

# A QUEEN'S PRIDE

FELINE NATION - BOOK ONE

N. D. Jones



Baltimore, Maryland

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## **Dedication**

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Proud Momma





N. D. Jones

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# Prologue: The Source

**Refusal of the Panthera Tigris and Puma Concolor to Cede Their  
Lands North of SaltCross Mountains  
1789**

[Contains a proposed Treaty with the Panthera Tigris of 1788]

Communicated to the Fatherland Party Chief, January 13, 1790

Department of War, January 13, 1790

Sir:

The commissioners of the Chief of the Fatherland Party have received the answer of your Panthera Tigris and Puma Concolor children to our talk. We are saddened to share that the negotiations did not conclude to our satisfaction. Despite our best efforts to address the objections of our feline brethren to the policy of our government, we have no choice but to move forward without their agreement. Already have your neighbors, Panthera Pardus, Panthera Onca, and Acinonyx Jubatus, secured in themselves land south of SaltCross Mountains.



The objections of Tigris and Concolor are of nominal concern. Their lack of vision and civility will not halt our expansion efforts. The Fatherland Party will grow our nation . . .



**SaltCross Mountains Treaty  
1799**

**ARTICLES OF A TREATY MADE AND CONCLUDED BY AND  
BETWEEN**

Generals David R. Murray, Benjamin H. Wilson, P. L. Albright, and Jacob S. Sawyer, duly appointed commissioners on the part of the Republic of Vumaris, and Unica Waddi of the Panthera Tigris Nation and Hubrax Cherla of the Puma Concolor Nation.

**Article I.**

From this day forward, war between the parties to this agreement will cease. The government of the Republic of Vumaris desires peace, as do the Tigris and Concolor Nations . . .

**Article II.**

The Republic of Vumaris agrees that the following lands will be the reserved territory of the Panthera Tigris and Puma Concolor Nations: AutumnRun, DimRock, and EarthBorough. The nations of Panthera Tigris and Puma Concolor henceforth relinquish all claims or right to any portion of the Republic of Vumaris, except in aforementioned territories . . .

**Article III.**

The Panthera Tigris and Puma Concolor Nations expressly agree:

1st That they will withdraw all opposition to current and future political parties.

2nd That they will not attack any human.

3rd That they will not engage in transmutation spasm beyond their reserved territories . . .

**Article IV.**

The Republic of Vumaris hereby agrees and stipulates that the country west of SaltCross Mountains and north of MistBreach Mountains shall be held and considered to be unceded. No human or person without the felidae gene shall be permitted to settle upon or occupy any portion of the land without the consent of the Nations of Panthera Tigris and Puma Concolor . . .

**Treaty with the Kingdom of Shona (Feline Nation)  
1902**

**ARTICLES OF A TREATY MADE AND CONCLUDED BY AND  
BETWEEN**

Chief Thaddeus Rupert of the Republic of Vumaris, Progressive Action League, and Khalid Bambara Leothos and Sekhem Zarina Leothos of the Kingdom of Shona, viz., Panthera Leo, Panthera Pardus, Panthera Onca, and Acinonyx Jubatus.

**Article I.**

It is agreed that a boundary line between the Republic of Vumaris and the Kingdom of Shona should be fixed between the lands. The boundary line is as follows: beginning at the Osa Forest and ending at the Ocean of Samgi . . .



# Chapter 1: Ruler of Lions

**1985**

The Republic of Vumaris  
Historic District of Minra City  
**First Evolution Union Headquarters**

**“This** is an insult.”

Asha’s father’s words mirrored her own sentiments. She sat between her parents—Bambara and Zarina Leothos, the khalid and sekhem of the Kingdom of Shona.

The man seated directly across the conference room table from Bambara, Chief Silas Royster of the First Evolution Union Party, paled at her father’s barely contained growl. Fingers laced in front of him and on the table, Chief Royster inclined his head at Bambara.

“I can understand how, from your perspective, you could view the addendum to the 1902 treaty as an insult to your kingdom. I assure you, Khalid Bambara, we do not intend it that way.”

“Your intention changes nothing.” Bambara crumpled the paper he held in his hand.

A copy of the same document had been given to Zarina and Asha. Upon reading it, Zarina had turned it over, the only sign of her

displeasure with the document's contents. For Asha, she'd had to read the addendum a second and third time to make sure her interpretation had been correct. She wished it hadn't been, but she'd read enough treaties between the various nations of felidae and humans to comprehend the legal language.

Next to Chief Royster sat his second-in-command, Deputy Chief Frank London, a short, slender man with eyes too large for his slim face and a nose so narrow Asha wondered how he managed to breathe. But breathe he did, adding to the conversation in a nasal voice that grated.

"We haven't changed the treaty in eight decades."

Zarina lifted Asha's paper from in front of her, placed it atop her own, and then folded the documents into quadrants—a sekhem's subtler response than a khalid's. "You say that as if we should be grateful for your country's continued adherence to a treaty we signed in good faith. You were neither alive back then nor was your party in power." Zarina glanced over Asha's head to Bambara. "Did the First Evolution Union exist at the turn of the century?"

"Fledgling. Inconsequential. But yes, they existed."

Satisfied, Zarina returned her focus to the humans, the only other people in the conference room with the royal Shona family. The leaders' respective bodyguards were on the other side of the door. No one in either negotiating party felt threatened by the other. This meeting was but a formality her parents engaged in every time a new party came to power. A first for Asha but far from her last. By the time she ascended to the rank of sekhem, however, these men would likely be retired and another party in power. They meant nothing to her. Once she returned home, she wouldn't have to lay eyes on them again or their country for another fifteen years.

She refrained from sighing of boredom and slumping in her chair. Her parents wouldn't appreciate either action. But Asha would give anything to have been allowed to remain in her suite. Perhaps, if she had, she would've been able to coax Ekon from his duty as her Second Shieldmane and into spending time with her while her parents were preoccupied.

"We are in power now." Chief Royster's voice didn't betray him, but his scent did—a mix of anxiety and impatience. "My party's fifteen-year tenure has only begun. We are confident, at the conclusion of our

term, the good people of this republic will see we are the best party and will reelect us for another term of office.”

“Fifteen years,” Bambara scoffed. “That is but a single grain in the hourglass of time. The treaty you wish to renegotiate is not even eight of those grains. But the Shona, the felidae, we were here from the beginning of time. You did not birth us.” Bambara nodded to Zarina and Asha. “We birthed you. If you’ve forgotten, humans are the genetic anomalies, not us.”

“Yet the humans of this republic have treated us as if we have no more right to this land and to exist than birds occupying a tree you want to use for your child’s treehouse,” Zarina added.

Her parents had an amazing knack for completing each other’s thoughts with seamless effort.

Chief Royster’s laced fingers tightened, but his face remained neutral. Deputy Chief London, however, glared at Zarina, his big eyes expressive in a way that delivered his silent anger over the reminder of their genetic inferiority to those with an active felidae gene.

“There are more humans than feline shifters.” Chief Royster inclined his head again as if his statement of fact should matter to Bambara and Zarina. “We need more land to accommodate our growing populace.”

“Hence the reason for the addendum to the 1902 treaty,” Deputy Chief London added. “Surely you understand our predicament.”

“Your predicament doesn’t concern us, although humans have forced them upon us time and again.” Bambara slid his chair back from the table. Zarina and Asha did the same. “There hasn’t been a single treaty engaged in between a felidae nation and this country that has stood the test of time. Each one has been broken.” Bambara stood and raised a finger, dark like his lion’s mane—a sign of his strength and good health. “The government of your republic, regardless of the sitting party, have shown that you have no honor, that your word, including those written on paper, mean little.”

“No,” Zarina said and stood, “not little. They mean a lot, but none of what is actually said or written. We came all the way to your home, paying our respects to people who, no matter our genetic connection, think themselves superior.”

Following her parents’ lead, as she always did, Asha pushed to her feet. She hadn’t liked the turn the meeting had taken, but she was relieved to have the negotiations end sooner than expected. If they

hurried, Asha would have time to watch Vumarian television. There wasn't much she enjoyed about the country, especially the people, but their television shows and music were fantastic.

Chief Royster also got to his feet. "The talks have only begun, please sit. We haven't had an opportunity to fully explain our plan. We're not asking for much. One or two of your cities on the border of Vumaris and Shona. CloudFrost or FlameRock, perhaps. The addendum doesn't stipulate which Shona region would be annexed to Vumaris. That's what the negotiations are for."

Her father's low rumble of a growl was all the warning he would offer Chief Royster. The human would do well to proceed with caution.

Zarina slid the folded documents toward Chief Royster, whose wide eyes and red face were evidence enough that he wasn't a stupid man. Lucky for his party, since he would lead them for the foreseeable future.

Asha stood at attention, waiting for what would come next. Her father's warning growl hadn't surprised her, no more than her mother's regal forthrightness.

"For longer than I like to recall, humans have expanded into our territory, with no care to the felidae already in residence. You came, took, and killed, all in the name of your belief in your manifest destiny to spread your ideas and people from one end of the continent to the other." Palms going to the dark wood conference table, Zarina leaned forward, her stare taking in the men across from her. "You have no God-given right to our land. You never have."

"We've never encroached on the lands of your kingdom." Deputy Chief London, still seated, glanced from Zarina to Bambara then back to Zarina. "We've never been anything but respectful to the Panthera Leo's borders."

"That's because," Bambara said, his hand grasping Asha's and holding it with a father's protective touch, "Shona is so far south of the continent, with hot, uncomfortable climes for humans, that your people didn't think it worth their effort to wage war with our kingdom."

"Are you threatening war?" Sweat broke out on Chief Royster's forehead. "We have a peace treaty with—"

"Felidae not protected by your peace treaties now call Shona home. Shona is their refuge, the only land left to our kind on this continent. We will not cede a single plot of land to Vumaris."

Zarina placed her hand at the small of Asha's back. None of her parents' gestures were meant to treat Asha as a child but were intended to include her in their stance as protectors of their kingdom—people and land. "We do not wish war, Chief Royster." Zarina stepped around her chair. The hand on Asha's back subtly pushed her toward Bambara. "Indeed, we have even respected your laws against transmutation spasm while in your republic, despite our desire to run and roam. No, it is rarely the felidae who've brought war to humans. We've come in peace, and we'll leave the same way. Thank you for your time."

Deputy Chief London surged to his feet, his pronounced laryngeal prominence bobbing. "You can't leave. You haven't signed the addendum."

"Did you not hear my mate?" Bambara, who'd begun to move away from the table, his hand still holding Asha's, stopped.

"Yes, yes, of course, but we aren't done here."

"You may not be, but we are."

Deputy Chief London opened his mouth to respond, but Chief Royster cut him off with, "Frank, that's enough."

"What do you mean? B-but the party . . ."

With a firm shake of his head, blond hair cut short, blue eyes intelligent and with a hint of shrewdness, Chief Royster silenced his second-in-command. "Thank you for your visit. You're welcome to stay until your party is ready to return south. Minra is one of the oldest cities in the republic. There's much to see here and to experience. There's plenty in our country's capital that would appeal to a girl your daughter's age. I also have an eighteen-year-old and, I swear, she knows more about the city than I do." Chief Royster shrugged—his nonchalance almost believable. "The girls would have fun together, I'm sure."

She'd never had a human friend, and she doubted she would gain one this visit.

Leaning down, Bambara kissed Asha's cheek, his full beard scratchy in a way she both loved and hated. Asha couldn't imagine her father's human face any other way, but his beard had a coarseness to it that invariably left short-lived red marks wherever they touched her soft skin.



"Being unable to transmutate makes my insides itch," he whispered. "I want to run and play." Bambara kissed her other cheek. "Are you ready to go home, my hafsa?"

Hafsa, young lioness. When combined with sekhem, as in Hafsa Sekhem, the endearment became part of her title. A weighty expectation, that of the future sekhem of her people. To Asha's eternal happiness, her mother would hold the title for years to come, giving her time to mature into the role before the full weight of leading a country of millions of felidae resided on her shoulders.

"From our kingdom to your republic, we thank you for your hospitality." Her mother had such a melodic voice, even when the sound was of her polite but deadly dismissal.

Led by Bambara, with Asha in the middle, they exited the conference room, negotiations ended and the treaty's addendum unsigned. Asha couldn't care less about the addendum. Her parents' decision was final. They would not relinquish any part of their kingdom to Vumaris. War wouldn't come. There hadn't been a war between Zafeo's felidae and humans in over a century.

She wondered if there were more sitcoms to watch and if she could convince Ekon to watch them with her. If she did, they'd likely kiss. Asha did enjoy Ekon's kisses. The young lion had the softest lips and a tongue made for more than boasting.

Asha couldn't wait to put this trip to Vumaris behind her. It had been a colossal waste of time.

"Another race when we get home, Dad?"

Asha wouldn't win, but that never stopped her from challenging herself to be better, to be more than she was the day before. That had been the first lesson she recalled learning from her parents, and she'd taken it to heart.

Frank London cursed foully. Well, Silas thought, dropping back into his leather chair, at least his second-in-command had waited until after the door closed behind their Shona guests before launching into a bout of vile curses. Silas considered interrupting, especially when Frank referred to Sekhem Zarina by names no man should say about a woman—human or felidae.

"I thought lions were the king of the jungle. Apparently not in Shona." Frank rounded on him, as feral as any wild felidae. "You're just going to sit there?"

"You're upset enough for the both of us." With the tip of his shoe, Silas slid Frank's chair toward him. "Calm yourself and have a seat."

"They didn't sign. You know the platform we ran on, the promises we made. Of course I'm not calm."

"Sit anyway. We need to discuss next steps."

Ignoring Silas, Frank stalked to the line of windows behind him. There wasn't much to see beyond other restored buildings lining Imperial Street. Their headquarters was set in the historic district of Minra. A mile down the road, humans had once marched off to wage battle at Autumn Run. Two thousand soldiers had left the city, defeat of the Panthera Tigris their mission during the war. Only two hundred or so had returned—a devastating defeat—but the soldiers had come back with tiger heads, pelts, and teeth as proof that the felidae could be killed like any other animal. The young nation had used the loss at Autumn Run as a nationalist's battle cry. When they had returned to Autumn Run the next year, with triple the soldiers and weaponry, they had claimed every acre of land the felidae tigers and cougars had dared to deny them.

Humans weren't inferior to the felidae. The tigers and cougars had learned that lesson well, as had other felidae nations. Apparently, the Shona lions needed reminding of their place in Zafeo.

Silas didn't like his party's contingency plan, though. The felidae were the beasts, not civilized humans like himself and members of his political party. But, as Frank reminded him, the First Evolution Union had made promises to their supporters. If they failed to keep them, another party, likely the Fatherland Party, with their long history of dealing with and controlling felidae, would rout them from their hard-won political and social gains.

He'd worked too hard, kissed too many asses, and told too many lies to lose it all because two lions possessed more pride than common sense.

His back to Silas, Frank continued to stare out the window. The man had defected from the National Science Union Party, bringing with him a more conservative, anti-felidae element that didn't exist in Silas's party. The conservatives weren't Silas's base of supporters, but they were Frank's. Until this round of elections, neither of their parties had

possessed enough political clout and deep pockets to oust the long-standing Fatherland Party.

Together, though, Silas Royster and Frank London were a winning combination—a force no one, not even the Fatherland Party, could stop. That included Bambara and Zarina Leothos of the Kingdom of Shona.

Finally, Frank rejoined Silas at the conference table, his too-large eyes reminiscent of an owl's, though the man pretended as though he didn't require glasses for reading small print. "We promised them land."

"I know." Silas reached for his full glass of water.

The meeting had been so short, the ice had barely melted. The three glasses on the other side of the table were also untouched. Khalid Bambara had taken one look at the glasses, sniffed each of them in turn, as if someone on his staff would be so stupid as to slip poison into the water, and then ignored them. His wife and daughter had done the same.

Silas drank half of the cool water before returning it to the coaster on the table, feeling better for having something in his stomach other than butterflies.

"This isn't the eighteen hundreds. It's not as easy to take land from the felidae the way the Fatherland Party once did. They also never went up against the lions. Everyone, including you, seems to forget that they left the Shona kingdom alone, and it's not because the southern part of the continent has two seasons—hot and hell."

"We made promises."

"I don't need the reminding."

Frank blinked those big owl eyes at him. "I think you do. You see immovable barriers where I see cats in need of neutering."

Silas's scoff didn't begin to cover the depth of his concern with the contingency plan his political aspirations had him agreeing to without the ethical hesitation a less driven man would've had. Still, were they prepared to enter the republic into a war with the lions over a political promise made during an election campaign when everyone said what people wanted to hear?

"The Fatherland Party left the lions alone for a reason. They are the only felidae who've always worked together as a cohesive unit. They've only ever lived exactly where they do now. Their roots are in

that land. The first felidae can be traced to the grassy plains of EarthBorough at the very southern tip of the continent.”

“Then they shouldn’t have a problem with us taking some of their northern areas. They can keep their grassy plains, dry-thorn forests, woodlands, scrubs,” Frank said and waved a dismissive hand, “or wherever they enjoy lying down with flies. For them to be no better than animals on two legs, they’ve developed quite the financial center, and it’s all in northern Shona.”

“They aren’t stupid.”

“I agree, but their strength is also their weakness.” Frank retrieved a manila folder from the briefcase he’d placed on the chair beside him before the meeting began. “Take a look.”

Silas opened the folder Frank slid in front of him. Inside were at least three dozen glossy pictures of the Shona royal family. None of them had been taken close-up; likely a long-range photo lens was used, but the three figures were identifiable.

As Silas flipped through the pictures of the Leothos family—laughing, smiling, and talking—Frank added commentary.

“That one was taken in Menle. Those right there in Batari. Oh, and those four in Tanset. Notice anything?”

“You have an international stalker on your payroll, and the khalid and sekhem take a hands-on approach to economic diplomacy, traveling to other felidae countries, which is how they’ve amassed so much wealth.”

Greed and power made strange bedfellows. Silas didn’t so much dislike Frank as he distrusted him. They were only six months into their term, but the pictures spanned at least two years. Even without a date on the back of the pictures, Silas could’ve estimated the timeframe based on the images of Asha alone. Like his daughter, a female growing from girl to young woman changed more than a father liked to notice. But changes to their face and body were present all the same.

“Everything we want is staring you right in the face and you still can’t see it.” Frank snatched the picture of Zarina and Asha walking on a beach, barefoot and in sundresses, Shieldmanes on either side of them.

Silas drank the rest of his water, thirsty for more than the cool liquid.

“They take her everywhere.” Frank slapped the picture on top of the others and closed the folder.

"So? Asha is their only child and heir. Do you expect them to leave her at home while they globe-trot?"

"Lionesses don't leave their young."

Silas may not think the felidae equal to humans, but he never confused their ability to transmutate into cats with them actually being like the felines into which they could transform. Except a few physical differences, such as vitiligo of the cheetah felidae, little visually distinguished those with an active felidae gene from their human counterparts.

"Parents love their children. That's kind of the point of having them. Lions are social, communal, fierce. They put family and pride above everything, which is why the Fatherland Party was never brave or stupid enough to go up against them. They are . . ." Silas trailed off, not liking where his mind had taken him or the smile on Frank's face.

"You've finally caught up. Now we're on the same page, Silas. The tigers and cougars were relatively easy to kill off. The tigers were tougher than the cougars, but they lived more like loose colonies than a strong confederation. By the time they moved past their narrow-minded independence to work as a united front against our forefathers, it was too late to save them. But the lions," Frank said and opened the manila folder again, "they are a pride . . . a family. That's their weakness. They'll sign because we'll take away the one thing lions care about more than land." With a thump of his index finger to the picture of a smiling mother and daughter, Frank's hand hovered over the image of Asha, heir to the Kingdom of Shona.

Frank stretched across the table until he was able to grab the two folded sheets of paper Sekhem Zarina had left. He opened the sheets that contained the addendum, smoothing out the wrinkles. "For her, they'll sign. For her, we can get them to do anything."

Silas thought how he and his wife would feel if they awoke one morning to find their daughter's bed empty and her gone. Desperation and fear would assault him first followed by anger, but also the willingness to do anything to have her returned unharmed.

"They're staying at Sanctum Hotel, a luxury hotel neither of us can afford. It must be nice to come from a country where your currency is the third highest in the world."

Grabbing a picture from the bottom of the pile, Frank showed it to Silas. "I know where they're staying. Sanctum Hotel is expensive, true, but also secluded. Their kali may have bought them the sole use of the

finest hotel in this part of Vumaris, but their wealth has also given us the perfect place to execute our plan.” Frank’s self-satisfied grin reached his big owl eyes. “We have friends in all the right places, Silas.”

More like the lowliest of places. But Silas had both taken their money and made them promises. Failure to repay his debts was not an option.

He looked at the picture of Sanctum Hotel. The building was situated in a quiet suburb south of Minra in the center of affluent gated communities. Most dignitaries stayed at the hotel when visiting Minra, the capital of Vumaris. But none of them had the money or the clout to reserve the 180-room hotel for their stay.

A part of Silas despised the Shona for having the power to do what most humans could not, as much as he envied the slice of heaven they’d carved for themselves in southern Zafeo. Unlike Silas, Khalid Bambara and Sekhem Zarina were beholden to no one.

That would soon change, however. “Call them. But tell them not to hurt anyone beyond what it’ll take to secure the girl. We can’t afford an international incident, and I don’t want a child’s death on my conscience.”

Frank’s twisted grin widened. “I spoke with the shift manager at the hotel this morning. I convinced the woman she wouldn’t lose her job if she supplied the deputy chief with the room numbers for the Shona. The girl’s suite is across the hall from her parents’. Rogueshade is already on standby. With a phone call and a go-ahead from me, they’ll be at Sanctum Hotel when the sun sets. By morning, we’ll have the girl and all the leverage we’ll need to get our addendum signed. Don’t look so worried, Silas. In a day, maybe two, we’ll have everything we need to secure our place in Vumaris history. Our party will be unbeatable once we’ve made northern Shona ours. A girl’s innocence is a small price to pay for success.”

Silas wasn’t so sure, but he nodded, grinned, and eyed the picture of the Sanctum Hotel again. “Okay, yeah, fine. Make the call.”

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# Chapter 2: Pure One

The Republic of Vumaris  
Batari County, Minra  
**Sanctum Hotel**

“May I be excused?”

Ekon smiled at the sugary sweet and oh so innocent way Asha had posed the question to her mother. Everyone knew between Khalid Bambara and Sekhem Zarina, when it came to Asha, the sekhem was the disciplinarian and the khalid the Maine Coon, the sweetest natured of the domestic cat breeds.

Several hours ago, the royal family had ended their meeting earlier than expected. The Shieldmanes had surrounded them as soon they'd exited the conference room, with Ekon pulling up the rear beside Mafdet, Asha's First Shieldmane, although she wasn't a felidae lion like all the other royal bodyguards. Ekon once asked Mafdet how a felidae cheetah had become Shieldmane to the Shona family. She spoke when it suited her. Mafdet had yet to answer his question.

Only Ekon and Mafdet were in the suite with the royal family. The other four Shieldmanes patrolled the large hotel, everyone's hunger sated after a delicious meal at the hotel's restaurant.

Asha grinned up at her mother, golden-brown eyes as beautiful as the young woman. She wasn't a spitting image of Sekhem Zarina, a six-foot female with golden eyes, a curvy figure she'd caught the khalid gazing at on more than one occasion, and full lips that concealed a tongue capable of stripping flesh from bone. Her curly golden-onyx hair framed her face like a lion's mane. It was this defining feature that Sekhem Zarina had passed on to Asha. The inheritance was as much her birthright as the title of Sekhem would eventually become. The name Asha, which meant *life* in the Ebox language of felidae lions, would be relegated to her past once she ascended to the throne. When that momentous time came, two or three decades in the future, Sekhem Zarina would bestow on her daughter a different name. One befitting her new status as Alpha of the Kingdom of Shona.

“What do you plan on doing this evening?” Sekhem Zarina asked Asha. “Fill your head with human situation comedies or blast their foul music, the way you did last night? Really, Asha, I don't know how you stand to listen to and watch such inanity.”

“Everything here isn't bad.”

“Yes, I know. But there is much corruption in this country, and I don't want you influenced by what passes as their culture.”

“Music and laughter won't corrupt me. That's what my friends are for.”

Khalid Bambara laughed. Sekhem Zarina and Mafdet did not. Ekon also laughed, but on the inside.

Hands at his sides, Ekon stood near the suite door, the same way Mafdet had positioned herself in the threshold between the suite's living room, where the royal family was, and the master bedroom behind her. Like Ekon, Mafdet wore black pants, boots, and suit jacket with a white shirt—his button-up, hers a V-neck blouse. Unlike Ekon, Mafdet carried more than a high-powered handgun. In a sheath strapped to her thigh was a wicked sixteen-inch sword blade with oversized spikes on the knuckle guard handle. A month on the job, he'd mustered the courage to inquire as to her sword's name because everyone knew all blade-carrying felidae had a name for their weapon. Mafdet hadn't answered that question either. How in the hell did the sekhem expect Mafdet to train him when the Shieldmane spoke in nods, snorts, and grunts?

"Are you planning on entertaining us with what you've learned from watching Vumarian television?"

"I would, but you're making fun of me."

Sekhem Zarina leaned down and kissed Asha's forehead. "Only a little. I don't have to ask if you comprehended what transpired today with Royster and London. I know you grasped the larger point not expressed in their addendum."

"Humans are rarely satisfied with what they already possess, even when they think they are. Eventually, they will seek more and more, if they believe the acquisition will make them happier, give them something they conclude is missing from their lives."

"Quite right. Lack of satisfaction, even peace within, makes one restless, greedy . . ."

"Dangerous," Khalid Bambara finished.

"Yes, very dangerous. That's why we'll not stay in this country longer than is required. We don't trust the new Chief and Deputy Chief. We're tempted to leave tonight, foregoing a meeting with the leader of the Common Peace Coalition Party."

That surprised Ekon. To his knowledge, Shona stayed out of foreign affairs involving Vumaris. From Asha's nod, she'd known about the meeting.

Khalid Bambara settled his hand on his mate's back, an outward display of their inner love.

One day, Ekon would like to express his feelings for Asha in the same way—a taken-for-granted touch that wouldn't garner a single raised eyebrow. He possessed no desire to become khalid, but he did wish to one day stand by Asha's side as her loving and devoted mate. Again, like her ascension to sekhem, that dream was years into the future. Ekon had yet to demonstrate his worth as a Shieldmane, much less as a worthy mate to the heiress of the Kingdom of Shona.

"But," Khalid Bambara said, "Shona can no longer continue its isolationist ways when it comes to Vumaris. Today has only served to reinforce what your mother and I already know. We need allies on this side of the continent. That may mean opening our borders to them, but we are far from making such a decision. We believe, or at least we hope, Mi Sun Choi's Common Peace Coalition Party can become a trusted ally. If not . . . well, that's for a later family discussion." The hand on Sekhem Zarina's back lowered to her hip, and Khalid Bambara stepped closer to his mate. "You did well today, hafsa, and your mother is only teasing."

"I know." With a step backward, Asha moved away from her parents. "So, umm, may I be excused?" She nodded to Mafdet. "I know you'll want to speak with Mafdet about our departure plans."

Before Asha could say what she was clearly building up to, Sekhem Zarina's gaze shifted to Ekon.

He gulped. Ekon had heard people refer to the lioness's piercing golden eyes as beautiful yet frightening. He didn't disagree. Ekon also refused to look away; to do so would be tantamount to rolling over and showing the alpha his belly. If he wanted to prove himself worthy of his post and Asha's heart, it would begin with not cowering from a mother's unrelenting scrutiny.

Seconds passed between them, with no one speaking or moving. Gazing into the eyes of a Shona lioness who'd lived 120 years, a little more than middle age by felidae standards, Ekon recalled Sekhem Zarina had chosen him to serve as Asha's Second Shieldmane above older and more experienced members



of the Shona pride. Her decision had brought honor to his house, and he'd vowed to live up to the faith she'd placed in his potential.

"As Asha grows into her role as sekhem, so too will you grow into your role as her First Shieldmane."

Ekon hadn't told anyone, not even Asha, of her mother's plans for his future. He wondered if Mafdet knew of Sekhem Zarina's intentions to elevate him to a post that by right should be hers. If Mafdet did, that could explain her standoffishness toward him.

Sekhem Zarina's gaze slid from him to Asha. "You may take Ekon with you but do remember there is a proper order of things."

"I know."

"There are several kinds of knowing, Asha. Take heed to all of them. Now go before I change my mind." Her eyes lifted to his again. "Protect her with your life, young Shieldmane. That was your pledge."

"Always. Until the end," Ekon voiced, repeating the same vow he'd made when he'd accepted the post as Asha's Second Shieldmane.

Asha wasted no time hurrying from the room, putting as much space as possible between them and her knowing mother. That distance was a mere walk across the hall to her suite. But once the door closed behind them, the massive suite in front of them, the distance seemed much greater.

Ekon slumped against the door, his heart racing from how an antelope must feel after having escaped the clutches of hunting lionesses—a rare, lucky feat that wouldn't reoccur.

A soft hand found his own and squeezed. "Mom's growl is worse than her bite."

Ekon laughed, a breathless hiccup unbecoming of Asha's sworn shield. "No one in all of Shona would believe that, not even you. Your mother is scary."

"She's overprotective."

Asha lifted the hand she held, curving it around her waist in very much the same way Khalid Bambara had held his mate. But Asha wasn't his mate and, if they didn't heed Sekhem Zarina's warning, she never would be.

Ekon pulled his hand away.

This time, the female's eyes that held his but with far less gold were Asha's. With her, his strength abandoned him. Ekon's eyes skidded down and away. "We can't. You heard your mother."

"Yes, I heard her."

Asha grasped his hand again, tugging him away from the closed door and to a circular pit in the center of the room. He removed his sidearm, placing it under a cushion but within reach. They sat on a plush, leather couch in the shape of a semicircle. The burgundy color complemented Asha's white and gold dress.

Picking up the remote from the table in front of them, the television in an open cabinet opposite the pit, Asha clicked the unit on. Sound blared but was quickly lowered.

"I thought we could watch a show. I like funny ones. But you can choose whichever one you want." Kicking off her sandals and scooting close, Asha handed him the remote control and rested her head against his shoulder.

Ekon had never met a more even-tempered, sweet girl. She could be mischievous, sure, and a little obstinate, but nothing more than what was typical for an eighteen-year-old with a strict mother. At twenty, Ekon was little better, and he had far fewer responsibilities than Asha.

"Mom only wants what's best for me."

"I know." Lowering his face, he sniffed her gorgeous mane of hair, tempted to run his hands through the dark, curly locks. She smelled of the countryside of his birth—lavender, moss, and with a hint of mint. "What do you want?"

"For you to hold me while we watch some awful but humorous television sitcom. Then for you to kiss me."

"I shouldn't have ever kissed you."

"You don't mean that."

No, Ekon could never regret crossing the line with Asha ten months ago. "You're right. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said it. It's just, I don't want to mess up."

"You won't."

"You only say that because I'm the first boy you kissed."

Asha patted his chest. "You aren't the first boy I've kissed."

"Wait. What?" He shoved her until she sat up. "I'm not?"

"I never said you were."

"True but—"

"You are, however, the first boy I've wanted to do more with than kissing."

That stopped his mind from whirling and started his heart racing again. "You can't go around saying stuff like that."

Her smirk reminded him of what he already knew. "Okay, fine, we're the only ones in your suite. But you know what I mean."

"Actually, I don't. It's not as if I asked you to have sex with me right here and now." A sure hand found his thigh and rubbed. "Unless, you know. We could. No one would know but us."

"And your mate, if your parents don't approve of our union."

"They won't choose my mate. They'll weigh in on my decision, but they would never force me into an alliance not of my own choosing. Besides, I don't have to be a virgin when I take a mate. I only need to be faithful to him, which I will be." She patted his chest again. "You aren't ready for us to become lovers, so this conversation is moot."

Affronted, his eyebrows winged up. "Not ready? Who's twenty and who's eighteen?"

"Being twenty doesn't make you ready. It just makes you two years older than me." She nodded to the remote. "If you don't intend on selecting a show, I'll do the picking. Or," she said and kissed his cheek, "we could kiss and touch and pretend we're going to go all the way but know we really won't."

Ekon liked that idea, but her statement about him not being ready, despite his age, had pricked his pride a bit. The sad truth was that she wasn't wrong. Him not being ready had nothing to do with Ekon having had sexual experience with only one person—a high school girlfriend who'd broken up with him a couple of months after graduation. His feelings had been hurt, but she'd warranted no stronger emotion, certainly not anger or even disappointment.

Asha, on the other hand, had a way of turning him into knots. Worse, she managed the act with subconscious effort, like calling him on his unvoiced fears, while also making herself vulnerable to him by revealing her own desires.

Ekon kissed her, lips gentle, tongue patient. When she opened for him, her moan a scratch behind the ears of his inner lion, he slid inside.

Licking.

Tasting.

Exploring.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Asha pulled Ekon atop her, thoughts of finding a mutually agreeable television show clearly forgotten. Her strong, lithe form felt wonderful underneath him. He doubted Asha would grow to her mother's height. She certainly hadn't inherited her father's tall, stocky frame either. Compared to most felidae lionesses, Asha was considered petite. Although, at five-six, she was taller than the average human female.

To Ekon, there was nothing average about Asha—neither her thick mane of hair nor the way her kisses made him want to purr at her feet—and lions could not purr. But, for Asha, he would make it happen.

Him atop her, they kissed, hands roamed, but clothes stayed on. Well, her dress did. Ekon didn't protest when Asha pulled off his suit jacket and tie and unbuttoned his shirt. No more than he complained when she rolled him over, straddled his hips, and kissed her way from his shoulders down to his belly

button. He did, however, moan and curse at the feel of her hand running over his erection through his pants.

He tensed at her exploring touch, and she giggled, the only reaction that gave away her inexperience and nerves.

"Have you done this before too?"

"No." Her hand felt him again, and he fought not to explode in his boxers. "You're big."

"You only think that because I'm the first man you've touched like this." He stilled her hand. Kissing was one kind of temptation but having her curious hand on him was pure torture. "What did you watch on cable after I left you last night?"

"What did you watch, when you returned to your suite?"

They stared at each other, neither blinking. But knowing what he'd watched until three in the morning had him releasing her hand and closing his eyes, permitting Asha to touch him all she wanted.

"I had no idea humans could be so inventive when it came to sex."

"Yeah," he croaked out, Asha's fingers on the tip of his erection, circling the head and drawing precum. "They have the best pornos."

"If you'd stayed, we could've watched one together. Will you let me see you?"

Ekon's eyes popped open. He hadn't needed to see Asha to know her humor hadn't extended to her question. Like Sekhem Zarina, Asha spoke with a forthrightness that often brought one up short when not prepared for her bold—sometimes too bold—frankness.

"We agreed not to go all the way."

"Seeing isn't doing. But I would understand if you rather not. I'm curious, is all. You're handsome. That I already know."

Fingers traced his brows, arched and thick; his nose, long bridge with a wide base; and his lips, wide with a plump center. She stopped at his chin before gliding her hand to his neck then across his clavicle.

Ekon shivered.

"You're strong. Your name is quite apt. But you're also fit, muscular. Your chest is broad and your . . ." Her eyes lowered to the erection tenting his pants. "The rest of you is a mystery I want to solve. Not all of it tonight, unfortunately." Dark eyes rose to his. "Have I shocked you? I didn't mean to. I just . . ."

Asha made to roll off Ekon, but his quick hands to her waist stopped her. "Don't go, and don't be embarrassed. There's nothing wrong with speaking your mind."

"You say that now. But you didn't see your face a second ago."

"Your level of openness is rare. Sometimes, it takes me by surprise."

"I don't know any other way to be."

"It's not a bad way to be, Asha, but everyone isn't like you and your mother. We aren't all so brave."

"Or arrogant."

"That's another word, I guess. But I don't think that's the right descriptor either." With a gentle tug, Ekon encouraged Asha to lay atop him. "If I undress for you, letting you see all of me, I'll want to do more than see you in return. You're right, I'm not ready, and I don't think you are either. There's no rush." Ekon tipped up her head so that she was looking at him. "Is there a rush?"

Asha shook her head, and he kissed the tip of her nose.

"Good. Then let me court you properly. I'll have my parents speak with yours when we return home. It's what we should've done in the beginning. Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"Good." Ekon hugged Asha tightly, his erection in need of release. "Find something to watch on the television that's not porn while I'm in the bathroom."

Asha kissed Ekon, not making it easy on him to use his hand instead of her virginal body to sate his desire. Setting her away from him, his willpower a thread on the verge of breaking, Ekon escaped to Asha's en suite.

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He groaned into the hand towel he shoved in his mouth as he came, spurting into his hand and over top of the open toilet. *Mmm*, the release felt good. Not as good as Asha's hand stroking him to completion or being inside of her would've felt. But it was what he needed to get him through the next couple of hours, while they watched television, pretending they wouldn't rather be having sex.

Hands washed and dried, clothes tucked in and neat, lust under control, Ekon walked out of the en suite, through the spacious bedroom, ignoring the queen-size bed, and back into the living room and . . .

Asha no longer sat on the couch in the pit. She stood near the front door. A door he hadn't heard open or close. But it obviously had because she wasn't alone in the room. A human male stood beside Asha, a gun pressed to her side.

Ekon snarled and stepped forward, claws and fangs extended.

The human lifted his gun to Asha's head.

Ekon stopped.

"Calm down, kitty, or I'll splatter her brains all over this white carpet."