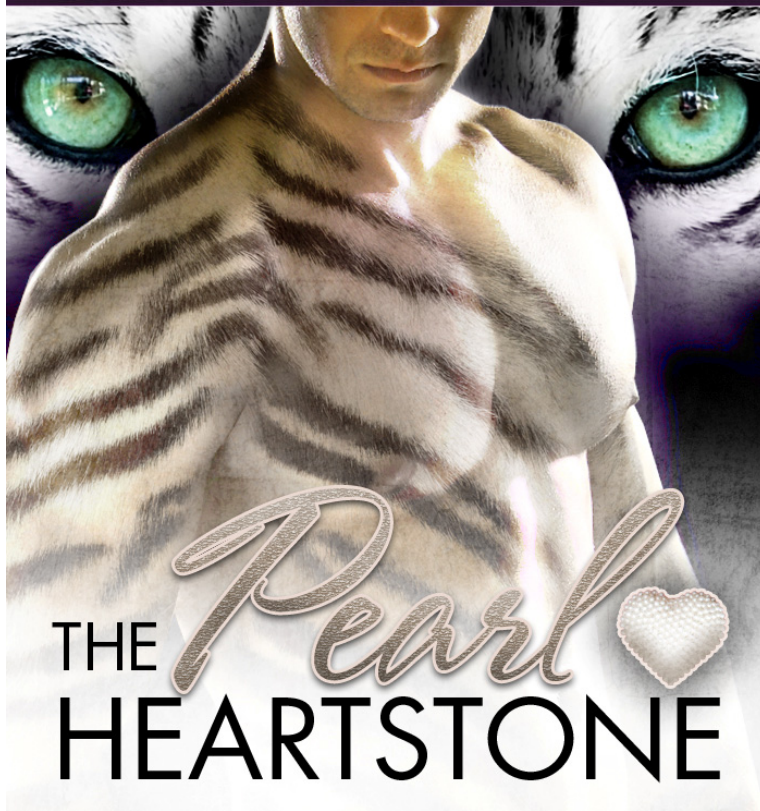


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SHIFTERS

Leila Brown



The Pearl Heartstone

By

Leila Brown

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The Pearl Heartstone

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Dedication

To all the wonderful fans who loved The Diamond Heartstone. I hope you enjoy this second installment as much as much as the first. This is also dedicated to Selena and Lissa...you guys are wonderful writing friends.

Prologue

Jorel walked into the room and knew instantly it had been a trap. His father must still be mad about what happened with White Tiger and his mate. It had been over six months since the incident. And truthfully, he was the one whose reputation had been damaged.

"Glad to see you could join us." His father walked down from the golden throne. The old man moved much too fast for one supposedly so old. He hurried down to Jorel and pulled him into an embrace. "Now was not the day to keep our guests waiting."

Guests? The room was empty except for his father and mother. "I don't see anyone." Jorel's heart raced as he pulled in the scent of his father's anticipation. The old man was up to something. Something that centered on Jorel. Something he wouldn't like.

"Open the doors," his father told the guards hidden near the doors.

The doors to the throne room opened, and scores of their extended family and friends marched in. All of them in formal dress. This nonsense better not be about finding a mate. He'd already done a tour of the eligible ladies and, although some of them were an enjoyable diversion, none had been his mate.

The crowd lined the walkway leading to the thrones. The king pulled in a deep breath, and Jorel fought down the urge to slap a hand over the older man's mouth.

"As you know, our people are dying. Our women are unable to bear the children we need to keep our race alive. Too many of our babies

are gone before they are weaned. If something is not done soon, it will be as if we were never here."

Murmurs raced through the crowd. His father was not saying anything they didn't already know. Their race was dying despite the aggressive efforts of their best scientist.

"I have found a solution," the king continued. "A solution that can save us all. It is unconventional, expensive, and a little distasteful, but it is our only choice." He pulled in another breath then rushed on. "Many of you were present when the rogue, White Tiger, and his mate fought in this very room. I have been in contact with him for several months, and his mate has recently birthed two cubs. Both healthy, both able to withstand our sun. Now—"

The sound of the crowd overpowered his father's voice.

"Blasphemy."

"Half-breeds."

"No breeds."

"Quiet!" The king roared. "We can either follow his example and save our people, our families, or die out and leave the planet to him and the descendants of those like him. Make no mistake; many have made the same inquiries as I have.

"To save our people we must introduce new blood. Those of you who find this too distasteful can leave. But know this. Those who leave will not be welcomed back." His father's booming voice brooked no argument.

Jorel watched to see who would break with the king. No one left the room. That should have reassured him, but seeing the disgust written on several faces increased his unease.

"To demonstrate my belief in this project, my son, Prince Jorel, will be the first one matched."

Shock whipped through him. He snapped his head around to stare at his father. This could not be happening. His father actually wanted to taint the royal bloodline with that of an inferior species?

"I believe our guests are here."

A boom sounded against the doors of the throne room. When the

king waved a hand, the guards opened the doors. White Tiger and his pack mate entered the room. Behind them walked a black-hooded figure. Jorel couldn't see the face, but the hands were those of a withered crone.

"Father?"

His father whispered to him, "No. You will not break from me. If you do, our kingdom will be lost. There are those who would consider your departure a sign that our time as the head family is over. Would you like to see them kill your mother?"

His mother? No. But right now, he could not say the same about his father. Using Jorel as a test subject did not sit well. Not at all.

Barrick, White Tiger, stepped to the king. "The Traveler has said she will touch none but the one she is to find the mate for. The fee is non-negotiable and offers no guarantees. If she does not find a mate in time she will, of course, refund all credits."

"What does he mean, *in time*?" Jorel asked.

"What that means is if I do not find you a mate in time, you will die." The voice came from beneath the black shroud. "Surviving without one's heartstone is difficult. And over time, the body and spirit will wither. How long this takes depends on the person."

Jorel didn't like talking to those he couldn't see. Truth was in the eyes. This might all be a trap or a scheme to bilk the royal family out of credits.

"It is agreed." His father nodded his head, and the hooded figure approached Jorel.

He was trapped. If he stopped them or backed away from that thing, he would be labeled a coward. And after his fight with White Tiger six months ago, he couldn't afford the slightest sign of weakness.

When the wrinkled hand hit his chest, he could not help the sharp intake of breath. At first, her fingers splayed across the thin hair that covered his entire body as if searching, and the next thing he knew, an intense pain jerked through his body. Her hand squeezed around his heart. It burned, and shockwaves of agony rocked him. Looking down, he would have sworn blood should have been gushing from a wound, but there was nothing. His chest was pristine.

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She twisted and turned her fist, and just as he felt his legs about to give out from under him, she pulled hard, and her fist sprang free. Jorel breathed a sigh of relief and immediately felt the loss.

The Traveler stepped back several feet then opened her hand. A clump of blackness shaped like a heart sat in her palm. She turned her hand and stepped back into White Tiger's pack mate. The man grabbed her by the shoulders as they both went down. The Traveler's hood fell back, and the entire room went quiet.

Instead of the crone Jorel had been expecting, the woman on the floor was easily the most beautiful creature he'd ever happened upon. Just as fast as he took in the sight of her in color, the rest of the room turned into shades of grey with only of a hint of the original color left.

He looked down to the black heart and realized it had cracked in two.

"What is going on here?" his father asked, pushing Jorel behind him.

"I have been at this a long time, and I have never come across a heart so filled with darkness and despair."

"What are you saying?"

"I cannot help your son. There are no mates for those who possess a black heart."

"So put it back."

"I can't. The heartstone is intended for his mate."

"Wait. It's not all black," the queen said, approaching them. Her slight frame glided to them like a living piece of fire in her red and orange gown.

They all looked down. Inside the blackness was a shiny glint of white. The Traveler bent down and brushed away the cracked black edges. When she stood, she held in her hands a perfect pearlescent heart. It was no bigger than the tip of his finger, but at this point, he'd take it. It was better than the alternative.

"Is it big enough?" the queen asked in an uncharacteristically worried voice.

"I will do what I can, but with only a tiny piece of his heart, his

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time will be short.”

The king and queen grabbed hands but nodded. White Tiger hit a button on his wrist and he, the Traveler, and his pack mate all disappeared.

His father had signed Jorel’s death warrant. How long did he have? A day? A week? A month?

Chapter One

"Finally," Allyson Gray almost screamed as she stepped into the cramped flea market. She'd been searching for the old lady that sold a reported million-diamond necklace to a Miss Alycia James. Sweat ran down her neck below her shirt only stopping when it soaked into her bra.

"Hello, my dear. Can I help you with something?" The woman held out a wrinkled hand to her.

The woman's skin was soft, almost plump. But when Allyson looked down, the flesh covering her fingers was puckered and pulled against the bone. Something wasn't right.

"Have you seen this woman?" Ally held out a worn picture of Alycia. The heat of the San Francisco sun beat down on her. Moisture dotted her forehead right along her hairline. She wiped it away with the back of her hand.

"Yes, Alycia is doing well. She and Barrick are expecting their second set of twins." The woman moved away and continued to pull items out of a rolling suitcase and put them on the cheap table in front of her.

Green hearts, red hearts, clear hearts. There were so many, and although Allyson didn't wear jewelry, she couldn't help but appreciate their beauty. "How do you know Alycia?" *Just tell me what I need to know so I can go back to the car and turn the air conditioner on full blast.*

"I drop in on all the matches I make. To ensure their happiness." The woman sat down in a white plastic folding chair.

"Matches?" This wasn't making sense. Allyson's instincts went on high alert.

"Yes, I helped Barrick find her," the woman said, looking at Allyson expectantly.

"Can you put me in contact with her?" Maybe this was just a misunderstanding. Maybe Alycia didn't want to be found.

"I don't know. They're so happy, and being reminded about home will do nothing but make her homesick." The woman tisked then moved down the table to reposition something.

"Can't she come home?" This didn't sound quite right. Surely, Alycia could call and check in. If for no other reason than to stop the unnecessary worry.

"Not without leaving Barrick or her children behind." The woman cocked her head and narrowed her eyes at Allyson.

"Well, see then, we have a problem. You say she has a husband and children and that she's happy. But no one has seen her. Heard from her. I can't just take your word for it." Her cop instincts wouldn't let her leave an innocent in such a position.

The sun hit one of the tickets on the table, and it shone a heart on the center of Allyson's shirt. It twinkled up at her, pulling her gaze from the old woman.

"Ah...perfect choice." The withered woman moved fast to the other end of the table. She picked up the teeny, shining jewel. When she held it up, it was a miniature heart. It looked only a tad bit larger than a pearl. "Here, dear, see how you like this one."

Ally had no intention of holding the damn necklace. She didn't wear jewelry. Ever. She knew a con when she saw one, and this woman was definitely up to something.

"Come on, it's so pretty. And seeing it on you will no doubt bring back a few memories of Alycia." The woman's lips twitched.

Ally lifted an eyebrow. Obviously, the woman was no fool. Okay, she'd bite. Buy it and get the information. "How much for the necklace?"

"Try it on first. Make sure it fits and feels right."

The petite old woman had it down to a science. From the moment

she'd held up the necklace twinkling in the sunlight, the only thing Ally wanted to do was clasp it around her neck. Something in her made her hold back. It screamed at her not to touch the delicate chain holding it.

"Come on, it doesn't bite."

It might not bite her hand but would most likely take a bite out of her wallet. Ally shook her head, reached out, and took the trinket. The moment the chain touched her palm, she knew she'd made a mistake. Another suddenly overpowered the little voice that held her back. One that screamed for her to put it on. It felt so right in her hand. As if it belonged to her.

"How much?" She just needed to get the info. If she hurried, she might be able to hold off the overwhelming urge to put it on.

"I can't sell it to you until we make sure it fits. Not all of them do, you understand. And then sometimes what we think will look right on us doesn't."

"Fine." Ally gave in and hooked the chain around her neck.

"Beautiful. It's a perfect match."

"Fit. Now I'll buy the damn thing if you tell me where Alycia is." She didn't have time for this crap.

"It's twenty dollars," the woman said, folding her hands across her tiny chest.

"Twenty dollars for this?" It wasn't even real. Nothing on the table was. And the heart around her neck was easily the most pitiful one out of woman's stock. Ally bit down on her tongue and fished a twenty-dollar bill out of her pocket before the woman raised the price.

Even as she handed the money over, a voice in the back of her mind called her all types of fools. "Now, about Alycia. When was the last time you saw her?"

"About three months ago. You know you are really beautiful."

Ally's eyes narrowed in suspicion. What was the woman angling for now?

"All you need is a bit more. Just a bit more. Can I see your hand?" The woman held out her palm expectantly.

"Where is Alycia?" Ally asked, slowly extending her hand.

"With her husband. Now, I think you're almost perfect. All you need is a little more. A trifling bit more. Do you want to be more?" The woman's voice changed. It no longer sounded like an old woman. No, there was power in this voice.

"What do you mean *more*? Look, I need to find Alycia. I'm done with this. Either tell me what you know here, or I'll haul your ass downtown and we can talk there." Ally should have pulled her hand back, but for some reason she couldn't. Couldn't move at all.

"Allyson, so you want to be more? More than just a police officer? More than ordinary?" The woman's stare held her immobile.

"Yes." The words slipped from her lips before she could stop herself. It wasn't a lie. She honestly wanted to be more, but then again, who didn't? Her arm tingled as a fire raced up from the woman's grip. She tugged harder and harder, but the modest lady's hold was solid and strong. More heat raced up her trapped limb. The woman knew her name. Every cell in her body screamed at her that she'd walked into a trap. This woman wasn't what she appeared.

"Let go now." Ally's throat burned as she said the words. She widened her stance and pulled hard. But it didn't work. The woman stood unmoved.

"Two eleven in progress at Broadway and Fredrick." The radio on her belt blared. *Shit*. That was less than two blocks away. The old woman finally let go of her hand. Ally could still feel the pins and needles just beneath her skin. She was torn. Should she haul this woman downtown and figure out what the hell was going on, or should she go after the suspect two blocks away? Had she just imagined the fire racing through her? There was no other explanation for it.

"Don't leave..."

Ally turned around and ran for the front of the market. She rounded the corner and raced to the storefront on the corner. She opened the door and saw the clerk crouched in a corner with his hands covering his head.

"Police. Which way?" she shouted at the man cowering behind the register. The openness of having the register in the middle of the store was

most likely what kept the clerk alive.

The cowering Asian man pointed toward the back of the novelty store.

"Was he armed?" Her heart sank when the man nodded his head. She should wait on backup. But if she did, that sack of shit would no doubt get away. Against her better judgment, she went to the back of the building.

She cleared every room before she stepped out to survey the alley. Clear. There was only one way out, and there were no sign of anyone. *Fuck.*

The slight creak of the iron fire escape made her jerk back against the wall. This idiot did not climb up the fucking fire escape. He couldn't be that stupid. Where the fuck did he plan to go when he reached the top?

She pressed the button on her radio. "Four seventeen K at two eleven." She hopped up and grabbed the ends of the fire escape to pull herself up. She really needed to catch this creep before he reached the roof. That would give him an advantage she couldn't afford.

She raced up the zigzag pattern of the iron steps. It groaned and creaked as rust fell from the bars at her hands and feet. By the seventh floor, she was just one flight below him.

"Police. *Stop,*" she shouted.

A knife came whizzing toward her head. Ally ducked right and leaned back, barely moving out of the way of the spinning blade. Her heart jumped as she bumped against the rusted iron railing. No way was she about to let some junkie's knife slice her. Who knew what kind of diseases coated that damn thing?

The slight moan of bending and breaking metal made her snap her head around to look over her shoulder. *Oh, damn.* The railing at her back fell seven stories before hitting the ground. She teetered on the edge for a few seconds before she fell backwards.

The air rushed up against her. She twisted and turned as she fell. She landed crouched on her hands and feet. A jarring pain rushed up her limbs, but that was all. No snapped bones. No crushed limbs. How was that possible? Incredible.

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An officer came rushing from the mouth of the alley. "Are you okay? I saw you fall. I mean. You should be dead." The man's words rushed together as he helped her stand up.

The first step was a touch painful, but after a few minutes, she was okay. She was fine, and their suspect was getting away.

"I need rescue at Broadway and Fredrick," the rookie radioed in.

"No. I'm fine. I'm fine." Allyson started walking back toward the fire escape.

"No way are you fine. I saw you fall. You could be really hurt." The rookie jumped in front of her, trying to stop her.

"I told you, I'm fine. That piece of shit is getting away. He threw the knife at me, so he's unarmed. And he's most likely high on drugs. I survived; his next victim might not." Why didn't he get out of her way? Blood pounded in her ears as her entire body seemed to hum with excitement.

"There's another unit on the way. Why don't you sit down?" He put an arm on her shoulder.

She shook his hand off. Hell, *he* needed to sit down more than she did. She was fine but pissed that this rookie was letting a guy who threw a knife at her get away. Where the hell were they getting these new recruits?

Three minutes later, they heard the sirens that signaled backup was finally here. Too late. The guy was long gone. Going to hurt someone else. She reached up and rubbed the smooth heart dangling around her neck.

She stood up and walked toward the front of the alley.

"They're going to want to check you out," he called out to her.

"If I need a doctor, I know my way to the hospital." *Thanks for nothing. Damned newbie.* It took her five minutes to make it back to the flea market. The old woman and all her goods were gone, along with the table and white plastic chair. *Fucking great. Just fucking great.*

* * * * *

Jorel awoke in a body-drenching sweat. He'd seen his mate. At least he hoped it was his mate. This was the first time in three weeks he'd

dreamed in color. True, vibrant colors, not the washed-out shades of the last couple of weeks. He'd seen the almost blinding yellow of her sun. The brown of her skin. It was almost a shade darker than that of White Tiger's mate.

The smell of her lingered in his nostrils. This was madness. You couldn't smell a dream. But it wasn't just her scent. The honey color of her eyes stared back at him when he closed his eyelids. The sway of her hips teased him into a painful erection. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted a woman so much.

He stared around the room. Fuck. Still black and white. Actually, it was shades of gray. That damned Traveler better deliver soon. He stumbled from his bed. He was losing his strength. If this kept up there wouldn't be much of him left when his mate did arrive.

Chapter Two

Ally read her email and listened to the scanner. That had been her life for the last week. There was nothing urgent going on. Nothing urgent enough for the chief to overlook her forced two-week vacation. She was fine. The paramedics said she was fine. The doctors said she was fine. But the chief didn't seem to believe her. She had less than a week to go.

She needed to get out of here. Not being able to go out and be in the thick of things was driving her stir crazy. She could go look for that old woman again, but Ally knew there was no way she would find her. No, she was long gone. Her last lead into Alycia's disappearance.

Now she was stuck here listening to the damn scanner as if it were some soap opera. Prowling around her apartment when what she wanted to be out there doing what she did best. Any time a call came over the air, she found herself riveted to the damn thing to find out if everyone was okay. She needed to get out. Get a life. Six more days.

Fuck. She was not this pathetic woman. It took her five minutes to jump in the shower and throw on a pair of grey sweat pants and a white T-shirt. A quick swipe of her brush through her long black hair and she was ready for a short jog. Halfway out of the door, she thought about her weapon and her radio. She stepped back inside. It only took a few seconds to strap her snub-nose .40-caliber backup piece to her ankle and her radio to her hip. No telling what kind of problems one could run into.

As soon as her feet hit the pavement, she felt better. Not good, but better. This was preferable to sitting cooped up in her apartment. She'd go

for run through the park. There was always something going on there.

* * * * *

Jorel knew his time was coming to an end. His body told him that by this time tomorrow it would be too late. They'd tried to contact the Traveler, but it was no use. The royal line would die with him. His father hung the entire kingdom's future on a prayer that would go unanswered.

"Where are you going, Prince Jorel?" Valek, the head of his personal guard, inquired.

"To die in peace," Jorel said sarcastically.

"Sir?" Valek did a double take and raised his eyebrow.

Jorel waved the guard off. He didn't intend to hurry his own death. No. He would go to the forest and spend his last night there. He would let the beast in him loose to run free one last time.

As he navigated the halls of the palace, his energy waned. If he passed out, he would die in bed. No. He would not die in such a pathetic manner. If he was going to die, it would be on his terms.

That damned Traveler. She'd bilked them out of a fortune. If he found her, he would kill her himself. She'd condemned him to a cruel death.

Every time he closed his eyes, he dreamed of the brown beauty. He smelled her scent. The dream last night had been almost too much. He'd watched her pleasure herself. He couldn't touch her. All he could do was watch her fingers stroke her wet flesh. He could hear and smell proof of her arousal. He couldn't even end the damn dream. It wasn't until she'd come completely undone that he was able to wake up.

Both her and the damned bitch of a Traveler would pay for this torment. Or they would if he lived long enough to see either of them. He reached the docking station ahead of his personal guard. If he hurried, he could be alone. The last thing he wanted to see was the pity on the face of a damned guard.

With quick movements that cost him most of his strength, Jorel jumped into the closest ship and powered it up. His guard entered the

hanger. He closed the hatch and grabbed the control stick.

"Prince Jorel. Stop. You can't—" The engines kicking on muffled the rest of the guard's words.

Jorel had no doubt the man was cursing him. As soon as the craft cleared the building, he kicked the engines to maximum speed. He would have less than a minute head start on the guard. If he wanted to get lost in the forest, he'd need that extra time.

Ten minutes later, Jorel landed his ship right outside the Imperial Forest. He jumped from the ship, tore his shirt and pants from his body, and shifted mid-stride. The pain of the change reminded him he was still alive. At least for now.

He ran through the forest. The loss of colors slammed into him. His last sights would not be of a forest that was lush and beautiful. The last thing he saw would be a black and white world that seemed to run together. The smells were muted. The grass. The dirt. Diminished was the fear of the tiny animals that scurried away from his beastly form.

His nose twitched with a new smell. An overpowering one. One that held a familiar refrain. *That woman*. The one from his dreams. He growled as he raced toward the source of the scent. He just might get his revenge on the Traveler and her partner yet.

He didn't know how far he'd gone. The smell of his ship was faint. He couldn't smell his guards, even though common sense told him the men should be nearby. A wall of white mist stopped him in his tracks. The woman's smell was definitely coming from inside of it. But there was a sense of wrongness about the cloud. His instincts told him not to chance it, but the desire for vengeance overrode his sanity. At least one of those damned women needed to pay.

He jumped through the mist and landed on a hard stone ground. He looked left and right. The green of the trees surprised him. He was awake and seeing in color. And he could smell her. She was close.

* * * * *

Ally heard the screams before she heard the call come over her

radio. There was a tiger loose in the park. How the hell did a tiger get into the park? It was nowhere near the zoo. She pulled out her weapon and flipped off the safety. This was definitely what she called an emergency situation. Waiting for backup would no doubt mean loss of civilian lives.

The screams guided her directly to the cat. There were several young kids and parents running from the area. By all rights, it should be chasing them, but instead, it lifted its head and stood still. She watched it sniff the air. She lifted her weapon and lined up the animal in her sights. It was beautiful. Its black stripes were eye catching against its perfect white coat. She'd never seen a white tiger before. And if she didn't pull the trigger quickly, she definitely wouldn't again.

The animal lowered his head and looked right at her. Really looked at her. It centered on her. Her heart raced. She pulled the trigger and fired. What the fuck? She'd been lined up with him perfectly. How had she missed? The tiger charged her.

Shit. Fear raced up her arm. Her body screamed for her to run. But years of training and instincts made her squeeze off three more shots. The animal moved left and right. The first shot hit its right shoulder. The second, the left. And the third missed him completely as he sprang on her.

She lifted her arms and shielded her face. He knocked her to the ground. The jarring fall knocked the weapon from her hand, and the animal swiped the handgun away from her with its huge paw. She was severely fucked now.

Chapter Three

I should kill her now, the beast in him growled. She was just as he'd dreamed her. Beautiful brown skin, black hair down to her delectable ass, and breasts that would more than fill his hands. What he hadn't been expecting was the attitude. She'd used a weapon on him. If he were at the palace, her punishment would be swift and deadly. He circled the woman. She hadn't moved since he knocked her weapon away. No doubt, more of her kind would show up soon with more weapons. He needed to find the way home. Now.

His strength was draining away as his blood ran down his fur. If he shifted now, he would no doubt pass out from the wounds. The only way to get her home would be to drag her. Jorel bent down and bit into the woman's shoulder.

Her scream of pain should've been music to his ears. Instead, it made him loosen his grip a bit. He pulled her back, dragging her toward the mist. It didn't take long for him to drag her through the barrier, and as the white, swirling vapors swallowed her world, she started to struggle. It didn't matter. She wasn't strong enough to stop him. A week ago, an hour ago, hell, ten minutes ago she might have been able to tear herself away. But the moment he'd touched her, his strength began to return.

"Prince Jorel." *Valek. Good.* He doubted he would be able to stay conscious long enough to see to punishing the woman.

He unlocked his jaws from the woman's shoulder. The taste of her blood made him worry he'd actually hurt her. He let his tongue swirl

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around her wound. The puncture holes looked clean. He hadn't ripped her skin more than necessary.

"Help me," she screamed.

He used his last bit of energy to shift back into human form. Her bone-rattling scream was the last thing he heard before the blackness pulled him under.

* * * * *

Please let this be a dream. Please let this be a dream. Ally scrambled to her feet and pinched her arm. Yep, that shit hurt. This wasn't a dream. She looked down at the man lying at her feet. No way did she just see what she thought she saw. No way.

She bent down and poked at him. He felt human. He looked human. Well, the stripes covering his pale flesh were more like a tiger than a man, but the twin gunshot wounds in his shoulders screamed that he couldn't be. No way. Men did not turn into tigers. And tigers did not turn into men.

She should get as far away from him as possible, but she didn't know where she was. And no way did she want to run into another man-tiger thing like him.

"Prince Jorel." The sound of another man filled her with twin shards of fear and dread.

"Help me. Help me." Please, God, let someone help her. She did not want to end up as this thing's dinner when he woke up.

She could hear hurried footsteps rushing toward her. As the man cleared the trees, she breathed a sigh of relief. He was human. Or at least he looked human, but he sported the same tattoos as Jorel. Several more men followed him, each of them sporting similar black stripes. Either this was really, really good, or she was fucked. Again.

"Prince Jorel." The first man ran to the guy at her feet.

Shit. She could make a break for it or stand and fight. It wasn't much of a choice. She was no coward. She took a few steps away from the men.

“Seize her,” the guard attending the tiger-man on the ground said without looking up. “If he dies, then so does she.”

One of the men stepped near her and grabbed her wrist. She flipped her hand out of his, rotated his wrist, and jerked his hand up behind him until she heard the telltale crack. Her heart beat an erratic rhythm in her chest. Blood hummed in her ears. She planted her feet in a fighting stance and waited for the next man to approach.

The next one charged at her. She bent low and swept his feet from under him. He landed on the ground. Two more came at her from both sides. She kicked one in the stomach but the other grabbed her from behind. She leaned her head forward then slammed it back into his nose.

“She’s trained. Fight her like you would Fi’on.” The guy in charge grabbed the prince by the waist and flipped the unconscious man onto his shoulder.

While she was watching the man, she lost focus, and the guards surrounded her. *Fuck*. She should not care about the idiot who brought her into this mess. Hell, she didn’t care.

“Can’t we talk about this?” she asked, backing toward a tree. She needed to find some way to cover her back. Not that she was going to be able to fight them all at once.

Just when she thought she might make it to a tree, they pounced. She kicked one down. Punched another in the face. But they piled on top of her, grabbing her limbs until they trapped her. They picked her up by her arms and legs and carried her in that same spread-eagle position through the forest.

“Let me go, you fucking dickheads!” Ally twisted and turned but couldn’t break free. If that tiger-man lived through those gunshot wounds, she was going to kill him.

She didn’t know how long it took them to reach where they were going, but it was long enough for the blood to drain from her arms and legs. They carried her into a metal ship and strapped her into a seat. The blood rushed back into her arms and legs. She bit her lip to keep from screaming at the pain.

“Has he opened his eyes yet?” one of the guards asked.

"No," the head guard said as he narrowed his eyes in her direction.

"And I hope he doesn't. The sorry sack of shit. He deserves to die for what he did to me."

All heads snapped in her direction.

The guard in charge walked back to her, grabbed her shirt, and ripped a piece of fabric from the bottom. He tied it around her mouth before stepping back and slapping her across the face. The blow jarred her teeth and sent stars spinning behind her eyes. She could taste the coppery sign of blood on her tongue.

"I suggest you shut up. Statements against the king and his son are punishable by death. And believe me; I would have no problem snapping your skinny neck."

She grunted but didn't try to provoke the damned bastard further. The last thing she wanted was for them to beat her until she couldn't fight back. This situation called for a clear head. And a plan. They didn't want to kill her, or at least not all of them wanted to kill her. So what did they want from her? Whatever it was, that would be her bargaining chip. Her way home.

Chapter Four

Jorel jack-knifed up and whipped his head around. This was his room. How? The last thing he remembered was dragging that blasted female into the forest. How the hell had he ended up here?

"You're awake. A shame."

The familiar voice irritated him. His cousin, Kalem, lounged against the wall staring at him.

"What's your problem?" Jorel croaked out before turning and looking for some water. The servants had left a glass for him. He drank it in one long swallow. He didn't have time or energy to deal with Kalem. His cousin had always been a jealous man. Jorel eyed him up and down. Why the hell was Kalem here? Did he just want to give his opinion, or was he here for something more? Jorel tried to wipe any emotion from his features.

"Since you had the bad manners to live, your father's dream of mixing our blood will also live. Not that I don't understand the attraction, but honestly, cousin, you'll be bound to your colorful beauty for all time. Your child will be less than a half-breed. But it's not too late. There are those who do not agree with your father. They would much rather see a new king rather than pollute their bloodlines."

The sneer in the man's voice set Jorel's teeth on edge. A new king? Jorel might not get along with his father, or agree with the king's every decree, but he would never advocate his own father's murder.

"Be careful, cousin, you are walking a fine line. Speaking of treason

is the same as committing it in some cases.” His blood ran cold as he watched Kalem’s face burn with a reddish tint.

“You mistake me. I do not speak of treason. I’m simply restating what I have heard.” Without another word, Kalem stood. He turned to the door.

“Maybe I should tell the king that you volunteered to be next in line for the great bridal hunt?” Not that Jorel was serious. He wouldn’t wish Kalem on his worst enemy. Then again, Kalem might be his enemy. He’d have to tell his father at some point. The king wouldn’t believe his own family capable of such malice.

That wiped the smile off Kalem’s face. He might not be above slandering the king’s plan behind the man’s back, but he would never think to deny him openly. Which left him only one option. To be bound to a female like Jorel’s.

“I see you are indeed your normal self.” Kalem turned toward the door. “Permit me to wish you a long life with your hellion of a bride.”

There was something about the way Kalem called the woman hellion that sent a chill down Jorel’s spine. What had that female been up to now? No doubt creating havoc. And that was something the kingdom couldn’t handle right now.

It took him an hour to make it to the lower chambers to see his bride. Why she had not been put close to his room, he didn’t know. If there wasn’t a good reason for this insult, heads would roll.

“Let me go, you fucking cat bastards!” Her voice bellowed down the hall and up the stairs.

Okay. That was a good enough reason. No way would his father listen to even a few moments of her screams. Right now, only her guards were being screamed at.

As he approached the cell, he could hear her stalking across the stone floors. A jolt of pain shot through his shoulder as he reached for the doorknob. Even with their newly purchased tissue replicators, his wounds still were not totally healed. That damn female had a lot to answer for. The whispers that were no doubt spreading through the palace would be painting him as less than a man. How could his own mate have brought

him down? He growled low as he opened the door.

She stopped and looked up at him. Her lips curled up. "Get the fuck out."

"Is that any way to talk to your mate?" he asked, smiling at her.

"I don't know what planet you're from, buddy, but I don't have a mate. I don't need a mate. I don't want a mate." She spit the words out at him. "What I want is to go home."

"Good thing you don't have a say in the matter." *Hellion bride* was beginning to look like a compliment.

"Says who?" she screamed.

"Says me. My family is the law here. You belong to me now." He couldn't help but enjoy the shocked look on her face. It almost made up for bullet number one.

"Oh, buddy," she said, shaking her head, "I don't belong to anyone."

"I'm not your buddy, I am your mate. Your master. You'd better get used to the idea."

"Fuck you." She continued her pacing across the room, but her gaze never dropped his. "This is kidnapping. Isn't there some kind of universal law? This can't be legal."

"Yes, we are under galactic law, which prohibits starting wars. Or the kidnapping of the ruling family. All things the Traveler would have taken into account when searching for my mate. Just like White Tiger's mate, you will grow accustomed to our world."

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Not likely." Her muscles tensed for a second before she leaped at him.

He ducked her outstretched arms as she flew through the air. Her reflexes were fast, almost as fast as the women of his race were, maybe faster than most. If he hadn't been watching her, waiting for her to make a move, she would have definitely knocked him down then raced out the door.

"See now, that wasn't nice," he said, advancing on her.

"Kidnapping me wasn't nice either." She didn't move back.

"Look, I suggest you make the best of this situation."

The scent of her tickled his nose. He didn't remember it being this enticing before. A low purr rumbled in his throat as he pushed her further into the cell then turned around and locked them both inside.

"Give me the key."

"No. You will have to earn my trust to come and go as you please. Until then, you will be at my side always." Which would no doubt be torture for them both. He crushed his body against hers. His cock rose as she struggled against him. Her hips brushed back and forth against his growing erection. Pressure built in his groin. "You will calm down, or I won't be responsible."

"What are you going to do? Hit me?" She pushed against him then pulled away, trying to wrangle out of his hold. "Well, guess what? I don't give a damn. If you think I'm going to sit here like a good hostage, you're dumber than you look."

Jorel didn't miss the insult, but with only a thin grip on his control, he had to let it pass. With each nudge against her soft body, he came closer to the edge that would ensnare them both.

"You have no idea what you are playing with."

"Oh, please," she said as her gaze caught his.

A flash of white distracted him. His heartstone. She was involved with the damned Traveler. She'd been torturing him. Killing him slowly. Too bad for her that he'd had enough sense to catch her and bring her here. He grabbed the top of her shirt and gave it a hard tug to get his necklace back. The chain on the necklace held firm, but the fabric of the shirt ripped.

"Get off me." She struggled harder, fighting with more strength than before.

"That's mine. Why did that damn witch give it to you?"

"Let go of my shirt." Ally twisted her arm from his grasp. She pulled back and delivered a hard slap to his face, but he still hung on. "Let go, you pervert."

He brought his hand down on the necklace, but before he could curl his fingers around the chain to snap it from her neck, a burning heat

burst from the stone. He snatched his hand back and dropped his hold on her.

“Get it off. Get it off.” Ally clawed at the jewel.

The smell of burning flesh flowed through the room, stinging his eyes. She convulsed as if her body resisted it. Her fingernails caught the edge of the stone and got singed in the process.

“Help me.” She looked at him for the first time with real fear in her eyes.

A look of total surrender played out on her face. He was unsure of what he could do. The only thing he knew was that she was suffering and she needed him to stop it. He grabbed her hand and pulled her up. She looked close to passing out. A fine sheen on sweat coated her body. Her legs couldn’t hold her up any longer. He guided her spasming body to the bed.

“Help me.” Her voice was hoarse. Barely a whisper.

Once he had her sitting, he grabbed the sides of her shirt and pulled. The fabric held firm for a moment then split right down the center. The chain that had held his heartstone dropped to the floor, empty. In the center of her chest, a noticeable heart was burned in the center of her perfectly smooth brown skin. Unless he wanted to cut open her skin and start digging, he was pretty sure they were stuck with each other. He looked up at her face and was surprised to find her still conscious. Only just.

“What the fuck did you do to me?” The accusation in her eyes mirrored her tone.

“You’re the one who had my heartstone. If you had just handed it over, none of this would have happened.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The necklace. That was mine. How did you get it?” His hands fell from her chest, but he still hovered above her.

“I bought it.” She grabbed her shirt and held the ripped edges together with one hand. “There’s no way it could have been yours. I bought it from this old lady—”

“The fucking Traveler.”

"Huh?" She looked up at him.

"You've been duped. That was no old lady. That's was the galaxy's best matchmaker and, unless I am mistaken, we are now bound."

"Look, I am not buying into this crazy game of yours. I want to go home, and if you know what's good for you, you'll take me."

The way she cut her eyes at him made Jorel jump out of her reach. He didn't imagine for a moment she'd feel an ounce of regret for kneeling or kicking him in his crotch. No, the look she gave him screamed how much she would enjoy delivering the blow.

"I'm sorry. If you had just handed me the heartstone that may have been possible, but it seems the heartstone is out of both of our reaches."

"Get a surgeon. Cut it out." Her eyes moved in frantic motions to the left and right.

She was going to break. Neither of them could afford this show of cowardice. He pulled back to send a stinging slap her way. Before his hand could connect with her face, she leapt to the other side of the bed.

"Do not hit me. Ever," she said, her eyes narrowed into tiny slits.

"I was trying to get you to calm down."

"I didn't ask. I'm telling you. Don't ever try to hit me." She put a big emphasis on her words. He didn't miss her interwoven threat. Nor did he miss how fast she'd moved. Faster than even him. There was something not quite normal about her. And he planned to find out what it was.

Chapter Five

"I don't care what he says. I am not going to a royal dinner. I am not leaving this room. If he doesn't understand, tell him to come down and I will say it to his face." Ally had no desire to sit down with him or anyone else. What she wanted was to go home. Point blank. End of story. He didn't honestly think that moving her into his suite was going to endear her to him, did he?

The slip of a woman bowed to her and hurried out of the room. Ally flopped back on the bed. She'd been through the room several times already, and there were no hidden passageways. No secret compartments. No way out besides the door, which boasted two guards.

A tiny piece of her felt happy that they deemed her such a threat that they beefed up the guard. It didn't even matter if she did escape. She had no idea of how to get back to that spot in the woods where he'd dragged her from the park.

Two loud thuds in the hallway knocked her from her puny pity party. What the hell was going on? She ran over to the door and peeked out. Both guards lay on the floor. Shit. Either somebody was trying to help her, or she was triple fucked. Either way, she wasn't about to sit back and wait for whoever was coming to show up. She opened the door wide enough to slip out then craned her neck to look down both directions of the hallway. Empty.

Right or left. Not that it freaking mattered. Left. She'd try left. Ally raced down the corridor, sliding to a stop before she rounded the corner.

She did another quick peek. Empty again. Everyone must be at that royal dinner. She ran down that hallway and right into Jorel as he rounded the corner.

She tried to backpedal away from him, but his hand snaked out and grabbed her before she could get away. Fire licked her shin when he touched her.

"Where the hell are your guards?" He marched her back to her room, and stepped over the slumped her guards. "What the hell did you do to them?"

"Nothing. They were like that when I opened the door."

He eyed her suspiciously but didn't say anything else about the guards.

"So where were you going in such a hurry? I was told you refused to come to dinner."

"I was leaving."

"We've been through this. You can't leave. You do, and we both die. That heartstone ties us together whether we like it or not." From the slight upturn of his top lip, he didn't like it any more than she did.

As soon as her gaze connected with his, her mouth went dry, and she found it harder to breathe. Her nipples tightened, and she wanted to scream her disbelief. She couldn't want him. Not in that way. She couldn't be that crazy.

"Look. I have no clue why you're doing this. I'm sure there are tons of women like you who would want to be stuck with you. Unfortunately, I'm not one of them. I don't need and don't want to be tied to anyone."

"I thought we could go the easy route. But it looks like you're determined to do things the hard way." The way he said *the hard way* left no doubt about which way he truly wanted things to go.

She'd played right into his hands and hadn't even known it. Moving around, she put the bed between them. "You knew I wouldn't come down to dinner with your family. You planned it. Planned this. I wouldn't be surprised if you took the guards out and were waiting for me to run into you."

He laughed at her. A sound that was far too appealing. "Sorry to

disappoint, but I was coming to tell you that if you don't eat with me, you don't eat."

"Fine, I'll starve." She tried not to stare at his face, which meant her gaze was glued to his chest.

"It's too late for that. Having this separate room was a privilege. One you didn't appreciate."

"Meaning what? I'm going to sleep where the servants sleep?" As she said those words, a whole different scenario played out in her head.

"No. You'll be sleeping with me."

Ally couldn't think of a snappy comeback. His pronouncement completely floored her. Sure, he'd said they were tied, and he acted as if, eventually, they would have to sleep together. But she didn't really think he would push her into it by taking away her choice.

"You can't do that."

He raised his eyebrows at her words. "Why not? My family is law here. And by the law, you belong to me." A smile played at his lips.

"I told you, Tigerboy, I don't belong to anyone." Before she realized it, she'd jumped at him. Her arms were outstretched, and her hands were poised to rake down his face and pull skin with them. She could've run faster, jumped harder, but her heart wasn't fully in it.

He caught her hands right before they reached his face. "Temper, temper." He pulled her down, wrapped his arms around her, and twisted her so her ass hit against his cock.

She bucked and moved, pressing against him, trying to get leverage to pull herself away from him or hit him hard enough that he let her go. Neither happened though.

"If I were you, I'd stop that."

"Good thing you're not me." She thrashed harder. The feel of his erection poking her in the back just made her fight more.

"Don't say I didn't warn you." Even as he said the words, liquid heat poured through her clothes.

"Did you just jack off on my back?" She stopped moving out of sheer disbelief.

"Nope. That's something else."

She heard his words, but her brain got foggy. Too foggy to continue to fight. Her body heated up in all the wrong places. What the hell was wrong with her? She didn't want him. Couldn't want him.

"Stop that," he growled in her ear.

Without thinking about it, she'd arched up into his erection and rubbed back and forth. There was nothing about that movement that screamed let me go. That had been more like an I-want-to-fuck-you kind of movement. And fucking was definitely something she did not want him thinking about.

"If you do it again, I won't be responsible for what happens."

She caught herself doing it again. The scent of him filled her nostrils. He smelled so damn good it made her mouth water. Maybe she should move again to see what he would do. *Do it! Do it!* Her body craved his touch. Starved for it. Her pussy muscles clenched with thoughts of him flipping her over and punishing her in the most delicious of ways.

No. No. No. She did not want him that way. He'd done something to her. Changed her.

"What did you do to me?" Her voice was weak with the strain of holding herself still. A battle she was quickly losing.

"I didn't do anything but try to give you a chance to get used to being my mate. But no. You had to fight it. Had to rush things."

Rush what?

He leaned down, and his erection bumped up against her ass. Her control on her overactive libido slipped. Her body stopped listening to the voice in the back of her mind. She had to touch him. Had to rub against him. Not doing so was almost painful. More like a dull ache that eventually encompassed her entire mind so that she could no longer distract herself from the feeling.

Jorel flipped her around, and she opened her arms and legs to him. She'd fight with him later. Right now, she wanted—no, *needed*—to feel his hard flesh pressed against hers. Even as she ran her hands along his back, she craved for a more intimate touch.

She leaned up and pulled what was left of her T-shirt over her head then shimmied out of her pants. Her bra and panties hit the floor next. The

only thing between her body and his was one thin layer of clothing. His.

"Take off your clothes." Even to her own ears, her voice was raw with need. What did it sound like to him?

He reared up and quickly disposed of his clothing. The sight knocked the breath from her lungs. His skin called to her. She curled her hands into tight fist. Where the hell was her self-control? This was worse than throwing herself at him. She was practically mauling the man.

As he pulled down his black leather pants, she bit her lip. The pain kept her locked in place. The insanity of her desire was almost overpowering. When his erection sprang free of the constraining fabric, she lost all competent thought. She needed to touch him. Feel him. Taste him. If she didn't, her heart would stop. Her lungs would explode. She would simply cease to exist.

When she wrapped her hand around his straining penis, Jorel felt as if his knees would give out. He hadn't had a woman in over a month, and this one was more than appealing. Looking down, he watched in fascination as she licked her lips before guiding the head of his penis to her mouth.

The soft warmth of her breath fanning out over the head of his cock sent a shiver down his back. His fingers itched to grab her head and hold her still as he slammed into her mouth. But from everything he'd seen about this woman so far, that would be the wrong thing to do. Although, with his pheromones soaking into her skin, he doubted she'd fight it right now, but when the effects wore off, she would be a hellcat.

He laced his right hand through her hair and pulled her head in closer. Her lips brushed the tip of his cock. His seed coated her lips. He sucked in a breath as she sucked the head of his penis inside her mouth. She stopped at the ridge below the head and licked all around. He tightened his fingers in her hair.

He should pull her away from him, but his body screamed in protest. Just a tiny bit more and he would flip her over and dive into her soft flesh. A few more seconds. Then she took even more of him into her mouth, and he lost track of his plans. The soft pad of her tongue tickled the sensitive flesh of his shaft. Damn it. It was so soft, so unlike the mouth

of his kind. He wasn't going to be able to hold off if he let her continue.

Jorel let go of her hair and pulled his cock out of her mouth. She looked up at him with a glassy, unsure stare. Her lips glistened with a combination of saliva and pre-cum. Her full lips pushed out even further than before. That did it. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to have her now.

In a quick movement, he flipped her over and dragged her over to the edge of the bed. It put her in the perfect position. He slipped a finger down into the heat of her. She was wet. Extremely wet. He pulled his hand back and moved until his cock touched the opening of her sex.

He bent down over her and bit her on the neck, barely enough to break the skin. She would carry his mark. When she cried out from the bite, he surged up into her. Although he slipped into her, it was a tight fit. The inner walls of her cunt squeezed him. The need to pull out and thrust back into her ate at him. He would have to let go of her in order to take her. He knew there was no way he would be able to hold her with his teeth. He'd rip her neck apart. He slowly pulled his teeth out of her skin and kissed the slight holes. Then he pulled out of her and slowly pressed back in. It felt so good it was almost torture. If only he could bear to do it slowly. But considering how long it had been for him, she was lucky he was able to get her ready.

Jorel took a deep breath and let his animal nature take over. He slammed in and out of her as fast as he could. He pushed her deeper into the mattress. Her body welcomed him in then clenched down on him as he tried to pull out. It was almost too much. Each stroke set him closer to that place where his animal nature would completely override his need to make this an enjoyable experience for her.

Her muscles clenched on him again, and he couldn't hold out against it any longer. He pounded into her with only one thought on his mind. *Mine*. She was his. It didn't take long for his body to reach the point where he couldn't hold back any longer. It hit him hard, stealing his breath and rocketing through his body. The skin along his shaft stretched as he felt the muscles swell. He'd heard of the linking that occurred between mates, but this was the first time experiencing it. The twinge of

pain that accompanied the swamping pleasure was nothing. Nothing. Every spurt of his essence that poured into her was another rush of intense ecstasy. He closed his eyes and tried to live in the moment.

"What the fuck did you do to me?" she asked, peering down into his face.

He sucked in a pained breath as she tried to pull away from him. Pure instinct had him wrapping his hands around her and holding her close to him. If she kept trying to pull away from him, he would be the one who ended up hurt. And there was no way in hell he was going to go to the palace doctor and try to explain why he had a strain in his cock.

"Be still. We are still linked," he said through gritted teeth as he pushed his engorged flesh further into her.

"What the hell does that mean?" she squirmed in his arms. "Let me go, damn it."

"I can't. If you try to move away, you'll hurt both of us." He moved his hips back until she winced. "That's what it means. My penis swells after I come to give my seed a chance to take root."

He watched as the meaning of his words finally sank in. She fought with earnest now, clawing at him and biting him.

"You fucking bastard. Let go."

He tightened his hold on her just as she dug her teeth into his muscled forearm. "Bite me again, and I will bite you back. And my bite won't be on your arm." That stopped her. She didn't move a muscle. "That's better."

"This doesn't mean anything. The second you let me go I'm out of here."

She wasn't pulling away from him, but she didn't relax either. It was like holding a damn block. He didn't doubt her words; she would run the first chance she got. Fine. He would just make sure she didn't have that option.

"You would run even though you might be carrying my cubs?" Anger permeated his every syllable. He would not allow this. She would make him a laughingstock among even the lowest peasant. "You will not run."

“You can’t stop me.”

“I can, and I will. You will not be allowed out of this room. If you are not with me, you will be locked in this room.” He pulled out of her and let his cum run down her legs.

He stalked across the room to a closet and pulled out some clothing. You will bathe and put this on. I will come back to collect you.”

* * * * *

Allyson looked at the transparent material he laid out on the edge of the bed. Was he serious? There was no way in hell she was going to parade around in that. It wouldn’t cover much at all. Honestly, she might as well be naked.

“I’m not wearing that.” She put her hands on her hips and tried to ignore her nakedness and the cum dripping down her legs. She needed to show him that the sex had not affected her. If he thought for just the barest second that he had accomplished something by having sex with her then he would no doubt want to do it again. And doing it again was a very bad idea.

“If you don’t wear it, you will walk around the palace naked.” His eyes said he meant every word.

She looked away from him to her pile of clothes on the floor.

“No you don’t.” He moved before she did. His fingers snatched up the pile of clothing and threw them in the fire.

Anger boiled inside her. Those were her things. What right did he have to destroy her stuff? Running on pure adrenaline, she launched at him. She grabbed his back and started clawing and punching at him. He whirled around and grabbed her shoulders, then yanked her off of him. But she wasn’t done. She twisted out of his grip and punched him in the stomach. He grunted and bent down, leaving his crotch open for the perfect shot. She lifted her knee to take him out of commission for a while. It was a trick. He had been expecting that. She could see it in the slight smile that lifted the right corner of his mouth. Before she could blink, he had her. He threw her up on the bed then pounced on her.

"You will show me the proper respect." He reached behind the bed and pulled up a length of rope. "If you aren't carrying my cubs yet, you will be by the end of the night."

This wasn't right. If he tied her to this bed and had sex with her until she was pregnant, she would never be able to escape. She could never leave a child of hers, and she didn't think that the doctors in New York were ready for a half-tiger half-human baby.

"I'm sorry. I'll be good. I'll put on the clothes. I'll do anything. Just don't tie me up." She tried to sound convincing. Had to be convincing.

"Anything?" he asked, his eyebrows going up. "Why don't I believe you?" He bent down and tested each one of the restraints.

"Don't do this. Please." Begging him went against everything inside her. She knew that if she didn't get out of this bed, she would be tied to him forever. And even if she were honest about how good the sex was, she couldn't, *couldn't* stay here.

"I will be back for you," he said as he bent down and kissed her on the forehead. Then he was gone.

Damn it. Why hadn't she just put the damn thing on? She could've been out there scoping out ways to get the fuck out of here. But now she was stuck, and when he came back, he would fall on her and sex her up until she forgot the fact that he wasn't human. That he only wanted her to be an incubator for his cubs. Tears welled up in her eyes. Even in this crazy place, she would still have to fight to prove herself worthy. The question was, did she have more fight left in her.

The creak of the door was her only warning that he was back. Damn it. He hadn't been gone long at all. She turned away from the door. No way was he going to see her like this.

"Excuse me, Princess," a female voice almost whispered to her.

Ally turned toward the voice. A young tigress entered the room. She wore an outfit similar to the one Jorel commanded she wear. It hid nothing. Her skin was just as pale as Jorel's, but the black stripes covering her body were smaller and thinner. She walked up to bed and pulled out a miniature knife. For a second, Ally thought the woman was going to kill her. But the woman reached up and sliced through the ropes.

The Pearl Heartstone by Leila Brown

There was a loud knock at the door. The petite woman walked over and pulled the door open wider. Two men came in carrying buckets of steaming water. They poured them in the empty copper-toned tub in the corner of room then left.

"The prince requested a bath for you. He says you may be sore." The woman smiled at her as she went into a cabinet and pull out some towels and liquids. She poured one into the bath and pushed it around with her hand. A sweet, chocolate scent overtook the sex smell that had permeated the room. "Come on, the hot water will help."

Ally wanted to hate the woman, but she couldn't. "What's your name?" Ally asked as she slowly stepped over the edge of the metal tub and sank into the warm water.

The woman smiled again almost seeming truly happy that Ally would speak to her.

"Fi'an."

"Well, Fi'an, I hate to be rude, but why are you being so nice to me?" There had to be a reason. Did she expect Ally to let her guard down? Fat chance of that happening.

"You will save my baby," Fi'an said with a brilliant smile on her face. "You will give him a chance to have a true mate. A real family."

Ally blinked several times before shaking her head. She had to have heard that wrong. "Excuse me?"

"Your dark skin protects you from our sun. Any children you have with Prince Jorel will inject new blood into our kind. Our sons and daughters will be able to have cubs without fearing that they will die before their first month is up. Many of our couples decide not to have cubs at all. Without your kind here to breed with..." Fi'an shook her head as if to say that even imagining what could happen was too much.

She rubbed her stomach. "That doesn't matter. The king has already decreed that your first-born will be betrothed to my child. He's been searching for a way to unite our families for years."

Panic welled up in Ally. They were already planning the future for children she hadn't even had yet. Children that could only be created one way. More mind blowing sex with Jorel. She was in the deep end here.

The door shifted. It was the slightest sound, but both women turned toward it.

"That's just the water bearers. I'll let them know that we aren't quite done yet." Fi'an took a step toward the door, but Ally grabbed her and stopped her. Something wasn't right here. Whoever was at that door didn't smell like the men who'd been here earlier. And those men had knocked on the door. They didn't just come in.

Ally saw the knife, and every cell in her body went on alert. She jumped out of the tub and ran to the door. Just as her hand hit the wood, the knife flew. She ducked then grabbed the assassin's arm and pulled him into the room. With his free hand, he reached down and grabbed another knife, but she was ready. With a quick jump, she was out of his reach. Hand to hand combat wouldn't work. She needed a weapon.

She heard a cry then the clatter of metal on the stone floor. The coppery twang of blood hit her nostrils. Fi'an. She seemed to go on autopilot. She ran over to where the woman laid, picked up the knife, and threw it. Just as her knife hit the man in the forehead, his knife hit her and stuck in her arm. Fucking great.

She bent over Fi'an, trying to see where the young woman had been hit. Blood coated her side.

"My baby. My baby," Fi'an said as she pressed her hand against her side.

From the looks of her, she wasn't that far along, so there was still a chance this wouldn't affect her pregnancy. Especially if she got help right away. Every second counted. She grabbed Fi'an, picked her up, and held her tight. She sprinted down the hall. Several of the guards were slumped down, looking knocked out but not dead. So it seemed she was the only target.

The noise and revelry coming from behind the immense, ornate doors was more than enough to guide her. She shouldered them open and walked through the tables with her head held high. The noise seemed to stop instantly.

"Your highness," she said approaching the dais where Jorel and a couple who had to be his parents sat. "Next time you send an assassin to

kill me, make sure he has decent aim."

A scream went through the air, and a tigress jumped at her, knife at the ready. "What the hell did you do to my sister?"

Ally turned to the advancing woman who was a mirror to the one in her arms—only stockier. "I am trying to save her. Do you want to fight or help?"

"Give her to me," the female demanded.

"Are you a doctor?" Ally watched the woman's eyes go left to right. "Then no."

"Follow me." The woman cut a path through the room and out a side door.

Ally didn't wait to see what Jorel would do or listen to the whispers that seemed to buzz around the room. But she felt the heat of him at her back almost instantly.

"Tell me what happened." The hard tone of his voice seemed to blame her.

"Don't talk to me that way. You did this. You brought me here. You tied me to a bed where I wouldn't have been able to defend myself." Her fingers trembled with her anger and the fear she hadn't let touch her until now.

"Tell me," he insisted, grabbing her elbow.

He didn't try to stop her. She would've kicked him if he had. So far, the tiny woman in her arms was the only person in the whole forsaken castle to offer her even the tiniest hint of friendship. Definitely more than he had.

"I was in the bath when they attacked. I defended myself and when it was over, I went for help for Fi'an." That about summed it up.

"That's not it. You are leaving out the part where this knife hits you in the arm." He touched the blade embedded in her arm.

"Don't touch that," she ground out as shards of pain raced down her arm. If Fi'an had been any heavier, she would have dropped her.

"So are you ready to tell me what really happened?" Jorel asked as they made their way into a medical room.

Ally walked over and set Fi'an down on the table. It didn't take

long for the doctor to come over. He ran a palm-sized machine over Fi'an's body.

"I can save her, but she has lost so much blood I doubt the pregnancy will continue." Even as he said the words, he was moving to get things ready for the procedure.

The tigress that claimed to be Fi'an's sister slammed her hand into a wall. She didn't say a word. Didn't growl. Just slammed her hand into the concrete wall repeatedly until the white of her hand was red with blood.

"I can remove the knife," a petite nurse said, coming to stand between Ally and Jorel. "Please lay down here." She led Ally over to another bed.

"I prefer to stand."

"Lay down," Jorel ordered.

Now she was definitely going to stand. Screw him. He put her in this situation, and now he wanted her to obey him. Not going to happen. "Just do it."

"But, Your Highness, if you stand more blood will—"

Ally grabbed the knife and yanked it out. She wasn't about to stand here while the nurse tried to convince her. Now the nurse could do nothing but patch her up while she stood. The nurse came alive and grabbed something stop the bleeding. She put a paste on the gash and then a patch on top of it.

"No stitches?" Ally wondered aloud.

"No, we use an insta-grow skin cream. It heals faster and rarely leaves a scar." The nurse finished taping the patch to her arm then turned around to assist the doctor.

"Lady Fi'an will be okay. But she will lose the baby in the next few days. Lady Fi'on, I trust you will find her mate. I wish to keep her here at least until the cub passes."

Fi'on turned from her sister's prone form and walked out of the room without a word. Did the woman blame her for Fi'an's loss? Ally walked over to the bed. The small woman looked even smaller. This diminutive woman who had been full of happiness and smiles less than an hour ago was now an entire a mass of pain. The physical pain from the

knife wound would heal, but the loss of a child might be something she couldn't bounce back from.

Someone needed to pay. And now it seemed she was going to have to stick around long enough to make sure they did. The only question was how to keep from becoming pregnant with Jorel's child.

Chapter Six

She stayed out of his reach as much as possible while they waited for Fi'on to return with her sister's mate. She could've done without seeing that scene. The love and affection that filled the room as Fi'an and her husband mourned the loss of their unborn child made her heart ache. Every single second rang with a truth that showcased everything that Ally didn't have. Had no hope of ever having. Not here, and not with Jorel.

When they walked into the room, she noticed that the door was slightly open. Would the body still be there? When they opened the door, she was relieved to see the body was gone, the blood was gone.

Jorel put a hand at the center of her back and led her to the tub. She shivered at the touch but refused to look at him. No way did she want to give him even the scant indication that she wanted him. She really didn't want him. No, what she wanted was to be comforted by someone who cared about her. Not just meaningless sex. But even that was better than the loneliness eating at her tonight.

"I can do it by myself," she said, shaking off his hand.

"Just get in the tub." He stood next to her waiting. "If you don't get in, I will put you in."

And he would to, of that she had no doubt. "Whatever." Ally stepped into the tub and sighed as the warm water seemed to drain away the stress of the day. She closed her eyes and, for the first time since the attack, didn't see the fear and anguish on Fi'an's face.

She was so relaxed she didn't jump when Jorel dipped a towel

down in the water and ran it over face. He bathed her slowly without saying a word. She bit her lip and held back a moan that seemed to bubble up from deep inside her. For the first time in a long time, she felt exhausted. She was tired, so damn tired.

"How did you kill him? He was a trained assassin." His voice was extremely soft. A tone she'd never heard from him before. It melted a bit of the ice surrounding her heart. Something she couldn't afford to let happen.

"Where I come from, I uphold the law. I carry a gun, but I don't need one to take care of myself." She didn't open her eyes to watch him. That would be too much. Make this too intimate.

"But you are faster than normal, aren't you?" he questioned, a bit too intense to be casual.

"How do you know that?" she asked, really tempted to turn and look at him.

"I encountered another like you. She wasn't as fast. She didn't fight. I doubt she could have survived what you did." His voice was tight, as if he didn't enjoy talking about this.

"Not every person needs to know how to fight where I come from." She didn't try to ferret out any more information. She could just imagine what happened. More than likely, he'd tried to intimidate this other woman and found himself outsmarted. Any other time she would've gone for the jugular, but tonight she just wanted to sleep. To relax. To forget about everything.

"I'm really glad you do."

It took her a moment to connect what he said to what they were talking about. Did he just say he was glad she survived? Was he? Was that just because he didn't want to have to find another baby incubator, or did he really care what happened to her?

"This water is getting cold. I think it's time we went to bed." He reached under her arms and hauled her out of the tub.

The cool air was extremely chilly. She shivered as he wrapped a towel around her then carried her over to the bed. He set her down then quickly undressed himself. He lay down beside her, only the towel

between his body and hers.

He reached out and pulled her into his arms. She tensed up, waiting for him to try something. She could feel his cock against her leg. It was hard, really hard. She tried not to think about it. He might be just waiting for her to pull away. Then again, he might be testing her. What the hell should she do?

Then she heard his even breathing. He was asleep, damn it. She was worried out of her skull that he was going to try to sex her up again, and he'd fallen asleep. She tried to twist out of his grip, but he just pulled her closer. Okay. She could just lie here. It might be a long, sleepless night, but just lying here was a better than what she'd feared.

It wasn't long before she fell asleep. She didn't dream, just slept until a heat seared through her thigh. It burned through her, making her so hot she woke up burning. Her breasts ached, and her pussy flooded with her juices. She turned toward Jorel, ready to scream at him or kiss him. And he was still sleep. Damn it. She couldn't even blame him.

Her blood burned hotter. She needed him. Needed to touch him. If she didn't, she would burn from the inside out. Stretching up, she connected to his lips, pulling at his. She traced them with her tongue. Her hands shook with both want and fear as she ran her fingers along his chest. He was going to wake up, and when he did, he would take her. But this time she wouldn't be able to blame him. No, this time it would be all her. And that's what scared her.

"Mmm," he moaned into her hair.

She thirsted with the need to taste him again. She leaned up to him and captured his mouth. This time he parted his lips and welcomed her tongue inside. His flavor was a mix of vanilla and cream with a hint of spice. The vanilla cream must have been the last thing he'd eaten last night, because he couldn't taste this delicious naturally. That would be just wrong.

He tightened his hold on her and then opened his eyes. Sleep and passion mixed in his gaze, and she could almost pretend he truly cared for her. Not that it mattered. Right now, all she wanted was his body inside of hers. She wanted the skin-to-skin contact. The towel was no longer a

benefit but more of a hindrance. She broke the kiss and pulled her towel open to press her skin against him. Her nipples brushed against the thin fur covering his body, and she shook with the pleasure of it. She needed him now. He was going too slowly.

She pushed him over onto his back and straddled him. His penis brushed against the inside of her leg, and a trail of fire followed in its wake. Suddenly she couldn't think. Couldn't take it slow. All she could do was line him up with opening of her sex and sink down onto him.

He came fully awake then. His cock was rock hard as she slipped down onto it. Her inner pussy muscles clenched him, making him feel even bigger. She didn't breathe easy until she was fully seated on him. She felt so full. Staying still wasn't an option.

He grabbed her thighs and pushed up then pulled her back down onto his hard shaft. She pulled in a ragged breath and clenched around him. He moaned deep. The vibrations from the sound pushed her control past her breaking point.

She moved up and down, riding him as if she were riding a horse. Every time she slipped up then down on him, her body sang with pleasure. She closed her eyes and inhaled a much-needed breath. And with each movement, she tightened her inner muscles on him, sending more electric waves of ecstasy coursing through her. He was so big and hard that she felt every ridge, every vein, every inch of him.

It seemed just a few short minutes before she felt him swell. Damn it, she was so close, so damn close to reaching her own orgasm that she whimpered with the knowledge that he would finish before her. He reached between their bodies and stroked her clit then pinched down on her tight bud, and she screamed as the orgasm hit her. It swamped her every sense. Her heart threatened to explode out of her chest as it burned through her.

It seemed to take several minutes for her breathing to go back to normal, but finally she felt as though she could pry her eyes open. Jorel was staring up at her. He was looking up at her with an expression she couldn't decipher. She turned her head away.

"You can wake me up that way any morning." The laughter in his

voice should have irked her, but it didn't. It made her want to smile. He could've been a smart ass about it, but instead, he said something that made her a tiny bit more comfortable. Another piece of ice melted.

After a few minutes passed, she climbed off of him. He reached over and hit a button on the stand next to the bed. She wanted to ask him what he was doing but was afraid that if she opened her mouth, he would ask her why she decided to sex him up this morning. Because honestly, she didn't know.

There was a knock at the door, and the same men who'd brought the water in yesterday brought in more. Some time during the night, someone had emptied and cleaned the tub. As soon as the water bearers left the room, she jumped up and raced across to step into the tub. Damn it, she forgot to get the soap from the cabinet. Now she could either get out and get it, or ask for help. Neither of which sounded good to her.

"Need something?"

Shit. No, she didn't. She turned away from him. He got up from the bed and walked over to the cabinet. She didn't miss the fact that he grabbed two sets of towels.

"I'll wash your back if you wash mine."

He was laughing, damn it. Why was he laughing? He wasn't acting like the jerk from yesterday.

"Why are you being so nice?" She bit her lip and watched as the laughter in his face disappeared. She didn't want the guy from yesterday back, but she did want to know what had changed.

"You prefer I not be nice to you?" He dropped one set of towels by the tub then walked out of the room with the other.

That wasn't what she meant, but it looked like she'd screwed it up. She took a deep breath then reached for the towels and soap. At least he hadn't chained her to the bed. That was a plus. She could explore the palace. She washed up quickly, toweled off, then put on the stupid excuse for clothing. She was as good as naked. But seeing as she'd stalked around the castle naked yesterday, this was an improvement.

She opened the door and saw two guards standing there. Hopefully they weren't waiting on her. A few steps and she wanted to kill

Jorel. The guards were following her. She needed to find an escape route, but first she needed to lose the goon squad.

After she turned down the fifth hallway, she turned on the guards. "Where is Jorel?"

The guards looked at each other then at her. They really didn't want to answer her. She could see it on their faces. They knew she was going to make problems. The question was, did they want to be part of that problem or not.

"Either you can answer me and we find him quickly, or you can stay quiet and we search every room in this place, got it?" She was serious too. She would do it just to spite them.

"I will take you to him," one of the two said.

"Smart man. Very smart man." She followed him, trying to take in her surroundings. She was creating a mental map of the palace. If she found an escape route, she needed to remember how to get to it.

All too quickly, they walked into a room where both Jorel and the man she assumed was his father sat over what could only be described as a chess set, or at least that was what it looked like to her.

"Jorel, call off the goon squad. I don't need a guard." She stalked over to stand right in front of the desk, nodded her head in greeting to the king, but seeing as it was his people out to kill her she wasn't about to get all warm and fuzzy. Jorel backed his chair away from the board, and she took a step in his direction. If he said something asinine, she wanted to be within slapping distance.

"The guard was not my idea. You can thank my father for your followers." He swept his hand out in the king's direction.

Well, hell. Now she was going to have to talk to him. She turned and plastered a smile on her face. "Your Highness. Thank you for your concern, but I do not need anyone to guard me."

"Nonsense. I saw the blood on you last night. Someone has seen fit to target you, and I will not allow you to be hurt."

"It's not me you should be worrying about. I'm not aiming to *hurt* anyone who attacks me." She was going for the kill.

"Be that as it may. My son has already indicated that there is a

possibility that you may already be carrying his heir. I will let no harm come to my family." He inclined his head, and she could see the steel in his silver gray eyes. He wouldn't relent. He wanted her for the children she could produce. There would be no help from his quarter.

"Fine. Just know this. I claim no responsibility for them, and although I have no plans on killing them, I will not cooperate with them. So if you find them laid out in the hall or tied up in a room somewhere, don't say I didn't warn you." She flipped what must be the king piece down on the tiny board and walked to the door. Before she could slip through it, Fi'on ducked into the room.

"I think I have a solution, Sire," Fi'on volunteered. "Let me be her guard."

Ally cut her gaze toward the woman. This had to be some sort of trick. Fi'on didn't even like her. "I don't think so," Ally said, taking another step to the door. Fi'on wouldn't be as easy to take down as the two men who followed her. She would definitely give Ally a run for her money.

"Wait," the king said in a booming voice. "The idea has merit. None have bested Fi'on. And surely, the princess can take a female guard places where a male guard may not follow. Yes. Yes. I like this idea." He rubbed his hand along the thin fur covering his chin. "Fi'on is now the princess' personal guard."

Ally blinked in surprise. She should have just ignored goons one and two but no, she went and expected someone else to solve her problems for her. When was she going to learn that it never quite worked out that way? Now she had an even bigger problem.

"So where are we heading?" Fi'on asked, coming up to stand beside her.

Ally looked the muscular woman up and down. She was almost a mirror image of Fi'an in the face, but the sheer size of her muscled body made her appear more masculine than feminine.

"I'm going to plan my escape from this delusional world." Ally walked out of the room without a backwards glance. She could hear the soft sound of Fi'on's footsteps coming up behind her.

"Well, I'm about to hunt down my sister's attacker." Fi'on didn't look at her. Didn't ask for help.

They came to a fork in the hallway. Left or right? She could always find an escape route later. She owed Fi'an justice, and she owed someone else a quick and painful death. Ally opened her mouth and sighed before saying, "I'm following you."

Fi'on didn't say anything as she led Ally through a maze of hallways until they came to a set of stairs that led them outside. Ally tried to memorize the way out, but it was useless. As soon as they were outside, Fi'on turned to her.

"So the killers want to get you. We give them the opportunity," she said, smirking.

"Gee, when did we decide to offer me up as bait?" Ally didn't mind being bait. Truly, that would've been her plan. Only difference was that she would have asked first.

"It's the only way," Fi'on said, her eyebrows arching as if she expected a fight.

"I know. I just prefer to be asked before I put my life on the line. Now, either you can fill me in and we can do this, or you do what you do and I can do what I do." Either way, Ally was going to end this thing so she could find a way out of here.

"Fine. We stand out here and wait for someone to attack," Fi'on said, turning to look and see who was watching.

"This isn't going to work. No one is going to attack if they think we are just sitting here waiting on them. We need to look busy. Do something that can be written off as an accident." Suddenly an idea struck Ally. "Do you fight?"

Fi'on frowned at her. "It would be an unfair fight."

"I'll go easy on you," Ally said with a smile.

"You can't really think you will beat me." Fi'on's arrogance would have been disconcerting if Ally wasn't one hundred percent sure that she could use that confidence against her.

"Your mate won't like it," Fi'on said, bending and stretching her legs.

“And I should care why?” As far as Ally was concerned, that made it even better.

“If they ask, I was showing you how to defend yourself.” Fi’on stalked away from the stairs.

“And when I beat you, tell them that I was showing you how to defend yourself.” It wouldn’t take long to wipe that smug smile off Fi’on’s face.

Soon they were in a stone clearing. “This is where the youth first train.” It was a dirt field surrounded by a semi-circle of rocks. A really open area. Even a person with a gun would find it hard to hide.

“Ready?” Fi’on asked.

“Bring it on,” Ally said, crouching into a defense stance.

Chapter Seven

“Stupid.” Ally closed the door behind herself. She hurt all over. Her arms, her legs, even her ass was sore. But she smiled at the knowledge that Fi’on was just as sore. The woman had pinned her three times, but Ally had won three times too. They were tied. After a while, they became so involved in one-upping each other they hadn’t noticed the gathering crowd. By the end, they both decided there were too many bystanders for anyone to try anything. The plan was to regroup tomorrow morning.

She leaned her head against the wall and groaned. The sound echoed in the room and ended with a growl. Ally flipped around and stared into the golden eyes of the fiercest looking animal she’d ever seen. He looked to be about the size of a lion, but it’s mousy brown fur and rodent face told her it wasn’t something she’d ever run into before. Was it another shifter like Jorel?

Its growl got louder as it took a step out of the corner. Could she get the door open before it struck? Her instincts told her no. So the only thing to do would be to kill the beast. There was an immense silver sword above the bed. If she could get to it, her chances of survival went up significantly.

She lowered her gaze to the animal and stared at it while she took a step toward the bed. The beast took another step in her direction. She was at least four steps away from the bed. Another step. The animal took another step to her and started a continuous growl. Ally could’ve sworn the sound vibrated the entire room, but that wasn’t possible. She was

letting her fear get the best of her. Another step. One more to go.

She saw the slight shift in the animal's weight. Time was up. The big rat jumped, and Ally jumped too. She scrambled to the head of the bed and grabbed the sword. It was so heavy that it took both hands to keep that thing steady.

The animal tried to claw up the sheets, but it couldn't get a good foothold. The combination of the animal's sharp claws and weight shredded the bed sheets every time it tried to pull up.

She swung the sword above her head and slashed down at her attacker just missing its neck. His claws slid into her flesh and yanked her down to the soft mattress. Ally pulled herself up and slashed at the creature's shoulder, hoping to free herself from its nasty grip. The beast jumped back as the metal sliced through its rank flesh. A spurt of green liquid covered the once pristine bed.

It snarled at her then sprang again. Ally had just enough time to get on her knees and brace herself for impact. She wrestled it until they both fell off the bed. The impact was a shock to her system and caused her to drop her weapon. It lay just a few inches from her, but she wasn't sure if she would be able to grab it and raise it in time to save her life.

As she watched, the animal tensed its hind legs just as she heard the creak of the door opening. She watched in horror as Jorel opened the door and the beast jumped at him. All the soreness in her muscles disappeared, and she grabbed the blade and jumped. She didn't know if she would be able to help, but she couldn't just sit there and watch him die.

* * * * *

Jorel opened the door only to be knocked back out into the hallway. For a second, he thought his mate had slammed the door in his face. Then he smelled the twang of animal blood, rancid animal blood. The beast in him roared to the front and crashed through the door. He was poised to attack. But he didn't need to. His mate plunged the family crested sword into a devilmite. Those beasts were notorious for killing errant warriors.

Yet, his pint-sized mate had taken one down. And a rabid one from the rank stench from the green blood.

"Thanks for all your help." Ally smiled up at him before she fell to a heap on the floor.

He raced over to her as he transformed back into his humanoid form. He grabbed a clean blanket from the chest at the end of the bed and wrapped her in it, then strode through the hallways until he got to the royal bath. Luckily, it was empty. He slowly lowered her into the water. The longer the green blood stayed on her skin, the more poison seeped into her system. And there was no telling how her body would react to the poison.

Jorel propped her up against the side of the bath then quickly grabbed the towel and soap. He stripped out of his clothes and got in the tub with her. It only took minutes to wash the blood off, but he could tell by her moaning that he was a few seconds too late. Enough poison had seeped into her system to start the fever. Fuck.

Jorel grabbed her up and raced her down to the royal doctor's private quarters. He saw the curious looks on the servant's faces as he passed, but they didn't try to stop him. The doctor opened the door only an inch. Jorel pushed it open the rest of the way. A young, naked lioness sat in his bed, growling with what could only be frustration.

"Doctor, I suggest you get your young visitor to shut up." Jorel chose his words carefully. He couldn't afford to piss off the doctor. Not when he needed the doctor's full attention.

The doctor turned to the young woman and growled a warning. The woman purred then twirled away from them. The doctor turned back to Jorel with irritation coloring on his face. "Well, show me what has you interrupting my playtime."

"A rabid devilmite. She killed it, but I think she's been poisoned by its blood. The fever has already started." Jorel slowly set Ally down on the empty side of the bed. "What can we do?"

The doctor began to examine her. He looked into her eyes and checked her reflexes. Jorel tried not to show his irritation at having the doctor push in between him and Ally. "It looks like the poison is attacking

her system the same as it would one of us. So it follows that the same treatment should work."

"But she's out cold. There is no way she can battle until she drops." The thought of waking her up to make her fight again went against even Jorel's sense of fairness. She'd been through enough today.

"The battle isn't the cure. It's the adrenaline. The endorphins that her body releases will combat the poison. So there's another cure for her."

Jorel looked at the doctor. He couldn't be thinking that Jorel was about to screw his semi-comatose mate. "You can't be serious."

"I am. Just think of it this way. Before you found her, you were dying. What will happen if the fever ravages her and you are left alone? From what you told me about her absorbing your heartstone, I think you will go with her." The doctor turned to Jorel. "You either do what you need to in order to keep her alive, or let her go. I can give her something to ease the pain as she dies."

For a second, Jorel thought he'd misheard the doctor. Speed her journey into death? Jorel didn't even think about what would happen to him. He couldn't sentence her to death. This puny woman who tested him in every instance. She treated him as if he was normal, not a royal man. He didn't think he could give that up so easily. That alone was something to fight for.

Jorel scooped her up and walked out of the doctor's room without another word. He didn't run through the halls to get to his rooms. No. He needed to come to terms with the fact that he needed to fuck his mate while she lay powerless. Actually, the doctor hadn't said anything about fucking her. He just said she needed an adrenaline rush. She needed to come again and again. Flood her body with endorphins to fight the poison.

He could do that. There were many ways to make a woman come. He could explore her body, memorize her every reaction. All in the name of saving her life. He refused to question why her life had become so important to him.

When he entered his rooms, he was surprised to see that the bed was now clean and there was no trace of the dead animal. The palace staff

had cleaned it up and discarded all the soiled linen.

Jorel set Ally down on the plush lounge chair. Her skin had begun to take on a slight red hue. The poison was working faster than he anticipated. He pushed her legs open. Starting at her lips, he began an abbreviated seduction. He didn't have time to go through an inch-by-inch perusal of her body. Instead, he needed to excite her erogenous zones and ramp up her anticipation for the coming orgasm.

He continued to kiss her and then reached up and tweaked her nipples. First with simple pinches, then ramping them up and rolling the buds between his fingers once they tightened. She moaned into his mouth as her body arched up to him. He moved down to take her breasts in his mouth. He sucked hard on one and then the other while he traced his hands down to her open sex. With deft fingers, he stroked up over her clit. The aroma of her anticipation swamped the room. He brought his fingers up to his mouth and tasted the flavor of her.

She was richer than the best Belusian cream, sweeter than anything he'd ever tasted. Something he could easily get addicted too. Although he knew he should prime her more, he couldn't stop himself from moving down to truly taste her. He wanted her to burst into his mouth.

He slid his tongue down her slit the back up, tracing the spongy flesh covering her clit, stopping to go over the erect flesh of her pleasure center. Each flick of his tongue against her sensitive bud sent a ripple through her. She pushed her body into her mouth. Her hands wove into the hair on his head. Her moans resounded through the room.

Jorel didn't stop. He continued to lick and suck her. He even lightly bit her. Finally, he knew he couldn't wait any longer. He traced her cunt, outlining the hole before pressing his tongue inside. He flattened his tongue and pushed it into her. Her gasp was music to his ears. He twisted his tongue around and around until her hands tightened in his hair. She moaned low and long as her cream flooded his tongue. He lapped up the juices while he inhaled the scent of her.

He looked up into her face and noticed when her eyes opened and closed several times. It looked like she might be coming out of it.

"Jorel? Jorel?" Her voice was slight, almost a whisper. "I'm sorry. I

couldn't let it hurt you. It was meant for me. I couldn't let it hurt you." Her eyes fluttered closed again.

Her words burrowed into him. She was still burning up, but the redness had left her face. The fever was still burning through her. He'd only beaten it back for the moment. She needed more adrenaline. More ecstasy. More sex. And although he wasn't happy with what he knew he needed to do, he was as determined to keep her alive, as she had been to keep him safe.

He picked her up and moved her to the bed. She didn't open her eyes again. He lay down on top of her, and the fever in her body felt like a fire burning him. He bent down and kissed her then held her. He placed his hands on her and tweaked her breasts again. The fire in her blood brought her back to a state of waiting. Her body was poised for more. Arched up to him as if begging for more. He reached down, grabbed her legs, and wrapped them over his elbows.

He needed to make her come, and come more than once if he wanted to break the fever. He slowly entered her, pushing until he was fully lodged inside her. He pulled out inch by inch until on the tip of him was still surrounded by her warmth. He thrust in again, this time more forcefully.

Ally gasped and arched up to meet him. She licked her lips and bit her bottom lip. Although she didn't wrap her arms around him, she did clench him. The muscles of her cunt squeezed his cock from base to tip.

Jorel sucked in a haggard breath and continued to plow into her. Each stroke that brought her closer to release brought him closer to his own. But he couldn't do that. He gritted his teeth and bit the inside of his cheek as he fought against the need that flowed through him.

He pulled in a deep breath as Ally arched beneath him and wetness flooded her channel. That didn't stop him. He continued to pound into her. Sweat dropped from his body onto hers. The beast within him roared to the forefront. He felt his body began to change, and he fought against it. He refused to take her in that form. But as he continued to take her, he started to lose the battle within himself. He was fighting against the need to come and the need to change. He was going to lose one of these

battles. Ally arched below him again and screamed as her body convulsed.

He thought the heat emanating from her body had begun to wane, but he was so hot himself he couldn't be sure. Just as he thought he was mastering the fight to subdue his beast, Ally reached up, wrapped her arms around him, and pulled his head down to hers. Her lips captured his, and suddenly her tongue was warring with his. And just that quick, he lost his battle. Both of them. His orgasm rocked through his body and his body shuttered as he fought the change.

The pleasure was so intense he thought he might black out from it. Both man and beast were shivering from the buzz vibrating through him. His cock expanded with his release, and he pried his eyes open to watch his mate convulse as another orgasm ripped through her.

Jorel purred as her flesh pulsed around his engorged cock. He'd never felt anything like it. The continued sensations meant that once he changed it would be a short interval before he would be able to get a hold of his body enough to change again.

As soon as his cock slipped from her body, he released his hold on his beast. The change was a quick thing. As if the beast had been waiting just below the surface of his skin. He laid there not moving. He didn't want her to wake up and see him in this changed state. She might become frightened and hurt herself trying to get away from him.

When she opened her eyes, they were still glassy. Would she scream? She smiled a watery smile at him then ran her hands along his hind leg.

It felt wonderful the way her hand softly stroked his coat. Too good. Her eyes flitted closed again, but this time her breathing was even. Her temperature was more normal. It was over. Thank goodness. He needed to get away from her. To think. Right now, he couldn't get her out of his mind. The feel of her. The smell of her. It was all swirling around him, stealing his focus. Turning him into something he didn't recognize. He needed to figure this out. Figure out what she'd done to him. When had she become so important? Things were changing so fast he didn't know what to make of it. What to make of her.

Chapter Eight

Ally awoke to an extremely dry mouth and sore body. She didn't remember much. A quick look around the room told her that she was alone. She lifted her head and then let it fall back onto the bed. Damn. Her head felt as if it weighed a ton.

There was a knock at the door, and before she could say come in, it opened. If it was another giant rat, or assassin, she was dead.

"So it's true you did suffer from devilmite fever. Nasty stuff." Fi'on strode into the room and over to a corner seat. "Don't know why I didn't think that they would try something like this. Whoever it is has a lot of access to the palace and royal family."

"Maybe we should figure out who it is before they try again." Ally sucked in her breath and sat up in bed. Her vision swam before her eyes, but she refused to show any weakness in front of Fi'on.

There was another knock at the door. The sound made Ally jump and whirl her head toward the sound. Pain stabbed at her eyes.

"The water bearers. I figured you might like a bath." Fi'on tried to smile at her, but it looked more like a sneer. It would be funny if every muscle in Ally's body wasn't screaming at her.

"Thanks." How the hell she was going to walk over to the tub was a mystery to her. She wasn't about to ask for help. That was for damn sure. The water bearers quickly filled the tub then left. Ally bit down on her bottom lip and slowly made her way to the tub. It was by no means elegant or graceful, but she'd done it under her own power.

"Damn, you are stubborn." Fi'on laughed.

"Do you mind standing by the door?" Ally smiled as she sank down in the heated water. It felt as if her entire body sighed as she relaxed into the tub. The fact that this was how the first attack happened, and the news of the second attack had no doubt already made it through the palace gossip mills, wasn't lost on her. She wasn't taking chances she didn't need to.

"We need to find this guy quick because the second attack could have taken both you and the prince out. Whoever it is has become truly desperate. The moment you start to breed, they will lose everything."

Fi'on leaned against the wall. "And with that fool of a doctor bragging that fucking is as good a cure as fighting, I am guessing that the next attack will be the last. They have to know that after the last three days, chances are almost one hundred percent that you are pregnant. But if they kill you before the prince announces it formally, they could still win."

"Wait a minute. Did you say three days?" Ally shook her head and sat up in the tub. "I've been out of it for three days? And what do you mean fucking?"

"Yeah. Prince Jorel has been with you for every minute of the last seventy-two hours. He just left with strict instructions that besides the water bearers, I am the only one allowed in this room." Fi'on shook her head as she repeated the command.

"He's been with me the entire time? And I am still waiting for you to explain what you mean by fucking."

"Devilmite are not only vicious animals, they are also poisonous. If their blood enters your system, it's a fast moving poison. It is said that only the adrenaline from fighting will combat it. But it seems that it rendered you unconscious, so the only way to save you was for the prince to screw you into several adrenaline-inducing orgasms." Fi'on didn't even bat an eyelash at the words, but Ally was suddenly extremely embarrassed.

"So the whole palace knows about the devilmite?" Ally told herself it didn't matter. They wanted the Prince to get her pregnant anyway, but

still, this was more than even she was prepared to take.

"Kind of hard not to know with the prince parading around with you naked in his arm that first night. I swear every servant knew about it before the carcass was even moved."

Okay. So everyone in the palace knew that Jorel had screwed her into some mind-numbing orgasms. She wasn't mad about him doing what he had to in order to keep her alive. What she did mind is that she was supposed to have had this intense pleasure and she couldn't remember one second of it.

"I'm thinking the way to ferret them out is to provide them with a situation they can't say no to," Fi'on said, staring up to the ceiling. "Maybe a fight. Yeah. You start a fight. Steal a ship then pilot it to a predestined place. I will be waiting for them to follow you."

"Hold on. If we're going out to the forest, I think we'll need some re-enforcements." Ally wanted to catch these creeps too, but even she knew when to call in backup.

"We don't know who we can trust, and you can't honestly tell me you believe that Prince Jorel will allow you to do this?"

No. She couldn't say that. Jorel would definitely not agree to this. Just telling him about this would most likely start a fight.

"So I say we let you rest today and maybe tomorrow while I get things ready. Then I will show you what to do on the ship, and you can do the rest." Fi'on smiled a genuine smile, as she seemed decided on the plan.

It was a good one. Or as good as Ally could hope for. If she talked Fi'on into sending her to the forest where she'd entered into this crazy world, she could go home. It looked like everything was going to work out.

Then why the hell did she feel so sad?

She waited for Jorel the entire day, but he didn't come back to their room that night. Was it because he didn't want her? Was it because he'd had his fill of the black girl? Had the novelty worn off?

The next morning she waited for him to come in and explain why he hadn't come to her. But when the door opened, it was just Fi'on.

"Ready for your bath? It's extra hot this time to help your muscles.

You need to ready for tomorrow. My sister's husband overheard plans to kill both you and the prince tomorrow night. He couldn't be sure who said it, but he didn't want to spook them. Make them rush. I begged him for one day before he tells Prince Jorel. That moves us up by one day. Will you be ready?" Fi'on didn't look convinced, but they both knew this was their only shot.

"Do I have a choice?" Ally didn't see how, but what choice did she have? She would make herself ready. And once her debt was paid, she was out of here. No matter how bad she wanted to feel Jorel's skin next to hers. Well, she had tonight. Tonight she could do it. Find him if he didn't come to her. If this was going to be their last night together, she could do it. She had to do it. If she didn't, she would spend the remainder of her life wondering what if.

"I'll be ready, but if we move the time frame up, you need to pick a place I know. Can we do this in the forest where Prince Jorel found me?" Ally tried to keep her voice level, giving nothing of her plans away.

"I guess," Fi'on said in an evasive tone.

Ally had no doubt the tigress was wondering about her. Wondering why there, but it didn't matter. She would do it, and Ally would escape. Either way, Fi'on's need for revenge outweighed her need to keep the royal family happy.

It didn't take long for Fi'on to go over the plan three times. She even volunteered to take Ally to the room where Jorel was in council with his father. She needed to remember the way, because this was where she would need to go tomorrow.

"Your Highness." Fi'on took a slight bow. "Your mate wanted to see you."

Ally might have gone looking for him later tonight, but for Fi'on to say that right now had her seeing red. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she wanted him, needed him. Her chest burned with the truth of it but no way was she ready to accept it.

"Enough for today. We have a viable list of candidates for now. Why don't you show her the market?" The king's smile was too big and too bright. Obviously, he'd heard about the devilmite fever and his

ingenious cure. Now it looked as if he was hedging his bets.

Jorel looked anything but pleased about the suggestion. He walked over to her, grabbed her elbow, and led her out of the room. In that instant, she changed her plans for the night. She didn't go where she wasn't wanted, and right now, he looked as though he wanted to be anywhere but with her.

"Let me go." She grunted at him as she pulled her arm out of his grasp. "If you don't want to take me anywhere, then don't."

He raked his hand through the hair on his head. "It's not like that."

"Then tell me what it's like. Because I know when a person doesn't want the pleasure of my company. A believe me, you look like it's pure misery to be anywhere near me." Ally concentrated on keeping her voice down. The last thing she needed was for the palace to be abuzz with the Prince's sexual rejection of her.

"Why are you acting this way?" he asked, staring intently at her.

"I'm not acting any way. You're the one who supposedly fucked me six ways from Sunday and then couldn't be bothered to see me when I came to. Exactly how am I supposed to feel about that? I really need you to tell me." By the end, she was screaming at him.

He backed her into their room. "I wasn't avoiding you—"

"Then what were you avoiding, because where I come from what you're doing is called a brush off. It's what you do when you don't want to be bothered with someone." Ally felt the anger burning just below the surface of her skin. She could smell her pheromones engulfing the room.

"Damn you. I told you it wasn't like that," he said, clearly agitated.

"Then tell me what it's like. Tell me." She wanted to jump on him. Pound him into dust. Bring him as low as he'd brought her. Her voice echoed through the room. She sounded shrill and hurt, but she couldn't keep it from her tone. The rejection she'd been fighting against her entire life roared to life.

"You don't understand. And how could you? You don't have the hope and future of the entire kingdom pinned on whether you can father a cub that won't die. That you rule in a world that is on the brink of destruction." He advanced on her until there was no room between them.

"You don't have a mother who was so devastated by the loss of one cub that she totally ignores the other. You've never been alone in a room full of packs. There are no packs of one, or there weren't until I was born."

She could hear the suffering in his voice, the same sound that beat at the back of her mind for so many years. "Yes. I do. I know more about loss and loneliness than you ever want to know."

"Don't do that. Don't pretend to know how I feel. I survived. When whole packs died in the birthing rooms, I survived. Me, the only cub born to a king and queen. I survived to watch our people snuffed out by an errant genetic mutation." His voice had become hard. As if he blamed the entirety of what was happening to his species on the fact that he had lived while others had passed.

Ally bit down on a need to comfort him. It came out of nowhere and hit her between the eyes. She tamped it down before he could see it. "You think you're the only one to know loss? Think again, buddy. I was three when I lost everything. And I do mean *everything*." All the old feelings that she never voiced came rolling to the front. "You say your mother neglected you? I wish they had been there to do that to me. You act like a spoiled child. Who gives a rat's ass about how anyone else thinks of you? If you're not happy, then what good is living?"

"My job is to provide for the people. To rule with an even hand and carry on the royal name." His words were spit out through virtually unmoving lips.

"Spoken like a true puppet. If that's how you see the rest of your life, then no wonder you're such an ass. I plan on living my life like I see fit. I *will* be happy. You can do whatever you want. I made a promise, and I intend to keep it." She took a step to the side, intent on reaching the door and getting as far away from him as possible.

"No. Your first promise is to me. You will stay here with me." His hand snaked out to grab her, but she slipped just out of his reach.

"No. My first promise is to my family. My mother, my father, and my younger brother, who all died when I was three. I lost everything in one afternoon. I had no one. So standing here listening you sing the 'poor me' song just doesn't fly. You're a grown man. If you don't want to be

prince, then don't. If your mother isn't close to you, be a big boy, make the first move. If you disagree with your father, tell him. Be a man. Not a scared, lonely kid afraid to make any type of connection."

When she finished her tirade, her body felt heavy. She hadn't said a word about her family to anyone in the last twenty years. And all of a sudden, she blurted it out to him. She turned away from him, refusing to look in his eyes. She didn't need his pity.

Ally couldn't take this. She needed to get out of here before her tears overflowed and fell down her cheeks. She didn't cry. Two steps back and a slide, and she was at the door. She turned to look at him rooted to the spot she'd left him. He was a complication she didn't need. Didn't want. If she didn't want him then why was her heart tearing to get out of her chest and her eyes brimming with unshed tears. She didn't want him. She wanted the man he could've been.

* * * * *

Jorel turned and looked at his mate. She was heading for the door. The last barrier around his heart fell away. How was it that she always did the unexpected? Turned him on his ear and treated him no different from any other man?

He'd shared his loss and fears with her, expecting her to laugh or to tell him he was crazy. But no, his mate pushed him toward living. Explained that she'd suffered more loss than he could have imagined, and she hadn't cut herself out of life. He watched her open the door and, for a moment, all he could think of was her walking out of his life. So far, he had never known what he was missing. He didn't know his littermate, didn't know his mother's love. But he knew Ally, and if she walked away, something in him cried that he would never recover. Never stop wanting her. He moved before he actually made a conscious decision to do so.

His palm slammed the door shut before she could slip out of the room. He couldn't say the words, couldn't make his mouth form them even though they burned his throat. He pressed her against the door and wrapped his arms around her. He might not be able to tell her how he felt,

The Pearl Heartstone by Leila Brown

but he would show her. That, he could do.

Chapter Nine

His arms were like steel bars around her. She didn't need this. Didn't want this. Didn't want him. What she wanted was her old life back. The life she'd spent years building. A life that didn't include him.

You don't mean that. If you did, you wouldn't be so excited by his cock pressing in on you.

Her breath hitched, and in an instant, the pain in her chest changed from a heart-wrenching fever to a different type of heat.

Jorel didn't move. Didn't change his comfortingly tight hold. It was she who leaned back into him and moaned as she turned her head to grab his lips. She wanted to feel alive. Needed it.

"You don't have to do this," he grumbled before he captured her lips in his. It was a quick, hard kiss.

He loosened his arms, turned her around, then swept her lips up into another mind-numbing kiss. His taste flooded her mouth. His hands were on her shoulders. In three quick movements, he undid the scraps of cloth that passed for women's clothing. His hands were all over her. He squeezed her breasts, pinched her nipples, then reached around and cupped her ass.

For a second she thought he was going to pick her up and take her over to the bed, but he didn't. He backed her against the wall and propped her up. His lips closed around her left nipple and tugged it into his mouth. He laved the tight bud before scraping the peak with his teeth, and then he turned to give the other nipple the same attention.

A low moan erupted from her lips. She needed more and wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck. He crushed her against the door and quickly shoved off his pants. In one quick movement, he slid her down on his waiting cock.

The delicious friction of his flesh sliding into her tore through her. He bit down on her neck and held her in place while he pulled out of her and pumped deep inside her. In. Out. Then back in with so much force, he rocked her body against the wall.

Ally bit down on her lip to keep from screaming. After three thrusts, she came. The wet sound of him pounding into her permeated the room. He still pushed into her, and when the euphoria of her orgasm started to fade, he rekindled her fire and another orgasm built deep in her core. Heat infused her body, and suddenly she was right back on the edge of a new orgasm.

He lifted his lips from her neck. "Come for me again."

All it took was those four simple words to send her over the edge. This time, he captured her mouth and swallowed her screams of passion. He thrust into one more time before he reared his head back and roared his own release. Ally slumped against him and held on to every single current of pleasure that flowed through her.

Jorel wrapped his arms around her and walked her over to the bed. He sat down on the edge and curled around her. He hadn't let her go since he'd wrapped his arms around her earlier. For the first time in a long time, Ally took a deep breath and relaxed. Totally relaxed. She fell asleep feeling protected and loved. She didn't question it, just enjoyed it. Tomorrow she would find out who wanted to kill her, and then she was going home. The smile on her face slowly fell away.

* * * * *

Jorel woke up before Ally. He bent down to kiss her and inhaled her scent. It had changed. Not a lot. Just a bit around the edges. Most wouldn't catch it. But he knew. He'd been around her long enough to know every miniscule detail of her scent.

His heart lifted. Their first litter. And all the cubs would live. He didn't have to worry that they would die like his sister. Something in his chest finally burst. He was about to have his own family.

Ally moaned and rolled over. She wouldn't be happy when he told her. He eased out of the bed, grabbed his pants, and quickly made his way to the royal baths. He made quick work of his bath and wasn't surprised to find a pair of his leather pants and cotton shirt folded up on the side bench when he stopped out of the water.

He found his father in the breakfast room. The need to tell his father that Ally was breeding was a surprise. The king would be more than pleased. He'd announce it to the entire kingdom.

But Jorel couldn't do that to Ally. He didn't want her to find out like that. No, he would tell her first. Give her a chance to accept it before the rest of the kingdom went into celebrations. He'd give her a couple more hours to sleep, and then he would tell her.

"Are we going to play the game?" his father asked. The game table sat between both of them.

When had he moved over here? Jorel shook his head. He needed to knock himself out of this fog. He stood up. There was only one way to clear his mind. He needed to tell Ally.

"Father, I—" Jorel didn't get to finish.

"Jorel. I need to leave you. You need to let me go. I can't stand this anymore." Ally's voice rang through the room.

His gut clenched then spasmed. He blinked several times and shook his head. "What do you mean, you need to leave?" Her words didn't make sense. She couldn't want to leave him after last night.

"I want to go home. I want my old life back." She leveled her gaze on him, and he could see the tears pooling there. "I don't want to be here." A tear fell from her eyes.

The need to do something almost overpowered him. He balled his fists and held them tight to keep from grabbing her. "It doesn't matter what you want. You are mine. Your home is with me."

"No, Jorel. It's not," she whispered, looking down at the floor. "If you won't take me, then fine. I will find a way to get away from you."

How could she say that after last night? He stared at her as if he had never seen her before. Had last night been a lie? Had she tried to get under his skin just to find a way away from him? Something in him said no, but his heart howled in louder. He'd been a fool.

"You are mine. Do you hear me? Mine. And you will stay with me." Jorel didn't mean to shout, but the pain swirling in his chest was screaming for release.

"Goodbye, Jorel." she said, stalking out of the room. He could see the sadness in her eyes.

She really didn't want him. He could see her heart in her eyes and it was breaking. Did she think he was going to be able to let her go? Hadn't she understood last night? Giving her up would be like trying to stop breathing. Neither was an option.

"Are you going to follow her, son?" His father asked.

"No. If I follow her now, I will say something I don't mean and most likely won't be able to take back. I need to calm down." Jorel flexed and unfurled his fingers. The muscles in his fingers hurt. She hadn't said a word about his confession last night, but it seemed as though she'd screamed every word to anyone who would listen. Why the hell did he say anything? Luckily, no member of palace security would let her out of the palace.

"Your Highness."

Jorel turned, ready to punch whoever it was. Instead, he nodded his head and grabbed the arm of the chair beside him. He recognized the new man. It was Leone, Fi'an's mate.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but my mate just informed me of Fi'on and Princess Ally's plans." He cleared his throat. "This is partially my fault. I never should have let Fi'on talk me into waiting to come forward."

The fur on the back of Jorel's neck stood up. "Tell me what?"

"A day ago, I overheard a couple of men making plans to kill you and the princess before she could start breeding. I told Fi'an. My mate immediately told Fi'on." The man took a deep breath. "From what my mate says, both Fi'on and Princess Ally planned to stage a fight with you then use one of the ships to get to the Imperial Forest. The flight plan was

most likely sent to all mainframe. Anyone looking would find it."

Jorel's heart stopped. If what the man said was true, then both Fi'on and Ally were walking into a trap. Whoever wanted to kill Ally would either be there waiting, or leaving the palace on foot to hunt her.

Jorel ran through the doors and raced down the halls. He burst through the door to an empty room. She was gone. She was gone. No doubt Fi'on had secured a craft for her. He needed to find her. He shifted into his tiger form and followed her scent through the castle. It only took a few minutes for him to catch her scent in front of the royal escape way. Damn Fi'on.

Luckily, he knew the frequency of the escape pod. He ran for the loading docks and shifted as he jumped into his personal craft.

"Prince Jorel." One of the guards said, rushing up to stand in front of his ship. "I cannot allow you to go without an escort."

"Have my personal guard follow me," Jorel said, trying to get a lock on the escape pod's signal.

"I'm sorry, sir, they aren't here."

The way the guard said the words stopped Jorel. "Where are they?"

"Not in the palace. They left about thirty minutes ago."

"In a ship or on foot?" Jorel knew the answer and dreaded it because no matter what the guard said, his mate was in serious danger.

"On foot." The guard had moved from in front of Jorel and now stood beside the footholds up onto the ship.

"Who do you serve?"

"My king and queen," the guard said without a moment of hesitation.

"And how do you feel about my mate?" That was the most important question.

"If she can breed out children, then she and those like her will save us all," the guard said with his head held high.

"Good. Climb aboard." Jorel wanted to be gone, but he also knew he would need proof. Someone to corroborate his story when he found his mate. The same guards that had helped him bring Ally to this world were the same ones trying to kill her.

No. He could be wrong. It was entirely possible that his guards were following his mate to keep her safe. Something in him said that was highly unlikely. It explained so much. How the assassins had been able to get access to his personal rooms. How they knew when she would most likely be alone.

How could he have missed it? Was he that blind? His inability to see the danger right in front of his face could cost him his future. He got a lock on the escape pod, revved the engine, and cleared the docking station. As soon as possible, he pushed the engines to their max speed. He prayed that they weren't too late.

Chapter Ten

Ally stepped out of the pod expecting to remember this forest but was disappointed. Nothing looked familiar. She walked around and around but couldn't find anything to lead her to the white mist that would mark her way home.

That's when she picked up on Fi'on's scent. And just as quickly as she caught it, a mixture of more masculine odors overtook the light, delicate scent. The shit was about to hit the fan.

A petite tigress came running through the bushes. For a second, Ally's heart raced. Even though it was Fi'on who ran toward her, her mind still screamed in terror, and she bounced on the ball of her feet ready to run.

Fi'on shifted and crouched. "Get ready. They were right behind me."

No sooner had Fi'on said the words than a huge tiger, lion, jaguar, and leopard jumped out of the bushes in front of them. The animals snarled at them, stalking back and forth. Then they shifted. They shouldn't have shifted. They should have just attacked. Why were they shifting? It only took a second. One second for Ally to be totally devastated. The four men in front of her were Jorel's guards. The same ones who dragged her into this world. They could have let her go, but no. They'd kept her in this world, and now they wanted to kill her. Anger boiled in her. More for their betrayal of Jorel and Fi'an's loss than for the attacks on her.

"Fi'on, we don't want to hurt you. Just walk away," the jaguar guard said.

"You killed my sister's litter. Most likely robbed her of any chance to breed." Fi'on's anger was almost a tangible thing surrounding her. She took a step toward the men, balling her finger into tight fists.

"That is not our fault. That bitch you are protecting is the real enemy. Her, and others like her, will dilute our genes until there is nothing left. Let us kill her and save our kind."

"See, that's where we're different, Valek. I am loyal to my king. I protect the princess with my life, unlike you. You were supposed to protect the prince, yet you put a devilmite in his room. What if he had walked in instead of her? What if they had both been poisoned?"

"It was a risk we were willing to take to protect our families." Valek narrowed his eyes at Fi'on.

"You are too late. She is already breeding. Killing her now will accomplish nothing. If..." Fi'on bared her fangs. "If you succeed in killing the princess, it won't matter. When they find her remains, they will smell the babies. They will know that our kind can be saved this way and will no doubt continue with breeding the next in line. Either way, nothing you do here is going to matter."

Ally tried not to react to Fi'on's words. That couldn't be right. No way could they know that quickly. She hadn't been here more than two weeks. She didn't move her face. Didn't smile. Didn't groan. Didn't reach down and rub her stomach. Right now, she needed to concentrate on being alive later to deal with the bombshell just dropped in her lap. She could feel her face heating with the need to know, to question, do something other than just stand here.

"Unless there is nothing left of her to find," the lion growled.

"I can smell it on her now, which means the prince smelled it this morning and the king shortly after that, so I'm guessing even if they don't find her body, the project is going forward. But what you haven't thought about is how diligent the king will search for those who killed his only hope for grandchildren." Fi'on crouched again, narrowing her eyes at the group of men. Her ears twitched. She was about to attack.

Ally thought she was ready, but when Fi'on jumped, it took her a second to follow. Two apiece. How the hell she was supposed to come out of this one alive, she didn't know. She leapt on the jaguar and hit him with the heel of her hand directly in the line of his throat. He bent over choking, and she turned and planted her foot in the balls of the other man. They recovered quickly. Too quickly.

After five minutes of parrying and bending to stay out of the way of lethal looking claws, Ally's strength began to wane. She needed to go on the offensive. But after finding out that she might be pregnant, she couldn't give her all in this fight. Which meant that where she normally would have risked everything and taken the biggest of chances, she held back. She played it safe. And that was going to get her killed.

The smell of blood flowed across the clearing.

"Fi'on?" Ally screamed. If that blood was Fi'on's, Ally was going to make a run for the ship. She was barely holding her own against two of the guards; there was no way she would survive four of them.

"I'm fine. He's not," Fi'on yelled.

Ally kicked the knee of one of the men in front of her. He fell. She vaulted over him. She aimed her foot at the other man but the fallen man grabbed one of her ankles and yanked her to the ground. The impact stole the breath from her lungs.

She waited for the men to pounce, but nothing happened. The hand on her ankle dropped, and after a moment, she sat up. Jorel and another man fought the two guards that had brought her down. Right now, while everyone was occupied, she could slip away. It would take no time at all to disappear into the trees, to go searching for a doorway home.

The smell of fresh blood sailed across the air again. It burned her nose and caused tears to well in her eyes. She knew that smell. Jorel. All thoughts of escape and hope evaporated. The need to keep Jorel safe became the center of her world. The cop in her made her assess the situation before she jumped in the fight.

Jorel's arm had just been slashed. Blood dripped down to his hand. From the look of it, the gash might have hit nerves, which meant he was one arm down. But his attacker's back was to Ally. She had an advantage.

Jorel was still a threat, so the guy couldn't afford to turn his back. If she acted now, she might be able to take him out in two quick movements.

Ally closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath, rolled her shoulders, and jumped. She knocked the guard to the ground. She stayed on his back, riding him down. The second she heard the air whoosh from his lungs, she wrapped her hands around the sides of his face and jerked his head to the left. The crack that rebounded against the trees told her that it was over. She'd snapped his neck. Killed him.

Death wasn't like it was in the movies. Wasn't a quick and easy thing. It lingered as the man's body slacked into a heap. Her hands shook as she pulled her fingers away from his head.

Jorel reached down, grabbed her hands, and yanked her up. "You crazy fool. You shouldn't have done that. I can handle my own fights." He slipped his hands around her and squeezed her up against his chest. He winced but didn't let her go. "You need to let me protect you."

There was a grunt, and suddenly the forest was quiet. Ally looked over at Fi'on. She hadn't escaped her fight unscathed, but she was doing a hell of a lot better than her opponent. The young man Jorel brought limped toward them.

Ally breathed a sigh of relief. Thoughts of Fi'on's earlier comments stole her thoughts.

"Am I pregnant?" She pulled back so that she could see Jorel's face. His voice might say one thing, but his eyes would tell her the truth. "Fi'on told them she could smell it on me."

"I didn't want to say anything. I wanted you to come to terms with this being your home before you had to deal with this." He tightened his hold on her as if he expected her to make a run for it.

She'd had her chance. No, she couldn't have left him like this. Not with his life on the line. And she knew the second he was able to hold his own, he would also do his best to keep her here with him.

Then it dawned on her. He'd known this morning. This morning when she'd told him she wanted to go home. When she'd set out to hurt him so that she could save him. She thought of the pain he no doubt went through knowing that she carried his child or children and yet she said

that she couldn't stay with him.

The need to explain burned in her. "I am so sorry about this morning. I had to do it. They were planning to kill—"

"I know." He interrupted her and put a kiss on her forehead. "I know you were protecting me. I knew it the second Fi'an's husband came and told me what he overheard."

"So I guess this means I'm in trouble." Fi'on came to stand beside them. There were claw marks all over her flesh.

"Oh, no. You kept my mate safe. So I think I will talk my father into giving you a special reward." Jorel smiled at her, baring all his teeth. "I am going to suggest that you be the next volunteer in the mating program. So we can see what happens when one of our women mates with an off-world male."

The horrified look on Fi'on's face screamed that Jorel had scored a direct hit. He'd found Fi'on's soft spot.

"Shall we go back to the palace? I think I have a need to speak to my father," Jorel said, guiding Ally away. "I doubt they were the only four in on this plot. Surely, there were more. And even if there weren't, there will be tomorrow. This is his plan. So either he gets everyone to accept it or he gives them options. A kingly command is not working."

They stepped over the fallen bodies and made their way to Jorel's ship. The ride was blessedly short and uneventful. Although, when they made it back into the dock, every member of the royal family was waiting.

The king and queen rushed up to them in front of a group of royals. The doctor followed then and immediately started treating Jorel.

"What happened?" his father demanded.

"Not everyone is on board with your plan to bring in others to save our people." Prince Jorel winced as the doctor probed his gash. "It was Valek and the rest of my guards. It seems they were determined to show your program was a failure. You might want to rethink this. I mean, if they rebelled against it so will others."

The king nodded, seeming to consider. He took a step toward Ally. "What do you say?"

Before she could tell him what she thought, he sniffed at her. He

grabbed her hand and pulled her closer to sniff again. If she smelled, oh freaking well. She'd just fought for her life and the life of his son. He sniffed again. If he did that one more time, she was going to hit him. Her patience was wearing thin.

"Hah. She is breeding. The plan works. Once she delivers a living litter, our people will be lining up to be part of this." The king was overjoyed. His entire demeanor changed. Suddenly there was a bounce in his step that didn't bode well. He turned to the crowd and raised his hands. The group quieted. "Princess Allyson is breeding. If anything happens to her, the punishment will be swift, deadly, and will be shared by the traitor's entire family. Now let us celebrate our good future."

The king swept out of the dock with his entire entourage. Ally shook her head. She'd just found out she was pregnant and suddenly the king was shouting it to the masses. She wasn't exactly cool with that. But what choice did she have? She couldn't find the mist to take her home. And she was damn sure Jorel wouldn't let her out of his sight anytime soon. Tears welled in her eyes, but she didn't let them drop. Right now, she just wanted to lie down and forget.

"I can't finish this here. I need all of you to follow me to the infirmary so I can treat you." The doctor strode down the long walkway. "We need to hurry. The king is no doubt calling all of the court to him. He will want to announce this as quickly as possible."

"Damn him," Jorel grumbled. "He goes too far."

"No, he is doing this to save Ally." Fi'on's limp was becoming more pronounced. She had been seriously hurt but hadn't said a word. "If everyone knows that she is the answer to our problem instead of a shot in the dark, they will fall in line."

"Umm, *she* is here and doesn't like being talked about this way." Ally was pissed.

When they walked through the infirmary door, everyone stood still. It was as if time had stopped for everyone but her. Then Jorel turned back to her. Yeah, okay, so everyone but the two of them.

"What the hell is going on, Jorel?" She tried to stop the wobble in her voice, but she didn't quite manage it.

"I don't know." He pushed her behind him as he took a few tentative steps into the room.

Suddenly a black hooded figure walked from a side room. "Prince Jorel. I see you are well."

Jorel just growled. He pushed Ally further behind him.

"Don't hide your mate, Jorel. I would like to meet her."

The woman's voice sounded familiar. Ally couldn't place it, but she knew she'd heard it before.

"Traveler, to what do we owe this pleasure?" Jorel asked.

"I come to talk to your mate. I remember what your heartstone was like when I first removed it from your chest. I won't leave her here if I think you'll hurt her." The woman walked toward them.

Jorel might be above hitting a woman, but Ally wasn't. If the woman was here to cause problems, then she'd chosen the right one today.

"I am not here to fight. I just want to ask Allyson one question," the woman said, coming even closer. "Allyson, are you happy here? Do you want to go home?"

"She is home," Jorel growled.

"That won't do you any good. She has been here long enough to make an informed decision. If she decides to go back, I will send her back." And there was nothing he could do about it. Although the Traveler hadn't said the words, Ally knew she meant them.

"What about our litter? She is breeding. What would those in her world do with our children?" Jorel no longer tried to push her away. Instead, he tried to hold her closer to him.

"Let her answer for herself," The woman barked. "Do you want to go home?"

Ally didn't know why she believed the woman, but she did. This was her ticket home. Her path back to a normal life. So did she really want to leave? Could she?

"Ally, don't do this. After last night, you have to know that we need to stay together. We have a lot in common. Not to mention my children growing inside you." Jorel turned to her and captured her hands.

"Look, I know you're not all bad. But I do miss my home, my job, my friends."

"Do you remember how it felt to grow up without your parents? Would you make your own children go through that? Would you make me? I might not be the good guy, or the guy who deserves you, but I am the guy who loves you with everything I have. Please don't leave me."

His voice pulled at her, reminding her of his confessions. Could she abandon him as he felt everyone else in his life had done? Could she take his children away from him? And the biggest question was, could she leave him? As she thought about how bleak her life back home seemed, she could feel every muscle in her body. Her arms and legs ached. Her head hurt, and she was tired. And the only thing she could think was that she wanted to go lay in the bed next to Jorel.

She turned toward the Traveler, and the muscles in Jorel's arms tensed. "As much as I miss home, I am where I belong." As the last of her words left her mouth, Jorel pulled her into his arms and captured her lips with his.

"If you will let go of the princess, I will finish patching you up." The doctor's voice surprised them.

Ally tried to take a step back, but Jorel didn't let her out of his arms. "I know I don't deserve you. But I am going to do my best to make sure you never regret that you didn't leave me."

"I can't regret it. I love you, and I don't want to be anywhere but here." Ally knew life her would never be the same.

Epilogue

When the royal twins turned one month old, the king made a new announcement. He gathered the royals and stood in front of his thrown.

“As a reward for bravery, I have decided that the next of our people to be matched by the Traveler will be our own Fi’on.”

Fi’on’s head snapped in the direction of where the king stood. He had to be kidding. She didn’t want to be mated. She wanted to be the head of the royal guard. Not head of the female guard, not the princess’ personal guard. No, she wanted the whole thing. But once she was mated, that would all change. She would be regulated to breeding. All her dreams would fall to the greater need to breed.

She smiled at the king as she made a decision. Life here had just taken a turn for the worse. She needed to disappear, and fast.

Author Bio

Leila Brown has been an avid reader since the fifth grade. As she got older, she read everything she could get her hands on, from horror to mystery before finally settling on romance as her favorite genre.

While in college studying computer programming and electrical engineering, she realized what she wanted to do when she grew up. She wanted to write those stories that entertained her through more nights than she could remember. Of course, her first attempts were less than remarkable and have been destroyed to protect the innocent.

Currently, Leila works a normal nine-to-five in the IT world. She writes during her lunch hour and at home after 9:00 P.M., when everyone in her house is asleep.

Is it easy? Yes. And no. Coming up with the stories is easy. Getting the words out of her head and onto paper is *hard*! But she couldn't live without it.

Come visit me at www.leilabrown.com