

Realignment

By karrenia

‘We’ve been swept up by more than mere circumstances, but caught up in the minutiae of day into night and the one after that. Sometimes I think that we don’t see the bigger picture that’s sitting there right underneath our noses all this time. How many of us are really free at the expense of another’s bondage?’

It’s not a realization that Panthera has come to in a flash of sudden insight, but when it did, it hit with all the force of a sucker punch to the gut.

She was determined that she would do something about it. This was heady thought which made her breathe catch in her throat and her pulse beat a little faster than normal.

If any kind of uprising or defiance of the brutal and tyrannical rule of Mumm-ra to be successful, it would have to take careful planning, and the assurance that all of those involved could be trusted to hold any and all information close to the vest.

And as much as she trusted her fellow cats, sad to say, some among them had grown too complacent, too accustomed to their place and privileges granted to them in the hierarchy among the animals to wish to change it, with the sole exception of Commander Leo.

She shuffled her feet and stood with her back against the wall of the holding cells with her arms folded across her chest, her tail swishing back and forth, contemplating how best to approach the leaders among the canines and other animals.

The individual that she had picked out to approach was a big muscular Doberman named Cato, and by virtue of both his toughness mental and physical had become the uncontested alpha male. As part of her ship-board duties she was responsible for making the rounds among the prisoners. Panthera was well aware that they were considered cannon fodder, the ones sent to do the grunt work, exploring any and all worlds that might possibly hold the stones of power that Mumm-ra

required to build some kind of magical sword.

It was still a prison sentence.

She waited until the right moment and then, with the apparent nonchalant shrug of her supple shoulders, she pressed the button that would deactivate the force field and allow her entry.

Panthera ignored the varying looks that her appearance caused among the other inmates of the cell; from apathetic, others hostile, others challenging, and some were simply curious.

Walking with her back ramrod straight and her tail curling behind her, she carefully schooled her face into an expressionless mask, until she found the one she needed.

“Cato, come with me. We need to talk.”

“You know my name?” he asked, his voice gruff but not entirely threatening.

“Yes. Why are you surprised?”

“I thought most cats thought everyone else beneath them. What do you want?”

“I’m not most cats,” she replied, “but if you want to learn more than I’d recommend you hustle. We don’t have much time.”

Cato, his eyes widening with surprise at her, had half expected to get a rise out of her, which he could use as an excuse to get the rest of the lads into a brawl. Even though he knew that it would be punished; it also helped to help build morale and made sure that bottled up emotions had a better outlet.

He was a bit disappointed but also intrigued that she did not rise to his baiting, instead he followed her out to the main corridor.

She reactivated the force field once they were both out of range.

“So, what gives?” asked Cato.

“Not here. Follow me and I’ll explain somewhere else,” she ordered, glancing around the cavernous space. “A little less noisy.”

“Afraid that we’ll be seen together,” he growled.

“In a sense, yes,” she replied.

“Well, well, now this does sound intriguing,” Cato remarked. “Lead on, little missy.”

Panthera whirled on him, teeth bared, “Whatever happens, let’s make one thing abundantly clear. Don’t ever call me ‘little’ missy’. You got that?”

“Clear as a bell, Ma’am,” Cato replied, outwardly with a smug grin spreading over his face, but inwardly a growing admiration for this particular female cat, as he spread his hands held parallel and open wide in the universal sign that meant no harm, no foul.

“Good, now that’s out of the way, come on, then,” she replied.

“Why are we talking in a supply closet?”

“It’s a big closet,” she replied absently, then turned and with an expressive look in her eyes, then with using a much more serious tone of voice.

“What I’m about to tell you has to be kept in utmost secrecy.”

“Why me?” Cato asked, although because he knew that there was much bad blood between their

two respective species, and it would take more than a few overtures and what not to overcome decades or even centuries of animosity; he had to admit that he was intrigued by this particular female and he had always admired her spirit, even though he had always been careful not to admit it.

“Honestly,” Panthera smiled. “Believe it or not, I’ve been watching you, assessing the possibility that you may want something that I’ve come to realize is more valuable than anything else we have.”

“What would that be?” asked Cato, somewhat flattered and wary of her intentions.

At first she did not respond right away, turning around to look out through the half-open door of the supply closet, with her fists clenched at her sides, her tail twitching in agitation and the rapidity of her thought; thinking how best to answer his question.

“The day will come, I’m certain of it when we will be able to speak openly about something that should not be tainted with the smell of treason. Finally she nodded and said: “The fight for our freedom.”

“You’ll forgive me, if that sounds a bit trite coming from one of your kind,” Cato replied.

“I know.” She paused and took a deep breath of the recycled ship-board air into her lungs before she answered his question. “I’ve come to realize that the right to live and die at any our own choosing, and not at the cruel whim of a despot, should be granted to all species.”

“Freedom!” Cato exclaimed in a deep, breathy gasp. “Do you have any idea what that would mean to my people? Even to all the other animals? Do you have any idea how long I have dreamed of it?” How long it has burned within us with a fire unquenchable, but knowing at all the time it was only a dream?”

“Too long,” she replied. “Everything can be taken from any one species or even any one

individual, but one can choose how to respond in the given set of circumstances; to choose one's own path.

“Let me get this straight, you didn’t call me out here to discuss our differing philosophies,” Cato remarked, standing with his arms folded over his chest and his ears suddenly rose to a fine point; an unspoken sign that he was trying to absorb both the nuances of the words as well as the underlying nuances. He had not risen to the position of leader among his own people without being able to read more than was apparent on the surface and what he’d seen and heard lately made him sense that that something untoward and important was in the offing. Aloud, he simply remarked, “You’re planning something, something big.”

“I am taking a risk in approaching you,” she said. “A carefully calculated risk, but one I believe must be taken.”

“I’m all ears,” Cato replied. “It’s the first step in order to accomplish our ultimate goal, and I also believe that you can be trusted with the secret.”

In a hushed undertone but with a powerful emotional tremor running through her voice, Panthera leaned forward and whispered in his ear, “We’re going to overthrow Mumma-ra.”

“Whoa! When you cats do something, you don’t think small,” he whistled appreciatively, with his ears flaring and his tail whicking back and forth with the heady thought of final, decisive action.

Panthera nodded. “Then you’re in. You must promise that you will not speak a word of this to anyone. If it gets out to those who might betray us to Mumma-ra...” she trailed off ominously.

“Trust me,” Cato said smugly.

“I do, as much as it surprises me,” she whispered, her hand placed over her chest, in order to get her emotions in check and bring her rapid breathing back under control.

Cato smiled, and then said, “Yeah I’m in, and you have my word of honor on that. In fact, I think I have more than a few contacts among the elephants and a few others that I can bring into this.”

“Are you certain of that?” asked Panthera anxiously, unaware that she’d been tapping the heels of her hand against the side of her uniform slacks. “If the secret gets out, we will be doomed before we even begin.”

Cato smiled and his ears twitched and he stretched out his paw and grasped hers in his own saying as he did so: “Allies, in a probably hopeless cause, facing overwhelming odds,” Cato mused. “Hey, I’ve always been a sucker for those kinds of fights. And, it occurs to me that it would take such times as these we are living in to make it happen.”

“Trust me,” Panthera said quietly, with a wry grin on her face. “The irony is not lost on me either.”

“Nor me,” replied Cato.

“That’s enough for now. It’s time I escorted you back to your holding cell. Just remember, “ she added. Until then, it’s important to keep up appearances of business as usual.”

Cato nodded,” and then added in a hushed but heady undertone, “In the meantime, I’ll sound out others among my own people and the elephants and others, and get back to you.”

“Good. Excellent in fact, but until then, I can’t make any more plans.”

“How can I get in touch with you?” asked Cato, the fur over his muscular arms bristling, both with the hope of taking decisive action and the lure of being able to make a difference in bringing about a change in the status quo.

“Take this,” she whispered. Panthera placed a flat oval silver disk into the palm of his hand.

“What is it?”

“It’s a microscopic communication disk. If I should ever need to get in touch with you, wear it in your ear, and press the green button. It will activate, and we can communicate with each other, since,” and she offered him a wry off-center grin, ‘we won’t have to resort to meeting in supply closets.”

“Sounds good to me,” Cato said as he flashed her a conspiratorial grin of his own in return.

“Until then, Panthera.”

Until then,” she replied.

Panthera finished up the remainder of her duties and was just about to go off-duty for the ship board equivalent of night, completing the last of her tasks in a kind of half-waking daze.

She was riding high on the initial success of her first steps in bringing those she believed could be trusted with the secret, aboard, and despite her own inner doubts, or preconceptions about other species, believed that Cato could be trusted to keep his promises.

At the same time, it was difficult to dissemble in the presence of Mumm-ra and those among his inner circle, especially Captain Tygus.

At the moment, they happened to cross each other’s path, just outside the corridor leading from the hangar deck to the crew quarters. He, too, was flushed with both excitement and the kind of arrogance common to the Tiger Clan.

Tygus had just come from reporting to Mumm-ra that he and his patrol had an almost eighty percent certainty that he finally zeroed in on the location on the last of the power-stones, and would be leaving to explore the world it was believed to be located on within the next forty eight hours of ship’s time.

She was feeling the effects of working a double shift and from her initial success with bringing the leader of the dogs on board; so when he asked her made a casual inquiry on how the grunt troops were doing, at first she believed that word had leaked out.

“Lieutenant,” he nodded a polite greeting to her as they both stepped onto the inside of the turbo-lift and pressed the button that would take them to the crew quarters.

“Captain,” she replied, automatically saluting, as suited their respective ranks.

“Anything to report?” he asked.

“No, the ship's systems and engines are both operating at established parameters, so we’re good to go.”

“Glad to hear that, because I can tell you, the big man is getting anxious about those stones of his. I hope that we find them soon, because otherwise I might just go beat my head against the wall of my quarters.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much, Sir,”” she offered. “You’ve got a hard head.”

“Yes, but the bulkheads in the crew quarters are much harder,” he replied.

“How close are you to locating the final one?” she asked seriously.

“Close enough. It’s difficult to tell, because of the ionic storms that periodically crisscross the planet’s surface, making long-range sensors problematic at best, but I’m fairly certain that we can navigate them and then send in the ground troops to do reconnaissance,” Tygus replied.

“Good,” she replied, uncertain even in her own mind, if her own roiling emotions and thoughts were as transparent as she believed them to be.

While the two of them had never really gotten along, even before she had begun to think seriously about the inequities of the system of iron rule underneath their lord and master, she had held a brittle respect for the older cat.

While that respect was not entirely gone, she still did not want to reveal anything of what was in the offing to him.

He was strong, loyal to a fault, brave and ambitious, of that there was no doubt. But those very qualities almost meant that he would not wish to rock the proverbial point, especially when rated so high in the current hierarchy as it currently stood.

As the turbo lift came to a halt at deck and the door irised opened, they stepped out. He turned to regard her, a curious expression in his dark eyes. Ones he did not care to read too much into at this later hour of the evening.

“Good night, Lieutenant, Panthera.”

“Good night, Captain Tygus,” she replied, wondering if he had noticed anything unusual about their otherwise innocuous conversation. If so, he gave no sign of it, and left to go to his own quarters.

When she was certain that he was out of both ear-shot and immediate sight line, Panthera dared to let out a sigh of relief that she had not even realized that she had been holding in, tapping the heels of her hand against her sides. Things and plans were culminating together at a heady pace, one that both excited and frightened her.

Should even the least little thing were to go wrong, all of their plans good shatter like a proverbial house of cards.

Panthera realized as she keyed the code for the door of her quarters, slipped inside and got ready for bed, that she was almost too keyed up to sleep. However, if she didn't get some soon, she

would be likely to fall over where she stood.

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Later that evening, in bed, having spent at least the first two hours twisting and turning, with her thoughts racing in every direction, Panthera had finally managed to get a decent night's sleep.

All the same, when she woke up and rolled over to check the readout on the chronometer that rested on her bedside table, it felt as if she hadn't gotten quite enough sleep, and her bed linen was wadded up in a ball at the foot of her bed.

Getting up and heading into the adjoining room to splash water onto her face and hands, she regarded her reflection in the mirror and tried to finger-comb some of the worst snarls out of her mane, thinking as she did so.

‘The last step of the plan is to bring around Commander Leo, and I think I know just how to do it, too. ‘

She sighed, and took a deep breath, before she said aloud. “Here’s to trying, rhymes with dying. But as a very wise cat once drummed into this stubborn head of mine, ‘Anything worth having is worth fighting for. I’ll be damned if I I’ll allow everything we’ve worked for go down without a fight.”

Chapter End Notes:

Also previously written for Zebra's request in the Live journal challenge 2012 Rare Women Exchange.