

A large, green, muscular alien warrior stands on the left, holding the hand of a young girl in a blue dress on the right. They are positioned on a dark, rocky surface. The background is a vibrant space scene with a purple and blue color palette, featuring a large planet on the right, a smaller planet in the middle, and a bright light source creating a lens flare effect. The overall mood is emotional and protective.

HONEY PHILLIPS

SANCTUARY FOR THE
ALIEN WARRIOR

TREASURED BY THE ALIEN

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HONEY PHILLIPS

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CHAPTER ONE

Barbara walked out of the law firm for the last time, and paused as she waited for the pangs of remorse to hit her, but there were none. They might come later, but for now all she felt was relief. How had she been so unhappy for so long and never realized it?

Because I never had time to notice.

She had been too busy putting in the long hours, working towards the next level - and today it had been made very clear to her that there was no next level. It didn't matter how smart she was, how well she knew the law, or how many billable hours she generated. None of that would ever overcome the fact that not only was she a woman, she was a woman from a poor, rural background with no network of rich, influential friends and relatives.

"Of counsel," she muttered, the offer still stinging. *Not partner.*

"Are you ready to leave, Ms. Emerson?" Phillip asked.

Phillip, a tall man with a worn face and kind blue eyes, was one of the firm's drivers. He'd been driving her home after her late nights working for years now. Today would be the last time.

"I suppose so."

He had already loaded her two boxes into the car. *Two boxes.* Not much to show for her ten years at McGiver and Scruggins.

She started towards the car door he was holding open, then stopped and shook her head.

“You know what? I think I’ll walk. Can you just leave my boxes with the doorman, please?”

“Of course.” He hesitated, then quietly shut the door and came to her side.

“It’s been my pleasure to drive you, Ms. Emerson. I will miss you.”

For the first time tears threatened, but she never allowed herself to cry.

“I’ll miss you too, Phillip.” Her throat threatened to close. “I’m sorry about all those late nights.”

“I didn’t mind, Ms. Emerson.”

“Barbara, please.” She offered him her hand and he took it in a firm grasp. “I hope we meet again.”

“As do I.”

He shook her hand, then returned to the car. She watched him drive off, regretting his departure more than almost anyone else she had worked with - which should have been a sign right there. She sighed and set off, glad she was wearing low-heeled boots with her Armani pantsuit. *Dress for the job you want*, she thought bitterly. That certainly hadn’t done any good.

The early spring afternoon was cool but sunny, perfect for walking, and she usually enjoyed being surrounded by the life of the city. Today she was too busy thinking about her future to pay much attention. *What now?* She’d been contacted by headhunters often enough to know she wouldn’t have a problem getting a position in another legal firm - but was that what she wanted?

More long hours, more demanding clients who wanted protection from activities that were certainly unethical if not outright illegal. When was the last time she’d even enjoyed practicing law? *Last fall*. She’d done some pro bono work for a woman’s shelter and it had been surprisingly rewarding. The

idea of doing more of that kind of work appealed to her - but it would require some major changes to her lifestyle.

Or perhaps not... She'd finished paying off the mortgage on her apartment with the previous year's bonus so her only housing expense would be the maintenance fees. She also had a very healthy investment portfolio - mainly because she'd had little time to actually spend the money she made. McGiver and Scruggins might be antiquated, chauvinistic bastards, but they had paid well.

All of which meant she had some time to decide, to consider taking a lower paid but more satisfying job. Maybe she could try reconnecting with some of the friends she so rarely saw these days. Perhaps even begin dating again. How long had it been? A year? Closer to two, she decided with an internal sigh.

The afternoon turned from cool to chilly as the sun descended and the wind picked up. The last few days had been warm, a false spring luring everyone into thinking that winter was over. But tonight it was cold enough to remind her that it was still February. As the wind managed to find its way under her collar, her apartment seemed a long way away.

She decided to take the shortcut through the park. It wasn't quite dusk yet and there were still a number of people around, but as she took the path across the long meadow, mist started to creep across the ground from the nearby lake. Sound seemed to fade away, even the usual noise of traffic on the avenue next to the park sounding muffled and distant.

Not much further, she told herself, keeping a brisk pace, her heels tapping lightly on the pavement. An odd strangled sound caught her attention and she paused to look around. At first she didn't see anything, but a flash of movement drew her attention to two figures close to the tree line. A young woman was struggling in the grip of a dark-suited man. *Damn.*

Pulling out her phone, she ran towards them, frantically punching in 911. The call didn't go through and she swore again. It was undoubtedly foolish, and possibly dangerous, to interfere, but as the girl started to slump to the ground, she knew she had to at least try to help.

“Hey! Leave her alone, you bastard.”

The man looked up and she had a fleeting glimpse of a white face in the fathering dusk - so white it could have been a mask. Her heart skipped a beat, but she refused to back down.

“I said let her go. I’ve just contacted the police and they’re on their way.”

She was close enough now to see him smile. There was something disturbing about that smile, but before she could decide what it was, a cold hand clamped down on her shoulder. Hard. She winced and tried to shove it away, but the grip was too strong.

He muttered something she couldn’t understand, and then she had a brief glimpse of another odd white face before a stinging pain radiated out from her neck. *He drugged me.* It was the last clear thought she had before darkness pulled her under.

CHAPTER TWO

“She’s waking.”

Barbara heard the words but had no idea what they meant, no idea who had spoken or where she was. Then her memories came rushing back. The girl, the strange men. They’d taken her too.

Forcing her eyes open, she found herself looking up at a white metal ceiling. Was she on a ship? Or in a vehicle? She turned her head and realized she was lying in a bunk of some kind, the wall beside her curving down towards the floor. It definitely wasn’t a vehicle.

A shadow fell across her and she saw the man from the park looking down at her, assessing her clinically before making a note on the data pad he was carrying. *Not a man.*

The bright lights in the cell made it quite obvious. What she had mistaken for a suit was a plain black uniform. And he wasn’t wearing a mask - his skin was actually a smooth, almost plastic looking white. His eyes had a disturbing red hue and when he opened his mouth, his teeth were unnaturally sharp. The hand he’d raised to his data pad had six fingers, not five.

An alien. It seemed like such a ridiculous idea, but she believed in the evidence of her own eyes. And the curving wall would make sense if she were now on a spaceship.

“Who are you?”

Her voice came out strained and hoarse, but he ignored her. How long had she been unconscious? And what had they done

to her while she was unaware? A streak of terror ran down her spine before she realized that her clothing was still intact. Nothing hurt except the lingering sting in her neck. She automatically raised her hand to the spot and felt a tiny hard lump beneath the surface - had she been chipped?

“What is this?”

“A translator,” he said dismissively. “So that your primitive species will obey instructions. All you need to understand is that you are now our property.”

“Property?”

“Yes.” He didn’t even look up from his data pad.

“You’re insane. Slavery is illegal in any enlightened society.”

Surely a society advanced enough to have spaceflight would be enlightened, wouldn’t it? Then again, using those spaceships to steal human women argued against it. *Women...*

“What happened to the girl? The one you were taking.”

He raised his head at that, his gaze cold despite his red eyes.

“She has been hysterical every time she has awoken. You appear somewhat more intelligent. You will handle her before she loses her value.”

“Handle her?” She glared at him. “She’s been kidnapped by aliens who aren’t even supposed to exist and taken away from everything she’s ever known. Of course, she’s going to be hysterical.”

“You will handle her,” he repeated with that same icy stare. “Or I will.”

The threat was no less terrifying because of the lack of detail, but she ignored the trickle of fear down her spine.

“She’s hysterical because you’ve stolen her - us - from our planet. I demand you return us at once.”

“Demand? Do I need to prove that you are not in a position to demand anything?”

He pulled out a gleaming metal object and it only took one horrified glance to realize it was a collar.

“No,” she said quickly. “It’s not necessary.”

Not that she had any intention of accepting this situation, but a collar certainly wouldn’t help her position.

“Good. Come with me. I trust I do not need to convince you that any attempt to escape is futile and will be punished?”

Fury washed over her, but she suppressed it behind her best neutral courtroom demeanor. An appearance of docility would be more useful in the long run than expressing her meaningless anger.

“I understand.”

She swung her legs off the bunk and stood. Her body seemed fine. If it hadn’t been for the ache in her neck, and her strange new surroundings, she could almost have believed that the encounter in the park had been a bad dream. Almost.

The alien pressed a control on his pad and the clear glass panel blocking one end of her cell opened. He led her out into a narrow white metal corridor. At the end of the corridor, a wide, circular stairway led down and he headed towards it, passing three more cells like hers on the way. All of them were empty, and she tried to take that as a positive sign.

“How big is this ship?”

He ignored her. The stairway only descended one level. When they reached the bottom, she followed him down another slightly wider corridor, this one lined with doors. He manipulated another control and one of the doors slid open to reveal what was all too clearly a medical lab.

Strapped to a table in the middle of the room was the girl she had seen in the park. She was very pretty, short blonde curls framing a delicate face, but she couldn’t have been more than twenty at the most. Even unconscious, with her wrists and ankles fastened, she was moving restlessly and Barbara could see the redness where the cuffs were damaging her skin.

“Bastards,” she muttered, forgetting her resolve to act cooperatively. “Remove those chains at once.”

“The last time I removed them she attempted to grab a scalpel.”

The comment came from another one of the aliens. He’d been standing on the far side of the room and she hadn’t noticed him before. His voice was as cold as her original captor’s, but she thought - hoped - that there was the faintest note of sympathy in it. A medic perhaps.

“I see.”

Moving to the side of the table, she looked down at the girl. She was breathing heavily and her eyes were moving rapidly beneath the thin skin of her eyelids.

“Hello,” she said softly. “My name is Barbara. You’re not alone.”

Did the restless movement still a little? She wasn’t entirely sure.

“It’s going to be okay,” she lied, reaching out and taking the girl’s hand.

As soon as she did, the girl’s eyes flew open and she stared up at Barbara, her small face distorted with terror.

“Y-you’re human,” she whispered.

“That’s right.”

The girl burst into tears and Barbara gestured for the medic to release the chains. He hesitated, then pressed the control. As soon as they fell away, she drew the girl into her arms, rocking her soothingly as she sobbed. She kept mumbling something as she cried, but it wasn’t until her tears began to subside that Barbara finally understood what she was saying: *I’m not alone.*

“No, you’re not, sweetie. What’s your name?”

“Natalie. Natalie Doyle.”

“Nice to meet you, Natalie. My name is Barbara.”

“You were in the park. You... you tried to help.”

Not that it had done any good, but she'd tried.

“That's right.”

For the first time Natalie raised her head and looked around, shuddering at the medical equipment. Her obvious fear turned to terror at the sight of the aliens and she buried her head against Barbara's shoulder.

“I think Natalie would feel better - be calmer - if we were in another room.”

She made the suggestion to the medic rather than her captor, and he nodded before turning to the other male.

“I've finished my tests, Krenar. You may take her.”

Krenar jerked his head at her and she tried to urge Natalie to her feet. The girl balked, gripping her jacket desperately.

“Don't leave me.”

“I'm not going to,” she said quickly as Krenar frowned. “We're just going to another room. Wouldn't you like that better?”

Natalie took another shuddering look around, then finally nodded and stood, clinging to Barbara's hand. Krenar took them back to her original cell, only staying long enough to let down a concealed bunk from the other wall before leaving. The glass door closed silently behind him, the silence more ominous than the clang of a cell door.

“What are we going to do?” Natalie whispered as she sank down on the bunk.

“I don't know, but there has to be a way out of this mess. I intend to find it.”

She spoke as confidently as possible and a tiny smile crossed the girl's face for the first time. But as Barbara sat down as well, she couldn't help the sinking feeling that there was nothing she could do.

CHAPTER THREE

According to Barbara's best estimate, a week passed before Krenar showed up at the cell once more - a week that had consisted of long periods of boring monotony interspersed with moments of despair. One of the white-skinned aliens, who she learned were called Vedeckians, showed up twice a day to push a tray of food through an otherwise invisible opening in the glass wall. The food was bland but edible, or at least edible to her. Natalie had eaten less and less as the days passed, despite Barbara's best efforts to cajole her into eating.

Unfortunately, the food deliveries were not the only times that Vedeckians appeared outside the cell. On several occasions a couple of them lingered outside the glass, watching them as if they were zoo animals, and discussing their probable value. Their conversations had made it quite clear that they were to be sold and why. Oddly enough, their breeding potential seemed even more valuable than their sexual appeal. They didn't seem to know or care that she was probably at the end of her childbearing years.

Natalie retreated even further after each such conversation, and Barbara had started trying to urge her into the tiny bathroom at the back of the cell whenever someone appeared outside the cell. But for the last day, Natalie had just turned her face to the wall and refused to eat or speak. She was growing increasingly worried about the girl.

When Krenar appeared, Natalie didn't move, but Barbara got to her feet, determined to try and reason with him. He hadn't

shown any sign of compassion so far, but he'd also indicated that he wanted Natalie in good health.

"What's the matter with her?" he demanded, gesturing to the silent girl.

"She's ill," Barbara said quietly. "I think she needs medical attention."

Not that she was convinced that a medic could help, but perhaps some indication of concern would get through to her.

"She needs to eat," he said brusquely.

"And she would if she was capable. Surely you don't want damaged goods," she added, remembering his original words.

He didn't reply, just turned and stalked away. She waited, holding her breath, but he didn't come back. She wasn't sure if she should feel encouraged or not.

When a Vedeckian arrived with food a few hours later, she didn't even try and coax Natalie into eating. Instead, she immediately pushed the full tray back through the opening.

"She needs to see your medic. Or at least bring him here so I can explain."

The Vedeckian hesitated, then shrugged and went away. She didn't hold out much hope that anything would come of her request, but she had to try.

"Do you think they're going to hurt us?"

The soft voice surprised her and she looked over to see that Natalie was watching her. Her face was as pale as ever, but at least she was sitting up.

"I...I don't know. I hope not."

Natalie looked like she wanted to ask something else, but then her face changed and Barbara turned around to see that Krenar had returned.

"Here," he said, passing her a bottle filled with a clear liquid through the food slot.

"What is it?"

“A nutritional substitute.” He scowled. “The captain has ordered that it be delivered to her each day.”

“Thank you.” She wasn’t quite sure why she felt grateful to Krenar, but he hadn’t treated them badly and he was clearly unhappy about the situation.

“I am not doing this for your sake.”

“Nevertheless, I’m grateful.”

He hesitated, his scowl deepening. “If she doesn’t take it, she will be returned to the medical lab.”

He stalked away without any further comment, but his meaning was quite clear. If Natalie didn’t eat voluntarily, she would be forced. She sighed, then sat down next to the girl on her bunk and offered her the bottle. Natalie just looked at it.

“Please, sweetie. You have to stay strong.”

“Why? So I can be b-bred by some alien?”

“We don’t know that it will come to that. And if we do get a chance to escape, you have to be strong enough to take advantage of it.”

“I doubt they’re going to let their valuable cargo escape,” Natalie said bitterly, but she grabbed the bottle and took a reluctant swig. Her mouth twisted, but then she shrugged. “I guess it’s not awful. Just kind of sweet and salty at the same time.”

Natalie only managed a few sips before putting the bottle down, but she picked it up again later for a few more and by the time Krenar returned the following day, she’d managed to drink the whole thing.

“You are both being transferred,” he announced. “The guard has a shock stick which he will use to reinforce his commands if you do not obey him. If you commit a second infraction, you will be fitted with a shock collar. Is that clear?”

The hint of color that had returned to Natalie’s face drained away, and any gratitude Barbara might have felt towards him disappeared as well. He sounded as cold and ruthless as ever.

How could a supposedly advanced civilization treat them this way - as if they were no more than animals?

“I - *we* - understand,” she said through clenched teeth as she put a protective arm around Natalie.

He nodded and stalked off again.

“Where... where do you think they’re taking us?” Natalie whispered.

“I don’t know.” She hugged the girl’s narrow shoulders. “But at least we’re together.”

CHAPTER FOUR

A short time after Krenar left, two Vedeckian guards appeared outside the cell. Barbara was sure she hadn't seen either one of them before, and both of them were carrying ominous looking metal rods. The glass door slid aside.

“Walk.”

Gripping Natalie's hand, she obeyed. One of the guards led the way rapidly through more of the white metal corridors, the other guard close behind. They came to a halt in front of a circular portal in the wall that opened like an iris. An airlock. They were leaving the ship. Why was that thought so frightening? *Don't be ridiculous*, she told herself. Perhaps their new destination would offer a better chance for escape.

They passed through the airlock and down a short passageway to another circular portal which opened into a vessel that wasn't much larger than a camper van. Some type of shuttle, perhaps? Windows ringed the shuttle, and Natalie let out a soft whimper as she saw the stars surrounding them. The guard frowned at her.

“Be silent and sit down.”

Barbara tugged the girl over to the small rows of seats at the back of the shuttle and urged her to sit down. Natalie was almost as pale as a Vedeckian, her lips trembling. As the portal closed and the ship's engines hummed more loudly, she gave Barbara a desperate look.

“I knew,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “I knew we were in space, but to actually see it...”

Her voice trailed off as she whimpered again. Barbara shot a quick look at the guards, but they were arguing about something and not paying attention. She understood what the girl meant. There was something so absolutely strange and final about the star studded emptiness surrounding them.

We're going to a new place, she reminded herself. Maybe things will be better there.

The trip lasted for several hours. Natalie fell into an uneasy doze, as did one of the guards, but Barbara spent her time watching the pilot. She was quite sure he was using some type of autopilot, but the other controls appeared to be a simpler version of the controls on a small plane. *Could I fly one*, she wondered. But even if she could, just being able to fly wouldn't be much use without a destination. It wasn't as if she could stop and ask a cop for directions to Earth. *Unless...*

What if they did have some kind of law enforcement out here? Maybe slavery wasn't allowed and there were authorities who would help them if they knew. That possibility was further reinforced when they reached their destination. The pilot directed the shuttle to a decrepit looking space station circling a large red planet. The entire place looked abandoned - hardly the site for a legitimate business enterprise.

A pitted hangar door didn't open until the last moment, and it closed immediately behind them. The furtive maneuver further aroused her suspicions.

"Wake up," one of the guards said roughly after they landed, shoving at Natalie's shoulder before Barbara could wake her.

The girl startled awake with a muffled cry.

"Wha...?"

"Time to go."

They were marched down a ramp and into a corridor that was in even worse shape than the exterior of the space station. The walls were scuffed and dented. Wires dangled from the ceiling along with some web-like material that might have been insulation. At least she hoped it was insulation and not the webs of some alien spider. She did her best to memorize the

way before the guard stopped in front of a depressingly solid door and unlocked it with a control on his belt.

The piteous cries of several babies immediately pierced the air, and the guard winced.

“Enter,” he ordered, and they both reluctantly obeyed.

The door closed behind them with a solid thump, but she was too distracted to pay much attention. The room must have been a lounge at some point with what were once colorfully painted walls, now peeling in long strips. Assorted furniture, most of it coming apart, was scattered throughout the room. A human woman was seated in what might once have been a recliner. She had a crying infant in each arm, while a little girl, perhaps a year old, leaned against her knees, also crying.

“Thank god. Please take a child. Any child.”

The desperation in the woman’s voice was echoed on her pale face. She looked a few years older than Barbara, but her face was already lined with fatigue, her eyes sunken and shadowed, her hair limp.

“I’m afraid I don’t have much experience with children,” Barbara said softly as she drew closer, trying not to frighten the child standing at the woman’s knee.

The little girl turned her head at the sound of her voice and babbled something, then took a few wobbly steps toward her before she started to fall. Some instinct Barbara never realized she owned had her sweeping down in time to catch the girl - who immediately threw her arms around her neck. The little girl’s face was stained with dirt and tears and she undoubtedly needed a bath and a diaper change, but Barbara found herself holding her protectively as she snuffled against her neck.

“Take one of the twins,” the woman ordered Natalie, then winced. “I mean, please. I can’t feed them both at the same time.”

Natalie rather hesitantly took the crying baby, and the woman immediately lifted her shirt and started feeding the other. The crying subsided almost immediately.

“Who are you?” Barbara asked. “What is this place?”

“My name is Carina,” the woman said wearily. “As far as I can tell, this is a holding pen for human women. And children. There were two other women here when I came. One of them was Mia’s mother,” she added, looking at the little girl Barbara was holding.

“What happened to her?”

Carina bit her lip and lowered her voice.

“She was sold to this big ugly alien who looked like a gorilla. Just her, not the baby.” Her voice dropped even lower. “I heard one of the guards say she killed herself.”

“Oh no.”

She automatically tightened her arms around Mia who had gone limp and heavy against her, and Natalie gave a muffled sob.

Carina gave Barbara an appraising look.

“She was tall with dark hair too. I’m guessing that’s why Mia took to you so quickly.” The other woman shrugged. “The other girl went fast too. I think they’re keeping me here to look after the babies until they have buyers lined up. They don’t seem to understand that it’s too much for one person. I wasn’t much of a bargain to begin with. I sure as hell ain’t one now.”

She gently detached the infant who had been feeding at her breast and nodded to Natalie. “Time to trade.”

Natalie obediently stepped forward, but Barbara could see how badly her hands were shaking.

“Why don’t you sit down with...”

“That’s Kevin. This is John.” A fleeting smile crossed Carina’s face before it was replaced by bitterness. “My miracle children.”

“They’re yours?”

“Oh, yes. The result of three years of fertility treatments. Then one day I take a walk in the park and next thing I know, all three of us are here.”

“Why are we here?” Natalie asked softly.

“Apparently they had some kind of plague that killed off millions of people, a lot of whom were women and children. Some of the survivors aren’t too particular about where they find replacements and the Vedeckians are happy to supply them.”

“Supply them?”

“With wives, children, mistresses, whores - whatever the client has the funds to purchase.” Carina gave a humorless laugh.

“Welcome to the warehouse, girls.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Barbara stared up at the ceiling, uneasily aware of the small, warm weight snuggled against her side. Mia had refused to leave her side since she'd arrived. At least she was now clean and tidy, although bathing a happily wiggling child was an experience for which she hadn't been prepared. Her blouse and pants had been soaked in the process. Fortunately, despite its cracked tile and flickering lighting the bathroom had the same type of hot air dryer they'd had on the ship.

The food was the same as on the ship as well, although it was simply stacked against the wall instead of being delivered. Natalie had given it a despairing glance, but Carina had half-bullied, half-coaxed into eating a little, and Barbara thought it had done her good.

There were some supplies for the children as well - bottles and formula and diapers of some hi-tech cloth that rarely needed to be changed.

Carina had taken advantage of their presence to have a shower of her own and returned smiling.

"That's such a relief. Those bastards don't seem to understand that you can't look after three babies and yourself at the same time."

Now that she was smiling, it was easy to see the attractive woman beneath the strain. Long black hair waved around a striking face with high cheekbones and dark eyes. Even though she'd obviously lost weight, she had a curvy build that would undoubtedly appeal to most males. For once Barbara

was glad of her own rather meager endowments - although if what Carina had said about the shortage of females was true, it probably wouldn't make much difference.

After Carina finished eating dutifully, if not enthusiastically, Barbara asked her how she'd been taken.

"What happened?"

Carina shrugged, picking up one of the boys and rocking gently.

"I don't really know. The boys had been restless all afternoon so I decided to take them for a walk because it always helped to settle them down. I'd done the same thing a hundred times before." She stared unseeingly at the wall. "It was late afternoon, but it wasn't dark so I wasn't worried about it. Then all of a sudden I noticed that everything had gone very quiet and there was this creepy mist –"

"I remember that," Natalie said. "The mist. And the men – the aliens – coming out of it."

The girl shuddered and Barbara reached over and gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

"Pretty much the same thing happened to me. I saw the mist and turned around, and there was this man coming towards me. I had pepper spray in my bag. I even got one of them, before they knocked me out., but it didn't stop them." Carina laughed bitterly. "I'm pretty sure I even know which one it was. He's always glaring at me. Serves him right."

"Was there... That is, did you leave a partner behind?"

Carina's mouth twisted in an unamused smile.

"He was a partner all right – but only in his law firm. Not with me. I got rid of him three years ago when I found out he was cheating on me with his secretary. But we'd been married for almost twenty years and I had a sympathetic judge. I made him pay." She looked down at the sleeping baby and her face softened. "We'd tried for years to have children so I used part of my settlement to fund the IVF. I was lucky - it eventually worked. But it was too late for that cheating bastard."

“He was a lawyer?”

“Yes, why?” Carina followed her question with a sharp eyed look at Barbara, then shook her head. “I should have known – you’re one too, aren’t you? I know that sharp, useless look. Sorry,” she added quickly. “I’m still a little bitter.”

Barbara would have said a lot bitter, but she smiled and shrugged.

“Don’t worry about it. A lot of people enjoy picking on lawyers. I’m often tempted to do the same myself – which is why I had just quit the afternoon it all happened.”

“Really?” Natalie asked. She’d been holding the other twin, but she’d been just as quiet as she was on the ship. “Why?”

“Because I finally understood that they already had their token female partner and they weren’t about to add another one.” She gave them both a rueful smile. “I decided it was time for a new life, but this isn’t what I had in mind.”

Carina snorted, then hastily rocked her son when he jumped at the noise.

“You can say that again. And you know what annoys me most, aside from the whole being taken and probably sold thing? That bastard is probably going to end up back in the house. If I were dead, I’d go back and haunt him.”

Barbara laughed and turned to Natalie.

“What about you, sweetie?”

The girl shrugged, avoiding her gaze.

“I’m not very exciting. I’m in – was in – my second year of college. I hadn’t even made up my mind what my major was going to be.”

“I’m sure there’s still time. I have to believe there’s a way back.”

Carina snorted again. “How? You going to sweet talk one of these bastards into returning us?”

“I’m not that optimistic. I was thinking more along the lines of a legal solution –”

“Of course you are.” Carina rolled her eyes.

“I suppose that is where my mind automatically goes, but look at this. There’s no way this is a legitimate operation, hidden away on what looks like an abandoned space station. And if it is illegal, then there is someone whose job is to enforce that law. All we have to do is find them.”

“Good luck with that.”

Despite the cynical comment, Carina looked thoughtful, and Natalie had an almost hopeful expression on her pale face.

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes, I truly believe that this is illegal, which means there is some kind of law against it. And if there are laws, there are people to enforce those laws.”

She chose her words carefully because as much as she wanted to give the girl hope, she was well aware that finding such law enforcement somewhere in this strange place might prove difficult. From the look Carina shot her, she suspected the other woman was thinking the same thing, but fortunately, she kept her mouth shut.

Several more days of boredom followed, but at least they had a little more room to move around than they’d had on the ship. In addition to the lounge area, there were three small bedrooms, each with a working bathroom attached. With the two of them to help with the babies, Carina lost some of her strained look. Once again they were in waiting mode and she both anticipated and dreaded what would happen when it did.

And then there was Mia. The little girl clung to her as if she were in fact her mother. She quickly discovered how little she knew about taking care of a child, but fortunately Carina was there to advise her - even if it came at the price of her gentle mockery. Focusing on Mia - on thinking of ways to entertain her and encourage her rapidly developing motor skills, of feeding her and bathing her - gave her a purpose. And when Mia wrapped her arms around her neck or snuggled against her, her heart melted.

But as much as the little girl's affection pleased her, she grew increasingly concerned about what would happen if the aliens came for her. How would the little girl handle another separation? How would she?

Then on the third day, everything changed again. Two guards came rushing in and ordered them to follow. When Barbara tried to question them, one of them raised his shock stick threateningly and she backed off. In the frenzied rush of activity, they barely had time to grab a few of the supplies that had been provided for the infants before following the guards.

The two males marched them through the corridors so quickly that it was difficult to keep up, but as they hurried along, she noticed that the base lighting that illuminated the floor was now flashing red, blinking on and off continually. Clearly it was some kind of alarm, but what could have happened? She had a nightmarish vision of some asteroid hitting the space station and tearing it apart, even though it seemed unlikely. They hadn't felt the station move.

They returned to what looked like the same hanger and were ordered back on board the shuttle. After a brief conversation, only one of the guards joined them. A few minutes later they were flying out into space again. Natalie was pale and shaking and the children obviously picked up on the tension. The twins started to fuss and Mia clung to her.

"Keep them quiet," the guard ordered.

Carina glared at the back of his head, but began feeding Kevin while Natalie held John. Barbara rocked Mia, humming softly, and the little girl finally fell asleep in her arms.

Silence descended over the shuttle, but it was an uneasy silence. The guard remained huddled over the controls, occasionally muttering to himself. Eventually she decided to try talking to him. Krenar hadn't been a fountain of information, but he had been willing to tell her a little.

"Is something wrong?" she asked quietly.

The guard turned and glared at her.

“Of course something’s wrong. I keep saying you fucking humans are more trouble than you’re worth, but no one’s willing to listen to me. They’re all too focused on how many credits they are going to get. They don’t care how big the risk is, but I do. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a fucking cell.”

Triumph filled Barbara – she was right. Taking them was illegal. Now all she had to do was to find a way to contact the authorities, whoever they were. Unfortunately, her triumph was short-lived. The guard’s voice had grown louder as he ranted, and his last words were loud enough to jolt Kevin awake. He immediately started to wail and John soon joined in. Mia also woke and started to cry, a quiet, hopeless cry that tore at Barbara’s heartstrings.

“Shut them up!” the guard yelled, but the harsh command only made the babies cry harder.

“Godsdammit.” He rose and stomped back towards them. “If you don’t shut them up, I will. Three adult females are almost as valuable and a lot less trouble. Fuck if I’m not getting something out of this disaster.”

He reached for Kevin and the small space exploded in chaos. Carina screeched and started kicking at him, somehow managing to strike a blow right between his legs. Apparently Vedeckians anatomy was similar to human anatomy because he howled and clutched his groin. Natalie dropped to the ground and tried to wedge herself between the seats, curling protectively around an increasingly loud John. Mia’s soft cries grew louder as the guard began to straighten.

“You’re going to pay for that, you bitch.”

He advanced on Carina again, this time managing to avoid her wild kicks as he reached for Kevin. He only succeeded in grabbing the boy’s diaper and Carina tightened her arms around her son. It was like some horrifying game of tug-of-war but the outcome seemed inevitable. She looked around frantically for some way to help. All she could see were some cloth bags that had been loaded on the shuttle with them. They were filled with something heavy and while they didn’t seem

promising, they were the only things that she could see that might be used as weapons. She thrust a still sobbing Mia at Natalie and grabbed one.

The weight of it in her hand gave her hope as she turned back to where the guard was still struggling with Carina. If he could knock him out, they might be able to find something to tie him up with while they figured out what to do. Knowing they only had one chance, she swung the bag with all her might at his head. It connected with the sickening thump, and then he simply collapsed, falling silently to the floor.

“We have to find something to tie him up with,” she said urgently, looking around as if rope might magically appear.

“I don’t think that’s going to be necessary,” Carina said slowly.

“What do you mean it’s not necessary? It’s not like he’s going to fall for that a second time.”

“I don’t think he’s going to fall for anything. Look.”

She finally looked down and saw the small pool of blood collecting beneath the guard’s head.

“Oh God no.”

She’d never intended to hurt him that badly, let alone kill him. *He deserved it*, a tiny voice whispered, but she ignored it as she bent down over him, frantically searching for some sign of life. There was nothing she could find and she finally sat back on her heels, giving Carina a hopeless look.

“I... I guess I killed him.”

“Good,” Natalie’s soft voice was unusually hard. “I hope they all die.”

Carina looked a little surprised at the girl’s vehemence, but she nodded as well.

“Can’t say I’m sorry myself. But now what?”

Both of the other women were looking at her so she did her best to put aside her appalled horror and think.

“Now we find the authorities they were hiding from. I’m sure they could arrange for us to get back home.”

Mia looked up, her face tear stained, and reached for her. She picked her up and the little girl immediately buried her face in her neck, her sobs gradually fading as Barbara rubbed her back.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I just had to stop the bad man.”

“You certainly did that,” Carina said dryly, and Barbara flinched.

But guilt was going to have to wait. Right now she had to figure out how to get them to some type of authority. Still carrying Mia, she headed for the pilot’s chair. The controls looked as simple as she remembered and she studied them carefully.

I can do this. I have to do this. For Mia, for all of us.

After a brief hesitation, she reached for the switch that controlled the autopilot and flipped it off. Wherever the Vedeckian had been headed, it wasn’t a place they wanted to go. She’d just have to try and pilot the shuttle herself. After all, how hard could it be?

CHAPTER SIX

Pralec Tor'Sarian swung himself up into one of the massive jungle trees, then settled in to wait. The green pattern on his skin blended with the native foliage and his tail curled around a nearby branch to help maintain his position. His ancestors must have hunted like this, he thought. Perhaps that was why he found it so satisfying. But that had been a long time ago - before Ciresia had become a dying planet, a constant symbol of the toll the Red Death had taken on their civilization.

Or perhaps by now the planet had started to heal, even if the Cire were lost. He wouldn't know - he hadn't been there in twenty years and now he could never go back, even if he wished to. A rustle sounded in the undergrowth below and he pushed aside the familiar feelings of guilt and regret to concentrate on his hunting.

When he caught sight of the rastran, he silently notched his bow and waited. It was moving warily, its long nose quivering as it sought out any threat. A faint breeze stirred the branches and the creature froze, its beady black eyes scanning the area, searching for danger. When a flock of birds burst from a tree at the edge of the clearing, the animal jumped, its head swinging in the direction of the commotion. Pralec waited until the creature resumed its progress, then shot. The animal dropped silently to the ground and he followed it in one swift leap.

A perfect shot, right through the heart - an instant death for the rastran and minimal damage to its valuable fur. A good kill, a successful hunt, and he paused to give thanks before heading

back to his makeshift camp. The fur would be cured and set aside for trade while he would smoke the meat in preparation for the upcoming winter. There was a satisfaction in that - in depending only on himself - but the cold season always made him restless, stirring memories that were best left buried. He was still tempted to leave occasionally, to take one of the infrequent ships that landed on Orman, but this was his penance. He would never leave his self-imposed exile.

Sighing, he slung the animal's carcass over his shoulder and headed back towards his camp. He had chosen this life. It is enough. He repeated the words silently, but the sense of restlessness continued to plague him and his sleep was troubled. He dreamed of the day he left Ciresia. Of the day he looked around at the tired, hopeless males who had lost everything and knew there was nothing there for him anymore. He'd been so young, and so painfully naive, begging passage on every ship that landed in the spaceport. Captain Gaemi had been the only one to listen.

"Where are you going, boy?" the captain had asked.

"Away," he'd said.

The male had shaken his head, but he'd also let him board the ship. He'd put him to work hauling cargo for little more than room and board, but in his fog of guilt and sorrow that had been enough. He didn't speak to anyone or make any friends. He worked, he tried to sleep, and he stared into the darkness. Eventually, some of the more pleasant memories of his childhood began to surface and he found himself longing for ground beneath his feet and air that had not been recycled. When they arrived on Driguera, he told Captain Gaemi that he was leaving

He'd barely gotten off the ship before he was robbed and beaten and left for dead. Fortunately, someone found him and hauled him back to the ship. Captain Gaemi had once again shaken his head and taken him back on board. But that time he'd done more than just allow him to return - he'd started teaching him. Taught him how to assess a situation, how to know when trouble was about to erupt, how to judge others by their actions and not their words. He'd even taught him to

fight - not the kind of fighting that had been taught at his military academy, but the kind that ruthless, desperate males employed.

He spent five more years on the ship, taking on more responsibility and absorbing everything Gaemi had to teach him. But the longing for a more permanent home never really left him. In the end, Gaemi had been the one to push him into making the change.

“Landing on Alliko tomorrow,” he’d said one night, not looking at Pralec while he stirred one of his terrible stews.

“I know. I checked the manifest this morning.”

“Friend of mine lives there.”

That wasn’t surprising. Gaemi had friends and acquaintances scattered throughout the Confederated Planets.

“I suppose that means you will be staggering back to the ship, still half-drunk, just before we are scheduled to leave?”

Gaemi glared at him from under bushy brows.

“You’ve never seen him intoxicated and you know it.”

“I know nothing of the kind. Unless you really intended to marry that Arkanian prostitute.”

“What a female,” Gaemi sighed. “Might have been worth adding a slime pit to have her on board. Why she could suck the skin off -”

“I am sure she was very skilled,” he interrupted hastily before his friend started on one of his long - and improbable - tales about his sexual exploits. “But is that what you wanted to discuss?”

Gaemi sniffed. “You’re just jealous.”

Perhaps it was true. Oh, not about Gaemi’s adventures with the Arkanian prostitute, but about his ability to have a relationship with a female, however temporary. Pralec had been taught that only a Cire female could satisfy a Cire male and he’d never thought to question it. Gaemi, of course, had encouraged him to see for himself. Unfortunately, it turned out to be true. He’d

never encountered a female who felt right, who smelled right, and any attempted sexual encounter just left him frustrated and lonely.

“Sorry, boy,” Gaemi muttered when Pralec stiffened. “Wasn’t thinking.”

He forced a casual shrug. “It is of no importance. Is there actually something significant about our landing tomorrow?”

“I want you to meet my friend, Voruma. He’s head of security for one of the big Houses.” Gaemi shot him another quick look. “He’s looking for a second in command. Told him you might do.”

“Me? But what about the ship? About you?”

Gaemi didn’t look up from the pot he was stirring so vigorously.

“We’ll be fine. Thinking about slowing down anyway. Maybe just some milk runs in the local sectors.”

“But -”

“You’re not cut out for this life, Pralec. You want a settled home, a place to belong. You don’t want to wander around the stars with an old male.”

“But -”

“Just think about it.”

So he did, and after a sleepless night he accompanied Gaemi to meet Voruma. The other male was a brusque, no-nonsense warrior who reminded Pralec of his favorite teacher at the academy. And when Gaemi left, Pralec remained.

His new life suited him and he was, if not happy, content. Ten years later when Voruma retired, Pralec took over as head of the house military and swore his devotion to House Garran. But then the old lord died. His son B’suk, the new lord, was reckless, unstable, and cruel. His loyalty - his honor - was to his house, but how could he be loyal to such a male?

The final blow came when he discovered that B’suk had been abusing young females. His vow of loyalty could not overlook

such heinous activities and he knew he would have to break his vow and report the male. Unfortunately, the officer to whom he tried to report B'suk was on the B'suk's payroll and he had threatened to have Pralec accused of the crime instead. Perhaps he should have stayed and fought to clear his name. Instead he used his old connections to get off world.

He'd ended up here on Orman, a tiny little backwater planet with a modest trade in furs and sweet smoke leaves. He'd built himself a small cabin in the woods outside the trading port and he'd been there ever since.

It is not a bad life, he reminded himself again as the first rays of the morning sun crept under the roof of his makeshift shelter and he abandoned any attempt to sleep. After he checked his smoker, he decided that if he could hunt another two rastran, or perhaps a lumin, he would be ready to return. Picking up his bow, he headed off into the jungle. He'd only made it perhaps half a mile, taking his time and checking for tracks, when he heard a distinctive yapping cry. *Fuck. A ternkel.*

The big beasts were vicious, deadly hunters with formidable claws. If he had stumbled on one's territory, he would be better off packing up and moving on now. He was about to start retracing his steps when there was a second cry - soft, terrified, and female. What the hell was a female from the port doing so far away from town? But the reason didn't matter. He set off at a run, racing through the undergrowth in the direction of the cries.

The ternkel snarled again as he approached, and he slowed to keep his passage silent. The small breeze disturbing the morning was blowing in his direction and with any luck, he should be able to take it unaware. With his hand on his knife, he slipped between two trees and emerged in a clearing on the bank of a small creek.

A slender female from an unfamiliar race, her brown hair tangled around her shoulders, stood facing the ternkel. Her eyes were wide with fear and her chest was heaving with her panicked breaths as she clutched a branch with trembling hands. Another, even smaller female sprawled on the ground

behind her. As the wind shifted slightly, the ternkel turned its head and spotted him. With a hissing snarl, it prowled towards him. He drew his knife and crouched low.

Hoping the female had the sense to run, he concentrated on the ternkel. When the beast was nearly upon him, he fainted right, then threw himself to the left as the creature leaped for him. His blade caught it in the side, but it wasn't a killing blow and the ternkel whirled around and came at him again. This time it managed to rake his leg with its claws before he rolled out of the way.

Cursing silently, he ignored the pain in his thigh and circled, watching for the right moment to attack. But his leg was going numb more quickly than he'd expected, slowing him down. The beast attacked again, and he barely managed to evade a second blow as he slashed the knife across its neck and stumbled away. His vision was starting to blur but by Granthar, he wasn't going to die like this, eaten by a fucking ternkel. He tightened his grip on the knife and when the ternkel rushed him again, he let the weakness in his leg carry him to the ground and slid beneath the beast, slicing open its belly in a hot rush of blood and guts as it collapsed over him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Barbara stood frozen in place, still shocked by what had just happened. How had so many things gone so wrong so quickly? In the space of less than forty-eight hours, she'd killed a Vedeckian, crashed a spaceship, and been attacked by some nightmarish combination of bear and reptile. One that she was pretty sure would have torn her apart if it hadn't been for the big green alien who had appeared out of nowhere.

Where had he come from? One minute she'd been clutching the branch she'd grabbed in a vain attempt to defend herself and Natalie, and the next he'd appeared out of the bushes like some kind of alien Tarzan. *But bigger than any Tarzan I've ever seen*, she thought as he pushed the body of the animal off of him and rose to his feet. Subtly patterned green skin covered acres of muscles from wide shoulders to ridged abdomen to strong thighs - all of which were clearly visible since all he was wearing was some type of leather loincloth. A suspiciously packed loincloth.

She gulped and tightened her grip on the branch. He'd come to their rescue - but what would he expect in return?

"Umm, thank you." He tilted his head, studying her from big, dark eyes, and she suddenly wondered if the translator worked for him.

"Do. You. Understand. Me?" she asked, slowly and distinctly.

He jerked his head in what might have been a nod, an expression she couldn't read on his face. A not unhandsome face, despite the reptilian cast of his features - angular

cheekbones and a strong jawline, a wide, thin-lipped mouth, and those big dark eyes. Instead of hair, he had a series of ridges that flowed over his scalp and across those very broad shoulders. His tail twitched, flicking towards her, and she gave it a fascinated glance as he started to bend over the creature's body.

"Thank you," she repeated. "If you hadn't come along..."

This time his nod was definitely in the affirmative, and she let out a long breath.

"Need help?" he asked, jerking his head behind her.

His voice was deep and raspy and her heart gave a funny little flip. She turned around quickly, dropping the branch, and saw that Natalie was sitting up.

"Are you okay?"

Natalie nodded.

"What happened? I remember we were going to get water and then..." The girl gave the clearing a confused look, then let out a soft cry when she saw the alien. "Who... who's he?"

"A friend," she said quickly, hoping she was correct. "He killed that creature."

Natalie's gaze traveled over to the dead beast just as the alien started calmly butchering it and all the color drained out of her face.

"I don't feel very well."

"Don't faint again," she said quickly. "Put your head between your knees and I'll get some water."

Water had been the reason they had entered the jungle in the first place. She only hoped the twins and Mia were still sleeping or Carina was going to have their heads when they got back. Grabbing one of the metal containers she'd taken from the shuttle, she headed for the stream. As she did, she realized that the alien was watching her, even though he was still bent down over the dead beast, and she had the strangest urge to blush.

Don't be ridiculous, she scolded herself. She couldn't even remember the last time a man had had that effect on her, let alone some primitive alien.

She stooped down to gather up some water, then hesitated. The stream looked safe, clear enough that she could see the shallow rocky bottom, but who knew what monsters might be lying in wait? The jungle had seemed safe enough as well. And then there were the invisible dangers of microscopic parasites and whatever else the water might carry. Biting her lip, she filled the container then carried it carefully back to Natalie. The girl had turned her back on the alien and no longer looked quite so pale.

"Don't drink it yet," she said quietly, then cautiously approached the strange male.

He was still butchering the corpse and after one horrified glance, she kept her gaze averted from the remains of the animal. He was assembling strips of meat neatly on large leaves, weaving them into a type of container as he worked, and the sight of that was far less disturbing. When she joined him, he looked up and she noticed that even kneeling, he was tall enough that his head was at the same level as her chest.

"Umm. I was wondering... That is, what's your name?"

He just looked at her, face expressionless.

"I'm Barbara. Barbara," she repeated slowly, patting her chest.

He followed the movement and her nipples automatically responded to that intense look. This time she couldn't stop herself from blushing as she hastily dropped her hand. His gaze traveled slowly back up to her face leaving an almost palpable trail of warmth behind.

"Barbara," he said finally, and that deep, gravelly voice did nothing to quell the unexpected arousal.

"That's right. I'm Barbara. And you are?"

A flash of what looked like amusement crossed his face so quickly she couldn't be sure she'd seen it.

"Pralec."

He patted his own massive chest and she suddenly wondered what it would be like to run her hands over that wide muscular expanse. *Oh, for goodness sake. Why am I acting like a silly schoolgirl?* It must be the adrenaline from the attack, she decided.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Pralec.” Fortunately her voice came out sounding reasonably composed. “Do you have a way to start a fire? Fire? Hot stuff? To heat the water.”

This time she was sure it was amusement on his face before he nodded.

“Oh good. Do you think you could start one for us? Back at the ship, I mean. So we can boil the water. And maybe cook,” she added, giving the strips of meat he was cutting a doubtful look. The beast hadn’t seemed very appetizing, but he was obviously preparing it as food and they were going to need something to eat.

“Ship?”

His voice sounded strained, and she gave him a startled look. Why did that bother him?

“Y-yes. I, err, kind of crashed it.”

A wide, surprisingly attractive smile crossed his face, and she found herself trying to explain.

“It’s not like I’ve ever flown one before and I thought the autopilot would handle it but all these lights were going off so I did the best I could. And we’re all fine.”

Except for the guard, of course, but that wasn’t because of her landing. *No, it’s because I bashed him over the head,* her conscience reminded her. She pushed aside the memory as a thought suddenly occurred to her.

“You know what a ship is. Does that mean you’ve seen more? Is there some type of spaceport here?”

He flashed a look at her but didn’t respond. *Damn.* Maybe spaceships were taboo or something. She’d have to work back around to it.

“But anyway, will you come and start a fire for us? The ship’s just a little way back through the trees in a clearing. A bigger clearing now,” she added ruefully, and she was sure his mouth twitched.

“Yes. Fire.”

“Okay then. Thank you.”

She smiled at him and he suddenly smiled back, that wide attractive smile, and their eyes met with a shock of something that felt oddly like recognition. For a long moment they stared at each other, and then she heard Natalie clear her throat. She blushed and started to turn away, only to find that his tail had wrapped itself around her calf, like a big, warm hand cupping her leg.

“Umm, you’re going to have to let go of me.”

He looked startled, then his tail quickly dropped away, leaving her feeling unexpectedly bereft.

“Fire,” she repeated like an idiot, then turned and hurried back to Natalie.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pralec grabbed his tail as it flicked in the direction his female had gone. *His* female? Where had that come from? There would be no female for him or any of his race. That knowledge seemed even more painful than usual with his - *the* - female's sweet fragrance lingering in his head and the memory of her soft flesh beneath his tail.

He did his best to concentrate on stripping the rest of the meat from the carcass, even though his instincts kept urging him to abandon it and follow her. *She will be safe enough*, he told himself, in a vain attempt to calm those instincts. The clearing she had mentioned was only a short distance away, and the ternkels were extremely territorial. No other predators would be present in the vicinity.

In addition, she - *they* - would need sustenance and the ternkel would provide it. Their flesh was considered quite tasty, although few were willing to risk hunting the dangerous animals. After he started a fire, he could show them how to prepare the meat and then...

And then what? His female - Barbara - has enquired about a spaceport. Once again his instincts rebelled. Port Lagona was far quieter than many of the spaceports he'd visited while traveling with Gaemi, but it was not civilized. Two unescorted females would be... vulnerable. He did not want to put them at risk, but perhaps they had a destination they needed to reach.

At least her assumption that he was incapable of holding an actual conversation was in his favor. He'd simply been so astonished by her presence that he'd lost the ability to speak

for a moment. His spur of the moment decision not to correct that impression had been driven by curiosity as much as anything. Although it felt a little too much like deceit to suit his conscience, it did mean that he would be able to listen and observe before deciding on the best course of action.

As soon as he finished butchering the carcass, he suspended the parcel of meat from a branch while he dragged the bones in the opposite direction of the clearing so that any small predators feasting on the remains would not disturb them. Then he washed his wounds, noting that they were not as extensive as he had feared, and filled the container she'd left behind. Taking the water and the meat he followed their tracks towards the clearing.

Even if he had not been a skilled hunter, signs of their passage would have been unmistakable and he found himself frowning. There was no reason to suppose that they were being followed, but why were they out here alone? And why had his female attempted to fly a ship she was obviously not qualified to fly?

A Vedeckian ship, he realized as he entered the clearing. The markings were unmistakable. *Fuck*. The race of traders had a sordid reputation and even before he'd settled on Alliko, he'd heard of them trading in females. And not just females he realized as he took in the rest of the occupants. Two, no, three infants as well as an additional female. One of the infants was sitting on his female's lap. Was she already mated, he wondered, his chest aching.

But their presence here was not good, not good at all. If the Vedeckians had lost such a valuable cargo, they would be coming after them. Had they at least had the sense to disable the tracking beacon? He placed the water and meat on a low boulder and headed for the damaged shuttle. The front end was completely crushed and he shuddered as he realized how close they must have been to dying.

"Hi, Pralec. This is -" Barbara's mouth dropped open as he strode past her. "Where are you going?"

He didn't respond, focused on turning off the beacon as soon as possible. The pilot's area was also crumpled, but most of

the control panel was intact and he located the beacon easily enough. Off. *Thank Granthar*. Their location wasn't being transmitted, and if they had turned it off early enough, they couldn't even be traced to this planet.

As he straightened, he caught a faint metallic tang - one he recognized all too well. *Blood*. He quieted his immediate flash of panic by remembering that none of the females had appeared injured. And if they were unharmed, perhaps that explained the mystery of how they came to be on their own in a Vedeckian ship - if not how they had overcome one of the bastards.

"Pralec? What are you doing?"

He turned to find Barbara behind him, frowning. She had brought the child with her and both pairs of eyes studied him - one as grey as a winter sky and the other the blue of summer, but both equally curious. He opened his mouth to explain, then reconsidered. He still needed more information before he revealed himself.

"Fly?" he said instead, gesturing at the control panel.

"No, it doesn't fly. Not anymore." Fine dark brows drew together. "But you know it's a ship and that it flies. How?"

He hesitated, then pointed at the sky.

"You've seen them flying? That must mean there's a spaceport here. Do you know where it is, Pralec?"

He suspected that she was talking to herself more than him, but at that moment, the child suddenly reached for him, flinging herself against Barbara's arms.

"Puh... Puh... Puh..."

Unable to resist the excited babble, he extended his hand and the child grabbed it in a surprisingly strong grip.

"Pralec," he told her.

"Puh," she repeated, and he couldn't help smiling.

Barbara returned the smile over the child's head.

“I think Mia likes you. But that doesn’t mean you can get away with not answering the question. Where are the ships?”

Now that he knew just how valuable they were, he was even less willing to take her to the spaceport. He took refuge in a shrug, soothing his uneasy conscience with the reminder that there were no ships in port currently. And as soon as he had more information, he would tell her everything. He almost changed his mind and told her when her shoulders sagged with disappointment, but then she sighed and smiled at him again.

“I suppose just because you’ve seen a few ships overhead, it doesn’t mean that you know where they were headed. Have you seen enough?” Her smile turned teasing. “You did promise me a fire.”

“Fire,” he repeated solemnly, and she laughed.

“Come on, Mia. Let go of the nice man. I mean, alien. I mean...”

She gave him a helpless look.

“Male.”

“I don’t think there’s any doubt about that,” she said dryly, her eyes flicking down over his chest to his hunting kilt. His cock immediately stirred and her eyes widened before a pink flush covered her cheeks and she dropped her gaze. “Umm...”

“Puh. Puh,” the child demanded, tugging on his finger.

“Want?” he asked Barbara, and she sighed.

“I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure her out.”

“Not... yours?”

“Yes, she’s mine! Well, not exactly.” She sighed again. “It’s complicated, but I’m responsible for her.”

The child had been watching their faces as they spoke, and she suddenly lunged towards him again. He automatically put out his hands to catch her just as Barbara tightened her grip and he found his hands trapped between the child’s small body and Barbara’s small, perfect breasts. He felt her breath catch and

the quick tempting press of her nipples against the back of his hands before he forced himself to pull his hands back.

“Puh-puh,” Mia demanded.

“I think... I think she wants you to hold her.” Barbara’s voice was breathless, her cheeks still that appealing pink.

“Me?”

“Do you want to?”

He nodded a little uncertainly and she handed him the child. She was so small, so impossibly fragile, but she squealed happily and reached up to pat his face with a tiny hand as he carefully gathered her close. He closed his eyes as that one small touch burned through him. Whatever it took, he would keep this child safe.

“Puh-puh. Puh,” she babbled.

“Mia definitely likes you.”

Barbara’s tone was mildly regretful, and he nodded to where the child’s other hand was still clinging to her arm.

“Likes us,” he said firmly.

“Us,” she whispered, her eyes huge in the dim interior of the shuttle.

He suddenly realized how close they were, his irrepressible tail once more curled around Barbara’s waist and the child between them. Her tantalizing fragrance filled his head and it felt... right, as if they were a family.

A family I can never have.

The reminder sent a chill through him and he carefully disentangled Mia’s small body and passed her back to Barbara.

“Fire.”

“Oh. Of course.” She bit her lip and he forced his tail to release her as she stepped back. “I’ll just, umm, tell the others.”

She whirled and left, Mia’s mournful “Puh-puh,” floating behind them, and he was alone once more.

CHAPTER NINE

“**W**hat was that about?” Carina demanded as soon as Barbara emerged from the shuttle.

I wish I knew.

“Do you think he knows?” Natalie whispered. “About the guard?”

“He couldn’t.” They had dragged the body away as soon as they recovered from the crash, a memory that still made her shudder. “I think he just wanted to see inside.”

She thought she did a good job of keeping her voice calm, but Carina gave her a skeptical look.

“He’s a fucking alien. I don’t trust him.”

“He saved our lives,” Natalie said before Barbara could respond. “All I did was pass out when that... thing started growling at us.”

“Yeah, well I just hope he isn’t expecting a reward,” Carina muttered.

“Or maybe he’s just a nice guy. There are some, you know.”

“Not in my experience.” The other woman glared at her until one of her boys whimpered, and then she sighed. “I suppose he might be all right. It’s just... hard to trust, you know?”

“I do, but I think Pralec is okay.”

“Puh-puh,” Mia said immediately, and she laughed.

“Mia seems to think so anyway.”

Carina rolled her eyes, but when Pralec joined them a few minutes later and began clearing a space for a fire, she didn't protest. In fact, after a glance at the meat he'd brought, she almost smiled.

"God, I've missed real food. It will make a nice change from that tasteless crap the guards fed us."

Pralec shot one of those too perceptive looks in Carina's direction and frowned.

"Guards?"

Damn. Why did his limited vocabulary have to include that word?

"I'll explain later," she said quickly. "Would you like me to help you with the fire?"

The frown disappeared, replaced by amusement as he looked back over at her and shook his head. His assessment of her fire-starting abilities was accurate, if not entirely flattering, but she was an intelligent woman. She could learn.

"Just tell me what to do."

He hesitated, then showed her a small clump of some kind of dried plant material before he pointed at the ground beneath the trees.

"Gather."

"You want me to collect some of that moss? I can do that."

As she placed Mia on the ground in front of Natalie, the little girl started chewing on her fists and a thought occurred to her.

"You don't happen to know if there's any edible fruit around, do you?"

He gave her another amused look and jerked his head in the direction of the jungle.

"Hunt... fruit?"

"Not exactly, but I thought maybe we could gather some if there's any nearby. I don't think Mia is ready for meat, but it

would be good for her to have something other than formula and crackers.”

His expression immediately turned serious as he looked over at Mia. He opened his mouth, then hesitated.

“Help,” he finally agreed.

“Thank you.”

She smiled at him and turned towards the trees only to realize that his tail had curved around her waist. When she put her hand on it to pull it away, she discovered that his skin wasn't smooth. Small raised nubs covered his tail and she ran her hand along it, intrigued by the feel of it beneath her hand. Did they cover his entire body, even his cock? The thought sent an unexpected rush of arousal through her body as her hand tightened.

He made an odd, strangled sound and she realized she was stroking his tail rather intimately. And enjoying it.

“Umm, sorry.”

She hurriedly pulled her hand away and escaped into the trees.

“What is wrong with me?” she muttered as she started searching the ground for more of the moss Pralec had shown her.

Why was she reacting so strongly to this huge alien? *Instinct*, she told herself. Women were biologically conditioned to respond to a powerful male, especially in a survival situation. But somehow she couldn't quite convince herself. It was more than just a physical reaction - she felt as if they were... connected in some way she couldn't explain.

Sighing, she picked up several handfuls of the moss, then moved a little farther into the trees, stopping every few feet to look around. Most of the vegetation was very similar to Earth species, but that just made the differences more obvious - a vine that dripped with tiny purple crystals or what might have been a flower but had long waving tendrils like an undersea plant.

“Barbara.”

Pralec's rough voice rasped over her and she jumped, nearly dropping the handful of moss.

"Sorry, I was just taking a quick look around."

She sounded a little breathless, but at least she hadn't shrieked. His face was impassive, but there was a gleam of laughter in his eyes.

"Find?"

"Yes. Here."

She handed him the handfuls of moss - which looked like much less in his big hands - and he examined it closely, his tail curling around her wrist as he did. He didn't even seem to notice that it kept happening, so perhaps it was just a social gesture for his people.

He sorted through the moss rapidly, discarded some of it after showing her the difference in texture between that and what he kept. She nodded and patted his tail, hoping it was the appropriate response since she didn't have a tail of her own. His tail twitched beneath her hand, then tightened around her wrist, gently tugging her closer. They were so close that his delicious spicy scent filled her head, making her suddenly dizzy with arousal. Her nipples tightened beneath her blouse, so stiff they ached, and she was so close to his massive chest. She would only have to lean forward a fraction to rub them against that hard, muscular expanse...

She actually started to do just that before she came to her senses. *What the hell am I thinking?* She took a quick step back just as he did the same, his tail finally abandoning her wrist. They stared at each other and she could see his chest rising and falling as rapidly as if he felt as breathless as she did. As if he were as aroused...

Don't look, she told herself, but it was no use. Her eyes had already dropped, staring at the massive outline of his cock, clearly visible beneath the thin leather loincloth. *Oh my God.* No woman could handle a cock that size.

But it would be fun to try.

Ignoring the wicked voice in her head, she forced a smile.

“Is there anything else you need? For the fire, I mean,” she added quickly when his eyes glinted with amusement.

After a brief second, he clearly decided to accept the topic and gestured at the surrounding trees.

“Fruit. For Mia.”

When she nodded, he turned and walked further into the trees, his tail swishing behind him. She swallowed hard and followed him, wondering why she wasn't more panicked. She was practically alone in an alien jungle with a very large and very aroused alien male.

Instead, all she felt was excitement and... anticipation.

“I'm an idiot,” she muttered, but she went with him anyway.

They stopped several times as he showed her what was edible, and by the time they started back to the wrecked ship, he had an armful of different types of fruit. He refused to let her carry anything which was sweet, if a little chauvinistic.

“You know I'm quite capable of helping,” she said. “I used to work out.”

Maybe not frequently, but she wasn't completely useless. His lips curved in that attractive smile as he solemnly handed her the moss. She couldn't help laughing as she pointed at the two large gourd-like globes, the clusters of white berries, and the branch of what looked like mini apples he was carrying.

“I'm not sure that's exactly an equitable division.”

“I want -”

He broke off abruptly, his eyes on her face, and she suddenly felt breathless again.

“What do you want, Pralec?”

“Help,” he said finally, but she had the distinct impression that wasn't what he'd originally intended to say.

“You are being a big help. I don't know what we would have done if we hadn't run into you.”

He shuddered, then urged her to resume walking. And if his tail ended up around her waist again, she decided it was only polite to leave it there.

“Finally,” Carina said when they returned. “We gathered all the wood within easy reach, but it’s not like we could get it started without big green.”

“We got some fruit as well,” she said quickly, hoping she wasn’t blushing.

Carina raised a skeptical eyebrow, then looked down at the twins and sighed as one of them rolled over.

“I was going to start introducing solid food to the boys soon as well. Although I don’t think weird looking alien fruit was on the schedule I had. What if it makes them sick?”

“There’s no rush. The three of us could try some today, then Mia tomorrow. If that all goes well, you could give a little to the boys.”

It wasn’t until after she made the suggestion that she realized what she was saying - that she had just casually accepted the fact that they would be here in the jungle for several more days. The thought no longer seemed as terrifying as it had even a few hours ago. The wrecked shuttle was still intact enough to provide a shelter, and now they had both food and water. And Pralec...

His presence had made the biggest difference, she admitted. From protecting them from the horrible creature to showing her how to find fruit. While she’d been talking to Carina, he had crouched down by the area he’d cleared for the fire, and now a small puff of smoke appeared. Thanks to him, they could cook food and boil water, and even though the air was warm and humid, the fire satisfied some atavistic notion of shelter.

But this wasn’t a permanent shelter. It wasn’t even some temporary camping trip where they could sit around and toast marshmallows and sing Kumbaya. They were stranded on an alien planet, dependent on a male who might choose to leave at any moment. Ignoring the unexpected ache in her chest at

the thought, she did her best to remember their priorities - locate some type of authority figure, find a way off this planet, and return home. Language barrier or not, she was going to have to drag some more answers out of Pralec.

CHAPTER TEN

As night fell over the jungle, Pralec quietly placed another branch on the fire, careful not to disturb a sleeping Mia, and glanced around the clearing with satisfaction. They had accomplished a considerable amount in one day. He'd constructed another smoker, a smaller version of the one at his camp, and hung the majority of the ternkel meat inside. The rest he had roasted over the fire and all three females had been delighted by the food, although he noticed that Natalie ate very little.

Barbara had been especially appreciative, making pleasurable little noises as she ate and licking her fingers in a way that made his cock twitch with interest every time. Even though it was forbidden, he couldn't help wondering how it would feel to have her lick his shaft with such enthusiasm. Would she make those same sweet little moans...

Fuck. He shifted uncomfortably as even the memory caused his cock to stiffen, and went back to reviewing their accomplishment. He'd dragged part of a fallen log out of the jungle and padded it with moss to make a seat next to the fire, and he's shown Natalie how to gather and crush soapberries for cleansing. He'd also shown Barbara how to modify the seats in the shuttle to create temporary beds, noticing a few traces of blood as he did.

"I think she wore herself out," Barbara said as she joined him and looked down at Mia.

She and the other females had taken turns having a makeshift bath and now her skin was flushed and damp. The faint minty

scent of the soapberries mingled pleasantly with her own intoxicating fragrance.

“Tired,” he agreed.

He’d never been around children before. He’d had no idea how active they could be, nor how curious. Even though Mia kept trying to pull herself up and take a few shaky steps, she was much faster when she was crawling. Between that and the fact that she also tried to put almost everything she found into her mouth, she required constant supervision. If he hadn’t also wanted to make the camp more comfortable for Barbara - for all of the females - he would have happily watched her. Fortunately, they all helped, almost as if they were a family.

“I’m going to put her down in the shuttle, but I thought maybe then we could talk? If you’re staying, that is?”

He should say no. He should see them all safely into the wreck, then leave and watch over them from a distance. He certainly shouldn’t give her a chance to ask questions he wasn’t ready to answer.

“Stay.”

“Good.”

She smiled at him, then bent down to pick up the child, so close that he would only have to give the slightest tug to have her in his lap...

No.

With an effort, he kept his hands - and his tail - under control as she picked up Mia. The baby mumbled something, then nestled against Barbara’s shoulder.

“Give me just a few minutes and I’ll be right back.”

He nodded, watching her walk away, then moved over to the moss-padded log to wait. When she returned, she had a determined look on her face and his heart sank. This was going to be awkward.

But at first she simply sat next to him, so close that their arms almost touched, and watched the fire in silence.

“I used to go camping when I was younger. My dad was a mechanic and he shipped me off to summer camp every year because he had no idea what to do with me when school was out.”

Her voice was matter of fact, but he couldn't help wondering what kind of parent would send their child away.

“Mother?” he asked.

“She died when I was very young. I don't remember very much about her. I'm not even sure if the things I do remember are real, or just stories I've told myself for so long they seem real.”

She tilted her head and looked up at him.

“Where are your parents?”

“Dead.”

His mother had died in the early stages of the plague and his father hadn't lasted long after that.

“I'm so sorry.”

She gave his tail what he was sure she thought was a soothing pat and he realized that it was around her waist again. Doing his best to ignore the provocative sensation of her hand on his tail, he nodded towards the shuttle.

“Mia's mother?”

“I'm her mother,” she said firmly, then sighed. “At least I am now. Carina said her birth mother was sold to someone terrible and she killed herself.”

A growl escaped before he could prevent it, and her eyes widened. For a moment he thought he had frightened her, but then a small pink tongue flicked over her plump lower lip. Did she like the sound? He almost repeated it, just to see, but she sighed again and looked back at the fire.

“I'm sure she must have been desperate to do such a thing, but I don't think I could have done it. Not knowing that my child was still out there.”

No. He couldn't see her giving up.

“Strong female.”

“Am I?” She gave him a rueful smile. “I guess I’m just used to having to fight for what I want.” She took a deep breath and turned to face him more directly. “And what I want right now are some answers.”

Once again he considered the possibility of just leaving, but he couldn’t do it. Not when those clear grey eyes were watching him so closely. He gave a half shrug.

“Ask.”

She suddenly laughed.

“I was so sure you weren’t going to answer, that you might even get up and walk off, that I was more prepared to argue than to actually ask. But let’s see. All right, I’ll start with an easy one. Do you live in a village?”

“No,” he said truthfully. His cabin was located outside of Port Lagona. “Live alone.”

“Hmm.” She gave him a speculative look. “But there is a village of some kind?”

“Yes.”

“With more people like you?”

“No.”

“No? That’s odd. You had to have come from somewhere.” To his relief, she let it drop, but her next question wasn’t much better. “Does the village have some kind of law enforcement?”

No exactly, although Sama, the main store owner, headed a kind of town council. He even used his root cellar as a temporary jail when necessary. But none of it was really official and it would be difficult to explain without using a larger vocabulary than he was currently using. He settled for a non-committal shrug and she sighed.

“I suppose that would have been too easy.”

She tapped a finger thoughtfully against her plump little lips, and he fought the impulse to replace it with his own. To see what that strangely tempting mouth would feel like against his

flesh. In an effort to distract himself, he decided it was his turn to ask questions.

“You - where?”

“Hmm. Since you didn’t seem that shocked by the shuttle - or us for that matter - I guess you understand that we come from somewhere else?” He nodded, and she continued. “We come from another world. A place called Earth.”

It wasn’t a planet he’d ever heard of, and considering their presence in a Vedeckian ship, he had a terrible suspicion it wasn’t even one of the Confederated Planets systems.

“How here?”

She hesitated and he could see her considering how much to tell him.

“We were taken, stolen by another group of aliens,” she said at last. “They are called Vedeckians. I don’t suppose you’ve heard of them?”

It was his turn to hesitate, but he finally nodded, unwilling to lie, and her face paled.

“Does that mean they’re here on this planet?”

He quickly shook his head, tightening his tail reassuringly around her waist.

“Safe here.”

“The strangest thing is that I believe you,” she said softly. “Ever since you showed up and saved me from that creature, that’s exactly how I’ve felt - safe. Thank you.”

Then she shocked him by leaning over and pressing those strange, impossibly soft lips against his mouth. The unusual action was surprisingly pleasant and he started to tell her so, but as soon as he parted his lips, that tantalizing little tongue swept inside, silky smooth against his rougher flesh. He’d never experienced anything like it before, but he instinctively curled his tongue around hers. The intimate touch was unbelievably arousing. As their tongues mated, a shock of pleasure jolted through his entire body and his cock swelled to full aching hardness.

Before he could stop himself, he pulled her onto his lap, his hands gripping her ass, and his tail wrapped tightly around her. She didn't protest. Instead, she wiggled closer, her lips parting to allow him greater access, and his cock throbbed against the soft, sweet weight of her bottom. He couldn't help growling into her mouth, and she clutched his shoulders, her blunt little claws trying to dig into his flesh.

"I... we can't," she gasped when she finally pulled away, panting. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"Again."

He'd never begged in his life, but his voice was low and rough with need. She swayed towards him, then shook her head.

"I have responsibilities - to Mia, to the others. I can't let myself get distracted. I don't want to do something we'll regret."

Regret? Never. His entire body ached with need, the heat of her sweet little ass searing through his leather kilt and the feel of her slender curves pressing against him exquisitely torturous. But she had said no. He reluctantly lifted her off of his lap and placed her back on her feet, forcing himself to let go.

"Understand," he said gruffly.

"You do? That's good."

There was an almost wistful note in her voice, but she nodded.

"Sleep," he ordered. "I keep watch."

"Keep watch? For what?" She shivered, casting a nervous look over her shoulder at the jungle and stepped closer to him. "Is something dangerous out there?"

Although there were always dangers in the jungle, he didn't anticipate any problems. He just wanted time to think.

"Safe," he repeated, and she bit her lip.

"If you're sure. I can come back later and take a turn..."

He shook his head and removed his tail from where it had wrapped around her waist again.

“Rest.”

“All right.”

She gave him one last look, then disappeared into the shuttle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Even though Pralec was keeping watch, Barbara couldn't sleep.

Instead, she lay on the converted chair, staring up at the metal ceiling. Except for the dim glow of the fire outside, the jungle was shrouded in darkness, odd little noises sounding in the echoing through the clearing. Except for those summers at camp, she was a city girl. This whole situation was completely outside her experience - especially Pralec - and yet...

She didn't feel panicked. If anything, she felt surprisingly calm. *And aroused*, she admitted. Her body still hummed with excitement, her nipples stiff and aching. She'd had no idea that she would react like that to what was supposed to have been a simple kiss. Under other circumstances she would have tried to relieve that lingering tension, but not here in the close confines of the shuttle with the other women and the children so close.

Why did I kiss him to begin with? In part it had been a genuine impulse to thank him for his assistance - but she'd also just wanted to kiss him. In the intimacy of the moment, she hadn't thought about the differences between his mouth and hers, nor about the fact that he was an alien. All she had been aware of was his size, his strength, and the deliciously spicy scent that intoxicated her.

Pheromones, she decided. It must be his natural pheromones. What most human men would pay to have that same effect on women. The thought made her smile and her body started to

relax, despite the lingering arousal and her eyes drifted closed...

Mia cried out, a heartbreaking sob trembling on her lips. She reached for her, lifting her into her arms just as Pralec appeared at the entrance to the shuttle.

“What is wrong?”

The little girl had buried her head against her neck, crying.

“I think she had a nightmare.”

“Puh-puh,” Mia sobbed, still clinging to Barbara.

“Some of us are trying to sleep here,” Carina mumbled. “If you wake the boys, there will be hell to pay.”

“Sorry,” she whispered apologetically and carried Mia outside to where Pralec waited, his face anxious.

“Is she all right?”

He put his arm around both of them as he spoke, and she made no attempt to move away.

“I think so. I’m pretty sure it was just a bad dream.” She looked up and gave him a rueful smile. “Although I didn’t know babies had bad dreams until now. There’s so much I don’t know about children.”

“You know enough,” he said firmly, gently stroking Mia’s back as her sobs diminished.

“Thank you.” She gave him a grateful look, and then it hit her. “Hey, wait a minute. How come you can speak in actual sentences now?”

He hesitated just a moment too long, and she backed away, clutching Mia and glaring at him. What kind of game was he playing?

“It is... complicated.”

“No, it’s not. You lied to me, or as good as.” Her voice had started to rise and Mia whimpered. “Sorry, munchkin. You understood everything I said, didn’t you?” she continued in a fierce whisper.

“I did.”

He looked absurdly guilty, his tail drooping apologetically, but she wasn't about to let him manipulate her again.

“Then why didn't you respond as you are quite clearly capable of doing?”

“You assumed that I was a... primitive male.”

That point hit home and she winced as he continued.

“It seemed easier to go along with it until I found out more about where you had come from and why you were here.” His tail flicked slowly back and forth. “In my experience, trying to help only leads to trouble.”

“But you did help us,” she pointed out, her initial anger beginning to fade a little.

“I did not wish you to be... uncomfortable.”

A choked laugh escaped before she could prevent it.

“Being stranded in the jungle isn't exactly the height of luxury. Is there a city nearby, or did you lie about that too?”

“My responses may have been minimal, but everything I said was the truth,” he said stiffly. “There is a small village a few days' journey from here. I live near it, but not in it.”

“And they are not like you?”

He shook his head, a fleeting expression of sadness crossing his face.

“No. I am Cire. There are few of us outside our planet - and soon there will be none.”

She started to ask why, then filed it away for later. Her other questions were more important.

“You said there wasn't a spaceport?”

“No.” An almost imperceptible hesitation before he sighed. “Trading ships do land near the village occasionally, perhaps once a month or so.”

“So we could leave?”

“Perhaps. If we are to continue this discussion, would you care to be seated?”

He gestured at the log, and she frowned at him. But Mia was growing heavy and it seemed silly to keep standing.

“All right,” she muttered. “But you keep your hands - and your tail - away from me, buddy.”

“Buddy? Are you confusing me with another male?” He growled, his apologetic air vanishing as he straightened and glared at her. “I am Pralec.”

“Trust me, I couldn’t possibly confuse you with anyone else. It’s just an expression.”

“A term of intimacy?”

He seemed pleased by the thought and she decided not to correct him. It served him right for hiding his ability to speak. Instead she shrugged and took her previous place on the log. Mia’s face was tear-stained, but she seemed to have recovered from her dream, babbling quietly as she perched on Barbara’s lap and watched the flames.

Whatever she was saying had the rhythm of speech and when she paused inquisitively, Barbara nodded and hugged her, pressing a kiss to the soft curls covering her head.

“I agree. It’s a very nice fire.”

“That is what she said?” Pralec asked from the other end of the log. He had obeyed her instructions explicitly, and she refused to admit that it had been much nicer to have him sitting right next to her.

“I don’t know. She’s still learning to talk, but it sounded like a question.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “I see. I have no experience with children either.”

“Puh-puh,” Mia demanded, and he focused on her.

“Yes, little one? What do you want?”

The baby held out her arms. Pralec gave her an uncertain look, but she sighed and nodded.

“Go ahead.”

He very cautiously moved closer. As if he were expecting her to attack, she thought, rolling her eyes. When he reached for Mia he hesitated again and she was sure he was remembering the last time they had passed her between them and the way his hands had brushed across her breasts. Dammit, now she was remembering it too. She didn't need to look down to know her nipples were pressing against her blouse.

Hastily extending her arms, she let him take Mia, but when he started to move back to the other end of the log, the little girl's lip trembled and she pointed at Barbara.

“Muh-muh.”

Her heart skipped a beat.

“Did... did you just say Mama?”

“Muh-muh.”

Unexpected tears sprang to her eyes. From the first moment Mia had reached for her, she'd felt as if the little girl belonged to her, but she'd felt uncomfortable about using the term. She hadn't expected to hear it from her, not this soon.

“Sit down,” she whispered to Pralec, and he obeyed.

Mia leaned back against him, placing one tiny hand on his arm and the other on Barbara's, and babbled happily.

“I suppose you realize she just had both of us do exactly what she wanted?” she asked, her voice shaky and a tremulous smile on her lips.

“She is a very clever child,” he agreed, sounding as proud as any father.

No. He was not Mia's father and if she had any sense at all she wouldn't permit this growing bond. Mia was already going to be heartbroken when he could not accompany them to Earth. But when she looked at the trusting way her daughter was leaning against him, she couldn't bring herself to intervene.

“You asked earlier about legal authorities,” he said after a long silence. “Most disputes here are handled directly, although

Sama, one of the store owners, occasionally serves as a judge. If you are looking for an overriding authority, you would need to speak to someone in the Patrol. They serve as law enforcement for our government.”

“But not here?”

“There is a remote possibility that a Patrol ship might come by, but it’s unlikely. This is a primitive planet with only a few small settlements. You would have to go off world.”

She could hear the reluctance in his voice as he spoke but she refused to acknowledge it, just as she refused to acknowledge her own doubts about leaving him.

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” she said determinedly.

“Yes. There is just one thing... What did you do with the body?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Pralec swore under his breath as the color drained from Barbara's face and she swayed. He quickly put his arm around her to support her and she didn't try to pull away.

"B-body? What body?"

Her voice quivered, despite her obvious effort to remain calm.

"The body of the Vedeckian who was piloting the ship. I assume you defeated him and took control."

He didn't phrase it as a question, but she shook her head.

"It... it wasn't like that. He was going to hurt one of the twins because he was crying."

A growl escaped before he could prevent it and Mia gave him a startled look, then patted his chest with her tiny hand.

"I h-hit him to make him stop and he just dropped to the ground."

"But you managed to find your way here?"

Her expression had calmed a little and she gave a half-shrug.

"Mainly by luck. I had watched them enough to figure out how to turn off the auto-pilot. Then somehow I managed to hit the right combination of buttons to pull up a kind of map. This planet was close and it was blue on the map."

"Blue?" What did the color have to do with anything?

"Pictures of our planet from space always show it as being blue. It seemed like a good sign."

He shuddered as he realized how badly their escape could have ended. His tail slipped back around her waist but he made no attempt to restrain it. He welcomed the physical reminder that she was alive and here, soft and warm against his tail.

“The ship brought us here. It might even have landed us, but it seemed like it was going much too fast so I tried to take over, and...” She gestured at the wreck. “You see the result. Thank God no one was hurt.”

Thank Granthar indeed. His tail tightened around her, but all she did was pat it again. He was rapidly becoming addicted to those gentle caresses - not that familiarity made them any less arousing.

“Anyway, after we stopped shaking we, err, dragged the body out of the ship and as far away as possible.”

“Ah. So that is why -”

He stopped abruptly but it was too late. Her eyes widened as she paled again.

“Is that why that creature - the one that attacked us - was here?”

“It is a possibility.”

She shuddered.

“I wasn’t thinking about big predators, just flies and rats and things. Insects and vermin,” she added at his confused expression and he nodded.

“It was a sensible idea. However, I think it would be best if you show me where you left it, so I can... take additional precautions.”

She shuddered again, but nodded.

“All right.”

They sat in silence for a moment, before he remembered his initial worry.

“How did you know to turn off the tracking beacon?”

“What tracking beacon?”

“Every ship is equipped with one. So they can be found in case of an emergency.” Her body tensed and she started to rise, but he gently tugged her back down. “You do not need to be concerned. It was already disabled.”

“Why would the guard have done that?”

“Three females and three infants? You were a valuable cargo. And the Vedeckians are not known for their loyalty.”

“So he was going to sell us himself? Bastard.”

“Dead bastard,” he reminded her, giving her a small hug.

“Yeah. It makes it easier not to feel as guilty.” She sighed and looked up at him, grey eyes thoughtful. “So now what do we do?”

He sighed and accepted the inevitable.

“After I make sure that the body is properly disposed of, I will take you - all of you - to the village. You can make inquiries as to when the next ship will arrive, although they do not follow a very regular schedule. When one arrives, I will... negotiate on your behalf.”

“I can do that,” she protested. “Negotiating was part of my job.”

“I am sure you can - if the captain is an honorable male.” His hand dropped to the hilt of his knife. “If he is not, you will require some security.”

“This really isn’t a very civilized place, is it?”

“No. That is one of the reasons I -”

Once again he stopped in mid-sentence. To his relief, she gave him a curious look but didn’t ask any questions.

“Since Mia is asleep again, I suppose I should take her back to bed and try and get some rest.”

“Yes. Tomorrow will be a long day, and we will not reach the village by tomorrow night.”

She nodded and rose. He followed, preparing to hand the sleeping child back to her.

“You are no longer angry with me for my deception? I am your buddy again?”

Her pretty lips curved into a quick smile.

“I suppose so, buddy.”

The endearment sent a shiver of pleasure down his spine.

“What you - we - did earlier, what is that called?”

“It’s called a kiss.”

Her gaze dropped to his mouth and he was sure her scent deepened with arousal.

“I wish to do it again,” he said, and she licked her lips.

“We both know things are already complicated.”

“Yes.”

“I have to make sure that we all get back to Earth safely.”

“Yes.”

“We shouldn’t,” she whispered, even as her lips parted and she swayed towards him.

“No,” he agreed.

He knew they shouldn’t. He knew that the more he touched her, the harder it would be to let her go. He didn’t care. He’d never wanted anything more in his life.

A choked giggle escaped her, and then her body skimmed the front of his as she stepped towards him and lifted her head, eyes gleaming silver in the moonlight.

“One kiss.”

“Thank you,” he said, and took her mouth.

As soon as he delved into the delicious sweetness of her mouth her body softened, molding itself against his as his cock stiffened so quickly he felt dizzy. The temptation to strip away her clothes, to cover her body with his own and sink his aching cock into her sweet cunt was almost overwhelming. The kiss

turned more demanding and she met him eagerly, rubbing her body against his. And then Mia made a faint protesting noise and they both froze.

How could he have forgotten he had the child cradled in his other arm? Barbara stepped back, her cheeks flushed and lips trembling.

“I really should try and get some sleep. If we’re going to leave tomorrow, there’s a lot to do.”

“I will make preparations as well. Sleep well.”

“And you.”

Not that there was any danger of that, he thought as she flashed him another quick smile and returned to the shuttle. His cock had never been harder - which should have been impossible. It wasn’t that a Cire male couldn’t get an erection other than with his true mate, but it was not a true erection, just as he could not have a true climax without his mate.

Was it possible... He shot a thoughtful glance in the direction of the shuttle, then shook his head. No, it wasn’t possible. The teachings had been quite clear, and his own parents had proven the power of that mate bond. Barbara could not be his mate.

But as he returned to his seat by the fire, he let himself consider the possibility and he smiled.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Are you sure about this?” Carina muttered the next morning as they followed Pralec through the jungle. “I still don’t trust him.”

“Why not? If he was a bad guy, wouldn’t he have shown it by now? Instead of feeding us and guarding us and making slings to carry the babies?”

Not to mention taking care of the Vedeckian’s body. He had gone off in that direction once the sun rose, returning to inform her quietly that he had disposed of what was left of the remains. She didn’t ask any questions - not about how he’d done it or what he meant by “what was left.” She supposed she should feel guilty that the male was now resting in an unmarked grave but every time she remembered him reaching for the baby, it was easy to overcome those scruples.

“Maybe. But how come he can suddenly speak English better than I can?”

“I don’t think he’s really speaking English,” Natalie volunteered. “I think the translator just makes it seem that way. If you really listen, there’s another sound beneath the words.”

Despite the perils they’d encountered, their escape had been good for the girl. She was no longer so pale and withdrawn and Barbara was no longer concerned that she was going to will herself to death.

“That’s not the point,” Carina snapped, then sighed. “Sorry. It’s just like I said - hard to trust.”

“I know.” She gave the other woman’s hand a quick squeeze.
“But I really think we can trust him.”

And not just because he made such an impressive figure striding through the jungle, the muscles in his impressive back flexing and his tail swishing lazily above an even more impressive ass. The now familiar spike of arousal began to hum through her veins even though he was too far away for it to be the pheromones she’d blamed it on. Although if it was pheromones, why wasn’t either of the other two women affected?

“Have you noticed that he smells really good?” she asked. Her attempt to sound casual was clearly a failure as both heads swiveled around to stare at her. “I was just curious,” she added hastily.

“I haven’t been sniffing him myself,” Carina said dryly. “Have you?”

“N-no. It’s just we pass Mia back and forth a lot.”

Her daughter was currently riding in the sling on Pralec’s chest, her legs kicking happily as she watched the jungle go by.

“I haven’t noticed.” Natalie intervened again. “I mean, he doesn’t smell bad, but not especially good either.”

Hmm. So it was just her.

He came to a halt ahead of them and turned. His gaze went directly to her, his eyes warm, and she suddenly suspected she was blushing again.

“My temporary camp is just ahead. I wish to stop long enough to get the meat and furs I collected on this trip.”

“Of course. Would you like me to help you carry something?”

He looked so appalled she almost laughed.

“I am capable of handling it.”

“I’m sure you are. But why don’t you at least let me take Mia for a while? I like carrying her,” she added quickly.

“She will not be too heavy for you?”

“Of course not. Do you want to walk with Mama for a while, munchkin?”

Mia squealed and waved her arms.

“Muh-muh.”

Unwrapping the sling proved to be a little more complicated than she’d anticipated and her fingers kept brushing against his bare chest and back. It didn’t escape her notice that the outline of his cock was beginning to show against his loincloth again and she casually moved around until his back was to the two other women. They didn’t need to know he was aroused.

As was she, she realized when he began fastening the sling in place on her. The quick brush of his fingers was more arousing than she’d anticipated and she was suddenly grateful that at least her arousal was invisible, except for her pesky nipples. She still knew she was blushing when she returned to the others, a determined smile on her face.

“All set.”

“I’ll say.” Carina raised an inquisitive brow. “Did I miss something last night?”

“Of course not. It’s just that Mia seems to like having us both around.”

“And you don’t mind him playing Papa?”

“Puh-puh.” Mia repeated, and Barbara smiled.

“How can I when it makes her happy?”

Carina’s face softened.

“I understand. If the boys had been around before my ex left, I wouldn’t have tried to stop them from seeing him, even if he is a low down, cheating, son of a bitch.”

“Just as well he’s not around,” she said dryly, and Carina actually laughed.

“Could be. Now come on, we’d better get moving before big green decides to carry both of you.”

Pralec had stopped to look back so she grinned and started walking again, even as Carina's words replayed in her head. No one had ever picked her up and carried her before. For one thing she was almost as tall as most of the men she'd dated - and she'd tended to pick them for their intellect, not their muscles. She would never have expected the idea to appeal to her but the thought of Pralec sweeping her off her feet was unexpectedly appealing.

Don't be silly. I'm probably too heavy anyway.

By the time they left his camp, she'd revised that opinion. He was carrying an enormous pack of rolled furs on his back, with additional bags of smoked meat slung over each shoulder and attached to his belt. He'd also offered to carry Mia again, although she'd refused.

"I'm not even sure you have room for her," she said, eyeing his burdens.

"I would make room."

"I know you would, but I like carrying her."

"Very well."

He didn't look happy about it but he simply dipped his head and set off again. She couldn't help a slightly wistful look at his camp as they went. Even though it was only temporary, he'd done a remarkable job of making it comfortable. A woven hammock hung beneath a three-sided lean-to, with a stump for seating next to the fire pit. There was even a table, small but perfectly adequate.

I miss tables. And chairs. And beds.

Beds...

A thought occurred to her and she hurried to catch up with Pralec.

"I was just thinking," she said breathlessly.

"Yes?"

"You said you didn't know when the next ship will come so we'll have to wait in this village of yours, but where? Do they

have some kind of rooms we could rent? And even if they do, how can we pay for them?"

Despite the burdens he was carrying, his tail immediately curved around her waist.

"Sama has a few rooms above his store and they are currently unoccupied. They are not elaborate, but I believe they will be adequate."

"Oh."

Although it sounded like a sensible suggestion, it surprised her and she realized she had assumed that he would want to remain close to them.

"Where do you live?"

"Outside town." He glanced down at her, his face unreadable. "It would not be suitable. It only consists of a single room."

I don't care.

But she kept her response silent. It wasn't as if she could abandon the other women.

"Will you come and see us?"

For a moment she thought he was going to say no, but then he nodded.

"Yes. And I will make sure that I am there when a ship lands - to make the arrangements."

Her pride wanted her to refuse his help, but they couldn't return home unless they could leave this planet. *Home*. The thought didn't appeal to her as much as she would have thought. Earth seemed so far away, so distant compared to the reality of their present situation.

"We still don't have any way to pay for those rooms," she pointed out.

"I intend to trade the ternkel fur for the accommodation. It seems only fitting since it was your presence that allowed me to catch it."

“Sure, because I did such a good job of being bait,” she muttered and he laughed, his tail pulling her closer.

She knew she should move away, but she didn't want to. She wanted to enjoy walking with him through the peaceful jungle, the air redolent with the scent of flowers and what sounded like a bird singing high overhead. The ground beneath their feet was thick with moss and even the odd, not-quite-green shade of the leaves no longer bothered her.

“Why did you decide to live here?” she asked. “Is it because you like the jungle?”

He didn't stop walking but his tail tensed and when she looked up, his face had turned grim.

“Not especially, although there were similar places on Ciresia once.”

“Ciresia?”

“My home planet.”

“You didn't want to live there?”

“No, but even if I did, I would not be welcome.”

“Why on Earth not?”

His tail turned even more rigid.

“Because I am a criminal.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pralec braced himself for Barbara's disgust and rejection, but all she did was give him a thoughtful look.

"I don't think I believe you," she said eventually.

"Why would you not? Do you think I wanted to tell you?" Even now the words were bitter on his tongue.

"In my experience, most criminals are much more interested in maintaining their innocence than announcing their guilt." She shrugged. "I'm even willing to believe that you may have committed an illegal act, but I do not believe that you would do anything you considered morally wrong."

He actually came to a halt, staring at her, and the other two females joined them.

"Is something wrong?" Natalie asked nervously.

"No, I..."

His mind went blank. Telling Barbara was one thing - he did not want to discuss his past with anyone else.

"Pralec was just adjusting his pack," she said quickly. "Is that better, buddy?"

The teasing glint in her eye helped steady him, and he nodded.

"Yes. Let us resume our journey. We have far to go."

They resumed walking, but neither of them returned to the subject of his past. He hoped she would let it go, but he suspected it was more likely she had decided it was not an appropriate time. The day passed slowly, and yet he found he

did not wish to hurry it. He had his female and child by his side and for now, that was enough.

They stopped twice for food and water, but he did not allow them to linger long. He could have covered the entire distance to the village in a single day, but he didn't think they would achieve the same speed. He was correct. All of the females were beginning to flag by late afternoon and even the infants had become increasingly restless. He had hoped to cover a greater distance, but he decided not to push them any further.

"We will make camp up ahead," he said quietly, and she gave him a grateful smile. "There is a rock formation that will provide protection."

Her eyes widened. "Do we need protection?"

"Probably not, but I was trained to prepare for the unexpected." He shrugged. "The rocks will also make it easier to set up camp."

"Now, see? That would have been a much better reason to offer," she muttered.

"I will keep that in mind next time."

But of course, there would not be a next time. Ignoring the ache in his chest, he urged them the short remaining distance to the clearing at the base of the rocks. Although he had never camped here, he had stopped to eat or fill his water bottle from the small flow that trickled down one section of the rocks. The ground was relatively smooth and dry beneath the slight overhang.

All three females sagged to the ground and began feeding the children. Mia enthusiastically dipped her fingers in the smashed jimar berries Barbara had prepared for her, while Natalie and Carina offered the twins a thin mixture of ground nutritional biscuits and formula. Such a domestic sight would have been common once, before the Red Death. Even after all this time, the devastation the plague had caused still haunted him, and he averted his eyes to concentrate on setting up camp.

The fire pit he had used before was still intact, and he quickly collected wood for the fire. Once the flames had taken hold, he set water on to heat and added several strips of the dried meat.

“If you have any left, add some of those apple-like things,” Carina suggested. “The najar fruit.”

It seemed an unlikely combination, but it would provide additional sustenance to the stew so he followed her suggestion. When they shared the contents of the pot an hour later, he nodded approvingly at the result. The slight tang of the fruit offset the fattiness of the meat while the sweetness mellowed the smoky flavor.

“This is excellent.”

Carina gave him a genuine smile for the first time.

“Thank you. My parents used to run a restaurant and I’ve always enjoyed cooking.”

“It shows,” Barbara said enthusiastically. “Maybe when the twins are older, you could think about opening up your own restaurant.”

“Maybe. Assuming we ever get back to Earth.”

“I’m sure we will.”

Despite Barbara’s confident tone, she shot him an uncertain glance. It should be possible, as long as they made it safely to a Patrol office.

I should go with them to make sure.

The thought popped into his head but he regretfully pushed it away. Even after five years, House Garran would not have forgotten. And then there was the price on his head...

No, the reasons he had chosen the life of a recluse had not changed, no matter how much he wished they had.

After they finished eating, he entertained Mia while the females prepared for bed. He had heaped dried vegetation along the base of the rocks and covered it with some of his furs to create makeshift beds. Not ideal, but acceptable, and

they seemed appreciative. Both Carina and Natalie lay down almost immediately, but Barbara came to join him at the fire.

Tired of playing, Mia had climbed into his lap and snuggled against him, her eyes drifting closed, and his tail wrapped protectively around her.

“Should I put her to bed?” Barbara asked softly.

“No, she’s fine where she is.”

He wanted to enjoy the illusion of having a child for as long as possible.

“Do you want to talk about it some more?”

He didn’t pretend to misunderstand.

“I don’t know. What did you mean when you said you had been around a lot of criminals?”

“I’m a lawyer. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say I *was* since I resigned the same day I was taken.”

“Why?”

“Because I finally accepted the fact that I wasn’t going to rise any higher in the firm. Because I was tired of working all the time and not having a life outside of work.” She flashed a quick smile. “Because I was tired of guilty clients.”

“And yet you do not think I am guilty.”

“Call it an instinct. What happened?”

“I swore a vow of loyalty to House Garran. I broke that vow.” Saying the words aloud still made him flinch.

“Why?”

“Because I found out that Lord B’suk was exercising what he called his rights over young girls in his territory.”

“That’s horrible. Of course, you had to break the vow.”

“An honorable Cire warrior never breaks his vow.”

“Bull shit. You don’t owe any loyalty to an evil person. What did you do?”

“I tried to report him, but the official was in his employ. He said I would be accused of the same crime I’d been trying to report.”

Her eyes sparkled with indignation.

“That’s outrageous.”

“I agree, and an honorable male would have remained to fight for justice. I escaped, ran away like a coward.”

“It’s not cowardly to leave an impossible situation.” She looked down, studying her hands. “I did some pro bono work for a woman’s shelter. I heard that a lot there as well - I married him for better or worse. I made a vow.”

“A woman’s shelter?”

“For women who have been mistreated.”

“You human males abuse their mates?”

“Sometimes.”

He shuddered, unable to imagine such a thing, especially now that females were so precious.

“I’m not sure why you’re so shocked,” she said dryly. “Your people are the ones kidnapping and selling women.”

“Not my people - and they would be arrested if they were caught.”

She didn’t look entirely convinced, but she returned to his previous comments.

“What is this Lord B’suk like?”

“Mean, lazy, and very clever. I doubt the charges would have stuck.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” she protested, her eyes flashing again.

“I know. I just never foresaw that he would accuse me. Or that anyone would believe him. Not only would it violate our honor, but it is well known that we only find satisfaction with our mates.”

“Wait a minute. What does that mean?”

“Sexual satisfaction is only possible with our mates. Only then will we knot and achieve a true release.”

“Knot?”

Her eyes had dropped to his lap and he could feel himself swelling under her avid gaze.

“My cock swells, locking us together after I release my seed.”

Two spots of color burned high on her cheekbones and her nipples were clearly visible beneath her thin shirt.

“But... but you’re hard now.”

“Yes.” Because he suspected she was his mate, no matter how impossible it seemed, but he didn’t want to frighten her. “We are capable of getting aroused without that bond. But it is... unsatisfactory.”

Her tempting little tongue flicked out to wet her lips.

“Oh. So if I were to, say, touch you now, you wouldn’t, err, finish?”

“Not completely.”

Or would he? Just the thought of her hands on him made his cock throb angrily, but their paths would soon separate.

“You should rest,” he said gruffly.

Somewhat to his disappointment, she didn’t argue. Instead she rose and gathered Mia from his arms, carrying the sleeping child over to the makeshift mattresses and settling her there beneath another fur.

But then she came back to the fire and held out her hand.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pralec looked at her, the expression on his face so shocked she would have laughed if her heart hadn't been beating so rapidly.

"Come with me."

"Where?" he asked, even though he was already rising to his feet.

"Not far. I just don't want anyone to wake up and see us."

"See us?"

"See us... kissing."

It was as far as she was willing to promise, but the hunger in his gaze only intensified. He didn't question her again, simply lifted her into his arms, just as she had pictured earlier - and it was as erotic as she had imagined. She buried her head against his neck, breathing in his intoxicating scent as he carried her around the edge of the rock face. They would still hear Mia if she cried out, but no one would see them.

He didn't put her down, keeping her pinned against the rock with his body. With her legs around his waist, she could feel his erection throbbing directly against her swollen clit.

"Kisses," he whispered, as if he were reminding himself.

"Yes."

He bent his head and captured her lips, his mouth hungry, urgent. His tongue stroked hers, the raised nubs that covered the surface sending shivers of excitement down her spine. As

their tongues danced, his cock ground against her and a whimper escaped her. His hands cupped her ass, his long fingers squeezing and kneading, as he rubbed her needy flesh up and down that thick, hard ridge.

“Pralec,” she moaned, and he groaned.

“You are driving me mad, my female.”

“I want to drive you mad,” she admitted. “I want...”

She wanted to be his female, but it was impossible. All they would have were these few stolen moments.

His fingers dipped between her thighs, rubbing her through her pants. Another whimper escaped when he pressed directly against his swollen clit and he smiled against her mouth as he concentrated his attentions there.

“I want...”

“Tell me,” he urged.

“I want your hands on me.”

“They are on you.”

“Without my clothes,” she whispered.

He froze and for a moment she was afraid he would refuse, but then his hands dropped to the hem of her shirt and dragged it over her head, leaving her bare except for her thin lace bra. He stroked his thumb over the fabric, the lace teasing her sensitive nipples.

“What is this for?” he asked.

“Pretty,” she gasped, the slow strokes fracturing her ability to think.

“Hmm.”

He lifted her higher, and then his mouth closed over her nipple, shockingly hot and wet, the texture of the lace against her sensitive peak adding to the wash of sensations, each pull of his mouth causing a corresponding pulse in her swollen clit.

Something thick and hard slipped between her legs and it took her overwhelmed brain a moment to register that it was his

tail, pressing exactly where she needed it most.

She rocked against it, her arms tightening around his shoulders as her arousal soared. Her breath was coming in rapid gasps, his own harsh breathing hot against her breasts as he moved from one to the other. She had never been this turned on in her life. Her climax roared towards her and she clamped her hand over her mouth, afraid that she would cry out as she shattered, her body shuddering in his arms.

He rocked her through the aftershocks, his mouth softening to gentle licks until her body went limp.

“Wow,” she whispered as a wave of exhaustion swept over her.

“You are pleased?”

She choked back a laugh.

“You could say that again.” She smiled up at him and saw that his face was harsh with strain. “What about you?”

“It is of no concern.”

“It is to me. Can I touch you?”

The hunger on his face was so intense that her breath caught, but he slowly shook his head.

“I think not. It would only make it... more difficult.”

“I came back to you because I wanted to make you happy,” she said ruefully. “Not to have you pleasure me.”

“Pleasuring you does make me happy. Far more than I think you know.”

She believed him, but that only made her heart ache even more.

“Rest now,” he urged, and she nodded.

He held her hand as they went back around the edge of the rock and over to her pallet, then stood looking down at her.

“Sleep well, my female.”

His lips brushed hers, and then he returned to the fire. She laid down next to Mia, tucking her warm little body into her arms.

The last thing she saw before she fell asleep was his solitary figure silhouetted against the fire.

The next morning seemed to come at an unreasonably early hour, but she was surprised to find that she'd slept through the remainder of the night. Nothing like a good orgasm to make a woman sleep, she thought, unable to suppress a smile. Pralec was still by the fire, stirring something in a pot and she sighed. The stew had been tasty but she didn't really want it again for breakfast.

But when she gathered up an equally sleepy Mia and went to join him, she discovered he was stirring berries into some kind of hot grain mixture. He looked up and smiled, and her heart skipped a beat.

"Good morning, my - good morning, Barbara. Good morning, Mia."

"Hi."

"Guh muh," Mia said happily, and his smile grew.

"Sit, and I will give you a bowl."

"What is this?"

"Travel rations. It can also be eaten dry, but I thought this would be a pleasant alternative - and that Mia might like it."

"She seems to think so," she laughed as Mia made a dive for the bowl. "Not yet, sweetie. We have to let it cool down."

"Oh, yay. Porridge," Carina said grumpily as she too came to join them, carrying both twins. Then she sighed. "Sorry. I'm not much of a morning person."

"I would never have guessed."

Carina smiled reluctantly at her teasing, and then Natalie joined them and they ate their breakfast in peaceful silence.

"How far are we going today?"

"Not as far as yesterday. I hope to arrive by midday."

He clearly doubted it was going to happen, but he didn't seem bothered about it. For that matter, neither was she. She found

she was in no hurry to end their little adventure.

Natalie excused herself while Carina nursed the twins. Pralec started breaking down the camp with the same easy efficiency with which he'd set it up. She offered to help but wasn't surprised when he refused. He had just started rolling up the furs when Natalie reappeared, her face white.

"Something bit me."

She held out her hand and Barbara could see that it was already swollen. Pralec looked at it and swore.

"Did you see it?" he asked grimly as he tied a strip of leather around her upper arm.

"Not really. Just a flash of something silvery. I feel kind of dizzy." Natalie swayed and Pralec cursed again as he helped her to sit. Then he beckoned to Barbara to join him as he started searching the trees.

"Ringta," he told her quietly. "Its venom is very dangerous. We need to get her to the medic in the village as soon as possible."

She fought down the feeling of panic.

"All right. What do you want me to do?"

"She won't be able to walk soon. I'm going to make a sled to pull her. Can you keep up?"

"We'll try."

"Good girl."

He cut three long branches and hurried back to the clearing. Carina was sitting next to Natalie, trying to get her to talk, and she gave them a panicked look.

"She's not responding."

Pralec hesitated. "That might be best. This way she won't be in any pain."

Barbara exchanged glances with the other woman and saw the tears in Carina's eyes. She felt like crying too, but what good would that do.

“If there’s anything you need, get it now,” she said urgently.
“We’re going to leave in a hurry.”

Carina nodded, dashed impatiently at her tears, and hurried off while Pralec built the sled. After cutting one of the branches into sections, he lashed together the framework, then lashed the furs they slept on to the frame before carefully placing Natalie on it. She moaned and tossed her head, but her eyes didn’t open.

Meanwhile, Barbara placed Mia back in her sling and put out the fire. She’d only grabbed one bag of jerky but she knew she couldn’t handle more while she was carrying Mia.

“Leave it,” Pralec ordered.

“But…”

“Speed is more important. Come.”

He picked up the longer ends of the sled, dragging it behind him as he set off at a rapid pace. She and Carina exchanged another look, then set off after him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Barbara did her best to keep up but even towing the sled, Pralec was much faster. Her lungs soon started to burn and her legs ache, but she kept her mouth shut and kept going. Getting help for Natalie was more important than her minor aches. Carina was equally silent, a determined look on her face.

Twice Pralec stopped to wait for them to catch up, but the third time she told him to keep going.

“You do not know the way.”

“All we have to do is follow the drag marks.” She pointed at the clear tracks left by the sled. “We’ll be fine. Just go - we’ll meet you in the village.”

He hesitated for another second, then bent and gave her a quick kiss before moving out again.

“Well, well, well,” Carina said as they set out after him, moving a little more slowly this time. “There appear to have been some developments.”

Dammit, she was blushing again.

“He’s very sweet,” she said defensively.

“I’m not sure sweet is the word I would have chosen, but he certainly seems smitten by you.”

“Really?” A sigh followed the eager question. “Sorry, I didn’t mean for that to come out quite so much like a high school student.”

Carina laughed.

“To answer your high school self, yes, I think he really likes you. He’s always watching you. And even if he is a man, and an alien, he doesn’t seem like quite as much of a bastard as the rest of them.”

“How nice of you.”

“Don’t mind me. I’m just old and cynical.” A frown replaced her smile. “Do you think Natalie is going to be ok?”

“I hope so. If anyone can get her there in time, it’s Pralec.”

Carina nodded, and then they saved their breath for walking. It turned into a never ending slog, the sore muscles from the previous day returning with a vengeance. They paused briefly a few times, but both of them were too anxious to take more than a few minutes before setting out again.

The sun was not quite at its zenith when the trees began to thin and they finally emerged into an open meadow. She gave the ground a dismayed look when she realized that the tracks were invisible in the long grass, but then Carina nudged her.

“Look, smoke. That must be the village.”

She was right. A faint wisp of smoke was rising over the top of the trees on the far side of the meadow.

“Let’s go.”

The energy that had sustained her through the first part of the journey began to fail as she fought her way through the long grass. Her feet dragged, the muscles in her thighs burned, and her shoulders ached. *Just keep moving.*

Mia whimpered, and she hugged her. “I know you’re hungry and tired, munchkin. So am I.”

Only a thin line of trees waited on the far side of the meadow and she sighed with relief as they passed through them and on to an actual road. A rough dirt road, but a road nonetheless, and it led straight to the village. The village was an odd combination of old Western mining town and space age colony, the buildings consisting of everything from wood and stucco to what looked like prefabricated plastic buildings.

The road they were on led directly through the center of the small settlement. A few smaller streets intersected with it to form a somewhat haphazard grid and it seemed peaceful enough, despite the odd mix of buildings. But without Pralec at her side, she felt horribly conspicuous.

“Where do you think the doctor’s office is?” Carina asked, looking equally concerned.

“I don’t know, but Pralec said the main store owner is kind of like their mayor. Maybe we could ask him.”

The other woman shrugged.

“I can’t think of a better idea. It’s worth a try.”

The main store was easy to spot - a large two story building with a wide porch that stood close to the center of town. As they approached, she noticed that the streets that had seemed so empty were starting to fill up - and mainly with men. Her heart started to pound but she did her best to assume her courtroom composure as they walked down the street.

No one said anything to them, they just stared, but her hands were shaking by the time she opened the big glass door to the store. A bell tinkled overhead as they entered.

“Can’t you read? I’m closed for lunch,” a deep voice growled.

A short, stocky male wearing an apron emerged from behind the counter, his orange fur peppered with white. He stopped dead when he saw them.

“Where the hell did the two of you come from?”

“It’s a long story. Are you Sama?”

“Aye.”

“Pralec said you were in charge so I was hoping you could tell us where the medic was located.”

Sama scowled. “Are you ill?”

“No, but our friend was bitten by something called a ringta. Pralec took her to the medic.”

“I see.” Dark, beady eyes regarded her suspiciously. “And where did you meet Pralec?”

“Does it really matter? We just want to find out if our friend is going to be all r-right.”

Her voice broke on the last word and his face softened a little before he shook his head.

“Better if I take you.”

He was untying his apron when the front door crashed open and Pralec stalked in. His eyes immediately went to her and she saw his shoulders relax a little.

“You are here. I was about to retrace my tracks to find you.”

“Puh-puh,” Mia whimpered, her lips trembling.

He joined them at once, carefully lifting her daughter free and cradling her against his shoulder while Sama’s mouth dropped open.

“How’s Natalie?” she asked urgently.

“The medic is cautiously optimistic. He is still working on her, but I did not want to leave you two alone any longer. You made good time.”

“We were worried. Can we see her?”

“Not for a little while longer, but I’ll take you there as soon as the crowd dies down.”

“Why were they all staring like that?”

“I told you - females are rare in many places.”

“I don’t like it,” Carina said belligerently. “They should mind their own damn business.”

Sama laughed.

“You must never have lived in a small community - everything is everyone’s business. All of you come back into the kitchen and have some lunch. There’s plenty.”

As much as she wanted to see Natalie, Pralec was probably right that they should wait, so she nodded.

“That would be very nice of you.”

Sama smiled, a white flash of fangs, and led them into the big kitchen behind one end of the store.

“Nice,” Carina said approvingly. She was less impressed by Sama’s soup and started cross-questioning him on the ingredients.

Barbara took advantage of their conversation to whisper to Pralec.

“Is Natalie really going to be okay?”

“I think so. Hawken has a reputation for being honest. Sometimes a little too honest.” He looked down at Mia. She was sitting happily in his lap and feeding herself the tiny pieces of bread he’d torn off for her. “I am sorry I had to leave you. I... worried.”

“You did the right thing. We’re just fine.” His tail was back in its usual position around her waist and she patted it gently, then yawned. “Maybe a little tired.”

An odd look crossed his face, and then he looked over at a bemused Sama, still listening to Carina’s lecture about spice ratios.

“Sama, my - Barbara and her friends will be here until the next ship arrives. They will require rooms.”

“Hmm.” The shopkeeper’s face immediately turned calculating. “We may be able to work something out - for the right price of course.”

“One ternkel pelt.”

From the look that flashed across Sama’s face, she suspected it was far too generous an offer, but the shopkeeper recovered his composure and sighed.

“Well, I don’t -”

“One pelt, Sama. No more, no less. And it includes food.”

“I suppose that would be acceptable. Do you want to see the rooms?”

“We have time,” Pralec said and she nodded.

Carina decided to stay and finish her meal, but she and Pralec followed Sama up in an interior stairway at the back of the kitchen. There was a lounge at the top of the stairs, filled with worn but comfortable furniture.

“This is available to all the guests,” Sama said, then flashed his fangs again. “But you’ll be the only ones.”

A corridor led off each side of the lounge, with rooms on each side.

“This room, I think. Since you have the little one.”

He opened the door into a large, plain room with a high ceiling and two big windows that flooded the space with light. The minimal furnishings included a big bed at one end of the room, two chairs by the windows, and a curtained alcove containing a low, built-in bunk and everything looked spotlessly clean.

“This is perfect. Thank you.”

Sama nodded, looking pleased.

“Bathroom through there. I better get back before your friend takes my kitchen apart.”

Another flash of fangs and he was gone, leaving her alone with Pralec.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Praleec looked over at Barbara as the door closed behind Sama, not quite sure what to say. She didn't seem to have the same doubts - she walked over and put her arms around his waist, resting her face against his chest with a soft sigh. His arms automatically closed around her shoulders and his tail wrapped her waist. Mia cooed, patting her face, and it felt just as right as it had the other day. Longing speared through him so intensely that it was an almost physical sensation.

I cannot have this, he reminded himself, but he couldn't bring himself to pull away.

"Thank you for the rooms," she murmured at last.

"I could hardly let you sleep on the street."

She smiled up at him. "Unlike the jungle?"

He almost wished they were back there, but that was not her life. Both she and Mia deserved more.

"Unlike the jungle," he agreed. "Although I intend to return and collect the rest of my supplies."

"Maybe we should go with you."

He wasn't sure if she was teasing him or not.

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe it just seemed simpler there." She shook her head. "Don't mind me. It's just been an eventful couple of days. And nights."

That look was unmistakably provocative, and he was about to suggest that those shared nights didn't have to end now they were out of the jungle when Mia started wiggling to get down. He obliged and as they watched her explore, he tried to remind himself that it would be best to stay away. But with Barbara still leaning against his side, her sweet fragrance filling her head, it was hard to remember.

He realized his tail had dipped lower, gently caressing her ass, but she didn't seem to mind. Her scent deepened with her arousal, tempting him. If she'd been wearing a dress, he could have just slipped beneath it to explore the source of that sweetness. His cock surged at the thought, and he sighed. This was not helping his resolve to distance himself.

"I should probably see if the crowd had dispersed," he said reluctantly.

"Yes."

But she didn't step away and together they watched as Mia used the chair to pull herself upright, then grinned at them.

"She's so proud of herself," Barbara laughed.

The little girl bobbed for a moment then slowly tottered across to them as he held his breath. She made it all the way, half collapsing against his leg at the end and he reached down and caught her, lifting her into the air as she giggled.

"An excellent walk, little one," he told her, then looked over at Barbara, expecting to see her smiling at them. Instead tears turned her eyes silver.

"What is it, my mate? What is wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just that she's growing up so fast." She sniffed and wiped away the tears. "I don't know what's wrong with me today... Wait a minute. What did you call me?"

"We should probably go to visit Natalie," he said, avoiding her question.

"Don't you try and ignore me, buddy. Why did you call me your mate?"

“It was a slip of the tongue.” He should have left it there, but he couldn’t bring himself to let her think it was just a mistake. “I am... drawn to you and under other circumstances, perhaps there could be more between us. But I know you cannot stay and I cannot go with you.”

“You’re going to make me cry again.”

“Please do not,” he said quickly.

She didn’t, looking up at him instead with an expression he couldn’t read.

“I thought you said that a Cire male could only mate with a Cire female. Could only find... satisfaction with one.”

“It is what I was always told, but as I said, I am... drawn to you in a way I cannot explain.”

The words were a pale shadow of the pull he felt towards her, but they were all he had.

“Did it ever occur to you that I feel that same pull?” she whispered. Before he could respond, she reached out and took Mia from him. “Come on, munchkin. Time to visit your Auntie Natalie.”

It took him a stunned minute before he could pull himself together and follow her. They found Carina still in the kitchen, one child in her arms and the other in a makeshift bed formed from a towel-lined drawer. When Barbara told her they were going to see Natalie, she gave them an apologetic look.

“Do you think she’d mind if I came along later? I’m just getting the boys to sleep and I don’t want to disturb them.”

“I’m sure she won’t mind. And maybe it’s better not to overwhelm her with too many visitors if she’s still weak.”

“Oh, good. But give her my love.” Carina smiled at them as she carefully placed her now sleeping son next to his brother. “Do you want to leave Mia here as well? She might need a nap too.”

He started to protest, but perhaps she did need some rest. He looked down at Barbara and she nodded even though she was clearly reluctant as well.

“Maybe that’s a good idea.”

She handed Mia to Carina and Mia’s mouth trembled, but then Carina distracted her with a piece of dough and they slipped away.

Sama had returned to the front of the store and was helping a customer, but he smiled at them as they passed through the shop and out the door. The customer, a tall Tallan male, watched them as well and he automatically put his arm around Barbara and pulled her close.

“Why do I think you’re doing more than just hugging me?” she murmured.

“Because you are a very perceptive female. I am showing my... claim on you. Just to make sure that no other male will bother you,” he added hastily.

“I see. In that case...”

She slid her arm around his waist and stepped even closer, the swell of her small breast a tantalizing pressure against his side. He looked down to find her laughing up at him, so pretty and so desirable that it took all of his years of discipline and training to prevent himself from carrying her straight back to her room and burying his cock inside her, his knot locking them together as he claimed her as his forever.

“Pralec? Buddy? Is something wrong?”

Her concerned question made him realize he was still locked in place. He fought his instincts back under control, gave her an apologetic smile, and they set off again.

They received a number of interested stares as they walked, but no one bothered them. He made sure to make eye contact with each male, relieved when they dipped their heads in acknowledgment of his claim. If his warning proved insufficient, he would be happy to demonstrate what would happen to anyone who disturbed her.

Hawken’s office was at the edge of the village. The building looked newer than the others, and when they walked in the medic was waiting for them. He was Skaal, tall and lean and with iridescent dark blue scales and penetrating blue eyes.

“Hello,” he said, giving Barbara a long look as Pralec tried not to growl. “I am Hawken. You must be one of Natalie’s friends.”

“Yes. How is she?”

“Doing very well, actually, although she is still in a delicate condition. Come along. I’ll take you to her.”

The clinic had two small rooms for patients and Natalie was lying on the bed in one of them, a bandage wrapped around her arm and hand.

“Hi,” she said weakly. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be silly. You have nothing to apologize for.” Barbara sat down on the edge of the bed and took the girl’s uninjured hand. “How do you feel?”

“Sick.”

Natalie’s lip trembled in a way that reminded him of Mia and it suddenly occurred to him that she was quite young. *Vedekian bastards.*

“That’s to be expected,” Hawken said quietly. “You were badly poisoned. You must rest for a few days.”

The girl’s eyes flashed towards him, her cheeks turning pink the same way that Barbara’s did sometimes. *Interesting.*

“Umm, okay. Except, didn’t we come here to find a way off the planet?”

“Sama doesn’t expect one for at least a few more weeks,” he said.

“Oh.” Natalie darted another glance at Hawken from under her lashes. “So I’ll need to stay here?”

“We have rooms over the store whenever you feel better,” Barbara assured her. “They aren’t fancy but they’re very nice. Carina is there now with the children. She’ll come visit you later.”

“There is no rush,” the medic said firmly. “She needs to recover her strength before she leaves here.”

His female looked from Natalie's flushed cheeks to the medic's protective stance and bit her lip, but she didn't comment. She talked to the girl for a few more minutes, then rose.

"I'll come and see you tomorrow."

"Okay."

Natalie's eyes were already drifting closed, and Hawken gave her a quick concerned look before he followed them out.

"I believe it would be best if she didn't have any other visitors today."

"Other than you?" Barbara asked dryly.

"I am her medic. It is my privilege - my duty - to care for her."

Once again his female clearly decided not to comment, but she frowned up at him as soon as they left.

"What do you know about him?"

"About Hawken? Very little. But then most people who end up somewhere like this don't like to talk about their past. He has an excellent reputation," he added when her frown deepened. "Everything I have heard indicates that he's highly skilled."

"I suppose that's something. Natalie obviously likes him, even though she's only just met him."

"Sometimes it happens like that," he said quietly. He saw her breath catch as she looked up at him.

"Yes, I suppose it does."

They walked back to the store in silence, and when they arrived he didn't follow her up onto the porch.

"Aren't you coming in?"

He steeled his resolve and shook his head.

"No. I have to go back into the jungle to collect the rest of the furs and the meat."

"Oh. Then maybe tomorrow?"

His fist clenched at his side but he managed to keep his voice calm.

“I may be gone for several days.”

“I see.”

He waited, dreading the next question, but she didn't ask.

“Then I'll say goodbye. And thank you.”

With her standing on the porch, their heads were almost level and she leaned forward to very lightly brush those sweet, soft lips against his.

“Goodbye, Pralec.”

Then she was gone, and even though every cell in his body protested, he forced himself to walk away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Barbara scowled at herself in the mirror. She was wearing one of the new outfits that Pralec had arranged for her - for all of them - to have, the day he'd left a week ago. It was a very pretty dress with wide shoulder straps and a straight fall of burgundy silk that suited her meager curves - but the only person she wanted to wear it for had not returned. At least, he had not returned to her. She had overheard Sama talking to another male and knew he was back in his cabin.

Bastard, she thought, but her sorrow was too deep for any real anger. It didn't take a rocket scientist to understand why he had pulled back. She was leaving and he was staying. Based on what he'd told her about his past, he'd already suffered so much loss she could understand why he didn't want to face more - but she would have given anything to spend this time with him, no matter how short it turned out to be.

"Mama."

Mia trotted over to her holding the stuffed doll Carina had made her. Her steps were still a little uncertain but she rarely crawled any more - and Pralec hadn't been here to see it.

"What is it, munchkin?"

"Puh-puh?" she asked sadly - even Mia had lost hope.

"No, he won't be here," she said gently as her daughter's lower lip poked out.

They were celebrating Natalie leaving the medical clinic, a good few days after she was ready to leave in Barbara's opinion, but she'd kept her mouth shut. The girl was clearly in

love with the medic and she suspected he felt the same way, although as far as she could tell, he'd kept things strictly professional.

At least he didn't run away.

Stop that, she scolded herself, even though she wanted to pout just like Mia.

"Come on," she said, picking up her daughter. "Let's go show Auntie Carina your new dress."

Mia's dress was made out of the same material as hers but had a pretty ruffle around the bottom.

"Duhss," Mia agreed, her smile returning.

Sama had agreed to let them have the party in his kitchen while the shop was closed for lunch and Carina was buzzing around happily, putting the finishing touches on the dishes. She'd essentially taken over the kitchen, but Sama didn't seem to mind. He'd even started offering some of her baked goods for sale and Carina had been delighted by every sale.

"I know I'm not making much," she told Barbara when they were sitting in the kitchen one night. "But it makes me feel useful, somehow. More myself, you know?"

"I do."

She'd struggled with that herself, with wanting to be something other than a kidnapped woman, and with Sama's help she'd found a program that was teaching her the written language most commonly used by the various races. Being able to read again was her touchstone.

They were all gathered in the kitchen along with Sama and his assistant Tumar, a gangly young male with spotted lavender skin, when Natalie and Hawken arrived. Hand in hand.

She darted a quick look at Carina and saw her friend had noticed as well, shaking her head.

Natalie looked radiant, so pretty that she couldn't blame Tumar for gaping at her with his mouth open until Sama whacked him on the shoulder.

“It’s so nice to have you back with us,” Carina said as she hugged Natalie.

The girl blushed, looking over at Hawken, and Barbara had a sudden terrible premonition.

“I’m not back, exactly.” Natalie lifted her chin. “I’m moving in with Hawken. We’re going to be mated.”

“What?” Carina looked outraged, but Barbara’s own feelings were far more complicated.

“We know it is very fast,” Hawken said calmly, stepping forward and putting his arm around Natalie’s shoulders. “But we both know it’s right.”

“Don’t you want to return to Earth, Natalie?” she asked.

“Why? My dad is only interested in my stepmom and the kids they have together. I don’t have any real friends. I didn’t even know what I wanted to study. I was just drifting. But now I’m part of something.”

The girl gave Hawken an adoring look and only the fact that he returned it made Barbara clamp her mouth shut on the thousand objections that rushed through her mind.

“So you’re going to stay here?” she asked, before Carina could get started.

“Yes, and Hawken is going to teach me about medicine.”

“That sounds very exciting. Why don’t you have some cake? We’ll join you in a minute.” She grabbed Carina’s arm and tugged her outside.

“How can you just stand there and let her throw her life away?” Carina demanded. “Someone has to talk sense into that girl’s head.”

“Do you really think you’re going to change her mind? She’s in love.”

Her friend snorted. “She *thinks* she’s in love. Didn’t we all at that age?”

“Maybe she really is. But even if it doesn’t last, she’s not going to listen to us now. She’ll just get angry. I don’t want to

burn any bridges in case she does change her mind.”

“Except we’ll be millions of miles away.”

“I hadn’t really thought of it like that,” she admitted. “Maybe... maybe I should ask Pralec to check on her from time to time.”

“If you ever see him again,” Carina snapped. “He’s just another useless male, alien or not. Oh hell, I’m sorry,” she added when Barbara flinched. “I let my mouth get away from me.”

“It’s all right. I know it’s because you care.”

“I do.” Carina gave her a quick, fierce hug, then stepped back with a defiant sniff. “I suppose we have to go back in and act like we’re happy for her.”

“Yes, we do.”

It was easier than she expected because Natalie looked so happy. But as she watched Natalie and Hawken, she realized there was another emotion tugging at her - jealousy. She was sure she could have had that with Pralec. And even if she was still leaving and he was still staying, couldn’t they at least have this time together?

Isn’t any moment of happiness worth seizing?

She quietly packed a bag with some of Mia’s things, then took Carina aside again.

“Mia and I are going to see Pralec.”

Her friend shook her head. “And I suppose this is another one of those situations where I have to keep my opinions to myself?”

“I’m afraid so. But sometimes it’s worth taking a chance.”

“Just promise me that you won’t end up staying here too.”

“I promise. I’ll be back - but hopefully not too soon.”

She slipped back inside to pick up Mia and her bag, then left quietly.

“You know where we’re going, munchkin?” she asked as they headed down the road out of town. “We’re going to see Pralec.”

“Puh-puh?”

“That’s right.”

Mia’s wide happy smile mirrored the way she felt. She could only hope that Pralec was going to be equally pleased.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Pralec ran the scraper over the underside of the pelt again to continue softening it, but he was not as focused on his task as usual. He'd spent three nights in the jungle, hoping that he would stop missing Barbara and Mia but it hadn't helped. It had been even worse after he returned to his cabin, knowing that they were only a short distance away.

I could at least go and check on them.

No. He'd already ventured into the village late one night when he couldn't sleep to stare up at her window like a lovesick fool. If he saw them in person, he knew he wouldn't be content to simply look.

Puh-puh.

He could almost hear Mia's sweet voice through the faint hum of insects.

"Puh-puh!"

It wasn't a memory - it was real and Mia sounded terrified. He took off a run and found Barbara and Mia where the trail to his house intersected with the main road. She had a big branch in her hand and she'd pushed Mia behind her, but there were two villagers confronting her. He knew both of them.

Mesja was a shifty drunk, but he'd thought that Tandis was a decent male. Anger turned his vision red but he forced himself to be calm, to move into position behind them.

"No need for all that, pretty lady," Mesja slurred. "We just wanna talk."

“I have no interest in talking to you.”

Her voice was ice cold and steady, but he could see her fingers trembling on the branch.

“There are other things we could do,” Tandis drawled, gripping his cock.

Her face paled, but she didn’t back down. “Pralec warned you.”

“Puh-puh,” Mia wailed, and Barbara made the mistake of glance down at her.

As soon as she did, Mesja rushed her. She looked up in time to see him coming and swung the branch, catching him squarely across the chest and knocking him backwards.

“You bitch,” Tandis growled, lunging towards her.

Pralec got that first. He used his tail to send the male off balance, then caught his head in his hands as he started to fall.

“She’s right. I warned you.”

He snapped the male’s neck, making sure to keep his body between Tandis and the females.

“If you ever come near my mate or child again, you will suffer the same fate,” he warned as Mesja scrambled awkwardly to his feet.

“Didn’t know you was still around,” he mumbled, his words muffled.

“I am. Spread the word.”

Mesja paled and fled, and he turned to Barbara. She dropped her branch and fell into his arms, her whole body shaking. He loosened his grip long enough to pick up a sobbing Mia, then drew them both close, but it wasn’t enough. He swung them both up in his arms and headed back to his cabin.

“I... I...”

“Hush,” he said gently. “We can talk once we’re inside.”

She subsided, one arm clinging to his neck and the other tight around her daughter. He carried them straight into the cabin,

lowered the bar he'd never bothered to use before, and sat down in his big chair with them. Mia's sobs died away and she started patting his chest with her tiny hand.

"Puh-puh, puh-puh."

"Yes, little one. I am here."

She smiled up at him, then wiggled to be let down. He very reluctantly put her on the ground, startled to see how easily she maneuvered.

"She is really walking now."

"Yes. You missed it."

Barbara's voice sounded odd as she pulled herself upright, but she didn't make any attempt to go further. Her face was still pale but she no longer looked terrified.

"I regret that. Very much."

"I believe you. My question is how much more will you regret by hiding?"

"I do not know." Staying away from them had not made him think of them any less or miss them any less. "Is that why you came?"

"Natalie and Hawken are mated."

Ah. Hawken had had the courage to claim his mate, and yet...

"Is he returning to Earth with her?"

"No. My world isn't ready for aliens. She is staying here."

"And you are not," he said gently.

"I can't. What kind of life would this be for Mia? Or for me for that matter? I was trained to defend the law, and that is still important to me."

He understood better than she knew. There were still days when he missed the training and discipline of the military, the camaraderie of his fellow warriors, but that path was closed to him now.

"Then nothing has changed," he said quietly.

“I know, except... I don't know if Natalie and Hawken will last - she is very young and it happened very quickly - but today, today she was so happy she glowed. And I want a chance at that. Even if it's just for a few days. I don't want to look back and regret not taking the chance.”

Could he do this? There was no question of chance on his part - he knew she was his mate. And he knew what it would do to him when she left. But would it really be any worse than the hollow emptiness he currently felt?

“I need to think.”

Her face closed and she started to climb out of his lap.

“We'll go.”

“No! I do not want you to leave.” That was the one thing he was absolutely sure about. “I just do not know how... far I can go.”

Her face softened again and she nodded. “I'm not trying to push you into anything. I'm happy that we're together again.”

“I am too.”

They smiled at each other, and then he sighed.

“I should go and make some arrangements about the body.”

“Are you going to be in trouble?”

“He attacked you. I was within my rights to defend you.”

She sighed.

“I can't decide if that's barbaric or realistic, but I'm glad. And if you're going back, I had a bag with some things for Mia. And for me.” Pink painted her cheeks again. “Could you bring it back?”

“Very well. Bar the door behind me.”

She nodded and followed him to the door. He had his hand on it when Mia looked up from where she was busily rearranging his small collection of unusual rocks he'd found in the jungle. Her eyes widened, and then her face crumpled.

“Puh-puh!”

Barbara picked her up and hugged her.

“It’s all right, munchkin. Papa’s coming right back. He’s just going to get the bag with the cookies that Auntie Carina made you.”

Mia gulped, and gave Barbara a piteous look.

“Coo-cuk?”

“That’s right. Cookies. And then Papa will be back, won’t you?”

“Nothing on this planet or any other would prevent me.”

She smiled at his vehemence but this time Mia didn’t cry when he left and he heard the bar drop into place behind him.

He reached the road just as a party of three males approached pulling an air sled - Mesja, Sama, and another male who he recognized as a crony of Tandris.

“There he ish,” Mesja slurred. “He’s the one who killed Tandish.”

“Is that true?” Sama asked.

“Yes. He attacked my mate and threatened to rape her, in front of her child.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Tandris’s friend protested, but he looked horrified.

“Is that true, Mesja?” Sama asked.

“Not ex-ex... We was just going to have a little fun.”

Sama sighed. “You’ll pay for the burial, Pralec?”

“Yes.”

“You satisfied, Ronal?”

The other male’s mouth twisted but he nodded.

“I reckon. I don’t hold with that kind of thing.”

“I’m not shatishfied,” Mesja protested.

“You’re lucky I’m not locking you up for assault,” Sama muttered.

It wasn't an empty threat. The village didn't have an official jail, but Sama had a very deep and very cold root cellar. Mesja scowled, but nodded.

"I reckon."

"Good. Then help me load the body."

He helped them get the body on the air sled, then they headed back to town with it. He found the bag half-hidden under a bush and hurried back to his cabin. Barbara breathed a sigh of relief when he identified himself and she let him in.

"You were gone a long time. Luckily I was able to distract Mia with your supply of storage containers."

The usually neat collection was now scattered all over the floor, but it was worth it to see Mia sitting in the middle of it and smiling. She beamed at him and lifted her arms.

"Puh-puh."

He obeyed the imperious demand and picked her up, smiling as Barbara came to join them. No matter how much heartache lay ahead, for a moment he could pretend they were a family.

"Where were you?" Barbara asked softly after Mia returned to her containers.

"I'll tell you later, after she's asleep. That is, are you spending the night?"

Her smile was an intoxicating combination of shy and provocative.

"If you want us to. And if you have somewhere for Mia to sleep?"

"I have just the thing."

The rest of the day was not dissimilar to most of his days. He worked on his furs and collected the late summer vegetables from his garden. He oiled his weapons and ran through a series of training exercises. He prepared dinner and set bread to rise for the morning. But it was all different in the one way that really mattered - he was not alone.

He explained the process of curing the furs to Barbara and she worked beside him, laughing at her lack of skill. He took Mia to the garden with him, showing her what he picked, and letting her try a sweet fruit warm from the sun. When he trained, Barbara watched, her gaze both appreciative and something more.

And he didn't eat alone. Barbara praised his cooking and fed Mia bites and the baby scattered food all over his clean kitchen and he felt lighter than he had in a very long time. While he cleaned the kitchen, she bathed Mira and the sound of happy giggles echoed through his cabin. And then Mia was asleep, safely tucked away in his little office niche, and it was just the two of them.

She came to join him in his big chair, curling into his lap as if she had always belonged there, and there was a sense of rightness, in addition to the gathering desire that had his cock aching and his head swimming.

"I have been thinking," he said, forcing himself to concentrate on the words and not the sweet press of her ass against his rigid cock.

"You said you wanted to do that." She tipped her head back to look up at him. "Have you changed your mind? About us being here?"

"Never. I want you both here. And I want to touch you and kiss you and explore every delicious inch."

He stroked his thumb across the already tight peak of her nipple and she gasped.

"I hear a *but* coming," she murmured as she put her hand over his to keep him teasing her breast.

"I cannot enter you."

The eyes that had been heavy with passion studied his face as he continued.

"If I enter you, if I knot inside you and claim you as my mate, I do not believe I will be able to let you go." Not without destroying himself in the process. "Do you understand?"

“I think so. But you still want to kiss and touch and other things?”

“Very much.”

There was a hint of sadness in her smile, but she was smiling as she tugged his head down. He licked those sweet, plump little lips and she moaned, opening to him. He took full advantage, discovering anew the delicious pleasures of her mouth. His hand remained on her breasts, teasing the two ripe little buds, as his tail slid down her leg to wrap around her thigh. Her hips bucked and she moaned again, her arms tightening around his neck.

His head was spinning, her scent making him dizzy, and he wanted more. Her legs parted, and his tail slid higher, slipping between her thighs as her heat called to him. She was already wet, her slick arousal dampening his tail and coating his fingers as he found her slit. So hot. So wet.

The tip of his tail pressed between her folds, seeking the entrance to her body, and her hips rocked forward. She was almost impossibly small, but she began to open around his tail, eager and welcoming. Her mouth broke away from his, and he heard her cry out, the sound sending another rush of heat through him. The need to fill her, to thrust his cock into her welcoming cunt, was overwhelming but he couldn't.

Instead, he pushed the tip of his tail in deeper, his fingers tightening around her bottom, and she gave that soft, eager little cry again. He couldn't hold back. With one quick, desperate thrust, he buried his tail deep inside her cunt. Her inner muscles rippled around his tail, so hot and tight that he could barely move, and he was lost.

He couldn't think, could barely breathe, all he could do was thrust, the movements instinctive and automatic. She writhed in his arms, her hips rising and falling, her soft cries filling his ears. Each time his tail retreated, her hips followed, seeking to keep him buried inside her. He growled again, and she moaned, the sound making his cock throb and leak, the need to thrust almost as strong as his need to come.

His tail pistoned into her again and again, her body tightening around him, the pleasure building until he could hardly bear it, and then she convulsed around him, her body milking his tail in long pulsing waves, and his own climax overtook him, his seed flooding out between their bodies in wave after heated wave as he clung to her.

He raised his head at last, the mixture of emotions that filled him too complex to name, and she smiled up at him.

“I have to admit you have a very talented tail.”

He hadn't expected to laugh, but he did, ignoring that distinct pang of longing to go that one step further.

“My tail thanks you. And I thank you.”

“The feeling is mutual. And a little sticky,” she added ruefully, looking down at the golden shimmer of his seed on her thighs.

“Then I believe a shower is in order.”

“Just a shower?” she whispered, tracing her hand along his cock, and just like that he was achingly erect again. “I imagine that water and soap can provide some interesting... sensations.”

“Then we should experiment,” he told her as he picked her up and carried her into the bathroom.

And as usual, she was quite correct.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Barbara woke as she had every morning for the past week, curled against Pralec's side, his arm around her shoulders and his tail around her waist - although sometimes the tip ended up between her breasts and other times it rested lightly against her mound. That tail was both a blessing and a curse. Her original opinion hadn't changed - it was extremely talented - but as much as she loved the thick slide into her, she found herself wishing more and more that it was his cock.

She suspected he felt the same way. Last night he had been sliding his cock back and forth along her slit, teasing her clit with each stroke, and somehow it had ended up wedged against her entrance. She'd felt the first delicious stretch before he jerked away, his face tortured. He quickly brought up his tail to replace it, but she pushed it gently away and took his cock in her mouth instead, loving the slight taste of her mingled with his taste. He always seems so shocked and delighted when she went down on him. In fact...

Her hand skated down the ridges of his abdomen to find the head of his cock, already swollen and leaking. He seemed to be constantly erect and once he'd let it slip that it was partially because he hadn't knotted and achieved a complete climax. She'd been horrified but he convinced her that he was still very, very satisfied with their time together. She believed him, but it was yet another reason why she found herself wishing for more.

But she had sworn to herself that she wouldn't push him, so she contented herself with swirling the moisture around the

thick head until his tail curled around her wrist. She looked up to find him smiling down at her.

“A very enjoyable way to awaken.”

“I’m only getting started,” she teased and his eyes heated.

She tightened her grip... and Mia gave her demanding morning cry, the one that meant come and get me right now.

He laughed, despite the rigid shaft in her hands, and sat up.

“Perhaps tomorrow. I will get her.”

He pulled on his pants and went to get Mia. She’d been wearing one of his shirts as a nightgown and she quickly pulled it down over her head.

But there wasn’t to be a tomorrow.

As they were eating breakfast and discussing the possibility of a picnic in the jungle, a loud hum filled the air and Pralec froze.

“What is it?”

“It is a ship,” he said quietly. “It means your time here has come to an end.”

She’d known all along that this day would come, but she still wasn’t prepared for the pain that spiked through her. She opened her mouth to say she couldn’t go, she wouldn’t leave him, but then she looked over at Mia playing with a spoon. She thought about the tiny village and the number of males and the absence of other children, and she bit her lip.

“H-how much time?”

Her voice sounded oddly distant, muffled.

“They rarely stay more than a day, two at most. There is not much here to trade.” He sounded equally strange.

“I see. Then I suppose I’d better pack.”

“I... Yes. I will accompany you to the ship to talk to the captain and make the arrangements.”

She repacked the small bag she’d brought with her like a zombie, determined not to cry. At the last second she threw his

shirt in as well, determined to keep something tangible, however small.

They had spent the week talking, but now there was nothing to say, the silence thick and heavy between them. Mia began to pick up on their unhappiness, looking back and forth between them anxiously, her happy babbling silent for once. Carina was waiting for them at Sama's, her own bag packed and the boys in a dual sling across her chest, but even she didn't seem as excited as Barbara would have expected.

Natalie was there too, but only to say goodbye.

"I'm going to miss you both, but I belong with Hawken," she said quietly. Her first glow of happiness had deepened into something stronger, and for the first time Barbara believed that the couple might just make it.

Could that have been her, if she'd had the courage to stay with Pralec? If she'd been alone, she thought she would have stayed, but she had Mia, and even Carina and the boys to worry about and it just wasn't that simple.

Sama accompanied them as their small group walked over to the small landing field at the edge of town.

"A Kissat trader. That's good."

Pralec spoke for the first time since they'd left his house and she looked up at him, then hastily looked away before the sight of his beloved features made her cry.

"Why is that good?" she asked, proud that her voice didn't shake.

"They're arrogant bastards and hard bargainers, but they'll keep their word."

"That... that's good."

The ability to speak was getting harder and she was almost relieved when he strode across the field to talk to the captain, but her eyes followed him the whole way, the lump in her throat growing.

They were too far away to hear the actual conversation, but even from her position, some of the body language was easy

enough to read. The captain's exaggerated carelessness and the gestures in their direction. He had feline features and thick orange fur, and he was dressed like a pirate in a story book. Did they have pirates here, space pirates, she wondered, her heart skipping a beat.

Pralec finally returned, the captain at his side.

"This is Captain Narval. He has agreed to take you to the Patrol station on Hereos Prime. It is his third stop and will take approximately two weeks, but he will also contact the Patrol on your behalf to see if there is an early place to rendezvous."

"Thank you," she said, her voice still flat and dull.

"I'm charmed to have such delightful companions, along with your... offspring."

He had a low, rather affected voice, and he almost shuddered at the last word. She frowned, her doubts returning, but Sama laughed.

"Don't be an ass, Narval. You bought out my entire stock of wooden toys for your nieces and nephews on your last trip."

"Only because they plague me so if I do not buy their affection with baubles."

This time she saw the lurking smile in those green cat-like eyes, and she smiled as well.

"I take it you are buying your way to favorite uncle?"

"Of course. One must be the favorite."

She laughed, and Pralec made a faint growling noise.

"You will guard them with your life," he ordered.

"I will," Narval said quietly, his exaggerated manner disappearing for a moment, but then he gave Sama a bored glance.

"I don't suppose you have anything worth trading for?"

"Perhaps. If you have something to offer besides tawdry trinkets and broken down machinery."

Narval pressed a hand to his chest.

“I’d never offer anything tawdry.”

The two males wandered off, still arguing, leaving the rest of them standing silently.

“There are two cabins,” Pralec said. “He described them as spacious so they will be small, but they should be adequate.”

“As long as it’s not a cell, I don’t care how big it is,” Carina said cheerfully. “Let’s take a look.”

At least someone was happy to be leaving. Barbara followed her across the field, a once more silent Pralec at her side, while Mia grew increasingly fretful.

“Puh-puh,” her daughter whimpered, reaching for him.

“May I?”

It was the first time he’d thought to ask, as if she were already a stranger, and her heart cracked a little more.

“Of course.”

Mia dove into his arms, but she didn’t look around and beam the way she usually did. Instead, she buried her face in his neck and patted his chest.

“There are only two other crew members,” Pralec said. “A com officer who’s also the backup pilot, and a mechanic who’s also a cook.”

Carina sniffed. “Great. That probably means all our food will taste like engine oil.”

“On the contrary. I like to sprinkle in a little burnt rubber and smoke as well, just for flavor.”

The speaker emerged from the belly of the ship wiping his hands on a rag, and Carina’s mouth fell open. Barbara couldn’t blame her. Neither cook nor mechanic conjured up the image of the golden skinned male who had just emerged from the shadows. His jumpsuit was down around his waist, revealing an upper body that was almost as impressive as Pralec’s. He had long dark hair tied back in a braid and sharp, angular features that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a very expensive male model.

His look at Carina was decidedly appreciative, lingering over the twins with an odd wistfulness.

“But perhaps you have some better ideas?” he added. Even his voice was sexy, as rich and smooth as molten honey with an almost Southern accent.

Carina abruptly recovered her composure, closing her mouth with a snap and straightening her shoulders.

“I’m sure I do, although I doubt you have adequate supplies or equipment.”

He didn’t seem the least troubled by her hostility - if anything he looked even more amused.

“Please allow me to show you. I am Fabrion.”

“I’m Carina, and that’s Barbara.”

“I’m charmed.” He gave her a quick bow and smile, before turning back to Carina. “And these two handsome males?”

Carina’s face finally softened a little.

“This is John and Kevin.”

“I am pleased to meet them as well. Shall we?”

Fabrion bowed, gesturing towards the landing ramp, and after the briefest hesitation, Carina joined him.

“That was interesting,” she murmured, forgetting her own troubles for a moment.

“Yes.” Pralec clearly had not. “May I accompany you to your cabin? I would like to be able to picture you there.”

She was tempted to refuse. She was sure that the memory of him in her cabin, of knowing how it could have been if he were there with her, was going to haunt her. But neither could she bear to say goodbye yet.

“All right.”

They climbed the landing ramp in silence, then took a lift up two floors to a central lounge filled with flamboyant, overstuffed furniture. A compact galley and dining area

opened to one side, and the cabins were off a short corridor on the other.

He'd been right. It was compact - a padded bench that opened out into a bed, a wall of built-in storage, and a smaller bench below what looked like a window but with a view of slowly moving stars. He showed her the concealed door to an even smaller bathroom.

"I am sorry it is not bigger."

"It's fine."

She couldn't look at him, and he gently turned her to face him. Did she look like that, she wondered, so strained that his skin looked etched across his bones.

"I... Thank you."

"Thank you? For what?" Her voice was threatening to break again.

"For the best week of my life. For the feeling, however brief, that I had a family."

She couldn't speak. If she did she would start to cry and she wasn't sure she would ever stop. He leaned down, his head resting against hers for the briefest moment. Then he stepped back and gently detached Mia, passing her to Barbara as she began to cry. His lips touched hers so quickly she could almost have imagined it, and then he was gone.

A vast terrible numbness settled over her. She wanted to echo Mia's sobs, but that wouldn't help either of them. Instead she rocked her, humming softly until Mia finally cried herself to sleep.

And then she just sat and held her daughter. Sat as the sound of activity increased outside. Sat as the engines began to roar and there was the unmistakable jerk of takeoff. She was still sitting when Carina poked her head round the door. The other woman looked flushed and happy and she might have resented it if she could have felt anything.

"I've made food for the boys so I thought I'd give Mia some as well."

“She’s sleeping.”

“I’ll take her anyway, so you can have a bit of a rest.”

She didn’t have the energy to argue, even though her arms felt cold and empty after Carina took the sleeping child. Carina started to say something, then shook her head and disappeared.

Would she cry now, she wondered. Now that she was alone.

But she wasn’t alone. The door opened again and this time Pralec stood there - huge and green and real.

“Wh... what are you doing here?”

He knelt in front of her and took her hands, and his hands too were big and warm and real.

“As soon as I left the ship I knew I’d made a mistake. The only place I want to be is with you and Mia for as long as you will have me. I love you, Barbara.”

“You do?”

“More than life itself.”

Her numbness finally vanished. He was real and he was here and he loved her.

“Oh God, I love you too.”

And then she was in his arms and he was kissing her frantically and she was kissing him back just as hard and it was all real.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Pralec knew that there were things to discuss, decisions to make, but they could all wait. The only things that mattered right now were that his mate was in his arms and that she loved him and that she was wearing far too many clothes.

His hands roamed eagerly over the thin dress, searching for the fastenings. She was wearing the same dress she'd been wearing that morning, the dress she'd been wearing when he thought he'd never see her again, and he ripped it open, destroying the dress as well as the memory. She gasped, her small breasts flushed and ripe but before he could cover them with his mouth, she started tugging impatiently at his shirt. Her fingers danced over the fastenings, her knuckles brushing his skin as she worked her way down and the sensation was so sweet that he almost didn't notice when her hand slid inside his pants. And then she grasped his cock, the touch like an electric shock down his spine.

Because of the restriction he'd placed on their lovemaking, he'd done his best to concentrate on her for the past week but she had still found ways to touch him. And now, knowing that he would soon be inside her, those long graceful fingers already had him on the verge of climax.

He gently pushed her back on the narrow bench, unwilling to take the time to expand it, and stripped away the remains of her dress. Fuck, she was perfect and ripe and beautiful and his. He stroked her hands down her front, lingering only briefly over her tempting breasts before parting her legs to reveal her delectable cunt, already flushed and glistening.

His fingers parted her slick folds and her hips rose to meet him, her eager little clit already swollen and ready. He teased the pink nub with his thumb, loving the soft gasps and cries that spilled from her lips as he dipped lower. Her cunt was even hotter, even wetter, and he leaned down to lap at her, groaning as her sweetness flooded his mouth. She gasped, her hips rising off the bed, and he drove his tongue into her, feeling her quiver around him.

“Please. More.”

He wanted more as well. He wanted everything. He moved higher, to lick and suck and tease her clit, and the tip of his tail teased her entrance.

“No,” she gasped. “Not your tail. Not this time.”

He shuddered, precum dripping from his swollen head at the thought of finally, finally sinking his cock deep inside her sweet cunt.

“Are you sure?”

“God, yes.”

He pushed her thighs wider and settled himself between her legs, the broad head of his cock resting against her slick folds. It didn't seem possible that he would fit but his cock wasn't that much larger than his tail. She tried to lift her hips to take him inside and he shuddered as he allowed himself to surge forward a few inches. *Fuck!* She was so incredibly hot and wet and tight that every muscle in his body quivered as he fought for control. Her inner walls rippled around him and her hips jerked, urging him on, and he could no longer hold back. With a deep groan, he drove his entire length into her.

He froze, fighting for control. He had never experienced anything so intense. So perfect. she gripped him so tightly that it was almost painful and he was afraid to move, afraid that his cock would erupt with the slightest movement and he never wanted this to end.

She was panting, her eyes closed, and he could feel each tiny movement as she fought to adjust to his size. Careful not to move his hips, he slid his hand between them and found the

sweet little nub of her clit, fully exposed by the fullness inside her. He stroked across the surface and she came with a wailing cry, He could feel everything, every pulsing movement as her channel massaged him with the tightest most delectable grip possible.

Somehow he managed to remain still until her body softened and her eyes opened and she whispered his name. And then he couldn't wait any longer. He began to thrust, rapid, urgent movements as the need to claim her, to make her his in every way, swept over him, too strong to deny.

He growled her name, his hips slamming into her, each powerful thrust making her gasp and moan, and then her cunt tightened around him again, milking him, and he couldn't hold back. He buried himself inside her as his knot expanded, locking them together as his cock jerked and pulsed, filling her with his seed, claiming her, marking her as his forever. The pleasure was so intense that the cabin seemed to spin around him as he clung to her.

When he finally lifted his head, she was watching him, her face warm and loving.

“Was that... too much?”

“It was perfect.” She traced her fingers along his jaw, and he shuddered.

The movement reverberated through their still joined bodies and her eyes widened.

“Oh my. How long does this last?”

“I am not sure.”

She tightened her inner muscles in a quick pulsing movement and he groaned.

“Longer if you keep doing that.”

Her teasing smile appeared and she did it again. He growled and slid his thumb back between their bodies. He made her climax twice more, each one wringing a few more drops from his drained cock, before they finally just held each other until his knot subsided and he reluctantly slipped free.

“I love you, my mate.”

“I love you too.”

He believed her, but he could also see that her busy brain had reengaged.

“I will not try and prevent you from returning to your planet,” he said quietly. He had accepted that possibility when he made the decision to return. “I will even accompany you, if you would permit it.”

The sound she made was half laugh, half sob.

“My planet wouldn’t be safe for you.”

“I could remain in hiding.”

“That’s no life for you, for anyone.” She hesitated, watching her fingers stroke his chest. “I wanted to return so that I would have a place for myself, but also for Mia. I want her to have an education, options for the future other than as a prize for a male. Do you think we can find that out here?”

“I think it is possible. Not all planets were as heavily hit by the Red Death, and many educational institutions are active again.” It was his turn to hesitate. “Most Cire remained on Ciresia, but I would not wish to go anywhere they have populated. They would not regard me favorably.”

“Then they are fools,” she said fiercely, her immediate defense helping to heal the long held wound.

He kissed her, but just as his passion and his cock began to rise, she pushed him away a little.

“I can’t forget about Carina either. If she wants to return to Earth, I have to help her.”

Even though he’d only briefly glimpsed the couple together, he suspected that would not be an issue for much longer.

“If she does not, then I would suggest we remain on board for longer. To see more planets and decide where we might wish to live.”

Her face lit up, clearly excited by the idea.

“Will Narval let us remain on board?”

“I imagine so. I will offer my services and he will tell me he doesn’t need them, offer me the lowest possible salary, and agree in the end. I would not be surprised if Carina offers to take over some of the cooking as well.”

She sighed. “Since I don’t think I have any useful skills, I guess I’ll look after the children and concentrate on improving my reading skills. Maybe I can find some other area of expertise.”

“Mmm.” He bent down to nuzzle the tender spot beneath her ear. “I find an intellectual female fascinating.”

She arched her neck to allow him greater access. “You do?”

“I do. And since Carina is keeping Mia for the entire night, I have plenty of opportunity to show you just how much.”

And he proceeded to do so.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Barbara woke up alone, but she didn't panic. At what seemed to be a very early hour of the morning, Pralec had kissed her and slipped out of bed. He told her he was going to speak to the captain about their passage and not to expect him back any time soon. She'd been too exhausted to protest.

And it's probably just as well, she thought as she gave a rather gingerly stretch. His massive cock was certainly a challenge, albeit a very worthy one. Even the nubs that covered it, just as they covered the rest of his skin, seemed larger and more defined, massaging every sensitive area inside her as he stroked in and out of her. Her clit gave a slow pulse as the thought but she did her best to push it aside and went to take a quick shower.

She had just gotten dressed when Carina and Mia came to find her. Her daughter launched herself at her, babbling excitedly while she patted her face.

"I'm happy to see you too, munchkin. I hope she wasn't any trouble?"

"Not at all. She was a little fussy at bedtime, but Fabrion played this flute-like thing until she fell asleep."

"He did, did he? Did he just stop by to visit?"

"He just wanted my opinion on some cookies he'd made, that's all."

"If you say so."

Carina glared at her, then laughed.

“Ok. I like him. A lot. But I’m not rushing into anything. Pralec mentioned that all of you were planning to stay on board longer and I thought it was a good idea.”

“Are you sure? If you’re in a hurry to get back to Earth, I’ll do everything I can to help.”

“I know you would. But once I was free and had time to think, I realized that this is the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to me. And it’s not like I have a lot to go back to except a big house and a lot of money.” Carina gave her a rueful smile. “And this morning I bartered my cooking skills for a chance to remain on board and it felt... good.”

She sighed. “I can understand that. I just wish I had something to barter.

“I’m sure there’s something,” her friend said encouragingly, but she shrugged and let it drop.

The next few days fell into an agreeable pattern. She and Mia often helped Carina in the kitchen, or spent some time with Pralec when he had a shift. She focused as much time as she could on her reading lessons and they progressed very rapidly. She was determined to find the perfect place for them, or at least a few to try.

And every night there was Pralec. Mia was back in their cabin now, in the window seat he’d turned into a bed, so they had to be very quiet. He was very good at thinking up new and creative ways to keep her quiet while sending her body flying.

They were approaching their second stop when disaster struck. Pora was on watch, but the rest of them had gathered in the lounge after another of Carina’s delicious dinners. She was sitting on Pralec’s lap, idly watching her daughter place a set of kitchen utensils one by one into a large container, then joyfully dump them all out again, when an alarm blared through the lounge.

Narval tilted his head to listen to it, then sighed.

“The Patrol.”

Her heart skipped a beat as Pralec tensed beneath her.

“What are they doing here?”

“They have the absurd idea that this ship has been used for smuggling. As a result they board us occasionally to search.”

“Have they ever found anything?”

“There is nothing for them to find.”

Narval looked the very picture of innocence, but she didn't believe it for a second. However, he also didn't look worried, so she took it as a good sign. Pralec was the one who looked concerned.

“What's wrong?”

“Hopefully, nothing.”

A few minutes later, two heavily armed Patrol officers climbed up the second floor. Both of them were from a race that looked rather like large teddy bears and she found it oddly distracting.

“Captain Narval, are you carrying any illegal substances?”

“Not on this ship,” he yawned casually.

The officer's eyes swept around the room, lingering first on her and then on Carina.

“You do not consider having human slaves illegal?” he snapped.

“We are not slaves,” she protested simultaneously with Carina. “Or do you think so poorly of our species that you assume it is the only way we can participate in your advanced civilization?”

The officer drew back, muttering an apology.

“If you are really that concerned about slavery, then I suggest you spend some time investigating Vedeckian ships instead of harassing innocent traders.”

She saw Narval grin out of the corner of her eye, but she refused to look at him.

“Your suggestion is not without merit,” the officer said stiffly. “But the captain has a history of questionable activity. We will perform a sweep of the interior.”

“If you insist. I assure you that you won’t find anything.”

I hope.

The officer nodded and the two males set off, carrying something that looked almost exactly like a tricorder from an old television show and she had the sudden impulse to giggle. Instead she relaxed back against Pralec, only to discover that he was still tense.

“What’s wrong?”

“I hope nothing.”

The Patrol officers continued to search, but returned to the lounge empty-handed.

“This is the last area.” Their tone was significantly more cordial. “We’ll just do a quick scan and then we’ll be on our way.”

One of them swung the tricorder in an arc around the room. A shocked silence fell when he reached her and the machine started to buzz.

“Me? What have I done?”

“No, sweetheart. Not you. Me.”

Pralec lifted her gently off his lap and rose.

“Pralec Tor’Sarian?” the officer asked.

“Yes.”

“I am placing you under arrest.”

“On what charge?” she demanded. “And where are you taking him? I’m his legal representative.”

The officers exchanged a look, then one of them nodded.

“We are taking him to Alliko, under violation of Code section 5.3A.”

“Which is what?”

“Murder.”

A stunned silence fell as the officers began herding Pralec towards the lift. That was when Mia realized he was leaving

her and burst into tears.

“No! Puh-puh, no!”

She started to toddle after him and Barbara had to pick her up and hold her as her cries increased. The officers looked even more uncomfortable, but they kept going, whisking him into the lift and disappearing, leaving behind a stunned silence broken only by Mia’s sobs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Barbara paced nervously back and forth outside the House Sodan reception room. It had been almost a week since Pralec had been arrested and she couldn't help thinking that time was running out, even though everyone had assured her repeatedly that the Allikan judicial system did not move that quickly. It had taken almost an entire day to convince Narval to come to Alliko. She still wasn't sure if she'd finally gotten through to his conscience or if he was just tired of arguing.

The fact that one of his relatives worked in the Sudan kitchens had been what encouraged her to appeal to them first. Although she'd spent as much of the trip as possible studying Allikan law and history, she desperately needed insider information. Then it had taken yet another day to get this appointment.

The inner door finally opened and a servant bowed to her.

"Lord Craxan will see you now."

Instead of the grand reception room she'd expected, the room beyond was simply an office - a large office, but with nothing particularly fancy about it. Even more surprisingly, the male regarding her from behind the desk was clearly Cire.

"You're Cire," she burst out, and he raised a brow ridge.

"And you are human. It was my understanding that I was meeting with the legal representative of a wrongly accused prisoner."

"You are. I am Pralec Tor'Sarian's legal representative. He is also Cire, and my mate."

“Indeed?”

An inner door opened and a pretty, plump human female entered.

“Craxan, Rissta just told me the most extraordinary thing - Oh.” She broke off as she saw Barbara. “You must be the woman Rissta was telling me about. You’re intending to defend your mate.”

“I am - was - a lawyer,” she said defensively. “But it is my understanding that the Tribunal doesn’t have any requirements about legal standing in order to appear before them.”

“That’s right. How did you know?”

“I’ve been studying on the trip here, but there’s still so much I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking for your help.”

“Of course we’ll help you, won’t we, Craxan?”

The big Cire behind the desk sighed.

“You don’t know anything about the situation, Joanna.”

“Rissta said that he was wrongly accused,” Joanna said triumphantly. “That’s good enough for me.”

He sighed again. “Who made the accusation?”

“House Garran.”

Barbara was sure that the expression that flashed across Craxan’s face was dislike, and that gave her hope.

“And he’s also a Cire,” Joanna added hopefully.

“A Cire without honor.”

“That is not true,” she said fiercely. “He has more honor in his little finger than most males have in their entire body.”

He regarded her thoughtfully for a moment, then dipped his head.

“What do you need?”

“I need any information I can get about the actual trial process and all of the people involved - the judge, the other lawyers, anything else you can tell me.”

“I can help with some of that,” Joanna volunteered immediately. “I have a couple of volumes of the Allikan equivalent of Who’s Who. Will you get the information about the judicial process, Craxan?”

“Do I have a choice?” he asked dryly, but the warmth in eyes was unmistakable.

It was the same way Pralec looked at her, she thought, and had to bite her lip to stop it from trembling.

“Come with me,” Joanna said softly. “I’ll introduce you to the rest of my family and then show you where to find those volumes and anything else we have.”

“Thank you,” she said sincerely and followed her out of the room.

They ended up in the kitchen, where Rissta was entertaining Mia with pieces of dough. The Kissat female’s fur was completely white, but she had the most perceptive eyes Barbara had ever seen, not to mention a wickedly sharp tongue.

“Mama,” Mia said happily and her heart did the same little flip it did every time her daughter used that name.

“Hello munchkin. I see you’ve been baking with Miss Rissta.”

“Never too young to learn,” Rissta cackled, just as the door opened again.

A pretty young Allikan girl in a ripped dress came barreling in, accompanied by a sturdy little boy who was clearly a blend of Cire and human.

“And these are my children - my daughter Tavi and my son Vani.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you.” Tavi curtsied as elegantly as if she were bearing a ball gown instead of the ripped dress.

Vani bowed. He was perhaps two years older than Mia, but was already showing signs that he would be a big male.

“I’m pleased to meet both of you as well. My name is Barbara, and this is my daughter, Mia.”

Tavi curtsayed again, then danced over to inspect what Rissta was cooking. Vani remained where he was, staring at Mia. Mia stared back, then raised her arms to be lifted out of her chair. As soon as Barbara put her down, she tottered over to Vani. They stared at each other for another moment, then Mia hugged him. Vani hugged her back, his small tail curving around her equally small body.

“Does that happen a lot?” she asked Joanna.

“No. In fact he’s usually kind of distant with people he doesn’t know.”

The children were sitting on the floor now, Mia babbling happily while Vani seemed content just to watch her, his tail resting on her ankle. Pralec had done the same when they first met, she thought, and her toast threatened to close. She had to get him out of this - she had to.

“Where did you say your library was located?” she asked, turning back to Joanna.

Joanna had also been watching the children, but she looked over Barbara and smiled.

“This way.”

PRALEC SAT STARING AT THE WALL OF HIS CELL. THERE WAS little else to do between the required exercise sessions. As usual he was thinking of Barbara and Mia. What had happened to them? Had they decided to return to Earth after all? He could only hope Barbara hadn’t hated him too badly.

One of the Allikan guards opened his door, and Pralec frowned at him. There were no activities scheduled for this afternoon.

“You have a visitor.”

Barbara? No, it couldn’t be. He was even more shocked when a Cire male entered. He was wearing Allikan robes, but he still carried himself like a warrior.

“I am Craxan, Lord of House Sodan.”

“I am Pralec.”

They stared at each other for a moment, and then the other male sighed.

“I have come to offer my assistance.”

“Assistance? Why?”

“Because your mate and my mate decided that it would bring you comfort.”

The warrior’s tone indicated that he did not agree, but Pralec was more focused on the other part of his statement.

“My mate? She is here? And my daughter?”

“Yes, they are both here. They are staying at our residence. In one of the guest houses on the grounds,” Craxan added quickly, clearly understanding Pralec’s instinctive growl.

“But why? I thought they would return to their planet.”

“Because they believe in you.”

“Perhaps they should not.” He couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his tone, but he looked Craxan directly in the eye. “I am not a murderer, but I did break my vow to House Garran.”

“Why?”

“When the new lord came in, things began to change. I started noticing hints of corruption. And then I discovered that B’suk was forcing young females to... service him. I broke my vow, left my House, and tried to report his behavior. I heard a rumor that there was a price on my head and I left.”

Craxan sighed. “There was indeed a price on your head. Do you remember the name of the male to whom you reported the crime?”

He frowned, trying to remember. “Jebar, perhaps? Something like that.”

“Jehar. He is the one you are accused of murdering.”

“You mean they wanted to shut him up and blamed me?”

“Exactly. Is there anything you can think of that would provide proof he was alive when you left?”

“I am afraid not.”

Craxan nodded.

“We thought as much, although I have an operative searching for additional information.”

“Why are you doing this? Because your mate asked you to?”

“That would be a sufficient reason, but there are others. I too have witnessed behavior from House Garran that I found... questionable. My daughter’s House was also taken over by a despicable male. And perhaps because we Cire deserve a chance at happiness.”

“I am not sure that I deserve such a chance.”

“Of course you do. And if your mate has her way you will receive it. She is a formidable female.”

“Yes, she is. Thank you,” he added quietly.

Craxan nodded abruptly and rose.

“I will continue to do what I can.”

He left without any additional assurances, but for the first time since he’d been arrested, Pralec allowed himself to feel a spark of hope.

Two days later he was summoned to trial.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Pralec kept his face composed as he was escorted before the Tribunal. The court proceedings were considered public events, with spectators attending the proceedings in person as well as those watching the live stream. He understood why it had been set up that way - to ensure that the court's decisions were not made in secret - but he still disliked the feeling of being on display.

His case was not considered to be of major significance so only three judges were present today, a female and two males. They watched him enter, their faces revealing nothing, and he wondered if the fact that he was Cire would be in his favor or not. His race was considered honorable, and yet he had committed a dishonorable act by breaking his vow.

The door on the far wall opened and Barbara entered, tall and elegant in the dark robes. Her hair was pulled back in a tight knot, her face pale, but she bore herself like a queen. She took one look in his direction and he caught the flash of despair in her eyes before she looked away again.

B'suk entered, flanked by two personal guards. He was dressed in vividly colored robes, completely inappropriate for the setting, and he oozed boredom and disdain. There was a low murmur from the crowd, but he did not think it a positive one.

“We will begin with the opening statements,” the Judge in the middle announced, and Barbara's shoulders straightened as the Prosecution spoke first.

“Your Honor, may it please the Tribunal, House Garran has brought this matter to you because they feel that their rights have been violated. We have presented evidence of a crime committed against one of their members. The accused, Pralec Tor’Sarian, was once a member of House Garran, but left the House.”

Another low hum. House members rarely left their houses.

“The charges are simple. Jehar, a trusted member of the household, has been killed and his body disposed of. Pralec Tor’Sarian is responsible for the killing. I will show you evidence that he has no alibi, and that he was involved with Jehar in an unspecified manner, which has led us to conclude that the death was due to a dispute, perhaps of a criminal nature.”

“Thank you. Ms. Emerson, you may now speak.”

“Yes, Your Honor. We deny the charge against my client, Pralec Tor’Sarian. He freely admits that he visited Jehar, however the purpose of his visit was to report criminal activity. We will establish that Jehar was alive when my client left.”

B’suk had been sprawling in his seat, apparently bored by the proceedings, but he straightened at Barbara’s statement. Pralec allowed himself another shred of hope. Had she really found someone to confirm what had happened that night?

“We also freely acknowledge that my client left House Garran. He did so because he witnessed behavior that was against the strong moral code of every *Cire* warrior.” Her voice was strong and clear, with just enough emphasis on *Cire* to get the point across, and he saw several people exchange meaningful looks. “It was my client’s attempt to report this behavior that led to the tragic death of Jehar. Thank you, Your Honor.”

The prosecuting attorney was the first to present evidence, but he only produced a few members of House Garran, none of whom he recognized. None of them had anything more than vague and unsupported stories of his alleged criminal habits and it was clear to see that neither the judges nor the audience were impressed.

The worst was a father who alleged that Pralec had seduced his daughter. The male was clearly upset but he was also clearly afraid, paying more attention to B'suk than to him.

"I would like to hear the testimony of the female who was seduced," the judge said, and tears appeared in the male's eyes.

"Unfortunately, my daughter was too embarrassed to reveal the truth, and she took her own life."

The judge gave him a hard look. "Then I must rely on the actual evidence. Were any tests performed at the time?"

The male raised his head at that, his face hardening.

"Would... would they still be valid, after all this time?"

"They may well be."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

Pralec saw B'suk glaring after the farmer as he hurried out of the courtroom. Was he worried about his own neck now? His heart sank as B'suk murmured something to one of his guards and the male rose to follow the farmer. He took a quick look around and saw Craxan seated at the back of the room. He also dismissed one of his guards, and Pralec breathed a sigh of relief. He trusted Craxan's guard to keep the farmer safe.

The next witness called by the prosecution attempted to prove that Jehar had been dead when Pralec left, but he had nothing of substance and the judges dismissed him. After a brief conversation with B'suk, the prosecutor rested his case.

Barbara had sat silently, her fingers twitching on the desk as the prosecutor spoke, but now she rose calmly, her voice once more cool and clear, and called an elderly male to the stand. The Prosecution immediately objected.

"Objection, your honors. I have no knowledge of this person."

"You should," the old male cackled before a judge could speak, "Been cleaning your offices for the past twenty years."

Several people in the crowd laughed and even the mouth of one of the judges twitched before they cautioned him.

“You may only answer questions which you are asked.”

“Yes, your honor.”

Barbara smiled at the old male. “Bahtra, you are the chief janitor for the House of Garran, is that correct?”

“Yep.”

“Forgive me for asking, but is it not unusual for a male of your age to still be working?”

He shrugged. “Ain’t got no pension. Don’t work, don’t eat.”

Another murmur from the crowd. A house pension was considered a standard benefit in most houses. B’suk glared at Bahtra but the elderly male didn’t seem to care.

“And you were working on the night in question?”

“Aye.”

“Objection, Your Honor. How can the witness be sure after all this time?”

“Mr. Brahta?”

“Got a perfect record. Never missed a day. So I had to be there. And I was there the next day when the Patrol came and all the fuss started. Reckon I was the last person to see him alive, ‘cept the killer of course. That was at midnight, right before I left.”

Pralec sagged with relief. His outbound passage on the ship that night at eight had already been established. The judges clearly reached the same conclusion. One of them raised his gavel, but before he could bring it down the farmer marched back in the courtroom, waving a torn and bloodstained skirt.

“I’ve got the evidence. I can prove what that bastard did to my daughter.”

“You are accusing Pralec?” the judge asked.

“No. I’m accusing that bastard, B’suk. He’s the one who raped my girl.”

B’suk surged to his feet, his face flushed. “You are lying, you old fool. Guard, get him out of here.”

The guard didn't go after the farmer. Instead he took a step closer to B'suk, looming over him as he looked at the judges.

"This is a trick," B'suk said frantically, his eyes darting around the courtroom.

The judges conferred briefly, and then the middle judge rose.

"The charges against Pralec Tor'Sarian are dismissed. Please arrest Lord B'suk for sexual assault."

A roar from the crowd and the judges banged their gavels until they were silent.

"In light of the additional evidence, the investigation into the death of Jehar will be reopened.."

B'suk was still sputtering as the guards hauled him off. Barbara turned towards him, her face radiant, and he rose and crossed the distance between them. The crowd was still buzzing and the judges were banging their gavels for order, but all he could see was his mate.

"I can't believe you did it," he murmured.

"It wasn't just me. Craxan was the one who found Brahta."

And then his lips were on hers. He heard the crowd cheer, but nothing mattered except that he had his mate in his arms and he was free.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Barbara yawned as she returned to the guest house. Night has long since fallen and the house was quiet but she smiled as she walked down the wide corridor. This place, with its tall ceilings and dark wood floors, and big open rooms, already felt like home. The glass doors that lined the back of the house were open and she found Pralec sitting on the veranda overlooking the back garden. Small, tasteful lights revealed the waterfall trickling down one wall and the artfully arranged clusters of bushes that concealed hidden benches. The bushes had tiny, almost invisible flowers but they perfumed the night with their scent.

He smiled when she joined him and held out his hand. She took it and let him tug her onto his lap, curling into him with a sigh of relief. It had been a long day and she still wasn't entirely sure what to think about it.

"I'm sorry I didn't get home before Mia went to bed."

"I told her an extra story to make up for it." He sighed. "I should say, I told *them* an extra story."

"Vani?" she guessed. It was the second time that week that the little boy had managed to sneak out of the palace and come to find Mia.

"Yes. I called Craxan and we decided to let him stay." He hesitated. "I have some news."

"So do I, but you first."

"Craxan offered me a position in the House Sodan guards. As second in command. Even after I broke my vow to House

Garran.”

He sounded so shocked that she stroked his tail comfortingly.

“He knows you are a good male. And that you will be loyal to other good males.” She bit her lip, trying to decide how to ask him. “But is that what you want? I know you don’t have good memories of Alliko.”

“That’s just what I was sitting here thinking about. I do have good memories, many of them. It was only that last year after B’suk came into power that was so terrible.”

“And the little matter of being arrested.”

“I still consider that part of the same issue. I trained with the guard today, and I remembered that I missed that as well.”

She studied his face in the dim light and decided she believed him. He looked at peace in a way she’d rarely seen.

“So you think you could be happy here?”

“Yes, but only if you and Mia are happy. I will go wherever I need to go to achieve that.”

“That brings me to my news.” She took a deep breath. “The Tribunal has offered me a position on their legal team. They think that my human legal background gives me a unique perspective that would be useful in some of their cases. It wouldn’t be a full-time position, but it might seem like that in the middle of a trial.”

“And is this what you want?”

“Very much. You and Mia will always come first for me - I have no intention of making the same mistake I made back on Earth and losing myself in my legal career. But I like the idea, and the challenge. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds perfect. But are you happy to remain on Alliko?”

“Yes. I like Joanna and it’s nice having a human friend nearby.”

“Two,” he interrupted, smiling. “Two friends.”

“What do you mean?”

“Carina dropped by, or perhaps *ran by* is more accurate. She and Fabrion have decided to stay here as well. They are planning to open a bakery.”

“A bakery? That’s a wonderful idea, and you’re right, it would be nice to have two friends nearby. But poor Narval is losing all his crew members.”

“I do not think he is suffering,” he said dryly. “He received a very nice reward for tracking down B’suk after he escaped the guards.”

“Rissta said he’ll just waste it, but I suppose it’s his to waste. Anyway, I also talked to Joanna and she promised that Mia could take classes with Vani, or with any of the palace tutors.”

He actually looked alarmed.

“She is too young for that.”

“Not for long. And I really appreciate the fact that Joanna offered because I know it means she’ll get a good education.”

He nodded, even though she could still see the doubt on his face.

“I suppose you are right. When she is ready.”

“Of course. So does that mean we’re staying?”

“I believe it does.”

She sighed, a weight lifting off her shoulders. She had enjoyed her adventures - or at least most of them - but it was nice to feel settled.

“Oh, that was the other thing. Joanna asked if we wanted to remain in this house.”

“What do you think?”

“I would like to stay. I know some people want to put their personal stamp on a home, but I like the fact that it’s already decorated and furnished. It’s a little big, but not overwhelming. Living in the grounds is convenient for all of us, and when Mia gets older, she’ll have lots of safe places to

play. But I didn't know if it was too close for you, especially now that you'll be working with the guard."

He considered her words, then nodded.

"I like being here. And I like knowing that you and Mia are protected."

"In that case, I guess we're home." She ran a teasing finger across his cock, loving the way it responded to her touch. "I think we should celebrate."

"You are not too tired?"

"Not at all. It's the opposite - like I have all this energy and I don't know what to do with it."

"I might have a few suggestions."

The warmth in his eyes made her nipples bead beneath her blouse and she happily accompanied him on a last check of the house, turning out the lights, pausing to watch Mia and Vani sleeping, huddled together like two puppies, and finally ending up in their room.

He kept a soft light burning as he carefully stripped away her clothes, pressing teasing kisses to every inch he uncovered before making love to her with such slow passionate intensity that tears sprang to her eyes when she climaxed for the last time with his knot stretching her perfectly.

He smiled down at her as he wiped away the tears, their bodies still locked together.

"I love you, my mate."

More tears threatened as she looked up at him, filled to overflowing with happiness. She had wanted a new life - she'd just never dreamed that it would be such a happy one.

EPILOGUE

*O*ne year later...

PRALEC QUIETLY ENTERED HIS HOUSE. HIS SHIFT HAD ENDED AT midnight and he expected that everyone was already asleep. He usually avoided evening shifts but they had been short-handed because of the holiday and he'd agreed to help out.

Barbara had left a few lights burning - enough for him to avoid the toys that were scattered down the wide hallway. He smiled and shook his head, picking them up as he went. Neither his mate nor his daughter placed much value on the military orderliness he would have preferred, but as long as they were happy, he was quite content to keep restoring order.

A low light was burning in Mia's room as well when he went to put away the toys and check on his daughter. He was not at all surprised to see a green head with a tuft of dark hair next to Mia's blond curls. Vani and Mia were still inseparable, and they were rarely successful in keeping them apart for more than a few nights.

After a few panicked nights when a four year old Vani, armed only with a fierce intelligence and an even fiercer will had managed to escape his bedroom and end up in Mia's, the four of them had discussed it and decided to do no more than to encourage them to engage in separate activities. For now they were still children - everything could well change as they grew older.

But would it, he wondered as he bent down and kissed both sleeping heads. If he had met Barbara at that age, would he have recognized her as his mate? And if he had, would he ever have allowed them to be separated? Still that was a problem for another day. Right now, he had a warm bed and an even warmer mate waiting for him.

He slipped silently into their bedroom, then sighed. The light was on in the reading nook adjacent to the bedroom. Books and papers were scattered around the big chair where Barbara was curled over a book. She was still wearing the black robes she wore for one of the Tribunal's court sessions.

"I thought you were going to bed early tonight."

She jumped and gave him a guilt look.

"I was, but Justice R'May brought up this interesting point about property inheritance in the Golden Age and I was just -"

"Doing a little research?" he asked dryly, gesturing at the chaos surrounding her.

She grinned at him, the teasing smile she kept for him alone.

"Exactly."

"Will you be much longer?"

He had long since learned the futility of trying to distract her when she was on the trail of some relevant piece of information, although he did have a few tricks up his sleeve. He unfastened his uniform shirt and tugged it off over his head, and she licked those perfect little lips.

"Nothing that can't wait."

She rose and came to him, pulling the heavy curtain across the reading nook so he wouldn't see the mess. The teasing smile reappeared as she began unfastening her robe, revealing nothing but pale, bare skin. He enjoyed the sight so much that it took him a moment to realize the significance.

"You appeared in court with nothing beneath your robe?" he growled.

“No. I had this on.” She gave him an innocent look as she let the robe fall to the floor to reveal a tiny lace edged garment that barely covered her nipples and ended at the top of her thighs.

“What is that?” he asked hoarsely as all the blood in his body rushed to his cock.

“On Earth I would have called it a teddy. The seamstress had never heard of it, but I think she did a nice job, don’t you?”

She turned to reveal an even lower cut back and a provocative band of lace flirting with the lower curve of her ass, and he had to grip his cock to force it under control.

“This is another of your undergarments?”

He didn’t understand her obsession with them but he couldn’t deny he enjoyed the pretty scraps of lace and silk.

“Kind of. What do you think?”

“I think there is not sufficient material for it to be under anything - especially a court robe,” he growled as he prowled towards her.

The lace over her breasts fluttered as her breathing sped up, her eyes wide and dark with arousal, but she was still giving him that provocative smile.

“No? Should I have been naked instead?”

“You should have been fully dressed. Preferably in something with long sleeves and a high neck,” he muttered as he put his hands on her waist and drew her towards him.

The cool silk had been warmed by her body, soft beneath his fingers, and he discovered another advantage to the garment as his tail slipped beneath the loose hemline to tease her already slick entrance. Her eyes fluttered closed as she arched her back.

“Mmm. That feels good.”

“Does it, my little scholar?” he growled as he slid his hand under the hem as well to swipe his thumb delicately across her swollen clit. She gasped, her hands clutching at his arms as she

tried to arch into his touch. “Are you sure it doesn’t require more research?”

“N-no. Just more.”

“More of this?” He let his tail slide into her tight silky channel as she clenched around him.

“Or more of this?” He pressed harder against her clit, circling it the way she loved.

“Yes!”

“Yes, which?” he asked as his tail began to thrust in and out.

“Both. More. God. Pralec!”

Her channel convulsed around his tail in a series of impossibly tight pulses as she cried out his name, the sweetness of her arousal filling the air until at last she went limp in his arms. He kept his tail inside her as he carried her over the bed, the movement teasing both of them. Her eyes fluttered open again as he laid her down and she smiled up at him.

“Hi.”

“Hello, my mate.” He tugged gently on the damp silk between her legs, tightening it over her clit. “You did not really wear this today, did you?”

“I did.” She gasped and laughed at the same time as he added more pressure. “But I wore that very respectable blue gown over it.”

Somehow the thought of that was even more arousing.

“It is just as well that no one else knows of these secret undergarments. No male would be able to concentrate for wondering what secrets were concealed beneath your clothing.”

“I only want one male to wonder,” she whispered, running her fingers lightly along his jaw.

“Good.”

His cock was still throbbing demandingly, but he was no longer in a hurry, content - for now - to hold his beautiful mate

in his arms.

“Did you know that Vani was here? I thought this was supposed to be a night apart.”

“It was, but Joann saw him scampering across the lawn and called me. He is nothing if not persistent.”

“I would be as persistent, to reach my mate.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Let us just say I suspect. But there are many years before it becomes an urgent matter.”

“Years...” She watched her fingers stroking his skin rather than looking at him. “I was thinking...”

“That is always dangerous.”

“I suppose so. But I was looking at Vani and Mia and thinking about the fact that they were two years apart and how that was a nice age gap and how Mia is two and how Joann said that the Confederation has lots of resources for mature women and...” She broke off and gave him a hopeful look. “What do you think?”

His heart was thudding against his chest so loudly he could hardly hear himself speak, but he had to be sure.

“What do I think about what?” he asked carefully.

“About trying to have a baby together.”

“You are sure?”

“I am. I think we have a lot of love to share.”

Thank Granthar.

“Then I think yes.”

Her eyes lit up, but he forced himself to leave her long enough to discard his remaining clothing, forced himself to take his time and worship every inch of her body, forced himself to wait until he was blind with love and need and he could finally bury himself deep in the body of this female he loved so much and let his seed fill her as they clung together in tangled knot of happiness.

ONE YEAR LATER...

“I DON’T WANT TO WEAR THE PINK ONE,” MIA WAILED.

“Why on Earth not?” Barbara asked, trying her best to keep her voice calm. “It’s your favorite.”

“Because Vani says pink is for girls.”

Suppressing the impulse to lecture her daughter on colors and gender roles, not to mention allowing a male to dictate her clothing choices - perhaps when she was four - she settled for a more obvious argument.

“But you are a girl so it’s all right.”

Mia gave her a suspicious look. “Really?”

“Yes, munchkin. And you know your Papa said how pretty you look in that dress.”

That did the trick. Thank goodness her daughter was still very much a daddy’s girl - it helped to counteract Vani’s influence.

Not that the influence didn’t go both ways. A few days ago she’d heard Vani rejecting his formerly favorite jimar berries because Mia thought they were yucky.

Now that Mia was cooperating, Barbara had her dressed and ready in time to pull on her own ceremonial gown.

“You look very pretty, Mama.”

“Thank you, munchkin. Let’s go and see if your daddy and brother think so.”

Mia giggled, all smiles again.

“Silly Mama. Darkin is too little to notice clothes. When’s he going to be big enough to play with?”

“The way he’s growing, it won’t take long.” He hadn’t been bigger than a normal human baby when he was born, but he had grown rapidly and at three months, looked more like a six month old. “He takes after his daddy.”

Mia nodded wisely, skipping along next to her.

“He has a tail like Daddy. And Vani. I wish I had a tail.”

“I don’t have a tail. And neither does Tavi or Auntie Carina. We’re all different.”

They reached the living room and Mia ran ahead to throw herself at Pralec.

“Look, Daddy! I wore the dress you like.”

Barbara shook her head, then smiled up at her handsome mate as she joined him and his tail settled around her waist. He had their sleeping son cradled in his other arm.

“I can’t believe he’s still sleeping.”

“Yes. I am beginning to think he can sleep through anything.” He leaned closer and murmured in her ear. “Just as well. You were rather noisy last night.”

Color flooded her cheeks as she remembered the way he’d teased her for so long that when she finally climaxed it had been impossible to keep quiet.

“That was entirely your fault,” she said with as much dignity as possible.

“Why were you noisy, Mama?” her daughter asked, giving her a wide-eyed look.

“Because your Daddy was... tickling me.”

“Tickle me too -” Mia began, then stopped and tilted her head. “Vani’s here.”

Mia ran towards the door, reaching it just as it opened and Vani dashed in. The little boy’s tail immediately curled around her as they started whispering to each other.

“How does she do that?” she sighed.

“I do not know.”

The door opened again as Tavi, Joanna, and Craxan joined them, and more people soon followed. Natalie was too close to her due date to come, but she’d sent love and a name day present. Carina brought two trays of delectable goodies from

her new line which were gone almost as soon as Fabrion put them down. Laughter and conversation filled the air.

A little while later, Barbara drew back into a window embrasure to rest for a moment. Pralec spotted her immediately of course, but she waved at him to keep circulating with Darkin. It was the baby's naming day after all. Pralec frowned, but kept moving.

Carina found her there a little while later and joined her on the window seat.

"Are you all right?"

"Just a little tired. Darkin sleeps very well - until he doesn't."

Her friend laughed.

"I still remember those days with the twins."

She shuddered at the thought. One was more than enough, and that was with Pralec's constant support. He'd take a leave of absence just to be with them and seemed perfectly content. She was beginning to think that she would be returning to work before he did, but as long as he was happy she didn't mind a bit.

They watched the gaily dressed crowd in silence for a few minutes.

"Who would have thought," Carina said softly.

"Thought what?"

"When we met in the warehouse, who would have thought we'd end up like this. So... happy."

"I know." She smiled at her friend. "I was ready for a new life, but I had no idea."

"It's almost enough to make you thank the Vedeckians."

"Absolutely not," she said firmly.

And yet, if she hadn't been taken, she wouldn't have found her mate or her daughter, or had her son, or this extended group of family and friends. Pralec looked over to check on her again, the familiar connection making her smile as their eyes met.

“Time to rejoin the party, I think.”

“If we must,” Carina mock grumbled, then grinned at her.

And together they went to rejoin their mates and celebrate their new lives.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Sanctuary for the Alien Warrior*! I love writing these books so much! I love heroines who choose their path and still find love love and family and, of course, naughty tails!

Whether you enjoyed the story or not, it would mean the world to me if you left an honest review on Amazon – reviews are one of the best ways to help other readers find my books!

As usual, I have to thank my readers for coming on these adventures with me - I couldn't do it without you!

And, as always, a special thanks to my beta team – Janet S, Nancy V, and Kitty S. Your thoughts and comments are incredibly helpful!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Honey Phillips writes steamy science fiction stories about hot alien warriors and the human women they can't resist. From abductions to invasions, the ride might be rough, but the end always satisfies.

Honey wrote and illustrated her first book at the tender age of five. Her writing has improved since then. Her drawing skills, unfortunately, have not. She loves writing, reading, traveling, cooking, and drinking champagne - not necessarily in that order.

Honey loves to hear from her wonderful readers! You can stalk her at any of the following locations...

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