



# Jaguar Moon Scent of a Mate

By

Teri Adkins

© copyright September 2006, Teri Adkins  
Cover art by Eliza Black, © copyright September 2006  
ISBN 1-58608-949-8  
New Concepts Publishing  
Lake Park, GA 31636  
[www.newconceptspublishing.com](http://www.newconceptspublishing.com)

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Dedication:

For the strength and courage of today's women, who dare to have it all.

## Prologue

*Maya Mountains  
Southern Belize*

In the hours before dawn, Miakoda was slated to die. Devante knew it, just as he knew with her death would go all hope for the Jaguar people.

He had stood witness to it once tonight. The grandparents--the spirits of his ancestors--had shown him every slash across her golden skin, every drop of blood that spilled from her lifeless body. He knew precisely which slice of the claw would be her deathblow.

He cursed his gods, the council. Cursed himself as he slammed his fist against the steering wheel. Why show him the damn vision if he was helpless to prevent it?

The drive through the mountains was taking too long. Giving his pilot time off left him stuck in his old jeep, plowing down vines and trying to ignore the incessant shaking of the front end.

He should have junked it years ago. Served him right for sentimental stupidity, hanging on to the first thing he had ever earned, when he could buy a dozen of them now.

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he tried to maintain control around the curves. The road was no more than a dirt path, rutted from rain and time. With the descent down the mountain, he was gathering more speed.

When he heard the loose rocks beneath his tires, he forced his foot to ease back. With the way his luck was running tonight, he would probably plunge over the side. Yeah, he would be a lot of use to everyone dead.

There were those out there who would be delighted with such news, but he was in no hurry to appease them.

He hit redial again on his cell, praying this time he would hear Ethan's voice. Knowing all along that if he did, it would mean Ethan was not doing his job. He listened to the constant ringing, then punched *end* before throwing the phone across the seat.

At the bottom of the mountain, Devante slammed on the brakes. He jumped from the jeep, shifting before his feet touched the ground.

His body was strong with solid muscles to eat away the miles. It would save valuable time cutting through the jungle. The strength and agility of his jaguar would serve him far better tonight than the jeep.

Was he too late? It would be his fault if Miakoda died. Only a fool put off the inevitable. Responsibility had been shackled to him from the moment of his birth. He never resented any of the demands made on him until now. Until Miakoda.

Silently he vowed to reach her in time, even as he forced his body to the edge of tolerance. Well-trained muscle struggled to meet his demand.

Ethan watched over her. He would protect her. Devante trusted his friend with his own life, and had never been let down. Of course Ethan would protect Miakoda. After all, Ethan had not been the one to fail his own sister.

## Chapter One

*Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary and Jaguar Preserve  
Central Belize*

Miakoda stood at the edge of the jungle, her predatory eyes scanning for movement. In the darkness, she heard the yelp of the puma. Her lips curled as she mewed her response to the invitation to come play.

This was her favorite time, when the creatures' songs filled the air, and imperfections were hidden behind the veil of darkness. Her ancestors, the ancient Mayans, believed day and night were two separate worlds. She agreed.

Tonight was the black moon, the darkest night, without reflection from the sun or earth to give the moon a glow. It was invisible, but palpable in each breath Miakoda drew, every beat of her heart.

She didn't need the moon to light her way. Her cat eyes were made for the dark, bouncing the tiniest of light back to the sensors for a second round of processing. They brought to life a world rarely seen by others. Her world.

The robe slid from her shoulders to pool around her feet as the cool wind danced across her bare skin. Caressing, teasing.

She leapt into the shadows with a fluid motion indiscernible to the human eye, and then moved swiftly through the dense undergrowth. She was a leguar, half jaguar and half leopard. Her eyes held the intelligence of the cat but the wariness of man.

Silent and deadly, she jumped over a fallen log to avoid the white-tailed fawn frozen in fright. He had nothing to fear. She wasn't the hunter tonight.

Like the jungle, she was edgy. It echoed through the rain forest in the sudden silence.

Miakoda lifted her head, scenting the wind as the hair on her neck stood. No scent was detectable but the threat was there. Somewhere in the dark, a pair of eyes was trained on her. She didn't need to see them to know they were there. It wasn't the first time she had felt someone watching. Waiting.

The hunter in her stirred as she crouched low, her eyes scanning shadows in search of prey.

The leguar stepped out, arrogantly blocking the path in obvious challenge to her territory. It was the first time she had seen one of her own.

Excitement welled in her chest as she rose from her crouch and instinctively crept toward him. The shining blue hue of his black coat glistened with tiny drops of rain. After searching for years, she had found the one thing she desired most.

His energy crushed against her, and she felt the man beneath. He was a shifter. The first she'd come into contact with since the day she had buried her parents. She knew of the shifters presence in Belize, but she had made no attempt to contact them, just as they had made no effort to reach out to her. Until now.

She felt his exhilaration in finding her, followed by anticipation of the fight to

come. It wasn't surprising that he expected an unfriendly welcome. Cats in the jungle usually fought for dominance or territory. She wanted neither.

Another step brought her close enough to look into his eyes. They were black, not warm like the night, but sinister and cruel. Empty. She froze.

Opening herself up, she allowed his energy to soak into her. Contact against skin activates sensory receptors, producing the touch sensation. Miakoda's receptors were sensitive to the unique energy emotions create. Without blocking, she could absorb this energy and read emotion. It was a gift, or a curse.

His hatred hit her with a force, nearly knocking her to her knees. Slowly she began to retreat, pushing away the negative energy sapping her strength. Like all good things, the gift came at a large price.

It was hard to back away from him when there were a million questions she wanted to ask, things she yearned to understand. He advanced toward her, and she accepted the inevitable. If she intended to see the dawn, she would have to kill him before asking a single one.

\* \* \* \*

Devante stood in the clearing and watched helplessly as the two black cats circled. He didn't acknowledge Ethan when the jaguar appeared. It had been his scent that had led Devante to Miakoda.

Ethan's stance was rigid and ready, waiting for the opportunity to strike. Devante understood his frustration. He felt as powerless as Ethan, unable to protect Miakoda for fear of injuring her by mistake.

It was impossible, the existence of an animal identical to Miakoda. Leguar's were rare, and no two alike. Her body was slender, small for a jaguar but larger than a leopard. Beneath her black coat, a dusting of rosettes could be seen. The jaguar was prevalent in her. How could there be another with the same markings?

In the darkness the two black forms were shadows. Devante could not help but admire the grace of the two fighting forms. Theirs was a dance skillfully mastered, their movements confident and sure. Deadly.

He snarled when a strong paw came up, razor sharp claws slicing open a cheek. Devante lunged as blood beaded in the torn flesh. His deep growl drew all eyes to him.

Eyes were the windows to the soul. As a soul walker, Devante knew that better than most. He saw in one the eyes of death, and in the other the eyes of life. Saw a soul that was connected to his. In that one instant, he knew.

With the stealth of his jaguar he was suddenly between the fighting cats. His hard body shoved Miakoda to the right. She rolled but landed on her feet.

Baring his teeth, the deep-throated roar was the only warning the enemy would receive before his death. Ethan leapt behind the cat, reassuring Devante he'd chosen well.

With Ethan's movements distracting the cat, Devante advanced. Massive jaws closed over the leguar's skull, as Devante applied the pressure to destroy. He felt no remorse for killing the one who had dared to threaten his intended mate. The future queen of the jaguars.

Without warning, he felt the leguar's skull changing, bones shifting and shrinking in size. Caught by surprise, Devante jerked back to look at the creature and instantly realized his mistake. On the ground the leguar had vanished, replaced by a scarlet

macaw. The bird rose to take flight, evading death.

Devante reached out, trying in vain to snag the fleeing bird. In the end, he could only watch in disgust as the wings flapped quickly to carry the enemy to safety.

He was filled with resentment for being cheated of his kill. Devante jerked his head to the right, his eyes searching Miakoda for injuries.

As he turned to approach her, she began to back away. He stopped to give her room. Hiding his human scent would give her the false comfort he was certain she needed. She was more comfortable around cat than man. On a soft stirring of the wind, she shifted to human form in obvious concession to his dominance. She wanted no more fights tonight.

Devante slid his gaze down her body, admiring every soft curve. She was shapely, not pencil thin like most women these days.

She was just as Ethan had described, and he couldn't be more pleased.

He knew some half-breeds were an aberration, deformed due to a mix in their gene pool.

From the photo that had been taken before her parent's death, Devante knew she'd been one of the lucky ones. The toll of their death was there, in the dark circles under her eyes, and the fine lines of her face. They only added to her delicate beauty.

She was darker than most of his people, and would stand out among them. It was befitting of the queen.

Ebony hair hung in a mass of shimmering curls past her shoulders. Her sun-kissed skin was warm, golden.

Even with Ethan watching over her, he had come close to losing her tonight. He'd hoped to give her time after her parent's death, but that was a luxury when her life was in danger. It was time to claim her. For her safety, for the sake of his own people. And maybe for himself.

Ethan was growing too attached to her. It had been obvious in his voice during his weekly reports. The jealousy had been slowly eating at Devante for weeks.

He was not hard on himself for it, accepting it as natural to his kind. Jaguars were jealous, territorial creatures. He was not about to share Miakoda with anyone. At least not until she fulfilled her duty.

By birth, she was his. That fate had fought to keep them apart, tried to rob them of their birthright, was nothing to him. He had cursed the fates and bested them before. This time too much was at stake.

He looked into her deep green eyes and knew any man who fell into that forest would never find his way out. It would certainly not be him.

He knew the moment she made her decision to leave.

"Are you going to allow her to go?" Ethan's words filled Devante's head as surely as if he'd spoken them aloud. As a mind walker, Ethan could easily communicate with his own kind.

*"For now. We'll stay close to her."*

*"Too close and she'll catch our scent,"* Ethan protested.

*"Doesn't matter."* They started moving down the same path Miakoda had taken.

*"What are your plans now?"* Ethan asked.

*"I believe it is time I met my queen."*

\* \* \* \*

Miakoda inched toward the thatch-roofed hut that had served as her clinic the past six months, alert and prepared. She heard the squeal of a mouse as the screech owl found its dinner, the wind ruffling the leaves that cluttered the jungle floor. Background noise, rarely noticed, but those insignificant sounds would alert her to danger. She'd been lucky tonight. If not for the two jaguars she could have been killed.

Jaguars were solitary creatures, the loners of the big cats. She had never known them to run in pairs. Her sightings of jaguars had diminished recently, but she knew their numbers weren't dropping at the reserve. Others had reported seeing them. It was as if the cats were avoiding her.

Entering the clinic, she reached for the string, then pulled. Light dimly lit the room as the single bulb swayed. There was electricity and running water from a well, and she was finally getting used to the outhouse.

She had spent much of her time since arriving in Belize in this room, charting vital information in an effort to save many species from extinction. None were more at risk than the jaguar.

She knew immediately she wasn't alone. Across the room sat the jaguar that had saved her life. She could not assume he was harmless.

His energy would invade her eventually, but by letting down her blockers she would have answers quicker. Knowing the emotions raging inside him could save her life. If it was an invasion, it was a necessary one. She refused to feel guilty about it.

Her eyes moved over the large cat curled lazily on the pine floor. He continued to clean his paw as if he belonged there. As if he was no threat.

His eyes were on her, watchful, curious. Her eyes trailed over him. He was magnificent, with unrivalled beauty.

His coat was the traditional goldenrod, with dark rosette spots resembling tiny paw prints inside each circle. He was large, at least eight feet from nose to tail, and she guessed his weight was two hundred pounds or more.

Miakoda was a *curandera*, a healer to the animals. It was a struggle to ignore her urge to treat him as the treasure he was. She wanted to examine him closely, to chart his size and weight. To determine what line he'd been born to.

Tonight had taught her caution. Emptying her mind, she allowed his energy to flow over her. She found the anger, the rage, the deadly threat she had felt in the jungle. He was struggling for control, and she knew it was a careful balance. As long as nothing provoked him, he would maintain his hold.

The jaguar rose slowly, stretching his well-toned body. There was a challenge in his eyes as he walked regally forward, his head held high.

She tested the air but felt no aggression. Lowering herself to her knees, she waited until he was only inches from her. The move put her in a vulnerable position, but had he intended her harm he could have left her to the leguar.

Her fingers itched to touch him, and she finally gave in to the impulse. She slowly stroked his back, his hair as smooth and fine as the silk of her robe. His massive head dropped to hers and rested there almost protectively. She buried her face against him, her arms circling his neck as tears burned behind her eyes. She had missed the majestic jaguars since their diminished sightings at the reserve. His growl was deep and brought out one of her own in return.

Next to her small frame, he was a hulking animal. She felt safe, protected for the



first time in months. She wrapped the pleasure of him around her, tucked it safely away. It would come in handy one day when she needed a little extra comforting.

Rarely did she invite one of the large cats inside. The last thing she wanted to do was domesticate the wild creatures. It was those primal instincts that kept them alive. To introduce them to humans, have them form a bond with one, could get them killed.

Humans were the biggest danger. Though the cats might view her as one of their own, she had been raised among man. She would never invite them into her human world--a dangerous place to the wild animals at the reserve.

But she hadn't invited this one. She stood, and then glanced over the room. The far window on the west was open. It hadn't been when she'd left.

Her eyes moved back to the jaguar. He watched her every move. Blood dripped from her face, and she moved to the cabinet that served as her medicine chest. She got out cotton to clean her wound.

The last physical contact she'd had with a jaguar had been her mother. Jaguars were all but extinct in the States, which was what had brought her to the jaguar preserve in Belize. She had joined the fight to prevent their complete extinction. The offer at the reserve had come at the perfect time.

She lined up gauze, disinfectant, and her mother's blue vial on the counter.

The energy in the room suddenly snapped, charging over her skin. She whirled to check on her visitor.

Striding across the room was not a cat, but a man. Her eyes trailed down, appreciating that his naked form was as perfect as his jaguar. Finely angled strength. Hair the same goldenrod brushed his shoulders; eyes the same amber stared back at her. A grin teased his mouth. He knew she was enjoying the view.

He walked toward her, each movement filled with purpose. Muscles rippled with every step, like a well-oiled machine synchronized to perfection. When he stopped only inches from her, his long fingers reached up to her chin, gently closing her gaping mouth.

## Chapter Two

“Who are you?” Miakoda could feel the heat of his desire against her skin. His fingers trailed her jaw, awakening her tamed cat.

“She knows who I am. She calls to my jaguar, just as he calls to her.”

His voice was deep, mesmerizing. Miakoda tried to speak, but the words came out dangerously close to a purr. Embarrassed by her reaction, she cleared her throat and took a step back.

Like all animals, every man has a scent. A taste uniquely his own. His scent was man--strong and heated like the sun--stirring the woman in her. It mingled with his jaguar--sensual and secretive like the night--arousing her beast. A heady combination.

She should have known immediately he was a Nahual, a shape shifter like herself. His powers had to be strong to mask it from her.

Giving in to the indulgence, she inhaled deeper, tormenting herself with spicy warm days, and woodsy cool nights. Of jaguar.

The urge to taste him was strong. To brush her tongue across his sweat dampened skin, take him into her mouth until she could get the real taste of him. The need was so strong she almost stepped toward him. There was no doubt he would welcome her. Jaguar blood was sensual, heated. When her body began to respond to his presence, she didn't bother to fight it, knowing it would be useless.

His body was perfection, smooth skin pulled tight over bulging muscle. He certainly wasn't the first naked man she had ever seen, but he was the only one to fuel such a primitive need in her.

Her breast swelled against the cool silk, and her nipples hardened painfully, erotically. She wanted his strong hands on them, that sexy mouth sucking urgently, igniting a slow burn that would only be extinguished when he was buried deep inside her. She could almost feel him there, velvet hardness filling her completely. Her sultry cat begged for it. The woman she was denied it completely. It would be stupid to give in to carnal lust with a man who was a stranger.

But he didn't feel like a stranger. It was as if some inner part of her recognized him and was screaming in denial.

“Your *gata* calls to me, begs me to take her.” Devante said and they both knew it was true.

“My cat doesn't make the decisions.” Miakoda had spent years learning to control the appetite of the jaguar. They were sensual creatures, and pairing for pleasure was not unusual. Unfortunately, she had lived too long among the human to approve of indiscriminate sex.

“Pity.” He retreated, seizing control of his cat with ease. She admired his discipline.

A knock sounded on the door just before it opened. The man who entered had to be the second jaguar, and lacked the power to conceal it.

His nod toward her guest was more salute than acknowledgement. “All clear.”

He stepped forward and handed a backpack to Devante.

He turned to Miakoda. "I'm Ethan."

From the corner of her eye she saw her naked guest opening the pack. She almost regretted that body being covered. But she needed it if she hoped to regain her balance.

Shape shifters had to plan around their changing or be caught in some very uncomfortable situations around humans. Around their own, it wasn't a problem. Nahual's had the ability to produce a partial change. With this ability came the benefit of growing hair and skin to cover their nudity.

But this one hadn't bothered with the loincloth. Created from the skin of their cat, the jaguar print was as concealing as when their pelts had been worn by man.

"I'm Miakoda." Ethan stepped into the room while she busied herself retrieving medical supplies. She looked up and realized her guest hadn't bothered with a shirt or shoes, or even to button the top button of his jeans. And that irritated the hell out of her.

"So Ethan, does your friend have a name?"

"He is Devante, *Principe* of the Jaguar."

She stole a glance at this supposed prince, but could read nothing in his obstinate expression. That he was a prince seemed to fit. There was an air about him. Imposing. Noble. Or maybe just arrogant.

"It was convenient that you two were passing through tonight." Suspicion filled her voice. It was no coincidence these two were at the reserve. "I appreciate the help. Three shifters in one night. This place is suddenly popular."

"Four, including yourself," Devante said.

The Spanish cadence in his voice floated through the air, surprising her.

English might be the official language in Belize, but most of the locals spoke one of many Mayan languages. They normally spoke little English.

Miakoda spoke Spanish, though not as well as English. She had also learned some of the Q'eqchi' language from her mother. This meant she could usually communicate in some form.

"Yes, four. Seems quite the party." She turned her full attention to Devante. Even with the expanse of stainless steel counter between them, his presence was overwhelming.

"What was he? He wasn't a *Nahual*. No therianthrope can take on multiple animals."

"Vampire?" Ethan questioned.

"No. The dead have a stench they cannot hide." Devante leaned against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest as he continued to study Miakoda. That constant dissection was beginning to make her jumpy.

"This one had no scent." Devante added.

"I agree. Even after I knew he was watching me, I detected no trace of him."

Devante straightened stiffly. "You knew there was a threat, yet you did not return to safety?" His voice was low.

"It's not the first time I've felt someone out there. There has been no attempt to approach me until tonight. If the intent is real enough, no doors can prevent an attack."

Devante muttered under his breath.

"A *brujo* could mask his scent." When Miakoda only stared at Ethan, he explained. "A witch. Some can take on other forms, using the skin of others."

“Skin walkers.” Some Indian tribes believed that a shaman could become the animal whose pelt they adorned. Just because she had never seen it done didn’t mean it wasn’t possible. Most people didn’t believe in shape shifters either and look how wrong they were.

“I thought he was leguar.” Miakoda said softly as she turned away and began searching through drawers.

“He wasn’t,” Devante said.

She could feel his eyes on her again, following her every move. They burned through her skin as if trying to reach her soul.

Let him. Her skin was a lot tougher than it looked. She gave up her search, unable to remember what she had been looking for. She turned back to Devante, waiting for him to finish.

“He was mimicking you. Either to mislead you or to confuse us.”

“It wasn’t for your benefit,” she said. “He appeared on the path before you arrived.” Whatever had been on that path had known her deepest desire. Had taken on the one form that made her vulnerable. She hoped he had only been imitating her, but something told her there was more to it.

“Maybe to gain your trust until he was close enough to kill you.” Devante walked casually around the counter, closing the distance between them like a cat stalking a mouse.

“I could feel his hate emanating from him. What was he after?” Miakoda asked.

Ethan opened his mouth, closed it at the quick shake of Devante’s head.

“Hard to say.” Devante leaned back against the counter, his pose decisively relaxed. She didn’t buy it. These two were not telling her something. Who said they could be trusted? For all she knew they could be just as dangerous as the shifter who’d tried to kill her.

“*We are not here to harm you.*” Ethan’s words flowed through her head. She whirled, her gaze locking on Ethan’s face as she narrowed her eyes.

“How in hell’s fire did you do that?” He had been in her head, she knew it without a doubt. They both might have the ability to hear her thoughts. And that would mean they would know her every move.

“Devante does not mind walk.” Ethan said aloud as if it that explained everything. As if that should relieve her mind.

“But you do.” She stated flatly.

“Si.”

“Stay out of her head, Ethan.” They both turned at the harshness in Devante’s voice.

“Of course.” Ethan bent in a mock bow. “I am sorry for the intrusion, Miakoda. It is mere habit.”

“Break it,” she snapped at him.

It wasn’t smart to let strangers or even friends know your darkest secrets. It was an invasion and one she didn’t appreciate. With her blockers, it would not be too difficult to close him out of her mind. “Why are you here?”

“It is an unsafe time for the mixed,” Ethan said.

“Mixed?” Miakoda asked as she turned to Ethan.

“We’ll get to that.” Devante turned to Ethan. “Check the perimeter and stand

guard outside. No one gets near this place without us knowing of their arrival. Understood?"

Ethan nodded before disappearing through the door, leaving Miakoda completely alone with Devante. It was the last place she wanted to be.

She reached for the cotton, awkwardly fumbling with the box. Her nerves were just too unsettled for gracefulness.

"Here, let me." Devante took the cotton from her shaky hands. "You'll scar," he said absently as he held her chin in his strong hands, turning her cheek toward the light. His movements were confident, as if he had done this before.

"Wouldn't matter." She shrugged. Nothing could with his fingers burning her skin, sending bolts of need all the way down to her toes. His touch was surprisingly gentle as he cleaned the three deep gashes on her cheek. "But I won't scar," she added. Her voice sounded husky to her own ears, and her eyes fluttered up to see if he had noticed. From the unbridled desire she saw there, he had not only noticed but also felt the same need. She dropped her eyes quickly.

Reaching around him, she picked up the blue vial. "A little of this stuff and tomorrow it'll be no more than a scratch."

She jumped when he dabbed disinfectant liberally over the cuts. When he leaned close and blew his warm breath over her skin to cool the burn, she felt her heart flip. It had been the same thing her mother had done after cleaning the scraped knees of a little girl. She felt the lump in her throat and forced herself to swallow around it. Her mother's strong hands would never be there to tend her hurts again. She would give anything just to see her mother's smile one more time. Hear her soft voice whispering words of comfort.

Devante nodded toward the vial. "What is that?"

"Family secret." She managed a weak smile.

His fingers stilled as his eyes stared deep into hers. There was something in them that forced her to hold his gaze. "Some families have too many secrets," he replied sharply as he pulled his fingers away from her skin.

## Chapter Three

Devante put distance between them as the air grew thick. "There are things we need to discuss."

She studied his weary features. Whatever he was about to say, she had the feeling she wasn't going to like it. He ran his fingers through his hair, the first frustrated gesture she had seen him make. It pleased her to see that human flaw.

"The jaguar *rey* is dead." The words came out flat, emotionless. But the weight that settled in her chest revealed his grief. If this man was the prince of the jaguars, then the jaguar king had been his father.

His suffering cast a shadow over her, and she dropped her barriers to take it all in. She couldn't remove it entirely, only time could. But she could give him a few minutes free of the load.

"I'm sorry for your loss." The words sounded as inadequate as they had six months ago when people had been mumbling them to her. She felt the urge to wrap her arms around him and offer comfort. It was doubtful he would accept it any better than she would have back then. "I trust the new queen is well?"

"There is no *reina*. My sister died seven years ago."

Miakoda wrapped her arms around her waist to chase away the chill.

"How?" The tears burned behind her eyes. The sinking feeling of loss that filled her was bleeding over from him. It had to be. She should feel nothing at the loss of these strangers.

She was not part of that world, had been turned away by that very king. His death, the death of his daughter, meant nothing to her.

"Does it matter?" Devante asked a little too harshly. His eyes locked with hers and he exhaled. "The council has been in charge since my father's death."

"That should make your elders happy. I've heard power is an obsession with them." It had been the vote by the elders that had forced the king to reject her and her mother. For that alone, she would never forgive them.

It had mattered little to her, having never known the security of belonging to the jaguar people. But to her mother it had been a constant heartache. One that she had carried with her to her death.

Miakoda dropped the soiled cotton in the trash, and turned to open the vial.

"I have to believe their intentions are good," Devante said. "They still believe in the old ways and expect to practice them. Some of the ancient laws and rituals cannot apply in this world. Things that were acceptable a thousand years ago cannot be allowed."

"Because they fight change, the elders come across as cruel. I'll admit some of their ways are barbaric. No one is happy under their control. A rightful replacement must be found for the throne."

"Without the queen, that seems impossible. Just where do you expect to find this new king?" She stepped up close to the metal cabinet. Using the reflection as a mirror, she began dusting the powder over her cheek. A soothing mixture of herbs, the clear

powder eased the burn.

"You may not have been raised among us, Miakoda, but you know the laws of our people. If the women of my line are unable to inherit the throne to pass to their *rey*, then a new lineage must come through the blood of the gods. Your mother would have told you this, if nothing else."

Her chest grew tight and she avoided his eyes. "Then you're out of luck. That legacy has vanished."

"Not completely. My line descends from the Jaguar Sun. To complete the circle, all that is needed is one of the Moon Goddess." He stepped closer, his voice softening. "It is your birthright, Miakoda."

"No," she whispered as she closed her eyes. She would not put herself through that. The loss of never knowing her mother's people was nothing compared to the hurt of being rejected again. She had seen what that rejection had done to her mother. Miakoda wasn't that strong.

"I have no birthright. The ones you ask me to honor are the ones who took it from me." Her movements were stiff as she replaced the cap on the glass bottle.

"So they sent you as their messenger boy? Tell them no thanks." She allowed sarcasm to drip from her words. It was better to feel his anger, use it to feed her own, than to soften toward him.

She made quick work of replacing the medical supplies while he stood several feet away. She needed the distance. Needed miles of it.

"Have you seen so few men that you fail to recognize one? Do not assume me harmless, *gatita*." There was no humor in his voice. "Your birthright cannot be taken from you, only you can refuse to accept it."

She stiffened her spine and raised her chin. "Well, Devante, I'm afraid you wasted a trip. I'm not the one you're looking for."

"There is no other." The finality in his voice exasperated her, as if the choice had already been made for her.

"My blood is tainted," she reminded him, knowing how the purebred jaguars felt about her mixed blood.

She didn't want him here. Didn't want a glimpse of the life she had been deprived of living. Family, friends. Understanding. Acceptance for what she was. He needed to be reminded of the reason she had once been exiled. Anything to force him to leave her alone and let her return to her world.

"Your blood is pure. No leopard could taint the blood of the Jaguar Moon," Devante said.

"Denying the leopard in me doesn't make it go away." She would never find acceptance for her kind among the jaguar. "What would a panther like me have to offer the great jaguar?" Her eyes cut into him, slicing as cleanly as a knife.

"You are no mere panther." Anger caused his voice to rise. She felt the heat of it skim across her skin before flooding through her.

"No? Isn't that what they call the dark cats?" Her voice lowered, hiding the hurt behind those words. She was no longer that little girl, longing to fit in. She was a woman and proud of her blood. No one would ever make her feel like less again.

"Panther." The word snarled from his lips. "A name with no meaning given to leopard, jaguar or even puma. You know it stands for any dark cat. Do not toy with me

on this. We both know who and what you are. Are you so ashamed that you deny it?"

"I'm not ashamed of my heritage." Her voice held a deadly calm. "I am leguar, born of a leopard and a jaguar. It is not I who bring shame to the name. The coalition banned my parents, and me as well. I owe the jaguar people nothing. We weren't up to their standards." The outburst left her feeling exposed and angry with herself for giving him even that little piece of her. None of that mattered anymore. Belonging had been important to her parents, not to her. Not any more.

"There are others of your kind who are in need." He spoke softly, as if he knew what those few little words would mean, knew that they would change everything. They did.

"Leguars?" She stood frozen, her entire existence hanging on his next words. When she had seen the leguar standing on the path tonight, she had been elated. To learn that he was trying to kill her paled compared to the disillusionment of discovering he had not been a true leguar. To know that she might actually be the only one in existence. She had never felt so alone.

"Possibly. There are many forms of hybrid people. They were wrong to cast you out, Miakoda. The hybrids were a hope during a time of need. The Great War. It is because of the coalition that you exist."

She had hoped for so long that there were others like her. It was one reason she had spent so many years searching the hybrid breeding mills, desperate to find one of her own. Had her mother and father known of the others? Was that why they had devoted their life to helping the mixed breeds? Like her, they had never found anything more than helpless, cruelly abused animals. Never another mixed bred Nahual.

"These hybrids you speak of, what are they?" He had her complete attention. Could there actually be hybrid shifters, much like the hybrid animals she rescued? Wasn't she living proof that they could exist? And how could they exist without her knowledge?

"Do you not know the story of your own creation? Of your conception, your birth?"

The skepticism in his tone was enough to put her on the defensive. "Of course I know it. My father was a leopard prince, my mother the jaguar princess. I was raised on the story of their love, as well as the price they paid for it. Though prohibited, they chose to stay together and raise me. That's the reason they were banned from their own people."

The sympathy that washed over his face was the final straw. "Don't waste your pity, Jaguar. I have done quite well on my own, as did my parents before me. We do not need your kind to survive."

"That story you tell is a fairy tale, a myth created to comfort a child. Surely as a grown woman you no longer believe it."

The blood rushed to her head as her heart raced. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because it is a lie."

"How dare you make such accusations? You never knew them, so you don't have the right. My parents were honorable, noble. They were better than all of your jaguars combined." No one would ever convince her otherwise. Her parents were the only people she had ever loved, the only ones to love her. She refused to stand back and listen to anyone criticize them.



He exhaled slowly, and rubbed his hand over the two day's stubble. "Twenty five years ago, our people--all therianthropes--were fighting the Great War. You've heard of it?"

"Of course." She snapped as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Everyone knows of the war between the shifters and the vampires. My father told me many stories of that time."

"Good. At least you are not totally ignorant."

"*Excuse me?*" She stood rigid, her hands braced on her hips. Her control was slipping, and she knew she would not be able to hold it much longer. She wasn't even convinced she wanted to.

"Why do you take offense for something you have no control over? If you are never told things, how can you not be ignorant of them?" Devante moved wearily to rest his hip against the gunmetal gray desk.

Fighting the leguar had tired them both, but it would be a long time before either of them rested.

"During the war, the coalition was approached by a breeder. A man they called Sinock. He spoke of a new line to our race, a new species that would be fearless against the vampires. This new species would be created from our strongest, the best among us. The advanced group would grow to protect all Nahual.

"You must remember that this was a time of great confusion and fear. Everyone was just trying to survive. The jaguar, leopard, even the wolf listened to the breeder closely. We had lost many fighting the vampires, trying to gain our freedom.

"Sinock convinced the coalition to sanction the inter-breeding of our people. The breeding was non-selective--"

"You mean no one had a choice," she clarified.

"Yes." Devante sighed. "The breeder selected the pairings and all were told to comply. Most did so willingly, with the knowledge that they were creating the hope of our people. Then the first hybrids were born. Some of Sinock's gene combinations were atrocious. Our people were outraged. The coalition could not ignore the cry of their own people and stopped the breeding. Sinock was banned."

"He had their approval," Miakoda said.

"They knew nothing of the monstrosities he was committing against their own people until it was too late."

"Just what did they think he was doing?" she demanded. What he was telling her was inconceivable. That the ruler of a people, that everyone responsible for protecting those people would turn them over like cattle. And that was the world she had longed to be a part of?

"The pairings the coalition was aware of were not unreasonable. Combining two animals of the same species, mating the strongest together. Some joining had even occurred on their own. It is the way in the wild, the strongest survive."

"And some eat their young. Kill the weak. There are limits, Devante. Lines we don't cross."

"I believe that lesson was learned. Once the coalition put a stop to the breeding, they began to understand how grave their mistake had been. Though they banned Sinock, there was little they could do with the ones already created." Devante rubbed at the tension building in his neck.

“They were people, for God’s sake, not just animals.” Her eyes narrowed. “What did they do?”

“They voted to ban all who were conceived.”

Miakoda inhaled sharply. “Let me get this straight. They approved of the breeding, forced their own people, then they abandoned those very people?”

“So it would seem.” At least he didn’t sound proud of that fact.

Miakoda paced the room, trying to expel the surge of energy. It filled her, threatening to steal her breath. When her head began to swim, she took another deep breath, forcing air into her lungs.

“They protected everyone but their own creations. Some had to be mere babies. But the coalition would see them as freaks, a reminder of their own evil ways. They would see in them their own shame.” She could hardly control her outrage. Yes, she would be considered the same freak to the Nahual. But at least she had been born from love. These poor creatures had been no more than a weapon to use against the enemy.

“They saw in them their failure. They had no choice but to ban the hybrids to ensure the purity of each line.” His eyes followed her fluid movements as she crossed in front of him.

“Sounds like they should have thought of that sooner. There were other choices. Like owning up to their mistakes by protecting the hybrids.” She rounded on him, looking to do battle. Searching for the enemy.

Devante would have been only a child himself at the time. It wasn’t his fault, she reminded herself. Energy built in her, humming just below the skin. Emotions were dangerous to her kind, more so with her than most.

“I do not disagree, merely state the facts.” His voice was deep and steady. A balm to soothe her fire.

“Why tell me?” She stopped pacing and faced him.

“After the breeder was banned, he sought revenge. Sinock wanted to be the king of the new species, a leader among the other shifters. What should have been his grandest hour turned him into an outcast.

“He was angry when his plan was destroyed and he was labeled a monster. In retaliation, he kidnapped the *principe* of the leopards, forcing him to breed with the heir to the jaguar throne.” His voice lowered, then hardened. “Your parents, Mia.”

“You’re wrong.” The words hung in the knot in her throat, burning as she forced them out. If he was right, it meant that her parents had lied to her, that her whole life had been built on that lie.

“If only I were wrong.” He shook his head.

She looked away from the pity she saw in his eyes.

“In doing this, Sinock committed the ultimate sin against our people. The elders would never allow two sacred bloodlines to be desecrated. They are protected above all else,” Devante said.

“The jaguar and the leopard people turned their back on their own future leaders, banned them from their homes because they failed to elude a monster’s revenge? You call that protecting them? Poor protection.” Miakoda said.

Her mind raced, trying to find the truth. Her parents had loved each other, hadn’t they? Could she have been so wrong about them?

She closed her eyes, searching for a memory of her parents together. Needing to

prove to herself that her life had been real.

The image of her father with his arms wrapped around her mother, love shining in her father's eyes as he had looked down at her. Their laughter. Behind it came another, then another. These were not staged scenes for the sake of a child. Her parents had adored each other, her as well. If she knew nothing else, she knew their love.

"They were not banned, Mia. No one would have banned the jaguar *princesa* from her people. It was only the hybrids that were not allowed to live among the purebred. Your parents could have returned home at any time and would have been welcomed."

"If that were true, they would have done so. I watched my mother yearn for her own people most of my life. She had no family left, but the people of her village meant everything to her. What you say cannot be true." He was wrong. He had been told these lies and believed them. That didn't make them fact, she reminded herself.

"It would be, if they loved you. In order to return, they would have had to give you up, each other as well. No one would have allowed them to continue to live together, taking the risk that another half-breed would be conceived.

"It is said that your parents found true love, that they were indeed soul mates. I do not know if it's true, only you know. Maybe they found something worth more to them than the acceptance of their own."

Miakoda felt a hurt so deep, she knew it would take a lifetime to heal. Losing her parents had nearly destroyed her. Learning what they had suffered in order to raise her with their love, sheltering her from those who would deny her, made the need to touch them, to speak to them that much sharper. And made her hatred of those who would have cast them out years ago that much stronger. They had hurt her parents, and in doing so had created an enemy in her.

"You come here now, telling me you need me in order to save the jaguar people. They are not my people. You would be insane to believe that the same people who shunned me twenty five years ago would now welcome a half breed to their throne."

"They can do no less. There is nothing they can do to prevent you from claiming what is rightfully yours."

"I'm sorry, but this is not my problem." Why should she get involved with the politics of the jaguar, after what they had done to her family? They would not welcome her interference. That had been made clear enough the day she had been born. She would be a fool.

"There is also another reason for you to return."

"Great. What other surprises are you waiting to spring on me? I have to be honest with you Devante, I don't think I can handle many more of your little secrets." He wouldn't convince her to change her mind. The jaguars were a strong, fierce group and she couldn't see anyone mistreating them for long. They would just have to ban together and overrule the elders. They would just have to take care of their own, as they had forced the hybrids to do.

"The hybrids need your help."

"Mine? Oh, that's rich. Suddenly everyone needs me. Just what is it you think I could do for them?" She wanted to flee the room, race off into the jungle and never stop. She wanted her skin damp from exertion as she used up the energy burning inside her. Crossing her arms over her chest, she forced her body rigid as she stood and faced him.

No matter how much she wanted to, she wouldn't run.

"You have spent a lifetime studying the hybrids."

"*Animals*, Devante. The animals I've studied and tried to help don't turn into men. Can you see the difference here? I know nothing of these people."

"They will each fall under the rule of their elders. They are in trouble. Is there more you need to know?" he challenged.

"Don't try to play on my emotions. The council cannot touch them. You said yourself the hybrids haven't been a part of that world for years."

"You do not follow the news of our race, or you would have heard the news. The coalition has lifted the ban, called the prodigal children home for their rightful welcome."

"No." She rubbed at the ache forming behind her temple. She had known this night would bring trouble, she just had not guessed at the magnitude. "Why?"

"Some of the hybrids have had trouble adjusting to their pairing."

"That's a nice way of saying they're out of control. Which ones?"

"The ligers, for starters."

"Hell's fire," she spit out between clenched teeth. "They bred tigers and lions? What were you people thinking, allowing such a thing?" She could feel the energy filling the air--anger, frustration--swirling around her, trying to force its way beneath her skin. She rebuilt the barrier, strengthened the wall as she fought to keep it out, but the effort it took sapped her strength.

"Breeding a solitary creature with one who needs a pride is not only cruel, it's dangerous. I have only seen one, and he couldn't be saved," she said.

"That's only one problem. Several have gone rogue." Devante no longer stood leaning against the desk, but began to pace the room, as if he too had energy to burn.

"Crazy, you mean." Her voice fell flat.

"If you prefer," he snapped and locked his eyes with hers.

She saw it then, in those eyes. He felt inadequate and was not happy about it. Just as she suspected, he wasn't happy to ask her for help. Well, that made two of them.

"What I prefer is to not have this conversation. What proof do you have that anything you say is true?" She just wanted to sink into her bed, cover her head and forget this night had ever happened.

The claw marks on her face burned, her head ached from hours of battling other's emotions, and she had missed supper. Hunger always made her grumpy.

"I have no proof, yet I speak the truth. The rogues have killed our people and human alike. No species wants the hybrids among their people. They are in danger everywhere they go. They have also attracted the attention of a group known as Hybrids Right to Creation."

"The only rights those monsters are worried about is their right to play god with innocent animals," Miakoda said. "They create the things of nightmares, then sell them to zoos or freak shows. The ones that are so hideous no one wants them are either destroyed or turned loose to fend for themselves."

"And the hybrid people have come under their radar. I do not need to tell you how detrimental it would be to our race if we were discovered. They would destroy us all."

"Boy, what a mess you people have created." And they wanted her to clean it up. Yeah, right.

“We did not create the hybrids.”

“Yes, you did. When the coalition sanctioned the breeding. That the monster they put in charge slipped from their control is their fault.” None of them were going to get off that easy. As far as she was concerned, they all condoned it when they looked the other way. “Why welcome them back now?”

“The coalition feels guilty, and they feel the hybrids need protecting.”

“They want to keep an eye on them,” she corrected.

“Probably. Something is threatening these people. The coalition is not made up of monsters, Mia. None of the men who sit at the table today were responsible for the nightmare twenty-five years ago. However, one by one, the hybrids are disappearing. Whispers blame the council of some species, but no one dares speak it aloud. I do not think tonight’s attack on you was a coincidence.

“They need someone who understands them, who can help them deal with what is locked inside them. You have worked with the animals and know some of what they are dealing with.” He held up his hand to warn off argument. “I know you know nothing of this species, but whether you’re ready to accept it or not, you are a hybrid yourself. You were raised with two animals inside you, and taught them to cohabit. You are all these people have.”

“You’re using the hybrids to get to me. You think I’ll agree to be your queen, in exchange for helping the hybrids.” She wanted to help them, she realized. No one could understand these people better than she could. Even her parents could not comprehend the battle that had once raged inside her. The war had ended for her, but only after countless mistakes. Those mistakes could now be used to benefit others.

“I can hope.” The boyish smile he flashed did something strange to her stomach. This one could be a charmer if he set his mind to it, no doubt. A shame his efforts were wasted on her. There was no way she was going to fall for this man, no matter how her body reacted to him. He wanted to use her, and he didn’t bother hiding that fact. Maybe he was smart enough to know she would have seen through the lie.

“Hope is useless. You’re right about one thing, I’m a hybrid. Whether conceived in love or revenge, I’m a half-breed. But I don’t need to become queen of a species that turned me away to help the hybrids. I’m capable of going before the coalition on my own. I can offer my help and obtain their approval.”

“The coalition is made up of leaders from every breed of Nahual. They can be a daunting group, even to the males of our kind.”

“Meaning that as a female, I will be intimidated. All of those big, scary, males and just fragile little me. If you think to scare me off, save it. I’ll meet with the leaders, hear what they have to say, and find out if what you have told me is true. Then I’ll make my own decision.”

He nodded and she could have sworn she saw his mouth twitch. She knew better. There were serious doubts in her mind that this one ever smiled without a motive.

“We will leave at once.”

“No, we won’t. *I’ll* leave in the morning, and *you* are free to leave whenever you want. It’s late and I’m in no mood to travel tonight.” And the last thing she wanted was to be closed up in a car with him for hours. She had virtually been alone the last six months and had grown accustomed to a certain measure of seclusion. She needed it to keep the stimulus to her sensory receptors down. Otherwise, she would be overwhelmed.

There had been rangers on occasion, but they respected her privacy for the most part, and she avoided them.

"We will travel together. You need more protection than can be provided here where you are isolated."

"You call this isolated? This place is beginning to feel overcrowded to me. Look, Devante, I appreciate the offer. Really. But I assure you there's no need. It's clear there's a threat, and I'll be prepared for it."

She hesitated before continuing, "I'll probably help the hybrids, regardless of the truth about my parents. But I won't get mixed up with your council."

"Once you are *reina*, the council will have no say over you."

Her laugh carried a hint of hysteria. "You think they'll just bow down to a leguar as their queen? Not likely."

"I'm growing tired of your denials, Miakoda. I have already explained that your blood--the blood of Ixchel, Moon Jaguar, and wife to Jaguar Sun--cannot be denied the throne. As for the leopard in you, my blood is dominant enough to wipe out your leopard."

"That's a myth, a legend. And even if it wasn't, my father was leopard. It is who I am. I will not perform some ancient ritual just to make myself fit in the council's eyes. Even if I did believe it was possible, it would be an insult to my father."

She had heard of a blood draining ritual, performed centuries ago, to bleed out impurities. It was similar to the bloodletting performed by physicians in the states a hundred years ago. Unlike those medical procedures--as bad as they were--the *Nahuals* were practically drained dry while blood was transferred from a more pure source. If the person died during the process they were said to have been undeserving of the donor's blood. Few, if any, were ever found worthy enough.

"No one is asking that of you. Your soul is that of the jaguar, it is strong in you, the leopard timid. I only mean that our children will be jaguar. My blood will see to it. No one will doubt their right to rule."

He spoke so easily of a world where she belonged. Where she could live a normal life, raise a family. Somewhere where she was free to be herself, not living behind walls to conceal her true self. Friends were impossible with the secrets she carried. She wanted to believe him. But she knew it was a trick, a lie to get her to yield to his wishes. She would not fall so easily.

"We will seek the coalition's approval of our match. They are aware of the problems we face with our council, but allow them control until a rightful ruler is seated."

"And what of the hybrids?" Miakoda asked.

"We will ask them to appoint someone as leader, so they may have a seat at the table as well. A sanctuary can be set up where they can exist in peace."

"So you can hide them away, you mean. Who would you name ruler? And who would care? Each species denied them a place among their own and now you think they'll welcome them at the table because the coalition decreed it? You know better than that."

"I don't have all the answers, Miakoda." She heard the wariness in his voice, but ignored it.

"No?" Her reply died on her lips when she turned her head toward him. His words, his body, were offering her a dream. Trust him and be welcomed by her own. No

hiding, no secrets. She could have friends, children, and acceptance. She shook her head at the absurdity of it. Time had taught her dreams turn to nightmares all too quickly.

“It’s late, Devante. You and your friend can stay the night, sleep on the floor in here. I’ll go with you tomorrow. But as a hybrid, not a jaguar.” She rubbed her neck in an effort to loosen the knotted muscles. This was why she preferred seclusion.

The night had held too much disturbance pulsating through the air, striking at her repeatedly. She did not want that part of people. It was hard to distinguish her own feelings, to deal with them without others flooding her. She gave up trying.

## Chapter Four

Devante heard the call and eased from his makeshift bed. It was a welcome relief from his tossing and turning. He had tried in vain to drown out the scent of Mia that still lingered in his head.

Protecting her was going to be a nightmare when the enemy could follow the scent of honeysuckle right to her door. By the gods, that scent was there, even in her animal form. A child could track her.

He made his way across the darkened room in silence. He was a predator, the supreme hunter. No animal in the jungle dared to engage him.

He stepped outside, carefully clinging to the shadows. He knew where his target was hiding. The dark clouds covered the moonlight, masking his location as he waited.

“Devan.” A strong hand closed over his shoulder.

“Ethan. I trust all is well.” At five foot ten, Ethan was short by jaguar standards, and muscular instead of sinewy.

The two men had been friends since adolescence. Though Devante would never admit it to Ethan, he had missed him the past months. As it was, Ethan had an ego few could match and which would only worsen at the news.

“It’s been quiet. I don’t think we’ll have any more trouble tonight.” A grin lit Ethan’s face. “Looks like you’re doing well for yourself. I’ve been here, what, six months? I’ve never been offered a bed.”

Devante searched Ethan’s features, but found only humor. “That’s in your favor, since your objective was to remain a shadow. As it stands, I wasn’t offered a bed. The same offer was extended to you, for a place on the floor beside me.”

Ethan shrugged, leaning casually against the wall. He didn’t fool Devante. That easygoing attitude might dupe his enemy, but he knew Ethan could tear out your throat and never drop that smile.

“As an afterthought, I’m sure. Besides, I’ve grown rather fond of the cool nights, so I’ll pass on the offer. I’ll have to sleep indoors soon enough.”

Devante’s eyes moved over the landscape. Miakoda had found a place of solace here in this jungle while her wounds healed. The loss of her parents would have hit her hard. He could relate. His eyes landed on his battle scarred jeep. Maybe he’d trade it for a new one.

His father had never understood Devante’s refusal to have everything handed to him. He had kept the jeep to remind his father and himself that he earned his own way. It no longer mattered. His days of trying to live up to his *padre*’s expectations were long gone. Hard work had bought him all he owned these days.

Miakoda would know about that. If her net worth had not been included in the report he’d received, Devante would have assumed she was broke. She certainly lived as if she were struggling. Bare essentials only. If it wasn’t money that drove her to push herself so hard, what was the reason? He hadn’t expected to respect her.

“Rather glad the cat’s out of the bag, so to speak.” Ethan chuckled, clearly



pleased with his own pun. "These last few weeks haven't been easy. That's one stubborn woman. Seemed she was determined to find a jaguar in this jungle."

"Scared off the competition, did you?" Ethan's grin was infectious and Devante caught himself before his lips curled.

"Can I help it if we're all so damn territorial?"

"Just remember why this reserve was established."

Ethan clutched his hand over his heart. "You wound me, Devan. I would never risk the jaguars. Their survival is vital to all of us. I'll admit I've kept the jaguars away from Miakoda, but not from their home. You know it was necessary, in case any of them were shifters. They would have known immediately who she was. There are too many who would do anything to keep a mix off the throne."

Devante understood that only too well. Until a few months ago, he would have been leading that group. Now he could do no more than protect the *princesa* and pray she would agree to become their *reina*.

"Can I help it that my scent warned them off? I'm certain she picked up on it, which probably explains why she searched so diligently to find me," Ethan said. "Has she agreed?"

"Agreed to accompany me to the meeting, but no more. She has no love for our kind." Nor did they hold any for hers. The hybrids had brought nothing but pain to the jaguars.

Devante brushed back the hair that had fallen across his brow. It was much longer than he usually wore, but with everything going on, he didn't see when he would find the time to do anything about it.

"Can you blame her?" Ethan asked.

"No," Devante acknowledged, he could not blame her and that rubbed. He wanted to. He needed someone to take his frustration out on. "It is not my place to blame."

"I've been watching her for months. She's a tough kid."

Devante scoffed, "I saw no kid upon my arrival, Ethan." What he had seen had done things to his body and his control that had not happened since he'd been a randy teen. It burned his stomach to know the only woman to affect him so primitively was a half-breed.

"It is not my intention to bring harm to our future *reina*." Devante had been ill tempered since arriving. Staying even a few hours was needless, especially when his people needed his protection. His plan had been to return before the council learned he was gone. Miakoda was making that impossible.

"Intentions have little to do with it." Ethan crossed his massive arms over his chest, eyeing Devante closely.

"If you have something to say to me, *hermano*, then spit it out," Devante snapped.

"Look, we all know how you feel about the hybrids--" Ethan began.

Devante interrupted before Ethan could finish. He was in no mood for lectures. "My *hermana* died to keep a half breed off the throne. I'm doing my best to hand it over to one. Cut me some slack, Ethan."

"Drina died keeping an insane man from ruling our people. That he was mixed had nothing to do with it," Ethan corrected. He was one of the few with the guts to disagree with their *principe*.

“What do you think shattered his mind? His soul was split, half jaguar and half puma. What do you think that does to the human side of a man?”

“Are you telling me all hybrids are insane?” Ethan challenged.

“I’m telling you that some animals should not mix. Miakoda just happened to draw a lucky hand. Jaguar and leopard have bred naturally in the wild and breed easily together. Not all are so fortunate.”

Ethan pushed his body away from the wall. “All I’m saying is she has a good heart. I’d hate to see it broken.”

“You are attracted to her.” Devante searched Ethan’s eyes, where the truth could be found.

Ethan looked off, his eyes distant. “Yeah, maybe a little. I’ll get over it.”

“See that you do,” Devante warned. “Remember who she belongs to.”

“I will not forget, *hermano*, that she will be *reina*, and belong to our jaguars.”

Ethan snarled. “That *is* what you were referring to, right?”

“She will carry my heir.” Whether Devante wanted it or not. It was the only way to insure his offspring would hold the throne. The line was carried by Miakoda, not by him.

If he were honest with himself, mating with her would not be a hardship. Her beauty was enticing, her body made for taking a man inside. He grew hard just thinking about sinking into her, feeling her close around him.

Ethan opened his mouth, but decided not to push it. There was no reason to engage his *principe*. He’d watched Miakoda long enough to know she could hold her own against any man.

Devante might be a little more hardened than most, but Ethan had no doubt that he’d fall. Only Miakoda could choose her mate. Ethan doubted it would be because his *principe* declared it. Being *reina* did not automatically mean mating with the *rey*.

“Did you track?”

Ethan knew Devante was steering the conversation away from dangerous territory and allowed it.

Devante would consider Miakoda his business and resent explaining himself to anyone. He knew the man too well to require one.

Ethan nodded. “The scent was mixed. Man and animal. It could mean there was one of each, or it could be one of ours. They were gone.”

“Just as well. We’ll leave tomorrow, and then we’ll be able to protect her.”

“You two seem to have hit it off.” Regardless of what Devante believed, Ethan was not jealous of his *principe*. Miakoda would serve him and the jaguars well. Ethan respected her and yeah, he was even attracted to her but it would go no further. He acknowledged it as nothing more than loneliness after six months away from his own. And Devante was the last man he would ever hurt.

“Meaning?” Devante asked.

This was a new side to Devante that Ethan had never seen. Possessive. It could be because Miakoda was valuable to their people, but Ethan knew it extended a little deeper than that. And wasn’t that interesting?

“I meant nothing. Just that it will be a bonus for you to join with one you find attractive.”

“We join for our people. Her beauty is of no consequence,” Devante stated

firmly, as if he believed it. "Her beauty will be a hindrance, attracting the males of our species. I will not allow it to alter my purpose."

Yeah, it was a real hardship climbing into bed with a beautiful woman, Ethan mused.

"You were watching her tonight?" Devante asked.

"It's what I'm here for, remember?" Maybe he could have a little fun with this after all. His *principe* had grown much too serious lately. Devante could have his pick among the women of their village, but Ethan knew he had never given any of them a second glance.

Devante might insist there was only the throne between him and Miakoda, but Ethan had been inside the man's head and knew Devante was attracted to her. He might be denying it, but he would only be able to fight it for so long. With the jaguar's heated blood, it would be a hard battle for his friend. Ethan was looking forward to observing the fight.

"And you watch her while she shifts?"

Ethan noticed Devante's frown. "Sure." Ethan frowned now as well. "What's this about Devan? Have you reason not to trust me?" Ethan stiffened. Possessiveness was one thing, but lack of trust was plainly offensive.

"That I have sent you to guard over our most valued bloodline should be answer enough," Devante said.

"Then why the damn questions?" Ethan's voice rose. After their years together, it stung that Devante would question him.

"Miakoda was raised among humans. She would not share our guileless view of the naked body. That makes her...vulnerable."

"Vulnerable. I see. You have a problem with me seeing her naked? I just don't get that, Devan. Miakoda is beautiful. Her body is like a song of grace when she shifts."

Devante growled. Ethan stepped back. "Better tell me what's eating at you before you rip my throat out. Just so I'll know what I'm going down for." There was no fun in this anymore. Ethan dared not move. If Devante wanted to attack, he would not lift a hand against him.

He knew Devante would protect Miakoda with his life if necessary, but he had not expected to be the perceived threat. The truth was, he tried to cut Devan some slack.

The man was like a brother, his pain shared. Losing his father had hurt Devan, but his sister's death had ripped him apart. It had been hard to witness, being helpless to ease it. So he could overlook more than most where Devante was concerned. But even he had his limits.

"I do not like you enjoying the sight of her body."

Ethan watched as Devante's round pupils changed to vertical, the slits widening. He was on the verge of shifting.

"It is our way, Devan. We see the body as a thing of elegance. None of our women, nor our men, hides such beauty."

"She is not one of us, Ethan."

"She will be."

"Even then it will not be appropriate. Not without her knowledge."

"Okay. Sure, Devan." There was no reasoning with a jealous man. And when that man was jaguar, trying was dangerous.

Devante's eyes lost their glow and Ethan exhaled. "Retrieve my jeep, if you do not mind. We will leave tomorrow for the mountains. Try to rest tonight. Miakoda and I will meet you in the village, after our meeting with the coalition. I can see to her safety until our arrival."

"No problem," Ethan replied. If he sounded a little stiff, he didn't care.

"Ethan, thank you for watching over her." Devante used the regal tone that always set Ethan on edge.

"She is as important to me as she is to you, Devante. She will be the future of all of us, in making you our *rey*." Ethan watched Devante nod, before turning and walking away. It was obvious that where Miakoda was concerned, Devante wasn't going to be any fun at all.

\* \* \* \*

Miakoda added more coffee to the cold cup before returning her gaze out the window. She had spent most of the night staring out at the jungle. If asked, she wouldn't be able to define one thing out there. She needed answers, but only managed to come up with more questions.

Sleep had evaded her after Devante's little bomb. It was evident in the dark circles under her eyes, if anyone cared to notice. She hadn't bothered trying to cover them, assuming no one would. It had been six months since anyone had cared enough to ask.

She had spent hours analyzing every word Devante had told her, and sometime during the long night, she had come to believe him.

Even living apart from the Nahual, many had chosen to keep her informed. So much made sense now. Miakoda had assumed friends had defied the elders by their visits. She knew enough to know that he was telling her the truth.

Her mother had told her of her royal blood. It was true her parents should not have bred.

Her father had been the brother to the future king of the leopards. Though he had never been set to rule, he was second in line and would not have been sacrificed.

More so with her mother. Jaguar royalty only came from two lines and those two lines were protected above all else. It was shocking to learn that her mother would have been welcomed back had she denied her daughter. It was something that her mother would have never done. Now the jaguars were desperate. The very blood they had turned away was the only thing that could save them.

The irony should have been amusing. Nothing could be further from the truth. She didn't want the jaguars' future in her hands.

When her mother had told her what her responsibilities to the Jaguars would have been had she ruled, she had been relieved at dodging the throne. Miakoda didn't want that kind of obligation hanging over her. The only things she knew of those people were the stories her mother had told her as a child.

How could she attempt to rule something so foreign? Who would follow a stranger, someone ignorant of their world? No matter who wished differently, they were not her people.

But the hybrids were. She sympathized with them, understood what they faced. She owed it to them to ease their path. It was what her parents had done for the hybrid animals, even giving their lives to help them. She could do no less for the hybrid people.

Even lost in thought, Miakoda knew the moment he entered the room. His feet were still bare, but she didn't need the sound. His scent gave him away. It was impossible to miss, even harder to ignore.

She cut her eyes to secretly take him in as she lifted the cup to her lips. He had donned only faded jeans, well worn in all the right places. She was beginning to become accustomed to his bare chest after knowing the man less than twenty-four hours, and that couldn't be a good thing. Just the sight of all that toned muscle and tanned skin awakened parts inside her she'd thought long dead. This morning he looked wild, untamed. Utterly male.

Devante seemed to have something against buttoning the top two buttons of his jeans, and it annoyed her that her eyes kept wandering there. With his disheveled hair and sleep-filled eyes, he looked more lover than stranger. And that was one place her mind didn't need to go. The last thing she needed was a lover to add to her problems.

Had he been just a jaguar and not the prince, she might have given in to her body's urges. She longed for that closeness, that connection to another person that had been missing from her life. With another Nahual, especially a jaguar, she would find it and could easily sever the connection the next morning.

But Devante was the future king and the one man to threaten her future. With him there would be no walking away.

"We need to get an early start." His voice was filled with sleep and fit into her fantasy nicely.

Her eyes followed the cup as he brought it to his lips. His hair was pulled back with a strip of leather, giving her a full view of the muscles in his neck working as he swallowed. She swallowed as well. He was temptation incarnate, and she had been too long denied. She could be in serious trouble.

"I'm ready. I've called the foundation, and taken a leave of absence. The truth is, my job here was finished." It had been months since she'd seen a jaguar. "I'll ask for a reassignment after this is settled." And hope like crazy they would find her one.

The Balam Foundation, the group behind the Cockscomb Sanctuary, had been detrimental in saving her sanity after her parents' death. If she had had to sit around, she would have gone crazy. She also believed in the work they did, their goal of establishing reserves for the jaguars. A place dedicated to saving them. She was proud of the small part she played in that, offering a safe haven for those on the verge of extinction or just in need of care. Home to the animals like her, monstrosities born in nature, or created by man.

She moved to the sink and rinsed out her cup. The next tenant in this little hut would find everything neat and tidy. All of her possessions were packed into two cardboard boxes, a pitiful testament to her life. Most of the treasured things had belonged to her parents, and she wasn't ready to part with them.

She would miss this place. It was the first time she'd lived alone, the first place to be only hers. And it was where her heart had started to mend.

"I'm sure there are many places you would be needed." Devante carried the boxes to the jeep.

The scent of the jungle drifted to her, surrounding her in the fallen leaves, the rich moist earth, and the decaying wood. The fresh scent of the mist that had fallen throughout the night. The essence of home.

“Where’s Ethan?” she asked as she opened the door for him. She found something reassuring about the younger man’s presence.

“He’s gone ahead. We will meet him later.” Devante slid the boxes in, then slammed the door.

Her brow rose as she looked over the muddy jeep. “Yours?”

He nodded, then slid into the driver’s seat. She got in on the passenger side before closing the door. “Needs washing. I’ll see to it later.”

Washing it wasn’t going to help the rust spots, she mused. And the dirt could be the very thing holding it together.

She leaned back into the seat as the jeep pulled away. With every mile, her unease grew. Hours later, full panic set in.

She had never been impulsive. Never been the type to pack up at the insistence of a stranger, just because he told her the hybrids needed her. And what if they didn’t want her help? What if, like the jaguars, they found her lacking? What even made her believe she could help, when the rulers of all shifters were not up to the task? Maybe Devante wasn’t the only conceited one.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” Miakoda said softly, unsure what his reaction would be. If she demanded it, would he turn around and take her back?

Devante glanced quickly at her, then turned his eyes back to the road. “It’s a little late to change your mind.”

“It’s never too late.”

“You have got to be joking. We are mere minutes from the hacienda.”

“I find nothing amusing in any of this, Devante,” she snapped as she folded her hands to hide their trembling.

How could she have ever agreed to this? She knew nothing about this man, nothing about the hybrids. What if the coalition refused to even listen to her?

“Nor do I. I assure you driving for hours, watching you sulk while ignoring me--”

“I’m not sulking.” If she’d been quiet, she had good reason. She had been busy telling herself she was doing the right thing. Convincing herself that it was what her parents would have wanted her to do. Trying her best to ignore his strong, thick fingers wrapped around the steering wheel. Or imagining how those hands would feel on her skin.

Inside the enclosed jeep, even with the windows down, his scent was driving her mad. The doctor in her had tried to reason it was pheromones. A natural female reaction to a male. The woman she was couldn’t care less what caused it. Either way, she nearly had to sit on her hands to keep them from reaching for him. Wouldn’t he get a big kick out of that? And how could she be obsessed with his body when she was about to make the biggest mistake of her life?

His eyes focused on her intensely. “You’re scared.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She turned her face away from him to stare blindly out the window. It might have been one of her problems, but damned if she’d let him know it.

The lush green of the rain forest was comforting, as the majestic Maya Mountains stood regally over them.

It was silly to worry over acceptance. She was a hybrid, one of them. What reason could they have for turning her away?

“It’s okay to be scared, Mia. This is something you should have been prepared

for at birth. It was your mother's responsibility to see that you were equipped to join with the *rey* and become *reina* to your people."

"Women have choices in today's world, Devante. We aren't promised to a man, to a way of life, before we are even born," Miakoda argued.

"That is exactly the way of it. Some of us have no choice. Our fates are predetermined from the beginning," he said.

"I don't know your people, or their ways," she said softly, not looking at him.

Victoria's Peak rose up to the heavens as they jolted over the dirt road toward Punta Gorda. Toward a future Miakoda couldn't even imagine.

"You will learn quickly. I will be beside you, as will others. You can do this."

"What if you're wrong?" She turned to face him. "What if this is not my destiny?"

"I am not wrong." His steady gaze never wandered.

She had never seen anyone with his confidence. Or maybe it wasn't that at all. "You're arrogant." She broke the stare and turned back to the moving picture outside of her window.

"Sí. But I am not wrong. Your fear is of the unknown, not of your path. You are uncomfortable around strangers, but soon these people will be much more. You will find all you search for here."

"You don't know me, Devante, don't presume to understand me."

"We are not so different, *mi amor*. Our life together will be a good one."

Blood rushed past her ears, giving his words an odd resonance. "I'm not your love, and we don't have a life together. We share a problem, and I'm only going with you to find a way to solve that problem."

It wasn't until then that she realized the scenery had stopped rolling by. They had arrived.

"Let's see if we can find a way to solve it then." He sounded disappointed, but she wouldn't give in to what he wanted just to make him happy.

## Chapter Five

The secluded estate sat on the edge of the lush, green jungle, offering the owner privacy and convenience. It was well guarded, as any king's palace would be.

It mattered little that this man was king of no country. Even he had his enemies. Well-guarded secrets and too many threats made living in a fortress necessary. Miakoda only hoped she never had to live with such necessities.

The tall stone walls, topped with wrought iron spikes, were both decorative and deadly. The ornate iron gates slowly opened, but the winding drive hid the hacienda beyond. When it came into view, Miakoda found it breathtakingly beautiful.

It had stood witness for centuries, and even from the distance, she could feel the leftover energy surrounding it. It was, in itself, a living entity.

Well loved in its life, the rich terra cotta color was as fresh as the day it had been painted. The iron railings that surrounded the balcony were intricately woven, and she knew there were protection spells woven throughout.

It seemed a lifetime ago that she had pulled down this very drive with her mother and father.

Guards stood ramrod straight at the wooden doors, either to allow or prevent entry. They carried no weapons, at least no conventional artillery. But then they didn't need it. Not when they could shift in a heartbeat and slash the neck or crush the skull before the intended victim could blink.

At Devante's nod the double doors swung open. Their heels clicked against the tile as she followed Devante down the hall. Plants graced every corner, bringing the outdoors in. She remembered the display of artwork, mostly jungle scenes and animal prints. At the end of the corridor a second set of wooden doors swung open.

Miakoda's steps faltered as the memory of another time came flooding back. Through a child's eyes she saw herself huddled just outside of those doors, listening to the shouts of the grownups inside. She could still remember the hurtful words that her uncle had hurled at her father, still see his shattered eyes as they had left his childhood home forever.

At the time, she had only known that her uncle did not want her father to leave. Now she understood that he had not been asking for her family to remain, but for her father to abandon them to return to his home.

That her uncle was among the many on the coalition of shifters didn't surprise her in the least. He was, after all, the leopard king. But she had heard rumors that he had risen to the rank of Grandee, the head of the coalition. It did little to steady her nerves.

She had seen her uncle a few times over the years. He had paid a visit to her father once, and had attended her parents' funeral six months ago. The words between her and this man who shared her blood had been wooden and formal, but at least he had bothered to show.

The room surprised her as they stepped through the massive doors. Despite its large size, it was warm and inviting. Floor to ceiling windows covered two walls,



bringing sunlight and foliage from the garden inside. It was a far cry from her expectations of this meeting. A chuckle escaped before she could stop it.

“You find something amusing?” Devante kept his voice low as they walked side by side toward the center of the room.

“A clandestine meeting like this,” she whispered, “belongs in the dark of night, deep in the jungle. By torchlight with secret passwords for entry.”

When she heard chuckles join his, she felt her face redden and was reminded a little too late she wasn’t the only one with exceptional hearing.

The small groups gathered around the room caught her attention. Obviously these meetings were not closed to others. All heads turned at their arrival, and talk of the half-breed drifted to her ears. She shut it out. Nothing they could say would hurt her. Life had taken care of that for them.

She felt Devante’s hand on the small of her back. Support or possession? She wondered. Miakoda should have been annoyed at him, but instead ended up annoyed at herself. It wasn’t right, the way her heart accelerated at his touch, or the way her cat brushed just beneath her skin in appreciation.

Most likely, it was his declaration of possession. And that would be his possession of the throne, certainly not of her. He had made no qualms about his true purpose.

With so many alphas in the room, testosterone was at an all time high. His would hardly be noticed.

They approached the table in the center of the room, where the heads of the races were seated. The table itself was a work of art. The aged mahogany with teak inlays formed a sunburst pattern in the center. Colorful tapestries draped the walls, one for each class of animal.

The crest of the wolf, leopard, jaguar, and lion hung among the bear, rat, tiger, and others. In all, there were close to twenty shifters represented. She knew there were others deemed unworthy of gracing this great room. If she won the battle today, the banner of hybrid would soon hang among them.

She glanced at the wolf’s banner, his snarl fierce and deadly. The jaguar was in mid-leap, his form fluid and willowy. What symbol would be chosen to depict the hybrids when no two were alike?

Devante had told her that once long ago, there had been another banner that overpowered them all. That of the great master vampire.

That banner had fallen with the end of his reign nearly twenty-five years ago, shortly after she had been conceived. It was that banner that had started the downfall of her kind. It would be fitting if the hybrids, the very thing created to destroy the vampire, replaced it today.

“Miakoda. This is a surprise.” The leopard king stepped forward, and for an instant, she thought he was actually going to wrap his arms around her. As if catching his own intent, he dropped his arms and took a step back.

She felt the sadness creep over him before it slid into her, and knew the moment that anger replaced it.

The leopard’s dark eyes settled on Devante, remaining until whatever threat intended had been delivered. What Miakoda didn’t feel was surprise from the king at her appearance.

"Is it Uncle Manus? A surprise, I mean?" His eyes flicked back to her. "I think you know why I'm here."

"Yes." Those dark eyes centered back on Devante. She was impressed that Devante didn't flinch, when anyone else meeting the dangerous warning in those eyes would have.

"We had a deal." The leopard's temper, when unleashed, was a dangerous thing.

"That deal has been cancelled," Devante replied.

"You do not have that power. One year was agreed on, six months have passed. You better have a damn good reason for going against my wishes."

"I do." Devante might not be cowering, but he wasn't a stupid man. When the Grandee was angry, you walked a thin line.

"A year for what?" Miakoda tried to keep the bite from her words, but when they spoke around her, it was hard.

"You were to be given a year to grieve before being approached," Manus stated, his eyes never leaving Devante.

"So it's true then." How could she be hurt by a man who had never shown any feelings for her? Never even acknowledged her existence.

Her parents had kept secrets from her out of love, however misguided. But this man, her own uncle, had cared too little to even bother telling her she wasn't alone in her world. That there were others out there just as lost.

"I was to be the one to tell you." Accusing eyes awaited Devante's response.

"She was attacked last night. I can no longer assure her safety if she continues to run alone. She must have the knowledge of what threatens her."

The sharp intake of breath was heard throughout the room. The leopard king roared, "Who dared to attack her? Everyone knows she is under my protection."

Obviously everyone but her. Why would the leopard king offer her protection? Out of some lost loyalty to his brother? It was a little late for it.

"My protection as well, though it mattered little. If I knew who attacked her, he would be dead." The conviction in Devante's voice left no doubt he meant it. These men, the strongest of their kind, were deadly. She had a tendency to forget that.

"You wish me to join with him, to lead the jaguars." It wasn't a question. She had known the answer before she had come. She was to be the pawn to appease the jaguars.

"No. That is to be your decision. I agreed Devante could offer you the choice, in exchange for your protection for one year. He breached that agreement."

"Would you have preferred I do nothing?" Devante asked. Although he kept the challenge from his voice, the power surging around him was threat enough.

"Under the circumstances, no." Manus shook his head, then exhaled. "We know it is dangerous for the hybrids. Still, we thought Mia was well hidden. Now that she is here, all will know of her."

Had he kept her very existence a secret? Embarrassed of the half-breed that branched from his tree?

What benefit was she to him that he would offer her protection?

"Protect me from whom?" she asked.

"Please, have a seat." Her uncle returned to his own at the head of the table and motioned for them to join him.

She took the seat to his left, Devante sitting next to her as everyone made room to accommodate them.

"I believe most of you know Devante, prince of the jaguar. This is Miakoda, my brother's daughter."

Miakoda scanned the group, her eyes lingering on the men she had met as a child.

Many had remained friends with her parents and visited them in the states. Just their presence was comforting, a lost link to her mother and father. People who had cared for them, as she had.

She waited while polite pleasantries were done before turning back to her uncle.

"I did not realize you knew so many here." It sounded like an accusation, one she ignored. This wasn't the time for personal feelings.

"Yes." She owed her uncle no more, so offered no further information. If he had been interested in her, in her father's life, he would have been involved in it.

"The hybrids." She let the statement hang, waiting to see if anyone would confirm or deny it.

"I know you have questions, and I'll try to provide the answers. They do exist. You were kept from that knowledge, as was your parents' wish," Manus said.

She wanted to ask how he knew what her parents would have wanted, but refrained. Business only. That was all that was between them.

"It was my intention to tell you of our world, as well as engage your assistance in dealing with the hybrids."

"What is it you think I can do for these people?" How could she help the hybrids when she had no home to offer, no protection for them.

"We need to establish a place for them among their own. You have experience with mixed animals. We would like you to evaluate each man and woman, recommend a group they are compatible with," Manus said.

"What you seek is impossible. These hybrids have been detested by their own, and no decree from you will change that. Haven't they been through enough? Do not subject them to more ridicule, more shame for their birth." She knew the price the hybrids had paid, because she had made the same payment.

"That is not what we are trying to do here. They need protection. How else are we to provide it for them?" her uncle asked. It was a fair question.

"They need a place to be who and what they are. Forcing them to adapt to your ideals is dangerous."

Years of anger, of resentment, came crashing through. Her uncle, like everyone else, wanted an easy fix, quick answers. No one bothered to take the time to ask even one of these people what they wanted. She tried to keep the anger out of her words, but knew she failed.

"You don't really understand them at all, do you? These animals are also men. Women. People with pride, with feeling. Two souls trapped inside one being, if you will.

"Yes, some hybrids would have a dominant animal. Maybe they could live among that breed, ignoring the weaker in them. But some would have two dominants, fighting for control." It was a problem she had spent years trying to educate people about, the dangers of breeding two species, of playing god and creating the unnatural, just to parade their creations in front of humans who would pay big to see these freaks. She

inhaled deeply, let it out slowly.

Anger wouldn't help them to understand. It was imperative that she find a way that would. "Imagine having a love for water, yet fearing it at the same time. To be a loner, and yet need to be with others. Wanting to be a part of a pack, yet longing for solitude. I have seen two natural enemies bred together, forced to live inside one body. Animals, foreign to each other, inter-bred together. Imagine not knowing yourself, of fearing the other side of you, or worse hating that side. That is what drives these people to madness.

"You have created the things of nightmares, and expect someone to fix them."

Her uncle's fist slammed down on the table, and she hated herself when she flinched.

"Damn it, do you not think we know this? We must find a place for these people. They are being hunted by both sides, and we stand no chance of protecting them when they are spread across the world."

Miakoda forced calm throughout her body, not an easy task when the anger was strong enough to send her reeling. Her stomach tightened, burned deep.

"I know you are trying, and I commend your efforts. It's the first step, admitting the wrong and trying to make it right. But in your haste, don't make another mistake." She rubbed at the ache in her temple in vain.

"Each species at this table has their own group," she continued, determined to have her say now that she had the chance. After this, she'd likely not get another invitation.

"They stand for one another, protect their own. The hybrids no longer fit into those groups. Give them a choice. A voice. Someone who will stand for them, and do what is in their best interest. Neither the wolves nor the leopards make jaguar decisions. Why is the fate of the hybrids in those hands? Let us protect our own."

"You name yourself one of them?" her uncle asked.

"Am I not?" she replied quietly. It was the question she had been asking herself. The one she had finally found the answer to. There was no hybrid clan to reject her. Only lost souls, scattered and alone. It was up to her to unite them. One day, there would be a home for them.

"Who would want to rule them?" Manus's eyes searched her features as if trying to find answers to unasked questions.

"I do." She held her head high, finally knowing this was right. This was what she was meant to do. Every step in her life had been moving her toward this. If she made mistakes leading the hybrids, at least she would know they were honest ones, made for the right reasons.

"No." Devante turned and spoke only to her.

"No?" Her voice belied her shock. "You can't tell me no." How could he callously say no, after he had been the one to tell her of the hybrids' plight? She was the only one who could do this. The only one who wanted to.

"She's right laddie, you've no voice at this table." Biorn, king of the bears, gained a dirty look for his interference.

"You cannot possibly think to rule the hybrids," Devante said, continuing to ignore everyone but Miakoda.

"Why not? According to you, I'm fit to rule the jaguars. Why not the hybrids?"

"A mere female, ruling the unruleable." Devante scoffed at her suggestion.

Miakoda could feel the acid churning in her stomach. She placed her hand under the table and rubbed the worst spot, trying to ease the burn.

"That's my problem, isn't it?"

"No. You make it mine as well." He turned to the men around them. "Miakoda is the jaguar *princesa*. Her blood is ancient, royal. She will join with me."

"You wish to perform the sacred rite?" Manus asked.

"Yes." There was no hesitation in Devante's reply.

"Do you believe your jaguars will accept a half-breed on their throne?" Manus' voice revealed his doubt.

Miakoda didn't blink at her uncle's words, hiding her pain behind hard eyes. Wasn't that exactly what she was? A half-breed. And for once, it was exactly what she wanted to be.

"They will have no choice."

She shook her head at the absurdity. She was sure to make friends after Devante finished cramming her down the jaguars' throats. Forcing them to accept her was one way to ensure they never would.

"If Miakoda is the ruler of the hybrids, would it be your wish to join the clan with the jaguars?"

"No. The jaguar would never permit it. I would never permit it. But the ceremony must occur to ensure the continuation of the jaguar. She must be *reina*; they deserve no less."

Miakoda's eyes flew to Devante. He made no secret that the hybrids were not good enough to join the jaguar clan. And yet he insisted on putting her--a hybrid--on his own thrown. As if he had every right to reject her people, but she could not reject his.

"If we agree, what does Miakoda gain from this?" Manus asked.

"She will take her rightful place as *reina*."

Miakoda snickered. He made it sound as if he was bestowing some great honor on her.

"It is through her blood that you claim that throne," Manus argued. "She is the last of the Jaguar Moon's line. Without her, no one can claim the throne."

"Is that your wish then? To abandon the line, see its destruction?" Devante's voice rose high and he didn't bother to mask his anger.

It washed over Miakoda and she silently cursed. These obstinate men were giving her the devil of a headache, and wreaking havoc on her nerves.

"Of course not. But she has never been welcomed by your people and will not be accepted so easily just because she would be their queen." The leopard held up his hand to silence them.

"I believe you would do all in your power to see that they accept her, for as you say, no less can be done for their queen. But she is leguar, a hybrid. She has spent her life protecting mixed breed animals and would be the best choice for them.

"What we ask of her is no small task. Even to a healer such as herself, caring for the hybrids will come at a great cost. We cannot ask this of her, and ask her to give to the jaguar as well. It is simply too much.

"Devante is correct and we will never abandon one of our own."

Miakoda fought the urge to argue that point.

"The jaguars are her people as well. Miakoda carries leopard blood, my blood through my brother. It does not make her leopard. Her heart is jaguar. She is of all worlds--leopard, jaguar and hybrid. She must learn to co-exist."

"How can I live in two worlds?" Miakoda dared to ask.

"By combining them. I understand the jaguars will not accept the hybrids into their family, but they can live side by side. The jaguars will protect their queen and her people. They are the strongest in the jungle, hunted by no one but man. They will serve you well. In exchange, you will join with the prince, preserving the line."

"I don't know how to rule one people, how can I rule two?"

"Do not be ridiculous girl," her uncle snapped, and it was evident that he regretted it when he tried to take the bite from his tone. "Your blood is the blood of a leopard king and a jaguar queen. You were destined to rule. You only dishonor your parents by denying your destiny."

The silence in the room was thick, harsh words choking the air. It was the ultimate insult to insinuate Miakoda would purposefully dishonor her parents. Everyone present who knew her knew she would die first. It was a clear indication of how little her uncle knew her.

"First the mixed, then the jaguars. I dinna know we were bartering for the wench," Biorn, the bear king, said lightly. "Come with me now, girl, and I'll steal you away to my homeland."

She gave him a tight smile, though it didn't reach her eyes. Everyone knew of the tension between her and her uncle and the reason for it. Her uncle's words had stung, delivered in front of the men. She knew what Biorn was trying to do, but she didn't meet anyone's eyes.

"Too cold in Norway," she replied with a forced teasing air.

"Ah, but we wouldna care, wrapped in our furs."

"Your ways are much too wicked for the innocent, Viking." This time her smile was genuine. Looking into Biorn's eyes sparkling with laughter, she felt her heart warm.

He had aged over the years, but aged well. He was a mammoth man, his long hair tied back and the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. His Nordic heritage.

She'd known him all her life and loved him just as long. Her father had held great respect for the king of the bear.

Why couldn't life be that easy, where she could find happiness with a gentle man like Biorn? It would mean the end of his line, since they could never mate. The end of the jaguars, as well. And what would become of her hybrids? No, she wasn't that selfish, even if Biorn weren't only teasing.

"Ach, show respect girly. I am chieftain of my clan, and by Thor, you wouldna be innocent for vera long."

The Ulfric laughed, his deep rumble roaring up from his chest, easing the tension even more. "Cease Biorn, before you start a war among us. Can you not see that all here do not find your banter harmless?"

The lion king nodded toward Devante, and all heads turned to the end of the table.

"That wee lad? No threat I see."

"He takes his job of protecting the girl seriously and you are dangerously close to insulting her," the lion added.

"I wouldna insult the lassie," Biorn replied, indignation in his voice.

"I may know that, but I'm not so sure he does."

"It is a dangerous game you play, when the playground is another man's territory," Devante replied lightly, but no one doubted the threat was real. His features might appear relaxed, but those hard amber eyes burned like fire.

"And you name possession where there is none," Biorn bellowed.

"Do you feel your claim is more substantial?" Devante's laughter was menacing. "As if she could ever find interest in a bear."

"Do na dare insult me boy!" Biorn's voice thundered over the room.

"Ulfric." Miakoda kept her voice low as she leaned across the table. "Does Biorn's face appear to be changing color to you?"

"Appears to be turning a nice shade of blue," Ulfric replied, not bothering to hide his amusement.

"Don't you dare pull that here, Berserker," the leopard king demanded. "I will have you removed and barred from these meetings if you persist."

"So the bear is a berserker." Devante leaned back against his chair, his body less threatening. "That would explain much."

"Devan, just stop it," Miakoda snapped. His brow rose at the familiar use of his name as all eyes fell on them with renewed interest. She didn't appear to notice. "Don't antagonize him. He meant no disrespect, and you damn well know it. Unless you want your throat ripped apart, leave him alone." She snapped warning eyes to the bear. "And you, stop teasing him if you can't take it. You go all blue, when you started it. Devante has done you no wrong."

"So that is the way of it." Biorn smiled, scratching his beard. "If I canna call him out on me honor, I'll approve of the joining then."

"Just what does that mean, you'll approve? Was this some pompous display to determine the dominant male? In all your years, Biorn, I would have thought you'd learned to play with others. I see now why no other women are at this table. I'm sure none of them wanted babysitting duty." Miakoda leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest.

Biorn might have been joking, but things were getting way too serious for Miakoda. Biorn was a deadly predator, and easily offended. Berserker wasn't an insult with him, it was a fact, as much a part of him as the raiding Viking he had once been.

Each group of animals had a different life span. No Nahual was immortal. They could all be killed, it just took more with some of them to pull it off. Bears seemed to have the longest life. It was tied somehow to their hibernation habits. And it had been proven that a few lived over a thousand years.

Lifestyle played a big part on how long someone would survive. Miakoda was no exception. The average life for a cat was approximately seventy years, mostly gained from their human genes. Fortunately, cats had nine lives, giving them an average of six hundred plus years. It didn't mean that they could cheat death, only that their lives were extended. Not immortal, but damn close.

There were only a numbered few alive who could boast of longevity. Most of the aged ones had died during the wars. These were new times, their race immature and trying to rebirth each species.

Their races might be harder to kill, but each had a weakness. And Miakoda knew the weakness in the berserker was rage. Rage made him act impulsively and impulse got

you killed.

Silence fell over the room as everyone held their breath. It was suicide to insult a berserker. Biorn was one of the few true ancients, a man not accustomed to overlooking a slight. Did he see her comments as just that?

The burst of laughter from the bear's end of the table told them all how seriously he took Miakoda's word. His laughter was contagious and soon the anxiety vanished.

Miakoda leaned forward, her arms on the table as she rubbed at the tension in her neck. The negative energy had left, but she still had the lingering effects to contend with.

Devante reached across her, and took her hand in his. He squeezed the pressure point between her thumb and first finger, easing the throbbing ache in her head enough to allow her to think again. It was a welcomed relief.

She smiled her thanks to him and regretfully pulled her hand from his. His warm skin against hers was much too distracting. This was the most important meeting of her life, deciding her future. She didn't need to be preoccupied.

"Enough!" Manus demanded.

Miakoda caught Biorn's eye and stifled a grin when he winked. In only minutes, Biorn had turned her uncle's anger into mockery.

"I grow weary of this banter. I will call for a vote and be done with this business."

He turned to Miakoda. "Do you agree to the joining in order to preserve the jaguars, or will you allow them to risk extinction?"

As if she could refuse when it was put that way. Like she could face the others around her and simply say no. Let them fend for themselves and if they become extinct, oh well. Damn him, he was giving her no real choice.

"Miakoda?"

The impatient voice of her uncle grated. No one would rush her into this. She had to live with her decision. Not her uncle, not Devante. There was only once choice. She couldn't live with herself if the jaguar people, her mother's people suffered.

"Okay," she replied through gritted teeth.

"And do you agree to represent the hybrids as well?"

"Yes." Her voice rang out clearly.

Manus nodded his approval

"Devante and Miakoda will join, taking the throne of the jaguar. As king, Devante will be welcomed at this table as jaguar. All opposed, speak now." Silence filled the room.

"Miakoda will be leader of the hybrids, and will represent them in all things. She alone will decide what is best for them. As such, she will take her seat at this table. Opposed?"

Again, this was met with only silence.

"So be it. We welcome them to our table and stand united to protect their people. From this day forward, the hybrids will be one of our own. Shape-shifter, Nahual. Accepted by all, shunned by none."

When no one spoke, Manus nodded. "Our business is concluded." He turned to Miakoda. "I would speak to you a moment in private, before you depart."

Manus rose, signaling the end of the meeting. "Join us, Devante."

Miakoda followed her uncle through the double doors, past the garden, to the



jungle beyond. He turned to her.

"Here we have no ears."

Manus indicated she should take a seat on the rock, and she quickly obliged. Her uncle was not a man to be ignored.

The oppressive heat mixed with the nervous flutters, making her stomach roll. Why couldn't she feel close to the man who was her father's brother? He was the last of her family, the only connection to the only man she had ever loved.

Her father had shared more than a name and blood with his brother. They shared the dark brown eyes of their father, the olive skin of their mother. She had inherited that as well.

As children, they had played, shared secrets, and grown to men. Staring into those brown eyes brought an ache. How could her father, someone so vital to her life, be gone forever? Could she really get up every day without him? Would the pain ever lessen for her?

"There are things I would say to you, things you should hear. I cannot find the words."

She didn't interrupt but waited while he paced off his nervous energy.

"I shared harsh words with my brother once. The reasons are no longer important. He died, having never known my regret. I will not allow it to happen again. We are blood. Maybe in time we will become more." He stopped, turned to her and waited.

"I would like that." It was true. She wanted peace with him and maybe someday an opportunity to know him.

He nodded, and the strain around his mouth eased. "Good. Good. I feel as if I've just turned you over to the wolves." He chuckled. "The task we ask of you is not an easy one. Had I not felt you capable, I would not have allowed it. You have done good work with your hybrid animals. Maybe you can help these lost souls. If you cannot, then I fear no one can, and their future will be bleak."

He lowered his stocky frame next to her on the rock, careful not to touch. They weren't ready for that step. "The leopards have not turned their back on you, by making you a part of the jaguar and the hybrids. You will always have us, always find a home here. Should you need us, you've only to ask."

"Thank you, uncle." He seemed pleased with the title. He acknowledged Devante's presence for the first time.

"I'll ask a favor of you, Devante."

"You've only to ask Grandee, and it will be done." Devante stood apart from them, offering them privacy should they want it.

"Miakoda is all that remains of my brother. Take her into your care, guard her against enemies."

"I can take care of myself." Miakoda's objection was automatic.

"Do not fight me on this. You've enemies not yet known to you, and more will come. You are a strong *gata*, but this you cannot fight alone."

"You have my word, sir. I will protect her with my life, as will my people."

"Then I can ask no more. I will leave you." He stood. "Safe journey."

She watched him walk away and felt lighter for the few minutes shared with him.

## Chapter Six

Miakoda leaned back on her hands, allowing the warmth of the stone to seep beneath her skin.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to ask.”

She looked up at Devante and her breath caught. She sucked air into her lungs. He was gorgeous, this jaguar prince.

The sun filtered through the dense branches above, casting rays of light over his body. He looked like an angel--the rays burning through his hair--and devil--with those piercing eyes and deadly stance.

His skin held droplets of sweat from the heat, turning his golden skin slick with it. She wanted to rub her hands up those massive arms, down that taut chest. She wanted to feel that dampness on his skin, rub it over her own. She wanted him, even knowing it would be a mistake.

“What?” She forced her eyes to look away, turned her head to the sky.

“Your powers, what are they?”

Her face quickly shut down. “I have no powers.”

“Yes, I think you do. Jaguars are born with a special gift. The rites administered at adolescence by a jaguar priest bring you the full power. The elders then teach you how to use this gift.”

She hesitated. “My mother took me to see an old Indian woman, a shaman, when I turned thirteen. She told me I would receive my gift in my own time.”

“You came into your power on your own? It would take strong medicine for that.”

“Who says I came into them?” She turned to him, challenge in her eyes.

“You gain nothing by hiding them from me. I can feel them vibrating around you.”

“I never told anyone, not even my mother.” Her gaze left his, and looked out over the jungle surrounding her.

She had been raised in the States, had known no other home--until the first time she stood in the rain forest and inhaled that sweet air deep into her lungs. Home wasn’t where your body grew, but where your soul did.

“Why did you not share this with your *madre*? She would have understood, could have helped you to understand.”

“I was raised human. I didn’t want to be different, any more than I already was. After our visit to the old woman, we never discussed it again.” Miakoda watched a spider monkey swinging from tree to tree, scurrying to find cooler shelter from the afternoon heat.

“Your *madre* was a mind walker. I am told she could connect with others of her race. Like Ethan.”

Miakoda laughed softly. “Yes, she could enter my mind. When I was very young, I thought it was my conscience always steering me to do the right thing.” Her

voice quivered. "She warned me of the danger the night she died. She saved my life."

"Miakoda means power of the moon, does it not?" When she nodded, Devante continued, "Like your *madre*, your power is lunar. You would require no rites to receive it."

"I've been able to communicate with animals since I was young." She turned back to him, this man she had agreed to join with. This man who was a stranger.

"A mind walker?"

"No. At least I don't think so." Why had she mentioned her ability to him? Because he was the first to ever ask?

"Have you tried to connect with a Nahuatl?"

"No. At least not until Ethan, but he opened that link." If she told him the truth, would he believe her or think she was nuts? Maybe her gift was common among their people. Or maybe she was the oddity she had always feared.

"True, but you have never tried on your own kind. You may also have that ability."

"Maybe." That she might share her mother's gift had never occurred to her. To be able to talk to others of her kind, to mentally communicate would be a useful skill. Provided there were jaguars willing to listen.

"There's more, isn't there, Mia?"

Her eyes met his. Could she trust this man? If not, it was too late. Only a fool would leave her home, agree to join with him and lead his people if she didn't trust him. The verdict was still out on whether she was that fool.

If he was out to hurt her, she had already given him plenty of ammunition. Giving him more would make little difference.

"I'm a doctor, a healer of animals. Emotions create energy. Happiness, joy, they create positive energy. Hate and fear create negative. Those energies fill a person, magnifying their feelings. I can absorb those energies, make them my own."

"I had an impression of such. And you can do this at will?" The sunlight brought his eyes to life, the amber glowing.

"Not exactly. It just sort of happens." She shrugged, lost for the words to explain it to him. Half the time, she didn't even acknowledge the ability, much less understand it.

"Without control, too much negative energy can overpower. You were never taught filters, were you? That can be dangerous," Devante said.

"Once I soak up their emotion, I can replace it with my own. Substitute the negative energy with positive. Calm them, give them happiness. I'll admit sometimes it is hard to reach that place, to dispel the negative. But I've learned to erect barriers. I'm still working to strengthen them."

"We can perfect that power Mia, teach you to control it instead of it controlling you."

She hesitated. She was telling him more than she had ever told another soul. But if he could help her to control it, maybe it wouldn't leave her so exhausted. Sometimes the weakness was more than she could take, leaving her vulnerable to enemies.

"I can do it to people as well. Sometimes, I can push them into doing things."

"Mind control?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. I suppose. I'm not asking so I guess I'm forcing them. However, I don't really feel like I control them. More like controlling their energy."

Their emotion. They subconsciously fight me, like a battle of strength.”

“Jaguars have a power given by the gods. This power is not meant to be a burden, but a precious gift. It is not wrong, nor evil. Only we can make it so. It is a testament to your strength that you have come into these powers.”

“What is yours?” she wondered aloud.

“I walk among the souls, the spirits of our ancestors. They offer guidance, show me things that will aid my people.” He stood, held out his hand to her. “Come, let us say our goodbyes. We will travel to the village this afternoon. The ceremony will be performed at midnight.”

He was merely offering her a hand up, but it felt like so much more. She placed her fingers in his hand, felt his strength close around them. When she was on her feet, he didn’t relinquish her hand.

“Must it be done so quickly?”

He pulled her around until they were facing. “*Sí*. Every day that we wait is a day we leave the jaguar and hybrid unprotected. It is time we accept our responsibilities, Mia. This is not about us.”

She felt the jaguar in her waken, stretch, and fight to be set free. Her jaguar was sensual, yet nothing had ever tempted her to this extreme. Of course, she had never come across one of her own.

But that wasn’t entirely true. If it was only his jaguar calling to hers, why hadn’t she reacted to Ethan? He stirred nothing in her. The feelings Devante unleashed in her were foreign, and more than a little frightening.

“This is.” His breath caressed her ear and brought her cat closer to the surface. He was calling to her cat, trying to awaken her. It was a battle to retain control. If she allowed her cat to take over, they were all in trouble.

“I told you once, she will not decide for me.” Her voice was low, seductive.

“No? My *gato* wants to play with you, *gatita*.” His thumb traced her jaw, wide fingers spanning around her neck. “He is not the only one.”

She couldn’t catch her breath, couldn’t move. His mouth lowered to hers. One taste. She would allow them one taste. White spots flashed behind her eyelids as the heat raced through her.

She felt strong hands lift her, felt the rough edge of the rock beneath. He stepped between her legs as if invited, the thin layer of her skirt no protection from his erection. Her legs wrapped around him, drawing him in.

Her head fell back in offering as his lips traveled down her neck to the swell of her breast. He tugged her shirt lower, his tongue burning a path across her skin.

He was perfection, but she would expect no less from his line.

He was, after all, descended from the gods. He would be a powerful lover, awaken her body as no other had. He would be addictive. Once he entered her, became a part of her, she knew she would crave only him.

This was not someone she could keep forever. Not someone she could turn to in the middle of the night, when she just needed to be held.

Sex would be a momentary closeness, feed an immediate need, but in the end would only be an expression of just how lonely her life was. She pushed him away, disgusted with her own weakness.

“Searching for a taste of the forbidden?” she said as she searched his eyes, trying

to find anger. She found only confusion and determination.

“Tasting what will be mine.” From deep in his throat came the sawing call of a male to his mate. The significance of that sound scared Mia to death.

“Don’t start more than we can handle Devan.” Please, she wanted to beg. She was so close to returning his call with a heated roar of her own that she bit her lip to prevent it.

“Ah, *gatita*, I promise we can handle this. My body cries out for yours. I ache with my need to slide into you, to feel you tighten around me. I can smell your heat, the very essence that marks you female. I want to taste every part of you, see if you are as sweet as your scent. We were made for one another.”

“I am not only jaguar. Does my leopard call to you as well? Does your jaguar want to taste the leopard in me?” She wanted to stop him, reminding him of her imperfection, of why they could never be together.

“*Sí, mi amor*. You think the leopard in you matters to me? Leopards are beautiful creatures, proud and strong. I accept what you are.”

What she was, was a fool. He would always see her as everyone else did. Different.

Her eyes closed, and stayed that way until she was sure they would be dry when she opened them. “What I am is of no concern to you. It will deliver you your kingdom. Nothing more. Just remember we join our people, not ourselves.” She turned away from him, away from pain and temptation, shifting on the run.

\* \* \* \*

Miakoda stepped down from the jeep, her eyes wide as she tried to take it all in. It was simply too much.

Devante hadn’t prepared her, but she wasn’t upset about it. Words would never do it justice.

Jaguars loved caves. The Maya believed all things, good and bad, came from the caves. People preferred houses. Devante had succeeded in mixing the worlds by creating a home inside a mountain.

The mouth of the cave held arched glass doors, and windows had been cut into the rock to allow light.

She followed him inside. The floors were limestone, the walls untouched and left unadorned. The family area was enormous. The deep burgundy leather screamed of male, as did the pool table and dart board. An elaborately carved chess set, each piece set with sunstones, was behind glass in a case that also held an impressive collection of books. To the left was an office, with a solid oak desk and another sofa with matching chairs.

The highlight of the room was a glass curio cabinet containing ancient artifacts. Highlighted with sunlight from a window covering another small opening in the wall, each piece flickered with life. The figures were of shifters in mid change, jade depictions of the Gods and carved jaguars. It was a magnificent collection.

The only man-made addition to the cave wasn’t actually attached but accessed through a covered breezeway just outside the door. A modern bathroom and shower had been added, with water pumped from an underground river.

The addition also contained the kitchen, surprisingly inviting and warm. The massive hearth was covered with an iron cooking grate and was also used to chase away

the chill on early mornings.

The oak table was nicked and scratched from years of use, the chairs worn rounded at the seat. A stainless steel ice chest kept food at a safe temperature without the steady need of electricity. A part of the cave, deep in the earth where the temperature remained cool, was used for storage.

Generators were used but sporadically.

The bedrooms, she learned as she was given the tour, were deeper in the cave. Here, torches lit the way, and stone served as the floor. Fresco paintings adorned the walls, decorative figures of animals and faces, painted by Mayan hands centuries ago.

They passed several doors before Devante stopped at one.

She was speechless as she entered behind him. Water trickled down over large stalactite, pooling at the base where centuries of water had carved it out like a basin. The bed was enormous with the face of the jaguar carved in each post.

She noticed the temperature inside the cave was perfect, and Devante explained he had installed a dehumidifier to keep moisture down. They hadn't extended the generator's electricity to the bedrooms. Secretly, she was glad. It would be a crime to change one thing of the natural perfection.

"What do you think?" he asked once they had completed the tour. That he would ask surprised her.

"It's wonderful." He visibly relaxed. "Surely you weren't worried about my reaction? How could you be with this?" Her arms spread out to encompass her surroundings.

"Not everyone shares my taste. I had hoped you would be comfortable here, as it is now your home. Some might prefer modern. More ... human," he explained as they ended the tour in the kitchen.

"I see. And since I was raised among the humans, you thought I would. You were wrong." Would this place ever feel like her home? Would she ever be comfortable enough to lounge around on a rainy day, or at ease enough to rummage through the kitchen when hungry?

"I'm glad. There is a *cenote*, an underground river further below, used as a bathing chamber if you prefer it to the shower." The bottle of water he handed her was cool, and she rubbed it against her cheek. Even after her time here, she still wasn't accustomed to the South American heat.

Miakoda looked up as shuffling feet entered the room.

"This is Maria. She runs the place." The old woman cackled at Devante's words, her warm honey eyes twinkling.

"No female can run you males." She eyed Miakoda, studying her in silence. "Though this one might stand a chance."

"This is Miakoda." Devante gave the woman a generous hug, and when his arm remained around her as he presented her to Miakoda, it was with an ease that said it clearly wasn't the first time.

"Power of the moon." Maria nodded her approval. "You've come. Knew you would. You are the daughter of your *madre* and could do no less." The old voice was gravelly but kind. Miakoda was instantly charmed.

"You knew her?" Why hadn't she thought of that before? Of course there were people here who had known her mother. This had been her village, hadn't it?

Miakoda longed for every detail the woman could provide, but it would be rude to ask them now, at their first meeting. There would be time enough for it later.

“Sí. A beauty, like yourself. Took our moon with her when she left. ’Bout time it returned.”

“Take care of her while I meet with the men. I’ll need to request a meeting with the council.” Devante patted Maria’s arm.

“No need to involve those old coots in the doings around here. They’ll just scratch and claw if it wasn’t their idea.” Maria stepped out of his reach, her arms on her ample hips.

“The ceremony will be performed regardless, but they should be told, out of respect if nothing else. Where is Lando?”

Time-carved wrinkles smoothed as Maria smiled, glowing with love. “Out roaming like a tom. Can’t keep that boy put.”

Devante’s face softened with a smile that reached his eyes. “Tell him I’ll see him when I return.”

Devante strolled from the room, and Miakoda wasn’t the least bit ashamed when her eyes followed the view. Anything that looked as good as his backside encased in soft worn jeans demanded it.

She did have the decency to blush when Maria caught her staring. The old woman chuckled and shuffled off to show Miakoda to her room.

Maria went straight to the boxes that had been delivered to her room and started to unpack. Miakoda’s first reaction was to lash out at Maria. She didn’t want anyone else touching those special things, just wasn’t ready to share the painful memories.

“Don’t worry with that, I’m sure you have other things you need to do.” Miakoda kept the bite from her words, knowing the old woman only wanted to help.

“Already done. There’s nothing to taking care of a place when no one’s normally here. It’ll be nice to have company.”

Miakoda watched as Maria pulled the framed snapshot from the box. The simple black frame went unnoticed as the bright smiles of her mother and father drew the attention. It was Miakoda’s favorite picture of her parents. Her hand automatically reached for it, and Maria placed it carefully in her hands without a word.

Miakoda’s fingers wiped at the smudge of dust before she placed it on the night stand. Her eyes lingered on the photo.

“I took that picture a week before they died. I had been taking shots of a litter of leopards.” Her daddy had snuck up on her mother and swept her off her feet. Miakoda had caught them in mid-motion as he had twirled her mother in circles, laughter glowing on their faces. It was how she would always remember them.

“She was a beauty, even as a child. I do not recall ever seeing her look so happy.”

Miakoda looked up at Maria as a tear fell down her cheek.

“Well.” Maria cleared her throat. “I’ll leave you to it then. One day soon I’ll dig out my old albums from my youth. Plenty of pictures of your *madre*, I’m sure.”

“I’d like that.”

Maria nodded and shuffled from the room. But not before Miakoda saw the old woman wipe at her own face.

Miakoda finished unpacking, then took her time looking around the room. She was in complete awe at the pure beauty of it.

Like the other bedrooms she had been shown, little was changed here. Minimal furniture, comfortable and serviceable, filled the space. A bed, armoire, and a dresser complete with a rounded mirror sat opposite an overstuffed chair and sofa.

The beauty came from the glittering stalactites meeting stalagmites, forming natural columns. In all she counted four as she settled into the chair. Candlelight enhanced the magic as it danced across the crystals forged in the rock. The room was warm. Not in heat, but in energy. It was a happy, soothing place.

Movement caught her eye, and she turned to see a curly mop of brown hair. He stood just outside the door.

“Want to come in?” she invited.

He gingerly stepped inside, stood as if unsure what to do next.

“It’s a wonderful room, isn’t it?”

He looked around curiously. “It is the tower.”

“The tower? That’s odd, since it’s hardly a tower at all.”

He walked to the first column, struck it with the flat side of his fist. Two deep bell-like tones played.

Miakoda giggled with delight. “Oh, how wonderful. A bell tower. You must be Lando.”

The miniature version of Devante nodded. She felt her heart trip. Was this little angel his son? It wasn’t a jaguar’s nature to mate for life. Instead, they bred with any willing female. With their sexual appetites, most were usually willing. It was a trait she found distasteful.

She had been given a rare gift for her kind, growing up with her mother and father. It had showed her the need for both in a child’s life, and her child would have no less. Not if she could help it.

Little eyes looked around the room.

“Looking for someone?”

“Uncle Devan.” She detested the relief she felt over that simple title. It shouldn’t have mattered so much, but she was relieved that he had not fathered a child without being committed to the mother.

But then as far as she knew, he could have a woman tucked away. And just because this was not his child, it didn’t mean there wasn’t one.

She looked down at the little waif, with his tan skin and dirty bare feet and fell instantly in love.

“He’ll be back soon. Do you know who I am?” Kneeling, she met him on his level.

Curls danced as he nodded. “You are our *reina*.”

“Not yet, but I will be.” And for once, the words rolled out, smooth as silk.

“Should I bow like I did with grandpa?”

“Please don’t.” Her stomach turned. Devante’s father had been one of the leaders twenty-five years ago who made the decision to cast her kind out. She accepted that.

But what kind of man would have his grandchild bowing down before him? And such a precious little boy.

“You have dirt in your hair.” She felt it then, his anxiety. She let the barricades down to learn more.

He was sad and frightened. But more than that, she felt his confusion. She



touched his curls, rested her hand on his head. He was a hybrid. The knowledge hit her like a bolt of energy. Shock jerked her hand away.

Had his grandfather hated him as he had all of the hybrids? Sad eyes looked at her as Lando moved to the chair. She approached cautiously, trying to form a plan. Her experience with children was non-existent. But she had to try.

“Did they tell you I was different?”

He didn’t respond. She didn’t let it deter her.

“I am, you know. I am leguar.” The inflection she forced into her voice made the word itself sound like a great honor.

“You are jaguar and leopard.” He curled his feet beneath him, indifferent to the dirt he left behind. It fell in clumps beneath his feet, transferring to the chair.

“That’s right.” Miakoda sat on the sofa, sliding her feet beneath her as well, but not before kicking off her sandals. This little one might have Maria wrapped around his finger, but Miakoda knew the woman wouldn’t take kindly to the dirt.

“The kids said you were a freak, like me.” There was no menace in the innocent brown eyes that studied her. He was simply stating a truth.

The innocence of a child was a mixed blessing. Miakoda knew it wouldn’t be long before the ugliness of the world chased it all away from him.

“Doesn’t sound very nice of them.” She tried to search her memory to find the words her mother had said to her when other kids had been cruel but seemed to come up blank.

“I hit Caton, and we fought.” Little fists balled, ready to battle the world.

“Because he called you a freak?”

“Nah, I don’t care about that. He said *mi madre* was *el Diablo*.” His voice lowered. “She wasn’t. It wasn’t her fault that I am.”

“Oh sweetie, you’re no devil and neither was your mother.” It took all of her restraint not to go to him, hold him close, and shelter him from the cruelty of the world. But since he looked ready to bolt, she knew better. Hugs he could get from Maria. He needed more from her, needed someone to understand and help him to understand as well.

“Sometimes kids are cruel because they are scared of things they don’t understand. You and I, we’re different. Unique. That’s not such a bad thing. There are others out there who are like us. The children, well, they always find something to tease about.”

“They call Isidro a mama’s boy ‘cause he can’t go into the jungle alone.” He wiped at his nose, smearing the dirt. She cringed at the hands that were as dirty as his feet. This boy needed a soaking in the worst way. Again, that was for Maria. It wasn’t his outside that needed attention, but his inner soul.

“See what I mean? And I’ll just bet he isn’t a mama’s boy at all. His mother just doesn’t want him to get hurt. The jungle is a dangerous place for a child.”

“That’s what Uncle Devan says.” Lando eyed her as if she might be a spy, sent by his uncle to test him.

“And he’s right. When I was your age, kids called me names.”

“Did they call you a freak too?”

Okay, she couldn’t take much more, or she was hunting down this Caton and beating the crap out of him herself.

"No. I grew up with humans, and they didn't know I was Nahual. But they knew I was different. Because of my dark looks, they called me Indian squaw."

"Did you slug them?"

She bit her lip. What should she tell him? She had made plenty of mistakes in her life and didn't want to give him any ideas. In the end, she settled on what she had wanted at his age. The truth. "I knocked Freddie Lincoln's front tooth out."

"Wow." At his look of awe, she wondered if she had done the right thing. The last thing she wanted to do was to encourage fighting.

"I bet you got in lots of trouble for that." From the gap he revealed with his smile, the same could have happened to him.

"I sure did. But my mother sat me down and told me why I had been wrong to allow my anger to overrule my head. No matter how angry we are, fighting is not the way to handle things." She wasn't so sure she believed that any more now than she had then. "Then she told me all about my ancestors. I knew about the jaguars, of course, but not the Maya. We are all descendants of the Mayans, you know that, right?"

"Uh huh." His little head bobbed up and down.

"Well, my mother explained to me they were some of the first Indians known. And in a way, I could have been an Indian squaw. She told me it was something to be proud of. But even if the names they called me weren't true, they still didn't change who I am.

"No one can ever do that, Lando. Every child is teased at some time in his life, honey. It's like a right of passage. Part of growing into a man."

"I would never tease somebody." He shook his head, adding weight to his words.

"Me neither." She shook her head as well. "That's because we know how bad it hurts."

"Sí. So did the others pick on you after that?"

"Well, the next day when I went to school, I stuck a feather in my hair just like an Indian. And you know what? It felt good to be who I was. It also took away their fun in teasing me, if I just laughed along. I became great friends with some of them."

"Freddie Lincoln?"

"No. Freddie was just a jerk. But he moved on to torture someone else soon enough."

Somewhere during the story, Lando had moved to sit beside her on the sofa. Comrades in arms, she mused. Her arm was around his shoulder, lightly touching him. He hadn't moved away, so she took that as progress.

"I'm in lots of trouble." Lando whispered in confidence to his new friend.

"I'm sure your uncle will understand." She whispered back.

"But the elders won't. Caton's *madre* said she was gonna tell on me. They'll punish me 'cause I fight so much."

"Nah--" Her words were cut off the minute his scent drifted to her.

Devante was leaning against the doorjamb, a rare smile on his face. That smile changed his face entirely, lighting his eyes and softening the harsh lines around his mouth.

She couldn't seem to take her eyes from that mouth. His eyes met hers, his brow rose in question, and she forced her eyes away.

What was it about this man that made her forget everything else when he entered

a room? Was it just his looks, or the aura of power that surrounded him? She was sure any woman who came across him would react the same way.

The thought that she was just one of many of those women and had no more power over him than any of them crossed her mind. She marked it off as ridiculous. She didn't want any more from him than protection for her people.

"You'll see. They'll punish me for sure." Lando whispered for her ears alone, snagging her attention back. She didn't have time to respond before he raced into his uncle's outstretched arms.

"What are you two whispering about?" Devante asked.

"Nothing," Lando said.

"Hmm. Should I alert the guards that we are about to have a mutiny on our hands?"

Lando giggled, just as Devante had meant him to do. "That's on a ship, Uncle Devan."

"So it is. Must be a rebellion then. Planning to oust the tyrant leader?" Lando tried to wrap his arms around Devante's neck but missed when he was tossed into the air. Lando giggled.

"Nah. Sides, Mia's gonna be *reina*, and I like her. I don't wanna oust her."

"Wise decision. Is that dirt in your hair?" Devante asked as the little arms finally settled around his neck.

Dark curls bounced.

"Looks like Maria's been bathing you in mud." Devante placed him on the floor, and Lando clutched his stomach and laughed.

"Better go find her and see if she can find a little *chico* under there."

Lando raced off, giggling.

Devante stood, his eyes narrowed as he studied her. She pulled her feet out and slipped into the sandals.

"It seems we are in luck. The council was in a special meeting when I arrived and has agreed to allow us to come before them."

"Great. Lucky for us." Like being called to the principal's office, without having to wait in line.

"All will be fine. We do not need their approval. So their reaction does not matter so much."

"I agree with Maria. Let's not tell them." She walked toward him, then fell in step with him as they wound their way through the cave.

"We may not need their approval, but it would go far if given. We do not want them as enemies."

It seemed a little late for that where she was concerned, since they had declared her the enemy long ago.

"Fine. Let's just get it over with." She felt like Lando going for punishment. They stepped out into the baking sun, and she inhaled deeply. The air was thick and would be until the rain shower. Luckily, in the rain forest there wouldn't be a long wait.

"I wanted to talk to you about Lando." She bolstered her courage as she paced her steps to his. It wasn't easy since he was much bigger, but she figured he was keeping his pace slow for her benefit. She was grateful, since she didn't want to appear before the council winded. "Was there some reason you didn't tell me he was hybrid?"

“Would it have changed anything?” He nodded to several of the villagers as they stopped performing their chores to acknowledge him.

“Yes. I would have known. Are you ashamed of him? Is that why you didn’t bother to introduce me to him?” She had a pretty good idea how his father had felt about his grandson, and she knew Devante had reason as well to hate the hybrids. But she didn’t want to believe it, and, after seeing him with Lando, realized she didn’t. But she wanted to hear it from him.

“I did not make introductions,” he said evenly, “because he was not home when we arrived. In my rush to meet with the elders, I did not go searching for him. As to your allegation, I will not discuss him with you or anyone else. He is all I have left of my sister, and I have raised him as my son, raised him Jaguar. That is all you need to know of him.”

“He’s confused about who he is.”

“If he is, he will come to me with it when he is ready. I know you are here to help the hybrids, and I agree most are in need of your help. However, Lando is not one of them. He does not need your healing.”

“What if I’m not wrong? He told me today--”

He suddenly stopped, his face tight. “He is not one of your hybrids, to be dissected. He is off limits. If there is a problem, I will deal with it.”

She wanted to tell him all that Lando had told her. He needed to know. But the words stuck in her throat. “Off limits.” She had known this was not her world, not her people. Never had that been more evident than at this moment. Still, it hurt. “I see. Well, I’ll make sure I try to avoid him in the future.”

He took her elbow and turned her toward the hut that had been hidden in the jungle growth.

“We are here. Let us deal with one problem at a time.”

## Chapter Seven

Miakoda trailed Devante into the thatch-roofed hut. Even with the window flaps open, the heat was oppressive.

Her eyes wandered over the faces around the rustic table. There were no amenities to be found, just the basics. She could understand the lack of need for materialistic things.

Six chairs were lined up behind the table, all six taken. There were no other chairs in the room, which left her and Devante standing. She didn't believe it was an accident. Always maintain the power, the upper hand. These men hadn't gotten where they were by forgetting that rule.

She had been expecting time-worn faces. Of the six, four matched her expectations. The two who were young, fifties maybe, surprised her. It seemed not all of the elders were ancient. Somehow, she knew the younger ones would be less forgiving.

"So, you have returned. Did you not feel the need to show respect by informing us of your departure?"

Devante didn't look nervous. She was sure she did.

"Gaspar. Please forgive my insolence, sir. No disrespect was intended. It was an unexpected trip made in the dark of night."

If the trip hadn't been planned, why had he decided to leave in the middle of the night? Had he known somehow that she was in danger?

The old man looked somewhat appeased by Devante's explanation. One of the younger men sniffed the air, frowning as if he scented a stench.

"What have you brought to us?"

Beside her, Devan stiffened, though she doubted any of the others had noticed.

"This is Miakoda, daughter of--"

"I know whose daughter she is. Why have you brought her to this place? Do you not know of the banishment?"

"Surely you have been informed, Senon, that the coalition removed the banishment of hybrids."

"Does the coalition rule our people? We had no seat at the table, no vote was cast by one of us." Senon replied.

"That is true, and why I am here today. As *rey*, I will claim that seat."

"It is your right." Gaspar seemed oblivious to the heat. Dressed in his long robe, it wouldn't surprise her if he fainted from heat stroke. Thin skin stretched taut over bones, with very little muscle between, as if his skin had shrunk and his bones had grown too large.

"No, it is not his right. Have you forgotten our laws? He alone cannot claim the throne." Senon looked as if he'd been stealing all of Gaspar's dinner, Miakoda mused. His portly belly filled his robe and sweat dripped from his forehead. It made Miakoda feel better just knowing he was suffocating in the oven of a room.

"If you know who this girl is, then you know he has a rightful claim," Gaspar

amended.

“He cannot claim it through a leopard!”

“I claim it through the blood of the moon. Can any here deny Miakoda is that blood?”

“The gods will never allow it,” Senon said.

“Then let them deny us,” Devante replied evenly.

“You offer your life for this girl then?” Gaspar asked.

“I don’t understand. I have agreed to be queen.” Maybe the heat was getting to her. She shook her head lightly, trying to make sense of what they were saying. The heat seeped through her every pore, the smell of stale air and sweat filled her lungs. It was no wonder the council were such grumpy men, they were slowly roasting themselves.

“Of course she does not understand. She is not one of us. It is an abomination to think we would allow it.” Senon snickered.

“Child, if you perform the ceremony and the gods deny your blood, you will be sacrificed,” Gaspar explained.

“You mean you’ll kill me.” Oh yeah, these guys were out there. Certifiable.

“Not the council, but the very gods you call upon. It would mean death to you and Devante. Do you wish to perform the ceremony?”

“It seems you skipped that part, Devante.” He didn’t as much as flinch at the accusation in her eyes. So much for trusting him.

“It is of no consequence to us. We will not be denied.” His mouth was a thin, tight line.

“What else have you failed to tell me?”

“We will discuss this at a more opportune time.” The very tone in his voice told her to drop it. That seemed to be his answer for everything. Later didn’t work for her this time.

“I don’t think so. Maybe we shouldn’t do this.”

Senon smirked. “If that is your wish.”

“I say let the gods decide. They are in need of a sacrifice.” One of the others spoke, and she realized no one had bothered to introduce the council. It was a slight against her, one she easily recognized.

“It will be up to Miakoda. If you decide to join, we will approve. We have nothing to lose. Failure will bring harm to none but you,” Gaspar said.

“Great,” Miakoda muttered.

“The ceremony will be performed tonight as planned,” Devante said, and this time no one objected. Miakoda knew which outcome they were all hoping for.

“Since that is settled, we have further business.”

Miakoda wasn’t sure anything had been settled, but as the bead of sweat ran down between her breasts, she didn’t object to the end of this meeting. Whatever it took to get out of the hut, she was all for it. And there would be plenty of time before midnight to consider her options and make a decision.

Gaspar nodded, and they watched as Lando was brought in.

“What is he doing here?” Devante stepped forward and placed his hand on the young boy’s shoulder.

“He was caught fighting for the third time. You have been remiss in your duties of the child. Punishment must be administered.”

She waited for Devan to speak up for the boy, cursed beneath her breath when he remained silent.

"The boy is what, seven? What seven year old does not get into a scrape or two?" Miakoda asked.

"We wouldn't expect an outsider to understand," Senon replied.

"Enlighten me," Miakoda snapped. She was getting sick of the constant reminder she was the outsider here.

"You were not raised among your own kind. The young ones have a difficult time controlling the beast at times. They can change when angered without warning. They could easily kill their opponent by accident." Okay, she had to admit that it made perfect logic. Hadn't she herself been afraid of doing that very thing to a lover?

"Lando, you have been accused of purposely provoking another. How do you plead?" Senon asked. He seemed a little too pleased in asking the question.

"I didn't like what he said, so I hit him."

"Then you are guilty. For this, you will endure your greatest nightmare, face your biggest fear. Three hours in the circle."

Okay, not sounding good. What did a seven-year-old fear? Miakoda's mouth opened and words spilled out before she even realized it. Not that thinking about it first would have changed anything. Giving her a hard time was one thing, doing it to a little boy was entirely another.

She could feel the waves of Lando's fear, his panic crushing through her. Her heart raced, just as his was doing. She took it all in, opened herself up to take it all from him. The weight filled her chest and made breathing the thick air more difficult.

"You have got to be joking. He deserves no such punishment. I don't know what this circle is, but three hours of punishment is unreasonable." It had to be bad for the child to be so terrified of it. She felt his hope building, hope that someone would help him. It took everything in her not to grab Lando and run from the monsters that would incite such terror in an innocent little boy.

"Cease!" Devante growled. Miakoda flinched. She seemed to be doing that a lot when deep voices were growling at her. At some point, surely she would become accustomed to them.

"I agree," stated Gaspar, the one Miakoda had begun thinking of as the nice one. That misconception fell quickly. "One hour would be more fitting. In favor?"

Tears streaked Lando's freshly scrubbed face, ripping at her heart. She listened to the vote with dead ears, the blood blocking out all else. She couldn't feel the flood of her own tears that fell, but her voice gave them away. Shakily she added, "He wasn't supposed to be fighting. I get that. But they called him a freak, his mother the devil. Surely the reason matters."

"I am afraid it cannot. The harsher the words, the stronger need for control. Do you speak for the boy, my child?" Gaspar asked.

"No." Devante stated firmly.

"Yes. If no other will, then I do."

Devante ran his hands through his hair and hissed. "He is my responsibility. I will speak for the boy, no other. She knows not what she is saying."

"Of course I do. Do I look dimwitted to you?"

"Sí. Now do as I say and remain silent," Devante said as hard eyes swung to her.

“So,” the elder leaned back, “you speak for the boy. It is fitting, like to like. It is your intention to stand in his stead?”

“You mean take his punishment?” she asked.

“That is exactly what I mean. That is what speaking for another at council means. Of course, you would not know that, would you? It is only fair that we give you the opportunity to reconsider. Is that your wish?”

Senon seemed even happier with this question. She hated a man who found so much pleasure in his work.

“Of course not. I’ll gladly take his punishment.”

“So be it. Three hours in the circle.” Senon smirked. “We will find out, hybrid, what your true fears are.”

“I believe I reduced that sentence to one,” Gaspar corrected.

“That was for the child. An adult can take the full punishment and should not have a reduced sentence.”

“One was voted, one approved.” Gaspar’s voice remained low, but it was obvious he carried the power here since no one argued.

The nice one was sounding better.

“I will speak for her,” Devante interrupted.

“Interesting.” The elder eyed him carefully, saying no more.

“You will do no such thing,” Miakoda hissed. How dare he stand up for her, when he hadn’t bothered to stand up for his own blood.

“Do not push me too far, Miakoda. I told you not to interfere with Lando.”

He turned to her and saw the tears. “I would have spoken for him, Mia, surely you know that.”

“Then why didn’t you?” She hated the tears, hated him more for witnessing them.

It was the first time Lando spoke. “He had to wait for the punishment. You aren’t supposed to talk until it’s time. I don’t want him to be punished. You neither. I broke the rules. One hour isn’t so bad. Don’t let her do it, Uncle Devan.”

“Hush now.” Devante patted the child’s head. “Of course she will not. I will stand.”

“I’m afraid the matter is done. She spoke for the boy. Unless she wishes to retract and let the boy take his own,” Senon said.

“And I have spoken for her,” Devante argued.

“It was refused. Only once can the rule be invoked. We will see it done.” They rose as one and exited the hut. Miakoda was surprised to find a crowd had gathered. It seemed word spread fast when punishment was to be administered. Instead of witnessing the punishment of a child, it would be their future queen. Yep, she was starting off just great.

“As her future mate, you are first choice. You will dispense the dream herb.” Gaspar tried to hand him the cup, but Devante refused to touch it.

“My hand will never harm her.”

Gaspar gasped, clearly upset. “You know the dose of bittergrass is too low to bring harm.”

“Physically, maybe. But we both know first hand the emotional damage it can bring. I ask you again, let me stand for her.”

“No. If she is truly to be *reina*, she must see to her own punishment. Offer the



cup, *mi hijo*,” Gaspar said.

“I will bring her no harm, *viejo*, and I will kill any among you that does.”

The elder took a step back. “So you challenge the council? That is unwise.”

Gaspar’s eyes were wide with surprise.

“*Sí*, I challenge,” Devante said.

This wasn’t sounding good. When she noticed Ethan shaking his head, she eased beside him. “What is he doing?”

“Challenging the council.”

“In my language, Ethan,” she whined, her patience worn thin by smug men and confusing customs.

“He will fight them.”

Miakoda eyed the bunch. Most of them looked ready to keel over on their own. Devante could take them, no matter who chose to fight him. Senon seemed full of spit and fire. Still, as her eyes traveled over each fine honed muscle on Devante’s body, she would place her money on him.

“Which ones?”

“All of them. Together. Don’t let their age fool you. Their powers are great, but their strength combined is deadly. It is with those powers they will fight, not with physical strength.”

“Stop him, damn it.” Miakoda grabbed Ethan’s arm.

“How do you suggest I do that?”

Her mind raced trying to find the answer. This damn game was foreign to her.

“Agree to give me that stuff.”

“I cannot.” Ethan hung his head.

“You can. You know he would never kill you.”

Ethan looked at her sadly. “For you, I think he would. But like him, I cannot hurt you.”

Gee’s, did they think she was that fragile? “It can’t be that bad, if it was meant for Lando. And Devante might kill any other. It will happen either way. Hell’s fire, don’t let him get hurt.”

Ethan dropped his head in defeat, but his voice rose clearly. “I will stand in.”

“No, Ethan.” Devante warned. “Do not do this thing.”

For once, Miakoda understood that only she could prevent this. Devante wasn’t being reasonable. Whether to protect his queen or from fear of her weakness, she didn’t know. And it didn’t matter. She just had to stop him.

“Devan, I have given my word. Please, show me the respect my position deserves and let that word stand for something.”

Devante closed his eyes, the strain evident on his face. His nod was all they would get.

She turned, her hands behind her back. Senon stepped up, binding her hands a little too tightly. She refused to make a sound. Tension was tight and any wrong move could shatter the ground she had gained.

“Tell me one thing first Devan, so there will be no mistake made later. If I were queen, could I overrule this?” She held her head high as her voice carried strong and sure. She would give them no fear.

“If you were *reina*, this would not be occurring. No one would dare do this to the

*reina*. And I--or you in my stead--would lay judgment and punishment.”

“But if I was queen, would I be above these guys? The elders?”

“*Sí*.” His eyes met hers. She had to blink to keep from falling under their mesmerizing spell.

“Good. Once I’m done here, we’ll get ready for tonight.” And the next time the old goats tried to pull a stunt like this, she would have the power to stop them.

“It does not change this, as you are not *reina*,” Senon replied.

“That’s okay. ’Cause my first act as queen will be to fire your ass.”

Devante bit back a smile and shook his head. “You cannot fire them, Mia. Their positions were born to them, as were ours.”

“But I can overrule anything they say?”

“*Sí*.”

“Good enough.” She blew at the hair falling over her eyes, finally throwing her head back in an effort to dislodge it. Having the power to overrule these control-hungry jerks was almost worth anything they could dish out. “Just let me take care of this little business and then we’ll work out the details for tonight.”

Devante’s cool fingers tucked the hair behind her ear. His fingers lingered. A tender gesture she found endearing. There was worry in his eyes. Worry for her.

A toothless grin appeared on Gaspar’s face as he stepped close. “*Sí*, this is our future *reina*. You will do, *mi niña*. You’ll do indeed.”

Devante stepped behind her, loosening the ropes to keep them from biting into her skin.

They weren’t necessary, since she had no plans to bolt. Senon had added them to further humiliate her. They had the opposite effect. She had done no wrong and was proud to be taking Lando’s punishment.

Miakoda took the luxury of leaning back and felt his chest against her. Here was strength. Opening herself up, she allowed it to seep inside her. She had strength of her own, but she was clueless to what awaited her for the next hour. Having a little extra stashed couldn’t hurt.

The trail through the jungle was well worn, a testament to others who had walked the same path. The clearing wasn’t far from the village, but seemed to be another world. The canopy above blocked out most of the sunlight, leaving the floor of the jungle cool and moist.

It seemed impossible that anything cruel could happen in such a beautiful place. The entrance to the cave stood on the edge of the clearing, with ferns growing at the base and blood-red orchids covering the ground. The color of the leaves and underbrush was a veritable party of green.

Miakoda stepped through the door and lowered herself to the ground, just inside the circle of stones. She bit her bottom lip, trying to stop the sudden shaking.

The ground beneath her was cool, but it was the shadows that worried her. Unlike Devante’s cave, or even the jaguar temple where the ceremony would later be performed, this cave was unoccupied in the jungle. Though rituals were likely performed here often, she knew tarantulas had a tendency to occupy the caves in the area. Or if she was lucky enough and it was the right season, she might even get an assassin beetle crawling over her. It wasn’t the beetle that frightened her so much--okay, it was that as well--but the little droppings they left behind could be much worse than the fear induced heart attack

she'd get from the tarantula.

Parasites from those droppings could cause the Chagras' disease. Fever, swelling around the eyes and risk of chronic disease with inflammation of the brain and heart. Flat on her back in the dirt of this cave had to be worse than what the elders had planned for her.

When Devante approached her, she forced a smile.

"You are shaking. This will be unpleasant, but you will come to no harm. I would not let you do this if there was real danger."

"That's what you think. Just don't let a spider crawl on me while I'm out of it." She shuddered. "Couldn't we do this outside?" On top of poison wood, maybe? She preferred the rash and itch over her current options.

"Trust me, Mia. I will watch over you while you do this."

"Okay, but promise me no bugs." His nod made her feel a little better.

Her people, the Maya and the jaguar, found all things in the cave. Life, health, and even death. Caves were the door between heaven and the nine hells. She had always loved them. This was the first time she had ever wished to be anywhere else.

"Drink this, then we will begin. Your arms are tied down to prevent injury to yourself."

Devante's voice was solemn, his face expressing no emotion. She was beginning to understand it was his poker face, the face he showed to the world when his emotions were high. And they were high, his energy filling the room. It bounced over her, but her barriers kept it out. The last thing she wanted was all of the leftover fear from those who had come before her, seeping in to add to her own.

"What is it?" She frowned as she looked into the tin cup.

"Calea Zacatechichi. The tea will be bitter, so drink it quickly. It is an herb that will open the door between the worlds."

Now that definitely sounded like a door to keep tightly locked. "Okay, a little more info please." She preferred her dry cotton mouth to what was in that cup.

"Dreams occur in a realm of supersensory reality. There is a realm between our world and the next, a place where the spirits roam. It is in this place that you will meet your greatest fears."

"So what, you do this to terrify the children?" Her attempt at humor fell flat.

"The purpose of this is not cruelty. It is to teach them control. The dreams are intense and explicit. They must learn to face their fears, conquer them. This must be done by the man, not the cat."

"Meaning I can't shift." Great. The only out she had was turning cat. In that form, bugs didn't faze her. Not much did, actually. Which was probably why they refused to allow them to shift.

"That is correct. If you shift, you lose control of your beast. This means you have failed and must begin again."

"So I lay here for an hour without shifting. That's it?" Maybe the spiders would crawl up beneath the elder's robes and bite them instead while she was sleeping. That almost brought a smile to her.

"Do not make light of this, Mia. The dreams you face will be your worst nightmare. Even you do not always know what those fears are. They will find you."

"Guess I'm about to find out." She hesitated, and then asked what she needed to

know. "So it will be only a dream?"

"Of sorts. An alternate reality," Devante said.

"Can anything that is changed there affect the real world?"

"No." He ran his hands through his hair, forgetting it was tied with a leather strip. When the strands didn't give, he pulled the strip from his hair and tossed it aside. The waves danced freely around his neck. "That is the reason why no physical harm can come to you in the realm.

"Of this, I am assured by the elders. I have done this myself many times and felt no ill effects physically afterward."

Which meant a person could be emotionally wounded. "Then what purpose does this realm serve? Was it only created to use against us?"

"It was not created for any purpose. It simply exists. Every moment in our life leaves a path through reality. Think of it like a child's drawing toy. The lines are drawn but are continuously being erased behind us. Then there comes the moment that creates so much energy that it is permanently burned into the slate. Those moments exist in the alternate reality world.

"It is a doorway to other worlds as well. A waiting room, if you will. The alternate world is a blank canvas until we fill it in."

"You're losing me."

Frustration gathered in his features as he searched for words to make her understand.

"If I need to speak to a certain spirit that is unable to journey to our world, I call on them inside the outer sphere. We meet in the middle realm.

"Just remember, any harm that comes to you in the outer realm is not real. None of what you are about to face can harm you."

"Should be a breeze then."

He lifted the cup to her mouth, and she drained the cool liquid. The taste was bitter, just as Devante had warned. She lay back on the cool earth and within minutes her breathing trailed off and her body relaxed. She closed her eyes.

*She was walking the familiar path by the lake, one she had walked every day of her life. Her feet were bare, not the paws she normally traveled on. No, she couldn't be cat, not in this dream.*

*The sunlight faded to black as the walls of the forest turned to walls of concrete.*

*"Daddy?" Miakoda whispered, afraid the sound of her voice would make him disappear forever.*

*"Gatita. Did you not receive your mother's warning? You were not to come to this place."*

*Odd, she had forgotten her daddy used the same endearing term as Devante. What else had she forgotten about such an important part of her life?*

*Her eyes searched the room and saw the chains that were bolted to the floor. The animal inside them did not move, and she sensed that his spirit had already crossed over. She saw the blood around his left back paw, where the shackle had rubbed.*

*"Where is this place?"*

*Her father didn't appear to hear her. "Your mother and I need to save these poor animals, before it is too late."*

*"Mama?" Miakoda scanned the room, but saw no sign of her mother.*

*“She is freeing the others. We must hurry, before they return.”*

*Didn't he know it was already too late? The metal door slamming against the wall sent a ring through the room.*

*“Run!” The warning came from just outside of the room. She could hear her mother's voice, see her father shift from the corner of her eye. They were on him before she could scream a warning. He fought them, slashing across their skin to leave gaping wounds. Wounds that didn't bleed. Miakoda narrowed her eyes, trying to see their faces in the blur of speed.*

*She felt no fear in them, in fact felt no emotion at all. She saw the claw attached to a human hand, but couldn't tell what form of animal. She screamed, the sound echoing against the walls as that claw tore the flesh on her father's chest. The blood flow was massive and would drain his life quickly. She was defenseless against the creatures in her human form, but still she fought them with everything she had. She felt the pain as they opened cut after cut on her body, felt the drain on her own life as she lost blood.*

*The growl came from behind them, and she turned in time to see her mother race into the room. “No!” She screamed as her mother flew across the room, landing on the back of the one who was still attacking her father. She had to help them, had to save them this time. She called to her cat, pulling her up from deep inside. The cat came to the surface but refused to form.*

*She tried again, only to curse as the cat refused. Her body was too weak now, the mind-numbing pain fading as she dropped to her knees and watched the claws of death tear her father apart.*

*Slowly she turned her head, her body falling to the floor in a puddle of blood, both hers and her fathers. She could see her mother only feet from her, her sleek black body covered in blood as the monsters kept slashing against her skin. Black eyes turned to her, evil laughing at her. She knew those eyes, had seen them before. She tried to remember, cursed when she couldn't place them.*

*Her eyes filled with tears as she met her mother's gaze, saw the sadness and despair. She had failed them again. She closed her eyes on the pain, and welcomed the darkness that took her.*

“What do you think she sees?” Ethan asked.

Devante watched Mia's body jerk as if fighting off an attack. He had heard her call out her father's name, heard the desperation in her voice as she had screamed out a warning.

To watch her writhing form fighting hidden battles was almost more than he could bear. Damn the elders.

“I imagine her worst nightmare was the death of her parents. I'm sure she is reliving every grisly detail.” Devante ran his hand over the day's growth on his chin. “We really are monsters, aren't we?”

“You mean because we allow those bastards to do this, over and over? Probably. But we're doing all we can to stop the elders, Devan. I have to believe true monsters would find joy in others' pain. Maybe that saves us.” They both turned back to Miakoda as a whimper escaped.

She had started to settle down, and they knew the first round was over. There would be no rest for her. Soon her body began to tremble as the next vision started.

“Here we go again.”

*Miakoda began walking the familiar path by the lake, one she had walked every day of her life. Her feet were bare, but not the paws she normally traveled on. But she couldn't be cat here, not in this dream.*

*When the sun started to fade, she waited for the jungle walls to turn to concrete. This wasn't real. Devan had told her nothing could hurt her here. She trusted him.*

*But when she looked up at the sky, expecting to find the ceiling of the cell blocking the sun, she found instead dark black clouds, descending lower.*

*They shouldn't be there, beneath the trees. Her skin itched, tingles racing along her arms as her cat sent out a warning. Something wasn't right. There should be no sun beneath the canopy of trees, no clouds gathering around her. The dark cloud shimmered, wavered, and grew to a shape. She watched as the dark form stepped from the fog.*

*She couldn't see his face in the darkness, only his body drawing closer and closer. She pulled at the binding that held her hands, jerking frantically to free them before the monster reached her. Blood hampered her efforts as the rope soaked up her precious life's blood.*

*This was a dream, she tried to remind herself, but even without her cat's warning, she knew better. This time the monster was real.*

*He stood over her, the black bottomless pits that stared into her eyes locking her in fear. Those eyes. Always those eyes. They were in her every nightmare. She was alone in the jungle without even her cat to aid her. The heat, the fear churned in her stomach forcing her to fight back the bile.*

*Monsters were real. Her father had never tried to tell her, even as a little girl, that no monsters hid under the bed. Instead, he had turned on the light and checked all the hiding places to make sure she was safe. There were monsters, but he would keep her safe from them. This time, even her daddy couldn't help her.*

*Closing her eyes wouldn't make him go away, but it would break the spell he was casting over her. When she felt the sharp tip of his nail slide along her jaw, her eyes flew open.*

*“You are strong, for one so small.”*

*“Who are you?” Her voice shook, and even before he spoke she knew the answer.*

*“I am the one who made you.”*

*“You're wrong, I was made by a leopard and a jaguar.” The pain in her jaw was instant and burned as the blood trailed down her neck. His long nail trailed a path through her blood, swirling circles over her skin.*

*She blocked out his laughter, menacing and shrill, trying to clear her head from the leftover dregs of sleep.*

*Had she awakened alone in the cave, or was she still locked in another realm? She knew Devan would never leave her vulnerable and alone while the council meted out their punishment. But he had also told her no harm would come to her in the otherworld. Her mind sifted through everything he had told her of this realm, locking on the one thing she felt mattered.*

*He had told her this world was a waiting room for others. A place where he could contact or meet with the spirit world. Somehow, Sinock had found his way here.*

*Maybe he would be unable to harm her, but she wasn't willing to do nothing and take that risk.*

*There were voices, shouts she could barely make out as words, but she recognized Devante's voice. Though it came from far away, she heard his curses, his accusations thrown at the council. A warmth in her hand sent a flood of tranquility covering her. He was trying to reach her, trying to help. She knew it, just as she knew he would be too late.*

*"Your parents were merely vessels I used to produce you. You are a part of me, as I am a part of you."*

*Weight pressed down on her chest, preventing her lungs from filling with air. Raw terror raced through her as she fought against any truth in his words. He was nothing to her, held no connection.*

*"You lie. You are no more than the monster under the bed."*

*Lightning flashed from the sky, striking the rock and sending a charge through her. Her fingers burned as black smoke filled the air. She coughed, covered her mouth with her hands, and realized the heat had burned through the rope. Locking on to the pain in her wrist, she fought consciousness, allowing the pain freedom to fill her. His hate, a vile living being, seeped into her every pore. Madness tore at her body, threatening to rip her soul apart.*

*"You are strong, but never doubt who will be victor in a battle between us. The powers you have are yours because of me. You will not use them against me, but at my bidding. I call to you, join your brothers and sisters against those who have turned against us."*

*Miakoda squeezed her eyes tightly against the bright flashes of light and silently sent up a prayer to the gods. She was the power of the moon, the blood of Ixchel. No monster would defeat her. Over and over, she called to them.*

*The power of the gods filled her as their spirits shimmered like glass around her. The barrier they formed was protection from the evil trying to consume her. At once, she dropped the shields she had erected and felt their souls join with hers. The ball of light grew, encompassing her in the warmth of their love. A face shimmered above her, and tears leaked from her eyes at the face that had held her so many times. The face of her mother. Then she was falling, sucked through a great hole into the world where she belonged.*

*Devante held her close, the strength of his arms threatening to crush her ribs. She smiled up at him, and he dropped his forehead to hers. His heart pounded against her chest.*

*"Forgive me, pequeña." His voice was hoarse, rough with the pain and knowledge that he was responsible.*

*"It wasn't your fault. Besides, I'm fine."*

*He said nothing but continued to hold her close. His face fell to the curve of her neck, buried in her hair as his fear abated. She was safe wrapped in those strong arms, cocooned in his warmth.*

*He was getting his breathing under control, while her every breath was turning into a struggle. She didn't want to feel this way about him, as if he was working his way into her heart. She pulled back from him, in more ways than one.*

*"Or I will be if you don't break something," she managed to get out.*

His arms loosened at once, and she drew a deep breath into her lungs. “Thanks. Any idea what happened?”

“Sinock somehow followed you. It wasn’t supposed to happen. The elders swore to me that no harm could ever come to anyone in the realm.” He cast his eyes to Senon, and she saw the hate burning there. “Never again will they be allowed to do this.”

“I’m not really hurt.” She wanted to calm him, to smooth the wrinkles in his forehead. Whatever harm she had sustained mattered little when he held her so tenderly.

He held up his hand, coated in her blood. The scratch on her neck had been real. She shrugged, even though she wanted to cry instead.

“Can we fire their asses now?”

“No, but I could kill them if you like.”

He didn’t break a smile. She shook from the chill that fact brought. He could do it. Probably would if she asked him to. He had honor and had given his word to her. It had been broken, through no fault of his own. The elders. Yes, he would kill them.

“That’s just a little freaky, Devan.” A shadow fell across them, and she found Gaspar standing behind Devante.

“How is the *niña*?”

“She’ll live, no thanks to you. But you have some explaining to do, old man.” The skin seemed to sag from the old bones as Gaspar nodded.

“I did not know Sinock was seeking you. Had I known, we would not have allowed you to enter without protection.”

“So you knew there was danger in the otherworld?”

“No. No, there has never been danger before.” Remorse was evident in the ancient eyes. “But we have not come up against the breeder in decades. He is very strong. It will take much to defeat him.”

“Why do you think he allowed you to leave?” Devante asked.

She felt like an idiot cradled in his arms like a babe, so she started to rise. When Devante offered her his hand she took it. No sense in being stubborn and refusing, just to find her legs wouldn’t hold her. The last thing she wanted to do was fall flat on her face in front of an audience. Especially an unfriendly one.

“I prayed to the Gods. I think they sent help.” Heat crept into her face. They probably thought she sounded nuts. Maybe she was nuts. After what she had just experienced, it wouldn’t even come as a shock.

If she had finally cracked, nothing could be done about it standing in the jungle. When she started walking back to the village, Devante fell in step beside her.



## Chapter Eight

“You need to rest.”

“I need a shower.” The smell of fear still clung to her skin, mingled with something more rancid she didn’t want to acknowledge, much less name. There was no way the breeder could have left his scent clinging to her from the otherworld, but she could smell him with her every breath.

“Maria will provide you with what you need.”

Devante had suddenly turned brisk and formal. Well, that was just fine with her. There had been a connection, a spark out in the jungle between them that had nothing to do with sexual heat. That spark had been more dangerous than lust. If he wanted to deny it, so would she.

All she wanted was to get tonight behind her, then sleep like the dead. She winced. After the hour she’d just spent, maybe that was a poor choice of words.

Maria’s gaiety was catching. By the time she had collected soaps and oils for Miakoda, she had convinced her to use the bathing chamber instead. The thought of being surrounded by such natural beauty made the decision an easy one.

The chamber was like nothing she’d ever seen. The limestone floor was smooth and covered with a bamboo mat. The floor of the chamber slanted down, ending in the teal blue waters of the underground river.

Though the room was cool, the water was warmed by the sun through a hole in the center of the ceiling. A natural made skylight. The sun had already started to set, casting the last shade of light over the room. The torches scattered around the room would not be needed for another hour.

The pool was wide, encompassing the width of the cave and deep enough to swim in. The corners around the cave were dark, creepy, and Miakoda avoided the shadows. She had had more than enough darkness for one day.

She dangled her feet over the edge before diving in. It was strange not to have a door to lock others out, but Maria knew the chamber was in use, and she knew Maria would keep the strays away.

Miakoda swam deep under the surface before floating on her back in the remaining sun. Her eyes studied the open ceiling, the wonders created by years of running water.

Crystals hung from the ceiling like icicles, shimmering in the light from the sun and the water. It was a magical place, where more than the dirt and grime of the day could be washed away.

Her skin tingled seconds before she felt his presence. The shock of it made her turn quickly, the movement sinking her beneath the water. She came up coughing and cursing as she struggled for air.

Strong arms pulled her above the water’s surface, holding her up until she had cleared her airway of water. She came around swinging, connecting firmly with a chin and cursing louder as pain shot up her arm.

The hands that had been holding her dropped as Devante's curses joined with hers to echo across the cavern. She rubbed her knuckles while he rubbed his chin.

Miakoda ground her teeth until her jaw ached. "What are you doing here?" She finally managed to ask, though it was no small chore. Not when she really wanted to drag him beneath the water and drown the jerk.

"Since it's the bathing chamber, I would think that would be apparent."

"It's already occupied, in case you failed to notice," she snapped back at him.

"Oh, I noticed." A quick smile flashed across his face. "Noticed it the minute you dropped that robe and slid on in."

She took another swing at him, but he was quicker this time. "You didn't think to stop me?" she demanded.

His grin was devilish, and it really pissed her off that she found it adorable. She was turning into a sucker.

His hair was slicked back, drawing attention to a face certainly chiseled by the Gods themselves. There were laugh lines around his eyes that she had never noticed before, a sharp contrast to the weariness she saw in his eyes.

The swirls of water created by the slow movement of his legs danced along her thigh, and she tried to ignore them as she moved her arms slowly. Her reply, witty and sarcastic, died on her lips when his thumb trailed over the superficial cut on her neck.

He pulled her against his body, pressing, molding her skin to his. Contact with those hard planes shot sanity straight out of her head.

Her hands, finally free to do what they'd wanted, were on his chest, his arms, as she felt the ripples of muscle beneath. Her mouth watered.

His hands fisted in her hair as his mouth covered hers. Driving. Seeking.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, her sensitive core growing wet against his stomach. His erection was rock hard, pressed against her as if begging on its own.

Hell's fire, she wanted him inside her. More than air. More than life. She would go mad if he didn't enter her soon.

It had never been like this. This ache, the raw need. She'd had a lover before, though brief and long ago. Sex had been a great let down. Or maybe Charles had just been inexperienced. She certainly had been.

The problem could have been her. She had held back, afraid of unleashing a beast she wouldn't be able to control. Afraid the strength of her cat would crush him or worse, rip out his throat in the heat of the moment.

There was no fear of that with Devante. This was the one chance to give and get all she wanted. Someone who could match her every stroke. The thought alone was nearly enough to push her over the edge.

"Tell me no." Devante's breath was heavy against her neck, and she knew he was fighting for control. She wanted him to lose, to relinquish that hold.

"Yes." She arched her back, pushing her body against him. Seeking, until he guided her to what she searched for. There was no waiting at her entrance, no slow slide in.

He entered her in one deep thrust, then he was inside her, filling her completely. A moan filled the air, hers or his, it hardly mattered. Nothing mattered except gliding over the hardness of him.

"Wait." He tried to still her movements. "You are so tight." He moaned.

It was too much, too long to wait.

"Can't. Wait." She rode him as the water sloshed against them.

He laid her back against the water's surface as his thrusts replaced hers. His cat's tongue, sandpaper rough, licked at her nipple until she cried out. He took the peak into his mouth, no gentle suckling. His lips, his tongue, his teeth drove her to madness.

She didn't want gentle caresses from him, no soft words. This was primal, animal-to-animal. This was setting the flames, licking them back over and over until white spots flashed behind her eyes.

She screamed her release, her body shuddering with aftershocks. And when she thought she could soar no higher, he joined her, his body sending her over the edge once again.

"That was just what I needed," she managed to say, after their breathing had returned to normal.

He held her close to him, his chin resting on her head. Then he was moving them toward the ledge, out of the water.

"It will be when I'm done."

He laid her back against her discarded robe, following her down.

"We've taken care of the need, let's see what we can do about the want." He settled beside her, his eyes drinking in every inch of her bare skin.

She moved, crossing her arms over her breasts as she turned to him.

"Let me look at you, *mi amor*." He moved her arms back to her sides. His finger traced her left areola, and then flicked the ring that hung from the nipple.

"This was a surprise."

Her face burned. "Rebellious college move." He was the only man to ever see her nipple ring. The only man to know it existed.

"It is the mark of royalty."

She shrugged, as if it didn't matter. "My mother had one. I kept planning to remove it, let it close up, but she seemed pleased. She gave me the stone."

"The moonstone." He leaned back, showing her the same ring in his left nipple. "As I wear the sunstone in honor of Itzamna."

Before she could even acknowledge it, he bent over her, his mouth replacing his fingers teasing the ring.

He took it slow this time, making sure they did their best to assuage what was quickly becoming an obsession with each other's bodies.

When he held her close after, her head on his chest, she wondered if that need would ever have been filled.

"I am glad that you have decided to mate with me, Mia."

She stiffened against him. "I haven't."

There was silence a second before he laughed. "But you have already done so."

She sat up, looked into his face. "No, that was sex. Nothing more."

He sat up as well, his face blank. "That was not just sex and you know it. That was mating, at its most basic level. We will produce a child."

"Not this time we won't. Don't you think I considered that? I'm not going to bring a child into this world based on my carnal needs. No matter how strong they are."

His voice was low. "Would giving me a child be so horrible a thing for you?"

She jumped to her feet, cursed when she realized she was bare assed and he was

sitting on her robe. Hands on her hips, she searched the room for something to cover herself.

“Your women are not cherished. Not by all. They are protected, but that’s not the same thing.” She spotted the sarong that Maria had left for her.

“You know little of our ways.”

“That may be true.” She sighed, crossed to put the dreaded thing on. “But I will not bring a child into a world not born of love.” She picked up the scrap of material, cursing when she realized she had no idea what to do with it.

“There would be love for my child.”

She studied him as she held the material against her. She felt more naked now than when she had been beneath him, opening for him to enter her. “I know there would be, and I wish it were enough. But it’s not, Devan. I want love for me as well. Commitment. My child--I--deserve a real home, a real family.”

She wrapped the material around her fashioned like a towel. “I know I probably won’t find it in your world, but if not, I’ll look elsewhere until I do.”

“You’ll breed human.” His voice hardened.

“If I must.”

“You would break the line, leave our people without a *principe* or *princesa*.”

“You will be their king, you can breed their heir. I want more, Devan. I’m giving all I can to the jaguars, but I need someone who wants me. Not to appease his lust or carry his child.”

“You think I did this thing for those reasons? To sate a lust, breed an heir?”

“I don’t know why we did this, but it was a mistake. Let’s just leave it at that.”

## Chapter Nine

Miakoda stood at the stone entrance of the jaguar temple, waiting for the others to make the steep ascent.

The temple was centered in the ruins buried deep in the jungle, not yet discovered by humans. Miakoda could feel the protection spell that fell over the place, hiding it from outside eyes. She was glad this place would always remain secret.

The temple had stood for centuries, and she could feel the strength of the ones who had stood before her.

Devante was beside her as they followed the jaguar priest through the small entrance.

The room was large, the floor smooth as if years of shuffling feet had worn it down. Light from the burning torches danced around the room.

Her eyes fell on the altar.

It stood in the center of the room just as it had for centuries. Two stone jaguar men, their jade cat eyes looking out on the room, held a flat, smooth slab above their head with their front paws. Their claws were extended as they stood on human feet. Man and cat. They were exquisite.

Even their beauty could not mask their morbid purpose. How many had lost their lives in the name of the Gods, their blood sacrificed on that very slab. How much blood had soaked into the limestone?

The day had cooled, but the stone temple held the heat.

As Miakoda followed Devante across the room, an icy draft brought chills to her skin.

For a moment, fear penetrated her skin, paralyzing her as the air left her lungs. Only a second, maybe two, then it was gone. As if it had only been her imagination. She knew it hadn't been.

She looked to Devante and saw he was watching her.

"You feel them," she said.

He nodded, not bothering to ask her to elaborate. He had felt them as well.

"Their souls return, pulled back to the place of their torment."

She shuddered. "How could they murder the innocent so callously?"

"Do not judge harshly what has gone before, Mia. It is not for us."

"I don't like this place."

The priest's sharp intake of breath had her turning her eyes to him.

He was one of the elders, one she hadn't been introduced to at council. No one had bothered tonight either. His name wouldn't make a difference.

She had already decided that she didn't like the man.

"That is sacrilege, as this place is the temple of the jaguar," the priest snapped.

"The jaguar is a proud animal, bold and beautiful," Miakoda began, uncaring if she made the priest angry. People had died here in the name of the jaguar. If the council had their way, she wasn't so sure they wouldn't still be dying. "Do not name them as the

reason for man's atrocities."

Devante said nothing as he took her hand in his and led her to the altar.

The priest raised his head, his voice echoing through the room. There were only the three of them to hear.

"We call to you, Ixchel, Moon Goddess. To you, Itzamna, Sun God. Grant your blessing to those who seek in joining to lead our people."

When nothing happened, Miakoda wondered if that was a good thing or bad.

The priest frowned, then raised his voice higher. "We acknowledge, Ixchel, this one unworthy--"

The flash of light was blinding, and Miakoda covered her eyes. When she opened them again the goddess stood before her.

In the last twenty-four hours she had witnessed a leguar change into a bird and take flight, learned the existence of a hybrid race created by a monster, and faced her worst nightmare in a realm between the worlds. As Miakoda stood before the blood altar in the jaguar temple, waiting to perform an ancient ceremony that would bind her to Devante forever, she thought she was beyond astonishment. She was wrong.

Nothing could have prepared her for the arrival of a goddess. She had never given much thought to the one from whom she descended. As Miakoda gazed at the vision before her, she realized she was much more than her mother's daughter.

Ixchel was the goddess of the moon, a healer like herself. Her beauty was breathtaking. Exotic eyes as dark as the night were set against skin as pale as the moon itself. Her midnight hair hung in ringlets to her waist. As Miakoda stared at Ixchel, she realized this was where her dark features had originated.

She knelt before her goddess, too stunned to speak. She felt the touch, light as it was, when the goddess touched her shoulder.

"Rise my child and let me look at you."

Miakoda stood, her head bowed. Ixchel's fingers gingerly touched her chin, raising her head.

"You are as stunning as your mother." Miakoda felt moisture dampen her eyes.

The priest interrupted, drawing the sharp eyes of the goddess. "Excuse me Goddess, but we ask you grant unto this one the power of the throne. If you deem her unworthy, we will offer her as sacrifice."

Energy slashed against the stone walls as Ixchel's eyes flared red. Even filling the small room completely, no energy passed into Miakoda.

"You dare to call my blood unworthy? Sacrifice one of mine, Priest, and you will know agony to rival the hell of Metnel. My blessing need not be given to one of my own."

Miakoda closed her eyes as another bright flash filled the cavern. Sparks danced over her skin as pressure built in the room. When she dared to open her eyes, before her stood a man to equal the most handsome of gods.

Where Ixchel was the dark, he was the light. His hair was the color of the sun and shown as brightly. His eyes were the same that had stared down at her tenderly as Devante had slid slowly into her. No introduction was needed to tell her he was the sun god, the mighty one. Itzamna.

"What has upset you, *mi corazón*?" His voice carried power even a fool would fear.

"This lowly priest dares to ask for my blessing for this union," Ixchel said.

The priest's mouth flapped before finding his words. "Forgive me, Moon Goddess. It is only because she is a half-breed--"

The walls rumbled. "You have been warned. Do not insult mine. Does my blood not flow in her?" Ixchel demanded an answer, and the priest struggled to give her the correct one.

"Sí, but--"

"And is my blood not sacred?"

Itzamna smiled at Ixchel, and Miakoda ached from the beauty of it. "You know as part of the ceremony he is required to ask our blessing for this union."

"And you know that is meant for those undeserving. How dare he think our own blood should face the same degradation?" Ixchel's gaze shot to the priest, and Miakoda almost felt sorry for him.

"Had he not asked, we would not have been invited to attend this ritual."

Itzamna's voice seemed to soothe the angry goddess.

"We need not an invitation to a joining of our choosing. How can he claim to be a man of us when he cannot see what is so clear in front of him?"

"He is a mere man, *mi corazón*, not a god. Certainly he meant no disrespect."

The priest dropped to the ground in front of them, his head bowed in apology.

"No, *mi dios*, I meant no disrespect. I only meant to assure this union was truly as you wished. Please forgive my ignorance."

"Then get off your knees and be finished with this, Priest. I would see my wishes done so I may leave this drab place." Ixchel turned her aristocratic nose up at the surroundings.

"Sí, Dios." The priest rose, his arrogance replaced with real fear.

He rushed Miakoda and Devante to the altar that had served up so much death.

When Miakoda touched the cool surface, she jerked away and took a step back from the silent cries of the lost souls.

She felt the solid mass behind her, a living breathing thing. Devante. Was he behind her to offer assurance or to prevent an escape?

This was what mattered to him, saving his people. He would sacrifice all for that one purpose. She wished she could blame him for it, but she couldn't.

He hadn't promised her more, had indeed told her the truth. If she wanted more from this union, that was her own problem. She wasn't even sure she wanted more from him.

But she would do this for her people and for his. He was right in that this was bigger than them.

She watched in silence as the priest moved to a recess in the wall, returning with a wooden box. It was intricately carved with the moon and the sun. He placed it reverently on the altar and then methodically began removing the contents.

The bowl was jade and carved with the jaguar. The obsidian blade's handle was carved, as well, and encrusted with the stone of the moon and the sun. The bone of the stingray followed, sharp and deadly, and was placed next to the knife.

Miakoda's heart raced as the metallic taste filled her mouth. Fear was a taste she abhorred. Her cat stirred in response, always there when she needed the added strength.

The urge to run from the room was great, but she wouldn't do it. Even as

Devante slid his arms around her waist, anchoring her to him, she knew she would see this through. His arms should not feel so right, after their argument.

"You've nothing to fear, *gatita*." His breath blew hot against her ear. Need arced through her, a tingle all the way through her body.

Two stones dangling from strands of gold were removed next before the box was set aside.

The priest spoke once again, "The moon and sun are two worlds. These worlds must be joined fully, creating one entity to rule. Flesh and blood, mind and soul.

"You have come to ask the Jaguar Sun, the Jaguar Moon, to honor this joining and offer their people to you." The priest's eyes cut to Ixchel and slid away quickly. "You have received their blessing. The first offering is the offering of flesh. You must join your bodies, claim the other as your own. If you are ready--"

"Okay, back up." Miakoda knew she was being rude, but at this point, who cared? She was giving herself to this ritual, and she would at least understand it. "You might want to explain that one to me, buddy."

Confusion passed over the priest's face, then he blushed. Miakoda knew she was in trouble.

"You will rule as one. One body, one soul," the priest said.

"Yeah, I got that. But if you think I'm climbing up on that rock and having sex-- in front of witnesses--they have a name for that, and I'm not doing it." She crossed her arms over her chest. There were things she would do for the jaguars, but that wasn't one of them.

"Voyeurism," Devante supplied as a grin teased his mouth.

"Did you know about this?" She rounded on Devante, ready to do battle. "And are you smiling?"

"Wouldn't dare smile." Devante turned to the priest. "It is not nec--"

"It is very necessary," the priest insisted.

"*Kinich Ahau*, save us from primeval priests too archaic to practice," Ixchel snapped. "Do you not smell him on her, Priest? They have already joined."

"Twice, I'd say," Itzamna added as he grinned.

Miakoda could feel her face burning. Nothing like having her sex life discussed among strangers to bring on the heat.

"He was made for you my child. It is only right that you enjoy what is yours." Ixchel stated softly, as if reading her embarrassment.

Okay, but did everyone have to know about it?

Itzamna turned to Devante. "I would speak the same to you, but with the smile on your face, I see no need to tell you to enjoy yourself."

"Well, then, we will continue." The priest picked up the bone, and Miakoda couldn't prevent the gasp.

"Blood gives us life. Blood must be given from one of the three lift points. Then you will carry the mark of the sun and moon."

Miakoda stared blankly as the priest looked to be waiting for an answer from her. The old man began to adjust his robe, clearly nervous.

"Air we breathe gives us life. Mating creates life. And suckling a babe continues life." The priest supplied, as if that would help her to make a decision. She was still sorting out the question. When she didn't move, Devante decided to speak for her. This



was one time she'd let him.

"She is already marked as the moon. Her left breast, as is the custom." Her eyes flew to him, certain that he had just turned on her. Traitor, that's what he was.

"Show them, Mia," Devante said.

"Oh great. You didn't tell me this was the X-rated version." She stepped forward and dropped the material as she studied a spot on the wall just over the priest's head.

The priest pulled a tool from beneath his robe that looked dangerously like modern pliers.

Ixchel shrieked. "What do you intend to do with that?"

"The ring, Goddess, it is a captive ring. It must be removed, --"

"Step aside man, before you make a mockery of this." Her eyes were soft as she turned to Miakoda. She looked down at the nipple ring. "You wear my stone, your mother's stone above your heart. It is as it should be." The goddess raised her hands, power emanating from them as she crossed her arms in the air.

Her words were ancient, the language unknown to Miakoda. She felt the room warm, a soft breeze drift across her skin. When the power ebbed, it was Devante's sunstone that hung from her breast, her moonstone hung above his heart.

"Now the Sun's stone is over your heart. All who see it will know that you belong to him, as he belongs to you." Ixchel passed the obsidian blade to Itzamna.

Miakoda's eyes clouded, and a haze filled her head. She tried to fight it, but it was too strong. When it finally cleared, blood dripped from a small cut on her breast. They had used their power to keep her from the pain. She would have complained, but as her eyes cut to Devante, she saw where his blood had been drawn. At the sight of blood dripping from his penis, she decided she had gotten off easy. Life points. She wasn't likely to forget those areas for a while.

Their blood joined as it dripped into the bowl. Bark paper was added before it was set ablaze.

"It is done," Ixchel said softly, then took Itzamna's hand in hers. "You honor us and all who came before you. Lead our people, protect them. They are yours."

Miakoda watched as their forms faded from the room.

\* \* \* \*

Miakoda and Devante stepped from the temple and descended the steep steps. The night felt surreal, as if she was watching it happen to someone else. At the bottom of the temple steps, Devante wrapped his arm possessively around her waist.

His voice rang out clearly as he addressed the people who had gathered to await their new king.

"I am Devante, righter of wrong, seeker of justice. I am Jaguar Sun. I take my rightful seat upon the throne as your new *rey*."

The cheers and applause were proof of their acceptance, their loyalty to him. He bowed regally, and then held up his hand to silence them.

"I present to you your *reina*, Miakoda--power of the moon. She is Jaguar Moon and takes her rightful seat next to mine. You will guard her, protect her as your own. Her will is my will. Obey her as you would obey me. She is mine, as I am hers." He waited a second, then continued, "She offers her protection to the hybrid as their leader. Her people are our people. We will see to each others' care, protect this extended family."

There was no applause this time, and the silence was deafening.

"You put a half-breed on our throne and tell us to honor her people?" A voice rang out over the night.

Miakoda felt her heart leap into her throat. This was what she had been expecting. That she had been anticipating just this refusal didn't make it any easier to accept.

"I place your *reina* on her throne and offer protection to hers as they do to ours. She has the blessing of Ixchel. The blood of the goddess flows in her veins. No other can claim this right. If any dare to challenge this, do so now." The muscles twitched in Devante's jaw as he waited out the silence. Beside him, Miakoda felt the raw anger consuming him.

"No half-breed will ever be welcomed on our throne!" the voice shouted. All heads turned, anger rising from some at the one who dared to disrespect their king.

Devante closed the distance in a single leap to snatch the insolent man by his neck. His feet dangled above the ground. "Do you dare threaten the *reina*?" His deep voice rose over the silence, a menacing threat to all.

"I meant no disrespect to you, Devante. You are one of us, and the throne has always been yours."

"That throne is given to me through the blood of your *reina* and no other," Devante said between clenched teeth. "Without her, there would be no *rey*. The council would rule forever. Show her respect or answer to me for it."

The man nodded, and Devante released him quickly, dropping him to the ground.

The crowd parted for him as he made his way back to Miakoda.

"Do you intend to fight them all?" she asked quietly.

"If I must. They will accept you Mia. In time they'll grow to respect you."

But she knew they wouldn't. If she was lucky, they would tolerate her, but no more.

Miakoda watched the woman glide through the crowd toward them. Like the others, her hair was golden, shimmering with every sway of her hips.

Even if Miakoda hadn't been born with leopard blood, she would never fit in completely with the jaguar. She was panther, the dark one.

The dark pigment was more common in the leopard. Rare in the jaguar, it was an oddity, an inherited trait. She knew now that she had inherited it straight from Ixchel, as her mother before her. Had anyone dared to insult the goddess for it?

The amber eyes of the woman, feminine and bold, searched the area and darkened when they landed on Devante. This one wanted him, Miakoda realized, and didn't bother to hide it.

It shouldn't have bothered her. She wasn't after a mate, and if she was, no one could hold Devante for more than a night. It wasn't the jaguar way. She felt her cat stir, and allowed her eyes to widen, the pupils narrowing as the woman approached.

"Angelina. It is good to see you looking well." Devante embraced the woman, and then stepped back. "I would like you to introduce Mia to the others while I speak with Ethan."

"Of course." The smile she sent Devante had Miakoda clenching her teeth. When the woman draped her arm through Miakoda's as if they were long-lost friends, she pulled back from her.

They both watched as Devante stepped away. Angelina waited until he was beyond hearing range.

"It is obvious that Devante only joined with you for the throne." The voice was honey, while venom dripped from her words. "He would have joined with anything for that right. It was his by blood, and he should not have needed to sacrifice himself to you. Jaguars do not mate for life and now that he has what he wants, he will never remain with you. You may be queen, but you will never have the king."

"Looks like you won't either." Miakoda's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

She saw the hair grow on Angelina's arm, itching for the fight. She felt her own begin to surface in response.

"Don't be so sure," Angelina replied.

The two women squared off as others near them stepped back, sensing the women's beasts rise. How clichéd was it that she was about to get into a catfight over a man. And while she could understand the woman wanting to fight for a man like Devante, she would never stoop so low.

Miakoda felt him the moment he stepped up behind her. The adrenaline over the fight to come quickly changed, the power flowing through her turning into desire. She could smell his scent, feel the steel in his hands as he placed them on her waist. The tight squeeze was more in warning than anything else.

"You will not fight Lina, Mia." The power quickly changed to fire as she rounded on him.

"I have no reason to fight her, unless she gives me one. Do not attempt to handle me, Devante. I make my own rules." She felt chafed, raw after the reception she had received. Only to have him side against her. She hadn't expected any different but damn she was tired of being the outsider. Just once, she wanted to feel she belonged. "I will not be ruled as one of your subjects."

"I'm not handling you, Miakoda. I am telling you will not fight Lina." His heated, angry eyes turned to Lina. "I expected better of you. Did you not hear my warning?"

Her eyes grew large. "You would fight me to protect her?"

"I would fight all to protect her. Whatever wrong you feel has been done here, let it go. You will need to work together for the Balam Foundation."

"She works for the foundation?" Miakoda asked, but she already knew the answer. Great. The one thing she thought had been hers and now she shared it with this one.

"Yes, as most here do." Devante held Lina's stare until she backed down, looking away.

"Why didn't you tell me you worked for the foundation?" Miakoda asked. It shouldn't matter. Of course the jaguar people would want to help the very foundation that was established to save their own.

Lina's laughter was menacing. "Work for it? Oh, that is priceless. Devante *is* the Balam Foundation."

"What do you mean?" Miakoda addressed the question to Devante.

"It is his. He founded it, financed it, and runs it. It is his baby." Lina's joy over imparting this information to Miakoda was evident in her voice.

"I see. And you didn't think it important to tell me I have been working for you

all this time?"

"You have not been working for me, you have been working for the jaguars. For the foundation. Yes, I started it, but I have others who run the day to day business." His voice was flat, as if he needed to offer no explanation.

"You told them to hire me, to bring me to Belize." It wasn't a question. She knew the answer, saw it there in his eyes.

"I made a suggestion. They were looking for someone with your experience, your knowledge to assist at the reserve. They were delighted when you accepted. I would never tell any of my people who to hire."

"You wouldn't have to, would you? A simple suggestion and everyone would jump to obey you." She turned to leave.

"Don't walk away. We will leave for the village soon, but you are not to wander off alone. You are still not safe."

She no longer felt safe. Here, among the crowd of the people she must call her own, she felt more alone and vulnerable than ever. She hated to admit, even to herself, that it hurt. Rejection always did.

In high school, she had never dreamed of being the prettiest girl. Only of being accepted. But the other kids had known, somehow, that she was not like them.

She had hoped college would be different. And boy had it been. Suddenly, her dark, exotic looks attracted the guys in droves. She had only dated one man briefly, but he hadn't been interested in her. Not really. Just in sleeping with her. After him, she'd turned to the books and graduated early, with honors. It was then she had learned to depend on no one.

She wasn't ready to let anyone else in, so why did it bother her that they didn't want admittance? Dreams only hurt when they died, and she had learned long ago not to dream.

She had spent her life on the outside looking in and was used to the view.

There had been a time when she wasn't a loner, like the rest of her race. It had been an adjustment after her parent's death, living on her own. But she had made it. She didn't need these people or their acceptance.

The faces blurred, the introductions stilted, but she made it through the rest of the night. Devante was by her side more often than not, but not because he wanted to be. She knew that, had known from the beginning. It was his way of showing his people that they would be forced to accept her.

By the time she returned to her room, she was exhausted from the turmoil of the night. She wanted to drop into bed and sleep until noon.

## Chapter Ten

Devante eased to the floor, resting his back against the smooth walls of his room. This cave had once been wet, the high water level smoothing the rock walls, softening the sharp angles to allow the walls to flow and curve.

He had explored here as a child, nearly a lifetime ago. His love of caves had flourished even then.

Resting his arms on his knees, he closed his eyes and allowed his head to fall back, resting on the stone.

His mind was in turmoil tonight. The joining was done, his rightful place as *rey* handed to him. His trouble should be over. His gut told him it had only just begun.

His people had reacted to Miakoda just as he had feared. He would force them to accept her. He had no choice. But even he couldn't ignore the fact that she did not belong among the jaguar. It wasn't just her mixed blood.

She had been raised among the human, her ways and her beliefs so different from his own. He needed guidance. Someone to show him the way to help her. There was only one place to find it.

He closed his eyes and spoke in the lost words of his people. Other voices joined in, those of his ancestors in the other world. He felt gentle hands reaching inside of him, pulling him through the door.

His soul emerged, entering a world where spirits walked free.

"My son." He stood and walked into loving arms.

"*Madre*. I was not expecting to see you." No matter what age a man grew to be, the loving arms of a mother would always ease the burden he carried.

"You were expecting your *padre*?" Her eyes lit with humor. "Did you think I would allow him to answer such an important question?"

She was just as he remembered and would always remain. His sister had inherited his mother's beauty. It had been a dangerous thing, driving men to madness to obtain it.

His *madre* led him across the room, her hand tenderly clasping his even while she lowered regally to the sofa.

Anyone walking by would see only a man resting on the floor, his eyes closed. Devante had ventured to another realm.

"I have asked no questions, *Madre*."

"Haven't you?" With the patience of love, she waited.

He took the seat next to hers, then leaned forward to rest his arms against his legs. "How is Drina?" He wasn't ready to voice his worries to her. Not yet.

"Your *hermana* is well. Unlike you, she carries no misery from her time in your world."

"She carried enough when she was in it."

His mother shook her head softly. "You cannot lay blame on fate's path."

"Was it fate that abused a young woman so cruelly or a half-breed beast?"

"Ah. Like your *padre*, you blame the hybrids. But you also blame yourself. Your *padre* has overcome his anger, realizing he was wrong. What of you? What of my grandson? Is Lando guilty of the death of his *madre*?"

"Lando is innocent of all cruelty."

"Naturally. But he is hybrid, the very thing you accuse."

"I have not accused the hybrids of anything except being dangerous," Devante said.

"The man who attacked Drina did not suffer from the hybrid's madness."

Devante's head turned sharply at his mother's words. It was a lie. Only madness could bring a man to do such horrid things.

"Power drove him to his end. It was well known that Drina would name the *rey* by joining. He didn't understand that forcing her to mate was not joining, or that it would bring to him a death sentence."

"I killed him a little too late." It was something he had to live with. Ten minutes earlier, and he would have found the cave where she had been held. Ten minutes, and he could have saved her life. He would not have been forced to hand the great jaguar throne to a hybrid. Drina would have been *reina* and named her own *rey*.

"Did you? Had you arrived sooner, we would not have the gift of Lando. The sacrifice of her life to bring him into the living world should not be darkened with such guilt. Life is as it was meant to be."

As it was meant. Like it had been meant for him to lose his *madre* when he was only a *chico* of ten. Meant for him and his *hermana* to be raised by a bitter, angry man who had hardened his heart at the loss of his beloved *esposa*. And had it been meant for his sister to suffer miserably at the hands of a hybrid who was only after the throne, just to have Devante turn that very throne over to one in order to save it?

A life path was forged with every step taken, not pre-drawn at birth. He had to believe that choices always made a difference.

"This is not what you came to learn." His *madre* spoke softly.

"You seem to know it already, so tell me." Anger filled Devante's voice.

"Guard your tone, for I am still your *madre*." She rubbed his hand lightly. "You have joined with the moon."

"Yes. The throne is secured for our line." His tone was still bitter, but she obviously chose to ignore it.

"Is it? You have secured it for yourself, but the moon's offspring will inherit."

"They will also be mine," he replied.

"I see. So Miakoda has agreed to mate with you."

He looked away from her. Mia would never agree, and he could never force her. But he wouldn't have to. Not when all he had to do was touch her body to watch it come alive for him. No, she might never agree to mate, but he would eventually plant his seed. And Mia would hate him for it.

"We will mate," he said flatly.

He felt his *madre* stiffen as she dropped his hand. "You will not force yourself on her."

He laughed, just couldn't help it. "No one could."

"It is not written that she mate with the *rey*. If she chooses another, you cannot prevent it."

He leaped from the sofa, began to pace the room. "She will mate with no other. I have given a hybrid the throne, the jaguar people, all that I have."

"That throne was given to your father through my hands, given to you by Miakoda. Half-breed or not, it is her blood that claims it. You have given her nothing, yet you demand from her everything."

"What have I left to offer?" he demanded.

"Yourself. You have offered her protection, but this one can take care of herself. She deserves a true mate, as do you. Offer her your heart."

He turned to look at his mother, stunned that she would even suggest such a ludicrous thing.

"I have no heart to give."

His mother sighed deeply. "You are stubborn, like your *padre*. He, too, thought he had no heart to give away, and still I carry it today. You may not choose to give this one your heart, *chico*, but if she leaves you, she will take it with her." She stood to leave, placing a gentle kiss on his cheek before vanishing.

\* \* \* \*

It was a week later, long before noon, when the knock on Miakoda's door woke her. Maria's voice drifted to her, sounding hurried.

"Come in, Maria." She eased up, draping her robe around her.

The woman was turning into Miakoda's first true friend. Two nights ago, they had shared margaritas and late night stories of Miakoda's mother. It was amazing how a shared hangover could bring people closer.

"There is a visitor to see you, dear, and he seems to be stirring up the men."

Miakoda changed quickly before following Maria into Devante's office. It would take a great deal to stir jaguar males, and if one man was doing it, he was surely a hybrid. Leaving one alone with Devante and his men wouldn't be good for any of them.

Devante was already positioned behind his desk when she entered. Ethan sat silent in the chair. She recognized the man standing before Devante but had not been introduced.

She walked past Maria and took the other vacant chair. All eyes turned to her.

"Good morning," Miakoda said with feigned cheer. "Maria felt my presence was necessary."

Devante nodded, even though he looked as if he didn't quite agree. "Nigel, this is Miakoda."

The man nodded, but he didn't bother to look at her. From what she could recall, their eyes had never met.

"Nigel is head of our security," Devante added.

Nigel was one of the dark ones. In fact, he was the only dark cat she had seen among the villagers. But this one was no mix. He might be called a panther, but he was pure jaguar.

Devante stood, and then walked around the desk to lean against the edge. "It seems you have visitors, Mia. Nigel escorted two men found wandering the village to the clinic this morning, just before dawn. They came quietly."

That sounded more like a confrontation than an escort. She stood and turned to leave. "I'll go see them now."

She felt Devante's annoyance instantly. Strange, she was picking up emotions

from him she usually couldn't sense in others. Strong emotions created the greatest energy and were usually the vibrations she centered on. With Devante, she felt even the weakest.

Not that she had much opportunity to test that, since he had kept his distance since the ceremony. Polite when necessary, he had told her his duties as king were keeping him away until all hours of the night. It could be the truth. Besides seeing to the village, he also had the foundation to run. And while he might have been born to money, maintaining and increasing it took solid investments, sound decisions, and time. From the looks of it, Devante was very good at devoting all three.

He'd told her at dinner the night before that things would be slowing soon. She wasn't sure if that was a warning to her that he would be around more, but she chose to believe it wasn't. If not for Maria and Lando, Miakoda would have been totally alone.

"We will go together," he corrected as he stepped beside her. "They are hybrids, Mia. I understand you feel obligated to help them, and I agree that is the purpose of your new position. However, you do not know these men, and they are not to be trusted."

"Because they are strangers or because they have mixed blood?"

He pulled no punches. "Both. Until we have a better feel for them, you will be guarded at all times."

"Am I to be guarded when I am alone with Lando, too? Or what about Maria? Should she be protected from me? From Lando? After all, we are hybrids."

"Do not be ridiculous. These men are wild animals."

"Are they? How can you know that without ever meeting them? What makes some hybrids dangerous and wild in your mind and others harmless?"

His eyes narrowed. "They are all a threat. You said yourself that the war they rage inside can drive them to insanity. How are we to know how close they are?"

The others in the room faded as her hot glare centered on Devante.

He might say her mixed blood didn't matter, but his actions made it clear. And why should he trust any of them, including her? She stood on the same ground all hybrids stood. A mutt in a world of pure bred.

Who knew what would be born from her. A jaguar? Leopard? Would her child have peace or a constant war inside? How could she ask herself those questions and still be willing to take that risk?

Devante's blood might ensure a jaguar from their mating. But even then, the leopard would exist. Why would he wish that for his own child?

"What of me, am I on the verge of insanity?"

"You and Lando are not like these people."

She inhaled sharply. "We are exactly the same as them. We are interbred, Devan, and we wage the same war."

"You are innocents in this." His shout echoed against the tall rock ceiling.

Miakoda's voice dropped low, was barely audible. "How can one be innocent and the next guilty? You blame the victims instead of the criminal. Because it doesn't sit well within your world, you deny that Lando and I are what you hate most."

"You know nothing of this," he said bitterly.

"Don't I? I have been at the brunt of enough discrimination to recognize it. You blame all of my kind for the death of your sister. I've heard the stories, and I know how she died."



She had asked Maria, and the woman had told her that much at least. When she had questioned her about Devante, the old woman had snapped her mouth shut tight. "I'm sorry for her, for you. But I cannot allow your prejudice to weaken the hybrids."

She walked out the door, aware the others followed as she walked briskly through the village.

The men stepped in front of her before she could enter her own clinic. How ironic was it that they tried to protect her from these people, when they themselves were the real threat?

"I thought they were *my* visitors," she said irritably to their backs.

Devante turned to regard her evenly. "Until we find out their purpose, they are strangers and no more."

She stepped through the door behind them. Immediately, she knew what they were. She might not know their animal yet, but she knew these two men were Nahuals, and hybrids at that. Strangers or not, these were her people.

She stepped in front of the jaguars and faced the hybrids. "It is good of you to join us." Miakoda forced pleasantness into her voice, though her every nerve was on alert. One wrong move and the jaguars would attack.

The smirk Devante sent her way told her he found her hostess routine amusing.

"You are welcome here, regardless of your reception." She cut her eyes toward Nigel, but the man didn't seem to notice or care. In fact, the man seemed unconcerned with her completely.

"I am Miles, and this is Neron." The young man stepped forward, his hand extended. She took it in hers and felt his unease. With so many standing over, waiting to pounce on him given any reason, she couldn't blame him.

"You are hybrids," she said in hopes of finding common ground.

"Yes, I'm a jagulep. Neron is...." His gaze went to the other man, as if unsure what to call him. He cleared his throat. "He is a mix, as well."

A jagulep. His father was jaguar, his mother leopard. He was like her, as far as blood ratio went. Though the father dominated the blood, it was no indication of the dominant personality. She was proof of that. This one could be either, or a combination. She could hardly wait to find out which.

"I'm glad you've come." She meant it, and it surprised her. The one called Neron eyed her suspiciously.

"I'm here to help," she added. And she could help them, as much as they could help her. Every step taken was a gain for her people.

Neron snickered. In a room full of men on the edge, it would seem a gutsy thing to do. Miakoda knew it only as stupid. She didn't need to know his animal to know problems existed within him.

"Neron, please." Miles was clearly upset. It seemed the two of them disagreed on something, and Miakoda was sure they were about to find out what.

"How can the queen of the jaguar help us?" Neron's words ended with a snarl.

Miakoda chose to ignore the contempt in his voice. "I am leguar before all else." She felt the jaguars stiffen, but she didn't care. She was what she was. Naming herself jaguar to please them only shamed herself and her hybrids. She would never do it. "I know the problems our kind face and as leader--"

"You think to rule us, because the coalition decreed it? You will never rule our

kind. You know nothing of us. Your cat is tame compared to most of us,” Neron said.

“I am aware of that. I have spent years working with interbred animals. I have seen first hand the nightmares some live. My medicine is strong and can help you adjust. You can learn to handle some of the problems we all face. A leader is necessary if only to coordinate the search for others. Ones in need. They are all alone, abandoned.”

Neron turned to Miles. “This was a mistake, coming here. These cats cannot help us. She is jaguar. We will see to this ourselves, as has always been the way.”

Miles seemed disappointed but nodded.

Miakoda fought the panic. She was on the verge of losing them, watching them walk away. It was unacceptable.

“What have you got to lose by trusting me?” Miakoda challenged. If these two left, the first hybrids to come to her, she knew all would be lost. She had to find a way to reach them, so others would know they could come to her for help. She had to gain their trust. It had to start somewhere, damn it.

Neron growled low, taking a step toward her. Miakoda stood her ground, refusing to give up her territory. And it was her territory. The clinic, the hybrids.

“Do not play us false, panther.” Neron intentionally invaded her space, his face close to hers in order to deliver his threat.

Devante snarled as his claws extended. He laid the knife-like nail against Neron's jugular, a warning that was immediately heeded. “Do not assume too much hybrid. Mia is not alone here. She is mine and will not be threatened.”

“Allow us to leave, and we will not return.” Miles held his cool, something Miakoda could admire. His eyes met hers, and she saw the pride.

“Of course. You are free to leave whenever you wish. But I'd like to know why you came.” Miakoda had to try one more time. For all of them. Because if she couldn't be the leader these men needed, they would have no one. They deserved more.

“We were told we would find help here,” Miles replied.

“And you will. Release him, Devan, and let's all calm down.” She crossed the room, took a seat in one of the chairs. She waited, as if across the room from her a battle of wills wasn't waging.

Devante stepped back cautiously and allowed Miles to join her. Slowly, each man followed. When all were settled, Miles turned to her.

Miakoda was the first to speak. “What is it you need from us?”

“There is a place a few hours from here, where two of our people are held. This place is well guarded. If we were able to reach the cats, we cannot communicate with them. They have been caged, abused, and their minds are confused.” Miles looked at Neron for help, but the man remained silent.

“We heard stories about you. We heard one of the guards talking, and he said you were the new leader. Their boss fears your power.”

“Who is this boss?” Ethan asked.

“We do not know.”

“How did you come to know of this place?” Nigel, always on guard, asked.

“We were held there ourselves until recently,” Miles said.

“They decided to let you go?” Ethan asked, letting his doubt shine through.

“Sure. They let us walk right out of there. Right after we ripped out the throats of the two guards on duty,” Neron drawled, and the grin on his face was terrifying.

“We only know of the room where we were held, where the others are held. We never saw anyone but guards,” Miles added, clearly upset by Neron’s behavior.

“Why didn’t the others escape when you did?” Miakoda questioned how they could leave two of their own behind. Or anyone, for that matter. Caged and abused. She wouldn’t abandon an enemy to such an existence.

“The female could not travel, and the male refused to leave her.”

“Tell us of this place and how we can aid you.” Devante might not trust these men, but if someone needed help, he would offer it.

\* \* \* \*

The pounding rain beat against her skin, a thousand stings. Visibility was zero, but that would never stop her. She heard Neron’s low growling behind her, but ignored his complaining. If he had a problem with water, he would just have to deal with it.

They had offered him the option of remaining behind in the village, and he had refused. She hated to admit that had gained him respect in her eyes.

It wasn’t the rain that had him so annoyed, but the puddles that were growing at an alarming rate. Soon, gullies would fill, the river would overflow and the water would flood the jungle floor. And with the exception of a few, cats hated large bodies of water. Luckily, she wasn’t one of them.

With her dark coat, Miakoda blended easily with the night. With the exception of Nigel, the others weren’t so lucky. Their colorful coats were more detectable and forced her to take precautions she would otherwise ignore.

Nigel and Devan might think they were in control of this mission, but she knew what she was doing. She usually worked alone and resented the intrusion into what she considered her own world.

She had done this before. When her parents had been alive, they had often rescued trapped animals.

It had been one of those rescues that went horribly wrong, taking her parents from her. If she thought about that too deeply, doubts would creep in and she would endanger them all.

Devante shifted as the six-foot wire fence came into sight. As a concession to her, all of the men covered themselves with the traditional loincloth.

Her eyes drank in the sight of Devante’s form, wandered lower to the flap that was meant to cover. She knew it was merely the long hair of their fur, but it covered well enough. Somehow it only enhanced his physique and created a vivid image of what lay beneath.

As each man shifted and gathered near, her eyes fell across each body. They were breathtakingly beautiful, powerfully male. Each cloth was as different as the animal who wore it.

Like Nigel, her covering was black. And like the men, she kept it simple. Why waste unnecessary energy, when the simple would cover her as much? The covering most women used was also the loincloth, with the added benefit of a bra.

“You’ll wait for us here.” Devante stepped beside her, blocking the men from view. Maybe she had stared at them a little too long, she mused.

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, sure. You guys can rush on in there. You can snatch up two scared cats, both mentally unstable as far as we know, and I’ll just wait outside like a good little girl.”

The corner of Devante's mouth twitched. "You have never been a good girl in your life."

"Did it ever occur to you that I just might be of help to you in there? We don't know what we're dealing with, but we know you cannot communicate with them. I can defuse their emotions."

Devante huffed. "I doubt that I could stop you from entering that building. These are your people, I know. But I would prefer that you remain outside. You would be of greater use to us serving as look out."

The look she gave him told him just what she thought of that suggestion.

"It was worth a shot." He shrugged.

"Sure it was. And not a bad idea. Maybe that's what you men should do while I go in and check it out. This isn't the first time I've done this."

"I do not hide behind a woman." Devante sniffed indignantly.

"No, you're too busy pushing us behind you. Look, it's obvious that we're all going in there, so let's save the argument. Can we at least agree that I approach the cat alone?"

Nigel snickered, as if she had made a real joke. She was beginning to not like that man.

It was hard to trust a man who rarely spoke. Not to mention the energy bouncing off him always seemed negative.

"No, it is too dangerous."

"You cannot speak to them, I can. I'll go in first, and if I'm unable to communicate, then I'll back off."

Miakoda shifted quickly, but Devante was quicker and stepped in front of her to take the lead. In her cat form, she couldn't even curse him aloud.

The place was a fortress. Apparently, there was big money in illegal breeding. A long hanging branch gave them access over the fence. They followed the sound of the roar and found what they were looking for.

It was dark inside the building as the four figures shifted again and silently entered. Neron had been left to stand lookout, and the cat had not liked it any more than Miakoda would have.

The concrete block held no windows, and only single bulbs lit the room. Their eyes adjusted quickly as they walked passed the first two cells secured with iron bars.

Nigel took out the only guard silently. His movements were so quick that Miakoda saw nothing but the body falling in a heap on the floor. She looked into Nigel's eyes and saw cold, hard staring back. She didn't need to ask if the guard was dead.

Miakoda made a mental note to return and free the animals in those cages once the Nahuals were safe. They were her main concern.

She found the one she had been told of in the third cell. He was liger, his unnatural size common in cross breeding a lion and a tiger. He was clearly agitated, as he paced the small area with his teeth bared. Immediately following one of his roars, a scared screech sounded behind her.

Miakoda turned to find a small cat, a tigon she suspected, huddled in the corner. This one was the one Miles had told her was unable to travel. She would travel tonight if Miakoda had to carry her out. Since she was no threat at the moment, Miakoda returned her attention to the liger.

She approached the cage with caution, looking for any sign of an impending attack. Her mind called out to the cat, pushing her energy at him, trying to initiate a change. She needed him in man form in order for them to communicate to him that they were no threat.

Enraged at her intrusion, he leapt at the bars, his extended claws missing her face by inches as she jerked her head clear. She felt Devante behind her, not reprimanding her as she expected but lending his strength to hers. Again, she called to the liger, gently pushing at his mind, telling him over and over that they were no threat. They were here to set him free. She pushed her calm energy out, spreading it over him.

She slid back the metal bar and opened the door. It was a surprise to find it unlocked and unguarded.

His feet were chained, allowing him room to move but preventing him from reaching the door. The chains would not have held him should he make the decision to leave.

"Why hasn't he escaped?" she asked no one in particular.

"Maybe he's hurt," Ethan offered. "Must be something keeping him here."

"The female." She stepped inside the cell.

"Damn it, Mia." Devante reached for her, his hand grabbing her elbow as he tried to pull her back from the cell. The liger reacted to the threat, going after Devante with deadly intent. The chain snapped immediately.

"Stop it!" She stepped in front of Devante, blocking the liger's attack. "He thinks you're trying to hurt me." The liger stood on his back legs, his front paws going to her shoulder.

He towered over her, sniffed, and then lowered his face level with hers. His head was mammoth, his teeth the largest she'd seen. No one moved, nor dared to breathe. One bite and he could easily take her head off. She forced air in and out of her lungs. Nigel moved to the female's cage behind them and caught the attention of the liger. He pulled at the lock in vain before finally giving up. His actions stirred the tigress, and she walked to the bars and stared at the liger intently. She mewed, and it seemed to soothe him.

Miakoda growled to recapture his attention. They needed to hurry before someone caught them. She needed his trust, and she needed it quick.

Biting back her fear, her hands reached to him, sank their magic into the thick fur of his neck. Her eyes locked with his, her hands rubbing along his ribs as she murmured soothing words. He roared again but with less menace.

Again, she called to the man, bringing him to the surface. Sending out wave after wave of warmth, peace.

The change was instant, before anyone could register it. One minute she was rubbing fur, the next heated skin. His hands were still on her shoulders and his naked body was inches from hers.

"Step away from him, Mia." Devante's voice ended on a snarl. She turned her head to find his eyes changing, his teeth sharpening.

"He won't hurt me," Miakoda said quickly. He had raged a battle with his beast and for the time being, the man had won.

"No, he won't," Devante said. "Step away from him before he is the one who gets hurt."

Either from Devante's words or the warning in his voice, the liger registered the

threat. Miakoda could feel his body shifting, changing back to his cat in order to answer that threat.

“No, we need the man. Back off, Devan, before he changes.”

“Not while his hands are on you.” Devante stood behind her, close enough to touch. But he kept his hands fisted, his eyes locked on the man in front of her.

“Oh, hell’s fire,” she snapped as she took a step back. “Now get control of that ego and back off.” Her eyes went back to the man. “We’re going to get you out of here.”

“Take the female first.” His voice was rough, as if he hadn’t used it in a while.

“We’re taking all of you.” Before anyone could argue, Miakoda stepped from the cell.

She took the bolt cutters from the pack Ethan wore harnessed on his back and passed them to Devante.

After he had easily freed the tigon and the other animals, they returned to the jungle, seven oddly matched cats creeping through the night.

They stopped to rest once they knew it was safe. The tigon was weak and thin from malnutrition, but she had held her own on the trail.

As they each found boulders to rest on, the liger hovered over the female, never leaving her side. One by one they shifted to man form, but the liger remained in cat form with the tigon.

“He sticks to her,” Miakoda noted as they rested on a rock.

“Let him. I don’t want him near you.” Devante dropped beside her, between her and the other cats.

“You cannot declare that. He is one of mine. They both are.”

He clenched his jaw. “He is dangerous. He may be one of yours, but I am concerned with only your safety. You will stay clear of him.”

“I can help him,” she insisted, though she wasn’t so confident.

Devante looked out over the jungle as he spoke. “I cannot stand his hands on you.”

“Devan--”

He turned to her, met her gaze. “Let me finish. I know it’s your place to help him. But have a care, Mia. I am jaguar, and, as such, I am territorial, jealous. I cannot change that. The beast cannot always be controlled. I will not be responsible for my actions, if you do not heed my warning.”

“I will never fear you, Devan.” It surprised her to realize it was true. She knew he would never harm her, would kill any who tried. There was a comfort there, in knowing that. Regardless of his reasons. “You will always control your beast, it will not control you. It is who you are. But rest assured, I have no interest in him as a man, Devan. Only in the cat.”

“Then I will do my best to see that he lives. As long as he understands where his boundaries are.”

She wanted to let it go, but she couldn’t. “Jaguars do not have life mates. There will come a time when we will grow tired of each other. When we will move on. Do not build walls that cannot be torn down.” She said the words because they needed to be said but found no joy in them.

He might grow tired and wish to move on, but she knew in her heart she never would. To expect the same of him was ludicrous.

“You are wrong, *gatita*.” His finger softly stroked her jaw, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear in a touch so gentle she sighed. “I will not grow tired of you, nor will you of me. Just remember, I do not share.”

No, but would he expect her to? When his jaguar appetite began to stir, would he roam to others to satisfy the hunger and expect her to ignore it?

“Nigel is ready to move on.” Devante looked toward his friend.

Nigel paced nervously, his sleek black body moving like a ghost through the trees. He was anxious to get them to safety. Miakoda’s eyes followed his movements, silently appreciating the fluid grace of the jaguar.

He was a dangerous man, the perfect choice for security. But he was still no match for Devante. She had no doubt the men would see to their safe return to the village.

She nodded to Devante, stood to follow him. She shifted smoothly to feline. As quietly as they had arrived, they stalked off through the jungle.

\* \* \* \*

Miakoda woke slowly, arching her back as she stretched her arms high. She had needed the rest after returning so late. It had been near dawn before they had returned, and she had fallen into bed quickly. Alone.

She hadn’t even seen Devante after they dropped her off at the clinic to settle in the female.

The sheet slid to her waist, the cool air teasing her rosy pink nipples to a peak. She felt energized and deliciously wicked.

Sleep filled eyes slowly glanced over the room and stopped on the figure resting in the chair. He had not joined her in her bed last night, but had been there, in her dreams. Stroking her, loving her.

His eyes pierced her now, and she knew that his lazy posture was misleading. He was ready to pounce on his prey.

Her heart raced as Devante stood and moved gracefully toward her. His body was hard, his movements tempting. He lowered his large frame to the side of the bed.

His eyes dropped to her breast, moments before his mouth followed. There was nothing gentle in his play. He was on the edge, needing, demanding.

All of his emotion was revealed to her in the hard pull of his lips on her breast, the sandpaper texture of his tongue as it slid over the taut peak, rubbing her to insanity. She knew he licked her with the tongue of his cat. That his heat was a mixture of man and feline.

She didn’t ask why he was in her room, knowing the answer already. They had had a taste of each other, and the pull to join again was beyond their own power.

It had been over a week since that night, and still she wanted him, needed him with an intensity that scared her.

“Tell me you want me.” His breathing was heavy. “Tell me you belong to me and no other,” he demanded as his mouth took, teased.

“I belong to no one, but I share myself with you willingly.”

“Not enough.” His tongue trailed down her stomach, lapping at her skin as if it were coated in cream. Her muscles clenched as she grew wet with want.

“Not nearly enough.”

She felt his need to possess her, felt it consuming him. He needed her body, but

she needed to know that her soul belonged to him as well. That he gave his in return.

She had joined with him, given him his throne, and it should have been enough.

“We will breed, and our children will be strong.” He pulled back, and only his hands touched her. Stroking her body with his feathery touch.

“You cannot decide that for me,” she managed to say.

“You will decide that on your own. I will never force you. Your bloodline will never see that done again, I promise. You’ll choose this of your own free will. I’ll have it no other way.”

She smiled, exasperated that he called that a choice. He might not force her, but he was relentless in his pursuit.

“And as far as I’m concerned, you chose when you joined with me. We are equal in this, Mia.”

“Of course we are. My leopard will not taint your line, as your blood will remove it completely from a child we conceive. I’m not sure if that is what I want.”

“You were meant to be jaguar, as were the women of your line.”

She sighed. “Maybe. Probably. The jaguar is strong in me, the leopard steps back meekly.” Her smile didn’t reach her eyes. “As in life, my father gave in to my mother in most things.”

“It is the way of mates.”

“Is it? Would you give in to me? I think not. Your Mayan blood is destined to rule all things. I don’t wish to be ruled.”

“We will rule together, *mi amor*. Now enough talk. I have things I would do to your body and my mouth can be used for more pleasant things than talking.” He proceeded to show her just how pleasant that mouth could be.



## Chapter Eleven

"I can help you." Miakoda stood in the center of the makeshift exam room. It had been set up in the small hut on the edge of the village.

Devante had seen that the women of the village cleaned it thoroughly.

The wooden walls had a freshly painted coat of white, and the floor was swept and scrubbed.

A fan swirled around in the center of the thatched-roof ceiling. Not air conditioning, but still a welcome relief from the heat.

"No, you cannot." The words were spoken with such finality that Miakoda realized the liger had long ago given up on help from anyone. Had probably given up on himself, for that matter. Maybe in time she would give up on him, too. But not before her best efforts to help him had been exhausted.

He was called Rainer, and he was a giant of a man. Ligers were the largest of the hybrid cats, the largest of any cat. He was the result of breeding a male lion with a female tiger.

Rainer's animal had both stripes and spots, with the mane and the roar of a lion, and the body of a tiger.

His strength would be unparalleled, inherited from both parents. Yet his size would dwarf them both. She estimated his weight to be around eight to twelve hundred pounds, twice the normal size of the Siberian tiger, the largest known animal in the cat family.

To her knowledge, ligers had only been bred in captivity. The species' territories would barely overlap, so animals rarely came in contact with one another. And tigers would hardly associate with a pride.

But then they didn't have to, when man was so eager to play god.

Ligers were bred for their size shock value alone.

The hybrid liger was normally sterile, as were many hybrid animals. This was not often the case with the shifters, but the tests had never been performed on the man. Looking at Rainer, she doubted he would ever consent.

"Maybe you can help Kira." Rainer nodded toward the tigon.

Miakoda's eyes fell on the female, her slight form curled on the blanket in the corner. She had been in the same spot since they had brought her in last night.

They had tried to put her in a bed but had given up when she had begun to fight them.

It was odd, how fickle nature could be. Though the tigon and liger both had a lion and a tiger parent, the two could not be more different.

In tigers, the father contributed the gene that limits growth. In lions, it was the mother. This explained why the ligers grew so large. Without these growth limitations from his parents, there was nothing to regulate Rainer's growth.

With no genes to control their size, ligers continued to grow throughout their life.

The tigons were the opposite. They had two sets of growth limiting genes, one

from each parent, making them normally smaller than either parent. It explained why Kira was so small.

Tigons were extremely rare, mainly because it was no easy task to get the male tiger to mate with the female lion. She didn't want to think about how Sinock had managed it.

Tigons resembled ligers, in that they had stripes and spots, though it was the only likeness they shared.

They produced the lion and tigers sounds when they roared, though they had heard neither from Kira since bringing her back.

Rainer hesitated, as if judging his ability to trust her. He seemed to have made his decision as he turned to Miakoda. "She hides within herself in her defense against the pain."

"She holds her animal form longer than any I've known," she said.

He nodded. "It has been weeks since a change."

Miakoda frowned at the news. It would make her job much harder.

The longer a Nahual remained in animal form, the more their animal characteristics took over. The animal and human should be balanced, changing often enough to maintain both sides of a whole.

But when that balance was upset, inborn defenses took control. In short, their bodies did what they had to do to survive. And that meant those defenses would fight what they perceived as an unsafe environment. And Miakoda would represent that threat.

"That can be dangerous. We cannot allow her to hide from herself. It is important that we get her to shift."

Miakoda squatted, her eyes level with the tigon. She held the cat's muzzle in her hands, locking eyes with her even when the cat tried to shy away. Miakoda gently pulled at her, testing the ground.

It would be a battle of wills to drag this woman to the surface. Her strength was forged from fear, and that kind of strength was hard to fight.

Miakoda settled comfortably next to her on the floor, attempting to draw the woman out a little at a time. She flooded Kira with calming energy, while absorbing as much of the cat's fear as possible without draining herself. She would need all her strength helping this one.

Miakoda joined her mind with the cat, coaxing it to back off, beckoning the woman forward to take control.

She crawled through the mass of emotions, struggling to make it past the fear. She went deeper, searching for a time before fear had consumed the girl. It was a long path, a painful one of hate and confusion.

Sweat beaded on Miakoda's skin as her breath grew heavy. One happy memory was all she needed. A small dose of positive energy she could grasp and bring to the surface would aid her.

As the search drew on, she began to worry there might not have been even one such event in the girl's short life. It was then that she felt it. Brief, but strong.

The vision of a young girl in pigtails swinging back and forth, closer and closer to the sky. Loving hands pushing the swing higher. A father's love, seen through the eyes of a child.

The pressure gripped Miakoda's chest as she remembered that feeling so well.

Miakoda grabbed the sensation tightly, held on to it as she emerged. Once at the forefront of the girl's mind, she set it free, flooding the damaged mind with its light.

The fight was draining Miakoda much too quickly, but she refused to ease up. She had one shot at saving Kira, and she was not about to screw it up.

Her stomach churned, her head screamed in pain, but still she held on. The girl was strong, though she didn't know it. Together, they could do this. Miakoda pushed herself further than she had ever done before.

Kira's one chance at a life was too close to abandon her. If she didn't free the woman soon, she would be lost forever.

Kira's animal was close to consuming the girl she had been. If she couldn't shift to human form, that side would be lost, driving her cat to madness.

Kira roared, baring her teeth at Miakoda. She drew back, releasing her hold on the cat's muzzle just seconds before those sharp teeth could sink into her skin.

A slight wave beneath the skin rolled down the woman's leg, seconds before the change started.

Miakoda knew the woman's fear had returned, growing with the changes occurring in her body. She was terrified at the vulnerability facing her in human form. It was understandable.

Miakoda wished more than anything that she could leave her in the security of her cat. But the woman was not making the choice, fear was making it for her. And that, to Miakoda, was unacceptable.

Miakoda reached out again, taking a firm hold of the cat's muzzle.

The room vanished from Miakoda's sight as her concentration locked on seeing the change completed.

She allowed her own cat close to the surface, dominantly threatening Kira's cat to remain dormant. Felines were not known to demurely obey commands.

The cat roared, hissed, a half human cry that reached straight to Miakoda's heart. She felt strong hands on her, fingers digging into her arms as they tried to separate her from her task. She fought against the pain, aware that her arms would carry bruises.

The external battle was too much to fight, so Miakoda ignored all but the internal war.

She held on to Kira, connected so completely that their emotions were one. Miakoda fought back the fear, all the while replacing it with feelings of safety. Of warmth and love.

And then the woman surfaced completely, full screams replacing the roar. Knowing she was winning now, Miakoda fought to stay awake, fought against the stabbing pain in her head that threatened her consciousness.

Her battle was over, but the woman would need more from her now than even before.

Even as the screams subsided, Miakoda was reaching for Kira, who lay crumpled and naked against the wooden floor.

Without warning, Miakoda felt the air whirl by as she was snatched up, then felt the pain course through her body as she connected with the wall like a rag doll thrown in a fit of rage.

The breath was knocked from her with a whoosh, her world fading as her head banged hard against the wall. Her sensors shut down against the red-hot pain.

The walls shook from the force of her body hitting it but didn't give. She held on, staring into the eyes of the enraged beast. Rainer's hands threatened to crush her arms as he continued to shake her.

Miakoda opened herself up, trying to absorb his rage, but there was too much and she was too weak.

There was no reaching him. Fear for the woman had snapped his control.

Suddenly, she was dropped in a heap on the floor, discarded and forgotten. Pain shot through her knees as she landed hard.

She was vaguely aware of the fight going on around her, the angry growls and roars penetrating the pain coiling tightly inside her.

Kira was once again curled in a protective ball, sobs jerking her body. The sound of them tore at Miakoda's heart. She had done this to the girl. Brought her back to a world of chaos.

Her only thought was of reaching the woman, of helping her to deal with the pain of the world she had forced her back into.

Emotions sizzled in the air. Anger, pain, fear. Their energy tore at Miakoda's battered body as she crawled to Kira.

Cradling her in her arms as she would a child, Miakoda rocked slowly as she murmured words of comfort. Words her own mother had once murmured to her.

Devante stalked the liger, fury blinding him to everything but the kill.

The black rage had started building even before he had found Miakoda limp in the liger's hands, as he beat her against the wall. Devante had felt her pain, her fear even through the miles that had separated them. It had eaten at him as he raced to close the distance between them.

He had been miles away with Ethan, excavating a cave on the west side of the mountain. Devante hadn't bothered to find Ethan, instead had communicated to him the danger to Mia as he had raced to reach her.

Devante felt the liger's concern for the woman, the uncontrollable fear that she was being threatened.

Blood seeped from wounds inflicted by the other, but both cats seemed unaware of their injuries, as they circled each other in the small room.

The sound of Mia's voice, soft and soothing as she murmured to the woman, slowly penetrated Devante's haze.

Dangerous eyes, deadly and fierce, turned to the woman he was so afraid of losing. That truth had hit him hard as he had faced that possibility, racing through the jungle knowing that this time he might be too late.

All fight left him when he saw Mira huddled with Kira, searching for protection from the men's fury.

He took a step toward her, the menacing rumble from the liger's throat stopping his motion.

Indecision tore at Devante--whether to kill the man responsible for hurting Mia, or go to her and ease the pain ripping her apart.

He couldn't stand to see her hurting, didn't know how she could handle the pain that was filtering over onto him. There would be another time to finish the liger, but Mia came first.

Turning his back on the liger, his body was on alert, looking for any signal that

the liger would attack.

He shifted to man-form before grabbing a blanket from the table as he approached the women.

Devante knew the woman belonged to the liger, at least in his heart where it mattered. When mammoth hands reached out to him for the blanket, Devante released it to him.

He watched those large hands scoop up the tiny woman and cradle her to his chest. At once the woman's wrenching sobs subsided. Devante turned his attention to his own woman.

He knelt beside Mia, catching her as she slumped forward. He cursed, part of him wanting to shout at her for putting herself in danger, while another part strangled on worry.

He swept her into his arms and carried her toward the safe haven of her room.

\* \* \* \*

Miakoda opened her eyes carefully, waiting for the red-hot pain to hit. When it failed to appear, she opened her eyes wider. Before she could rise, Devante was there.

Her movements were slight for fear the pain would return. Her head felt as fragile as glass, cracked and waiting to crumble.

Devante eased her forward, stuffing pillows behind her back. Once she was settled, he sat beside her.

His hands moved slowly over her skin, reassuring himself as he came across every scrape or lump. He ran them up her neck, slowing massaging her scalp as he checked her injuries.

"Not so bad."

She smiled. "I told you I had a hard head."

He wouldn't be satisfied until he had checked every inch. Strong fingers worked sore muscles as he continued. When he ran those fingers down her arms, she felt goose bumps rise.

Then she felt him lift the sleeve of her T-shirt and tried to pull back from him.

It only encouraged him more. Determined to see what she tried to keep hidden, he pulled up the sleeve again. The bruises forming were in the shape of handprints.

She watched the storm build behind those amber eyes.

"Don't." She touched his face with the palm of her hand and rested it against his cheek.

"I should have killed him." His voice was low, deep with the anguish she saw in his eyes.

"You knew I needed you more." It had been that simple. Her words seemed to cool some of the fire in his eyes.

"Now do you believe me when I say the hybrids are dangerous? I will speak with the coalition, tell them they must find a replacement to help them."

She stiffened and quickly regretted it when her muscles protested. "You will do no such thing. This changes nothing. I will still lead the hybrids."

"They are all on the verge of losing control. This only proves it. The next time, I might not be there to save you. Or it could be someone else who is attacked. I cannot allow them to remain near my people."

"Then we will leave here, find a place of our own." There was no anger in her

words, only disappointment. She had known from the beginning that their union could never last. That the great jaguar would never accept her people.

"You are jaguar, one of mine."

"No, I'm not. I am a hybrid, which puts me as close to the edge as you claim all hybrids are. We will not remain where we are not wanted, even though *my* people are no more threat than yours." It would always be the way with him, a distinct line drawn between their people to separate the pure blood from the mixed. They would never be welcomed as equals.

His denial that she was anything other than jaguar only proved he could never accept what she truly was.

"How can you say such, when you were nearly killed?" Devante demanded.

"It was my fault, Devan."

"No. You won't take the blame for his actions." His body tensed, but his hands remained gentle.

"Hear me first." She knew she had to make him understand. It might be too late for them, but she had to save the life of the liger.

She wasn't stupid enough to believe this was over.

"I knew how Rainer felt about Kira, and I knew how she would react to being jerked back. I should have warned him, prepared him for the reality of it. Or maybe made him leave all together." Her thumb traced his jaw line. Such a strong face, strong hands, yet such a gentle touch.

"I've seen how some men react when the women are in danger."

"You were the one in danger." Satisfied her bumps and bruises weren't life threatening, his stiff posture eased.

"Rainer didn't know that. They don't know me, can't yet trust me. I should have considered that."

"He could have killed you." He pulled her into his arms, holding her close. "Had he succeeded, it would have killed me as well."

Would it? She wondered. He would feel responsible, as he would for anyone under his protection.

She knew he claimed to care for her, yet how could he when he refused to see her as she really was? It was only the jaguar side he cared for.

No, her death wouldn't devastate his world. Not as his would do to her.

"But he didn't kill me. He reacted as any man would, regardless of species, when someone they care about is threatened. The same way you reacted when you realized I was in trouble. You were there to protect me." She pulled back from him, her eyes meeting his.

"How were you there when you were with Ethan miles away?"

"You needed me." He shrugged. "I felt your pain, your fear. It nearly did me in."

"I didn't realize your ability to feel emotional energy was so strong."

"It's not. I can only feel what you feel, no other. The bond between us grows stronger. The Gods have joined us completely. We are one. I share your gift, as you share mine."

The truth of that awed her. What would it mean to have his gift? Would she be able to communicate with the souls of those gone before, as he was able to do? Was it

possible that she might be able to reach out to her parents? It would be worth all of the pain and scorn she had endured if it were true. It would be worth any cost.

At the knock on the door, Devante moved between her and any threat.

"No one would dare harm us here, Devan. We are protected, surrounded by your people." She laced her fingers through his, needing the contact as much as she needed to protect the one who dared to walk through that door.

"Come in," she said, once she was sure Devante wasn't going to pounce on some unsuspecting soul.

When Rainer walked in, she knew even she couldn't save him. Devante's fingers dropped hers, and he was across the room before she could stop him.

Devante partially shifted, razor-sharp nails and teeth waited for one move, hovering above Rainer's heart.

"No!" She knew it was useless, but she had to try. One wrong move and it would be done. No going back, no changing this one second of time.

She didn't know if Devante would be able to live with Rainer's death, but she knew she couldn't.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't slice you open." Devante's words hissed out, his energy taking a true form. His claw pierced the skin of Rainer's chest, and blood slowly stained his shirt. The cut was shallow, but the next one wouldn't be.

"I have none. But I ask you to spare my life just the same, for Kira still has need of my protection."

Miakoda realized Rainer had done nothing to protect himself from the attack. He had stood tightly, his arms at his side, as if waiting for his punishment to be dealt. As if he deserved whatever Devante would do to him.

Not even in his anger could Devante harm a man who refused to fight back or even to protect himself. He dropped his hand and took a step back.

"How did you get in here?" Devante demanded. His anger wasn't gone but he had a hold on it. For now.

Rainer shrugged. "An old woman directed me."

This one either feared nothing or was long past caring what happened to him. Miakoda's vote was on the later. The trait of despair seemed to run rampant in the hybrids.

"I came to see how your woman is doing. Did I harm her?"

"Hell yes, you harmed her, and for that offense I should kill you." Devante took a step toward Rainer, clearly wanting to do that very thing.

"I'll live," Miakoda added quickly. She didn't bother to correct Rainer and tell him she was not Devante's woman. She wasn't so sure anymore.

She was queen and under his protection, so maybe that qualified her. To a male of their kind, it was all about territory.

Rainer nodded. "I am sorry." He turned his eyes to Miakoda. "Please forgive me for the unforgivable. My nature, that of my lion, has always been to protect the female. All females. It seems it is something I fail at often these days."

"It's okay. I blame myself as much as you. I should have prepared you a bit more. How is Kira?"

His scowl deepened. "Sleeping."

"She needs it. When she wakes, I'd like to see her again. If you have no

objection.”

“I am told you are the leader of the hybrids. It is not my decision.”

“You’re wrong. Everything is your decision. I’m only here to help, not dictate. But I do feel I can help her. You know, Rainer, that she could not remain in her feline form much longer, or we would have lost her completely.”

“Yes. It was my fault she remained as long as she did. After my incompetence, she was much safer with her cat and it offered her solace.”

“It is a natural reaction, our protection mechanism. She wasn’t ready to return to us. Soon, with our help, she will be,” Miakoda said.

“You have helped her, and for my interference I am ashamed. I would be grateful if you would do all in your power to help her more.”

Miakoda nodded.

“You will not go to her without me.” Devante’s declaration brought fire to Miakoda’s eyes.

“Of course I will. I can’t have you standing over me with all of my patients. My people have to learn to trust me and I them.”

“This is not negotiable.”

“Damn right it isn’t. When I’m in my clinic, no one will be looming over me. Confidence, trust, they come first.”

“You come first.” Devante stepped toward her, his face tight. It only added to the strength evident in the angle of his jaw.

“No deal,” she said.

“I forbid it.” He took another step closer, his intention menacing.

“You can’t forbid my actions!” She placed her hands on her hips and moved her feet apart, braced in her fighting stance.

“I must. It is the way of it. I cannot change it, nor can I change who I am.”

“Don’t give me that crap. I know more about your temperament, both of you, than you do.” Her gaze moved to include Rainer. “You are jealous, territorial, short-tempered, and dangerous. All big cats are. But you know what?” Her eyes flashed dangerously, showing them a bit of her own temper. “I’m a big cat, too. And you don’t see me running wild like the two of you. You have hang-ups, deal with them. Learn to control your beast and not the other way around. And neither of you will be with my patient and me. Any of them.”

She waited for Rainer to make a comment, but, wisely, he remained silent.

“If I ever feel the need for protection from one of mine, I’ll ask for it.” Her voice lost some of its edge. “I’m not a fool, don’t treat me like one.”

She put distance between them. “Don’t force me to leave, Devan.” It would come to that in the end, they both knew it. But for now, they needed to put their differences behind them and concentrate on helping the hybrids.

He nodded sharply. She accepted it for what it was, compliance without agreement.

“If you two are finished with your little testosterone contest, meet me in Devante’s office so we can get to work before you wake *my cat* and really piss me off.”

She slammed the door behind her and marched straight to the bathroom. She combed her hair and secured it in a ponytail. After washing her face, she returned to the office to await them.



For all of her big talk, she was scared to death of her next meeting with the woman. She needed to examine Kira and try to learn just what the girl had been through.

The real threat to Miakoda wasn't the threat of physical abuse but the emotional battering she was sure to take. And neither man could save her from that.

Whatever had happened to Kira had nearly crushed her. It would take a great deal to break a lion. Miakoda's only experience with a tigon had been a true animal.

She not only needed to help the cat this time, but the woman as well. And failure meant human suffering. She prayed she wouldn't fail.

By the time the men arrived, she had gathered her strength.

"What happened to her? I can feel so many emotions swirling around her it is almost unbearable. Pain, fear, shame." She hadn't waited until they were seated but began the questions as soon as they entered. She leaned against the desk, too keyed up to sit.

When the liger cursed, Miakoda waited until his rant had finished.

"How I help her, if I can help her, depends on my knowledge of what I'm dealing with. I don't dare make a move without knowing her triggers, for fear that I'll make it worse. She is very fragile, I can feel it."

"We were captured days apart," Rainer began, "and caged together once they realized that we would not fight each other. I think they hoped we would breed on our own. We became friends."

"You fell in love with her," Miakoda said and watched Rainer drop into a chair, rubbing his eyes with the palm of his hands.

"Yes, and she with me. It was stupid, as we can never be together." He ran his hands over his face, as if he could wipe away the memory. "They decided to breed her and gave up on me when I failed to cooperate. There was a tigon, a hybrid, half crazed and wild. The madness had taken him."

"They did not realize you were shifters." What would that do to a person, to be caged as an animal?

"That is my belief. Kira tried to communicate with the male tigon, to connect with him on some level. She's sensitive, though it is a new gift and very weak."

"There are those here who can help her with that," she said.

Rainer nodded. "When that failed, she fought him. He was strong, but her fear made her stronger. In the end, she killed him."

No, this woman wasn't weak, Miakoda realized. She had just been dealt too much. It was no wonder she chose to hide inside herself. Miakoda wondered if she wouldn't do the same, given those circumstances.

"You were there while all of this occurred?"

"Yes, locked in my cage beside her. Watching, knowing there was nothing I could do to stop the attack. Having to kill that man--that animal--broke something in her." Rainer shook his head. "I should have killed him."

Kira wasn't the only one who needed help, Miakoda realized. Rainer would need counseling as well. "That she stood to protect herself will make her stronger, once the shock wears off."

"They put us back together after that and tried again to force our joining."

"What happened?" she asked quietly.

"I killed one of them. They shot me full of some tranquilizer and separated us

again. They would have killed me, I'm sure, but I was just too big a prize."

"I'm so sorry, Rainer," Miakoda said softly.

"What's she gone and done this time?" The woman's voice, filled with mockery, drew everyone's attention just as it had been meant to do. All eyes turned to Lina as she sauntered into the room. Her arrival was almost more than Miakoda could take.

Lina came and went in the house as if she had the right, and Miakoda was getting tired of it. It took everything in her to keep from slapping that smirk off Lina's face.

She might have considered it more seriously if her battered body hadn't called her a fool. She wasn't up to fighting anyone tonight.

It hadn't taken long for Miakoda to learn that Lina was persistent in her chase of Devante. She flaunted herself at every opportunity.

The woman hardly bothered to cover herself at all, and, even then, Miakoda suspected it was more than Lina wanted to wear.

The sheer, gauzy material was more in complement than coverage and went as far as exposing the dark nipples beneath.

Lina had draped the sarong around her hips twice, and every step appeared to be the one that might just show it all. Not that she hadn't shown it all in the past week. She just bared different parts each day.

It wasn't jealously, Miakoda assured herself, but her decent self-respect that was offended. And it was wrong to constantly entice the men. It was embarrassing to the men and to her that she had to witness Lina's attempts to lure them.

Today, Miakoda refused to take the bait. There were things she needed to do, important things. She didn't care if the woman stripped naked and danced on the table. Maybe she'd fall off and break her neck.

Like usual, there were men following close on Lina's heels. Today it was Ethan and Nigel.

"I hope you'll excuse me, but I have an appointment." Miakoda strolled from the room, ignoring Devante's footsteps behind her. He caught up with her just outside the door.

"Where are you going?" He stuck his hands in the pockets of his chinos in an attempt to appear causal. He failed miserably. She could feel his temper simmering just beneath the surface.

"Since when did I start answering to you? You're not my keeper, my father, or my husband." Not that she would ever answer to a husband, should she end up with one.

His brow wrinkled. The action drew her attention to those penetrating eyes.

Today, the sunlight brought out flecks of copper as they glistened like polished stones, much like his own sunstone.

"It is the same as if we were married. The joining ceremony was performed in front of witnesses who can attest to the unbreakable bond. Shall I call down the Gods?"

"Don't you dare threaten me. We joined our lines, our blood in order to give us both what we wanted."

"The throne was only half of what I want."

She visibly stiffened. "I was never part of the deal. We shared blood, our bodies, and joined our life force. I gave you all you're going to get." How could he talk of wanting her after claiming all hybrids were on the verge of madness? And maybe she was. She sure felt out of control, and Lina was only adding to it.

She wouldn't even blame Devante for looking Lina's way. With Miakoda, Devante could have nothing more than what they already shared.

But with Lina, he could have it all. Since Miakoda had already given him his damn throne, what more could she offer him? Sex? Hell, he could get that from a dozen willing women in the village, Lina first in line.

"We joined our souls, Mia. We are connected, by our bond."

"Yes, damn it, we're connected. As connected as we're going to get. I'm not who you want me to be, Devan. I don't even want to be." He needed someone like Lina, who embraced her jaguar and the ways of their people. Lina, who like all jaguars could find the beauty in the body and showcase it to perfection, as if showing it were the most natural thing. Lina, who would make him the perfect mate.

They would look good together, with their traditional markings. There would be no doubt what their offspring would look like. No doubt that they would be pure jaguar. And Miakoda would be forced to scratch the woman's eyes out if she ever touched him. What a mess her life was turning out to be.

"I want you to be mine, nothing more. I do not wish you to be any different."

"Do you hear yourself? That's what I'm talking about. People don't belong to other people."

"Are the hybrids not yours? Would you not stand for them, protect them against all others?" He paced in front of her, trying to burn off anger. "They belong to you, and you to them. Just as we belong to each other."

When he said it that way, it sounded wonderful. Like they could build a life together. As if he could love a mix, after watching one destroy his sister.

"What are you so afraid of, *gatita*?" He had stopped pacing and stood inches from her. It was hard to hide from him when he seemed to see straight through to her soul.

"I'm not afraid. And you aren't being reasonable. Your people accept me only as the tool that handed you the throne. Do you honestly believe they will ever accept me as your mate? As their rightful queen?" How could they, when even he couldn't accept that part of her?

"You are their queen. No one will ever choose a mate for me, Mia. Especially when I have already chosen one for myself."

Yeah, he made it sound easy. As if the entire world wasn't against such a union. "Why can't you just be happy with what we have? You have your people, and I have mine."

"I cannot get enough of you. My body craves you like a fool bewitched. It will never be enough. You played me false, allowing me to sink into you, allowing us to become one as was meant to be, leading me to believe you have accepted me."

Had she led him on, letting him believe they could have something more? She just didn't know anymore. She wearily rubbed at her eyes. "If I did, I'm sorry. It was a naïve dream, Devan, and this is reality. We are from different worlds. Look at Kira and Rainer. I didn't have the heart to tell him that had they bred, it would have killed her.

"Even if she isn't sterile, they can never breed. What kind of life can the two of them have? Their love is destined to destroy them, just as ours would."

"So they don't have children. They would have each other and maybe that's enough for them. We're not them. In the eyes of our people, our Gods, we are united.

You carry my mark. All know you as mine. There can never be another for either of us.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“You will not take another lover.”

She would have laughed, if she’d had the energy. Like she didn’t have enough problems without adding another man in the mix. “This is about Miles, isn’t it?” He didn’t respond, but he didn’t have to.

The moment she had set Miles up as her assistant in the lab, Devante had grown shorter with him. If he had known about their conversation just this morning, he really would be impossible. As it was, she was shocked that Devante had been right about Miles’ intentions, and she had been so wrong.

Miles had asked her, in his sweet way, if she would consider mating with him. He had meant nothing by it, just the offer to continue their line.

She had softened when he had told her he would be honored to carry the line forward, if she so chose. She had told him, as gently as possible, that she would choose whether to breed jaguar, leguar, or human. But no matter the choice, it would be made for love. The same held true with Devante. She would have love or she would have nothing.

“I’m not looking for another man.” She had more than she could handle now.

“That is good, *gatita*, because you would be issuing a death warrant.”

“There you go again. Overreacting. You make me crazy when you talk that stuff.” She started to stalk off, but turned, wanting to have this finished. Needing to find some solid ground between them.

“I do not overreact where you are concerned. Your denial of us changes nothing. I will kill any man who touches you, in anger or in lust.”

“And does that go both ways, Devan? You throw out threats, but what about me?” She thought about the woman, standing at this very moment in her own house, waiting on Devante to return. Waiting for the one opportunity to put her hands on him.

“Of course. I belong to you, Mia, just as the Gods decreed.”

She could see the confusion in his eyes. Did he honestly expect her to believe he hadn’t noticed when a woman threw herself at him? “Then keep that hussy from hanging on you or you may find her throat ripped out.” Okay, so she needed counseling as well. She probably sounded like a real nut job, denying any possibility of a permanent commitment between them, and with her next breath threatening some woman who made it known she wanted him.

Maybe she was inflicted with the hybrids’ madness. But until they settled this between them, until she was sleeping alone, he was off limits.

He wasn’t the only one who didn’t share. They were bound together and as far as everyone was concerned, they were joined. What Lina was doing was an insult to her. But Miakoda could admit to herself that when Lina came slinking up to him, sliding her long fingers over his chest, it wasn’t her wounded ego that brought blood to her eyes.

His smile didn’t help her disposition in the least.

“Which hussy would that be?” he drawled.

“Oh, there’s more than one? Why doesn’t that surprise me? There’s no telling how many heartsick fools you have hanging around here.” She poked him in the chest with her finger, anger bouncing inside her ready to explode. “Lina is the one *I’m* talking about. I’ve not encouraged any man, but you, you do nothing to stop her.”

His smile faded. "She is harmless."

"Is she?" Miakoda stood in front of him, her hands on her hips. "So you say. Maybe sliding those long fingers of hers over your chest is innocent. Rubbing against you every chance she gets. And maybe the guy who touches me the way she touches you is harmless, too."

He growled and closed the space between them. "Who has dared touch you in such a manner? If Miles has attempted--"

"This has nothing to do with Miles. No one has touched me, but it doesn't seem so harmless to you now, does it?"

He cursed. "If Lina ceases her ways, then we will live as man and wife?"

"No. But she will live to find her own man." She couldn't believe she was threatening another woman over a man. Damn, where was her self-respect? This man brought out the worst in her.

Devante's smile was back. "Instead of your man. I hear what you do not say, and your admission has made me very happy." He pulled her into his arms.

She fought against him, or at least made a good show of it. When his arms wrapped around her, held her close, it was the only place in the world she wanted to be. "You're reading too much into it." Her voice sounded breathless, even to herself.

"I don't think so. It is enough for me that you are jealous." His lips nibbled at the corner of her mouth.

"I'm ignoring you." But she moved her head until her lips lined up with his. She felt the fire course through her as his lips covered hers, felt his tongue demand entrance.

She gave him everything he asked for, returning his kiss with an urgency that shocked her. When he pulled away, he leaned his head against her forehead while they both took in deep gulps of air.

"I must go see Kira."

"No," he said.

"Please, don't start on me again," Miakoda said. Had she shouted it to him, he would have simply fought her back. But her soft words seemed to reach him. "You have to trust me."

"I trust you with my life," Devante said.

"But not with my own." Miakoda realized it was true.

"You take less care with your own."

She pulled from his arms, where she could think clearly. "I don't have a death wish. There's danger in what I do, but I know how to minimize it. I do nothing blindly, and I trust my instincts."

"The risk is too great and accidents happen just as they occurred today. There are many who wish you harm. I could not stand to lose you, *gatita*."

She hated it when he called her those soft endearments. Hated it and loved it. It softened something in her she didn't want softened. "You face danger every day, Devan, yet I trust you to come back each night. We can't live in fear or change who we are."

"My head agrees with you, it is the rest I am having problems with. It would be much easier if you would agree to marry me."

She grinned, shaking her head. Marriage would only make him worse. "You think you would lighten up then?"

"No," he answered honestly. "I would grow more obnoxious."

“Impossible.” Her grin faded. She didn’t have time for teasing. Didn’t have the right when so many of her people suffered.

“He must be stopped, Devan, the one who is terrorizing the hybrids. I have to help this woman. I think I may be the only one who can.”

“We will stop him.” He kissed her once on the lips, then stepped back. “Go, do what you must, but remember to return home to me soon.” He nodded, and Nigel appeared.

“How long has he been standing back there?” Her voice was low.

“Since you walked out the door. He has been assigned to watch over you.”

“Devan--”

He ignored her, turning to speak to Nigel. “Do not leave her side, except when she is in the clinic with a patient. If you hear anything from inside that even smells of danger, break the door down if you must.”

Nigel nodded and fell in step behind her. It was no use arguing with him. He was never going to change. But at least he had given her the concession of privacy with her patients.

As she walked through the lovely little village, she realized that she was beginning to love him in spite of his archaic attitude. Or worse, Gods help her, maybe because of it. And it would only serve to hurt her.

Miakoda pushed all thoughts of Devante aside as she strolled down the dirt road leading through the village. Even the escort trailing behind her couldn’t dampen her spirits on such a beautiful day.

Had it been anyone other than Nigel following her, she would have made an attempt at small talk. She was grateful it wasn’t needed with him. Or wanted. It gave her a chance to enjoy the view.

The village was nestled in the jungle, the canopy of leaves above blocking out the sunlight. The cooling breeze chased away the summer heat.

Thatch-roofed huts dotted the dirt path, identical but unique in the toys scattered about and the flowers that covered the small yards.

As she neared the clinic, she had to admit she couldn’t fault Devante. No expense had been spared, and though the outside looked as if it had stood for generations, the inside had been remodeled and was crispy clean.

The cabinets were stocked and the equipment top notch. Only the best for his people.

The plan had been for her to treat the jaguars as well as the hybrids. She had her doubts if any of them would ever trust her enough. So far, she had one patient.

She entered through the small waiting room and passed her office and the exam room as she made her way to one of the three patient rooms in the back. Two were filled now, one with Miles and the other with her first true patient, Kira.

Neron had chosen to find a place to sleep somewhere in the jungle, and, secretly, she was glad. The man still made her nervous, and she didn’t think his presence would be a benefit to Kira or Rainer.

Rainer didn’t need his own room, since his time was spent at Kira’s side. Miakoda had found a cot for him instead.

Miles had been warned to stay away from Kira, lest he seek Rainer’s wrath.

When the whimpers reached her ears, she broke out into a run. Rainer was still

with Devante, leaving Kira alone. As she bounded through the door, she stopped short.

“What are you doing in here?” she demanded, not waiting for an explanation as she crossed to Kira’s bed. She was huddled in the fetal position, her head turned into the pillow.

Miakoda looked up with fire in her eyes and saw that Miles had his arms extended as if to warn off attack. From the panic in his eyes, she knew he had been trying to calm the woman down, not upset her.

It didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was repairing the damage he had done.

“Out! Wait for me down the hall in my office.” Miakoda didn’t watch to see if he would obey but began murmuring softly to calm Kira. The skin beneath her hands grew heated as she rubbed Kira’s forehead, siphoning off the emotions.

The weight in Miakoda’s chest grew as she sucked up the fear and pain into her own body. When she finished, Kira was drained but resting peacefully.

Miakoda dragged herself to her office to deal with her next bit of business. Miles fidgeted with the curtains, looking out at the jungle beyond. The squeak of her chair as she dropped herself into it caught his attention.

“Care to explain to me what you were doing in Kira’s room?” Miakoda was too tired for niceties. She had taken more energy in than she would have liked, but nothing could be done about it. She was strong enough to handle the discomfort. Kira wasn’t.

“I didn’t mean to upset her. She must have had a nightmare. She was crying out. I tried to talk to her, but she just started moaning or something. What’s wrong with her anyway?”

Miakoda raised her brows at the man. “Do you honestly expect me to fill you in when that is none of your business?”

He had the decency to look embarrassed. “Of course not. I was just wondering if she was going to be all right.”

He was one of the reasons that she would be. Had it not been for him, Kira would still be locked in that cell.

“She’ll be fine.” Miakoda hoped it was true. Life had no guarantees. “Thanks in part to you and Neron.”

He nodded. “If you, um, need anything to help her, let me know.”

“I will.” She watched as he hastily left her office. He was a solemn man, and she couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

Were all of the hybrids damaged, in one way or another? Had their very creation been cause enough to curse their line? And if none of them had come through life unscathed, how could she be egotistical enough to believe she had survived undamaged?

## Chapter Twelve

Miakoda forced herself to stand, her body heavy with fatigue. She had allowed Kira time to rest and sneaked a few minutes herself. But she could not put off her session with Kira any longer.

Every hour that passed was another hour that Kira was locked inside herself. She might not be hiding inside her feline form, but she was hiding nonetheless. It was time for her to begin healing, so she could rejoin the real world.

Her eyes were open, staring at the ceiling, when Miakoda entered her room.

“You’re awake. How are you feeling?”

Kira’s eyes moved to her, but she continued to stare without words.

“My name is Miakoda. I’m a healer.”

“You....” Kira had to stop and swallow, as if the job of talking was too much for her.

Miakoda poured her a glass of water from the table and offered it to her. It had been at least two weeks since the woman had used her voice.

“You are a mixed.” Kira took another sip.

Miakoda pulled a chair next to the bed. Sitting would put her eye level with Kira. “Yes, I’m a hybrid. Leguar, more precisely.”

Kira nodded. “You are the leader now.”

Miakoda smiled. “So you were listening. The coalition has given me a seat at their table, representing our people. I’m here to help the hybrids. But I’m also a doctor, just so you know I am qualified to help you.”

“You speak strangely.”

Miakoda chuckled. “I was raised in the States, among humans. What about you?”

Kira shrugged. “No place. Where am I?”

“At my clinic in the Maya Mountains. The jaguar village, have you heard of it?”

Kira tried to rise, but Miakoda touched her shoulder. “You are safe here. Rainer is not far away. Would you like to see him?”

“No.” Kira rested back against the pillow but looked away.

“Okay. Maybe when you are feeling stronger. He has been here with you night and day, watching over you. He’s been very worried about you.”

She was losing the woman again. “Kira, do you remember being rescued from the compound?”

Kira did not even acknowledge she heard Miakoda.

“I can help you, honey. I know it’s hard, but you cannot begin to heal until you let it go.”

“I remember.” Sad eyes turned back to Miakoda. “I remember everything about that place.”

“Rainer said you were very brave.”

“Rainer is wrong. I’m not brave, I’m crazy. The madness of our kind has taken



me.”

Miakoda reached for the small hand that had balled into a fist and rubbed gently until the muscles loosened.

“No, the madness hasn’t gotten you. You are too strong for it. Strong enough to defend yourself when you were attacked.”

Tears rolled down Kira’s face. “I killed a man.”

“You defended yourself against an animal. The man had been dead a long time. You did the only thing you could.”

“Rainer saw it all. How can he stand to look at me knowing what I did?”

“Because he loves you. Did he not kill one of them himself to protect you?”

“I keep seeing his eyes, the madness in them. He was going to kill me.”

“Yes, he was. What you have survived was a nightmare, Kira. I won’t make light of it. But you did survive it. Now you must be strong enough to forgive yourself and move on with your life.”

Kira wiped at the tears with the back of her hand and tried for a smile. “I heard you. Your voice. You were soothing me, trying to bring me back.”

“And you came back to us. Taking on our feline form brings us strength when we need it. But we cannot remain in that form forever. You need time to recover before you shift again. Promise me you’ll stay and let me help you?”

Kira hesitated, then nodded.

“Good. That’s enough for us today, and you need to sleep.” Miakoda stood and replaced the chair against the wall. She turned back to Kira. “The man who was here earlier, Miles, is harmless. He’s a hybrid, and I’ve hired him to assist me here in the clinic. He has been told to stay away from you, but if you need anything, just call out to him.”

It wasn’t as if she really needed an assistant, without any patients. But she knew Miles had needed a place to stay and gut instinct had told her he wouldn’t take charity.

She would need to arrange for a temporary place for the hybrids. They couldn’t all sleep in her clinic, once they started to join the group.

And she would need to start thinking about a permanent home for them. She and Devante might have reached a truce, but she knew what he said held some truth. Once the hybrids started coming, it was certain at least some of them would be lost to madness. She couldn’t risk the jaguars any more than he could.

She would ask Devante about a temporary home for them, and see what he could come up with.

“I’m leaving, but Rainer should be returning soon. Unless you want me to ask him not to return.”

“Let him decide.”

Progress, Miakoda mused. It would be slow, but it would come. “Rainer had mentioned to me that you are sensitive. It can be hard, when the gift is first encountered. I can teach you blockers if you like.”

“I would appreciate it very much.”

“Good. Tomorrow then.” Miakoda touched her hand once more, squeezed softly. Kira didn’t realize that Miakoda was actually drawing out the negative energy, replacing it with her own positive energy. But the woman would rest comfortably tonight. It was the best Miakoda could offer her.

Miakoda stepped through the door of the clinic, surprised to see the sun had set. Shades of gray filled the sky as night crept in.

She was bone weary. The session with Kira had been rough, but she was making real progress.

Looking back over her shoulder at the shadow behind her, she tossed one of the bottles of water she had nabbed on her way out the door.

Nigel caught it and nodded his thanks. He had remained outside the hut, waiting on her through the hours she had been inside. She had forgotten he was there.

He had not interrupted her, not even for relief from the afternoon heat.

The walk back through the village was a series of daydreams. She promised herself a shower, then decided on a swim in the cenote instead. Closing her eyes, she could almost feel the cool water sloshing against her skin. But she wouldn't be able to linger.

Rainer would be waiting on an update on Kira's condition, and no matter how much she wanted to put off the meeting until morning, she knew she couldn't leave him worried tonight.

She waved Nigel off when she reached the door to the cave, and she watched as he silently disappeared.

Voices drifted down the hall from Devante's office. He wasn't alone. She could easily pick his commanding tenor out of the crowd.

Few discussions remained private in a cave, where sound carried. She'd need to remember that. She cringed inwardly and slowed her steps, knowing she would be required to make small talk. Her brain just wasn't up to it tonight.

It seemed Devante's home was the local hangout. Maybe everyone just wanted to be close to their king. There were always people around and for someone like her who preferred solace, it was a trying situation.

She considered lowering her head and passing quickly by the door, in hopes no one would notice her. But it would seem rude if anyone saw her. The last thing she needed at this point was to alienate herself further from the jaguars. Besides, she had been raised better than that.

She leaned against the doorframe, drinking in the sight of him. He looked the part of king. Sure and confident, his very presence was comforting. Maybe that was the real reason his people congregated around him.

He wore a black T-shirt tonight, his wide chest pulling the material tight. Every definition of muscle was evident. It was no wonder Lina chased after him. Even more than his devastating good looks, his body oozed power. Complete male power pulling at the center of any woman. It had locked on to her but good.

He stood in the back of the room, his forearm braced on the limestone wall. Engrossed in conversation with Ethan, he seemed unaware of anyone else's presence.

Whatever they were discussing seemed to have them both irritated, and emotions were running high in the small room.

She didn't have the strength left for blockers. When the energy hit her, she felt it soak into her soul.

Closing her eyes, she waited for the nausea to pass.

It was like ingesting poison, that burning sensation deep inside.

Once it was gone, she opened her eyes. There had been more than irritation in

this room. She had felt lust.

Her glare moved over the occupants, noticing that something had caught Ethan's attention. When Miakoda's eyes followed his, she saw the reason.

Lina sat, though posed was more accurate, directly in Ethan's line of sight. Just where he and Devante would be unable to miss her.

As usual, she had draped the sarong casually across her body, leaving little to the imagination. The fact that Devante did not seem to notice did little to calm Miakoda. Not when all other male eyes in the room were drinking her in. Including Rainer. It seemed even being in love didn't stop the eyes from roaming.

Miakoda had not been completely truthful with Devante. It wasn't only the familiar way that Lina touched him that drove her nuts. It was her flagrant flaunting of her body. The constant open invitation her body signals sent to him.

The sarong was not the normal dress for the women in the village. Most of the Nahuals preferred it for the easy access in shifting.

The Mayan women in the village wore the traditional white cotton blouse with intricate embroidery around the collar. Each delicate design held special meaning for the one wearing it. Their skirts were colorful, with varying lengths, depending on the age and status of the woman.

But even the other shifters who chose to wear the sarong wrapped it in a way to maintain modesty.

Miakoda turned her eyes from Lina, seeing all of the little display she cared to watch. Whirling on her heels, she hoped to escape. A deep voice stopped her. She didn't want to turn around, to show them all the fire in her eyes.

"Mia, I didn't know you had returned." Probably hadn't been able to see past those perky little breasts that were drawing his eyes. Maybe it wasn't fair to accuse him of gaping when she hadn't actually caught him. Being a male, she knew he had noticed.

When Ethan choked on his drink, Miakoda's accusing eyes flew to his. "*Out!*" Her mind demanded. He nodded once and was gone. She was too tired for blocking.

Devante was crossing the room to her, a frown forming on his brow. She had to say something, instead of standing there like an idiot. Hell's fire, she wasn't going to give Lina the satisfaction of knowing her little antics were getting to her.

Miakoda's eyes moved to Rainer. He was one of the reasons she had stopped anyway, to update him on Kira. Not that he seemed overly concerned, sitting on the sofa ogling Lina.

"Kira is improving. Give me a minute to freshen up, then I'll meet you in the study. I won't be long."

It was childish to ignore Devante, but it would be worse to snap at him in front of everyone. Or let him know just how close she was to growing claws and snatching out Lina's sleazy heart.

"Mia, is something wrong?" Devante followed her out the door.

The shadows in the cave danced around them as they stood in the passageway.

He looked tired, the lines on his face more pronounced. She didn't want to add to his problems. She didn't want to care that he had them.

He had done that to her, made her care. He didn't even bother giving her proper respect as his lover where Lina was concerned, yet she was supposed to smile and take it.

"What could be wrong? I come home worn out to find a house full of people."

Don't you ever get tired of it? I thought jaguars were solitary creatures."

"It's business, Mia. A *rey* does not have the luxury of privacy."

"Business? I wouldn't call Miss Perky-breast entertaining a house full of men business. Just another day around here." Damn, damn, damn. Maybe she should just snatch out her own tongue. Hell's fire, she sounded like a jealous fool.

His lips curled. "You're exhausted, you should rest."

"Don't change the subject. Why do you allow her such behavior? She flaunts herself." If she was going to make a fool of herself, at least she was going to have her say.

"It is the way of our people. Most clothe themselves in the sarong to allow quick transformation."

One more thing that made her stand out. She didn't wear them, just couldn't get the hang of wrapping them without everything hanging out.

"That's not why she does it, and you know it. The women in the village know how to wear it and maintain dignity. Maybe they should give her lessons. Looking at her chest is a little different than looking at a man. And that sarong doesn't cover her, it only showcases."

"We are sensual people, she means nothing by it."

He was defending her again, only digging his hole deeper. Gods, how Miakoda hated it here. Where the customs were strange to her and people looked down on her for being different. Hadn't it been that way her entire life?

"Of course she does. Are you telling me it is okay for a woman to walk around half naked?"

His brow wrinkled again. "The human body is natural to us. You were raised among humans, where they hide themselves behind their moral issues. Here, among her own, the men hardly notice what humans would consider a show of too much skin. Her actions are harmless, I assure you. I see nothing wrong with them."

Her smile should have warned him. "Of course you don't. I'm just overreacting. Let me freshen up and I'll be back shortly."

She left him standing there, looking as if he had placated her. The man had a lot to learn, and she was about to be the perfect teacher.

\* \* \* \*

Miakoda rose from the cool water, her body relaxed but her mind as tense as ever.

Devante was a fool. Or maybe he just thought her one. No one could miss the blatant invitation Lina continued to extend to him, not even him. She might come from a world away, but people weren't that different.

Surely, he didn't fall for that line he was trying to hand her. If men were breathing, they were looking. They couldn't even be blamed for it, when it was right in front of their face.

None of the other Nahuals in the village were as brazen as Lina.

Miakoda had seen the looks on the faces of other women when Lina was present. Wives and girlfriends alike kept a close eye on their man when Lina entered a room.

But what really aggravated Miakoda was for Devante to make it sound normal. As if women bore it all and no one noticed. Men noticed. All men, be it human or *Nahual*. Not that they had that much to notice, since Lina's chest was so flat it could be mistaken for a man's.

Okay, that was stretching it. But Lina was rail thin, without the womanly curves men usually fell for. Unless, of course, they went for the long, fluid, model type.

Devante was just blind to other men's reaction to Lina. Or maybe he wasn't blind at all and enjoyed the show. Would he be so blind to Miakoda if she suddenly decided to run around dressed like Lina? Maybe then he would realize just how revealing it was.

How would he feel if the tables were turned and others looked at his lover with lust in their eyes? By his own words, it wouldn't happen. They wouldn't notice her. Sure. Right.

And maybe that was just what he needed, she decided as she snatched up the material and started wrapping. She would prove him wrong in ten seconds flat.

Miakoda stared at her own reflection, at the way the gossamer fabric fit snugly around her hips.

She had to admit, changing would be quick wearing so little. But she had been shifting since adolescence, and clothes had never been that big of a problem.

It didn't take much to figure out the problem with the sarongs worn here. They were entirely too small. Maybe it was in concession to the heat.

The material was the color of her moonstone, beautiful and delicate. When Devante had presented her with it, she had wondered what she would use it for.

This version of the sarong was a nightmare created by a man. Had to be. It seemed simple enough, until you tried to wrap the material around, covering enough to be decent. Or maybe this scrap of material was supposed to make it impossible to cover. Lucky for her, covering up wasn't her intent tonight.

Maybe she really was a prude, raised on her human morals. Would she ever be jaguar enough to feel comfortable showing her body? She examined her reflection.

Even though she had wrapped it twice around, it was provocative as hell. Like anyone would notice if she made a mistake in the tying, she mused, with her breasts standing high in all their glory. Even though she covered much more than Lina had the decency to do, it was still very revealing.

There was no way she had the guts to do this.

But telling Devante how she felt had gotten her nowhere. It was time to show the man just what he had closed his eyes against. He needed to know firsthand how it felt to have another's eyes filled with wanting for what he claimed belonged to another.

She pulled the long strands of her hair in front of her shoulders, ignoring the little voice that called her a chicken. She was going to do this, but at least her hair would help conceal her.

She just prayed what Devante had said was not true. If she walked into that room, and men didn't notice, all of this would be for nothing. And her pride would be a mouthful to swallow. Maybe Devante was right, and jaguar men didn't notice the bodies of the women in their group. Or worse, maybe Devante himself wouldn't care what Miakoda did. She was about to find out.

She paused outside his office door, took a deep breath before she stepped into the room. The rush of adrenaline stirred her cat. Awake and alert, the cat stretched and provided her the courage she needed.

"Rainer, if you're ready we'll step into the living room for privacy."

She felt Devante's eyes on her, hot and burning, as he perused her body. Watched mesmerized as he crossed the room in what seemed like seconds. The heat, the wanting

she saw in his eyes nearly brought her to her knees. Everything faded away but her wanting of him. When his hands grabbed her arms, her breathing deepened at the quick shot of need.

*“Qué bella,”* Ethan said with a little too much enthusiasm. “Look at you!”

“Look elsewhere, damn you,” Devante snarled to Ethan.

Miakoda raised her brow, certain she had gotten the reaction intended. “It’s not as if I’ll turn him to stone.”

His fingers dug deep as he pulled her through the door, down the passageway to the nearest bedroom. Hers. The door slamming reverberated through the cave.

Devante released her as if her skin burned his fingers, then turned his back to her.

She could see his cat flare, the hair ripple along his skin. He growled a warning, to the beast or to her she wasn’t sure, but she stepped back defensively. Maybe she had pushed him too far.

He turned abruptly, his pupils narrowed and long as his fierce glare pierced her.

“Devan.” Genuine fear raced through her, fear for him, for herself.

“Why Mia?” His voice was a whisper of power, but she heard the pain. There was no way she could be flippant when she had hurt him.

“To show you it matters.”

“Did you think it would not?” His eyes demanded a reason. “That I wouldn’t care if you showed yourself to other men?”

“You said they would not look, as I’m part of the group. And if they did, no one would care.”

“You’re more than part of the group, Mia. You are mine.”

“And that changes the rules?”

“By the gods yes,” he hissed.

“Then it changes all of the rules, Devan,” she said softly. “How do you think I feel when another woman looks at you with lust burning in her eyes? I know there is little that can be done to prevent it from happening. You command that. But when a woman blatantly offers herself to you, it matters. It might happen, but not in my own home. I won’t be disrespected by your people.”

“Touché. You did this to prove a point.”

“Yes. And I didn’t show myself. I am covered more than some of the women in the village.”

He leaned against her dresser, pulled her between his legs as his hands moved the hair that still covered her.

Her nipples puckered through the sheer material when she felt his eyes on them. “We’re lucky no one was killed.” He breathed against her nipple, just before his tongue lapped at it through the fabric. Once. Twice.

“I agree. Lina pushed me over the edge in there tonight.”

He grinned, his hands cupping her breast. “I rather like you over the edge, as long as you keep it behind closed doors.”

His voice sobered and he took her chin in his hands, forced her to look into his eyes. She could see the warning. “Mia, don’t pull anything like that again. Those men in there are my friends, my brothers, and I could have ripped their throats out just for looking at you.”

He softened his words and his mouth as he covered hers. He took his time

unwrapping her, like a present he savored. It was much later before he joined everyone back in his office, and only after Miakoda was sated and asleep.

She woke hours later to Devante standing over her bed. She rubbed the spot where he had been when she had fallen asleep, finding it cold. She had wanted to wake up in his arms, but instead he had left her after she fell asleep.

"We've been summoned by the coalition." His voice was commanding, all business. Obviously, their lovemaking had meant something different to him.

"It's too soon for another meeting." She pulled the sheet with her when she stood up, feeling vulnerable with him fully dressed.

"Sí, it is. I don't know what this is about, but an emergency session has been called." She watched as he tied his hair with the strip of leather. Why did that one action always stir her? She was forming an odd fixation on that thick hair. Brushing his shoulders, it made her want the weight of it in her hands. Not many men could pull off the ponytail thing, but good lord, it only made Devante more masculine. If such a thing was possible.

"That can't be good," she said as she watched him lace his boots.

"I agree. Whatever it is, we will handle it. Be prepared to leave immediately."

He left her alone to dress, waiting for her in his office before escorting her to the helicopter.

The man at the controls nodded at her, his tanned face relaxed and confident. She took her seat next to Devante as the sound of rotating blades filled the silence.

It didn't take them long to reach the hacienda by air. Rick lowered the helicopter down in the open pasture, the smooth landing undetectable.

The last time Miakoda had been inside these gates, she had been facing one of the biggest decisions of her life. Now, weeks later, she still wasn't sure she had made the right one. It no longer mattered.

There had been no turning back for her when she had pulled Kira back. The hybrids were hers to protect.

The jaguars, in time, might or might not become hers, but Devante had found a way into her heart, and she was afraid she would never dislodge him. Just as Lando had. Right or wrong, they were hers now as well. Yeah, things had changed in the last few weeks.

This time her nerves were steady as she walked with Devante down the corridor. She shared a mutual respect with the men they were about to face and had finally made peace with her uncle. He might have cast her father out over his refusal to abandon her, but it had come at a great cost to him. That he was trying to do the right thing, make up for that wrong, told her he was a good man. And this time Devante was standing at her side.

Oh, he'd been standing there the first time, but for his own reasons. At least they were here for the same ones this time around. She just wished she knew what they were.

The entrance to the room was guarded, but it was the wolf that watched them. Gray eyes, still and cold, followed their every step. The lack of others told her this meeting was of utmost secrecy.

Security was heavy, as they had learned upon their arrival where they had again been met by the wolves. That they were such a presence here tonight didn't bode well for this meeting. Something was wrong. She felt it in the emotions swirling around the

room, the thick wall of tension.

As they took their seats at the table, she felt the first touch. Sadness from the lion, anger with the Ulfric and even regret from Biorn.



## Chapter Thirteen

Miakoda knew something bad had happened. Silence filled the room, as the leaders only nodded at their arrival. She sensed each man was in great turmoil over the deed they were about to perform.

"We appreciate the haste with which you arrived." Her uncle's formal tone set the mood for the meeting. There would be no teasing banter among friends tonight.

"We were told our arrival was of great importance."

"As it is." Her uncle shook Devante's hand and then turned to Miakoda. His eyes trailed over her. "I trust you are well, child?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Good. Good," he replied absently. "I'm going to let Ulfric take the table, as it is for his pack we are gathered."

"I won't drag this out." He stood, his hands braced on the table. "One of my pack was attacked, nearly killed. Her neck was practically ripped apart. She'll live but will bear the scars for the remainder of her life. Physical and emotional. As it is, we are still uncertain if she will regain the use of her legs." He cleared his throat.

Miakoda knew to one of their kind, it was a fate worse than death. If she was paralyzed, the woman would no longer have the ability to shift physically, only in her mind. It was a road to hell.

"We believe it was a hybrid that did this." His eyes fell on Mia as he let his words hang in the air. His accusation nearly brought her out of her chair.

"No. How could one of mine be guilty of such a thing?" She looked to her uncle for support but found only sadness in his eyes. "I have heard of no rogue in our territory," she replied weakly, but she knew the truth. They would never accuse unless they were certain.

Devante slipped his hand around hers, both for restraint and support. "What leads you to believe it was one of ours?"

Miakoda's head snapped to Devante at the possessive term. Her heart fluttered. That was twice he had claimed the hybrids, and she wondered if he was even aware that he did it.

"Only her recollection of the attack. I'll admit, it was hard to make sense of it at first. She claimed to be attacked by a lion, then a leopard. It could only be one of yours, Mia. I am sorry. I hate to drop this on you so soon after taking on the hybrids. Nonetheless, my people will not ignore this attack. Even now, I can barely restrain my pack from seeking justice."

She met the eyes of the man she had known most of her life, one she knew to be a fair man. She also knew no one present would tolerate such an attack. Herself included. "I'm sorry as well, Ulfric. If there is anything I can do for the woman, you've only to ask."

"I know." He nodded.

"You are sure he was part lion, part leopard?" Devante asked.

“Yes. I must stress to you, Mia, that there is a small chance this one is not a shifter. He could be one of the animals turned out by the breeding farms. The wolf felt nothing but the animal, though sometimes that is all that remains of the rogues. That said, we do have information that leads us to believe he is, in fact, Nahual. We will send the man’s file with you. He is a suspected hybrid and has suddenly disappeared.”

Suspected hybrid. He made it sound like being a hybrid was as bad as being a suspected murderer. Or rapist. She ignored the urge to lash out at him. He meant nothing by his words. That was the sad part, they never did.

“We will hunt the animal, Mia, if that is your wish. I understand it would be difficult for your people to hunt one of their own,” Ulfric offered.

“There will be no need. With Mia’s approval, the jaguar will hunt the rogue. It is our problem.” Devante squeezed her hand to offer support, and only then did she realize that he still held it.

“It is everyone’s problem,” her uncle amended. “We aren’t here to dump this on you.”

“Thank you, Uncle Manus, but Devante’s right. It’s our problem, and we will deal with it. Our people will choose if they wish to participate in the hunt. It will be their decision, hybrid or jaguar, to hunt and kill this rogue.”

“We appreciate your cooperation. But understand this, the animal must be put to death. Not only for the protection of others, but for the attack on one of mine.”

“I understand, and we will honor your people by assuring you this will be done.” She could only hope it was an animal they were dealing with and not a shifter.

The taking of a life was going to be hard, but the taking of a life that was human was something she wasn’t sure she was capable of doing. She understood this was the way of their people, the only way it could be handled. There would be no trial like in the human justice system, no life in prison.

They couldn’t afford for one of theirs to spend time locked in a cell, where he could be discovered if he shifted. Or when needing medical attention. The only courts for them were either their own elders or the coalition. But for this rogue, judgment and verdict had already been handed down.

She would carry it out. To keep peace among the race, she had no real choice. Had one of hers been attacked, she would demand no less. No matter what they found, she would serve justice. *Gods, just let it be an animal.* Another hybrid going rogue would only make the hybrids even more outcast.

The trip home--and it surprised her that she was beginning to consider the village home--was made in near silence. There was nothing left to say.

The coalition had been efficient, turning over all information on the rogue. They knew more about this man than they had led her to believe.

In the guise of resting, she stole an hour in her room after their arrival. Sprawled on the quilt she was sure Maria’s hands made, she opened the file she had brought back with her.

Yancy Rilo was an oddity, even as a man. The coalition believed him to be a leopon, a cross of leopard and lion. It was not an unusual cross in the animal world, as Japan had bred several for their zoo. As with so many others, it did not appear to be a good combination in shifters.

The only picture of the man in animal form was grainy and unconfirmed. Still,

Miakoda felt sorry for the animal. He had the body of the leopard, the face of a lion. The mane was evident, though straggly and thin. As if the cat had lost a great battle and his mane had paid the price. It was a sad sight for the regal lion.

As she looked at the picture of the man, she realized he hadn't fared much better. It seemed as though it had not occurred to the breeder that the spirit of the animal shown through to the man. Or maybe he just hadn't cared.

Yancy was a short, stocky man, much as the leopard and lion were. He had gone bald prematurely, and his complexion was ruddy. His health had been poor from birth.

It wasn't a problem for him any longer. Miakoda was sure the madness had eaten away at what little sanity he had, and he had long since given in to the animal.

She closed her eyes, burning the image of the man in her mind. She didn't want to forget that tonight they hunted not just an animal, but also a man.

She closed the folder and went in search of the others. They would be gathered at the cave, asking the gods to bless the journey ahead.

Miakoda heard the laughter before she stepped into the clearing. The sound brought her to a halt.

Miles, and even Neron, had been taken into the group of jaguars easily. Even Rainer had been accepted. For a group who claimed to be loners, the jaguars seemed an open and friendly lot.

At least for some. For whatever reason, she had not bonded so easily. She turned back to the trail leading away from the clearing.

It wasn't because of her blood that they denied her. Why refuse one hybrid yet accept another? What was it about her that kept her a loner? Did she really prefer it that way, or was it just all she had even known?

As was the way, she felt his presence before she saw him. It was the feline in her that whispered her mate was nearby. Miakoda tried to ignore it.

"You can't keep yourself apart from everyone forever, Mia. It's a lonely way to live." He leaned casually against a tree, his features clear to her in the dark.

"Is that what you think I'm doing? I prefer to be alone. You should know that by now." Did he have some of Ethan's ability to read minds? Is that how he knew exactly what she was thinking? If he had, she'd have known it before now.

He pushed off the tree, his sinewy form gliding toward her. She loved to watch him walk, his movements confident and sure.

"I think you are afraid to be with others. That's different than preferring it that way. I see it in your eyes, that longing to belong."

Embarrassed that he saw a part she wanted to keep hidden, her anger flared. She didn't want his sympathy. "I do belong, just not in your world."

"Ah, but our worlds, they are the same. Why do you keep yourself an outcast?"

"I've spent time with the people here."

"You haven't let one of them near the real you. Just as you run from me, you run from them, fearful of anyone getting too close. What is it you fear they will find if they look too deep, Mia?"

She knew the answer. They would find the vulnerable little girl, longing to belong. And once they found that weakness, once she admitted to wanting to fit in, their denial of her would matter.

Devante stopped an arm's length from her. She could reach out and touch his

massive chest. Her hands fisted at her side.

"Is your ego so big that you cannot accept that I just don't want to get close to you?"

"My ego isn't the one denying it. Your body is, every time you touch me. Or when I see your eyes cloud with desire. You let me touch your body and withhold the rest from me."

He closed the distance between them.

There was no way for her to think clearly when that body was inches from hers. His scent swirled in her head, his body towering over hers. He hadn't bothered to tie his hair back after his shower, leaving it loose to curl around his collar. She loved it that way. It made her fingers itch to feel the texture. And the damn man probably knew it.

"Lust is common, especially among our kind. It means nothing." She needed to convince him, and then maybe she would believe it herself. To need more from him--from a man she knew had no more to offer, would never accept her for who she was--was just setting herself up for heartbreak. Insanity. And maybe if she told herself that often enough, it would matter.

"Ah, but it is not just anyone you want, *amor*. It is me you want inside of you." Those words whispered over her skin, caressing her body.

It was true and that scared her more than anything. No matter what her head told her, her body would crave his for the rest of her life.

"It could be anyone." She argued more against herself than him.

She stepped back when his eyes shifted, his pupils growing long. "Do not go too far, Mia. It would be unwise for another to cloud those eyes of yours."

His finger brushed down her jaw, but she hadn't seen him move. "Devan." It was a plea, to stop or never stop, she wasn't sure which.

"Lust can be assuaged, yet ours burns on. Shall we try again? How long would it take to drive the need from us?" His thumb traced her lips. His hand dropped to span her neck.

"A night?" His hand slid lower, outlining the swell of her breast with his finger. Just a touch, featherlight.

"A week perhaps?" His thumb found the peak, rubbed gently through her shirt. "Tell me, *gatita*, and it will be done."

He crushed her to him, his mouth angry, demanding. He pulled back from her, his breath hot against her lips as he spoke.

"Is it your wish to send me away then, to allow another to take my place?"

"No." She breathed out. She wanted no other, would never want another as much as she wanted him.

"How many times of taking me into you, of feeling that perfect fit as I slide in and out of you will be enough?" His hand slid up her leg, beneath her skirt, until he found what he was after.

He tore away the scrap of silk, his fingers finding her moist and ready as he slipped inside her, taking her higher.

"Never." She rubbed her body against his, unashamed of showing him the need that rushed through her. Wanting him had never been the problem.

"How long will we belong to one another?"

"Forever." The words barely formed, hardly registered in her mind as his fingers

worked her body. His thumb found that one secret spot, and she cried out as he masterfully played her.

“Not long enough.” His body crushed her against the tree, the bark biting into her back. He didn’t bother removing her clothes, just pulled her skirt up as he slid down his zipper.

“Someone could walk up on us.” She didn’t care, didn’t care if the world saw them as long as he didn’t stop. This was how she needed him, hard and quick. No time for thoughts, no time for words. Just hot and needy.

“Let them.”

She wrapped her legs around him, against his arousal. Her breasts were free and his mouth was sucking urgently as he slid inside that tight, wet glove.

She sucked in her breath as her body tightened around him. He wrapped his arms around her, protecting her skin from the biting bark as he went deeper, then deeper still, until he was completely filling her.

She wrapped her arms around the limb overhead, held on as he pounded toward a release that would surely kill them both.

His thumb moved back to her, sending her careening over, waiting until her body had finished with the aftershocks before following her over the edge.

All of his glorious hair spilled around her as he buried his face against her neck. His breath came in short bursts that leveled off before he pulled back and looked into her eyes.

“We have business for our people to see to, but when it is done, we will finish this thing between us. Until that time, remember who and what I am. I do not ask meekly for what is mine, nor do I question it. Some things just are.”

He lowered her legs to the ground, kissed her quickly on the lips as he helped her straighten her clothes. Once they had hidden the evidence of their lovemaking, or at least made the attempt, they walked toward the clearing by the river hand in hand.

## Chapter Fourteen

When they stepped into the clearing, their actions would be clear in the flush on her cheeks, the satisfied grin on his face. They might have thought they had hidden it, but to those watching nothing had ever been more evident.

They joined the others and began to make plans for their night ahead.

The Coalition had given them the general area Yancy was last seen. All that was left was to gather the hunters and search down their prey.

It had not taken long for the news to spread.

“Mia, I don’t want you on this hunt. This animal is crazed and dangerous. Let the men handle it.”

Miakoda looked over the group of misfits and smiled. Theirs was a strange family, but was turning into a family just the same. The beautiful, fierce jaguar stood proudly next to liger, jagulep, and others who had never dreamed of such acceptance. Theirs might not be built of love, but many families were formed and survived through strife.

They stood side by side when it counted, as she had learned when the call had been sent out that a hunting party was needed.

In truth, they had had to send men away, not wanting to leave the village unprotected. Besides, too many men traipsing through the jungle would only alert the prey.

Her gaze fell on Lina, and, for once, she could not find fault in her appearance. Had Devante finally gotten around to talking to the woman?

It had surprised her when Lina had answered the call to hunt almost as much as the faded jeans and T-shirt she had on. Miakoda was finding much about the woman that surprised her. Like the way her eyes kept avoiding Ethan’s, or the aggrieved look he kept sending her way. Once things were settled, she would need to think about that more deeply.

“Our women are strong, Devan, and will fight for what is right beside our males.” Miakoda’s voice was strong, and all ears turned to listen. “Do not belittle us, nor treat us as less than we are. You know we are up to this fight.”

“Damn it, Mia. Why can’t you just step back for once and allow the males to guard the females as it was meant to be without turning it into a battle?”

“Because the females do not need protecting.” She held up her hand to stop his rant. “We will, however, allow the males to lead this battle. We will not interfere unless we are needed.”

He bit back a smile. “Yes, my *reina*.” He nodded his head slightly. “You sound more regal every day.” He added for her ears only as he moved to stand beside her. “Just make sure you do not get yourself hurt, or I will be your next opponent.”

He was making progress, Miakoda mused as they started through the jungle. He was far from reformed, but giving in and allowing her to accompany the men on this hunt had been hard for him. She knew it was the first step.

The jungle was quiet, warning of danger. The group of cats spread out across the jungle floor, creeping slowly as they sought the scent of their prey. The scent of blood, of a fresh kill was in the air.

As the night grew on, the first signs of daybreak brought with it the first prickling of her power. Miakoda felt it, in the fear of the prey and the madness of the hunter. He had not killed for food this time but for the taste of blood.

A few feet further, they came upon the carcass, the shredded remains of the wild hog that had moved too slowly when hunted by madness.

At least he had died quickly. Her eyes moved to Rainer. As part lion, he was the closest in relation to the animal they were hunting. And like this animal, Rainer had been close to the hybrid madness.

She had been surprised and worried when he had requested to hunt with them.

She had almost denied him, but there had been something in his eyes. Some need to stop the lunacy he had been such a part of. She knew he would do what needed to be done to ensure no other woman was attacked. Just as his Kira had been attacked.

She had also decided that as part lion, it was justice that he meet out the punishment.

The leopard was a hunter who preferred the branches above. Everyone in their group knew this, but most of them were floor hunters. Some took to the trees, while others kept their eyes trained on the canopy above. When the attack came, it was from behind where no one had expected it.

"Mia, don't move!" Devante shouted even as her body felt the threat and froze. She did not need his warning, not when every cell in her own body screamed out to her. She had known he was there, even before Devante had spotted him.

She could feel his hate, his clawing need to destroy. He had fought too many beasts from within and had lost the battle. The man in him had long ago died and only the beast remained.

It was heartbreaking to feel what someone had done to such magnificent creatures. She wanted to help him, but knew it was too late for this one. She would find a way to live with it.

His smell surrounded her, filled her senses until she was aware of his every breath. The others had turned and were creeping back toward her with the stealth of their kind.

But every movement sent the beast closer to the edge. Dropping her barrier, she tried to take some of his rage, but he held it too tightly to him.

She knew she would need to touch him in order to soothe his energy enough to keep the madness at bay, to keep him from killing someone. If she could, it would mean he would not die in battle but in peace. She could then inject the needle that would put him at ease.

The growl warned her she would never get the chance even as the claws raked her hip. She cursed, felt the blood dripping down her leg.

Hell's fire. It was her fault. She should have been expecting the attack. Cornered animals had no choice.

He turned for a second attack, standing on his back legs while his paws swiped out at her. He was suddenly knocked to the ground. Miakoda knew, even as she turned to attack, that Lina was the only one close enough to have saved her life. Even as the

shock of that sunk in, strong paws swung out at Lina.

Miakoda jumped on his back, forgetting her plan to calm him in favor of saving Lina's life in return.

Her strong paws wrapped around his neck, her teeth sinking into fur just as the lightning bolt flew from Lina's fingers. Miakoda knew it would be a direct hit but didn't have time to drop from his back before she was knocked to the ground. The energy directed straight at his chest brought him crashing down on top of her. Guess it had been a good thing Devante had forbidden a fight between her and Lina. With power like that, Miakoda hadn't stood a chance.

The males were there, but Miakoda was partially pinned beneath him. She couldn't turn to pull the needle from the pack around her neck.

Her green eyes searched, found Devante, and knew it would be useless to count on him. His rage would prevent him from turning as long as the beast was a threat.

Ethan was her only hope. As soon as the thought appeared, and she called his name, Ethan turned to her, shifting as he grabbed the pack from Miakoda's neck.

The beast roared at him but was too busy fighting off the other men to do any real harm.

Yancy's blood fell in rivers around Miakoda as he took swipe after swipe of the claws raging at him. She could feel his pain, and the madness rose up again. She pulled at him, soaking up his energy, but the horror was too much. She shut down completely to save her own soul from madness.

The needle was pulled from the case and injected into his skin.

He was paralyzed in seconds, falling as dead weight on top of Miakoda. For a moment, the breath was knocked from her, and she wondered if she would die tonight with him.

She heard Devante cursing, felt the others lift the huge beast to free her.

She shifted, pushing away the hands that tried to help her to her feet, crawling instead to the head of the leopon. She murmured softly to calm his inner struggles and felt him finally relax.

She didn't feel the tears that fell freely down her face as she watched the animal give up the fight.

He should have been treated with more humanity, but it was the best they could do for him. He had not asked to be bred by monsters, nor was his madness something that he could have prevented. It had been destined from the moment of his conception.

She felt the weight, the enormity of her task loom over her. The hybrids were in such need. How could she ever hope to help them all? The war inside them was a constant round of battles, each leading them a step closer to the same end as this leopon.

Every thing Yancy had done, she blamed on the one who had created him. Had created them all. Sinock.

"Will he ever be punished?" Her voice was hoarse, burned with unshed tears.

"*Sí, mi amor,*" Devante responded.

She watched in silence as the men buried him deep in the jungle, offering him in death the honor he had never received in life. No words were spoken on the journey back.

Devante's arms surrounded her waist, solid and real, offering her more than words. Offering her kindness. Understanding.



Slowly, one by one, they shifted to cat and raced through the jungle.

\* \* \* \*

Miakoda opened her eyes slowly, recognizing her own exam room. No one had bothered to cover the metal table before laying her on it.

Her bare skin shivered against the cool metal. To her burning body, it was a welcome relief. The sheet draped across her body was definitely for modesty, not for warmth.

She turned her head to the right and found Lina on the table next to her. Memory came flooding back. She had blacked out just inside of the village from loss of blood.

She reached for her thigh to survey her injuries, touching the gauzy bandage.

"What's your damage?" The female voice next to her had to be Lina's, but from the sound of it, the woman was in little pain.

"Thigh. Yours?"

"I'm numb all over, thanks to a bunch of overgrown men knocking me to the ground, but that's all."

Miakoda sent up a silent thank you to the gods. The last thing she needed was for Lina to have a broken bone, or worse, to scar. A constant reminder of the debt she owed this woman.

"Why'd you do it?" Miakoda had to ask.

Lina didn't bother pretending she didn't understand. She shrugged, wincing at the movement.

"You are one of ours. Our *reina*," Lina said.

"You could have had him, if you'd allowed Yancy to kill me." Both women knew she was talking about Devante.

"No, I couldn't. If you had died, it would only have destroyed him." Lina hesitated. "You belong to each other. You did, even before you met. I was wrong to try to come between you."

Silence lingered between them.

"Thank you for that," Miakoda said.

Both women turned at the sound of raised voices coming into the room.

"What's the problem?" Miakoda sat up, leaning back on her hands.

"You're awake." Devante crossed to her, did his best to give her a dirty look. He failed miserably, showing her instead his relief that she was alive.

"You disobeyed me, and because of this you were hurt." His thumb caressed her cheek, making a mockery of his anger.

"Yeah, well, the whole obey thing seems to be a problem for me."

He sighed heavily. "Why can I incite fear into the fiercest of creatures, yet cannot earn it from a tiny *gatita*?"

"Do you really want me to fear you, Devan?"

"No." He turned to nod at the men hovering around the door. "You might as well come in since I've no choice in the matter."

"What's going on?" Miakoda watched as Miles and Ethan entered. Both men eyed Devante wearily.

"It seems there is no one to see to your stitches," Ethan said as he focused on Lina, eyeing her closely.

Yeah, there was definitely something going on between those two.

"Miles can do it. I've seen his work when he stitched up one of the villagers, and you said yourself his jaguar medicine is strong. So, what's the problem?"

"The problem is that you require stitches in a very delicate place." Devante was concerned with them causing her more pain. Her tolerance was high, thanks to years of sharing in others pain.

"The skin is no more tender on the thigh than anywhere else. He can give me a local for the pain."

"It is not the pain that causes me the problem," Devante stated flatly, and she failed to hold back a laugh.

"Yeah, well, that's because it's not your pain." She saw the utter annoyance on his face. "Look, I'm in no position to do it and unless you're volunteering, I suggest you get over whatever is bothering you or wait outside."

He frowned, letting her know she was right, but he wasn't happy about it.

"I'll remain."

\* \* \* \*

"Tell me about Sinock." They were gathered in the living room, too tired to do more than sip the cool water that Maria had brought them.

Ethan and Lina shared one sofa, close but careful not to touch. Miakoda figured they needed to be near each other but refused to admit it.

Miakoda herself was curled up next to Devante on the other sofa, his arm wrapped around her. Lando was curled up on the other end. His little arms were wrapped around the book on Pumas Devante had dug up for him.

Lando slept soundly now that he knew everyone was all right.

His concern over her had touched her more than she cared to admit. It had been a long time since she had felt she was part of a family. And though she knew the dangers of getting used to such a feeling, she figured she'd earned a little respite from reality today.

"The children have many names for him," Lina began, then hesitated as her eyes met Miakoda's. "Like devil breeder."

She felt Devante's arm stiffen around her. "You must consider, Mia, that the only knowledge of the hybrids these children have had in the past was through the rogues.

"Parents used them to frighten the children into obeying. 'Don't go into the woods, or the diablo's monster will get you.' It was one way to ensure their safety."

"My skin is tougher than the taunts of a child, Devan," she assured him.

"In the Balam Popol Vul--the jaguar book of council--our history is told. The book's existence is unknown to all but our people. As you know, we are descended from the great Maya. The Balam Gods looked down on those who had jaguar hearts and blessed them.

"Our people were once skin walkers. The Gods changed that, gave us the ability to shift without needing the pelt. Our gifts come from them, the skin walkers, as they were *bruja*."

"So we are part witch." Miakoda found the idea delightful.

"Not anymore. Now we are Nahual. A combination of many things."

"Humans call all shifters weres, but it is a grave misconception. The only true weres are the wolf," Lina said.

"Then the stories of the werewolves are true. I wondered, but would never risk

offending the Ulfric to ask.”

“Not all wolves are weres. Sinock was refused by the Alpha twenty-five years ago. The Ulfric insisted no wolf could be used in breeding. There was no way to make the wolf stronger he said and felt that crossbreeding would only weaken them.”

“Good for him,” Miakoda said.

“Yes, but his refusal angered Sinock. As he left the meeting, on a night of the full moon, Sinock cursed the first wolf Nahual he came across. He trapped the poor soul between worlds. His mind was torn between human and wolf, and eventually insanity took over.”

“Like the hybrids.” Miakoda said quietly. She could feel Devante’s eyes on her. How many souls had this monster damned, how many more would follow before they could stop him?

“There had been legends about werewolves before then, but most were exaggerated stories about the shifters. It is true the werewolf kills, that his bite can change humans. He was meant to be invincible, a monster that cannot be stopped, forced to kill and in return, creating more werewolves.”

“But silver kills him,” Miakoda said.

“A mistake of the breeder, to be sure. But the damage to the wolf has been done. The stories are nightmares for humans, and the wolf is forever feared,” Devante said.

“The curse cannot be broken?” How sad, Miakoda realized. The breeder had ruined their race in more ways than one. Even the beautiful wolf that had refused him had been damaged in the end. Everyone had paid a high price except Sinock.

“Only Sinock can break the curse. But even that could not repair the damage. Not until every werewolf is dead and the curse dies out can it truly be over.”

“So he mutated the wolf’s line after all.” The Ulfric had always been a friend to her family. The wolf was a noble creature, honorable and loyal. Their code was strict, their punishment swift. The shame of the werewolf would surely weigh heavily on them.

“So once Sinock is killed, there is a chance the curse could be broken. Maybe they will find an answer then.”

“No one knows what would happen. Where one mistake has been made, maybe there are others. We have never dealt with a skin walker with his power.”

“He’s not a skin walker,” Miakoda stated firmly.

“How do you know?” Lina asked. The two women had not mentioned what had happened between them again. Miakoda felt sure they’d said all there was to say anyway.

It felt strange not to be biting each other’s heads off and to actually be working together.

Miakoda wasn’t sure if they would ever be actual friends, but at least she didn’t have the urge to kill Lina anymore. It was something.

“Because we saw him shift from a leguar to a bird. Even if he did find the skin of a leguar, and I do not want to even think about that, he would not be able to shift so quickly to the Macaw. Skin walkers require the pelt of the animal to change, right?” Miakoda turned her head to Devante.

He nodded. “Sí.”

“He could be a *brujo*,” Ethan added.

“I don’t feel any power coming from him. No, I don’t think he’s a witch. All I

sense is hatred, madness. And something evil.”

“Maybe he really is el Diablo,” Lina said.

No one responded to that. “Whatever he is, we need to find him, and stop him,” Miakoda said.

“Oh, no problem. We’ll just hunt him down and let you take care of him, since you two seem to be old friends,” Lina drawled sarcastically. But instead of being offended, Miakoda laughed. Lina really couldn’t help being a bitch.

Ethan stared back and forth between the two women. “That’s it, you two cut it out. You’re really creeping me here.”

“You would prefer that we fight?” Lina turned her head to Ethan.

“At least it’s what we’ve come to know as normal.”

“Sorry, but you’ll get used to it,” Miakoda said. The truth was, hating Lina had taken a toll on her. All of the negative energy was hard, jealousy even harder. As long as Lina kept her hands to herself, Miakoda would welcome a truce between them.

“I guess when it comes down to it, little things like jealousy seem ridiculous,” Lina said softly.

Miakoda’s eyes flew to Lina. Had the woman read her mind, or simply felt the same as she did? Miakoda almost laughed at the absurdity. Like Lina would have any reason to be jealous of her. Even if she was sleeping with Devante, they both knew Lina’s words rang true. Devante would never love a mixed breed.

“I’m proud of you, Angelina,” Ethan added as he brought her hand to his mouth. Of the four of them, it seemed he was the most shocked by his actions. He cleared his throat, dropping her hand.

“So, what do we do now?” he asked. It was an apparent attempt to steer the conversation away from him, but as tempting as it was, they allowed it.

“What is the one thing the breeder wants the most?” Devante asked. Everyone was silent as they considered the question.

“To slaughter us all,” Ethan said in a bad attempt at humor.

“To rule us all,” Devante corrected.

“That’s right. It was his purpose for creating the hybrids in the first place,” Lina said.

“And there’s something else,” Miakoda began, rising from Devante’s chest so she could see his face. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you earlier. I believe Kira is only eighteen, nineteen at the most.”

“But that’s impossible. Sinock was banned twenty five years ago.” Ethan stopped as realization hit. “He didn’t stop breeding. Shit. He’s been doing this all along?”

“If he has, that means there could be a whole world of hybrids out there that we know nothing about.” Miakoda thought of the magnitude of that problem but just couldn’t wrap her mind around it. It was for another time. “They could be following him. Doing his bidding.”

“Maybe,” Devante said.

“Someone knows more than they’re telling us. What about the elders? They have to know something about him,” Miakoda said.

“Yes, but when I spoke to them about him, they swore to me he was no more than a man.” Devante rested his forearms on his knees and laced his fingers together.

Miakoda noticed the toll of his responsibilities in the fine lines that had appeared recently on his face.

"Do you believe them?" she asked.

"I see no reason for them to lie."

"That was no man changing shape in the jungle," Ethan added.

"So maybe he was once a man, when the elders knew him. Something must have changed." Miakoda stood, then moved to the bar and poured herself a brandy.

"I'll have one of those," Lina said as she crossed the room. Miakoda handed her the half full glass.

Miakoda's thigh ached, and she fought the urge to rub it. She kept it to herself, knowing Devante would scold and end up trying to send her off to bed if he knew. She'd refuse, he'd argue and she would end up mad at him. She reached for another glass and filled it. She wasn't in the mood to fight with him tonight.

"How are we to fight something we know nothing about?" Miakoda's voice echoed the frustration building inside of her. Questions. All their questions brought were more questions. Would she ever find answers?

"We ask someone who does." Devante stood, then crossed the room and took the glass from Miakoda's hand. After he drained the liquid, he handed it back to her. His grin was quick and charming.

"Please, help yourself." She turned to pour herself another. She was starting to feel like a bartender. "Who are you planning to ask?"

"The Gods. We'll go to the realm--"

"We? Oh no, I'm not going back there. Last time you-know-who showed up."

"We'll be together this time."

"Great. One more for him to kill." She turned the glass up herself this time and downed it in one gulp. It burned a path down her throat, but she refused to cough. Her eyes watered and finally the burning faded, leaving warmth behind. Still, it took her a minute to find her voice.

"Can't we just go to the temple and call Ixchel like the priest did?"

"The priest did not summon Ixchel," Devante reminded her. "She appeared because she was angry with him for insulting her. It would be unwise for us to anger the Goddess by summoning her to our world, then ask for help. We must go to her realm."

"Fine, then you go. That's your world anyway. You go there all the time, right? There's really no need for both of us to go." She poured another drink and took this one with her back to the sofa.

"I cannot summon Ixchel, not alone." Devante raised his brow at the drink in her hand but said nothing.

"Why?" Miakoda asked, sipping from the glass gingerly.

"She would likely ignore me, or worse, answer my summons without an escort. Itzamna would kill me if he were to catch us alone."

"Is there something about you two I should know?" She couldn't be jealous of a Goddess. Okay, she could, but what good would it do? A goddess, for hell's sake.

"That's what we need, a war between the god and goddess," Lina snapped.

"Ixchel must be summoned first. If she appears with someone other than Itzamna, we will be unable to summon him," Devante said.

"Why would she show with anyone but Itzamna?" Miakoda asked, truly confused.

"To piss him off. Or because Voltan has returned," Lina added.

Miakoda's head was beginning to swim and it wasn't from the brandy. Okay, maybe some of it was. Liquor had always had a strange effect on her, thanks to the feline blood. "Who's Voltan?"

"Ixchel's husband. Ex, if you ask her," Lina said.

"Wait. I thought she was married to Itzamna. Mother of the Bacab." Miakoda knew that much, at least.

"She is. And their four sons hold up the sky," Lina clarified.

"So she's what, screwing around on Itzamna? Sounds pretty stupid, given he's the mighty one and knows all." Miakoda thought back to the temple. The two seemed incapable of hurting each other.

"No one knows for sure, but Itzamna accuses her often." Lina settled in next to Ethan. For the first time, Miakoda really looked at Lina and Ethan.

They looked good together. The way they avoided touching each other was over-exaggerated, almost as if they were afraid of what might happen if they did.

"See, the moon and the sun were lovers. Itzamna pissed Ixchel off, by accusing her of having an affair with his brother, morning star. He exiled her to Isla Mujeres, the island of women," Lina said.

"I can see why she was pissed," Miakoda agreed.

"Yeah, he left her there for centuries. Truth was, she had been faithful to the sun. Anyway, that's where she met Voltan. He was a human hero, turned deity, and the new kid. Ixchel was bored, lonely, and looking to punish Itzamna. Voltan filled all three, so she married him.

"Trouble was, Voltan preferred to hang with Nacon, the war god, fighting battles rather than staying home with his new wife."

"She was no better off, still lonely, and missed the sun like crazy. So, she decided to go back to Itzamna. Her grandfather found out and knew that she was about to start a war between Voltan and Itzamna, so he shot lightning at her and killed her."

"What a loving family," Miakoda mumbled.

"Yeah. For like, six months, the dragon flies sang over her, until the sun came and brought her back. She told Voltan their *till death* part was fulfilled, and she followed Itzamna back to his palace. They married, raised their children and should be happy, but Itzamna is crazy jealous and accuses her regularly of being unfaithful."

"After all she went through? She should be unfaithful, just to show the idiot," Miakoda said, heat turning her face red. Wasn't it just like a man? Give him everything you have, and he blames you for something cooked up in his own mind.

"I think she feels the same way, 'cause if she's pissed at him she'll show up with someone else just to remind him she's capable. She could have anyone she chooses and they both know it. It really pisses him off. And trust me, no one wants to anger the sun." Lina chuckled, shaking her head.

Miakoda smiled. "You sound more American than I do."

Lina shrugged. "College in the States."

Miakoda stared surprisingly at Lina. "Really? You'll have to tell me about it."

"Not now," Devante interrupted before Miakoda could ask anything. "Right now, we have some place to be."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere until I get a few hours of sleep." Miakoda stood.

“You guys can play hostess to yourselves.” She turned sultry eyes, warm and inviting, to Devante. “Are you ready for bed?”

“Is that an invitation, *gatita*?” His low voice rolled over her skin, the friction igniting a burn down deep.

“No. That’ll come once we’re in bed.”

\* \* \* \*

Three hours later, Miakoda was flat on her back in bed, cursing his rotten soul. He had caught her at a weak moment, sleepy and sated after he had exhausted her with mind-numbing sex, and tricked her into agreeing to his plans. It was a bad idea. Probably one of the worst. But then, she had made so many bad ones lately, who could tell?

She turned her head on the pillow to look at Devante beside her. If they had been alone in the room, she could have come up with a hundred different things they could be doing in the bed together, and none of them included a crazed killer.

Demons hell, how could she even think about sex after the acrobats they’d just performed? Not to mention the dirty way he’d whispered against her ear, just as she was drifting off to sleep. She’d have said yes to anything without even hearing the question. Which was exactly what she had done. All because he had blown her common sense with that last orgasm. And she was thinking about doing it again.

Since it seemed to be standing room only in her bedroom, she turned back to stare at the ceiling.

When Ethan handed her the glass of mixed herbs, she closed her eyes and downed the drink, just as she had the brandy. Shame that she didn’t get the same effect from this.

Her head grew foggy. Not a bad sensation, but a pleasant little swimming as the room started narrowing. The haze grew, turning to dark gray before the smoky air floated away.

And then she saw him walking through the smoke toward her. Devante.

Not the leader of the jaguar, but the man, who only hours before had worked her body to exhaustion. His smile was devastating as he held out his hand to her. An invitation. She was mad at him. The thought to deny him came quick, but in truth she could deny him nothing.

She placed her hand in his, just as the sky darkened again.

“Ignore it. Come to me and let us see about our business here.” His warmth closed around her fingers.

He was dressed in amber silk, with threads of gold running throughout.

The sarong covered his hips but left his chest deliciously bare. He wore sandals on his feet, and his hair hung loose around his shoulders. He looked like he was a god, instead of a subject.

When Miakoda looked down at her own body, she snickered. It was obvious Devante had chosen their clothes in this world to satisfy a whim. The gossamer fabric fell gracefully from one shoulder, held together by a gold broach with a sunburst design.

The pale material was the color of the moon, sheer yet covering in all the right places. She could feel the thin gold rope that circled her head and kept her long curls out of her eyes. Her sandals matched his. Maybe such an elaborate state of dress was required for a visit to the gods, but she refused to ask. Knowing him, he had done it to please himself.

They turned down the path that would take them to the gods.

Lightning flashed across the sky as thunder shook the mountain. The slashing rain stung her exposed skin, leaving red welts behind.

Tendrils of wet hair whipped around her face as she fought to take another step against the raging wind.

Had it not been for Devante's tight grip on her hand, the savage wind would have blown her over the steep edge.

Yaluk, the lightening god, seemed pissed tonight. That wasn't her problem.

Her problem was making it up the mountain. She wouldn't think about what awaited her at the top. If she considered that, she would give in to the urge to turn tail and run. She didn't run from anything in her life. Not anymore.

Devante's warm hand squeezed hers, reminding her that she was not alone.

It seemed like hours before they reached the clearing. Their clothes and hair were dry, as if the raging storm had never been. Around them was nothing but clear sky. Here, the darkness wasn't evil, but warm and inviting. Here was Ixchel's world.

"Call her." Devante stepped back from her, giving Miakoda room. Unsure of what he wanted, she followed her gut. She raised her arms over her head and felt the glow of the moon surround her, felt the power seep down into her body. It stroked her skin, like a caress from moon beams.

"Ixchel, goddess of the moon, I call to you." The wind blew gently across her face, lifting her hair, as she turned toward the moon. "We seek your guidance and summon you to appear."

The sweet scent of night surrounded them. Night was so much more than the darkness. It was a world of serenity. A place brought to life by the creatures that inhabited it. A perfect balance of dew-dampened leaves, musical song, and unleashed power. Of magic and mystery, secrets and seduction.

The bright light was beautiful against the night. A thousand stars blazed. When Miakoda opened her eyes, Ixchel stood before her. Itzamna was by her side.

"What is it that you seek that you would summon me?"

Miakoda bowed before them, then stood slowly to meet Ixchel's glare.

"It is the breeder. We need to know how to defeat him."

"Walk with me." Ixchel held out her hand, motioning Miakoda to follow. It was not an offer she could refuse, even if she had wanted to. She didn't. It was the reason she was here.

As the two walked away, behind them the sun rose to shine brightly in the sky. It seemed the power of the moon brought night even to the sun.

"You wish to defeat Sinock?"

"Yes." At the goddess's nod, Miakoda continued. "Devan's powers--are they strong enough to defeat him?"

The goddess stared at Miakoda, her dark eyes finding answers to questions Miakoda had yet to ask. "What of your own powers?"

"My powers are weak compared to Devan's. I can absorb emotion, but Sinock is too powerful. I can't take his evil in without going mad."

"You have the power of Luna. You rule the night. Yet you still do not understand what this means. Devante is powerful, yes, as he rules the day. He can call on many gods, through Itzamna and Kinich Ahau. On his own, he would stand a chance



of destroying Sinock. But it is not for him to do.”

“I don’t understand. He won’t defeat him?”

“It is you who Sinock seeks most of all. Do you not know why?”

Miakoda shrugged, afraid of the answer. But still, she spoke her fears aloud.

“Because he created me from revenge, I guess. Or maybe because I was his first creation after the banishment and he sees me as his.”

“Sinock is not sentimental, Miakoda. He cares not that you were his first. He wants you for the power you hold. To possess you is to possess that power. You must look inside yourself to unleash all that you are, all that you have become. Two halves of one soul. Only then can Sinock be defeated.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You will understand when it is time.” Ixchel stopped, turned back to the men. Miakoda watched her face soften.

“You love him.” Miakoda was astonished that it was so easy to read the Goddess. But love was evident in her longing look.

The goddess laughed, musical and magic. “Of course.”

“Yet you...,” Miakoda hesitated, not wanting to offend.

“Yet I torture him with others when I am angry at him,” Ixchel finished for her. “Love is a strange anomaly. It can make otherwise normal men perform in the strangest of ways.” Again, the goddess laughed. “Imagine what it can do to Gods? It has been said that I am often moody. That I can even be dangerous, deadly when angered. It is true, I suppose.” She shrugged, resigned to the truth. “Nothing angers me more than Itzamna when he accuses me of straying.

“I am faithful to him, as he is to me. He knows this, deep inside. But he is a jealous one and cannot help lashing out. I appear with others to remind him that I can and will remove myself from him if he does not contain that jealousy. It nearly destroyed us once.

“You have questions about your man as well. I wish that I could tell you all will be right with your world one day, my child. It is not for me to decide. Trust in yourself, and follow the path.”

They had stopped walking and stood gazing out over the valley below. From their height, the tree tops below joined, forming a carpet of green.

Miakoda spotted a waterfall to the right of them, the water cascading down the smoothed edges of the rock. It fell hundreds of feet, the pool lost beneath the trees.

The sounds of the rain forest mixed with the night calls, a magical song made to soothe. She felt a peace within herself that had been missing for so long.

When she heard the rustling beside her, she turned just as Ixchel slipped her hand into Itzamna’s. Miakoda blinked, surprised to find that the men had joined them. She smiled at Devante when he stepped beside her, but it fell quickly away when she noticed his scowl. Obviously his talk with Itzamna hadn’t gone so well.

There was no flash of light this time when the gods left them, just a sizzle of energy before she was left standing alone with Devante.

“Did you learn anything?” Devante asked.

“Nothing I understand. Sinock is after my powers. What about you? Does Itzamna speak in riddles, as the goddess does?”

Devante looked off into the darkness. Itzamna had told him there would come a

time when he wouldn't be able to save Mia. That only by his trust in her would she be saved. "Nothing that will aid us."

\* \* \* \*

Time was closing in on them. Miakoda could feel the power of the moon strengthen as it neared full phase.

The others grew agitated, expectant. Tempers flared hotly, but that was not unusual. The full moon brought out the best in some, the worst in others.

She just wanted an end to it. Tomorrow night the moon would be full, the night its energy was greatest, the time when magic gained its greatest power.

If she had any chance of beating Sinock, that would be the best time.

It would be his, as well. She had no doubt that he would try to work the power of the moon in his favor.

His spells were no match for her true lunar connection, and the moon would never turn against her.

She had too much to lose, and she had already given that monster more than enough. He wouldn't win.

It would be arrogant to believe it would be an easy battle. His powers had been honed, strengthened for years. Hers were as young and untried as a virgin. At least if she failed, she could not be sacrificed as one. Certainly not after the way Devante had stroked and played her body the last few weeks.

Lifting the glass to her lips, she sipped the cool tea. From the limestone balcony, she watched Devante below as he spoke softly to Ethan. With her hearing, she could easily hear them going over every detail of tomorrow night's plan.

Rainer had offered himself as bait, putting word out that he wanted to join with Sinock.

The idea was that the breeder wouldn't be able to refuse the help of the liger in bringing down the jaguars and the hybrids.

Rainer would stroke Sinock's ego as he set the trap, offering to bring Miakoda to him as a gesture of his loyalty. As far as plans went, it had merit. She knew it wouldn't work.

Sinock was no fool, and he would be expecting a trap.

She had argued with Devante to allow her to be the bait. Sinock might still expect something, but with her powers as the prize and within reach, he wouldn't be able to resist.

She had tried to tell him that Ixchel had said that only her powers could defeat Sinock. She didn't know what Itzamna had told him, but he had stuck to his decision and refused to budge. Had flat out refused to even discuss it. When Ethan and Nigel had sided with him, she knew she didn't stand a chance.

Instead, she had concocted a plan of her own. If Sinock refused to take Rainer's bait, she would offer him the one thing he wanted the most. Her.

As if sensing her presence, Devante lifted his head, met her stare. His look wasn't friendly and warm, but one of heat and possession. She allowed the same heat, the same possession to fill her own. A blatant invitation. She smiled when he left Ethan, knowing he would be joining her soon.

His hand was warm on her shoulder, and she leaned her head back to rest against him. She should be angry for his refusal to trust her plan, but she wasn't. The need to

protect burned strongly in him and was one of the things she had come to love about him.

When his hand traveled down to capture her breast, she felt her nipple harden. He could do that to her, with just the slightest touch. Her body was so attuned to his that his need could reach her from across a room.

She stood, turned to face him, and slid her arms around his neck.

Tonight, she wanted no intrusion into their world. No battle to come, no need from their people. Just her and her lover, exploring each other's bodies.

She kissed his neck just below his ear and felt his pulse quicken. Giving in to her own desire, her tongue licked the salt from his skin. His taste was intoxicating.

"Will you make love to me, Devan?" Her voice was thick with need.

"A thousand times at least." His hands wrapped her waist, lifting until she wrapped her legs around him. His strength made light of her weight as he carried her through the double doors. He didn't stop at her bed but carried her down the hall.

"I'll make love to you, *querida*, as only a true mate can. As a man makes love to his wife. But this time it will be in *my* bed."

Her heart pounded. She couldn't see the significance of it but knew making love in his bed, his own private world, meant something.

As he lowered her to his massive bed, she didn't care what his reasons were. Not when that wonderful mouth of his was on hers, tasting, demanding more. When it trailed down her neck, her head fell back in complete compliance.

Her body belonged to him, had since his first touch. There was no point in denying it when it so easily made a mockery of her.

His hands lifted her shirt, kissed the skin along the edgy lace of her bra.

"We are one Mia, you and I. There will never be another for us." In seconds, her skirt was on the floor, soon joined by any cloth barrier standing between them.

Then they were gloriously naked, skin against skin. He found the moist welcoming between her legs, working his thumb against her until she was begging him to enter her.

He braced his body above her, hovering just at the entrance until she wanted to scream with frustration.

"Say it, Mia. Say you'll always be mine, always want me for yours. Tell me you want this forever."

"Forever. Devan, please." She arched against him, trying to cool a fire that was burning too deep. When he entered her with one stroke, the fire only grew. She heard the roar, wondered which of them had made the sound.

He was driving against her, molding them into one with every stroke. She cried out, desperate for more, fearing it would be too much.

His mouth covered hers. Crushing, melting together their every breath until they breathed as one, beat as one.

When her release came, the force of it pushed her to the edge. For a moment it was as if she was inside him, could feel his release inside her, and feel his need to consume.

He rolled to his back, never pulling from her as she lay against his chest. Their breathing leveled as he rubbed his callused hands down her arm.

His heart beat against her ear. His scent, their scent, mingled together and filled her head as she closed her eyes. Locked in his arms, nothing could ever reach her. She

was safe. Safe from monsters and nightmares. Safe from loneliness. Sleep took her quickly.

\* \* \* \*

Voices drifted to her as she opened her eyes. Devante tucked the sheet around her shoulders and smiled down at her.

He was dressed in faded jeans and a royal blue pullover. She loved the color against his dark skin. Her eyes followed the voice near the door, and she found Ethan hovering there uncomfortably.

"I have to leave you, Mia, but I'll return as soon as I can. There is trouble in the village."

"I'll come with you." The sheet slipped as she started to rise, and annoyance flashed briefly on Devante's face. Grabbing the sheet, he pulled it up and draped it around her neck.

"There's no need. Its nothing, children playing pranks I'm sure. Some graffiti painted on some of the huts. I need to see who is behind it before the council gets wind of it."

He stood over her, clearly not ready to leave. "I'm leaving Ethan here until I return." Devante nodded toward the door where Ethan leaned casually against the jamb.

"I'll be fine. I'm sure Ethan has other things to see to."

"Not a thing. At least nothing that can compare to guarding over such a lovely body." Ethan advanced into the room.

At Devante's low growl, she laughed. "Stop it you two. It's too early for nonsense, and I haven't had my coffee."

Devante poured a cup from the pot Maria had left and handed it to her. Her eyes went glassy.

"Coffee? Oh, thank the Gods." She inhaled the wonderful scent and closed her eyes as that first sip slid down her throat. She moaned. Heaven.

"Likes her coffee, doesn't she?" Ethan asked, clearly amused.

Devante's eyes cut to Ethan. "You can keep an eye on things from the other side of that door." He planted a quick kiss on her forehead, though she hardly acknowledged the gesture or moved the cup from her lips.

Her eyes opened. "You two scoot. After I empty this cup, I'm refilling it and taking it below to the river, where I'm going to ignore the world for an hour. If I see either of you before that hour is up, it won't be pretty. Now you have about two seconds before I drop this sheet and get out of this bed."

Devante chuckled as the door slammed behind Ethan. "You have him running scared."

She did just as she had threatened, dropping the sheet and luxuriating in the heat that filled Devante's eyes as they trailed down her body.

"It's not me he's afraid of." She took another step toward him. "Doesn't look like you are afraid of me either."

She smiled her cat's smile, sexy and daring. She could hear his pulse quicken, see the small drops of sweat on his forehead.

"You're wrong, Mia. I'm terrified." The grin fell from her face when she saw the fear staring back at her.

She closed the distance between them, cupped his cheek in her palm. Fear didn't

belong on such a strong face, and she didn't like it there one damn bit.

"What are you afraid of Devan?"

"Waking up without you." His arms reached for her, molded her against his body.

The intense energy of his fear filled her, his desperation to hold on to her beat at her. She pulled her head back, looked into his eyes. "Lucky for you I'm a late sleeper. There'll never be a reason for you to wake up without me beside you." When his lips met hers it was with a tenderness that brought tears to her eyes. This was her king, her mate. Right or wrong, they were one.

## Chapter Fifteen

There was no sign of Ethan on her way through the cave. But then, she had learned he could fade into the surroundings easily enough.

She padded silently through the layers of rock, the cave winding deeper into the earth. Even in the muted light, she could see the tiny figures covering the ceiling. The bats were harmless.

The temperature seemed to drop with her every step, the cool air a wonderful relief to the sweltering heat of the jungle.

Moisture condensed on the walls, but she didn't dare touch. Down deep, the cave was still alive and every action had a price. Her touch could cause a deadly reaction in the organisms that lived there. She would never damage such a precious gift.

She finally found the room she was looking for.

The sun was already high, filling the room with light. Dipping her feet in, she finished her coffee before diving in to the warm water.

She would never be able to take a shower again. Nor squeeze into a tiny bathtub. This place had spoiled her in many ways.

Floating on her back, the water lapped over her stomach as she remembered another time, another swim. That one had ended up with her in Devante's arms, but then most things these days did. It was the last thing she would ever complain about.

Something had changed in him the last few days. He was no more possessive or attentive than usual, yet she felt a desperation to it. As if he were just waiting for her to disappear from his life. Even if she wanted to, there was no way she could ever leave him. Or her people. Somewhere along the way, she had fallen in love with them.

Last night, he had called her his mate. She couldn't argue against it any longer. For whatever reason, the fates had seen fit to mate them. No one could fight the fates and win.

Whatever heartache lay ahead of her, she would follow the path to it. She had no real choice. At least her time with Devante would be worth the pain.

But the price would be high. She would never hold her own child. That was what staying with Devante would cost her. Regardless of his feelings for her, he would never accept her completely. She would always be a hybrid.

He refused to even acknowledge that side of her. For that alone, she would never risk having a child he might reject.

Any child born to her could easily carry the leopard traits. He would certainly carry the genes. Could in fact be born resembling the leopard. Sure, the chances were small, given Devante's blood. But the danger still existed. She might be willing to risk her own heart but not that of her innocent child.

Still, she couldn't help but respect Devante. Wouldn't he find it amusing to know that he reminded her of her own father, the mighty leopard? Like her father, Devante had struggled to keep his family together against staggering odds. His family of jaguars.

Like most large cats, jaguars were loners. Most roamed the earth alone, making

them vulnerable to attack--much like the hybrids.

The lions were an exception, having banded together. The jaguar people, it turned out, were another.

Even the males had gathered and remained to protect their own. Devante had done that.

Through the foundation, he had found a common goal for their focus. Tension ran high among them on occasion, but in whole, it was a success. And his people were benefiting from it, as well as the jaguar animals.

It was growing common for the Nahual males to mate with the females and remain with them to raise their young. Some were even choosing to perform marriage ceremonies, old or new. Their young were now protected and the extinction that had threatened their race when the ancients had perished was now a thing of the past.

They would succeed in saving the jaguar animals as well. And she would help them to accomplish it.

Everything she had come to care about was here, giving her no reason to leave. No reason, except love.

Miakoda had long ago realized the bond her parents had formed was a rare thing. Most people lived a lifetime, married and raised families, yet never knew the kind of love found when two souls joined as one. A true soul mate. The rumor that her parents had found it was true.

She would survive without it. Devante cared about her, and she knew it would be a good life with him. She loved him and it would be enough. Fairytales only happened in books.

A shadow fell over the open ceiling, covering the room in sudden darkness. The deep-throated chuckle sent her blood curdling in her veins.

She turned back, swimming quickly toward the rock ledge, very aware of her vulnerable state.

She didn't have time for the jeans she had brought, but just grabbed instead the T-shirt and shorts she had worn down.

When she turned back to the water, the shadow was gone and the room was once again full of light.

She hadn't imagined it. The threat had been real, and she fought back panic. There was only one way out of this room.

There was another opening across the water, deep below the surface where the river went deeper into the ground. Devante had told her no creature, man or animal, could enter through the small hole filled with water. She wasn't going to wait around and see if he had been right.

Her wet feet slipped on the smooth rock as she ran up through the cave. She had to reach Ethan and the others, had to make sure no one had harmed Lando.

When she reached the first bedroom door, she knew she was too late.

Ethan lay face down, his body on its side against the rock wall. She ran to him and rolled him over gently.

There was blood on his face, running down from his forehead. His eyes were dazed, his pupils dilated. His voice startled her.

"Get out of here. Maria has Lando hidden safe. Get to Devan, tell him its Sinock." Ethan gasped, fighting to maintain consciousness long enough to help her.

As if his name alone had conjured him up, Sinock appeared in the passageway behind Ethan.

"Yes, run to your king. Tell him the evil one has arrived," Sinock mocked them as he walked toward her, each step clicking against the stone floor.

She backed away slowly as Ethan made a grab for Sinock's feet. His hands were merely kicked away.

Miakoda had nowhere to run, no way out except through the cenote. She knew she would be trapped in there.

She felt Ethan in her mind, just a stirring at first but growing stronger.

*"Mia, I can't call out to Devan. I need your strength to reach him."*

She felt the mind link connect. *"Do it."*

*"Devan...."* Ethan's voice drifted off. It was obvious Ethan was fading fast, his powers barely a brush of shadow in her mind.

*"Devan!"* Miakoda screamed out to him as she entered the cavern. She heard Devan answering her call, heard Ethan trying to tell him of Sinock's attack.

*"The village is under attack by the demons. Keep Mia safe, I'll get there as quick as I can."* There was no response from Ethan. *"Ethan, damn it, answer me!"*

*"Stop yelling at him. He can't answer you. He's dead. I know he's dead. His head was bleeding, and I shouldn't have left him."* Shrieking the words, she rambled on as her mind raced to find a place to hide.

*"Mia, calm down."*

*"Easy for you to say. You don't have a psycho from hell on your heels."* She dove into the water, swam for the other side.

*"How bad is Ethan?"* Devante kept his voice calm, the smooth inflection warming her skin, soothing her soul. Reason filled her head once again.

*"I don't know. He can't be dead, we can still hear each other."*

He hesitated, as if judging her control over the fear. *"We are connected through your power, not Ethan."*

*"Damn it, damn it."* She pulled herself up onto the ledge. *"Why can't it be night, when I have power? Why does this shit happen when I'm defenseless?"*

*"Where are you? Where is Sinock?"*

*"I'm in the cenote, and he's on my tail. Any suggestions would be helpful."*

*"I'm on my way, but I won't make it in time. You must swim through the opening. It'll take you out of the cave."*

*"You said no one could fit through there."*

*"I know, but you're small and you can fit. Do it Mia, now. It's the only chance you have. I'll meet you on the other side."*

She dove back into the water just as Sinock's body made a splash on entering. *"It's dark, I can't see the opening."*

*"You can see, let your eyes adjust. Relax your mind and see the light coming from the sun."*

*"I see it."* Miakoda pulled her body through the small hole, barely squeezing through. Just as she thought she'd cleared it, she felt the tug on her foot. She was being pulled back out of the opening.

The struggle forced water into her lungs as she fought to free herself from Sinock's tight grip. *"Devan, I can't break from him."*



*“Fight Mia! I’m almost there.”*

She could hear his breathing, feel his racing heart. She knew he was trying to reach her. She had to trust that he would.

Blood coated her hands from the sharp rock that scratched her fingers as she tried to find purchase.

She tried to call out to Devante, but her head was spinning, her world going black.

\* \* \* \*

Devante turned as another demon attacked and drew his powers like a gun. All hell was breaking out in the village, and it was up to him to save his people. It was going to cost him Mia.

The demons of Xibalba, Vucub Caguix, and Hun Came had obviously united with Sinock’s mind-ravished hybrids against the jaguars.

Unlike the ones that lived among his people, these hybrids were lost, their souls given in to madness. Or maybe they had been born that way.

Devante was almost glad Mia wasn’t here to witness it. It would rip her soft heart apart to see what had been done to her people.

Sinock had gotten creative with his breeding, once he was free of the coalition’s restrictions. These were no more than monsters, bred for destruction and fear. The true nightmares.

He watched in horror as a creature, a frightening mix of wolf and leopard, pounced on Nigel’s back. The dark cat grabbed the muzzle only seconds before the razor-sharp teeth would have ripped him to shreds.

Devante heard the neck snap as Nigel flipped him to the ground. With laser precision, Nigel’s claw ripped open the chest to jerk the still beating heart from the body.

No one had time to decipher the best way to kill the enemy, but none of them could survive without a heart.

Blood ran down Nigel’s arm, but he signaled to Devante that no harm was done.

Devante had his own battles to contend with. The hybrids and jaguars were unevenly matched against the evil they fought.

The best Devante could do for them was to take out Hun Came, just as he had done to Vucub Caguix. He would send them both back to their hell.

His mind called out to Mia once again even as the claws raked his chest. The fire burned hot as air blew across his torn flesh. Once blood filled, the fire turned to pain. Pain he could handle.

Devante had not felt Mia, had not been able to reach her since she had faded out during her struggle with Sinock.

Fear and worry tore at him. He needed to reach her quickly and didn’t have time to toy with a demon.

In order to get the demons to leave Xibalba, the place of fright, Sinock would have had to promise them something they could never get a taste of in their hell. And Devante knew exactly what that had been.

The taste of power, the taste of blood. The blood of the Jaguar Nahual was a rare thing for a demon from hell. But even that paled compared to the blood of the hybrid. In them, the demon could taste not one, but two beasts. The power would be twice that of the Jaguar. It was doubtful that most of the hybrids even knew what lay dormant inside of them. And there was no doubt that once the demons had finished off Mia’s hybrids,

they would turn on Sinock's own creations.

Even Mia didn't understand the power she held. She would learn, in time, just how powerful her blood really was. Not just the blood of the jaguar moon, but the blood from a leopard king, as well.

Devante had never acknowledged that side of her existed, much less told her that it held unlimited power. She would need that power now, if she was to defeat the monster.

He turned his attention back to Hun Came. The blow to the demon's cheek that Devante had delivered lay open, the blood around the edges turning to black.

Other gashes leaked blood on his body, some made by Devante and some left from others who had fought against the demon. He knew none of the others had survived.

Devante wasn't about to join them. The razor-sharp and ragged teeth of Hun Came snapped out at him, their strength capable of crunching through muscle and bone with one snap.

Devante could still hear the screams of the men who had lost arms and legs to this demon, their bloody limbs tossed aside like the useless garbage they had become. The blood bath had run deep.

He lashed out, his own sharp claws raking down the demon's chest. It only added more blood to the flood of red. It was not the way to defeat this demon.

Gathering the fiery gas of the sun in his hands, he shot the ball of fire straight at Hun Came's heart. Surprise registered on the twisted face as his piercing screams shook the village. Before the demon's carcass could hit the ground, he shattered into a million particles of dust to be carried off by the gust of wind. He was, once again, banished to Xibalba.

Devante called out to Nigel, "I'm going after Mia. You got this?"

Nigel's smile only enhanced the death in his eyes. "It is as good as done. Find the *reina* and kill the *híbrido*."

\* \* \* \*

Miakoda opened her eyes gingerly, the pounding ache in her temple competing with the burning in her fingers. She focused her eyes, adjusting them to the darkness.

She was in a cave but not the one she had begun to call home. The floor beneath her was not stone but damp earth.

Her wet clothes had turned the dirt to mud, clinging to her arms and legs as it dried.

She was alone, except for the vampire bats that circled above, as upset by her presence as she was by theirs. These were not the harmless bats of her own cave, but hungry little creatures with a thirst for blood. Their tiny teeth were the least of her worries. They had detected the scent of her blood coating her hands. Dinner delivery.

Reaching for the large rock behind her, she pulled herself up to lean against the wall. One of the bats grew brave, diving toward her. She batted him away. It wouldn't be long before the others followed. She couldn't fight them all.

The trip here might have been a blur, but she knew who had brought her to this place. Too much inhaled water and not enough air left her head swimming.

Sinock was a much bigger threat to her than the bats. Shaking off the final effects, she focused her attention on the one person that mattered.

“*Devan.*” His name was a whisper in her mind. She didn’t know if she could reach him, if she had the powers that Ethan had. Her mother had been a mind walker. Had she passed that same gift on to her daughter?

“*Mia? Where are you, why have you not answered me? Has he hurt you?*”

Finding the link, holding it open between them was a struggle. “*I’m okay. How about Ethan?*”

“*He’s with Lina and Miles. He’s alive, that’s all I know. Where are you?*”

“*I don’t know. In a cave, down deep, I think.*”

“*The entire village will soon be searching, Mia, but there are at least a dozen caves. You’ve got to give me more.*” His desperation bled through to her.

“*I don’t have more. It’s dark, I don’t remember anything.*”

She opened herself up, soaking up any energy she could find. “*There’s little energy here. Just Sinock’s leftover anger. And elation. Shit. I hate to see him happy.*”

“*He won’t be for long. He’ll be dead before this night is done.*”

“*The villagers. You said there was an attack. How bad?*”

“*We need to concentrate on getting you home,*” he barked, his voice booming inside her pounding temple. “*Concentrate. Help me find you, damn it.*”

“*Don’t snipe at me.*” She pushed to her feet. She walked to the entrance of the cavern, and looked out. “*The cave doesn’t seem to go any further than this. Only one way out.*”

“*Describe the room.*”

“*Not much of a room. More like the end of a passageway that just suddenly ends.*” She started moving in the only direction she could. “*It feels like I’m walking up, an incline of sorts.*” Even with her night vision, it was hard to make out much in front of her. She slid her hands along the cool, damp walls of the cave. Just that touch grounded her.

“*Don’t go looking for trouble. Stay where you are until I get there,*” he snapped again. His tone was really starting to annoy her.

“*We don’t even know where I am. What’s the difference in looking for trouble or waiting on it?*” She couldn’t wait for help and give the bats time to attack. There were thousands of them.

She saw the light ahead. When she entered the room, it astounded her.

“*It looks like a cathedral. Beautiful. The ceiling has to be thirty, forty feet high with torchlight exploding from the shimmering crystals. The room is a circle, the rough edges worn smooth. I can feel something here. Sacrifices. There were sacrifices here.*” Her voice rushed out even as her mind said the words to him. “*Ceremonies. Dancing. It’s a door to one of the hells. I can feel it. Find the door,*” she told him.

The shadows flickered, swelled until they filled the room. The air grew foul, obnoxious with the smell of decaying flesh and stale blood. Of death. Yeah, evil possessed a stench.

Miakoda closed her eyes, focusing only on the air flowing in and out of her lungs. The tightness lessened. She didn’t need to open her eyes to know he was there.

Night was as much a part of her as the air, the darkness an old friend. One way or another, it would end tonight.

She opened her eyes and saw only black, and she knew this darkness was sinister, vile.

His silhouette sharpened, cleared as he came into view. The harsh line of his jaw, the razor-sharp teeth, and those malevolent eyes. Sinock was in his true form tonight.

Energy sizzled against her skin, rousing her cat once provoked. She allowed her to surface, but stopped her short of taking physical form. The strength of her cat was not what would defeat Sinock.

Devante was still with her, connected fully with her mind. He would see what she saw, feel what she was feeling. And if she died while he was tied to her, he would experience the same fate.

She knew Sinock would find a way to reach him through her. The only way to ensure his safety was to make certain he was beyond Sinock's reach. He would have to be disconnected from her completely.

*"Don't even consider it. You cannot defeat him alone and you will only succeed in following his wishes."* Devante's tone was harsh, even in her mind. As if he heard her, he softened his thoughts. *"He plays you, gatita. He wants you alone and fearful. We will beat him, but we will do it together."*

*"You are my one weakness, the very thing he can use to hurt me. Removing that will make me stronger."*

*"You will never be stronger without me."*

"Excellent my dear." The voice startled her, causing her to drop her connection with Devante. She spun, found Sinock hovering just feet behind her. How did he do it? No one ever got the advantage over her, sneaking up without her knowing they were there. Yet, this one had done it again.

She forced a smile on her face, knew she only managed a thin line. Good enough. As long as she wasn't cowering in fear.

She sent her mind searching, found Devante's once more. *"Stay with me."* Her mind whispered as she faced Sinock.

*"Don't drop me again. Gods, but you'll be the death of me. Open up your mind, let me see what you see."*

*"I'm a little busy here. You'll have to look for yourself,"* she snapped back at him.

To Sinock, she appeared poised and calm. "What is this place? You wanted me here, you must have a reason."

"Was it not your intention to offer yourself as bait?" Sinock asked.

She heard the sharp intake of breath, but didn't have time to explain to Devante.

"Yes, I know all about your little trap. The hybrids are my people. I created them. I live in their souls. Just as I live in yours, Miakoda. Your minds are easy to invade." He hadn't reached her mind. Her block must be holding, otherwise he would have known Devante was there. Or maybe he did know. Maybe he would destroy them both.

*"Stop it!"* Devante snapped.

"Does it matter where we are?" The image he projected to the world was just a shell. The real man, the monster that he was, was evident in his cold eyes. The eyes of death.

She shrugged with an apathy she certainly didn't feel. "Doesn't matter. I can kill you here as easily as anywhere else."

Sinock's laughter filled the cavern. "Ah, I will enjoy you for years to come. This

is not just any place you stand, but before the door to Metnel.” The worst of the hells. With a choice of nine, it would be her luck to be stuck with the worst.

*“I’ve got it. Listen to me Mia, don’t antagonize him. It’ll take me a bit to reach you, just stall.”*

Stall. Yeah right. How in the hell was she supposed to stall a lunatic whose only interest was in killing her?

*“Talk him to death,”* Devante muttered. And Gods help her, she wanted to laugh. Only he could do that to her. It was exactly what she needed to fight off Sinock’s negative emotion.

“What is it you want from me, Sinock?”

“So you have learned of me. Good, it will save precious time. You will join with me, Miakoda, and rule beside me.”

Devante’s curses filled her head, distracting her.

*“Confronting him is not stalling,”* he snarled.

“Sorry Sinock, but I’m spread a little thin at the moment. Check back with me.” She turned, started to walk away. She knew she wouldn’t get far, but even a foot of distance between them was better than standing so close.

She desperately wanted to breath air that wasn’t filled with his stench.

The force of his power spun her around, locked her into place. Her arms flung out to her side, frozen as if chained there. His chuckle did nasty things to her pulse.

“Rule with me or bow to me, there is little difference. First, I will take your powers, then you will be sacrificed to Ah Puch. There will be little left for him when I have finished with you, but he receives so few sacrifices these days he will not mind overmuch.”

The slash across her wrist appeared suddenly, though she had not seen any movement from him. It stung, like a thousand tiny drops of salt poured into her open flesh. Blood ran down her arm, dripped to the dirt below. She watched as the ground absorbed it, greedy for the power from the overspill.

“Must not waste such treasured things.” He moved then, as if floating above the ground. Ever slowly toward her. Self-preservation had her jerking against the unseen restraints, even though she knew it was useless.

“What are you?” She heard Devante’s curses in her mind, ignored them so they wouldn’t distract her.

“I am all things. I am the vampire who walks in the light, the Nahual with many animal forms. I summon the gods of the underworld, of the deepest of hells.” His voice emanated power, echoed against her skin, his evil seeping into every pore. She felt it squeezing her lungs.

“And how do you do these things?” Her words were strangled.

“Why, by blood of course. Blood is the answer to all things. The blood of the vampire gives me his powers, but none of his weakness. The blood of the werewolf gives me the ability to shift, as the blood of Nahuals gives me their animal form. The blood is the secret to complete power.”

“It is why you created the hybrids. For food.”

“Not for food, for strength. Their blood is the strongest. One sip and I have the power of two great animals instead of one. And from you I’ll have even more. The power of the moon, the blood of Ixchel. Before I am done I will have the blood of the

sun as well.”

She would never allow it. Her blood, the blood of Ixchel, would never be used to harm the sun. To harm Devante. She would bleed out, watch it drain into the dry earth first. Her heart rate increased, pumping blood coursing through her body. The flow increased, the blood flowing from her wrist.

“No!” Miakoda squeezed her eyes shut against the pain as Devante’s scream beat inside her head.

*“I won’t have to bleed to death. Your yelling in my pounding head will kill me first.”* The pain eased, then subsided completely. She could have kissed him.

*“I’m holding you to that.”*

The thought drifted across her mind, his voice a soft caress. Just his touch of warmth was enough to slow her heart beat.

*“Call Ixchel,”* Devante demanded.

*“Go away and let me handle this.”* It was dusk, only minutes away from total darkness. Her powers couldn’t be at full. Not yet.

She needed midnight to be at full lunar power, when the moon was highest in the sky. It was still hours away.

Ixchel had told her she would have to be the one to defeat Sinock. It could only be done by embracing all that she was. Two halves of one soul. Half leopard, half jaguar? But she had embraced that part of herself years ago.

No, there was something more. Embrace what she had become. What had she become? Leader of the hybrids, queen to the jaguar. Devante’s mate. Two halves of one soul. Could it be possible? His soul. Hers. Soul mates.

Miakoda knew that during the full moon, the sun and moon were in a straight line, with earth in the center of them. If it were possible, she could not only pull power from her moon, but power from Devante’s sun too. It might be enough. It had to be.

Bony fingers grabbed her wrist. She closed her eyes, tried to summon the power to break from his hold.

Sinock’s breath was hot on her skin, and she shook even as sweat ran down her back.

She opened her eyes, watching as the serpent tongue lapped at the blood running down her arm. Her skin burned like the fires of hell.

Stained teeth grinned as thin lips covered her wound, drank greedily.

She didn’t want Devante in her mind, anywhere near Sinock. He could use her to hurt him, and she wouldn’t be able to bare it.

*“You’ll never hurt me, Mia. Now call her, damn it!”* Devante’s voice broke through. But she paid it little attention. She didn’t need him to tell her. She knew what she had to do.

Miakoda had to call down the moon’s power and harness the sun. She couldn’t wait until midnight. By then, they would be dead.

The sun had set, replaced with the moon. The night had come. She could feel it in her veins. Feel it in the blood pumping through her heart. From the blood draining from her body.

Lifting her head toward the heavens, her arms still locked out at her side, she closed her eyes and blocked out everything but the night.

The sounds, the scents were hidden from her, but they lived inside her soul. She

could feel the power of the full moon. Her blood pumped faster, her heartbeat increasing as the power filled her.

Her skin tingled, electrified. Sinock jerked from her, the stench of his burning skin filling the air.

"Ixchel. Ixchel, I call to you." Her voice echoed across the cavern, repeating the words again and again.

"Stop it, you fool." Sinock struck out at her, grabbed her around the waist.

She racked him, in an age old move she'd learned in high school. Humans were good for something. His face was red with rage, his energy seeping into her, joining with her own. He would be shocked to know that his anger added just the energy she needed to free his hold on her. Near bursting, she raised her arms high.

"Ixchel, Goddess of the Moon." Blood ran down her arm, flowing down her chest. She felt it beneath her shirt, dripping from the sunstone above her heart.

She heard Devante's chant to Itzamna, soft, but strong, filling her mind as he called to his God. He was the mighty one, and didn't need the sun to command his power. Locked together, their energy filled her, hammering against her skin.

Bright light filled the room, blinding and hot. Her arms still extended, she turned in a slow circle, power emanating from her every pore. She was the light, the dark. The sun, the moon. She was the power of all things. Her energy grew, and shot from her in a blast of fire that burned all in its path, leaving nothing but ashes behind.

The shock waves of energy knocked her off her feet.

When the light dimmed, she opened her eyes. Sinock was gone. The energies that washed over her were pure. Warm.

Before her stood Itzamna and Ixchel. Ixchel nodded her approval, then stepped into Itzamna's embrace.

The jaguar raced into the room, Devante shifting to human form. He stopped only inches from her.

She wanted to touch him, to know that he was real. Safe. He was her breath, her heart. Her soul.

He reached for her, pulling her to her feet as he crushed her against his chest. It felt like home.

"I cannot take many more scares from you, *gatita*."

He wanted her, she knew it was true. He might grow to love her, as she had grown to love him. It would have to be enough for now. She had no choice but to accept it. She could never leave him. He was everything.

*"No, you will never leave me, mi amor. My soul would wither and die without my moon to light my nights. I will not grow to love you tomorrow, for I started loving you long ago."*

His hand covered her heart as his mouth found hers. His kiss was a promise of love and life. He pulled back when he heard a throat clearing deeply.

Miakoda turned to the goddess. "Thank you."

"I did not fight this battle for you, merely arrived in time to witness it."

"Where did all of that power come from? I felt as if I couldn't contain it all."

Ixchel's musical laughter filled the room. "From inside of you. It is the true power of your unity. You are each powerful in your own right, but together as one, you are unstoppable."

“What of Ah Puch, ruler of Metnel?”

“He is where he belongs, Sinock by his side. He will not fight this night, as he knows he cannot best the power of the sky.”



## Epilogue

A breeze blew the curtain softly as moonlight filtered through the open window. The wooden jaguars stood guard over the couple curled beneath the covers, wrapped in a tangle of arms.

Devante ran his hand lovingly over the swollen mound of Miakoda's stomach.

"He will be strong, like his mother," he murmured, his warm breath against her temple.

"She will be beautiful, like her father," she replied, a grin curling her lips. It had been a constant between them, the complete inability to agree on the sex of their unborn child--as they disagreed in most things, except the ones that really mattered. It would always keep life interesting.

Miakoda felt the stirring in her mind, just as Ethan's voice appeared. "*My reina, we've new arrivals.*" Before she could respond, Devante was there, a whirlwind inside her head.

"*Out! I told you to stay out of her mind.*" The link that had been formed connecting her mind with Devante's had not been broken. Miakoda doubted it ever would.

"*I did not want to disturb you,*" Ethan scolded, sounding like a petulant child.

"*You're disturbing me greatly. Go away.*" Devante immediately filled Miakoda's mind with the things he wanted her to do to his body, most involving her mouth.

"*No need to be rude!*" Ethan snapped as he vanished from her mind.

Miakoda chuckled, content that all was right in their world.

THE END