

* *Lady Aibell Press* *

MATE HUNT



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by

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CHAPTER ONE

“There are some things that you never forget, no matter how old you become.” Gwini tugged the brush slowly through Mira’s black-tipped mane. “I just wish you could understand how important this is. It would make matters so much simpler if you submitted to your fate instead of complaining about it.”

“I don’t want a mate—not yet.” Mira scowled at the reflection, wincing when the brush caught in a tangle of tawny hair. How it ended up in such a mess she would never know. Unlike Gwini who always appeared to be perfectly groomed, Mira had resigned herself to always looking as though she had just been dragged through a bush backwards and then tossed in the nearest pool. With lush fur and ink dipped tips she could have been as beautiful as her sibling if she ever managed to find a way to comb her mane into some form of co-operative state. “I’m not ready to settle down with a mate and children.”

Great creator, children! As if anyone who knew her could ever foresee her as a mother. Please. A wild thing would have taken better care of cubs than she ever could. Out of all of the Tygra’s in the settlement, she was the last one any in their right mind would ask to cub sit.

Trees. Climbing rocks. Exploring to the very edge of the perimeter just to see what new delights lay beyond the safe confines of their home. Those were the joys of her life, not younglings.

“What you want and what your body is ready for are two different things.” Gwini threw the brush down on the bed. “I felt the same way when it was my turn to enter the forest for the hunt, but it worked out. These past few years with Jyrn have been some of the happiest I have ever known.”

Mira’s lip curled in a deeper scowl, her sharp canines exposed. Jyrn. If any male had deserved to be removed from the mate hunt it was that weak willed excuse for a Tygra. She had never known one like him. No matter what her sister wanted Jyrn backed down and let her have it. So much for the hunt being a way to find the strongest, most compatible mate. If that had been the plan, it had failed

miserably with him.

She had never even heard him growl, not in the three years since he had been claimed as Gwini's mate.

"I know you don't think much of him," her sister said as if reading Mira's mind.

"Gwini, that skinny male of yours jumps at shadows. How can you expect him to help you protect your young, when you have them, if he can't even stand up for himself against the local rogues?" Mira nodded toward the window. "I've stood there and watched as those un-mated males do everything shy of tweaking his ears, and he's let them. How can you stand it?"

"Some males are made for fighting and others are more the intellectual type. Let's be honest, I have quite enough of the hunting instincts in our bond to make up for his lack."

Mira frowned, running one set of long claws through her fire touched mane.

"Besides I don't know why you have a problem with him," Gwini said. "He's my mate, not yours."

Mira turned, giving her sibling a long, hard look. Gwini could have had her pick of the males. With her soft golden red fur, the long mane of hair that curled down to her waist and deep sapphire eyes, she attracted the attention of any male with a pulse when she walked through the settlement. Like all of their kind her body fur was short and silky, covering Gwini's skin like a wrapping of velvet revealing the sleek well-formed figure beneath. She could hunt, stalk, wrestle and still had all the protective qualities needed in a good mother, so when she had paired up with the settlement book worm it had been the shock of the year.

"It's just as well that one of you can fight, or he'd have lost you to a challenge within a few days of the mating taking place." Mira tugged one set of claws across the bedding, her tail snapping through the air in angry twitches. "There's no way he could have defended you, and the rogues know it. They even come after me now because of him."

Un-mated males.

They could be a problem, more so when there weren't enough females around to sport with. Not that they ever got as far as mating—the rough and tumbles at least kept them partially under control until the time of the hunt.

When they entered the forest the rules changed.

The forest changed everything.

It lay beyond the walls of the settlement. Wild, untamed, filled with dangers—or so the keepers of the lore told them. Beasts that were not seen anywhere else lived among the tall trees and large plants. Creatures that would hunt and kill a Tygra if they had even half the chance; and that place, with all its dangers was where the young of the colony became adults at last.

Even in all of her daring explorations at the edge of the colony Mira had never dared to break the rules concerning the forest. That was the one place she had no desire to enter.

“They’d be coming after you now no matter who I was mated to. They’re nothing but walking hormones, and you know it. All bluster and no bite. As for why they are coming after you, it’s because they can smell you. You’re pheromones have kicked into gear; that’s why your name has been pulled out for the hunt this time.” Gwini smiled, shrugging off the complaints. “You’re more than capable of keeping them under control. I’ve taught you how to fight, so did our mother. If you have a problem with the rogues and you don’t think you can handle it, cry out for help. They know they are not allowed to force you outside of the hunt.”

“And that’s another reason I don’t want to enter that damn thing.” No bite, not yet at least. During the hunt their bites would be all too real, and their claws unsheathed ready to defend their chosen mates from any male that came too close.

Why would she need one of those damn rogues to defend her?

Gwini was right, she could take care of herself and did not need a mate for that. Well, most of the time she could. When it was one on one, or two on one. More than that and she tended to err on the side of caution by avoiding the rogue pack completely. Besides, most of the trouble came from the rogues themselves, and not from other sources.

“Ah, you want to pick your own mate, without answering to the call in your blood? Silly cub. Don’t you know it was that sort of foolishness that almost destroyed our people generations ago? If we forget what we are and turn our backs on our heritage, our nature, we will be no better than those who caused the first of the upheavals.”

Cub, she had not been a cub in years. Just what was so wrong with the idea of her choosing her own mate without taking part in the hunt? Did they really think that the world would end if she stepped outside the traditions that chafed at her very soul? Nonsense, complete and utter nonsense. There was no way that things were going to tumble into the abyss just because one female refused to enter the hunt.

“That’s just legend,” Mira said “Foolish tales told to youngsters so they won’t question why the hunt still takes place.”

“Not according to our historians. There are records of this, ones kept in the parliament building.”

“Have you ever seen them? Do they actually exist, or are they just another way of keeping us all under control?” Mira demanded, fixing a harsh gaze on her sister. “I mean has anyone ever seen them?”

“Jyrn has.”

Mira blinked, opening her mouth to speak only to find she lacked the words. Jyrn had seen documents that were that important? Why would anyone trust such a weak male with that type of information? The wrong look from a rogue and he would spill his guts in order to save his own life.

What a waste.

“Are you sure that he’s seen them and he’s not trying to make himself seem more important?”

“Are you accusing my mate of lying to me?” Gwini snarled as the hair on the back of her neck rose, and her tail snapped through the air.

“No, I’m not. I was just thinking aloud.” Gwini should have been paired with a strong, alpha rogue. One that would father healthy cubs, provide for her when she was nursing and not rely on her to be the hunter of the family. Just what had happened in the forest to make her choose Jyrn no one knew except Gwini and her mate, and neither of them was willing to discuss it.

“I don’t want to ever hear you put my mate down again, is that understood?” Gwini’s gaze narrowed on her younger sister. “He may not be the type of mate you would have wanted to see me with, but that doesn’t change the fact that he and I are life mated. I expect to hear you speaking more respectfully about him in future. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” Mira whimpered, backing down. The last thing she needed right now was to end up in a tussle with Gwini.

Slowly the tension eased from Gwini’s body, the violent snaps of her tail turning into a slow snaking through the air until the last of the anger vanished from her brilliant eyes. “Now sit down and think this through. We’re Tygra’s, our entire species are hunters. Can’t you accept it? This is how we were designed. We have this drive to find the right mate and have children. Even with the boundaries secure, we know that our world could go through another upheaval at any time and we will be right back were we started, struggling through the rubble trying to rebuild.”

“Designed by the mythical elders. Those wonderful beings who raised our people up from their low status, invested us with the ability to walk on hind legs, speech and the written word.” Mira grumbled as she curled up on the bed, reciting the litany she had been taught as a cub. Bad enough that she had been brought up by Gwini over Jyrn, now she had to sit through a lecture. “They left the planet a millennium ago. No one even knows if they ever existed beyond the few bones scattered here and there. Another set of cub tales.”

“You know better than that.” Her sister reached out, cuffing her quickly behind the ear. “I should wash your mouth out with soap and water for disrespecting our creators like that. I’m not sure what’s gotten into you of late, you never used to be like this.”

Mira grimaced. Soap was a horrible creation. Trying to clean it from her fur took forever, and the taste was disgusting. Just why Tygra's ever used the stuff was beyond her. It was hard enough to get a Tygra to step a washing pool. And why would they when they could relax and groom each other?

A wet Tygra could be a miserable looking sight.

"I'm just nervous about tonight, that's all." Mira winced and edged further back on the bed, rubbing at her throbbing head. The creators, beings that had lived on their world long before the Tygra's, the ones responsible for their creation, what nonsense. "So you really do believe we evolved from household pets?"

"I'm not sure, but there is evidence of another species that lived here before we did, before the first set of upheavals that rocked our world." Gwini settled down on the edge of the large, unmade bed. "I know it's hard to accept sometimes, but we had to have come from somewhere. Our scientists are still trying to piece together the truth from the stories we have been told and the scant evidence that is scattered over the planet. It's not easy for them. How would you like to be one of the people looking for an answer that might not even exist?"

"If it got me out of taking part in the hunt I really wouldn't care." Mira growled, turning her back on her sister. The whole idea of entering the forest tonight infuriated her. She had spent the best part of the last three months searching for a way to avoid taking part in the hunt only to find nothing. Neither a hint nor sign of a way she could legally be exempted from the ceremony.

"Now you're just being foolish. The hunt really isn't that bad when you think about it. You might not even find a mate in this one and you're strong enough to fight off any male that doesn't take your fancy." Gwini brushed one long clawed hand through Mira's hair. "You're strong, Mira. Don't you ever forget that. If you find a male who is stronger, then accept him. If not, take the mate you want."

"And if I don't see one I want?"

"Then you walk out of the forest at the end of the hunt without a mate for another year. If you're strong enough to deny them, then you'll have earned that right and no one is going to question you. Our ways may be savage, even dangerous at times, but they have served us for many generations now. Each year we're stronger than we were the year before, and have had no major problems for the past twenty years."

"Oh yes, no problems, not unless you count having far more males than females in the settlement. Which means that I have to deal with the damn rogues every time I step foot outside our apartment." Mira scowled. "I haven't had a moment's peace from those beasts in the past two months."

If they weren't stalking her as she walked outside, they were trying to pounce her to the ground and force her into a very intimate tussle. The sort of contact that left her wondering just what would happen during the hunt. It did not seem to

matter just how much she denied what was going on. Those touches, their growls against her neck, the firm but teasing bite into her throat offered a hint of what might happen once she entered the forest.

No, she had to shut the images out.

They were just rogues, males without a mate, and she wanted nothing to do with them. And as long as she kept them at a distance, she would be fine.

“I don’t see that as a problem. Males tend to be more prone to accidents than females; the numbers will eventually balance out.” Gwini curled up on the bed, draping one arm about her sister, pulling her close. “Besides you’ll have a dozen males fighting over you tonight. What female wouldn’t want that? You’ll be the center of attention with all of those young bloods, the rogues, each one doing everything in their power to attract you.”

It should have been the high point of her life, so why did the very thought of the hunt leave her shuddering in a mix of fear and disgust?

CHAPTER TWO

“You’re not excited by all of this?” Filia curled up on the warm grass next to Mira, relaxing in the soft glow of the sun. “I can’t believe that. Tonight is going to be the biggest night of our lives, and you’re trying to tell me you’re not the least bit thrilled by the anticipation of it all?”

“Why would I be? You know full well I’d avoid entering the hunt if I could.” Mira growled, digging one long claw into the dirt. No matter where she went there was someone preparing for the hunt. Did no one else care just what they were being forced into? “Gwini would never forgive me, and she’d turn me over to the pack leaders herself if I tried to run.”

“It’s not such a bad thing, Mira. I don’t know why you’re dead set against the hunt. Our people have been choosing their mates this way for centuries now. Just think about all those delicious rogues, each one vying for your attention.” Filia purred, stretching out slowly against the soft, new grass. “Like that large one, you know the one I mean, the black and tan male with the scar on his arm. He could hunt me down any time.”

“Kyrnt?” His name came to mind all too quickly. Kyrnt of the rogues, the one with the golden eyes and determined walk. He was the only one in the mixed pack that refused to leave her alone. At least she had been able to frighten the others off from time to time, either by force or threatening them with the council, yet neither worked against Kyrnt. No matter what she tried, she could feel his gaze on her every time she stepped foot outside the sanctuary of her home.

Until today.

Like the rest of the rogues he would be preparing for tonight. Strange, the thought left her both relieved and disturbed at the same time.

Who would he leave the forest with?

Perhaps Filia, or another like her that really wanted to take part in the hunt. Her stomach clenched at the thought of him picking another.

Great Huntress, why should she care if he picked someone else? So much the better for her that way. He would no longer follow her around, sniffing her out at every chance he had. The thought should have left her relieved instead of fighting an upset stomach.

“Is that his name? I’ve never dared get close enough to ask.” Filia sighed. “He’s haunted my dreams for the past year, ever since I hit maturity point. If he picked me for his mate I’d not attempt to fight, not even for show. Just one look from him and I’m about ready to purr there and then.”

“You’re bad.” Mira rolled her eyes in disgust. “He’s just a male. He’s nothing special.”

“Yes, for Kyrnt I’d turn bad, if that really is his name.”

Mira shuddered. She’d come outside to avoid talk of the hunt and the probing questions from her sister only to walk right into another set, this time from her best friend. “I think it is, not that I pay any attention to them.”

“How can you ignore them?”

“I just do.” A lie, but one that worked for now, and normally saved her from many embarrassing questions. “It’s the best way.”

Mira rolled onto her stomach, trying to enjoy the feeling of the warm sun against her back. The small pieces of cloth she wore across her breasts and loins did little to impede the soft caress. Old enough to look like a fully mature Tygra, old enough to mate, not old enough to demand the right to walk her own path. The conflicting rules that governed their kind left her frustrated at the best of times.

“Don’t you ever dream of what it would be like to have a mate?”

“No.” Mira snapped.

“Hmm, you said that very quickly.” Filia nudged her. “Come on, be honest. Don’t you ever lie in bed and wonder how a mate would touch you. What their fur would smell like, how their tongue might play across the back of your neck just before his teeth grabbed you and he—”

“No, I damn well don’t! Sheesh. I’ve got better things I can spend my time on than daydreaming about some over muscled, empty headed, mate hungry male all night.” Mira tried to shut out the images that Filia’s words brought to mind. Kyrnt and his intense gaze, the commanding strut to his walk, the way he always seemed to be able to find her. “I’ve no interest in taking a mate, or being claimed as one, and I will be walking out of the forest tomorrow morning without one.”

“You have to be one of the strangest female’s I have ever known, Mira. But I still like you.” Filia grinned, arching her back as her tail slithered out across the grass, her long claws digging into the grass.

“What are you planning on doing?” Mira leaned up on one elbow, fixing her friend with a stern look.

“Oh, I think you know very well what I’m about to do.” Filia’s striped tail

twitched back and forth slowly as she lowered her hindquarters to the ground.

“We’re too old for that.”

“It’s practice, you’ll need to be in shape for tonight.” Filia’s pink tongue peeked out from between her full lips. “What are you afraid of? That you won’t be able to dodge little old me?”

“Filia...” Mira warned, her body tensing.

“One.”

“I’m not in the mood for this.”

“Two.” Filia grinned, baring her small sharp teeth.

“I’m warning you.”

“Three.” In a blur of orange and black stripes, Filia pounced across the small patch of grass, her claws pulled back as she aimed her front paws at Mira’s chest.

“Brat!” Mira rolled, quickly coming up onto all fours.

“Yes, and your point would be?” Filia swiped at her, forcing Mira to dart backwards across the grass.

“You’re an adult, we both are, we shouldn’t be acting like this in public.” What if Gwini or Jyrn found out about this? She’d never here the end of it. “We’ve got to keep up appearances.”

“Wrong. We’re not full adults until tomorrow morning, and I intend to enjoy our last moments of adolescence, even if you’re too stuck up to relax and have a bit of fun.” Filia tumbled into the still protesting Mira, bringing her to the ground in a tangled heap of fur and tail. “Besides you need to lighten up.”

“Maybe I’d be able to if I didn’t have to take part in this damned hunt tonight.”

“Yeah, of course you would.” Filia rolled her eyes. “You’ve been uptight for the past six months, ever since you came into heat.”

“I am not in heat,” Mira protested.

Filia leaned up on her hands, looking down into her friend’s eyes. “Oh yes, you are, Mira. I can smell it, we all can. The only one still denying the fact that you’re ready for a mate is you. And by tonight you’ll either have accepted it, or you’ll be left for another year lying to yourself and denying what has been going on.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Are you ready?” Gwini ran her claws through Mira’s hair.

“No, but I wasn’t aware that it mattered.”

They were waiting, all of them. The unmated males. The eager females. Each one now watched the sky, searching for the first light of the moon to touch the edge of the forest as the signal for the hunt to begin. The females would go first, darting into the tree line, given a scant half an hour head start in order to find a good place to wait for their chosen mate, or defend themselves from an unwanted male’s attention.

“Mira, it’s time. We both know that.” Gwini wrapped her arms about her younger sibling. “I was nervous too, when it was my turn. It’s perfectly normal to be uncertain, even afraid.”

“I’m not. I just don’t want to...” A pair of golden eyes fixed on her trembling form, his scent swamping her senses, silencing her protest.

“Yes, you do. You’re just too afraid to admit it.”

No, she wasn’t ready. Not now. There had to be a mistake.

“Go, make me proud.” Gwini released Mira from her grip long enough to turn her toward the other waiting females and send her in their direction with a sharp push. “And remember, no matter what, at the end of the day it’s your choice how you take a mate.”

Mira stumbled toward smiling Filia and the other females. *Her choice?* Utter nonsense. If it had been her choice, she would not be standing with the others waiting for the call to run.

Naked, too. Why did they have to do this naked? The small pieces of cloth she had worn since becoming mature had not offered much in the way of protection from prying eyes, but now she wanted them back.

“Our last moments as cubs.” Filia smiled, a light dancing in her soft gaze. “Can

you believe it's come so soon? It only seems like a few days ago we were rough housing in the nursery pile."

"Right, and a couple of hours ago you were pouncing me as if we were still there," Mira snapped and instantly regretted it. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean for it to come out so nastily."

"You're nervous. It's okay, I understand."

"And you aren't?" Mira glanced around the group. Females from all over the settlement, and a few small farms beyond, had gathered for the event.

"No, I'm excited but not nervous. I know whatever happens tonight is meant to be." Filia shifted her weight from foot to foot, tail snapping through the air. "It's better than waiting on your first name day."

Mira's jaw tightened as she fought back the urge to snap again at her friend. It was nothing like a name day celebration, or anything else she had experienced. Her world would change once she entered the forest, and not for the better.

"It's time," she murmured.

The first silver fingers of moonlight caressed their way across the treetops, turning the drifting mist into a torn white blanket, and lent a ghostly appearance to the forest.

"I'm not ready." Mira's heart skipped a beat, stomach knotting as she sensed the growing tension among the gathered females. "I'm not ready to do this, there has to have been a mistake."

"Just go with it. You can do it, Mira. I have faith in you." Filia squeezed her arm one last time before she stepped away, preparing herself for the moment when they could run.

"But I—"

A long low growl started somewhere in the middle of the pack, a dozen voices joined as one, more adding to the sound, picking up the call. All around her the females she had grown up with, the ones she had always thought had been sensible, down to earth, understood that they were no longer the beasts they had once been, changed. Gone were the calm pack members, her siblings in spirit, as they reverted into howling creatures of the forest.

No. Not her. She was not like that.

She could fight it. Deny it.

Her body tensed, hair rising on the back of her neck. A twitch snapped through her tail.

No. This was not to be her destiny.

Claws raked into the dirt. A heady scent filled the air, calling to them. Calling to her.

Run with us. Hunt with us. Know what you are. Answer the call. Answer it.

Not a beast, not a creature in the hunt, she would not...

A howl tore from her throat, merging with those around her, reason fleeing into the back of her mind long enough to force her into moving. Her body turned, ears pricked up, claws extended as she, like the others, ran headlong into the forest.

Branches caught at her fur. Long fingers of wood snagged against her body, slowing her desperate rush through the trees. Her breath burned in her throat, lungs ached, pulse throbbing through her being with each new frantic step into the depths of the night.

Why was she doing this?

This went against everything she believed in.

Because this was the way of things, her people did this. They ran, they hunted. It did not matter how strongly she had protested it, or how determined she had been; once the call began, instincts kicked in.

Despite everything, she was just an animal answering the instinctive need to hunt.

A beast

And she loved it.

An animal answering an inbuilt drive to run, to chase and to find a mate. Yet she had never felt so alive as she did now.

Great creators, was this how Gwini had felt?

Her senses kicked into full gear. Each scent, sound, vibration added to the rush. Sweat, fear, lust, the damp loam beneath her paws, it all mingled into one delicious flush of sensation.

Others, she could hear the others amongst the trees, though none came close enough to infringe on her territory just yet. Distant sounds of males and females as they stalked each other. Defending their space, welcoming each other into their lives.

Mira turned, her gaze darting around the small clearing. A nest of leaves beneath one large tree. Light filtered in through the gap in the canopy, turning the edges of the leaves into burnished silver.

Beautiful.

Her tail twitched, a low growl filling the area, marking it. Claiming.

Hers. Her space. Not theirs.

She could fight here. Defend herself. Keep those weak males away.

Weak like Jyrn. Better suited to being an unmated, unclaimed male for the rest of his life. Not strong enough to provide for cubs, or sire them. Gwini had made a mistake.

Stronger, faster, smarter. She would leave the forest unclaimed, having fought off anyone foolish enough to come her way. No one who entered the forest had the strength to face her. Her snarl warned of that. The sound would keep them away, tell them to stay back and like weak little fools they would do so.

A small sound. Subtle. Little more than a whisper through the cool night air, caught her attention. Her ears pricking, claws extended, ready to fight.

Gone.

Whoever it was had vanished, stepped back from her space as quickly as they had brushed the edges of her world.

Fools.

Weak minded males.

Good. Better this way. They might actually see a few more years of life.

What would it be like to rip out a throat?

Her tongue flicked over the edge of her teeth, testing them.

Her kind were hunters, killers. Natural to fight to the death, but only here, only now in this moment of the hunt did the walls of civilization crumble enough to let loose the beast within.

Few had the courage to face the darkness that burned in the depths of their soul.

“Pretty.” His voice carried on the cool air, a silken caress wrapped around a daggers edge.

“Who?” She growled, half crouched. Her claws extended as she turned, searching for the source of the voice. A voice she knew.

“You know who. You’ve always known who would come for you.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Kyrnt.

“My space,” she growled, edging back from the sound of his voice.

“My mate.” He stepped into the circle of light, his golden eyes moving openly over her form. “Or you will be by the time this night is over.”

“No.” Her lips pulled back, baring her teeth. A warning any of their kind understood. “No mate. Not now. Not ever.”

“But you can feel it, can’t you?” He took a step closer, proud, arrogant, unafraid despite the length of her claws, or the sharpness of her teeth. “The drive to run, hunt, fight. That need to test your strength against mine. And a small part of you wants to know what it would be like to feel my teeth in the back of your neck at that moment, that precise moment when you are claimed.”

Claimed.

“Never going to happen.” She paced around the small clearing, keeping away from his grasp. “I will not be claimed. I’m not like the rest of you.”

“No, you’re not. You’re stronger, faster, smarter than all the others. You won’t accept just any male that comes into your life. I’ve always known that.” He moved into the full light of the moon, muscles rippling under his sleek fur, a heady scent clinging to his being. Musky. Compelling.

No. Don’t think about him like that.

“This is my space. Leave. Now.” The challenge left her lips before the levelheaded voice at the back of her mind had the chance to speak. “Go, before I tear you apart.”

“Do you really think you have it in you to do that?” His shoulders rolled, tail curling in slow circles. “You’re a female. You have that violent passion burning under your fur. Let it loose. Test yourself. Test me.”

“You’re asking me to kill you.” Did he really want that?

Who cares what he wants, just do it. Bite. Rend. Claw. Bite. Tear his throat

out.

“Am I?” Light played over his fur, catching on his claws, reflecting in the depths of his brilliant eyes. “Are you sure that’s what I’m doing? Or am I pushing to see how you will react, to see if you have the guts to face me.”

“Yes.”

“To what?” He smiled, licking slowly across his canines.

“What do you mean?” His scent wrapped around her, tugging on her senses. The urge to step forward, taste him, feel his fur beneath her paws threatened to overwhelm her.

“Which one are you saying yes to, or don’t you know?” Kyrnt darted toward her. Feinting left, his fingers brushed over her shoulder before he stepped out of her reach as she clawed out at him. “You want this. Need this. No weak male for you, but one that knows how to keep you in line. One who is strong enough to bring you to your belly, yet has the courage to let you explore your dreams. Ah, the cubs we will have. The bloodline we will add to the settlement. Think about it.”

She had. More often than she had ever permitted herself to admit.

Coward. Kill him. Don’t give in this way. You’re stronger than that.

“Liar.” She snarled, crouching as she watched him more closely. *Don’t let him close enough to grab you. Too dangerous.* The wrong moment and she would end up on the ground. Under him. Pinned to her stomach. Helpless.

Mira shivered, the walls of her sex clenched tight, rippling. Her nipples hardened, brushed by her own fur and sent waves of delight through her body.

“You need this. You need me.”

“I need no male!”

“Not just any male, you need the right male.” He moved without warning, closing the gap between them, his paws hitting her shoulders as he bore her to the ground. “You need me.”

She twisted, trying to throw him off. Snapping toward his shoulder with her teeth. His claws latched around her throat, forcing her head back to the ground. Enough pressure to prevent her from moving, not enough to hurt. The light in his eyes took on a dangerous edge.

“Nasty.”

“I’ll tear your blasted throat out!”

“You’ll try.” He leaned close, licking over her left cheek, his breath caressing her face. “You’d fail, but I know you’ll try. I wouldn’t expect you to just roll over for me. What fun would there be then?”

“Bastard!” She squirmed under him, claws digging into his sides, her feet scrambling up as he arched away from her dangerous points. A small gap, a moment where he failed to keep her flat on the floor, enough to get her feet up against his stomach. Her muscles bunched, every ounce of strength she possessed

she forced into the double kick that sent him tumbling away from her body. “I’m not going to be that easy. I don’t want a mate.”

“Your body says differently.” He landed on all four paws, claws extended into the ground, tail snapping. “That scent is hard to ignore. Even you can’t deny it coats your skin now. Look at yourself, you’re alive, aroused, nipples hard, your body craves the feel of a male. You’ve never had one, never tasted one, yet you crave it now.”

Craved what?

Him you fool. You crave him. His touch, his teeth. How his claws will feel across your body. Deny it, refuse him, walk out of the forest without a mate, it won’t change what you want here and now.

“What if I only want you on my terms.” She rolled up to her feet, watching his every move.

“Your terms?”

“As the submissive in the relationship. You answering to me, not the other way around.” She edged closer, ears twitching. “You’d obey me, hunt when I permit it, bow down to my desires.”

“Ah, little Mira, you wouldn’t know what to do with a submissive, weak male like that. I’ve seen how you look at your siblings mate. The disgust in your eyes. What they have works for them. It would drive you mad within a moon.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” She tensed, watching for an opening, that moment to strike. Yes, she could put him to the ground, force him to submit then send him on his way. Disgraced. No female would ever want him after he had been beaten by a female and then sent packing. The ultimate rebuttal.

“Try it then. If you think you can.” He beckoned across the clearing. “I’m right here, if you have the nerve to try.”

Mira growled and rushed him. Thought, reason, they both vanished in her need to prove him wrong. The ground tore up beneath her claws, time slowed down, and every hair on her body rose. Fire burned through her veins as her feet left the ground. Her front paws landed against his chest and she bore him to the ground in a tumble of fur, tails and grass.

Her time. Not his.

Her way. Not his.

She snarled, teeth bared and parted as she leaned down seeking to bury them deep in his throat.

CHAPTER FIVE

His claws caught in her fur on the back of her neck, yanking her up from his throat. His growl filled the air. “Ah, so close, so very close, Mira.”

She lashed out, her front paws tearing into his chest. The scent of blood filled the air as it welled up from the shallow gashes. Kyrnt hissed in pain, but the grip on her neck remained in place as he shook her hard and fast.

“Nice try.”

“Kill.” She spat the word at him, trying to claw him again, but the grip, the length of his arm, combined to keep her from being able to do anything but snag a few hairs from his chest. “Will kill you!”

“No, you won’t.” His free hand closed about her left wrist as he twisted it behind her back, forcing her body against his still bleeding chest. “You won’t want to by the time we are finished. We both know that.” His grip tightened in the scruff of her neck, arching her throat, exposing it.

“What are you doing?” she whimpered, eyes wild. She lashed out with her free hand, the heel of her paw slamming into the side of his face.

Heel? Why not the claws. Why didn’t I just claw him?

“I’m claiming you.” His teeth brushed over her throat, so close to the veins. Just a little more pressure, a single bite, and it would be over.

A deep shudder played through her body, bringing to life a low moan that pulsed through her sex, clenching it tight, as she felt the heady rush claim her core.

No. She could not give in. Not like this. Not without a fight.

But she could feel him, buried in her body, even now. She sensed what it would be like to be filled, claimed, mated to one like him. It didn’t matter that she tried to deny it. That she had spent so many years fighting against this one moment, this need in her own body to submit to the passion her people barely kept under wraps.

Instead of feeling lost, becoming angry, a sense of peace seeped through her

body, fueling the drive to curl tighter to him. Submit. Accept. Become his. It would all have been so easy.

Fight him.

Why?

Because you need to. You want to. You've always wanted to.

Two halves of her nature warred. One sought his touch while the other desired his death, neither one willing to step back far enough to let her make a choice.

"Please." Mira shivered, her free hand tangling in his mane. He smelt so good, like oak, musk, rich oils and pure sex all rolled into one. Not like the times the pack had tried to pounce her, or the moments where she had been caught against the wall until she had fought free. This time she reacted. Leaned toward him. Craved what he offered.

"Please what?" His rough tongue lapped slowly over her throat, lips nibbling a path across her chin up to her lips. "Please stop, please continue, please roll over and play dead?"

"You're making fun of me," she whimpered, leaning into the touch of his lips. So soft, tender, despite the sharpness of his teeth. "Kiss me."

"Are you demanding, or asking?" Kyrnt said, his lips moving away from hers in soft, nibbling bites that left a path from her mouth toward her ear. The caress of his breath sent a wave of delight through her trapped body.

"Why does it matter?" Her grip tightened in his fur.

"One is the act of a female still trying to claim she is the dominant in the pairing, the other is the plea of a mate to be."

"Let me think, give me a moment to think," she pleaded. "I need that time."

"No, you don't. You'd reason this away, find some excuse not to answer the call in your body." His tongue traced the edge of her ear. "Don't think, just react."

"Please." Mira tried to squirm away from his touch, only to find she arched closer to him instead. Her mind screamed one thing, her body another. "I can't do this."

"You're afraid," Kyrnt whispered.

"No," Mira snapped. "I'm not afraid."

"Yes, you are. Admit it. You're afraid of knowing what it would be like to be a fully adult female. To feel your body merge with another, fur against fur, skin against skin. Two hearts, two minds, two sets of desires becoming one. You're afraid of losing yourself."

Fear. Did it all boil down to simply being afraid?

No.

He had to be wrong.

She was not a coward.

"Give in to it," he purred against her ear. "Let yourself sink into the drive, the

desire. You can feel it burning in your core, claiming you. You want it. I know that. We both know that. So give in. Taste it. Step past the fear, shake off the chains that bind you, that prevent you from being the full-blooded female you are. At my side, as my mate, you could stare down any male in our world without ever thinking twice.”

Mira wanted to melt into him, taste him, feel his fur under her tongue but his grip on the back of her neck held her in place.

“No, not yet,” Kyrnt said. “Not until you’re ready to accept.”

“I can’t,” she whimpered, twisting against him. His fur and hers, both played over her nipples. His taut stomach, defined chest, the strength of his muscles beneath his soft, silken fur all drew her attention. The growing outline of his cock pressing against her stomach triggered a fresh wave of heat, something she had been able to ignore until that moment. Now she wanted it. Wanted to know what it would feel like as he pushed into her body. Would it hurt? No, Gwini had told her that there was no pain beyond that of the fight itself and how that could be arousing. Something she finally understood now that she struggled in his grip. “I just can’t.”

“You can, and you will.” Kyrnt’s grip tightened on the scruff of her neck. His gaze locked with hers, holding her attention more firmly than his claws ever could. A deep seated flame danced in his golden eyes, daring her to walk into the fire with him. Her breath caught in the back of her throat. Her heart pounded with each passing moment.

He moved, without warning, twisting her facedown toward the ground, pressing her against the damp grass in the circle of trees.

“Don’t.”

“Why not? This is our way. This is the way of the hunt.” His teeth nipped at the back of her neck. “Our people do this. Turn me away if you want to, but remember a liar is not tolerated amongst our kind.”

It would not have been a lie, if she turned him away. Would it?

Her hips pressed back against him, the long, smooth line of his cock calling to her, urging her to part her thighs. She needed something from him, but did not know what. If he knew, if he understood, he denied that magical pressure, instead giving her nothing more than a touch here, a brush there, enough to send a deep, rippling shudder through her body and deep between her thighs.

Mira needed more. So much more.

His teeth nipped into the back of her neck. His hands pressed down on her shoulders, keeping her head to the ground, her ass raised high in the air. Every inch of her skin tingled in anticipation. His breath, the soft breeze that worked through the clearing, both combined to leave her squirming beneath him.

He nuzzled against her back, stroking slowly, his hands reaching down her

body, tracing carefully along her sides until Kyrnt closed his grip on her hips.

Mira growled, bucking, trying to arch her way free of him. She pushed back against him as her claws dug into the earth beneath. One last fight, one last try to break free, to struggle against the way of the mate hunt, and then he would see, then he would know that she did not want this. No matter what her body did, no matter how her hips pressed to meet his.

Her body lied.

The heat that burned through her core was a lie.

She needed no mate.

A low howl of desire spilled from her lips as she pressed back against him.

“You want this,” he growled softly. “The fight was brief, just enough to spark the urge to mate in you, now you need more. You need to know what it is like to writhe beneath me. Claimed. A mate. A full adult.” He smiled, baring his teeth. “Offer yourself to me. Make the pairing complete.”

Her thighs parted under him.

“You want this?” This time he phrased it as a question.

She growled softly in reply, hips pressed to him.

“If you want me, say it. Say it, Mira!” He leaned close, his grip never easing from her hips. “You have to say it, accept me. Accept me my mate.”

“I h-have,” Mira stuttered.

“Say it. You have to say it.” The edge of his cock brushed against her lower lips, nestled between the soft, protective covering of short fur. “We’re not what we once were, our kind. We were raised up in their image, changed, but we still have this need, this drive to seek the hunt. The strongest mate. Accept me as your mate. Accept me as your partner in life, in the hunt.”

What had they been like? Before the change. Before the creators had adapted them?

Wherever the thought had come from it fled at the soft touch of his cock between her thighs. The need, the craving to feel him buried between her thighs, to take that step into adulthood overruled all other emotions.

“I accept you.”

Kyrnt growled and thrust into her body, his cock parting her soft, heated lower lips. His claws dug into her hips as she whimpered, filled in a way she had never known could be possible until that moment. Heat claimed her body, building in her core, liquid, molten as it coated her inner walls.

Her breasts throbbed, nipples hard against the ground beneath them, her knees parting as she arched back against his thrusts. What had brought her to this time, this place, no longer mattered, only his body, hers, their need, the lust that burned through them both and now ruled the small clearing.

She could hear them, sounds of the others in the forest, mating cries, fights,

arguments that dissolved into the soft grunts of passion. Instead of slipping away into the background, becoming nothing more than part of the beat of the night, the noises urged her on, mingling with her own heated cries.

“I’ve waited so long for this,” he growled against her back, reaching forward over her body, hips circling with each rock into her body. Her body stretched inside, adapting to him. No pain, just the delight of his touch. “You always denied it. Denied the passion in you, but I knew it, sensed it under your skin. The way you moved, talked, the dance you played with me. Teasing looks, the challenge. I knew it would be you and no other as my mate.”

Mira whimpered, her sex tight about his cock, thighs taut as she pressed back against him, welcoming him with each beat of her heart. Delight played across her body, her breasts pressed to the ground, dirt catching between her claws.

“So hot, so needful.” His chest pressed against her back, his thrusts rubbing deep into her body, against places she had never thought existed in her. New sensations, delights she had heard of in whispered conversations. “Mine. My mate, until the end of days.”

Pressure built between her thighs, a roaring filled her ears as she growled beneath him. It forced toward something she barely understood. A need that knew no denial.

“Say it.” His teeth nipped at the back of her neck.

Mira snarled, shaking her head. No longer even sure why she would deny him.

“Say it!” Kyrnt caught the skin at the nape of her neck fully, growling into her fur. His thrust filled her completely.

A low hiss of breath pushed between her teeth at the feel of his bite.

“Say it and let the passion out.”

Pressure. Pleasure. Pain.

No escape from it.

No way to deny it.

All she could do was accept and rejoice.

“Yours!” she half growled, half screamed, arching beneath him.

“Mine!” His teeth sank fully into the back of her neck, his cock buried deep between her thighs.

Liquid heat washed through her body, her inner walls now a silken grasp about his cock as she shuddered beneath him. She whimpered, pressed tight to him, her hips lifting as soft spasms rocked through her vulva.

Neither of them moved, but lay there on the damp grass, his arms now wrapped about her body, holding her against his chest for a moment longer. In silence he rolled onto his side and pulled her with him. He purred into the back of her neck, his cock still buried between the slick walls of her trembling core.

Mated.

Claimed.
Somehow, it no longer seemed like such a terrible fate.

THE END

About the Author

Terri Pray

Originally from England, Terri Pray now lives in Minnesota with her husband and two children. Her work ranges from sweet romance to wild erotica, horror, and suspense, to fantasy and adventure. With several books in print with more in e-book, and her fantasy series, Erien, now to be the basis of a new D6 Role playing game, it's hard to imagine that this English import has only been writing professionally since 2003.

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