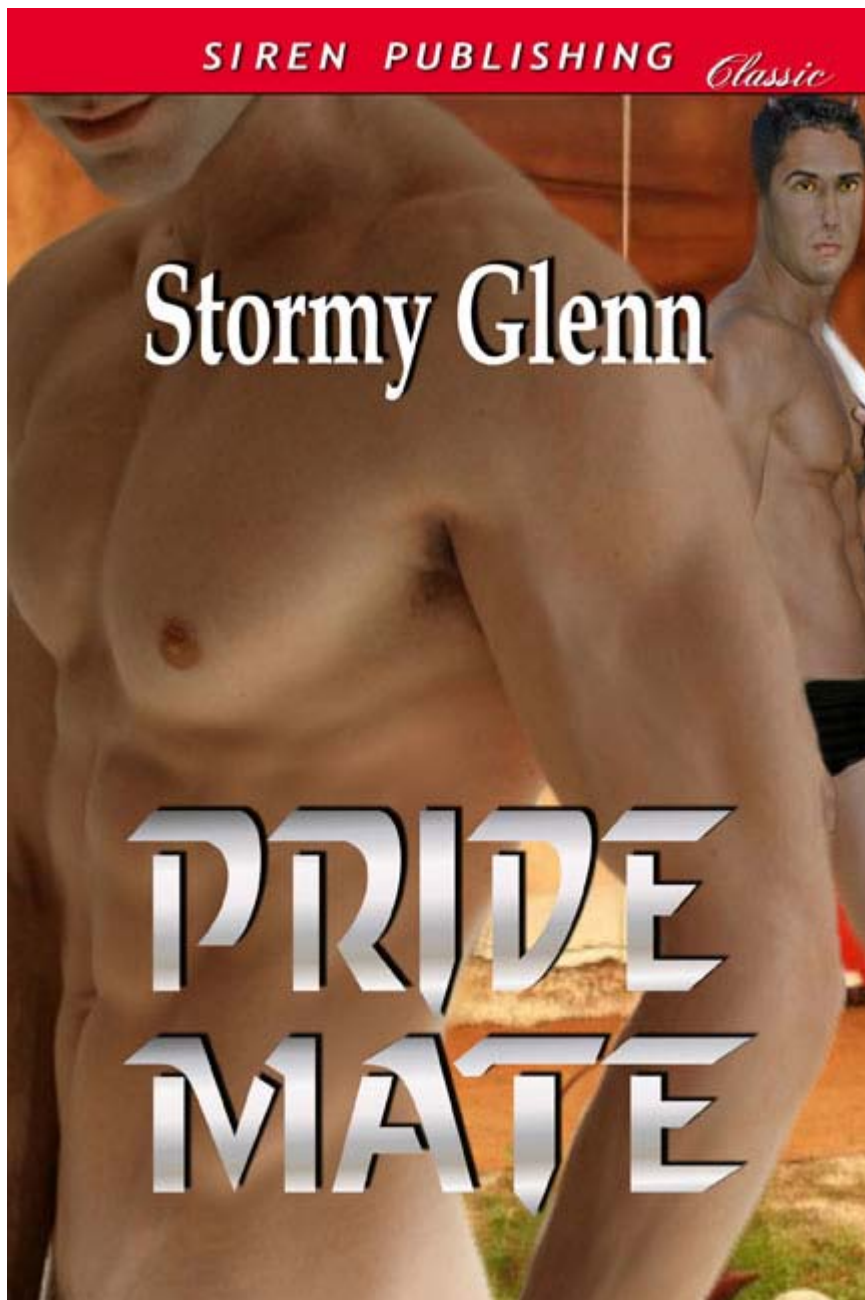


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Stormy Glenn

PRIDE MATE



Katzman 3

Pride Mate

Shaikh Bogden Dhal Wuher Al'Abdalha couldn't forget Anjali or the time they spent together. If it hadn't been for the death of his father, Bogden never would have left his mate. And he knows Anjali is his mate. They dream together.

To get Anjali back, Bogden buys his contract and sends for him. But Anjali isn't overjoyed to see Bogden. Instead, Anjali thinks he is a slave, bought due to his training as a pleasure slave. And he's pissed when he discovers who his new master is.

Before they can settle their differences, someone betrays them, attacking their desert camp. Chaos reigns as Bogden and Anjali try to fight for their people, fight for each other, and fight to stay alive. But can two men win against insurmountable odds or will they lose the love they share before they know they have it?

Genre: Alternative (M/M or F/F), Futuristic

Length: 40,981 words

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

PRIDE MATE

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Letter from Stormy Glenn

Regarding E-book Piracy

Dear Readers,

It is a joy for me to write my books and interact with my readers. I love creating worlds and characters in my books. Writing is also my career, my way of supporting my family, and I work at it fulltime. I do not have another career.

I am very upset and distressed when my books are pirated. My work has been stolen.

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With deep gratitude,

Stormy Glenn

DEDICATION

To all those on my yahoo group who inspires me with questions and encouragement, this book is for you. You know who you are!

PRIDE MATE

Katzman 3

STORMY GLENN

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Prologue

“I’ve found him.”

“Him?” Hassan asked, arching an eyebrow curiously. “Who him? Could you be more specific, brother?”

“My mate,” Shaikh Bogden Dhal Wuher Al’Abdalha said simply as he looked across the table at his brothers. He folded his hands together to keep from drumming his fingers anxiously on the table as he waited for his brothers’ responses.

“Many blessings upon you, brother,” Urik said, pounding on Bogden’s back so hard he grunted and fell forward. Urik was strong, the strongest of all the brothers physically. The man could crush someone if he wasn’t careful.

Bogden was just grateful that his brother never challenged him for leadership of their pride. Urik might win. Luckily, he said time and time again that he didn’t want the mantle of leadership. He much preferred not being in charge of the pride—just himself.

“Thank you, brother,” Bogden said after righting himself.

“So, where is he?” Hassan asked as he plopped down in a chair across the table from Bogden. He looked excited, but not as excited as Bogden felt that he could share this news with his brothers. “When do we get to meet him?”

“That part is not so easy.” Bogden grimaced. “I do not believe he knows we are mates.”

“He doesn’t know?” Hassan asked. “How can that be? A mate always knows.”

“He’s not a Katzman.” Bogden grimaced as he watched the surprise and shock on his brothers’ faces as he imparted that bit of information. “I found him when I was in service to the High Ruler. Anjali is from Elquone, like Commander Chellak Rai’s mate.”

Bogden couldn’t help but smile as he remembered the sexy little man he’d discovered while on a rescue mission with Commander Rai. He’d known the moment he spotted Anjali inside the cave that they were meant to be together.

“Ashu!” Urik swore softly. “You really know how to make things complicated, don’t you?”

“What are you going to do?” Hassan asked.

“Offer a contract for him?” Bogden asked. He hated the idea of offering a contract for his mate, but he couldn’t think of any other way to get the man now that Anjali had returned to his home planet of Elquone. “What else can I do?”

“Meet him?” Hassan asked.

“We’ve already met, Hassan. We rescued Anjali along with Trajan and Saris after they crashed on that deserted planet.” Bogden grinned proudly. “Anjali is the one that knocked Toc Jerell on his ass.”

“Then ask him if he’s even interested in being with you. Get to know him a little better.”

“And if he says no?” Urik snapped. “You know what will happen to Bogden if he’s denied his mate, his *mayht*. Is that what you want for him?”

“No, of course not, but...” Hassan shook his head.

“I will have my mate, Hassan.”

“Isn’t there just some way you can—I don’t know...,” Hassan waved his hand absently in the air, “work him into it slowly or something? Do you really have to purchase his contract?”

“Hassan!” Bogden snapped then immediately regretted it when his youngest brother’s head dropped forward. “Look, Hassan,” he said, calming his voice and his facial features, “I promise to give him whatever time I can, but now that I know he is out there, I can wait no longer to claim him.”

He really didn’t need Hassan’s agreement to claim his mate. It was an instinctual imperative to claim a mate once that person had been found. Bogden could no more deny that natural part of himself than he could stop breathing. Anjali was his.

It helped that Bogden had recently been appointed the Shaikh of the Leonid Pride upon his father’s death. Bogden now ruled all of the Province of Leonidia as his father had done before him. His word was law and final. Still, it made things easier to have his brothers’ agreement and support.

“So, will you help me obtain my mate?” Bogden asked hopefully as he looked across the large wooden table at his brothers. They nodded their heads. “All right, I’ll have Yasir get the ball rolling first thing in the morning.”

“What if he says no, Bogden?” Hassan asked.

“Why would he? I’m offering him a good life here. As my mate, he’ll help me rule our people. He’ll be the *Hahyda*, the heart of our pride.”

“I don’t know, Bogden.” Hassan shrugged. “It all seems so cold and calculating to me. I mean, come on, a contract? Weren’t those outlawed by the Federation of Planets? Look at all the trouble Chellak Rai went through when he had a contract with his mate. He almost went to prison.”

“Hassan,” Bogden said, “you know I don’t have any other choice. I need my mate. As for the contract, that is what is needed to bring

Anjali to our province. I figure if we complete the mating ceremony when he arrives, then no one can say anything.”

“I know. I just feel bad about—”

“Hassan, things are still precarious on Katzmann. You know that,” Bogden said. “Our life here is dangerous even without the interference from the Federation of Planets. I have to bring Anjali here as fast as I can and complete the mating before his contract is sold to someone else. I don’t have time to romance him.”

“Yeah, but it’s like you’re buying him. Why can’t you just get to know him first? Isn’t that what normal people do?”

“Hassan, we are not normal people.” Bogden chuckled.

“No, I guess not, but this still feels wrong.”

“Once I get Anjali here and complete the mating ceremony, I’ll make sure that there is nothing that he wants for. If he’s anything like most people I know, he’ll be in heaven.”

“If you say so,” Hassan grumbled. “But I still don’t like it.”

“Would you rather I didn’t send for him?” Bogden asked, his voice hardening with aggravation. Everyone knew what would happen if Bogden didn’t have his mate now that he’d found him. The separation would drive Bogden insane.

“No, but—”

“Look, let’s just do this, and we’ll deal with the fallout after he’s here, okay?” Urik said, looking between the brothers.

“Urik.” Hassan laughed. “Ever the voice of reason.”

“Bite me!” Urik snarled, making Hassan laugh even harder.

“Okay, I’m going to go talk with Yasir. I’ll be back in a little while,” Bogden said as he stood to his feet. He could barely stop himself from rolling his eyes at his brothers. They were always arguing with each other.

Maybe it came from growing up together, but he knew neither of them would hurt the other or him. They were brothers, with Bogden born first, then Urik, and last, Hassan.

They were also closer than he believed most brothers were. Bogden knew that his brothers would do anything for him, just as he would for them. Needing his mate wasn't going to change that. Bogden wouldn't let it.

Chapter 1

“You can’t be serious. You sold my contract? I’m your son. How could you sell me?” Anjali yelled at his father from across the table. He was so pissed he couldn’t see straight. He’d barely been home from his ordeal three months, and already his father was trying to get rid of him.

“Anjali, you’re overreacting. I did not sell you. I agreed to a contract for you.” Yuri Kirill tried to reason with his son.

“So, you basically sold me. Tell me, Father, how much was I worth to you? How much do you get for me?” Because Anjali knew as sure as he was standing there that his father made money off the deal.

Anjali was shocked although he knew he shouldn’t be. His father used his children like commodities. Already, four of his five siblings had been sold into contracts, his father collecting the contract fees.

“There is nothing dishonorable about a contract, Anjali. It’s done every day. Besides, your brother was too young.”

“My—my brother?” Anjali asked, shocked. “You were actually considering my brother? He’s not old enough to enter one of the castes. He’s barely old enough to enter into a contract. Have you finally lost your mind?”

“I think I’ve heard just about enough out of you, Anjali,” Yuri snapped as he slapped his hand down on the desk. “I am the head of this household, and you will do as I say.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll just have to enter your brother into the contract.”

“He’s not old enough!” Anjali yelled, thinking he had figured out how to keep his father from selling him or his younger brother. He knew he was wrong when he heard his father’s next words.

“He’s of legal age—old enough by our laws. Nothing says I can’t enter him into a contract now and put him into training when he is old enough. I need the money that this contract will bring, Anjali. I will have it one way or another. Now, is it going to be you or your brother?”

Anjali stared at his father, hating the man with everything in his being. It wasn’t like they had ever been close anyway. Having been raised at the family compound, he had met his father maybe five times in his entire life. He dreaded each and every time.

Yuri Kirill preferred to stay where the action was in the city and the Senate House. He came home every few years, just long enough to drop off another child he had created with some nameless woman.

Anjali wasn’t even sure who his mother was. None of his siblings knew either. Within moments of his birth, he had been whisked away by his father and brought to the family estate. Except for when he’d been sent for his Vergnügen Caste training and then been kidnapped by Trajan Varl, Anjali had remained on the estate until today when his father had arrived.

Knowing that his father saw him as nothing more than an investment, it still hurt that he was selling him to some nameless stranger. Anjali knew that was exactly what his father was doing—selling him.

Oh, it might be wrapped up with a pretty bow called a *contract*, but it all came down to selling one person to another for an agreed-upon sum of money. Yuri would receive a large sum of money, and Anjali would be someone else’s property. It was slavery, plain and simple.

But maybe he could save his brother. He certainly couldn’t save himself or anyone else. “If I agree to this, I want Marika to go with

me. I want you to sign papers giving me all control over him. That's the only way I'll agree to this."

Yuri looked intently at Anjali for several moments before nodding his head. "Done, but only if you agree to the contract in every way. You will not fight it. Is that clear?"

"As crystal," Anjali said. "Now, who did you sell me to?"

Yuri started chuckling. "Oh, I think I'll save that part of it. I wouldn't want to end your anticipation before it's time."

Anjali rolled his eyes. "Fine, but I won't sign anything until I have Marika's papers in my hand. Am I clear?"

"You'll be ready to go in two days." Yuri snickered. "Marika, too, of course."

"Of course," Anjali replied, wondering what he had gotten himself into. If his father was keeping the name of the contract holder from him, he must be truly amused by the situation. Yuri Kirill never did anything unless it was in his best interest.

"Can I go now?"

"Certainly, my son, but as I said, be ready to go in two days. You do not want to keep anyone waiting."

Anjali ground his teeth together, trying to keep the angry words in his mind from spilling out of his mouth. He had two days to pack his belongings and get ready to leave the only home he had ever known. Two days to resign himself to being someone's property.

He quickly left his father's office and closed the door behind him before leaning back against the wall. Anjali had to draw in several deep breaths before he could even consider moving again.

His entire world had just come to a screeching halt. It had ended as surely as if someone had stabbed a knife in his heart. Anjali pressed his hand against his stomach when it began to roll, nausea sweeping through him. He had no clue how he was going to get out of the mess he suddenly found himself in. There just didn't seem to be any options left to him.

Anjali rubbed his hand over the small bump in his abdomen he kept hidden from everyone with long bulky tunics and almost let go of the tears threatening to spill from his eyes. There didn't seem to be any option left to either of them. And there was no one coming to save them. Anjali and the child he carried were on their own.

Taking one last deep breath, Anjali pushed himself away from the wall and headed down the hallway toward Marika's room. He needed to fill his brother in on what had happened and tell him to pack as well. Marika was the youngest and the only sibling Anjali had left. His father had already sold his other siblings off in contracts. He opened Marika's door and looked in, finding him sitting by the window reading a book.

Marika's face was anxious as he looked up when Anjali entered. Worry lines had formed around his eyes, and his face was pale. "Has he left yet?"

Marika hated their father just as much as Anjali did, maybe even more so. Marika was not an outgoing person, preferring his books and plants to people. He got nervous every time their father came to visit and tried to hide away as much as he could.

Yuri was not quiet concerning his disgust of his youngest child. He was constantly putting Marika down whenever he could, calling him names and basically making his life miserable. Yuri seemed to derive great pleasure from it.

"He'll be leaving in a couple of days, but so will we. Our illustrious father has seen fit to sign a contract for me. The only way I would agree to it was if he gave me complete control over you and you got to go with me. He agreed."

"What? He sold you? How could he—" Marika suddenly frowned. "How much?"

Anjali shook his head. "He didn't say, and I don't really care. I'm just glad he agreed to my terms."

"Did he say who he sold you to?"

Anjali shook his head again as he wondered the same thing. “No, he wants me to savor the anticipation.”

“Idiot!” Marika grumbled.

Anjali carefully lowered himself down to sit on the floor beside his brother, patting Marika’s leg. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“Anjali, what if the person who bought your contract is as bad as our father?” Marika asked as he fidgeted with the worn material of his pants. “Maybe we should just leave now while we can.”

“No, Marika.” Anjali shook his head even though he had thought the very same thing. “We have to see this through. It may be our only chance to get away from Father legally. If the person that bought my contract turns out to be like our father, then we’ll leave. Okay?”

Marika shrugged his shoulders. “I guess, but I’m scared, Anjali.”

“I know,” Anjali said, “me, too. But as long as we stick together, we’ll be fine. Besides, whoever bought me could turn out to be someone really nice. Even if they’re not, maybe their family will be.”

“If they’re doing business with Father, I doubt it.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right, but we can hope, can’t we?”

“You never should have come back,” Marika whispered. “You were free. You should have stayed away and stayed free.”

Anjali grimaced. He had almost stayed free. If it hadn’t been for the urgent call from his father concerning Marika getting sick, he would have, too. Marika was the only thing that could have brought Anjali back, the only thing that could have taken him away from where he really wanted to be.

Luckily, it hadn’t been a life-threatening illness, just one that made Marika unable to serve their father for a certain amount of time, hence why Anjali was called home—to serve his father.

Anjali reached up and lifted Marika’s chin. “And leave you here? I couldn’t do that, and you know it. You’re all I have, Marika.” Marika and the unborn child Anjali now carried.

“What about the guy you told me about?” Marika asked, one golden eyebrow arched. “You seemed to have a lot to say about him when you got back. You could have stayed with him.”

Anjali dropped his arm and stared down at his fingers as he began to twist them together. Heartache flooded him as he remembered Bogden and the few weeks they’d had together. He almost reached down to rub his stomach but stopped himself just in time.

The unborn baby he carried was his little secret. He hadn’t even told Marika yet, and his brother was his best friend. But talking about the baby would make it real, and right now Anjali needed it to still be a fantasy.

“He left,” Anjali said softly. “I thought maybe there was something there, but...” Anjali shrugged as the pain of Bogden’s desertion swept through him again. “I guess he didn’t have a reason to stick around.”

Anjali imagined he would wonder until his dying day why Bogden had left him. He knew the man had liked him. Hell, after Anjali had been rescued, Bogden had hardly ever left his side, and then, one day, he was simply gone.

There had been no goodbye, no words spoken between them or promises made. Bogden had just been gone. In fact, it had taken Anjali two days of searching before he even discovered that Bogden had left. No one said anything to him, as if he didn’t matter.

Anjali supposed, in a way, he didn’t. He was just someone that Bogden had rescued and fooled around with on the side. He had been expected to return to Elquone and his family. The connection he thought he had with Bogden was probably all in his own mind.

Maybe it was a byproduct of his Vergnügen training? The training could be more intense than Brüter training. A Brüter was trained to sire a child by contract. A Vergnügen was trained to be a pleasure slave, subject to the will of whoever owned the contract.

Anjali was just thankful that his training was never completed. The thought of being a mindless drone, subject to the sexual whims of

whoever owned his contract, made Anjali's stomach clench and threaten to rebel.

Of course, nowadays, almost anything threatened to make his stomach rebel. It was just another reason why Anjali didn't understand Bogden leaving him. They had shared some special times together, intimate times. For Bogden to leave after that broke Anjali's heart into a thousand aching pieces.

Anjali shook his head to get rid of his depressing thoughts and patted Marika on the leg. "Come on. You need to start packing. I don't want Father to have any reason to keep you here. And pack something small just in case we do have to run."

Marika looked around his small room. Anjali knew there really wasn't much for either of them to pack. Yuri Kirill was not known for sending much money home to his family. Most of what they had they had to work for.

"I'm going to my room to pack. I'll be back in a little while, and then maybe we can go down to the lake for a while. How's that sound?" Anjali asked, wanting to reassure his little brother.

"That sounds great. We haven't been down to the lake in a few weeks."

"Okay, then I'll be back in a couple of hours. I want you packed by the time I come back." He pushed himself to his feet, hoping Marika didn't notice how much effort it took him to get up off the floor.

"Okay."

Anjali watched his brother start gathering his most precious possessions, putting them into a small, raggedy old bag. It was a sad bag holding a sad amount of stuff. He vowed that, someday, his brother would have everything he'd ever wanted.

Turning toward the door, he paused when Marika called out to him. "Thanks for doing this, Anjali. I know you only agreed to Father's demands because of me. I'll make it up to you someday, I promise."

“I didn’t do this for you, Marika. I did it for us. Both of us.” *And for my child.* “I want us to have a chance at a new life away from Father. So, the best way you can pay me back is to be happy.”

“Okay, Anjali. I’ll try my best.”

“I know you will.” Anjali laughed as he walked out of the room, heading for his own bedroom. He hoped he was making the right decision where Marika was concerned and that whoever bought his contract, or at least their family, would accept Marika and treat him right.

And maybe they would accept Anjali’s secret, too.

* * * *

Anjali groaned as heat suffused his body. He ached, every nerve in his body feeling like it was being stimulated at the same time. Opening his eyes, he glanced down, his heart beating faster when he saw golden eyes looking up at him through a fall of raven-black hair.

“Bogden,” he whispered.

“My mayht, how I’ve missed you.”

A small cry fell from Anjali’s lips, and he arched into the air when Bogden began planting small kisses over his heated skin. Anjali panted heavily, aching with need. He felt this way every time Bogden touched him—lost, out of control. Only Bogden seemed to be able to keep him together.

He never dreamed Bogden’s hands would feel so warm, so gentle. The man was a warrior. He wielded a sword, fought for Commander Chellak Rai. He had trained most of his life to fight by the commander’s side. His demeanor, his larger-than-life size, and even the life he had lived, belied the gentle touches he bestowed on Anjali’s body.

“Bogden!” Anjali cried out when the man’s teeth nipped at him. A moment later, Bogden’s tongue soothed the small bite before moving on to more skin. Bogden’s hands were not idle, either, caressing

Anjali and slowly driving him out of his mind. Anjali didn't even have the brainpower to form a thought. All he could do was lie there and soak up the pleasure shooting through his body.

"Touching you brings me such pleasure, mayht."

Anjali wanted to answer, to tell Bogden he felt the same, but his thoughts fragmented as Bogden's hands and lips continued their hungry exploration of his body. Every little touch made his body tingle.

Anjali's breath hitched in his throat when Bogden's hands gently moved over his distended stomach. He glanced down quickly, worried that Bogden would be repulsed by the changes in his body. The last time they had been together, Anjali had been slim, beautiful. Now, he felt huge, and it would only get worse over the next two months until their child was born.

He was shocked when a serene, prideful smile crossed over Bogden's lips as he looked down at the large bump. He gently ran his hands over Anjali's skin, grinning wider when the baby gave a small kick.

"He's a strong one, mayht. He will make a fine warrior." Golden eyes suddenly glanced up at Anjali, making him inhale softly at the intensity he could see in their depths. "Thank you, Anjali, for giving me this gift."

"Y—you don't think I'm ugly now?"

"I've never seen you look more beautiful, mayht. This child that we created together is the proof of all we mean to each other. For you to carry him, to give life to that child..." Bogden shook his head. "Entya habby, entya hyety, entya a'lhabby."

Anjali frowned. "What?"

"It means you are my love, you are my life, you are my heart." Bogden grinned then leaned down to place a gentle kiss on Anjali's belly. "You are my mayht."

Anjali opened his mouth to reply, not sure of what he was going to say, but his breath came out in a long, surrendering moan instead.

Bogden had moved farther down his body, licking and kissing his fevered skin.

A spurt of hungry desire spiraled through Anjali when he felt Bogden's mouth take him in. Bogden's tongue slowly caressed the head of Anjali's cock, licking each inch, the slit in the top, then down under the edge of the head before Bogden swallowed him down to the root.

Anjali and Bogden had spent a lot of time in bed together back on Katzmann before the man disappeared. They had tried a lot of different things, experimenting with what they both liked and what aroused them both, but in all that time, Bogden had never sucked Anjali's cock. The feeling was mind-blowing.

Anjali started to arch into the air, wanting to push more of his cock into Bogden's mouth, until he felt two slick fingers sink into his ass. Anjali suddenly didn't know what to do—push up and into Bogden's mouth or push back and impale himself on Bogden's fingers.

Bogden took care of that indecision for Anjali when he started sucking on the cock in his mouth and shoving his fingers in and out of Anjali's ass all at the same time. Anjali went into sensation overload. The soft moans falling from his lips became louder and louder with each motion until he was letting out one loud cry.

"Bogden, please!"

"Okay, mayht, roll onto your side."

Anjali was all too eager to comply. He rolled onto his side then felt Bogden move up and settle down behind him. Anjali glanced over his shoulder, curious as to what Bogden's plan was until Bogden lifted his leg in the air and moved closer.

He couldn't control his outcry of delight. His eyes fell closed and his head dropped back when he felt Bogden's long, hard cock start to sink into his ass. There was nothing in the world that felt as good as Bogden fucking him. Nothing.

“Open your eyes, mayht,” Bogden said, his voice sounding rough and thick. “I want to see you when I take you.”

Anjali opened his eyes and turned to look at Bogden again. His breath hitched, his hands clenching in the blankets beneath him as Bogden filled him. Bogden’s golden eyes darkened to a deep amber color, their intensity almost too much to look at. Anjali suddenly knew he wasn’t just being fucked—he was being consumed, and he was helpless to stop it. He didn’t want to stop it.

“My mayht,” Bogden whispered. “My beautiful mayht.”

Passion inched through Anjali’s veins as Bogden began to move slowly, gently. Each thrust was measured, made to give the most pleasure possible. As gentle as Bogden was being, Anjali could see the cost of the man’s control in his eyes and feel it in the clench of Bogden’s hand on his hip.

“I won’t break, Bogden.”

“I will not bring harm to you or our child,” Bogden bit out through his clenched teeth. “I will love you in my way.”

Anjali wanted to argue, but he was too caught up in the sensations produced by the feeling of Bogden’s cock filling him over and over again. When Bogden’s hand wrapped around his cock and started stroking him, Anjali knew he wouldn’t last long. He was too close to the edge.

Passion pounded through Anjali. He couldn’t catch his breath. The pleasure, building at an alarming rate, was pure and explosive. Anjali felt like he was going to fragment at any moment.

“Come for me, my own,” Bogden whispered in Anjali’s ear. “Come for me, mayht.”

Anjali gasped in sweet agony as Bogden’s words shattered what little control he had left. His body melted as his release swept through him, the world around him careening on its axis until nothing existed except for him and the man crying out behind him.

Waves of ecstasy throbbed through Anjali as Bogden’s release filled him, warming him from the inside out. A deep feeling of peace

entered Anjali's body as Bogden's heavy breath blew across the curve of his neck.

"My mayht."

Anjali smiled as he turned to look at the man he had been falling in love with for weeks. He swallowed the despair that suddenly filled him when all he saw was an empty space where Bogden should have been.

Anjali glanced down to find his own fingers wrapped around his cock instead of Bogden's. His hand and lower belly were covered by his cum, but there was no other sign that he had just been loved by the large Katzman. Anjali was all alone.

He pressed his lips together to keep his agony at bay for just a few minutes more and reached for a cloth to clean himself off. He'd been having dreams about Bogden since he'd left the planet of Katzmann. He'd gotten used to waking up covered in his own cum. That didn't make it any easier to find he had just dreamed their intimate encounter.

Anjali tossed the dirty cloth down on the floor after cleaning himself off then curled into his bed, pulling the blanket back over his body again. Only when the blanket covered his head and he had his face pressed into his pillow did he give free reign to his agony.

Tears slowly slid down his cheeks. The babe inside of him moved, kicking against his stomach as if trying to alleviate some of Anjali's pain. Anjali wrapped his arm around his stomach, holding on to the one connection he had to Bogden even though he knew it would never take the place of its father. Nothing could.

Bogden had stolen his heart then tossed it away as if it didn't matter to him. That, more than anything, made Anjali's heart ache. He had been ready to give Bogden everything, and the man simply didn't care.

Anjali sniffled and wiped away the tears on his face. He had his baby and his dreams, but he wondered if that would be enough. In that moment, Anjali hated Bogden Wuher.

* * * *

“Anjali, your father would like to see you in his office.”

Anjali turned from cutting bread to look at his father’s assistant, Andrei, and nodded his head. He set the knife down and quickly wiped his hands before walking out of the kitchen toward his father’s office.

Great! What did he want now? Didn’t he understand that food wouldn’t be put on the table by itself? It wasn’t like they had lots of servants running around. Those were all reserved for his father’s estate in the city.

Anjali knocked on the office door when he reached it, waiting for his father’s reply before entering. He immediately noticed that there were two other men in the room. The first man was about his father’s height. He was dressed simply in black tunic pants, a white shirt, and a long, black robe.

The second man was dressed much the same way, but he was much, much taller. He had to be at least a good foot taller than Anjali’s own height. He seemed very intimidating. Anjali wondered briefly if he was related to whoever bought his contract.

But that would be impossible. The contract holder wasn’t supposed to be here for another day. While Anjali was packed and ready to go, he wasn’t ready to leave just yet. This place, while he hated it, was still the only place he had ever lived. Anjali also still hadn’t figured out how to escape the hell he was in, or even if he could. He needed more time.

“You called for me?” Anjali asked as he tore his gaze away from the two men and looked at his father.

“Yes, Anjali, due to pressing family duties, an emissary has arrived early for your contract. As such, I called you here to sign the contract,” Yuri stated as he held out a pen for Anjali, pushing a long document forward for him to sign.

Anjali inhaled sharply and stilled his features. He would not outwardly react, as he knew his father wanted. He took the pen from his father and leaned over the papers. “Do you have the other papers I require?”

“Now is not the time to talk about that, Anjali. Just sign the contract. We can discuss this later,” Yuri said, smiling over at the two men standing in the room. Anjali nearly rolled his eyes at how fake he knew the smile was.

“No, that was not our agreement. Either you have Marika’s papers ready for me or I will not sign.”

Anjali could see the anger and frustration in his father’s face, but he was insistent that he have Marika’s papers before he signed the contract. He wasn’t stupid. Once he signed the contract, he no longer had any leverage over his father.

“Anjali!” Yuri growled quietly as he stood to his feet, glaring at Anjali. “You agreed to sign the contract, and you will sign it right now.”

“Not until you give me Marika’s papers.”

Yuri took a threatening step toward Anjali, raising his hand in the air. “So help me, Anjali, if you don’t—”

“I do not believe the Shaikh wishes for the young man to be harmed in any way, Senator Kirill. If you persist in this course of action, I will be required to inform him of this, thus deducting a significant amount from the agreed-upon sum,” said the smaller of the two men.

Anjali turned to look at him in surprise. The Shaikh? Who in the hell was the Shaikh, and what did he have to do with Anjali’s contract? Was the Shaikh the one who purchased him?

“May I remind you, sir, that until Anjali signs the contract, he remains under my control?”

“Very well, Senator, then we withdraw our intent to enter into a contract with you and your son. Good day, sir.”

Anjali watched in shock as the two men turned to leave the room, his father nearly sputtering in his haste to keep them there. A part of him was thrilled that the two men were leaving. He had never wanted this contract in the first place. The other part of him saw his last opportunity for freedom from their father slipping away.

“Wait, please,” he said before he could stop himself. When the taller of the two men pinned his eyes on him, Anjali wished that he had kept his mouth shut. But this was his best hope of getting out from under his father’s thumb.

“I did agree to sign the contract. My father is correct about that. However, we have an agreement between the two of us, and I cannot sign until my father follows through with his end of the deal. As soon as he does, I would be more than happy to sign.”

“Senator?” the smaller man said, looking over at Anjali’s father.

After several moments, Yuri walked over to his desk and opened the middle drawer, pulling out a small piece of paper that he threw down on his desk. He looked up, glaring at Anjali.

“Now, sign,” he ordered.

Anjali reached over to the desk and grabbed the paper Yuri had thrown down, opening it up and quickly reading it. He was surprised that his father had actually had the papers drawn up. As far as he could tell, they were ironclad. He now had total control over his brother until he was of age.

“Would you mind, young sir?”

Anjali turned to see the smaller man standing next to him, nodding his head toward the paper Anjali held in his hands. He raised an eyebrow in query. What did he want?

“May I look? I am Yasir, the Shaikh’s personal assistant. I am well versed in the laws of your province as well as the entire planet of Elquone. I would be happy to take a look at them.”

With a small shrug, Anjali handed the paper over, watching his father’s face turn red out of the corner of his eye. The man looked at the paper for several moments before handing it back to Anjali.

"If your intent was to retain legal guardianship over one...Marika Kirill, then these papers are in proper order."

"Yes." Anjali nodded his head. "He's my younger brother. I told my father I wouldn't sign the contract unless he agreed to give Marika to me. If what you say is true, then there is nothing left but for me to sign."

"I would be happy to witness for you, young sir," the man smiled at Anjali.

Uh...okay, whatever. Anjali picked up the pen and quickly signed his name on the contract before he lost his nerve. Setting the pen down, he turned to face his father once again.

"Can I go now? I need to finish getting dinner ready."

Yuri reached down to grab the contract, reading it over quickly before nodding his head and waving his hand absently at Anjali. "Yes, you may go."

Anjali nodded, heading for the door. He nearly jumped out of his skin when the larger of the two men stepped up behind him. What did he want? He waited for the man to say something, anything, but he just continued to stare at Anjali.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"My apologies, Anjali," Yasir said. "This is Malachi. He will accompany you until such time as you arrive in our province."

"I told you I agreed to the contract. I won't run away."

"Oh, no, Anjali," Yasir hastened to say, "Malachi is not here to keep you from running away. He is now your bodyguard. He is here to protect you."

"My bodyguard?" Anjali frowned in confusion. "What do I need a bodyguard for?"

"Was this not explained to you?" Yasir asked, glancing at Yuri before looking back at Anjali.

"Was what explained to me?" Anjali asked.

"Your contract holder is a very important man in our province. As such, you must be guarded at all times. It is the Shaikh's wish."

“Okay, whatever,” Anjali said as he turned back toward Malachi. What did he care? He had too many things to do to worry about people being after him. “Come on, big guy, kitchen duty awaits.”

Anjali didn’t wait to see if the man followed him as he headed back toward the kitchen. Dinner was to be served in forty-five minutes, and he had a lot to do before then, especially if he was to have guests.

“Are you and Yasir staying for dinner?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Yes, we will be staying for dinner. We are here to escort you to our province.”

“Of course.”

Anjali walked into the kitchen to see Marika chopping some of the fresh vegetables that they grew in their garden. He looked up and smiled when he saw Anjali. The smile quickly fell from his face when he looked past Anjali and saw Malachi.

“Not to worry, Marika. This is Malachi,” Anjali said quickly. “He’s been assigned as my bodyguard. He won’t hurt you.”

“Your bodyguard?” Marika frowned. “What do you need a bodyguard for?”

“Apparently, my new contract holder is someone important, so I get a bodyguard,” Anjali replied as he reached for a knife to finish cutting the bread he had been cutting before being called into his father’s office.

“So, you signed the contract?” he leaned over to whisper into Anjali’s ear. “Did Father give you my papers, too?”

“Yes, he didn’t want to at first, but when the emissary started to leave, he gave in. The emissary, Yasir, looked your papers over and said that they were all legal and everything. When I leave, so do you.”

“Really? I get to go with you? And Father can’t stop me?”

Anjali turned to Marika, a smile on his face. “Didn’t I tell you that I would take you with me? Didn’t I? I would never leave you behind.”

Marika smiled back at Anjali, the relief clear on his face. “I knew you wouldn’t, Anjali. I was more worried that Father wouldn’t keep his word. Or that I wouldn’t be allowed to go with you.”

Anjali’s eyes widened. He had never thought about that. He turned to look over at Malachi. He barely contained his sign of relief when Malachi nodded his head. Okay, that was one hurdle out of the way.

Looking back at the cutting table, He wondered how to get over his next hurdle—feeding so many damn people.

* * * *

“Do you think we made enough food?” Marika whispered to his brother as they watched the people around the table eating. They had been expecting three or four people besides themselves. Nearly fifteen had shown up, most of them cronies of their father’s from the city.

“Just keep the wine flowing, Marika. No one will know the difference,” Anjali snickered. “I’m going to go back to the kitchen and see what else I can dig up. You go refill everyone’s glasses. That should keep them busy for a while.”

Marika nodded, grabbing a fresh bottle of wine and heading into the large dining room. Anjali turned and went back into the kitchen. He opened several cupboards, finding nothing. He was just starting to search through the pantry when he heard a noise behind him.

Thinking it was Malachi, he held another loaf of bread out behind him. “Malachi, would you set this on the counter for me?” he asked.

Once the loaf of bread had been taken out of his hands, Anjali searched around until he found some cheese. Bread and cheese—well, at least it was something. He hated to part with it. It was his last loaf of bread and hunk of cheese. And they weren’t due for any more cheese for another week. Oh, well, what could he do?

Turning back toward the kitchen, Anjali stepped toward the cutting board, stopping suddenly when he saw a tall, dark shadow

standing in the doorway. That wasn't Malachi. Strangely enough, Malachi was shorter than the man standing in the doorway.

"Can I help you?" Anjali asked cautiously, wondering where Malachi was. He was supposed to be Anjali's bodyguard. Why wasn't he here to guard his body?

"You are Anjali." It took Anjali a moment to realize that the man had said it more as a statement of fact than a question, but he answered him anyway.

"Yes, I am Anjali. Is there something I can do for you?"

"I am Urik."

Okay...

"Hello, Urik." Who in the hell was Urik? Another bodyguard? Anjali took a cautious step back as Urik walked farther into the kitchen. His eyes widened as the light shined down on him. The man was huge.

Anjali wasn't sure he had ever seen someone as big as Urik. As Urik moved forward until he was standing in front of him, Anjali realized that he was right. He had to tilt his head all of the way back just to see into Urik's face.

"Uh...hey, I need to get this stuff cut up and out to the table." Anjali took another step back.

"Do you not have servants to do this?" Urik asked, looking around the room. His nose wrinkled in disdain.

"Servants?" Anjali started laughing. "Are you serious? I'm not even sure I have enough food to feed the mob my father brought in." He picked up the hunk of cheese and waved it at Urik.

"This is my last bit of cheese as it is and my last loaf of bread. We won't get any more for a week. My father doesn't deem it necessary to spend money on things he believes we don't need, like extra food. Most of what you and the other...*guests*...are eating tonight was grown by my brother and myself."

Anjali slammed the cheese down on a platter along with his last loaf of bread and a knife. Picking the tray up, he started past Urik, turning at the last minute to glare at him. "I hope you choke on it."

He saw the shocked look on Urik's face before he turned back around and left the kitchen, carrying the tray of bread and cheese to the dining room. He walked straight to the table and put the platter down before going to stand by the courtyard doors with his brother.

He watched with disgust as the men around the table began digging in to the loaf of bread and hunk of cheese like it was their last meal. It was gone in minutes, nothing but a few crumbs left on the platter.

Pigs!

Anjali was surprised when he saw Urik walk back into the room, his eyes instantly moving to meet his and back to the table. He was even more surprised at the slight snarl that crossed Urik's lips as he watched the men around the table eating.

Urik walked across the room and leaned down to whisper in Malachi's ear. Malachi stood up, gesturing to Yasir, who also stood up. Malachi stepped forward, and their heads bent together as if they were having a conversation they didn't want anyone to overhear.

"Hey, now, what is this?" Yuri said as he lifted his head to look toward the three men. "I thought we were having a celebration here. Is my table not worthy of your company?"

Anjali rolled his eyes, feeling both embarrassed and aggravated. His father was drunk...again. He wouldn't be surprised if half of the men at the table were drunk. It wouldn't be an unusual occurrence.

"Senator, I have a hard time celebrating anything when there isn't even enough food to feed the guest of honor and his brother," Urik replied, gesturing to where Anjali and Marika stood by the courtyard doors.

Anjali knew it wasn't good when Yuri's face burned red. He grabbed Marika's arm and stepped back as their father jumped to his

feet, slamming his hands down on the table. “How dare you impugn my honor!”

“What honor would that be, Senator?” Urik snapped. “The one where you live lavishly in the city while your children stay on your family estate starving and having to scrounge for every scrap of food they eat?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Yuri shouted.

“Don’t I, Senator?” Urik asked. “You’ve spent years in the city living the life of a king. It’s only now that we find out your family has been languishing in squalor while you live the high life. I’m sure the new High Ruler will be very interested in this information.”

“Now, see here—”

“No, you see here, Senator Kirill. The contract has been signed, and you have been paid. We’re leaving, and we’re taking Anjali and his brother with us back to Katzmann.”

Anjali’s heart jumped into his throat at Urik’s words. He distantly heard his father start to laugh hysterically. His new owner was from Katzmann? He’d be going back? Anjali didn’t know if he would be able to handle being so close to Bogden and not trying to go to him. It would be sure agony, and his father seemed to know that.

“Oh, that’s right, Anjali. I forgot to mention that little part, didn’t I?”

Yuri walked quickly around the table to Anjali, grabbing him by his long, thick braid before anyone could stop him. Pulling Anjali forward, he pushed him down to his knees, yanking on his hair so that Anjali was looking up at the huge man.

“Your new master, Shaikh Al’Abdalha, lives on Katzmann.”

Chapter 2

Bogden was dressed in full tribal chief regalia as he waited for his mate to arrive, right down to the turban on his head. He was grateful for the headpiece as the edge of the long fabric covered his entire face except for his eyes. He didn't want anyone to see how anxious he was.

Urik had contacted him the moment they entered into Katzmann planetary airspace. Since the Province of Leonidia didn't allow air travel, it took another two days of traveling by camel train for Urik, Yasir, and Anjali to arrive.

Bogden had been nervous then. Now that Urik had called and said they were only an hour away, he felt like he was ready to rip apart at the seams. The waiting was excruciating. Bogden couldn't believe he was about to see Anjali again after what seemed like forever.

He had hated leaving Anjali behind when he returned to his home province, but he'd had no idea until a couple of weeks later that the man would return to his home planet of Elquone. He had thought he and Anjali had something special together. He had thought the man would wait for him.

Knowing that Anjali had used Bogden's departure to leave Katzmann had been a bitter pill to swallow. It wasn't like Bogden had wanted to leave Anjali. That had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done, especially knowing that the man was his mate.

If it hadn't been a call from Yasir telling him of his father's imminent death, Bogden never would have left. Or he at least would have made arrangements to take Anjali with him. There just hadn't been time.

Bogden had been ordered home to be at his father's bedside to await the man's death. It might sound grisly, but Bogden was his father's heir, the next in line for Shaikh. His father had to officially appoint him the next Shaikh, and that could only be done in person and by tribal ritual.

The days that followed his father's death had been filled with ceremony and grieving. Bogden's father had been a good ruler, if not a great one. Bogden hoped to follow in his footsteps.

He was just glad his father was finally with his mother, who had passed away a few years earlier. Knowing their souls were together in the stars was Bogden's one saving grace as he went without his fated mate.

Once Bogden had settled into the mantle of leadership, he wanted to bring Anjali to him. His heart had nearly broken when he'd contacted his former commander, Chellak Rai, and learned that Anjali had returned to Elquone.

He'd been angry, nearly going into a rage. Only Hassan had been able to talk him down and make him see reason. And then Bogden had explained why he was so pissed. The contract was the quickest way Bogden could think of to get Anjali to Katzmann. He just hoped that Anjali understood why he bought the man's contract.

Bogden's heart began to beat faster when a line of camels broke over the sand dune across from him. He gripped the reins of his horse a little tighter as he watched the camels move slowly in his direction.

He wanted to ride down as fast as he could to see his mate, but he knew tribal protocol said he had to remain where he was. His mate had to come to him, no matter how hard it was for Bogden to sit there and wait.

And the waiting was excruciating.

It took another twenty minutes for the caravan to ride down the side of the sand dune and cross the desert floor to the sand dune Bogden sat on. The horse beneath him moved restlessly as the line of

camels approached until Bogden pulled the reins back and leaned down to whisper soothingly into the animal's ear.

His horse, Mishla, was one of a kind on Katzmann. He stood nearly as tall as Bogden when he was on the ground, and his hair was pure black. The thing that made Mishla so different from other horses, besides his large size, was the small horn he had in the middle of his forehead. The red eyes didn't help, either. It unnerved most people.

Since Bogden had had the horse since Mishla was a young colt, he found almost everything about the horse endearing. He was a present from Bogden's parents. They had grown up together, trained together. Mishla knew what Bogden wanted sometimes even before he knew himself.

That was why Bogden wasn't the least bit surprised when Mishla started down the side of the sand dune without any prompting. As big as Mishla was, Bogden knew he couldn't have stopped the beast even if he had wanted to.

And he didn't want to. He just held on for the ride. When they reached the bottom of the sand dune, Mishla stopped. Bogden frowned. They were still several yards away from the caravan. Bogden tried to nudge the horse forward, but Mishla was having none of it. The horse just stomped his hooves and snorted, prancing in place in the sand.

Bogden rolled his eyes and sat back to wait. He knew he wasn't going anywhere, at least not while riding Mishla. That was the last piece of the puzzle where his horse was concerned. The beast was stubborn.

When the caravan finally drew close enough for Bogden to make out people's faces, he eagerly searched each one until he spotted the one he was looking for. His breath caught in his throat when he spotted not the face but the violet eyes of his mate staring back at him.

Anjali's lower face was covered to prevent the desert sand from irritating him, much like Bogden's face was covered. Only, Bogden

wore the traditional desert turban. Anjali wore the face covering of a veil.

Bogden knew he'd be lying to himself if he said he didn't like seeing Anjali in the traditional garb of his people. The long, flowing, white Mishlah Anjali wore proclaimed him unmated, but only because it was white.

Bogden would soon change that. Not that he wanted Anjali parading around in the nude or anything, but he imagined the whole body covering worn by a majority of the desert people was uncomfortable to one not used to wearing it.

Once they mated, the color of Anjali's desert robe would change to black with golden thread embroidering the sleeves to denote Anjali as belonging to the Leonid Pride. The continued use of the face covering was optional. As Bogden watched several of his pridemates take in Anjali's violet eyes, he was considering it.

He growled low in his throat to warn them off, huffing loudly when they all lowered their heads in submission. Being the Shaikh of the Leonid Pride made him the leader. Being the quickest and most strategic fighter made him the alpha male. No one went against him and lived.

Bogden could barely hold himself in his saddle as he waited for his brother, Urik, to help Anjali down from his camel and lead him over to where he was. He wanted to leap down and take his mate in his arms. He knew he couldn't.

Tradition said that he had to wait for Anjali to come to him, just as any mate would. By walking through the burning hot desert sand in his bare feet, Anjali was showing his willingness to join his mate wherever he was.

Still, Bogden tensed when Anjali winced as his feet hit the hot sand. He rankled at anything that caused his mate pain. He promised himself that the moment they arrived at the oasis where they would spend the night he would bathe Anjali's feet in cool water and rub oil over them.

When Anjali reached him, Bogden could see the confusion on the man's face. He could tell it warred with Anjali's need to escape the hot sand by the way his mate tried to keep himself from hopping from bare foot to bare foot.

Bogden swung his leg over the saddle and slid to the ground. He took in Anjali's widening eyes and turned back to his horse quickly to hide his smirk. The man really had no idea what was happening. He would.

Bogden opened a leather satchel attached to his saddle and pulled out a small, black velvet bag. He opened the second bag and shook out the golden anklet he'd had made just for Anjali into the palm of his hand. He also grabbed the leather waterskin that hung from his saddle.

According to the contract Bogden signed for Anjali, he had to have a token of status from his new owner. Luckily for Bogden, a mating in the Leonid Pride meant that he must provide his mate with a symbol of his commitment. He could get both done with one delicate anklet.

Turning back to Anjali, Bogden stepped closer to him. He was once again amazed how much taller and bigger he was than his little mate. Anjali's head barely came up to his chest. But fate would never mate two people together that were not the perfect match. Bogden just kind of thought fate had a sense of humor.

He knelt down at Anjali's feet. He felt Anjali tremble when he lifted his left foot and placed it on his thigh. It took just a moment to place the golden chain around Anjali's ankle and seal it shut. From this day forward, it could never be removed.

Once the anklet had been secured around Anjali's ankle, Bogden raised the man's foot and kissed the top of it. He set Anjali's foot back on the sand and stood. Opening the waterskin, Bogden poured a small amount into the palm of his hand and held it against Anjali's lips until the man drank it down. This was Bogden's way of showing

everyone that he would care for his mate and see to his health and safety.

There was only one more required ritual to be performed before Bogden could take Anjali into his arms. To cement their mating, they needed to exchange blood, and he needed to claim his mate intimately. One could be performed now, in front of everyone. The other would be performed tonight, if Bogden was lucky.

The exchange of blood was sacred between mates. Even though Bogden knew they were mates, he had waited to exchange blood with Anjali until now. The mating cycle a Katzman went through when newly mated was intense and even dangerous. He didn't know if either he or Anjali would have survived the separation. Waiting was the better choice, he hoped.

Besides, they had their dreams. Being able to connect through dreams was one of the first signs of a mating. Bogden and Anjali had been dreaming together since they'd parted, and what dreams they were.

Even Bogden was stunned at how erotic they were. He woke almost every time covered in cum and feeling more satisfied than he ever remembered feeling, except for when he was actually with Anjali in real life. He could only hope that they would continue to dream together now that they were back together.

Bogden withdrew the Khanja from the belt around his waist. One swipe of the curved blade, and blood trickled across the palm of his hand. When Bogden reached for Anjali's hand to do the same, the man jumped, jerking his hand back to cradle it against his chest.

He knew Anjali had to willingly accept the mating even if he didn't totally understand what was happening. He just held out his uncut hand until Anjali slowly lowered his and held it out to Bogden.

Bogden wasted no time. He sliced the blade across the palm of Anjali's hand then clasped both bleeding palms together, mixing their blood. After so much silence since Anjali had arrived, the ensuing

noise from people shouting and yelling as they celebrated the mating of their Shaikh was nearly deafening.

Anjali jumped, swinging around to stare at the others in shock. Bogden wasn't sure if the man was scared or just confused. Either way, Anjali was now his. Bogden grabbed Anjali around the waist and swung him up onto Mishla's back. He grabbed the edge of the saddle and swung up behind Anjali then wrapped one arm around the man's chest and pulled him back.

With a flick of his other hand, Mishla began to move, taking them back up the sand dune he'd come down and farther into the desert. Home was two days away, assuming they didn't get hit by any sandstorms or other mishaps.

That gave Bogden two days to convince Anjali that they were meant to be together. It was not a lot of time when he could feel Anjali holding himself rigid in his arms. Bogden sniffed the air and knew he was right. He could smell the fear coming off Anjali in waves.

"You are safe, mayht."

Anjali jerked in his arms then swung his head around to stare up at Bogden. He knew if he lifted the veil covering Anjali's face that the man would have a shocked expression. "Bogden?"

"You were expecting someone else?"

"What in the hell are you doing here?"

"Where else would I be?" Bogden asked. He swept his hand out to encompass the desert sands around them. "This is my home."

"*You* bought my contract?"

"I did."

"I thought contracts of this sort were illegal on Katzmann?"

"They are, which is why we completed the mating ceremony of my people, something recognized by everyone on Katzmann. Now, if anyone questions the contract, it will not matter. We are mated."

Anjali froze. "We're what?"

"In the eyes of my people, the Leonid Pride, we are mated."

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You belong to me, Anjali. The contract from your planet says so, and the mating ceremony from my planet says so.” Bogden chuckled, joy filling him that he was able to speak the words of possession. “You are my mate.”

“You bought me,” Anjali whispered.

Bogden frowned when he heard the slight tint of horror lacing Anjali’s voice. They had made such a connection before he had been called away. He thought Anjali would be happy that he was here.

“It is true that I purchased your contract, but I saw no other way to return you to me.” Bogden frowned as he thought over his words. “I still do not understand why you went back to Elquone. You knew I would be returning for you.”

Bogden expected Anjali to say something, maybe even something angry about his quick departure. He never expected Anjali to start struggling so hard that he needed to pull Mishla to a stop and pin the man against his chest.

“Anjali!” Bogden hissed when he started to receive more than one raised eyebrow from those around them. If any of his pride thought Anjali was not there of his own free will, they could raise issue with the mating until all facets of it had been completed. “That is quite enough out of you.”

Anjali stilled, glaring up at Bogden. “Yes, master.”

* * * *

Bogden was nearly beside himself with worry over Anjali’s behavior. Since calling him *master*, Anjali had refused to speak another word even when Bogden asked him questions. He had finally given up. The silence between them had run into hours.

“Shaikh?”

Bogden turned to look at Yasir as the man rode up on a camel. “Yes?”

“Camp has been set just over the ridge at the Al’Hareen Oasis. A tent has been prepared for you and your mate as you requested.”

Bogden smiled, suddenly feeling renewed energy fill him at the prospect of reaching the oasis. The camp would be filled with tents for everyone, each tent holding rugs and pillows for lounging. Food would be cooking over an open fire pit, most likely a goat slaughtered in honor of his new mate. Water would be gathered from the well for everyone to drink and clean the dust from their bodies.

The Al’Hareen Oasis had the added benefit of being one of the few places between them and home that had a fresh pool of water for bathing. Bogden would bet almost anything that he could coax a few words from his mate by letting the man bathe in the pool.

Elquone had a much different landscape than Katzmann. Trees, valleys, and fields of green grass abounded. Rivers seemed to flow just about everywhere. Katzmann was the total opposite of desert sands and rocky cliffs. For those not used to the terrain, it could be very inhospitable.

It could also be a very dangerous place. Besides the hot sun beating down on everything that moved, the desert was rife with poisonous snakes and scorpions. The wandering bands of cutthroats and thieves that preyed on unsuspecting travelers didn’t help. Just stepping out onto the desert could get anyone killed.

“I’m going to be sick.”

Bogden blinked at the first words he’d heard out of his mate in hours. Anjali had a hand held over his mouth, his face going paler with each passing second. Seeing Anjali start to gag, he quickly pulled Mishla to a stop and swung off the horse. Bogden barely had time to pull Anjali down from the horse before the man fell to his knees and started throwing up.

Bogden quickly grabbed a waterskin off of his saddle and a cloth to wipe Anjali’s face then turned and crouched down next to the kneeling man. The veil that had covered Anjali’s face was useless

now. Bogden pulled it away from his mate's face and used his Khanja to cut the fabric away.

"Here, have some water, mayht," Bogden said as he held the waterskin out to Anjali. "Rinse out your mouth."

Bogden frowned when Anjali swallowed a bit of water then spit it out. He doubted the man knew what an affront it was to waste water in such a manner. He could only hope that none of his fellow pridemates took offense with the thoughtless gesture.

"Anjali," Bogden said softly, hoping no one overheard him, "it is an insult to the desert people to waste water in such a manner. Water is very highly valued here. You must not let anyone see you make such waste."

"I just threw up, and you're chastising me because I spit out water?"

"I am only trying to protect you, mayht." Bogden reached out to smooth the golden-blond hair back from Anjali's face, grimacing and dropping his hand when his mate reared back from him. "You do not know of the rules governing this province, Anjali, and you will be given some leeway because of that, but you will be expected to follow them quickly. It could mean lives if you do not."

Bogden didn't think it was possible, but Anjali's face paled even more. "You would kill me?" Anjali whispered. "Over water?"

Bogden poured a few drops of water out onto the clean cloth in his hand and reached over to gently wipe Anjali's face. He thought carefully over his words. He didn't want to scare Anjali as he imagined the man was scared enough right now. But he also needed to make his mate understand the severity of wasting water.

"You've brought your brother with you, yes?"

Anjali nodded, his eyebrows drawn together as if he were confused.

"In the desert, water, even a few drops, can mean the difference between life and death. The temperature in the desert can reach up to

about 120 degrees in the heat of the day. A person can only live for about two days in that environment.”

Bogden pointed to the small splatter of water Anjali had spit out. It was drying in the sand even now, the moisture disappearing at an alarming rate. “Those few drops you spit out could mean the difference in whether your brother lives or dies.”

Anjali inhaled sharply.

“Not because I or anyone in my pride would harm a hair on his head or yours but because water is scarce. There is only so much with us right now. If something happened and we ran out of water, people would die.”

Anjali swallowed hard and looked at the waterskin in Bogden’s hand. “Are we going to run out of water?”

“Not at the moment, but it is always a possibility in the desert. Thankfully, there is an oasis just over the next sand dune where we can replenish our water supply for the continued trip home. But things happen. There is always a danger in the desert, Anjali. Always. And you must remember that.”

Anjali’s violet eyes darted up to meet Bogden’s. The man licked his lips, looking anxious. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“I do not expect you to learn the rules of desert life overnight, mayht, and I will explain them to you as much as I can, but I do expect you to respect them when you know them.” Bogden shook the waterskin at Anjali. “Never waste water. That is the first rule. It is the life of our people.”

“H—how many rules are there?”

“There are a lot of rules for living in the desert, mayht, but I will teach you all that you need to know.” Bogden stood and held out his hand to Anjali, waiting until the man took his hand then pulling him to his feet. “The most important thing to remember is not to waste water and to drink in moderation. Too much water can be unhealthy, as can too little water.”

“How do you know the difference?”

Bogden helped Anjali back to the horse and lifted him up before climbing up behind him. He was impressed with the questions Anjali asked. They were not frivolous questions. They showed true thought and a sharp mind.

“Unfortunately, that is only something you can learn with time.” Bogden wrapped one arm around Anjali and grabbed the reins with the other. “Until then, I will show you all that you need to know and insure that you have all the water you need.”

Bogden waited for Anjali to reply, but when he heard nothing, he figured his mate was thinking over everything. Not everyone could acclimate to desert conditions, especially someone who came from a planet rich in water. Bogden hoped that his little mate wasn’t one of those people.

“Are special considerations made for women and children?” Anjali finally asked.

Bogden was pleased and smiled. “Yes, mayht, those who cannot care for themselves are cared for by the rest of the pride. It is our duty as well as our honor to care for the members of the pride, be they warrior, woman, or child.”

“Our duty?” Anjali’s head tilted back as he looked over his shoulder. “What do you mean *our duty*?”

“I am Shaikh, mayht. I am the leader of the Leonid Pride. As my mate, you shall lead with me. Our people will look to you for guidance and advice. They will need your direction as much as my own.”

Anjali’s mouth dropped open. “Are you mad? I can’t lead anyone. I can barely take care for myself. What makes you think I can lead a pride?” Anjali’s hand fluttered at his collarbone.

Bogden chuckled lightly at the anxious gesture. “Fate would not gift me with a mate that did not have the best of qualities. I knew from the moment I first saw you that you would be a fit mate for me. You are everything I need.”

“Fuck you, Bogden,” Anjali suddenly snapped, his face filling with anger.

“Anjali!”

Bogden was shocked by Anjali’s words, even more so when the man crossed his arms over his chest and glared straight ahead. He doubted he had ever heard a swear word come out of Anjali’s mouth in all of the time he had known the man.

“If I was so important to you, then you wouldn’t have left me without a word. You didn’t even leave me a note,” Anjali snapped.

“Anjali, that’s not true.”

“I don’t believe you. I don’t believe a word that comes out of your mouth.”

Bogden grabbed Anjali’s chin and pulled the man’s face around. He couldn’t believe the mismatch of emotions that swirled through him at Anjali’s words. He wavered between complete and utter rage and total disbelief.

“You are my mate. I would never leave you without letting you know,” Bogden spit out through gritted teeth. “I not only left a note for you on the morning I was summoned away, I left direction with a friend for you to be informed that I would be back for you.”

Anjali’s face fell, his eyes filling with tears. “What note?”

Chapter 3

Anjali turned a little in the saddle and grabbed onto the black cloth covering Bogden's arm as he tried to keep his emotions under control. He desperately wanted to believe Bogden. He just didn't see how he could. He had never found a note, and no one had ever spoken to him of Bogden's leaving.

"What note?" Anjali asked again when Bogden didn't answer him.

"Anjali, I wrote you a note telling you that I needed to return home for a little while but I would be back for you." Bogden frowned. "I asked you to wait for me."

"I never received a note," Anjali said as he shook his head. Confusion rolled through him. His life would have been so much happier if he'd received a note from Bogden. "I woke up one day, and you were gone. No note, no message, no nothing. You were just gone."

"But, Anjali, that's...that's not true," Bogden said softly. "I left you a note."

"I didn't get it."

Anjali didn't know what to think when Bogden's eyes left his and the man looked around the desert. He seemed to be digesting the knowledge that his message hadn't gotten through. Anjali just didn't know how Bogden felt about that knowledge.

"Bogden?"

"Is that why you left, Anjali?" Bogden finally looked back down at him, and Anjali almost wished he hadn't. The man's golden eyes

were darkened with confusion and a hint of anguish. “Is that why you didn’t wait for me?”

Anjali quickly dropped his eyes, not wanting Bogden to see the misery he could feel welling up inside of him. “I didn’t think you wanted me anymore.” Anjali shrugged as he looked down at his fingers and twisted them nervously together. “I mean, we never made any kind of commitment between us and—”

Anjali gasped as his face was suddenly forced back up to Bogden’s. He started to tremble at the fierce look in Bogden’s face and the way the man’s dark eyebrows drew together in a severe frown. There was even a small tick in his clenched jaw.

“Don’t ever think we didn’t have a commitment between us.” Bogden growled. “We had a commitment the first time you accepted me into your body.”

Anjali’s breath hitched in his throat as he remembered the very first time he and Bogden had had sex. It had been magical, almost more a fantasy than reality. Anjali felt like Bogden had touched him on more than a physical level. It had been almost unworldly, like the dreams he’d had so many times since leaving Katzmann.

In the weeks that had followed, every time they were together was much the same. Bogden just had to reach out and touch Anjali, and he felt like he could fly. Anjali’s mind burned with each memory. He didn’t think he would forget a single one of them. Just thinking about them made him ache.

“Then why did you leave?”

Bogden took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He seemed almost preoccupied by something. “I was needed here.”

“I needed you, too.” *We needed you*, Anjali thought silently as he wrapped an arm around his waist and faced forward again. *We needed you. We still do.* Anjali wondered how long he had before Bogden discovered his little secret. He knew it would only be a matter of time before it happened. And he had no idea how Bogden would react.

Anjali had been in a Vergnügen training facility, not a Brüter facility. Before Trajan rescued him, he'd been training to be a pleasure slave, not a breeder. Anjali still didn't know how he'd ended up carrying a child unless there had been some sort of mix-up in his training. That was the only thing he could think of.

He also wondered if being one of the Vergnügen Caste made him more desirable to Bogden. What would the man do when he discovered the mix-up? Would Bogden still want him when he realized that Anjali wasn't a pleasure slave? Would he want a breeder?

Anjali was too scared to ask. He didn't think he could handle Bogden's rejection. He just didn't know how to avoid it. His secret wouldn't stay secret for very long. Already he showed in the small swell of his abdomen. All too soon, that swell would grow until everyone would know he carried a babe.

And then what? Would Bogden cast him out? Would he take the child so Anjali could never know him or her? Anjali had seen the Brütters that were returned to Elquone without their children. They were broken, their heartache and sadness so obvious Anjali wondered how they took each breath.

Anjali didn't want to be one of those people. He didn't want to know his child was out in the world and not be able to be there to see him or her grow up. He'd rather be dead.

"My father was dying, Anjali," Bogden said softly. "I didn't want to leave you, but I was ordered home. I couldn't ignore a command from my Shaikh. I had to be here so that he could pass on his position to me. That's how things are done here."

Anjali nodded, hoping Bogden wouldn't question his agreement too much. He understood the need for Bogden to go home if his father had been dying. He didn't know why Bogden hadn't taken him along if they were meant to be together as the man said.

"I just don't understand why you didn't receive my message. I left you a note and told Amal to tell you where I was going."

Anjali frowned and turned to look back at Bogden. "Amal?"

"He is a soldier from another pride, a warrior like myself."

Bogden grimaced and looked back out over the barren sand dunes again. Anjali was beginning to see a theme in that stoic look. Whenever Bogden was thinking of something disheartening, he looked out over the landscape.

"When Chellak Rai sent out the word, we all responded, leaving our homes and our families to be at his side as we fought for our freedom. We wanted to restore the old rulers to their rightful places. We wanted to be governed by a true Katzman. Every pride offered up warriors to fight."

"And you were one of those warriors?"

"Yes, I was one of those warriors, as were Amal and many others from prides all over the planet. The day Chellak Rai was placed in power was a proud day for all of us. It was a chance for freedom from everything we had suffered for more than a generation."

Anjali only knew what he had heard about the war that had taken place on the planet of Katzmann. Chellak Rai's father had been the ruler thirty years previously. The king and most of his family had been slaughtered by Vortigern Vedek. Chellak had survived, secreted away by loyal servants to be raised in another pride.

When he had trained enough and raised an army, he came back to reclaim his father's throne. Things were still in an upheaval all these months later, but they were settling down. Anjali imagined it was hard conquering an entire planet. He was positive he didn't want the job.

"What does this have to do with this man?"

"He was one of the warriors that went to fight with Chellak Rai. When I had to leave, he stayed behind. He is the man I asked to deliver my message to you."

"I never received it." Anjali shrugged. "I never even met the man."

"And that I do not understand." Bogden frowned again. "I specifically asked Amal to tell you that I was needed home suddenly

but that I would be back for you. It makes no sense that he would ignore my order.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Oh, no, mayht, I never doubted for a moment that you were telling the truth. You have never lied to me,” Bogden said quickly. “I just do not understand why the message was not delivered. You should have received my note at the least. I left it on the table in your living area.”

Now, it was Anjali’s turn to frown. “There was no note, but a cleaning woman was in the room when I woke up. I guess I never really thought about it. I just assumed she was supposed to be there. Maybe she picked it up.”

“What cleaning woman?”

Anjali flinched when Bogden’s arms tightened around him. He saw a suspicious tick start throbbing in Bogden’s jaw again. The man was furious. “I don’t know her name. I never asked. I was too busy looking for you. I wanted to know why you left before I woke up.”

“I received word that my father had taken ill and wasn’t expected to recover.” Bogden’s tone softened, as did the grip he had around Anjali’s waist. “I would not have left you if it wasn’t needed, Anjali.”

“If I was so important to you, then why didn’t you take me with you?” Anjali voiced the one question that had been burning at him for a while—well, one of many. “Why did you leave me behind?”

“I thought it would be the safest place for you.”

Anjali opened his mouth to tell Bogden how very wrong he was when a sudden shrill yell filled the air. Anjali jerked at the loud shout, swinging around to see where it came from. Before he could spot anything, Bogden’s arms tightened around him, and the horse they were on suddenly started galloping across the sand.

“Hold on, Anjali,” Bogden said loudly.

Anjali held on. His eyes darted frantically around the sand as he tried to figure out what was going on. More men, in black clothing like Bogden’s and riding horses and camels, seemed to join their

group from the left and right. Everyone seemed to be heading in the same direction, which was toward the large sand dune in front of them.

Off in the distance, Anjali spotted more riders on horseback. He didn't remember that many men being with Bogden, but he could have been wrong. He hadn't been paying that much attention to his surroundings when he'd arrived. He'd been too overwhelmed with meeting his new master.

He also thought it strange that all of the men surrounding him and Bogden were dressed all in black while the men riding up to them were dressed in an odd mixture of colors, some of their clothing seeming more like rags than anything.

Anjali gasped when the outriders suddenly drew swords and started fighting with new riders. He pressed himself back against Bogden's chest, seeking safety in the arms of the only one he knew could protect him. Seconds later, he was grateful he had when a dagger went flying in front of his face.

"Bogden!"

"Just a little farther, Anjali, and we'll be safe."

"Safe?" Anjali squeaked. People were chasing them. Where could they possibly be safe? Anjali gripped the saddle horn and a large portion of the horse's mane as fear filled him, both for himself and for the unborn child he carried. They were riding hell-bent for the sand dune, and the ride was rough. Anjali had no idea what all of the bouncing around could do to the baby.

As they broke over the top of the sand dune, Anjali's mouth dropped open. A wave of armed riders rushed toward them like a sea of black moving across the tan-colored sand. His grip tightened on the saddle and horse hair.

Anjali was positive that they were about to die. He closed his eyes and leaned back against Bogden, wanting the touch of the man to be the last thing he felt before he died. When the horse started to slow,

Anjali knew it was all over. He just leaned back and waited to feel his death.

When nothing happened after several moments and the horse came to a stop, Anjali slowly opened his eyes. What he saw made him almost as nervous as the riders that attacked them. He and Bogden were totally surrounded by riders on horseback dressed all in black, their swords drawn in a defensive gesture.

Anjali peeked out around Bogden's arms. In the distance, he could see men fighting with swords and knives and just about anything they could get their hands on. More lay on the ground either injured or dead. Seeing the black outfits of those around him, he could easily pick out who was fighting whom. He just hoped the guys in black were on their side.

"Bogden, who are these guys?" Anjali whispered as he reached back to grab at the man. When he didn't get an answer, Anjali turned to look back at Bogden. His heart stuttered in his chest.

Bogden's eyes were closed, his head dipping down to his chest. A large, dark stain was slowly spreading across his tunic. When Anjali pressed his hand against the stained fabric, it came away covered in red.

"Bogden?" Anjali whispered again. Getting no response, Anjali swung himself sideways in the saddle so he could grab Bogden before he fell. "Bogden!" Anjali shouted. "Somebody help me."

Hands were almost instantly there to assist Anjali, but he only had eyes for Bogden. When someone grabbed him around the waist and started to lift him down from the horse, pulling him away from Bogden, Anjali screamed and started struggling. He got in several good scratches and a few punches before he realized the man holding him was Urik.

"Urik, Bogden's hurt," Anjali said as he tried to push away from the strong arms that held him.

"I know, little one," Urik replied as he set Anjali on his feet. "Let us get him down, and then we can see how badly he's hurt. Just stand out of the way."

Anjali bounced from foot to foot, twisting his hands together nervously as he watched someone lay a multi-colored, rug-looking thing down on the ground. A moment later, three men stepped forward and carefully pulled Bogden off the horse and laid him down on the rug.

Anjali darted forward, evading the hands that reached for him, and fell down next to Bogden. He gently brushed a bit of sand off of Bogden's face, his brows drawing together when the man didn't move. He didn't even flinch.

A shadow fell over Bogden's face. Anjali reacted instinctively, pushing his body forward between the shadow and Bogden until he hovered over Bogden's head, protecting the man with his body.

"Who—"

"It's just me, Anjali," Urik said softly. "I need to see to Bogden's injuries."

Anjali nodded and leaned back, allowing Urik access to Bogden. He bit his lip as he watched Urik rip Bogden's tunic down the middle. A soft gasp fell from his lips when he saw the blood covering Bogden's smooth chest.

"Urik, what—" Anjali swallowed to clear the lump from his throat. "How did he—"

"Bandits, Anjali," Urik said softly as he worked on Bogden. "Unfortunately, they are a problem in the desert. They roam the land looking for travelers and those they can prey upon. We've tried to stop them, but it is an ever-growing problem, especially since the war."

"Why?"

"Not everyone came out of the war on top, Anjali. Some people lost everything. Others were slaves before the war and have no home now that they have been freed. The High Ruler tries to help, but the

problem is so widespread that there is only so much he can do.” Urik looked up from Bogden’s chest and shrugged. “And people have to eat, Anjali.”

“But they didn’t have to hurt Bogden. I’m sure he would have given them food if they just asked.”

“You’re right. He would have, but this may not have been about food. It could have been a simple robbery or even someone out for revenge against what they saw as a warrior. It doesn’t really matter how it happened. It just did. The important thing is to make sure Bogden is all right.”

“What can I do?”

“Talk to him,” Urik said as he dribbled some water onto a piece of cloth. He started wiping the blood away from Bogden’s chest. “Just keep talking to him, Anjali. He needs to hear your voice and know that you’re okay.”

Anjali didn’t see how that was going to help, but he was willing to do whatever was needed. He scooted over to kneel next to Bogden’s head and leaned down close to him. He could see Urik working on Bogden’s wound out of his peripheral vision.

“Hey, Bogden,” Anjali whispered. “I’m okay. You saved me, but now you need to save yourself. Open your eyes, Bogden, please. I need you.”

Anjali took a deep breath and let it out slowly then leaned closer until his nose brushed against Bogden’s forehead. “Please, Bogden, I need you. We need you.” Anjali smiled. “I have a secret, Bogden, a secret just for you. If you open your eyes, I’ll share it with you.”

“Anjali?”

Anjali looked up to see Urik staring down at him from where he knelt in the sand next to Bogden’s body. “Yes?”

“We need to turn him over.”

Anjali scooted back but not too far away. The moment Urik and another man turned Bogden over, he crawled right back over. He

grimaced and swallowed past the lump building in his throat. Bogden's back looked worse than his front.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"He will be fine." Urik pointed to the small, jagged gash high on Bogden's shoulder. "He was shot with an arrow. As long as it wasn't dipped in some sort of poison, the wound should heal right up. I doubt he'll even be down for more than a day."

"Poison!" Anjali screeched.

"Sometimes, the arrowheads are dipped in poison. It doesn't look like this one was, and if these were marauders, I doubt they have the money to buy poison. Usually, they are too greedy to spend that type of money. They just want to create mayhem so they can steal what they want in the chaos."

"How will you know for sure?" Anjali's hand trembled as he reached down to smooth the hair back from Bogden's forehead. "What if the arrows were dipped in poison and we don't find out in time? Will he die?"

"Anjali, you need to calm down," Urik said as he patted Anjali's hand. "You're not doing yourself or Bogden any good by getting upset."

"But—"

"Bogden is a strong one, little one. Stronger than almost any of us. That is why he is our chosen Shaikh. He wouldn't have gained his position if he was easily felled by an arrow."

Anjali gapped at Urik. He couldn't understand how the man could be so nonchalant about Bogden being shot with an arrow and possibly one dipped in poison at that. Shouldn't they be rushing Bogden to a healer or an infirmary or something?

"Now, we need to get him moved to the oasis."

Anjali watched in confusion as Urik gestured to some sort of contraption that two men were putting together a few feet away. He couldn't figure out what it was until it was laid on the ground, and then it made sense to him.

Two long wooden spears had been wrapped and tied in heavy cloth. A large amount of fabric hung free in the middle, creating a cradle where Bogden could lie. The top of the entire stretcher was tied by a rope to Bogden's horse.

Anjali began to step nervously from foot to foot as Urik and another man lifted Bogden up and carried him over to the litter, carefully laying him down. The moment Urik nodded to him, Anjali hurried over.

"I can stay with him?"

"You are his *mayht*, little one." Urik grinned, which Anjali found strange considering the dire circumstances. "No one has more right to him than you."

"*Mayht*?" Anjali frowned. "Bogden called me that before, but I don't know what it means."

"It means mate, little one," Urik explained as he gestured for Anjali to come forward. "You are Bogden's mate, his *mayht*. Now, why don't you walk here with Bogden while I lead his horse? We have to go slow, but we should reach the oasis soon. You can see the tents just off in the distance there."

Anjali glanced across the sand to where Urik pointed, his eyes widening in surprise at all the brightly colored tents set up under a bunch of trees. He couldn't count all of the tents, but there had to be more than ten of them in multiple colors.

He could just barely see people walking about a large fire burning in what seemed like the center that all of the tents circled around, like a common area. It actually looked very inviting if one dismissed the numerous armed warriors standing strategically around the camp.

As the litter started moving, Anjali reached down and grabbed Bogden's hand, needing the connection to the man. He walked beside the litter as it slowly moved along the sand toward the camp. The closer they moved to the campsite, the more people Anjali noticed.

"Urik, how many people are here?"

“Just about a third of the pride, mostly warriors. The women and children stayed behind at pridehome where it is safest for them.”

“Pridehome?”

“It is where we live, Anjali, our home. We call it pridehome.” Urik smiled back over his shoulder. “You will love pridehome.”

Anjali glanced around the barren sand and shook his head. He didn’t think so. Urik’s deep chuckle made his face heat up, and Anjali dipped his head in embarrassment.

“Not to worry, little one, pridehome is vastly different than this desert. Granted, we still have lots of sand and such. That’s a given when you live in the desert, but pridehome is built in the side of a rock mountain around an oasis. It is very beautiful.”

Anjali nodded, still wondering how anyone could think the barren wasteland surrounding them could be beautiful. He couldn’t see anything but sand, sand, and more sand. Even the few trees surrounding the campsite didn’t make the place seem any more inviting.

A loud shout suddenly went up, and Anjali jumped in fear, looking around quickly for more marauders. When he didn’t see anyone riding down on them, he looked back toward the campfire. Anjali wasn’t sure he felt any safer when he saw the entire camp start surging toward them.

“Urik?”

“It is okay, little one, they are just excited to have us home. Everyone has been waiting to meet their Shaikh’s mate. They will be very happy to meet you.” There was a slight frown on Urik’s face when he looked at Anjali, and it sent a chill of fear down his spine. “You must remember one thing, Anjali. No one is to touch you unless they have Bogden’s permission.”

“But Bogden is—”

“Right now, until Bogden wakes up and can care for you himself, I will take care of you. If you have any questions, come to me.”

“What about Marika?” Anjali asked as he suddenly remembered his brother. He could have smacked himself in the head for forgetting him in the first place, especially after all the work he had done to get his brother here.

“I believe Malachi is caring for your brother.” Urik gestured off to the side of them.

Anjali glanced over, his eyes widening when he spotted his baby brother riding on a camel in front of Malachi. He was chatting away as if he hadn’t even noticed the fight they had just been in. He looked happy and more animated than he had in months.

Maybe this place wouldn’t be so bad after all. Anjali started to smile until he looked back at the crowd of people coming closer. The smile quickly fell from his lips to be replaced by tightly pressed lips. Anjali gripped Bogden’s hand harder and stepped closer to the litter. He didn’t want anyone to separate him from the only person he felt safe with, unconscious or not.

Urik stopped suddenly and turned around. At first, Anjali thought he might have done something wrong until Urik reached over and pulled a piece of Anjali’s head covering down off his head and over his face.

“Keep your face covered, little one.” Anjali reared back, but Urik only chuckled at his confusion. “Until Bogden can fully claim you and your Mishlah and Thawb are changed to his colors, it is an insult to him for anyone to see your face uncovered except family.”

“Thawb, Mishlah. What in the hell are those?”

“Your robes, Anjali.” Urik waved his hand down, gesturing to the clothes Anjali wore. “The long gown underneath is called a Thawb. The outer garment is called a Mishlah. It’s made of cotton in the summertime and wool from our camels in the winter. The Mishlah is a traditional cloak worn by men on the top of the Thawb.”

Urik pointed to the black robe that was now balled into a small pile at Bogden’s feet. “Bogden, as our Shaikh, is wearing the traditional Bisht. Normally, he wears a Mishlah also, but for your

mating he wore the Bisht, which is usually only worn for special occasions such as weddings or festivals. The coming of his mate was grounds enough for Bogden to dress in his Bisht.”

Anjali nodded, but he knew he’d never remember all the strange names Urik was giving him. Why didn’t they just call them robes or something? Wouldn’t that be much simpler? “And why is he wearing a tunic and pants when I’m in a dress?”

Go ahead, Urik, explain that one. Anjali smirked to himself.

Much to his chagrin, Urik laughed. “Bogden wanted you to get used to our traditional garb, little one. Nothing more than that. I know for a fact that he has pants and a tunic waiting for you back at camp. Although you will still need to wear the Mishlah and headpiece to keep yourself protected from the weather.”

Anjali rolled his eyes then blushed furiously when Urik started laughing again. He didn’t understand how things were supposed to be, and he doubted he ever would. Everyone kept referring to him as Bogden’s mate, but Anjali knew he was the man’s property. He wondered how many other people knew that as well.

Would he be treated as a slave by Bogden’s people? What would that mean for his child? Would the child be a slave, too? What rights did they actually have, if any? Anjali was so scared he started to shake. He grabbed the edges of the robe-Mishlah-thing covering him and pulled it tighter around his frame.

The rush of the crowd was just about to reach him, and at that moment, Anjali wished he was anywhere but where he was. He would even take being back home with his father. With Bogden unconscious and unable to help him, he was alone, and he was terrified.

This was not a good start to his new life.

Chapter 4

Bogden stifled the small groan that fell from his lips as he woke. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He instantly knew he lay in his tent. Besides the dark canvas roof he looked at over his head, he could hear people moving about outside the tent and all normal sounds that would come from a campsite.

People were cooking. Others cleaned their weapons. He could even hear the bleating of goats off in the distance. What he couldn't hear was Anjali, and that sent a shiver of fear racing through him unlike anything he had ever felt before in his life.

Panic flared when he tried to sit up and felt a stabbing pain in his shoulder. He groaned and fell back to the bed. He suddenly remembered Anjali arriving and the attack that followed, and his trepidation increased. Had something happened to his little mate that he couldn't protect the man from?

"Anj—" Bogden tried to swallow, his throat feeling as dry as the desert around him. "Anjali?"

"Bogden?"

Bogden winced as a loud clatter filled the tent. Then, his mate was suddenly leaning over the top of him. There was a smile on his face, but Bogden was more concerned with the tears he could see gathering in Anjali's violet eyes. Still, he couldn't prevent himself from leaning into the hand that Anjali cupped around his cheek.

"Hi, how are you feeling?"

"Thirsty."

A soft flush filled Anjali's face. "Oh, of course, I should have thought of that. Hold on, and I'll get you some water."

Bogden almost protested when Anjali moved away, not wanting to be away from his mate, but the man was back before Bogden could form the words. A small silver cup was held up to his lips, then sweet, cold water filled his mouth. Bogden groaned when Anjali pulled the cup away a moment later and set it down. He wanted more. His throat was so dry he could barely swallow.

“Not too much right now, Bogden,” Anjali said as he brushed some hair back from Bogden’s head. “You’ve been very sick. Urik said you could only have a little water at a time until you were better. More would make you worse.”

“Sick?” Bogden didn’t remember getting sick.

“We were attacked, remember?”

Bogden nodded. He did remember that, and he still didn’t know if Anjali was okay.

“You were shot with a poisoned arrow. By the time we figured it out, you were already sick.” Anjali grinned, and the happiness in that smile filled Bogden to bursting. “But Urik said with a little rest you’re going to be just fine.”

“How are you? Hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. You kept me safe.” Anjali moved, curling up a little more next to Bogden as if he were getting comfortable. “It was a little scary meeting everyone without you there, but Urik took good care of me.”

“Marika?”

Anjali giggled, and Bogden suddenly remembered the sweet sound he had fallen for the first time he heard it. It sounded sweeter than the most beautiful desert bird he had ever heard. He wanted to hear it over and over again for the rest of his days.

“I think we’re going to need to keep a close eye on my baby brother. A certain bodyguard of yours has taken quite the interest in him. I haven’t seen Marika without Malachi following him around since we arrived. I’m not even sure they’ve been apart more than twenty feet.”

“Mates?”

Anjali shrugged. “I don’t know. Neither of them have said anything, but I’m not sure Marika’s ready for mating anyway. And, truthfully, that may be why they haven’t said anything. Still, I don’t think Malachi is going to let anyone close enough to Marika for anything to happen to him. He seems very protective.”

“Mates,” Bogden said, positive he was right. He started to chuckle, but it quickly turned into a cough. Bogden felt like his shoulder was going to explode with the force of his cough. By the time he stopped coughing, Anjali was kneeling next to him again, the silver cup in his hand. He held it up to Bogden’s lips and let him have another drink before setting it aside once more.

“Here, let me get a look at your wound. I want to make sure it hasn’t started bleeding again. You’ve ripped out your stitches more than once already.”

Bogden lay back on the multitude of pillows behind him and watched Anjali’s face as the man pulled the bindings over his shoulder wound away and checked him over. Surprisingly, Anjali looked happy. Well, not happy, exactly, but content. There was a healthy glow to his face that gave him an ethereal radiance, as if he was well cared for.

Bogden felt a bit of jealousy fill him that he hadn’t been the one who had put that look on his mate’s face. He was jealous of the time the man spent with others and not by his side. “How long have I been sick?”

Anjali glanced up, his eyebrows arching in surprise. “You don’t remember?”

“I don’t remember anything past the bandits attacking us.”

Anjali giggled again. “You’ve missed quite a bit, then.”

“Tell me.” Bogden watched Anjali’s face avidly as the man began to talk.

“Well, you’ve been unconscious for about ten days. Urik said it was due to the poison on the arrow that hit you. The wound got

infected from the poison, and you had a fever for quite some time.” Anjali shook his head. “And, let me tell you, that wasn’t pretty. Besides the fact that you were burning up, you kept shouting and fighting us. At one point, Urik had to tie you down to keep you from hurting yourself.”

The smile suddenly fell from Anjali’s face as he pressed his lips together in a tight grim, and his glow faded as his face paled. He sat back on his legs and wrapped an arm around his waist. Anjali’s eyes were troubled as he looked down at Bogden.

“Don’t do that to me again, Bogden.” Anjali swallowed hard. “I thought I had lost you.”

Bogden reached for Anjali’s hand, clasping it tightly with his and pulling it to his mouth. He planted a small kiss on top of Anjali’s hand then pressed it against his chest. “You’ll never lose me, mayht. I’ve come back to you, haven’t I?”

The smile was slow to come across Anjali’s lips, but it did come, and it made Bogden feel ten feet tall. “Yeah, you did. But I would be much happier if you just refrained from getting hurt at all in the future. It would make me very, very happy, okay?”

“Okay, Anjali.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, Anjali, I promise.”

Those words seemed to make Anjali feel better. The glower on his face faded, and the color came back. Anjali replaced the covering on Bogden’s shoulder and pulled the blankets back up around him, patting his naked chest lightly.

“Are you hungry?”

“I could eat.”

“You just wait right here, and I’ll get you something to eat.”

Anjali looked excited as he jumped to his feet and hurried out of the tent. Bogden couldn’t help but wonder why. Things had been pretty precarious between the two of them when the marauders attacked. What changed?

“Well, you’re certainly looking better, brother.”

Bogden glanced over to see his brother, Urik, lifting the tent flap out of the way and walking in.

“Urik, how goes it?”

“Not too bad, brother.” Urik walked in, dropping the tent flap, and crossed over to sit down on several cushions next to Bogden’s bed. “When you were injured, we let the bandits go and just regrouped. I thought it was best to get you and your mate to safety rather than chase after them.”

“I agree.” Bogden nodded. “Anjali is my mayht, and his safety is my first priority and always will be.”

“As it should be, my brother.” Urik smirked. “But your mate is quite the fierce little warrior. I don’t think you have much you need to worry about where he is concerned.”

“Fierce little warrior? Anjali?” Bogden frowned. When he thought of his mate, fierce warrior wasn’t the first thing that came to mind. Adorable, sexy as hell, and even mouthwatering, but fierce? Not so much.

Urik chuckled and made himself more comfortable on the cushions. “I didn’t think you’d believe me, but I’m serious. He was scared when we first got here, but the moment your fever started, he jumped right in like a little general and started ordering everyone about.”

“Anjali?”

“You should have seen Anjali, brother. I thought Yasir was going to blow a vein or something. Anjali just started ordering everyone around and he didn’t care what anyone said. He knew how he wanted things done and he was going to get them done, one way or the other.”

“He didn’t offend anyone, did he?”

“Are you kidding? Yasir adores him now. So does almost everyone in the camp. They can’t do enough for him. I wouldn’t be

the least bit surprised if Yasir ignores you in favor of Anjali. The man is falling all over himself to make Anjali happy.”

“Really?”

Urik nodded. “He’s amazing, Bogden. He doesn’t just ask frivolous questions. He asks real ones, and he gets involved. He’s already milked a goat, made cheese, woven a rug, and even helped get a stray out of a sinkhole. He seems to have no problem getting his hands dirty and helping out.”

Bogden didn’t know whether to be jealous over not being there to see his mate become accepted by his people or proud that his mate had shown himself to be such a good man. Both were strong possibilities.

A sudden soft breeze caught Bogden’s attention when it blew his hair over his forehead. He turned to see Anjali standing in the doorway of the tent, a silver tray held in his hands. He looked a little nervous as he glanced between Bogden and Urik.

“Is this a bad time?” Anjali asked. “Should I come back?”

“No, not at all, mayht.” Bogden waved his hand, gesturing for Anjali to come forward. “You are always welcome in our tent, no matter who is here.”

Anjali smiled and hurried over to set the tray down on a small table next to Bogden’s pillow platform. He knelt down and started pulling lids off the plates on the tray. “How hungry are you? I brought several different things because I didn’t know what you would want.”

“Anything is fine, mayht.”

“I didn’t think I would like this when I first tried it, but it’s actually pretty good.” Anjali giggled. “Well, as long as the goat’s milk is cold and you add a little more sugar.”

Bogden arched an eyebrow as Anjali mixed something together in a bowl then dipped a spoon in. He quickly figured out what Anjali was talking about when he held the spoon filled with *Harees*, a kind of porridge with mutton.

“You like Harees?”

"It's not bad, although I have to admit I like the roasted goat better. Urik made some the other night, and he added some spices to it, which kind of gave it a sweet, smoky taste. We used flatbread to make sandwiches with it, and it was very good."

Bogden smiled as he took the bite Anjali offered and chewed. He was surprised that Anjali was right about the cold milk and extra sugar. It did make the porridge-like substance taste better.

"This is very good, Anjali."

"I have more," Anjali said quickly. "Yasir taught me how to make Al'Harees."

"And how do you like it?" Bogden asked between bites.

"It's actually pretty good, almost as good as Urik's flatbread sandwiches." Anjali giggled as he glanced over at Urik. "Almost."

Urik nodded and gave Anjali a traditional hand gesture of thanks by touching his forehead with his fingers and bowing his head slightly. "My thanks, little brother."

"What else have you done?" Bogden asked, wanting to hear everything. Anjali seemed so excited by his experiences.

"Well, I milked a goat, but it's not much different than milking a cow, and I've been doing that for years. The rug weaving thing was pretty fun, but I swear my hands ached for hours afterward. I'm used to working in dirt, but that weaving thing takes a lot of concentration and very nimble fingers."

"It sounds like you've had quite the adventure." Bogden chuckled. He was happy that Anjali was adapting so well but sorry he had missed so much. Maybe he would be able to experience some new things with Anjali when they arrived at pridehome.

"It's been interesting. I will give you that."

Anjali held out another spoonful of food, but Bogden waved him away. "I'm full, mayht, but thank you. It was wonderful."

Anjali nodded and reached for the silver tray. "I'll just take this to Yasir."

When Anjali stood, he suddenly swayed as if dizzy. Bogden grunted in pain as he pushed himself up, ready to catch Anjali if he fell, but Urik was there before him, resting a steadying hand on Anjali's shoulder.

"I'll take this to Yasir," Urik said as he took the tray from Anjali. "You go spend time with your mate. I imagine you have a lot to talk about."

"Oh, but—"

"Anjali."

Bogden frowned, feeling like he was missing some vital piece of a puzzle. Anjali had gone from excited and happy to scared and nervous. And Bogden certainly didn't like the way Anjali kept looking at Urik.

A slow growl started to come from him, building in his chest and climbing up his throat. He might have been unconscious for the last ten days, but he was still in the midst of the mating cycle that every newly mated Katzman went through.

His possessive instincts during the mating cycle made him sensitive to any perceived threats to his claim on Anjali. His protective instincts toward his mate were in full force. It gave him an overwhelming need to physically claim Anjali, to protect him and cherish him.

"Urik," Bogden growled quietly.

Urik's eyes widened. Then, he quickly stepped away from Anjali and hurried toward the door. He paused at the entrance to the tent and glanced back at Anjali. "Just tell him, little one. I promise you he will understand."

Urik exited the tent, and the door flap fell closed. Bogden turned his attention to Anjali, surprised to find the man watching him with anxiety filling his beautiful violet eyes. "Anjali, what is wrong?"

Anjali glanced down at his fingers, twisting them around in the cloth of his tunic so hard that Bogden was afraid he might rip the

fabric. He didn't understand what was going on, but, obviously, his mate was upset about something.

"Please tell me, mayht."

"I wasn't going to tell anyone else until I had time to tell you, but—" Anjali's eyes begged Bogden to understand when the man looked up. "I didn't know what to do. You were unconscious, and Urik said if you weren't there that I was under his protection and—"

"Did he touch you?" Bogden snapped, sitting halfway up.

"Wha—no!" Anjali quickly shook his head. "No one has touched me. I just—I had to tell someone, and you weren't there and—"

"Anjali, you're really starting to worry me. Just say it already."

Anjali's face paled, but he nodded, licking his lips as if they had suddenly gone dry. Bogden was totally confused when, instead of saying anything, Anjali reached down and smoothed his tunic down over his stomach—his very distended stomach.

Bogden could see tears filling Anjali's eyes as the man looked back at him. "I think there was a mix-up in my training. I was supposed to be a pleasure slave, one of the Vergnügen Caste, but—" Anjali shook his head. "I think I'm a Brüter, a breeder."

"Ashu, Anjali," Bogden said as he dropped his head down into his hands, "I thought something had happened to you."

"Something has happened," Anjali cried out. "I'm carrying."

"Oh, mayht," Bogden said softly as his head came up and joy filled him. He gestured with his hand for Anjali to come closer. Anjali looked hesitant at first but then hurried over to sit down on the bed platform. Bogden grabbed him and pulled him to his side. "Anjali, everyone from Elquone is a breeder."

"No, they said that I was supposed to be a pleasure slave. I haven't been through the Brüter training."

"The Brüter training is a myth that the old High Ruler started so that your people wouldn't fight the training processes. Every one of your people has the ability to give birth, even you. It's something you're born with."

“You knew?” Anjali whispered.

“Yes, but I thought you knew, too.” Bogden rubbed his hands up and down Anjali’s arms. “If I had known that you didn’t know about it, I would have told you.”

“How can you know and I not?”

“Trajan and Saris told me.”

“And how did they know?”

“Remember when Toc Jerell had you all in that cave?”

Anjali nodded.

“Well, he spilled the beans. I don’t think he knew you’d conk him over the head, and he told Trajan and Saris everything. I always figured you heard the whole thing and knew. I’m sorry if you didn’t.”

“No,” Anjali said softly, “I didn’t know.”

“And all of this time, you’ve been going out of your mind, haven’t you?”

“You—you’re not mad?”

“I think it’s wonderful.” Bogden leaned over and kissed Anjali’s temple then sat back. He glanced down at the distended stomach under Anjali’s tunic. His heart sang with delight when he saw the loving caress Anjali gave to his stomach. “The only thing that would make me happier is if you seemed happier with this.”

“I’m not unhappy, I just—” Anjali shrugged. “I didn’t know what you’d think or what you’d say. I was supposed to be a pleasure slave, not a breeder.”

Bogden grabbed Anjali’s chin and tilted his face up to his. “First of all, you are not slave, pleasure or breeder. You’re my mate.”

“You didn’t want me because I was a pleasure slave?”

“Anjali, when a Katzman finds his mate, it’s like we’ve found our other half, the one person in the entire universe that the gods fated just for us. Our mates make us whole. They give us back a part of ourselves that we don’t know is missing until it’s returned. The pleasure we get from each other in bed has very little to do with that.”

Anjali snorted in disbelief.

“Okay, it has a lot to do with sex, but it doesn’t have everything to do with it. I’d still want you if we never had sex again.” Bogden chuckled. “Although I seriously hope that doesn’t happen. I very much enjoy having sex with you.”

Anjali’s laughter filled the tent as the man threw himself against Bogden and pressed against his chest. Anjali’s face nuzzled into Bogden’s neck. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, mayht.”

Anjali’s head snapped up so fast that Bogden barely had time to move his own head out of the way. “How much did you miss me?”

Bogden’s eyes widened at the blatant invitation in Anjali’s eyes. He suddenly felt like he couldn’t breathe. He hadn’t been with Anjali in nearly three months except in their dreams—a very long time to be separated from his mate. Just the thought that Anjali wanted him made Bogden ache.

“Is it safe for the baby?”

Anjali’s face paled, and he dropped his head down into the middle of Bogden’s chest. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything about having a baby. They don’t teach pleasure slaves these things.”

Bogden chuckled. “They don’t teach pride warriors these things either, but I know someone who does know.”

Anjali’s head came back up again, his eyes so wide they dominated his pale face. “You do?”

“Hand me that box over on the side table,” Bogden said as he pointed.

Anjali quickly reached over and grabbed the box, handing it to Bogden. He looked anxious and curious, biting his lower lip as he watched Bogden open the box and pull out a small, flat metal device.

The Province of Leonidia was a bit different than the rest of the planet of Katzmann. They frowned on airships, most modern technologies, including weapons, and strangers. Many people saw the province as old-fashioned and backward. Bogden saw it as a simple land with simple people.

His people were happy, eking out a living from the desert and the bounty it provided. They didn't need the modern conventions that the rest of the planet used and even found them useless and ridiculous.

However, every once in a while, modern technology came in handy. Only Urik, Hassan, and Yasir knew that Bogden had a communication device hidden away. While he wouldn't necessarily get in trouble for having it, people wouldn't be happy about it.

Bogden punched in the code he wanted then waited for Saris's face to appear in the vidlink. Saris Chattan was a specially trained Brüter doctor. He was also mated to another Katzman, Trajan Varl, and carrying a children, twins, himself. If anyone would know about carrying a babe, Saris would.

"Bogden, good to see you, my friend," Saris said as soon as he came online.

"Saris, it is good to see you as well. You are looking well."

"I look fat." Saris snorted. He stepped back, and Bogden got a good look at the large belly Saris was sporting under his shirt.

"You look happy."

"Yeah, okay, I guess I can go with that." Saris chuckled. "So, what can I do for you, my friend?"

"Anjali is here with me and—"

Saris's face suddenly paled, and the man glanced around as if looking for something or someone. Then he leaned in closer to the screen. "Anjali is with you?"

"Yes." Bogden frowned and pulled Anjali to him as a sudden chill ran down his spine. "I had my emissary sign a contract for him by proxy and brought him here to Leonidia. Why?"

"Have you completed the mating?"

"Almost."

"You need to and soon. If you want to keep him, bind him to you any damn way you can."

"Saris, what in the hell is going on?"

“Your friend Amal went to Anjali’s father and got him to overturn the contract. He said that your emissary was supposed to sign the contract for him but you paid him off. Yuri Kirill went to the High Ruler of Elquone and got him to nullify your claim to Anjali.”

“He did what?” Bogden yelled as he sat up. He heard Anjali whimper next to him and immediately regretted his shout. Bogden pulled Anjali’s face into his neck and cradled the man close to him. “Shh, mayht, he will never take you from me. I promise you this.”

Bogden’s anger was barely tempered by the sudden panic that filled him. He wanted to tear Amal apart piece by piece for the fear he put into Anjali. He was also anxious over what was happening. He didn’t understand why Amal would do such a thing.

“Why does he want me?” Anjali whispered into Bogden’s neck. “I’ve never even met the man. Why would he do this?”

“I don’t know, Anjali, but I will find out, I swear.”

“Bogden?”

Bogden suddenly remembered that he was on vidlink with Saris and turned his attention back to the small screen. “What else can you tell me?”

“I don’t know much, but I’ll ask Trajan to look into it. In the meantime, get Anjali to your pridehome as fast as you can. If I remember everything that Trajan told me of your province, your pride is very isolated.”

“That is true.”

“Then my suggestion would be to get Anjali home and not allow any visitors unless you know exactly who they are, and, truthfully, at this point, I wouldn’t trust too many people. The High Ruler of Elquone has been arguing with Chellak for days about ordering you to return Anjali to Elquone.”

“It’s never going to happen, Saris. Anjali is carrying. That’s why we called.”

“Damn, you do know how to make life interesting, don’t you?”

“Anjali is mine, Saris. We’ve already completed most of the mating rituals, and he’s been accepted by my pride. I will not give him up for anyone.”

Bogden almost smiled at the small kiss Anjali placed against his skin but thought better of it considering the situation. He gently patted Anjali’s hip in response, trying to let the man know he had heard Anjali’s unspoken sentiment.

“I don’t think anyone here on Katzmann would make you return Anjali if the mating has been completed, Bogden, but that doesn’t mean that the High Ruler of Elquone can’t get the Federation of Planets involved. If that happens, this might be out of Chellak’s control.”

“I know, and I appreciate everything Chellak is doing, but I still won’t let Anjali go. He’s my mate, and he’s carrying my child. That means he’s mine. No one can dispute that.”

“You never asked me that,” Anjali said as he pulled his head back to look at Bogden.

“Ask you what, mayht?”

“If this was your child.”

Bogden smiled and cupped the side of Anjali’s face. “I know it’s mine, Anjali. I never doubted it for a minute.”

“How do you know?” Anjali suddenly paled. “I mean, it is, but how can you be so sure?”

“I’m sure because I know you, Anjali. You would never have sex with someone you didn’t care about. It’s just not in your nature. And since you love me, I figure that means you have only had sex with me, which means this is my child.”

“Since I love you?” Anjali whispered. “I never said I loved you.”

“You might not have said it in so many words, but you’ve said it.” Bogden smiled as he caressed the side of Anjali’s face. “Every time you let me love you, every time you smiled at me or laughed at something stupid I said, you told me you loved me. You’ve said it a thousand times in a thousand different ways.”

By the time he was done speaking, Anjali's mouth was hanging open. Bogden grinned and gently closed Anjali's mouth before leaning forward to place a small kiss on his lips. "I love you, too, mayht."

Bogden felt a warm glow flow through him at the silent tears that trailed down Anjali's face. The brilliant smile on his lips made Anjali's face shine. "Really?"

"Really, mayht."

"I hate to interrupt this touching moment, believe me, but we still have a problem here, Bogden. I don't think that Amal is going to stop until you have Anjali safely hidden away in your pridehome and the mating is completed."

"We will get underway immediately, Saris, not to worry."

"No, we won't!" Anjali said quite loudly. "Bogden was injured, and he's still healing. He needs at least another day before he can ride."

"Anjali—"

"Not happening, so forget about it. I didn't just pull your ass out of a fever and poisoning and everything to see you toss all of my hard work away riding that damn horse of yours."

"Poisoning?" Saris asked. "What poisoning?"

"It's nothing."

"It is something," Anjali snapped. "We were attacked by bandits or marauders or something, and Bogden got shot with a poisoned arrow. He's been unconscious with a fever for days. He just woke up."

"In this case, Bogden, I'm afraid I have to agree with Anjali. If you've been poisoned and unconscious for more than a few hours, then you need to rest. Let Urik get things organized. You can head home tomorrow."

Bogden sighed deeply. He knew when he was beat. "Fine, we'll stay here for one more day, but we're heading home tomorrow. I

don't care if I have to be carried on a litter the entire way. We're going home where Anjali will be safe."

"Why am I not safe now?" Anjali asked. "You said we were mated in the eyes of your pride and that it would make the contract not a problem."

Bogden felt his face flush when Saris started laughing hysterically. He rolled his eyes. "There are several parts to mating in the Leonid Pride, Anjali. We've completed all of them but one."

"So?" Anjali waved his hand in the air in a frustrated gesture. "Let's complete it, then."

Bogden smirked and arched an eyebrow at Anjali. "Why do you think we were calling Saris?"

Chapter 5

Anjali tried to sit still as Bogden placed the vidlink back in the box and set it on the table, but it took everything he had to not move. He felt like a hundred little ants were crawling all over his skin, making him agitated.

Saris had given his go ahead for Anjali and Bogden to be intimate but they had to use precautions, nothing rough and nothing that would put Anjali in any strange positions. Anjali was so wired he'd take anything he could get. Just being near Bogden made him so anxious he could probably get off without any stimulation at all.

When Bogden leaned back against the cushions behind him and clasped his hands together, Anjali pressed his lips together. Bogden looked way too calm for Anjali's liking, especially since he ached so badly his teeth hurt.

Anjali had never thought he'd see Bogden again after the man left. He'd given up hope that he'd ever have the one man he wanted more than any other. Anjali figured he'd spend his life wanting Bogden but serving someone else.

When he'd discovered that he was carrying, his joy at knowing he had a little bit of Bogden with him was tempered with the knowledge that he would never be able to share the precious life with Bogden.

Now, he was being given a chance with both Bogden and their child. He wasn't about to let some man he'd never met interfere with that. If Bogden's claiming him involved them having sex, so much the better. Anjali was all for it. He just wished Bogden would get to it.

"Are you sure this is something you want to do, mayht? Once it happens, it can never be undone."

"I'm sure." Anjali frowned. "I'm just a little confused, though. We've had sex before. How is this time any different?"

"We didn't have time to discuss our mating before, and I would never do something that life-altering without talking with you first."

"Isn't that what you did when you bought my contract?"

"In a way, I suppose that's true, but I knew you loved me just as much as I loved you. I hoped that once we were together, you would accept me."

"So, if I accept you, that makes us mates?"

"We're already mates, Anjali. This will just cement it."

Anjali arched an eyebrow at Bogden when he heard the low growl in the man's voice. Apparently, Bogden didn't like the thought that they might not be mates. There was something about the vehemence in Bogden's words that thrilled Anjali right down to his toes.

Anjali moved closer to Bogden, trailing his fingers over the black tunic covering his chest. "I dreamed about you."

"I dreamed of you, too," Bogden said. "Sharing dreams is one of the signs of a mating."

"Really?"

Bogden nodded. "We dream together, and often. It is a way of building a bridge between us." Bogden's breath hitched in his throat. His eyes were intent, almost obsessive. "Every time you dreamed, I was there, mayht. I shared your dreams with you as you did with me."

"You—" Anjali swallowed hard as a sudden thought came to him. "That's why you weren't surprised when I told you that I was carrying. You already knew."

"I did." The warmth in Bogden's smile echoed in his words. "Do you remember when you dreamed and told me of our baby?"

Anjali nodded, remembering the joy he had felt at sharing his news with Bogden. In his dream, he hadn't been afraid or nervous. He had been excited, joy filling him at the excitement on Bogden's face at the news.

Bogden had dropped to his knees and gently kissed Anjali's stomach even though it was still flat. He had been so excited. Bogden had kept touching Anjali, caressing his belly. That joy had come every time Anjali dreamed. At the time, he had attributed it to a fantasy he built in his imagination. Knowing it had been real took Anjali's breath away.

Anjali's smile wobbled as he reached for the hand Bogden held out to him. He was stunned that every dream he had was shared with Bogden and a bit embarrassed, too. Some of his dreams had gotten pretty erotic.

Settling down on the cushions beside Bogden, Anjali rested his head on the man's chest. He still had questions and could only hope he didn't sound like an idiot when he asked them. He just needed to know.

"If you knew I was carrying and we had sex in our dreams, why did you need to ask Saris if it was okay for us to be intimate?" That just totally confused Anjali.

"Because making love to you in a dream is a little different than making love to you in person. While it may have been real to us, maybe, it was still a dream and not physical. And I won't do anything that could bring harm to either you or our child. I just needed to be sure."

Anjali didn't reply, just snuggled in closer to Bogden. He felt like tonight, for the first time in a long time, there were no shadows across his heart. Bogden loved him and wanted him and their child. Anjali felt blissfully happy.

"So, now that we know, do you suppose we can do this without the dream thingy?"

Bogden grinned and rolled Anjali onto his back. Anjali absently noted how careful Bogden was with him, making sure he settled his larger body beside him instead of on top of him. Bogden's hands, however, were suddenly all over Anjali. He wasn't sure there was an

inch of his skin that wasn't caressed as Bogden slowly stripped the clothes from Anjali's body.

Anjali groaned when their naked bodies came together, thankful that Bogden had been naked under the blankets. Nothing had ever felt so good as Bogden's hot body pressed against his.

"So beautiful, my mayht." Bogden's words were whispered against Anjali's skin, making him tingle. He leaned into the hand Bogden stroked down his chest, wanting more, wanting it never to end. "I can't believe you're finally mine."

"Always yours," Anjali murmured. He felt like Bogden was wrapping him in a silken cocoon of euphoria with each gentle caress. As wonderful and as vivid as the dreams had been, they didn't compare in the least to Bogden in reality.

"And you'll always be mine, Anjali." Anjali thrilled at Bogden's words but even more at the intensity in his eyes. Bogden's gaze seemed riveted on Anjali's face. Then it moved over his body slowly. "Every last, luscious inch of you."

Anjali had just enough time to take in Bogden's words before the man's lips claimed his and drove every thought right out of his mind except the feeling of the man kissing him. Anjali groaned and opened his mouth, allowing Bogden in.

His tongue moved against Bogden's, touching, caressing. Each small touch, each lick, felt like heaven. Anjali never wanted it to end and almost protested when Bogden pulled away until he felt the small kisses pressed against the skin of his throat then his chest. When Bogden's mouth latched onto his sensitive nipple, Anjali cried out as ecstasy filled him.

At the base of his throat, a pulse beat and swelled as though his heart had risen from its usual place, wanting to be near Bogden. Anjali moved toward Bogden, impelled by his own passion, needing to feel more of Bogden's exquisite touch.

He reached for Bogden, running his hands over the man's naked body. He gloried in the groan that fell from Bogden's lips at his touch.

He tried to turn toward Bogden, wanting more contact until he felt long fingers wrap around his aching cock.

“Bogden!”

“Look how you burn for my touch, mayht. So sweet, so responsive.”

Anjali wanted to look, but he was too busy going out of his mind. Bogden’s hand was stroking him slowly at first, and then with more vigor. Every time he got to the head of Anjali’s cock, he rubbed his fingers over the top. The gentle touches sent shivers of delight through Anjali until he couldn’t stand it anymore.

Anjali cried out as his body arched into the air, his cock thrusting through Bogden’s grip as an orgasm of epic proportions raced through his body. Bogden’s hands slid across his belly as he gently lowered Anjali back down onto the cushions then moved to kneel between his knees.

Anjali felt melty, blissful. He blinked several times as he looked down to see his big, strong mate kneeling between his legs, licking away the evidence of his pleasure. It was hot.

The sudden flush on Bogden’s face was arousing but not as much as the desire burning in the man’s golden eyes. Anjali moaned softly as he felt one of Bogden’s hands slide down his stomach to the soft curve of his hip as the man explored.

Anjali grinned at the sudden inhale of breath from Bogden, and he let his legs fall apart. Bogden seemed mesmerized then suddenly started looking around the tent almost frantically.

“Bogden?”

“I need oil,” the man said. “Where’s my oil?”

Bogden abruptly leaned over Anjali, reaching for a purple bottle sitting on the side table. Anjali arched an eyebrow at him, wondering what exactly was in the bottle. Was it lube or something more?

Anjali doubted he’d ever find out. Bogden opened the bottle and poured some lavender liquid out on his fingers. Before Anjali could

question him, Bogden put the lid back in the bottle and set it on the bed.

A moment later, Anjali inhaled sharply when two slick fingers slid into his ass. There was a brief moment of pain, but it quickly turned to pleasure as the oil started heating up. By the time Bogden started moving his fingers around, Anjali's cock was hard again, and he was pushing back against the man's intruding fingers.

"Wha-what is that stuff?"

"It's a special oil made from the thorns of the Shawii plant. We call it the desert thorn. It intensifies our pleasure while ensuring that you are not harmed. It has medicinal properties that help loosen you up."

"We're gonna need more!" Anjali cried out as Bogden added a third finger. "It's glorious."

"Not to worry, mayht, desert thorn grows naturally around our pridehome."

"Good," Anjali huffed. "Good."

Bogden's grin was mischievous as if he knew something Anjali did not. Anjali was pretty sure the man did. Bogden seemed much more experienced than he was. If Anjali didn't know better, he would have thought Bogden was trained as a pleasure slave. The man knew how to bring him pleasure with a simple touch.

"My turn, mayht," Bogden said as he pulled his fingers free and wiped them on a nearby cloth. Anjali frowned until Bogden moved over to lie down behind him, tucking his curves neatly into his own contours.

"I remember this position."

"Do you, mayht?" Bogden asked as he placed numerous kisses along the curve of Anjali's neck.

"Yes, in our dreams."

Bogden's hands slowly moved down Anjali's body, skimming his side to the curve of his ass then down to wrap around his thigh. "Lift your leg up, Anjali."

Anjali did as Bogden directed, pulling his leg up as close to his chest as he could. He could feel himself opening up, ready for Bogden's possession. The soft nudge of Bogden's hard cock took the breath from Anjali's lungs. It had been so long since he had felt the man inside of him that he thought he might die if it didn't happen in the next two seconds.

"Mine now, mayht," Bogden groaned as he slowly sank into Anjali's ass.

Bogden moved so slow that Anjali could feel the very veins lining the man's cock brush against him as he was impaled. Anjali snuggled back against Bogden as the man filled him to the brim, their legs intertwining.

Bogden started moving, and Anjali thought he was going to pass out. Each thrust, no matter how small or how large, sent pleasure burning through his body. He had thought that Bogden jerking him off had been pretty damn good. This was better.

Bogden's fingers burned into Anjali's tingling skin as his hands explored the lines of Anjali's back and waist and hips. His lips traced a sensuous path of ecstasy along Anjali's shoulder and throat.

The man seemed to be doing everything he could to drive Anjali crazy. It was working. Anjali squirmed and pressed back against Bogden each time the man thrust into him. He panted, his chest heaving with each breath he took.

"Bogden, please!" Anjali begged when he felt himself teetering on the edge of another orgasm. When Bogden's bleeding wrist was suddenly thrust in front of his face, Anjali glanced back at his mate in confusion.

"It has to be your decision, Anjali," Bogden said solemnly. "If you take my blood, you will bind us together forever. Once it's done, it can never be undone."

Anjali didn't even hesitate. He kept his eyes locked with Bogden's as he grabbed the man's arm and brought it to his mouth, licking

away the man's sweet-tasting blood. He could see the answer to his gesture in the sudden heat flaring in Bogden's eyes.

"My mayht." Bogden seemed to suddenly lose the tight hold he had on his control. His thrusts increased in tempo until he was nearly ramming into Anjali.

Anjali groaned around the flesh in his mouth when one of Bogden's hands wrapped around his cock again. The pleasure was explosive and just what he needed to send him over the edge. Anjali cried out, his head falling back as a second orgasm ripped through his body.

Bogden's hand gripped his hip so hard that Anjali knew he would have bruises in the morning. With one mighty thrust, Bogden roared out Anjali's name as he came deep inside him, the knot finding lodging against Anjali's prostate.

The sudden blinding pain he felt in his shoulder as Bogden's teeth sank into his flesh started to bring him down from his orgasm, but just as quickly as the pain came it faded away to be replaced by pleasure so intense that stars danced in front of Anjali's vision until they shattered into a million glowing lights.

The strong, masculine scent of his mate filled Anjali's senses, wrapping around him. He felt a warmth fill him like a light infusing his body and suddenly felt Bogden's love like a physical caress.

Anjali felt Bogden's arms wrap around him, one hand covering his heart, the other the swell of their child. Soft kisses were placed along the curve of his neck again. He felt like their bodies and their hearts were finally in perfect harmony with each other.

"My mayht."

Anjali couldn't control the soft sob that fell from his lips when he heard Bogden's silently spoken words in his mind. In all of the upheaval of Bogden's leaving and returning to Elquone, he had forgotten that mates could talk together in their minds, but only once they had accepted the mating between them.

It was a special trait of the Katzmen, one that was kept secret from almost everyone. The only reason Anjali actually knew about it was because of the time he spent with Chellak Rai and his mate, Demyan, after his kidnapping.

Demyan was unable to speak verbally due to an injury he had received at the hands of one of the men who had killed Chellak's parents. Chellak and Demyan communicated through their mind bond.

"Anjali?"

"I forgot about the mind bond." Anjali could feel Bogden's smile even if he couldn't see it. He also felt the man's happiness through their bond—another effect of being mated to a Katzman.

"I did not, and I am quite happy that you can hear me through our bond."

"I know." Anjali giggled. "I can feel you."

"You will always be able to feel me—to feel my love for you—just as I will be able to feel you." Anjali giggled again when Bogden gave him a gentle squeeze. "It means we both accept our mating. We have a bond that goes beyond physical, mayht. It goes deep into our souls."

Anjali couldn't keep the grin off his face as he turned his head to look at his mate. "And you like that, don't you?"

"I do." Bogden grinned right back, happiness dancing in his eyes. "Our child will soon be able to talk to us, too."

"Our child?" Anjali gasped.

"It may not be as we do, in words and such, but you will be able to feel him, feel his emotions. Every Katzman child can talk to his or her parents through their bond. It comes in very handy once they are born and need something but can't tell you in words."

"I'll bet." Anjali was astounded but also excited about the prospect of being able to talk to his child. "Are you sure it works with me? I'm not a Katzman."

“According to Demyan, it does. Both he and Chellak can talk to their twins.”

“Twins!” Anjali felt his face pale. “What if we have twins?”

“We won’t.” Bogden smiled as he rubbed Anjali’s distended belly. “There is just one this time. Maybe next time we will be blessed with twins.”

“Next time?” Anjali squeaked, not sure if he was panicked by the idea of twins or excited.

“Well, I know that you have to eat meat to be fertile, so we can space them out, but, yes, I would like more.” Bogden arched one dark eyebrow. “Wouldn’t you?”

“I...” Anjali swallowed hard. “Let’s get me through this one first. Then we’ll talk.”

Anjali was just starting to digest the fact that Bogden wanted more children when he felt the softening cock inside of him start to harden back up. His eyes flew up to Bogden’s. “Again?”

“What can I say, mayht? You are very beautiful carrying our child. I find it very arousing.”

Anjali rolled his eyes, but he didn’t protest when Bogden leaned over to kiss him even as the man started slowly thrusting into him again. He would take Bogden any way he could get him even if the man was a little weird.

Chapter 6

Bogden grinned as another pride member walked up to see how he fared. Everyone seemed to be happy to see him and happy that he was once again on the mend. Bogden couldn't count the number of people who had already wished him well.

It was a good feeling being cared for by his pride. While he knew he had the skills to lead, Bogden always felt that there was a certain something that a Shaikh was born with that made them better leaders.

His father had had it as a great leader of their people until the day he died. Bogden could only hope that he had it as well. No matter how much training someone had, if they didn't have that special something, they would never be a good leader.

"Everyone has been so nice to me."

Bogden smiled down at his mate, pulling the man closer to his side as they walked through camp. "Did you expect something else?"

"Truthfully, I didn't know what to expect." Anjali smirked. "You have to remember I thought I was coming here to be a pleasure slave to some unknown master."

"Not to worry, mayht, I have every intention of you being a pleasure slave." Bogden wiggled his eyebrows until Anjali started giggling. "My pleasure slave."

"Yeah, well, just don't expect me to call you master."

Bogden saw several of his pride members stop what they were doing and stare as his laughter filled the area around them. They looked for a moment then smiled, turning back to packing up the camp as if satisfied everything was okay with their Shaikh and his mate.

It was planned for them to leave in the next hour and head back to pridehome. The trip shouldn't take more than two days, and Bogden was happy about that. He wanted to get Anjali home where he would be safe as fast as he could.

Usually, the trip from the oasis only took a day and a night, but he wanted to go just a little slower due to Anjali's condition. He hadn't discussed the baby with anyone except Urik and wouldn't until he had Anjali home.

He didn't want to be out in the open if someone had an issue with a breeder being in their midst. Bogden felt pretty sure that everyone would be accepting of Anjali if not excited that the bloodline would continue, but after the fiasco with Amal, he wasn't taking any chances.

Anjali and their child were now Bogden's first priority, even above those of the pride. He'd step down and move to the capital city with Chellak Rai before he gave up his gorgeous little mate.

"Would you like some jerky?" Anjali asked as he held out a small piece of brown meat. "Yasir and I made some yesterday from that leftover goat that Urik roasted. It's pretty good, but we need to see about getting some different spices."

Bogden watched with a great deal of interest as a frown came over his mate's face. Anjali always seemed to be thinking of something—a question unasked, a task unfinished, or something. Bogden wondered if the man's mind ever slept.

"Can we do that?"

"Do what, mayht?"

"Can we buy more spices?" Anjali waved his hand around to the desert surrounding them. "I know we're pretty isolated out here, so there probably aren't a lot of open markets and such, so how do we get stuff we need?"

"Most of what we need we take from the desert," Bogden explained. "Whatever we can't get from the desert, we trade for."

"Trade?"

Bogden grinned. "Once a month, the desert prides meet to discuss old and new laws, see other family members that may have mated into other prides, and trade for things we need. If there is something you desire, we can trade for it then."

"Really?"

"Really, mayht."

Bogden enjoyed the animated smile that came over Anjali's face. He seemed pleased by the knowledge that they could trade for the things they needed. Bogden promised himself that he would ensure that Anjali's first market time was a great success. He'd show him everything.

"Come, mayht, I have something I want to show you."

Bogden couldn't keep from laughing as Anjali bounced along beside him. Even carrying their child, the man was a bundle of energy. He couldn't help but wonder what the babe would be like. Bogden's every move was measured, calculated. He was a warrior. Anjali just seemed to move as if he couldn't stand still. That didn't bode well for restful nights of sleep in their future.

"You know, I really didn't think I would like it here when I first arrived," Anjali said as they walked. "But the more time I spend here, the more I like it. There's something..." Anjali shrugged, "almost peaceful about this place."

"The desert is both very beautiful and very dangerous, mayht." Bogden walked with Anjali, watching his face to see when the man would notice they had left camp. The people and tents were falling behind them, the desert opening up before them.

"Have you always been here?"

"Except for the times when I trained with other prides and when we helped Chellak then rescued you, Trajan, and Saris, yes. This is my home."

"Is it always like this?" Anjali waved his hand out to encompass the desert sands.

“Pretty much. There are times when the desert is serene, not a single grain of sand moving. Other times, like during a sandstorm, the sand is so thick you can’t see an inch in front of your face.”

Anjali nodded as if he understood what Bogden was talking about, but Bogden knew he didn’t. No one really understood what it was like to experience a sandstorm until it happened. They might be a way of cleaning the desert, changing the landscape, but they were also deadly. More than one pride member had died during a sandstorm.

“In the wintertime, the landscape is pretty much the same, but it gets very cold. And while it can make the desert seem very barren, it has its own type of beauty. The summertimes are just as beautiful but blistering hot. There are even parts of the desert that are hotter than all the rest. Hotter than the depths of hell.”

They walked around the corner of a sand dune, and the sight Bogden wanted to share with Anjali opened up before them. Bogden grinned when Anjali skidded to a stop and inhaled sharply.

“Bogden,” he whispered, awe covering his face. “How—”

Bogden and Anjali looked out over a small valley amidst the sand dunes and high, rocky cliffs. A field of purple flowers filled that valley from one end to the other. There were so many flowers that the field looked like a blanket of flowers.

“These are your desert thorns, mayht.”

“Where are the thorns?”

Bogden walked over to the closest plant. He pulled his Khanja and cut off one of the stems, flower and thorns included. He put his curved blade away and walked back to his mate, holding the stem a few inches away from Anjali.

“Remember when I said that the desert can be both beautiful and dangerous?”

Anjali nodded.

“These beautiful purple flowers hide a deadly threat.” Bogden turned the stem so that Anjali could see the dark tan thorns. “These

thorns, if they pierce your skin, can be toxic, causing nausea, hallucinations, and even death.”

“If it’s so deadly, why do we use it as an oil?” Anjali frowned. “And how do we use it? I mean, how do people make it into oil? Wouldn’t it kill us?”

Always with the questions. Bogden smiled. “You would think so, wouldn’t you? The thorns are carefully harvested from the stems then crushed into a pulp-like substance. That pulp is pressed until all of the sap is extracted. The sap is what makes the oil. We mix it with a variety of essential oils until it becomes our Shawii oil.”

“But isn’t it still poisonous?”

“That’s the interesting part.” Bogden pointed to one thorn but made sure not to touch it. “Only the thorns themselves are poisonous. Once the sap from the thorns is extracted and mixed with essential oils, it is no longer lethal.”

“Then how do you get the thorns without being poisoned?”

“Carefully.” Bogden laughed.

“Bogden, I’m serious.”

“So am I, mayht. A few select people are specially trained to harvest the thorns and turn them into oil. It’s a lot like a warrior is chosen and trained. We all have something we are good at—being a warrior or a shepherd for our goat herds or even a rug weaver. And some people are good at making Shawii oil.”

Bogden frowned at the little shiver that seemed to shake Anjali’s body as the man stared at the thorns. He didn’t want to scare his mate or make him upset. “Anjali?”

“If that damn oil is so good, then why are so few people chosen to harvest it? I would think that you would want as much of it as you could get your hands on.”

Bogden chuckled. “Because the making of the Shawii oil is very secret.”

Anjali arched an eyebrow.

“Do you remember that trade market I told you about? Well, we need something to trade, don’t we? The Leonid Pride is the only pride that knows the secret to making the Shawii oil. Others have tried to make it, but no one has perfected it, just our pride. Because of that, it is a highly prized commodity.”

Anjali’s face broke out into a huge grin as he giggled. “And worth a lot of money, I’d bet. That stuff is like gold.”

“Pretty much.” Bogden carefully pulled the purple flower off then tossed the stem away before holding out the flower to his mate. Anjali started to reach for the purple flower then paused, his eyes flickering up to Bogden’s.

“Is it safe?”

“Yes, very. I would never give you something that wasn’t safe.”

“Oh, I know that. I just...” Anjali’s face flushed, and he glanced away for a moment. “I guess I was just caught up in your story. I’m sorry.”

“Not to worry, mayht, I know you are just learning our ways. I’m sure there will be many more situations where you are curious, and I am glad you question things even if this flower is safe to touch. It shows that you are always thinking of your safety.”

“You don’t mind the questions?”

“I love the questions. I love how your mind works.”

“Okay.” Anjali seemed happy with Bogden’s reply as he smiled and plucked the flower out of his hand, holding it carefully to his chest. “Thank you.”

“You are very welcome, mayht.”

Bogden placed his hand in the low of Anjali’s back as they began walking back toward the camp. It was just as slow a walk as when they had arrived. Bogden didn’t want to put any strain on Anjali by walking too fast.

“Is Shawii oil all the desert thorn plant is good for?”

“Now, that is a very good question, Anjali, and the answer is no. As I said, the thorns are very poisonous. The sap we extract from

them is poisonous until it is mixed with essential oils, rendering the poison useless. If we don't mix it with essential oils, it's a simple poison."

"Simple!" Anjali snorted. "There is nothing simple about poison."

"True, and if I had to make a bet based on your description of my symptoms, I'd say I was poisoned by the desert thorn."

"Then that means someone you know poisoned you."

"It looks that way, but it is not necessarily the truth. We try to make it a practice not to share the desert thorn poison with anyone. For one, the stuff is deadly. Two, sharing this poison with others means it can be used against us."

"So, if you think you were poisoned by the desert thorn, how did it happen?"

"That I don't know. It makes sense that it was someone I know as we don't share the secrets of the desert thorn with anyone outside of the pride. However, I can't think of anyone who would want to kill me. I've only been Shaikh for a couple of months. I haven't had time to make enemies."

"Could it have been this Amal guy?" Anjali asked as he glanced up at Bogden.

"If you had asked me that a couple of days ago, I would have said no, but now I'm not so sure. I thought Amal was my friend, an honorable man. After everything I've learned, I don't know what to think of him."

"I think you need to start making some different friends."

Bogden chuckled. "You might be right, mayht."

They walked around a high sand dune, and Bogden's heart jumped into his throat. He grabbed Anjali and pulled him down to the ground, hovering over the top of him and covering the man's mouth with his hand.

"*Don't make a sound, Anjali,*" he whispered through their bond. He could feel the fear racing through Anjali's body as he trembled.

"*What's wrong?*"

"There are riders in the camp."

"Riders?"

"They do not belong to our pride," Bogden explained. "Until I know who they are, we need to stay hidden."

"How do you know they do not belong to our pride?"

It didn't pass by Bogden that Anjali had used the word *our* when referring to the pride. The man was slowly starting to see himself as part of the pride instead of an outsider. Bogden couldn't have been more thrilled about that.

He was not, however, thrilled that they had visitors. He wasn't expecting visitors, and Bogden worried that they might be the bandits who had attacked them earlier or maybe even Amal himself. Both situations were a danger to Anjali.

"I know everyone in our pride, mayht, and I do not recognize these people. Besides, most of our pride wears Mishlahs of black, denoting them as belonging to the Leonid Pride. These riders are wearing brown Mishlahs."

"What do we do?"

"We do nothing. I'm going to slip around to that other sand dune over there and check out the situation. You're going to hide." Bogden pointed several yards away to a sand dune that came up to the edge of the camp. *"I want you to make your way to the field of flowers. If you go along the edge of the field, there is a small cave on the far side hidden by the flowers and the rock face. Hide there, and I will come for you when it's safe. Just remember not to touch the thorns."*

Anjali nodded, and Bogden slowly slid his hand away from the man's mouth and up to cup around his cheek. Anjali's eyes were filled with anxiety. Bogden tried to smile and reassure his mate but knew he had failed when tears began to sparkle in Anjali's violet eyes.

"Stay safe, mayht." Bogden leaned forward and placed a small kiss on Anjali's lips before reaching down and gently caressing the soft swell of his stomach. *"Keep our baby safe."*

“Bogden, I don’t want you to go.”

“I have to, mayht. I have to find out if we are in danger.” Bogden kissed Anjali again, feeling his own tears well up in his eyes. He blinked several times until the tears went away then smiled down at his mate. *“Entya haby, entya hyety, entya a’lhabby.”*

“You are my love, you are my life, you are my heart,” Anjali whispered.

“You remember.”

“I will never forget.”

Bogden stroked his thumb up the curve of Anjali’s cheek, drawing in as much of the man’s gorgeous features as he could. He was deeply afraid that he might never see his mate again, and that made his heart ache so much he thought it might stop beating.

Bogden untied the waterskin from the belt around his waist and handed it to his mate. Before he could say any more, and deeply afraid he would start blabbering if he did, he pushed away from Anjali and started scooting around the edge of the sand dune they hid behind.

After moving several yards away, Bogden glanced back to see Anjali making his way back toward the valley they had just left. His heart ached to not be able to stay with his mate, but he knew discovering the threat to them was the best way to keep Anjali safe. A known threat was easier to deal with than an unknown one.

Bogden turned back to what he was doing, moving down to his belly to scoot along the sand when he got closer to the camp. He could hear people talking, but not many seemed to be moving around.

Just as he started to move between a gap in the sand dunes, Bogden caught a flash of material out of the corner of his eye. He froze, barely breathing as he waited to see who or what it was.

It quickly became clear that it was someone sneaking away from the camp. Bogden let loose a small sigh of relief when he recognized Yasir crawling toward him. He glanced back at the camp to see if anyone else had seen the man then scooted toward him.

Just as he reached Yasir, the man reared back, his face paling. Bogden barely had time to cover Yasir's mouth before the man's cry of distress fell free. Bogden pulled Yasir to the ground and looked past him to see if his cry had been heard. When no one appeared, Bogden looked down at the man he had pinned to the sand.

"How many?" he mouthed.

Yasir shook his head.

"Do you know them?"

Yasir nodded.

"Who?" Bogden removed his hand from Yasir's mouth but just a few inches in case he had to silence the man suddenly.

"I don't know his name," Yasir whispered, "but he's a warrior like you. I've seen him before when you brought some of your friends home after the planet was retaken."

"Amal?" Fear laced Bogden's words. "Could his name be Amal?"

Yasir seemed to think about it for a moment then nodded. "It might be. I am sorry, Shaikh. I just don't remember."

"It's okay, Yasir. You can't be expected to remember everyone." Bogden pressed his lips together for a moment as he tried to think about what to do next. "Can you give me a rough estimate of how many there are?"

"Ten, maybe twenty men."

"Are they armed?"

Yasir shuddered. "Very. They have laser guns."

"Ashu!" Bogden knew his warriors were fierce fighters, but even they were not immune to laser fire. They bled just like everyone else. "Where's Urik?"

"They have him tied up near the center of the camp."

"And our other warriors?"

"Those that are not dead have been herded to the middle of the camp. They were being tied up when I escaped out the back of your tent."

“Good. Now, what about the rest of our people? Are they injured?”

“There are a few injuries from what I could see, but I do not know how many. Urik told me to stay inside the tent and hide.” Yasir swallowed hard, looking panicked. “I tried to do as he said, but the riders started searching the tents. I thought it was best to try and get away and go find you.”

“You did good, Yasir.”

“I was a coward.” Yasir sniffled. “I should have stayed and fought.”

“Yasir, you’re not a warrior. It is not your place to fight. You came to warn me, though, didn’t you? Those were not the actions of a coward.”

Yasir nodded, sniffing again.

“Now, I need you to be brave again, Yasir.”

“Anything you ask of me, Shaikh, is yours.”

“Anjali is hiding in the cave beyond the Shawii field. I want you to go to him and keep him safe. He doesn’t know how to protect himself in the desert. You do.”

“I will do as you ask, Shaikh.”

“Thank you, Yasir. That means a lot to me. Anjali is my life.” Bogden rolled off of Yasir and settled down close to the sand. “There is something else you need to be aware of, Yasir. Anjali is from Elquone like our High Ruler’s mate, Demyan.”

“He is a breeder?”

Bogden knew that Yasir had heard of the Brütters from Elquone. Everyone had heard about the breeder who had given birth to twins, providing Chellak Rai with children. It was of great fascination and discussion among many of the inhabitants of Katzmann.

“Yes, and he’s carrying our child.” Bogden waited to see how Yasir would react, but when all he saw was wonder on the man’s face, he continued. “You must be very careful with his health so that nothing happens to either of them.”

"I will protect them with my life, Shaikh." Yasir seemed almost excited, which amused Bogden a bit. "This will be a blessed event, Shaikh."

"I hope so." Bogden grinned then waved his hand toward the valley of flowers. "Now, go, and stay low to the ground. I do not want you spotted. I will come for you and Anjali when everything is safe."

"Yes, Shaikh."

Bogden glanced at the encampment one more time then turned to watch Yasir crawl across the sand again. He wished he had more provisions to send with Yasir because the small waterskin he had given Anjali would only last so long.

They were at an oasis, and Yasir and Anjali could get more water if they could reach the natural water spring without being seen. Bogden just hoped Yasir knew to wait until the coast was clear before trying.

The other worry was food. Bogden knew Anjali had some jerky, but he didn't know how much, and he didn't know how long they would need to stay hidden. Hours would be fine, but if the situation turned into days, it would be dangerous for Anjali and Yasir.

Once Yasir crawled out of sight, Bogden turned back to the camp. He started scooting along the top of the sand, following the trail that Yasir had made. Besides getting him back to camp, he would cover Yasir's trail with one of his own. Hopefully, whoever had attacked the camp would think it was Bogden coming into the camp and not someone leaving.

Bogden blew out a soft sigh of relief when he reached his tent without being noticed. Lying flat on his stomach, he peeked around the edge of the tent. What he saw sent a chill down his spine.

Urik and the other people from the camp were kneeling on the sand in the center of the camp, their hands clasped behind their heads. Several armed men walked about, occasionally hitting or kicking anyone who got in their way and a few who didn't.

One man, dressed all in black much like Bogden was, stood directly in front of Urik, his arms crossed over his chest as he snarled something to Bogden's brother. Bogden decided to crawl under the canvas edge of his tent so that he could get closer to the action. He wanted to hear what they were saying.

He lifted the edge of the canvas tent and squirmed his way underneath the heavy material. Before letting the canvas fall back down, Bogden reached back and smoothed the sand, hoping no one would notice that his trail suddenly ended at the edge of the tent.

Dropping the canvas back into place, Bogden moved quickly about the tent. Along the way, he grabbed some nonperishable food and extra waterskins and shoved them into a small bag. He set the bag at the edge of the tent then scooted over to the front.

The closer he got, the louder the voices became until he could distinguish between Urik's and the man shouting at him. Bogden knelt at the edge of the tent and pulled the edge of the canvas back just enough to peek through the material to the center of the camp.

"I want to know where he is!"

Bogden immediately recognized the voice of his former friend and ally. Anger unlike anything he had ever known swept through him as he realized that the man he once fought side by side with had betrayed him and even now put his family in danger.

Bogden clenched his jaw and tightened his grip around the edge of the tent canvas to keep himself from jumping out and confronting Amal. Truthfully, he wanted to do more than confront the man. He wanted to beat Amal until the man could never utter another word.

"I do not know," Urik replied.

Bogden winced when Amal smacked his brother across the face with the back of his hand. A small trail of blood trickled down Urik's chin, but fire burned in his eyes as he glared up at Amal. Bogden just hoped his brother didn't piss Amal off too much. He had no idea what Amal might do if truly angry.

Amal was a warrior and could even be considered a good warrior. He just wasn't a great warrior. Even Chellak had recognized that. Amal was never given duties that might mean the life of another person.

He especially was never put in charge of Demyan's safety as other warriors were, including Bogden. At the time, Bogden had wondered about that. He never understood why Chellak refused to let Amal protect the Brüter even when he pleaded for the duty. Bogden felt that he finally understood Chellak's hesitation.

There was something not quite right about Amal, and Bogden wondered why he had never seen it before. He had always thought Amal was an honorable warrior, but he was quickly seeing another side to the man, one that scared Bogden down to his soul.

"I want to know where Anjali is, and I want to know now."

Bogden blinked in shock. Amal really was here for Anjali. Bogden just couldn't figure out why. Anjali belonged to him.

His heart pounded frightfully in his chest when Amal grabbed the man kneeling next to Urik and held a laser gun to his head. Somehow, he knew that Amal wouldn't hesitate to shoot the man.

"I will not ask again," Amal snapped. "Tell me where Anjali is, or I will start shooting your precious pride members one at a time."

"I'm telling the truth," Urik said. "I do not know where Anjali is."

Bogden squeezed his eyes shut when Amal pulled the trigger and a member of his pride fell dead to the sandy ground. He drew in a deep breath before opening them again, sending up a prayer for the man's family.

When he looked at the center of the camp again, his eyes widened as fear for his brother's life filled him. Urik had gone into a rage when Amal shot the other pride member. Even now, several men were wrestling him to the ground.

Bogden wanted to rush forward and rescue his brother and other pride members, but he knew he needed to use his head. His anger

could be a tool, but only if he thought carefully and didn't give in to the need he felt to kill everyone who threatened all he held dear.

He started looking around the camp, counting the number of men armed and what they were armed with. He came up with fourteen men—five with laser guns and the rest carrying swords of different types. In all actuality, it was a ragtag group of fighters. Bogden doubted more than a few of them had any real training. That didn't make them any less dangerous.

"Amir, Amir."

Bogden turned to see another man running up from the left side of the camp. It was quickly obvious the man wasn't one of his pride. Besides the fact he was dressed as shabbily as the others, he called Amal *Amir*. Anyone who knew anything about the desert people knew that the leader of the pride was called Shaikh, not Amir. Amir was the term used for a visiting dignitary.

Bogden could see from the way the man dropped to his knees that he considered Amal his leader. He must have thought Amal was one of the desert people and addressed him as he thought he should be addressed. Bogden almost snorted at the misconception. Amal didn't have the qualities to be a leader.

"I've found tracks, Amir," the man said.

Bogden didn't wait to see what Amal's reaction was. He turned and sprinted across the tent, grabbing the small bag of supplies as he went. He climbed back out under the tent canvas and scurried across the sand as fast as he could go while staying low to the ground.

Just as he reached the edge of the sand dune behind his tent, Bogden heard men coming up behind him. He gave up trying to stay low and just ran. Part of him wanted to reach Anjali as fast as he could so he could protect the man. Another part wanted to lead the bandits off in another direction away from Anjali. Bogden's mind was so filled with rage and fear that he couldn't decide which one to do.

He kept running toward the cave Anjali was supposed to be hiding in. As he reached the ridge of the sand dune that lead into the small

valley, the sight of the purple desert thorn flowers suddenly gave him an idea.

Bogden changed direction from running toward the edge of the valley and headed right for the middle of it. If he could get enough of the bandits to follow him into the midst of the desert thorns, he might be able to take several of them out of the picture. The likelihood of him being poisoned was just as high, but it was a price Bogden was willing to pay to keep his mate safe.

“Anjali, is Yasir with you?” Bogden asked through their link as he ran. He could hear the shouts behind him getting louder as the men chasing him gained ground.

“Yes.”

“I want you and him to get out of the cave. Run as fast as you can away from camp. They discovered your trail, and they are coming for you. I’ll slow them down as best as I can, but you need to run and run now.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to create a distraction so you can get away. But please, mayht, run. Don’t let Amal get you. Yasir can lead you back to pridehome. Just do as he says.”

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, mayht.” Bogden grimaced as he hit the first smattering of desert thorn plants. He hoped Anjali couldn’t tell he was lying through his teeth. He knew Anjali. The man would never leave if he thought Bogden’s life was in danger. *“Go, mayht. Go now.”*

“We’ve already left,” Anjali whispered back. *“Yasir is leading me out through a break in the rock face at the back of the cave. He says it’s a secret passage to the other side of the mountain.”*

Bogden almost stumbled in his shock. He’d been inside of the desert cave more times than he could count, but he’d never noticed a secret passage before. He could only hope that Yasir was telling the truth and not leading Anjali to his death.

"Just be careful, Anjali. I'd die if anything happened to you."

"I'll be careful."

"I love you, Anjali."

The force of Anjali's anguish was so strong Bogden felt it through their bond and grimaced, wishing he could be there to comfort his mate. Hell, he wished they weren't in this situation at all. That would make him a very happy Katzman.

"I love you, too, my mayht."

Bogden felt his heart tremble in his chest at Anjali's words. A second later, that same tremble turned to an all-out thundering throb as someone tackled Bogden from behind, dragging him to the ground.

Bogden kicked out with his feet as he struggled to turn over. He wanted to see whoever had him, not lay on the ground on his stomach. He barely rolled over before a blinding pain filled his head as he was punched in the face.

Bogden tried to shake the pain off. He swung out with his own hands, tearing at any bit of skin and fabric he could reach. He knew he hit his mark more than once when he heard grunts and groans, people swearing.

The little bit of satisfaction that filled Bogden at the knowledge that he was giving as good as he got was quickly drowned out by the pain that racked his body as he was hit and kicked over and over again.

Bogden kept his groans of pain behind clenched teeth. He refused to give Amal or his men the satisfaction of knowing that they were hurting him. But that refusal was getting harder with each punch.

The energy was slowly seeping out of Bogden's body, his ability to fight back becoming hampered by the beating he was receiving. He knew by now he had to be a bloody mess. He wouldn't be able to hold out much longer.

"All right, that's enough. I want him to be able to talk, not dead." Bogden rankled at the evil laugh that filled the air. "For now."

His arms were grabbed, and he was dragged to his feet. A hand wrapped in his hair and jerked his head back. Bogden couldn't see through one swollen eye and just barely through the other, but it was enough for him to make out Amal's features as the man walked over to stand in front of him.

"Why?" he choked out. He had to know why a man that he considered a friend had betrayed him.

"Anjali is mine."

Chapter 7

Anjali panted heavily as he followed Yasir through the dark passage. He was glad he wasn't claustrophobic because the space between the rock walls was so thin that he had to walk very slowly so he wouldn't hit his distended stomach on anything.

He couldn't stop thinking about what Bogden might be doing or what the man planned to do. Bogden was a warrior, and Anjali knew that. Logically, he should act strategically and not in haste. But this situation was not logical. It was terrifying.

"How much longer, Yasir?"

"Not much, myssa."

"Myssa?"

"It means...um...friend, I suppose. There is not really a definition to the word as you would know it. It is like friend, ally, and brother all rolled into one. It is meant as a sign of affection and friendship from one pride member to another."

"Hmm, I like it."

Yasir chuckled as he glanced back over his shoulder. "Yes, it is a good word."

"Do you think Bogden is okay?"

"I am sure of it, myssa."

"How can you be sure?" Anjali certainly wasn't.

"You are mated. You would know if he was dead, feel it in your heart. As you are still standing and not consumed with grief, I believe he is all right."

Surprisingly, that made sense to Anjali. It also made him feel a lot better. "I hate this."

"It is not my preferred activity, either. However, the Shaikh wanted you taken to safety, and that's what I will do."

"I just feel bad leaving him behind." Anjali grimaced. "Who knows what is happening to him. I get the feeling this Amal guy is out of his mind."

"Yes, I got the same feeling, on both counts."

"On both counts?"

Yasir suddenly stopped and turned to look at Anjali. He looked nervous, a small frown covering his lips. "Urik told me to hide in one of the tents, and instead of fighting for our people, I did. And then I ran to find the Shaikh when they started searching the tents. I am a coward."

"Urik is the Shaikh's brother, correct?"

Yasir nodded, looking totally confused.

"Doesn't it stand to reason that when the Shaikh is unavailable, you follow Urik's direction? Urik told me that I was under his protection when Bogden was unable to care for me. Wouldn't the same be for you?"

"Yes, I suppose that is true."

"Then weren't you following your Shaikh's orders when you stayed in the tent?"

Yasir's eyebrows drew together in a deep frown. Anjali could tell the man was still confused as Yasir nodded his head. "Yes, that is also true."

"I may not know much about desert people, but I would think disobeying an order from your Shaikh, even a temporary one, is worse than being a coward. And besides, if you hadn't come after me and Bogden, there wouldn't have been anyone to lead me to safety. Maybe this was your purpose all along. Have you thought of that?"

A slow smile started to move across Yasir's lips, his confusion fading away. Yasir clasped his hands together and gave Anjali a small bow. "You are wise beyond your years, myssa. I thank you."

"If I am so wise, why can't I figure a way out of this damn mess?"

“Because it may not be your place to do so.”

“How can you say that?” Anjali exclaimed as he stopped walking to stare at Yasir.

“Please, do not misunderstand me, myssa,” Yasir said as he turned to look at Anjali. “I do not mean to offend.”

“Then explain what you meant.”

“The Shaikh informed me of your condition.” Yasir’s hand came out to hover over Anjali’s stomach. “He was not trying to break your confidence, just ensure I knew so I could make things easier for you.”

“Fine, but that doesn’t explain what you meant.”

“We each have a place in this world. We are taught that from birth. Your mate’s place is to be a warrior and our Shaikh. My place is to serve our Shaikh and make his life easier so that he may lead our pride without worrying about the little things in life.” Yasir nodded toward Anjali’s stomach. “Your place is to ensure that the Shaikh’s child is taken care of.”

“I am not a brood mare!”

Anjali huffed and crossed his arms over his chest, realizing as he did so that it pulled his tunic back against his body, making the swell in his stomach more prominent. He quickly reached down and pulled the tunic away from his body, hiding the hump once again.

“Of course not, myssa, but you bring the gift of life to our pride. That is far more important than fighting or swinging a sword.” Yasir snickered. “Any muscle-bound moron can do that. I dare you to find one that can do what you can.”

“Just because I can carry a child doesn’t mean I’m incapable of fighting.”

“I have no doubt of that, myssa, but what is more important? Protecting the life you carry or taking others?”

Anjali drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly as he admitted that Yasir might be right. That didn’t mean he had to like it. “Okay, I get what you’re saying, but if the opportunity comes to get Bogden out of trouble, I’m not going to look the other way.”

“And that is as it should be, myssa.” Yasir smiled as he turned around and started going through the passage again. “We will both look for an opportunity, yes?”

“Yes.”

Anjali followed after Yasir, wishing he knew exactly what was happening with Bogden and where he and Yasir were headed. Not knowing the answer to either question was driving him out of his mind.

“*Bogden?*” Anjali tried to reach Bogden through their bond. “*Can you hear me?*”

His anxiety level flew higher when he received no reply. He could feel a faint feeling of love coming through their bond, but it was tinged with fear. Anjali just didn’t know if the fear came from him or Bogden.

“*Bogden, please answer me if you can.*” Anjali’s heart pounded so hard that he pressed his hand over it, afraid it might leap out of his chest. “*Bogden?*”

“*I am here, mayht.*” Bogden’s words were faint and strained. Anjali inhaled sharply, stumbling to a stop. He suddenly knew that, whatever was happening to Bogden, it was causing him a great amount of pain.

“*What’s happening?*”

“*Are you safe, mayht?*”

“*We’re still in the cave. Yasir says we are almost out.*”

“*That is good.*”

“*What’s happening, Bogden?*” he asked again. “*I can feel your pain.*”

“*I am sorry, mayht. I would keep this from you if I could.*”

“*Don’t!*” Anjali covered his mouth as a sob threatened to spill free. “*I will always need to know what is happening to you, good or bad. We’re partners, remember?*”

“*I could never forget, mayht.*”

"Then don't hide anything from me. It will just make me worry more." Anjali started breathing a little better and began walking again, trying to catch up with Yasir. Apparently, the man hadn't noticed that Anjali had stopped walking. *"Now, tell me what is going on."*

"Amal has me, mayht. Me and nearly everyone in the camp."

A small cry fell from Anjali's lips, and he had to grab onto the side of the rock wall to keep from falling to his knees in anguish.

"Are you...are you hurt?"

"I am a little scuffed up but nothing I can't survive."

"What can I do to help?"

Anjali knew what Bogden was going to say before he said it and rolled his eyes. *"Just stay safe, mayht. As long as I know you and the babe are okay, I'll be fine. I'll find a way to get free."*

Anjali was so frustrated he wanted to beat Bogden in the head. He was tired of everyone treating him like fragile glass. There had to be something he could do to help his mate. Running away to hide was not what he had in mind.

"Just keep yourself alive so you can come home to me," Anjali finally said. *"I'll take care of things on my end."*

"Anjali, please, I—"

"I will keep myself safe if you keep yourself alive."

Anjali could hear Bogden's sigh through their link. He could feel it. *"All right, mayht."*

"I need to go, Bogden. I'm falling behind, and I don't want to lose Yasir. I'll check back with you in a little while."

Anjali could feel Bogden's anxiety for him. It was almost a living, breathing thing. He felt much the same way, but at least he was free. Who knew what was happening to Bogden? Anjali knew he was in pain, but he didn't know exactly what had caused that pain. He just had to figure out a way to help Bogden without putting himself or their baby in danger.

Anjali almost cried out when he suddenly remembered the vidlink Bogden had hidden back in their tent. If he could get his hands on the vidlink, he could contact Chellak Rai and get his help. But, first, he needed to catch up with Yasir. Surely the man could help him retrieve the vidlink?

“Yasir,” Anjali called out, but not too loudly. He had no idea who might be listening. He hurried down the passage as fast as his rounded stomach would let him. Just as he started around a corner in the passageway, Yasir popped into his line of vision.

Anjali screamed then slapped his hand over his mouth, his face flushing with embarrassment. Yasir merely arched an eyebrow at him. Anjali dropped his hand and drew in several deep breaths.

“Don’t do that!”

“My apologies, myssa.”

“How far are we from camp?”

Yasir frowned. “We are almost to the entrance to the cavern ahead. It is on the other side of the mountain from the camp. Why?”

“We need to go back.”

“Oh, myssa, I do not believe—”

“I figured out how to help Bogden—hell, how to help everyone.” Anjali was so excited about his idea he had a hard time standing still. He just knew if he could get the vidlink he could call in the troops. “There’s a vidlink in Bogden’s tent.”

“Ashu!” Yasir smacked himself on the forehead and started pacing around the tight space they stood in. “I should have thought of the vidlink, but I did not. I was just so scared and—”

“Yasir!” Anjali snapped as he grabbed Yasir’s arm and pulled the agitated man to a stop. “We both should have thought of it, but we didn’t. Now, we have. Let’s stop worrying about what we did or didn’t do and just go back and get it.”

“Yes, yes, that is good,” Yasir said as he calmed down. “We will go back and get the vidlink. We can call for help.”

Anjali grinned. “And I know just the people to call.”

* * * *

Anjali was panting heavily by the time he and Yasir reached the cave again. He knew he probably shouldn't be going as fast as he was, but the quicker they retrieved the vidlink, the quicker they could call for help.

"I will go for the vidlink, myssa," Yasir said as he patted Anjali's shoulder. "You stay here and rest."

"Oh, no, Yasir, I couldn't—"

"Please, myssa, let me do this. The Shaikh asked me to keep you safe, and I can't do that if you follow me out into the desert. At least here, I will know that you are safe and hidden away from those bandits."

"They aren't bandits, Yasir. The man that attacked the camp is called Amal. He's a..." Anjali shrugged. "He *used* to be a friend of Bogden's, a warrior. He seems to think that I belong to him."

"What better reason for you to stay hidden, myssa? He cannot find you here, and even if he does enter the cave, you just have to go back through the secret passage." Yasir grinned broadly. "It is even more of a secret than the cave itself."

Anjali knew when he had been beaten. Besides, he didn't think he had the energy to go all the way back to the camp. He was exhausted now as it was. "Okay, you go back to the camp and get the vidlink. Do you know where Bogden keeps it?"

"Oh, yes, myssa, in the little box on the side table. The Shaikh showed it to me one time. A fascinating device."

Anjali giggled. "Okay, hold on one moment. I want to talk to Bogden and make sure it's safe to go back to the camp. Maybe he can create a diversion or something while you slip back into camp."

Yasir nodded. Anjali walked off to the far side of the cave. There were just some things that needed to be done alone. He leaned back against the cave wall and closed his eyes, concentrating on Bogden.

"Bogden, can you hear me?"

He waited a few agonizing minutes. Then Bogden's voice came through, sounding tired and pained. *"Mayht? You are safe?"*

"I am," Anjali replied. *"Yasir and I have come up with a plan to free you and the others."*

"Mayht!"

"No, this is a good plan, one that will not put me in danger, I promise. I'm not even going to leave the cave."

"What is this plan of yours?"

"Where are you now? Are you back at the camp? Is anyone back at the camp?"

"Yes, they brought us back to the camp a little while ago."

Anjali wanted to swear up a blue streak but decided Bogden didn't need the added frustration. *"Tell me where everyone is."*

"The bulk of the pride members have been taken to one of the tents. The warriors are all being held in the center of the camp so the guards can keep an eye on us."

"And the guards?"

"Why do you need to know, Anjali? What is this plan of yours?"

"Yasir is going to sneak back into camp and get your vidlink. Once he brings it back here to me, I can contact Chellak Rai and ask for help."

Anjali didn't know what to think when Bogden's laughter came through their bond. The man seemed greatly amused by his plan.

"Bogden, it's a good plan."

"I am sorry, mayht. You are right. It is an excellent plan. Urik and I will give Yasir thirty minutes to return to camp, and then we will create a diversion. He must be quick and come in under the back of the tent. Amal has guards patrolling everywhere."

"I understand," Anjali replied. *"I'll let Yasir know. Just don't do anything that will get you killed. I don't want to raise this child by myself."*

"I will be careful, mayht. I promise."

Anjali took a cleansing breath, feeling better about things than he had in ages, then turned back to Yasir. “Bogden says he will give you thirty minutes to get back to camp, and then he and Urik will create a distraction. You’re to go in under the back of the tent and watch for guards. They’re everywhere.”

“As you wish, myssa.”

“I wish you would let me help.” Anjali held up his hand when Yasir opened his mouth to argue. “I know, I know, that’s not going to happen. Just be quick and stay safe. Bogden and the others are counting on us.”

“I will not disappoint, myssa.”

“I know you won’t, Yasir.”

Anjali felt his nerves frazzle the moment Yasir left the cave. It wasn’t terribly dark inside, but it wasn’t well lit, either. He felt like every shadow was about to jump out at him. The biggest thing that bothered Anjali was the silence. Nothing moved. He couldn’t even hear the breeze outside, just the sound of his own heartbeat.

Feeling agitated and unable to stand still, Anjali began to explore the cave. It was slow going as he couldn’t see that much. A large amount of it Anjali felt with his hands as he moved along the rock walls.

Anjali stopped at one point and took a drink from the waterskin Bogden had shoved in his hand before demanding that he run. He started to tie it back around the belt on his waist when the waterskin slipped through his fingers and fell to the sandy ground.

Anjali blew out a frustrated sigh and carefully knelt down in the sand and started searching around for the waterskin. He froze when his fingers encountered something cold and hard. He moved his fingers slowly over the object and tried to identify it.

His eyes widened when he pulled the item up to the faint light in the cave, and he realized he held a Khanja knife. It had seen better days. The silver blade was rusty, as was the burnt gold hilt. Several small strings hung from where the blade met the hilt. Anjali pulled at

them, realizing that they were leather strands. He held the knife in one hand and reach down to search the sand for anything more.

“Ah hah!” Anjali said gleefully as he pulled an old, worn, and faded leather sheath out of the sand. It looked in worse condition than the Khanja blade. Still, it was a sheath, and anything was better than nothing.

Anjali stuck the knife into the sheath then stuck the sheath under the edge of his belt, tying a small knot in the few remaining leather strands on the sheath. He patted at the leather pouch a couple of times to see if it would fall off then went back to searching the cave.

By the time Anjali had made a full circle around the cave, he had found an empty waterskin, another leather sheath, this one disintegrating, and a pouch that held something that might have been jerky at one time. Now, it was just stinky dust.

Anjali stood up and brushed his hands free of any remaining sand. He looked around the cave wondering what to do next. Figuring enough time had gone by, he started toward the mouth of the cave. He wasn't planning on leaving. He just wanted to take a peek outside.

Just as he started to reach the entrance to the cave, he heard a loud scream. Anjali stopped walking and turned his head to one side to hear better. He thought, for a moment, he might have imagined the sound until he heard it again, and closer this time.

Panic swelling inside of him, Anjali quickly glanced around the cave and tried to find a place to hide. Just his luck, the rock walls came right down to the sandy floor. There were no stray rocks or outcroppings, nothing to hide behind.

The only place Anjali could think to hide was the secret passageway through the back of the cave. He raced across the room as fast as he could, slipping into the small passageway just as the voices reached the cave.

Anjali pressed himself back against the rock wall and covered his mouth so that his panic couldn't escape. He could feel the baby

moving restlessly inside of him and stroked his other hand down his swollen belly.

Seconds seemed to tick by at a slow crawl. Anjali knew people had entered the cave. He could hear the moving around, their footsteps heavy in the sand. They just weren't speaking, so Anjali couldn't identify them. His pulse seemed to beat faster with each passing minute.

"Where is he?" a voice suddenly shouted. "You said this was where he was hiding."

"I don't know," came a reply so weak Anjali barely recognized it as Yasir's voice. "This was where I left him."

For a moment, deep sadness welled up inside of Anjali at Yasir's betrayal. He suddenly knew how Bogden must feel at what his friend Amal was doing. Yasir had become Anjali's friend, and to know the man turned him in to Amal sent tears trailing down his cheeks.

Then Anjali heard the unmistakable sound of flesh hitting flesh. Only by biting into his lip did he keep from crying out as he peeked around the corner and saw the condition of his friend. He knew then that Yasir hadn't betrayed him.

Blood trickled from the corner of Yasir's mouth. There was a large, purplish bruise on the swell of Yasir's cheek. His clothes looked torn and dirty as if he had been rolling around on the ground or fighting or something. Yasir just didn't look good.

"How can you see anything in this damn place?" the other man shouted.

Anjali tore his gaze away from Yasir and glanced over at the man shouting. He wondered if this was the infamous Amal. He had to be. It was the only possibility. He wore Bogden's sword on his waist.

He didn't look like that much, not really. He was a few inches shorter than Bogden, a few pounds lighter. The man carried himself like he was important but also like he expected people to treat him like he was important.

He strutted around the cave, making sure that all eyes were on him. Every time Yasir started to look away, the man would reach over and smack him across the face. Anjali wanted to smack Amal.

Anjali jerked back and pressed himself against the wall when Yasir suddenly launched himself across the room, landing just inches from the entrance to the secret passage. He closed his eyes when he heard Yasir cry out, and the sounds of Amal hitting him filled the room.

“Lazy, good-for-nothing runt!”

Several minutes later, silence suddenly filled the room. Anjali couldn’t contain his need to see if Yasir was still alive. He inched forward and peeked around the edge of the passageway. Amal stood by the door talking to two other men, his back toward Anjali.

Yasir lay on the ground just inches from him, though. Anjali dropped down to his knees and crawled forward just enough to see into Yasir’s bruised face. He picked up a couple of grains of sand and tossed them at Yasir.

Yasir’s eyes opened, but he didn’t look toward Anjali. Instead, his hand reached under his cloak and pulled out the vidlink. Anjali glanced up to where Amal stood and watched him as Yasir slowly moved the vidlink toward him.

The moment it was close enough, Anjali grabbed it and pulled it back against his chest. He glanced back down at Yasir to find the man’s dark brown eyes watching him intently, pain and regret filling them.

“I’m sorry, myssa,” Yasir mouthed.

Anjali shook his head. Yasir had nothing to be sorry for. The man had done exactly as he had been ordered to do. It wasn’t his fault that he was in this mess. It was Amal’s.

Anjali gestured with his hand for Yasir to join him, but the man quickly shook his head and nodded toward the passageway. Anjali gestured again, wanting Yasir to come with him and get away from Amal.

Once again, Yasir shook his head and gestured for Anjali to go back into the passageway. Anjali grimaced then pulled the Khanja out of his belt. He slid it into the sand next to Yasir's body then watched Yasir quickly cover it up with more sand until the knife disappeared.

"Go!" Yasir mouthed.

Anjali touched his hand to his forehead and bowed his head slightly to Yasir. Yasir nodded then looked back toward the doorway. Anjali scooted back into the passageway. The moment he was far enough inside, he stood and started hurrying down the escape route.

Once he felt he had put sufficient distance between him and the danger in the cave, Anjali stopped and turned the vidlink on. He dialed Chellak Rai and waited for the man to come online. The moment he did, Anjali let out a small cry of relief.

"Anjali?"

"Chellak, we need help, please. You have to come."

Chapter 8

Bogden was going out of his mind. He had seen Amal and his ragtag group of warriors and outlaws capture Yasir and drag him away. The screams had started soon after that, filling the air and sending a chill of foreboding through Bogden's body.

He didn't know what Amal was doing to Yasir, but he had a pretty good idea, and it made him angrier than he could ever remember having been, except for when he'd discovered Amal was after his mate. That had made him madder.

Still, Bogden would never forgive himself for the pain and anguish Yasir and the others of his pride were presently going through. He was supposed to be their leader, the one who protected them from harm, and here he sat with his hands literally tied behind his back.

Angered beyond his control, Bogden started struggling against the ropes on his wrists. He wanted free. He wanted to free his people. He wanted to get his mate back and somewhere safe. He wanted...

Bogden froze and glanced around quickly to see if anyone had seen his little panic attack. When he only encountered Urik's eyes watching him, Bogden gestured with his head for the man to keep a lookout then started tugging on the ropes he had felt loosen during his struggle.

Within moments, Bogden's hands were free. He wrapped the rope around his wrists again in case anyone was looking then sought out the guards. Two were guarding the tent with the other pride members. Another four walked around the small group of warriors sitting behind Bogden. He had no idea where the rest of them had gone.

Bogden waited until they glanced away then slowly began to inch his way toward his brother. It felt like it took forever. Urik helped by moving toward him. The moment they were sitting right next to each other, Bogden dropped the ropes around his wrists and went to work on his brother's.

Once Urik was free, Bogden gestured for the warrior behind him to move up and take his place. Dressed in black as they all were, he doubted the men holding them could tell them apart. One warrior was as good as another.

Bogden scooted back as the other warrior scooted forward. They had to stop several times when the guards looked their way, but finally, they exchanged places. Bogden worked on the ropes tying the men on either side of him as Urik worked on the warrior who had taken his place.

Once he was done, Bogden did it again and again until all of his warriors were untied and waiting for his signal to attack. He slowly made his way to the front of the group then sat down next to his brother again.

Bogden couldn't believe one little temper tantrum had gotten him free of the ropes and given him the chance he needed to save his people. Maybe he should act like a spoiled brat more often. Anjali would be thrilled.

Bogden waited until the two guards in front of him had turned away then nodded to his brother. Urik nodded to a few of the warriors behind him. Bogden crept forward, the ropes that had been holding him hostage held tightly in his hand. He could see Urik doing the same out of the corner of his eye.

When he got up behind the guard, Bogden wrapped the rope around the man's neck and pulled, countering it by placing his knee in the man's back. The man gurgled, struggling against the rope around his throat until a distinct snap filled the air and the man slumped.

Bogden pulled his rope free and lowered the man to the sand as he quickly glanced around for the other guards. He was pleased to see one guard down and the other two being taken out by his warriors.

Several other warriors were sneaking between the tents, some with weapons, some without. Bogden knew they were headed toward the tent that held the rest of their pride members. He knew his men would free them.

He had someone else to save.

“Urik, I need to go save Anjali and Yasir. Organize a group of warriors to help our pride get to safety.”

“I will see it done, brother, and then join you.”

Bogden nodded then took off toward his tent. He needed weapons that only a warrior from outside of the desert would understand. He raced into his tent and over to a large, brown wooden chest along the far wall.

Dropping to his knees, Bogden opened the trunk and started rifling through it until he found what he was looking for. At the very bottom, hidden by several layers of clothes, was a small silver box. Bogden grabbed the box and opened it up.

He didn’t like bringing modern technology into the desert when so many people hated it, but at times like this, rules were made to be broken. Bogden checked to make sure that the energy cells were charged then tucked the laser gun into the waistband of his pants.

Bogden grabbed a few bladed weapons just in case he needed them then hurried out of his tent. He ran to the side of the tent and turned, making straight for the valley of desert flowers and his mate.

Warrior-trained and used to the desert terrain, Bogden was hardly breathing heavy at all by the time he reached the valley. He skirted the edge of the field and made his way over to the opening of the cave.

Hearing raised voices when he reached the cave entrance, Bogden pressed himself against the rock face and withdrew the laser gun from

his waistband. His heart pounded in his chest, more so from the cries he could hear from inside the cave than from exertion.

Bogden couldn't stand it anymore. The cries from inside of the cave were growing fainter, not louder. Whoever was in there was in a losing battle. He gripped the gun tighter in his hand and turned the corner.

Things seemed to happen so fast Bogden barely had time to register them. Amal was standing near the door. He spotted Bogden when he walked in and dove out of the direct line of fire. There was a man down on the floor, unmoving, an old, rusted Khanja sticking out of his side.

A third man had Yasir pinned to the sandy floor. It was immediately apparent what he was trying to do by Yasir's half-naked body and the sobs falling from his lips. Bogden immediately aimed and pulled the trigger, taking great pleasure from the man's pained expression as he slumped down over the top of Yasir.

Not knowing what other threats might be waiting for him in the dimly lit cavern, Bogden pressed his back against the rock wall and began looking around the cave. It took a few minutes for his eyes to fully adjust, but when they did, he spotted Amal trying to scoot toward the door.

"Stop where you are, Amal, or I'll stop you." Amal stopped, slowly looking across the cave at him. "Drop any weapons you have on you very slowly. This gun has a hair trigger, and I would hate to see anything happen."

Amal moved slowly as Bogden directed, pulling the gun out of its holster and dropping it on the ground. A sword and two knives followed. Bogden seriously doubted Amal had given up all of his weapons, but he wasn't going to get close enough to check, not until he had the man tied up.

"Yasir, are you okay?" Bogden asked without taking his eyes off of Amal. He didn't trust the man in the least, not anymore.

“Yes, Shaikh,” Yasir whispered, but he didn’t sound okay. Bogden moved closer and knelt down on one leg to pull the dead body off of Yasir. When he did and he finally tore his gaze away from Amal to get a good look at Yasir, Bogden wished he hadn’t killed the man so quickly. He deserved to be tortured first.

“Come, Yasir, let’s get you covered up.”

“Yes, Shaikh.” Yasir’s movements were slow and timid. He bit his lip the entire time, wrapping his torn clothing around his body then stumbling over to stand next to the wall. Bogden grimaced when Yasir squatted down and wrapped his arms around himself, staring off toward the cave entrance.

Bogden quickly searched the dead man’s body, pulling his weapons off of him and handing them back to Yasir. Once Yasir was armed, he stepped over to place himself between the abused man and Amal.

“I asked you before why you’ve done this, Amal, and you didn’t answer me. I’m going to ask one last time because we were friends. I thought you were an honorable man. Why would you do this?” Bogden waved his hand back at Yasir. “Why would you harm someone like this?”

Amal snorted and rolled his eyes. “He is a casualty of war.”

“This isn’t war.”

“The hell it’s not!” Amal snapped. “We’ve been at war since we fought for control of Katzmann, and we’ll continue to be at war until our High Ruler no longer bows to the whims of the Federation of Planets.”

“You’re not serious.”

“I’m perfectly serious, and so are a lot of other prides. We’re tired of living by the rules of the Federation. We ruled our planet before without any help from them. We can do so again.”

“We need the Federation, Amal. It gives all of the planets one law to follow.”

“We should be ruled by our laws!” Amal snapped as he took a threatening step toward Bogden.

“And if we were ruled by our old laws, you would be executed for trying to steal my mate.”

“He belongs to me. Me!” Amal slapped his chest with his hand. “I bought his contract. By rights of trade, he is my property.”

“He was mine long before you ever signed a contract for him, and we both know you lied to get that contract. Anjali is mine.”

“His legal guardian signed a contract with me for his services. The Federation will enforce my contract and make you turn him over to me.”

“His services? You moron,” Bogden shouted, “Anjali isn’t a pleasure slave. He was never a pleasure slave. I don’t know who gave you your information, but they were wrong. His training wasn’t ever completed.”

“You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not.” Bogden smirked. “Trajan kidnapped Anjali from the Vergnügen Training Facility before his training could be completed. He is not a pleasure slave.”

“I saw you. I saw what he can do. I know he is a pleasure slave. He’s from Elquone.”

Bogden frowned as a creepy feeling crept up his spine. “You watched me and Anjali have sex? What kind of sick freak are you?”

“He will be mine!” Amal shouted.

Bogden stepped back, the unstable sheen in the man’s eyes making him wonder just how long Amal had been insane. Amal didn’t seem to know what he wanted, going from freeing the planet of Katzmann from what he perceived as the evil Federation to wanting Anjali to be his pleasure slave. He was out of his mind.

“Anjali is my mate, Amal. I signed a contract for him in good faith. We have completed the mating rituals of our pride and of all Katzmen. My claim on him is recognized by our people and will be

recognized by the High Ruler of Elquone as well as the Federation of Planets. You cannot take him from me.”

“I will have him,” Amal shouted as he pulled a knife out of the back of his pants and jumped across the room, the knife raised threateningly in the air. Bogden knew the man wouldn’t hesitate to kill him.

He pulled the trigger before Amal had taken two steps. A bloom of bright red started to spread over the front of Amal’s tunic. The man slowly lowered the hand with the knife and spread his other hand out over the blood, looking down at the hole in his chest as if totally surprised to see it.

“You shot me.” Amal looked up at Bogden, confusion drawing his eyebrows together. “Why would you shoot me?”

“You tried to take my mate from me.”

“He’s just a pleasure slave,” Amal whispered right before he fell to the ground.

Bogden waited to see if the man would move. When he didn’t, Bogden walked over and squatted down next to him, reaching out to feel for a pulse. There wasn’t one. Amal was dead.

“Shaikh?”

“He’s dead, Yasir. He can’t hurt you again.”

“An—and the others?”

“If they are not dead by now, they soon will be. Urik and the other warriors are rounding everyone up.” Bogden lifted his head and smiled over at the frightened man pressing himself back against the rock wall. “You did good, Yasir.”

“Anjali? What happened to Anjali?”

“You don’t know?” Bogden asked as he jumped to his feet.

“I...I...when they brought me back in here, I got the vidlink to Anjali like he wanted, and he went back into the secret passage. After that...” Yasir shook his head. “I thought he was with you.”

Bogden pulled his Mishlah off his shoulders and wrapped it around Yasir’s. He could feel the man tremble when his hand

unknowingly touched his skin and couldn't help but wonder what horrors he had been unable to save Yasir from. It was a guilt Bogden would live with for the rest of his days.

"Listen to me, Yasir. I have to go after Anjali. I need you to show me where the secret passage is, and then I want you to go back to the camp and find Urik. Do you think you can do that?"

"Can't I go with you?"

Bogden shook his head. "It's not safe, Yasir, and I don't want to put you in any more danger. You've already suffered enough. It's time for you to seek safety."

"I am safe with you, Shaikh."

"And you'll be just as safe with Urik."

Considering all he had been through, Bogden was shocked by the small smile that came over Yasir's lips. "Anjali said much the same thing to me."

"Then you should do as your Shaikh asks and go find Urik, where you'll be safe. I'll find Anjali and bring him home."

Yasir nodded and stood up. His steps were a little wobbly as he made his way to the far side of the cave and showed Bogden the entrance to the secret passage. Bogden waited until Yasir made his way past the three dead bodies and the outside of the cave. Then, he turned and entered the rock passageway.

"*Anjali, can you hear me?*" The silence that met his words sent fear racing through Bogden's heart. He stepped up his pace, moving quickly but silently, his heart pounding the entire time. "*Anjali, answer me, mayht. Where are you?*"

Bogden had no idea how long the passage was, but it felt like it was taking forever to reach the end. No matter how fast he ran, he couldn't see anything but dim light and high rock walls.

As he ran around a corner of the passageway, it opened up into a large cavern. He could see light filtering in from the far side and figured it was the entrance. Bogden stopped long enough to check the energy cells in his laser gun then hurried toward the entrance.

The bright sunlight after so much darkness blinded Bogden for just a moment as he stepped outside of the cave. He flung his arm up over his eyes until his vision adjusted. What he saw when he lowered his arm a moment later made his mouth drop open in shock.

Upwards of fifty armed warriors stood before Bogden, their guns drawn and pointed directly at him. Bogden froze, fear for himself and his mate making it nearly impossible to move a single muscle. If he died, he would never be able to save Anjali.

“Bogden?”

It took Bogden a moment to recognize the voice speaking to him and narrow in on the tall, golden-haired man who had led him and so many others into battle. When he did, so much relief filled Bogden that his knees buckled and he dropped to the ground.

“Chellak.”

Chellak Rai, High Ruler of Katzmann and Commander of its armies, ran over and grabbed Bogden, keeping him from falling even farther to the ground. Bogden drank greedily when a waterskin was pressed against his lips then pushed it away after several deep gulps.

“An—Anjali. I can’t find Anjali.”

“He is here, my friend. Look.”

Bogden followed the line of Chellak’s hand as he pointed to a spot in the middle of the warriors. At first, he didn’t see anything. Then several warriors stepped aside like a wave of sand moving across the desert, and there was Bogden’s mate.

“Anjali,” Bogden whispered, unable to utter a louder cry due to the tears clogging his throat.

“Bogden!” Anjali shouted as the man hurried toward him.

If it wasn’t for the strong arms of Chellak holding him up, Bogden would have fallen right back into the sand when Anjali jumped into his arms. Bogden wouldn’t have cared if he had fallen back into a field of desert thorns. He had his mate back.

“Oh, mayht, I missed you so much.”

“Bogden,” Anjali whispered like it was a little prayer of thanks.

“You are okay?” Bogden pushed Anjali away from him a few inches to run his hands over him, his face, his chest, his distended stomach. “The baby is okay?”

“We’re both fine,” Anjali answered, snuggling back into Bogden’s arms. “Saris has already looked us over and proclaimed us *bruised but not broken*.”

“That is good to know, mayht, but why did you not answer me when I called for you? I thought something terrible had happened to you.”

“I didn’t hear you.”

“I used our bond.”

Chellak’s deep chuckle interrupted anything Anjali might have been about to say. Bogden turned and glared at the man, not happy with the interruption. “You have something to add?”

“Saris has equipment in the ship’s infirmary that can be dangerous, so there is an energy shield around it. It interferes in the bond between mates.” Chellak chuckled again. “And you wouldn’t believe how much fun we had discovering that neat little fact. I nearly tore the place apart when I couldn’t find Demyan.”

“I know the feeling.” Bogden chuckled.

“Have you seen Marika?”

Bogden glanced down at his mate, frowning as he tried to remember if he’d seen Anjali’s brother in the crowd of people taken hostage. He didn’t want to tell his mate that he hadn’t, but he also knew he couldn’t lie to Anjali.

“I haven’t seen him, mayht, but I wasn’t looking for him either. My mind has been consumed with finding you. I imagine Marika is back at camp.”

“Can we go find him?”

“I’ll send warriors out to find your brother, Anjali. I think it would be best if Bogden was seen by the doctor.” Chellak wrinkled his nose. “And maybe had a bath.”

Anjali giggled, much to Bogden's delight. He knew that was exactly the response that his friend had been hoping for. Anjali stood to his feet and held out his hand. Bogden inhaled sharply when he got a good look at the swell of the man's stomach. Anjali really was getting big.

Bogden took Anjali's hand, trusting Chellak to help him up so Anjali didn't have to. Once on his feet, he started limping toward the ship Chellak and his warriors had arrived on. He gestured to the large transport, snickering.

"You do realize that modern conventions like spaceships aren't really accepted around here, right?"

"They are now."

Bogden arched an eyebrow, not sure he knew what his former commander meant.

"Bogden, I understand that your people don't like modern technology. I get that. But our people need to be better protected. I'm not saying you have to have ships flying in and out of here, but you do need to take some precautions."

Bogden nodded, sighing deeply. "I know. I'm just not sure what to do about it."

"After things settle down a bit, we'll figure it out. I'm sure we can come up with a compromise that your pride will accept, but we can't let something like this happen again. Your pride is not adequately protected as it stands right now. I can't have that. I need all of my people to be safe, not just the ones that live in the cities."

"Speaking of things settling down, there's a couple of bodies back in the cave that need to be removed. Make sure you tell your people to stay clear of the desert thorns, or you will have more dead bodies on your hands."

"The desert thorns?"

"The purple, flowered plants." Anjali giggled. "I'll explain what they're for later."

"Uh, okay." Chellak looked confused but didn't press the issue.

“Has anyone contacted Urik or any of my other pridemates?” Bogden asked, suddenly concerned about what was going on back at camp. Urik said he would join up with him as soon as he could, but Bogden had yet to see his brother.

“I sent a unit of warriors to the camp after Anjali told us where it was,” Chellak replied. “I have not yet heard back from them, but that does not mean there is anything wrong. If there was a problem, they would have contacted me and asked for reinforcements.”

Bogden had to admit that, at least, made sense. Nothing else about this situation did. He glanced over at Chellak as they climbed onto the lift to the ship. “Do you have any idea why Amal did what he did?”

“You don’t know?”

“He spouted everything from wanting to rebel against the Federation to wanting Anjali because he thought he was a pleasure slave. I never could get a concrete answer out of him. He attacked me, and I had to shoot him.”

“He’s dead?” Anjali whispered.

Bogden looked down to see Anjali’s pale face staring back up at him. He suddenly realized that he had never told his mate that he was out of danger. Bogden sighed as he wrapped his arms around Anjali and pulled him close.

“Yes, mayht, Amal is dead. He can never hurt you again.”

“What about my father?” Anjali asked. “If he nullified your contract and signed one with Amal, won’t that cause problems? Can my father sell me again?”

“No, Anjali, your father can’t sell you again. I’ve already sent word to the Federation council that your contract with Bogden has been fulfilled, just as mine was to Demyan. Your mating has been recorded, and there is nothing your father can do about it.”

“And what about Marika? What if he decides to sell Marika?”

“Marika never had a contract.” Chellak smirked. “I’ve already had someone look into this. Your father signed guardianship papers over to you, not a contract. Only you can sign a contract for him.”

“I would never do that!”

Chellak chuckled. “I have no doubt of that, Anjali. But until he is of legal age to accept a mate, he is under your control. And Bogden’s, now that you two are mated. As your brother and legal ward, he is an official member of the Leonid Pride.”

“And I’d be happy to share that information with him if we could find him.”

Bogden stroked his hand over the side of Anjali’s face. “Have no fear, mayht. Wherever he is, Marika is safe.”

“How can you know that?”

“He’s with Malachi, his mate.”

Chapter 9

“Are you sure he’s going to be okay with Malachi?” Anjali asked as he looked over at his brother. Marika was once again riding on the front of a camel with Malachi, chatting away. He seemed no worse for wear from his ordeal, not that he had gone through what everyone else had. Malachi had ensured that by spiriting Marika away to safety when Amal attacked.

“He’ll be fine, mayht. Don’t worry so. Malachi is an honorable man. He won’t touch a hair on Marika’s head until he has come to talk to you.”

“Me? Why would he need to talk to me?”

“You are his legal guardian until he turns of mating age next month. By rights, Malachi must gain your permission before courting your brother.” Bogden chuckled. “And then he must negotiate a mate price.”

“A what?”

“A pride member must negotiate a mate price with the parent or legal guardian for his mate.”

“You didn’t.”

“The hell I didn’t. Do you have any idea how much money I paid your father for you? I suspect it was the highest mate price my pride has ever seen.” Anjali giggled when Bogden leaned down to nuzzle his neck. “And you were worth every ounce of gold I paid.”

Anjali burst out in laughter as a sudden thought entered his head. “My father had no clue, did he?”

“I don’t understand what you mean, mayht.”

“The mate price—it met the requirements of your pride. My father actually thought you were buying me.”

“Paying a mate price for a mate is a very old tradition. To an outsider, it can seem no different than buying someone, but it is.”

“How?”

“We cannot complete the mating without our mate’s acceptance. Even if I paid the mate price for you, if you were to deny me, I could not take you from your father. A man that forces his mate is banished from his pride.”

“You removed me from my father without my permission,” Anjali scoffed. He wasn’t really upset by Bogden’s words, but he didn’t understand how paying a mate price was any different from buying someone.

“Ah, but I did have your permission, mayht.” Anjali squirmed when Bogden started planting little kisses along the curve of his neck where it met his shoulder. “Remember the first time we made love when you accepted me into your body?”

“Yeah,” Anjali moaned, arching his neck to give Bogden better access. Each little kiss sent a tingle of desire racing through his body.

“You became my mate when you accepted me.”

A lust-filled groan fell from Anjali’s lips when Bogden’s hand slipped beneath the waist of his pants and grabbed his cock. “Ashu, Bogden.” Anjali quickly looked around to see if anyone saw what Bogden was doing. “Should you be doing that? Anyone can see us.”

“Just lean back in my arms, mayht.” Bogden chuckled. “No one will see a thing.”

Anjali didn’t know how they couldn’t. Bogden had his hand down Anjali’s pants, stroking his cock. The movements he was making were kind of unmistakable. On the other hand, it felt so damn good, Anjali wasn’t sure he cared who saw them.

Anjali decided to ignore the multitude of pride members riding beside him and Bogden and just concentrate on the pleasure his mate

was giving him. He leaned back in Bogden's arms and pressed the side of his face against Bogden's shoulder.

"Are you going to come for me, my mayht?" Bogden whispered into his mind as he kissed a line down Anjali's throat. *"Are you going to show me how much you want me?"*

"I'll do anything you want." Anjali's body ached for Bogden's touch. He squeezed his eyes closed as his cock was stroked faster and faster. The ecstasy of Bogden's touch exploded over his body. Having Bogden rub his cock wasn't as good as feeling the man deep inside of him, but it was a close second.

Anjali started panting, his orgasm edging closer with each stroke of Bogden's hand, each swipe of the man's thumb over the crown. The hard length pressing against his back and ass hinted at things to come.

"Bogden, I need to come."

"Then come, mayht."

Anjali turned his head and pressed his face into Bogden's tunic. A long groan fell from his lips as he gave in to the searing need blazing through his body. Bogden's low groan filled his ears as the man continued to stroke him, prolonging his orgasm for several moments.

He savored the feeling of satisfaction Bogden left him with even as he acknowledged a growing wet spot on his lower back. He sighed in pleasant exhaustion and lifted his lips for Bogden's kiss.

Whatever thought had been about to form in Anjali's mind fragmented as Bogden's lips claimed his, hungrily kissing him. An ache was sparked by that one indelible kiss, one that made Anjali wish they were anywhere except where they were.

Riding through the desert on a horse, surrounded by warriors and pride members, was not where Anjali wanted to express himself physically to Bogden. He preferred the soft cushions of his mate's tent.

"You've made a mess of my pants, Bogden," Anjali said when his mate finally lifted his head.

“I have.” Bogden grinned.

“How do you expect us to hide this from the rest of the pride?”

“Why must we hide?” Anjali rolled his eyes at the arched eyebrow Bogden gave him. “We are mated. We have an obsessive need to express ourselves in a physical manner as often as we can. It is to be expected. Our pride would worry if we did not constantly want to be together.”

“That may be, but I’m not sure I want everyone knowing our business.”

“Not to worry, mayht, there will be a place for us to change not too far from here.”

“Us?”

Bogden’s grin was sexy as hell. “You did not think you were the only one that needed to change, did you?”

Anjali suddenly thought of the wet spot on the back of his pants, and his eyes widened. “Did you—”

“I did.”

Bogden looked so pleased with himself that Anjali couldn’t help but laugh. The man made him laugh, his mere presence filling Anjali with joy. In that moment, Anjali didn’t even care that Bogden had bought him. He was just glad he was there.

Bogden suddenly smiled and pulled a small cloth out of his tunic. “Here, mayht, we can clean up with this if you want. The desert air will dry away any other trace of anything.”

Anjali giggled as he felt Bogden push the cloth into his pants and clean the cum off of him. When Bogden was done, Anjali took the cloth and did the same for Bogden. His pants were still wet, but as Bogden said, they were drying.

“Do you think Yasir will be okay?” Anjali asked as he handed the cloth to Bogden then glanced across the way to where Yasir was riding with Urik. The man hadn’t spoken more than few words since they regrouped at camp. Anjali didn’t know what Yasir had gone through, but he was starting to get very worried about the man.

“He will heal in time.”

“Do you think that’s possible?”

“Urik will make sure it is. He will care for Yasir and keep him safe.”

“He doesn’t have to do that. Yasir could come be with us.”

“Yasir is Urik’s mate. He will not allow anyone else to care for him.”

Anjali gasped in shock, but the closer he looked at the two men, the more he could see that Bogden spoke the truth. They might not be talking, but Urik held Yasir in his arms as if he were a precious jewel. His large body even seemed to hover over Yasir’s, protecting him from everything and daring anyone to hurt the man.

“If they are mates, then why haven’t they claimed each other?”

“That I do not know, mayht. They have not seen to tell me this. I just know that after Yasir was hurt, Urik refused to allow anyone else to care for the man. Urik even refused to go back to the capitol with Chellak to train our warriors.”

Anjali glanced back over his shoulder in confusion. “Train our warriors?”

“Chellak does not want us to be without protection anymore. He has formed a plan to bring technology to our desert but on a limited basis. Ten of our warriors have been chosen to go to the capital city to be trained. When they return, they will be knowledgeable in modern warfare, weapons, and technologies. They will also be bringing back equipment to keep our pride safe.”

“Actually, that’s a pretty good idea.” Anjali was impressed. “If we limit who is trained and who is outfitted with modern weapons, we can still keep our pride safe and keep the technological backlash to a minimum.”

“That is the plan. I don’t want to change too much of the way we live. Our traditions are important to our pride. But their safety is important, too. Pridehome must be protected so that our people can live in peace.”

Anjali agreed. While he didn't want to change the way the pride lived, either, he could see the need for modern technology. There was no way they could hope to keep pridehome safe when they were bringing swords to gunfights.

That didn't mean traditions couldn't be preserved, however. It just took a careful balance of what the pride needed and what they wanted. Anjali had no doubt his handsome mate could figure out a way to do it.

"So, tell me about this pridehome of yours. What's it like?"

"Why don't you look for yourself, mayht?" Bogden pointed to a spot past Anjali. "There it is."

Anjali turned to look in front of them, his mouth dropping open at the walled city built into the mountain in front of him. He'd never seen anything like it in his life. Not even the capital city looked as beautiful.

The city itself seemed to be built right into the face of a tall rock cliff before spilling down out over the desert. A high wall surrounded the city. Large gates sat in the very front of the wall guarding the city. Anjali could just make out numerous colored canopies dotting the tan-colored buildings.

What surprised Anjali the most were trees. There seemed to be hundreds of them in a multitude of colors. There were also bushes, plants, ponds, and fountains. It did not have the look of a desert dwelling. It looked like paradise in the midst of a barren land.

"This is pridehome?"

"This is *our* home."

Anjali could barely contain his surprise, and pleasure, at the sight of his new home. It was beyond beautiful, far more than anything he ever envisioned in his head.

"Well, mayht, what do you think?"

"It's perfect."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stormy believes the only thing sexier than a man in cowboy boots is two or three men in cowboy boots. She also believes in love at first sight, soul Mates, true love, and happy endings.

Stormy lives in the great Northwest region of the USA, with her gorgeous husband and soul Mate, six very active teenagers, two boxer/collie puppies, one old biddy cat, and one fish.

You can usually find her cuddled in bed with a book in her hand and a puppy in her lap, or on her laptop, creating the next sexy man for one of her stories. Stormy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website at www.stormyglenn.com

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