



ZENINA MASTERS

LOST ROAR

Robbed of her roar, Nicia doesn't want a lion. She goes to the Crossroads and has a wolf follow her home. No red hood required.

Nicia was at the fundamental lion compound and rescued from a life as guard beast for her family.

Her mother's family takes her in and helps her recover from the years of abuse.

Once she is recovered, she decides that it is time to seek out a mate, provided she could change her mind and come home if needed. With that agreement in place, she heads to the Crossroads.

Braxton has been watching for a mate, and while several women came close, it was the sombre lioness asking for directions that caught his attention. He wanted to make her smile, and when that became his primary pleasure, he knew he was in deep.

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Lost Roar
Shifting Crossroads Book Twelve

By

Zenina Masters

Chapter One

Nicia smelled the lions approaching before she saw them. She crept around in the shadows in the front of the house, watching them approach.

A huge male walked toward the house, and Nicia cocked her head. It wasn't a male she had met before. She waited until he was firmly in her territory, and then, she ran for him.

He was surprised by her attack and she knocked him to his back. He flailed and got to his feet,

returning the attack with a roar. She ducked under him and jumped, but her chain pulled her tight.

She lashed her tail and fought back to her feet. She sucked in air as hard as she could, but the male came up behind her and pinned her to the ground with his jaws on the back of her neck like a mother with a cub.

He had to hold her around the wide cuff of leather and chain that bound her throat. Other feet rushed by her, feline and human alike. She heard shouting from inside the house, and the family was pulled out one by one, lined up on the

lawn.

Nicia thrashed in the grip of the other lion and wished she could give sound to her frustration.

When everyone was out of the house, the lion let her go. He shifted to his human form and stroked her head. "Come on, lass, into your human shape."

She shook her head and the chain rattled.

He unbuckled the collar and knelt next to her. He was old for a human, in his sixties at least.

Nicia flexed her paws and shifted a little at a time. When she finished, she was kneeling on the ground,

her long brown hair around her and hiding her from the gazes of those around her.

The man next to her inhaled deeply. "What is your name, lass?"

She hesitated. Her voice was horrible to hear, or so she had been told. She licked her lips and slowly spoke. "Nicia Wells."

He blinked. "Nicia?"

She nodded.

He extended his hand. "I am your grandfather. Anderson Mooring."

Nicia was suddenly overcome with sorrow. "Mom is dead."

He blinked away tears. "I know. She made it out to a hospital, but

she was too badly mauled to tell us where she had been. I only found out she had had a child about a year ago. I have been looking for you ever since."

Nicia let tears flow. "You were with her when she died?"

"I was."

"Thank you. She should not have died alone." She took his hand, and he pulled her to her in a hug.

"I knew it was you the moment you knocked me on my butt. Nancy had the same spirit."

"I know. She never stopped fighting." Nicia looked up at him and smiled through her tears.

“Would you like to come home with me?”

She nodded. There had never been a home for her here. It had always been a life of pain and loss. Time to try something new.

* * * *

Later, Nicia learned that every home in the fundamentalist lion compound had been raided. Children had been separated from mothers who were committed to the cause, and the mothers were kept in an area to learn life skills and how to live on their own.

Nicia changed her name to Nicia

Mooring. She wanted nothing of that previous life attached to her beyond the scars she couldn't get rid of.

She woke at dawn and crept down the stairs, making breakfast for her grandparents. She whisked the eggs, popped the toast and put the turkey bacon on to fry.

Helena came down in her robe, "You know you don't have to make breakfast, Nissy."

She smiled, "I like it. If you don't mind it, I would like to continue."

"If it makes you smile, keep doing it. Your voice is sounding better." Helena grinned and gave

Nicia a hug.

“Thanks. The healers are doing what they can, but the scar tissue is extensive. My father was trying to silence me with the wire. It nearly worked.” She rubbed the bands of scars on her throat as she thought of Dan Wells. The scars were as much a part of her as the black lock in her hair or her silent attack pattern.

“The mages aren’t really on our frequency, so they do what they can.” Anderson came down in his robe and slippers.

“I know, and I am grateful for their help. My voice doesn’t make

people flinch anymore.” She had been to three lion-guild debriefings, and she had watched the reactions of those around her.

She finished breakfast, and as they all sat together, Helena asked, “Have you given any more thought to finding a mate?”

Nicia nodded and bit her lip. “I have given it thought, but I am not sure that I could deal with a lion. I know there are a few interested males, but I simply want to tear them to shreds.”

Anderson sipped at his coffee. “That isn’t good. I am guessing that there is only one thing to do when

you are ready.”

Nicia looked at him through narrowed eyes. “What is that?”

Helena snorted. “Send you to the Crossroads, of course. One of the other females managed to find a good match there outside the lion species.”

Nicia thought about it. “Leandiir. She ran a few days before the raid.”

Anderson nodded. “That is the one. She lives at the Crossroads now as the medic, from what we hear.”

“She always enjoyed all things medical.” Nicia didn’t mention that Lee had come by her post and

talked to her in low tones, scratching her head and easing the pain of the collar.

In Lee's family, transformation had been forbidden, and in Nicia's, she had been posted outside as guard the day that her mother disappeared with a trail of blood behind her.

She didn't tell her grandparents that either. They already had enough harsh memories of their daughter's last days.

"So, what kind of species can I meet there?"

Anderson shrugged. "Any of them. Birds, dogs, cats, I even have

heard of a reindeer running through the main intersection.”

Nicia collected the plates and loaded the dishwasher. “You have been getting into some serious research then.”

Helena sighed. “We didn’t know you existed until a year ago, but now that you are here, we want nothing but the best for you. You are Nancy’s daughter and that is all that matters. If you wanted to live on your own and not find a mate, we would be fine with that as well.”

Nicia cocked her head. “I would like to try. Is there a way to go to

the Crossroads on a trial basis?"

Helena smiled, "I think Anderson is going to get that very information today."

Nicia inclined her head. "Thank you. I think I will go for a swim this afternoon if that is alright?"

"I might join you, Nissy." Helena smiled.

She finished cleaning up from breakfast and grabbed her outside gear. The Moorings lived on the edge of a huge lake surrounded by rocky outcroppings. With her pack in place, she headed out to one of the spires of stone that appealed to her.

She climbed the spire, sat on the top of the rock and looked out over the green, stone and water. Nicia could breathe here, really breathe. She inhaled, threw her shoulders back and opened her mouth. Nothing. Her roar was gone.

She removed her clothing and put it on her pack. She shifted into her lion and repeated the effort. Nothing. Being strangled by her father had killed her roar. She slumped down and looked at nature all around her, enjoying the sun on her neck. The scars would fade, but she might never get her voice back. It was something she

was coming to grips with, but she didn't have to like it.

Chapter Two

Nicia looked at Krisia across the table and inclined her head. "I remember you."

Krisia gave her a look close to tears. "I remember you as well. Your neck..."

Nicia nodded. "That is me. It was quite the night, and you sent me and Anderson home."

"You look better." The transporter sniffed.

"I do. Thank you, Krisia. So, what do I need to do to get me to the Crossroads?" She patted the other

woman's hand. Giving comfort didn't come naturally to her, but she was trying.

Helena and Anderson were standing in the background, willing to provide any details that Nicia couldn't.

"Well, it seems your grandparents have set you up for a nice room at the Open Heart Bed and Breakfast. It will allow you privacy, and the host is a charming woman who will make sure you are cared for at all times." Krisia gave her another concerned look.

"Thank you." She turned and extended her hand to her

grandmother.

Helena smiled and squeezed her hand quickly.

Nicia returned her attention to the transporter. "What else do I need to do?"

"The account is set up, you have your bag and I have samples from your grandparents and your mother. You will have plenty of time to look around and see if you are amenable to any of the men there. There is an out for those from your community. If you want to leave, just tell the guardians, and they will send you home."

Nicia nodded. "I understand.

Where would I live if I do find a mate?"

Her grandparents shared a look. Helena pressed a hand to her shoulder. "If he has a home or territory of his own, his species might expect you to move there. You will have to discuss it with him. You are always welcome here, you know that, and I want to be called the moment that you finish your time in the Crossroads. I will tell Anderson where you are, and we will make arrangements to come to you if you can't come here."

Nicia nodded and felt her heart

lurch as she looked at the two people who had made her mother. The living blend of their features had been the most comforting thing of her life, and she was gone now. The past was the past, and it was time to seek the future.

She signed the final document and nodded to Krisia. "I am ready."

She pulled a few strands of her hair out and folded them neatly, rolling them into a column. "My contribution to the payment."

Krisia smiled. "Thank you. If you are ready, I will make the portal on your deck."

Nicia nodded, got to her feet,

hugged her grandparents and picked up her bag. She was ready. Outside, light flared, and she stepped into it, transporting away from her family's home and into an agonizing light in the Crossroads.

Nicia looked around from her position on her knees. Pain radiated from her, but it was quickly dissipating.

A woman approached her carefully. "Just breathe deeply. Predators sometimes have problems with the transport."

A glass of water was extended to her and Nicia took it. "Thank you."

The water went down and cooled

the last of the pain. She handed the glass back with a nod. "Thank you again."

Her inner beast watched the motions of the woman, and she nodded. The woman was a swan. The cat in her could identify any bird.

"I am Teal, this is my mate Tony and we are the guardians of the Meditation Centre."

Nicia got to her feet. "I am Nicia Mooring."

"We have been hoping you would come. Your name was on the list of the...well, the list."

Nicia inclined her head. "I know

what list you are referring to.”

“If you will wait a moment, Lee is on her way here.”

Nicia hefted her bag. “I will wait.”

Teal looked nervous. “Do you ever smile?”

Nicia smiled briefly. “I am trying.”

Teal was about to speak, but the door opened and she gasped instead.

Nicia turned, “Yes, I am that one.”

Lee was waiting, and Nicia walked to her and gave her a hug. “Hello, Leandiir.”

“Nicia. You look amazing and your voice is so much better.”

Nicia gave her a genuine smile. “You are blooming, Lee. How pregnant are you?”

Lee hushed her and ushered her out into the sun. “I haven’t told anyone. Most folks here don’t have the best sense of smell, and my mate is usually distracted when I am around.”

Nicia linked arms with her childhood friend and walked out with her into the strange environment that smelled of shifters and magic.

“How have you enjoyed your

time here?"

Lee shrugged. "Well, once I helped to stamp out an illegal drug infiltration, it has been fairly calm. I set bones and give x-rays, as well as stitch up cuts. We have a full contingent of beavers here, and they can get into the oddest scrapes with trees."

Nicia felt another smile flit across her face.

Lee pointed out the café, restaurant and new salon. "I want to introduce you to my husband. He was with me that night when I faced my father."

Lee had mauled her father into a

comatose state from which he had not woken. The lion guild was watching him for any sign of waking. He had to pay for what he had instigated.

“I see. My grandfather came for me that night. I have been with them since.”

Lee blinked. “That is amazing. I thought your father said you had no relatives.”

“He lied. My mother was one of the stolen ones. After she ran and died, my grandfather found out that I was alive somehow. They never have said how they learned about me.”

“I think the lion guild had us under surveillance. They were eager to help when we decided to move to rescue my mother and siblings.”

Nicia nodded. “You did very well.”

They entered the Crossed Star and Lee hauled her past the bar, waving cheerfully at the tattooed serpent shifter behind the bar. “Hiya, Chuck.”

Nicia didn't have a chance to say hello; she was dragged up a set of stairs and prodded into an office. “Jim, this is my friend Nicia.”

Nicia inclined her head to the

tiger shifter. "I am pleased to meet you. Lee is a handful once you get through her initial hesitation."

Jim extended his hand. "You are correct. Lee has mentioned you. She worried."

Lee grimaced.

Nicia smiled slightly. "She does that. She was born to nurture."

Jim looked between them, and he blinked. "She told you before she told me."

Nicia actually cackled. "She didn't have to. I have abnormally keen senses."

Lee's mouth was open. "How long have you known?"

Jim sighed, "About a week. I was waiting for you to tell me."

Nicia recognized a family moment when she saw one. She had done research. "I will just be downstairs or maybe someone down there can show me to the Open Heart. You two need to talk."

She retreated before Lee could call her back. With her backpack in place, she headed into the main area of the bar. Nicia walked up to the bar.

"What can I get for you?"

She looked at Chuck and cocked her head. "Directions to the Open Heart Bed and Breakfast."

He looked toward the stairs.
“Where is Lee?”

“Having a heart-to-heart with Jim. She forgot to tell him something.” Nicia arched her brows. “So...directions?”

He blinked at her directness and was about to speak when a man came out of the shadows and stood next to her. “I can show her, Chuck. I need to get back to change for dinner anyway.”

She turned and looked at him, smelling predator and dog. It wasn't unpleasant because his human form also smelled of musk and warmth.

“I am Nicia.” She extended her hand.

“Braxton.” He smiled and took her hand.

She blinked at the heat that ran up her arm, and he jerked noticeably. Shaking her head, she released him. “So, directions?”

He smiled. “This way. It is nearby.”

She walked next to him and absorbed his traits as casually as she could. Black hair, ice blue eyes and an easy-ranging gate put him in the wolf family.

Nicia kept pace with him and in a few minutes, they were walking up

the steps into a Victorian home with the sign out front.

A blue woman who smelled of magic and nothing else opened the door with a smile. "Nicia Mooring. So nice to see you. Teal sent your icon along. Apparently, something about you flustered her and that is not easy to do."

Braxton passed her and continued up the stairs.

Nicia took the charm and tied it on her wrist. "Thank you."

"My name is Teebie. I am your host, and yes, I am a djinn."

Nicia cocked her head. "I am still behind on my reading. You are

made of magic, right?"

Teebie laughed, "Basically. So, you have met Braxton?"

Nicia nodded. "He was very kind to offer me escort here."

Teebie looked at her and tilted her head. "I am beginning to see what threw Teal off. You are very much the predator, are you not?"

"I am. It was what I was forced to do, so I have not bothered breaking the habit." She shrugged.

"Understandable. Would you like to see your room?"

"Please. I think I need to dress for the evening. From the research I have done, this is not appropriate

attire to snag a male with.”

Teebie nodded. “That is probably correct. Hunting camo is not a standard clothing choice for seduction.”

Nicia looked down and then up again. The djinn might have a point. If she was going hunting for a husband, she was going to have to use different bait.

Chapter Three

Wearing a cocktail dress and some heels that Helena had taught her to walk in, she brushed her hair down in a long curtain and then slowly coiled it up and pinned it on her head with jewelled spikes.

She wasn't hiding the shiny scars on her neck. They were part of her, and she wore them as a mark of survival. Nicia slipped in two earrings and turned her head from side to side. If one ignored her neck, she looked quite striking.

The dress was golden lace over a

black slip. It showed skin around neck and shoulders, and the lace hem was three inches longer than the black, which would lead the eyes up her legs.

Seduction was a manoeuvring business, but like any trap, you just had to have the right bait.

She checked out her butt and nodded when she confirmed that she hadn't tucked her skirt into anything. With nothing left to do, she headed out to find herself some dinner, and then, she would return to the bar.

Teebie was working at an antique desk in the entryway when Nicia

came down.

She looked up and her eyes widened. "Oh my. That is certainly a change."

Suddenly insecure, Nicia ran her hands down her thighs. "Is it all right?"

"It is gorgeous. You are gorgeous. I am sorry, I just wasn't expecting you to turn into something with such grace."

Nicia felt a smile fight to the surface again. "Thank you. It takes some getting used to, but I pride myself by not just changing into an animal but another kind of human."

“You have done very well. Where are you off to for dinner?”

“I believe that the café would suit me. My grandparents are footing the bill for this, so I don't want to tax them.”

Teebie's face sobered. “I understand. Well, have fun this evening, and if you run into trouble, don't be afraid to call for help.”

“Thank you for your offer of assistance. It is really appreciated though my features may not show it.”

“I am beginning to understand that. Well, have fun and enjoy

yourself. Don't put pressure on to meet someone right away."

"I won't. Thank you again."

Nicia headed out to the café, and she acknowledged that she was drawing attention. She kept her senses on alert and entered the café. She found an empty seat and slid into the narrow booth.

A form appeared next to her, and she smiled at Braxton. "Hello, again."

He blinked, and his mouth opened and closed. "Nicia. I had no idea that you...I mean you look...I mean. Good evening."

She laughed again and enjoyed

the relaxed feeling it gave her.
“Have you eaten?”

He nodded. “I have, but I would love to join you and keep you company while you eat.”

“Please.” She gestured for him to sit. Nicia hadn’t heard of that one before; she asked, “Is that common?”

He sat straight. “I don’t know. I have never before had the urge to wrap a woman in a sheet to keep other eyes from her.”

She blinked as she realized that he was referring to her. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Because you look good enough

to eat.”

She stifled another laugh. The idea of being prey was hilarious. “Thank you.”

She ordered a cheeseburger and salad with a lemonade. He ordered pie and coffee.

While they waited, she worked on her small talk. “So, Braxton, what do you do in the outside world?”

“I am a bounty hunter.”

She perked up. “A what?”

“I track people who have skipped out on their bond. They promised to attend court and then they didn’t.”

Nicia rifled through the television shows in her mind and found a movie with that subject matter. "Oh. Do you like it?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Sometimes more than others."

"How hard do you have to train? Is there school involved?" She leaned forward, fascinated. Hunting people was something she was born to do.

He smiled. "You have to know how to work computers to learn how to track the jumpers. Aside from that, you can just follow leads and use tracking techniques to find them. Being what I am, I have an

advantage over human hunters.”

“Could you teach me how to do it?”

Braxton blinked. “You want to track humans? You are such a little thing.”

She wanted to growl at him, really wanted it, but there was nothing in her throat. Aggression made her silent and far more dangerous. “I may be smaller than you, but my senses are keener.”

She was also bigger and stronger, but she didn't want to play that hand yet. “Tell me more about how you catch someone. I need an occupation in the human world.”

She listened to the details about becoming a skip tracer while she ate her meal. He didn't touch his pie as she ate and the scent teased her nostrils.

Her mind made frantic notes on how to follow his instructions while she smiled and nodded, the smiles coming easier now that she was getting information in return.

He finally asked, "If I can ask, what is that scar on your neck?"

She lifted her head. "There is more than one. It is the mark my father made the night he tried to strangle me. He knocked me out with this pressure, and when I

woke, I was chained to the front yard and designated the official guard animal. The collar remained in place, and I fought it every chance I got and injured myself. These scars are the result, as is my voice.”

His astonishment was apparent. “Your parent tried to kill you? Where was your mother?”

“He had already mauled her nearly to death. I kept him from killing her and fought him off while she ran for her life. I heard later that she died from her wounds, but at least her family was with her.”

Braxton's mouth was open in surprise. It was a funny look for a predator.

She blinked at him. "I am guessing that is not the response you were looking for."

"Uh, no. I was not expecting that. You were...chained?"

"I was. I am sorry if that upsets you." She frowned and finished the last bite of her salad.

He blinked rapidly. "No. I just don't see you as the kind to give in to chains."

She smiled and was sure she showed some fang. "I didn't, which is why I am here today. I didn't

give in to the chain. I waited.”

Braxton cocked his head. “What was your education level?”

“I was homeschooled through high school and have my diploma issued by the state. That was achieved when I was fourteen.”

“Good. What have you thought you wanted to do?”

She smiled. “That is the problem. My grandfather rescued me, and he and my grandmother have offered me time to heal and recover. I concentrated on healing my voice, but it still isn’t quite right.”

His look said he knew what kind of damage a collar could do. “So,

you are intrigued by the idea of becoming a skip tracer?"

Nicia smiled, and it was not a friendly smile. "Hunting is something I know how to do."

Braxton started eating his pie, and she ordered a slice for herself. Over the next two hours, he gave her a complete breakdown of legalities, procedures and methods of dealing with the weapons that several of the targets would be carrying.

She soaked it all in, finding herself interested in the details of the procedures involved. When he got into the equipment needed, she

paid extra-close attention. Cuffs, zip ties and Tasers were his preferred accessories. His particular speciality was pulling in his targets without using guns. It meant he could easily work in several of the states that restricted weapons.

“Wait, you are a wolf. Where is your pack?”

“You know what I am?”

She blushed, “You smell like wolf.”

He blinked, “When did you know?”

“When you came up next to me in the bar.”

“Wow. You do have

exceptionally keen senses.”

She remained hot pink. “Yes, I actually do.”

He leaned forward and asked, “What is your animal?”

Nicia laughed. “I was wondering when you would ask. I am a lion.”

Braxton blinked and exhaled. “That would explain it. There is something about you that says you are ready to slash or pounce.”

She rested her chin on her open palms and batted her lashes at him. “I save the slashing and pouncing for special occasions.”

He grinned. “So, would you care to go dancing at the bar?”

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't know how to dance."

"I can show you. I promise, nothing funny."

She got to her feet and reached for the bill.

He slipped it out of her fingers with a quick move.

Nicia blinked. "Why are you doing that?"

"We have spent three hours chatting, that makes it a date and that makes it my pleasure to treat you."

Nicia cocked her head. "Thank you?"

"You are welcome. Now, let's go

instruct you in the fine art of dancing.”

She found a fluttering in her stomach that spurred a slight smile. The anticipation of fun was so long forgotten it had been hard to recognize it.

Chapter Four

Every other word out of her mouth became, "Sorry."

Braxton grinned and kept moving her around the dance floor. "If you keep apologising, I will begin to suspect you are Canadian."

She laughed. "I am just so frustrated that I keep bumping into everyone."

He leaned in and kissed her.

She froze in place as his lips coasted across hers, sending small trips of sensation through her.

When he lifted his head, he

smiled. "What, no apology for colliding with my face?"

To her surprise, she was moving with him, dancing easily through the crowd.

"I believe that that one was your fault."

His arms were around her, but his body wasn't pressed to her in an offensive way. Instead, there was an inch of space between them, rapidly heating up.

A few other males had tried to cut in, but she had snarled at them and they had left.

"Did you know that you show fang when you snarl?" Braxton had

seemed rather pleased.

She shrugged. "I suspected as much. I had spent over a year in my other form when the raid occurred. It took a while for me to stop opening parcels with my claws."

He laughed out loud, and the noise made her smile again. They were coming faster and each time, something inside her loosened a little. Who knew that something as small as a smile and sense of humour would be so important to feeling like she belonged?

They danced for hours, until her feet ached. When she was exhausted, she whispered, "I think I

need to go back to the Open Heart now.”

He smiled brightly. “May I escort you?”

She smiled back. “Please. I have enjoyed this evening.”

“Me too.” He offered her his arm and they walked out of the bar and through the streets of the Crossroads.

At the namesake of the Crossroads, he stopped to kiss her again.

The vulnerable feeling of being kissed with her back exposed caused her to stiffen up. She remained tense until he stroked her

back and ran his hand up to cup the back of her neck. The small bit of protection was what she needed. She leaned up on her toes and returned his kiss with enthusiasm, learning as she went.

She heard him growl low, and his arm tightened around her. She could feel every ridge and muscle of his torso as well as the thick bulge of his erection.

Nicia held onto his shoulders for balance, but she didn't need to. He wasn't letting her go anywhere.

The moment he bit her lip, she snarled and pushed him back, using her strength to topple him over.

She was still in his arms, so she went with him, but instead of letting her go, he held her tight and started laughing.

Scowling, she pushed free of him. "Why did you do that?" Scrambling to her feet in heels was difficult. So was being covered with his scent.

"If I said I was testing you, would you kill me? I wanted to see what you would passively put up with."

She wrapped her arms around her belly. "Why?"

"I wanted to make sure you weren't going with me because you were afraid to say no."

She snorted and started stalking

away. "Saying no has never been a problem. The one time I try to say yes, I am bitten by a damned dog."

"Nicia!" He called to her but she kept walking.

When he grabbed her arm, she extended her claws and swiped across his chest.

Braxton took the hint and grunted at the impact.

Nicia stalked back to the Open Heart, greeted Teebie politely and licked the blood from her claws as she headed up the stairs. He didn't taste half bad.

* * * *

Braxton touched the wounds left by the claws of the woman he thought could be his mate. "Damn it."

He headed to the first aid station and rang the bell.

Four minutes later, Lee appeared, and she winced when she saw his bloody chest. "Damn, Brax. I thought she would go for you."

He sighed. "She did. I fucked it up by trying to play with her a little."

"Her sense of humour is still developing." Lee opened the door and waved him inside.

"What can you tell me about her?"

“Specifically? We were part of the same community, but we weren’t allowed to socialize much. I visited her once she was trapped, but there wasn’t anything I could do.” Lee sighed.

“Take off your shirt, Brax.”

He hopped up on the exam table and removed his shirt. It was trashed. She had really done a good job with the fabric.

“Why was she chained up?”

Lee got her kit and gauze and started to clean the claw marks. “From what I heard, her mother tried to escape and her father was going to make an example out of

her. He shifted and mauled her. Nicia got in between them and fought him off, allowing her mother to run for it. She was never seen again, but the lion guild had records of her being in a hospital.”

“She has a scar around her neck.”

“The collars that were used had spikes on the inside to keep the females from roaring. They were charged with defending their family homes, but I don’t know anyone who was chained up as long as Nicia was. It is amazing that she is still sane, let alone looking for a mate. She had more reasons than not to distrust men.”

Brax winced as she cleaned off the blood but more from the information he was getting. He had used precisely the wrong tactic with her. Of course. He could track and capture any target, but his luck with women sucked. He could always get their interest, but he could never keep it.

“She was asking me questions about being a skip tracer. Do you know why?”

Lee kept working. “Nissy was always our best hunter. Her family was allowed to shift to chase off coyotes. She knows how to hunt. With only a high school education,

there are not a lot of options for her.”

“So, if I offered to make her my partner...”

Lee leaned back and looked up into his face with an amused grin. “That would be better than any roses or present you could give her. She needs to anchor herself in the modern world. The fundamental lion community was a twisted version of reality. She needs something she can depend on. Guaranteed cause and effect.”

He nodded. “So, even after this, you think I still have a chance?”

Lee laughed. “Look at the cuts.

She went long but she went shallow. This was a swipe to teach you a lesson. You will be healed in two days if you don't shift."

Brax looked down and blinked in shock. The lines stung and crossed from his heart to his hip, but they were indeed very shallow.

Lee put her cotton and cleansing liquid away. "If she had wanted to, she could have broken your ribs and caved in your chest. She likes you, despite her irritation."

The medic handed him a spare shirt. With shifters, it was probably safer to keep them in stock.

"So, how should I approach her?"

“Start off with breakfast and offer to take her for a run in the meadow.” Lee winked. “It worked for me.”

Brax sighed, “Can I ask you more questions if they come up?”

“Sure, or you can ask Jim. He came at it from the outside as well, and aside from being a pain in the hairballs, he has helped me adapt.” Lee grinned.

Brax nodded. “Thank you. I will take you up on that. This sounds like a messed-up situation.”

Lee patted him on the arm. “Oh, hon, you have only touched the edge of the crazy that occurred in

her life before last year.”

Brax pulled the shirt on and winced at the tenderness of his chest. “Why am I starting to think that I got off easy tonight?”

Lee laughed as they left the first aid station. “Because you are a very smart man. Now, get to bed. You are going to have quite the workout tomorrow and having the marks on your chest will play on her sympathies.”

“Will I need it?”

“Consider her a target that you are hunting. Use any advantage you can get.” She left him and headed back to the bar.

Shrugging, Braxton headed for the bed and breakfast. He got more advice and insight than Lee had thought. The raid on the lion compound was whispered about by every species. It was the proof that the shifters were not societies unto themselves. The corruption had spread through other species, and those shifter guilds had moved to stamp it out. The damage control was still ongoing and his current mode of employment.

The more he learned about Nicia, the more he knew that he would enjoy working with her, and he knew she would enjoy spending

her days on the hunt.

Now, he just had to convince her he wasn't a jackass. It was easier said than done.

Chapter Five

Attractive casual was difficult to pull off, but Nicia thought she managed it with a silk shell and a draped skort. Strappy sandals completed the outfit, and she braided her hair in a straight column that hung nearly to her waist.

The moment she opened her bedroom door, she smelled breakfast. Smiling, she headed downstairs and stopped short. Braxton was sitting at the table and reading a newspaper.

Teebie entered and gestured for her to have a seat. "The newspaper is one of my personal tricks. Don't tell Teal and Tony. They disapprove of my sort of magic if it is used too casually."

Nicia smiled and sat down. Teebie poured her a cup of coffee and Braxton ignored her. That irritated her.

"So, Braxton, how long have you been here?"

Teebie froze at the challenge in her tone and immediately moved with more care.

He looked at her over the paper with his ice blue eyes calm. "Two

weeks. I have met ten candidates that I considered but none of them were the right fit.”

She scowled and sipped her coffee. “The right fit, like in bed?”

Teebie coughed and disappeared into the kitchen, leaving a platter of muffins, another of bacon and a pot of honey.

He calmly folded the paper. “No, personality-wise. I am a difficult man to be with for a woman who likes to play games. I played some of my own games last night, and for that, I apologise. I would like to start over with you this morning, if I may?”

She was intrigued. "How would you start over?"

"Would you care to go for a run through a meadow? Flat out, no worry about running into humans?"

Nicia propped her chin on her fist and batted her lashes. "I think that would be a good start. Eat up. You are going to need your strength."

He laughed and they ate until they groaned.

Teebie came back in and sighed with relief. "I thought you were going to maul him."

Nicia drank her second cup of

coffee. "No, that was last night. Today, we are starting over."

Teebie's eyes widened, and she looked to Braxton for confirmation.

He shrugged, winced and nodded. Braxton sighed and looked at Nicia. "Well, if you are ready, I believe that we can race as soon as we get to the meadow."

She replied, "I hope for your sake that you like the colour gold, because all you are going to see is my tail."

He got to his feet, and when she took his arm, he winked, "Aw, you were in my dreams last night."

Blushing at the image that put in

her mind, she let him lead the way to the meadow. There were shifting cabanas to one side and none were occupied. He nudged her into one of them and took the one next to it.

She heard the rustling of fabric and quickly removed her clothing, placing it neatly on the shelf. She shifted into her lion form and stalked out with her tail lashing.

He was waiting for her, with his ears perked and his head cocked. He was a dark wolf with a pale muzzle and the same ice blue eyes as his human form. She found him very pretty.

He yipped and leaned in with his

front paws forward and his butt in the air.

She shook her head and started to trot into the meadow. Once she heard him behind her, she started to run.

Her muscles bunched and released as she dug into the soft turf with her claws. She sprinted through the meadow and continued until she reached the far end; she used one of the trees as a springboard and changed direction, going over Braxton's head and back through the meadow.

She heard him howl behind her and wanted to roar in response but

there was no use. Nothing would come out. At the cabana end, she turned and trotted back into the centre of the meadow, sitting in a patch of dandelions and rolling to her back with her belly in the air.

Braxton came up beside her and sat there panting, watching her wiggle in the grass.

Once she was covered in pollen, she sat up and knew she looked silly.

He didn't respond in any way except to shift into his human form and extend his hand.

She sniffed him, licking at his hand with her rough tongue. Once

she was confident of the taste of him, she tucked her head under his hand and coaxed him into petting her. She let out a happy rumble as he scratched behind her ears and brushed fluff and pollen from her fur.

He sat next to her, and she put her head in his lap, enjoying the trust he was showing in his vulnerable condition.

“You are quite large, Nicia.”

She swatted him with her tail.

He chuckled and dug his fingers into her shoulders in a massage. “It was a compliment. I have seen smaller lionesses before. You are

one of a kind.”

She rumbled again. It wasn't quite a purr, but it was all she could manage.

He touched the scars around her neck, and she tensed. He stilled for a moment and then moved his fingers over the hardened skin. “This must have been agonizing.”

She moved her head and lapped at his thigh in agreement.

He continued to stroke her and she relaxed, gradually shifting back into her human form.

He still stroked her hair after she shifted, running his fingers through the strands.

She was facing his feet, and when she turned to look at him, his expression showed his interest. The erection was a secondary hint. It had been hard to ignore it pressing into the back of her head.

She smiled. "I won the race."

He nodded. "You did."

He leaned forward and kissed her. She pressed her hand to his chest and felt the last vestiges of the marks she had made the night before.

Nicia had to admit admiration for him not showing them to her in their full, bright glory. She was not one to take kindly to subterfuge.

Naked in a sunlit meadow, there was not a lot of room for manipulating someone, but playing with them was something else entirely.

Nicia reached out and wrapped her hand around his erection, stroking him slowly. His kiss grew more violent as she moved her hand on him to the beat of his heart. After a minute or so, it was a very fast motion.

He moaned into her mouth and shuddered suddenly. His cock jerked in her hand and jets of pearly white struck the grass.

A peculiar sense of power ran

through her. Nicia had never given someone pleasure like that, and she was proud that she had figured it out on her own with a little help from online porn.

He rested his forehead against hers and caught his breath. She carefully let go of his cock, remembering that it could be sensitive after its release.

Nicia inhaled the scent of his spent passion and smiled. That would stay in her mind, and she could bring it out when she wanted to coax a smile out of her thoughts.

Braxton tilted his head and kissed her softly. "Why are you smiling?"

After all, you didn't get anything out of it."

"I just proved that I am not completely inept when it comes to this sort of thing. Consider me proving that I have a learned skill." She chuckled, which surprised her even more than the smiling.

"May I return the favour?" He was very polite about it.

"What do I need to do?"

He grinned. "Just let me touch you and don't claw me."

"I think I can do that."

"Good. Now, straddle me and look me in the eye."

She blinked and did as he asked.

He slid a hand into her hair and stroked the back of her neck under her hair until she relaxed against him. His other hand slipped between her thighs and slowly rubbed against her. Nicia's work on him had caused her arousal to render her slick, and he used her own moisture to ease his path.

He kissed her, and she had to admire his ability to multitask.

To her surprise, her hips started to rock against his fingers completely out of reflex. It was fascinating to feel the heat he was causing in her, and for a moment, he held his fingers steady and she

moved against him on her own.

Something was building inside her, and it had the same kind of surge that she had felt during her first shift. The feeling that there was something inside her that wanted to get out in the world.

His fingers moved faster on her clit and she held her breath while her body tensed, trying to pull her into whatever happened next.

She inhaled sharply and flattened her fingers on his shoulders, trying not to claw him as her body shook over and over as his touch kept the waves going on and on.

Nicia slumped against him, and

he stopped the circling torment. She sat flat against his thighs and pressed her forehead to his chest. He was sweating, and her tongue lapped out to taste the salt on his skin.

He continued to stroke the back of her neck, and she eventually looked up at him. She didn't have any words for what had just happened. She leaned up and kissed him, parting her lips and slipping her tongue in to duel slowly with his.

He sighed and held her tight for a moment before they ended the kiss. "So, would you like to become a

skip tracer?"

She narrowed her eyes. "I thought you were out for a mate."

"Oh, I am, but I can't be a partner to anyone other than my mate, so if you want the job as a hunter, you will have to marry me."

She laughed in surprise. "Are you serious?"

"Usually. I am eager to take you as you are if you will accept me with all my flaws."

Nicia cocked her head. "Really? You don't know much about me."

"I know enough to know that you are a good hunter, you hate injustice and you will not stop if

you sense someone is being victimized. What else do I need to know?"

She twisted her lips. "I can't roar."

"Silence is better when you are hunting. If your roar is meant to return, I am sure it will."

Nicia couldn't think of a reason to say no. He wasn't a lion, he wasn't a jerk and he was very handsome and considerate. She had seen far worse matches in her lifetime. "You will have to get the approval of my grandparents."

He grinned. "Done. We have a deal."

“I would shake your hand, but I think that would be a little silly considering my current position.” She smiled again and ducked her head.

“I like your current position. I think we will do all negotiations in our relationship in this position.” He smiled, and the wolf was in there as well as the man.

She stroked his cheek. “Remember, my claws can come out with very little effort.”

“It adds a thrill of danger for me.”

Nicia’s eyes went wide as she realized that part of his attraction

for her was the danger that she posed. It figured that the one thing she used to be punished for was now the trait that had caught her a mate. Destiny was a pain in the ass.

Chapter Six

Teal and Tony were surprised by the rider of her family's approval. Normally, people came to the Crossroads in order to circumvent their families.

After all the documents were signed, Nicia took the bouquet of flowers that Lee had brought and hugged her childhood friend, or as much of a friend as she had been allowed.

"If you need anything, get in touch with Krisia, and she will get in touch with me. You aren't alone

anymore, Nicia.” Lee smiled and squeezed her again.

“I know, but now, first I will go to Braxton and see if he can help me. Then, I will turn to my grandparents, the lion guild and then you. I love you, but I am a fan of proper channels and you are pregnant. I don’t want to cause you any stress.” Nicia stroked Lee’s hair.

“Stop being so logical. This is your wedding day.”

“Well, technically, it is my contracting day and only if my grandparents agree.”

Lee sighed and shook her head.

“Fine. Now shoo. I am sure that everyone is waiting for you.”

Nicia looked over at Braxton, and he seemed content to wait an eternity for her. She wasn't going to make him wait that long. “All right. Keep well, Lee.”

She smiled at Lee and waved farewell to Tony and Teal. She got the feeling that the guardians were happy to be rid of her.

Braxton put his arm around her, and the world got bright in a flash. She blinked and looked around, laughing when she realized they were on her grandparents' deck.

Helena was staring at her from

the kitchen window, a slow smile spreading across her lips. Nicia could hear her yell, “Anderson! She’s home! She got one!”

Braxton burst out laughing and waited to greet her family.

Anderson came out and approached them cautiously. “Nissy, it seems you have brought a mate home.”

Nicia smirked, “Not a mate, not yet. Just a fiancé for now. Our mating depends on how well you get along with him.”

Helena heard that and skipped forward to hug Braxton with all her might.

He winced and Nissy was sure she heard a creak.

Anderson sighed and met Nicia's gaze with his. "She does lack dignity."

Nicia smiled, "Now I know where my mom got it from. I always wondered."

He smiled back at her and tears came to his eyes. She read what he wanted, and she crossed to him for a hug.

She could smell the tears that he refused to let drop. She smiled up at him. "It's okay."

He nodded and swallowed quickly.

When he let her go, she made the introductions. “Braxton, this is Helena and Anderson Mooring. They are the only relatives I have that I speak to.”

He nodded and extended his hand to Anderson. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Mooring.”

“Call me Andy.”

“My full name is Braxton Croft. Call me Brax.”

Helena smiled. “What a lovely name, Brax. So, child. What are you?”

Having already given her authorization, the formality was funny enough to send nervous

giggles through Nicia. The lightness of mood was not like her, and she tried to snap herself back into her cold analytics.

“He is a wolf, Grandma.” Nicia waited and Braxton put his arm around her.

“Which pack?” Helena narrowed her eyes, and they shifted to feline for a moment.

Braxton smiled, “I was born to the Silver Run Pack in Washington State. I have since gained independent wolf status with the guild. I operate in all territories, so I am a guild wolf now.”

Helena and Anderson seemed to

know what that was, and they smiled with a pleased expression.

Nicia muttered out of the corner of her mouth. "Did you just tell them you have a government job or something?"

He chuckled. "Something like that."

Helena invited them in, but Braxton inclined his head toward the table and chairs on the deck. "I would like to sit out here if that is possible. It is rare that I see such a beautiful view."

Anderson went inside and made a pot of coffee and brought out a pitcher of lemonade while it was

brewing. "Nissy's favourite."

Nicia poured a glass and asked Braxton with an arched brow.

"Yes, please."

Helena got a glass, but Anderson didn't drink lemonade, so Nicia sat down and watched the lake ripple far below. Braxton moved his chair until he was next to her.

"This is an amazing place you have here, Andy."

Nicia chuckled. "It is my grandmother's home. In lion society, the women own the territory and invite the men in. It keeps the men aware of their position as protectors and reminds

them that they could be replaced if necessary. I mean, it isn't really that way, but it is a tradition."

Helena smiled. "Andy gave me the money for the property as one of his courting gifts. I paid for the house out of my savings."

Andy grinned, "It is exactly what she had in mind. Helena's family are contractors."

"The Sargar Pride?"

Helena beamed. "Exactly."

Braxton whistled softly.

Nicia didn't know what the big deal was. She had rich relatives. It didn't matter, as a lioness, she had to make her own way in the world.

Nicia was beginning to suspect that Braxton didn't just hunt humans for money. "Braxton, what is a guild wolf?"

He leaned back and side. "Well, I did tell you what I do for a living."

"Right."

"I may have neglected to mention that I specialize in shifters."

Anderson chortled. "Not a good way to start a life together. Always tell the whole truth. It will bite you in the ass far less as time goes by."

Nicia cocked her head. "It doesn't matter to me as long as I get to hunt."

Helena and Anderson blinked and sat back. "You are going to become a hunter?"

Nicia smiled and sipped at her lemonade. "I already am a hunter. I am just going to work to be in a position where I get paid for it."

Helena opened her mouth, but Anderson put his hand on her arm. "Darling, even infected, near dead and almost mute, she managed to knock me on my ass. That takes a bit of doing, as you well know. I think this is her calling."

Nicia beamed. "Thank you, Grandpa."

"Don't thank me yet. Brax has

authorization to work outside his pack's territory. You need to get the same authorization from the lion guild and answer to the shifter council alone."

Braxton nodded. "He's right. I was going to mention that as soon as we got the official authorization."

Helena scowled. "Authorization for what?"

Nicia snickered. "I put a clause into our mating contract. You two have to approve of him or he goes his way and I go mine."

In unison, they straightened and said, "We approve."

Braxton exhaled and pulled out his cell phone. "Please excuse me."

He sent a quick text and then put his phone face down on the table before he lifted Nicia's hand to his lips for a quick kiss.

She smiled, and her grandparents exhaled in relief as well.

Helena smiled. "So, you need your trousseau. Well, in this case, it is your trust account." Helena's smile faded, and she quickly got to her feet. "I will bring the coffee."

Anderson waited and then leaned forward. "It was Nancy's trust account. We transferred it to your name after the seekers found

out about you.”

Braxton asked, “Seekers?”

“Those lions had been sniping females from anywhere they could find them. Nancy was taken at a truck stop on her way to a job in Kansas. They found her car but no one could find her. It was like she had dropped off the face of the earth until she turned up at that hospital, twenty years later.”

Braxton nodded. “So, seekers found the trail?”

Anderson nodded. “The doctors told us that Nancy had given birth, and we wanted to find the child. Against her family’s

recommendations, Helena hired every seeker within three hundred miles of the hospital. Nothing. When one of them asked to scent Nancy's clothing, we knew she had found something, but she told us that Nancy had run across three states and stolen clothing before she collapsed."

Nicia kept her mouth shut. She only knew bits of this story.

"The seeker backtracked from the emotions that Nancy left on the fabric and announced that we had a granddaughter and she was in danger. The lion guild stepped in and stopped us from doing

anything. They were waiting for someone inside to make a move. Someone inside the compound had to ask for help, and we had to wait. When Leandiir escaped and asked for help, she was the trigger to unifying prides from all over the continent. I had to be there, and I was."

Braxton looked over at Nicia, and she gave him a tiny smile.

Anderson leaned back as Helena returned with the coffee on a tray and a computer tablet.

Helena smiled. "Don't let me interrupt you. I like hearing this part."

“Well, I knew Nicia by scent. She smells like her mother and grandmother. I crept up in my lion form so that the others could get past me once I had subdued her. She smelled weak and sick, so I didn’t think there would be much of a fight. Nicia was watching me from the shadows.

“I walked toward her and tried to introduce myself, but she wasn’t going to let me pass. She slammed into me hard enough to send me end over end. When she backed up, I could hear the chain rattling and smell the blood coming from her. Every move tore the collar deeper

into her neck.

“I didn’t want her to keep hurting herself, so I shook off the ache of the tackle and fought her until I pinned her, my jaws on the back of her neck.”

Nicia smiled and said softly. “Mom used to do that when I was throwing a tantrum or chasing things I shouldn’t bite, it calmed me.”

“I shifted and unbuckled that collar, throwing it away as the moon lit the metal shards on the interior. With the metal inside her body and her unable to heal, she hadn’t been able to shift back to

human. What followed was the slowest shift I have ever seen. It looked painful, but when she was done, I saw my granddaughter for the first time.”

He was tearing up again and Helena patted his hand. “Andy is a big softy. Nicia was really sick and the mage guild had to bring out some healers. Her voice sounded like a baritone that smoked twelve packs a day, and they fought the infection and the scar tissue until we have the charming even tenor that you hear today.”

Braxton winced. “The scars were worse?”

Nicia took his hand under the table.

Helena looked at him like he was dim. "She was in a cutting collar for over a year. There was more scar than neck when the raid occurred."

Nicia smiled. "Helena couldn't come on the raid because she wanted to tear his throat out."

"Who?"

"My father. He bought my mother from the kidnappers and kept her captive for over two decades. He does need to die, but Anderson didn't want her to do it."

Braxton squeezed her hand. "Thank you all for this. It is good to

have an eye on the past.”

Helena and Anderson sat shoulder to shoulder and leaned into each other. It was obviously a habit that had grown over time.

Nicia wished that she and Braxton developed that kind of closeness, but right now, she just wanted to get to the actual mating. It was weighing on her mind.

Helena picked up the tablet and flicked her fingers over it. “There. The first instalment is in your account. A monthly stipend will be deposited into your account from this moment onward. It is just the interest. We don’t want to mess

with the principal at your age.”

Helena turned the tablet to Nicia, and Nissy stared at the amount. “Twelve thousand dollars a month?”

Helena smiled. “Just enough to keep you solvent. You can buy a car, a house, a gun. Everything is in your name, Nicia Mooring.”

Nissy sat back and tried to imagine what the hell she was going to need over a hundred thousand dollars a year for. Her mind was a blank.

Brax’s phone rang, and he excused himself to speak briefly with the person on the other end of

the line. He grimaced and nodded as if the person on the phone could see him. With a shift of his thumb, he hung up. "A transporter will be here in ten minutes. Your meeting with the lion guild will be immediate and from there, we are to proceed to the shifter guild."

Helena blinked. "That's fast."

Brax grinned. "I am very popular and the hunters are delighted to have a lion in their midst. Yours isn't a species that often joins in."

Anderson leaned back with his coffee cup near his face and his legs and arms showing complete relaxation. "We are a busy people."

Nicia giggled.

Helena looked like a beam of light had just dazzled her eyes, and Anderson rubbed her back. He smiled. “Yes, we approve. Definitely.”

Braxton reached out and rubbed the back of her neck, and Nicia couldn't really argue with her grandparents' sentiment. She approved as well.

Chapter Seven

Nicia faced the head of the lion guild and his mate, or her mate. It was hard to see which one of the couple was in charge. Norman and Ystine looked very normal for people who radiated with power.

“Guild Master. How are you this fine afternoon?” She smiled and inclined her head politely.

“I am a little confused. I have heard that you have gone to the Crossroads and come back with a mate, but he isn’t one of ours?”

She shook her head. “No. Not

even feline. He's a wolf, and he is waiting just outside."

Ystine smiled, "You look happy."

"So far so good. Frankly, if I would have mated with a lion, I would have seen Wells every time he came near me. That would not have ended well."

Norman flinched and conceded. "You have done what is for the best then. Your mother was an extraordinary woman, and I wish you nothing but the best."

Nicia narrowed her eyes. "I hear a *but* in there."

Ystine sighed. "You are going to be severed from the lion guild. We

will allow you to visit with friends and family, but you cannot call upon the guild for help. Do you accept this condition?"

Nicia bowed her head. "I appreciate what the guild did for me. I will forever be in your debt." She swallowed and looked at them. "But if I need to walk free to move into my future, I will turn and leave this room today with a light heart."

Norman grinned and got to his feet.

Ystine came after him, and Nicia was surrounded in a group hug. "You cannot call upon me as guild master, but you can always count

me as friend. Go out and find your future.”

Released from the hug and her link to the lion guild, she signed her resignation and left the way she had come.

Brax was waiting to hug her, but she didn't need comforting.

She smiled. “I feel lighter.”

He laughed. “Good. Keep that attitude. Now, we face the shifter council.”

Two floors, three halls and nine doors later, they knocked on the door, and the buzz of the opening made Nicia blink. “You know, I always thought that the guilds and

councils would be in some sort of underground cavern, not a high-rise in the middle of an urban centre.”

Brax opened the door. “Move with the times or die.”

“Clever. Is that embroidered on a cushion in here?” She entered the richly appointed boardroom and faced thirty men and women who were looking at her expectantly.

Norman was sitting in one of the seats. He winked at her.

A man with dark hair and lean features that resembled an older version of Brax tapped a gavel on the table. “Nicia Mooring, it is our

understanding that you have severed ties with your guild.”

“I have.” She could smell all the different animals that the shifters embodied, and it was like being trapped in a fresh zoo. *Is that panda?*

“We also understand that as your mate is embroiled with the shifter council, you are interested in achieving the same status for yourself.”

She frowned. “If you are referring to being a hunter, I always have been a hunter. I am just enthused about the possibility of being paid for my efforts.”

The room filled with amused

chuckles from the representatives.

The gavel tapped again. "We are disposed to accept your offer to answer to us. Do you have any conditions?"

"I do not wish to be separated from Braxton by any significant distance. I have just gotten him and I want to keep him close."

The man chuckled.

Braxton put his arm around her waist and squeezed. "I agree with her condition. As a mated pair, we will be working together. Separating a team is not a good idea."

The councillors spoke quietly for

a few minutes. Finally, the representative nodded. "I will agree to your terms. Now, come forward, sign the document and provide a blood sample for the anchor stone."

"Anchor stone?"

The wolf smiled; she was sure of his species as his eyes flicked and paled in amusement. "You place your blood on the stone, we give you a charm under your skin, and when you have found your target, you bring them here. Braxton will show you how it all works."

She swallowed at the thought. Well, if it were how things worked,

she would do it. The first thing came when she signed her name.

The wolf councillor looked at her. "You didn't take his name?"

Nicia smirked, "Not yet. We haven't been joined in the human world yet. I will think about it."

He sighed and looked past her to Braxton.

"So, how are you related to my mate?"

The councillor smiled, "You figured that out?"

"You look similar and at close range, you smell similar. I know you are a wolf, but I would guess you are his uncle?"

Braxton let out a chuckle. "She is very, very good."

The councillor nodded. "I am understanding everyone's opinion of her. I look forward to her success."

A block of obsidian was put down, and the councillor said, "Put it between your palms. It will do the rest."

Nervous, she picked up the block, and her hands were flattened on two of the six sides. Suddenly, the damned thing bit her!

She put the block down as quickly as she could, and the stone turned from black to ruby red.

Nicia scowled and looked at the marks on her palms. The pinpricks were healing but small, dark spots were left where they had been.

Braxton put his arm around her. "If you clap or press those two precise pinpoints together and think about the shifter council headquarters, the tiny fragments will pull you here and anything you have in your embrace."

"So, a hug cues the transport?"

"The hug, plus the contact, plus the thought. They have made it as precise as they could. Now, I will show you where we end up when we transport."

She nodded and turned to the door.

“Pick up your stone. You will need to set it in the floor.”

He waited while she grabbed the biting stone.

“Don’t worry. The piercing and embedding was a onetime thing. It doesn’t need to happen again.”

She made a face and held it gingerly as she walked away from the rapidly emptying council room.

“They just showed up for me?”

“Yes, getting a new hunter is a very big deal. They needed to know what you looked like so that if their agents are involved in a retrieval,

they know who not to shoot at.”

“I am guessing that there is also some kind of dossier involved.”

“You are very smart.”

They entered the lift and went right to the basement. The basement itself was a huge open area with only the support posts to break up the vast expanse of concrete and the strange patterns on the floor.

“Stay away from the edge of the rings. Each ring with a stone is registered to a live hunter. Not all are currently active, but the stone locks the circles to anyone who doesn't have that blood signature.”

She blinked. "So, it becomes a prison cell."

"Yup. All you have to do is roll free of it and your catch is locked in place until the keeper comes and takes them into custody."

They walked past a few more rings before he stopped. "This one is mine. The one immediately across from it is available."

Nicia followed his directions, and she slid the stone into the slot waiting for it on the outer ring. There was a click, the circle began to glow and she felt a matching pulse in her palms. "Wow."

Braxton was on the outside of the

ring, and he reached up and physically knocked on the barrier that met his touch.

“Double wow.” She got to her feet and reached for that barrier, but her hand passed right through it. Nicia went back and forth across the exterior of the ring before reaching out to touch the barrier around Brax’s circle. It felt like cool stone. “That is amazing.”

“I am glad you are impressed. It took transporters three generations before they came up with that charm. Now, it is time to get your kit.”

Two floors up, a charming

woman handed her a cell phone, walkie-talkie, handcuffs and procedure manual. Nicia lifted her eyebrows. "Do you have a Taser back there?"

The woman grinned, "Only on request."

"I am requesting."

"I am filling out the forms." The woman laughed.

A few minutes later, Nicia had her Taser and the charge packs for it. She was given a belt covered with pouches and sent on her way.

Nicia exhaled and shrugged. "So, what happens if your target has injured someone?"

“You call an ambulance and get the perpetrator away for justice.”

“So, you just leave them?”

“No, you stabilize them first.”

She scowled. Leaving a victim did not sit well with her. If it happened, she would make up her own procedure. Braxton would just have to learn to accept her quirks. After all, they were on their honeymoon.

Chapter Eight

Nicia fought the urge to punch Braxton, but she let him carry her over the threshold of the hotel's honeymoon suite.

Once inside, he placed her gently on the bed and then went to close, bolt and lock the door.

He peeled off his clothing, and she did the same. No sense pretending, she wanted him inside her, and given the tremor in his hands, it wouldn't be long until it happened.

With a final kick to send her

panties flying onto the pile of her clothing, she smiled and beckoned Brax with one finger.

His torso was marked with a few scars that showed severe damage to his flesh. As she stared, he crawled on top of her, kissing his way from her belly to her jaw. Nicia trembled as he kissed her. She focused on not clawing at him and parted her legs for the nudging heat of his cock.

“You aren’t ready yet.” Brax groaned.

“Then, kiss me again and we will figure out what needs to happen.” She stroked his chest and his shoulders before bucking and

twisting until he was on his back and she was flattened against him.

She couldn't help her laughter. He looked so surprised.

“How strong are you, Nissy?”

She shrugged. “I honestly couldn't say. It is always there when I need it. I think it comes from living in my other skin for so long.”

He nodded as if it made sense, but she was slowly writhing around on top of him, using his skin to stroke hers.

Her nipples pebbled into diamonds while she slowly twisted against him, rubbing her cheek

along his and nipping his neck. It was a matter of trust for predators, and he tensed but let her nibble her way down to his torso.

Her rough tongue lapped at his skin, taking in his taste until he filled her senses. She worked her way down to his erection, and she slowly drew her tongue across the sensitive head.

He groaned and grabbed for her hair, but just as she was about to wrap her lips around him, he pulled her away.

“No, I want to be inside you.” He lifted her, flipped her to her back and lay between her thighs on his

belly, pressing his nose into her sex with no warning.

His hot breath, lapping tongue and low growling combined as the ultimate aphrodisiac, and she gripped his dark hair and held on tight as she gasped and bucked. His tongue stroked deep and lapped at her. He was cheating just like she did. His beast was in for the mating, just as hers was.

She trembled when he moved up her body, and she tasted the tang of herself on his lips and tongue. His cock pressed against her and she tried not to tense. It was a matter of holding onto her self-control as he

worked inside her and ran into the barrier.

Nissy met his gaze and Brax was not surprised. He shifted his weight to his elbows and stroked the back of her neck. She wondered why he was using the calming stroke until he shifted his hips forward. "Son-of-a-bitch!"

He winced. "I won't tell my mother you said that. It is technically accurate but not flattering."

She snorted and waited while the firebrand inside her didn't seem inclined to injure or maim. The throbbing pain eased after a few

minutes, and she was shocked that he could hold onto his control. "Why not just let go?"

"Because as much fun as it would be, I want us to join together. It is important."

Brax watched her features, and when her pain eased, he shifted his hips back and slid them forward. "How was that?"

"Do it again, or you will get claws in your butt." Nissy grinned, and she welcomed the thrusts as they grew deeper with every retreat and return.

They rocked together with the scent of her blood in the air. It

increased their frenzy, and finally, she shifted to canines and bit his shoulder as carefully as she could.

He responded with a hard bite to her shoulder that locked him in place while his snarling groan and shudders gave indication of his release.

Nissy let him go and carefully licked her lips before she returned and cleaned his wound. "Sorry."

He laughed and was doing the same on her shoulder. "Sorry as well."

When they were done, sticky and firmly mated, she sighed in relief. "Now, no one can pry us apart. We

are legal by every council.”

Brax laughed and removed himself from her body, carrying her to the bath with ease. The huge tub filled quickly, and he made a quick call to housekeeping for the bed so that it would be made again before they returned.

She cleaned off at the sink before she stepped into the tub, and while the heat shocked her sensitive flesh for a moment, it started to relax her muscles a moment later.

When Brax slipped into the bath with her, he tugged her over and started to rub her shoulders. “So, what is the deal with a lioness and

a roar?"

"Oh, that. Well, it is said that a lioness can't defend herself or her people if she isn't whole, so missing my roar is a rather big deal."

"Can you just do voice training?"

"No. It was a reflex throttled down by constant pain. I don't know what would bring it back, but something, somewhere might. I am willing to keep looking."

Brax worked on the knots in her shoulders. "Are you sore?"

"No, a simple shift should fix the worst of it."

"Good. We have an assignment."

She splashed in the water and

stared at him. "When? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because, we had to obey the technicalities, and now that we are official, other species will sense it."

He had a point, but it was still annoying.

"What are we going after?"

"If nothing else comes up that takes precedence, would you believe that it is an armadillo loan shark?"

"It figures that an armadillo would want to be a shark as well."

Brax laughed and worked down her back until he reached her butt. "You have a great ass, but you carry

a lot of tension here.”

“I carry tension in my ass. Good to know. So, on our assignment. What should I wear...and how do we get there?”

“As soon as you get a good night’s sleep under you so we can start fresh in the morning, I will give you the transport briefing.”

He laughed, and sure enough, she yawned now that her discomforts had been reduced. “Fine. But tomorrow, I am going to be full of questions.”

“And I will answer every one, but for now, I just want to hold you close in a tub full of bubbles.”

Nissy would give him twenty minutes and then her pruney fingers would drive her out of the tub. For now, the cuddling was nice. She hoped he kept up the cuddling.

Curled together in bed, she smiled. "So, what do I need to know about our first target?"

Brax groaned against her neck. "Let me guess, it is after midnight?"

She grinned. "You are smart, too."

"Can we talk about this during daylight?"

She snorted. "Fine. Hang on. I need to heal, so this will be quick."

Nicia inhaled and shifted to lioness and back to human in ten seconds.

Brax sat up and stared. "You can shift that quickly?"

She yawned and nuzzled the pillow. "I can, but it makes me sleepy. The slow shift is better if I want to remain active."

He wrapped his arms around her again and spooned against her. "Can you show me how to do the slow shift?"

"Sure. I can also show you how to shift just your head and hands if you don't already know that one."

"Who taught you this stuff?"

Nicia smiled. "My mom. She was apparently on track to rule the Sargar Pride before she was snagged. Mastering shifting was part of that."

"Why didn't she escape before she did?"

"Me. We were supervised when together and otherwise kept from each other. The other wives resented having to keep us apart. It cut into their time with Wells. We both got to feel the effect of that, but when we started to defend ourselves, things changed."

"That is when you began hunting."

“Yup. They chained me to one of my siblings, and I hunted with them tied to me.”

He scowled. “How did that work?”

“Not well, but at least two of my half-sisters were decent hunters after I got through with them. I suppose it was luck that our family was charged with security around the compound.”

He stroked her hair as she settled in his embrace.

“Nissy, I promise to tell you what you want to know in the morning. Go to sleep and tomorrow we will hunt.”

He stroked the back of her neck, and she let the memories of the past float away until she was nodding off.

If she were wearing her tail, it would be lashing in excitement.

Something had come up and now her first hunt was going to involve a bear who was distributing illegally obtained parts of other shifters for aphrodisiac and magical purposes. The armadillo would just have to wait.

“I can’t believe that a shifter would do that.” Nicia shook her head and headed back to the council building for the next step.

Brax sighed. "Oh, just because you have a second form doesn't make you a better person. You should know that more than anyone."

Nissy shrugged. "I still hold out hope for the rest of the species."

"Being an asshole is not simply restricted to lions."

"Fine. I will concede that as likely. What are we doing?"

"Well, with the means by which we return, it helps to start here. The shifter council has vehicles stashed around the continent, and they will have a transporter send us to one of them."

“The shifter council has a transporter on staff?”

He shrugged. “They have to. We have to flit around the continent at a moment’s notice.”

“I thought there were other hunters.”

“Oh, there are, but you can’t send a hummingbird to deal with a bear. They try and match our skills to that of our prey.”

They walked into a room on the first floor and a smiling woman was waiting for them. “Where to, folks?”

The office that she was in looked very comfortable and homey.

Brax extended his phone, and the woman nodded and made a note in a large ledger. "Got it."

She gave them a focused look and nodded. "You don't need to change clothing. You should be fine."

Nicia sighed. "Hello, I am Nissy. I am new."

The transporter stopped and laughed, extending her hand. "My name is Mary. I am pleased to meet you, Nissy."

Brax exhaled noisily and waited.

Nicia looked at him archly and snuggled up next to him. "Manners matter, fluffy. Remember that."

He raised his eyebrows. "Fluffy?"

“I am trying out pet names. So far fluffy is in the lead.”

Mary was making noises indicating that she was strangling on her laughter. “Well, I had better get you going before the fur flies. Stand on the icon and I will send you to the matching site.”

Brax wrapped his arm around Nicia and she was forced to follow him to stand on a decorative mosaic in the floor. A mild increase of light surprised her, but they were standing in a new building when the light faded.

The empty building was cool and the air tasted different from that of

the shifter council headquarters. They really were in a new place.

Braxton seemed pleased as he led her through the stone building and toward a minivan that was waiting for them. "Every building is the same. All the layouts are identical."

"If we transport back, how do the vehicles get returned to the building?" She settled in the passenger seat and buckled up.

"When we get back to headquarters, we tell them where we left it and a local shifter retrieves it, either from the abandonment point or the impound lot if it gets picked up. It

is then returned here with the keys placed..." He flipped down the visor and keys slid into his lap. "Here."

"It seems that someone has put a lot of research into this."

He grinned. "Trial and error. It takes a while to create a working model, but with our populations more spread out and many shifters choosing to ignore their guilds, it means we have to adapt our methods."

Brax drove them through the strange city using the GPS to guide them to a small shop on the outer edge of town.

“Is it always this easy to find them?”

“No. I believe we got this assignment to test you.”

Nicia wrinkled her nose as she hopped out of the van. She checked her phone and saw the picture of the man they were looking for. Garret North, smuggler and seller of shifter bits.

The shop didn't have a sign but did have an alternative medicine logo. Nicia pasted a smile on her face and went in, determined to find out where the bits and pieces had come from before she snagged him.

The scent of shifter energy smacked her the moment she entered the room. She shook her head and screwed her smile back in place as Garret rose to his impressive height from behind the counter.

“Can I help you two?”

Nicia looked back at Braxton and sighed. “I am looking for something to give to our local mage to calm his...you know. He is wearing me out trying to keep up.”

Braxton played along and looked shamefaced.

Garrett nodded. “I believe I do. It won't be cheap.”

She shrugged. "I don't care. I just want to walk normally again."

He smiled and turned, reaching up and bringing down a jar of tiny shards. He used tongs to lift out a sliver. "These are quite pricy, the shards of a gemstone turtle shell."

The scent of pain that surrounded the shards was agonizing for her. She smiled and turned her head, "How long do they last?"

"One shard placed under the skin will last for two years. Given your partner's obvious virility, I would take ten to last for the next two decades. You might not find a supply again."

She wrinkled her nose and said. "I will take six. Now, I am looking for a gift for my brother. He's looking for a nice young man, and I think he needs a little help."

She pointed to the peacock feathers in a vase. "May I see one of them?"

"You know your properties."

She shrugged. "I have done my due diligence." She took the feather and inhaled sharply when the familiar scent struck her. It wasn't the scent of the feather; it was on the base where it had been ripped from the bird. This test had suddenly taken a turn that spiralled

her mood into darkness.

“May I look around?” Her smile was weak. She placed the peacock feather next to the shards she had agreed to purchase.

“Of course. Take your time.”

Braxton put his arm around her, and she led him through the shop, getting sicker by the moment. When Garrett came around to show her a particularly attractive set of lioness teeth carved into earrings, she turned and struck him in the throat, sending him stumbling back into the counter.

Braxton took the hint and grabbed him, wrapping his arms

around Garrett and transporting him back to the shifter council headquarters.

Nicia locked the door, bolted it and drew the shades. Inside, she collected samples from nineteen animals, all carrying the familiar scent. When she had checked everything, she grabbed the bags, lined up the two pinpoints on her hand and wished to be back at the headquarters.

Light swelled and receded. She was in the basement again with her samples and Braxton was staring at the half-shifted Garrett trapped in his circle.

Braxton asked her, "What is all that?"

"Wells."

Garrett jerked in shock and went from half-bear to human in a second. "You know him?"

She showed her fangs, and to her shock, a growl came out. "Where is he?"

"I don't know." He closed down and got a little sly. "I might remember if you let me out of here."

Braxton was staring at her. "What is the problem?"

She grabbed him and the load of contraband. She stalked with him

to the entryway and closed the door. "Do you see these?"

"Of course. They are contraband stolen from murdered shifters."

"This is the work of my half-brother, Teron Wells. These shifters were alive when they were harvested, and that peacock was alive four days ago. The feathers were ripped out of him and the flesh is still drying on the edge of the feather."

Braxton suddenly focused on her completely, and she saw the hunter in him. "What else can you get from them?"

She smelled the bags, "There is

fear, but there is heat and dust.”

She got an idea. “He had bear-claw trimmings in here.”

She went through the bags and found the small pack with clippings. “Don’t watch.”

Nicia turned her back and popped one of the bear claws into her teeth, sucking at the dirt. She spit it back into her hand. “What happened to the compound?”

“What compound?”

“I need to talk to Norman.”

“Use your phone. All the numbers are in there. I will check the items into evidence.”

She nodded and waved him off

while she waited for the lion guild master to answer the phone.

When he did answer, she fired the questions at him and gave him the bits of information she had weaned from the evidence.

“So, what you are saying is that there is a rogue male lion holding a bunch of shifters hostage. I find it hard to believe that none of them have broken free.”

She cleared her throat. “Teron is a weasel, but he pays attention. He knows you can't shift with metal under your skin. He used to taunt me about it often enough.”

Norman got quiet. “You think he

has collared them?”

“I think it is worth checking out. I caught his scent on parts of nineteen different species.”

“How could he do it without being seen?”

The answer was obvious to Nicia. “He is probably using the punishment rooms. They are under the buildings and they connect in a maze.”

Norman hissed. “There is a city under the desert?”

“That is my guess. So, you find out how many of the men from the compound have disappeared. I will wait for your call.”

Braxton returned. “They are running identification on the samples you brought back. If they match to any missing persons, we will have the support of the entire shifter council. We just have to wait.”

She hugged him and inhaled his scent, cleansing the fear that she had just inhaled into her lungs. “I think I want to go wait somewhere else. How long do we have that honeymoon suite?”

Chapter Nine

Forty-eight hours of sex and snuggling later, Nicia was more than ready to join the other hunters that were assembled for the incursion.

Braxton flipped her braid to the centre of her back and kissed her quickly. "I am very proud that you are willing to go back there."

"I think it will be good for me. I have already gotten my growl back, I wonder what it will take to bring my roar."

Brax grinned, "I have tried my

best.”

He had. She had screamed, moaned and used language that she couldn't quite remember in the light of day, but no roar. Her body was covered with nips, his with light claw marks, and while they both ached, they didn't regret a moment.

“It was better than the best. Your best is excellent.” She nuzzled his cheek.

There were a few other hunters already in the boardroom. For a mass transport, the guild master would have to make the push. There were no mosaics or icons in

the compound, so they depended on her to put them where they needed to be.

Nicia was going to lead. No one knew the punishment area like she did. Four of the young males had gone missing, and she knew the bastards. They had run home.

She snuggled up to Braxton, rubbing her face along his cheek to keep herself calm. He took the hint and stroked the back of her neck.

Nissy calmed and they waited. When everyone was ready, a quick call to the transporter brought her and her mate to the boardroom.

Krisia stood, nodded, raised her

hands and moved them all without a word. She had been there for the first raid on the compound and her eyes showed that the memories of what she had seen were still with her.

Nissy opened her senses the moment that the light faded. Yards were overgrown, flowers were scraggly and dust had settled on everything.

The Wells house was the closest, so she showed the hunters how to see and disarm the traps, and then, she took them inside.

She suspected that Krisia had used her memory of home to bring

them there. She had landed, standing on what would have been the furthest edge of her chain.

Once inside, there was no power, no light, but Nicia led them quickly to the hidden access panel and down the steps to the punishment halls.

They had agreed to seek the halls in groups of three or four. They were too extensive to go through without it. The walkie-talkies were rigged to earpieces so someone finding something could report in.

Nicia and the others lifted their heads to scent the air and set off. She followed Teron's scent,

knowing that despite the fact that he was smart, he was also very lazy. His pathway would not have traps along it.

Braxton was at her side and slightly behind her and a hunter named Troy was behind him. Nicia had never worked with an otter before, but he had a serious nature that appealed to her.

She paused and noted three small tripwires arranged in a row, next to a pressure plate.

It took Braxton three minutes to clear the wires and plate, but when they passed it, they knew what the wires were hiding.

Nicia opened a door in the hall and reeled back at the smell of animals in captivity with no way to clean themselves. "Oh god."

Cage after cage contained a shifter, each one bound with a thick collar crusted with blood.

Troy opened the first cage and let out a limping beaver. He reached for the collar and Nicia stopped him.

"Wait. We need to do a health assessment before we open that collar. Infection that his animal can fight off might not be suitable for his human to survive. We are here to help. We are here to help you all

get out of here alive but you have to have patience. Please.”

Troy blinked. “How do you know that?”

She tapped her neck. “I didn’t get this scar because I am clumsy with necklaces. I lived a year in a collar like that, but I was able to clean myself to some extent when it rained. I was chained in my family’s front yard.”

They went down the line and opened cage after cage. When Nicia got to the second to last cage, her heart broke.

A pregnant lioness lay on her side, panting with the pain of the

collar and the confinement of the cage.

“Come on, sweetheart. We will get you somewhere safe.”

Nicia was so fixated on coaxing the female into the open space between cages that she almost missed the slight noise of a trapdoor opening.

She saw the female flinch and heard a masculine roar a moment later. Nicia whirled to face her half-brother in his shifted form.

There was only one thing to do, she dropped her belt and tore through her clothing as she did her fast shift. Within a few steps, she

landed on Teron and bit his neck, shaking her head to pull him off balance.

He snarled and tried to pull her off with a grip on her shoulder, but she clenched her teeth tighter and pulled harder.

Nicia released him and circled him; there was surprise and a bit of fear in his eyes.

She lashed her tail and growled low.

He blinked and roared at her again. That was enough.

Out of the shreds of her clothing, she sniffed out the bear claw and licked it up, crunching down on it

with deliberate focus.

Power flowed through her and she lunged at Teron, bowling him to his back and biting his neck, tearing as blood covered her face. She kept up until he whimpered and his body began to resume its human form.

She released him, but she watched carefully. Teron didn't disappoint. The moment she backed away, he shifted again and snapped at her, so she lunged in and broke his neck.

Nicia sat back and watched the naked and wide-eyed form of her brother come out of the fur and

hide.

She huffed, stood up and roared, shaking the cages and vibrating the ceiling. She shook her head to clear it and shifted back to her human form.

She got to her feet and put on the tool belt. "I should have brought an extra shirt or something."

Braxton was shaking his head and taking off his shirt. "Or something. You roared."

She smiled and tears started to run down her face. "I did."

"Why are you crying?"

"I feel better." She grabbed his head and kissed him. "I feel

whole.”

He slipped his shirt over her head and pulled her arms out through the sleeves of the black t-shirt. “I am so very glad.”

Troy cleared his throat. “If you are both glad, can we get on with this?”

“Let’s get them out of here. I will carry the female. She is going to be heavy.”

“What exactly did you do during the fight?”

She grinned. “I will explain later. It was complicated. Now, report in and we will make our way out.”

She soothed the female, told her

what was going on and lifted her up, carrying her down the tunnels and into daylight. The pool in the back of the property was still supplied by the well, so the water was relatively clear. Nicia set the pregnant female down next to the pool and stripped quickly before jumping in.

The female stepped into the water and sighed as Nicia scrubbed her with her hands and nails. Splashes rang out in the deeper water, and the other animals cleansed themselves before their return to human form.

A couple came in down the steps

at the shallow end, and to Nicia's surprise, the other groups had all left the collars on.

After she was as clean as she could get, Nicia helped the pregnant female out of the pool and found a shady spot for her out of the heat.

Healers began arriving, and one by one, the collars came off and the survivors of captivity could be identified.

Transporters brought clothing and took the survivors back for a debriefing. Two out of the four lion males had survived meeting the hunters, but those two were

heading for castration as the lightest sentence and death as the most likely.

Twenty-nine species were in evidence, including the gemstone turtle. She had to wait until her shell filled in before she could shift. They had been carving chunks off it.

The two survivors said that Teron had approached them with the offer to help them make a fortune, so a kidnapping and imprisonment ring had been established. Apparently, Teron had been very convincing.

When the healer finally

approached the lioness, Nicia was there next to her. “You can’t take the collar off.”

The healer paused. “Why not?”

“She is pregnant. She can’t shift until she has the cub. If she does, she will miscarry and that would be awkward. The child won’t shift with her.”

The healer pulled her hands back. “What do I do?”

“Tell me how close she is to delivering. If we are lucky, she is already in labour.”

The healer slowly stroked her hands over the lioness. “She is over term. We need to get this going.”

Braxton stayed nearby and helped as the healer induced labour, and after two hours in the hot sun, the cub slid into the world, legs kicking and tail lashing.

“Now, take the collar off.”

The collar came off and the woman slowly shifted back into a familiar form. “Lorianne Argus.”

Lorianne looked up and tears were streaming from her eyes. She gathered up her cub and the kitten began to nurse.

Lorianne had been promised to Teron, but when the raid occurred, Lorianne had put it out of her mind. Teron hadn't. If he couldn't

have her as a woman, he would have her as his lioness.

The little kit was a girl, and Lorianne smiled down. “Her father is dead, and she doesn’t need his evil to begin her life. I would like to start it with hope.”

Nicia smiled, a little teary. “That is a very good way to start.”

Lorianne asked, “Can I name her...”

“Yes?”

“Can I name her after your mother? She was the strongest role model I can think of – oof!”

Nicia hugged the mother and child, “I would love that. Nancy

Argus. It's a good name."

Braxton and the healer had suspiciously bright eyes when Nicia turned around. He said, "It is a very good name."

The lions took care of their charges and Nicia and Braxton returned to the hotel.

He snorted. "Check your account balance."

Looking at him suspiciously, she checked her accounts online and her jaw dropped at the line of deposits for thousands upon thousands of dollars. "What the hell happened?"

"Each member of the missing had

a reward offered by their guild. You got your share plus a team-leader bonus. It does pay to do the right thing.”

She laughed and threw a pillow at him.

“Now, tell me what you did in the fight. I have never seen a shifter that strong.”

“Oh. My mother had a friend who was a mage, and she learned what the normal mages do with the bits and snippets that we give away for our trips to the Crossroads and such. When one shifter uses part of another with the focus on magic, they can unlock the moment of that

particular power. I still had that bear claw."

"So, you have super strength?"

"Only until I pass the bits of that claw. Shifters can't use much magic, but we can do that much." She waggled her brows.

"So, if I ingested some rabbit fur with the intent to take its properties?"

"You would be facing a divorce or living in the hallway until it wore off. I am not having sex with a rabbit."

He wrapped his arms around her. "I am very impressed with you, lioness."

“And I think I am beginning to love you...fluffy.” She giggled and squealed as he flicked her over his head and flipped her to the bed.

He got naked in a hurry and jumped onto the bed, landing with all fours on her and using his muzzle to lick her jawline.

“Ack! Cold nose!”

Laughing, she tried to hold him off and finally gave in while he cleaned her face for her. “I hope you paid for a pet deposit.”

He nipped her shoulder and shifted to his human form. “That wit of yours is going to get you into trouble.”

She grinned and wrapped her legs around him. "I am delighted to say that it already did. This kind of trouble I can handle."

They tumbled around, and she knew she needed to pick a territory, but there were other things to keep her attention at the moment.

She might have to talk to that turtle after all.

Author's Note

Welcome to 2014. I am delighted to be continuing the Shifting Crossroads series.

This year, we will be examining the seedy underbelly of shifter communities, meeting a chupacabra and finding out a little more about elves.

2014 should be interesting and educational.

Thanks for reading,
Zenina Masters

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About the Author

Zenina Masters was born in Canada and lives in Canada. She has a regular job and does nothing particularly exciting with her life. She enjoys fishing, silence and the ability to pick and choose friends she can trust. Life is too short to watch your back all the time.

Her writing life is a teeny bit of escapism, she would probably chicken out if confronted by three naked men and looks forward to

one day finding out.