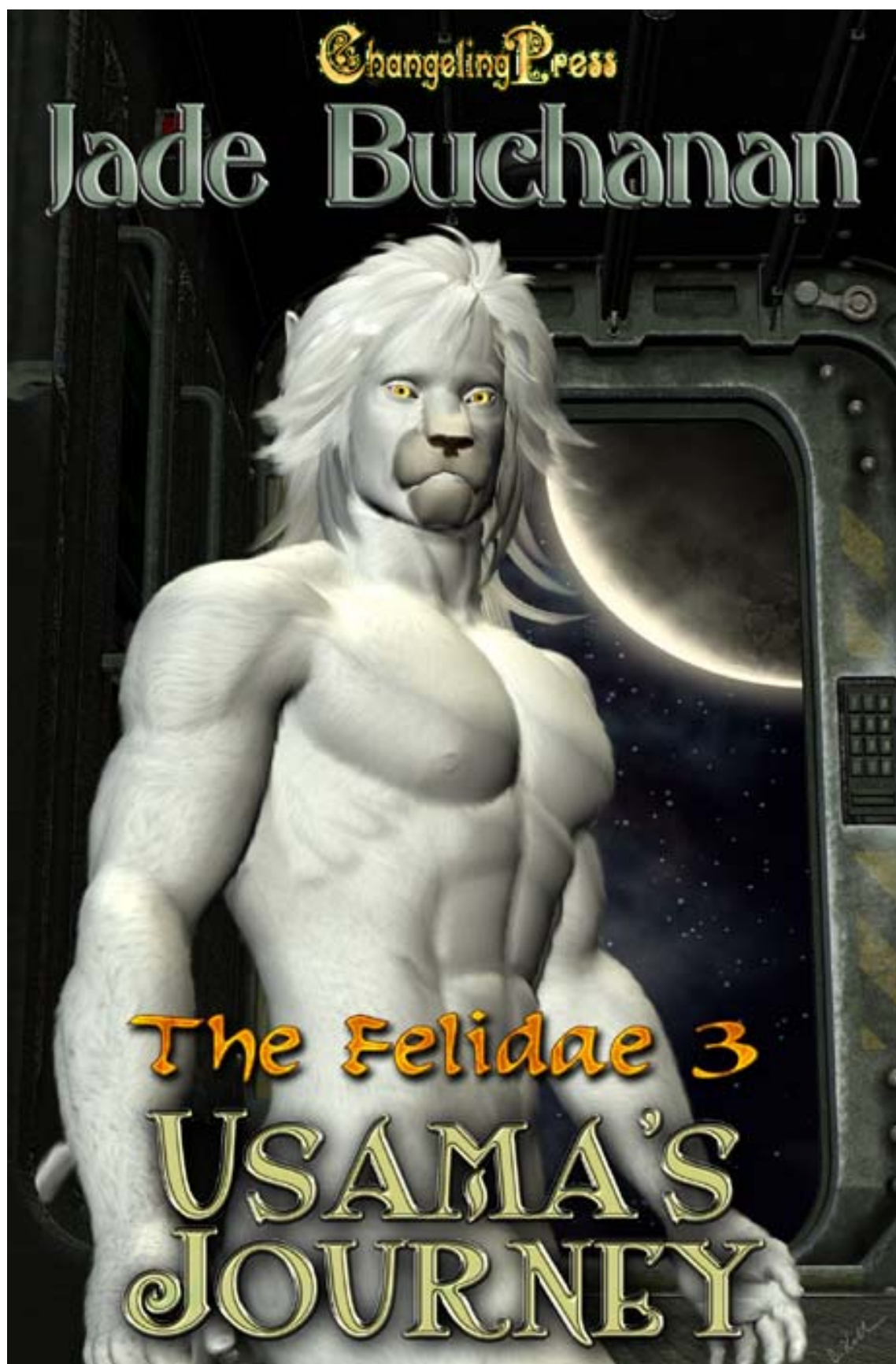


Changeling Press

Jade Buchanan



The Felidae 3
USAMA'S
JOURNEY

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The Felidae 3: Usama's Journey

Jade Buchanan

Usama Gatti has always known who he is. The youngest Gatti brother was born the only white Leo in his pride. He can't be a hunter. He can't be a pride leader. He can't be anything but what he's always been... weaker than those around him.

Usama has just found the one thing that will make him strong -- his love for Rajiv.

Rajiv Citrakaya has always known who he is. Born into the Tigris, he is fierce, territorial -- deadly. He was born knowing he's stronger than others. Because of that, he doesn't fight and doesn't get involved in the politics around him. It's too dangerous.

Rajiv has just found the one thing that will make him fight -- his love for Usama.

Chapter One

Usama sulked, burrowing deeper into his bunk when the echo of Asad's roar shook the ship. "Well, someone is getting off. It looks like I'm the only one who isn't getting any right this minute," he grumbled.

Instantly contrite, he thought of Catan. He shouldn't be upset that his best friend had found love. What the man had gone through had been horrible.

Shuddering to get rid of the memories, Usama curled up on his side. He felt a soft spot for the little Lynx. He understood him in some way. It seemed weird that he would find his best friend in a Lynx. Usama was one of the Ruling Leos. The elite of the *Felidae*. They weren't supposed to mix outside of their clan but his family had always been different from other Leos. Just look at his older brothers. One had mated with a human and the other with a Lynx. Unheard of.

He was so incredibly happy that his brother had found love with Catan. Asad might be his brother, but the way he looked at Catan made Usama so jealous sometimes. He wanted someone to look at him that way. The way Asad cared for Catan was what he wanted. He wanted to be watched and loved like that.

He knew his friend wasn't even aware of how Asad looked after him. If Catan knew the reason he so often got the easy shifts was because Asad pleaded with Laithe, the Lynx would probably be angry at the interference. Usama knew *he* wouldn't be angry at getting that kind of attention.

Right now though, Usama was in need of an entirely different kind of attention. Ever since Laithe, his pride leader, had found his mate, the pheromones on the warship *Shahnaz* were literally dancing in the air. Usama had recently discovered the pleasures that could be had with another being, and he was dying for more.

Usama stretched his body, his thoughts turning to Rajiv Citrakaya. The large Tigris outweighed the Gatti brothers by over a hundred pounds, stretching up to surpass seven and a half feet in height. The Tigris clan was the largest species among the *Felidae*, and if they weren't so solitary, they would be formidable threats against the Leo rulers. It was a good thing the Tigris never wanted to rule the *Felidae*; they just wanted to be left alone. Which was why it was so weird that Rajiv stayed with them.

The only Tigris who associated with others -- of his own kind or outside of it -- Rajiv was different. Oh, not that he actually associated with them, most of the time he still kept to himself. But Usama had never understood why Rajiv chose to stay with his brother.

Hmmm, he definitely needed a distraction. Maybe it was time to find out exactly why the Tigris stayed with them. Nearly bouncing in his excitement, Usama left his room to move toward Rajiv's quarters. Before the end of this night, his curiosity would be appeased. He just knew it.

Although... the few times he and Rajiv had been together intimately, the furthest thing from their minds was talking. He couldn't stay away from the man. He was drawn to him. To the way Rajiv made him feel.

Besides, Rajiv had saved his life recently and if that didn't create a bond, he didn't know what did. Years ago, the pride had rescued Catan after he had been brutally attacked. The small Lynx's attackers had been a rival pride patrolling the skies, one that didn't like the other clans among the *Felidae*. Laithe had responded to a distress call from Kanad, the planet where the Lynx made their home, but they had been too late to save Catan's family. The smaller man was the only survivor and he had been with them ever since.

They had all grown to become a family since then. Now, with Laithe's mate Rowan in the pride, they were complete. He hadn't been sure about her when he first met her, but he had grown to love her in the past few weeks. Unbelievable to think that he'd never even heard of her before then, and now he couldn't think of his life without the hairless human in it. He never would have thought that his older brother would

find his mate, not to mention the fact that she wasn't even a *Felidae*, but another species entirely.

He had been out walking with her and Catan when they'd been attacked. When the men who'd hurt Catan before had shown up to take him again, Usama had tried to fight them off. He knew he wasn't strong enough. He knew going into it he would lose. Shyam was a fierce fighter, and he was used to taking what he wanted.

Usama didn't fight. His brothers had always protected him. He didn't have any other choice though. He had to save his friend. He was lucky Rajiv had entered the clearing, rescuing him in the nick of time. Killing the man who had attacked him.

He winced at the reminder of that fight. Most of his bruises were gone, the cuts and scrapes were still slowly fading, but it was his arm that continued to pain him. Held tight to his chest with a bandage, the broken appendage would take time to mend. He was lucky it was the worst that had happened to him.

Looking up, he realized he had reached Rajiv's room without noticing. Usama stood outside the door, debating with himself whether he should interrupt the man or not. Now that he was here, he realized his nerve was deserting him. About ready to turn around and slink back to his quarters, he was startled when the door slid open in front of him.

"Are you going to stand there all day, or did you want something?" Rajiv growled.

"Well, umm, actually, I, ah..."

Rajiv grunted, reaching out to grab Usama by the shoulders and drag him into his quarters. Usama stumbled when he was released, catching himself on the side of the bed in front of him with his good arm.

"What are you doing here?" Rajiv asked, folding his arms across his impressive chest.

Usama looked upward, following the path of Rajiv's arms up and over his shoulders to focus on his face. He was such a gorgeous man. Taller than the rest of them, his short fur was a brilliant reddish-orange with strong, black slashes covering his

body, wrapping around his sides and up and over his face. His belly was the only thing on him without stripes, a stunning white that contrasted with the rest of his fur. Rajiv towered over him -- silent and unmoving except for the slow slide of his tail as it moved up to caress one thigh.

Usama couldn't breathe while he watched that tail. He had never considered Rajiv in any sexual way before the Tigris had approached him when Rowan arrived. Actually, that was a lie. He had always *looked* at him, he just never thought he would ever get the chance to act on it. Now he knew exactly what the powerful Tigris could do, and he couldn't get the thought out of his mind. Rajiv leisurely uncurled his arms, standing straighter while he sniffed the air in front of him.

"What do you want? Do you wish to be taken again?" he purred, stalking forward to stand directly in front of Usama.

Rajiv pushed his body closer to Usama, causing the younger Leo to back up. He tripped against the bed at his back and ended up sprawled over the surface of it. Looking up at the man above him, he tried to slide back when Rajiv leapt onto the bed, only to be caught by hands grabbing at his legs.

Usama looked away, staring at the wall opposite the door. Unlike the rooms of the Gatti brothers, Rajiv had chosen to decorate his room sparsely. The big bed in the center was the only furniture. The walls were plain and depressingly gray. There was no color anywhere, unlike Usama's room which was furnished in bright greens and blues.

Rajiv lowered his head, licking a path down Usama's neck before clamping down on his shoulder. He bit in suddenly, his teeth sliding easily into the marks already present from the last time they were together. Usama reared up at the sharp pleasure-pain of Rajiv's canines piercing his skin.

Rajiv moaned around the skin in his mouth before releasing it to lap at the blood.

Usama panted, caught up in the man above him. That was... that was unbelievable. He arched his lower body, grinding it into Rajiv's stomach, his cock aching hard from Rajiv's nip at his shoulder.

Rajiv licked along his chest, skirting the bandages holding his arm in place, following the lean musculature to his stomach. He bit down into the muscle beneath him, making Usama quiver and buck up against him. Rajiv chuckled darkly before lowering his head to lap at his erection straining upward. Engulfing Usama's cock in one swoop, he sucked firmly, pressing down with his hands on hips that threatened to rear up.

Rajiv pulled up, concaving his cheeks with the pressure, before smoothing his rough tongue up the underside of Usama's cock. Lowering his head, he licked down to Usama's sac and beneath it to his ass. In one long lick, he traced his path backward, ending up at the tip of Usama's cock before engulfing the entire shaft within his mouth again.

Reversing direction, Rajiv kissed his way back to his ass, rimming him until Usama thought his head might explode from the pleasure. Then he was inserting that magical tongue deep into his ass, twisting it while he drove it inward.

Usama bucked, fearful for a minute that he was about to come. Rajiv grabbed the base of his cock with one hand, tightening it while his other hand rose up to play with his sac, rolling his balls gently before removing both hands.

Usama's eyes rolled back in his head at the feel of the long, rough tongue fucking his ass. He thought he just might die when Rajiv's tongue was joined by two of his fingers, thrusting in and twisting to press against something inside his ass. Just when he was afraid he was going to lose it completely, Rajiv rose up to blanket him again, fitting his thick cock against Usama's entrance.

Usama's gasp was loud in the silent room when Rajiv slowly began pushing into his ass. The smell of nawra flowers was ripe in the close confines of the room. He didn't know when the man had gotten out the oil, but he was grateful for it when Rajiv's cock slid into his bottom in one long glide.

Rajiv grunted against his shoulder, biting down again to clamp his teeth in Usama. The barbs ringed the head of Rajiv's cock pressed against his flesh, a hot insistent pressure, driving him mad. They were electrifying inside of him, scraping his

prostate with every stroke. Rajiv's one hand landed hard on the mattress by his head. His other hand anchored them together with a grip on Usama's hip.

There was something different this time. Before, Rajiv had been dominating but it was almost casual. Now something had changed and Usama couldn't quite put his finger on it, but Usama was too far gone at that moment to care. Maybe it was him that was different.

Usama bucked up in concert with Rajiv, bringing his legs up to wrap around the larger man's waist. He held on for dear life when Rajiv sped up his thrusts, sending Usama faster toward the climax he felt building at the base of his spine. His good hand grabbed hold of the blankets near his head, catching and releasing the fabric in time to Rajiv's thrusts. One of the man's big, hot hands reached down to pull at his cock, and he was lost, shooting powerfully while his ass clamped tight around the cock sliding up into him.

Rajiv hissed in response, burying himself completely in Usama, releasing his shoulder to bring their mouths together in a kiss when he spurted his release deep inside of him. It felt like he had just possessed Usama completely.

When Usama returned to himself, he was completely draped around Rajiv, his arm and legs locked into position. Rajiv purred against his neck, lapping at his skin while he calmed down from his own explosive release.

Pulling back, Rajiv looked down at him. He brushed Usama's mane with one hand, the other still wrapped around his half-stiff cock. "Are you all right?"

Usama nodded in response, his voice lost. A smug look of male pride crossed Rajiv's face.

"Have you ever wondered why I approached you the day the little human arrived? I made a promise to myself that day. I swore I would appease any curiosity you might have under one condition," he purred, his voice a throaty growl.

Usama swallowed hard, afraid to blink while he stared up at Rajiv. "Condition?"

"Mmm, I decided that if you wanted to be with me, you would be mine unconditionally. Until I choose otherwise. I was going to give you time to decide, but

now I don't think I will. I can't get the sight of your battered and bleeding body out of my mind. I'm taking the choice away from you now. Is that clear, Cub?"

"Don't call me that!" Usama attempted to push upward, only to be caught again when Rajiv lowered his much larger body to blanket his own, careful of his broken arm.

"Fine, I won't call you that... Usama. Do we have a deal?"

"Do I get to think about it?"

"You just did. You're mine," he uttered, tilting his head.

He considered Rajiv's words. He had loved what they'd done before. If he were to be honest with himself, the big man made him feel safe. "Fine, I-I'll be yours, although I'm not entirely sure what that means."

Rajiv's face tensed with fierce male pride, his teeth bared, the long canines glistening in the light. "Mine," he snarled.

"Yours," Usama whispered, acknowledging the change his life had just taken. He couldn't imagine ever wanting to be with someone else after what had just happened. He had just been dominated completely. And he loved every minute of it.

Chapter Two

Usama whistled, prancing down the corridor from Rajiv's room. Rajiv had let him sleep while he went up to prepare for their landing on Himalay, and now Usama was practically bouncing to see Rajiv's home world. What would it be like?

He whistled again, a sharp, piercing sound. He was proud of the talent Rowan had taught him. None of the others could whistle. He was learning so much about her people through the little human. He didn't think he would be so interested, but he couldn't help himself.

Spying movement up ahead, he paused, cutting off in mid-whistle. Lev was leaning against the wall outside the room he shared with Morgan, his head buried in his hands.

"What is wrong with you? And don't give me any excuses this time, Lev. I want to know," Usama entreated, rushing up to his older brother.

Lev sighed, uncharacteristically silent. Something was wrong with his brother. He needed to know what was going on. He opened his mouth to speak again.

"Not here," Lev grumbled.

He spun around, marching toward the bridge and the atrium. Funny that it was where everyone went when they wanted a moment alone. Lev remained silent, walking onto the bridge and ignoring the sight around him. Rajiv was at a console, whispering to Laithe and Fahd. Rowan was standing behind them, looking out at the stars. The entire top of *The Shahnaz* opened up to the outside, meaning they had an uninterrupted view of the stars around them. The inky darkness was relieved by millions of twinkling lights, beautiful and captivating.

Veering to the left, Usama followed Lev into the atrium, closing the door behind him. He engaged the lock, ensuring they would have privacy. "Okay, we're alone now. Talk."

Lev leaned up against the wall, pressing his forehead into the glass. He raised his arms, placing his palms to the wall on either side of his head. Rocking back and forth, he rolled his forehead along the surface. "I don't know where to start," he huffed.

"At the beginning would be nice," Usama offered, growing more concerned by the minute. This was Lev, his carefree, fun brother. He wasn't supposed to look so tormented.

"I've been having dreams," he whispered.

"Dreams about what?"

"Sex, mostly," Lev said, a tinge of humor in his voice.

"So what difference does that make? You're always thinking, talking or actually having sex. So I'm not surprised you're dreaming about it." Usama rolled his eyes. He didn't understand what the big deal was.

"Yeah, but I've never dreamed of having sex with someone other than Morgan. And every time I've talked, thought or had sex, he's always been beside me. When I dream, he isn't there."

Usama considered Lev, confused. He furrowed his brow, his mouth drawing down at the sides. "I don't understand. It's just a dream. What's so special about it?"

"It's not a dream, or not entirely a dream. I feel like I know the man in them. Like he means something to me. I can't shake the feeling that I'm supposed to do something with him. That he'll make a difference in my life. This isn't supposed to happen. I love Morgan, I always have, and I won't let anyone come between us."

"Why would you think your dream means something's coming between you? It's just a dream, Lev. Calm down." He placing both hands on Lev's back, drawing circles on the broad expanse, trying to soothe his brother.

"It just feels so real. Remember when Laithe told us what his dreams about Rowan were like? How he just knew she was meant to be his? Well, that's how I feel

when I dream about this man. I don't know what to do," he whispered, the anguish evident in his rough voice.

Usama pressed his body against Lev, hugging him from behind. He couldn't think of a single thing to say, so he remained silent, offering Lev what little comfort he could. Everything was changing. He wasn't sure if it was for the better or not. He liked the way things were, and he wasn't quite sure what was going to happen to any of them.

Someone knocked on the door, a loud banging. Usama gave Lev one last squeeze before going to open it. Laithe stood there, frowning down at him. He looked more like Lev and Asad, although his face was surrounded by a dark chocolate-colored mane instead of the golden manes of his other brothers. But they were all big men, strong men.

Sighing, Usama considered his own body. It wasn't that he was small, because he wasn't. He had less muscle mass than his brothers, but he wasn't a fighter so it wasn't really expected of him. He wasn't that much smaller than them though. They were all around the same height. No, it was the pure white color of his fur that set him apart. It set him apart from everyone in the Leos... and the rest of the *Felidae*, come to think of it.

"Do you think you two can actually do some work today, or is that too much to ask?" Laithe sighed.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Usama muttered, walking forward, forcing Laithe to back up a step. He turned outside the door, looking back at Lev. Lev had his customary grin on his face, but this time, Usama knew it was a mask. He was still torn up inside about these dreams of his. Wonderful, just what they needed when things were finally calming down around them. They didn't need any more upheaval in their lives.

He wandered out onto the main bridge, spying the large orb they were heading toward. Himalay looked so different from Felid, his own home world and the home of the prides. Felid was so open, grasslands covering the majority of the planet, but Himalay put it to shame.

Himalay was covered almost entirely by land, intersected by pockets of water. In the very center of the large landmass in front of him, towering mountains sprang up, covering miles in each direction. They almost looked like they could go on forever. Rich forests coated the base of each mountain, so thick he couldn't see within them. Where the mountains dipped, fields of tall grass grew, rich and green.

The closer he got, the more nervous he became. What would be so bad that the Tigris would ask for help? They never asked for help. They normally stayed out of the affairs of the other *Felidae*. So what happened?

He shifted in place, darting glances at Rajiv while the other man worked. He wanted so badly to ask him what he was thinking it was practically killing him to keep his mouth shut. Rajiv didn't share things with him. He didn't share things with anyone, but Usama wasn't quite ready to be slapped down in public. The rest of his family didn't understand what he had with the large Tigris and he didn't want Laithe to decide he had to defend Usama from anything.

They touched down with a gentle *thud*, Usama inserting himself beside Fahd to help with the final preparations before they could leave *The Shahnaz*. It was entirely quiet outside the warship from what he saw. Too quiet. No Tigris had come to investigate their landing. Curious.

He made sure he was standing near Rajiv when they disembarked, keeping close to the other man. He wanted to reach out and touch him, but decided the best thing he could do was fade into the background.

Rajiv just looked unapproachable right now. His face didn't give any indication to his thoughts. It was frustrating, to say the least, when Usama was more used to having every emotion flash across his face. Everyone always knew what he was thinking.

They stood in a clearing of tall grass, ringed by forest on all sides, *The Shahnaz* behind them. They were waiting for... *what*? What the hell were they waiting for? He fidgeted, looking back and forth between Laithe and Rajiv, waiting for one of them to

make a move. Laithe looked impatient but Rajiv merely stood in place, his eyes narrowed.

"What're we waiting for?" Rowan whispered, pressing up against his side.

Usama jumped, not realizing she had been beside him. *Way to be a hunter, Usama.* He snorted, shaking his head. At this rate, Laithe would never trust him to accompany them on any hunts. He would forever be forced to wait on the ship with Catan and Rowan. *Yippee.*

He turned his head to see where everyone else was. Morgan and Lev were crouched behind him, both men looking off to either side. Morgan was one of the Pardus, built along similar lines to the Leo, but lacking their glorious mane. He was a sun-dappled cream color, covered entirely in black rosettes. The spots were as unique on him as Rajiv's stripes were on the Tigris. He yawned, showcasing his powerful canines. He was probably wishing he could find a tree to climb about now. Morgan much preferred to be in the trees, up off the ground.

Fahd was positioned to the left of Laithe, blocking him from any attack. Fahd and Laithe had been lovers once, years ago when they were both younger. Fahd was a Pardus like Morgan, but he was completely black, head to toe. He had the same black rosettes on his skin, appearing when the sun struck his gleaming fur the right way. Usama still couldn't believe that Fahd and Laithe were together again. It had taken the love and understanding of Rowan to bring them all together. With her in the middle, they had found a new love together. The one thing that had been missing from their relationship before had been fixed. Apparently all they needed was a tiny, hairless female to find happiness. Strange.

Rajiv was on Laithe's right, angled to cover both their right and the front. Asad and Catan made up the rest of their group, Catan burrowing into Asad's side, the larger man holding him in place.

"I don't know," he returned to Rowan.

"Hmm, well, this is boring," she said with a sigh, crouching down to sit cross-legged near his feet.

He followed her down, squatting beside her. He glanced around him, seeing if anyone was paying attention to them. "Did Laithe or Fahd say anything about what we're doing here?" he murmured, trying to keep quiet. Rajiv's ears twitched, turning in their direction. Damn. He'd forgotten how sensitive his hearing was.

She shook her head, frowning. "They didn't tell me anything other than what we heard on the bridge. I have no idea what we're doing here. Fahd is freaking, he said he thought this might be a trap."

"Fahd always thinks something is a trap. He needs to --"

"Lighten up," Rowan finished.

"I don't think it's possible for Fahd to lighten up. He was born that color," Usama said, puzzled.

Laithe had to turn around and hush them Rowan was laughing so hard. She was nearly bent double, gasping for breath. Usama shook his head, amused despite his confusion. She was definitely fun to be around.

A twig snapped to the left, making everyone swing their heads around in that direction. Rowan's laughter cut off abruptly with a gasp. Fahd and Rajiv tensed, their muscles bunching. Rajiv let out a low, coughing grunt.

"Stop that right now, Rajiv," sounded a female voice from beside them.

Usama gaped when she stepped out into the clearing. She was tall, nearly as big as Rajiv, but sleeker. Her fur was a paler shade of orange, glinting reddish-blond in the light. Her stripes were a dark nutty brown, wrapping around her body in a pattern completely different from Rajiv.

She was wearing a cream-colored loincloth, with a single wrap of fabric fastened around her small breasts. Her eyes were yellow, her face tense when she came forward. Her ears twitched, and she constantly moved her gaze around, never resting on any one spot for long. She was alone. No one followed her.

Rajiv simply stood in place, watching her with penetrating eyes. With a grunt, he closed the distance between them, grabbing her up in a firm hold. He pulled her close, enfolding her to his larger frame, rocking her back and forth.

Usama frowned, reaching up his good arm to rub a spot on his chest. Why did it hurt so much to see Rajiv with someone else? His heart turned over. He didn't quite like this feeling. It wasn't as if he had some kind of hold on Rajiv. He didn't know what to think. They were just fooling around. Weren't they?

"I've missed you, Matputra," she said, hugging Rajiv.

He grunted, saying nothing, but Usama noticed his arms tighten before releasing her.

"Did you call us here, Ambaya?" Rajiv rumbled.

"Agni did. We have a problem that we do not know how to deal with. We've never encountered this before. Come, I'll show you," she said, her voice rough.

"Of course. Ambaya, my pride leader, Laithe Gatti." Rajiv stepped to the side, allowing Laithe to come forward. They clasped forearms, Laithe bowing his head. "Laithe, this is Avani. She is my ambaya, my birth mother."

Usama huffed, feeling like an idiot. They didn't look like each other, but he should have known better. Funny, she didn't look like anyone's mother. She was too fierce, so unlike his own mother.

"Ambaya, this is Rowan and Fahd, Laithe's mates. The large Leo is Asad and the Lynx is his mate, Catan. Morgan is the spotted Pardus and Lev is the second of Laithe's brothers. And this is my cittaja, Usama, the youngest of the Gatti brothers."

Avani glided forward, elegant despite her fierce expression. He held out his arm, intending to clasp her hand, but she ignored him. Hugging him tightly, she whispered something in his ear. He didn't know what it meant. He didn't understand a word she said, but it sounded nice. Usama felt the blush creep up his neck and bloom on his face. Incredible, but he was embarrassed for some reason. *Cittaja*? What did that mean? Was it something important? It sounded exotic. He turned his head to the side, trying to hide his tinted cheeks from the others.

He couldn't look at Rajiv, afraid he would look like a blushing virgin before her wedding night. Rowan had been telling him stories about human customs, and that was

one that he couldn't understand. If he had to wait for Rajiv, he might have gone crazy. Although Rajiv might want him now, did he want him for all time?

Usama couldn't bring anything to a union between them. Rajiv was a warrior. He was strong enough to protect himself. Usama was the one that needed protection -- he wasn't an appealing mate, that was for sure. No, they were just fooling around for the time being. They had to be.

It was a good thing females were scarce among the Leo. If he had to compete against his brothers for a female, he would lose every time. No doubt about it. He could never defend his family. His clash with Shyam made that perfectly clear. He admitted -- if only to himself -- that if his father and uncles hadn't been so determined to protect him from the other prides, he wouldn't be so weak when it came to hunting and fighting. If they had treated him like his older brothers, he would have learned how to protect himself. Instead he had been made to stay at home with his mother. Not that he minded, but he was starting to get tired of everyone having to watch out for him all the time.

It was a good thing his parents were more modern in their thinking. If he had been born to some of the other prides, they would have killed him at birth.

If he and Rajiv lasted for much longer, the other man would soon get tired of protecting Usama and then what would happen? No, it was better not to get his hopes up.

Avani motioned them to follow her, leading them into the forest. Fahd was twitching but Laithe ignored him, setting out after her. Usama stayed close to Rowan, Catan joining them after a few steps. Got to make sure all the weaklings were in the center of the group. He kicked the ground in front of him, wincing when he realized it just made him seem petulant.

The strong bodies of Rajiv and Laithe walked at the front of the column, Fahd right behind them. Usama couldn't look away from the sight of Rajiv's back. It was corded with muscle, flexing with every step he took. He glided over the ground, his steps sure and deliberate. Despite that, he never made a sound, his feet placed carefully

among the twigs and leaves littering the path. His tail shifted, swaying with every step. Usama bit back his groan, licking his lips.

The trees opened up in front of him, merging into tall grass once more. Rowan grabbed his arm, squeezing tightly. They weren't alone.

Chapter Three

Usama crouched, keeping his eye on the Tigris in front of him. There were dozens of them. This was unheard of. The Tigris weren't supposed to come together like this. He'd always been told they stayed away from each other. What were they all doing here?

Fahd snarled, angling himself in front of Laithe. "What's going on here?" he growled, echoing Usama's thought.

"Do not be alarmed," Avani spoke softly, her rough voice gentle. "We have reasons for being here. We mean you no harm." She held her hands out to her side, motioning back the Tigris men who had stood at their entrance.

They were all massive, big and strong. They ranged in color from the muted tan of the grasslands to the vibrant red-orange of the sun, their stripes shades of brown and black. Several bore obvious wounds and he wondered if they'd been fighting. Put that many Tigris together and there was bound to be a struggle or two.

The one thing that surprised him though was the number of females among the men. They stood together in a group, but they looked almost as fierce as the men.

Rajiv strode forward, toward a cluster of men standing to the left of them. Fahd cursed, low and powerful, but he reluctantly followed. Everyone was staring at them. It was a little intimidating.

Rowan and Catan moved closer to him, Rowan burrowing into his side with every step.

"Rajiv! You made it," one of the men said, strolling forward to clasp forearms before hauling him in close for a hug. The two pounded each other on the back, mock-snarling.

"Welcome home, my son," an older man said, coming forward gracefully. He looked a little like Rajiv, although Usama wasn't an expert on Tigris by any degree. But they looked similar, the main difference being the amount of white fur the other man had covering his mouth and the sides of his face. They clasped arms, nodding to each other.

"Why did you call us, Agni?" Rajiv rumbled.

"We had no choice. It was getting desperate. The Paridhav has been called," the man said gravely.

Shock flashed briefly across Rajiv's features. If Usama hadn't been studying him so closely he wouldn't have seen it. As it was, the familiar mask was back before Usama figured anyone else had noticed. What would shock Rajiv? And what was this Parid thing?

"Rajiv, explain," Laithe hissed, probably fed up with not knowing what was happening.

Rajiv lowered his head to Laithe, causing the Tigris close to them to growl with displeasure. He ignored them.

"A Paridhav has been called. It is a mate hunt of sorts. It only occurs when desired mates have appeared within the Tigris clan and several Tigris want them. It has not happened in many years." He turned back to Agni. "Why did you call me?"

Agni remained silent. He swept his hand to the side, urging the Tigris to part in front of him. There, sitting on a stump of a tree, was the most curious sight Usama had ever seen. And he'd seen some pretty interesting things since Rowan had joined them.

Rowan cried out, rushing forward. The man sitting on the stump opened his mouth on a gasp, surging up to meet her. She was stopped by Fahd's uncompromising arms around her, and the man was stopped when Rajiv stepped in front of him, but they weren't deterred.

"Oh, my frickin God! Where did you come from? Do you speak English?" Rowan babbled.

"Oh, God, oh, God, what the fuck is going on here? Were you taken too?" the hairless man asked.

He was taller than Rowan but similarly colored. His skin was the same fragile-looking shade of ivory, reminding him of the skin of a fruit they'd found once on Seren, the Pardus home world. The fur on the top of his head was lighter than hers, closer in shade to the pelts of some of the Tigris around them. It was a soft red color. He had some kind of metal on his face, two circles around each eye, with a stalk connecting them and two more holding it all in place over his ears. *Interesting*. His fingers itched to grab the metal and see what it did. Why would he wear it? It couldn't be a human thing because Rowan didn't wear one. Maybe only the males of their species wore them.

The man was wearing a loincloth, his hairless body looking odd among all the orange coats surrounding him. His body was leaner than the Tigris, lightly muscled, but it looked strong. His biceps and the muscles on his chest flexed while he tried to figure out a way to get past Rajiv. He only came up to his chest. So what he'd suspected was true. All humans were tiny. He looked like he was the same size as Catan.

"You were taken? By whom?" Rowan asked, frowning. She turned her head to Laithe, still wiggling in Fahd's hold. "You know, seriously, you people have to learn new ways of taking humans. You were damn lucky I'm such a forgiving lady, but you can't just take people!"

"We had nothing to do with this, and you know it," Laithe returned, walking over to her. He reached out, palming both of her breasts just above Fahd's arm. "And I didn't hear you complaining last night about how I take certain humans. I think you like the way I *take* you. Or am I wrong?" he whispered, silkily.

Fahd grunted, leaning down to rub his cheek along hers. She let her head fall back, moaning quietly.

"Right, so not the time and place for that," the human muttered, crossing his arms. "You're telling me you want to be with them?"

Usama realized suddenly that all noise had stopped in the clearing. It was one of those things you didn't notice until it was gone, but he hadn't picked up the quiet

conversations taking place between the other Tigris before now. All attention had decisively swung toward them. All eyes were on their group, waiting, judging.

"Okay, I think someone has some explaining to do," Lev put in, staring intently at the human male. Morgan was looking back and forth between Lev and the human, a frown on his face. He didn't look too happy. Lev looked enthralled with the human. He jerked suddenly, looking to Usama, his eyes wide. He inclined his head to the human with a deliberate motion, widening his eyes again. Oh, God... was that the man from his dreams?

Usama turned to Rajiv, disconcerted when he realized the other man was watching his reaction. He held out his hand, and Usama rushed toward him. In the background, he heard the voices of everyone else, but his attention was all for Rajiv. "What's going on?" he whispered.

Rajiv smoothed one big hand over his mane, pushing it back from his face. He huffed out a breath. "I have a feeling one of my clan is responsible for taking the human from his world. There is nothing we can do for him. The Paridhav has already been called."

"Wait, that mate hunt *is for him?*" Usama asked, his voice squeaking. "We have to stop it. He can't become mated to one of the Tigris. He just can't."

Rajiv remained silent, studying him closely. He didn't look happy. "Why does it matter? Do you have feelings for the little human?" he snarled.

Usama shook his head, keeping his gaze on Rajiv's face, despite his obvious displeasure. "Please, Rajiv. I can't tell you why, please just trust me."

"The Tigris here have journeyed long to come to the meeting place. They will expect the Paridhav to take place. If it doesn't, there will be fights, and many may die," Rajiv explained, a thread of disgust in his voice.

"You sound like you don't approve."

"I don't. I think the Paridhav is one custom that should die like our ancestors. It has no place in this world."

"What are we gonna do?" Usama asked, worried.

"We?"

"Of course, we have to do something, Rajiv. Please," he entreated.

Rajiv looked thoughtful, staring at the human. "There is not much we can do. I must speak with my father." He turned without another word, striding to the older Tigris who had shown them the human in the first place.

"What is *he* doing back here?" a Tigris growled behind him, his voice low and raspy.

Usama twirled in place, staring at the new addition to their group. The man was tall, not quite as bulky through the shoulders as Rajiv, but just as muscular.

"We called him, not that it's any of your business, Pran," said the smaller man who had first greeted Rajiv, coming up to stand beside Usama. He noticed that the man was still taller than him, but he was small for a Tigris.

"It is my business, Navin. Stay out of this, or you'll regret it when your brother leaves again with his disgusting pride. Taking in runts and humans? Disgusting." Pran spit on the ground near Usama's feet.

Usama curled his lip, vibrating with the need to say something but holding his tongue.

"I seriously hate that man," Navin muttered. He turned to study Usama. His fur was the same shade of orange as Rajiv's, glinting red ochre in the sunlight. But where Rajiv possessed pure black stripes, his brother's were a nutty brown. They reminded him of the stripes on Avani, Rajiv's mother, the woman that had met them in the clearing.

Usama wondered what he must be thinking. Navin's amber eyes studied his body carefully, lingering on his broken arm and the various cuts and scrapes.

"Did my brother do that?" he asked, pitching his voice low.

Usama's eyes widened. "No! Rajiv would never hurt me."

"But those are his teeth marks in your neck. Unless I'm mistaken? You have his scent all over you." His voice sounded worried, but he didn't look judgmental.

Usama felt the heat of a blush again, flushing his neck and face with a pale pink. Not for the first time, he cursed his white fur. If he was tawny like his brothers, no one would be able to see the blush. He shrugged, not able to come up with a response.

"Do you care for him?" Navin asked, watching him carefully.

"Why would you ask me that?"

"I just want to know. He's my only brother."

Usama hesitated. He didn't want to have this conversation with him. It wasn't that he didn't have feelings for Rajiv, but they were all so new. So confusing. He just didn't think he should be having this conversation with a man he had just met. He remained silent, allowing Navin to draw his own conclusions.

Chapter Four

Rajiv paced in the forest, skirting the wide pool beside him. He had come here to think, to clear his mind but it wasn't working. With a splash, he dropped himself into the water, allowing the clear fluid to chase away the dust and grime covering his body. He purred, sinking up to his neck in the calming pool.

He didn't know what to think, being back on Himalay with his cittaja by his side, his heart mate. He knew the younger Gatti didn't share his feelings, but he would in time. Rajiv had claimed him as his mate; it was clear to see for every Tigris in that clearing.

Navin had taken Usama under his wing, showing the little Leo around the encampment while Rajiv had argued with his father, Agni. If it were up to him, the Paridhav would take place and the winner would get the human male, but he knew his own mate was upset about the prospect. He might not believe in the Paridhav, but he couldn't go against his clan. The Tigris had gathered expecting a mate hunt. He didn't want to think of what would happen if they didn't get it.

His purr grew in intensity, the remembrance of Usama asking him for help running through his mind. His cittaja had come to him without question, turning to him for help. He refused to believe it was because he was Tigris. No, the smaller man trusted him to take care of his problems.

A twig snapped to his left, but he remained in place. He had scented his mate the minute he came close to his resting place. Seconds later, Usama appeared on the path leading to the pool, looking nervous. Rajiv lowered his eyelids, studying his mate.

"Umm, Navin told me I'd find you here," he said, shuffling his feet. "Is it okay?"

Rajiv nodded, parting the water with a stroke to take him closer to the edge of the pool. Usama grimaced, not sharing his love of the water. He was a Leo; they didn't

know how to swim like the Tigris or the Pardus. Rajiv looked his fill, watching the play of muscles when Usama shifted from foot to foot, studying how his white mane ruffled in the breeze. Usama turned his face up to the sun, his strong neck exposed. He hissed, his cock filling with blood under the warm waters. It was no longer calming, but heating his blood.

"Come. Sit on the edge of the pool," he coaxed, waiting until Usama had settled himself carefully in front of him, dangling his feet in the water.

"Were you able to talk to your father?" Usama asked, lowering his hand to run it through the water, cupping the liquid in his palm and letting it fall back into the pool.

Rajiv nodded, satisfied, watching his mate. His cock throbbed, urging him on, but he ignored it. The hunt was half the fun.

"What did he say? I know I didn't really explain myself before, but I just think the human deserves to have some say in this. How did he come to be on Himalay? I thought the Tigris didn't travel off planet. I mean, I always assumed that they didn't because you're the only Tigris I know that actually does, travel off planet, I mean. Aren't you?" he finished, tilting his head in question.

Rajiv blinked, a slow slumberous movement. He wasn't sure which of those questions he was supposed to answer first. He waited, sure that Usama wasn't finished. Sometimes he was amazed at how well he knew this man. He was content to lie in the crystal clear waters and listen to his voice.

"I mean, it's okay if you aren't the only one that travels. I guess it's natural to be curious with your surroundings, isn't it? That was so nice of Navin to bring me around the clearing. He introduced me to some people. I don't know where the human went, but he went off somewhere with Laithe and Rowan. I think Fahd went with them too. Do you think Rowan knows him?"

Rajiv closed his eyes, letting the words wash over him, not really paying attention to the exact wording, but listening to the tone. It was calming. More calming than the waters surrounding him. Strange, but he liked it.

"Ugh, I sound like a child. Just ignore me, I don't know what I'm saying." Usama shook his head, putting his arm out to lever himself back up.

Rajiv pounced, throwing both arms around his mate's waist, holding him in place.

Usama jerked, looking surprised.

"Stay," he said, tightening his arms. Rajiv nuzzled the lean stomach in front of him, running first his cheek and then his mouth over the tender flesh. He teased him with his canines, fully aware of how vulnerable a position Usama was in. If he wanted to, he could tear out his belly in seconds. He purred, unbearably excited by that vulnerability. Usama wouldn't want to hear that; Rajiv knew how sensitive he was to being thought of as weak. If he only knew how much Rajiv got off on the idea. He liked that Usama was weaker than him.

He nuzzled lower, running his furred cheek over the rising cock below. He lapped at the head, tasting the salty essence on his skin. Usama's scent was strong here, his musk pure. The smaller man moaned, throwing his head back and wrapping his good hand around the back of Rajiv's head. He held him close, hitching his feet out of the water to rest them on the edge beside the pool.

The position left him completely exposed and open to Rajiv's explorations. He nipped the skin of Usama's inner thigh, setting the muscles quivering. Holding one thigh tight, he ran his lips over the muscle in front of him, reaching his knee and licking down his calf. When he reached Usama's foot, he lifted it in the air, mouthing the arch. Usama tensed, his toes curling under. With a growl, Rajiv sucked the big toe into his mouth, not caring that his canines scraped Usama's flesh. He pulled vigorously on the digit, treating it like he would the head of Usama's cock. He released his toe with a pop, licking along his slender ankle.

Usama was gasping now, pleading for more. Rajiv allowed his lips to curve, giving himself the liberty to be free in front of his mate. He was always so careful to keep his inscrutable mask in place around the others. There were always reasons for his

behavior, but in front of his mate, he wanted to be uninhibited. They would have no secrets.

Rajiv tenderly placed Usama's foot back on the ground, surging out of the water to return to the flushed cock in front of him. His lips curving, he lapped at the head. He teased Usama with a small suckle, immediately deserting his cock to lick along his other thigh. His own shaft was throbbing now, his balls drawn up tight despite the fact he wasn't even touching it. He was getting off on pleasing Usama.

He was more ferocious this time, unable to prevent himself from sinking his teeth into the quivering muscle of Usama's thigh. The other man screamed, grabbing the back of his head in a relentless grip, pressing his face closer. Usama held him there, panting.

"Please, Ra-Rajiv, I can't take anymore," he gasped.

"You'll take everything I give you and beg for more before I'm done with you," he promised.

Moving down, he concentrated on his knee, sucking up the flesh in front of him, placing teasing licks on the back of his knee until Usama was reduced to whimpering. He purred against the skin, moving down to pick up his foot. He licked along the top, tasting the last vestiges of salt that hadn't been washed away by the water. "I love the taste of you," he said, his voice guttural.

Usama could only moan in response, his voice getting louder, more ragged.

Rajiv finally gave in, releasing his foot and moving back to the long, curved shaft of his cock. He tested the firm balls in one hand, rolling them gently, seeing how close Usama was. With his hand still on the spheres he opened his mouth, taking his cock deeply into his throat with one swallow. He bobbed his head, sinking down before sliding his lips almost all the way off, keeping just the head in his mouth, his lips caressing his barbs. Usama keened, claspings his head harder, pulling on the short fur.

Rajiv twisted his head, sucking up and down in a swirl, running his tongue against the small barbs ringing the glans, determined to give Usama as much pleasure as he could. His canines pressed insistently against his cock, a constant reminder to

Usama of how deadly he was. He was half tempted to nick him with his tooth. His little mate was quite the pain slut. Instead, he purred, taking his free hand and reaching below to tease the puckered star of Usama's anus. The Leo tensed, cutting off his breath with a loud gasp. He held still for a second, the whites of his eyes flashing before he came with a throaty moan.

Rajiv drank him down, milking the shaft with his hand to get every last ounce of cream from his mate. He licked the sensitive glans, grinning when Usama whimpered from the sensation. He continued to lap the softening shaft, waiting until Usama was breathing easier before deciding to take him up again.

"Here, careful now, hold on to my shoulder," he crooned, pulling Usama into the water in front of him, holding him around the waist. "Can your arm get wet?"

"Yeah, the healer on Felid said it was all right," Usama murmured, his head lolling forward.

Rajiv held him up, taking all his weight, content to hold him for a moment. His aching cock was throbbing insistently but this was for Usama. He pressed a kiss to his temple, holding him in place. Usama shifted, rubbing against him.

He slid his hands down Usama's hips, reaching one down to toy at the area where his tail met his backside. He tugged on the appendage, getting a firm hold. Moving his hand up and down, he worked it like a cock until Usama was undulating against him. He threw his head back, exposing his throat to Rajiv.

With a groan, he released the tail, gripping both ass cheeks in his powerful hands. He hauled Usama up, holding him out of the water. Leaning forward, he placed an open-mouthed kiss against his chest, licking along his pectorals. The water surrounding them was warm and inviting. This was bliss, to be in the water with his cittaja like this.

He lowered Usama, turning him in the water and guiding him to hold onto the edge of the pool with his good arm.

"Is this comfortable?" he asked, touching the bound arm. Usama nodded once.

Rajiv bent his head, nipping at the back of Usama's neck, sucking the skin into his mouth and biting down. He licked along his shoulder blades, holding Usama by the hips. Reaching up one hand, he placed his fingers beside Usama's mouth.

"Get them good and wet, Usama. I need you, and I can't wait," he growled.

Usama immediately sucked his fingers deep into his mouth, pulling on them and licking between the two digits. Rajiv rested his forehead against Usama's shoulder, almost undone by the response.

He moved his hips, brushing his cock against Usama's ass, running it along the crease. His cock head bumped Usama's hole, causing the man to groan around his fingers. He bent his knees, pressing his shaft lower to slide between his two rigid thighs. He fucked the space between Usama's legs, groaning when the head of his penis bumped the back of Usama's sac. With a snapping cough, he pulled his fingers away, unerringly finding the little hole with the moistened digits. Usama bent forward, raising his ass to make it easier for him. He was completely relaxed and open, allowing Rajiv easy access to the warm cavern.

He curved his fingers, finding the little button inside Usama, rubbing it intently. Usama bucked, mewling his need and shaking his hips.

Both men were rocking now. Rajiv pulled out his fingers and lined up his thick cock. His first attempt wasn't successful and he growled his displeasure. Usama was whimpering now, trying to hold still. He lifted his ass up higher, Rajiv placing a hand on his stomach to make it easier for him to do so. Finally he found the right angle, butting his cock head up against Usama and slowly easing inward. He mouthed Usama's shoulder, finding the spot where he had marked him before. When he bottomed out inside Usama, he pierced his shoulder, sliding his canines in deep.

He moved just his hips, thrusting in and out. He needed to come, badly. The hunt was over, and Usama was his. He purred around the flesh in his mouth, sucking the skin. His testes drew up tight against his body, aching full. He was still supporting Usama with one hand on his belly. With the other, he palmed Usama's cock, bringing him closer to his own release. The pressure started in his spine and he gladly

went over the edge, coming fiercely. He slid his thumb over the slit in Usama's cock, intent on bringing him with him. Usama groaned, spurting his own release into the water in front of him.

When he was coherent again, Rajiv opened his mouth, careful of Usama's flesh. His spent cock slipped out of his mate. Usama was near catatonic, falling asleep after coming intensely twice in a row. He maneuvered the man around, picking him up easily and laying him lengthwise against the edge of the pool. Rajiv ducked, splashing into the water before coming up to lay his head against Usama's belly.

Usama stirred, bringing up his good arm to rub against Rajiv's shoulder blades, drawing up his knee and shifting into a more comfortable position. Rajiv purred, opening his eyes to see Usama staring down at him with a curious expression on his face. Good, he wanted to shake up the Leo. He kept his lower body in the water, letting it and his mate soothe him into a sleepy state. He closed his eyes again, rubbing his cheek along Usama's belly.

Chapter Five

Usama stirred, feeling the bite of cooler temperatures, signaling the coming night. He was lying on his back, holding Rajiv close to him. The other man was still in the water. Usama shuddered at the thought of being in the water for that long. It wasn't that he minded water -- he cleaned himself just like everyone else -- he just didn't want to lie around in it like Rajiv did.

They should get back to the camp, though he was reluctant to move. He looked down at Rajiv. He had his head propped up on Usama's stomach, his eyes closed and a peaceful expression on his face. This was the first time he'd ever seen the other man asleep. He'd always left after they had sex before, or Rajiv would leave. They had never fallen asleep like this together. It was a disconcerting feeling. He didn't quite know what to make of it.

He lifted his arm from where it was lying on Rajiv's back, smoothing along the silky fur. He could get used to this, waking up to the feel of another body holding him down. The heat from Rajiv was keeping his belly warm, but the rest of him was starting to get cold. He shivered.

Rajiv instantly lifted his head, opening his eyes without any lingering trace of sleepiness. *How'd he do that?*

Rajiv lowered himself into the water, soaking his head before popping back up to stare at him. He nuzzled into his belly, rumbling with pleasure. Usama propped himself up with his good arm, leaning into the Tigris. His legs twitched when Rajiv ran his talented fingers along his thigh, and his cock began to stiffen again.

"You better come back to the camp. It's getting dark," Lev rumbled, coming up behind them.

Rajiv didn't react but Usama was embarrassed to admit he may have squeaked a bit -- okay, more than a bit, but he hadn't even scented Lev.

Rajiv pulled himself out of the water, grabbing hold of his good hand and yanking him up beside him. He shook himself fiercely, getting water everywhere.

Usama brushed himself off, his face red when Lev sniffed him knowingly. "Sooo, no need to ask what you've been doing," he snickered.

"Leave me alone," Usama muttered, swiping at his brother.

Rajiv ignored them both, stalking off ahead of them to the encampment. Lev waited until he was further ahead before turning to look at Usama. "Did he say anything about the mate hunt?" he asked, intently.

Usama noticed Rajiv's ears swivel back, but he remained silent, deciding not to alert Lev. He'd been torn earlier. He wanted to tell Rajiv so badly about Lev and the man, but he didn't want to break his brother's confidence. It was confusing. It was the first time he had ever considered telling one of his brother's secrets. *What did it mean?* He shook his head.

Lev said, "I don't know what to do. I'm sure it's him. I'm almost positive of it, but I haven't been able to get close enough to him to figure it out."

"Are you sure you really want to figure it out?" Usama asked quietly.

"I have to know. Regardless of what it means for Morgan and me, I need to find out what these dreams mean. If he's my fated mate... do you know what that means for me? Only pride leaders connect to their mates through dreams and mind links. I'm not a pride leader," he groused, his voice anguished.

"What's going to happen tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Laithe has been meeting with Rajiv's parents and the rest of the elders among the Tigris. They won't listen to him, even when he tried to use Rowan's connection to the male to claim family rights."

"Laithe did what?" Usama asked, surprised.

"He tried to claim family rights. He figured they might agree to it because both Rowan and the male are from the same planet, but the Tigris disagreed with him. Said

they didn't share the same scent so they weren't related. If they aren't related... well, you get the point. No deal. I just wish there was something we could do. Maybe one of us could participate in the mate hunt. Do you think they'd let us?" he asked, the excitement obvious in his voice.

Usama chewed on his lower lip, fretting. Would the pride be able to participate? None of this made any sense. Rajiv turned his head, meeting his gaze. He was frowning, a puzzled look on his face. Usama offered a shy smile, gratified when Rajiv returned it.

They entered the clearing where the rest of the Tigris had made their camp. Drab tents had been set up sparsely around the area, but most of the men were making their beds on the hard ground. Rajiv led them to a collection set apart from the rest. As they walked up to the area, Rowan emerged from one of the dwellings, smiling widely when she saw them.

Rajiv nodded to them all, meeting his eyes briefly before wandering off to where his father and brother were crouched together.

"Can you believe it? I've never been camping before, and here we are," Rowan exclaimed.

"Why aren't we staying on *The Shahnaz*? It's just over there," he said, pointing to the trees behind them.

"We were asked to stay here with the others. Avani feels it is better for us to be near the human male to act as an additional barrier to any aggressive Tigris who may decide to start the mate hunt early," Laithe said, coming out of the tent behind Rowan.

"Did you find out anything about him?" Usama asked, curious about the other man.

"I can do one better. C'mon," Rowan gestured, stepping around the tent. Usama followed, looking back when Lev was stopped by Laithe. They started arguing quietly, but he was too far away to hear the words. He figured it had something to do with Lev wanting to meet the man. Laithe obviously didn't want him to.

Rowan led him to another dwelling close by. He noticed Asad right away. His brother was posted outside, his arms crossed over his chest and his tail jerking smoothly. He looked bored.

"Is Catan still inside?" Rowan asked, sidling up beside him.

Asad nodded, glancing to the opening of the tent. "They're talking about what happened to the male. Catan is the best person to speak with him right now, besides you, Rowan. He will get him to tell his story."

"Wait, you still don't know what happened to him?" Usama asked, surprised.

Asad shrugged, moving to the side to let them pass. Usama let Rowan enter first, ducking in behind her. Catan and the male were sitting cross-legged on the ground, facing each other. Catan was whispering about how he'd been found by the pride, how they had saved his life.

The male looked thoughtful. He glanced up when they entered, smiling at Rowan and looking inquisitively at Usama.

Catan introduced him. "Aaron, I want you to meet my best friend, Usama Gatti. He's the youngest brother of Laithe and my mate, Asad."

Usama nodded to the man, holding out his hand to grasp Aaron's arm.

"Hi, I'm Aaron. It's a pleasure to meet you," he said, fidgeting with the bit of metal on his face.

"Okay, I'm dying to know what those are," Usama said, unable to contain it any longer. He squatted, making room for Rowan to slide next to him.

"These? They're my glasses," Aaron said, taking them off and holding them out to him. Usama took them gingerly, surprised at how light they were. "They help me see."

He held them up to his own face, rearing back when everything went blurry and out of focus. He felt dizzy, immediately handing them back. "I hate to say this, but I don't think they work," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

Aaron and Rowan shared a look, smiling at each other.

"No, they help *me* see. My eyes are bad, so I need these to correct my vision," he explained.

"Aaron was taken like Rowan was," Catan interrupted, bouncing with his excitement. "One of the Tigris found him on Earth and brought him back here."

"So where's the Tigris now?" Usama asked, confused. "And why are you the subject of a mate hunt if you were taken by someone else?"

"Turns out the man already has a mate and was never interested in me in *that* way, thank the Lord. I'm still not sure why he brought me here. He won't talk and the rest don't really care at this point how I came to be here. They're all too excited about the idea of a hunt." Aaron held up his hands in defeat.

Rowan immediately changed the subject and they ended up talking about the similarities between Earth and the *Felidae* planets. Aaron and Rowan weren't from the same place, but they were close enough to be neighbors, or so they said. Both of them kept naming names to see if they knew anyone in common.

"All right, boys and girls, time for bed," Morgan quipped, sticking his head in the tent.

Usama smiled at Aaron, standing up to leave. He needed to talk to Rajiv about this. He actually liked Aaron. He didn't want the man to get hurt any more than he already had.

He followed Rowan and Catan outside. He stood for a moment, watching Catan and Asad walk away. Rowan followed them, veering off to meet Fahd and Laithe.

"Did you hear Lev wants the pride to participate tomorrow in the mate hunt?" Morgan said, standing beside him.

"He told me. What do you think?" he asked hesitantly.

"I think it's a damn shame the human's going to be hauled off by some aggressive Tigris tomorrow."

"Morgan," he huffed.

"What do you want me to think? I'm not going to fight those brutes, not even for Lev."

"Are you sure?"

"If I thought I could possibly make a difference here, I would. Believe me, Usama, I'm not trying to be the injured party here. I don't know what's going on and your brother has clammed up on me for the first time since I've known him. No worries though, we've never been exclusive so if he wants to scratch an itch with someone else, he can feel free. But I won't stick my neck out for somebody that I've never met before just because Lev feels like he should do something," Morgan fumed, pacing back and forth.

Usama couldn't imagine what he was going through. Lev was his brother, and he loved him unconditionally, but it was plain to see how torn up Morgan was by this. Despite his words, he looked haunted, and it was so unusual for him to look so defeated. This was killing both of them. He felt bad for them, but Aaron was just as much a victim as they were, probably more so. Something needed to be done, and it seemed like he was the one that had to make it happen.

"I need to find a fighter. Someone strong, who can win but be willing to turn Aaron over to us," he mused.

Morgan snorted, stopping to look at him with a disbelieving frown. "You must be joking. Good luck finding a Tigris that will willingly hand over his glorious prize in the mate hunt. The only Tigris that you know that would be strong enough and moral enough to do that is Rajiv, and we all know he won't."

"Why?"

"He hates the very idea of mate disputes. I saw him fight over a territorial issue once when we were younger. You weren't there, so you might not know about it, but we were all on Felid once when there was a fight among the prides. Rajiv stayed back, keeping out of it until one of them threatened Laithe. Before any of us could do anything, Rajiv had attacked him. It was terrifying to see. He was beauty in motion, absolutely stunning. The man can fight, and he's damn good at it. Which is why he doesn't do it. He said afterward that he doesn't fight because he doesn't want other

Tigris to continuously challenge him in order to try and best him. It's all about status here, and the strongest fighters are considered kings among the rest of them."

He didn't know if he would ever want to see that. Rajiv was dangerous enough without having to add seeing him tear someone to pieces to the mix.

"Regardless of who fights tomorrow, the boy doesn't deserve this treatment. He should be free to make his own choice," Morgan said, returning to the original topic.

Usama thought about that for a moment. Aaron had been taken from his home, from everything familiar, to be thrust into a situation that was completely alien to him. It sounded more than a little familiar.

"Do you think Rowan feels like she wasn't given a choice?" He was afraid that she would see the same parallels between her situation and Aaron's.

"Rowan made the choice to stay with Laithe and Fahd. You and I both know that Laithe would have followed her anywhere. If she had really wanted to return to her planet, he would have gone with her. He wouldn't have forced this on her."

He smiled, gratified that Morgan thought so. He didn't want Rowan to resent any of the pride because of what was happening right now. This wasn't normal behavior among the *Felidae*. She was still so new to their world, he was afraid she might decide that she didn't want to have anything to do with them.

"You, little Gatti, are in the tent to the right. Sweet dreams," Morgan said, leaving to go his own way.

He stood in place, thinking over the conversation in his mind. He would give his left nut to be able to talk this over with Catan right now. They were best friends and he had come to rely on the Lynx for support. They understood each other in a way the others never would. He sighed. Catan was with Asad now. He didn't want to interrupt them, but it didn't stop him from glancing over at their tent.

Usama wandered over to his own, pushing open the flap and ducking his head inside. Like Aaron's tent, it was completely devoid of furniture or blankets of any kind. Too bad, as it was starting to get really cold. Felid was always warm, but he was

starting to realize that there were more differences between Felid and Himalay than just the inhabitants.

The good news was that he seemed to have his very own heater. Rajiv lay curled on his side, his head propped up on one hand, studying him. Usama smiled, relieved that he didn't have to go looking for the man. "You seem to be in my tent," he joked, biting his lip to see how it would be received. He still didn't know Rajiv well enough to be sure he would take kindly to his brand of humor.

Rajiv purred. "On the contrary, it seems you are in my tent. The payment for a night's accommodation is quite steep. I'm not sure if you can afford it."

His eyes widened, delighted that Rajiv was willing to play. "Hmmm. I'm sure I can come up with the right currency, kind sir. Won't you tell me how much it's going to cost?"

He knelt down on the floor, sliding closer to Rajiv. The Tigris' eyes flashed, narrowing to slits. Usama almost let out a purr at the sight, holding it back to see what would happen next.

Rajiv moved suddenly, sitting up and spreading his legs. "The first payment of the night is to suck my cock. Get it nice and wet for me."

Usama let out his purr, rumbling up from his chest. Eagerly, he bent down on his hands and knees, nuzzling his face into the soft flesh in front of him. He licked along it, getting the hardening shaft nice and wet just like Rajiv ordered. He wiggled his ass, curling his tail around his own thigh.

Rajiv's cock was so different from his own. It was certainly bigger. The shaft was long and curved, jutting up to rest against his belly. The capped head was flared and ringed with a line of barbs. No wonder he went nuts as soon as the man was inside him. They were curiously hard against his tongue, a fascinating texture. His sac was furred, drawn tight. He raised one hand to cup it, holding it in his palm while he licked up and down the shaft.

Rajiv moaned encouragement to him, content to lie back and let Usama take the lead. His arms were spread out by his side, his knees drawn up on either side of Usama.

Usama lifted up, placing his lips against the head, kissing the tip before sucking the slit. Rajiv tensed and Usama repeated the motion. Sucking hard, he dipped his tongue into the slit, coaxing out the cream he was dying to taste. Rajiv once said that he loved the taste of Usama, but he couldn't get enough of the spicy taste of Rajiv's skin. He swallowed, angling his head to lick down the shaft again.

He didn't think he could fit that big shaft in his mouth but he was determined to try. He ran his tongue over the head, ringing the barbs with his tongue before opening his mouth wider. He bobbed, gagging once, but managed to fit the entire head in his mouth. His lips were stretched wide. He was loving every minute of this.

Rajiv snarled, placing his palms to either side of Usama's head. He guided him in his strokes, finally urging him up. "Straddle me, Cittaja."

Usama wiggled into place, happily complying with Rajiv's orders. The other man pulled a familiar bottle out from behind him, snapping the top off and releasing the smell of nawra flowers into the small space. He held the bottle up, taking one of Usama's hands and pouring a generous amount of oil in his palm. "Get yourself ready for me. Now."

Usama blushed, feeling the heat of the flush run up his neck and into his face. He arched his back, moving his hand behind him and smoothing the oil around his anus. He coated two fingers, thrusting them into his ass, preparing himself for Rajiv's thick length.

Rajiv groaned, reaching around him and pulling his fingers out. He shifted Usama into place, guiding him to his shaft. Usama lowered himself, feeling the stretching of his body around the fat head. His body protested for a second, before parting. He moaned, wiggling his hips to feel the fullness in his bottom, the almost indescribable heat. There was a touch of pain, only serving to make him hotter, almost out of his mind with lust. Rajiv grabbed onto his hips, guiding him up and down the length of his shaft, the flared cap of his cock bumping his prostate with every stroke. Usama leaned back, moving to the rhythm Rajiv dictated. He wanted to do this forever,

he felt so connected to the other man. Unbelievable to feel so connected. He wanted more. He never wanted this to end.

"Come for me, Usama. I need you to release now," Rajiv panted, his voice tight.

Usama twisted his hips, his eyes rolling back in his head when Rajiv placed one rough hand around his cock. He thumbed the barbs ringing his glans, flicking them with his nail. Usama screamed his release, pumping his hips erratically when his seed erupted onto Rajiv's belly.

Rajiv clamped down hard on his hip, thrusting into him, roaring out his own release. Usama was sure they heard that outside the tent, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Slumping forward, he landed on Rajiv's chest, breathing unsteadily. He finally shifted to Rajiv's side, curling up with his head on his chest. They stayed that way, both satisfied to remain still.

"Were you going to tell me about Lev?" Rajiv murmured, stroking his palms down his back.

"I really wanted to, but it wasn't my secret to tell."

"Tell me now."

Usama sighed, ruffling the fur on Rajiv's chest. His tail beat a steady tattoo against his thigh. "Lev's been having dreams about this hairless male. He doesn't know what they mean, but we all know that mate dreams mean you're supposed to be a pride leader. That's why Lev and Morgan have been fighting. When Lev saw Aaron today, he was sure he was the man from his dreams. Lev wants Aaron, but he doesn't want to lose Morgan."

"Morgan is strong. He won't give up his intentions because of another male. Regardless, Lev won't be able to stay with Aaron, fated mate or not."

"Why would you say that?" Usama asked, propping up on his hand to look at Rajiv. He would be glad when this stupid arm healed. It was starting to be annoying.

"In case you've forgotten, there is going to be a Paridhav tomorrow. The human male is the anticipated prize and there are over forty Tigris warriors out there who want to claim him, either for themselves or for the prestige of besting so many others."

"Lev seems to think that maybe the pride can participate," he ventured.

"That will never happen. The Tigris won't allow it. The Paridhav is sacred to our people, whatever my feelings toward it are. They would never allow an outsider to sully the honor of the ritual."

"I just don't understand why it's so important for them to have this mate hunt," Usama pouted, upset that Lev's plan wasn't going to work. If Lev or Fahd couldn't fight, then who would? He wasn't sure he wanted Rajiv to participate, even if he was willing, which Morgan seemed to doubt. Besides this was a *mate* hunt. If Rajiv won, wouldn't that mean he'd get the human as his mate? And why did the thought of that cause him to want to throw up his dinner? He didn't want Rajiv to look at anyone else.

"Years ago, before our females started producing male cubs in abundance, the Paridhav was much more than simply a mate hunt. It was an opportunity for Tigris to come from all across Himalay. The event would last for days on end. The men would gather, they would fight for the status of being a victor, for recognition. The females would watch and study them. They would pick their mates out of the victors. The strongest males were the only ones allowed to breed. It was a sign of their reproductive ability.

"Over time, the mate hunt changed. It became a way for males to fight for a single female or a small number of females. As the genders became imbalanced, the hunts changed again and males became the prize. The Tigris were never like the Leo. We don't travel together. We don't congregate except to mate. Males never had much contact with each other except to fight over mates or territories. Your clan may have had sexual relations with men in the past, but mine never did until the last several generations."

"So the mate hunt may be tradition, but can't we argue that Aaron doesn't belong here?" Usama said, trying to find some way to fix this so no one got hurt.

"It doesn't matter where he started out. He's on Himalay now, so he's ruled by the clans. It would be the same for any unclaimed male or female on the planet."

"We have to do something, Rajiv. Please, we have to do something to stop it. I like Aaron, and he doesn't deserve to be mistreated. He isn't supposed to be here, but fate has brought him to my brother, and I want to make sure Lev has a chance at whatever is planned for his future. Please," he entreated.

Rajiv was silent. He finally nodded his head. "I'll take care of it. Don't worry. Now sleep. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

"How long will the Parid-thingy last?"

"Could be hours, could be days. It depends on the combatants. Go to sleep," he said, pressing a kiss to Usama's forehead.

Usama snorted, curling up against Rajiv. It was hours later when he finally fell asleep, his mind too busy running scenarios.

He had a bad feeling about this.

Chapter Six

"No, no way is this happening," Usama cried, looking to Laithe for help. "You didn't say that's what you intended."

"You didn't ask me what I meant when I said I would take care of it. You only asked me to help your brother. This is the only way for me to help you right now. There is no one else strong enough that I trust," Rajiv said, crossing his arms.

"Then Lev can fight, or Morgan. Fahd would probably do it if Rowan asked him to. I don't want you to do this, Rajiv. Please," he pleaded.

This wasn't what he wanted. When he'd asked Rajiv to help him, he thought he would just ask them to call it off. Or at least find a way for them to spirit Aaron away during the night or something. Not this, he didn't want this.

"Why are you doing this?" Laithe questioned. "You don't fight, you told me so yourself when you first joined the pride. I remember you distinctly saying you wanted a change from the territorial fights on Himalay."

Rajiv shrugged, remaining silent.

"Okay, tell me again. What exactly happens during the Paridhav?" Laithe asked with the voice of reason.

All of Laithe's pride were gathered together. The human, Aaron, was off with Rajiv's parents and his brother, Navin. They all looked worried but Usama was the only one pacing. His tail jerked a deliberate motion back and forth.

"The combatants will match off according to rank. The winner of each match will go on to fight the winner of the next match. It will continue until there is a clear champion."

"Okay, seems simple enough," Laithe replied, nodding his head.

"Nothing about this is simple!" Usama exploded, unable to believe that his brother was actually agreeing to this stupid idea. Rajiv could get hurt from this, didn't they see that? Some of those Tigris out there were massive. They were incredibly powerful. It was why so many in the other clans feared the Tigris. He knew that a single blow from Rajiv's hand could kill a smaller man. Fierce, territorial and deadly, the Tigris made formidable enemies.

Rajiv stood, moving behind him and taking him into his arms. Usama panted, confused by his reaction. He knew how strong Rajiv was. He wasn't worried about the other male losing, but still... just the thought was enough to paralyze him with fear.

"Please, you don't have to do this," he pleaded. "We'll find another way."

"You wanted me to help. This is the only way I know how. Let me do this for you, for your family. It means something to you to save this male. I know it does."

"I can't stand the thought of you getting hurt because of something I asked you to do," Usama said, nearly in tears. "You don't fight, everyone says you don't fight."

"I chose to do this. Have you no faith in me, Cittaja?" Rajiv asked, a smile in his voice.

Usama turned around, wiggling out of his hold. "I think it's time for you to tell me what that means. I know it's important, otherwise you wouldn't keep calling me that."

Rajiv paused, motioning the others away. They left without a word, leaving him alone with the Tigris. "It means *my heart mate*, for that is what you are to me," he said, matter-of-factly.

Usama parted his lips, staring at the other man, shocked. "How long?" he whispered.

"How long have I felt that way, or how long will it last? I wanted you from the moment Laithe described you to me and it will last until I draw my final breath."

"I-I... how?"

"Years ago, my father and I traveled to Felid to visit your father, to pay him our respects on behalf of the Tigris. You may not know about it because I never saw you the

entire time I was there. I remember sitting outside with Laithe, listening to my father and yours talk about how the clans needed to be connected. How times were changing and we needed to stick together.

"Your father mentioned his youngest son. He said if you had been born years ago, or to someone less loving, you would have been put to death for being born a vulnerable, pale runt."

Usama bristled, not happy with his words, but realizing that he was being honest.

"I turned to Laithe to ask him if all his family were so concerned with those born at a disadvantage. At the time, I didn't mean it to be complimentary. I had been brought up to respect strength and might. He didn't say anything at first, but then he started to talk about you. He told me that the first time he had ever seen you, you were a cub, just days old. He said you looked so tiny, so vulnerable that he didn't know what to do."

Usama nodded in understanding. Laithe had told him that once years ago.

"Then he said, 'I was ready to like him because he was my brother, but he looked right at me, so clearly and intently that my heart became his. I loved him in that instant, not because he was my brother, but because he was Usama.' I will never forget that. I fell in love with you through your brother's words that day. When my father asked me to stay with the Leo to try and build a relationship between the clans, I accepted. Because of you."

"Rajiv..." Usama whispered, overcome. "I don't think I'd survive it if anything happened to you. I don't know what I feel. I've never felt this way before. I can't wait to be with you, I think of you all the time when I never used to before. What we have... I don't know what to do about it. I feel so helpless. I don't know what it means. I don't know if I --"

"It's okay, Cittaja. It's enough, for now," Rajiv responded, holding him close.

A noise interrupted them. Turning, Usama spied Navin standing off to the side, twisting his hands together. "Forgive me, brother, but they are ready for you."

Rajiv shrugged his shoulders, nodding. He kept his gaze on Usama. "If you don't want to see this --"

"Just try and keep me away right now," Usama interrupted. He braced his arm on Rajiv's chest, reaching up to capture his mouth with his own. They came together, their lips clinging tenderly.

Rajiv backed away, stalking toward the large gathering of Tigris in the centre of the clearing. Usama followed him at a distance, walking beside Navin. The man remained silent, shooting him occasional glances but not saying a word.

When he got close enough to his pride, Laithe held out his hand, motioning Usama closer to him. He burrowed into the arm his brother slung over his shoulder, taking comfort from him. Remembering the words Laithe had spoken to Rajiv, his eyes teared up. He had the best family he could have ever asked for. He squatted down beside his brother, Navin following to sit on his other side.

"It's about to start," Navin grunted.

The men had been separated, gathering in smaller clusters. Usama jerked when he realized there were a few of the females in among the men. "The women are going to fight?" he asked, surprised.

"We don't separate our females according to *Felidae* tradition anymore," Navin responded. "They aren't fragile, may the Creator help anyone who tries to treat them like they are."

Usama hissed, surprised when pandemonium broke out among the warriors. He was waiting for them to make some sort of announcement, but they just began fighting. He was sure there was some sort of order to everything, but it looked horrifying.

He kept his eyes on Rajiv, ignoring everything else around him. He winced every time Rajiv slammed into the Tigris in front of him. The men and women were growling and hissing, the sound growing louder until their voices filled the clearing. He wanted to cover his ears, but he was afraid to move -- afraid that if he moved somehow it would cause Rajiv to falter.

He whimpered, jerking when red bloomed across Rajiv's shoulder, five vicious gouges rent through his flesh.

"Oh, God, I can't watch this," Rowan whimpered, turning her face into Laithe's chest. Fahd stepped up beside her, running his palms down her back, not taking his eyes off the scene in front of him.

Usama flicked his eyes around the group surrounding him. Lev and Morgan were hand in hand -- both bent forward at the waist, intent on the combat, Morgan whispering encouragement. Avani and her mate, Agni, were silent, both still and inscrutable.

Beside them stood Aaron, completely horrified by the vision in front of him. He looked about to burst into tears at any moment. He kept darting glances behind them, obviously trying to judge if he could get away without anyone coming after him. Usama couldn't begin to understand what he must be going through. The winner of this brutality would get him as their prize, to do with as they wished. It was completely barbaric. This would never happen on Felid.

The seconds ticked by like hours, the hours like days on end. He couldn't move from his position. His legs were beginning to cramp, but he couldn't move. Every swipe against Rajiv felt like it was hitting him directly. He couldn't live without this man. How stupid that he hadn't figured it out before. He had actually passed him off with some dumb comment about not being sure of his feelings, after he admitted his deep feelings for Usama. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have been so blind?

The sun passed overhead. Fahd had taken to pacing back and forth in front of them, snarling softly. Laithe was sitting on the ground, Rowan curled up in his lap. Navin remained beside him, offering him silent comfort every time Rajiv looked like he might be tiring. The noise was bloodcurdling now. The massive Tigris would rush at each other, swinging their arms with brutal accuracy.

The sound escalated, reaching a fevered pitch. There were now half as many Tigris; the rest had slunk off, bloody and beaten. They hadn't stayed to watch, but left the area immediately.

"It's because they have been disgraced among their clan. They can no longer show their faces this day. In time, it will be forgotten, but we don't often gather together, so they will have the opportunity to lick their wounds, so to speak," Navin explained, the tension evident in his voice.

"Why aren't you fighting?" Usama asked, his voice a dry croak.

"I don't want the human. I agree with your pride that he should be free to make his own choice, but you'll find that my family is some of the only free-thinking members among the Tigris. The rest are all about survival of the fittest. The strongest survive and the weakest are beaten or subjugated. It's the rules of the wild, the rules of the Tigris clan," he said, his voice disdainful.

"What does that mean for you?"

"I don't know --" He broke off, leaning forward when Rajiv landed hard on the ground. He shook himself, leaping out of the way of the lethal strike of his opponent. Navin bowed his head, continuing. "I don't want this for myself. I don't want to live like this. I can fight, I'm strong enough, but I don't have the heart or the passion to try and win. I'd rather be studying, learning about the world around me or the worlds in the stars."

"You want to be an explorer, a scientist?" Usama asked, surprised.

"Why not? Just because no Tigris has ever done it doesn't mean I can't. My own brother is the first Tigris to ever willingly join a pride. I think I should at least try and follow in his footsteps and do something different."

"I think that's a great idea," Usama encouraged.

They fell silent, stopping to watch the scene in front of them.

"You need to eat something, Usama," Morgan coughed, coming up beside him.

"I'm not hungry," he said, not taking his eyes off Rajiv. He was trying to will his strength into the other man, determined to stay strong for him.

"At least drink something, then," Morgan growled, hitting him on the shoulder of his good arm. "What would Rajiv say if he came over here to find out you'd been neglecting yourself?"

Usama grumbled, pissed that Morgan had said the one thing guaranteed to get him to go along with him. He reached out, swiping the canteen from Morgan's outstretched hand. He guzzled the water, throwing it back at Morgan. He remained undaunted, instead passing over a hunk of dried beef for Usama to chew.

He grudgingly accepted it. It was ridiculous that he was eating food reserved for when they traveled instead of partaking in some of the wild game that had been captured yesterday, but he wasn't moving from his spot. He was at least gratified that Morgan understood him that much. He turned to offer his pride mate a smile.

A scream pierced the clearing.

Usama immediately turned back, jumping to his feet. One of the men lay face up on the ground, his neck bent at an impossible angle. Another Tigris stood over him, glancing up long enough to meet Usama's horror-struck gaze. It was the man who'd been so rude when they first arrived, the one who'd spat at his feet. He'd snapped the other man's neck with ease.

Holy fuck, this was bad.

Chapter Seven

Rajiv grunted, easing himself into the water. His whole body was a mass of bruises. Large cuts peppered his body, the result of a few well-placed swipes from his opponents. Usama stood beside him at the edge of the water. He had babbled the entire way to the pool, apologizing for making him do this.

Didn't he understand that he didn't have a choice? He wanted Usama to be happy and this was the only way to do that. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if the pride fell apart because of this human male. He had fought too hard to become a part of it.

"Are you okay?" he asked, leaning back against the side of the pool, letting the water ease his aches.

Usama shook his head, studying his face carefully. "Shouldn't I be the one to ask you that?"

"I'll be fine, don't worry about me."

"You still have one more opponent to fight. I think you'll beat him, but it's not going to be easy," Usama said, changing the subject.

"Pran has always wanted to be the victor among the Tigris. It isn't unheard of for him to deliberately pick fights to draw people into disputes."

"I'm scared," Usama admitted, unable to get the picture of that other man out of his head. "I didn't think you were supposed to be fighting to the death." His voice quivered.

Rajiv sighed heavily, sinking wearily into the water again, dropping below the surface. He bobbed back up, blinking water out of his eyes. "It shouldn't have happened. But it isn't the first time. Disputes over mates have been known to end in death before."

"You should have seen the look on Navin's face. He was terrified after it happened. He didn't even stay to watch the end. Although there wasn't much that happened after that. I just... I can't believe that happened."

Usama shuddered, dipping the toes of his left foot into the water. Inexplicably, he crouched down to lower himself into the water. Rajiv raised his arms, providing a support for his mate, careful of his arm.

Usama shook himself in the water, causing droplets to fly everywhere. Rajiv let out a coughing laugh despite himself, charmed that Usama would get into the water with him voluntarily. He pulled Usama in front of him, holding him close to his chest. He reached down, rubbing his hands along the sleek sides of his mate.

"What's going to happen tomorrow?" Usama asked, leaning his head back against his shoulder.

"Pran and I will approach each other in the morning, and one way or the other, this will all be over. I'd rather not stay long after. It might be best to leave as soon as we possibly can."

Usama hummed, raising his arm and curling it around his neck. Rajiv lowered his head, pressing it deep into the inviting space where his shoulder and neck joined. He sniffed his mate, drawing the scent of the man deep into his lungs. He didn't want to lose this feeling. He tightened his hold, ignoring the aches and pains he was feeling. It wasn't the first time he'd been injured, and it wouldn't be the last.

He angled his head, shifting Usama in his arms until he could align their mouths, tasting his mate. Their lips clung, light and easy. He growled, wanting to take it further, but content to lie still and savor him. Releasing Usama's mouth, he dropped his head back to the bank behind him.

"Aren't we just the pair?" he asked, a trace of humor in his voice. "Your arm is still broken, but just as you're healing your cuts and scrapes, I have to go and make up for the loss."

Usama chuckled, twisting his face to the side to rub their cheeks together. "I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Rajiv tensed, relaxing his muscles when what his mate was saying sank in. "So, you've decided?"

"I remember you saying once that I didn't get to choose. That I was yours."

He growled low in his throat, tightening his hold on Usama. The other man squirmed, letting out a suspiciously pleased purr. "You'll always be mine," he rumbled.

"Just like you'll always be mine, so don't you forget that when you win the mate hunt tomorrow and you find yourself with a human as a prize. This is just for show, so don't go getting any ideas."

"Does that mean you aren't interested in playing with him?" he asked, well aware of how much Usama liked to watch others.

Usama squirmed in his hold, his appealing flush rising up his body. The arm around his neck tightened further. Usama obviously liked the idea. Rajiv nuzzled the reddened cheek, smiling to himself.

"I didn't say that, I just meant that you won't be playing with him."

"Oh, is that right? What about you, what would you say if I asked you to let the human fuck you? Hmmm... would you like the feel of his cock, so different from the rest of us, deep in your greedy ass, filling you up? His smooth body pressed flush against your own. Would you like that?" he goaded, letting out a moan when Usama's cock began to engorge, hardening to point straight ahead.

He swished one arm in the water, stirring up the currents, letting the water brush against Usama's flesh. He moved his hand, cupping his sac. Usama groaned, arching his back and fucking the water in front of him. It would offer no relief, simply inflaming him further than he already was.

He raised his head, scenting Morgan and Lev before they entered the clearing.

"Well, we were coming to see how you were faring after your big match today, but obviously you're not that badly injured," Lev teased.

Rajiv shifted Usama and himself in the water, turning them around so Usama faced the bank and his pride mates. Usama gasped, shuddering in his hold, flushed and wanton. Morgan's eyes flared, his tongue peeking out to moisten his lips. Lev merely

looked like he was joking, until he glanced at Morgan, recognizing the heat in the other man's gaze. His lips curved, and he twisted his head, meeting Rajiv's eyes. He nodded, answering the unspoken question hovering in the air.

Lev maneuvered Morgan in front of him, mirroring the pose Usama and Rajiv were in. Morgan caught on quick, twisting one arm up to wrap it around Lev's neck. The two men moaned, Morgan's cock rising up to meet Lev's seeking hand in no time. Rajiv snorted, shaking his head at Lev's obvious impatience. They should savor this, but he admitted that he was too damn anxious to reaffirm his bond with Usama to wait too long.

"Do you like what you see, Usama?" he whispered, licking along his ear. Usama moaned, tilting his head to give him better access. He raised one arm, grabbing a handful of mane and using it to jerk his head further aside. Usama twitched, his backside rubbing against Rajiv.

Morgan slid to his knees, twisting to suck Lev deep in his mouth, keeping his head tilted so he could keep one eye on Usama and him. Lev smiled, petting the back of Morgan's head, rubbing strongly on the back of his ears. He pumped his hips almost leisurely.

"Do you think Morgan wishes that was you he was sucking? Tasting the difference between you and his other lovers, pulling you deep into his throat. I bet he'd like that, don't you?" he murmured.

Usama couldn't keep his eyes off the two men. He was increasing his thrusts against Rajiv, begging him wordlessly for more. It wasn't good enough. Rajiv wanted him screaming for mercy before he'd fuck that tight, little ass like he wanted to.

"Or would you rather be the one sucking him off? Is that what you want? Do you want to take that long, curving shaft into your mouth?"

Usama whimpered, keeping a tight hold around his neck. He sagged, his knees giving out. Rajiv grunted, wading forward in the water to push Usama up against the bank again. This was very familiar territory for them, made so much more intense with the addition of Morgan and Lev.

Lev reached down, tapping Morgan to release him. Morgan whimpered, complying reluctantly. He licked his lips. He must be savoring the taste of Lev, keeping his gaze on Usama. He appeared wanton, studying the man in a way that he hadn't before. It was the look a man got when he saw a sure thing.

Lev urged him forward, making Morgan stay on his knees to shuffle closer to the edge of the pool and Usama who was waiting for him. The spotted man dropped to his ass, spreading his legs wide, presenting his flushed cock to Usama. He looked back at Rajiv, a questioning look on his face. Rajiv grunted, pleased beyond all his dreams that Usama was letting him make the decisions here. It was obvious he wanted to taste. He was licking his lips and moaning continuously, but he was letting Rajiv call the shots.

"Go ahead, Cittaja. Take him into your mouth, taste him for me," he urged. This was for Usama. He wanted to let the man experience everything he had ever wanted. They would have no secrets from each other. It was up to him to fulfill every one of the young Gatti's needs.

Usama uncurled his arm from around his neck, bracing it against the bank while he leaned over the edge. He arched his neck, bringing his mouth ever closer to Morgan. Reaching out his tongue, he placed just the tip against the capped head. Morgan moaned encouragement. Usama backed up, again turning to look at him. Rajiv nodded. "If this is what you want, I want you to have it. I would never deny you a need. I know you want this."

The younger man turned back to his friend, engulfing the head of his cock into the wet warmth of his mouth. Rajiv held onto his hips in a firm hold, squeezing the flesh in his hands.

Lev kept one hand on Morgan's head, murmuring to his lover. He glanced up, meeting Rajiv's intense gaze. His stare was heated, his pupils dilated, his breathing choppy. It looked like he got off on the idea of seeing his lover pleased as much as Rajiv did.

Rajiv pulled up on Usama's hips, unable to wait. He slid his cock along the crease of his ass, pumping it against the yielding flesh under him. It was almost too

much for him. He heard a loud slurping sound and raised his gaze from where he had been studying the play of muscles along Usama's back to see Morgan with his head leaned back. Lev had spread his legs, dangling his cock over Morgan's head. The Pardus was supporting himself on his hands, his back arched while he sucked on the head of Lev's penis, occasionally taking it deeper when Lev bent his knees.

Usama was clearly oblivious to what was going on above him. He continued feasting at Morgan's groin, not taking his eyes off the shaft in front of him. He moaned happily, brushing his backside against Rajiv.

Rajiv reached under him, pressing his finger to the puckered hole, testing his readiness. Inexplicably, his fingers slid in without hesitation. He grunted loudly, gritting his teeth hard to keep himself from exploding from the velvet feel of Usama's ass gripping his fingers.

Usama released Morgan's cock, turning his head to grin impishly at Rajiv. "Do you like my surprise? I made a quick stop off at the tent before when you were talking to everyone else. I thought it would be better if I was already prepared for yo-you... oh, Ra-Rajiv..." he moaned, bucking when he added a third finger, scissoring them to widen the little hole.

Lev chuckled. "You must be amazing, Rajiv, if he was that anxious to get you inside him." He looked intrigued.

Rajiv shook his head, urging Usama back to his task of driving Morgan mad. He guided the head of his cock to the waiting hole, lining up and driving inside his mate in one seamless stroke. Usama gasped, breathing erratically. He tried to lick Morgan, but he couldn't concentrate. Every time Rajiv pulled out, Usama keened. Every time he pushed back in, Usama moaned, grimacing with the pleasure.

Rajiv took his good hand within his own, placing both around Morgan's angry-looking shaft. He pumped him, creating a tight grip around Usama's hand, allowing Morgan the pressure he must need about now. Lev was grunting, sinking his cock further into Morgan's mouth, moving closer to his own climax.

Rajiv ignored them, placing his free hand around Usama's throbbing shaft, pressing them both closer to the bank to hold them up in the water. He pumped, once, twice, feeling his mate release, shooting his seed. His ass clamped down on Rajiv's cock, creating an unbearable friction.

He couldn't hold out, coming hard seconds behind his mate.

Morgan and Lev both cried out, the pressure from them working his shaft causing Morgan to release his seed over both of their hands, the pearly white liquid oozing down his shaft. Lev pulled out at the last second, following their lead and letting loose on Morgan's chest.

The four collapsed, all trying to find their breath.

"Well, looks like I'm the one who needs a bath now," Morgan muttered, causing Usama to snort with laughter.

Chapter Eight

Usama groaned, more than ready to go home. Rajiv had been just as impatient as him, that much was obvious when he deliberately entered the clearing in the morning, striding up to Pran and knocking him back a step. The challenge had been embarrassingly brief.

Rajiv had taken no prisoners, placing one well-thought-out blow after another on the unprepared Pran.

Rajiv had been declared the undeniable champion, but he hadn't wasted time in gloating over his victory. There weren't even that many Tigris left. Most of them had left the day before after their own losses. Those that were still present were content with the outcome of the challenge and had left without any issue. Pran had slunk off, his tail between his legs, but he had taken the time to shoot a smoldering glare in Navin's direction. There was trouble to be had for the younger man if he wasn't careful.

Usama had asked Rajiv if Navin could come with them, but Navin wasn't quite ready to shoot for his dream. He wanted to stay on Himalay for a while longer. Rajiv had just ignored him when he tried to get him to talk his brother into changing his mind. He said they didn't even have enough room on *The Shahnaz* for the current occupants. There was no way they could fit one more on board.

They were now in the proud possession of one pissed-off human male. Aaron wasn't any happier being bundled off like a trophy and taken somewhere else when he had just been getting used to his new surroundings. He wanted to go home, but the pride had neglected to tell him that Lev had different plans in mind.

Regardless, they had to go back to Felid, if only for a few days. They needed to report this to their father. It wasn't something he should hear over the comm. This was going to require an in-person visit.

"Are you still up here?" Rajiv asked, entering the atrium and striding to where Usama was curled up on a bench at the back.

He lifted his head, offering his lips to Rajiv. The larger man hovered over him, licking along the crease of his mouth, thrusting his tongue in. He licked the top of Usama's mouth, lingering. Rajiv stood up, smiling indulgently at him.

"I was just thinking."

"Hmm... I may have to cure you of that," Rajiv joked. "Every time you start *thinking*, we end up in trouble."

"You aren't funny," he said, giggling despite himself. "Besides, you can't blame me for what just happened. I had nothing to do with it."

"Right, of course. You are just a sweet little angel, not getting into any trouble at all. You know what happens to little cubs that lie, don't you?" he threatened, his eyes gleaming.

Usama grinned, squirming in his seat. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Hmm... little cubs that lie get spanked," he growled, the throaty purr all too serious. His face lost all traces of laughter. "I think we should punish you now, so you learn your lesson."

Usama smiled to himself, turning in his seat to go down on his hands and knees. He jiggled his hips, pretending to be getting down off the bench, trying to entice Rajiv.

A hard *smack* came down on his ass, startling him. He hissed, pressing his face into the cushion. Rajiv caressed his buttocks, palming the mounds before bringing his hand down with another *smack*, then another. "I told you not to doubt me. I always follow through, Usama," he muttered.

Usama sighed, wiggling his hips again when the smacks stopped. His ass was stinging, but it was a beautiful feeling. The cheeks were hot, a very deliberate reminder of his mate. He loved it, loved the physical mark of his possession by Rajiv. He belonged to the other man, and he wouldn't have it any other way. "More..." he moaned.

Rajiv grunted, picking him up around the waist and swinging him until he landed upside down over one strong shoulder. Usama leaned forward, sinking his teeth into the adorable ass in front of him. Rajiv hissed, slapping him again, harder this time. Usama moaned, twisting until his cock rested hard against Rajiv's shoulder.

Rajiv stepped outside, making his way onto the main bridge. It was currently empty, the rest of the pride below in their own quarters. Usama wondered how many of them were having sex right now, figuring it was a safe bet that at least a few of them were. All except the human, of course. He had taken Usama's old quarters, since Usama had been told in no uncertain terms that his place was with Rajiv now. He wouldn't have it any other way.

He pressed his cock into Rajiv, thrusting to get some friction along it. Rajiv groaned, letting him go and dropping him to land on his feet. He walked forward, pressing Usama back until he touched up against the wall. Usama grinned, waiting to see what would happen next.

Rajiv dropped to his knees, not wasting any time before he had engulfed his shaft, swallowing deliberately. The back of his throat fluttered over the barbs ringing Usama's glans, caressing them.

He groaned loudly, throwing his head back and banging it against the wall. *Unbelievable.*

Rajiv sucked strongly, pulling back until just the head of his cock was inside that amazing mouth. He smiled, allowing Usama the smallest glimpse of his deadly canines.

He sighed, thrusting his hips, uncaring of the threat of danger. Rajiv would never hurt him but the truth was, he seriously got off on just the idea of the threat. He was so much stronger than him. It was an incredible turn on to have that much leashed power under him... or over him. He loved the idea that he could break him in half if he really wanted to, but his love would prevent it.

Rajiv started to purr, the deep rumbles vibrating through his sensitive cock. He threw his head back, uncaring when it hit the wall with a resounding *clang*. He panted, reaching down to grab hold of his head with both hands. He was so close... so close.

The Tigris swallowed firmly, lifting up to wrap one hand around the base of his cock, moving down to squeeze his testes.

Usama screamed, jetting his seed into Rajiv's mouth, thrusting his hips.

Rajiv growled, grabbing him by the hips and pulling him down to the floor. He pressed up his knees, opening Usama completely to his gaze.

It made him feel vulnerable, exposed. He stretched his good arm, wrapping it around his thigh to open himself up further to Rajiv. The big man followed him down, hovering over him and pressing his thighs back into his belly. He curled his toes, waiting.

Rajiv teased his fingertips over his anus, hitting his nerve endings and causing him to flex his ass. He growled, looking around madly before surging upward. Usama mewled at the disappearance, staying in place while he watched Rajiv stride back into the atrium. He returned with a bottle of nawra oil, squeezing the top to pour a dollop out in his palm.

"I don't even want to know where you got that," he groaned, tensing when Rajiv placed his fingers against his anus again, running them in circles around the hole. He pressed his fingers in, opening Usama up thoroughly.

"I brought it with me," Rajiv growled. "I'm going to have to carry the damn thing around my neck soon. I can't get enough of you, anytime, anywhere, anyhow."

They were both reduced to gasping for breath, the tightness of Usama's ass enveloping Rajiv's cock when he began inserting it. They quickly established a rhythm, Rajiv controlling the pace, finding his pleasure inside his mate. Usama tossed his head, gripping his thigh tight. He would never get enough of this feeling. As long as he was beside Rajiv, he always knew things would be okay. But the feeling of Rajiv inside him... it felt like home. As long as they had this, they would be okay.

They found their release together, Rajiv bending over him to rest his forehead against his own. They kissed, languidly, Rajiv remaining half-hard inside him.

"You have got to be kidding me!" Morgan's disgusted voice rang out. "Not only did you have fun without us, but you actually broke the cardinal rule about having sex on the bridge. No one gets to have sex on the bridge unless we all get to watch..."

Usama shook his head, slapping Rajiv when the big man started to vibrate, his chuckles rumbling through his body. Things never got boring around here, that was for sure.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

Jade Buchanan

Jade Buchanan was born in the summer of 2006, out of a slightly shy but definitely warped mind. Jade's alter-ego spends her days working in the world of safety management consulting, but at night she lets Jade out to play. Preferring to live in the world of fiction in which she was born, Jade can be found wandering through fields of words whenever she can. Now if only she can find her dream man -- a time-traveling Scottish laird who was born a werewolf that became a vampire and lived on a pirate ship, only to make his way to the new world and work on a ranch in Montana (with a brief foray in the Navy SEALs), before conquering the space time continuum and becoming a space marauding pirate and ruling the galaxy -- she'd be a very happy lady.

Jade would love to hear from you. She can be reached at jade.buchanan@yahoo.com or <http://www.jadebuchananbooks.com>