



A KISS OF
FROST

HONEY PHILLIPS

A KISS OF FROST

A SCFI ALIEN WARRIOR HOLIDAY ROMANCE

HORNED HOLIDAYS



HONEY PHILLIPS

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Other Titles](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER 1



Subcommander Jackasarian D’Frostulen knew something was wrong. The ship was shaking wildly, throwing him painfully from one side of his hiding place to the other before he finally managed to wedge himself into a corner. Another abrupt change of direction, and then his stomach churned as they momentarily lost gravity. When it returned, it slammed him against the metal walls like an invisible hand.

What was happening? Ambassador Nicholsarian was the finest pilot that Jackasarian knew. Then again, he was the finest everything – the finest officer, the finest swordsman, and the epitome of a Tandroki warrior. An attainment that he would never reach - as Nicholsarian had been only too pleased to point out.

But despite the ambassador’s icy perfection, something had obviously been bothering him for the past few months. He had been desperate to find out why – hoping that even a shred of information might save him from what appeared to be the inevitable fate of being dismissed from the Tandroki forces.

When he had first been appointed to the position of attaché to the ambassador, he had been delighted, assuming it was an indication that he had been truly accepted as last. Nicholsarian had been quick to disillusion him. He had been appointed solely because of his lineage, and the ambassador had no intention of allowing him to remain.

He’d been investigating the ambassador’s ship when Nicholsarian returned and in a fit of panic, had hidden himself

in an unused bulkhead storage locker. He hadn't expected the ship to take off, but once it did, he saw no option but to remain in hiding throughout the journey, sneaking out at night in order to scavenge for rations. Every day he had hoped that the flight would come to an end, but he hadn't expected it to end like this. As far as he could tell the ship was out of control and they were about to crash. An ignominious end to an ignominious career.

The ship lurched again, then began a wild spiraling fall, throwing him around so violently that he couldn't remain braced in the corner and tumbled helplessly around the small compartment. His head cracked against one wall and his hip against another, before the final impact threw him against the floor with bruising force.

He blacked out for an undetermined amount of time. When he regained consciousness, he was sick and dizzy, every muscle in his body aching. There was no sound from the surrounding ship, just the faint click of cooling metal. He couldn't stay hidden any longer. After a brief fight with the warped metal of the storage locker, he managed to force the door open. The ship was still absolutely silent. Where was Ambassador Nicholsarian?

His instincts urged him to run – to get away as far away as possible before the ambassador regained consciousness - but his brain insisted it would be best to know what happened. He crept cautiously towards the front of the ship, noting that despite the impact, the ship still appeared structurally intact.

The door to the bridge was open and he saw the ambassador sagging against the harness of the pilot's chair, blood trickling down his face. *Skef*. Was this his fault? Had his presence on the ship affected Nicholsarian's calculations and caused the crash? What if Nicholsarian was... dead? He took a step closer, and to his relief saw that the ambassador was still breathing. *Thank Moroz*.

As much as he had suffered trying to live up to Nicholsarian's standards, he didn't want to see him dead. But just how badly was he injured?

He made his way back to the medical unit and grabbed the portable scanner. Ambassador Nicholsarian moaned as he returned, his eyelids flickering, but he didn't regain consciousness as Jackasarian ran the scanner over him. A minor head wound, superficial despite the blood still trickling down from beneath his horns.

His relief was followed by despair. What was he going to do now? He had no doubt that once Nicholsarian regained consciousness, he would be looking for a reason for the crash. He was equally sure that once the ambassador discovered him, he would be blamed. If Jackasarian was lucky, the ambassador would give him the opportunity to defend himself, even though he stood no chance against the other male's superior skills. There was also the distinct possibility that the ambassador would not consider him worthy of the honor and would simply eliminate him.

His first instinct – the instinct to run - reappeared as he peered out of the ship. They had landed amidst some trees, trees planted in a random arrangement that would never have been permitted on Tandrok. Even worse, some white substance was falling from the sky and accumulating on the ground. He searched rapidly through the files on his portable data unit. *Snow*. A frozen substance that fell from the sky at irregular intervals. How... intriguing. Such an occurrence would never have been permitted on Tandrok.

He hesitated again, looking out at the uncontrolled weather and the irregular placement of the trees. He should be appalled, but then he had never fit into the precisely ordered world of Tandrok. He was not entirely Tandroki, and he had never been allowed to forget it. Just as his mother had never been allowed to forget her mixed heritage.

He had often wondered why his father had chosen to join with her. His mother had told him once that it had been for love, but that was not a concept that applied to most Tandroki matings. They were arranged for wealth or social position or mutual advantage. If his father had ever succumbed to such an emotion, he must have long since forgotten it. He treated Jackasarian's mother with the same icy disdain with which he

treated Jackasarian. They were constantly watched and measured against a standard that was impossible to meet.

He had a few distant memories from when he was very young of his mother laughing, even singing, but by the time he was sent away for his military training that had all ceased. His mother played the part of a proper Tandroki mate to icy perfection. She had addressed him formally and bid him farewell in a cool icy voice, but as he turned to enter the transport, he saw her fists clench and realized that her hands were shaking. He'd wanted to go to her, but his father had noticed too, stepping closer and frowning down at her. Instead, he had forced himself to enter the transport. It was the last time he'd seen.

Both of his parents had died the following year in an accident and at ten years old he found himself orphaned and the leader of his house. It made little difference – he still carried the stigma of his non-Tandroki blood. No one ever mentioned it, but the knowledge was always there in their eyes when they looked at him. Whenever he did something that was not quite right, not quite the epitome of Tandroki perfection, he could feel the weight of their disapproval.

Since the ambassador showed no immediate sign of regaining consciousness, he decided he would take the opportunity to find out more about their situation. He bent over the console, searching for information about their current location. K.R.S. Three, an uninhabited planet that had been mapped at some point in the past and then ignored. The records indicated that it contained no sentient life forms. He began a quick survey to verify the findings and almost immediately received a signal, then another.

Technology was in use on the planet, primitive to be sure, but technology nonetheless. Could intelligent life have developed so quickly? There was always the possibility that it had been overlooked before, but the Tandroki were usually quite thorough when checking for potential enemies. He studied the output again. The technology was primarily in small clusters along the coast, with a few larger clusters further inland. The

interior of the continent was essentially empty - except for one location.

A bright spot, close to the edge of the mountains that dominated the eastern side of the continent. Based on the strength of the signal, it indicated a very sophisticated power source, perhaps even enough to power a spaceship. Was that why the ambassador had come? To meet with someone away from prying eyes? And if so, was that his answer?

The ambassador groaned, and he froze, expecting the other male's eyes to open. They did not, but he knew he was running out of time. He looked back at that blinking spot on the map, then he aimed his date unit at it and recorded the location. It might not be a ship, it might not even be enough technology to secure the appropriate level of comfort for a Tandroki warrior, but at least it was a chance. A chance he was prepared to take.

Ambassador Nicholsarian moaned again and Jackasarian shivered, already imagining the icy contempt of those eyes surveying him. *No*. He never wanted to face him again. He ducked back down the hallway, grabbed a travel bag, and quickly filled it with everything he could think of to aid his survival. In addition to a drone and a selection of travel rations, he removed several sets of nanites from their crystalline matrix. Pulling on a white survival suit, designed to regulate his body temperature, he grabbed his bag of stolen items, and left the ship.

The snow covered the ground past his ankles - an odd, but not entirely unpleasant sensation as he made his way across the clearing. Before entering the trees, he paused to look back. From here, the damage to the ship was scarcely noticeable. It would undoubtedly take some work to repair, but he was sure that Nicholsarian would complete those repairs with his usual icy competence - and then he would leave.

If he did not remain with the ship, he could lose all possibility of ever returning to Tandrok. The thought should appall him. Instead, he found himself grinning as the weight of expectations he would never meet and a way of life that had never suited him lifted. If he died on this unknown planet –

which seemed entirely possible – at least he would be facing on his own terms. He slipped into the trees.

CHAPTER 2



“*W*hat will you give me for her?” Katerina’s father asked, and her heart skipped a beat.

Dammit. She had suspected he was up to something. He had sent her off to bed with a gruff command but as soon as he was out of sight she had snuck back through the caravan to spy on his meeting with Guyten. She had expected him to have some kind of nefarious plan, but she hadn’t expected him to be trying to sell her off.

“I don’t know. She is rather... willful.”

The sound of the second voice made her fists clench even more tightly at her sides, but along with the anger was the sickening dread in her stomach. Guyten was the chief of the other caravan. The two had crossed paths earlier that day and decided to share camp and do some trading. *I didn’t expect to be one of the trade goods*, she thought bitterly,

“You just have to know how to keep her in line,” her father said dismissively. “I thought you’d be up to the challenge. And she works well enough once you get her mind right.”

Works well enough? Her fists were clenched so tightly that her nails dug into her palms. She spent her days cooking, cleaning, hauling goods, or anything else her father demanded, including taking care of Merry, her younger sister.

Merry. Her heart skipped another beat. There was absolutely no way she was leaving her sister to her father’s cruelty. As long as she was around, she could divert his anger, but he wouldn’t hesitate to take it out on her sister if she wasn’t there.

“I don’t know,” Guyten drawled. “A little spirit can be entertaining in the bedroom, but it grows tiresome on a daily basis. And the sister is prettier.”

Her skin crawled at the obvious lust in his voice. Her sister was only ten years old.

“Nah,” her father drawled. “Got plans for that one. She’s going to make me a ton of money in a few more years. Already got some prospects lined up.”

He didn’t even care that her sister was still a child. All he cared about was what he could get out of her.

“You’ve been doing a lot of trading with the mines. I might be willing to consider a partnership as part of her bride price.”

Her father’s voice settled into the jovial times he used for negotiations. She was sure that most of the people they dealt with thought of him as a big, jolly, good-natured man. They didn’t see the cruelty behind the smile, but she had lived with it her entire life.

She backed away from her hiding place, her hands shaking. *What am I going to do?*

He’d threatened to marry her off before, but she’d always thought it was an empty threat. Apparently the prospect of a share in the profitable mineral trade had made him forget that she also handled all of the accounts – at least for all his legitimate sales and purchases. She also spent a lot of time smoothing over ruffled feathers. His jovial manner tended to get a little thin when dealing with the other traders in the caravan. Hell, she even did the majority of the navigation and had for the past few years.

A cold wind blew down from the mountains and she shivered, pulling her shawl more tightly around her shoulders as she hurried back to the small wagon she shared with her sister.

Her sister was asleep when she climbed into the wagon and Katerina’s heart ached as she looked down at her beautiful, innocent face. Their coloring was not dissimilar – they both had golden hair and blue eyes – but that’s where the similarities ended. Her hair was fine and straight and

impossible to manipulate so she simply braided it back out of her way. Merry's hair fell naturally into soft curls that framed her angelic little face. Her sister's eyes were a deep sapphire blue, while Katerina's were so pale they were almost grey. And while Merry was still a child, there were already hints that she would grow into the same small, curvy woman that her mother had been, whereas Katerina was tall and almost painfully thin. She had no curves to attract a man's attention, but apparently even her plain face and lack of curves were not going to deter Guyten.

Her sister was the only reason she had remained with the caravan as long as she had. There had been a boy once, a few years ago. He'd been sweet and kind and offered both her and her sister a home. But she'd suspected he'd never stand up to her father – and her father would never let her sister go. He'd already recognized that the pretty child would become an even more beautiful woman and he knew she would be an asset. But she'd hoped - until the night she'd snuck off to meet her suitor and found her father standing on the path. He had a thick length of wood in his hand and was slamming it slowly and steadily against his meaty fist.

“Where you going, girl?”

“Just into town.” Her heart was beating so loudly she was sure he could hear it.

He slowly shook his head, the wood still slapping steadily against his hand.

“Don't think that's a good idea. Path is kind of treacherous. Someone might get hurt.”

It was a clear summer evening and the moon shone down on the smooth, wide path leading to the town. She looked at it and she looked at him. Rage threatened to choke her, but she couldn't take the chance, couldn't let someone be hurt on her behalf. She nodded.

“Yes, I can see just how treacherous it would be. Perhaps another time.”

Keeping her head high she returned to the caravan. The next day her sweet suitor came looking for her. She watched from within her wagon as her father, jovial once more, put his arm around the slender shoulders and led him back out of their camp, talking affably the entire time. Whatever he said, it had been enough. Her suitor never returned, and the next year when they came back, she had heard that he was married.

No one was ever strong enough to stand up to her father, including her, she thought bitterly. But where did that leave them? No one in the caravan would be foolish enough to assist her. No one in the caravan...

Two weeks ago they had stopped at a small village for a market. It wasn't one of their usual stops and she had wondered why at the time, although now she realized it had simply been to delay their progress in order to meet with Guyten. Perhaps that was also the reason he had been more on edge than normal. He made the uncharacteristic mistake of seizing her arm and swearing at her in front of one of the village women. He had stopped as soon as he realized, then did his best to turn his charm on the woman, dismissing the incident. The woman had smiled amiably enough and moved along, but she circled back to Katerina's stall a short time later.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked softly as she pretended to examine a length of cloth.

Shame flushed her cheeks as she nodded, hastily pulling her sleeve down to conceal the bruises already darkening her skin.

"I'm fine."

"Are you?" Penetrating blue eyes focused on her face. "If you need help, come to me. My name is Jelle. Anyone in the village knows where to find me. I can get you away from him."

"I... My sister..."

"She's welcome too. Just remember. Jelle. Yes, I'll take three yards at this," she added in a louder voice as Katerina's father walked by. "It will be perfect for my new gown."

Katerina's hands were shaking so badly she had no idea if the woman gave her the right amount of money for the cloth. Was this it? Was it finally a chance to escape him? She watched the woman walk away, a slender figure who looked far too fragile to stand up to her father. And the village itself – small and peaceful. How would they react if her father and some of his men came storming in, demanding her return? They wouldn't stand a chance. But the thought didn't leave her head for the rest of the evening.

She barely slept, trying to come up with a way to meet the woman again, to ask more questions, but when she awoke from her last uneasy doze, her father was already ordering everyone to hitch up their wagons.

Had he been suspicious? Or had he simply been in a hurry to get to this meeting? She couldn't be sure and now it was too late.

Or was it? If she and Merry could get back to Jaelle, maybe she really could help them. And maybe it had been long enough that her father wouldn't immediately know where they had gone. It had taken them two weeks and another stop to get to this camp. The wagons didn't move much faster than a person walking, but it would still take them two weeks to return – two weeks in open country where they would be far too easily spotted. At least if they followed the caravan route...

She quickly pulled out one of her precious maps. Yes, just as she remembered. There was a shorter route leading back through a pass in the foothills - a route that no one ever took. It had been several years, but hadn't she asked her father about it when they traveled this way before? And he'd adamantly refused to consider it.

"Too dangerous," he said, looking unusually grim.

"I don't understand. The river winds around a bit, but there should plenty of space for wagons to pass next to the river –"

He backhanded her.

"I said it's too dangerous."

He had stomped off without any further explanation, but Reggi, an older woman who had been with the caravan for a long time, had been more forthcoming.

“They call it Ghost Valley. Because of all the people who went in and never came out.”

“Ghosts? You can’t be serious.”

The old woman shrugged.

“You get to my age, you see a lot of things. Place doesn’t feel right to me.”

Reggi stopped traveling with them the next year, settling down on the coast, but Katerina could still remember the way her face had sobered as she added, “Best to avoid trouble.”

No doubt Reggi was right, but she was already in trouble. The pass through the valley would be shorter, it would provide more shelter, and with any luck it wouldn’t occur to her father that they might go that way.

Mind made up, she blew out the lantern, then climbed into her bunk and waited. The time ticked slowly by but eventually the flap was pushed aside and the reek of whiskey wafted into the wagon. Her father chuckled and stumbled away. She waited as patiently as she could until she was sure everything was silent, then threw back the covers and went to her sister’s side, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Merry’s eyes flew open, wide and startled in the dimness.

“Time to go,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 3



*B*y the time the sun rose, Katerina and Merry were already well into the pass. Getting out of the caravan had been easy enough. She knew the guards' routines like the back of her hand. Merry hadn't even questioned her, layering on her heaviest clothes as Katerina retrieved the travel bags she had concealed in the storage beneath her bunk. Although she had assumed it was too late to return to Jaelle, now that one chance of escape had presented itself, she had been determined to be ready. She'd gradually been adding to her stock of hidden supplies, and she'd even managed to hide away a few coins. Her father kept the strongbox in his own wagon, but she'd snagged a few coins while she was doing the books. Not very many, but at least it was something.

She'd gathered everything that she could think of that might be useful but wouldn't weigh them down. She'd hesitated the longest over her small collection of books. They had been surreptitiously obtained over the years, but they were heavy and she had memorized almost every word anyway. In the end, she only slipped her favorite into her pack and traced her hand lightly over the others, fighting back the urge to cry. Finally, she'd pulled blankets from each of their beds and made a blanket roll for each of them. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

Merry had followed her silently until they reached the entrance to the pass, the lights of the caravan a long distance behind them.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” her sister finally asked.

“Father has decided to marry me off.”

Merry’s eyes widened. “Isn’t that a good thing? To finally get away from him?”

“No. He wasn’t a nice man.”

“He still might be better than father. And maybe I could come with you –”

“No, sweetheart.” She shuddered at the thought of her sister within Guyten’s grasp. “Father would never have let you go, and I don’t want you anywhere around him.”

“Who was it?”

“Guyten.”

This time her sister shuddered. “I guess I know what you mean. He’s so old and creepy. You know he even tried to give me some candy last night?”

That bastard. She gave her sister a quick hug.

“I’m very glad you didn’t take it.”

Merry rolled her eyes. “I may be young but I’m not stupid.”

Katerina laughed. “I know you’re not.”

“So where are we going?”

“There was a woman in the village where we stopped two weeks ago. She said she could get us away and keep us safe.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But I believe that she will try and maybe that’s the best thing we’ve got right now.”

Merry bit her lip, then squeezed her hand.

“All right then. Let’s get going. This place gives me the creeps.”

Her sister’s words gave her pause. There was no way Merry could know the story of Ghost Valley and yet she had sensed that there was something different about this place. As they

resumed their journey, she looked around, trying to decide what it was about the pass that bothered her. The land was pretty enough, even on a gloomy winter day. The river ran close to the base of the mountains on the far side of the pass but on this side there was a wide strip of grassland between the river and the wooded foothills leading up into the mountains.

She had chosen to stay close to the tree line so they wouldn't be immediately visible to anyone following them, but the pass followed the somewhat erratic path of the river and the open plains behind them were quickly out of sight. The pale grey of the rock and the deep green of the rushing water beneath the heavy grey sky made a serene if slightly ominous picture, and yet she did not like the sensation prickling at the back of her neck.

It was almost too peaceful, with only the rush of the wind and the soft rustle of their footsteps to disturb the silence.

"I don't hear anything," she muttered, half to herself, but Merry picked up on it immediately.

"That's what it is. I haven't seen or heard any animals, not even birds. Where do you think they are?"

Merry's face had turned pale, and Katerina did her best to give her a reassuring smile.

"I'm sure they're all tucked away in their burrows. They're smart enough to stay inside on a cold day like this."

And it was cold. As far as she could tell, the temperature had been dropping steadily ever since they left the caravan and she cast an easy glance at the looming clouds overhead. Was it going to snow? They were as well-equipped as she could make them, but if it did snow, there would be no wagon in which to take shelter. Had she been foolish to try to escape now? *But if we hadn't left now, it would have been too late.* The best thing they could do was to keep moving and try to make it to the safety of the village as quickly as possible.

But despite the increasing cold and the heavy clouds, snow held off. Even Merry's energy died away as the day wore on and Katerina decided that they had come far enough that it

would be safe to make an early camp. She started looking for a suitable place and decided the best option was a giant boulder that rose out of the earth like an enormous foot. The rock face had split to form a narrow vee. While it wasn't covered, the rock would provide protection from the wind – and anything that might be lurking around the mountains after dark.

They gathered firewood, and she used her firestarter to create a small fire at the mouth of the vee. She added powdered trail rations to a pot of water and set it over the fire to heat, and then they huddled behind the fire in their blankets.

“I can't believe we're doing this,” Merry murmured, her head resting on Katerina's shoulder. “I never thought we'd get away from him.”

“I know. I'm sorry I couldn't get you away before.”

Merry raised her head and gave her a wide-eyed stare.

“Why are you sorry? I know you did your best. I know if there was a way you would've gotten us out. He was much worse to you than he ever was to me.”

It was true – he had never been kind to Merry, but he had never been as abusive to her sister as he was to her and he'd never laid a hand on her.

“Good,” she said fiercely. “I never wanted him to touch you.”

“I know. You got between us often enough.” Merry leaned over and hugged her. “Thank you.”

“Don't be silly,” she said, her voice shaky. “That's what big sisters are for.”

Their meal was not exciting, but it was hot and it was filling and then they curled together in their blankets and slept. Or at least, Merry slept. Katerina dozed fitfully, startling each time a branch snapped in the fire. She had intended to let it die down to embers, but there was something so reassuring about the firelight, that she added more fuel every time she woke.

Shortly before dawn, she fell asleep. In her dreams she saw a handsome prince, just like in her book of fairy tales. Tall and broad shouldered, his skin as pale as snow. His silvery white

hair curled down to his shoulders while his dark, spiraling horns reached up to the sky. His eyes met hers, a clear bright blue, and then he smiled. In her dream, she smiled back and reached out her hand for him...

Merry rolled over, digging her elbow into Katerina's side, and she woke. Her eyes immediately went to the other side of the fire, there was no one there. *Of course not*, she scolded herself. Handsome princes were the subject of dreams, not reality. But as she drifted back to sleep, she could almost feel him watching her.

CHAPTER 4



Jackasarian ducked back into the woods just as the female's eyes opened. What was he doing? It would be foolish to reveal himself to the primitive inhabitants of this planet. Not that it took much effort to remain hidden from them. They seemed to pay very little attention to their surroundings, only focused on their daily activities. Primitive activities, he thought disparagingly, and yet there was something fascinating about the way they lived their lives. Everything was so... uncontrolled.

His trip inland had not been uneventful. He had encountered a meat animal with horns even larger than his own and had barely managed to escape with his skin – and his pride – intact. On another occasion he had encountered two of the primitive inhabitants copulating in a small grove. Thankfully, they had been too engrossed in their interaction to notice him.

He knew he should have slipped back at once. Instead, he had lingered, fascinated by the raw, unTandroki-like passion displayed by the couple. The male had used his mouth on every part of the female's body, even the pink folds between her legs. And she - she had done the same. He should have been repelled. The ancient prophet Moroz had taught the Tandroki long ago that such passion only led to violent and unpredictable feelings, and yet he had been enthralled.

When they completed their encounter, they had collapsed together, the male holding the female tightly. Another transgression of Tandroki ways. Such personal contact was

frowned upon whether it be between male and female, or mother and child. His mother had learned that lesson as well.

The couple were murmuring together in soft voices when he finally withdrew but of course he could not understand them. He found himself curious. A well-prepared warrior should learn all he could about the inhabitants of a hostile territory, he decided, ignoring the fact that it had not previously occurred to him.

He set the translation protocol to run on his data unit, but it was difficult to obtain sufficient input without the risk of exposing himself. In the end, he had applied some of the nanites to the drone he had taken from the ship, manipulating it into the shape of a pika, a small local animal. Its diminutive size and harmless appearance made it easy to send into more populated areas to gather data and by the end of the second week, he had a solid working knowledge of their language.

He had gained much of his knowledge about their origins from an elderly male telling stories in a town square in exchange for alcoholic beverages and a few coins. His drone had perched in the mouth of a nearby alley, listening as the elder spun a somewhat incoherent tale. Jackasarian managed to interpret enough of the tale to understand that the inhabitants were called humans and that they were originally from a planet called Earth. They had arrived many generations ago when their colony ship crashed on K.R.S. Three.

The elder's tale was met with skepticism and even outright disbelief from the older members of the small crowd, but the children nodded eagerly. Children, mixing freely with the adults. He shook his head. Another concept with which he was unfamiliar. Tandroki children were restricted to their rooms and their studies, except for a few specially selected occasions, and as soon as they were old enough, they were sent off for training according to their caste. He had been sent for military training as soon as he reached his eighth year.

He was so busy considering the wildly divergent child-rearing practices, that he missed one of the males in the crowd approaching his drone. His first notice came when a big fist closed around his drone's neck.

“Look at this. Brave little bugger to come all the way into town.” The male laughed heartily. “Foolish little bugger. He’ll make a nice addition to the stew pot.”

No! His drone did not deserve such treatment. Uncharacteristic anger filled him as he manipulated the controls and sent a short spike of electricity into the male’s hands. The male swore and dropped the drone, and the drone scurried away into the darkness of the alley. The male swore again, but before he could go after him, two of the children from the crowd tugged on his sleeve, pleading for the small animal. The male grunted, but he did not pursue the drone as it cautiously made its way back through the town to where Jackasarian was waiting.

The drone’s hind leg was dragging and he growled as he picked up the small body, once again filled with that uncharacteristic rage. His claws emerged as he contemplated visiting the same injury on the boorish male, and the sight was enough to shock him out of his anger. The claws were legacies from Tandrok’s primitive past and no Tandroki ever permitted them to emerge. He hastily retracted them as he set the nanites to work to repair the injury, smoothing down the soft fur.

“I’m sorry you were injured,” he murmured as the big purple eyes blinked up at him.

By the Horns! Now he was speaking to an inanimate object. But it also occurred to him that he had been so intent on retrieving his drone not because of the fear that the human male would discover its mechanical components, but simply because he was ... concerned about the drone. Such feelings were unacceptable by any Tandroki standard. And yet, he was no longer on Tandrok, or Perchten, or any of the planets in the Tandroki Empire. Why should he obey such restrictions now?

“I will call you Keffi,” he announced.

The drone’s eyes blinked in seeming approval and he found himself smiling. If nothing else, communicating with the drone verbally would allow him to practice his newly acquired language skills. He accepted the justification, refusing to consider the matter any further even though a small part of

him admitted that it was... comforting to have a companion as he continued his journey.

Now, he looked down at the little creature, and murmured, "We should move on."

Yet he found himself lingering as the pair stirred. The younger female bounced to her feet, but the female who had so enthralled him lingered in her blankets, her eyes fastened on the place where he had disappeared. Did she have any idea how appealing she looked? Her face flushed, her glorious hair a wild tangle around her face, her eyes still heavy – as if she had just engaged in the same type of activity as the female in the woods.

But that female had aroused no more than curiosity. This female made him want to be the male who put that look on her face. To his shock, his shaft stiffened at the thought, pressing painfully against the tightfitting survival suit, and he took a half step in her direction before he realized what he was doing.

She shook her head as if dismissing him, a painful reminder of all of those who had dismissed him before, and his chest ached. But then she put her arms over her head and stretched, the graceful gesture revealing the exquisite lines of her body, and a second wave of arousal coursed through him.

This is entirely unacceptable, he told himself. But despite that knowledge, he was unable to tear himself away as they began their morning preparations. He watched in appalled horror as each of them disappeared behind a clump of bushes and he realized that they were attending to their bodily functions. His survival suit made such distasteful actions unnecessary, but he found it far more distasteful that two delicate females should be exposed to these conditions. Their breakfast was far too meager – and he noticed that his female insisted the younger female eat the larger portion. Once again he had to stop himself from stepping forward, this time to offer nourishment.

After doing their best to eliminate any signs of their camp, they rose and resumed walking. *Interesting*. Were they afraid that they were being followed? His claws sprang free once more, but this time he ignored them.

As soon as they were out of sight, he went and inspected the remains of their campsite. They had done a surprisingly adequate job, although it would not deceive a trained tracker. He set to work, making sure that no one with this planet's limited technology would ever know that they had paused here, then hesitated. Should he continue to follow them, to remove any sign of their tracks? What of his own mission? He pulled up the monitor on his data unit, then realized that they were headed in precisely the direction he needed to go.

A fierce grin split his face as he lifted Keffi to his shoulder and set off after them.

CHAPTER 5



The second day's traveling was even worse than the first. Katerina's muscles were stiff and sore from the previous day's walk as well as the uncomfortable night on the bare ground. She had thought that caravan life was difficult and draining, but it was far easier than this constant walking.

The terrain was not difficult – it would have been an easy drive for the wagons – but it was monotonous. The scenery never changed – the grey wall of mountains on the other side of the pass, the cold, rushing river, the empty stretch of dry grass leading to the foothills on their side of the pass. Not to mention the constant icy wind that whistled along the pass, bringing the scent of snow.

It also didn't help that because of the way the river wound along, they could see no further than the next curve. Each time they came around a bend, she hoped to see something different. She knew they were a long way from the end of the pass, but she still found herself hoping to see the end each time they turned the corner. Each time she was disappointed.

Merry wasn't helping. She had woken up cheerfully enough, but that cheerfulness had ended after the first hour of their journey, and then she began to complain. Not just about the current journey, but about every unpleasant incident she could remember. Katerina did her best not to respond, simply nodding as her sister bemoaned her circumstances but as the day slowly turned into afternoon, she finally snapped. Her feet hurt, her back ached, and the cold wind was giving her a headache.

She came to an abrupt halt, fisting her hands on her hips as she glared at her sister.

“I’m sorry, Merry. I’m sorry that this is cold and hard and we don’t know where we’re going. I’m sorry that your life hasn’t been everything you wanted it to be and I’m sorry that our father destroyed the doll I made you for your sixth birthday. But what do you want me to do? Do you want to turn around and go back? To go back to the caravan and the wagons and riding instead of walking?”

Merry’s mouth dropped open, tears gathering those big blue eyes.

“No, of course not.” Her mouth trembled and a tear slid prettily down her cheek. “I’m sorry, Kat. I know it’s not your fault. None of this is your fault. It’s just that talking distracts me.”

Katerina sighed and put her arms around her sister.

“I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I know you’re not trying to upset me. I guess I’m just tired.”

Merry tightened her arms around Katerina’s waist.

“I don’t want to go back,” she whispered.

“Neither do I.”

Merry leaned her head back and smiled up at her. When Katerina cried, her eyes and nose turned red and her face went blotchy. Her sister looked as pretty as ever despite the tear stains on her cheeks and the tears caught in her long dark lashes. She tapped an affectionate finger on Merry’s nose.

“All right, we’re agreed. We won’t go back.”

“And I’ll try not to complain so much.”

She laughed. “Or maybe just keep it under your breath. Maybe there will be something different around the next bend.”

Her sister nodded eagerly.

“You know what would be nice? What if there was a cabin there? Just something small that had been abandoned where we could spend the night.”

Her sister was off again, quickly lost in fantasies about an idyllic cabin, but she didn't mind. She much preferred the fantasy to the complaining. As they resumed walking, the back of her neck tingled and she couldn't help glancing over her shoulder. All day she'd had the uneasy feeling that someone was following them, but she'd resolutely pushed it aside. If her father had discovered them, he wouldn't waste any time playing cat and mouse games. He would have marched up to them, roaring his displeasure and using his hands to emphasize the fact. She shivered at the thought, her pace quickening.

No, it couldn't be him. She didn't really believe it was anyone. The pass still felt far too silent and abandoned for any type of animal life, let alone other human beings. *Maybe it's my snow prince*, she thought with a smile. As ridiculous as the thought was, it comforted her and the feeling of being watched transitioned from being alarming to being oddly comforting. She was still smiling when she caught up with her sister and together they passed the bend of the river. Both of them immediately came to a halt.

"Well, you did say you wanted something different," she murmured, her voice shaky.

Up to this point, the tree line had roughly paralleled the river, but now it drew far, far back in a wide sweeping curve to create an open valley. The mountains formed a wall around the edge of the valley, like the walls of the bowl and in the center of the bowl a vast gleaming sheet of ice stretched from the tip of the mountains down into the valley, smooth and gleaming blue white even under the clouds.

A glacier, she decided, awed at the power that had ripped away the side of the mountains and formed that smooth sheet of ice. A small collection of stone buildings huddled at the base of the glacier, partially ruined, but surprisingly intact considering their obvious age. The sight of them teased her memory, but it took her a moment before she realized why they look so familiar. She was more accustomed to wooden, or even stucco buildings, and on a much smaller scale, but there was no doubt. This had been a trading post.

How had it ended up here? And why had it been abandoned.? It didn't look foreboding as much as lonely and isolated, resting in the shadow of the glacier.

"Looks like you got your other wish as well. It's not exactly a cabin, but it is shelter."

"Are you sure?" Merry asked doubtfully. "It's kind of creepy."

"As Reggi used to say, never look a gift horse in the mouth." The words had never made sense to her, but the meaning was clear enough. "It even looks as though parts of the roof are intact," she added with an uneasy look at the sky.

The heavy clouds dropped even lower as they made their way across the valley. The size of the glacier made the distance deceptive – it was much further than it had appeared and the light was fading when they reached the first of the stone buildings. A long stable building, with little remaining except the outer walls and a few crumbled piles of rocks where the stalls had once been.

"I think we can do better," she said cheerfully, just as the first snowflake brushed a wet kiss across her cheek.

The next building, a storeroom of some sort, had all four walls but no roof and it was far too large to be able to heat. Just beyond it she found the first of a pair of small buildings on either side of an opening into an interior courtyard. Gatehouses, she decided. The gatehouse had all four walls and most of the roof and would be easy to heat. She breathed a sigh of relief as she led Merry inside. The remnants of a hearth were built into one wall and a long bunk into the other. Broken pieces of furniture were scattered around the small space, but everything looked as if it were still in the same place that it had originally been, simply crumbled from disuse and abandonment.

"It's like they just left," Merry whispered, echoing her thoughts. "But why?"

Reggi's ghost story flitted through her mind, but she was not about to share that with her sister.

“I don’t know. Maybe the trade died out, or they simply decided to move along. You know a lot of the caravan masters don’t like to stay in one place for very long.”

Her father certainly did not. He resented their winter break, always pushing to move at the first sign of the spring thaw.

“I suppose.”

Merry didn’t look convinced, but she didn’t argue as Katerina quickly built a fire in the abandoned hearth. Despite its age, the chimney was still intact, and the fire caught easily, sending a welcome warmth into the space. She gathered the rest of the wood scattered around the room and stacked it neatly next to the fireplace. It was a decent amount, but probably not enough to last through the night given that it was old and dry and would burn quickly.

“I think I’ll go and see if there’s more wood in the other gatehouse.”

“I’ll come with you.”

She shook her head, worried at how pale and tired her sister looked.

“Don’t be silly. You just stay here and rest. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Fortunately the door to the gatehouse was pointed away from the wind, but the opening still allowed heat to escape. Making a note to put a blanket across it when she returned, she crossed the stone paving to the matching building on the other side. The snow had started to fall in earnest, quickly whitening her hair and the shoulders of her cloak, but very little had accumulated, the wind whisking it away almost as soon as it landed.

The second gatehouse was a mirror image of the first one, and in even better shape. There was even a wooden chair, still intact despite its age. Somewhat cautiously, she tested the chair but to her delight it held. Would Merry be equally as thrilled, or was appreciation for a chair something that occurred with age?

For a moment she wondered if they should move over to this building, but she didn't want to waste the fire or uproot her sister again. Instead, she piled as many of the scattered pieces of wood as she could manage on top of the seat before lifting it cautiously. It was heavier than she had expected, but she didn't have far to go and she made her way carefully back across the paving, finally beginning to whiten.

"You'll never believe what I found," she called cheerfully as she backed into the gatehouse and carefully set down her burden. "It's an actual chair."

She lifted her head to smile at her sister, but the room was empty. Merry had disappeared.

"No," she whispered, staring at the empty room in horror.

How could she have been so foolish? There must have been someone following them, and it hadn't been some mythical snow prince, it had been a human. A human who had stolen her sister. She raced back outside.

"Merry!" she cried, but the wind whipped the word out of her mouth. She searched the ground desperately, looking for any trace of footprints, anything to indicate where he might have taken her sister, but the swirling wind disturbed the snow so much that it was impossible to find any tracks. She rushed back to the entrance of the courtyard to look out across the valley. It wasn't quite dark yet, but she couldn't see any signs of movement in the valley.

A tiny spark of hope lit in her chest. Maybe Merry's kidnapper hadn't wanted to face the snowstorm. Maybe he was concealed somewhere in this complex of buildings. They were far too many to be able to search easily, but she refused to let that deter her. She would knock every stone to the ground before she let someone take her sister.

She raced back inside long enough to fumble through her bag and pull out a small torch. She breathed a thankful prayer when she pressed the button and a thin, bright stream of light appeared. The technology to create such a thing had long since been forgotten and she had no idea how long it would last, but at least she wouldn't have to search in the dark.

Grabbing a sturdy length of wood with her other hand, she hurried back outside. As she started for the first in the row of buildings that lined the courtyard, something brushed against her foot. She jumped back, her heart beating wildly, but when she aimed the light at her feet, she found a pika sitting on its hindlegs and staring up at her and her racing pulse slowed. The small furry creatures lived on the lower slopes of the mountains. They were shy and tended to avoid humans, but this one seemed intent on attracting her attention. Its white fur mingled with the falling snow but its lavender eyes sparkled as it chirped at her.

“I don’t know what you want, but I have to find my sister.”

She tried to move around it but it jumped in front of her again, still chirping, and one of those small, hand-like paws tugged on her cloak – almost as if it wanted her to follow it. It was ridiculous, impossible, but as she looked at the complex of dark, abandoned buildings her heart sank. The pika traveled in family groups. Was it possible that it was trying to lead her to her sister?

Another spark of hope lit in her heart, but she did her best to temper her excitement. It was only a chance, a slim chance at that, but since she was going to have to search anyway, maybe she would start by finding out where the pika wanted her to go.

“All right. Show me the way.”

Her feeling of embarrassment at speaking to the small animal disappeared as it immediately dropped back down on all four feet and scampered away across the courtyard. Praying that she was right, she took off after it. It moved with surprising speed for such a small creature, but whenever she thought she was about to lose sight of it, it would pause and wait for her. The combination of hope and dread as it led her deeper into the warren of ruined buildings made her heart beat faster and faster until it finally paused in front of one of the smaller buildings.

Although it looked abandoned, it was remarkably intact, the heavy wooden door still solid in its hinges. Turning off the

torch to let her eyes adjust to the darkness, she tightened her grip on the piece of wood. As her eyes adjusted, she caught what might have been the faintest glow from behind the closed shutters. Grasping the door handle, she pulled it down as quietly as she could. It responded with surprising smoothness and she gradually began to ease the door open.

But then she heard her sister's voice, and her caution vanished. She snatched the door open to reveal an obviously inhabited space, lit by lanterns. Her sister was standing in the middle of the room, whole, safe, and clearly annoyed as she stomped her foot and glared at the man, no, the boy, standing in front of her.

“And I'm telling you I was perfectly safe. She's my sister.”

Katerina burst into tears.

CHAPTER 6



Jackasarian breathed a sigh of relief as his female discovered her sister. He had been concentrating on her and missed the fact that the male had taken the young female until they were on the other side of the courtyard. He'd followed quickly, intending to engage the male in combat. But when he caught up with them, he noted the male's youth, his half-starved frame, his patched clothes, and his lack of weapons.

As he hesitated, the young female kicked out, her foot connecting solidly with the young male's leg. The male winced, but he made no attempt to retaliate as he half-carried her inside another building. He decided there was no immediate threat, then returned to find his female already searching desperately for her sister. Although he had been tempted to join her, he had decided to send Keffi instead, delighted when she followed his drone back to the hiding place.

And it was very clearly a hiding place, he thought, studying it through Keffi's eyes. The windows were shuttered and covered with blankets. The large stone-covered stove used an artificial energy source that produced no smoke. The young male swore impatiently and pulled Jackasarian's female inside the room before quickly closing the door.

Keffi slipped inside before it closed and retreated into the corner where he could observe without being seen.

"Don't leave the door open. Never leave the door open."

Jackasarian did not appreciate the young male's tone, nor the fact that he had laid hands on his female, but with the increased light in their hiding place, the male's youth was even more apparent. So too was the worry on his young face.

"I don't understand. Why did you take her?" his female asked, shaking off the male's hand as she rushed to her sister's side.

The two females clung together.

"I told you Katerina was my sister," the young one sniffed.

Katerina.

Her name rang like music in his ears. He could imagine whispering it as he slid into the soft depths of her willing body. The image was so delightful that it took him a full minute before he realized that the conversation had continued.

"I already said I'm sorry," the boy scowled. "I was trying to help you."

The young female glared back. "We don't need your help."

Katerina sighed and patted her sister's arm.

"Calm down, Merry. At least until we find out what is going on. Who are you? And who are they?"

She gestured around the room and for the first time he realized that there were others present. Two small children huddled together in a sleeping space carved out of the wall, their faces almost identical. Another, slightly older child was half hidden behind a wooden barrel.

"I'm Johnny. The twins are Cecil and Cecilia. And that little squirt is Lorna."

The child behind the barrel stepped forward, smiling widely enough to reveal a missing tooth and he recoiled in horror. Who had done that to her? Human teeth were too blunt to represent any threat. Why would someone have taken one from a child?

"I'm Katerina, and this is my sister, Merry. But I don't understand. What are you all doing here? Aren't there any adults?"

Even through Keffi's vision, he could feel the tension in the room. Lorna darted back behind her barrel and the twins huddled deeper into their covers. The boy scowled pugnaciously.

"I look after them. We don't need no fu – freaking adults."

"But how did you get here?"

The boy turned away from her, the tips of his ears turning red.

"This trader came through town. He was in a hurry and needed someone to help on the trip. Said he was going to the city and that I could earn a lot of money."

"And you went with him," Katerina said gently.

Johnny shrugged, still not looking at her. "Nothing for me in town. Thought I might do better in the city. But I didn't know."

He turned back, his young face anguished.

"He had them locked up in his wagon."

One of the twins whimpered.

"I told him I didn't want no part of it. But he said if I tried to leave he'd hurt them. I didn't know what to do."

Lorna crept out from her hiding place and took Johnny's hand. She smiled up at him with that broken smile.

"You thayed with uth."

"Yeah, squirt. I said I'd take care of you and I will." He looked back at Katerina, his face softer. "We came down Ghost Valley even though I told him it wasn't a good idea. We patched up here for the night. There was a storm so we stayed another day, and another. When we woke up on the third morning, he was gone."

"Ghost Valley?" Merry asked.

"He never came back?" Katerina asked at the same time.

Johnny shook his head.

"Nope. I wanted to run for it, but it was still storming. The storm lasted a week and he still hadn't come back. I decided

he must've wandered off and gotten killed. This place is safe enough. No one ever comes here."

Katerina bit her lip, looking around at the children.

"What about food?"

"We got food. I make sure the kids eat." Johnny's initial scowl faded into a surprisingly charming grin. "If you mean me, I've always been skinny."

She didn't comment and Jackasarian suspected that like him, she thought there was more to the story.

"I have a few supplies and I'd be happy to share them. In exchange for a place to stay," she added hastily when Johnny stiffened. "This is much cozier than the gatehouse."

"Yeth. Thay," Lorna said, smiling up at her.

"I reckon that's all right," Johnny said. "There's some extra furs up in the loft."

"That's wonderful. I'll just go get our things and come right back."

"I'll help you," Merry volunteered.

Katerina opened her mouth but Johnny beat her to it.

"You stay here," he said roughly. "I'll go. Girls don't need to be out in the snow."

Merry glared at him but Katerina laughed.

"I notice you don't object to me going out in the snow." A tide of red swept up over the boy's face, but Katerina smiled at him and put her hand on his arm. "I would be very happy to have you accompany me."

Merry sniffed, but didn't object as her sister and the young male set off into the storm. Jackasarian found himself agreeing with the youngster. Females did not belong outside under these conditions. He would have been happy to retrieve their belongings, but he did not see how he could do so without revealing his presence and he was curiously reluctant to do so. Not simply because as far as he could tell, humans were

unacquainted with other races, but from an unusual feeling of trepidation.

She had smiled at him once, but she had been half-asleep. What if she recoiled now that she was awake? He couldn't bear the thought of seeing the dismissal in her eyes that he'd seen in so many others. He settled for tracking them back to the complex, keeping to the rooftops and out of sight.

The fire she had built was almost out and Johnny made a disgusted noise as he kicked apart the remaining embers.

"I shoulda come back sooner to put this out." He gave her an oddly shy glance. "Your sister is quite a fighter."

"Yes she is, thank goodness. I never want anyone to be able to take advantage of her."

The boy colored again. "I could show her a few moves, if you'd like. You learn to watch out for yourself when you're on the street."

"How long were you on the streets?" she asked softly and he shrugged.

"As long as I can remember. There was an old woman who used to feed me sometimes, but she didn't have much to spare. And then she died."

"Oh, Johnny, I'm so sorry."

She gave his hand a quick squeeze and even though Jackasarian did not like her hands on another male, even a young one, he admired her sympathetic heart.

The pair gathered up Katerina's belongings and headed back to the other shelter. He lingered long enough to remove all signs of the fire and to restore the gatehouse to its previous condition before following them.

Once back at the shelter, he hesitated, looking at the closed doors and window shutters. Through Keffi's eyes, he could see them inside, laughing and happy. He had never felt quite so isolated before, not even when the other males in his class decided he was unworthy and refused to speak to him for an entire year. His father's death and his new position as head of

his house had ended that, but he had never forgotten. This, somehow, was even worse.

He actually got as far as putting his hand on the door, determined to make his presence known and force them to accept him, but that approach had never worked with his fellow warriors. Why would it work with this group of misfit humans? He would have to be satisfied with watching. But as he prepared to settle back with his data unit, he happened to glance up. There appeared to be just the faintest glow from beneath the roof of the shelter.

Curious, he climbed up the end wall, his uncovered fingers protesting the icy cold of the stone. He discovered a small window wedged beneath the roof in the crook between this building and the adjacent one. It too had been shuttered, but the shutter was slightly ajar, revealing a sliver of the loft beyond. There was laughter from below and through Keffi's eyes, he could see Katerina bend over a pot on the stove. Her face was flushed and she was smiling.

A tantalizing aroma made its way out through the small crack. To his utter shock, his stomach made a noise. He had been surviving on nutrient pills – more than enough to satisfy his physical requirements but at this moment they seemed completely inadequate. Food had never been of interest to him, but he suddenly long to taste whatever she was cooking below. He remained huddled next to the window, listening as she served the meal and they ate together. She told the children a story then sent her sister up the ladder to the loft, following with a bucket of water.

“Do you want to wash?” she asked.

“In the morning.” Merry yawned, then settled down on the pile of furs at the far end of the loft. “G’ night, Kat.”

“Good night, sweetheart.”

The lights below went out but he had excellent night vision and he could see clearly as she pushed down her pants to reveal pale, slender legs, then shrugged off her shirt as well. Beneath it, she wore nothing but a thin white garment that left her shoulders bare. With a tired sigh, she sat down on her own

pile of furs and dipped a cloth into the bucket of water. She ran it across her face and down her arms and her legs while he greedily watched each movement.

By the Horns, what he wouldn't give to trace that same path with his tongue - just as the human male had licked his female. But the human male had not been thorough enough. He wished to explore every inch of her skin.

She reached beneath the garment to cleanse her breasts and he saw her nipples, surprisingly long and thick for one with such small, perfect breasts. His shaft was pressed so painfully against his survival suit that he could feel it throb with each beat of his heart. She even dipped the cloth between her legs and although he could not see he could easily imagine its path. A growl almost escaped his lips and he pulled away from the window, afraid of betraying himself. His body had blocked the wind and when he moved, cold air must have entered because she shivered and frowned at the window. She moved across to try and close the small gap but the shutter didn't respond when she tugged on it.

She was so close to him. Only the wooden shutters separated their bodies. Her fragrance washed over him, as clean and sweet as forbidden fruit. The shutters would not stop him. With one move, he could wrench them open and pull her into his arms where she belonged. The impulse was so strong that he had to dig his claws into his palms in order to prevent himself from taking action.

He sat huddled in the darkness, blood dripping slowly onto the snow until she sighed and returned to her furs. She pulled her blanket over her shoulders but it wasn't until her breathing deepened that he allowed himself to move. Then he wedged his body against the crack, determined not to permit any more cold air to disturb her.

As the night passed the snow piled up around him, the weight adding to the insulation of his survival suit and he felt oddly content. Perhaps he dozed because the next time he opened his eyes, the sky had begun to lighten. He needed to move before he was discovered. He climbed to his feet, or at least he attempted to. He had not accounted for the effects of a long

night of cold. His feet refused to support him and slid out from beneath him. He grabbed for the stone wall of the neighboring building but his hands too were numb with cold and he couldn't grip the rock.

He fell. A hard landing only slightly softened by the mound of snow beneath him. The sky whirled above him floating in and out of his vision with the drifting snow. And then she was there, her beautiful face staring down at him.

He smiled, and then the world went dark.

CHAPTER 7



*K*aterina dreamed about her snow prince. Dreamed that he carried her off to an ice palace with soaring walls and a bed covered with white furs. Dreamed he laid her down on those furs and kissed her and touched her and...

A loud thump penetrated her dreams, and she startled awake, her heart racing. Everyone else was still asleep and nothing seemed to be wrong. Perhaps it was just the snow sliding off the roof. From the white glow seeping through the crack in the window shutters, it must be morning. Odd. She hadn't felt cold all night but now there was a definite chill in the air now.

The remnants of her dream lingered. She wasn't a virgin, but the few times she'd escaped her father's eye long enough to meet a man she'd found the entire experience rushed and unsatisfactory. It had never left her feeling like this – her nipples hard and throbbing and her clit swollen and pulsing between her legs. She could still smell her dream lover, his cool, minty making her skin tingle.

She was tempted to relieve her aching body, but then Merry muttered something in her sleep and distracted her. Her thoughts turned first to her sister and then to the other children. What was she going to do? She couldn't leave them out here on their own, but how could she take them with her when she had no place to go? It had been bad enough dragging her sister into the unknown. Jelle had promised safety, but she couldn't expect her to find a solution for an additional four children.

She remembered the way the twins had cuddled against her side as she told stories last night, obviously desperate for affection. Johnny had clearly done his best, assuming a responsibility that was far too heavy for his thin shoulders, but he was too young to be both mother and father to three other children.

From what she'd been able to determine, all of the children were orphans and unwanted. Lorna had even been given to Tolva by an aunt who didn't want the responsibility of the child. And what he planned to do with them? Johnny thought that he'd probably intended to put them to work, despite their age. Tolva had been heading north - not south to the city - and the only thing in that direction was the mining claims.

While child slavery was not permitted anywhere she had ever been, children often began work at a very young age. Not that her life with her father had been much better, she thought bitterly, but at least he was only taking advantage of her and not someone else's children.

Someone stirred down below and she heard the sound of muffled giggles. She was no closer to a solution than she had been when she first woke, but at least she had a few days to consider the problem. Although she was quite sure that her father would be searching for them, she still believed he would head back along the trail first. She certainly couldn't see him fighting his way through the snow to find them. It should be safe enough for now.

She quickly pulled her pants and shirt back on and climbed down the ladder, leaving Merry to sleep. The twins were the ones who had been giggling, and they gave her identical sunny smiles when she appeared.

"Look," Cecelia whispered, pointing at the door.

The pika! She had forgotten all about the creature in the relief of discovering her sister, but it must have been inside the entire night. Now it was pacing restlessly back and forth in front of the door. As soon as it saw her, it chirped excitedly and came over to tug at her pants as it had done the previous night.

“I’m sorry,” she laughed. “You must really want to get outside.”

She removed the heavy wooden bar that locked the door, then pulled it open to reveal a grey sky and more snow drifting down from above. She expected the pika to dart off immediately but instead it tugged on her pants leg again. It was acting the same way it had last night, as if it wanted her to follow it. She didn’t want to leave the warmth of their shelter, but the pika had been the one who’d led her here, and she felt as if she owed it something.

Quickly pulling on her boots and wrapping her cloak around her shoulders, she stepped out into the snowy morning. She expected the pika to take off through the maze of buildings, but instead it scampered along the front of their shelter to a large mound of snow in the corner between their building and the next. *Maybe that’s what I heard falling from the roof*, she thought as the pika climbed on top of the mound, chirping again.

It wasn’t until she took another step closer that she realized there was a body half buried in the snow. He was wearing a white garment that blended with the snow and it took a moment for her to realize just how big he was, her eyes traveling up over strong legs to a narrow waist and broad shoulders and finally to his face. A stunningly handsome face, as white as the surrounding snow. Was he... was he dead?

She bent cautiously over him and his eyes opened – brilliant blue eyes that seemed oddly familiar. Then he moved his head and the snow fell away to reveal his horns - the same horns she remembered from her dream. It was her snow prince.

“You,” she whispered.

He smiled up at her, a surprisingly sweet smile despite the sharp white teeth it revealed, but then his eyes fluttered closed again.

No! She automatically reached for him, grasping a big shoulder, his muscles firm and strong beneath her hand. His head moved at her touch but his eyes remained closed.

“Who is he?” Johnny asked suspiciously as he appeared at her side, and then his eyes widened. “What is he?”

“I don’t know, but I think he’s hurt. We have to get him inside.”

“You gotta be kidding. What if he’s dangerous?” The boy’s eyes traveled from the horns to the big body and he shook his head. “No, I know he’s dangerous. What if he hurts the kids, or tries to take them?”

It was a fair question, even though she found his size more reassuring than frightening. She didn’t believe that he meant them any harm, but could she take the chance? The pika chirped impatiently, staring at her from its big lavender eyes, and oddly enough, that helped her to decide.

“But what if he’s not dangerous to us? We can’t just leave him out here to die. Is there somewhere inside where we could keep him separated?”

Johnny scuffed at the snow with his foot, scowling, then gave a reluctant nod.

“There’s a bedroom back behind the stove wall. Tolva was sleeping in it.”

“Will you help me get him there?”

“I guess.”

Johnny was obviously not enthusiastic about the idea but he bent over the stranger’s body with her. It was immediately clear that he was far too heavy for them to carry. Johnny grunted and disappeared back inside, returning with a blanket. With a considerable amount of effort, they managed to roll the stranger onto the blanket and then the two of them dragged it across the snowy ground and into the shelter. The children looked at him with wide eyes, including Merry who was now awake.

“He’s so handsome. Who is he?”

Johnny scowled at her.

“He’s a stranger. A creepy looking stranger. You stay away from him, you hear me?”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

“Stop it, you two,” she said, still panting from the effort of tugging his body along. “Unless you want to leave him in the middle of the floor, we need to keep going.”

Johnny stopped glaring at Merry, and nodded.

“Yeah, this way.”

He opened the door in the back wall next to the stove to reveal a small bedroom. The wooden bedstead was still intact, furs draped over the frame. She looked at it and sighed. How was she going to get him up on the bed? As she bent over to try and tug him up, his eyes flickered open.

“Can you stand?” she asked. “I want to get you onto the bed.”

He didn’t really seem to see or hear her, but when she put her shoulder under his arm to lever him up, his arm tightened around her shoulder. She was all too aware of the strength of that arm but although her pulse was beating rapidly, it wasn’t from fear. This close to him, his scent washed over her and she recognized it. The same cool, minty scent that had filled her head when she woke. Just the memory sent a small pulse of arousal through her body.

“That’s right,” she murmured. “Can you stand?”

It took a few tries before her words seemed to penetrate, but he half stumbled to his feet, and she urged him the few steps to the bed and down onto the furs. He collapsed down, taking her with him, his arm still around her shoulders and she found herself plastered on top of his big body. It felt oddly comfortable, as if she belonged there, and it wasn’t until she heard Merry giggle that she thought to free herself.

He was unconscious again, but she managed to swing his legs up on the bed before covering him with another fur. She wished she knew what she could do to help him but he looked strangely peaceful, more as if he were sleeping than unconscious and his breathing was steady enough. Maybe all she could do was wait. She reluctantly left the room and Johnny immediately started to close the door.

“Don’t do that,” she protested. “I need to check on him and see if he wakes up.”

The boy crossed his arms. “What if he attacks us?”

“You saw him, Johnny. He couldn’t even stand. How about if we leave it open for now? Once he regains consciousness, we can decide if we need to lock him in.”

“I suppose,” he muttered. “I still think he’s dangerous.”

She also suspected that her prince might be dangerous, but for an entirely different reason.

CHAPTER 8



Jackasarian's head pounded, pain reverberating through his skull. Even his horns ached. Where was he? What had happened? For a confused moment he thought he was back on the wrecked ship but there was an unfamiliar softness beneath him. He heard a familiar sound and forced his eyes open to see Keffi perched on his chest, the big lavender eyes studying him with what appeared to be anxiety. The memories came flooding back.

Katerina.

Had that been a dream, or had she indeed been there? He turned his head to search for her but he was alone. Alone, but inside. The room was primitive at best, but he was inside, no longer isolated and alone in the cold and snow. The door to the room stood ajar and he could hear voices beyond. He should join them, announce his presence, that he felt oddly reluctant to leave his resting place

A small figure slipped through the open door. It was the child – the one with the missing tooth - and she padded quietly over to the bed. Despite the deformity, she was not an unattractive child. Short dark hair framed a face with large, dark eyes and a certain impish charm.

“Hello. I’m Lorna. Who are you?”

“I am Subcommander Jackasarian D’Frostulen.” His voice came out annoyingly weak.

Her eyes widened

“Jack Froth? Did you bring the winter?”

He started to shake his head, then thought better of it as pain spiked through his skull.

“No, I am Subcommander Jackasarian D’Frostulen, and I certainly did not bring this very unpleasant winter.”

She didn’t pay any attention, bouncing excitedly on her toes.

“I have to tell Ceci.”

She dashed back to the doorway.

“He’th awake. Jack Froth ith awake.”

A startled silence fell, and a moment later the doorway was filled with humans but all he could see was Katerina, her silver blue eyes sparkling as she smiled at him.

“I’m so glad you’re awake. How do you feel?”

A Tandroki warrior never admitted weakness.

“I am quite well,” he said stiffly and tried to rise.

Unfortunately, his body betrayed him and as soon as he lifted his head, the room spun dizzily around him. He collapsed back down to the bed, barely avoiding the indignity of groaning at the pain as she rushed to his side.

“Don’t try to get up. I think you must have hit your head.”

He wanted to deny it, but it was foolish to ignore the reality of his situation. When her long fingers gently touched his forehead, he almost groaned again, from pleasure this time.

“He could be faking it,” the young male said, glaring at him suspiciously.

“Of course he’s not faking it.”

“He is right to be wary,” he said approvingly. “An unscrupulous male might feign injury. However, I am Tandroki and we would never use such tactics.”

“Tandroki? What’s that? And why does Lorna think that you’re Jack Frost?”

“The Tandroki are my people.” He wondered uneasily if he should disclose his mixed heritage, but soothed his conscience

by deciding that it would mean nothing to her. “I am Subcommander Jackasarian D’Frostulen.”

Her eyes widened and then she smiled at him.

“That’s quite a mouthful. I can see why Lorna was confused. Is it all right to call you Jack instead?”

He considered the matter. The shortening of his name was a familiarity that no one had ever taken, but he liked the sound of it on her lips.

“You may,” he said, attempting to bow his head graciously before he remembered the pain of moving. He couldn’t entirely hide his reaction and her hand returned to his brow, her cool fingers soothing away the pain.

“Stop trying to move. Would you like something to drink?”

The question reminded him of the dryness of his mouth and throat but he refused to let his eagerness show.

“That would be acceptable.”

“I’ll get it,” Merry said and dashed off into the other room.

The others remained with him. Johnny leaned against the wall, his arms folded and suspicion in every line of his body. The twins leaned against the boy’s legs, watching him with big eyes, while Lorna hovered at Katerina’s elbow.

“But you are Jack Froth, aren’t you? I know you are,” Lorna said eagerly. “And if you’re here, that meanth ith almoth time for the Longest Night.”

“The Longest Night? And who is Jack Frost?”

Katerina smiled. “The Longest Night is the turning of the year. We celebrate with festivities.”

“And prethenth,” Lorna interrupted. “I got a prethent once.”

Once? If the celebration occurred every year, why had she only received one present? His female had obviously picked up on it as well, because she put her arm around the girl and hugged her.

“Yes, there are presents on the Longest Night.”

“For us too?” one of the twins whispered, slipping over to join them.

Katerina looked at him and he could clearly read the sorrow on her face, just as clearly as he could see the hope on the children’s faces.

“I am sure that there will be presents for everyone,” he said recklessly. After all, how hard would it be to find something to please them?

“I like presents too,” Merry said cheerfully, returning with a mug in her hands.

“Of course you do,” the boy scoffed and stalked off into the other room.

“What’s the matter with Johnny?” Cecelia asked.

“He’s just mean,” Merry muttered, but Katerina shook her head.

“Maybe he never got any presents either,” she said softly.

Merry looked stricken, but she pressed the mug at Katerina.

“Here’s the water.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

Katerina looked at him, then turned to the children. “Why don’t you go and check on Johnny? I’ll be out in a few minutes to start breakfast.”

“Okay. Bye, Jack Froth.” Lorna said cheerfully and herded the twins out of the room. Merry reluctantly followed them, and then Katerina smiled at him.

“I’m going to help you lift your head so you can drink. And don’t tell me you can do it,” she added with mock severity. “It will be our secret.”

Was that why she had sent the others away? So they would not witness his shame in requiring assistance? Her thoughtfulness made his chest ache, but he still did not intend to admit to any weakness.

“I can –”

Ignoring his words, she slipped her arm beneath his head as he attempted to lift it and he found his face pressed against her shoulder, his mouth only inches away from her breast. She gave a startled laugh and he saw her nipple pebble beneath the thin cloth as his breath wafted across it.

“I didn’t really think this through, but I suppose this will work.” Her voice was breathless but determined as she raised the mug to his lips. “Here, drink.”

The liquid distracted him and he drank thirstily, draining the entire mug before she pulled it away. As she did, a last drop of water fell on her shirt, rendering the thin fabric almost translucent and he couldn’t resist. His tongue slipped over to probe at the damp cloth and wrap around the taut nub beneath the fabric.

Her whole body shuddered as her scent changed, becoming richer and sweeter. For a second she seemed to lean closer, but then she hastily pulled away. Pink covered her face, just as it had covered the young male’s face the evening before. What did these color changes signify? In her case, it appeared to be embarrassment. She rose to her feet, needlessly brushing down her pants and avoiding his eyes.

“I’m going to make breakfast. I’ll bring you some.”

She fled the room and he stared after her. He should not have touched her in such a way, but with her sweet taste still lingering on his tongue and the memory of her response, however brief, he could not find it within himself to regret the transgression.

Weariness overcame him, but he smiled as his eyes closed.

CHAPTER 9



*K*aterina fled back into the main room, carefully avoiding looking at Merry or Johnny as she moved over to the stove. Hopefully the warmth would dry her shirt before anyone noticed the wet spot. But even as the fabric dried, her nipples remained in stiff little buds. She had never experienced anything quite so erotic. His tongue had been far longer and more agile than a human tongue and when it had wrapped around her nipple, tugging on the stiff peak, it had sent a surge of arousal through her body. How could she be so attracted to someone who was so clearly not human?

It had been easier before when she thought of him as a fantasy, as if one of the stories in her books had come to life. Even when she first discovered him lying in the snow, his differences seemed irrelevant compared to the necessity of tending to him. But now that he appeared to be recovering, her curiosity was aroused.

Where had he come from? He had said he was Tandroki, but that meant nothing to her. She was aware that humans were descended from a group of colonists who had crashed on the planet many generations ago, although that knowledge was rapidly disappearing – and had disappeared already in some of the smaller and more insular villages. The larger towns were less restrictive, but even there the story of their origins was passing into myth. Her father had made sure that everyone in the caravan knew that it was not a topic to be discussed.

Was it possible that Jack had also come from another planet? It certainly made more sense that he was an alien rather than a

mythical creature for one of her storybooks, although she still liked thinking of him as a snow prince. Perhaps he came from a frozen world and he had an ice palace like the one she had dreamed of, she thought with a smile.

A hand patted her hip, distracting her from her thoughts and she looked down to find Cecilia staring up at her, her mouth trembling.

“What’s the matter sweetheart?” she asked, picking up the little girl.

“Is it really almost the Longest Night?”

She thought for a moment. The caravan was usually back in their winter camp before the celebration, but they had been much further behind schedule than usual. At least in part because of her father’s determination to marry her off to Guyten, she thought bitterly. Now that she considered the matter, it was almost time for the festivities.

“Yes, I think so. In another week.”

Cecelia looked even more distressed.

“But how will Santa find us?”

The colonists’ holiday traditions were a mishmash of various customs but the idea of the mysterious stranger delivering presents on the Longest Night was one of the most popular.

“There is no such thing –” Johnny started to say.

“Because he’s magic,” she interrupted quickly. “He could find you anywhere.”

“Really?”

The hope on the little girl’s face was almost painful to see, but Katerina nodded firmly. Cecelia beamed at her, then wiggled to be let down and ran over to her brother.

“Why’d you tell her that?” Johnny muttered. “The sooner she learns that no one’s going to give her anything for nothing, the better off she’ll be.”

“She’s just a child. It doesn’t hurt to let her believe.”

“It will when he doesn’t show up.”

The sorrow on Johnny’s face was clearly visible beneath the scowl.

“He’ll show up,” she said firmly. “One way or another, he’ll show up.”

She hoped it wasn’t an empty promise, but she’d had a lot of experience in making the holiday special for Merry. It had taken a lot of ingenuity – and a lot of hiding things from her father – but she’d always managed. She had less to work with this year, but she also didn’t have her father to worry about. She tilted her head, listening to the wind howling around their shelter.

No, he wouldn’t be out in this. In fact, given the strength of the storm, the traders were undoubtedly demanding that the caravan return to their winter quarters. Even her father would have a hard time refusing to move given the current conditions. She smiled as she returned to her pots, already considering presents.

The building had apparently once been used as both workshop and residence. The area beneath the loft was cluttered with material, including stacks of faded fabric and assorted odds and ends. She was sure she could come up with something.

Once breakfast was prepared, she left Merry and Johnny to look after the younger children while she took a plate into Jack. He was awake again, his blue eyes gleaming in the dim room with an attractive and entirely inhuman light. The pika was curled at his side, and his long fingers gently stroked the soft fur.

“Are you hungry? I brought you some food.”

“Food would be acceptable,” he said after a brief pause.

“But do you want something to eat?” she asked, wondering why he seemed to have difficulty admitting to his preferences.

“I do not require your sustenance, but it would be... welcome.”

She shook her head. Apparently that was as close as he was going to get to admitting that he wanted food.

“Can you sit up? It would be much easier to eat that way.”

“You do not wish to raise my head?”

The question was innocent enough. The look on his face was not. A quick rush of heat swept over her as she remembered his tongue exploring her. Ignoring it, she raised an eyebrow.

“Do you need help?”

As she had anticipated, he frowned. “I do not require assistance.”

He immediately tried to sit up, but she could see how much pain it caused him. Putting the plate down, she bent over to help him. His face pressed against her chest again but this time he did not take advantage of the fact and simply allowed her to help him upright. Telling herself that she was not disappointed, she took a step back and studied him.

“You look a little better.”

“The Tandroki heal swiftly.”

“Who are the Tandroki? Where do you come from?”

“From Tandrok,” he said, and she huffed in frustration.

“And where is Tandrok?”

“It is forbidden to discuss such matters with primitive —” he broke off, but it was too late.

“With primitive species? We may be primitive, but at least we have the good sense not to knock ourselves out or insult someone who is trying to help us.”

He actually looked abashed, dipping his head in an obviously formal and equally obviously painful gesture.

“Please forgive me. I meant no offense.” He sighed. “And perhaps it is not significant in this case.”

“You mean because we know we are not alone in the universe?”

It was his turn to study her.

“I have heard tales of your origins,” he said cautiously.

“Yes, I’m familiar with them. I know that we came from another planet. And I rather suspect that you did as well. Where is your ship?”

An odd look crossed his face. “It crashed.”

“This planet does not seem to be very lucky, does it?”

He tilted his head, the light catching on his horns, but as he did she heard his stomach growl. She smiled, picked up the plate, and handed it to him.

“I’m sorry. I’m keeping you talking instead of feeding you.”

He took a cautious bite of the food, then his eyes widened.

“This is delicious,” he said, chewing thoughtfully. “I had no idea that food could be so delectable, even after I smelled your cooking—”

Oh my God. The only way he could have smelled her cooking was if he had been close to them. She narrowed her eyes at him.

“You were there in the woods, weren’t you? I didn’t dream you.”

He gave that stiff, painful nod again.

“Have you been stalking us?”

She took a step back towards the door, suddenly afraid that Johnny had been right all along.

“Not at all,” he said hastily. “Our destinations simply coincided.”

“But you still hid from us.”

“I did not consider it wise to reveal myself, given my differences.”

He gestured at his horns and some of her anger died away. Humans could be intolerant. And given that it was apparently against his protocol to interact with “primitive” species, she supposed it made sense to remain concealed.

“I guess I can understand that,” she admitted reluctantly.

Was it really so bad that he had been following them?

“I also removed all traces of your passage,” he added, and she frowned.

“I already did that.”

“You did well enough for an... untrained warrior.”

“I rather suspect you intended to say either woman or primitive, but you’re not wrong. I don’t have any training.”

He gave a cautious nod, but she saw his eyes flick towards the plate of food. She shook her head.

“Go ahead and eat.”

“Thank you, zersetta.”

“What did you call me?”

He didn’t raise his eyes from his plate, but she thought he seemed uncomfortable.

“It is a Tandroki word. It means female... esteemed female.”

He looked so uncomfortable, she couldn’t help asking. “Is it complimentary?”

“Oh yes.”

He finally looked up, and when their eyes met, it was almost as if a bell chimed in her head. Perhaps it was foolish, but she trusted the sincerity on his face.

“This really is most delicious,” he added, clearly changing the subject.

“Even compared to what I’m sure is far superior Tandroki food?” she couldn’t resist asking.

“There is no comparison. For us, food is simply sustenance. A balanced diet is provided in the form of pills or nutritional supplements.”

“That’s all you eat? Even on special occasions?”

“For formal occasions, food is chosen for its rarity or its visual appeal. Taste is not a consideration.”

She shuddered.

“That sounds terrible. This is just basic cooking but it sounds much better than either of those options.”

“I believe it is far from basic.”

He was looking at her again, his eyes warm, and she could feel herself blushing. Walking over to the window, she cracked open the shutter. Of course there was no glass in the window, but despite a few flakes of snow, she welcomed the cool air against her flushed face before she remembered her patient.

“Is that all right? Are you cold?”

“Not at all. My survival suit keeps me warm.”

He gestured at the form fitting white garment that he wore, and she followed his gesture, doing her best not to linger at the bulge between his legs, clearly visible even in a seated position. Could it really be as outsized as it appeared? Was it as long and agile as his tongue? She hastily snatched her gaze away, doing her best to ignore the tingle of arousal at her thoughts. His head was tilted again, as if studying her reaction, and she quickly took refuge in the previous subject.

“I’m actually surprised at how much I have to work with. Johnny is so thin that I thought he was starving himself to feed the children, but he was right, there’s a lot of food. It’s strange though. It seems to have accumulated over a number of years.”

“Why is that strange?”

“As we discussed, this is a colony planet. Life has not been easy and even though things are better now, it’s unlikely that anyone would leave a supply of food behind when they moved on.”

“Perhaps they intended to return.”

“Maybe. But this valley doesn’t have a good reputation. It’s almost as if they were scared into leaving.”

An icy finger seemed to sweep down her spine and she quickly returned to the window to close the shutter again.

“I will not allow any harm to come to you,” he assured her.

She could hear the sincerity in his voice, but considering that he was barely capable of sitting up, it wasn't quite as reassuring as she would have wished. Perhaps her expression revealed her doubts because his face suddenly hardened. He cast the plate aside and rose to his feet, joining her at the window with shocking speed. He threw open the heavy shutters with terrifying ease to reveal the empty, snow-covered alley before slamming them shut and turning to her with a triumphant smile.

“Never underestimate a Tandroki warrior.”

But then his smile faded and his already pale face turned even whiter. She hastily grabbed his arm, placing it over her shoulder as she put her other arm around his waist. She could tell he was fighting it, but then he sagged against her and let her bear some of his weight as she eased him back towards the bed.

He collapsed back against it, his arm around her shoulders once more bringing her down on top of him. This time she was between his legs and his cock rested directly against her, leaving no doubt that it was just as massive as she had thought. Her eyes had not deceived her.

His arm was still around her shoulders and those strange blue eyes gleamed at her despite his obvious exhaustion. His cock flexed and for a second she was tempted to respond, to press her suddenly swollen and aching clit directly against that thick length.

“Whath the matter with Jack Froth? And why ith he hugging you?”

Lorna's voice interrupted the moment, and she jumped up, knowing her face was flaming once again.

“A Tandroki warrior should know better than to overexert himself,” she told him sternly, before turning to smile at the little girl.

“He thought he was feeling better but he's still a little sick.”

“Ith that why you were hugging him? To make him feel better?”

Unable to think of a better explanation, she simply nodded, and Lorna's face lit up.

"I can do that."

The little girl launched herself at Jack, fortunately landing across his chest as he quickly threw a fur over his lower half. She wasn't sure how he would react, but he looked as surprised and delighted as he had when he tasted the food she brought him. He put his arm around Lorna as she tucked her face against his neck, and her chest ached with an old longing. Her father had never welcomed hugs, or any sign of affection, and she had been a lot younger than Lorna when she learned that lesson.

Fighting back a sudden urge to cry, she picked up the abandoned plate, wiped completely clean, and headed for the door.

"I'm just going to check on our supplies," she said, and fled.

CHAPTER 10



Jackasarian watched his female flee, his head spinning with a confusing mix of emotions. Emotions that any true Tandroki warrior would have rejected. He had made so many mistakes. He had called her his beloved mate – a term that belonged to the primitive times before Moroz taught them discipline and serenity. He had succumbed to the sensual allure of alien food, not to mention the even more sensual allure of her body pressed against his. He had revealed far more about himself than he should have done, and he had capped it all with a foolishly arrogant display.

And yet, although she had properly chastised him, she didn't seem disgusted either by his display, or the resulting weakness. Any Tandroki female would have been appalled. In the midst of his confusion, the warm body tucked against his side and the small arms around his neck felt strangely comforting. He gently put his arm around the fragile shoulders.

“Thank you for the hug,” he said gravely. “I am already feeling much better.”

And it was true. The food Katerina had prepared might not have been as perfectly balanced as the Tandroki supplements, but it had given him strength. He moved cautiously into a sitting position, although he didn't have the heart to dislodge the little girl still clinging to him.

The twins appeared in the doorway and Cecelia, obviously the bolder one, gave him an uncertain look.

“Miss Cat said Lorna was hugging you to make you feel better.”

“Yeth I am,” Lorna said defiantly. “And he thaid ith working.”

The twins exchanged a look, then to his shock, they crossed the room and climbed up on the bed as well. Fortunately his erection had vanished as soon as his female left since Cecil dug a sharp little knee into his groin in the process. He hid his reaction as stoically as he had his reaction to the arrow that had pierced his shoulder during one of his junior training bouts. The twins settled down next to him, then gave him an expectant look. What did they want from him?

“Do you know any thorieth?” Lorna asked in her sweet whispering voice.

“I do not,” he began, but then he remembered that his mother had told him stories once - long ago, before his father’s efforts to turn her into a proper Tandroki female had succeeded. “Or perhaps I do,” he added slowly.

Their faces grew even more expectant as he did his best to recall one of her stories.

“Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away,” he finally began.

It was an improbable tale about a lost heir and magical powers and the bonds formed when a small group fought against overwhelming odds, but as he spoke he remembered more and more. He could almost hear his mother’s voice whispering in his ear.

Merry wandered into the room and climbed up on the end of the bed. Johnny immediately followed her, leaning against the wall in his usual defiant pose. Even Katerina appeared before he had finished the story, smiling at all of them as she listened.

“And they all lived happily ever after,” he finished, just as his mother had always finished.

“That wath a great thory,” Lorna said.

“Yes it was. Tell us another one,” Merry said eagerly.

“I am not sure that I know another one,” he admitted.

Celia's small hand tucked on his arm. "You can tell that one again."

He gave his female what he was sure was a helpless look, and she laughed.

"Not now, kids. Jack still needs to rest."

"But we hugged him loth," Lorna protested.

"And I'm sure it was very helpful. But he still needs time to get strong again. Come on now, time for lunch."

He was sure his face was far too eager, because she looked at him and laughed again.

"Yes, you too. I'll be back in a moment."

Everyone filed out of the room, leaving him feeling oddly bereft. He wanted to demand that they return, or even to follow them, but even if his dignity had permitted it, he was not entirely sure that his legs would obey. His attempt to impress his female had drained him. He despised the foolish weakness, and began a series of exercises to strengthen his muscles by tightening and contracting the individual muscles.

The isometric exercises required very little actual movement, but he was still drenched with sweat by the time his female returned. She noticed immediately and rushed over to him, placing the bowl she was carrying aside as she put her hand on his brow.

"Why are you sweating? Do you have a fever?"

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Much better now that you are here, zersetta."

She put her hands on her hips and frowned at him.

"I wish I knew if that was true or if it's simply male pride speaking."

"I would not lie to you."

Although, perhaps, he had not always told her the entire truth.

"All right," she sighed and handed him the bowl. "I made soup for lunch. I think you'll like it – Johnny has already eaten two

full bowls. I just wish he wasn't so thin."

"This can happen when a young Tandroki male starts to become an adult. Is that not true for human males as well?"

"It is, but I still feel as if something is wrong. Maybe when we leave here, I can find a doctor to look at him."

"Leave?" His heart skipped a beat. She was already planning on leaving him alone again?

"I don't think we can stay here forever." She sighed. "As you probably guessed when you saw me trying to cover our tracks, someone is looking for us."

"Who?" he growled, the sound unexpectedly vicious in the small room as his claws threatened to emerge. "Another male?"

She gave him an astonished look as he did his best to smooth his face into the correct neutral mask.

"I suppose you could say that. It is my father."

"You are fleeing your male parent?"

Was he as cold and unfeeling as his own father had been?

"Yes I am. He wants to marry me off to someone I despise, and make me leave Merry behind."

"You do not wish to mate with this male?" he asked as neutrally as he could.

"No I don't. He's rough and he's cruel and he's already lost two wives."

His claws began to dig into his palms and only the knowledge that any bloodstains would worry her enabled him to stop them from going any further.

"You will never be forced into a mating," he vowed.

Her lips twisted. "I appreciate the offer, but you're not always going to be around, are you?"

The question hung in the air between them. He wanted to assure her that he would never leave her side, but it was impossible. Revealing himself to this small group was one

thing, revealing himself to the much larger human population was another. And what did he have to offer her?

Unless the technological source he had been seeking offered a solution. He had not even thought about his quest since he had decided to follow them. He should undoubtedly check again, but the warmth of the delicious soup filled his stomach and he felt strangely lethargic.

“I was just thinking.” If she was disappointed by his failure to answer, it was not apparent on her face. “Since it looks as if we will be here until the Longest Night, I would like to make the children some presents. Maybe you could distract them and tell them another story later today while I work on their presents?”

“I truly do not know if I recall any other stories.”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Children are quite happy to hear the same story over and over again.”

“If it assists you, then I will be happy to do so.”

“Thank you. Now why don’t you get some sleep?”

“I am not an invalid,” he protested, even though his eyes felt heavy and his body was limp and exhausted.

“No, but you are recovering from a very bad fall.” Something changed in her expression. “You were on the roof outside my window, weren’t you? That was why you fell.”

“I was blocking the shutter,” he murmured, too sleepy to consider his words. “I did not wish you to be chilled.”

His eyes drifted closed as he spoke, but then an impossibly soft mouth brushed against his.

“Thank you,” she whispered against his lips, and he was suddenly wide-awake.

This joining of mouths was not a Tandroki custom, but he had seen those two humans and he knew what came next. He wrapped his hand in the fine silk of her hair and let his tongue slip into the tempting warmth of her mouth. By the Horns, he had never tasted anything so delicious. For a second, she froze, and then she responded eagerly, her small tongue brushing

against his as he explored. He wrapped his tongue around hers, so different and so delightful.

His other hand slid down over her back, seeking the hidden warmth between her legs. When he brushed across the damp fabric, she gasped into his mouth, and suddenly pulled away. He forced himself to release her as she scrambled back to her feet. Her face was once more a delightful shade of pink.

“I... I...”

Words failed her. She waved her hand and once more fled the room. He cursed silently in Tandroki as he looked at the empty doorway. This was becoming an unfortunate habit. But despite the painful throb of his disappointed cock, he was not entirely dissatisfied. She had responded to him. Not reluctantly, but enthusiastically, he thought, tugging at his aching shaft.

Perhaps her own eagerness had frightened her. Perhaps she required a gentler approach, a chance to become accustomed to his touch. He needed a plan. He began considering the matter with the same intensity as when he had planned his first military campaign, but before he made much progress, exhaustion overcame him and he slept.

CHAPTER 11



*K*aterina hurried over to the stove, hoping that heat would help disguise her pink face, but it was not successful. Merry gave her a curious look as she came to join her.

“Why are you blushing?”

“I’m not blushing. The stove is hot.”

The excuse sounded weak even to her own ears, and Merry gave her a disgusted look.

“I’m not a child. I bet it’s because of Mr. Tall, Pale, and Handsome in there, isn’t it?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said with all the dignity she could manage. “But speaking of Jack, I have a plan to distract the children.”

She lowered her voice, looking around the room. The twins were curled up together asleep on their bunk. Lorna was sitting on the floor by the fire, arranging pebbles into some pattern only she could see. Johnny had gone to check the valley and make sure there were no signs of life. Given the fact that the snow continued to fall, she wasn’t worried about it, but she suspected he needed an outlet for his restless energy.

“Jack’s going to tell them another story this afternoon so I can work on some presents for the children. Can you help make sure that they stay in there and warn me when he’s through?”

Merry nodded eagerly.

“That’s a wonderful idea. What are you going to make for them? And me?” she added, with a teasing smile.

“Aren’t you too old to believe in Santa?” she teased back.

“Never.” Merry pressed her hand against her heart and exaggerated shock, and they both laughed.

“There are lots of bits of fabric around. I thought I’d make Ceci a doll.”

Merry sighed. “Like the one you made me that our father destroyed because he was mad at me?”

“Yes, sweetheart. Do you mind?”

“I’m too old for dolls.” Merry said, but her eyes were suspiciously bright.

Two dolls, she decided immediately.

“And a wagon for Cecil,” she added. “There’s plenty of wood, although I may need Johnny to help whittle the wheels.”

“Oh, Johnny,” Merry snapped. “I’m sure he’s far too busy.”

“And I’m sure he’d be happy to help. What do you have against him?”

The two had been fighting ever since they arrived.

“I don’t know. He just annoys me.”

Merry started to turn away, but not before Katerina saw the betraying blush on her cheeks. Oh Lord. The last thing she needed was for her sister to develop her first crush, especially on a prickly boy like Johnny - although she suddenly wondered if his antagonism towards her sister came from the same cause. Abandoning that worry for later, she returned to the subject of presents.

“I think Lorna would like a game, but I’m not really sure how to make one.”

“Maybe you could use a wide piece of wood to make a board,” Merry said thoughtfully. “Can you find something to burn the squares?”

“That’s an excellent idea. And Johnny could make the pieces.”

Oops. Merry scowled at her.

“I could do that.”

“Maybe you could work together,” she suggested, hoping she wasn’t making a mistake.

“Maybe.”

Despite Merry’s apparent reluctance, she rushed over to Johnny as soon as he returned, waving her hands excitedly as she whispered to him. The boy started off as stiff and scowling as ever, but he eventually gave in to Merry’s enthusiasm. The two of them huddled together in the corner making plans while she went to check on Jack and discovered that he was awake. His blue eyes gleamed at her, but to her relief, he made no reference to their kiss.

“Are you ready for your storytelling duties?” she asked, wishing her voice didn’t sound quite as breathless as it did.

“Of course. I am ready for any duties you wish to impose upon me.”

His voice was deep and warm, a distinct change from his usual somewhat arrogant stiffness, and she was sure she was blushing again. Dammit.

“Good,” she said with as much dignity as she could manage. “I’ll send them in.”

The children eagerly went to join him, Merry following while Johnny stayed in the main room.

“Your sister says you need my help.”

“I’d appreciate it. I want to make a little wagon for Cecil, but I think my wheels would turn out pretty crooked. I saw you whittling earlier and you look really good.”

He ducked his head. “Not much else to do.”

She bit her lip, then decided to take advantage of the opportunity.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do? In the future, I mean.”

He immediately scowled and crossed his arms.

“We’re gonna stay here. We don’t bother no one and no one bothers us.”

“I understand that.”

She truly did. Despite the makeshift nature of their accommodations, this felt more like a home than her father’s wagon had ever felt.

“But the children are so small. What would you do if one of them got sick? Or if the food runs out? Or the fuel for the stove?”

“I can take care of them,” he said defiantly. “If the food runs out, I’ll hunt. And there’s plenty of fuel. There’s boxes and boxes of it in the cave beneath the ice.”

“A cave?”

“Yeah. Tolva found it that first day we were here. He made me go with him to make sure I didn’t run off with the kids while he was gone. There’s a bunch of stuff in there. Fuel cubes. Some metal stuff I don’t recognize. That’s where I got my knife. Stole it when Tolva wasn’t looking.”

He showed her the knife he used for whittling and for the first time she realized it was far superior to anything their current technology could produce. Just how long had this place existed? Even the technology to produce the smoothly cut and fitted stones that made up the walls was almost obsolete.

“Maybe I should take a look at this cave,” she said slowly. “Are there more supplies in there? Food supplies, I mean?”

He flushed and looked away, kicking at the floor.

“Don’t know. Can’t read.”

Her heart ached, but she suspected he would not accept her sympathy.

“If you ever want to learn, I’d be happy to teach you,” she said briskly. “I taught Merry, or at least I tried,” she added with a grin.

Her sister was a reluctant student at best. Not entirely surprisingly, that caught his attention.

“Maybe I could join you, just to watch and see.”

The suggestion surprised her. She hadn't really thought about resuming lessons but really, there was nothing to stop her. As long as the snow lasted and they were snug in their shelter, she had plenty of time. Usually lessons took second place to traveling or setting up a stall, or whatever chores her father had assigned her.

“I think that's an excellent idea, although I suspect Merry will not agree.”

She was quite right. As soon as she announced that she intended to resume their lessons, her sister's lower lip poked out.

“But it's the holidays.”

“Not yet. And we have lots of time until then.”

“You don't have our school stuff.”

“Not all of it,” she admitted, a pang striking her at the thought of her lost books. “But I have enough. Johnny is going to join us,” she added casually before Merry thought of another excuse.

“Really?”

Merry's protests stopped as she slanted a look at the boy from under her long lashes. He had been following the conversation, but when Merry looked at him, he muttered something and headed outside. Katerina sighed. Was it a mistake to let the children's interest in each other encourage them to work together?

The thought continued to trouble her for the rest of the day and she ended up asking Jack about it that evening. All of the children were asleep. The snow had stopped briefly in the late afternoon and she had bundled them all up as best she could and sent them outside to run around and release their energy before calling them back in for hot soup and cuddles before bed.

The exercise had worked. All of them had fallen asleep soon after dinner and even Merry had climbed up the ladder to the loft with a sleepy yawn. Johnny was supposedly working on Lorna's game, but his head was resting on the table. She grinned at his slumped figure as she quietly picked up a stool and carried it through into Jack's room.

"Do you think it's a mistake?" she asked him, sitting down next to the bed.

"I have no experience. Tandroki males and females lead very separate lives."

"Really? Even if you don't go to school together, what about dates, or social gatherings?"

"Amongst the Great Houses, social occasions are very... structured. Everything one does is observed and judged."

"Great Houses?"

"The House of Frostulen has a long lineage." His voice sounded strange. "I am not its finest son."

She gave him an astonished stare. "I don't believe that for a moment."

A brief smile flashed across his face before he sobered and shook his head. "I am not a true Tandroki warrior."

There was a wealth of meaning in his words, but before she could ask, he returned to the original subject.

"Although I do not have much experience with the interactions between males and females, I do have experience with young males. I believe that Johnny is an honorable male. I do not think that he would harm your sister in any way."

"I'm afraid it might be the other way around. Merry is too young to understand how easily she enchants people."

"She is nowhere near as enchanting as her sister."

His voice had deepened again, and she shivered in response.

"But she's so pretty," she protested automatically.

He tilted his head, considering.

“She’s an attractive child and will no doubt become an attractive adult. But you, zeretta, have a far more rare and exquisite attraction.”

Her breath caught in her throat and her tongue swept out to moisten suddenly dry lips. His eyes gleamed as they followed the movement, glowing in the dim room.

“As I suspect you’re about to run away again, I have something for you.”

Warmth heated her cheeks.

“I wasn’t going to run away,” she protested. “And you don’t need to give me anything.”

“I do not need to, but I want to.”

He reached beneath the furs, disturbing the pika, and pulled out a long clear strip that he handed to her. At first she thought it was glass, but unlike glass, it flexed slightly in her hands.

“What is this?”

“It is to place over the gap between the shutters, so that you will not be chilled. The dimensions should be close enough, but let me know if I need to alter it.”

“You made this? For me? But how?”

“Keffi retrieved my bag for me.”

He reached beneath the furs again as Keffi made a disgusted noise and scampered off to the end of the bed. The bag appeared to be made of white silk, thin and flat.

“And this was in there?”

He laughed. It was the first time she had seen him laugh and it turned him from handsome to breathtaking. She was so busy staring at him that she almost missed his words.

“No, but the bag contains nanites – a technology which can be used to manipulate matter.”

“That’s amazing. Can I see?”

He opened the bag to reveal a collection of small crystals, with the same intricate patterns that frost created on a windowpane

and she caught her breath in astonishment.

“You really are Jack Frost.”

“Perhaps I am the Tandroki version,” he said lightly. “Do you wish to retire now?”

“Yes, but not because I’m running away. I’m tired, and the children will be up early. But first...”

She bent over him and kissed him. He didn’t respond but she could feel the tension in his body, so she licked at his lips, delighting in the cool, minty taste of him.

“I’m not going to run away,” she whispered. “I want you to kiss me back.”

With a harsh groan, he obeyed, pulling her down next to him as that wonderful, seductive tongue entered her mouth, setting her senses on fire. Fire and ice, she thought dazedly as his hand swept down her back again. This time he made no attempt to reach between her legs, but simply pulled her closer, pressing their bodies together. The thick ridge of his erection pressed against her stomach and she rocked against it.

She wanted more, but the sensible voice that lived inside her head could not be silenced for long. The children were just outside the room and the door was still ajar. She couldn’t allow this to go any further, despite the need humming in her veins.

“We can’t,” she whispered as his mouth left hers and began trailing down her neck.

He paused, his tongue licking gently at the modest vee between her breasts. She wanted, as much as she ever remembered wanting anything, for that tongue to go further, to fasten around her nipple without anything between them. But after a brief hesitation, he raised his head.

“You are correct. I promised myself I would not rush you. It seems that my desires overrule my restraint.”

“My restraint’s a little shaky too,” she agreed, reaching out to caress his face.

Her fingers brushed against the base of his horns and he groaned again, his erection pulsing against her stomach.

“Are they sensitive?” she asked curiously, running her finger along the ridge where his horns emerged from his skin.

“Very,” he said firmly, putting his hand over hers and pulling it away. “Unless you wish me to forget my restraint completely it would be best not to touch me there.”

“I’m almost tempted,” she whispered, but she stood up and adjusted her blouse. “You will notice that I am not running away. I am walking.”

“But you are still leaving me.”

His voice sounded oddly desolate and she was almost tempted to throw caution to the winds and climb back into bed with him. Instead she held up the piece of flexible glass. “But I’m taking your present with me. It’s like you’ll be with me all night long.”

“I do not believe that is the same,” he said dryly, but the despairing note had vanished.

“Then we’ll just have to meet in our dreams.”

Giving into temptation, she bent down for one last kiss before whisking herself out of the room.

CHAPTER 12



Jackasarian was dreaming. He was in an ice castle – surrounded by walls of gleaming blue ice. Something called to him and he followed it deeper and deeper into the castle until he came to a room with a bed of white furs. Katerina waited for him on the furs, her slender, graceful body gleaming in the light. Her eyes opened, the same silvery blue as the walls, and she reached for him. He went willingly, but as he cupped one of her small, perfect breasts, her skin felt wrong, rubbery and cold beneath his hand. And when she tugged him down for a kiss, her mouth too was cold, her taste wrong. His cock throbbed incessantly, but when she wrapped her cold fingers around it, he jerked away.

“No. Who are you?”

The face beneath him flickered, but before he could recognize it, he jerked awake, his heart racing as if he’d been running for miles. His body was drenched in sweat and he felt as limp and exhausted as if he had truly been running. What the hell had he been dreaming?

It was still night, the rest of the cabin dark and still with only a faint glow from the stove breaking the darkness. A chill shivered across the skin and he looked over to see the shutters of his room caked with ice. He hoped that the material he had provided for his female would serve to ward off that chill.

Despite his exhaustion, he was reluctant to return to sleep and he slowly sat up. His limbs felt shaky, but the movement no longer sent pain shooting through his head. He forced himself

upright, suddenly feeling compelled to check on his female and the children.

His knees shook, but his legs held as he made his way to the entrance of his room. Everyone was safely asleep, but before he could return to his bed, Johnny emerged from the shadows.

“What do you want?” the boy asked, his young voice challenging despite his low tone.

“Nothing.” A Tandroki warrior would never admit to being perturbed by a dream, and he cast around for another explanation. “I am not used to extended periods of inactivity.”

That was certainly true. Even hiding away on the ship, he had emerged late at night to train silently while Nicholsarian slept.

“Oh yeah? What do you usually do?”

A number of what he now realized were meaningless activities, but he shrugged. “Many things. I worked for a very demanding male. But I also trained each day.”

“What kind of training?”

He hesitated, but the boy was already suspicious and he had no desire to lie to him.

“Warrior training.”

Surprisingly, Johnny’s face relaxed, and he gave Jackasarian a tentative smile.

“That sounds kind of cool.”

“If you would like, I could show you some basic moves.”

“Yeah. I’d like that.” The boy’s face hardened again. “But don’t think that means I’m not watching you.”

Johnny moved his hand to reveal the knife he’d been concealing. A long, thin blade, sharp enough to inflict damage. He nodded approvingly.

“That is as it should be. You are responsible for your family.”

“Family?” A look of longing flashed across the boy’s face so quickly he almost missed it, but then he straightened his shoulders. “Yeah, my family. No one messes with them.”

He nodded and after one brief glance at the loft where his female slept, he returned to his room.

But not to sleep. Instead he spent the remainder of the night considering his female's plans for the upcoming celebration. It had not previously occurred to him, but with the assistance of the nanites, perhaps he too could contribute. He was still considering appropriate gifts when day finally dawned and he heard the sound of activity in the other room. Keffi jumped down and trotted off to investigate. A short time later, Katerina appeared in the doorway, still flushed with sleep, and gave him a shy smile.

"How did you sleep?"

"Not as well as I would have slept with you by my side," he said deliberately, watching in delight as her color deepened.

She lifted her chin and pretended to ignore his response. "Are you feeling better?"

He considered the matter. Despite the lingering lethargy, the pain in his head had vanished and he felt more like his normal self.

"I am well."

"Genuinely well?" she asked suspiciously, and he laughed.

"Yes, but perhaps not entirely at full strength. Do you wish me to entertain the children again today?"

He found himself looking forward to the prospect, and was pleased when she nodded.

"I have also promised to show Johnny some training moves," he added.

"Good. And maybe if you get a chance, you can talk to him about the future. He doesn't want to listen to me, but maybe you can make him realize that he and the children can't stay here forever."

He did his best to keep his face composed as he nodded, but her words were a harsh reminder that this interlude would not last. He should be searching for the location of the technology and planning his next moves, despite the desolation that filled

him at the thought of leaving his female and the children. But in the end, he did not reach for his data unit. There would be time enough for that when he was alone once more.

The day passed much as the previous one had passed, but he found no cause for complaint. Teaching Johnny the basic moves proved surprisingly pleasant. The young male lacked strength, but he was swift and agile and possessed an equally agile brain. He would make a fine warrior.

The preparations for the Longest Night continued and he ended up as the recipient of several secrets as the others included him in their plans. He even began his own preparations when his females sent the children out to play in the snow. When the children piled on his bed for the afternoon story and Katerina gave him a conspiratorial smile before disappearing, he was filled with an unexpected emotion.

“Whath the matter, Jack Froth?” Lorna whispered, looking up at him anxiously as she stroked Keffi’s fur.

“Nothing is wrong, little one. I am simply content.”

A contentment he had never felt before. A feeling that, at least for now, he belonged.

And when after the children were asleep, Katerina once again came to talk to him, he was more than content.

She leaned back against the bed as she told him of her endeavors. She made no objection when he stroked the fine silk of her hair, gently freeing it from its tight braid so that he could run his fingers through the soft strands.

“And I think if I soak some of the fabric in boiling water I might be able to make some dye to color Cecil’s wagon -”

“I want to kiss you,” he interrupted.

He wanted far more than that, but he did not want to frighten her. *Patience*, he reminded himself. She bit her lip, then looked at him from under her eyelashes.

“I want to kiss you too.”

He moved away from the edge of the bed, lifting the fur in silent invitation. She rose and headed for the door, and for a

dreadful moment, he thought she was going to leave. Instead, she closed the door and returned, climbing into bed with him.

The soft warmth of her body was an almost unbearable temptation, but he could feel her trembling, and he waited.

“Just kissing,” she whispered, and he smiled. He could work with that.

Hesitating no longer, he tugged her gently against his chest. He could feel the hard pebbles of her nipples despite his survival suit and her shirt, but he wanted to be closer.

“Would it alarm you if I removed my survival suit?”

“Umm, maybe just the top part.”

No doubt she was wise to insist that he keep his cock restrained. He swiftly unfastened the top of his suit and pushed it down, then reached for her once again. To his delight, she had also removed her upper garment and for the first time he felt the soft swell of her breasts against him, her skin soft and warm and silky and so different from his dream. Her taut nipples pressed against his chest and he slipped his hand between their bodies to stroke his thumb across the tempting peak.

“I don’t think that’s kissing,” she said breathlessly.

“You are correct. I will remedy that immediately.”

He pulled her higher and fastened his mouth over the soft mound, his tongue wrapping around the stiff peak. She gasped, and then she arched against his mouth, her hand pulling his head against her. His hand returned to her other breast, but this time she did not object, urging him on with soft cries as he teased each peak in turn.

Her body quivered beneath him and he raised his head, concerned.

“Are you not enjoying –”

“Don’t stop,” she cried, tugging on his head. “I’m so close.”

“So close to what?”

“To coming,” she said impatiently, and when he frowned, she seized the base of his horns.

Desire roared through him, his cock on the verge of exploding, and he suddenly understood what she meant. He eagerly resumed kissing her breasts, but this time he let his hands slip lower to the damp heat between her fabric-covered thighs. He wanted to rip away the offending fabric, but she had dictated this boundary.

Instead he rubbed his hand over the damp fabric until he found a place that made her moan and clutch him even more frantically. Ah. He concentrated his attentions there, letting his claws emerge to scrape across the sensitive area. Her back bowed and a series of convulsions shivered over her body. The sweet scent of her arousal overwhelmed him, and his cock jerked in helpless spasms as his own release overtook him.

His body was as limp and drained as if he had trained all day, but he pulled her close, tucking her against his side. She snuggled willingly against him and he heaved a satisfied sigh.

“I enjoy kissing,” he said solemnly, and a muffled laugh escaped her.

“I think that was a little bit more than kissing.”

“Does kissing not mean using my mouth on your body?”

“It usually means only our mouths meeting.”

“What a shame, when there are so many other delightful places to use my mouth.”

His hand was resting on her upper thigh, and he tightened it, just a fraction, but enough so that his fingers dragged against her pleasure spot and he felt her shiver in response.

“Maybe you’re right,” she whispered. “Maybe next time...”

Her words ended in a wide yawn, but he smiled into the darkness as he tightened his arms around her. There would be a next time.

And that night he didn’t dream at all.

CHAPTER 13



“*T*here you are.”

Lorna’s indignant voice woke Katerina from the best night’s sleep she’d had in ages. She was warm and comfortable and... still wrapped in Jack’s arms. *Oh no*. She had meant to return to her own bed, but she’d fall asleep so quickly and so soundly that she hadn’t woken until morning.

Sighing, she rolled over to find Lorna standing next to the bed, frowning at her. It only got worse from there. All of the children crowded into the doorway. Merry was staring at her, obviously shocked, while Johnny was glaring at Jack. At least the twins only looked curious.

“Is it story time?” Ceci asked, and she winced.

“Not yet,” Jack said from behind her.

His voice sounded far too amused for her liking and she started to slip away, but his arm remained firmly locked around her waist. She didn’t want to struggle against him, especially with Johnny looking like he was ready for a fight.

“I must have fallen asleep,” she said quickly. “If you’ll go out and get ready for breakfast, I’ll be out in just a moment.”

“And close the door,” Jack added as the children filed reluctantly out of the room, Keffi scampering after them like a herding animal.

Johnny was the last to leave. Based on the way he slammed the door behind, she needed to talk to him and soon. She rolled

over to glare up at Jack who looked just as amused as she had expected.

“Why didn’t you just let me get up?”

“In case you have forgotten, you are not wearing any clothes on your upper body.”

Oh. *Oh*. She’d never gone to bed without clothing on before and she hadn’t even thought about that.

“And given Cecil’s habit of placing his knee in uncomfortable places, I did not want to take the chance.”

His hips flexed against hers and he was just as massively erect as he had been the previous evening.

“I never should have stayed,” she said, clutching the furs to her chest as she sat up and started searching for her missing blouse and camisole. “You should have woken me.”

His amusement vanished.

“I did not want to wake you. You seemed content in my arms and I did not want to sleep alone again.”

There it was again, the desolate note that tugged at her heartstrings.

She sighed. “I’m not sure I wanted to be alone either, but we have to think of the children. What are we going to tell them?”

“I thought your explanation perfectly adequate, and quite true. You did fall asleep in my arms.”

She blushed as she remembered why she had fallen asleep so readily. She had never had such an intense and overwhelming orgasm and simply from his mouth on her breasts and his hand - his claws! - between her fully clothed thighs. What more could he have done if they had both been naked?

The thought sent a pulse of arousal straight to her clit and she saw his eyes gleam, little blue sparks appearing in the depths. He started to lean towards her, and she abandoned the search for her missing camisole and quickly pulled on her blouse.

“No you don’t. If you kiss me again, I’ll be here all day.” He started to respond, and she shook her. “Don’t tell me you have

no objection. I'm sure your stomach would object, as well as the children's."

He laughed and threw up his hands.

"You are correct as always, zereetta."

Oh Lord, the children.

"Your explanation may work for the young ones, maybe even Merry," she added doubtfully. She hadn't been able to protect her sister from everything that went on in the caravan. "But it certainly won't fool Johnny."

"I will speak to him," he assured her, standing up and stretching.

For a moment, all she could do was stare. The top half of his garment was still down around his waist, sinking perilously low over his narrow hips. She could see the vee of muscle leading down into the opening of the garment, the massive ridge of his erection barely covered by the cloth. In fact, his erection seemed to be the only thing preventing it from falling to his feet. Under other circumstances, she might have found the courage to pull it down, but this was not the time or the place.

"Get dressed," she hissed, and whirled for the door.

The three youngest children were already at the table as Merry finished wiping their faces. Her sister looked up at her, her eyes sparkling with laughter.

"Your blouse is buttoned wrong."

She did her best not to wince, especially when Johnny gave her a disgusted look.

"And your hair is a mess."

Dammit. With a muttered excuse, she hurried into the small bathroom behind the other side of the back wall. The cold water from the pump helped cool her flushed skin and when she emerged, her hair was braided back as tightly as she could manage and her blouse was buttoned – correctly – all the way up to her neck.

“I started the oatmeal,” Merry volunteered.

“That was nice of you, sweetheart,” she said, hoping that it wouldn’t be too lumpy.

Merry was a little haphazard in her approach to cooking. As she gave the pot a vigorous stir, Johnny stalked over to the door.

“Ain’t hungry.”

He slammed the door behind him, and Lorna gave her a wide-eyed look.

“Whath the matter with Johnny?”

“He is experiencing the growing pains of the young warrior,” Jack said, as he ducked his horns to pass through the doorway and enter the room.

He was once again fully dressed, but the form fitting uniform clung to every muscular inch, and her heart skipped a beat. She had only seen him upright once before, when he tried to prove his strength, but he’d weakened so quickly and she had been so concerned about getting him back to bed that she had missed the full impact. Now he looked every inch a Tandroki warrior, huge and imposing and alien in their small shelter.

But then Keffi chirped a greeting and tried to climb his leg. He laughed and picked up the pika and put him on his shoulder and suddenly he was his familiar self again.

Lorna beamed up at him with her gap toothed smile.

“Are you all better, Jack Froth?”

“I am well,” he said, with a brief, challenging look in her direction.

“Wow,” Merry whispered in her ear as Lorna started peppering Jack with more questions. “You did well, sis.”

Dammit, the annoying heat was back in her cheeks.

“I didn’t *do* anything,” she said with as much dignity as she could manage.

Merry shook her head, an unusually adult look on her pretty face.

“Then you should. Guyten would never get past him.”

She had no doubt that was true, but it wasn't as if Jack would always be there. She had to take Merry, and hopefully the children, to safety, and Jack had his mysterious mission.

I really need to find out what he's doing, she thought but then he looked up at her from over Lorna's head and the truth struck her with a blinding blow.

She didn't care about his mission. She didn't even care about safety. She wanted them to be together. If it had only been her, she wouldn't have hesitated, but she had Merry and now the other children to think about.

“I will go after Johnny,” he said, rising to his feet.

“Thank you. Breakfast will be ready when you get back.”

“Do not wait for us. Our discussion may take some time.” He smiled at her worried face. “I promise I will return him safely.”

An hour later, he did just that. She'd spent the vast majority of that hour debating the wisdom of going after them, but each time she'd given the door a longing look, she reminded herself to trust him. Neither of them seemed the worse for wear when they returned. Johnny's hair was ruffled, but his hostility had disappeared. Jack looked as serene as ever but as he reached for his now completely lumpy oatmeal, she saw a red gash on his arm that disappeared beneath his garment.

“You're hurt. What happened?”

“It is merely a scratch. Do not worry. Sometimes this is how warriors communicate.”

She didn't like how easily he dismissed it, but when he went to wash his bowl, the gash had already begun to heal.

All of them remained in the main room for the rest of the morning. She sat Johnny and Merry down for a lesson, and when Lorna showed an interest, she gladly added her. The

twins also decided to play school and doodled happily on some extra scraps of paper.

After lunch, Jack took the children into his room for another story. Although she knew he would never admit it, he did look tired and she hoped he hadn't over exerted himself. After a few finishing touches to her presents, she wrapped them in more fabric scraps and hid them away. Assuming she hadn't lost track of time, tomorrow night would be the Longest Night and they would celebrate the following morning. Normally there would be a special dinner in the evening and another feast the following day, but she had very little to offer except more of what they were already eating. It was plentiful and filling, and even tasty, but there was nothing special about it.

She was looking regretfully at her food supplies when the story ended and everyone spilled back into the main room. Jack came to join her, putting his hand casually around her waist. She was sure she heard a quickly suppressed giggle from Merry and knew she should push him away, but dammit, she didn't want to. She wasn't sure how much time they would have together, but she wanted to take advantage of every moment.

"Is there a problem, zereetta?" he whispered in her ear, his warm breath sending a pleasant shiver down her spine.

"Not really. We have plenty of food. I was just wishing I could make something special for the children for the holiday."

"I would also enjoy something special."

She grinned. "I'm sure you would. Johnny mentioned that there are more supplies in the cave at the foot of the glacier and I was wondering if I should go and investigate."

"Not on your own," he said firmly, walking over to the shutters. "We still have several hours of daylight. How far is it to this cave?"

"I'm not sure. Johnny, where is the cave you mentioned? Is it far?"

"Nah. I could do it in fifteen minutes. It'd probably take you at least twenty," he added, but he was smiling as he said it.

“Then this would be an ideal time.” Jack looked at the boy and something clearly passed between them. “I know you will take care of our family while we are gone.”

Our family. Unexpected tears threatened to spill down her cheeks and she hastily began her outdoor preparations to distract herself from the sudden longing. While she made a list of things it would be nice to have, Johnny brought out the makeshift sled he used to transport goods.

They stepped outside, Keffi joining them at the last moment. Jack lifted the little creature to his shoulder as he frowned up at the sky.

“I do not like to look of those clouds.”

They loomed low and heavy, pregnant with snow, but they didn’t seem much worse than normal.

“I expect it will snow again tonight, but we always seem to have a clear period in the afternoon. And besides, it doesn’t sound like it’s very far.”

Johnny had directed them back through the rear of the trading post and across a sparsely wooded area at the base of the mountains. The ice sheet ended in a tumble of rocks and fallen trees and the opening was difficult to spot at first, but Johnny’s instructions were clear and Jack quickly found the half hidden opening.

The passage was dark and foreboding, and she hesitated, stepping closer to Jack. He took her hand and smiled down at her and she relaxed. She had brought her small torch and used it to light the way into the narrow entrance. He gave it an approving glance as they walked down the tunnel.

“I see you do have some technology.”

“Less and less each year. I don’t know how long it will be before the power in the torch fails, but I won’t have any way of restoring it.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “I may be able to assist with that.”

“You’re going to share some of your precious Tandroki technology?” she teased.

“I will share everything I have with you,” he said solemnly, and there went her foolish heart again.

She bit her lip but before she could think of a response, the passageway suddenly widened and they stepped through into an enormous cavern. The size of the cavern was readily apparent because as soon as they crossed the threshold, floor level lighting began to glow, outlining the space and running down racks and racks of goods. A number of the racks were already empty but a vast amount of supplies still remained, and she gasped. Many of the items she saw were increasingly rare or impossible to find.

“I can’t believe no one ever knew this existed. Some of these racks contain items valuable enough to make someone’s fortune.”

“Is that what you want?” he asked. “I will be happy to assist you in retrieving them.”

“I don’t know. It would be nice to have enough funds to purchase a house for Merry and the children.” *And you*, she thought, but didn’t quite have the courage to add. “But we get all kinds of people traveling with the caravan. Some whose fortunes are improving and some who have lost everything. I’m not sure that wealth made any of them happy.”

“That has been my experience as well.”

The haunted look was back on his face and she remembered what he had said about belonging to a Great House. Had he been wealthy once?

“And I’m cynical enough to know that the more you have, the more some people will try to take it from you,” she added. “People like my father.”

“He does not sound like a desirable parent,” he said, tugging the sled behind them as she set off across the smooth stone floor to find the food supplies.

“He most certainly is not. But he can fool a lot of people.”

“What do you mean?”

“Merry gets some of her looks from him. He’s big and blonde and handsome.” Even though time and alcohol had begun to take their toll. “Most men like him and he’s very good at charming women, but it’s all on the surface. Behind it, he’s cruel and spiteful and has a terrible temper.” She shook her head. “And I don’t want to think about him anymore. What was your family like?”

“I am not sure we have enough time for that subject,” he said slowly, and she huffed in exasperation. “My father was not hot tempered. He was stern and disciplined and never spoke without thinking. I am not sure that I would consider him cruel,” he added as they stopped in front of one of the racks. “But he was not kind.”

“And your mother?”

“She was kind, once. I remember her laughing and telling me stories. But that is not the Tandroki way, and my father was not happy. She... changed to please him.”

She gave a cry of delight when she found a large canister of sweetener and quickly added it to the sled, then gave him a curious look.

“Why do people do that? Fall in love with someone and then expect them to change?”

“There is nothing about you that I would wish to change.”

Their eyes met and her heart skipped a beat at the implication of his words. Did he love her? Before she could gather the courage to ask, his face stiffened and he turned away.

“There are additional supplies over here.”

Half regretful and half relieved to drop the subject, she moved on to the next rack. By the time they finished, supplies were stacked almost to the handle and she gave him a teasing look.

“I hope you know you’re going to have to pull that.”

“I am at your service.”

But when they made their way back down the narrow passage to the mouth of the cave, it was immediately clear that they

were not going anywhere. The heavy clouds had dumped their burden and a raging blizzard swirled outside the cave.

CHAPTER 14



Jackasarian looked out at the storm in dismay. With the aid of his survival suit, he could brave the weather, but there was no way he would permit his delicate female to take such a chance.

“We will have to remain here.”

She gave him a desperate look, although she was already starting to shiver from the icy wind sweeping into the tunnel entrance.

“We have to get back. We can’t leave the children alone.”

“Johnny is there. He will look after them.” he assured her.

Although he was concerned as well, he had every confidence in the young male. Their encounter that morning had not begun well. As soon as he found Johnny, the boy whirled, his knife in his hand.

“You leave her alone, you hear me? You leave all of them alone.”

His claws threatened to emerge, partially because of the threat and partially because of the insult to his honor.

“I would never hurt any of them. Or allow any harm to come to them.”

The boy scoffed, his face pale with anguish.

“They always say that. They always seem kind. But then...”

His anger disappeared and he reached for the boy’s shoulder.

“No!”

Johnny’s knife flashed, and he felt his skin part. It was irrelevant. He raised his hands and took a step back.

“I will not change. I’m exactly as you see me. Katerina was with me by her choice. She sets the boundaries.”

Johnny’s pale face was even whiter than normal as he looked at the blood dripping from Jack historians arm.

“I didn’t mean to cut you,” he muttered.

“You felt threatened. And you defended yourself. There is no shame in that.” He hesitated. “Sometimes one must act but sometimes it is best to evaluate the situation first.”

Johnny scuffed at the snow with his boot, as some of his color returned.

“Yeah, but then what if it’s too late?”

“That is a valid argument. But that is one of the reasons we train, both our bodies and our minds. To analyze and then to react.”

Nicholsarian had given him the same speech, he remembered. He had resented it then and he wondered if the boy resented it now. But Johnny only looked thoughtful and nodded.

“Are you going to keep training me?”

“For as long as you wish,” he said somewhat recklessly, but it was worth it when the boy grinned. “How about now?”

“Very well. We will begin by racing to the entrance of the compound and back.”

It was a simple enough feat, but it would help relieve the boy’s tension so that he would be more receptive to the slower moves to come.

Johnny grinned again and bounced on the balls of his feet.

“I bet I can beat you, old man,” he called as he raced off.

Old man? Shock held him motionless for a moment, just as the boy had undoubtedly intended, but then an answering grin curved his mouth and he took off.

By the time they returned to the shelter, they were both tired – more tired than they should have been given the limited amount of exercise – but they had reached a solid understanding. He was quite confident that the boy would protect their family.

“I’m sure Johnny will look after them,” Katerina agreed now, still looking out of the storm. “But what if they’re worried about us? What if someone tries to come and find us?”

Although he did not think Johnny would permit it, it was a valid concern. The boy’s sense of responsibility might extend to searching for them. Keffi chirped softly into his ear, and he nodded.

“We will send Keffi back with a note assuring them of our safety.”

“But he’s so little. Will he be all right?”

Even aside from the Tandroki technology empowering the drone, the animal on which Keffi had been modeled was at home in these conditions.

“He will be perfectly fine.”

She hesitated, then nodded. After she wrote a note on the back of her list, he tied it around Keffi’s neck with a strip of fabric torn from the bottom of her shirt.

“Be careful,” she whispered to the drone, kissing its furry little nose before sending it off into the storm.

It didn’t hesitate, but was immediately lost to sight in the swirling cloud of white.

“And now I wish I was the one to have taken the message,” he said.

“You? Why?”

“So I would have received your kiss.”

Her cheeks turned pink as she shook her head.

“You had lots of kisses last night.”

“I do not believe one ever receives enough kisses.”

“Maybe not,” she whispered, but then she shivered and remorse filled him.

“I am a foolish male to keep you here in the cold.”

He took her hand and led her back towards the main cavern. Although the storage area was well above freezing, the temperature was designed for the storage of goods, not humans. He was considering searching through the supplies to see if he could find additional fabric, when the air shifted. He felt the slightest hint of warmth, along with the scent of vegetation.

It was so faint that he couldn't be entirely sure, but he decided to investigate. He had assumed the rear wall of the cabin was solid, but as they drew closer he could see folds in the rock. The scent emanated from one of the larger folds, along with a definite increase in temperature.

“I think there is another cave back there.”

“That's nice,” she said doubtfully.

“A warmer cave.” She still didn't look convinced, so he added. “Perhaps even a hot spring.”

She sighed and handed him her small torch. “I guess that might be worth finding. But if this dies while we're in there, you'd better be able to bring us back.”

“I will make sure of it.”

As it turned out, the path did not present a challenge. The passageway twisted as it went back beneath the mountain, but no other passages branched off of it before it emerged into a moss covered cave. The air was warm and humid, with a lush herbal scent. Steaming water trickled down one wall, flowing into a series of three pools before escaping beneath the far wall. In addition to the moss, small plants clung to the cracks between the rocks, their foliage a faded grey.

“Wow,” she whispered. “Do you think I could take a bath?”

“Perhaps.”

A thought struck him, and he turned out the small torch. As he did, the vegetation sparked to life around him, no longer black

and grey. The moss gleamed a deep purple and the plants on the walls shimmered in soft shades of pink and blue. Once his eyes adjusted, the light they emitted was enough to enable him to see quite clearly.

“Can you see under these conditions?” he asked.

“I can. And it’s so much prettier like this.”

He nodded and went to test the water. He thought the top pool would be too hot for her delicate skin, but he decided the third pool was suitable.

“I believe it is safe for you to bathe.”

“That would be wonderful. I’m getting awfully tired of heating water over the stove.”

Ah. He had struggled with what to give her for a present, but perhaps a constant supply of hot water would please her.

She had left her cloak back in the supply cavern, and now she removed the heavy shirt she had worn beneath it before her fingers went to the buttons of her shirt. She hesitated, looking at him, and he half expected she would ask him to leave. Instead, she smiled, a slow seductive smile that sent all of the blood in his body racing directly to his cock.

“Are you going to join me?”

“Yes.”

The word came out as a harsh growl, but her smile only widened as she began unfastening her buttons. He should be removing his survival suit, but he was too entranced to look away as she slowly unfastened each button to reveal a sliver of pale skin. Her nipples stiffened, thrusting against the thin cloth, but they remained veiled as she kicked off her boots, then slid her pants down those long slender legs. Her shirt fluttered around her legs, barely concealing the small patch of pale golden curls at the apex of her thighs but even that obstruction was too much.

“Remove the shirt,” he growled.

“But you’re still wearing all of your clothes.”

A matter easily remedied. He toed off his boots impatiently and ripped away the rest of his garment with a speed that would have torn any other fabric. Her eyes had been fixed on his face as he removed his clothing but now they dropped, drifting down his body. He saw them widen and caught the increased scent of her arousal.

“Oh my.”

Her voice sounded breathless. Was she afraid? Before he could reassure her, she smiled again and let her shirt fall to the ground.

He had never seen a more beautiful sight. Slender graceful limbs, the soft subtle curves of her waist and hips and those small perfect breasts with the surprisingly large, dark nipples. His dream version of her had been a pale shadow of reality but when he reached for her, he was almost afraid that he would find her skin cold to his touch.

Instead, her skin was soft and warm and silky. He pulled her against his chest and for a moment he was content just to hold her, just to feel her naked skin against his as he ran his hands down the fragile lines of her back to the small, sweet curve of her ass.

Her arms slid around his waist and she nestled her face against his chest and gave a sigh that echoed his own contentment.

But as delightful as it was to simply have her naked in his arms, the demands of his body could not be ignored forever. His cock ached and throbbed with every beat of his heart, and he put his finger beneath her chin raising her face to look at him.

“I am no longer interested in bathing.”

“No?” Her voice was breathless but the seductive smile returned to those sweet pink lips. “What do you want?”

“I want everything.”

“So do I. Make love to me, Jack.”

His groan came from the depths of his soul, and she gave a shaky laugh. “But I do want to bathe as well.”

“Later,” he promised as he carried her down to the moss.

He hesitated once again as he rose above her, pausing to savor this moment, to memorize every detail. Even when he was alone again, he would have this memory to keep him company. He shivered at the thought, and her hand came up to touch his face, her eyes gleaming silver in the dim light.

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“Skef, no,” he growled, then winced, ashamed of his use of such language but she only laughed.

“Good. Because I don’t want you to stop.” Her lips curved again. “Or maybe I do want you to stop thinking and just kiss me.”

He pushed all of his worries about the future aside and bent down and kissed her. She accepted him willingly, her small, perfect tongue stroking his. But although his urgency had not vanished, neither had his desire to appreciate every moment. He lingered over the kiss until she was writhing restlessly beneath him and then he cupped her breast, tugging at the taut, rosy peak.

“You are very sensitive here,” he murmured as he trailed his lips down her throat and across to the tempting bud.

“I guess so,” she whispered, and then cried out as he wrapped his tongue around her nipple and tugged.

Very sensitive. He lingered over her breasts as well, but his urgency was building and he ran his hand across the slight swell of her stomach and down, delighting in the soft damp curls that clung to his fingers. His hand slid lower, through the heated, delicate folds, seeking the entrance to her body. Small, so small, and yet it accepted his finger eagerly, the wet kiss of her flesh surrounding him in a teasing promise of what was to come.

He found the spot he had discovered the previous night, a swollen pearl of flesh that quivered beneath his touch. He felt her body stiffen, and then her back arched, drawing more of his finger into her delectable cunt, pulsing around it in rhythmic waves.

She cried out as her body shook and either by accident or design, her hands came up to clutch at the base of his horns. Desire roared through him and his desire to take his time disappeared. He rose over her, his cock notched at that small entrance as he looked down at her. Even in the dimness he could tell her cheeks were flushed, but she smiled at him and brought her legs up to circle his waist. pulling him closer.

With a helpless thrust, he obeyed, sinking into the hottest, tightest, silkiest haven he had ever dared to imagine. Her body resisted but even if he could have found the strength to withdraw, those long legs tightened, urging him on as he sank deeper and deeper until their bodies touched.

He shuddered, his whole body urging him to move but he could feel her channel fluttering around him, trying to adjust, and he forced himself to remain still. Her eyes were bright, too bright, he suspected, but her smile was even brighter.

“You are well?” he managed to ask between gritted teeth.

“I’ve never been better.”

Her body tightened around his cock in a long deliberate pulse, and all possibility of restraint vanished. He roared, the way his primitive ancestors would have roared, and thrust. He pulled her hips closer, lost in the ancient, primal need to claim his mate, plunging harder and harder into her welcoming body. He heard her cry out, felt the pulsing wave surrounding him again and it only spurred him on. He buried his face in her neck, the sweet taste of her skin adding to his arousal. As lightning streaked down his spine and his cock exploded in wave after wave of liquid heat, he buried his teeth in her neck.

Marking her.

Claiming her.

Mating her.

CHAPTER 15



*K*aterina gasped as Jack's teeth sank into her neck - the fiery rush of pain immediately followed by a pleasure so intense that she found herself climaxing yet again, their bodies pulsing together. He collapsed down over her as the waves gradually faded, his limp weight warm and comforting and she put her arms around his neck, holding him tightly.

She had never known, never had any idea that a sexual encounter could be so overwhelming - and perhaps it couldn't have been with anyone else. She ran her fingers through the soft thick silk of his hair as his breathing slowly steadied. His mouth moved against her neck in a curiously ticklish motion before he suddenly raised his head, his face appalled.

"I bit you. I marked you."

"I did notice." The stern mask began to cross his face and she tugged lightly on his hair. "It's fine. I didn't mind at all. In fact, it was kind of exciting."

She shivered in remembered pleasure and the movement reverberated through their still joined bodies. His eyes heated, going back to the bite mark.

"It requires tending."

"I suppose so."

She assumed he meant that the wound would need washing, but instead he bent his head and began licking the mark. An unexpected streak of desire speared through her. It almost felt as if he were licking her clit instead of simply her neck and she

found herself tightening around him. He groaned and she felt his cock flex and begin to harden. He quickly lifted his head, an odd look on his face.

“I have heard of such things, but I did not believe them to be true.”

“What things?”

He hesitated, then slipped free of her body and rolled to his back, pulling her against his side.

“The Tandroki have a turbulent history. We were always fierce fighters - too fierce - but the Prophet Moroz taught us the value of restraint and control. This type of mark is from those earlier times, but Moroz argued against it and it is no longer practiced.”

“What does it mean?” she whispered.

He hesitated for a long moment and she could feel the tension in his body.

“It is a mating mark,” he said at last, his voice absolutely neutral.

Did he sound like that because he regretted what he had done? Or because he was afraid she would reject him? The thought that he had claimed her warmed her heart, but her practical side still wondered if there was any future for them. Knowing that she was being cowardly, she chose not to respond to his comment. Instead, she sat up and smiled at him.

“I believe you promised me a bath.”

The stern look vanished and he smiled back.

“I did indeed.”

He rose to his feet with that shockingly fluid grace, lifted her into his arms, and then jumped into the pool with her. Her head went beneath the water and she popped back up, laughing and spluttering.

“That wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

“You said you wished to bathe. I was simply ensuring that you were completely wet,” he said innocently.

“I suppose I can’t argue with that.”

The pool was not quite as deep as it first seemed, and Jack found a rocky outcropping at the right height for a bench, then pulled her down onto his lap. She went willingly, snuggling against his chest. They sat in silence as the water trickled down around them.

“You know, you never told me what you’re doing here in this valley,” she murmured at last.

He sighed.

“I told you that the ship on which I arrived crashed, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Afterwards, I searched for any signs of technology. There were a number of small signals, but they were very –”

“Let me guess – primitive?”

He tried to suppress his laugh, but she could feel it reverberating in his chest.

“As you say, primitive. Or at least, not sufficient to leave the planet.”

Her heart skipped a beat as she waited for him to continue.

“But there was another signal, a much stronger signal. I suspect it could have been made by another ship.”

“Another wreck, you mean?” she asked hopefully.

“Probably. But it was possible that I could repair it using the nanites.”

“You couldn’t repair your own ship?”

He stiffened again, but she waited patiently.

“It was not my ship,” he said at last. “It belonged to Ambassador Nicholsarian. I have no doubt that he will repair it and leave this planet with all due haste.”

“Without you? Why?”

“I was not invited on board,” he blurted out. “I told you that I was not a proper Tandroki warrior.”

“You mean you were a stowaway? In hiding?”

“I am afraid so. I know that such behavior is unacceptable. I should have told you sooner and I understand if you wish to leave me.”

His voice was cold and formal once more, but she knew him well enough now to hear that note of desolation beneath the formality.

“First of all, I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to because of the storm. But I don’t want to, Jack. It wouldn’t have made any difference to me earlier and it makes no difference to me now. I’m not concerned about the past. All that matters to me is the way you are with me and with the children. As far as I’m concerned you are the finest example of a Tandroki warrior.”

His breath caught, and then he was kissing her, urgently, frantically, his amazingly talented tongue reawakening her arousal. Their bodies slid together beneath the water and he made an impatient noise, then carried her back out of the pool and laid her down on the moss once more. His mouth moved to her neck, licking and sucking at the still swollen bite mark and sending flames of desire straight to her aching clit.

He moved to her breasts and this was no gentle, thorough exploration. His mouth was hot and hard and demanding, sucking and tugging until her nipples were swollen and distended before moving between her legs and impatiently pushing her thighs apart. He growled, and then his mouth descended over her clit, his tongue wrapping around the swollen, aching bud, and the world sheeted white as she came in wave after helpless wave of pleasure.

He sent her flying straight into another climax before thrusting his tongue inside her, eagerly lapping at the signs of her arousal and stroking the sensitive insides of her channel. A third climax hovered just out of reach, and then he was gone.

She cried out in protest and he returned, spearing her with his cock in one long, hard, aching thrust. His face hovered over her, handsome, alien, and beloved, the gleam of the plants reflecting on those towering horns as he drove into her

helpless body. All she could do was cling to him as he drew yet another climax from her before his own overtook him.

Once again he buried his face in her neck, not to bite, but to lick slowly and sensually at the mark he had left. Her lips curved in an unexpected rush of happiness as she hugged him against her.

“Now I need another bath,” she murmured teasingly, and he raised his head and smiled down at her.

“Then you shall have it.”

He carried her back to the pool, entering more circumspectly this time, and they snuggled together in the warm swirling water. There was no soap of course but one of the plants had a pleasant, herbal smell and a slippery sap that left her skin feeling cool and refreshed as they finally returned to the bed of moss.

She expected to fall asleep immediately, but found her mind returning to the children. Despite sending Keffi with their message, she couldn't help but worry about them.

“How long do you think the storm will last?” she asked.

“I don't know, but I suspect that means you wish me to check.”

“Would you mind? If it wasn't for the children, I would be perfectly happy to remain here, but I can't help being concerned.”

“I understand. I will return shortly.”

She watched regretfully as he pulled his white garment back on, kissed her and disappeared out of the cave. He was as good as his word, returning almost immediately.

“Night has fallen, but the storm has passed. Shall we go home?”

Home. She smiled up at him.

“Yes please.”

“Very well.”

He pulled at her feet and insisted on helping her dress, thereby lengthening the process considerably since he insisted on kissing each part of her body before covering it with clothing. When she was finally fully dressed, and decidedly aroused, he grinned down at her.

“I’m giving you fair warning. I am telling the children that you are very tired and that you will be sleeping with me tonight.”

She suspected she should object, but she only smiled at him. However much time they had left together, she meant to enjoy every minute.

CHAPTER 16



*K*aterina could hear Merry and Johnny arguing before they even opened the door.

“I don’t care.” Merry said, and Katerina was quite sure she stomped her foot. “If you won’t go after them, I will.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Johnny said firmly. “You read your sister’s note. She said they were safe and were going to wait in the cave until the storm passed.”

“But the storm stopped ages ago.” Merry’s voice trembled. “What if she’s hurt?”

She winced. They probably should have checked the weather earlier.

“It hasn’t been very long,” Johnny said. “I’m sure they’re all right.”

There was a muffled sob, and she quickly opened the door to find Merry sobbing in Johnny’s arms. He gave her a helpless look as she rushed over and pulled her sister into her own arms.

“It’s all right, Merry. Everything’s all right.”

“Oh thank goodness. I was so worried. I tried to keep busy by cooking supper, but even that didn’t work,” Merry ended on a wail.

Based on the rather burnt looking remnants in the pan, she couldn’t argue, but she hugged her sister again.

“Never mind. We bought lots of things back with us.”

The other children were already clustered around Jack as he hauled the sled in through the door.

“Wow,” Lorna whispered, her eyes wide. “What did you get?”

“All kinds of things. We’ll have a special dinner tomorrow night for Longest Night, and then a real feast the next day.” She looked around at the hopeful faces, including Jack’s, and laughed. “But for tonight, how about some hot chocolate?”

The children only looked confused, and she realized they’d probably never had it, but Merry gave them an encouraging smile..

“You’ll like it. It’s so good.”

As she picked out the ingredients and set the water on to boil, she saw Jack murmur a few words to Johnny. The boy’s shoulder straightened, and he beamed proudly. She was happy to see that they seem to have reached an understanding. She finished making the hot chocolate, and handed it out in their collection of mismatched mugs. Lorna took a cautious sip, then beamed at her.

“Thith ith very good.”

The twins were too busy drinking to say anything, but their wide chocolate-ringed grins signified their approval. Johnny gave her a complimentary nod, while Jack smiled at her. After washing the twins’ faces, she settled them into their bunk, her heart aching as each of them in turn put their arms around her neck and hugged her.

“Night, Mama Kat,” Ceci whispered, her eyes already closing. Lorna soon followed the twins, but Merry was too excited to sleep, chattering cheerfully for a long time before she finally wound down.

“Go to bed, sweetheart. We have a lot to do tomorrow.”

“But no lessons, right? Not on the Longest Night?”

“I suppose not. They can wait a few days.”

Merry cheered, hugged her, threw her arms around Jack’s waist, then headed up the ladder to the loft.

“I don’t mind doing lessons,” Johnny muttered.

“Good, then we’ll spend some time on that in the morning. I just hope your example will rub off on Merry.”

He blushed, looking absurdly young, then nodded.

“I’ll do what I can.”

“I know you will.”

“Time for bed,” Jack said and held out his hand to her.

She didn’t hesitate to take it, but Johnny frowned at their joined hands. He bit his lip, then looked up at her.

“Jack said it was your choice, but is it truly?”

“Yes, Johnny,” she said softly. “But thank you for checking.”

She suspected he would not appreciate it, but she bent down and gently kissed his cheek. “Good night, sweetheart.”

The astonishment on his face nearly broke her heart, but she did her best not to let it show as she followed Jack into his room. Their room.. The thought gave her a warm glow, even as she continued to worry about Johnny.

“You think he’ll be all right?”

He didn’t pretend to misunderstand.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “He is already an honorable male. He simply requires guidance to make sure that he remains on the right path.”

“Guidance from someone like you,” she said softly.

“I am not sure that I am worthy.”

“Nonsense. I don’t think he could have a finer mentor.” She bit her lip, then blurted out, “Can you stay? I know not forever, but maybe for the winter? We have everything we need here and I can take care of the children and you can help Johnny and –”

“I will stay as long as you need me,” he said, interrupting the wild rush of words.

He had not said forever, but then neither had she, and she didn't quite have the courage to ask.

And perhaps it didn't matter. The winter months stretched out in front of them and they would be together, together as a family. She slowly removed her clothes, and despite the arousal tingling through her body, it already felt familiar, even comfortable to climb into bed with him and nestle against his side. He kissed her, and then made love to her with a slow, gentle persistence that finally rocked her into a shattering climax. She snuggled against him, content to know that they were together and they would remain together through the long cold winter months.

When she woke up in the morning, he was gone.

Despite her disappointment at waking up alone, she wasn't particularly concerned. It would be just like him to let her sleep late, she thought with a smile as she climbed out of bed and pulled on her clothes. Shuddering at the thought of the cold water in the bathroom, she walked out into the main room only to find it silent. Everyone was still asleep except for Johnny. He was bent over her book, his mouth moving as he attempted to sound out the letters.

"Good morning," she whispered, "Have you seen Jack?"

He shook his head.

"He wasn't here when I woke up."

That was odd. It seemed so unlike him to leave without a word to anyone. Perhaps he'd gone to check on the weather. Or maybe he'd decided to return to the cavern for additional supplies but no, the sled was still next to the door.

Having discovered a cache of tea bags in the supply cavern, she put some water on to boil, then began on breakfast. By the time it was ready and all the children were awake, Jack still had not returned.

"Whereth Jack Froth, Mama Kat?" Lorna asked, frowning.

"I don't know, sweetheart. Maybe he's training."

But although her answer seemed to appease the little girl, Katerina found himself too agitated to eat. She went to the door for the third time that morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, but the snow remained smooth and undisturbed. Where the hell was he? Had he been lying to her all this time and now that he'd gotten what he wanted, he'd taken off? *No*. She refused to believe that. She remembered the reverence with which he touched her, the combination of gentleness and passion in his kiss, and shook her head.

She was about to close the door again when Keffi came skittering around the corner and raced towards her. He clung to her leg, chirping anxiously as he tugged on the fabric. He was acting the same way he had when he'd wanted her to follow him to find Merry.

“What is it?” she asked, bending down. “Do you know where Jack is?”

He squeaked, tugging on her leg again and her heart skipped a beat. There was no message tied to his fur, but something had to be seriously wrong.

“I have to get ready,” she told him and hurried back inside with him following anxiously.

“I have to go and find Jack,” she whispered to Johnny, pulling him aside. “I don't know what happened but something is wrong.”

“I'll go,” he said immediately.

“No, I'd much rather you stayed here with the children. I'm sorry to have to ask again so soon after last night –”

“Don't be silly,” he said impatiently. “Of course I'll take care of everyone.” He hesitated, then pressed his knife into her hand. “Take this with you. Just in case.”

“What if you need it?”

“We'll stay inside, with the door barred. We'll be fine.”

She was tempted to argue, but the knife did make her feel better and she had the sudden feeling she was running out of time. She went to her sister next.

“Merry, I have to go after Jack. I want you to stay here and help Johnny take care of the children. Can you do that for me?”

For a moment Merry’s lip trembled, but then her expression turned serious and Katerina had a brief glimpse of the woman her sister would grow into as she nodded.

“We’ll look after them. But please hurry back. And bring Jack with you.”

“I have every intention of doing so.”

She gave her sister an all too brief hug, wrapped her cloak around her shoulders, picked up the clearly anxious Keffi, and slipped out the door.

As soon as they were outside, she put Keffi down and he immediately took off. At first she thought he was heading in the direction of the supply cavern and all kinds of dreadful scenarios raced through her head. Had Jack slipped, fallen? Had one of those racks fallen on him? The vision of him bleeding on the cavern floor haunted her as she did her best to increase her pace.

But instead of heading for the cavern, Keffi continued to the base of the glacier, climbing nimbly up through the assortment of rock and ice that had formed where it reached the valley floor.

What on Earth would Jack have been doing up there? But despite the questions filling her head, she didn’t hesitate to follow the pika. She was nowhere near as nimble as he was, but she managed to make her way over the mound of debris at the base of the glacier. Once she was on the slope above it, the path was smoother. Twice she thought she saw footprints, but she couldn’t be entirely sure. Life in the caravan had not required her to learn tracking skills and she was forced to place all of her faith in Keffi.

She bit her lips as they approached the wall of ice, wondering how she could climb over it, but it was not as solid as it appeared and Keffi led her behind the ice. The atmosphere immediately changed. She had grown used to the unusual

silence of the valley, but here the silence seemed to carry an almost physical weight, pressing against her as she followed Keffi. The path began to climb, even smoother now and obviously not natural.

Had the original colonists done this? Had they created this secret passageway into the heart of the glacier? But then they came around a massive pillar of ice and she knew that no human could ever have created what awaited her. A towering castle of ice with strange, angular walls filled the space behind the glacier. It fitted so seamlessly with the surrounding ice that it could almost have been a natural phenomenon except for the straight lines and rigid angles.

Keffi chirped impatiently, perched in what was all too clearly a massive doorway that reared far over his head. He looked like the little boy in the fairytale, about to enter the giant's castle. Had Jack entered it? He must have done, but why?

"It's just an empty castle," she whispered to herself, but the silence seemed to swallow her words.

Gritting her teeth, she thought of Jack, and she passed through the doorway..

The ice palace was divided into smaller rooms, or at least chambers. All of them were empty, only the tall, perfectly smooth walls of ice defining the spaces, but she held onto the hope that Jack was somewhere in the vast maze of ice. Keffi led her through the passages, climbing steadily higher and higher. They must be at least halfway up the mountainside by now, she thought, although the deceptive sameness of the endless rooms and long passageways made it difficult to be sure. But then Keffi chirped and increased his speed. She followed him, her heart thudding painfully against his chest as he led her into another room, and this one was not empty.

The room was oddly like the one of which she had dreamed, with tall gleaming walls of blue ice and in the center of the room, a raised dais heaped with white furs. Jack was sprawled on his back in the middle of the furs, his body unmoving except for an occasional shudder that rippled over him. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling overhead, unseeing.

She knew it might be a trap, but she didn't care, sliding across the ice in her haste to get to him.

"Jack. Jack!" she cried desperately. "Look at me!"

He didn't respond and she grabbed his shoulders. His skin was as firm and smooth as ever but horribly cold beneath her fingers. Ignoring the chill, she shook him frantically. Keffi jumped up on the bed, chirping at him, but he didn't respond to either of them

"Jack," she sobbed. "What's wrong? Who did this to you?"

She kissed him, but he did not respond to that either, his mouth cold and still beneath hers. Tears dripped down her cheeks as she bent over him.

"Please come back to me. I love you."

More tears fell, and one of them splashed into those blind unseeing eyes. He shuddered again, and then his eyes came alive, immediately focusing on her face.

"I love you too."

CHAPTER 17



Jack searched for Katerina. He could hear her calling him, knew that she needed him, but he was surrounded by a thick white fog and he couldn't reach her. He tried, over and over again, growing increasingly more frantic, but then there was a break in the fog, a spot that glowed with a warm golden light and he raced towards it. As he reached it, he fell, tumbling over and over, and then he landed, back in his own body with his female bending over him, tears on her beautiful face as she whispered that she loved him.

"I love you too."

His voice sounded odd, as strained as if he'd gone for days without food or drink but she didn't seem to care. She gave a joyous cry, and then she was kissing him, her mouth sweet and delicious against his. But despite that, it took all of his strength to respond to her. He couldn't even lift his arms to hold her against him.

She drew back, her face worried.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I feel weak," he admitted.

Despite the worry he could see in her eyes, she smiled at him.

"At least that's a change from well, although not in the right direction. Do you think you can sit up?"

He tried flexing his hand, and to his relief it responded. His arms took longer, but eventually they too moved and with her

help, he managed to sit upright. His head spun dizzily, but it was much better than lying helplessly on the... bed?

“Where am I?”

“In an ice palace behind the glacier.”

“How did I get here? How do you get here?”

“I’m here because Keffi brought me.” She hugged the small creature fiercely. “Thank goodness. He showed up wanting me to follow him. But I have no idea how you got here. What do you remember?”

“I’m not sure.”

He frowned, trying to remember. At first the only thing he could remember was the white fog but before that... yes, before that, he’d been dreaming. Dreaming about Katerina. She’d called to him, saying that she needed him and he had been helpless to resist. He’d followed her, although he had no idea where he had gone, only aware that she was just out of reach.

“I dreamed that you were calling for me,” he said slowly. “But even in my dream, something about it felt wrong.”

He shuddered as another memory resurfaced. Of being here on this bed with the female who looked like Katerina but was not. She tried to kiss him and he pushed her away. She laughed, revealing a mouthful of decidedly nonhuman teeth, and shrugged.

“If you prefer it that way, Tandroki.”

She laughed again and disappeared, leaving him lying on the bed of furs. He was fully dressed, but he felt as if hundreds of cold mouths were pressed against his skin, sucking the energy from him until the white fog took him.

“There’s someone else here, isn’t there?” she whispered. “This place isn’t empty.”

“No it is not. And whoever is here is not from this world. She knew that I was a Tandroki warrior.”

They stared at each other, and then she nodded slowly.

“Remember what we were saying about the planet being unlucky? My ancestor’s ship crashed. Your ambassador’s ship crashed. Maybe someone else did as well.”

“I believe you are correct.”

“But who could it be?”

He searched his memory, even though his mind too seemed oddly lethargic. He was sure he had heard of a similar situation.

“The Fereg,” he said finally. “They are a parasitic race who exist on the energy of others. According to the information I received, they did not always kill those from whom they fed, but I suspect that here that may have changed.”

Her face was pale, but she nodded. “That makes sense, especially with almost no one using this pass anymore. We need to get out of here.”

“Yes,” he said immediately. “You should go.”

“What do you mean *I* should go? What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to confront the Fereg. I cannot allow it to continue to drain your people.”

“You can’t. You can barely stand. And what if it’s not alone?”

“They travel alone, otherwise they would try to feed off each other.”

She shuddered, then gave him a brave smile.

“I understand why you need to do something, but why not wait until you’re stronger?”

“It has to be now. We are already deep inside her layer. And my strength is returning rapidly.”

That was true enough, although he was still a long way from peak condition. He also did not share his other concern. The Fereg had reached him in his sleep, calling to him when he was most vulnerable. If she had done it once, what was there to prevent her from doing it again? No, he couldn’t take the chance.

“All right then. I’m going with you.”

“Zeretta, you’re very brave, but you are not a warrior.”

“I know that, and I promise to stay out of your way if there’s a... battle.” Her voice broke on the last word, but she hurried on. “But I thought I lost you. I can’t go through that again, not knowing where you are or what’s happening. I’m coming with you.”

Even though he was concerned for her safety, he found he was equally reluctant to lose sight of her, afraid he’d end up back in the fog searching for her.

“Very well.”

He rose to his feet, but although he managed to stand, his legs immediately threatened to give out on him. Katerina wedged itself under his arm just as she had done in the bedroom what felt like a lifetime ago.

“Just as well I’m coming,” she muttered. “You can’t even stand properly yet.”

He deliberately tightened his arm around her shoulders. “Perhaps we should see what else I can do.”

She laughed, just as he had intended, and some of the concern left her expression. “It certainly sounds like you’re on your way to recovery.”

“I am well,” he assured her, and she rolled her eyes before looking over at Keffi.

“Maybe we should send him home?”

He looked at the drone and the drone stared back at him. Theoretically, he should have been able to send Keffi back to the shelter, but somehow he suspected his order would not be successful.

“I suspect that he will not leave.”

“I think you’re right.” She sighed. “So where do we find this Fereg?”

“On her ship, of course. Her nest will be there.”

“Her ship? You think there’s a ship in here somewhere?”

“I am sure of it,” he said, taking a few tentative steps towards the doorway. To his delight, although his legs shook, they obeyed. “I suspect this was the signal I was receiving all along.”

She had moved with him, continuing to provide support, and she gave him a curious glance.

“If she lives on her ship, then why this palace?”

“Perhaps she intended to fill it with slaves from whom she could feed. Or it might simply be part of her nature to build such a dwelling.”

“Like a bird making a nest, only on a really big scale.”

He tilted his head, considering the matter.

“I believe an insect building a web would be a more accurate analogy.”

“I assure you, I didn’t need to know that.” She shuddered and inched a tiny bit closer.

“You’re sure you do not wish to leave?”

“No, so stop trying to get rid of me.”

“I would never do such a thing.”

“I know. Then let’s get going so we can get back to the rest of our family.”

“Our family,” he agreed, loving the sound of the words on his lips.

How strange that he should have had to come to this isolated planet to find what he had never found on his own.

They started walking, Keffi following at their heels, usually silent. Katerina also had nothing to say, simply clinging to his hand as they walked. Since he suspected the ship would be at the apex of the castle they moved steadily upwards and with each step a portion of his strength returned.

As they moved down a long passageway, something about the walls attracted his attention. They were no longer as smooth

and clear as they had been. He paused for a moment to inspect them, but as soon as he realized what they contained, he tried to hurry Katerina away. He was too late, and she stared at the walls in horror.

“Are those... bones embedded in the ice?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“First insect aliens and then bones in the walls, could this place get any creepier?” she muttered as she finally let him lead her away.

As it turned out, it could.

They climbed the last ramp and found themselves at the top of a tower. A ship rested in the exact center of the tower, a Fereg ship, just that he had suspected. A thick layer of ice covered the metal surface, and it clearly wasn’t going anywhere, but the landing ramp was down. He gave her a quick look.

“Why didn’t you wait for me here?”

“Nope. I’m coming with you. But here, take this.”

She held out her hand to give him Johnny’s knife. Such a small weapon, but he took it gratefully.

“Thank you. When I tell you to get behind me, promise me that you will listen.”

“I will. I’m not stupid. I know I’m not a fighter.”

“Only with that fierce heart of yours,” he said, hugging her.

They climbed to the top of the ramp in silence, the metal seeming to absorb the sound of their footsteps. Did the ship dampen all surrounding sound, he wondered, feeling the weight of the silence. No one appeared to be on board, but the ship still had power. Lights flickered as they made their way up onto the bridge.

More ice filled the space, creating an ornate structure with a single figure reclining in the center of the network.

“Welcome, Jackasarian,” she said, rising and coming towards him.

For a terrible moment he saw Katerina walking towards him, but then he recognized the illusion, the small differences that separated the artificial from the genuine. He heard his mate gasp, but when he let go of her hand and waved her back, she obeyed.

“Why are you here, Fereg? This is not your world.”

For the briefest fraction of a second, the illusion flickered, but then the false Katerina smiled.

“Why I’m here to serve you, Jackasarian. To give you anything that you desire.”

The voice was close, but the words were entirely wrong. His fierce mate would never speak so subserviently, and he had no wish for her to do so.

The Fereg drifted closer and he tensed, trying to remember what weaponry lay behind the illusion. Long limbs - thin, strong, and clawed. The Fereg did not tend to favor weapons, preferring to rely on the power of illusion and their own natural abilities which might give him an advantage.

His hand trembled on the hilt of the knife. A hand that had not trembled since the day his first training master had him hold a sword at attention for an entire day. But the Fereg bore his female’s face and even though it was only a pale imitation, he could not bring himself to strike her. The horrible facsimile smiled.

“Afraid, Tandroki?”

Keffi chittered beneath him but he was afraid to look down, afraid to take his eyes off the Fereg. She suddenly screeched, a grating, high-pitched cry and the illusion faded, replaced by her true form - a bony skeletal frame and writhing tentacles surrounding a gaping sharp-toothed mouth. His grip tightened, and he slashed the blade across her neck. Her body collapsed and the ship shuddered.

His female raced over and clutched his arm.

“Are you all right? Is she really dead?”

“Yes, thank Moroz.”

He pulled her into his arms, his hands shaking again, from relief this time.

“I almost failed you. I knew it was only an illusion, but I could not bring myself to strike.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I’m glad Keffi was here.”

“Keffi?” he asked, remembering the noises he’d heard.

She gave a choked giggle. “He bit her. That’s when the illusion faded.”

He looked down to find the drone at his feet, purple blood still staining the white fur around his mouth. Somehow, he was not surprised. Drones were not supposed to act autonomously, but Keffi had surprised him time and time again.

“You are a very worthy warrior,” he told the pika solemnly, and he was quite sure Keffi understood.

“I can’t believe his ship has been here all this time, buried in the ice.”

“I’m not sure it was buried in the ice. At least not originally. I think the Fereg caused the ice to form in order to hide the ship,” he said looking around. Despite its age, the ship appeared remarkably intact.

“And she’s been feeding off of people this whole time?”

“Yes. I suspect she was feeding off of me even before she called me here. That is why I had those bouts of weakness. I think she’s been trying with Johnny as well but he wasn’t quite old enough to fall into her trap.”

She shuddered and tightened her arms around his waist.

“So many wasted lives.”

“Yes, and I would have been one of them if I had not been blessed with such a courageous and intelligent mate.”

“And a very intelligent pika,” she added, smiling down at Keffi. But then she bit her lip and looked up at him, her eyes uncertain.

“This is what you’ve been looking for, isn’t it? A ship to take you home.”

Home. No, Tandrok had never been home.

“I –”

“Is it too badly damaged?” she interrupted. “Will it take a long time to repair?”

“It is old, but I do not see any structural damage. I have no doubt that the nanites could repair it if I chose to make the attempt.”

“*If?* Does that mean you’re not going to try?”

He smiled tenderly down at her worried face.

“Of course not. My home is here with you and the children. It is the only home I have ever had and the only home I could ever want.”

“Are you sure? This is a primitive planet.”

“Of course I am sure. You are my mate. I love you. And I will never leave you.”

A tear slid down her cheek but her smile blinded him. He bent his head to kiss her, but as he did the ship shuddered again and Keffi squeaked.

“I think our celebrations had best wait. I suspect that without the Fereg’s presence, the barriers she constructed will begin to disintegrate.”

He was right. No sooner had they left the ship than a great sheet of ice collapsed behind them, burying the ship in icy shards. It would be almost impossible to reach, but he was unconcerned. He had no interest in it. His only concern at the moment was escaping from the ice.

Grabbing Katerina’s hand, he raced back down through the network of passageways. Twice they had to reverse course because fallen ice blocked their path. She did her best to keep up with him, uncomplaining despite the exhaustion he could see on her face, but she just wasn’t fast enough. He paused long enough to bend down.

“Climb on my back. It will be faster.”

Thank Moroz, she didn't argue, but climbed up, bringing Keffi with her.

“Hold on,” he warned, and he ran.

More ice crumbled behind them, jarring crashes that made the ground beneath his feet tremble. The shattering walls sent clouds of frozen crystals swirling into the air, half obscuring his vision, but he blinked and kept going, ever downwards. They were almost at the entrance when a great roar sounded behind them and the ground rolled beneath his feet. He pulled her around to his front, wrapping his arms around her and Keffi, just as the ground gave way and they were caught in a tumbling rush of ice and snow that burst free of the glacier and slid down the mountainside to land at its base.

His ears rang with the roar, and his whole body felt sore and bruised, but Katerina was still tucked safely in his arms. He rolled them over, searching her face anxiously.

“Are you unharmed?” he asked desperately.

Her lips curved and then her eyes opened, sparkling up at him.

“I am well,” she said solemnly.

His laugh rang out through the crystal clear air, and then he was kissing her and nothing else mattered. He was still kissing her when the children came running up and piled on top of them in a great snowy pile of love and laughter and family.

CHAPTER 18



As Jack pulled Katerina to her feet and she tried to dust the snow off her clothing, she looked up at the sky, shocked to realize that it was barely midday. The time in the ice palace had seemed to last forever, but it had only been a few hours.

And something else was different.

“Look,” she whispered, pointing overhead as a flock of the bird-like creatures native to the planet flew by high overhead. It was the first time she’d seen any kind of animal life since they arrived in the past. “Do you think they came back because the ship was destroyed?”

“I think it is entirely possible. More animals may follow.”

“That would be wonderful. As much as I love Keffi, it would be nice to see some other animals occasionally.”

A small hand tugged anxiously on her cloak.

“Mama Kat. Ith it thill the Longeth Night today?”

“Well, yes. I suppose it is. We should get ready.”

Lorna cheered and raced off to tell the others while Jack gave her a worried look.

“Are you sure? It has been a strenuous morning.”

“Well you slept through most of it,” she teased, then shook her head. “Right now, I’m too happy to feel tired. And we’ve gone to a lot of trouble to try and make this special for the children. I don’t want them to miss out on that.”

“I do not want to disappoint them either.”

“Good, then that’s settled.”

Hand-in-hand, they followed the children back home. Johnny led the way with Merry at his side, talking excitedly as usual.

“You think Johnny will put on some weight now?” she asked, and he laughed.

“It’s possible, but you must remember that he is in his growth phase. I do not believe you will be able to fatten him up.” He smiled down at her. “Of course if you wish to make the attempt with me...”

“You are a very greedy male,” she said with mock severity.

“Indeed. But there are other things that are far more appealing than food. Perhaps we should have our own celebration after the children are asleep?”

Her breath caught at the hunger in his gaze and she nodded.

“I like that idea.” She hesitated. “But it’ll be a long time until then and there’s something I want to make sure you understand. I meant what I said. I love you.”

The glow in his eyes intensified, his hand tightening around hers.

“I love you too. I am only sorry that I waited so long to tell you.”

“I didn’t tell you because I thought you were going to leave me.”

“And I thought that you would leave.”

She lifted his hand to her lips and pressed a quick kiss against his knuckles.

“We obviously need to work on our communication skills. We should probably begin by deciding what we’re going to do next.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do we need to do anything?”

“You mean, just stay here?”

“Why not? You were already prepared to spend the winter here. We have an adequate shelter, which I can make even more suitable. It is peaceful and quiet and we have access to a ready supply of stores. And I think the children are happy here.”

They reached the house as he finished speaking, and he gave her a quick smile.

“Think about it, and we can discuss it later.”

His lips brushed against hers for the merest second, but it was a promise of what was to come.

She thought about his suggestion as they prepared the house for the Longest Night. As they baked cookies with her new ingredients - cookies that the children decorated and that filled the room with the smell of spices. Instead of stockings she had made small bags from some of the extra fabric and she hung them on the ledge over the stove. She had little to go in the bags except a few treats she had discovered in the supply cavern, but Johnny had carved a small animal figure for each of the children and Jack had used his nanites to create small, sparkly bouncing balls.

After the meal, they all piled onto Jack’s bed and she told them all of the holiday stories she could recall – everything from Krampus to Santa to Old Man Winter and, of course, Jack Frost. After the younger children fell asleep, they carried them to their beds. Merry scurried up the ladder to the loft while even Johnny settled into his bed - and then they were alone.

She found herself feeling oddly bashful. It had been one thing to talk of love and plans for the future after such an eventful day, but now they were back to their regular life, did he still feel the same way? She snuck a glance at him from under her lashes and her breath caught at the warmth in his eyes. Her fears vanished like frost touched by the sun.

“I think I do like the idea of staying here,” she said as she started removing her clothing. “It feels sturdy and comfortable, the way home should feel. I’ve always wanted a real home.”

“You have never had one?”

She shook her head.

“My father always preferred to be on the road. Most of the traders choose to return to the same place each winter, and many of them create homes there. He wasn’t interested. There were quite a few winters when he didn’t even take a break. Instead, he’d take a smaller group down to the coast and trade there during the cold season.”

She slipped off the rest of her clothing as she spoke, and although his eyes were fixed on her body, he was obviously still listening.

“Would you be satisfied with this as a home?”

“Yes, I think I would. Like I said, it feels right, but it’s more than that. We’ve already started making memories here.”

“Like kissing in our bed?” he suggested and she laughed.

“Yes, that’s one of them. But also things like preparing for the celebration and decorating cookies. And even the simple things like having lessons at the table or making breakfast. Those kinds of memories are the things that truly make a home.”

He nodded. “I understand that. The only place I remember with any fondness from our residence on Tandrok is the swing in the courtyard behind the house. That is where my mother used to tell me stories.”

“I’m glad you have that memory. We could even put up a swing here, in honor of her.”

“I like that idea.” Then his expression changed and he held out his hand, his eyes gleaming. “But right now I would like to make more memories with you.”

“I agree.”

She walked over to where he was sitting on the edge of the bed, but when he reached for her she knelt in front of him instead.

“What are you doing? The floor is cold and hard.”

“That’s all right. I don’t mind,” she whispered as she put her hand around his gloriously erect cock and felt it pulse against her fingers.

“Are you... are you going to put your mouth on me?” he growled.

“It had occurred to me.”

She nuzzled her face against him, breathing in his cool, minty scent, even stronger here.

“Is that a Tandroki custom?” she asked.

“Absolutely not.”

She took a long, delicious lick of his cock, licking it like a huge candy cane, but then what he said penetrated and she looked up at him.

“If it is not a Tandroki custom, how did you know what I was going to do?”

“I... watched. There was a couple in the woods and they were pleasing each other. That is what gave me ideas on how to please you.”

“You mean you’ve never been with a woman, I mean a female, before?”

“No. As I said, it is not our custom. There are exceptions, of course, but I never met anyone with whom I wanted to make such arrangements.”

“In that case, you’re certainly a very fast learner.”

He smiled down at her. “May I have another lesson?”

“In a minute. Right now, your lesson is to learn how to enjoy this,” she said as she circled her tongue around his shaft.

“There is no doubt of that,” he gasped and from the way his claws dug into the furs, she believed him.

She swirled her tongue around his shaft again, then took his head in her mouth. He was far from small and she had to stretch around him, but it was worth the effort as she heard him gasp and begin muttering in his own language. She wasn’t

quite sure if he was praying or cursing, but he was clearly pleased and she took him deeper, determined to make his first time memorable. He filled her mouth to overflowing, and when his head brushed her throat, she swallowed around him. He gave a hoarse cry, and then he exploded in her mouth, tasting exactly like liquid candy cane as she swallowed greedily. His cock had barely finished pulsing in her mouth before he reached for her, lifting her up over his body before pulling down on his still rigid cock.

“Now it’s time for my lesson,” he growled.

He learned it so well that she barely had the strength to pull on a nightgown before curling up in his arms.

“I do not like anything between us,” he grumbled.

“Neither do I, but I suspect the children will be in here very early. You should get dressed too,” she said, yawning. He grumbled again but obeyed, and she was asleep within minutes once he returned.

Her prediction proved correct. It was still dark when Lorna came racing into the room, followed almost immediately by Cecil and Cecelia. To the children’s delight, Jack pretended to be asleep and they took turns giggling and poking him trying to wake him up. The sound of their laughter drew Merry and Johnny as well, and she smiled at all of them.

“I suppose now that we’re all up, we might as well go and see if Santa brought anything.”

The children cheered and raced back into the other room, and after a not entirely quick kiss, they followed. It was a modest holiday by most standards, but the children were thrilled by everything. Lorna hugged her doll fiercely to her chest, too overcome to speak. Merry was delighted with the dress that Katerina had made her, but she seemed even more pleased by her own doll, her eyes filling with tears as she reached over and hugged her.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I know I’m really too old for dolls, but it means a lot to me.”

Johnny was equally thrilled by the wooden training sword that Jack had created for him. She looked around the cozy room and the children exclaiming over their presents, and then over at Jack, sitting with Cecil on his lap as the little boy showed him the wonders of his wagon. He looked up and smiled as their eyes met.

Yes, this was home. And she'd never been happier.

EPILOGUE



*S*ix months later...

“NOW TRY,” JACK SAID AND SHE FLIPPED THE SWITCH. THE new light fixture hanging over the table glowed to life, and they all cheered. The light was the latest in his home improvements. He delighted in surprising all of them with a variety of small ways of improving their lives. And he had already succeeded in transforming their home, she thought, looking around with a smile.

Once they had agreed to remain at the trading post, he decided that they needed more room and had broken through the wall into the adjoining dwelling. As a result, Merry now had her own bedroom as did Lorna and the twins.

They had converted the attic space into a room for Johnny, although he spent little time there. He preferred to be with Jack, and the two of them had formed an inseparable bond. In addition to the bedrooms, he had expanded the bathroom, adding a tub and an endless supply of hot water. Although the bathroom had been a present for her, he enjoyed it just as much as she did and they’d spent many hours together in the big tub.

The decision to remain at the trading post had proved positive in more than one way. Now that the Fereg was no longer perched on the mountainside, birds and animals returned to the valley - and so did the people. The first small caravan had passed through only a few weeks after the snow cleared. It

contained three families, intent on moving south. After spending a few days at the outpost, and some extended discussions with Jack, two of the families had decided to remain and set up shop. One was a potter and the other a weaver and their skills had been very welcome.

Others had joined them since then. Somewhat surprisingly, once the initial shock had passed, none of them seemed to have any issues with Jack. Perhaps it was because he smiled more easily these days, or perhaps it was because it was difficult to be intimidated by an alien who had no hesitation about carrying Lorna around on his shoulders while she used his horns to steer him like a draft animal. His love for the children – and their love for him - was apparent in everything he did.

As was his love for her, although perhaps he demonstrated that best when they were alone in their small room. She felt the familiar pulse of arousal as she remembered the previous night. He had taken a casual comment from her as a challenge and proceeded to prove to her that she could indeed have six climaxes in a row. She had suspected she would never walk again, but she'd already recovered enough to wonder if seven was out of reach.

As if he heard what she was thinking, he looked over at her and grinned. She knew she was blushing as she smiled back and bent over the stove. She was experimenting with a collection of sweet treats to be offered for sale in the new bakeshop that had opened. Most of the stalls around the front courtyard were now populated, some with temporary merchants who would stay for a few weeks or months before moving on, and others like the first two families who had decided to remain permanently.

“Kat! Kat!” Merry came bursting into the room, her face white, Johnny right behind her. When he was not accompanying Jack, he was always watching over Merry. “He’s here, he’s here.”

“Calm down. Who’s here?”

“Father! I saw the caravan.”

Merry burst into tears and she automatically put her arms around her sister, murmuring soothingly as she looked over at Jack. His smile disappeared and he was once more the stern Tandroki warrior. She had no doubt that he could protect them, but she still dreaded the inevitable confrontation.

“I need to go and talk to him. You stay here with Johnny.”

Her sister clutched her hands.

“No, don’t go. He’ll take you away from us.”

Lorna’s lip trembled and Ceci began to cry.

“Don’t go, Mama,” Lorna pleaded.

“No one is going to take me anywhere. You know Daddy would never let that happen.”

“Never,” Jack growled but his harsh voice helped settle the children.

She swiped the flour off her hands and did her best to look confident as she went to the door, Jack right behind her.

“Bar the door,” she whispered to Johnny as he followed them. “Just in case he tries something tricky.”

He nodded and she squeezed his hand. He smiled, no longer as uncomfortable with casual affection as he had been.

“I will keep them safe.”

“I know you will.”

In spite of that, and in spite of Jack’s intimidating presence, her stomach churned as they made their way back to the main courtyard. The caravan was just reaching them and her stomach flipped as she recognized her father’s wagon, her own small wagon still fastened behind it. *Never. I am never going back there.*

“Never,” Jack agreed and she realized she must have spoken out loud.

They reached the entry to the courtyard, and she stopped, determined to make him come to her for once. But it was not her father who climbed down from the lead wagon.

“Stan?” she asked as she recognized the man walking towards them.

Stan was a wiry older man, her father’s second in command. She had never cared for him, but he was neither as cruel nor as hot-tempered as her father.

He gave a quick, wary glance at Jack as he joined them.

“Got news for you.”

“What is it?” she asked cautiously

“Don’t suppose there’s any reason to sugarcoat it. Your Pa’s dead.”

“Dead?” The ground seemed to move beneath her feet. As much as she despised him, he had always been so full of life. It was almost impossible to imagine that life snuffed out. “What happened?”

“After you and the girl ran off,” Stan said, his voice carefully neutral. “Your pa and Guyten got into a big fight. Guyten accused him of hiding you and your pa accused Guyten of stealing you both.”

He gave her a quick look, but she was still too shocked to respond.

“It seemed like they patched up their differences, and they both went off to look for you. But then the storm came and only Guyten came back. He said your pa froze to death, but I reckon it was Guyten’s knife. He was going to claim our caravan too, but he’d been out in the cold too long. He didn’t make it.”

“Dead? They’re both dead?” she whispered, still stunned.

“Aye. You fixing to make a claim on the caravan?” he asked, studying her face.

“Me? No. I’m not interested..”

A look of what might have been relief crossed his face, even though he couldn’t seriously have thought she’d challenge him for the role of caravan master.

“Your things are still in the small wagon. Haven’t touched them. Reckon the least I can do is leave it with you.”

“I’d appreciate that,” she said with genuine gratitude. “And you’re welcome to stay and trade.”

“Nah. Not this time. Too soon. We’ll water the animals and move on. But we might be back in the fall if it’s okay with you.”

“We’ll be here.”

He nodded and moved away, yelling at a couple of his men to unhitch her wagon.

“I can’t believe my father’s gone,” she murmured to Jack.

“Are you upset?”

“I suppose I should be, but no. All I feel is relief.”

“Good. He does not deserve your tears. I will ask the men to help with the transfer of the wagon so we can tell Merry. Do you think she will be upset?”

“No I don’t think so.” She recovered enough to give him a teasing grin. “And if she is, I’m sure Johnny will comfort her.”

They returned to their home and Merry was just as relieved as she had predicted. Work was abandoned for the rest of the afternoon, and Jack took them off into the fields behind the outpost for a picnic, although she suspected it was also to give the caravan time to leave.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked as they climbed into bed that night.

“I really am. I always knew he was a terrible father, but it’s even more obvious now after seeing how wonderful you are with all of the children.” She bit her lip, trying to decide on the best way to approach her question. “In fact, I was thinking…”

“It is always dangerous when you begin a sentence with those words,” he said, but his eyes sparkled with laughter.

“All right then, I was wondering if perhaps you might consider expanding your fatherly duties.” She took a deep breath. “I

was wondering if we should have a baby - that is, if it's possible."

His eyes blazed blue fire, happiness in every line of his face.

"I can think of nothing that I would like more. And I will do everything in my power to make it happen. Beginning tonight."

He kissed her, his tongue twining with hers in the way that never failed to build her arousal, and then he moved to her mating mark, nipping lightly at the sensitive flesh, and she smiled. A home, a husband, a family, and hopefully, a baby. She'd never thought to be so happy.

THE NEXT SUMMER...

"I AM NOT AT ALL SURE THAT THIS IS A GOOD IDEA," JACK said, pacing impatiently from one side of the room to the other.

"It's been almost two years," his mate said. "You don't honestly think he'd still be angry?"

"The amount of time is irrelevant. Nicholsarian never forgets anything. Or forgives."

"What is there to forgive?" she asked calmly. "You know that the crash wasn't your fault. There's something about this planet, or at least this area which affects ships."

"But I was not supposed to be on his ship."

"True. But does it really matter? Jaelle says he's happily mated to a human now."

It was Katerina's friendship with Jaelle which had eventually led to the knowledge that Ambassador Nicholsarian had remained on K.R.S Three. She had written to the other female to let her know that she had found safety and the two of them had struck up a correspondence. Jaelle had mentioned her healing skills, and as Katerina's time grew near, he'd grown increasingly nervous about the birth. At his suggestion, Katerina had written to ask if Jaelle could be present.

Jaelle had agreed but when she arrived at the outpost, she was accompanied not only by two children, a baby, a dire wolf, and a drone in the form of a bird, but by another Tandroki warrior – the legendary Commander Krampasarian. He was not directly acquainted with the other male, but he was more than aware of the commander's reputation, and his competition with Nicholsarian for the position of ambassador to Perchten - a competition that Nicholsarian had won after Krampasarian disappeared.

Under the circumstances, the fact that he had worked for the ambassador did not seem promising. And Krampasarian's first icy glance only compounded that suspicion. But then the other warrior turned to talk to his bride, tenderness replacing his previous arrogance, and Jack found himself relaxing a little.

Krampasarian eventually softened enough to help ease Jack's fears about the birth. He would not go as far as to say they had become friends, but since their mates had become close, he suspected they would be seeing more of each other over the years. He found the prospect surprisingly agreeable. It wasn't until the night before they were due to leave that he thought to ask about Nicholsarian, wondering if Krampus had heard anything.

The other male only looked amused.

"I believe I will leave you to discover that for yourself."

He'd dismissed the comment at the time, but a few weeks later he had received a message from the ambassador.

"'I'm coming to see you.' What kind of message is that?" he asked, not for the first time, resuming his pacing.

"Jack, stop. You're making me dizzy."

Katerina gently removed Varak from her breast as she spoke. Their son. He still couldn't believe that he had a son. He was a perfect mixture of Tandroki and human with pale golden hair curling around the small, dark nubs of his horns.

"Here, why don't you take Varak? If you insist on pacing back and forth, you might as well take him with you."

He gladly took his son, cradling him against his chest, but he did not immediately resume his pacing, studying his female instead.

“You look tired, zeretta.”

“Having a baby is tiring.” She gave him a rueful smile. “And I think I’m missing Merry’s help.”

Merry had been delighted by the baby and eager to assist Katerina. She and the other children were visiting friends for the day - under Johnny’s watchful eye. He did not want them present for the meeting in case Nicholsarian proved... unpleasant.

“I think Merry is already growing up,” he said wistfully. “At least it will be a long time before Varak is an adult.”

“Not that long. It’s surprising how quickly children change.”

She was right. He could already see the changes in all of them

“Then we should just keep having babies so we remember what it’s like when they are young.”

“*We* don’t have babies. You may start the process but *I* actually have the baby, so let me assure you I do not intend to become a baby making machine.”

“Of course not, zeretta.” He smiled at her. “Although that does not mean we can’t practice.”

“I’m all in favor of practice, but only practice,” she added with mock severity as her hand drifted down over his cock. “Perhaps we can practice again tonight. Assuming your son decides to sleep for at least a few hours.”

His shaft stiffened as it always did at her touch but just as he bent his head to kiss her someone knocked firmly on the door. Nicholsarian.

“I will answer it,” he said, handing the baby back just in case Nicholsarian immediately went on the offensive.

At first glance, the ambassador did not look any different, as icily perfect as ever, but then a small curly head appeared next to his leg.

“Hi. I’m Lottie. Do you have any cookies?”

He saw Nicholsarian give a resigned sigh, and he couldn’t help smiling. Perhaps it was going to be all right after all. An hour later, he was almost sure of it. Nicholsarian also had a human wife, a human daughter, and a new baby. They had taken Lottie - and a tray of cookies - to play with the other children while their mates became acquainted. Jenna and Katerina were chatting comfortably, rocking the babies, when Nicholsarian rose.

“Let us go for a walk.”

His earlier trepidation returned, but he gave his mate a reassuring smile as he rose to join the ambassador. They emerged into the warm evening. In silent accord they turned towards the back of the trading post and away from the activity in the public areas. Neither one of them spoke until they reached the fields behind the outpost.

“I apologize for hiding on your ship,” he said finally.

“It was not correct Tandroki behavior.” Nicholsarian’s voice was absolutely neutral.

“No, it was not. But then I have never been a very satisfactory Tandroki warrior, as you were quick to point out.”

“Did I? I do not remember making any such statement.”

“You were constantly correcting me.”

“Indeed, because I believed you had potential. If I did not, I would not have bothered.”

He came to an abrupt halt and Nicholsarian took another step before turning to face him.

“You thought I had potential? You didn’t think that I was unworthy because of my heritage?”

The other male sighed. “Jackasarian, are you familiar with my lineage?”

Now that he thought about it, he’d never heard anyone mention it and he slowly shook his head.

“I was a child of the streets. What right did I have to judge lineage? What I did have was the right to judge behavior.”

The year in which he had served as Nicholsarian’s attaché suddenly took on a whole new perspective.

“I thought you were going to dismiss me,” he admitted.

“Not at all. My only intention was to turn you into a perfect Tandroki warrior.” Nicholsarian looked back at the lights of the outpost and smiled. “I do not believe that either of us fits that description anymore.”

“Do you regret that?”

“Never. This life can be challenging, and even painful, but I would not have missed one second of it.”

He thought of his mate and his children, of their cozy home and his ongoing plans to make it better, and the peaceful, uncontrolled valley that surrounded them.

“I have no regrets either.”

“Then it appears that everything has worked out for the best. Shall we return to our families?”

“I can think of nothing I would like better,” he said sincerely, and together they made their way back through the gentle warmth of the summer evening to his home.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *A Kiss of Frost*! I originally wrote the first story in this series - *Krampus and the Crone* - as a standalone, and yet here we are on book three! I have so much fun with the stern alien warriors and their feisty heroines, and with the kids and the pets and the holiday theme that I love returning to this world!

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 always, I have to thank my readers for joining me on these adventures! Your support and encouragement make it possible for me to keep writing these books.

And, as always, a special thanks to my beta team – Janet S, Nancy V, and Kitty S. Your thoughts and comments are incredibly helpful!



Up next! I'm returning to the *Seven Brides for Seven Alien Brothers* series with ***Endark***!

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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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