



AN ALIEN BERSERKER

FOR

Christmas

WARRIORS OF THE LATHAR

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

MINA CARTER

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PROLOGUE

*H*is beautiful little human was leaving.

K'laus of *Izaea* stood on his side of the forcefield and glowered as the station's lead healer spoke to her. He wasn't supposed to be able to see through the privacy setting on the forcefield, but he could. His visual adaptations were different than the ones imperial Lathar were used to, and the healing staff hadn't realized that yet. Which had allowed him to study the little human at his leisure...

When she'd been brought in, her face had been motionless—a perfect but distant beauty like the stars he'd looked to as a child, dreaming about the day he would travel among them. Because back then he'd had no doubt that he would qualify to train as an imperial warrior. It was his destiny... his birth right.

Until the day he'd been tested, and all his dreams came crashing down around his ears. He'd tested positive for the *Izaean* mutation, so there would be no imperial training for him.

Instead, he'd been packed off to *Parac'Norr*, and with each passing year, his blood rage had gotten deeper and more uncontrollable. So bad that he didn't remember the incident that had landed him here, being poked and prodded by high-level healers as they tried to work out why his rage was even less controllable than a normal *Izaean*. Why he had attacked and hurt his own brothers...

He shook his head, cutting those thoughts off and focusing instead on the delicate little human female listening intently to

the healer.

She'd been more dead than alive when they'd brought her in. The instant they had, the instant he'd seen her, everything within him had reset. Clung to her like a compass needle to true north.

And now she was leaving...

"*Nooooo!*" he roared. He threw himself at the forcefield as he was forced to watch her walk away from him, down the middle of the medical bays, and out through the double doors.

He roared and beat at the forcefield, trying to get to her. Trying to follow her. But it was no good, the field wouldn't give. Finally, he slid down the wall, his gaze fixed on the doors she'd left through, his eyes glittering and focused.

It didn't matter how long it took.

He would escape.

He would find her.

He would make her *his*...

“Welcome to Faulkner Gen-Mod. How can we help you?”

The bright and perky greeting of the receptionist grated on Holly Walters’ last nerve. She yanked her wayward wheeler case to a halt. Or she would have, only the case had other ideas. Its one wonky wheel, previously perfectly behaved, veered off to the left and caused the case to slam into the back of her leg. Her lips pressed into a thin line, juggling a paper travel mug of coffee and trying not to spill it down herself as she looked at the bubbly blonde who stared at her with absolutely no recognition in her eyes.

Great. She was new. Another one. Maggie must have aged out. Dean preferred only bright and young as the “face of the company.” Mid-twenties was it when it came to receptionists.

“Hi,” she said, forcing a bright smile to her face. “I’m Holly Walters, one of the lead gen-mod keepers here. I... lost my security tab—”

She hadn’t lost it. It had been eaten by a vicious, man-eating tiger that had been fairly intent on eating her as well.

“Oh, right!” The girl’s eyes widened. “I’m so sorry. We weren’t expecting you today! Let me just get you a new tab printed off.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate it.” She smiled, leaning one elbow against the sleek, metal counter as the girl busied herself at the other end of the expanse. She turned and looked around at the huge foyer. It was all metal and chrome, with

arty shots of animals displayed on the huge screens suspended overhead. A reassuring, authoritative male voice droned on in the background, explaining the company's background.

With a keen eye on conservation, Faulkner Gen-Mod, in association with its parent company, Faulkner Industries, has successfully reintroduced genetically modified populations of previously extinct species back into their native ecosystems. This focus on conservation...

Blah blah blah. She tuned the PR out. Yeah, Faulkner Gen-Mod was squeaky clean on the surface, but its CEO, Dean, was utterly focused on profit. The conservation angle was just that—an angle. Most of the company's efforts went into providing gen-modded animals for rich clients. Very rich clients were prepared to pay a lot for pets they couldn't get anywhere else.

She turned away from the screen as it flicked to a view of the savanna and a familiar orange, white, and black striped face came into view.

Attila. She closed her eyes and breathed, ignoring the flashbacks of being pinned under a massive feline body. The white of lethal fangs. Hot agony as her flesh was torn and ripped. Blood. Blood everywhere.

She swallowed, trying to put the thoughts from her mind. Attila was a special case. He'd been boosted to near human intelligence levels, which she'd argued was a mistake at the time—a big mistake. Tigers were apex predators with a natural intelligence... boosting that was a disaster waiting to happen.

The attack wasn't her fault. She'd been played. She knew that. But—

“Ms. Walters,” the receptionist said behind her. “Your tab?”

“Doctor Walters,” she replied automatically as she turned. “Thank you so much.”

She reached out for the tab, but the girl held it just out of reach.

“I... don’t think anyone’s expecting you,” she said, a look of indecision on her face.

Holly reached forward and plucked the tab from her fingers. “That’s fine. I’m just going to head up to my office and check on my research.”

Her prize in hand, she sighed as she headed toward the bank of elevators, new security tab in hand. It was a wonder she didn’t “age out,” as Dean’s girlfriend... arm candy... whatever. How could they be considered an item when he hadn’t even visited her after the attack?

Shaking her head, she sipped her coffee on the elevator ride up, emerging on the top floor where all the executive offices were. Breezing through the outer doors, she smiled at a surprised-looking Sophie, Dean’s PA, and pushed through into her boyfriend’s office.

The man in question was standing by the window, comm unit to his ear. He turned, an irritated look on his face, and blinked in surprise when he saw her. It didn’t take him long to recover.

He covered his comm unit with a hand to mouth at her. “Just give me a minute, okay?”

Shrugging, she blanked her expression and walked across the office, parking her case by a heavy cabinet and leaning her ass back against it.

Arms crossed, she sipped her coffee as she waited for Dean to finish his call. They weren’t an item, as such. At least, they’d never had that conversation, the actual “are we dating” one.

It had started with her accompanying him to official functions, and somehow, everyone had then assumed they were in a relationship... even them. She still had her place but stayed most of the time at his penthouse.

At least, she did when she wasn’t in an alien hospital. That had made her mind up. They were done. Through. If he couldn’t be bothered to visit her when she was at death’s door, what did they have?

Nothing. They had nothing.

She sighed and dropped her empty coffee mug in the trash as he finished his call.

“Darling! So good to see you!”

He smiled broadly as he closed the space between them. She ducked to the side, going for air kisses instead of the kiss he was trying to land on her lips.

A frown on his handsome face, kept that way by *very* expensive plastic surgeons, he leaned back. “What’s the matter, babe? Rough trip?”

She blinked. He couldn’t be *that* dense, surely? But this was Dean James Faulkner, the third, they were talking about. Worshipper of the almighty credit.

“What’s the matter? Oh gee, I don’t know, Dean,” she threw back. “Rough trip... I could’ve broken a nail... almost got killed by your fucking pet project tiger! And to top it all off, my *boyfriend*...” She air-quoted. “Didn’t even bother to visit me.”

He looked uncomfortable.

“You know I don’t like to use such outdated and exclusive terms, Hols,” he said chidingly.

Oh, okay... he was more bothered about her calling him her boyfriend than anything else she’d said.

“And besides,” he added, throwing more fuel on this raging dumpster fire. “It would have been an admission of guilt that subject 10-C was defective. That’s if I could even have gotten up there. Those aliens—”

“Were more than happy for family to visit,” she interrupted him. “Given the serious nature of the injuries. Like the fact I almost *died*.”

Speaking about it in such a detached way made it easier. Like she wasn’t the one who’d lain in a hospital bed, on death’s door, with no visitors. Suddenly she felt sad. Dean *was* her only family. Her dad had died years ago, and since then it had just been her... and her work. Until Dean. Yeah, well... if

it hadn't been for the odd, raging alien in the bed next to hers, she'd have had no company at all while she recovered. Not that she remembered a lot of it. She'd spent most of it sleeping.

But still, it would have been nice for her boyfriend... Nope, he wasn't that, she decided abruptly. If he couldn't be bothered to visit when she'd nearly *died*, she was so done with the relationship.

"So... we're done," she said, surprised to find her heart wasn't pounding in her chest. Instead, she felt a sense of completion... of *rightness*. "And I'm back. I want to get back in the saddle. What do we have up next?"

She looked at him, one eyebrow raised, imagining projects in the far-flung corners of the world. Somewhere remote, preferably well away from the office, where she could recuperate in her own time and give herself space from him.

Dean froze, a guilty look washing over his face.

"What?" she demanded. "What is it?"

"Well... that's the problem, Hols. We, well we didn't think you were coming back, so we hired on a new lead scientist," he said with a wince. "I don't have anything for you. Well, there is *one* job..."



"A new lead scientist! Can't freaking believe it..." Holly muttered as the train pulled to a stop at the resort station. Her temper had been simmering since she'd left the office and boarded a transport direct to her new assignment. There was no point in going home, after all.

She'd been going to until Sophie had run after her with the delightful news that Dean had ordered her apartment packed up and her things put into storage when she'd been injured. Apparently, no one had expected her to survive.

So she was down a boyfriend *and* a place to live.

She pursed her lips as she pulled her carry-on down from the overhead rack. It was completely understandable that no

one had expected her to survive an attack like that, and if not for the alien medical team, she wouldn't have. Their capabilities were so far in front of humanity's that she didn't even have a scar to show for her tangle with Attila. But her scars, or lack thereof, weren't the problem. What stung, what *really* stung, was the fact that Dean had moved on so quickly. It just reinforced that she'd made the right decision. He hadn't even said anything to her breaking up with him.

"Seriously, it's not even been two weeks," she bit out under her breath as she joined the slow-moving queue of passengers disembarking first class.

At least he'd sprung for that... she'd always traveled first class to all her assignments, but she didn't know what the protocol was for inconveniently not-dead staff. For all she knew, it could be something completely different to what she was used to.

Taking a deep breath, she managed a smile and a small thanks for the attendant bidding them goodbye. Just because she was having a shitty day... week... month... didn't mean she should be mean to someone just trying to do their job.

"Enjoy your stay in Christmas Falls!" the woman replied chirpily. "Merry Christmas!"

Her smile froze and she hurried out. She hated Christmas, with the passion of a thousand fiery suns. That wasn't a new thing. She'd hated the season since her father had died when she was a teenager.

Her mother had never gotten over it, and although she'd never wanted for anything... the best clothes, the best schools, beach holidays twice a year at exclusive resorts... it had been like Christmas no longer existed. At least not for the Walters household.

Like her father, they'd never spoken of it again. Each year her mother, a socialite extraordinaire, disappeared somewhere exotic, leaving Holly to fend for herself. That had never bothered her. She'd used the time to study, bringing her grades up high enough to allow her to qualify for a place at Travers Allied, a learning institute that spanned the Terran systems and

specialized in gen-mod. She'd left home and never looked back. Her mom was somewhere in the outer systems this year, on some high-class cruise of the Cascade Nebulae.

She stepped out the door... and got hit in the face with Christmas.

“Oh. My. God.”

Her eyes wide, she looked around. It was a scene straight off the front of a Christmas card. The station was on a small rise above a town filled with delightful little chocolate box houses and shops with lights strung from lampposts. A huge Christmas tree sat in the middle of the town square, undecorated for now, but it didn't take much imagination to see it in full Christmas regalia. The whole thing was surrounded by snow-covered, softly rolling hills rising up to the ever-darkening sky. Christmas carols filled the air, the sound a perfect accompaniment to the smell of hot chocolate from somewhere.

“Dean, I am going to fucking *kill* you,” she hissed savagely and yanked her case behind her as she began to trudge through the snow toward the town's only hotel, Pine Lodge, located behind the town square.

Half an hour later she made it to the front door, wet up to the knee and frozen to the bone. The walk had taken far longer than she'd expected, rather than the short stroll it had looked like. Something about the bio-dome affected the way her eyes saw distance—a deliberate optical effect to give the illusion the dome was far larger than it actually was.

Pushing open the front door, she practically fell through it. The heat from the roaring fire near the reception desk hit her, and she bit back a moan, tempted to just collapse into a little puddle on the floor and stay there until her bones thawed out.

“Well, hello there! Welcome to Pine Lodge!” a bright voice announced, and she swung around to find a receptionist had popped up from behind the desk, broad smile and Santa hat firmly in place. “What can I help you with today?”

She headed toward him, more dragging than wheeling her carry-on now. When Sophie had said “Christmas resort,” she’d expected a light dusting of snow, some lights... more glitz and fantasy than actual freaking snow.

“I’d like to check in please. I have a booking.”

Exhausted, she managed a small smile from somewhere. She’d been on her feet since leaving the alien space station this morning, which had taken *hours*... or rather, it had taken her hours to pass through customs and immigration where the staff seemed to consider her no longer human. As if a brief trip on an alien ship for medical reasons had suddenly changed her entire species.

“Of course, let me just check for you in the system. What’s the name?” the receptionist, whose name tag had “Robert” printed in neat letters on it, asked with a smile.

It seemed to be a permanent fixture, either down to the fact he was a perpetually happy person... or maybe surgery. If she had to work here, it would definitely be surgery. Her resting bitch face was more appropriate to a Halloween resort than this candy-cane Christmas sweetness.

“Holly Walters. Faulkner Gen-Mod would have made the booking,” she said, shoving her hand through her damp hair. Wet from the snow, it had already started to curl up thanks to the heat of the fire in the lobby.

“Oh, yes... here we go. Oh, you’re our new keeper? Pippa will be *so* pleased. The herd have been fractious since Alison left on maternity leave. They don’t like change, you know, not this close to Christmas.”

“Uh-huh, yes,” she replied as he set about booking her in, his fingers quick over the keyboard. “New keeper.”

Of reindeer. She suppressed her sigh. What did she know about reindeer? Sweet freaking nothing. She was a predatory-species specialist; what she knew about herd species could be printed on the back of a stamp. As long as it was a very small one.

“I’ve put you in room seventeen,” Robert offered her a keycard. “It’s one of our quietest rooms... but not much of a view of the town. I can move you if you prefer?”

She caught his hopeful look. The one that said, “Please be a nice lady and stay where I’ve put you.” Not a surprise; the hotel was probably full since it was only a few days before Christmas.

She took the card with a bright smile.

“You know what? I have plenty of work to do monitoring the herd, so quiet is perfect.”

As she turned, a small, blonde-haired whirlwind swept through the door. She stopped in the middle of reception and gave Holly a pleading look.

“Please... please tell me you’re our new keeper?”

“She sure is, Pippa!” Robert caroled in delight. “Just arrived. I checked her into room seventeen.”

“Oh, that’s excellent. Nice and quiet in there. I’m Pippa, the resort manager,” she introduced herself as she strode across reception, offering a tiny hand for Holly to shake. “You have *no* idea how much we’ve been looking forward to your arrival.”

Holly nodded as she shook hands. “So I hear. You’ve been having trouble with the herd? They’re a little fractious?”

Pippa nodded. “They’ve very much bonded with Alison, our full-time keeper. But she’s left for maternity leave and Gary... well, he loves the deer and all but they really run rings around him. And we only have a few days until the Christmas spectacular. The kids are going to expect to see Santa and his reindeer!”

Her heart sank. Gen-one mods that had bonded were always a pain in the ass to deal with. But... at least they weren’t likely to disembowel her. Herd animals she could deal with.

Plastering a bright smile on her face that she didn’t feel, she reassured the resort manager. “Don’t worry, I’m sure I can

get at least a partial bond with them and get them working as a team. Herd animals are creatures of routine. Once I get them settled back down into their regular routine, I'm sure everything will be fine. Do you need me to head up there now, get the lay of the land?"

Pippa checked the old-fashioned watch on her wrist. "No, they'll be bedded down for the night now. Best to start fresh in the morning. To be honest, we weren't expecting anyone from Faulkner until tomorrow anyway, but I'm glad you're early. So much to do before Christmas!"

Humans were so easy to track, it was almost laughable. As was how easy it had been for him to escape from the station in orbit. But then, the station *was* run by B’Kaar at the moment, who had little to no idea of how to keep an Izaean under lock and key.

K’laus paused at the top of the snowy slope and looked down at the little town in the valley below him. He’d spent the last few weeks in the medical bay on the station as they’d tried to bring his blood rage under control. He didn’t remember arriving there. All he remembered was blackness and rage... the need to tear everything around him apart to try and assuage the fury that pulsed through every cell of his being.

He’d managed to put enough of it together from the healer’s conversations to know what had happened. Shame rolled through him. He’d hurt people. His blood rage had spiraled out of control, and the healers on the station had been his last chance... if they hadn’t found a cure, his next stop would have been a march out into the deserts on *Parac’Norr* and a blaster shot to the back of the head. It would have been a mercy. No one wanted to live with blood rage, the curse that haunted their blood.

But it hadn’t come to that. They’d shot him up, and on day four he’d calmed down. Enough that he had long lucid periods. The lead healer had congratulated everyone on calming the feral beast. None of them had realized that his calmness had nothing to do with the medication and

everything to do with the little human female they'd put into the bed next to him.

He'd been full-on raging out when they'd wheeled her in, snarling and hurling himself at the forcefields one second... the next utterly focused on her. She was tiny and so beautiful it had made his heart and his body ache. He'd moved as close as he could, breathing her scent in and imprinting her on his memory.

She'd been injured, lying there like the dead, and for long hours, he'd thought he might lose her. So he'd stood vigil, watching the monitors for any sign of change, ready to alert the healers just in case.

Then... the next morning, she'd murmured softly in her sleep and woken. Her eyes were a warm brown that had transfixed him instantly, and that was it. Between one second and the next he'd become hers utterly, entirely, and for as long as he should draw breath in this existence.

As he learned, though, she was human, and far too precious to allow a ravening beast like him, *an Izaean*, near. But fortunately for them and everyone on the station, she wasn't there to be mated to any Latharian or B'Kaar warrior. Instead, she'd healed and yesterday, they'd let her go.

He'd broken himself out of sickbay an hour after she left. Some kind of disturbance in the civilian sector that was being constructed had taken the forcefields offline long enough for him to slip away unnoticed, but it had taken him nearly a full day to find her. Sure, he'd had to work out how to get off the *draanthing* station without tripping any alarms and, once he was on the surface, how to track his little human. His father had been a shadow, though, one of the empire's assassins capable of finding anyone, anywhere in the known galaxy. And he was his father's son through and through...

Christmas Falls.

He tilted his head. The settlement below him looked... different to the areas he'd traveled through to get here. But the protective dome probably meant this was some kind of conservation area. They'd had a few on his home planet, put in

place to protect a vulnerable species, either flora or fauna, so he understood the concept. The weather control in here was set to snow, so he assumed whatever was being protected needed a colder environment. It was colder than a human could stand but only a mild inconvenience to him as he trudged down the hill toward the buildings.

He picked the back of the biggest one to make his ingress into the settlement, all senses alert in case any of the humans spotted him. Dressed as he was, in a station jumpsuit, no one would mistake him for human. He reached the back of a bunch of outbuildings and skirted around them, sticking to the darkness still clinging to their walls. The sun was about to come up, and he needed a change of clothes quickly, so he could blend in. Fortunately, his appearance wasn't typically Latharian, his features broader and his pupils more rounded than most.

Salvation came in the form of an unlocked door. Pushing it open, he found a room with baskets filled with clothes. A smile spread over his face as he moved through the selections quickly. Not a lot would fit his larger-than-human frame but he found enough to clothe himself. No boots, though. He pulled the cuff of the strange pants down far enough to conceal the fact his weren't human attire. It would have to do.

The sun was peeking over the horizon as he made his way around the big building. It had to be some kind of central meeting place. The largest constructions in any settlement were usually a center of power, so he figured he would start there tracking his little human down.

“Hey!”

He ignored the voice calling out behind him as he skirted along the back of the building, hands in the pockets of the strange human jacket.

“Hey! Buddy! Are you the new guy? Jamie Kringle?”

That got his attention and he looked up. A human male was half hanging out of a door at the back of the building, a look of perpetual harassment on his face.

“Who’s asking?” he answered the question with one of his own. It was always the safest tactic in situations like this. Two things stood out immediately, though. One, the human hadn’t tagged him immediately as an alien, which was good and two, a “new guy” was due in, and no one knew what he looked like...

Which played into his favor, especially as he knew the weather outside this bio-dome was closing in. It was the reason he’d had to cross country on foot, rather than using other transport. All the routes in and out of the dome were sealed until the weather passed.

So no one was getting in or out, including this Jamie Kringle, whoever that was.

“Boss said you’d be showing up this morning.” The human leaned further out and threw something.

Automatically, K’laus snatched it out of the air. It looked like some kind of electronic tab.

“You need to get that.” He nodded toward an all-terrain vehicle parked nearby. “And collect a woman called Holly Walters from the front. Take her up to the deer stables on the east side. Apparently, she needs to study deer shit or something...”

“Yeah. No worries. On it,” K’laus said as he turned and headed for the vehicle. Thank the gods the healers had decided to screen human dramas in the station medical bay, for the “comfort of the human patients.” It had enabled him to pick up their language and speech patterns without a translator implant.

He smiled as he slid into the operator’s seat and, a second later, figured out how to turn the archaic machine on. An hour here and he’d already found his prey.

Things were looking up.



SHE HATED Christmas and Christmas Falls... and snow. Especially snow.

“Can’t they turn down the enviro-controls for just a little bit?” Holly complained under her breath, glancing out of the window as she left the hotel dining hall after breakfast.

Fresh snow had fallen overnight, so everything was pristine white—bright and blindingly perfect. She was not at all looking forward to getting out there and working in it. As far as she was concerned, snow only belonged on Christmas cards and the obligatory Christmas romance movie.

Instead of heading back upstairs, she hung a left to head out to the front of the hotel. The resort manager had dropped her a message last night to inform her that her ride up to the stables would be waiting outside for her by 8 a.m.

Thanks to the “excitement” of yesterday, she’d overslept and was running late, which meant she needed to get her ass out front so she didn’t miss her ride. Being late on her first day was such a no-no. She might not *want* to be here or to look after reindeer, but that didn’t mean she was going to be unprofessional about it.

But she could walk and talk. Hitting Dean’s number on her comm unit, she put it to her ear as she skirted through the main reception. She didn’t really want to talk to him, but she did need the company’s files on the gen-ones here—what their DNA build was and what techniques had been used to create them. She refused to go into a situation blindly, especially after Attila.

But reception was utter pandemonium. Somehow overnight, the holiday season had landed in Christmas Falls with a vengeance. Music blared out from hidden speakers, competing with the babbling geese noise of hordes of families waiting to check in. She narrowly avoided being flattened by two kids on out-of-control hover-cases and slipped outside just as a female voice answered the call.

“Dean’s phone!”

“Oh, Sophie...” Her thoughts froze for a moment, her brows crowding together. “Has Dean got his comm on forward to you? I hope he’s paying you extra for that.”

“Oh, yeah... totally,” the blonde PA trilled a quick laugh. “You know what he’s like, all work and no play and all that.”

“Yes, unfortunately I do.”

Holly’s reply was grim. Dean got so involved in his work at times that he forgot to eat or sleep... or visit the girlfriend who’d nearly been killed by one of the company’s experimental mods. She’d *told* him they shouldn’t boost Attila’s intelligence that far.

“So... how is Christmas Falls?” the other woman asked breathlessly, sounding a little distracted. Noises on the other end of the comm sounded very much like she was shoos someone out of the room.

Holly’s lips pursed in realization. She’d interrupted an early morning tryst by the sound of it, which was odd. Normally Sophie was in the office by half seven. Perhaps she had the day off?

She eyed the town laid out in front of her. It was like falling into a chocolate box painting.

“It’s... Christmassy, that’s for sure.”

“That’s so awesome! I’ve always wanted to go there. It looks amazing in the brochures!”

“Awesome, yes... that’s one way to put it,” she replied, not wanting to burst the girl’s bubble. It wasn’t her fault Holly didn’t like Christmas because of too many bad memories.

“When you see Dean, could you let him know I need the files on the resort’s gen-ones sent over. I’m about to head up and check on the subjects here for my initial assessment, and I could do with that information.”

“Of course, Holly, as soon... as...” Her sentence broke up, and Holly could hear the giggle in her voice.

“Look,” she said quickly. “You’re obviously on your day off. I’ll just drop him a message. You enjoy the rest of your

day!”

With that, she ended the call and immediately dialed her bestie Audrey, who answered straight away.

“Hey, girl! How’s hell on earth?”

Holly groaned. At last, someone understood her dislike of all things Christmas. “Hell. Utter hell. Minus the fire and brimstone. Instead, it’s carols on loop and bloody frostbite!”

“I cannot believe asshole-in-chief sent you there,” Audrey sniped. To say she didn’t like Dean was an understatement. Then she heavy-breathed down the line for a second.

Holly grinned, knowing her friend had her comm tucked under her chin as she multi-tasked. She was always on the go, working two jobs that Holly knew of to make ends meet—a feat made more difficult when her sister needed such complex and expensive medical care.

“Yeah, well... this new lead scientist got the plum job, and I got stuck with frigging reindeer. What do I know about reindeer?”

“Well... how about their names?” Audrey suggested.

“Sorry?” Holly asked as she headed down the steps toward the turning circle for vehicles in front of the hotel. It was just past eight, so her ride should be here soon.

“I don’t know what they’re called. I haven’t received the files yet. Usually, they just get subject names. Unless the keeper named them... What?” she asked as Audrey broke into laughter.

“The reindeer! Everyone knows their names... Dasher, Prancer, Donner, Blitzen...”

Holly groaned. “I walked right into that one. Oh my freaking god...”

“What?”

She stopped right in the middle of the walkway, her gaze riveted onto a scene a few feet away. A vehicle had broken

down, and a guy stripped down to a sleeveless vest was in the middle of manhandling a spare tire into place.

“*Muscles*,” she managed, whispering down the comm.

“Muscles?” Audrey sounded perplexed. “No, I don’t think that’s one of the reindeer names. Not that I’ve ever heard of anyway.”

“*No*,” Holly breathed down the comm. “*Hot guy with muscles. He’s changing a tire and he’s a ten... no, he’s a freaking twenty.*”

Audrey whistled. “A twenty... from Miss I don’t notice thirst-traps herself? Who is this paragon of sexiness?”

“*I don’t know*,” she whispered, trying to look nonchalant while ogling at the same time. It totally paid off when the hottie in the sleeveless vest squatted to get the tire in place, his biceps bulging. It was whimper-inducing. “*He’s wearing work coveralls, so I think he works here.*”

At that her good mood took a nose-dive. Working here and looking like that? He was going to be a target for all the bored wives of wealthy tourists who’d come here to show off on the slopes on the other side of the resort.

It didn’t stop her from watching him out of the corner of her eye as he tightened the nuts holding the replacement wheel in place. He must have sensed her attention because he looked her way curiously.

She snapped her eyes to the front, staring at her personal access unit like it held the secrets of life. From just that glimpse, though, he looked familiar. Very familiar. She just couldn’t place him...

Where on earth did she know him from?

A vehicle was in his way when he rounded the end of the building, ready to drive up to the front doors of the hotel and pick up his little mate. K'laus frowned and leaned out the window. Why stop right there in the middle of the single-track road?

When the engine of the little all-terrain sounded again, more of a whine than a rumble, he had his answer. The back wheel had blown its tire, the rubber flapping around uselessly under the snow chains.

“Hey! Hold on!” he called out, hopping out of his own vehicle and heading over. A quick glance confirmed that no one was standing at the front of the hotel waiting for him, so he focused on the other vehicle.

He reached the window to find an elderly lady, her lips compressed into a thin line as she tried to marshal the recalcitrant vehicle into compliance. It just whined again, the drive train not able to get purchase with the back wheel out. She looked up as he knocked on the window.

“You have a tire out at the back,” he told her. “Do you have a spare? I can put it on for you if you do.”

“Oh! Would you? That would be so kind of you, if you didn't mind?” she asked with a bright smile.

“Not at all.” He smiled back. Humans were still odd looking to him, so tiny and fragile, even the males, but he was starting to get used to being around them. And his Holly was

perfect, with her dark hair and eyes. “Do you want to show me where the spare is?”

“Of course, just give me a moment.” The human woman turned to a smaller human in the passenger seat next to her. “See Leo? We have our very own Christmas angel!”

“Really?” the smaller human bounced up to look at K’laus, his bright blue eyes shining. He’d literally never seen a human so small... then realized it was a child.

“He doesn’t look much like an angel,” Leo complained, looking sideways at the female. They had similar features, so she was probably an older relative. “He looks kind of like uncle Shane. Doesn’t he, Grandma?”

Okay, that answered the question of the familial relationship. K’laus stood back as the female turned the vehicle off and opened the door.

“He does, yes, a little. You sit still while I help Mr...” she asked, looking at him curiously.

“Jamie Kringle,” he supplied promptly, only for her eyes to widen.

“Oh my, *you’re* Kris Kringle’s grandson? My, my... you certainly grew up!”

For a moment he froze, certain he’d *draan* things up already. High-level tech was banned in Christmas Falls in order to protect the ambiance and olde worlde feel of the resort, which meant no bio or DNA scans, so he couldn’t be caught out that way. But if this female actually *knew* the human he was pretending to be...

“Up and out,” she continued, apparently not needing any input from him into the conversation. He reached out a hand automatically to help her down from the vehicle and to get her footing on the slippery snow. “I haven’t seen you since you were a teen. Your grandfather said you joined the army, though. He’s *so* proud of you.”

Okay, that wasn’t so bad. If no one here had seen the real Jamie Kringle since he was a teenager, all he had to do was

avoid the grandfather long enough to grab his mate and get out of here.

“I...” he looked down at himself and then grinned as he followed her to the back of the vehicle. “Yeah, good food and exercise and all that.”

“Does a body good. That’s what I always say. Spare’s in here,” she said, popping the back hatch on the vehicle. As it lifted, she leaned in, giving a meaningful nod toward the front of the vehicle. “You’ll have to forgive Leo. We lost Shane in the Edanian Conflict a few years ago. Leo idolized his uncle and it’s been really hard for him. We’re not even sure he realizes that Shane’s not coming home.”

K’laus inclined his head. He might not be human, but loss was universal. “I’ve lost many of my brothers in battle,” he said in a low voice. “So I know how he feels. Sometimes it’s like they’re just in the next room and they’ll walk through the door in a moment. Or they’re coming back on the next combat shuttle. It takes time, and some need longer than others.”

“Oh, you are a good boy.” She smiled and stepped back to allow him to lift both the spare wheel and the toolkit from its storage space. “I’m Miriam... Miriam Skeldon,” she added. “You remember, Skeldon’s Tree Farm back out past the slopes?”

“Ahh! Yes, of course... Are you sure Leo is your grandson? You don’t look old enough to be a grandmother!”

The distraction was offered with a charming smile, so she didn’t focus on the fact “Jamie Kringle” obviously didn’t remember her.

“Oh my, you are a heartbreaker, and that’s for sure!” she caroled with laughter. “Yes, he’s my grandson. Now, get away with you, flatterer!”

He chuckled as he set to work. It didn’t take him long to figure out the toolkit or the way the wheel attached to the vehicle, and he fell into the familiar routines of vehicle repair and maintenance.

Before he'd tested positive for the Izaean DNA mutation, he'd lived on a little backwater planet not that different from Christmas Falls with rudimentary tech and farms all around. He'd learned to maintain machinery at his father's side almost before he could walk and he still did so on *Parac'Norr*. Even rage-filled berserkers needed vehicle techs.

Before long, though, he had to strip his coveralls to the waist, leaving him with just a thin outer layer on his torso. It was cold here and all the humans were bundled up, but he was made of sterner stuff. Compared to back home and the ice mountains of the Izaean world, this morning's weather was mild and warm. He didn't want to sweat and stink up the clothes he was going to be wearing all day.

Just as he was strong-arming the new wheel into place, a prickle at the back of his neck warned him he was being watched. Glancing quickly over his shoulder, he scanned the area, his attention snagging on the slender figure of a female less than a hundred feet away.

Holly Walters.

She yanked her attention away from him, even though he knew she'd been staring, and focused on the comm device in her hand. He grinned as he clocked the bright wash of color on her cheeks. His little female had totally been checking him out.

The smile stayed as he fixed the wheel into place and tightened the nuts, careful not to tighten them beyond the machine's tolerance. He was *much* stronger than a human, and if he sheered metal with his hands, someone, somewhere was going to start asking questions.

"That should do it," he called out to Miriam as he rolled the flat tire to the back and reloaded it and the toolkit into the storage compartment. "Do you want to give it a go now?"

The engine of the vehicle purred to life, and as he watched, it crawled forward a few feet, the snow chains he'd replaced on the wheel biting into the freshly fallen snow.

Miriam leaned out the window and waved. “All good now, thank you! And tell your grandfather I said hi!”

“Will do!” He waved as she and Leo drove off. Then he turned his attention to Holly, who was doing her level best not to notice him. Grabbing his jacket from where he’d hooked it on a nearby bench, he walked toward her.

“Miss Walters?” he called out, needing her to look up and see him, really *see* him. “Are you Miss Walters? Due to head up to the deer stables today?”



OH MY GOD, the hottie was walking toward her.

For a moment Holly’s brain locked, all her attention on how damn *hot* the guy was. He strolled toward her with a loose-hipped walk that shouldn’t be physically possible on the icy surface. Not when everyone else, including her, had to imitate penguins and waddle or else end up on their asses.

No, it wasn’t a walk... it was a stalk. For a moment she felt like prey being eyed up. Her breathing caught, panic flooding her body as she remembered those final moments before Attila attacked.

She sucked her breath in and forced steel in her spine as she fixed him with a hard look.

“It’s *Doctor* Walters, actually,” she told him coolly, in a voice that thankfully didn’t shake. “Are you my ride up to the stables?”

Her icy manner slid off him like water off a duck’s back. He smiled, the expression transforming his features from merely handsome to panty-wetingly devastating.

“I am indeed. I’m Jamie Krin—”

Before he could finish the sentence, the sound of an engine screaming and brakes squealing made them both turn around. Her eyes widened in horror as an expensive sports car skidded sideways as it entered the semi-circle in front of the hotel. She

couldn't move. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion as the driver lost control for a second and then the back end fishtailed. The back wheel caught the melting snow, spraying it up in a white, sludgy arc... right toward her.

She squealed, the sound cut off as she was hit by something large and warm. Strong arms wrapped around her as Jamie yanked her up and out of the way. She clung to him, twisting to watch the snow splatter over where she'd been a moment before.

"I'd have been soaked..." she breathed, turning to look up at him.

He smiled. "Then it's a good thing I was here to rescue you. Gotta help out the city folk. You'd never survive out here otherwise."

It was already frigid out here but her mood dropped to absolute zero. He thought *she* was a city girl who couldn't survive outside the city? She'd trekked across the Sahara, through what remained of the amazon jungle, and navigated the many wastelands of the planet in order to further her research. Sure, none of them had been frozen vistas like Christmas Falls, but she was in no way, shape or form, a helpless "city girl."

She extricated herself from his arms as quickly as she could and took a step back, readjusting her bag over her shoulder.

"City, huh? I'll be sure to tell the next expedition team I work with that I need extra looking after," she threw back, lifting her chin to show him she really didn't care what he thought of her. "I'm sure that won't bother them at all, given that I lead those expeditions. And," she added, needled beyond belief that he thought she was a "city girl," "put a damned shirt on for heaven's sake! It's bloody freezing out here. I wouldn't want you to catch a cold driving me up to the stables."

With that, she swept past him, climbing up into the only other vehicle standing on the semi-circle and settling herself into the back seat. Yanking open her bag, she pulled her data-tablet free to review the files Sophie had just pinged to her.

Surprise filled her as she opened the first. The deer were gen-ones, among the company's first lines and long since discontinued. She hadn't realized any gen-ones remained alive, which meant these deer had to be well over twenty-five years old. Which was—she checked quickly—well over the natural age for deer in either the wild or in captivity.

The vehicle shifted as her driver climbed in. She cast him a look from under her lashes. He was huge, not just tall but built on bigger lines, and he was perfectly built. She might not specialize in human modification, mainly because it was illegal everywhere but the Edanian worlds. Actually, it was illegal there as well, but they'd cut themselves off from the rest of the Terran systems. Even so, she could appreciate the man's fine build, indicating impeccable DNA.

Shaking her head at her fanciful thoughts, she let him do the driving while she read up on her new hooved charges.

Holly didn't speak to him all the way up to the stables. K'laus kicked himself. He shouldn't have made that comment about city-types, but to be fair, she did look like a stiff breeze would blow her over. How was he to know she was some kind of survivalist expedition leader? Something he didn't approve of. Expeditions of any kind were dangerous, and these humans let their precious females just wander off on them, regardless of the risk?

Not able to do anything about that now, he concentrated on driving. At first, he'd had been a little worried that he wouldn't know which way to go, and thus out himself as not being who he said he was, but as soon as they pulled out of the turning circle in front of the hotel, the cheery sign in front of them had "to the reindeer" right there in front of them.

As they drove, he watched her circumspectly through the rear-view mirror, but she hadn't once looked up. All her attention was on the device in front of her, a human version of a Latharian dataflex, but he didn't mind that. It meant he got to study her without her being aware of it. He had managed to do that while she'd been in the *Devan'kra* medical bay, but she'd been unconscious while she healed. He'd memorized her beautiful features while they'd been still and unanimated, unlike now. Even at "rest" her features were constantly changing. It was fascinating, and he was enthralled.

She nibbled her lower lip in the most adorable way, her eyebrows wrinkled together as she concentrated. And she read

silently to herself, her lips forming the words on the screen in front of her. Fortunately, he could lipread.

“...Cervid species... large herd animal...reach speeds of up to thirty-six miles per hour... males and females grow antlers...”

He frowned. She was supposed to be the deer-keeper, but it had sounded very much like she was brushing up on them before she arrived. Before he had chance to ask, though, they arrived and she clambered out of the vehicle.

“I’ll pick you up later?” He threw the vehicle into park and almost fell out of it as he made to follow her.

She looked over her shoulder, offering a tight smile, but already someone was striding out from the stables to greet her. His hackles rose at the presence of a human male, the rage within him demanding he storm over there and remove the male’s head from his neck. Only the fact that her body language changed had stopped him. After a brief handshake, she stepped back away from the other male, her manner and bearing entirely professional.

K’laus watched as they began to walk back to the stables, effectively dismissing him. He had no reason to follow them, so he returned to the vehicle, watching to see if Holly would look back before they entered the stables and disappeared from view.

Then as the male opened the door for her and just before she stepped inside, she glanced back. At him. A grin spread over K’laus’s lips as he started the engine again and turned the vehicle back toward the town.

She might not like him much, for reasons he couldn’t figure out just yet, but she *had* noticed him.

It was a start, and a start was all he needed.

It didn’t take him long to get back to the hotel. After he’d parked the vehicle back where he’d found it, his supervisor, Karl, found many other tasks that needed to be completed, which took him all day. When he asked about collecting Holly from the stables, he was told it had been taken care of and

handed another list of tasks to complete. The sky was dark by the time he'd completed them all and made his way into the hotel itself.

It was decorated for the human midwinter holiday Christmas. He found himself looking around in wonder. He'd never seen so many bright decorations in one place. Or decorations so shiny. They'd celebrated midwinter back on the planet he'd grown up on, but it had been nothing like this.

The day had been one like any other, with fields and livestock to tend, but they'd had a midwinter log on the fire, cut from the *vistas* tree, and a huge feast in the village's long-hall. It was a time of celebration and a reminder that family and community were the lights that would bring them through the harshness of winter.

Humans, though, took midwinter to a different level. They appeared to worship a fat male in a red suit, obviously some kind of god, and offered him presents that he took away in his sack. Quite how this god managed to visit every household on the planet to collect his tithe wasn't clear, but by the looks of it, it had something to do with the reindeer. And a "nice" list...

Shaking his head, he turned to find himself pinned by the megawatt smile of a human female with pale hair and lips outlined in blood red. He froze, feeling like he was staring down a *kronestrag*, a vicious predator on his home planet that tracked its prey relentlessly.

"Well, hello!" she trilled, tottering toward him in a pair of sparkling red high heels. "You must be Jamie Kringle? Robert said you'd be arriving today."

"He did?" he had no idea who Robert was, but rolling with it seemed the best option.

"Absolutely, and I offered to welcome you. I'm Maxine." She smiled up at him as she linked her arm with his. "We're like a big, happy family here at Pine Lodge, so I'm like your new best friend! Now, I've put you in room thirty-four, one of the better staff quarters."

She stopped and looked around him. “Did you already bring your bags in?”

He shook his head, trying to figure out how to extricate himself from her clutches without offering offense, but she had a death grip on his arm.

“No, we parted ways during transit,” he explained smoothly, thanking those endless human dramas again. “Apparently the company will send them by courier when they arrive.”

“Oh! No worries at all.” She beamed, walking him through the main reception hall. Holiday-makers thronged the area, all talking at the same time. He was forced to stop a couple of times as small children stepped or ran right in front of him. “You’ll have a credit line at several outlets in the resort, which it should be enough to get you sorted until your luggage arrives.”

She smiled again as they stepped into one of the elevators, putting a hand out to stop a couple of holiday-makers from joining them.

“So sorry, this elevator is malfunctioning,” she said with a broad, professional smile, teeth still very much in evidence. He was surprised the tourists didn’t recognize she was a predator and run in panic. “Please head on over to the other side of reception. Those elevators are working just fine.”

The other humans thanked her and then turned and headed the other way. As the doors shut, he slid her a sideways glance.

“This elevator is malfunctioning?”

If so, why the hell were they in it?

“Oh no!” She gave out an ear-assaulting tinkling laugh. “Don’t worry; we’re perfectly safe. I just didn’t want to be trapped in here with chattering guests. They never fucking shut up.”

If he didn’t have such a good poker face, his eyebrow would have waged war on his hairline.

“Besides...” She giggled and cuddled closer to him. “We’re just getting to know each other, and we really don’t want anything to get in the way of that. Do we?”

“Err... no?” Even to his ears, he didn’t sound convinced. Just being this close to her, having her touch him, made him feel slightly nauseated. The only female he wanted touching him was Holly.

Plus, he was fairly sure Maxine had cut the circulation off to his arm by now, and he managed to snatch it back as the elevator stopped and they stepped out on what must be the staff level.

“I’ve put you just down here,” she said, wiggling down the corridor in a manner that involved way more hip action than it should. Perhaps she was struggling to balance on those ridiculous heels. But then she cast him a sultry look as she waved the keycard over the panel.

“I’m just down the hall,” she breathed in a husky voice. “Perfect for... a little midnight assignation.”

“I’m married,” he told her bluntly. He wasn’t, not yet, but he might as well be. Holly Walters was the only female he was interested in ever since the first moment he’d breathed in her scent.

“Oh!” Her eyes narrowed, and her movements paused. Her gaze dropped to his hand. “You don’t wear a wedding ring.”

He shrugged, ignoring the accusatory tone. “Gets caught when I’m working, so I don’t wear it all the time.”

In a neat bit of footwork his old close-quarters battle tutor would have praised, he managed to get himself on the right side of the door, with her on the other side. “Thank you for showing me to my room, Maxine. I wouldn’t want to keep you from your duties,” he said shortly and closed the door in her face.

He leaned against it, closing his eyes and feeling the frustration from the female on the other side. Eventually, he heard her stamp her foot and storm off, leaving him alone, thank the gods.

Giving a shudder, he looked around the small room. It had little more than a bed, a small desk and a rail on the wall to hang his clothes. A door led to a small bathroom. He eyed the shower, wondering if he'd even fit in there.

Shaking his shoulders, he turned around and left the room, pocketing his keycard. He'd need to get down into the town and secure some clothing and other necessities if he was going to blend in here. And something to eat wouldn't go amiss. His stomach was growling like a *deearin*.

And, if he was lucky, he might run into Holly again...



THEY ARRIVED at the most picturesque stables set on a snow hillside that Holly had ever seen. Seriously, it was like she'd climbed right inside a Christmas romance film or something. Her gaze cut to the very handsome driver.

Apart from the fact the hero was a jumped-up, arrogant asshole who seemed to think she was a city girl and couldn't find her way out of a paper bag. Actually no, that was *straight* out of a damn Christmas romance movie.

Stuffing all her notes back into her bag, she clambered out of the vehicle and dropped the half foot or so into the snow. And sank to mid-calf. Great. Just bloody great. She was used to places like the reconstructed African savanna, not the artic.

"I'll pick you up later?" Jamie said as he climbed out of the driver's side of the vehicle.

She looked over her shoulder and offered a small, nondescript smile. But then her attention was taken up by someone striding out from the stables to greet her.

She squared her shoulders, hoping that her nerves about dealing with deer weren't written all over her face, and walked toward him. She was as ready as she'd ever be to deal with a herd of prey animals.

"Hey!" the guy in front of her called out. He was probably in his early twenties with a rangy build and a crop of bright

copper hair. His blue eyes were friendly as he reached her and offered a hand.

“You must be Doctor Walters? I’m Gary, assistant keeper here. Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she replied, giving him a professional smile and shaking his hand firmly before stepping back. “How are things here? I was told the herd has reacted badly to the loss of your lead keeper?”

Gary nodded as they began to walk back to the stables. With every step she could feel the driver’s eyes on them, like an itch between her shoulder blades.

“They have, yes. They’re creatures of habit, and they really don’t like their routines messed with. Jingle in particular has taken Alison’s absence hard. But... she worked as long as she could and with the babies needing extra care in-vitro...”

“Oh, yes. Of course.” Holly nodded. She’d read the file notes. Alison Bancroft’s was a high-risk pregnancy and the decision had been made to admit her into the hospital to ensure the safety of both mother and the twins she carried.

“I’m sure the decision wasn’t made lightly. We just need to get the herd back on an even keel now. Do you want to give me a rundown of the current situation and their daily routine?”

Gary beamed and started talking, his face and hands animated. Holly kept half her attention on him, absorbing all the information he was imparting with practiced efficiency. But that didn’t stop her turning to look over her shoulder just as they reached the door to the barn.

Jamie was still there, watching her. She shivered at the look on his face, somewhere between ruthlessness and desire. He was a dangerous one, very dangerous indeed. It was a good thing she was immune to handsome men and their charms. As sexy as Jamie was... she would not fall prey to him, or whatever intentions he had.

Half an hour later found her with a pitchfork in hand, literally shoveling shit.

“You know, it amazes me how gorgeous creatures like you can produce so much shit,” she said, using a shoulder against Jingle’s heavily furred rear end to make the big reindeer shift his weight onto the other foot.

From Gary’s rundown, she knew they were mucked out each and every day, but there seemed to be at least a week’s worth of shit in here.

Jingle chuffed, looking over his shoulder with amusement in his beautiful eyes. She was used to dealing with gen-modded animals, who were often way more intelligent than their natural counterparts, but this herd was first generation so she hadn’t expected much from them. She’d been surprised by the depth of intelligence in their eyes as she’d greeted each of them in turn. Her heart had been instantly stolen by their velvety noses and curious natures.

They might be gen-ones but whoever had worked on them had *really* known their stuff. The eight members of the herd were delightful with their own, very distinct personalities and were very keen to follow instruction. Mostly.

Right now, Jingle was mostly just getting in her way as she mucked out his stall.

“I know what you’re doing.” She chuckled as she stopped *again* to give him pets.

“This is what you’re after. Isn’t it, handsome?” she murmured as she stroked his muzzle.

He just flicked an ear at her in answer. She shook her head and gave him a few more minutes, leaning against his heavily furred shoulder. “You are such a handsome boy.”

She lost herself in the touch, needing it just as much as the animal in front of her did. Stroking pets, not that the reindeer could really be considered “pets,” was proven to reduce stress and anxiety in humans, and heavens knew, she needed a bit of stress relief after the last few weeks.

As her fingers smoothed over the soft fur of Jingle’s ear, she allowed her thoughts to wander. And they wandered their happy way right back to her sexy driver of earlier. Again.

Sure, she'd allowed herself a few thoughts of Jamie and his ridiculously sexy biceps... or the tight ass he had in those jeans. She thought she'd done really well, and a girl was allowed a *few* thoughts about a sexy guy. Right?

But... she had work to do, which didn't include drooling over a guy who probably spent most of his nights in the beds of the lodge's female guests. She wasn't built for casual, no way, no how. Which made it all the more surprising she'd been with Dean for so long. He'd never given her any confirmation that their relationship was actually *going* anywhere. But that was all in the past now and good riddance. She felt lighter than she had for months.

She sighed and gave Jingle another pet before standing upright and attacking the mucking out with more vigor.

She *still* couldn't get a hold of Dean. He hadn't replied to any of her emails. She knew there was an issue with comms getting through due to the weather, but still...

"Okay, sunshine, you're all done and clean." She smiled at Jingle as she slipped from his stall and made her way to the next one.

After her initial meeting with the herd, she'd checked over their records, finding to her pleasure that the previous keeper had kept meticulous records. All the herd were in excellent health and seemed well-adjusted with none of the instability that often showed up in the gen-ones.

She was relieved at that. After even just a little time in their company she'd fallen *hard* for the herd.

"Okay, Snowy, your turn," she said, her voice chirpy as she turned the corner to the next stall. Only to find it empty.

"Shit."

She yanked the door open to confirm that, yes, Snowy was indeed gone. Her heartrate skyrocketed as she whirled to scan the barn. Where had he gone? She couldn't see hide nor hair of him, which worried her more than if she'd been looking after a predator she couldn't see. A predator would attack... but a prey animal hid when they were hurt or sick.

“*Nononono*,” she moaned, racing to the door to check it was still locked. She refused to lose a reindeer. Not on her watch.

“Gary!” she called out, trying not to let panic fill her voice. “Snowy’s stall is empty!”

The assistant keeper popped his head up, a bright copper flag above the wall of Ivy’s stall. “Oh, he’s always doing this. Check the feed store. He’s an absolute pig. Just a belly on legs.”

“On it!”

She turned and headed down the side of the stalls to the feed area at the end of the barn. Less than halfway, her panic dissolved into amusement as she spotted the big, hairy butt sticking out of the door.

“Seriously, Snowy?” she demanded, her hands on her hips. “You get yourself out here, right now!”

The reindeer shuffled backward and turned. She burst into laughter. He was still eating, his cheeks filled with munched up carrots like a huge hamster.

“Hungry, huh?” she asked, shaking her head. He was more akin to a mischievous toddler than being a serious problem.

“Come on,” she ordered. “Let’s get you back in your stall before you start looking like a carrot!”

Later that evening, Holly left the hotel restaurant feeling full and content. Good food and the long, hot bath she'd had as soon as she got in to warm up after being out in the cold all day had done wonders for her mood.

She slipped her jacket on as she headed out of reception and into the cold of the night. She'd been meaning to head down into town after dinner anyway to do a little shopping. It *was* only a few days to Christmas after all, and she still needed to shop for Audrey's present.

Stepping out of the front door of the hotel, she turned her collar up and started to walk down the road. It had been a long day but a good one—surprisingly good, actually. She hadn't expected to like working with the reindeer quite so much, and Gary was lovely to work with. He obviously cared about the herd so much, and they him. The problem was, they didn't listen to him at *all*.

It didn't take her long to get down to the center of town, and somewhere between the hotel and the main street, she seemed to have gone back in time. The streets closed in, buildings rising high either side of her, and the bow windows of the shops lit up with their tantalizing displays. With cobbles under her feet and the carol-singers in Victorian costume by the bandstand in the middle of the town square ahead, she felt like she'd gone back in time.

"Bloody Christmas everywhere," she grouched, but her voice didn't have quite as much venom behind it as before.

Maybe that was to do with the fact that everywhere she looked, people had broad smiles. The place exuded happiness and anticipation—community spirit—in a way she'd rarely seen before.

“Hot chocolate first,” she decided. Hot chocolate was one Christmas tradition she could get behind. “Then shopping.”

She raised on her tiptoes to look along the street and see if she could spot the source of the wonderful chocolate smell that was wafting through the air.

A chattering family coming the other way made her step to the side. An icy drip down the back of her neck made her look up sharply to see a snowdrift just about to separate itself from the canopy above her.

She squeaked and screwed her eyes tightly shut as she tried to duck to the side, waiting for the snow to hit. No way would she be able to get out of the way in time. She just wasn't fast enough.

But before the snow could hit, a pair of strong arms wrapped around her, and she found herself tucked against a broad chest. She heard a *whhumppff* as the snow cascaded all around them, but sheltered by a larger body, she didn't get covered.

“This is becoming a habit,” a deep voice rumbled and she looked up into a pair of familiar blue eyes.

Jamie. He'd rescued her. *Again.*

“Hey,” she breathed, feeling safe nestled against his broad chest. Most of the snow seemed to have hit his shoulders, leaving a shimmering layer that sparkled.

“Oh my god, you could have gotten hurt,” she gasped, reaching up to brush the snow off his shoulders. “Or soaked! Are you okay?”

His lips quirked as he set her on her feet and shook off the remainder of the snow. It piled around their feet in little snowdrifts.

“I’m fine. It would take more than a little snow to bother me.” He frowned as he looked up, his jaw tightening. “They need to check the environmental controls on the dome. Some of this stuff is melting, which is making it slip... if it hits someone, it could cause a serious injury.”

“I’ll call it in immediately,” the shopkeeper, who had emerged when the snow had fallen, said quickly. He looked them over in concern. “Are you both okay?”

“We’re fine,” Jamie assured him, sliding an arm around her. “It was just a little snow. None of it hit you. Did it?”

She shook her head at his question, amazed that he’d gotten to her so quickly. She hadn’t even seen him on the street. “Hey! Are you stalking me?”

“What?” He looked down at her in surprise. “No, of course not. My luggage didn’t arrive, so I was just grabbing some supplies to tide me over.”

Color hit her cheeks as he motioned toward a couple of bags, emblazoned with the logos of local shops, that had looked like they’d been thrown aside.

“Oh my, your things!”

Darting forward, she scooped them up, but thankfully, none of the contents were wet. Holding them out, she offered a smile.

“No harm done, and thank you for saving me again. Would you... I don’t suppose...” she stop-started, feeling embarrassed. All he’d done was rescue her, *twice*, and she’d accused him of being a stalker.

“Would I what?” he asked, taking the bags from her. The slight brush of their fingers made her shiver.

She lifted her chin, ignoring the heat in her cheeks. “I don’t suppose you’d like to have a hot chocolate with me. Would you? To say thank you?”



“How can you *never* have had hot chocolate before? Growing up in a place like this?” Holly asked him, her

beautiful face upturned as she walked by his side, mug of steaming hot chocolate held in both her hands.

K'laus shrugged, his own mug held in one hand as he held the other arm out to support her if she slipped on the snow underfoot. It was a real risk if the dome temperatures were beginning to fluctuate. But so far, it seemed only the snow on that one canopy had melted and slipped.

“It’s like anything really, if it’s your norm, it doesn’t seem special. Does that make sense?” he asked, glancing down at her.

He was totally winging it. The only parallel he could think of was the awe Latharian warriors had displayed at his battle prowess... but among Izaeans he was nothing special. They all had blood rage, the ability to tap into that primal fury and use it in battle. His was just a little more... extreme than most.

But revealing the fact he was an alien to her was so not on the agenda. She thought he was Jamie Kringle, born and bred right here in Christmas Falls and for now, that was the way it was going to stay.

“Oh, absolutely. But it’s nice, being your first...” she said with a small, teasing little smile.

He shot her a sharp look, managing not to choke on the sip of hot chocolate he’d just taken. Had he imagined the double meaning there? She seemed entirely too wholesome and professional for something like that.

But no, the little smile that curved her lips said he absolutely had not imagined it. He swallowed the burning mouthful of sweet liquid and cream, managing not to splutter and spray it everywhere as heat hit him broadside. She’d be his first in more ways than just the hot chocolate. He wasn’t innocent, but she’d be his first human. And his last anything, if he got his way...

He saw a smile in her eyes as she lifted her mug and took a prim little sip from it. The teasing little witch. He managed not to growl at her, resisting the temptation to crowd her into a

closed shop doorway and find out what hot chocolate tasted like directly from her lips.

“You have a little... something...” she said, lifting a hand to indicate her mouth. He knew he had cream on his lip, but didn’t make a move to wipe it away. Instead, he looked at her, his expression deliberately clueless. Would she touch him voluntarily?

His breathing caught as she reached up, her voice a soft murmur.

“Here, let me.”

Her touch was soft and delicate. And seared him down to the bone. He’d held her in his arms, twice now, but this was the first time she’d touched him. The first time she’d initiated contact. He watched her, enthralled as she smiled.

“All gone.”

Then she licked the cream off her finger in a brief flash of a pink tongue that forced a groan from the center of his chest. If they were anywhere but here... if he wasn’t pretending to be a nice, *safe* human male, he’d already have had her under him, screaming his name as he claimed her.

But they *were* here, and he was pretending to be a human, so he had to play nice. For now.

“Tease,” he gave her a warm smile but kept his predatory instincts in check.

Safety was the key. He needed her to see him as safe and give her a chance to get to know the real him before he revealed himself as an alien. Not just an alien, but an Izaean, the worst possible incarnation of Lathar humanity would ever come across—a beast filled with blood rage capable of taking on and destroying entire armies... yet who would never harm a hair on her head.

“Maybe,” she shot back. “You seem to like it, though.”

“Oh, I do. I like you too, a lot. Have you been a deer-keeper for long?” he asked, deliberately changing the subject

to safer topics. He didn't want a one-night thing. He was playing for keeps and mating marks around his wrists.

That was the only thing that would save him when they found out he was missing. Given his preoccupation with the little human female in the next bed to his, it wouldn't take the healers long to work out where he'd likely gone. But his own fate was an abstract concept. If she rejected him, his life was over anyway. He knew the rage in his blood would never stand for them taking her away. They'd have to terminate him, for the safety of everyone around him.

A strange expression crossed her face at his question.

"Can I tell you a secret?" she asked as they found an empty table in the middle of the town square. Undercover, there were patio heaters to stop the humans freezing to death, and no snow had collected on the little benches.

"Of course," he said, holding a hand out to help her take a seat.

"You have such old-world manners. It's delightful." She smiled up at him as she sat and he settled in opposite her. "Okay, so time to fess up. I'm not actually a deer-keeper. I *am* a gen-mod specialist, but I focus mostly on predatory species not herd animals like deer."

That explained why she'd been on the space station with such severe injuries. But of course, he couldn't ask about that. Not without revealing who and what he was.

"Oh? So how'd you end up here in Christmas Falls?" he asked, taking another swallow of his hot chocolate. It reminded him of Latharian field cake, but in liquid form. Perhaps this was the version humanity used for its warriors? "Did you decide on a change of field?"

Her lips pursed as she shook her head. "No. I... had an accident so I was off work for a while. This was the only job available when I got back."

Her words were tight and her expression closed off, anger well-hidden in the backs of her eyes. Something had happened, that was for sure. What, though, he wasn't sure.

“I hope it wasn’t a bad accident,” he replied, watching her carefully without seeming to do so.

The last thing he wanted was for her to think he was an obsessive creep, even if he was obsessed with her. He’d quickly gleaned from the human shows he’d watched that being labeled obsessive creep was a *bad* thing. The problem was that obsessive was the very core of a Latharian who had found his fated mate.

“Are you fully recovered now?”

He knew she was. No way would the lead healer on the base have let her go if she wasn’t. Plus, he’d managed to get a look at her bed’s medical readouts before she’d been discharged. She was probably in better health after a stay on the *Devan’kra* than she had been for years before it.

“Yes. I am. Thank you for asking.” She smiled at him over the rim of her mug, and he was lost in the sparkle of her dark eyes. An image hit him of her smiling at him in the morning, her hair mussed from sleep. A savage ache hit him to make that fantasy a reality. And soon.

“Can I ask what happened?” he pressed her a little, hoping that she’d open up. “If you deal with predators on a day-to-day basis... that sounds kinda serious. Humans... humanity as a whole aren’t really built to take on predatory species, even the ones from this planet.”

She looked at him directly, and for a moment he wondered if he’d slipped up and she’d somehow worked out that he wasn’t who he said he was. Or even human for that matter.

Then she sighed, curling her hands around her mug on the table in front of her. She wore gloves so he didn’t need to worry about her getting frostbite or anything.

“I... got careless,” she admitted in a low voice. “I was dealing with a predator, an enhanced tiger. It had had its intelligence boosted, which I knew, but I didn’t realize quite how much. It was clever enough to hide that from us. It got the better of me and got out. I was badly injured in the process.”

He reached out at the distress in her voice, putting his hand over hers. “I am so sorry you had to go through that.”

She shrugged, not moving his hand, and her gaze sought his. “I would have been dead if not for one of the aliens. Attila, the tiger, sensed another predator nearby and left me to protect his territory. At least, that’s the only thing that makes sense from what I remember. The CCTV footage wasn’t useable. Attila knew where the cameras were and how to stay out of sight.”

“An alien saved you? Against a tiger?”

Surprise filled him. Latharians were hardy, and he could see one of them facing off against a big cat like that to save a female, but he wouldn’t really have described them as predators. Warriors yes, but not predators.

“Uh-huh, yes, apparently. Not the emperor or anyone like that but a younger one. Cade Vorr. He’s not on Earth at the moment so I couldn’t thank him in person. I wrote him a thank-you email, though. I hope it gets through.”

A Vorr. K’laus barely stopped his eyes widening in surprise. Now the predatory comment made sense. The Izaean had long suspected that the old bloodlines hadn’t died out in that clan, not that they’d ever say anything. Like the Vorr, the Izaea had their secrets the empire didn’t need to find out.

“Well, I’m glad he was around to save you,” he said with a squeeze of her hand. If he ever met this Cade Vorr, he would thank the male himself. He would forever be in the Vorr’s debt for saving his mate.

“Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here drinking hot chocolate and forced to endure another round of this song,” he chuckled, looking around as the carol singers started up again. Something about halls and boughs of holly.

“Yeah, Christmas carols. You either love ’em or you hate ’em.” She giggled, the sound soft and carefree. She looked up and over his shoulder just in time to give him enough warning that someone was there before a big hand landed on his shoulder.

Otherwise, he might have reacted violently to being touched. As it was, he steeled himself, looking up to find an older human male beaming down at him.

“What’s a guy got to do to get his grandson to visit him when he gets back in town?” the human boomed, the deep voice filled with laughter that matched the lines around his deep-set blue eyes.

Kris Kringle. Jamie’s grandfather. K’laus froze for a second, sure his deception was now over, but then he realized the old human had approached *them*. Like he recognized them... no, recognized K’laus, which was impossible. He’d never seen the old male before in his life, even if he did bear a little bit of a resemblance to males of his own line before he was discovered to be Izaean and sent to *Parac’Norr*.

“And, who is your delightful companion?” Kris Kringle added, leaning forward and offering a hand to Holly. “I’m Kris, Jamie’s grandfather. I hope he’s been doing his best to charm you. I’ve told him a hundred times I’m not too old to babysit great-grand-nippers.”

K’laus almost groaned. No way would she do anything other than run off as fast as her legs would carry her now.

“Pops!” he hissed, hoping like hell that’s what Jamie called his grandfather. “We were just having a hot chocolate. No need to throw us up the aisle just yet.”

Fortunately, she didn’t seem to take offense.

“He has been very charming.” She smiled, shaking the old man’s hand. “But I need to get going. I have an early start in the morning. I’ll let you guys catch up. See you for my lift in the morning, Jamie?”

He nodded, appeased by the fact she wanted to see him again.

“Eight o’clock sharp,” he promised, and he’d keep the promise, even if he had to kill off some other hotel employees. “It’s a date.”

She gave him a blinding smile and, with a wave, disappeared off into the crowds. Leaving K’laus alone with the

human grandfather who had somehow recognized him, even though they had never met.

“Lovely girl,” Kris said, looking the way Holly had disappeared. “Early start? So she’s not a tourist?”

K’laus shook his head, watching the human carefully. Now he could see him properly, he realized they really did look alike. So much so, it was eerie. Suddenly he wondered what this Jamie Kringle actually looked like.

“No. She’s the new resort deer-keeper. Came in yesterday, started this morning.”

Kris sat back, a look of satisfaction on his wrinkled face. “Good. Those boys up there need a caring hand now Alison is gone.”

K’laus just nodded. He had no idea who Alison was, and to say anything would just reveal his ignorance.

“Oh, I ran into Miriam Skeldon earlier,” he said, lifting his mug to drain the last of his hot chocolate. “She said to say hi to you.”

“Oh she did. Did she?” Kris smiled, the expression making K’laus wonder if there was something between the two older humans. “I’ll have to pop up there to visit. Must be hard for a widow, living alone up on the edge of the dome like that.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Do you want a drink? I can go get one for you?” he asked, suddenly realizing that the old human didn’t have hot chocolate to warm him through. Or even a particularly thick coat to shield him from the cold.

“Oh no, I’m not stopping. I just spotted you from the other side of the street.” The old man levered himself to his feet, hands on the table. “In fact, I should get going. Lots to do before Christmas you know!”

For a moment, the way the lights from the boughs overhead changed, he appeared to have a red hood covering half his face. K’laus shook his head, dispelling the fanciful thought.

“I’m sure they’ve got you all set up in some fancy room in the hotel, but make sure you come on by to visit, okay? House is mighty empty these days without family.”

K’laus had risen at the same time as the old human and nodded. “Of course. I’ll make sure to do that. Goodnight... Pops.”

“Night, son.” And with that the old timer wandered off with a wave over his shoulder, leaving the alien berserker deep in thought.

If he could pass for human enough to fool a human into thinking he was family, why couldn’t he stay here... on Earth?

To Holly's disappointment, Jamie hadn't been on driver duty the next morning but another guy she didn't know. Apparently, some of the staff had come down with a nasty flu virus so they were all shifting roles to make sure everything got covered, and Jamie had been pressed into service elsewhere.

It didn't stop her thinking about him all day, even while the herd did their level best to run her around in circles. It would have been frustrating if it hadn't been cute when she'd realized they were playing musical stalls or something to make her laugh. But she managed to make sure their inoculations were all up to date and checked them all over prior to the big Christmas spectacular in a few days. Ivy seemed to have a little bit of a limp, which she was keeping an eye on.

Holly pursed her lips, tapping on them as her driver—again, not Jamie—pulled up in front of the lodge. If necessary, she'd pull the smaller female and the sleigh would have to run with seven deer, not eight. She didn't care if it was an odd number, or if it was Christmas, the health and well-being of her animals was her top priority. Then she froze, a small frown in the middle of her brow. When had they become *her* animals?

Before she could think about that further, Pippa appeared in the doorway of the lodge like a Christmas-themed whirlwind.

“Ah! There you are, Holly,” she said with relief as Holly climbed out of the all-terrain vehicle, advancing on her with a combination of relief and purpose. “I’m really sorry, but I’m going to have to beg a favor.”

“Uh, sure. What can I help with?” she asked, settling her workbag more securely on her shoulder. Whatever Pippa needed help with, she hoped it wasn’t something hotel-related. Her only experience in the hotel sector had been a disastrous four hours as a trainee receptionist. She’d managed to book three guests into the wrong room and sent the switchboard into meltdown. “I have to warn you, my only work experience involves either labs or animals...”

“How about trees?” Pippa asked, a pleading expression on her face. A large box with legs appeared in the doorway behind her. A moment later Jamie looked around it, smiling when he saw her.

“Half the resort staff are down with this damn flu virus, and I have no one to decorate the tree in the middle of the square. Jamie’s already been voluntold... but since you’re not technically one of my staff...” the small blonde winced with hope in her eyes.

Tree decorating. How hard could it be?

“Sure,” Holly said with a smile. “I’d love to help. Let me just head up to my room and drop my bag and I’ll be right down!”

Pippa held her hand out. “If it’s nothing confidential, I can put it behind reception for you. Robert will guard it with his life. I promise.”

“Oh, awesome. Thank you.”

Bag offloaded, Holly smiled as Jamie walked down the steps toward her, balancing the precarious box of decorations easily.

“Thank you guys *so* much,” Pippa caroled and then was gone.

Jamie chuckled. “She has not stopped today. It’s been an absolute nightmare. Shall we?”

“So I hear. Most of the staff are ill?” She fell easily into step with him as they made their way down main street.

He nodded. “Some new variant. It’s got the resort doctor quite worried.” He looked down at her. “I’m glad to see you’re not affected. It sounds like a nasty one.”

“That’s one of the perks of working for Faulkner.” She shrugged dismissively. “Every single vaccine and shot out there, so we don’t pass anything onto the animals. How about you? No sniffles?”

He shook his head, pausing for a moment to let a large family of tourists past him. “Nope. Not one. Had all my shots in the military. They should be current. I only got out recently.”

He was ex-military. Okay, things made a lot more sense now. Like the way he was built and the generally capable air around him... and the hard look he had about him at times, when he thought she wasn’t looking. Okay, so maybe not so much of a bed-hopping male tart as she’d thought.

“Thank you for your service,” she said with a smile, stopping to look up at the tree they were supposed to be decorating. It was... mammoth. Sliding a glance sideways at the box in his arms, she wrinkled her nose.

“Either Pippa made a miscalculation,” she started only to follow his gaze to the four other boxes already on the ground in front of the tree. “Okay, best get started. Shall we?”



Within an hour, K’laus had worked out that Holly was as strict as any general or war commander he’d worked with and that Christmas tree decorating was an art and science he would *never* master.

“No... we have a clump of red over there and one of green over here,” she announced from her perch on the stepladder above him, her lips pursed.

Suppressing his sigh, he worked on moving the little bulbs around to her satisfaction. For the seventh time.

“How’s that look?” he asked, glancing up.

The light behind her had turned her dark hair into a fiery chestnut halo, and her cheeks and nose were pink from the cold.

“Yep... looking good.” She beamed at him and he froze, unable to look away. She was the most stunning female he’d ever seen. All he wanted to do was pluck her from her perch and crush her lips beneath his. Find out if they tasted as sweet as they looked.

“Okay, so that’s lights and tinsel... we need to get the angel on now,” she announced, reaching into the box she held on her hip. It was large for such a little female, and for a moment she wobbled on the steps, a small gasp escaping her lips as she grabbed for the handrail.

He was already there, holding the bottom of the ladder.

“Almost,” she breathed, her eyes bright as his heart thundered away in his chest. If she fell, she could hurt herself. Something that he would not... *could* not allow. His soon-to-be mate would not come to harm on his watch. No way. No how.

“Just be careful,” he warned her, holding his hand out for the box as she reached up to put the angel on top of the tree. He barely breathed as she stretched, her sweater coming away from her jeans to reveal a slice of satin skin he couldn’t look away from. Unlike some of the females here he’d seen, who were thin and wiry to the point of skeletal, Holly was pleasingly curved.

Just memories of her figure and the way she’d pressed against him when he’d saved her from the snowfall yesterday kept him awake half the night. In his dreams, he’d explored her more, pulled her into the recess of one of the closed shop doorways and explored her lips as surely as his hands had explored her curvy little body.

He’d woken hard and aching, forced to finish himself off in the shower so he could return to bed and finally sleep. The growl worked its way up from the center of his chest, only

stopped by the iron will he held over himself. He was dressed for the outdoors, yes, but these “jeans” humans wore were nowhere near as effective at hiding the state of his body as combat leathers would have been.

She managed to place the angel, and he breathed a sigh of relief. “Come down now,” he ordered, a rougher edge in his voice he couldn’t help. “Before you fall.”

“Oh, I’m not going to fa-aaalllll!” She ended on a squeak as the ladder wobbled just at that moment and she lost her footing. He moved at the speed of light, plucking her out of the air to cradle safely against his chest with one arm while grabbing the ladder so it didn’t fall on some poor unsuspecting human with the other.

“Hey,” she managed breathlessly, her arms around his shoulders.

“Hey.” His lips quirked as he set the ladder right and then wrapped his free arm around her as well. She fit perfectly against his chest, like she was meant to be there. “Staying a while or just dropping in?”

She groan-giggled, and it instantly became a sound he wanted to hear again. “That was terrible. Please tell me you don’t have a stash of dad jokes!”

“Okay, I won’t,” he agreed promptly, even though the idea of being a father and getting to use those dad jokes for real took his breath away.

Instantly, an image of her, dressed in his shirt, her stomach swelled with his young, filled his mind. It was all he could do to stand there, and not stride off to find somewhere private so they could work on making that fantasy a reality.

“I knew it. You *do* have a stash of dad jokes!” She smiled, leaning closer.

He leaned in as well, his whole focus on the scant space between their lips. His whole body ached with anticipation. Of that first touch. Of what her soft lips would feel like under his. Of how she would surrender to him... sweetly, he decided.

She wasn't a fighter and he didn't want her to be. He just wanted his sweet, curvy little human in his arms for always.

“Hey! *Hey!* Jamie! It's me, Leo!” An insistent little voice caught at the edge of his awareness and he pulled his head up, still sharing breath with Holly. He looked out of the side of his eye to see Leo, Miriam Skeldon's young grandson, leaning over the barrier around the big Christmas tree and waving maniacally at them.

He looked at Holly again as frustration crowded through him. So near yet so far.

“Hold that thought?” he murmured and gently set her down on her feet. Because they had an audience, and such a young one, he didn't slide her down the front of his body like he would have to let her know just how much she affected him. Instead, he released his hold on the back of her knees and placed her down before heading over to Leo. Holly just smirked at him and started to place the baubles on the lower branches.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said with a wide smile for the youngling. “How's it going? You're not out here on your own. Are you?” he asked suddenly, looking around and not seeing Leo's grandmother or, indeed, any adult with Leo.

“No, my dad's over there with his *date*,” Leo drawled the word with disgust, waving a hand in the general direction of the tables near the hot chocolate stand. Sure enough, a couple was standing there, the male sharing the features Leo would have when he matured and attained his prime.

“I got fed up of the mushy stuff, and what you're doing looks more fun. Can I help?”

“Errr...”

K'laus wasn't used to younglings. There were no children on *Parac'Norr*, in fact, the only being to have ever spent childhood there was their warleader, Raalt's son. He remembered other children when he was growing up on his home planet but that was it. Most beings kept their younglings

well away from K'laus and his brothers. Izaean warriors were unstable and unpredictable. Dangerous.

“C'mon... if I have to watch them kiss, I'm gonna barf. For reals,” Leo said, making fake vomiting sounds.

K'laus looked between where they were and where the father was sitting with his female. It wasn't far, with a clear line of sight. As soon as the male looked around for his offspring, he would be able to see him over here with Holly and K'laus. And Holly was a good person, trustworthy. Anyone could see that.

“Okay,” he agreed, reaching out to lift the youngling over the fence. “But you have to do as Holly says. Promise?”

“*T*his hill is a bloody killer. Isn’t it?” Holly asked the reindeer plodding along next to her as the crisp snow crunched underfoot.

Snowy didn’t reply, looking at her pocket with a hopeful eye. She chuckled and rubbed the fur behind his ear before palming another bit of carrot.

She and half the herd—Snowy, Candy, Ivy, and Ginger—were out in the enclosure at the back of the stables. She’d wanted to check that all the fences were sound even though they were in a bio-dome. Several notes in Alison’s records had indicated the possibility that a large predator, maybe a wolf, had infiltrated the dome. So Holly made sure to keep a careful eye out and warned Gary to make sure the stables were secure as well as she headed out to check the fencing.

They were adaptive electric fences, meaning that nothing should be able to get through to her deer, but she carried a rifle slung over her shoulder, just in case. It had enough stopping power to put down a charging rhino, not that there were any outside a zoo these days. She’d learned her lesson after Attila, and no mere wolf was going to get the drop on her.

So far, though, so good. The fence was up and running, with no breaks, and every weak point she’d identified was holding well.

She paused for a moment and turned. Up this high, the stables were below her and the snowy slopes swept all the way

down to the bottom of the valley where the town lay like a twinkling jewel in the middle of the pale perfection.

She blew out a breath, her bangs lifting away from her face. It was actually really pretty up here. All the Christmas crap aside, it was nice to be back out in nature again, even the cultivated nature of a managed bio-dome. She'd missed this, though. Actually dealing with animals in a natural environment rather than in the zoos she was used to, cooped up in a lab looking at viable samples or, even worse, the endless meetings her position as lead scientist seemed to require.

She rested her hand on Snowy's back, feeding him slices of carrot with the other.

"How's it gotten to this, eh boy?" she mused, stroking the soft fur of his ears. She much preferred it here, with just the animals and no reports to be done or KPIs to worry about. "I bet all you have to worry about is where your next carrot is coming from or whether you have soft straw to sleep in. How about you take over as lead scientist and I'll stay here, huh?"

Here. With the very sexy handyman/driver—one she was trying very hard not to think about after that incident by the Christmas tree. All she'd been able to think about all night was being held in his arms, against that solid, broad chest and the way his lips had almost brushed hers...

Snowy wuffled and nosed her pockets again for more treats. She couldn't help but laugh. "Gary was utterly right about you, Snowy. You *are* a belly on legs."

She continued along the fence line, crunching into pristine snow all the way. No more was scheduled for tonight, but from what she'd read, during the snowfall cycles, conditions could get pretty rough out here. She certainly didn't want to be caught out in it.

As she went, she doled out the rest of the treats to the deer with her. She'd brought them as bribes to keep the herd with her, but she hadn't needed them. The small group had stayed with her for the entire walk around the enclosure. Well, all

apart from Candy, who was lagging behind. Holly made a mental note to keep an eye on her to make sure she was okay.

She paused at the top of the enclosure and leaned back against the fence. The sky was clear and filled with stars. From here, you couldn't even see the new alien space station being constructed in low orbit. Of course, she knew it was all a simulation, the dome programmed to show a view of what the sky would look like without pollution and the storms that raged outside. Still, she was glad it didn't show the alien base.

She had mixed feelings about it. She couldn't deny that it had saved her life. She'd taken a look at her medical records from the attack and... holy fuck, even with a team of the best human trauma surgeons, she wouldn't have survived.

No, her continued ability to breathe and enjoy life was directly down to the advanced medical technology and doctors on the Latharian base. So she couldn't really wish it gone. If it wasn't there, she would definitely be dead right now. No two ways about it.

For a moment, her mind wandered back to the big guy who'd been in the bay next to hers. She'd been aware of him all the time she was there. She even suspected that she'd been dreaming about him before she'd come out of her coma. Weirdly, even though he was loud with all his roaring and snarling, and even though she hadn't really ever gotten a good look at him thanks to the privacy shields, he hadn't once actually scared her.

In fact, in an odd way, he reminded her of Jamie. Which was ridiculous... the sexy ex-military handyman was literally a world away from a lethal alien who didn't seem to speak, just snarl.

The doctors had called him something... *Izaean*. She'd looked the word up when she'd left the base. It seemed to roughly translate to "berserker." Jamie was too nice to be anything close to an alien berserker.

Just as Snowy had scarfed down the last treat, her comm unit chirped. A smile curved her lips as she saw Audrey's name and ID on the screen.

“So how goes the snowy version of hell?” she asked as soon as Holly answered the call. She heard traffic noise in the background, which meant that Audrey was on the metro on her way home or, more likely, off to her second job. Seriously, Holly had absolutely no idea how her friend managed to keep going at such a breakneck speed.

She looked around. “Actually, it’s really quite pretty.”

Audrey gasped and demanded, “Okay, who are you and what did you do with my friend?”

She chuckled. “I mean, it’s nice up here. Away from all the people and the Christmas crap.”

“With reindeer? Aren’t they like peak Christmas crap? You do remember they pull Santa’s sleigh. Right?”



TO HER DISAPPOINTMENT, there was no Jamie again to drive her back down to town. Instead, Robert smiled at her from the driver’s seat. She smiled back, managing to conceal her disappointment. Their chat on the way back down the hills was comfortable and had the added benefit of filling her in on a lot of the history of the resort and the families that had lived there for years. Including the Kringles.

Apparently, Jamie hadn’t just gone into the military. He’d gone into the special forces and was some kind of hero after a rescue a couple of years ago. She bit her lip. A hero ex-soldier didn’t seem like the bed-hopping man whose she’d mentally painted him as.

“So, what managed to get you out from behind the reception desk today?” she asked as they drove through the center of town.

“Necessity,” he threw over his shoulder. With only a few days now to Christmas, the place was full to bursting with tourists looking for that Christmas magic, so it took them a while to weave through to get to the hotel.

“Most of the staff are off with this flu bug. It’s a real nasty one. Then the power went out in the north wing, which meant Dave, Jamie, and Todd have been working in there all day and Pippa can’t drive an all-terrain so I was the only one available to come pick you up.”

That explained Jamie’s absence then. She nodded. “You know, I’m rated to drive an all-terrain if you need me to?”

“Really?” Robert beamed over his shoulder at the news as they pulled into the semi-circular drive in front of the lodge. “I’ll tell Pippa. It would be awesome to have some more options. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“No, not at all. Anything I can do to help out,” she said as they pulled to a stop in front of the main doors. As though timed perfectly for their arrival, they opened to reveal Pippa, the resort manager, Jamie trailing in her wake.

“Uh-oh.” Robert chuckled. “You might regret saying that.”

“I-well...”

“No take-backsies!” Robert said, still grinning as she opened the door. She didn’t clue him in that her aborted comment hadn’t been anything to do with wanting to take her offer back and more because all her brain cells had stalled at the sight of Jamie pulling on a winter coat. The T-shirt he wore pulled tightly over a carved body made for sin, one she absolutely wanted to get out of his clothes and explore at her leisure.

Climbing down, she turned to find Pippa right there, her expression somewhere between hopeful and desperate.

“I’m really, *really* sorry to ask this,” she began with a wince, looking between Holly and Jamie. “But I have no one to man the hot chocolate stall during the Christmas faire, starting in like... ten minutes. Is there any chance—”

Before she’d finished speaking, Holly held out her bag. Pippa broke into smiles.

“Thank you! Thank you *so* much! You don’t know how much you guys are saving my life right now!” she exclaimed, already claiming Holly’s bag and herding them in the direction

of the town. “Look for Mabel in the candy cane store when you get down there. She said she’d get everything set up... she just can’t run two stalls on her own, but she’s there if you need her!”

And with that, she was gone, back into the hotel like a whirlwind of energy.

“I swear,” Holly groaned, rolling her shoulders. “If we could bottle that, we’d make a damn fortune.”

Jamie chuckled. “That’s the truth. It’s obviously the magic of Christmas.”

“Must be. We’d better get down there and do our part.” And if she was lucky, the magic of Christmas hot chocolate would replace the long, hot bath she’d been going to take after hauling straw bales about all day. “Hopefully none of the customers will notice if I smell like deer. I don’t have straw in my hair. Do I?”

She cast him a sideways glance to see if he was bothered by her straight-from-the-stables look. He just smiled down at her. “Nope, no straw, hay, or anything else remotely deer like.” He leaned in and took a breath. “And you smell wonderful. Like always.”

He’d noticed what she smelled like? For a moment Holly was tongue-tied. Long enough for him to reach for her hand and tuck it onto his arm.

“Could be slippery,” he said at her look.

“Really?” She’d been out in the snow and ice all day, but... “Yeah. These cobblestones are a right bitch when the weather drops cold.”

They walked down into town through the crowds together, and she’d never been more aware of a guy than she was right now. Their almost kiss from last night kept playing over and over in her mind. Had he looked disappointed when Leo had interrupted them or had that just been her imagination? He hadn’t made another move toward her all night, not even when they’d walked back up to the hotel, so perhaps he thought he’d had a lucky escape...

She nibbled her lip. She needed to talk to Audrey about this. It wasn't like her to second-guess herself quite so much.

“Stop thinking so much,” Jamie leaned down to murmur in her ear as they reached the town square where all the booths were. He reached up to smooth away the crease between her brows, the soft touch sending a spark through her entire body. “Whatever you're worried about, it's not as bad as you think. I promise.”

She nodded but before she could say anything, she spotted the candy cane store, the grey-haired woman behind it waving at them madly.

“That must be Mabel.” She nudged Jamie in that direction and after five minutes of whirlwind introduction to the art of hot chocolate making, they were left on their own to man the stall.

Used to working in wide open spaces with animals, she hadn't considered what working in such close proximity with a hot guy like Jamie would be like. It played havoc with her senses. The stall was tiny, which meant they were constantly moving around each other, and it seemed he took every opportunity to brush up against her. Not in a creepy way, but in a way that sent fire through her veins and made her want to press up against him more.

Each contact sent a thrill through her and him. At least the little look in his eye whenever she apologized for bumping into him said the contact affected him just as much as it did her.

At first she thought he was doing it on purpose, but she reassessed that when she saw how focused he was on the job they'd been given.

Every customer was greeted with a bright smile, and he listened carefully to get their order right the first time. He didn't falter once, even though she knew he'd been working all day—and at manual labor as well. That had to take it out of a person.

“Thank you. I’ll put that in the charity box for the resort foundation.” He smiled as yet another customer refused their change. She was sure that was something to do with his charming smile.

“Jamie,” Holly murmured, half turning to touch his arm as a new customer reached the front of the queue and pointedly ignored her, looking beyond her to Jamie.

Blonde and beautiful, she was bundled up in a bright red coat, her white scarf and red hat making her look very Christmassy indeed. “You have a customer.”

He turned around, looking at her before he noticed the other woman. Even though it was cold outside, he’d long since shed his winter coat and was just dressed in a long-sleeve T-shirt that showcased his impressive body.

Suppressing the shiver touching him had caused, she moved to the back of the stall and left them to it.

“Well, hello handsome. Where *have* you been hiding yourself?” The other woman’s voice was low and sultry, with just the right amount of “come to bed” vibe in it.

Holly shook marshmallows out into the waiting bowl with vehemence. It was nothing to do with her if he had a thing going with half the local residents or staff here. A couple of days working together and an almost kiss didn’t mean she had any kind of claim on him. Even if she wanted one...

“I haven’t been hiding at all, Maxine,” he said, his voice more reserved than she’d heard it before. “Pippa’s kept me very busy what with all the staff off sick at the moment.”

Ahh, *this* was Maxine. Holly had heard about her. Mostly complaints from the other staff that the glamorous receptionist had taken to her bed at the first sniffle and refused to leave it even though everyone else was on death’s door as well. It didn’t seem she was well-liked.

“This *awful* flu,” Maxine agreed, putting her hand up to her throat and managing a small, very fake-sounding cough. “It’s been absolutely wretched.”

“It has. What can I get you?” Jamie asked.

Holly turned and looked over her shoulder, eyeing up the line of customers forming behind Maxine.

They were doing a rapid turnover tonight, so she really hoped he didn't want to stop and chat with her. They were going to get overwhelmed if he did.

"I'll have a caramel hot chocolate with whipped cream and marshmallows," she decided, her lips in a perfect bee-stung pout.

"Just a small one though. I have to watch my weight, you know," she said, casting a scathing look down Holly's figure bundled up against the cold. Unlike Jamie, she was freezing back here. "Unlike some, obviously."

"I beg your pardon?" Jamie's voice went from friendly to subzero in a heartbeat. "Could you repeat that?"

"I-I," Maxine stuttered, her gaze stabbing Holly, who had turned around to watch this little drama and crossed her arms over her chest. The woman behind Maxine didn't look impressed either. "You know what I mean."

"No... I'm afraid I don't. You're going to have to explain it to me," Jamie replied, his voice firm. Giving her no level of camaraderie or support to work with.

"It's... don't worry about it," she said quickly. "Actually, I'm not feeling too well, so I think I should get back..."

Jamie didn't say anything as she walked away but then turned a charming smile on the lady who stepped up next.

"Merry Christmas! What can I get for you?"

They started working again, prepping drinks in companionable silence. Then they reached for the marshmallows at the same time, their hands brushing. She looked up at him as he indicated she should go first.

"Thank you for that," she said softly.

He didn't pretend not to know what she was talking about. "You're welcome. No one gets to abuse my m... my friend and get away with it."

Her heart swelled and she was still looking at him as she went to drop the marshmallows on the top of her drink. But she wasn't paying attention, misjudged it and gasped as she knocked the drink over. Before the hot liquid could spill all over her hand and arm, he was there, knocking her hands out of the way.

"Oh my god!" she gasped as it splashed all over him instead. "You need to get that under cold water."

Grabbing his arms, she shoved his hands under the cold tap in the tiny sink. "Why did you do that? You're burned!"

He watched her with an odd little smile on his lips as she fussed about him. "If I hadn't, you would have gotten burned. That's unacceptable."

Her knight in a tight green T-shirt.

She looked at him under her lashes, suddenly realizing how close he was. Then he leaned down suddenly and claimed her lips in the sweetest, softest kiss anyone had ever given her.

Holly hadn't been able to sleep because of *that* kiss.

Simple and sweet, it had rocked her to the core, but almost as soon as she'd felt Jamie's lips on hers, more customers wanting hot chocolate had forced them to separate. She hadn't been able to get a moment with him after that, a group of the hotel's employees sweeping them up on the walk back up to the lodge. Nor had he been her driver this morning. In fact, the keys had been waiting for her in reception with a note from Pippa that all her licenses had checked out and would she mind driving herself up to the stables.

Holly pulled the big vehicle to a stop near to the stables. The parking lot was empty, Gary's vehicle noticeably absent as well. A frown creased her brow. He'd looked a little off color last night, and she hoped he hadn't come down with this damn flu-bug as well.

Nibbling her lip, she climbed down from the vehicle as her thoughts went back to last night. That kiss. What if Jamie regretted it? What if he was trying to avoid her now? She didn't *think* she'd thrown herself at him last night... in fact, *he'd* kissed *her*. Even though she knew that, the doubt demons just wouldn't leave her alone.

"Hey, guys," she called out as she pushed open the main doors, letting herself into the warmer interior of the stables. "How is everyone this morning?"

A waft of straw and warm reindeer hit her and she breathed in. She could see herself living with that scent for the

rest of her life.

Candy lifted her head, waffling softly in welcome as Holly passed. She reached out and petted the big deer's velvety muzzle en-route to the small kitchen at the back of the stables. She'd get the kettle on and then start the rounds to make sure the herd had their breakfast before she settled down with a warm drink.

Before she'd gotten halfway down the stables though, the scuff of a boot made the blood freeze in her veins. She froze instantly, her eyes wide as she listened out. Yes, there it was again, in the last stall near the kitchen, the sound of someone moving around.

Shit. Someone was in here. It couldn't be Gary because his car wasn't outside, and he'd already told her he lived on the other side of the dome. Way too far to walk.

So who was it?

Her gaze flicked to the office on the other side of the stalls. The big rifle she took with her when she went outside, to protect the herd with, was locked up in there. To get it, she'd have to go past the stall where the intruder was. If whoever it was came after her, she'd never get the safe open and the rifle loaded in time.

Shitshitshit. She needed another option.

Keeping her breathing light, she sidled to the left and picked up the nearest thing, one of the pitchforks they used to clean out the stalls. Hefting it lightly, she crept forward, her gaze intent on that last stall. It was Ivy's stall and her heart twisted at the thought of someone hurting the small reindeer. Ivy was an utter sweetheart who loved people. She wouldn't understand someone trying to hurt her. She'd be completely devastated.

She crept closer, until a familiar deep voice reached her ears.

"Efil a ladtath ti delias vortratan."

She frowned. That... was that...

“Jamie?”

Standing up, she looked over the stall wall to find it *was* Jamie in there with Ivy. He looked up, one hand on the little deer’s neck where he’d been petting her, his expression guilty for a moment.

“Oh, hey, Holly. I didn’t hear you come in,” he said, unhooking a bud out of his ear with a smile, his expression brightening. “How long have you been there?”

“Thank god it’s just you,” she breathed a sigh of relief, leaning the pitchfork against the wall. “I thought someone had broken in here for a moment.”

“No. Just me.”

He patted Ivy’s neck again and indicated the straw where she was lying in the newly cleaned stall. “I thought I’d get a start on this before you arrived. The left side of the barn is done, just the stalls on the right need doing now.”

She blinked in surprise. That was a good hour or so’s work. “How long have you been up here? *Why* are you up here? Not that I’m complaining. It’s always nice to have help shoveling shit.”

“There was a problem with one of the weather nodes up near here and because I’m a bit of a dab hand with engineering stuff, Pippa asked me to have a look rather than call in a company engineer. Apparently, they cost the earth.” He shrugged. “When I was up there, Gary sent a message on the employee group that he’s fallen ill as well, so I thought I’d drop in and give you a hand with these cuddle-bugs.”

“Ah... well, thank you.” She smiled, genuinely pleased to see him... and even more pleased that there didn’t seem to be any awkwardness between them. “Okay, I’m just going to get the kettle on and sort these hairy beasties’ breakfast. Then we can have a coffee. I think you’ve earned it.”

“Amen to that,” he chuckled. “Let me just get the last of this down and I’ll be in to help you.”

She waved over her shoulder as she walked off. He’d come to help her, just because. It made a warm, fuzzy feeling spread

out from the center of her chest. Handsome and thoughtful... and not the bed hopper she'd assumed after he'd shot Maxine down last night. Now he was here, all the way out in the cold so she didn't have to look after the deer herself.

She couldn't keep the smile off her face as she bustled around the kitchen and feed room, getting the reindeer's morning feed ready. They liked something warm in the morning, and the specialist feed she found in the bins was the best quality, which pleased her. She was glad that the resort was looking after its animals. Some places didn't, even though gen-modded animals were horrendously expensive. That was something she had never understood. Why spend so much on an animal and then not feed it right?

Her comm unit chirped just as she'd poured hot water into the last of the eight feed buckets

"Hey, girl. Oh... my god, do I have news for you!" she answered it as she carried the heavy kettle back over to the counter.

"What news is that?"

She almost dropped the kettle as Dean's voice filled the air rather than Audrey's.

"Dean!" she almost squeaked. "Sorry, I thought you were Audrey."

That would teach her to look at the screen before answering. But to be fair, given that he'd been avoiding her calls recently, she really hadn't expected him to be calling her. And, rather than be relieved he'd finally gotten in touch, she was... irritated?

"Obviously," he replied, a hint of mocking amusement in his voice.

"Was... there something you wanted?" she asked, returning to the buckets to mix the feed.

"Actually, I had some news for you."

"Oh?" She continued mixing. If this was something about another bunch of meetings or project bidding, she was just

going to hang up and pretend the bio-dome's weather protocols were on the fritz.

“Yeah, I know how much you hate Christmas, and we've had a new assignment come in. Working with a resurrected species.”

“Really? Which one?” she asked, not getting her hopes up.

The company had been working on a lot of extinct species, most of them ones she had no experience with or desire to work with. Considering he'd all but benched her, it was probably a resurrected mosquito species or something.

“The thylacine.”

She froze. “Someone got a stable sample and managed to replicate it?”

“Uh-huh. They found some stable DNA in an old private collection somewhere. I know you have a thing about them so I figured you'd want in. Call it an apology for not... you know... visiting you while you were ill.”

“Absolutely!” She'd give her right arm to study the thylacine. They'd been extinct since the 1930s and no one had been able to clone them. “When does the assignment start?”

“The first litter is about to be born ex-vitro. You'd need to leave Christmas Falls on Christmas Eve and travel direct.”

Christmas Eve. Just two days away. She looked around her feed buckets. That would leave the herd without an experienced keeper. And Jamie...



HE HADN'T MEANT to kiss Holly last night. It had just happened. But he couldn't be sorry that it had. He'd been behaving himself, even though every time she brushed against him was like a siren's call, every cell in his body awakening and attuning to hers. Before he knew it, without even meaning to, his lips were on hers.

K'laus dropped his head, groaning at the memory. Her lips had been so soft and sweet under his. The merest touch had made a slave of him instantly. It had been all he could do to contain the rage and passion that filled his soul and not crush her tiny little form up against his bigger, harder one as he took what he wanted... *needed* from her sweet lips.

Yet, at the same time it had been as easy as breathing. Just the idea of hurting her, or scaring her, made him feel sick to his very soul.

Those two needs, both at war with each other and also perfectly in sync, had kept him awake all night, especially since events had conspired and he hadn't managed to get another moment alone with her. He'd tossed and turned all night, tormented by his own thoughts and needs until finally he'd been forced to get up and attend to himself in the shower.

But it hadn't been enough, and even now, with her perfume on the air, his thoughts were consumed by her. Consumed by thoughts of their kiss and the need to kiss her again. Deeper. Harder—

He broke his thoughts off quickly before they could turn dark. He needed to stay gentle with her. The last thing he wanted was to scare her off. He would *not* be the violent, unstable berserker around her. No way. No how. The blood rage and its unpredictability had ensured that his kind, the Izaean, were barred from the new mate program. He didn't intend to let it be the death knell to his relationship with Holly as well.

Laying the last of the straw down for the little reindeer in the stall with him, he patted her rump as he made his way out the door. Something was soothing about helping out with the animals. They weren't the *kervasi* of his youth, but they were somewhat similar... just with one less pair of legs and less of a tendency to try and take chunks out of whoever was caring for them.

Leaving his pitchfork leaning up against the wall near the next stall, he made his way to the feed room at the end of the barn. For a big male, he'd always been light on his feet,

something that had aided him many times in battle. So he wasn't surprised that Holly was unaware of his presence in the doorway, her voice raised as she spoke on her communications device. He was about to announce himself, but something in her expression stopped him. He took a step back and froze, melting into the shadows.

"Dean! Sorry, I thought you were Audrey." Her voice was breathless and soft. His eyes narrowed. Who was this Dean? No visitors, human or otherwise, had visited her while she was injured on the station, but from the tone of her voice, this male was someone she was close to.

"Obviously." The sound of the male's voice lifted all the hackles on the back of K'laus's neck. It was smug and self-important all at the same time. The kind of male he wanted to punch in the face. Repeatedly.

"Was... there something you wanted?" Holly's voice cooled a little as she returned to the buckets to mix the feed. The comforting smell of warm vegetation and something sharp filled the air. It reminded him of the porridge served at breakfast in the dining hall on *Parac'Norr*.

"Actually I had some news for you." The male's accent was very like Holly's. Smooth and cultured, educated even. K'laus's lip curled back a little. Most Izaean weren't educated beyond a certain level. Their leader, Raalt, tried, but it was difficult when the students went into a rage and tore up the classrooms. Still, he had different skills, ones this "Dean" would never be able to comprehend.

"Oh?" She continued mixing, her attention on the buckets in front of her. He appreciated her preciseness and the care she took in making sure each animal had the correct amount for their needs.

"Yeah, I know how much you hate Christmas and we've had a new assignment come in. Working with a resurrected species."

K'laus rocked back on his heels. He didn't know Holly hated the human midwinter holiday. She hadn't given any clue

and had seemed happy to be involved. And who *didn't* like celebrations? His eyes narrowed. More importantly, why?

“Really? Which one?” she asked. She was playing it cool, her tone sounding indifferent and distant, but thinking she was unobserved, her expression betrayed her interest.

“The thylacine.”

She froze. “Someone got a stable sample and managed to replicate it?”

What were thylacine? K’laus kicked himself, wishing he’d done more research on Earth and its animals and didn’t have to rely on information from old sitcoms.

“Uh-huh. They found some stable DNA in an old private collection somewhere. I know you have a thing about them so I figured you’d want in.”

He had to stop the growl emerging from the back of his throat. This *draanthic* was using Holly’s interests against her and trying to steal her away from him. All his fears were realized when she replied, her voice bright and eager.

“Absolutely! When does the assignment start?”

“The first litter is about to be born from ex-vitro. You’d need to leave Christmas Falls on Christmas Eve and travel direct.”

He stepped back, his heart sinking. She was going to leave him. Within days she would be gone and he would lose his chance with her.

His jaw tightened, a tiny muscle in the corner pulsing. If anyone had been watching, they’d have seen his eyes flash black as he fought to contain the beast of his rage within.

No one was going to take her from him. He would just have to ensure that she couldn’t... didn’t want to leave.

He had to make her want to stay. With him. Forever.

Ending the call, she looked at her comm unit for long minutes, nibbling her lower lip. It was a dream assignment. No, more than that, it was *her* dream assignment.

The thylacine was a predator species that *no one* alive had ever worked with. All they had to go on was historical record from a period where records weren't comprehensive and the science of animal keepership and conservation hadn't matured. She doubted that she would be able to actually use much within the records they had, whether the authors back then would have even known to take note of the information she needed.

It would be a blank slate. A chance to make her name independent of Faulkner. Independent of Dean, who had co-signed every paper she'd put into the Institute of Conservation...

Movement caught her eye and she looked up to find Jamie in the doorway. Quickly, she stuffed her comm unit in her pocket.

"Hey there, handsome." She smiled. "Just in time to help feed the hungry beasties."

Just the smell of the warm feed on the air had gotten a reaction from the herd. Wuffles and soft honks came from the main barn, and then the sound of stall doors being kicked.

"They're more than a little impatient, I think." He grinned as she offered him the nearest feed bucket.

“Story of my life,” she grumbled, good-naturedly. “Bossed about by large, hairy beasts.”

He shot her a mischievous look over his shoulder and scrubbed at the scruff on his chin. “Really now?”

“Get away with you now.” She laughed, brushing past him with the first two of her buckets. His deep laughter followed her as they set about feeding the herd.

She’d all but finished when Jamie called out, concern in his deep voice. “Holly? Can you come take a look at Jingle? He’s favoring his left hind leg here.”

“On my way,” she chirped, hiding her worry as she threw the latch on Snowy’s stall. Alarm bells rang through her as she headed that way. They didn’t have long until the Christmas show, and it looked like she might have two reindeer out...

“Hey, Jingle,” she crooned as she entered the stall with Jamie to find that, yes, the stocky deer was standing with one of his back feet wavering off the ground. How could he have injured himself in here? Nothing was in here... and he’d been fine yesterday when she’d bedded them all down for the night.

Clucking her tongue in concern, she ran her hands down his legs, looking for any problems. Everything seemed fine, though.

“I can’t feel any wounds or swelling.” She looked up at Jamie. “How was he earlier when you cleaned out the stall?”

He shook his head, leaning in, and she got a hint of warm skin and pine fresh shower gel. “Walking normally.”

“So whatever he did, it happened while he was in here,” she mused, starting to stand upright. “I’ll need to get the scanning kit and have a loo— *Opphhfff!*”

Something hard and heavy nudged her in the small of her back, sending her crashing into Jamie. He caught his breath, strong arms wrapping around her, but her momentum knocked them both off their feet. A second later she was sprawled over Jamie’s broad chest.

“What the—” she breathed, one hand on Jamie’s shoulder as she pushed her hair back to look over at Jingle.

Who whuffled at them in amusement before walking, quite normally, over to tuck into his feed bucket.

“Why you little...” she couldn’t help the laugh. They’d been had. Completely and utterly had.

She looked down at Jamie and all amusement fled. His expression was hard and focused as his hand slid up into her hair.

“We didn’t get chance to talk last night,” he rumbled in a deep voice.

“Just shut up and kiss me again,” she ordered, shaking her head.

He nodded, the hint of a smile curving his lips. “As my lady wishes.”

His hand tightened in the back of her hair, and she shivered in anticipation as his lips rose to meet hers. This kiss, though, was nothing like the soft, almost chaste kiss of last night.

Instead, he claimed her lips with fire and passion—not hard or demanding but with a devastating finesse that had her shivering in his arms. A small gasp, or cry, escaped her. She wasn’t sure which, but it didn’t matter. The softening of her body against his and the spread of her hands over his broad chest were both an invitation as was the slight parting of her lips.

She needed more. Much more.

He didn’t need a second invitation. With a deep groan in the back of his throat that sent shivers through her entire body, he deepened the kiss with a sure thrust of his tongue.

Heat and need exploded through her, holding her in thrall as he kissed her like he owned her. And she wasn’t complaining. Each touch, each stroke of his tongue made fireworks go off in every cell of her body, and she pressed forward, eager for more.

The kiss became wild and heated, but then he broke away, his breathing as ragged as hers. “We need to stop...”

She pouted, unable to help herself. Now he’d kissed her properly, it wasn’t nearly enough.

“At least,” he added, his expression softening as he reached up to gently tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “We need to stop here. This is not the place I planned to make you mine for the first time.”

She all but melted. He had a delightful way of saying things, and the burr of possessiveness when he said the word “mine” just did it for her.

“Okay,” she breathed, nodding. “Later then?”

“If you’ll invite me to share your bed, yes. Will you?”

She’d never had a guy actually *ask* before. Usually one thing led to another and they ended up in bed, so this... this was different. This was *good* different.

“If you’ll join me for dinner first?” she asked, breathlessly. Then she bit her lip and looked up at him, hoping she looked all sultry. “Because you’re going to need all your strength.”

“Oh, am I now?” He chuckled softly. God, even the guy’s laugh was a turn-on.

But then his expression turned hard and he looked sharply to the side, like he was listening for something.

“Did you leave the side door open?” he asked, hands on her upper arms as he rolled them both to their feet.

“No, I haven’t been out there today. Why?”

“Because it’s open. And I latched it when I brought in the straw earlier.”



K’laus pushed Holly behind him as he stalked toward the open door. The hackles on the back of his neck were all raised, every instinct he had warning him to be on alert. Just like earlier when he’d been checking out the weather node further up the slope.

Several times he'd stopped and scanned his surroundings, sure he was being watched. It couldn't be one of the human tourists. He'd never seen a group of beings so ill-equipped for any kind of bad weather before. Their idea of foul-weather clothing was... interesting to say the least. It seemed more designed for aesthetics rather than to stand up to any serious weather.

And no way would any of them be able to conceal themselves from him anyway. Not only was he *Izaean* and could scent them, but his clan had a visual adaptation for the planet they'd colonized. Whatever had been stalking him was definitely not human. And if it was in here with Holly and the deer... fury rolled through his veins, looking for an outlet. He wouldn't let whatever it was harm any of them.

Holly surprised him by snagging one of the pitchforks leaning against the wall. At his cocked eyebrow, she just shrugged. "Gary's off sick, so whatever is out there..."

He wanted to argue. Wanted to crowd her backward and lock her in the feed room so she could be safe, but he couldn't. Not without questions. And she *was* the head keeper here, so technically she was his boss.

So instead, he nodded and motioned for her to stay behind him as they turned the corner at the end of the stalls. The side door was open, flapping in the growing wind and allowing flurries of snow in. His eyes narrowed as they reached it.

"This has been pushed from the inside," he realized, leaning out to pick up the wooden pin that usually kept it latched. "It's wet."

"Teeth marks." Holly's eyes widened as she plucked it out of his hands and ran her fingers across marks on the surface. "Shit... one of them is out!"

She dumped the peg in his hand and whirled around, checking all the stalls like a demon was on her tail.

"It's Snowy!"

She appeared in front of him, her expression distraught. "I can't have latched his stall door properly, and he's out there on

his own.”

Pushing past him, she rushed to the open door, looking out. Night was beginning to fall and the storm was just rolling in, dropping visibility to around twenty feet.

The storm was artificially induced, yes, but it was no less real and dangerous for it. He'd taken a look at the weather-node earlier. Once a weather cycle was initiated, there was no stopping it.

“He's always looking for food,” she murmured, looking up at him. “He probably thought he could find something out there.”

K'laus looked out into the storm, arm in front of her to stop her rushing out there. “He's from a species that is used to this weather. Isn't he?”

She nodded but then shook her head. “You don't get it. He's gen-modded. None of these deer are used to being out there in the snow. They've been stabled all their lives. Plus, he's a herd animal. Even if his wild instincts did emerge, they would be based on being in a herd, not alone.”

Draanth. Okay, that changed things. Especially with a predator out there.

“Go get some gear on,” he ordered her. “I'll hook up the trailer and meet you outside. Okay?”

SHE JOINED him outside in less time than it took him to hook up the transport trailer to the back of the big all-terrain vehicle she'd driven up here. When she did, he had to conceal his surprise. Slung across her back was a large rifle, similar to the weapons he'd trained with since childhood. What was even more surprising was the way she handled it, like she absolutely knew what she was doing.

“You drive. I'll ride shotgun,” she said firmly, swinging herself up into the passenger seat. “Alison's notes said it's possible a wolf has made its way into the dome, so we need to find Snowy and *fast.*”

He inclined his head. His instincts about a predator being out there were all bang on then. In this instance, he'd rather have been wrong, but in his heart of hearts he knew he wasn't, or that the predator was far away.

The snow was practically blinding as they drove through it at breakneck speed. He relied on all his nonhuman skills to keep them on an even keel as they searched, looking for even the smallest hint of a furry rump.

"He can't have gotten far," Holly yelled over the wind and the driving snow. "Let's keep circling outward."

He nodded and followed her instructions, very aware of the tiny female next to him. He'd thought she was soft and delicate, someone to be protected, but now he realized she was more than capable in her own field—determined and ruthless even, especially when it came to protecting her animals.

And *draanth*, if that wasn't the sexiest thing he'd ever encountered.

"Shit! There. Two o'clock!" she called out and he swung the big vehicle that way, careful not to jack-knife the trailer and rip it free.

The snow cleared a little as they saw Snowy at last. The deer was standing, feet set and his antlers down... fending off a huge canid-type predator.

The wolf. It had to be. And it was about to leap and attack the deer.

A snarl of rage ripped free from K'laus's chest, and he threw himself out of the vehicle and through the snow toward the creature, getting between it and its prey.

"*Jamie!*"

Holly screamed as the wolf lunged, but he was ready for it, slapping its snarling muzzle away in a move it patently wasn't expecting. Its eyes latched on to him hungrily and he saw his own death there.

"Not happening, *draanthic*," he snarled at it, keeping himself between it and its prey behind him.

“Stay back, Holly,” he barked, seeing her move in his peripheral vision. She was there, bringing up the rifle.

“He’s just in the wrong place at the wrong time. We can relocate—”

The wolf snarled and lunged toward her, taking the path of least resistance. In the blink of an eye, K’laus saw its thinking. Its original prey was protected, but there was another, smaller but easier to get to. So it chose her.

He bellowed, his vision filtering red as he thundered over the snow to intercept it. His heart raced as time slowed down. He wasn’t going to make it in time. The wolf leaped, powerful legs bunched beneath it, lips curled back to reveal its vicious teeth.

Digging down for a last burst of speed, he launched himself through the air. Reaching out, he stretched his body as far as he could...

Triumph burst through him as he grabbed hold of the wolf’s hind leg and yanked. It snarled as they twisted and tumbled through the air, *Izaean* and wolf in a deadly tumble of wickedly sharp teeth and heavy blows. He roared as he wrapped it up, avoiding the snapping jaws as he circled a big arm around its throat and squeezed.

“No no! Don’t kill it!” Holly begged, already in his line of sight and bringing the rifle up. “We can relocate it.”

He almost roared at her for her stupidity, getting so close to a vicious creature like this. But he swallowed it down, managing to hook his legs around the beast and turning on his side to stretch it out.

The soft pfft-pfft of the rifle and the jerk of the wolf in his hold told him she’d fired and hit her mark. Seconds later, the wolf went limp in his hold, finally sedated.

He dropped his head back to the snow for a second and then lifted it to fix her with a hard look.

“You are the *most* stubborn and stupid female I know!”

Jamie's roar almost stunned Holly into silence, but half a second later her anger caught up with her and she snapped back, "I beg your freaking pardon!"

"You heard me."

He heaved upward and twisted in the same movement, rolling the big wolf off him in a show of strength. It was almost as impressive as the way he'd taken the animal down in the first place.

She'd never seen anyone that fast or that strong. Not a human, anyway. But he was ex-military, ex-special forces.... She'd heard stories about secret enhancement programs. That had to be it. He'd been modified in very much the same way as the animals she worked with had.

She would have to ask him about it, assuming it wasn't a sensitive subject, some other time. Like one when she wasn't tempted to put a tranq dart in his ass.

He towered over her, fury on his face. "You could have gotten yourself hurt out here!"

Oh, no he hadn't. That just made the rage rolling through her veins all the worse. She stepped up, stabbing him in the center of his broad chest with her finger.

"Really? *Really?* You *still* think I'm some kind of pampered city girl who needs looking after?" she demanded, flicking her windblown hair out of her face so she could glare up at him better. He was much taller than she was, but she

didn't find it intimidating. At the moment, she just found it irritating that she had to look up to meet his eyes.

"No!" He swore but the wind ripped most of the words away, making them sound odd and alien. "Of course I don't. I've seen how you work. Seen how you handle *that*," he nodded toward the big rifle in her hands, loaded for bear with heavy-yield tranquilizer darts.

"But this..." he motioned toward the unconscious wolf. "This is something else. This is a *real* predator, not one of your experiments. He could have really hurt you. Even killed you!"

She went still.

"Like Attila, the tiger who landed me up on the space station? The one who mauled me so badly that human doctors couldn't save me, so it had to be the aliens?"

He froze, and a strange expression crossed his features—somewhere between realization and guilt. But she couldn't work out what he had to be guilty for.

A second later he hauled her into his arms, rifle and all.

"I know you're more than capable. Hell, you're a total badass," he murmured, his deep voice soft in her ear as his larger form blocked out most of the storm raging around them. "You'll have to forgive me for being an utter caveman. I saw that wolf threatening you and lost it."

Her anger deflated in a heartbeat, and she leaned against him.

"You make it very hard to stay mad at you when you say things like that," she grumbled, wanting to stay in his arms forever. Only Snowy, crowding in next to them for warmth, stopped her. "But we have to get this guy back. Before this all gets too thick to drive through."

IT ENDED up with her driving back, Snowy loaded up snug as a bug in the trailer and Jamie on the flatbed of the all-terrain, the rifle trained on the still unconscious wolf.

Half an hour later they were back safely, Snowy back in his stall while the wolf had been left to wake up in its own time in one of the secure cages behind the examination rooms. She'd checked out the caging, and it was solid with no rusty or damaged areas even though it hadn't been used for years. It would be safe there until they could get the relevant conservation authorities in and have it moved back to its own habitat.

"There's no going back out there," Jamie turned his head as she joined him looking out the window near the front door of the barn.

It was practically white outside, a raging blizzard that meant they couldn't even see the all-terrain in the parking lot less than ten feet away.

"How long is it scheduled for?" she asked, trying not to let her heart leap in anticipation of spending more time with him alone. Preferably somewhere warm and dry rather than in the middle of a blizzard.

He slid her a sideways glance. "Until the morning. About six a.m."

Shit. She checked her watch. It was closing in on eleven. Surprise filled her. It had taken them longer than she'd thought to locate Snowy and get him back and settled.

"Well," she said, pushing off from the window frame. "I guess we'd better find some blankets and bed down in the office."



SHE'D BEEN AROUND many men in her life, both personally and professionally, but none had ever affected Holly like Jamie Kringle did.

She murmured an apology when she brushed against him for what felt like the hundredth time while they were laying their blankets out on the pullout beds in the main office. Or rather, she was laying blankets out on the pullout bed while

Jamie was making do with what looked like a very thin camping mat on the floor. She shuddered. She'd slept on them many times on expeditions... she knew how uncomfortable they were.

"Oh, this is ridiculous," she said suddenly, stopping and looking at him. "Why don't you just share the bed with me?"

He straightened, a strange light in his eyes as he looked directly at her. She sucked a breath in at the dark heat she saw there. He hadn't been anything other than a perfect gentleman, but she knew he was dangerous. Physically dangerous, he'd proved that with the wolf, but dangerous to her on a personal level as well. On a male-female level. She was aware of him in a way she'd never encountered with a man before.

"Are you inviting me to share your bed?" he asked, his low, deep voice sending shivers along her spine. She knew what he was asking. If he did, there would be little sleeping.

Heart in her throat, she nodded. He stalked toward her, each step closer sending the anticipation rolling through her veins higher.

He didn't say anything as he stood in front of her. He simply reached up and slid a big hand into the loose fall of her hair. She bit her lip and he groaned.

"Don't look at me like that, *kel*... sweetheart," he groaned. "Or I won't be held responsible for my actions."

He leaned down, his next words breathed against her lips. "I've wanted you since the moment I saw you. It's been hell ignoring my instincts."

"What instincts are those?" she whispered, her hands spreading out over the broad expanse of his chest. He'd shed the heavy winter jacket and, even though the air was chilly in here, was dressed in just a thin T-shirt. He definitely ran hotter than she did.

"The instincts that wanted me to throw you over my shoulder and find the nearest room with a bed to make you mine." It was the last thing he said as he leaned in and claimed her lips.

Like the kiss earlier, it was hot. Demanding. Whimpering, she pressed closer, sliding her hands up over his shoulders. She drove one hand into the short hair at the nape of his neck, feeling the silky strands slide over her fingers.

He didn't wait for an invitation this time, parting her lips with a hard swipe of his tongue. She moaned as he drove inside, each brush of his tongue against hers making the arousal surging through her body deeper. Tighter. Harder.

She broke away, her breathing compromised. "Well, we have a room... and a bed..."

His lips curved into a smile against hers. "We do. Don't we?"

But he pulled back to look down at her, his expression serious. "I have to warn you though, little one. I play for keeps. Does that scare you?"

His expression was intent, and she had nowhere to go, but she found she didn't want anywhere to go. After so many boyfriends who refused to commit, his focus and determination was a balm to a soul she hadn't realized was bruised and battered.

"No." She shook her head. "It's... nice."

He grinned, the expression predatory, and scooped her up. "Oh, it's going to be more than *nice*. I promise you that."

She shrieked, clinging to his massive shoulders, but a second later he'd placed her in the center of the bed and his lips were on hers.

After that, there was no talking. He kissed her with a devastating finesse, leaving her needy and clinging to him. Their clothes disappeared as if by magic, or very eager hands, and before she knew what was what, he was braced over her, the very thick head of his cock nudging at her entrance.

She caught her breath at the feeling, the need threaded through every cell in her body warring with nerves at the size of him.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, nudging her chin up so he could kiss under it and along the side of her neck.

Her hands curled into claws against his solid upper arms as he began to rock, not into her but against her. The thick, heavy length of his cock slid against her, in the groove of her pussy lips. Pushing. Pressing. Stroking against her clit in a continuous movement.

She moaned as pleasure spiraled through her body, centered in the little bundle of nerves between her thighs. She ached, her hips rocking with his. Needing more. Needing everything. Needing *him*.

“*Jamie*,” she gasped, turning her head and forcing him to meet her lips from where he’d been kissing behind her ear. “*Please*,” she demanded against his mouth.

He growled, the sound the sexiest she’d ever heard. “No. I want you to come first, I want all of your pleasure. I want to hear it and then feel it as I make you come again all over my cock.”

She couldn’t help it. She whimpered, brought impossibly close to the edge by his words. What power did he hold over her that her body reacted to him in such a way?

“That’s it, *kelarris*,” he groaned, his movements speeding up. “Just a little more. Give me your pleasure. Come. *Now*.”

She gasped, shattering apart as she ground against the solid bar of his cock. Her hips jerked, heat like a tidal wave washing through her body. Her pussy clenched tightly around emptiness, a deep-seated ache she knew only he could ease.

“*Fuck*, yes... *Jamie*, *please*,” she begged raggedly. “I need you now.”

“You have me. I promise.” He moved over her, kissing her again as he notched himself against the entrance to her body and began to ease inside her.

She caught her breath, clinging to him. He was huge, stretching her but not so much it was painful. Instead, it just ensured that she felt every inch of him as he gently rocked back and forth, working himself inside her in short thrusts.

It felt like forever but then he was fully seated, pulling back to look down at her.

“You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” he told her as she clenched around him, her pussy throbbing with the need for more. Heat hit her cheeks, and she reached up to claim a quick kiss. What could she say to something like that? How could she react to the look of reverence in his eyes?

So she resorted to threats.

“If you don’t move, right now,” she growled. “I’m kicking you out of this bed and you’ll have to sleep on the damn floor all night.”

He grinned, amusement in his eyes. “As my lady commands.”

One arm braced on the hand by her head, he pulled back, looking into her eyes as he slid back inside her. All the way. In one long thrust. She whimpered. Then he did it again, and again, each time harder and faster.

Her moans and gasps filled the room, competing with the erotic sound of skin on skin. The air was no longer chilly, her skin where it brushed against his heated. She moaned and lifted her legs, wrapping them around his lean hips.

His movements slowed and he dropped his head, swearing softly under his breath. “Fuck, beautiful, you’re going to make me spill before I’m ready.”

She grinned, sliding her hands over his glorious body. “I ___”

But she didn’t get to finish her sentence. His mouth crashed down over hers and she forgot everything but the hard dominant kiss and the demands he made of her with his body.

His movements sped up, every inch of his big, powerful form bent to bringing them both pleasure. It was all she could do to cling to him, rocking her hips against his as they chased their pleasure together.

Heat and tension wound tighter and tighter. His kiss, the dual penetration of his tongue and his cock, were her undoing.

Before she was ready, she felt herself beginning to come apart again. Her breathing stuttered, her hips following suit, and she whimpered as he pulled back to look down into her eyes.

“It’s okay, beautiful,” he murmured, sliding his hand between their bodies. “Just let go. Give it all to me.”

His clever fingers found her clit and she was lost. Ecstasy exploded through her in an unstoppable wave. She screamed silently as it washed through her, taking her under. She clenched down hard on his cock, milking it for all she was worth.

He groaned, all but collapsing over her, and then his control was gone. With a growl, he gripped her hip, holding her tightly as he powered into her. Each hard thrust sent her pleasure spiraling higher.

Once, twice... on the third thrust he buried himself deep within her, throwing his head back to roar his own release to the rafters above.

“Oh my god, Holly, you did it? You slept with Muscles?”

Audrey’s whoop of triumph down the line brought color to Holly’s cheeks and she flattened the comm unit against her chest for a moment, looking around in case anyone had heard.

“Shhh,” she warned when she put it to her ear again. “People are here, you know? They can hear you!”

“I don’t care!” Audrey giggled. “My girl’s getting some and about time! I *knew* Dean was shit in bed! So, what’s Muscles like? Built like a stallion and can go all night?”

Holly couldn’t help the little curve of her lips as she peeked around the end of the all-terrain to where Jamie was offloading the last of the reindeer behind the lodge. The resort Christmas parade was less than an hour away and Santa’s sleigh was already here, ready to be hooked up.

“His name is Jamie. And... oh hell yeah.” She giggled back. “On both counts. And then some. Let’s just say... Dean who?”

Audrey catcalled down the line. She’d never made any pretense of the fact she didn’t like Dean and thought he treated Holly terribly. “You go girl! Of course, you know that whoever you make out with at Christmas will be yours forever. Them’s the rules of Christmas.”

“Psshhhht! Don’t be ridiculous,” Holly threw back. “It’s what happens in Christmas Falls stays in Christmas Falls.”

“Nope. Uh-uh, I think that’s Vegas.”

“Well, I’m making it about Christmas Falls.” She smiled, watching Jamie as he led Snowy down into the temporary pen. He was stripped down to a T-shirt again and she couldn’t help but admire his broad back and that ass in his tight jeans.

“Oh, I am so going to hell, lusting after someone with Santa right here,” she whispered.

Audrey’s words about Jamie being hers forever hit her hard, though. For all their night had been as hot as fuck, she would be leaving soon. And somehow, despite his words about playing for keeps, it seemed at the heart of things, Jamie was a small-town boy. He’d been out and seen the world but still come home. No way would he want to leave here, where the horrors of the real world were kept at bay, for her.

She sighed and then straightened up as a bunch of flowers walked around the end of the main hotel building. A shiver of warning rolled up the back of her neck as she spotted the Italian leather shoes, totally unsuitable for this weather, and the legs of a designer suit.

Dean.

“Shit. Audrey, I gotta go. Dean’s here.”

“Oh crap. Okay, doll. Call if you need me.”

“Thanks.”

Dropping the comm unit into her pocket, Holly set off across the parking lot, trying to head Dean off before he got anywhere near the deer... or Jamie.

“Dean?” She stopped right in front of him, cutting him off. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Holly!” He beamed as he looked around the huge bouquet. “I’m here for you, babe. To say sorry and whisk you off for a romantic ‘back together’ Christmas weekend.”

Her jaw dropped so much she must have looked like a cartoon. “One, don’t call me that. And two, we are not getting back together. We weren’t really together in the first place!”

His smile slipped a fraction but quickly reasserted itself. “How can you say that, babe? We were living together for two years!”

Cold sweat broke out along her spine. His voice was loud enough to garner interest from everyone here around the back of the hotel. Including Jamie. She saw him straighten up, his expression forbidding as he looked their way.

Right now, though, she had bigger problems to deal with. Namely one ex-on-off boyfriend who wasn't getting the hint.

“Living together? Yeah, sure we sometimes shared the same space, but rarely at the same time. You were either off on business or I was off on assignment.” They'd probably spend a total of six weeks together. And six weeks did not cohabitating make.

“Holly? Is there a problem here?” Jamie's deep voice sounded just behind her and she wanted to throw herself into his arms in relief. But she didn't. She was a grown woman and she didn't need a man to fight her battles for her.

“Nope,” she shook her head firmly. “No problem. My ex-boyfriend has the wrong end of the stick and is just about to leave.”

“Ex-boyfriend?” She felt the extra chill in the air as Jamie turned his hard gaze on Dean. “The one who left you alone while you were badly injured in the alien hospital?”

Dean didn't bat an eyelid, leaning forward to offer Jamie his hand. “Dean Faulkner, of Faulkner Gen-Mod.”

“Jamie Kringle. Of Christmas Falls,” Jamie said, reaching out to engulf Dean's hand in his larger one. For a moment Holly expected pain to flare across Dean's face as Jamie proved he had a stronger shake, but she should have known better. Jamie didn't need to resort to such tricks to prove his masculinity.

Dean's smile disappeared. “No, you're not.”

“I think the man knows his own name.” Holly chuckled.

“No. Seriously.” Dean looked at her, and for once she saw no artifice in his expression. “I was supposed to be sitting next to Jamie Kringle on the way over here.”

She shrugged. “So, he came back earlier than planned. No biggie.”

Dean looked between the two of them. “No, you don’t get it. Jamie Kringle *did* come back. In the hold. He’s dead, Holly. This guy is an imposter.”



He’d lost her.

The instant that *draanthing* ex-boyfriend of hers had said he was lying, that the real Jamie Kringle was dead, he’d lost her. He’d seen the shutters come down behind her eyes and her body language. The way she looked at him had changed.

K’laus sighed and lifted his head, letting it fall back against the wall behind him with a resounding thud. Again and again. It didn’t matter how hard he hit it, it wasn’t like he had anything in there to damage anyway. His recent exploits just proved that.

What on earth had he been thinking?

He’d seen all those human shows. He *knew* that human women prized honesty. But that was the problem... he hadn’t been thinking. Obviously. What he should have done, as soon as their relationship had become physical, was come clean about exactly who and what he was.

Although... “*Hey, kelarris, just thought you should know. I’m not actually Jamie Kringle. I took a dead male’s identity to stalk and get close to you. Oh yes, and I’m the alien monster from the next bed to you on the alien space station. I was there because even my own kind think I’m dangerous, and they were trying to decide whether or not to execute me.*”

Yeah, that was so not going to go down well.

In fact, he was surprised that an imperial retrieval squad hadn’t already arrived to take him into custody. Lifting his head, he looked out through the bars of his cell and across the

single room that constituted the Christmas Falls police department.

Normally, the concept of a police department would have amused and fascinated him. The empire didn't have civilian peacekeepers in the same way. And even if they did, none of them would have ever considered locking an *Izaean* up in a cell like this. The bars... hell, the walls themselves were way too thin to stand up to blood rage.

Blood rage that was entirely absent now. The curse that had haunted his blood since he'd hit puberty, the ever-present, untiring beast that circled and waited for the moment when his let his guard down was gone. Or at the very least, placated so much that it might as well not be there anymore.

He couldn't even muster it in order to break himself out of here. What would be the point? All he would do was track Holly, the female who didn't want him anymore.

Because he'd lied to her.

And that was the crux of the matter.

She didn't know he wasn't human. An alien. That hadn't been what had put that awful, closed-off look in her eyes that tore at his heart and soul... that had made the same beast in his blood keen with misery and pain. No, it had been finding out he wasn't *who* he said he was. Not *what* he'd said he was.

He groaned and dropped his head back again, ignoring the opening of the police department door. He was screwed because even if he could get her to look past that lie, he still had the greater one, that of his species, to contend with.

"I would like an explanation as to why you're holding my grandson in custody when he's done nothing wrong?"

K'laus lifted his head at the sound of a deep, irate voice at the front of the department.

To his surprise, Kris Kringle stood there, his shock of white hair almost illuminous under the strip lighting. The weather raged again outside, framed in the window behind Kris, and for a moment the old human seemed a part of it—a physical manifestation of darkness, snow and chaos. For a

moment, he could almost believe the old man was one of the Aesiia, but then he shook his head and the odd notion disappeared.

“He’s... well, he’s not Sergeant Kringle, and I’m afraid impersonating dead military personnel is an offense,” the officer at the desk said carefully, as if he didn’t want to upset the old man. Probably because he’d just referenced Kringle’s dead grandson.

Draanth, and K’laus had pretended to be him. Even though he hadn’t known, it was still a shitty thing to do.

“No, he’s not Sergeant *Jamie* Kringle,” Kris said in a tone that suggested a sigh was waiting in the wings. “But if you’ll check the records, you’ll find that he’s Sergeant *Carl* Kringle. Jamie’s twin brother.”

K’laus froze right there in his cell, back up against the painted brick wall. This wasn’t happening. The chances of him rolling into town and being mistaken for a man who hadn’t arrived was one thing, but being able to pass himself off as the dead male’s brother as well... No way.

“Check his retinal scan,” Kris ordered, ushering the police officer toward K’laus’s cell.

He tried to catch the human’s eye, attempting to warn him that he absolutely wouldn’t pass a retinal scan. He didn’t think that kind of thing was even *allowed* in Christmas Falls. No advanced tech, that’s what the brochure said. As soon as the systems registered that he was nonhuman, all kinds of alarm bells would go off. That imperial retrieval squad would be breaking down the door quicker than you could say, “Christmas Falls.”

“All right, Mr. Kringle, if you say so,” the police officer gave K’laus a look. “Now, I don’t want any trouble, sir. Step forward to the bars please.”

“Of course,” K’laus agreed and levered himself up from the hard bench. These weren’t the worst conditions he’d ever had to face. Compared to *Parac’Norr* this place was practically luxury accommodation.

So he stood in front of the bars like a good boy, his hands still bound in front of him in the silly plastic cuffs they'd put on him when he'd arrived.

"There's no need to do this, you know?" he said as he leaned forward, his words more for the old human than the officer who was fiddling with the retinal scanner. It was archaic equipment even compared with what the *Izaean* had, and seemed to be temperamental at the best of times. It had been the reason they hadn't scanned him when he'd arrived.

"Nonsense!" Kringle boomed, his deep voice one step from the *ho-ho-ho* K'laus had been subjected to from every representation of Santa Claus since he'd arrived. With a voice like that, not to mention the white beard, it was a wonder he didn't take up the role of Santa in the town's big show. But if he'd done that, he wouldn't be here springing K'laus from lockup.

The machine the human on the other side of the bars held up to his face bleeped softly and a light beam shone into his eye. He resisted the urge to blink, holding still until it had finished.

"Well, I'll be—" the officer muttered, his eyebrows shooting up so much they practically merged with his receding hairline. "Match registered. Sergeant Carl Kringle, retired."

K'laus was as surprised as the human but somehow managed to keep his expression neutral, even a little irritated. Exactly as a male who'd been locked up under false pretenses might.

"Well now you know," he grunted. "So how about you let me the hell out of here?"

It didn't take the police officer long to let him out, apologizing profusely for the mix-up. He kept his mouth shut during the reams of paperwork the human required just to let him out of the door. As soon as they were through it, he turned to Kris Kringle to find the older male watching him.

"You know I'm not your grandson," he said bluntly.

Kris nodded, a hint of amusement in the way the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled. “No. I know that.”

“I’m not even human.”

There. It was out in the open.

He waited for Kris’s expression to crumple, to twist in shock. Any moment now as that knowledge registered. But the old human just stood there, looking back at him.

“I know.”

“I’m an *Izaean*,” he pressed on. “The worst kind of Lathar. A berserker.”

Kris smiled, a small snort of amusement in the back of his throat. “Well, that’s fitting.”

“How did you know? And why help me?” He folded his arms, staring the older human down. “Why would a human do all this for an alien? A *dangerous* alien he doesn’t even know?”

“Let’s just call it the magic of Christmas. Shall we?” Kris smiled. “And why should an alien, a *good* man, be barred from that? From the magic of Christmas? Now, are you going to stand around here or are you going to do something about that beautiful young lady keeper? The one with the asshole ex?”

His mood took a nose dive.

“What can I do? She knows I lied about my name. How the *draanth* do I tell her I lied about my species as well?”

“You told me.” Kris was just as blunt as before. “Explain. It’s all you can do. If she won’t listen to you, if she’s not prepared to give you a chance, that’s a her problem... not a you problem. *But* I think you’ll be fine. Now what are you waiting for? Get yourself to the station!”

K’laus blinked. “The station?”

Kris’s expression dropped serious.

“Yeah, your girl is leaving Christmas Falls. Tonight.”

Leaving Christmas Falls was harder than she had thought it would be.

Holly stood on the platform as she waited for her train, sniffing into her handkerchief. Allergies, she told herself, from where she'd buried her face into the fur of her reindeer when she'd said goodbye to the herd.

But she knew better than that. It wasn't allergies. Leaving the deer was like tearing out her own heart. In just a few days they'd wormed their way into her heart. Even though she was a self-confessed predator addict, the softer, more caring nature of the herd was so welcoming and comforting that she hadn't wanted to leave.

But she had to. Not only had Dean arrived and ripped the scales from her eyes about Jamie, but he'd also let her know that the start date for the thylacine job had been pulled forward. If she still wanted it.

Actually, she wiped the tears off her cheeks with cold fingers. It had been more a case of if she still wanted to be employed, she had to leave right now. Because Dean was an utter asshole. When his attempts at reconciliation had failed, he'd given her an ultimatum—leave now or look for another job.

Her jaw tightened as a train whistle sounded in the distance. When she'd arrived, the retro-chic of the place had driven her up the wall, and she hadn't been able to wait to leave. But now, she watched the steam just visible over the

hills the track wound through with misery. It signaled her departure from this place and she found she didn't want to leave.

But she had to.

Dean thought he had the upper hand threatening her with her job like that just because she didn't want to go back to the way things were. And why should she want to go back to a relationship where they were little more than ships in the night, flatmates with benefits when they happened to find themselves in the same place. Or where she was a handy plus one for Dean to all the fancy functions he attended. A relationship where, when she'd been almost fatally wounded while working for *his* company, he simply closed up her apartment and hired a new lead scientist rather than rush to her bedside.

That on its own would have been enough for her to say *hell no*, she mused as the steam over the hills got thicker and more distinct. She could even hear the whistle now. Reaching down, she pulled her small carry-on closer.

Now she'd come to her senses, she'd told him where to get off just on the strengths, or lack of them, in their previous relationship. And that was before she even considered Jamie.

Her breathing stuttered painfully in her chest. She'd fallen hard and fast for just the type of handsome charmer she'd always said she'd avoid like the plague.

She'd seen the type time and time again. They used their looks like a weapon and got away with it because most people *still* assumed attractive people were nice. Like being good looking meant that they were somehow inherently good. You saw it all the time in books and holomovies. The villain was always hideous to look at. Like his appearance was a visual indicator of the corruption within.

But she knew better.

Some of the nastiest people looked the best. The exterior didn't match what was inside but acted as a mask. You'd have

thought humanity as a whole would have cottoned onto that by now.

Not that she thought Jamie was evil. Far from it. But he *was* a liar. His name wasn't even Jamie for heaven's sake...

"Holly?"

As though thinking about him had conjured him up, Jamie's familiar deep voice sounded behind her.

Her heart gave a painful lurch, and she whirled around to find him standing behind her. He was still dressed in the same clothes as earlier, when the resort police had hauled him away, his wrists zip-tied because they hadn't had handcuffs big enough to fit him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. How had he known she was leaving? Then she shook her head. "You know what, Jamie, it doesn't matter... what the hell *is* your name anyway? I can't keep calling you that. It's not your name."

He took a step forward, his hands held out like she was a skittish deer about to bolt. Wariness and misery filled his eyes, hitting her like a punch in the gut.

A group of holiday-makers crowded onto the platform behind him, and he was forced to take a step closer. She lifted her chin, refusing to back down.

"My name is K'laus," he said carefully, resignation in his eyes. Like he already expected her not to believe him.

"Apt for the season," she commented dryly. "Why did you lie?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, as though steeling himself for what was to come. When he looked back at her, he wasn't Jamie anymore. He was... something else. Something that both scared the living daylights out of her and drew her in, all at the same time.

"Because I'm not human, Holly. I'm *Izaean*."

She froze, her breath punching out of her lungs in surprise. *Izaean*. She knew that name... knew what an Izaean was. An

alien, and not just any alien. The kind of alien the Lathar, the aliens humanity had an alliance with, feared. More than that...

“*You,*” she breathed, her eyes wide in realization. She *knew* she knew him from somewhere. “You were in the bed next to me.”

He nodded, his big frame held still, watching her. “I was there when you were brought in. You were so pale I didn’t think you would survive. But I wanted you to, with every cell in my body. I took to watching your monitors, ready to alert the healers if anything with your condition changed. It brought me out of my blood rage, allowed me to focus.”

Half-remembered details from her stay on the station emerged. She’d been half out of it on pain killers and other meds, delirious with pain, but some things she did remember. Like the massive alien in the bay next to hers.

“You were roaring. Attacking the forcefields,” she said and he nodded.

“I was... not myself,” he admitted. “I was in blood rage. You brought me out of it.”

She couldn’t help taking a step toward him. He was an alien... Somehow that was a surprise, yet she could see it now. He was *huge*. Like built on bigger lines. And there was something else about him, something indefinable, but definitely not human.

“Why were you in there? Were you hurt?”

She couldn’t stop looking at him. She’d spoken with aliens when she’d been discharged from the station hospital and on her journey back down here, but none of them had filled her with the same sort of fascination as he did.

His expression twisted with shame for a moment.

“No, Holly.” His voice was low as he reached for her hand. She let him take it, his touch making her shiver. “I wasn’t injured. I was being restrained. Tested and prodded before they decided whether or not to put me out of my misery. I had lapsed completely into blood rage and couldn’t get out. Not until I saw you. *You* brought me out of it, *kelarris.*”

“You’ve called me that before. What does it mean?” she breathed, the memory of their night together coming back to her. Oh my god, she’d slept with an alien.

And it had been *good*. Better than good. She’d felt a connection with him she’d never experienced with a human man.

“It means beloved,” he murmured, running his thumb over the back of her hand. “It means light of my life. It means you are everything to me, and I’ll love you until the day I no longer draw breath.”

“Oh...” she breathed. Her anger at him had disappeared. “Is that why you followed me? To...”

He nodded. “The moment I saw you, I was yours. I broke out and followed you here to try and persuade you to be mine.”

She frowned. “But why did you pretend to be Jamie?”

He smiled gently. “I’m sorry I lied to you. I arrived and someone mistook me for Jamie Kringle, and I just rolled with it.”

She pursed her lips. “Well, no more lies. Understood?”

His gaze cut to hers. “You mean...”

He’d broken out of what amounted to a space station and found her on Earth. More than that, he’d watched over her like a guardian angel while she was ill. And... somewhere between sharing hot chocolate and saving Snowy from that wolf, she’d fallen hard and fast for him.

She gave a small smile. “Say it again.”

His smile was knowing as he eased her into his arms. “Say what again? That despite all the odds against us, I love you. That I’ve loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you. Holly, will you agree to my claim and take me as your mate?”

“Husband,” she corrected him. “Or mate, I don’t care which. Yes! I will. Now... It’s Christmas, K’laus. Just shut up and kiss me, okay?”



CHRISTMAS DAY

K'LAUS'S LIFE had changed in the space of just one planet rotation. Just yesterday he'd been languishing in a cell, contemplating his own execution upon the arrival of the inevitable imperial retrieval squad. He was an *Izaean* who had been deep into blood rage, no doubt they were tralling bricks at his escape and were desperate to capture him in case he raged out on some humans somewhere.

Now he was packed in between several members of Kris Kringle's family on the large sofa, a glass of something fizzy and alcoholic in his hand as he watched Holly entertaining a group of kids with facts about Santa's reindeer.

His thoughts paused as he reveled in watching his delicate and beautiful mate. She'd agreed to his claim, and even now a ring sparkled on her finger. Apparently other human rituals needed to be completed as well, but he didn't care. She was *his*, had spent the night in his arms. Not sleeping, but...

He shook himself out of the thoughts, which were definitely not appropriate for mixed company, and smiled as he lifted his glass to his lips to take a sip of the champagne, which was apparently customary after announcing an engagement. He liked it, sharp and bubbly and his blood rage didn't react to it at all. He smiled as the dark marks on his wrists caught his attention.

He was an *Izaean*, and he *had* been in blood rage. Had being the operative word... This morning he'd woken up to the best Christmas present of all.

Mating marks encircling his wrists. The gods had blessed his and Holly's mating, proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was, indeed, his and they had been made for each other.

“Hey, handsome.” Holly dropped into the seat next to him with a brilliant smile. “How about we make a break for it after lunch?”

“Is that even allowed?” he murmured, unable to resist leaning down and stealing another kiss from her lips. He’d spent the entire night kissing her, but it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. “Aren’t there penalties for not partaking in all the required festivities?”

She giggled as she leaned into him, the slight weight of her body warm and welcome against his. “I think given we’re newly engaged, they’ll let us off.”

“I hope so.”

“You know,” she said softly so only he could hear, her eyes dark with warmth and love. “I didn’t want to come on this job. I didn’t want anything to do with deer, but instead, it’s brought me a new job with the resort and my very own alien hero. I love you.”

Warmth spread from the center of his chest, and he leaned down to nuzzle her nose with his. “And I love you. I will love you until the day I cease to draw breath and become one with the stars. And then I will love you for eternity.”

EPILOGUE

Audrey Callahan was either the luckiest girl in the world or the unluckiest, depending on which of her rather large, extended family you asked.

Lucky because, after years of working two, sometimes even three jobs, she'd somehow landed a premium job as one of *the* first human workers on the civilian sector of the new base in Earth orbit.

Unlucky because, as her little cousin Demi was so fond of telling her with the absolute confidence of a six-year-old, there were *bound* to be aliens that were monsters and liked to eat humans for breakfast. Or dinner. Or as a midnight snack... it all depended on the time of day and how inventive she was feeling.

Right now, though, as she stepped off the transport and onto the airlock of the new base, Audrey couldn't hold back the grin that crept across her face. The airdock opened onto a glass-sided corridor and the full glory of the space station, or at least the civilian sector of it, was revealed to her.

Glass domes were everywhere, some with what looked like parks in them yet others looked like huge sports stadiums. Below her was the shopping center, an entire semicircle wall of shops, bars and other establishments while office and residential block towers rose high above.

Her eyes widened as she twisted, trying to press herself up against the glass to see the tops. Nope, she couldn't see them, not from this angle. How freaking *big* were they?

“You know,” a voice sounded behind her. It was so deep it sounded like mountains moving over each other and sent a throb through her lower body so intense she had to bite back a gasp. “My mother always used to say if the winter winds switched, you’d end up stuck to the glass.”

Cheeks flaring, she straightened up. Shit. She was supposed to be meeting her new boss, Utak Tev, here and the last thing she wanted to do was make a fool of herself.

Turning, she found herself face to face with a monster. A red and grey-skinned monster wearing a suit of all things.

Her voice froze as her throat closed over, her mouth moving soundlessly. He was *huge*. With horns and... her eyes widened as she backed up... a tail.

“You’re... you’re...”

She didn’t get any further. Her words cut off as she fell over something behind her and landed hard on her ass. Screwing her eyes closed tightly, she held her breath as she waited for the clawed hands to tear into her.

Demi had been right. The aliens were monsters, and now she was going to end up as a snack...

Thank you so much for reading

AN ALIEN BERSERKER FOR CHRISTMAS!

I hope you loved reading K’laus and Holly’s story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

The next book in the Warriors of the Lathar series will be Murphy’s story. Join my newsletter for the latest updates on the series.

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