



CHEETAH WILD

DORANNA DURGIN

A feline huntress in cheetah form prowls the night, protecting women from predators, but she can't protect herself from falling for her new partner...

Mark Burton and Tayla Garrett are Sentinels, members of an ancient clan of shapeshifters who protect the earth and humanity. As part of the covert organization, Tayla and Mark had known each other for years...though neither of them recognized the deep desire they secretly harbored for one another. The Tayla and Mark are teamed up to work on the summit, a meeting with an informant from the Atrum Core, a ruthless group that uses their abilities to gain power at any cost. But Mark also has another assignment—to help a struggling Tayla meet her full potential. And the only way to get Tayla's powers to fully mature is by becoming her Sentinel bedmate....

A cheetah shifter romance.

Previously published as *Wild Thing*.

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CHAPTER 1

Watch her, Nick Carter had told Mark Burton, and sent Mark into the night after Tayla Garrett—into the sporadically lit Phoenix park she patrolled this night. Watch her patrol, watch her stalk the night greenways—a little sideways jog to avoid a loose dog, so casual, and then all her attention back on the night, on the people within the park, and only Mark’s excellent warding keeping him from her scrutiny.

Watch her. As if Mark had been doing anything *but* watching Tayla Garrett since his recent reassignment had them crossing paths in Sentinel field activity. Not to mention in the Phoenix brevis regional office, in the hallways...in the damned security lot where she sometimes parked a scooter and sometimes parked a bike. But she’d made it clear enough she still—after all this time—preferred to keep her distance, and he’d reluctantly, aching, respected her wishes. In spite of the restlessness, the aching, and the tendency to offer her name at intensely inappropriate moments in his personal life. Not that he’d expected to see that particular date again, anyway.

She’d always done that to him. As an awkward fourteen-year-old, growing into impossibly long legs, learning to hide her natural speed from the world and to finesse her cheetah shift, while Mark, a much more mature and worldly eighteen year old, learned that he was indeed human-bound in shape, regardless of his parentage and obvious peripheral shifter skills—the physical prowess, the tracking skills, the prescience...

She runs the Phoenix city parks at night, Nick Carter had told him—Nick, regional adjutant and rarely directly involved in Mark’s Sentinel assignments. “You’ll see what I mean—and I need you prepared to deal with it. You’re going to work together on the summit.”

Summit. Fancy word for a meeting with an Atrum Core snitch, a man whom the local Core sect would no doubt love to identify and eliminate—*after* a satisfying round or two of torture.

The Atrum Core. Not nice people. Not from their very earliest start, when the world was barely looking at AD, and the Romans and the Gauls were mixing it up in so many different ways. The Sentinels were finding their shape-shifting; the Atrum Core remained ever determined to overpower them any way it could, full of need and greed and ancient family squabbles. And while the druidic Sentinels had grown into their calling as protectors of the earth and its inhabitants, the Roman-sired Atrum Core became entrenched in grabbing power and influence without scruple or care for the consequences, stealing from the earth and even from the lifeblood of innocents to create their power-manipulating amulets and twisted workings.

She runs the Phoenix city parks. Hot damn, she certainly did. Must have been a challenge to dress in the necessary natural materials needed for taking the change and still look like *that*. Skirt that showed blouse that sheer, camisole peeking out low over her perfectly plump breasts. Her hair, fiery copper, spilled carelessly from a high, loose ponytail, strands of it framing her face. A saucy little purse dangled off her shoulder, and long, long legs stretched down to leather flats—incongruous but no detraction at all. No, no, not the slightest. A living lure, she was.

And a huntress. With all the innate grace of her cheetah form, she moved across the dark grassy grounds of the east Phoenix park, showing no sign of whatever Nick Carter thought Mark might see—what he should *prepare to deal with*. Nothing but the ever-present thump of wild blood in his veins, wishing for that which he could never do so he might join the one he might never have

wishing for that which he could never do so he might join the one he might never have.

Prescience stole his breath. Here. Now. It happens.

Prescience, a gift from his mother's line. And tracking, from his father's side. Not to mention the Sentinel strength, the uncanny night vision, the superb hearing. A certain resistance to death. But when it came to the shifting, Mark was empty. Nothing there to reach for, nothing there to set free.

Here. Now. It happens.

“Hey! No! What're you—*hey!*” A woman's voice, high and startled and shifting quickly to fear.

Mark jerked back his instant response. Sentinels, guardians of the earth—in the beginning, against the Atrum Core, and now against almost anything.

But not tonight. Tonight, in spite of having trained since childhood, Mark merely *watched*. Watched as Tayla's posture changed from sexy insouciance to taut huntress within. *Wild thing*. Still human, still very much in undercover mode. But oh, Tayla Garrett could run. Mark's heart swelled with the beauty of it, the flashing legs and stunning grace, deceptively swift—crossing the patch of green between curving sidewalks and manicured trees before he could so much as blink, having spotted what Mark couldn't yet see.

He moved in slightly—she wouldn't notice, not now. Not with her eye on her target, there, just the other side of the sandstone-brick public facilities: two struggling figures, and she was almost upon them. Mark drew closer, fists clenched on his need to plunge into the fray. Never mind orders—she'd be furious and embarrassed by his intervention.

So he watched. Closer now, easily making out the plump, scantily dressed young woman who fought off a man twice her size. Close enough to see Tayla, moving so swiftly she had no chance to decelerate, and what was she *thinking*, and ah, there—she had it planned all along, that lightning grab at the attacker as his arm swung back to strike, using *him* as her brake—transferring all that speed into torque as she planted her feet and wrenched him back and around. His arm made a funny crunching noise as it broke; he cried out and gave way, slamming up against the sandstone brick while the young woman sobbed and scrabbled to put a few feeble feet between them. A few feet and then, face distorted with fear—of Tayla as much as her attacker—she gained her balance and fled.

“No, dammit, let me help—” But Tayla stayed on the man, anyway, following up to snatch the side of his head, fingers twined in his hair and steadying him as her other hand dove for his throat—attempt to circle that beefy neck, but grabbing his windpipe in a precision claw grip.

Whoa. That's my girl.

But in the next instant, the huntress fumbled.

“You let her get away!” the man choked, gesturing vaguely after the fleeing woman.

“So I did,” Tayla said, her voice a purr. “You won't, though.”

“My cousin—” he said, and surrendered to her grip. “Been looking so long—”

Doubt changed Tayla's posture entirely, suddenly.

No, Mark thought at her, inching closer. *You can't buy that.*

“You *hit* her.” But the doubt crept through to her voice.

His voice sounded stronger. “I was defending myself!”

The doubt settled in. In spite of her instincts, in spite of what she'd seen, in spite of what she was and the training behind her...

The man tore away from her faltering grip; he grabbed her shirt, bunching the fabric between her breasts and jerking her headfirst into the brick beside him.

And then he, too, was gone.

Watch her. Just watch her.

Mark took a step forward anyway. And another, and

Mark took a step forward, anyway. And another, and—

No. Not yet. Not against orders. Hands bunched in painfully tight fists, he faded in behind a carefully tended tree, deciduous park luxury in the middle of the valley desert. Tayla sprang back to her feet, spitting mad, with every intent of following her quarry—but a car engine roared to life in the nearby parking lot, tires squealing...popping the car over the lot's speed bumps and out the exit.

Not even a cheetah could run that fast.

She swore—and then she abruptly tested the wind, head lifted as she tasted for power trace and found it, looking directly toward his hiding place. Mark froze—but she shook her head slightly, dismissing him. Knowing there was a Sentinel somewhere in the area, just as she knew the park was clear of anyone else, and not figuring it had anything to do with her. She swiped a hand over her forehead—she bled there—and over a lip now glistening with blood instead of lip gloss, and she cursed again. And then she quite suddenly took her cheetah, buff and black-spotted gold, dropping down, lithe and leggy, bounding out across the grass and into the darkness.

Away. A failure. A hunter losing not to wits or strength or speed, but to confidence skewed. Gut instinct ignored.

You'll see it, Nick Carter had told him.

And Mark had.

Doing something about it...

That was something else altogether.

CHAPTER 2

Tayla swept hair from her eyes, settling it back into place as she tucked her bike helmet under her elbow and strode for the Sentinel brevis regional office stairs. Miles of predawn biking hadn't done her a bit of good. Hadn't erased the previous night's debacle from her mind, and hadn't provided her with an explanation that would slide past Nick Carter's radar.

The man was consul adjutant for a reason. Hardly anyone saw the consul himself, an aging man who personally administered only his pet projects. But Carter...he was everywhere. Knew everything.

He probably already knew *this*. Why else the first-thing meeting, requested by page while she was miles out on her ride with no time to hit home first? All right, he knew. So she'd just walk right into his Phoenix satellite office—waved in by his admin, who assessed Tayla's appearance and then looked away with obvious restraint—and say what she had to. Footfalls silent on thick padded carpet corner office windows overlooking the vast sprawling humanity filling the Phoenix desert valley, office itself full of greenery and growing things, nothing of trendy faux reality but all combining to fill the office with a heady connection to the earth that the rest of the city often forgot. Carter bent over his desk, shuffling papers.

Yes, she'd just walk right into his office and—"I screwed up, that's what," she said.

"Tayla." Carter looked up. Not a man ever to be caught by surprise—no vulnerability there, only hard efficiency, a certain hint of omniscience. And yet Tayla could have sworn she saw a glimmer of start.

Maybe she imagined it. But she didn't imagine the way Carter's gaze cut quickly to the side—to the other person in the room.

She fumbled her helmet. She grasped the hem of her cap-sleeved jersey, fighting the need to tug it down over her hips and the revealing Lycra knickers that surely, after all, she could have found time to change.

Mark Burton. Someone had to be kidding. *Mark Burton*.

The same Mark who'd gone to her Mesa high school, who'd run through secretive Sentinel brevis training a group ahead of her, whose personal trace she would have detected in an instant had she not been closed off to the overload of the brevis regional main office.

Mark Burton. She'd made it through her teenage years, somehow—years during which her feelings for him had hovered around her in a veritable aura of schoolgirl crush. Humiliating. Freshman girl, senior guy...the one gawky and struggling to put the pieces of herself together, the other finishing that first growth to manhood, oozing easy confidence, a trail of beautiful, clueless non-shifting cheerleaders following behind him. Never even looking her way.

Just as well.

Distance. It had worked on her then, and it had been working on him now—since her run of luck had ended and so had years of working the field in the same huge city without crossing paths. Since they'd been working the same sectors but not the same teams.

It looked as though that was about to end, too.

So Tayla did what she knew, what had worked. She gave him the briefest of nods, and then she pretended. *You're not here. You don't matter. I got the message years ago, don't you worry.*

Carter offered her a mild look, not so much as hesitating at her biking outfit, and nodded at the

second chair flanking his desk. “Yeah, you screwed up,” he said, pale green eyes cool beneath hoarfrosted black hair that reflected his wolf. “Have a seat.”

She didn’t look at Mark Burton. Didn’t need to. He stood taller than most, of a height with her when many men weren’t. His parents, if they hadn’t passed along the powerful lion, had given him their tawny hair—which was growing more sable by the year, just as the African lion mane darkened with maturity—and a lazy kind of power. Didn’t have to move sharp to move fast; didn’t have to move brute to move strong. Medium brown eyes that shone whiskey gold in the right light...

No, Tayla had no need to look at him. She met Carter’s gaze instead. “What’s going on?”

“New assignment,” Carter said. Generally, Tayla kept to her foundation assignment—rotating between the city’s extensive parks to troll for human predators. But sometimes Carter pulled her in for the short, hard hunts to which she was so well-suited; she either worked solo, or as part of a team large enough to let her blend, one in which she could drift away to fulfill her own role.

Cheetahs. Not known for being team players.

At least, that’s what she liked to tell herself. Excuse enough.

Carter handed her a folder. She couldn’t help a glance at Mark; she found him with a folder already in hand. The realization caught her by surprise, and she missed Carter’s next several words. “...calling it a summit. But you can think of it as a major informant download—and you’ve only got couple days to secure the site.”

Mark raised an eyebrow. “If you want us to keep the Core from shredding this guy—” *literally* “—we need more time than—”

Carter cut him short. “The escalated timing is his call.” End of discussion, that. “You two will be working the site.” As if already hearing the words rising in Tayla’s throat, he lifted his head to stop them with nothing more than that hard gaze. “You’re both right. We need more time. But we don’t have it. So you’ll go in low and quiet, a small, specialized team. You’ll know every crack in the sidewalk before our informant arrives—”

“Scottsdale,” Mark said. His voice was still what she remembered—an amazing velvet that made her bones vibrate. Vibrate and crave more. “No cracks on those sidewalks.” High-end area on the west side of Phoenix, extra buff and gloss and cost to match.

“Maybe not,” Carter admitted. “Contact will be made at Eldorado Park—or Vista del Camino a block south. Our man will be staying in the Fronds Hotel, but he’s playing it cagey about the meet.”

“And us?” Tayla asked. She stuttered over the very thought of a hotel room. *Quiet torture. Cruel quiet torture.*

“Empty condos next to Vista del Camino, at least until we get a handle on the meet. But that won’t be your responsibility. You’ll cover before and after. Keeping the area clear of surprises.”

“But...” Tayla said, searching for words—trying to maintain her strong, aloof self and floundering around somewhere in awkward teenager-speak instead. “But...”

Mark spared her a glance, if not much of one. “If you’re worried about last night—”

Last what? But she saw the faint wince around Nick Carter’s eyes and she suddenly knew, and *awkward* made way for *horrified indignation*. “You were *there*?” She stood, not even realizing it, the ventilated bike helmet clutched before her. “You were the one? You saw—” And over to Carter. “You *told*...?” Because of course that’s how Mark had known of her bobble. Her hesitation, the self-doubt that had allowed her quarry to escape.

But she caught the tightness in her throat, and the strain in her thinning voice, and she caught the knuckles white around her helmet chin strap. No, that’s not the way she wanted to do this. She took a breath. A deep one. She found herself. “This is a park thing—I can work it alone. I can work it *better*

alone. And—” she flickered a glance at Mark, just enough to see his faint recoil when she added “—I’m not alone, then I need someone who can keep up with me.”

Someone who could shift. Whose other form knew speed.

She hadn’t meant to put that faint gleam of hurt in his eye. Only to protect herself. To regain herself.

“I don’t need to prove myself to you,” Mark said. “Not to anyone.”

“No, I meant—” She stopped, every part of her miserable and hating this. Worse than not being noticed. “It wouldn’t make sense to put me with Ruger, either.” Massive Ruger, who took the bear. “I a team, maybe. As partners...it just gives us something to overcome. That’s why I usually work alone.”

“Ruger is a healer, not a tracker. Not security.” But he took it down a notch. “It’s no big deal, Garrett.” Even if maybe it was, if maybe a moment ago he might have called her *Tayla* instead. “You can be the legs if you want.” His gaze flicked down the length of her knickers and down her bare calves, all the way down to her biking sneaks, and right back up again, all the way to her—

She fought the urge to cross her arms over her chest. “Really,” she said firmly, speaking to Carter. “I work better alone.”

She expected him to shake his head. He wouldn’t have brought them here if his mind wasn’t already made up. But she didn’t expect—

“Let me be blunt,” he said. “I need more from you than you’re giving. I need more from you than you *can* give right now. I’m borderline on taking you out of the field for assessment.” He stopped—out of pity or mercy, she couldn’t tell. But you know these parks. You’re a tracker. You work personal security. You’re used to putting on an innocuous front.” Okay, maybe she’d get through this unscathed....

Or maybe not.

Carter’s gaze narrowed. “But not by yourself.”

She dared another glance at Mark. No, it really couldn’t get any worse. She’d fumbled in front of him, she’d insulted him, and now Nick Carter had stripped her bare and naked in front of him. He no longer looked hurt or angry; he looked distant. Maybe even sorry for her.

Great.

“Mark’s unique perspective can make a difference,” Carter told her. “I *need* it to make a difference. And so do you.”

Tayla stood a little straighter, lifted her head a notch higher, and dragged herself through the moment with sheer strength of will and a stubborn chin.

“I mean it,” Carter said. “Don’t pretend you don’t see the problems lately. If you want to stay in the field, you’ll listen—you’ll let Mark be your partner, not just someone you pretend isn’t there.”

Mark snorted gently beside her. So he’d noticed, had he?

“And Tayla,” Carter said, not easing that hard wolf gaze of his one little bit, “the Sentinels need it to make the difference, too. This summit is critical—more critical than I can even tell you. We *must* have this information.”

Mark leaned forward. “This have anything to do with the leak on that Tucson operation?”

Carter stiffened. Ever so slightly, if only for an instant. He said only, “It’s important. Too important to let personalities and feelings rule what happens next. Do you both hear me?”

“Yes,” Tayla said. She’d caught a snatch of equilibrium in that scant exchange, moments when the spotlight had turned away. She might not agree, she might hate this, but she understood clearly enough—this choice was no choice at all. She’d come to terms with the details once she had some

space to herself. She could ground herself in that, find a certain calm there.

In the next instant, Carter shattered it. He said, "Starting tonight."

* * *

She'd been stunned.

Mark didn't need an empathetic connection to know it—he'd seen it on her face, in every stiffened muscle of that long, graceful body.

Only *that* body could wear *those* clothes—biker geek—and make him instantly hard, there in the office of his field supervisor plus.

For Nick Carter didn't bother with the average field assignment. He knew about them all, he watched over them all...but sending Mark and Tayla out to scour the Vista del Camino in the late spring heat of the desert? Not an assignment that needed his personal attention.

Unless it really was all that important.

Almost important enough to get Mark's mind off his own body. Off *her* body.

But not quite.

Carter gave him a mildly amused gaze, there in the wake of Tayla's departure. Chin tipped high, green eyes fighting to stay cool and floundering with panic, fiery red-gold hair unruly in the wake of the helmet, the perfect mussed look.

That panic told him what he needed to know. She wanted nothing to do with him. Not his non-shifting self, not his very human reaction to her.

Carter waited for the door to latch firmly behind her and speared Mark with a direct look. "That went more easily than it might have."

"You think?" Mark said flatly.

"You know, don't you, that she hasn't been initiated?"

Flat out. Carter just said it flat out. As if he wasn't talking about Tayla Garrett's very private sex life.

"Uh," Mark said. In the back of his mind he heard *gusty panting, a cry of pleasure, a demand for more; the tingle of his nape as fingers traced the cowlick pattern there and the delicate touch of a tongue—*

He closed his eyes, swallowed hard.

After a moment—during which Carter left him suspiciously alone—Mark said, "That sounds like her business."

"Under the circumstances?" Carter offered up a snort that might have passed for amusement. "Until she finds herself a Sentinel bedmate, she won't fully mature into her abilities. It's slowing her down, and it's integral to her confidence issues. So at the moment, it's very much my business. And yours, as of now."

"I..." Mark said, giving Carter a look of patent disbelief. "Uh. What?"

Carter shook his head, shoving paperwork aside to clear his desk as if this conversation was the most important thing in the world. This conversation about Tayla Garrett, Mark Burton, and sex. "I'm not blind, though the two of you just might be." Another hard look, unyielding. "Sort it out, Burton. Because the root of her problem is *you*."

CHAPTER 3

Empty condo. All theirs.

Not damned empty enough. Not with only one bedroom. Oh, and a kitchen, already stocked. A sparse living room, with couch and recliner and no television but a laptop with a secure connection to brevis. And that one bedroom, with one bed.

The root of her problem is you.

Or so Carter had said.

Looking at Tayla now, Mark wasn't convinced. She stood in the living room, temper flaring as bright as her brilliant red-gold hair in the Phoenix sun, flush riding high on her cheeks, eyes hidden behind sleek trendy sunglasses but expression not hidden at all.

Mortified. Humiliated. Resigned.

And determined.

"It'll be Vista del Camino," she said, nodding out the double doors of the private balcony—enclosed, its corner filled with a terra-cotta pot containing an impossibly groomed and healthy rent-a-plant, the second-floor height looking down on the perfect view of cultured green landscape, tree clusters, and improbable ponds. "Eldorado is too busy—between the skate park and the baseball diamonds and all that night lighting, I don't see our snitch feeling at home there. So we should focus on clearing del Camino."

"He'd do better to hide in his hotel room," Mark said.

She cast him a look of surprise. "There's no way we're letting him bring in active amulets—and that means he'll have to do protective workings on the spot. He'll want to be where he can steal from the earth for that."

He'd known that. If he'd stopped to think about it. But thinking still wasn't his best thing. Not with prescience—*gusty panting cry of pleasure*—tickling around his nape.

Or wishful thinking. Possibly a little of both.

"Let's head out," she said. "I need some real ground under my feet." She'd changed from her biking gear and now looked perfectly ready for a power walk in the park in sporty capri pants that made her legs look longer than ever and settled on her hips in just the way to taunt a man—*don't you wish your hands were here*—along with tidy walking sneaks, neat sport socks over trim ankles, and a sleeveless pale green shirt with a slender empire tie that made her perfect breasts just...

"Perfect," he murmured.

"What?"

"Perfect idea," he told her. "The park."

She sighed. "Look," she said. "This is hard enough, being thrown together on an op with no chance to warm up to it. Carter may have a layered agenda, but I think we should just forget it. Go for the op. That's the important thing, and, anyway...Carter's full of crap." She said it again, more assertively. "He's full of crap."

"We trained together," Mark pointed out.

"We trained in the same place," she corrected him, voice exquisitely dry. "You would have to have looked at me once or twice to say that we trained together."

He'd looked at her, all right. Seen what she was. *Cheetah. Glorious speed, wild abandon, feral*

grace. All wrapped up in emerging from herself, back then, crying out for the space to do that—but unmistakable to anyone with eyes.

Mark Burton had always had eyes. The prescience had helped even then, layering in visions of what she would be.

It hadn't been wrong, either.

But she hadn't seen any of that, it seemed. Hadn't felt his regard, only his distance. If she now gave that distance back to him...

He could hardly blame that, no matter what Carter thought or said or wanted.

He cleared his throat. "The park," he said, and reached for the condo keys he'd tossed on the counter upon entering. "Show me around."

* * *

"I wonder what's really going on," Tayla mused, taking Mark to where the park's second pond trailed off the teardrop shape of the first. "Carter's been tense. And for once it's not about Dolan going rogue down in Tucson regional."

"If something's wrong down south, blame Dolan Treviño...that's the party line," he said. "Not one I buy."

"Whatever it is, it's turning the heat up on our summit," she mused. "The snitch is going to choose a place where it'll look natural to settle in for an hour, maybe two. We can anticipate that. He's going to want vantage, defensibility...but not predictability." She walked them along the wavering, incongruous asphalt path that followed the trickling ponds through the long, narrow park, and if she had any awareness of him—from the unrelenting echo of blood pounding in his ears at the sight of her in those ass-hugging pants or the uncomfortable restriction of his jeans—she gave no sign of it.

No sign of it at all.

Damn Nick Carter, anyway. Mark had a lot of practice in giving Tayla Garrett space...

He had no practice at all in being close.

"Here," she said, stopping outside a copse of trees, turning to him—and something in her voice gave her away—a bit of tightness and a bit of tremble. Nothing he would have seen if he hadn't been...

Wishful thinking.

"It's a good place," he agreed, putting his mind back to the work. The afternoon heat sat heavily on him, dampening the edges of his hair even in the low humidity. *It's a dry heat* only went so far; after a certain point, hot was *hot*. Tayla seemed more at home in it, with barely more than a flush on her cheeks. But something else...

Something else had her uneasy.

Mark did a quick check of their surroundings; he did a quick dive into less obvious senses, hunting for a suspicious trace—for the sour taste of the Atrum Core. He found only the sweet tingle of subdued personal power beside him.

Her trace wasn't particularly strong; it was private, as was she. And yet as he looked closer at her, the trace grew stronger, invading him from the inside out—hot savannah grasses and musky dry air and lurking, wild speed....

"Do you smell that?" she asked, and the tension in her voice brought him out of his tracking focus. "Do you *feel* that?"

"Nothing but—" *you* "—us," he said. "If the Core is here, I'm missing it."

“That dog,” she said, her gaze pinpointing a big goofy, hairy animal on the other side of the narrow pond. ~~A little bit camel, a little bit Rastafarian, a whole lot Disney.~~ Tayla took an unconscious step away from it—away from the narrow little arching footbridge that would take them over the thin neck of the pond before it widened out into the next teardrop in the chain—and Mark remembered, suddenly, how she’d avoided the dog at the park. Remembered, vaguely, that she’d simply never like dogs. “It should be on a leash,” she said. “Do you see its owner?”

“Must be here somewhere,” Mark said, sounding, he thought, reasonable and not the least bit amused.

She drew herself up in affront. “If you think I’m frightened of that thing, then you don’t know me very well.”

“If you think I’m that easy to fool, then you don’t know *me* very well.”

Tayla watched the dog. It hesitated long enough to slake its thirst from the pond, and moved on. “I don’t like dogs,” she admitted. “It’s a—”

Mark let out a startled snort of laughter. “I don’t believe it,” he said. “It’s a cat thing!”

She glared at him. “That doesn’t mean I’m not right. Look at it, out there in the heat. It should be holed up in the shade somewhere right now. And did you see the way it looked at us?”

“I saw the way you looked at it,” Mark observed.

She pulled her attention away from the dog, anger growing. “I knew this was a bad idea,” she told him. “I don’t know what Carter was thinking. He should have known you’d ignore me—it’s what you’ve always done. Tell you what, Mark—you do your thing, I’ll do mine.” She turned away from him, heading for the footbridge—toward the dog.

Surely not. “Tayla—”

“What are you worried about?” she asked, turning around but not stopping, the net result of which was swift backward progress, unerringly aimed at the little bridge. “You’re right, I’m wrong. The dog’s nothing and I’m just a scaredy-cat. Literally.”

Now, said the prescience. Make the difference.

Not how; it never told him how. Only that nudge—*time to act.*

He startled off into a run. A few quick strides and he was past her, grabbing the footbridge railing and swinging around to plant himself in front of it—in front of her. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Whatever.” Her attempt at *casual* wasn’t the least convincing. She almost stepped closer; she *almost* stepped into him. But she closed her eyes and she set her jaw; she shifted back—imperceptible but definite. “Look, just go back to ignoring me. It worked better for both of us, don’t you think?”

“It didn’t work for me at all,” Mark told her, and he wanted to pull her close again. Never mind the dog snuffling around on the other side of the pond, or anyone else who might just be watching, or the work they were supposed to be doing out here. “I only ever did what I thought you wanted.”

“Oh, sure, because having my heart slowly ripped out is just what I’ve *always* wanted!” she snapped, and then clapped her hands over her mouth.

Mark’s mouth opened; no sound came out. His throat constricted—hope, or maybe fear, or maybe—*gusty panting, a cry of pleasure, a demand for more, the delicate touch of a tongue—*

“What?” she demanded, all drawn up and drawn into herself, about to retreat into the very distance that had fooled him for so long. “Did you say *tongue*?”

He shook off the prescience—*hell, let it be prescience*—and tried, less successfully, to shake off the net of sensation tightening around his body—hope and anticipation and aching *want*, so much that he almost found himself pulling her in as if he had every right, kissing her hard and taking her down—

With his mind fighting such things, it took him by no surprise at all when his mouth said, “Son of

a bitch, Carter was right. He was *right*. It's *me*."

~~She gave him a wary look, ducked beneath the arm he had planted on the footbridge railing, and slipped past him to the center arch of the bridge. "What's *you*?"~~

He whirled to face her, gesturing at her, lost to discretion. "*This*. What's going on with you." What he'd seen the night before. What he'd seen in her just then.

Because she'd wanted him.

She'd *always* wanted him.

She'd been protecting herself all this time, and tearing herself up inside—keeping herself from her own potential.

If he'd figured it out for himself, he might well have been with her by now. Never mind Carter's damned *assignment*—this was about Mark and Tayla and what *they* could be. "Not you. *Us*," he corrected himself, and hooked a finger over the nosepiece of her sunglasses, plucking them free and exposing her eyes. He tucked them into the V neck of her shirt. "What's going on with you is about us."

She sucked in a breath. "No," she said. "I mean—no! What are you even thinking?" But those green eyes looked trapped and wild as she backed up against the railing, hands blindly seeking out the support.

He closed the space between them. Beautiful early spring day, romantic little footbridge, quiet park. Meant for it. He closed the space and he took her shoulders, holding them tightly, drawing her forward slightly with his emphasis, feeling the intense fullness of prescience throbbing heavily between them and about to turn into truth. "Tell me," he said, his senses swimming with her, "*tell me* you don't feel this."

She shook her head, short and sharp and with a flare of panic. She shoved at him, if not hard. "I never said I didn't want you." She snapped out the words with such emphasis that he almost missed them. "I've *always* wanted you. It's just not *messing* with me. I had to learn to deal with it, didn't I?"

"Problem is," he said, throat tight around the words, "it's *messing* with *me*."

She froze. She stared at him, wide-eyed. "Oh!" she said. And "Oh!" And, fingers suddenly in his hair, mouth on his and kissing him hard, back arching into the play of his fingers on her back, no words at all.

Kissing.

She was kissing Mark Burton. Mark Burton, for whom she'd yearned these past ten years. Mark Burton, who'd never seemed to look twice at her, who always had a date in the wings or on his arm, who'd walked past her so many times over so many years that she'd developed a huge coping callus and resolutely developed her mediocre dating life outside the Sentinels.

Mark Burton, wrapping his arms around her, all but wrapping his body around her, suddenly noticing her very intently indeed. Unmistakably. Thoroughly. With all the fiery hot, sparky special effects her own body could produce, from the tingling down her spine to the whirl inside her head to the hot, heavy gravity gathering in the very center of her.

But...

She was kissing Mark Burton out in public on the middle of the footbridge when she should have been hunting Atrum Core trace, fully learning the park.

Screw that, I already know the park.

What she didn't know was *this*. Strong hands stroking her back, exploring the curve of her waist

heading up for her breasts. She leaned toward anticipated touch—and then ached at the loss when he returned to her waist. She hadn't known, either, that two mouths could anticipate and tease and promise with such intensity. That she could lose herself in the moment so completely.

Or that she could affect him just as deeply. Mark Burton, the distant...the casually aloof lion secure in his domain. And here he was, his breath made of jerky little rasps and everything in his body straining toward hers—everything in his energies twining up with hers—

And then someone laughed nearby and they froze, lips still touching and breath mingling, just as their energies had done and their bodies yearned to do. Together, they remembered that they stood in public—on the exposed arch of the bridge at that. After a moment, he pulled back far enough to rest his forehead on hers. “You do feel it,” he said, voice so rocky she barely made out the words.

“I...”

She'd meant for there to be more words after that, she was sure of it. But none came, and she mutely shook her head. “We...”

No words there, either. But he only laughed, short and self-deprecating. “Yeah,” he said.

“Work,” she said desperately, her hands rebellious enough to wander along his arms, just barely obedient enough to stay away from his delectable ass. “The dog...”

Still easily within sight, it had wandered down along the pond. Mark shrugged it off. “We'll call animal control.”

“Work—”

“This *is* work,” he asserted—and stopped short.

Too late for that.

“Excuse me?” She went stiff in his arms.

An unspoken expletive came through quite clearly in his expression. “Tayla—that didn't come out right—”

“You *think*?” And if he hadn't meant to say it was work to kiss her, then he'd meant to say that kissing her was part of work, and the only way that could be was—

“Tayla—”

“No,” she told him, more brittle yet. “Don't even try to make it better. What are you going to say that this was somehow part of your assignment? That Carter *told* you to—” And that's when she knew. Her breath stuttered in her throat. “Oh my God. He *did* tell you. He told you I haven't been initiated, didn't he? And he wants it done, I'll just bet. Did he tell you that? Does he think it'll settle me out?”

Mark winced; he closed his eyes, his expression one of pain and his hands tight on her waist. She shoved him away—not with the frantic cry swelling in her throat, but with angry disdainful defiance, drawn from the cheetah within. Long strides, shoulders straight, head up. Off the footbridge and heading down the path toward the park entrance.

The day, so pleasant a moment ago, suddenly felt hot; she wanted nothing more than to reach their condo and walk straight into the shower. She knew this park; Mark didn't. Let him learn it, then. He'd no doubt concentrate better without her—and if he needed to cool off, maybe someone would push him into this manicured little pond.

One could hope.

She stalked across the road.

She stalked into the condo.

She skipped the elevator and strode up the stairs, two at a time, third floor up and barely breathing hard. *Kissing him took more breath.*

Kissing him.

She lost a sob on that one, blindly digging for her key and inserting it in the lock. How had she even thought he'd suddenly found her interesting? To him she was what she'd been then—all the legs, all the awkward, face not grown into its features...emotions running wild and awareness of her shortcomings so crippling that she could only function by hiding all that insecurity away from everyone, including herself.

And these days, if she thought she'd probably grown into herself, if she thought she was generally good at her job, that lack of confidence still lurked...quiet and completely camouflaged—at least until Mark Burton had shown up in her sector and brought it out, turning her right back into that teenage girl.

So she made it into the condo and she quietly closed the door, and she slumped back against the wall and slowly slid to the floor. First a snuffle, then a sob, and then that young teen was back, crying all the familiar feelings she'd thought she'd long outgrown.

Because Nick Carter was right. She'd gone downhill these past months. Her work was crap. But he'd thought this would help...

He must be thinking with his man-brain.

She'd ask for reassignment, that's what. Phoenix wasn't the only place for an American cheetah to thrive.

The thought speared through her. If at first she'd cried in desperate hurt, now the grief came from loss—of home, of years of longing. But she could do this. If Carter insisted on this partnership, she'd take whatever disciplinary action he meted out, and she'd leave—because as much as she wouldn't work with Mark Burton, she wouldn't work with the adjutant who put them together.

“Aah, Tayla.”

She startled; she had no idea when he'd come in and that alone infuriated her. That he stood in the doorway, dismay in his dark honey-gold eyes—that infuriated her over again. Too close to pity, that dismay.

“Get out,” she told him, her voice amazingly hard for all the crying she'd just done. She swiped away the remaining tears, through with them. “You're done with this assignment.”

“Am I?” he said, surprised.

“Yes. I'm calling Carter right now.” She spared him a glance, digging into her pocket for her slim phone.

Bemused, he said, “What if—” and then stopped and shook his head. He crouched beside her. “Put the phone away, Tayla. Talk to me.”

She spat rudeness at him. “Your bag's right there. Go for it.”

“Not until you hear me out,” he said, though his expression had gone a little flat, a little grim. A little hopeless. “Not until you *listen*.”

Some part of her grasped at that new expression like the hunting creature she was—grasped and pounced. “I've heard *enough*,” she said. “You can call Carter and tell him you screwed up. You fooled me for a few moments, but that's all you get.” She pushed away from the wall and stood, bouncing on her toes once or twice as she looked down at him—golden boy, lion child who couldn't take the lion and who had somehow lost his way while looking. “You're not my problem,” she said, and didn't care about the puzzlement that crossed his features. It felt good, that—not his reaction, but her own ability to do the right thing for herself, breaking free of the weight of years.

Later, she'd cry again. Because the feelings were real, and the attraction, the could-have-beens... those were all too real, as well. But the choice had been his all along, and she wasn't going to ruin herself for it.

“Bag,” she said, pointing. “Door,” she added, pointing to that, too. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

* * *

Mark bounded to his feet, startling her into a few tripping steps backward—but still graceful somehow, ever graceful. “Listen, wild thing,” he growled, and her eyes widened, “this has nothing to do with Carter.” Another step, and she was up against the arm of the couch, one hand lightly touching the wall. He’d cornered her, never smart—

But Mark was done with smart.

“Yes,” he told her. “That’s what he wants. But only because he sees...he thinks...Tayla, it’s about *us*. He said I’ve been blind, and he’s right. All this time, I never let myself...I mean, God, you were glorious. Didn’t you ever know? I was just a guy who couldn’t find his lion, and you...you were *everything*....”

She narrowed her eyes at him. The knuckles of her hand were white against the wall. “Right,” she said. “And didn’t you hide it well.”

“I wasn’t the only one!” he said with a sudden explosive intensity.

She laughed, and it had that bitter sound—if it weren’t for those white knuckles, he’d never have guessed from her voice, her expression, even her posture, that she’d been pressed back against the side of the couch. Her tall and leggy form, her speed and lithe strength...no match for the lion behind him. She knew it; she had to know it. She never blinked. “Nice,” she told him. “I’d hate to see what you bring for flowers. Thorns and poison ivy, maybe?”

God, she was quick. And Mark couldn’t get his act together, couldn’t think. Couldn’t get past the memory of her lips and her body and her responsiveness, not to do anything but take her arms and give her a wordless, frustrated little shake.

“Right,” she said again. “The man-brain at work. You and Carter. Nice try, but it wasn’t real. Now, leave me alone.” She shook him off—and her eyes widened when he didn’t let go.

“Not real?” he repeated, and it came out as a growl. “Not *real*?” He jerked her in close, pressing himself against her. No question about that, knees bumping, arms tangling, her breasts pressed against his chest; his erection trapped so firmly between them that he hitched a breath, struggled to retain himself. He watched her eyes go wide and stay there, pupils huge, lower lip suddenly trapped between her teeth. “Tell me,” he said, and barely managed that—stopping to clench his jaw, regain control. “Is that *real*?”

Her fingers dug into his back; she closed her eyes. “Please,” she whispered. “*Please*. Don’t make me sorry if I believe.”

“Believe,” Mark said, panting tightly. “It’s about...*us*....”

The end of words, then. The beginning of the fumbling—shirt over her head, bra gone in an instant, beautiful breasts in his hands. His shirt gone, too, flung across the room even as she ran fingers down his back, kneading muscle—pulling him in close enough to kiss and bite while they both quite suddenly worked at his belt. Her pants came down with a simple snap and tug; her underwear proved flimsier than he’d expected, but neither of them cared, and her hair tumbled down to brush his skin. She raked her fingers along his back, ribs and muscle and all the way down—he cried out with the sudden jolt of it and then again when she drew up one of those very long legs and wrapped it around the back of his thigh, jerking them close. “Tayla,” he said, a mere rasp of demand.

No question about that answer, her tongue and teeth on his neck, his ear, his lips, her hands

tugging him ever closer, her hips lifting, and there she *was*, just the right place, and he drove into her hard enough to shove her back onto the side arm of the couch. She took him in with a cry and fierce delight, arching back—and trusting him, letting him hold her while she brought both legs around him, changing the angles between them so when they jerked together again it was Mark who shouted out, who lost the feeling in his feet as sensation rushed down his spine and targeted the frantic place where they came together again and again, driven by Tayla's cries and Mark's disbelieving, clawing demand for release, all hot skin and exquisite sensation until Tayla's hands grew suddenly more urgent against him, reaching and groping and finally raking into his buttocks to thrust hard, a wail of release building in her throat and a reverberating in Mark's chest and mind and body as they tripped each other into wild splinters of hard pleasure.

* * *

For a long moment, she clung to him, clothed only where Mark's body covered hers, the couch fabric soft against her bottom, the scant hair on Mark's chest pleasantly harsh against her breasts and belly as they panted against each other.

And slowly, new sensations trickled in. More than his body against hers, *inside* hers, and the scent of him all over her. His trace...that, too, permeated her being, in a way she'd never felt before. And something else, too.

A completeness.

Not just the completeness of an afterglow with the man she'd loved since she was old enough to love, but something deeper. Something that swept through her inner self like a sun inexorably chasing away shadow, revealing pieces she hadn't even known were there—shoring up the weak spots, filling the empty places. Her skin electrified; her heart pounded with wild strength, absorbing it all. She trembled in it, ducking her head into the hollow of Mark's neck—torn between fear and exultation and the absurd impulse to cling to her comfortable way of things, to shout *I take it back!*

"No," she whispered out loud, and trembled again. "I take it all back. I don't want to be initiated. Really."

"Shh," he told her, and quite suddenly he was standing and he'd brought her right along with him, his arms wrapped around her back, tucking her up tight. Only for a few steps, enough to get around the end of the couch and lower her there, climbing in alongside her. "It gets easier. But it's rough when it comes late." *Initiation*. Of course. "Blame it on me. If I'd approached you all those years ago..."

She'd blame him, all right. He'd done this to her. He'd known it would be hard, that it would wash over her in a tsunami of foreign sensations after all this time. Finding lovers outside the Sentinels had been one thing, easily done. But inside the Sentinels? There had only ever been one, and he'd always been out of reach.

And now he'd done *this* to her.

She bit him. Not quite restrained enough to be called a love bite, right there where his neck flowed into his shoulder. Almost instantly, another wave of change hit her, sweeping electricity across her skin and a jumble of sensations and feelings within, his trace beating loud in a part of her mind that had never noticed anyone's trace before—a hard, thumping pulse of tingling scent. She arched into it, finding it both pain and pleasure—and, still within her, he stirred, relaxed satiation growing hard again. He sucked in a breath; her sense of him surged, became too much. She made a noise of dismay.

"Shh," he told her again. "It settles." He ran a hand down her side, a long caress. Soothing. He

found her breast and stroked that, too, then her hair, her back, sweeping across her bottom and down the back of her thigh to her knee, pausing there to hitch her leg up slightly and secure himself there. He stroked up inside her thigh; the sensations began to focus and he found that spot, too. Dismay became demand again. His mouth smiled against her skin. “Better?”

“It will be,” she told him, and breathed in the amazing new taste of him. “Show me again what’s real.”

And he did.

* * *

“I don’t suppose there’s any need to tell Carter,” Tayla said wryly, cat-stalking across the condo living room with the air-conditioned breeze running over fully exposed skin, enjoying the feel of it. Mark wasn’t quite as casual; he’d found his pants. He took the ice water she brought and lifted the glass to his mouth, gulping it down like a man in a sports drink commercial, right down to the drop of liquid lingering at his lower lip.

Tayla bent down and licked it off.

He grinned in predatory satisfaction. “You *have* changed.”

“I hope you like it,” she told him. “You did it.”

He threaded his fingers through her hair and kissed her, long and hard, before releasing her to stand back up. “You’re right,” he said. “Carter knows. Any Sentinel in the east side of Phoenix knows *someone* was initiated this afternoon.” And, more seriously, he added, “Is it settling?”

“It’s not comfortable,” she admitted. “But at the same time...”

“It’s *right*.” Mark nodded, and his gaze went a little darker, a little introspective. “I know. Though once, I hoped—”

“The lion,” Tayla said, understanding immediately. “You thought it might give you the lion.”

He looked up at her, startled, and shook off the darkness. “I’ve got a cheetah now,” he said. “What else matters?”

“You could have had the cheetah for a decade,” she reminded him. “But maybe it means more now. To both of—Mark?”

He’d stiffened, hand closing tightly around the empty glass in his hand. His eyes widened, slightly but definite; a muscle in his jaw twitched. Tayla reached for the glass—and whatever had grabbed him so suddenly now released him just as fast; he jumped slightly and lost the glass entirely, leaving Tayla to pluck it out of the air. “The park,” he said, looking dazed. “We need to go...”

Tayla glanced out the window at the darkened city. Nighttime was no problem for her, either human or cheetah—not with the enhanced night vision most field Sentinels shared. She wasn’t sure if the same held true for Mark.

He might as well have read her mind; he waved away the concern—but the gesture wasn’t quite coordinated.

“You okay?” she asked him. “What...?”

“The prescience,” he said. “I can’t really...the impressions don’t translate well. And they don’t ever come this strong—either your initiation spilled over or we’ve got a real situation...or both.”

“We won’t take chances,” she told him, pulling her bag up to the recliner and unzipping it to pluck out leggings, a long-sleeved T-shirt with a hood and black running shoes. She pulled on her underwear, found her bra, and within moments was more dressed than he was, still sitting there with his daze in place, watching her every move. “So let’s go. We’ll check out the park.” She pulled down

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