

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



*Tia's
War*

KAMA SPICE

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Tia is of mixed blood, a human and shapeshifter. She is stronger and faster than other women and has joined a band of rebels to put her extra-human abilities to use. Now she has been sent into enemy territory to seek and destroy a toxic substance, but something goes terribly wrong.

During the mission, Tia is captured by Inuku, the general of the enemy's warriors. Tia knows she should hate him, but she has seen this massive shifter in her dreams. She recalls with exquisite detail the feel of his hands and mouth on her body. Try as she might, Tia cannot stop herself from responding to Inuku. Just being near him makes her skin burn for his touch. Would he command her body the way he commands his warriors?

The longer she's around him, the more desperate she is to find out. When things become heated, in more ways than one, Tia has to decide between her desire to escape the enemy and her increasingly powerful desire for Inuku.

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Tia's War

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Chapter One

Tia clutched the dagger and lunged at the tall, lithe, dark-haired man, aiming the sharp point at the corded muscle where his shoulder met his neck. He was deeply bronzed from the sun, and the climate was hotter than any Tia had ever known.

He grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her, pulling her body roughly against his. "You will learn, pussycat," he said in a low growl. He held her against him with one arm around her waist, pinning her other arm at her side while the hand wielding the dagger was wrenched high against her back.

Tia felt the cold steel of the dagger's blade against her bare skin as she struggled—succeeding only in causing herself more pain. Her fingers had gone weak, but the man held the dagger in place, not letting her drop it and not taking it from her.

Tia knew this was a dream—no, something more than a dream. A vision maybe. The kind she would get from time to time that would eventually unfold as reality. Maybe not exactly in the way she'd envisioned the events, but close. But who was this man? She'd never seen him before. He didn't look like anyone she knew. And yet he felt familiar, as if she'd known him her whole life...or would.

"What do you want from me?" she whispered. She had ceased to struggle for her own benefit and worked to calm her breathing.

His arms gentled around her as he began to stroke her down one side, but he kept hold of Tia's hand, the one with the dagger.

A flurry of emotions cascaded through Tia. Anger at being held immobile, confusion about who this was and what he meant to her, and the very real, very hot sensation of something like cold flames licking her flesh at each of his strokes.

She reached out with the fingers of the arm that was pinned against her side and dug her nails into his thigh.

She felt the rumble of sound in his chest and he tightened his hold on her again.

"If you're trying to arouse me," he said, "it's working." He easily pried the dagger out of her almost limp fingers and allowed her arm to drop.

Tia felt the circulation resume as she shook her hand. She wanted to massage her shoulder, but the other arm was still against her side.

And then she felt the tip of the dagger at her jaw. She froze as he traced a line gently from where her jaw met her ear and down to just between her breasts.

"I wouldn't need this," he said softly. Tia felt the warm puffs of his breath against her ear. "If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn't need a dagger." He held the blade poised with the point against her chest then released the arm that had been pinned against her side as he slipped his other hand up to cup her breast.

"But I don't want to kill you," he murmured, catching the lobe of her ear between his teeth. "What a shameful waste that would be." He kneaded the flesh of her breast gently, pulling the nipple to a point between his thumb and forefinger and rolling it.

Tia caught her breath. Why had she lunged at him with the dagger? She was supposed to hate him, she thought. But why? He was an enemy, wasn't he? But enemies didn't caress women with such tenderness...did they?

The hand that had been kneading her breast traveled down her belly. Tia felt the man's erection against her back as his hand found its target and, cupping the soft flesh at her mound, pulled her against his chest. He slipped a finger into the base of her slit.

Tia realized she was holding her breath and let it out as a trembling sigh. She could feel the hair at the entrance to her channel growing wet. She was melting. But she needed answers. She dug into her reserves for the strength one needs when pulling out of the quicksand of dreams. Or in this case, a dream-vision.

She ground her buttocks against his erection and was rewarded with a soft moan. Then she pressed her lips to the knuckles of the hand that held the dagger—just for a moment to throw him off guard—before she bit down as hard as she could.

He cursed, released his hold on the dagger for barely a second—but long enough for Tia to grab it and slip out of his hold.

And then she ran.

Tia jolted upright in bed and took great gulps of air into her lungs. She felt as if she'd run miles. But she was alone in her room. The soothing music she played to help her fall asleep at night was still on, and the clock on her nightstand said two forty a.m.

"Oh god, Tia," she admonished herself, "get over yourself." Ever since she was a child, she would have these kinds of vivid, strange dreams that felt like something other than dreams. She'd never been able to explain it to anyone, but she would get one, and then the dream would keep coming until an event similar to the dream unfolded in her life. It had happened when her mother left, when Tia had staged her own death, and when she joined the Stealth Blades. And now.

She never knew when the event was coming, so she couldn't avoid or change it. She only knew when she was in it, and then it all sort of clicked into place.

She didn't know who the man was in her dream, but she knew that something about him made her body vibrate like a tuning fork. She balled up the covers between her legs and squeezed her thighs together. She needed relief if she was going to get any sleep tonight. She slipped her fingers into the dampness between her legs and stroked herself. Images of a tall, bronzed, long-haired man pinning her arms above her head while he thrust into her played vividly in her mind until she exploded then drifted into a calm and finally undisturbed sleep.

* * * * *

Tia tucked the dagger back into the leather sheath at her thigh. She tightened the laces on her calf-high vyna-leather boots and wrapped the floor-length burgundy cape around her body, fastening it with a sash. On her way out the door, she grabbed her Escobar beam gun and slung it over one shoulder.

"Never know," she whispered into the emptiness. Even though the government did its best in ridding the human territories of those blood-lusting Lith'hah, Tia was convinced some of them still lived among her kind, just waiting for the chance to do harm. Niman Zul, when he rose to power, launched a media campaign at all levels, even at the grade school level, to teach humans how to spot and report anyone suspected of being a Lith'hah.

"Quite a task," Tia muttered, striding out the gate and heading toward the training facility, "especially since it's almost impossible to distinguish them from humans unless you're right underneath them." Even before she arrived at the outer periphery of the facility, she could hear the *wheean!* of Escobar laser guns—"beamers" as they were more commonly referred to throughout the Force.

She flung open the doors to the air-conditioned main quarters and walked straight to the white and stainless steel office of Roy Vishal, one of the main players at StateCorp, Inc.

StateCorp was the highest grossing corporation in the country, and the leading manufacturer of all hovercraft used in the human military, the Force. The company had just begun to move into manufacturing a faster, more advanced hovercraft for personal use and Vishal was spearheading the initiative.

What no one in the company knew was that Vishal was also one of the founding members of the Stealth Blades—a group of renegades who, when they first began, were simply a small, unorganized group of scattered misfits. Mostly people who didn't fit in for some reason or another, were isolated loners with exceptional IQs or were technological whizzes and completely useless in social contexts. But they all had one thing in common—they were staunchly anti-Zul's policies.

Over time, they managed to accrue more members—some who held rather high posts in either government or technology sectors. They called themselves the Stealth Blades and became more organized. They built training facilities in remote locations and began a rigorous training regime for new recruits.

All Blades now went through intense training under extreme conditions so they could withstand even the toughest questioning by members of Zul's Force. As a result, the Stealth Blades had been one of the few resistance organizations that had not yet been breached by the HIB—the Human Intelligence Bureau—and Zul's people.

But in recent years, with the threat of terrorism from the shapeshifting beasts in the Northern Territories, some of Zul's interests had merged with those of the Blades. The Stealth Blades were interested in protecting humans from the marauding beasts while Zul used the fear of the beasts to keep the human population under control.

Tia had been actively involved with the Stealth Blades for just under five years now.

"What's going on with the new strategy?" Tia asked, shrugging out of her cape.

"Tonight," Vishal mumbled, signaling the shades to darken on the windows of his office. There were a few younger Stealth Blade recruits on his staff, Tia had noticed, and she saw them setting up near Vishal's office to allow him the time he needed to meet with her.

He locked the door with the flick of a switch at his desk then pulled up a virtual map that was projected in midair from the console on his wrist. He walked to it and began to slide colored dots, representing Stealth Blades and the enemy, with his fingers along the grid.

Tia went to stand next to him, furrowing her brow. "We'll be flanked on three sides by mountains." She looked more carefully at the target. "And what looks like a stream on the fourth."

Vishal took the pointer out and set it down. "That's not a stream. It's a rushing river. Looks like a stream from here." He eyed Tia for a moment. "Cold feet?"

Tia smirked. "You wish. That would prove your theory that even among Stealth Blades, men are more resilient, wouldn't it?"

He grinned and turned back to the map. "If you take the Blades up this way," he said, tracing a path westward and coming around the marked target, "and enter through this pass here, you'll go unnoticed—of course you'll be in the latest version of the Lightning Fleet, which has advanced masking capabilities—up until the pass then you'll be cloaked and the enemy will have no way of detecting you."

Tia circled a flat area, just outside the target range. "This looks like a good spot to set camp. Let the Blades rest before beginning the offensive."

"Which engages fully at oh-four-hundred hours," he said, nodding and staring at the spot Tia had marked.

"And why aren't we just letting HIB Force handle this again?" Tia asked, even though she knew what his answer would be. Still, she had to ask. If she was going to lead a band of Blades into the belly of the beast, she had to know she was doing it for the right reasons.

His face grew a shade of deep pink and Tia saw sparks ignite in his eyes. "Because no one in the damn government is interested in anything beyond votes, Tia. You know that. They start thinking about the next election as soon as one is over, and Zul has been in power long enough to know how to manipulate voters' minds." He leaned on the knuckles of one hand and looked into her eyes. "They don't care about the people, Tia. There's a threat out there far worse than anything we've ever known, and we are sitting ducks. You've seen what those beasts can do."

A spike of adrenaline shot through Tia's limbs. Yes, she had seen what those beasts could do. Had seen it with her own eyes. And it was those images, of mauled young women, that settled it. Every battle was a rush, with adrenaline coursing through her

limbs, filling her muscles with a strength she often had to rein in. As it was, she could easily outrun the fastest of human men. She could see things in the dark that most people couldn't, and her sense of smell was extraordinary. Her senses were far beyond any human's—enough that she had learned to be very careful about drawing back before arousing suspicion. If she weren't a Stealth Blade, she didn't doubt she'd have been singled out under suspicion of being an enemy spy. As it was, most people assumed she was as strong and fast as she was because of her training. And if they thought otherwise, they kept it to themselves.

"Tia?"

She snapped back to attention. "I'm sorry... What was that?"

Vishal gave her a look. "This is an important target. Our intelligence points to this area," he circled a spot with his finger, "being the storehouse of the substance they're planning to use for contaminating our air space. And over here," he moved to another section in the target range, "they hold the liquid substance to pollute the water supply from here to the Southern Sands."

Tia whistled on an in-breath.

"It's important we move quickly on this one, Tia. They have abilities we may not know about, even with our thorough methods. We may have Blades in the top tiers of the HIB, but no one has actually seen everything those beasts are capable of."

Tia knew about the thorough methods of the Human Intelligence Bureau—methods the Stealth Blades had acquired and used against terrorist copycats using the current political instability to leverage their own agendas. Tia kept herself from wincing outwardly. Those very thorough methods had been used on her years ago, when the Stealth Blades she had voluntarily joined wanted to be sure of her loyalty. It was a critical balancing act. She had to be strong enough to survive the training, but she had to tone down her strength and speed to win the trust of the leaders. If she had shown herself to be faster and stronger than any of her male counterparts, she might have been turned in to the HIB for Observation and endless tests. *That* she could never allow. Tia knew she was different. She knew she was not quite human, or beyond human...but she was, exactly, she did not know. At one point, she had been deathly afraid that she might be one of *them*, but—try as she might—she could not change her body into the giant cat shape of the beasts. Tia was immensely relieved to not be one of those monsters, but what she was...that was still a mystery.

Her mother had taken her to doctors she trusted when Tia was a little girl, and all the tests came back normal. The doctors said Tia was a healthy human child with no abnormalities. But Tia knew there was something fundamentally different about her. It was a difference that set her apart from everyone she knew and grew more pronounced as Tia grew older.

Tia had willingly endured the "conditioning" of a Stealth Blade. For her, much of it was child's play, but she'd managed to convince them that she was expending great effort.

Besides, it had helped her forget—the mother who’d abandoned her, the grown children she herself left behind upon discovering she wasn’t aging like a normal human being. At seventy-something, she looked more like a thirty-something while her children were a healthy “human” forty-seven and fifty. *As if I’m not human*, she thought now, scowling.

Still, she looked more like one of *their* children, her grandchildren. It was beyond freakish and she’d kept her distance, moving farther and farther away and visiting less and less frequently. Near the end, she was communicating only via holophone and disabling the visual connection.

To spare them. To spare those she loved from what she was—which she knew was beyond human...but what, exactly, she was, she had no idea. She had yet to meet anyone else like herself. There were the beasts, and there were humans—and Tia was neither. Or both. She’d concocted all kinds of scenarios in her mind about who or what she could be, but there was nowhere for her to go, no one for her to go to. She couldn’t bear the thought that she might be one of *them*, but she didn’t fully belong in the world of humans either. She was in a half world. Not fully anywhere.

“Tia!”

Vishal’s voice snapped her back to attention. “We know enough,” she said smoothly, “to strike swiftly, destroy their storehouses and move out.”

Vishal nodded, looking a little relieved. “Glad you’re not daydreaming.” He pulled up a calendar and scrolled through, clicking on *Lunar*.

“We’ve planned this offensive after one of their religious events,” he said, pointing to the lunar equivalent of the date of the planned attack. “They’ll either be in deep sleep or plied with that vile-smelling brew. Their brats will be separated and somewhere over here.” He pointed to an area clear away from the target. “It should be smooth and easy.”

Tia’s stomach twisted. She didn’t think she’d ever get used to the way some of her colleagues referred to the enemy’s young. She’d seen holopics of the adults who had been caught in human territories after attacks. In their human form, they were almost indistinguishable from normal humans, except that they had a light sheen of hair on their bodies—much like the few silver hairs that cropped up on her own body from time to time—hairs she’d taken great pains to wax and pluck and hide.

Yes, they were the enemy, but... Tia thought back to the buttery sound of her eldest grandchild’s voice. She remembered holding him in her arms the day his mother brought him home. She’d left soon after that, knowing her presence would only create pain and alienation in their lives.

Eventually, she’d had to stage her own death when it became clear that she would not die during their lifetime. She set her PH, her personal hovercraft, to malfunction over the waters near her home, and watched it swoop gracefully into the crashing waves. She’d made certain some of her personal items washed up on shore a mile or so away, just so there was no doubt.

Then she'd sought out the Stealth Blades. They had a reputation for being strong and fast, and they'd set up networks that allowed them to operate under the radar of Zul's government and the Force. Exactly what she needed.

That was over five years ago. Every so often, she would get the urge to check on her grandchildren, but Tia knew they were not hers anymore. To them, she was dead.

Tia gave Vishal a nod. "I'll have the band strap up in an hour. The Lightning Fleet should get us there by, oh," she paused to calculate the distance and speed of the craft, "I'd say twenty-two-hundred hours. We'll start loading up at dusk."

"You will need to remain shielded in your cloaks. Those fuckers can smell anything."

Tia nodded briskly. "I'll keep my QSCD on." The Quarters to Site Communication Devices had been swiped straight from HIB headquarters. One of the Blades had scrambled their signal and rewired it so that they could be used for Blade maneuvers. The device had become a critical part of their operations. "With the monitoring signal constantly transmitting our location," she added.

She took another look at the map. There, under the lines and dots, was someone's home. A place where their young laughed and played.

"Your emotions are the enemy's greatest weapon," was one of the first lessons of Blade conditioning. She remembered it clearly, in the clipped, toneless speech of one of the masked leaders. "Make no mistake. If you start seeing the enemy as human, it is a breach of security. That breach will allow the enemy in. Your own emotions will instantly be used against you, and you will find yourself giving up your freedom—willingly."

Tia had moved through Conditioning quickly. She was a tremendous asset to the band with her swift thinking and agility. She climbed quickly up the ranks until she was a leader of her own band.

Most people, including Tia, had grown up hearing stories of Lith'hah as children. Tia had never heard stories at home from her parents, but she'd heard the tales at school. They were mythical creatures, they'd been taught—like unicorns and mermaids. But the few initial reported sightings were laughed off. Until there were more and more from very credible sources.

It wasn't until groups of males began marauding the Southern Territories that the HIB took notice. News of the beasts spread quickly. The rising fear of the masses was what Zul and his cronies fueled to catapult themselves into power. Tia remembered watching the news with others, sitting on the edges of their seats in a bar. It was the day the leaders of the Lith'hah came out of hiding to meet with the "human Council" as they referred to them.

Zul and his PR team, who made generous contributions to many of the media stations, made quick work of portraying the old shifters as cruel and barbarous. Footage of what the beast leaders said was shown next to footage of mauled victims—making it clear that they were inconsistent, treacherous and manipulative. As a result, Zul built

his entire campaign around launching an all-out offensive against the Lith'hah, and was elected in a landslide victory.

She squared her shoulders and stood taller. Her leaders had been right. How many humans would the beasts wipe out with their germs? How many babies would drink contaminated water and die slow, agonizing deaths at the hands of those butchers? They, clearly, didn't empathize with humans. Tia had no idea how such cave-dwelling beasts could possibly come up with the technology for germ warfare—and she didn't trust Zul or his news station buddies, but even Vishal had said they'd gathered data that showed the beasts were indeed capable. Tia supposed they could easily have stolen human technology and run with it.

Vishal waved a hand and the map disappeared. "Destroy everything."

Tia nodded. She would do just that; she didn't trust Zul and his administration. And though she trusted Vishal more, she'd learned enough in her years on this planet to be wary. Everyone had their price. But she had seen mauled victims, talked to them...held their hands. She'd seen how their lives had been torn apart, never to be whole again. To make sure no more young women met that fate at the hands of those beasts—that was worth fighting for.

* * * * *

The Lightning Fleet hovered above the ground for a moment longer before landing softly, allowing the band members inside to finally file out and spread in the area.

"Keep cloaked," Tia ordered, pressing the button that would send her command to all the earpieces. She ignored the faint but distinct groans that came back.

She gave the captain of the fleet, a Stealth Blade who'd been trained as a member of the Force's Air Unit before joining the Blades, a nod, and a moment later, the doors sealed silently shut. The fleet rose to hover above the ground again and was gone in another instant. Tia turned toward the pass that would take them to the other side of the rugged mountain range. It would be a long journey in humidity and darkness. The Northern Territories. Tia had been beyond the human-beast border before, but never this deep.

On her own, she would have been faster, Tia thought dryly. But she wouldn't have been able to take on the numbers she was told to expect.

She nodded to Priya and Limak, the two senior Stealth Blades who were assisting her. "Everyone in formation."

Almost immediately, the senior Blades, who were not yet band leaders but showed promise and were ambitious, had the band standing in clean, straight rows, and as a group, they began to move up the mountainside.

Single hovercrafts would have helped, but even in stealth mode they were too bulky this far beyond the border. Besides, Tia had heard the top leaders saying that the masking function had been faulty in recent tests. Not to mention the terrain was

unfamiliar, with jutting rocks and steppes that could have caused tremendous damage to a craft, leaving members stranded in hard-to-get-to spots.

This strike involved hand-to-hand combat. The enemy was well-protected by the mountains and harsh terrain of the Northern Territories. According to Vishal's sources at HIB, human satellites hadn't been able to penetrate deep enough into beast territory to map the terrain as well as intelligence needed to launch any real kind of offensive.

So the top leaders of the Stealth Blades had taken it into their own hands. Sending a small group on foot was the only way to get in and find out where they were storing toxic substances and destroy them. If Tia doubted Vishal and the other top Stealth Blade leaders in any way, she didn't for an instant question their tactical maneuvers. Every time they'd saved a family, school or hospital, from any threat—whether domestic or foreign—in the five years she'd been with them, everything had been planned to the last detail and gone smoothly each time. But a sliver of doubt flashed through her mind nonetheless. None of the top leaders had ever had to scale a mountain this far beyond the human-beast border.

"This terrain is a bitch," she heard Limak mutter through the earpiece.

Tia had turned off the feedback from the other band members and set her communication device to receive and transmit with Blade headquarters and with the senior assistants. With the push of a button in her gloves, she could toggle between the two.

Priya's response crackled through. "Amazing how different it becomes as soon as you cross the border, right?"

Tia continued the ascent quietly. Night sounds from unfamiliar animals took up around them as they moved through, screeches and hoots unlike anything Tia had ever heard.

Tia sensed that the band members were on edge, and the heat under their thick, burgundy cloaks was stifling.

"You'd think they'd figure out a better way to filter the air through these cloaks," Limak said, not bothering to mask his irritation.

"These cloaks have been manufactured and perfected over time by top Blade leaders who knew the day would come, in the not too distant future, for air-tight, masked suits designed to keep out deadly toxins," Tia said sharply. "They've been used in training exercises in the deep woods of the territories with much success and they've been tested in labs to make sure they keep you safe on missions like this one."

"But none of those top leaders have been on missions like this one," said Limak. His tone was mildly challenging.

It was true. "No," she conceded, "but they risked their safety in the testing of these suits. I stood behind thick glass panes as deadly gases were released into a room where the suits had been hung on racks; then, when the air was neutralized until it was safe to enter, tests were done by the top leaders, who wore hazmat suits and gloves, to see if any of the toxins had penetrated through the material."

“Okay, they tested them thoroughly,” Priya said, “but they still have never had to venture this far into beast territory.

“No,” Tia answered. “The tests were repeated until nothing made it past the cloaks—until the environment inside the cloak was as safe as a summer meadow, even if the environment outside could fry a person’s lungs. I suppose our leaders were more concerned about that than a little bit of perspiration from the wearer.”

That seemed to quiet them down for the time being. Tia didn’t mind the grumbling, in fact. She knew the band members and her assistants were as committed as she was, and letting off a little steam was healthy. What worried her now was making this plan go off without a hitch. They had to get in, find where the toxins were being stored, destroy everything, and get out quickly—before anything could go wrong. The longer they stayed, the more the chances of something going wrong.

Tia briefly pressed the button in her left glove that allowed her to hear the conversation among the band members. Mostly quiet, with a few surprised exclamations at unfamiliar sounds or scuttling mountain rodents. She turned the channel off again. Tia knew she was pushing the band beyond their thresholds, but if they stopped on the side of the mountain, they’d be easy prey for who knew what. They had to get to the plateau on the other side of the pass. It would offer shelter and a place to regroup.

The senior Blades kept pace, and Tia heard their labored breathing in her earpiece, but they said no more about the cloaks. The goggles she wore had a console that was coordinated with the movements of her eyes. Tia’s night vision allowed her to see easily without the goggles, but they gave her a map to follow—since she couldn’t use her extraordinary sense of smell through the cloak’s material—and a read on the location of her band members.

She spoke into the transmitter, sending her transmission to all, “Not much longer now, Blades. Soon we’ll be in range of the target. Remember—we’re searching for contaminants meant for release into human air.”

That did the trick. The band stepped up its pace. Within another hour they were at the pass.

* * * * *

They strapped up under the stars, in the silence of their cloaks. The Blades were in better shape after a few hours’ rest and some food. Tia couldn’t have been prouder. She loved the Blades like family. In fact, they were the closest she had to any kind of family now.

Tia spoke into her communication device, sending the transmission to Priya and Limak. “So, the strategy is clear?”

Limak responded first. “The strategy is clear, as is the goal.”

"We went over it at least a dozen times before even beginning the journey into shifter territory," Priya added.

Tia nodded then moved to the front, with her assistants close at her side. She paused for a moment, closing her eyes and opening her senses. The cloak made it harder to read her surroundings, but she got the sense that all was calm.

Perfect. The downward climb was easier and quicker than the one up the mountain. Small stones and rocks underfoot at times caused band members to slide several feet before regaining their balance, but the journey was smooth almost 'til the end.

That's when Tia noticed too late that a young couple at the base of the mountain caught sight of the advancing group. After only the briefest moment of hesitation, the female bolted in the direction of the settlement and the male shifted into a giant cat before their eyes.

Even though they'd seen the surveillance footage of shifters mauling their victims, the Blades, including Tia, were stunned into inaction at seeing it live and in the flesh. Her assistants' shouts of "*Holy shit*" resounded through Tia's earpiece.

She stumbled back, her heart thudding in her chest, before pulling herself together. Then, speaking into the transmitter as she moved, she ordered, "Slice him. Surround and fire. *Now.*"

The male was on the ground in a flash, but the alarm had been sounded. Within seconds, there was a clanging from some sort of primitive instrument that reverberated on all sides.

Limak cursed. "Damn—the other one must've sounded the fucking alarm!"

"Move in," Tia ordered, leading them into the settlement.

Immediately there was a commotion of beamers slicing through flesh and the scent of burning skin and hair. Growls of beasts mixed with human screams filled the air, and all around there were jaws clamped around twisting torsos and the blue flash of beamers in the darkness.

Tia used her goggles to search out the targets. She located the marked spots right away, but when she looked at the location, there was nothing there. "Locating targets," she said, engaging the Quarters to Site Communication Device. "Site to quarters, do you read?"

No response.

Maybe there was a delay. Where were the damn buildings?

She scanned the settlement again as more and more of the enemy poured out in various stages of shifting into their cat form. Teeth were bared and Tia heard the guttural roars of giant, enraged beasts.

She skirted quickly around the settlement, searching for storehouses, buildings, *anything*. "*Nothing*. I see no goddamn buildings," she fired into the transmitter. "Site to quarters, *do you read?* I see nothing but *tents*."

When a cat, or half cat, got in her path, she struck out with her beamer, not pausing to see whether it lived or died behind her and kept moving.

"Find and destroy those contaminants!" she shouted into the communication device.

The plan was to hook explosives up to the buildings then move the troops out. She felt the weight of the dormant explosive that was adhered to the inside of her cape and searched fervently for where the damn contaminants could be housed.

There were screams and cries all around her.

"Where are the fucking storehouses?" Priya's question came through loud and clear.

Tia was wondering the same thing. "*Site to quarters*. I need coordinates for storehouses!"

Nothing.

The Stealth Blades were falling. She heard their cloaks tear as incisors pierced through. "*Now!*"

Still no response.

The QSCD couldn't have been malfunctioning. It had been fine the entire journey in. What the hell was going on?

"I see something!" Limak shouted.

Tia whirled around to see what Limak was pointing to. *Finally*. It was slightly off from where it had been on the map, but it was the only structure around that could even remotely be considered a building.

She heard Limak shout, "Behind you!" and turned as a cat of medium build lunged toward her.

Tia swung her beamer quickly. It flashed blue and sank into the cat's rib cage. He teetered for a moment as Tia jabbed toward his throat. The beamer missed, slicing into the cat's shoulder instead. But it worked, and the shifter fell long enough for her to keep going.

She sprinted toward the crude, domelike structure she'd spotted. "Offensive engaged," she rasped into the transmitter. "First target in view. Proceeding." Then to Priya and Limak, "Cover me!"

Somewhere, in the far reaches of her mind, as she ran toward the structure, it registered that the cries around her did not sound as they should. But she was well-trained and focused on nothing but her goal.

When she made it to the dome, she clipped a quick "At target" into the transmitter. But at this point, she knew she wasn't going to get a response.

Tia felt for the explosive in the outer layer of her cloak and wondered how any contaminant could be housed in something so poorly sealed. She held her beamer out, ready to strike as she stole toward the flap that led into the structure. A *flap*. Not an airtight door or plasti-sealant.

When she flung the flap aside, her eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness inside. It was empty of any beasts.

"Piles of some sort of substance in first target," she muttered into the transmitter. At least it would go on record, she thought.

She kept the inner layer of her cloak sealed as she approached piles upon piles of whatever these beasts had stored. Her fingers curled inside her gloves as she reached out to take a handful.

She brought it close enough to register its chemical makeup through the layers and filters of her cloak.

No, it couldn't be.

She swallowed hard and looked around. The dome was piled full of grain.

For a moment, Tia went blank as the sounds of battle raged outside. This was the only structure in the vicinity large enough to be any kind of storehouse. She was in the precise location of the target. They hadn't gotten lost and everything had gone exactly as planned. She stared into the darkness around her.

Then her brain clicked into gear. She darted from pile to pile. "There is no substance!" she yelled into the transmitter. "Only grain! It's food... It's goddamn *food*!"

The sounds of a brutal and bloody battle outside seeped through her confusion. And suddenly she realized why some of the screams had sounded so strange to her earlier – they were the screams of women and children.

Tia tore out of the building, shouting into her transmitter. "Retreat! Retreat at once! There is *no* substance. Repeat. There is no fucking substance!"

But as soon as she was out on the field, she stopped dead in her tracks. Bodies from both sides lay in slumps on the ground. Some were small. Oh god, they were so small.

Please don't let them be dead.

Tia sank to her knees in dazed disbelief. She pulled a young girl into her arms, a girl who was still breathing but badly injured. She looked like any regular human, but with a light sheen of fur on her skin.

Tia stared at the blood on her gloves.

Priya and Limak had stopped fighting at her command and were retreating into the woods, in the direction they'd arrived. On their heels were blood-thirsty, enraged cats.

Oh god, have mercy.

That was Tia's last thought before a tremendous force slammed into her, knocking her unconscious.

Chapter Two

Inuku tore through the woods. In his cat form, he was large and lean, with a tan coat streaked through in black and shades of red that glinted in the sunlight. Blood-red rage pumped through his limbs, making him twice as fast as normal. In his powerful jaws, he clutched the limp body of a human soldier.

Inuku tasted the metallic human blood and smelled its minerals even through the strange mesh material of the soldier's cloak. He held himself back from snapping the man's head off. The urge to kill the murderer was strong, but Inuku was a master warrior. He held his urge in check, knowing his Leader King would want the man alive. Besides, Inuku would take great pleasure in seeing this vermin suffer for what he had done. To defenseless, unarmed civilians.

He thanked the Ancients that some of the wounded Lith'hah at the Healing Grounds were Internals with the ability to send and receive thoughts. They had immediately sent an urgent telepathic summons for help. Why none of them foresaw the attack was beyond him. Had the humans advanced their shielding to the point where it matched that of the Lith'hah?

He shuddered at the thought. He had been fast asleep when he was jolted awake by the Internal he'd shared his bed with that evening. She woke up screaming, her fingers pressing into her temples. "There's an attack in the territories! Bloodshed on the Healing Grounds!"

He was up and out in an instant. "Send a message to every warrior in the area," he'd said over his shoulder. Then he'd bolted, running so fast he was a blur.

When he'd arrived, most of the damage had been done. But he felled several of the human soldiers left before spotting what he was certain was one of their leaders. He knocked him out with a blow and grabbed him in a mouthful of cloak, leaving the tending of wounds in the capable hands of healers. But first he made certain there was no further threat by sensing the area and sending cats in all directions to search for additional pockets of human forces.

None were found. But just to be sure, he placed several of his most powerful warriors around the perimeter.

Inuku's veins pumped hot fury. The Healing Grounds! Why would any warrior attack another's healing area? He fought the nudge to clamp down with his jaws.

He'd spotted the insignia on the cloak of this soldier right away. An elder from the Council had drawn it for all Lith'hah warriors, having seen it in a vision, so they would be familiar with the leaders of the human forces.

Liars with no honor! he thought, remembering the account the elders had given of the first meeting ever with the humans. And how the human leaders had twisted the words and intent of the Council in order to justify a war.

"They don't even want to negotiate!" one of the grand elders had raged. "They want only our lands!"

"They want completely to wipe us out," another agreed. "To erase us as if we never existed and own and pillage all that we have cultivated."

Inuku was glad for the run. The thunderous rage that was blowing through him was lethal. He slowed only when he came into the clearing of the prideland.

It was a home his Leader King Rawa, had lovingly built from the ground up for the pride he knew he would one day lead. And his vision had come true. The pride was now a good fifty strong, living on the grounds Inuku had helped Rawa construct—digging wells, laying stones, clearing paths, hauling boulders and trees to create comfortable dens, digging irrigation canals and baths, diverting the flow of streams... Soon, as word got out that there was a new pride with a new Leader King, Independents found their way to Rawa's grounds.

None of them were interested in toppling him. News had spread of the seemingly indestructible leader and his forward-thinking ways. They simply wanted to join him. Eventually, the Independents found mates from neighboring prides, or far off ones, and brought them back to Rawa's grounds to rear their cubs and carry on the rituals of the Ancients.

Inuku looked around at the grounds, his heart swelling as it always did when he thought of the love and sweat and...*hope* they'd poured into creating this home. He went straight to the guarded caves near the bank of the rushing stream, nodding once to the large, hulking males who'd dropped everything to bow to their general.

He deposited the vermin in the dank, musty cave, ordering his warriors to keep tight watch on the human leader. He would return soon, but not before checking on the other warriors and having an Internal tally the losses and wounds of the battle. He would also confer with the Leader King.

* * * * *

Inuku watched Rawa stalk the floor of his den. It was palatial, fit for a Leader King and his Queen—who was currently out at the baths. Inuku could see the play of emotions in his friend's eyes.

"Sehra heard everything, saw everything. She picked up on a signal from one of the telepaths and helped to broadcast the information to other Internals."

Inuku nodded. "I heard it from an Internal who must've picked up Sehra's message."

Rawa continued to pace, each muscle tense with rage, each word laced with a deadly growl. "Of all the dishonorable... Why in the name of the Ancients would anyone attack the Healing Grounds?"

Inuku clenched his fists. "There weren't many. It seemed to be a small party sent for a specific purpose."

Rawa's eyes flashed. "Did we get them all?"

Inuku nodded. "There were some who attempted retreat, but their speed was no match for our warriors."

The leader knitted his brows. "They didn't have vehicles or machines?"

"Strangely, no. They were all on foot."

"They couldn't have walked all the way from the human territories on foot. They are far too feeble."

"No, they likely traveled by vehicle to the other side of the pass."

Rawa nodded. "They must have developed some advanced shielding for their craft. We must move the Healing Grounds to another location and seal the pass. I'll speak with the Council and the Leader King in those territories."

Rawa seemed to be thinking out loud. But they were old friends and Inuku had once saved Rawa's life and helped him find his mate and lifelong love, so Inuku knew he could voice his thoughts and opinions freely.

"Why do we not strike them?" It was a question he'd asked many times in the past year as the humans became more and more aggressive in their offensives.

"You know the answer to that, Inuku. It is what they expect of us. They thought we were myths all this time. The only reason they even know we exist is because of the Lith'hah males who went illegally into human territories to carouse and partake of the privileges male humans enjoy."

Inuku nodded. "You're right. If they hadn't lost control, shifting into their cat forms in front of the humans and using their strength against them..."

"But they did, and as a result some were captured and tortured. They revealed all they knew about Lith'hah ways and systems."

"Not all," Inuku reminded him.

"No, thank the Ancients. Not all."

Some of the elders had seen what was happening in a vision and silenced the males before they could reveal too much. But by then the damage had already been done. The humans were afraid. And they were a frail species—when they were afraid, they destroyed what frightened them.

"Any still alive, besides the leader?" Rawa asked.

"From what I managed to gather from the Internals so far, most are still alive," Inuku said. "It was a small group—nothing like what I've seen from the humans before."

Those who were injured have been taken to Healing and Deprogramming with Grand Elder Lyra."

Rawa thrust a hand through his hair and muttered, "Good. They will be useful to us once they are deprogrammed." Then he looked at Inuku. "Why do you think they would send such a small group so far into our territory?"

Inuku shook his head. "I've been wondering the same thing for the past few hours. It makes no sense."

"Well, the answers are with the captives," Rawa muttered. "See to it that none are harmed. We need answers if we are to adequately defend ourselves."

"You can't blame the warriors for their rage, Rawa. Any Lith'han who'd witnessed what they did upon entering the grounds would have wanted blood."

Rawa seemed to relent. "How many did we lose?"

"Three or four – mostly elders who did not respond to the healers' efforts. The rest were young and took quickly to the herbs, balms and mutterings of the healers."

"Why did no one – not even the elders – see this coming?" Rawa wondered again.

"They wore some sort of cloak. The leader is in one now. A strange material..."

Rawa narrowed his eyes. "If it's undetectable by our Internals, we have a serious problem on our hands. Bring me the cloak of the leader. I'll have the Council examine it and send out an imprint to all Internals." He paused for a moment then looked carefully at Inuku. "Are you concerned about this leader of the humans? Be sure not to underestimate them, my friend."

Inuku clenched his jaw. "Not at all. Their strength is in their weapon. Without those, the humans are nothing but unevolved primates."

"Yes, but they are putting all efforts and energies into those weapons, my brother. They've made our annihilation their primary objective." The leader sank into a high-backed stone chair. "When so much energy is directed at a single objective, it is bound to give way."

"What are you saying?"

Rawa rested his chin on two fingers. "Find out everything the leader knows. Using whatever methods you must. But keep in mind our goals, Inuku. I want to integrate this leader among us. He may become our greatest weapon against the humans."

* * * * *

Tia shook her head to clear it. Everything was so heavy. Hard to lift her arms, couldn't move her legs... A shroud. She was in some sort of shroud or... Was it the cloak that felt so stifling?

The floor beneath her was hard as rock. Where *was* she?

She lifted her head with great effort and looked around, but her vision was cloudy, blurred. The cloak's systems had malfunctioned – the transmitter was dead, and the

vision gauge and map in the goggles was a blank screen. She switched it to manual mode and the dim cave she was in began to take shape.

Slowly, she began to remember bit by bit until there was an avalanche of images—death, battle, defenseless and unarmed victims. What the hell had gone wrong? How could she have been sent into a civilian settlement? Where was the substance, the buildings, the damn *storehouses*?

Nausea clutched at her stomach. Sweat trickled down the sides of her rib cage, from her temples down to her neck and into the corners of her eyes. She wanted to wipe her brow, but she dared not remove the cloak. She didn't know where she was, but she knew she was behind enemy lines. The cloak was her only protection. Her beamer was gone and she was alone.

A dull ache throbbed in her side. Tia shifted and sucked in a sharp breath. She was bleeding. The fabric of the cloak stuck to spots on both upper arms. She half crawled, half pulled herself to one wall of the cave and leaned heavily against it.

There had been no sign of any “substance”. Not a single building in sight. Her group had fallen like flies and she had led them into that slaughter.

But... Why? Why would the top leaders send a band into a, a *village*, for god's sake?

Try as she might, Tia came up with no answers. None of it made any sense. Priya and Limak! Had they made it out? She leaned her head back and tried to calm her breathing. The cloak, without its systems engaged, was simply a heavy, thick blanket made of virtual-metal mesh, a material that allowed a person to blend into the surroundings and move undetected until the enemy was within ten feet in just about any environment.

She wanted to claw out of it now, but instead she sealed it tighter. She knew how the beasts could be with women. The stories had made the news almost daily for close to a year after the first attacks were reported. Some of the women's families had gathered their own hunting parties and headed north with nothing more than shotguns. They'd come back empty, but it had spurred a call for action from the population at large.

It was then that Tia knew she had to do something. She was different. And Zul set into motion laws that had people pointing out anyone who was “suspicious-looking” in the name of protecting what he referred to as “the human nation”. People feared for their children and their daughters and their future. They gladly pointed out anyone who looked unusual or behaved in a manner out of the ordinary. Fear was a powerful motivator. And Tia, with her silver hair, over-smooth brown skin, her extraordinary speed and athleticism, and her unusual eyes...was definitely different.

After much agonized deliberating, she'd made the decision to stage her own death. Over time, she reinvented herself. Where once she had been Mama Nelle to her children, she was now Tia, a Stealth Blade. She'd cut her hair short, dyed it black, popped in dark contact lenses, plucked any stray silver hairs that sprouted up on occasion from her forearms and face, and joined the Stealth Blades...

Tia jerked her head up at the sound of voices outside. Male voices.

Three males walked in, in their human form. Tia was grateful for that. She had seen enough of them changing into cats to last her a lifetime.

The males were large, various shades of tan and brown, well-muscled and naked. She couldn't help but take in the size of their sex, large even while flaccid. Her eyes darted around the cave, looking for a way out.

One of the men laughed. "There's only one way out, human. And you're not getting anywhere close to it."

Tia stilled. Already she'd broken a cardinal rule—show no fear. She had no beamer and her cloak was useless, but she still had her wits. *Smarten up and use them, girl*, she ordered herself.

Her arms were trembling from loss of blood and she felt weak, but she pulled herself up as tall as she could and faced the voices. Immediately, she spotted the leader. He stood back behind the other two, observing and ready to give orders. He was taller, with hair like a flame that went down his back.

Tia gasped as one of the men grabbed a handful of her cloak and lifted her easily off the ground.

"Come out of your hiding spot, vermin," he growled, "or I will gladly tear it apart—with you in it."

Tia stayed silent. Clearly, there was nowhere to run. And even if there were, she didn't have the strength to do it. With the heat in the cloak and the blood oozing from her arms, the edges of her vision were beginning to fray.

The man shook her violently. "Open up!" he yelled.

Tia struggled for breath inside the cloak.

"Release him," someone said.

She didn't know who spoke or who he was referring to. All she wanted was to suck cool air deep into her lungs. With trembling fingers, she began to pull apart the cloak just as the man holding her released his grip.

She fell into a heap at his feet at the same time the cloak came apart.

The air felt glorious on her damp skin and she pulled in great gulps of oxygen. Her vision sharpened for a second as it lit upon the jarring familiarity of the figure she'd identified as the leader. Where had she seen him before? And then she noted the reactions of the other men, just before she passed out again.

Inuku almost staggered back. He had been willing to let his warriors take this human to the brink of madness, to show him death's door, only to bring him back with answers—useful answers for the Council. But he was a *she*.

One of the men moved forward. "This is going to be more fun than I thought."

Inuku snarled. "*Back.*"

The warrior turned toward his general, bewildered. "But this is the leader of the men who attacked our defenseless!"

"Our *Healing Grounds*," the second man added.

As if Inuku could forget. "Yes. But it should be clear he — *she* — is not in any shape to answer questions right now."

The men grudgingly agreed.

"I'll take her to an elder and let the Leader King decide how we should proceed."

Inuku lifted the human female, noticing the gashes from his own incisors on her arms and the caked blood on her skin. He pressed his thumb against her neck and felt a faint pulse. She had lost a lot of blood.

She whimpered, pressing a hand against his chest, as if to push him away.

He scowled. Humans were a frightened and frail lot. Perhaps that was why they destroyed everything. Like children lost in the woods, lashing out with a stick at every noise and trick of the eyes. Only these were not children. And they were lashing out with dangerous, destructive weaponry.

When he arrived at the healing dens, he sought out Grand Elder Lyra, one of the most powerful Internal elders on the Council. He found the ancient wizened sitting by a small fire. The smoke from the fire spiraled up and out of a small opening in the structure created just for that purpose.

"This fire — the fire of creation," the grand elder said, not lifting her eyes from the flames, "has not gone out since the time of the Ancients. It has moved from location to location, but it has never been extinguished."

Inuku placed the human female on a bed of skins. "How has it been moved without being extinguished?"

Now the old female looked up. "Embers from the original flame were taken, placed in stone bowls and carried, sometimes across many territories, through underground tunnels, over vast deep and dark waters, my child." There was a whimper from the skins and the grand elder turned to look at the bundle on the floor. "She has come."

Inuku turned his sharp gaze on the grand elder. "You saw her?"

"Yes. I've had a vision. Many of us have."

"She led the attack on the *Healing Grounds*."

The elder nodded slowly. "She was misinformed."

Inuku grunted. "Misinformed or not, she is the reason innocent Lith'hah are now dead."

"Yes," the elder agreed. "Many of her own are dead as well."

There was a rustle of movement at the entrance and Inuku turned to see Sehra, the Leader Queen, glide in. She was in the flowing, filmy material many females had begun wearing since humans had been integrated into Lith'hah ways.

Some of the humans had come willingly, disillusioned with the ways of their own and afraid of the direction their leaders were taking them, and others were taken as prisoners during attacks or skirmishes at the border. They were injured or near death, and the elders nursed them back to vibrant health. Those humans were integrated into Lith'hah life through ceremony and ritual, and their resulting loyalty was no less than any full-blooded Lith'han.

They were useful, Inuku agreed reluctantly. They taught the Lith'hah about human ways, human customs, the reasoning behind some of their fears. But Inuku had neither the time nor patience to hear these beyond what was necessary for his work as the king's general. He was a warrior. And to him, humans were out to wipe the planet clean of Lith'hah. His job was to stop them by whatever means before they succeeded.

"This is the human leader?" Queen Sehra asked.

Inuku bowed, even though Sehra was like a sister to him. "She has lost a lot of blood."

"It is not the blood that is taking her life force," the grand elder mumbled.

The queen trained her piercing gaze upon Inuku. "You understand she must be kept in separate quarters."

He nodded. "We always keep females in separate quarters, Sehra."

She pursed her lips. "Inuku. She is a *human* female. They have different...needs."

Understanding dawned in his eyes. He had heard that human females had monthly cycles, unlike Lith'hah females who could will their bodies to ovulate whenever they were ready to conceive. It was a method perfected through the centuries to allow Lith'hah young the highest chances of survival. If females conceived and gave birth around the same time, the cubs were reared together by an entire pride of females.

The queen continued. "I want a female placed in the quarters with her at all times. You will question her, Inuku—I trust only you—but you will not use harsh methods."

Inuku scowled for what felt like the hundredth time that day. "She led the attack on the Healing Grounds!"

"Indeed," the queen snapped. "And when you lead attacks, do you order *yourself* to lead the charge? Or do you follow the orders given by your leaders?"

Inuku clenched his jaw and stayed silent. He swore the grand elder was grinning in the midst of all those wrinkles and folds.

"We need to find out who was behind this attack and why," Sehra said, softer this time. She walked to the bundle on the floor, placed a hand on the forehead of the human and closed her eyes. "I'm getting only jumbled thoughts," she said to the grand elder, "but I will enter the Great Void this evening for guidance and answers if the Ancients grant it."

Then she stood and walked to Inuku. She placed a gentle hand against his face. "Rein in your rage, Inuku. It will be useful enough soon. But not now." She looked at the human. "And not against her."

Chapter Three

Tia lifted her lids with great effort. She had no idea how long she'd been in and out of consciousness. It seemed like one long dream sequence. All she remembered were foreign smells—something burning...herbs maybe, the chanting of an old woman, cool salves on her skin and some sort of bandages on her arms. And all throughout, the shadow of the man from her dream-vision.

She lifted the collar of her shirt, it was the same shirt she'd been wearing underneath her cloak, and looked at the shiny, new pink skin forming on her upper arms. There had been gashes there, she was sure. She didn't remember seeing them, but she remembered the dull pain that had radiated throughout her entire body.

How long had she been here? How long since the day of the attack? The light sweatpants and T-shirt she'd had on underneath her cloak were filthy. They smelled of battle, sweat, fear, rage.

All at once the weight of unanswered questions tumbled upon her like a wall of bricks. She doubled over and pressed her fingertips to her temples. Why had she been sent this on that mission? What were Vishal and the top leaders trying to prove or gain? Where were her band members? Had anyone survived?

There were pinpricks behind her eyes as tears burned their way through tight blood vessels. She blinked them back. She could not afford to fall apart. She was behind enemy lines and she would need to keep her wits about her. She'd need a plan.

Tia sat up and looked around. She was in some sort of airy cave. There was a hole in the rock face above, a crude sort of window with a screen over it. It was broad daylight outside. A beautiful day, one she would have enjoyed immensely had circumstances been different.

Her stomach clenched. She needed to find a way out and fast. But how would she do that? She had no idea where she was. Her cloak was gone and she was surrounded. She had no idea which way was out.

Think, Tia, think.

But before she could come up with anything, the figure of a man walked in.

Tia shielded her eyes from the blinding sunlight that suddenly flooded in. When the man shut the door behind him, Tia could see him more clearly.

That was when she seemed to lose all sensation in her arms and legs. It was *him*—the man from her dream-vision. Tia scrambled backward with a gasp.

He'd been naked in her dream-vision, but now he wore what looked like deerskin slung low around his hips. He looked at her warily as he pulled out a stool and sat down.

Tia's heart was hammering in her chest. She turned away as everything underneath the skin was revealed in all its glory.

The man smirked. "Yes, you humans are uncomfortable with all that is truly natural."

Tia met his eyes without wavering but remained quiet. Nothing in her dream had told her whether this man was friend or foe. His very presence sent heat racing through her limbs and her instincts told her he wouldn't harm her, but he was one of *them*. And because of that, Tia would keep her guard up.

Still, she noted that he was exactly as he'd been in her dream—lithe and catlike. And his eyes... Those eyes were unnerving. So much like her own underneath her dark contact lenses. They were eyes that shone, even in daylight, with a multifaceted depth like gems. And while Tia's were like silver diamonds, his were a kind of topaz—her birthstone. She recalled the feel of his hand, sliding down along the side of her body and cupping her mound...

"You will tell me everything you know," he said, interrupting her thoughts in a voice that purred it was so soft.

Tia pulled herself together with some effort. The cocky assuredness, the absolute confidence with which he uttered those words combined with the calmness of his tone felt like a blow. She narrowed her eyes. "You will get *nothing* from me."

"Careful, human." He spoke the words like a soft curse.

Tia clenched the edges of the cot, trying in vain to shove the images, sensations and feelings of her dream-vision away. But they persisted. The dream-vision had felt so incredibly real that she could actually feel the man's hands on her body again. Her insides twisted as she remembered how her body had responded so readily.

"You are indebted to my queen for your life. You should express gratitude to whatever force you thank for our queen's wisdom and generosity.

He stood and came close, placing his hands on either side of her on the cot.

Tia struggled to maintain her composure as she took in his very male, very musky scent.

He leaned his face so close to hers she could feel his breath against her skin. "You may be one of the most attractive enemies I've ever seen..."

Tia desperately willed her heart to slow its pounding.

"But to plan an offensive against the most vulnerable members of an opponent is vile and despicable to Lith'hah," he continued. "Your human leaders, however, must have thought it a worthy offensive. And you... Your beauty is misleading. You carried out the attack with great enthusiasm."

Tia blanched. She spoke without thinking. "I would never have hit a settlement of women and children," she whispered. That mouth, the mouth she had seen in the painfully vivid dream was inches from her own. She could almost feel the softness of his lips...

Something shifted in his eyes before he quickly masked it. "But you did."

Tia swallowed, struggling to keep up with all the thoughts and emotions whirling through her body. He was too close. And the shock of realizing who the band's targets were in those few moments reverberated through her again, full force.

"I was told there were contaminants!" she said. Her voice was like a thin, strained thread. "They said they would use them on us—on our children..." Tia's eyes flashed. "I would have done everything in my power to keep that from happening."

"Who said?" he asked. His brow was furrowed and he searched her face closely.

Tia realized she'd said too much and clamped her mouth shut. His skin looked as smooth and warm as she'd seen it only a few nights ago—all she had to do was reach out and...

He leaned close and whispered into her ear, "Clearly, your superiors have misled you." Then he pushed back and stood to his full height. "You have no warriors at your side and gone are your rods and fancy cloaking devices. Now you are a simple human female. A lovely one, I'll admit, but gone is your façade of power."

Tia was eyeball level with his cock. She couldn't help staring. It was partially erect, and she was annoyed that noticing could send a small thrill through her body. She pursed her lips. She knew little about this man and his kind, and she wasn't sure just yet what kind of danger she might be in. She would not reveal the extent of her capabilities or her undeniable attraction to him.

He folded his arms across his chest, still looking at her intently. "Ima is here to keep watch over you," he said, nodding toward the entrance.

Tia turned, startled to see a young woman there. When had she arrived?

"She will be in the quarters at all times, and while I have no doubt she is fully capable of keeping you contained on her own, I have stationed warriors outside the entrance as well."

Tia narrowed her eyes into slits, but she kept quiet. Let this asshole underestimate her. It would make things that much easier when she made her move.

He turned to leave.

"Wait!"

He paused and lifted a brow.

"If I need to...use the facilities?"

He smirked. "Ima will assist you."

Inuku walked out of the holding quarters with a puzzled frown. The human female had divulged some interesting details. And even in his anger, he had felt an intense attraction for her. She was beautiful, yes. But Inuku was accustomed to beautiful women. No, it was more than that. This female was no ordinary human. He'd seen her run at the Healing Grounds. She was faster than any of the others. She'd run with

precision, leaping easily over boulders, and she had wielded her weapon with a skill and mastery beyond the others.

But there was more—a kind of familiarity. Inuku felt as if he knew her already. As if they'd met before... But that was impossible. Where would he have met and gotten to know a human female? Still, when he was in her presence, something pushed at the edges of his consciousness. Something about her that pulled at him, made him want to draw her against him and taste her skin, her lips...

He shook the thoughts out of his head. It hadn't been that long since he'd been with a female, and there were certainly plenty who were willing on the pride grounds. Why was he responding so strongly to this one?

He set his jaw and forced his mind back on track. It made perfect sense that the human leaders would choose this female to lead an offensive. But she had made it clear that she'd had no idea what she and her small group were attacking. She had thought they were stopping an even more deadly attack against their own. What had she said they'd been searching for? Contaminants?

He replayed her words in his head. What contaminants? And why would her own superiors mislead her? What could they possibly gain by sending such a small party deep into the enemy's territory? He turned that thought over and over in his mind but could come up with no answer.

He would need to get more information from her. He felt himself stir as he remembered the scent of her desire. He'd caught it, but it had confused him. The scent had been too much like that of a lover—the desire of one who knew the desired.

And there was something else that had thrown him off. She had responded readily when he brought up the attack on the Healing Grounds. Experience had taught him that humans who were trained as warriors were more resistant to emotions. While Lith'hah relied on emotions as units of information, human warriors were taught to disengage from their emotions.

This female had not disengaged. She'd clearly felt the anguish that came with attacking the unarmed and defenseless. And she'd expressed it unabashedly before she clammed up.

That had caught Inuku off guard, drawing him in and engaging him before he even realized it. The female was an ocean with crashing currents of contradictions. She was at once familiar and foreign, vulnerable and impenetrable.

But he would devise a plan to seep through her hard exterior later. Right now, he had a meeting with the Council. It was at a neighboring pride ground this time, so he shifted quickly and picked up his pace. If the humans were bold enough to move this far into the territories, all Lith'hah could be in grave danger.

The Council leaders were already seated when he arrived. There were Leader Kings, Queens and generals present from all across the territories. Ever since the war had begun, Council meetings required the presence of all decision makers. The location

of the meetings was undisclosed until the hours before each meeting, leaving only enough time for all required to make it there on schedule.

Most high-ranking Lith'hah were Internals, but with many of the prides moving away from exclusionary ways of thinking, more and more External Lith'hah were among the higher ranks, including Inuku's Leader King, Rawa, whose body could regenerate in a fraction of the healing time of other Lith'hah. Inuku had seen Rawa come back from the dead when they'd first begun their friendship. He had ever since believed his leader to be immortal.

Inuku was an External with the ability to become unseen by the naked eye. He always wished he'd been born with the extraordinary vision of Internals—the ability to see into the Silence of Wisdom, the Darkness of the Eternal, or any number of names given to the Great Unknowable, and to hear the thoughts of others on the fourth and even fifth dimensions. He supposed he should be grateful not to have the wrenching headaches Internals sometimes got and the disturbing dreams and extreme weakness or fatigue after especially draining connections. And his ability had served him well, especially as a warrior.

He slid into a seat next to Rawa just as a Council member stood to speak.

"This is the farthest into Lith'hah territory the humans have dared to travel. Before this, they had not made it much farther than the border."

Another elder, a female, remained seated but commanded as much attention as the standing male. "It has been three years since the beginning of this madness. I'm surprised it took them this long, especially given how extremely motivated they seem to be to rid themselves of us."

"*Imbeciles*," spat a King from the Western Territories. "We were building dens, harnessing the energies of the sun and wind, and digging irrigation canals before they even discovered they had thumbs."

"But discover them they did," Rawa said. "And they have put all their might and resources into creating machines that destroy all living things."

Inuku nodded. "I've traveled through the human territories unseen, and they have torn apart their own lands. Dug into them for whatever mineral they deem valuable and usurped many of the very resources they need for the continuance of their race."

The male who'd stood now sank into his seat. "They destroy, deplete and turn their backs to the ruins."

"Which is why they are turning to the Northern Territories," Rawa said. "Their own resources are dwindling while ours flourish. Their own are starving while we have piles of grain, rich soils and plentiful game."

"But they could easily have what we have without killing us, no?" said a young general. "Why not negotiate a peace treaty? Lith'hah have always been a peaceful species. We would be happy to share our resources..."

Inuku smiled without warmth or humor. "Humans are a strange species, young warrior. If they must share what is theirs, they see it as a loss to themselves, not the

gaining of friendship or alliance. If someone has what they want, they believe they must take it by force and either subjugate or annihilate the 'opponent'."

"*Opponent* being anyone who would like to keep a portion of what they have cultivated for themselves and their cubs," Rawa added.

"No," a Queen from the east said in agreement. "They are not interested in sharing. They hunger eternally. It is a deep and endless wound into which they will throw everything."

"Unless they are stopped," Sehra said. "We create, they destroy. It is a fine and precarious balance."

"But one that must be maintained at all costs," a wizened elder named Kowani said.

An eastern Leader King, a Lith'han of Emerald lineage named Kelum who was a strong ally to Rawa, spoke next, moving the discussion to tactical maneuvers. "Do we have the most recent information about their capabilities? Have they discovered the shield?"

A general from the west, whom Inuku knew and respected, spoke first. "From what my warriors have gathered, the shield has not been compromised. The humans know there is an area in the skies they are not able to penetrate, but their science tells them it is only winds and natural forces."

Inuku nodded with a wry smile. "The humans' belief that we are 'primitive' and therefore incapable of great technological feats can be used to our advantage. They do not understand that science and the spirit flow from the same source. While they have spent generations advancing their science and technology, we have maintained focus on the spirit – and can now accomplish feats they cannot even begin to understand."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"Let us extend the shield to the grounds then," Kelum said. "They must not be allowed to enter this far into Lith'hah territory again. If they manage that, our stability will be greatly compromised."

"And in the meantime?" Inuku asked. "Do we continue to simply ward off their attacks as we have been? Why do we not go into their territories and simply take over?"

The female elder, Kowani, answered first. "What would you prefer, my son? That we butcher them as they hope to butcher us? To steal the future of their young? Is that how you wish to see yourself...your purpose and your destiny?" She paused for a moment before continuing in a softer voice. "That is not who we are, my child. Our glory is not only in the way we live, it is also in the way we die. The Laws state that we kill to eat and in self-defense. Not for material gain, not in service to our basest urges, not for sport. Many individuals and even entire prides have strayed from The Laws, egregiously so at times, but always – *always* – they have returned because there is simply no other way. Abide by The Laws, my child, for they are the truth. They are the only way forward for any of us, and were written by the Ancients with your highest potential in mind."

Inuku grumbled. He hated when the elder members pulled the Ancients' philosophies out. There was no arguing then. As cubs, all Lith'hah were taught the power of The Laws. Not just through story and retelling of history, but through actual example. The humans were a living testament to the consequences of breaking The Laws. Lith'hah who could, like Inuku, travel unseen, did so with older guides and came running back. Cubs who were Internal were led by experienced elder Lith'hah into certain human territories on a sort of visual journey in human thought forms and patterns. All came back to the rest with the same story—loss, confusion, a species in great need of spiritual guidance and direction.

"Let us place warriors just inside the shield," Rawa suggested. "It will serve as added reinforcement and couldn't hurt."

"Sehra," Kelum said, turning to her, "Will it require much effort to hold a shield over the entire Lith'hah territories?"

The Queen was thoughtful for a moment. "It will be draining. But we shall take turns, just as the warriors at the shield. The winds, heat, rain and other forces of the Elemental Lith'hah on the outside of the shield will help."

There were not many Elementals, but the Council agreed to send a message to them, issuing the command to surround the shield.

"And what of the female leader we have in holding?" asked the Leader Queen Maribu from the Western Territories. "I am getting disjointed visions of her, but it is clear she is a critical piece to our defenses."

Inuku chose his words carefully. "I will be heading back to question the human after this meeting."

Queen Maribu looked at him with deep intensity. "You must win her trust. The Ancients whisper that she is a bridge between the humans and Lith'hah."

"I have heard those whispers too," Sehra said.

Inuku was surprised. He'd gathered that the human female was different, but that she might play a significant role for the Lith'hah in this war? He wondered how she could possibly act as a bridge between the two sides when she was so clearly aligned with the humans. When his thoughts turned to the attack she'd led against some of the most vulnerable members of his kind, rage surged anew in his bones.

Sehra turned to him, as if reading his thoughts. "We did not lose many Lith'hah in that attack, Inuku. She is alone, outside her home and very likely frightened."

"The few warriors we lost were valuable," he answered. Though he imagined this female must be valuable to the humans who'd granted her a leadership position, as well.

"Indeed," Rawa answered. "But it was not our warriors who fell. The lives we lost were elders who knew their time had come—"

Kelum jumped in. "Many of whom chose to use that opportunity to cross into The Great Unknown. Remember, we had some of our most potent healers on those grounds. Intuitives. Many of them might have sensed the attack coming."

"And yet they warned no one?" It was a question from the young general crackling with anger.

"What is written cannot be undone. The Ancients are far wiser than we, my child," Elder Shyam explained. "The elders must have known their time was near and that the attack would do more good than harm for Lith'hah. What must happen *will* happen, no matter how much we attempt otherwise."

"And the attack has given us the leader," Queen Maribu added.

Elder Shyam inclined his head. "Indeed. A far more substantial gain than the loss we've had to endure in return."

A female grand elder stood and raised her arms above her head. Everyone followed suit, lowering their heads as she spoke the words to adjourn the meeting. "I invoke the blessings of the Ancients in our endeavors. May our actions reflect Your intentions. May we serve only as a conduit for Your divine plan. Illuminate our path with Love, Light and Truth and we shall use our every gift from the stars in service to those principles."

Inuku was thoughtful as he exited the meeting den. In spite of the draw he felt to the human leader, he would never have imagined that "winning her trust" would come anywhere near his role as Leader King's chief general.

* * * * *

Tia lay on the cold, hard floor of the den, with only a thin skin between her back and the granite. The square of light above her showed a blinding blue sky, with not a single wisp of cloud. The flimsy mesh screen could easily be pulled aside, but getting to it would be impossible. The ceiling was over ten feet high. Even standing on her toes on the cot didn't get her close.

She was hot and sweaty from the sit-ups she'd just done, but being cooped up in the small cell was going to drive her crazy. "That's probably the plan," she muttered.

She sat up and looked at Ima. The woman was reclining on something that looked like a hammock but for sitting.

"I really need a bath," Tia said.

The woman yawned without covering her mouth. "The general is due back any minute."

"Is that supposed to be an answer?"

Ima simply closed her eyes and rested her head back against the wall.

Sure enough, several minutes later the "general" strode into the cave.

Tia scrambled quickly up from the floor but swayed as soon as she got on her feet.

She was caught in strong arms that lowered her onto the cot.

Again, she was just inches from the mouth she'd kissed in her dream-vision. Her lips tingled with the memory. She wondered if that part was true—if it would come to pass. She never knew which parts of her dream-visions were foresight and which were just regular dreaming. Tia pressed her fingers against her temples and waited for her vision to clear before looking up into the man's unnerving topaz gaze.

He stayed put with a hand on her shoulder and watched her closely, not missing a thing. "You will not be held as prisoner," he said, standing up after a moment. He took the pitcher from the stone slab that served as a table and poured a cup of water that he handed to Tia. "You will have the run of the grounds, but if you attempt to escape, you will be brought back."

"Integration?" Ima asked, moving in from the door.

He nodded. "It's what the Council wills."

"*Integration*?" Tia said. She drained the cup and looked from the woman to the man. "You mean like...brainwashing?"

He gave a humorless smile. "No. We mean *un*-brainwashing. You think what you learned as a human is Truth? You humans wouldn't know Truth if you were reared with it in your hand."

"Oh right," Tia shot back, "because you invented it."

A slow, lazy smile played on his lips as he leaned back against the stone table.

Tia couldn't help her gaze from flicking over the contours of his body from the high cheekbones, down his thick neck, to the solid plates of his chest. She brought her eyes back up quickly, but found that he'd been watching her.

"Ima, you can step outside," he said.

Tia swallowed. Even though she'd just downed the cup of water, her throat felt parched again. "No, I don't think—"

But the door opened and shut before Tia could finish.

The color of the man's eyes darkened as she turned to him. He took a step toward her.

Tia instinctively leaned back. This was dangerous. His presence made her entire body vibrate with awareness.

One corner of his mouth lifted in an amused half-smile as he sat down next to her on the cot.

Tia tried to move away, but he grasped both her wrists firmly, holding them across his lap in each of his hands. "I am checking your pulses," he said.

"You're checking my what?" She looked at him in confusion as he placed three fingers of each hand on the inside of her wrists.

"Your heartbeat is weak," he said after a moment, still looking at the thin skin of her wrists.

Tia wondered how that could possibly be with the hammering in her chest. She looked at the reddish-brown of his rough, calloused fingers as he pressed them against her wrists.

"But your liver, lungs and spleen are getting stronger. Everything else seems to be fine." Then he raised his eyes. "I am not a healer, but I know you need rest and nourishment.

Tia's insides twisted. His hands still held her wrists and he wasn't making any move to release them. She couldn't help but note that if she moved her arm just a few inches along his thigh she would reach the edge of the small square covering his...

Snap out of it, she told herself. "You can tell all that by feeling for a pulse?"

"Not a pulse," he answered. "Several pulses."

He listened for another moment, and Tia noticed the curve of his eyelashes as he moved his fingers to different positions on her wrists.

"I need a bath," she said abruptly. She needed to get out of this room was more like it.

He ignored her, sitting a moment longer with his fingers on her "pulses" before he finally got up and walked to the door. "You will live," he said. "I have matters to attend to. Ima will take you to bathe."

Tia let out a shaky breath, rubbing her wrists where his fingers had been. His grip hadn't been rough or painful, but she could still feel the imprint of his fingers on the various points he'd touched.

He opened the door and said, "Ima, take the female to the stream with some herb wash while I go and speak to some of my warriors."

Then he cast a quick glance over his shoulder at Tia before walking out.

Ima leaned her head in. "Okay, let's go."

The "warriors" who'd been guarding Tia's cell looked her up and down with open contempt and barely concealed sexual interest as she walked past. One of them tossed a bottle of what Tia assumed was "herb wash" to Ima. "Make certain she leaves that odor behind," he said.

Tia shot him a look of pure hatred. As much as she wanted to lunge at the prick, she knew she would be dead in seconds if she did.

He sneered at her but said nothing more.

She followed Ima through the woods to a stream. There was a small waterfall that fell into a calm pool and then flowed gently back out. Tia couldn't wait to feel the water on her skin. At home, she would have blasted the shower on high, letting the hot water work away the grime and ache of the past few days. Or weeks. She had no idea how much time had passed since the attack.

Ima stripped down quickly.

"You're going in too?" Tia asked.

Ima laughed. "Of course. I have orders to stay close to you at all times."

Tia nodded, her eyes taking in Ima's nipples, which were dark and large at the center of proud, full breasts. Her body was strong and lithe—something Tia noticed all the beasts seemed to have in common—and there was a lush triangle of dark curls between her legs.

Ima chuckled. "Are you going to stop staring long enough to undress, or shall I help you?"

Tia felt her face grow warm. "I thought I'd have some privacy for my bath."

Ima grinned. "Shame and modesty with regards to the body are human concepts. Lith'hah do not adhere to them. We are not ashamed of our bodies and we are not shamed by seeing others'. Now come, remove the rest of your clothing and let us enter the stream."

The lure of the water was too strong and Tia kept the rest of her thoughts to herself as she stripped down. She slipped her T-shirt over her head and quickly examined the fine hair on her arms. Sure enough, it was past time for another waxing. The few, straggling silver hairs were beginning to grow back quickly, as if they realized they finally had a chance to grow free and were making up for lost time. She was certain the silver roots on her head had begun to show too. Soon, the lighter hairs she plucked from her eyebrows would be visible.

She was nineteen when all the changes had begun in her body. When her eyebrows blanched and the fine hair on her arms began to show silver patches, her mother had furrowed her brow and grilled her. She asked Tia if she had had any urges to "change form". At the time, Tia had no idea what her mother had been talking about, and soon the questions stopped. Her mother seemed to be satisfied that Tia was a normal young woman who simply resembled her mother.

Tia now stood naked before Ima and followed the woman to the water's edge.

Before entering the water, Ima uncorked the earthen bottle she'd brought and took a whiff. "Mmmm...smell this," she said, pouring some of the thick, amber liquid into her hand and passing it to Tia. "It is for your hair and body."

Tia took the bottle and poured a small amount into the palm of her hand and handed the bottle back. Ima was right. The herbal wash had a heavenly mixture of pungent herbal and light floral scents. She glanced at the beast woman as she placed the bottle on the ground and headed into the water.

They stopped at a calm spot where they could stand easily in calm, waist-deep water.

Tia wanted desperately to remove her contact lenses as she normally would during a bath or shower. She rubbed her eyes to clear some of the irritation, but they really needed to come out. They'd become dry and painful in the heat and she had no solution to rinse them out with. She didn't need them to see—they were not prescription lenses—only to cover her difference. But out here, there was no one to point fingers.

As Ima mixed the herbal mixture in her hand with a little of the stream water and began to lather her hair, Tia quickly slipped her lenses out and let them swirl into the water around her until they were gone. Something clutched at her heart—almost as if a part of her swirled away too...little lies that had held her in place, in a life she never really belonged.

But she felt infinitely better. Her eyes adjusted to her surroundings and she saw everything in sharper detail. She glanced at Ima. She really was striking, Tia thought. The down on her arms had an almost violet glow and the woman made no move to cover or hide herself. Quite the opposite in fact. Tia watched as Ima stood tall, breasts jutting out as she washed her face with the lather that had run down from her thick hair. The trail of foamy lather trickled down to the valley between Ima's breasts and Tia felt her own nipples tingle as her eyes lit upon Ima's large areolas.

"Do you like what you see?" Ima's voice was soft but still contained an irritating edge of amusement.

Tia snapped her eyes up. "I didn't mean to stare."

"You can stare as long as you'd like," Ima purred.

Tia looked at her in surprise. Keeping her gaze fixed on Tia's, Ima cupped her breasts and began to slowly lather them. Tia watched, unable to look away.

After a moment she stopped, moving closer to Tia.

Tia struggled with the conflicting urges to stay put and step away. Part of her was drawn to this woman—her boldness and her unapologetic delight in her body and sensuality...her beauty. But did Tia really want this? Did she want... And then Ima was against her.

"Your eyes..." the other woman said. There was confusion in her voice.

Tia took a breath before looking directly at Ima. This was not Zul's realm. No one would lock her up for examination here. No one would give her tests for having strange eyes. "They're different," Tia finished.

Ima cupped Tia's chin and tilted her face up so she could get a better look. "They're more than different," she said. Then, almost to herself, she muttered, "It can't be..."

With the puzzled expression still etched into her face, Ima trailed foamy lather along Tia's jawline to the back of her neck. With strong, deft fingers, she massaged the muscles at Tia's nape.

Tia felt herself relax into the small, circular movements of the other woman's hands. She felt the cool flow of water around her waist, and her ears tuned in to the sounds of the stream, the birds, the whisper of leaves. And she allowed herself to dissolve into the gentle, but firm caresses of Ima's fingers. Tia wanted to forget everything—the events of the past twenty-four to forty-eight hours, her long life of loneliness and secrecy, being held captive in strange territory. In this moment right now, she wanted everything to be okay. She felt no fear and no judgment in the stream with this woman.

Tia opened her eyes as Ima's hands moved lower, caressing the sides of her breasts and moving to the tightened nubs at their peaks. Tia intuitively sensed that this—whatever it was—was some sort of olive branch. It almost felt as if Ima was extending some sort of peace offering. Was that possible? If it was, Tia was not going to refuse it.

She moved closer to Ima until their nipples grazed against one another.

Ima slid her hands up to massage Tia's scalp for a moment then slowly slid them down again, this time to Tia's butt, tugging Tia closer until she was against the length of Ima's soapy body.

Even though Tia had taken women lovers in the past, the slick feeling of Ima's body against hers aroused her in a way she'd never before experienced. Ima was not only unapologetic about her sensuality, she was unequivocally sure about her identity. This was a quality Tia had always found attractive in lovers. It was something Tia had never had—the ease of feeling comfortable in one's own body. It was somewhat intimidating and incredibly exciting at the same time.

Tia allowed herself to flow with whatever was moving through her. It seemed at once foreign and familiar. She felt the weight of the woman's breasts—smaller but firmer than her own—and began to rinse the soapy foam from them. She cupped her hand, lowered it into the water until it filled then poured the water over Ima's breasts until they were free of lather. Then she lowered her mouth and pulled one of the nipples into her mouth.

Ima moaned, slipping her thigh between Tia's legs.

Without thinking, Tia pressed her mound against Ima's thigh. She slid her other hand down over the woman's belly and slipped her fingers into the velvety folds between Ima's legs.

Ima's hands traveled up to knead Tia's breasts, pulling and tweaking the nipples until Tia's breath came out as shallow puffs.

Tia rubbed her fingers gently against the hardened nub near the top of Ima's slit before slipping her finger inside. She felt Ima shudder as she slid another finger in then began a rising rhythm with her palm flat against Ima's clit.

When Ima gently pulled her breast away from Tia's mouth and brought her own lips around Tia's nipple, Tia ground herself desperately against the other woman's thigh. She rode her leg with mounting urgency as she moved her hand faster against Ima's mound.

With a cry, Ima dug her fingers into Tia's hips and shuddered with the waves of her climax. She pulled Tia against her thigh and moved with her until Tia felt the force of her own orgasm course through her.

She didn't want to think about the fact that she, a Stealth Blade who deeply mistrusted these beasts—was sent in to kill them, in fact—could be so intimately entwined with one of their women. But as far as she knew, the women had never mauled anyone.

As Ima poured water over her and helped rinse the herbal wash off her body, Tia noticed a slight movement in the trees.

She froze. "There's someone out there."

Ima smiled. "Of course—it's the general." She looked over her shoulder before her eyes slid back to Tia. "But he's gone now."

Tia's eyes widened. "He was watching us the entire time?"

Ima raised an eyebrow. "Of course. He likely came to make sure everything was all right."

Tia felt her face grow hot at the thought that the general had witnessed the intimate contact between the two women.

"It's all right," Ima said softly. "Lith'hah ways are very different from the ways of humans. We bond out of affection, out of friendship, out of simply wanting to show goodwill. It is not about ownership or entitlement, even when one is mated."

"I'm not worried about that," Tia said quickly.

Ima looked puzzled. "Then what are you worried about?"

Tia looked back at the trees where the general had been, and wondered what exactly she was worried about.

Chapter Four

As she walked to the Integration Area with Ima, Tia felt much better. She was wearing a bland shift dress Ima had given her. The hem of it reached mid-thigh and it was shapeless, but it was clean.

Tia looked out of the corner of her eye at Ima. Her hair flowed in waves almost to her hips and it had a plum-colored hue to it. She was strong and well-muscled, but there was a softness to her too. A kind of gentleness.

Tia's body still tingled from the brief interlude in the stream. Ima was much warmer and Tia felt a bond with the woman. She wondered if being sexual with all beast kind was like that—a connection in some way that felt almost palpable. The way she was feeling right now was in stark contrast to how she'd felt earlier. Had the woman brainwashed her without Tia knowing it? Besides the maulings on TV, she knew almost nothing about the ways or attitudes of these shifters. She knew very little about them, she realized suddenly, beyond what she'd seen on Zul's controlled media waves.

She looked around at those they passed now. They seemed completely comfortable with nudity and their bodies—she assumed this unselfconscious attitude also extended to sex and sexuality...as Ima had just pointed out.

She noticed some stares and whispers as she passed and pulled herself up taller. She kept her mind focused on the task at hand—mapping her surroundings. The sun was dipping west toward the stream, so the direction they were headed was northeast. The Integration Area was northeast. Tia made a mental note of that.

The grounds were in a large clearing surrounded by woods. The waterfall and stream were probably a steady supply of game, drinking and bathing water, and irrigation for the crops she'd passed toward the south. Grain. The same grain they'd had in the structure she and her band had raided. The shock and dismay of the moment she discovered she wasn't holding a lethal substance in her hands, but a life-giving *grain*, sliced through her again. How could an operation have gone so horribly wrong?

They walked around the base of a mountain and came into another smaller clearing. This one had small but secure structures arranged in a circle around its periphery. The structures had no doors or flaps of any kind, but they were solid, built from stones that had been shaped to fit together like pieces of a puzzle. Tia guessed it would have taken them years to sand the stones down and build this area alone, never mind the rest of the settlement she'd seen. How had these primitive beasts built something so elaborate, so...*durable* without the use of modern technology? How had they cleared these grounds? Tia had not seen or heard a single machine or engine the entire time she'd been here.

Ima strode straight toward the largest of the structures, one that was carved directly into the mountainside, with large stones fitted together to create a sort of building that jutted out of the mountain rock, looking almost like a natural outgrowth, and gave what Tia assumed was a salute to the general.

His was the only one with a "door" — large and wooden and curved at the top with archaic hinges, the likes of which Tia had only seen in history books. If she wasn't being held prisoner, she might have found it quite beautiful, she thought. It was almost like stepping back in time.

The general nodded without looking up from the map he was examining on a granite table, and Ima silently exited, but not before giving Tia a gentle smile. Tia wished Ima would stay — she felt far more comfortable with Ima than this man, especially since it almost felt as if she were stepping into another one of her dream-visions. But Tia guessed Ima wouldn't be far — probably standing just outside until she was summoned again. That's what Tia would have had Priya or Limak do.

Tia's chest constricted at the thought of the senior Blades and their fate — a fate she had led them to, but she quickly shoved that thought aside. She needed to remain composed.

"You smell much better," he said, still not looking up.

"You don't," she shot back.

He threw his head back and laughed and she instantly regretted her words. They sounded childish — not the retort of a capable senior Blade who led her own band.

"If I'd known you were so sensitive, I'd have strewn the place with flowers," he said, golden eyes glittering as he turned to look at her. His eyes swept down the length of her. He straightened and came toward her.

She instinctively stepped back as her pulse rate increased a notch.

When he was within inches from her, he said, "You are not like others of your kind." His voice was all buttery softness again.

Tia looked at the ground. "How many of 'my kind' have you known?"

"Not many," he admitted. "But I have walked unseen in your territories. I know a little about your ways... Enough to know that many of your females do not respond the way you did to Ima in the stream."

Tia felt her cheeks burn. She gritted her teeth and turned away from him. "I had no idea you were out there watching."

"No, I kept myself concealed," he said, almost in a murmur. Tia heard him move closer, and then the feel of petal-soft lips against the base of her neck.

She stiffened, throwing him a quick look and backing away. She remembered again her dream-visions. Was he friend or foe? It had never been made clear. But her body was open to him. Ready for him.

He pinned her with a penetrating look. "There's something about you..."

"That's what Ima said."

A lazy smile played on one half of his mouth. "You're on first-name terms now, I see."

Her face flushed, but she said nothing. She would not give him the satisfaction of getting a rise out of her. She cursed her dream-visions. What good were they if they gave no indication as to whether she would have to fight this man or whether he would become an ally? Besides, what she did, sexually or otherwise, was none of his business.

He dropped the crude writing instrument he'd been using and walked to a circular window in the wall. He pulled aside the curtain. "Many of your warriors," he said, "are out there."

Tia moved quickly but cautiously to his side, peering out the opening. Her mouth unhinged and a small gasp escaped. There they were—Sianwu, CJ, Amar, Hai Jyu, Sam, Youssuf...

"Priya and Limak!"

Before she knew it, she was running. She shoved open the door and launched herself in the direction of the Senior Blades. Her heart thudded furiously in her chest. Were they all right? Hurt? Tortured? She didn't care. They were alive!

But before she could even make it to the edge of the clearing, she was caught and yanked back against what felt like a wall. Large brown arms encircled her, pinning her arms against her sides, and she was hauled back into the general's quarters.

"Too soon for them to see you," he said through clenched teeth.

She kicked and struggled in his hold. "Fuck you."

He laughed before dropping her unceremoniously onto the floor. "You have to work your way up to that, my sweet."

She pulled herself up onto her feet. "Those are my band members," she said, her voice trembling with rage.

"They *were* your band members. They are members of the Lith'hah now."

She looked up at him, aghast. "They would never cave to beasts!"

His eyes darkened and he took two steps toward her, pulling her arms behind her and holding her hands in the grip of one of his large ones. He grabbed a handful of hair, yanking her head back so her eyes met his dead-on. "Who are the beasts?" he asked softly. "We, who aim to live in harmony with our surroundings, or you, who came to destroy our sick and unarmed in the middle of the night?"

Tia's voice was tight with simmering rage. "How many humans prowl *your* territories looking for strip clubs and bars then rape and maul innocent young girls before running back into the safety of your woods?"

"Ancients," he cursed, his arms tightening around her. "Any Lith'han who ventured into your territories to harm humans did so illegally. They were severely punished. It is against The Laws to behave as they did and to commit the egregious crimes they committed." He looked out the window and muttered, "Those imbeciles are partly to blame for this war."

Tia was taken aback. It was an admission of sorts. He was breaking a cardinal rule — *admit nothing*. But he seemed to be doing so openly and without any qualms.

For a moment, she was acutely aware of the hard warmth of his body against hers. She still stood within the circle of his arms, but the hand that had grabbed a handful of her hair had moved down to the small of her back. She heard her own breath coming out as shallow puffs. When he looked back at her, she felt as if she'd been swallowed by the depths of his eyes.

"That does not explain your attack on our Healing Grounds," he said.

Everything in her wanted to lean her face just those few inches and meld her lips against his. But she clenched her hands into fists and said nothing.

"You would have butchered our most vulnerable," he continued, unrelenting. "Our young, our elders...our wounded and healing." He let her go slowly but didn't move away.

Tia bit her bottom lip. She remembered the sounds of that night. The young screams, the small bodies... "I—I thought..." She drew in a deep breath to steady her voice. "Our intelligence showed a strategic target."

"Your intelligence was wrong!" His voice simmered with rage. "There was nothing but food and healing supplies."

Everything from that night slammed back into her now. The dull thud of bodies hitting the ground, beamers slicing through flesh and bone. The smell of blood and fear and singed hair. "There was supposed to be a toxic substance—you were going to release it into the air... Or something you were going to poison our water supply with..." She looked up suddenly, realizing she'd spoken her thoughts aloud.

Her blood ran cold as she watched his golden-amber eyes harden into steel slits.

His voice was lethal. "Humans must lack even more basic sense than we could have imagined. Why would we poison the same waters we use? Why would we release toxins into the same air our young and elders breathe?"

Tia stared at him. She had no answers. She had only questions.

The silence lay thick between them. "You'll stay here," he said finally. He gestured behind her to a narrow hall leading to the back of the building, deeper into the mountain. "There is a room in the back for you. It is equipped with facilities. I have a room between yours and this one."

"Am I a prisoner?"

"You are free to roam in acceptable areas." He walked to the door. "For now, those are only in this den."

"I want to see my band members," she said, but he was gone.

* * * * *

Inuku strode through the healing dens. He'd been watching the healers and elders work tirelessly with the humans. Some of the most powerful elders had traveled across the Territories to assist this pride. Word was that something pivotal was happening with this particular raid. Sehra had mentioned it too—the Ancients planned everything meticulously, she'd said. No mere Lith'han could understand the depth and breadth of the Ancients' wisdom and their love for the planet and its inhabitants.

His thoughts kept traveling back to the human leader. She was not like her peers. She stood taller than most of the human females. She walked differently. She held herself in a manner none of the others did. It wasn't a confidence necessarily but more of a ramrod determination. She was like any of his fiercest warriors in that regard.

And there was the scene he'd witnessed in the river. Ima and the human leader engaged in an interaction he could only ever imagine two Lith'hah females in. the scents, the energy they had generated was at once familiar and magnetic, and it had thrown him off balance. He could have walked away. He could have let Ima pull this female into her circle of confidence in privacy. But something had held him riveted. There was something larger going on with the arrival of this human female. She was not Lith'han, and yet she was unlike any human Inuku had ever seen.

Something stirred at his core, like a fire being stoked. As much as he didn't want to admit it, he knew he was intensely attracted to her. The feel of her curves against his chest when he'd caught and held her was still burned in his memory. And the current generated by her desire at the stream had held him captive. There was a connection to the spirit there. Inuku was no Internal, but even he could sense that.

He had wanted to run his own hands down the length of her, to cup her breasts and nick the thin skin of her neck... He shook his head to clear it, annoyed by his own response to this leader among humans.

He stole quietly into a room where a session was taking place. He watched the grand elder light a stick of the sacred Barlo weed, wave it around the room then set it in small dish made for that purpose. She then sat on the floor across from the human she was working with. She crossed her legs and reached out to hold the young man. She began a low chanting, rocking back and forth until the human was rocking with her, keeping her rhythm.

Inuku turned to the young warrior assisting the elder. "How have things been progressing?"

"Very well," she replied. "The humans, after their initial resistance, have been very cooperative. Especially now that the process has begun."

"How far have you progressed?"

"There are areas in their brains that have been pinched and closed off, blocking flow. Others have been spliced and reconnected in unnatural patterns." She looked up at him and Inuku sensed the scent of desire beginning to dot the space between them. "Nothing like those patterns exists in nature," she said, a sort of fire dancing in her eyes.

Inuku looked her over with mild interest. "It's the result of their conditioning?"

She nodded, still staring at him. "Grand Elder Lyra says it's the many hours they spend in front of those luminous boxes, absorbing rays from screens which transmit images and sounds and messages their leaders want them to absorb. She says that all of this, slowly and through years, has created new connections in the humans' brain nerves to the point where they do not even know what is true. They do not trust their own instincts."

Inuku clasped his hands behind his back and turned toward the grand elder. The rocking had stopped and now both the elder and human seemed deep in concentration. But he could feel the energy in the room. It was sizzling with the tension of psychic surgery. There was the sense that what was being performed was sacred, life-saving, and could only succeed with the guiding hand of the Ancients.

"How many have we successfully released so far?" he asked. He saw the young woman swallow before sliding her eyes away from his face.

"Almost all of them from this attack. They are a peculiar species. After they've seen one go through and come out looking more peaceful, happier and looking at his surroundings in wonder, they almost clamor to be next."

"Who was the first?"

She smiled. "Grand Elder Lyra knows what she is doing. She chose one who seemed to be some sort of assistant to the leader. This assistant was the hardest one to bring around, but the grand elder managed to convince her to give just one reconnection a try. She brought over a human from the Western Territories who had undergone the reconnection process some time ago and had that human speak with our human leader's assistant. It was much easier after that."

He lifted one corner of his mouth. Grand Elder Lyra was legendary in her Internal abilities. She was quiet and used her power only when absolutely necessary, but he'd heard she could harness all the elements just by uttering a few words. Working with humans would be cub's play for a grand elder of her stature. "I'm sure it wasn't *all* 'easy'," he chided.

She shook her head, cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "No, of course not. But Grand Elder Lyra is a powerful Lith'han."

He nodded, smiling down at the exuberant fresh face. "And she has a capable young Lith'han like you to offer her assistance."

She grinned, her face relaxing. "I'm just glad she's on our side."

He walked through the area, making sure there were no glitches. There were a handful of elders working on releases and reconnections in the rooms, some working with humans and Lith'hah in the gardens, cubs bounding through the grounds wanting to play with anyone—human or Lith'hah—and the smells of simmering stews from the area kitchens. It could be a regular day on the pridelands, Inuku thought bitterly, if they weren't in the midst of a war.

He strode toward the kitchens and picked up the covered earthenware dishes that had been set aside.

A bulky male of Lazuli descent nodded. "No coarse salt in those."

Inuku grinned. "You got it right this time?"

The male, who was obviously born to nourish others with food, shrugged. "Let's hope. The last thing I need is an angry general in my kitchens."

Inuku laughed. "Which one is for the human?"

"Blue pot."

Inuku carried both dishes, wrapped in thick sheepskin fleece, back to his den. He'd purposely built a large den near the training areas when he and Rawa were designing the pride grounds. If Inuku was to oversee all defense and security operations, he wanted to be right where everything was happening. To be available and on hand, monitoring all activities. He needed to be where anything having to do with the safety and security of Lith'hah under his watch would not go unnoticed.

It helped that he could go anywhere unseen. That had been what allowed him to save the life of his friend and now Leader King Rawa. He had been able to distract the Protectors who were on watch then slip into the cave they'd locked him up in and carry him out. He'd feared Rawa was already dead, but the man had proven to be indestructible.

Inuku nodded to Ima, who was of Violet descent. Hers was a lineage comprised solely of female warriors who mated with males only to conceive, sharing their deepest intimate lives with other females and rearing only their female young. If a Violet had a male cub, she left him in the hands of a trusted pride to rear as an Independent.

Ima opened the heavy wooden door for him and he stepped into the cool interior of his den.

Inuku set the dishes on the large granite table against one wall. He could hear the movements of the human female in the back as he sat down on a wooden stool and waited. The smell of food would draw her out.

Sure enough, she came out barely a moment later. She had torn small slits along the sides of the shift dress—for ease of movement, he supposed—and a slit at the neckline, perhaps for comfort.

Inuku's eyes traveled down the swoops and dips of her body. He felt a tightening at his crotch.

"It's hot," she snapped. "Is it always this hot?"

He brought his eyes back up to her flushed face and gave her a lazy grin. "It is far cooler in this den than out there. The heat is from the energy being generated to hold up a shield."

"I didn't see a shield," she said, fishing for information. Everyone knew the beasts were protected by something—some kind of barrier, but how they did it and what it was—that was a mystery.

"It's invisible." Inuku caught her glancing at the dishes. He slid the blue pot toward her along with a wooden spoon. "Eat. This one is made for you especially, to help you heal from your wounds."

She looked as though she was fighting her own need for food, but eventually she sat down. She lifted the lid carefully, as if something might jump out at her, and sniffed the contents. Then, in one quick move, she grabbed the spoon and began to slurp the stew like a gorging female.

Inuku leaned back against the wall and watched her. He wondered if this was how she would be in the heat of bonding. Would she hold back, fighting her own need? What would it take for her to give in to her hunger? And once she did, would she revel in it with great abandon?

He picked up his own spoon and began to eat. The stew was perfect. He finished before her and sat back while she tilted the dish to get at the last spoonful of liquid in it and popped it into her mouth.

"I am Inuku," he said.

She looked at him with surprise then slowly pushed her dish away. "Thank you for the food. I didn't know I was so hungry."

He nodded. "Your body is still healing. It needs nourishment."

She looked around the granite table. "Do you have any napkins?"

He was puzzled. "Napkins?"

She turned to search the rest of the room. "Something to wipe my hands on?"

Inuku nodded in understanding. He reached for a nearby towel and tossed it to her.

She wiped her mouth and hands on it then turned to him. "How many of my band members are alive?"

Of course. She was a true leader of her warriors. Inuku knew that if he were in her position, he would be preoccupied with the same question. Who was alive, how were they treated...and how would he plan all of their escape. He couldn't help raising one corner of his mouth in a small smile. She wouldn't get far, but he had to respect her effort – she was still thinking about her warriors.

"We saved as many as we could."

Hope sparked in her eyes and something shot through Inuku. Her eyes...they glittered, almost as if...

He leaned forward, but she quickly looked away.

She stood and walked to the window, drawing aside the curtain. She blinked quickly, as if adjusting her eyes to the blinding light, then watched the activities through the small square. "When can I talk to them?"

He folded his arms. "Not yet."

He saw her set her jaw and look out the window again.

Inuku allowed his gaze to travel down her jawline to the soft place where her neck met her shoulder and then down farther.

She turned back and caught him staring. More sparks ignited in her eyes as she clenched her fists at her sides as she faced off with him. "I would like a solid answer. When will I be allowed out of this *den*, and when will I be given access to my band?"

Inuku didn't dare move a muscle. In that moment, with her eyes sparking and her fists balled at her sides, everything in him wanted to slam her against the wall and sink himself into the heat she was generating. And there was something else—the scent of desire. It was not the scent of raw, physical attraction he would expect from someone unfamiliar and curious—like the young female he'd just seen assisting Grand Elder Lyra. No, the scent coming from this female was of a familiar desire...as if she knew him already. Inuku struggled to bring himself back under control.

"When?" she asked again through clenched teeth.

"In due time."

She narrowed her eyes as her gaze lit upon his erection, which steepled the flimsy patch of animal skin that was slung around his hips. "Can I have Ima 'stand guard' over me? Doesn't your kind consider it more appropriate to have women guard female prisoners?"

"I don't blame you for wanting Ima in here—she is a beautiful Violet." He grinned, knowing he was infuriating her further. "But I am the general of the King's warriors. This is my den. You are the leader of the human...band. And you led an attack on some of our most vulnerable members. You stay here." He looked into her eyes. "With me." His grin faded as he unfolded his arms and stood. "My 'kind' have laws against dishonoring, laws that have been strictly enforced in the last few years. But don't worry. Even without The Laws, you have nothing to fear from me. I will not touch you again."

Inuku was about to turn toward the door, but something caught his eye. He looked closely at the female's hair. With the slice of white light coming in through the window, he could see what he'd thought before was a trick of his imagination. But now there was no mistaking it. The roots of her night-black hair were silver.

He moved closer immediately, eyes narrowing as he took a handful of her hair. "This color..."

She gasped but seemed rooted to the spot.

Inuku scanned the roots of her hair, her eyebrows, her skin. He yanked the leather flap at the window aside to get a better look, but she wrenched herself out of his hold and staggered back, eyes wide.

He let her go, a strange look coming over his face. "Your eyes! And humans grow silver hair when they age," he said, confusion lacing his words. "What is your age?"

Tia remained silent.

He took a step closer. "What is your age?" he repeated.

"You said you wouldn't touch me," she whispered.

His gaze never left her face. "I will not touch you in a bonding way – unless you desire it. And I will not harm you." He moved even closer as she backed up against the wall. Why was this female's hair silver when her face and body looked like a young woman's? And why did she have the eyes of a Silver Lith'han?

Inuku knew humans aged much more quickly than Lith'hah. Their cells didn't have the regeneration capacity that Lith'hah cells did. Lith'hah had been around far longer, had evolution on their side, but the humans...their skin began to crease when they were in their forties, some even sooner.

"I...I... My hair went gray prematurely."

Inuku slitted his eyes. She was lying. There was something unsettling about this female, he'd felt it from the beginning. She was not who she claimed to be.

He whirled around, covering the ground to the door in two long strides, and flung open the heavy wooden door. "Ima, summon Grand Elder Lyra." Then he slammed the door shut, grabbed the female by her wrists and dragged her to a stool opposite him.

She wriggled and fought in his grip, but he held on. He wanted answers. Something was not as it seemed, and Inuku was not going to make one more decision regarding this human or her warriors until he knew what it was.

"We wait," he said, his voice low with dangerous undercurrents. "You will go nowhere until the grand elder has seen you."

The silence in the den became amplified as they waited for the elder to arrive. Inuku was aware of nothing and no one other than the female sitting across from him. At one point, he leaned forward, looking into her silver gem eyes, searching for answers, but instead falling into their depths. Her eyes were expressive—they held every unspoken word and unexpressed thought. Inuku thought that if he searched those windows of her soul long enough, he might find some hidden truths...

She turned and stood abruptly, but he caught her wrist and pulled her back onto the stool. "I said we wait."

Inuku wanted to lay her down on the skins and map her body with his lips and feel the walls of her *wima* clamp around his length...but there were too many mysteries about her. Too much he needed to know first.

He didn't let her out of his sight for a second, not even when the door opened and the elder walked in. Only when she was at his side did he look away from the human female. Then he stood and bowed his head in the greeting of respect for a grand elder. "Grand Elder Lyra."

She raised an arm and placed her palm on the crown of his head. "May you have a long life and serve the Great Unknowable, my child."

Inuku raised his eyes to the grand elder, acknowledging the blessing, then turned to the female on the stool, who was quietly watching the exchange between Inuku and the grand elder.

The grand elder turned to the female and Inuku saw a look of recognition in the old Lith'han's eyes. "Ah," she said. "So you have arrived." She moved to sit on the stool Inuku had just vacated. Settling herself on the stool, the old Lith'han reached a hand out to touch the human's face.

The human leader shrank back at first, and then, as if remembering the touch was from a feeble old woman, she seemed to relax.

As a warrior, Inuku knew the sensation of having an elder enter his consciousness for the purpose of healing wounds or drawing information. It was pleasant, and with an experienced, loving grand elder like Grand Elder Lyra, the human female would be like damp clay in the old Lith'han's hands.

Slowly, Inuku saw the female's eyes grow heavy until they closed and she leaned toward the grand elder. Within seconds there was a shift in temperature and a hazy glow of light from the two. And Inuku knew the grand elder must be knocking at the door of the human's consciousness. It was always with permission, none of the elders would ever enter another's consciousness without consent. It was like a gentle nudge, a request. And if the door opened, the elder went in. If not, they respected the boundary.

Inuku knew from the change in temperature that Grand Elder Lyra had been granted permission. She was in there, looking for the answers to her questions in the spirals of the human's DNA.

After what seemed like an eternity, the grand elder opened her eyes. She grazed a knuckle over the cheek of the female and whispered a few words in the language of the Ancients.

The female opened her eyes. "What was that?" she breathed. "What just happened?"

Grand Elder Lyra smiled warmly at the female then stood. "This is the child of a Lith'han," she said.

Words flew away from Inuku like a flock of frightened birds. They overlapped and flapped wildly, not knowing how to make themselves manifest—*human, Lith'han, child, attack, leader, human, female...*

The female shot up from her seat and backed away from the elder as if she'd been burned. "No... You're crazy... You're, you're trying to brainwash me!"

Grand Elder Lyra gave her a mildly sympathetic look. "No, my child. One of your parents was a Lith'han, and in you, there are without doubt Lith'hah patterns."

Finally, Inuku found his voice. He felt as if he were dragging words over sharp boulders. "How could that be? Lith'hah, when mating in human form, do not pass along Lith'hah genes."

The grand elder nodded. "There seems to have been a deviation. A mutation of sorts, and a single strand of DNA passed through in the mating." The old woman shrugged her bony shoulders. "The Ancients have their reasons."

Inuku's throat grew parched. It was beginning to make sense now—why this female felt different to him. The familiarity of her hair, her eyes... Her superior strength and speed in relation to the other humans.

"One of the marauding males?" he asked. "Was her mother dishonored by one of our males in the human territories?"

"No," the female spat. Inuku could see a fire of rage simmering in her silver eyes. "My father was a good man," she said through clenched teeth. "And my mother wouldn't have let *anyone* 'dishonor' her. You don't know what you're talking about. You're both crazy!"

The grand elder looked at her carefully, though she ignored the female's words. "Not a marauding male," she said, as if thinking out loud. "I searched as thoroughly as I could, but some things are not meant to be known—or they remain hidden until it is time for knowledge."

"The males who went into human territories to partake of human excesses only crossed for short periods," Inuku said.

The grand elder turned to look into Inuku's eyes. "This female is approximately seventy human years in age. While Lith'hah males certainly ventured into human territories early on, they were few and far between. And they were discreet. This trend to go into human territories and partake of excesses is new—within the past twenty years or so. It is part of the reason our safety has been compromised...and part of the reason for this cursed war."

Inuku's eyes grew wide with slow understanding.

"This human," Grand Elder Lyra said softly, "has a Lith'hah mother."

Chapter Five

Tia wanted to run. What they were saying could only be sheer madness. Her mother—one of *them*? She was speechless. Every fiber in her body was tense with the desire to flee, to stop listening to this insanity. What could this old beast woman possibly know about her?

But then why was she trembling? Why did she have the sudden, inexplicable urge to fling herself into the old woman's arms and sob into her frail shoulder? Why had she allowed the woman to touch her, to...probe her mind, as if sifting through ash for gems?

Tia didn't know what was going on. What had come over her? There was something about the old woman that had pulled her in. Something that felt like grandmotherly love. Something that had felt like *motherly* love.

Her throat tightened. "My mother is not a beast," she thought angrily. She was never as warm as Tia would have liked, to be sure, but she had been a good mother. She had nurtured and protected Tia and her brother throughout their lives.

And then she had vanished. When Tia had needed her most. Her father had been dead a year, Tia had had her own children—one a toddler, one still nursing when her mother walked out.

Tia had struggled to understand, and she had even gone searching for her mother—or her mother's body. But every path led her nowhere. Finally she'd given up and grieved the loss. Accepted that her mother was gone and that was that.

Zul had been reelected and had begun his "war on the beasts" in earnest. Everyone knew what to look for in spotting one of *them*. And even though Tia knew that if she didn't try hard to conceal her differences, she could be mistaken for a Lith'han female in their human form, she *knew* she was not a shifter. She had tried to make it happen a few times—closing her eyes tightly and focusing her thoughts with all her might into turning into a cat. But...nothing. That had been all the proof she needed that she was fully human and normal.

And her mother—her mother had lived as a human for most of Tia's life, under the same roof, never *once* shifting into an animal. Tia would have known, wouldn't she? There would have been signs surely? But there was nothing at all. Just a normal family. Her mother was a beautiful woman with startling silver hair streaked with black, some soft, downy silver on her body and sparkling gemstone eyes. Tia assumed she simply took after her. Her mother's parents had all passed away before Tia was born, and she'd had no brothers or sisters.

Tia had questioned none of this because her father had so readily accepted her mother. He'd adored Tia's mother until the day he died.

So, Tia took to the task of rearing her children and creating a home for herself, diligently dying her hair and eyebrows, removing any silver stray hairs from all visible parts of her body and keeping her contact lenses in during waking hours. Under Zul's rule, any sort of difference was suspect. She hid her "defects" meticulously from the world, her friends and neighbors, even her loved ones—until the fact that she wasn't aging became impossible to conceal.

And now this. Icy fingers clutched at her chest, making it harder to breathe. Her mother couldn't possibly have been one of *them*...could she? How could she have concealed such a huge secret? *Ha!* came a bitter laugh from somewhere deep inside. Tia knew exactly how she would have concealed it—probably in much the same way Tia had.

But why? Why wouldn't she have told her? Why have human children if she couldn't rear them? If she couldn't love them? Tia knew the answers even before she finished the thought. It was the same reason she had her own children. Tia had had no idea who or *what* she was.

But her mother had known exactly what she was, *if* she was what the old beast woman claimed. *But she didn't know what I was.*

Try as she might, Tia could think of no better explanation for what she was capable of, what she looked like and why she wasn't aging like everyone else.

How could that be? Lith'hah, when mating in human form, did not pass on Lith'hah genes. That was what the general had said.

She snapped her head up at the sound of the heavy door closing. She'd been so wrapped up in a storm of thoughts and emotions that she didn't notice the old woman leaving.

The general—Inuku, he'd called himself—turned slowly toward her, his hand still on the door handle. His eyes were a strange, glittering mix of emotions—topaz with glints of silver and sapphire. Tia saw open curiosity there.

"You are part Lith'hah," he said, taking a step toward her.

"I'm not part anything," she said immediately, backing away.

"No," he said slowly, stopping to stand a few feet away from Tia. "I imagine you're not." He looked directly into Tia's eyes. "You are wholly Lith'hah then."

She faltered but quickly composed herself. "And I am wholly human." She realized that it was an admission of sorts, but she needed time. She needed to be alone to think things through.

The general seemed caught off guard. Tia watched the quick play of emotions on his face.

"Do you claim your Lith'hah heritage as willingly as you claim your human one?" he asked finally.

Now it was Tia who was caught off guard. She looked away as his question wormed into her. Try as she might, she could summon no words. It was as if every train of thought she started ended in a void – falling off a cliff into blank nothingness.

After what felt like a lengthy silence, he said, “So you are a Lith’han, but you led an attack on a pride’s Healing Grounds.”

“I told you,” Tia hissed, “I had no idea it was a...Healing Grounds.”

He narrowed his eyes, as if he was weighing her, measuring and gauging something. “You are fully assimilated into human life,” he said. “And you seem to fully side with humans.” He folded his arms loosely across his bare chest. “For all intents and purposes, you *are* human.”

Tia gritted her teeth. “I never said otherwise.”

He went on as if she’d never spoken. “Except you are not. Grand Elder Lyra is among our wisest, most powerful elders. If she says you have Lith’hah blood, then you most certainly do. In which case, not only are you one of us, you are one of us through your mother’s bloodline.”

He took a step closer and Tia forced herself to stand her ground. But waves of what she’d felt during her dream-vision washed over her and it took all her effort to appear calm and unfazed.

“Can you shift?” he asked.

Tia swallowed. “No,” she said, relieved that her voice sounded firm and solid – unlike the commotion in her chest.

A shadow flitted across his features. He was disappointed, Tia realized with surprise.

“You are not fully Lith’hah then.”

She clenched her fists as blood pounded through her limbs. Whether he knew it or not, the general was echoing a refrain that had played in her own mind since she was old enough to know she wasn’t like anyone she knew. She was different, weird, unusual.

He stared calmly at her. “Clearly you are not wholly human nor wholly a Lith’han... You are halfway between both, in a place that does not exist.”

For a moment Tia couldn’t breathe. Then, before she knew it, she was in motion.

She grabbed the first thing she laid her hands on – the crude writing instrument that was shaped into what looked like a dagger – and lunged at him.

He caught her easily, twisting her around and sharply tucking the arm with the writing tool behind her, pinning it in place as he pulled her against his chest. Her other arm was immovable at her side as he held her still.

“Easy,” he said quietly.

Tia struggled against him with all her might, tears of frustration welling in her eyes. She hated that she had let him get to her, and that he knew it. She’d given him insight

into one of her deepest vulnerabilities, and the worst part was that she'd had absolutely no control over her rage. He'd managed to nail her in her most raw, most tender spot.

"You will learn that physical combat with a Lith'hah warrior is not a wise choice for anyone—human or Lith'hah." His voice held the faintest trace of a growl.

She stilled when she knew that he was right. He was a thousand times stronger and bigger than she was, and she had lunged at him with what was essentially a pen. Besides, she'd reached her pain threshold with the arm twisted behind her back.

"I am going to release you," he said into her ear. "If you try something like that again, you will be locked up in one of our holding cells—and trust me, you do not want that."

He let her go carefully and with surprising gentleness.

Tia walked to the wall and leaned back against it, massaging her shoulder. She dropped her head against the cool surface. "The...elder... She— None of you know what you're talking about," she whispered.

He walked deliberately to where she stood now massaging the circulation back into her arm.

Tia felt her pulse speed up a notch. It seemed to do that whenever this man came within a foot or two away from her. A bead of sweat trickled from her hairline and down the side of her neck.

When he was right in front of her, the general placed one palm flat against the wall and leaned in, staring into her eyes. But still he remained unnervingly silent.

Tia willed herself to return the stare, unflinching. She didn't pull away as he grazed the back of one finger against her cheek. She felt herself drawn to him. She wanted to feel the heat of his skin against her own. But he wasn't like Ima. With Ima, she'd felt completely comfortable and at ease. With this man, there was something feral, something like a live current that felt dangerous to Tia. Being close to him tensed every muscle in her body with desire. Tia struggled to contain the strength of emotions raging through her body.

He dropped his hand. "Now the puzzle is beginning to take shape," he said quietly.

"You know nothing about me," Tia repeated in a faint voice.

He placed both palms against the wall on either side of her head and leaned closer.

There was a charge that crackled between them, so strong it was almost solid, sparking and popping in the air as the moment stretched out. Tia took in the lines of his full mouth, his high cheekbones, and the vibrations that ran through her body when she met his eyes.

He leaned in and planted his lips softly against hers.

Blood pounded in Tia's ears as everything in her body responded with a longing that frightened her. What was it about this guy that made her respond to him like this?

She parted her mouth under his and took his tongue between her lips.

He growled in the back of his throat, lifting her under her arms and pressing her body against the rock wall with his.

Tia moaned softly, wrapping her legs around his waist. She tangled her fingers in his hair and arched her body against him. She felt the ramrod length of his erection pulse between them.

She pulled her mouth away. "Please," she gasped.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "I will not harm you," he said. His voice was tight and his breathing ragged.

She shook her head. "I need...to think. I need time alone... Just... Please..."

He stopped and looked into her eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was steady. "Clearly, you were not aware your mother was a Lith'hah."

She licked her lips. "If she was." She desperately needed to be alone. Ever since she'd crossed the damn border into beast territory, she felt as if she'd been blasted with bomb after bomb of confusion. Everything she'd ever known as solid, hard fact was suddenly blown into shards that were raining back on her, embedding themselves painfully into her skin. And having this man pressed against her was not helping.

He studied her face as closely as she'd seen him studying the map earlier. Something shifted around his eyes. Not quite a softening but a sort of relenting as he eased her onto the floor. "You will have the peace of the den until this evening. Ima will bring the evening's meal."

She watched him walk toward the door. His bronzed shoulders were broad and glistening with the sheen of sweat. The rectangle of skin slung low on his hips skimmed the tops of large, powerful thighs. He was all tightly corded muscle and power. Not power she was accustomed to, like that in machines, but raw, coarse, natural power that unfurled and lengthened with the spark of an emotion, not the touch of a button.

When he paused at the door, Tia lifted her eyes to his face.

Something flitted across his features and he paused for a moment. But then he opened the door and exited without another word.

Tia exhaled in the silence that followed, allowing herself, at last, to slide down the wall and crumple to the floor.

Inuku had rounds to make and training to observe, but he put them all on hold. His mind was still reeling from the contact with the female, not to mention just having learned that she was part Lith'hah. It was a jolt he hadn't bargained for—earth-shattering really. Lith'hah, when mating as humans, did not pass along the Lith'hah gene.

They were descendents of the legendary saber-tooth tigers. Only when mating in their cat form could females conceive—it was a trait perfected through centuries of evolution to protect the species from extinction. It ensured not only the survival of the

species, but that the power of their abilities did not diminish or dilute with interbreeding. It was the reason they'd managed to survive for so long intact.

Until now that is. Now their existence hinged upon those very same abilities the Ancients had taken such great pains to preserve.

His cock was still painfully erect and a run would do him good to release some of the energy coursing through his veins. He removed the rectangle of skin from around his hips and tied it across his torso. Lith'hah were very comfortable with nudity, but the humans among them were less so. As commanding general of Rawa's forces, Inuku was often in the presence of humans—the ones being integrated, those who'd chosen to live amongst Lith'hah, prisoners awaiting an elder's request to scan and probe. To put those humans at ease, he followed the advice of elders and fell into the habit of tying the thinnest of deerskins around his hips. It was annoying and uncomfortable at first, but now he'd become accustomed to the feel of it against his body.

He shifted into his cat form and bounded up the mountainside to the royal den. When he arrived, he stood on his hind legs and retracted into his lithe human form, retying the skin around his hips. His erection had subsided somewhat, but any thought of the human female, however brief, sent blood rushing back between his legs. Inuku knew he needed to keep his mind on matters of pride security.

He greeted the guards in passing and headed onto the terrace in front of the den's entrance. The Leader King and Queen were seated on a bench strewn of wood and twine, deep in discussion with their foreheads close together.

Inuku cleared his throat and bowed his head. "Your Majesties."

Rawa looked up and flashed a grin. "Come, Inuku. I don't know why you insist upon the formalities. Sit with us. Sehra and I were discussing areas the shield may need further reinforcement—"

"The human leader is part Lith'hah," Inuku blurted out.

Sehra jerked her head up.

Rawa stared at Inuku. "That's impossible."

Inuku paced the marble floor. "Grand Elder Lyra read her. I knew she was different... When I saw her on the day of the attack—she was faster, stronger, leaped higher than any of her warriors."

Sehra shook her head. "Lith'hah traits are only passed when mating in cat form—no human female could have survived a mating with a male in his cat form..."

Inuku paused before repeating what the grand elder had said. "Her mother was the Lith'han."

Rawa sucked in his breath, his eyes widening. "Still... The Lith'hah genes cannot pass..." He furrowed his brow. "The grand elder read it? She was sure?"

Sehra stood and walked to the edge of the terrace, looking out over the pride grounds. Then she echoed what Inuku had heard the grand elder say earlier.

"The Ancients have their reasons, strange as they may seem to us," she said softly. "What does this human leader look like?"

Inuku ran a hand through his hair. "She has tried to cover it up, but the truth is beginning to show. From what I can see, she looks like a Silver."

Now Rawa stood too. "A Silver...?" He glanced at Sehra then back to Inuku. "Are you absolutely certain, Inuku?"

The shimmer of a few straggling hairs on the female's arms, the roots at her scalp, the glittering silver-gray eyes—all flashed through Inuku's mind. He nodded. "There is no doubt."

Rawa let out a low whistle. "There is only one female, of *any* descent, who has lived among the humans."

The three of them looked at one another before Sehra nodded. "I'll summon her. I don't know how I will tell her—Kessa Lyah, the great Leader Queen of the Northern Territories—that we are holding one of her young against their will, in captivity."

Rawa shook his head again. "Be sure to let her know that same young of hers led the attack on our Healing Grounds."

Sehra shot him a look before settling cross-legged on the terrace floor and closing her eyes. "I don't have access to her thoughts," she said, before going into that silence that all Internals connected to. "She is a very private Lith'han. But I will send word to one of her guards, a female I've communicated with in the past. As soon as I receive a response, I will let you know."

When it was clear that Sehra was on her journey into the deep well of knowledge, Inuku turned to Rawa. "Brother, I have questions. The human female..."

Rawa pierced his long-time friend with a gaze for a moment before shaking his head. "Of all the eligible and willing females in the pridelands, only *you* would desire the one female who attempted to decimate us."

Inuku rubbed his forehead. "I don't know what it is, but I feel the intense urge to bond with her, Rawa."

Rawa grinned. "It's the mating urge, you monkey. It's what I felt for Sehra—it's the coding of the Ancients that comes alive when you meet the one you're destined to be with."

"Why would the Ancients want me to mate with a human female?" Inuku asked.

Rawa shrugged. "They have their reasons."

Inuku shook his head. "I wish They would communicate some of them to us. This human leader is a formidable warrior, but even though she has the blood of a Lith'han, she cannot shift."

Rawa gave him a strange look. "You do not believe that somehow means she is less than, do you, Inuku?"

Inuku rubbed his eyes as he searched for words. "Less than, no. She is, without doubt, a fierce leader, incredibly sharp, intelligent and...sensual. She seems precisely the type of warrior I would select to lead my forces."

Rawa laughed. "And precisely the type of female you would take to your bed skins."

Inuku grinned, knowing his friend was right.

Rawa tilted his head to one side. "So what is it then? Do you believe she would be an unwavering enemy of the Lith'hah even when she possesses Lith'hah genes?"

Again Inuku shook his head. "No," he said slowly. "But she did not know she was Lith'hah, and she resists the fact."

Rawa shrugged. "It is to be expected. She has learned something about herself from those she does not know and has been taught to mistrust. She needs time to know it in her own mind."

"Yes," Inuku agreed, "but if she does not know herself—if she does not know what she is capable of and what her limits are—how can anyone else know her?"

Inuku saw understanding dawn in Rawa's eyes. "Yes," the Leader King said quietly. "I know you better than you know yourself, my brother." A smile played on his lips. "None of us are completed works, Inuku. We are constantly changing and evolving." He glanced at his Queen. "Even those of us who claim to know ourselves well need to get to know ourselves through the eyes of those who love us."

Inuku gave him a confused look. "What are you talking about?"

Rawa chuckled. "I believe you have met your match with this female."

Inuku stared at Rawa. Could it be true? Could he grow to care for a human female as he would care for one of his own? But she's not a human female, he reminded himself. She is also, as she pointed out, fully Lith'hah. *Even though she cannot shift.* Would that be an issue if they were to mate? He thought of the pure joy in running alongside a female he'd bonded with in her cat form. How would it be to never experience that with one's mate?

He shook his head. "Perhaps she would be better off with a human male," Inuku said. "They'd have more in common than if she were to be mated with one of us."

"She is one of us," Rawa reminded him. "And let her decide what she'd be better off with."

"She is one of us and yet she's not, Rawa," Inuku said quietly. "She's her own. With a female like that, I'd be worried no one could be *her* match. She's utterly unique. I've no doubt she doesn't even know what she's capable of—especially if she has had to hide her true strengths from other humans throughout her life."

Rawa nodded. "Not to mention Silver blood runs through her veins," Rawa pointed out.

Inuku sobered. He knew Rawa was referring to his personal struggle to win Sehra from a den that would never agree to her union with a male of lower lineage. In fact,

she had been promised to the Emerald Leader King Kelum of the Eastern Territories when Rawa and Sehra fought for the right to love one another despite what some considered his lesser lineage and External ability.

"I've heard the Silver Kessa Lyah is a progressive Leader Queen," Inuku said.

Rawa nodded. "I've heard the same. But this is her young."

Lith'hah females protected their young with vicious ferocity, acting first if they thought their young were in danger and thinking later. If Kessa Lyah thought any of them were harming her young, there would be carnage, and the Council would deem it appropriate.

He thought about the human female—whose name he still did not know, he thought grimly. There was no doubt now that she awakened the mating urge in him. But whether she was his destined mate remained to be seen. That would require more time together, he would need to inhale her scent and open his senses to her to see if theirs was a story written in the stars.

Sehra stirred.

Inuku immediately brushed aside his thoughts. He wanted to hear what news Sehra brought back of the human female's mother.

But before Sehra could utter a word, the alarms began to blare.

* * * * *

Tia had been rummaging through memories of her mother and searching for clues when the horns sounded. They reminded her of the battle horns from old movies, calling soldiers to action. The sound made her blood boil and her muscles tense in anticipation.

She scrambled up from the floor where she'd been sitting to the small window and peered outside. Something was wrong. She saw elders directing some of the larger males, who, judging from their size and build, Tia assumed had to be high-ranking warriors. Those same warriors shouted commands, and within minutes, those in human form had transformed into giant cats.

Tia caught her breath at the sight of them all. She didn't think she would ever get used to seeing it—a man or a woman one minute, a giant, large-jawed, vicious-looking beast the next. They stretched out, grew fur, their teeth sharpened and extended, claws came out, and there were deafening roars as they dropped on all fours.

Suddenly, there were hundreds of them. Tia had no idea where they were all coming from, but they poured in from the woods and the mountains. Within minutes, there were in formation. Neat rows of black, brown, tan, white, red cats, growling and throwing their heads back.

Something had definitely happened to piss everyone off. An attack somewhere. Tia wondered what the target was and who led it. Her heart began to race at the thought of human craft in beast territory. This was the opportunity she needed.

She saw the grand elder who'd been in the den with her earlier, Grand Elder Lyra. She was directing several humans in slate-gray outfits. Tia's eyes grew round as she recognized many of her own band members. She wanted to call out to them, "Limak! Umar! Priya! Azena!" but they would never hear her in the chaos.

She watched in amazement as the beasts lowered to the ground so the humans could climb onto their backs, her own band members! None of them were being coerced and yet not a single one of them protested. They seemed as motivated to move into battle as they had been when she led them.

Tia placed her hands against the cold wall for support. How could they so easily have shifted alliances? "Traitors!" she wanted to shout but remembered the words of the grand elder. The incredible news that she was one of *them*. That made *her* a traitor to both sides. And the attraction she felt for their general – didn't *that* make her the biggest traitor of all?

She had been treated well, for a prisoner. She knew her people were also being treated well. They looked healthy, with not a scratch on their bodies. In fact, they seemed completely at home.

But we're not at home, she reminded herself. Regardless of what it was like under Zul's rule, the human territories were all any of them knew.

Once the formation was complete, the commanding warriors moved to the front and transformed. As they began to move, Tia saw Ima run, shifting into a large white cat in the process, and fall into step with the others.

Tia stepped back from the window, her heart thudding wildly in her chest. If Ima was in the formation, she wasn't at her post.

Tia moved quickly to the door and opened it a crack. There was no one there. She opened it wider.

The cats were moving past the den now. The air was alive with the energy of battle and the troops were focused on a single point somewhere in the distance. They did not notice the lone female who stepped out in their midst.

One cat, a large chestnut-colored one, stopped to sniff her. He looked at her curiously, nudging the shift dress she wore.

Tia froze, staring into the wild, blazing orange eyes of the beast.

It looked at the humans on the backs of the others then back at her.

Tia realized it was trying to make sense out the fact she wasn't wearing the "uniform" the other humans had on. But the beast lowered and she understood with a jolt that he expected her to climb on.

Without another thought, Tia pulled herself up onto the wide, muscled back of the chestnut cat.

He slid easily back into formation, and they began to pick up speed.

Tia gripped the cat's mane and tucked her chin into her chest as the wind whistled past.

She didn't know where she was going. She was unarmed, without a protective cloak and riding on the back of the enemy. She held on for dear life.

* * * * *

Tia heard the battlefield well before they arrived. She knew those sounds well. When the first blast of explosives and whizzing light missiles reached her ears, Tia felt a surge of rage course through the beast she was riding. He lunged forward, going even faster.

Tia dug her fingers into his shoulders and pressed her thighs against his ribs so she wouldn't be thrown off. She had a feeling he wouldn't stop to retrieve her if she fell. She noticed the other humans weren't having nearly as difficult a time holding on. Their uniforms seemed to seal them somehow to the cat they were riding.

When the formation branched off into two streams, Tia guessed they were surrounding the battlefield. It's what she would have done. They tore through the trees and Tia ducked and swayed to avoid low-hanging branches.

When they burst into the clearing where the battle was raging, Tia's throat went parched. This was not an attack on a military target. She could make no sense of what was taking place before her.

There was a gaping wound in the ground where explosives were dropping, almost methodically. It seemed random to Tia, but she knew it couldn't be. There was something about this spot that her superiors wanted destroyed. But it was a spot the beasts seemed intent on saving.

Humans in burgundy cloaks were being beamed onto the ground in large, rose-tinted columns of light. As soon as they fully materialized, they took up their Escobars and began warding off cats racing toward the deepening crevice. Other burgundy cloaks had begun to guide a pipe into the ground. Inserting it like a straw into a thick shake.

This attack was not about enemy threat, Tia calculated. It was about whatever was in that ground. She saw with horror that the cats were literally throwing their bodies between the missiles and the torn, tattered earth.

Tia slid off the cat she'd been riding. She had felt his shock and horror upon first witnessing the scene. It mirrored hers. Tia was no stranger to battle, but there had always been a code of honor she adhered to. She'd always known it was her own and one not always shared by others, but she stuck by it. And this... What she saw now left her with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. It just felt *wrong*. There was no obvious target, no enemy threat, no opposing army. Just a constant barrage against empty land that the cats were sacrificing their lives to save.

She shook off the shock and confusion. The attack wasn't by Stealth Blades—this was an official attack by the human Force. Somehow, they'd found out about the shield and a way to breach it. Surely they knew what they were doing? If this was the chosen target, there had to be some tactical reason behind it. And if she wanted to get out of

these territories, she needed to get closer to the area being destroyed. She would have to get in the direct line of vision of the Lightning Craft.

A sliver of doubt flashed through her mind. Would they pick her up? What if they thought she was one of the enemy? She certainly looked like she could be. But there could be Stealth Blades in those craft. She had to take the risk or be stranded here forever. She would come back for the Blades that wanted to return. The others could stay if that's what they chose.

Tia moved swiftly, ducking and leaping among cats, humans in slate-gray outfits, and hooded, cloaked humans wielding Escobar beamers. She was the only one in a short shift dress. She'd easily be spotted as she made her way toward the carnage.

If there were Blades on board, they had to know who she was, even from that distance. No doubt they had sent missions out to search for survivors of the attack she'd led. The missions had obviously failed—if they were launched at all, she thought grimly—since she was still here. But even if there were no attempts to recover survivors, the burgundy cloaks had a data feed that would immediately recognize her if she was spotted.

She stopped just short of the chasm in the earth and stared, wide-eyed, at the gash her fellow humans had torn into the ground. Black liquid pooled at the bottom of the wound and Tia had to step back. She was feeling faint, almost as if the gash were in her own flesh. As if the bombardment had occurred on the terrain of her own soul.

She stumbled back and fell to one knee. The last thing she heard was the scream of an Escobar beamer.

Chapter Six

Inuku had seen the human leader from the corner of his eye and was swiftly weaving through the chaos to get to her when he saw the cloaked, hooded figure of one of the invaders reach her first.

He shot across the stretch of land to where she lay, certain he was tearing muscle fibers from the sudden burst of speed. The hooded figure raised its light-sword and plunged it toward the crown of the female's head just as Inuku leaped through the air and sank his incisors into the cloak's strange mesh material.

Inuku tasted the metallic flow of blood in his jaws and tossed the cloaked figure aside, spitting out whatever blood had trickled into his mouth. Then he shifted into his human form and scooped the female over one shoulder. He spotted Ima, a lithe Violet in her cat form, and ran to her.

Her eyes took in the human draped over his shoulder and she lowered immediately so Inuku could climb onto her back. He grabbed a fistful of the Violet's mane and pulled himself up as the white cat bolted toward the line of trees.

Inuku rested the female on his thighs, as if she were straddling him, and cradled her head against his chest while he leaned forward to hold Ima's mane with his other hand.

He shouted a battle cry as they lunged toward the woods, retreating through the sounds of battle. Inuku couldn't bear to leave his warriors behind, but this female was unprotected. She didn't have the armor the elders had fashioned after examining the material of the human cloaks from previous prisoners. The cloaks were made of a sort of metallic mesh with wiring throughout. They were like a walking thunderstorm with information systems traveling throughout the entire length, a sort of visual information screen before the eyes, and a communication port that went into the ear.

In short, they were replicating what the Lith'hah did *without* wires and screens and ear ports. It's what the Lith'hah had been doing for centuries. Inuku thundered his cry again, his eyes stinging with frustration. His warriors were falling, and he was rushing away. But it was to save this human female's life—human-Lith'hah, he reminded himself—a female who might possibly be his mate. But one who thus far resisted her Lith'hah lineage. He acknowledged the urge to protect her coursing through his limbs. It was an urge one only had with a mate or pride member. Inuku felt as if the hand of the Ancients was guiding him and Ima and this human-Lith'hah female swiftly toward safety.

There was no physical wound on her. The damage would be on a psychic level. It was damage all Lith'hah who'd witnessed this latest savagery of the humans would

need to heal from. Inuku struggled to keep from seeing red. Struggled to keep the blind rage at bay.

They flew through the trees toward the pride grounds. Inuku's blood pounded furiously in his ears. How had the shield been breached? How had the humans learned of the Sacred Burial Ground of the Ancients?

Inuku knew the humans traded in minerals of the earth. They amassed piles of material possessions in the trading of these minerals and that seemed to be their only goal, the amassing of possessions.

He knew too, that the location of the Sacred Burial Ground had to have been chosen precisely because it was rich in those specific minerals. They were the blood of the planet. While cremation was the customary rite of the dead, some Lith'hah requested that their bodies be placed into the ground when they crossed. This was to nourish the earth with the material of their bodies and to add to the minerals and rivers of energy coursing through the planet, so those who walked its surface were in turn nourished in the endless cycle of all living things.

Those minerals and rivers of energy were the reason every single living organism was able to continue its existence, including the humans. What could they *possibly* be thinking as they tried to slice the body of the planet in half? Could their greed blind them so completely that they were willing to sacrifice their very souls? And how had they learned of the material at the sacred site? Had they been informed somehow? Or had they developed new advanced methods of detection?

Inuku shook his head. It was incomprehensible. In all his years, he'd been taught that the spirit nurtured the body and the body nurtured the spirit. To lower all other systems in the service of the body was not only mind-boggling it went against every Law of the Ancients. It was utter devastation—pure madness.

To be sure, there were Lith'hah who indulged in pleasures of the flesh—some to an excess—but they were duly punished, without mercy or exception and sent to spiritual council until they were whole again if they transgressed any of The Laws. But these humans—they seemed determined to sacrifice all.

The female stirred in his arms. She opened her eyes for a brief moment, circling her arms around his neck and settling her face against his chest before returning to the inner core she was most likely attempting to stitch back together.

Inuku tightened his hold on her. For whatever reason, the Ancients had brought her here to the Lith'hah. To *him*. And he would not question Their wisdom. Nor would he question the blinding urge to protect her as it mingled with an almost frightening hunger within his deepest self. It was the mating urge—he no longer doubted it. A jumble of emotions tossed within as Inuku struggled to imagine a life with a mate who could not shift. What of their cubs? Would they have the ability to change form? Again, he hung on to his faith in the wisdom of the Ancients—They have Their reasons, he told himself firmly.

As Ima descended along the mountainside, the pride grounds came into view. Inuku was not angry with her for leaving her post. It was a natural urge for any Lith'han to run to the defense of its mother when she was under siege. And Ima was a Violet. She was a protector among protectors.

But he had underestimated the human female, a mistake that could prove costly if she couldn't be revived. He would never underestimate her again.

Ima turned her head and pricked her ears for direction.

"To the grand elder," he said, "quickly."

She raced to the den of Grand Elder Lyra, who was already waiting outside.

"I've lit the Barlo," the grand elder mumbled. She looked as if she had been waiting for them. "Place her by the healing fire."

Inuku slipped off Ima's back and carried the human to the thick sheepskin laid out next to the smoldering flame. There were stones of varying hues placed in positions around the cave. Stones with energies only a grand elder knew how to manipulate. It was the healing wisdom of his kind, and for the millionth time since he became general of the King's forces, Inuku was immensely grateful.

The grand elder sat on the other side of the fire, making signs and symbols with her hands as she chanted the language of the Ancients.

Inuku and Ima, who'd shifted back into human form, stepped back to the den's entrance, allowing the grand elder space to perform her ritual.

Inuku clenched and unclenched his fists, torn by the desire to return to his warriors and to stay to ensure the safety of the human-Lith'hah female. The latter won out, enforcing even further the mating urge he'd been denying.

Ima placed a hand on his arm. "It is out of our hands now."

He nodded. "It enrages me nonetheless."

She offered a look of understanding. "If it helps, I glimpsed briefly into the human's thoughts."

Inuku gave the Violet his full attention. "What did you see?"

"Fractures. The plane of reality she existed within has been smashed into as wide a chasm as the Sacred Burial Ground of the Ancients. The grand elder is undoubtedly making an attempt to mend it, but not in the way it was constructed before."

Inuku watched the flame flicker as the grand elder's chanting became one long uninterrupted train of sacred phrases. He began to slip into trance with the chanting but pulled himself back. Still, he managed to touch some of the Divine Void the grand elder was invoking. Once again, he was filled with awe at the immensity of what Internals faced each time they entered the Void. It was simply breathtaking. Inuku hadn't even entered, but from just outside the periphery, he could see how large and vast and empty—yet pumping with life—that silent space was that Internals traversed on a regular basis. Then, without knowing how or why it came to him, Inuku was clear about what he must do.

"With your permission, General, I would like to return to the battlefield."

Inuku shook his head. "No," he said. His voice was unwavering in its certainty. "We cannot fight this battle with the humans on their terms. They have spent many years perfecting the art and science of destruction. We must approach this from another angle."

He walked out of the den, with Ima on his heels, and looked into the woods toward the Sacred Burial Ground. "Send a message to all available Internals. Have them throw up the strongest shields they can around our warriors and then around the Burial Ground. Tell them to seal the shield back with the original, but it will now hold a new formation and pattern."

He clenched his jaw as more and more pieces of a new strategy fell into place. "Tell the warriors to stop focusing on physical warfare immediately, and rely solely on their internal strengths. Order all Externals to retreat—to find cover among the trees and lend their psychic energy to every Internal. *Now.*"

She nodded as understanding dawned on her sharp Violet features. But before closing her eyes and descending into the waves of the Great Void, she said, "Oh— I also received word from Queen Sehra. The great Leader Queen Kessa Lyah is on her way."

Inuku rubbed his forehead, praying to the Ancients for guidance. He would need it.

* * * * *

Tia was not awake. And yet she was wide awake. It was like a dream-vision, but she was far more conscious—her body was not conscious but *something* was, and she was an active participant. She was enveloped in darkness, as if in space, with pinpricks of light surrounding her. There were stars, some bigger than others in the space around her, stretching into eternal distance. And she was not alone. There was a presence with her, not a body, but a sort of flame. An old, familiar, kind presence. It seemed to be guiding her, coaxing her.

She was not afraid. Tia stretched out her arms, allowing the cool feel of darkness to flow around her skin. It was not air like she was used to. It had a feel to it, as real as her body.

But something was broken. Tia could feel the sharp edges, stinging like shattered glass, pieces that were *her*. They were a part of who she had been. And they were scattered throughout the empty, surrounding darkness. Instinctively, she reached down to pick one up, fingering it carefully. It held memories, images, emotions that snaked their way through her fingers.

She dropped it and shrank back. A wave of sadness rolled toward her, filling her up from her toes through her belly, into her chest and up to the crown of her head, finally spilling out from her pores. She screamed and clawed at the silence, letting more and more pour forth. It was ages of pain. A kind of torment not many could hold together in one psyche.

Not many humans.

Tia stopped short at the voice that wasn't a voice. It was information that was outside her at the same time that it was inside her. It flowed into and out of her, surrounded her. Yes, she realized. Not many humans could hold that kind of torment in one psyche.

But a Lith'han's blood runs through your veins, my child. Your mother is from a line of great Silver cats. And you are her young.

In here, in this darkness and silence, Tia knew, without a shadow of doubt, that it was true. She could feel the weight of it in her bones. Here, only Truth existed. Everything flowed in and out of everything else. There was no room for falsities. The future and the past were one long, connected thread, existing together in one plane and spiraling both above her and below. She saw it as clearly as if her eyes were open. As clearly as if she were awake in broad daylight. She saw the interlocking web of organic matter, from plants and trees, to animals, birds, humans and Lith'hah, to the mountains and seas and stars and the most distant of planets. All of it was one extensive, pumping organism.

What you were had to be shattered, my child, so that a new you could be born. As the phoenix from the ashes, so too shall you shall rise from the rubble of this death.

Yes, death. That's what it had felt like. Like one version of her—Tia, the Stealth Blade, Tia the band leader, Tia who fought to help annihilate an entire race of beings had died.

She allowed the last of the flow of pain to trickle out, leaving a vast emptiness in its place. She picked up one piece of shattered glass, which she now discovered was not glass at all, but a clear, sparkling gel-like material. It looked as if it should be sharp, but it wasn't. She knew she would have to fill the emptiness. She would have to take those shattered pieces and turn them into something whole, something that fit together properly, something new.

She began the process. It was painstaking at first. There were so many tiny pieces, each overflowing with information, so much to digest and incorporate. The past and present and future all collided together in one space, existing as one.

There were the early memories of her childhood. Tia saw how deeply her mother loved her and how difficult it had been for her to conceal her true self, but that she had done it to protect her children. Much in the same way Tia had. She saw the world then—pre-Zul. And that he was not the reason they were in the mess they now found themselves in. This trajectory had begun well before Zul and his cronies. There had been a break in the thread in ancient times that led to now. A sort of illness that had built up, gathering momentum and force.

If they didn't bring things back into balance soon, everything would be destroyed. And somehow this small act, gathering the shards of her former self and putting them back together in a new formation, was part of that healing. She didn't know how or why, but she knew it was critical work. Critical for any kind of future...for any species.

One by one, she picked up the shards, examining them. She smelled them, tasted their contents, absorbing what needed to be absorbed and reshaping the rest to fit differently, in a new pattern. Like this, she went through the world of her teen years, her early twenties, motherhood. She saw her own children as they grew, her grandchildren and the rapidly changing world as Zul came to power and grew through the influence of his supporters and other likeminded men of the world.

From here, where everything was connected, she saw the strands linking one thing to the next, all the way until it was clear how some distant, far off incident or person affected her. From here she could see it all. The vast, eternal, infinite web of time and space, glittering like a sea of jewels, dotted with flickering points. The points were events and people. And from each point of light there were other strands, shooting off into multiple directions with one being thicker than the rest.

That was the decision, Tia realized. The thickest strand was the path chosen. It reminded her of the choose-your-own-adventure books she'd read as a child, where the end was always predetermined, but the path— *You chose your own path*. It could be an easy one or a bumpy one, but that was where the choice was.

She saw her mother, shaping her features so they aged according to human biology, in a world that feared her greatest gifts. Here is where reshaping the pieces became more of a challenge. The emotions were too raw. Tia felt as if she were being sliced and nicked, bleeding at every turn. How much of the pain from her mother's absence had affected the makeup of this...whatever it was that had shattered. It wasn't her mind or her brain. And it wasn't her heart. It was something else. A heartmind. A part of the psyche that was wired to both.

Your soul.

Tia started. She'd become so absorbed in the task at hand, at mending, picking up splintered pieces, that she'd forgotten she wasn't here alone. There was the Presence.

I am only here if and when you require my assistance, my child.

Tia tried to see the exact spot where the voice seemed to emanate from, but whenever she looked directly toward it, she saw nothing. However, if she looked just off to the side, she could see the faintest glow of whitish, buttery light. It was the source of the Presence. There were other glows like it throughout the web. But none were as close.

You are free to take as long as you need to complete the healing. I've shielded you from communication and transmission. Go now. Do your work.

Tia didn't fully understand what she was being shielded from and why, but she was eager to go back to the shards of her old self. She was eager to see the memories, however painful, and to relive them and reshape them. To transform pain into something beautiful and powerful.

And right now, there was a deep chasm right at the spot where her mother had left.

* * * * *

Inuku sat next to Ima in the shade of a large Mun'hai tree. The Violet had been in the Void for over an hour. It was times like these that Inuku cursed his External ability. If he had even a drop of Internal blood in him, he could drift into the Great Void to see what was happening on the other side of the world. But he was an External—his ability was physical, not psychic. And being an External was, in part, what made him the stellar general he was.

Ima's expelled a loud breath before her eyes flickered open.

Inuku snapped to attention.

"The shield is now strong," she said, "the humans' explosives are no longer penetrating."

He nodded. "Have they retreated?"

Ima touched his arm. "Yes. Some lag behind, still trying to breach the new shield but without success." She drew in a sharp breath. "The damage is extensive, General. We have lost a great many of our warriors."

Inuku stood, electric rage coursing through his limbs. "Yes. They have become desperate and forsaken all honor." He looked at Ima. "How did they know where to hit?"

She pursed her lips. "The cloak of the human female. It was fitted with some sort of recording device and transmitted a tracking signal. It must also have some sort of environmental detection device, similar to the way Lith'hah are able to sniff out certain minerals and metals."

Inuku slammed his fist into the open palm of his other hand. "And we sent the cloak to the Council!"

Ima nodded. "It had been sitting in Council chambers during several meetings before anyone began examining it. That gave them enough time to find the signal, even through the shield, and devise a way to breach it."

"And what they must've heard from those meetings—Council often discusses the protection of Sacred Sites at meetings! It would have been child's play for the humans to deduce which of the minerals they sought were at which Sacred Site based solely on Council discussions."

"They have too much information now, General. Enough to wipe us out completely."

Inuku clenched his fists. "That won't happen." He turned toward his den. "Were you able to see what the grand elder is doing with the female?"

She shook her head. "She has shielded them both—scrambled the frequencies so none of us can see into or receive information from that point on the continuum. We all feel the results of what is happening, and the web is shifting underneath us as a result, but none of us can—"

They both turned at once toward the sound of someone tearing through the trees.

Inuku had immediately begun to shift, readying himself for whatever it was thundering unannounced through the woods. He noticed Ima was already on all fours.

But what emerged from the line of trees took his breath away.

He halted the shift and went back to human form, dropping to one knee and bowing as the Silver cat before him stood up on hind legs and shifted back into her human form.

"Your Majesty," he said with a bow.

Ima shifted back to her human form as well and bowed. "Ancients. It's Kessa Lyah," she whispered.

Inuku had heard stories of the legendary Leader Queen, but had never seen her up close. Even as an elder, she was voluptuous, moving with a languid sensuality that made any Awakened male growl with yearning.

She swept past them. "Where is my daughter?"

Inuku stood and strode past her, blocking her path. "She is with Grand Elder Lyra right now, Your Majesty. They cannot be disturbed."

The Queen's eyes flashed. "I know. I was in the Void. Show me to my daughter *now*."

Inuku paused for only a moment before spinning on his heel and leading the Queen into the grand elder's healing den.

When they entered, Inuku felt the crackle of the air. It was alive with whatever the grand elder and the human female were engaged in.

The Queen went immediately to the human-Lith'han, sinking to her knees at the woman's side. She leaned close, examining the younger woman's features, and reached out with a trembling hand, stopping just short of making contact. She drew a shuddering breath, placed both hands lightly on her thighs and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

Tia bent down to pick up one of the remaining shards when a warmth flooded her senses. It was a perfumed kind of quiet, the kind that wafts in through a window in the summer. A honeysuckle breeze.

She smiled and went back to filling the void where her mother's loss was. She felt her presence now, and knew her mother had never left her. She lived and breathed within Tia, within the silence of the darkness that had always been there.

Tia trusted this silence, the magic of what she was creating...the symphony of the Unseen.

She had almost all the pieces in place. She stood back and gasped in delight. It was a sight to behold. A glittering marvel of a masterpiece, perfect in its imperfection. A construct that had once been brittle and delicate now stood tall and resilient,

immovable. It had sealed tears all over—in the spots where Tia had molded the pieces together, giving it the look of a shattered vase that had been glued together.

But it was alive. A life force pumped through it...*her* life force. Tia knew this—whatever it was she was creating—was a part of her. When she moved, *it* moved. It was stunning and beautiful and so powerful it was almost frightening. It was her.

Chapter Seven

Inuku knew the females were coming out of the Great Void when the temperature in the room shifted. When an Internal went into the Void, the temperature in a room or in the immediate vicinity always went down a notch.

Ima placed a light hand on his arm.

The human-Lith'han was the last to open her eyes.

"Water," the grand elder ordered.

Ima sprang into action, pouring water for all three and quickly carrying the cups to them.

Inuku moved immediately to the side of the human-Lith'han, his urge to protect stronger than ever. He cradled her head against his forearm, helping guide the cup toward her lips.

She drained the water and held out the cup for more.

Inuku handed it to Ima to refill.

He looked at the female in his arms and wanted to throw everyone out of the den. She was delicate and fierce all at once. Her eyes blazed like silver diamonds and there was a sheen of silver hair on her body. She now looked every bit the Silver she was descended from. Every muscle in his body tightened with wanting. But he ground his teeth and reined it in.

The Leader Queen flicked a glance at him before becoming absorbed in her daughter again. "Tianelle," she said softly.

Tianelle. So that was her name. Inuku rolled it around in his head.

"Mom...?"

"Oh Tianelle, my baby," the Queen crooned. Tears shone in her diamond eyes. She cupped her daughter's face in both hands. "I had no idea..."

The female – Tianelle – caught the Queen's hands in hers. "Mom!" Her lips began to tremble. "That was you... At the end – that was you."

The Queen nodded. "I wasn't there... I haven't been there – the least I could do was be here now to –"

"It's okay, Mom. I get it. I saw –" She looked around at all of their faces, settling on Inuku's.

Heat raced through his limbs as he involuntarily tightened his grip on her.

"Everything," she whispered. "I saw everything." She gently loosened herself from Inuku's grip and reached for her mother. "I missed you, Mom," she said softly, swallowing a sob.

The Queen gathered her daughter into her arms. "I've always had dreams," she said, smoothing the younger female's hair. "And I searched and searched for answers in the Great Void, but could never decipher them." Tears dropped down her cheeks. "If I had known, I would have turned right around for you."

"I know." Tianelle's voice was petal soft, like a child's.

Inuku remained as silent as possible, wanting to respect the process of the Silver cat and her daughter – the *two* Silvers, he corrected himself.

When they separated, Tianelle looked at everyone. "We have to move fast," she said. Her voice was tight. "The humans are amassing one of the biggest offensives I've ever seen. Their plan is to wipe every last Lith'han off the face of the planet, and then they will begin fighting amongst themselves in earnest – eventually wiping each other out as well, until there is nothing left."

A hush settled in the den.

Grand Elder Lyra spoke first. "Tianelle has insight into the humans that we do not. She is of them, and they are of her. Her roots mingle with theirs." She paused, her eyes sparkling. "But she is very much a Lith'han as well. She is an Elemental, one of the rarest Lith'han traits to be passed down."

The Leader Queen drew in a sharp breath. "My grandmother was an Elemental. It skipped me, and I never knew about Tianelle..." She paused and seemed to collect herself. "When I first came back, I had almost lost all of my own Internal ability. I had to learn to tap into it again. Valren was very patient as I learned slowly to connect with him, in mind as well as body and spirit."

She glanced at the grand elder. "Tianelle, since you are here, under the care of Grand Elder Lyra, I'll not move you to my pride grounds, though every maternal urge in my body commands me to do just that. The grand elder is one of the best we have in mending and healing the psyche. I will meet with your Leader King and Queen," she said, "to make sure you are given the respect due a princess of the Silver lineage." She stood and strode purposefully to the door.

With her hand still on the door handle, the Queen paused and spoke low enough so only Inuku heard her next words. "Don't be misled for even a second, General. She may not be a shifter, but with a little practice, she'll be able to tear you apart with a single thought."

Inuku bowed his head. "I'll mind my claws, Your Majesty."

The Queen curled up one corner of her mouth. "It's not *your* claws I'm worried about, General."

He grinned, marveling at the Queen's instant transformation from emotional mother to fierce Queen.

"Tianelle," she said, addressing her daughter, "we need a constant feed on the humans' movements, darling."

"Already on it, Mom. They're regrouping as we speak."

The grand elder headed to the door, as well. "We must assemble at the Sacred Burial Ground of the Ancients."

Inuku nodded. "Ima, put out the orders. Make sure the cooks bring something fortifying to distribute."

Interesting—the human-Lith'hah, Tianelle, was an Elemental. He was still processing that fact. Elementals were rare, only a dozen or so ever existed in the same generation. As their name suggested, Elementals commanded the elements—earth, water, fire, air. Inuku wondered which of the elements this female commanded, and thought the idea of mating with this female couldn't possibly get more complicated. As it was, he was of a "lower" lineage than she and, regardless of how progressive most Lith'hah were nowadays, there were some who still abided by those outdated ideals. And then the matter that he could change form while she couldn't. Now there was the Elemental issue. The fact that she was an Elemental meant she would be needed on Council. She would be required to take an active role in the guidance and protection of the entire Lith'hah species. It was far more than he had ever bargained for when considering potential mates.

He didn't have to wait long to find out which of elements the human-Lith'hah commanded. With Tianelle on his back and Ima at his side, a small brigade of Lith'hah, including Grand Elder Lyra, traveled at a steady pace to the site of the recent attack.

They broke through the dense cover of trees to the field that he had, just hours before, left with an injured Tianelle in his arms. The injury, the full impact of it, had been to her psyche. That's what the grand elder had told him. The attack on the Sacred Grounds had been the equivalent to a blast in close range to Tianelle's heart.

Inuku couldn't believe his eyes. Other than the bodies of wounded and dead Lith'hah, the Grounds looked as if they had suffered not even a scratch. He turned and studied Tianelle, who had slid off his back and was walking to the center of where the gaping hole had been in the ground. By the look on the grand elder's face, Inuku knew the mending of the earth was Tianelle's doing. He guessed that while she was putting together the broken pieces of her psyche, she had also put together the tattered pieces of the earth.

He shifted back into his human form and placed the skin about his hips. He watched the female who he now readily admitted he felt the intense urge to mate with, kneel to the ground and feel the skin of the earth, as a healer might feel for a heartbeat. Every muscle in his body clenched with a yearning that surprised him. But he focused his attention on what needed to be done now.

"Ima, go with the grand elder and gather the wounded. Assist her in doing as much healing as necessary to get all those wounded back to the pride grounds for proper care."

Ima nodded then went to work.

Inuku surveyed the Sacred Grounds. This was the place of some of the holiest Lith'hah rituals and ceremonies. It was the Sacred Burial Grounds of the Ancients, not because the Ancients were buried there in truth, though some undoubtedly were, but because underneath this very spot was one of the most powerful meridians running through the planet. He did not know how many meridians there were in total. During lessons as a cub he had learned but now couldn't recall. What he and every other Lith'han knew for certain was that under these grounds ran live, pulsing arteries of the Great Mother. To sever any artery was to guarantee a slow death for the planet as a whole.

He took another look at Tianelle, who was seated cross-legged at the center of the scar that ran the length of where the humans had dropped their explosives. Her eyes were closed and she was far off in the Void somewhere, he was sure. That look was one all Internals wore when they were deep in trance as they traversed that vast darkness. She seemed completely oblivious to the activity around her.

He began to gather the bodies of the fallen warriors. Other generals, healers and Lith'hah from the surrounding prides soon joined as many warriors in the vicinity had heeded the alarm, running immediately to the Sacred Grounds to battle the intruders. It was a grim task, and Inuku soon became immersed in remembering his fallen warriors, honoring their valor and building pyres that would send the smoke of their bodies to the stars.

By nightfall, a far corner of the Grounds was dotted with the fires that would see the fallen warriors into the other side. Inuku was so wrapped up in making sure the warriors were sent off with the respect and reverence they deserved, that he hadn't even noticed the landscape had gradually changed shape behind him.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Ima asked.

Inuku had been standing with his hands clasped behind his back, watching the fires leap and stab into the night like lithe, ritual dancers. Now he turned to Ima. "What is?"

She looked at him with surprise for a moment, but then turned and pointed behind them, to the heart of the Grounds.

Inuku's eyes widened as he took in the sight. The line of scar tissue that had run along the wound of the earth was now a raised mound, a good five or six Lith'hah shoulder-heights tall. The mound meandered like a serpent along the earth, and at the very crest sat Tianelle.

"She has been sitting there the entire time," Ima said. "The wounded warriors have been watching her, finding their hopes lifting with the earth she has raised. They are calling her Earth Healer."

Inuku realized he was holding his breath, and let it out in a slow and shaky exhale. "She did that by herself? Without moving a muscle?"

Ima smiled. "The earth just seemed to rise up beneath her like a building wave of water, only much, much slower. It looks like she is adding layers of protection to the precious artery of the Great Mother."

Something broke and fell deep within Inuku at that moment, like a piece of a mountain during an earthquake, and he knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was drowning in a kind of desire he had never before experienced. It was a desire to merge completely and seamlessly with another soul until there was no delineation between where one ended and the other began. He knew they would have many issues to negotiate if they were to mate, but he knew too, that he wouldn't ever want another female. The thought of never being able to run alongside his mate in their cat forms still saddened him, but if Tianelle had the strength to let go of the past and move toward a new, unknown future, he would walk with her. Isn't that what the elders always taught the young Lith'hah—that in order to grasp new wonders they couldn't even imagine now, they had to give up attachments to the old ones?

In that moment, with the fires of the departed burning all around them and the earth rising into stronger scar tissue under the loving guidance of one female, Inuku knew he would sacrifice whatever it took to make their mating work.

As he watched her stir, Inuku swore Tianelle was the embodiment of the light of the Ancients Themselves.

* * * * *

Tia pulled out of the trance only when she was certain the wound was adequately protected. And, just for good measure, she had reached out to other smaller arteries that branched off this main one and raised smaller, barely discernible mounds above them as well. When she saw her work from above, in the Great Void, she saw that the main, winding mound and the ones branching off from it could almost resemble a dragon, and she was pleased.

She didn't know where the information or knowledge came from to do these things, but when she entered the silent darkness of the Void, the answers were all there. She didn't think about them, she simply *responded*.

She stood carefully, her legs wobbly beneath her. She tested them by taking a few small steps. When she was steady, she gingerly descended the mound.

The general was immediately at her side. He took her elbow and placed a cup of water in her hands.

Tia didn't care where it came from or who had brought it. She knew only that she was immensely grateful. In the Void, she had learned that this ability to command the element of earth was a gift passed down through generations of Silver cats. Some Sapphires had the gene to command water, some Emeralds had the ability to command air, and the Ambers could wield fire. Sometimes the elemental ability skipped generations, as with her mother, and sometimes it was dormant until something—like the shattering of this artery under the Sacred Grounds—jolted it to life.

When she looked around, she realized the general had led her to the dark edge of the tree line where there were very few Lith'hah. The fires on the pyres smoldered and the stench of burning flesh hung heavy in the air. Many of those who had come to help

had already headed for their respective homes after offering prayers and paying their respects to the fallen.

"General—" she began, but he interrupted her.

"Inuku." He took the cup from her hand and leaned down to place it on the ground.

She looked into his face and was unnervingly aware of how close he was. She was eye level with the hard, bronzed plates of his chest and his smell, that musky mixture of maleness and sweat, filled her senses. It was familiar and even somewhat comforting now. She knew, from her forays into the Void, that Inuku was the one in her dream-visions and that he was destined to be her mate. For the first time since she'd made actual, physical contact with the man from her dream-visions, she gave way to what her body had been telling her all along.

"Inuku..." she said, but couldn't move beyond those words. She placed her hands, palms flat, on his chest and closed her eyes. "I saw... I saw that you and I—we are like two swirls of water that form a complete drop. We were swirling around one another, creating a circle of energy that increased in speed..."

She felt his muscles tighten underneath her hands. Her eyes fluttered open. The look on his face set white-hot flames lapping at her skin.

He closed his hands around her wrists and moved her hands away. "You are an Elemental, I've heard," he said quietly. "And now I've seen that you command the earth in connection with the Great Mother herself." He leaned closer, so close she felt his breath against her lips. "But you do not command fire—do not play with it."

Her eyes widened. "Oh— I'm... I didn't mean to..."

He lifted one corner of his mouth, never taking his eyes off hers. "Don't apologize. But if you put your hands on me again, I can't promise I will have the strength or willingness to contain myself." He caressed her cheek with the back of one hand. "Come, Tianelle," he said softly. "You look pale. Let me take you back to the den so you can rest."

Tia allowed herself to sway against his hand. She was indeed feeling the effects of the effort she had expended in healing the wound of the Great Mother then in building up the layers of protection so no other force could access such a vulnerable, precious artery. And she knew there was a lot more fighting to come. At the edges of her vision, she had seen that her former commanding officer, Vishal, was heading up the next attack on Lith'hah territory. And this attack would be one of their most vicious offensives yet. Tia had seen them pull out the missiles and the powerful bombs they planned to detonate, to obliterate all resistance in "beast territory". She cringed inwardly at the thought that she had used the same words to describe her mother's kind. *My kind*, she thought, correcting herself.

Tia knew from her training as a Stealth Blade that soon all Lith'hah and human allies would be required to expend every ounce of strength and energy they had to battle the human Force, and the massive stores of weaponry they planned to use.

She stood back and nodded. "Yes," she said. Her voice was barely above a whisper. "We must rest."

Inuku slowly and deliberately removed the small square of skin from around his hips and slung it over one shoulder so that it lay diagonally across his torso.

Tia couldn't help but fasten her eyes to the solid, granite length of his cock. Her heart began to pump in overdrive and her hands itched to reach out and stroke him. By the time she realized that was precisely the intended impact, he had already begun to shift.

His mane glowed in the light of the moon, like a halo framing his face. And his eyes shimmered like gems at the bottom of a pool. He growled softly and bent low so she could climb onto his back.

Tia pulled herself up, grabbing fistfuls of his thick mane. As they surged through the trees, she felt his muscles rippling beneath her and wondered what it was like to *become* one's most animal nature. To run so free, with such abandon and joy through the wilds of raw and unrefined nature.

In the Void, she was as far away from the physical as a body could get. The silence of the darkness was the absence of physical limitations, it was the absence of delineation and duality while being a shifter, an External shifter, was to be fully grounded in the physical. To revel in the flesh and the senses.

A sadness took hold of her. She would never know. She was not a shifter. She was of them, yet she would never be them. Just as she had been of the humans but had never really belonged to them.

Is this how it would be then? She would spend the rest of her days never completely belonging anywhere? She would go through the rest of her life stuck in the halfway world where no one could meet her, no one could accompany her or understand her?

Her eyes threatened to fill, but she took a deep breath and shoved the thoughts away, straightening her spine. She had work to do—important work that could mean life and death for all Lith'hah and humans alike.

By the time they arrived at the den, Tia was half-asleep. She hadn't realized just how much of a toll immersing herself in the Void would take on her physically. She struggled to keep her eyes open as she slid off Inuku's back but leaned on him gratefully when she felt the warmth of his human body against hers.

And she didn't resist when she felt herself lifted up into his arms and carried into her room. As soon as she was laid down on the skins, she slipped into a deep sleep.

Chapter Eight

Inuku closed the door softly behind himself and headed straight to the grand elder's den. Inuku knew that was where everyone would instinctively congregate, and this was a night when a congregation was necessary. There was much to do and quickly. There was the smell of a hunt in the air, and they all felt it. In the same way any prey knew when it was being stalked, but had no idea from which direction the hunter would pounce, Lith'hah all over the territories were hooked in to the Internal network and the Externals all had their senses alert and wide open.

He broke into a short, quick sprint—as much from the tension in the air as from the need to shake off the desire coursing through his veins from being so close to Tianelle.

Several elders were already gathered at the grand elder's den and Ima loped in a few minutes behind Inuku. Slowly the den filled with decision makers and elders. When Rawa and Sehra arrived, the meeting was called to order.

"Who is transmitting to Internals in the network?" a Council member asked, once everyone was seated around the large stone table.

"I'll do it," Ima offered.

"I shall send out a live feed as the meeting progresses as well," Grand Elder Lyra said. "We must waste no time. I was with the Silver princess in the Great Void as she built the mound this evening. I wanted to ensure she was unharmed by forces she is not yet aware of—she is still new to her ability after all, though she wields it with remarkable skill for one so new. Still, there are rogue Lith'hah who may harbor ill will toward a princess they have not accepted, and there are areas of the psyche she has not yet learned to protect as she goes about her tasks."

The grand elder looked around the room before continuing. "In the princess's awareness, I saw that the humans plan to annihilate all Lith'hah resistance. They have enough knowledge and information from the device they had implanted into the princess's cloak to carry out their mission."

Inuku felt the room tense. "And they seem to have the weaponry and force necessary to carry out that mission a thousand times over," he said.

Rawa turned to him. "Then we must not fight them in a battle of weapons."

"No," Sehra agreed. "We must use our strengths then. We must do battle with whatever advantages we have—"

"Our abilities," Rawa finished.

"I have the Great Leader Queen Kessa Lyah," a grand elder said. "She speaks through me this night. She says—This will not be a battle like any other we have waged. We cannot outfight these humans."

"Listen to the Leader Queen," a Council member said, "she has lived among these butchers and barbarians."

"Let her speak!" admonished a visiting general from another pride.

The grand elder speaking for Kessa Lyah continued. "The Leader King Valren will, with the permission of the Council, dispatch one of our most powerful Internals to scout out a new location for Lith'hah. We must relocate..."

"It will have to be somewhere the Mun'hai tree can thrive," Sehra said, looking thoughtfully at Rawa.

"And it will have to be sheltered enough that we will not be found," Rawa said, nodding slowly.

"It can be like it was in the old days, when we first moved to these territories," Inuku added. "Fine for the occasional, isolated spotting of a Lith'han—"

"Yes, let them believe again that we are mythical creatures of old," Rawa said. "Our kind long outlive the humans. Soon, their stories will come from elders whose memories the younger generations will doubt."

"And the young will again believe that we never existed," Sehra added.

The grand elder spoke again. "Leader King Valren says—We are having our Internal scout lands across the great expanse of black waters, where the climate may be similar to these territories."

"Do a careful scan," Rawa said. "We want no humans anywhere remotely nearby."

"It would help if we were buffeted by mountains and bodies of water as we have been here," Inuku added.

Grand Elder Lyra did a sweep of those in the room. "Good. I have sent word to Valren and Kessa Lyah to inform us as soon as possible when they have found an adequate location. Once they have," she said, looking at Sehra, "perhaps you, Your Majesty, could scan the location, based on the feed you receive from the scout. When everyone is in agreement on the location, we shall all link to the Internal network."

"Including Externals?" Rawa asked.

She nodded. "We will need the combined energy of all Lith'hah for this endeavor. Once the location is confirmed, all Internals will submerge into the deepest Void, and all Externals will be at the temple, appealing in the most powerful way, to the forces to bend and refract space and time."

Kessa Lyah spoke again, via the male grand elder. "And if all goes as planned the Lith'hah as a species will simply vanish in the eyes of the humans."

"All that will remain of us on these grounds will be our temples, our mounds, our stone walls and buildings..." Sehra said. Her words were weighted with sadness.

Inuku felt it too. So many generations were birthed and reared here. The grounds of these territories had nurtured them well, providing home and shelter, rest and rejuvenation. It would be like severing a limb to leave here, knowing they would never return.

Even Grand Elder Lyra's voice was hoarse. "I will begin preparations for the temple worship for all Externals in this pride. Please instruct all prides to prepare immediately, Your Majesties," she said, pulling herself up on elderly bones and bowing to Rawa and Sehra. "Their finest temple space with the best of their sacred Barlo weed, and their most skilled drummers should lead the worship. All Internals should be instructed to eat and rest and prepare for the most strenuous effort of their lives. The Elementals among us are charged with the task of shielding the territories to the best of their abilities while the transition takes place."

Everyone else rose, and it seemed to Inuku that the room rippled with a heightened energy, laced through with the grief of loss.

"We have no time to spare," Rawa said. "Is everyone clear on their tasks?"

There was a chorus of "Yes" and nodding heads.

As they headed out of the grand elder's den, Inuku fell in step next to his Leader King Rawa and Queen Sehra. "Every Lith'han in the territories is now engaged in the process of defending themselves against one of the most brutal invasions we have ever faced."

Rawa rubbed the several-day-old stubble on his face and nodded. "Let us pray to the Ancients now that everything proceeds smoothly."

"It will," Sehra said, though her voice lacked certainty to Inuku's ears. "With the help of the Ancients, it will."

"General," Grand Elder Lyra called from behind them.

Inuku quickly embraced Rawa and Sehra before they changed form and made their way to the royal den. Then he stopped to allow the grand elder to catch up with him.

"A word," the grand elder said, ambling toward him.

Inuku nodded. "Of course."

"The Silver princess, though she is certainly an Internal, should worship at the temple with the External Lith'hah."

Inuku looked at the grand elder in confusion. "But wouldn't she be more helpful as an Internal?"

"She will still intuitively plug into the network, General. But since she is not a shifter..." The grand elder's creased, knowing eyes seemed to search over his shoulder for the right words. "She will need the energy generated through active worship to launch her completely into the network as a fully functional component—something Internals have known our entire lives. Right now the princess has access to only one small portion, the little bit that is necessary for her to do the work of the Ancients. And she has only discovered her Internal ability recently." She looked at him intently. "It would be the equivalent of providing basic, brief training to a young cub and then asking him to command the king's warriors in an epic battle."

Inuku stared at the old Lith'han. "But, Grand Elder, with all due respect, the human female...Tianelle—did she not heal the wound at the Sacred Burial Ground on her own?"

"That was certainly an impressive and unprecedented feat, General. The shielding of the grounds during the attack took the combined energy of all our Internals. For the task at hand we will have only our Elementals and a few Internals to shield *all* pride grounds in the territories while the rest of the Internals work to relocate our members. The princess is, without doubt, destined to be a powerful Elemental, but right now she is new and we do not know the extent of her abilities. She will need to feed on the energy of vigorous worship to sustain her efforts." She gave him a meaningful look. "I would rather she surprise us with her power, General, than lose her to our poor judgment."

Inuku nodded. He had never understood how completely vulnerable Internals could be, and the thought of it, when he was honest enough to admit it, frightened him. The idea of wielding such immense power as an Elemental was capable of while at the same time possessing a psyche that could shatter like an egg was overwhelming to an External such as himself—who spent the bulk of his time strengthening mind and body. The idea that Tianelle had the potential for such immense power while at the same time being so devastatingly vulnerable made Inuku want to watch over her for the rest of his life. To shield her from any and all harm so that she may expand and fulfill her highest potential. He vowed he would be there to see that day.

But for now, he would make sure Tianelle was at the temple. If that would help keep her safe, he would personally deliver her there himself if necessary.

The grand elder paused before turning to head back to her den. "Though I am playing it safe by having the princess at the temple during the transition, she will do her part in what needs to be done. Of that, I am absolutely certain. She was brought to us, at this juncture, by the Ancients for a reason. She will serve as a bridge, in a different capacity than her mother did, but a bridge she will certainly be."

* * * * *

Tia woke to the dark veil of night. She looked up through the skylight in her room and saw the stars blinking above. She felt a tingling on her skin, a sensation she was beginning to associate with a flash of knowing. And a second later, the knowledge that the attack from human forces was scheduled for twenty-four hours from dawn flashed through her mind.

Unable to sleep any longer, Tia got out of bed and grabbed one of the skins she'd been sleeping on and pulled it around her like a cape. She was surprised at how cold nights got around here, given how stifling the heat of the day was. She walked into the main area of the den. There, spread out across the large stone table, were parchment drawings—maps of some sort to a place she'd never seen. She looked carefully at the terrain, the names written in thin, scrawling ink and tried to find similarities to any

lands she had heard of or studied. The drawings showed a series of mountain ranges and rivers and a large lake, but there were no familiar names or markings.

"It's good that you don't recognize it—that will be our new home."

Tia jumped at Inuku's voice, but quickly composed herself. "Where is it?"

"It is an island off the shore of Great Terralia, surrounded by the dangerous currents and winds of the expanse of black waters. It is remote and few humans have been willing to brave such treacherous conditions, but a few lone souls have. Still, it has been largely uninhabited for centuries."

Tia looked back at the map. "But how will *we* get there then?"

"We will be teleported," he said simply.

Tia's eyes grew round. "Wow," she breathed. "It's like science fiction. I'm sure the Human Intelligence Bureau has been trying to figure out a way to do that forever."

Inuku raised one corner of his mouth, but Tia saw no warmth in the partial smile. "Yes," he said bitterly. "Your humans want everything that is ours while eliminating us completely—we, the builders and creators of everything they seek to own."

She stiffened. "They are not 'my' humans. I don't agree with the slaughter of innocents."

"But you led your forces to slaughter innocents," he said evenly.

Tia clenched her jaw. "I am a Stealth Blade band leader," she said. "I trusted and followed the orders of my superiors."

"But are you not taught to think?" he pressed. "How could you know so little of the target? Why would they have you attack civilians at the Healing Grounds?"

Memories of the devastation from that night, the feeling of profound betrayal and the sense of the earth moving beneath her feet, nothing solid, nothing what it seemed, came tumbling back. "I knew plenty about the target," she spat. "I'd seen beast males marauding through our towns and cities, tearing apart women—little girls!—in their pursuit of pleasure!"

He blanched. "They were not fit to be among us," he growled. "They represent nothing of what it means to be Lith'hah."

"Just as there are those humans who represent the filth of what it means to be human," she retorted. "And then there are those, like my father, who are kind and loving, working their entire lives to do some good..." Her voice faded for a moment before she straightened and looked him in the eye. "I don't know why they had me attack your Healing Grounds, General. My best guess would be that they wanted to plant the bug—the tracking device deep in the pride grounds. I was simply expendable. My band members and I... We were all expendable."

It was the first time she'd admitted it. That she and her band had been sent to die, with no ceremony, no gratitude, no recognition. One of the most stunning realizations she'd had during her time in the Great Void was that Vishal had turned on them, the Stealth Blades he'd helped found and organize.

Apparently, the HIB had found his selling price and made an offer. In his capacity as one of the higher-ups at StateCorp, Inc., he had accepted. Not for the benefit of the Blades this time, Tia thought bitterly, but for the benefit of his own pockets.

Tia had wanted, right then, to send a warning to all Stealth Blades still under his leadership, but there was no way to do that without also possibly compromising their safety.

She realized with a jolt that Inuku had been quietly watching her as thoughts and emotions warred their way across her face.

"And you, Princess... Where do you place yourself now?" His voice was soft like a caress.

Tia willed her voice to keep steady. "I have seen a lot in that Void," she said. "I know more of who I am and where I belong than I ever have in my life."

He moved closer. "And that is...?"

Tia felt the urge to flee flapping wildly within her but held still. "My mother is a Lith'han. I am an Elemental. I have both human and Lith'hah blood in my veins. I kept my identity a secret for a long time, not knowing why I was the way I was, knowing I wasn't a shifter but that there was something very different about me than everyone else...in the world." Her throat tightened and she took a shaky breath before continuing. "If the human authorities discovered that I'm part Lith'hah, they'd kill me or worse."

"So, you're here because you're afraid you'll be killed?" he asked mildly.

Tia's eyes flashed. She had the sense that he was trying to draw something out of her or goad her into losing control. She felt her pulse pound in her temples, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her crumble. "I am not afraid of death," she said.

He ran a finger through her hair and, even though the gesture sent a current of electricity through her limbs, she resisted pulling away. "Then why do you stay?" he asked quietly.

Because I have every right to be here, she wanted to say. Because I am every bit entitled to Lith'hah status as anyone else. But the words wouldn't come out.

She knew he was waiting for an answer, but the longer she remained silent, the more her resolve wavered. Just a few hours ago, she had felt so sure—more sure than anything in her life. This ability to know things, to connect with others internally, through a sort of ancient network...it was nothing short of magical. It was as close as she had ever come to believing in some sort of higher force and having proof of its existence.

But now, as much as she wanted to claim her heritage, to announce with great relief that she knew who and what she was, she was awash in doubt.

Without warning, the general cupped the back of her head with one hand, pulling her toward him and locked his mouth on hers.

Tia struggled with the urge to push him away and draw him closer at the same time. Heat flushed through her limbs and settled as a maddening pulse between her legs. She dropped the skin she'd been using as a cape to ward off the night chill and allowed the soft curves of her body to meld into the hard contours of his.

She parted her lips underneath his, wanting to taste him, wanting to pull him inside her. His tongue was warm and gentle, belying the need evident in the solid length of his shaft pressing against her.

She placed her hands flat against his chest, savoring the heat of the plates there and breathed in his smell, all musky and male. Tia wanted nothing more than to sink to floor and open herself to this man.

This *Lith'hah*, she reminded herself. She once was terrified and repulsed by his kind. What was she doing now? He was right—she had no idea who she was. She pulled as much air into her lungs as she could and shoved him back with all her might.

He staggered back with a shocked expression. Good. She had caught him off guard.

Tia used that moment to yank open the heavy wooden door and tear out into the night. She knew this was probably the most dangerous thing she could do right now. It was inviting chase. She guessed he would change into his cat form and come after her, animal instincts heightened.

But she had to get away. She had to get out of that den and into the cold night air, in the comfort of trees and under the wide open sky. She wanted to outrun her own skin and merge with the world that had brought her here, as a child who was loved and accepted unconditionally.

Inuku cursed himself for giving Ima the night off to rest. But she needed it as much as everyone else, he thought, as he scrambled up and shifted before giving chase. What, by the love of the Ancients, was this female thinking? She didn't stand a chance of outrunning him.

Perhaps I pushed her too far, he thought, sniffing the air as he ran. Her scent was easy to pick up and, as he'd become used to lately, it set his blood boiling.

She had headed straight into the woods. He cursed again. There were serpents in there, and all manner of creatures that, although no match for *Lith'hah*, could be extremely dangerous for humans.

He ran through the trees, following her scent until quite suddenly it was gone. Inuku cast about wildly for any trace of it, but there was nothing. It was as if she had simply vanished. He closed his eyes and stilled, focusing on the sounds around him.

Quietly, he climbed up a tree to get a good view of the surrounding area.

Ah, *there*. Just to the left was a heat form and the faintest sound of ragged breathing.

Inuku began the shifting and spreading of molecules within his body so that light would pass through him rather than be reflected or absorbed by his form. It was what

allowed him to become not invisible really but *transparent* and had saved his life as well as Rawa's on many an occasion.

This time, he didn't need it to save his life; he needed it to get to Tianelle.

He moved like smoke in this form, undetected and silent. She would not run because by the time she knew he was near, he would be upon her.

When he found her, she was standing with her back against a large oak tree, eyes closed and she seemed deep in concentration.

Inuku allowed himself to form back into his human shape. "So you've figured out a way to be undetected," he said softly.

She gasped and looked about.

"It's me. This is my ability."

Tianelle looked as if she wanted to dash away again.

He stepped closer. "Why did you run?"

She looked as though she was struggling to compose herself. "I needed to get out of there."

"Princess..." he said softly, moving closer still.

She seemed to tense but didn't move away.

Inuku could hear the trembling of her breath, he was so close. Suddenly, he felt like a lout. An overbearing oaf who had pushed her beyond what she could endure right now. *And for what?*

He bent down and brought his lips to rest lightly against the thin skin of her neck.

He felt her stiffen and spoke quickly to soothe her. "This is an extremely difficult time for all of us," he murmured. "I shouldn't have pushed. I only... I wanted to hear —"

She pushed back, creating distance between them.

He shook his head. Being this close to her was dizzying.

"You wanted to hear *what?*" she grated.

He chose his words carefully. "I wanted to hear you say that this is where you belong. That you are a Lith'hah."

Her bottom lip quivered and she bit it.

He wanted to gather her in his arms, but he dared not move. He didn't want to risk losing her — having her harden her heart against him out of fear, in an effort to protect herself. He was sure if he had lived through the kind of isolation and loneliness she had, if he'd had to suffer the abandonment of family and home and any form of community, he would probably not want to let anyone get too close either.

Chapter Nine

Tia wanted nothing more than to crumble in his arms. To let it all go and give in to the hunger for safety, for stability. For a pair of strong arms to hold her up and shield her...just for a little while. Just for once.

She looked into his face and searched desperately for a sign, anything that would let her know he was for real. But her own emotions were getting in the way of sensing anything. She balled her hands into tight fists and turned around so he couldn't see the flickers of remembered pain in her eyes.

Why was it so hard to let go? Why couldn't she just give in to the physical need without opening herself up to Inuku? Her body opened to him like a sunflower straining toward the sun. She wanted his hands on her. She wanted to feel him inside her. But every time she thought of it, a part of her froze in terror.

He put a hand on her shoulder and she went rigid as the touch first sizzled then bore into her, shaking her to her depths. She was glad he couldn't see her face and the tears that were beginning a slow descent down her cheeks.

He tugged at her gently, prodding her to turn around. But she turned away.

She felt him move closer. Then his arms went around her and she nearly came undone. Her knees felt like liquid and Tia knew she was in dangerous territory. She wanted to dissolve into this man's embrace and stay there forever.

She tried to wrench herself out his grasp, but he held fast, making the circle of his arms an iron ring that held her up, against the heat of his chest. A kind of icy fire coursed through her, swinging her emotions from terror to need, with desperate longing the only constant.

Tia struggled against him. "Let me go," she sobbed.

She heard him grunt when her heel made contact with his shin. But his voice was soft. "Never."

That only made her struggle harder.

But he grabbed her upper arms and whirled her around to face him. "Stop," he commanded. His voice was absolute but gentle.

Tia went still and fatigue washed over her. "Let me go," she whispered.

Surprisingly, this time he did. He released his grip slowly and she sank to her knees, burying her face in her hands. "I'm a freak," she said, feeling him lower himself to the ground in front of her.

Her voice was thin as a spider's silk. "I don't know who or what I am. I've never completely felt that I fit in anywhere..." She looked up into his eyes, her face streaked with tears, but her eyes now dry. "I can't tell you what I am or where I belong."

There was something in the look of his eyes that calmed her. He put his fists on the ground, on either side of her knees, and leaned in to kiss her lips. This time she opened her mouth and hungrily took his tongue.

She didn't care anymore whether this was dangerous. She didn't care if after this she would be abandoned yet again. This feeling, right now, was worth whatever came after.

He placed one arm around her and lowered her to the ground underneath him.

Tia stretched her legs and snaked her arms around his neck, grabbing handfuls of his thick hair.

He explored every crevice of her mouth, tracing the edges of her teeth and sucking the tip of her tongue as his hands slid slowly down the sides of her body. He smoothed the shift dress down along her rib cage to her hips and below to the hem that rested mid-thigh. Then he slipped his hands underneath, sliding back up on naked skin.

Tia pulled away to gasp for air as the folds between her legs became slick and warm. *And he hasn't even touched anything yet. Dear god, it's as if I haven't ever made love before.* And, indeed, she felt as if she hadn't.

He reached underneath and cupped her bottom, pressing his now granite-hard shaft against her.

Tia threw her head back with a moan and felt him tense at the sound.

He brought his hands around and caught hold of both her wrists. Gently but firmly he pinned them above her head with one hand, bracing himself on one elbow and keeping his gaze steady on hers.

Tia's breathing grew ragged as her eyes stayed riveted to his. Even if she wanted to look elsewhere, she was powerless to.

He took one finger and hooked it into the neckline of her dress and gave a swift yank.

Tia gasped as the material tore to her navel.

Never moving his eyes from her face, he tore the rest of it down the middle and brushed it aside. Only then, when both sides of the dress were moved aside, did he pull back, allowing his eyes to travel slowly down the length of her.

"You're lovely," he whispered.

Tia heard the tremor in his voice and felt her clit tighten in response. "Touch me, Inuku," she said, jutting her breasts up.

His eyes darkened with the same hunger she'd seen before, but he moved deliberately, grazing the back of his hand against her skin. He slid his knuckles down the center of her body and stopped just above the hairline of her mound.

She moaned and parted her lips, running her tongue along the top one. She pushed against the hand that held her wrists. She wanted to grab fistfuls of his hair and bring his full, soft lips to her nipple.

But he only adjusted his grip and held her wrists more securely. “Don’t move,” he ordered.

Her eyes widened at the command as heat flooded between her legs. Tia knew she was soaked. She was hot and slicked and ready for him. She ached to feel the entire length of him, heavy and thick, sliding into her. To feel her body stretch and settle around him in a tight grip.

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to ride the waves of sensation that throbbed and coursed through her. And suddenly she saw herself through his eyes. She saw the beauty that was Tia in his mind and thoughts.

Then, as if burned, she pulled back. But he had felt it.

“You touched my thoughts,” he said, halting.

She winced. “I didn’t know I was going to...”

“Again,” he said, leaning down to crush her mouth against his.

Tia closed her eyes and opened to his thoughts.

Can you feel what I’m feeling? he asked.

Tia thought he’d spoken the words but realized his mouth was still on hers, his tongue mapping and claiming every inch of her mouth.

She reached out tentatively and felt the surge of heat and fire that rolled off his thoughts. She gasped and snapped away.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, pulling her back. His voice was hoarse as he slid the tip of his tongue over the bud of one pebbled nipple before claiming her mouth again.

Tia shivered and closed her eyes. This time, she was more prepared for the intensity of his emotions. But she was amazed just the same. She stood in the whipping winds of his need and hunger.

This is how a Lith’han hungers for his mate, came his clearly formed thought.

But... I’m not your mate, she responded.

Yes, he returned, *you are, and you will know it soon enough.*

How can we be mates if I’m not –

But her question was cut off as he caught the hard nub of her nipple and rolled it gently between his thumb and forefinger.

She let go then, sending him the full force of her yearning.

He moaned in response, planting light kisses down the center of her body as he made his way to the heat between her legs. Hooking her knees over his shoulders, he ran the tip of his tongue along the crease where each thigh merged into swollen labia. Tia felt him pull apart the outer lips of her pussy and swipe the tip on one finger from opening to clit.

She dug her heels into his shoulder blades and arched her body, grabbing the back of his head and pulling him toward her.

He caught her hands and pinned them under his on either side of her body as he continued a slow, agonizing exploration of the wet folds of her pussy.

Tia writhed desperately beneath the sure, languorous strokes of his tongue. "Inuku... Stop teasing me," she breathed.

He ignored her, taking her clit between his lips and letting it slip out slowly – and doing that a few more times until Tia thought she would tear apart with need.

When he slid back up to give her a crushing, fierce kiss, Tia formed a clear, vivid image of what she wanted and flung it like a fireball with all her psychic might.

He pulled back, looking dazed for a moment, then his eyes cleared and a wild hunger settled on his face. He rolled over onto his back, pulling Tia on top of him.

Tia kissed him long and hard before squirming down. She grasped his cock between both hands and slid her tongue along its shaft, running from base to tip, before licking the swollen tip. Then she took him into her mouth, stroking his shaft with her hand as she moved her mouth in a slow, building rhythm.

She felt his fingers dig into her shoulders and her skin was charged like a live wire. Inuku's moans heightened her awareness to her surroundings, opened her up to him even more. Her nipples tingled and she felt the syrupy wetness of her need spilling onto her thighs. Tia slipped her lips one more time over the plum tip of his cock then nestled it between her breasts, cupping them together and sliding Inuku between them as she teased and tweaked her nipples.

She could come like this. It had happened before once while she was masturbating – she had come simply by stimulating her nipples and squeezing her thighs together...

In an instant, Inuku pulled her up and rolled on top of her.

"Oh no. You'll not deprive me of the pleasure, Princess." His voice was husky and Tia started at the sound of it. Up until now, much of their communication had been mind to mind. And she had forgotten that she had all but broadcasted her thoughts and memories to him.

She bit her lip as Inuku nudged her legs apart with his knees and settled the tip of his shaft at the entrance to her now thickly creamed channel.

Tia wrapped her legs around him. *Please, Inuku...*

Please what, Princess? he asked, pressing against her opening. *Tell me what you want.*

Tia knew it was an epic battle for him not to thrust into her with all his force. His thoughts were coming to her fervent with need, but he held back in an iron grip of control.

He held her hands to the ground with both of his now, his mouth devouring hers.

Fuck me. She flung that thought loud and clear, opening her mind and showing him just how wholly her body burned for him.

And with that, his resolve crumbled and he thrust into her.

Tia caught her breath as she filled with him. He seemed to grow even harder and larger once inside her. She hitched one leg over his and dug her heel into the back of his thigh, arching her body to take as much of him as she could.

He pulled out until just the head of his cock remained inside then plunged into her again.

With each thrust, Tia edged closer to exploding. She felt his length glide over her wet, swollen clit as he slid into her. He began to move faster, building into a rhythm that sent them cresting one of the most powerful waves Tia had ever ridden.

And then everything blew apart. Tia wrenched her mouth from his and screamed as she came just a moment before he growled, tensing against her.

He released her hands and gripped her hips, grinding into her as he emptied himself deep into her.

Tia wrapped her legs around him and tangled her hands in his hair, pulling him down for a deep kiss as her body jerked with the rhythms of her orgasm.

Her thoughts, as well as her limbs, were still entwined with his when she floated into one of the deepest, sweetest sleeps she'd had in longer than she could remember.

* * * * *

Inuku slipped quietly out of his den at dawn, his feet leaving prints in the dew that shivered on blades of grass. It was agony to tear himself away from Tianelle—Tia, she had called herself in her thoughts. He had carried her back to the den and laid her on the skins, covering her with the softest sheepskin he could find. Then he had meant to walk away, but she'd clung to him and he was powerless to do anything but lie next to her, cradling her body against his as they both tumbled into deep, exhausted sleep.

The sweetness of last night's bonding washed over him again, and he had to stop for a moment to slow the wild pounding of his pulse. He did not know how things would work out for the two of them, but he knew he must be with Tia. There was something ancient and otherworldly at play in their union. He was no Internal, but he could sense the work of the Ancients deep within his bones.

He made his way to the temple where Grand Elder Lyra would be making preparations for the worship this afternoon. "In twenty-four hours," she had earlier informed them all, "the humans will attack."

A current coursed through his limbs. He always felt like this before a battle. But this one would be the most important of his life—of all their lives. If any one thing went awry during the transition...

He shook his head. He didn't even want to think of all the possibilities for disaster. As an External, he had it relatively easy. All he had to do was direct his energy to the Ancients and draw upon the power of That Which Is Unknowable—to pull it down and center it at the temple with the other worshippers through dance, drumming, trance

and ritual. There would be identical worship going on throughout the pridelands at each pride's central temple.

All cubs, pre-Awakened Lith'hah and elders would gather at the holy caves where they would be protected by the thorned shrubs keeping out poisonous serpents. Inuku put a couple of Externals on duty outside the holy caves for additional security.

The Internals would then be responsible for the teleportation of all Lith'hah to the new location. They would feed on the energy and power generated by the Externals. And the Elementals would command earth, fire, water and the winds, using those elements to shield and deter the human forces until every last Lith'hah was safe in their new home.

He climbed the hill that was crowned with a ring of large, flat stones. A deep, round pit had been dug within the sacred circle of stones and inlaid with flat granite and marble. On one edge of the sunken circle was a flat granite slab that served as an altar. On it was a large earthen bowl that held freshly drawn stream water, a stone bowl with sprigs of the sacred Barlo weed that had already been lit, and a paste made of Mun'hai berries that would be passed around to fortify worshippers after the ritual.

Lith'hah and humans alike were weaving supple branches from the Mun'hai tree into wreaths that would be laid at the foot of each stone slab, guarding the worship space.

Inuku saw Rawa hauling a drum and moved quickly to help him move it into position. "Is Sehra preparing the royal den for her descent into the Void?"

Rawa nodded, guiding the large drum to a point between two of the stones, helping to form the perimeter of the ritual. His expression was of unwavering determination. "She is purifying the den to make room for the sacred energy of the Great Unknowable."

The men headed back to the assembled drums and grabbed another, working silently to move it into place between the next pair of stones and so on until a drum dotted each point between the large stones. Here, the drummers would sit, orchestrating the speed at which the dancers moved in ritual trance.

Ima approached them with cups and a pitcher of cold brew. "Thought you might need to replenish," she said.

Inuku grunted his thanks and tipped the water down his throat. He realized suddenly that he had not yet broken his fast this morning.

Ima eyed him. "You look worn, General. Shall I have the cook put something together?"

Inuku nodded. "Indeed. I will check in with the grand elder and see if she has a task for me, then I will be glad for a meal."

Something caught Ima's attention over his shoulder and she leaned forward in a bow. "Your Majesty," she mumbled.

Inuku turned to see Leader Queen Kessa Lyah and dipped into a bow as well. "Your Majesty."

Rawa embraced her. "I thought you would be preparing your den as is my Queen."

"I have my Silver sisters with me for the teleportation. We thought our energy would be more powerful if we were together. They are handling the purification of the royal den."

Rawa nodded. "There are six of you?"

"Seven, including myself," she answered absently. Her gaze fixed on Inuku. "And where is my daughter?"

Inuku lowered his eyes. "In my den, Your Majesty."

She looked him up and down. "I smell her scent all over you."

He looked into her face. "We bonded last night."

Rawa raised his eyebrows but remained silent, and Ima's jaw unhinged.

"If you..." the Queen began, but Inuku cut her off.

"She is my mate, Your Majesty," he said quietly. "I do not mean her or your pride and lineage any harm."

The Queen pinned him with a stare before her eyes softened. "I feel you are true, General. I shall rest assured that Tianelle is in good hands." She turned as if to leave. "Tell my daughter that I anxiously await our reconnection in the new land. There, she shall be trained in all the mysteries of the Silver lineage." Her eyes flickered for a second and her next words were fierce. "She is entitled, shifter or not, to the secrets and mysteries of her heritage."

"I will pass on your message, Your Majesty," Inuku said, inclining his head.

She looked at Rawa. "And what of your humans—both rehabilitated prisoners as well as those who traveled to the pridelands by choice? Have any chosen to stay behind?"

"Not one," Rawa answered with a hint of pride.

The Queen laughed. "None from my pride as well. Only a scarce few have chosen not to join us," she said. "And they have already been taken to locations where they will find their way back to human territories, having learned nothing of our plans to relocate."

"Those who have chosen to stay," Ima piped up, "have done so because they feel more at home here than in their own territories. They will be worshipping among the Externals at all temples."

"Indeed," the Queen said with a smile. "They shall be taken into the fold of Lith'hah life. And today they shall witness the Lith'hah in our greatest glory." Then she cocked her head to one side. "And are you not an Internal, young Violet?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Ima said. "I am here at the bidding of the grand elder. In a few moments, I will return to my den to join the other Internals in our task."

The Leader Queen nodded then embraced Rawa. "I am off then. I was hoping to bless Tianelle, but perhaps it's better she rest before we begin in earnest. We have a mammoth task ahead."

Rawa gave her a squeeze and kissed both her cheeks. "May the Ancients bless us all," he said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Inuku watched her leave, seeing what Tia might look like in a few more decades. When the queen was out of sight, Inuku sought out the grand elder.

She was sorting through the sprigs of Barlo weed. "Only the finest will do for this ritual," she said as he neared. "No blemishes or rot, else we curse our efforts." She looked up at him. "Sit, my child."

Inuku obeyed, lowering himself onto a stool next to wizened elder.

"Tie those leather straps into the holes of these masks, will you?"

Inuku looked at the basket of black leather masks—simple black rectangles with holes cut out for the eyes. "We'll be masked for the ritual?"

"Oh yes, my child," the grand elder said, nodding. "In the days when the Ancients walked this earth, they did rituals in complete anonymity, with no markers of mortal identity. The physical form is a distraction to the spirit when invoking That Which Is Unknowable."

Inuku nodded. "Will worshippers be in cloaks?"

The grand elder shook her head. "We need the most potent of all forces for this task. Nothing but the masks will be worn for the ritual. There is no quicker and more powerful route to the sacred than through the flow of erotic energy in ritual."

This Inuku understood, as did all Lith'hah. It was one of the first things all cubs learned upon their Awakening—*The erotic is the life force of the Divine. It is the precursor to all of creation when it is merged with love.*

He began tying the thin leather straps to the masks.

Chapter Ten

Tia woke feeling rejuvenated. She'd seen in her waking dream-vision that the temple was ready and everyone, both human and Lith'hah, was making their way to their assigned positions. Though she didn't know it for sure, she felt in her bones that it was true—that these dreams during her waking moments held truth. They were more like visions or nuggets of knowledge she needed to have. They were not the dreams she'd had all her life before she'd come home to herself here. *In beast territory.*

She smiled. *That's what I am,* she thought. What sweet irony that she'd found her way here with the purpose of destroying everything that now was building her up and sustaining her.

It was time. She walked to the basin of water and splashed the cool liquid over her face, rinsing the grogginess away. Tia flitted out with her mind to search for Inuku. She found him in the cook's quarters, popping the last of the bread into his mouth. She closed her eyes as a feeling a warmth spread through her limbs at the memory of their lovemaking.

She walked up the hill to the temple, glancing at the faces of others who were making their way to the top. Each face surged with energy. Some were bright with joy and expectation while others were etched with worry lines.

Tia felt nothing but calm. For the first time in her life she knew who she was. She was among those who knew exactly who and what she was and honored it. Plus, something about emptying her feelings, giving voice to some of her most feared thoughts in the presence of a loving witness had eased a heavy burden for her. A burden, she realized with a start, that she had been carrying for many years.

There were sounds of drummers testing the tightness of the skins across the barrel of their drums as Tia neared the sacred circle. Each drummer was already positioned around the perimeter, and Tia exchanged a smile with one of the females before taking the mask offered to her. She had seen the masks in her dream-vision and knew now that what she saw had been foreknowledge.

She positioned the soft leather rectangle over her eyes and tied the leather straps behind her head. She had walked to the temple nude, armed with the knowing from her dreams. Tia marveled at how comfortable she was walking around completely naked. It seemed...*right* in a way she never imagined it could.

She was sprinkled with scented oil then ushered into the sacred circle where humans and External Lith'hah were gathering. Soon there was scarcely enough room to move, and Tia felt the heat of the bodies around her as the sun continued to rise above. Each body was slick with the oil, and Tia grew heady with the mixture of scents—Barlo

weed, the musky, woodsy scent of the oil, the scent of bodies and the expectation that something tremendous was about to take place.

The drummers began pounding a slow rhythm. It pounded beneath her bare feet, vibrating through the cool marble floor of the temple. It seemed to be snaking straight out of the center of the earth, out of the deep, dark womb, Tia thought, throbbing and pulsing with life, pumping into her limbs. Her body began to buzz as it came alive. Something inside her seemed to unfurl with the beat of the drums, and she opened, stretching her arms to the vast expanse of sky and closing her eyes.

Some of the people around her began to sway to the beat. Tia allowed her body to move of its own accord. All around her were oiled limbs. The feel of skin, sliding and pressing and jostling, awakened her senses. Muscles, corded and tight, pressed against her breasts and the soft mounds of a woman's breasts were sealed against her back. She felt the tightening nubs of the woman's nipples just beneath her shoulder blades.

Tia heard the woman sigh softly in her ear and felt heat rushing to her own vulva in response.

Soon she allowed the other worshipers to conduct her movements, and her hips swayed, gyrating in tandem with those on all sides of her. After a few moments, the softness of the woman behind her was replaced with the hard body of another male. She was held firm between the two male bodies, but no one put their hands on her. Their arms, like hers and everyone else in the sacred circle, were in the air, appealing to the Ancients and drawing down the power of That Which Is Unknowable from above. Their feet stamped and pounded into the marble floor, waking the serpentine energy of the Great Mother from below.

A thread of desire sizzled up through her center line, from her sex through her navel, up between her breasts and out the crown of her head. Desire that, when sparked, was a call to a lover. A longing to be one with a mate. A longing to merge with the Divine.

A chant suddenly took shape in her thoughts, keeping rhythm with the drums.

We are gifted with desire,

To seek union with the sublime,

The Divine.

Desire is a divine gift from

The Great Unknowable

A gift meant to access

The greatest of our power.

As the drums beat a bit faster, the movements of the bodies around her responded to the call, and she was more tightly sandwiched between the men on either side of her. She felt the erection of the man behind her, pressing into the small of her back. Her nipples pressed and rubbed against the back of the man in front as they tightened into

hard, sensitive buds. Her breathing became shallow, rapid, and she felt herself slipping into a trance state.

The mask obstructed her peripheral vision so she could not see on either side without turning her head fully. Because of this, she kept her head tilted up toward the skies, feeling the energy ripple toward her from above.

The stars were always above, even when masked by daylight.

She imagined the desire inside her as a raging fire that sparked at her clit, the epicenter of her creative life force—now engorged and full, aching within the folds of her labia. She saw, behind heavy-lidded eyes, this fire rise as a column through her very center and she pressed against the back of the man in front of her with a groan.

The drumbeat was speeding up and her pulse kept pace. She writhed among the undulating bodies. She wanted the feel of rough, coarse hands on her skin, cool fingers pulling and tugging at her nipples...a tongue lapping at her clit.

Inuku... She sent his name out like a prayer.

She fought for breath, unable to get Inuku out of her thoughts. A raging fire spread through her torso. Her limbs burned as skin slid against damp, sweaty skin on all sides. She felt the hot honey of her sex spill onto the outer lips, coating the fine silver hair of her pussy.

She imagined herself impaled by Inuku's thick shaft. Imagined the feel of his fullness pulsing inside her. She yearned to complete the energy circle as lovers do and spin into bliss.

The male behind her gently wedged one large, solid thigh between her legs, allowing her to straddle his leg. His shaft raged between them, hard and insistent.

Suddenly, from outside her range of vision, large hands grabbed her. She was pulled through the mass of bodies until she stood, heaving, at the edge of the circle, sandwiched between a large male and the marble wall of the sacred circle.

She gasped, struggling to pull out of the trance, and stared wildly into the eyes of the masked male. Instinctively, she struggled for a moment, until she heard his voice.

"It's me, Princess..."

Then she stilled momentarily until he began to move against her. "Inuku..."

She allowed herself to slip back into the trance state she'd been in before and pressed her mound against his thigh, slipping easily along its length, her body pinned against the wall and held up by the throng of bodies around her.

Inuku kissed her long and deep as his hands made a languorous journey over her heated, oiled skin, before he sank to the ground in front of her. Grabbing her ass, he lifted her so Tia could hook her legs over his shoulders.

Tia felt his tongue slide over her clit once, twice and again before he took the swollen nub into his mouth and sucked. She ground and rolled her hips against him, sending him her thoughts with all the force she was feeling in her body and soul.

He allowed her clit to slip out of her mouth slowly before plunging his tongue deep into her pussy.

Tia screamed as the orgasm crashed through her, bringing with it a tidal wave of Inuku's need and her own urgent desire to merge into every aspect of her surroundings. She rode the singing current, as if she were poised on a high note that wouldn't end—but was about to get higher.

Inuku stood up with Tia's legs still over his shoulders and nipped at the skin of her thighs. Then in one quick swoop he cupped her ass and unhooked her legs, allowing her to slide down between him and the wall until the tip of his cock rested at the entrance to her slit.

Tia writhed fervently as the waves took her higher. She grabbed fistfuls of Inuku's hair and rasped, "Now, Inuku, *please*."

His mouth came down on hers, obliterating any other sounds that might've escaped as he thrust into her, impaling her on his hot, pulsing shaft.

Tia ripped her mouth away to scream and dug her fingers into his shoulders.

Inuku placed his hands flat against the wall on either side of her as she wrapped her legs around his waist and hung on.

He began a steady rhythm, keeping time with the beat of the drums and sending her blasts of wordless impressions. They were like fireballs—his thoughts and hers—merging and spiraling like a pillar of flames, and Tia wondered how either of them would survive this ritual and teleportation.

The pace increased to a feverish pitch and Tia felt herself break open. Her essence spilled out of her and mingled with Inuku's in a thunderous clap that tore and resounded through her core. It was as if the entire room and its participants were suspended in time and space. As if the beating of the drums was one long scream that all were caught up in and held.

And then the beat between the in-breath and the out-breath. The moment where everything was frozen but crackling with the prescient knowledge of what was to come.

Tia felt herself flung into the Great Void. She felt the universe expanding and contracting in anticipation of a great shift. She saw millions upon millions of flickering lights like stars, all the way out into the depths of the black space. Somehow, she knew these were all souls.

Yes, came a response, these are the lights of souls. Timeless and formless. They appear to you as you do to them, a bright light in the greatest darkness of all time.

Tia reached out to the lights closest to hers and felt a powerful current surge through her. She was connected to the network. Its beat pulsed inside her and through her and she in turn contributed to its power. She began to feel, underneath the stillness, frenzied activity. The rapid currents underneath still waters.

Tiny molecules moved and shifted, were accelerated and rearranged. Intuitively, she drew in the creative power of her orgasm and flung it into the collective network.

Over and over, she slung balls of crackling electricity into the network, feeding off the energy and power of the ritual dance, her climax and the seed of whatever was growing between her and Inuku.

Yes, she thought, that's what it is. The most powerful force in the universe is flowing within me right this minute. Taking its most potent and creative form. And she wasn't afraid. Here, surrounded by those doing the same work, using the forces of love and the erotic to create and build, Tia did not feel afraid or uncertain.

The impact of her orgasm and merging into the network rocked her to the very center of her being. But suddenly the Void was filling. More and more lights entered as, together, they grew, still inhaling and exhaling as one. And soon there were even more, until the Great Void was all but completely obliterated. The light was became blinding and the heat almost unbearable.

She felt Inuku at her side and, somewhere, not far away, was her mother. She felt them, even if she could not see them. She held on as long as she could until everything disappeared.

* * * * *

Tia stepped onto the barge that had been quickly thrown together for human use across the still, nearly transparent river to the other side of the island. Her Stealth Blade training took over when they'd arrived in the new territory and she had surveyed it carefully once her consciousness settled back into her body.

The cluster of islands was perfectly and naturally concealed by a constant, rolling fog. Within the small area dotted by islands, the water was calm and smooth, buffeted by natural reefs, cliffs and stone outcroppings. Just out beyond fishing and swimming range was a change in the currents and the ocean's waters became rough and choppy – a lethal deterrent to any seafaring vessels that might venture this far from the mainland. The climate, however, seemed to work for the Mun'hai tree. This was the critical element. Lith'hah survived and thrived off the medicinal, nutritive and sacred properties of the Mun'hai, and although enough of the dried berries and preserves, bark, leaves and roots had been transported to the new home, saplings had been planted as soon as everyone gained their bearings.

The human at the prow dug his pole into the bottom of the water and they began to glide across the surface of the river. If anyone had witnessed their arrival to this cluster of islands, she mused, they'd likely have seen humans and Lith'hah materializing out of thin air. Once again she marveled at the incredible feat they had accomplished, hundreds of different souls in separate bodies, merging into one beating heart, with one single mission to deliver everyone safely into the arms of a new home, and then separating again into different, unique souls – water droplets from the same ocean of consciousness.

When the barge thudded softly against the shore, Tia stood and walked carefully to the edge, leaping off and onto the fine white sand of the narrow beach. Then she headed up to the den.

Inuku had the meal laid out on a large makeshift table, a slab of flat stone sitting atop four solid pieces of wood. Tia knew they would slowly piece together the rest of a comfortable home. But now she would enjoy this meal with her family. Her mother had arrived earlier along with Valren, and Grand Elder Lyra was sitting in deep conversation with Ima and Ima's new partner, a Violet female named Rhian. Tia still grew warm whenever she thought of that that day in the stream with Ima, but since then, Ima had been nothing but warm and affectionate, acting as a trusted and loyal friend.

Tia's stomach growled from the scent of roasted meat as she pulled aside a loosely hung flap and entered the den.

"Tia, my love!" her mother exclaimed, walking toward her with open arms.

Tia squeezed her mother in a hug and as always felt the prick of tears in her eyes whenever they shared warmth.

When they pulled apart, Valren kissed her forehead. "Good to see you again, Tianelle."

"It's good to be here," Tia answered truthfully. She was getting used to Valren. He seemed like a good man, and her mother and he clearly adored one another. He would never be her father, but Dad was long gone. And this man obviously made her mother very happy.

"Now that the princess has arrived," Ima said, sauntering over to her and placing an arm around her shoulders, "can we *please* eat?"

There was a ripple of laughter as everyone moved to take their seats.

"Where's Inuku?" Tia asked.

Just then an arm encircled her waist from behind. "I feel as if I've been waiting a lifetime."

She laughed, settling into his embrace. "I saw you this morning."

"Yes, that was a lifetime ago," he murmured, nipping gently at her ear.

"You know I needed to meet with my band members."

"How was it?" he asked, taking her hand and leading her to the table.

She drew a breath, shaking her head in wonder. "I can't believe these are the same people I trained. They seem almost...reborn. Youssuf said that he feels as if he has found his 'long-lost spiritual home' and Sianwu has already fallen for a Lith'han—a male."

"I saw the two of them making eyes at one another," the grand elder said. Her eyes twinkled with amusement. "Their spirits feel compatible. We'll see if everything else falls in place as well."

Ima's partner Rhian threw her head back and laughed. "I'll venture you don't actually want to see that, Grand Elder."

"Ah, but you'd be incorrect," the grand elder replied mischievously.

Rhian laughed even harder and everyone else joined in.

After offering their thanks, everyone attacked the feast with hearty enthusiasm. Tia realized the Lith'hah had an immense appetite. *I am the only non-shifter here.* The thought set a tender old wound to throbbing, but she pushed it aside and focused on the food set before her.

The conversation hummed along in a pleasant rise and fall of good-natured teasing, warm glances and affectionate touches. Tia felt her heart filled to the seams with joy.

Inuku maintained physical contact all throughout dinner, and Tia welcomed it. There was something reassuring about sitting next to him, feeling the weight of his arm casually draped across her shoulders or the heat of his hand on her thigh.

As the evening wound down, her mother and Valren embraced Tia and Inuku as they got ready to leave.

"My love," Kessa said, "Valren and I must return to our own pride grounds now."

"Yes," the King said, putting an arm around her mother.

My mother. Tia enjoyed the savoring the weight of those words in her mind.

"We've settled as close as possible to Sehra's grounds, without encroaching on her territory." She cupped Tia's face and Tia saw that her mother's lashes were wet. "Now that we've reconnected, I want to get to know Tia as a mother ought to."

Tia threw her arms around the older woman. "I missed you so much, Mom! When you said you had to go away, we had no idea you'd fall off the face of the earth! We had no contact with you and then when Tinan died..." she trailed off. It had been awhile since she'd thought of her brother, much less said his name out loud.

Sadness creased the corners of her mother's eyes. "I would give anything to have both my babies by Sher here with me now. He was a good man. But the gene seems to have only found its way to you, Tia – and for that, at least, I am grateful."

Tia felt the waves of her mother's grief. Even though she'd seen her mother's actions and the reasons for them when she first entered the Void, Tia's emotions would take longer to catch up with what her brain understood.

Her mother sighed deeply. "I thought you both would be long dead by now, my love. How much pain this must have caused you all these years!"

"I thought you had died," Tia said sadly. "I mourned you and everything. I'd read a book that said you should do a ritual to let go of loved ones you had no closure with, so that's what I did."

"Did it help?" the grand elder asked quietly.

"Yes," Tia said. "It did help me to let go."

"Oh my darling," her mother murmured, drawing Tia back into the circle of her arms. "We have many years now to get to know one another again. I thank the Ancients with every ounce of my being for giving me a second opportunity with you. I will spend the rest of my days making it up to you."

The memory of faking her own death flashed through Tia's mind. "You have nothing to make up, Mom. You were doing what you thought was best under the circumstances. I'm not angry."

"But we missed out on so much!" she cried.

"You are reunited now," Valren said softly. "You can spend as much time as you like together."

Tia gripped her mother's hands. "Yes," she whispered. "We have all the time in the world now, Mom."

The Queen squeezed Tia's hands in return. "Sleep well tonight, my love."

Ima and Rhian left shortly after her mother and Valren, enveloping Tia and Inuku in warm embraces.

The grand elder was the last to leave. "My dear," she said, approaching Tia. "You have many things to adjust to, including navigating the Great Void. You connected with the network of Internals during the teleportation and now you must learn how to hold your place within it."

Tia nodded. "It took everything out of me."

"You scared me half to death," Inuku said. "I thought you were dead when we materialized here."

"Not dead," the grand elder said somberly. "In the Halfway Space. That is where souls go when That Which Is Unknowable, the greatest and most supreme force in the universe, is deciding whether to keep them or send them back to the land of flesh."

Tia's eyes widened. "So I could've died?"

"You were but a breath away," the grand elder said, inclining her head and making a gesture of reverence. "The Great Divine sent you back because you still have work to do among the living. You are a great force and a powerful Elemental, my dear. You will work with me to master your ability."

The grand elder blessed both Inuku and Tia then slipped into the night.

"She moves as if she is decades younger," Inuku remarked.

"I wonder what she was like when she was my age," Tia said with a small smile. It still unsettled her that she could have been so close to death without knowing it. But she already understood that she was dealing with immense power when she had hooked into the network. It didn't seem like such a long shot for that power to overwhelm and overtake someone.

She exhaled with relief. "Thank goodness she's around to help me figure this all out."

Inuku gathered her in his arms. "I've got a couple of things you can help *me* figure out."

"Really," she drawled. "You seem to have figured out quite a bit already, General."

His voice grew rough. "There's still plenty of uncharted territory."

Tia felt a tightening at her clit as his lips claimed hers. He slid one hand up to cup a breast and began gently kneading. All words vanished from her thoughts as pure sensation rippled through her body.

Inuku groaned deep in the back of his throat as Tia opened her thoughts and feelings to him, reaching into his desire for her and merging with it.

I love it when you do that, he formed for her. *It makes everything so much more intense.*

Tia reached up and tangled her fingers in his hair. *I do too, my love.* She started for a moment but felt Inuku's arms tighten around her. She heard the words "my love" reverberate in his thoughts. His need for her intensified a thousandfold.

Abruptly, he reached around to cup her bottom with both hands and lifted her off the floor.

Tia wrapped her legs around his waist, hooking her ankles behind him as he strode to the bed of skins.

Inuku dropped her on the skins, sinking to his knees and snapping off the small covering around his hips.

Tia reached out, circling her fingers around the base of his shaft.

He dropped his head back and closed his eyes.

Tia felt him savoring her touch, allowing her this one indulgence for a moment. She knew he was about to grab her wrist just a second before he did.

Inuku flipped her over onto her stomach.

Tia sensed the need throbbing throughout his thoughts, and hers grew to match his. She felt her pussy grow wet. *Touch me.*

He growled in response, pulling her up on her knees. "Not yet." He leaned over her and whispered in her ear, "Do you trust me?"

She swallowed hard, searching in her heart for the answer. But it came easily. "Yes," she whispered. "I trust you."

"I want to do things to you," he said gruffly. "Everything. Whatever you can handle and more."

"I can take it," she rasped. She could feel his strained need, close to bursting.

He bit her shoulder. "If you want to stop, tell me now. This is your only chance."

Tia arched her back until the rounds of her ass pressed against his taut shaft. "I don't want to stop," she panted.

She felt him lean away from her for a moment then the feel of cool liquid squirting over her ass. "What — ?"

"Quiet," he growled. "You had your chance to stop and you didn't take it." He rubbed the liquid, which Tia now realized was oil, between her ass cheeks then slathered some more around her anus. "Now you're mine."

She drew a sharp breath in as she saw an image of what he planned to do, but her thighs shook in sweet anticipation as well as a little fear. She had never been penetrated there before.

As if sensing her apprehension, Inuku reached an oiled hand around and gently gave her clit a couple of slow strokes.

She slammed her ass against him with a moan. "Oh you tease."

He moved his fingers from her clit to tug and tease each nipple in turn.

Every inch of Tia's body tensed, ready to explode. She felt him sit back on his knees and gently spread her ass cheeks apart. She saw the mental image of her puckered, tight bloom.

With the image came Inuku's fiery thought, *It's perfect...*

That thought was followed by the image of his cock, thick and glistening with oil, penetrating the virgin opening. She sensed the burst of contained desire that flooded through him as he slowly and gently slid one trembling finger in then two, twisting and gently working the edges as he slid deeper.

She felt his cock bob against her and knew he was keeping a tight rein on the overwhelming need to slam into her. She saw all his restraint, like a foaming beast behind a flimsy fence, and she sensed the tremors throughout his body as he held back.

Then he slid his fingers out and the tip of his cock was against the tight, oil-slicked opening. She drew in a trembling breath as he began to slide in, ever so slowly.

She felt herself opening more than she had ever thought was possible, opening to take him in, stretching for him.

When he was completely inside, he reached one hand around to stroke her clit. His fingers slid into her slit, sliding over the hard nub and down farther. He dipped one finger into her honeyed pussy then pressed the palm of his large, calloused hand flat against her vulva.

"Oh yes!" she gasped, grinding against his hand.

He cupped the plump folds and moved the damp flesh around in circles as his cock continued to press into her ass.

Tia felt submerged in all-consuming want. Her arms shook with the effort of holding herself up, and every inch of her body blazed in an erotic inferno.

"Hold still," he growled when the full length of his cock was inside her. He released her vulva long enough to grab the flask and pour more oil onto her ass and the point of their joining. Then he pulled out, not as slowly as he'd gone in, and began a slow, building rhythm.

Just when Tia thought she couldn't take any more, he slipped his fingers into her slit again, driving them deep into her pussy.

She drew in a sharp breath as everything shattered. Then, with a scream, she rode the waves of one of the deepest orgasms she'd ever experienced. She arched her back, bucking against his hand. "More!" she gasped.

She felt the heat of his chest, hovering just above her back as he braced himself on one arm beside her, and continued the escalating rhythm of his cock in her ass. He thrust his fingers into her pussy again and again until he was pumping urgently into her.

Tia felt every single cell in her body open to him, reach out and merge into the fire he was whipping up. Within seconds the first wave of his own orgasm slammed into him.

He pulled back and roared, convulsing with the power of his climax.

Inuku... Tia's thought reverberated throughout the raging heat of their union. She felt his mind reach immediately for her and together they drifted in the clouds of their combined consciousness until sleep overtook them.

* * * * *

"There are many answers in the Great Void," the grand elder said, during one of their first training sessions. "Sometimes there are multiple answers, some contradictory to the same question."

"Then how do I know which one is the Truth?" Tia asked.

Her mother, who had joined them for this session, laughed. "They are all the Truth, my sweet."

Tia furrowed her brow in confusion.

The grand elder gently continued. "In your heart you know which Truth is the one that speaks to *you*, my child. It is this task with which the Ancients have entrusted you. To know and map your own heart."

Her mother's eyes lit upon Tia. "Will you and Inuku make the Vows?"

Tia's eyes flitted across the floor of the den as she considered the question. "I don't know," she answered, "I think I am still afraid."

The grand elder looked surprised. "Afraid, my child?"

Tia nodded. She was thoughtful for a moment. "At every one of our gatherings I am the only non-shifter," she replied. The old pang of not belonging anywhere or *to* anyone stabbed inside her chest.

"But you are every bit a Lith'hah as any shifter," her mother countered vehemently.

"Indeed," the grand elder agreed. "In fact, you are more powerful than many."

"But I will never be able to mate with Inuku as a cat." Her eyes filled and she drew a deep breath to quell the tears. "He deserves better. He deserves to have a full den, with cubs to rear..." Her voice snagged and she fell silent.

Her mother reached out and brought Tia into her arms. "Oh my sweet Tia...not all males want cubs."

"Inuku does," Tia answered softly. "I've seen it in his thoughts."

"But your own mother did not mate with your father while she was in cat form," the grand elder countered logically. "And the product of that union was *you*."

Tia jerked her head up. "Yes, but I— I'm...imperfect."

"Imperfect!" her mother exclaimed, incredulous. "You have the power to heal the Great Mother! How in Ancients' name does that make you imperfect, Tianelle?"

"We have humans among us now," the grand elder said. Her voice was steady and strong and wise, and it soothed Tia. "You are first among our kind to have both human and Lith'hah blood mingling in your veins." The grand elder's eyes sparkled. "It is not ours to question the wisdom of the Ancients. If They have taken it upon Themselves to merge human and Lith'hah, then They have Their reasons."

"Are you saying that there could be more like me?" Tia asked, her eyes growing round. She realized she was holding her breath and released it on a long exhalation.

A small smile played upon the grand elder's lips. "I'm saying there is a human female right now holding the seed of one of our Lith'hah males in her womb."

Tia stared. "Is it Priya? Or Azena?"

Her mother leaned toward the grand elder in astonishment. "Yes, who is it?" she whispered.

"It is not for me to reveal," the grand elder said. Her voice held laughter. "That honor is reserved for the mother and father. But all of your fellow humans—those who decided to stay—have settled in nicely. They seem to be leading happy, fulfilled lives. I am only blessed to have lived long enough to see the day when human and Lith'hah might live among one another in harmony and peace."

Tia looked at her mother and swallowed through the tightness of her throat. "It's true," she said. "Priya and Limak are happier than I've ever seen them. All of my band members are." And then, in a surprised kind of awe, she added, "There will be others like me."

Her mother nodded. "And they will be welcomed and loved, as you are—as all of your band members have been."

"So that means," Tia said, her eyes suddenly brightening, "that if Inuku and I have children, they won't be alone. They won't be freaks and outcasts! They'll have playmates and friends and...an entire community!"

"Yes, my child," the grand elder said, her voice echoing in the den as she gave way to rare and rich laughter. "Now go to Inuku. He waits for you. We are finished with today's session and I must confer with the Leader Queen on matters related to the Council."

Tia scrambled up, bowing in respect to the grand elder. She leaned down to hug her mother. "I'll see you soon, Mom." And then on impulse threw her arms around the small, frail old woman as well.

She caught the grand elder's whoop of surprise as she exited the old Lith'han's sanctuary.

A tinkle of laughter warmed Tia's throat, as tears of joy mingled with mounting excitement. She raced across the meadow and up the small mountainside where Inuku waited, in the den he'd built with his own hands.

For our life together, she thought.

And then she sent a thought out, reaching for Inuku's consciousness. *I'm coming, my love.*

About the Author

Kama Spice has lived in the East and the West and merges both in all her stories. She discovered erotic romance when a cute boy slipped a novel into her locker at school. She was instantly hooked and began smuggling them home to savor the words and delight in the sensations they aroused.

In her twenties, as she was living many of the adventures she would later write about, she created a vivid fantasy life with chiseled, smart heroes and strong, feisty heroines—all of whom inevitably made it onto the pages of her crowded journals. Thinking there was no place for all that writing except within the quiet pages of her hidden journals, Kama pushed them into the back of her closet and focused instead on writing and publishing books in other genres.

Eventually, however, through connections with friends, rummaging online for more exciting reading and a little bit of serendipity, she found her way to the Ellora's Cave site. *cue angels singing* Here, she reconnected with her love of all things romantic and all things naughty. Now she lives with her sexy and very funny husband and their children, and happily writes whatever pops into her head—knowing there are connoisseurs who will savor and delight in it as much as she did while writing it.

Kama welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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