lie back down almost immediately.

"You are too weak to run anywhere, darling," he mumbled.

She wanted to slam her fists against his chest, but he was right. She just didn't have the strength right now.

He wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her close.

She shivered against his warmth, too drained to fight. His familiar, musky scent washed over her as she surrendered to exhaustion once again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"She does not possess the sense of a gnat. If any male suffered so for me, I would make my True Mate vow within a single breath."

Kessa woke to the sounds of two females moving about in the den. She opened her eyes and stretched soundlessly, listening to their conversation.

"He has less sense than she if he ran as far as the Southern Sands. None but the likes of *she* could survive there."

"Well, he almost didn't! You heard that elder? The one who said he came stumbling back to habitable territory carrying the half-dead Silver Lith'han in his arms? Well, let me tell you they were *both* half-dead."

"Yes, but she was very close to crossing over. He has healed much more quickly than she."

Kessa felt as if something inside her were singed. He went down to the Southern Sands to haul her back for the satisfaction of seeing her put to death? Did he revive her only to have the satisfaction of killing her himself?

She wanted to weep in frustration. All the exhaustion of running for days and nights, of feeling the constant gnawing of hunger and the incessant fear of being following and recaptured...to have it all end up with her back in the Leader King's den was unbearable.

She turned over to her side and pulled the sheet over her face.

One of the females whispered, "She stirs!"

"She'll not wake. Her body still requires much rest."

Kessa wished they would all leave. She wanted to be alone with her misery and despair. To lick her wounds in private and pretend none of this had ever happened. That she was still back in her home that sweet, beloved Sher had built.

The females shuffled about some more, but then, to Kessa's relief, the two who'd been talking about her as if she weren't in the same room left. Shortly after, she heard the elder female make her way out of the den as well.

Kessa peeled back the sheet and slowly sat up. The den was darkening as the sun dipped over the distant mountain range outside. She stood and walked around the den, feeling the muscles in her legs come slowly, painfully back to life. She stretched and bent her arms, massaged the back of her neck, glad to be moving and fever free after so long.

She saw that one section of the den had been set up as an infirmary station. There were kettles of brewed healing herbs, herbal casts and bowls of ointments that the elders must have concocted to bring her back from the brink of death.

But why? she wondered. Why would they go to such trouble when she had done nothing but show her contempt and discontent?

*He* probably ordered them to, she thought bitterly. No doubt he wanted to see her suffer some more.

She popped a berry into her mouth, closing her eyes to savor its sweet juice as it trickled down her throat.

Someone cleared his throat behind her.

Kessa spun around.

Valren was leaning against the wall of the den with his arms crossed, watching her.

She clutched the edge of the table behind her and worked to steady her breathing. "How long have you been standing there?"

He shrugged. "Not long." His voice was like butter.



Emotions whipped around inside Kessa like the Extreme North winds, and she leaned back against the table for support.

"Why did you bring me back here?" she whispered.

He gave her a level gaze. "You belong here."

"I have never belonged here," she hissed, narrowing her eyes. "I want nothing more than to find peace somewhere far, far away from the nearest Lith'han."

He clenched his jaw but continued to gaze calmly at her. "That will never happen," he said, "you have already put the entire Lith'hah at risk. The two you helped escape have far too much knowledge about us. If you continue to run off like an untrained toddler, I shall have to keep you under arrest for the rest of your days."

Her heart began to thud in her chest as she realized he could very easily do something like that. "You *asshole*." She hurled the human curse at him with all the hatred she could muster.

He lifted one corner of his mouth in a humorless half smile. "This is all your doing, darling. You brought it on yourself."

Without thinking, Kessa reached her hand back, grabbed the first thing her hands touched and shot it at him.

He nimbly sidestepped the bowl of berries. The shock on his face was quickly replaced with fury as Kessa grabbed another bowl and threw it with all her force, aiming directly at his head.

He lunged toward her, but she moved with surprising speed, considering she was still recovering from deathly illness.

Kessa dashed deeper into the den, searching for something, anything she could use to hurt him as badly as he was hurting her. Her eyes lit upon a small chisel near a heap of coiled vine. She snatched it up and whirled around.

Valren came to a sudden halt as Kessa crouched, chisel in hand, ready to spring.

He slit his eyes as he watched her every movement.

Kessa leaped toward him and swung.

He ducked, but the chisel caught his upper arm, sinking into the muscle and drawing a small yarn of blood. He cursed, grabbing her arm and twisting it behind her back as if he were fighting another male on the battlefield.

She cried out in pain but struggled harder to free herself. She kicking back with her heel, hoping to connect with his kneecap, but hit his shin instead.

He grunted and tightened his grip on her arm. Again she cried out, drawing her other arm forward and elbowing him as hard as she could in the ribs. He drew a sharp intake of breath as he grabbed her other wrist and pinned both arms behind her back as far back as they would go without breaking. Then he drove her against the wall, pressing into her from behind.

Kessa turned her face to avoid having her nose crushed and screamed as she made contact with the hard, cold rock surface.

Valren brought his face close. There was unrestrained rage in his voice. "Just what do you think you are trying to achieve?"

"I hate you," Kessa whispered. "I don't want to be anywhere near you." And even with the limited movement of her hands, she managed to dig her nails into his abdomen.

He yanked her arms back again and she let out another scream. He pulled her away from the wall and flung her facedown onto the skins.

Kessa scrambled onto her hands and knees and reached for a battering stick. But he was immediately behind her, dragging her back and pinning her down with her arms above her head.

Kessa screamed into the skins. This time not from pain but from the sheer frustration of defeat. She let her limbs go slack as the fight drained out of her.

Valren loosened his grip but didn't let go.

Kessa could feel his chest still heaving.

After a few moments, he moved off her but stayed within arm's reach.

Kessa moved slowly, her body tired and exhausted. She rolled away from him and sat up, propping herself against the wall. "I got you good," she said, eyeing the gash on his arm. The blood had stopped flowing and began to coagulate.

He looked at the wound. "You did not get me good enough. I heal quickly."

"I'll keep that in mind for the next time," she said.

He glanced at her sharply, but she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

"What will it take," he asked in a calm voice, "for you to be at peace?"

Kessa opened her eyes, feeling the shift in his energy. "Let me go," she said quietly. "If I swear to not come into contact with any humans again, for as long as I am alive, you have no reason to keep me here."

He stared at her, not answering for a moment. Then he shook his head and moved closer to her. "I will never let you go."

"Why?" she asked, her heart thumping against her chest. "I will be as an Independent."

"Females cannot be Independents," he said smoothly. "The Council will never allow it. You are too important to the needs and survival of the pride."

"So, you will keep me here, against my will, to use me as a resource." Her voice trembled with outrage.

He sighed, swiftly pulling her back onto the bed next to him.

Kessa pushed against his chest but was too weak to fight any longer.

He brought his mouth down on hers and kissed her, stroking her side from just under her breast to her hip and back, until she stopped pushing against him. He moved his mouth along her cheek to her ear. "You are blind," he murmured. "You cannot see what is directly in front of you."

Kessa's body had stopped struggling against him, but inside she fought her own body as it responded to his touch.

His lips moved down the side of her neck and he slid his hand down to caress a buttock before sliding his hand farther, along her thigh.

Kessa shivered as a battle of epic proportions waged within her. "I am not blind," she said. "I see clearly that you ran all the way to the Southern Sands so you could have the satisfaction of punishing me yourself—brought me back from death's door so that you might kill me yourself."

He stopped abruptly and pulled back to look at her, full on. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

She gaped at him in disbelief and pure rage.

"Is that what you think?" He shook his head. "Clearly, your legendary intelligence does not filter through to some areas."

Kessa felt her face get hot. "And clearly your arrogance far exceeds its repute."

He let out another rich laugh, agitating her all the more. This time, he drew her close and kissed her hard. His hands moved along her spine, down her thighs and brushed the sides of her breasts.

She fought as her body opened to him. Hated that she wanted him so badly.

He drew his knuckles down her belly and cupped her mound, moving his mouth from hers to brush his lips against her jaw and down her neck to her collarbone. "Do you feel as if I am punishing you now?" His voice was warm and thick, wrapping around her like an embrace.

Kessa felt her clit swell against his rough palm. Her voice was nowhere to be found.

He pulled her back and looked deep into her eyes. "I do not want to punish you, Kessa Lyah," he said, his voice heavy with wanting. "I only desire to pleasure you. The first time I went to claim you it was out of a leftover desire from my younger days to possess the legendary Silver Kessa. This time, I went to find you because I could not bear the thought of leading a pride without you." Then he slipped his fingers inside her.

Kessa gasped, her hands flying up to clutch his shoulders. She stared at him in confusion, struggling to comprehend the meaning of his words. Her breath came out in short gasps as Valren pressed against her vulva, reaching deep into her pussy. *I only desire to pleasure you... I went to find you because I could not bear the thought of leading a pride without you.* Could he be toying with her? Did she dare to believe his words?

But there was naked sincerity in his eyes. "There is not much that frightens me, but the thought that I could lose you was intolerable," he said softly. "You have managed to worm your way into my heart with your sharp words, your infuriating rebellious nature and the strength of your spirit. I will never lose you again." He brought his lips down to her breast and teased the nipple until it was erect.

Kessa moaned softly – half in pleasure and half in wonder. She didn't know what to believe, but she knew that right this minute, he was wide open and desperate for her. She could feel it from him. Somehow she had missed this before. Or misread it.

He sucked her nipple gently and began stroking her clit in small circles. She stopped thinking altogether. She threw one leg over his side, guiding him to her opening and bearing down until he was inside her.

He let out a low moan, grabbing her ass and pushing into her as deep as she would take him. He shifted his weight so he was on top of her and slid in and out of her wetness.

Kessa spread her legs and bent her knees, digging her heels into the skins as she rose to meet him. She cupped her breasts and kneaded them, pulling on the hardened nipples and staring into Valren's eyes as they darkened with desire.

He sat back on his knees, pulling her up with him, and then stood with his rod still inside her, and walked to the table. He cleared everything off with one swipe and lay her carefully down in the mess of sweet berry juice and creamy sauces and spilled bark brew.

Kessa raised herself up, leaning back on her hands as he pumped into her. She arched her back so the length of his shaft caressed her clit each time he slid in and out.

She watched him pant with a frenzied arousal she could feel through his skin. She ached for release. She kneaded one breast with her hand as he pumped harder against her.

Kessa felt his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her ass as he thrust into her. She let go of her breast, threw her head back and cried out as she came. Wave after wave reverberating through her as she exploded. Her entire body shuddered with the force of her orgasm.

Valren pushed her back gently and climbed onto the granite slab, ramming into her in a frenzied pace. Soon, she felt him stiffen as he growled with the force of his own orgasm. She held him as his body convulsed against hers.

He collapsed next to her and she snaked her arms around his neck, tightening them until her entire length was pressed up against his. Then she promptly and swiftly fell fast asleep.

## **Chapter Ten**

When she awoke the next morning, Kessa was in bed and the den had been completely cleaned. Everything she had thrown in her fit of rage the night before had been picked up or swept away. The table was cleared and wiped. Even her skin felt clean.

"Good morning," Valren said, dipping in through leather curtain. He held steaming bowls and napkins, and a male behind him held a pitcher in one hand and two cups in the other.

The male placed the pitcher and cups on the table and quietly exited.

Kessa looked up into Valren's smiling eyes, looked at the bowls of porridge and felt her stomach rumble. "I'm starving," she said.

"I thought you might be. Teep grain porridge will help you regain your strength." Then he added, "You'll need it after last night."

She looked up. "Are you referring to our lovemaking or when I tried to kill you?"

He laughed as he set the bowls down on the table. "Both."

He sank down next to her on the skins. "Kessa Lyah," he said. "Please stay. I want you to be a member of my pride. I want you to stand next to me as I fulfill my role as Leader King."

She began to protest, but he held up a hand. "After you...left, a group of our most respected elders banded together and demanded the Council hear them out. They insisted the Ancients sent you to live among the humans so you could learn their ways to become better armed to protect the Lith'hah. They warned the Council that if you weren't absolutely, unequivocally embraced as an equal Leader in this pride, the Council would have a civil war on its hands."

Kessa's eyes widened. She looked at him carefully, making sure he was not joking or using sarcasm. "But...why?"

"They are elders, Kessa," he said softly. "They know things we do not."

"What did they mean? How can I become an equal Leader?"

He took a deep breath before answering. "I told them I wanted you for my Queen."

Kessa's jaw unhinged as she stared at him, registering his words.

He looked away. "You will not be obligated to take the True Mate vow," he said. "That is a commitment of the heart and soul. This is a matter of governance and the future of the pride." He turned back to her. "You have a home here, Kessa Lyah. You belong here. The pride wants you to stay."

Her eyes stung with tears as a pit of joy, mixed with sadness, lodged in her throat. Kessa was at a complete loss for words. They had fought for her. All of them. Well, maybe not all...

"What about Darthian?" she asked.

He knitted his brow. "Darthian and his mates are coming around," he said. "They seem to like things the way they were and are resistant to change. But if they want to stay in this pride, they shall abide by the pride's collective decisions."

"He's not trustworthy, Valren."

He opened his mouth to speak but seemed to think better of it and stopped. He looked at the wall, but seemed far away. "Darthian and I grew up together. We did not share a mother, but his died in childbirth and my mother raised us both. I loved him like a brother. Over the years, he has grown farther from the boy he was when we were young. And when it was clear that I would become Leader King, something changed in him. He remained loyal and is a highly skilled general, but...there is a wall between us."

"There's something very hard and cold in him," Kessa said quietly. "A cruel streak."



He waited a moment before responding. "You do not know him as I do," he said. "I have seen him grieve over the loss of his mother. He has fought by my side in every battle as a loyal general. I know there is much good in him."

There was a rap on the stiff leather curtain.

Valren turned around in irritation. "What is it?"

"Your Majesty, your presence is requested at a Council meeting immediately."

He looked at the still-closed curtain as apprehension settled over his face. He turned to Kessa, leaning down to kiss her deeply and tenderly before rising. "I shall return as soon as possible."

When he was gone, Kessa ate her porridge and drank the fresh berry juice Valren had brought up. A warmth spread through her as she thought about last night—how hot she had been for him, right here, on this granite table.

She ran her hands over her body, sending tremors of pleasure throughout and decided to go for a walk in the sun. She hadn't been out in such a long time and she could see the sun peeking around the edges of the heavy curtain. She stepped out onto the ledge and noticed immediately there were no guards stationed outside.

It was all true, she realized. She was free to go if she wanted, whenever she wanted. She walked through the grounds, smiling at the elders and little ones. She sensed that they were happy to have her among them.

"Kessa Lyah, you are up and about," said an old voice.

She turned to see the old female who had been sifting through herbs when Kessa was in the thick of her fever. "Yes, I wanted to get some air," she said, smiling at the old Lith'han.

"You are welcome, granddaughter," the old woman said.

Kessa swallowed the lump in her throat. No one had called her daughter or granddaughter in decades.

The woman walked close to Kessa, drew the shape of a five-pointed star in the air between them then blessed her. "Kessa Lyah, may you live and reign long as a Leader of this pride. And upon your crossing, may you and your True Mate join the stars that watch over us."

Then the wizened elder walked away.

Kessa couldn't help the tears that sprang to her eyes. This was a love she had missed terribly and denied the hole its absence had left. Now that she focused on it, Kessa could hardly believe how she could have ignored such a deep yearning.

She shifted into Lith'hah form and ran. She wasn't trying to escape. She no longer wanted to escape. But she wanted to close that chasm inside her somehow. That giant, gaping hole she had left her pride of origin for. The hole that just got bigger with time as she kept running away.

She found a large, flat rock in a field and leaped up onto it, changing into human form as her feet and hands landed softly on its warmth. She stretched out and allowed the rays of the sun to caress her limbs and accepted its healing force.

Could it be possible that all this time Valren had kept her here because he *wanted* her here? Could it be that she had misunderstood his intentions because of her own mistrust for the Lith'hah? These were possibilities Kessa had never considered before.

She yawned and rolled to her side when a large shadow leaped up onto the rock next to her.

"What have we here?" Darthian drawled. "The Silver beauty who has captured our dear Leader King's heart...and balls?"

Kessa sat up quickly, her heart hammering in her chest. She moved as far away from the red eyes as she could without falling over the rock's edge.

"What do you want, Darthian?" she asked in a voice far calmer than she felt.

He moved closer to her, sniffing her shoulder and neck as he walked a slow circle around her body.

"I want to see what's got the Leader King so worked up," DARTHIAN said in a low voice. "I imagine you've had many, many years of experience luring Lith'hah males, Kessa *Lyah*. I heard about your pre-Awakening escapades. The Independent you bonded with before you left..."

Kessa stopped breathing.

"Was a friend of my father's," he finished with a smile. "I heard them speaking about it one night over a pitcher of brew."

Kessa slit her eyes and coiled back like a snake ready to strike. "Fuck off," she hissed. And to think—she had been ready to give this maggot a chance after Valren's story of their shared childhood!

He laughed. "You curse like a human." He narrowed his eyes. "I heard you fought and screamed like a hellion, but that you loved every minute of it, Silver princess. A lot of the pre-Awakened ones are ready before the Council considers it legal to mate with them."

He moved closer to her and slid a finger down her arm.

Kessa jerked away from him. "Don't touch me, you degenerate piece of shit."

He grabbed her arm. "Too good for me, princess?"

Kessa struggled against him, clawing at his face.

He grabbed her hand and threw her onto the rock, climbing on top of her and holding her arms at her sides.

Kessa screamed. This was not going to happen to her again! She brought her knee up between his legs as hard as she could.

He howled, holding himself, and rolling off her.

Kessa jumped off the rock and began to run back toward the grounds. But she was still weak, and DARTHIAN recovered, catching up to her quickly.

He clamped a hand over her mouth and dragged her back.

Fear shot through Kessa. There was no one around for miles. Her screams would go unheard. She knew that even as a Silver female, Darthian was stronger than her right now. She fought as hard as she could, but her limbs trembled with fatigue.

He flipped her over, shoving her face into the grass.

Kessa tried to wriggle away, kicking her legs.

He reached one hand down to cover himself and lunged for her with the other.

She slipped out of his grasp and scrambled out of his reach.

He grabbed her ankle, pulling her down and forcing her legs apart.

Kessa reached in front of her, grabbing fistfuls of long field grass, and tried to pull herself out from beneath him. Terror pumped through her veins. She prayed to the Ancients, begging for their help. Pleading for someone to come, for something to happen to stop this nightmare.

She reached forward again, and her hand fell on something cold and hard. She closed her fingers around it. Using every bit of strength left in her body, Kessa swung the metal pole backward, aiming for Darthian's head.

He roared in pain and fell back.

Kessa clambered up, still clutching the piece of metal.

Darthian's face was covered in blood. One hand was pressed against his head and blood dripped over his fingers.

Kessa swayed on her feet as Darthian sank to his knees. The last thing she saw before collapsing was the face of Malvar as he lifted her gingerly off the ground.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Kessa tied the final ribbon on the sash that was tied to both Lith'hah, symbolizing unity and eternal joining. She walked back to the throne set up for her, next to Valren's, and sat down to watch the rest of the Uniting Ceremony. Kessa remembered the ceremonies from her childhood, but this was one of the most beautiful she had ever witnessed.

Malvar and Nyongah threw Mun'hai berries into the fire. The berries crackled and popped as the couple walked around the flames seven times with the pride elders reciting sacred poetry to music and drumming.

Kessa caught Valren staring at her a few times throughout the ceremony and found herself growing warm under his gaze. The fire in his eyes was one she could dance around forever.

Although it had taken close to an hour for Kessa to fully regain her senses after the incident with Darthian, Valren told her what had happened.

When Malvar carried her back to the pride grounds, he told the members simply that she slipped and fell. He carried her straight to the den, sent an urgent message for Valren to return, and waited.

When Valren swept through the curtain shortly after, Malvar told him everything he'd seen and heard—that his senses had picked up Kessa's terror as he was gathering berries by the stream. That he'd run swiftly in the direction of her scent and as he drew near, he saw Darthian on the ground on top of Kessa, trying to force himself upon her.

As he ran closer, he saw Kessa grab a spike from the ground—one of the ones used for the stations during Revelry nights—and drive the spike into Darthian.

When she woke, it was with Valren lying next to her, holding her close and kissing every inch of her skin.

"If he wasn't dead already," he said, "I would kill him my bare hands."

Kessa saw sparks of pain and anger in his eyes. "He's *dead*?" she whispered.

He clenched his jaw and nodded. "And deservedly so. I had Malvar, Kulim and Varsha find a spot far from the pride grounds to bury his body."

"You won't give him a ceremonial burial?" she asked in surprise.

His arm tightened around her waist. "He's lucky I didn't throw him to the vultures. If he had lived, his crime would have been punishable by death in any case." He reached up with his other hand to stroke her chin. "Your intuition was right about him, my love," he said. His voice was tight. "I should have listened to you. I should have listened to my own doubts about Darthian—long ago."

Kessa wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body against his rising warmth. "If he was like family to you, I can see why it was hard to believe the worst about him."

He had kissed her tenderly then, dropping light kisses down her neck, leaving searing imprints on her breasts and over her stomach until he settled between her legs. There, he brought Kessa expertly to the brink of sheer madness as she draped her legs over his shoulders.

Kessa was sure the entire pride grounds heard her as she came, shattering to a million blissful pieces while Valren held her bucking, writhing hips steady.

Kessa brought her attention back to the Uniting Ceremony. Everyone sat as the elders rose, one at a time, to offer their advice and counsel to the newly united. Then all Lith'hah feasted and celebrated, dancing until the first fingers of light stretched across the Northern sky. As with the Night of Revelry, the little ones, some protesting, others already sound asleep, were sent to their dens with assigned caregivers.

Kessa had learned that Malvar and Nyongah had made their True Mate vows some years back. They had moved quickly through the required rituals to determine whether they were truly a star-chosen match. And they had prevailed. Tonight was the

culmination of those rituals. Kessa's eyelashes were damp as she watched the beautiful Nyongah, decorated from head to toe in heatpaint, gaze with adoration at Malvar.

The couple recited the commitment they had composed during an earlier ritual, and not a single Lith'han in the crowd was dry-eyed. The ceremony wound to a close and the young caregivers began to gather the little ones to take them to the dens that had been closely inspected by both Kessa and Valren several days ago.

When the last little one was a speck in the distant field, the drumming started up, soft and slow at first. It would build as the night wore on. The sky was streaked with fuschias, oranges and golds, and a larger, celebratory bonfire was lit.

Valren touched her arm as he stood. "Come with me," he said. "There is one more ceremony."

Kessa looked up at him in surprise but stood and followed.

They walked away from the pride and toward the stream.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "And what is this other ceremony?"

He smiled at her. "You will find out very soon."

They crossed the stream and headed deeper into the woods, bearing north. After a while, Kessa insisted. "Valren. Where are we going?"

"Shh," he said. "Only a little more."

Soon, they came to a clearing. It seemed to be a natural circle of trees in the middle of the deep woods. Kessa caught her breath as the sun shone into this one spot in the cool, shaded woods. The trees towered above and the scents of eucalyptus and maple filled her.

"It's beautiful," she breathed. "How did you know it was here?"

Valren nodded to the other side of the circle of trees.

Kessa looked in the direction he'd indicated and froze. One by one, a group of three Lith'hah emerged from the woods, at different points on the circle. All were in their cat shape. All were Silver females.

She looked up at Valren. "What—?"

He took her hands in his. "They are here for your Awakening ceremony." Then he kissed her lightly on her forehead and walked back in the direction of the pride.

Kessa turned to the Silver females as they changed into their human forms. One seemed roughly her age and the other two were elders.

"Granddaughter," said one of the elders. Her hair was more white than silver, and her left eyebrow was the deep red of the Mun'hai berry. She placed a hand on top of Kessa's head in blessing. "You may refer to me as Grandmother throughout our ritual...and beyond."

Kessa's heart seemed to tremble at the touch of the old woman's hand, at the overwhelming love in her eyes.

The second elder, whose eyes were a pale amethyst, did the same, saying "Daughter" instead, and ending with "You may refer to me as Mother throughout our ritual...and beyond."

The one who was Kessa's age bowed her head. "Sister," she said warmly. Her hair was most like Kessa's, but it was flecked throughout with spots that shimmered like tiny drops of black oil. "You and I shall walk as two souls on one path. I will carry you when you grow tired, protect you when you are threatened, stand at your side when all have forsaken you...just as you will do for another sister after another ritual one day."

Kessa felt as if her heart would burst at the seams. "How can I have an Awakening ceremony?" she asked, blinking back tears that threatened to spill. "I have moved well beyond those years."

"Your True Mate arranged it, Daughter. We go through many Awakenings—not all of them are ushered in with ceremony," the amethyst-eyed elder—Mother—said kindly. "You may have been robbed of the first, but it is never too late to don that which is rightfully yours."



Kessa was about to correct the elder woman's assumption about Valren being her True Mate, but the old woman cupped her chin with one hand. "You are about to lead a pride, Granddaughter. We are here to evoke the blessings of the Ancients and to usher in your reign with the energies of the foremothers of your clan."

"Come, Sister. We have prepared the ritual."

Kessa sat on a flat rock in the sun as the women took handfuls of a yellow pasty substance and slathered it all over her body. When she was covered everywhere except her eyes, nose and mouth, Grandmother stood.

She raised her eyes to look at the sky and began to mumble an incantation. She seemed to move into trance as she sang parts of the prayer into the ether sphere.

Kessa worked hard to keep from melting into a sniffling puddle as she listened to the prayer of her clan. When she was a child, her mother had told her of this prayer, and she should have heard it during her own Awakening ceremony, decades ago. But this was the first time she was hearing it, and it was arranged especially for her—by Valren.

When Grandmother was finished, the women all placed their hands on Kessa and led her to a small pool just outside the ring of trees.

"You must enter the water to remove the paste, Sister, and not a moment before," said the woman closest to Kessa's age. "It must be of your own free will."

"It is symbolic of your rebirth, Daughter," the amethyst-eyed elder said gently. "We cannot guide you to it, nor can we encourage, convince or otherwise persuade you to enter the Waters of No Return."

"Do not touch the paste, Granddaughter," the eldest said, "until you are submerged in the water. And do not shift into your Lith'hah form."

The three women stood back and waited for Kessa.

The paste was hardening and cracking on her body. She itched to scratch it all off. But she didn't know how deep the water was, or what lived in it. Her limbs felt stiff and

heavy and she wondered how on earth they expected her to swim or tread water in this condition. The thought that this could be a trick flashed through her mind.

Kessa looked at the faces of the three women then back to the still surface of the water. She closed her eyes and listened to the quiet voice inside her. She remembered Valren's words from that afternoon by the stream...an afternoon that seemed so long ago now. *"You are unlike any female I've ever met. You follow the voice that most of us forget to heed."*

Carefully, she placed one foot in front of the other until she was at the water's edge. There, she paused a second before continuing into the pool. Her feet were bare but there were no sharp rocks or stones to cut her skin. The sand beneath her toes was soft. The water was cool and felt soothing as the hard flecks of paste dissolved on contact. She looked under the surface and saw only the smallest of fish flitting away as she moved deeper. When the water was up to her neck, she paused for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and ducked her head under the surface.

Instantly, she was enveloped in silence. The water of the pool was soft and silky against her skin. The paste dissolved away as Kessa looked around, wondering how many of her clan members had walked through this exact ritual, had gone through their life changes in these same waters. She could hear nothing but the beating of her own heart. She closed her eyes, bringing her knees into her chest and curling into herself. She was floating and bobbing in a womb, with the love and nurturance of her fellow Silver females on shore. Waiting for her to emerge.

Kessa did so slowly. She knew that she was shedding a skin. She was leaving behind a self who was no longer useful to her future. She was entering a new skin, embedding remnants of who she was into who she was becoming. She unfurled and came up for air at last. When she looked for the women, she realized she had drifted much farther from them than she had realized. She swam back until her feet sank into the soft bed of the pool.

The eldest Lith'han was reciting a new prayer this time and the other two Silver females joined her. The two eldest raised their arms, linking their hands together, high above their heads, forming an arched sort of "gate" in front of Kessa.

The female that was Kessa's age stood on the other side, one hand outstretched, waiting to walk with her, side by side, in all of her endeavors. Kessa walked through the gate of her foremothers and joined her sister on the other side, ready to begin anew.

The sister then changed into her Lith'han shape and bent low for Kessa to climb onto her back. When Kessa rode back onto the pride grounds, she was astride Sister, with Mother on one side and Grandmother on the other in their human forms.

There were gasps all around as pride members parted to make way for the four Silver females. Kessa heard the whispers.

"She's glowing!"

"Something has changed in her...do you see it?"

"What a magnificent sight those Silvers are..."

And from the elders – "There she is, our Leader Queen."

"At last," whispered another.

The four Silver females climbed up the side of the mountain to the Leader King's den.

Valren was alone and finishing a meal when they arrived. He stood as they parted the curtain and stepped inside.

Kessa saw his eyes fill with warmth when he saw her. She immediately dismounted and walked into his arms.

Grandmother walked toward them, raising her arms in blessing.

Kessa and Valren lowered their heads so the old woman could place her hands upon them.

"I invoke the blessings of the Ancients and the stars to settle upon this Leader King and Queen. Let them reign long, with love, light and truth in their hearts, always," the

elder woman mumbled. When she was finished, she kissed them both then stood aside as Mother did the same and Sister after her.

Kessa embraced each of them, holding them tight for as long as she could while Valren stepped quietly aside to give them space.

Kessa knew she would likely not see them again. Rituals and ceremonies were symbolic and meant to usher one into a new stage of life, but she felt a strong bond with these women.

Mother cradled her face with one hand. "Go and lead," she said with a smile. Kessa saw the glitter of excitement in her eyes. "Your story will be told from generation to generation, Kessa Lyah."

Sister held Kessa's hands in her own for a moment before kissing Kessa on each cheek. "May the stars watch over you both, Sister," she whispered.

When they left, Kessa watched them from den's opening until the woods swallowed them up.

"You've changed," Valren said quietly when she returned.

"Yes," she whispered. She sat down at the table and stared silently at the backs of her hands for several moments.

Valren pulled up a stool and sat next to her.

Kessa drew a deep breath. "It was very...healing. I actually felt as if there were fissures — real, physical tears — that were mended."

Valren listened quietly.

"I know the wounds weren't physical," she said, "but I could feel things sealing and being put back together the way they were supposed to be, not how I had patched them up..." She looked up into his eyes.

He nodded, prodding her to continue.

"When I left my pride, I turned away from everything that reminded me of the Lith'hah. It was too painful to think about because Lith'hah are such sensual, embodied

beings. Our senses and our sexuality are stitched into every part of life. The humans — they compartmentalize it. Most humans do not connect sexuality with the spirit, with healing, with reverence. It is often not a form of soul bonding but more of a body bonding...”

“It must have felt safe for you,” Valren said softly.

She nodded. “Yes, safe—but incomplete...though I didn’t know it. And I never would have known it if you hadn’t brought me back.”

“I’m sure you would have figured it out eventually,” he said with a smile. Then more seriously, “Even while here, you could have given in to your fear and fought the very element that would heal you.”

“I told myself that wild and wanton Lith’hah sexuality was the reason for all my pain. I think I believed...” She stopped as her eyes pooled with tears. She took a breath and willed herself to get through this explanation. It was something she needed to do to connect with him, to share something of what she had just gone through with this man she now knew she was deeply in love with. “I created an image—a story—in my mind of uncontrollable Lith’hah, wild with lust and not giving a passing thought to what or *whom* they hurt.”

He reached across to caress and massage the base of her neck.

“But being here, living among the pride members, being with *you*...” She took his hand and held it between both of hers. “It forced me to face the story I conjured. Forced me to look at what was truly there, not what I had put there. And I learned, quite to my chagrin,” she paused to smile at him, “that in turning away from all Lith’hah, I had also turned away from myself.”

He smiled back, pulling her into his arms. “You were never that far away from yourself,” he teased, resting his forehead against hers. “I think you were right about...here.” He kissed her gently, drawing her toward him with his kiss, in a slow and steady rhythm.

Kessa felt herself open immediately. Her entire being flooded with a love and longing too intense to contain—one she didn't want to contain—and now, she realized, one she no longer *had* to contain.

When they bonded this time, Kessa knew she had entered a whole new universe. She allowed her Lith'han sensuality free rein in the safety of Valren's embrace. Her desire as a woman stitched together with the joy of her childhood. Her confidence and assurance in her self and her own abilities merged with the fearless explorer she was as a pre-Awakened Lith'han. She had indeed crossed a threshold.

She made love with Valren through that night and the next day, until they were both exhausted and blissfully spent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kessa heard the sound of birds chirping outside the den. She slipped out quietly and made her way to the fat Mun'hai tree. She climbed onto a thick branch just a few feet above the ground and sat with her back against the trunk. The last six months had been like an unforecasted hurricane. Kessa couldn't believe she was here, back in the Northern Territories where she'd once sworn she would never return.

She heard a soft chuckle behind her and whipped her head around. Valren swung himself up and sat on the branch in front of her. His hair was tousled from sleep, and Kessa couldn't help but reach out and rake her fingers through it.

"It got cold in there without you," he murmured against her cheek. His golden eyes shimmered.

She smiled. "I wanted to watch the sun come up."

Her breath caught in her throat as he placed one of his large, rough hands behind her head and pulled her to him. She matched the ferocity of his kiss.

When he pulled back, he looked into her eyes and leaned his forehead against hers. "I dreamed that you were ready to...leave."

She pulled back in surprise. Then she shook her head and moved closer to his warm body, circling her legs around his waist.

He buried his face in her neck and held her close as she moved her body. "I cannot lose you," he said, his voice tight with emotion.

"You won't," she whispered.

Kessa took handfuls of his long hair, letting it slip through her fingers. "Thank you, again," she said quietly, "for my Awakening. It was..." She searched for the right words but couldn't find them.

He tilted her chin up. "I told you before, there is no need for thanks. It was your right."

"How did you manage to do it?" she asked. "How did you find all the women? I mean, they must have been scattered throughout all the pridelands..."

"Indeed," he said, his voice rich. "I worked with the Council to locate them. It took some time, but I was determined."

Kessa swallowed the pit that had formed in her throat and dropped her head on his shoulder. "It means more to me than you could ever know," she whispered.

He held her for a long moment without saying anything. When he finally spoke, Kessa felt his voice rumble against her.

"I know your experience has made you the woman you are, Kessa Lyah," he said quietly, "the woman I love."

She jerked her head up.

He looked deep into her eyes as he smoothed her silver-streaked hair back. "But I would do anything to take the hurt away...to have been there when that bastard Darthian put his hands on you."

She drew in a slow breath. "The hurt is what makes me who I am too," she said, her voice tight. "It has not been easy, I admit. But it moves me to be more protective, more cautious, and to never take things for granted."

He pulled her in close. "I love you, Kessa Lyah."

She looked up into his eyes, not caring that her emotions were laid bare. Before she could even think about it, she began to recite the words she knew by heart – words she and her playmates had recited as giggling little girls, "practicing" for the day they would actually use them.

"I am yours," she began. She could hear the blood pounding in her ears. "Body and soul. I, Kessa Lyah of the Silver Lith'han lineage, vow to stand beside you for all of my days..."

His eyes widened as she recited the vow. He was silent for several moments afterward. When he spoke, his voice was cautious. "Are you...certain? No one has heard you and I will not hold you –"

"Yes," she interrupted. Her heart flipped in her chest as she realized just how certain she was. "I am taking the True Mate vow. I will stay with you until the end of my days as I help you lead the pride into our future."

His golden eyes were like brilliant gems glinting in the sun. "So it shall be done," he managed before pressing his lips firmly against hers.

"But," she said, pulling back, "there will have to be some major changes."

He raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"Such as harsher punishments and laws for any Lith'han found tormenting or harming humans."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I was too focused on other matters at the time, but you made some good points about that the night of the Revelry – when you were defending your humans."

"They're not my humans, Valren. They are their own. Just as I am my own. And they are good, kind souls. There are many like them. Yes, we must defend ourselves and our kind, but only against true enemies...it is a lesson I have had to learn myself."



He watched her face quietly for a moment before pulling her against him again. "You are my Leader Queen...and my True Mate now," he said, his voice husky. "You have as much a say in laws and punishments as I do." He hesitated for a moment before adding, "I agree—it is in the best interests of the pride to find a way to live among the humans, peacefully."

"I would like to draft a proposal for the Council," she said. "I have some ideas..."

He grinned. "Of that I have no doubt."

She tangled her fingers in his hair, bringing his mouth down to hers. Her heart fluttered as she thought of their future together. She was finally somewhere she could be her whole, complete self. Perhaps one day they would have little ones.

She drew a quick breath as Valren slipped into her wet, waiting pussy. She pressed the length of her body against his. She held on to him as they rose through the spiraling heights of their lovemaking.

Kessa would walk next to her True Mate as the Leader Queen, separate but equal in the governance of all matters related to the pride. And in the den or in the mountains or in the streams, she would be his lover, opening her body to him and merging with his soulfire—both of them, together, swirling and rising like stellar dust, pressing into the unknown in one another's arms.

## About the Author

Kama Spice has lived in the East and the West and merges both in all her stories. She discovered erotic romance when a cute boy slipped a novel into her locker at school. She was instantly hooked and began smuggling them home to savor the words and delight in the sensations they aroused.

In her twenties, as she was living many of the adventures she would later write about, she created a vivid fantasy life with chiseled, smart heroes and strong, feisty heroines—all of whom inevitably made it onto the pages of her crowded journals. Thinking there was no place for all that writing except within the quiet pages of her hidden journals, Kama pushed them into the back of her closet and focused instead on writing and publishing books in other genres.

Eventually, however, through connections with friends, rummaging online for more exciting reading and a little bit of serendipity, she found her way to the Ellora's Cave site. \*cue angels singing\* Here, she reconnected with her love of all things romantic and all things naughty. Now she lives with her sexy and very funny husband and their children, and happily writes whatever pops into her head—knowing there are connoisseurs who will savor and delight in it as much as she did while writing it.

Kama welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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