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Shifters

Crystal Jordan

WEREPLANETS



IN HEAT

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Wereplanets: In Heat

By

Crystal Jordan

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Dedication

For The Deanna Lee, who flogged me into finishing in a hurry. You provided such inspiration for this work. My other inspiration was a dear friend who declined to be named, but he was instrumental in coming up with one of the naughtiest scenes in the book. This one's for you.

Also, for Dayna, Eden, Emma, Jen, Diana, Shelli, Lori, and Nonny. A pleasure working with you, as always.

Chapter One

The snow tigress was in heat.

His nostrils flared. He could smell her desire from across the ballroom. Her scent called to him, tempting him to cast off the veneer of civility and take her in any way he could.

Mahlia Najla Mohan.

His mate.

Longing warred with sadness at the thought of her. Of their lost child. Pain exploded in his chest, choking him. *No*. He would not think of that. He could not. The agony would drive him to his knees.

"*Amir* Varad." His manservant's voice pulled him back to the present. Varad pasted a charming smile on his face, appearing the besotted male who would soon have his mate begging him for the surcease only he could grant her. And possibly conceiving an heir to the Vesperi throne. A new heir.

"Welcome back, brother." Taymullah's hand clapped on his shoulder.

Varad quirked a brow at the shorter man. And he was a man; the boy he'd left behind six months ago had grown into someone he hardly recognized. The last half turn had been a difficult time for all of his family.

Taymullah's face settled into serious lines as he turned to look over at his brother's mate Mahliah. "You have a great deal of work before you, Varad."

"I know."

He swallowed, his gaze tracking her movement. Mating on Vesperi was a complicated affair, only lasting from a woman's heat cycle to the next. Because he was here, no one would touch his woman. Had he not returned in time, it would have been a different tale. However, she could always choose to mate away from him. His gut clenched. *No*. Mahlia was *his*. Had been his since the moment he'd looked into her ice-blue eyes, so rare among his people. His treasure. She would have no other for as long as they both lived. Whatever tragedy they shared could not destroy the depth of emotion that had always pulled them together.

Gods, he was tired. Six months on a spacecraft for the trade run was more than he cared for, but he doubted the werebears on the planet Alysius would trade with anyone except him personally. Lord Kesuk was not a man to trust.

A genuine smile tugged at Varad's lips as he thought of the Arctic Bear clan leader. He wondered how the enormous man had fared after Varad had encouraged the tiny human woman to return to the werebear's caves. The man hadn't stood a chance. Lady Jain would have seen to it. Varad's grin widened. Mahlia would like Jain immensely.

And Kesuk would try to kill him when he returned next turn, no matter how happy the werebear lord was with his lady. It would be an interesting fight. Varad flicked a barely-visible piece of lint from his sleeve as he wondered who might be the winner. A tiger versus a bear. Yes, interesting.

He shook his head, marveling again that a spaceship could have drifted among the stars since before the Earthan sun had died. Two unaltered humans, Lady Jain and a young scientist, Sera, had survived a crash-landing on the werebear planet. Humans were extinct now, having no way to survive the harsh environments of the four colonized planets. Only gene-splicing with different animal species had made it possible for humans to survive at all.

He wondered how the two women would fair. Lady Jain had her new Bear clan to contend with, but Sera had insisted on journeying to Aquatilis, the planet that maintained the greatest level of technology from

old Earth. He suspected her choice had more to do with her fascination for a certain merman ambassador than her need for machines.

"*Amir*, your guests await you." His valet bared his teeth a bit at the word *guests*. Varad chuckled as he descended the curving staircase from the wide balcony. Unlike Taymullah, one of the few who had supported Varad's expeditions, his manservant disapproved of the trade relations with Alysus.

"Well, we shouldn't disappoint our *valued* visitors." A warning was in his tone. He was the king here, the *Amir*, and his wishes would be obeyed by all. If he bore the responsibility of leadership, he demanded the respect that came with the position.

"Yes, my *Amir*." His servant bowed and backed away.

Trade had always been maintained between Vesperi and the Harenan weredragons, but many had thought him mad when he set out to find the other two planets. It had been a risk, he admitted. But what was life without risk? None could deny that the new flood of goods from the werebears and merpeople were good for all four planets. No matter how much they might like to protest. He tried to cover his laugh in a discreet cough.

He sobered abruptly, the grin falling away from his face. Many of his people agreed that trading with the seemingly barbaric werebears was a mistake. They were a rough people, but he'd grown to respect them, especially Lord Kesuk. He sighed, the weight of his responsibilities riding heavily on his shoulders. He shrugged as though to shift the burden, but nothing could ease his troubles.

A sweet laugh rippled across the ballroom and he wasn't the only one who turned to smile at the source. Mahlia. Another challenge to face. Whether it pleased either of them or not, he would soon have her.

The room gleamed with white marble and wildly colored swaths of fabric. All the ostentation a feline could need. He worked his way across the vast ballroom to her side, nodding to his guests, noting the flashing scales of the Harenan weredragons, the imposing bulk of the first Alysian werebear ambassador, the violently colored hair of the Aquatilian merpeople. An interplanetary gathering, just as he had hoped. Excellent.

When he reached Mahlia, she was entertaining a merman and the werebear ambassador with a story about her inability to master the waltz as a child.

"*Amira* Mahlia." His hand stroked down the length of her bare arm, tracing the tan stripes on her creamy skin with a fingertip. He savored the feel of her, enjoying the way her servant had gathered her long cream and bronze striped hair on her head, leaving her shoulders bared in a laced black corset. One of her legs was exposed by the filmy deep blue skirt slit to her waist. His cock hardened, the need to have her fisting his gut. A deep breath dragged her scent to him yet again. Only because he was so focused on her did he hear the soft catch in her breath before she turned icy blue eyes on him. The natural black lining that surrounded all weretiger eyes made hers stunning.

"*Amir* Varad." She attempted to curtsy before him, but he quickly squeezed her elbow to keep her upright. Even after a turn, she was not accustomed to her role in society. Or perhaps she was still uncomfortable with him. It mattered not. His mate would not bow to him. She was his equal. The only true partner he had in his world. He inclined his head to her and after the briefest of pauses, she followed suit.

"Your *Amira* was just telling us an amusing story, *Amir*." The sub-bass rumble of the werebear split the silence, a white smile flashed in his dark face. The hammered metal circlet welded around his massive bicep, a mark of his standing among the Bear clans, glinted in the light from the glowlight chandeliers.

"Yes, the Aquatilians wish you all felicity in your return." The merman's nasal tone and sophisticated speech demonstrated the difference between his culture and that of the werebear. Only Mahlia could have charmed the two into maintaining a peaceful conversation for more than a few minutes.

"Welcome home, *Amir*." He turned to see Katryn, his mate's closest friend, approaching their group. Her dark hair rippled to her hips, and her golden skin was set off in a stunning white gown reminiscent of an Ancient Grecian toga. The weredragon was beautiful, but the first thing

one noticed about her was the purple scaling that crept from her wrists to her biceps.

Still, no other woman had ever called to him as Mahlia had. Anticipation tensed his muscles. Soon. Soon he would have her. Would have her legs about him as they rode each other, her slick heat tight on his thrusting cock. He bit back a groan, then traced a finger down the lacings of her corset. Her breath panted as her scent increased, surrounding him, commanding him.

The hunt would begin soon.

* * * * *

The hunt would begin soon.

Heat spun through Mahlia's body, a force she could not control. Need made her hands tremble and her legs shake. She turned desperate eyes to Katryn, but her friend just shrugged. Mahlia closed her eyes. No. No one could save her from this. She could not even save herself. Sweat beaded on her upper lip. When she breathed, it was only to pull in Varad's scent. Desire slammed into her, dampening her pussy.

The endless, relentless need of her breeding time tightened her core until she bit back a scream. Her breath panted between her lips. She didn't want this. She did not want another child. Ever. Losing her young was more than she could bear.

Her physiology did not care what she wanted.

Varad's hand splayed across her back, easing up over the naked skin of her shoulders. She didn't look at him, but she knew he craved her. The heat rose, tearing into her with the fierce claws of the tiger within her. A low snarl pulled from her throat, her fangs bared as her head tilted back against her mate's shoulder. His gaze clashed with hers, the slitted pupils in his golden eyes expanding wide, his nostrils flaring.

He could smell her need. His fingers moved to spread over her lower belly, pressing her backside to the rigid line of his cock. It burned through the thin material of their clothing. They locked together in that

moment, the animals buried just beneath the surface rising to strip them of anything but the instinct to breed.

Her control spun away, and it began. A tiger scream ripped from her and she jerked away from Varad. The whole ballroom turned to look at her, most of the tigers' lips curving into knowing smiles. She was beyond caring, beyond embarrassment, beyond anything but the driving need to have her mate buried deep inside her. Her eyes darted to the nearest exit. Yes. There. Run. Make him catch her.

She leaped forward, her legs burning as she pushed herself to get a head start on Varad. His roar sounded behind her, the crowd parting to allow them through. She slid through the arched doorway, the rich tapestries lining the walls blurring into a rainbow of deep color as she sped past. His pounding footsteps echoed behind her, gaining on her. Where could she go? She needed to go faster. *Faster.*

The dune-racers. She could get away on one of them. Where was the corridor that led to the dune-racer bay? Lust clouded her thoughts, made her want to run without a plan. Straight and fast and long until she was caught. The end of this game was inevitable. She knew it but she could prolong the anticipation. Adrenaline pumped through her system, the freedom of the hunt made her laugh. She broke left, rushing headlong toward the open 'racer bay.

Hearing the sucking pop of bones re-forming behind her told her that Varad had changed into a tiger. Once glance over her shoulder confirmed it. The auburn and black striped hair spread down from Varad's head to cover his body. Claws bit into the white marble floor as his paws hit the ground. The hard, possessive golden eyes locked on her as the graceful cat's muscles bunched and flowed, racing after her. Her womb contracted, juice pooling between her thighs. She hissed, facing ahead once more, pushing herself to greater speed. *Faster. Faster. Don't stop.*

"Ha!"

She'd made it to the bay. Now she needed a dune-racer. There, the blue glow of exhaust rolled from one of the 'racers. Her boot heels rang against the hard floor and her legs burned, but she couldn't stop—he was

getting closer, almost upon her. Sweat poured down her face, slipping down her chest and beading between her breasts. The corset bit into her flesh as she sobbed for air and her breasts almost spilled from the top with each deep breath she dragged into her lungs.

Flinging herself at the 'racer, the slit in her skirt allowed her to swing a leg over the side. Her hands grasped the handlebars and she twisted the left grip to accelerate. The bottom dropped out of her stomach as the 'racer shot straight up into the air, and then roared forward, heading right for the open bay doors. Varad's cat shriek of frustration echoed through the immense bay, drowning out even the 'racer's engine. She was almost free of the palace proper. The doors came closer and closer with every nanosecond.

Metal rang as a huge tiger's weight slammed down on top of a large hovercraft, his paws stretched forward in a leap. Her breath caught as she watched Varad change in mid-air to his human form. He was nude, the golden sinew of his muscles rippling as the fur retracted to reveal the subtle stripes on his skin. She screamed as he flipped neatly onto the 'racer behind her. It dipped under the added poundage, and she fought to control the machine so they didn't crash.

The Dead Sea curved to her right, a wide swath of underground water and the lifeblood of Vesper. Excitement spun through her as the amazing speed of the 'racer shot them out and across the open white sand dunes. The wind whipped at her hair, ripping it from its bindings to wave behind her.

"Mahlia." His smooth, cultured voice was a guttural growl in her ear, and a lightning flash of pleasure zinged to her pussy.

One of Varad's hands slid against her scalp, making gooseflesh erupt down her arms. She could feel the sharp points of his claws on her skin. He was almost feral. She had pushed him that far. Just the thought made her sex clench. His lips pressed to her shoulder, tongue laving the flesh. Then he bit her. Hard.

She sucked in a shocked breath and shoved her hips back to rub against his thick cock. All that separated her from him was the thin film of her garments; the bulbous crest of his dick teased her. Liquid heat rolled

over her in waves. The claws of his other hand raked up her thigh, and he fisted his fingers in her skirt to rip it away, letting it spin off into the wind. She gasped at the slight pain and the coolness on her naked flesh. His hands fitted to her waist, shoving her up to lean over the handlebars of the dune-racer. The machine wavered as she overcorrected. Gods, she couldn't crash them, couldn't die without knowing the feel of him pounding within her once more.

The blunt tip of his cock brushed against the lips of her pussy as he slid beneath her raised hips. Then he forced her down to the base of his shaft in one brutal thrust. She screamed as her inner muscles stretched and convulsed around his dick. She wanted more, harder, faster. Her hands clamped on the 'racer's handles, fighting to hold on to her sanity as pleasure slammed into her.

"Yes, Varad. Please." She breathed the words, doubting he could hear her over the 'racer's engine and the wind. He set a hard driving rhythm, hammering into her wet pussy. Her cat senses could smell the musk of their combined sexes over the rush of wind. Her heart pounded loudly as exhilaration twisted inside her.

I always please you, Mahlia.

His telepathic words stroked over her mind just as his hands jerked hard on the lacings of her corset, pulling it down until her breasts sprang free of the restraint. Cold wind puckered the tips and she arched as his hands rose to cup them, his fingers grinding her nipples, pinching them, pulling them hard. Her body bowed under the harsh lash of pleasure. She wanted it hard, fast and rough. The heat inside her built, screaming for all he could give her.

More. More. More.

Yes. His voice dropped to a silken purr in her mind, the calm before a dangerous storm.

His fingers dropped to wrap tightly in the corset laces, he used the leverage to pull her against him as he shoved his thick cock deeper into her. Her clit rode the cold metal of the 'racer as his hot flesh slammed into her from behind. She wanted to close her eyes and revel in the sensations exploding through her, but she had to focus on controlling their skimming

flight over the dunes. The dangerous thrill of it made the sex better for her, made her want him more, made the pleasure writhe like an untamed thing through her.

Varad, I'm going to—

Come for me. Be wild for me.

He roared as he ground against her pussy, his fingers jerking her down. Harder and harder. Faster and faster until he froze behind her, shuddering as his seed spurted inside of her.

Yes.

She threw her head back and screamed out her orgasm, her tiger's roar resonating against the dunes.

"Mahlia!" Varad's arms wrapped around her, and he leaped away from the 'racer seconds before it exploded into the side of a massive sand dune.

He rolled them over and over, away from the smoking fire. His body settled over hers to surround her, shelter her. He buried her face in his shoulder, big hand splayed against the base of her skull.

"Are you all right?" He pulled back, straddling her as his fingers brushed over her body, looking for injury.

"Yes," she gasped. The heat burning within her returned full force. She needed him again. *Craved* him.

She arched beneath him, lifting her hands to stroke over the stripes on his chest. His skin gleamed in the light of Vesperi's three moons. He was such a beautiful man. His auburn and black striped hair brushed his shoulders, and a thick loop earring studded his left ear. Unexpected in a civilized king. Dangerous. Sexy. Even in the night, her cat's eyes could see the details of every slope and plain of his muscled body. Her fingers brushed over his flat nipples, and they hardened under her touch. She swallowed, lust spinning wild in her, clouding her thoughts, bringing her world down to one thing, one need. To mate.

Varad, I need...

She couldn't finish the thought, her mind an incoherent babble of begging, desperate want. Her hips twisted against the sand and she snarled low in her throat, daring him to deny her, to claim her.

He extended the claws on one hand, slashing her corset to ribbons. Retracting his talons, he fisted his fingers in the tattered remains and ripped it from her body, baring her to his eyes. All she wore now were her long black boots. His gaze swept over her flesh in a heated caress before locking with hers. The gold of his irises bled to the corners of his eyes, his pupils expanding to see all of her.

He bent to suck her nipples into his mouth. She tangled her fingers in his soft hair, sifting through the bi-colored locks, pulling him closer. His teeth nipped at the swollen crests, making pleasure flood her pussy with moisture. Cool air brushed over her damp nipples as he trailed his tongue down her ribcage, circling her navel. Her breath sped up in anticipation, and she parted her legs to allow him access to her core. He bit the soft swell of her belly and she gasped. Settling between her thighs, his hard fingers shoved her legs wider for him.

A slow lick teased her dewy lips and clitoris. She panted, pushing closer to his mouth, needing satisfaction. He chuckled, flicking his tongue over her clit but not giving her the hard, insistent contact she craved.

Her fingers flexed in his hair, tugging hard.

"Varad!"

Your taste is lush on my tongue, Mahlia. Tell me you want my fingers within you.

"Touch me," she begged, sobbing hard. "Please, Varad."

He purred against her pussy, and her heels dug into the sand, shoving her hips up as her upper body bowed. Her pussy clenched tight on his invading tongue. His fingers pressed into her wet depths, stroking hard and fast, giving her just the kind of friction she needed. Her thighs shook as she rode the high edge of orgasm, and tears gathered at the corners of her eyes to slip down her cheeks. Excitement flashed through her, tingling over her flesh. She was so close she could taste the sweet bliss of it. He sucked her clit, and she screamed as pleasure hit her in a rush, orgasm fisting her pussy in rhythmic waves.

Oh, Gods. Oh, Gods.

It wasn't enough. Her mating heat pressed in on her. She needed his cock moving deep inside of her. Now. Her fingers dragged at his hair, pulling him on top of her.

Come inside of me.

Oh, I will, my Amira.

He lunged up, covering her with his long, muscled length. She gasped at the hot press of his flesh against hers. It had been so long since she felt this—six excruciating months. His chest slid against her breasts, and he shifted to guide his cock to her opening. Her breath seized at the slow, hot glide of him within her. He ground his hips lightly to stimulate her clit. She closed her eyes, hooking her booted feet under his buttocks to keep him tight to her.

He grunted as he sank deeper in her, but he stopped moving. Her palms pressed to his back, fingers curling over his shoulder from behind. His head dipped to sip the skin of her throat, just where she liked it. She purred in pleasure, but wild craving bit into her. Heat swamped her, made her hiss and arch beneath him, thrashing in the harsh grains of sand.

I can't wait, Varad. Don't tease.

"Tease?" He pulled back, a charming grin curving his lips. His pupils contracted into thin points when she stared up at him. She knew her own eyes would have no white around the irises. The pale blue would reach from corner to corner. Her claws bared and she raked them slowly down his back. His breath hissed out as his hips bucked against her.

Yesssss.

Her eyes closed as the heat slid over her consciousness, instinct taking over. Her legs tightened on him, her pelvis rocking against his hard thrusting cock. He was so big it almost hurt to have him inside her, even now. She loved it. She wanted it. They moved together, slick skin slapping against slick skin as a fine sheen of sweat sealed their flesh with each quick thrust. She could smell the spice of his skin mixed with their sex. His lips pressed to the side of her neck and he bit her. She could feel the soft prick of his fangs as he scraped gently. It was enough to shove her over the edge.

"Varad!" Her scream carried across the sand dunes.

His head bowed back and his fangs glistened in the moonlight. He roared his orgasm, riding his cock into her soft, welcoming flesh. His warmth pumped into her and her sex contracted to keep his seed inside.

And finally she relaxed, spent. Panting, she waited for the high to crash, for her heart to stop pounding. She pushed against his shoulders until he rolled off of her. Pulling her knees to her chest, she arched into a nimble leap, landing on the balls of her feet, the heels of her boots sinking into the soft sand. She turned away from Varad and faced the direction they had come. She couldn't see the bulbous points of the palace. It was designed to look like the old Earthan Taj Mahal. The building rose high into the sky, a beacon for travelers as the rest of the city was buried beneath the ground. They had gone much too far if she could not see its impressive heights. Her stomach churned in uneasy fear.

Are you certain you are well, Mahlia?

She jerked her head to the side, ignoring the concern in his tone. "I am fine."

More than fine, she was now in control of herself again as the overwhelming waves of mating heat receded in the cold reality of near death. Gods, she was such a fool. What had she been thinking to ignore the dangers involved in handling a dune-racer? And now they were countless miles from the capital with no way back. The sun would rise soon. She squeezed her eyes closed. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

And she was, in all likelihood, pregnant. Her stomach pitched at the thought. She would know soon enough. If she hadn't conceived, the heat would continue until she did. It was the nature of a weretiger. Then she would have the four short months of tiger gestation to brace herself for the terror of being a mother again. Tears stung her eyes. She couldn't do it again. Her breath escaped in ragged puffs. Gods, she wasn't strong enough to watch the life drain bit by bit from a tiny being who'd captured her heart. To see the genetic disorder so rare among the weretigers eat her child from inside out. She remembered the silky feel of Jeevan's skin, the milky breath as he cuddled against her. Nausea rolled over her, and she swallowed hard to push it back.

"How long do we have to get back before the sun rises?"

"A few hours."

"We'll never make it back in time."

"We must try. Rescue is not coming."

A bitter laugh squeezed past her tight throat. "No, you're right. No one will be looking for us. They'll assume we're holed up somewhere, fucking each other senseless in our quest to beget them a living heir."

"Mahlia—"

She slashed a hand through the air. "No. I don't wish to speak of this. Let's shift into tiger form; we'll move faster that way."

"As you desire, *my Amira*." His jaw clenched as his head dipped in a sharp nod.

Chapter Two

She was so lovely in the moonlight, but it couldn't stop the anger that licked at him for her insistence that they ignore Jeevan's death. By ignoring it, she let it grow like a wide gulf between them. His gaze followed her pale body, his cock twitching to life once more. He groaned. He should not want her again so soon, but it had always been so with them. No other woman could compare.

He growled, stooping to change into a tiger. The suction of bone and sinew popping into a new shape sounded loud in the quiet still of the desert. The sound was mimicked by Mahlia's change into her snow tiger form. Her long boots lay discarded beside her as they faced each other.

Watching her, he considered. He could obey her wishes and not speak of their lost son, or he could use the time she was trapped with him to his advantage. He dragged his tongue down a long fang, then stopped himself. He'd picked up the habit from Kesuk over the past three turns. He shook the thought away, focusing on his mate.

It was not your fault he died, Mahlia. Or mine.

Incandescent rage burned in her blue eyes as her tail lashed behind her. She pivoted on her haunches to run for the capital city, her long white and brown striped body gliding over the brilliant white sand. He pulled even with her shoulder but did not pass her. He did not want her to fall behind. Her safety was precious to him and he would not lose her to the scorching heat of the sun. If not for the near constant nightfall the moons provided by blocking the sun, Vesperi would be far too hot to inhabit. It

was too close to the sun. No human could survive under its blistering heat for more than a few minutes. They would be incinerated.

I know that.

Her telepathic voice was a tight, furious cadence in his mind.

Yet you are angry with me.

You left me! You left me here to cope alone.

You told me to leave.

The pain of that still reverberated through him, but he'd had six months without her to know that he had no desire to live that way. Her quiet strength was a balm for him, and he'd craved her every day he'd spent alone.

You wanted to go. You wanted to run away and I wasn't going to beg you to stay.

He snorted. *Beg me? You never acted as though you wanted to have anything to do with me. How was I to know, Mahlia? I am a king, not a mind reader.*

You didn't ask me to come with you.

Space travel is dangerous, Mahlia. I won't—

And your worry is greater than mine? You think I don't fear that you'll never return when you leave for half of each turn?

He continued as though she hadn't interrupted. *I won't risk your life. I won't lose someone else it is my responsibility to protect.*

Her stride faltered for a moment before she picked up her speed, stretching into a sprint. *Don't you see that you're losing me anyway?*

His breath caught. *Mahlia—*

She shook her head, pointed ears twitching. *What of this child? If we've made a—*

We have. And if not, we will try again.

Maybe we shouldn't. It is not unheard of for an Amir to have multiple mates throughout his life.

His roar sounded over the sand. *Never!*

Varad—

He leaped in front of her, whipping around so they stood face to face, noses nearly touching. His eyes locked with her, awareness spinning

between them as it always did. He wanted her still, again. Always. He made his thoughts low, coaxing, seductive. *Could any man please you as I do, Mahlia?*

She paused, her gaze sliding away. *No.*

A bare whisper met his mind, but he was satisfied. She could not consider leaving him. Pain banded his chest. He shook his head. He would not stand for it. Ever. Stepping aside, he jerked his chin in the direction of the palace, indicating that she continue.

She pressed forward and he fell in behind her, the fast rhythm of her smooth stride a pleasure to behold. *You will see our babe for a bare month and then off you'll go, disappearing into the ether for the Gods know how long.*

I do what I must for our people. Trade keeps us prosperous.

You need to also do what you must for our mating. For our family.

You think I neglect you?

I am not a mind-reader either, Varad. I think you don't care for my company enough to see me for more than a few stolen moments to roll in bed. I am merely a convenient bedmate. Even then, it is for but half the turn. What tigress would be satisfied with that?

He snorted. *You think this is convenient? If I wanted a bedmate, I could have any one that I desired.*

She hissed at him, but said nothing more. She was jealous. Good. It meant she cared, no matter what she pretended. He spoke nothing less than the truth. Sex was an easy thing, but mating? That was another issue altogether. Did she not know that he would do anything for her? Anything except let her leave him.

Still, she had not discussed Jeevan with him. For both their sakes, they needed to talk about this. Silence stretched between them while they ran as fast as their legs would carry them. Their breath grew labored, and his muscles screamed with pain. Every part of him ached and with each step agony slammed into him, racing up from his paws to the base of his skull. He knew not how many miles they had traveled. The distance before them stretched interminably. The dunes gave way to hard-packed white dirt and he breathed a momentary sigh of relief. They were getting close. Pointed spires rose into the sky, the golden tips coated to catch the

solar heat and power the capital. The sky began to lighten with the ominous beginnings of sunrise.

His gut tightened. Gods, they might not make it. No. They were too close to fail.

Hurry, Mahlia. He sent the command and picked up his pace until he drew even with her. Her pale blue eyes were dull with exhaustion when she looked at him. Her head dipped low with each stride, labored breath whistling out. *We are almost there.*

Just...go...

Her telepathy was barely above a whisper and his heart stuttered at how weak she sounded. He prayed as he had not since his son lay dying that there was a miracle for them. Go on without her? He snorted. Foolish thought.

I will not leave you.

Then...you will die.

I have faith.

I do...not.

Go Mahlia. He whipped his tail at the back of her legs. She hissed at him, but did not slow, racing for the gates of the city. Good.

Oh, Gods. The gates. He narrowed his eyes and saw that the massive metal gates were swinging closed as they did at every dawn. Fear hammered at his heart. No. He would not let his mate die. Not another life so precious to him. Never again.

Open the gates!

He shoved the telepathic command as wide as it would go. Surely someone would hear him and obey their king. The gates shuddered, creaking to a slow stop, only a hairsbreadth of an opening between them. Would the guards be able to reverse the mechanisms in time? His breath bellowed out as he ran, his legs shaking with fatigue, no longer landing solidly beneath him. He willed the gates to part with all of his might. They groaned and began to swing open again. Yes!

Run Mahlia! For Gods' blessing, run!

He had no idea how it was possible, but her paws dug deeper into the ground, and she sprinted even faster. The glow of sunlight began to

lighten the horizon, and they had but moments before it would kiss them with its deadly rays.

The gates loomed closer, and they were almost upon them. A few more strides would take them through. The scorching burn of the sun hit the back of his legs, and he yowled at the pain.

Varad!

He shifted to his human form, his bones popping back into place. Leaping forward, his arms wrapped around Mahlia and he lunged through the opening. They rolled, tumbling until his back slid against a solid stone wall. He groaned as Mahlia collapsed beside him, her white fur matted and filthy. His chest burned with every breath he pulled past his parched lips.

"We...made it. I told you...we would."

She growled but did not so much as twitch the tip of her tail. He reached out to stroke his hand down her back. A low, soft purr vibrated her body.

A resounding crash closed out the light in the tunnel between the gates and the city. Covered walkways with tiny skyholes would let in enough light to see by, but not enough to burn. The rest of the city was lit with solar-powered glowlights.

"Amir! Amira! Are you well?"

Two guards erupted from a side door. They knelt beside Varad, helping him to his feet. He hissed at the sting to the back of his calves. He tipped and leaned on the wall, his forehead pressed on his forearm.

"Varad?"

Mahlia heaved to her feet. She turned to the guards, lifted her chin, and they nodded, turning to run for the palace.

"What...was that?"

I...sent them for a healer. You're hurt.

He sighed, too weary to argue. Turning, he rested his back against the rough wall and slid down to sit, crooking his legs so the burns would not touch the stone ground. He tilted his head up and closed his eyes, another deep breath escaping.

A triumphant smile curved his lips. Gods, they'd made it.

* * * * *

I won't lose someone else it is my responsibility to protect.

Responsibility. A bitter laugh slipped past Mahlia's throat as she shifted into her human form. Just what she'd never wanted to be. Her father had passed his duty for her protection on to Varad. And happily so. What minor pride lord wouldn't want his daughter mated to the *Amir* of Vesperi? All her sisters had mated well because of her match.

She slumped down on the open hovercraft that carried them to the palace. Her head lolled on her neck as she watched the passing buildings. People stood in clumps, bartering, haggling, just as they would any other day. Some were naked, having obviously just shifted from their animal form. She yawned and turned away. She was so tired she could sleep for a full turn.

Varad lay with his back to her, a cloth slung across his hips while a healer bent over his scorched legs. Guilt swamped her that he suffered for having saved her. Her heart squeezed. Varad was a good man. She should be content with that, but she just...wasn't. It wasn't his fault. It was hers.

She'd never expected to love him or to be so crushed that he thought of her as a duty. He had mated to a naïve girl a turn ago, but so much had happened since then that the cocoon of security she had always known was now ripped away. Nothing could have prepared her for her role as *Amira*. Weretiger prides were political to an extreme degree.

Who sat beside whom at meals, who spoke to whom and in what order. What she wore, how she spoke. Everything was scrutinized and criticized or emulated. The only friend she could keep was Katryn. As a weredragon, she was separated from pride politics. Katryn's ambassador father negotiated with Varad and no one else.

The healer knelt beside her. "*Amira?*"

"Yes, how is Var—the *Amir?*" Straightening her shoulders, she struggled to sit properly, as befitted an *Amira*. The healer laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, forcing her back down.

"The *Amir* will be fine in a few days. His legs look worse than they are, and will likely not scar. He was quite fortunate."

"Yes. Fortunate." She sighed.

"Are you well, *Amira*?"

She nodded, serving up a wan smile. "Just tired. It was a long night."

Her eyes never left Varad and she considered her situation. He made it clear he wanted her, of that she never had any doubt. But could she live forever on the scraps of his attention? Half of each turn alone, ruling the planet by herself? Bombarded with questions and demands, never permitted a moment to relax. Was it worth it? If Varad returned her love, she'd have no doubts. If she had someone to count on, to depend on when everything fell to pieces, she would gladly make the sacrifices.

After last turn, after Jeevan died, Varad had abandoned her, leaving her with no one to share her grief. Varad had gone, and she'd been left to be the brave *Amira* her people needed. Her personal loss was Vesperi's public tragedy. Her hand rested low on her belly. Gods, why did it have to be so hard? Love shouldn't hurt this much. Shouldn't be coupled with so much crippling despair.

Varad leaned up on an elbow, glancing over his shoulder at her. She tried to smile but failed. He winced a little as he shifted.

How do you feel?

Better than I look, no doubt. He winked.

Clawmarks scored his back in wide swaths. She had done that, just as he had left behind bruises and wheals on her breasts and thighs. Mating was not a gentle process, and she stretched her sore muscles, promising herself a long bath when she returned to her chambers.

The healer squatted before her. "I can examine you when we return to the palace, *Amira*."

"I said I was fine."

"Of course, *Amira*. I meant to confirm that you are with child."

Her heart jolted. Dear Gods. How had this happened? Not again. She snorted. She knew how this happened. How Varad happened. Now that the healer had said the words, it wasn't just something that was

between her and her mate. It seemed so much more real now. So many expectations rode on this pregnancy. She couldn't just be pregnant, couldn't have her fears about the child's health, future and happiness without discussing it with advisers and making a public decree.

Licking her parched lips, her mind scrambled for a way to escape this. To run away from her reality. She cut off the thoughts. No. No turning back. This was her life. She was with child, she was mated. Acceptance was her only option. Her shoulders flexed, already feeling the weight of her responsibilities settling, a cage closing around her. If she listened closely, she could swear she heard the lock snap into place. Trapped.

The hovercraft jerked, throwing her forward. Her muscles groaned in protest at the sudden movement. She hissed out a sharp breath, squeezing her eyes closed.

"Mahlia?" Varad turned to face her.

She lifted a hand to ward him off. "Don't."

Don't pretend you care now. Don't pay attention to me for a few moments and then ignore me when your duty calls you away. Don't be concerned while you're with me and expect everything to be as you left it when you return. Just don't. But she kept the words back. It wouldn't help them, and he didn't deserve her discontent. He was just being...an *Amir*.

Pulling herself over to the side, she slipped off the hovercraft and stood naked in front of the palace. The craft was swarmed with servants who wanted to help her and Varad. They wanted to coddle them, but if either she or Varad allowed it, it would be looked down upon as a weakness. It didn't matter. She wanted to be left alone. She rolled her eyes at the double standard, but a small smile quirked her lips. Tigers were a peculiar lot, and they were her lot.

Varad's manservant moved to his lord's side, an ever-present frown in place. Taymullah watched this, then snorted and walked up to stand beside Mahlia, his hand grasping her elbow in support. "Stodgy old bugger."

She glanced up at Varad's younger brother. He looked so much like her mate, slighter perhaps, but with the same deep amber eyes, full lips,

golden skin and auburn and black hair. Why couldn't she have loved him instead? He was easy, uncomplicated...and she felt nothing but friendship for him. He'd been the first to make her laugh after their son Jeevan died. After Varad left. Without his knowledge of the inner workings of palace politics, she never would have survived. Varad would have returned to a revolution.

He grinned down at her. "So...interesting evening?"

Nudging him with her shoulder, she grinned. "Hold your tongue."

"I could, but I'd look ridiculous."

She giggled, lifting her hand to cover it with a cough. People would think her callous to laugh when her mate was injured. Lifting her chin, she walked inside the gleaming white building. Varad would return to his chambers and sleep. She was not needed and she craved a few hours of blissful slumber herself. And a bath. A long, hot bath.

Taymullah spoke to her as a low aside. "Do you need any assistance?"

"No. Your brother might."

"I suspect you'll see him sooner than I will." His wicked chuckle spoke volumes, and if they weren't in public, she'd have boxed his princely ears.

"Haven't you anything better to discuss than your brother's mating habits?"

"Certainly not. The whole planet is abuzz with rumors of a new heir."

Her stiff fingers folded over her belly, pain zinging through her at the thought of palace gossipmongers. "It could be a female."

"A female can grow old enough to breed a proper heir."

She snorted. "*Proper* indeed."

"I say only what is true, *Amira*."

"How is it that you are such a tease and so very practical all at once?"

He released a great sigh, his boots rapping a staccato beat on the marble floors. "A talent I learned at my elder brother's knee."

"A truer statement has never been uttered."

"Taymullah the Truthful. Shall I have a statue carved in my honor?"

"And where shall we put this statue, brother?"

They both jerked as Varad's low tone sounded behind them. Taymullah stepped aside, bowing slightly, a hand over his heart. "Why in the nude gardens, of course. So that my likeness could watch over the lovely ladies who were so educational to me as a child."

"A fitting place, I think." Varad's gaze danced with mirth.

Mahlia choked, biting her lip to keep from laughing. She recalled how her eyes had popped wide the first time she had seen the white marble statutes of women frolicking naked in the lower gardens. Varad had followed her outside that evening, and they'd made love for the first time at the foot of a voluptuous goddess.

Meeting Varad's gaze, she saw that he remembered as well. His pupils expanded and he stared at her lips, her breasts, and the thatch of hair between her thighs. Heat followed in the wake of his gaze, sliding over her skin. Her nipples hardened into tight crests, jutting towards him. Wetness flooded her pussy. Adrenaline hummed through her body, made the exhaustion fall away into nothingness. Gods, she wanted him.

Taymullah coughed into his fist. "Well, I believe the two of you have some...catching up to do. I'll see you at the first moonrise meal."

A small smile pulled at Varad's lips as he stalked forward, his smooth stride backing her into the wall. The gold of his irises bled out to the corners of his eyes.

"I—I should get some rest."

His bent his head to her throat, inhaling her scent. "Yes, bed is an excellent place for you."

"You should sleep too. You're hurt."

"Will you kiss it and make it better, Mahlia?" The wicked promise in his voice made it clear that he meant for her to kiss something besides his injuries. Her breath caught at the thought and her head tilted back. The slight roughness of his tongue flicked across the pounding pulse at her throat. She moaned, falling back against tapestries that lined the walls.

"Varad."

Yessssss?

He dragged the word out, a seductive stroke on her mind. Her hand lifted to slide down his smooth chest, the tips of her fingers tracing the light stripes that crossed his skin. She dragged her nails over his flat nipples, and they beaded at the rough contact. He hissed out a breath, leaning into her. The jut of his penis pressed to her belly, and liquid heat pooled between her thighs. Anticipation thrummed through her body.

His lips dipped to caress her collarbone. She tilted her chin up to give him better access. Her hands slipped around to press against his shoulder blades. A low purr souged from his throat. He opened his lips to bite her lightly. She moaned and he swallowed the sound in his mouth as he moved to kiss her. His tongue thrust in, hard and demanding. She met it with her own, her lips shifting beneath his. Her fingers curled into claws, raking down his back. His hips jerked, slamming into hers.

Yes. Please.

I love when you beg, my Amira.

He suckled her tongue, drawing her into his mouth. Lifting his hands, he cupped her breasts and tweaked the tips until they stood in hard points. Oh, Gods. She couldn't take it. Desire made her body throb.

Drawing back, he lightened the kiss. Teased her. Toyed with her. Broke away to spread kisses along her jaw, down her throat.

Her head fell back against the wall as she gasped for breath. "I'm dirty."

"And thank the Gods for that."

She grinned, shifting her torso to rub her nipples against his chest, loving the friction of his rougher skin on her sensitive flesh. "I *meant* that I spent the night running through the sand and I'm filthy. I can't go to sleep this way. I need a bath."

A dark chuckle slid from his throat. "Then we should make certain your needs are...satisfied."

But he stepped back, left her barren of his touch. She arched toward him, wanting. Just wanting.

After you, Amira. He grinned and tipped an easy bow before her. She huffed out a laugh. *Tease.*

“And you like it.”

Yes, she did. Pushing away from the wall, she walked to her door on legs that shook beneath her. Every step brushed her thighs together, stimulating her pussy. It was all she could do to hold back a moan. Her mating heat had ended, but the aching, relentless want still rode her. She was afraid that where Varad was concerned she would always feel this way.

The carved wooden door of her chambers loomed before her. She grasped the slick metal handle in her hand and pushed the door open. Unlike the glowlight illuminating the corridor, her servants had pulled the shutters on her windows to block the sun. She stepped into the gloom, her cat eyes quick to adjust to the lower lighting. Varad followed close behind.

“I want—”

“A bath? Yes, you said.”

Flicking a finger over a panel on the wall, Varad cued hot water to pour into the immense pool that was sunk into her bathing chamber. Steam rose in lazy curls within a few moments. Sitting on the edge of the tub, she pushed forward to slip into the hip-deep water. She hummed in pleasure as it lapped over her flesh. It would rise to just under her breasts in a few moments. She loved to bathe, loved the caress of warm water against her skin. Like most of her kind, she liked to swim in her tiger form as well.

She rolled onto her back and started with lazy strokes across the tub. Bobbing upright at the opposite side, she turned to see where her mate was. Varad sat on the ledge and dipped his feet in, but made no move to join her.

She swam back toward him until she could lay a hand on each of his knees. His eyes heated to the color of molten gold, zooming in on her floating breasts.

Her heart pounded until she could feel each thrumming beat throughout her body. “Aren’t you going to join me?”

“I think I’ll enjoy the view for a while.” He leaned back on his hands, casual, cool, calm. But his body betrayed him. His cock curved in a hard upward arc, the veins coursing blue beneath the thin skin.

She quirked a brow, grinning. "So long as you don't mind me doing the same."

"It's only polite."

"Mmm...polite. We should always be polite." She licked her lips, staring at his long penis. He had the most beautiful cock she'd ever seen. She wanted it inside of her. Her hands rubbed over his muscled thighs.

"You wanted a bath."

"I am in the bath." Each kick of her legs sent a stream of hot water to caress her already overheated pussy. If he didn't get in here with her soon, she was going to scream.

"So I see. Do you feel clean yet?"

A slow, hot smile pulled at her lips. "I'm not certain. Perhaps you should come see if I missed any important areas."

"Like where, for instance?"

"Well, my back."

"Your back?"

She nodded and slid back in the water, paddling her arms to stay afloat. He arched his hips and dipped into the pool after her. Thank the Gods.

"I do think I see somewhere you missed."

"Do you?"

He laid his arms along the edge of the tub, resting against the side. "Yes, come here so I can reach it."

Diving beneath the surface, she flitted over until she reached the side and exploded up to twine her arms around his neck. He laughed and pulled her in, his hands cupping her buttocks. Her breasts crushed to his chest. She closed her eyes for a moment, just to enjoy the feel of him.

"I thought you were going to see if I missed something."

"Ah, yes. Duty calls." Reaching back, he dipped his hand into a bag of cleansing sand. He offered her a handful and then took one for himself. He rubbed his thumb over his fingers to work up a lather. Then he stroked over the long strands of her hair, massaging her scalp. Gooseflesh shivered over her skin. She followed suit and buried her fingers in his striped hair. It felt like Aquatilian saltwater silk against her palms.

His hands dropped to slip down her back, the sand a sweet roughness on her skin. Would he—? Yes. His fingers dipped between her ass cheeks to tease at her anus. She gasped, pushing back against him. She squirmed as the grainy sand pushed into her ass along with his finger. He stroked her until the sand dissolved into a slick lubricant. Closing her eyes, she moaned, pleasure lancing through her.

“Very dirty.”

“Please, Varad. I need...” Her head fell back on her neck as her hips worked against his fingers. A hot thrill made her pussy tighten, clenching on nothing. Tension spun through her, and she panted. Oh, Gods. Oh. Gods.

“Yes? You need what?” He added a second finger, thrusting as deep as he could within her.

She didn’t answer but buried her face in his neck. Her ass bucked backward. She was going to...going to... Her breath caught as orgasm slammed into her and her body arched while hot pleasure lashed at her. He drove his fingers in her to draw the sensation out for her, until she shuddered and moaned.

He spun her in water until she leaned back against the edge of the pool, his hands lifting to bracket her shoulders and grasp the ledge. His knee rose to nudge her legs apart. Moving forward, he stroked his cock over her pussy lips. She gasped, tilting her hips to open herself wider for him.

“My turn.”

She wrapped her legs tight around his lean hips, her heels pressed to the back of his legs to pull him closer. He hissed and she froze, heart pounding. “Did I hurt you? Your legs?”

He shook his head and hitched her higher against the side of the pool, lifting her legs until her knees pressed to the small of his back. She pressed herself to him, the water sealing their bodies together. His cock probed at her swollen entrance and her eyes slid closed, enjoying the feel of his skin on her skin. He thrust into her, hard, fast, deep. She gasped. The angle was incredible. He moved and the water lapped around her, feeling like a thousand fingers caressing her flesh.

Each stroke hit her in just the right spot. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she held on tight. Her hips arched to meet his, to bring him deeper.

"Oh, Gods."

"Not a God, just a king." His low chuckle rumbled from his throat and sounded through the wide room.

Her head bowed back on her neck, and her pussy contracted around his cock with each thrust. "Don't stop. Please. Don't...stop."

He groaned and his arms corded as his fingers tightened on the ledge. "I couldn't."

Twisting her hips, she felt her orgasm gather. Sweat and steam dampened her skin and droplets slid down her body. The added sensation increased her pleasure, driving her on. Her claws extended to score his shoulders. She was so close. Her eyes slid closed.

Her pussy clenched tighter and tighter and every thrust of his cock made it better for her. And then the sensation broke. She sobbed as light exploded behind her lids. Her pussy flexed over and over around his dick. He tensed, going rigid against her. His hips slammed forward in a last jolting push before he groaned and shuddered.

She pulled him closer as he dropped his head to rest in the crook of her neck, both gasping for breath. Every ounce of tension leeches from her muscles, and she purred as he kissed her throat softly.

"We should get out." His voice hummed against her skin.

"I'm comfortable here."

He chuckled and pulled back. In one graceful move, he rose from the tub. Bending, he lifted her from the water, cradling her limp form against his chest. She sighed. Feline lassitude pulled at her, and she sank into a dreamy state of consciousness. He deposited her on her soft, wide bed and crawled in with her. It felt unusual to have anyone in bed with her. She'd almost forgotten what it was like to share her private space.

Varad lay between her legs, his chin resting against her belly. Desire for him filled her. Warm fingers that stroked over her body. His hair tickled her thighs. He dipped to kiss the swell of her stomach. Fine

saltwater silk sheets caressed her back, and she stretched her arms over her head.

"We need to talk about Jeevan, Mahlia."

"Why? It won't help anything. He's *dead*, Varad. My son is dead." Her voice faded to an agonized whisper as she spoke. Her body tensed as the pleased fog cleared from her mind.

"*Our* son."

She hissed at him, anger flashing hot through her. Why could he not let this rest? They achieved some semblance of peace and he kept pressing on a sore spot. "Fine. We should move on and just...heal."

"Have you?" The gold of his eyes expanded to the very corners. His fangs slipped past his lips.

"What?" Her voice was defensive, rude. And she didn't care. She jerked up and back, pressing herself against the headboard.

He sat up. "Moved on? Healed? Have you managed to do so? Because I cannot see the evidence of it."

Acceptance. She breathed deep. She had to accept. Wasn't that what she decided? And he was determined to ruin it for her. To force her to talk about...*no*. "Get out."

"Excuse me?" His brow lifted, incredulity flashing across his face.

"This is my chamber and I wish to rest. You've gotten what you wanted. I'm pregnant. So...leave. It's what you do best." Her face flushed and her voice shook. Her hands clenched and unclenched. Gods, she was so close to breaking. How did he do this to her? Only he could. She loved it. She hated it.

He stared at her for a moment, assessing. Anger flashed in his eyes, but he mastered it. His pupils contracted into thin lines, irises solidifying to round human orbs, the tiger within him firmly leashed. He blinked and she couldn't read anything on his face. His usually smooth movements were jerky as he stood and walked toward the door. Before he walked out, he turned to her once more, his body rigid. His long fingers clamped so tightly on the door handle, she heard the metal squeak.

"This isn't finished, Mahlia...but I have time, don't I?" Dark promise laced his low tone.

Crystal Jordan

Gods help her. She curled onto her side, tucking her knees under her chin. Wrapping her arms around her legs, she closed her eyes and forced herself to think of nothing. To remember nothing. To let the exhaustion of this endless night take over. Pulling in a slow, shaky breath she let herself fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter Three

Varad's bare feet slapped an angry rhythm against the cold marble floor. His fists bunched at his sides. Woe to anyone who tried to speak to him just then. He slammed into his chamber. The wooden door shuddered in its frame as it crashed closed.

He paced across the wide room, frustration making it impossible to relax. Damn her. *Damn* her. Was this how she wanted their life to be? Never working to overcome problems? Temper boiled in his veins. And damn her for making him lose control this way. He made logical decisions in his personal and public life, ruled an entire *planet* with a fair, even hand. Then he encountered her and went insane.

He snarled just thinking about it. Pain that was ignored festered, never healed. Who but he would understand her loss? Who but he would want her no matter what? Who but he would crave her for all the days of his life? He thrust a hand through his hair, gripping the still-damp strands. He could smell her sweet scent on his skin.

A knock sounded on his door and he hissed. Who was disturbing him in the middle of the day? Did no one tell them that cats were *nocturnal*? They should be abed. Like his mate was. Without him. He sucked his teeth in disgust, not at all surprised to find his fangs fully extended. His nostrils flared, catching the scent of his unwelcome guest.

Taymullah.

Care for a walk, brother? I can feel your rage through the door.

Why are you even awake?

It's a sad day when you even need to ask. Amused satisfaction filled his brother's telepathic voice.

Varad's lip curled. He did not want company; he wanted to stew in his own discontent. His breath huffed out. Insane *and* foolish. He could lay both at Mahlia's feet today.

His brother's voice turned cajoling. *Come along. We have seen none of each other since your return. A walk will clear your head.*

He jerked a saltwater silk robe from his bureau, tightening the belt as he wrenched open the door. Pulling back when he came face-to-fist with Taymullah's upraised hand, he swatted at his brother's arm. "Fine. I will come."

Taymullah grinned. "I'm so very glad of your sweet-tempered company."

He growled and said nothing as he stalked past. Taymullah clasped his hands behind his back, matching his older brother's stride. Varad could smell the sex on him. *Three tigresses?* He rolled his eyes.

"Where shall we go? The nude gardens?"

And recall the feel of the first time he slid hard and fast within Mahlia, her moans kissing his ear, her nails clawing his back as she screamed his name and came apart in his arms? He thought not. "The market will be fine."

"As you wish."

They walked in silence. The wide stairs of the main doors led to a sloping path down to the market. The underground walkways kept the sun out, even at midday, but the heat enveloped them and within a few moments they were sweating. A few industrious merchants were setting up for the first moonrise market. Colorful carpets littered the paths, baubles from Vesperi and their trade worlds mingled on sale carts. The smell of the Dead Sea and sand dunes wafted on the hot desert breeze along with cooking sweetmeats.

Taymullah cleared his throat, glancing at his brother several times. "Nice day."

Varad snorted, in no mood for idle chatter. "You have a purpose for this walk, brother. Speak your mind and be done with it."

Taymullah sighed. "I adore your mate."

Varad snarled, whipping around to slam him against a wall, bits of stone raining down on them. His fingers fisted in his brother's shirt.

"Careful, Taymullah."

"*As a sister.* I must say she does not look as happy as she should to see her mate."

Varad hissed, angered even further than anyone could see things were not right between them. What could he say? Nothing. That he couldn't fix the problem, couldn't find a way around or over it without some cooperation from Mahlia made frustration tear at him with a tiger's claws.

"She has never dealt with Jeevan's death. This turn was rough for her."

Varad choked on a bitter laugh. "I know it. She refuses to speak of it."

"You haven't dealt with it either, brother."

His shoulder went rigid, his fingers tightening on his brother's clothing. "I am *trying*."

"Try harder." Taymullah shook off the harsh grip, straightening from the wall.

Varad rubbed at the back of his neck, trying to ease the tension. Looking for a neutral topic, he thought of the upcoming evening and the work that awaited him. "I need to speak to the werebear ambassador about—"

"Done." His brother flicked negligent fingers through the air.

Varad blinked. "And the weredragon ambassador—"

"I'm speaking to him at second moonrise."

"And how will you deal with him?" His brows rose. When had Taymullah learned to negotiate with dragons?

"With a firm hand and a great helping of patience for a people whose behavior makes little sense and who don't care to explain." Meeting his brother's eyes, Taymullah shrugged. "I may have assisted your mate this past turn. As I thought you would have wanted."

"Trying to take my kingdom, brother?" He was only half-joking. It had happened before, and Varad knew that his absence would make it an easy thing. His heart contracted at what that might mean for Mahlia and their child. He hated to ask his brother, even in jest, but he had to know.

The smaller man stopped dead, turning to face him, a more serious expression on his face that Varad had ever seen. His brother dropped to his knee before Varad, a hand placed over his heart. "Never. I wish you, your mate and any kits you may sire a long, healthy life and prosperous reign."

He swallowed, shamed for what he had accused his brother of. But he would do whatever it took to protect his mate. "I see."

"There are two people on this planet you can trust without question, brother. I am one of them. Your mate is the other, though she may not know it." His brother smoothly regained his feet and turned to continue their walk.

He cleared his tight throat. "Thank you."

Taymullah glanced back when Varad did not immediately follow. An easy grin split his features, made his amber eyes dance. "I have no desire to be an *Amir*, but I will do what I must in your stead to ensure you have a throne to return to."

"Taymullah the Wise." He chuckled, falling into step beside his brother.

"That would be a statue for a different garden, I think. Though, if my likeness is to populate the planet, I would prefer it to be in the form of wee kits to frolic at my feet."

"Is there a mate you have in mind to bear these children for you?" Mahlia would love to meet the woman to claim a permanent place in his mischievous brother's affections.

"Mmm...no. But I will keep testing them until I find just the right one. Don't worry, brother. I take my duties seriously."

He laughed, clapping Taymullah on the shoulder.

* * * * *

There was a purple dragon wrapped around the pillars that supported the silken canopy over Mahlia's bed. Its great black eyes stared into hers when she awoke. She sucked in a shocked breath as she bolted upright, her heart racing.

"Gods, Katryn! Are you trying to kill me?" Her hand pressed to her chest.

No, but since you don't have your mate in here with you, I thought you could use some company. She unwound her long body from the bedpost and slid with reptilian grace to the floor.

"You're supposed to ask permission before entering."

The dragon snorted, stretching onto the windowsill. The shutters were wide open to let in the moonlight. The second moon already hung heavy on the horizon. The dragon twisted, popping and reforming into Katryn's human form. Her smooth cinnamon skin contrasted with her ebony hair. The purple scaling on her arms and thighs glinted in the mellow lighting.

"I did ask, *Amira*, but you were not coherent enough to answer."

"How did you know Varad wasn't here?"

"I saw him leaving the palace with Prince Taymullah near first moonrise."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh." She lifted her delicate nose to sniff the air. "He was here, but not in your bed. *Tsk, tsk.* Waste of a perfectly good bed, in my humble opinion."

"Humble, ha." She hugged her knees to her chest, propping her chin on the bony plateau.

Katryn's long hair shifted to pool in her lap as she looked out the window. Her voice was deliberately casual. "You always supported his decision to trade with all the colonized planets."

"That was before—"

Katryn's dark eyes flashed as she turned back to face her. "Before you had to take some part in what that meant for your planet?"

"So it's my fault?" Mahlia's shoulders tensed, waiting for her friend's response.

Katryn huffed an impatient breath. "Why are you so eager to blame anyone?"

"Can we talk about something else?" Desperation sounded in Mahlia's voice, and she didn't care. She couldn't do this now. Or ever. It was enough that she was dealing with her *current* pregnancy.

"As you wish, *Amira*. But if you'll take a small piece of advice from someone who loves you and wants what's best for you: talk to Varad. He needs you as much as you need him."

She shifted, uncomfortable. "Does he? I'm not so sure."

"I am. I would give half my scales for a man to look at me the way he looks at you. And that is all I will say on the matter."

Relief flooded her, and she released a huge sigh.

A coy smile curled Katryn's full lips as she turned back. "So, tell me...how was the mating ritual?"

Mahlia laughed, then sobered to put on her primmest *Amira* voice. "I do not reveal the details of the *Amir's* sex life."

"Oh, come now. Let me live vicariously. Is he as good as his reputation says? It takes at least twice to be a true judge of these things. So..."

"Katryn!"

She opened her mouth to respond when she froze, her head cocking to listen. Mahlia lifted her sensitive nose to sniff the air, straining to hear as well. Varad. Her heart seized at the thought.

The door pushed open as an enormous tiger stepped in. He flicked a glance at Katryn. She stood, bowed and padded on silent feet out the door, closing it behind her.

Mahlia lifted her chin. "I was talking to her."

You'll be talking to me. His voice went silky, dangerous in her mind.

The great tiger stalked forward, its golden gaze locked on her and she swallowed. He ran his tongue down a long fang, fierce passion in his eyes. The smooth feline grace couldn't cover the barely leashed violence. His claws bit into the silk sheets as he leaped onto the end of her bed. His eyes never left her as he moved, forcing her to lie back as he stood over her. Her fingers rose to sink into the warm fur at his neck. His head tilted

back and he began to change, and within moments a naked Varad lay nestled between her spread thighs. Her fingers buried in the soft hair at the nape of his neck.

Her body reacted, dampening, loosening as she arched beneath him. Her knees rose to clasp his hips through the saltwater silk sheets. His buttocks flexed, pushing his erection against her heated pussy. Desire roared like a greedy wildfire through her, burning everything in its path.

He rolled away, leaving her barren, cold, aching for more. She curled to her side, squeezing her thighs together in a desperate attempt to ease the relentless need that throbbed there. He sat on the side of the bed, propping his forearms on his thighs.

He twisted to glare at her, his pupils thin slits of anger. "I will not be distracted. We have yet to finish our discussion from earlier."

Discussion? The words struggled to register in her lust-filled mind. *Jeevan*. He wanted to talk about their son's death. Nausea pitched in her stomach, and she felt as though she couldn't breathe.

Make it stop. Make the pain stop. Please, Gods. That's all she'd done for the past turn. One day at a time. One breath. One moment. Anything but confront the fact that her son, her sweet child, had been ripped away from her life by an accident of fate. Her hands fisted at her sides, nails biting into her palms.

She closed her eyes, agony rolling over her in a suffocating wave. "I can't...I'll just start yelling at you again."

"So yell, scream...just do *something* but remain angry. It won't help you to hold it all in."

"No."

A low snarling hiss issued from his throat, and she swallowed, scooting back against the headboard. His hand whipped out, caught her wrist in an iron grip. His eyes were full gold, the tiger stalking her. She panted, excitement and fear sliding through her.

Varad?

"You know what happens to those who don't please their *Amir*?"

She licked her lips, her blood pounding hot and wild in her veins. He pulled her to him, easy strength overpowering her. Digging her heels

into the mattress, she tried to resist, but it was a half-hearted effort. Her pussy was on fire, cream oozing from her depths. Her body screamed for him to take her. Hard, fast, deep. Now.

Oh, Gods. What would he do to her? She'd never seen him this angry. Never pushed him this far.

"I—I..."

"You refuse to speak to me, Mahlia. This I cannot tolerate." A sharp tug flipped her facedown on his lap, her hair brushing the floor beside the bed. Her wrists were caught in his firm grip at the small of her back. Blood rushed to her head, and she felt a giddy anticipation balloon in her chest. His palm stroked over her backside, and she moaned.

"Oh, Gods," she whispered, her body tensing against his legs.

A sharp slap echoed through the massive chamber. She jumped as flames licked over her skin. His palm landed hard against her ass, alternating cheeks, falling in an unpredictable rhythm. Just when she relaxed, another slap would fall. Her sex clenched, aching to be filled. She arched up into his hand, a dark pleasure she couldn't define exploding through her.

Then it stopped, and she was left shuddering, confused. Wanting more.

"Do you like this, Mahlia?"

Her breath sobbed between her lips. "Yes."

His fingertip skimmed over her sore skin, making her gasp as the sensations skittered over her hot flesh. He dipped between her buttocks and she froze, waiting. One finger swirled around her anus.

Yes. Please Varad.

He lifted her, tossing her onto the bed with careless ease. His weight pressed her deep into the mattress as he settled on top of her, behind her. His cock nudged her ass and she arched beneath him, spreading her legs wide. Shameless abandon ripped through her.

"*Please Varad,*" his voice mocked her as his breath caressed her ear. He slid a hand around her stomach, lifting her hips to dip his finger between her legs. He parted her pussy lips with rough fingers, flicking the

tips against her rock hard clit. His fingers swirled in her depths. A low purr dragged from her throat.

His cock thrust into her anus, a slow push that stretched her past bearing. Pleasure-pain lashed at her, her ass too tight on his driving cock. Her fingernails extended into claws, tearing into the expensive sheets. She pressed back against him, wanting more, *needing* all he could give her. He moved in smooth, hard strokes, burying his dick deep within her ass again and again and again. His fingers matched his cock thrust for thrust until she was screaming. She was so full, so desperate for more. Sweat slid down her face, and her arms shook as they tried to support her.

The muscled ridges of his stomach spanked against her hot backside, the slap of his flesh meeting hers loud to her sensitive ears. She loved it. Moaning, she writhed beneath him. Heat wound through her, drew her muscles tight.

Then he stopped. She sobbed in protest, shaking with her need.

His smooth, wicked voice sounded in her ear. "Do you want more? Would you beg for it?"

"Yes, anything Varad. *Yes.*" Her breath shuddered out as she gasped for breath.

His cock pulled out and slammed deep. His fingers flicked over her clitoris. The dark magic of his tone seduced her as surely as the pleasure twisting through her.

"Do I please you as no other?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes, orgasm gathering in her pussy. A few more strokes and she'd go over. Oh, Gods *yes*.

"Say you'll talk to me."

Her tongue barely wrapped around the words. Anything to make him keep him from stopping, to make him move. She would die if he stopped again. "Yes."

"Are you not my *Amira*, my queen, the jewel of my kingdom?"

"Yes. Yes. *Yes.*" Starbursts exploded behind her eyes, her muscles locking as she came.

A tiger's roar sounded behind her, echoed by her own high-pitched, animalistic scream. She threw her head back, fangs fully extended

as the tiger within her sprang free. She shuddered over and over, Varad pumping within her, dragging out her orgasm until the world went black and she collapsed, spent.

* * * * *

Varad loved this view. The rapidly cooling air caressed his bare skin, and he stood with a forearm braced against the open window, watching the last fading rays of the sun being swallowed behind the moons. A great sigh slid past his lips. Gods, he was tired. And no closer to resolving his problems with his mate than he had been the day before.

She still lay on the bed sleeping. Her pregnancy would sap much of her strength over the next few months. He could hear her slow, deep breaths and smell the fragrance of her soft skin mingled with the lingering scent of their vigorous sex from the night before.

Hopeless exhaustion pulled at him. He wanted to give up, give in. Closing his eyes, he dropped his chin to his chest. He was so tired of fighting her, fighting to preserve their mating. It would pass, he knew. The endless longing he had for her was too deep-seated, too essential to his being for him to ever let go. He shook his head.

"Mmm...Varad?" Her sleepy voice pulled him from his weary thoughts. He turned to see her push herself upright, sweeping her hair out of her eyes. She slipped to the side of the bed and gathered the sheet around her, tugging it over her breasts. The silk pooled at her hips, exposing the sweet curve of her backside as she stood. Waiting, he watched her walk to him, the sheet parting to reveal her long, slim legs with each step. He purred at the sight, desire kicking him in the gut. His cock hardened, throbbing.

She yawned as he folded her into his arms, her cheek lying on his shoulder. His hand swept up the soft, soft skin of her back. She dropped the sheet to let it pool around her hips. Her palm cupped his bicep as he pulled her other arm over his shoulder, slipping his finger down the silky underside of her arm.

"Mahlia."

Tensing against him, he knew she waited for him to push. Again. The sadness of this moment spun between them, and for once she didn't fight. She swallowed. "I know I promised, but..."

"Are you angry that he died, Mahlia? Or angry that I left?"

"Neither. Both. Stop it, Varad." She shook her head and tried to pull away.

He tightened his arms. This was it. Now or never, he'd reached the end of his endurance. "I cannot."

Her fingers bit into his shoulder. "Why? *Why?* I did everything I was supposed to do Varad. Isn't that enough?"

"No." Both of their breaths sped as agitation rippled through them.

"I hate you!"

He flinched back, pain ripping through him. Closing his eyes, he turned away. "That is unfortunate, my mate."

"Stop reminding me." Her hands crossed to clench the opposite arm.

"I cannot help what you are to me, Mahlia."

Her voice broke. "You can! You're the *Amir*, you can do anything."

"Except cut out my own heart, my love." Agony exploded deep within him, and each breath was a painful rasp of air.

Her head shook, making her striped hair fly wild around her shoulders. "I am not your love. You don't...you *can't*. You left us like we were nothing to you. Don't pretend now that it's convenient for you."

Grief settled cold and heavy on his chest, forced the air from his lungs. "I never left Jeevan, Mahlia. I was here through all of it, by your side, and his. Every. Single. Moment."

Her arms folded around herself, and she swayed on her feet. "I know. I wanted to hold him so much. I couldn't...I couldn't."

The memory sliced through him, flaying his heart, his soul. He groaned, closing his eyes. He remembered. Gods, he remembered everything. At the last, even the lightest touch had made Jeevan scream in pain. So they had stood on opposite sides of his tiny bed and watched as their babe had drawn his last shuddering breath. A low keen of pain had erupted from Mahlia's throat as she'd hit her knees, curling into herself

and rocking. Varad had stared for a moment, but it was too much for any father...for any man. He had turned and walked away, his steps picking up speed until he was running as fast as his legs could carry him, the scream of a tiger's roar echoing down the corridor as he went.

Nothing had drawn them together since.

He turned to her, closing his hands around her arms. She jerked back, tears swimming in her beautiful blue eyes. Her lips shook and compressed into a soft line. Then her face crumpled and she broke, the tears finally falling. She collapsed against him.

Sobs wracked her body as she pounded her fists on his chest. "You just left us. You didn't care. His body wasn't even cold yet when you flew away without a backward glance."

Shock slammed into him, exploding in his mind. His hands bit into her arms. "You truly believe that? *I loved him too*. I miss him every single day. There's a hole in my heart where Jeevan should be."

She let go, crying so hard she gagged. No more hiding her anguish, no more pretending to carry on in stoic silence for her people. She screamed with her grief, and it tore at him. He pulled her tight against his chest, emotion so deep it threatened to swallow him ripped through him. Salty moisture filled his eyes, and he held his mate to him, needing her soft body and sweet strength.

Spent, she lay limp against him, hiccupping sobs shaking her slim frame. "I can't do it again, Varad. What if—what if it's our genetics that don't combine and this child has the same defect? What if it was no accident of nature?"

His hands brushed through the long strands of her hair. "We will do it because we must. If this babe has the same defect we will love him or her for the time we have together. It is that simple and that difficult."

"Such cold logic." She huffed.

He snorted. "Love has no logic. Love is insanity."

"Love, *ha*."

Could he say it? Outright, no subterfuge? Yes. She needed the words, and he needed to say them. Still, his throat constricted. "I love you. I always have. I always will."

Her jaw jutted stubbornly. "Varad—"

Sighing, he tipped her chin up and forced her to look at him.

"Perhaps you should see it from my point of view. Did you never think to ask? I left you to do what must be done because I trusted no one else to do it. I had to leave. To do my duty. I *trusted* you to do the same. There is no one else I would as easily trust my people to, my throne to, my heart to. Only you."

Her eyes widened, wary surprise flashing through their pale blue depths. She said nothing, just stared up at him.

He swallowed, forced the words out. "I died every day without you, knowing the one person who could understand, who would feel as I did, could not be with me. If it makes me cold, calculating, then I confess to it. I never meant to hurt you, Mahlia. If you believe nothing else, believe that."

She glanced away, another tear slipping down her pale cheek. Her eyes clenched closed, and she whispered, "I believe you."

The tight band around his chest snapped as relief rushed through him. Finally. Finally something to give him...hope. That they could make it through this. He loved her so much it was a physical pain at times. A life without her would be no life at all.

Thank the merciful, benevolent Gods.

He cupped her jaw in his palms, stroking his thumbs down her cheeks to wipe the moisture away. She leaned into his touch, pressing her hands to his chest. Her fingers idly circled his nipple and he sucked in a breath, desire punching him. His dick hardened at even the simplest touch from her, no matter how serious the moment. An ironic smile twisted his lips.

She stared at his chest, watching her fingers move as she toyed with him. "I—I'm scared Varad."

"So am I."

Tilting her head, she glanced up at him from the corner of her eye. "You are?"

"Of course." What sane man wouldn't be? Only a fool would remain unruffled when all that mattered to him hung in the balance.

Would she accept that they belonged together regardless of the pain they might experience? Had he convinced her? Bearing his soul to this woman was a trivial thing if it worked.

She wasn't alone.

The thought, inane as it was, ran through Mahlia's mind over and over.

She wasn't alone. Varad was scared too. Somehow that made it...easier to admit. To face. To get through this new pregnancy and pray to the Gods for a happier outcome. Pulling in a deep breath, she felt as though she was surfacing from a deep swim in the Dead Sea. Like the heavy water had closed her in darkness and someone had reached out and caught her before the tides ripped her away.

Varad. Her eyes closed. Gods, she loved him. And...he loved her too. Sweetness bubbled up within her, and a smile burst over her lips. He *loved* her.

He grieved for their babe too, suffering in solitude as she had. Smiling through the rage and pain as she had.

No more. No more of that for either of them, ever. She squared her shoulders. It was right that they have each other. No one would ever know what they had been through, how they had survived. They were good for each other. They needed each other. The rest would take care of itself.

His hands stroked up and down her back, comforting her. Even that light touch was enough to make her shiver. Glancing up, his golden eyes swirled with the carnal heat that spun between them. Her sex tightened, drenching with moisture, and she gasped. She splayed her fingers wide over his chest, and he leaned closer, a rumbling purr vibrating under her fingers.

I crave your touch, Mahlia.

"You crave my touch?" Sliding her hand between them, she wrapped her fingers around his cock. Squeezing, she worked up to the bulbous crest and rotated her palm over the head. His eyes drifted closed, and his face flushed with pleasure.

"Yes. Touch me."

Dropping to her knees before him, she continued to pump his dick in her fingers. She wanted to taste him, to suck him. She licked her lips, a teasing grin playing over her face as she looked up at him. *What about my tongue, Amir? Do you crave that as well?*

He sucked in a harsh breath, his pupils expanding as he watched her. He cupped her jaw while the other hand toyed with her hair.

Locking her gaze with his, she started to change, knew the color in her eyes bled out to a solid blue. She focused the shift, let her tongue become rough and textured, stroked it lightly from the base of his cock to the tip, swirling it around to dip into the tiny hole. The salty tang of his juices slipped over her tongue.

"Mahlia," he gritted out her name, a warning, a plea.

His fingers fisted in her hair, and his hips bucked, thrusting his cock to the back of her throat. He snarled, hovering on the edge of feral. Her thighs tensed. Seeing how she could push him to the limit made her so wet. Heat fizzed in her veins, made her heart pound. She loved it. She wanted more.

"Mmm..." she hummed around his shaft and purred deep in her throat.

Gods, Mahlia. His groan reverberated through her mind.

Come for me.

Moving with the lightning fast reflexes of his tiger side, he flipped her over onto her back. "Come for you? Not just yet."

She gasped, arching beneath him. His hot flesh burned her front as the cold marble floor seared her back. Shuddering at the exquisite contrast, she lifted her legs to wrap them tight around his hips. "I want you, Varad."

"Say you love me. I want to hear it." His finger threaded through her hair, his eyes meeting hers straight on.

She swallowed and her heart stilled as she met his gaze. Tears welled in her eyes and her lips shook as she tried to smile at him. Her voice came out a soft whisper. "I love you, Varad."

His breath hitched, and he closed his eyes as though he were savoring the sound of her words. She lifted her palm to stroke his strong jaw. *I love you, Varad.*

Tightening her muscles, she tucked her ankles under his ass. He dipped his head, his lips caressing hers in a slow, soft kiss. He licked his way into her mouth, tongue stroking hers. Her pussy spasmed, empty, aching, wanting. She moaned into his mouth, excitement simmering through her. Her heart raced, sweat beading on her skin. Suckling his tongue, she bit down lightly. He groaned, his fingers tugging on her hair, brushing over the back of her neck. She shivered at the contact as chills spread down her arms.

His cock probed at her damp pussy, entering just a little then retreating. Teasing her. She slipped her fingers into his silken hair, loving the texture against her palms. His scent filled her nostrils. Varad. She immersed herself in him: the feel of his skin on hers, the taste of him in her mouth, the hot masculine smell of his body. She craved it the way he craved her.

Look at me, Mahlia.

Her gaze met his, blue on gold. Her breath caught. The heat in his eyes was hot enough to burn. He entered her in one long, unhurried push. Her pussy stretched to accommodate his length. He pumped into her, slow and hard. The moment spun between them, passion rising higher and higher until her muscles screamed at the leisurely pace he set.

"Please Varad. Faster, harder, something. Anything."

"Anything?"

"I need—"

His dick slammed into her, and she arched to meet him thrust for thrust, their gazes still locked, still together as they rode the storm. Together, yes, perfect. Yes. Her orgasm gathered slowly, rising like a tide within her. Heat sizzled, burned, then roared through her until she bucked against him. She was so close she shook with it, need exploding deep in her belly. Sliding her hands to cup his shoulders, her fingers clenched, nails biting into his flesh as her excitement expanded. He reached down, fondling her clitoris, flicking over the sensitive nub until

she cried out. Tingles raced over her skin as she flashed over into orgasm, coming in a rush so hot she thought her body couldn't contain it.

Varad.

"Mahlia."

She watched his eyes lose focus, turn inward as he came, his hips jerking as he shuddered over her, in her. Her pussy clenched again in a small orgasm, and she flushed, moaning. She panted, her muscles relaxing one by one until she lay limp beneath him.

She sighed as he pulled away. Stretching cat-like, she purred as her muscles bunched and flexed. His arms surrounded her, lifting her as he carried her to the bed. She drifted in a dream-like state for a long while, feline satisfaction coiling through her.

She lay curled against his side, her cheek pressed to his chest. She could hear his heartbeat, steady and strong just like him. His hand splayed over her lower belly, and she felt the familiar flutter of fear. Her eyes closed but she confronted it. Yes, she was afraid. Yes, she didn't know what would happen next. But Varad was here with her, and they would face whatever might come together.

She was strong enough for this.

And she would soon welcome a child into the world. A smile curved her lips, the first shimmer of joy spreading through her.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For this. For not giving up on me."

"Never."

Her eyes opened, and she traced an idle finger over the stripes on his chest. "I'll miss you when you leave."

He lifted her hand to his lips. "It will be difficult to miss me when we're closed up in a flying canister of metal. I suspect we might try to kill each other. Won't that be fun?"

Jerking back, she sat up to stare down at him. Shock flickered through her. "Wha—"

His arms folded behind his head, a smug grin curving his mouth. "Taymullah is old enough to reign as regent while we're gone. And fully

capable of assuming command. I'll speak to Lord Kesuk and try to convince him to trade with Taymullah in my stead next turn. I think my brother would enjoy Bear clan women. They are...buxom."

"You had best not know anything about their sexual prowess from personal experience."

"I was trading for several turns before we met, my love." He held up his hands, innocence wreathing his handsome face.

She hissed at him. Innocent, ha. Not her Varad.

He heaved a long-suffering sigh. "As I was saying...if anyone would understand the need to protect a mate and young, Kesuk would."

"So would you." She laid her palm on his cheek. "You don't have to do this. I—I know why you have to leave, and I support you in this. I can stay."

"But I want you with me. I want to see my child grow. I don't want to miss any of it. Not one more moment with you or my heir." His fingertip brushed over her stomach before trailing up to swirl around her nipple. Her breath caught as he tormented her, a tiny smile pulling at his sensuous lips.

She swallowed. "I love you."

His serious amber eyes met hers, all teasing gone. "And I love you. If...if our genetics don't mix and we cannot have a child together, then I will declare Taymullah our official heir."

"Varad—" He would do that? Give up the possibility of any child, for her? Emotion banded tight around her chest, squeezing her throat closed.

"You are my heart and soul. I will have no other."

She cupped his jaw. "Nor I."

"Then come back down here." He crooked a finger at her, the playful smile back at full force.

Wrinkling her nose at him, she grinned. "Lead on, *my Amir*."

"Yours. I like the sound of that. Of course, that means you have me for the rest of your life."

"I think I can handle that."

Wereplanets: In Heat

"Yes, we are well matched, are we not?" He laughed, rolling her beneath him.

Her arms slid around his neck, sweet contentment wrapped around her heart. "So you keep telling me."

"And, of course, I was right all along."

"Show me how well we fit, *Amir*." She mated her sex to his, lifting her hips to rub against him.

An arrogant feline smile curled his lips. "My pleasure."

"And mine."

The End

Author Bio

Crystal Jordan only began writing about a year ago, after she finished graduate school and needed something to fill the hours that used to be eaten away by homework. What started as a hobby has quickly become a new career. She now writes paranormal, futuristic, contemporary, and erotic romance. Additionally, she is a member of RWA and its erotic romance chapter, Passionate Ink. She also belongs to the award winning author's resource website and forum RomanceDivas.com, where she serves as a moderator and Paranormal co-liaison.

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