

**Heart of the Cat:  
Sarafin Warriors Book 3**



**By S. E. Smith**

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my husband Steve for believing in me and being proud enough of me to give me the courage to follow my dream. I would also like to give a special thank you to my sister and best friend, Linda, who not only encouraged me to write, but who also read the manuscript. Also to my other friends who believe in me: Julie, Jackie, Christel, Sally, Jolanda, Lisa, Laurelle, Debbie, and Narelle. The girls that keep me going!

And a special thanks to Paul Heitsch, David Brenin, Samantha Cook, Suzanne Elise Freeman, and PJ Ochlan—the awesome voices behind my audiobooks!

—S.E. Smith

Montana Publishing

Science Fiction Romance

HEART OF THE CAT: SARAFIN WARRIORS BOOK 3

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First E-Book Published October 2018

Cover Design by Melody Simmons

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Summary: A human woman learns the unknown species of big cat she has been asked to help heal is more than he appears and must decide if she should help him or hide the secret she was born with.

ISBN: (Paperback) 978-1-944125-45-5

ISBN: (eBook) 978-1-944125-45-5

Published in the United States by Montana Publishing.

{1. Romance—Fiction. 2. Science Fiction Romance—Fiction. 3. Paranormal Romance—Fiction. 4. Urban Fantasy—Fiction.—5. Contemporary Fantasy}

[www.montanapublishinghouse.com](http://www.montanapublishinghouse.com)

## Synopsis

Prince Walkyr d'Rojah's mission is to find an ancient artifact known as the *Heart of the Cat*—a powerful gem that holds the mythical power that connects his people. His only clues are an ancient scroll and the legends passed down through generations. However, he isn't the only one searching for the *Heart of the Cat*. A secret sect determined to overthrow the royal families of the Sarafin, the Curizan, and the Valdier wants the power contained in the gem for themselves. They are more than willing to do whatever it takes to obtain it.

Trescina Bukov's affinity with large cats has taken her all over the world. A frantic call from a local rescue group compels her to fly to Wyoming in the western part of the United States. A new species of leopard was discovered near death.

Walkyr is shocked when the human female connects with his leopard—and recognizes what he is. Now, he must deal with the assassins who have followed him, calm his leopard that wants to claim a crazy human, and try to find out why all the clues in his search for the Heart of the Cat are pointing to a planet far from home.

When two worlds collide, there are bound to be sparks. Can Walkyr maintain control of his cat long enough to take care of business first, or will he be forced to let it loose to save the woman who is hiding a life-threatening secret.

## Prologue

### **Forest Kingdom on Sarafin: Centuries Before**

Mia could see the raging fires through the open windows of the palace as she ran barefoot along the dark corridors. The brilliant flames gave the night a malevolent glow. Terrified screams rang through the air and added to the chaos and confusion.

Mia's heart thundered in her chest when she heard urgent shouts behind her. She quickly turned left and ran down another long corridor to seek a place to hide. All around her, she could hear the pleading voices of the servants begging for their lives before their cries were brutally silenced.

She stumbled as she fled down one corridor after another in a desperate search for the one place that might save her life—and the life of her unborn child. Clad only in a thin nightgown and cloak, she shivered from shock and the cold stone beneath her bare feet. Tears blinded her, and she barely stifled the grief threatening to overwhelm her.

She brushed away the tears that burned her eyes with a shaking hand. Her parents, the King and Queen of the Forest Kingdom, and the palace guards were dead, murdered by traitors. Her mate had also been murdered.

Mia's cat had awoken her with a hiss of warning, and frightened by her cat's urgency, she had fled down the corridor to her mate's study. Raul often retired there in the evenings when he couldn't sleep.

Mia almost hadn't had enough time to hide behind a large column. She'd heard them coming, their footsteps accompanied by the sound of screams, then seconds later, Mia had witnessed at least a dozen armed men stop in front of Raul's study. Most of Raul's attackers had concealed

their faces, but her cat could sense that some of them were not from Sarafin.

She had turned away, her back pressed to the column and her fist pressed against her mouth. There was no way her mate could survive such an onslaught, but Mia had been unable to abandon the desperate hope that somehow they would not kill him. She peered around the column, watching one of the men standing in the doorway, his sword dripping with Raul's blood. His cloak didn't have a hood to conceal his features, and she had recognized his face all too well—Airabus. They had grown up together. Once, she had considered him a friend.

Beyond him, she could see a body in the shadows of the room. Her mate lay dead—murdered by the warrior he'd thought was his best friend and ally.

She had remained in her hiding place, trembling with the strength of her grief. As the group moved down the hallway, led by a man dressed in an elegant, black hooded cloak edged in gold, Airabus had commented to another man that he hoped the attacks on the other Sarafin kingdoms were going as well as this one. Mia had listened intently as he talked about simultaneous attacks against the Valdier and Curizan home worlds. He said the three ruling families would soon be completely destroyed and replaced.

She had recoiled when she heard Airabus mention Prince Raffvin, a Royal Valdier Dragon Lord. She was stunned that any Sarafin would work with a Valdier Prince to murder the Sarafin royal family. How could they turn on their own people? When they were out of sight, she turned and fled.

It had been an hour since then, and she felt like the nightmare would never end. She heard footsteps approaching from the west wing and fruitlessly wiped at her tears as she once again squeezed as much of her body into an alcove as she could. Shifting into her cat would make her slightly more dangerous, but she was vastly

outnumbered, and there were fewer possible hiding places for a tiger than there were for a woman. She held her breath as a group of warriors ran past.

There was only one person she could trust now. Mia had not spoken or seen the Goddess Aikaterina since Mia was a little girl, but she hoped that the Goddess would hear and answer her plea now.

It was not common knowledge that the very existence of the Sarafin species depended on the gift that the Goddess had given them, the power to shift into large predatory cats—and it was certainly not widely known that the power came from the blood of the royal family as much as it came from the blood of the Goddess Aikaterina. By destroying the royal family, the traitors were destroying themselves. There was only one way to prevent that—the *Heart of the Cat*.

*I sense danger, her cat hissed. They wait for you.*

*We must get to the chamber, Mia instructed, knowing that there was no other choice. There is another passageway. We will use it.*

*The traitors may know about it, her cat warned.*

Mia shook her head. *There is no way anyone else could know of the chamber. Aikaterina warned me that I must not tell anyone, including my mate. Only I know the way to the chamber,* she reminded cat, her throat tightening with grief at the thought of her dead mate.

*Shift, her cat commanded.*

Mia carefully scanned the area before she shifted. Once deep inside her cat, she soothed the small cub nestled inside her. The cub sensed the danger they were in, but it was more than that—the tiny life inside of her felt the loss of her father. Grief almost paralyzed Mia as the image of her dead mate flashed through her mind. A shudder ran through the large black tiger.

*Go, she ordered, pushing aside her grief.*

The black tiger silently slipped back into the wide corridor. She hugged the wall away from the windows, trying to keep in the shadows as much as possible. At the end of the corridor, she lifted her head and sniffed the air. Her cat curled her lip, revealing sharp teeth. She remained silent. As much as she wanted to attack the Curizan and Valdier warriors she scented, she knew that it would be a futile endeavor that would only lead to her capture or death.

*Traitors!* her cat silently snarled. *They work with Curizan and Valdier—Traitors to Sarafin.*

*We must protect our cub. If we are captured, they will kill her,* Mia reminded her cat.

Her cat turned her head and looked up. There was a small staircase that led to a room above the chamber they sought. If they could slip into it, they could follow a hidden passage down to the chamber and then continue to their destination below the palace.

Mia's cat pulled back into the shadows and retreated several feet to a narrow spiral staircase that opened onto the balcony. Her belly hung low, at times rubbing against the worn stone steps as she climbed. Warmth filled her when she heard purring. Her daughter thought it was funny that Mia's belly was so big that it dragged against the steps.

*That is because you are going to be big and strong like your father,* Mia teased, trying to distract the cub from the seriousness of the situation.

*Gone.*

That word caused a feeling of sorrow to sweep through Mia. The cub was far enough along to understand more than Mia had realized. She winced when she felt a sharp pain cut across her abdomen. Her tiger paused and waited. Fortunately, the pain was brief.

At the top of the stairs, Mia paused and peered from her vantage point above the corridor below. The two guards had been joined by two more that were positioned to cut off anyone trying to escape. The new warriors were also

Sarafin. She watched with rage as they shifted and rolled their shoulders.

“Have they found her yet?” the Valdier guard asked.

“No, but she is heavy with a cub, and the High Lord has sealed the palace. She cannot go anywhere. The night is almost over. Once the sun rises, she won't be able to hide in the shadows,” Airabus stated.

“Has there been word on the other kingdoms?” the Curizan asked.

In the dim light, Mia could see Airabus grin. His sharp-toothed smile was marred by the fact that one of his canines was broken in half. Her claws dug into the wood, slicing through the long rug and leaving deep gouges. She wanted to slice his throat.

“The King of the Desert Kingdom and his mate are dead, but the young prince is missing. The others will fall soon. Lord Raffvin is working to ensure that,” Airabus replied.

“It is a shame that Princess Mia never knew the truth about her mate's past. I wonder if she would still mourn him if she did,” the Valdier sneered.

Mia lowered herself to the floor as a wave of confusion hit her. She waited to see if the warrior would continue, but Airabus hissed at the man to shut up. She pulled back into the shadows of the railing when Airabus looked up, as if sensing her watching.

With painful slowness, she crawled back until she was pressed against the wall. Rising partially to her feet, she moved to the end of a small decorative area. With a press of her nose, a panel opened near the bottom, and she slipped through the opening and disappeared into the hidden passage, the panel automatically sealing behind her.

Shifting, she held her stomach with one hand and the wall with the other. She carefully followed the winding maze of hidden staircases and narrow corridors until she

reached the entrance to the room she was seeking. The sharp pains had returned, and she knew she was in labor.

Mia stumbled forward until she reached the end of the staircase. Ahead of her was the chamber Aikaterina had shown her when she was a child. She walked to the far wall and pulled on the lever that opened the secret door. The panel silently slid open, and Mia stepped inside. Her breathing sounded loud in the large room. She panted as she tried to control the pain from her contractions.

She gazed around the chamber. The room had a soft glow, radiating upward from a central pedestal. The light reflected off the white ceiling and walls. A pool of clear liquid surrounded the pedestal, and on top of the pedestal was an ornate basin. A series of rocks created a bridge that led to the treasure concealed in the shallow, curved basin.

Mia slowly walked around the edge of the pool, then paused and shifted again. Her tiger emitted a soft, rumbling groan as another contraction swept through her. Her stomach tightened, and she panted.

*We are almost there. I cannot reach the center. Only you can,* she reminded her cat.

Her cat grunted in response. Her shimmering silver eyes focused on the first step. With a graceful leap, she landed on the rock. The stepping stone moved, and she whipped her tail to steady herself.

She waited until the rock stopped moving before she jumped to the next one. With another leap, she landed on the next rock. Once again, the stone shifted. This time the movement caused a slight wave and some of the liquid splashed up onto her front paw. She quickly lifted her foot and shook it when she received a painful burn. The liquid looked like water, but it was a corrosive acid pool designed to keep the *Heart of the Cat* safe.

*Hurt,* her cat whimpered, nursing her paw against her chest.

*I know. You must be careful,* Mia replied.

*I try. Cub coming,* her cat panted.

Mia didn't respond. She focused on calming the cub. The infant was squirming in distress. She couldn't come yet. It was too dangerous. She needed to get to the center area and safety.

Placing her injured paw on the stone, she focused on her next leap. Time was running out. She heard footsteps approaching, and her fear threatened to choke her. Somehow, the High Lord had discovered the secret passage.

*You must hurry. We have to get to the Heart before it is too late,* Mia desperately ordered.

*They smaller. I miss...*, her cat protested.

*We will die anyway. They have found us—and the Heart,* Mia whispered in resignation.

Her cat turned and hissed when nearly a dozen men entered the sacred chamber from the secret passage. She snarled and flashed her teeth as the last man entered, the High Lord who led them all. His tall form was covered in a cloak, and his face was hidden by the hood. Airabus and two other traitorous palace guards stood by his side.

“Bring her to me and retrieve the *Heart*,” the High Lord ordered.

Mia could feel the determination of her cat as she turned her head and crouched. She realized that her cat was planning on jumping from the stone they were on to the center platform. Such a jump would be extremely difficult from this distance for even the most agile cat. To do it while heavily pregnant and in labor was suicide. Even though she knew they were likely to die anyway, the thought of dying by falling into the acid pool sent terror through her.

*No!* Mia gasped in horror as her cat leaped.

A strangled cry escaped her when they landed safely and rolled. Her stomach tightened, and she felt warm liquid against her back legs as her water broke. Shifting back into

her human form, she placed one hand on her stomach and gripped the edge of the basin with the other. She pulled herself up and leaned back against it. The traitors hadn't yet reached the first stone of the pool. Turning her gaze to the cloaked figure, she wearily lifted her chin in defiance.

"You will never have the *Heart of the Cat*," she informed him.

The High Lord reached up with both hands, pulled back his hood, and removed the cover over his mouth that had been distorting his voice. Mia's chin trembled, and her knees threatened to give out, a soft cry of distress escaping her when she saw his face. Raul. How could he be the one who was responsible for the destruction of the Kingdom of the Forest and the death of so many of their people? Her grip on the lip of the basin tightened as she shook her head.

"How could it be you? You... You were... I saw you fall," her throat tightened as overwhelming grief and pain ricocheted through her.

"The *Heart of the Cat* belongs to us, Mia. Only you can retrieve it. Bring it to me, my love. With this power, we will control the three worlds," he cooed.

"That is not what was agreed upon, Sarafin. The gem is part of the collection," the Curizan warrior standing several feet away growled.

"Kill them," Raul ordered with a wave of his hand, not taking his eyes off of Mia.

"Raffvin warned that you might betray us, Sarafin," the Valdier warrior snarled.

Mia watched as the Valdier warrior shifted. A charcoal and white dragon appeared, blowing flames as the Curizan sent out shafts of shimmering white energy toward the group of Sarafin warriors. They were vastly outnumbered, but their abilities gave them an advantage that Mia had been unaware they possessed.

Several Sarafin warriors retreated from the dragon's flames while two more fought to keep from being impaled

by the mysterious spears of white energy. One of the men stepped too close to the edge of the pool. He teetered there before one of the energy spears struck him, knocking him backwards. His screams of pain did not last long as his body dissolved in the shallow pool filled with clear acid.

Mia clumsily crouched and moved around to the far side of the pedestal. Her fingers trembled as she dipped her hand into the clear liquid. Tears blinded her as she lifted the crystal-clear gem out of the basin. She ignored the roar of the dragon and the snarls of the huge cats as they fought back. She looked up at the man who had once held her own heart in his hands.

“Give me the *Heart*, Mia,” Raul quietly ordered, his words barely piercing the pain wracking her body.

“You betrayed me. You betrayed your daughter. You have betrayed your people,” she responded, her heart feeling as if it were being ripped from her body.

“We will rule together, my love,” Raul murmured, jumping onto the first stone.

Mia looked into his eyes and saw the lie. As much as it hurt to accept, she would not deny what was right in front of her. She and Raul were not on the same side. Her body trembled as she cupped the *Heart of the Cat* in her hands. She slowly rose to her feet and lifted the stone above her head.

“Aikaterina, I beg of you, save my people,” she whispered.

“No!” Raul growled, jumping to another stone.

A white bolt of energy struck her, and Mia bowed in sudden shock, pressing her hand to her chest. Behind Raul, the Curizan returned her shocked gaze with one of triumph. His glee at striking her was short-lived when two Sarafin warriors struck him from behind and sent him into the shallow pool.

The man screamed as the acid wrapped around him and he grabbed at the stone that Raul was standing on. The rock

shifted, and Raul slipped. His right arm sank into the liquid up to his elbow as he tried to keep from being catapulted into the pool of acid. Mia swayed as her mate screamed in pain and struggled to keep from falling. He yanked what remained of his arm out of the pool of acid and gripped the stump with his left hand. Swaying, he jumped and clumsily landed on the next step as the Curizan disappeared beneath the clear liquid.

“Mia,” he hoarsely choked. Despite the agony he must have been feeling, his glittering eyes were focused not on her face, but on the stone she held above her head. “Together, my love. We will rule the galaxy.”

“Never, Raul,” Mia whispered. The crystal-clear gem of the *Heart of the Cat* turned red with her blood as she gripped it with both hands again. “I give this burden to our daughter. I will not live long enough to shoulder it, and there is no other who can. May she live and one day bring peace to our people—a peace that her father sought to destroy.”

Mia could feel her life fading away, even as the pain in her abdomen intensified. Tears streamed down her face as her knees buckled, and she sank down to kneel on the platform.

Her eyes remained locked on her mate as he jumped a step closer. The ghastly remains of his partially dissolved arm hung limply by his side, the stump already sealed by the burning acid. She felt like she was seeing him for the first time. He was no longer the handsome warrior who she had admired from afar as she was growing up and then joined with less than a year ago. Instead, she saw him for what he was—a cold, heartless traitor who would sacrifice his own people for power.

“Please... do not let him... harm our... child,” she whispered, fighting to live long enough to give her daughter a chance.

Warmth from the *Heart of the Cat's* magic surrounded her and her soon-to-be-born child as the Goddess answered her plea for help. Waves of gold surrounded the pedestal, protecting them in its warm cocoon. Relief washed through Mia. The *Heart of the Cat* would be protected. The certainty of that knowledge soothed the tears from her cheeks as she closed her eyes. Her mate could not reach her now.

*Please, protect my people... and my cub,* Mia silently pleaded as another contraction tightened her body.

*They will be safe,* a soothing voice said inside her mind.

Mia wasn't sure if the Goddess was really there or if it was the power of the *Heart of the Cat*. She didn't care which one it might be as long as it protected her people and her child from the man who would have destroyed them all. Her lips parted with a cry as another intense wave of pain surged through her.

She pressed her back to the pillar and panted as pain twisted her lower abdomen. Another strangled cry escaped her, and she reached down between her legs, barely catching the tiny infant that slipped from her body.

Mia opened her eyes and looked at Raul's enraged face. A tired smile parted her lips when she heard her daughter's first cry. She struggled to lift the newborn infant into her arms. Once she did, she cradled the baby against her breast. She immediately felt the love from the spark she had carried in her womb wash over her, giving her renewed strength.

"Trescina, my beautiful, beautiful, little cub," she murmured, caressing the infant's cheek with her fingers.

"Mia..." Raul hoarsely called.

Mia lifted her cold eyes and stared at her mate. "You will never have the *Heart of the Cat*... or know the love of our daughter," she weakly vowed.

Mia felt the power of the gem she still held in her hand engulf her and Trescina. The golden glow turned to a blood

red. Mia fought against the darkness that rose up to swallow them. A strange and wonderful magic enveloped her and Trescina, and she knew the Goddess had answered her plea.

Her life here was over. Her last wish was that her daughter would never experience the heartache of knowing the truth about her father's betrayal, but she feared that was one wish that would be impossible for her to keep—unless Aikaterina sent them far, far away where they would never be found.

# Chapter 1

## **Earth: Centuries later Siberia, Russia**

Trescina Bukov laughed as she chased her younger half-sister through the forest. Ahead of her, Katarina darted around a thick tree and hid. Trescina slowed and looked around, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

Katarina's breathing sounded loud to Trescina. On silent feet, she crept forward until she rounded the large tree trunk and pounced on her sister, sending her tumbling into the freshly fallen snow. She released a pleased sneeze when Katarina's arms wrapped around her neck, and her sister tightly hugged her.

"Oh, Trescina, I wish I could shift into a tiger like you can," Katarina sighed.

Trescina ran her sandpaper tongue along her sister's cheek. The affectionate caress drew a loud squeal of disgust from Katarina. Trescina gave her sister a toothy grin before she shifted back to her human form and rolled to the side until they were both lying in the snow staring up at the barren trees.

"You were doing good until you bolted. If you had stayed in your hiding spot, I probably wouldn't have found you," Trescina teased.

Katarina sat up and gave her an indignant look. "Of course, you would have found me. You always do, no matter how good a hiding place I find," Katarina good-naturedly complained.

Trescina lifted her legs in the air and then gracefully dropped them so she could roll to her feet. Katarina mimicked her movement. They both brushed the soft snow off of their heavy clothing.

“You are getting much better. It took me twice as long to find you as it did the last time,” Treescina said.

“Treescina, why can you shift into a tiger, and I can’t?” Katarina asked for the hundredth time. “I can hear you and Momma when you talk, and I can talk to the tigers that Momma and Papa care for, but...” she trailed off sadly.

Treescina wrapped her arms around her sister. Her heart ached for Katarina.

“I don’t know. Momma said she would explain when the time was right,” Treescina murmured.

They jumped and pulled apart when they heard a series of popping sounds. It almost sounded like firecrackers, but those were not allowed on their property. Treescina stepped in front of Katarina and frowned.

“What was that?” Katarina asked, gripping her arm.

Treescina was about to answer when she heard the sounds again. They both started forward when they heard their mother’s cry. Treescina stumbled back a step when Katarina grabbed her arm.

*Hide!* their mother warned them telepathically.

*Momma,* Treescina called.

*Protect your sister, Treescina,* their mother instructed as the popping sounds came again.

Treescina turned and gripped Katarina’s gloved hand. Pulling her sister behind her, she ran clumsily through the snow. They made their way deeper into the forest until they reached a river that was partially frozen. Along the bank were the skeletal remains of trees that had become entangled when they washed down during the spring thaw.

“Climb inside and stay there,” Treescina said, pushing her six-year-old sister toward the cluster of dead trees.

“What are you going to do?” Katarina asked, climbing between the jagged limbs.

“I have to help Momma. Papa is not here,” Treescina replied, picking up several broken branches and covering the spot where Katarina was crouching.

“But... Momma said that we must hide,” Katarina protested, grabbing the branch Trescina was about to place in front of her.

Trescina looked at Katarina. They were as different as night and day. Katarina’s hair was strawberry red, and her skin was almost as pale as the snow, just like their father. Trescina’s long black hair was thick, and its texture reminded her of the mane of the lions she petted at the zoo they had visited a few months before. Her olive complexion was even darker than their mother’s.

They had several traits in common, though. They both could communicate with the large cats on the reserve, and they were both stubborn like their mother—at least, that was what their dad liked to say when they got into mischief.

When Trescina heard yelling and a loud, masculine scream rip through the air, she quickly turned and looked back toward their home. Her cat hissed. Fear swelled in her at the thought of her mother facing danger alone.

“I’ll be back,” Trescina said.

She impatiently looked over her shoulder when she felt Katarina’s hand on her arm. She pulled free with a shake of her head and took off at a run through the snow, shifting into her tiger so she could move faster. Ahead of her, she could hear the echoes of popping again.

Dodging trees and ducking under fallen branches, she focused on running as fast as she could. She hoped their father had heard the sounds as well. He had gone to check his hidden cameras along the mountain where he had seen lynx tracks.

Trescina broke through the line of trees onto the tundra. In the distance, she could see flames rising from their house. A flash of black caught her attention. Charging forward, she ran faster than she had ever run before. She emitted a low cry when she saw two men dragging the body of a large Siberian tiger toward a truck.

The flash of black was back. This time her mother attacked one of the men aiming his weapon at a Manul, also called a Pallas cat. This smaller species of cat was a furry wild cat that normally lived in the Altai and Buryatia steppes near the Russian-Mongolian border, but this one had been brought to the reserve after it was injured in a poacher's trap. Trescina and Katarina loved to play with the small cat in the evenings and early mornings after it had been fed.

*Momma, behind you,* Trescina warned as a second man lifted his rifle to shoot her mother.

Leaping through the air, she rammed her compact body into the man's side. Her claws cut through his leather jacket and into his skin. She twisted, and the powerful attack, combined with her momentum, knocked the man off-balance. With a sharp report, the rifle fired harmlessly into the air instead of at her mother.

The man fell to the ground. Trescina rolled several times before she surged back to her feet. Her cat hissed a warning when one of the men turned from the back of the truck with a gun and aimed it at her.

She darted forward as the man she had knocked down sat up. The man from the truck fired three rounds at her. One hit the ground in front of her while the other two struck the man she had attacked earlier as she moved behind him.

The man jerked each time a bullet hit his chest. A loud curse exploded from the man standing next to the shooter. Trescina's mother turned her head and hissed. Blood dripped from her mother's chin and coated parts of her fur.

*Trescina, run!!* her mother ordered.

"Idiot! You are shooting our men. Kill the cat!" the man growled in Russian.

Trescina turned to follow her mother's orders when she heard the loud repercussion of gunfire. Her mother jerked backwards. At the same time, the man who had fired the

shots earlier convulsed. She looked up and saw her father running across the open area toward them.

“Vlad, let’s go,” another man said in Russian, coming around the side of the truck.

“Not without that cat. Look at her coat. Her pelt will be worth a fortune on the black market! I want the cub as well. We can sell them both,” Vlad ordered.

Both men ducked when her father shouldered his rifle, aimed, and fired at them. The man next to Vlad lifted the rifle in his hand to return fire. Trescina saw her mother leap forward, her front claws extended. Trescina backed up as her mother drove the man back against the truck. Her powerful jaws clamped around the man’s neck. The rifle in his hand fell to the ground as he struggled to break free.

*No!* Trescina cried when she saw Vlad pull a machete out of the back of the truck.

She watched helplessly as Vlad drove the long blade through her mother’s ribs. Her mother stiffened and released her grip on the man’s throat. Vlad pulled the machete free and stabbed her mother again.

Her mother emitted a loud yowl of pain before she crumpled to the ground. Grief seared through Trescina, and she attacked with everything she had in her small body. Her teeth sank into the man’s arm near his elbow. He twisted and punched her in the side near the top of her ribs. She clawed at his chest in a desperate attempt to break free.

He struck her again, this time against the side of her head. The stunning blow caused her to release her grip on his arm. His long fingers gripped the skin of her nape and he held her up and away from him. She braced for another blow when he lifted his hand. The force of his backhand snapped her head to the side, causing black dots to dance in front of her.

Darkness fogged the corner of her vision before she shook it away. Staring at the ground, an uncontrollable sob

tore from her throat when she saw the dark blood staining her mother's side.

*Fight, Trescina, her mother weakly ordered. Use your claws.*

Trescina could hear her mother struggling to breathe. She whimpered again when the man pulled her close, using her as a shield against her father's assault.

The man next to Vlad straightened, lifting one hand to grip his savaged throat. There was a loud report from her father's rifle, and the man's eyes suddenly widened. He looked down at his chest. A circle of blood began to bubble from the bullet hole in his heart.

Trescina cried out when Vlad's hand tightened on her neck as he backed around the side of the truck. Her father dove for cover when Vlad lifted his bleeding arm and fired several shots from his pistol. Trescina's cat hissed in rage. These men—especially this one—had come to destroy her small, happy family for nothing more than greed.

She erupted in a wild frenzy, raking her back claws down the man's chest, opening up new deep cuts near the ones she had already inflicted. The man moved to put more space between them, and Trescina took advantage, striking him across his left cheek, leaving four lines of deep cuts from his cheekbone to his chin.

He opened his hand and dropped her. When she landed on the ground, he shot out his booted foot and struck her in the side, sending her flying back against the heated stone of her burnt home. Trescina lifted her head and watched with dazed eyes as the man named Vlad jumped into the truck that had been left running.

She flinched when rock, snow, and grit from the spinning back tires struck her face and chest. She struggled to her feet and shifted back to human form. She staggered on trembling legs over to her mother where she lay panting. Dropping to her knees, she bent over her mother's limp body as her father slid to a stop and knelt beside her.

“Oh, my beautiful love. You must hold on,” her father pleaded softly in Russian as he moved his hand to the deep wound on her side. “Please, my love.”

Trescina caressed the soft fur of her mother’s face with trembling hands. Her father’s words passed over her numb mind as he frantically tried to stem the blood flowing from her mother’s side. Tears blurred her vision when her mother’s body shimmered, and she shifted into her human form.

“Momma,” Trescina choked as she ran her fingers along her mother’s cheek.

“Trescina... where’s... Katarina?” her mother forced out in a voice filled with pain.

Trescina reached down and grabbed her mother’s hand. She pressed the back of her mom’s cold fingers against her damp cheek. She released a trembling breath as she fought to answer.

“She’s safe. I hid her down near the river,” Trescina responded in a soft, tearful voice.

Her mother pulled her hand free and reached for the chain around her neck. When the necklace caught under her mother’s shirt, Trescina reached down and helped her pull it out.

“Take it,” her mother ordered.

Trescina looked at her mother in confusion for a moment before she clumsily unhooked the clasp and pulled it free. She held the glowing red gem between the palms of her hands. Looking up at her father, she silently begged him for help.

“Ivan...,” her mother’s voice was barely audible.

Trescina watched her father scoot closer and grip her mother’s hand. Tears coursed down his face as he lifted the pale fingers to his lips. His own hands were stained with her blood.

“Protect them.... My people...,” her mother whispered.

Ivan nodded. "I will, my love. I will protect them with my life. Your people will always be safe," he vowed.

A tender smile curved her mother's lips before she turned and looked at Trescina again. A flash of pain swept across her face, and she tried to draw in a breath. Trescina could see the light fading from her mother's eyes.

"You must... keep our secret. Our people..." her mother's voice faded to silence as she released her last breath.

"Momma," Trescina cried.

She bent forward and pressed her cold cheek to her mother's. Harsh sobs made it hard to catch her breath. She wrapped her arms around her mother's neck and rocked back and forth, calling for her.

"Momma..." another soft voice called.

Trescina lifted her head and looked at Katarina. She must have felt their mother's passing. Their father turned and held out his arms. Katarina ran forward with a sob.

"I'm so sorry, Mia. I should have been here," their father muttered as he cradled Katarina in his arms. "I will protect our daughters. I swear I will protect them with my life."

\*\*\*

Vladimir Mirvo pressed the smooth sleeve of his worn brown leather jacket against his ravaged cheek. A low curse escaped him when he felt the sting of his ripped flesh. The tiger cub's claws were like razor blades. They had laid his flesh open as smoothly as a surgeon's scalpel. The damn cat had inflicted wounds on his face and chest that he would carry for the rest of his life.

He tightened his right hand on the steering wheel of the truck when its back-end started to slide. He fought for control of the bulky vehicle on the slushy, mud-covered road. He eased back on the accelerator to keep from losing

control. Vlad shot a quick look at the side mirror to see if he had put enough distance between himself and the man who had unexpectedly appeared. Now several hundred feet from the house, he released an irritated sigh. He was the only man out of a team of five to survive what should have been a simple mission.

He grimaced in pain when he hit a deep rut, jarring his body and reminding him again of the deep cuts to his chest. Mud splashed over the hood and coated the windshield and side windows, nearly blocking his view of the slippery road in front of him. With an impatient flick of his wrist, he turned on the windshield wiper. Globbs of mud smeared across the already dirty glass, creating half-moon streaks that allowed him limited visibility.

He reached down and gripped the window crank. He turned the lever and quickly rolled the window down so that he could see behind him. In the reflection, he saw the blond-haired man who had shot two of his men kneeling next to the large tiger that had attacked them shortly after they had arrived. He started to refocus on the road when it hit him that there was something odd about the scene behind him.

He eased up on the gas pedal, opened the window, and wiped at the side mirror. He ignored the pain that exploded through his cheek when the frigid wind swept across the open wounds. He stared at the image reflected in the mirror. A young, dark-haired girl was bent over the still figure of the large, black cat. When he had first glanced in the mirror as he pulled away, there had been the tiger cub next to the tiger.

He cursed when he glanced up at where he was driving just in time to see the narrow road wind to the left. He jerked the steering wheel in time to make the turn, and could now no longer see what he wanted to in the mirror. Slamming on the brakes, he shifted the truck into park and

grabbed the binoculars from the floorboard between the two front seats.

He pulled the door handle and practically fell out of the truck in his haste. Running up the side of the slope, he fell to his stomach and lifted the binoculars to his eyes. He swept over the field of vision until he narrowed in on the house that he had set on fire when they first arrived.

Vlad followed the ground from the edge of the house until he found what he was searching for. The man knelt beside the body of the large cat. Adjusting the focus, he moved to the dark, curly-haired little girl who was bending over the tiger.

Confusion swept over him. Where was the tiger cub? Where had the little girl come from? It had not been long enough for a girl to appear and a tiger to disappear—not by conventional means. There had been something off about this from the beginning. Adjusting the focus on the binoculars again, he returned his attention to the injured black tiger. A sudden wave of shock and disbelief swept through him. Instead of the tiger, a woman lay between the man and child now. He focused on the woman. He could see blood staining her clothing.

“Impossible!” he muttered.

He cursed in frustration at not being able to get a clearer view. A shiver ran through him when he saw the little girl lift something between her hands. He pulled the binoculars away and looked at the snow when he felt a drop of liquid fall from his chin. Bright red blood stained the pristine white, reminding him of the sharp claws that had raked his cheek.

“They are unnatural beasts who must be cursed,” he muttered as he scooted backwards and up onto his knees before pushing off the ground.

His mind swirled with the images he had just witnessed as he walked back to the truck. His gaze narrowed on the dead tiger in the back. He lifted the tailgate and secured the

canvas to make sure no one could see what he had in the back. The Siberian tiger's pelt would bring him a small fortune on the black market, but he was now thinking of something that could bring him much, much more.

A grim smile curved his lips. A child who could change into a tiger would bring him great wealth. There were buyers all over the world that would pay a fortune to own someone as rare as she was. He would return once he had unloaded his cargo and had his face stitched up. That would give him time to do research on the identity of the blond-haired man and recruit the help he would need to capture the child.

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### **The Full Booklist**

#### **Science Fiction / Romance**

[Dragon Lords of Valdier Series](#)

*It all started with a king who crashed on Earth, desperately hurt. He inadvertently discovered a species that would save his own.*

*Abducting Abby* (Book 1)

*Capturing Cara* (Book 2)

*Tracking Trisha* (Book 3)

*Dragon Lords of Valdier Boxset Books 1-3*

*Ambushing Ariel* (Book 4)

*For the Love of Tia Novella* (Book 4.1)

*Cornering Carmen* (Book 5)

*Paul's Pursuit* (Book 6)

*Twin Dragons* (Book 7)

*Jaguin's Love* (Book 8)

*The Old Dragon of the Mountain's Christmas* (Book 9)

*Pearl's Dragon Novella* (Book 10)

*Twin Dragons' Destiny* (Book 11)

### Curizan Warrior Series

*The Curizans have a secret, kept even from their closest allies, but even they are not immune to the draw of a little known species from an isolated planet called Earth.*

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### Marastin Dow Warriors Series

*The Marastin Dow are reviled and feared for their ruthlessness, but not all want to live a life of murder. Some wait for just the right time to escape....*

*A Warrior's Heart Novella*

*Sarafin Warriors Series*

*The St. Claire family may be slightly ridiculous, but they are formidable. Those cat-shifting aliens won't know what hit them!*

*Choosing Riley* (Book 1)

*Viper's Defiant Mate* (Book 2)

*Dragonlings of Valdier Novellas*

*The Valdier, Sarafin, and Curizan Lords had children who just cannot stop getting into trouble! There is nothing as cute or funny as magical, shapeshifting kids, and nothing as heartwarming as family.*

*A Dragonling's Easter*

*A Dragonling's Haunted Halloween*

*A Dragonling's Magical Christmas*

*The Dragonlings' Very Special Valentine*

*Night of the Demented Symbiots* (Halloween 2)

*The Dragonlings and the Magic Four-Leaf Clover*

Cosmos' Gateway Series

*Cosmos created a portal between his lab and the warriors of Prime. Discover new worlds, new species, and outrageous adventures as secrets are unravelled and bridges are crossed.*

Tilly Gets Her Man (Prequel)

Tink's Neverland (Book 1)

Hannah's Warrior (Book 2)

Tansy's Titan (Book 3)

Cosmos' Promise (Book 4)

Merrick's Maiden (Book 5)

Core's Attack (Book 6)

Saving Runt (Book 7)

The Alliance Series

*When Earth received its first visitors from space, the planet was thrown into a panicked chaos. The Trivators came to bring Earth into the Alliance of Star Systems, but now they have been forced to take control of Earth to prevent the humans from destroying it in their fear, and to protect them from the militant forces of other worlds. No one was prepared for how the humans will affect the Trivators, though, starting with a family of three sisters....*

Hunter's Claim (Book 1)

Razor's Traitorous Heart (Book 2)

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The Alliance Boxset Books 1-3

Challenging Saber (Book 4)

Destin's Hold (Book 5)

Edge of Insanity (Book 6)

The Alliance Boxset Books 1-6

### Lords of Kassis Series

*It began with a random abduction and a stowaway, and yet, somehow, the Kassisans knew the humans were coming long before now. The fate of more than one world hangs in the balance, and time is not always linear....*

River's Run (Book 1)

Star's Storm (Book 2)

Jo's Journey (Book 3)

Rescuing Mattie Novella (Book 3.1)

Ristéard's Unwilling Empress (Book 4)

### Zion Warriors Series

*Time travel, epic heroics, and love beyond measure. Sci-fi adventures with heart and soul, laughter, and awe-inspiring discovery...*

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**Science Fiction / Paranormal / Fantasy / Romance**

Magic, New Mexico Series

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**More Than Human Series**

*Long ago there was a war on Earth between shifters and humans. Humans lost, and today they know they will become extinct if something is not done....*

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**The Fairy Tale Series**

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\*Free Audiobook of The Beast Prince is available:

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**The Seven Kingdoms**

*Long ago, a strange entity came to the Seven Kingdoms to conquer and feed on their life force. It found a host, and she battled it within her body for centuries while*

*destruction and devastation surrounded her. Our story begins when the end is near, and a portal is opened....*

*The Dragon's Treasure* (Book 1)

*The Sea King's Lady* (Book 2)

*A Witch's Touch* (Book 3)

*The Sea Witch's Redemption* (Book 4)

## **Epic Science Fiction / Action Adventure**

### Project Gliese 581G Series

*An international team leave Earth to investigate a mysterious object in our solar system that was clearly made by someone, someone who isn't from Earth. Sometimes we truly are too curious for our own good. Discover new worlds and conflicts in a sci-fi adventure sure to become your favorite!*

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*Survivor Skills* (Book 3)

## **New Adult / Young Adult**

### Breaking Free Series

*Makayla steals her grandfather's sailboat and embarks on a journey that will challenge everything she has ever believed about herself.*

*Voyage of the Defiance*

*Capture of the Defiance*

*Makayla is older now, but when she needs help, her friends from years ago join new and unexpected allies. Capture of the Defiance is a thriller mystery that stands on its own as danger reveals itself in sudden, heart-stopping moments.*

The Dust Series

*Fragments of a comet hit Earth, and Dust wakes to discover the world as he knew it is gone. It isn't the only thing that has changed, though, so has Dust...*

*Dust: Before and After* (Book 1)

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## About the Author

S.E. Smith is an *Internationally Acclaimed, Award-Winning, New York Times and USA TODAY Bestselling* author of science fiction, romance, fantasy, paranormal, and contemporary works for adults, young adults, and children. She enjoys writing a wide variety of genres that pull her readers into worlds that take them away.