



## Chapter One

Mersi Kassar sat up straight in the saddle of her *tarnid*, watching the desert caravan moving behind her.

The two large suns were low in the sky, the dying day's sunlight warm on her skin. She silently took a quick inventory. A row of the six-legged *tarnids* walking in single file, and behind them, several other beasts of burden, and then the covered transports. There were a few enthusiastic travelers walking, as well.

She smiled, her gaze turning to the desert dunes beyond. She was a woman of the desert. It was in her blood, her bones, her soul. By the sands, she loved a desert sunset. It was beauty beyond words.

Her *tarnid* snorted, and she reached down and patted the beast's scaled neck. "Easy, Jila."

In three more days they would reach the gladiator city of Kor Magna, the capital of the desert world of Carthago. She hoped the rest of the caravan ran smoothly. She was looking forward to some time off. Even a woman of the desert enjoyed some civilization sometimes. She wanted to go shopping, watch one of the gladiator fights in the arena, and maybe even head to the glitzy casinos for dancing and gambling.

She wouldn't want to live in the city, or stay there too long, but she was a woman who appreciated all the fun things life had to offer.

For the first part of her life, she'd had to suffer through plenty of not-fun stuff—desperate poverty, lack of food, servitude.

Ignoring the clutch in her belly, she tugged on Jila's reins and the beast broke into a trot along the line. She was free and had a life she loved very much, that's what was important.

She called out hellos to the travelers, checking that everyone looked hydrated and well. She nodded at the grizzled caravan guards riding toward the back, their gazes continually scanning the dunes for sand pirates or desert raiders. She continued even farther back, checking on the young workers who were traveling with the food and storage transports. They all nodded and waved.

She nudged Jila, and they trotted back toward the head of the caravan. She loved her job ensuring the Corsair Caravan ran smoothly. She closed in on Corsair's *tarnid* at the very front of the line of travelers. The caravan master was a good friend and an excellent boss. He was a man of the desert, and he'd rescued Mersi from enslavement.

Her gut tightened and old scars throbbed. Years ago, her poor, desert family had sold her to the harem of a desert warlord. Mersi swallowed. Even now, she remembered the terror. The man had been old, rich, and ruthless. She'd escaped before he'd touched her, and she'd taken her chances with the desert.

She'd been sixteen at the time. Corsair, and his right-hand man, Bren, had rescued her. They'd found her stumbling through the dunes—dehydrated, sunburned, and almost dead.

The men had saved more than just her life. They'd saved her soul and given her a home.

She smiled. That had been over ten years ago. And in that time, she'd become Corsair's left hand.

She moved closer to her friend's beast and saw that Corsair had a woman in his lap. The caravan master was kissing her.

Neve Haynes, a rescued woman from Earth, wasn't trying very hard to get away from Corsair. The kiss was wild and passionate. Mersi smiled, but along with the joy and amusement, she also felt a gut-deep ache.

Corsair was so in love with his Earth woman. The woman had endured a horrible abduction by alien slavers and fought for her freedom. She'd ended up colliding with Corsair in the process.

A part of Mersi was awfully...envious of them. She wanted passion. She craved it. She'd had lovers—but she still didn't know what all the fuss was about. Sex was...pleasant. It hadn't been until she'd seen the steam generated between Corsair and Neve that she knew differently. Sometimes the pair just had to share one sizzling look and Mersi felt the heat. And she knew it was more than just attraction, that the couple connected in some soul-deep way.

Deciding not to interrupt the pair, Mersi turned her *tarnid* away.

She tried hard not to think of the man whose arms she really wanted around her. Big, brawny arms. A strong, silent man of the desert, who had a head as hard as *obdura*. Compared to Bren's skull, the desert rock was as soft as a sponge.

Mersi lifted her gaze, scanning the caravan, and spotted Bren instantly.

He was riding on a *tarnid* with scales of the deepest black, a little separated from the main group. He had his usual crossbow attached to his back, and he wore typical, beige-colored desert clothes, although his shirt and trousers were edged with dark leather from a desert night beast.

He'd caught the beast himself, and she knew that because she'd watched him do it. Bren was an excellent hunter and provided most of the fresh game for the caravan.

It was just a shame such a skilled hunter hadn't followed the trail of clues she'd left him leading to *her*.

"All right, time to make camp," Corsair called from the front of the caravan.

Cheers went up and that meant Mersi had work to do. As the caravan slowed, the caravan workers moved the transports to form a protective circle. The tents would be set up inside. Mersi slid off Jila and got busy.

"Hani, can you get those dining tables set up, please?"

The worker nodded. "Sure thing, Mersi."

"What's the status on those tents that needed mending, Senia?"

The tall, green-skinned woman smiled. "All done."

A crowd of kids raced past Mersi and she emptied her pockets of sweets for them. She quickly passed through the kitchen area, checking the bustle as the cooks and their helpers started fires and pulled out large pots. She nodded. Everything was under control.

"Mersi."

She spun to see a weathered man standing nearby, clutching his hat. "Yes, Nader? Problem?"

He nodded his head. "Engine on one of the storage transports is making a strange noise."

She smiled. "I'll take a look."

"Already grabbed your toolkit."

She smiled and followed him to the transport. It was a large flat vehicle that could carry heavy loads and had a simple engine. The desert sand was not compatible with advanced technology. That's why caravans like theirs were in high demand by travelers.

She opened the engine compartment and mentally cursed. There was grease everywhere. She checked the parts and spotted the problem. A grease line had burst.

Fishing around in her toolbox, she nabbed the repair kit. She was good with gadgets. She was pretty good at a lot of things—sewing, cooking, fighting, fixing. Out in the desert, it was rare to find help when you needed it, so it made sense to gain as many skills as you could.

“Mersi.”

The deep voice rumbled through her. She tipped her head back and saw Bren—tall, big, and gruff. He had a rugged face that looked hewn from stone, a strong jaw, and eyes of deep, soulful brown. Corsair’s desert shrike bird of prey, Rogue, rested on one broad shoulder.

“Hey,” she said.

“I’m heading out to hunt. Kitchen said they were a little low on meat.”

She smiled and stood. “Then I know you’ll bring us back something scrumptious to cook.”

He reached out, brushing her cheek with his thumb. Mersi froze and she felt the tension arc between them. She barely suppressed a shiver. By the sands, she felt that small touch right through her body.

“Grease.”

She blinked. “What?”

He stepped back. “You had grease on your cheek.”

*Great.* That was a sexy look. “Thanks.”

“I’ll look for some *quolbies* too. Saw some of their tracks earlier.”

Her favorite meat to eat. She gripped his hard bicep and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “You’re my hero, Bren Hahn.” She felt the hard muscle under her fingers and desire curled in her belly. “You know how to spoil a girl.”

He went as stiff as a board, then he reached over his shoulder and pulled his crossbow off his back. Rogue shifted, ruffling his feathers. Bren's face was impassive, showing no reaction to her standing so close to him.

That lack of reaction was a slash to her heart.

"You deserve more than *quolbie*." He turned and stomped away.

She watched Bren's heavy tread. He was far too big to move lightly—not that he was awkward. She knew he could move very quickly when he needed to.

She knew so many little things about Bren. She'd been in love with the big lug long enough.

Her gaze drifted down Bren's form—over the broad back and muscular legs—and the air whistled through her teeth. She was in love with him, but he didn't return the sentiment. She sucked in a shaky breath.

Oh, he cared for her, sure, but he just wouldn't let her get any closer. She knew he'd lost his family, although he rarely talked about his past. He was shut up tight, like a locked box.

And she desperately wanted him to give her the key.

She remembered the moment she'd first seen him, when he and Corsair had saved her in the desert. He'd held her in his arms—a terrified girl on the cusp of womanhood—and she'd felt safe for the first time in her life. He'd been in his early twenties then, but even then, his dark eyes looked like they'd seen everything. He'd been stoic and rock steady. Everything she'd never had in her life.

Corsair was charm and laughter, and she loved him like a brother. Bren was strength and safety.

And the man she wanted so much it hurt.

A man she knew was hiding something from her and who refused to let her in.

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Bren Hahn crouched on the sand, staring into the growing darkness. He could no longer see the trail he was following but he sensed his prey close by. He had very good night vision and hearing, as well as the ability to detect slight vibrations.

Like the racing heartbeat of the small, cat-like *quolbie* ahead.

Overhead, Rogue gave a sharp cry.

The bird had seen it too.

Bren peered into the shadows and saw movement. *I know you're there*. Something else inside Bren sensed prey too, the darkness in him sharpening with anticipation. He lifted his crossbow, pulled in a steady breath, and pushed that hungry blackness down. He fired.

He rose smoothly and spotted the *quolbie* lying on the sand. He picked it up, offering a quick thanks to the spirits of the deserts, and added the animal to the other *quolbie*, the *manis*, and the larger *dharial* slung over his back.

Swiveling, he headed back in the direction of the caravan. Best to head back now before the desert night beasts decided he wasn't so scary and tried to take a bite out of him. He whistled for Rogue and a moment later, the shrike flew in and landed on his shoulder.

Bren enjoyed the cool night air and the quiet, soaking it in. Soon, he saw the glow of the caravan ahead. As he got closer, he scanned the line of transports set up in a defensive circle, looking for any weak spots. Bren spotted the first sentry and lifted a hand. The man returned the gesture. The *tarnids* snorted from their temporary pen as he passed.

As he slipped through the entrance and into the camp, he heard laughter and chatter. He scowled. The guests were enjoying themselves—eating, drinking, talking. Bren wasn't a huge



fan of talking. Usually, he found people talked about unimportant things and wasted his time.

Actually, he wasn't a huge fan of people in general.

He stopped at the food tent and dropped the game on the table.

"Bren!" The head cook bustled over. The rotund man exclaimed in delight. "Thank you. You always bring us the best."

Bren nodded and then headed back to his tent. After he'd washed up and changed, he steeled himself and headed toward the campfire. If he tried to hide out in his tent, Mersi would find him and drag him out.

He took in the travelers seated on chairs and blankets. Most looked weary from weeks of travel, but there was a fresh air of excitement tonight. Everyone knew they were getting close to the end of the journey. He saw a huge, bald-headed man throw his head back and laugh, slapping a hand against his knee. The man was a retired gladiator heading home to Kor Magna. Beside him was a slim woman with pale skin that shone like glittering jewels. She wore a wisp of pink fabric, and had a set of slender horns twisting out of her white hair. There were varied species sitting around the fire, all brought together by their adventure through the desert.

Bren spotted Corsair. The man was hard to miss. Tall, powerfully built, with shaggy brown hair threaded with gold. He also had golden eyes and a face that the ladies seemed to love. Not that Corsair worked his charm on the ladies anymore. As Bren watched, the caravan master wrapped an arm around the lean, dark-haired woman at his side. He yanked her in for a kiss that was long, wet, and deep.

Bren's best friend was now besotted by a woman from the distant planet of Earth. Bren had to admit, Neve Haynes suited Corsair perfectly. She wasn't a woman of the desert, but she was a warrior at heart and kept Corsair on his toes.

But as Corsair cupped his woman's cheek, his face softened. There wasn't just passion and challenge between them, there was also love.

Deep-throated, feminine laughter reached Bren's ears. The most beautiful sound in the world.

He swung his gaze and saw Mersi laughing with some guests. Her gentle curves were outlined by her simple trousers and fitted shirt. Tonight, she'd slung a strand of chunky blue stones around her neck. The pale blue-green matched her eyes. She had a pretty face and long black hair she usually kept pulled back in a long tail that he knew almost brushed the top of her pert ass.

A handsome man grabbed her hand, telling her something. She kept smiling but shook her head.

Bren gritted his teeth, his jaw creaking. If the sand sucker didn't let her go—

Mersi pulled her hand free and walked away with a cheery wave. As she passed two desert kids—Danan and his sister Aura, who they'd rescued recently—she ruffled their hair.

Need was a sharp gnaw in Bren's gut. Mersi was...light, and laughter, and goodness.

Too many nights, he could only get to sleep by taking his cock in hand and stroking himself while he thought of Mersi—her smile, what he imagined she tasted like, what color her nipples might be, what sounds she made when she found her pleasure.

His cock hardened and he swallowed a groan.

"Bren."

*Drak.* Corsair appeared at his shoulder.

"Evening." Bren thought his voice sounded mostly normal.

His friend followed Bren's gaze. "She deserves love, my friend."

Bren stayed silent.

“She deserves a man who worships her.” Corsair stepped in front of him, his gold eyes gleaming in the firelight. “Someone to hold her, support her, warm her on a cold night.”

Corsair’s voice lowered. “You already love her. Share it with her.”

“She deserves the world,” Bren murmured.

“She wants you.”

Bren watched her smile at an old couple sitting quietly by the fire. Mersi deserved better than him.

“She deserves so much more.” Corsair made a frustrated sound, but Bren looked at his friend. This man was the only one who knew the rot in Bren’s soul. “She deserves better than me.”

Corsair muttered a curse. “You’re one of the best men I know, Bren. Solid as bedrock, dependable as a sunrise, and loyal to the ends of the dunes.”

Bren stared at the fire.

“You’re also as stubborn as—” Corsair shook his head “—I’ve run out of good descriptions. I’ll leave you to brood.”

As his friend strode away, Bren saw some travelers had pulled out instruments and started plucking at the strings. As the low, sultry music played, a few people got up to dance. One woman pulled Mersi in for a dance and she whirled in a circle. She threw her head back and laughed.

The sound moved through him. He loved her laugh. Mersi colored his world and was the heartbeat of his life. He’d protect her from all the dangers of the desert—including himself.

Suddenly, aquamarine eyes met his across the fire. She said something to her dance partner and made her way across to Bren.

“Hey, I saw your haul. Nice work.” She smiled. “And I saw the *quolbie*. Thanks.”

He nodded.

She grabbed his hand. "Come and dance."

He locked down his body's response and tugged his hand away. "I don't dance, you know that."

She gave him a sad smile. "I keep hoping you'll change your mind."

"I never will, Mersi." He turned and walked away.