



Changeling Press

# United Passion

Aubrey Ross

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## **United Passion**

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**As a Pride leader, Maddox knows unification is the only chance the cat-shifters have of surviving the harsh conditions at Alpha Colony. His reputation for ruthlessness is well known, so the other pride leaders quickly fall in line.**

**Convinced any form of cooperation is unacceptable, Dyauna and her followers are determined to defy their human captors at every turn. Still, the rest of the rebels will accept unification if Maddox can recruit Dyauna.**

**Their relationship has always been tempestuous, but he knows how to make her purr. Her radical ideals once drove them apart, and he can't let it happen again. He'll take her captive for a few days and focus entirely on her pleasure. Then she'll be forced to admit they are meant to be together, just like the cat-shifter clans.**

## Chapter One

Standing in the shadows beyond the cozy cavern room, Dyauna watched the impassioned couple, fascinated by their fierce brand of lovemaking. They wrestled and strained, determined to get closer, desperate for more of each other. It was hungry, and graceless, at times violent, and she had never seen anything so beautiful.

Grayson lunged suddenly, thrusting his thick cock into Sasha as he pinned her to the furs on her stomach. She tossed her head and growled, the sound soft and sensual rather than aggressive. He spread her arms and let her feel his weight for a breathless moment before he rocked back onto his knees.

With firm tugs and steady control, he shifted position, drawing her hips up while keeping her shoulders low. Sasha held perfectly still, tense and waiting. He drew back slowly, pulling nearly out before he thrust deep again. The hard lunge drove her forward, so she braced herself on her forearms, maintaining her position as he fucked her with demanding fervor.

Desire washed over Dyauna, the tingling heat making her dizzy. It had been so long since anyone touched her with anything resembling true hunger. People sought her advice and tried to manipulate her influence, but few saw beyond her position.

“Do they know you’re watching them?”

Stifling a gasp behind her hand, Dyauna spun around and faced Maddox. Tall and imposing, his sculpted features seemed at odds with his massive body. Of all the morphs in Alpha Colony, why did Maddox have to find her indulging her voyeuristic tendencies? She moved away from the entrance before she responded, not wanting her guests to realize her rude behavior.

“I dropped by to make sure they’d settled in and...” She didn’t have to explain herself to this man. He had turned his back on everything she valued, choosing to

accept subjugation rather than fight for his fundamental freedoms. "You're a long way from the village. What do you want?"

"One of the sentinels told me you were harboring the fugitives. I wanted to see for myself." The gold flecks in his green eyes glistened in the torchlight, giving his intense stare a mesmerizing quality. Thick tawny hair swept back from his face, his features tense with disapproval.

"Grayson is my friend, and we're all fugitives." She wouldn't be browbeaten by a lap cat. They'd made their choices a long time ago. "What goes on beyond the village is none of your business. No one here is Barbary pride."

He moved in close, forcing her to accept his nearness or retreat. And Dyauna never retreated. "I'm not here as pride leader. I'm here as your friend. Give them supplies if you must, even find somewhere else for them to hide, but don't let the keepers find out you've been sheltering them."

"Unlike village dwellers, we're not afraid of the keepers. They've already stolen our most prized possession. Without freedom, everything else is irrelevant."

He placed his hands on the cave wall beside her head, effectively trapping her with his body. "You were born here, Dyauna. How can you crave something you've never tasted?"

"I've seen enough of the world to understand that this is wrong." She stood up as straight as she could, trying to diminish the difference between their heights. "We were meant to roam free, not live in cages."

"You live in a cave," he pointed out with an irritating smile. "Is this really better than the cottages in the village? Are you happier when you indulge your animal side?"

"The crux of the issue hasn't changed. You think happiness lies in suppressing your cat and becoming more human, while I'm only happy when I suppress my human side and give in to my cat."

He shook his head, silky hair brushing his broad shoulders. Even irritated as she was, it was easy to remember those soft strands teasing her skin and sifting through her

fingers. Maddox hadn't been her first lover, and he hadn't been her last, but it was always his image that lingered in her mind and fueled her fantasies.

"Life is balance and compromise."

She laughed. "Life is instinct and passion." She nodded toward the chamber where sounds of pleasure still emanated. "Maybe you should watch for a while. Remind yourself what living looks like."

Pushing off the wall, he stepped back with a sigh. "Grayson is flirting with disaster. They both are. The keepers aren't going to let this slide."

"They have no choice. It's already done."

He didn't argue. His gaze moved over her face for a moment then he shrugged. "You never listened to me before. Why did I think you'd listen now? You obviously knew the dangers when you took them in. Like you said, the damage is done."

"They have nowhere else to go." Perhaps he didn't realize the full scope of their predicament. Knowing Grayson, he would have told no one but her. Should she enlighten Maddox or let him slink back to his precious village in ignorance? Even if the vid didn't go viral, as they hoped it would, they wouldn't be able to conceal Sasha's transformation for long. The rumor mill ran nonstop at Alpha Colony. "At the risk of sounding like a pervert, glance in the chamber and tell me what you see."

"I don't need to look to know what I'll see. The sounds they're making are explicit enough."

"There is a reason for my request. Just look."

To her knowledge, having sex still triggered the shift in Sasha. Dyauna hoped tonight wouldn't be the night Sasha gained control over her new abilities. All the descriptions in the world wouldn't impact Maddox like seeing the phenomenon for himself.

Maddox ambled toward the entrance to the chamber, reluctance evident in each step he took. After a brief pause, he leaned slightly sideways and peeked inside. He sucked in a deep breath.

Having experienced a similar reaction the first time she saw the white tigers together, she understood what he was feeling. Awe and hope, a potent combination to be sure. She pressed against his back and leaned out far enough to see past his shoulder. Grayson and Sasha were still going at it, their position much as it had been when Maddox interrupted her naughtiness.

Each movement seemed more savage, more primal, when performed by white tigers. Grayson covered his mate, easily dominating her. He was bigger, his stripes darker, but they were both incredibly beautiful. They were a matched set, capable of reproducing, rare and precious in this bleak world.

Maddox moved away from the entrance, taking Dyauna with him. "How was this done? What triggered her change?"

"What have you heard? How are people explaining Sasha's disappearance?" She led him down a narrow corridor and out into the night. Cool mountain air ruffled her hair and sent shivers racing across her skin.

"Do you need to morph? The night air is chilly."

"A gentleman would offer me his coat," she said with an ironic smile. He'd wrapped a *geron* around his lean hips, but the supple material was his only garment. Stacks of *gerons* were left around camp, so people could cover their nudity after shifting back into human form. It was just as common to see people striding about naked. Only outsiders were bothered by the rebels' nonconformity. Her lower body was covered by a similar wrap and her hair concealed her breasts -- when the wind decided to cooperate. "What are they saying in the village?" She reminded him of her unanswered question.

"Some are saying Grayson kidnapped Sasha, but most believe she went with him willingly. I haven't heard a peep about her transformation." He raked his hair with his hands, his agitation obvious. "Is DOMA up to their old tricks again, or was Sasha some sort of latent?"

The Department of Morphological Affairs -- just the name made Dyauna antsy. And shortening the title to DOMA didn't minimize their corruption or erase the crimes



they had fostered against an entire species. Of course the fact that their scientists had created the species they abused twisted everything into a convoluted mess.

"DOMA never gave up their old tricks. They've been more careful, and a little less ambitious, but they've never changed their tune."

"Did Sasha know what they were doing? Did she give permission to be modified?"

"She had no idea until she triggered mating fever in Grayson. No human could have done that, so he asked his grandfather to scan her. Imagine her surprise when Dr. Darman verified the presence of white tiger DNA neatly spliced into her own."

"Grayson must have sensed she was a hybrid, at least on an instinctual level. He's been fascinated with her ever since she arrived." Maddox was quiet for a moment, his gaze averted as he processed the developments.

Should she tell him they had recorded Sasha's first transformation and that they'd sneaked the vid beyond governmental firewalls, making it accessible to the public? No, she'd shared enough already. He'd either find out when the outrage erupted or the plan would fail and there would be no reason for him to know.

"Does General Hidaka know about this?"

The question jerked her back from her speculation. Of course his first concern would be for a human. She stepped away from him so quickly she stumbled over a tree root and nearly lost her balance. "You'll never change, will you?" She tossed back her hair, welcoming the wind's sharp sting. "I just showed you a white tiger pair and all you can think about is the fucking general! Go back to your village, lap cat. There's nothing for you here!"

\* \* \*

Maddox shot to his feet and whistled above the din. "Be quiet! No one can hear anyone when everyone talks at once." He was cranky; there was no way around it. His visit to the rebel camp had affected him far more than he expected, far more than he was ready to admit.

"Why is this human female so important?" a young tiger-shifter asked. He stood near the back of the room where people were crammed in shoulder-to-shoulder. "I don't understand why everyone is so upset."

One of the elders moved to Maddox's side, his voice strong and steady as he faced the crowd. "Most of you are second or third generation. You were spared the horrors of those early years. We were treated like animals, kept in cages, and subjected to endless experiments. You can't even imagine how bad this could get. Our lives might be simple now and somewhat constrained, but we are left to ourselves and allowed to make our own decisions."

It had all begun with the purest of intentions, or so the elders claimed. A team of ambitious scientists engineered miniscule amounts of animal DNA into the genetic code of terminally ill patients in a bold attempt to save their lives. It took many attempts, and countless combinations, but once the team succeeded they grew more ambitious. Soon they were using a wide variety of animals and producing amazing results.

Some insisted morphs, those capable of shifting from human to animal and back, were an inadvertent development that caught the project by surprise. Maddox thought they were the inevitable destination for this form of genetic manipulation. Either way, it no longer mattered. Morphs existed and DOMA was responsible.

"We are 'allowed to make our own decisions'? How can that possibly be enough for you?" The objection came from one of the village sentinels, a muscular male from Serengeti pride.

"I was as shocked by the implications of Sasha's transformation as all of you." Maddox resumed the explanation that had been interrupted by the escalating emotions of the people he addressed. "To answer your question" -- he motioned toward the youth in the back of the room -- "Sasha had no idea her DNA had been manipulated. She is as much a victim of DOMA as we are, and she is proof that they have no intention of changing their ways."

"There have to be others like her, humans who were changed without their knowledge," the burly sentinel said.

"The vid of her transformation has been picked up by news agencies all over the world. People are demanding a full investigation and protesters are already targeting DOMA facilities. But this is DOMA we're talking about. They successfully orchestrated one of the most widespread cover-ups in the history of cover-ups. The vast majority of the population still believes their lies."

"If we ever hope to free ourselves from DOMA's tyranny, this could be our only opportunity," the sentinel insisted.

"I'm not disagreeing with you," Maddox told him. "We need to take action. We must apply pressure from within, while the public outcry chips away at the exterior. But this can only be effective if we are all pushing at the same time and in the same direction. We have a common enemy. All other disagreements must be put aside. If we don't attack as a unified force, we might as well not bother."

"And of course you will lead this unified force," the leader of Serengeti pride challenged. "We will all follow along behind Barbary pride?"

"We can put it to a vote, but it must be settled quickly. DOMA will find a way to discredit the vid. They will try and spin this to their advantage."

"What about the rebels?" Serengeti's leader asked in the same provoking tone. "Talk about counterproductive."

"Dyauna might be made to see the importance of this opportunity." Maddox hoped his skepticism didn't show. To sell this line to the others, he was first going to have to convince himself that Dyauna could be reasonable. "This could give us a common ground even with the rebels."

The pride leader scoffed, then straightened and looked Maddox in the eyes. "If you can bring the rebels to the table, Serengeti pride will follow you."

An intoxicating combination of dread and anticipation twisted through Maddox's heart as the other pride leaders quickly offered similar vows. Unity was finally within his grasp. All he had to do was make the most contrary woman on the planet see things his way.

The impromptu meeting quickly disbanded. No one wanted to draw the attention of the keepers, and that many cats all in one place was bound to raise a few human eyebrows.

Jizette made her way to Maddox's side as the council hall emptied. Maddox smiled at his sister and motioned her toward the small office tucked away in the back corner of the hall. "You've got your work cut out for you." Amusement shone in her gold-green eyes. "Did you mean what you said about Dyauna, or were you just saving face?"

He walked into the tiny supply closet and moved cleaning supplies aside, revealing a trap door in the floor. Heaving the hatch open, he motioned Jizette on ahead. She climbed down the ladder attached to the framework supporting the council hall's floor. The bunker wasn't large, but it was filled with forbidden technology. Scanners and computers allowed the pride leaders to monitor developments beyond the fortified walls of the colony. Any uplink would be immediately noticed by the keepers, so communication required other means. At least this gave them some idea of what was going on in the world around them.

Maddox activated a screen and tuned to a continual news feed. "Have you seen the actual vid? It's pretty amazing."

"I saw it this morning before all hell broke loose."

He nodded, his mind returning to the task before him. "Dyauna hates the keepers. She wants a life separate from their interference. For the first time in years we are on the same page."

"I don't know." She shot him a sidelong glance. "Dyauna has never been known to play well with others. Do you really think you can bring her to a negotiations table and expect her to behave like a civilized person?"

"You don't know her as well as I do."

Jizette laughed. "I'm not sure anyone does. Why don't you drag her down from her mountain camp and tie her to your bed until she sees reason? I think you'd both enjoy that strategy."

The thought sent heat pulsing through his body and memories swimming through his mind. The year he'd spent with Dyauna at his side had been the happiest of his life. Then her younger brother had been killed by a keeper and her attitude had spiraled out of control. She let resentment and anger reinforce her negativity until life in the village became intolerable.

"I'll try talking with her first. If that doesn't work, I'll keep your suggestion in mind."

\* \* \*

Amara flowed with the crowd streaming out of the council hall and quickly disappeared into the surrounding forest. Her mind was buzzing with all the possibilities and complications arising from this new development. If the cat clans stopped arguing with each other and joined forces against common enemies, it could be very bad for her and Izak. They had managed to elude the rebel leopards, largely because there were so few of them. If the village cats joined the search, it would only be a matter of time before they were caught and punished for their misdeeds.

Anxious to share her worries with Izak, Amara freed her animal self and shifted into a lithe young tigress. Their hideout was deep in a mountain canyon, not far from the perimeter fortification. She padded along a rocky streambed then zigzagged through the trees. She was relatively certain no one was following her, but she didn't want to leave a discernable trail.

The acrid scent of fear hung heavy in the air as she climbed toward the cave's narrow entrance. She picked her way carefully on paws more suited to climbing trees than canyon walls. In fact, unless circumstances left no other choice, she preferred to stay on the ground.

She darted into the cave and paused. The metallic tang of blood scented the air along with fear's bitter tinge. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the dimness and she spotted the source of the smells. Huddled against the back wall of the cave, Izak's pet trembled and moaned. A manacle around his ankle was connected to a stake driven into the cave's floor and the iron band around his neck kept him from shifting into a timber

wolf. Locked in human form, he was forced to endure the wounds Izak inflicted on a regular basis.

Izak stood near the fire pit, but he hadn't bothered to greet her. His gaze gleamed in the dimness as he waited for her next move. "It's about time you got back. I've been waiting forever." Surly and petulant were Izak's favorite moods and today he'd managed to combine the two.

Satisfied that there was no danger, Amara released her shift and donned the dress she'd left near the cave's entrance. "Keep this up and you'll wear out your new toy."

"Then you'll have to go catch me a new one." He shrugged and turned back to the flames. "I don't see the problem." A wedge-shaped crevice in the cavern wall worked well to vent the smoke. Even so, Izak was careful to keep the fires small.

"It's not nearly as simple as you make it sound, and things are about to get a whole lot more complicated." If there had been any other option left for Amara, she wouldn't have turned to Izak. He was unlikable and cruel, but he was also her only hope for something better. Fertility equaled power in morph society and Izak had fourteen siblings. All of his brothers and sisters had strong, healthy offspring, so Amara had high hopes for Izak.

Her own attempts at breeding had been heartbreaking. Her mate had set her aside after her third pregnancy resulted in stillborn cubs. If Izak's seed proved strong enough to overcome her weakness, there was a small chance she could find another mate, or at least be tolerated by the fertile females.

In the meantime, she was stuck with Izak and his ever-increasing hunger for cruelty. They had played with the dog together the first night, and Amara had to admit she'd enjoyed their games. Releasing her pent-up frustration had been wonderfully cathartic, but Izak's impulses ran deeper and darker than hers.

"What do you mean things are going to get more complicated? What did you learn during your foray into the village?"

She hadn't realized he was paying attention. He often lapsed into silence for hours, ignoring her entirely. "When I arrived the village seemed deserted. I thought maybe there had been some sort of raid. But everyone was crowded into the council hall."

"Why? What was the meeting about?"

"Apparently DOMA is still creating hybrids. One of the guards triggered mating fever in Grayson and when he fucked her --"

"She morphed?" He sounded skeptical, so she merely nodded. Arguing with him was a waste of time. "I'd heard stories about his father, that he could trigger transformation with his seed. I had no idea Grayson had inherited the ability."

"They must have known it was going to happen. They had cameras running when she transformed for the first time."

"Or they just wanted to watch themselves fuck." He smirked, obviously amused by the idea. "Does DOMA know about the recording?"

"Everyone knows. They leaked it to the public domain somehow, and it's being reposted faster than DOMA can pull it down."

She had his full attention now. His features tensed and his hands clenched. "How has DOMA explained the vid?"

"I don't know. I don't think they've had time to spin it."

"Then what was the purpose of the meeting?"

"Maddox wants to use the public outcry as a bargaining chip with the keepers. The exact terms have yet to be determined, but mainly he wants all the various cat clans to band together and apply pressure at the same time. He's even going to try and recruit the rebels."

"We can't let that happen. If they stop fighting amongst themselves, I'm a dead man."

"As long as they're focused on the keepers, you should be safe enough. But I understand your concern."

“Dyauna won’t stop hunting me until she knows I’m dead. Her limited resources are all that’s kept me alive so far. If she has Barbary scouts at her disposal...” He heaved a ragged sigh and shook his head. “We can’t let this alliance happen.”

“I agree. Unity spells nothing but trouble for us. But how do we prevent it?”

He scratched his chin, gaze narrowed and cunning. “The alternative is surrender, so I’ll think of something.”



## Chapter Two

"Call me when the fighting starts," Dyauna offered. "I'm always happy to kick keeper ass." Frustration rolled across Maddox's handsome features. He'd been trying to convince her to join his farce of an uprising for almost an hour and the conversation had ceased to be amusing about ten minutes ago.

"I'm not ruling out aggression," he said carefully. "It's just important that we exhaust every non-violent avenue before we use physical motivation."

She laughed and tossed the stick she'd been fiddling with into the fire. They were standing in the large common room of the series of caverns the rebels had claimed as their own. Her people were offering them as much privacy as the situation allowed. Ordinarily she would have taken him outside for this sort of conversation, but the late afternoon had opened up into a seasonal downpour that would likely last well into the night.

"I knew they'd clipped your claws down in the village, but I hadn't realized you'd been neutered as well."

"Very funny," he growled, his tone assuring her he found the comment anything but amusing.

"I wasn't trying to be funny." She moved toward him, head held high, knowing he wouldn't back down. "There was a time, not that long ago, when the name Maddox commanded respect. You used to be a regular badass. What the hell happened to you?"

His jaw clenched and his nostrils flared before he recovered enough to speak. "Violence invites violence, and the keepers hold all the cards. We're outnumbered, outgunned, and --"

"Outclassed? Is that at the heart of your hesitation? Have you been their pet so long you think they're better than we are?"

"I'm just trying to prevent a slaughter," he snapped. "We can use the public outcry as motivation to negotiate --"

"Never retreat. Never surrender. I'm through negotiating with those bastards." She tossed her hair over her shoulders and motioned toward the cave's entrance. "And I'm through listening to this bullshit. Enjoy the rain."

He stared at her for a long, silent moment, green eyes shimmering in the firelight. Then he shifted in a fluid rush, bounding out into the soggy twilight while his exasperated roar echoed off the cavern walls.

"Why do you insist on provoking him?" Grayson strode toward her, Sasha at his side.

"I provoke everyone."

"True, but you're particularly prickly whenever Maddox is around."

Dyauna shrugged with a nonchalance she didn't feel. "I have this thing about unfulfilled potential. You should understand. I harassed you until you accepted that you were meant for more than being your grandfather's lackey."

"I was never my grandfather's lackey." He didn't seem overly offended by the slight. Still, he chuckled and shook his head. "So what grand potential is Maddox squandering?"

"Where would I begin?" The wistfulness in her voice revealed more than she had intended. She needed to change the subject fast.

"How long were you two together?" Sasha asked with a knowing smile.

Dyauna shot her an annoyed glance and ignored the question. "He said response to the recording has been volatile. DOMA has been issuing cease and desist orders while they scramble for a way to explain the transformation."

"It won't take them long to explain it all away," Grayson predicted. "We have to be ready with stage two."

Dyauna arched her brow, crossing her arms over her chest. "I didn't realize there was a stage two."

"We used a fictitious outbreak of a nonexistent virus to explain why Sasha and I had to be quarantined. Grandfather pretended to check Sasha's team and all of the emergency responders for this virus."

"Pretended to check?" Dyauna echoed. "What was he really screening for?"

"Genetic manipulation. Step two is proving to the world that Sasha is not an isolated case. Grandfather sent his findings along with the vid of Sasha. His contact is supposed to wait until the fervor starts to die down and then release the new file. DOMA will claim the findings were falsified, but we hope it will make enough people suspicious that they'll start having their DNA checked for themselves."

"Is there a stage three?"

"We have several ideas, but nothing is set in stone."

She was more intrigued by the recent events than she was willing to reveal. Having the village cats focused on disruptive strategies brought them closer to her way of thinking than they had ever been before. Still, as long as Maddox was insistent on talk, there was no way they could collaborate. She had nothing to say to the keepers, no compromise she was willing to make.

"I'll be right back," Grayson told his mate. "Warm up by the fire. The air is getting cold."

Dyauna moved over, making room for Sasha at her side. "He coddles you. You need to demonstrate your strength so he'll back off."

Sasha chuckled, a light effervescent sound. "I happen to like the way he 'coddles' me. I don't want him to back off."

"This isn't the village, and it's not the human world. Depending on the strength of others will get you killed." Dyauna had learned the hard way never to depend on anyone but herself.

"I am not helpless," Sasha stressed. "I would never stand around waiting to be rescued, but some situations require teamwork rather than individual strength."

Dyauna didn't argue. In her opinion teamwork encouraged mediocrity and discouraged personal responsibility. When each person succeeded or failed on their own merits, it was a far better motivator.

"Do you have a mate or consort among your followers?"

Dyauna glanced at Sasha, debating what to say. Even surrounded by followers, Dyauna was always alone, separated from the others by a role she'd forged through sheer stubbornness. "I realized at a very young age that my life path would be unique. Emotional attachments have never appealed to me."

"Really?" Sasha pivoted toward her, dark gaze sharp and assessing. "What made your life path unique?"

"I'm a half-breed. My father was leopard, my mother lioness."

"Then you're unable to --"

"I'm barren, so I had to prove my worth in other ways. I became more aggressive and more daring than anyone else until they had no choice but to acknowledge my skill."

"I see."

"I don't think you do." Dyauna spotted a flash of pity before Sasha averted her gaze. "Half-breed females are passed from male to male. Some are left to starve when they lose their physical appeal. They scavenge for food or become servants to fertile females. I had no intention of living like that."

"So you became a soldier?"

"I knew I would have to fight for everything I wanted. This vocation just made the most sense."

By the time Sasha looked at her again, the pity had been replaced by curiosity. "Do you consider yourself a leopard or a lioness?"

"I shift into a leopard, but I can't reproduce, so such distinctions are irrelevant."

They lapsed into silence for a time. Dyauna stared into the fire, feeling hollow and alone. She'd abandoned the dreams of youth long ago, but discussions like this sent echoes of longing reverberating through her soul.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset," she lied. "My life is what it is. No amount of wishing will change it." Unable to maintain her bland expression, Dyauna turned toward the cave's opening. "The rain is letting up. I'm going to check the perimeter."

\* \* \*

Maddox stood in the relative shelter of a leafy tree staring up at the cavern's entrance. He was infuriated and freezing, but he couldn't make himself turn around and head back to the village. Neutered? Did Dyauna honestly think he'd lost his nerve? It took discipline and determination to remain calm in the face of all this conflict. The predator in him demanded that he take action, urging him to brawl at every turn. He wasn't afraid to fight, far from it. He just wanted the fight to accomplish more than bloodshed and mayhem.

He took a deep breath and mentally prepared for the next act in this melodrama. Suspecting the meeting wouldn't result in Dyauna's cooperation, he'd come prepared for Plan B. He'd used a backpack to transport what he'd need, and he'd stashed the pack in some bushes while he went to talk with the feisty rebel leader.

Dressed now in a pair of faded jeans, he tightened his right hand around a small dart gun. The tranquilizer would bring down her cat if he couldn't snag her in human form. But the flexible metal band in his left hand was a far better option. If he could snap the band closed around her neck, it would keep her from shifting until their dispute had been resolved. The band had no mystic properties. It was simply strong enough to withstand the pressure of transformation. If she chose to shift, the band would strangle her, so it was doubtful she'd test its effectiveness.

As if summoned by his frustration, Dyauna appeared in the opening. She paused, looked up at the cloudy sky, and then shifted, hurrying down the slope leading away from the rebels' hideout. He tucked the dart gun into the back of his pants, and stepped out in front of her before she could build up too much momentum. Her paws skidded across the rain-slicked ground, and she growled in protest of the abrupt halt.

"We need to talk." He did his best to sound assertive without provoking her. He wouldn't reveal his true intentions until he had her secured in the relay station.

After a momentary pause, she released her shift, transforming from cat to woman in a smooth, flowing motion. She stood before him naked, unashamed and glaring. "You might need to talk. I need to run off this frustration before I take it out on someone who doesn't deserve it."

"Why don't we take it out on each other?" Before she could react to his suggestion, he uncoiled the band with a violent flick of his wrist and slapped it against the side of her throat. The band wrapped around her neck like an obedient snake, and he quickly squeezed the ends shut.

"What are you... Where the fuck did you get a suppression collar? Take it off! Right now!" She frantically felt for the clasp, determined to release the band. It wouldn't do any good. Only a pulse from the remote would deactivate the catch and the remote was safely stashed in the pack, which was once again strapped to his back.

He grabbed her upper arm and dragged her deeper into the trees. She was distracted by the band, as he knew she would be, so she didn't anticipate his next move. He withdrew a min-hypo from his pocket and pressed it against her upper arm. Disbelief widened her eyes and then they rolled back in her head.

Her legs crumpled beneath her, and he swept her up in his arms. He cradled her against his chest for a moment, making sure she was out cold. Then he swung her to his shoulder, wrapped his arm snugly around her legs, and headed off through the trees at a determined jog.

\* \* \*

Reality returned in stages. Dyauna wrinkled her nose. Why was she surrounded by the scent of humans? Where the hell was she?

She blinked repeatedly, trying to focus through the light glaring in her eyes. Hadn't it been night just a moment ago? How long had she been unconscious?

She'd been arguing with Maddox. Then he'd slapped a suppression collar around her neck. She forced her eyes open, determined to ascertain her situation.

"Welcome back." He sat in a chair beside the bunk on which she lay. He held out a foil packet and a bottle of water. "Take this. It will help with the headache."

Unable to think past the pounding in her head, she didn't bother arguing. She lifted her hand to take the packet, and her other hand came along for the ride. Shit! He'd bound her wrists with metal handcuffs, which were attached to the frame of the bed by a length of chain.

"You are one twisted fuck. Has anyone ever told you that?" A semi-verbal sound was his only reply. Still, if the sudden quirk of his lips were any indication, he didn't object to the label. She opened the packet and popped the tablet into her mouth. He handed her the water and she drank deeply. "That light is killing me." She shaded her eyes with her hand.

"It's either on or off, and it's really dark without it. Give that a minute to work and the light should become more tolerable."

He had her naked and chained to a bed, yet he made no move to touch her. "What are you hoping to accomplish by bringing me here?" She still wasn't sure where here was. The prefab construction screamed DOMA, but the design was different from the cottages they had erected in the village. This was a one-room structure, unless one of the two doors led to another room.

"It occurred to me that your refusal to see reason might be connected to a broader problem. I suspect that our unresolved issues are clouding your judgment."

"Oh really?" She scooted back against the wall, taking the water bottle with her. "First of all, there is nothing unresolved between us. We are history whether you're willing to accept the fact or not. Secondly, I never let my personal feelings interfere with my judgment, so this is a waste of time."

"Maybe, but I say it's worth investigating."

"I don't give a damn what you say. Unlock these cuffs and let me go."

The smile flirting with his mouth finally parted his lips, revealing even white teeth and adding a predatory gleam to his gold-green eyes. "Not a chance. You're my prisoner until I'm ready to let you go, so you might as well start cooperating."

## Chapter Three

Shaking off the rain, Amara ducked back into the cave she'd been sharing with Izak. The air was cold and clear, which brought her up short. She'd grown accustomed to fear's sharp scent. Her gaze darted to the corner where Izak had staked out their prisoner. Dried blood stained the stone floor, but the puppy was gone.

"Where is he?" She tried to remain calm, but dread expanded with alarming force, drying her throat and speeding her pulse. "Where's our toy?"

Izak ambled toward her, dark eyes gleaming despite the cave's dimness. "I broke him, but it doesn't matter. There's a new game I want to play."

"I don't want to hear about a new game until you tell me what you did with the dog!"

He lunged for her, fisting his hand in her hair. "I don't like your tone. Do you need another lesson in obedience?"

She averted her gaze and took a deep breath. As much as she enjoyed her punishment, there was more at stake than physical pleasure. If the dogs found the body... She didn't even want to imagine the uproar such a thing would cause.

"Where's the body?" His fingers tightened painfully, but she couldn't back down. "What did you do with him?"

"Do you think I'm a complete imbecile? I weighted him down and sank him in the lake. No one will find him unless they dredge the lake, and there's no reason for anyone to go to all that trouble. They'll blame it on the keepers. The dogs hate them even more than we do."

There was logic in what he said, but he was growing more careless with each passing day, and more perverted. She'd hoped the dog would keep him entertained for longer than a few short days. "Tell me about this new game." She was almost afraid to



ask. As soon as she was certain she carried Izak's young, she'd snuff out his worthless existence and return to her clan. Everyone presumed she'd gone into seclusion when her mate set her aside. If she returned with a litter growing in her belly, no one would be surprised if she refused to name the father. None of the males would want the shame of stillborn cubs associated with their name. Everyone would wait and see if the cubs survived. And if they did, she would reclaim her place among the fertile females.

"If all the cat clans are shifting their focus toward a common cause, we need to reignite hostilities."

She moved closer to him, easing his hold on her hair. "And how do we do that?"

"We trap one of the Barbary females and make it look like she was raped by the rebels. We keep her blindfolded, and I'll put on a show like you've never imagined. We'll make her believe the rebels are sending a message, that they are insulted by Maddox's determination to tame them."

"Many morphs can sense another's inner breed. If we trap the wrong female, she could lead both clans right back to us."

He shoved her away with a derisive snort. "You going soft on me? I thought you liked these games as much as I do."

She shivered as his gaze bore into hers. She had a dark side, an element of her personality that enjoyed cruelty and rebellion, but Izak was letting these "games" consume his life. There was nowhere he could run, unless someone smuggled him out of the colony, and it took serious connections to accomplish something like that.

Perhaps Izak had accepted that his death was a foregone conclusion, so he intended to raise as much hell as possible in the meantime.

"What are you thinking, pretty Amara? Are you still trying to scheme your way back into the clan's good graces?" His mocking tone stung nearly as much as a slap. "None of the men will have you, even if I manage to knock you up. All you will have accomplished is to saddle yourself with two or three cubs. And you won't be able to support them without whoring, which is what you're trying to avoid. Isn't it?"

He was just trying to confuse her, trying to entangle her fate more completely with his. Well, she wasn't listening. She still had options available to her. He had something she needed, so she was helping him, temporarily. When the end came, and his accusers caught up with him, she'd be far, far away!

She stood up straight and met his gaze, refusing to be cowed. "I think you have a death wish. And I'm not ready to die."

"I think you've come too far to turn back now." His arm lashed out, hand clasping her throat. "If you betray me, it will be the last thing you do."

Barely able to breathe, she grasped his wrist with both hands. "I won't betray you." Tears stung her eyes and her chest began to burn.

His grip loosened, but his nails dug into her skin. "We're in this together, whether you like it or not. Don't forget, you came after me."

He was right. She'd stalked him, hoping to use his erratic behavior to her own advantage. But things had progressed more swiftly, and his desires were more twisted than she had realized. "We're partners. I haven't forgotten."

"Partners?" He scoffed. "Hardly."

Rather than argue with him, she ran her hands up his arms and placed them on his shoulders. "The rain has finally stopped and the moon is bright. If you're anxious to play your new game, let's get started."

"My thoughts exactly."

\* \* \*

Maddox took in Dyauna's mutinous expression, unable to suppress his smile. She would argue and resist, and he'd savor every minute of her struggle. She was stubborn and proud, determined to deny them both what they wanted. But he was just as determined to break through her resolve and explore the tender feelings she was afraid to acknowledge.

Their attraction had always been volatile. That was part of the appeal. They shouldn't want each other, shouldn't crave the pleasure they had found in each other's arms. He was Barbary pride, the oldest and most powerful group among the lion-

shifters. She was a half-breed rebel. According to social convention, she was unworthy to be his consort, much less his mate.

He didn't care about social convention. He'd been willing to thumb his nose at obligation and follow his heart. But she hadn't allowed herself to believe his devotion was genuine. She'd used anger and rebellion to insulate her from the pain. She wasn't willing to be his whore, and she couldn't believe he'd want her for anything more. So she ran.

"I've tried to give you time to sort through your feelings on your own," he began.

"How very generous of you."

"But time has only made you more stubborn and more determined to shut me out."

She threw the empty water bottle at his head. He easily batted it aside. "I'm not shutting you out, you arrogant jerk. I've moved on. Why can't you get that through your thick skull?"

"You've moved on?" He sat on the foot of the bed and she drew her legs up to her chest, keeping herself just out of reach. Though her feet hid her sex and her knees pressed against her breasts, he was still undeniably aware of her nakedness. Her skin was smooth and golden, a tribute to her indifference to clothing. "Who have you moved on to?"

"That's none of your business."

"Indulge me. It's been ten months since you left the village. Who shares your bed?"

With a careless shrug, she stared into his eyes. "If I get an itch, I find someone to scratch it. It's seldom the same person twice. Leadership is easier and more effective if I keep an emotional distance between me and my followers."

"Do you like sleeping alone?"

Annoyance flashed in her gaze, but her voice remained cool and composed. "I'm willing to sleep alone because it helps maintain order among my men. Few women have chosen to join the rebellion. Life is hard in the caves."

"You have chosen to make life hard. It doesn't have to be this way."

"When the other option is owing my existence to our captors, I'll take the caves."

"What if you didn't owe your existence to the keepers?"

"What ifs are a waste of time."

He shook his head and waited a beat, determined to maintain his cool. She exasperated him faster than anyone else, and still he ached to find the words to end their emotional standoff once and for all. "Negotiating is a waste of time. Supposition is a waste of time. What don't you find wasteful?"

"Fighting! Driving those worthless bastards off our land."

"It's not that simple, and you know it."

"It's only complicated because you insist on acting like a neutered lap cat." She kicked out at him, her glare not quite believable.

"I'm civilized, perhaps even tame" -- he pivoted toward her and caught her ankles -- "but I am not neutered. I think we should establish that fact right now." She had the audacity to laugh. He pulled her ankles, but she kept her arms tightly wrapped around her legs, so her entire body slid toward him rather than unfolding as he'd intended.

"Did I wound your pride?"

"No, you challenged my lion, and he's not willing to ignore the insult." He crawled onto the bed and pushed her over. She rocked onto her back, legs still tucked against her chest. Easily anticipating her next move, he deflected her kick as he lunged forward, neatly spreading her legs in the process. "You're about to find out how far I am from neutered, and how much I missed wrestling with you." Before she could object, he pushed her bound hands over her head and settled his mouth on top of hers. She wiggled and bucked, refusing to kiss him. He nipped her bottom lip and growled, "Open for me."

"Fuck you," she gritted out between clenched teeth.

He pushed up, resting on his knees and forearms as his gaze searched her angry face. Her full lips pressed into a rebellious line and her forehead was furrowed, eyebrows nearly touching. If it weren't for the fear deep in her eyes, he would have continued on with his forceful advance. Surely she knew he would never hurt her?

Then why was she afraid?

"Stubborn to the bitter end." He reached up and found the crank attached to the bed frame. With a few quick turns, he took up the slack in the chain connected to her handcuffs and secured her arms above her head. He skimmed his fingers along her sides and grasped her hips. "Do I need to bind your ankles, or are you going to behave?"

"I have no intention of giving in to you, so you might as well release me. Unless you've acquired a taste for rape since I left you, this is going nowhere."

He chuckled as he unfastened his jeans. "Another challenge? You should know better than that." With deliberate slowness, he peeled the sturdy material past his hips, then pulled his legs out, and tossed the garment aside. He knelt between her thighs, naked and aroused. His fingers wrapped around his shaft, and he stroked from base to tip, drawing her attention to his jutting cock. "See. Fully functional."

Her lips parted as if she'd offer some smartass remark. Instead, her cheeks flushed and her tongue brushed over her lower lip. "This doesn't mean anything." Her voice broke, and she turned her face away, breasts quivering as her breath grew stilted.

"It means you still want me." He traced her slit with the head of his cock, rubbing her clit in tantalizing circles. She was already damp and hot, her earthy musk rising all around him.

"So what?" Her gaze shot back to his, bright and defiant. "I want a lot of things I can't have."

He arched over her, cock positioned to take her. "What makes you think you can't have me? Say the word and I'm yours."

"For how long? In what capacity? This is cruel. Just fuck me!"

He would never be content to “just fuck her,” but she wasn’t ready to accept the full scope of his feelings. So they’d wrestle a little while longer. “Push up with your hips and take me, if that’s all you want.”

“Damn you!” She yanked against the handcuffs and tried to twist away. “Stop teasing me.”

“I’ve barely begun to tease you.” He shifted the angle of his hips and slid his shaft across her clit as he pressed her into the mattress. She shivered and moaned, helpless beneath him. “Kiss me. I need your taste in my mouth.”

“I don’t want to --” His lips swooped down and cut off her protest. He pushed his tongue past her lips, tracing her teeth, daring her to bite him. She caught his tongue between her teeth for just a moment then released him with a frustrated cry. Her lips parted and her tongue slid along his, pushing her taste into his mouth.

He sifted her hair through his fingers, luxuriating in the soft strands. Their lips moved and melded, tongues eagerly sparring. Her mouth was soft, her taste addictive. He wanted more of her, all of her, all at once.

Keeping his hips carefully angled, he rocked between her thighs. He slid his erection against her mound, withholding the fullness she obviously craved. She trembled and wiggled, then wrapped her legs around his waist and squeezed.

“Stop,” she murmured, then jerked her head to the side and cried, “Or do it for real!”

He smiled, loving the way her eyes sparkled and her skin flushed. “If this isn’t real, what is it?” He pushed away from her, settling his weight on his knees.

“I want you inside me.” The admission sounded muffled and... defeated. Why did she resist her feelings so stubbornly?

“And I want you to admit this is real, that you want more than my body.” Their gazes locked, and her lips trembled, but no sound emerged. He gently cupped her breast, circling the nipple with the pad of his thumb. “All right. If pleasure is all you’ll accept from me, let’s explore that common ground.”

Dyauna closed her eyes, unable to maintain her emotional reserve while holding his gaze. Maddox had such beautiful eyes, bright and expressive. She saw passion and tenderness in his gold-green stare, yet frustration and disappointment were quickly eroding the warmer emotions.

His hands swept from her shoulders to her waist, pausing to caress her breast and circle her navel. Maddox loved foreplay. He would touch and kiss, nibble and lick until she was screaming for release. Ordinarily she welcomed his leisurely pace, but tonight her emotions were raw and her desire demanding. She was tired of the conflict, tired of being strong and unflappable. She craved the fullness of his cock deep inside her and his weight covering her, driving away reality as he unleashed a maelstrom of pleasure.

“Maddox, please. No more games.”

He latched on to her nipple and suckled, sending ribbons of heat streaming through her chest and abdomen. His fingers rolled her other nipple, creating similar sensations. With his free hand he cupped her mound, fingers closed, touching without parting. Teasing! Everything he did only made the ache between her thighs more unbearable.

She arched her back and ground her pussy against his hand, knowing the effort was futile. He knew what she wanted, and he’d give it to her when he was damn good and ready. She’d angered him with her provocation, and now she must pay for her outspokenness.

Even as her mind provided the excuse, her heart rebelled. His every touch was tender, caring. This had nothing to do with punishment. He was seducing her senses, slipping beneath her defenses, trying to claim her heart.

She went wild beneath him, bucking and twisting, kicking and yelling in frustration and fear. “I will not yield!”

“Easy, love.”

He moved over her, pressing her down with the weight of his body, subduing her struggles with minimal effort. He was big and strong, able to protect and shelter

her. She opened her eyes, tense and resentful. She was a warrior! She didn't need to be protected or sheltered. She needed a good hard fuck, nothing more!

"I won't hurt you." Framing her face with his hands, he captured her gaze. "Is this what you want?" He reached between them and guided his cock to her entrance.

She held her breath and allowed his passion-warmed gaze to wash over her. Slowly, he pushed into her pussy, filling the emptiness and easing the ache. Her breath escaped in a ragged sigh and she arched to take him deeper. His thumb settled over her clit, stroking the swollen nub in lazy circles. She hooked her calves over his thighs and tightened her inner muscles, savoring the fullness and the heat.

Pushing off the bed, he rocked back onto his knees and drew her hips up, finding a better angle for his cock. "Put your ankles on my shoulders."

"Why?" The question was out before she could stop it. Despite his gentleness, predatory hunger burned in his gaze. His lion was not only awake; he was tossing his head and stretching the confines of Maddox's human form.

He didn't argue or repeat the directive. He pushed her knee toward her chest then brought her foot to rest on his shoulder. She moved her other leg into position and waited to see what he had in mind.

His fingers explored where their bodies joined, caressing her folds and accentuating how tightly her body stretched to accommodate him. "Relax your muscles and feel me."

She could feel little else. His cock was thick and long, filling her to capacity.

"This is where I belong; the only place I want to be." He brushed his thumb across her clit, making her start and shiver. "Are you ready to stop running from your destiny? Haven't you kept me waiting long enough?"



## Chapter Four

Dyauna knew what Maddox was asking. The last time they'd been together, he'd wanted to mate with her, to form a bond that would link their minds and spirits. "Nothing has changed. I can't mate with you."

His eyes narrowed and his features tensed. "You won't mate with me. The only thing preventing our union is you."

He pulled back and she held perfectly still. Would he pull out and leave her wanting? He hesitated for a moment, his expression inscrutable. Then he thrust deep and leaned forward, pressing her thighs against her breasts.

"You feel so fucking good." His tone was harsh and muffled as he drove into her again and again.

More than ready for the steady rhythm, her body raced toward completion. She couldn't move with her legs folded and her arms bound. All she could do was accept what he gave her. Tension gathered, rippling along her inner muscles. She closed her eyes, reaching for the climax with determination.

He thrust inward and stopped. "Not yet."

Her orgasm fizzled, and she whimpered, clutching her hands into fists.

"Look at me." He settled back on his knees, still buried to the hilt inside her.

She knew what she'd see, all the hurt and disappointment, the anger and frustration. "I'm sorry." The words slipped from her lips of their own volition.

"Why are you sorry?"

"Because I can't be what you need me to be."

"I love you, Dyauna. That's not going to change, no matter how many times you deny me." Her heart flipped over in her chest and she slowly opened her eyes. His gaze

burned with golden intensity, his lion barely contained. "If you won't trust me with your heart, at least surrender your pleasure."

His gaze bore into hers, burning, demanding. Her nipples tingled, and liquid heat rolled through her pussy. She bent her knees and angled her feet behind his neck, allowing her to relax and concentrate on the pleasure gathering between her thighs.

He pulled back just a bit then drove inward with a sharp, shallow thrust. The impact sent sensation radiating through her abdomen. Then his thumb resumed its rhythmic orbit, building the pressure, propelling her toward release.

Her lashes began to drop and he growled. "Don't close your eyes."

It was so stark, so intimate with his handsome face looming over her. He watched her and commanded her with his touch and his expression. She dove into his gaze and surrendered to his fingers, caressing him the only way she could. Her inner muscles gripped his shaft, holding him, hugging him.

"Now."

He caught her clit between his fingers and thumb, gently pulling on the tender bud. She cried out sharply and arched off the bed as pleasure burst within her. His fingers prolonged her climax, encouraging each deep spasm with careful pressure and subtle motion.

She trembled and tears blurred her vision. Regret rushed in on the heels of her orgasm. What they wanted was impossible, so why did he continue to pursue her? He lowered his head and claimed her mouth, rewarding her surrender with a lingering kiss. The sweet tenderness only compounded her conflict and made her chest burn.

Her legs slipped to his elbows as he began to rock strong and steady between her thighs. His mouth moved over and against hers, but the kiss was bittersweet.

His groans and throaty cries ignited the embers of her arousal. It felt so perfect to be beneath him and filled by him. By limiting her ability to move, he encouraged her to submerge herself completely in the pleasure. Sensations washed over her and spiraled through her.

Regret and uncertainty disintegrated as the power of their joining drove rational thought from her mind. No past and no tomorrow. They were together as they were meant to be.

Harder and deeper, his demanding thrusts filled her completely. He threw his head back, momentarily breaking their kiss as a savage cry tore from his throat. He ground against her and released his seed deep inside her body. She savored each hot jet as her core rippled around him.

He lowered her legs to the mattress and brushed her hair back from her face. "I've missed you."

He whispered the words against her lips and her control snapped. She turned her face away, sobs building within her.

Maddox watched her chin quiver, surprised by her reaction. "Why are you crying?"

"Get off me." Her tone was sharp and insistent, so he reluctantly obliged. He freed the cuffs from the bed frame, but left her wrists bound.

She turned away from him, curling on her side and covering her face with her hair. Unwilling to abandon the intimacy they'd just created, he lay down behind her and wrapped his arms around her trembling form. His hand ran up and down her side, comforting rather than arousing.

He'd hoped to break through her emotional reserve, knew that was the key to moving forward. Still, he'd expected anger not tears. "Sweetheart, you're making this much harder than it has to be."

"No" -- she sniffled -- "your optimistic view on the world is not realistic. I've seen the cruelty firsthand."

Keeping his arm beneath her neck, he rolled her onto her back and brushed the hair back from her face. "What happened to your mother was inexcusable, but I won't let anything like that happen to you."

"How will you prevent it? My father tried to protect my mother from the prejudice, but he couldn't be with her night and day. Whenever he left, she became 'that

leopard's whore.' Your pride shunned her, and father's clan ignored her. Do you honestly think they will be more accepting of me?"

"Those antiquated attitudes are what I'm trying to improve."

"They aren't attitudes; they're instincts. You can't change the nature of the breed." Sadness bled through in her tone.

He shook his head and pressed his hand against her cheek. "We aren't slaves to our instincts. We are able to make choices and change behavioral patterns. It might feel more natural to cling to our individual clans, but the situation is dire. Our survival depends on cooperation. No one breed is powerful enough to take on the keepers alone. We must unify."

"The problems with our relationship have nothing to do with unification." He started to object, but she raised her hands and touched his lips with her fingertips. "No, listen to me. The breeds can work together to resist the keepers without becoming one large clan."

"Don't you want to be with me?" Her obstinacy was wearing him down. He couldn't fight the expectations of his pride if Dyauna resisted him every step of the way.

"You know the answer to that. This has never been about what I want."

"Then say it." He brushed his thumb over her lips. "Just once, let me hear you say that you love me."

"My feelings are irrelevant," she snapped, anger flashing in her eyes. "You are pride leader. You must be able to pass on your bloodline."

He drew his arm out from underneath her and rolled onto his back. There was an obvious solution, but he knew she wouldn't like it. "Pride leaders are allowed to have more than one --"

"I don't play well with others, and you know it."

"So I'm just supposed to let you go? Let you fight your rebellion while my heart breaks?"

She shifted to her side and propped herself up on her elbow. "The longer we allow this to go on, the harder it will be to end it."

"I don't want it to end." He caught her hand and pulled it to his mouth. The cuffs dragged across his chest, the cold metal shocking against his skin.

"Fate doesn't care what we want." Her wistful tone only incited his determination. "We are meant for different paths. That should be obvious."

"I don't accept that. If you didn't love me, I'd move on. But I know that's not the case."

"I enjoy being with you, but this isn't love." Her gaze darted away as she made the claim. "It's lust, pure and simple."

\* \* \*

Grayson paced in front of the fallen log on which Sasha sat. It had taken longer to reach the small clearing in human form than it would have if they'd shifted into tigers, but he didn't know Jizette, wasn't comfortable enough with Maddox's sister to converse with her in the nude.

"If you don't stop pacing, you'll wear a rut in the ground." Sasha smiled at him and patted the log beside her. "Come sit down."

A rustling in the darkness announced someone's approach. Grayson inhaled deeply and verified that the visitor was a lion. After a long pause, a tall blonde woman walked out of the surrounding trees. She wore a simple cotton dress and held a backpack in one hand.

"Thanks for coming," he greeted. He'd spent enough time in the village to know who Jizette was, but this was the first time he'd spoken with her.

"What can I do for you? Your message was rather vague."

Sasha stood and moved up beside him, slipping her hand into his. "Do you know where your brother is right now?"

Jizette's guilty smile confirmed their fears. "Not exactly."

"But you know what he's doing?" Grayson persisted.

"I have a pretty good idea."

“Dyauna went on a perimeter sweep a couple of hours ago, and she never came back.” Grayson spelled it out so there would be no confusion. “Is she with Maddox or should we be searching the forest?”

She closed her eyes for a moment then slipped her hands into the pockets of her dress, trying not to let her amusement show. “They’re together, and they’re safe. There’s no reason for concern.”

“I’m not sure I agree. Does Maddox actually think he can coerce her into... What exactly is he trying to do?”

“This has been brewing for a long time. The proposed unification is just the catalyst that motivated Maddox to act.”

“I told you they were a couple,” Sasha said, and the women exchanged knowing smiles.

Grayson shook his head. “Talk about opposites attracting.”

“I’m not sure where he took her,” Jizette went on, “but if they were in danger, I’d sense it.”

“What’s going on outside the colony?” Sasha asked. “Has DOMA managed to suppress the vid or discredit us completely?”

“Not for lack of trying.” Jizette finger-combed her hair back from her face. Like everyone in Barbary pride she was tall and striking. “The fallout from the vid has surpassed our most optimistic projections. Coverage has been all over the news feeds. There have been demonstrations and numerous calls for a full-scale investigation.”

“Is my grandfather safe?” Grayson asked.

Jizette offered him an encouraging smile. “I spoke with him this morning. He was questioned and released. I think they know he’s involved, but they can’t prove it.”

Grayson nodded. He hated the passivity of his role, but there had been no other way. Separation was their best chance of deflecting danger away from his grandfather. “He was supposed to keep me updated through Maddox.”

“Well, Maddox was unavailable, so I convinced him to update me. I was going to come see you in the morning, but your message beat me to the punch. Your

grandfather's contact will release the test results sometime tomorrow. Hopefully that will keep the momentum going." She rolled her shoulders and glanced off into the distance. "If Maddox shows up in the village, I'll send word to you."

"We'll do the same if they return to our camp," Sasha promised.

Jizette nodded and melted into the darkness.

\* \* \*

Dyauna watched emotion erupt in Maddox's gaze. Tenderness was consumed by something hotter, more intense. He rolled off the bed and grasped her bound wrists, pulling her to a sitting position.

"All you feel for me is lust?" He was definitely angry, but she heard challenge and longing in his tone as well.

If she admitted how deeply she cared for him, all it would do was postpone the inevitable. No matter how much she loved him, he would always be bound by pride obligations. Obligations she couldn't help him fulfill. "You are by far the best lover I've ever had, but what does that mean in the long run?"

His nostrils flared and golden light burned away the green in his eyes. He pulled her off the bed and dragged her toward the center of the room. "You are always encouraging me to indulge my cat. Would you like to know what my lion is urging me to do right now?"

She shivered and licked her lips. Knowing how desperately he wanted her filled her with a sense of power. "Why don't you show me?"

A low growl rumbled in his throat, and he lifted her arms above her head. With a deft flick of his fingers, he released a length of chain connected to the metal beam supporting the ceiling and fastened it to the center of her handcuffs.

"That's convenient," she muttered, looking around the sparsely furnished room. "What is this place?"

"When the keepers upgraded the power grid last year, this relay station went offline. They've more or less forgotten about it. We find it useful from time to time."

"So I see." She could have struggled, probably should have put up some sort of fight. In the end it wouldn't have mattered. Her body had reawakened the moment aggression flashed in his eyes. She could claim not to love him, but she wasn't a good enough actress to convince him she didn't want him.

She wasn't sure how long he'd keep her captive. Until morning? Perhaps a day or two? Eventually, he'd accept her decision and turn her loose. He had no other option. He couldn't keep her in chains for the rest of her life. Not that she'd mind being his captive. Passion always tasted sweeter when he commanded her.

He trailed his fingertip down her upraised arm, across her collarbone, and into the valley between her breasts. "If you're determined to walk away from me, I better take my fill of you now." His fingers curved against the underside of her breast, his thumb lightly rubbing her nipple. "I suspected you wouldn't make this easy for me, so I brought along some of your favorite toys."

Her gaze shot to the backpack he'd left on the floor beside his chair. "How long are you going to keep me here?" Desire sank through her abdomen and settled between her thighs. Male morphs were dominant by nature and Maddox was no exception. He'd patiently taught her how to trust him with her pleasure, how to abandon herself to the security of submission.

"Until I'm tired of you." His tone was raw, almost harsh, and she could no longer decipher individual emotions. Cupping both breasts, he bent to her nipples, suckling one and then the other. His lips were firm, his mouth hot. His teeth carefully scraped against her sensitive flesh, launching sparks into her belly. He caught one tip with his teeth and the other between his fingers, squeezing until she moaned in pleasure-pain. "Too much?" He raised his head and looked at her when she didn't reply. "Maybe you'll like this better."

Lifting the backpack to a chair, he riffled through its contents. She couldn't see what was inside and wasn't sure she wanted to know. Anticipation sizzled along her nerves and made her nipples tingle. He knew just how to touch her, how much she



could process before pleasure turned to pain and extinguished her enjoyment. They'd discovered her limits together.

He returned with two thin golden bands. "Remember these?" Not waiting for her answer, he suckled one of her nipples until it was tightly puckered. Then he slipped the band over her erect peak and slowly squeezed the adjustable ring, forming a snug circle. The band didn't pinch like a clamp. It created a constant pressure that made her nipple tingle and burn.

She fidgeted and tossed her hair, her clit twitching as if protesting the attention he was bestowing on her breasts. He anchored the other band then kissed each breast, hunger making his eyes shine.

Grasping her hips, he pulled her forward and rubbed his cock against her belly. "I should have made you suck me off before I restrained you."

"If that's what you want, sir, unhook the chain." His cock bucked against her belly, obviously agreeing with the suggestion.

"Later. I have something else in mind." He returned to the backpack momentarily then moved behind her before she could see what he'd retrieved. "This is more fun when the oil is hot, but we'll have to make do."

The spicy scent of sandalwood and cinnamon reached her nose a moment before his slick palms skimmed across her abdomen and over her breasts. He was careful not to dislodge the nipple rings as his fingers drew lazy circles around her breasts.

"Your skin is soft naturally, but this feels amazing." He rubbed against her, his oil-slicked chest sliding against her back. Their skin quickly warmed the oil and intensified the scent. She wiggled back against him, wishing her hands were free.

"Part your thighs, Dy. Let me touch you." His hand skimmed across her belly and slipped between her legs. He groaned against her ear. "No need for oil here. Your pussy is still slick from before." His fingers parted her folds and slid over her clit. She rotated her hips, rubbing against his fingers. Tingling heat gathered beneath his touch and spiraled up through her core. "Does that feel good?"

"Yes, sir. Gods, yes." She pressed her lips together, trying not to cry out. He shifted suddenly, pulling away as he pushed his other hand between her legs from behind. His long fingers thrust into her cunt while he lightly strummed her clit. She trembled, instantly on the verge of orgasm. "Please, may I come?"

"Yes. Squeeze me hard, show me how much you like this."

She dropped her head back on her shoulders and surrendered to the urgency. His fingers drove deep and her passage compressed in tight, rhythmic spasms.

He didn't allow her to come down completely. His fingers caressed her clit while he bent and picked up something from the floor. Oil drizzled across her ass cheeks and then his fingers spread it over her skin and into her crease. He circled her anus and her cunt pulsed in response, a new cycle of arousal rolling across her senses.

"I want to fuck your ass." He drove a finger past her sphincter as he whispered the words into her ear. "Do you want that too?"

A harsh gasp tore from her throat and she almost came again. She hadn't indulged her secret desires since she'd moved to the caverns. Only with Maddox did she feel safe enough to submit completely, only with him had she ever known true bliss.

"Anything," she whispered. "No, everything. I want everything you can give me and more."

His mouth fastened on to the side of her neck, sucking and biting. Heat streaked from her neck to her pussy and she yelped. Holding her firmly with his teeth, he positioned his cock against her anus and entered with slow, steady pressure.

She rocked onto the balls of her feet as his shaft stretched her back passage. Pressure blinded her for a moment, the sensation too sharp for pleasure, yet not harsh enough for pain. Eased by the fragrant oil, his cock slid deeper and deeper. His fingers kept her poised on the brink of orgasm with a light, circular motion.

A fresh rush of cream trickled out onto her thighs and made her unavoidably aware of the emptiness in her pussy. She wanted him everywhere, surrounding her, consuming her, driving away everything but this moment.

His free hand steadied her hip as he started moving. She pushed back against him, craving the savage intensity. He shuttled in and out, possessive growls accompanying each slow thrust.

The handcuffs dug into her wrists as his movement strengthened and sped. Her nipples tingled within the rings and her head spun. Pleasure washed over her in lazy waves, inundating her senses, yet refusing to crest.

*Say it, Dy, his voice commanded in her mind. Admit you love me.*

She screamed in exasperation, frustration threading through her arousal. She poured energy into her mental shields. She'd had no idea they had deteriorated, allowing him access to her mind and her emotions.

"Just fuck me! I love it when you fuck me." The statement started out strong, but faded into a breathless whimper.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and drove deep as he shuddered in release. His persistent fingers triggered her long-awaited orgasm. Still, her temper wasn't appeased by the pleasure.

"It doesn't matter if I love you," she cried. "My love won't give you cubs, so stop tormenting me!"

## Chapter Five

Maddox wrapped his arms around Dyauna and savored the firm clasp of her ass on his cock. For just a moment he'd slipped beyond her shields and felt her volatile emotions, and the conflict ravaging her fiery spirit. It broke his heart to know he was the cause of the conflict, but he was doing everything in his power to find a resolution.

Dyauna was one of the most powerful clairvoyants in Alpha Colony. Her telepathic range was massive, and she could identify other morphs by the rhythm of their energy. Her psychic shields were nearly impenetrable. He was one of the few who could have punched through if he chose to force his way into her mind. Of course, that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted her to acknowledge their love, to invite him into her mind as she'd accepted him into her body. She needed to understand that nothing was more important than building a future together.

"I have a surprise for you." He reluctantly separated their bodies, craving more of her even as his cock slipped free. He had hoped distance would ease the continual ache, but she'd haunted his thoughts and filled his dreams with images of the things they'd do together. Not all of the images had been sexual. He'd seen her at his side through good times and bad, well into the future.

"Another toy from your bag of tricks?" Despite her angry outburst, her tone was rather breathless.

Circling around in front of her, he admired her lean body from every angle. Her skin still gleamed from the oil he'd spread across her undulating body, and the golden rings crowning her nipples made him want to start round three. He drew in a deep breath, held it, then released it in a ragged sigh. There was too much left unsaid between them, too much unresolved. Mesmerized by the beauty of her face, he reached up and unhooked her handcuffs from the tether, allowing her to lower her arms.

She dragged off the nipple rings before he could stop her, and tossed them in the general direction of the bed. Her anxious movement drew his attention to her wrists and he caught her upper arm, holding her still so he could examine the damage. The cuffs had abraded her wrists, her skin bruised and broken in places.

"Fuck," he muttered, angry with himself for not anticipating the possibility. "Why didn't you tell me I was hurting you?" He retrieved the key from his backpack and opened the cuffs.

"I was distracted at the time." She sounded more embarrassed than angry. "It stung, but I didn't realize the cuffs had done this."

She had always had an aptitude for pain that he'd been reluctant to explore. He loved it when she turned wild and abandoned, willing to try anything, but hurting her in any way was hard for him. Swinging the backpack to his shoulder, he took her hand and led her to the door.

"We'll take care of your wrists at our new destination."

"Where are we going?" She hesitated in the doorway, alert and watchful.

"You'll see."

She tugged against his hand and motioned to the suppression collar. "Can we dispense with this?"

He tensed, wanting to trust her, yet knowing her too well. The second he released the band, she'd shift and do her best to escape. "Not yet. Maybe after we've enjoyed my surprise."

She didn't argue, but she jerked her arm out of his light grasp and moved into the clearing in front of the relay station.

The night was cool and clear, the rain clouds having long since drifted east. The village was in the valley on the far side of the mountains, the keeper's compound even farther east.

Dyauna gazed at the starry sky, trying to regain her bearings, no doubt. They were surrounded by trees and rolling hills rather than steep, rocky canyons. It wouldn't take her long to realize they were southwest of her camp.

Not wanting to hurt her any more, he placed his hand at the small of her back rather than grasping her wrist. "You'll like this. I promise."

She stared at him for a long, silent moment, rebellion simmering in her bright gaze. She was thinking about bolting. He could see it in her eyes. But she couldn't shift, so he could easily track her. He wasn't ready to let her go, would never be ready to let her go.

"How long are we going to keep pretending that there can ever be a solution for us?" She tossed her hair over her shoulders, and put her hands on her hips.

"I'm not the one pretending, and we'll never find a solution until we start looking for one." He motioned her toward a game trail, barely discernable in the moonlight.

She released her shift enough to illuminate her eyes, and his verbal directives guided her through the forest. They hiked down a rocky incline then upstream along a narrow brook.

"I love the smell of rain." Her wistful tone caught him by surprise. Her expression was still so tense. "It leaves everything so fresh and..."

"Soggy?" He chuckled as his feet slid on the rain-soaked turf. "It's not far now."

The trees thinned then parted, creating a natural clearing. At least he presumed it was natural. This place was too secluded to attract many visitors. Across the clearing rose a rock face, not grand enough to be termed a cliff. A waterfall meandered down the formation, emptying into an oblong pool. Moonlight glistened off the rippling water before it narrowed and became the stream once more.

"Our bathing facilities?" she guessed.

"Yes, but that's not the surprise." He swept his arm toward the pool. "Stick your toes in and see how it feels."

After treating him to a suspicious glower, she approached the pool with obvious mistrust. She looked around, visually scanning the trees as well as the water. Finally, she found a relatively flat spot and pushed one of her feet into the pool.

"It's warm. How is this possible?"

"Water gathered at the bottom of the waterfall and then a hot spring pushed up through the streambed, enlarging and warming the pool."

"How far are we from my camp? I'd like to bring --"

"Very few people know about this place, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"All right." She knelt and splashed the warm water on her face.

"I stashed a bucket behind the waterfall, so we can have a warm bath without contaminating the pool."

"Makes sense. I don't suppose you have shampoo and soap stashed back there too?"

"No shampoo, but I have soap in my backpack."

"Soap will be a damn good start." She followed him to the waterfall and helped steady him as he reached back into an indentation in the rock and withdrew a large metal bucket.

He filled the bucket and they walked a good distance from the pool. "Soak your wrists for a minute before we break out the soap." She knelt beside the bucket and he opened his pack, rummaging for a moment before he produced a small bar of soap. "I have an ointment for your wrists, but it will have to wait until after we've enjoyed the pool. The water will just wash it off."

"They aren't as bad as they look. I bruise easily."

"I know. But it's no excuse. I should have been more careful with you." It was one of the reasons he'd never been comfortable exploring anything more aggressive than spanking. She took her hands out of the water and he moved the bucket to one side as he knelt facing her. He wet the soap then coated his hands with the fresh smelling lather. "Don't move." Starting at her shoulders, he washed her arms, her neck and her torso. He tried to keep his touch light and utilitarian, but his hands had a mind of their own. Her skin was so warm and her shape so damn appealing.

"If I agreed to back your play -- and I'm not saying I will -- what will be your first move?"

She wanted to talk now? He tipped the bucket over her shoulders, allowing some of the water to rinse away the lather. "That will be up to the clan leaders. I'm pushing for a unified campaign, but everyone will still have a say."

"Consensus is the most ineffective way to govern, especially in wartime."

She had a point. Debate took up precious time, and their window of opportunity was limited. "There has to be a way to streamline the democratic process without abandoning the concept completely."

"If I were you, I'd allow one leader from each breed to bring their preferences to you. The clan leaders can select a breed minister or whatever they want to call it, and you can make your decisions based on the advice of the breed ministers rather than trying to negotiate agreement out of all the clan leaders."

He lowered his hands to his legs and gazed into her eyes. "That's a wonderful compromise. It would allow everyone input without obstructing efficiency."

"It will also allow the clans to retain their individuality. I can see the benefit of combining our forces, but you can't meld all the breeds into one feline hodgepodge."

Pausing long enough to renew the lather, he ran his hands up her thighs. "I want you on the council. You can be the leopard minister."

She stopped his hands just short of their destination. "That's not my decision to make. The leopards must be free to name anyone they choose."

"But if they vote for you, will you agree to join the council?"

"One step at a time." She released his hands and parted her thighs. "I'll explain the process and suggest we take a vote."

"There are only two leopards in the village. All the rest have joined you in the caves. Do you really think they'll name anyone but you?"

"Time will tell. And if we're adamantly opposed to your chosen course of action, we reserve the right to withdraw our support."

"I don't think that will be a problem. We all want the same thing." His sudsy thumbs dipped between her thighs, teasing without parting her folds.



Dyauna closed her eyes and let hunger roll through her being. Her hands were free, but he hadn't given her permission to touch him, and she wanted to touch him, needed to explore his hard body as thoroughly as he'd explored her.

Not trusting herself to remain passive, she moved her hands behind her and grasped her ankles. He washed away the residue of their lovemaking while his careful touch triggered a fresh rush of cream. Her faint musk mingled with the scent of soap and rain-washed pine.

He leaned in, nipping her earlobe. "You're not relaxing. I can smell your arousal."

"Then stop touching me!"

His finger rubbed her clit while he scraped his teeth against her throat. "I don't want to stop." He trickled water over her lower body, allowing a steady stream to cascade between her thighs. "And you don't want me to stop."

As if to prove his point, he pushed to his feet and headed back to the pool for more water. She watched the bunch and flex of his ass and longing spiraled from her chest to her pussy. How could she want him again so soon after... The thought was laughable. She'd never stopped wanting him. Even when they were apart, her heart ached to be with him.

She grabbed the soap off the ground and stood, determined to indulge her need to touch him before he took control again. "Your turn," she said as he returned with a fresh bucket of water.

"I suppose that's only fair." He set the bucket at her feet and grinned. "How do you want me?"

"Lock your hands behind your head." As soon as he complied, she went to work, gliding her soapy hands across his body. The position showcased his thick biceps and the muscular definition of his torso. She followed each contour, savoring the strength so obvious in his impressive form. He could snap her like a twig if he wanted to, yet he'd never harmed her, never intentionally hurt her. At least not physically.

That wasn't fair. The emotional hurt had been unintentional too. He couldn't help who he was or the expectations that accompanied his position. She'd left him, not the other way around.

She shook away the distracting thoughts and moved behind him. His back was easily as impressive as his front. Wide shoulders tapered to lean hips and that fabulous ass. His legs were long and thickly muscled, and even his feet were attractive.

After rinsing the lather from his body, she paused to admire him. "I'm not the only one aroused by bathing." She nodded toward his cock, which arched before him, thickly erect and begging for attention.

"On your knees," he growled. "I want to fuck that sassy mouth." He released his hands and reached for her.

She went willingly, eagerly, needing the security of his strength, craving the pleasure she'd only found within his sheltering arms. He helped her to her knees and brushed her hair back from her face as she brought his cock to her mouth. Closing her lips around the tip, she suckled firmly, hardening his shaft even more.

He groaned, his fingers pushing into her hair, caressing not controlling, allowing her to play. She stroked his shaft with one hand, and cradled his balls in the other. All the while she licked and sucked on the flared head.

"Harder." His tone was rough and urgent as he pushed farther into her mouth.

She tightened her fingers and drew more deeply, allowing her teeth to scrape against his delicate skin. His groans and gasps urged her on, feminine power unfurling within her. She lashed him with her tongue and carefully tugged on his sac as her mouth slid up and down on his hard flesh.

"Hands... on... my... hips." He punctuated the sentence with the rocking of his pelvis. She moved her hands to his hips and he established a stronger rhythm.

She angled her head, taking him deeper. His hands fisted in her hair, holding without hurting. She closed her eyes and surrendered to the fire, the heated rush of being taken by him. Her pussy echoed his steady rhythm, clenching and releasing in time to his hips.

The salty-sharp taste of precum spread across her tongue. She flicked against the slit, anxious for more of his evocative essence. He groaned again and sped his pace, driving to the back of her throat with each thrust.

Reaching back, she clutched his ass, enjoying the determined flex of his muscles against her palms. With a muffled cry, he drove in as far as he could, and came in shuddering spurts. She swallowed and licked, milking his cock with firm suction. He was hers. Now and forever, he was hers.

The possessive thought shocked her. Did she want Maddox to belong to her? She eased back, releasing him as she maneuvered her feet beneath her.

"What's wrong?" He reached for her, but she twisted away.

"Nothing. I just... nothing."

"Didn't you want me to finish like that?"

"No. I wanted you to."

"Then why are you upset?"

"I'm not upset. I'm cold." She tossed the last over her shoulder as she turned and hustled toward the pool.

He followed in her wake then wrapped his arms around her as she started to submerge. The water lapped at her waist, and he pulled her back against him, trapping her arms against her breasts.

"You're still running away." His warm breath teased her ear and a shiver raced down her spine. "What are you so afraid of?"

She tensed, ignoring the heat of his body and her instantaneous response to his touch. "I'm not afraid." She sounded harsh and insistent, but not nearly as convincing as she'd hoped.

"When I touch you, and especially when I taste you, I feel possessive and fierce. I want you beneath me, and beside me, and with me. I want to share everything with you." His hold eased and his hands caressed, his face pressed against her hair. "Did you feel it too? When I trusted you with my pleasure, did you feel the overwhelming need to bond with me?"

“What I need is for you to accept reality,” she snapped, “and stop teasing me with things that can never be.”

He turned her around, frustration sculpting his expression. “In reality, the only one keeping us apart is you.”

“I won’t be your whore!”

“I would never ask that of you. I love you, Dyauna. I want you to mate with me. I want us to --”

She raised her hand, stopping his passionate declaration as trepidation tore through her being. “Something’s wrong.” She tugged at the suppression collar as her leopard tossed within her. “Take this off me now!”

His gaze narrowed, sharp and assessing, then his head snapped up and he sniffed the air. “We’re not finished here. Consider this an intermission.”

They rushed to shore, and he retrieved the remote from his backpack. The band released with a soft pop. She tore the band off and tossed it aside, rubbing her irritated skin. Her leopard surged, refusing to be denied any longer. With no other explanation, she shifted and bounded off through the trees.

## Chapter Six

Maddox snatched a *geron* off the stack by the cavern's entrance and wrapped the simple garment around his waist. Shouts and growls led him to the large, central chamber of the rebel camp. Six Barbary males faced off with the snarling leopards. Dyauna stood between the two groups, attempting to maintain order.

Releasing his cat enough to roar, Maddox drew the attention of both groups. "What the hell is going on here?" He motioned toward Ulli, the strongest sentinel in Barbary pride. "Who is protecting the village if six of my best fighters are here?"

"Serengeti pride reinforced the perimeter before we took off. This is important." Pain flashed through his anger and then he said, "You didn't see her, sir. This cannot go unanswered. No one will stand for it."

"Who was harmed, and why do you presume my men are to blame?" Dyauna took a step toward the lions, but one of her men blocked her path. He took up a protective position in front of her, obviously determined to keep her safe. "That's enough, Brette." She slipped around him then motioned him back. "We have to get to the bottom of this."

"Ulli, and only Ulli, explain why you're here." Maddox moved closer to his men, watching closely for any flare of anger or potential outburst.

"The forest patrol found Genna down by the spring house. She'd lost so much blood she was lucky to be alive. According to her, a couple of leopards grabbed her and dragged her off into the forest. They beat her and... tortured her."

"Did she see her attackers?" Dyauna asked. "Can she help us identify who did this to her?" Gasps and mutters of protest rippled through the leopards. Why would she even consider the accusation? The question was clearly written on every leopard face.

The sentinel shook his head. "They put a cloth bag over her head. She never saw them."

"Then it could have been anyone!" Brette stepped up beside her again.

She raised her hand, warning him back. "What made Genna think her attackers were leopards? Is she able to smell different breeds?"

The talent was fairly common, but it required concentration and practice. Maddox crossed his arms over his chest, content with Dyauna's progress and direction. She was remarkably calm in the face of these accusations.

"They made damn sure she knew why they were hurting her." Ulli paused, color slowly bleeding from his face. "They carved 'hell no' across her chest. You tell me what else that could mean."

Maddox had heard enough. He moved in front of his men, commanding their attention with his posture and his gaze. "Someone went to a great deal of trouble to implicate the rebels, but there's a serious flaw in their strategy."

"My people know nothing about the alliance," Dyauna put in. "I haven't told them yet."

The lions exchanged confused glances then Ulli asked, "Who would do such a despicable thing? What do they gain by tormenting an innocent woman?"

"There are only two possibilities," Dyauna said.

"Two?" Maddox looked at her, far less comfortable with her nudity than she was. He hated that his men could see all of her, wanted to reserve the privilege for himself. "I can only think of one. Izak."

"Izak is far more likely to remain at large without every cat in the colony looking for him," she agreed. "But the keepers also benefit from preventing an alliance."

"That presumes that they're aware of the negotiations," Maddox countered.

Challenge raised her brow and she turned toward him. "Do you honestly think a spontaneous development of this size could take place without the keepers' knowledge? How did you explain the gathering in the council hall?"

He couldn't argue with her logic. "All right, so we have two suspects: Izak and the keepers. Izak has avoided punishment for too long already. He moves to priority one. It will be harder to prove keeper involvement, but I won't rest until this is resolved."

"It works to our advantage to let them believe they succeeded." Dyauna joined her men. On the surface, the gesture was casual, but Maddox understood the deeper meaning. She was sending him away -- again!

"Does this mean you'll explain the alliance to your men and allow them to vote on a breed minister?"

"There is no harm in discussion." Her protective aloofness was solidly in place. Maddox wanted to shake her. "I'll send a messenger with our decision."

He'd been dismissed! His claws dug into his palms as he stared at her stoic expression. He'd been so close to reaching her, so close to penetrating this façade. "I'll dispatch scouts. There are only so many places Izak can hide."

"What about the keepers? How do we determine if they're involved or not?"

"I'll launch an investigation. We have friends among the keepers. I'll find out what they know."

She nodded and a fist closed around his heart. There was nothing more to say. He'd run out of excuses to linger. "I'll let you know the moment I learn anything."

Her second nod was even more stilted.

He motioned his men toward the cavern's entrance and reluctantly followed them out.

\* \* \*

Amara paused, composing her expression before she entered Izak's hideout. After they'd finished with the lion female, Amara had stayed near the village to observe the response once the girl was discovered. It hadn't taken long, and the outcry was everything Izak could have hoped for and more.

Barbary pride had been ready to raze the mountain camp and end the rebellion once and for all. There was no way Dyauna and her followers would be able to talk their way out of this one.

Maybe this was the best time for her to end her association with Izak. She could return to the village and --

Izak grabbed her arm and yanked her into the hideout. "Why are you lurking in the shadows like a ghoul?"

"I was just catching my breath."

He snorted. "The trail isn't that steep. I climbed it with the dog slung over my shoulder."

*Well, good for you.* She wisely kept the sarcastic response to herself. But he was really starting to grate on her nerves. "Your plan worked beautifully. Six Barbary sentinels stormed off through the forest with bloodlust glowing in their eyes. I won't be surprised if they slash throats first and ask questions later."

"Where was Maddox? Did he lead the charge?"

"I'm not sure where he was. He wasn't one of the six."

Izak made a rumbling sound, but didn't elaborate.

"This is what you wanted. Why aren't you pleased?"

"I will be pleased when you return with confirmation that they did more than argue."

Amara heaved a frustrated sigh and planted her hands on her hips. "You want me to run all the way over to the rebel camp? I just came from the village. You're going to wear me out."

He snorted again, a sound she was coming to hate almost as much as she hated the creature who made it. "You were worn out long before I took you on. Now go make yourself useful!"

\* \* \*

"I didn't expect to see you back so soon."

Maddox glared at his sister then sighed. "I didn't expect to be back so soon."



"The plan didn't work as well as we expected?"

Jizette meant well, but he really didn't want to review the details of his encounter with Dyauna. Especially not with his baby sister. "She's stubborn and she's afraid. If it was easy, she never would have left."

"What is she afraid of? Haven't you told her how much you love her?"

"She knows. Trust me, she knows. But her mother was shunned by Barbary pride and the leopards weren't any more accepting. She knows I'm expected to have full-blooded cubs to carry on my line, and she knows she can't give them to me."

"There are options for any pride leader. Adopt one of the orphans or --"

"Our bloodline is prolific. That's one of the most important biological characteristics. It's my responsibility to keep this pride strong, and growing." He paused for a frustrated sigh. "And there is no way in hell Dyauna would be happy if I claimed more than one mate."

"So approach the primary mate of one of the fertile females. It's unusual for pride leader to be a secondary mate, but there is no rule against it. The lioness would already have a primary family, so your interaction in her daily life could be minimal."

Cubs born to secondary mates were often raised by their fathers. It prevented conflict with the cubs of the primary mate, not to mention the primary mate himself.

He was pride leader. The thought of becoming a secondary mate had never entered his mind. But Jizette might be on to something. Could Dyauna love and nurture his cubs if another female gave birth to them?

The fertile female's primary mate would be honored by her connection to the pride leader. And if she already had cubs by her primary mate, she would be expected to release his cubs as soon as they were weaned. It wasn't ideal, but it was as close to a resolution as he'd found so far.

"It could work." The hope in Jizette's eyes stabbed into his heart. She wanted him to be happy as badly as he wanted to find a way to be with Dyauna.

"If Dyauna could accept me having sex with another female."

"That, unfortunately, is unavoidable."

\* \* \*

Sensing another presence in her private room, Dyauna jarred awake, muscles tense, senses instantly on guard.

"Relax," Maddox's deep voice reached out from the darkness, "it's just me."

"How did you get past my guards?" She sat up on her pallet, heart thudding madly in her chest. The leopard inside her stirred, anxious, ready to surface and pounce, while the woman was thrilled that he'd returned.

"I explained that I had information for your ears alone, and they let me pass."

"They should have awakened me and asked permission to..." He joined her on the bed and she forgot what she was saying. Crawling toward her, hair framing his handsome face, he appeared feline despite his human features.

"We need to talk, but first we're going to finish what we started at the waterfall." He urged her onto her back and arched over her, weight balanced on his knees and forearms. "No more excuses, no evasions, and no more running away."

"But I --" His mouth interrupted her protest. His warm lips sealed over hers and his tongue gently teased. He was stubborn, perhaps even more stubborn than she was. She'd told him all the reasons they couldn't be together, and he kept coming back, kept showing her all the reasons they shouldn't be apart. She opened wider, welcoming him inside as she slid her tongue over his.

Any female in the village would die to be in her place, so why was she resisting him so determinedly? She ran her hands through his hair, the soft strands tickling her sensitive fingers. His taste was familiar, rich. Her body ripened and warmed in response.

She inhaled his scent and moved her hands to his shoulders then his back. His body was amazing, and he frequently denied her the pleasure of touching him, so she took full advantage of his distraction.

It didn't last long. As he kissed his way down her neck, he pulled her arms above her head and pressed them into the blankets. He stroked and suckled her breasts, while

she arched and whimpered. He knew how hard to squeeze, how deeply to suck to send sensations ricocheting through her body.

Even her breasts didn't hold his attention for long. He was on a quest, and nothing would keep him from his goal. Scooting down along her body, he used his shoulders like a wedge. Then he caught the backs of her knees and opened her farther. He paused, his face framed by her thighs. His lips parted as if he would speak then he shook his head and looked into her eyes. All the fire and tenderness she could ever want was waiting for her if she was brave enough to accept it.

Maintaining eye contact as long as he could, he bent toward her pussy and inhaled. Desire rolled through her body, pooling between her thighs. Her core contracted and she raised her hips in silent invitation. Words had become a distraction, so they let their bodies communicate.

He parted her folds with the tip of his tongue. She held her breath, trembling in anticipation as his exploration led him ever closer to her clit. His tongue found the swollen nub and she gasped.

His hands slid down her thighs and under her ass. He cupped her bottom and raised her toward his mouth. Desperate for more of his carnal kiss, she held her legs open and pushed up. Tension gathered low in her belly, encouraged by the circular motion of his tongue. Her abdomen quivered and her breasts ached, the nipples still hard from his attention.

"Please, sir, may I come?" She whispered the words out of habit, shocked at how naturally they came to her lips.

He managed a subtle nod without breaking the rhythm of his caress. His lips closed around her clit and she cried out with his first tender suck. Sensations shot up her spine and down her legs, leaving her trembling long after the spasms faded.

Leisurely moments passed as she savored the afterglow; then he pulled her up so they knelt together in the center of the bed. He framed her face with his hands and kissed her, filling her mouth with the proof of her pleasure.

"This is the last time I will ask this, so consider your answer carefully."

She didn't like how this was starting. Though worded as a caution, it sounded too much like an ultimatum.

"I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. If there were a way I could fulfill the expectations of my pride and still have you as my mate, would you bond with me?"

## Chapter Seven

Amara crouched in the bushes, staring up at the cave entrance. The rebel camp was quiet. A small hunting party had departed shortly after she arrived and one of the guards had passed a short distance away without even realizing she was hiding.

Unfortunately, she'd been unable to see or overhear anything that indicated whether or not there had been a brawl with Barbary pride.

She should assure Izak his plan had worked and be done with it. Without being able to interact with the leopards, she had little chance of finding out the answer to her question. And she sure as hell couldn't ask someone. How would she explain her interest in the event?

A twig snapped on her right and she whipped her head around. *Shit!* One of the guards rushed toward her, shifting back to human form as he charged.

"Who are you and what do you want..."

The rest of his demand was lost as she turned and bounded off through the underbrush. Fear drove her faster than she'd ever gone before.

An angry feline cry assured her the leopard followed. She zigzagged and doubled back, determined to blur her trail. There was no time for more elaborate measures. She had to keep moving.

Another cry rent the cool night air, closer this time. Branches scraped her face and poked into her sides as she barreled through dense bushes and exploded into a small clearing. A brook meandered along in a natural culvert. She charged into the water and ran upstream.

Water splashed her face several times before she realized her frantically pumping legs weren't the cause. She glanced skyward and a raindrop connected with her nose. Not pausing to celebrate her good fortune, she ran on through the night.

\* \* \*

"Is your question hypothetical or have you figured out a way to have your cake and eat it too?"

Maddox smiled. Dyauna sounded cautious and a little bit annoyed, but considering her potential for volatility, her reaction was rather mild. "My sister reminded me of a custom that could offer us a way to have it all."

"Do I even want to know what Jizette suggested?"

"I hope you'll be pleasantly surprised." He took a deep breath and chose his words carefully. This negotiation meant more to him than any other. "The ratio of females to males within Barbary pride is better than the colony average, but we still have more males. If I became a secondary mate to a fertile female, we could raise the cubs and my bloodline would be preserved."

"You would be a secondary mate as opposed to being primary mate to more than one female?" He nodded. "But secondary mates are males who have been unable to secure a primary mate among the fertile females. If I'm your primary mate, doesn't that disqualify you?"

"I'm pride leader. I could cover every female in the pride if that's what I wanted, which it is not!"

She smiled and her lashes swept down, concealing her gaze. "You'd have to cover at least one."

It wasn't a question. Still, he felt obligated to respond. "I would only mount her in cat form, and only as many times as it took to impregnate her. Morph females don't orgasm in cat form, so --"

"I'm a morph female. I'm well aware of the distinction."

Tension swirled around them, heating his skin and compressing his chest. He placed his hands on her hips and leaned in close, his mouth hovering over hers. "Is it an acceptable compromise, or are you willing to find another? I'm willing to consider other options as long as we're working toward an eventual joining."

She raised her hands to his chest and smiled into his eyes. "It's by far the best option I've heard so far. You would have cubs and I would have you."

He brushed his lips over hers as he whispered, "We would have cubs and we'd have each other."

Her lips parted beneath his and her tongue swept into his mouth. He wrapped his arms around her, deepening the kiss. She tilted her head and clutched his back, her nails lightly scraping.

Passion, hot and demanding pulsed through his body. With a soft growl, he lifted her hips and found her moist entrance. Her legs flexed against his sides as he brought her down, filling her passage with his straining cock.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and buried her hands in his hair. She had softened and surrendered, but she couldn't move in this position. He cupped her ass with both hands, sliding her up and down while their mouths continued the devouring kiss.

Her inner muscles tightened around him, accentuating each stroke. Her nipples rubbed against his chest and her gasps and moans urged him onward.

Needing more than this physical union, he reached for her mind. "Lower your shields. I want to feel your pleasure."

She broke the kiss, pushing against his shoulders until she could see his face. He lowered her to his lap, pushing his entire length into her snug heat. Her gaze shimmered with passion and tenderness, and just a hint of uncertainty.

"Don't take me down this road unless you mean it. I don't think I'd survive if you betrayed me."

For Dyauna to intentionally reveal any measure of vulnerability was an amazing development. "I love you, and I will protect you for as long as you live." He infused each word with sincerity and gently nudged her mental shields.

Her breasts pressed against his chest as she took a deep breath. He didn't push. He waited for her to emerge from behind her emotional protection. The barrier thinned, then an opening appeared, and her being flowed into his mind.

Joy and longing rushed through him. She had concealed herself for so long, he'd forgotten the true beauty of her fiery spirit. He absorbed her energy, savoring the sweet burn of her emotional intensity.

She rocked back, taking him with her. He caught himself against the bedding, keeping his weight from crushing her. She dragged his head down and resumed their passionate kiss.

*No more holding back.* Desire pushed into his mind along with her words. *Fuck me hard. Claim me now.*

Exhilarated by her surrender, he drew his hips back and thrust deep. She arched into each lunge, her hands squeezing his shoulders. His lion gave a possessive roar and his movements sped. He drew her arms over her head and pinned them to the blankets.

*Feel my fire.* He eased into her mind, careful and restrained.

*More.* She gasped. *I want all of you!*

His cat surged, accepting her invitation with undeniable power. He pulled out and flipped her over, drawing her hips up as he thrust back in. She braced her legs, maximizing the impact of each drive. Her cunt clasped him so tightly he groaned and tossed his head. She cried out, arching and clawing the blankets beneath her.

Pleasure washed over Dyauna in sizzling waves. She absorbed the energy with greedy abandon then pushed the wave back into Maddox's mind. He covered her, controlling her with his weight and the steady pounding of his cock.

His mouth pressed against her shoulder, teeth pressing against her flesh without actually biting. The tantalizing possibility sent a fresh ripple of want swirling through her pussy.

"Do it. Please." She punctuated the request with a stab of pure lust.

He growled and bit down. Sensation zinged from her shoulder and struck her clit. She cried out, coming in sharp shallow pulses. She lowered her shoulders and pressed her cheek against the blankets, demonstrating her complete surrender.

His warm tongue brushed over the bite mark and his thrusting slowed, waiting for her arousal to rebuild and intensify. He slipped one hand around her hip and



between her thighs, teasing her folds and circling her clit. The lazy caress focused her attention on the steady slide of his cock.

"You are so wet." He shivered and scraped his teeth against her spine.

"Do you want to finish in my ass?" The thought was thrilling, yet intimidating. Her cream wouldn't work as well as lubricant. Could she bear --

"No. I want to feel myself moving in your cunt." He pushed off the bed, centering his weight on his knees. His other hand eased between their bodies while his first concentrated on her clit.

The embers of her arousal burst back to life, warming her blood and tingling along her inner walls. She trusted him implicitly, craved the shattering pleasure she'd only known with him. Relaxing her body and opening her mind, she offered him everything.

After coating his fingers with her cream, he moved back to her other entrance. He circled her anus and her clit simultaneously and sensations swirled through her abdomen. She tightened her inner muscles, urging him on.

He chuckled and eased the tip of one finger beyond the tight collar of muscle. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes. Please, push deeper. Give me more."

His finger drove steadily inward then pulled back even slower. She groaned and shivered as pleasure followed in his wake. He thrust his cock deep, while only the tip of his finger teased her. Then he reversed direction, driving his finger in as he pulled back with his hips.

The combination catapulted her arousal with staggering speed. With just a few rotations, she was trembling on the verge of release. "Please, sir, may I come?"

"Not yet. Fight it off. I want us to come together."

She groaned and clutched the bedding with both hands.

He moved his hand away from her clit, allowing her to focus on the dual penetration. Her cunt rippled and clenched as his cock slid in and out. He eased a second finger into her ass and left them deep as he resumed a strong, steady rhythm.

She drew him deeper into her mind, sharing the emotions she'd denied for so long. He gasped and thrust faster, his emotions amplified by hers.

*I claim you as my mate. Let nothing and no one attempt to tear us apart!*

*I claim you as my mate, she echoed. Together for all time!*

He thrust home one final time, shuddering violently as he released his seed deep inside her. She arched higher, taking all he could give. Blinding sensations and joyous emotions radiated from them and swept into them as their bond anchored their souls together.

Carefully withdrawing his fingers, he wrapped his arms around her and pressed against her back. "I have waited so long for this night." He found one of her breasts and squeezed. "I will never let you go now."

Turning her head sharply so he could see her smile, she said, "Glad to hear it, because I have no intention of letting you go either."

She stilled and contentment washed over her in soothing waves. She could still sense their bond though his emotions were receding even as their ardor cooled. Emotions had to be exceptionally strong from them to spontaneously pass across the bond. Thoughts were the same way. They could send thoughts to each other, but they wouldn't be aware of each other's thoughts unless they intentionally entered the other's mind.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Our bond," she admitted. "It's not nearly as intrusive as I'd imagined."

He tightened his arms around her and rolled to his side, taking her with him. "Good. The only thing I want to feel intrusive is this." He flexed his abdominal muscles, causing his cock to buck.

"That's no intrusion. He's always welcome."

"Always?"

She laughed. "Are you adapting to our exhibitionist ways?"

"Perhaps." He nibbled her earlobe then whispered, "Did you explain the alliance to your men?"

"I did."

"And?" He prompted her answer with a playful nip.

"And they named me breed minister."

Reluctantly separating their bodies, he shifted her to her back. His gaze moved over her features before locking with hers. "Are you doing this for me?"

"No. I'm doing this because it makes sense for the leopards. We're all morphs, and we all want the same thing. It's time to put our differences aside and work together."

Before Maddox could respond to her observations, Brette called out from the corridor. "Dyauna, I need to speak with you. It's important."

"Wait for me by the fire." She scooted off the bed and pushed to her feet.

"Do you want me to wait here?" Maddox asked, his gaze bright with curiosity.

"No. If something's wrong, you might come in handy." She grabbed a *geron* off the stack by the doorway and draped it around her body. Her men were accustomed to seeing her naked, but it bothered Maddox.

He stood as well, looking adorably tousled. She tossed him a *geron* and watched with hungry appreciation as he wrapped it around his hips. "Ready?"

With a nod, he followed her out into the common room.

Grayson faced Brette across the fire pit. Mistrust radiated off Brette, but Grayson shot Maddox a knowing smile.

"What's going on?" she asked her guard.

"I surprised a tigress while I was on patrol," Brette explained. "I told her to identify herself, and she took off as if I was going to kill her. I followed her for a while, but the rain picked up, and I lost her trail." He looked into the fire, obviously disappointed in himself. "I'm sorry, Dyauna."

"Do you have any idea who she was or what she wanted?" Dyauna asked.

"She was crouched in the bushes watching the entrance. No one was hurt and nothing was taken."

She paused, milling over possible explanations. She glanced at Grayson then focused on Maddox. "I think our list of suspects for Genna's attack just shrank to one. Izak is the only one who has any reason to spy on this camp."

"But the intruder was definitely female," Brette insisted.

"And I've said all along he couldn't have eluded us this long without help." She shifted her gaze back to Grayson. "Which one of the tigresses is stupid enough to help that son-of-a-bitch?"

"There's only one I can think of who's stupid -- and desperate -- enough. Amara," Grayson replied.

"She's been in seclusion since her mate set her aside," Maddox pointed out.

"Which leaves her ripe for recruitment by someone like Izak." Dyauna shook her head. Despite the evidence, it was hard to imagine why anyone would help Izak after all the pain he'd caused.

"I've seen her several times in the village," Maddox added, "but she's spending an awful lot of time somewhere else. If we head back tonight, I can find out the last time anyone saw her."

Tempted to sweep the perimeter herself, Dyauna hesitated. Brette was one of her best trackers. If he lost the tigress' trail, it was unlikely she would find anything he missed. Still, she didn't like the idea that the intruder had gotten away.

"Besides, we need to let the other pride leaders know you're joining the alliance," Maddox reminded her.

"I suppose we do." She looked at Brette and managed to smile. "Don't beat yourself up over this. We'll find her. It's only a matter of time. And without his accomplice, Izak will be that much easier to bring down."

"We'll send word once the council of ministers has decided on a plan of action."

Grayson accepted Maddox's promise with a nod. "Don't waste too much time talking. Public interest can fizzle out just as quickly as it erupts."

"I'll make sure they don't," Dyauna assured with a rebellious grin.

They said good-bye and started down the steep trail leading away from the cavern's main entrance. "Jizette is going to gloat for weeks," Maddox said as they neared the bottom.

"Why is that?"

"She was convinced we belonged together long before either of us accepted it." He caught her shoulders and turned her to face him. "And regardless of what anyone says, we do belong together."

"You don't have to convince me."

He kissed her, his lips warm and tender. "Race you to the village." He lunged forward, shifting in midair, and landing with mesmerizing agility. Moonlight silvered his tawny coat, but his eyes glowed amber even in the shadowy night. *Are you coming?*

*Ask me again when we reach the village. I'm sure we can work out something.* With a playful smile, she released her cat and let her leopard run wild.

## **Aubrey Ross**

Aubrey writes an eclectic assortment of erotic fiction. From power struggles between futuristic clans, to adventurous shapeshifters, her stories are filled with passion and imagination. Some of the awards her work has earned include an EPPIE finalist, Passionate Plume finalists, and a CAPA Nomination from The Romance Studio.

With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, Aubrey dreams of fascinating worlds and larger than life adventures -- and wouldn't have it any other way! Visit her website at <http://www.aubreyross.com>. Join Aubrey's news group at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Anything-but-Ordinary/>.