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Leila Brown



**THE DIAMOND  
HEARTSTONE**

*The Diamond Heartstone*

*By*

*Leila Brown*

## **The Diamond Heartstone by Leila Brown**

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### **The Diamond Heartstone**

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## **Dedication**

There are so many wonderful people who helped me get to where I am today. First and foremost, my husband. Thank you for believing in me, pushing me, dragging me, reading for me and editing for me. I can never express my thanks for all the things you've done for me.

To my beta readers Nakia, Nicole, and Chaya. You were right, the book is good. Thanks for reading for me.

To Grandma, thanks for always telling me I could do anything.

And finally to my children. Thanks, Andre, for keeping me on my toes, physically and mentally. And to Mason and Leila, you are my constant inspiration.

## **Prologue**

Belusian Prime, Theta Galaxy

“You have the credits?” The woman in the dark hood reached out to him with a wrinkled hand from the dark shadows of the abandoned transport room.

Barrick held out the small black card charged with one hundred thousand credits. An extreme amount. But he was willing to pay any amount for her services. Her knobby fingers snagged the card without ruffling the fur lining his hand. Faster and more agile than she looked.

She put the card into a reader. Three beeps later and he could almost see the grizzly white of her smile. It seemed jagged. Like an animal who knew how to render flesh from bone.

“Ahh. We are agreed. I need just one more thing from you.” The woman reached out to him again. This time she bypassed his hand and ground her palm against the fur on his chest. Her furless skin felt warm and smooth.

She flexed her fingers and white-hot blinding pain pulsed through him. Her fingers seemed to slip through his skin. They closed around his heart and squeezed the organ. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move. Was she trying to kill him? Had he been duped? Unfortunately, this part of the ship was barely used since each of the crew now had personal wrist transporters.

Calling on the beast from within, he loosened the rein on his control. Blood rushed through his veins like a flood overpowering a river. He'd show her what happens when you cross the 'White Tiger', the most feared man in the Theta Galaxy. He hadn't earned the moniker for nothing. Crossing him meant death. A slow painful one.

"I think I have it," she said, pulling her hand back.

Barrick's chest bowed out, following the path of her clenched fingers. She was pulling his very essence out.

"Lady, what you're about to have is a whole lot of trouble," he panted in metered breaths. The bones in his hands popped as they elongated into paws. The fur surrounding them thickened.

"Don't even think about it unless you want me to cancel our deal," she said with icy calm

"Easy for you to say. I'm not trying to kill you," he growled through clenched teeth. "Yet."

"Down boy. I'm not killing you." She laughed at him. "I am removing your heartstone. I've been told it is quite painful."

"Look, witch, whatever you're doing, finish it. Or I won't be responsible." His nose shortened and seemingly melded into his face. He could smell her now. She didn't smell old. She smelled of dust and hope. If hope had a smell. Her look and her smell didn't mesh.

More of her trickery? He never should have agreed to use only the floor's track lighting. Too many shadows to hide in. No matter. When his eyes changed he would get a true look at her. And if she continued to cause him any amount of pain, there was little anyone would be able to do to save her. The room was empty. There was nowhere for her to hide.

"There it is." Her hand slid from him without a sound. She held a heart-shaped crystal in her pristine hand. It was amazingly clear with four sliver thin black stripes running through it. "Almost pure. I'm amazed." She slid him a challenging glance as she stroked the crystal with her fingers.

"That did not come out of my chest." His beast seemed to all but disappear. He had never banished the animal so quickly before. Something slid up the side of one arm and down the other.

"Sure it did. This is yours and it will lead me to your true mate." Her thumb stroked along side the stone again.

"How long?" He bit his lip. Now the slight caress ran down the hair on the back of his calves. He turned quickly looking for the culprit. Something was wrong. It took several seconds for him to figure out what it was. Everything around him appeared dull as if someone had drawn a screen over his eyes. His normally super sharp vision was dull, almost monotone in its bleakness.

"There has only been one instance where I was unable to find a mate in time," she said, shaking her head in a tiny movement. She swept her black full length cloak around her.

"What do you mean 'in time'?" He walked away from her and started searching the room.

"Precisely that. There is a time limit on these things. No one can survive without their true essence for too long. What are you doing?"

"True essence?" He'd looked behind the few boxes and chairs in the room. "There's someone else in here. I can feel them."

"Anything less and I could not be sure of finding the right one for you. If you die, I'll return half the credits to your family." She pulled a black case from beneath her cloak. With steady hands she placed the crystal on a small reddish pillow and closed the case. "Did I forget to tell you that you will feel each stroke of the heartstone? And not always the same. Some may be more intense than others, of course."

"Of course," he echoed. That would have been good to know before hand.

"You will know when I find her," she said, moving away from him.

"How?" He rubbed fingers in his eyes as the color seemed to drain from the room. Everything turned to shades of gray. How much of himself was he going to lose? He looked up to ask the question, but the Peddler had vanished.

## Chapter One

San Francisco, California

"You like this one?" The small hunched woman behind the makeshift flea market booth eyed her. The woman's fingers glanced across the yellowed plastic counter, lightly touching another of the beautiful necklaces. Her voice floated over the loud voices around them.

Alycia James liked the look of the jewelry but she knew she didn't have the money for it. She nodded her head and started to walk away from the stall. Why tempt herself?

"Wait, I have others. Come look. These are special."

The woman's voice stopped her in mid stride. *You can't afford it, why look and torture yourself?* What could looking hurt? Turning around, she moved back to the stall and bent over as the woman pulled out a small black case. Her wrinkled fingers pried open the leather lid.

"I just got this one in." The glowing shine of a crystal heart twinkled up at her. It was only a bit smaller than the palm of her hand. "Go ahead. Pick it up."

"I couldn't." The sign above the stall read 'You break it. You bought it' in bold black letters. There was no way she would be able to afford this. Not working on an unpaid internship. This last semester had drained her savings. Thank God this was the last one.

"It's sturdier than it looks." The woman picked the crystal up with



her gnarled fingers, pushing it toward Alycia.

"It's not stolen or anything, is it?" Alycia asked, eyeing the woman suspiciously.

"No. It was given to me freely by the owner," she stated, pushing the necklace at her again.

Alycia took the heart pendant. There was a thick black string tied around it. Encasing it. Binding it.

"Try it on," the coarse voice coaxed.

"Are you sure it won't break?" Alycia asked as several young men pushed by her. Her knees hit the table, jarring everything on it.

"The string is really strong. It will not break. If it breaks, I will replace it. No charge." The woman smiled, showcasing a missing-tooth smile.

The second she touched the crystal an unfamiliar warmth spread through her. Something was holding her, caressing her. A feeling of safety and security washed over her.

She wanted to slip it around her neck but didn't. Once there, Alycia didn't know how she would be able to take it off again.

"Put it on. See how pretty it will look against your dark skin." The woman gestured for her to try it on. She must know how the crystal made a person feel. Was probably banking on it. Too bad, she didn't have enough money to be a mark.

But she really wanted to feel it next to her skin. She needed to experience the pull of the chain around her neck, the weight of the stone between her breasts. Alycia separated the ends of the chain and reattached them underneath her hair. The heart hung in the center of her chest. Something so big should feel heavy and clunky, but she could barely feel its weight.

"It is beautiful," the woman pronounced, holding up a cracked mirror. The stone twinkled, catching light from every angle. It almost seemed to glow from within. It looked... expensive. Too expensive. Anyone who saw her would see her thinned out cheeks, full lips and wide brown eyes and wonder how she could afford this.

She pulled the chain up and was awed by the way it seemed to

shine brighter against her dark caramel skin.

"Lovely," the woman said, turning the mirror up to catch Alycia's face. "It is so beautiful against your skin."

"I'm sorry," Alycia said, reaching behind her head. She really shouldn't have put it on knowing she would never be able to buy it. Her fingers fumbled around for the clasp but met only chain links.

The woman held up her hands. "No, no leave it on."

"But I can't afford this."

"You didn't even ask how much it was." The woman crossed her arms in front of her sagging chest. Her wrinkled skin pinched at the corners of her mouth as she smiled.

"How much is it?" Alycia tried to keep the longing from her voice and failed miserably. The stone was so beautiful and felt so... so... right. Like it belonged to her.

The woman arched an eyebrow. "How much money do you have?"

"Seriously, how much is it?" The fold of ten one dollar bills bulged in the pocket of her jeans. Money for lunch today. She'd go without lunch for this. Who wouldn't?

"Ten dollars," the woman said, tilting her head at Alycia.

"Are you sure this isn't stolen?" *Please say no. Please say no.*

"I'm sure, now do you want it or not?"

Alycia reached into her pocket, pulled out the crumpled bills and handed them over. She shouldn't be buying this. It went against every saving instinct she'd followed for the last five years. She never let anyone talk her into an impulse buy.

*Live a little. If you don't, what in the world have you been working for?* It was only ten dollars. Ten dollars. She reached up and stroked the smooth stone and the pawing at the pit of her stomach eased. It was hers, bought and paid for.

"It will bring you much happiness," the woman said, pocketing the money.

"Hopefully." Alycia stepped back from the stall. She nodded her thanks to the woman and moved down the aisle. She was well and truly broke now. Might as well catch the BART back to the hotel.

She was steps away from the small exit of the market when one of the stall vendors called out to her.

"You there. Yes, you," the man said, pointing at her.

She looked away pretending not to hear him. She didn't have any more money. Even if she did, the too shiny look of the gold in front of him screamed 'fake'. One hundred percent gold. Yeah, right. Gold plated was more like it. They'd probably turn your skin green.

The little man rushed around the edge of his stall. He actually ran up behind her. She stopped and waited on him to catch her. He had to be just over five feet. His shirt and pants looked a little too tight. And who in the world wore dress shoes to a flea market? Even if you were a vendor.

Dust kicked up around him as he stopped and he let out a series of rattling coughs. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help but notice your necklace. Do you mind if I have a look at the pendant?"

"Sure," Alycia said, more than a tiny bit proud of her new trinket. She bent down so that he could pull the necklace up to his eyes.

He put a small eyepiece up to his face. "Just like I thought. Nothing shines like a diamond."

Alycia yanked back. "Diamond?" He had to be mistaken. "This isn't a diamond. It's a rhinestone or quartz or something," she stammered.

"You see that jewelry stand over there?" He pointed to his tiny stall. "That is my stall. It is filled with drill diamonds. Those things are so tiny the naked eye can barely see them. If I can tell the difference between that and glass, I think I can tell if that is a diamond." His tongue rushed out to wipe the spittle that dripped from the corner of his mouth.

She didn't mean to agitate the man. But the thought of buying a diamond this size for ten dollars was ludicrous. Ridiculous. More than ridiculous.

"Look, I just bought this for ten bucks. No one would sell a diamond this size for ten bucks," she said, suddenly suspicious. Did he and that old woman have some type of scam going on?

"It's not a perfect diamond. It has four large fault lines that run straight through it, but still it is a desirable piece. How much?" he said, digging into his pocket.

"Excuse me?"

"How much do you want for it?"

"It's not for sale." She closed her hand around the heart and started walking again. She was getting the hell out of here. Let him and that old woman run their scam on someone else.

The man pulled on the edge of her elbow to stop her. "Ten thousand."

"Let me go." She yanked away from him.

"Fifteen."

"It's not for sale," she said, suddenly getting nervous. If someone heard this outrageous conversation they might try to kill her for the damned necklace. She should have never stopped when he came running after her. She sped up. Her long legs ate up the ground, leaving him behind.

She had almost made it out of the flea market parking lot when someone grabbed her shoulder from behind.

"Going somewhere?" a security guard asked her. His grip tightened on her arm. "Let's go see what kind of trouble you're in."

"Let me go," she said, yanking hard on her arm. "I haven't done anything."

"If that's true, why is that man chasing and yelling after you?"

Alycia bit the inside of her lip. No matter what she said he wasn't going to believe her. He'd already made up his mind she was a thief. Guilty until proven innocent. God, this is why she preferred animals to people. One person might be okay but people in general could be so stupid.

"Sir, is there a problem?" the guard asked the short heaving man as he practically dragged Alycia behind him.

She stared hard at the little man. If she had intended to sell the necklace, she definitely wasn't going to sell it to him now.

"No, sir. I was only admiring her necklace." The man was clearly sensing he was causing more trouble than he wanted.

"Now, let me go." She yanked her arm out of the guard's hands. "Asshole." She walked away from both of them. Her hands immediately

moved to the diamond. She rubbed along the smooth surface and let her anger drain away.

"At least show me where you bought the damn thing," he yelled after her.

No way. He could find it on his own. She was here as a rep for Big Cat Heaven for a series of lectures on the mating of captive tigers. She'd volunteered for this trip for a free mini vacation before graduation. But she didn't sign on for this bullshit. She was getting the hell out of here. She loved the scenery in San Francisco but the people and crowds always reminded her why she hated it.

As she stepped onto the BART train, her fingers glanced over the warm stone. It felt so natural, so right. It was hard to believe she just bought it about an hour ago.

## **Chapter Two**

It didn't hit him right away that the meat in front of him was actually red. In the last six months, it seemed he'd forgotten what colors actually looked like. At first, it had been simple to close his eyes and pull it up from memory. But as one month turned into two then three, some of his memories began to fade. The explosion of color was almost an assault on his eyes. The red of the meat, the blue, green and orange of the fruits and vegetables. His suffering was over.

"She did it." All doubts about The Peddler disappeared. He looked around the communal dining room as if he was a young cub once again, gaining the ability to see in color. He could even see the light color in the not too distant stars.

"Did what?" Timbal, his pack brother, asked.

"Nothing." He refused to raise anyone's hope. This union could be a disaster. But if it wasn't...

"More secrets?" his brother teased before sinking his teeth into a large piece of meat and pulling it from the bone. "First half of your credits, now this. Better not let the medics find out. They quarantined you for a week over your eyes. Wonder what they'd do if they found out you're talking to yourself?"

"Shut up," he said, pushing his brother onto the floor. "You breathe a word of this and you'll be dealing with more than you can handle." The fact that the medics around the plant were all reporting significant breakdowns in their DNA meant every single charge was taken seriously.

Every outbreak dealt with. Some permanently. It was the main reason he needed to find a mate off-world. His descendants would live on while the purist died out.

"Threats?"

"Promises, Lil Bro. Promises." He rose from the table and warmth enveloped him. Light fingers ran down the length of his back. He could swear someone was stroking him.

His penis stood at attention. He needed to get out of here before someone noticed the large bulge in his pants. He marched to the door and left the room without a backwards glance.

Another long caress down the front of his body pulled a groan from him. That damned witch hadn't mentioned anything about this. Another one down the front of his face and along his neck. Barrick turned to the cool wall outside the door. He leaned his head along the silver metal as his body went up in flames.

His need to mate just revved from zero to light speed in a matter of minutes. The Peddler better bring his mate soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two million dollars. Two freaking million dollars. The man's words seemed foreign to her. How in the world could a ten-dollar piece of glass be worth even a fraction of that?

"Did you hear me, miss?"

"I'm sorry. It's not for sale." Her fingers trembled as she pushed the pendant inside her blouse. She turned around and left the shop.

This wasn't possible. Things like this didn't happen to her. She'd gone to the pawnshop on a whim. An impossible whim.

She didn't doubt for a moment that the guy behind the counter had low-balled the value. Hell, the pawn shops in Oakland where she grew up rarely gave more than ten percent of what something was truly worth. She wasn't new to how businesses like that operated. And she knew that guy at the flea market had been trying to cheat her.

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"What the hell do you mean you're not bringing her to me?" Barrick growled at the woman on the vid screen inside his office.

"Just what I said. It's not my job to bring her to you. I'm paid to find her." Her boredom with the conversation blared across the speaker. She drummed her fingers on the dark glass of the table in front of her.

"You had her? In front of you, and it was too much to ask that you just pick her up and bring her to me?"

"That's not the way it works."

"I could give a fuck how it's supposed to work. I paid a lot of credits for you to find my mate and what?" He slammed his hand onto the chair arm. The bolts groaned but held.

"I found her but I cannot bring her over to this side."

"What the hell does that mean?" he asked, running his tongue along his top teeth in agitation.

"It means that your mate exists in another dimension. I can't bring her across but since she now possesses your heartstone, you can."

"And how do I do that?"

"You figure it out because frankly that's not my problem." She hit a series of buttons and the screen went blank.

Barrick slammed his fist on the chair repeatedly until the bolts snapped and the left arm of the chair clanked onto the floor. She expected him to live in this constant state of arousal? To feel these phantom hands stroking him all hours of the fucking day and night? He'd find that witch and make her take him to his mate.



### **Chapter Three**

Alycia turned the ATV to swerve around the trunk of the downed tree. Ten million dollars. The internet appraiser had told her that he was low-balling it. With only photos to go by, he couldn't be one hundred percent accurate. Why would someone sell a necklace worth ten million dollars for ten bucks? She could sell the damn thing and open up her own practice. Hell, with that amount of money, she could open her own big cat preserve.

She hit a bump and the necklace jostled in the gap between her breasts. Her nipples hardened at a sudden infusion of heat. Yeah, she could get ten million dollars if she could make herself take the damn thing off. It wasn't that she thought anyone would steal it. The warmth was soothing, calming, even with the vibrating machine between her legs.

She looked down at the GPS and veered right. Five more miles and she should be able to see the laboring tiger. Ten million. The ATV sped along the short distance. She stopped the machine well short of the animal's haven. Just sit and observe. Once the babies were born, she'd sedate the mother and tag the babies.

The animal huffed and panted, her belly moving round and round. Alycia lowered her binoculars and picked up her bottle water. This should be over quick. This was the tiger's first liter. She should have no more than two in there. Settling back in the seat, Alycia picked up the

binoculars again.

She sat in the same position for over 3 hours. But when the mother tiger stopped panting and stopped trying to deliver the cubs, she knew she was going to lose them.

Lifting the rifle's scope to her eye, Alycia sent the tiger a silent apology then pulled the trigger. The tired animal growled more than roared when the dart hit. The serum was quick acting. Mama tiger was knocked out in minutes. Alycia turned on the engine and sped to the sleeping animal. She needed to work quickly. The tiger would only stay knocked out long enough to tag the two cubs.

Taking out her gloves, she quickly donned the elbow covering latex. She set her hand along the tiger's soft orange coat. The babies' moves rippled against her. She plunged her right hand inside the tiger, reaching upwards until she felt the womb. She latched onto two paws and pulled down. The legs slipped down easily. She pulled her hand out bringing the two legs with her. Using both hands, she wrapped them around the tiny body and pulled. But the little guy wasn't budging. Mama needed to be awake to use her muscles and push him out, but Alycia couldn't help when the tranq wore off.

Death was not an option. Alycia grabbed the twitching legs and pushed them back inside. She twisted the cub around as much as possible. She grabbed two legs and pulled down again. The legs slid out easily but stopped when it came to the baby's bottom. No. Alycia pushed the legs inside and tried again.

Time after time the legs slipped out but the rest of the cub wasn't coming. The little guy had stopped twitching minutes ago but he still needed to come out if Alycia was going to be able to save the other one. It continued to move. There was one more thing to try. She pulled the closest cubs legs out and pushed down on the tiger's womb, careful not to crush the remaining cub. The tiger's breath hitched. It moved its whiskers.

That tranq must not have been full. Or someone didn't pump the right amount of medicine in the gun. Damn newborns. She knew she should've shadowed his cocky ass. The tiger lifted her paw and Alycia

turned quickly, scooped up her stuff and ran to the ATV.

Under normal circumstances, the tigers here wouldn't let anyone close. A mother in the middle of birthing her cubs would be vicious. She drove a short distance away into a thicket of tall grass and cut the engine. Lifting her binoculars she prayed the tiger would go back into labor.

The tiger awoke with a start. She wasn't panting. She wasn't even breathing hard. She licked her paws and stretched. *Come on, Mama, get back into it.* But the tiger didn't seem in any rush to expel either cub. Alycia waited another forty-five minutes for the tiger to expel the first cub. It came out slowly and didn't move. Mama tiger bit the umbilical cord and licked at the tiny unmoving animal. Stillborn. Tears pooled in Alycia's eyes. She knew it had been coming. Knew it from the second that the tiger had started waking up. Her hope lay in the second cub.

It took another thirty minutes for that one to come out. And it too was still. She lowered her binoculars. She couldn't bear to look anymore. Tears streamed down her face. If only she'd had more drugs, maybe she could've at least saved one of them.

Alycia craned her head back. Her head pounded with guilt. Maybe it was her actions that caused this. But wild tigers rarely labored more than one to two hours. The policy at Big Cat Heaven was to let nature take its course, whatever it may be.

Her heart squeezed as her hands contracted with memories of the feel of the baby tiger as it moved in her hands. She smelled the distinctive fragrance of blood from the laboring animal. Maybe if she'd pushed down harder on the womb. Maybe... There was no way to know. The mother may have lost both cubs anyway. The one thing she knew for sure was that she helped to kill those two cubs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Barrick landed the small shuttle in the thicket of blue everlasting trees. He needed to get off of his ship. Get away from anyone before the damn burst.

The machine touched down as he felt the first tears roll down his

face. He could barely deal with the sense of her hands all over his body. This all-consuming sorrow was too much. He needed to find her now. If nothing else, he needed to wrap his arms around her and take away some of her drowning pain.

Once clear of the ship, Barrick let the animal loose. His jaw cracked and popped. Bones shifted and realigned. Muscles and tissue roped through his arms and legs. White and black hair darkened and lengthened along his paws and arms. In seconds, he was the animal. It didn't stop the pain. Sitting back on his hind legs, he let loose a roar that seemed to shake the ground. He roared again and again until his throat was too weak to let out even the quietest whimper.

Nothing stopped the pain. It did nothing but make it more raw. More real. It ran up his arms. Burned his chest. Burned every inch of his heart until he couldn't think of anything else.

He'd give his life to find her. Run. He needed to run. Running wouldn't help to find her but it might dull the pain. After a few minutes, his legs burned like his heart. His entire body seemed to be one big flame.

*Stop.* The fog in front of him wasn't natural. Something was warning him away. He stopped running and instead slowly walked around the mists. He should not enter. He couldn't smell another cat's scent, so the feeling didn't make sense. But something warned him not to enter. Yet the closer he got, the less his heart hurt.

If he entered the fog, it might assuage the pain. He put one foot into the fog. A shiver raced through him and he swore his coat changed from white to orange. But once he'd completely stepped through the white fog, the feeling faded.

The pain in his heart was no longer all consuming. The deeper he stepped into this new forest, the more he could feel her. She was here. In this place. He must find her.

He ran through the forest, picked up her scent, and lost it. Then he saw her. Sitting on a foreign form of transport. The machine roared almost like an animal.

He sat low in the high grass, watching her. He'd traveled all around the universe and had seen all types of beings. But nothing like the caramel

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brown of her skin. It was so indulgent, so rich. Her waist length black hair was just an added jewel. She was a treasure. One he fully intended on claiming for himself.

She stumbled over to a small pool of water and immersed her arms. Was she bathing? He surveyed the pool. She was alone. *Take her now. Take her now.*

## Chapter Four

She hadn't been paying a lot of attention. Not until she heard the leaves crunching. The GPS hadn't shown any cats nearby but the hair on the nape of her neck was standing on end. She could swear that there was one in the tall yellowed grass to her left. She didn't chance a look over to make sure. If it was a male, he might take the direct eye contact as a form of aggression.

Her bike wasn't that far away but, counting the time it was going to take to start the thing, she wouldn't make it. But what was the other alternative? Stay here and be dinner? Not freaking likely.

Alycia took a breath, hoping to slow down her thundering heart. *One.* She darted a quick look over into the grass. It shifted. There was definitely something there. *Two.* She bent down towards the water again. *Three.* She pivoted and took off in the direction of her ATV.

She was almost there but something was right on her heels. She yanked the key from the lanyard around her neck. Jumping on the bike, she jammed the key into the switch and turned it on. The motor roaring to life didn't drown out the sound of the tiger's roar.

With a small squeeze of the handlebars, the bike jerked forward. She raised her head in time to see the tiger launch at her. Her hands instinctively flew up to protect her face. It hit her squarely in the chest, knocking her onto the ground. The air whooshed from her lungs and her head bounced on the ground.

Barrick was careful not to land on his mate. She was beautiful. Well, once you got beyond the fact that she didn't have any fur. Her skin was more the color of pure Belusian Cream, the rarest delicacy on his world. Would she be as sweet?

He needed to carry her out of this place. He could hear the roar of several animals nearby but none sounded familiar. His body pulsed with the need to change but it refused to obey. He sat there over her prone body trying again and again to change but nothing happened.

It was that damned mist. It had to be. Once he got free from it, they would be safer. He bent over her prone body and carefully clamped his jaws on her shoulder. He didn't want to risk marring her face.

"Uhhh..." she moaned.

He had no illusions that if she woke, he would be fighting to get her onto his ship. He dragged her through the tall grass and to the barrier of mist. Again as he stepped through it, he felt his body shift again. Once free, he tried to shift again. This time it worked. The fur along his arms and legs retracted. He lowered her to the ground.

The bones in his hands cracked and popped as they shrank. Soon his paws looked like normal hands. He looked around but the mist was gone. The only thing surrounding them was the lush green and red forest he'd run through his entire life.

"What the hell is..." She leaned up into a sitting position. Her gaze swung up to meet his. She stopped talking and scrambled away from him.

"No, you don't." He stalked forward and wrapped an arm around her. He lifted her up and threw her on his shoulder.

"Let me go!" She pounded against his back. She screamed again and again.

"Stop screaming," he said, whacking her on her ass. He wanted to wrap his fingers around those rounded globes, but he wasn't a total asshole. He wouldn't take her here on the ground. He could wait until there was a bed.

"Where are you taking me? Where am I?"

"Home. And home." He whacked her on the butt again for asking stupid questions. There was more anger than fear in her voice.

"Let me go." She beat her small fists against his back. "I'm not going anywhere with you." She screamed several more times but there was no one here to help her.

Another whack on the ass.

"People will look for me. I'm very important where I come from. When they find you, you're going to go to jail."

Another whack followed by a grunt this time. He wasn't amused. The last person to threaten him with prison died before he could follow through on his threat.

When they reached the ship, he dropped her. He typed in a command to close the large window opening before she could jump out of it. He set in the coordinates for the station and turned on the autopilot.

"What is your name?" He sat in the one seat in the little ship and swiveled the chair around to face her.

"Why?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

"I need a name to call my mate. Some might find it offensive if I just called you 'mate'."

"Your what?"

"My mate."

"Okay, who are you? Is that you, Chuck? Did you slip something in my drink this morning? Rufies, X, what?" she said, pointing her finger at him.

"I can guarantee you I am not this 'Chuck'? Now, your name?"

He watched as her hands went into the 'v' of her tan blouse. Suddenly, invisible fingers rubbed along the outside of his nipples. "Stop."

"What?" She jumped in place, both hands reaching down to steady her.

"You will stop that." No doubt that witch told her how to torture him.

"Stop what?" she asked. "Not only am I being kidnapped by aliens, but they're crazy ones."

It was his heartstone. It peeked from beneath her shirt. "Hand me the heartstone."

"What, my necklace?" She looked down to the stone.



## The Diamond Heartstone by Leila Brown

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"Don't play games. That is my heartstone no matter what the damned Peddler said." He reached for the heart.

"No." She wrapped her hands around the stone. "She said it wasn't stolen. And I bought it. That makes it mine."

"See that'd work if you were talking to someone who gave a fuck. But seeing as how you're not, hand over my stone."

Her hand tightened on the gem. "And if I don't?"

"Then I will just have to take it from you."

"No." She raced away from him.

"There's nowhere to run." He chuckled as he followed behind her.

"I'll break it on the floor before I give it to you." She yanked on the chain. It didn't break.

Okay. The Peddler never said whether the stone could break or not. Who knew what would happen if it broke? There was too much he didn't know for him to chance it.

"Wait. At least let me look at it."

She narrowed her eyes and shook her head at him. "If it was yours, wouldn't you already know what it looks like? Try again."

"It's not like you have a choice." He advanced on her, moving so quickly she didn't have a chance to move. Her fist was tightly closed around the heart. He grabbed her hand and squeezed. Enough pressure and she'd let it go.

Her knuckles cracked.

"Let it go." He squeezed tighter.

Her fingers loosened around the stone. He pushed it onto her the skin of her chest to try to stop her from closing her fingers back around it. Heat seemed to burn from within the heartstone.

"Stop. It burns. Stop!"

The fire seared the tips of his fingers. He yanked his hand back and watched as she pulled her hands away too. Light blinded him. Water streamed out the corner of his eyes. Another of the witch's tricks.

## Chapter Five

The pain was going to make her pass out. The smell of burned skin scorched her nostrils. The roaring in her ears got louder.

"Help me," she pleaded with the thing standing in front of her. Her chest was going to burst. Her lungs burned with the need to take in a breath but the pain stopped her from doing it. Every beat of her heart sent the pain higher. It closed her throat and radiated down her arms.

Just as quickly as the pain started, it stopped. She lifted her hand to her chest. The skin was tender but nothing too—. Oh hell. What was that? She tentatively touched the raised flesh again. A burn mark?

"What the hell did you do to me?" Looking down, she saw the darkened outline of a heart. It looked like a brand. She touched the sensitive scorched skin. It wasn't kind of like a brand. It *was* a brand.

He walked up to her and ripped her shirt. The buttons popped off and scattered onto the floor. His eyes narrowed as he examined the mark. He must have decided her breasts were more important because his eyes dipped down to inspect them.

"Get your hands off of me, you perv." She slapped at his hands.

"Mates don't deny each other," he said, gripping her tighter.

"I told you I'm not your mate." There were a lot of things going on here but she knew for a fact that she was not his anything. He wasn't even human. And one of her biggest standards was that a guy had to be human.

"Shall I prove it to you?"

She didn't like that sound of that. Mates... well they mated. And she doubted that would be a good idea. What if he didn't have the right equipment? Even if he did, what if it wasn't the right size? That could prove to be painful... for her. She tried not to look down between his legs but couldn't help it. The pale black tattoos that covered his face and upper chest flowed all the way down his body and even up over his large penis.

What the hell was she doing? She wasn't actually considering sex with this cat man. She wasn't that desperate.

"Look, I'm just saying that I'm human and you obviously are umm... umm... not."

"That doesn't seem to matter," he said, pointing down at his clearly evident erection.

Okay, so maybe he did have the right equipment. That still didn't mean she was going to do it with him. She liked animals but not like that.

"It matters to me."

"Please buckle in and prepare to land," an automated voice announced in the ship.

"There's only one seat on this cruiser so you need to sit on my lap." He turned the chair around and sat down.

"Not on your life, buddy."

"That's fine with me. But if this thing has any problems with the landing, you're going to hit the ceiling. Maybe get knocked out again."

And find herself in a worse situation than she was in now. Narrowing her eyes at him, she moved around the chair and sat on the front of his legs near his knees. As her hands ran across the soft fur, the muscles in his legs tightened.

He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her back onto his lap. Her back was in full contact with his chest. His erection pressed into the lower part of her back. He was big. She could feel the length of him. No mating with him. Definitely, no mating.

"This does not mean that I am your mate." She kept telling herself that but from the wetness pooling in her panties, her body wasn't buying it.

"Whatever you say," he whispered against the back of her neck.

The hairs on the back of her neck strained. It took everything in her not to let a shiver race down her spine. She watched through the large window as the ground got further and further away. Once they broke through the clouds she saw the sun. It wasn't yellow like the sun she was used to. It was white. Pure white.

"Where am I?" Did she just step into the twilight zone?

"You're home," he said, pointing to a floating space ship. The metal gleamed in the bright sunlight. The ship was easily hundreds of times larger than the tiny can they were on.

She ground her teeth together. "And where is that?"

"Wherever I am." He reached out and touched a button on the watch-like thing on his wrist.

A large bed filled the center of the room. Alycia shook her head. There was no bed in the small ship. They were no longer in the ship. They were in someone's room. Someone's bedroom.

She turned around and around but didn't see a door. No way out.

"The door is voice activated. My voice."

"Look. I am not your mate. I don't know how else to say this. How to make you understand." She moved around the room, trying to keep him at arm's length.

"There is only one way to tell if we are mates." He moved slowly. Stalking her.

"I don't think so." She kept moving, trying to stay exactly opposite him. The bed was proving to be a better blocker than the chair on that damn matchbox of a ship.

"If we do this and we're not mates, I will take you back home."

That brought her up short. Back home. One time and she could go home. If she didn't take him up on this, he might decide to just not take her home at all. One time. Just one time and she could go home and forget this crazy day ever happened.

"One time and you take me home."

"If we're not mates. If we are mates, this will be your new home." He leveled a gaze on her. This wasn't an agreement so much as a command.

"What if you think we're mates and I don't?"

"There is no mistaking a true mating. No denying it." He took another step towards her.

She took a step away. If she was going to do this, she needed to stop backing away. No matter how much half of her disagreed. He said he would take her home. She had no choice but to trust him.

"Okay," she said, taking a deep breath.

He rounded the bed and walked to her. She didn't move. Didn't try to run away. She'd made her decision. One time. And one time only.

He stopped right in front of her. "You will enjoy this." He stroked her chin and tilted her face up to him. His lips dipped down and covered hers. Funny, she didn't feel any whiskers. No fur. His lips were soft and he tasted like pure decadence. She pulled in a deep breath. Her nostrils filled with his overpowering male scent with a hint of a deep forest smell.

Stop. She refused to enjoy this. Refused. He bit her lips softly. Small tiny bites. Not enough to hurt, but enough to entice her into opening her mouth.

His slipped the shirt off her shoulders. The only thing between her breasts and him was her lacy red bra. His hands traced down her sides, stopping at the top of her work khakis.

"Stand still." He pulled up a hand. His fingernail elongated and curved down. Like a claw. The hard nail hooked inside her pants and underwear at the same time. He pulled down and ripped them all the way to her feet. Once he finished with one side, he did the other. The clothes fell into a pool at her feet.

Moving a hand up, he ripped the back and shoulder straps of her bra. Her last shield fell to the floor.

"Beautiful." He lifted his head to stare down at her. His eyes darkened to an emerald green. They were so large and clear, her own reflection stared back at her. His erection poked her in the stomach. He rubbed up and down against her. The short fur along his chest tickled her skin. Mmm... softer than any blanket she'd ever owned.

He picked her up, dropped her on the bed and crawled on it behind her. His hands gripped her by the hips and he ground his erection against

her ass.

He let go of her hips and reached to the table by the bed. He grasped the empty bottle and put it up to his mouth. He bit down on the top and yanked it off with his teeth. He pulled out his penis and let out a deep breath, squirting into the bottle at a full blast for about three or four seconds. He filled the glass vial about a third of the way before screwing the top back on.

“Did you just pee in a bottle?”

## **Chapter Six**

“No. I did not piss in a bottle.”

Alycia slumped on the bed. She went from revved up to repulsed in seconds. If he hadn't had that damned bottle, he would have pissed all over her.

“If it's not piss, what was it?” she asked, trying to scoot away from him.

“My essence. A very strong dose of pheromones. You know what that is?”

She ignored his question. Of course she knew what pheromones were. “And you just happened to have a bottle sitting by the side of the bed.”

“Yeah. I know when it's about to come and that stuff is too precious to waste.”

She'd heard that animal pheromones were a highly sought after prize but seeing what it really was, she doubted the rumors. There is no way anyone put that on them. The liquid was yellow just like urine. Pheromones... yeah, right.

“Would you like me to prove it to you?” He didn't wait for an answer. He wrapped his hand around his penis and pushed the head up and down until a few drops of liquid pooled at the top. He wiped up the liquid with one finger and turned her around. His fingers held her face with one hand while he wiped the liquid along the flesh of her upper lip.

When she inhaled, her throat went dry, her stomach clenched and fire raced through her. He bent down and pulled her into a kiss. He tasted sweeter than the richest chocolate. *More*. She opened her mouth to him. She needed more. His hands brushed over her shoulders and down her back. She arched up and pushed against him.

The softness of the fur beneath her fingers required her full attention. She found his nipple and bent down and sucked it into her mouth. He pulled a breath in and held it. His chest puffed out, giving her a better target. She licked, bit, sucked and teased the bud into a tight peak before moving on to the other one.

He laid back on the bed and let her continue to touch and lick on him. She moved her hands down between their bodies until her fingers reached his hardness. Her fingers wrapped along the velvety soft steel of him. The hair along his penis wasn't as thick as that along his chest. It flowed with her hand as she moved it up and down.

"Hmm. Faster," he said, squeezing her breast.

His low rumbling vibrated against her chest. Drops of wetness ran down one of her legs. It would be running down both legs in no time if he kept touching her like that.

He moved her up and took a nipple in his mouth. She couldn't reach his penis anymore. Not that it mattered. She just needed to touch him. Connect with him. Taste him. She ran her hands down through the white hair covering his head. She pulled hard on his hair. His neck snapped back, exposing the sensitive skin beneath his jaw. She bent down and dropped kisses along his jaw. She'd worked her way up and down his jaw before pain pulled her back.

How long had he been pulling her hair? The long dark ends of her hair covered his fist. Using his free hand, he flipped her onto her stomach.

"Get on all fours."

She crouched on her arms and legs, spreading wide. The hair running along the skin of his thighs rubbed against the back of her legs. Her heart raced as she waited for him to push inside her.

The soft wet flesh of his penis moved along her back. A couple of drops of hot liquid dropped onto her back. The fire inside of her turned



into an inferno. She needed him inside her now. Reaching back, she tried to wrap her fingers around him. He let out a roar that made her jump.

"I'm in control. Not you." He bent over her. His penis was right there. It nudged against her nether lips. His breath tickled her right shoulder one second before he sank his teeth into the flesh of her shoulder.

She screamed. The head of his penis pushed inside her. His teeth held her in place as his cock stretched the walls of her vagina. She didn't remember him being that big. He pulled out until the very tip of him was the only thing connecting them. He bore down with his teeth, keeping her still as he pushed further inside her. He slid in more easily this time. Inch by inch he pushed in until she swore he was going to hit her womb. Just when she thought she couldn't be any fuller, he stopped. His legs brushed against her ass.

He opened his mouth, letting her go. He kissed the bite, licking up the blood. "Are you okay?"

She pulled in a few breaths before nodding her head. He leaned up and grabbed her hips and pulled out a small bit. He slammed back inside of her. She caught her breath and tightened her inner muscles in time for his thrust. She felt the ridge of every vein, every muscle in his penis.

"Ahhh." She moaned as he pulled out and pounded home again. She didn't imagine it. Her entire body was pulsing around him. What would happen if she squeezed as he pulled out and pushed in? Would it enhance this?

She waited until he thundered inside her again. Before the electric shock of pleasure dissipated, she squeezed her inner muscles around him. As he pulled out, she heard his deep moan.

He slapped the rounded globe of her ass. "Do that again."

She smiled. He must have liked it. This time instead of waiting for him to press inside her, she squeezed on his downward stroke.

His loud roar tore through the room. He slammed into again and again. Harder. Faster. She concentrated on her fistful of the bed sheets. She would not lose control. Her body was a pulsing pleasure orb. Every nerve cell felt overloaded. She inhaled a breath and exploded. She squeezed hard as he slid in and slipped out. The orgasm prolonged until she swore she

was going to reach an even higher level. But what else was there after an orgasm like that?

She floated back to reality. He slammed into her again before he roared into the air. The bed shook with the force of it. His essence burst inside her. Hot liquid filled her, over and over in an unending stream.

He wrapped his arms around her midsection and pulled her close. He flipped over onto his back and carried her with him. Keeping them connected.

"I dare you to say we aren't mates after that."

"That was nothing." She panted, trying to catch her breath. "Good sex doesn't mean we're mated."

"Not just the sex. Great sex. And this." He moved as if he was going to pull out of her.

A pain tore through her remaining euphoric state. "What the hell?"

"When we mate, our penises swell for about 10 to 15 minutes afterwards. It ensures our seed a chance of taking root."

"Seed?" Seed. As in semen? As in pregnancy? As in having his children? "Get off. Get off. Get off!" She yelled at him, pushing off him.

"I can't. And, if you try, you're going to hurt yourself." He pulled her back down onto him.

She twisted and turned in his grasp. "Let me go. You can't do this. You said you'd take me home."

"I told you if we were mates there would be no going home."

"You... you knew this would happen."

"It is what happens between mates. If we were not truly mated, I would have slid out followed by my seed. There would be no breeding."

"You should have told me," she said through clenched teeth. She wanted to hit him. Bite him. Hurt him for tricking her.

"Now, why would I do that?" He laughed and shifted beneath her. "Don't you think I should know your name?"

The rumbles in his chest pushed her up and down on him. She was going to bite him. She lifted his arm and bit down with all her might. It took a few seconds for her to taste the salty tang of his blood.

"It would help if you possessed real teeth," he said nipping along

her neck. "I am Barrick."

She elbowed him in the stomach. "And you bit me. Hard. I'll have marks." She elbowed him again.

"That's the idea. It's a mark of possession. All mated females will have the same marks. Say my name."

She shook her head. "I am not an animal. I'm human. We don't mark our mates—I mean our husbands. This is barbaric." She refused to say his name. Somehow that would make all of this more real.

"You are no longer human. You are my mate. That makes you mine." He nipped at her tender skin again. "If I hadn't marked you, another might have challenged me for you. Would you have me kill for you?"

She was a staunch supporter of life. She couldn't knowingly sentence another to death. Not even him. She turned away from him rather than answer his question.

"I hope you don't think this means that I'm staying here. You tricked me. So that makes our agreement null and void." She crossed her arms over her breasts and his arm.

"And if you are breeding? What then? Will you take my cubs with you when you leave? Or will you leave your own blood behind?" He whispered above her ear. "Say my name."

"Just shut up." She reached up and covered her ears. She knew the pain of being left behind. Her parents had done it to her more times than she could count. The final time she'd been seven years old. She told them how alone it made her feel but they hadn't cared. They left her at her aunt's with smiles, kisses and a weekend's worth of clothes. But they hadn't come back that time. She swiped a tear that slipped down the side of her face as her heart bled with pain that never seemed to completely go away.

"What is wrong?" He turned her face up to him. "Am I that distasteful to you?"

She sucked in a breath. If she told him about her childhood, he would use it to try to hold her here. Why wouldn't he believe a lie? She looked down the bed to where her legs were cradled by his.

"Fine." The anger in his voice rocked through her.

He moved her to the side so that she lay on the bed instead of him.

The only point where their bodies connected was their sex. Another few moments and even that separated.

"Where's the bathroom?" she asked. She didn't want to stand and let his juices run down her legs.

"Just stand up. We have robots that will clean the mess."

"Ewww. Can I get a towel or something?" The wall between them was still there and she was clinging to her dignity by a thread. No way would she be able to face him with his semen streaking her legs and pooling at her feet.

"Stand up," he commanded. When she didn't immediately do as he asked, he rolled off the bed and stomped around to her side. He grabbed her beneath the arms and lifted her up on her feet.

As soon as she opened her legs, a gush of liquid poured out of her. Warm and sticky.

"Why the hell did you do that?"

"It'll help mark you as mine," he said as he stalked to the wall. "Open." The wall slid open revealing another room. He stepped through.

"Wait—"

"Close," he said, effectively slamming the door in her face.

## **Chapter Seven**

"So did you find a prime catch while you were away?" his brother asked him as he stepped into the communal dining quarters. "Don't bother denying it. I can smell her all over you."

Barrick just refrained from lifting his arm to smell. He'd spent the last fifteen minutes in the bathing quarters washing. Even after that he still found himself in a state of semi-arousal.

He should have been depleted. But no. He closed his eyes and could see her. Smell her. Feel her squeezing his—

"Barrick." His brother hit him in the arm. "Damn, she must be a great piece of ass. I've never seen you like this."

Had his brother just moved closer to him? Was he smelling him? "What the hell are you doing?"

"I can't help it," his brother said, only half jokingly. "It's like Belusian cream. What'd she do? Bathe in the stuff?"

Belusian cream was one of the rarest delicacies of their world. Many went mad trying to find more. It was one of the reasons it was so rare. Those who found pure deposits consumed as much as possible on sight.

When his brother bent down and sniffed his hands, Barrick knew he was in trouble. He was going to have to introduce her to his crew before they tore his ship up looking for her. He might have one or two hotheads to deal with but having mixed blood had its advantages.

He pushed his brother away from him as he jumped up from the

table. He rushed outside the dining area. He stalked down the corridor. This was a complication he could do without.

As he passed two of his senior officers, he saw them stop and sniff the air. Shit. "Quarters," he said, pushing a button on the bracelet on his wrist.

Seconds later he appeared in his bedroom. His mate slept in the center of his bed. Right where she belonged. He scanned the room. One of the cleaning bots was pushing some of the stained bed coverings to the cleaning shoot. No doubt she had wiped his essence off with the material as soon as he left.

He walked around the bed. Her skin was so smooth. Her only fur was the long black strands covering her head and the curly ones on her sex. His penis went from half erect to fully erect. What the hell was it about this creature that did this to him? He was in control. Always. Until he met her.

"Wake up," he said, rubbing up and down her arm. If he took her again quickly, he could spray her with his scent. That should be enough to keep his crew away from her. But with the price it cost to find her, he couldn't waste the possible money. He'd introduce her to them and make sure they knew she was off limits. Totally off limits.

He shook her again. She moaned in her sleep and turned her head away from him. His penis bobbed up and down within the confining pants. This was going to be a short introduction. He could waste a few drops of his scent to make sure she cooperated. What would happen if he used more than a few drops?

He leaned in close to her. "Are you ready to give me your name?"

She didn't make a sound but rolled away from him.

"Wake up," he said, bending down to her ear.

"Ummmm." She purred and stretched out her arms and legs.

A really short introduction. Hell, if he didn't wake her up soon they might be mating again before they left the room.

He shook her a bit more forcefully. "Get up."

She woke, shooting straight up in bed. "What? What? I'm up. I'm up."

"I need to introduce you to my crew." He stepped over to a wall.

"Water room." The wall slid open to reveal a bathroom with a tub that looked more like a pool. "Tell me your name and you may wash yourself while I gather you a hanin."

He watched her face light up even as she tried to scowl at him. Be mad at him. He knew how to take care of that. He would keep her so satisfied she wouldn't have time to do anything but purr her pleasure to him.

"Alycia."

He turned his back to hide his smile as she scrambled off the bed and ran into the watering room. Alycia. He liked it. It rolled off his tongue. It felt right.

"Close." The door to the watering room slid shut, locking her in. He walked over to another wall. "Open," he commanded. The wall slid open. Row after row of his body conforming pants and soft shirts greeted him. He reached back behind his clothing and pulled out an even sheerer fabric. The fabric was so thin there was no doubt his crew would be able to see right through it. But if he clothed her in anything else they would all wonder why he hid her from them. That kind of curiosity would lead to nothing but problems. Fucking problems surrounded him.

He crumpled the fabric in his hand as he issued the command to close his clothing room. He entered the watering room just as she dove under the water. Her form sliced through the waves. He clenched his fists as he fought the urge to join her. Her long limbs were graceful. Too graceful. More problems. She would never be allowed to bathe in mixed company.

"Alycia," he said with more force than he intended.

Her head popped up through the surface. Her hair streamed down her back. "I haven't been skinny dipping since I was a kid."

She laughed as she leaned back and floated on the surface, her body displayed to him in all its perfection. He was at the edge of the pool before he realized he'd even moved.

"It is time to get out." He held a hand out to her.

She moaned. "Do I have too? It feels so good."

"Yes." His voice brooked no further argument. He was holding onto

his control by a thin thread. When they completed the task at hand, he would teach her a lesson about teasing.

Her fingers touched his and tore through the shreds of his control. He wrapped his hands around her damp body. So soft. So warm. He led her over to one of the benches lining the wall.

"Tell me this isn't why you made me get out."

"You talk too much," he said pulling her lips into a silencing kiss. She tasted new and fresh. There was no lingering anger or bitterness. Good. She needed to accept that this was her new home.

"Well, I wouldn't have to if you stopped touching me." She huffed.

"Do you really want me to stop touching you?" He slid his hand across the tip of one of her nipples. The tiny bud beaded up against his fur.

Alycia sucked in a breath. "No... I mean yes. Stop touching me." She tried to jump up from the stone seat but he was too fast for her.

He pulled her back down. "Did I say I was done?"

"No, I did." She tried to pry his arm from around her. "Let me go."

"No." He pushed her down into a horizontal position. "Don't move."

"You're not the boss of me." She pushed against his hand. "I don't want you."

"Really, then why are you so wet?"

"I just got out of the bath, stupid."

"Don't call me that." The fur of his coat stood on end. "I've killed for less."

"Sorry," she said, looking down at the rippling water.

"Besides I'm talking about right here." He dipped his finger through the flesh covering her clit. He rubbed up and down. The slick sound of his finger kneading against her nub echoed in the room.

"Are you sure you don't want me touching you?" he taunted.

Alycia moaned and closed her eyes. Her hips bucked up and down in time with his fingers. The delicious aroma of her excitement mixed with the heavy mists in the watering room made each breath a taste of her. Barrick licked his lips and bent down. Just one taste and they would leave. One taste.

He bent down and ran his tongue through the valley of her sex. The



sweet taste of her exploded in his mouth. Better than that damned cream. He needed more. Getting down on the floor, he used his hands to push her legs open wider. He spread her nether lips open and swiped his tongue up and down the length of her. With each stroke he rolled the sides of his tongue in forming a 'u' and stabbed it into her core.

Her juices coated his tongue over and over again. *Mate. Mate. Mate.* The beast in him pushed at him to fuck her again but he needed to stop. He needed to introduce her to his crew. Get the formalities out of the way. Otherwise he wouldn't be getting around to that task any time in the near future.

Barrick sat back on his feet and watched her twist and turn in frustration.

"No," she cried. "Why'd you stop?"

"I told you we have something to do." He stood up slowly, determined not to show her how shaky his legs were.

"Why did you start it?" she asked, swinging her legs over the bench and standing up in front of him.

"Because you're mine." He grabbed her hand. "You will remember that."

She snatched her hand back to her side. He laughed at her and grabbed it again as he led her through the wind chamber.

"Close your eyes."

She immediately closed her eyes, scrunching her face up in the process. He turned on the drier. Five seconds later, the wind stopped and the door opened. She held her hands up to her hair. It fell around her shoulder straight and untangled. She looked up at him, clearly intrigued with the machine.

"You could make a fortune with those things where I come from."

The anger from earlier was gone. Or if not gone, well hidden. He hesitated to ask her if she'd accepted her fate, not wanting to ruin the small slice of happiness they were sharing.

"Here." He handed her the gauzy garment.

"What is this?" She held it up to her face and looked through the fabric.

"This is the normal dress of our women when they are not in their other form." He grabbed the shoulder straps and held it up, as it should be worn.

"Tell me you're kidding. This thing will barely cover my breasts and let's not even mention my ass." She held it as if it were something she loathed to touch. "And I'm supposed to wear this out?"

"If you want to get out of this room, you will."

"Maybe I will just stay in this room forever." She stepped through the open door to the bedroom.

"That's fine with me." He moved in close behind her. His erection pressed against her. She snatched the stupid excuse for clothing from him and pulled the silky top piece over her head. It fell to her midsection like the top of a belly dancer's outfit. Her breasts looked humongous. She narrowed her eyes at him.

He held up his hands as if he had nothing to do with this, which wasn't exactly true. If he hadn't ripped her clothes to shreds, she'd have something decent to wear.

She held out her hand. "Just give me the other damned piece."

He gave it to her without breaking a smile. And he was lucky he didn't. She was ready to kill someone and he was the only one in the room.

She stepped in the sheer fabric and slipped it over her hips. The fabric fell away from one of her legs. A slit. A freaking slit all the way up to her waist.

"Okay. Did you forget to mention this?" she said, thrusting her leg forward. She might as well not be wearing anything at all. "Let's just do this." She could barely refrain from tapping her foot in irritation.

He opened the door and stepped through. She peeked her head out of the door before following him. She hid in his shadow, hoping no one could see her.

He navigated the maze of hallways without ever slowing down. There were no doorways. No telling how many rooms lay behind those walls. He stopped. She was looking over her shoulder to make sure no one came up behind them and stumbled into his back.

"Don't say anything. Let me do all the talking and this should go

smoothly. And keep your eyes on the floor. I don't want any of the men to think you are trying to attract them."

Like she would. Was he trying to convince her or himself? He didn't have anything to worry about. She tended big cats, knew them inside and out. But big cat/men... That was a whole 'nother story.

He turned and opened the door. She followed him inside and was amazed. There were at least fifteen big furry men standing and sitting around the room. And every single one of them was staring at her. Their markings were a lot darker than Barrick's. Well, all of them except one.

"This is my mate." His voice thundered through the quiet room. "She is off limits."

Was he going to tell them her name?

"So you unchained her from the bed?" One of the men walked up to him and slapped him on the back. "Are you going to introduce us?"

"No," Barrick said, baring his teeth at the man.

That was it. All of them were white. And not just white but pale. Pale white. She tried not to stare at any of them. But their white and black markings were so distinct, almost like tattoos. Only one of the men's stripes flowed in the same direction as Barrick's but they weren't as wide and covered more of his face.

The man circled her three or four times, continuously sniffing her. "She is definitely carrying your scent. What'd you do? Douse her in it?"

She didn't like the nosy stranger. He asked too many questions. Personal questions.

"Or did you drown her in it?" The man bent down and smelled her crotch area.

Alycia stepped away from him. She didn't know what passed for manners here but she imagined smelling someone's crotch was offensive no matter where you came from.

"I can still smell her, brother. And now that I've smelled the source I think it actually smells better than Belusian cream. Shall I taste it just to be sure?" He took a step towards her, invading her personal space.

"Touch her and I'll break your hand." Barrick bent his head and growled the words at him. But it seemed he should have roared to the

room at large.

Her eyebrow rose. "Brother?"

More of the cat-men were coming forward. Alycia pressed against Barrick's side. He clasped her hand inside of his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. He would protect her or he would try.

"Where'd you find this one, captain?"

"Captain?" she asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

"And she speaks our language? How'd you manage that?" his brother asked, stepping out of the way as the men moved in closer on the couple.

"Don't let them touch me," she whispered up to Barrick.

She had no doubts the men heard her but she really didn't care. Some of them were looking at her as if she were their final supper. A few had dropped down on hands and knees and were nosing around her exposed leg.

"I told you, Belusian Cream." Mr. Twenty Questions shook his head and laughed.

"Fuck. I thought it was just you being an ass," he said, pulling Alycia behind him.

She looked through the space between Barrick's arm and body. None of the men in front of him were on their feet. The thin hair covering their bodies thickened as the muscles on their legs and arms popped out like popcorn. Within seconds, two white tigers, three white lions, and what had to be two white jaguars surrounded them. Every one of the beasts was intent on her.

"You've got to get her out of here," his brother said, baring his teeth at the approaching animals.

"We're both going to have to shift to keep them off of her."

One of the tigers roared as it leaped at them. Barrick caught it by the neck and deflected it into the wall.

"When we shift, you need to get out of here. Go back to our chambers."

"I can't open the door." She crouched down behind the brothers. The roars of the beasts were getting louder. She covered her ears with her

hands.

Barrick pulled the watch off his arm. "Here take this. The blue button will take you there." He leaned down, kissed her and gave her arm a reassuring squeeze before falling on all fours and shifting. He was the most beautiful tiger she'd ever seen. Even on all four paws, his back was level with her belly button. Barrick and his brother were larger than all the other cats. Tigons. Half tigers, half lions. It had to be.

He turned his head and roared at her. Alycia jumped and remembered the watch in her hand. She pushed the blue button. The air around her stilled and her stomach dropped down as if she were floating. Suddenly she was back in his bedroom.

This little watch could be her ticket out of here. If one of those little buttons took her to his ship, she might have a decent chance of escaping. There were four big buttons on the watch. The blue one brought her here so either orange, green, or red.

Red was usually a sign of danger so it had to be orange or green. She pressed the green button and found herself inside what had to be the command center of the ship. Lights went on and off, noises beeped, and three of the cat men were manning the consoles. When they looked up, she hurriedly pushed the orange button.

She opened her eyes quickly. She was standing in front the chair of the small ship.

"Thank goodness." She pressed the blue button for the autopilot.

"Enter destination, please."

How the hell was she supposed to know? "Where was the last destination?"

"Last destination was home."

Alycia rolled her eyes, not that the computer could see her. "And the destination before that?"

"The Neutral Forest."

"Take me there." She strapped into the seat. If that's where he found her, that's the way home.

"Please prepare for take off," the voice droned.

Would she really leave? What if she were pregnant? She shuddered

## **The Diamond Heartstone by Leila Brown**

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to think of what people would do with a half human half tigon being. She put the thought out of her mind. First things first. She had to find a way home.

## **Chapter Eight**

Barrick bit down on the neck of the last rebelling member of his crew. So far each one had either submitted to him or his brother. Once he had this last one's acquiescence, Barrick would be free to go and find Alycia.

The tiger below him reared up a bit. Barrick tightened the muscles in his jaw, cutting off the animal's air supply. He didn't want to hurt his navigational officer but he would not have a repeat of today's performance. The salty tang of blood filled his mouth. Finally, the animal below him stopped resisting and lay on the floor.

Barrick opened his jaws wide and let the animal go. He roared at the room in general. The next one to get too close to his mate would be shown no mercy. He shifted back and commanded the door to open and left the room without even a backwards glance.

"Wait up," his brother said, running up behind him.

"You couldn't have expected that to have gone any different. Even if she didn't smell like that, just looking at her would have induced the same type of riot. Her skin... it was—"

"Mine." Barrick barked out.

Timbal continued on as if Barrick hadn't spoken. "No. Not white. Nowhere have I seen such pristine skin. And add in the fact that it was such a rich striking color. And it must be able to take our sun." He grabbed

Barrick and spun him around. "You have to understand the men's curiosity."

Barrick harrumphed at his brother.

"You never did say where you found her."

"No. I didn't."

"Well, I know she's not from this world. So the question becomes why. Why did my brother go searching for his mate?"

"I couldn't find enough mated males to fill our orders for the stronger pheromones."

"Try another one," his brother said, speeding up and turning to block the walkway. "Why?"

"Because." Barrick moved to go around his brother.

"Not good enough for all the trouble I just went through. And no doubt the countless problems this will create. You owe me an answer."

"I don't owe you anything. This is my life."

"And our business. You seriously impacted it today. Now that the captain is mated, what do you think the rest of the crew is going to start thinking about? Especially if they have to smell her every day."

Barrick stopped quickly. He didn't think about that one. Mates were almost impossible to find. The biggest barrier was the fact that their women had a choice. And, with their DNA breaking down with each new breeding, very few of their women would accept their true mates. His Alycia didn't have that option.

"Shuttle One has left the station," the computer announced over the intercom.

"Problems. See what I told you. Your mate has just stolen your personal shuttle."

"That's impossible. She has no idea how to fly it. Computer, who is flying Shuttle One?"

"Shuttle One pilot unknown."

Barrick stared at the ceiling. Would this never end? Did he need to chain her to the bed? He lifted his head and roared his frustration. When he found her, he would teach her to be obedient.



## **Chapter Nine**

Alycia watched out the window as the little craft flew faster than any plane she'd been on. Green trees, blue trees, even completely white ones. If she knew how to fly this thing, she'd be tempted to land just so she could see the things close up.

"Prepare to land." The irritating autopilot voice blared into the small space.

She hurried over to the seat and strapped in. The ship shifted and started floating down. A loud bang erupted, tossing the ship to the right. Alycia's neck fell forward then snapped back. Black smoke curled outside the windows and started filtering through the ship.

"Navi... trols... going offline."

What the hell did that mean? She looked around the control panel. The autopilot light switched from blue to red and finally went blank. She grabbed what looked like a joystick and pulled it towards her. The front of the ship tilted up and over. She pushed hard on the stick but it was too late. The ship was flipping end over end. She was going to crash. Hopefully this damned ship had airbags. Her stomach dropped out as the darkness rushed up, taking her.

Alycia woke up to the sounds of people stepping through the wreckage. A large piece of metal covered almost her entire body. Only one part of her left leg was exposed. Please let them overlook her.

"Search the wreckage."

Alycia heard the voice and knew it wasn't Barrick. It was like the sound of one of her old bosses, too self-important. Like the guy assumed he was better than the people he spoke to. Definitely not someone she wanted to know.

Another voice sounded directly above her. "I see something, Your Highness."

She closed her eyes, trying not to make them too tight. Before she could decide whether to make a run for it or not, the large piece of metal was pulled off her upper body. She peeked through her lashes and enough light filtered through her lids for her to know one man stood above her. He was taller than an average man and sporting the same tiger-like markings that Barrick had. Most of his were hidden beneath a sort of tunic, his pants mirrored those that Barrick wore but of a cheaper grade.

"I think she's alive."

"Of course she is." Metal crunched as someone approached. "If she were dead we would smell the stench of death."

A large hand skimmed the flesh of her upper arm. The hand moved to her breasts and down her legs. It was rough, but not rough enough. It was too smooth. With animals and men, it was easy to tell those that worked to find a meal and those that sat back and let others provide for them.

"Pick her up. We will take her to the palace."

"But, sire. This is not part of the Imperial Kingdom. We cannot just—"

"Silence. Pick her up. She is mine." Angry stomping accompanied the command.

Big rough hands picked her up and slung her over a shoulder. She kept breathing normally as the man's shoulder pushed into her stomach with every step.

"What about this ship, my prince?"

"As you said, it is outside the Imperial Kingdom. It's not our problem."

The servant looked back at the wreckage and stopped as if he were unsure.

"Get over here," the prince yelled.

The man jogged over to the prince, punishingly jamming his shoulder into her with every step. They boarded another ship. The man sat her down in a chair and strapped her into a seat. She wanted to open her eyes but that would put her in a small ship with two males who turned into who knows what. There was no escape from this one.

It seemed like less than five minutes when she felt the familiar shift in air pressure. They were landing.

"Take her to my chambers and call the palace medic."

The way this man treated his own servants didn't give her the warm and fuzzies about how he planned to deal with her. The servant scooped her up. This time his steps were definitely less jarring.

"I know you are awake. I hope that you can understand me. The prince plans to keep you as his pet. Your only means of escape is to get away before he puts you on display to the entire palace."

What the hell had she done? Jumped out of the frying pan and into the fires of hell? Pet? Display? Why had she run away?

The slave turned down corridor after corridor. This place was huge. Alycia gave up on trying to memorize the route. Right side up it might be possible. Hard but possible.

Too soon the man opened a door and stepped beneath an arch. He walked through several rooms and deposited her on a bed. Her body bounced onto a firm mattress. She waited until the man closed the door to the room before she let her breath out in a big whoosh. The room was huge, but it fit the massive furniture. The chairs were two times the size of the one in Barrick's chamber and the bed was double the size.

The room was laid out with several rooms branching off from a center room. The carvings and gems adorning nearly every surface screamed at her. This guy liked to surround himself with his wealth.

"She's right through here. Now, I don't want you to tell anyone about her."

Alycia fell back on the bed and closed her eyes.

Someone held up her wrists. *Slow down. Slow down.* She tried to regulate her breathing but knew she was failing miserably. Anyone with

an ounce of training would know she was faking.

Her wrist was placed back against her body. Hands roamed up one leg and down the other with medical precision. Next up and down her arms. Her head was moved from side to side. Was he going to check her teeth next?

Fingers skimmed over the bite marks on her shoulder. "My lord, she is mated."

"Impossible."

"I'm afraid it's not. She has the marks. That explains the scent."

"I will not give her up. I found her. She is mine."

"But the laws—"

"If you enjoy your position, you will forget that you saw those marks." The tension between the two men was almost palpable. "Now wake her."

"I want no part of this." The doctor's footsteps pounded out of the room.

"No matter. I know how to wake you." Air rushed by her cheek signaling his swift exit.

*Please don't let him touch me.* She tried not to cringe. There was no way in hell she was going to just lay here and let him put one finger on her.

Ice-cold water splashed against her skin. Alycia bolted into an up-right position. Her eyes popped open. She spun around quickly to find the prince several steps away from the bed.

"See. I didn't need that fool."

Scanning the room, she searched for some kind of weapon. There was a sword on the wall behind him. That was out. Large claws on the desk to her left. But he would be there by the time she got out of the bed. She was stuck. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"I wonder if you can understand me." He tapped his fingers against his almost non-existent lips. He took several steps closer to the bed.

She moved away from him.

"I bet you can. If you're mated, you'd have to. Otherwise..." He raced around to the other side of the bed.

Alycia jumped away again.

"I like this game. Shall we continue? What do I win when I catch you?" Not if but *when*.

She would not play with him. Not like this. She had a good idea of what he wanted and she had no intentions of giving it to him.

A voice sounded from the doorway. "My lord, the men have retrieved the object you requested."

"Bring it in." He smiled down at her but didn't make another move in her direction. This couldn't be good. Not for her.

Three men carried in a golden cage. It stood about ten feet tall and five feet wide. It reminded her of the strip club cages she'd seen in the movies except this cage sported a major league lock.

"Set it on the floor," the prince instructed.

The men set the cage down. It clanged against the marble floor.

"You are dismissed," the prince told the men as they stood there staring past him at her.

When they didn't immediately move, the prince opened his mouth and roared at them. The sound shook them out of their stupor. They marched from the room without a word.

"Word of you will spread through the palace by this evening's meal. Maybe I will present you to the court tonight." He unlocked the cage and opened the door. "Now either you get in or I shall put you in." His wicked smile spoke volumes on which option he preferred.

Bastard. If she moved to the cage, he would know she understood their language. If she stayed here, he would get to touch her. Alycia got off the bed and walked over to the cage. Once inside, she held up one finger and flipped him off. *Screw you, buddy.*

## **Chapter Ten**

“Approaching destination,” the autopilot announced.

Barrick hoped she hadn’t left the shuttle. That would make finding her that much more difficult. He peered out of the large window and stopped. Even his heart screeched to a standstill. A large wreck lay just beyond a thicket of trees.

He punched in a series of commands in the console and was instantly transferred down to the wreckage.

“Alycia!” No one answered. She had to be all right. He’d felt her sorrow and fear, surely he would’ve felt the pain. That is if she wasn’t killed on contact. Blood roared in his ears as he licked extremely dry lips. With unsteady arms, he touched the control watch on his arm.

He started looking around the wreckage again, this time looking for signs of life. Something to give him hope. He picked up a part of the ship’s hull and stopped. There was a charred hole in the large piece of metal. She didn’t crash the ship. She’d been shot down. Whoever did this was going to pay.

Barrick hit a button on his wrist communicator. “Someone shot down her ship. Check the surrounding area for any trace of an imperial ship.”

There was no immediate answer. He held still, betraying none of his anxiety or relief at finally hearing his brother’s voice pour over the speaker. “One emission trail. It ends at the Palace.”

He should have expected that. Royals never could keep their damn word. Neutral zone, my ass. He transported himself back onto his ship. It took several seconds to input new coordinates. The ship hummed and zipped as it started on the new course.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alycia closed her eyes as four men lifted the cage and walked it into the crowded room. There were tiger women in that same damned outfit she wore but their thick fur made the outfit appear somewhat decent.

"I'd like to introduce my new pet," the prince said, standing and clicking an elongated nail against his cup.

The entire room stared at her. All eating, laughing, even breathing stopped. She stared back out at them. Not one of the faces looking at her held a bit of sympathy. Their eyes were sharp with curiosity and their mouths open in disbelief. She was tempted to flip them all off. She was no animal to be caged. The questions fired from the crowd—so many she couldn't comprehend them all, but most seemed fixated on her skin.

"Why is she that color?"

"Is it natural?"

"Does it rub off?"

Of course, her skin was natural. If she had been home, she would have considered those racist comments, but here it seemed they truly wanted answers to the questions. They seemed fascinated.

"It is natural. And, no, it doesn't rub off." He took a sip from his cup, his face a mask of boredom.

"It looks like dirt. Did you just rub it on her for a show?" a female voice asked from somewhere near the head table. She was short, with an unnatural looking buzz cut. It set her apart from all the other tiger women in the room.

"Fi'on, shall I prove it to you?" he asked, turning to his left. He was talking to one of the women at the head table.

He stalked to the cage. The men holding it sat it on the floor. Alycia eyed him warily. Did he expect her to just let him touch her? He was

freaking lucky she agreed to put on the new clothing. But that's where her cooperative streak ended.

He walked over to her. She did not run around the cage to avoid him. She would wait until he made his move. He snaked his hand between the bars. Alycia jumped to the other side of the cage.

Several of the onlookers gasped in surprise. His eyes narrowed. He walked around to the other side of the cage and tried again. This time it was harder to avoid his fingers. One skimmed against her elbow but fell just short of its goal.

This time there were open chuckles and smirks. She watched the lines around the side of his mouth deepen and his lips thin out. He stalked around the cage several times before he stopped in front of her. This time she didn't try her luck. The second she saw him moving his hand, she jumped to the other side of the cage.

Laughs echoed through the room, none louder than Fi'on's. Many of the guests who had turned around were no longer paying them any attention.

"You will not make me a laughingstock," he growled at her.

"I did not make you a laughingstock. You did that on your own." She whispered the words at him. Chuckles erupted nearby. It seemed her words traveled to other ears.

"You need to train your pet better," Fi'on yelled from the head table.

The prince let loose a roar. The nails on his hands elongated into claws. He reached through the bars and, before she could move, he slashed one arm and then the other. Pain seared through her. She bit her bottom lip and held back the scream that burned her throat. Tears pooled in her eyes but she refused to let them drop. Her future would be short-lived in this place. She refused to act like a good little pet and it seemed the prince had no problem rending her flesh from her body.

A roar sounded from behind them. It shook the floor and quieted the room. She wanted to turn around but to do so she would have to give her back to the prince. She would never give him that much power over her.

"It seems that one of you has kidnapped my mate."



Barrick. He had come. A smile blossomed on her face as she saw fear in the prince's eyes. He quickly recovered, hiding it with a look of disdain.

"Mate?" the king asked.

"Yes," Barrick growled. "It seems that one of your ships got a little excited and shot her ship down inside the Neutral Zone."

"None of my soldiers would do that. Call the guards," he said to one of the men at his side.

Barrick's voice came from nearby. "I suggest you back away from that cage."

The prince backed away from her. He was close to the head table when Barrick rounded the cage. It took several kicks to break the lock. It fell to the floor in broken chunks. He looked pissed.

"She's not your mate," the prince announced to the room in general.

"How do you figure that?" Barrick asked as he pulled her through the door of the cage.

She winced as his hands squeezed on her arms. Barrick looked down at her and zeroed in on his hands. He bared his teeth at the sight of the blood oozing through his fingers.

"She's not of our world," the prince stated and walked away.

"Who has marked my mate?" Barrick thundered.

"It's not my fault she can't follow simple instructions. She needs to be trained."

"I couldn't let him touch me," she whispered, looking up at Barrick. "I just couldn't stand there and willingly let him do it."

Barrick gave her a curt nod and turned to the king.

"You voided the peace agreement and shot down a ship in the Neutral territory. You kidnapped my mate and have marred her skin. I claim the Rite of Challenge."

The queen's gaze swung up to her husband's. One of her hands flew to caress the skin at the base of her neck. "Surely things are not so serious. Those are only minor scratches. You would not be foolish enough to fight to the death over something so inconsequential."

"That is my right. You can't deny me this time. He had to know she

was mated. And yet he still put her on display and marked her." Barrick turned and looked directly at the prince. "Do you accept the Rite of Challenge?"

"From a half-breed?" The prince sneered at him.

"You can concede and admit your guilt," Barrick said, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"I accept this little challenge. But, when I win, she will become my pet again," the prince said, ripping off his pants.

Barrick looked down at her and raised an eyebrow. Was she willing to take that chance?

She nodded her head at him. She would stand with him. She might have deserted him on the ship but she would stand with him now. He'd come for her even though she didn't deserve it. The least she could do was put her faith in his fighting ability.

He shrugged out of his clothes, becoming totally naked. He took off his watch and handed everything to her.

"If I do not win, press the green button and you will be transported to the ship. Autopilot is set up so, as soon as someone boards the ship, it'll go directly back to the station."

She tiptoed up and kissed him full on the mouth. He stared at her but did not say anything.

"If you're done?" the prince taunted as he laughed and shifted.

"Don't rush to your death." Barrick shifted into the tigress. Barrick definitely had a size advantage but, from what she knew about the prince, that might not be enough. This royal family fought dirty.

A female voice sounded from behind her. "Two men fighting over you. What a display."

She turned her head slightly. Fi'on. Alycia moved to take a step away from the female.

"Oh, no, you don't," the tigress said, grabbing Alycia's wrists. "Just a little insurance."

Alycia dropped everything but the communicator when Fi'on pulled her hands behind her.

"I thought you didn't like the prince," Alycia said, twisting against

the other woman's grasp.

"Oh, this has nothing to do with him. I'm doing a service for the crown. A service that will be highly rewarded," the woman whispered in her ear.

The sound of furniture breaking shocked her. She snapped her head back to the fight. The prince jumped at Barrick. Barrick kicked him onto one of the tables. The table crumbled like a box of toothpicks.

Barrick pounced on him and the prince reared up. They slashed at each other with their large paws. They snapped at each other's necks but they were evenly matched.

Barrick shifted back into his humanoid form. He snapped two quick punches at the tiger's throat.

The animal backed away but didn't shift back into his humanoid form. The prince lunged at Barrick. Barrick side stepped it and kicked at the animal's knees. He missed one but connected with the other. The animal roared its pain. Barrick raced around the animal and grabbed it around the neck.

"This is over. Concede and I won't have to kill you." Barrick elongated his nails. Blood streamed through the animal's fur.

Fi'on whistled sharply. Barrick's head snapped up.

"Let him go or I kill her." The woman stuck her hands into Alycia's throat. If she decided to draw her claws, Alycia was dead.

"Let her go."

"No. You let him go first."

"Fine," Barrick said, pulling his hand away from the prince's neck.

The animal fell to the floor and coughed. He craned his neck almost as if he were about to spit up a hairball. The woman didn't immediately let go of Alycia.

"Let her go."

"I don't think so. You have nothing else to bargain with. I suggest you surrender." The woman lifted her head slightly as if she were superior.

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?"

"I know that. Look around you." She swept her arm out to indicate the thirty or so guards who'd marched into the room.

"See that's the problem with royals. They always think so small. Timbal?" Barrick shouted.

"Laser's targeting." The curt reply sounded from the communicator on Alycia's wrists.

"I suggest you let her go. Otherwise my brother will fire a targeted beam—"

"You won't kill her," the woman spat at him, tightening her grip on Alycia.

"You're right. I won't kill her."

The woman smiled cockily.

"But I will target the kingdom's entire Belusian Cream deposits. How long will you be royal when you have nothing to bargain with?"

"Release her, Fi'on." The king's command was a knife slicing through the quiet of the room.

The tigress pulled her hands away from Alycia. Barrick walked over to the pair and stood toe to toe with the small tigress. He grabbed one of Alycia's arms. She turned towards him before looking back at Fi'on. Alycia pulled back her free hand, balled her fingers into a fist and knocked the tigress to the floor.

Barrick shouted at the shocked crowd around them. "No one touches her. No one!"

The king waved a hand and the crowd of guards parted, making a walkway for them to leave.

"Before you leave, we must know why even a half-breed would accept such a mate." He cast a quick glance at Alycia then grudgingly added, "Not that she is not beautiful."

"Simple. I refuse to let my line die out because of old tradition." Barrick stared hard at the king. "In a few generations, my descendants will be thriving. They will take over what is left of your kingdom when your line dies out."

"How do we even know they are mated? Honestly, she might be just a common sex slave. That he had sex with such a creature means nothing," the prince said haughtily.

"Shall I prove it to you? Shall I show you what you will never have?"

He looked to the prince when he asked the question. Another challenge.

Alycia jerked with the realization of what he was proposing. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

"By all means entertain us. Show us what we are missing." The prince's bored voice rang false.

"Timbal. If I call your name, start vaporizing. And, if I don't report back in thirty minutes, target all fields and fire."

"Got it," the voice radioed back.

"If any of you comes close to us, I call his name. Got it? A quickie. Then we're leaving." He directed the last at the king specifically.

The king rolled his eyes. Barrick had waited a long time for an excuse to knock this particular royal family on their ass.

He bent down over a wide-eyed Alycia. "This is your punishment for running away."

She jerked back as if he'd struck her. He reached down and tore her skirt from her. He tore off two small strips and bound the wounds on her arms.

His hands snaked out and pulled her up against him. He brushed his lips over hers. She tasted so good. So sweet. So right. He plunged his tongue into her mouth and savored the feel of her tongue dueling with his.

He moved his hands up and made short work of pulling the top of her hanin down and exposing her breasts. Her nipples hardened into peaks with only a small brush of his fingers.

He cupped her breasts, squeezing them as he continued to kiss and stroke her with his tongue. She looked over his shoulder. The men were all breathing hard. She watched their chests move up and down in a labored manner. Their hair stood on end. It reminded her of the men on Barrick's ship right before they shifted. She grabbed Barrick's shoulders and dug her nails through his fur and into his skin.

He picked her up and walked her over to the nearest table. With one arm, he swiped the cups, plates, and food off of the table. He bent her over the table. She was directly facing the head table.

He bent down and ran his hands up and down the back of her legs, slightly scratching her without breaking the skin. Her moan drifted across

the silent hall.

"Are you going to cream for me, baby?" He squeezed the globes of her ass. He pushed them together and pulled them apart.

He traced one finger down the center of her sex. Her creamy liquid coated him. The scent of her permeated the room. Several of the males fell down onto all fours. A few were even starting to change.

Barrick nodded his head towards the group of males that had almost finished changing into their animal forms. "Get those men."

The king didn't seem to hear him at first. But when he saw how out of control that little group had become, he signaled for the guards to get them. The guards didn't obey the king. They too were fighting the change.

"Have the tigresses get them out of here," Barrick barked at the king. This was pushing the limits of his self-control. "Or we're done."

"Fi'on. You and the tigresses get them out of here."

Fi'on didn't look happy to be sent from the room. She eyed Alycia with a promise of retribution. A small group of tiger women led the animals from the room.

"If you need to send anyone else from the room, do it now." Barrick brought his hand up to his mouth and licked her juices from his finger. She was all his. Every single drop.

He slipped his finger down her center and moved it up and down several times. Each time he stopped at her opening and pressed inside. She moaned again and pressed her sex back onto his hand.

"Purr for me," he commanded as he added another finger to the one moving in and out of her. Her muscles tightened around him.

She moaned deep in her throat. Her hands reached to the far edge of the table. "Please," she begged. "Please."

Barrick pulled his hand from her. He bent her legs at her knees. His erection rubbed against her wet core. He pushed forward and the head of his member slipped inside of her. He pulled out and slid it in again, then rammed into her while pulling her legs up and back. It was like lighting a short fuse on fireworks. Nothing and suddenly an explosion.

Her body bowed up, almost coming completely off the table. He reared back and pounded into her again. She screamed her ecstasy.

The sound of her surrender broke the last hold on his control. He slammed into her again and again. The squishing sound of her sex pulling at him echoed through the quiet room.

He looked up at the head table and searched out the prince. He smiled at the look of jealousy covering the man's face. That's all Barrick needed.

Barrick let go of Alycia's legs and grabbed her shoulders. He pulled her entire body down on his every up stroke. Her muscles quivered around him. She was close. A few more strokes would push her over the edge.

He slowed down his strokes, making each stroke in and out rock her entire body. It wasn't long before she screamed out her release. Wetness ran out of her and onto him. The warm liquid sent him into his own release. He pushed into her, letting the juices run freely down him. He could feel the knot at the base of his sex push up inside of her. He threw back his head and roared as his body shook with his own fulfillment. It took more than a few minutes for him to become aware of their barely restrained hostile surroundings.

He bent down and picked up the limp body of his spent mate. Turning her around, he wrapped her legs around him.

"Hope you enjoyed the show," he said as he hit the button on the communicator. The head table wavered in front of them and was suddenly replaced with the controls of the small ship.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Barrick leaned back into the familiar cold of the pilot's chair. Quiet surrounded them as the autopilot steered them clear of the Imperial Kingdom.

Alycia looked up at Barrick. He could have left her in that damned cage. Hell, after leaving him like she did, she deserved it. With complete certainty she knew her worst day with Barrick would be a hundred times better than her best day with the prince. She'd sworn the day she found out she would never see her parents again that she wouldn't leave anyone the way they'd left her. But that's exactly what she did.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into the fur of his neck.

He pulled her away from him and stared at her. "For what?"

"Sorry for running away. Sorry for being such a burden. Sorry for you having to come and get me." Tears clogged her throat. There were not enough words for her to express the pain eating at her.

He pulled her into a tight embrace. Would it be so bad to stay here with him? Honestly if she could find her way back to earth, what would she be going back to? There was no one there who would have risked what Barrick did to save her.

"I think I'm about to cry." The sound of Timbal's voice blared across the communicator. "You might want to shut the speaker off. Lucky for you, half the crew had to be excused because of your little display."

Alycia struggled out of Barrick's arms. Her hands flew up to her mouth. That little display had been fine when she knew she would never



see those people again but Barrick's crew? That was entirely different.

Barrick hit a button on the communicator on her wrist that cut off Timbal's laughter.

"Your skin is turning red," he said, clearly fascinated.

"That's because I'm embarrassed."

"Of what?"

"Your entire crew heard us fucking."

"Not fucking, mating," he said. "Fucking is only for pleasure. Mating means more. Besides, every one of them would give anything to be in my position." He moved slightly, sending a back-arching shiver down her spine.

"It meant something to you?" she asked, lowering her hands but not meeting his eyes.

"It always has. We mate for life. From the moment I found you, everything has meant something."

"I thought you did it so that you could make money?" she asked, too scared to even hope. What if she raised her eyes to his and saw a lie there?

"What is money?" he said, looking at her a little too innocently.

She rolled her eyes up to the ceiling. "Whatever you get in return for your pheromones?" she said, hitting him on the chest.

"Oh. That's just an added benefit."

"That's not what you said—"

"Forget what I said. I am telling you that you are more important than any amount of credits." He cupped her face in his hands and brought her lips down on his.

She'd never felt so wanted. So... so... loved. That's what he did. He made her feel loved, a feeling she knew deep within her heart she returned.

Gasping for a steadying breath she said the words. Words she couldn't remember speaking in her entire life. "I love you." They came out almost too quiet for her own ears.

"Of course you do," he said. "That's what it means to be mated."

She smiled down at him. He hadn't specifically said the words back to her but she wasn't about to push it. She would save that until later. She

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would enjoy torturing him until he yelled the words over and over again.

## Epilogue

The vid screen beeped for the fourth time in the last hour.

"Are you going to answer that?" Timbal asked swinging around his chair from the control room's computer console. "It's becoming annoying."

"No." Barrick answered.

"It's coming from the Imperial Palace," Timbal said.

"I know who it is. They've been calling for the past two weeks non-stop." Barrick pressed a button to mute the damned noise.

"What do they want?" Timbal asked, curiosity clearly showing as he narrowed his eyes.

"To find out how I found Alycia." Barrick stared down at the latest order. The demand for mated pheromones had more than tripled in the last two weeks. Thankfully his mate was as insatiable as he was.

"Are you going to tell them?"

"I gave them a price. I don't think they liked it." A trace of a smile curled at the corner of Barrick's lips.

"Two million credits?" Timbal laughed, throwing out an outrageous number.

"No." Barrick looked up from the handheld computer link in front of him to catch his brother's gaze. "I think it's about time we had a land base."

"You didn't."

"If I give them the information, then it's the only way our line will get a Belusian Cream Deposit. I've got future generations to think about."

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With the deposit came land and a measure of security.

Timbal broke out in laughter.

It was too much. Too high a price. But one the Imperial family couldn't afford not to pay.

### **Author Bio**

Leila 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 and finally stopping in romance.

After college, she finally realized what she wanted to do when she grew up—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. :D

Currently, she works a normal 9 to 5 in the IT world. She writes during her lunch hour and at home after 9pm 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!

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