

KUTARIAN WARRIORS

Christmas
WITH AN
**ALIEN
SAVAGE**

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CHRISTMAS WITH AN ALIEN SAVAGE

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Christmas with an Alien Savage
Kutarian Warriors Book 4
by Alexa Grant & Ivy McAdams

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CHAPTER ONE

GEMMA

I WONDER IF I COULD TEACH SOME OF THESE HUGE SILVER WARRIORS TO LINE up alongside that big bonfire and slam into each other over a football?

The air outside is crisp. Leaves have changed to many vibrant colors. We're just missing the shrill sound of a whistle and the thunder of bodies colliding. It would top off the season for me.

Given there are no longer any humans on planet Xion V, however, I imagine orchestrating a ball game would be an insane undertaking.

"I wasn't ever into football," Trinity says from across a small fire in the village's central square. "I couldn't follow the game. Though I did go to a few every year back on campus. You can't beat the view."

Eva's ears tilt curiously. "A bunch of pretty-colored jerseys on a green field?"

Trinity snorts. "Uh, no. The men in tight pants. They even stand on the line and put it all on display for you."

I chuckle and pull in a long breath of fresh night air tinged with the smell of burning wood, roasted meat, and vegetables. "I watched every Cowboys game last year because I knew once we got into space, it was going to be years before we could watch regular tv again."

It's hard to believe that it's only been a few months since we first set foot on Xion V, considering how much has happened since then. I guess getting attacked by monstrous aliens, rescued by the native humanoids, *becoming*

one of the locals, and marrying into their way of life can do that to a girl.

“I do miss reality tv sometimes,” Trinity says.

Eva pops the last veggie on her plate into her mouth. “I feel like we’re *living* the best reality tv sometimes.”

“Like Survivor in Space?” I laugh.

“Something like that,” Eva snickers. Her eyes light up when another woman joins our circle. Eva reaches toward her. “Gimmie!”

Waella, one of the original Kutarian women, steps around a log toward the warm fire with a plateful of food in one hand and a month-old infant in the other. Eva is eager to take the baby off her hands, and Waella doesn’t fight her. She hands the sweet little boy over and settles down on a log next to Kaami, our other true Kutarian friend.

The five of us and one elder are the only women in the Kutarian tribe now. A brutal attack from the monstrous stagni creatures left their numbers crippled years ago. Luckily for them, their Shaman’s experimental ability to move our beings from our weak human bodies into strong Kutarian ones that could breathe the air and survive here saved not only our lives but also the future of their tribe.

It was a risky move, but they lucked out. Some of their warriors are irresistible, and it wasn’t long before we’d fallen for them.

“Look at you, cutie,” Eva coos, cuddling the baby in her arms.

Little Namami is growing into a big boy already, but his tiny face is still to die for. Eva tickles her nose against his, and his tiny feet kick in his blanket. If it wasn’t so cool out tonight, he’d be wearing nothing but a hide diaper, and I know that little tail would be wiggling all over the place.

Warmth spreads through my chest, and I rest a hand against the large swell of my silver belly. If I wait for a moment, my baby will squirm and kick. Watching Namami is enough to set off my emotions. Just like any time I think about holding my baby for the first time, teaching him or her to ride a levadon, seeing Kovak’s eyes stare up at me from that sweet little face.

A powerful kick against my palm makes me smile. If the estimates Waella gave me are correct, my baby will be here in the next couple of weeks. I’ve never experienced anything so exciting and terrifying all at the same time. I don’t know the first thing about being a mother. Or children. And I have the added complexity of being here, no longer a human and not on Earth. I’ll be raising a Kutarian baby after only three months of being a Kutarian myself.

My crash course is creeping up quicker than I can keep up.

“How are you feeling?” I ask Waella.

Like a hungry animal that's been interrupted, she looks up from her plate of food. I half expect her black mane to bristle and for her to growl at me, but she just smiles. The skin surrounding her golden eyes is puffy, and her body sags with exhaustion I've always heard is normal for new mothers, but she also looks happy.

“Now that I have two hands, I'm great,” she says.

Eva continues snuggling the baby as if she didn't hear the comment. She's a good babysitter, whether she realizes it or not. She'll make an excellent mother in another four or five weeks when her baby arrives, too.

Who would have thought the three of us would end up on a strange planet together, living as nine-foot-tall silver aliens with hot husbands and new babies on the way? Only a lunatic.... But I'm so grateful.

“Just one extra hand back is all it takes?” Trinity asks Waella. “It sounds like you've got things pretty under control.”

“Everything is fine,” Waella says. “Namami is my fourth boy. Not much has changed.”

I stare at her in wonder. This baby may be her fourth boy, but he's her sixth child. I'm blown away by those numbers. Of course, she's ten years older than me, but still...that's an entire flock of kids.

“You're a machine.” Trinity's eyes sparkle. “I don't know how you do it.”

Waella smiles. “Because I must.”

Trinity's brows jump up her forehead. For a moment, it looks like she wants to say something, but then she nods and turns to watch Eva with the baby.

I reach over to pat Waella's hand. “That's impressive. You must be a wonderful mom.”

“She's a great mom,” Kaami says. “Her children are growing to become helpful additions to the tribe.”

Waella beams at Kaami.

There are a few groups of children left over after the stagni attack years ago, most of them being cared for by older siblings or remaining fathers. The third adult Kutarian female, Maev, is much older than us—on Earth she'd be enjoying a good book in Florida—and keeps to herself. Of course, she had all boys, so Waella's daughters will be the next in line to make families.

Namami is the first child born in the last few years, but soon there will be a whole new wave of babies. The villagers are all overjoyed.

Especially our men, who are striding into the village center now.

Everything inside me warms when my eyes meet Kovak's. My giant, Kutarian husband, whose green eyes glint like emeralds. His large, muscled chest glistens with silver. He wears only a long loincloth, and I can't complain about how much of his hips and strong thighs I can see. The sight of him still takes my breath away.

He's flanked by Drek, his second-in-command, and High Warrior Xjhun. They've returned from an evening scouting run just before the end of dinner.

The men are usually busy during morning and evening meals, and the Kutarian women gather in one corner of the central square. Our claimed spot. Back on Earth, we'd be a regular bunch of *Sex and the City* gals. Only the next generation where we're all popping out kids.

I smile when Kovak steps up behind the log I sit on and rests his hands on my shoulders, fingers massaging the muscles along my neck. I don't get tense from stress like I did back when I was a human, but his fingers working into my muscles still feel phenomenal. Especially over the last few days when sleeping, sitting, or just existing with this giant pregnant belly is uncomfortable and causes some kinks in my body.

He leans over my shoulder and brushes his nose along the ridge of my ear. "Good evening, my love," he whispers. "Have you left any food for me?"

I cough out a laugh and swat at his arm. "Are you saying I can eat an entire starward by myself?"

He chuckles, a warm breath against my ear. "Of course not. You're much too petite for that."

He's lucky I love him so much, or I'd have to bash him over the head with the platter balanced on my lap. The one I've already filled and emptied twice.

I put my hand over his on my shoulder and give it a squeeze. "Go grab food before it's gone."

"Or before Gemma eats anymore of it," Eva snickers before blowing me a kiss.

I can't hold back the smile, but I give her a warning nod all the same. "You best watch out, or I'll eat your food next time."

Kovak pats my shoulder and departs. He and his men take a quick detour to the food table.

Trinity shivers and holds her hands nearer to the fire. “Ugh, I’m cold.”

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Eva has gone back to staring at the baby cradled in her arms.

“Being cold?” Trinity scoffs. “It’s the worst part of summer going away.”

“But harvest season is the best time of the year.”

“Earth to Farmer Jane, you’ve lost your mind.”

“That saying doesn’t really work anymore, you know. Why would Earth be talking to me?”

Trinity’s face scrunches in frustration. “What’s good about harvest season? It’s not like we’re going to have corn mazes or Halloween around here.”

“Wouldn’t that be fun, though?”

“I’m going to miss scarecrows and pumpkins,” I say. “Not to mention Thanksgiving and everything about Christmas.”

Both Trinity’s and Eva’s ears lower.

“Oh, no Christmas,” Trinity pouts.

Eva cuddles little Namami closer. “That’s going to be a tough adjustment.”

“These guys like to celebrate things, though,” I say. We’ve had five celebratory feasts since we arrived, from welcoming us to the village to mating and pregnancy announcements and Namami’s birth observance. “At this rate, we won’t have energy left by Christmas time.”

The others nod, but a tinge of sadness still lingers in my throat.

It’s one thing to leave behind all our Earthly possessions and human relationships, but our culture and traditions, too?

To be fair, Kovak has been more than accommodating with the *odd human things*, as he calls them. Such as frequent bathing—somehow, he doesn’t stink like sweaty human men do, so he doesn’t understand the need. Or brushing teeth—I’m not sure if it’s a hygienic adaptation or something these guys eat, but their teeth and breath stay remarkably fresh. *Lucky me*. I loathe going to the dentist. But the other women and I still enjoy using the minty blue scrape sticks to brush our teeth in the morning. It makes them feel slicker and cleaner against my tongue.

But what about big things like holidays?

We sure can’t Trick-or-Treat for Halloween. There aren’t doorbells to ring or candy to hand out. I’ve been living in a different body than I grew up in for the last three months, so wearing a costume seems a little silly at this

point.

Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays, but it wouldn't be an easy one to recreate here on Xion V. Unless the Kutarians want to celebrate the day we arrived and underwent their swap experiment...

Reel it in a bit, Gemma. You're not sliced bread.

Christmas is about the spirit, though. Isn't that what all the seasonal specials said? We don't need lit-up trees or fancy gifts, colorful cookies or entire weekends devoted to running up credit card bills at the mall to make the holiday special. We just need to be surrounded by the ones we love and celebrate that beautiful feeling of peace and giving.

Although, when I think about Christmases as a child, it was about some fancy bits and bobs. Like decorations and presents. It was about driving around the neighborhoods at night to find the houses decorated with lights. Some would have a string of white icicles hanging on the front porch eaves, while others were decked out with eight tiny reindeer pulling a sleigh of red sparkling lights on the lawn, every nearby tree and bush wrapped in a sea of colored bulbs. It was drinking hot chocolate and decorating a tree in the living room while Christmas classic movies played on the television.

It's hard to give up everything. But once I fully learn the Kutarian traditions, I'm sure that will help heal the hole of losing Christmas. Teaching my child new holidays and the ways of the Kutarians.

If only we had some sort of calendar so I knew what to look forward to next.

"It would be fun, though," Trinity agrees.

I nod, and my Christmas memories vanish as the men return with their platters of food. Kovak sits next to me, his large body putting off a heat that used to draw me in. Now, I'm so hot I leave a small gap between us so I don't sweat.

Trinity and Eva both sit close to Xjhun and Drek, and a small prick of envy hits me.

"What would be fun?" Kovak asks.

"An old tradition we do on Earth," I say.

Trinity rubs her hands together. "Lots of parties."

"And other things," Eva says.

"I'd like to hear about it sometime." The crinkle in the corner of Kovak's eyes is genuine when he smiles at me, and my bones feel like putty.

He's so good to me.

I'm so busy gazing at him I jump when he puts a hand on my thigh and leans closer. "Did you enjoy dinner?"

"Yes."

His nose nuzzles in closer to my ear. "Good. Leave any room for me in there?"

And just like that, my entire body is awake. No matter how overflowing I feel with a full stomach and a nearly full-term baby sitting on me like a kangaroo joey. I twist on the log to look up at him, and he rests his forehead on mine. I know that hunger in his eyes, and it eats me up inside. Sets me aflame.

My hand is quick to touch his chest, slide up his neck, and bury into the dark hair behind his ear. "There's always room for you."

The eager rumble in his chest is so satisfying it's like he's pressed that vibration right up against me.

"Good," he says. "Let me take you home."

CHAPTER TWO

GEMMA

KOVAK LEADS ME INTO OUR ONE-ROOM HUT, AND ONCE THE FLAP ON THE door is closed, he wraps me in his arms. His forehead touches mine, and I breathe in his fantastic scent. Greens, leathers, maybe a bit of levadon. That part is still so wild—my husband smells like dinosaurs. It’s even crazier still that I love it all so much. Every piece that makes him unique.

He backs toward the bed, coaxing me along with him. When the edge touches the back of his legs, he sits and moves his large hands to my belly.

In the human world, I would have picked out cute maternity shirts and dresses. As a Kutarian, I’ve gone with Waella’s example and have continued to wear my normal clothes. A skirt and a leather top that reminds me of a bikini with tassels I had my senior year of high school. Plenty of space for that belly to grow and display without a stitch of cover. Thankfully, the silver swell is cute.

Kovak presses his hands against my skin with a bit more pressure, and I know he’s hoping for a kick.

His voice is quiet in the dim light of the tent. “Pregnancy suits you.”

I choke on a good-natured laugh. “Being as big as a house suits me?”

One of his hands slides up my body to the back of my neck as he stands up against me again. He holds me close enough that his soft breath touches my face. “Being full of life suits you. You are so giving and brave.”

I have only a second to smile before his lips touch mine. He kisses me

gently at first, then deeper. Hungrier. These days, I never miss a beat for some love. My body craves it. Far more than any certain food I've wanted since this started.

I want *him*.

His passionate energy wraps itself around me as he folds me against him. His hands grip my waist, then slide up my back before slipping beneath the strap of my top, fingers pressing into the muscles around my shoulder blades. All those places that are difficult to reach and feel phenomenal when he touches them.

Only these aren't simple touches. His fingers are like hooks, snagging their prey and drawing it closer. And I'm here for it. It's easy to let my body go loose when he's holding it.

"You are a beautiful woman carrying my child," he continues. "Here in my hut. In my life."

As soon as he lets go of my mouth, his lips are on the move. He presses fervent kisses to my jaw and throat. The pulse in my neck thrums even harder against his lips. That spot that used to be erotically ticklish is now more sensitive than ever. Everything is more exciting now with the hormones raging.

His tongue touches my neck and everything below tightens up, stands at attention and begs for his next move. A strong breeze could send me over the edge right now.

His mouth moves down to my shoulder, kissing along more sensitive skin. He whispers across my collarbone, "I thank the gods every day for you."

His energy swells with his words, and I'm overflowing with love and a need so big it feels as if it may take over and consume me if he doesn't cure it. This man has always captivated me, but these last few weeks of pregnancy have made it even more intense. My appetite has ramped up, especially after a brief spell of feeling too miserable to do anything physical.

Now, I want his hands all over me. His body as close as we can push it, weighing on me, filling me.

I need him.

As he drags his hot tongue up my sternum, I pant out a breath and grab his arms.

If he doesn't touch more of me now, I may turn into a mewling wreck. Nobody likes a beggar.

I find his hands and guide them to my breasts. He doesn't need further encouragement, and those big palms cover me completely, kneading the enlarged globes. Not only are they bigger than normal, but the moment he touches them, I'm also shocked by the rewarding electricity that rushes through me. I gasp and press into his hands.

"You're a hungry girl tonight, aren't you?" he rumbles as he kisses his way up my throat to just beneath my ear.

"I am," I murmur breathlessly.

His nose moves into the hair at the nape of my neck, and he takes a deep breath. "Good. I'm starving."

His hands drop to the tie of my skirt at my hips and he pulls it loose. It's a little harder to slip free than normal—I think my hips must be wider—but he handles it with urgent fingers, and the skirt drops to the bed. A flash of nerves runs through me, wondering if my body is unattractive now, but it's a short-lived worry. No matter what shape I'm in, my body demands his attention. Begs for more.

And he doesn't seem to have a sliver of hesitation as those clouded green eyes rake up and down my form. Then his hands find mine, and he entwines our fingers as we back up toward the bed.

He lays me down on the soft fur blanket and climbs in next to me. While he covers me in kisses once more, one of his hands slides down my side and around my swollen belly. His fingers graze my hip and press in harder over my pelvis beneath my belly. It may only take a second's time, but to me, it's all a drawn-out tease. A journey to the end. To the most unbelievably sensitive part of me. I squirm as the heel of his hand bears down against the flesh stretched beneath my hip bones. The mound nearing the junction between my legs.

How can there be so much real estate between my belly button and the good stuff?

In the last pulsebeat, I can't stand it anymore and lift my hips toward him. His fingertips slide through my folds and touch so many pressure points at once that I cry out and shiver against him.

He groans. "You're on fire."

It's impossible to keep my hips still with his hand lodged there. "I know."

While his fingers tease me and his thumb finds and works the most sensitive spot, he kisses me with enough force to steal my breath away. His lips are feverish on mine, and it makes my head spin.

I love that my arousal turns him on.

My hands move over his chest and the hard biceps of his arms. It's difficult for me to reach most of him now, but I manage to pull my leg up over his hip to give him full access to me.

My energy buzzes when he loosens the laces on his loincloth. Even with his strong, electrifying fingers between my legs, I can't stand another moment of waiting.

"Kovak," I whimper. It's not quite a moan, not quite a whisper.

I've succumbed to begging.

"Mm," he hums against my lips. "Yes."

He knows my needs. He's hurrying. I feel his energy swallowing us whole. He wants me more than he can stand, too.

He rips the loincloth free, and I tilt my hips higher. The throbbing sensation between my legs is enough to drive me wild. I press up into him, begging for it.

Only it's not the tip of his erection that enters me.

It's his fingers.

It still feels great—I tilt up for that wave of arousal too—but it's not the filling stretch I want. Not the heavy, sinking-in sensation where he touches my soul that I need.

I pant out a breath, though, because my body still wants him. Any part of him. I'll take it. Maybe we're just getting started.

But I know we're not.

It's been like this for weeks. I just always hope I can seduce my husband enough to do me properly.

His fingers slide in deep, and I do my best not to think about how much I want more of him. How his fingers do the job just fine in a pinch. If only we hadn't been in pinch mode for over a month now.

He's still unbelievably sexy. His fingers are long and strong. They're definitely hitting me in all the best spots, and it only takes moments for the sensitive tinglings to go full-force.

I focus on how much I love him and how good his energies feel, waves of adoration and devotion washing over me. He's happy, feeling great, and when he shifts next to me and his breath catches, I know what else he's doing.

Even as my back arches against the fantastic build of pressure in my abdomen, I twist to peek down between our bodies. What I find leaves me in

a slurry of emotions.

His hand moving on that rock-hard staff is sexy as sin. Enough to send another little zing through my lady parts.

But him doing that instead of me is cramping my urges.

As long as I can kick this craving for now, I can at least sleep.

I lean back into the fur blanket and close my eyes. Despite any other feelings I have, his fingers are wicked, and in only another moment more, my muscles tighten like a bowstring. I arch my back and rub against his hand, chasing that explosion of amazing. When I catch it, I cry out, grinding my frustration against his fingers until my entire body is weeping.

His body tightens and hardens next to me. My name is on his lips and there's no way I can stay frustrated with him. Not when his energies tell all his truths, swirling with love and the utmost attraction. Not when they collide and flow with my own, singing in perfect harmony.

He groans and holds me against his chest. Everything about him smells so good, and even though I'm ready to keep going, I can also be content leaning into him and letting him shelter me with his body until I fall asleep.

He whispers his love into my hair, and I know I'm the luckiest bitch in the land.

Even if I am a needy one.

CHAPTER THREE

GEMMA

I AWAKE TO SOMETHING TOUCHING MY ARM. AT FIRST, IT'S TOO DARK TO SEE and I jump, but the warm fingers on my skin are comforting and Kovak's dark silhouette stands over me.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he says. "I want to show you something."

A quick glance around the tent lets my eyes adjust. The first slivers of dawn creep down from the skylight above the fire and around the edges of the door flap. It's early. Even as the seasons change, I know the sun is quite the early riser on Xion V.

"What is it?" I whisper as I ease to the edge of the bed.

Well, ease is what I was going for, only I do it with as much grace as a beached whale. I roll from one side to the other, trying to grab for anything I can use as an anchor.

Thankfully, Kovak's hand is waiting for me.

"I think you will love this," he says, pulling me to my feet.

He leads me to the door flap and pushes it aside. It's morning out there but darker than I expected—what the hell time is it? He knows it's hard for me to sleep. Is this necessary?

The pathway torches outside are still lit, and an unusual amount of moths flutter through the orange light. I draw back behind the flap with a grimace—I don't know if Kovak and I have discussed this outright, but I'm not a fan of bugs.

His hand presses against the small of my back, keeping me close. “It won’t hurt you.”

Easy for him to say. He’s used to the flying creepy crawlies around here—but, wait. They aren’t moths at all. They’re not even alive. I blink the tired blur from my eyes and look again.

The soft white forms aren’t fluttering around the firelight. They’re falling, almost floating down to the ground. Collecting in tiny crystalline shapes.

I gasp, the sight surprising me even more than the early morning chill in the air.

“Snow,” I whisper.

Kovak’s excited smile fades, and his eyebrows lift high. “You know snow?”

“Of course. We have snow on Earth.”

I step outside and spread my arms out to catch as many of the falling snowflakes as I can on my skin. Unlike Xion V’s odd bubble rain, its snow looks like ours back home each winter. Snow wasn’t a guarantee every year in South Carolina, but that’s what made it special. Days we could go play in our waterproof clothes and boots. My neighbor and I would make snow angels and sculptures in our front yards. Sometimes we’d jump into the snowball war with the boys across the street.

“It’s a magical time,” Kovak says.

I spin, doing my best Julie Andrews impression as I catch snowflakes on my tongue. “It’s an important part of the year for us too. What do you do here in the Cold Season? Is there a holiday?”

He leans against the hut structure, large muscled arms crossed over his chest and an adorably lopsided grin on his face. I love when he looks at me like that. Like he could stand there watching for hours. I feel seen. And loved. I stop mid-twirl to smile back.

“What is a holiday?” he asks.

I chuckle and walk back to him, hands reaching. “Oh, right. I guess you wouldn’t use that word here. There’s nothing to escape from.”

He takes my hands and brings them to his lips. “Did you have dangers to escape before? You haven’t mentioned —”

“No. Nothing like that.” I squeeze his hands reassuringly. “We had stressful lives. Jobs, school, debt, shitty relationships. Sometimes we needed a break from those things.”

I’m skilled enough at reading Kutarian eye and ear movements now to

know he doesn't understand half the things I listed, but he nods anyway. "A holiday will help?"

I cough out a laugh. "It's supposed to, but truthfully, some holidays are just as stressful as the rest of life."

"That doesn't seem productive."

"It's not."

He kisses my knuckles, giving me that look he has when he's thinking about those *odd human things*.

My cheeks warm, and I shake my head. "Some holidays are wonderful, though. They're for celebrations. Special times of the year."

His smile grows, much more genuine than before. "That's more like it. Celebrations are always good things. Especially now."

That's what I was hoping to hear. I grin. "Now...that the Cold Season is here?"

He leans forward and rests his nose on mine. "Now that you are here, and our child soon will be too. He'll have his own celebration."

Ah, yes. Not quite what I was hoping to hear, but he's right. We'll be celebrating a new bundle soon.

"Of course." I glance back up at the falling snow.

A tinge more light blooms across the sky, and flakes are falling faster. Each time one lands on my pointed ears, they twitch. Like a tiny muscle spasm. I barely feel it, but it still amuses me.

"In the snowy season back on Earth," I say, "we have a huge celebration. It lasts for weeks."

"That's quite a party. What's it for?"

"Many things. Different, er, tribes of humans celebrate it in different ways. For different reasons."

"Why did *you* celebrate it?"

I stare at him, considering the big question. Early morning chats on Xion V apparently include getting out of bed before the sun and discussing the deep philosophical and spiritual parts of your life.

I need coffee.

Or at least some hot chocolate. The childish part of me who's stoked to see snow this morning agrees. Steaming hot chocolate in a cute Christmas mug and topped with tiny marshmallows would be perfect right now.

"I suppose my reason is mostly just tradition," I say. "I never asked either of my parents why we celebrated Christmas. Or why they celebrated."

Neither of them were spiritual as far as I know, though I never stopped to ask them that either. As I get closer to becoming a parent myself, I realize how much I never took the time to talk to my family about important things in life. “They celebrated when they were children, so they kept the traditions going.”

“What do you do for this Christmas holiday?”

I lean into him to escape the biting edge of the chill in the air—or as much as I can with this giant belly in the way—and he wraps his arm around me.

“It’s a lot, actually. Are you ready?”

That cute crooked grin of his is back, and my tummy flip flops. “I have all the time in the world.”

So I do my best to explain Christmas.

That it comes from a beautiful old story of a miracle in a barn—I leave out as many details as possible, as even attempting to touch on an entire religion to a man from another planet sounds exhausting. Too much for this pregnant lady right now, at least. Instead, we talk about how the season is about peace and giving. That it alone caused momentary truces in war and led thousands to give to those less fortunate. That many families celebrate by spending time together, giving gifts, and eating good food. The decorations, the songs, the television specials. Santa Claus and his merry crew.

Once I’ve started, it’s hard to stop. I can’t believe how much pours from me. By the time I stop to read Kovak’s expression, I’ve been out of his arms and moving back and forth, describing everything with animated hands and a few excited flicks of my tail.

He’s gazing at me in wonder when I slow down. “Are you sure dinosaurs were your specialty before coming here? I’ve never seen you sparkle like a star quite like you do when you discuss Christmas.”

“I may have been one of those horrible people that put my tree up before Thanksgiving.”

“Horrible, you?”

I laugh. “Well, I don’t think so. It’s nothing, really. Just a silly joke back on Earth. It just means that, yes, I do love Christmas. And I would love to share it with you and our baby.”

Kovak’s ears and eyes convey his happiness as he approaches me. Even with how much my blood is pumping following my passionate description of the holiday, the warmth leaching off his body beckons me closer. I reach around his hip, eager to touch his skin. It sears my fingertips in the most

comforting way.

“We should celebrate Christmas here,” he says. “You have an enormous family to share merry with now.”

His wording tickles me. “Share *joy* and *be* merry. But you’re right. I wish I could decorate the entire village.”

“You can.”

He’s so sweet. How did I get so lucky? Only, the look on his face isn’t the playful one I was expecting. He’s serious.

I draw back a few inches to look him over. “You think I can single-handedly bring Christmas to the village?”

“I think you can do whatever you want.”

“But it’s a big to-do. Planning, gifts, decorating, food. Like a feast. I mean, it doesn’t have to be huge, but I wouldn’t want to half-ass it either. I think I’d feel worse if I introduced you all to a lousy Christmas, you know? Or what if no one wants to take part? It doesn’t seem right to come in here and drag my human customs along with me, expecting everyone to play along and —”

He presses a finger to my lips, and my voice vanishes.

“Gemma, do not fret. You’ve only just explained this holiday to me, and I invited you to show it to us. You’re right. Our Cold Season is usually void of any extra joy. Adding some happiness won’t hurt anyone.”

A thrill shivers through me. “Are you serious? You really want me to do this?”

“That’s up to you. You’ve seemed tired lately, and we will be extra busy soon. But telling me all about this Christmas has you as bright as a star in the sky. I want nothing more than for you to make this come alive. Live your holiday.”

I wrap my arms around him and plant an appreciative kiss on his lips. So much energy courses through me that I dance on my tiptoes.

“You’re going to love this!” My mind’s rushing a million miles per hour. Checklist after checklist.

“I’m looking forward to it,” he says. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“First, we need a date. A certain day to plan for.”

One of his ears perks up. “I thought the celebration was weeks long.”

“It is. Kind of. The cheer and decorations last that long. Then Christmas Day comes. It’s the big one. When everyone shares their gifts.”

“And San-tah visits in the night.”

“That too. All on the principal day. We use those calendars I told you about.”

He nods. “Months. Weeks. Tuesdays.”

“Right. We know which specific day of the Cold Season Christmas comes every year.”

“The calendars sound helpful. While we don’t normally count our days, the Skylights will come soon.”

“What are those?”

“Bright rivers of color in the night sky. On this side—” He points to the northern horizon, miles of peaceful mountains. “—brilliant green.”

I stare at the sky in wonder, imagining the swirls of color. Xion V has Northern Lights? It was a phenomenon I always wanted to see on Earth but never got the chance. Now I live in a world where they’ll display right over my head. I’m ecstatic.

Only, Kovak’s not done with his surprises.

He points again, this time toward the plateaus where the human base had been. “In that direction, currents of blood red.”

I gasp, gaze glued to the empty dawn. It’s clear of any clouds or heavenly bodies—neither the sun nor the moons are visible yet. Everything’s still moving between night and day. The sky is often clear like this. It’s beautiful.

It’ll be far more breathtaking with two sets of colored lights dancing through the night sky.

“Are you serious?” The corners of my eyes sting with tears. “Green *and* red?”

“I suppose Earth does not have that. Are you crying?”

“It sounds so beautiful, and the colors... They’re perfect for Christmas time!”

His concern morphs into a brilliant smile. “Really? Then I suppose we’ve just been preparing for you to host this new celebration.”

It’s hard to suppress the tremble in my voice. “I suppose so.”

This is really going to happen. I’m going to introduce Xion V to its first Christmas! My child is going to get to experience the holiday magic I did growing up. Things will be different, of course, but we’ll make our own new traditions. I can’t wait to tell Eva and Trinity.

“This is amazing.” I grasp his hands. “Celebrating Christmas morning right after that beautiful light show will be perfect. When do the Skylights happen?”

“They follow the first snow of the year. Usually three or four days later.”
All the excitement and blood drains from my body.
Three or four *days*?
Well, deck my halls. I’m fucking screwed.

CHAPTER FOUR

KOVAK

“THE EVENT IS BOTH ONE DAY AND AN ENTIRE CYCLE OF PALE MOON?” DREK asks as he secures the leather saddle strap on his red levadon.

As Gemma has explained it to me, a cycle of Pale Moon is what they call a month on their calendar.

“That’s what Gemma says.” I pat my levadon’s shoulder. Vax has a dark hide that flickers with red and white lights, showing his happiness. Gemma tells me he looks like a cross between Earth’s raptor and a rex. “It seems as if her people celebrate on a small scale for many days, then in the biggest way on the last day.”

“What could they possibly celebrate for so long?”

“That part is confusing, I’m afraid. There seem to be many things they are celebrating, but most of them are vague. Just feelings. Trading for goods they sometimes don’t even have the proper resources for.”

“This sounds complicated.”

“I agree, but Gemma really loves it.”

“She batted those eyelashes at you, didn’t she?”

I bow my head and do my best to swallow a laugh. “They’re magic wielders, these females, aren’t they?”

Drek finishes with the saddle and rests his hands on his hips. “More than I ever thought possible.”

Even though he doesn’t look up, I can see the wonder dancing in his eyes.

I feel it in the energy waves he pushes out. He's in awe of our situation, too. Three months ago, we were a pair of Kutarian bachelors, one of many doomed to a life of being alone. No hope for love or creating a family like our people have done for eons before now. The way my father did when I was a child and his father before him. It's the warrior's way to take a woman and raise a new line of Kutarians. To teach them his values and the way of the people. To show his sons how to be a good man and give nothing but love and honor to his mate. And to show his daughters what a brave and loyal warrior should be and that they should accept nothing less from their own mates later.

All these things were stripped away from so many of us the day the stagni monsters attacked our camp years ago. Some days I feel guilt tickling around in my stomach that some of my warriors have not found this miracle as I have. But they have hope now that a handful of us are happy. The Shaman has given us a beautiful gift in our new women. He will do it again for the others.

"Have you told her already that we will take part?" Drek asks.

I crack a smile as I grab onto the strong ridge at the base of Vax's neck and leap onto his back. "Of course I have. I would give her the world."

"I wonder if Eva feels the same way about this celebration." Drek mounts beside me, and we move the levadon down the side path of the village to the northern boundary.

"It sounds like Christmas is a widespread ordeal. All the human women likely would be happy to experience it again. At least Gemma thinks so."

"With all those babies coming along soon, it would be nice for them to take some time to enjoy themselves. I don't know about Gemma, but Eva's already changing things around the hut and preparing. She calls it *nesting*."

"Gemma has been as well, but from how she describes this celebration, it won't be time to relax. She has big plans."

Drek lifts his eyebrows. "Right here at the end?"

"The child isn't supposed to arrive for many days. Not before her Christmas Day."

"She's a strong woman, taking on so much."

"That she is. I don't want her to feel as if she can't appreciate and express things from her old life here. Even though we weren't allies with the humans, we weren't enemies either. None of our women need to be afraid to be themselves."

“I agree.” Drek nods and sits back in the saddle as we travel outside the village and down a worn trail toward the woods for our morning patrol.

We crest the top of a short ridge and look down into a wide field. A thick forest of violet trees stands on the far side of it. In the center, a single rider stands. Upon seeing us, he urges his brown levadon forward, and they approach.

“Good morning, Xjhun,” I call out when he’s close enough. “Anything to report today?”

The young warrior is on alert, ears still moving and listening to the world around him as he joins us.

“I haven’t heard any stagni today,” he says. “A few Stretch Necks in the valley. A small herd of vultir passed through. Not much action today.”

“Good,” I say. “Thank you for your ears, Xjhun.”

Some days, Xjhun patrols by himself. His hearing is good enough to track anything approaching the village long before it becomes a threat. He may be the youngest of my warriors, but his value is beyond compare.

“All is well at home?” He pulls his levadon up next to ours and the three males sniff at each other a moment before going back to looking around.

“Well, but chaotic.” Drek chuckles.

Xjhun frowns at him, then me.

“Gemma has decided she wants to host a celebration,” I explain.

Xjhun’s ears tilt with even more confusion. “What’s wrong with that?”

Drek and I explain the magnitude of Gemma’s idea and what this could mean for the women.

“Should we worry?” Xjhun asks.

“I’m sure they know how much is too much,” I say. “If Gemma thinks she can host something this huge, who am I to stop her?”

“I agree,” he says. “Encouraging them to continue with their customs won’t hurt anyone else. The rest of the village may like it too. As long as the women don’t push it too hard. With all this nesting going on, they shouldn’t load too much on themselves.”

Drek cracks a grin.

It’s all I can do to keep from laughing myself. “If you’d like to suggest limits to three pregnant females, be my guest.”

CHAPTER FIVE

GEMMA

“FOUR DAYS?” EVA SHOUTS.

Trinity opens her mouth but can't manage more than a squawk.

I wince. “I know. Super short notice, huh?”

“More like *no* notice.”

“We can pull it off.”

“You made it sound like you want to do the whole shebang, though,” Eva says. “An entire Christmas.”

“I want the whole shebang. It's just going to take a lot of work.”

Trinity leans back and laughs. “You've lost your mind.”

“I just think it would be really nice to have our Christmas here. Something to hold on to.”

Eva's eyes widen. She looks back and forth between us like she's afraid to weigh in. Trinity's nose crinkles on one side. She must think I'm nuts.

“I'm exhausted,” Trinity protests. “Aren't you tired?”

I lift a finger in the air. “Not enough to cancel Christmas!”

She stares at me for a long time. I'm not sure if she's waiting for me to break and tell her I'm kidding or if she's calculating just how far off the deep end I've gone. I hold her gaze until she grins and shakes her head. “You crazy sonovabitch. I'm in. What do we do?”

This time when I give Eva my you-know-you-want-to eyes, I have backup. Trinity pats her on the knee.

Eva looks back and forth between us again for a moment before she finally crumbles. “Fine. I think you’re both insane, but I also want Christmas goodies.”

My booty wiggles in delight. “I knew you had it in you.”

“Mmhmm. And how do you propose we work this miracle?”

I fan out some loose sheets of paper I brought along, holding them up like Kutarian-sized playing cards. “One step at a time, ladies. We can make this happen with planning and a few lists.”

“Oh, man.” Eva covers her face with both hands and groans. “Not Gemma’s to-do lists.”

“Hey. They are functional and perfect for big jobs. You weren’t complaining when I organized your last semester juggling pre-vet exams and the neo-paleontology program.”

Eva drops her hands to her lap. “No, I wasn’t. Having you slave-drive for me was helpful.”

I beam at her. “See? Planners and lists will get you through.”

“But we have like three days,” Trinity says. “If we were talking about a round of Dirty Santa and decorating a tiny tree, sure. But I have a feeling that’s not what you’re talking about.”

“Hell no, it’s not.” Eva’s lips skew into a sassy smirk as she props her chin in her hand. “Gemma is *go big, or go home*.”

“I told Kovak if I was going to do this, I was going to do it right,” I say.

“So how do you suggest we make this happen?” Trinity asks. “I’m too pregnant to stand around for an hour hanging stockings and decorating a tree.”

“Small bits at a time, of course.” I’m giddy as I get to my feet—slowly and awkwardly—and deal a few pieces of paper out to each of them. Thank the gods we were able to recover some decent materials from the old human base that weren’t ruined in the fires. “Since we can’t do everything, let’s capture our favorite parts. Decorations, traditions. We can each make a list of five things that mean the most to us every Christmas.”

“Top five? Have we become Cosmo magazine?” Trinity asks.

Eva snickers. “Cosmos: The Xion V Edition.”

“Come on,” I say. “It’ll work.”

“What about presents?” Eva asks.

“You can put that on there.”

“No, I mean, are we going to give each other gifts? What about everyone

else?”

Her eyes grow wide, and the flare of panic in her energy waves reaches me. Despite being a farm girl who used to work with hundreds of goats in one day, the work I’ve piled in front of her in the blink of an eye must be too much for her to handle. Trinity stares at me expectantly.

“I think that’s pushing what we can handle,” I say. “Let’s keep it simpler this year. Who knows what may become of it, but for now, let’s think small.”

“Like just the three of us?” Eva asks.

Trinity nods. “And our mates?”

“Exactly,” I say. “I may include Kaami and Waella, because they were so helpful to me before you guys woke up.”

Eva claps her hands. “Yes! And Baby Namami.”

My friends have devolved into grins now, and bubbly energy swirls around us. Already, I’m feeling the Christmas spirit.

“For now, I think that’s enough on the gift roster,” I say.

The other two nod.

“I can’t just pull up Amazon or run down to Target, though,” Trinity says. “What do we do?”

Eva rubs her hands together. “We make things. Back home, we used to give out cheese and butter to our neighbors for the holidays. The ones we liked, anyway.”

“Vicious. Though I could do with some cheese for Christmas.”

“Find me a goat and I’ll make you some.”

Trinity’s smile turns a little sour, like she hadn’t considered where the cheese would actually come from. “That sounds inhumane.”

Eva laughs. “Not a bit.”

I once asked Eva about goat ranching back when we were freshmen in college together. She explained the huge process of milking the entire herd, keeping track of all their vetting and breeding, welcoming the tiny babies, and even raising some of them by hand if the need arose. They were like pets. All one hundred forty-two of them.

I clear my throat to bring the women back on track. “That’s exactly what we need, though. Handmade gifts from the heart. No one has to knit a blanket or anything huge. I don’t even mind if I don’t get a gift.” My hand goes in the air to show my sincerity. “I just want there to be a Christmas.”

Being able to celebrate the holiday with my friends and my new Kutarian family is already enough of a gift for me.

“Waella has that really cute design she does for her baby clothes,” Eva says. “I’m going to ask her to teach me.”

Trinity’s eyes light up. “That’s a great idea.”

The women exchange a glance and look away from one another, as if they’ve spoiled their own surprises already.

“Wonderful,” I say. “Presents aside, write down what else you want to experience. What if we choose one from everyone’s list? That way, we can all have something we want.”

The surrounding excitement is palpable now. I love it.

Pens hit paper. Eva scribbles in earnest. The white-lined sheets of paper—ripped from a spiral notebook—crinkle as we work. I’ve been thinking of my top traditions all morning, so this is a quick chore for me. I do my best not to keep adding things while I wait for the other two to finish up.

My toes bump up and down, jiggling my leg, when their pens stop moving. “Ready to check them twice?”

Trinity scrunches her face. “Har har.” Then she holds her list up and reads from it. “I’ve got exchanging gifts. Christmas dinner, usually with my friends. Shopping. Decorating a Christmas tree. And eggnog, for sure. Eggnog while decorating, shopping, whatever. That should be a year-round drink.”

Eva wrinkles her nose. “Really? You like it that much?”

“What’s not to love? It’s like coffee and a cake had a baby and you added rum. Voila. Best holiday drink ever.”

“I believe we are short on rum,” Eva says. “And sugar and cream.”

“Does it have all that in there?” Trinity asks.

“You don’t know how to make your Christmas special?”

Trinity frowns. “No. I just pour it out of the carton.”

Eva gasps, and I laugh.

“This girl used to orchestrate a hundred goats going into the milker a day.” I point at Eva with a grin. “Cartoned eggnog may be blasphemous.”

“Damn right it is,” she says. “I may have had some out of a carton in college, but I at least had it homemade growing up.”

Trinity shrugs. “I never thought about the possibility of it being homemade.”

“Are you going to tell me you thought brownies only came in a cellophane wrapper, too?”

Trinity’s eyes drift back down to her list, her lips skewed. “We don’t all

have parents that know how to *make* things.”

“Fair enough,” I cut in. “But the best part of this is that we can introduce our children to our favorite traditions.”

Eva purses her lips. “Maybe not eggnog...”

“Anyway,” Trinity says. “What’s on your list, Eva?”

“I wrote decorating the tree, too. Also, baking Christmas cookies. Decorating the house and the yard with characters and twinkly lights. Watching Christmas movies and going on the Polar Bear Plunge.”

Trinity frowns. “Excuse me, Polar Bear Plunge? What the hell is that?”

“You’ve never heard of it?” Eva grins. “I have family that live near the coast in Florida, and they do it every year. We adopted it Tennessee-style. It’s actually for New Year’s Day, but it’s in the same holiday spirit. People wear Santa outfits and things.”

“And *it* is?” Trinity asks.

“Everyone goes out to the water—either the gulf or the lake—and goes for a swim!”

Trinity shivers. “Why?”

Eva shrugs. “It’s tradition. Bring in the new year. I think I was sixteen or seventeen the year I was visiting my grandparents on New Year’s, and I thought a swim in Florida would be a piece of a cake. Boy, was I wrong. That water was fucking cold! There were some pretty hot guys out there, dressed only in Santa pants and boots.” She bites her lip. “I jumped out of the water screaming and ran past them on the beach. It was pretty embarrassing.”

“Did they get in the water too?” I ask.

Eva looks at me with a curious head tilt.

“The guys. Santa pants dudes. Did they get in?”

Eva sprouts a grin. “They did. I guess it was a bit like a grey sweatpants situation.”

I swallow against the tightness that forms in my throat.

Grey sweatpants all wet? *Have mercy.*

I shift in my seat with a swish of my tail. Things are getting tight and excited just thinking about that.

Though that leaves my mind drifting back to last night, and that’s not something I want to think about right now. Not with how things ended.

“What did you write, Gemma?” Eva asks.

“My list, right.” That’s a good distraction. I lift my scribbled-on piece of paper. “I put Christmas treats, momento ornaments, kissing under the

mistletoe, looking at neighborhood Christmas lights, and decorating the tree.”

“What exactly is a memento ornament?” Trinity asks. “Your mother didn’t hang your baby teeth on the tree, did she?”

Eva laughs.

“Just pretty souvenir ornaments,” I say. “You can get them all over the place.”

“Every state and just about every interesting place has one.” Eva rolls her eyes and grins. “Gemma had a collection in the dorm, too. From movies, memories, a couple from the amusement park in the next county over. Three from the neo-paleontology program, one for each year we attended. And don’t get me started on the dinosaurs.”

One of Trinity’s eyebrows arches. “There are *memento* dinosaur ornaments?”

“A couple years ago, they put out celebratory ones for twelve different species,” I say, realizing how silly it might sound. But they were adorable on the mini tree in our dorm room. Especially the year we were in the neo-paleontology program. They were a hit in the dorm. Trinity didn’t join us until we were in the space-prep program, so she never heard about the Paleo-Christmas tree.

Trinity’s lip curls in amusement. “They who?”

“A program that no longer matters to us,” Eva says. “What do we do with these lists now? We don’t have much time to plan this thing.”

“Everyone enjoys decorating a tree,” I say. “That should be a default. I mean, that’s a Christmas given, anyway.”

Eva flips her paper over and scribbles out *Christmas tree*. I can’t help but smile. My little list maker.

“How are we going to decorate a tree, though?” Trinity asks.

“There are a lot of lights around here,” Eva says.

Some of the overhanging tree branches that line the village have some bioluminescent features. At night, the leaves glow in beautiful white and blue lights. They’re not something I’ve learned much about, but they are beautiful. There’s also colored fire and possibly even more I haven’t experienced yet.

“You’re right,” I say. “I’m sure we can put together some fun, colorful decorations.” I scan the items on my list again. “Some of mine are easy to eliminate. We can’t drive around and look at neighborhood lights. Or start a collection of memento ornaments. But maybe mistletoe?”

Trinity waggles her eyebrows. “That sounds fun, too.”

“The Kutarians don’t know what mistletoe is,” Eva says. “We can use any little sprig and call it mistletoe.”

Trinity rubs at her chin as if she’s sprouted a beard and purrs. “Intriguing. I vote for that one.”

“Awesome.” Check one for me.

Eva writes on her paper. “Mistletoe, good. What else?”

“I’m going to guess shopping is out too,” Trinity says.

Eva and I exchange a glance. Lord help us if Trinity’s child inherits her dry sense of humor.

“I’ll go with Christmas dinner,” she says. “We always did a big turkey, with yams and a green bean casserole.”

“A little space bird sounds good.” I grin.

“Do they have turkey?”

“We can always ask,” Eva says.

“That would be amazing.” Trinity closes her eyes and smiles.

I recognize that pregnancy-craving face. Getting the right food this year may be the most important thing we can do. Three pregnant, still-adjusting women could use a little comfort food.

While Eva jots down the next item, I swivel in her direction. “What about your item?”

When she’s done writing, Eva flips the paper back over and scans the list. “Lucky me, some of my things are being covered. Now I’m curious...do you think Waella or Kaami know how to bake?”

My stomach rumbles in anticipation of her suggestion. I pat the big swell of my belly absently. *You just ate breakfast. I’ll feed you when it’s time.*

As much as I want to jump up and cheer, I shrug. “They cook those morning cakes in some sort of hot rock contraption. I don’t know if it works like an actual oven, but maybe.”

“Cookies would also mean finding the right ingredients,” Eva says. “If they’re going to be savory and crumble in your hands, they may be more disappointing than yummy.”

“Agreed,” I say. “But maybe there are some sweet ingredients around. There are so many plants here.”

There’s a wistful look in my friends’ eyes. I know I must have it too. After months without sugar, it’s not a big deal not having it. Especially since our Kutarian bodies didn’t live on coffee and sugar for decades. But the memory of cookies... Tell my pregnant body it’s never tasted a cookie before

and get back to me.

“I can’t wait to experiment on that, for sure.” I clap my hands like an excited kindergartener.

“Me either.” Eva bounces on her log seat. “That also rounds out our list. A decorated Christmas tree, mistletoe, a Christmas dinner, and cookies.”

“Plus some gifts,” I add.

“And four days to work,” Trinity says.

“I think we should get on it then,” I say. “Should we each take our own suggestion for now? Go see what we can find out?”

“Who do I see about a turkey?” Trinity snickers.

I grin back. “Ask your husband.”

Eva’s tail wiggles, almost as if she’s wagging it. “I can’t wait.”

She jumps up, and I go to follow her, only I can’t wobble my fat, off-balanced body off the log. Trinity stands, and they each grab one of my arms and pull me to my feet. The three of us bounce off one another’s bellies like bouncy balloons. Finally, we each steady one another and plant steady feet.

“There,” I laugh. “Now, get to work.”

Who cares about a ridiculously short deadline? We’ve got this in the bag. We’re going to deck the halls out of this place.

CHAPTER SIX

GEMMA

I STAND NEAR THE WATERFALL AT THE EDGE OF THE VILLAGE. FROM ITS RIDGE, I can see down into the valley and the different groves of trees that grow on either side. I haven't seen anything resembling a Christmas tree here, but festive symbols have been far from my mind the last few months. I'm not sure I'll find what I'm looking for among the mishmash of purple and green leaves down there

It's a peaceful hunt until the little one dropkicks me in the ribs.

Sonovabitch, its got strong legs.

I rub my belly. "Hello to you, too."

I was never pregnant as a human or around anyone who was. I spent my early to mid-twenties in college and then the neo-paleontology and space-prep program. This is all new to me.

Eva's seen thousands of births. Even if they were only goats and the occasional barn cat, at least she knows *something*. Trinity learned some things during her short stint as a mother-to-be. And even though Waella has been a tremendous help to all of us during this time, it wasn't long ago that I swapped into a completely different life. It's been helpful hearing some of what Trinity learned just to put things in human terms. To ease the stress.

I've learned that the cliché morning sickness and the ravenous eating for two are both an actual thing, but they rarely happen at the same time in a pregnancy. Thank goodness. Now that I'm nearing the end of the line, I'm

starving. If I don't feed Little Junior, it feels as if he or she will devour me.

Trinity also tells us that doctors and baby info apps compare the baby's growth milestones to fruits and vegetables. Like, "Good morning, your baby is now an avocado." I suppose food is the least scary thing a mom might imagine hiding in her tummy, so it works.

For humans, at least.

An app would tell me I have a monster melon in there. One of those prize pumpkins Eva's Clydesdale would have to haul to the fruit stand. If I'd known when I went to the Halloween Harvest Day in fifth grade that the massive pumpkin I sat on for a picture would one day compare to the size of my unborn baby, I'd have run for the hills. Or at least never eaten pumpkin again.

I'm cradling my tummy in my arms, wondering what my baby will look like, when another pair of hands slide around from the back, gliding over the soft skin on my abdomen. I jump a little—that waterfall blocked out any sound of someone approaching—but I know Kovak's powerful arms and fantastic smell anywhere.

His lips move against my hair. "What are you doing out here, my Gemma?"

I lean back against his chest. "Looking at those trees out there. I need one for Christmas."

"It is a gift you want?"

I chuckle. "No, I don't want it *for* Christmas. It's part of the decorations."

His hesitation hangs in the air for a moment.

"You are going to decorate a tree out in the forest?"

"I hope we're going to bring it home."

Kovak lets go of my belly and turns me around to face him. A small pinch mars his brow, and he looks at me as if he expects me to burst out laughing.

Sike! Just making sure you were listening!

"Gemma, you don't expect to bring a tree home like a pet, do you? They don't move like that here."

"That would be creepy. No, I don't expect it to move like an animal, but I know a little replanting magic. In theory. We can move a tree."

His brow jumps in the air, and he smiles. "I'm looking forward to seeing this trick, then."

"Good. I'm going to need your help."

He takes one of my hands and brings it to his lips. "I am here to help you. Always."

My heart glows. I know he speaks the truth.

As if giving its own approval, my stomach growls.

Kovak laughs. "And now, I will feed you."

I drape an arm around his neck. "My hero."

He leads me down the small path from the top of the ridge, careful to keep his hands on me, and we walk arm in arm to the village center.

"I have to go help Drek clear a couple of squeaker nests that have gotten into the levadon pit," he says as he escorts me to where they have set up strips of cooked meat and fruits for lunch. "I can come join you again when we're done."

Standing on my toes, I plant a kiss on his lips. "See you soon."

When he leaves, I stand unmoving at the food table and watch him go. It's impossible not to stare at the wide stretch of his back and shoulders. The muscles bunch and move with such impressive power and fluidity. He's so strong, so masculine. Those dimples in his lower back, right over his ass. I love them. They're the perfect spot to rest my hands when he's in between my legs. I want to touch them now.

I bite my lip as he goes.

Now I understand that saying. Hate to watch him go, but love to watch him leave...

"Whoa, Gemma." Eva laughs. "You look like you're in happy land."

She and Trinity appear on the other side of the table as if by magic. How long have they been standing there?

My cheeks burn. "Oh, you know, just thinking about lunch."

"If by lunch you mean Kovak's ass, 'cause that's definitely what you were staring at." Trinity grins.

I lift a hand to fan my cheeks, but the flame beneath them only grows.

Eva comes around next to me and grabs a platter. "As if. I don't even know how you can think of that right now. That need to eat you guys were telling me about? It's here. I can barely focus on anything else."

Trinity snorts. "You just wait. From what I hear, the other one is coming."

Oh God, Trinity. I look down at my platter to hide my face.

"The other what?" Eva asks.

I lift the large plate and hold it up to cover the lower half of my face.

Maybe I can slink out of this conversation and no one will notice.

Unfortunately, Trinity joins us on my other side. I'm trapped.

"New hormones," she says. "They'll start bombarding you any time now."

Eva curls her lip like she doesn't believe a word of it. "You must be joking. In this beached whale's body?"

Trinity nudges me with her elbow. "Right? You know what I'm talking about."

I stare at her, still halfway hiding behind my empty bone platter. Part of my brain disagrees with this conversation. There's no way I can discuss this with anyone. The other side screams for me to shout it all out loud. Connect with my friends. Beg for their ears.

It's not like there's many people to talk to out here. Or couple's counseling.

I give a grunt of acknowledgement. "Regrettably, yes."

Both women make a surprised sound. Eva's brow furrows, and I think she's having a hard time accepting her future.

Trinity goes for disappointed instead. "Regrettably? Are we not living on the same planet with the sexy silver studs walking around?"

I lower my plate and add strips of meat. "Yes, we are, but it doesn't make things easier."

Just staring at Kovak's chiseled form walking away was enough to get me going. That's insane. Thankfully, I'm not a man or my friends would have found me in the middle of an awkward situation.

Trinity shrugs. "I love having my own jungle man."

"Maybe some jungle men aren't as wild as others." Eva gives Trinity a dangerously pointed look, as if she's trying to shut her up.

Something akin to guilt twists my insides.

Or else that was my giant pumpkin baby using my bladder as a soccer ball.

"It's fine." Eva puts a hand on my arm. "Most couples fall out of the honeymoon phase, but it doesn't mean the relationship still isn't strong."

Oh God, I shouldn't have said anything. This is awful. I give my friend a haphazard shrug, knowing I said more than I should have and I don't need to elaborate further.

It's out there now, though. I can't take it back.

Stupid mouth.

Eva pats me. “What’s the problem? Is Kovak...*you know?*”

The way her brows dip with her voice is horrible. Suggestive and pitiful.

“No!” I sputter. “Kovak is fine in, uh, that department.” I wish I hadn’t loaded up my plate so I could use it to shield my face again.

What did my mother always tell me? *Keep your marriage issues to yourself and all bedroom matters private. Don’t project your problems to the world.* Of course, my mother had been divorced three times before I left for college, so what did she know about good marriage advice?

Except now that I’ve already spoken the words, I think she’s probably right.

My fingers tremble on the platter, and I set it on the table.

The teasing twinkle in Eva’s eyes disappears. “I didn’t mean to stir the pot even more.”

I give her a weak smile. It’s not her fault. “It’s okay, sweetie. Just pregnancy bullshit.”

Trinity nods and links her arm through mine. I retrieve my plate again before we head for our favorite corner to eat. “The hormones are a bitch, for sure. Xjhun was late for patrol the other day because he looked so good in that loincloth.”

Eva follows us with a half-full plate. “The same one he wears every day?”

“It was sitting differently. I could see more of his ass.”

Eva laughs, and as we find a log to sit on, Trinity’s gaze drifts away, likely gazing at hot alien tail in her mind.

I nod. “That’s it, though. Just the smallest thing. Kovak came home after training a couple days ago and he smelled extra...”

“Sweaty?” Eva offers.

“Yummy.”

Trinity points at me like she knows exactly what I’m talking about.

Then all I can think about is Kovak stepping through the hut flaps that day while I sat on the bed fixing one of my tops, his silver skin glistening with perspiration and that hot masculine smell filling the room. He looked tired, but the smile that spread over his face when he saw me was enough to draw me off the bed like a jack-in-the-box.

“I still don’t know how you can think about sex,” Eva says. “I’m so exhausted and uncomfortable.”

“So was I just a couple of weeks ago,” I say. “Now this is much stronger.”

“Move over, horny husbands,” Trinity says. “Pregnancy needs are way worse.”

Eva looks thoughtful. Maybe even wistful.

As she should. It’s fun. Or at least it would be.

“So Kovak came home all...yummy.” Eva’s lips twitch as she fights a grin. “It sounds like you’re *happy* all the time. What happened?”

“I welcomed him home, of course,” I say.

“Your face says it wasn’t a proper welcome.”

“It wasn’t.”

“More like when dear Auntie Gladys comes over and you have to stand there and smile while she pinches your cheek?”

Trinity snorts out a laugh.

“Thankfully, no,” I say. “More like when the Red Dragon used to deliver to our dorm room after we’d been talking about it all day and we could practically smell it coming down the hall.”

“Mm.” Eva clasps both hands in front of her. “That place was so good. How could that not be a proper welcome?”

“They got my order wrong. The sweet and sour chicken is really tasty, but the white rice isn’t nearly as good as that fried rice I wanted.”

Trinity rests a hand on her belly. “I really want Chinese food now. Are we still talking about sex?”

Ugh. I’m digging the hole deeper and wallowing in the mud at this point. Why is this so hard to say out loud? Kovak is amazing. The best husband, and I know he’ll be a fantastic father. I’m still drunk on his love every day and the way his energy buzzes with mine. It’s the best.

Why does this bother me so much?

“I want Chinese, too,” I mumble.

Both Trinity and Eva throw their hands out with exasperated noises.

“Are you having sex or not, dragon lady?” Trinity asks.

Oh God, I’m sorry, Mom.

“We do things.” My tail flicks back and forth behind me, the bitch never failing to display my discomfort. “Just not *all* the things.”

“That’s better.” Trinity plucks a slice of meat from my platter and pops it into her mouth.

My pregnancy hormones tell me to bite her finger. My civilized side is more accepting. She is trying to help, after all.

Trinity is oblivious to the matter. Her expectant gaze is like a tractor

beam. “Go on.”

I take a deep breath. “Kovak is fantastic. Truly. I wouldn’t trade him for the world.”

Eva doesn’t move, but Trinity looks bored, like she can see right through my shit.

“It’s not about that at all.” I’m getting on my own nerves now. How do women just spout off about these kinds of things?

“So Kovak isn’t making you unhappy.” Eva pats my knee. Her voice is softer than I’ve ever heard it. Like she’s taking care of one of her critters. Normally, I’d feel ridiculous about that. But today, I’m grateful. “But he’s also not taking care of everything?”

“God, yes.”

Having those words out in the open feels like opening a release valve.

“We fool around,” I say. “I do things to him. He does things to me.”

“Things,” Trinity mutters before licking the meat juice from her fingers. “Handsies. Oral. Yeah?”

Thankfully, there’s no mirror out here because I’m confident I’m glowing as red as Rudolph’s nose.

“Um, yeah,” I sputter.

“A little tail play. What? You’ve never tried it? You should.”

“Right, yeah. All those things. And they’re great. I mean, really great.”

Trinity holds up a hand. “We get it. You love your husband.”

“But we never actually do it anymore. I have fun, but he doesn’t scratch that itch.”

Eva puts a couple fingers to her lips like she’s surprised. Trinity’s face doesn’t change.

“No penetration?” she asks.

Good God, when did she become the Kutarian Dr. Ruth? I believe that odd knocking sound is my knees fidgeting together over here.

“Nope,” I say.

“That’s a thing, though, you know,” Trinity says. “Men being nervous about it while you’re knocked up. I read in one of those pregnancy forums back when I—Well, anyway, there are men who can’t perform because they’re afraid.”

“I didn’t say he couldn’t perform,” I add in. Because he sure can. In plenty of ways. Just not the way I want.

“Sure, but you know what I mean.” She puts her pointer fingertips

together. “They don’t want to touch heads.”

“Trinity!” Eva gasps.

“Whaaat?”

Dammit, I think that mirror would show me far less red now. More like drained to white. Is this conversation over yet?

“That can’t happen, though,” Eva says. “The baby’s all wrapped up and cocooned in there.”

“But is it?” Trinity asks. “It is in humans, but what about aliens?”

Eva falters for a moment but holds her ground. “All mammals are that way. It seems far-fetched to think Kutarians would be that different.”

Now, *I’m* getting nervous. “What if we are?”

“Maybe you should talk to Waella,” Eva says. “Ask all your questions. Then you can tell Kovak.”

“That sounds like a good idea, actually. If I can assure him everything is safe, maybe he’ll feel better.”

Eva smiles.

“I hope everything gets better.” Trinity leans in to wrap me in a hug, but I hold up a hand.

“Don’t. I may need a little less physical contact right now. From everyone but Kovak.”

Trinity draws back with a barely contained smile.

“Sure, no problem,” she says. “I wouldn’t want to get that motor going.”

I fight the urge to cover my face. How embarrassing.

“Speaking of things we want for Christmas,” Trinity continues. “Now I know why you picked mistletoe.”

Oh God, what now?

“Forget the doorway. You better hang that bitch over your bed.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

KOVAK

I STAND NEXT TO VAX, AND WE BOTH WATCH DREK RIDE OVER FROM THE levadon pit. The sun has long passed the high point of the day, and the air is growing colder again. I expect the snow to return soon. That will make Gemma happy, and me, in return. Her talking about the weather and Christmas yesterday is the happiest I've seen her in weeks.

I've heard from other warriors that females often go through difficulties in their mood while carrying a child. Gemma's had some low moods lately, so it's been a blessing to see her so energized.

"You ready to go, or do you need more thinking time?" Drek asks as he stops next to me.

"Hmm?"

"You look like your brain is far away. Distracted by this Christmas thing the women are doing?"

"Some. Have you gotten your orders yet?"

"Eva wants me to take her to look for things tomorrow. 'Shopping,' she says."

I'm not familiar with this term, but that's not unusual. Even though they speak our language now, the women often use words we don't understand.

"What are *shoppings*?"

"I don't believe it's what we're hunting. It's more what we're doing."

"Human hunting."

“That is what it sounded like. We’re going to the spice fields. She’s looking for something sweet.”

I mount up, and we direct the levadon toward the edge of the village. “Like melons? There aren’t any of those in the fields.”

“That’s what I said, but she claims the taste differs from fruit.”

“Do the two of you intend to walk the fields licking every plant to find it?”

Drek cracks a grin. “Maybe not the *plants*.”

I snort. “As long as you keep your naked ass off what I’ll later put in my mouth, I hope you enjoy yourself.”

Drek laughs as we urge the levadon into a faster gait around the village border. “We’ll do whatever needs to be done for her to find what she’s looking for.”

I know he’s telling the truth. His devotion to his mate is always at the forefront of his mind.

As Lead Warrior, I must at least appear completely committed and focused on my duty and position, although I’m sure my warriors are aware of the truth. I’ve not recovered from the drunk love I feel for my Gemma yet, and if I have my choice, I never will. I try my hardest not to let it affect time with my men—they need my support and guidance still—but I believe the life we have now only makes us train and scout harder. My unmated warriors are fierce and give all they can for their people and village, but my men—myself included—with newly pregnant women waiting for them at home? We fight like the end of the world is at stake and the two moons will curse us should we fail. Because our whole worlds *do* sit back in that village counting on us to protect them.

“Does Gemma have you on a hunt, too?” Drek asks.

“We are to search out a tree.”

Drek’s ears cock to the side, followed by his eyebrow. “A...tree?”

I nod. “She’s going to accompany me to find the right one.”

“What do you do with the tree once you find it?”

“We bring it home.”

“The celebration calls for the sacrifice of a tree?”

“She claims that’s the normal tradition, but she wants to preserve the tree’s life and transport it alive to the village.”

Drek snorts out a laugh so hard he pulls his levadon back to a stop. “She’s going to invite the tree to Christmas? Do trees walk on Earth?”

Vax and I turn and look back at him. “I asked her the same—though, apparently, they are the same as here. But humans have developed a method of removing a tree from the ground in a way that preserves its life, and they successfully move the tree from one spot to another.”

“Fascinating. Humans are regular shamans.”

“From the sound of it, they do it all the time. Plants, flowers, trees. If they construct their homes in an area without proper vegetation, they just move some in.”

“That’s resourceful. So the two of you are going to find the perfect tree to honor and set it up to continue life in the village?”

“That’s her plan. The Chief was open to the idea of bringing in a tree as well, though he was far more confused than any of us.”

“I would think so.”

We ride in silence around the next bend. Pacing levadon have worn the path in the icy grass down to dirt. Some of the beasts have taken on a guarding role, including the villagers as part of their herd. Even though they know not to come inside the perimeter—a few have accidentally knocked down huts and people with their tails in the past—they guard us from outside.

Drek and I follow the path around the back of the Shaman’s large tent. It’s the closest edge to the row of huts where I live. Gemma is waiting there for me.

“What are you out there for this morning?” I ask Drek before we part. It’s my job to know where my warriors are in order to keep them and the rest of us safe.

“Xetmir and I are going to track some red birds. Eva needs eggs, too.” Drek shrugs like he isn’t exactly sure what his mate is up to, but it’s not slowing him down.

“Best of luck on your hunt.”

He nods, his brow tilted just enough I imagine he’s thinking the same as I am. We’re both on a very untraditional hunt today. It’s almost amusing, even.

We part ways, and I dismount and stride into the village to collect my Gemma. When I turn down the path through the middle of the huts, I find her standing outside ours.

“There you are.” Her smile is dazzling.

“The cold weather suits you. The way your cheeks turn pink and your eyes sparkle...” I can’t stop staring. Other Kutarian women don’t blush like our human ones do. It’s fascinating and I love the look on my mate.

“Are we ready to go?” she asks.

“I am ready when you are, love.”

She slips her arm through mine and I escort her back to where Vax is waiting for us. Gemma eyes him warily, which is odd because she’s taken to the levadon well. After that first rescue and coming face-to-face with her first carnivore, that is.

“Are we both riding him?” she asks.

It’s an odd question. We’ve ridden him together before.

“Of course. It’d be far too long of a walk.”

The tip of her tail twitches and her ears turn back a bit. She’s not comfortable with this. I put a hand on her arm.

“You don’t want to ride him?”

“I don’t want to hurt him. I’m a lot bigger now.”

I know better than to discuss weight with a female, but the notion is so irrational I can’t help the laughter that bursts out of me.

Her eyes pop open, and her ears drop. She’s completely shocked, and I can’t apologize fast enough, the laughter still squeezing my chest.

“Gemma, you are no different than before. Vax could carry you without even realizing you’re there.”

“But I’m very different now.”

“You mean this?” I press a fingertip into the soft skin of her belly.

She looks down at it and nods meekly.

How adorable. I move closer and cup her face. “You’re as perfect as you were on the first day, Gemma. Your body is doing exactly what it’s supposed to do. And it certainly isn’t heavy.”

In one quick motion, I scoop her off the ground. She screams, but she’s safe as can be. With one arm under her knees and one supporting her back, careful not to squish her belly, I cradle her against my chest. She flings her arms around my neck and holds tight.

“Kovak!” she gasps.

I grin with a small shrug. “You’re nothing but cozy.” It’s no problem for me to hold her, and Vax is much stronger than I am.

She opens her mouth to protest, but I reach up and deposit her on Vax’s back. By the time I let her go, she’s laughing.

“How about give a girl a warning next time?” Even though she’s pretending to be cross, her eyes are still lit with amusement.

“I’ll be sure to do that.” I mount up behind her, adjust my seat so she’s

comfortable, and we head down into the valley.

After we pass through the gap in the ridge and move into more open land, I keep my eyes open for any danger. It's more important than ever to keep threats away. My firstborn, the child of my heart and soul, will arrive within the next turn of the moon. Another baby soon after that. While on my watch, the village will be as safe as ever.

A lone vultir steps out of the trees on the far side of the valley, regarding us with a silent stare for a moment before lowering its head to graze. Besides it and a few birds overhead, the morning is peaceful.

The hills surrounding the village are normally quiet. An occasional harmless animal, or even an entire herd of vultir or starwards, passes through, but nothing that will approach our home. The levadon are the only dangerous animals nearby, and they've been living in peace with us since before the time of my father's father.

A squirrelly pack of vultures—the ones Gemma refers to as raptors—found their way to the village a few months ago, drawn by the squawks of a laboring levadon. The mate of Drek's Rhux. Trying to protect our people and animal companions while there was an equally dangerous mother levadon in the pit was quite a challenge, but thankfully, our men are just as cunning as those scavengers. And luckily, Drek's mate Eva turned out to be an invaluable addition to our tribe as an animal healer. The levadon family, including the two rapidly growing pups the vultures were after, are thriving and owe her their lives.

We rarely find actual threats until we reach the outer ridges of our territory. Where mountains sprout up and cliffs drop into the large green valleys.

Where we are now.

Today, a herd of Stretch Necks and a lone juvenile Thunder Claw stand in the distance. The small carnivore would still be a threat to us and our levadon, but the Stretch Necks separate us, and the predator has wisely given them a wide berth and watches from the edge of the trees.

"I feel his pain," Gemma says. "I feel like I could eat one of those brontos, too."

I chuckle and wrap my arms around her to place my hands on her belly. It seems like it's doubled in size in the last few weeks. She insists pregnant humans get even bigger, and I feel remorse for their species. How painful that must be for a woman.

“If you want some of that,” I murmur against the black locks above her ear. “I’ll get you some.”

She snickers. “You? Take down a Stretch Neck?”

A burning sizzle of pride straightens my spine, even though her voice says she’s only teasing. “You think I can’t do it?”

She leans back against my chest with a casual shrug, but I can look down at her face now. At that smug, silly smile I’ve seen her wear time and time again when she’s doing her best to get a rise out of me for fun.

“I’m offended,” I say. “My own mate thinks I can’t hunt.”

“Your own mate thinks those giants’ll squash like a bug you.”

“A bug! How dare you?”

“A cute bug? With a cute tushy and —”

She squeals out a laugh when I dig my fingertips under her ribs. She wriggles against me to escape, but there’s nowhere to go in the saddle.

“No, Kovak, stop!” She laughs. “I’m going to pee myself!”

Vax halts and turns his head just enough to peer back at us. I’m not sure if he’s disturbed by the fuss she’s making or if he actually understood what she said.

I laugh as well. “I’m done. Let’s not do that.”

She lays back against me with a big breath of air, like I’ve worn her out completely. “Of course. I wouldn’t want to ruin the upholstery.”

I wrap my arms around her again, this time pulling her in close and appreciating the way her hair smells. How her warm body feels against mine. The thrashing and laughing did a number on my body too, and I’m sure she can feel how happy I am now. Excited to be alone with my woman.

To my delight, she seems happy to be alone with me, too. Her body arches so she can lay her head back on my shoulder, which does the most magical thing with her lower half. Even with the baby on board, her spine curls out from my chest and her tight little rear presses hard against my loincloth. My body tightens, aching for her. When she moves her ass back and forth against me, I’m lost.

She’s in just the right spot for me to lower my face to hers and claim her mouth. It’s soft and hot. My favorite combination. I kiss her like I haven’t in days, even though it’s only been since last night that we shared a heat like this. Even so, I can’t get enough of her.

The moons have made their revolution multiple times since her arrival. She’s been with me an entire season, walked with me in our mating

ceremony, and now carries our precious future. Still, I want her like the first night she painted me with the glowing essence of the plaxa. Like when she sat pressed against me in the saddle like this on our way back to my hut. My body aches for her just as strongly. Only now, she pulls on my heart stronger than ever.

I never knew love could grow like it does. Exponentially. Enough to encompass my entire being. As each of the moons turn, I love my Gemma all the more.

And while her body adjusts and cares for our child, it's even more alluring. New curves to cover with my hands. Fresh smells and energies that have me intoxicated by her.

My mouth contours to hers and my hands slide up her belly and over her ribs, teasing the warm skin until I can press my palms around her breasts. Her mouth opens with a soft gasp. The sound is so innocent and erotic all at once, and I groan.

As I kiss along her jaw and press my lips and fangs to the side of her neck, my eyes wander the far tree line of shrug trees. The bushy branches would provide the perfect amount of shade and cover to lay my Gemma on the grass beneath me.

I coax Vax in that direction with my knees while trailing my teeth along the sensitive skin of Gemma's throat. One of my hands squeezes her breast.

Then her fingers catch mine, and she pulls my hand away.

Damn the moons, did I hurt her?

"Look, there," she says.

Her body straightens, no longer pressing against mine, and she points in the distance. My head is dizzy and I'm confused, but I look, my ears pressed forward and eyes sharp.

Only, there's nothing there.

"What is it?"

"The perfect tree!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

GEMMA

I DIDN'T THINK IT WAS POSSIBLE TO GET COCK-BLOCKED BY A TREE.

Poor Kovak.

I hate that I'm thankful about it. As much as I long to let him keep going—and I really want him to—I know by now where that will lead. It'll be amazing. He'll make me clutch the bedsheets and feel fucking fantastic, but after two months of waiting for what I really want, the whole dance is a tease. I don't know if I can do it anymore.

I've got to talk to Waella as soon as possible.

Kovak's body is so close to mine—distractingly so—but I point insistently at the tall evergreen-looking tree ahead of us. "That's the one we need right there."

Kovak is silent for a moment, enough to fit in a whole handful of his currently quick heartbeats, before nodding. "Of course. We'll claim that one."

I'm sure I detect an odd beat in his voice, like he isn't sure why we've stopped the fun to look at a tree.

Me either, baby.

I wish I could open my big mouth and just spit out what's bothering me. Like I did with my friends. Okay, it was more like pulling teeth, but I did it!

It's just so embarrassing.

The first night the unfavorable incident happened between us wasn't that big of a deal. He wanted me to use my hands on him until he finished. I

thought nothing of it then. We'd done that plenty of times, and he'd just used his fingers on me, too. But the next night, it was more of the same, except with his mouth. Normally, after causing me to see stars with only his tongue, he was ready to dive right in. And I was eager for him. Nothing felt better physically and emotionally than the two of us joining together after he'd brought me up to my highest of heights.

Only that time, he didn't do it.

We fooled around without him entering me at all. It was an empty feeling I wasn't about to accept. Not when I was straddling the lap of my giant, handsome warrior.

How he'd missed that most important step was beyond me, but I wasn't about to play along quietly.

I tried seducing him, kissing his chest and grinding our naked bodies together until he groaned, both in pleasure and in pain. I didn't have time to figure out why before he slipped out from under me, pulled his loincloth back on, and left the hut.

Left me there alone.

I was stunned. Awash with embarrassment and an empty longing that solidified into something cold and hard in my belly.

Kovak had never left me unsatisfied before. He'd certainly never left the room without a word like that. It made me feel foolish and awkward. I wanted to stomp after him and demand answers, but in that raw moment, I didn't want to know why he suddenly didn't want to have sex with me.

Had I become too large and unattractive in my pregnant state? I felt swollen and not myself, but things weren't that different yet. What would happen when I actually got fat and puffy?

I didn't want to think about it.

Kovak came back to bed that night and held me like he always did. Whispered in my ear how much he loved me. The days that followed were fairly normal. Even though we didn't have sex again, we continued to come together in other ways, and he worshipped me more than ever. It kept our love and life going outside of the bedroom, at least. I don't think Eva and Trinity even noticed before I stupidly mentioned it earlier.

What Trinity said about Kovak being scared was interesting at first. There being a possibility other than him not wanting me anymore was life-giving. Once I really thought about it, though, it seemed ridiculous. He's a grown man. Why would he actually be afraid of hurting the baby? It's super sealed

up in there, and even though it sometimes feels like he can damn well reach the back of my teeth with that thing, I know it won't hurt anything.

Or at least I think it won't.

All I can do is try to avoid the disappointment without hurting him.

I bring Kovak's fingers to my lips, kiss his knuckles, and refocus on the tree.

As difficult as it is to ignore the ache in my belly and the heat pulsing between my legs, I can't worry about Kovak right now. I have an entire Christmas to help put together, and despite the difficulties in the bedroom, I'm still thrilled by the opportunity to celebrate. It's a fantastic distraction and revives a part of my life I thought I had lost forever.

And I may have found the best tree for the job.

It doesn't have the shaggy needles of a traditional evergreen tree on Earth, but it's green and fairly triangular. The branches don't start for at least ten feet up the trunk, but they do taper to a point at the top like a spade. If cutting the tree down was an option, we could eliminate all that extra trunk, but I hate the idea of chopping it down to decorate like we do on Earth. Not because the tradition is especially barbaric—it was one my family enjoyed every year—but I'm living much closer with nature now and the annual killing of the trees seems silly if I can transplant one to reuse year after year. If the Kutarians are accepting of the holiday, that is.

Instead of needles or leaves, the tree has green...fur? I've seen a few trees like this in the time I've been here but have never taken time to study them. From afar, the puffs look like horse hair hanging from each branch. Fluffier than a willow branch, but far softer and more limp than pine needles.

Kovak steers Vax toward the grove, which is full of similarly shaped trees of different colors. Lilac, fuchsia, sky-blue, green.

"They're beautiful," I say.

Kovak nods. "That's the haynut tree."

"Haynuts like the ones we eat with the mango fruits for lunch?"

"Those are the ones."

"I love those. They smell so good."

I've helped harvest fruits and vegetables from the small crop land to the south of the village, but most of what the tribe gathers is wild. Food grows everywhere and is easy to collect. This grove, however, is much farther away than where we typically gather our food. No wonder I haven't seen wild haynuts yet.

Now that I pull in a deep breath, though—the trees smell so good. It’s not the pine needle scent of Earth’s Christmas evergreens, but it’s a lovely surprise of its own.

Vax stops a few feet from the first trees in the grove and glances around. Maybe he thinks they’re perfect, too.

“Vultir and starwards come here in the thawing months,” Kovak says. “When the haynuts pop up.”

“Are there any animals in here now?”

“Not likely. Though I’m sure Vax will let us know.”

The levadon’s nostrils flare wide as he looks around. Vultir is his favorite snack. He’ll be the best lookout for us while we examine the tree.

Kovak holds my hand and helps me slide down from the dino’s back since it’s not something I can safely do on my own anymore. I shiver as soon as my bare feet hit the cold grass. Even though my body runs hot most of the time now—like a baby furnace, Trinity reminds me—cold sensations on my extremities seem extra chilly.

Kovak dismounts behind me and walks toward the trees.

“This is a fine choice to bring along for your celebrations,” he says. “But how is it you intend to move it again?”

I put my hands on my hips as I look up into the tree branches. The haynut is a huge tree, even bigger than I first thought. At least twenty-five feet tall. I reach up to touch the green fur that sprouts from the lowest hanging limbs. It’s not hair...more like long needles that aren’t hard and crunchy like the ones on Earth. Foot-long, needle-like tendrils that move with a mystical-looking wave, almost like it’s underwater. I’m transfixed watching it, and the fascination grows even more when I run my fingers through it.

I had a toy pony growing up that went with my plastic dolls, but it was much more fun to play with. Even though it had an adorable face and was locked in a cute trotting pose, the best part was its hair. Platinum blonde and silky smooth. The mane and tail were perfect for braiding and styling, but I enjoyed sitting and watching cartoons while running my fingers through the hair. I couldn’t stop touching it.

The silky, hair-like needles hanging from the tree are the same, and I stand there for a moment, just letting them run over my hand. These trees are like a remarkable mix of a beautiful willow and the wacky trees from a Dr. Seuss story. A magical inspiration I could use in multiple ways.

Staring at the green strands, Eva’s words from the day before come to

mind. *“We can use any little sprig and call it mistletoe.”*

Perfect.

With a whispered apology under my breath, I snap the thin branch a few inches above the tuft of green. I hook the new mistletoe twig in the waist of my skirt and point at the base of the tree. “We uproot it. Maybe we can build a sled or something big enough to transport it?”

Kovak frowns and his tail twitches. I’ve lost him.

“Have you ever dug up a tree before?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Tampering with the tree bodies can kill them, and only the northern fire storms pull the trees up from the ground.”

“Fire storms?” That sounds terrifying. But that’s a conversation for another time. “As long as you keep the roots intact, you can normally move the tree and replant it.”

“What are roots?”

I open my mouth, expecting to give a tip or suggest a strategy, but his question takes me aback. “No one studies the plants much here, do they?”

“Just in the spice fields. But once the seeds go in the ground, those plants don’t move.”

I can’t help but smile at that. Some of our human concepts must be as weird to him as Kutarian ones were to me originally, like swapping bodies and riding freaking dinosaurs. He’s not picturing trees and flowers pulling themselves out of the ground and running around on their bare white roots, is he?

“All plants—or at least all plants we have on Earth—anchor in the ground with roots. Just like this tree.”

“The toes,” he says.

A small laugh tickles through me. “The what?”

Kovak grins and points to the tree’s base. “Its toes. They hold it into the dirt.”

“Yes, that’s it. We call them roots. They pull water from the ground to keep it alive.” He nods as if he knew that part, and I’m relieved we’ve only had a vocabulary hiccup. “If they’re not damaged when you dig up the plant, you can place it somewhere else. Anywhere else with proper soil and sunlight. We do it all the time on Earth.”

“You do?”

“Well, not me personally.” Do I sound ridiculous, explaining all this like I’m an expert? “But I’ve seen it done, and I know the basics.”

Kovak stares at me in a way that makes every inch of my skin prickle with warmth. “My Gemma, the tree woman.”

At first I think he’s cracking a joke, but his smile is glowing. He’s actually impressed.

And just like that, any tiny worry over our relationship that’s hiding in the depths of me vanishes. My insides melt into a gooey mess of love and thankfulness that he’s here, and he’s mine. I don’t even care that I’m now the Tree Woman despite somehow letting an unkillable succulent die in my dorm room freshman year.

“Just doing what I can.” I may not be the most qualified for the job, but I know how to fake it till you make it. “Do you have shovels? Digging equipment? This is going to be a big job.”

“We have brahnts.”

Wait, is he talking about pigs?

I stare at him for a heartbeat. “Uh, the bacon dudes?”

Kovak’s lopsided grin widens. “Those, yes.”

“How will those help, exactly?”

“If there are any glowshrooms buried, the brahnts will move their body weight in dirt to get to them.”

My ears perk excitedly. “That’ll work.”

CHAPTER NINE

GEMMA

THE SNOW RETURNS JUST BEFORE THE SUN DIPS BELOW THE MOUNTAINS THAT evening. Soft, slow flakes that swirl and catch the firelight in our corner of the village center. Even though I have a furred shawl draped over my shoulders, I still shiver against the chill in the air.

Kaami sits next to me as we finish our early dinner. The women have been more scattered today than normal, everyone working on individual projects. It's rare that Kaami and I get to visit without the others or her children around.

"How are you feeling?" she asks.

"A little tired, but it was a busy day."

"I heard you went riding with Kovak. So soon to your baby, it's no wonder you're tired."

"I get energy from having things to do." I hold up two pieces of paper, full of checklists.

Kaami's eyes don't register understanding—the Kutarians have a very simple written language and don't grasp my strange to-do lists—but she still smiles.

"I think it's good to stay busy," she says. "It'll prepare you for being a mom. We're always busy."

"You seem like it. I hope I can keep up."

"Gemma, I've seen you transition from not knowing anything about this

land or the people to being a normal part of the tribe. I'm sure you can handle this too."

"Becoming one with a bunch of other adults is one thing. What if I don't know how to keep a baby alive?"

Kaami chuckles and pats my knee. "You will learn. We were all clueless when we started. But now you have an entire village to help you."

"It takes a village..."

One of her ears cocks to the side like a dog trying to understand what I mean, but I just smile.

"That's a saying on Earth. We believe in the power of a community too. 'It takes a village to raise a child,' they say."

Kaami's smile reaches all the way to the sparkle in her eyes. "Your Earth people are smart like you. We are here for you, Gemma."

Not only do I value her opinion, but she also has three children of her own already. She knows what she's talking about, and I don't think she'd blow smoke up my ass for no reason.

I give her a watery smile. "Thank you."

I don't know if it's the memories of being alone here months ago and depending on Kaami, or maybe it's all these extra hormones, but I'm flooded by a need to hug her. So I do. She wraps her arms around me, too. We've only just leaned into one another when I feel some of the air leave her body.

"Speaking of children..."

We straighten, and I realize her gaze has wandered to the middle of the square. Waella and Eva are approaching with platters of food, but behind them, two of Kaami's children run toward us with flapping tails and giggling faces.

The smallest one crashes into her, and Kaami wraps the little girl in her arms. Her daughter Xemi must be around six, the boy behind her maybe ten. I'm still learning to recognize the ages of the children here. They grow at different rates than human children, quickly as infants but slower through the rest of childhood. Besides Waella's six and Kaami's three, there are eight others to keep up with. Soon, three more.

"Maami." The silver-skinned girl with oversized ears and beautiful blue eyes cuddles into Kaami's lap. "I do not want my food."

Eva, wrapped in an awkwardly oversized blanket, and Waella both give us a silent nod of greeting as they join us at the fire.

Kaami's preoccupied by her upset daughter. "Why not, love?"

“Ashor said it came from a starward butt.”

Everyone around the fire looks up at once. Ashor’s shouting drowns out Eva’s snort of laughter.

“She’s fibbing!” he cries.

Xemi glowers at him. “Am not!”

Kaami smiles between them, not giving in to their squabble. I exchange a glance with Eva. *Kids are the same on any planet.*

“Come with me.” Kaami takes little Xemi by the hand. “We will find something yummy for you to eat.”

The little girl looks appeased. After Kaami gives Ashor a look of warning, he follows behind with lowered ears and an annoyed tail whipping back and forth.

The small family leaves the corner, and Eva grins. “Just in time for dinner and a show.”

“Ashor enjoys his antics,” Waella says.

“Boys will be boys, my mother always said,” Eva says.

Waella snickers around a bite of food. “Your mother is an intelligent woman.”

I’ve heard Eva’s stories about her older brothers. It sounded like I should count myself lucky I didn’t grow up with a brother. “All you can do is hope they one day grow out of their bullshit and be good men,” I say.

Eva looks up and studies me for a moment. She seems to be trying to tell me something with her eyes, but for the life of me, I don’t know what she’s getting at.

Speak, woman.

She tilts her head toward Waella twice and sets her platter on the log next to her. “I need to grab some more of that mango-sauce. It’s tasty.”

The hard look on her face tells me she means business. She’s like the perfect wingman, only she’s delivered me to my midwife.

Great.

Thanks, Eva. What if I was enjoying myself and don’t want to dive into my screwed up sex life right now?

I give her a tight-lipped smile, and all at once, I’m alone with Waella.

She puts a strip of meat in her mouth and chews, barely looking at me. Oblivious to what I’m going through.

I talk to Waella all the time. Why is the thought of asking her questions about Kovak and my baby so scary? She’s a talented healer, and honestly,

I'm lucky to have her as I go through this big unknown.

She often checks on how things are progressing and how I'm feeling. Those questions are simple, though. It's the more personal ones I have a hard time with.

Any emotional changes? How are things with you and Kovak? Is he excited?

I answer with automatic responses. Fine. We're fine. He's thrilled.

But our relationship is what's been weighing on me the most.

How can I blurt that out, though? She's known Kovak her whole life. She and I are friends, but it hasn't been for very long. How am I supposed to discuss my sex life with a woman I just met three months ago?

A part of me knows I should treat that part like any sort of clinical trip to the doctor. But back on Earth, I never bumped into my gynecologist at a coffee shop. I don't know if I could face the woman who lights up my downstairs like a runway and goes spelunking with those cold-ass tools and just strike up a conversation.

I don't have the first clue how to talk about any of this with Waella.

But I have to.

I nibble on the head of a sprout, a brown broccoli-like vegetable, and wish it had a bit of rum in there.

"Where's Namami?" I ask.

One ice-breaker is as good as another, I suppose.

Waella looks up and wipes some steak juice from her lip. "Trinity is playing with him."

"Really?" It comes out of my mouth before I can stop myself. Even though she's the only one of us that has ever been pregnant before, she's never struck me as particularly maternal. I'm surprised by the thought of her babysitting. "That's nice."

Waella nods. "Anything that gives me an extra couple of minutes to eat by myself is good."

Okay, Gemma. We don't have much one-on-one time. Focus.

"Right. Hey, I have something to ask you."

My stomach twists, even as she nods pleasantly.

"Of course."

"It's about babies. Or really, being pregnant. Or pregnant anatomy."

Get a grip, woman.

My tongue feels dry and too big. Does it swell when it's not moist

enough?

“Are babies, like, wrapped up in there?” I move my hands over my belly. “In a bubble?”

Waella’s smile is gentle and kind. “They are. In their own little egg.”

Oh shit, have I asked all the right questions before now? The babies aren’t actually in eggs, are they?

Waella blinks larger eyes for a moment as she watches me freak out. Then she puts up a hand to stop me. “Not a bird egg, dear. I guess you could call it a bubble.”

So much relief rushes out of me, I nearly fall off my log seat.

“The baby is safe in there. Is that what you’re asking?”

I take my lower lip between my teeth tentatively. *Go, Gemma. Do it.*

“Yes. And no. I want to know if the baby and its bubble are okay if anything else should...go in there.”

“You really shouldn’t put strange things in there.”

My cheeks burn like she’s put a stick of fire to them. “No, no. I mean...”

“Kovak?”

My stomach feels like it hits my toes. Everything inside goes cold, even while every square inch of my skin flames in embarrassment.

“Yes. He—we—have been having some problems. I’ve got all these hormones going, right? Really looking forward to the alone time and all that, but he won’t...”

Waella nods, and I let my words drift off. She reminds me of a kind grandmother, even though she’s not that much older than me. She sets her platter to the side and gives me her entire attention. Far more than I want, but I’m listening.

“He won’t mate with you, you mean?”

I wouldn’t choose those exact words, but...

“Yes.”

“Is he acting reserved in any other way?”

“Not at all.”

“I hate to say it, but Eva was right before. Boys will be boys.”

“Excuse me?”

“Maybe I’m not using that phrase right, but it’s not uncommon for warriors to fear the bodies of their mates when they carry their children.”

“Being afraid to hurt the baby, you mean?”

“Normally, yes.”

“Do you think that’s what’s wrong with Kovak?”

Waella’s eyes soften. “I’ve known Kovak for a long time. He’s never been as happy as he is with you. His soul sings a new song. He’s not the same man I knew before. If you have any doubts about him, let them go. Some men do all they can to protect their family, even in odd ways.” Her mouth tilts crookedly, and the thought lifts some of the weight from my chest.

“You think he may be back to normal after the baby arrives?”

“I would bet on it.”

I blow out a shallow breath. Thank God.

With my soul more at ease and the important part of the conversation over, I peek toward the center of the square where Eva stands by the food table. As soon as I catch her eye, she starts walking back. She looks like an overgrown, furry caterpillar in that giant fur blanket, a tiny bowl of sauce cupped between her hands.

“This stuff is so good.” She enters our circle and sits down like nothing’s happened. Then she stares at me, her eyes raking over my mostly uncovered body.

“How are you not freezing?” she asks.

“Baby heat. It’s real. I about sweat Kovak out of the bed at night.”

She bundles the blanket tighter beneath her chin. “I’m looking forward to that. What have you been listing out?” She nods her chin at the lists in my lap.

“Right now? Presents.”

“Goodie! So much fun. Do you have any ideas yet?”

“I have a few rattling around in my head. One you can help me with, if you’d like?”

She nods and lifts a piece of mushroom dipped in mango sauce to her mouth. “For sure. I’d love to help.”

I sit taller to look around, ears on the swivel, but there aren’t many others nearby or paying us attention. Prime dinnertime won’t be for another hour. It’s just us and Waella.

I huddle in closer. “Do you remember those cliffs near the NASA base? That had the shiny chunks of rock in them?”

“I was thinking of going there too!” Eva claps.

I knew this lady was my bestie for a reason.

“Trinity loves all those shinies,” she continues.

“Exactly. I’m sure we could find something amazing out there.”

“Xjhun’s already brought her back a nice little stash of them. You think we can find something she’s not already hoarding away in her tent?”

“She can’t have everything.”

“Should we go in the morning?”

I take a corner of my lip between my teeth, wondering what the men will say to that. “Do you think Kovak and Drek will get mad if we try to go out there?”

She chuckles. “Uh, alone? Yeah. But maybe they’ll go with us?”

“Maybe, but I already took him off course today. The plateau is much farther away.”

“It’d only take a few hours to get there. We could get it done.”

A few hours between everything else on my list? I know this was originally my idea, but our small timeline already has me panicking.

“Drek mentioned wanting to track striders tomorrow,” Eva says.

“Striders? Why?”

The big ostrich-looking birds are like a cross between a Gallinimus and a muscled stork. Some feathers, some scales, long necks and legs. Those things are fast. They remind me of some cartoons I saw as a child where the characters were TSTF. Too stupid to function. The bird-like dinos are drastically unintelligent. Walking off cliffs or right into the jaws of waiting Thunder Claws. They’re a bunch of oversized dodo birds.

“For Christmas dinner,” Eva says.

“Oh. Brilliant.”

I’ve never eaten one, but now that I think about it, I can’t believe I didn’t consider them in place of a turkey.

“Xjhun told Trinity they should be like what she’s looking for, so Drek is going to scout some out tomorrow. Apparently, they migrate through here this time of year.”

“It sounds like we have the perfect outing for tomorrow,” I say. “I’ll talk to Kovak about it tonight.”

“And I’ll tell Drek.”

Her wording is enough to make me burst out laughing, but I hold it in check with an amused grin. She could just *tell* Drek. She’s got that man wrapped around her finger, and he’s delighted to be there. I love them.

“Do you have ideas for anyone else yet?” I ask.

She sticks out her tongue. “I thought shopping for men back on Earth was hard. What do you make for the father of your child?”

The point hits true for me, too. “It is hard. The first time in my life I’d actually love to see a few commercials. What should we buy, Oh Powerful Google?”

Eva giggles. “Or those ads on our Truebook feed that could read our mind and spit out every ‘Thirty Things Your Man Wants This Year’ article you can think of.”

“We’ll just have to get creative.”

“More than saying, ‘Merry Christmas, I made you a baby?’”

“If we want to show them the proper way to celebrate.”

“I knew it. I’ll mark that one off the list,” she says. “But really, I was thinking of making Drek something he could use on patrol or with the levadon.”

That doesn’t surprise me. The two of them spend a lot of time with the dino-mounts. They’re the wrangler pair in these parts now.

“Can you make something like that?” I ask.

“These guys are skilled warriors and badass with their obsidian spears, but they don’t have any ranged weapons.”

I stare at her expectantly. “Are you going to make him a gun?”

She wrinkles her nose humorously. “No, but I used to make bows and arrows with my grandpa.”

“Really? Does that mean removing it from the box and attaching the string?”

“No, I mean find our own sticks, bend them just right, and add the cordage. We carved arrows too.”

I shake my head and blink. “You were a little survival girl, weren’t you?”

“Grandpa was fun.”

“He sounds like quite the character.”

“I haven’t made one in a long time, but I think I could still do it.”

“I don’t even know why you’re still considering this. I’m sure Drek will be very impressed. Hell, I can’t wait to see it. Get to work.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ve got other ideas to get to, but I’ll see you tomorrow. And Waella...”

The quiet mother, just happy to get some peace while she eats her dinner, smiles up at me.

“Thank you,” I say. “For the talk.”

“Of course, Gemma. I hope you’re feeling better.”

“I am.”

With a wave to them both, I head into the rows of huts. I have more brainstorming to do, but I'm forming an idea of what I want to make for Eva. Something I think she'll really like. A perfect gift for my most special friend.

CHAPTER TEN

KOVAK

“KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN OVER THERE.”

It comes out of my mouth automatically, but Gemma doesn't turn back and give me one of those faces that says I'm coddling her too much, so I guess I'm okay.

I half meant it in encouragement, to keep her eyes peeled because it's easy to miss some of the more precious stones if you're not paying proper attention. But I also meant it in all seriousness because even though I could sprint to her in just a few pulsebeats right now, that's still too far for my liking. She's close enough I can still easily hear her and Eva chatting, but I can't reach out a hand and immediately pull her to me. In the village, that's not a big deal. Out here on the prairie, my nerves are in shambles.

I lean against Vax's shoulder and cross both arms over my chest, attempting to listen to Drek's description of the strider footprints he saw earlier this morning, but my attention is elsewhere. It's watching the beautiful curve of Gemma's back as she leans over and pokes at a few stones in the dirt, as well as the tree line in the distance just beyond her. It's listening to the women speak and laugh, such a lovely sound, while also waiting for a footstep behind me or down the straight line of the plateau's slope. It's staring at the swell of my mate's belly and knowing our baby is depending on me to protect it. From everything.

And right now it's in the Big Valley.

Where I once rescued his or her mother from the vicious beasts that roam this land.

I am not comfortable being out here with my family, but I know how much this means to Gemma. I'll tolerate it, but I'm counting the breaths until I can pull her onto the levadon's back with me.

"You awake over there?"

My ears swivel in Drek's direction, and I straighten with a start. Even Vax is staring at me, probably wondering why I'd started leaning on him so hard.

"I'm fine."

"You've seemed lost lately," Drek says. "Everything okay?"

"Just adjusting to the idea of being a father."

One of Drek's ears twitches and his encouraging expression doesn't look as strong as it did a moment ago. "I know what you mean. It's such a big change."

"It's a wonderful change. I just don't like them being out here."

Drek looks at the women too, studies them. I can feel his energies moving through some of the same feelings I did.

"The women and children are safe in the village," I say. "These women venture out so much farther than our mothers and sisters ever did."

Drek's gaze never leaves Eva and Gemma, but the edge of his mouth turns up in a smile. "They do. They are brave Kutarian women. It makes me love them all the more."

The energy that waves around me now is one I know the feeling of all too well. I gaze at them with an appreciative hum in my throat.

They are brave. They've been through so much in so little time. And still they're flourishing. We are not worthy of their dedication and love, and yet, I will forever be humbled and appreciative Gemma chose to stay with me.

I'll just have to double up on patrols and security to keep everyone safe. There are enough warriors to spare. Xjhun's six-man patrol traveled to the north end with a few brahnts this morning to dig up Gemma's tree. Once the festivities are over, I'll rearrange the groups and areas to ensure thorough coverage of our borders.

All will be well. I'll be sure of it.

Drek and I stand and watch in silence a moment more before Gemma jumps up with something clutched in her hand.

"I found it!"

She holds a rock out for Eva to examine, and they both hop on their toes in an excitement I can feel all the way over here.

“Success,” Drek murmurs, and we both chuckle.

I don’t know what all they’re looking for, but whatever shiny rock they found was the last item on the list. With that, we should be good to head out. Just in time to save myself from blurting out any more unwanted worries.

The women walk back to us, and Drek holds out a hand. “Let’s get those treasures home.”

Eva grins and takes his hand, showing him a palmful of sparkling rocks.

“Did you get what you needed?” I ask as I drape an arm around Gemma’s shoulders.

“I did. Look at this thing!”

She holds up an oval-shaped green stone with a rainbow-like sheen. It’s remarkably clean for a mountain rock, and I can see the allure of it. The green is a pleasant shade, especially with the other colors swirling over it. The surface catches the sun in a fascinating way. I suppose I can see why the females like them so much.

“That’s very attractive,” I say.

Gemma laughs. “Attractive? It’s beautiful. Trinity is going to love it.”

Her laugh is so nice I can’t let the conversation go at that. “Things can’t be attractive and beautiful all at once?” I give her side a playful prod as I help her up onto Vax’s back.

She giggles. “I doubt you’re attracted to the rock.”

“I’m not, but I am attracted to you, and you’re very beautiful.”

“That’s different.”

“Oh, I know.” I mount up behind her and curl around her body. “You’re far different from anything I’ve ever known.”

“One of a kind,” she purrs.

I pull her closer until she leans her head back against my chest and looks up at me. I press a kiss to her forehead, my heart singing.

“Ready to head home, love birds?” Drek asks.

If we were in a safe space, I’d tell him to go without us. I have a beautiful woman to tend to. But we can’t linger here, so I nod at him. “Lead the way.”

Drek steers Rhux away from the plateau, and we follow the shallow path we made earlier in the snowy grass, heading back toward our ridge between the mountains. The morning is peaceful, and even though it snowed again last night, most of it has already melted away. It’ll likely be the last day the air is

warm enough to clear the snow. The real Cold Season is on the way. The Skylights will appear in a couple days now. Tomorrow, the world will be white.

We ride in silence for several paces before Drek speaks up, "Tell us a story of this Christmas thing."

"You mean the origin story?" Eva asks.

"No, one of your stories."

The women exchange a glance, and even though I can't see her face, I can feel Gemma's energy glow. She loves talking about Christmas. It makes me smile, and I settle deeper in the saddle behind her.

"I celebrated on the farm," Eva says. "We got two extra Christmas trees for the goats to nibble on. I don't know if they like them as much as the pumpkins at Halloween, but they still went nuts over them."

"What's Halloween?" I ask, while Drek inquires about the pumpkins.

Gemma giggles quietly, and the tremor in her body is delightful against mine.

"Halloween is another holiday," Gemma says. "Instead of trees, we celebrate with pumpkins. They're like your spotted melons, but big and orange."

She holds both arms out and touches her fingertips together, as if she's holding a big boulder. Interestingly, her arms don't stretch out too much further than her own belly right now. But I keep that tidbit to myself.

"Humans have a lot of holidays," Drek says.

Eva rolls her eyes and laughs. "You have no idea. So, the goats loved their holiday treats, and the horses walked in the parades with us. We put Santa hats on them, and one year I painted some candy canes on Hercules's big ol' butt, and the little kids loved that. He did too. Peppermint was actually one of his favorite treats, and at the end of the parade, the kids would all gather around and feed him candy canes."

Eva smiles. I wonder how wistful she may be now. It sounds like she had an entire herd of animals back on Earth. A lot to take care of. Though from Gemma's stories, I know they've been living away from their parents' homes for some time. Maybe Eva has had proper time to adjust. Thankfully, we have our own herd of animals for her to help. She fits in perfectly here.

I turn my attention back to Gemma and wrap my arms around her. "What about you? Tell us about your Christmases."

"We rarely had a big Christmas when I was growing up," she says. "But

there was one year when my grandmother came to visit. My parents had been fighting a lot, so it was nice to have her around. She took me shopping and to this breakfast with Santa thing where we ate pancakes and bacon while all the little kids ran over to jump up onto Santa's lap."

"The Santa is real?" I ask. "From how you explained it before, I thought he was a Christmas god who blessed the children each year."

"That's pretty much it. Only, some guys dress up like him to surprise the children, too. Some regular guy who also has a round belly and nose like a cherry. The kids love it. I was like twelve that year, though, so Gran and I just watched. It was the best breakfast."

Gemma rubs her belly, and I wonder if she's remembering or hungry. Or thinking of our child. Is she going to be upset she can't take her baby to this breakfast with Santa? I hope this celebration is as magical as she hopes it will be.

"After that, we made cookies at home and drove around the neighborhood, handing them out. Until all the pretty lights came on."

Even though there's a tinge of sadness in her voice as she reminisces, her energy is radiant and calm. Just how I like it.

"That sounds like a nice day," I say.

"It was."

I hope I can bring her as much joy during her holiday as she had before. As well as prepare for the next time she needs me to make this season special for our children. By the way she's cradling her belly right now, I have a feeling that's going to be a dream of hers. And a goal of mine.

From what I've heard, she's doing a fine job getting her Christmas preparations together. Our warriors will have her tree dug up today. Kaami stopped by the hut early this morning before we left to give Gemma a lesson on creating baby clothes. She has her lists of other items I can't decipher, but I know she's working hard.

Such an amazing woman.

Ahead of us, the last ridges before home loom. Riders wore the path through them down to smooth stones generations ago. Hundreds of levadon feet have run through here.

Drek leads the way around the rocky walls, at one spot pointing out a pair of tracks in the snow. When I ride over them, I look too.

The divots in the icy blanket have three large toes. Not the wide spread of a juvenile Thunder Claw or levadon, not the clawed foot of a vulture. These

have an outer toe that curls in toward the center one, made for grabbing the ground as it runs. Impossible to mistake.

We've come across a young strider.

Perfect.

"Looks like you've found what you're looking for too," I call up to Drek. He turns his mount around with a cocky grin. "Just in time."

The migrating striders haven't gone into the southern valleys yet, as we'd hoped. Xjhun asked us early this morning to keep an eye out today. It's possible there's only a day or two left to hunt them. If we want to present them to our women for their Christmas feast, we still have a chance.

I just wish they were closer to the village. Striders out here in the valley can be dangerous. They're the favorite meal of many creatures.

I've barely formed the thought when Rhux comes to a stop in front of us. Vax's muscles bunch and tighten beneath me.

I've let my guard down, and I curse myself as all my senses heighten. My focused gaze goes to the horizon, my ears following on a swivel. The field is clear, but I can feel the slight tremble in the air. Hear the hint of footfalls in the distance. The rhythm isn't one of a four-legged beast, and a sense of urgency explodes in my chest.

I know what monsters track the striders in the cooling season.

I should have paid more attention.

By the time I whip my head around to check the northern field, Gemma's already pressed back against me with a yelp. She cowers low in my lap, arms clutched around her belly, and I pull her closer.

But the first glimpse of a square carnivore head sends a shudder through my body like it never has before.

The rest of the Thunder Claw bursts over the hilly horizon in the distance, and my blood turns to ice. The beast runs toward the far river, where the striders have likely gone for the day, but that's not nearly far enough away.

Eva screams, but Drek is quick to cover her mouth and quiet her. He clutches the reins around his woman as Rhux spins in an agitated circle. Gemma remains frozen in my arms, and my chest fills with the sound of my pounding heart.

For a moment, my body feels like stone. I can't move. We'll be stuck here until the monster comes to devour us. The black dread seeps through me and sinks like a sickening weight in my gut.

We're easy prey out here, though it isn't my life I'm afraid for. I've run

from and occasionally fought off a Thunder Claw with my tribe. They're vicious, but we can best them. Today, however, I'm not out here with my men. I'm here with my pregnant mate. The two beings who matter the most to me in this world.

How could I have brought her out here?

"Kovak!" Drek bellows.

My ears jerk toward him, and like a sleeping muscle that isn't sure it's going to cooperate today, my neck follows.

Drek is a stone's throw farther away now, his reins bunched in tight hands with Rhux fighting against them. He's wheeled back around to stare at me. Then his eyes move to the field behind me, and they grow larger. My stomach pinches, like it wants to empty itself in utter horror.

The women scream and I know before I turn that it's already happened. The Thunder Claw has spotted us.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GEMMA

“KOVAK!” I GASP, MY HANDS CLUTCHING HIS THIGH AND GRABBING FOR HIS arm. “We have to go!”

I kick my feet furiously and some of the jabs connect with Vax’s ribs. He may like me, but I’m not his bonded rider. No matter what I say or do, he’s not going to listen to me.

It has to be Kovak.

Unfortunately for us, he’s not responding.

“Kovak, please!” I twist around enough to shake his shoulder. I don’t know if it’s my voice or seeing that gigantic asshole sprinting up behind us, but Kovak finally comes back to life. The stiffness that’s taken over his body melts away.

“Hold tight,” he grunts, and when he grabs the reins, I nearly faint in relief.

Drek and Eva dash for the path through the ridges ahead of us, and Kovak follows them. The levadon bolt for the rocky terrain with a few squawks I’ve learned is them communicating with one another. They’re intelligent and they’re fast, but we’re in horrible conditions. We’re riding double on them, slowing them down. Not the brightest move. I know Kovak and Drek were trying to be more protective, but now that we’re here...stupid. I know Vax can top out faster than this. Probably Rhux, too.

Not only are we slow, but we’re also jumping right onto the rocky road

up the slope. The worn path may look close to cobblestone but I wouldn't place a bet on which one of those rocks will wiggle and move when we sprint over them.

The hammering of the Thunder Claw's feet on the ground is like an earthquake trailing us. In the neo-paleontology program, I learned the Thunder Claw species usually grew to an average of sixty feet long and between twenty and twenty-five tons. I have a feeling this beast tops the scales at the higher end.

We learned nothing about levadon in the courses. It was an undiscovered species then—I imagine it still is for the rest of humanity. I don't know how fast they run, but I've seen them escape large predators before.

Just not with me on their backs.

The jostling is a bitch on my hips and belly. I cling uncomfortably to the saddle with my knees and grab at Vax's rough, scaly neck, but nowhere is there a good anchor point.

I do my best, and Kovak keeps an arm around my chest like a seatbelt.

“Hang on,” he growls in my ear.

His body's tense. I fit myself to it for more support. And to hide.

Are we about to get eaten alive?

Ahead of us, Rhux slides on some of the loose rocks and makes a leap for the top of the slope. Part of its prey slipping away must really piss the Thunder Claw off because it opens up and lets loose an ear-splitting roar.

I cower against Kovak's chest, wishing I could cover my ears, but I don't dare let go of Vax's neck. The sound shakes through me like a crack of thunder.

How can that beast run full throttle while making a noise like that?

Once we reach the top of the slope, Vax puts his head down and dashes up onto the ridge. Snow-dusted rocks dot the terrain, some of them half the size of the levadon. As Rhux dodges one, something in front of it moves and he jerks to the side with a surprised squawk.

I'm afraid something else has jumped out to eat us from the front, but it's only a young strider. The ostrich-looking beast squeals and dives out of the way of the tromping levadon feet. Vax spots the creature up ahead, unperturbed, and continues forward as fast as he can.

Until Kovak pulls back on the reins to slow him.

“What are you doing?” I gasp.

“Don't let go,” is his only answer.

His arm slips free from my body, and a new panic flares to life inside me at the threat of falling off and getting trampled by giant dino feet.

Vax slows, shaking his head against the reins with an alarmed snarl. It's amazing he's listening to Kovak at all with the Thunder Claw on his tail, but somehow, he's hanging back, waiting to see what his rider will do.

Fascination aside, these two have lost their fucking minds!

"Kovak!" My throat closes around the word and I barely get it out. *Don't slow down*, I want to say. *We're no match for Head-the-Size-of-a-Bus back there.*

The words won't come through. I dig my heels into Vax's sides, hoping he'll have more sense than my husband.

The ground quakes beneath those heavy feet. It's way too close. Coming up on the ridge path. The Thunder Claw has a wicked smell, and I can see the saliva sparkling on its teeth.

Way too close.

Kovak lets go of the reins to pull a long knife from a sheath on the saddle, and my body turns to ice. I open my mouth to scream at him, but everything is too tight to make a noise. I've had nightmares like this. Being in harm's way, needing urgently to scream and shout, form the words to call for help, but nothing comes. I've never felt so constricted in my waking life as I do now.

If you're going to fight this asshole, let me off first!

Far ahead, Rhux has stopped and turned. Drek and Eva look back at us with horrified eyes.

I want to shut mine. To block out all the torment and just drift back behind my eyelids until I can't feel or hear anything going on. But my body is buzzing far too much for that. I'm in major fight-or-flight mode.

All I can do is hang on.

Vax dodges the large rocks, maintaining the speed Kovak's set him at, even while the monster closes the gap between us. Then we pass the strider still huddled by the rock, and Kovak jerks behind me.

Time crawls. I glance back just in time to see the big knife fly and embed itself in the strider's head with enough force it knocks the animal flying. Blood splatters into the soft snow. The strider lands and bounces, sprawling onto the path behind us.

Kovak's arm tightens on me once more, and his free hand is back on the reins in an instant. We're sprinting again, drawing away from the giant

Thunder Claw as it stalls and stops to smell the fallen animal. It pokes the strider with its massive nose, flops it over, and starts eating.

I gawk at the scene and let out a gasp of laughter.

Holy shit, it stopped. We almost died.

My body collapses back against Kovak's hard chest, and I feel faint all over again. Like I may pass out in relief.

"What in two moons were you thinking?" Drek scolds when we rejoin them on the path.

"Saving your tail," Kovak says as we ride by the other two. "Let's keep moving before it decides it's still hungry."

CHAPTER TWELVE

GEMMA

BACK AT THE VILLAGE, WE RELAY THE STORY OF OUR MISADVENTURE MORE than a few times. Or at least Kovak and Drek do. After the first one and a half retellings, Eva and I retire to our nearby corner of the village square to sit and breathe. Many of the Kutarians offer condolences and thanks for our safety. I take everything in stride with heartfelt gratitude, but it grows more and more difficult to remain strong and in one piece.

It's the first time since settling into my new peaceful village life that I've come face to face with death. I've seen the dangers—been just as up close—but it feels different this time. There's a baby to worry about. I've grown accustomed to not being afraid of everything living on this planet. Even though I know the men see some terrors of Xion V when they're away from home, it's easy to forget about all the bad and focus on the beauty when we stay in the village. Where it's safe. Where life is simple and I'm not afraid to bring a child into the world.

Out there on the plains, things felt quite different.

Thankfully, Trinity doesn't ask questions when she joins us—I'm sure she's heard the story from all the men. She just puts an arm around Eva and me and lets us sit in silence.

Once the crowd of concerned villagers dissipates, Kovak comes over and places a hand on my shoulder.

"How are you feeling?" His voice is gruff, like he's tired of talking.

I lean my cheek against his warm forearm. "I'm okay. Just tired now."

He steps over the log I sit on, crosses in front of me, and squats at my knees so he can reach a hand up to touch my face. It's strong and feels so safe and warm against my skin. Like he's hugged my entire body with just that one touch.

"Are you sure?" he whispers.

His eyes are big and beautiful, full of concern. As much as I'm moved by his anxious and worried energy, I'm more overcome with the need to be sure *he's* okay.

My hands go to his chest, slide up his collarbone and neck, anywhere I can connect with him.

"I'm here," I say. "With you. And we're alive."

The tug at the edge of his mouth is the most handsome and touching smile I've ever seen. "For that, I am thankful."

This man did everything he could to save us. Not only me and our child, but our friends and the entire village. If that Thunder Claw had followed us home, it would have caused catastrophic havoc before anyone could have taken it out or chased it away.

Kovak's a hero.

My hero.

And as much as the entire village wants to toast him at dinner tonight, I want him all to myself. To snuggle in his arms, where I feel loved and completely safe.

He runs his hand down my neck and shoulder, raising goosebumps on my arms. "Are you hungry?"

I shake my head. I'm not in the mood to eat. My stomach's been swirling for the last couple of hours. "I'm just going to go rest in the hut during dinner."

I go to stand and Kovak's hands grasp mine, helping me to my feet. Then he dips his head to find my eyes and recapture my attention. "Are you sure you're okay? I can have Waella make you a tea."

As much as I could use a little anti-anxiety, the thought of sipping hot tea makes my stomach turn on its head. I grimace. "I'm fine, really."

I step out of the ring of seats, and Eva pats my hand as I go by.

"Feel better, sweetie," she says.

"Thanks. I think I just need to lie down for a while."

I don't need an escort, but I'm grateful for Kovak's shoulder to lean on as

he leads me out of the square. I'm tired. It must be the adrenaline dump. And lugging around this whale of a body.

"Don't worry about dinner," Kovak says as we near our hut. "I'll go back and get you some if you change your mind. For now, we can just turn in early."

I relish what a good man he is. How well he takes care of me. But his words stir up more unease. Jumble all the considerations of what that statement could eventually mean.

I don't know if I'm ready to talk to him yet.

Nor am I ready to go back to his bed without having that conversation.

My teeth gnaw into my lower lip as the anxiety courses through me.

This is so stupid, I berate myself. I've never had a hang-up over talking to him. About anything. It's been one of the beauties of our relationship. I'm so comfortable with him.

Why am I feeling so weird about our sex life? It's not like we haven't done and seen and enjoyed everything.

Just talk to him.

Like it's so easy. But it's not. So much so that I want to cry.

We reach the doorway. Kovak puts a hand out to push the hide flap out of the way, and I put one up to brace against the wall frame before we go in.

"You don't have to stick around here," I say. "I'm just going to rest and work on some gifts."

His brow creases between those big green eyes as we pause in the doorway.

"Are you sure?" he asks. "I don't mind staying."

"I'm sure. Really." I manage a smile and squeeze his hand. "You should go eat. Be with your men."

I know he's already sent Xjhun and a few others on a stealth patrol—*Do not get close enough to be scented or engage the Thunder Claw, but be sure it doesn't wander closer this way*—but I'm sure he and Drek could decompress together.

"If that's what you want," Kovak says. "I'll leave you to your peace."

"Just for a little while. I need to rest."

He brings my fingers to his warm lips. "I will check in on you later, my Gemma."

My smile is impossible to suppress. Even my ears drop back as I glow at him. I'm lucky he's so understanding.

After he departs, I go inside and stoke the central fire to flood more light into the room. The trunk Kovak made for me a couple of months ago sits in the corner. I open it and pull out the Christmas goodies I have gathered so far. One of the tiny onesies I made with Kaami this morning is complete. It's not Macy's-quality but pretty darn good for my first go. The cloth-like leather is pale and bare except for a tiny dinosaur I drew on it with a piece of wax-like coal Waella gave me. I wanted to write something cute like *I Just Did Nine Months on the Inside*, but none of the other Kutarians would get it, so I went with the drawing.

I pull out a second onesie I've started and a dark leather bag I'm figuring out the dimensions for. I need to get them both done today. If the timing Kovak gave me is correct, the lights will be in the sky tomorrow night. The day after that is the one we've designated as Christmas. I've got a day and a half left to finish my gifts.

I need to move my tail.

Thankfully, I have an evening to myself now and an excuse to stay in and finish them.

As long as there are no interruptions.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KOVAK

I RETURN TO THE CENTRAL SQUARE CORNER WHERE GEMMA WAS SITTING, AND I must wear my confusion and concern on my face because before I can even sit, everyone turns to look at me with an assortment of frowns.

“Is she okay?” Eva asks.

Drek reaches over to grab my shoulder. His grip is hard but comforting. An exchange of energy shifts through us. I know he’s there if I need him for anything.

“She’s fine,” I say, though I don’t know how much I believe Gemma’s own words.

She’s been different lately. Sometimes herself, the woman I adore. Sometimes someone else. A woman I love no less, but I find myself confused about how to be the man she needs and make her happy. Often, it seems like she doesn’t even know who that is. Like she’s just as lost as I am.

“She’s not eating, though?” Waella asks.

I hadn’t noticed her presence. The group has grown since I left. Drek sits next to Eva and Trinity. Kaami’s boy Ashor plays next to Waella and her newborn. The healer stares at me with the typical concern I’ve known from her for ages.

“The chase really rattled her,” I say. “She isn’t in the mood to eat.”

Waella nods, but her face doesn’t smooth out as I expect. She turns her attention to her baby, but I can tell there’s something more she wants to say.

Maybe there's more I want to say too. I'm not even sure anymore. An odd feeling of being lost has crept over me, which isn't something I normally deal with. I always know what's going on in the village and how the tribe is doing. It's my job to know in order to better protect us. If something is amiss, my chief priority is to figure out what's wrong and fix it.

I enjoy fixing problems.

But when the issue involves the heart of the woman I love—and remains just beyond my understanding—things become complicated.

I stare at the sleeping baby in Waella's arms. Soon, Gemma and I will have one of those, too. A new, unknown part of life to deal with. I hope it's more transparent than my current situation. That it doesn't add to an already confusing problem.

A sudden pang of panic hits my gut, and I stand from the log I've only just settled onto.

“Waella, can I speak with you for a moment?” I ask.

She looks at me again, surprise etched in her brow. I can feel the others in the circle staring, too, but I'm not budging now.

It's not odd that the Lead Warrior would need to speak with the High Healer. Even if I've never needed to before.

But I've never had a pregnant mate at home before either.

After only a moment's hesitation, Waella nods. “Of course.”

I offer a hand to help her up, but she's already on the way. With the baby tucked against her shoulder, she stands and moves past me out of the circle. I follow, careful not to meet any of the others' gazes. I don't know what I'm doing yet. Just that it needs to happen.

Thankfully, no one calls after me.

Waella and I stroll through the village square and out into the clear side, far from the rows of huts, near the levadon pit. This quiet spot has a fantastic view of the mountains where the Skylights will bloom in another day's time.

An area of wide, flat ground stretches between the edge of our community space and the canyon where the sound levadon munching on their recently delivered dinner drifts into the air. It's a place where the youngsters often run and play. A calm, open space where mothers walk with their babies and enjoy the quiet, or at least they did years ago when there were more of them.

Now, a small part of it is being dug up. A hole wide enough to fit a large tree.

What's left of the grass this season has been peeled back like the flaps on a hut door, exposing the hard ground beneath. Two Kutarian men chip at it with their spears while another shoves glowshrooms into the loosened dirt with a stick. A hungry brahnt snuffles along after them. The animal's nose and tusks turn over mounds of packed soil at a time. The hole for Gemma's tree roots will be done in no time.

Waella watches the diggers too as we walk by at a leisurely pace. She's not rushing me, and thankfully, she speaks first.

"This Christmas tradition is interesting."

"Unlike anything I've ever heard of."

"Nor I, but the women seem very fond of it. I had Eva in my hut yesterday learning to make some sort of sweet she insists is pertinent to the celebration. Trinity has asked for help making dinner plans. Even my Enud is off digging up a tree?" She laughs like it's a preposterous notion.

A couple of days ago, I would have joined her.

Instead, I smile. "Gemma has been more excited about the celebration than she has been in a while."

Waella nods. "It is good you're doing so much to help her, then."

A twinge of guilt hits me in the throat. Am I doing enough for her?

"I'm trying," I say. "Though now I'm worried I've traumatized her with our outing today."

"Thunder Claws are a terrifying part of life. There likely isn't one of us living here who hasn't run from one at some point."

"They don't have things like that in the human world, though. She's not used to it."

"Now she is. Just in time to teach her child proper respect for the creatures here."

I want to defend Gemma and insist it's me who should take better care of her, but I know Waella has a point. My mate isn't on my arm at every moment. I won't have my child by the tail all the time either. They both will be on their own sometimes.

Hopefully, Gemma realizes how important it is to stay with the tribe. We all work together to protect one another.

Waella and I circle around the open space again, away from the village square and huts where there is more privacy.

"Part of this Christmas thing is gift giving," I say, hoping to ease my way into the conversation I really want to have. "Is there anything for the baby I

can give to Gemma? She's so focused right now, I don't want her to feel overwhelmed when that time comes."

Waella pulls her lips in and studies the ground in front of us while we walk. "That is a good consideration. I believe Gemma's friends are handling part of that too, but I might suggest something practical. Like a bed."

Of course. A baby bed. I sweep our small hut with my mind's eye, realizing how little we have that would be helpful for a baby. I need to get to work.

Waella puts a hand on my arm and offers a reassuring smile. "It's okay. You need very little to start with. Start small. A bed is a fine idea."

Right, small. I can do that.

I let out a breath. "Thank you."

"Of course. Though, if you wouldn't mind a suggestion for now?"

I nod earnestly. "Yes, please."

"It's the mother who needs you now. Not the child. It comes later."

Her words blur into everything else I've been considering. Christmas, babies, safety, what should I give for my first gift-giving celebration? Now my child doesn't need me?

"I thought she would like the bed so she wouldn't have to worry about where to put the baby," I sputter. "Do I need to give her something different?"

Waella's smile warms, and I feel as if I'm looking at my mother. There's a knowing and maternal gleam in her eyes that eases the panic from my heart.

"The gift is a fine idea," she says. Her hand drops from my arm to support her baby's bottom. "What I mean is your mate is missing something from you right now and it's put her in a turmoil she doesn't know how to deal with."

I only thought the situation had confused me before.

"I've done something to distress her? That's the last thing I want."

"I doubt it's something you've done on purpose to hurt her."

Hurt? The thickening in my throat is unbearable.

"She does need your help, though," Waella continues.

Her gaze is sharp. Feeding me hints. Like I should know the answer and she's waiting for me to guess.

"I want to help however I can," I say.

Her face splits into a grin. "I don't know that it'll be a tremendous sacrifice." She stops to address me more formally. "Gemma has spoken to me

about her needs, asked how I could help. But I'm afraid it's not something I can assist with." She chuckles good-naturedly and nods to me. "That's all you."

A tickle of recognition dances at the edge of my thoughts, but I feel as if she's being pointedly cryptic.

"What can I do?"

"Her. Give her yourself." She points at me, first at the chest, then at my loincloth and back up. "All of that."

For a heartbeat, I think she's lost her mind, but that finger motioning at all of me sends a warm flush along my skin.

She means...

My ears droop an inch, and the back of my neck itches. I rub at it as I turn and start walking again, if for no other reason than I don't have to look at Waella anymore. The large lump in my throat grows uncomfortable, and I clear it away with a loud sound that startles even me.

"I see." My voice sounds strangled, and I cough. "She said that?"

Waella walks with me, and thankfully, she watches the ground, too. "That's right. It seems she's been missing you."

"But I'm there for her. I thought she was happy."

"I don't think she's *unhappy*. She just wants...more."

I pad through the crispy grass, listening to the dull crunch while Waella's words turn over in my head. *She wants more.*

"I understand, but I thought... Should we not take measures to protect the baby?"

Waella stops and regards me with a tilted head, a pitying smile on her face. "Kovak, that won't hurt the baby."

The skin along my cheekbones and ears burns. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. That baby is in the safest place it can be."

"And I can't hurt it?"

"You cannot. Actually, relieving the mother of stress helps the baby, too."

I sit on those words for a moment more, testing them. No one's ever bothered to give me advice about mating while a female with child before. I know how babies enter the world, though, and it seemed most logical not to put something as big as me in there. A tongue, maybe. A couple of fingers, no harm done. Gemma seemed happy with that. But I suppose it wasn't enough.

It was no simple job for me either. We haven't been together fully in

forty-two days. It's been agonizing. She feels and smells so good. It's all I can do sometimes not to flip her over and bury myself inside her. I've dreamed of it. Handled business on my own far more than I have in my life, unable to contain all the need I have for her.

She bewitches me, and these last two turns of the moon have been hard.

But now Waella is telling me I don't need to hold back anymore.

Gemma's healer says it's fine.

I won't hurt our baby. And I'll make Gemma happy.

I barely manage to give Waella a proper thank you before I'm backing away. "I appreciate the gift ideas, and the—you know—talk."

Her face lights up in a relieved smile. "You're most welcome."

She speaks it to my tail, however, because I'm already three long strides closer to the huts across the field.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GEMMA

I HOLD UP MY SECOND COMPLETED ONESIE AND SMILE TO MYSELF. THIS ONE IS made of the same eggshell-colored leather cloth as the other one, but I've drawn a traditional Christmas tree on the front. It's cute.

"I've kicked this sewing's ass," I say out loud to no one but myself.

That's another gift down. I must be halfway through my list by now. I can finish the others tomorrow, our designated Christmas Eve.

Working with my hands has helped ease my anxieties. I'm no longer playing the memory of the open mouth and big teeth coming at us over and over in my head. Or holding onto the feeling of being surrounded by that wretched smell and the tremble of giant feet hitting the ground.

Focusing on doing my best on the onesie has calmed my heartbeat. Besides my unsettled stomach, I'm feeling better. Enough to smile at my work as I set it on the back table next to the other presents I've finished so far. My to-do list sits there too, but rather than stir my pulse up by looking at it, I pick up the short branch I took from the Christmas tree. My mistletoe.

One Christmas, when I was around eight years old, I went with my grandmother to a holiday party. It was something small her friends put on with their families, with dancing and festive games. Dirty Santa and Christmas snacks for the kids. In the doorway between the two open rooms, someone had hung a piece of mistletoe. I'd never paid it any attention before that day, but as couples walked through, I became fascinated by it.

Some pairs walked right through, but some stopped to share a kiss. I took up a post nearby to watch as discreetly as I could, the first to notice when partygoers would lock lips. For most of them, it was a peck. One pair of teenagers went through later in the night, and the boy took the girl by the arm and pulled her back into the doorway with him. It seemed to confuse her until he nodded at the mistletoe. Then she smiled shyly. I couldn't hear what they said, but he went for it. Their kiss was much longer than the others, and both were all smiles and pink cheeks when they walked away.

There was something magical about the mistletoe after that day for me. Christmassy and flirty all at once. I never got my kiss under the mistletoe back on Earth, though.

Now, it's not a kiss that I want.

I glance at the support pole over the bed.

Trinity's voice whispers through my head—*Forget the doorway. You better hang that bitch over your bed*—and I laugh.

Though, then again...

What the hell.

I pull a loose piece of leather thread from my workspace and take the mistletoe to the bed, careful to balance myself as I step up onto it. Keeping myself upright with a giant belly throwing off my center of gravity is harder than I expected, but I grab the post overhead without toppling over and hold on. Then it's just pushing the cord between the pole and the tent leather overhead.

Things are feeling tipsy up here, but I've got it. I think.

Until the doorway flap opens behind me. I startle, but I keep a hand on the ceiling and frown curiously over my shoulder as Kovak strides in.

He's got that after-training glisten about him, and my nose flares all on its own, pulling in his intoxicating scent. His eyes widen when he sees me on the bed and I think he's going to scold me, but he doesn't look angry.

Instead, his eyes sweep up and down my body.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Is everything okay with you?" he echoes. "What are you doing up there?"

I glance at the string dangling overhead. "Hanging my mistletoe."

When I look down again, I find him prowling closer to the bed. Like a cat in the tall grass. His eyes are locked on me. Something's different, and there's an energy flowing into the room with him that feels like the beginning

of a lightning storm. Prickles of heat and electricity. On the verge of something dangerous.

I like it.

“That string up there?” he asks. “What for?”

I shake my head and hold up the small branch. “No, silly. *This*. Mistletoe is a Christmas tradition.”

He reaches the side of the bed, close enough I could reach out and touch, and I watch him closely. The shift in his eyes and ears tells me he’s distracted, yet still listening to my words.

So I go on.

“You hang it from a doorway for a party, or all season long.” With a quick wrap, loop, and tie, I secure the furry branch to the beam above us. “When two people stand under it, tradition says they share a kiss.”

He nods, gazing up at the green fuzz, before locking eyes with me again. Then his hand reaches for me, touches my hip and slides around to pull me toward him. In only two small steps, I’m at the edge of the bed and close enough he can slide both arms around my hips. They’re loose on my backside, just holding me against him, and my tail drapes over his wrists. It’s so close and so sensual it’s impossible not to get swept up into his warm mood.

“A kiss under the mistletoe?” His voice is deep and a touch slower than normal, a sexy drawl that pulls me in even further. “A kiss like this?”

His lips touch the large swell of my belly. The brush is as light as a butterfly, but enough to send a flicker of electricity through my body.

“Not quite like that,” I whisper.

He watches me as he slips a finger into the waistband of my skirt and pulls it down a few inches so he can deposit the next kiss on my bare hip.

“Maybe here,” he mumbles against my skin.

My pulse doubles. There is definitely better. Staring down at his bright green eyes from high up on the bed is mesmerizing.

“Though I’m curious...” His voice trails off. “If you’re supposed to hang mistletoe in the doorway... What’s it doing up there?”

His words throw me off guard for a moment. I knew this was a bad idea.

His gaze goes to my throat when I swallow, and the heat in his eyes is enough to catch my blood on fire. The energy that flows from his body is thick with need. He wants me as much as I want him. Even with the recent frustrations in our bed, I can’t ignore the way my body responds to him.

I still want my husband more than ever.

“I hung it up there for good luck,” I say.

Part of me feels silly about being too nervous to talk to him about our issue, and I half expect to feel a wave of distaste from him. But it’s not there. Instead, there’s a flow of excitement. A thrill in the air so strong I can smell it.

Kovak’s hand slides into my hair as he steps up onto the edge of the bed, closing the gap between us.

“You don’t need luck at all, my Gemma,” he rumbles before his mouth is on mine, and I’m lost.

He kisses me like it’s the first time. Fiery bolts of exhilaration lick through my body like the mistletoe has started us back at the beginning. Teenagers all hot and in a hurry.

He’s tall and broad enough to reach me around my belly, and for a moment, I forget all about it. His thumb caresses over my cheekbone, and the way his mouth captures me, I feel more loved and wanted than I have in my life. It’s a simple thing, a kiss, but today it’s everything I need.

Or at least it was.

When his fingers twist in my hair and draw back, I gasp at the thrilling sensation it sends through me. He tilts my chin up just enough so he can kiss my throat. His lips on my neck are so hot it feels like they’re branding me. The sear against my skin is delicious, and I open my mouth in delight.

“I want to be sure you never feel you need it, either.” His growl is sensual, vibrating over me, teasing my skin everywhere.

His hands move to my hips, holding me steady as he steps back off the bed, and with just a few movements of his fingers, he has my skirt ties loose. The leather cloth falls away. I feel more exposed than normal, standing up here on the bed. My pelvis aligns with his chest. Far closer to his hands and face than normal.

Every bit of me is so alive at this moment. I can even feel him breathing on me.

“There is no luck with us, Gemma,” he whispers. “Unless you count the good luck of us finding one another in the first place.”

His eyes lower to my body, to the junction between my legs. His face bows as if he means to kiss it, but instead his tongue slides between my thighs, curling right into my burning folds.

The sudden spark from his touch is like cold water dousing my feverish

skin. A shock to my body that makes me jump. I gasp, nearly losing my footing, and hold onto his shoulders to keep myself upright. My knees wobble and threaten to give.

“Oh, God,” I whimper, but his hands on my hips help to support me.

His tongue is as strong as any of his other muscles, and when it finds the most sensitive spot between my legs, I cry out.

I don’t know what’s come over him, but I’m ready. My fingertips dig into his shoulders as he works my body into a frenzy. When I’m afraid my legs won’t hold me anymore, he retreats a few inches to look up at me.

“You are the best thing I’ve ever tasted,” he rumbles. His eyes are wild, both sparkling and clouded with need.

“You are so skilled with your mouth,” I whisper.

His fingers on my hips tighten, and his eyes shift in intensity. He’s focused, honed in on me in a way that leaves me lightheaded.

It’s damn sexy.

“I enjoy making you feel good with it,” he says.

His excited breath on my wet skin causes goosebumps to prickle all over.

I run my fingers through his dark hair. “Then don’t stop.”

With a primal growl deep in his throat, he urges me down to the bed by the hips and flips me over. On my hands and knees with my rear in the air, I peer back over my shoulder at him. He kneels against the bed behind me and lowers his head again to drag his tongue—hot and fat—along the entire length of my folds. A shiver pulls through my body on contact.

Then the tip finds that tender part again and works it just right. My Kovak knows my body perfectly, and I can’t believe how fast he can get me to the edge of transcendence.

Being with him like this is enough to wash away any other fears or reservations from the day. It vanishes into the air with my gasp of delight.

I needed this.

I needed to be loved and caressed by the man I love.

Only now that my body wants to let go and let the euphoria take me away, I worry what will happen next. A knot of anxiety forms in my stomach.

I should have talked to him sooner. Now, I’m too far gone to have this conversation, and when I try to say his name, it only comes out in a gasp of ecstasy.

His tongue disappears long enough for his lips to move on me. “My Gemma, I can’t get enough of you.”

His words are amazing, but they also nearly bring me to tears. Frustration and an inkling of despair. It's cruel to hear at a time like this.

He laps his long tongue up my length again with a hum of satisfaction. I almost come undone at the wave of fire that burns through me.

"I *haven't* had enough of you," he sighs.

It takes a moment before his words register, but he continues on before I can truly consider them.

"It's been so long, Gemma." There's pain in his voice.

He sits back and his face is no longer between my legs. Even though my body is weeping for him now, a cold rush of fear moves through me.

Is that it? I didn't finish at all this time.

His hand props against my hip, his palm spread on my backside so I don't move. But on the inside, I'm a swirl of emotions. Ready to burst and feeling incredibly empty.

His voice is deep when he speaks again, brooding and sexy. "Far too long. I can't stand it anymore."

He shifts behind me, getting to his feet.

For one nightmarish breath, I think he's leaving. My hair flies when I whip my head around to look back at him again. Only this time, he's still there. His loincloth is gone and his body strains with his need.

I can't catch my breath as I stare, and when he tugs against my hip, pulling me closer, I feel as if I may pop already.

I whimper his name, pleading for him. But he's already there.

"I've needed you, Gemma." His voice sounds pinched, as if he's gasping for air like I am. "Needed to feel all of you."

Oh, God, I'm not going to make it.

I jump when I feel the tip of him brush my entrance. He fits himself just inside and I shudder in amazement already. When he sinks in completely, I can't hold on anymore.

That long, delicious stretch sends me right over the edge. Euphoria pings through me at a hundred miles an hour. I make a noise akin to a scream, but I can't help it. It's never felt so damn good.

He chokes out my name, and I can tell I've almost done him in, too. But he's still insanely hard, moving inside me like he's made it back home. It's perfect, and soon I'm riding another wave of amazing.

I've missed him so much and needed this for so long. A mix between the physical ecstasy and the strong connection with my mate. We are one again,

and it moves me so much that by the time he groans with release, tears are streaming down my face.

“Kovak, I missed you.” I sob.

But he just holds me, and it’s exactly what I need. He doesn’t ask if I’m okay or if anything is wrong. He can feel in my energy waves that I’m exactly how I want to be. Everything is back to normal.

Everything is amazing.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GEMMA

I SLEEP BETTER THAN I HAVE IN A LONG TIME. MY BODY'S WORN OUT. Everything aches in the most amazing way. The hut is warm, and my fur blanket is tucked up under my chin. I'm one content mama-to-be.

Except the brawny arms that held me all night are gone. It's not unusual for Kovak to wake and head out for training or patrol before I'm awake, but after our night together, I was hoping to wake up still nestled against him.

I slide a hand over his cool side of the bed and groan.

Something moves in the hut.

"Good morning to you, too."

I sit upright at the sound of his voice. It's thick from not being used yet today and so alluring I want to drag him right back to bed.

He stands at the back of the room, wearing a pair of long leather pants. What did they call those in the historical novels I read? Breeches? It's such a fresh look, far from his normal loincloth, but I'm not hating it. They're straight-legged with a distinct seam up the outside of the leg. The front is split like a pair of jeans with a fly, but the laces are undone and the sides of the pants hang low on his hips.

I take my lower lip in between my teeth. *Have mercy.*

"What's that you're wearing there?" I coo at him.

He glances down at the pants and looks back at me with a lopsided grin. "Pants. Do human men not cover up when it gets cold?"

I laugh as I scramble my way out of bed. He's hot, *and* he's got jokes.

Moving isn't easy today. My body hasn't had a workout like last night in a long time, but I make it over to him and rest my fingertips on his hips. "This isn't exactly how they wear them, though."

Aside from a few teenagers I've seen walking the streets after school, of course. But they wore clothes underneath.

Kovak, on the other hand, is practicing his sex-on-a-stick look with these pants. I could lick him from head to toe.

He glances down at my hands and his unfastened pants. "You mean the laces? I haven't finished yet." There's a mirth in his voice that tickles me into a giggle.

"Shall I help you with that?"

My fingers bypass the laces to take a quick dip inside the flap. The way everything comes to life in my hand drives me wild. I'm definitely awake now.

He chuckles but stills my hands. "Unfortunately, I have to go. My men don't need to wait on me."

Disappointment washes through me. "You're leaving?"

He brings my now empty fingers to his lips. "The Skylights come tonight. We're going to bring in the striders for your Christmas dinner tomorrow."

Oh, right. I've done this to myself. *Damn you, Past-Gemma.*

"If it's for dinner, can't you go tomorrow?"

"The snow is in place today. It'll be deeper tomorrow."

Sure enough, snow and ice fill the bottom inch of the doorway beneath the flap. There must be standing snow out there today.

I give Kovak my best puppy dog eyes.

His apologetic smile is enough to crumble me into pieces. "Besides, the striders will not have proper time to cook if we wait until tomorrow. It has to be today."

Worry creeps into my chest at the idea of him going out there, though. "What about the Thunder Claw? You don't even know if it's out there still."

"Xjhun's group has been scouting the area. The Thunder Claw has moved off. From what we can tell, the striders have gone to the south. We'll follow them and avoid any contact with the Thunder Claw."

"What if it tracks you?"

"We'll be on the lookout. This isn't the first time we've gone hunting, my Gemma."

The worry in my chest finds a crack and slithers into my lungs. I put a hand against my sternum to dampen the radiating ache.

“I don’t like this idea.”

He pulls me against him and hugs me close. “Do not worry about me. I’ll have Xjhun and my warriors with me. We will bring down a couple of striders and be back home before you know it.”

“How long?”

His ears tilt back a fraction as he calculates. “Maybe by lunch.”

“Maybe?”

The way his ears move forward and his entire face melts into a smile would normally be enough to soothe me, but today I’m still worried.

“I can’t predict how long it’ll take,” he says, “but I’ll do my best to hurry back to you. In the meantime, there’s a lot of beautiful snow outside.”

I stare at him for a moment. He’s trying to placate me. Like catnip for a riled-up minx.

I do love snow.

“Fine, but I’m walking out with you,” I say.

He nods, taking a small step back to reach down and tie up his laces.

I watch him work. The way his large biceps and shoulders bunch as he moves. The way his fingers brush over the soft silver skin stretched between his hip bones. I know how that part of his flesh feels under my fingertips. My lips. My body. How it smells and tastes.

He’s lucky he makes quick work of those laces and covers the exposed skin. For a moment, he was in danger of a more persistent request that he stay, including whatever sort of shimmying and stripping I needed to do to make it happen.

The way his eyebrow and the side of his lips perk up when he looks at me tells me he knows that too. “Don’t worry. We’ll be back soon.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

I don’t know what got into him last night, but I’ve never been so happy to be around him.

Now, I don’t want him to be away from me at all.

But he’s going with Xjhun to hunt, to bring Trinity the big turkey dinner she wants for Christmas. To make our holiday special.

Because I wanted it.

Kovak’s done nothing but try to help make this come to life. A giant celebration that’s nothing but a fantasy here. An outrageous make-believe

party I could have fabricated for all he knows. But he doesn't care.

Bless him. He's such a good man.

I smile at him, and he leans down to rest his forehead against mine. My eyes flutter closed, and I do nothing but stand there and breathe him in. He smells like home.

Then he takes my hand and leads me toward the doorway.

The simple cloth shawl I've been wearing no longer hangs there. In its place are two thicker ones made of soft leather and rimmed in fur. He takes one and wraps it around his shoulders. It doesn't cover his chest, but it drapes over his back and shoulders enough to provide warmth while still giving his arms full range of motion. It looks like a rough version of a knight's mantle, and I take a moment to soak that image in.

"I had Kaami make you one of these too." He slips the smaller one off the hook and hands it to me.

"You're so sweet."

He wraps it around me and secures a tie beneath my throat. It holds a surprising amount of warmth against my back as soon as it touches my skin.

"We'll get some pants for you too," he says.

"You don't have a maternity section around here, do you?"

Kovak frowns. "Maternity?"

I once saw a few pairs of maxi skirts with maternity belly waistlines I loved in an Old Navy store. I always thought I'd wear something like that one day. But leather skirts work too. I'm not sure pants would have the proper give for my belly now.

"It's clothes we have back home. But for now, I'm fine like this."

"But it's cold."

I chuckle darkly. "Not for me."

"If you're sure." He grabs the long, black-tipped spear resting in the corner by the door, and we head outside.

My breath catches. Snow sparkles over every inch of the ground. A light sprinkle of snowflakes still falls, dusting the huts and trees. The smell of wood burning and meat roasting wafts from the square. I've never experienced a Christmas barbecue in the snow, but it's not something I would turn down.

"Wow," I murmur. "This is a winter wonderland."

"Beautiful?"

"Very much."

“I’m glad it makes you happy.” He leans in to kiss my forehead again. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Please be careful.”

I hold onto his hand as he walks away, stretching my arm out until I can’t reach him anymore. He smiles at me one more time before leaving. Other large footprints mar the snowy path he’s taking, leading to the levadon pit. I’m glad so many others are joining him.

While I watch him go, Trinity crunches through the snow on my other side.

“Good morning.” She pulls a similar leather shawl up tighter over her shoulders. When she reaches me, she links an arm through mine. “Ready for breakfast?”

Not only am I thankful for the distraction, but I’m also starving. My stomach actually growls at the mention of food. “Yes, ma’am.”

“THAT THING LOOKS SO MUCH BIGGER THAN I REMEMBER.” I WATCH AS TWO levadon drag the massive tree behind them into the village.

I watch the commotion outside from the split leather-flap doorway of Waella’s hut. A group of six warriors and two levadon escort the tree into the village clearing, dragging the tree through the snow by simple harnesses strapped across the dinos’ chests and shoulders. Hopefully, the slush on the ground will help protect all the furry branches.

“That’s good, right?” Trinity asks. “We’ll have a giant tree like the Rockefeller.”

I grin. “It’s awesome. Doing our first Christmas right.”

“Why not? You should come check on these. They’re starting to smell.”

I turn from the doorway and join her at the makeshift oven at the back of Waella’s hut. A metal sheet resembling wreckage from the NASA base covers the second fireplace, creating an improvised oven. Some traditional Kutarian snacks bake inside.

A few steps closer and I can smell the fruity scent, too. I think that means my treats are done.

The first batch of half-burnt ones served as a trial run. They didn’t smell nearly as nice. Thankfully, that odor has dissipated.

“I can’t figure out if they smell good or…” Trinity leans toward the oven and sniffs.

I wrap a leather cloth around the edge of the metal sheet, another piece that looks like it came off one of the ruined biodomes from the plateau, and pull it off the top of the fire. I set it on the wooden table next to us and recover the second sheet, too.

“Maybe they taste better than they smell,” I say.

“Like cooked chicken in the fridge?”

I laugh. “What?”

“You know, when you’ve got a leftover chicken casserole or baked chicken breasts. It makes the whole refrigerator smell like gas.”

“Gross.”

“Tastes fine, though.”

“These don’t smell like that, at least.”

She takes another tentative sniff. “No, they’re okay. I just hope they taste better.”

Waella comes through the flaps with Namami strapped to her chest by a soft leather wrap. She stops and sniffs once the doorway closes behind her.

“You have been cooking.”

“We have.” I hold up the hot sheet of treats proudly.

“It smells wonderful.”

Trinity wrinkles her nose but doesn’t argue.

As long as Kovak thinks so, I can handle the smell.

“Thank you.” I put the tray next to the first one on the table. “Would you like to taste test one?”

“Of course,” Waella says. “Did you two know they’re pulling a tree in like it’s a giant vultir they’ve hunted and tied to the levadon? I’ve not seen anything like it.”

Trinity and I exchange a grin. Waella should see us bring trees home back on Earth. Strapped to our cars, also not unlike bringing a deer home.

“It’s going to be so beautiful when it’s decorated,” Trinity says.

“I look forward to seeing it.”

Behind us, the flaps part again. Eva steps in with an armful of bags and bowls. She lights up when she sees us. “Yes, you’re all here. It’s time to make cookies, bitches.”

Her energy is an instant wave of camaraderie and cheer. Thank gods for my wonderful friends distracting me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KOVAK

I NEVER PAID MUCH ATTENTION TO HOW THE YELLOW MORNING SUN GLINTS off the glistening snow on the ground, but it really is beautiful. In my memories, the Cold Season brought fewer plants to gather and animals to hunt. It meant traveling wider to find proper wood to burn in our fires and bartering with the handful of women left in the village to make our warmer garments, or requesting they teach us to mend our own clothes.

But today, I find myself truly appreciating the season.

Riding next to Xjhun and two other warriors, I get lost thinking about Gemma and how she looked when she saw the snow for the first time. I haven't seen someone get so excited about the turn of the season since I was a child and the snow was still magical. My mind wanders to my first Christmas celebration right around the corner. To last night with Gemma.

It only takes a second of my thoughts turning in that direction to send an excited tingle running throughout my body.

Last night was mind blowing.

I haven't felt that connected to Gemma in ages. I hadn't even realized how far I'd let her slip away until we came together again. It was even better than finding that spark the very first time.

Perfect.

I can't believe I almost messed up so badly. Sometimes the best intentions don't hit the mark. All I can do is try my hardest every day to make

sure she's happy. Like loving her to the fullest, body and soul. And doing what I can to make this Christmas magical.

"The rock was a shiny black that sparkled even brighter when I cracked it open," Xjhun says next to me. He's been talking about gifts for the last leg of our patrol. Ideas he's had and what he plans to give Trinity.

"She must really like those sparkly rocks," I say. "Gemma wanted to get her one too."

"She does. You should see her collection. They cover half the hut."

"At least it's not those little squeakers."

"You mean like Ansa did when we were kids?"

When we were young, a girl close to our age had a habit of bringing home those odd little vermin and letting them live all over her parents' hut. Until the things bred a tiny army, spread through the village, and ate nearly our entire summer supply of spotted melons and haynuts.

Xjhun laughs. "You're right. It could be far worse than pretty rocks."

"It makes gift giving easy, too."

Xjhun inclines his head in agreement. "Are you gifting Gemma something?"

"I have a plan if we can get these striders tracked down early enough."

I'll need a nice chunk of time, but we've been riding for a couple of hours and are in prime territory to come across a herd. And once we see the first footprints, we all go into tracking mode.

It doesn't take long to catch up to them. When the footprints are fresh enough, my warriors and I dismount and scout ahead on foot. Striders don't have the best hearing, but it's hard to miss levadon approaching. Especially when we have to pick our way through part of the forest to reach them.

We draw close enough to hear them shuffling around in the snow looking for food, and we drop to our bellies to avoid being seen. From there, it's a short crawl for Xjhun and I to get to the edge of a small open field. The clearing is big enough that two villages could fit inside, but once these beasts run, it won't be much room at all. We have to be skillful and patient.

Six striders stand with snow up to their ankles and flakes dotting their feathery backs. All of their long necks stretch to the ground as the beasts peck into the slush. From afar, they seem fairly harmless. A cross between a grass runner and a gigantic bird. But I know better.

Beneath the snow are taloned feet that'll open a warrior up completely in one swipe, spilling everything on the inside. Their mouths slope and taper

like a bird's beak, filled with nasty pointed teeth that dig in and won't let go. Thankfully, they usually run instead of sticking around to fight, but there's often an ornery one...

"Are you sure you need two of those?" I whisper.

Xjhun nods. "Even if the rest of the village doesn't care to partake in the other parts of the celebration, I'm sure they'll eat."

He has a point.

The tribe designates hunters to catch small game for daily feeding of the villagers. When herds of larger animals come through, I lead my warriors out in an organized hunting party. We divide into teams and employ the attack formations our fathers taught us, ensuring we capture all the game we need.

Today, however, I've let Xjhun lead the hunt. The women designated Trinity in charge of the Christmas food, so her mate will bring in the striders. I like this dynamic. Ever since our women graced the village, our lives have felt more cohesive.

My relationship with Drek, who was already my best friend, has grown even closer. Gemma and Eva came to us already a pair, too, and I can't put my finger on how that's increased my bond with Drek, but I know it's there. I suppose we sit and talk more. We've disclosed things about ourselves that never occurred to me to discuss with him before. Like my favorite color—why have I never considered which hue pleases my eyes the most? Or how many children I want and what I will teach them?

Xjhun and I have also grown closer. He was one of my favorite junior warriors until he proved himself a few months ago. I was proud he moved up to High Warrior at such a young age, but our relationship didn't branch out much further than that. Now, I can take him on a special hunt and put him in charge. I trust him, and for some reason, I now know his favorite color is green.

"Let's grab two then," I say.

We slink back through the snow. It's frigid against my chest, but the icy contact keeps me awake and on my toes. When we're a safe distance away, we stand and hurry back to the other warriors. Xjhun relays his plan, and we mount up.

Dinner's ready for the taking.

VAX SNORTS SOFTLY BENEATH ME, SHUFFLING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN HIS two tremendous feet. The snow muffles the sound, but I keep a tight grip on the reins to hold back his excitement. He loves to run and chase after our prey. After many years of working together, he knows how to hunt an animal without grabbing and eviscerating it.

Next to us, Xjhun and his levadon Desian turn in a circle, ready to move. The other two warriors and their mounts await his orders.

“You two take the small male on the right side.” Xjhun points at the others. “Kovak and I will get the light-colored one to the left.”

We all nod. Our group is downwind and far enough away we can whisper safely, but we still answer silently. It’s a good habit.

Xjhun leads the way, and we all file through the trees. The forest has dense points but plenty of trails. We creep to the edge of the clearing where it opens into the field. Then we dash out.

Two striders at the back of the herd squawk first. Then they all go mad, launching themselves into a feathery stampede. Vax and Desian roar as we fall in next to the herd. It’s the thrill of the hunt. I let loose a whoop and lift my spear into the air. We’ve got the creatures flanked on all sides, and we make quick work of running them down.

Spears fly, beasts wail and snarl, bodies fall. The pale strider I’m after loses its footing and slams into the snow. Vax runs right to it and puts a clawed foot down on its neck to keep it still, but the animal is done. It’s not getting back up. On the other side of the clearing, our partners fell their target, too.

Kutarians aren’t just fantastic warriors. We’re expert hunters as well.

“Gods bless us and our energies,” Xjhun says when we meet in the middle of the field.

The rest of the strider herd has escaped, and we’re alone with our kills.

“That was a quick and easy hunt.” I pat Vax’s neck. “Trinity will be happy.”

Xjhun beams. “She will. This food is all she’s talked about for days. She tells me they usually eat a bird creature called a turkey for Christmas dinner. It’s more the size of a Jagger Beak.” He forms his hands into a shape, rotating them around to show a small animal the size of an infant.

“Gemma tells me her family had a big Christmas dinner too, though her main meal was called a ham,” I say. “That’s like the morning jerky, she says.”

“It’s odd there are so many different traditions.”

“From what I understand, there are countless human tribes. And everyone practices a little differently.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“Are you ready to load these beasts up?”

“What about your gift? Are you going to work on it?”

“Xjhun, High Warrior. Once determined to train from sunup until sundown and destroy every stagni to avenge his brother’s death. He who led the hunt to take down the biggest plaxa and dance in its blood. Now, most worried about striders and giving gifts to the woman of his heart and her friends.”

He laughs aloud, a big hearty boom. “When your woman is smiling, so is mine.”

“They do feed off one another, don’t they?”

“It’s like they were born Kutarians, swapping energies all their lives.”

“I guess humans are more connected than we knew.”

He nods before nudging the limp foot of the pale strider in front of us with his toe. “We can get these prepped for transport if you need to get to work.”

“You have my thanks. I’m going to see if I can track down a sagobob.”

“A gift from the sacred tree?” Xjhun’s ears press forward with interest. “What a treat.”

“I want to bless Gemma and my child with its gifts.”

“My apologies for any suggestion you may not have been taking the gifts seriously.”

I chuckle. “It’s a custom I’m not used to, I’ll admit. Nor have I had anyone to give to since I was a child.”

“I understand that. I was fortunate to have my brother at my side as long as I did. Now Trinity has healed the chasm left in my chest. I’m looking forward to seeing her smile when she opens her gift.”

“Opens?”

“Trinity insists on concealing them. We should wrap gifts with cloth or leather, so it’ll be a surprise.”

“That’s right. Gemma mentioned that.”

“Best wrap it up.” Xjhun winks. “Also, I saw some blue ivy vines up that way.”

I glance in the direction he’s indicating. The blue-colored plants often

grow near the sagobob tree and would be a good place to start my search.

“Thank you. I’ll check there first.”

Xjhun and the other warriors get to work pulling rope off the levadon and prepping the animals to haul back the fallen striders.

I take Vax to the forest edge Xjhun pointed out. It’s far beyond the clearing, but now that we’re not sneaking and tracking our game, it doesn’t take long to find the blue ivy. The bushy cerulean leaves sprout along the snowy ground, and near its source, another familiar branch.

The purple limbs of the sagobob hang into a game trail as clear as day. Its bark is brightly colored. Even though I can’t see it, I know the inside of the tree is a brilliant mix of light and dark purples, like the sky in the late thawing months.

“Stay here.” I motion to Vax to stay on the game trail and not follow me into the trees where he could poke his eye.

This sagobob tree is a large individual. There are plenty of branches I can use for my project without endangering the tree. I smile when I reach it and put a hand on the beautiful bark. If I work quickly, I can finish the gift in an hour or two.

I look at the blue ivy at my feet, wondering the best approach to taking some branches down, when I see the tracks. It stops the patter of my heart instantly.

There on the game trail is a pair of footprints. Fresh. Recent. The owner can’t be that far away.

A Thunder Claw. Back for more strider.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GEMMA

“MOVE IT UP ON THAT SIDE. RIGHT THERE.” I POINT OVERHEAD. “NOW JUST drape it on that branch. Perfect.”

A warrior standing on the back of his ashen-colored levadon sets a vine rope on the end of the tree limb in front of him. The vine's flat pale leaves glow and wink in a beautiful pulse of life. They're not that impressive during the day, but I remember my first night in the village when I saw them. They were like little fairy lights sparkling in the trees.

Eva figured out how to detach the vines from their normal spot in the trees and stretch some of them out to our Christmas tree in the village clearing. Now our tree will be lit with a beautiful glow.

“Here's another tooth.” Eva hands me a discarded levadon fang that she looped a thin ring of ivy around and fastened into an ornament.

I find the nearest empty spot and hang the tooth from a branch.

We can't reach much of the top of the tree—and Drek refused to condone us climbing up on the levadon in our state—so we convinced him and some of the other men to help us. Eva sits on a leather pad, fixing ornaments for me and directing her mate on where to hang the ones high off the ground. There are a few bare spots that still need decorating, but I've let it go. Eva and Drek can do their thing. Even if I wanted to go against Drek's orders and climb up there anyway, my beyond-pregnant ass says no, and that he's right. Best to keep my feet on the ground.

Especially after last night. I rub at the ache in my side as I step back to look at my work. My evening with Kovak was the best, but the resulting aches in my under-worked muscles are rough.

Waiting on him to return from the hunting trip hasn't helped. The girls and I finished up our mountain of baking—Eva actually figured out a damn close mimicry of Earthen cookies—then came to help with the tree. It's been distracting, thank goodness, but there's no pushing away the growing nag in my gut that it's well past afternoon now and Kovak and the hunters still aren't back. The sun still hangs in the sky, though. I shouldn't worry so much.

But tell that to my stomach. When Eva brushes off her hands, declares the ornament hanging finished, and suggests a snack break, I'm not feeling it.

I didn't eat at lunch, either, but the worry tying my stomach up in knots has left no room for food.

"You sure you don't want a little something?" Eva asks. "You've been working hard."

"I just don't feel like eating right now. Maybe when the hunters come back."

"Did Kovak say when they were returning?"

"As soon as they get the striders, by the sound of it. I tried to get him to stay home, but he insisted Trinity needed her strider."

"That was very thoughtful."

It was. I'm appreciating the shit out of my husband right now, but this ill feeling in my gut is driving me insane. It's been too long, and I want him to come home.

"I'm sure he'll be here soon." Eva pats my shoulder.

She joins me to admire the tree. It's not exactly a traditional Christmas tree, but we've set the vines around the fuzzy green puffs and let them hang from the lowest branches to give the illusion of a full-bodied tree. A fair start to our makeshift Christmas, if I do say so myself..

"This is looking great!" Trinity beams as she prances up to us. "It's all ready for tomorrow."

"We made some Christmas magic happen." Eva's face turns up in delight too.

"It's ready for gifts now," I say. Thankfully, I've finished mine on time. Getting them together in four days has been a rat race, that's for sure. But today, the distraction was necessary.

“I’ll bring mine over soon.” Trinity links her arms with ours and leads us away. “You ladies ready for some grub? I’m starving.”

Eva glances at me, but I just lift a shoulder.

“Sure, let’s go.”

LEFTOVER JERKY AND FRUIT FROM LUNCH STILL SIT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE square. Or at least what’s left of it after Trinity and Eva have had their share.

“You want this before I eat it?” Trinity waves a short piece of jerky in my direction.

The number of times I’ve had to kindly refuse a bite is monstrous.

“I feel like a little kid on Christmas Eve night!” Eva claps her hands together. Her face glows with joy, and all her tingly feelings dance around me. Like she’s sitting in a happy pink cloud of good energy.

“When I was a kid, I could barely sleep on Christmas Eve,” I say.

Trinity shakes her head. “Me either. Up all night waiting for the sound of hooves on the roof and Santa coming down the chimney.”

“I tried to trap him one year,” Eva says.

I laugh. Of course she did.

“I hope you’re up all night as an adult, too.” Trinity winks at me.

I sputter, half a cough and half a laugh erupting from me, leaving an instant cramp in my side that I rub with one hand.

“What?” Trinity laughs. “Everyone should get what they want for Christmas.”

Eva giggles.

“Actually,” I say, and just the single word is enough to make the other women lean forward on their log seats. They perch there, waiting for me to continue. I wave them away dramatically. “Oh, come on. Seriously?”

“We don’t have tv dramas or romance novels to entertain us anymore,” Trinity says. “Spill it!”

“Fine. I may have stayed up most of last night getting all my Christmas wishes early.”

Eva snickers and claps.

Trinity nods her approval. “Did you use the mistletoe?”

Dammit, how did she know that?

I do my best to keep a straight face, but I'm still tickled over last night too. "I hung it over the bed."

Trinity pumps an arm in the air. "Yes! I knew that would work."

We all laugh.

"Who knew mistletoe had genuine power?" I say.

Trinity raises her hand. "I did. Billy Wharf in eighth grade. Nicholas Cohen sophomore year." She counts on her fingers like she's trying to remember them all. "Alex Bell and Joe Hayes at Aunt Sarah's Christmas party the year I turned sixteen."

"Damn, Trin," Eva gapes.

Trinity just beams. "Christmas magic."

"You could have told me that before I put that shit on my ceiling." I laugh. "That sounds dangerous."

"What's going to happen? You going to get *more* pregnant?"

I smack her arm playfully.

"I'm glad you've fixed your dry spell thingy," she says.

My eyes roll back with a delighted and heavy smile. "Me too."

"No wonder you're sore and not eating," Eva says.

I tilt my head to the side, not following.

"I've seen you limping around. You got a major workout, and it sounds like you're satiated enough to last for days."

I wrinkle my nose at her. "You're so silly. I'm just saving room for those delicious cookies."

Eva wiggles happily. "Me too. I can't wait to dive into them."

"I want turkey," Trinity says.

"Turkey substitute," I remind her.

"Furkey!" Eva says.

"Whatever it is, I'm going to put that big ol' bird in my mouth. Then I'm going to take a long nap."

"That sounds more like Thanksgiving," Eva says.

"Either way. It's happening tomorrow and I'm excited as shit."

Eva and I exchange a glance and grin.

I'm glad Trinity's so happy. This whole Christmas thing really was a great idea.

But I wish the men were back with the damn furkey already.

Eva stands and stretches both arms over her head. Her small round belly is so cute.

“If you’re not going to eat,” she says, “are you ready to take a stroll around our Christmas village?”

That sounds perfect. The evening light wanes, and I can’t let myself think about how late the hunters are coming back. *Don’t worry, he’d said. I’ll be back soon.* It will only be an hour or two before nightfall.

“Yes, let’s see it,” I say.

Trinity and I wiggle ourselves off our seats. Some of my muscles feel like they’re cramping up. My back and hips are tight. I should drink more water.

We walk through the snow that’s stayed on the ground all day—and judging from the thick grey clouds above us, may start falling again soon. The Christmas tree is visible from the square, stretching high into the sky and sparkling with the soft vine lights.

It’s beautiful.

A smile forms on my lips as my friends lead me over, each on one of my arms. The tree looks even more amazing now that daylight is dimming. The vine glow is not as bright as twinkly electric lights, but it’s so much more than I thought we’d have out here with no wires or light bulbs. We still have a freaking tree. Lit up and fantastic all the same.

And there beneath it...

My breath catches. The excitement tightens throughout my body, and I place a hand on my belly.

Someone has already placed wrapped gifts beneath the tree.

“What the—” Eva laughs.

“How are there already presents?” I ask.

Trinity swings her arms and tail playfully. “I may have snuck some under there.”

“You sneaky thing!” I laugh. The movement throws a stitch in my side, and I rub it.

Eva glances over and her smile drops. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I stick out my tongue, though it doesn’t do much to help my discomfort. “I needed that laugh. My body just can’t handle it. I guess I’m too fat to laugh now.”

Eva’s mouth only turns up a little on the side. Her brow creases. “Maybe you should sit down.”

I’m about to tell her not to be silly—my body does far worse things when I sneeze—but a commotion behind me pulls my attention away.

A few levadon jog up to the edge of the village and stop. Their riders

dismount, and my body sags with relief. Finally. The hunters have come back.

I was really starting to wonder...

Only, there's Xjhun and his brown dino Desian. The other two levadon are pale green. And neither rider is Kovak.

I look beyond the group, down the field. Even farther. Nowhere do I see another levadon or rider.

My throat constricts instantly, and I wobble. Eva and Trinity flank me, both of them grabbing an elbow to help me stay upright.

"Xjhun!" I finally squawk, his name scraping up my throat in a horrible noise.

He's already running toward me. He furrows his brow and looks around as well.

Every part of me is rock hard, waiting for him. The tension in my muscles hurts, and it's just getting worse, like it's ripping them in two.

Xjhun slides to a stop in front of us, his eyes and ears surveying the surrounding village. Then his gaze stops on me. The way his eyes widen and his ears dip back frightens the ever-loving hell out of me.

"He's not back yet?" he breathes.

I didn't think my body could spasm even more, but I gasp as it wrings me like a wet rag. "What?"

"I thought he beat us here," Xjhun croaks. "We got ambushed by a Thunder Claw."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GEMMA

THE TERRIFIED MOAN THAT QUAKES THROUGH MY BODY HAS ME DOUBLING over. The pain drags me down, tears me apart, and it's all my friends can do to keep me upright.

"Gods in hell." Xjhun jumps back.

Fear grips me, and a cold sweat breaks out over my forehead and down my neck. The Christmas lights spin in front of my eyes. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. My legs feel like jelly, and my body sags to one side as Eva wraps one of my arms over her shoulders to help hold me up.

"Oh God," Trinity whimpers. "Is she okay?"

"She's in labor," Eva hisses. "We have to get her to Waella."

She shifts my arm on her shoulder to better hold me up and tries to lead the way. Only I'm grabbing in the opposite direction.

I can't focus. The light and pain in my eyes is too much. But I'm determined to snag Xjhun.

"What's going on?" I cry.

"Your baby's coming." Eva's voice is soothing, but it's not the answer I want.

The muscles of my abdomen tighten again, like someone's wrapped a towel around my waist and twisted it tight—as if the towel was like vulcanized rubber and was squeezing me like a tube of toothpaste.

It's painful enough I can barely get out the next words. "This is too fast."

“Sweetie, I think you’ve been in labor all day. All that discomfort? It’s just intensified now.”

A sob wracks me, and I don’t know what to think. As much as I’ve been looking forward to bringing my baby into the world, I can’t picture that anymore. Just Kovak, chased down in the snowy forest. Destroyed by one of those nasty carnivores.

My love. My child’s father.

I’ve lost him.

My chest caves in and everything hurts. Like I’m being set on fire.

I scream.

I won’t make it here without Kovak. He’s my reason for living. For surviving and thriving. We’ve made a home here. A life and a family.

He never even got to see our baby.

Then another horrible notion jabs into my head, piercing and rooting in like an evil seed.

What if I lose my baby, too?

The very idea of going on without Kovak is too painful to even think about, but this additional pain is wretched. I fear there’s no possible way my baby will survive my grief. If not...then I don’t want to either. Even while the contractions in my abdomen threaten to tear me apart, the thought of coming out on the other side of this without my child is far worse.

I can’t lose anymore.

I can’t.

I won’t survive it.

The next time my eyes flutter open, Waella is looking down at me in concern.

“Move her over here,” she whispers.

The women move me into the doorway of a hut. It’s Waella’s. I recognize the leather flaps that part in the middle. Bodies bustle around me as Waella directs someone to move furniture in her hut. In a haze, I look back at our decorated tree on the other side of the village. It stands tall and proud. So much beauty we put together that I won’t get to see. That I won’t be able to show Kovak or my new little baby.

This tiny creature inside me. Depending on me. I’ve failed it. Failed everyone. I’m not strong enough. This planet is wild, and we all have to fight to survive. I was never meant to be a Kutarian. I hate that I’ve let Kovak down like this.

The least I could do in his wake is birth the child that will carry on his legacy.

But I can't even do that.

My muscles lock up, and I can feel my consciousness slipping away. My head lolls back on my shoulders.

Above us, the sky is turning black. Tiny flakes of snow drift down. They catch in my eyelashes. Beyond, a neon green light stretches over the northern mountain peaks. I can barely focus or even convince my eyes to move, but I shift my gaze to the south, and sure enough... The first ripples of the red river in the sky spill out over the valley.

The sky's not dark enough to see them well yet, but they're there. The double northern lights signaling the beginning of the Kutarian Christmas.

It's here.

Despite my lost husband and my broken body, it's arrived. I hope my friends will find joy and spread the cheer of such lovely traditions.

Another contraction wracks my body. I scream out a throat-ripping sob as the women coax me inside.

When the hut's door flaps close, we're shrouded in darkness. Once the distractions outside are gone, my body seizes up another monstrous time, and I fall limp again.

This time, for good.

THE SNOW IS FALLING MUCH HARDER WHEN I OPEN MY EYES. THE MORNING sun hides behind the clouds, but a lovely glow still descends on the land. When I get to my feet and brush the flakes from my arms, I'm surprised to find a herd of vultir standing in the fluffy white field in front of me. Their heads are lowered, and they shuffle snow to the side to grab at the grass underneath.

None of them seem concerned in the least that I'm standing ten yards away. I've never been so close to one that was still alive.

I take a silent step, waiting for them to bolt, but the only movement is a casual ear flutter from one. Gentle like a butterfly landed on the tip of it, and the deer-like creature just waved it away.

Float along, little butterfly.

The calm is serene. I could soak into it like lying back in a big tub of warm water.

Then one of the vultir lifts its head to look at me. Its huge ears push forward, but it appears far more curious than bothered by me. That's when I notice it's not just its ears. Its whole body is immense. Much larger than any vultir I've seen. All of them are. Fluffy around the neck and each sporting an impressive rack of antlers.

It's not until one in particular lifts its head that I realize what I'm looking at. The stag has big dark eyes, and where the others have a wide black nose, his is pale. Void of most color, like it belongs to an albino specimen. Or maybe these vultir are like horses on Earth with a chance the soft nose skin can be black or pale and pink. Because this one has a pink hue to it. Like it could be a sunburn. Or turning a little red...

My eyes widen, and I look from one vultir to another as each raises its head and stares at me. A soft sound drifts through the breeze, like the distant tinkle of a silver bell... I'm pondering what it could be when something else steps into the clearing.

The snow's still heavy, but I make out the shape right away.

The Kutarian is tall and silver-skinned, but everywhere else there's so much color. From the long red hat on his head to the green holly wreath around his neck, and the stark black belt and gold buckle on his waist...

I gasp aloud and jump back.

The next time I blink my eyes and open them again, everything has changed. I'm inside a hut again, tucked underneath warm furs near the smell of freshly burning wood.

Reality rushes back to me like a windstorm. I'm out of my dream and back in real life. It feels like coming back to life after walking in the spirit world. The feeling in my body returns, but somehow all the pain that devoured me before is gone.

And like my last time returning from the spirit world, the first thing I see is Kovak, and I'm filled with immediate warmth. He's sitting cross-legged near me, and just like before, he gazes down at the small body in his arms with unfettered love and devotion. Only this time, it's not me he's looking at.

It's a tiny silver baby.

The moment I see those bright eyes, everything inside me stops. As if by instinct alone, my mind bursts wide open. My existence breaks, and the pieces of my reality fit themselves back together in entirely new ways. I am

no longer one being, but two. I am a mother. My heart is no longer my own, existing solely within me. There's a piece of it there, cradled in Kovak's arms. Never again will it be whole without its missing piece.

As I stare at the beautiful new life, more of the evening's events descend on me. Needing Kovak and fearing he'd never come back again. The pain and the fear. A sense of waking and sleeping in waves as my body contracted. Visions of Waella between my knees, telling me to push. I don't remember anything after that, but something wonderful must have happened.

Tears choke me, and I burst out a sob.

Kovak startles and turns, instantly shifting the baby in his arms to reach a free hand out to me. "Gemma!"

I try to sit up to reach him, but the lingering pains in my body attack with a vengeance. Things are stiff and stretched and broken. But he comes to me, leaning over to press his forehead against mine. The way his eyes close and he pulls in a deep, relieved breath is everything.

A sob hits me so hard I can barely get out any words. "I thought..." I cling to his hand on my face. I want to be closer to him. If he could hold me in a bundle up against his chest like the baby, I'd be there already. Overcoming the fear of losing him will be no simple matter, but for now, I need to touch him.

"I'm here," he whispers across my lips.

My fingers tighten on him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay. Sorry I'm late."

I choke out a half laugh and nuzzle in closer. I could be content to sit there with him against me forever, breathing the same air and feeling his heavy heartbeat and his energy waves.

Until I hear the baby stir.

It makes a tiny mewling noise and stretches its small body in the blanket. Kovak draws back from me enough to look down and lift the bundle up in between us. I stare at the little face, a tiny nose and mouth just like Kovak's. Adorable little pointed ears and a lock of dark hair nested between them. Rosy cheeks and silver sparkles on the skin.

"Kovak..." I breathe in awe.

"Isn't she beautiful?" he whispers.

All the happy, squishy feelings inside me shift to big pink fluffies.

"A girl?" I squeak.

His dazzling eyes meet mine, and he nods.

I stare at her again. A beautiful baby girl. My entire body is itching to cuddle her.

“Can I hold her?”

Kovak’s brief chuckle is deep and warm. “You made her.”

I’m not sure I could be any happier at this moment. I manage to sit up further and hold out trembling hands. “We made her.”

He shifts to slide the bundle into my arms, and his smile is so proud I feel like I could burst on the inside.

She settles into my arms perfectly and gazes up at me with gorgeous blue eyes. The softest looking skin I’ve ever seen.

“She is absolutely perfect,” I whisper.

Kovak settles in next to me and leans into my shoulder so he can look down at her too. “She looks like you.”

I cuddle her closer and lean down to rub my nose against her tiny button one. “Hello, sweetheart.”

She blinks her wonderful eyes a couple times until I lean away. Then she stares up at me again.

Looking between her and Kovak, my heart sings. My world is complete.

Everything is perfect.

“She is beautiful,” Eva murmurs with a smile from the other side of the room.

I look up, and I’m surprised by how many others are in the hut.

Eva and Trinity sit on a bed, gazing at us with tears glistening in their eyes. Waella is near her oven fireplace, boiling water and cooking something that smells amazing. Drek and Kaami stand just inside the door flaps.

“Thank you.” I smile at each of them.

Most of them just nod back, but Trinity cracks a grin. “You gave us a scare there for a minute.”

“But we knew everything would be okay,” Eva slips in. “It’s been the best Christmas miracle.”

Her words tickle my heart, and a vision of the strange dream I had before I woke up comes back to me. Were those reindeer? And...

No, don’t be silly.

It was just a Christmas dream.

I lean closer to Kovak and press a kiss to his lips. He reciprocates with a happy sigh, like he’s been waiting to do that for a long time.

What a fantastic Christmas miracle.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KOVAK

THE SNOW HAS STOPPED, UNVEILING A CLEAR AND DAZZLING SKY ABOVE US. Stars dot the vast darkness like sparkles on one of the shiny rocks Gemma picked out for Trinity. Over those, the amazing Skylights swim like currents in a river.

It's a vision I've seen every year since I was a child, but tonight it's as if I'm seeing everything anew. Gemma smiles up at the sky with such wonder in her eyes. The red and green lights dance on her face, and it's magic. I'm captivated by her.

When her head and eyes turn toward me, it's like the world slows. Tiny snowflakes still cling to her long lashes, and I appreciate the beauty in her eyes. In the way her cheeks bunch and dimple in the cutest way when she smiles. I only *thought* I'd seen happiness on her face before. Now she shines, absolutely glows like her very own star.

And I know why.

The amount of love I feel for the tiny creature in her arms is mind numbing. She's been a part of our world for only hours, yet I still can't comprehend the way my heart doubled in size the moment I held her in my arms. It grew instantly like a sponge ball that's taken on too much water.

I know already that I would take on the world for my little girl. She can barely focus her giant blue eyes on me, but she owns me.

Those magnificent eyes that look just like her mother's.

In only a few turns of Pale Moon, I've gone from the hardest, most respected warrior in our village to the mate of a beautiful woman and father of the newest member of the Kutarian tribe. I know by the way I can't stop staring at them both that I've gone soft.

Before, I would have found the feeling irritating. Embarrassing. What good is a soft warrior? But now I know. There's everything good about him. He has more to fight for than any other man in the village.

Any dangers lurking nearby will have to go through the wrath of the gods to get through me and hurt my family and the tribe that cares for them. Gods curse any who try.

Gemma's eyelashes flutter when she smiles at me, and my heart thumps hard against my chest.

"Happy celebration day." I press a kiss to her temple.

She hums as I do, but touches my lips with her fingertip. "It's *Merry Christmas*."

"Then *Merry Christmas* to you."

"And to you."

"I'm so proud of you."

The baby, bundled in a dark leather blanket high on her chest, yawns and closes her eyes.

Gemma watches her in awe before glancing back up at me. "What for?"

I pinch her chin lightly between my fingers, as if to scold her. "Other than bringing a miracle to life?"

She scoffs playfully. "You brought the miracle. I couldn't have done it without you."

My fingers slide against her cheek, and I cup her face in my hand. She leans into it.

I worried about her so much while I was gone. I knew she would worry. Returning to find out how much distress I'd caused her was gut-wrenching.

Not long after I spotted the Thunder Claw footprints and returned to the warriors, we discovered the beast in the next clearing. I suspect it'd been trailing the striders, but after it caught scent of us and the dead ones, there was no getting rid of it. It was too late to disengage the fallen striders from the levadon, though. Xjhun and a second warrior did the only thing they could to save their levadon mounts. They rode off as fast as they could while the fourth warrior and I distracted the Thunder Claw. After some time, we ended up separated.

Far out in the forest alone, I circled back to find the sagobob tree and gathered all the pieces I needed. Staying out too long to work on the gift for Gemma wasn't the best choice, but I'd shaken the Thunder Claw off my trail and was relieved to come home with a completed project wrapped in layers of dry blue-green leaves.

Only when I returned home, I found a small crowd gathered around Waella's hut and the sound of my Gemma wailing inside.

Every bit of my bravery vanished as I sprinted for her. I promised the gods everything I could offer if they protected her and spared her the pain she was in. I wanted to console her, but she was in a fit, in and out of consciousness. She didn't even seem to realize I was there. Not until after Waella delivered the baby and Gemma rested.

Waella told us later that Gemma took strength from the sound of my voice, that I helped her make it through, but I know my Gemma did all the hard parts herself.

As I gaze at my females in wonder, Drek takes a spot alongside the huge, lit tree in front of us.

"What an amazing night for a celebration," he says.

I nod. My small family and I gather by the Christmas tree surrounded by our friends. Eva stands nearest the tree, bundled under a thick blanket and smiling at Drek. Xjhun has an arm draped over Trinity, holding her close. Kaami and Waella also stand close by, pointing at the wrapped gifts and the items decorating the tree with curious smiles.

"Who doesn't want to open presents at midnight on Christmas?" Eva asks.

"I think it's perfect," Gemma says. "I don't know about you all, but there's no way I'm going to sleep tonight. We may as well celebrate."

I join in with most of the others by lifting an arm in the air and calling out in agreement.

Life is perfect. May as well celebrate.

GEMMA

“FIRST, I WANT TO SAY CONGRATULATIONS TO GEMMA AND KOVAK,” EVA says. “They’ve already gotten the best Christmas gift of all.”

She smiles at me, and I know I must be beaming in return. Getting married and having children is something I always hoped to share with my best friend. I never would have guessed how close we would actually become.

“Also, I have to admit I’m bursting with curiosity here,” she continues. “Do you know what you’re going to call her yet?”

I hug my sweet, sleeping baby closer and look to Kovak. “Actually, I had an idea.”

He nods. “I am eager to hear it.”

“Remember how I told you there’s a similar river of lights on Earth? It’s called the Aurora Borealis there. Since she was born beneath these streams of color, perhaps she could be Aurora.”

Eva clasps her hands in front of her mouth, and her eyes well.

Kovak’s face softens. “I think that’s a fine name. One with meaning and strength. I love it.”

I gaze in wonder at the little girl in my arms and whisper the name across her little forehead. She stirs, but continues to sleep.

It’s a perfect fit.

My little Aurora.

“I love it too,” Eva chimes in. The others agree.

“Let’s eat cookies and open presents now!” Trinity laughs.

I join in. There are plenty of strangely wrapped packages under the tree. My precious distraction is sleeping peacefully in my arms, and I’m thrilled to take part in this magic we’ve created.

Trinity slips out from under Xjhun’s arm and hops over to the stack of gifts. “I’ll play Santa!”

Eva and I exchange a look and chuckle. Trinity was the last of us I expected to act so giddy over Christmas, but she can hardly contain herself.

She picks up a smaller package and examines it. It’s one that I made, and as soon as she spots the *To: T From: G* I etched into the stiff hide cover, she squeals.

“This one’s for me!”

She prances over to Xjhun and hands it to him—she’s taking her Santa job seriously—and gets back to work. Similar small packages go out to all the women and larger ones to the men. Drek’s is long, skinny, and half his

height. His face skews, utterly perplexed as he stares at it. Eva slaps at his arm playfully and giggles.

Once everyone has something, Trinity claps her hands and declares, “Now open!”

Memories of my own Christmases flood back as the group tears into their wrappings. The sound is a little different without the ripping of paper and the plastic bows being tossed around, but all the faces are the same. Excited.

Everyone oohs and awws at once.

Kovak pulls in a long breath as he brings the makeshift box to his nose. “I knew I could smell these somewhere.” He looks at me in wonder. “I haven’t had these since I was a child. How did you know?”

“I had a little help.” I’m elated that he’s happy with the fruity crackers I made. It’s the best present I could have asked for. Well, one of them. I’ve truly been blessed this Christmas.

He pulls me in against his chest, careful of the baby, and gives me a long hug. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What have you got there?” He nods at my unopened present.

“I’m not sure yet.”

He sets his box at his feet and holds out his arms to take Aurora. For a split second, I hesitate. Is it worth trading my warm, beautiful bundle for a gift? I want her closer. My body needs her so much it feels like I need to reabsorb her.

But this is the Christmas party I wanted. It’s time to play along.

I slide the baby into his arms, and he cuddles her against his chest. She doesn’t stir at all.

Seeing him cradling her against his immense chest, close enough he can gaze down at her, is a present all in itself. I can’t get enough.

When he looks at me and nods at my gift, I get to work.

Someone has scrawled on a tiny piece of paper on top. *To Gemma. Thank you for our Christmas. Love Eva.*

Again, my heart melts. I’m such a mess today. I glance at her, but she’s busy twirling around in the new fur robe Drek’s given her. It’s beautiful, and so is she. He looks just as excited and surprised with the bow and arrows she made for him.

Grinning, I go back to my package and pull it apart. One solid piece comes out in my palm and I turn it over to examine it.

A medallion made of bone fits perfectly in my hand. On one side, Eva's etched our names. *Gemma, Eva, Trinity*. And on the other... My breath escapes me before I can even let out a gasp.

A levadon head is carved into the front of the bone plate. Surrounding it are the words, *Our First Christmas*. I stare in amazement, my fingers moving over the skilled craftsmanship. It's then I discover the small loop of cordage attached to the top.

It's not a medallion at all.

All the tears come then. Still recovering from my ordeal earlier and the wash of emotions that came with being reunited with my love and meeting my new baby, this is enough to cause the entire dam to burst wide open.

Kovak looks at me in horror before he must realize the truth.

I'm not upset. I'm just so very lucky.

Eva crosses the circle, her eyes rimmed in tears. She wraps her arms around me and I collapse into her.

"You made me an ornament?" I blubber into her new robe.

"Not just any ornament."

I nod. "A momento ornament!"

She pulls back, and even though her face doesn't resemble the girl I met the first week of freshman year, her eyes do. We've grown and changed so much since then, but she's still my best friend.

I give her a watery smile. "Thank you."

"Merry Christmas."

Before she steps away, I run my fingers through more of the fur robe and bounce my eyebrows at her. "That's nice."

She snuggles down deep into the robe until it's up around her ears, and she looks comfy as hell. "Isn't it nice? It feels like silk."

Eva returns to Drek's side while I step up to the tree and hang my new ornament on the lowest branch, right where everyone can see.

There's a silent pause while everyone admires it before Trinity jumps up to the tree again, ready for round two.

We go through a few rounds until all the presents are gone.

Eva made Trinity a baby mobile out of the small shiny rocks we found at the plateau wall. I gave her a big silvery stone, but Xjhun topped them all. He found a black sparkling rock that looked like stars in the sky, but that wasn't what he gave her. Somehow, he carved it into a ring, and Trinity looked like she was going to faint into his arms when he slipped it on her finger.

Trinity made Eva, Waella, and me each a cute little onesie. She must have gotten pointers from Kaami like I did because they look perfect. Mine is a soft, light-colored leather, nearly white, and I can't wait to see my little Aurora in it. The two I made I gave to Waella.

Xjhun jumped in excitement when he got his treats from Trinity, and I caught a look between him and Kovak. Pure bliss and understanding. It made me laugh out loud.

When Eva opened the black saddle bag I made for her, she came at me again with the same response I gave her: tears, a smile, and a big hug.

Eva, Trinity, and I pass around Christmas cookies for everyone to try—thankfully they're a hit and we promise to make more. We give Kaami a special batch we made for her and her kids, and the rest we'll give out to the tribe in the morning.

After everyone has settled in with their cookies and gifts, bundled up with their loved ones and friends, Kovak is the last to stand apart from the group.

"I have something too," he says.

I'm curious what he means as he passes me the baby. The only one who seems to know what he's talking about is Xjhun. His youthful face splits into a huge grin. Now I'm excited.

What's going on?

Kovak marches toward the nearest huts on this side of the village square. Most of the ones in this row are empty, but he disappears into one.

I glance around at my friends in question, but the women look as clueless and anxious as I feel.

Then, just as quick as he disappeared, Kovak steps back through the flaps. At first, I think he's pulling a blanket on the ground, but as he gets closer, I gasp. He hauls an entire travois behind him. Three long poles are bound with vine, and nestled on top is a large package wrapped in giant elephant-ear leaves.

I can barely form words through my smile. "What is this?"

His gaze locks on me, and it feels as if we're the only two people here under the tree.

"A gift," he says. "For the woman and child who have given me life."

I think I'm walking on air by the time he stops next to me. The package looks so nice that for a moment all I can do is stare at it.

Until Eva giggles behind me. "Open it!"

Kovak nods, so I tear into the leaf wrap. I work as fast as I can with one

hand, and by the time I've stripped it all off, I'm laughing.

Then I gasp again and stand back.

"A crib," I breathe.

Made of purple wood, it's the most beautiful piece of furniture I've ever seen. On the outside, it is lavender, and it glistens with swirls of darker purples in the places where it has been cut or smoothed. The structure is made of simple bars and walls on four sides with four thick legs, but the craftsmanship is wonderful. Everything about it makes me smile bigger.

The other women gasp and coo as well. Murmurs of praise and wonder echo around me, but it's Kovak's voice that cuts through it all.

"I made this from the sagobob tree."

I've heard of this Tree of the Gods and have seen it used sparingly throughout the village. The blessings of the tree are the highest honor, and my heart swells.

"You honor us, Kovak," I say.

"You honor me, my love."

I put my hand to his face and reach up on my toes to plant a kiss on his lips.

"You've made my Christmas the best ever," I whisper.

"Merry Christmas, Gemma. I love you."

I settle into the warmth of being sandwiched between my husband and my new daughter. Being here and having them is a Christmas miracle.

I just had to travel the universe to find it.

EPILOGUE

GEMMA

THE WARM AFTERNOON SUN OFFSETS THE WINTER CHILL. THE SNOW STOPPED falling mid-morning, and the white blanket left behind sparkles in the sunlight. Kovak and I sit side-by-side on the rocky waterfall ridge at the edge of the village. The water flows behind us, a sound that's become one of my favorites since arriving here, and we can see for what seems like miles from our spot on the rocks. I lean against Kovak's shoulder with a dreamy sigh.

A small herd of vultir prance in the snow far down in the valley. I can barely make them out from such a distance, but they look happy moving about in the cold weather. In the adjacent field, a family of starward pushes their snouts through the snow, digging for any remaining shoots. Brilliant pink sparks light up along the young ones' spines as they feast on what's left of the flora underneath.

All the peaceful beasts around us are a pleasant contrast to the nasty Thunder Claws we've run into lately. But as usual, the monsters don't come near the village. We're safe here. Safe to watch our wonderful world and be with our favorite people.

Kovak tightens his arm around me, and I kiss his arm.

"She is such a delightful baby," Eva coos. She sits cross-legged on a blanket on the ground near us, bundled in her heavy robe and cradling little Aurora close to her face.

Auntie Eva has been dying to be on duty since the baby's arrival last

night, and she's visibly overjoyed to finally have a chance to cuddle the new addition.

"Can we feed her a cookie yet?" Trinity grins next to her, waving one of the Christmas treats in the air.

Kovak chuckles. "Not until she has teeth."

"Next year?"

We all look at Kovak, because not only are my friends and I learning to be moms, but we also don't know that much about Kutarian children yet. We're new to this in so many ways.

Thankfully, he nods. "All our babies can eat Christmas cookies next year."

Eva and Trinity cheer.

I smile and snuggle closer to him. "Are we going to do Christmas again next year?"

"I think it would be a fine idea," he says. "Everyone's loved the cookies. They're excited about the dinner, which smells amazing."

He's right. My stomach's been rumbling for the last hour, waiting for the slow-roasted strider, honey-glazed purple yams, and cracked haynut pudding to be served. Everything smells divine.

"Most who have heard of what's been going on like the idea of giving gifts next time too," he says.

"That would be fantastic."

"It would. Thank you for bringing such a giving and cheerful celebration to the Kutarian people."

I sit up proudly. "The Kutarians are my people now. I would do anything to make them happy."

His smile is sexy and warm as he leans his forehead against mine. "And you have. From bringing them Christmas to growing the tribe with a beautiful new daughter. We are so thankful to you."

I take his hand and lean in for a kiss. "I couldn't have dreamed you up if I tried. I'm so lucky."

The rumble in his chest is like the purr of a giant cat, and I feel more alive and happy than I ever thought possible.

Nearby, Eva giggles and rubs her nose on Aurora's.

Next to her, Trinity massages her side. "Ugh, I ate too many of those cookies. I better stop before dinner time. My stomach hurts."

I lift my brows and smile knowingly at Kovak.

The additions to the Kutarian people have only just begun.



DID YOU ENJOY VISITING THE KUTARIANS? READY FOR MORE OF ALEXA'S books? The best way to stay on top of new releases, exclusive content, and more goodies from the world of Alexa Grant is to [sign up for email updates!](#)

Thank you for reading!

Revisiting Xion V and the Kutarians I love so much was amazing. I wasn't sure I would ever get to write Gemma, Trinity, or Eva again since they all got their happily ever afters, but this holiday season... I just had to pop in again! Because what's better than Christmas and babies??

Maybe I'll revisit again someday... :)

If you enjoyed this slice of life in Kutarian Warriors series, please consider **leaving a review**. **Word of mouth is a book's best friend!** Even a single small sentence helps spread its love around.

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ABOUT AUTHOR ALEXA GRANT

Alexa Grant has been living and breathing books since she learned to read. Going to new places and meeting new people is her jam. The crazier the better. It's no surprise that fantasy was and continues to be her favorite. Bring on a big mix of magic, animals, and the normally impossible.

As she got older, she fell in love with romance storylines as well. Now her worlds of magic end in love, and who can beat those happy endings?

Alexa married her favorite bear shifter and they live in a small town with their two cubbies. When she's not reading, she's watching movies, studying architecture, or sitting on her grand To Be Read mountain with a cup of coffee.



ABOUT AUTHOR IVY MCADAMS

Ivy McAdams wants to be a cowgirl when she grows up.

She may reside on the beaches of Florida, but her heart lives in the wide open spaces of Wyoming. She grew up dreaming of horses, playing cowboys and indians on her grandfather's farm, and curling up on the couch with him to watch westerns. Cowboys have been her heroes ever since.

Ivy loves the warm feelings and happily ever afters of a romance novel and has married her passions together to bring you historical western romance stories.

When not writing, she's taking care of two beautiful girls and teaching them to adore books as much as she did growing up. She can't wait until they're big enough to dress in cowboy hats and ride horses with her.