

A Seacat's Love

Prologue

*Sunday, the 7th of April, Year 1992
California, Earth*

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The early morning rays touched Rick McCall's stoic features as he entered through the iron gates to the quiet California cemetery. With half a dozen white roses clenched in one hand, Rick walked in a stiff gait up the main road until he reached the first intersection. He turned left to cut across the expansion of manicured grass and neat rows of marble and granite headstones toward a barely traveled road. He knew the gravel path well enough to follow it blindfolded.

The chirping birds had no soothing effect on Rick. He ignored the playful squirrels that chased one another and the tiny chipmunks that darted across the landscape. His mind was set on his destination.

Rick arrived at an isolated section of the cemetery and stopped in front of a flat gray headstone. He knelt on one knee to remove the dry twigs that covered the engraving. His jaw clenched and relaxed in a steady rhythm, while his fingers outlined each letter.

It was said that time could heal a broken heart. It was a lie. Rick's heart had yet to heal from the loss of his beloved wife and unborn daughter.

Rick remembered the day he had met Mary at the gym he had frequently visited. They had gone on their first date a week later. Six months into their whirlwind relationship, they were married. They had shared three blissful years when Mary approached him with her desires to start a family. Within two months of trying, Mary had conceived. It was a dream come true for Rick.

Rick placed the flowers he carried above the etched words. *Forgive me, Mary.* He could not say it enough. His right forefinger rose to trace the three-year-old scar that ran across his left cheek. Rick kissed his fingertips and then caressed Mary's name. *I love you. I would've willingly exchanged places with you. I was too slow...too late.* His eyes closed. *I should've known better. I made the wrong choice, and you paid with your life.*

Rick made a tight fist that caused his knuckles to snap. "Never again," he vowed.

He recalled the day of the final viewing. Mary had looked like an angel in her white coffin. Embraced in her arms was the daughter she had always wanted. Rick read the etched words beside Mary's name: Samantha McCall. He had named the infant after Mary's mother, just as Mary had intended.

You would have made a wonderful mother. The long knife scar on Rick's cheek tingled. With a regretful sigh, he stood and left.

No, Rick would never forget, nor would he be placed in that situation again. Rick McCall vowed to never again lose a loved one because of his career.

Chapter 1

Wednesday, the 22nd of May
Phoenix Mountains Preserve
Phoenix, Arizona

II II II

Three makeshift tents stood amid a forest of tall shrubs and cactuses in the mountain's untouched wilderness. Leonora, the only female in the group of five humanoid felines, placed a log on the campfire. She looked over the dancing flames at her three male colleagues, who hovered around a laptop placed on a small, portable table. All three had their deceptor devices activated, which allowed their feline features to disappear, making them appear as ordinary males from Earth. They were discussing the latest data collected during a field trip to the nearest town.

Leonora retook her seat on a folding chair by the fire. The rustle of material drew her attention to the nearest tent. Her fourth teammate stared at her from the entrance. By the heated expression on Tigif's face, Leonora knew where his thoughts were treading. She did not want any part of it.

Tigif and Leonora were barely on speaking terms. The only time Leonora spoke to Tigif was when it concerned the expedition. Otherwise, Leonora kept her distance from him. When she had turned fourteen, Tigif began his amorous advances. Since she turned fifteen, a mature adult by Oceanan Laws, Tigif's behavior worsened. She was tired of graciously telling him that she was not interested in becoming his lifemate.

Like most females, Leonora did have plans of one day finding a mate and creating a large family. However, she was not going to settle for just any male. She did not want a lifemate. She wanted a soul mate.

Oceanans believed the god Onssa divided a soul and placed each half into different beings. When the two beings mated and their souls matched, both spirits would unit as one essence. The souls' union would result in a cluster of cuts placed on the recipient's body on their final, joint orgasm. This matrimonial mark for the female was located below the waist and for the male, above it.

A soul mate was sought by all felines. However, there were some who were willing to settle for second best—a lifemate and a lifescar. By law, this matrimonial mark must be a single cut. For the male, its location must be on his left forearm and for the female, on her right thigh.

Leonora was not one to settle for second best. Until her soul mate made himself known, her inventions and discoveries came first in her life.

She had thought Tigif's obsession with her was over when he began dating her sister. Leonora became elated when he proposed to Karla. But the second their ship left Oceana's gravisphere to embark on this assignment, Tigif resumed his pestering, which now bordered on sexual harassment.

Leonora picked up a stick, so she could poke at the logs. The logs shifted. The fire crackled and popped, and her gaze followed the rising smoke. Her sights paused on the brilliant sparkle from the stars. Leonora sighed. She missed her home, her siblings. But alas, she had a job to do. Until her job was done, she could not go home.

Leonora placed the stick down and reached for the electronic journal that was on the small, portable side table beside her seat. She chanced a look at Tigif, to make certain there was plenty of space between them. Satisfied, she opened the laptop; pushed Tigif, her planet, and her family out of her thoughts; and began documenting her findings for that day.

From the tent's entrance, Tigif stared at his desire: Leonora. Back on his home planet of Oceana, Tigif had changed offices to be closer to her. He had asked her to dinner many times. He even suggested a romantic trip through space. Leonora had declined each invitation. She went as far as to try to convince him she was not interested in a mate. Tigif did not believe her. Nor was he one to take no for an answer.

In efforts to obtain the ultimate prize, Tigif cunningly seduced Leonora's adopted sister Karla. The feline kodkod believed she was going to wed the orange-and-black striped tiger, once he returned from the expedition. Karla was ignorant to how Tigif manipulated and used her eagerness to have a family against her. In truth, Karla was just another expendable pawn in Tigif's intricate plans.

Leonora's brother proved to be more difficult to fool. Challen was protective of the two females he had raised from infancy. The lion was never far, nor gone long enough for the tiger to make substantial progress. Therefore, Tigif had to invent a way to get Leonora away from the towering cat, if his dreams were to become a reality.

Tigif had suggested a trip to a planet long ago forbidden, but not forgotten, to his colleagues of elite scientists. The reasoning Tigif gave them was to study the parallel similarities of species evolution between the earthlings and Oceanans. A first hand picture and understanding to Oceanan evolution could be obtained since the humans were still maturing and would not reach Oceana's present standard of living for another two or three millenniums. The true meaning behind the trip Tigif kept to himself.

The scientists had fallen for it, but not Challen. Challen was not about to allow his little sister, who was a member of the science team, to partake in what he deemed a suicidal mission. Another hurdle had appeared before Tigif.

Tigif quickly leapt over that barrier the day the Oceanan king gave his approval for the expedition. Tigif had arrived at the end of the long meeting. In the corridor, Tigif had overheard King Oren conversing with an Oceanan warrior named Forrest, as they discussed the possibility of joining an alliance of peaceful alien nations.

Unfortunately, the king could not make the voyage to the headquarters of the alliance and leave Oceana unprotected. Tigif swiftly approached the king and nominated Challen to go on King Oren's behalf. The king had eagerly agreed and made an unsuspecting Challen his delegate.

Tigif smirked. His well-executed plan had come together very nicely. There remained no obstacle between him and his goal, except Leonora herself. He licked his lips. With a feline's grace, he walked in her direction. Leonora's lack of interest had forced his hand. To win her over, Tigif was convinced that he needed to be more forceful with her. After all, feline females liked aggressive males.

He reached for Leonora's shoulders with the intentions of giving her a sneak preview to his true nature. The lioness jumped to her feet, leaving him grasping air. A new scent reached Tigif's nose a split second before a swarm of human soldiers trampled the campsite.

II II II

Thursday, the 18th of July
Sky Harbor International Airport
Phoenix, Arizona

Rick glanced out the window from his seat aboard the Boeing 757. Millions of lights lit up Phoenix Sky Harbor International, the streets, and the buildings below. Rick was glad to be home. He sat back in his seat and closed his eyes, as he felt the plane make its final descent to the runway.

While the plane taxied to the terminal, a sense of dread came over Rick. A slight wrinkle appeared on his forehead. He wondered what was wrong. His latest assignment had gone without a hitch. Still, life as a secret agent had taught Rick not to leave anything to chance. He opened his eyes and discretely scanned his fellow passengers in coach.

Rick casually reached inside his partially opened blazer. His fingers grazed over the handle of his Glock 18. The plane reached the terminal and stopped. Rick waited. Everyone within the cabin stirred at once. They reached for their belongings in the overhead compartments or from beneath the seats in front of them. Rick watched for any sudden or suspicious movements.

The flight attendant gave the okay to exit the plane. In a double-file line, the passengers made their way toward the front of the airplane. Rick decided to exit last, just in case. He examined each face carefully as they passed him. Not one triggered a memory or seemed familiar. Not one made an aggressive move. Rick blamed his ill feeling on fatigue and shrugged it off.

His cell phone was clipped to his belt. Extracting his hand from within his blazer, Rick switched the phone on. He pulled his backpack from underneath the seat in front

of him and made his way to the door. The cell phone vibrated as he walked passed baggage claims.

Rick answered, and the voice of his team leader responded. Lance Blaisdale wanted to meet with him. It was urgent. Even though he was exhausted and wanted to go to his hotel room to sleep, Rick complied. He could never say no to the one man he seriously respected.

Rick had met Lance when he first joined the agency, six years ago. Lance Blaisdale was already rising in the rankings. As time passed, they became extremely tight. Like brothers, they would argue and fight, but they were always there for each other.

When Lance was assigned to lead an elite team of specially trained agents, he offered Rick a position on the Shadow Team. Rick had jumped at the opportunity to advance his career. He never guessed his choice would lead to the death of his wife and unborn daughter.

Rick took his car out of long-term parking and drove for nearly three hours, following Lance's directions. Arriving at the fork in the road, he slowed the car to a halt. He peered through the windshield to the span of road lit by the headlights. The path to the left was clear, but large boulders blocked the right side.

A natural deterrent, he thought. A trick his team used more than once to keep unwanted visitors at bay. Rick glanced at his watch and saw it was one in the morning. *I should be in bed*. He shut off the ignition and reached for the backpack he had thrown on the passenger seat. He pulled out a mini flashlight and exited the car. He used the key remote to lock the rented four-door sedan.

Lance's instructions were to climb over the boulders and head north for forty minutes. On top of the highest rock, Rick paused to stare at the night sky. The stars sparkled like diamonds, brighter than usual on this cool Thursday morning.

Rick loved to stargaze and normally spent an hour staring at the stars before going to bed. The twinkling lights represented life, and the clusters, family. His wounded soul found solace in their untainted existence. On this night, oddly, their mystical lights brought him only distress.

Following Lance's orders, Rick jumped down, onto the other side of the boulders and started walking. He found his leader waiting patiently by a tall, wired fence topped with curling, razor-sharp barbed wire. Not recognizing the area caused Rick's uneasy feeling to increase.

He greeted Lance with a slight nod. Lance returned the gesture, and then he led the way to the back entrance of a building, heavily guarded by the military. More from habit than need, Rick mentally documented his surroundings as they bypassed all security checkpoints and took an unmonitored elevator to the lowest level.

During this time, Lance remained silent. Rick eyed his leader's bowed head—a clear indication that something was bothering him.

A small bell announced their arrival, four levels beneath the ground's surface. Lance exited the elevator first. Neither made a noise as they walked through dimly lit corridors to an off-limits section of the underground labyrinth. The many dangerous biohazard signs hinted it was a laboratory of some sort.

Rick continued to study his friend's mannerisms. Lance, with his hands in his pockets, regarded the glossy floor. An outsider would deem his appearance as distant and a bit bored. But to the members of the Shadow Team, in particular Rick, they knew Lance's demeanor meant the opposite.

"So how did it go?" Lance's voice gave nothing away.

This came as no surprise to Rick. During their training years, Rick had given Lance the nickname "Control." It stuck. Lance's ability to maintain a level head during sticky situations enabled him to find the best solutions for grave problems. It had helped Lance rise in the rankings swiftly.

Rick played along, as usual, shrugging indifferently. "Smooth and by the number, as always. Was there any doubt?"

"You know there wasn't. You're my best man. Why else do you think I keep sending you on these sorts of assignments?"

Rick tilted his head sideways. His right eyebrow rose to mock his friend. "I thought it was because you hated my perfect record and hoped I'd fail." Lance's expression changed to one of shock and hurt. If Rick were not extremely tired, he would have considered laughing.

"Nonsense, McCall. How then would I ever replace you?" Lance jokingly added, "Not that the thought hasn't crossed my mind."

This time Rick did chuckle. "I'm sure it has. But don't get your hopes up too high. I'm only twenty-seven, and I intend to be here for a very long time." He continued to scope his surroundings, unable to shake his increasing anxiety. "I'm also sure the purpose of this late night interlude has nothing to do with the results of my latest assignment. So let's cut to the chase, Control." He looked at his leader. "Where am I? What's so important that it can't wait until a decent time?"

"Straightforward as usual, eh, McCall? That's what I most admire about you." With a ghost of a smile, Lance shook his head negatively. "You never beat around the bush."

Rick slowly exhaled. "And you never hesitate to say what's on your mind. So why start now? Spill it."

Lance stopped and displayed his famous, all-knowing smirk. "You're not going to believe it."

"Coming from you, that doesn't surprise me."

Resuming his pace, Lance casually asked, "How do you feel about extraterrestrials?"

"I don't."

"You mean you never considered the possibility?"

"No."

"I don't believe you. Everyone thinks about aliens at least once in their lifetime."

"Why should I, when there are so many lost souls on this planet to contend with?"

Lance sliced the air in front of him with his hand. "Forget all that for a second, will you?"

Rick's eyes narrowed. This was definitely not good. Lance never has a problem with expressing his thoughts. Hell, his problem was keeping his opinions to himself. "Why?"

"Listen..." Lance paused in the middle of the hallway. He smoothed back his short, wavy brown hair and said, "What would you say if I were to tell you that life does exist out there, and it's not like anything Hollywood has portrayed?"

If Lance had planned to shock Rick, he failed. Unable to suppress the yawn that had been building inside, Rick opened his mouth wide, behind his forefinger and thumb knuckles. "I would say, 'Good night, I'll see you on Monday.'" He turned to head back the way they had come in. He was not expecting Lance to snatch a hold of his arm.

Lance placed his face to an inch from Rick's and whispered, "I'm serious."

Rick yanked his arm free but kept his face close to his boss's. "So am I."

"Rick, listen to me." Lance moved away, but kept his voice low. "Please."

Being the loyal friend that he was, Rick resigned to listening. "Okay. Go ahead."

"I've asked you here tonight, because something of immense importance has come up. And you're the only person I can trust."

"Go on."

Lance quickly scanned both ends of the corridor before continuing in a hushed tone. "Two and a half months ago, we received a report of extraterrestrials in the vicinity of—"

"You're kidding me, right?" Rick crossed his arms.

Undaunted, Lance proceeded. "Naturally, we didn't believe it at first. But we simply couldn't resist the temptation of investigating for ourselves."

"Your contact was that convincing?"

"They certainly were."

They? Hmmm. "Well, *I'm* not convinced that easily."

"You will be."

"How's that?" Rick's voice cracked with laughter.

"We—"

All talking stopped. The men listened in earnest to the commotion taking place around the nearest corner. Sharing a brief look, they decided to investigate. When they reached the corner, a blur of dark hair crashed into Rick's chest.

The impact propelled the stranger backward. Rick responded with quick reflexes. He tried to stop the person's progression downward, but thrown off balance from the unexpected collision, he only succeeded on landing on the smaller frame. The curvaceous form underneath him instantly alerted his senses, but the strong scent of body odor kept him from responding in his usual, healthy manner.

His face screwed up. Rick removed his nose from dark, sticky strands. His breath snagged at the sight of the palest blue eyes he had ever seen. "Bloody hell." He shot to his feet and brought his assailant with him. His heart banged in his chest. All curves vanished from his head as Rick took his first good look at the woman.

She was petite in height. Underneath all the dirt, bruises, and dried blood, her skin tone was a sickly yellow. Her face was oval in shape with thin eyebrows that slightly sloped downward in the center. She had a slim nose with a tiny tilt at the tip

and pouty lips. Her dark hair hung in greasy strands to the middle of her back. Rick's eyes opened wider when he noticed she had pointy earlobes.

Then all coherent thoughts halted when Rick spotted those eerie eyes, traveling over him. It was the second time he had felt like the prey instead of the predator. Memories of the first time filtered through his thoughts.

His father, Charles, had known the pain of losing his wife for being a British spy. Rick had held his mother in his small arms while she died. Charles then lost his life, holding back the enemy, while six-year-old Rick ran through a thicket of trees, carrying his baby sister, to his godfather's home nearby. To silence the boy, the killers had followed. Rick had stared into the barrel of a gun before he and his sibling were critically injured, his godfather killed.

"Move and I'll kill you."

Lance's words brought Rick out of his past. He blinked to clear his vision and saw Lance had his gun aimed at the woman's heart. "Control, what the bloody hell is going on here?"

Lance pointed to the woman with his chin. "She's the reason I brought you here tonight." His gun never faltered.

Rick noticed how the woman brazenly inspected him underneath the dim lights. The black silk shirt and slacks he wore felt like they were shrinking under her scrutiny. "What do you mean? Who is she? Why is she painted like a lioness?"

Lance twisted his lips. "She's not wearing makeup, Predator. She's an alien," he replied, in a condescending tone.

"What!?"

"An *alien*. Remember our little conversation just a moment ago?" Lance pointed with his gun. "Well, this is what I was talking about."

"I can't believe it." Rick passed a hand over his face. "I'm seeing it, but I can't believe it." His soft-spoken words placed a scowl on the lioness's face.

"I am not an *it*!" she corrected before taking a step toward Rick. "And you have to help me."

Rick raised his right eyebrow at her. "I have to do what?"

"You have to help me. They are trying to kill me."

The pacy sound of boots on steel reached his ears. With a quick look over her head, Rick spotted the approaching soldiers. A warning bell gonged in his head. That impending doom was now clear.

"Please, they already killed two of my friends. They are going to kill me next. You are my only hope. Please help me." The fear in her pale eyes was too profound for the situation to be a sham.

"What is she talking about?" Rick asked Lance, who was staring at the woman.

Lance seemed not to have heard him. Instead, he thoughtfully said aloud, "She must've escaped the scientists."

"Scientists?" Rick's heart increased in tempo. "What scientists?"

"The ones experimenting on us!" blurted the woman before the guards rudely yanked her from where she stood.

The two soldiers grabbed her forearms and forced her to walk in the direction they wanted to go. After taking several steps, the lioness dug in her heels, freed her right arm, and struck the shorter man in the face with the heel of her palm. She then quickly elbowed the second man in the stomach, grabbed his head when he doubled over, and rammed her knee into his face.

"Wow," whispered Rick, in awe by her willingness to fight.

His gaze lowered to the floor, as thoughts of Mary entered his head. Mary had no desire to learn self-defense. Her excuses were endless. At the time, Rick gave in and stopped his badgering to make her happy. He now regretted doing so. If she had known how to fight, perhaps her chances at survival could have been greater. His soul, then, would not have been so lonely.

A sharp yelp brought his attention back. One of the soldiers had grabbed the woman from behind. He had her lifted high in the air in a viselike grip around the waist. The woman struggled to free herself.

"You don't have to be so rough," spoke Rick over the commotion. "Let her down!"

The soldier ignored him. The woman cried out in frustration and fear.

"Stay out of this," ordered the second soldier.

Rick watched the woman's struggle increase. The feeling of urgency grew quickly in him. His instincts to help a being in need took control. He rushed forward and immediately dislodged the woman from the soldier's grasp.

The soldiers were not pleased with the interference. They changed their target and attacked Rick. Rick had no plans to fight the men. They were simply obeying orders. However, after being shoved and punched in the face for his well intentions, Rick's anger got the best of him.

"Predator, stay back!" Lance returned his gun into his shoulder holster, so he could grab his friend from behind with the aid of several soldiers who had just arrived at the scene.

Rick escaped his human restraints and immediately punched one of the men in the nose. The satisfying crunch beneath his knuckles made him smile. He heard a woman's cry, and his smile vanished.

Spinning on his heels, Rick saw the feline make a slashing motion across a soldier's stomach. The man cried out, reached for his abdomen, and fell. Blood poured from the open gashes. Rick did not recall the woman having a knife. His gaze whipped to her hands. His muscles tensed. Her nails were extended to razor sharp claws.

Lance paused at Rick's side. Together, they watched the woman fend off several more soldiers. They could tell she was trained in combat, even though her aim was off and her execution slow. The few contacts she did manage to make with her claws were fatal. One soldier had his throat slashed, another his chest shredded.

As the fourth man fell from having his face sliced, her attention landed on Rick. Her pale blue eyes were aglow. Rick caught his breath, and his stomach clenched tighter. Those eerie eyes inched toward him, but Rick could not move away.

Lance swiftly placed his frame in front of Rick. "Stay away from him!" His gun was aimed and ready before he finished his order.

The woman stopped, but her eyes remained locked with Rick's. {Please, do not fear me.}

Rick gasped. Her voice sounded clearly in his head, yet her lips did not move.

{We meant your race no harm.}

Lance glanced Rick's way. "What is it?"

{You have to believe me. They are poisoning us. Help me.}

Rick stared at the woman, unsure of what to think. Did she just speak to him telepathically? "Did you hear what she said?"

"She didn't say anything," replied Lance.

More soldiers arrived. The woman was quick to fight them. Her mental pleas for help continued between kicks and punches. Rick went around Lance, intending to help her.

Lance, once again, placed himself between Rick and the guards. "Predator, no!"

"We can't let them hurt her." Rick pushed forward.

"Think of your career." Lance held him back. "You'll lose everything."

With Rick out of the picture, the soldiers were able to overpower the small alien. She was dragged unceremoniously kicking and screaming down the corridors.

"Predator! *PREDATOR!*"

Rick felt helpless. What could he do? What should he do? Mary's tearful face floated into his thoughts.

He had arrived home from a covert assignment overseas. Mary had been seven months pregnant and in the mood for pizza. While Rick waited for his order, his cell phone vibrated on his belt. The hairs at his nape stood on end at the sound of a breathless Mary in tears. The cause of her distress suggested the Predator make an appearance before his darling, little wife paid for his actions. The intruder's voice was unrecognizable.

Rick nearly dropped the phone as he dashed to his car. Racing down the highway, he called his boss, only to discover the stranger had also contacted him. The Shadow Team was already on the way to Rick's suburban home. In the end, the enemy had paid for their daring, but so had the Predator.

Rick was unable to help his wife. He had failed her. He could not fail again. Only one problem stood in his way: this woman was not human. What could he do to help someone who was not from this planet? He could think of no answer, but he knew of someone who always had answers.

Rick faced Lance. "You brought me here because of her. Why? Did you know this was happening? You are the one with the clout. Why didn't you do something? Why aren't you doing something now? If what she said is true, you should be the one helping her."

Lance clenched and unclenched his jaw. He looked down at the dead soldiers. "I never should've brought you here."

It was not what Rick wanted to hear. He grew angrier with his friend. Since when had Lance started turning his back on those in need?

Rick inched his face closer to Lance, drawing his attention, and snarled, "You better start talking, and you bloody hell better start now."

"Predator," Lance paused. "I was wrong to involve you. I think it's best if we forget what happened here tonight."

"Really?" Rick moved forward, forcing Lance to step back. "I think not."

"Rick, listen to me. What she said was nonsense. You know that. She obviously wanted to escape. We can't let her roam around the streets. She's an alien. Can you imagine the sort of panic she will create among the public? God knows what sort of diseases she's carrying. You yourself saw what she's capable of doing when confronted." Blue eyes pleaded with blue. "I say, let's forget the whole thing ever happened and go home. We can both use a good night's rest."

Rick's mind raced as he tried to grasp at some semblance of logic. He inched closer to Lance and hissed, "You started this. You were the one who dragged me here in the dead of night. You were the one gung ho on getting me to believe aliens existed. Well...*now* I believe. Tell me, what the bloody hell is going on here!"

Lance was not talking fast enough for Rick. What he wanted was to go after the girl—cat. He was still unsure which she was. However, years of experience, plus the aggressive guards, spoke of something other than royal treatment awaited her. She was in trouble. He was sure of that—as sure as he was about Lance Blaisdale knowing more than what he was willing to say.

"I can't."

"What?" Rick placed his right ear closer to his boss's mouth. "Did I hear correctly?"

"I wasn't supposed to talk about it. If my superiors found out, my career will be over."

"What are they planning to do to her?"

"I don't know."

"Liar!" Rick shoved Lance against the nearest wall. He held Lance pinned with his left forearm across Lance's shoulder and neck. With a menacing glare that had made the toughest of men shiver, he snarled, "I'm not a fool, Blaisdale. I know you're never in the dark about anything. You're always well informed. You were up to something by bringing me here, so talk!"

"Rick—" coughed Lance.

"Stop toying with me! I'm not in the mood, damn it! I want to know what the bloody hell the government intends to do with her! Is what she said true? Are her friends dead? What part do you have in all this?"

The sound of guns being cocked interrupted them. Rick turned his head. Lance could only turn his eyes. The sight of the eight MPs caused Rick and Lance to tense. Apparently, they had returned to retrieve the four dead soldiers the lioness had managed to kill.

"Step back," ordered one of the officers.

Rick's expression turned savage. He secretly delighted in the sight of the soldier's Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

"I said, step back," repeated the man.

"You're quite demanding for a pup," sneered Rick. The young man's face turned red under his glare.

The soldier cleared his throat and forced his voice to sound authoritative. "I am Lieutenant McLean, not a pup. I'm ordering you to release that man."

"I take no orders from a puppy."

The young man stood straighter. "I am not a child, sir. I'm a lieutenant in the US Army. Now back away."

"It's okay. This man works for me," squeaked Lance. His eyes returned to Rick. "You should go home."

"Not until this is settled."

"There's nothing to be settled here," Lance said with finality. "Gentlemen, please escort Mr. McCall to the gates."

"I'm not leaving."

"Good night, McCall. I will see you on Monday."

"Lance." That one word held a great deal of warning.

"Good night."

Lance's "good night" held such finality that Rick knew all too well it would do no good to argue. A growl formed deep in his throat. He released Lance and was escorted to the front gates at gunpoint.

Chapter 2

Before dawn's first light the following day, Rick's dark form materialized from behind a bush. He blended in with the evening's inky chilliness as he scurried forward. He easily created a hole in the silver-steel web that encased the isolated complex with heavy-duty cutting pliers. Rick squeezed his frame through the jagged, makeshift entrance. His focus never faltered when his black shirt and slacks snagged on the fence.

In a crouch position, Rick raced to the building he had visited the night before. He paused by the dimly lit doorway. Several gloved fingers dove into his shirt pocket in search of a lock pick. With his sharp sights on the small keyhole, Rick tested the doorknob. It turned smoothly.

His forehead creased underneath his mask. *I thought this building was top secret. Who could've carelessly left this door unlocked?*

Rick placed his ear against the cold metal and listened for signs of life. When he deemed it was safe, he swiftly entered the building and shut the door. He glanced at his watch. It was five o'clock in the morning. Without further delay, his strides soon matched the rapid beating of his heart.

Like a smoky shadow moving across gray walls, Rick easily bypassed all manned security checkpoints. With a phantom's grace, he floated over the infrared beams, glided around all the motion detectors, sailed past the booby traps, and instantly vanished whenever a security camera turned in his direction. So far, no one knew he was there.

Nearing an elevator with the words "off limits" impressed across it in yellow and black, he thought for the umpteenth time, *What if she was already dead?* As before, Rick would not dwell upon it. The thought of being too late to aid another woman did not sit well with him.

Rick used the short descent in the elevator to make sure his weaponry were all loaded and within easy access. He felt certain, as long as the alarms were not set off, the hardest part would be finding the laboratory. According to his calculations, he had one hour to find the lab, grab the girl, run back to his car, and hightail it out of there before sunrise. If all went according to plan, she will have disappeared before anyone figured out she was gone.

Taking a deep breath, Rick stretched his neck and flexed his hands. He then reached for the six-shot tranquilizer rifle he carried on his back. Though he was no stranger to killing, he had

no desire to kill his own people over an alien. Besides, the she-cat might have exaggerated. Some women, when under stress, were known to blow things out of proportion.

The elevator bell announced his arrival. Rick's senses came alive, ready for action. The only sound he detected came from his heart banging against his ribs. The further he crept through the facility, the quicker and louder it played.

He smiled. His chaotic heartbeat, the shallowness of his breathing, the tension in his muscles, and the anticipation of what was yet to come made his insides quiver with excitement. Rick loved the feel of it. This was the reason he had become a secret agent. Nothing fulfilled him in this way, not even sex. Danger was his addiction. His drug. His aphrodisiac. He never intended to quit.

Around the next corner, two guards posted beside a closed door sparked his interest. He could not tell whether it was the laboratory or not from his location. Peeking at his watch, he counted fifteen minutes were already up. He had to make a choice, fast. Time was running out.

Taking a calming breath, Rick spun from behind the wall, rifle raised. He took immediate aim, and two small darts zoomed from the base of the rifle with minor sound, hitting their intended targets in the neck. Rick rushed forward, refilling both chambers, as the men simultaneously slid onto their rumps then tilted sideways to the floor.

Rick tested the door. It was locked. He had suspected as much. He checked each officer for the card key. His mood brightened when he recognized the soldier carrying the key was the annoying Lieutenant McLean.

Ha! You bastard. It serves you right.

After a quick look down both sides of the corridor, Rick used the card and entered the lab, dragging the two sleeping officers into the room behind him. Rick positioned the men to one side of the door before he about-faced. The combined smells of harsh chemicals, feces, and decaying flesh instantly assaulted his nose. Yet, it was what he saw that made Rick wonder who the real animals actually were.

There has to be a logical explanation for all of this, he thought to himself. *How can anyone who calls himself human do such a thing?* The ghostly image of his wife helped him take his first step.

Rick move past a couple of cages. Inside were two of Earth's felines. An attentive mountain lion lay leisurely on his side beside his rotting meal. Across from the lion, a chirping cheetah paced agitatedly in her unkempt prison. Beside the nearest computer terminal, Rick spotted a little house cat trapped in a cell that was one size too small. It stared at him with large, sad eyes.

Poor cats.

A short walk from the felines appeared to be four bodies—two on gurneys, two on lab tables. Each was covered with a dried bloody sheet. Rick headed first to the two bodies closest to the larger cats. He paused next to one of the gurneys. His forehead and nose scrunched up at the source of the pungent stench that saturated the room.

The second hand on the silver clock made its way around the face once, and still, Rick remained motionless. His eyelids closed. His thoughts were on rapid rewind. Rick

was back in his car, racing down the streets, hoping to reach his old house and pregnant wife. He forced a deep breath into closed lungs in hopes of controlling his emotions—a bad idea, for the potency of the air caused him to gag and cough.

Rick's fearful gaze raced over the covered contours of the body, while he did his best to smother the noises. Was it her? Did he fail again?

The sound of a single gunshot echoed in his ears. Rick jolted. The memory of his wife's falling body took a firm hold of him. The bullet hole at her temple oozed blood. Tears gathered. His scar started to sting. The words "wrong choice" and "failure" made him extremely angry. It was this rage that gave Rick the necessary courage to yank back the sheet.

The corpse was that of a black man with black rosette markings scattered around his body. His torso was sliced from each side of the collarbone, down the center of his trunk to the pubic area. The dried, rotten skin was pulled up and away, exposing cracked and parted ribs. The cavity was excavated. His reproductive organs were exposed and parts were missing. His eyeballs were gone, as well as several of his fingers. Even patches of his flesh and scalp had been taken from him.

"Dear God!" Rick stumbled back and bumped into an elevated table, toppling over a shiny steel tray that held an oscillating saw, rib cutters, an enterotome, scissors, forceps, a Hagedorn needle, and a scalpel.

The loud, metallic crash sent the lion retreating to a safer distance with a short roar. The small kitten hissed. The cheetah flinched in her movements, growled, and continued to pace more nervously.

Rick whirled around and deposited all the contents in his stomach onto the floor. There was not much. As a seasoned warrior, he could not believe what he had just seen, or done.

With nothing left to retch, Rick wiped his mouth along the sleeve of his shirt. He reached behind him with his right arm to reposition the sheet upon the mutilated body. He took a moment to brace himself on his forearms with his head hung low in between. The coolness of the metal wall helped settle his stomach, along with several deep gulps of air.

A slight, sudden movement to the right caught his attention. Rick carefully made his way to that side of the room, while pushing to the back of his mind what was left of the alien. This covered body was situated in the center of the room. Rick mentally braced himself before he lifted the material enough to expose only the face. The sight was enough to force the air out of his lungs in a single gush.

Scattered images of clinging to his dead mother and lifting his wife's limp body, popped in and out of his head. A picture of Mary in her coffin remained frozen in his mind. She laid motionless with her eyes closed, embracing their tiny baby.

The ache in Rick's chest intensified. His gloved fingertips roved across her right temple. *I'm so sorry, Mary.* The tears fell. *I never should've left you. I should've taken you with me.* Time stood still as his wife's pasty image faded away.

In her place appeared a pale lioness. Without warning, her eyelids snapped open. Rick yanked his hand away as if he had been burnt. Startled and confused, his mind slowly returned to the present.

Rick noticed the woman's swollen, cracked lips; puffy, red-rimmed eyes; and the tearstains down her dirty cheeks. His innards coiled tight. Her haggard appearance pulled at his heartstrings. Rick had thought that part of him was dead—the part he did not want reborn.

Still, the need to verify she was indeed alive was intense. Rick traced the side of her drawn face before resting his fingers on an artery. He held his breath and concentrated. At the confirmation of a pulse, his tensed muscles relaxed, and his covered head lowered onto her bony chest. The echoing pulsations of her heart flowed through her into him, aiding to calm him further. His lips curved in a smile, while he absorbed the unusual moment with no desire to move.

{Who are you?}

Rick had not forgotten her telepathic ability. Hearing her words in his head did not startle him as much this time as it did initially. He raised his head and peered into eyes that had stayed with him since viewing them the night before. "It's me."

She gasped. {Predator!}

"I'm going to get you out of here."

{How?}

Rick could not answer. Her eyes robbed him of speech. Like a magnet, they pulled him in. *So pale. So beautiful.*

{Predator?}

Rick blinked several times to break their magical spell. "Uh...trust me."

"Who in the blazes are you?" someone said.

Rick's right hand shot for his gun. This time it was his semiautomatic. The gun was aimed and readied before he realized the voice had come from a man with the markings of a tiger.

Since when have I been so careless? Rick's sights fixed on the ragged looking cat locked behind steel bars. "A friend of yours?" he asked the lioness, while he placed his gun away.

"Yes," she answered with a shiver.

Rick glanced at her and noted how flushed her features were becoming. The fact that she was pale a moment before and he was in the center of a research lab, prompted Rick to remove a black glove and touch her forehead.

"My God, you're burning up," Rick said. Replacing his glove, he immediately untied her limbs from the thick leather restraints.

"What are you doing? Who are you?"

Rick spared the male alien another look. The cat flashed his teeth menacingly at him. He ignored it.

"I demand to know who you are!" the tiger hollered.

Rick's fingers skirted over the woman's jaw. "Stay here," he whispered.

He went to free the tiger from his captivity but spotted the computer monitor and decided to take a quick peek first. He quickly located the medical logs kept on the

aliens. Rick rummaged the desk and found what he needed in one of the smaller drawers. The CD slipped into the drive, and Rick soon had his copy.

This might come in handy, he thought, placing the silver disk into his shirt pocket.

On his way to the cage, Rick glanced at the reason he was there. The small lioness wobbled to one of the counters. He was extremely grateful to have reached her in time. He recalled the mutilated jaguar, and bile rose in his throat at thoughts of her meeting the same demise. It made him more determined to secure her safety.

Positioned directly above the counter, Rick noticed a safe. He saw the woman punch in several numbers. The sealed chamber hissed opened. He wondered what was inside.

Rick stopped in front of the cage. He did not trust the tiger behind the bars. The way those light green feline eyes regarded him made Rick nervous. Rick wondered why, since no human had the power to do so. He pulled from his shirt pocket a lock pick and knelt before the lock.

"Who are you?" the man asked, moving away from the bars. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" replied Rick. "I'm getting you out of this place." The lock was a cinch to pick. Rick opened the door. "Unless, that is, you have a preference for cages and dying."

"No, actually, I do not," the cat replied, but made no move to exit the cell.

Rick's head cocked to one side. He resisted the urge to make a sarcastic reply. "So let's go."

Rick saw doubt in the man's eyes. He did not blame him, but they had no time to waste. When the cat's gaze stopped at a location behind Rick's shoulder and widened, Rick whirled about, readied for an attack. He saw no one but the mysterious cat-woman with a large pouch in her hands. She swayed on her feet. Before Rick made a move, the indecisive tiger shoved him to the side and rushed to her aid.

"Leonora!" exclaimed the tiger.

Rick quickly regained his balance and got to the woman a second behind the tiger. He reached for her shoulders, but was too late. The tiger had snatched her from the floor and hunched his body protectively over hers.

"Get your hands off her, human. I will not let you hurt her." He growled.

"Don't be stupid. If I wanted to hurt her, I would've killed her when she was on the table."

The possessive manner in which the man held the cat-woman caused Rick's stomach to churn. To keep from commenting, he grinded his teeth. It was best the alien carried her, he reasoned. After all, it would be up to him to get them out of there alive. He certainly could not do it if he had to carry an unconscious woman in his arms.

Rick glanced at his watch and his lips pulled over his teeth. "Bloody hell. It's five thirty. We have only thirty minutes before sunlight to get out of here."

"Where are we going?"

Rick's right brow tilted, but because of the mask, no one saw it. On the other hand, the distrust behind the cat's lowered lids was crystal clear. "Why? Is there somewhere you need to be?" he asked.

The cat stonily returned his stare.

Telling himself to allow this man to carry the woman was a complete different story to actually seeing him lift her into his arms. It looked too much like an intimate embrace that Rick itched to punch the man across the room and lock him up in his cage again.

Rick suppressed the annoying need, for that part of life was forbidden to his breed—a lesson that had cost him too much to learn. "Don't hold her so tight; you're smothering her." He bumped shoulders with the cat as he headed for the door.

The feline growled at the clear challenge. "Pick up the sack. We need—" "Forget it!"

"What is inside that sack is critical to our survival." The man's voice slowed. "If you care about this woman, then you will do as I say."

The sudden jolt in Rick's midsection stopped him in his tracks. The last man who had spoken those words to him materialized before him. He had a gun pointed at Mary's head. In his arrogance, Rick had thought he could take him. He was wrong. He could not afford to make another judgment error.

Grumbling, he returned for the bag. "I don't know what's so bloody important in this bag. But if it's essential to her survival, then I'll get it." He slipped the long drawstring over his head and left shoulder and positioned the large bag behind his back. "I have it. Now let's go." Rick paused in front of the main door. He first pointed with his digit finger to the man then to himself. "Remember, from now on *you* will do as *I* say."

Rick could hear the feline growling as they traveled along the corridors. It made him move faster. With two-thirds of the building behind them, victory was too close at hand to care. When he paused at an intersection, the feline intentionally bumped into his back. Rick's lips pulled over his teeth.

"The exit is this way." The male's striped head pointed in the opposite direction they headed.

"No, it's this way," Rick corrected, pointing with his gloved finger. "Follow me."

"No, it is this way. I remember it from when they brought us to this nightmarish place."

Rick spared a glance at his watch. His tight hold on his patience was slipping fast. "We have no time to argue, okay. So let's go!" He continued onward with no signs of stopping, unaware that the tiger had stopped following.

He was about to explain how they had to be extremely cautious in this portion of the building because of the infrared beams and the motion detectors hidden throughout, when the alarms began to blare.

What the...? Rick searched for what had triggered the alarms. He spotted the tiger down the hall, frozen in place. His head whipping from side to side looking for unseen attackers.

"You bloody idiot! You broke the stream!" Rick rudely grabbed the cat by his ripped collar. "You stupid cat! Now look what you've done."

Wild-eyed and frightened, the cat tried to apologize.

"Keep your bloody apologies to yourself!" Rick yelled above the alarm, pointing to the stirring lioness. "It won't be me you will need to apologize to, but to her if we get caught, you stupid idiot!" Rick released the cat, pulled out his Glock 18, and rushed off in the direction he had intended to go from the beginning.

Utilizing his combat skills and weaponry, Rick lived up to his codename Predator by quickly taking out his prey. He tried desperately not to kill anyone, only crippled the soldiers long enough for them to escape. It was not easy. The entire squad stationed at the facility was after them.

Christ, you would think the world would come to an end with the disappearance of these aliens, Rick grumbled silently, as he led the way through the wilderness.

He was grateful the alien at least lived up to his lineage, surefooted and fast. They made it to his car in record time. Rick opened the passenger door and slammed it shut once the two felines were inside. He jumped across the hood, slid off the opposite side, and hurried to his seat behind the wheel. Before the soldiers reached the road, they had screeched out of sight.

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The blue sedan raced along the highway. There were a few cars and trucks on the road. Tigif watched the human remove his mask and rub his face. The tiger's vision blurred as he regarded each sharp angle of the human's profile. The male's long yellow hair, tied in a ponytail, repulsed him.

He passed the cup of his hand over his mouth. "So...are you *Predator*?" He made certain the human could read his disgust on his face and hear it in his voice.

Rick nodded once. "My actual name is Rick McCall. You've heard of me?"

"I have." Tigif blinked several times to help focus on the lovely feline in his arms. "Leonora spoke of a *human* who fought to protect her. She called him Predator." He bared his teeth and said, "That is as far as my gratitude will go."

It pleased Tigif to see Rick clench his jaw. He wanted the human to make no mistake. They were enemies to the end. He overheard Rick softly repeating Leonora's name. His gaze narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"You called her Leonora."

His face was unreadable, but Tigif was not fooled. "That is correct. I am called Tigif."

"Tigif," repeated Rick.

"Are you named after the—"

"No!"

"*Sorry.* I was only trying to pass the time with small talk. I've never met an alien before, especially one that looked like a tiger or a lioness. I apologize if I've insulted you."

"Apologize?" Tigif snickered. "Your kind does not know the meaning." His lip curled. "Your disgraceful race only knows about destruction and misuse."

"If you hate humans so much, then why, may I ask, are you here?"

"We do not hate humans," answered Leonora in a small voice.

Tigif looked at her. He did not want her speaking to this human. The last thing he wanted was for the male to get any ideas about her. Leonora was his. She was destined to become his lifemate, whether she liked it or not.

"Please forgive Tigif, McCall. He is bitter that our friends did not survive. It has nothing to do with you."

"Why are you defending him?" snapped Tigif. "And what do you mean it has nothing to do with him? It most certainly does have everything to do with him."

Rick remained silent, but his jaw worked overtime.

"It has nothing to do with McCall but everything to do with those males back at the research lab," Leonora corrected. "If it were not for Rick, we, too, would have been killed."

Tigif's eyes doubled in size. She had shortened another male's birth name without the male's consent, which was a sure sign that she was attracted to him. The gleam in Tigif's eyes hardened.

"Thank you for saving us, Rick. We truly do appreciate it." Leonora sounded sweet and grateful. How she ogled the human was another indication that she was interested. During the three seasons Tigif had known her, she had never looked upon a male with favoritism, not even him.

"Leonora," he warned.

"Rick is our friend, Tigif. He has proven himself by saving our lives." Her head rested against Tigif's chest, yet her attention remained upon Rick until she dozed off.

Tigif's focus zoomed in on his new obstacle. *He is not our friend. I will make certain of that.*

Chapter 3

Lance went in to work earlier than usual. Everything that had occurred during the last two months irritated him to extremes. He had no control over the situation concerning the aliens, something he was uncomfortable with.

He sat behind his desk, taking care of some paperwork. The only light that illuminated the windowless room came from a little desk lamp at his right hand side. This was a normal pastime whenever there was something on his mind and sleep eluded him.

The ringing of the phone stopped his pen in midmotion. His attention riveted to the receiver. Somehow, Lance knew in his gut exactly who would be on the other end and what the topic of conversation would be.

On the fourth ring, he answered. "Hello."

"Hello, Blaisdale?"

"This is Blaisdale," he responded in a monotone voice.

"This is Anderson. I'm at the research lab. We have a situation here."

"I'm listening."

"Someone has broken through our security setup."

"Was anyone hurt?" Lance asked.

"Several of our boys will be of no use to us for a while. But that's not the half of it."

"Go on," Lance patiently prodded.

"Whoever did it freed the remaining two aliens and got away."

Lance closed his eyes and inwardly groaned. *Last two.* He dropped his pen and pinched the arch of his nose. "Do you have any idea who it was?" His voice was void of all the emotions that swam inside him.

"No, but we will. The amateur left some evidence behind."

Lance reopened his eyes. *Shit!* "What sort of evidence?" he calmly asked.

"The idiot couldn't keep his food down. In a few days, we'll know if a connection is made."

Lance frowned. "I see." He picked up his pen and began to twirl it between his fingers.

"I was told you were at the lab the night before. You were with someone."

Here it comes. "That's right. A member of my team."

"What were you doing at the lab, Blaisdale? You weren't due back for another week."

"I left some important documents at one of the lower level offices. I needed to work on them right away, which is why you find me here. I'm working on them as we speak."

"And your man?"

"He arrived that evening from an overseas assignment I had sent him on. I asked him to meet with me, so we could go over his next mission."

"Why was he at the lab, Blaisdale? We specifically told you no one is to know about the aliens."

"I haven't spoken to anyone about our dealings with these aliens."

"But he knows about them, doesn't he?"

"Only because *your* men bungled up and the woman escaped, running into *my* man."

"I was told he defended the cat."

"Of course. She's a woman, and those damn guards were using extreme force on her," Lance told him, undaunted by the anger in his commanding officer's voice.

"You know damn well why we have to use extreme measures with those monsters! You've seen what they're capable of doing. You saw her kill four of our men! She left a trail of bodies along the hallways!"

"In self-defense."

"Self-de—"

"My man saw a woman in need of help, and he responded. He killed no one." By interrupting Anderson, Lance was certain he could confuse Anderson and make him misunderstand and believe he was referring to Rick's use of force and not the alien's.

"What did you tell him afterward, Blaisdale? I'm sure he had a lot of questions concerning her."

"Actually, he didn't. He knows better than to question his superior officer. And besides, I told him to forget everything, or there would be serious repercussions."

"And did he?" Anderson's doubtfulness was obvious.

Lance was sure the guards had spoken about Rick's behavior toward him. No one but those on the Shadow Team understood their unique relationship. Lance was not about to explain it to outsiders. He preferred to let them find out the hard way.

Lance's sharp ears overheard a male voice calling for Anderson. "I know what you're insinuating." He kept Anderson from responding to the newcomer. "And I have to say, I don't like it." He sighed. "But don't take my word for it. My friend is right here with me, if you wish to drill him yourself."

Lance's heart raced a mile a minute. He was taking a risky chance, but he had no other choice. The only route open to him now was to bet on his reputation as a loyal team player.

"Just a minute," said Anderson to the other male. *"No. There's no need, Blaisdale. However, there is one thing: Can he be trusted?"*

"Trusted to do his job and what he's good at? Definitely. Why don't you just speak to him yourself, Anderson? He'll be more than happy to answer any of your questions."

"*I said, just a minute, lieutenant,*" Anderson irritably instructed the person who had entered his office. "*There's no time for that right now. There are things I need to take care of first. Besides, I trust you, Blaisdale. I trust your judgment. You certainly can't blame me for asking. You can never be too careful.*"

Yeah right. Lance twisted his lips. "I agree. Let me know if a match is made. I'll see what I can come up with on this end." His voice was still emotion free.

"Will do. Bye."

"Bye." Lance hung up the receiver. Lifting his sights from his desk, he stared into the dimly lit room. "Predator," he whispered with the hint of a smile. "You are so predictable."

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At first, nothing but total darkness surrounded Leonora. A white glow gradually filled the emptiness. Beyond the light, she heard their voices long before their faces came into focus.

The lab! her mind cried. *Dear Onssa no, I do not want to be here again. Rick, help me!*

Leonora knew it was a dream. She tried to wake up. Alas, the nightmare would not release her. From where she lay, she saw the cage that was her prison for nearly two months. Two of her colleagues stood by the bars. She watched them try to bend the bars apart to escape to aid her.

Tigif growled. "This cannot be happening." His unsheathed claws tightened around the silver bars. "This *cannot* be happening."

"Have mercy, great Onssa."

Leonora heard the tearful, low voice beg her god. She glanced to her right. The sight of her young companion, writhing in the throes of death on the table beside hers, filled her with a gut twisting agony. She was helpless to do anything but watch Pandor suffer.

Pandor lay flat on his back on the icy cold table. Foam poured from his mouth. He turned his face to Leonora. She glimpsed his delirium through his glazed eyes. He gurgled and gasped for breath. His eyes cried out to her. Pain. Excruciating pain that reached new heights before the last plateau faded. Longing. No longer could he endure the unbelievable torture that racked his body. Death was his only reprieve. His blue eyes rolled back until nothing could be seen but white. Time stood still for all involved.

Mercy, Onssa, mercy, begged Leonora before Pandor finally received some. His straining body moved no more. Tears fell from her eyes. Her heart felt heavy at the loss of another friend.

How could she have allowed such a thing to occur? The fate of her friends would remain with her until the death. She blamed no one but her own fear and weakness. Had she stood her ground and not yielded to their joint, male arrogance, then perhaps their paths would have taken a different course. Never again would she make the same

mistake. What could she do to put an end to what was taking place before someone else was unmercifully killed?

A man in his middle twenties, dressed in a white overcoat, rushed past her to a computer terminal. The sound of growling brought her attention to the two locked in the cage. Their thinner bodies strained against the unyielding bars. She noticed they were glaring at something beyond her head. She angled her neck and looked behind her. An older man in a white overcoat headed in her direction.

The human paid no attention to the growls or hisses that flooded the room. He flipped the small bottle he held in his hand upside down. The clear amber liquid was steadily withdrawn into a syringe.

Leonora pulled on her wrist and ankle restraints. The corner of his lips curved at her futile attempts to escape. With a light tap on the cylinder, the bubbles made their way to the top. He inched closer to her with eyes that were a pair of bottomless pits, void of any compassion. The evil behind the glasses darkened at her words.

"Please, do not do this. This is wrong. I...we have done nothing wrong. I beg of you...please stop." Sadly, her pleas fell on deaf ears.

He was having too much fun. How often does the government pay someone to play Dr. Frankenstein? It was a scientist's dream come true. If his experiments went wrong and his test subjects died, they simply scratched it off as benefiting the human race. After all, that is what science research and lab experiments conducted on animals are all about, correct?

The protests shouted from the cage were ignored. He held Leonora's arm still. Not bothering to cleanse the area, he overlooked bedside manners and jabbed the needle into her skinny arm. Forcing the liquid into her system placed a smile on his face.

Excitement and anticipation surged through him. He was positively pleased with all the data collected these past few weeks. Because she was the only female in the group, it was difficult not to rush through the preliminaries. However, if accurate results were to be collected, then every step must be heeded—every painful step, which made his smile reach his ears.

"How long do you think it will take for her to show some reaction?" asked the young assistant from his seat. He was inserting the latest data gathered from the dead specimen into the computer.

"She's smaller than the other four. I'll say, give or take, two hours." Over the rim of his glasses, the scientist looked at the round clock that hung on the silver wall to his left. "You can leave her here for now."

Taking off the thin, gray frames, he pinched his tired eyes. No longer were they as sharp as they were thirty years ago. "In an hour, we can throw her back in with the others. Right now, it's time for lunch."

"Fine by me," the assistant replied, without a pause in his typing. "I'm starved."

The rapid clicks of the keys slowed and became distorted. Leonora's blood was on fire as it made its way through her veins, taking with it the latest series of human

medications. Each injection had been worse than the previous. How much more could her weakened form endure?

With his glasses still in his hands, the graying scientist lowered his face closer to hers. "How do you feel?"

The twinkle she saw in his eyes was unmistakable. "Go to blazes!" Leonora growled. When he left her side on a chuckle, her hackles rose. "You will get yours. I promise."

The room grew black and began to swirl. It reminded Leonora of sailing through the stars aboard her brother's ship. Challen had allowed her to pilot *Star Gazer* many times. She might never partake in her favorite pastime again.

The recollection of her brother's handsome face brought an onset of tears. Challen had been so adamant about her not participating in the science expedition. It all seemed like yesterday, but in fact, a season and a tide has passed.

Leonora coughed. Her lungs refused to accept the air that was saturated with the blood of her friends. Every cell in the remaining shell that was her body cried out in pain. She was freezing, yet she felt the immense heat escape her sickened form.

What is happening? She no longer felt she could rely on her senses, or the clarity of her once-sharp mind.

A light appeared. Like a beacon of hope, it pulled her out of the uncomfortable darkness. A small portion of it turned a dark blue. The larger part became a golden yellow, surrounding the blue. A face formed, and a warm, cozy feeling flickered to life within her hollow center. It was difficult to believe she could feel something in her dead soul. Without a doubt, it was because of this shining beacon: Rick McCall.

A part of her no longer trusted freely. It had been destroyed along with her friends. This part refused to accept that McCall had actually returned for her, an alien. The other side of her—the part that struggled to survive—was extremely grateful and deeply touched.

Challen had taught her to give a being the benefit of the doubt. "Never judge all by the actions of a few," he had said. That was somewhat difficult to do when a voyage meant for research and exploration turned into a survival trip.

Still, the only route to survival was to make an ally of someone of this planet. It was the only way to raise the odds in their favor. True, she did not know the first thing about Rick McCall—only that he had taken the first step to being called a friend. But she did trust her brother's wisdom. Therefore, Leonora will place her life in Rick's hands. She prayed her trust was not misplaced.

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The blue sedan raced down the freeway. Rick chose to bypass his rented hotel room and head straight for his ranch home in Phoenix.

Ten fingers curled tightly around the steering wheel, instead of around Tigif's neck. Rick's jaw hurt from the amount of clenching he had done. The sight of Leonora

wrapped up in Tigif's arms deeply disturbed him. The manner in which the tiger caressed her face, arm, and back was a distraction. Each time the cat caught him looking, he smugly kissed Leonora's lips and tightened his embrace.

The thought of them as lovers made Rick's stomach churn more viciously. He considered, more than once, stopping by the roadside to toss the cat out. He knew it was crazy. He had no business thinking along those lines. Nevertheless, he was unable to keep from wanting to skin the cat alive.

Tigif had revealed the bag carried several bracelets he called wristguards. The scientists had taken the wristguards from the Oceanans when they first arrived at the lab. The humans had tried to figure out how the strange bracelets worked. When told of the instability of the devices—and how one can blow a hole in the ground the size of two football fields if mishandled—they immediately gave up trying and placed the large bracelets in the safe.

Tigif had explained it was not true. They simply did not want the human scientists to learn about their technology. The wristguards were normally worn only by the Seacats—the warriors of his race. His king, Oren, had made a onetime exception. He had allowed the scientists to use the wristguards because built into the bangles was a deceptor device, which allowed them to look human by removing the feline markings on their skin and adjusting their skin pigmentation.

Rick secretly watched Leonora against his better judgment. *She must've been a looker once.* His jaw tightened, and he touched his scar. *I have to remember my promise.*

He pulled into the two-car garage. They entered through a small office. The dining room was across from it. Turning right in the hallway, they passed the kitchen on the left and entered the living room at the end.

Rick pointed to the right side, to the short hallway that led off to two more doors. "Through that hallway is a guest room. You can place her in there."

He made a left, continuing through a third hallway that led to the master bedroom. The room was big enough to host a king-size bed, an armoire, and two side tables. No light filtered through the heavy drapes that covered the bay window. The room was painted tan. No pictures or artwork hung on the walls. Rick had donated everything Mary had touched and sold his old house.

Lance had bought the minimum furnishings and accents to keep the two-bedroom, two-bath house from appearing too empty. Lance had said Rick was depressed as it was and needed something to cheer him up, so he had his mother decorate the house for Rick. Rick had never told either of them that it did not work.

He returned to the guestroom with extra clothes for both aliens. "Here." He rudely tossed a pair of black jeans and a plain shirt with buttons down the front at Tigif's face. He missed his target, for the feline caught the garments before contact.

He pointed to the hallway, to a closed door beside the bedroom. "The shower is behind that door. I won't guarantee the clothes will be a perfect fit, but they will have to do. Give me your clothes, and I'll dispose of them."

He examined Leonora's flushed cheeks. Her feline features were limited to skin tone. His opinion was settled. With or without the device activated, underneath all the dirt and bruises, the woman had the potential of being a beauty to behold.

What was he thinking? Rick shook his head. "How is she doing?"

"Not good." Tigif wiped his sneer with his dirty sleeve. "Her fever will not cease. It continues to worsen each time it flares."

"McCall?" Leonora's raspy voice interrupted them.

Rick dropped to her side. "I'm here, sweetheart." He saw that Tigif stiffened at the endearment. It pleased him to give the cat a dose of his own medicine.

"Do not let them hurt him. Please. Promise me, you will get Tigif off this planet."

There was an unexpected twinge at Rick's chest. He clenched his jaw. He had to admit that he was impressed. Not many people would consider placing someone else before themselves when faced with death. It was an honorable act, and Rick commended her. Still, it irritated him to have to protect the orange –and-black striped tiger.

"I promise," he reassured her.

What else could he do? Being the man that he was, Rick would not—could not—allow anything to happen to Tigif. Leonora thanked him with a smile that could brighten a room. Rick's heart banged furiously against his ribs at the heavenly sight.

Looking everywhere but into her hypnotic eyes, he struggled to stay focused. "Leonora, do you...umm...think you can...aah...change your clothes if I..." He cleared his throat. "Help you sit up?" He noticed his hands shook. He hid it by making two fists.

"My clothes?"

"Yes, honey, we...umm...ahem." His eyes rolled in disgust. "We have to get rid of your clothes. The bathroom is next door. I've...uh...brought you a shirt of mine. But I'm afraid we'll...aah...have to buy you a pair of jeans later. We don't have much time right now."

He showed her the shirt and then placed it at her side. "I don't know if I've been discovered yet, but I don't intend on staying here to find out. We're leaving immediately to my safe house. No one knows of its location but me. So how about it, darling? Do you think you can do it?"

"Of course," she replied, already sitting up.

Rick smiled at her inner strength. He placed a supportive arm around a shoulder that trembled. "Here, let me help you." Five sharp blades dug into his left bicep and yanked him from her side.

"She does not need your help, *human!*"

"Tigif! What are you doing?" Leonora scolded in disbelief.

"If anyone is going to assist her, it shall be me."

"Tigif!"

"It's all right." Rick raised his hand to assure her.

"No, it is not all right. Tigif—"

"Forget it, Leonora. Really, there's no time for this. I need both of your clothes immediately." Looking into her pale eyes had a soothing effect on him. "I'll be in, in about fifteen minutes. Do you think you'll need more time?"

"All I need is five," she answered him just as softly.

This time Rick gave her his most dashing smile and wink. "That's my girl." He faced Tigif with a seething expression. "You can change in the bathroom, and you have two minutes." He held up two fingers for emphases.

The cat opened his mouth. Rick figured he was about to protest. Leonora cleared her throat, stopping him. Instead, Tigif growled and stormed off to the bathroom. Rick followed him out. Before closing the bedroom door, he took a last peek over his shoulder. A glimpse of firm, young breast, trying to escape a blouse one size too small, caused him to exhale—sadly.

Man, get a grip. Rick scowled. *She belongs to someone else. Besides, she's not even human.*

He went back to his bedroom to put on his disguise. It consisted of larger clothes that made him appear thinner, a salt-and-pepper wig, black-colored contacts, a silicon face that made him look three times older, and some silicon fingertips. When he had rented the car, he had used an alias.

While he blended in the edges of his mask with makeup, he thought of Leonora's deceptor device. *It would be much easier if I had one of those.* Rick stared at the older man in the mirror. *I wonder how I would look as a cat.*

Back in the guestroom, Leonora gingerly removed her torn, bloodstained denim pants and shirt from her aching body. She detected the sound of running water from beyond her closed door. Not about to wait in the nude for Tigif to finish, she put Rick's black shirt on.

It was made of silk and fell to midthigh. His mesmerizing scent, combined with the shirt's softness, soothed her frail nerves. Since she crashed into him in the research lab, he filled her thoughts. She had felt an instant attraction for the human, the likes she had never known with any male—feline or alien.

Everything about Rick pleased her. From the top of his golden crown and blue eyes, to his muscular built, down to the soles of his black booted feet. He showed signs of being a noble, brave, and honorable warrior. Those were qualities she found most appealing. Not many would place so much on the line for aliens. The only male she knew with those qualities was her brother.

I wonder. Her fingers took their time to inspect a sleeve with admiration for the owner. *Could all this have happened for a reason? Onssa, are you trying to tell me something?*

Leonora glanced around the room. It was a cozy room with yellow walls, a full-size bed, a wooden dresser, and a matching nightstand. She found no artwork on the clean walls. However, mounted on the wall opposite the bed was a medium-size, rectangular screen the humans use for entertainment and delivery of important news to their citizens. The humans called it a television.

Oceanans had similar monitors, but not as large, that were only used for communication not for entertainment. Entertainment was found elsewhere.

Her attention moved to the door. She thought of the decorator, and her stomach fluttered. It was too soon. Matters of the heart cannot be rushed. She must allow it to play out as Onssa wished.

An Oceanan would overcome any obstacle to obtain their desired mate. Nevertheless, most would not mate with someone who had a black heart or was already paired. Their honor would not allow it. There were many things unknown about Rick McCall. Until she uncovered his secrets, his past, Leonora could not allow her wounded soul to be exposed.

She needed a distraction. Since Rick had not returned for her clothes, she would take them to him. On opening the bedroom door, the sound of water stopped. She reentered the room and headed back to the bed. She decided to leave her garments on the bed for Rick, while she showered.

She waited by the bathroom door for Tigif to exit. It remained closed. Leonora became frustrated. She took that opportunity to scan the room beyond the small hallway. Perhaps a hint to who Rick was would reveal itself to her through his furnishings.

The hallway ended at a large room painted a rich yellow. This room displayed a colorful, yet tasteful, artwork over the fireplace mantel. Her sights landed on the brown leather sofa and loveseat. Her stomach rebelled. Unhappy with her discovery, she rushed back to her room.

How could Rick have seats made of animal skin? I thought he was honorable. She sat on the bed. *How could he?* Her hands landed on her boney knees. She rubbed her eyes and forced her mind off the topic for now.

She looked at the bathroom door. It remained closed. By the time a dripping tiger sauntered out, her foot was tapping away on the wooden floor.

Leonora vaulted off the mattress. "Have you forgotten we are being hunted? Can you possibly go any slower?"

"I can, but I figured you would like to bathe." He suggestively smiled and inched closer. "Do you require assistance?"

Leonora rolled her eyes and shook her head. "We have no time for this. Excuse me." She brushed past his blocking form.

She locked the door and rushed to the stand-alone shower. What she really wanted was to soak in a hot tub. Alas, as she told Tigif, there was no time for it. As it turned out, it was the best ten-minute shower she ever had. When she exited, she noticed her clothes were still on the bed. She picked them up and headed in search of Rick.

In the living room, Tigif stood beside tan curtains. His focus was outside. An elderly male appeared from the hallway across from her. She tried to recall if Rick had mentioned someone else lived in his house. Tigif spotted the old male and prepared to pounce on him. That answered her question. She hurried forward to stop a catastrophe from occurring.

The old male raised his hands in the air and exclaimed, "Whoa there, tiger! It's only me."

Leonora and Tigif sniffed the air.

Tigif regarded the male closer. "McCall?"

Leonora could not believe her nose. How could two men be one?

"That's right." Rick's smile showed he was pleased his disguise worked.

Tigif pointed to the old, wrinkled face and attire. "Why do you look this way?"

I had no idea humans could disguise themselves so proficiently without a deceptor device. Leonora inched forward quietly. *Amazing.* Neither man knew she stood behind Tigif's large frame.

"There's no time for explanations." Rick held out an aged, freckled hand. "Do you have your clothes ready?"

"Here you go?"

"Thanks." He made to walk around Tigif. "I'll go ahead and get Nora's and—"

Tigif blocked his path and pressed an extended nail into Rick's chest. "You stay the blazes away from *my* Nora, human. If I see you touching her again, I will kill you. Understood?"

The lines on Leonora's face deepened in anger. She understood Tigif's distrust for the humans at the lab. It was even acceptable for him to be suspicious of Rick. Nevertheless, Tigif comes from a planet far more advanced than Earth. She saw no reason for him not to know there are good and evil beings among all species. Etiquette dictated that he keep his misgivings silent and give Rick a chance to prove himself. She scanned Rick's face for a reaction and spotted anger flaring in his black eyes.

Rick ignored that daring finger and took a challenging step closer. "I don't recall giving you any reasons to believe I would appreciate being threatened."

"Tigif! What in the blazes do you think you are doing?"

The irritation Leonora felt sounded clearly in her voice. Like two schoolboys caught placing a snake into their teacher's desk, the men jumped and faced her. Rick bowed his head and began to fidget. Tigif stood ramrod straight.

"Nora, you should be in bed resting," said Tigif, wiping the drool off his lips.

"Do not tell me where I should or should not be. I am *not your Leonora*. I asked you a question."