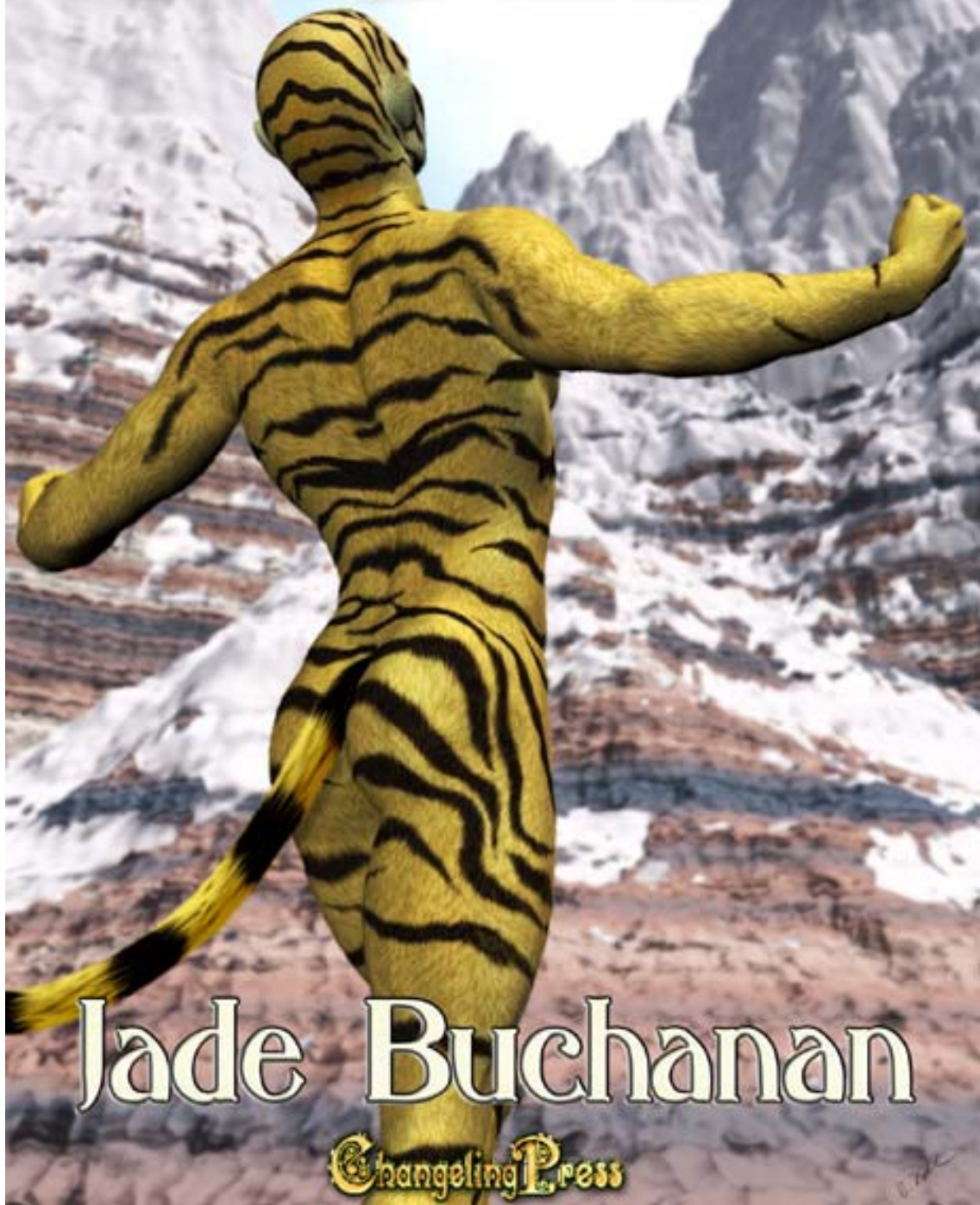


The Felidae 5 NAVIN'S MASTER



Jade Buchanan

Changeling Press

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ISBN: 978-1-59596-719-0
Formats Available:
HTML, Adobe PDF,
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:
Changeling Press LLC
PO Box 1046
Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046
www.ChangelingPress.com

Editor: Connie Alberts
Cover Artist: Bryan Keller

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The Felidae 5: Navin's Master

Jade Buchanan

Navin Citrakaya is in trouble. Big trouble. Ever since his brother Rajiv fought in the last mate hunt, Navin's life has been a living nightmare. Rajiv's rival is after Navin, and won't rest until he claims Navin. Navin needs a protector, fast.

Isha Rajendra isn't interested in socializing with the other Tigris, until the day he receives a sweet offer. He'll protect Navin under one condition -- if Navin wants to be safe, he must submit to Isha. Completely...

Dedication

This is for Jade, and for her mom, my best friend, Rebecca. Life throws challenges our way, and we have to decide how to face them. I'm so proud of you both. Love you!

Chapter One

Navin crouched, waiting for the sound of voices to fade before he gingerly stood up. He tested his ankle, careful not to put his full weight on it.

Damn, he was tired of this. It wasn't anything outright that he could complain to the elders about. Although, he wouldn't have gone to the older men even if it was an out and out attack on him. He needed to be strong, like Rajiv would be.

He didn't want anyone to see him like this. Bad enough almost everyone within distance knew that Pran had it in for him. They didn't need to know Navin was hiding from the larger man. He just didn't know what to do. Pran was the stronger of the two of them. In a full on fight, Pran would win. There wouldn't even be a contest. Rajiv had beaten him, but then again, Rajiv was a force unto himself. He was nearly the strongest Tigris in existence.

Rajiv was the only reason he was still alive. Navin wasn't naïve enough to think anything else. Pran wasn't going to kill him outright, because the first thing that would happen would be Rajiv's return. If Rajiv had to come back to Himalay to bury his brother, he wouldn't be happy. Hell, he'd probably kill first, ask questions later.

This was all Pran's fault. If he hadn't tried to fight in the Paridhav, the mate hunt, then he wouldn't be after Navin right now. Pran had lost -- badly -- to Navin's older brother. He took his defeat horribly, humiliated in front of the entire clan.

One of the other Tigris had taken a human and brought him back to their home planet, the first human to ever step foot on Himalay. He'd been out scouting other planets, and had become bored. Deciding to take home an oddity from his journey, the Tigris had only wanted the man as an amusement. Offering him up in a mate hunt had been the perfect solution.

Tigris had come from all over Himalay to participate. It had been decades since the last hunt had been called. It was a test of strength and endurance. All you had to do was outlast your opponents. Every time a combatant was knocked out, he or she was forced to leave, their tail tucked between their legs... literally.

The goal was to fight until the end, and the prize was the intended mate. The human, Aaron, had been furious when he'd found out. He just wanted to go home, and Navin didn't blame him one bit. It was why he'd contacted Rajiv. Well, to be honest, he'd told his father to contact Rajiv, but it was the same thing.

Rajiv had returned to Himalay with Laithe and his pride. The other *Felidae* had been outraged that a human male was being offered up as a prize in a mate hunt. Laithe's human mate, Rowan, was especially miffed -- a new word he'd learned from her. Navin was afraid she was going to have a horrible image of the Tigris, but she seemed pretty fair-minded. She wouldn't judge them all because of the actions of the majority. Navin had tried to make sure the ruling family of the *Felidae* realized that not all Tigris believed in the survival of the fittest.

Some of the Tigris just wanted to survive, period.

Look where it had gotten him. Hiding from the rest of the Tigris, determined to appear strong... at least on the outside. Inside, he was a mess. The incidents were escalating. This was getting serious, and he wasn't sure what would happen next.

So far Pran had kept his troublemaking relatively small. It was just enough to make Navin concerned, but not enough to leave him so terrified he'd go running for help. He was actually becoming scared that it was all in his imagination. Sure, he'd had a few close calls with his food. But that could have been an accident. He couldn't prove that Pran had contaminated his dried meat. He was just lucky he had a sensitive gag reflex. It had tasted horrible. If he hadn't thrown up he might have swallowed the poisoned meat.

Still, it didn't necessarily point the finger at Pran. Even if the meals had been doctored on purpose, there was no proof Pran was behind it.

This latest accident, though... was no accident. His notes were all gone, torn to pieces. At first glance it looked like an animal had gone through his sleeping quarters, trashing his equipment and destroying everything.

Everyone knew how much he treasured his research material. He wanted to be a researcher, studying the world around him. He took detailed notes wherever he went, cataloguing the flora and fauna, keeping track of migrating patterns and particular food sources of each animal in the area. It wasn't as easy as it sounded either. Most of the animals on Himalay viewed him as a predator. It was pretty hard convincing your food that you just wanted to study them right now, not eat them. Because of that, he kept meticulous care of his research.

Now it was gone. He couldn't salvage a single note.

He couldn't prove if it was an animal or Pran, although, to his way of thinking they were pretty much the same thing at the moment. Pran was acting like an animal. This went beyond revenge against Rajiv for humiliating him. This was personal.

What the hell had he done to piss off one of the most powerful Tigris?

He crept along the path, swiveling his ears to keep track of the noises around him. He couldn't afford to have someone come up on his weak side right now. Wincing, he stepped on his sore foot, shaking his head at his stupidity.

When he'd realized the destruction of his property was no accident, he'd panicked. Thinking that Pran might be lying in wait inside his abode, Navin had freaked out, stumbling back. Unfortunately, he'd caught his left foot on a broken piece of equipment, falling to the ground. His ankle would be fine. It was nothing more than a hard bruise, but boy, did it ever hurt.

Navin approached his destination, silently limping across the clearing, looking both ways.

"What are you doing here?"

Navin stopped, his shoulders hunching. Recognizing the voice, he jerked his tail, flattening his ears to his head. "I need to talk to you, Father."

"What happened to you?"

Agni came at him from the left, a blur of orange and black. He looked so much like Rajiv that it was uncanny for a moment. The only difference between them was the excess of white Agni had around his face and neck. His fur was a brilliant orange, the individual strands sleek and short, interspersed with thick bands of black.

Navin sighed, trying to decide where to start.

"Just tell me, Navin. I know you, so stop trying to sort out the words in your mind. Just say whatever happened."

He faced his father, studying the older man. "Someone, or something, wrecked my abode. All my notes, all my equipment, everything is gone."

"Gone?"

"Trashed, unrecoverable, shattered, destroyed, damaged, ruined..."

Agni coughed, a rumbling noise deep in his throat that escalated into a roar. "*He's going to pay for this.*" Agni's movements were brisk and controlled as he began pacing.

"We don't know it was him."

Agni turned to him with a stare of disbelief. "You cannot think to tell me someone else may be responsible for this? We know who it was, and he won't get away with it this time."

"I don't have any proof. Could you imagine what would happen if I attacked him now? We both know I can't fight him."

"So, get someone else to do it."

"You will do no such thing, Agni, and I can't believe you would even suggest it."

His mother, Avani, approached them on silent feet, a comforting presence despite the fierce frown on her face. She was a lighter shade of orange, almost blonde in the sunlight with creamy brown stripes. A strip of cream colored fabric was bound around her chest, another at her waist. Her golden eyes flashed as she studied her mate and her son.

Navin took after his mother. He was the same shade of orange as his father and brother, but he had her creamy brown stripes. He was also slimmer than his father, inheriting his mother's leanness.

"Ambaya --"

"Navin, do not interrupt me. Your father doesn't know what he's talking about. We'll just contact Rajiv, he'll take care of this."

"Ambaya, Mother, we can't. I'm not calling Rajiv and that's final."

Navin wasn't contacting his brother to come fight his battles for him. There was no surer way to lose face within the clans than to have a family member take care of you like you were still a little cub. Besides, he'd had a hard enough time convincing Rajiv to leave after the mate hunt. He couldn't call him back now at the first sign of trouble.

Navin knew that Usama, Rajiv's mate, had been pushing for Navin to join them, but he wasn't ready for that. His brother had finally found his mate, and Navin wasn't about to step in and ruin it for Rajiv. It had to be hard enough with everyone else on board to fully celebrate a new mating and Navin didn't want to be the cause of any more tension for his brother. He'd hate to have to be around that many people on a daily basis anyway.

Usama Gatti was the youngest son of the leader of the *Felidae*. The *Felidae* included all the known species, the Leo with their fluffy manes, the spotted Pardus, the small, unsociable Lynx and the Tigris. They were governed by the Leo, the one species who were actually thrilled to be part of a group. The Pardus made excellent bodyguards. They were incredibly loyal and often lived on Felid, the Leo home world, protecting the pride leaders. The Lynx had their own home world and they very rarely associated with the others. There was only one that Navin knew, little Catan, who belonged to Usama's pride.

With his white fur and his thick mane, Usama stood out among his family and the rest of the Leos but he had a hidden protective streak that showed itself on occasion. Usama was a fitting mate for Rajiv, no doubt about it, even though he wasn't Tigris.

Usama's older brother, Laithe, was destined to rule the clans one day and he was a fierce warrior already. As one of the pride leaders, he was responsible for a lot. His own pride was made up of his three younger brothers and their mates. They hadn't started out that way, but apparently the addition of Laithe's human mate had managed to bring them all together. It had allowed them to reveal their feelings for each other, and Navin was happy for them all.

Sure, Navin wanted a mate of his own, but he couldn't imagine finding someone on Himalay, the Tigris home world, who would appreciate his differences. The Tigris were known for keeping things as they were. They hadn't quite embraced change the way the ruling Leo had.

"Avani, the boy's right. We can't call Rajiv. He'll need to find another protector."

"You cannot be serious." Avani turned to view her mate, her eyes wide.

"There's only one man strong enough."

"Who?" Navin asked, curious.

"Isha Rajendra."

"No." Avani wrung her hands, the only movement that betrayed her anxiety.

"There's no one else," Agni soothed, sliding his tail along his mate's leg.

"Go off planet, Navin. We'll contact Rajiv. He'll come back here and he can take you away. It's safer."

"Mother, I won't run to my big brother every time I have something happen to me."

"So, instead you'll run to a complete stranger? He'll kill you without a second thought. You don't know what the man's like. Isha likes his privacy. Why else do you think he didn't participate in the Paridhav?" Avani jerked in place, pleading with her eyes for him to drop this.

"I assumed he didn't participate in the mate hunt for Aaron because he had no need for a human."

"He has no need for anyone, Tigris or human." Avani presented them with her back. Her tail slid back and forth.

"Isha's a big, brutal bastard, but if he swears to protect you, then nothing will happen to you. It's as simple as that. No one will go up against him," Agni added.

Navin considered his father's words. He didn't know what else he could do at this point. He didn't want to run to some stranger and beg for protection, but he had a feeling Pran was only going to escalate his aggression.

What would happen next? Navin could fight the man, but he didn't want to do that unless it was his last resort. He wasn't a fighter under normal circumstances. He preferred being left alone to his own devices. Why wouldn't Pran just leave him alone?

"I don't understand why he's after me. I didn't do anything to him. It was Rajiv who beat him. So why is he still trying to pick a fight?"

"It's probably easier for him to take it out on you, Navin. He can't get to Rajiv unless he wants to travel to Felid. Besides, Laithe and his pride are off planet more than they are on planet. It isn't as easy as it seems to get a hold of him." Agni stroked his chin in thought.

Navin nodded. It was true, the Leo home world, Felid, might be the home base of Laithe's family, but the Leo pride leaders were often given the duty of patrolling the skies. They traveled in massive warships, visiting other planets, keeping the peace when it was needed. As the most politically powerful among the *Felidae*, the Leo were depended upon to make sure the rules were kept.

It was a job that should have gone to the Tigris, considering they were more powerful physically, but the Tigris were too solitary to bother with trying to rule other people. At least, for the most part, that was true. There were a few exceptions, and Pran seemed to be one of them. He was determined to be the best, the most dominant among the Tigris. The dominant Tigris was granted privileges that weren't shared with the others. He was granted choice hunting grounds, and was consulted often whenever there was a dispute among the rest of them. It was a position many sought out. But it was also a position that only the strongest could hold.

Unfortunately, Pran didn't exactly understand that you didn't become a leader just because you said you were. You had to back it up with something.

It was why Agni wanted Navin to visit Isha. The big Tigris was the best of the best. He didn't fight often, but he didn't need to. It was well known that he could back up whatever decisions he made with might. His territory was smack in the middle of Himalay, surrounded by mountains on two sides and lakes on the others. A thin corridor marched between the two large bodies of water, allowing animals in and out but protecting his privacy.

It shouldn't have been prime land, except for some reason wildlife seemed to prefer the lush grasslands in that area. It was enough to make Navin's fingers itch to record the information and find out why they were attracted to that particular plot of land.

Isha didn't have to go far to bag dinner. It was practically waiting on his doorstep. Besides, being central, he had access to all the other territories around him, including mating rights if he wanted it. It was a prime location.

"You think I should search him out? What if he refuses?"

"Then we start over again, and call Rajiv." Agni reached forward, clasping Navin's shoulder. "This is only going to get worse, and you know it. I don't want you to get caught up in something that is out of your control. You have a tendency to get distracted by your surroundings and it would only take not paying attention once before I'd be calling my eldest back to attend your funeral. I won't see that happen."

"I'll go, if that's what you think is best. I'm sure he'll say no, but what choice do I have?"

"If you don't send word within two weeks, I'm calling Rajiv anyway," Avani replied. "I won't stand by and do nothing."

"Four weeks."

"Two, and if you keep arguing, young man, it'll be reduced even more. Don't try to sway me. I'm not going to back down."

Navin chuckled despite himself. If there was one thing you didn't want to do on Himalay, it was piss off a mother by threatening her cub. The female Tigris were more

fierce than any other among the *Felidae*. They refused to sit back and let the men fight their battles for them. Heck, half of them were better warriors anyway.

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

"I'll always worry about my sons. That will never change. Be safe."

Avani embraced him, pulling him forward into her arms. He inhaled deeply, comforting himself with her scent. Releasing his mother, he turned to embrace his father. "I'll find some way to contact you. Trust me, I'll be fine."

"Just because you keep saying you'll be fine doesn't mean I'm actually going to believe you." Avani sniffed.

"Let me worry about your mother. You figure out what you're going to say to Isha to convince him to help you. He's straightforward. Just give him something he wants and he'll help you."

Navin knew what he'd like the Tigris to ask him for in return for his protection, but he had a feeling it wouldn't happen. He'd only seen Isha once before, and he'd never actually gotten close enough to talk to the man. But it didn't stop him from admiring him from afar. Isha was drop-dead gorgeous. Exactly the type of man Navin was attracted to. Strong, powerful and just dominant enough you knew he preferred to call the shots during sex.

"Thank you, Father."

Agni nodded abruptly, sniffing. "Go. Before Pran discovers you missing."

Navin turned to leave, not allowing himself a backward glance. He knew what he had to do. Testing his bruised ankle, he lowered his full weight on his left leg, grimacing from the twinge of pain. He couldn't allow himself to show any weakness before Isha, so he better start getting used to running on the injury. It wasn't that bad anyway. It could have been a lot worse.

Within a few hours, he was deep in the forests blanketing Himalay. Occasionally he would have to cross one of the exposed grassy clearings and he was sore from tensing his body in fear of being followed. Logically, he knew Pran wasn't following him. He'd backtracked a few times to see if Pran was downwind of him, but he hadn't

scented the man yet. It would be a lot easier if Pran smelled foul like his black heart hinted he should. Unfortunately, Pran was actually quite attractive when he wasn't sneering. It was mostly his hatred of the Leos Rajiv lived with that made him look so ugly to Navin.

He stopped, extending his head and sniffing carefully at the edge of another clearing. He couldn't detect anyone in the area, but it paid to be careful. Gingerly stepping out of the tree line, he lowered his center of gravity, crouching down to run across the clearing. Breathing hard, he reached the other side, studying the trees around him. He was now in Isha's territory.

It didn't take him long to figure out he was being watched.

Chapter Two

"Who are you?" Isha's voice was a deep, vibrating growl. The man stepped out from the foliage, stalking forward.

He was an imposing figure, large and muscular. His fur was a pale orange, with gray-black stripes running along his body, broken by the cream cloth he had wrapped around his hips. It gave him a soft look, but one would never accuse Isha of being soft. His coat was thick and shaggy, different from Navin's own sleek fur. Isha's head was down, his black ears tipped forward, displaying the white spots on the backs of them. Great, just what Navin needed, a display of obvious threat. Apparently Isha wasn't too happy to see him.

He cleared his throat, balancing back on the pads of his feet. "I'm Navin Citrakaya."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me, cub?" Isha hissed, lifting his upper lip and displaying his glistening canines.

Navin shifted in place. "I'm Agni and Avani Citrakaya's son. Rajiv's brother." His voice got quieter and more hesitant the more he spoke.

Isha stared back at him, flicking his tail idly.

"I-I wanted to ask you for help."

"And I should give it to you, because..."

Navin stepped nervously forward. "Because I'll die if you don't."

"So?"

"So?" Navin repeated, incredulously. "I'm talking about my life here!"

Isha lashed out, grabbing him around the neck with a powerful grip. "Don't tempt me or I might just save Pran the trouble of killing you," he growled.

Navin gasped, drawn to his toes by the crushing grip. Isha released him carelessly, his point made clear. He watched while Navin struggled to take in air. "How did you know it was Pran?" he managed to gasp out.

"Everyone's heard of your troubles, cub. It's not exactly a secret."

Shrugging his shoulders, Navin considered the big man in front of him. "What do I need to do to convince you to help me?"

Isha stared at him, his golden eyes piercing. He turned, giving Navin his back. "You have nothing I need."

Navin couldn't believe it. *He was going to leave!* Isha couldn't leave, not after he'd come all this way to get him. He had to find something to make Isha want to help.

"Please, I'll do anything," Navin implored, grabbing on to Isha's arm. The muscles jerked under his fingers. He could barely wrap his hand around the big biceps. Isha was simply massive.

Stepping around to face the larger man, he blinked up at him. "Please, just tell me what to do. I need your help."

Isha purred, a deep rumbling coming up from his chest. "Is that right? You'll do anything for me? What exactly are you willing to do?"

Pacing forward, forcing Navin to back up, Isha towered over him. Navin was suddenly nervous, his tail quivering. This sudden change of interest had him confused. What exactly was Isha getting at?

"Well, I-I... yeah. I'll do anything. I'll end up dead if I don't do something. This is serious."

"Mmm, yes, it is very serious. You see, I have something that needs to be tended to, and I do believe you may be the best person for the job. Are you willing to go through a little... test... to see if you suit?"

Navin swallowed. "Uh, yeah, I could go through a test. Right now?"

He didn't quite like the look on Isha's face. Just minutes ago Isha had looked as if he couldn't care less about Navin. He'd been bored with the entire discussion, and now

there was a particularly crafty gleam in his eye. Navin didn't trust it. What would Isha ask him to do?

Navin bumped against something behind him. Swiveling his head, he realized Isha had backed him into a tree. He was trapped between the hard wood at his back and the large bulk of Isha at his front. He widened his eyes, studying the other man. "Ummm... Do you want to know the details about Pran? I should probably tell you what you're up against."

"Does it look as if I care about the details? I don't give a shit about you or your problems. I'll keep you safe as long as you please me. Disappoint me at any step and you'll be out on your ass finding another protector. Now, I don't have time to waste. This is your choice. Do you consent to be mine?"

Navin swallowed hard. "If you're talking about what I think you are, then yes, I consent."

Isha purred. His fingers went to the cloth at his hips, untying the knot at the side holding it in place. With deft movements, he had the cloth undone, falling to the ground. Navin couldn't take his gaze off the cream fabric. He was afraid of looking higher. He hadn't exactly expected this.

That didn't mean he was particularly upset by this turn of events, but he hadn't allow himself more than a faint hope Isha would want him sexually. Wait -- this was sexual, right? Wow, he'd be embarrassed if he went down to his knees only to find out that Isha removed his loincloth for some other reason.

Navin raised his eyes, following the muscular calves and thighs in front of him, studying the pattern of Isha's stripes. He tore his gaze away before he looked at his groin, quickly studying the other man's stomach. The orange fur gave way to soft white strands on his belly. He wanted to curl his fingers in that thick mat, see if it was as silky as it looked.

"What will it take to please you?" Navin was proud that his voice didn't shake. It wasn't easy keeping his tone nonchalant, but he thought he managed to pull it off.

"Oh, I think you know," Isha purred. "On your knees."

Navin's heart pounded against his breastbone, a runaway thumping he couldn't control. Try as he might, he couldn't get his knees to bend. They were locked in place, his entire body tensed. This didn't happen to him. Females never approached him because he wasn't strong enough to tempt them into a mating. Males hardly ever approached him because he always had his head in the clouds. He wasn't self-assured like Rajiv was. Although, if any man approached Rajiv and told him to drop to his knees, the man would be missing a set of balls after Rajiv tore them off.

And why, oh why, was he thinking of his brother at a time like this?

Navin's cock was still soft; he wasn't turned on yet. The fear still running through his body hampered him. But, oh boy, he could definitely see himself with this man. The images tore through his mind, a flipbook of pictures detailing the way things could be. Navin on his knees, Isha taking him from behind. Navin screaming out his pleasure, Isha tearing strips down his sides while he found his own release. He wanted that, all of it.

His cock jerked, filling with blood as the images filled his head.

Gulping, he met Isha's gaze.

"I believe I told you to get on your knees. If you aren't interested, you might as well turn tail and go back the way you came."

"I'm interested," he gasped.

"Prove it."

Navin quivered, bending his knees and sliding down the tree at his back. He was grateful for the support, needed it. Not knowing what to do, he simply knelt in place, studying the man in front of him. "What do you want me to do first?"

"Do I have to spell everything out for you?"

Swallowing his snort, Navin shook his head. He wasn't that innocent. He knew what Isha wanted of him, but it wasn't as easy as he thought it would be. All his other partners had at least shown an interest in him. Isha was only half hard, but as he watched it lengthened, hardening in front of his eyes.

What a wonderful cock. It was hanging down, thick with a flushed tip. The shaft itself was a darker orange, almost reddish, covered with delicate grey stripes. They formed a fascinating pattern, drawing his eye down to the head. One stripe met the opening at the end of his cock, pointing to the hint of liquid clinging there.

Navin's mouth watered. He wanted to taste that. Raising his eyes, he peered up at Isha, watching the man while he came closer to Isha's cock. Sticking out his tongue, he tasted the pre-come, savoring the bite of flavor.

Isha made no movement. He was completely still. It seemed like a challenge to Navin, and his inner researcher made an appearance. What would it take to draw him over the edge? He wanted Isha crazy with lust. He wanted to be able to say that he was the one to drive the man insane with need.

It was a foolish wish, but he wanted it nonetheless. He wanted some kind of reaction from Isha, and if that was all he could claim, so be it. He needed this man if he wanted to stay alive. It wasn't only that, but it was the only reason he was willing to admit to himself.

He slid his tongue along the glans, licking up the taste of Isha, drawing it into his mouth. The flavor burst on his tongue, an aphrodisiac to his already inflamed senses. It was amazing. Navin's cock jerked, his balls drawn up tight. He didn't know what it was about this man, but he was so damn close to coming himself just from the taste of Isha. What would it be like if Isha asked for more? How far was Navin willing to take this?

He moaned low in his throat, leaning forward to take more of Isha into his mouth. He was literally shaking from the need coursing through his body. His face was flushed, his cheeks heated. He hoped no one came upon them like this. He probably looked like a wanton, on his knees in the forest, submitting himself to this powerful man.

Isha grunted, moving his hips slightly, thrusting forward in tiny movements. It wasn't enough. He wasn't crazy enough, yet. Navin swallowed, drawing more of Isha in, running his tongue down the shaft and pulling hard on the flesh in his mouth.

He released Isha with a pop, reaching up with his hand to grab hold of the base of Isha's cock. Holding it steady, he traced over the grey stripes with his tongue, following the pattern around the shaft to where it met his body. Even his balls were striped, and they got just as much attention from Navin. He sucked one into his mouth, laving it with his tongue. Isha coughed, grabbing hold of Navin's head in one big hand.

Navin smiled around the tender flesh between his lips. He only hoped Isha didn't notice his involuntary movement. Something told him this man preferred to be the one in control. He might not like Navin's expression. He couldn't hold back his glee. If he was going to be this rock-hard just from sucking Isha, he wanted the other man with him when he lost control. It simply wasn't fair for only one of them to be lost to the feeling.

"Stop playing around. Suck me," Isha growled, tightening his hold on Navin's skull. His other hand came up, stroking along the back of one of Navin's ears.

Navin moaned around the sac. *Ga'ad fortune*, that felt good. He loved having his ears touched. It was such a sensitive part of his body. He'd never had a man pick up on that before, and it wasn't exactly something he felt comfortable asking his lovers to do.

Arching into the touch, he released Isha's balls, moving up to take his cock once more. Concentrating on just the head, Navin pulled strongly, purring around the glans. Isha arched, bucking his hips.

Navin couldn't stand it any longer. He reached down to his neglected cock, unwrapping the cloth around his hips and palming his hardness desperately. He was close, his balls drawn tight, and the pressure in his lower back signaled his impending release.

"Did I say you could touch yourself?"

Navin whimpered.

"Let go, now. You'll come when I say you will, and not a minute sooner."

Releasing his cock reluctantly, Navin resumed his attention to Isha. He needed to come so badly, but he was more than willing to get Isha off as fast as possible. Maybe then the man would let him achieve release too.

Careful of his canines, Navin stroked his teeth along the head of Isha's dick, running his sharp whites over the tender flesh. Isha hissed, pulling hard on Navin's ear. "More..."

Navin obliged him, tilting his head to run his teeth down Isha's shaft, pressing hard, but not hard enough to break the skin. He was trying to be careful. He didn't know where the man's limit was.

Isha rumbled, dragging Navin's head closer to his body, thrusting his shaft along his cheek. The liquid at the tip slid against Navin's skin, painting it. Isha's scent intensified. He was close. Navin nibbled along the crease where Isha's shaft met his body, pressing his face against Isha's cock, trying to give him as much sensation as he could. He tested Isha's balls in one hand, rolling them around carefully.

Isha pulled on Navin's ear, snapping his teeth together audibly. Without warning, he thrust against Navin's face, spurting thick jets of come along his skin. The warm liquid hit his cheek, dripping down to his chest. Navin purred, arching his back and pressing his face closer to Isha's throbbing cock.

Snarling, Isha grabbed Navin by the short hairs on his head. He maneuvered him down, pushing him to the ground in front of the tree, on his hands and knees.

"I can't wait." Isha's voice was tense.

Navin lowered his head, dropping his forehead to the ground, bending his elbows and settling more comfortably. He was aware that he looked like a female in heat, presenting his ass to the man above him, but he really didn't care. He was so desperate to come, he was wiggling his hips. He wanted to take himself in hand, but Isha's warning rang through his head. He was willing to wait, for now.

Pausing, Navin waited for Isha to move, but the man didn't touch him. Angling his head to the side to see what the delay was all about, he met Isha's gaze. The other man was studying his body, possessiveness evident in his eyes. Navin wasn't sure he liked that look.

"You want my help?" Isha purred.

Navin dropped his head to the ground once more, nodding softly.

"Say the words."

"What words?" he whispered.

"If you want my help, you'll belong to me for as long as it takes before I tire of you. Say the words."

"I-I'll belong to you."

"For as long as it takes." Isha's prodding made his teeth clench, but Navin couldn't do anything about it. He needed the man's help.

"For as long as it takes until you tire of me."

The words sounded so final in his head. What would happen if Isha never tired of him? Silly. Of course Isha would tire of him. They all did. Eventually everyone either got tired of Navin's distractions or wanted more from him than he was willing to give.

"Good. Now arch your hips higher."

Navin complied, putting an extra jiggle into the movement, hoping to entice Isha to move faster. His erection hadn't flagged at all. It was still throbbing insistently. He needed to feel Isha inside of him. Now.

Isha chuckled, sending a biting slap to Navin's ass. Navin jerked, stunned by the action. Damn, he'd liked that. His cock leaked, and he could feel his heartbeat in his glans.

Isha reached over his head, plucking a flower off the *ljuba* plant near Navin's face. He hadn't even seen it there. Squeezing the flower, Isha collected the clear gel that emitted from it. Smoothing it between his fingers, releasing the spicy scent, Isha hummed.

Navin waited, barely breathing. Isha's fingers found his anus, painting circles around the hole. He bucked back into the digits, moaning when Isha backed off. He slapped Navin's ass. Navin stilled. *Ga'ad*, he needed those fingers in him.

Isha returned to his hole, sliding one finger inside his anus without warning. Navin gasped, clenching tight around the intrusion. He loved the feel of it spearing through him. Isha removed his finger, pressing it in again, this time with a friend. The two fingers thrust deep, scissoring to open up the passage more.

Navin couldn't believe Isha was being so gentle. He had almost expected the man to just thrust in. He wouldn't even have blamed Isha if he had. They were both on edge.

Isha reached forward again, plucking another *ljuba* flower. Navin turned his head, studying the man's movements. Isha released the clear gel, slathering it onto his striped cock, making it nice and slick. He removed his fingers, butting his cock up against Navin's hole. Without any other movements, he began to push inside. Navin relaxed his muscles, giving the man what they both wanted.

He panted, pressing his face down into the hard ground underneath him. Isha had a firm hold on his hips, using it as leverage while he sunk his cock balls deep into Navin.

The small bite of pain was inflaming him. He couldn't hold back his movements. Couldn't stay still while Isha was using that big cock to drive him mad. Isha settled on his back, purring into his ears. Navin tossed his head, the feel of Isha's muscled length along him one more thing to add to his arousal.

"Please..."

"Please what, Navin?"

"Oh, *Ga'ad*, you big bastard. Move!"

Isha snarled, sliding his length in and out, leaving Navin feeling like he was rearranging his insides. Every sensation in Navin's body arrowed to that one spot, that one opening that was holding Isha's cock inside. Isha paused right before he slid out, leaving just the head in Navin's anus.

He paused long enough that Navin was worried he would stop altogether. He whimpered. That must have been the sign Isha had been waiting for because he immediately thrust back in, putting all his force behind the movement. Navin was thrown forward onto his hands, the weight of Isha enormous on his back. He loved it.

Isha released one hand to palm Navin's cock, jerking it once, twice before Navin sprayed his seed. He felt it boiling up from his balls, the sac drawn tight to his body before erupting up his shaft. Stars flashed before his eyes, and his entire body clamped

down on the foreign object in his rear. His whole focus shifted to that place where Isha was inside him. He gasped, wordless cries, as he came harder than he could remember ever doing.

Isha sped up his own thrusts, his movements jerky and uncontrolled. He thrust in against the tightening flesh, growling low in his throat. Navin tightened his ass, encouraging the man to finish. He wanted him to come deep in his ass, wanted it so badly he was almost terrified for a minute. When did his pleasure come from pleasing this man?

Before Navin could panic from that thought, Isha jerked, stilling inside Navin. He could actually feel Isha's release, bathing his insides with the warm seed.

He slumped to the ground, boneless. Isha stayed inside him for a moment, leaning heavily on his back.

Finally, Isha stirred, picking himself up and kneeling beside Navin. He picked up the cloth that had been discarded on the ground, winding it around his hips before throwing the other one beside Navin's head. Navin sighed, pushing up to sit. His ass protested the shift, but he didn't want to give Isha the satisfaction of seeing his pained expression. He quickly moved into a kneeling position. He studied the cloth beside him, picking it up and winding it around his hips, mirroring Isha's progress.

"Come, we need to be at my abode before dark." Isha wasted no time getting up. He was five paces away before Navin had risen to his feet.

Navin walked behind him, content to remain silent. What had just happened? He'd never had anything that intense before. He couldn't figure out what it was about the other man, but he couldn't draw his gaze away. Maybe it was the way he was so secure in the silence. A lot of people tried to prattle on whenever there was quiet. Navin had never understood that. Silence was good, it let him think.

His gaze was brought back time and again to Isha's ass and his swaying tail. The tip trailed the ground occasionally, bumping around as if it had a mind of its own. Navin was almost hypnotized by the movement.

Well, at least he'd gotten what he came for. He wanted Isha's protection and he had it. Now what was he going to do? Isha obviously expected them to have some kind of sexual relationship. But what about the rest of the time? Was he just going to ignore Navin until he wanted a willing hole to sink into? That would get boring quickly. Unless Isha wanted sex all the time, but really, they had to do something else in between.

He realized he knew nothing about Isha other than the basic facts. He knew Isha was powerful, he knew he liked men -- that was made very clear just a few minutes ago -- and he knew that he lived alone. There had to be more to Isha than that.

Looking up, Navin realized they'd reached Isha's abode. This was it. The structure was set back in the foliage, partially hidden. He hadn't even seen it until they were right up close to it.

He followed Isha into the one-room hut, stopping dead at the sight in front of him.

Chapter Three

"Uh, who is that?"

Navin couldn't draw his gaze away from the wholly domestic scene in front of him.

What the hell?

Standing in front of him was a female Tigris holding a tiny cub in her arms. The female was the muted tan of the grasslands, her stripes black and bold. The cloth around her breast and hip was a deep, dark black. She was frowning fiercely at him, obviously displeased at his appearance.

Why did Isha bring him here if he already had a mate and cub? Navin looked away, blinking to rid himself of the sudden moisture in his eyes. What was wrong with him? It wasn't as if he had any ties to Isha. So they had sex? It didn't mean anything. Obviously, it didn't mean anything to Isha or the man wouldn't have brought him here.

Was he having trouble with his mate? Because he definitely seemed to like men. Navin hadn't imagined what'd just happened. Isha had been turned on, no doubt about it. But he obviously liked women too, or else it was a miracle that he'd managed to get his mate pregnant with his cub.

He couldn't even pretend that she was someone else's. He could smell the combined scent of Isha and this other woman in the cub. She smelled like her parents. What had he gotten himself into? He didn't want to be the cause of any tension between Isha and this woman. What the hell had Isha been thinking, bringing him here?

"I see you have a new plaything," the woman purred, tightening her hold on the cub.

"Enough, Rabi'a. Do not interfere here."

Isha stepped forward, reaching out to take the cub that was handed over to him. He held her at arm's length, ignoring her when she tried to get closer. Turning, Isha thrust her at Navin. He fumbled, desperately reaching out to grab the cub before Isha dropped her.

She was incredibly soft, her fur fuzzy and supple. It framed her body in great big tufts, sticking up in all different directions. She was a pale yellow, with slim gray stripes. A small strip of cloth was wound around her hips. He had a feeling she would grow up to be colored like her father. She blinked up at him with petite blue eyes, so beautiful. Studying him with as much intensity as he was studying her, she didn't take her eyes off him.

Navin smiled despite himself, unwilling to be mad at her because of something her father had done. She cooed, giggling back at him, waving her small paws in the air.

"Good, I knew I'd made the right choice," Isha breathed beside him.

Navin jerked his head away, ignoring the other man. Carefully, he tucked the girl cub closer to his body, not entirely sure how to hold her. He had never been around cubs before. This was an entirely new experience for him. He wasn't even sure how old she was. How did you figure out how old a cub was? He wished his mother were here. She would know what to do with the little one in his arms.

"If you're done, I'd like to be off. I don't have time to sit around and chat with you, Isha." Rabi'a turned in place, stepping away from them without a second glance. She didn't even seem to care about her own child. What kind of a mother was she? He was starting to get mad, his chest tightening with frustration. He had known only love growing up. His mother had never turned her back on him like that. He had always known how she felt about him and Rajiv. What was wrong with this woman?

Isha nodded, starting out after Rabi'a. "Watch over her for a minute. This won't take long."

"Wait!" Navin cried out, juggling the cub in his hands while he tried to run after Isha. Isha huffed, turning around with a glare. "I don't even know her name."

"Beryl."

Navin was speechless. Were they both completely heartless? Isha stepped outside, following Rabi'a over to a conveyance set aside. They stood close together, not touching, but close enough that Navin couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Hmmm... seems like you were born with the short straw, little one. Your mommy and daddy don't seem like they are very good at expressing their feelings."

Beryl cooed again, clapping her hands together. He started to pace around the abode, bouncing her in front of him. Damn, she was cute.

The abode was laid out differently than his own. Whereas his had been filled to the brim with equipment and reams of research material, Isha's was plain and sparse. A roll of bedding was set to the right, a small crib beside it. So Beryl did live here.

Chairs sat across from the door, exactly three of them. Obviously Isha didn't get many guests over. Shelving stood to the left of the door, food and utensils arranged on the wood in neat little rows. Isha struck him as an incredibly orderly person. So why did he have a cub? He knew enough about them to realize they were more than a little chaotic. They didn't exactly fit into a tidy, organized life.

He was confused that Isha lived inside. His own brother hated being indoors unless he had to be. Most of the male warriors preferred to sleep under the stars. Maybe Isha was different. Or maybe it was the influence of his mate that made him build this hut. Couldn't very well have a mate and cub around if you spent all your time outside. Most females tended to get angry at that.

"Well, what are we supposed to do, Beryl? Seems like I'm supposed to be your keeper unless your daddy has other plans."

She followed him with her eyes, never taking her gaze off him. She seemed fascinated by him. Maybe she never had anyone talk to her before. It seemed a shame. She should have playmates to keep her company.

He stiffened, causing Beryl to squawk in indignation. Any playmates of hers would mean that Isha would have to mate with that bitch again. The thought made Navin feel sick. He didn't want to picture them together.

This was stupid. He had no claim on the man. Isha had made it more than clear he was only interested in one thing from Navin. Emotions and feelings weren't supposed to play a part in it.

Outside, the conveyance roared to life, shuttling Rabi'a away. He couldn't believe she hadn't even said goodbye to her child. "Don't worry, little one. I'm here for you. I'll make sure you have lots of love and affection for as long as I'm around."

"What are you doing?"

Navin jumped. He and Beryl both swung their heads toward the door. Isha was propped up against the frame, his arms folded across his chest, a small bag dangling from one hand. Navin couldn't tear his gaze away. Isha was so big, so beautiful. The muscles in his arms flexed and twitched under his fur. Navin blushed, embarrassed to be caught looking at Isha like that when he was holding the man's daughter in his arms.

"I asked you a question."

"Oh, I'm just studying everything. Making sure I know where everything is."

"You only need to know where the sleeping pallet is and where the food area is. That's why I brought you here. Don't get used to the surroundings."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Navin frowned. It wasn't as if there was much to look at anyway, so what was the man's problem?

"It means that you won't be here long enough to worry about anything else. I like my privacy. I don't care for other people bumbling about in my space, messing things up and making a nuisance of themselves."

"Wow, do you have any idea how arrogant you sound?"

"Does it look like I care?" Isha stepped forward, reaching a shelf set in the wall and placing his bag inside. Opening the bag, he pulled out an animal skin filled with liquid.

Beryl cried out, lunging forward. It was all Navin could do to keep her still without dropping her. She obviously knew what that meant.

Isha studied the two of them. "Do you know how to feed her?"

"I've never been around cubs before. I'm not a keeper. I just want to get that straight right now."

"Is that so? I do believe I granted you my protection if you did what I wanted. I want you to care for Beryl. Do you have a problem with that?"

Navin gritted his teeth. There wasn't anything he could say to that. Did he really need this man's protection? Unfortunately, yes, or he'd tell him where to go. "Fine. What do I need to do?"

"Feed her. How hard can that be?" Isha shook his head, a grimace on his lips.

Navin sighed, reaching for the animal skin. Taking it from Isha, he looked around, sat down in a chair and settled himself with Beryl on his lap. Beryl grabbed for the skin impatiently, while he unclasped it and held it up for her. She sucked strongly at the opening, lying back to make herself comfortable in his arms. Continuing to study him, she made little contented noises. He sniffed, detecting the *dher* milk inside the container.

Isha watched them, not moving from his place against the wall.

"So, are you ever going to tell me why you asked me to come with you when you already have a mate and cub waiting for you at home?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you. Is that clear?" Isha glared at him, clearly unhappy to be questioned. "I'll be back later."

"Where are you going?" Navin really didn't want to be left alone right now. What happened if Rabi'a came back and decided to take her frustrations out on him? By her comments, it was clear that Isha and she rubbed each other the wrong way.

Isha ignored him. Without a backward glance, he left the abode.

Navin peered down at the sleepy face in his lap. "Looks like it's just you and me, cub. Your daddy's a jerk."

She murmured, and Navin chose to take that to mean she was in agreement with him. Snorting at his foolishness, he rocked her back and forth. The skin popped out of her mouth, dripping milk over her chin.

He bent his head, inhaling to bring her scent in sharper focus. She smelled sweet, like fresh linen hanging outside. At least there was one good thing about this whole circumstance. If he had to take care of Beryl, he could ignore her father whenever Isha became too rude. He could do this.

Isha was a man of his word. Even if he treated Navin like shit -- and it really wasn't that bad, yet -- he would still protect him with his life if it came down to that. Pran would either ignore him now that he was with Isha or he'd attack and be killed by Isha.

Navin dozed off and on while he waiting for Isha to come back. He finally got up, placing Beryl in her crib. She seemed content to sleep, so he left her at it. He was sure she'd make her demands known soon if she wanted something else.

He woke to the sound of crying. Navin grunted, trying to place the sound. Blinking, he looked up to see Isha standing over him, holding a screaming girl cub in his arms.

"Why is she crying?"

Isha ignored him, holding Beryl out at arm's length. Navin threw back the covers, reaching up with one arm to accept the cub. He cradled her close to his chest, sending a glare at Isha. She sniffed, tucking her head into Navin's fur.

"Would it kill you to comfort her?"

"I don't believe it is your place to question or criticize me. If you don't like it, then leave." Isha turned, pacing to the door.

"Wait! Where do you think you're going?"

"Out. I have matters to deal with. You are to stay close to the abode. I don't trust Pran. He could be watching for you. Keep her near, and feed her."

Navin shook his head to clear it from the lingering traces of sleep. "You're leaving just like that? But you've already been out."

With a snort of disgust, Isha motioned to Beryl. "I already told you what your duties were. Do not question me." He turned away, walking outside.

Beryl started squirming, letting out an indignant wail. Looked like it was time for her feeding. Navin jiggled her in his arms, standing up and moving to the *dher* milk that he'd fed her earlier.

Humming softly, he nuzzled her head while she drank. Well, he was truly here. The one place where he would be safe from Pran. At least in theory. Time would tell whether Pran would follow him.

He could put up with anything in the meantime. He might not like Isha ordering him about all that much, but the man was incredible. Navin closed his eyes, picturing Isha in his mind. The way Isha made him feel was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

He couldn't get attached, no matter what. Isha might be attractive -- understatement of the year -- but he was acting like a jerk with his daughter. Besides, Isha seemed to take great pleasure in telling him what to do. He'd had enough of that growing up with Rajiv. He didn't need another dominant male bossing him around.

With nothing but time on his hands, he set about studying his new home. He had no idea how long he'd be here, so it was probably best to figure out what there was to do.

It would be nice to go out exploring, but he was afraid to take Beryl with him. Isha might just kill him if something happened to her. Besides, he had a habit of getting lost in his thoughts when he was in unfamiliar territory, and he still didn't know where Pran or Rabi'a was. He didn't want to come upon either one of them.

It looked like it was just him and Beryl today. Maybe he could find something to play with.

It didn't take long before Navin was utterly exhausted. There was more to watching over a cub than he'd thought. He wished his mother were here. She'd be able to guide him at least.

It was completely dark before Isha returned. Navin hadn't prepared any meals because he wasn't entirely comfortable inside Isha's home. If he'd been with anyone

else, he would have taken the liberty, but he didn't want to anger the other man any more than he'd already done.

Isha carried in a few slabs of meat. He'd obviously been hunting. He slammed them down on the waist-high shelf over the food area -- ignoring Navin -- and took down several jars above his head.

"Do you need any help?" Navin ventured. He wanted to be useful.

Isha paused in his preparations. "You can grab some milk."

Navin smiled, glad to have something to do. Assuming the *dher* milk would be in the usual spot, he wandered over by Isha, searching for a hook in the floor. Spying it, he pulled it up, reaching down and finding the skins set inside the cool space. He grabbed one, setting it beside Isha on the shelf, and reached up to grab a couple glasses. Navin had to bite his tongue to keep his small talk to himself. This was going to be harder than he thought.

They ate in silence, both sitting in the social area. Navin bit his lip, sneaking little glances to the sleeping pallet on the floor. There was only one. Did that mean he was going to be sharing it with Isha, or would Isha expect him to sleep on the floor? He still wasn't sure if Rabi'a was coming back tonight. What would happen if she came in and found the two of them on the mat together? *Ga'ad*, this was hard.

Isha stretched, standing up and throwing his arms up above his head. He rotated his head, picked up their dishes and took them back to the food area. Navin jumped up, sure that he should be doing that. He was here to help Isha, after all. Isha ignored him... again. This was starting to become a pattern. He couldn't stand it anymore. "Look, I know you're helping me out, but I don't know what you want. Just tell me what you want me to do. I can't stand this. I need to know what you expect."

Isha froze, twisting his head to study Navin. "I already told you what I expected from you."

"Yeah, but you neglected to mention the mate and cub."

Isha glowered, his brows drawn down, his eyes half-lidded. The amber gaze was piercing.

"Please, I'm not trying to make things worse. I just need to understand where I fit in here."

Isha shrugged. "As long as you're here, you will warm my bed and care for my cub."

"What about Rabi'a?"

"What about her? She is of no importance to you. She won't be back for a while, so clear her from your mind."

Navin shrugged. If Isha wasn't concerned, then he shouldn't be. He didn't like it, or understand it, but who was he to challenge someone else's arrangement. As long as she didn't try to come back while Navin was still here. "I don't share," he blurted out, unable to stop himself.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I -- I... as long as I'm here, I w-won't share."

"Is that so?"

Navin straightened his shoulders. He was firm on this. "Yes."

Isha quirked an eyebrow, a curiously pleased look on his face. "Good."

"Uh... yeah. Good." He couldn't believe Isha had given in. What the hell did that mean?

"Stop thinking so hard. I can hear you from here." Isha snorted, turning his back and sitting down on the sleeping pallet. He removed the cloth around his hips, settling himself down for the night. Navin kicked at the floor, suddenly shy. He was supposed to join him, right?

"Cub, get your ass in here, now."

Navin smiled, walking past Beryl to check on her first. She was dreaming, her eyelids fluttering madly. He touched her forehead with one fingertip, whispering, "Goodnight."

Sliding in beside Isha, Navin remembered at the last minute to take off his wrap. He lifted his hips, untying the knot and unwinding the fabric. He settled down again, his back to Isha.

A warm, solid arm came around him, Isha's palm pressed to his chest. Navin sighed, relaxing back into the body behind him. He could get used to this.

Chapter Four

“Hmm...”

Something wasn't right.

Navin snuggled deeper into the covers, trying to figure out what was different. It'd been two weeks since he'd come to Isha, and he'd spent most of that time with Beryl. Isha was still distant, except when he took Navin at night, riding him hard until they were both gasping for air. It was times like those that Navin looked forward to each day.

He hadn't heard anything from Pran. It was as if the man had given up. It couldn't be that easy though, could it? Pran wasn't one to give up without a fight. He must know by now that Navin was with Isha. It wasn't exactly a secret.

He rolled over. Where was Isha? Lifting his head, he studied the small room. There wasn't enough room to hide anything so he'd be able to spot Isha right away if he was inside. His gaze met with a cold, bare room, curiously silent.

Wait a minute... Where was Beryl? She was always making some kind of noise at night, huffing in her sleep or making little humming noises. She couldn't keep quiet and he'd started to get used to the baby sounds.

He was pretty sure she must be with Isha, but it was well after dark. Where would Isha take her? Getting out of bed, he ignored the strip of cotton on the ground beside their sleep mat, padding naked to the door. Pausing outside, he tilted his head, trying to get a hint of noise to tell him which way they'd gone.

His heart was pounding, but he couldn't figure out why. It wasn't as if he was worried Isha had left. He wouldn't have abandoned his house and territory, not with another male inside who could claim squatter's rights to it. So where were they?

Confused, he started walking toward the lakes. Isha wouldn't have gone toward the mountains, not with a small cub. Would he? He might not be the world's greatest father, but he cared about Beryl, Navin was sure about that. It seemed he was watching her more lately, studying her every move when she played with Navin at night.

Isha spent most of the daytime hours away from them, doing who knew what outside. Navin spent the time with Beryl, trying to teach her to speak and watching as she crawled along the ground. She was so quick, so determined to get into everything. She seemed to take it upon herself to claim anything that got in her way, like her father. She definitely had his territorial streak. It was kind of cute.

He'd fallen in love with her before he'd realized she'd taken his heart. He couldn't imagine his life without her in it. She brought him so much joy. He had trouble believing how much his life had changed, but he wasn't upset about it. Even if he never had a relationship worth mentioning with Isha, Beryl made up for that. Well... she made up for part of it. He desperately wanted a stronger relationship with Isha.

Beryl had him wrapped around her little finger, though. He remembered his mother saying once that her life had changed when she had Rajiv and him. He'd questioned her at the time, wondering why she'd given up her place as one of the female warriors. Her comment was that if she couldn't change her life for her children, what could she change it for? They were now her life and she couldn't risk herself as a warrior with two cubs at home.

He was starting to understand what she meant. He felt that way about Beryl. The little thing had snuck up on him and delivered a fatal blow. He'd never be the same again.

Splashing sounded off to his left. He stopped, tilting his head again. He cocked his ears, stilling his body. Was that them? He couldn't hear any noise save for the splashing, but whom else would it be? An animal out drinking at night? Not this close to Isha's abode. They were careful to stay clear of his main territory, instead gathering along the fringes. It might be prime grazing land for the majority of wildlife here, but

they knew a predator when they smelled one. Isha was one hundred percent predator with a capital P.

Navin stalked to the nearby where he'd been directed to bathe, the source of the splashing. It was close enough to the house to keep away from most animals, and it was shallow enough he could take Beryl with him. Was that where Isha had gone?

He crept up close, careful to keep himself downwind of whomever was there. He stepped cautiously, placing the pads of his feet deliberately to avoid making any noise. The last thing he wanted was to step on a twig and alert the person they were being watched.

Reaching the edge of the foliage around the pond, he peered through. Isha was there all right.

Navin gasped, throwing his hand across his mouth to silence the sound. Isha was there with Beryl. The big man was sitting down at the far edge of the pond from where Navin was standing, his body half submerged in the water. Beryl was between his thighs, and she was the source of the splashing.

He was holding her carefully in his massive paws, smiling down at her when she bounced around in the water. Droplets of moisture were flying around. Isha was soaked, his fur matted down.

Isha was smiling? Navin's lips parted, utterly shocked. Isha never held Beryl, he always made Navin take care of her. So what was this? His heart turned over. He felt curiously weak. For a minute, he wasn't sure his legs would hold him up. They looked so right together, father and daughter playing in the water.

Isha bent his head, rubbing his cheek along the top of Beryl's head. He purred, the sound vibrating across the water and reaching Navin where he was hiding. Beryl giggled, such a sweet laugh. She looked so natural in his hands. Isha was being so careful to hold her in place.

Navin sniffed, finally aware of the moisture on his cheeks when he bent his head to look away. Seeing father and daughter together made it very clear to him suddenly.

He wanted to be a part of that bond. He didn't know how it happened, or when it happened, but he wanted to belong with Isha and Beryl.

The splashing stopped.

Navin glanced up again, staring right into the face of Isha. The other man was watching him. How had he known where he was? Navin sniffed, realizing he'd given away his position when he'd started crying.

Isha wrapped Beryl in a strip of linen, carefully drying her. Beryl's coat fluffed up around her body, giving her an even cuter look. She giggled, high-pitched and childish, when she shook her body to rid herself of the last clinging moisture. Isha chuckled, picking her up and swinging her into his arms.

The big man started forward, coming closer to Navin. Not moving, Navin waited for them to reach his hiding spot. Isha didn't say a word, just studied Navin for a minute. Finally turning, he started back to the abode. Navin followed, blinking the tears out of his eyes.

What was he going to do now?

They reached their home, Isha carrying Beryl across the threshold. She was slumped in his arms, half asleep. He placed her carefully in her crib, laying her down and pulling the blankets up around her. She snuggled into the covers, closing her eyes on a tired sigh.

Isha remained standing beside her for a moment, looking down at her. Navin was afraid to move. Afraid to break this dream. This was just too unreal. It was what he'd been hoping for, but he didn't know what to do next.

Isha turned to him, still silent.

He wasn't sure who made the first move, but suddenly they were in each other's arms. Isha held him tight, pulling him close. Navin sighed, angling his neck for the lips that suddenly came closer. He kissed Isha, moaning into the other man's mouth. They clung together, embracing, their lips moving slowly. The kiss was languid, relaxed.

He'd never dreamed this would happen. He whimpered, pressing tighter to Isha, determined that this didn't end.

Isha moved back imperceptibly. "Hush..." he soothed.

Navin moved forward, making up the small space and pressing his lips tight to Isha again. He opened his mouth, accepting Isha's tongue, drawing it deep into his mouth. Isha tasted sweet, like the dried meat and *dher* milk they'd had at dinner.

Isha angled him backward, careful to keep them both upright. His ankles hit their sleeping pallet, and Navin allowed himself to be coaxed onto the bed. Isha followed him down, never letting go of his lips.

Isha covered him from above, a warm, furry blanket. He wrapped his arms around the big man, holding him close. Isha hummed, obviously content to take things slow. Neither man made any effort to speed things up.

This was so different from anything they'd done before. All their previous unions had been hard and fast. They'd been too caught up for anything else. But this night called for something different. Something had changed between them, between Isha and Beryl even. He wasn't sure when this had all started, but Navin wasn't willing to break the spell by questioning it.

He shifted, his cock bumping against Isha's. Both men moaned into each other's mouth. They slid against the other, their pre-come slicking themselves so the movements were slow and easy.

Isha grabbed Navin's cock in his palm, squeezing in time to the thrust of his tongue in Navin's mouth. Navin bucked his hips, encouraging Isha. He managed to free one arm that had been clinging to Isha's back. Sliding his hand down Isha's side, he touched as much of the other man as he could. He didn't want this to end.

When he reached Isha's hip, Navin slid his hand along the surface, searching for his long cock. They jerked each other slowly, long teasing touches that went from root to tip. Isha nipped at his lips, soothing the bites with his tongue. Navin groaned.

He bumped his tail against Isha's leg, wrapping it around his thigh as much as he could. Isha shifted, entwining his tail around Navin's, the two appendages rubbing together, heightening their arousal.

Soon it wasn't enough for Navin. He needed Isha inside him. "Please, Isha."

Isha nodded, releasing Navin to reach for the tube of *ljuba* beside the sleeping pallet. Isha had it sitting there the day after Navin came to stay. He'd obviously gathered up the gel from the *ljuba* flowers when he'd been out hunting. Navin had never been so grateful for its presence as he was now.

Navin brought up his legs, holding them at the knee. He stared steadily back at Isha, never taking his eyes off the other man. Isha bent down, licking a path along one ass cheek. Navin quivered, his legs shaking. He tossed his head back and forth.

Isha steadied him with one hand on his hip, pressing his face close to Navin's hole. He licked again, a single swipe through Navin's crack, paying special attention to the small opening. Navin arched his back, presenting his ass to Isha.

The man could do whatever he wanted right about now as long as it led up to him fucking the breath out of Navin.

Isha moved in for the kill, sucking and licking at Navin's hole, running his long tongue around and around the opening. Narrowing his tongue, he pressed it into Navin's ass, paying special attention to trigger the nerve endings. Navin sighed, closing his eyes. *Ga'ad*, that felt good.

He writhed in place, finally ready to beg Isha to fuck him. He couldn't stand this anymore. "Isha..."

"I know. I'm almost there."

Isha reared up, grabbing the tube of *ljuba* and slicking his cock. He placed his right hand by Navin's head, holding his slick cock with the other. Leaning down for another bruising kiss, he lined his cock up against Navin's entrance.

Navin couldn't look away when Isha started to press into him. The man completely owned him whenever he fucked him. Navin would gladly do anything as long as this never stopped. He loved the feeling. He loved... no, he shut off that line of thought immediately, closing his eyes.

"Look at me."

Navin opened his eyes, staring up at the man above him. Isha's face was flushed, his stripes standing out in relief. His teeth were bared, the glistening canines picking up whatever light was in the room and reflecting it back.

Navin whimpered, wrapping his legs around Isha's waist. He pressed his heels into the man's thighs, just under his flexing ass. Isha purred, leaning down to capture his mouth again.

The men moved together, in a dance choreographed from shared time together. They knew each other's body, knew what spots were sensitive and what spots would drive their partner mad. After two weeks together, Navin felt as if Isha knew his body better than he did.

He gasped when Isha hit that spot inside his ass destined to drive him absolutely out of his mind. He arched his back, trying to get Isha to hit the spot again. Isha chuckled, slowing down his strokes and teasing Navin. The man knew how desperate he could get.

"Say the words," Isha whispered, his voice barely audible.

"What words?"

"The ones you spoke when we met. Do you remember?"

Umm... ah! "Yours, *Ga'ad*, yours. For as long as you want me."

"That's right. Mine, for as long as I want you."

"Please, Isha, please."

Isha sighed, languidly stroking his cock inside Navin, driving them both to the edge. "Who do you belong to?"

Navin moaned. "You..."

Isha panted, arching his back and thrusting harder. He dropped his head, resting it on Navin's forehead. The two men stared at each other while Isha picked up the pace, both gasping toward their orgasms. They came seconds apart, Isha's hand on Navin's cock coaxing his seed out of him. The tight clamp of Navin's ass proved too much for Isha. With a yell, he spurted his release inside Navin. Both men puffed for breath again.

Finally, Isha rolled off him, sliding to the side. He gathered Navin close, resting on his back and pulling Navin against his side. Laying a kiss on Navin's brow, he closed his eyes. Navin studied him, watching his face relax.

He still couldn't pinpoint what had happened tonight. Shrugging, he placed his head on Isha's shoulder, hugging the man close. His ass ached in the most delicious way. He could definitely get used to this.

Lifting his head, he glanced at Beryl's crib. She was silent inside. Who knew that the distracted researcher would be so content staying at home, playing with his cub and waiting for his mate to come home?

Chapter Five

"Time to wake up!"

The shrill voice caused him to jerk awake. Isha was standing beside the pallet, obviously up before the feminine voice tore through the abode. Wait... feminine voice?

He looked over at the door, spying the lounging figure of Rabi'a.

"What's she doing here?"

"Navin --"

"Don't 'Navin' me, Isha. What's she doing here?" He couldn't keep the panicked tone from his voice.

Navin couldn't believe this. Just last night everything had been perfect. He'd finally gotten a glimpse at the real Isha, and had the most intimate experience of his life. Now, *she* was back.

Rabi'a was holding Beryl, and he had an insane urge to go over there and rip his baby out of her arms. Rabi'a turned, walking outside. "I'll let you discuss this."

Navin flushed, his heart pounding. He quickly stood up, stumbling over the bedding around his feet. He rushed forward, stopped by Isha's arms around his back. He was pressed tight to Isha's length but he continued to fight the man. Where was Rabi'a taking Beryl?

"Don't do this, Isha. Please, she belongs here. Don't take her away from me." His voice quivered. He couldn't hold the tears back. He wanted his baby. "She's mine now. Please, don't take her away from me."

"Navin, shhh, it'll be okay. Don't cry."

"It won't be okay!" Navin shook, his whole body quaking. "Get her back. Please, just let me go see where she's taking her."

"She's fine, Navin. Rabi'a won't hurt her."

"She hurt her by leaving in the first place. She gave up any rights to Beryl when she did that, and I won't let you do this."

"I'm not doing anything. Would you just calm down and I'll explain everything." Isha's voice held a hint of steel, his frustration evident.

Tough. Navin wasn't going to back down. Beryl was his, he didn't care who her biological mother was. He'd been the one looking after her for the past two weeks. He didn't know how she'd ingrained herself so quickly into his life, but he couldn't imagine not having her beside him.

Before he could truly lose it -- although, Isha probably thought he'd already lost it -- Rabi'a returned. "Things are not always as they seem, Navin." Her voice was calm.

"I don't understand. You left her here, with every indication that you didn't care."

She juggled Beryl in her arms, holding her awkwardly, as if she wasn't used to the weight. "Has Isha chosen to enlighten you as to our arrangement?"

Isha growled, but Navin answered her before he could interrupt. "No, he hasn't said anything about you." He was horribly confused by all this. The tears were streaming down his face and Isha still had a firm hold on him.

"Not everyone was meant to be a parent. Isha and I knew what we were doing. We wanted offspring to carry our genes on, nothing more. Isha prefers the company of men, so he would never settle down with another woman. I have my own reasons for doing this. If I seemed heartless, it was simply because I was being practical. We could never stay together and raise Beryl. We would kill each other before long. We are much too similar in temperament."

Navin shook his head, trying unsuccessfully to pull away from Isha. The other man was still holding him tight, rubbing his cheek against Navin's head the way he'd done with Beryl last night. He didn't understand any of this. So Rabi'a wasn't taking her home? She was leaving Beryl with Isha and him? What was going on here? He sniffed, reaching up and wiping the tear tracks away. "I don't understand any of this. Why'd you leave her here?"

"When Isha brought you home with him, I saw it as my chance to leave. You can give her what I cannot. You can be the mother I could never be. It may seem heartless, but I assure you it was a very practical decision."

"What, so emotions don't play into it at all? She's your child." Navin's voice quivered.

"Yes, and she's bonded to you much stronger than she's ever done with Rabi'a," Isha added.

Rabi'a nodded, very matter of fact. She didn't seem upset about that. "I'm not very maternal. I recognize that. Don't judge me because I'm not the same as you. I do not have that capacity within me."

"You don't know that. You may surprise yourself one of these days." He felt sorry for her. She'd never know the love that Beryl had in her if she kept that attitude. Stupid to feel sorry for the one woman who could ruin his current life, but he was lucky to have both Isha and Beryl. She had nothing.

"Like I said, my situation is unique. I have my own reasons for why I wanted a child. This was my only chance. Any other male would have expected me to stick around and raise the cub. I made my choice and I do not regret it for a minute. Beryl will grow up to be an exceptional female. She'll be strong like Isha, but I know she'll have your compassion. It will make her a ruling female. I made the right choice, and I do not regret it. She belongs with you."

Stepping forward, Rabi'a held out Beryl. Navin snatched her quickly, appalled at his actions, but he needed to hold his baby again. He snuggled Beryl close, smiling when Isha's arms came up to surround them both.

Rabi'a smiled, but she didn't look happy.

"Will you stay with us, for a while? There's no need for you to leave so quickly, is there?" Navin didn't want her to leave. If she could spend a little more time with Beryl, he was sure she'd get to see what a great child she had. He was aware that he might be shooting himself in the foot, but he couldn't hold onto her forever. Besides, Rabi'a was still her mother. She deserved to have time with her.

"I'd like that, if you don't mind. I'm aware that I'm intruding upon your territory."

"Oh, it's Isha's territory. I don't really have a say about it, but if he wants you here, I'm all right with that."

Rabi'a looked like she wanted to say something, but she remained silent. Isha grunted, the sound harsh, but he didn't say whatever it was that he was thinking. Navin started to see why they'd be so miserable together. They were the same person. *Ga'ad*, they'd never speak to each other. He wondered how they'd managed to stay together long enough to mate.

Actually, he didn't want to wonder about that. Just the thought of Isha with someone else was enough to make Navin feel ill. "I'll leave you two alone for a moment. I realize this must come as a shock to you." Rabi'a bowed to both before leaving the abode. He watched her back, before turning to Isha. He was aware that he was clenching Beryl tight to him, but he couldn't let her go.

Isha rubbed his hand over his face, lifting his shoulders.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, going straight to the question he wanted answered.

"Tell you about Rabi'a?"

"Yeah. I thought she was your mate. You didn't give me any reason to think otherwise."

"Navin, I didn't... Look, I don't know where to start." Isha looked vulnerable for the first time since he'd met the man. What was this?

"Isha?"

"Look, you don't understand. When I met you, I didn't want you. I had just found out Rabi'a was going to leave Beryl with me and I didn't know what to do. I'm not exactly warm and fuzzy --"

"Yeah, I noticed."

Isha frowned, creasing his forehead. Navin had to hide his face in Beryl's fur so Isha didn't see his smile. He knew this was hard enough already. Beryl babbled at him, tugging on his chin with her little paws. He kissed her fingers, shaking his head at her.

"I was coming down to the main encampment to find someone when you stumbled upon me. You were perfect for what I needed. I'd help you and you'd help me."

"Yeah, I got that too."

"Look, would you stop being such a smartass. I'm trying to explain myself here." Isha growled at him, making Beryl giggle.

Navin snorted. "Daddy isn't so scary, is he, little one?"

"Stop it," Isha mock-growled. He stepped forward, rubbing one hand along Beryl's back. "I didn't think I'd get so attached to her."

"So, you really just mated with Rabi'a to pass on your genes?" It sounded so clinical to him.

"That sounds horrible, but it's true. I knew there was no way I'd ever settle on another female. I just have no interest in them for the most part. Rabi'a was the one who approached me. She lined out her strategy, told me it would be strictly a one-shot deal. We both agreed we were ready for offspring, but we didn't want the emotional side of a relationship to interfere."

Navin hugged Beryl tight, refusing to let Isha see how much that hurt. So, Isha didn't want a relationship? Where was this going, then? Were they just fuck buddies? Would Isha really get rid of him when he tired of Navin?

"I didn't expect Beryl to grab me with both hands and hang on for dear life." Isha's voice was hushed.

"Last night. Was that the first time you --"

"No. I've been taking her out every night after dark. I didn't want to wake you."

"Why'd you hide it? I wouldn't have done anything to stop you. I might have even --"

"That's why," Isha interrupted. "I wanted time alone with her. I know you would have joined us and I wouldn't have wanted that at first. I know I'm not as good with her as you are." He said the last as if it was a deep, dark secret he was ashamed of.

Navin didn't know what to say. How come he'd never guessed this was inside Isha?

"I fumbled the first few times. I watched you so carefully, saw how you handled her. I didn't want you to judge what I was doing. Telling me I was holding her wrong, or something. She seemed to like it when we played in the water. I -- I..."

"Oh, Isha." Navin stepped forward, straight into Isha's embrace. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Isha's voice was gruff, obviously covering up his surprising emotion.

"I'm sorry I judged you. I thought you didn't care. I thought... well, it doesn't matter what I thought. I wish you'd trusted me to share that with me before, but I understand. You were excellent with her last night."

"Really?"

Why hadn't he guessed this vulnerability was present? Isha seemed so strong, like he had everything under control. Here was something Navin could help him with. It made him feel useful.

His heart beat against his chest, reminding him of how dangerous it would be to get in any deeper with this man. He was afraid he'd be broken if Isha ever rejected him. It couldn't be helped. He'd lost his heart to Beryl on their first meeting. He'd lost his heart to her father last night.

He was in too deep.

Sighing, Navin held out Beryl for Isha to take. "Here, why don't you put her down for her nap? Rabi'a isn't back yet, but I'm going to go out and take a little walk around, okay?"

He was giving himself time to think, but Isha needed time alone as well. He needed to see that Navin trusted him. It was ridiculous that out of the two of them, Isha was the one with the stronger claim on Beryl, but Navin admitted he was more

comfortable around her. How terrible must that have been on Isha? Wanting to get closer to his daughter, but afraid he didn't know what he was doing. Must have been a first for him. No wonder he panicked. He was always so in control.

He paused for a moment, studying father and daughter together. He was right, she was going to look exactly like Isha when she grew up.

He stepped outside, turning his face up into the shining sun. Walking for a few minutes, he wasn't really paying attention to his surroundings.

"Well, well... look who I found. You've been a naughty boy, Navin."

Navin whirled toward the voice, tensing when Pran stepped out into the clearing. Great, just when he'd started relaxing his guard. He wondered if he could run back to Isha without Pran attacking him.

"What are you doing here?" Navin angled himself, stepping backward.

"Oh, I think you know. Did you really think I was going to let you go? I've claimed you already, boy. You're mine."

He really didn't need this now. Not after everything that had been happening with Isha and Rabi'a. He'd almost forgotten about the threat of Pran.

A terrible growl sounded behind Navin. "You dare? Navin is mine, Pran. Leave now." Isha's body was suddenly pressed to Navin's back, his arms coming around to clamp Navin to him. When had he come? He was supposed to be with Beryl.

Pran scowled, his attractive features turning ugly with the force of his emotions. "Stay out of this, Isha. I have prior claim."

"You have no such thing. He's mine." Isha snarled again, the sound ringing through the clearing.

Navin opened his mouth to speak. Isha squeezed him tightly, cutting off his air. What the hell? If he wanted to say something, he damn well would. Turning to glare at Isha, he was surprised when the man grinned.

"You think this is funny?" Pran snarled. He stepped forward, obviously wanting a long and painful death. No one fought Isha. It was common knowledge among the Tigris.

Pran apparently wasn't privy to that knowledge. He lunged, throwing himself at Navin and Isha. Navin ducked out of the way, propelled in part by the hand from behind him.

Isha met Pran head on, the two men clashing together fiercely. The clearing was filled with the sound of their fight, grunts and piercing growls. Isha swiped out with one hand, slashing four deep gouges along Pran's chest. Pran screamed in pain.

"Enough!"

Pran startled, turning to the right and just barely avoiding Isha's fist. Navin followed his gaze to spy Rabi'a, holding Beryl close. She must have come back after he'd left.

"Rabi'a --"

"Enough, Pran. Get out of here before you make this worse. I've heard about your little threats, and enough is enough. Leave it alone."

"You have no idea what you're talking about." Pran spat on the ground, his tail jerking madly. He lifted a hand to press against his wound.

Navin frowned. How did these two know each other?

Rabi'a stepped forward, ignoring Isha's warning hiss. "I know why you're doing this, and truthfully, I don't really blame you for being mad. But you're taking it out on the wrong person and you know it. Punishing Navin, or even Rajiv, isn't going to hurt the one person you're mad at. So let it go. Please, Pran. For me. Let it go."

Pran's chin quivered. Closing his eyes, he huffed out a breath. "You know nothing," he hissed. With that last parting shot, he turned and loped off.

"Okay, what was that about?" Navin stared down the path Pran had taken. Was he going to come back? That was easier than he'd thought it would be. He'd prepared himself for a long, drawn out battle.

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you all the details. He was hurt once, a very long time ago by someone he cared about. Because of that, he hates the Leo, hates anyone who associates with them. I can't really blame him, but he's become a very bitter man since then. He needs to stop or he'll do something he'll regret."

"Who was it?" Isha asked, pacing toward Navin and taking him into his arms.

"You know, or at least you suspect, or you wouldn't have asked."

Isha squeezed Navin, rocking him back and forth.

Rabi'a sighed. "I'm sorry, I must go. I have to warn my brother that Pran's worse. Maybe he can come back and do something about it. It shouldn't have gone on this long. Pran needs to stop."

"I understand." Isha released Navin, stepping forward and taking Beryl from Rabi'a. "You are welcome in our home anytime. You know that, right?"

"Of course." She leaned in, brushing her lips against Isha's cheek. Repeating the gesture on the top of Beryl's head, she motioned for Navin to approach. He stepped forward. "Take care of them. And take care of yourself."

"I will. Be safe, Rabi'a. I'll be thinking of you."

She quirked her lips, chuckling, before she leaned in and kissed him on the lips. Ignoring Isha's growl, she lingered, startling Navin. Pulling back, she laughed gaily. "If you could see your face, Isha! What, you think I'm going to steal your boy?"

"He's mine, don't worry about that," Isha growled.

"I'll see you all soon." Rabi'a turned, loping off to her conveyance.

"Where's she going?" Navin asked, leaning into the arm Isha slung over his shoulder.

"She's going to her brother."

"Riiight, but who's her brother?"

Chapter Six

"Have you ever heard of the half breed, Khalid?" Isha asked.

"Rajiv's mentioned him before. He's part of Durai's pride, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he was born to the same female as Rabi'a but they have different fathers. Khalid's father was a Leo. When the man found out about his son, he came to take him away. That's all I know about it, but obviously Pran is tied into that somehow."

Navin frowned. "As long as he doesn't come back here, I'm okay with it. I just don't like how out-of-control he was. It was scary."

"You don't have to worry about him. If what Rabi'a said didn't sway him, you can be assured that I'll kill him if he ever sets foot in my territory again."

"Wow, I can't believe it's over. I kept expecting this big, huge fight. I wasn't prepared for this. It's kind of a let down."

"A let down? Because no one got killed? Navin, you really need to rethink your priorities. You should always be prepared for death, but you should never go seeking it for yourself or for others. Trust me, once you kill a man it stays with you."

Navin shrugged. "Rajiv said something similar once. I forgot about that."

"Where is your brother?"

"You didn't hear?"

Isha turned them to start walking back to the abode. Beryl babbled to him, clapping her paws and squealing over everything they passed. Isha nodded occasionally, seemingly caught up in her explanations. He was a good father. He bounced her against his chest, holding her close.

Navin brushed up against his side, entwining his tail with Isha's as they walked.

"I'd heard that he was mated to one of the Gatti brothers."

Navin nodded. "The youngest one, Usama. You know, the one that's pure white."

"Ah, yes, I was surprised when I heard. Your brother is always so careful to remain strong. I was shocked to discover his mate was so weak."

"Usama isn't weak. He's just different. He's tough, believe me. He fought one of the Leos a while ago when they first met the human his brother mated. Apparently he held his own. He may be white, and at a natural disadvantage, but he knows how to protect himself."

"Sounds like you like him," Isha commented, swinging Beryl in his arms. She giggled, squealing loudly.

Navin laughed, covering his sensitive ears. Isha was wincing. "It's your own fault for that one. Yeah, I like Usama. He suits Rajiv."

They reached the clearing. Isha stood back, waiting for Navin to enter first. They both slumped down into chairs, sighing. "Well, let's hope things get a little less exciting after this. I don't think I can take much more."

Navin laughed. Beryl giggled again, holding out her arms for him. Isha passed her over easily, and Navin cuddled the little one close. "Did you have fun today? Got to see lots of pretty things, didn't you? Hung out with your mommy again. Hmm... you must be hungry, huh?"

Beryl cooed, blowing kisses at him.

"I still have no idea what she's saying." Isha rested his head on the back of the chair, stretching his legs out.

"Give her time. I've been trying to practice with her, but I don't think she's ready for us to learn what she's saying yet."

"She just wants to give her two fathers headaches. I can see right through you, Beryl."

Navin froze.

"What's wrong?" Isha immediately picked up on his distress.

"What did you just say?"

"She just wants to give us headaches."

"No, you said two fathers. As in the two of us?" Navin couldn't breathe.

"Well, yeah. She has two fathers. What did you expect me to say?" Isha seemed genuinely perplexed.

Navin blinked to keep the tears away. His throat was all clogged up. "*Ga'ad*, I'm acting like a female again."

"Yeah, you might want to stop that. I'm not attracted to females."

"Did you just make a joke?"

"Better write this day down, it may never happen again."

Navin laughed, throwing his head back. "Oh, I'm getting to you. Slowly, but surely, I'm getting to you. Maybe you're the one who should be careful. I'll have you turned into a genuine, caring Tigris before long, crying at sad stories and whimpering like a female."

Isha mock-growled, standing up to tousle the top of Navin's hair. "Never!" he sneered, laughing as he walked to the kitchen.

"We should put Beryl down. She's drooping again."

Isha wandered back with a sleeve of *dher* milk. Exchanging his burden with Navin, he held Beryl close, bringing her to the crib. He set her down, carefully pulling the blanket up over her.

Navin drank some of the milk, standing up and bringing it back to the kitchen. "I'm about ready for a nap myself."

Isha grinned, walking over to their pallet. He sprawled along the surface, patting the mat beside him. Navin wasted no time in getting under the covers, snuggling up beside Isha.

It was quiet for so long Navin had almost fallen asleep.

"Are you happy with me?" Isha's voice was hushed.

"What? Where did this come from?"

"You've given me so much. A home for my daughter, a family, yourself... I don't know what I can give you in return."

Navin couldn't figure out what to say. Was he serious?

"I know I'm not very good at this kind of stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Intimacy. I just don't know what to do, how to act. This isn't coming out right. You deserve better."

"Better than what?" Navin was aware he was parroting Isha's words, but he seriously couldn't figure out where Isha was coming from. Didn't the man know how happy Navin was?

"Me."

"Are you kidding me? I don't ever want to hear you say that again! I never would have thought you'd be so insecure. Frankly, I don't like it. You don't know what you've given me? The same things I've given you! You gave me Beryl, you gave me yourself. You've given me the strength to stand up on my own, knowing you'll always be at my back. That's what you've given me. I love you, Isha. I don't give my love easily, but you have it."

Isha stiffened beside him, turning to face Navin. "You mean that?"

"I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it. I love you."

"Cittaja, heart mate..."

Navin breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm guessing you feel the same way as I do?"

"Of course, Cittaja. You have held my heart since the first day I saw you with my daughter. You were so gentle with her. I just didn't know how to act around you. Until the night I saw you watching us in the water. I saw the love in your eyes that night, or at least I thought I might have seen it."

"Oh, you saw it all right. I meant it then, and I mean it now. Please don't make me leave."

"What? Why would I do that?" Isha frowned.

"You said when you got tired of me --"

"That will never happen. Have no fear."

"Is that right? Why don't you prove it?" Navin wriggled, anxious to see what Isha would do next.

"Prove it? Isn't that supposed to be my line?"

Navin laughed. "Well, if you don't think you're up to it..."

Isha smacked him on the arm, shaking his head when it made Navin laugh harder.

"Do you want to fuck me?"

Navin froze, his breath caught in his throat. Suddenly, he started choking. Isha pulled him up, exasperated. He pounded Navin's back until Navin waved for him to stop. "Are you serious? I thought you were dominant."

"I am, Navin. That has nothing to do with whose cock is up whose ass. Trust me, you'll know who's in charge."

Navin almost swallowed his tongue at that image. "*Ga'ad*, you're trying to kill me, aren't you?"

"Do you want to or not?"

"That's not much of a choice. Uh... definitely! What did you think I was going to say?"

"Stop trying to be a smart ass and get the *ljuba*."

Navin whimpered. "Just like that?"

"What, you wanted to wait for an engraved invitation?"

"Now who's being the smart ass?"

"Just get the *ljuba* or you won't get anywhere near my ass."

Navin reached over to grab the tube. He wasn't giving this up anytime soon. He wanted this so badly. Who knew? He'd never been interested in topping before. He'd always been the submissive partner in any relationship. Although, he was starting to learn that submission had nothing to do with who was fucking and who was being fucked. He had a feeling Isha was right. He would know who was in charge. Isha didn't radiate submission from any pore.

Isha lay back, getting comfortable on the pallet.

"Uh, I don't know how long I can last," Navin admitted.

"It's fine, cub. Just take me however you want to. There'll be time for more later. We have a lifetime of laters to get to."

Navin lowered himself to rest against Isha. "I love touching you."

"I noticed." Isha grinned, letting his head fall back.

Navin took the rare opportunity to study the other man. He was built solidly, his body muscular and fit. He radiated power. His stripes were fascinating, drawing Navin's eyes down, following the unique pattern. He liked them better than his own nutty brown stripes.

He reached down to palm Isha's cock, determined to make this good for the other man. Isha groaned and arched into the touch.

"Have you ever..." Navin didn't know how to phrase the question.

Isha shook his head in the negative. Navin blew out a breath, suddenly aware of how much pressure was on his shoulders. If he didn't make this good for Isha...

He leaned down, kissing Isha's stomach, running down the stripes on it until his lips met the shaft of his cock. Isha shifted on the bed. Navin let his lips caress the flesh in front of him, not applying too much pressure, just enough to drive Isha mad.

He angled his head, sucking the tip of Isha's cock into his mouth. Relaxing his mouth -- careful of his teeth -- he started to bob down on the thick length. It hit the back of his throat, and he tried to ignore his automatic gag reflex.

He kept repeating his mantra in his head. *I have to make this good for Isha, I have to make this good for Isha...*

While he had Isha distracted, he inched one hand down between his legs. Glancing over his sac, he paused for a moment to cup the round spheres in his hand. Isha groaned when he rolled them gently.

Navin moved down, sliding his finger behind Isha's balls and smoothing down the strip of sensitive skin. He toyed with the puckered hole, running his digit around and around, teasing Isha with the motions.

Releasing Isha's cock, Navin glanced down to see what he was doing. He had the tube of *ljuba* in his free hand and he used it to slick up his fingers, warming the gel in his hand. Returning to Isha's backside, he gently explored the pucker, seeing how far he could go before Isha tensed up.

He was pleasantly surprised when Isha bore down on his finger. "Stop fucking around!" he demanded loudly. Navin grinned, thrusting his finger in with one slide. Isha cried out, jerking his hips. Navin glanced up to make sure he was all right. His cock was leaking profusely, the head flushed red.

Oh, yeah, Isha liked it.

He removed his finger, inserting two fingers this time, scissoring them to widen his opening.

"That's enough, Navin." Isha was gasping for breath. He sounded as if he'd been running for hours.

"It's not enough, Isha. Hold out a bit longer."

Isha growled. "I said it was enough. Fuck me now!"

Navin had to pause or he was in danger of coming himself. He loved that dominant throaty growl. Did him every time. Without stopping to second guess his decision, Navin scooted up, fitting himself between Isha's thighs. His cock bumped against Isha's ass, and they both paused.

"Now," Isha purred.

Navin began to press in, gritting his teeth against the fierce tightness. He wasn't sure if he could make it. Isha had his eyes closed, his face tight. Navin slid in past the head, his eyes crossed from the sensations shooting through his body. Isha tightened the ring of his ass. "Oh, shit!" Navin jerked, his balls emptying his come into Isha. He hadn't even gotten the whole shaft in and it felt like his cock was exploding.

Isha cried out, reaching down to jerk his own cock. Navin reached up to help, sliding his thumb along the slit in the head. Isha gasped, locking eyes with Navin and then he, too, was coming. The white liquid fell in droplets to his belly.

"Oh wow, I'm sorry," Navin gasped. "I tried to hold out, but your ass is like a vise. I just couldn't do it."

Isha snorted. "Do you hear me complaining?"

"We need to do that again so I can make it up to you."

"Mmm, I could get behind that."

Navin crawled up Isha's body, settling himself down beside him. "You mean I could get behind you, don't you?"

"Don't get smart with me." Isha chuckled, swiping his hand against Navin's ass. "Get some rest. We'll be up with Beryl in a few hours."

"I can't wait. Let's just hope things calm down now."

Navin closed his eyes, breathing deeply, inhaling the scent of his mate.

Chapter Seven

"Navin, get up!"

Ga'ad, was he ever going to wake up normally? Navin snuggled deeper into the covers, groaning when Isha smacked him on the ass.

"I'm serious, get up now!"

Sighing, Navin sat up, blinking his eyes. "What's the big deal?"

"I believe I am."

Oh, shit! Navin turned slowly, meeting his brother's gaze. Rajiv was standing in the doorway, a horrible glower on his face. His tail was still, a dangerous sign.

"Rajiv, what are you doing here?"

"Ambaya contacted me. She said you hadn't contacted her in two weeks and she was worried Isha had rejected you. Why didn't you tell me about Pran?"

Rajiv stalked into the room, ignoring Isha. Navin groped around for the material to wrap around his hips, scooting up to get dressed while still under the covers. Suitably decent, he stood up, crossing his arms. "There wasn't anything you could have done."

Rajiv snarled.

"That's enough, Rajiv. I won't have you threatening my mate."

Rajiv threw Isha an incredulous look. "Your *what*?"

"You heard me the first time. It's my job to protect Navin and I've just about had enough people threatening him."

"You think I would hurt my own brother? Look here, Isha, you better take that back or you'll be the one I'll hurt."

Navin huffed. They were acting like children.

"You dare come into my home and threaten both of us? Who do you think you are?"

Usama suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Uh, guys, what's going on in here? We can all hear you."

"Usama, get back outside!"

Usama glared at his mate, folding his arms across his chest instead. He looked to Navin, shaking his head. Navin grinned, glad to finally have someone he could commiserate with.

Beryl took that moment to wake up screaming loud enough to tear the roof down. Usama and Rajiv froze, swinging their gazes around. The door was suddenly filled with men. Fahd was the first to enter, his big black body held protectively in front of his mate. Laithe pushed him aside, the tall Leo shaking his thick brown mane to see in each corner.

Navin spied several more figures behind them. That was probably Asad and Lev right behind Laithe. They looked the most alike of all the Gatti brothers. Both men possessed the same tawny skin and golden mane. A spotted arm appeared behind Lev; that must belong to Morgan, the Pardus. Navin wondered where the humans were.

Shaking his head, he ignored them to go to Beryl. He picked her up, holding her close despite her flailing limbs. "What's wrong, little one? Are you mad at all the screaming? Yeah, you're the only one who's allowed to scream in here, aren't you? Those bad men are trying to take away all the attention. We won't let them do that, will we? No, we won't."

Isha appeared behind him. He reached out to stroke Beryl's cheek. "Hush." Beryl opened her eyes, still flailing around, but her voice was knocked down a few levels. She was whimpering now, big fat tears on her cheeks.

"It's okay, little one. Daddy's here."

"Both of them," Isha added. She swung her head around, finding Isha with her gaze.

Navin suddenly realized how silent the rest of the room was. He turned, Beryl tucked safely in his arms, to find his brother standing with his mouth open.

"Surprise," Navin whispered. Rajiv looked like it wouldn't take much to knock him down.

"When?"

"It's a long story, trust me. Look, I'm sorry I didn't contact Ambaya. I completely forgot about the two-week limit."

Rajiv snorted. "You're going to be in so much trouble for this one."

"Somehow I think she'll forgive you once she spies this little one," Usama quipped. "What's her name?"

"Beryl." Navin looked down at his daughter with pride. Isha definitely made beautiful babies.

A feminine gasp sounded from the doorway. Rowan pushed her way in, sliding past her mates, Laithe and Fahd. "Oh, she's absolutely gorgeous! Can I hold her?"

Navin nodded, passing her over to Rowan. She took Beryl like a pro, instinctively holding her the way Beryl liked.

"This doesn't change anything." Rajiv was still glaring at Isha. "I haven't forgotten that my innocent baby brother was in your bed when we got here."

"Rajiv, drop it." Navin shook his head.

"What happened with Pran?"

"It's taken care of. At least I think it is. I'm not sure what he'll do or where he's gone, but Rabi'a said she was getting her brother to take care of it."

"Khalid is coming here?" Laithe asked, his voice quiet.

"You know Khalid?"

Laithe shrugged his shoulders. "Everyone on Felid knows Khalid. He's the biggest man I've ever met, with the best traits from both his Leo and Tigris heritages. What does Khalid have to do with Pran?"

It was Navin's turn to shrug. He still wasn't one hundred percent convinced of that himself. Regardless of the story Rabi'a and Isha told him, he couldn't see Pran being hurt by some male. He didn't seem to care about anyone.

"Hey, Navin."

Navin whirled, spying the human, Aaron, standing beside Lev and Morgan. Aaron was smaller than the two furry men. The only hair on him was the reddish mop on top of his head. Surprisingly, his face was now covered with hair, too. That hadn't been there when he'd left.

"Aaron! You came back? What, couldn't get enough of the Tigris? Just had to come back here to hang out with us, didn't you?" He laughed, shaking his head. Aaron grinned, coming forward to clasp Navin in a bear hug. The two men had become close when he'd been here before. "Seriously, what are you doing here?"

"Turns out I'm mated to Lev." He nervously fidgeted with his glasses, stroking his fingers along the wire frame.

"What?"

Morgan coughed, the sawing sound loud in the room. Beryl giggled, clapping her hands. "Uh, actually, I'm mated to both Lev *and* Morgan." Aaron turned back to the men with a leer.

"*Ga'ad*, I didn't see that coming." Navin snorted, looking around the room. Rowan was sitting in a chair, rocking back and forth, her eyes closed, Beryl tucked close to her heart.

Laithe and Fahd had come up behind her, studying the babe in her arms. They both had goofy expressions on their faces. "I can't believe so much has changed since you found me." She smiled, humming a few bars of an unfamiliar tune.

"Are you happy?" Navin shifted, moving closer to her. She was the only woman in the room, one of the only humans, but she was more fragile than Aaron ever would be. He was curious as to how she felt living with these men who were so different from her.

She paused, lifting her lashes to reveal her crystal bright gaze, luminous with unshed tears. Leaning down, she rubbed her cheek against the top of Beryl's head. Navin watched while Beryl snuffled, curling in tighter against Rowan.

"I couldn't be happier. I have a family now. We're a family."

Navin looked at the men around him. Laithe and Fahd were standing beside Rowan, their tails entwined. Asad was leaning against the wall beside them, his little Lynx mate pulled up tight against his chest, Asad's big arms holding Catan close. Morgan and Lev were seated side by side on the floor, Aaron leaning against Lev's side, his head on Lev's shoulder.

Rajiv had slowed in his pacing, finally coming to a stop beside Usama. The two men weren't touching, except for the occasional brush of their tails against each other. Usama shifted in place, rubbing his shoulder against Rajiv, causing the bigger man to purr contentedly.

Isha's bigger hand suddenly grasped Navin's own. He glanced down, curling his fingers around Isha's.

Laithe might not have realized what he was doing when he set out after his mate, but that one event had set into motion all of this. Rowan was right. That one event had brought them together, making them stronger.

Making them a family.

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 www.jadebuchananbooks.com.