



Not Just a
Kiss

JENNAH SCOTT

NOT JUST A KISS

The last thing Raju Bhandari expects on the night of his first leopard shift is to find his mate. He is ready to start training for the endurance test that will determine his place in the leap. But the son of the alpha has a different plan in mind.

Sujan Malakar, son to the alpha of his snow leopard leap, has found his mate. On the night of Raju's first shift, he goes to Raju's home to tell him how he feels. But Raju doesn't acknowledge their mating bond. For the first time, Sujan is rejected. Not one to back down from a challenge, he continues to pursue Raju to show him they are meant to be together.

Raju's pride keeps him from seeing the truth in Sujan. Everyone says they can see their attraction to each other, so why is he the only one who doesn't?

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

NOT JUST A KISS

By Jennah Scott

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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M/M Romance Group Publication

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Photo Description

In this black and white photo, two men embrace passionately. They are both nude, and the smaller of the two is in the throes of passion. His head is thrown back and he's grasping the bigger man's head. The male on the left is marking his partner on his neck, and he's holding him so his partner arches his back. His hand is supporting the man on the right's neck.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am a kitten, well not those small baby kittens, but a Snow Leopard kitten. As a shifter we can live for a long time, way longer than humans as due to the Shifting of muscles and cells when we Shift, our cells remain young and healthy.

My first shift has just occurred, at 18 years old, so I am still a kitten within the Pride. The Alpha's son is looking for a mate and I have caught his eye. I am not going to give in, but I can't seem resist his charms and attention...

Lots of cuddling, Kittenish play and cuteness! I don't mind D/S relationship, not too hard-core.

Sincerely,

Cherlly

Story Info

Genre: new adult, paranormal

Tags: bonded mates, coming of age, competition, feline shifters, Himalayan, spicy

Word Count: 17,039

Acknowledgement

This is my second story in the Love Landscape's Anthology, and I want to once again thank everyone for the opportunity to participate. The organizers have been incredibly helpful. Thank you, Cherly, for the prompt. As this is one of my first shifter stories, this was a challenge, and I hope you enjoy the story. Thank you to my critique partner, Raven. Without your help I wouldn't have been able to do this.

NOT JUST A KISS

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Chapter One

Raju

I stared at the moon, high above the tallest peak. The white snowcaps glistened in its light. When tomorrow dawned I'd be a new man. No longer a boy, but a man. In three months' time I would have the opportunity to compete for my position in the Leap.

Eighteen.

I was finally eighteen and had completed my first shift.

As I lay in the snow, the desire to make a snow angel washed over me, and I realized while I was now a man, I was still a child—a gift from my mother no doubt. She told me to live life. Enjoy it. My father taught me to be respectful, confident, protective.

I think I fell in the middle of both of their teachings because, in truth, I was not the strongest in the Leap, nor was I the weakest.

Blue spots in the moon's surface drew my attention. It was so strange seeing them there. The color was familiar, and yet... not.

"Raju, you still up here?" my mother called out from below.

"Yes, *aamaa*, I am here." I sighed. *Time to go home already?* "I'll come home in a few. I just wanted to enjoy the moon a little longer."

She stopped at my side and crouched in the snow next to me. "My dear Raju, you've had an eventful day, and now you lie here in the snow with nothing more than a thin pair of shorts on. I know we do not get cold easily, but I would feel better if you were inside."

"Of course. It's just so... beautiful."

"I would have never guessed. My son, the romantic."

I pushed up and bent my knees. She squeezed my shoulder and stood. "There is another reason I came to find you."

"What's that?"

"You have a visitor."

For the first time since she came up the hill, I looked at my mom. Pride and excitement shone in her eyes. A flush colored her cheeks, but not from the cold, I was sure.

“Who?” There were only a few people who would have come by tonight. The Leap had run together to celebrate the first shift for a few others and myself. My friends had all gone home, saying they were too tired and sore to hang out.

Not me. I wanted to run longer, farther, but at the insistence of our alpha, I returned home.

“Sujan.” His name was a whisper on her lips.

My entire body tensed. Sujan was the alpha's son, the second in command. Only his father could and would contradict Sujan's orders.

“What's he doing at the house? Is everything okay?” He had no reason to visit. We weren't friends. Sujan was three years older than me. We didn't run in the same circles.

“Everything's fine, *chora*. He just said he wanted to check on you. See how you were doing after this evening. I think it's very kind of him.” She squeezed my shoulder once more. “Come speak with him.”

I stood and brushed the snow from my back. “Fine. I'll come down, but I don't know why he's here.”

Mom started toward the house, and I followed close behind, ready to catch her if she stumbled. If the trail had been wider I would have walked with her arm twined in mine.

Dad and Sujan were sitting in the front room when we walked in, oil lamps lit around them. Dad preferred to entertain out front rather than in the back room where the TV was. He said it was too much of a distraction.

I stepped foot inside the doorway and Sujan jumped from his seat. He held his hand out for me, and I took it. Electricity shot through my arm.

Whoa. What was that? I glanced up at him, eyes widening. He winked, and I flew backward, nearly knocking over a small table where we dropped our keys and things.

My father rose from his chair. “Raj, you and Sujan chat in here. Your mother and I are going to call it a night.”

Mom met him near the back hallway and they linked hands. She turned to me with a smile and mouthed, “Good night.”

I narrowed my eyes. What was going on here?

Sujan indicated the chair next to him with a sweep of his arm. I hesitated, taking him in. The man was gorgeous, tall, with more muscles than I could ever hope to possess. There was a reason no one challenged him as second—and it wasn't his status as the alpha's son. Sujan's gaze caught mine, and I swallowed. Beautiful. Clear blue, like the sky on a clear summer afternoon. The spots on the moon flashed in my vision. Was that where I'd seen the color? Sujan's eyes? I shook my head. *No*. There had to be another reason the blue stood out. I mean, how often did anyone see blue spots on the moon?

“Raju, please join me.” His deep timbre slid over my skin.

I found myself purring, literally, which brought on thoughts of Sujan in his leopard form: white fur with black spots, just like the rest of us; slightly bigger; more powerful. His eyes stood out more against the white of his fur than they did against the dark tones of his skin. I saw myself running with him, rubbing against his side, curling next to him when we stopped to rest.

“No. I have changed my mind. Sit at my feet. I would like to touch you.”

Once more I jerked back. “Sit at your feet? What the hell? I am not submissive to you, Sujan.”

“Are you sure about that?” He tilted his head to the side.

I wasn't sure. Actually, I was fairly certain I was more submissive, since I'd never once been an aggressor. But submissives within the Leap were not allowed to do much more than care for others. We needed them, but I didn't want to be with them. I wanted to help. Be there to fight for our people. To do that, I had to compete in the challenge. I had to finish in the top five. Submitting to Sujan, or even going to him in a submissive way, was counterintuitive.

I sat in the chair next to him.

“What can I do for you tonight?” I sat with my back ramrod straight and shoulders squared.

Sujan massaged his forehead. “Are you planning to race?”

“Of course, I am. It's what we all do. You competed, despite knowing your place in the Leap was secure. Why wouldn't I?”

“Because I asked you not to?”

My jaw dropped. Surely he wasn't... no. I had to have heard him wrong. “Are you?”

Sujan nodded.

“I have to run. If I don't then I'll be at the bottom. I don't want that, Sujan. I'm a better man than that. Your request won't keep me from entering.”

“What if you didn't have to worry about your place in the Leap?”

“How is that possible? We all have a rank. It's how responsibilities are divided. Only couples...” Only couples shared rank and responsibilities. To not be concerned would mean I would be in a pairing. “Do you mean me and you?”

It was a risk to ask, but I couldn't wait any longer for him to get to the point. The adrenaline high from my first run was fading quickly. My bed called my name.

“Since you have to ask, it appears I haven't made myself clear enough. Yes, I mean you and me. Us. Together.”

“W-wh-why?” There was no reason for him to want me. I wasn't anyone special. My parents weren't special. None of us had done anything to truly stand out.

“Does it matter why? You are eligible to take a mate. I want you.” He shrugged. “That's all we need.”

“I'm eligible, and you want me. That's enough?” I repeated his words, not sure I'd heard them correctly. Surely he didn't mean I had no say. What if I didn't want him? Which I didn't. He was attractive, but hell, I'd just shifted for the first time. I hadn't even had a chance to look for a mate.

“Do you not want me as your mate?”

“Not right now, no. You're attractive, Sujan, but I've been eighteen for less than twenty-four hours. I just experienced my first shift. Gotta admit... I'm not ready to be tied to only one person so soon.”

Sujan shook his head. “I am the second in command. My father is alpha. Why would you not want me?”

Cocky much? Sure, I hadn't spent much time around Sujan, but I had no idea the guy was as egotistical as this.

“The reasons I just gave aren't enough? What if I've already got eyes for someone my age? What—”

“You don't,” he interrupted.

I flopped back in the chair with a long sigh. Damn him. “How do you know?”

“Easy. I’ve been watching you, Raj. You have friends. But you aren’t attracted to them.”

“And you think I’m attracted to you?”

I had closed my eyes and didn’t see or hear him get up from his chair, so I wasn’t expecting his lips on mine, hard, with a hint of desperation. But his hands on my face were tender, gentle. To add to my surprise, I kissed him back. I didn’t touch him, left my hands on the arms of the chair. But my lips parted for Sujan. I purred when the tip of his tongue touched mine. He wasn’t the first guy I’d kissed, but he sure as hell was the best. As quickly as the kiss began, it ended. Sujan pulled away, leaving me panting.

“Yeah, Raj. You’re attracted to me.”

I opened my eyes to see the smirk on his face. *No. I’m not attracted. That wasn’t interest. He just knows how to kiss. Why would I turn down that opportunity?*

Then again, why was I turning down the chance to mate with Sujan? Because that wasn’t me. Dad had taught me to take pride in my abilities. I knew I could help this Leap.

But I couldn’t do that as Sujan’s mate. No matter what, he’d outrank me.

“Just because I kissed you back doesn’t mean I want to mate with you, Sujan. You should know as well as anybody, a kiss is just a kiss.”

Sujan lifted me from the chair, his hands under my arms, holding tight. He took the seat and pulled me into his lap. *Damn, he’s strong.* I tried to maintain my stiff posture from before, but his hand rubbing up and down my body did weird things to my equilibrium. My mind blanked completely, and the next thing I knew I was curled into his chest. My head lay on his shoulder. Sujan pressed his mouth to mine once more, softer this time. It wasn’t a heated kiss, more sensual, warm.

“You put on a show, Raju. But inside, you are a kitten. And you will be my kitten. You will not compete. I will not allow it.”

“Don’t call me a kitten.” I sat up and gave him my best glare—not good enough since he smiled rather than bristled.

“I called you a kitten because of your place in the Leap: newly shifted, young. It was not meant to hurt you. The way you snuggle, you really are a kitten.”

I don't know how long we sat in the chair, Sujan touching me, while I tucked closer to him. I didn't argue with his demand. I would race, and he could demand the opposite as much as he pleased. I would earn my rights within the Leap.

Sujan leaned over and kissed my forehead then whispered, “You will be mine.” He nudged my thigh, and I slipped off his lap. “Get some sleep, kitten. Tomorrow will be a new day.”

He left me standing in the front room, exhausted and confused. Yeah, tomorrow would be a new day—my first day of training. Three months. The countdown was on.

Chapter Two

Sujan

I stood on the back porch of our house and stretched. Dad had gone for his morning run, so I took advantage of the quietness. Being the son of the alpha sucked. A lot of people wouldn't agree with me, but really, it did. There was always someone coming or going. Dad spent two-thirds of his day in meetings. A member of the Leap constantly needed his opinion.

That left me as the gopher boy. Dad didn't speak in any way other than commanding. It had always been that way. I wanted to change things when I took over the Leap.

Movement to my left caught my attention, and a couple of guys burst from the trees the next second.

Raju was quick on their heels. Good lord, that guy made my heart pump. It could be negative twenty degrees outside and one look at him would heat my body enough to make me sweat.

He was shorter than most, smaller too. The guy had a spine of steel though. If I hadn't known it before, I would have figured it out last night. It had taken everything in me not to toss him over my shoulder and carry him home to my bed. I've been waiting for him to turn eighteen and shift. Until our mate shifted, we didn't know for sure they were meant for us. One look and I knew; he was mine.

Although, from his rejection, he hadn't figured it out yet. But he would. Sooner rather than later if I had any say. And I did, because I was the alpha's son.

"Raju," I called out before vaulting over the deck rail and landing in the snow. He and his friends came to a sudden halt and turned back toward me.

I couldn't hear their exact words, but from the blush on Raju's cheeks—a turn-on if I've seen one—I had a feeling he wouldn't be any happier with me than he was last night. Damn it, telling him how much I wanted him, I'd sounded more like my dad than I'd intended. I had to make up for that. Apparently, I wasn't starting off very well.

"What?" Raju asked when I was within hearing distance.

"You guys out for a run?" I knew they were and I knew why. He was training, even though I'd asked him not to.

No. That wasn't right. I'd commanded him not to. *Shit*. I really needed to get my head on straight. As alpha, I didn't want to be known as Mr. Commando. That was Dad's title. If I didn't stop with the man I intended to mate then how could I with my people?

One of Raju's friends, Markham I think, snickered. "Running is what we peons tend to call what we're doing, yeah."

I snarled then pulled back when I saw Raju flinch. "I deserved that."

"If you don't need anything, we need to get a move on. Mark's got work later, and I want to make sure we get at least five miles in. Then Prem and I are going to start on the obstacle course."

Was he purposely trying to point out his defiance? I looked at Raj with raised eyebrows. He gave a quick jerk of his head. "I thought..."

"Yeah, you thought wrong. See you around, Sujan."

I tried to conceal my disappointment when he left. He showed no indication he'd enjoyed a moment of the night before; just a jerk of his head and he was off running once more. Prem and Mark followed him.

"I suck at this. It should be easier." I stalked back to my house and up the deck to where my cup of coffee sat, now cold. I needed someone to talk to. Maybe Mom could give me something, anything. A romantic I was not.

Mom was in the kitchen when I walked inside. She gave me her patented mom smile and pointed to the barstool.

"Sit, my boy."

I did as she bid and propped my elbows on the counter, then rested my head in my hands. "He hates me, *mamu*."

"No he doesn't. He doesn't know you. What happened last night?"

"I was an ass." She swatted me with a hand towel. "Ouch. Sorry. But it's true."

"Then fix it." Mom turned to the stove where she stirred a pot of soup. She made it sound so easy.

"I'm trying. He was outside running, and I went to say good morning."

“You intended to say that, but what actually came out?” *Damn it.* It would help if she didn't know me so well—even better than I knew myself apparently.

“I reminded him of my decree that he wouldn't compete. Well, I tried to anyway. He turned his back on me and ran off.”

“You sound like a whiny little child, my boy. This is not the son I raised, nor your father. The problem is you haven't shown him why he should love you the way you love him.”

Love. No. I didn't love him. Or maybe I did. Wasn't that what it meant to have a mate? You loved them and would do anything for them, including putting yourself in danger to protect them. Or pissing them off to keep them safe—perhaps by keeping them from competing in the annual endurance race?

“I do love him,” I whispered the revelation. Mom was right. I had to show him why he should love me. Since I'd started watching Raju over a year ago, I should have stepped up, made my presence known. I hadn't. Now I had to pay the price.

“Of course you do. And he will love you, Sujjan. Believe it or not, you are impossible not to love.”

The smile that formed couldn't be helped. “You say that because you're my mom. I think your opinion is a bit biased.”

“While that may be so, it also is true. The members of our Leap love you. They will be happy having you at the helm when your father retires his position as alpha.”

“Raju insists on running the race.”

“As he should.” She set her wooden spoon down and came to my side. “This is something you don't understand. Mine and your father's fault, I'd say. As the alpha's son you haven't had to earn a spot in our Leap. You inherited your place. The respect you may have had to work for, but it was a bit easier being who you are. People knew from the beginning they would someday follow your lead.”

She tapped me on my chest. “You mustn't take advantage of this. While they may have to abide by your leadership, that does not mean they will respect you if you turn into an idiot. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma'am. But if Raju were my mate, he wouldn't have to worry either.”

“My boy. You see it that way, but he doesn’t. Nor will others within the Leap. To them, and to your Raju, if he were to mate you without competing then he would be seen as an opportunist. One who got what everyone would love to have without trying. Some of our people—though not all—would make him work three times as hard to earn their respect. Long after they should have given it, they would continue to push him. Test him. Make sure he was worthy of you and this Leap.”

“Ridiculous.” I tried to pull away, but Mom wrapped her arm around my waist and tsked.

“This is what I mean. You don’t understand. If you truly want Raju as your mate then you must let him train. For himself. And for you. Use his training to your benefit. Help him. Show him you truly want him as your mate.”

Something had been bothering me since our run, and Mom’s comment about wanting him as my mate brought the question to the surface.

“I saw for myself. Raju is my mate. But he doesn’t know. Why is that? Does it mean what I saw was wrong?”

Mom chuckled. “No. It just means he’s not ready yet. When the time comes, he too will know what you know. Raju is a kitten, Sujana. Give him time.”

Yeah, he was a kitten. My kitten. Although, I’m sure my mom meant it in a different way than I did. Thinking of him snuggled in my lap made my cock harden and my body tighten.

Time. I didn’t want to wait forever, and this would be the only run he’d make. I’d give him one, no more. And I’d sure as hell make certain he was prepared.

Chapter Three

Raju

Sujan was going to be a real pain in the ass. Prem and Mark led me right to his backyard, and I wanted to punch them both in the gut for it. Not that they knew anything about him coming to my house or my sitting in his lap.

“Looks like Sujan is finally making his claim,” Prem said from behind me as we ran through the woods.

“What are you talking about, finally making his claim?” I called over my shoulder.

“Sujan’s wanted you for a while, Raj. How could you not have noticed?” Mark caught up to me.

I shook my head. “I don’t know what either of you have seen that I haven’t. Sujan’s never said two words to me.” *Before last night anyway.*

A cold, wet splat hit me square in the back—a snowball. I turned to Prem, who was dusting snow from his hands.

“Hey!” I shook the snow from my back and neck and bent to gather my own, but Mark knocked me over.

“Wake up, Raj. He’s been watching you for at least the last year. Haven’t you noticed how he kept showing up where we were? In town? Hell, he’s stopped in the store when we had to run errands for our parents.”

They were both crazy, out of their minds. There was no correlation between seeing Sujan in town and him watching me. Was there? I shook my head. *No.*

“Shit. He really hasn’t noticed, Mark. Amazing. I saw him too. Thought it was coincidence at first, but then he started popping up more and more. He’s really never said anything to you? Not even yesterday?”

Lie to my friends or let them in on my surprise visit? It shouldn’t have been a hard decision, but part of me wanted to keep it to myself. Spending time with Sujan felt... special, even if I didn’t want to admit it.

“No, I’d never talked to him before yesterday. Well, last night.”

Mark wagged his brows. “Do tell.”

“There’s not much to tell. He came by the house, told me I couldn’t compete because I was to be his mate.” I shrugged. One day I’d tell them everything, but not today.

“Prem, did you catch that?” Mark looked at Prem and rolled his eyes. “Sujan came to this asshole’s house, said he was his mate, and ordered him not to compete.”

Prem’s brows rose at me. “Why are you still planning to race?” Mark shook his head at Prem. “He’s insane. A hot piece like Sujan said that to me and I’d drop to my knees and kiss his feet.”

All three of us broke into laughter. We finished our run, and Mark left to get ready for work. His parents owned a farm, and he had to help work the land when he wasn’t in school. This was our last year of school; in a couple of weeks we’d graduate, and his breaks would end. Mark would begin working in the fields daily, unless he earned a spot as a warrior within the Leap.

Prem and I used the walk to the obstacle course as a cool down. Soon enough we’d be dripping sweat once more. The course consisted of sparring, rock climbing, and fighting in leopard form. As new shifters we had to work on controlling our shifts, becoming quick and efficient. Practice until our muscles hurt so much we couldn’t move a finger. In its entirety the course stretched ten miles in diameter, which is why we set a plan to run at least five miles a day.

“Do you really intend to run the course?” Prem fell into step with me as we headed to the rocks for climbing.

“Yeah, I do. Why wouldn’t I? This is what we do. I don’t necessarily want to be part of The Force, but I want to give back to the Leap.”

“As Sujan’s mate you would help him. Be his second when he becomes alpha. The only way to help more than that would be to take over after him.”

I shook my head. “Nope, I would be his mate. He would still have a second. No way would they give me that title. Usually it would go to a son, but...”

“Well, yeah. But that’s why it makes sense for him to appoint you as his second. He could do that, you know. Change the way of things. Haven’t had much change in a long time. Some of our laws and practices are outdated.”

My jaw dropped. Prem was right about the lack of changes, but he was the last person I would have ever expected to voice his opinion out loud. Prem loved the Leap, worshipped the alpha. We all did in our own ways—some more than others.

“You aren’t happy?” I asked.

“No. Maybe.” He shrugged. “We need to move forward with the times, like the appointment of second. Why can’t it be the mate of the alpha? I’ve never understood why there had to be a separate appointment. And the annual run seems so... I dunno. If I were alpha, I wouldn’t have it as a requirement. I mean, we all have things we do well. Why not just use our natural talents and let things fall into place on their own? If you’ve got two who are strong enough, they could fight in some way to determine dominance—like our wild cousins.”

I thought about what Prem said. His questions made sense. But Ankit Malakar was not a man to question. I’d guess Sujan didn’t question him any more than we did. Was Sujan the same way? If I ever succumbed to his order, would I lose my ability to question? Or was he different than his father?

From what I’d seen so far, there was no difference. Sujan was as unyielding as the current alpha. *Definitely not a point in his favor.*

Ugh. Why was I even considering Sujan? I didn’t want his attention. I wanted to find my own mate, have a little fun. Yet, as we stood at the bottom of the climb, all I saw were Sujan’s blue eyes, his toned body. I imagined the soft touch of his hand on my back, how perfect we fit together in my chair.

Prem cleared his throat. “Don’t know what you’re thinking about over there, but I can tell you those pants don’t hide shit.”

I glanced down and groaned at the tent slowly forming. *Perfect. Just perfect.* I adjusted myself, flipped off Prem, and stepped into the safety harness. With members of the Leap settled deep within the Himalayan Mountains, it was important we had a rescue team to help in an emergency. Some of us worked for the teams at Everest full-time, but we were always at the ready to help our own family.

Forcing my focus to the wall, Prem and I made our way up and down a few times. I made three successful passes before switching to belay so Prem could take his turn. From there we moved to the next task—hand-to-hand combat. This was the area in which I needed the most help and training.

My mom was a schoolteacher and my dad an accountant. Neither position lent itself to knowledge in hand-to-hand combat. Prem tried to help, but he didn’t have much experience either.

“Punch with your right, block with your left. Don’t leave yourself open. Punch with your left, block with your right.” Sujan’s voice froze me in place.

Prem took a cheap shot, and I landed on my ass.

“What the hell? Warn a guy next time.” I rubbed my jaw where Prem’s right hook connected and glared at him. “Cheap shot.”

He chuckled. “Doesn’t matter. All about winning in this game. Want me to give you some privacy?”

“Nope. We’re on limited time here. He wants to stick around, fine by me. At least we’ll have a little eye candy.”

“No argument here.”

I stood once more and took my stance. Sujan’s advice lingered in my thoughts. When I did as he suggested my body fell into a rhythm. I no longer felt like I was all over the place, but moving with a purpose. And Prem didn’t have an open shot... until he kicked me in the side.

When I hit the ground the second time, I stayed on my back and stared at the sky. “I’m not cut out for this.”

How was I going to survive the gauntlet if I couldn’t even make it through a practice spar with one of my best friends? As I lay contemplating the upcoming torture, a phone started ringing.

“Hello,” Prem answered.

Sujan crossed his arms and peered over me. “You going to lie there the rest of the day?”

I ignored his question and concentrated on listening to Prem. Whoever had called wasn’t delivering good news. Prem’s words were short, his voice tight. Minutes later he squatted next to my head.

“Gotta go. Mom needs help with my little sister. Apparently she decided she could fly and hurt herself.”

Sujan jumped up. “Do you need medical help? I can call Doc and send him to your place right away.”

Prem waved him off. “Let me go home and check for sure. If we need Doc then I’ll call him. Thank you for the offer, Sujan. You stay here with Raj.”

Thanks a lot. Damn Prem. Sometimes I thought my friends were worse than the old maids who swore they were matchmakers. I closed my eyes and waited for his footsteps to fade. When I opened them once more, ready to get back to working out, I didn’t see the blue sky above me. Instead, Sujan’s eyes filled my vision, his hand extended for me to take.

I shoved him out of the way and pushed myself off the ground. "I've got it. If you don't mind, I need to move on. Now that Prem is headed home and Mark is working the fields, I'm going to have to work on shifting by myself."

"Let me take you to my place. I'll help you. Being in a secluded area can be a good thing. Especially in the beginning."

His offer was genuine, but I fought the temptation. If I went to his house, accepted his assistance, then I wouldn't have the willpower to stop what may or may not happen next, like kissing him. Or cuddling... I shook my head.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'll stay out here."

Sujan sighed. "Listen, I screwed up yesterday. I get that. Let me help you. You only started shifting. The way Dad sets this up, your last fight is in leopard form. He says only the true protectors can make it through everything and still find the energy necessary to not only shift, but win in a battle of dominance."

Interesting. Maybe Sujan can help me in other ways, like sharing trade secrets. How would that be any different than accepting him as my mate and sliding right in next to him in the Leap?

"You don't even want me to participate. You're intent on making me your mate and ordering me around. What changed that you're now handing out advice?" Good advice at that, but I refused to admit that much to him.

Sujan scrubbed his hand over his face. "I'm sorry, Raju, really. I do want you as my mate, but I've seen the error of my ways. The last thing I want is to turn into my father. What I did, commanding you, it was wrong. I get it. Please?"

Once more his sincere words threw me sideways. How was I supposed to stay away from him if he stayed like this—honest and open, almost sweet? Simply put... I couldn't. Sujan drew me to him. So this once, I'd follow him home. After all, a secluded place to shift would be helpful, at least for today. Tomorrow I'd come back out on my own, with or without Prem and Mark, and I'd prepare for the course.

"If I come over, no touching or kissing. Okay?"

He smirked. "Deal. No touching or kissing unless you initiate."

"That won't be a problem. I need to practice shifting. A secluded place will help." I hated the qualifier he added at the end of his agreement. I wouldn't touch him, no matter what.

I led the way to the bottom of the course. “You drove?” I nodded to the bike parked at the trailhead.

“Yep. Come on.”

Fantastic. I’d get to spend the few minutes with my arms wrapped around his muscular torso. I groaned and climbed on behind him. This was such a bad idea.

Chapter Four

Sujan

For whatever reason, I thought having Raju on the back of my bike would give me a chance to get my cock under control. My jeans had tightened to the point of pain, and having his hands around my waist only made it worse. *Karma's a bitch.*

I slowed the bike at the edge of our drive and carefully pulled into my spot in the garage.

“Would you like something to eat or drink before we get started?”

“No, Sujan. I don't want food. I don't want anything to drink. I don't want a tour of your house, and I sure as hell don't want to see your bedroom. You told me I could work on shifting out here. Should I go around back?”

“Enough,” I snapped. “I said I was sorry. I'm giving you free rein with my backyard to work on shifting in private. Unless I'm dumber than even I know, nothing I've done today deserves being treated like this. Not once did I mention taking you to my room. So get over yourself and go around back. If you need me, holler. I'll come running I'm sure.” No doubt about it. If Raju needed me, I'd be there, pain in my ass or not.

Raju's snarl turned to a frown. He looked at me with regret. “I'll be out back. Thanks... thanks for letting me come over.”

His shoulders fell forward and he walked out of the garage. I fought back the urge to chase him, take him in my arms, and tell him it was okay. No matter how much I wanted Raju, we couldn't have a relationship based on constant apologies. To make a relationship work I had to figure out what made him happy. Show him what made me happy.

Give him time. Mom's words echoed in my thoughts. If she was right then letting him go off on his own was the right choice. Later, I'd go to his side.

“Sujan.” Raj's voice was distant but not too far away.

I headed around the corner of the house. Raju leaned against the wall, one leg bent, his foot propped up on the stone. He'd shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Yeah?”

“I... um... I mean...” Raju looked at me, then over my shoulder and to his left and right.

“What’s going on, Raj?” He shook his head. Without second-guessing myself, I went to him. I lifted his chin so our eyes met. “Talk to me. I’m here to help.”

“Can you... never mind.” Raju slipped beneath my arm and started jogging to the tree line surrounding the house.

“Raj. Stop.” I ran after him.

He was fast, I had to give him that. When I finally caught up, I grabbed him by the upper arm and pulled him to a stop. We tumbled to the ground, landing with me on top.

“Leave me alone. Please.”

“Damn it, talk to me. What is going on? Is this about what I said at the house?”

“No. It’s about me. I can’t shift. Okay? Is that what you want to hear?”

A tear slipped from the corner of his eye. I lowered my head to his and kissed away the moisture. “Yes, it is. Not for the reasons you think. Everyone struggles at first. That’s why I wanted you to come home with me. Better to struggle with no one around than in front of everyone, right?”

“No. It’s better to not fucking struggle at all. How the hell am I supposed to earn my place in this Leap if I can’t even shift without it taking forever?”

I sat back on my heels, still straddling his waist. My cock struggled against my zipper. *Oh, great. Please don’t let it scare him away.* Now wasn’t the time for him to notice my arousal. For that matter, now wasn’t the time to be aroused, but my body didn’t pay attention.

“Calm down, Raju. Getting worked up won’t do you any good.” He started to shake his head again, and I held him still with a hand on either side of his face. “Breathe with me. Deep breath in, and slowly blow it out.”

We did this a couple of times, and all the while I studied his eyes, watched the fear fade with each concentrated inhale and exhale. Once he relaxed, I took more control. “I’m going to get off of you, and you’re going to strip for me. Understand?”

“Why?”

I sighed. He wasn't going to do anything I said without a fight. “Because I said so.”

“Right. This is piss-poor seduction you know.”

“Raj, I'm not trying to seduce you. Seriously, I'm trying to help you shift. Remember: practice makes perfect.”

“Ahh, yes, the age-old proverb.”

Brat. I climbed off of him and opened my mouth to respond, but he sat up, reached behind his head, and pulled his shirt off. Then Raju shimmied out of his shorts.

My breath caught when he stood in front of me naked. He'd gone commando. Brat indeed.

“Good. Now close your eyes and imagine your leopard form.”

“This is—”

“No more arguments. Do what I said.”

He started to dispute my directive once more then snapped his mouth shut when I glared at him.

While his eyes were closed, I stripped myself and willed my cock to behave. Having someone else to guide and show how to shift made the first few times a lot easier. At least it had in my past. I hoped the same would go for Raju.

I watched him fall to his hands and feet, all the while keeping his eyes closed. His back arched and his leopard took control. In a blurred moment he went from human to leopard. The transformation took my breath away. Small. His coat had a hint of tan, with black spots just like the rest of us. But once again, his gaze captured me. Raju was so full of love and a desire to help others. His leopard spoke to me.

“*Yours.*”

I nodded. Yes. He was mine. And I was his.

Once he had time to adjust to the change, I crouched in front of Raju and nuzzled my cheek against his. Raj stretched his front paws out, lowering into a bow of sorts. I ran my hands through his thick fur before standing up.

He grunted and nudged my calf with his nose.

“Like that, do ya?” I chuckled. “Shift back. I’ll shift with you next time and we can play.”

Raju stepped back, lay down, and rolled to his side. I watched him return to his human form.

“Welcome back. How do you feel?”

“Good. It gets easier doesn’t it? Changing back wasn’t as hard as the first time.”

“Sounds about right. Ready to go again?”

“Were you serious about playing?”

I smiled. Oh yeah, I was serious. In his leopard form, Raj wouldn’t be able to resist the pull to pounce and run. He was still a kitten after all. And his leopard recognized our mating even if Raju hadn’t accepted it yet.

I nodded and knelt next to him. We’d do this together. “Close your eyes, Raju.”

“Wait.” The single word came out in a whisper.

“Yeah?” I rubbed his shoulder. The call of bare skin was impossible to resist.

“You spoke to my leopard.”

I sucked in a breath. When we all shifted, we used mindspeak to communicate. But if one of us returned to human, we no longer had the ability to talk back and forth... except with our mate.

Was Raju ready to admit what I already knew?

“I did.”

“If what you said was true about being my mate then why didn’t he answer back?”

Confusion sounded loud and clear in his question. I released the breath I held. Raju didn’t realize his leopard had spoken to me, called to me, acknowledged himself as mine. But I didn’t know how to tell him the truth. He wasn’t ready. That much I could see now.

“It takes time to develop the connection. You’ll see.” I ruffled his hair. “Let’s do this. Close your eyes and picture your leopard. Let him out to play.”

I followed my own instructions. A minute later I took off through the trees without looking back. Raju would follow.

Chapter Five

Raju

The third shift turned out to be even easier. My muscles rearranged themselves faster. The pain of the change lessened. The rush of the moment remained. Enhanced senses as a human were great, but seeing things through my leopard... indescribable.

Sujan barely gave me time to recover before running off. I growled and went after him.

Just as the sensory changes left me speechless, so did the urge to run, to chase. I lifted my nose to the sky, seeking Sujan's scent: spicy, woody, unique to Sujan in a way I couldn't explain.

His scent became stronger. I was closer, but I didn't see him. Stopping, I looked around. No sign of Sujan.

"Where did you go?"

"Ahh, the kitten lost me already. Use your senses. You smell me, but you can't see me. What do you hear?"

I crouched low to the ground, blending in with the snow, and listened. Birds chirped. Small animals rustled the grass somewhere off to my left. I made a mental note to seek them out later.

"Focus, kitten."

The air was calm; only a soft breeze broke through the trees. Above me, a branch creaked. Certainly the breeze wasn't strong enough to make the trees sway. I'd forgotten to look up in my search for Sujan.

I lifted my eyes to the treetops. There. He jumped over me—from one limb to another with incredible grace.

"Teach me how to do that, Sujan."

"Your leopard already knows how. Let him take the lead."

"I tried yesterday. I couldn't do it."

I sat on my haunches next to the trunk. If I couldn't climb a tree, how could I be assigned a watch duty?

"You didn't give over control, kitten. Let go of your human limitations. You're a leopard. Accept that."

What was it about his voice that soothed my nerves? Gave me the confidence to let go?

"I'm your mate."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"We are mates. We know everything about each other. I'm not reading your mind."

Before I had a chance to register what my body was doing, I was halfway to the top of the tree, leaping from one limb to the next.

"Good. I'm proud of you, kitten."

If I could've smiled, I would have. I mewled my appreciation of his praise.

"Keep coming. Catch me if you can." His laughter rang through my thoughts.

"Run, run as fast as you can," I taunted.

No sooner did I think I'd caught him than he sprang down to the ground. I growled, having missed him again.

"Want to play a game of cat and mouse, kitten?"

No, I didn't want to play because I would no doubt be the mouse. While I didn't want to, my leopard had different plans, because he purred his agreement, the traitor.

"Sure. I doubt my leopard would let me turn you down, no matter how much I don't want to be humiliated."

Sujan jumped from behind a tree. He butted his head into my side, pushing me away. Then he licked my face.

"Seriously?"

I shoved my muzzle in the snow to wipe off his touch, hoping he'd think I didn't want his affection—a lie, of course. In truth, I wanted more. I was ready to roll over and give him my throat, submit completely, both as leopard and human. All thanks to one show of attention.

No, more than that. Sujan was helping me more than I would have ever expected. And he did it because he wanted to. Wait. Could it have been a way to make me accept his belief that we were mates? My leopard seemed to agree,

but I wasn't so sure. Or I hadn't been until that moment, when it took every ounce of my control not to roll over.

"Admit you want me to do it again." He nipped my front leg.

I nipped back then took off toward his house. If I beat him there, I could shift back and head home before the temptation to do so much more overpowered me.

"Now who's got to catch who?" I laughed and felt my lips pull away from my teeth. Not in anger or fear, but in happiness.

Cutting through the wind, breaking the snow with each step, I felt freer than ever before. It was no wonder the guys found every reason possible to shift.

I darted around trees and almost got sidetracked by a hare desperately trying to avoid me. At the edge of the forest, near Sujan's home, I found a spot to hide. Since camouflage and pouncing was new to me, I let my leopard take over.

Buried in the snow, I waited for Sujan. And waited. *"What's taking so long?"* Sujan didn't respond and panic settled in. What if he'd been caught up in a trap? They weren't all that common, but every once in a while a foreigner passed through with the idea they could trap us and take us home for a trophy.

Just as I started to get up, a heavy weight landed on my back. Teeth clamped around my neck, leaving me two options: fight or submit. I fought. Twisting to the side in an attempt to knock off my attacker didn't work. I tried to lift up onto all fours and shake him off, but I was unsuccessful again.

"Let your leopard take over, kitten. If you fight me, you will lose, every time. You have to let him in. Not just when you feel like it, but from the moment you shift to the moment you return to your human form."

I relaxed, hearing Sujan's voice in my head. I tried once more to fight him off, but my strength was nearly depleted. With too much ease, he flipped me over and caged me in. Sujan won. I closed my eyes and shifted back to human, a complete failure.

He bit my bare shoulder when I refused to look him in the eye. I'd given him my neck; looking him in the eyes was too much. Right then all I wanted to do was get my clothes on and go home.

Sujan tried again to get my attention, but I refused. He quickly shifted back.

“Get off of me, Sujan. I’m going home. This was a mistake.” I set my hands on his chest, ready to push him off, but I couldn’t find the power. Tears burned my eyes. How had this turned so bad?

He’d helped me. For a while I began to think maybe I could be his mate. Then... humiliation was the only word that came to mind. I’d never win against the older, stronger men of the Leap in three months, which meant I wouldn’t have the chance to protect my people—the one thing I wanted most.

“Hold on, Raju. I think we should talk about this before you run away.”

This time I did shove him away. “I’m not running away. Christ, you just took me down without a fight. I’m so fucking weak. I need to go.”

Sujan didn’t fight me. I stood and began moving toward the house where I’d stripped down and left my clothes. Training was done. I needed sleep and to start fresh tomorrow. Halfway to my destination, arms wrapped me in warmth. I couldn’t move, trapped once more.

“Kitten, stop beating yourself up. I’m older. I’ve got more experience. And as son of the alpha, my powers are stronger than anyone in this Leap other than my father. You’re not weak. I didn’t mean to hurt you or embarrass you. Please don’t leave. We were having fun, were we not?”

I dropped my chin to my chest. It felt good to be close to Sujan. My back pressed against his chest, his warm hands on my stomach. My cock twitched. How could I argue with him?

“Yeah, I was. But don’t you see... if you bested me, others will too. How am I supposed to earn my spot as a protector if I can’t do that? And if I am your mate, which I’m not saying I am, how am I supposed to protect you?”

Sujan didn’t respond. He turned me around, and before I had a chance to ask what the hell he was doing, his lips were on mine. The kiss was so much more than the last time. Desperation, desire, passion, and anger all rolled into one toe-curling, spine-tingling fusion of our mouths.

I grabbed at his hair, pulling on the longer locks. A need to have him closer, so much closer, overwhelmed me. My mind shut down. All that filtered through was how good it felt to have Sujan take what he wanted, no questions and no decisions to make. I had to kiss him. He made it impossible not to.

A rumble bubbled up from his chest. Without thinking, I wrapped one leg around his waist, searching for more of... something, anything. Sujan slid his

hand down my back, over my hip, and under my leg. When he put pressure on my thigh to lift me higher, I obeyed his silent command.

His other hand slid around my waist and squeezed. I lifted on my toes, and he shifted his hand between my legs, his fingers digging into my inner thigh. He was just as hard as I was. Our cocks pressed against our stomachs. I froze, afraid to move. If I did I'd lose it. I'd come all over him like it was my first time.

The man did things to me I had no idea how to process. Every concern of protection and failure fled, replaced by a flame of ecstasy.

Sujan pulled away first. I lifted my fingers to my swollen lips. "Umm."

"Not my mate. I wish you'd forget that idea and accept that you are. Only my mate would turn me on as quickly as you do, especially when you've already pissed me off." He didn't relax his grip on either of my thighs. "Come inside with me, kitten. Let me show you how good it can be between us."

Kitten. He'd called me that more than once. The previous evening he'd declared me his kitten. But a kitten was weak. I refused to be weak despite his proof moments ago. I shook my head and forced myself to move from the safety of his hold.

"I can't. I need to help out around the house before Mom and Dad get home. Then tomorrow I'll have to find someone to help me spar and fight with. You showed me today Prem won't be of much help. He's no more experienced than I am. Maybe Mark can help. He's bigger, worked in the fields." I turned and walked back to Sujan's house.

"Raju, wait..."

But I kept walking. It was the best course of action. I had to believe that. He was a distraction I didn't need.

My mate. Maybe so, but that didn't mean I would roll over and take whatever was handed to me. I had to earn my place in this Leap. Today had been fun, but it was time to go. Kittens played. I was no kitten.

Chapter Six

Raju

The next few weeks I did everything I could to avoid Sujan. More than once he came to the training area, putting a kink in my plans. Prem and Mark were right at my side—trying to convince me to give him another shot.

I told them both about our day. Prem smacked me around for leaving the way I did. Even with their reprimands, I didn't regret leaving. I had to. If I lost myself in Sujan, I'd regret anything we might have. And I still wasn't convinced he was my mate. All my life I'd been told when I found my mate I would know. I'd look in his eyes and see the bond between us.

There was only one window in my bedroom, on the side of the house that faced Sujan's. Standing at that window, staring out, I tried to remember if I'd seen anything when I looked at Sujan. No matter how hard I tried, nothing came to mind. But then why was I pulled to him? Staying away had been no small amount of torture. When I ran the other way, it took all my willpower.

"Raj, if you don't get your head out of your ass, the training won't matter much." Prem leaned against the doorjamb.

I looked at him. "Tell me something I don't already know."

"What's got you messed up in the head now?"

"Mates. That's what he keeps saying. And I feel drawn to him, Prem. But other than that, the signs aren't there. I can't communicate with him when I'm in leopard form and he's human. I don't see any mysterious, unexplainable bonds between us when I look in his eyes." I sat on the bed. "You've seen his eyes. They are the most gorgeous blue I've ever seen. There should be something... anything, right? That's what our parents say time and time again."

Prem pushed off the doorjamb and came to sit by me. He rubbed his hand down his face. More than anyone else, I'd bugged Prem about my conflicting thoughts. The strength of our friendship kept him from beating me to a pulp—I was certain of that. Because if anyone annoyed me the way I had him, we'd have severed ties quickly.

"I'll say the same thing I've been saying for two weeks. The same thing Mark told you. You're not paying attention. For whatever reason, you're so far

in your head you can't see what Sujan is showing you. Tell me, in the last month, how often has he been on the hill watching? Protecting? Has anyone given us shit about our training? We're not exactly the biggest, fastest, or most experienced. Everyone else under the age of twenty would have been subjected to the antics of the older members, but not us."

Was that true? Sure, we hadn't been given a hard time, but was it because Sujan was there? Did everyone but me know about our mating?

"Skip training today, Raj. Go talk to him. But when you do, go with an open mind. If you miss out on your mate because you were too stupid to open your eyes—that's a regret you don't want to have. I saw it happen with my sister."

"I can't miss training. The competition is in less than two months. If I want to protect our people, I have to do this." Prem opened his mouth to start again, and I held up a hand to stop him. "I'll go see him after. I don't know if you're right or not, but I owe it to Sujan and me to find out. And I promise, I'll go with my eyes open."

He sighed. "Good enough, I guess. Come on. Mark's waiting."

After training, Mark and Prem went with me to Sujan's house. Not because I needed an escort but because they wanted to make sure I followed through on my promise to see him. Admittedly, I considered going back on my word, so I couldn't be upset with them for their meddling.

Sujan met us outside. "What's wrong? What's going on?"

He stood with his hands on his hips, a concerned look on his face, but in control, ready to act if necessary—an alpha through and through. He was softer than his father, but not by much.

"Nothing's wrong. I-I'm..." My heart pounded in my chest. I rubbed my sweaty palms on my pants. "I came by to talk to you."

Mark and Prem each squeezed a shoulder, and Mark leaned in. "See ya, Raj. Call us later if you need to talk."

I nodded without looking back at them. If I broke eye contact with Sujan, there was a good chance my nervousness would win out, and I'd chase after my best friends.

A slow grin pulled at Sujan's mouth. "You came to talk. To finally admit you're my mate? Tell me you've pulled out of the race."

I widened my stance and crossed my arms over my chest. "Even if I do accept you as my mate, which I'm not doing yet, I will still compete."

Sujan walked toward me, coming to a stop just out of arms reach. Enough distance I didn't turn tail and run away. "And if I order you?"

His grumbled words sent a shiver down my spine. "Sujan, if you want anything to do with me, if we are really mates, then you will respect my needs. You won't give me a command like that."

"Spoken like a true mate. You are ready to admit you're mine, aren't you, kitten?" His next step put him in my space. He ran his fingers from my forehead down my cheek and over to my lips. He stopped with two fingers on my mouth. "No words, Raju. Look at me. Really look. Tell me you don't see it as well."

Prem gave me the same advice. Look. Open my eyes and really look. So I did. This time I shut down my thoughts, my doubts, and I stared into Sujan's sky-blue eyes. When I started to break our connection, he held me in place with his hands on my shoulders.

"Stop doubting yourself, kitten. You are mine. Your leopard knows it. I know it. Your friends know it. Other members of the Leap recognize our connection. You are the one who refuses to accept us."

He didn't speak out loud, but his words were clear as day in my mind. I tried to answer to him.

"Then why don't I see the bond when I look into your soul? I know you said you see it in me, but I can't."

"You can. You choose not to. Your mind is in the way. If you shifted right now, your leopard would show you."

There it was. We communicated mentally. My leopard purred at Sujan's words, an acknowledgement in itself.

"How can we make any type of mating work, Sujan? I want to protect our people. No one, especially you, will allow me to do that if I am your mate."

"There are ways to protect our people that do not include fighting. You will see this in time, Raju. I would prefer to do that myself, at your side. If you choose not to, then I can't force you. However, if there is a way to convince you that we are best together then please tell me. I'll do what needs to be done."

His words rang true. I looked into his eyes once more. No longer did I see sky blue. Deep inside, I saw his soul. I saw the connection between us. My soul

intertwined with his. A memory from my first shift played in my thoughts. On the moon were two blue spots. They were Sujan's eyes. I should have known then he was my mate, but I missed the sign.

"I'm yours. But are you mine?" I asked.

"Yes, Raju, I am yours." He pressed his lips to mine in a quick kiss. "Now come inside with me, and let's make it official."

"Your parents."

Sujan laughed. "Ahh, kitten. I have the downstairs to myself. It is my place, just as it will be my second's when my parents move out and I take over the Leap. They will not bother us."

I nodded. "Okay."

Sujan took my hand in his and led me inside. He was my mate. I wasn't sure what that meant or how we would figure things out. But for the first time, I chose not to worry. Sujan promised we'd both be happy.

Chapter Seven

Sujan

So many emotions passed through my mind—joy, desire, relief, frustration. Raju caused every single one of them. I wanted to pick him up and swing him around. I wanted to shift with him and run all night through the trees. I wanted to strip him bare in the drive and take him right then. Actually, that one I almost did.

He saw our connection, accepted our mating. Raju was mine.

With our hands intertwined I guided him through the garage, down the stairs to my apartment, and barely made it through the door before I picked him up and tossed him on the bed. Raj's eyes went wide. He gripped the blanket covering my bed.

“What are you...?”

I smiled. “I'm making you mine so there's no question within the Leap.”

“I'm still going to compete, Sujan. This doesn't mean I'm not going to earn my spot with our people.”

“Strip for me, kitten.” I stood back from the bed, knowing if I made a move toward him I wouldn't take this slow, like Raj needed, like I needed. This was a moment to savor. I'd found my mate, and no matter how much I ached for him, I wasn't going to make this a race to the finish.

Instead of doing as I instructed, Raj propped himself up on his elbows. “Not until you promise me not to fight about whether or not I compete. I'm doing it whether you give me permission or not.”

“Raj, strip now. We'll talk about the other later.”

When he jumped off the bed and stalked past me, not even a glance over his shoulders, I knew I'd screwed up once more. *Will I ever get it right with him?*

“A true mate would take the time to listen, no matter who's the more dominant of the two. I may not be as strong as you, but that doesn't equal disrespect. Goodbye, Sujan.”

His words dealt a crushing blow. My need for control vanished. “Fuck. Stop, Raju. Shit. I'm horrible at this. Don't you get it?”

The door didn't click closed, so I turned, hoping he'd stayed. My heart and soul wanted to make Raju mine more than my cock. If we didn't move beyond the damn survival test, I was going to lose him. I took a deep breath, gathering courage before I looked up.

"Don't I get what?" Raju asked. He stood with his back against the door, his arms crossed over his chest.

I looked at his eyes, needing to know where we stood. Had I made him shut down once more? Would he continue to forgive me and come back? What I saw made my knees weak—desire, pain, happiness. We shared the same feelings, yet I kept pushing him away.

"I'm an idiot when it comes to this whole mating thing. The way Dad tells the story, he saw Mom and knew immediately she was his. He walked up to her, said as much, and they lived happily ever after." I sat on the bed. "So I did the same with you, and you didn't believe me. You asked me to give you time, and I couldn't stay away. Please don't deny the connection between us. While I continue to screw this up, you continue to come back. I don't deserve you, but damn if I can't stay away."

With my head buried in my hands, I didn't see Raju move from the door. Not until he knelt between my legs and pried my hands from my face did I know he'd come to me, again. What had I done to find a mate as wonderful as him?

"I won't deny the connection, but I won't be treated like a child."

"But—"

He shook his head. "I'm a kitten. I get it. My first shift was a month and a half ago. You're older, but not by much. Neither of us knows how mating works. My dad had to chase my mom for a year before she admitted the inevitable. I guess it's different for everyone."

"How does it work for us?" I was lost for answers.

This was not something I could talk to Mom or Dad about. Dad would tell me to man up and take what was mine. While Raju was a kitten, he was *my* kitten. It hadn't taken long to figure out he had some fight in him. He wouldn't be "taken" as Dad would suggest.

Raju leaned into me and rested his head on my chest. He wrapped his arms around my waist. "We figure it out along the way I guess. But I'm serious

about earning my spot, Sujan. I don't want to take the easy way out just because we're meant to be together. No one will respect that. If I compete and fail, well, at least I'll know where I stand. At least I will have tried."

I knew what he meant about trying. Dad never handed me anything. And I could have gotten what I wanted simply by being his son. But as he'd earned the respect of our Leap, so did I. Listening to Raju, Dad's way of doing things made sense. He didn't want life to be easy for me. If I were going to take over the Leap one day then I needed to know how to work, how to earn my place. Just like Raju wanted. Except...

"The run is dangerous, Raj. What if you are hurt? Or killed? It's happened you know."

He chuckled. The vibration of his laugh made my dick go from semi-hard to steel in a second. Any hope he hadn't noticed disappeared when his thin fingers slid from my back around my waist and dipped below the band of my shorts. He wrapped his hand around my cock and began a slow, torturous stroke.

"I do know. You also know that doesn't happen very often. It's the reason for the competition, Sujan. Your father started this. And I have no doubt you will continue the tradition. Help me train. Make me ready."

He punctuated the last word with a squeeze at the base of my shaft. I leaned back on my arms, giving him more access. Raju released me long enough to slip my shorts over my hips.

"I thought I told you to strip. Why am I the one getting naked?"

Raju smiled. "I'm going to take care of you, Sujan. Let me give you this."

I was about to ask what he wanted to give me when he took me in his hot, wet mouth. I groaned as his head bobbed up and down.

"Want to last, kitten." He took my balls in hand and massaged them at the same time he flattened his tongue against the underside of my cock and licked me all the way to the head. "Not going to last like this. I need you. Want you."

"Mmm. Shouldn't I be the one begging?" He smirked.

The playful kitten pushed too far. I gripped him under the arms and pulled him away from between my legs. Raju's gasp brought a smile to my lips. "Now you've done it. I gave you a chance. No more."

Once more his eyes went wide. Only this time I didn't stay away. My leopard was tired of waiting. I gave him a piece of control. A growl began deep

and rumbled from my throat. Raju scooted back to the wall, a mixture of anticipation and fear on his face.

I placed one knee on the futon and inched forward. Raju sucked in a breath when our gazes met. He saw my leopard, and his responded with a purr.

“Mine. All mine.”

He nodded.

“Your clothes are still on.” I raised an eyebrow at him.

With effort, I held back a chuckle as Raju scrambled out of his clothes, shirt, shorts, and boxers strewn around my room.

“Much better.”

I pulled his feet out, so he lay flat on his back, and straddled his thighs. His soft skin and hard muscles were a mix of sensations like everything else about Raju—small yet fierce, hard yet soft. And we belonged to each other. His eyes clouded with want, and he bucked his hips.

“Time to slow down,” I whispered.

I pinned his wrists above his head. So close to his pouty lips, I kissed him, tasting him. Carefully at first when he opened for me, our tongues touched, and the spark he ignited burst into flames. Raju arched into me, rubbing himself against me.

Simmering desire turned to blazing need as our bodies got to know each other. I released his wrists, and our hands tangled with each other, learning each other's curves and angles. Raju eased his hand between us, and wrapped his fingers around both of our cocks.

“Ah, yes,” I grunted as his grip tightened. A few more twists and pumps was all it would take to send me racing over the edge.

Raju's jaw clenched. Sweat broke out on his upper lip. He was holding out for me. My heart swelled. Just because we were mates didn't mean insta-love, but with Raju, I was falling fast.

“Come for me, kitten. Take us both there. Give it to me.”

He lifted his hips, twisted his fist around our cocks, and bit his upper lip. That was all it took. We both stilled, our muscles tightened, and we came at the same time, screaming each other's name.

I fell over to Raju's side, and he curled into me. His arm draped over my chest, head on my shoulder.

"Thank you, Sujan."

"Mm." I ran my fingers through his hair. Thank you wasn't enough. Being with him felt like coming home.

"You never said yes to me participating in the games next month."

Damn. He hadn't missed that. "I don't want you to."

"This is new for both of us. I'd hate to start something only to finish it so soon. But I will, Sujan. What we just did. What we're doing now. I'd love to have more of it."

"Me too. You're not going to give in on this, are you?"

He kissed my chest, knowing I would cave. "Nope."

"Promise me you'll let me help with your training?"

Another kiss. "Yeah, babe, you can help."

"If you get hurt, you'll pull out?"

Another kiss, this one on my neck, Raju followed with a nip of his teeth. "Sure."

"Keep it up and I'll have you screaming my name again."

"That's a bad thing?" Raju asked as he crawled on top of me this time.

No, no it wasn't. I grinned. "Not in the least."

A while later he screamed my name... twice.

Chapter Eight

Raju

Morning sun filled Sujan's apartment. I'd fallen asleep in his arms and woken feeling better than I'd ever felt. It was a case of not knowing what you were missing until you had it. Everyone told stories of finding home when they found their mate. They said it would feel right. But they never had words to truly explain.

Waking up with Sujan, I understood. There weren't words to describe the pleasure, rightness, sense of belonging.

He stretched next to me. "Good morning, kitten."

Damn if I didn't purr for him when he rubbed his hand over my chest. With Sujan, I was a kitten. There was no point in fighting the truth. I would kneel for him, loved the feel of his fingers in my hair, and snuggled against him as much as I could, all of it without shame.

"I need to get to the hill. Prem and Mark will be waiting for me."

Sujan rolled on top of me, his arms to either side of my head. "Will they ask questions?"

"Probably." I lifted my head just enough to press my lips to his before lying back down. "I won't tell them anything though. It's none of their business."

"Everyone will know the minute you show up on the back of my bike."

"According to my friends, and you, the Leap already knows about us. I was the only one who didn't."

"You did. You just chose not to face facts. But I'm so glad you've changed your mind."

He leaned down and kissed me a second time. Sujan's kiss was so much more demanding, forceful. Any fuzziness from waking up disappeared as my body reacted to him. The way his hands drifted up and down my sides when he pushed up on his knees, our lips never parting. I rose with Sujan, wrapped my arms around his neck and opened for him.

I broke the kiss to catch my breath. "Need to get ready, babe."

Sujan rolled to the side and fanned his arm out toward the bathroom. "All yours."

When I stood from the bed, he smacked my ass hard enough to make me jump. I massaged the flare of pain and noticed the heat radiating from my skin.

“Fuck.”

“Thought you’d like that. Now get moving. I’ll do the same once you’re done. If I go in there with you, we’ll never make it up the hill.”

That stopped me cold. “You said...”

“I said I’d train you. That means I’m going with you. Don’t even try to argue with me. It’s compromise, Raju. Get used to it.”

Get used to it. Sure. It was that easy. I huffed. We had agreed. There was no going back now. Acceptance or not, that didn’t stop me from adding a little extra muscle when I shut the door.

Later that afternoon I stood next to Prem. He stood taller than me, and bulkier, though not as big as Mark. Prem had been working with me on the climbing, and we’d just finished our last ascension.

Sujan and Mark were off working on hand-to-hand combat. I wanted to do some shifting, but Sujan assured me that was better done at his place. He promised we’d get to it later.

“You’re falling for him,” Prem said.

I didn’t have to look at him or ask who he was talking about anymore. “Yeah, I am. I’ve been an idiot, Prem.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” He squeezed my shoulder. “We’re all new to this. It’s not like we shift and then expect to find our mate that night. You didn’t do anything the rest of us wouldn’t have done.”

“You think so?” I stared up the mountain.

“Okay, so we may not have ignored our mate for nearly a month when he was around pretty much as often as possible, but yeah, I’d have pushed like you did.”

“Do you think I should compete? Sujan still wants me to skip it. As his mate, I have my spot in the Leap.”

Until the question was out, I hadn’t realized how much Sujan’s desires weighed me down. For the first time since I could remember, I wasn’t certain running the annual event was a good idea. What if something really did happen? What if I was injured? Or worse...

I turned to face Prem, and his hand dropped from my shoulder. Our gazes locked, and he remained quiet long enough to make me worry.

“What do you want to do, Raj?”

“Honestly, I don't know anymore. He keeps asking me not to, and I keep telling him I'm going to. But this morning... being with him felt... well, it was good.”

“And now you're rethinking this whole 'prove your worth' stuff.”

“Not intentionally. But yeah, I guess I am. If I can be with him and protect him, does anything else matter? I mean, I want to protect our people. But maybe I'm not strong enough for that. If I don't earn my spot during the run then all this will have been for nothing. And let's face it. I'm nowhere close to the ability or size of you or Mark. And you two are small compared to many of our soldiers and rescuers.”

This conversation had taken a turn I wasn't sure I was prepared for. Thankfully, Sujan was nowhere around to hear my concerns. He'd probably support whatever I wanted, but silently he'd be ecstatic if I decided to take my place at his side and quit worrying about everything else.

I dropped my rigging and moved to sit against the mountain face we'd just scaled six times. Had things changed so much in twenty-four hours that I was actually considering letting go of the run?

Prem sat next to me. “You know you can protect us at his side? With you taking care of him, you take care of us.”

Was he right? Could I do both? Would protecting Sujan and being there for him be enough when he took over the Leap?

“What would you do if the roles were reversed, Raj? Would you want him to participate? Would you ask him to do what he's asked of you?”

“Good question. I don't know. Probably. Have people actually died when running the course?”

A long silence passed between us. I hugged my knees and laid my head on my arms, my gaze on Prem. He lowered his chin and whispered, “Yes.”

So it was true. I could die. I could lose the man I was falling for, hard. But that could happen no matter what. It didn't have to be during the endurance test. Did it make sense to put myself in the position though, just for pride?

I didn't know.

“Talk to him, Raj. It’s the best advice I can give you. Only you can come to the best decision for yourself. Don’t make it without checking out all the angles. We only think we know what Sujan will say. He may see how much this means to you, and encourage you rather than ask you step away once more.”

“He’s already done that. We agreed that I could continue training as long as he was by my side. That’s why I’m more confused than ever. Why am I now second-guessing everything? This morning when we left his place, I wanted to be here. But now... I just...”

My thoughts trailed off with my words. I stared into the distance, not looking at anything specific, remembering the warmth of Sujan’s arms around me throughout the night, the way he looked that morning—relaxed, worry-free.

Memories of the last month flooded my thoughts—Sujan standing on the edge of the practice field, keeping an eye out for me, meeting me at least once a week for lunch or dinner, showing up at home more than once just to talk. My parents loved him. He took care of our Leap. He knew the trials each family faced and celebrated their successes. Sujan was young, but already he showed how strong he’d be as alpha.

And I could stand next to him, without continuing to bring friction to our new relationship.

Chapter Nine

Sujan

During the day, a shift happened within Raju. I don't think he meant for me to see it, but I did. When we left in the morning he'd been fine, but as the day wore on, he distanced himself from training, spent more time contemplating a turn of some sort. As much as I wanted to call him on his lack of focus, I didn't.

Once we made it back to my place, that changed. On the ride home he'd not only distanced himself from training, but from me as well. He didn't hold me the same way he had that morning. We hadn't spent much time together over the last month and a half while he trained and came to terms with our mating, but when we did he was enthusiastic, eager. Tonight there was none of that.

"What's going on?" I asked as he climbed off the bike.

"Nothing." Raju didn't look at me. He started off toward the house.

"I thought you wanted to work on shifting some more."

That caught his attention. *Good*. In his leopard form I could get him to open up. At least I had before. Maybe this time would be different.

"About that, I think tonight it'll be better if I just head home."

"Okay. Why?"

And if he wanted to head home then why hadn't he asked me when we left the mountain? Not that I wanted him to leave. In fact, I wanted to ask him to stay with me forever. Move in. Make my place his. But fear kept me from saying the words.

"You keep asking me to pull my name from the test. Do you really want that? Or is it some kind of control play?"

This again. I should have known he wouldn't let it go so quickly.

"Raju, I've been chasing you for over a year. You didn't see me that first year because you didn't want to. When you turned eighteen and shifted, I saw then we were mates. I didn't want to wait any longer, so I made my intentions known. You rejected me. It's been over a month since then, and I finally got you into my bed."

He crossed his arms over his chest. His tongue darted out and licked his lower lip. A rush of ecstasy hit me. I wanted to nibble on that lip, suck on his

tongue. Once more he denied me. To think I had thought last night was a turning point. For someone so eager, young, he sure made this whole thing difficult.

I shook my head. Maybe if we laid everything out, we could finally move past this. I sat on the seat of my bike.

“To lose you now, even the minimal risk... I’m not happy about letting you put yourself in that position. The night you shifted and I kissed you for the first time, you said a kiss was just a kiss. With you that’s not true. I’m addicted. I can’t get enough. I only wish it was the same for you.”

Hurt clouded his eyes. He shifted back and forth on his feet. A sliver of hope that maybe he felt the same intensity made my heart quicken. I went on.

“What I said this morning remains true. I won’t go back on my word. If you want to compete, I won’t stop you. But I will help with your preparation. I will not watch you fail because you weren’t ready.”

“And if I said I would withdraw, then what?”

“I didn’t think you wanted that.”

“Me neither. But when I woke up with you this morning, something happened. Working out with Prem and Mark wasn’t the same. For the first time, I didn’t feel a burn in my gut to make it to the top of the Leap. I’d look over at you and wish we were back in bed, or running together again.”

He paused, and I kept as still as possible. *Is he really considering not competing?*

“Prem told me to talk to you before I made any decisions. As mates it’s only fair. If I do this it means I take my position in the Leap without earning it.”

His voice wavered on the last few words. I cautiously walked to him. “What’s the real reason you keep pushing all of this about your position, Raj?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” Raju turned away from me, but not before I caught the glint of tears in his eyes. Whatever was going on in his head was a big deal.

“Come on. Let’s run.”

“I’m tired. I’d rather not.”

I grasped his waist and pulled him into me. “Not for training, kitten. I want to run for enjoyment—just you and me, no agendas, just freedom from everything.”

“Sounds perfect. Race ya.”

Raju's face lit up with a smile. The sadness in his eyes morphed into pure joy. My kitten had come out to play. He yanked his shirt over his head and kicked off his shoes, socks, pants. Before I had my shirt over my head, he'd shifted and taken off for the woods behind the house.

I followed his scent and paw prints until they disappeared. His scent grew stronger and I looked to the trees, but he'd managed to hide himself well.

“Where are you, kitten?”

His answer came in the form of a laugh.

“Ahh, we're playing that way, are we? You've learned a lot over the last few weeks. I'm proud of you. But I will find you.”

“Give it your best go.”

I gave control over to my leopard. He didn't waste time searching out his mate. We flew through the underbrush, not slowing until Raju's scent was impossible to miss. I sat back on my haunches, my nose to the air, and inhaled deeply.

“Found you.”

Leaves rustled ahead of me. A flash of white against the trees caught my attention. Raju took off back toward the house, but he had to cross my path to do so. I waited until he was within reach and pounced. We rolled a few times. He tried to pin me, and I let him get close before using all my strength to flip him over onto his back.

His tongue fell out of the side of his mouth in a smile of sorts.

“Gotcha.”

Raju planted his front paws squarely on my chest before shoving me off. He'd caught me and my leopard off guard, and we fell to the side. *“No you didn't. Come on, Sujan. You taught me better than that. You haven't won until you've got your teeth around your opponent's neck. I haven't surrendered yet.”*

“Feisty kitten.” He took off after throwing my own lesson back in my face. I growled and ran after him. I was faster and caught up with him before he had a chance to make it to the trees. Raju had become much more adept at leaping through the branches and limbs above.

There was no messing around the second time I caught him. My leopard wanted to claim him, mark him as ours. And I let him. Raju was on his back in seconds, his throat exposed for me.

"I let you catch me."

"Ahh, kitten, you keep telling yourself that. You're mine, forever."

"Just as you're mine. I think I'm falling in love with you, Sujan."

Thank goodness for that. I was long past gone for Raju. I nipped his nose before letting him up. We lay beneath a tree, and Raju curled against me.

"Talk to me, kitten. Why are you so worried about your place in the Leap?"

He didn't give me anything for the longest time. I searched for some kind of hint, but all I found were images of he and I together. Enough to make me want to shift back to human form and carry him home.

"My dad chose not to complete the endurance run. When I asked him why, the only thing he said was he wasn't prepared. I never found out what that meant. He won't say it, but I've seen his frustration in not being allowed to do more for our people. He told me once he'd always planned on becoming a soldier when he turned eighteen and shifted. I don't want to regret anything, Sujan. I'm eighteen. In our world, that really is a kitten. We've got so long to live... so long to regret."

Raju didn't give himself enough credit. He was wiser than most of the men in our Leap. I couldn't fault his reasoning. In fact, because of that, I felt the need to encourage him to do what he wanted. If that meant I stood by his side while he participated in the run, then that's what I'd do.

"And now? You're not sure. Why?" I asked.

"I told you, this morning something changed. Or maybe last night. I guess it could be part of the mating. I don't know. But when we were out there sparring and climbing, none of it seemed as important as spending time with you, getting to know you. I thought I wanted time to explore, to get to know my leopard self. And I do. With you."

Without thinking, I rested my head on top of his. He pushed back into my side. We were as close as we could be in our leopard forms, yet not close enough.

"Shift back, kitten. I want to take you home."

He didn't reply. Instead, he stood on all fours and moved a few steps away before lying back down and shifting. More than ever, I needed to touch Raju, to feel his warmth against my bare skin. I sensed he needed the connection as well. Whatever crest we'd reached, we had to go over it together if we were going to move forward.

I tucked an arm behind his knees and one at his back and cradled him in my arms. Raju wrapped his arms around my neck and buried his head in my shoulder as we made our way to my apartment.

Chapter Ten

Raju

My time was up. I'd laid it all out for Sujan, and he'd carried me home. The decision had to be made: take a hit to my pride and skip the run, or go through with it anyway. By the time Sujan dropped me onto the futon, my decision was an easy one.

"I'm going to withdraw," I said.

"Are you sure?" Sujan scooted me over and crawled into bed next to me.

"Yeah, I am. I'll help Prem and Mark get ready, but you're who I want. You matter more than a ranking in the Leap."

"You would have done well."

"I don't think so. I think I would have finished near the bottom."

"You're smarter than many of the bigger men. It's not always the biggest, strongest person who can make a difference. That's why Dad has different challenges. I've seen you shift. You're a natural, and you're quick to think of ways to evade potential problems."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Sujan cupped my cheek and pulled me to him. Our mouths met, and he didn't wait for me to invite him in. Sujan took control, his tongue taking over mine without hesitation. He was right; a kiss wasn't just a kiss. This moment would forever be seared into my memories. The best kiss I'd ever received—so much love, from both of us. I wasn't ready to say the words, but I knew he would feel how much he meant to me.

There was more I could do for him. I nudged his shoulder until he lay on his back.

"That's an evil look you've got going on, kitten." He smirked.

"Mm, yeah. Will you let me take care of you, Sujan?"

I didn't wait for him to answer. With one hand on each thigh, I spread his legs and settled between them. His cock jutted up, straining for my touch. My mouth watered for his musky taste, a little salty and a whole lot of man.

I licked my lips then took him deep. Sujan arched off the mattress. His fingers dug into my hair and pulled. Heat pulsed through my dick as it hardened. Neither of us was going to last long, but I needed him to come first. I sucked him deep while I reached between my legs and gripped my shaft, squeezing to hold off for a few more seconds.

As I eased my way up Sujan's cock, I hummed against his silky skin. Sujan groaned and thrust his hips upward, shoving himself down my throat. I let go, gave control to him as he began fucking my mouth. Uncontrollably, I humped the mattress.

I stopped long enough to speak. "Shit. Going to come, Sujan. Don't want to finish before you."

"I'm right there, kitten. Give it to me. Give me what's mine."

"You've got me. All of me." I did as he asked. I let go again. His name rolled off my tongue between heaving breaths. Each jerk of my hips brought another spurt of my juices.

Sujan yanked me to his chest. Our mouths collided in a mash of tongues and teeth. Between our sweaty bodies his seed spilled from his cock. Finally, we both stilled, not worried about cleaning up. I was too exhausted to move, and if Sujan's panting was anything to go by, so was he.

I wasn't sure how much time passed before Sujan broke the silence. "Move in here with me, Raju. I want to wake up with you beside me every morning. I want to fall asleep with your head on my chest every night. I know we've got a long life together, longer than normal because of our leopards, but I don't want to waste a second of it. You said you don't want to regret anything. Neither do I."

There was only a split second of hesitation before I answered, "Yes."

Sujan chuckled.

"What?"

"I had to practically beg you to accept me as your mate. But when I ask you to move in with me in less than a day, you agree without hesitation."

He had a point. I laughed with him. "What can I say? I was an idiot to delay what was meant to be. But, Sujan, I still want to be the one who protects you. I know when you take over the Leap you'll have a second. He won't be me. But that doesn't mean I won't be the one to have your back."

“If you didn’t, I would be disappointed. Our mates are chosen for us by the spirits for a reason. I don’t know what that reason is, and we may never know. But I wouldn’t have it any other way. You’re strong in ways you don’t realize.”

Even though I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that, I didn’t argue. Everyone in the Leap was raised understanding our mates were chosen for us. Whether we ever knew the true reason didn’t matter, just like Sujan said. I smiled. What we had... this was the way things were supposed to be. It was time I stopped fighting and pushed my pride to the side, at least for a little while.

“Who knew a kiss could be so...” I didn’t know how to describe what his kisses or his touch did to me.

“Yeah, I know. You’re amazing.”

“You too. I love you, Sujan.”

“Love you too, kitten.”

The End

Glossary

aamaa – mother

chora – son

mamu – mom

Author Bio

Born and raised in Texas, Jennah is a transplant to Missouri long enough ago she should probably consider that her hometown. But she will forever be a Texan. She loves to write any story that will make a reader smile, laugh, and maybe even cry (although you won't ever hear her admit that she cries). Whether the next story she writes is contemporary, urban fantasy, LGBT, or whatever other crazy idea she comes up with, there will always be love and romance in the midst of trials and turmoil.

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