

A stylized illustration featuring a large, muscular blue-skinned alien with curved horns on its head. The alien is shirtless and stands behind a woman with long, wavy brown hair wearing a red, short-sleeved, button-up dress. They are positioned in front of a white, two-story house with a porch and a chimney. The scene is set outdoors with green trees and a clear blue sky.

HONEY PHILLIPS

How the
ALIENS were WON

TEMEC

TEMEL

HOW THE ALIENS WERE WON



HONEY PHILLIPS

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CHAPTER 1



“*I*’m very sorry, Mrs. Carmichael.” Mr. Raven wrung his hands together nervously. The bank manager was a tall, gaunt man with a mournful face that hid a kind heart. “But I’m afraid I will have to ask for the full rental amount beginning next month.”

“I understand,” Ida said quietly.

He cleared his throat apologetically.

“I know you’ve had a difficult time since your husband’s death, especially with the new baby, but now that you’re out of your blacks, my wife...”

He didn’t continue, but he didn’t have to. They both knew that his wife was driving the decision. Not that Ida blamed her. Mr. Raven had been extremely generous by cutting the rent in half for the past year. She suspected that he also felt some measure of guilt for not warning her that Abner was depleting their savings account.

“I don’t suppose you’ve managed to find any additional sources of income?” he added hopefully.

Since she knew he meant it kindly, she managed to avoid snapping at him. But if she’d been able to bring in any additional credits, the first thing she would have done was to pay the rent in full. She hated taking charity, but with an irresponsible husband who’d managed to blow through all the assets

she'd brought to the marriage before he died, and three other mouths to feed, she hadn't had much choice.

She'd done everything she could think of to earn an income, from taking in laundry to sewing projects, but it was barely enough to feed them and cover the reduced rent. Unfortunately, the town of Wainwright had been founded on old-fashioned Earth principles, and even though times were changing, job opportunities for a widow with children and no real skills were hard to find.

He twisted his hands again.

"I do have one suggestion." He looked back over his shoulder as if he were afraid someone would overhear—his wife, no doubt—and dropped his voice. "I have a smaller property available. It's not close to town and it, err, needs some work, but perhaps..."

A location outside of town would make outside employment more difficult, but it would also allow her daughter Dora more freedom.

"How much is the rent?"

He named a price that was half of the reduced amount she was currently paying. Her expression must have given her surprise away because he gave her an apologetic look.

"It hasn't been lived in for some time. I don't believe my wife even remembers..." He stopped abruptly, then coughed again. "The rent is unlikely to change anytime in the near future."

He didn't add anything else, but she understood what he was saying. If Mrs. Raven wasn't aware of the transaction, she couldn't pressure him to get more blood from Ida's proverbial stone.

"Perhaps I could take a look at it?"

"Of course, of course. Just remember, it hasn't been lived in for some time. In fact, it might take some work..."

"I don't mind work," she said quickly as an expression of doubt crossed his face. "I could drive out there this afternoon and give you an answer tomorrow, if that's all right with you?"

He hesitated while she held her breath, then nodded.

“Probably best not to come to the bank. I’ll stop by in the morning.”

She smiled at him as she rose to accompany him to the door.

“Thank you, Mr. Raven. I really appreciate everything you’ve done for us.”

“Not at all. I believe we were put in this world to help the less fortunate. Not that you’re less fortunate,” he added hastily, a faint hint of color touching his cheeks. “But we all admire your courage, especially with your husband leaving you in a delicate condition. That is...”

His color deepened as he broke off again. Suppressing the usual feeling of guilt, she gave him an even warmer smile as she opened the door.

“You’re a very kind man, Mr. Raven. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

He bowed briefly over her hand and left, walking quickly down the street towards his bank. She watched him for a moment, then sighed and returned to the parlor. A fancy name for a no longer fancy room. Although she kept it as neat and tidy as the rest of the house, the fabric on the ornate settee and chairs her father had gifted her on her wedding day was now faded and worn.

In addition to the formal furniture, she’d added a more practical chair that she used for sewing. The sturdy chair matched the treadle sewing machine which dominated one corner of the room. She wasn’t a dressmaker, but she could make alterations or produce simple clothing. Since she’d promised Mrs. Taylor that she’d have the pants she was hemming for her youngest ready by tomorrow, she decided to finish them before going to find Dora. She wasn’t looking forward to telling her daughter they might be moving out of town.

She should have known better. As soon as she picked up the pants, Dora appeared in the doorway, cradling Angel against her chest, her pretty face marred by the scowl that came too easily these days. Dora was her husband’s daughter from his first marriage and she had always been a handful, but Ida often found herself missing the mischievous girl she had been before his death.

“So? Is the old bastard kicking us out?”

Dora's tone was petulant, but Ida could see the worry in her eyes and kept her voice calm.

"Don't say that. Mr. Raven has been more than generous and you know it."

Her daughter sighed and sank down gracefully in the chair by the window, the morning light sparking red highlights in her dark brown hair. With the baby in her arms she resembled some ancient Madonna.

Angel squirmed in her sleep and made the little mewling sound that was the closest the three-month-old ever got to crying. Dora rocked her gently and the baby settled back down as Dora gave her a wary look.

"What did he say?"

"That he was going to have to ask for the full rent again. Apparently the fact that I've moved from wearing black to grey has convinced Mrs. Raven that we're ready to move on." She couldn't quite suppress a sigh, but she tried to sound cheerful as she hurried on. "Fortunately, he has another property which might be suitable."

Dora's suspicious look didn't change.

"I bet it's some kind of shack on the edge of town."

"Well, it's not actually in Wainwright. But that could be a good thing," she added hastily. "We wouldn't have to worry so much about someone finding out that Angel is your daughter."

"I suppose that's good." Dora's lip trembled as she looked down at the baby. "But it doesn't really change anything. We still have to keep pretending she's yours so that everyone in town doesn't know I'm a slut."

Ida went over and put her arm around Dora's slender shoulders.

"You're nothing of the kind. Malcolm was a bastard who took advantage of you."

Unfortunately, the traveling salesman who had visited Wainwright last spring was also an extremely charming man. She'd been busy dealing with the aftermath of Abner's death and the harsh reality of their limited funds and hadn't kept as close an eye on her daughter as she should have done. Dora

was also reeling from his death—for all his faults, he'd loved his daughter and the two of them had been close—and in her grief she'd turned to the seemingly kind older man.

Based on what Dora had told her, that kindness had disappeared as soon as Malcolm found out she was pregnant. He'd accused Dora of trying to trap him, suggested she had other lovers, and left town within a week. That was when a hysterical Dora finally came to her. She'd assured her daughter that she'd stand by her, but Dora had begged her to pretend that she was the one who was having the baby.

Knowing how narrow-minded some of the people in Wainwright could be, she'd eventually agreed. Since everyone assumed they were staying close to home and refusing visitors due to their mourning period, the deception had been easier to pull off than it would have been under other circumstances. However, she'd warned Dora that she might regret the decision, and she suspected that that time had arrived.

“We could always tell everyone the truth,” she said gently. “Your real friends won't care.”

“I know, but it's not about me. I just can't stand the thought of people talking about Angel.” Dora stiffened and pulled away slightly. “It was the right decision. Tell me about this other house.”

Accepting the rebuff, she moved back to her sewing chair.

“I really don't know anything about it, except that it's —”

“Mama, Mama!” The door flew open as her son rushed in. “Guess what?”

She laughed as he came to a breathless halt in front of her, the blue eyes he'd inherited from his father sparkling with excitement. When she'd sent Tommy off to play with the little boy next door, he'd been as neat and tidy as she could make him. Since then he'd torn his shirt, there were suspicious smudges on both knees, and his face was streaked with dirt.

“What in the world have you been doing, Tommy?”

“Playing miner. But guess what we saw when we was digging our tunnel!”

“Gold?” she guessed.

“No.” His face fell momentarily. “I wanted to find some for you, Mama.”

Her chest ached as she met Dora’s eyes over his head. She’d done her best not to let Tommy know how worried she’d been about their finances but he’d picked up on it nonetheless.

“I don’t need gold,” she said firmly. “Tell me what you saw.”

“Two new aliens!” The excitement returned to his face. “One was gold and the other was red—with a tail!”

“That does sound exciting,” she agreed. “I wonder if they’re the ones who’ve moved into Happy Valley.”

“The farming cluster?” Dora asked, an odd expression on her face. “You didn’t mention there were aliens living there.”

“I only just found out. Mr. Armstrong mentioned it when I was at the store yesterday. Do you remember Mary Caldwell? She was a few years older than you, but apparently she’s just moved back to take over her parents’ farm. He was joking about how she’d probably end up married to one just like Nelly.”

The shopkeeper’s daughter had married an alien and gone off to live with him on the old Wainwright ranch in the mountains. It had been quite a scandal at the time, but that had been almost six years ago and the town had somewhat reluctantly accepted it. The fact that the ranch had also increased the amount of trade flowing through Wainwright had definitely helped.

“Aliens?” Dora shuddered. “Human men are bad enough. Alien men are even worse.”

She spoke with unusual vehemence and Tommy’s eyes widened.

“Why is men bad?” he asked, and Ida shot her daughter a warning glance.

“They’re not all bad,” Dora said with an apologetic smile. “I bet you grow up to be a good one, squirt.”

He puffed out his little chest and beamed.

“I already is. Mr. Raven said I was the man of the house now.”

No doubt he'd meant well, but the last thing she wanted was for Tommy to take the weight of their problems on his six year old shoulders.

"How about you just be a good boy for now?"

"Unh-uh. I's the man." Before she could respond, he tugged on her skirt. "Can I go back and play with Lucas again?"

"Maybe tomorrow. We're all going to take a ride out to the country this afternoon to look at a new house."

"Away from Lucas? But he's my bestest friend."

"He can still be your best friend, even if we don't live next door."

"I 'spose."

He didn't look convinced, so she gave him a quick hug.

"He could always come and visit. And you'll have lots of room to run and play "

The despondent look vanished. "Can I go tell him?"

"Later," she said firmly. "Right now I need to find the little boy underneath all this dirt."

He giggled as she ushered him out of the room, and she found herself hoping that the new house really would be a new start for all of them.

CHAPTER 2



An hour later, a clean Tommy was bouncing excitedly on the carriage seat next to Ida as they set off. Like most of their possessions, the carriage had a certain decayed grandeur. It had been a gift from her father, and he'd always wanted the best for her. When his health started to decline and he'd reluctantly decided it was time for her to get married, he'd handpicked Abner as the most promising candidate. He'd thought a respectable widower with a young daughter would provide her with a secure, peaceful future.

As much as she missed him, she was sometimes glad he hadn't lived to see the reality behind Abner's prosperous appearance. He'd been living on good will and credit, and her dowry had quickly disappeared into the seemingly bottomless well of his debts. The inheritance her father had left her had disappeared just as quickly. Unfortunately, she hadn't realized until it was too late.

Pushing aside the unhappy memories, she smiled as Lady tossed her head. The dapple grey mare—another present from her father—was getting on in years, but she seemed to appreciate the warm spring morning and the opportunity to stretch her legs. With any luck, a house outside of town would provide the opportunity for Lady to graze—a nice change from her current small livery stable.

She'd chosen a burgundy dress and wearing a color for the first time in over a

year gave a surprising lift to her spirits. Even Dora appeared more cheerful, looking around curiously as Angel chortled happily on her lap. Perhaps this move would work out for all of them.

“I’ve never been out this way before. It’s pretty country.”

It was. Low rolling hills, covered with the soft green haze of spring, stretched out towards the horizon, interspersed the thickets of trees running along the banks of numerous creeks and streams, still swollen with winter runoff from the mountains behind them.

“I haven’t either, but Mrs. Caldwell, Mary’s mother, always used to say that Happy Valley was the prettiest place around.”

“Happy Valley? Where the aliens live?”

Dora frowned when Tommy’s eyes widened with excitement.

“Are we gonna see the aliens, Mama?”

“Oh, I doubt it. We’re not going that far. Mr. Raven said the house is on the road leading out to the farms.”

The other two sighed, Dora in obvious relief and Tommy in disappointment. Ida wasn’t really bothered one way or the other, except for a mild curiosity. Nelly seemed happy enough with her alien husband, as did the other women who’d married the aliens living on the ranch, but Ida couldn’t imagine that one would be interested in her—which was just fine with her. While she wasn’t quite as vehement as Dora about the flaws of the opposite sex, the last thing she needed was another husband.

Other than his carelessness with credits, Abner hadn’t been a bad husband, exactly. He was merely... disinterested. He had simply wanted a mother for his daughter and someone to run his household. Once she’d given him a son, his already limited interest in the more physical side of marriage had disappeared completely and frankly, it hadn’t been much of a loss. She’d always found their intimacy more awkward than exciting and had accepted the fact that she just wasn’t a particularly sensual person.

A simple new life away from town—and away from male complications—would be good for all of them. Mr. Raven had implied there was some land

associated with the house and hopefully she could start a garden. If they could reduce the number of supplies they needed from town and eliminate the stable bill for Lady in addition to the smaller rent, she might actually be able to save some credits for a change.

She was so caught up in the pleasant drive and the hope of a more prosperous future that the reality was even more of a shock.

“Look, Mama,” Tommy shouted. “Is that our house?”

“I...I’m not sure.” Hoping desperately he was wrong, she checked her watch to see how long they’d been driving. Then she spotted the crossroads ahead and the big tree to one side of the house. Mr. Raven had told her the house stood at the crossroads next to the tree. “I’m afraid—I mean, I think so.”

“You have got to be kidding,” Dora muttered.

She couldn’t blame her. The small house might have been attractive once. Now it was little more than a rundown shack. There was no paint left on the weathered siding, at least half of the windows were broken, and the door was hanging off its hinges.

“I’m sure it’s better inside,” she said calmly.

It wasn’t. The few remaining pieces of furniture were broken. Wind and rain coming in through the broken windows had marred the floors and caused the paint to peel from the walls. From the empty tin cans and piles of debris, it had clearly been used as a waystation for travelers—travelers who were none too particular about sanitation.

Dora gave her an appalled glance, even as Tommy started digging through a heap of discarded cans.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Mr. Raven did say it needed work.”

“Work? It needs to be torn down.”

“Maybe the rest of it is in better shape,” she said, still clutching at her happy little fantasy as she went to explore.

The bones of the house weren't bad. A kitchen and living area were on one side of the hallway, with two small bedrooms on the other side and two more upstairs. There was even a bathroom with relatively modern fixtures, although when she turned the tap all that emerged was a thin brown sludge. But she'd seen a well in the yard and they could use that until they figured out how to repair the plumbing.

And it does have land, she thought, wandering back out to the front porch. The remnants of a barn were equally decrepit, but it still had a roof and most of the walls. The fence enclosing the large pasture behind it needed mending, but that could be done over time.

"However much Mr. Raven is charging us, it's too much," Dora muttered as she came to join her.

"I don't think he's been out here in a long time." She took a deep breath of the crisp spring air. "And there's nothing we can't handle with time and work."

"Don't forget credits."

Her daughter had a point—some of the repairs would require additional supplies.

"Maybe Mr. Raven would be willing to provide them in exchange for our labor."

"And increase the rent as soon as we get it fixed up?"

The cynical expression didn't suit Dora's pretty face.

"I honestly don't think he'd do that." Although Mrs. Raven was another matter. "And he said he didn't think his wife remembered this place."

"I'm sure Mildred's little network of spies would be only too glad to fill her in."

Another good point, but...

"I don't really think we have a choice," she said quietly. "We can't afford to stay in our current house and you know our options are limited. The housing situation in Wainwright hasn't changed over the past year."

As soon as the reality of their reduced circumstances had set in she'd tried to find other housing, but Wainwright was too small to offer much in terms of rental property. A few of the stores on Main Street let out rooms on their upper floors, but they tended to be noisy and the lack of privacy meant their deception about Angel would be all too easy to spot.

There were also a few small cottages intended for temporary workers, but the operative word was small, and as much as she loved Dora they both needed a little space sometimes.

"Wouldn't it be nice to be away from town?" she added hopefully.

The Dora of a year ago would have sulked and pouted. The new Dora only sighed as Angel waved her chubby little arms happily.

"I suppose. Angel seems to like it, don't you, sweetheart?"

Breathing an internal sigh of relief, Ida gave a firm nod.

"Good. Let's start by making a list of what we need."

Practically everything as it turned out, but the first thing to do was get rid of all the debris and give the place a good scrub. At least the furniture in the house in town was hers so they'd have places to sit and sleep and eat, although she'd have to arrange for someone to move it. She was wondering uneasily how much that would cost as they finished their survey.

"It was probably a pretty house once," Dora said absently, running her hand over the banister.

"And it will be again. You'll see."

"You wouldn't have it any other way, would you, Mama?"

An unexpected lump appeared in Ida's chest as Dora gave her a quick, impulsive hug. Dora had been nine when Ida married Abner, both old enough to remember her mother and to resent a newcomer. She'd resisted using the word Mama for a long time, so Ida always treasured it.

"I promise I'll do my best. Shall we head back to town?"

"Why don't we explore a little first?" Dora wandered back out on the porch

and pointed farther along the road they'd traveled. As it headed south, it dipped down into a small valley to run next to a creek overhung with trees. "That looks pretty."

She needed to finish her sewing job and start arranging for the move, but maybe it wouldn't hurt to spend a little time enjoying the countryside—especially if it helped Dora feel more enthusiastic about the move.

"I wanna 'splore."

Tommy popped up next to them, his face once again streaked with dirt, and she sighed.

"Maybe we should use the creek to give you a bath instead."

He nodded enthusiastically, and Dora laughed and ruffled his hair affectionately. Despite her doubts about a stepmother, she'd readily welcomed a baby brother.

"You wouldn't like it. I bet it's still icy cold. You'd be hollering like a wildcat as soon as you put a foot in it."

"Would not."

"Would too."

"Since I don't plan to let Tommy go swimming, I guess we'll never know," she interrupted. "But I'm agreeable to driving a little farther. But only a little way. I still have sewing to do."

Tommy cheered, his annoyance forgotten, and Ida breathed a sigh of relief as they all climbed back in the carriage.

Their route led them parallel to the creek, first through a field scattered with tiny white flowers, and then into a copse of trees. They were just emerging into another clearing when Tommy, who'd been sitting very still, suddenly announced, "I'm hungry."

She smiled down at him.

"Then it's a good thing I brought some sandwiches. Shall we stop here and have a picnic?"

It was a pretty, peaceful spot. A rocky outcropping a short distance back from the road was framed by trees and the short grass was already lush and green. When Dora nodded her agreement, she pulled the carriage off the road and into the clearing. As Tommy darted around exploring, she removed Lady's harness and put her on a picket line to graze. Dora sat down on a sun-warmed boulder and started nursing Angel.

"Look," her daughter said softly, nodding at Tommy.

They both watched as he hopped across the road, then stripped off his shoes and socks before sticking his foot into the creek. He immediately shivered and pulled back and they both laughed.

"He just had to find out for himself, didn't he?"

Dora grinned at her and she smiled back.

"Especially since we were trying to tell him not to do something he was determined to do."

Her daughter's smile vanished.

"Was that aimed at me? Because you warned me to stay away from Malcolm?"

Oops. She hadn't consciously been thinking of the parallel, but perhaps it had been in the back of her mind. Her brief hesitation only made Dora more annoyed.

"Must be nice to be right all the time."

"Trust me, sweetheart, I've made more than my share of bad decisions."

Dora's mouth opened and she winced, already anticipating the question. Had marrying Abner been a bad decision? Perhaps, but it had also given her Dora and Tommy so she couldn't really regret it. Fortunately, a barefoot Tommy came bounding back before Dora could ask and she had to scramble for an answer.

"Where's the sandwiches?"

He looked at her as if he hadn't eaten in weeks and she laughed.

“I’ll get the basket while you get your shoes.”

He raced off to fetch them, and then the three of them enjoyed the simple meal. It wasn’t until they were finished that a chill suddenly skated down her spine. Something felt wrong. The birds that had been chirping in a nearby tree had gone silent, and an unnatural stillness filled the clearing. The sky had a faint yellowish tinge that worried her, and she rose to her feet.

“I think we’d better —”

Boom!

The crack of thunder directly overhead was so loud that it drowned out Tommy’s terrified cry. Lady reared, dislodging the picket line. As soon as her hooves hit the ground again, she took off. *Dammit.* Before Ida could even consider chasing after her, the skies opened, rain descending in torrents. The open carriage would provide little shelter, but after a frantic look around, she gathered Tommy into her arms.

“The rocks!” she yelled at Dora over the increasing roar of the wind. “Shelter.”

Dora was huddled over Angel, trying to protect her from the rain, but she nodded. Even the short distance to the outcropping was a struggle against the increasing violence of the storm, but they found a crevice large enough to provide shelter and managed to tuck themselves into it and out of the rain.

“Now what?” Dora asked, rocking a whimpering Angel.

“Now we wait until the storm is over,” she said as calmly as possible.

“I don’t like this.” Tommy’s voice trembled as he peered out at the sheets of rain obscuring the clearing. Thunder boomed again, and she tightened her arms around him.

“I know, sweetheart. But what do we always say about storms? It’s just giants playing a game in the sky.”

“Pretty big giants,” Dora said dryly. “Bigger than your aliens, squirt.”

That drew a tiny giggle from Tommy and she felt some of the tension leave his small body. She gave her daughter a grateful smile and rocked him the

same way Dora was rocking Angel. But even though he began to relax, she couldn't prevent a nervous glance out into the clearing. The creek was already swollen, and with this much rain...

If the water makes it this far, we'll just have to climb up on the rocks, she decided, even though the thought of the four of them at the mercy of the storm terrified her. For now, all she could do was wait and watch.

CHAPTER 3



Temel stared at the pile of books and papers on his desk and sighed. He'd thought that once he left the military he wouldn't be as burdened with paperwork. He'd been wrong. It also didn't help that the nearby town of Wainwright still used actual paper for most of their transactions. *Paper*. He shook his head as he picked up yet another list of supplies that were apparently imperative if they wanted to raise crops to feed their animals.

He'd thought that farming would be simple—yet another wrong assumption. But then again, he'd never had any experience with the production of food. He was the son of a minor Kemberian noble, and his training had centered around politics and weaponry rather than animal husbandry.

Such a long time ago, he thought, looking down at the House signet ring he still wore. Somehow he'd never been willing to abandon it, even though those ties had long since been cut. He'd been brought up to believe that his duty was to his House, to his Lord, and to his planet. *But now my only duty is to my squad*, he reminded himself, fighting back another sigh.

Even this farming venture was for their benefit. He'd encountered the son of the ruler of his House by chance in Port Cantor, Cresca's spaceport. Artek had also chosen not to return to Kember after the long, vicious war on Vizal, and he'd told Temel how much a simple life on a mountain ranch had helped to heal his males. This farm was intended as another sanctuary for former

warriors, and Artek had suggested he take on the project.

And it's already working for one of my males, he thought with a smile, although perhaps that was due to the fiery female Borgaz had chosen as his mate rather than hard work and natural surroundings. He suspected his other two warriors would have a more difficult time. As if the thought had conjured him up, Kalpar appeared in the doorway.

A tall, lean male, as deadly with his tongue as with his ever present knives, Kalpar rarely displayed any emotion other than a slight, mocking amusement, but Temel knew the pain that ran beneath the sardonic facade. The mockery was on display now as he leaned against the doorframe.

“We have received a request for help.”

“Help? From whom?”

“From Artek. I’m not sure I completely understand how he knew—something about a banker and the shopkeeper—but apparently a pair of females and two children were headed in this direction prior to the storm. The horse that had been pulling their carriage returned without them.”

Females and children out in the unexpected storm that had raged for many hours before finally blowing itself out overnight? He shuddered at the thought and rose immediately, his protective instincts on high alert.

“I will go in search of them.”

“Do you want me to accompany you?”

He thought for a moment, then shook his head.

“I need you to finish repairing the fences damaged by the storm before any more cattle escape. And keep Naffon from killing himself when he replaces the boards on the barn roof.”

The two males exchanged a grim look. The youngest member of their squad had a reckless disregard for his own safety that worried both of them.

“Yes, Commander. Although I may need to use one of my knives to pin him to the ground.”

Kalpar's fangs gleamed in a mocking grin, and Temel sighed yet again.

"Without violence, please." He picked up his comm and strode towards the door. "Now tell me what you know."

"Apparently they were headed for the place where the road to our valley intersects with the trade route."

"There's nothing there except a large tree and a worn out shack. Why would they go there?"

"From what Artek said, they are planning to rent the, err, shack," Kalpar said dryly, and he gave him an appalled look.

"It's completely unsuitable for females and children. Perhaps we should offer —"

He broke off in mid speech. Most of the abandoned farms that made up their cluster were in no better shape and they were intended for warriors, not stray females. He would just have to do his best to discourage them and send them back to town. Once he found them, that is. His pace increased as he headed through the kitchen towards the barn.

"I'll make my way along the road in that direction. Hopefully they just took shelter in the house and the horse got loose."

Not that he thought the shack would provide much protection, but it was undoubtedly better than being outside during the storm.

Kalpar nodded, and Temel went to the stable to saddle his horse. The animals the humans called horses were genetically modified versions of a species from their native planet, as were many of the farm animals. He'd had little experience with riding animals in the past, but he quickly developed an appreciation for that mode of transport.

If he hadn't been worried about the subjects of his search, he would have enjoyed the ride through the crisp morning air. The road ran next to a pasture already lush with spring growth before curving around a hill and dipping down to travel alongside a usually shallow creek. Everything appeared clean and new in the aftermath of the storm, although he could see signs of the destruction it had wrought.

A section of the pasture fence had been blown down, and as he approached the wooded section of the road next to the creek, the path was scattered with branches and debris. The creek had also overflowed its bank in several places and parts of the road were underwater. While it wasn't deep enough to hamper his mount, he slowed, keeping a careful eye on the dark muddy depths to his left.

Once he thought he heard voices calling, only to realize it was a group of wild birds repairing their nests, also damaged by the storm. It seemed unlikely that the missing family had made it this far away from the crossroads, but as he continued on he found himself scanning the edges of the road. The side opposite the creek was dotted with low trees and thick shrubbery that could easily conceal a body.

The thought haunted him, bringing back horrific memories of the war, and he hurried on, determined to reach the crossroad as soon as possible. Then he came around a curve of the road and found the way blocked by a wide stretch of water. The ground must have been lower there because water spread all the way from the creek to a rocky outcropping.

A carriage stood on the edge of the road—or more accurately, it lay on its side next to where the road must once have been. Water churned through the spokes of the wheels, and even as he watched it shifted slightly in the rushing water. The presence of the carriage suggested that he'd found his missing family, and he quickly dismounted, tying the reins to a tree before approaching the swirling expanse of water.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw a human female clinging to a boulder with one hand while she reached desperately for something with the other. Another female crouched on the rocks above her, staring down at the water as she clutched an infant to her chest.

CHAPTER 4



Temel vaulted onto the back of the overturned carriage to get a better view of the situation. As soon as he did, he realized the female was trying to reach a small boy clinging to a log, his hands white with terror. The log was wedged against a tree, just out of the female's grasp, but that wouldn't last. The force of the water was already pushing it away from the trees. When it began to move, the female gave a choked cry and started to let go of the boulder.

"Stay there," he ordered. "I'll get him."

Her head whipped around when he spoke, but he didn't have time to wait for her assent as the log broke free, picking up speed as it headed towards the creek. The child looked up at him, his eyes wide with terror.

"Just hold on a little longer."

The boy nodded frantically, but his grip on the log was weakening. Temel dropped down from the carriage roof and raced back to the edge of the creek. Grasping an overhead branch, he lowered himself into the fast-moving water. Although the water only reached his neck, the force of the current threatened to drag him from his feet and he fought to maintain his position, concentrating on the approaching log.

As it rushed towards him, he stretched out his arm, reaching for the boy. The boy let go of the log with one hand, his eyes locked on Temel's face as he

desperately tried to grab Temel's outstretched arm. The current swirled the log around and the child's other hand slid off the bark. His scream was echoed by a cry from the female.

"No!"

Temel let go of the branch and threw himself towards the boy. He managed to wrap a hand around the boy's arm and heaved him towards the bank. The child let out a desperate gasp as he swung in the air and then scrambled wildly for purchase. One of his flailing feet managed to find the edge of the bank and he steadied himself.

As soon as he was sure the boy was secure, Temel pulled himself out of the water, then grabbed the child's shirt and pulled him away from the bank and into his arms.

The boy gave a muffled cry, then threw his arms around Temel's neck and buried his head against his shoulder, his whole body shaking.

"It's all right, little one. You're safe now."

"Oh, God, thank you. Is he all right?" the female called, and he looked up to meet her relieved gaze.

She was a beautiful female, he noted automatically, even in her present soaked condition, her face pale and her eyes huge and scared. She took a half-step towards him, then grabbed hold of the boulder with both hands as the force of the water threatened to knock her off her feet.

"Stay there," he ordered. "I will come for you."

She bit her lip, a plump pink lip, but nodded as he gently pulled the boy's arms away from his neck.

"What's your name, little one?"

"T... T... Tommy."

"You've been very brave, Tommy. Can you be brave just a little bit longer while I go and get the rest of your family?"

The boy's face was so pale that his skin looked transparent, but he nodded.

“G... get Mama and Dora.”

“I will. You just wait here. And don’t move,” he added with a stern look, although he thought the boy was too frightened to stir.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good boy.”

The praise brought a hint of a smile to the pale face, and Temel nodded approvingly before wading back into the water. The water swirled around his thighs, still powerful even though he was out of the direct current. If the female had let go of the rock, she could easily have been swept away. Shuddering at the possibility, he worked his way to her side and she looked up at him with a frantic expression.

“Is Tommy all right?”

“He’s fine.”

Her relief was so visible it was almost painful.

“Oh, thank God. When I saw the log tip, I thought...” She shook her head, the brown strands of her hair straggling damply around her face. “Thank you for rescuing him.”

He automatically gave her a quick once-over to reassure himself that she was unharmed. Her wet clothes clung to a lush, curvy body and he couldn’t help noticing the stiff peaks of her nipples straining against the wet cloth.

“If I help you, can you walk to dry land?” he asked, ignoring the strange flare of heat in his body as she gazed up at him.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “My leg feels a little funny.”

The water hid her legs from sight and he frowned.

“How funny?”

She blinked up at him and then shrugged.

“I don’t know—weak?”

“Are you injured?”

“Maybe a little. But I’ll be all right as soon as I get out of the water. It’s just so cold.”

Her teeth chattered slightly as she spoke and he noticed the goosebumps on her arms and face. Was it his imagination or did her lips have a hint of blue about them?

“I’ll carry you,” he said, reaching for her, but she shook her head.

“Dora and the baby first.”

She pointed up at the younger female on the rock above them, still clutching the baby as she gave him a suspicious look.

“Who are you?”

“Dora! This isn’t the time for formal introductions.”

The female at his side huffed indignantly, but he dipped his head.

“I am Commander... I am Temel. Artek sent word that you had not returned to town, even though your horse made her way back.”

“Lady made it back to town? Well, that’s a r... relief.”

His female’s teeth were chattering again and he gave Dora an impatient look.

“She needs to get out of this water. Come.”

Dora looked over at his female and bit her lip.

“You’re right. Take Ida first and come back for me.”

Since that suited his own inclinations, he simply nodded and picked up his female—Ida. She gasped, but didn’t argue, starting to snuggle closer to him before flushing and pulling away.

“Sorry. You’re just so warm, even though you’re wet.”

He smiled down at her and tucked her more firmly against him.

“I don’t mind.”

In fact his body appreciated the soft curves more than it should, his shaft beginning to stiffen against his wet pants. He made sure to hold her above the betraying bulge for the quick trip across to where her son waited.

“Mama,” the little boy sobbed, throwing himself at her as soon as Temel carefully set her down.

She swayed, then sat down a little too quickly. He frowned, remembering what she’d said about her leg, but he needed to get the other female. He strode back across to the rocks and held up his hand.

“Well?”

“I can probably walk,” Dora said, frowning at him.

Was there a resemblance between her and his female? He couldn’t decide and he was already impatient to return to Ida.

“The current is stronger than it looks. Are you willing to take that chance with the child?”

She looked down at the baby in her arms, bit her lip, then shook her head. She reluctantly took his hand and he lifted her away from the rock, carrying her back across the water. Her body was stiff the entire way, but he had no desire to pull her closer. As soon as he put her on the ground, she crouched down next to Ida and Tommy.

“I told you the countryside was a bad idea,” she muttered.

He frowned, finding it an inappropriate remark, but Ida choked a laugh and then both of them were laughing. *Females*. Tommy gave him a confused look, but he just shrugged before going to retrieve his saddlebags.

“I have blankets.” He handed each of them the small silver square, then showed them how to unfold them. “And one dry shirt. Perhaps for the infant?”

“Oh, thank you,” Ida said, flashing him a quick smile. “We’ve been holding her against our bodies to keep her warm, but it would be nice to put her in something dry.”

A vision of a child pressed against Ida’s delightfully large, naked breasts

threatened to reawaken his arousal, but he forced himself to turn back to the saddlebags.

“I also have emergency rations, if you’re hungry.”

“I’m hungry,” Tommy announced. He already seemed to be recovering from his ordeal, inspecting Temel thoughtfully as he took one of the protein bars. “You have horns.”

“Yes, I do.”

Ida also took a protein bar, but Dora shook her head.

“Whatta they for?”

“My ancestors used them for fighting.”

The boy’s eyes widened.

“Thath cool.” The words were half-muffled by a mouthful of protein bar, but his excitement was obvious.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Ida said firmly, but her eyes were equally curious. “You don’t fight with them anymore?”

“They are no use against blasters.” His voice sounded more bitter than he intended, so he shrugged. “I suppose now they are simply... decorative.”

“Does that mean the bigger the better?” A pretty wash of pink covered her face as soon as she realized what she’d said, and Dora gave her a scandalized look. “I mean...”

“Size is a factor,” he said calmly. “But so is skill.” The pink intensified before he continued. “We hold ceremonial bouts to demonstrate.”

“You mean you still fight with them?”

“Only for display.” He rose, then held out a hand to her. “Now let’s get you back to the house so you can get warm and change into something dry.”

“Thank—”

“We should be getting back to town,” Dora interrupted.

“You can’t go back along the road until the water subsides, and even then you don’t have a vehicle. Or a horse. I’m not yet familiar with the entire area, but while you’re getting dry, I’ll see if there is an alternate route.”

“Thank you,” Ida said.

Dora didn’t look happy, but this time she remained silent. As he helped Ida to her feet, she swayed, and he immediately wrapped his arm around her waist.

“What is it? Your leg?”

“I’m fine.” She smiled down at Tommy’s worried face. “Just a little stiff.”

He didn’t entirely believe her, but she didn’t appear to be bleeding and it would be better to tend to any injuries once she was warm and dry.

“I believe the horse will carry all of you.”

“But what about you?”

“I’m quite capable of walking.”

How many miles had he covered on Vizal’s war-torn surface? This would be a much more pleasant excursion. She opened her mouth again, but before she could say anything, Dora handed her the baby.

“Here. Hold Angel while I mount.”

The younger female swung herself into the saddle with commendable ease, and immediately reached for the infant. Ida handed her up, then gave him an uncertain look. He smiled and lifted her onto the horse, relishing the soft lushness of her waist beneath his hands. He lifted Tommy up behind her, made sure their blankets were secure, and untied the horse’s reins.

Kalpar would no doubt be amused at the procession, but he was filled with an unexpected contentment at the thought of bringing his female to his home. *Not my female*, he reminded himself, but he still smiled as they set off.

CHAPTER 5



Ida put one hand firmly over Tommy's arms where they were wrapped around her waist and grabbed the edge of the saddle with the other. She had ridden as a teenager but that had been a long time ago. She didn't remember the ground looking quite so far away, but she tried to relax into the gait of the horse.

The paper thin silver blanket Temel had given her was surprisingly effective, and warmth started to creep back into her chilled body. It had been a long night crammed into the crevice in the rock, but she'd finally managed to fall asleep once the thunder stopped and the winds died down. Just before dawn she'd woken to find icy water lapping into the cave. She'd hurried everyone out and up onto the rocks, getting drenched in the process, then watched in horror as the water continued to rise.

"But the storm is over," Dora protested. "Why is it getting higher now?"

"My guess is that all the water the storm dumped in the mountains is making its way down here now. It might have melted some more snow as well."

Twice they had to climb higher—and then Tommy had slipped as he reached over to pick up a shiny rock. She'd gone after him just as he grabbed onto the log, but the water threatened to sweep her away as well. *Thank God Temel turned up when he did*, she thought, looking at the big blue-skinned male leading the horse. As if he sensed her looking, he glanced back over his

shoulder and smiled at her.

Unexpected butterflies fluttered in her stomach as she returned the smile. His features were not human, but they were undeniably handsome with a strong, angular bone structure, eyes that flickered from navy to silver, and a wide, sensual mouth. She was not a small woman, but she'd felt like one when he picked her up so easily and cradled her against that impressively muscled chest. Her stomach fluttered again just as Dora looked over her shoulder and glared at her.

“What’s wrong with you?” her daughter whispered in a low, furious voice.

“Nothing’s wrong with me.” Other than an increasing throbbing in her leg.

“After all the lectures you’ve given me, we’re all going off with a strange man—I mean, alien?”

Her own anger started to flare.

“Do you have a better suggestion? And in case you’ve forgotten, he saved Tommy’s life.” Her voice quivered. “I can’t think of a better recommendation than that.”

Dora looked momentarily abashed, then stuck out her chin.

“Maybe, but what about the others? Who knows how many of them are living in this house of his?”

“Four,” Temel said calmly in his deep voice. When Dora’s head swiveled around to face him, he shrugged. “I have excellent hearing.”

“I...”

Dora started to mumble something, but he ignored her.

“In addition to myself, my comrades Borgaz, Kalpar, and Naffon live in the main house. Although Borgaz has been spending most of his time with his mate Mary.”

“Mary Caldwell?” she asked. “I heard she only just moved back.”

“She has not been on her farm for long,” he agreed. “But Borgaz has been helping her restore it and...” He shrugged again. “He didn’t need long to

know she was his mate, although he had some... concerns.”

“Typical male,” Dora muttered, and Ida poked her in the ribs before smiling at Temel.

“I’m happy for both of them. Perhaps I’ll get a chance to see her before we head back to town.”

This time Dora was the one to poke her and she sighed.

“If we have time,” she added.

“Perhaps I can contact Borgaz for you.”

He smiled at her and turned back to the road. Her daughter clearly wanted to argue, but after glaring at the back of Temel’s head for a moment, she decided to keep her mouth shut and Ida breathed a sigh of relief.

The feeling of relief increased as they left the wooded area next to the creek and climbed a slight rise before following the hillside around to the old Johnson farm. She’d never heard anybody say anything nice about the previous owner, although his wealth had been a frequent topic of discussion. A wealth that was reflected in the peaceful, prosperous farm laid out before them. It wasn’t until they drew closer that she saw some evidence of damage from the storm along with a few indications of delayed maintenance.

They passed an empty pasture, then a small herd of shaggy red cattle in the field behind the barn. The animals looked up curiously as the horse walked past, and she caught a glimpse of a brown furred tail as something scurried between the barn and a shed. Next came a large but sadly neglected kitchen garden.

The back porch of the sprawling white house overlooked the garden, and Temel brought the horse to a halt at the bottom of the porch steps, tying the reins loosely to the railing. He lifted Tommy down, then reached for her. The dizzying ease with which he swung her to the ground made her stomach flutter again, especially combined with those big warm hands on her waist. They lingered for a fraction of a second longer than necessary before he let her go.

He made no attempt to help Dora down and once again her daughter handed

her Angel before gracefully dismounting. To Ida's surprise, Dora didn't immediately reach for the baby again, frowning around at the quiet farm.

"Where are the others?"

"I'm not positive, but Kalpar was going to mend fences and I believe Naffon was going to work on the barn roof."

Dora's gaze shot up to the peak of the huge two-story building, her eyes widening.

"That's a long way up."

"Heights don't bother Naffon."

Although Temel spoke calmly, there was something in his voice which made her give him a quick look. Why did he look so worried? Before she could ask, he was urging them up the steps and into a large, farmhouse kitchen.

The kitchen must have been attractive at one time. A row of windows along the back wall looked out across the porch to the garden and the fields beyond, and sturdy white cabinets were topped with thick wooden counters. Unfortunately the counters, along with every other surface, were hidden beneath a miscellaneous assortment of dishes, tools, and food supplies. It wasn't exactly dirty but the clutter and the lack of organization made her fingers twitch.

Temel cast a somewhat helpless glance at the stove, a huge, gleaming piece of equipment that stood in pristine contrast to the rest of the kitchen.

"I'm not really sure about the food situation..."

"I think we'd prefer to get out of these wet clothes first," she said firmly as Angel began to whimper. "We can worry about food later."

He couldn't quite conceal his expression of relief.

"Yes, of course. This way."

He opened a door at the back of the kitchen to reveal a hallway leading to two small bedrooms, each equipped with twin beds, a laundry room, and a compact but thankfully neat bathroom. She suspected the area had been

designed for servants, but it was warm and clean and that was all she cared about.

Dora took Angel and quickly disappeared into one of the bedrooms, leaving her and Tommy alone with Temel.

“Is there anything I can get for you? We don’t have any female clothing in the house, but perhaps you would care to borrow something?”

His eyes skated down over her damp clothing as he spoke, changing from navy to silver, and her body responded to that heated look, her nipples thrusting against the damp, clinging fabric.

“It’s probably easier just to put them in the dryer. That is, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course not. My house is your house.”

The last words were said in a slightly stilted voice before he bowed his head and vanished back into the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

“He’s a real alien, Mama,” Tommy said, clearly awed. “I knew we was going to see one.”

“We were going to see one,” she corrected as she ushered him into the bathroom and turned on the water. “Let’s get you into a hot bath while I dry your clothes.”

He didn’t argue, splashing happily in the tub as she picked up his abandoned clothing. After a quick glance at the mud streaking them, she decided a wash was also in order. Leaving him using the soap to imitate a spaceship, she went to find Dora.

Angel was nursing sleepily while Dora stared absently out the window, and she stroked the baby’s cheek affectionately before turning to her daughter.

“I’m going to wash Tommy’s clothes. Do you want me to put your dress in as well?”

“No, it’s not that bad.”

Her daughter’s voice was as distant as her gaze, and after a brief hesitation, she sat down next to her.

“What’s going on, sweetheart? Why does being here bother you so much?”

Dora’s cheeks turned pink, but she shook her head.

“It’s nothing. I’m sorry if I was rude.”

“Just a little,” she said, nudging her daughter’s arm, relieved when she smiled.

“It’s just... so much change. First Daddy dying, and then having Angel, and now we’re moving. I don’t really want to stay in town, but I’ve never lived anywhere else. And now we’re in his—I mean the aliens’ house and it’s all very confusing.”

His? The emphasis on the word didn’t escape her. It hadn’t seemed as if the two of them knew each other, but perhaps...

“Have you met Temel before, Dora?”

“Temel? No. Why?”

“Just wondering.” She put her arm around her daughter’s shoulders, and Dora leaned into her. “I know it’s been a difficult year, but we still have each other and that’s what really counts.”

“I know, Mama.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes until a burst of laughter from Tommy was accompanied by a large splash. She hugged Dora again and rose.

“Why don’t you get some sleep while I take care of our clothes and talk to Temel about the best way to get back to town?”

“Are you going to ask about the size of his... horns again?”

Dora’s eyes sparkled when Ida blushed, a genuine smile finally crossing her face.

“I’m sure we have much more important things to talk about,” she said with as much dignity as she could manage, but Dora’s laughter followed her out of the room.

Tommy had done his best to swamp the bathroom so she hauled him out of

the tub, dried him off, and tucked him into bed in the other bedroom.

“But it’s light out,” he protested. “Only babies go to bed in the daytime.”

“So do little boys who spent the night in a cave.”

His attempt to argue was interrupted by a huge yawn and by the time she’d put their clothing in the washer and returned to check on him, he was sound asleep. A second check revealed Dora and Angel sleeping as well, but she felt too restless to join them.

She mopped up the water Tommy had splashed everywhere, then took her own bath. The hot water felt heavenly and helped to relieve the lingering ache in her leg. She slipped down until only her nose and her nipples were above the surface. Remembering the way they had stiffened under Temel’s gaze, she brushed her thumbs over the taut peaks, heat curling low in her stomach.

How long had it been since she’d felt even a flicker of desire? And yet her body undoubtedly responded to the big, powerful male. An alien at that. An alien who had saved her son and rescued her and her family, she reminded herself. Perhaps it was just gratitude...

But as she remembered the feel of his big hands clasping her waist, another wave of heat washed over her body. Definitely more than gratitude.

She played with her nipples for a few more seconds, wickedly imagining that Temel was the one touching them, then sighed and reached for the soap. Her secret little fantasy would have to wait until she was alone in her own bed. Right now there were things to be done.

CHAPTER 6



By the time Ida wrapped herself in a large and somewhat threadbare towel and emerged from the bathroom, the wash cycle was done. She moved the clothes to the dryer, grateful that they could be done by machine. The elaborate clothes her father had preferred to see her in could only be hand-cleaned. Pleasing him had made her happy too, but her simpler clothes were a better fit for her new life.

Yawning, she climbed into the other bed in Tommy's room, expecting to fall asleep immediately. Instead, her mind refused to shut down, worrying about Dora and thinking of all the things they would need to do to the rental house to make it fit to live in—a task that loomed even larger without a carriage to go back and forth to town. Perhaps if the receding waters didn't sweep it into the creek, she could ask Temel to help her get it upright.

That thought led to an extremely pleasant image of those big muscles rippling as he heaved it back into place, and she threw off the covers as another wave of heat washed over her.

Really, this was ridiculous. She was far too mature to be spending this much time thinking about a man, let alone having semi-erotic daydreams about him. *Not a man, an alien*, she reminded herself, but the reminder did nothing to quell the lingering arousal. Sighing, she rose to her feet and tiptoed out of the room.

Her dress and underthings weren't completely dry, but they were dry enough to wear and she dressed quickly, then tied her damp hair back in its usual neat bun. After another quick check on Dora and Angel, she slipped into the kitchen, closing the door quietly behind her.

The cluttered kitchen bothered her just as much as it had previously, and she decided it offered a small way to show her gratitude... Rolling up her sleeves she set to work.

The rest of her family was still asleep when she put the last clean dishes into the dish cabinet and regarded the now gleaming kitchen with satisfaction. Much better—but would it make any real difference to Temel? Perhaps the mess didn't bother him. She thought for a moment, then grinned and opened the pantry cupboard. Hopefully he had a sweet tooth.

Deciding on a simple, familiar cookie recipe, she made a double batch, humming as she switched the trays in and out of the oven. Once they were done, she piled some of the still warm cookies on a plate and went to find Temel.

The rest of the house was much grander than the kitchen and servants' quarters. A huge dining table with twelve chairs was centered beneath an elaborate chandelier, although everything was covered with dust and there were pieces of some kind of machinery on the table. The elaborate furniture in the large formal parlor put her set to shame, but it too was dusty and neglected.

She clucked her tongue and moved out into the wide entry hall. A beautifully carved staircase rose to a landing with a large stained glass window, but she was more interested in the double doors that opened into what was clearly a study. Temel sat behind the big desk frowning down at some papers. As she watched, he sighed and rubbed his forehead between his horns, the gesture eloquent of weariness, and her heart ached for him. It couldn't have been an easy morning for him and he was already back at work.

Before she could announce herself, he looked up and their eyes met. Something flashed between them, and she felt oddly breathless as she went to join him.

“I made you some cookies.”

He gave the plate a puzzled look.

“Cookies?”

“It’s a kind of sweet treat. I hope you don’t mind that I used your supplies to make them. And tidied up a little,” she added guiltily.

“Of course I don’t mind. I told you to treat my house as yours.” He was still staring at the cookies. “You made these for me?”

“Yes, but I made a lot so there’s enough to share with your men—I mean, your males. Aren’t you going to try one?”

He rather cautiously picked one up and took a small bite, then a much larger one before closing his eyes and groaning in appreciation.

“These are amazing.”

“Oh, good. I wasn’t sure if you liked sweet things, but most people do and I know the recipe by heart so it seemed like a good idea…”

Realizing she was babbling, she came to an abrupt halt as he opened his eyes again. He smiled, a slow, sensual smile that made her stomach flutter.

“I do believe this is the most delicious thing I have ever put in my mouth.” His eyes dropped to her mouth. “So far.”

She knew she was blushing again and quickly turned away to study the bookcases lining one wall of the room.

“What a lot of books. Have you read them all?”

She winced at the stupidity of the question, but he only laughed.

“No, and I don’t believe the previous owner did either. They don’t appear to have been touched for many years. But I’m improving my ability to read in your language and I intend to go through all of them eventually.”

“Really?” She studied the titles—everything from ancient Earth poetry to farming methods. “I think he bought them just to look impressive.”

“I don’t mind. I enjoy reading and I’ve had little opportunity to do so for many years now.”

She turned back to find him looking at her over the empty plate. He must have inhaled the rest of the cookies.

“I guess you were hungry.”

“Yes.”

His eyes were on her mouth again, but although the heat returned to her cheeks, she didn't turn away. Instead, she forced herself to discuss more practical matters.

“Did you find an alternate route back to town?”

“Yes and no. There is another road, but it would at least double the travel time.” He gestured towards the window and she realized that it was already past noon. “You could ride cross country, but it would be easy to get lost. Unless you're familiar with this territory?”

“Not really. I had a passing acquaintance with Mary's mother, but I only ever saw her in town. I never visited her out here.”

“Then why were you out here?”

She sighed and sank down in the chair next to the desk.

“Looking for a new place to live. We can't afford the house in town anymore, and Mr. Raven suggested the house at the crossroads.”

His horns drew together as he frowned, giving him an intimidating look.

“You are aware of its condition?”

“Yes, but there aren't many alternatives. I'm sure we can work with it.”

She did her best to sound confident, but his frown remained.

“You could remain here,” he said after a long pause. “Those rooms are unused and you are welcome to stay there as long as you like.”

An unexpected urge to cry swept over her, but she shook her head firmly.

“That's very kind of you, but we can't take advantage of your hospitality.” She looked past him to the window again and pursed her lips. “Although

perhaps we should stay here tonight. With any luck the creek will have gone down by the morning, and if not, we'll have more time to take the longer way. That is, if you don't mind loaning us a carriage? Or a wagon?"

"Of course not. I have every intention of accompanying you."

He probably just meant so that he could bring his wagon back, but that didn't stop her heart from skipping a beat at the thought of spending more time with him. She should probably object, but instead she smiled at him.

"Thank you. And since we're spending the night, I'd like to at least cook dinner for all of you."

"It's not necessary," he said at once. "I'm sure you're tired. And you said your leg was bothering you?"

"I think it was just a cramp. It's fine now and I'm not really tired." She smiled at him. "I enjoy cooking."

He hesitated, then nodded. "If you mean that, then I will happily accept. Kalpar usually cooks, but he's out mending fences and I don't know when he will return."

"Good. Would you like some more cookies before I get started?"

His response was so enthusiastic that she smiled all the way to the kitchen.

CHAPTER 7



Jemel stared down at a document on his desk, but he wasn't concentrating on the words. Instead, he was listening to the sounds of Ida in his kitchen—sounds that gave him an unfamiliar sense of peace, of being at home.

Which makes absolutely no sense, he reminded himself. His father had always been very strict about protocol. The only people working their kitchen had been servants, and they were required to remain unseen and unheard except when serving the tediously long meals in the formal dining room. Perhaps it would have been different if his mother hadn't died giving birth to him—or perhaps she would have been as rigid and formal as his father.

He wished he had the courage to take his work into the kitchen, or discard it all together and just join her and continue their conversation. When she'd returned with a second larger plate of her delectable baked goods, she'd sat down by his desk again, sipping on a mug of the human beverage they called coffee. He couldn't suppress his shudder when she offered him some.

"No, thank you. I tried it once in Port Cantor. Once was enough."

She laughed as she took another sip.

"I suspect it's an acquired taste. But if you dislike it so much, why was it in the pantry?"

“The former owner must have left it.”

“Really?” She gave the mug a fascinated glance, then shrugged and drank again. “It still tastes fine.”

“A matter of opinion.”

She laughed again and asked him what he was doing. They must have spent an hour talking—talking about the farm cluster and his plans for it and talking about her life. Her previous mate had died, but she clearly didn’t wish to talk about him. Instead, she told him about her father. Her mother had also died while she was young, but her relationship with her father was far warmer and more loving than his had been.

“We were very happy and I was quite content living with him. I’m not sure I would have ever left home, but when he realized he was ill, he wanted me to get married. He wanted to be sure that there would be someone there for me.”

Her voice was carefully neutral, but he couldn’t escape the impression that her marriage had not worked out the way her father had desired.

“I’m sorry,” he said, deliberately not specifying the reason.

“Don’t be. I have Tommy and Dora.” Her teeth closed down on that pretty plump lower lip as she realized what she’d said, and then she jumped up. “I’d better see if my family is awake and get started on dinner.”

He’d let her go, but a short time later he’d walked quietly into the dining room and opened the door to the kitchen. He hadn’t joined her, but he let himself listen as she moved around the kitchen and then as the rest of her family joined her. It wasn’t the first time he’d felt like an outsider, but this was both sweeter and more painful than usual.

My duty is to my males, he reminded himself—but he didn’t close the door.

A short time later, a small dark head peeked around the doorframe.

“Hi.”

“Hello,” he replied solemnly, looking over at the boy. “Can I help you?”

Tommy grinned and ran into the room, scrambling up into the chair opposite

him.

“Nope. Mama said I could ‘splore the house as long as I didn’t break nothing.”

“An excellent suggestion. And do you always do what your mother tells you?”

The boy made a face at him, then grinned again.

“I try.”

“Smart boy.”

“My father used to call me Smarty Pants. But the way you say it sounds better.”

Tommy frowned as he spoke, and Temel found himself wondering if his father had intended the term in a derogatory manner, although he didn’t understand why acknowledging intelligence would be considered an insult.

“Mama’s smart too,” the boy announced, his frown vanishing.

“I agree with you.”

“I think she likes you.”

The boy was grinning at him again, his feet kicking back and forth under the chair.

“Does she?” He kept his tone as calm as possible.

“Uh-huh. And Dora doesn’t.”

That had been quite clear, although he wasn’t sure why.

“Dora’s gonna marry a prince one day,” Tommy continued cheerfully.

He tried not to smile, although he could easily envision the young female making just such a comment.

“Indeed? And what will you do then?”

“I’ll look after Angel, I guess. And Mama.”

He nodded approvingly at the boy's solemn tone.

“Good. It is a male's job—and his privilege—to look after the females of his family.”

“What a privi...privlish?”

“It means a special honor.”

“Tommy, what did I tell you?”

Ida appeared in the doorway, tiny tendrils of hair curling around her flushed face and looking far too appealing for his peace of mind.

“You said I could ‘splore.”

“This isn't exploring. It's interrupting Temel while he's working.”

“I don't mind,” he said quickly. “And the door was open.”

She shot him a look he couldn't read, but held out her hand to her son.

“Come along now.”

Tommy gave a sigh that seemed too big for his small body and climbed down from the chair looking so dejected that he started to insist the boy could stay. He caught her amused head shake just in time.

“I know. It's a hard, hard life.” Her hand brushed across the dark curls. “But maybe helping me with the apples will make you feel better.”

The boy's dejection magically disappeared and he grinned up at his mother before racing off to the kitchen.

“He was acting?”

She laughed. “Let's just say he was exaggerating because he didn't want to leave. I think he likes being around another male since he's usually surrounded by girls.”

“Was he close to his father?”

The question popped out before he had a chance to reconsider, and he immediately regretted it when her laughter vanished.

“No,” she said quietly, then followed her son.

What kind of male would not appreciate such a bright, engaging child? Despite his own father’s many flaws, they had spent a considerable amount of time together—although not for his benefit as it turned out.

He was still pondering the matter when he heard a familiar icy voice in the kitchen.

“Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my kitchen?”

CHAPTER 8



Ida stared up at the big, angry alien who'd just stormed into the kitchen, her pulse racing. He was as tall as Temel, although not as broad, and his skin was pale lavender. She'd always thought of it as a soft, pretty color, but there was nothing soft about the male glowering at her. He was dressed all in black and his dark purple hair was cut military short, revealing sharp pointed ears.

Behind her, Dora gasped and Angel let out a soft whimper. The stranger flicked a quick glance in their direction with eyes that glowed an eerie white before looking back at her.

"Well?" he snapped.

Refusing to let him intimidate her, she straightened her shoulders and returned his glare.

"I am cooking dinner, and if I were you I'd be ashamed to call this my kitchen considering the state it was in."

Those eerie eyes flicked around the kitchen before returning to her.

"Perhaps I liked it that way."

"Or perhaps you simply didn't like cleaning it, Kalpar."

Temel's deep voice came as a welcome relief, but she did her best to hide her

reaction.

“And I suspect you know exactly who they are considering you were the one who told me they were missing,” Temel continued. “Now step back.”

The last words were undoubtedly a command and Kalpar immediately obeyed before turning his glare on Temel.

“You were supposed to return them to town.”

“And no doubt I would have done so if the road hadn’t been flooded and their carriage overturned, and they hadn’t been forced to spend the night in the rocks.”

“And I fell in the water.”

Obviously emboldened by Temel’s presence, Tommy marched over to her side, scowling at the new alien. Kalpar’s face finally lightened as he looked down at her son.

“Did you indeed? That must have been quite an adventure.”

Tommy tilted his head, obviously not having considered it that way before, then grinned. Temel also came to her side as Kalpar shook his head at him.

“I should have known better than to send you, matma. I suppose this was inevitable.”

Matma? She gave Temel a puzzled look, but he was still focused on Kalpar.

“You should apologize, and thank Ida for her hard work.”

“That’s not necessary,” she said quickly. “I’d probably react the same way if I walked into my house and found a strange man in my kitchen. I just wanted to express my gratitude.”

Temel frowned at her. “I told you that wasn’t necessary.”

“She probably can’t cook anyway,” Kalpar said, giving her a sardonic look.

Instead of responding, Temel looked around until he found the cookies she’d placed on a shelf out of Tommy’s reach and grabbed one, thrusting it at Kalpar.

“Try it.”

Kalpar gave it a suspicious look but took a small bite, then another, frowning thoughtfully.

“Too sweet for my taste, but the flavors are well balanced.”

She rolled her eyes, but the compliment pleased her. Kalpar moved over to the stove, lifting the pot lids.

“And for the evening meal?”

“Roast chicken and potatoes, green beans with onions and tomatoes, and creamed corn.”

Kalpar sniffed the contents of each pot without commenting, but he inclined his head slightly before moving away and she decided to take it as approval.

“And apple crumble,” Tommy added enthusiastically. “It’s my favorite.”

“You say that about every dessert, squirt,” Dora said.

“Do not.”

“Do too.”

“Now that sounds familiar. My brother used to—” Another alien strolled into the kitchen, as tall as the other two but with oddly textured golden skin and a wild mane of gold hair. His deep, lazy drawl came to an abrupt halt as he saw Dora. “You.”

He knew Dora? Her daughter’s face turned pale but she lifted her chin and glared at the newcomer.

“You. I was hoping I’d never see you again.”

Again? Before she could ask any questions, the newcomer swept Dora a mocking bow.

“Nice to see you too, princess.”

Kalpar sighed. “It appears introductions are in order. I am Kalpar and this disreputable male is Naffon.”

Naffon grinned even as he started to object, but she interrupted him.

“I’m Ida Carmichael. This is my son, Tommy, and my daughter, Dora, and —”

“And my sister, Angel,” Dora said quickly.

So her daughter intended to continue the pretense? Although she didn’t believe that the three males would care about the baby’s parentage, perhaps it was just as well considering they did visit Wainwright occasionally. Which also meant that Temel would have a reason to pass by the little house at the crossroads. The thought distracted her as Naffon approached the table, flinging himself carelessly into the seat across from Dora, bright blue eyes flicking from her to Angel. Dora looked everywhere except at him.

“Your pot is about to boil over,” Kalpar pointed out and with a muttered exclamation, she returned to her cooking.

The dinner was a success, at least as far as the food was concerned. They ate everything she’d cooked and even Kalpar approved. The conversation was less successful. Naffon tried several times to talk to Dora and she completely ignored him. The situation wasn’t helped by the fact that Kalpar decided to engage her in conversation instead, making Naffon’s eyes snap dangerously.

Temel sat next to her and praised her cooking, but he was also watching the byplay between Kalpar and Naffon. When Naffon’s claws—claws?!—suddenly popped out, he rose to his feet.

“That’s enough,” he barked. “Naffon, stop acting like a spoiled child. Kalpar, stop provoking him. If the two of you can’t behave, you can go sleep in the barn.”

“But it’s time for dessert.”

Tommy’s shocked protest broke the tension. Naffon’s claws retracted as he gave her son a cheerful grin.

“We certainly can’t miss dessert.”

“Indeed, I’m curious to see what you have done with such simple ingredients,” Kalpar added.

Everyone but Dora enjoyed the apple crumble. Her daughter merely pushed her spoon around her plate and as soon as the others finished, she excused herself, taking Angel with her. Naffon's eyes followed her, but he didn't comment before turning to her with a charming smile.

"That was a wonderful meal. I don't suppose you'd like to cook for us again?"

"I think I can manage breakfast before we leave. If you don't mind?" she added, glancing over at Kalpar.

"Not at all. In fact..." He stopped and gave Temel an inquiring look. "Did you get as far as the crossroads?"

"No. As I said, the road was flooded. If the water goes down, we'll go by there tomorrow. Why?"

"I was just wondering how well that shack handled the storm."

Her heart skipped a beat as she remembered the broken windows and leaning porch.

"I'm sure it will be fine," she said quickly. *It has to be.*

"But if it is not, it occurs to me that we might have an alternative." Kalpar raised an eyebrow at Temel.

"I already told Ida that she and her family are welcome to stay."

"We don't need your charity," she snapped, then bit her lip when Tommy gave her a startled look. "I'm sorry. I know you didn't mean it that way. It's a very generous offer, but I can't take it."

"I had no intention of offering you charity," Kalpar said coolly. "I was going to suggest that we hire you. To cook, and keep the house clean."

"Ida is not a servant," Temel protested immediately, but she pursed her lips thoughtfully.

The idea of working as a housekeeper didn't bother her. She really did enjoy cooking, and although she didn't exactly love cleaning, she did enjoy the results and it would be nice to be paid for it for a change.

“I wanna stay here, Mama.”

Tommy gave her his most beseeching look as Naffon grinned approvingly. *Naffon*. Somehow she suspected Dora would not be as enthusiastic about remaining.

“I’m not sure we could stay here,” she said slowly. “But perhaps I could come daily instead. And bring Tommy,” she added when he tugged on her skirt.

This time Temel was the one to frown.

“It is quite a long distance for daily travel. And what if the road should flood again? It would be better if you stayed here. If the quarters behind the kitchen don’t please you, there are other bedrooms upstairs.”

“It’s not that, it’s just... Why don’t I wait and see how well the house handled the storm before I decide?”

Kalpar nodded, then cuffed Naffon’s ear.

“Time to check on the cattle.”

“Again?”

Despite his protest, Naffon rose to his feet, then gave her his charming smile.

“I do hope you and your family decide to join us, Ida.”

Blue eyes sparkled at her before he turned and followed Kalpar out of the kitchen, and she shook her head.

“He certainly knows how to turn on the charm.”

“Does he?”

Temel’s voice had dropped to a low growl, and she gave him a startled look.

“I didn’t mean that I was falling for it. Although I wonder if Dora did.”

“Do you think they’ve met before?”

“Yes. Although they obviously didn’t get as far as exchanging names.”

“Is he Dora’s prince, Mama?”

Tommy’s question was interrupted by a huge yawn, and she laughed.

“I don’t know, sweetheart, but I think it’s time for you to go to bed.”

And she wanted to talk to Dora.

“I’m not sleepy,” he protested around another yawn, but he snuggled against her when she picked him up.

“Will you return?” Temel asked softly. “I would like to talk to you.”

She should probably refuse, but she nodded anyway.

“Yes, but it may be a little while.”

“I’ll be in the study.”

He’d suggested nothing more than a quiet conversation in a room full of books, but as she carried Tommy off to bed, she felt as excited as she had been before attending her first dance.

CHAPTER 9



Temel paced back and forth across the study as he waited for Ida, hoping she wouldn't change her mind. The more he thought about Kalpar's suggestion, the more he liked it. He would have her and Tommy under his roof. *And her daughters*, he thought, frowning. There was something odd about their relationship, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it, other than the fact that Ida seemed much too young to have a daughter of Dora's age.

He was still considering the matter when she arrived. Her pretty round face was flushed again, and she gave him a shy look from under long, dark lashes.

"Sorry that took so long. Tommy insisted on a story even though he could barely keep his eyes open."

"I didn't mind waiting."

There was a fireplace on the wall opposite the bookshelves, and he ushered her to the seating area in front of it. He'd lit a small fire to ward off the chill of the spring evening, and she gave it a grateful glance as she settled down on the small sofa. He hesitated, then joined her, their bodies only a handspan apart.

"It's nice to have a fire," she murmured. "That water was so cold."

"You're still cold?"

He put his arm around her to draw her against the warmth of his body. When she tensed, he started to remove his arm, but then she sighed and leaned against him.

“Not really, not after a hot bath and a warm kitchen. It’s more like the memory of cold, if that makes sense.”

She shivered as she spoke, and he drew her a little closer.

“I understand. There are still times when I feel cold and wet and hungry even though none of them are true.”

“The war?” she asked softly, and he gave a quick nod before changing the subject. He had no intention of distressing her by discussing the horrors of the war.

“Did you talk to Dora?”

“No. She acted as if she were asleep, although I’m sure she was only pretending.”

“But she’s never mentioned Naffon before?”

“No, although she was acting a little strange on the way out here.”

She sighed and stared into the fire. He remained silent for a moment, considering his words.

“You seem very young to have a daughter of that age,” he said finally.

“That’s very sweet of you,” she murmured, sounding half-asleep. “Although it’s definitely possible. Women tend to marry young up here. But I wasn’t one of them and she’s actually my stepdaughter. But she’s my daughter in every way that counts,” she added fiercely.

He hummed an agreement and she relaxed again. How had he never realized how pleasant it was just to spend a quiet evening with a female before? Because he’d never had time? Or because he’d never encountered the right female before? He was not an impulsive male, but he could not deny his immediate attraction to her.

“Dora seems very close to your youngest daughter,” he said a little while

later, and she tensed.

“It’s... complicated.”

He could hear the reluctance in her voice and decided to let the subject drop. He could wait for his answers until she was ready to talk. Right now he had a more important subject on his mind.

“I hope you will decide to stay here. Is there anything I can offer to help encourage you to agree?”

She pushed away from his chest so she could look into his face.

“Why, Temel? Why do you want me here?”

“In part because your presence changes things. You make the house feel... welcoming. Like a true home—one I don’t think any of us have ever had.”

“Really?”

“I’m afraid so. My father was obsessed with his position and raising me to fulfill his expectations. Naffon had a brother, but it was just the two of them until his brother died. And Kalpar... He doesn’t talk about his past, but I have no reason to believe it was happy.”

“I’m so sorry. Is that why all of you joined the military?”

“In my case, it was expected. As for the others, it wouldn’t surprise me.”

Those big green eyes studied his face for a long moment before she nodded.

“And the other reason?”

“This,” he said, and kissed her.

He knew he shouldn’t, but he could no longer resist. Kissing was not a Kemberian custom but he’d seen it done often enough to be curious—and Ida was the only one who’d ever tempted him into fulfilling that curiosity. The pressure of her soft lips against his was decidedly pleasant, but he was about to move to more responsive areas when she sighed against his mouth and her lips parted.

Her tongue came out to tentatively touch his, and he groaned at the erotic

contact as her sweetness flooded his mouth. The intimacy of the act was both shocking and arousing, and he stroked his tongue into her mouth. She accepted him eagerly, her arms tightening around his neck and her lush breasts pressing against his chest, the hard peaks of her nipples a sweet temptation. The sensation made his cock harden even further, and he ran his hands down her back until he could cup her ass.

She gave a soft squeak as he pulled her against him, but then she rocked against the thick bulge of his cock and sighed into his mouth. It was almost as if she were melting into him, and he wanted more, wanted her naked and willing beneath him, wanted to take her right here in front of the fire, claiming her as his. Instead, he slowly gentled the kiss, nuzzling her cheek and throat before leaning back to study her dazed expression.

“I never understood the attraction of kissing before. But now...” He ran his thumb along her swollen lower lip, struggling for control when her tongue darted out to taste him. “It is a heady pleasure.”

“You’ve never kissed anyone before?”

She blinked at him, a slow smile crossing her lips when he nodded. He smiled back, caressing the delicate shell of one ear and the sensitive chord of her neck just to see her shiver with pleasure.

“I knew there would be passion in you.”

She blushed, that delightful pink flush coloring her cheeks.

“There hasn’t been much opportunity for passion in my life recently,” she admitted. “Or ever, really.”

He wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking.

“Your previous mate did not inspire passion?”

“Not like that. Our relationship wasn’t bad exactly, just... unexciting. He must have thought so too, because he never came to my bed again after Tommy was born. He had the son he wanted—or at least the one he said he wanted.”

“You don’t believe he did?”

She sighed, looking down at her hands as they toyed with the fastening of his shirt.

“I don’t know. Maybe it would have changed as Tommy grew older, but Abner had very little interest in a child. And Tommy was smart enough to recognize that.”

“He’s very intelligent,” he agreed. “He must take after his mother.”

She smiled, and this time she kissed him. He had her bent back over his arm, his hand on her breast before he came to his senses and reluctantly raised his head. Even more reluctantly, he released the soft flesh filling his hand and pulled her up into a sitting position.

“You are a very tempting female.”

Her flush deepened again and he was quite sure she would have kissed him again if he hadn’t held her gently in place.

“But I want to make it clear that if you decide to work for us, this is not part of the job.”

“Well, of course not.”

She looked so indignant that he laughed. “As long as you know.”

“But you aren’t saying you don’t want to kiss me, are you?”

“Gods, no. I would be happy to spend hours kissing you.” He brushed a finger lightly across those impudent nipples. “Exploring you. Tasting you.”

She swayed towards him even as he sighed and returned his hands to her waist. “But we both have responsibilities.”

“I know. Maybe we should call it a night?”

“One more kiss first,” he growled.

One kiss turned into three and then four and by the time she finally pushed gently against his chest, her lips were pink and swollen, an equally pink and swollen nipple peeked from the unbuttoned top of her dress, and his cock was so hard he could have driven a nail through an iron bar.

“I’m pretty sure that was more than one kiss,” she whispered as she sat up and started buttoning her dress. “And if we keep going, I’m afraid we’re going to end up doing a lot more than just kissing.”

His cock jerked an enthusiastic assent, but she was right. He didn’t want to destroy the tenuous bond between them by rushing her.

“As I said, there is no doubt Tommy get his intelligence from you.”

She laughed and briefly touched his cheek.

“Perhaps Naffon learned his charm from you.”

He shuddered as they both rose.

“A horrifying thought.”

He escorted her to the door, then stood looking down at her, reluctant for the evening to end.

“It really was a delicious dinner. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Sleep well, my sweet.”

She smiled up at him, touched his cheek again, and disappeared back through the dining room. He watched until she entered the kitchen before turning back to the study. The pile of documents on his desk still awaited his attention, but for once his sense of duty wasn’t strong enough to compel him to resume work.

Instead, he banked the fire, turned out the lights, and headed to his room for a long, cold shower.

CHAPTER 10



With her body still humming from Temel's kisses and touches, Ida expected to have a hard time falling asleep. Her response to him shocked her, but instead of worrying about it, she was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow—and her dreams featured Temel in a variety of erotic activities. She woke just before dawn with her nipples hard and a slow, throbbing pulse between her legs.

This level of sensitivity, of excitement, was a new experience for her. She'd come to her marriage a virgin. Abner had been surprisingly patient with her and hadn't caused her any pain on their wedding night. Their weekly couplings had not been unpleasant, just unremarkable. So unremarkable that Tommy was six months old before she realized that Abner had stopped coming to her bed.

She'd briefly considered broaching the subject, but in the end she focused her attention on her son and daughter instead. If he'd aroused even a fraction of the passion that Temel drew from her, she suspected she would not have remained silent.

But did shared passion mean there could be a future between them, she wondered, staring up at the ceiling as the light outside the window increased. Dora had been passionate about Malcolm and look how that had ended up. Not that she thought Temel was the type to get her pregnant and then abandon her.

Her hand covered her stomach for a moment, remembering the feeling of a life growing inside her. *Perhaps a life with pale blue skin and tiny horns*, she thought, then shook her head at her foolishness. Now she was really putting the cart before the horse, especially considering her age.

She sat up just as a soft murmur came from Dora's bedroom. *Excellent*. If Angel was awake, even Dora couldn't pretend to be asleep while she was nursing her daughter. She'd come so close to telling Temel the truth last night. She didn't want any secrets between them, but this was not just her secret.

Wrapping the blanket around her shoulders, she padded quietly across the hallway to Dora's room. Her daughter was sitting up, feeding Angel, and she shot her a wary look.

"Good morning," she said calmly, sitting down next to her on the bed, then waited for Dora to relax. A not uncomfortable silence filled the room, broken only by the sound of Angel suckling.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" she asked at last, and Dora bit her lip.

"No! Well, maybe—not that there's much to tell. I ran into him at the market." A faint smile twisted Dora's mouth. "I mean I actually collided with him. I thought I was going to fall, but he caught me. We... stared at each other and then I ran away. That's all."

She suspected that Dora still hadn't told her the entire truth, but she let it go.

"Is that why you were so reluctant to move out here? To be close to their farm?"

"Yes. I'm sorry—I know I was kind of rude."

"Little bit," she agreed and was rewarded with a smile. Taking a deep breath, she continued, "After you went to bed last night, Temel offered me a job working here as a cook and housekeeper."

"What? You aren't seriously thinking of taking it?"

"I'm considering it."

"But why?"

“It would be a steady income, rather than having to wait for the next sewing job or doing laundry all week.”

Dora was still staring at her, her eyes wide.

“You mean you want us to live here?”

“That’s one option,” she admitted. “And it would be the most economical. Another possibility would be to ride Lady back and forth from the house at the crossroads—assuming it made it through the storm—but that would be time-consuming.”

Looking down at Angel, Dora sighed.

“I guess that wouldn’t make much sense. But you’re sure there aren’t any better options in town?”

“I am, but I’m willing to check again. Whatever we do, I want it to work for all of us. I don’t want you to be unhappy.”

“After this past year, I’m sure I can manage anything.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant,” she said gently.

“I know, but I’m not even sure I believe in happiness anymore. Not for more than a few fleeting moments anyway.”

Her heart ached for her daughter, but it had been a difficult year and it would take time for her to heal.

“There’s one more thing. If we do stay here, I think we need to tell them the truth about Angel.”

“What? No!”

Dora’s vehement protest startled Angel into releasing her nipple with a soft cry. Murmuring an apology, Dora gently encouraged her to start feeding again.

“Someone is bound to figure it out eventually, but I don’t think any of them would think less of you. Very few places are as old-fashioned as Wainwright.”

“But... What if he thinks...” Color flooded her daughter’s cheeks as she looked away. “I just hate anyone knowing how stupid I was.”

“You weren’t stupid. You were trusting. There’s a difference.”

“It doesn’t feel like it,” Dora muttered, but she calmed a little.

“You don’t have to decide right now. Just think about it.”

“All right.” Dora’s expression lightened as she studied her face. “And what about you and Mr. Big Blue Alien? You seem pretty cozy.”

“He’s very kind,” she said with as much dignity as she could muster.

“Kind, huh?”

The memory of the previous night’s kisses rushed through her head as she jumped to her feet.

“I’ll just go and get started on breakfast.”

Before she could leave, her daughter reached out and grabbed her hand.

“I wouldn’t mind, you know. If you found someone else. You deserve to be happy, and I know Papa could be... difficult sometimes.”

It was the first time Dora had ever acknowledged that Abner had flaws, and an unexpected lump filled her throat.

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

She bent down and hugged Dora, then headed for the kitchen, determined to put all thoughts of a new relationship out of her mind. But when she looked up from frying eggs and saw Temel smiling at her, her heart did a funny little jump and she found herself wondering if it was already too late.

Naffon and Kalpar wandered in, followed by a yawning Tommy with his hair in wild spikes all over his head and a misbuttoned shirt. Her heart skipped again when Temel fixed the shirt and smoothed the wayward curls. *Dammit*. Everything seemed to be moving very quickly all of a sudden. And after all her lectures to Dora about getting to know someone before becoming emotionally involved.

When Dora and Angel finally joined them, she served breakfast. Dora was still refusing to speak to Naffon, but although he watched her from those bright blue eyes, he didn't push it. Instead, he addressed his conversation to Tommy, even though several of his remarks were clearly intended for Dora.

She did her best to be polite but equally cool towards Temel as they ate, but she was aware of his eyes on her every time she looked up. Unfortunately for her state of mind, he was the first to finish.

“Do you still want to try driving back into town today?”

“I think we'd better,” she said reluctantly. “So we can decide what we're going to do.”

She avoided looking at him as he walked around the table to stand behind her chair.

“Very well. We will take the wagon.”

“We? Are you sure? What about your work?” she asked.

“There's nothing that cannot wait.”

Kalpar gave them a thoughtful look.

“I have an alternate suggestion. Why don't you both ride over and see if the road is clear first? It won't take long to check on horseback, and if the road is drivable you'll save a considerable amount of time taking the wagon that way. If not, you'll still have plenty of time to make the longer drive before nightfall.”

Dora gave a muffled exclamation, but when Ida looked over at her, she nodded.

“Go ahead. We'll be fine here.”

“I wanna go too,” Tommy protested.

Temel opened his mouth, but Naffon spoke first.

“I thought you wanted to help me milk the cows.”

Her son looked torn for a moment, then nodded enthusiastically and Naffon

grinned at her.

“You see? Everything will be fine.”

“I should wash the dishes first,” she said weakly, but Dora jumped up.

“I can take care of them. You go on.”

Giving in to the inevitable, she smiled at Temel.

“All right. Just give me a minute to get ready.”

He smiled back and she hurried into the bedroom, her pulse already racing with anticipation.

CHAPTER 11



A short time later, Ida was accompanying Temel to the stables, wondering again how everything had happened so quickly. He looked down at her and smiled.

“Everyone seems determined for us to spend time together. Do you mind?”

This was her opportunity to back out, but she found herself shaking her head.

“No, Kalpar was right. It makes sense to check and see if the shorter way is open.”

He opened the stable door and followed her inside, then hesitated.

“I could do it alone.”

He was clearly reluctant to make the offer, but the fact that he did it anyway gave her the confidence to shake her head.

“Since you’re doing this on my behalf, it’s only fair that I accompany you. Actually, maybe I should go by myself and let you get on with your work.”

His eyes glinted silver in the dimness of the stable as he put an arm around her waist and gently tugged her towards him.

“Absolutely not, my sweet.” He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. “It is my honor to watch over you.”

He cupped her face, tilting her head back to give him better access, and kissed her. His other hand skimmed down her back, stopping just short of her rear. Her body responded instinctively, her breasts aching and her knees turning to jelly. His tongue slid across her bottom lip, coaxing her to open for him before dipping inside. Her hands slid up around his neck and then into the short, thick softness of his hair. They brushed against the base of his horns and he groaned into her mouth, pulling her closer, the thick bar of his erection a tantalizing promise against her stomach. She slid her hand towards it —

A loud whicker startled her, and she jumped. Temel raised his head, his breathing as rapid as hers.

“A timely reminder, I’m afraid. We’d best be on our way.”

Despite his words, he held her for another long minute before finally stepping back.

The stallion he had ridden yesterday was in his stall and Temel saddled him, then saddled the smaller mare in the next stall and led her out. She gave the horse a nervous glance and he immediately paused.

“Would you rather ride with me instead?”

Yes. Despite her instinctive response, she shook her head and let him lift her into the saddle. Her dress made it a little awkward, but the mare stood calmly as Temel returned to the stallion and she started to relax.

“We’ll go slowly,” he promised, and urged his horse forward.

As they rode out of the stable yard, she looked over to see Tommy skipping along next to a grinning Naffon, clearly talking a mile a minute. He waved cheerfully when he saw her and she returned the wave, happy that he seemed content to remain behind.

Her horse obediently followed Temel’s horse, and she found herself settling into the saddle. It was easier without Dora and Tommy to distract her, and the lessons of her childhood began to resurface, giving her the confidence to ride up next to him. He looked over and smiled.

“That’s better. Would you like to go faster?”

“Maybe a little.”

He urged his horse into a trot and her horse followed. The morning breeze ruffled her hair, blowing the strands away from her face, and the sun shone down as she turned her face up to its warmth. The short grass was a bright green now that the storm had passed, and she could smell the tang of damp earth and the scent of wildflowers in bloom.

It was a beautiful day and the beauty of it combined with the rhythmic movement of the horse, making her feel languid and slightly aroused. The smooth leather of the saddle cradled her bottom, only the thin cotton of her drawers between her skin and the seat. She was acutely aware of the pressure of the saddle against her clit as she moved with the horse. By the time they reached the section of road that ran beside the creek, she was squirming in her saddle and trying to ignore the fact that Temel’s eyes were gleaming silver again.

“The creek’s gone down.”

His voice was carefully neutral, and she forced herself to look over and focus on his words. The rushing water was now below the banks of the creek, although it still flowed quickly.

“Yes. Hopefully the road will have drained by now as well.”

“Hopefully,” he echoed, those gleaming silver eyes dancing across her body.

Could he tell she was aroused, the folds of her sex damp and swollen? If so he didn’t say anything, and she shifted in the saddle again as they continued down the road.

The water that had flooded their clearing was also considerably lower but it still covered the road, her overturned carriage like a mournful island in the muddy water. He dismounted and approached the edge of the pool, bending down to test the current.

“It should be safe, but it’s still a little fast for my liking, and I don’t like the fact that we can’t see the surface beneath the water.”

She sighed and nodded. The last thing she wanted to do was take the chance of another direct encounter with the icy stream.

“Then I guess it’s the long way.”

He mounted again and brought his horse up next to hers.

“Or you could give it one more day. If it subsides as much as it has over the past day, it should be safe tomorrow. And it will give you a little longer to see how it would be to remain with me—us.” The warmth in his eyes threatened to take her breath away, but he kept his voice quiet. “But I will accept whatever you decide.”

She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. There was no reason for them to hurry back to town, and as long as she was contributing she didn’t feel as if she were taking charity. Besides, she also wanted to see how Dora reacted, given her hesitation about Naffon. If the thought of repeating the previous evening occurred to her, she refused to admit that it might also have influenced her decision.

“You’re right. We might as well give it another day,” she agreed a little breathlessly, and he flashed her a brilliant smile before urging his horse back down the road.

“You mentioned yesterday that you would like to see Mary,” he said as they emerged from under the trees. “Her farm is only a short distance in that direction.”

“You don’t need to get back?”

“Eventually. And I would like to speak to Borgaz.”

“All right. As long as I get back in time to prepare lunch.”

“What a diligent worker,” he murmured, his eyes warm and amused. “You clearly deserve a bonus.”

“I’m not working for you yet.”

“Then perhaps you deserve something else.”

He reached over and grabbed her horse’s reins, bringing them both to a halt. With his usual effortless strength, he lifted her off of her horse and onto the saddle in front of him. His cock throbbed against her thigh, and then his mouth was on hers.

She surrendered to the heat of his kiss, her arms twining around his neck, her hands sliding back into his hair and up over those fascinating horns. He growled deep in his throat as he cupped her breasts, his thumbs stroking over her nipples and making her squirm. His erection pulsed against her thigh, and she squirmed against it.

He growled again, and one of his hands dropped to her leg, sliding up under her skirt and finding the damp heat between her thighs.

“Temel,” she gasped, clutching desperately at his horns.

A thick finger slipped through the slit in her drawers and slid along her embarrassingly wet folds to the heated pulse of her clit. A single swipe of his finger across the swollen nub and she exploded, rocking against him as her body quivered in his arms.

When she finally found the strength to open her eyes, he was smiling down at her, a purely male satisfaction on his face.

“You are very beautiful when you climax.”

The rush of pleasure at his words was followed by a rush of embarrassment. She’d let him give her an orgasm. In broad daylight. On an open road. She pushed herself upright, looking around nervously. There was no one in sight, but she pressed her hands against her flaming cheeks. How could she have done such a thing?

“I shouldn’t... That was...”

Apparently he understood what she was too embarrassed to say because his face softened.

“I should not have let myself be carried away.”

She shook her head, refusing to let him take the blame.

“I didn’t try to stop you. I wanted you to... touch me.” Her voice shook a little but she kept her eyes on his face. “But maybe not here.”

“I understand.”

He gave her a quick gentle kiss and lifted her back onto her patiently waiting

horse. They set off again, but she rode a little behind him to give herself time to think. She'd never experienced such a fast powerful climax before. The eroticism of the ride had undoubtedly contributed, but she suspected it had been mostly due to the big, powerful male riding in front of her.

She felt... different. Not like a beloved daughter, or a respectable wife, or even a loving mother. She felt like a wild, sensual creature, like the kind of woman who could enjoy making love in the open air instead of a darkened room. *Different is good*, she thought, but it was also frightening. And how did she reconcile this new part of her with her other sides?

She was still pondering the matter when a small white farmhouse came into view. As they approached, she quickly tidied her hair and drew her normal respectability around her like a cloak

This close she could clearly see that the farmhouse was undergoing renovation, but it still had a friendly, welcoming air. Mary came out of the house as they came to a halt, followed by an enormous red-skinned alien. He was as large as Temel, with small horns and a long sinuous tail.

“Ida? Is that you?” Mary looked so shocked that she had to hide a smile. “What on earth are you doing out here? With Temel?”

She knew she was blushing again, but she did her best to sound casual.

“It’s rather a long story.”

“Then I’ll make a pot of tea and you can tell me all about it,” Mary said firmly.

She gave Temel an uncertain look, and he nodded.

“Go ahead. As I said, I need to speak to Borgaz.”

She hesitated a moment longer, then slid down from her horse and followed Mary into the house.

CHAPTER 12



“Well, this is a surprise.” Borgaz grinned at Temel as soon as the two females entered the house. “Weren’t you just telling me you had no need for a mate?”

He started to deny that Ida was his mate, but the words felt wrong. Even though Kemberians didn’t believe in fated mates, the connection between them was too strong to deny.

“I... I don’t know,” he said instead. “She has responsibilities—a family—and so do I.”

His friend gave him a thoughtful look as he dismounted.

“That does not have to be a barrier.”

“I agree, but I’m too old to go rushing into anything.”

Borgaz’s gaze was uncommonly penetrating, and he found himself grateful that his skin did not betray his emotions as Ida’s did. Anger, passion, amusement—all of it was reflected on her skin.

“Not rushing?” Borgaz said eventually. “The bond between the two of you is already clear.”

He sighed and rubbed his face, but again, he could not deny it. Not that he wished to, but he usually preferred to take his time preparing and executing

his plans.

“It’s a shock, isn’t it?” His friend’s face was surprisingly sympathetic. “When it happens at last.”

He couldn’t find the words, and eventually just shook his head. Borgaz accepted his lack of response as he took the reins of Ida’s horse and led the way to the somewhat crooked barn.

“Am I right in assuming that these are the travelers you went off to rescue?”

“You are. It was just as well that I did. Her son was in danger of being swept away.”

He shuddered at the thought of what might have happened if he hadn’t been there.

“Her son? You said she has a family?”

“Yes. She has a daughter, two daughters, as well.”

“Ah. A nice little brood for a matma to cluck over.”

A matma was an avian who spent much of her time circling her brood. Borgaz had been the one to give him the nickname, and he shook his head again.

“I do not cluck.”

“I disagree.” Borgaz grinned at him as he began brushing down the mare. “So what happens now with your not-quite-mate and her family?”

“As she said, it’s complicated,” he said, picking up his own brush. “They are looking for a new residence and are considering the house at the crossroads.”

“That shack? It’s far worse than any of the farms in our cluster. Why not give her one of those?”

Because I prefer to have her under my own roof. Ignoring that truth, he resorted to the more obvious answer.

“You know those are intended for other warriors.”

“We don’t exactly have a stream of candidates yet,” Borgaz said dryly.

“I offered to let her stay at the main house, but she didn’t want to take what she saw as charity. Then Kalpar suggested we offer her a job as a cook and housekeeper. She’s considering it.”

“*Kalpar* suggested it? Is she that good a cook?”

“Yes, she is.”

“But?” Borgaz prompted.

“But I do not wish her to feel obligated to take care of me, of us.” The thought had bothered him all night. “Nor do I want her to stay because she feels she has no other choice.”

“I see.”

When his friend didn’t add anything else, he gave him an irritated look.

“That’s it? No other words of wisdom?”

“That’s your area, not mine, but I’ll repeat your words back to you—why not just ask her? Don’t assume it won’t work and make both of you unhappy.”

“It’s unfair to expect me to follow my own advice,” he muttered, but he smiled as he concentrated on his horse.

After they finished taking care of the horses, they talked a little about the plans for the other farms in the cluster—farms that had been purchased by the previous owner in his desire to expand and then left abandoned. Borgaz had surveyed all but the two most distant ones.

“I would have to leave Mary for two full days, and I am unwilling to do that.”

He could understand the heat of newly mated bliss and had no intention of insisting. If their positions had been reversed, he would not have left Ida. He already disliked the thought of being separated from her.

“I don’t suppose it’s that important. I think we can safely assume they are in the same condition as the other farms—abandoned but reclaimable.”

“They would only be suitable for someone who wished to remain at a

distance. None of us would want to be that far away from our matma.”

Borgaz grinned at him and he shook his head, but neither the comment nor the nickname displeased him. It was his duty to look out for his males, but it was also his honor and his pleasure. Would his... attraction to Ida interfere with that duty?

No, he decided, but he couldn't quite escape a faint feeling of guilt.

Conversation finished, they went to join their females. Ida was laughing when he entered and she gave him a quick, guilty look, her cheeks turning a betraying pink. *Hmm*. He wondered what she'd been saying but he found the idea that she'd been talking about him more satisfying than distressing. An unexpected reaction considering his usual preference for privacy.

They talked for a while longer and he found himself envying the casually possessive way Borgaz's tail curved around Mary's waist or his hand rested on her shoulder. He would have been happy to have indicated his claim on Ida in such a way, but given her embarrassment on the road—a not unjustified embarrassment—he kept his hands strictly to himself. An unnecessary restraint as it turned out.

When they left to return to the main house so that Ida could prepare lunch, he was aware that she kept stealing glances at him from under her lashes and he finally brought both horses to a halt again.

“Is something troubling you, my sweet?”

“Do you think I behaved too wantonly before? When you... touched me?” she burst out.

“Gods, no. I would have been delighted to give you more pleasure, but I thought you wished to stop.”

“I did. Mostly.” She bit her lip before she rushed on. “But if it wasn't that, then why were you treating me like a stranger at Mary's house?”

He started to object that he'd done no such thing, then realized what she meant and reached for her hand.

“You mean because I was not touching you?”

“Well, yes. I thought maybe you didn’t want them to know that we were... involved, but I already told Mary —”

Her words cut off as her cheeks flamed again.

“Told her everything?” he asked, once more amused rather than annoyed.

“Not exactly, but I don’t have many friends who would understand.”

She wasn’t looking at him, and he reached over and gently lifted her chin so he could see her eyes.

“Understand what?”

“The way you make me feel. So... excited.”

The pretty color hadn’t retreated from her cheeks, but her nipples beaded beneath the bodice of her dress. He cupped a lush breast with his free hand and she immediately leaned into him, then bit her lip.

“If you mean the way you respond to my touch, then I can only be glad. Did talking to Mary soothe your concerns?”

“A little. She said it can be like that. With the right person.”

The unspoken question hung in the air between them, but despite his own conversation with Borgaz, he had more thinking to do. Rather than respond, he tugged at the tempting little nipple. Her eyes turned heavy with desire as she swayed towards him, but then she pushed his hand away with obvious reluctance, and gave him a shaky smile.

“I think we’d better be on our way, or I’ll end up in your arms again.”

“I would not object,” he assured her, but he set his horse in motion once more.

When they returned to the kitchen, Dora was slicing potatoes, Angel in a towel-lined basket next to her.

“Naffon found it for her,” she explained. “It’s more convenient than holding her all the time.”

“That was nice of him,” Ida said cheerfully, but her daughter only gave a

noncommittal nod.

Dora looked disappointed but resigned when Ida explained that she'd decided to give the creek another day to go down.

"I suppose that makes sense. Is there anything else you'd like me to do?"

Ida accepted the change of subject, and he left them to their preparations as he finally returned to his neglected pile of work.

Lunch was less tense than their previous meals, Tommy full of excitement over his morning with the cows. Dora was less rigid and Naffon less provocative, even though neither of them spoke directly to the other.

"Kalpar doesn't come back for lunch?" Ida asked as he helped her wash the dishes.

"Sometimes, but right now he's moving the herds to spring pastures. He can be gone for many hours, and I believe that is one of the reasons he suggested hiring you to cook. No pressure," he added quickly when she shot him a suspicious look. "Just giving you all the facts."

She turned back to the dishes, but not before he caught the hint of a smile on her face.

He actually managed to get some work done that afternoon, although once again he kept the kitchen door open so he could hear her moving around. Tommy also joined him again, scribbling away happily on a piece of paper.

"What are you drawing?" he asked after a while.

"All of us," the boy announced proudly, holding up a sheet of paper filled with colored shapes with stick arms and legs.

He examined it thoughtfully.

"Is that how we all look?"

"Yep." Tommy frowned, pointing to a blue rectangle with horns larger than his head. "That's you. And that's Mama."

He hid a smile at the round little blob standing next to him. The others were easy enough to identify, right down to the small pink oval representing

Angel. *My family.*

His chest ached as he put the picture down and smiled at Tommy.

“You’re an excellent artist.”

“I know,” the boy said complacently. “Mama tells me that all the time.”

He was about to hand the picture back when he noticed another small blob half-hidden in the row of trees at the top of the drawing.

“And who’s that?”

“The fairy in the woods. I saw her earlier.” Tommy slipped down from his chair, losing interest in his drawing. “I’m hungry.”

“Don’t you want to take your picture?”

“You can keep it!” Tommy yelled, already dashing out of the room.

A fairy in the woods. He smiled at the boy’s imagination as he traced his finger over the figures in the drawing. This time he noticed that the little stick arms belonging to his figure and Ida’s were joined. Did even Tommy sense their connection?

He was still thinking about it later that evening as he paced in his study, once more waiting for Ida to join him.

But then she slipped through the door, closing it behind her, and everything evaporated except the need to kiss her.

CHAPTER 13



“Wait a minute,” Ida said breathlessly as Temel stalked towards her, silver eyes gleaming. “We should probably talk.”

“Later,” he promised. “First I’m going to kiss you.”

His lips closed over hers before she could reply and she was lost. His mouth was hard and demanding, his tongue delving deep into her mouth, and she let herself succumb to the pleasure of his kiss. His big hands kneaded her ass, then he lifted her up against the door, the thick bulge of his erection pressing directly against her aching clit.

She squirmed against him, desperate for more, and he broke the kiss.

“I want to remove your clothing. To see your body.” He traced a finger over her nipple, teasing her through the cloth covering it. “To feel your skin against mine.”

She shivered as she remembered how good it had felt the night before when he slid his big hand into her dress. But...

“We really do need to talk.”

He hesitated, the swollen ridge of his erection flexing tantalizingly against her clit, and she was almost ready to abandon the idea of conversation when he sighed and placed her gently back on her feet.

“No doubt you are right. I lose all hope of control in your presence.”

The compliment delighted her, even as he led her back to the small settee where they’d sat the previous night. This time he didn’t bother to sit next to her. Instead he simply sat down and pulled her onto his lap.

“At least I can hold you while we talk.”

She had no objection, but she suddenly found herself at a loss for words. The speech she’d so carefully practiced had disappeared from her mind. He waited patiently, his thumb making gentle circles on her hip.

“I don’t have a lot of experience with men,” she blurted out at last. “And definitely not with passion.”

“You mentioned that last night. Is that a concern for you?”

“Yes, and I think I need to explain why.” She took a deep breath, twisting her hands together. “I need to tell you something about Dora, but it has to remain between us.”

Her daughter had given her permission to tell Temel her story, but only Temel.

“Very well.”

“Dora was very close to her father and she had a hard time dealing with his death. I should have realized, but I was too busy trying to handle everything else.” Including the knowledge of how very little remained of her inheritance.

“And your own sorrow?” he suggested.

She shrugged uncomfortably. “I was sad that it happened, of course, but more as if he were a friend, or even an acquaintance. We weren’t really close, even though we faced each other across the breakfast table most mornings.”

While he read his paper, she made sure that Tommy ate, and Dora tried to tell him her latest news.

“Anyway, while I was dealing with everything, Dora met a man. He wasn’t a good man, but he was charming and he... awakened her. She lost her head and I think at least part of it was because she’d been very sheltered until then

and the way he made her feel was new and exciting.”

“And Angel was the result?”

“You knew?”

“It’s probably more accurate to say I suspected. The bond she has with her daughter is very obvious.”

She sighed. “I know. That’s one of the reasons we’ve kept to ourselves so much over the past year. But even though I have claimed Angel as mine, eventually the town is going to wonder.”

“I agree that it would be obvious to anyone who spent time with your family.” He hesitated, his hand tightening deliciously on her hip. “I appreciate the fact that you trusted me with the truth, but I don’t quite understand the relevance. It makes no difference to me if you have one child or twenty.”

“I’m glad, but that wasn’t it.” She frowned down at her hands, wondering how to put it. “Even though I’m much older than Dora, in many ways I’ve been just as sheltered. I went straight from my father’s house to my husband’s. This is all very new to me.”

His horns lowered as his brows drew together.

“Are you comparing me to the male who preyed on your daughter?”

“Oh, no,” she said quickly, reaching for his hand. “I’m just afraid that I’ll make an impulsive decision in the... heat of the moment. I don’t know that I trust myself.”

His expression softened, even though he was still frowning.

“I think you underestimate yourself. As you said, you are older than Dora. You are a mature, responsible female. You wouldn’t make foolish decisions.”

She appreciated his confidence, even though the term “mature, responsible female” made her cringe a little.

“I’m not sure you’re right. Do you know how close I was to asking you to make love to me this morning? Right there on your horse.”

Her clit pulsed at the memory and she felt his cock jerk beneath her bottom.

“And who would it have hurt?” he whispered, his thumb resuming the seductive circles on her hip. “I would have been delighted to pleasure you and there was no one around to witness it. Are you afraid that I would leave you with child?”

His hand slid across to her stomach as his cock jerked again.

“My seed is not currently fertile,” he added. “Although even if it were, I would never abandon our child.”

She believed him, but...

“It’s not just that.” She took a deep breath. “I am already very attracted to you. I... care for you, even though we’ve only known each other a short time. If we were... intimate—more intimate—it would be very difficult for me to leave you.”

“What if I didn’t want you to leave?” he asked quietly, and her wretched heart skipped a beat again.

Their eyes locked, then he gently nudged her lower lip with his thumb, freeing it from where she’d clamped down on the soft flesh with her teeth.

“Do you wish to leave now?”

“No,” she said honestly. She wanted to be naked in front of the fire with him, but she reminded herself again that it was too soon—and too dangerous to her fragile heart.

“Then perhaps we should talk instead. I hope the more you get to know me, the less you will fear me.”

“I’m not afraid of you—I’m afraid of myself. Of the way I react when you touch me.”

His lips suddenly twisted as his eyes gleamed wickedly.

“We were taught that the best way to overcome a fear is by exposing yourself to it.”

Her eyes widened.

“What do you mean?”

He flicked his thumb across her nipple, watching her face.

“Is that too much?”

She considered it, then shook her head. The sensation was exciting, but it didn't make her feel vulnerable.

His eyes still on her face, he began to unbutton her dress. He didn't rush. One by one he released the buttons, sliding the fabric away from her body to reveal the thin chemise underneath. It was old and well-washed and there was nothing particularly seductive about it, but the way he looked at her made her feel beautiful.

He slid his hand beneath the thin material as he had done the night before, the warmth of his rough palm against her skin making her quiver.

“And this?”

While he waited for her to answer, he gently kneaded the soft flesh.

“It feels good,” she admitted, and he smiled again.

“Too good?”

She gave a choked laugh. Was it ridiculous to be afraid of the sensations he created? Or rather her reaction to them? But he didn't look critical or disapproving; he simply waited patiently for her response. The fact that he was being so careful with her made her heart melt a little more.

I'm playing with fire, she thought, but she shook her head.

“No, not too good.”

He slid the straps of her chemise across her shoulders, taking her dress with them. The callused tips of his fingers lingered on the sensitive skin of her shoulders for a long moment before he pushed them both down, leaving her exposed to the waist. She immediately covered her breasts with her hands and he didn't try to stop her, even though his eyes gleamed silver as he watched.

Even her own hands sent tingles of pleasure down her spine—but his had felt better. Gathering her courage, she let her hands drop.

“Beautiful.”

The appreciation on his face calmed her nerves, as did the way he watched her face as he slowly cupped her breasts again. She'd been right—it did feel so much better when he touched her—and she instinctively arched into his touch.

“Look,” he ordered, his voice strained, and she obeyed.

The sight of her pale flesh overflowing his big blue hands added to the pleasure coursing through her body, a pleasure that only escalated when he tugged on her rosy, swollen nipples. Her body was quivering again, and then he raised her breast and leaned forward, his mouth covering her nipple, shockingly hot and wet and wonderful.

This was nothing like nursing a baby, she realized, clutching desperately at his horns as he curled his tongue around the taut flesh and then sucked. Fire streaked from her nipple straight to her throbbing clit and she cried out. He immediately pulled back, silver eyes going to her face.

“Too much —”

“No,” she gasped, tugging impatiently on his horns.

She caught a brief glimpse of his smile before his mouth closed over her again, sucking harder as his fingers worked her other nipple, before switching to her other breast. He went back and forth, driving her body steadily higher as she urged him on until he finally clamped down hard, his teeth scraping one swollen bud as his fingers tightened over the other and her climax swept over her.

As soon as she cried out, he pulled her into his arms, stroking her hair and murmuring praise as she shuddered against him. When she finally stopped shaking, she pulled back to look up at him. His face was warm and... affectionate, and her heart ached as a corresponding warmth filled her own chest. As she'd suspected, the physical intimacy had only made her feel closer to him.

“This was not what I intended when I came here,” she murmured.

“Did I push you too much?”

She shook her head, raising her hand to smooth away the line between his brows.

“No. I wanted everything you did.”

Which was perhaps the problem. She wanted him to touch her, wanted the sensations he created with his hands and his fingers and his tongue. But she needed time for her head to catch up with her body. And her heart.

She pulled her chemise back up, although she left her dress around her waist, then curled against him as he settled back down facing the fireplace.

“Now let’s try another type of intimacy,” she said softly. “Tell me about your father.”

CHAPTER 14



Jemel tensed at Ida's request, then forced himself to relax. How had she guessed that the subject was so difficult for him? But she had trusted him to touch her even though she felt vulnerable—the least he could do was give her the same trust.

“My mother died giving birth to me,” he said slowly, and she took his hand but remained silent. “So it was always just the two of us. He never showed any interest in another female. I was never really sure if it was because he had loved her so much—or because he had what he wanted, a son, and he didn't need another female.”

Her fingers tightened around his at the bitterness in his voice, and he forced himself to continue.

“Kember has a very rigid social structure. My father was a minor noble, very conscious of his position, and equally determined that I should better it. Do you know Lord Artek?”

“Nelly's husband? I know who he is although we've never spoken. And I've never heard anyone call him Lord Artek before.”

He shrugged.

“From what he told me, he abandoned the title after the war.”

He'd often wondered how difficult it had been for the other male to abandon

his position—a position his father would literally have killed to have.

“Artek’s father was the ruling lord of our House, and my father was determined to impress him. He brought me up to believe that my duty was to my House and more specifically to the lord of our House.”

“Was he a bad ruler?” she asked when he paused.

“Not particularly. Cold, even to his own son, but he put the interests of our House first.”

“What happened?”

“The war on Vizal happened. A stupid war about nothing more than bragging rights over a piece of territory. All first born sons on Kember were called to fight, and of course my father was thrilled to volunteer me. I had been well trained as a warrior, and he ordered me to make sure I covered myself with glory and returned full of medals and acclamations.”

It had even seemed reasonable at the time.

“But the reality of war is nothing like the way it is told in history books, even when it accurately reflects the number of casualties. Each of those numbers is a person, someone I knew, someone who died.”

She twisted around to face him, her eyes worried.

“You don’t have to keep going.”

“I think I want to. I’ve never talked about it before. My squad was there— they know what it was like, but we never discuss it.”

“Never?”

“Only indirectly. We all know why Naffon is afraid of enclosed places and make sure he is never in that position, but it’s never said out loud.”

“Didn’t your military try and help after the war?”

A bitter smile twisted his lips.

“It is difficult to accept help from someone who has never experienced it. Who talks about finding peace and has never lived through a nightmare.”

“Which I suppose brings us back to your father?”

He nodded.

“I was injured in the second year of the war, badly injured, and sent home. I was so grateful to leave, but my father was irate. How could I have let myself be injured? Where were my medals? Why hadn’t my rank increased?”

He could still hear the echoes of his father’s voice.

“I told him how terrible it was, how much I hated it, but he didn’t listen. My injuries were severe enough that I was released from service, but as soon as I could walk, my father volunteered me again.”

Her eyes widened, tears pooling in the green depths.

“How could he do that to you?”

“Because his ambitions were more important than his son.”

He’d come to terms with that eventually.

“But if he was the one who volunteered you, surely you could have refused to go?”

“Perhaps. At the time I was too shocked and too angry to consider it.” And too hurt.

“So you went back?”

“I did. Somehow I found myself in a command position and my rank did increase, just as he wanted.” He’d acquired a collection of meaningless medals as well.

“Was he proud?”

“I don’t know. I never saw him again. I even changed my name so that nothing that I achieved would reward him in any way.”

He stared into the fire, remembering the day he’d walked out of the records office, his new identity a welcome relief.

“And you switched your loyalty to your men,” she said softly, and he gave

her a startled glance.

“How did you know?”

“Because you are a decent, honorable male.” She twisted around to face him, going up on her knees to put her hands on his face. “Any father should have been thrilled to have you as a son.”

She kissed him. Not passionately, but gently, soothingly, and somewhere deep inside the lingering ache of his father’s betrayal eased a little.

But it also left him feeling oddly vulnerable and he suddenly understood what she’d meant about intimacy. Exposing his feelings had left him with a feeling of exposure, almost of embarrassment, despite the fact that she’d reacted with understanding and compassion.

Rather than continue the conversation, he gently pulled her dress back up over her shoulders, then started to button it. Her cheeks flushed prettily as his hands brushed against her breasts in the process, and his arousal immediately flared again but he forced himself to ignore it.

“Thank you for trusting me,” she said as he helped her to her feet. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She paused at the door, gave him one last smile, and then hurried out of the room.

He didn’t sleep that night, his thoughts circling in an endless loop. As soon as dawn began to streak the horizon, he gave up the effort. After he dressed, he went to the kitchen only to find her sitting at the table, staring thoughtfully at her mug. When she looked up and saw him, the sweet smile that crossed her face made his chest ache.

He wasn’t sure what he expected her to say—what he wanted her to say—but she only rose and went to fill the kettle.

“Since I know you don’t want coffee, how about some tea?”

“Thank you.”

He crossed the room silently to her side. She made a startled noise when she turned to find him right behind her, and he drew her into his arms.

“Good morning, my sweet.”

He kissed her. She tasted of coffee, but she transformed it into something rich and delicious and he feasted on her mouth, relishing the way she melted against him, her hands clasping his horns once more.

“Now that is an excellent way to begin the day,” he said when he finally raised his head, his troubled night no longer important.

“I agree, but I have a question.”

She concentrated on one of the buttons on his shirt.

“What is it?”

“How would you feel if I agreed to work for you, but I told you that it meant we couldn’t spend any more evenings together like last night?”

“I would be disappointed.” *And hurt.* Perhaps even more so now that he had told her about his past, but he kept his tone light. “I would rather have kisses than cooking.”

She gave him a startled look and he managed a laugh.

“Does that surprise you?”

“No. I like kisses too. It’s just... It’s a risk to move here—not just for me, but for my family. I don’t want whatever happens—or doesn’t happen—between us to jeopardize them.”

He drew back as if she’d struck him.

“Do you think I am the kind of male who would force you to leave if you rejected my advances?”

“No,” she said quietly. “I wouldn’t have gone as far as we have if I thought that. But this is my family and I’m responsible for them. I needed to be sure we were clear. Wouldn’t you have done the same if it affected your men?”

He nodded as his anger faded. She was right to make sure that everything was clear.

“Then I hope you’ll understand this next part.”

Her attention was back on his buttons and he was already dreading what she would say next.

“I think we should have a moratorium on kissing. For one week,” she added quickly. “If we can get through a week without kissing or touching, then I’ll agree to formally accept your offer and move in a week from today.”

He was right—he hated the idea. But he understood.

“Very well. Beginning when?”

Mischief sparkled in her eyes as she looked over at the clock on the wall.

“In five minutes?” she suggested, then gasped as he tugged her impatiently into his arms. “Or perhaps ten.”

It was actually fifteen, but he did his best to make sure the memory of those fifteen minutes would last all week.

CHAPTER 15



Exactly a week later, Ida looked around the bedroom she shared with Tommy and smiled. Her quilt was on her bed, Tommy's precious spaceship blanket on his, and their clothes filled the small closet and dresser. The rest of her furniture and belongings were stored in one of the outbuildings, although Temel had offered to let her change anything in the house she wanted.

As much as she appreciated the offer, those things represented her past, and she was determined to focus on the future. The carved wooden crib that had once been Tommy's was set up in Dora's room, Tommy's books and toys were on a set of shelves she'd brought from his old bedroom, and her album of photos was stored in the bedside table. Nothing else was important.

She shook her head as she glanced out the window—barely midafternoon and everything had been done. Then again, Temel had only waited for the sky to lighten before heading into town. With four large males at her disposal, it had taken surprisingly little time to pack up ten years of her life. Dora had accompanied them as well, slipping away briefly to mail a few letters, but she didn't seem distressed by the move.

They had retrieved Lady as well. As she'd hoped, Temel had been able to recover her carriage as well, although she hadn't been present. It had simply shown up in the stables one morning, all traces of the muddy water removed.

As they loaded the wagons, she'd seen Mrs. Raven watching from the other side of the street, her eyes wide and scandalized. She was a short, stout woman with a round, rosy face, but as with her husband her appearance was deceptive. In her case it hid a bitter, mean-spirited heart, but Ida had just given her a cheerful wave then ignored her.

No doubt she would be the subject of town gossip for weeks to come. *They'll probably think I'm setting up some sort of reverse harem*, she thought with a smile. But she didn't want four males—she only wanted one. The one who had waited so patiently all week.

They had kept to the moratorium. *Mostly*. There had been a few brief slip-ups, for which she was equally guilty, but they'd done their best. She continued to join him in the study each evening, but they'd quickly learned not to try and share the settee but to sit in separate chairs as they talked. Saying good night was another danger zone—it was far too easy to lean towards him for a good night kiss. Or that first moment in the morning when he walked into the kitchen and their eyes met.

But the limitation on touching had also encouraged them to talk. She suspected she knew more about him than anyone else, everything other than the details of the war, but she had no intention of forcing him to relive those days.

And he knows just as much about me. The knowledge should have made her feel vulnerable. Instead it made her feel safe. If he knew everything and still... liked her, she had nothing to fear. And tonight they could do more than just talk. She hugged her excitement to her chest and went to find Dora.

Her daughter was leaning over Angel's crib, setting the colorful mobile dancing. A little to her surprise, when she'd told Dora that she thought moving to the farm would be best for all of them, her daughter only nodded.

"I suppose it's as good a place as any for now."

"If you're really unhappy here, I think I have enough put by for a small place in town."

She didn't believe that Dora would be happy there, but she wanted to give her the choice. Her daughter only shook her head, an odd look on her face.

“No. I think Wainwright belongs in the past.”

Dora didn't look unhappy now, Ida decided, only thoughtful. But then she'd been like that all week—quiet and thoughtful.

“All moved in?” she asked softly.

“Yep.”

“I want you to be happy here.”

“I know, Mama.”

Dora left the crib and came over to give her a quick, impulsive hug. Her slender body felt more fragile than normal, and Ida frowned.

“Are you losing weight?”

“No.”

Her daughter rolled her eyes at the question, the familiar gesture reassuring her, even though she resolved silently to keep an eye on how much Dora was eating.

“I thought I'd make a cake for tonight as sort of a moving-in celebration. Would you like chocolate?”

Something flickered in Dora's eyes before she shrugged.

“I don't mind. Whatever you make will be delicious.”

She laughed. “I hope so. I'm sure Kalpar won't hesitate to tell me if it doesn't meet his standards.”

Dora rolled her eyes again, a more normal smile crossing her face.

“He's definitely picky.”

He was, which made his praise even more satisfying. Everyone else was simply enthusiastic about food. Thank goodness they'd also stocked up on supplies while they were in town. Mr. Armstrong had fulfilled the order, chatting easily with Temel, while his second wife eyed her almost as suspiciously as Mrs. Raven. She wasn't going to miss the town gossips at all.

“Do you want to come help me in the kitchen?”

“In a little while. I have a few things I want to do first, while Angel is sleeping.”

“All right. Whenever you feel like it.”

As soon as she walked through the kitchen door, a big arm grabbed her and Temel pulled her into his arms with a satisfied growl.

“Gods, I’ve missed this.”

“Me too.” She reached around and gave his butt a playful squeeze. “I’m surprised you waited this long.”

“If I’d kissed you this morning, we would never have made it to town.” His eyes gleamed silver as he gazed down at her mouth. “And if I’d kissed you while we were in town, we would probably have scandalized the whole community.”

“Do you think we’re safe now?” she asked, licking her lips provocatively.

“No. But my patience is at an end.”

He started to lower his head, then took a quick look at the row of windows, muttered a curse, and yanked her into the pantry closet.

The first touch of his mouth against hers sent a shock of pure pleasure through her body, then a flush of heat as his tongue swept over her bottom lip and slipped into her mouth. She’d thought she remembered how good he tasted, but the memory couldn’t compare to the reality. Her hands slid up to clutch his horns and he groaned into her mouth, his arms tightening around her.

Somehow she found herself pinned against the pantry wall, one big hand holding her in place for his kiss while the other tugged impatiently at her skirts, dragging the fabric up over her thighs. The cool air against her leg made her shiver—or perhaps it was due to the anticipation of what was to come. He hadn’t stopped kissing her, and every stroke of his tongue promised more.

She whimpered into his mouth as he found the opening in her drawers and a

thick finger slipped inside to trace her slick folds.

“You’re already ready for me,” he growled approvingly, nipping at her lower lip as that big finger probed at her entrance. Her sheath fluttered as he pushed deeper, even the single digit stretching her.

Despite the impatience he’d displayed earlier, he took his time, working her open before settling into a demanding rhythm as his thumb found her swollen clit.

A few quick strokes of his clever fingers was all it took to send her flying.

“Perfect,” he purred as she trembled against him. “You are so beautiful like this.”

He resumed the delicate strokes over her still sensitive clit as his gaze dropped to her breasts.

“I want to put my mouth on you again.” Her back arched instinctively and he gave her a wicked smile. “And not just on those luscious breasts.”

Her breath caught in her throat at the thought. She’d heard of such a thing, of course, but she’d never experienced it. The suggestion should have scandalized her, but they both felt her channel pulse around his still embedded finger.

“You... you would like that?” she whispered.

“I would love that,” he growled, his voice strained. “I would love putting my mouth on you and licking that pretty little clit until you scream for me. Would you like that too?”

“Oh, God, yes.”

She’d never thought the idea would excite her so much. She was on the verge of another climax just from the prospect and the slick glide of his thumb across her throbbing clit. Another scandalous thought occurred to her and she licked her lips.

“Can I do that too? Put my mouth on you?”

His eyes blazed silver as he fumbled between their bodies for the fastening of

his pants —

“Mama. Where are you, Mama?”

Tommy’s voice shocked them both back into reality. He quickly set her back on the floor and tugged down her skirts while she tried to pat her hair into place, hoping it wasn’t too disheveled. Since he hadn’t removed any of his clothing, he looked as neat as ever.

“Tonight,” he growled, and opened the pantry door.

“There you are.” Tommy darted over and hugged her, then gave them both a curious look. “Whatcha doing in the closet?”

“Just checking supplies,” she said as lightly as possible, even though she knew her cheeks were burning.

Luckily he accepted the explanation, far more interested in the coin he held out to her.

“Lookit! I found buried treasure.”

“That’s very exciting,” Temel agreed, giving her ass a quick squeeze before bending down to look at the coin. “Where did you find it?”

“It’s a secret. Is that okay?” Tommy asked anxiously.

“Of course it is.” Temel smiled and ruffled his hair. “Was it buried very deep?”

Her chest ached as Tommy launched into an excited explanation, inadvertently revealing the location of the coin as he talked. This past week had been so good for him. All of the males had accepted him so easily. He accompanied Naffon to milk the cows each morning and drew pictures in Temel’s office. He’d even accompanied Kalpar for a long exciting afternoon of moving cattle. She suspected that Kalpar somewhat regretted suggesting it, but he’d been very patient with Tommy, tempering his usual mocking comments.

She intended to start his lessons again next week, but she’d let him have his freedom to run and play this week. Temel had also suggested teaching him some basic self-defense skills. She wasn’t entirely sure about the idea, but

she was happy that he wanted to spend time with Tommy.

While the other two talked, she set about gathering the ingredients for her cake. Dora and Angel joined them a short time later, followed soon after by Naffon. The big male seemed to have a second sense for when Dora was in the kitchen.

Their relationship was... odd. Dora still never addressed him directly and he seemed to have given up on talking to her, although she frequently caught him watching Dora. She would have put it down to nothing more than another male enchanted by her pretty daughter—except that Dora was definitely watching him as well. Perhaps she should try talking to her again. Tomorrow.

Tonight she had other plans.

CHAPTER 16



Ida's heart was pounding so hard as she entered the study that evening she suspected that Temel could hear it from across the room. She closed the door behind her and flicked the lock he'd installed two days ago.

He was standing in front of the fireplace watching her, his eyes blazing silver. His shadow loomed against the wall, the huge horned silhouette making her breath catch. For the first time in a long while she was very conscious of the fact that he was not human. But then he held out his hand and the strangeness vanished as she hurried over to him.

"Sorry it took so long," she whispered. "Tommy didn't want to settle down. He's so excited about living here."

Permanently, she hoped, but it was too soon for that.

"You are always worth waiting for, my sweet."

Despite the courteous words, she could hear the strain in his voice as his eyes swept over her.

"You have a new dress."

"An old one, actually. And a nightgown, not a dress," she added, blushing. One she had once planned to wear on her wedding night but it hadn't been ready in time. She wasn't even sure why she'd kept it, but watching Temel's

face as he surveyed the frivolous froth of silk and lace, she was glad she had. “It’s a little tighter than it used to be.”

He traced his finger along the low neckline, her breasts already threatening to spill over the tight bodice.

“I do not consider that a fault. Now remove it.”

Her breath caught, her heart racing even faster.

“Please,” he said, gently, despite the strain she could hear in his voice. “Let me see you, my sweet.”

She gave a shaky nod, and started to untie the ribbons holding the gown on her shoulders but her fingers trembled so much she couldn’t manage it. He put a big hand over hers, stilling the jerky movements.

“Do you want me to help you?”

“Yes, please.”

He carefully untied the ribbons, the silken ends falling down her sides, but she clutched the gown against her chest before it could follow. The silver in his eyes softened as he studied her.

“Do you want to wait? Take more time?”

“No,” she whispered, took a deep breath, and let go of the gown.

It cascaded to her feet, the silk caressing her body as it fell, leaving her completely exposed to him. His eyes blazed silver as he studied her and then he sank to his knees in front of her.

“Exquisite,” he murmured, his big, warm hands sliding down across her hips.

His eyes were completely silver now as he reached for her foot. She hadn’t expected that and she had to put a hand on his broad shoulder for balance as he ran his thumb across the arch, then stroked a callused palm up over her ankle to the delicate skin of her calf.

He did the same thing with her other leg, then let his hands drift up to her knees, pausing to circle them.

“So soft,” he murmured, then trailed his fingers up her inner thighs.

Her legs were shaking, and she was so aroused she felt a silky drop trickle down her thighs. He caught it with his thumb, licking away the tiny droplet before urging her legs further apart. Even from above she could see the plump folds of her sex, already flushed and glistening. A sudden bout of shyness urged her to close her legs but he held them easily in place as he studied her. He suddenly leaned forward, pressing his face against her as he inhaled deeply.

“Temel,” she gasped, her hips bucking forward instinctively.

He growled, those strong, talented hands moving around to cup her bottom and yank her even closer. His tongue swiped the full length of her slit before flicking over her throbbing clit. Once. Twice. The third time, he closed his lips around it and sucked.

It was like lightning exploding in her brain. Her nails dug into his shoulders as her entire body shuddered and she cried out, writhing against him as he held her firmly against his mouth, prolonging her climax until she could barely stand.

He finally gentled his touch, but his tongue continued to explore, licking over every inch of her. She moaned, the sound echoing in the silent room as her arousal started to build again. Her head fell back helplessly, her eyes closing, but then he thrust one of those thick fingers deep inside her, and her eyes flew open.

He was watching her, his gaze fixed on her face, his mouth still against her sex, and those silver eyes glowing. She stared down at him, completely unable to look away. He found the little nub of her clit again, suckling it gently, his eyes still on her face. He did something different with his tongue, a swirling motion that made her gasp as he brought her closer to the brink once more. The swirl of his tongue and the occasional flick of his thumb across the tiny pucker of her rear hole made her shudder as sensation overtook her.

Her sex clenched around his finger and her inner muscles tightened in anticipation as the ball of heat at her core began to expand outward. Her breath stuttered in her chest when he looked up at her, holding her firmly in

place as he drew her clit into his mouth again.

“Temel!”

Her cry echoed through the room as the waves of ecstasy crashed over her. His eyes still didn't waver, those piercing silver eyes locked on her, and her body convulsed in his grasp. She threw back her head, her mouth open in a wordless scream as she rode out the orgasm.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, as she finally came back to reality.

She sagged against him, his words filling her with pleasure, then blinked in surprise. Somehow they had ended up on the floor in front of the fireplace, but she didn't even remember moving.

“You told me you were going to make me scream. You didn't tell me you were going to make me pass out.”

His eyes immediately darkened with concern.

“Are you all right?”

“I'm wonderful,” she assured him. “That was even better than the whispers I heard.”

“Whispers?”

“There's not a lot of talk about sex in Wainwright, just secrets told behind closed doors.”

“But you've never...”

“Never.”

His eyes began to gleam again, and she smiled up at him.

“And as soon as I can move I intend to put my mouth on you.”

“Later,” he growled. “I want to be inside you first.”

“Then you'll have to take your clothes off.”

He immediately stripped his shirt off over his head, muscles rippling beneath that gleaming blue skin. He rose long enough to toe off his boots and

unfasten his pants. He'd been completely dressed the entire time he was feasting on her and somehow that had only added to the eroticism of the act.

Then he stripped off his pants and she lost the ability to think.

His cock sprang out between them, long and thick and a much darker blue than the rest of his skin. Fascinated, she rose up on her knees to examine it and discovered it was covered with an elaborate pattern of swirling ridges, ridges that pulsed when she ran a tentative finger across them.

“Were you born this way?” she whispered, tracing her finger along one of the ridges, rough against her finger.

“Yes,” he groaned as her breath wafted across his cock.

Remembered her previous intention, she leaned closer, retracing the path of her finger with her tongue. He groaned again and then she was on the floor with his huge body looming over her, his horns gleaming in the firelight.

CHAPTER 17



*S*lowly, Temel reminded himself, trying to control the desire raging through his system. He knew she was not untouched, but he'd also felt the impossibly tight grip of her sweet little cunt around his finger.

He needed to prepare her, and he forced himself to pause long enough to taste the rosy tips of her breasts, remembering how he had drawn her climax from her with only his fingers and his mouth. She responded just as eagerly this time when he suckled the stiff little peak. Her channel was still slick and swollen from her previous climax, but she opened around his finger. She gasped when he tried to add a second finger, but he bit gently on her nipple and pressed it into her just as her climax swept over her.

A distant part of his brain urged him to continue preparing her, but it was too late. He needed to be inside her now—he needed her hot little cunt squeezing his cock, her sweet juices bathing his length as she convulsed around him.

He lowered his body over hers, slowly stroking the tip of his cock between her soft, slick folds, gritting his teeth against the urge to impale her. Her arousal coated his shaft as the ridges of his cock rubbed against the tiny pearl of her clit. She arched against him, her beautiful eyes dark with passion.

“Please, Temel. I need you.”

Need, his heart sang as he probed as gently as possible at her small entrance. Gods, he needed her as well, needed her with a hunger he had never felt

before. Her eyes were wide, emerald green flecks catching the firelight as he lowered his mouth to hers for a quick possessive kiss.

Her delicate flesh began to part around his cock, then enveloped the broad head in a hot, silken embrace. He kept his hips perfectly still, despite her gasping moans, giving her a moment to adjust to the penetration. But his body was crying out for release, his seed rushing to his cock as the tight little muscles gripped him.

He groaned against her mouth, fighting back the climax he so desperately needed. Then her hands clamped down on his horns, her body rising to meet him and he was lost. He pushed forward, sinking into her slowly, perfectly, the tight channel straining to accept him as it parted around the thickness of his cock.

When he finally buried himself completely, he paused, his breath coming in harsh pants, and found her looking up at him, her eyes wide and dazed, but full of trust. The aching sweetness of her acceptance flowed over him and his body finally surged into action. He withdrew, the friction of his ridges against her slick walls making them both gasp and then slammed back into her, their bodies meeting with the harsh slap of flesh against flesh.

She cried out and arched into his next thrust, her hands clawing at his shoulders, and he increased his pace. Their bodies rocked together as he plunged into her over and over again, pleasure swamping him. Her small nails dug into his skin as she gasped his name, begging him to move faster and harder until there was nothing but the heat of her flesh surrounding his cock and the tight clasp of her cunt, pleasure rolling through him in a violent wave as his seed erupted into her body.

His cock jerked inside her, over and over again, before he collapsed onto his forearms as his orgasm drained the last of his energy. She was still trembling beneath him and he brushed her tousled hair from her face and kissed her forehead.

“Perfect.”

She smiled up at him, her eyes heavy.

“Worth waiting for?”

He'd been waiting his whole life for her, but he only nodded.

"Without a doubt." He brushed a gentle thumb over her swollen lips. "I want you to sleep with me tonight. In my bed."

She hesitated, biting down on that swollen lip.

"What if Tommy wakes up and sees that I'm gone?"

"What would he do?"

"Either go back to sleep or come looking for me, just like he did earlier."

"Then we'll hear him coming."

She laughed, the vibration rippling through their still joined bodies.

"You have a point." She reached up and touched his cheek. "I want to stay with you, but I'll have to leave before it gets light."

"That gives us a lot of time," he said, smiling into her eyes, his heart swelling with satisfaction.

He reluctantly pulled free, then reached for her pretty gown before picking her up and carrying her to his bed. Her eyes were already half closed when he gently wiped a cleansing cloth over the swollen pink folds. The evidence of his possession satisfied him far more than it should, and he smiled as he joined her, tucking her against his side.

"Sleep," he said when she stirred. "You need your rest."

She was asleep almost before he finished talking and he quickly followed her, his body limp with satisfaction.

He woke before dawn to her mouth on his cock. He groaned and stroked a hand down her back as she looked up, green eyes sparkling.

"You said I could do this later. It's later."

He laughed as he shifted to allow her to kneel between his legs.

"Tell me if I do something you don't like," she added.

"I don't think that's possible," he said, then groaned as she flicked her tongue

across the base of his shaft. His fingers dug into the sheets as he tried to remain still for her exploration.

She took her time, examining him with fingers and mouth, teasing and tasting his skin as her sweet breath fanned over his heated length. The warmth of her mouth surrounded the head of his cock and his eyes closed as she began to suck on him, a little timidly at first, and then with increasing confidence. The pleasure was almost more than he could bear as her mouth and hands worked him, drawing him closer and closer to the brink.

He tangled his hand in her hair, and she looked up at him, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction. She kept her eyes on his face as she took him deeper, so deep that he felt her throat flex around the head of his shaft.

With a hoarse shout, he came, his seed filling her mouth as pleasure swept over him. His body strained towards her, desperate for every ounce of pleasure she could give him, as his climax went on and on. When it finally ebbed, she gave him one last long lick, then lifted her head and smiled at him.

“Was that all right?”

He pulled her up his body for a long, lazy kiss, letting his hands skate down over the graceful curve of her back to the lush swell of her ass.

“I don’t believe it could have been better,” he said when he finally released her mouth.

“That sounds like a challenge,” she murmured, snuggling against him even as she sighed. “I have to leave soon.”

“I know.”

But neither one of them stirred, and he felt the oddest emotion surge through him.

It took him a long time to identify it as contentment.

CHAPTER 18



Ida hummed contentedly as she went about the now familiar routine of preparing breakfast in the big kitchen. Her body still hummed with satisfaction, a slight, pleasant ache between her legs reminding her of the previous night with every step.

Even thinking about it made her stomach flutter with excitement—the memory of his touch, the hungry look on his face as he kissed her, the incredible sensations as he brought her to climax after climax. And the feelings he’d created inside her were as wonderful as the physical pleasure he’d given her.

As she stirred the oatmeal, her humming turned to singing, and she knew she had a foolish smile on her face. She’d realized over the past week that she had grown to love him, but she hadn’t realized how much that love would enhance their physical connection. She suspected he felt the same way, but she wasn’t as convinced that he would allow himself to admit it yet.

But we have time, she thought with a giddy smile.

Dora appeared in the doorway, gave her a startled look, and shook her head.

“You’re obviously in a good mood this morning.”

She shrugged happily.

“Why shouldn’t I be? Everything is going well. We’re settled here. The town

didn't burn down around our ears yesterday. And Tommy's still asleep so I had a quiet moment to enjoy my coffee before I started on breakfast."

Her daughter didn't respond, just pulled a loaf of bread out of the bread box and started to slice it, and Ida gave her a puzzled look.

"Did something happen yesterday? You're acting odd."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Dora carefully avoided looking at her as she put the slices of bread in the oven and pulled out the butter. Ida sighed and tried again.

"Did you at least get your letters mailed?"

Dora's face turned pale, and then she turned and ran out of the room. Ida was trying to decide if she should go after her when Temel appeared in the kitchen. His eyes gleamed as they traveled over her, and even though she was fully dressed, she felt naked under that heated gaze.

"I missed you after you left," he murmured as he joined her at the stove.

"I missed you too." She took a deep breath as she began to ladle the oatmeal into bowls. "I was thinking. What if we let Tommy know I will be sleeping in your room from now on? Then I wouldn't have to leave."

She'd expected him to agree immediately. Instead his body went still, and she gave him a worried glance.

"What is it?"

"I am not sure that I am ready for our relationship to become public."

A sudden pain pierced her chest.

"Why not? Are you ashamed of me?"

"Of course not." His instant denial made her feel a little better, but her heart sank as he continued. "It's just—I hoped this farm would provide a sanctuary for my squad."

"I know."

“But it doesn’t seem right to seek my own happiness while they are still struggling.”

That wretched sense of duty had reared its ugly head.

“Don’t you think they already know?” she asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

“They may suspect, but it’s not the same as flaunting it in their faces.”

Rage swept over her so fast she felt dizzy.

“Flaunting it? You mean you’d rather treat me like some dirty little secret? Fucking me in your study behind closed doors and ignoring me everywhere else. Unless you need something cooked or cleaned, of course.”

An answering anger started to flare on his face.

“I’ve never treated you like that and you know it.”

“Do I?”

They glared at each other before he suddenly reached for her, yanking her against his big body. She wasn’t sure if he was going to kiss her or yell at her, and perhaps he wasn’t either. Before he could decide, they were interrupted by a sleepy voice from the back hallway.

“Why are you hugging Mama, Temel?”

“Indeed.” Kalpar’s amused drawl echoed the question as he came in from the back porch.

Temel gave a frustrated growl and stormed off towards his study. The same frustration made her own eyes sting with tears and she hurried over to Tommy before Kalpar could say anything else.

“Let’s get you dressed, sweetheart.”

Before he could object, she bundled him out of the kitchen and into his bedroom. Dora popped her head around the door, looked from her to Tommy, then sighed and disappeared again. Terrific. She’d just have to hunt her down later.

Once she dressed Tommy, she sent him ahead to the kitchen. She heard the low rumble of Naffon's voice, but before she could follow Tommy, Temel intercepted her in the hallway. She saw the yearning in his eyes before he hardened his expression.

"You know I think of you—all of you—as my family," he said. "I will not abandon you, but my squad is also my family and I need time to consider what is best for all of us."

Her temper flared again.

"Is that your way of saying 'leave me alone?'"

"Of course not, but neither do I want you to believe that you are my dirty little secret."

He gave her a long, assessing look, but before she could think of the right response he dipped his head and walked away. *Dammit.*

She forced down her anger and returned to the kitchen. She was quite aware that Kalpar was watching her, but she did her best to ignore him. Naffon didn't seem to know anything about what had happened, talking cheerfully to Tommy despite a few quick glances towards Dora's room. Both males left at the same time, taking Tommy with them, and she sank down at the kitchen table, exhausted by the effort of pretending everything was all right.

At last she hauled herself to her feet and made a pot of tea. Tears pricked her eyes as she looked at it and she dashed at them angrily. She'd always preferred to confront a problem head on. With Dora hiding out in her room and the rest of the house empty, this was the perfect time to force Temel to talk to her.

She loaded up the tea tray, adding a plate of cookies at the last minute, then marched past the now gleaming dining room table beneath the sparkling chandelier and into his study. She was so prepared for battle that it took her a moment to realize that the room was empty.

She placed the tray on the desk and threw herself down in his big office chair. Of all the times for him to decide to leave. Unless he was just avoiding her of course. She swung around towards the bookcase and then her breath caught in her throat.

One of Tommy's drawings had been neatly framed and placed on an empty shelf right next to the desk. A drawing that included all of them from Temel to Angel, as well as Kalpar and Naffon. Tears sprang to her eyes as she picked up the image and slowly traced the lines that connected her hand with Temel's. Perhaps he really did consider them all his family after all.

She was still staring at the drawing when the comm unit behind his desk buzzed, immediately followed by a frantic voice.

"Temel, Temel. Are you there? Come in, please."

She bit her lip as the message repeated, the caller sounding even more frantic. There was a flashing green button on the device and she pressed it tentatively.

"Hello?"

It took her a moment to realize that she had to release the button in order to hear the other speaker.

"Where's Temel?" the caller demanded.

"I don't know. He's not here."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Ida."

"The human cook?"

"Yes," she snapped, annoyed at the label. "Who are you?"

"Harkan. Rosalie is my mate."

"Oh, she's Mary's friend."

The light dawned. Rosie had also mated an alien and lived on a nearby farm. Because she was heavily pregnant she hadn't felt like traveling and Ida hadn't met her yet.

"Is Mary there?" Harkan demanded.

"No, and I don't know where she is either. Why?"

“Because I think Rosalie is in labor. I contacted her doctor, but it’s too early. He wasn’t expecting her to go so soon and they haven’t been able to reach him yet.”

“How early?” she asked.

“A couple of weeks.”

“Then there’s nothing to panic about,” she said soothingly. “Sometimes babies just come a little early. I’m sure she’ll be perfectly fine.”

“You know about these things?”

“A little. I’ve had a baby of my own and helped the midwife on occasion.”

“Then you have to come and help Rosalie. Please,” he added frantically. “She’s scared and I don’t know how to help her.”

She bit her lip, but she couldn’t leave a woman to have a baby by herself.

“All right. Where’s your farm?”

He snapped out some quick directions before signing off, and she hurried away to tell Dora where she was going. But Dora and Angel weren’t there either. She scribbled a quick note and left it next to the crib before dashing into the empty kitchen.

“Dammit, where is everyone?” she muttered.

She tried yelling out the back door, but no one answered. Still swearing under her breath, she raced off to the stable. Saddling her mare was a lot harder and took a lot longer than she remembered, but she finally made it into the saddle and set off past the empty fields, hoping she was in time.

CHAPTER 19



Jemel stared absently at the countryside as his horse moved rhythmically beneath him. He'd tried to work, but memories of Ida filled the study and he couldn't stand being in there any longer. Fortunately, he'd made it to the stable without encountering anyone, but the ride had not cleared his head as he'd hoped. Instead his thoughts tumbled around in endless circles.

Her accusation that she was his 'dirty little secret' had been ridiculous. He'd never made any attempt to hide his feelings about her. Although he'd only mentioned her to Borgaz, he was quite sure that both Naffon and Kalpar were aware of his feelings. And yet...

He'd never touched her in front of them, never called her an affectionate name, or mentioned the time they spent together. *Had* he been trying to hide their relationship?

He'd been so happy when the week had ended and she'd agreed to move in. And then last night had been everything he could possibly have hoped for. He'd never felt as close to another person. Even after she left that morning, he'd been filled with happiness. But then he happened to glance out the window.

Naffon was crossing to the milking barn. He obviously thought he was alone and he'd abandoned his usual cheerful posture. His shoulders slumped

wearily, his whole posture so evocative of despair that Temel's heart ached for him. That was when the first doubt had entered his mind.

How could he flaunt—he winced—*demonstrate* his own happiness while his males were so troubled. He was responsible for them, both physically and emotionally. His jaw clenched as he reminded himself of his duty. Of the need to stay focused on his role as leader.

But his chest ached at the memory of Ida's accusing eyes, and the sight of her fighting back the tears.

He thought he was doing the right thing for his squad. Wasn't he? He wasn't in the habit of asking advice, preferring to shoulder his burdens alone, but did the advice Borgaz had given him apply here too? Should he simply ask them?

They'll insist they want my happiness, he realized immediately, but that didn't mean it would be easy for them. His thoughts made another loop before he sighed and reined in his horse. This was getting him nowhere.

Talk to Ida, an inner voice urged. Admittedly he'd tried to explain but he'd done it while she was still reeling from what she obviously considered a rejection. If he could reassure her that he cared—that he loved her—perhaps she could help him come up with a solution.

The thought pleased him and he headed home with a lighter heart, urging his horse into a gallop as his determination increased. He was smiling by the time he walked into the kitchen, but he knew immediately that something was wrong.

Dora was crying quietly, tears running down her pale cheeks. Tommy was looking anxiously from Naffon to Kalpar. Naffon was scowling and Kalpar was looking more sardonic than usual, his eyes glowing white. Tommy jumped up as soon as he saw him, racing over to wrap his arms around Temel's legs.

“You'll fix it, won't you? Promise me.”

“Of course I will,” he promised recklessly. “But what's wrong?”

“Mama's gone,” Dora and Tommy said at the same time, and the world literally swayed around him.

“Ida’s gone?”

“Yes. Your cook appears to have flown the coop.”

He could hear the concern beneath Kalpar’s mockery, but it didn’t stop him from rounding angrily on his friend.

“She is much more than that and you know it.”

Kalpar raised an eyebrow.

“Ah, but does she?”

She couldn’t possibly have left because of their argument, could she? *No*. No matter how angry she might have been with him, she would never have left her children behind.

“When was the last time anyone saw her?” he demanded.

“At breakfast.” Naffon looked as grim as he’d ever seen him. “We left after that and took Tommy over to the long meadow to see the new lambs.”

“I didn’t even say goodbye,” Tommy said, his mouth trembling.

He reached down and picked him up, patting the boy’s thin shoulders when he flung his arms around his neck.

“When did you see her last, Dora?”

She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

“Before that. But when I took Angel out for a walk, she’d already washed the dishes.”

Two hours, three at most. A thought suddenly struck him. He’d been in such a hurry to return to the house that he hadn’t really been paying attention, but he didn’t remember seeing the riding mare in the stall next to his horse.

“Naffon, can you check and see if the mare is gone?”

The male nodded and hurried off.

“She probably just went to visit Mary,” he said, doing his best to keep his voice calm for the boy’s sake. “I’ll contact Borgaz and ask.”

Kalpar frowned but didn't comment. Tommy refused to let go of him so he carried him into the study with him. His chest ached at the sight of the tea tray on his desk—a tray with two cups. She'd come to talk to him and he hadn't been there. The drawing he'd framed was lying on the desk as well. Had she understood the significance? And if she had, why had she left?

He quickly contacted Borgaz.

"Have you seen Ida?" he demanded as soon as the other male answered.

"No. We went on a picnic earlier and were away from the house."

From the lazy satisfaction in Borgaz's voice, he could guess that the picnic had entailed much more than food. Perhaps if he hadn't been so foolish, he could have taken Ida on a similar picnic.

"Why?" Borgaz asked when he didn't respond, his voice sharpening. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm sure everything is fine." Aware of Tommy's pale face, he kept his voice calm. "But Ida went out earlier and she hasn't returned."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

Borgaz didn't wait for an answer before signing off.

"Is he coming to help?" Tommy whispered.

"Yes, son. Don't worry. We'll find her."

They both looked up as Naffon strode in.

"The mare's gone, along with the blue saddle."

At least they knew she was on horseback, although that meant she could be anywhere in a wide radius.

"Could she have gone to visit Harkan and Rosie?" Naffon suggested.

Ida had never mentioned Rosie, but it was a possibility, and he allowed himself to hope as he quickly tried to contact Harkan. There was no response.

"That's odd. They haven't been going very far since Rosie is so close to her

due date.”

“Maybe they went on a picnic too,” Tommy suggested, his voice trembling.

“Maybe they did. We’ll keep trying to contact him. In the meantime, we should set up a search grid.”

Naffon nodded grimly and went to spread a map of their land over the dining room table. Another pang of guilt hit him at the gleaming surface and the faint scent of citrus oil. She’d done so much to make the house comfortable and he’d done too little to acknowledge it.

Which is going to change the moment she returns.

He refused to admit there was any other possibility.

“Perhaps she went into town,” Kalpar suggested as they bent over the map.

Tommy’s face turned dead white.

“The creek,” he whispered, and Temel gave him a reassuring hug.

“It’s safely within its banks.” He looked over at Dora. “Does she have any friends in town? Anyone she might decide to visit?”

She hadn’t mentioned anyone to him, but they hadn’t spent much time talking about Wainwright.

Dora slowly shook her head.

“We haven’t really seen much of anyone for the past year. But maybe she went shopping?”

“Contact the shopkeeper,” he ordered Naffon. “But try not to raise the alarm just yet.”

Tommy whimpered and he hugged him again.

“Artek would send help,” Kalpar suggested. “And Drakkar can cover a lot of territory from the air.”

“See if he’s available.”

Kalpar nodded and followed Naffon back across the hall.

“I should have stayed in the house and talked to Mama.” Dora’s voice was low and sorrowful. “But I couldn’t face it, and I went out instead. If I’d stayed, she might still be here.”

“It is foolish to dwell on what might have happened,” he said firmly. “I might have stayed as well, but I did not.”

Kalpar returned.

“Drakkar is already headed this way, but it’s because Rosie is in labor. Artek left a message for him to come and see us once the baby is born.”

No doubt that explained why Harkan wasn’t answering his comm.

“Their flyer needs repairs again, but they’ll try to get it working and head this way,” Kalpar added. “But Artek said it could be several hours.”

By which time it would be late afternoon. The thought of Ida alone in the dark horrified him.

“Mr. Anderson hasn’t seen her.” Naffon came back frowning. “I told him she was coming into town to pick up a few things and we had some more requests. He’s to tell her to call us if she arrives at the store.”

None of them mentioned the fact that the mare could easily have made it to town by now if their estimates of how long Ida had been gone were correct.

“I think I’ll ride up to the lake,” Naffon said suddenly. “We were talking about spring flowers and the possibility of early berries this week and I mentioned that might be a good place.”

He wasn’t surprised that the other male took refuge in action, and he nodded. At least it was a possibility.

Naffon paused by Dora’s chair long enough to drop a big hand on her fragile shoulder.

“I’ll do what I can to find her.”

She flashed a quick glance up at him and nodded, but didn’t say anything as he strode off.

Kalpar rubbed his chin.

“If she’d ridden west, I think we would have seen her. Since Wainwright is to the north and Naffon is heading south, I’ll try east.” With a careful look at Tommy, he added, “I’ll send Borgaz along the road to town.”

“Thank you.”

Kalpar stopped next to him and waited until he looked up.

“When she returns, tell her how you feel.”

He left before Temel could respond. Tell her how he felt? She would be lucky if he ever let her out of his sight again.

His body itched with the need to do something, but he knew he was better off here, coordinating the other efforts. He monitored his three males and waited for a message that didn’t come from the shopkeeper. Artek did send a message, but it would be close to dark before they arrived.

Tommy and Dora had joined him in the study and Tommy had fallen asleep on his lap, a dirty thumb jammed into his mouth. Dora sat quietly next to the desk, rocking her baby and wiping away an occasional tear. They were sitting in silence when the comm buzzed and he snatched up the receiver.

“Yes?” he barked.

“It’s a boy,” Harkan announced joyfully. “We have a son.”

He’d been so focused on finding Ida that he’d almost forgotten that Rosie was in labor and it took him a moment to adjust.

“Congratulations.”

He did his best to sound happy for the other male, but it was a pitiful effort. Harkan didn’t seem to notice, cheerfully listing his son’s measurements.

“And be sure and thank your mate again. She was wonderful with Rosalie,” Harkan added. “I’d better —”

“Wait!” he ordered so sharply that Tommy jerked awake. “Ida was there?”

“Yes. I was panicking because we weren’t sure when Drakkar would arrive and Rosalie was so frightened. Ida came right over as soon as I spoke to her, and she made it all seem so simple. We’re very grateful.”

“Is she still there?”

“Why, no. She left just after Drakkar arrived. She should be home by now. Is something wrong?”

“I’m sure everything is fine,” he said, as much for Tommy’s benefit as Harkan’s. “But I’ll head over there now.”

“I would offer to help, but...”

“No, you stay with your child and your mate. Hold them tight.”

He hung up and found Tommy and Dora staring at him.

“She must be somewhere between here and there,” he said. “I’m going to look for her.”

“I wanna come,” Tommy said.

“I know, son, but I’ll get to her faster on my own. Can you wait here and look after your sisters?”

The boy bit his lip, then nodded.

“Good boy. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Dora, if you hear from anyone else, let them know I think she’s somewhere between here and Harkan’s place.”

“I will.” Pale fingers grasped his arm. “Bring her back to us.”

“I will,” he echoed and set off at a run to get his horse.

He covered the ground quickly until he entered the wooded area between the two farms. Dusk was beginning to fall and the shadowy light beneath the trees deceived the eye as he scanned the ground for any sign of her. Then something moved beneath a tree, the blurred shape resolving into the silhouette of a horse. He vaulted out of the saddle, racing towards the image, and heard Ida call his name.

She was leaning against a big tree, her face streaked with dirt and tears, but she was real and she was alive and he breathed a prayer to the gods as he dropped to his knees next to her.

“Oh, gods, I was so scared I’d never see you again. You’re mine, do you hear

me, Ida? I love you and I'm never letting you out of my sight again."

"I love you too," she sobbed, then cried out when he tried to pull her closer.

"Are you hurt?"

"It's my ankle. I twisted it when I fell, and it hurts so much."

A quick glance revealed that her foot was at an awkward angle, but he didn't want to take the chance of removing her boot out here.

"I'll try not to jostle it, but I'm going to have to put you on the horse to get you home."

"Home," she echoed, a shaky smile on her lips. "I've been dreaming of that ever since I fell. And dreaming that you would come and rescue me," she added in an equally shaky voice.

"I would have been here sooner if I'd known where you were."

He lifted her carefully into his arms. Her face went white and her nails dug into his arm, but she didn't cry out.

"I'm going to put you on the horse, then get up behind you, all right?"

She nodded, biting her lip.

"Brave girl."

Despite his best efforts, she was only half conscious by the time he mounted behind her. As soon as he was seated, he picked her up, cradling her in his arms as they set off. He fastened the mare's reins loosely to the saddle horn, and she trotted along obediently behind them.

"Why didn't you send the mare home?" he asked, when her eyes flickered open.

"I tried. She didn't want to go."

He nodded, then gave the horse a puzzled look.

"Were you riding her bareback?"

"No." A rueful smile twisted her lips despite her pale face. "I just didn't do a

very good job of putting the saddle on her. It slipped off on the way home, taking me with it.”

“My poor sweet.”

He held her tighter, only too capable of envisioning how much worse the fall could have been.

“I didn’t dream it, did I?” she asked slowly. “You did say you loved me?”

“I did. And I intend to spend the rest of my life proving it.”

Another smile crossed her lips before her eyes drifted close. He gathered her close as the horse walked through the silent woods and thanked the gods once again that she was safe in his arms.

CHAPTER 20



Ida floated inside a fluffy pink cloud, vaguely aware that someone was manipulating her ankle. She flinched, expecting pain, but there was nothing except a slight stretching sensation.

“She moved,” Temel growled. “You promised this would not hurt her.”

“It is not hurting her. She is not in distress.”

She didn’t recognize the second voice but it had a coolness that reminded her a little of Kalpar. Her ankle was moved again, then enclosed in a soothing heat and she gave a relieved sigh.

“She is lucky. It is sprained, but not broken. Keep it wrapped in that protective bandage and make sure she stays off of it for at least a week.”

“I will carry her everywhere she needs to go.”

Temel was still growling and she smiled.

“No, you won’t.”

“Are you awake, my sweet?”

Even with her eyes closed, she recognized the hand holding hers and she smiled again.

“No.”

“Liar.”

Familiar lips brushed against her cheek, and she finally forced her eyes open to see Temel smiling down at her. Despite the smile, his face looked strained and she tried to lift her hand to smooth away the wrinkle between his brows but it weighed too much for her to move.

“You look tired,” she whispered.

“That is because he has exhausted himself trying to dictate how I should care for my patients,” the second voice said impatiently, and she managed to turn her head far enough to see a huge male with copper colored scales and wings. Wings? And why did he seem oddly familiar?

“Are you a dragon?”

“No, I am Arkani. For some reason you humans refuse to acknowledge the distinction.”

Despite the rather mocking response, the hand that picked up her wrist and found her pulse was exquisitely gentle.

“She is recovering from the anesthesia,” he told Temel. “Give her one of these tablets each hour for the next six hours. No more, no less. Then one every four hours for another twenty-four hours. Then one every eight hours for the rest of the week.”

Her fuzzy brain finally cleared enough for her to recognize the male standing over her.

“You’re the doctor.”

“Indeed. I am Drakkar.”

“Did Rosie have her baby?”

For the first time, the rather harsh face softened.

“Yes, a son. Both mother and child are doing well. The fact that you were able to calm her fears made the delivery much less stressful than it might otherwise have been. I should send you to all my maternity patients.”

“You will do nothing of the sort,” Temel interrupted. “She has no intention of

assisting you.”

Why was he being so grumpy?

“Because I was out of my mind with worry,” he snapped. “And when I finally found you, you were alone and in pain. All because of a foolish desire to help.”

“Did I say that out loud?”

“The anesthesia has a tendency to remove the filters a person usually employs.” Drakkar flashed her a quick, slightly frightening smile and picked up a compact medical bag. “If she develops a fever that lasts for more than twenty-four hours, or if redness spreads up her leg from the wounded area, contact me.”

He vanished through the door before she could thank him. As her gaze returned to Temel, she finally realized she was in his bedroom.

“I’m in your bedroom.”

“Our bedroom, and yes.”

He was still frowning and she sighed.

“But I thought you didn’t want anyone to know.”

His eyes closed for a brief moment.

“Can you forgive me for my stupidity? I was an idiot.”

“Yes, you were.”

He gave her a surprised look, then grinned.

“Drakkar was right, no filters. Although I still do not like that male.”

“Why ever not?”

“I did not like his hands on you,” he growled.

This new jealous side of Temel was surprisingly satisfying, but she shook her finger at him.

“He’s a doctor.”

He made a disgusted expression before his face softened and he picked up her hand.

“*Can* you forgive me for being such a fool?”

“Yes. I should have listened to you. But you should have listened to me too.”

“I know.”

He kissed the back of her hand, sending an unexpected streak of excitement shooting through her body.

“That feels nice,” she murmured dreamily. “You can kiss me other places too.”

“Do not tempt me, my sweet. That will have to wait until your ankle has recovered.”

She pouted at him and he laughed, then bent towards her. His lips had just brushed hers when a small tornado came racing into the room.

“Mama! Are you better now?”

Temel caught hold of Tommy before he could fling himself over her ankle and put him down next to her instead.

“We was worried. We waited and waited and waited for you to come home.”

“I know, sweetheart. I’m sorry. I fell off my horse and couldn’t get back on.”

“Temel promised he’d find you, and he did.”

“Yes, he did,” she agreed, smiling up at him.

“He said you was sleeping up here now, so he could take care of you,” Tommy added innocently.

“He did, did he?” She opened her mouth then closed it again. It would be foolish to protest when she’d been the one to suggest it in the first place. “Do you mind?”

“Nah. I like having my own room again. And Dora’s right next door. She was

worried too.”

“Where is she?”

“Crying again,” Tommy said, making a face. “She keeps doing that.”

“I’d like to see her,” she told Temel.

He nodded and rose.

“Watch over your mama for me,” he said as he left, and Tommy nodded importantly.

“I like Temel lots, Mama. Don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Maybe he could be my new daddy?”

The question took her by surprise and she hesitated, not sure how to answer him. She settled for the perennial parental favorite of “we’ll see.” He accepted it without argument, then snuggled against her side, telling her about the spring lambs he had seen.

The pink cloud started to descend again as she listened to him and she was half-asleep when Temel returned with Dora. Tommy was right, she was crying, but she was so obviously distressed that her heart ached for her daughter.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. I’m just fine except for my ankle and it won’t take long to heal.”

“I should never have left the house,” Dora gulped with another sob.

“Don’t be silly. Fresh air is good for you and Angel. You didn’t know I’d have to leave.” Something pricked at her memory. “But didn’t I leave a note in your room?”

“I didn’t see one.”

“That’s strange. I’m almost positive I did. But maybe the anesthesia is playing tricks on me.”

Temel shot a quick look at her puzzled face and rose again.

“I’ll check.”

After the door closed behind him, Dora gave her an apologetic look.

“There was something I wanted to tell you.”

“All right,” she murmured, yawning sleepily.

Her daughter started to say something, but then the door opened and both Kalpar and Naffon appeared. Dora immediately stiffened and looked away from the big golden male. He shot her a quick unreadable glance before smiling at Ida.

“I’m glad you’re back. I thought we were going to have to go back to Kalpar’s cooking.”

Kalpar cuffed him around the ear, but gave her the most genuine smile she’d ever seen from him.

“Cooking aside, I am glad you have returned. We were concerned about you.”

“That’s what I said,” Tommy piped up.

Kalpar hesitated for a moment.

“You make the commander happy. We see that and we are grateful. He deserves it.” When grateful tears sprang to her eyes, he took a quick step back. “I will leave you to rest.”

Naffon shook his head as the door closed behind the other male.

“Not the most graceful exit, but no doubt he is correct. Rest well, Ida.”

His eyes darted to Dora for a brief second before he bowed his head and departed as well.

“You really should tell me what happened between the two of you,” she told Dora, then winced. *Oops*. She was speaking her thoughts aloud again.

“It was nothing,” Dora said firmly. “But you should know —”

The door opened again and this time Temel entered, holding up a scrap of paper.

“You did leave a note, but it must have blown off the table because it’s such a small piece of paper. I found it under the bed. That’s why you didn’t see it, Dora.”

Her daughter nodded, looked at the two of them, then rose.

“I’ll visit you again in the morning, Mama. Come on, squirt. Time for bed.”

“I wanna sleep with Mama,” he protested, throwing his arms around her neck.

Temel opened his mouth, but she gave him a quick shake of her head and he shut it again.

“Go with your sister, Tommy,” she said firmly.

He gave a beleaguered sigh, but sat up and climbed off the bed.

“I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

They each kissed her and left, silence descending over the room.

“Do you think that’s all of my visitors?”

“I hope so,” he muttered.

“Me too.” She made a weak attempt to pull back the covers, her arm growing heavy again. “Come to bed. I want you to hold me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“But—”

“Don’t argue with the injured person,” she said sleepily.

He laughed and finally kicked off his boots and joined her, drawing her carefully into his arms.

“Better?”

“It would be better if you were naked, but I suppose this will do.”

“The moment that bandage is off your ankle, my naked body is at your disposal.”

“Good,” she yawned. “That gives me lots of time to make plans.”

Even through the fabric separating them, she felt his cock flex, and she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

CHAPTER 21



Her ankle improved rapidly, but it was a frustrating week. Temel insisted on following Drakkar's exact instructions, refusing to let her even attempt to walk. He was equally adamant about not making love until the bandage had been removed. He did relent enough on the fourth day to use his mouth and hands to bring her to climax, although he insisted on holding her leg down the entire time—a restraint that was unexpectedly arousing.

Dora continued to act strangely. She quite clearly wanted to tell Ida something, but her courage kept failing her and her attempts usually ended in her running out of the room crying. Ida did her best to be patient, but it was more than a little annoying.

Even Tommy was unusually clingy, but she couldn't blame him and by the end of the week he was back to his usual sunny self.

"I think we should celebrate the removal of your bandage," Temel announced when the day finally dawned.

"Oh, I have plans on how to celebrate," she assured him, trailing her fingers across his cock.

She knew she was teasing him, but she'd decided they might as well be equally frustrated.

“You know, my sweet, we have a lot of time to make up for tonight.”

She shivered in pleasurable anticipation.

“Good.”

The familiar silver gleamed in his eyes, but he turned the subject back to the celebration. It was just their small group, but Dora and Tommy made colorful paper chains and Kalpar cooked a truly outstanding meal. Afterwards, Temel kneeled in front of her chair and very carefully unwrapped the bandage. Her ankle looked exactly the same as it had always looked. He flexed it gently, moving it in a complete circle and there wasn't even a hint of pain.

“As good as new,” she announced with a gleeful smile.

He returned her smile, but instead of rising, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. Her heart started to thud against her ribs.

“What's that?” Tommy asked.

“A gift for your mama.”

He held out the box to her, and she stared at it.

“What is it?”

“A ring. A symbol of my love and my devotion. I'm sorry it took so long for me to tell you. Will you marry me, Ida? Will you be my mate?”

“I will,” she said, her voice firm despite the tears in her eyes.

“Thank the gods,” he said with a sigh of relief, and kissed her.

As always when he touched her, she lost track of everything else, but then Tommy was there, wiggling between them.

“I wanna see.”

Temel opened the box to reveal the ring—two strands of metal woven together in an elaborate pattern, interspersed with small sparkling diamonds.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it,” she said firmly and held out her hand so he could put it on her

finger. They would need to register the union, but as far as she was concerned, the moment he slipped it on her hand, they were married.

She turned her hand back and forth, admiring the way the light caught on the stones, then frowned. There was something oddly familiar about the pattern.

“Does this represent something?”

“Yes, but it’s private. I will explain later.”

Tommy looked at the ring, then looked from her face to Temel’s.

“If you’s married, does that mean Temel is my daddy now?”

Her breath caught as she gave Temel a helpless glance. He leaned forward to take Tommy’s hand.

“Would you like that?”

Tommy nodded enthusiastically.

“Yeah! I love you better than anyone. Except Mama,” he added with a guilty look at her. “And Dora and Angel.”

“That means you have lots of love to go around,” Temel said solemnly. “I would be honored to be your father.”

“Yay!” Tommy cheered, then hugged him as she swiped surreptitiously at the tears slipping down her cheeks.

“Congratulations,” Dora whispered, leaning over to hug her. “I’m very happy for both of you. And the squirt.”

“Thank you, sweetheart. But Temel is right, it just means more love to go around.”

“I know. And he’s a great guy, but I had a dad. That hasn’t changed.”

“I understand.”

The all too ready tears glistened in Dora’s eyes, but she only hugged her, repeated her congratulations, and fled.

Naffon and Kalpar also offered their congratulations. She believed they

meant it, and from the way Temel's shoulders relaxed, he did too.

The party broke up not long after that, and she and Temel put Tommy to bed. He kept looking at them and grinning, but sleep eventually won out and then Temel focused on her.

"And now it is my turn," he whispered as he lifted her into his arms, a dark promise in his words that already had her nipples stiff and aching.

He'd carried her around a lot over the past week, but this was different, the heat already flaring between them. She pressed small sucking kisses to his neck as he walked, and his hand tightened on her ass.

"Do that again and I'll throw you down and ravish you right here."

She licked the curve of his ear instead and he groaned. The next instant he flung the bedroom door open and carried her into their room. He set her down, checking to make sure she could stand easily, then took a step back, his eyes devouring her as he circled her body. Goosebumps flared on her arms, feeling exposed to his hungry gaze, even though she was still fully dressed.

"Remove your clothing," he ordered when he completed his circuit, and the command in his voice sent an excited shiver down her spine.

She obeyed silently, letting her dress slip to the ground, leaving her in her thin chemise. He circled her again, and this time he touched her as he did—brief teasing touches that sent her arousal soaring.

He paused in front of her, looking down at her flushed face and stiff nipples.

"Very pretty," he said, plucking at her nipple through the thin cotton, and her clit pulsed with excitement. "Does that mean you are ready for me?"

Without waiting for a response, he tugged the chemise higher, revealing her pale, curvy thighs and the soft curls between them, already pearled with arousal. He growled his approval, his finger sliding through the slick folds, and her knees threatened to give out as he circled her swollen clit. She whimpered a protest when he removed his finger, sliding it into his mouth with a groan of satisfaction.

“Delicious.”

He repeated the movements, but this time he pushed his finger lightly against her mouth until her lips parted. The taste of her own arousal was surprisingly erotic, and his eyes flared silver as she sucked on his finger.

“I can’t wait any longer.”

His voice was a harsh growl, but it only added to her excitement.

“Then don’t,” she said. “I want you just as much.”

He growled again, then spun her around, bending her over the bed.

“Hold on.”

He spread her legs further apart, then paused to study her exposed sex. She looked back over her shoulder as he freed his erection, the thick ridges gleaming in the firelight, and her mouth went dry as he stepped up behind her. His cock nudged her open, slowly stretching her around him, then thrusting deep in one powerful stroke.

Oh, God. He felt even larger like this, filling her completely, his ridges scraping the sensitive inside of her sheath. He bent over her, his mouth hot against her neck as he held her steady, and then he began to thrust, taking her with rough, powerful strokes.

All she could do was brace herself and take everything he gave her, her climax roaring towards her. She began to shake as the pleasure threatened to overwhelm her.

“Please, Temel,” she gasped.

He thrust even harder, slamming home as he roared. The hot pulses of his release triggered her own climax, and she shuddered in his arms as he supported her trembling body. He gave a low, satisfied rumble when her body relaxed, but he didn’t withdraw.

“Again,” he growled, swinging her around to face him as he carried her to the chair by the fireplace, pulling her down over his still erect cock as he sat and sending another shudder of excitement through her body.

His eyes dropped to her breasts, barely covered by the thin chemise.

“Show me.”

She blushed, but she obediently pushed down the neck of the chemise to expose her swollen breasts and the stiff pink peaks of her nipples. He caressed her breasts gently before rolling the taut little tips between his fingers and tugging lightly. A surge of pleasure went straight to her core as his silver eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

“Did you like that, my sweet? Or maybe this...”

His hand slipped down between their bodies, unerringly finding her swollen clit. She moaned as he circled it and he bent her back over his arm as his mouth found her nipple. He sucked hard, teasing the tight peak with his tongue and teeth, while his thumb pressed relentlessly on her clit.

The double stimulation was too much. Pleasure shot through her and she clamped down hard on his thick cock, crying his name as her body convulsed. His groan followed, and he yanked her down harder on his shaft as he filled her with his seed.

He gave a satisfied sigh as her pussy fluttered around his still swollen shaft and pulled her limp body against his massive chest.

“That was wonderful,” she whispered when she finally regained enough strength to speak.

“A good start to our mating night?”

“Mmhmm,” she hummed sleepily, and then his words penetrated. “Start?”

“Oh, yes, my sweet. By the time morning arrives, I want you to be absolutely certain about two things. Most importantly—just how much I love you.”

He bent down and gave her a quick, sweet kiss.

“I love you too,” she whispered. “But what’s the second thing?”

“That you are mine,” he said, then kissed her again as his hand slid back between their bodies.

She would have sworn that she was too exhausted to be aroused again, but

she was already starting to ache for him again by the time he broke the kiss.

“Yours,” she agreed, and gave herself over to pleasure.

EPILOGUE



The next day...

THE NEXT MORNING, IDA WOKE UP FEELING SLEEPY, SORE, AND COMPLETELY satisfied. She'd had almost no sleep and she didn't regret a moment of it. Temel had very successfully proven both of his points.

She climbed cautiously out of bed, relieved to find that her ankle still felt strong and healthy, and took a quick shower before heading to the kitchen. Temel frowned when she appeared.

"I intended to bring you breakfast in bed."

"I'm tired of breakfast in bed. And I'd be happy to cook."

Kalpar bowed and stepped aside before Temel could voice the protest clearly hovering on his lips. She hummed happily and set to work, feeling like her old self.

Tommy hadn't appeared by the time breakfast was ready and she went to check on him. He was still fast asleep and she decided not to wake him. The previous day had been hard on him. There was no sound from Dora and Angel's room so she didn't disturb them either.

They had just finished eating when Tommy appeared, yawning sleepily.

“Did I miss breakfast?”

“No, sweetheart, I saved some for you.”

She went to fix him a plate and returned to find him sitting on Temel’s lap, still half asleep, and she smiled at the pair of them. Tommy woke up enough to devour his pancakes while the males talked about their plans for the day, but Dora still hadn’t appeared by the time he’d finished.

“I wonder if I should wake Dora up,” she said at last.

“She’s already up.” Tommy yawned again. “I went into her room to get my ball and her bed was empty. And the crib.”

“What?”

Her startled cry was echoed by Naffon’s as her heart started to pound.

“Go check the stables,” Temel ordered, and Kalpar took off while Temel went to Dora’s room. He returned almost immediately, a sheet of paper in his hand and a grim look on his face.

“She learned from your experience. This was in the center of the bed with a book on each side.”

She started to reach for the paper, but her hand was shaking too badly to hold it steady.

“Read it to me,” she whispered, and Temel nodded.

“I’m so sorry for leaving like this, Mama,” he read. “I know I’m a coward for not telling you I was leaving in person, but every time I tried I couldn’t find the words. But I can’t stay here any longer. I meant what I said last night—I’m very happy that you and Temel found each other—but it just makes me realize what I’m missing. I don’t think there’s a place for me on the farm.”

“No place for her?” Naffon growled. “What is she thinking?”

Temel shook his head and continued.

“There’s something else I didn’t tell you. The day we moved, I wasn’t mailing letters. I went to see Mr. Raven. You see, Daddy gave me some of my first mama’s jewels when she died. They’ve been in a box in the bank all

this time, but I finally asked Mr. Raven to sell them for me.”

“I thought about moving back to Wainwright, but there are too many memories there, and too many people who would judge me. I’ve decided to use the money from the sale and make a new start in a new place where Angel and I can truly be mother and daughter. Please don’t worry about me. I’ll send word as soon as I’m settled. All my love, Dora.”

“Don’t worry?” Her voice shook. “How can I not worry when she’s out there on her own?”

“Your mare and carriage are gone,” Kalpar announced as he returned to the kitchen.

“But where could she have gone?”

Temel shook his head.

“I don’t know, but I’ll try and find —”

“I’ll find her and bring her back,” Naffon said immediately, and she gave him a doubtful look.

“Are you sure? I don’t think she’s going to listen to you.”

“Oh, she’ll listen.” A fierce grin spread across his face, his eyes bright. “In fact, it’s past time for her to start listening.”

“But—”

It was too late—he was already striding out of the kitchen—and she gave Temel a helpless look.

“I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

He stared after Naffon, a thoughtful look on his face even as he put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

“I’m not so sure. He seems very determined.”

“But Dora doesn’t even like him!”

“Are you sure about that? For someone who claimed not to like him, she

spent a lot of time watching him.”

She nodded reluctantly. “You noticed that too?”

“I did. And I believe the fact that he was equally aware of her means he will not give up until she’s found.”

She couldn’t disagree. The two of them did have a connection, however odd.

“I hope so, but I hope it doesn’t take long.”

NAFFON SENT A BRIEF DAILY MESSAGE REPORTING ON HIS SEARCH EFFORTS but it was almost a week later before he finally sent the one she’d been hoping for, and by that time she was a nervous wreck. Temel had done his best—and it was a very good best—to distract her, but she couldn’t help worrying. It didn’t help that she had to keep up a calm facade to avoid worrying Tommy. Although Temel tried to hide it, she knew he’d been worried as well. He gave her a relieved smile as he read her the message Naffon had sent to his comm.

Found them. Both perfectly safe. Heading back.

“Oh, thank goodness. Where did he find her? Did he say? And how long will it take to get back?”

Temel laughed and shook his head.

“I don’t know anything other than what I just read to you.”

“Can you call him back and find out?”

“I’ll try, but the signal is very weak.” He tapped the device, then shook his head again. “And now it’s gone. I’m sorry, my sweet.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m just glad to know they’re safe. Naffon will take care of her, won’t he?”

“Of course he will. He may occasionally be reckless with his own life, but he would never endanger a female or an infant, and especially not Dora and Angel.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Instead of answering her, he began to toy with the top button of her blouse. Her breath caught, her nipples tightening as he slipped it open and moved to the next one. He kept up the same leisurely pace as he worked his way down the row of buttons, but with every brush of his hands against her increasingly sensitive skin, her arousal grew.

“Now then,” he murmured, nuzzling her neck. “Since you know Dora and Angel are safe, do you think you can concentrate on your pleasure?”

“I’m sorry if I’ve been distracted.”

“I understood why.” He slipped his hand into her open blouse and tugged on her nipple, smiling when she gasped and arched into his touch. “But I enjoy having your full attention.”

“You have it,” she said breathlessly as he moved to the other peak, increasing the pressure. “Do I have yours?”

“Always? Why?”

“Since Dora and Angel have been gone, I’ve realized how much I missed having a baby around the house.”

He froze, his hand still on her breast.

“What are you suggesting?” he asked slowly.

“I thought that if you were willing, maybe we could try for a baby.” He still hadn’t moved, and she bit her lip. “If you want to, I mean.”

“I can think of nothing I want more. I love you, Ida.”

And then he was kissing her, his mouth hard, passionate, and wonderful.

ONE YEAR LATER...

TEMEL OPENED THE DOOR TO THE NURSERY, NOT SURPRISED TO SEE TOMMY peering down at his brother. His son was still fascinated by the new baby.

“He’s so little. Littler than Angel.”

“Babies do start out that way,” he agreed. “But they grow.”

“How fast? When can I play with him?”

“Not for a while, I’m afraid. Right now, it’s your job to look after him.”

Pride puffed out Tommy’s chest as he smiled up at him.

“I can do that.”

“I know you can. Now you’d better get back to bed before Mama finds out you’re missing.”

“All right.” A wide yawn interrupted his agreement. “Love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, son.”

He smiled as Tommy yawned again and disappeared. Two fine sons. Two fine sons and a beautiful mate. He was a very lucky male. Evander stirred restlessly, and he bent down to pick him up. They had named the baby after Ida’s father and he knew how much that pleased her. Evander had inherited his mother’s pale skin, but his soft cap of hair was midnight blue and the two small nubs where his horns would appear were already apparent.

He changed the sleepy baby, then carried him to Ida. She smiled up at him as she took the baby.

“Was Tommy in there again?”

“He was.”

He settled down next to her as she opened her gown and brought the baby to her breast. As always, the sight of her swollen red nipple sent a flare of excitement through his body, although he did his best to suppress it.

“I’m glad that he’s interested and not jealous,” he added.

“I think that’s because you pay so much attention to him. You’re a wonderful father, Temel.”

If he’d had her pale changeable skin, it would have reflected his pleasure.

“It is important to me.”

“I know it is.”

Her emerald eyes were warm and loving in the soft glow of the lamp, and he cupped her cheek before turning his gaze to their son. The baby only suckled a little longer before falling back to sleep, and she sighed.

“He was too sleepy to eat. You know what that means.”

“Another very early morning?”

“Exactly. But we can keep trying to get him on a schedule.”

He shrugged.

“It’s not that important.”

“But it was your idea!”

“Because I wanted you to have a chance to rest.”

She started to laugh, which did tantalizing things to her still exposed breasts.

“And I thought it was all those years of military discipline. In that case, why don’t we just let him eat when he’s hungry? No matter when it is.”

“I have no problem with that.”

“There is one small problem,” she said thoughtfully.

“What’s that?”

She tugged on her nipple and a drop of milk appeared.

“My breasts are swollen. Do you think you can help with that?”

The blood rushed to his cock so quickly he felt dizzy.

“It would be my pleasure.”

He carried Evander back to the nursery, made sure he settled back down to sleep, and hurried back to the bedroom. She’d discarded her gown while he was gone and her body gleamed pale and beautiful in the soft light, even more lush since her pregnancy.

She held out her hand and he went to her, kissing her gently even as he

reached down to cup a plump swollen breast. She gasped against his mouth, and he smiled as he lowered his head.

He was indeed a very lucky male.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Temel*! I do enjoy a hero - and a heroine - who are too busy worrying about others to realize they deserve happiness as well! I also hope you enjoy reading about more mature characters as much as I enjoy writing them!

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

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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