

ELLORA'S CAVE **XANADU**

WINTER
OF THE *Beast*

VONNA HARPER

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Vonna Harper

Dio of the Puma clan is a skilled warrior and hunter. What he doesn't feel prepared for is his new role as ruler of a clan with few women. Does he have the necessary leadership and compassion or will his need for sex dominate? Only the massive, mysterious Beast knows.

When her cruel husband casts her out, Tawia can no longer call herself a Falcon. Her future a frightening unknown, she heads into the wilderness as winter approaches. The Beast watches.

Captured by the enemy warrior, Tawia fights her body's demands. Trust is as incomprehensible to her as the relationship between Dio and the great puma. But neither man nor beast are willing to set her free.

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WINTER OF THE BEAST

Vonna Harper

Chapter One

"Ashlyn is no more."

"Death has taken her?"

"Finally."

Dio threw off his hide covering and sat up. The interior of the bachelor structure he'd built on Puma Mountain was so dark he couldn't make out the man standing at the entrance, but he recognized Ber's voice. "Have you told the others?"

"Not yet. I wanted to inform you first."

Glad Ber couldn't see his expression, he gritted his teeth. "Were you with her when she died?"

"Luann and I were. Also Jurik, of course."

As the Puma clan's Healer, Jurik had been spending much of his time with Ashlyn the Ruler ever since the wise, elderly woman suffered an attack that had left her unable to lead. Ashlyn had lain deathlike for much of the summer and through fall. Perhaps it was ordained that she should die as winter approached.

"Luann was with you?" he questioned. "Why would your woman want to see our Ruler? She isn't of our clan."

"Not at first, but she is now. She wanted to let Ashlyn know she no longer had to struggle to live." Ber sighed. "Perhaps that was what Ashlyn needed to hear because she breathed her last while my woman knelt beside her bed."

The ways of the spirits were more than Dio would ever comprehend. What he needed to resign himself to was that with the Puma clan's ruler dead, responsibility for guiding them would fall to him. Secure in the knowledge that Ber couldn't see what he

was doing, he rubbed his left shoulder where the mark the Beast had placed on him years ago lay.

His erection didn't surprise him. He couldn't remember when he'd last awakened without one. Unfortunately, unlike Ber, he had no woman to turn to and now was hardly the time to handle that task himself.

"What do you want to do?" Ber asked. "There's no reason to tell the others until morning, is there?"

"No. I'll go to her lodging and stay with her body so Jurik can sleep."

"Her death was expected, but she has ruled us for so long that only our elders remember a time before her. How much will change for the Pumas now and how much will remain the same?"

Careful not to brush his cock, Dio pushed himself to his feet. Ber stood in the entrance with the leather and wood door open enough to accommodate his sturdy body, which meant the cold night air was seeping in.

As a senior Puma warrior, Dio had seen nearly thirty winters so was accustomed to violent storms that seemed to go on forever. Fortunately, the first snowstorm hadn't yet reached the Puma settlement high on the mountain, but the promise and threat were there.

Tonight the air smelled of adventure and hunting, even battles, all things that would be denied him once he became ruler. He'd accept his new role, but what about the man he'd always been? Could he turn his back on what had long defined his role within the clan?

"You've changed," he told Ber as he reached for his footwear. "Become more concerned with the clan and less with the Beast."

"Luann has shown me how to look at myself and life in a different way."

Even though she'd initially been his prisoner, Luann, a member of the Deer Clan, which lived in the great, distant valley, had decided to remain on Puma Mountain with

Ber. Before Luann came into Ber's life, the other warrior had had little existence beyond that of Beast Master, but Dio no longer thought of Ber as more beast than man. The woman Ber had mated with was responsible for him becoming less beastlike and more compassionate.

"You're lucky," he said, "to have found her. Otherwise you'd still have no one to sleep with." *Like most Puma men, me included.* His cock throbbed as if in agreement.

"I feel blessed for what the spirits have given me."

"And for what The Beast allowed you to have. He could have killed her."

"I know. Dio?"

Although he shook his head, Dio was careful not to let resignation creep into his voice. "Yes, I'm going. Ashlyn deserves my respect."

"And after you've done that?"

Was it Luann who'd made Ber more aware of the emotions of others? Was any woman capable of doing that to a man, not that he was ever going to find out as long as Puma men far outnumbered the clan's women. "Before I face the future for all of us, I must go on another spirit search."

"Now?"

Ber might be referring to the weather, but Dio guessed he was wondering why when Dio already knew what his future held. "Tomorrow."

One more chance to embrace isolation. And to make my peace with my future.

* * * * *

After pulling her hide cape around her neck, Tawia of the Falcon Clan lifted her head and looked around. No wonder it had gotten so cold. She was no longer on the valley floor but had reached the foothills of Puma Mountain. Fighting a shudder, she stopped and took in her surroundings. She shouldn't have come here. Granted, Falcon men sometimes hunted in the mountain's lower elevations, but only the most foolish of women would venture near land claimed by the warlike Pumas.

Or a woman who had no future.

The weight of the pack on her back provided needed distraction from the image she'd carried out of the Falcon village and into the wilderness. Shrugging provided momentary relief followed by leather straps digging into her collarbone. She freed herself from the burden and placed it on the ground. It was late afternoon, which meant the sun would soon set. Once that happened, a bone-touching cold would envelop her. Thank goodness she'd had the presence of mind to include her bedding in her pack. In addition, her husband had given her enough food for several days and every piece of clothing she owned.

She'd left behind the nearly nothing garment she'd worn on her wedding night.

Determined not to allow herself to slip into the past, she looked around for a place to spread out her bedding. The ground under a large, spreading tree was littered with the leaves it had shed during fall. The leaves would provide a cushion from the hard earth, and hopefully the tree would shelter her if the wind picked up.

"Falcon spirit. Have you abandoned me, or will you remain beside me tonight?"

Even though she didn't expect an answer, she strained to hear something in the wind. Even if she could, it was too late to retrace her steps. For tonight at least she'd sleep on land claimed by the Pumas.

* * * * *

The Beast was out there. Even in the dark, Dio sensed the massive puma's presence, and although Ber was the only Puma who fully understood the Beast's emotions, thoughts and actions, Dio mentally embraced the creature. Perhaps he should be afraid, maybe he was a little, almost as much as he dreaded his future.

"You and I are alike in many ways," he told the unseen Beast. "Neither of us has any control over our destinies. Have you made your peace with the fact that you're the only one left of your kind? What is that like?"

Startled by the desperation in his voice, he clamped a hand over the mark on his shoulder. He was tempted to let the other hand go to his cock for the distraction he craved, but trying to connect with the Beast was more important.

“What is it like to be a puma with killing teeth and tearing claws? If I were one, would I face each day the same way? Like you, would I have resigned myself to never having a mate?”

He took a moment to let the words sink in and then continued, “Maybe, if the spirits will it, I’ll find someone the way Ber did.”

The wind seemed to laugh at the ridiculous notion, and as it faded away so did his fantasy. The spirits had long ago determined that only a handful of baby Puma girls would be born. Whether that was so the Pumas would remain a small clan or because of some sin an ancient Puma had committed he didn’t know.

“I want to embrace my leadership role, and yet I don’t,” he admitted. “That’s why I’m here. I need to make my peace with my fate, somehow.”

Tired of his thoughts, he wiggled his toes inside his leather boots and shrugged to remind himself of his small pack and the spear and knife fastened to it. He’d only brought a little food, but hunting would give him something to do tomorrow—if it didn’t start snowing.

“The spirit Winter decides when it will cover the land with snow.” He spoke as if the Beast were standing in front of him. “I wish He would let the Pumas know when that will be. Does he warn you, Beast?”

Neither the Beast nor the wind seemed inclined to answer, and after settling his limp cock against an inner thigh, he started walking again. It would be dark in a few hours, but fortunately the moon was full and at least right now there were only a few clouds, which meant he wouldn’t lose his way, not that he cared where he was going.

Walking was good. Walking gave him something to do and would make it easier to sleep tonight. He hadn’t given much thought to where he was going, but he must have

had the weather in mind when he headed for lower elevations. Besides, moving downhill was easier.

Most of the deer had left the higher elevations, which meant hunting should be successful tomorrow. Even if he spotted one at first light, he might follow it for awhile to give him something to do beyond wondering why he questioned his ruler skills.

Tension at the back of his neck stopped him in midstride. His first thought was that the Beast was studying him, but he soon realized that whatever presence he'd sensed wasn't large enough to be the great puma. Shadows were becoming longer and harder to distinguish, but instead of cursing the poor tracking conditions, he relished testing his skills against whoever or whatever was out there. His cock took note, prompting him to reposition the half swelling.

At this elevation he was no longer on land claimed by the Pumas. Instead, it was an area without ownership where any clansman could come to hunt or fish in the several creeks and lakes. Despite its designation, however, a Puma seldom came here alone. One never knew whether he'd come across a large, hostile group. Well aware of that, Dio planned his every step as he headed in the direction instinct dictated.

There was a steep slope ahead of him with a number of large trees at the top. Undoubtedly birds nested in the branches. Maybe squirrels and other climbing rodents had claimed the same trees. He might encounter a bedded down deer. Determined to improve his chances of surprising one, he slowed even more and took to the shadows.

This was what gave his life meaning. He felt most alive when he was stalking game. Pitting himself against creatures at home in the wild made him feel more animal than man, connected with his world. He knew how to hunt. What he had to learn was how to think and guide as Ashlyn the Ruler had.

Breathing deep brought a scent he didn't recognize to his nostrils. He stopped again and removed his pack. That done, he carefully set it on the ground. The scent again caught his attention, and he slipped behind a large bush. Once he reached the top, he'd be able to see much more than he could now. Although he preferred to hunt standing

tall, he'd learned to do whatever needed to be done to bring down a prey. Lowering himself to his knees, he crawled with his right knuckles instead of his palm on the ground so he could grip his spear.

Not being able to clearly see where he was going concerned him, but hopefully he was invisible. And even if his prey, if that's what the presence turned out to be, spotted him, he relished the confrontation.

By the time he reached the nearest tree, he was more than ready to rest his knees, which he did by rocking back onto his haunches. The wind hummed, and an owl hooted. Bats flew overhead intent on their nightly search for winged insects, and he gave thanks to the spirits for creating bats to counter mosquitoes.

Spirit thoughts faded to be replaced by the single-mindedness that went with hunting. He was no longer a Puma male but a predator open to everything that might reach him. His cock had settled back into a peaceful state, but now it sought to claim his attention. Forcing thoughts of self pleasure aside, he went back to absorbing his world. The scent was even stronger now but more sensation than aroma.

Movement at the base of a tree in the middle of the grove drew Dio's attention there. It was so slight it might have been caused by the wind playing with some leaves or maybe a rodent. Knowing better than to dismiss it, he continued to focus on the tree trunk.

The movement came again. He compared it with everything he knew about what took place in nature, but nothing came to mind. More interested than ever, he slid around the trunk that had been sheltering him. As he did, he gave silent thanks to the Beast for what he'd learned about being a hunter.

A familiar presence stirred his senses. He didn't try to make out the Beast because if the great creature wanted to remain hidden, it would. Reminding himself to be patient, he waited for the Beast to communicate with him. After a few seconds, a deep voice resonated inside him.

An intruder.

"What is he doing here?" Dio whispered.

I don't know. And it's a female, not a man.

"A woman? From which clan?"

Falcon.

"You want me to grab her?"

Yes.

"Why?"

She may provide the answers you are seeking. And if she doesn't, at least her body might quiet yours.

"I'm a warrior, not a fighter of women."

The Pumas' future is in your hands. Everything you experience adds to your wisdom.

* * * * *

An owl had been hooting, each call interspersed with long periods of silence. Now it struck Tawia that it had fallen silent. At least the bats still flitted through the darkening sky. Clouds were moving in from the south, which made her wonder if a storm was on its way. If that happened, maybe she should watch where the bats went when they'd finished hunting and join them in their shelter.

A shudder rocked her at the thought of having to share a small, dark space with the creatures. Better to stay near the trees.

She was about to sit down again when the hairs on the back of her neck lifted. Confused and alarmed, she looked all around. Although she saw nothing, she continued to feel uneasy. Picking up her knife made her feel a little better, but how was she ever going to fall asleep if she —

A sound no louder than bird wings spun her around. She caught a glimpse of something rushing at her. Then it slammed into her and knocked her back and to the ground. Her elbow struck something hard, and her arm went numb, causing her to

drop her knife. Despite the hot weight on top of her, she reached for what might be the only thing to stand between her and death.

As she closed her still-numb fingers around the hilt, she acknowledged that a human and not a puma was on top of her. It had to be a man. No woman's muscles were that hard, no woman so large.

"No!"

"Yes," came the decidedly male response.

Driven by terror, she bent her knees in preparation for getting to her feet. At the same time, she twisted her upper body away from the weight. She was now on her side with her legs tucked under her and her head lifted.

No matter how much she fought to buck her attacker off, the all-consuming form held her fast to the ground. Turned the way she was, she couldn't see who it was. At least the hand holding her knife wasn't trapped under her, but even with fear lending strength to her muscles, she didn't try to stab her attacker. Instead, wondering if she had it in her to kill another human being, she forced herself to stop struggling. For now.

"You don't belong here," the man said.

"Let me go. I mean no —"

"Where are your warriors?"

Her first instinct was to tell him the truth, that she was alone. That way, maybe, he wouldn't see her as the enemy. But if she did, he'd know how vulnerable she was. "Nearby. They'll be here any minute."

When he laughed, the deep sound rumbled through her. For no longer than the amount of time it took her to draw a breath, his laughter mesmerized her. Then memories of her husband taking her when and how he wanted washed over her. It wasn't ever going to happen again, it wasn't!

More furious and determined than afraid, she swiped her knife at the stranger, grunting as she did. The blade struck something soft.

"Damnation!"

Even before his oath fully registered, her attacker grabbed her wrist so tightly that she lost feeling in it. She struggled to strike him again, but her weapon slid out of her numb fingers. Breathing raggedly, he released her arm, picked up her knife, and flung it away.

"No!"

She again bucked under the heavier weight and somehow managed to turn toward him. In the shadows, he was massive, huge, the largest living creature she'd ever seen. Even as she acknowledged her impression, she knew fear was responsible. He was a human, not a monster. Her arms were free. She didn't dare ask herself where his were as she called upon every bit of strength she possessed.

Planting her elbows on the ground, she fought to sit up. "Let me go!" She tried to strike him with her head, tried to knee him in the groin.

Instead of giving way, her attacker settled a broad hand over her breasts and pressed down until her back ground against rocks and dirt. Ignoring what was poking into her spine, she closed her hands around his forearm, digging in with her nails. Survival. Her world revolved around the single word.

"Damn you!"

Powerful fingers tightened around both of her wrists. She fought to lift her head so she could bite him somewhere, anywhere. But before she could, he forced her arms over her head.

"No!"

"Yes."

Chapter Two

Breathing rapidly, her attacker crossed one wrist over the other. Then he pinned them to the ground with a single powerful hand. Another “No!” pressed against her lips, but she refused to let it free.

His breathing was even quicker than hers with a sharp quality that said he was in pain. Much as she wanted to take comfort from knowing she was responsible, she could barely think for the weight settled over her hips and the too-big body leaning over hers. Only one thing mattered. She was in a battle for her life, one she was losing.

Desperate, she twisted from one side to the other and back again. Sweat bloomed everywhere. Her muscles trembled. And she remained stretched out and helpless.

“You can’t win this battle,” he insisted. “Why exhaust yourself trying?”

“Let me go! I’ve done nothing —”

“I’ll decide that.”

Before she could think what, if anything to say in response, he lifted himself off her. Relief at being able to breathe freely distracted her. By the time she could concern herself with what he had in mind, it was too late. Still holding her arms above her head, he grabbed the shoulder closest to him and flipped her onto her belly. Screaming, she tried to kick back at him.

“Quiet!” He brought her arms down and then pressed her hands against the small of her back.

Instead of obeying, she screamed again. If he asked why, she wouldn’t have been able to answer. Even if her clanspeople had heard, they wouldn’t have done anything. She kept trying to batter him with her boots.

"A fighter." His grip on her wrists tightened, and he pressed down on the small of her back, flattening her breasts. "I didn't expect that."

How could he have had any expectations unless he'd been watching her? Even more unnerved, she fought with every bit of strength in her until she sweated under her heavy clothes. Because of the way her head was turned, she still couldn't see him, but his presence was unmistakable. She imagined him on his knees and leaning over her, his weight keeping her where he wanted her. He appeared content to let her fight, and she wondered if he was laughing at her.

What she couldn't comprehend was how her body seemed willing to absorb his heat, his strength. Not only had her nipples hardened, her pussy was hot and hungry for something she refused to acknowledge. How could this be when she'd grown to loathe being touched?

She should hate this powerful stranger. Instead, he fascinated her. Yes, he might rape or kill her, but she could only live in the moment, and at this moment she was a woman in a man's grasp.

At length exhaustion slowed her. Although she strained to keep her breasts off the ground, she did so with no hope that her effort would lead to freedom.

"A worthy opponent." He sounded a bit out of breath himself. "I lift my hand in acknowledgement."

When the pressure on the base of her spine let up, she prayed he'd let her go, but the fingers roping her wrists together remained in place. Her spine ached from arching so long, and with a groan, she collapsed, turning her head toward him as she did. He was reaching into a small pouch around his waist.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, surprised at her ability to speak. Was his knife in there?

He didn't answer of course. Why should he care what she was thinking? Then he withdrew his hand, and she had her answer. In his fingers was a slender length of leather resembling the kind her clansmen used to secure the legs of just-killed deer.

"No!" she bellowed followed by another, albeit feeble attempt to break free.

"Yes."

The first touch of soft, yet sturdy leather against her flesh triggered something feral inside her. "Bear dung! Spawn of a snake!" she cried, redoubling her efforts to break free.

"Go on, call me those things. It won't change anything."

"Lizard tail!"

"So you hate me, do you?" He straddled her with his inner thighs hard against her outer ones and his knees grinding into her. That done, he lowered himself. If not for her clothing, the telltale hard length might have settled into the valley between her ass cheeks.

The tantalizing pressure distracted her. She remained aware of the restraint he was wrapping around her wrists but couldn't concentrate for the impact of his warmth seeping into her veins. He wasn't touching her, yet he seemed to be everywhere, a total possession she strangely wanted. Nothing about him reminded her of her husband.

Beyond all reason, she wanted this stranger on top of her, wanted his hands claiming and controlling her while his cock slipped past her outer sex lips. She'd never tell him that of course. By the spirits, she didn't understand.

"There," he said, the word ending with a sigh.

Lifting her elbows, he gave her arms a shake. Her wrists remained pressed together with one on top of the other. Leather caressed her skin and left its impact on her bones. Numb and alive at the same time, she turned her head even more and stared up at what she could see of him. Even with layers of clothing between them, she felt him in ways she'd never felt another human being.

Done. Captured. The battle lost. The future belonging to him.

Giving no hint that he was ready to let her up, he rocked forward. The hard weight now pressing against the base of her spine pulled her attention away from the inertia

that had seized her. He obviously felt no need to hide his erection from her, and with his every breath, his cock slid over her anew. If they were naked, would he turn her over, spread her legs, and enter her? Maybe he wouldn't bother. Instead he'd lift her onto her knees and take her from behind.

Her cheeks burned, and her throat felt tight. Something stirred in her core. If she dared take her eyes off him, she would have closed them so she could focus fully on what was happening to her.

"Damnation," he muttered.

Leveraging himself by briefly pressing down on her waist, he swung off her. A moment later, a piece of her mind closed down, allowing her to concentrate on what he was doing. Her neck and head ached from trying to study him. Well aware that he might stop her, she rolled onto her side and then onto her back. Her bound hands forced her to arch her spine, and her now hard breasts pressed against her garment. Distracted by her sensitive nipples, she didn't immediately note what he was doing. Then it registered that he'd removed his heavy coat and was pulling his pants down over his hips.

"What are you doing?" Her lips felt numb.

"What I need to, damn it."

"You can't! I won't let you."

His laugh lacked warmth. "How are you going to stop me? Now be quiet."

The no-nonsense tone silenced her. The dying light outlined his nearly concave belly and prominent hip bones. It didn't matter that she didn't want to study his body, her traitorous eyes were doing just that.

Thigh muscles meant for a physical life were outlined beneath dark flesh, and fine hairs dusted him from groin to knees. He hadn't exposed his calves, but she had no doubt his lower legs would mirror the same hard strength.

What would those muscles feel like under her fingers?

Stop thinking like that!

At least she managed to keep her gaze off his cock while she gained an impression of the rest of his lower body, an impression that set her body to humming. Then she stared at the dusky, rigid length. She'd seen nude males from earliest childhood. Some, of course, had been aroused. Before her marriage she'd dismissed those erections as having nothing to do with her, but sex had taught her a great deal about what caused a soft, limp male organ to swell and change color—and what a man, her husband at least, believed was the only way to deal with the change.

In no frame of mind for comparisons, she couldn't say whether her husband Footh's erect cock or this man's was larger. What she had no doubt of was that the warrior was taller with broader shoulders and firmer muscles and his cock matched his physique.

Dragging her attention off his erection, she noted that he was examining the outside of his left thigh where blood bubbled around a wound perhaps as long as his thumb's width. Shrugging, he looked down at her.

"Pain is good," he said. "It makes me concentrate on what matters, not this." He swiped a hand over his cock. "Look at the way my thigh is bleeding. Do you know what that tells me?"

She shook her head.

"There's nothing spurting. You missed an artery. I'll be sore but not slowed down. Do you know what that means?"

Again she shook her head.

"What is your problem, *captive*? Can't you speak?"

"I have nothing to say." *And if you think your nudity is unnerving me, you're wrong.*

"No apology?"

"What? You attacked me. I was defending myself."

"True." What might be the whisper of a smile briefly transformed his features. "I *attacked* because only a fool would approach a stranger in any other way."

Although she could have pointed out that not every clan saw others as the enemy, she remained silent. What little she knew about the Pumas had led her to believe they always chose battle over negotiation. If that was true, he must be disappointed by how easily he'd subdued her.

Subdued. Waiting to see what he intended to do next.

To her relief, he pulled his pants back up, not that that did enough to erase what she'd seen from her mind. There was something about his bold and yet casual display of the most personal part of his body that intrigued her. In some regards his cock reminded her of a weapon in that it was simply there, potent and ready.

Done with his assessment of his injury, he positioned himself above her with his legs on either side of her hips, his stance saying he was in charge and relished being so.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"That's what I need to decide." He ran a hand through his hair and something flickered in his eyes. The way he was looking at her had her half believing he didn't know how she'd gotten where she was or what, if anything, he had to do with it.

"What do you mean? If you don't know, why did you knock me down and tie me up?"

"Because that's what the Beast ordered."

Beast! A shiver charged through her. It took everything she had not to look around for the fearsome creature that ruled the Pumas. She'd never seen it, but descriptions had left nothing to the imagination. "What does it have to do with—"

"He commanded me tonight." Frowning, her captor folded his arms across his too-impressive chest. "Something he seldom does."

"But when he does, you don't question?"

A nod so slow she wondered if he was doing it for himself was his only response, and as she studied him, the fear born of his mention of the massive puma gave way to

something else. This powerful and self-confident man was becoming more complex with each moment.

“What is your name?” he abruptly asked.

Thrown off balance, she replied with a whispered, “Tawia. What do they call you?”

“Dio.”

The simple and strong name took root in her mind. Was it simply the gathering darkness and her helplessness that had her feeling as if she was drawing closer to him? Maybe what she’d been recently endured played a role.

For safety reasons, the entire Falcon clan lived in the same village, which meant she’d known them all since birth. Marriages were arranged by families looking to either hold onto or increase their land wealth. Also taken into account was a young man or woman’s physical health. Because she’d never known a moment of illness and hadn’t suffered a single broken bone, it was assumed that she’d be able to bear and raise a large number of children while carrying out her farming duties.

From the moment her husband had been chosen for her, she’d watched Footh with an eye to his skills with earth and livestock. Because he was considerably older and already wealthy, her parents had had to gift him with three horses, a sheep-herding dog, and a large stack of dried corn in addition to a quarter of all their land. Despite her reservations about marrying someone she essentially hadn’t known, she’d done what was expected of her. Not once had her pulse raced at the sight of her husband. Not once had she looked forward to touching him.

Now, staring up at Dio of the Puma clan, she experienced both. “Why are you here?”

“I told you, the Beast—”

“He ordered you to leave your people and come down from the mountain?”

“No.” He scanned their surroundings.

Beneath his pants was the cut she'd inflicted on him. Behind her back were the hands he'd bound. She should hate and fear him, yet it wasn't that simple, might never be that simple.

"What about you?" he asked, not looking at her. "Why are you here?"

"I had no choice."

"What? Why not?"

"It doesn't matter. I shouldn't have."

"Because now you can't go back." That said, he leaned down, took hold of her elbows, and hauled her to her feet. Her thighs and then her lower legs glided over his ankles as she went.

The moment she was on her feet, she knew she'd been right. He was big, a near mountain of a man from a clan known for its fierce approach to life. No Falcon understood why the Pumas had chosen Puma Mountain to live on when they could have claimed a place with rich soil and winters free from snowstorms.

But now she began to understand the high elevation's hold on him. He wasn't a man for an easy life and warm sun on his skin. Rich earth and gentle winds wouldn't challenge him, and without challenge, his existence didn't have enough meaning.

Swirling in sensation, she tried to back away, not just from his body but his impact. He allowed her that single step, then stopped her with a shake of his head. His fingers, still on her elbows gave out wordless messages that sent her mind to tumbling and brought fresh heat to her center.

"Tell me something." His breath washed her forehead and dampened her hair. "If I hadn't stopped you, would you have gone back tomorrow?"

"No."

She waited for him to demand an explanation. Instead, he slid closer. This time his thighs brushed her, his breath continued its heated assault, and she saw nothing but

him. Only a demented woman would want to be this close to the enemy. She must be that, or drowning in dangerous sensations.

“What about now?” he said. “If you were free, would you run?”

Run. Put distance between them. Never see him again. “I don’t know.”

“Hmm. You don’t understand why it’s like that, do you?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know.”

Daylight was all but gone. She couldn’t see anything except Dio, couldn’t take her thoughts beyond what she was experiencing. Of course she wouldn’t tell him how alive she felt. It was safer, maybe, to let him believe she was resigned to whatever he intended to do to her.

“We’re together,” he went on. “I don’t know why that is or what purpose the Beast had in mind when he sent me after you.”

“Can you ask him?”

“No. When or if the Beast believes the time has come for that, he’ll tell me. For now it’s just the two of us.”

Trying to comprehend what he’d just said and her reactions to his presence, she lowered her gaze so she was staring at his chest. His coat was more than adequate covering for tonight and would keep him warm no matter how much the temperature dropped, but if she had her way, she’d pull it off him so he’d be just as vulnerable as she felt.

No, not vulnerable. What she wanted was to stare at his nude body. More than just stare. Touch. Explore. Make sense of what that form was doing to her.

Lost in a wave of energy gripping her sex, she didn’t immediately note that although he still had hold of her, he was turning from her. By the time she’d torn her thoughts off sensation and longing, he’d angled his body so he was looking toward Puma Mountain.

Something that wasn't quite tension had taken control of him. Although it made no sense, she wanted to run her hand over his arm and assure him that nothing bad would happen to him as long as she was there.

"The Beast," he muttered.

Instantly stripped of everything except the words' impact, she strained to see what Dio was looking at, but his body was in the way. Still even with his back to her, she felt as if they were in whatever this was together.

"Beast," he continued after a moment, "I greet you."

Chapter Three

The creature, who was both spirit and guide to the Pumas who'd named themselves after him, stood higher on the slope. Dio had to lift his head to meet the puma's gaze. Because it was rapidly becoming night, he sensed more than saw the Beast's shape, but it didn't matter because he'd seen the deadly teeth, powerful legs, sharp claws, muscled body and intense eyes before.

You have her, the Beast said in his mind-talk way. She is your prisoner.

"Yes."

Why?

"You commanded me to."

Did I?

Confused, Dio glanced over his shoulder at Tawia. Although he'd let go of her so he could concentrate on the Beast, she remained in place. Her eyes bulged, and her mouth hung open as she stared at the Beast.

"Maybe you didn't," he admitted, mindful that two sets of ears were listening. "From the moment I saw her, I wanted her."

As a man or a predator would?

His lips dried, compelling him to lick them. Covered as she was in winter clothing, he could only guess at her contours, but her body called to him. He wanted to fuck her. Wanted with a fire that gripped his cock and more. Only her body, her female place, would satisfy the deep hunger.

"Maybe both," he belatedly replied.

Man and predator are at war with each other?

Other clans saw the Beast as nothing more than a massive and frightening puma with killing fangs and claws, but to the Pumas he was wisdom beyond their comprehension. "Perhaps you know me better than I do myself," he admitted.

I'm more alone than you are, Dio. Because of that, I understand.

He'd been in search of suggestions about how to wisely lead his people, not how to handle life without a woman. But he had found and captured one, hadn't he?

"This was your doing then?" He indicated Tawia. "You sent her to me?"

I directed your legs toward her. What happened then was your doing.

"Was it?" he demanded.

You wanted to press your cock against her. Don't tell me you don't want her naked under you.

"Don't accuse me of—you know. Nothing meant more to Ashlyn than ensuring that a Puma man never rapes. Even without enough women in our clan, we would always remain above what she declared a crime."

And when you take Ashlyn's place, will you say the same thing?

Even as "yes" pressed against his clenched teeth, he couldn't escape the image forming in his mind's eye. In it Tawia lay naked and trembling on the ground while he, so hard that his cock ached, loomed over her. Helpless resignation pulsed in every line of her body while his hummed in anticipation of ending his celibacy. She was his. He could do whatever he wanted to her.

He'd keep her with him forever.

And she'd spend her entire life hating him for it.

And when the violent act was over, he'd hate himself. More than that, he'd know he wasn't worthy of becoming ruler.

Being ruler calls for sacrifices. You must put the rest of your clan before yourself.

"And stand as an example to them. I know." He curled his hands into fists. "Ashlyn governed with a woman's heart while I can only be a man."

A man who has been handed someone who is not Puma.

Did he understand what the Beast was getting at? The Falcon who called herself Tawia was different from a Puma woman. Perhaps less. Whatever existed between him and his captive, now and in the future, was his to decide.

But not far from Puma land.

"I seek your wisdom," he told the Beast. "And I pray you will remain by my side in the days and years to come."

Seek your own wisdom. Listen to your body.

His mind and body seemed to be two very different things as witnessed by the tension gripping his muscles. Although Tawia was slight of frame, she was courageous enough to have come here by herself. When he'd sat on her buttocks to keep her from injuring herself, he'd nearly been undone by the enticing mounds, and thoughts of what else made her a woman. He longed to see her breasts, touch them, run his tongue over their tips.

Groaning, he turned his back to the Beast. Even with his awareness of the creature as strong as it had been when he'd first spotted him, he fixed his full attention on his captive.

Her coat wasn't as thick as his, but that was because she lived in the valley. If he took her into the mountain, she'd get cold.

If?

"I saw him." Her eyes were still large, her expression incredulous. "The Beast. He's terrifying."

"That's because you don't understand him."

"He's part of your clan, not mine. Will he kill me?"

"No."

Instead of replying, she divided her attention between him and where the Beast had stood before fading into the shadows. He tried to put himself in her mind but couldn't imagine what seeing the puma for the first time was like.

"What are you thinking?" she demanded. "Don't stare at me like that."

"I'll do what I want."

"Of course you will. You've won."

Had he? Why then did he feel weak and confused and so tense he wondered if he might shatter?

Do you understand what she's doing to you? It's a woman's magic, her strength.

The thought of being on his knees with his face buried in this woman's sweet-smelling core sent his legs to trembling. He needed to taste her, explore every inch of the body beneath her clothing, to lose and then find himself in her.

Anticipation gave way to uncertainty followed by determination. The Beast had just warned him not to let a woman's magic destroy his ability to lead his people, hadn't he? He wouldn't run from her, wouldn't concede defeat. Quite the opposite, he'd show her who had won and in the victory take his reward.

Maybe.

"Come here." Jerking his head, he indicated a spot in front of him.

Instead of obeying, she looked behind her as if searching for an escape path. "Why?"

"Because I ordered you to. Because I'm the Puma ruler."

"I owe you nothing, no respect, no —"

He leapt, covered the distance between them in two easy strides, then closed his fingers around her elbows. As he hauled her against his chest, he commended himself for having created a convenient way of controlling her, but when her breasts melted against him, his blood threatened to boil. Even as his cock filled, his mind emptied.

She was female to his male.

He wanted her. He'd have her. Make her want him.

Not against her will.

Letting go of her elbows, he wrapped his arms around her and pressed her against his body. His vision blurred and with his captive's breath penetrating the layers of clothing, he no longer cared what, if anything, the Beast saw and did.

Sensing no resistance from her, he shifted his hold so he could keep her in place while stroking the side of her neck with his free hand. He'd take her to where clothing was no longer necessary. He'd slowly strip her, or even better, watch as she willingly shed her clothing. As for whether he'd wait until she was naked before doing the same himself –

"Are you going to hurt me?"

"No. Why would I?"

"I stabbed you."

Still exploring her soft neck with finger pads that seemed rough as bark in comparison, he lowered his head so he could smell her hair. Like the majority of Falcon women, she wore the thick, nearly black mass long and parted in the middle. Although struggling had tangled it, it still reached nearly to her waist. Puma women took a more practical approach to their hair by braiding it to keep it from getting in the way.

Loose hair spoke of a femininity he was unaccustomed to, a further acknowledgement of what made women different from men. If he wasn't careful, he'd lose his sanity in the sleek thickness.

Aware of the danger, he nevertheless opened his mouth and closed his teeth around the strands at the side of her head. He kept his hold tentative. Her scent swirled around him. She'd recently washed both her hair and body with flower-scented water. Hopefully he'd learn what flowers she used. For now he was content to immerse himself in nature's scent and the newly washed body.

Tonight this slight stranger belonged to him. Her back warmed his arm. His fingers had found the vein at the side of her neck. Not just his cock but every muscle, bone and vein sent urgent messages to his brain.

"What are you doing?"

He started to say he didn't know only to remain silent because he wasn't ready to release his hold on her hair. Then she shifted her weight, and he suddenly felt foolish. A warrior, a soon-to-be ruler didn't let the enemy's hair fill his mouth.

"How does it feel..." his voice sounded harsh, "to be helpless?"

She shifted again and took a long, deep breath. "Frightening."

"What else?"

She didn't answer, only turned a little in his embrace as if testing her limits. Maybe he was telling himself what he wanted to believe, but he wasn't convinced she was afraid. Yes, he'd bound her wrists, but he hadn't caused her pain, certainly nothing like she'd inflicted on him.

Not sure which of them he was pushing, he guided her around so she stood with her back to him. Wrapping an arm around her neck, he drew her against him. Although she was off balance, she didn't try to get away. "Why are you afraid of me?"

"That's not what I said."

"Then what?"

"You asked what being helpless feels like."

He wanted her honesty. Even more he wanted her to be naked, for both of them to have shed every bit of clothing. Another image of what he imagined she looked like threatened to turn him back into an animal. Instead of wrenching himself free, he pulled her more firmly against him. Let her feel his cock and anticipate. Let her contemplate how tonight was going to end.

Let her want it as much as he did.

"Are you married?" His question surprised him.

"Not anymore."

"He died?"

"No."

Instead of pushing for an explanation, he concentrated on slowly working his restraining arm down from her throat to the dangerous swell of her breasts. She shuddered and caught her breath just as his own snagged. The back of her head rested against his chest. He wished she was doing so because she trusted him, when the truth was his grip prevented her from straightening.

His mind swirled. He saw reds and golds and other colors he couldn't identify. This morning he'd been contemplating his preordained future. Tonight he had a woman in his arms and his body was screaming at him to take her, take her.

Her coat fastened in front. Even as her breasts called to him, he loosened the two bottom leather ties. Instead of finishing the job, he pushed the garment aside. Underneath the coat she wore a deer hide shirt and loose pants with another tie at the waist to keep it from sliding off her hips.

The moment he closed his fingers around the leather strip, something changed about her. Tension was seeping out of her, sliding off into nothing and leaving her standing on less-than-steady legs. She no longer resisted his hold, and her breathing became ragged.

"If your husband didn't want you, he was a fool."

"I don't want to talk about him."

"Hmm. Then tell me about the place you shared with him," he asked to keep from contemplating what her belly would feel like. "Did he build it for you?"

"No. Before we were married, he'd put together a small hut for himself. I hoped he'd enlarge it or at least add an opening so sunlight could come in, but he didn't. You don't care. I know you don't."

She swayed. Determined not to let her collapse, he changed his hold so his arm was now under her breasts. The tantalizing mounds pressed against his forearm. Her fingers were curled and her nails pressed against his middle.

Once again his mind's eye filled with colors. He didn't care whether the Beast was still there or what the creature thought. Only this woman's body mattered. That and his terrible hunger.

Risking too much, he loosened the gathering around her waist. Then before he could change his mind, he slipped his hand under her pants. Soft, warm flesh waited. Flesh far different from his own. Intoxicating.

Thanks to several accommodating Puma wives who took pity on the clan's unmarried men, he wasn't a virgin. Except for the first time when he'd had to be shown what to do, fucking hadn't made him feel as if he'd nibbled on too much *ahaka* root. Until now.

Fuck her? He hadn't yet touched her sex.

Giving silent thanks for the night, he spread his fingers over her belly. When she sucked it in, he went with her while keeping his rough fingers on skin nearly as soft as a baby's.

Baby? He should ask if she had children.

Later.

The arm under her breasts started aching, and he realized he'd all but lifted her off her feet. If it was him, he'd be kicking and cursing whoever had hold of him. She, however, gave no indication she didn't want to be held this way.

His thoughts went no further than what he was doing as he continued his downward exploration. She relaxed and tensed by turn. Her breathing remained erratic, and when her buttocks pressed against him, his breath snagged. Only one thing mattered, sliding his fingers over sleek, warm and hopefully wet tissues.

She moaned, sounding as if she'd been chewing *ahaka* root herself.

Emboldened, he widened his stance and drew her even closer. His trapped cock throbbed, fought for freedom. Despite his concern that he couldn't hold back, he ran his fingers into the unbelievably soft hair guarding the entrance to her sex. Another drunken moan from her scraped his nerves. Her legs slid further apart, in invitation?

If she'd been a Puma woman, he would have asked permission. Instead, filled with a warrior's determination and a man's need, he touched her core with outstretched fingers. She shook, shuddered. An inhuman sound rolled out of her.

"Where's your battle, Tawia?" he challenged. "Are you surrendering?"

"Don't—speak."

She was more than soft, more than warm. His temple pulsed as he concentrated on locating that most secret of secret places. Her sex flesh moved easily under him, so intriguing that suddenly he was in no hurry to reach his goal. The silken, swollen flesh had been created for him. Her secret tissues fascinated him, imprisoned him, took what remained of his mind. When his legs trembled, he couldn't think how to still them.

"I can't—I can't..."

"What can't you do?" he asked.

"Fight you."

Until now she'd undoubtedly believed certain things about herself, carried certain beliefs about his people. Her fellow clanspeople might have warned her that if a Puma captured her, she was to expect harsh treatment, maybe a violent death.

Instead she was letting him, a Puma, place his hand between her legs.

The why behind her submission was beyond him. All he could do was run his forefinger over her sex. Her full and firm breasts held their own appeal, but for now and perhaps the rest of the night, this magical place was his world.

There it was, the opening to her woman-cave. The tissues surrounding it easily gave way, and he slipped in. Moisture coated his forefinger. Once more he found it difficult to breathe and his tortured cock howled.

The Puma wife who'd turned him from a boy into a man had explained that a woman's sex-channel lubricated itself in preparation for fucking but only when she wanted sex. Otherwise the channel remained dry.

Tawia was wet, hot and loose.

Chapter Four

Tawia couldn't remember how to move. Granted, she kept shuffling her feet and occasionally thrust her buttocks against her captor, but those movements took place without conscious effort.

The Puma man had left no doubt of his intentions when he'd untied the fastening around her waist and touched her bare belly. She should have fought. She was a Falcon woman, not some animal tethered for this man's pleasure.

He was pleasuring her, lightly running his finger into her private place. Being helpless had something to do with her reaction, perhaps more than she wanted to acknowledge. Whatever the truth, she had no choice but to concentrate on what was taking place between her legs. The shiver. The need.

His finger's journey was so slow she feared she'd lose her mind before he finished, yet she didn't want him to rush. He obviously knew how to excite a woman, but why was he going to the effort? What could her responses possibly mean to him?

Dio was touching her everywhere, at least it seemed that way. His much larger and stronger body put her in mind of a massive tree trunk, one with a beating heart and moving lungs. When he'd captured her, she'd noted how large his hands were, but back then she'd been concerned with how hard it would be to escape his grasp. Now being free was the last thing she wanted.

How incredible to have that solitary finger in her. It belonged there. Her system responded as if he had every right and she every expectation. He advanced and retreated, never plunging in all the way, promising but not fully delivering. Because he was coming at her from behind, his palm pressed against the so-sensitive nub that brought her her greatest pleasure.

The pressure was good, wonderful! The slipping, sliding sensation as his finger explored her channel repeatedly brought her to her toes. She kept forgetting to breathe and had given up trying to hold still. By turn her legs were weak and strong.

Her arms burned, not from being restrained, but because she couldn't touch him. Couldn't take him on the same journey.

Heat tore through her starting with her temples and ending at the bottom of her feet. Hot pressure pushed against her temples. More reached her throat before spreading over her ribs. Her breasts ached and burned, the unexpected pleasure taking her from where her physical body was to a place she'd never known existed. Attacked by a long, rolling shudder, she ground her teeth together.

"Are you cold?"

What?

When he didn't repeat his question, she sank back into the world he'd created. He no longer massaged her channel, yet his finger remained in her, and she was content. Or was she? A sensation akin to what she felt during a bright and beautiful spring day took hold of her. She longed to dive into the sensation, to cover herself with it, to die in it.

"Are you cold?"

I don't know, don't care. "No."

"You're shivering."

Of course she was, and unless she was mistaken, he too trembled. Now that he'd brought them to her attention, she acknowledged that the shivers were at least partly caused by the night air on her exposed belly. The rest came from being a woman.

As he expelled a long, slow breath, her lungs seemed to absorb what he no longer had a use for, and she buried her nails in what she could reach of his deer hide coat. As a child, she'd hated seeing deer carcasses hanging, but the clan's survival depended in

part on everything deer provided. Tonight, however, only the fur-wearing man mattered.

“You’re still shaking.”

Closing her eyes, she struggled to put her body at rest, but the effort only drew her attention more fully to her sex. His finger was still there, quiet and waiting and covered in the liquid heat she had no control over. Her sex muscles gripped him, relaxed, tightened again. She envisioned sucking him so far into her that his finger reached her womb.

“Don’t.”

The single word came from somewhere far away. She didn’t have to heed it, didn’t have to concern herself with whether it was meant for her. Wondering vaguely if the Beast was responsible, she buried herself in the first hot touch of a climax. Her inner muscles clenched, drew her deep into herself. There! Almost.

“Don’t,” he repeated.

He was pulling out, denying her! Frightened and lost, she fought her restraints. “Please,” she begged. “Please.”

“Damn you.”

The sharp curse pulled her back. He’d escaped her and was wiping her offering off his finger by running it through her pubic hair. Shaken by her inability to understand or control her reactions, she vowed not to make a sound.

Whose body was this? What had happened to the one she knew?

Not bothering to pull her pants back up, he pushed her away only to steady her before she fell. The flesh over her ribs where his arm had been was already cooling. Although her coat had slipped back into place, her still exposed belly was getting chilled. She couldn’t say the same for her sex, which still pulsed, releasing its telling moisture.

Night had claimed the world. A few stars were already out and a crescent moon peeked out from behind the trees. She'd only rarely been by herself at night and never where she wouldn't feel safe. She should have thought about this before leaving the village. If she had, her hands wouldn't be tied and a man she'd always thought of as the enemy wouldn't be behind her.

Gathering courage, she faced him. Her cheeks burned, the sensation nearly as distracting as the heat between her legs.

Dio appeared as a dark form surrounded by even more darkness, all shadows and unreal.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Take you to where you'll be warm."

* * * * *

Dio's longer legs easily covered the unseen ground as he propelled her up the mountain. She hated the way she kept stumbling, and hated him for being in much better shape. He probably could climb all night without getting tired while she sweated and her legs ached. Again and again she was tempted to order him to let her rest, but what if he refused?

His silence added to her unease. If her warmth was all he cared about, wouldn't he have left her with her sleeping mat and coverings? Instead he'd left her belongings behind.

She'd seen the Beast! It wasn't imaginary after all as she'd sometimes suspected. If her impression of it was right, the Beast was at least three times larger than a normal puma with frighteningly sharp claws and long, gleaming teeth capable of easily tearing her apart.

This mountain was where the Beast lived.

For the first time since they started, Dio slowed. He'd been propelling her along via his hold on her elbow with them walking side by side. Now, still holding onto her, he

stepped ahead a little. She made out a narrow trail snaking around boulders and low-growing shrubs that had probably been made by deer, although maybe his people were responsible. Her mouth dried at the thought of being surrounded by Pumas.

When he gave her arm a tug, she stubbed her toe but kept her footing. *I can't do this anymore*, she longed to say but didn't. The slope was getting steeper with each step. If not for his grip, she probably would have whirled and run although she'd probably fall and roll all the way down the mountain.

The image of her tumbling end over end until she reached the valley made her smile. Surely she was so tired that she was taking leave of her senses. At least climbing meant exerting so much that she didn't have to worry about getting cold.

"He's with us," Dio said.

Hearing his voice after such a long silence tightened her belly. Heat pressed against her cheeks and neck. This wasn't real, none of this was.

"The Beast?" she belatedly thought to ask.

"Yes."

She had to fill her lungs before she could continue. "I didn't hear him."

"Because he isn't like other pumas. We're nearly there."

Unsure whether she should be relieved or anxious, she turned her attention back to her footing. Dio didn't have to jerk her along so why was he acting as if he wanted nothing to do with her while doing just the opposite?

After a few more steps, he slowed and veered to the left, leaving the trail. She stumbled after him. Without the trail to guide her, she hugged Dio's side. The air chilled her lungs. Her nose and chin had gone numb, and her eyes kept watering.

"There. Duck."

The words came so close together that she could barely distinguish between them. She sensed rather than saw him bend deeply and did the same. Something dark passed

overhead. More somethings closed around her. Unable to see the stars or moon anymore, she had no idea what it was or where he'd taken her.

The air no longer smelled of vegetation and earth. Instead, she took in the lifeless scent of rocks. It wasn't any colder here, just dryer as if the moisture had been sucked away. Although she didn't want to, she stayed close to Dio's side.

For a moment he seemed to understand what she was going through. Then he stepped away. "Don't move," he said.

If she wasn't so confused she would have found his order laughable. Where did he think she'd go when she literally wouldn't have been able to see her hands in front of her face? The silence here was oppressive, absolute. Fortunately it didn't last long. He was making a whirring/grinding sound she recognized as the effort it took to heat metal to the point that it gave off sparks. She stared at where she thought he was until she spotted a flash of light. The flickering grew.

He'd started a fire in a fire pit back from the entrance to the cave he'd brought her into. Determined to comprehend as much as she could, she watched as he walked over to the closest cave wall. He pulled a branch out of the crack it had been crammed into, carried the branch over to the fire pit, and stuck one end into the flames. Once the tightly woven twigs caught fire, he placed it back in the crack to illuminate their surroundings.

The cave was much larger than the hut she'd shared with Footh and tall enough that Dio easily stood upright. The fire danced over his form, transforming him into something that stirred her blood. He belonged here. He was at home with stone walls surrounding him, a small opening leading to the great unknown beyond, and a long crack in the rock above the fire through which smoke escaped.

Tearing her gaze off the big, competent-looking man, she scanned her surroundings. Now that the cave was well-lit, she spotted a number of drawings on the walls. Most compelling was a large one that vividly depicted the Beast surrounded by other, smaller pumas. Beyond them was a circle of humans, the majority armed

warriors. Her attention was drawn to a well-defined human figure the warriors were looking at.

"Our ruler," Dio said.

"I can't tell, is it a man or a woman?"

"Neither." Before she could ask what he meant, he continued. "Our ruler can and has been both man and woman since the beginning of the Puma clan."

A shudder ran through her, and she fought the desire to join him. Instead, she walked over to the fire and turned her back to it. Then she glanced over her shoulder at the cave opening.

"Don't," Dio warned.

"Don't what?"

"Try to run. The Beast is out there."

I don't want to leave. "Should I be here?" she asked instead. "Is it a sacred place?"

"Sacred?" His laughter stroked her, increasing her awareness of him. "Hunters use it because it's on the opposite side of the mountain from the Puma compound. No matter what the weather, we can stay in here for days at a time."

"That's something you do a lot? Hunt, I mean."

"I used to but soon those days will be behind me."

Although his resigned and melancholy tone intrigued her, she sensed this wasn't something she should press him about. Needing something to do other than study him, she again turned her attention to her surroundings. A number of sleeping mats had been placed between the fire pit and the back of the cave. In addition, several piles of belongings were stacked against the walls.

"Food, clothing and weapons," Dio explained. "And over there," he nodded at the rear, "is where we keep our firewood."

She was in a man's world, a place where men gathered to boast of their accomplishments. They'd discuss hunting techniques and debate if and how to attack

other tribes. If they ever doubted their ability to best an opponent, they kept that to themselves. Surely they'd never admit that thoughts of injury or death kept them awake.

Dio was one of those hunters and warriors, at least he had been. Maybe he didn't know what he'd become.

She was asking herself why that had occurred to her when he walked over to her, took her elbow, and turned her so her back was to him. *Touch me, touch me. Finish what you started earlier.*

Instead, he untied the cord around her wrists, and her numb arms fell to her sides. A tingling sensation started, and she brought her arms in front and started rubbing her forearms. Then her shoulders burned, prompting her to massage them. Dio had been responsible for the compromised circulation. Maybe he considered it his responsibility to get her blood flowing freely again.

Turning toward him, she looked up expectantly, but if he felt any guilt, she didn't see it in his expression as he stared at something beyond her. She'd seen that lack of compassion before, in Footh.

Angry, she stalked away, pretending an interest in the wall drawings she didn't feel. However, the longer she studied the one of the Beast, the more it captivated her.

"Why do your people worship him?"

His chuckle reminded her of the sound a patient parent might use with a small child. "You saw him. Don't you consider him worthy of worship?"

"What about fear? He's a predator."

"He's never harmed a Puma."

Although she wanted to question him further, knowing Dio was watching her made it nearly impossible to concentrate on anything except him. Back when she was changing from a girl into a woman she'd become aware of the new ways men studied her. Their stares had both unnerved and intrigued her, and she'd loved the flushed

feeling and heated moisture in her woman's place. She'd gone into marriage anticipating so many things, so many sex-filled nights, only to have those fantasies replaced by reality.

In the little time she'd spent with her Puma captor, those early sensations had returned. Not sure she could trust her legs, she swiveled toward Dio, but he was no longer studying her. Instead, he'd walked over to the entrance and was staring out at the night. Her heart sank at the possibility that they were going to be joined by his clansmen. Just the same, she felt she had to see what had captured his attention. Closing the distance between them wasn't hard. Then she was so close she sensed his presence on every inch of her body. Her heart hammered and her palms grew moist.

"What is it?" she made herself ask.

"The Beast."

When she joined him at the entrance, cold air made her question her decision, but Dio was warmth and more. If he could handle the rapidly lowering temperature, so could she.

The stars and moon were there along with a solitary owl and the unseen insects who sang their nightly song. This world wasn't that much different from the one she'd lived in down in the valley and yet it was. Every part of her was alive and aware.

"I await you," Dio said.

Although the air beyond the cave remained chilly, she sensed a warmth that hadn't been there earlier. It could come from only one source, the Beast.

I am here.

"I know," Dio said as she tried to comprehend that the Beast's words had reached her mind. "What do you want of me?"

Nothing.

"I don't understand. Always before —"

That was before. Now is the time for you to discover if you have what it takes to be ruler.

"How? Except for *her*, I'm alone."

Reach her. If possible, learn her secrets.

Her secrets. Did the Beast really think she'd reveal anything to the stranger who'd brought her here? Despite her desire to remain close to Dio, she stepped away. She was trying to decide what, if anything, she needed to say when it dawned on her that neither he or the Beast had spoken again. From where she was, Dio's features were lost to the night, and she hadn't spotted the Beast. She felt alone and caught within her own thoughts, particularly the secrets the predator had alluded to.

"You know what he's talking about, don't you?" Dio said. She sensed more than saw him turn toward her.

"What makes you think that?"

"Don't evade."

"What do you expect? To have the Beast concern himself with me – I'm not a Puma. Why would he care anything about me?"

"Because I do."

She had to concentrate on what she was doing to get her legs to take her back to the fire. Once there, she focused on getting warm again, but all too soon, she started sweating so removed her coat. Having only one layer of clothing between her and Dio added to her vulnerability. At the same time, her awareness of her body grew.

Leaving the entrance, he headed toward her. With each step he took, she felt lighter. She watched as he shed his coat. Unlike her, he didn't stop with that. Instead, he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it aside so it landed on top of her coat.

Firelight played off his muscles and added definition to his features. He stood so his profile was to her and his shoulder, side and hip were within reach. The cave wall drawings of Puma warriors had been impressive, but they were nothing compared to this raw male form. Even without the bulky clothing, his size overwhelmed her,

although maybe it wasn't his size so much as her reaction to him. She longed to touch him and let his heat seep into her finger pads.

Looking into his midnight eyes, a fire that had nothing to do with the nearby flames roared to life in her. Hunger now lived, not just between her legs, but throughout her. Her heart might stop beating if she pressed her body to his, but she didn't care. The only thing that kept her hands knotted at her sides was the knowledge that she'd lay herself bare if she did.

"Why did you do that?" She let her gaze trail down his chest. "It's your way of letting me know how powerful you are?"

"No. I want you to see this."

He swiveled so she was now looking at the back of his right shoulder. At first she thought she was seeing a shadow. Then her vision cleared and she realized he'd drawn her attention to a mark over his shoulder blade. This was no scar. It was too pure and well-defined for that. Shivering, she touched it.

"Ashlyn the Ruler placed that tattoo on me on my tenth birthday. It's the same as the one she had."

Tracing the outline of a puma crouched to attack took almost all of her attention. The rest went to the muscle beneath. A puma was all muscle; the predator wouldn't survive without it. Was Dio any different?

"Do all Puma men have such marks?"

"No. Only I do."

What had Dio thought and felt while Ashlyn worked charcoal beneath his skin? Had he felt honored or overwhelmed?

"Each ruler has the task of finding who among the Pumas should succeed him or her. At ten years old it didn't mean that much to me except that my playmates expected me to lead them in our hunting and fighting games."

She could see him doing that. Already taller and stronger than his companions, he'd effortlessly plan imaginary hunts and lead them into pretend battles.

"Why are you showing it to me?"

"I had no say in my future. It was chosen for me."

She'd heard that melancholy tone from him before. She and Footh had never had a serious conversation so she couldn't draw from personal experience when it came to deciding how to respond. Besides, talking would take her from awareness of both their bodies.

A cross between a sigh and a groan from Dio said he wasn't immune to her touch. She could have stopped, should step away from him. Instead, she flattened her hand against the puma tattoo. The predator's energy and determination seeped into her, although maybe it was Dio she felt. This was his place, his land, his tattoo and she the outsider.

An outsider who longed to change things between them.

When he started to turn toward her, she dropped her hand. Then, not thinking about what she was doing, she took hold of his shoulders and pressed her mouth where her fingers had been. His taste rested on her lips. Her nipples hardened and a sensation like molten lava spread over her sex.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"I don't know."

Now it was his turn to capture her shoulders and hold her before him. "Don't you?"

"What do you want me to say? Everything has changed since you came into my life. I don't know who I am anymore." Shocked, she closed her mouth.

"And before today you did? That's why you were alone out there?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does."

Chapter Five

"Why would you care why I left my village?"

"Why? I left mine because I needed to be alone with my thoughts. Was the same true for you?"

"No."

Taking a backward step, he looked down at her. As she lifted her head, she noted what his pants couldn't hide. Despite her agitation, the thought of touching that bulge made her mind swirl.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

When she shook her head, his jaw muscles tightened.

"Tell me! I don't want there to be secrets between us."

"Don't, please."

"Don't what?"

"Push me. I owe you nothing."

"Why are you afraid of honesty?"

Angry at herself for being a coward, she laced her fingers together. "Maybe because my husband and I never had a conversation like this."

"Why not?"

Her first impulse was to avoid this question as she'd done the last, but his naked chest touched her in too many ways. "He wasn't interested, and I didn't know how to break through his silences."

"What about when you were having sex? Did you speak the same language then?"

"We didn't speak. I did what he demanded of me, and when it was over..."

"What," Dio whispered, again stepping into her space, "did you do?"

Be honest. Don't stop now. "I cried. At least I did at first."

Something broke free inside her at the admission. Dio surrounded her. More than that, he was listening to her and asking the right questions.

"Over time," she continued, still looking into his deep, dark eyes, "I stopped wishing for what I knew was never going to happen. After sex, I made my mind empty so I could sleep."

"You found no satisfaction in fucking?"

Tell him the truth. Don't hold back. "It was all about his pleasure and demands, his belief that a wife exists to please her husband."

"Why would he think that?"

"I don't know. Every time I tried to ask, he insisted I shouldn't question my role."

"Which was?"

Hadn't she already explained? But try as she did to reconstruct what she'd just said, she couldn't get her mind to reach beyond the potent form standing not far enough away.

"To satisfy him the way he demanded. Once I learned how to bring him to climax, it only took a few minutes. Then he left me alone."

His eyes narrowed as he ran a knuckle over her right breast. Sucking in a breath, she took his wrist and held his hand in place.

"You're a woman who needs to be touched," he said. "Did you want your husband to leave you alone?"

He was asking too many questions. But if she refused to answer, he might rob her of his warmth. "I became good at giving him what he demanded. He taught me well and now I can give any man pleasure."

"What about yours?"

Unnerved, she released his wrist. Slipping into the mental cocoon that had held her together during her marriage, she slowly ran her hands down Dio's sides. The ladder of his ribs beneath taut and toned flesh stood in sharp contrast to her husband's soft body, forcing her to fight her response to the warrior's form. His hands were now on her shoulders, but her nipples remained hard and deliciously uncomfortable.

Take me, show me what it truly is to be a woman.

But if that happened, she might fall apart.

Her fingers were now at his waist with his cock inadequately protected by well-softened leather. Still searching for courage, she loosened the cord around his waist. His pants slipped to his hips. When she started easing the waistband around his hip bones, he captured her wrists.

"You're asking too much of me." His breath hissed. "I can't just stand here."

"Please, let me show you."

"What about you?"

Why would he care about her needs? "Pleasing you pleases me," she evaded. "Surely you aren't afraid."

"Of you? Hardly."

At that he twisted her arms behind her back. His chest pressing against her breasts made her wonder if she might fly. What would flying feel like? Magical certainly, frightening and wonderful, raw and naked and exposed. Trusting?

How she wanted that! Wanted and feared.

"Why won't you let me touch you?" she asked.

He continued to loom over her, forcing her to arch her back. Despite her confused thoughts and responses, she loved having him support her this way. Having her arms behind her again didn't alarm her. How would he respond if she widened her stance and welcomed his legs into the space? What if his leg pressed against her aching pussy?

"Go on." He brought her upright, then let go of her arms. "Touch me."

Touch me in return, please.

Cognizant of how many times she'd sent that silent and unheeded plea to Footh, she again took hold of Dio's pants. Her intention had been to pull them down over his legs as quickly as possible. Instead, as his navel came into view, she slowed. Every inch of flesh being revealed caused her to tremble anew. Her mouth dried, and the pulsing at her temples made her dizzy.

His was a man's body, no different from any other. She had no reason to be undone by him, none at all. Granted his muscles called to her and his warmth set off sparks inside her, but she should be getting used to that by now, shouldn't she?

His navel spoke of his birth. She hadn't known him back then and had no knowledge of his parents, siblings, friends so why this aching need to moisten a finger and slip it into the depression?

Keep going. Do what you do so well.

The slow, downward march of his remaining garment continued to his hips, the exposure of male hair, the base of his cock.

She stopped, breathed deeply, tightened her grip. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that the flesh over his knuckles was turning white. In contrast, her own hands burned.

Don't stop now.

Pulling the deer hide toward her, she glimpsed what lay barely hidden. The long, hard mass of flesh made her shudder.

"What is it?" he asked. "You're afraid?"

Revealing her emotions had been her undoing in her marriage. She wouldn't let that happen again. Careful to return her attention to his chest, she continued her slow exposure. His cock sprang free, brushed her thumbs. Hot and confused, she shivered again.

"You aren't looking at it," he muttered. "Why not?"

Lifting her head, she locked her gaze with him. She'd been told that her eyes were particularly large and deep set for a woman and wondered if he'd agree. More important, she wondered what they were giving away.

"Why not?" he repeated.

"Because...I'd rather do this."

Clinging to what she'd been taught and taught herself during her marriage, she slid her fingers over the sides of his manhood. Dio was more endowed than Footh, his erection harder, fuller, richer. Determined not to draw any more comparisons, she struggled to think of nothing except bringing him satisfaction. If only she could quiet the thrills gliding over her.

"Something first," she said, reluctantly drawing her hands off him and taking hold of her shirt hem and pulling it over her head. The effort left her too weak to hold onto the garment, and she let it slip to the floor.

"By the spirits!"

Footh had never exclaimed like that, Footh, who she'd just vowed to push out of her mind. "What?" she asked.

"Your breasts are beautiful."

Telling herself that being a member of a tribe with only a few women had prompted him to say that allowed her to dismiss his exclamation. Still, she slid her hands under her mounds and lifted them. They felt heavier than earlier, and when she touched her rigid nipples, the contact resonated throughout her.

She released them, gasping when they settled back into place, drawing at her rib cage as they did.

The drawing sensation increased. She longed to fondle her breasts again. More than that, she longed to beg Dio to do so. Lacking the courage, she cupped her hands around his cock. The blood-filled channels pressed against her palms.

He tensed, groaned.

Turning her head so he couldn't see, she smiled. This man who, until now, had given no indication he feared anything, was leery of a woman's hands on his most vital organ. Although she was tempted to tease that she intended to kidnap it, she didn't. Instead she tightened her hold on Dio's cock. "Careful," he hissed.

"Don't you trust me?"

"You have my cock in your hands."

"If I do something you don't like, you can make me stop, but this feels good, doesn't it?"

His nod seemed reluctant, prompting her to renew her vow not to harm him. She smiled again as she ran a hand under his cock and lifted it much as she'd done to her breasts. Its weight and warmth captured her full attention. As she gathered his balls in her right hand, he straightened even more. His quick intake of breath spread through her.

Wondering if she could get him to relax and enjoy, she released his balls and began stroking the top of his cock. Resting the way it did in her palm, she felt every jolt and tremor. If he had his hands on her sex, what would she want him to do?

Stroke and caress. Vary his touches so each one felt new.

Taking what she'd just admitted as her guide, she positioned both hands so her fingers glided effortlessly over his length. Despite the impulse to rake him with her nails, she kept her strokes featherlight. His cock stood out proud and strong.

Free to caress every part of him, she varied her manipulations, occasionally reaching under him to finger his balls. Each time she did, he jerked, and his knuckles whitened anew. His breathing lacked rhythm.

Hot juices leaked from her sex. Waves of need rolled through her, compelling her to repeatedly tighten her pussy muscles. Doing so did nothing to quiet the unexpected burning heat, provided no explanation for why. This wasn't the body she knew.

"What is this about?" He sounded far away. "What are you trying to prove?"

"Nothing. I want to pleasure you."

"Why?"

Don't ask. Just let these moments happen.

"Why?" he repeated.

Giving up trying to understand anything, she slowly lowered herself. Despite the strain in her calves and thighs, she didn't immediately rest her knees on the ground but positioned herself so his cock lay against the top of her left breast. Balancing herself, she guided it between both breasts and pressed them together, trapping him.

"By all that's holy," he muttered. "Incredible."

Although her legs cried out for relief, she leaned into him. His tip kissed her chest wall. He moaned.

"You like?"

"Yes, damn it, yes!"

He ran his knuckles over her cheek, distracting her. She started to fall back but braced her arms behind her in time. Doing so allowed him to slip out of the prison she'd placed him in. Her breasts jiggled in protest.

Positioning herself so her knees carried most of her weight, she rested her hands on her thighs. His pants were bunched around his knees, his thighs bare. Trying not to think about what she was about to do, she inched forward and rested her cheek against his thigh. Her arms went around his lower legs, held tight to the warm strength. His cock brushed the top of her head.

Despite the ringing in her ears, she straightened and rolled his pants down so they were now around his boots, hobbling him.

Moisture pooled in her mouth. In the past she'd tried to hold her breath to save herself from the onslaught of Footh's less-than-clean scent. Now she couldn't breathe deeply enough. The enemy warrior smelled of danger, male, the unknown. Excited, she extended her tongue and touched it to his tip.

Rolling forward, he fisted her hair. "By all that's holy, where did you learn that?"

Determined not to mention Footh, she ran her tongue over the side of his cock, following as her tongue pushed it aside.

Accustomed to immediately drawing Footh's cock in her mouth so she could finish her chore, she started to open her mouth. Then, hating what she'd once been, she stopped. After bracing his cock with her hand, she lightly bathed the rigid organ. Her pussy tightened with every stroke. Yet she felt loose and free, disconnected from herself while more in tune with her body's messages than she'd ever been.

Again turning her head to the side, she brushed her cheek against his cock. Something hot gripped her belly. Alarm touched her. What was happening to her self-control?

The answer came with Dio's taste, smell, and the blood pulsing in his cock. He was changing her, awakening her, making her feel new. More fluid than she'd thought she was capable of producing ran over her sex lips like a slow-moving wave. Some coated her inner thighs. She felt no shame, only wonder.

"What is this about?" he asked when, finally, she closed her lips around his tip. "You're a witch after my soul?"

"No." She couldn't bring herself to release his cock long enough for more than the single word. Hoping he'd find a measure of understanding in what she was doing, she again sucked him into her. She did so gently, slowly, showing the way with her inner lips before lightly running her teeth over his satiny flesh. She loved the taste and weight and wonder of him. Even when he bucked forward causing his tip to press against the back of her mouth, she let him slide over her now flattened tongue.

I've never felt what I'm feeling now, she wanted to tell him. Always before this was my duty, something that brought me no pleasure.

Closing his fingers over her shoulders, he pulled back so only his tip remained in her. Then he stopped. In gratitude, she lathed the slit at the end of his cock. He gifted her with salty sweetness.

A lightninglike jolt scraped the length of her spine. The sensation ran from the back of her neck down to her crack. Arching, she mewled around his organ.

"That sound," he muttered, "is going to make me insane."

Unable to speak with him in her, she clamped down with all the strength in her lips and again touched her teeth to him.

"Careful." He grabbed her hair with both hands.

She waited for him to pull her off him. When he didn't, she willed her jaw muscles to relax. To her delight, he slid in and out of her wet cave. Whatever had burned her spine returned. Another force ground against her breasts. Her pussy wept.

She was swimming, moving aimlessly in a summer-warm lake. The sun caressed her arms and reached through the water to stroke her buttocks, back and legs with heat. She sucked and licked while giving herself up to the current gaining strength in the previously placid lake of her mind.

When she'd started to kneel before Dio, she'd done so with the intention of pleasuring him. She hadn't expected to feel such aching pleasure. Sparks touched her core. The current, wilder than before, returned. She rode it as she'd once dreamed of riding her husband.

"Beast!" Dio cried out. "Beast, is this your doing?"

An image of the massive puma slid into her consciousness, and she embraced the muscled form.

"Beast? What are you trying — ah!"

His cock jerked, jerked again. Hot cum pooled on her tongue. Listening to his strangled cries, she relaxed her hold. Although she prayed he'd slow down and let the moment last, the frenzied movements continued. His hold on her hair brought tears. She didn't ask him to stop.

"Ah! Ah!"

Blinking away her tears, she dug her fingers into his buttocks. He continued to thrust at her. His legs shook, his butt muscles felt like rocks.

By the time he'd finished, her mouth was full of him. She let a little of the hot stickiness slide down her throat, then opened her mouth. His wilting cock and its offering slid out. She wiped cum from the corner of her mouth and then swiped her hand over his belly.

His legs still trembled and his breathing was anything but steady as he brushed her hair from her face. Although she wanted to study his now limp and hopefully satisfied cock, she sensed him staring down at her.

"Where did you learn to do that? Are you sure you aren't a witch?"

"Look at me." Brazen, she lifted her breasts. "Are these a witch's? Would a witch allow herself to be captured?"

"How would I know such a thing? No Puma woman does what you just did."

"Oh? You have slept with every Puma?"

"Of course not."

She didn't know what his life up until today had been like, knew no more about him than he did about her. He was no longer thrusting his pelvis at her and she was no longer in danger of having her nose flattened or her oxygen cut off. But he hadn't stepped back and still had hold of her hair.

Suddenly self-conscious, she slid her hands out from under her breasts. She nearly laughed at the way they jiggled, only to lose interest as she stroked his buttocks.

"What is this?" He sounded more in control than a moment ago. "If you're trying to get to me again, you'll have to wait." He glanced over at the sleeping mats.

Just like Footh, caring nothing for my needs.

She tried to shake off the thought, but it, along with her humming agitation, refused to be dismissed. No longer caring whether Dio wanted to be touched, she got to her feet and walked over to the entrance. Cold air wrapped around her.

"What are you doing?" Dio asked.

"Thinking." *Wanting.*

When he didn't respond, her first thought was that he didn't care, but her melancholy and discontent came from within her. How could she expect him to read her mind when she didn't understand it herself?

The night called to her. Instead of going back for her shirt, she picked up his coat and threw it over her shoulders.

Clouds were starting to cover the stars to what she believed was the south, and she could barely make out the closest trees. Just the same, the compulsion to leave the cave remained overwhelming. Dio didn't ask her to come back, didn't command or come after her.

Night on Puma Mountain was colder than she was accustomed to, and the smells were a mix of the familiar and foreign. Perhaps she should be afraid, but she wasn't. The need to understand herself was too strong.

A half dozen barefoot steps took her to the trail she and Dio had been on. A dozen more had her looking down at what seemed to be a bottomless canyon. If she wasn't careful, she might fall when she desperately wanted to live.

"I don't know who I am tonight," she muttered. Her feet already ached from the nearly frozen ground. "Taking Dio into my mouth brought me pleasure, but it only lasted a little while. Why did I do it? I owed him nothing. I barely know him."

Don't you?

The Beast! Yet even as she stifled a gasp, she knew this was why she'd come outside. "What do you want me to say, that because I gave him sex, his mind and heart are open to me? They aren't."

Give him a chance.

"For what?"

Trust him.

"I do. Otherwise, I wouldn't have let him bring me up here."

What choice did you have?

The Beast was right, back then she'd been Dio's prisoner. In many ways she still was. "What do you want me to say?"

To me, nothing. To him, everything. If you have the courage.

Trying to make sense of what the Beast had just said made her head ache. Not only that, even with Dio's coat on, she shivered and the ache now extended to her calves.

Listen to your body, Tawia. Open your heart. Trust him with your secrets.

Chapter Six

Exploding the way he had had left Dio physically and mentally exhausted while confused and disappointed in himself. He'd wanted to sleep, nothing more. Then Tawia had gone outside and all thoughts of rest had died. Now he stood with his back to the fire, his pants back in place, as she reentered. She hadn't answered his question about where and how she'd learned to perform mouth sex. He should thank her but that would take the conversation to a place maybe neither of them was ready for.

When her gaze settled on him, he saw something both guarded and vulnerable in her. Taking care to keep his expression neutral, he indicated the spot next to him. "I put on another log."

"So I see. There are clouds. Maybe it's going to snow."

"Maybe. Are you hungry?"

"No."

Like him, she stood with her back to the flames. After awhile, she inched away from the heat. He thought she'd take off his coat, but she didn't, and he wondered if she was suddenly shy about revealing her breasts.

For a few minutes they hadn't been Puma and Falcon. They hadn't even been simply man and woman but something deeper and more mysterious. She'd given him so much while he'd —

"I was nervous the first time I went hunting with my father and uncles," he said. The admission seemed to hang between them. "I was afraid my arrows would miss and they'd laugh at me."

"Did they?"

"My arrows, yes. My relatives, no. My uncle said he went hunting three times before he brought down his first game. Then my father admitted that his first time he stumbled and all his arrows spilled out."

A smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "Why did you tell me that?"

So you'd do the same. "Are you sorry I did?"

"No, not at all." She started to wipe her forehead only to shrug off his coat. She tossed it so there was no danger of a spark reaching it, but what mattered to him was seeing her breasts again. Them and her shoulders, arms and ribs. His lungs snagged and his cock stirred.

"Was the Beast out there?"

"I didn't see him but we *spoke*."

Something in the way she stared at him told him that whatever she and the Beast had discussed was between the two of them. It had to have been about him, right?

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Satisfaction. Release." He held out his hands. To his relief, she placed hers in them. "I never expected what you did."

"The Pumas don't have sex that way?"

"Why would the gods have created women the way they did, with cunts, if they weren't to be used for sex?"

Some emotion darkened her features. "What if the man doesn't want any more children? What you and I did, there's no risk of that happening."

"And little pleasure for the woman."

If anything, her eyes became even more shadowed and weren't they glinting? "You're right," she whispered. "No pleasure for me."

Tawia was a stranger to him, nearly. He had no right to intrude on her thoughts and emotions.

"You said something about the man not wanting more children." Hard as he tried, he couldn't stop himself from studying at what he could see of her flat belly. "Is that how it is between you and your husband? You've had all the babies you want?"

A soft sigh tore at him. "Not me, him."

"The two of you argued —"

"No." Her chest rose and fell, rose and fell, prompting him to draw her against his side. "Footh is much older than me. His youngest child recently married. He didn't want to start over again with me, his second wife."

Why did your family make you marry a man so old? "And he made sure that wouldn't happen by not putting his cock in your sex channel?"

Staring at the ground, she nodded.

"Whose idea was mouth sex?"

He'd barely gotten the question out when she jerked free and paced over to the wall with the most drawings. He doubted she was seeing it. "He didn't care about your needs, did he?"

"It doesn't matter. That's behind me."

"Why? Is he dead?"

"No."

"Then, if you return to your village, you have to face him?"

Her back still to him, she clamped her hands over her ears. Mindful that she might not allow him to touch her, he joined her and gently brought her arms down to her sides. She stiffened, then relaxed.

"You're all right?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Does my touching you bother you?"

"No."

Taking her at her word, he wrapped his arms around her with her breasts pressing against his forearms and her deep breathing not telling him enough. His blood ran hot, his cheeks burned, and his cock began to harden. Despite the distractions, he drew her against him and buried his face in her hair. She continued to pull air deep into her lungs.

"What you've told me isn't a marriage. You deserve better."

"You aren't a Falcon. You don't understand."

I want to, need to. "Then tell me."

"No. Don't do this to me, Dio, please."

As he turned her so they were face-to-face, he vowed that before the night was over, he'd know what she'd gone through and do everything he could to help her get past whatever she'd had to endure.

She was much smaller than him but not childlike. As he continued to hold her, chest to chest, her nipples hardened. The moment she'd taken him into her mouth, he'd been incapable of concentrating on anything except his insistent cock, but he didn't see how she could have treated him the way she had without reacting. Maybe he'd ask her to suckle him again, this time so he could study her.

No! Forget self-pleasure. Focus on her and what she deserved.

"Are you warm enough?"

"Yes."

"Good because I want you naked."

Naked, Tawia thought, *naked*. The word loosened her sex and sent it to moistening itself again. Unnerved, she tried to back away, but Dio held her against him. Instead of struggling or demanding he free her, she rested her cheek against his chest. "Why?" she managed.

"Why? You're a beautiful woman and I'm a man."

Darn these tears! She'd spent so much time learning to control them. What had happened to her hard-fought determination not to show weakness? "You think I'm beautiful?"

"Don't you believe me?"

"I don't know!" Her head started spinning. She'd spoken honestly and now would give anything to take them back. At least she could straighten before her tears dampened his chest. Couldn't she?

"I've embarrassed you?" he asked. "I shouldn't have called you beautiful?"

No. I needed to hear it. "I, ah, I didn't expect it."

"That's the only reason?"

His questions dug too deep and came too close, nearly as close as his body. Instead of making good on her vow to put distance between them, she surrendered to the dangerous impulse to look into his eyes. Too late she remembered her tears, but if he noted them, he didn't say anything. Instead, he again said he wanted to see her naked.

"What about you?" she asked.

"Except for my ankles and feet, you've already seen everything there is to see about me. Now it's your turn."

He was right. If it hadn't been for his pants bunched above his boots, he'd have been naked while she took him to the point of release. She could give him countless reasons why he was wrong about it being her turn, remind him that she wasn't a captive, or a wife with no choice but to obey. Instead, when he let go of her, she read his message in the act. More than read. Wanted.

Her fingers shook so she wasn't sure she could untie the knot securing her pants, but, unnerved by the thought of letting him take over, she kept at the task. Her hips were broad and her thighs sturdy, made for childbearing. At least that's what she'd believed until she became Footh's wife.

Not Footh! Not now.

"There," she said unnecessarily when her pants were around her ankles. "You have what you want."

"Not yet."

With that, he crouched and lifted her left leg, compelling her to grip his shoulders for balance. He drew her foot free, then did the same with her right. After that she had no reason not to step away from her discarded clothing.

As he stood, she nearly placed one hand over her breasts and the other in front of the mass of hair standing guard to her sex. Instead, not sure why, she let her arms drop and lifted her head. Her eyes were dry now, her vision clear.

"What brings you the most pleasure?" he asked. "Where to you want to be touched?"

Nowhere. Everywhere. "I don't know."

Puzzlement wrinkled his forehead. Then he cocked his head and lifted an eyebrow. "Hmm. Does this mean we need to experiment? Something you need to know, even though I'm not married and might never be, I have received some education in a woman's needs."

Resolutely adopting the same light mood, she shook her head. "Are you going to tell me about that education or will I be forced to let my imagination run wild?"

"Your imagination might have you expecting more than I can deliver."

"Then you didn't have the Puma women lined up eager to, what did you call it, educate you?"

He winked. "Of course I did. And fighting each other to be first in line."

"I don't believe you."

"Too bad because I do know a few things. At least I hope I do."

His tone had gone from playful to serious. More important, his eyes slid from her face to her throat and then her breasts. "Once Puma girls were declared to be of marriageable age once their breasts started developing," he said as he laid a hand on

her right one. "But when she became ruler, Ashlyn declared that girls were to remain untouched and at their parents' sides for at least a year after."

His fingers were light, the slightest weight. "Do, ah, do you agree?"

"Now I do. I didn't when I was learning what it meant to be a man."

Dio was being nakedly honest. She had to do the same. "When my first bleeding time came, I told my mother that I was no longer a child, nearly a woman. She laughed and said I wouldn't always feel that way."

"Was she right?"

What had she just told herself, that she needed to match his honesty? It would be easier if she didn't want more than five fingers barely on her flesh. "Yes. It wasn't long before I grew weary of the bleeding. But that wasn't all."

Taking her hand, he led her over to the sleeping mats and knelt on the closest one. She did the same.

"Why did you want to be a child again?"

"Because...being a woman, a married one, wasn't what I thought it would be."

He leaned forward and touched his lips to her forehead. "Thank you."

Do that again, please. "For what?"

"Honesty. Did your parents know how you felt and why?"

Say it. Don't hold back. "No."

"Because?"

"I was confused, angry and sad and afraid. Trapped."

Instead of prodding her for more, he placed his hands around her waist and drew her toward him until her knees fit into the space between his. His aroused cock was only inches away. If she took command of it, he'd stop asking questions, stop wanting to hear her speak. Although she was tempted, she flattened her hands over his chest for balance, warmth, and courage.

Lightning ran over her nerves and into her veins. Her mind pulsed. She needed to cry again, wanted to laugh, settled for a whisper.

"I wish I'd known Footh's first wife," she admitted. "If I had, I might have known how to make him happy."

"Are you sure she did?"

Was her breath reaching his chest like his ran through her hair? "No, but they stayed married until her death."

"Maybe because she didn't have the courage to leave."

"Maybe."

"So you had no one to share your emotions with?" He again pressed his lips against her forehead. This touch lasted longer, and when he was done, moisture stayed on her flesh.

"I stayed busy. I grew and harvested food with the other women, sewed new clothes, repaired our house. Whenever someone asked, I watched their children."

"How did Footh feel about that?"

So hard. So necessary. "As long as he was with the other men he didn't mind, but when he was home, he wanted me with him tending to his needs."

"How many needs could one man have?"

Despite the knot in her belly, she chuckled. "I think he must have grown weary thinking of them. I know I did."

"Good."

The little bit of praise brought fresh tears, which she tried to blink away, only to have him push her away and then down so she now lay on the mat with her arms fluttering and her legs tucked under her.

After straightening her legs, he stretched out beside her with one arm supporting his upper body. The other was within a whisper of her breasts.

"I think," he said, "that the hardest thing about not having a woman to share my bed with is not being able to talk like this. My father said that's what he loved the most about my mother, having one person he could be totally honest with."

Self-directed pain evaporated at his words, prompting her to bring his hand down and resting it in the valley between her splayed breasts. "It isn't that way for my parents. Their marriage, arranged by their families, brought two pieces of land but little else together."

Dio trailed his fingertips under the breast closest to him then back into the valley. Her world blurred. "Then I'm sorry for them. My father is only half the man he was before my mother died, but he cherishes his memories."

Dio's mother was dead. Lifting her head, she brushed her lips over his arm. Another lightning stroke smoked through her to steal her mind and make her body ache.

"I'm sorry," she managed. "For both of you."

"Thank you."

Had he stopped his travels between her breasts? Maybe, but it had only lasted a moment or two. Now he was carving a hot and welcome circle around the one closest to him. Running her fingers over his chest and upper arm, she licked her lips and clamped her thighs together. The effort sent energy to her woman's place.

She'd felt this wanting so seldom, and when it crept over her, she'd learned to silence it. Otherwise she might not survive. But the man hovering over her, touching her, wasn't her husband. She didn't care who he was, not now as she sank into herself and broke free at the same time.

"What's this?" Leaving off what he was doing, Dio ran his hand between her legs. "What are you feeling?"

Everything! Lacking the courage to speak, she bent her knees, opening her legs as she did. The wild creature inside her clawed for freedom. She didn't know how to hold it back, didn't want to.

"You're wet here." He slid the side of a finger over a sex lip. "And here." He did the same to the other lip, staying with her even when she twisted to the side. "Hot. Swollen."

Hearing her pussy boldly described made her blush, but maybe his words had only a little to do with the flushed sensation. The shadowed world he'd brought her to faded into nothing. She closed her eyes and collapsed, her arms now useless on the mat.

A shiver rocked her only to settle into a hum as she gave herself up fully to her body and the man touching her core. He pushed her legs farther apart. Fingers, she couldn't tell how many, slid over her entrance. Lacking any control, she let her legs splay outward. She'd never given her sex up to her husband this way.

"What happens to you when I do this?" Dio asked as a fingertip covered her entrance. Before she could think how or if to answer, he wiggled his finger.

She whimpered and somehow her hands were on her hair, pulling. Sweeping aside her inner lips, he housed the tiniest bit of himself in what wept for him.

"What are you feeling? What are you thinking?"

"Thinking?" Tugging on her hair made her wince, but she couldn't stop. "By the spirits!"

"Your spirits or mine? Maybe neither, Tawia. Maybe there's only the two of us and the Beast."

The Beast, watching in that mysterious and invisible way of his. Maybe guiding Dio. Maybe reading her thoughts.

Releasing her hair, she went in search of him. Instead, her hands wound up on her breasts. She'd lost contact with her sex while trying to speak. Now awareness slammed back into her. Dio had pulled out, left her channel empty. But it didn't matter because his fingers were everywhere else. He used her never-ending flow to paint her inner thighs and the swollen, hot button of flesh she only rarely allowed herself to caress.

She should have pleased herself more. If she had she would be prepared, maybe. Instead, she panted, kneaded her breasts, and thrashed her head. His fingers, palm, even the heel of his hand, teased and tested her entrance. At first his touches were gentle, tentative even. They were equals in this exploration, two people learning what it was to be a woman.

Then the pressure increased. His invasion of her channel came and went, but each time he dove deeper, took her further from sanity. She kept lifting her buttocks in her attempt to swallow what she could of him, but he kept dancing away, breaking her down, making her cry out.

Maybe this wasn't about granting her pleasure. Maybe he cared only about his exploration.

Didn't matter. Only his calloused fingers kissing that most uncivilized place did. She'd known he'd eventually find the small nub, tried to ready herself for the jolts that would accompany the first touch.

Preparation hadn't been enough.

"Spirits! Please!" she sobbed. "I can't—can't..."

"What can't you do?" He touched her clit again, staying there longer, making the contact stronger. Destroying her.

"Don't. Please don't."

"You don't like this?"

"I can't think."

"Good."

Alarm momentarily distracted her, but her body trusted him. That's what she had to focus on. That and his gentle, yet all-encompassing caresses. Her legs lay open, her sex threatening to melt. She kneaded her breasts, acknowledging the contrast between her rough treatment and his consideration.

In the past she'd tried to study what was between her legs so she'd know what her aroused clit looked like, but her attempts had been less than successful. Did she dare ask Dio to describe what he was seeing? Would he think her foolish? Even if she trusted him, she couldn't remember how to speak.

"You brought me great pleasure," he said from somewhere in the fog he'd disappeared into, "by doing something I didn't know was done. Now I want to do the same for you. But I'm not sure. If I do something you don't like, tell me."

"It's good. Everything is."

"I love how soft you are here." He ran his hand from the front of her pussy to the small space between it and her ass. Instead of returning to where he'd begun, he pressed against the space.

"Spirits, please!"

"They're not here, just you and me, Tawia. Tawia? I love the way that sounds on my lips."

Lips. His mouth against her forehead and her feeling cherished.

After giving that private, personal spot a tap, he slid his fingers over flesh she half believed was catching fire. Her sex channel tightened then spasmed. Alarmed, she squeezed her nipples until the hardened flesh burned.

Order him to stop. Tell him you can't handle –

But she wanted him between her legs with his knees against her inner thighs and the fluid he'd painted them with cooling while the rest of her heated.

"Goose bumps." He ran a fingernail over the side of her neck, making her jump. "Here. And here." His nail scratched her belly.

There wasn't enough air in her lungs. Her heart kept expanding. Maybe it would explode. Opening her eyes, she shook her head, but all she saw were shadows tinged in red.

Dio no longer teased her sex. Instead, he'd slid both hands under her buttocks and was lifting and drawing her toward him at the same time. The sleeping mat burned her back. When he let her down, her deeply bent legs were on his thighs while her buttocks rested on his knees. Blood rushed to her head. She pressed a hand to her temple.

"Not comfortable?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter."

"Yes it does. Tell me what you need."

You. Desperate for his hands' return, she lifted her hips.

"Not yet," he muttered. "But soon."

She should have kept her desperate need for this stranger who'd taken over her world from him, but it was too late. Burning hunger drove her to rake his thigh.

He shuddered. "Ah!"

"I didn't mean —"

"Do it again."

She blinked until she made out his features. He was smiling at her, an undercurrent of something intensifying his gaze. "You can't want me to hurt you."

"That wasn't pain." When she didn't respond, his smile faded. He caressed the side of her neck. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I don't know."

"I'll show you, but not now. Now is for something else."

She stared at nothing as he straightened her legs and lifted her even higher onto him until the back of her knees rested on his shoulders. Now she barely noted the blood pulsing in her brain.

By the spirits! His breath kept washing her pussy. He'd hoisted her legs onto his shoulders so his mouth was close to her sex, so close she knew every time he exhaled.

He wasn't just breathing. He was touching her. With his tongue. His lips. His tongue again. Licking. Tasting. Drinking of her sticky offering. Shuddering, she grabbed his arm.

"I can't—I can't!"

"Yes you can. Because it's my gift to you. And your gift to me."

More licking. Heat on heat. Her sex swelling and her pussy lips so sensitive she bleated every time he touched her there. Her clit ached. Lightning landed on it, circled the tiny nub, tightened.

"Yes, yes! By the spirits, yes!" Her voice rasped. She tried to swallow, couldn't remember how.

His lips now, soft and searching, his cheeks pressing against her thighs and his nose on her mons. Unable to keep still, she fisted the mat. Then the tip of his tongue sank into her, and she dug her nails into his thighs. Couldn't stop.

"Yes, please, yes!"

Something rumbled. The sound exploded in her, changed into a woman's high cry. Her sex muscles shivered. The shivers became a wave and then a small earthquake. She was breaking apart! She tried to fight off his invading tongue only to buck toward him.

"Ah! Ah!" *Dying. I'm dying.*

And I don't care.

Chapter Seven

Although he would have given a great deal to take Tawia's breasts into his mouth, Dio contented himself with watching their slow rise and fall as she slept beside him. Soon after he'd brought her to the point of release and beyond, she'd started yawning and hadn't objected when he gave her some water to drink followed by encouraging her to lie down. Thinking she might get cold now that she was no longer sweating, he'd pulled a hide covering over her shoulders only to have her push it down to her waist.

Sounding as awed as he'd felt, she'd thanked him for the gift he'd given her. Then, although he could tell she was trying to stay awake, she'd dozed off. He'd stretched out next to her, but sleep wouldn't come. He wanted her, wanted his cock buried deep in every part of her. At first the breadth of his desire shocked him, but he'd made his peace with it. What he couldn't comprehend was why he wanted this Falcon woman so much. Why he needed to know more about her.

She, a married woman, had had no control over her body. Its response had shocked her. She must have fucked countless times so shouldn't she have known what to expect?

Yes, her taking him into her mouth had undone him, but surely she was much more experienced than he was. Perhaps her husband had never tongued her to climax, but had things gone deeper than that?

Something new had taken place inside her, a journey never before taken, a level of trust never granted before perhaps? Why?

Sighing, he inched away from Tawia and got to his feet. The cave was warm enough that he didn't feel the need to pick up his coat. Then he found himself at the entrance where the deep chill beyond met him.

"You're still here," he told the Beast as he stepped outside. "I feel your presence. You're receiving my thoughts? How much do they matter to you?"

The question is, how important are they to you?

"A great deal," he admitted to the unseen presence.

Why?

He rubbed his forehead. "Maybe because I'm learning there isn't much difference between the Pumas and Falcons."

A worthy ruler needs to comprehend that.

"Yes, he, or she, does." Ignoring his already chilled feet and goose bumps on his shoulders and back, he frowned. "But there's more to what happened tonight. She's more than just a Falcon. She's. . ."

What is she, Dio?

There the Beast was, standing in front of the closest trees. Staring at the imposing form, Dio was struck by the mix of age and strength in the puma. Dio's understanding was that the predator was well over a hundred years old, and if what Beast Master Ber had said was right, the Beast had lived alone since leaving his mother's side. He was the only creature of this size. More than that was his willingness to share his wisdom with the Pumas.

Tonight Dio was learning that the Beast didn't always share. Sometimes, like now, he asked questions.

"Although she's a Falcon, I believe she's lost her place within her clan," he said.

And that matters to you.

"Yes." He hugged himself in an attempt to retain what warmth he could. "I'm not sure why. Coming to care about someone is a journey, one I want to take, with her."

Instead of asking why, the Beast waited.

"She hasn't told me why she left her husband and village, but she should share the reasons with someone. Me."

You intend to force her?

"Not force, never. I want to give her a reason to trust me."

Return to her then.

* * * * *

Cold flesh pressed against Tawia's legs as Dio joined her on the sleeping mat and pulled the hide blanket over them. "You've been outside," she said, instantly awake. "Why?"

He rested a chilled arm on her breasts. "I've been thinking. Talking."

"Does the Beast ever sleep?"

"Maybe not."

"You were talking to him about me, weren't you?"

"Yes." He spread his fingers over her throat, making her shudder. "Ah, how warm you are."

"You stayed out too long." Turning toward him, she exhaled so her breath reached his throat. "Just like a man."

"Am I like every Falcon male? Like your husband?"

His question gripped her. She could evade as she'd done before, but if she did, she'd never be any closer to Dio than she was now.

Better to take the risk. Better to trust.

And if she turned out to be wrong – no, she couldn't believe that about him.

"Footh is no longer my husband."

"You divorced him?"

She closed her eyes to hopefully make the telling easier. "Not me. He placed my belongings outside the door."

"Because?"

"Because he didn't want me."

Muttering something, he drew her against him, then rolled onto his back so she rested partly on top of him. Laying her head on his chest, she looped a leg around his. His engorged cock kissed the top of her thigh.

"When I asked why, Footh said I didn't please him."

"Is that all he cares about? What about sharing, caring?"

"I tried."

"You did everything you could to be a good wife?"

Be honest. Hold back nothing. "I did when we were first married. After awhile...I should have known what he was thinking. The year we spent together, he seldom smiled and almost never laughed."

"How could you stand that?"

"What choice did I have?" Although not looking at him made the talking a little easier, she wished she could gaze into his eyes and thus judge his reaction. Even more, she wanted to lose herself in the imprint of his cock on her thigh. "My marriage was arranged. I had a duty to fulfill. My parents' pride and wealth was at stake."

"Pride? Wealth? That meant more to them than your happiness?"

Dio wasn't a Falcon; she didn't expect him to understand what was expected of a Falcon woman. "I don't believe they knew Footh well enough to realize what living with him would be like for me."

"You didn't tell them?"

She started to shake her head but stopped because she wanted to listen to his heart beat. The wind might be blowing, but in here the only sounds came from the fire, their words, and bodies. "No."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't have changed anything. When a Falcon woman leaves her parents and goes to her husband's house, it is for life. She turns her back on her childhood and becomes a wife."

"To a man she hates."

"I didn't hate him."

"Didn't you?"

Stunned, she concentrated on the feel of him under her. If this was right after he'd captured her, she would have fought both him and his questions, but Dio deserved honesty. So did she.

"I didn't want to. My belly never rumbled because he always provided. As the wife of a wealthy man, a powerful elder, I was respected. Those I'd grown up with treated me differently. They were in awe of my new station, and I felt wealthy and powerful myself."

Revealing how prideful she'd initially felt embarrassed her. If it wasn't for Dio's warmth, strength and embrace, she might have admitted her failings, but she was hard-put to concentrate.

"I came to feel like two women, the one I presented outside the house I shared with Footh and the one who cried alone."

"You were trapped." Dio lightly walked his fingers over her spine. "Thinking you'd never be free."

Please don't stop. I need this. And you. "Yes."

"With a man who didn't want children. That hurt the most, didn't it?"

How did you know? "Yes." She could go on like this, answering each question until Dio ran out of things to ask, but would she ever be free of the past? Able to move forward? To let her body absorb his?

"At first I didn't say anything about my desire for children. He intimidated me. He knew so much while I felt like a bird trapped in powerful hands. I was suffocating, desperate for freedom."

"Is that how you felt when I grabbed you?"

Dio's fingers continued their sensual journey up and down her spine. Her head ached from everything trapped inside it, but the rest of her now felt loose and wild and alive, so alive. Dizzy with the wonder of it, she squeezed her thighs together.

"No." She didn't try to keep the wonder of her discovery out of her voice. "That was exciting. A little frightening, yes, but you made me feel alive." *You still do.*

"What happened when you asked him to place a baby in your belly? You did, didn't you?"

Hurting, she struggled to respond. "He said it wasn't going to happen. He'd married me for business reasons."

"What do you mean?"

"To the Falcons, everything revolves around land. Those with the most are the most powerful. Footh had three daughters, so when they married, he had to gift the families of their husbands with much of his land. By marrying me, he was able to replenish much of his wealth."

"That was more important to him than who his wife was?"

Dio's body fit hers so well. She loved the gentle, yet heated touches on her spine and rhythm of his heart, his warrior-strong legs against hers. The past was that, gone and done with. No longer meaningful.

"He told me that cock and cunt sex weakened him, which is why he'd stopped fucking his first wife long before she died. I begged him to give me a chance. I wanted to find a way to reach him, for our marriage to become meaningful, but he said I had no right questioning his decisions."

"So he insisted you bring him release in the way you showed me, with your mouth?"

"Yes. I hated it." How easy admitting that was tonight. With Dio. "Even when he praised my technique, I hated it."

"Then why did you do what you did to me?"

"Mouth sex is all I know."

"By the spirits! You believed you were what, appeasing me by doing what pleased Footh?"

"Not appease. I wanted to give you pleasure." Wondering if she'd revealed too much, she concentrated on the feel of Dio's body and the way his voice tiptoed over her nerves. Determination returned. "I dreamed of leaving and living by myself. If I'd known how to hunt, I would have." A harsh laugh burst from her. "Then Footh made the decision for me."

"By putting your belongings outside."

"A woman can't leave her husband, but a man has the right to cast off an unwanted wife. When that happens, her family is shamed."

"Shamed? Why?"

"People say the divorce came about because the woman lacked wife skills, which her parents should have taught her."

"Falcons are so different from Pumas. No Puma man would ever cast out his wife."

"I wish it was like that with—no, I don't."

"Why not?"

His voice made her think of a night breeze rustling fall leaves. His rising and falling chest calmed her. At the same time, his cock and the promise in his embrace made her heart race and her skin grew even more sensitive. The two of them were alone in the world. No one, except for the Beast, knew where they were or what they said. What they did.

Her mind filled with heady images. Sex with Dio didn't have to be about only his needs. He'd already demonstrated his understanding of her pussy's needs. This man who was a member of a clan she'd always feared had guided her to climax. Maybe he'd do it again, endlessly, if she wanted.

Lifting her head, she studied the dark blur that was his chest. Her hair trailed over it. "I can't go back. My parents won't open their door to me. Even if they wanted to, they'd become outcasts. I'm dead to them."

"What kind of people are the Falcons?"

"The only kind I've ever known."

"So the moment you saw your belongings, you knew your life as a Falcon had ended?"

"I needed to walk and be alone. That's all I knew. Where I went didn't matter, neither did what might happen once I'd left the village's safety. I had to decide what to do with my life, somehow."

"Decide? You didn't have any choices."

Later she'd explain that being divorced constituted a death sentence for a Falcon woman, but at the moment it didn't matter. How could it with Dio's compassion spreading over her?

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

Lowering her head, she brushed his collarbone with her lips. "For what you did earlier. Giving me release the way you did was incredible."

"I wasn't sure what I was doing. I simply wanted to gift you."

Delaying the desire to kiss his chest again, she shook her head. "My *gift* to you was the only thing I knew. You could have fucked me. Instead, you made everything be about me."

"There are certain things you need to learn about men, about me at least."

"What things?" He'd begun kneading her ass cheek.

"When my sex lets go, it takes awhile before it rises again. I wanted to fuck you, but I couldn't."

His honesty had her rubbing her breasts over his chest, that and the pure joy of giving and receiving sensation. His prolonged groan said she was doing the right thing.

"There was something else."

Waiting for him to continue, she rose up a little until only her nipples touched him. The kiss of flesh on flesh made her pant.

"I wasn't ready to place my cock inside you."

"Oh."

"Fucking, the kind of sex that might result in a child, shouldn't take place between strangers."

"That's what you believe we are, strangers?"

"Not anymore."

Tears filmed her vision, but for once she felt no need to hide them. "The journey between us has begun?"

"Is it one you want to continue?"

She answered by gliding her knotted nipples over flesh pulled taut against his chest muscles. He'd stopped massaging her ass, and the fire he'd built had burned down so only coals remained, but her throat and cheeks remained flushed. Panting helped a little. Moistening her lips, she pressed them against his chin, nibbling it as she did.

"You *are* a witch!" He swatted her right ass cheek. "Did I say you could do that?"

"I don't ever want to have to ask permission again."

"No, of course you don't."

Kissing his chin distracted her from the swats being delivered to her ass. Moving from his chin to his mouth destroyed her ability to think. Opening her mouth a little more, she deposited dampness on his lips. His taste rushed into her. Hungry for more, she guided her tongue between his lips. He met her moisture for moisture, touch for touch. His breath drenched her lashes.

A rolling shiver beginning at the base of her spine and traveling over her shoulders brought her back in touch with the rest of her body. Although he'd again stopped his playful punishment, her buttocks continued to burn. She tried to look behind her, realizing too late that doing so ended her exploration of his mouth.

"Easy," he muttered. "Trust."

"I do."

"Then it's all right if I do this?"

By all that's holy, he was touching his thumb, at least she thought it was his thumb, to her rear opening. She tensed only to relax when he wrapped an arm around her back and brought her hard against him. Her feet and lower legs remained on the mat, but the rest of her was on top of him with her head resting on his chest. She imagined her hair trailing over him, her buttocks exposed.

Pressing her fingers against his side, she tried to concentrate on tracing the outline of his ribs, but he'd told her things she needed to hear and touched her as she'd never been touched. She couldn't remain still, couldn't simply absorb his heat. And she needed to learn if she'd spoken the truth when she told him she trusted him.

His ribs protected his lungs and heart. Hopefully her leg wasn't pressing against the wound she'd inflicted on him, but he'd move her if she was causing him pain, wouldn't he?

Complex question. One she couldn't hold onto. Better to sink into the sweet, hot pressure building in her.

There was no reason to hold back tonight, no need to keep a harsh fist on her body's needs. This Puma warrior had tasted her sex and drank of her juices. He'd held her as she shuddered her way to a climax. He knew what her cries sounded like, the look and feel of her erect nipples. He'd seen her with her mouth hanging open, her neck and chest flushed with heat.

And he carried memories of the feel of his cock in her mouth.

How new he'd tasted! How exciting his length, breadth and heat!

Unable to hold back a moan, she nestled into him, guiding a leg between his as she did. His cock, trapped under her thigh, stirred. She started to press her leg against him only to forget what she'd been about to do.

His finger was leaving her rear hole, sliding slowly over the space between ass and pussy. Another moan slipped free with yet another building in her throat. She exhaled.

He reached her sex, his fingers gentle and controlling, teasing moisture from her. His finger rested against her entrance, prompting her to push herself at him only to collapse again when she realized he couldn't reach any deeper.

She could do this, lie on him as if she'd become his blanket, moving just enough to hold his cock's interest. The moments would tick on. She'd continue to simmer, nothing more. For how long?

"I didn't expect this," he muttered. "Never thought we'd end up like this."

"What did you think?"

"Not enough." His chuckle hummed through her. "I acted on instinct when I should have – no, I'm glad I didn't leave you alone."

"So am I."

He shifted her higher on him until her cheek pressed against his and he could easily touch her from head to feet. His hand left her pussy, and she lifted her buttocks, feeling empty and alone despite their shared heat.

"I need – don't do this, please!" Her words were raw and naked, unwanted and yet necessary. "I've waited so long for – please."

"Easy, easy."

There he was, his knowing finger against her sex. Sliding over her drenched lips, slipping into the valley between them, diving into her, pausing and then diving deeper. Turning her head, she closed her teeth over his ear.

He shivered but didn't try to pull free. "You're so sensitive here." He drew out of her pussy, then captured a lip between thumb and forefinger and rolled the flesh about.

"Spirits, spirits!" she cried, allowing his ear to slip free.

"No spirits, not even the Beast. Just you and me."

And sex. The kind she'd wanted since she'd realized what it was to be female.

She could, would wait, hold herself together, press her breasts and belly against this man while he worked his mystical ways on her.

Her vow closed around her and became her world, her life. Positioned the way she was, she could do precious little to pleasure Dio. Later she'd change that, but these were her moments. His so-knowing fingers gliding and invading, gliding again. Her breathing roughened and stopped each time he circled her clit. Her nub had never been this sensitive or her need to have it manipulated so powerful.

"Why did I use ropes?" Dio asked. "If I'd known controlling you would be so easy, so pleasurable this way, I'd have done so from the beginning." Chuckling, he ran a long, strong, rough finger so deep in her she thought he might never find the way out. His palm and other fingers cupped and sheltered her pussy. He was right. She could live like this. Never move again. Always locked in his embrace.

Unless—

Thinking to test the limits of his embrace, she rolled from side to side, brushing her breasts over his upper chest as she did. His finger remained locked in her, and she tightened her sex muscles around him.

"Ah!" he gasped. "Are you coming?"

Not yet but wildly close, maybe within a few breaths of losing self-control. She responded in the only way she could by again clenching him within her.

"Coming? Without me?"

Instead of answering, she again closed her mouth around his ear and leaned back. He shuddered and his breath ragged. She stuck her tongue in his ear.

“Ah! By the — ah!”

A sharp sting on her buttocks and she released him. Her pussy was empty again, ignored and starving. Grabbing her around the waist, he pushed her up and off him. Her breasts sagged. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

“What I want.”

Planting her hands on his chest for balance, she brought her legs under her and sat upright. Her legs were on either side of his hips with his sex against her belly. One hand rested on his chest. The other went to his cock. She lightly grasped the tip.

Frowning, he lifted his head.

“Trust,” she whispered. “This is all about trust.” *And learning what tomorrow can be.*

Sitting with her legs splayed over his and his hip bones caressing her thighs, she looked around. She couldn’t make out the cave drawings and had her back to the entrance so couldn’t tell whether the Beast was watching.

Dio was hers. He lay under her, taut and waiting, his eyes hard yet soft on her. Anticipating.

“I never thought I’d do this again,” she muttered, indicating her hold on his cock. “Never believed I’d want to.”

“I changed that for you?”

“Yes.” She steadied herself with a deep breath. “That isn’t all.”

“Do it, Tawia. Place me inside you.”

He understood her better than she did herself. Wondering if he could read her expression, she rose up, positioned his cock between her legs, and slowly lowered herself. He filled her, his hard bulk spreading her, gliding easily. When she was certain he wouldn’t slip out, she released him and cupped her breasts. Tilting her head upward, she stared at the cave ceiling.

Dio, buried in her. She, skewered by him. Alone with her thoughts and nerves. Wondering what he was feeling. Whole and trapped and free all at the same time. Embracing what it meant to be a woman.

Pressure on her hips caused her to look to where Dio's hands now bracketed them. "More," he said. "Finish it." Increasing his hold, he settled her down on him. His cock claimed and owned her, completed her.

When he arched himself at her, she tightened her sex muscles. He ground into her, slammed at her, robbed her of breath and sanity. Her too-heavy hands slid off her breasts. She tried to lift them back in place only to grip his arms.

"Ride me," he panted.

Yes, yes! Still holding onto him, she lifted herself until perhaps half of his cock remained buried. Then, not seeing anything and knowing even less, she slipped back down to where she belonged. His hold on her thighs tightened.

"I can't stop," she warned him. "If I hurt you —"

"You won't." Releasing a thigh, he lightly slapped a dangling breast. "Do it! Just do it."

Spurred on by the delicious sting, she tried to lift herself off him again only to offer the full length of her channel to him. She fucked him, her legs and hips straining, breasts shaking. Bucking like a wild thing under her, he slapped her breasts and the tops of her thighs. Sweat stained every part of her. It hurt to breathe. Still she lifted herself and fell, lifted and fell. Her clit ached, demanded.

Her hand was on his belly and inching toward their joined bodies. Sweat made her fingers slippery. She rose once more, slid her fingers between them, came down. A fingertip found her clit.

The cave disappeared. The only flames that mattered exploded on her clit and in her pussy, and she screamed. Her climax shook her, opened her core only to close it down and around Dio's cock.

“Ah, ah! Yes, ah!”

Waves. Tossing about. Rolling on and on. Screaming again.

The cave returned, the air both cool and hot. She didn't know the person she'd become, wanted nothing except to continue riding her climax. Then her sex muscles contracted, clenched Dio's cock once more and she remembered who she shared the cave with.

She tried to blink him into focus only to sag forward. Closing his hands over her breasts, he kept her from collapsing.

“Done?” he asked.

“I...don't know. You?”

“Not yet.”

Before she could think what, if anything, to say, he rolled onto his side, taking her with him. Her mind might not comprehend what was happening, but her body did. Gathering her muscles, she rammed against him. His weight trapped the leg under them, the other clung to his sweat-slick thigh. Holding herself tight against him, she clutched his shoulders and threw back her head. Her breasts sealed themselves to his chest, her hair stuck to both of them.

“There!” he exclaimed. “Yes, there!”

A pain-shock bit at the base of her spine, compelling her to straighten a little. The moment the discomfort eased, she redoubled her hold on him. He came at her, a fierce creature demanding everything of his muscles, lungs and heart. She shook under his assault, head whipping, breasts shuddering, legs burning.

Another shock, this one centered in her pussy, struck her. He kept pounding at her, hissing deep in his throat. She needed to scream out her fresh climax, but when she opened her mouth, only a harsh cry burst free. Her body broke apart, shattered, gloriously died.

He joined her somewhere in the middle of that incredible death, spewing cum throughout her, his cry deeper, louder, no less frenzied. Her muscles screamed, but she continued to cling to him, helping him come down, helping her understand.

And when he lay spent and panting beside her, she touched her lips to his. Her tears burned her lids and cheeks. She let them flow.

He ran his tongue over her lids, lapped at her cheeks.

"It's all right," he whispered.

Epilogue

Tawia looked lost in his coat. He regretted putting it over her shoulders instead of his own, but at least they had on the rest of their clothes. Although his body insisted on sleep, that would have to wait because the Beast was waiting for them.

"It's going to snow," Tawia said from where they stood just outside the cave. "I can feel it."

Having grown up on the mountain, he knew well how an approaching storm scraped his senses and cooled his blood. He hadn't expected her to be able to read the unspoken warning in the sharp wind.

"Before morning," he told her. "I can't say how long it'll last."

"I don't care. We'll be safe in the cave."

"The walls will feel as if they're closing in if we're trapped for several days."

Without the moon and stars to mute the night, he could only guess that she was looking up at him. Needing the feel of her, he drew her to his side and draped an arm over her shoulder.

"I know what being trapped feels like," she said. "This won't be like that."

Tawia might be divorced, but she hadn't yet put that time behind her. It would take awhile and maybe more tears, but together they'd bury the past. Turn their eyes to the future.

"He's here," he said softly.

"I know."

Pulling her closer, he rested his cheek on the top of her head. If he'd ever held a woman like this before, ever wanted to protect one the way he now did, he couldn't remember. He might have forced her into his world, but now she belonged in it.

"Beast," he said. "I await your wisdom."

You don't need it.

Wondering if he'd ever be complacent when that deep voice touched his mind, he stared into the dark. "I don't understand." He had to work at dismissing Tawia's presence enough to concentrate on what the Beast had just said.

Don't you? Did you need me telling you to hold her? To help her speak of her past?

"I needed those things," Tawia said. "From him, only him."

Why was Dio the right one?

Dio held his breath.

"I sensed his compassion," she whispered. "It was more than just the sex. He cared about me. He knew I needed help revealing certain things. He made me feel safe."

Safe from what?

"My emotions," she said after a moment. "I was so used to holding everything inside, expecting nothing from a man."

When she took a shuddering breath, Dio turned her into him so they were chest to chest and his arms warmed her back. "It's not like that anymore," he told her. "I swear, it'll never be like that again."

Because you're ready to take her into your world?

"If she's ready to take those steps."

Feeling her breath on his chin, he looked down to find her mouth waiting for his. He kissed her deep and slow and hot.

"I'm ready," she said when they were done. "I'm no longer a Falcon."

"And willing to become a Puma?"

"Yes."

That isn't all. Dio, take what you learned tonight. Use that wisdom as you embrace your new responsibilities.

"I thought you weren't going to offer advice."

Is that how you see it?

"It doesn't matter." Bringing Tawia back to his side, he again stared at where he believed the Beast was standing. "What does is knowing I'm ready to become ruler."

"Dio?" Tawia wrapped her arm around his waist. "You led me to believe you weren't ready to turn your back on the life you were familiar with."

"I wasn't. Then you opened yourself up to me and things changed for me. All I need to do is listen, and care."

Care. Take that word into your heart and build your life around it. That, not just strength and courage, is what makes a ruler.

"He's right," Tawia said. "I wouldn't be where I am now if I hadn't sensed your compassion. I've never told anyone the things I told you tonight."

Her arm hugged his waist and her side was strong against his. "I always put myself first," he muttered. "I believed that was necessary in order for a warrior to survive. Admitting I'm no longer a warrior was hard."

"All change is hard." Her voice dropped. "Seeing my belongings cast aside meant I could no longer live as I always had."

"It was more than that. You weren't willing to accept the fate Footh tried to hand you. Otherwise you wouldn't have gone out by yourself, and you wouldn't have fought me."

"I'm not fighting anymore."

Because she trusts you, just as the rest of your people will. Go back inside before the storm hits.

"What about you?"

If you need me, I'll be there, but your leadership doesn't depend on me.

Moments ago he'd been keenly aware of the storm's smell and the Beast's hulking presence. Now only Tawia mattered.

Her and the waiting cave.

About the Author

“Of course I’ve time-traveled to the ancient Everglades, infiltrated bondage strongholds, done wilderness search and rescue, and spent a night trapped in a workout gym with Mr. Universe. How can I possibly write about something I haven’t experienced?”

Although I love telling readers that, the truth is much more mundane. In my “day” jobs, I’ve been a commercial pilot, brain surgeon, worked as a white-water river guide, bee keeper, snake charmer and garbage collector.

And if you buy all that, let me pitch the bridge I have listed on eBay.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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