

HONEY PHILLIPS



Seven Brides FOR
Seven ALIEN Brothers

GILMAT

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CHAPTER 1



“*Y*ou should come with us,” Endark growled.

Gilmat sighed as he watched the other male prowl around the greenhouse, his restless energy beginning to disturb the plants. He stroked the leaves of the nearest, sending soothing vibrations throughout the space. They responded as slowly as always, but they began to calm as Endark came to a halt in front of him.

“Well?” the other male demanded.

“You know I will never take a bride. I will not propagate my flawed genes.”

A flash of amusement washed away some of Endark’s aggression.

“There are other reasons to want a mate.”

Home. A family. A spike of longing speared through him, and the leaves around him shivered. He quickly sent another wave of calm as he shook his head.

“I am content with what I have here. But if you are sure this is the right path for you...”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but Endark nodded violently.

“I don’t have a choice.” He flexed his hand, claws appearing at his fingertips. “I am losing control of my beast. I wake up from dreams of blood, of my claws sinking into flesh... I can’t go through that again.”

“It was war. You had no choice. None of us had a choice.”

He knew the words were true, but the lack of choice hadn't prevented his own horrific memories, or his guilt. He and Endark had met as teenagers, both of them unwanted and fighting to survive, but he had been the one to suggest the military. He had thought it would provide discipline and structure to their lives, a chance to leave unpleasant memories behind and make a difference. If he could not utilize the skills that had been bred into him, at least he could use his physical size and strength to do some good. Instead, they had ended up on Vizal involved in what became an endless and eventually useless war.

The only good thing to come out of that war was the bond of brotherhood he had established, not only with Endark, but with the other members of their squad, all of them now living and working together on this isolated ranch. The irony of the fact that the ranch that was helping to heal them was located on the same planet they had originally left did not escape him. But the hard work and beautiful surroundings had worked. After almost two years on the ranch, several of his brothers had healed to the point where they were contemplating taking brides from the human town of Wainwright on the other side of the mountain pass.

Artek, their former commander, had been the first to take a bride. He had married Nelly and brought her home to the ranch. Gilmat couldn't deny that her presence had made a difference—not just because she put them to work restoring the main ranch house, but by bringing a softness to their lives that had been missing for a long time. He was not surprised that some of the others wanted brides of their own. In Endark's case, a mate bond was more than just desirable, it was necessary—the only way to calm his raging beast. He dropped a big hand on his brother's shoulder.

“I know you will do what is right.” He looked out at the snow that had begun to fall earlier that day. “But perhaps you should wait until the weather clears.”

Endark was already shaking his head.

“No! We can't wait any longer. And the snow will provide cover for our campaign.”

Before Gilmat could respond to the military terminology, Endark hurried on. “And besides, the timing fits the... history that Nelly recounted.”

Gilmat sighed again, but didn't argue as Endark gave him an abrupt nod and left through the greenhouse doors. Nelly had told them a tale from human history—a tale of warriors returning from war and finding themselves without females. A wise elder had told the warriors to go to a nearby town and claim their brides while they were dancing and joyous.

There was to be a dance in Wainwright that very night, mirroring the events of the story—assuming that it was an accurate account. He had his doubts. Even amongst his own people, with their meticulous recordkeeping, events in the past were often altered over the years.

At least only Endark and their youngest brother, Benjar, had decided to go into town. They would be the only two disappointed if their quest were unsuccessful, although he hoped they would both find their brides. He knew he would never do the same. He resumed his work, checking moisture and nutrient levels, and methodically recording growth and productivity. But throughout the long, snowy afternoon, he found his thoughts straying to his brothers and their quest.

How would the citizens of Wainwright respond to their appearance? The humans who had settled on Cresca tended to avoid other races, especially outside the main spaceports. Wainwright was even more isolated, located a good distance from other human settlements. Its founder, Josiah Wainwright, had deliberately modeled the town after a more primitive time in Earth's history. Josiah was also the previous owner of the ranch and they had purchased it from his estate, but even after his death, the principles he'd established continue to dominate the town.

As a result, they had decided to keep their presence minimal. Only Artek and his second in command, Callum, had visited Wainwright. And now the townspeople were about to meet a surly Endark and the irrepressible Benjar. He shook his head at the thought, hoping again that everything would go well for his brothers.

The snow continued to fall as night fell and he did one last tour through the greenhouses to make sure that the heat was working properly before returning to his own quarters. Only a curtain of vines separated them from his lab and plants filled the rooms. His plants, nurtured and cared for over the past two years, and as always, they responded to his presence. One of the vines brushed against his cheek while a flower bud bent towards him, beginning to unfurl as it released a heady fragrance. He smiled, some of the tension leaving his body as he stroked his hands across their leaves.

After his usual simple meal, he sat down with a book, but he found himself restless, despite the comfort of his sanctuary.

Had Endark and Benjar been successful? Were they even now on their way back to the valley? He briefly considered going down to the ranch house for news, but the snow was growing deeper and he suspected it would be a futile trip anyway. He couldn't imagine that either Endark or Benjar would want to do anything other than carry their brides to their homes.

He was beginning to drift off to sleep when he heard a distant roar. An avalanche this early in the season? The sound renewed his anxiety. He found himself pacing the floor as his vines whipped back and forth. He was on the verge of going to the ranch house despite the late hour when there was a knock on his door.

He opened it to find Benjar standing there, a cloth-wrapped bundle in his arms. The big pink-furred male gave him a cheerful grin.

"I have a present for you."

Benjar thrust the bundle at him, and he took it automatically

"I don't understand."

"She's your bride. Take care of her."

Benjar grinned again and disappeared into the snowy darkness before Gilmat could respond.

Bride?

For a moment, he stood staring out into the night, noting how much deeper the snow had grown since nightfall, then stepped back inside and closed the door. He sat down and carefully began to unwrap his present. A female, a beautiful female with a flower-like face surrounded by golden petals. A very small female, although the soft curves nestled against him were far from childlike. Her eyes fluttered open for a second. Blue, as blue as the leaves of a rare azuran plant. They were wide and dazed, but when they met his, she smiled.

Mine.

His arms tightened around her even as she drifted back to sleep. His people did not believe in mate bonds. Although they mated for life, all alliances were performed for one reason and one reason only: to produce the best genetic results. She was human and an unlikely genetic match. It didn't matter. She was his, and he was keeping her.

CHAPTER 2



The rich, earthy scent of greenery surrounded Julie when she woke, and she smiled. She must have fallen asleep in the small conservatory attached to her bedroom again. She liked to sit in there and read, and it wouldn't be the first time she had fallen asleep there. Unfortunately, her mother inevitably found her and demanded that she return to her bed like a proper young lady. Her smile dimmed, her mood sinking as it always did when she thought of her mother. She honestly believed that her mother loved her, but she certainly didn't understand her. Nor did she understand that her matrimonial plans for Julie's future were never going to happen.

Sighing, she started to stretch and suddenly realized that not only was she not in her bed, she wasn't in the big chair in her conservatory either. Her eyes flew open and found a strange man holding her.

Not a man. Subtle shades of green covered his skin, while his hair was several shades darker with an odd texture, more like plant tendrils than actual hair. Despite those differences, his features were not dissimilar to human features—and he was stunningly handsome. Handsome and huge, with massive shoulders and a big arm curled around her, supporting her as easily as if she were a child.

I should be frightened. She had never been in a man's arms before, certainly not one this big and this green. But she wasn't afraid. There was even something familiar about him.

"I dreamed about you."

“You woke up before, but only for a moment.”

His voice was a deep rumble against her side, and she could actually feel her body responding to the vibration. The response was almost as shocking as finding herself in his arms. Men had expressed interest in her before. She’d been told often enough that she was pretty, although she suspected that the main attraction was her mother’s wealth and position in the community. But none of the men who had tried to court her had ever interested her more than her books and her plants.

“Who are you? And where am I?”

Her voice sounded remarkably calm. Even now, a small part of her thought she should be panicking, but the familiar scent of greenery soothed her and the arm surrounding her felt warm and comforting rather than predatory.

“I am Gilmat. And your name is?”

“Julia Watson,” she said automatically, then smiled at him. “Although everyone other than my mother calls me Julie.”

“Julie.”

Mmm. Hearing her name in that deep voice was even more pleasant. Something cool and smooth wrapped around her hand, and she looked down to find a vine intertwined with her fingers. It looked like one of the species native to Cresca, and she gave it a puzzled look.

“Is that a koda vine? Aren’t they usually dormant at this time of the year?”

For the first time, she looked beyond the male holding her, and her eyes widened. She struggled to sit up, and after a brief second he assisted her, although he kept her perched on his lap as she looked around in amazement. She’d never seen any place remotely like this—it was as if her conservatory had come alive and grown to three times its original size. More of the koda vines rose from the floor, forming thick trunks that framed a glass roof. Other than the roof and a small kitchen area, everything was covered with foliage.

Gilmat was seated on a bench that followed a curved outer wall, but the surface of the bench was covered with thick

velvety moss rather than fabric. Even the smoothly polished wooden table in front of the bench appeared to grow out of the ground. A wildly divergent mixture of vines covered the other surfaces, many of them flowering. Through an archway on one side of the room, she caught a glimpse of more rooms, leading through to a waterfall on the far wall.

“Yes, the koda vines are usually inert at this time of year, but I... encourage them. By providing a suitable environment,” he added quickly.

Interesting. She had a smaller version of the vine, but even in the shelter of her conservatory it had gone dormant at the end of summer. Sternly suppressing the urge to ask him about the environment she forced herself to focus on her own situation.

“Where am I?” she asked again.

“You are on what used to be the Wainwright ranch.”

His voice sounded oddly strained, and she peered back at him over her shoulder. His eyes were focused not on her face but on her body, and she suddenly realized that she was only wearing her thin cotton nightgown. The quilt that must have been wrapped around her had fallen down around her hips. Her mother would have been appalled, but the air was pleasantly warm and she was technically dressed. She gave a mental shrug and decided not to worry about it. Besides, she rather liked the way he was looking at her.

“All right, I’m at the ranch. But how did I get here?”

The last thing she remembered was going to bed, exhausted by another horrible evening. Her mother had insisted that she wear a far too elaborate dress to the town dance and then tried to force her into dancing with anyone she considered a suitable candidate for matrimony. As far as she was concerned, they were all too old, too lecherous, or both.

Fortunately, Becky, the seamstress who worked for her mother, was also Julie’s friend. Becky had sewn a deep, concealed pocket into the ridiculous gown and she’d used it to smuggle in a book. She’d managed to sneak away from her mother and spend a pleasant few hours reading, but then she’d had to

listen to her mother complain all the way home. As soon as they returned, she'd gone to bed with a headache. And now she was here.

"Benjar brought you to me," Gilmat said slowly. "As my bride."

"As your bride?" Damn, even an unknown alien was determined to marry her off. The absurdity of the situation hit her, and she started to laugh.

"You are my bride," he repeated, and her laughter died away. Deep green eyes were fastened on her face, and she suddenly felt oddly breathless.

"You don't even know me."

"I know you are the one for me." He sounded completely confident, but then his face softened and the vine still wrapped around her hand gave a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry, little blossom. I will wait until you are sure as well."

He seemed convinced that it was only a matter of time. Before she could decide on a response, a wave of tiredness washed over her and she yawned. He immediately settled her back against his chest, cradling her the same way he had held her when she woke.

"You should rest. It is still night and you have had a long journey."

"A journey I don't remember," she pointed out sleepily.

This Benjar person must have drugged her, she decided. There didn't appear to be any side effects other than the lingering exhaustion, but perhaps that was why she still felt warm and unafraid. Still, there didn't seem to be any point in getting annoyed about it after the fact.

I wonder if it was some kind of plant-based compound, she thought, then yawned again. She would have to ask him for details later. Right now, the comforting scent of greenery filled her head and Gilmat's arms were warm and protective around her. She snuggled against him and went to sleep.

CHAPTER 3



Gilmat stared down at the woman sleeping so trustingly in his arms. *My bride*. Immense satisfaction filled him as he settled her more comfortably against his chest. She hadn't even questioned his claim, although she seemed more amused than convinced. It didn't matter—he was prepared to wait.

According to Nelly's tale, the warriors' brides had been happy with the warriors and refused to leave when the villagers came to bring them back. She murmured something in her sleep, and he realized his arms had tightened even more at the thought of someone taking her from him. Time... He needed time.

He shifted the vines aside to peer out through the glass walls. Despite the darkness he could see that the snow was still falling heavily. Good. No one would be traveling in this weather, especially not any weak human males coming to take his bride from him. A noise that sounded oddly like a growl rumbled in his chest as thorns began to erupt from the vines covering his walls.

His plants were responding to his protective instincts just as they had responded to Endark's restlessness earlier, but with greater intensity. People tended to forget that plants were aggressive living things but in this case they were also responding aggressively because of his bond with them—the bond that was usually so hard to access. Fascinating. Perhaps he should conduct some experiments while the bond was so active.

He didn't want to leave his bride, but he should take advantage of this opportunity while she was sleeping. He also needed to collect food to give her the next time she woke. He reluctantly rose to his feet, then placed her back on the bench, and pulled the vines around her, creating a hammock to cradle her body and keep her safe and comfortable. The vines obeyed his commands as easily as they had done when he was a very small child, before his skills attenuated.

The cloth in which she had been wrapped slid to the ground, leaving only leaves surrounding her soft curves, but he wasn't concerned. His plants would keep her warm. He lingered for a moment longer, entranced by the glimpse of pale flesh between the deep green of the leaves. The vines began to move, plucking at the hem of her gown and he realized with a start that they—*he*—was trying to remove it. *No*. He forced the movement to still, then abruptly returned to the greenhouses, removing himself from temptation.

Food, he reminded himself. She would need to be fed. The first greenhouse was his lab, consisting of plants he was utilizing for experimental purposes. The fruit-bearing plants were in the third greenhouse, and he headed towards it, reluctantly leaving her behind. And yet he could still feel a thread connecting her to him—a thread that stretched but did not break.

As he began to gather various fruits, that connection settled into place. Although he was still anxious to return to her, he no longer felt quite so concerned about leaving her. He was bending over a strawberry vine, encouraging the fruit to perfect ripeness, when a flicker of movement attracted his attention. He whirled around and saw Julie, still sleeping peacefully in her vine hammock—a hammock now suspended from the vines in this greenhouse.

He had not tried to manipulate them, but they had responded to his subconscious wishes and brought her anyway. It was an unprecedented experience. Normally, manipulating them to this extent would have required immense concentration, but it appeared his bond to this female was so strong that plants were responding to his unspoken desires.

He never heard of such a thing. Nowhere in his research had he ever come across any suggestion that his skills could be influenced by another person. He hesitated, torn between curiosity and a desire to protect his bride. She was not the subject of his experiments. But perhaps he should investigate the records in greater detail.

In the meantime, her closeness comforted him as he returned to gathering his fruit—fruit that burst into ripeness beneath his hands. When he returned to his quarters, the hammock followed.

He prepared the fruit and set it to one side before sitting back down. Julie's hammock settled into place next to him as he opened his tablet and began searching the historical records for any similar precedents. The world outside the greenhouses began to lighten as the day dawned, but the snow was falling so heavily that he couldn't see anything beyond the glass except the swirling clouds of white. The sight did not displease him. No one would be coming to try and take his bride from him today.

Thorns appeared again at the thought, but he took a deep calming breath and the vines settled. He still gave them an uneasy glance. Responding to his unconscious thoughts could be dangerous. He would have to find a way to exert control—a control he already had difficulty establishing consciously.

Julie stirred, stretching in her hammock. The vines slid back to allow the movement, revealing more of her small, lush body. The thin fabric of her gown provided little concealment. He could see a hint of the pink tipping each generous breast and the shadowy patch between her curvy thighs. His sap rose, his cock stiffening to full, aching hardness despite his best efforts to get it under control.

Her eyes opened, as clear and blue as he remembered, but completely awake this time. The effects of the sleeping potion appeared to have disappeared completely. He tensed, waiting for her reaction and hoping that she would not be frightened. Instead, she smiled.

“I remember you.”

CHAPTER 4



I didn't dream him after all.

Julie sat up, noticing as she did that the vines that had apparently been supporting her slipped away. *That's right. Koda vines.* She remembered them from before, just as she remembered the huge green alien sitting next to her.

"You're Gilmat, right?"

"Yes. And you are Julie."

She remembered that deep, rumbling voice as well, and how good it had felt when he spoke, his chest vibrating against her as he held her in his arms. Something he was no longer doing, she noticed regretfully, although at least he was so close that their arms were almost touching.

"Good. I was afraid it had just been a dream."

"And it is good that it is not?"

Good that she was here in this unusual place, surrounded by intriguing plants and an even more intriguing male? *Yes.*

"Definitely. My normal life is somewhat... restricted."

"You were not cared for properly?"

His voice dipped even lower, to the point where it was almost a growl, and the air in the room seemed to thicken with tension. She quickly shook her head.

"If anything, I was cared for too well." Surrounded by luxuries she didn't want. "We had a nice house and plenty of food and clothing. I know I shouldn't complain. It's just..."

He waited, that intense green stare fixed on her face.

She sighed. “It’s just that that’s all it was—a very safe, comfortable life. I wanted to go away to school to study, but my mother wouldn’t permit it.”

She had debated leaving anyway, but in the end she’d decided to wait until she turned twenty-one and received the money her father had left in trust for her. It was the practical decision and she did what she could to study on her own, but she often felt as if she was simply biding her time waiting for her life to begin.

“She did not wish you to receive an education?”

He seemed almost as angry about that as he had when he thought she was neglected, and she smiled. It sometimes felt as if she were the only person in Wainwright who valued learning.

“Oh, she wanted me to know the basics. But she doesn’t put a lot of value in advanced education, especially for a woman. Her primary concern is making sure I make an advantageous marriage.”

His hair stirred, the tendrils moving in what looked like agitation.

“You are *my* bride.”

He had said that last night as well, and she remembered thinking it was amusing at the time. This morning, it no longer seemed so funny. She shook her head.

“I don’t plan on being anyone’s bride.”

He studied her face, but rather to her surprise he didn’t argue. Instead, he rose to his feet, that big body looming over her.

“Are you hungry? I have prepared food.”

He moved across the room without waiting for a response, returning with a large platter filled with a colorful selection of fruit, all of it at the peak of ripeness.

“This looks wonderful.” When he didn’t sit down next to her, she gave him a quizzical look. “Aren’t you going to join me?”

“If you wish.”

“Yes, please. I really don’t like eating alone.”

Ironically, that was exactly what happened most of the time. Her mother’s demanding social schedule frequently kept her away from the house during mealtimes, but Julie had no desire to accompany her on her rounds. She would have been perfectly content eating in the kitchen with the housekeeper, Becky, and Becky’s brother Danny, but her mother stringently objected to her dining with the staff. Her objections didn’t bother Julie, but she didn’t want anyone else getting in trouble because of her. As a result, she usually ended up eating on a tray in her room by herself.

This is much better, she thought, shoving the memory of all those isolated meals away as Gilmat sat down next to her.

“I’m familiar with the strawberries, of course, and the peaches and the watermelon.” They were hybrid versions of the original Earth plants, designed to grow well on Cresca.

“Although all of them are out of season as well,” she added with a smile. “You are obviously an excellent gardener.”

To her surprise, he looked more uncomfortable than pleased with the compliment. She changed the subject, pointing to a pile of pale pinkish berries.

“I’m not familiar with these. What are they?”

Just as she’d hoped, her question distracted him.

“They are zold berries,” he said. “They are native to Vizal, and both Drakkar and Frantor enjoy them.”

“Drakkar and Frantor?”

“My brothers. We all served together,” he added. “Everyone on the ranch was part of Commander Artek’s squad.”

She nodded and cautiously bit into a zold berry. It exploded in her mouth in a burst of sweetness.

“Oh my gosh. That’s delicious.”

He didn’t respond, his gaze fixed on her mouth, and then a big thumb swiped across the corner of her mouth.

“You have some juice here.”

She could see a drop of juice glistening on his thumb, and she impulsively leaned closer and licked it off. His whole body shuddered.

“I’m sorry,” she said, feeling her cheeks heat. “I shouldn’t have—”

Her words broke off as he raised his thumb to his mouth and ran his tongue across the spot she had licked. His eyes closed briefly, as if savoring the sensation then focused on her face.

“You taste delicious.”

She felt suddenly breathless.

“You can’t tell what I taste like just from that.”

His eyes dropped to her mouth again, and her pulse sped up. He leaned closer, and his lips brushed against hers for the briefest instant before he stood abruptly, leaving her feeling unexpectedly disappointed. It wouldn’t have been the first time that someone had tried to kiss her, but it was the first time she had wanted it. Since he obviously didn’t feel the same way, why had he said he wanted her as his wife? Was he after her mother’s money as well? Appetite deserting her, she pushed the plate away.

“Last night you said that this is the old Wainwright ranch,” she said briskly, hiding her disappointment. “That means that Nelly lives here as well. Where is she?”

The shopkeeper’s daughter had married one of the aliens several months ago. Julie didn’t know her very well, but she’d enjoyed their brief conversations.

“She lives in the main ranch house with Commander Artek. Why?”

“I suppose I should go see her and see if she can make arrangements for me to get back to town.”

“No!” he growled.

His hair was moving, and the vines on the surrounding walls rippled as if a breeze had blown across them.

“What do you mean, no? Do you intend to keep me here forever?”

And why did that thought not dismay her as much as it probably should?

“There is too much snow,” he muttered.

He stalked over to the edge of the room, pulled aside some of the foliage to reveal tall glass walls. All she could see outside was white, and when she went to join him, the intensity of the storm was immediately obvious.

“What happens when the storm ends?” she asked, looking up at him.

His hair was moving again, but he didn't respond. She sighed, and put her hand on that massive arm. His skin was smooth and warm, but there was no disguising the hard, powerful muscles beneath it. A little shiver of excitement skated down her spine, and the tips of her breasts suddenly tingled. Shocked, she looked down to see her nipples thrusting against the thin cloth of her nightgown. *I'm aroused?*

It was an unfamiliar sensation, one she wanted to explore, but...

“My mother will come for me. Or send someone for me,” she added knowing that was a more likely alternative.

Was that another growl? Before she could decide, he crossed his arms and frowned down at her. He should have looked intimidating, but her arousal didn't diminish. Instead she wanted to smooth away that frown.

“She would have to find you first.”

“True, but given how isolated Wainwright is, I don't suppose it will take very long for someone to think of looking here.” Especially given how prejudiced the town was about the new inhabitants of the ranch. She shrugged, looking back outside. “But I don't think even my mother could convince anyone to come looking for me in this weather. So what are we going to do until then?”

His eyes heated and she waited hopefully, but instead he took a step back.

“I have work to do.”

“Can I help?”

“I...” He shook his head. “Not today.”

She sighed. “Then what am I going to do?”

“You said you wish to become a scholar? Can you read Galactic?”

“Yes, although I had to teach myself so it may not be perfect.”

In keeping with the rest of Josiah Wainwright’s antiquated ideas, the school curriculum was similar to what one would have found on Earth hundreds of years in the past.

“Come with me.”

As he led his way into the next room, she found herself studying him, studying the broad shoulders and the muscles rippling beneath his skin, studying the high, firm buttocks. Were all men this attractive from the rear and she just never noticed before? She had obviously spent too much time with her—

“Books,” she gasped as he came to a halt in the next room and she tore her attention away from that magnificent body. The curved walls of the room were filled with bookshelves. Vines wove their way amongst them as they had in the main living area, but the glass dome of the ceiling was completely bare, flooding the room with a white glow despite the heavy snow. A large desk stood on one side of the room while a large window in the outer wall had a wide, moss-covered bench in the deep embrasure.

“This is amazing.”

And indicated a surprising degree of wealth. Her mother had complained often enough about the cost of Julie’s books. Perhaps he wasn’t after her family’s money after all.

“Aren’t you concerned that the plants will damage the books?” she added.

“Not all.” There was that uncomfortable look again, an odd mixture of pride and regret. “Perhaps you could find something here that interests you.”

For the first time in her life, she actually hesitated before moving across to the shelves. She had never considered the possibility that another person might be more interesting than a room full of books.

“I’m sure I can.”

“Good.” He hesitated, then reached over and brushed his thumb across her mouth again. “There is more fruit on the table, and the facilities are on the other side of my room. Make yourself at home. I will return to feed you again.”

And then he was gone.

The brief caress reawakened her lingering arousal. She pressed her hands against the throbbing peaks of her breasts, surprised at how pleasurable it felt. She had read about sexual pleasure of course and had tried touching herself, but she’d never found it particularly interesting. Perhaps her experiments had omitted a necessary factor—like a certain huge green alien.

But right now she had more urgent bodily needs to attend to and she went in search of the facilities. The next room was clearly his bedroom. It too had a curved outer wall, the space filled with an enormous raised platform carpeted with moss. His bed—the only bed. Would they be sharing it?

The final room was smaller, but large enough for a big tub against the outer wall. Water flowed from the tub to mingle with the water trickling down the waterfall before disappearing beneath the far wall. Unlike the rest of his dwelling, the walls here were clearly rock, although plants still grew from every nook and cranny. Once again, a clear glass dome formed the ceiling. On the far side of the waterfall, she discovered thankfully familiar modern plumbing.

As she washed her hands and returned to the study, her thoughts kept traveling to Gilmat. Why was she so attracted to him? And why had he declared her his bride only to leave her alone?

He said he would give me time, she remembered. But how much time did they have? Her mother would be hot on her trail as soon as the storm eased. If she wanted to explore this unfamiliar desire, she had no time to waste.

CHAPTER 5



Fear and triumph warred with each other as Gilmat hurried back to his lab. His plants were finally responding to him the way they should—to the control he'd been bred to establish. The problem was that they were responding to his subconscious desires rather than direct commands. When Julie looked up at him, her lips shining with zold juice, he'd been unable to resist touching her, then tasting her sweetness mingled with the sweetness of the berries.

When he touched her, her delicious fragrance had increased and he saw the small peaks of her nipples thrusting against her gown. He'd been on the verge of deepening the kiss when he noticed that the vines which had made up her hammock had returned, curling around her back, and he'd known that they were preparing to lift her into his arms, to hold her captive for his kiss. As much as he wanted that, he forced himself to stand, to walk away before he allowed them to do something he would regret.

The same thing happened when they were looking outside, when she mentioned leaving. He could feel the vines thickening, strengthening, preparing to fortify his home against anyone entering—or anyone leaving. He even found the thought appealing. He wanted his bride safely at his side, protected from any danger, but that protection was meaningless unless it also extended to him. He had every intention of keeping her, but he wanted her full and enthusiastic consent to the idea of being kept.

The physical attraction between them was undeniable, and her curiosity and quick mind attracted him just as much. He was confident that she would agree to be his bride, given time. There it was again—time. How long did he have before her mother or the townspeople came searching for her? His fists clenched at the thought, and long, wicked thorns suddenly sprang up amidst the leaves of the vine framing the window. He stared at them in dismay.

He was not a violent male. He could fight, and fight well, but never with the mindless blood lust that sometimes overtook other warriors. He was always in control. Endark had even teased him about it, saying that the strands of plant DNA in his genetics kept him calm. He was wrong. Plants were living beings like any other living beings, and they would fight to protect themselves. The methods might not be as obvious—thorns instead of swords and poison instead of bullets—but they could be just as deadly.

No, his control came from the years of discipline. Of trying to become what his genetics had promised. Every Gremin child was tested beginning at birth, if not before, searching for those markers which indicated a successful genetic enhancement. He had seen his records—he knew that he had been tested for all of the skills that had been bred into their race. He also knew that his affinity to plants had been far in excess of what the people who had bred him had hoped to achieve. He had no memory of his breeders, and he certainly never thought of them as parents.

His first memory was of being alone in a meadow as a vine crawled across the grass towards him. He had been three, perhaps four, and he remembered being afraid as the vine reached his side and the leaves parted revealing a handful of long, whip-like stamen. He remembered a voice telling him to stop it, but he couldn't and he remembered the stamen striking his side, leaving lines of agony. The scars still lingered, and he brushed his fingers across them as he did so frequently.

It had not been the first test, or even the worst. No matter how hard he studied, no matter how much discipline he tried to exert over his mind and his body, he was a failure. When he

turned sixteen, he'd had one final chance to succeed. If he had passed that test, he could have remained with the Gremin. Instead, he had failed and was cast out on the streets of Port Cantor. He had been told it was because it would provide job opportunities, but even then he had known he was being exiled for his failure, to avoid any chances of his faulty genes contaminating others.

Fortunately he was big enough and strong enough even at that age that few were willing to take him on. He had also trained himself to fight during his studies, even though such pursuits were considered primitive by his people. Primitive they might have been, but they had saved his life during more than one of the more extreme tests. They had also proven useful when he encountered a half-Vultor boy cornered in an alley by four humans. His claws and fangs had emerged and he looked almost feral, but he stood little chance against four much larger males. He had seen the look of desperation in the boy's eyes, and he'd gone to help. Together they had defeated the four men. He and Endark had been friends ever since.

Was he experiencing the mate bond that Endark was trying to find? This overwhelming need both to protect and to claim? At least Endark understood such a bond. Nothing in Gilmat's studies had ever indicated such a thing occurred amongst his own people.

He almost wished the snow would stop falling long enough for him to find his friend and ask for information. But once the snow stopped falling, the chances that someone would appear to try and take Julie from him would increase. Perhaps it was just as well that he didn't have any talent with the weather. If he did, he would be tempted to let it fall forever, to surround them with walls of snow and ice impossible to scale.

Or perhaps not. He sighed and stroked his hand along the thorny vine, willing it to calm. Keeping her locked up was not the answer for either of them. He wanted to show her the beauty of the valley and the mountains, wanted to see his brothers and continue the work of reclaiming the ranch. The thorns slowly disappeared back beneath the bark.

Control, he reminded himself. He would have to remain in control at all times. He did his best to settle into the discipline of his familiar routine. Nelly had requested an additional sweetener, and he was cultivating a sweet-sapped plant to produce crystals in addition to the liquid sap. It was proving successful, but the crystals were so large that they would require pounding before use. He planned to continue making modifications until he could produce smaller crystals.

But the taste was quite satisfactory. The sweetness reminded him of the sweetness of Julie's mouth, and his sap immediately began to rise at the thought. His attempt to control it failed miserably, so he sighed and moved to the next worktable. This was a simpler experiment, conducted only for his own pleasure. The lensca flowers had tiny, delicate petals which, under the right conditions, were as transparent as glass. But they were impossibly fragile and even the brush of another leaf would cause them to collapse into limp strands. He was working on strengthening that structure without losing the delicate transparency.

"What a beautiful plant. I've never seen flowers like that," Julie said.

He turned and any sap left in his body went directly to his unruly cock.

She had walked through one of the misters, rendering her already thin gown translucent, and he could see every detail from the golden curls at the apex of her thighs to the exact shade of pink tipping each breast. But it was more than just that small, delectable body. It was the smile on her face and the curiosity in her eyes that turned him rampant.

Her eyes suddenly widened.

"Look at that!"

He reluctantly tore his gaze away and looked down at the plant he had been examining. Hundreds of flowers had erupted, creating long, luxuriant cascades of the delicate blossoms, and even now more bubbled up from the stem in a waterfall of flowers.

“How did you do that?” she whispered.

CHAPTER 6



Gilmat looked as shocked as she felt as he stared down at the flowers overflowing the small plant he had been observing. Beautiful flowers, perfect crystal blossoms surrounding a tiny blue center. She'd never seen anything like them before, and she'd certainly never seen anything like that explosion of blooms.

His expression of shock disappeared, replaced by one that looked more like guilt as he quickly released the plant and stepped back.

"It is called a lensca. An ice crystal plant," he added. "Don't touch it."

"I wasn't going to," she assured him, although her fingers itched to stroke one of the small blossoms and find out if it felt more like glass or living surface beneath her hand. "But how did you do that?"

Now that he was no longer touching it, no more blossoms appeared.

"It is difficult to explain," he said stiffly, looking over her head back towards his dwelling. "I thought you intended to read."

She had tried to explore his fascinating library. Although there were books in at least two languages she didn't recognize, there was also a substantial collection of works written in Galactic, including some of her favorites. But despite the wealth of reading material and the comfortable window seat that seemed to mold itself around her, she'd been unable to focus on her reading.

Instead, her mind kept straying towards the big green male and their limited time together, and she had decided to seek him out. Apparently he was not as interested in seeing her. Once again, her disappointment led to annoyance, and she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

“You know, for someone who was so quick to inform me that I was his bride, you don’t seem very interested in spending time with me.”

“Not interested?” He gave her a brief glance, the astonishment on his face soothing her hurt pride, before looking away again. “I am delighted to have you here with me.”

“Then why won’t you even look at me?”

He made a strangled noise, his body angled away from hers.

“Your... clothing is very transparent.”

What? She looked down in confusion. *Oh*. She had felt the dampness surrounding her as she entered the greenhouse but hadn’t realized what it had done to her nightgown, rendering it almost see through. She knew she should be embarrassed. If she had been in Wainwright, she would have been mortified, but somehow here it didn’t seem to matter. She shrugged.

“Appropriate clothing is simply a social convention. Some cultures fetishize different aspects of the body. There were times in Earth’s past when a glimpse of ankle was considered far more shocking than a glimpse of bosom. The Halta species consider ears to be the most erogenous part of the body and they may only be revealed to one other partner during their lifetime. And on Shalin—” As she warmed up to her subject, she suddenly realized that he was staring at her. “What?”

He started to laugh, his already handsome face becoming even more breathtaking.

“You are correct, of course. But I assure you, little blossom, that any right-thinking society would consider every part of your delectable body provocative.”

He pulled a woven cloth from a nearby bench and wrapped it around her. As he did, his fingers skated across the side of her

breast and that one quick, delicate touch made her whole body pulse with arousal.

His fingers lingered for a fraction of a second before he gave that same strangled sound and turned away. His fingers brushed against his hip as he did so and she realized that his pants were stretched tight across his penis—an enormous and very erect penis. *Oh my.*

She had seen pictures of penises before in her biology books. One of them even had a very interesting section on the variations between species, but she couldn't remember ever seeing one quite so large and impressive. Did he have other traits, she wondered, remembering some of the enhancements with which other species were blessed. She was almost tempted to ask him, but perhaps it would be better to conduct some more research first.

“My point was that it's not the clothing but the surrounding culture that dictates what is acceptable,” she said instead.

“Perhaps,” he agreed, although he didn't sound convinced. “And perhaps we should continue this discussion back in my dwelling.”

“Wait a minute. What about your crystal plant? Does it always flower like that?”

He hesitated for a long moment, then shook his head.

“No. It's never happened before.”

“So you made that happen? How?”

“I believe I made it happen, although I did not choose to do so.”

She had the impression he was choosing his words carefully, but she only nodded.

“Could you do the same thing with the next one?”

An identical plant was positioned next to the first, but it only had a few scattered flowers.

He was already shaking his head.

“I cannot.”

“How do you know? Maybe the conditions just haven’t been right before. You should at least experiment.”

He sighed and rubbed his hip.

“Very well.”

He reached for the next plant and as he did his hand passed over the existing flowers. She could have sworn he didn’t touch them, but they suddenly melted, leaving long, limp blue strands instead of the sparkling flowers.

“Do they always melt so quickly?”

“Yes,” he said bitterly. “I have been endeavoring to create additional stability, but so far my experiments have been unsuccessful. Just like this one will be.”

He curved his hand around the base of the plant, positioning it where it had been when she entered the lab, but he was correct—there was no eruption of flowers.

“You see?”

Hmm. As far she could tell, everything in the lab appeared to be the same as when she had entered. What could have triggered that explosion of bloom? She looked at his downcast face and then remembered the way he had looked at her when she entered—and the size of his erection. Could she have been a factor? Or was she putting two and two together and making five?

A reckless impulse swept over her, and she stepped closer to him and took his hand. With her other hand she unwrapped the cloth surrounding her, then pressed his hand directly against her damp cloth-covered breast. Her already erect nipple brushed against his palm, and his hand tightened, causing another flood of excitement. Then she was being lifted into his arms as his mouth descended over hers. He kissed her as hungrily, as passionately as any bride could desire, his cool minty taste making her mouth tingle as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back just as enthusiastically.

He had one hand buried in her hair and another one beneath her butt and what felt like another arm wrapped around her waist, but she was too busy kissing him to analyze the

situation. She squirmed against him, trying to relieve the ache in her breasts, and then he was touching her there as well, wrapping his fingers around her nipple and tugging at the needy flesh.

She gasped into his mouth, and he suddenly pulled away. He looked so shocked that she blushed and ducked her head. When she looked down, she saw that the experiment had been a success. More flowers had erupted from the second plant—enough flowers that they covered the surface of the worktable and flowed down towards the floor.

“Look! It worked.”

“No, it didn’t,” he said stiffly. “You look.”

She frowned and followed his gaze down her body. The hand that had been tugging at her nipple was not a hand at all. Instead, a vine was wrapped around the taut bud. Another vine was curved around her waist, holding her against him, although that was definitely his arm beneath her and his hand on her ass.

“I don’t understand. Do you control the plants?”

“No, I don’t,” he said grimly. “I would never restrain you in this way.”

“You aren’t restraining me.”

Was he? She tugged gently on the vine around her waist and it immediately released her.

“You see? It was just holding me.”

“Because I wanted to hold you against me.”

“In case you didn’t notice, I didn’t mind. And really, I started the whole thing, remember? If I hadn’t wanted you to touch me, I wouldn’t have put your hand on my breast.”

The vine still circling her nipple gave a quick squeeze, and dropped free.

“You were just experimenting,” he said, his voice strained.

“To a certain extent, but believe me when I say that my interest in scientific endeavors does not extend to offering my

body. Unless I want to.”

She tugged gently on his neck, pulling his head down towards hers, and noticed that he automatically lifted her higher so that she could brush her lips gently across his.

“I’m very happy with the results of our experiment,” she whispered.

He sighed and rested his forehead against hers.

“I wish I could say the same. Not that I don’t enjoy kissing you,” he added quickly when she stiffened. “I would happily spend the rest of my life feasting on the nectar of your lips.”

She decided to ignore the rest of the part about the rest of his life and think about it later.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“My people are bred for certain genetic traits. In my case that should include the ability to communicate with and manipulate plant matter. But it was unsuccessful.”

“How can you say that?” she asked, remembering the natural beauty of his home and looking at the lush, healthy variety of plants surrounding them.

He sighed again and began carrying her back to his dwelling.

“I have some skills. Generations ago they would’ve been considered impressive. Now they are a mere fraction of what I should be capable of doing.”

Hmm. His skills certainly seemed impressive to her, but it was not a subject with which she was familiar.

“What would you have been doing if you had developed those skills?”

“I would have been assigned to a research lab.”

“Doing the same type of research you’re doing here?” she asked innocently.

The corner of his mouth twisted into a smile.

“Far more important work,” he assured her, but he no longer looked quite as distressed.

“Would you have been working with other scientists?”

He shook his head.

“Plants compete for resources, and we would do the same.”

“Then maybe it’s all for the best.” She waved back across the workroom to where the crystal plant still covered the worktable with its beautiful clear blossoms. “Now we can work together. And who knows what we might discover?”

CHAPTER 7



Gilmat put down his tablet, rubbing his eyes. Despite Julie's intriguing suggestion, he had insisted on doing additional research as soon as they returned to his quarters. He found it difficult to believe that the powerful effects of the attraction between them would not have been noted—noted and studied. And yet he'd been unable to find anything in the records. As he'd told Julie, any of his people who developed the level of skill that had been expected from him were sent to isolated locations to work and study.

"No luck?" she asked softly, and he looked up to find her smiling at him.

She'd been sitting in the window seat reading while he investigated, and his vines had curled around her shoulders and across her waist. While he couldn't directly feel the silky texture of her skin or the soft swell of her stomach, he had been aware of them as he worked.

"I'm afraid not. I find it hard to believe that this has never happened before, but if it had happened, I'm sure it would have been recorded."

"Hmm." She stroked the vine across her waist, her fingers tangling with the smaller tendrils, and he could easily envision her touching him the same way. "Are all your records digital?"

"They are now. Originally they were on paper, of course, but the data was scanned and added to the database many years ago."

She put aside her book and rose to her feet, running her small hand down the vines as she did. Her gown had dried so it was no longer transparent, but it was still thin enough for him to see the tantalizing movement of her body beneath it as she began to pace back and forth.

“But what if all the records weren’t included?” she asked thoughtfully.

“Why wouldn’t they be?”

“You said your people were bred for these abilities. Why?”

The subject was a closely guarded secret amongst the Gremin, but considering that he had been exiled he no longer cared about those restrictions.

“I assume you know that two of the planets in this system—this planet and Tuknis—are open to human settlement? There is also a third planet in the system, Valleyant, and that is where my people originate.”

“I remember reading something to that effect, although there were no details about Valleyant.”

“No outsider has ever been allowed to visit.” He sighed. “We were always a race of scholars, scientists, but the single-minded pursuit of knowledge can be dangerous. Our experimentation with plants was so successful that we succeeded in eliminating animal life from Valleyant.”

Her eyes widened and he could see questions trembling on her lips, but he kept going.

“Anything we need, anything we wish to trade, has to come from our plants. That’s why the ability to manipulate them is so vital. That’s also why it’s so important to keep accurate records.”

“Unless there was something they didn’t want you to know.” She tapped her luscious lips thoughtfully. “Are any of the original written records still available? Do you have access to them?”

“Not without traveling to Valleyant and accessing the main reference library in the capital,” he said dryly, then paused,

something teasing the back of his mind. “At least...”

He turned to the shelves behind him, running his fingers along the spines until he found the book he wanted.

“As soon as we arrived here, I started collecting books. I have a standing order with a bookseller in Port Cantor. This arrived earlier this summer.”

She came to lean against him as he carefully placed the fragile book on his desk.

“What a beautiful book. It looks very old.”

“It’s both,” he agreed.

The cover was intricately embossed with plants and flowers. The pages were written in an elaborate flowing script interspersed with small paintings.

“It’s also extremely difficult to read because of the script and because it’s written in an ancient version of our language. I only made it through the first few pages before I put it aside. I intended to try again once winter arrived.”

He had looked forward to studying the ancient text while the snows fell, but then Julie had come and now long evenings with a book no longer seemed enticing.

“I definitely think you could say that winter is here,” she said dryly, looking at the snow blowing against the window.

“I will see what I can decipher, but I’m not sure it will do any good. From what I can tell, it’s a fictional tale.”

She shrugged. “That doesn’t mean it won’t be useful. Even fiction reflects a version of the writer’s reality. It’s worth a try.”

“Very well.”

She started to move away, but he grabbed her and lifted her onto his lap instead. She squeaked, then smiled up at him.

“Did you decide to abandon research and try some more direct experiments?”

“It is a very tempting idea.” *Too tempting.* “But what if it harms you?”

“Harm me? Why would it harm me? Everything you did made me feel wonderful.” She licked her lips, and his sap began to rise. “In fact, if you experimented, I bet you could make me feel even better. Or I could make you feel better,” she added thoughtfully, then grinned at him. “Can I experiment with you, Gilmat?”

Fuck yes.

He bit back his immediate agreement as his now fully erect shaft pulsed beneath her luscious ass. As delightful as the prospect sounded, he suspected he would have no hope of remaining in control if she were touching him.

“This is my area of expertise,” he said sternly. “If we’re going to experiment, I’m going to conduct the experiment.”

“Yes, professor,” she said meekly, but her eyes sparkled. “Where do you want to begin?”

He couldn’t resist that mischievous look.

“A well-run experiment always begins with observation.”

He lifted her off of his lap, ignoring her disappointed murmur, and sat her on the edge of the desk in front of him. She was so small that their faces were level—the perfect height for kissing—but that was for a later stage of the experiment. For the moment, he was content just to observe. She quivered under his scrutiny, the small buds of her nipples becoming more prominent.

“Color, for example. Response to stimuli.”

He stroked his thumb across the taut peaks.

“Your nipples appear to be pink and responsive, but because they are partially concealed, accurate observation is difficult.”

“Is this better?”

She pulled the fabric tighter across her chest, but it still obscured too much for his liking. Instead, he leaned forward and sucked one of the tempting little peaks into his mouth. The

wet cloth created little barrier as he sucked eagerly and she arched against his mouth.

“You should repeat the experiment,” she demanded when he finally lifted his head.

“Or perhaps I should keep this as a control.”

He stroked his thumb across the dry cloth covering her other nipple, and although she shivered deliciously, he decided she was right and bent his head again.

That was better. Her nipples were a deeper shade of pink now, clearly visible through the once again transparent cloth. Her eyes were heavy with pleasure as she tugged at him again, raising her face for his kiss. He obliged, losing himself so completely in her kiss that he didn't realize at first that she had wrapped her legs around his waist and was wiggling against him.

“Are you trying to change the parameters of the experiment, little blossom?”

“Yes,” she said impatiently, trying to tug him closer with her adorably small curvy legs.

“You are forgetting the rules. Observation first.”

He gently lowered her back onto the desk and raised her gown. Golden curls, already scattered with pearls of moisture, and beneath the curls, flushed, glistening folds. Absolutely perfect.

“Gilmat?”

Her voice quivered and he dragged his eyes away to focus on her face. Her small blunt teeth were clamped on her full lower lip.

“Do you wish to stop the experiment, blossom?” he asked gently.

“Not at all, but please touch me. I feel more comfortable when you're touching me.”

“Of course.”

He stroked his hands up her thighs and she sighed happily, her face relaxing. Satisfaction filled him. Had anyone ever craved

his touch before?

“Now where were we? Ah, yes. Observation. A darker pink here. And very, very wet.”

He carefully parted the delicate folds, then lowered his head and ran his tongue the length of her small slit. Her sweetness flooded his tongue as she cried out, her back arching so strongly that she almost slid out of his hands.

“Hold still, blossom. You wouldn’t want to affect the results of the experiment, would you?”

“I can’t hold still,” she protested, her hips still shifting restlessly.

“Then I will assist you.”

He tightened his grip on her thighs, pulling her legs further apart as he devoured more of her delicious nectar. A small pearl of flesh at the top of her slit produced the most satisfactory results, and he worked it relentlessly with his tongue until she cried out again, her body pulsing in long, rhythmic spasms before finally going limp. Too limp for more, he decided and raised his head.

“I would call that a successful experiment,” she murmured sleepily.

“Delightful,” he agreed, and her lips curved.

“That’s not what I meant. Look at the window.”

He followed her gaze, turning to look back over his shoulder.

The vines surrounding the window were blooming, large clusters of pink petals framing the blizzard outside. Just as they had before, the plants had responded to their interaction. *But still without my control.* And what if that made it dangerous?

He turned back to Julie, but her eyes were closed again and her breathing had settled into a steady rhythm. She was asleep. He would have been quite content just to watch her until she awakened, but he needed to know more. Smoothing her gown back down over her luscious hips, he lifted her back onto his

lap, cradling her against his chest as he began the laborious process of deciphering the antique book.

CHAPTER 8



I never knew I was such a wanton, Julie thought happily.

Her lack of interest in sex up until now must have been due to the absence of interesting males, not because of any failure on her part. But perhaps that was just as well. Her mother would have died if Julie had discovered a fascination with bodily pleasure back in Wainwright. Here on the ranch she didn't have to worry about anyone else's opinion. She was simply disappointed that she had fallen asleep before she could suggest any additional experiments.

She had woken to find herself comfortably ensconced in the window seat, vines supporting her once again. Gilmat had looked up as soon as she woke, but he'd only smiled and returned to his book. *Hmph*. He didn't seem interested in repeating their experiment, so she wasn't going to suggest it.

Although she pretended to bury herself in her book, she kept finding herself watching him from under her lashes. Everything about him intrigued her, from the subtle pattern of his skin to the fierce intelligence in his eyes. And that enormous penis. *No, that enormous cock*, she thought. The word seemed far more appropriate, even though she was sure that her cheeks were flaming.

Just how far did she want to go? And was actual sex even possible? There was a considerable size difference, after all, and while she had found it delightful so far, it was possible that there were physical limitations. If only she had her own books so she could research it...

She sighed, put down the book she was pretending to read, and went to look at his shelves again.

“Are you looking for anything in particular, blossom?”

She jumped at the sound of his deep voice, then gave him her best innocent smile.

“No, just looking.”

“Fine. Just let me know if you need help.”

His voice dropped on the last words. Was he making a sexual innuendo? If only she knew more.

“Do you have anything on human biology?” she asked as casually as possible.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, just curious.”

His face relaxed as he frowned thoughtfully.

“I believe the only material that I have regarding humans is a small collection of fiction that was inadvertently included in my last shipment. They’re on that lower shelf. I haven’t gotten around to returning them yet.”

“Thanks, I’ll take a look.”

The collection consisted of a few mysteries and a historical retelling—none of which were relevant—but it also contained a romance. Would that be of any use? Perhaps. She had told him that fiction contained an element of truth. She shrugged and took the book back to her window seat.

Two hours later, her cheeks were flushed and her mind was spinning. She’d had no idea that there were so many possibilities for pleasure between two people. She gave Gilmat a speculative look just as he raised his head, his nostrils flaring.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, but he only shook his head.

Her voice had come out low and husky, and she had to fight to keep from squirming in her seat. The man in the book had been extremely well endowed—rather more than any actual

human male, she'd decided—but the book had several very creative options for stretching the heroine. Maybe it was time to propose another experiment... Before she could decide, he stretched and rose to his feet.

“It’s time to do some work in the greenhouses. Would you like to come?”

Curiosity about his work triumphed over her lingering arousal, and she jumped up.

“Of course.”

He took her hand as he led her through his lab and into the other greenhouses. One was dedicated to grains, one to fruits, and one to vegetables. All of them were flourishing despite the storm outside the greenhouses. They were in the vegetable greenhouse and he was showing her the records he kept when she had a wicked idea.

“What are these called?” she asked, pointing to one of the plants.

“Those are dika. They’re originally from Tuknis, but they have an extended growing season here.”

“Are they ripe?”

“Yes. Do you want to try one?”

When she nodded, he picked it and handed it to her. Instead of tasting it, she ran it through her fingers. The dika was a long, smooth column of deep green, perhaps the width of her two fingers. Much smaller than what she remembered of Gilmat’s cock but perhaps that was just as well when she considered its purpose. If only it were a little more... personal.

“Blossom, what are you doing?”

His voice sounded strained again, and when she looked up his gaze was fixed on the dika sliding between her fingers.

“Just something I read,” she said lightly and caressed the dika again, letting her fingers linger on the smooth surface as he watched every movement.

“Is this something to do with one of those human books?”

“I was just looking for advice.”

This time she circled the dika, scratching lightly with her nails, and he growled.

“What kind of advice?”

She gave him her best wide-eyed innocent look.

“You said I was your bride. I assume that means we will have s-sex.” The pink in her cheeks was real. “And I was wondering how to prepare myself. To s-stretch myself.”

“Stretch?” he repeated, still watching her stroke the dika, and then his head snapped up. “Stretch yourself? You were going to use one of my plants?”

He looked furious, but his cock was straining against his pants again.

“Umm, yes?”

He growled again and snatched her up in his arms as the dika fell unnoticed to the floor. His hair writhed around his head, and when she lifted a curious hand, some of the tendrils curled around her fingers. She couldn't hear him growl again, but his chest was still vibrating wonderfully against her breasts as he stalked through his house and dropped her on his mossy mattress.

“Let me make one thing perfectly clear, blossom. I will be the only one touching you, the only one preparing you, and definitely the only one stretching you.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “Can we get started?”

He groaned and came down over her, caging her beneath his big body as her heart raced.

“I haven't finished researching.”

“Does that really matter?”

“Yes. I told you that I won't take any chances on harming you.”

“What about just a little stretch? That won't hurt anything, will it?”

His hips jerked, and she felt the wonderful, tantalizing length of his cock pressing between her legs.

“You already had your mouth on me,” she whispered. “This would only be a little more. Just a small experiment.”

Green sparks flashed in his eyes at the word experiment, but she managed not to smile.

“It’s for science,” she said as solemnly as possible, and he shook his head, a smile twisting his lips.

“I suppose one must be prepared to make sacrifices for science.”

She opened her mouth to respond, and he kissed her. The game they were playing vanished from her thoughts as she kissed him back. How could a mere kiss arouse her so quickly? By the time he lifted his head, her whole body was aching.

“My pretty little bride,” he whispered, stroking his hand lightly across her breasts.

They were so sensitive that even that light touch made her gasp. His hand slid lower, beneath her nightgown, and she wiggled impatiently.

“Take it off.”

He obeyed, then leaned back to look at her once more.

“Delectable.”

They both watched as his big green hand traveled back down her body, gently parting the curls. Her thighs jumped involuntarily at the delicate touch.

“I’m not sure I can stay still.”

“Let’s see.”

His finger dipped lower, sliding between her folds, and even that single digit felt enormous—but so, so good that her legs spread further apart. He slid his finger back and forth, passing lightly over her clit with each stroke. Enough to build her arousal but not enough for her to climax.

He held up his finger, shining now, and circled it with his tongue. “Delicious.”

“Your finger is bigger than the dika,” she murmured.

“Indeed. Would you have preferred that?”

She shook her head frantically.

“No! Now please put that big, wonderful finger of yours inside me.”

He growled and kissed her again as he finally began probing at her entrance. Her body resisted, her muscles tightening, and he started dragging his thumb across her clit, harder now as the tip of his finger slid inside. He pushed deeper as her body spiraled higher, quivering on the edge of climax. More resistance was followed by a sharp sting, the slight pain sending her soaring, her channel convulsing helplessly around that big finger as she cried out into his mouth.

His hands turned soothing, his kiss gentle, before he raised his head, his eyes warm.

“Better than a dika, blossom?”

“So much better. At least I think so—I didn’t actually get a chance to try it out.”

“And you will not,” he said firmly.

“I suppose not, since this was another successful experiment,” she said happily, and pointed to the flowering vines now forming a canopy over the bed.

He sighed and lay down next to her, hugging her against his side as they watched the vines swaying gently above them.

“I still think we should hold off on experiments until I finish my research.”

The specter of her mother appearing at the door haunted her, but perhaps he was right. Perhaps she was rushing things.

“I guess we could try,” she said doubtfully.

He smiled and pulled her to her feet, running a big hand gently down her back before he shook his head.

“We’d better start by covering that delicious body of yours. A male can only take so much.”

He rummaged in a wooden trunk, returning with one of his shirts and dropping it over her head. The hem reached her knees and the neckline kept attempting to slip down her shoulder, but those intense green eyes were just as approving.

“Do you want to come back to the greenhouse with me?”

She gave him another innocent look. “To the vegetable section?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I hear there are some interesting fruits as well.”

“We’ll stick to my lab,” he said firmly, and she laughed as she took his hand.

His work was extremely interesting and she found herself telling him about some of the research she’d been doing. He was equally interested, and they talked long into the evening. They even managed to keep their hands off each other—mostly. After all, what were a few kisses, a tugged nipple, or even a tiny little climax between a supposedly married couple?

Unfortunately, when they finally decided to go to bed he refused to join her. Instead, he settled her on the mattress, gave her a much too chaste kiss, and went off to sleep in a hammock in the living area. His conscious intentions were good, his unconscious ones less so. She woke in the middle of the night to find their bodies intertwined, a network of vines binding them together.

CHAPTER 9



This is interesting.

Julie smiled into the dimness as she realized Gilmat was wrapped around her—and his vines were wrapped around them both. They were both also completely naked. She wasn't sure if he normally went to sleep this way, but she knew she'd been wearing her nightgown.

“Clever vines,” she murmured under her breath.

While she had no objection to their situation, she had the sneaking suspicion that he would be appalled and probably rush off to do some research. She fully intended to take advantage of the situation.

Running a cautious hand over a huge arm, she admired the strong muscles rippling beneath his skin. His skin was warm and smooth, but not quite like human skin. It had a subtle texture, almost leaf-like, that felt amazing beneath her hands.

Very slowly, she twisted in his arms until she was facing him. A faint glow came from the skylight, just enough light for her to make out his handsome face, peaceful in sleep. Her nipples were aching again, and she really wanted to rub them against that big, hard chest, but there was more to explore first. The vines obligingly supported her as she pulled back just a little, enough to look down at his cock. *Oh my.* How had she ever even considered that puny dika as a substitute?

Even in his current state he was huge, and rather than being smooth and featureless, thick veins covered his shaft, forming a tree-like pattern. A small circle of hair-like tendrils

surrounded his cock, and she wondered if they were as responsive as the ones on his head. She lightly stroked one of the tendrils, and it immediately curled around her finger. Ah, even more responsive—and stronger. It was tugging her finger towards his shaft, exactly where she already wanted to go. She couldn't resist.

As soon as her fingers closed over him, he groaned, but when she peeked up at his face his eyes were still closed. He was also growing, lengthening and thickening beneath her hand as she watched in open mouthed amazement. She'd known he was big, but the reality of that massive shaft filling her hand, still growing, actually shocked her. And aroused her. Her clit throbbed in a slow, insistent pulse as she wondered what it would be like to have him inside her.

She stroked her thumb across one of those thick, branching veins and a small pearl of liquid appeared on the head. Refusing to release her grip, she used her other hand to gather it up and bring it to her lips. Minty, with that same slight tingle she felt when he kissed her. She stroked him again, determined to encourage more of the delicious little drops, and he pulsed in her fist as more appeared. More, and then still more, as she tugged harder and increased her speed. She was so focused on the exciting results that she forgot about not waking him up.

She was pumping him and sucking on her finger when he growled, and she looked up to find his eyes open and blazing. He shuddered, and then exploded in her hand, his minty seed splattering across her breasts and her stomach and her mouth.

FUCK!

He'd never come so hard in his entire life, just from the sight of his pretty bride's wide blue eyes, her pink lips pursed around her finger, and her small fingers gripping his cock. His seed covered her, gleaming green against her pale skin, marking her.

Mine.

He rolled her beneath him, heedless of everything except the need to bury himself inside her. His stamen parted her folds, unerringly finding her pleasure spot and stroking the heated nub. She cried out immediately, her small body shaking, and the knowledge that she had been so aroused by touching him only added to his own arousal. He notched his head at her entrance even as he lifted his head to watch her face as he entered her for the first time. But she gave a choked gasp as her body resisted and some remnant of sanity returned.

For the first time, he noticed that vines were curled around her body, around both their bodies.

“What have I done?”

“Not a damn thing,” she said fiercely.

She threw her arms and legs around him, the movement pushing his cock harder against her tiny channel, and he froze, afraid of hurting her.

“I was the one who did this. You were asleep, and I was experimenting.”

In spite of his guilt, his cock flexed at the memory.

“Blossom,” he warned, and she gave him a guilty look.

“I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“Just to make me climax in my sleep?”

“I didn’t know I could. But that was pretty good, wasn’t it?” she said triumphantly.

“It was amazing. I just wish I had been awake to enjoy more of it.”

“I can do it again,” she offered eagerly, and his cock jerked. She wiggled against him. “We could try this again too, although I don’t think one finger stretched me enough.”

He couldn’t help laughing.

“My cock is much larger than my finger.”

“Much, much larger,” she agreed. “But I’m sure I just need some more stretching. Or maybe we could just do it all at once

and get it over with.”

Her legs actually tried to pull him closer, but he forced himself to ignore the wet, tempting kiss of her small entrance.

“When I make love to you for the first time, it is not going to be so you can ‘get it over with,’ understand?”

He could tell she wasn’t convinced.

“Maybe you could just put the tip in?”

He burst out laughing and hugged her, but as he did he felt the faint tug of the vines and his laughter immediately faded.

“How did I end up here?”

“I don’t know, but I think your theory is correct.”

“My subconscious desires?”

She nodded vigorously, the movement doing delightful things to her breasts, but he did his best to concentrate. It could have been worse—or could it? All his subconscious—and his conscious mind for that matter—wanted to do was to bring them together.

“We were together when you woke?”

“Yes. And it wasn’t just the vines. You were holding me.”

That didn’t surprise him. He would be content to hold her forever.

“Could you have moved away?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t try.” She tapped her lips thoughtfully. “But I think so. I wiggled around a lot, and the vines didn’t stop me. I guess I should have just let you sleep, but I was curious.” She peeped up at him from under her lashes. “And it was definitely worth it.”

He lifted himself higher and she reluctantly released her arms and legs. His seed still gleamed on her skin, and he couldn’t resist rubbing it into the soft flesh. Her nipples beaded as he caressed her breasts, and her hips shifted restlessly.

“Do you need something, little blossom?”

“Just the tip, please.”

“No tip,” he said firmly, even though his sap pulsed at the thought. “But perhaps a finger.”

“Or two.”

How could he refuse? With a lot of attention to her clit and some gentle coaxing, she did take two. Afterwards she gave him a sleepy, satisfied smile.

“Are you going to stay with me now?”

“I might as well. I suspect the vines would bring me back anyway.”

“Exactly. It’s the sensible thing to do,” she said solemnly, then yawned.

He laughed and tucked her against his side.

“Go to sleep, little blossom.”

She fell asleep almost immediately, resting trustingly in his arms. Perhaps he didn’t need to worry so much after all. If all he wanted was for them to be together, how could there be any harm in that?

But the next day he deciphered the last section of the ancient book and realized just how dangerous it could be.

CHAPTER 10



“*W*hat’s wrong, Gilmat?”

Julie wasn’t sure he’d even heard her.

The day had started off so well. They’d woken up—together. Taken a bath—together. And then worked in the greenhouses—together. They hadn’t done more than kiss and cuddle, but since she was a little sore from the previous night she didn’t push it.

After lunch, they’d returned to the study. She was contemplating a few of the scenes from her novel while he worked on the antique book. Then something in the air had changed. She’d looked up and found him staring into space, his face pale. And now he wasn’t even answering her.

She put her books aside and went to him, wiggling her way into his lap, a little reassured when he immediately put his arms around her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked again. “Is it the book?”

“Do you remember I told you that there was no animal life on Valleyant?” he said at last.

“Yes.”

“Now I know why. This story does its best to glorify it, make it into some grand romantic event, but it was destruction.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s the way our attraction amplifies my skills. It’s not just attraction that will do it—it can happen with any very

powerful emotions. And when two already very skillful people have their talents increased exponentially...”

“Kaboom?” she said softly.

“As you say, kaboom.” He shook his head. “No wonder they do their best to isolate anyone with strong enough skills.”

“At least you don’t have to worry about that with me. I don’t have any skills.”

“Don’t you?” he asked broodingly. “I’m completely obsessed with you.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I don’t know. I would destroy anyone who laid a hand on you. If my skills were stronger, I suspect I would be capable of destroying an entire world for you.”

“There is no world to destroy, not even a single person,” she said gently. “Just you and me, alone. And all that’s happened is that you’ve caused a lot of flowers to bloom.”

She’d thought it hadn’t happened the previous night, but when she got up she’d realized that their mossy mattress was covered with tiny pink flowers.

“But what if that’s not all?” He sighed. “Would you mind if I left you for a little while, blossom? I need to work. It... comforts me.”

She wished she could provide the same comfort, but she understood. How many times had she turned to her books?

“All right, professor. And I promise not to go to sleep.”

He gave a questioning look.

“So the vines don’t carry me to you,” she explained.

To her relief, he smiled, then kissed her before he went to his lab. She remained at his desk, flipping idly through the pages. Was he overreacting to be so concerned? Or was she being naive because she wasn’t worried?

As much as he downplayed his skills, his abilities with plants were truly amazing. She could believe that he could cause

serious damage—except she'd never met anyone so thoughtful and caring. What was she going to do when her mother inevitably found her?

Her thoughts chased each other in circles, and she finally sighed and stood. As much as she'd enjoyed the previous night, lack of sleep was getting to her. She picked up her own book and went to take a nap.

When she woke, Gilmat was sitting next to her, but he was reading her book.

“Now I understand about the dika,” he said, smiling at her.

“You look a lot happier.”

“I feel better. I thought about what you said and I decided you were right. Producing a few extra flowers isn't going to hurt anyone, and I certainly don't have enough talent to destroy anything.”

She wasn't quite so sure about that, but she kept her mouth firmly closed.

“All I can do is to keep working on my control and hope that it will improve. And spend the rest of the time worshiping my beautiful bride.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan.”

The green in his eyes deepened, and he swept aside the blanket of vines that had been covering her.

“You are not wearing any clothes.”

“Maybe the vines took them off.”

From the flicker of doubt on his face, she suspected he still wasn't quite as at peace with the situation as he'd indicated.

“Did they?” he asked.

“No, it was all my idea. But I wouldn't have minded if they did. They don't scare me.”

“What if I used them to spread these pretty little legs?”

She shivered—with excitement—and her nipples tightened.

“I see that idea meets with your approval. Although I do enjoy having my hands on you.”

He ran his hands up her legs, gently pushing her thighs apart, then frowned.

“You are still very red. Are you sore?”

“No—”

He gently touched her folds, and she couldn't prevent herself from wincing.

“Maybe the tiniest bit sore,” she admitted.

“Wait here,” he demanded, and hurried away.

“Where does he think I'm going to go?” she sighed.

He returned almost immediately with a small jar of pale green cream. When he twisted off the top, the scent of flowers filled the room.

“What's that?”

“A healing lotion. It will help. You should have told me earlier.”

“It's really not that bad,” she protested, but then he swept the cream over her folds and she sighed with pleasure. Cool and soothing, it chased away the previous irritation.

He took his time, gently massaging it into every inch of her flesh, even spreading it across her swollen clit.

“That's not fair. You're getting me all excited again.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“God, no.”

He coated his finger with more of the cream, then gently pressed it against her. Even though she'd taken two fingers, her channel was swollen and he had to work his way deeper, the delightful coolness smoothing his way. Even then he didn't stop, using his thumb to rub more cream across her clit as his finger pumped gently in and out of her. He kept the pace so slow and gentle that her climax took her by surprise, lifting her

up on the crest of a long, slow wave before washing gently down again.

“Mmm. You can heal me anytime.”

He laughed and bent down to kiss her.

“Finish your nap, blossom.”

“Why don’t you join me? You didn’t get a lot of sleep either.”

“As long as you behave yourself. You need time to heal.”

“I’ll be good,” she promised.

She kept her promise, but unfortunately he also maintained his determination to wait for her to heal even though the cream had worked immediately. Both that evening and again the next day he kept his hands and mouth strictly above her waist, and while she certainly enjoyed it, it wasn’t going to help her adjust to his size. It didn’t help when the snow stopped for a brief period. Although it didn’t stop for long and the clouds still hung low over the valley, it was a reminder that her time was running out.

Late that afternoon, she was wandering rather aimlessly around the lab while he finished up his notes and she spotted the jar of healing cream. *It really is miraculous stuff*, she thought, remembering how quickly it had soothed away her soreness. Hmm. Maybe it even worked fast enough to heal as soon as any damage occurred. She was wearing another one of his shirts, and she slipped the jar quietly into the pocket, already anticipating bedtime.

CHAPTER 11



*B*y the time they decided to go to bed, Julie was so excited that she knew it was obvious. Gilmat gave her a suspicious look.

“Are you up to something?”

She opened her eyes as wide as they could go.

“Me?”

“That is not a reassuring answer.”

“Well, if you don’t want to go to bed with me...”

She let the collar of the oversized shirt slip down far enough to reveal the top slope of her breast and his eyes flared.

“When have I ever not wanted to go to bed with you?”

“It is your husbandly duty,” she agreed.

The term felt more and more accurate, and she loved to see the pleasure on his face when she used it. He picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, tossing her shirt aside as he laid her down.

He kissed her then began working his way down her body, lingering over her breasts until they were pink and swollen.

“More,” she demanded, trying to push his head lower. “And if you say not until I’m healed, I’ll tie vines around you myself.”

He laughed and obeyed, sending her into a shattering climax with his mouth and his finger. Excellent. She was as prepared as she could be. She coaxed him into sitting up, then climbed

onto his lap. His cock sprang up between them, as thick as she remembered, those thick veins throbbing as she stroked his shaft.

“Blossom, you don’t have to—”

“Hush,” she said and kissed him.

While he was distracted, she dipped her fingers into the healing cream and then used the cream to stroke his shaft. He jerked as the cool cream coated his cock and gave her another suspicious look.

“What are you doing, Julie?”

“Just a little experiment. Doesn’t that feel good?”

“Yes,” he groaned as she stroked faster, the cream easing her way.

When he was almost there, she rose up on her knees and perched over his cock.

“Blossom,” he gasped.

“Just the tip. Just a little taste.”

Before he could argue, she pushed down. It was still an impossibly tight fit and she still struggled to take him, her body stretched to the limit, but the cream helped and his cock finally breached the tight muscles. *Oh, God.* Her body quivered, overwhelmed by his thickness and the delicious pressure. His stamen danced across her clit, the teasing strokes helping her handle the stretch.

“That’s the tip,” he growled, his body shuddering as much as hers.

“Just a little more.”

His hands went to her hips, but not to pull her off as she feared. Instead he helped ease her down another inch, two, but there was so much more to go. He started to lift her up again and she immediately protested.

“Hush,” he said. “This will help.”

He didn't withdraw completely, but he spread more of the cream around her stretched lips and then around his shaft before he eased her back down. This time she made it almost halfway before she began to pant and he repeated the process. Slowly, slowly, until at last he filled her completely. Her body shook, completely overwhelmed, balancing between pleasure and the shocking fullness.

He reached for the cream one more time, but this time his stamen pulled aside the hood and he massaged the cold cream directly across her clit. Her climax crashed down over her in an avalanche of pleasure, her body shuddering helplessly around the massive cock filling her so perfectly.

He echoed her cry, his hips jerking beneath her as a torrent of liquid heat filled her already overstuffed channel and sent another series of convulsions running through her body. His arms were so tight around her that she couldn't move but she held him just as tightly, happier than she'd ever thought to be.

GILMAT CLUNG TO JULIE, UNABLE TO SPEAK, UNABLE EVEN TO move. He had never felt so complete, so satisfied, so grateful to have found his mate.

"Oh my," she whispered, and he finally found the strength to raise his head.

"What is it?"

"Look."

Every single plant in his quarters was in full, luxurious bloom. They were surrounded by a riot of color and fragrance, but he found he wasn't even remotely concerned. The flowers were a fitting tribute to his bride.

"Beautiful," he agreed, looking back at her. "Are you all right, blossom?"

"I'm wonderful! I thought that book was exaggerating, but it didn't even come close," she said earnestly.

"I'm glad you thought so. But you are still a very devious female."

Her eyes widened. “I was just experimenting.”

“And what is your conclusion, professor?”

“That just the tip isn’t enough.”

He couldn’t hold back his laughter any longer, and it rippled through their still joined bodies. She quivered, then frowned adorably.

“I thought males were softer afterwards.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps they are.”

“But not you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never done this before.”

“Never?”

“No, blossom. There never seemed to be much point.”

She still looked shocked. “But you’re so good at it.”

“You inspire me, my beautiful bride. I only want to please you.”

She tapped her lips thoughtfully.

“And I want to please you. I can see we have a lot of room for experiments.” His cock jerked and she smiled. “Maybe we should try one now.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, that book had lots of interesting positions...”

“You aren’t sore?”

“Not at all. And if I do feel a twinge, there’s lots of healing cream.”

“Good. Then let’s try this.”

He laid back across the bed, making sure she remained seated on his cock. She wobbled, then found her balance, her luscious tits swaying as she moved. She wiggled experimentally as his stamen circled her clit, and then she grinned.

“This is going to be fun.”

She was right.

CHAPTER 12



*S*omething is different.

Julie couldn't decide what had changed at first. Gilmat was wrapped around her as usual, his face buried in her hair, a big arm folded across her waist, his hand cupping her breast. The vines formed a blanket over both of them. Everything seemed exactly the same except...

"It's not snowing."

She sat up, ignoring Gilmat's muffled protest. Or at least she tried. Between the weight of his arm and the clinging vines, only her head popped up. She sighed and pushed harder. The vines released her, but his hand lingered on her waist as she sat up far enough to be able to see through the windows. A deep carpet of white surrounded them, but not only was it not snowing, the sky was a bright, pale blue. Her pulse started to speed up.

"Gilmat, wake up. The snow has stopped."

He'd been smiling up at her sleepily, his eyes warm with appreciation, but her words finally penetrated and his face hardened. He sat up next to her and pulled her against his body.

"You can't leave me, little blossom."

"I don't want to leave you," she said quickly, putting her hands over his. "But my mother will come for me."

He didn't seem to hear her.

"She can't have you. I need you."

“And I need you. You know I’m not going with her, don’t you?”

He looked so uncertain that her heart ached.

“I love you, Gilmat.”

“Thank the gods. I love you too.”

“And I’m not going anywhere,” she added.

“Really?”

“Really.”

He gave a shuddering sigh of relief.

“That’s good, because I’m not sure I could have let you go, even if you’d wanted to leave.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m not leaving.”

He looked outside again.

“I’m not convinced that the storm is over. This may only be a temporary pause.”

He could very well be right, but the clear sky was a potent reminder that eventually it would stop and her mother would come for her.

“I hope you’re right, but I should talk to Nelly.”

His arms tightened, his hair moving agitatedly.

“You can’t leave me,” he repeated.

“I have no intention of leaving you, but I—*we*—need to let Nelly know that my mother will be descending on the ranch in full battle mode.” The surrounding vines began to thrash as well, and she quickly amended her words. “I don’t mean a physical battle. She is armed only with a loud voice and the complete conviction that she always knows best.”

“A formidable foe,” he agreed, but the vines settled.

“How far is it to where Nelly and Artek live?”

“Not that far, but the snow is very deep.”

She could hear the reluctance in his voice, and she patted his arm as she smiled up at him.

“Then maybe you’d better carry me there.”

His approval of that idea was evident both on his face and in the stiffness of his shaft.

“As long as that’s not too much for you,” she added, poking playfully at his chest.

The green sparks flared in his eyes as he started to lower her back down to the bed, but then he sighed.

“If you are determined to go, we should leave now. I don’t know how long the clear spell will last.”

“I suppose you’re right. And the sooner we go, the sooner we can return. I thought of a whole new experiment last night.”

“Little blossom, that is not the way to convince me to leave,” he growled.

“Later,” she promised, tangling her fingers with the tendrils of his hair, before slipping free.

A short time later they were on their way, Gilmat carrying her as she’d suggested. Since the snow was up to his thighs in some places, she doubted she’d have made it more than a few feet otherwise. She snuggled against him, looking around eagerly.

The ranch occupied a wide river valley, mountains rising protectively on each side. They were on the lower slope of one of those mountains, and he headed down towards the river. As they left the greenhouses behind, she could see the faint outline of planting beds, the lines visible despite the snow.

“What do you grow out here?”

“These are test beds, to see if the strains I’m developing can handle the weather conditions. Our growing season is somewhat limited, so I’m trying to develop hardier and faster growing plants.”

“Such as?”

She asked partly because she was curious but also because she could feel the tension in his arms. The distraction was successful. As he began telling her about his efforts, he started to relax. It wasn't until they reached a group of outbuildings—a very short time later—that he stiffened again.

“You were right when you said it wasn't far,” she murmured as he carried her past them and towards an impressive, if somewhat rundown, ranch house.

“I liked being close to my brothers.”

“Good. That means it will be easy to visit.”

The term reminded her of her mother's many social calls, and she started to laugh.

“What amuses you, little blossom?”

“I was just thinking about what my mother would say if she could see me now,” she said, gesturing at her body. “I don't think she would consider this appropriate attire.”

He had insisted on dressing her in his clothes, even though they were far too big, pointing out quite correctly that her nightgown was not suitable attire. She didn't argue, despite her opinions on the cultural importance of clothing. It was one thing to be almost naked with Gilmat, entirely another to face her friend and her friend's husband.

In addition to his clothes, he'd wrapped her in one of his coats and then covered the whole thing with her quilt. The whole ensemble was certainly warm but it was just as certainly unflattering. Her hair had been pulled back into a quick braid, and she looked about as different from Mrs. Watson's pampered daughter as it was possible to get. Her mother would be appalled, but Gilmat only looked confused.

“I don't understand. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you, but I don't think my mother would agree. Or Nelly.”

He scowled as they approached the house, and the bushes framing the door began to grow larger, blocking their path.

“Stop that,” she scolded.

“I have always liked Nelly, but I will not permit her to make you uncomfortable.”

She gave his chest a soothing pat.

“That’s not what I meant. Women just notice more about how other women are dressed.”

“I notice everything about your attire. Although I prefer you without it.”

His eyes were heating again, but at least the bushes were retreating. Her body also responded to the warmth in his eyes, but it would have to wait.

“Later,” she reminded him.

He sighed and carried her into the house. They walked through a huge vaulted living room with a stunning view to a big kitchen. Nelly was perched on her husband’s lap, laughing as she fed him bites of something. She looked up, her eyes widening as they entered, and Gilmat reluctantly placed Julie on her feet.

“Julie? Is that you?”

“It’s me,” she said, bracing herself for the other woman’s disapproval despite her reassuring words to Gilmat. Not only her clothes but her circumstances were unacceptable by the town’s standards.

“Oh my goodness, it’s so good to see you.”

Nelly gave her a warm hug, and she relaxed.

“But I don’t understand,” Nelly said. “How did you get here? Gilmat, you didn’t go to town, did you?”

Julie gave her a shocked look. “You knew they were going?”

“Not until it was too late,” Nelly said dryly, shaking her head. “We sent Callum after Benjar and Endark, but apparently it was too late.”

“Where are they?” Gilmat asked.

Artek shrugged. “All I know is that the trackers show that everyone is back on the ranch.”

“Trackers?” she asked.

“All warriors receive one. So we can be located if...”

Gilmat’s words trailed off as she shivered. The thought that something might have happened to him in that war was too terrible to contemplate. He tugged her gently against his side, and she took a reassuring breath of his clean, minty scent. When she looked up, Nelly was studying her thoughtfully.

“But if Gilmat didn’t go to town, how did you end up here on the ranch?”

“Benjar delivered her to me,” Gilmat said stiffly.

Artek frowned, but Nelly started to laugh.

“Of course he did.” Her laughter faded as she turned to her husband. “But we have to find him—and Endark. The other women they took might not be as calm as Julie seems to be.”

“I will—as soon as the storm is over.”

“If my brothers are as happy with their brides as I am, they will not welcome the interference,” Gilmat warned.

“Bride?” Nelly looked from his face to hers. “Did you agree to that, Julie?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “I plan to stay here on the ranch with Gilmat. I mean, if that’s all right.”

“Of course. My brothers’ brides are welcome here.” Artek smiled, the expression softening his somewhat stern appearance. “In fact, each of you is entitled to a share in the ranch.”

“I don’t need a share.”

All three of them immediately protested.

“Yes, you do.” Nelly smiled at her. “We may need the votes to keep these males in line.”

“It is your right.” Gilmat’s arm tightened around her. “Consider it a gift.”

“And it might make it easier for your mother to accept—” Nelly’s eyes widened. “Your mother! What’s she going to say

about this?”

She winced, reminded of the purpose of their visit.

“That’s why we’re here. I’m sure that as soon as the storm ends she’ll be barreling across the pass looking for me. I wanted to warn you.”

Nelly and Artek looked at each other, then Nelly shook her head.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. At least not any time soon. There was an avalanche the night they left. We believe it blocked the pass.”

“I heard it,” Gilmat said slowly, looking at Artek. “Do you think Endark was responsible?”

“Perhaps.”

“It’s all my fault.” Nelly wrung her hands. “If only I hadn’t told them that wretched story.”

“The one about the Sabine women?”

Gilmat had told her about Nelly’s “historical tale” and she’d recognized it immediately.

“Yes, they decided to interpret it literally.”

“Because they wanted it to be true. If I hadn’t thought my fate was decided, I would have done the same.” Gilmat smiled down at her. “And Benjar was not wrong. He did bring me my bride.”

“That doesn’t mean it worked out for the other women,” Nelly said tartly.

“Perhaps it did.” Artek placed a gentle hand on her waist. “But even if it didn’t, you know none of my brothers would harm a female. Once the storm ends we will check, and if any female wishes to leave, they may join us here until the pass is open again.”

“Maybe it’s already ended,” she suggested, but both males shook their heads.

Artek pointed at the window.

“Look. The skies are already darkening.”

“Then it is time for us to leave,” Gilmat said firmly.

“Already?” Nelly gave him a dismayed look. “I wanted to visit with Julie. You could stay here until the next time it clears.”

He hesitated, looking at her, but she shook her head.

“The plants need us. But I promise we’ll come back soon.”

Nelly sighed. “I suppose that makes sense. But before you go, would you be offended if I offered you a few things? You’re as pretty as ever,” she added quickly. “But those clothes don’t look very comfortable.”

They weren’t. Despite the vines Gilmat had used to tie them on, it was a constant struggle to prevent them slipping down and they were far too heavy.

“I wouldn’t be offended at all,” she said gratefully.

Nelly grinned and tugged her hand. “Then come with me.”

CHAPTER 13



Gilmat frowned at his bride as she wandered restlessly around the room. Ever since they had returned from the ranch house, something about her was different.

“Are you sure Nelly didn’t offend you?”

“For the tenth time, no, she didn’t. I’m very grateful to have a change of clothes.”

The hem of the pale blue gown dragged on the ground, and it was so tight around her breasts that her nipples were clearly visible through the fabric—not that he objected to that in the slightest.

“I prefer your other gown.”

She rolled her eyes, but she came and sat down on his lap.

“That’s my nightgown. It’s intended for sleeping.”

“Or you could dispense with clothing all together.”

“I know, but it’s kind of nice to be wearing something familiar. Even if it doesn’t fit very well.” She sighed and plucked at the fabric. “You know, my mother and I never agreed on clothing styles, but I had some very pretty dresses. I wish I had one of them to wear for you.”

His fist clenched at the reminder, and she reached up to tangle her fingers in his hair.

“What’s wrong?”

“Remember I told you that there was a final test before I was expelled?”

“Yes.”

“That was the test.”

“I don’t understand.”

Somehow it was easier to discuss the memory of his failure with her small body nestled against him and her fingers entwined in his hair.

“We are presented with a strand of plant fiber. The test is to spin it out into a piece of cloth large enough to cover our body.”

“From a single strand? That’s impossible.”

“If I truly had the skills they expected, it would have been an easy task. And while I no longer care about the test, if I had the skill, I could clothe you however you wished.”

“It still sounds impossible to me. How does it work?”

He struggled for a way to explain.

“You part the fibers and then expand them, the same way wool is broken down into yarn and then woven into cloth.”

“You mean the same way that your vines create a blanket over us?”

“Not exactly...” he began, then hesitated.

With the vines, he was simply encouraging their natural tendencies. The plant fiber was no longer connected to a living source, but was it really so different? He reached over and plucked a leaf. It was easily the size of his hand, far larger than he was given during his test, but perhaps...

He smoothed his fingers across it and it stretched, spreading out beneath his hand like ice melting into water. The growth pleased him, even though it was a long way from the level of skill he should have had.

“That’s amazing,” she whispered, then smiled at him. “You keep surprising me, my professor.”

His sap rose at her provocative tone, and the plant material shimmered. Was she the key to this as she had been to so much

else?

“Remove your clothing,” he growled as he placed her back on her feet.

Her smile turned seductive as she unbuttoned the gown and let it fall to her feet. She was wearing nothing beneath it, and the sight of her beautiful naked body almost distracted him. But the plant material pulsed beneath his fingers and he wrapped it around her body. She gasped as it immediately clung to her delicious curves. It covered her, but it was far from being the pretty gown she desired.

He stroked the upper edge, adjusting the material to highlight the upper swell of her breasts. Another stroke extended the hemline into delicate strands that fluttered around her softly curved thighs. Another adjustment, and then another, each one flowing as naturally as if he'd always had this skill. In the end, she was finely dressed as any of the fashionable ladies he had seen in Port Cantor. Triumph filled him at her delighted expression.

“This is beautiful.”

She twirled happily in front of him, then pulled him down for a kiss.

“I knew you could do it,” she whispered against his mouth.

“Because of you, little blossom.”

“I think the skill was there all along.”

“Perhaps, but it took you to bring it out.”

The provocative smile returned.

“Does this mean you can make whatever I want?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

She took his hand and ran it across her breasts, a fraction of an inch above her nipples.

“Then perhaps the neckline should be a little lower.”

He obeyed, although his adjustment placed it just beneath the rosy peaks instead.

“I see your dress-making skills are superior to mine,” she whispered breathlessly as his hand lingered, stroking the tempting little buds. “And perhaps the hemline should be a little higher?”

The fabric parted, pulling back on either side to reveal the perfect golden curls at the apex of her thighs. Unable to resist, he lifted her onto his lap as he struggled to free his erection.

“You’re definitely going to have to make some clothes for yourself.” Her small hand tried to close around his cock. “I don’t want to have to wait to touch you.”

He growled, flicking away the rest of her gown as he pulled her down on top of him, sheathing himself in the silky tightness of her delectable body. She shivered, her sweet cunt fluttering as she tried to adjust to his size, but her pretty lips formed a playful pout.

“You destroyed my dress.”

“I’ll make you another,” he promised, even as he stroked deeper into her.

“Are you going to destroy that one too?” she gasped.

“Undoubtedly.”

“Good.”

She leaned forward and nipped his ear, and all thoughts of clothing disappeared in a blaze of desire.

A VERY LONG TIME LATER, THEY WERE SWINGING LAZILY IN A hammock of vines because he couldn’t be bothered to move as far as his bed. She was nestled against his side, and he thought she was asleep until he looked down. The same strange expression that had bothered him earlier was back on her face.

“Are you going to tell me what’s troubling you?”

“It’s not troubling me exactly.”

“But?”

“When Nelly took me away to get some clothes, she told me she was pregnant.”

Pregnant? Artek had mentioned passing on the legacy of the ranch when he first told them that he wished to seek a bride, but he hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

“He didn't tell me.”

“They only just found out.”

“And this bothers you?”

“Not at all. It's just—how is it possible? They are very different species.”

“We hybridize plants all the time—you know that.”

“It's not exactly the same. Or is it?” She sat straight up, and he automatically adjusted the vines to support her. “Could I be pregnant?”

“Of course not... That is...” He thought back to the effect she'd had on him from the beginning, of the plants responding to his subconscious desires, and of the flowers blooming as they made love. “I don't know. Before you came I would have said it was impossible, but so much of what has happened since then would have been impossible.”

He had once told Endark that he had no desire to pass on his faulty genes, but now the thought of his seed flowering inside her sent a rush of sap to his cock. Perhaps it was possible after all. But his pretty bride was biting her lip.

“This troubles you?”

“Yes and no. I would love to have a child with you, but I also want to continue my studies.”

“Then we will wait. Assuming it's not late,” he added. “I'm sorry, blossom, but I was not making any attempt to prevent my seed from being fertile before.”

“It's not your fault. I didn't consider the possibility either. But even though it may be too late, can you do that going forward?”

He was not yet convinced he had full control over his desires, but even in the deepest parts of his mind he would never choose to do anything against her wishes.

“I can.”

“Good.” She trailed her fingers down across his chest to stroke his stamen. “Then why don’t we experiment a little more with clothing?”

He obeyed happily, quickly discovering that partial clothing could be almost as provocative as her naked body—especially vine-like little straps that presented her luscious breasts for his mouth or framed the flushed folds of her delectable cunt.

Between their experiments and their ongoing work in the lab, he would have been content to remain in their quarters forever, but two days later there was another clear spell and she insisted on returning to the main house to visit. After that, they visited regularly.

As the storm continued to wind down, more of his brothers began to appear with their brides—including Benjar. His youngest brother gave him a triumphant smile.

“It appears you like your present.”

“I am forever in your debt,” he said seriously, and Benjar ducked his head, looking uncharacteristically embarrassed.

“It was really Endark’s idea. He didn’t want you to be alone.”

“Then I am in his debt as well. I’m surprised he has not yet returned.”

Benjar’s grin reappeared.

“It’s hard to tear yourself away from your mate. Unless she can’t cook,” he added in a loud whisper.

“I heard that,” Ruby said, elbowing Benjar in the side.

She was a pretty female with an impish smile that echoed Benjar’s.

“It was not a complaint. You have many other desirable characteristics,” Benjar purred, reaching for her.

Gilmat quickly backed away. The young couple was very... open with their affection and tended to forget they were not alone. He went to seek out Artek instead and found him in his study.

“Have you heard from Endark?”

“No, but the tracker indicates he is still in his cottage. Are you concerned?”

He shrugged, wandering over to look at the deep layer of snow that still swathed the valley.

“I don’t know. I know how desperate he was for a mate and how potent those first days together can be.” He gave his former commander a rueful smile. “I would be here far less often if my bride didn’t enjoy the company of the other females.”

“They have a close bond,” Artek agreed. “And perhaps Endark’s bride would also enjoy some company. I believe I may visit him. Unless you would rather...”

He considered it, but Endark’s cottage was halfway up the mountain and he was not ready to leave his pretty bride for that long. And if Endark were truly in the grip of mating fever, he would be more likely to listen to Artek than to him.

“I think it would be best if you went.”

Artek sighed and nodded.

“It is my responsibility.”

“You are a good friend—a good brother. You brought us together on Vizal, and you brought us all here to heal. You even started us on the journey to our mates. Thank you.”

For once Artek appeared to be at a loss for words, but then he smiled.

“We are all part of this family—a now delightfully expanded family. Perhaps you could ask my mate to come and see me? I would like to spend some time alone with her before going to see Endark. That is, if you can drag her away from Benjar’s constant demand for food.”

“I believe he is... occupied with his bride at the moment.”

“Then you’d best hurry—he is even hungrier afterwards.”

Gilmat laughed and went to find Nelly.

Two days later, Endark returned.

CHAPTER 14



“*A*ll right, what’s going on?” Julie demanded.

When Gilmat found out that Endark had returned, he had hurried them off to the ranch house, but as soon as they arrived, Artek had taken him away.

Now all of the brides were gathered in Nelly’s kitchen, including a new addition. Endark had been accompanied by Becky, and Julie had never seen her friend so happy. All of them looked happy, she thought, far happier than they had ever been in Wainwright. But she suspected they were also concerned about why all the males had assembled in Artek’s office.

Becky sighed.

“They are worried that the Vultor might attack. Do you remember all those stories about Josiah’s lost bride and how she never joined him here on the ranch? Apparently, she did make it but her flyer crashed. She was rescued by a Vultor, and they fell in love.”

“How romantic,” Ruby sighed.

“It might have been except she died later and her mate went crazy. He thought the ranch belonged to his pack, and he sent Vultor here to spy on us.”

“Oh.” Pearl’s eyes widened. “Is that why I ran into a Vultor in the warehouse?”

“Probably. Anyway, his heir kidnapped me, but Endark rescued me and everything’s fine,” Becky added quickly.

“I suspect it’s not entirely fine,” Pearl said quietly. “Callum looked very serious.”

“Seren, one of the Vultor who came to the ranch, said he considered the matter closed, but he warned Endark that some of the pack might seek revenge.”

Julie shivered. Although she knew that Endark was half-Vultor and Becky was clearly in love with him, like most human children she’d been brought up hearing horror stories about the Vultor. But then their husbands joined them again, accompanied by Becky’s younger brother Danny. Gilmat scooped her up out of her chair and sat back down with her on his knee. He was just so big and strong and reassuring that she relaxed.

Becky looked around and frowned.

“Isn’t there another brother?”

Nelly sighed and explained that Frantor had been badly wounded in the war and avoided everyone. Julie couldn’t help but feel sorry that he was alone—until it turned out that Benjar had made yet another bride delivery the night he brought her to the ranch. Which meant there was another bride after all.

Artek and Callum went off to check, and Nelly decided to make cookies. She would have offered to help, but Gilmat’s arm was tight around her waist and his hair was waving as it did when he was upset. Was he upset about the possible threat? If they had been alone she would have demanded answers, but since the house was full of people she decided to wait until they were back in their home.

She looked around at the crowded kitchen and suddenly smiled.

“What amuses you, little blossom?” Gilmat murmured.

“My mother was always so determined to keep me out of the kitchen, and here I am.”

A tendril worked its way free from his shirt and curled around her wrist.

“Here *we* are.”

“Yes. That’s what makes it perfect.”

He relaxed as the day wore on and they ended up staying all day, even giving in to Nelly’s request that they all remain for dinner. They were all assembled in the living room waiting when the doors opened and a new male entered. Frantor. He was badly scarred and had a prosthetic arm, but he looked nowhere near as tormented as she had expected. Then she saw the woman with a radiant smile holding his hand and she understood. He too had found his bride.

“Benjar strikes again,” she murmured softly to Gilmat as Nelly cried all over Frantor.

“He’s going to be even more insufferable,” he said, but she could hear the warmth in his voice.

They were introduced before they went into dinner, and she finally recognized Frantor’s bride as Florie, the woman who ran the restaurant in town. Dinner was the big family meal she had always wanted, but the males disappeared again after dinner and when they returned, Gilmat looked tired and worried.

“Let’s go home,” she said softly as she took his hand.

“You’re welcome to stay here,” Nelly offered.

“Thank you, but I think we’ll go home. It’s not far, and we need to tend the plants.”

Gilmat was carrying her out of the door before she even finished speaking and she laughed.

“I guess you wanted to go home.”

“Yes. That is... unless you wish to stay.”

“Not at all. I enjoyed the day tremendously, but I’m ready for a little time alone with my big handsome husband.”

His arms tightened, but he didn’t respond to her teasing voice with his usual enthusiasm. As soon as they returned home, she led him through into the bathroom.

“Strip,” she demanded, and for the first time his usual humor reappeared.

“You’re being very demanding, little blossom.”

“Yes, I am. Now remove your clothes—and mine. We’re going to take a nice relaxing bath and then you’re going to tell me what you’re worrying about.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is to me. Now less talking, more clothes off.”

He smiled, brushed his finger across her dress and then his own clothes, then picked her up and climbed into the tub, settling her on his lap. She took a deep, contented breath.

“It’s so nice and peaceful here.”

He laughed. “Perhaps for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can... hear the plants. Not words exactly, but a constant rustle in my mind.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Not at all. I find it very soothing.” He bent his head and nuzzled her neck. “I find you soothing too.”

“Just what every woman wants to hear.”

He laughed as his stamen began to circle her clit, and she forgot all about soothing him. Their activities sent most of the water in the tub onto the floor, but it was worth every drop. Afterwards he carried her back to the bed, but despite her boneless contentment she hadn’t forgotten her original concerns. As soon as they were in bed, she rolled on top of him and poked his chest.

“Now talk.”

“I assume you know about the Vultor?”

“Of course. Becky told us.”

“I thought as much. Anyway, Frantor is a very talented mechanic. He has created a collection of drones that we can use to monitor the valley.”

“That sounds good.”

“It is. The problem is that we’re not sure if it will be enough. Unless they come in a pack, it will be difficult to distinguish normal activity from potential problems.”

“I can understand that. And the ranch is so big it makes it even more difficult.” He nodded, and she poked his chest again. “What I don’t understand is why you seem so much more concerned than the others.”

“It’s not concern—it’s frustration.”

His hair began to move, along with the vines on the walls.

“Why?” she asked gently.

“Because I should be able to monitor the ranch,” he burst out. “I should be attuned to everything that happens in this territory.”

“I see.” She tapped his chest again, thoughtfully this time. “Are you aware of what’s happening in our home?”

“Of course.”

“The greenhouses?”

“Yes.”

“What about the planting beds? The orchard?”

His eyes looked into the distance, but then he nodded.

“They are resting now, but I can still sense them.”

“What about farther?”

They discovered he could sense the surrounding area as far as the ranch house, plus a few of the fields he had planted.

“That’s amazing,” she said sincerely, but he didn’t look much happier.

“It’s not enough to protect you—to protect everyone.”

“Maybe it’s like a muscle and you need to exercise it. Try again.”

When his eyes closed, she slipped down his body and wrapped her hand around his cock. Even in this state she could barely

get her fingers around him, but as soon as she did, his eyes flew open and he began to stiffen.

“Blossom!”

“Yes, professor?”

“What are you doing?”

“Conducting a little experiment of my own. Just keep trying.”

He started to object, but then she traced her tongue along one of those marvelous branching veins and he stopped. She licked her way happily up his now fully erect shaft, then swept her tongue across the head, licking up the minty drops.

“Julie,” he groaned.

“I don’t think you’re concentrating. Plants. Valley. How far can you go?”

“The river.”

His voice was strained, and she rewarded him by stroking his shaft and licking across the head again.

“The far side of the river.”

She stretched her mouth around him and sucked gently. He gave a hoarse cry, and then his hand was buried in her hair as his hips bucked and he flooded her mouth with sweet, minty seed. As soon as his hips stopped jerking, he hauled her up his body and kissed her, unconcerned that her lips were still wet with his essence.

“The pass,” he said in a dazed voice. “I got as far as the pass.”

“You see? I was right. All you need is a little practice—and some creative inspiration.”

“I don’t think I have ever been quite so inspired before.” He grinned, then flipped her over on her back. “Now it’s my turn to inspire you.”

“I don’t need inspiration,” she protested weakly as he began kissing his way down her body.

“I’m sure you can think of more ways to encourage me.”

He was right. By the time he was through with her, she'd come up with several very creative ideas, and she couldn't wait to put them into practice—as soon as she recovered.

CHAPTER 15



Gilmat paced up and down one of the rows in the fruit greenhouse, then noticed that the leaves on the plants were beginning to tremble. He sighed and sent calming energy in their direction before leaving. He had come out here to avoid worrying Julie, but he didn't want to upset his plants either.

It had been two weeks since Endark's warning and nothing had happened. He had spent the time practicing diligently, but while his skills had definitely improved he still wasn't sure it was enough. He had quickly discovered that it wasn't possible to encompass the entire valley at one time. Instead, he and Frantor had worked out an alternative. If one of the drones indicated a possible cause for concern, he would concentrate his attention there to see what he could pick up.

At his request, Frantor had added a small vine to each drone and it helped significantly, enabling him to focus his efforts. He knew he was getting stronger but the thought of failing haunted him. This wasn't a matter of being exiled from his society—his bride's life could depend on his skills. As much as he tried to hide it from her, Julie knew he was worried. She did her best—and it was an astonishingly good best—to encourage him, but ultimately, he was the one responsible.

The monitor he always wore pinged, and he immediately checked the coordinates, extending his senses. Bodies moving through the woods, at least a half-dozen. He sent the alarm, then raced into their quarters and grabbed Julie. She didn't question him, clinging to his neck as he hurried to the main

house. Almost everyone else was living there now, but he still needed his time with his plants. Frantor and Florie had also remained at his workshop in the converted mill, but they appeared just as he arrived.

“You saw?” he asked grimly.

“Yes.”

Everyone was gathered in the big living room, and Julie clung to his hand as he put her down.

“We will go and meet them,” Artek said calmly. “They are moving slowly and openly. It is entirely possible that they have come simply to speak to us. Callum and Danny will remain here to protect our brides.”

The boy’s mouth quivered, but he put his shoulders back and went to stand next to Callum.

“Frantor will also remain to track their movements and Drakkar will provide air cover. Endark, Benjar, and Gilmat will come with me.”

They were all familiar with the plan, and no one questioned Artek.

Julie’s mouth trembled as well as he bent to kiss her.

“Hurry back,” she whispered. “I thought of a brand new experiment this morning.”

In spite of everything, his cock started to stiffen and he smiled.

“Enticement enough for any male. I will be back as soon as I can.”

As soon as they were out of the house they increased their speed, settling into the familiar lope with which they had covered so much ground during the war on Vizal.

“I hoped never to do this again,” he said quietly to Endark.

“Me too. But at least this time we know we have something worth fighting for.” His fangs flashed. “I just hope it doesn’t get that far.”

He nodded, doing his best to concentrate on the path, but his thoughts kept returning to Julie. Despite the necessity, he hated leaving her behind. He wanted her here when he could see her, protect her.

“They are still traveling next to the river,” Artek said as he joined them. “Gilmat, is there anything you can do to keep them there?”

“Perhaps.”

It was more difficult to concentrate while they were on the move, but he was familiar with that stretch of land. He did his best to thicken the bushes that climbed the slope leading up from the river. It was far from a perfect effort, but hopefully it would be enough to discourage anyone in the advancing party from attempting to sneak around them.

“We will wait for them here,” Artek said finally, coming to a halt. It was a wider clearing with rocks along one side and the river on the other, easy to defend.

They waited silently as he tried—unsuccessfully—not to think of Julie alone and vulnerable without him. Even Benjar was quiet, only his tail lashing impatiently behind him.

The Vultor finally came into view. They did not seem surprised to see them, but Gilmat suspected they had already picked up their scent. They came to a halt on the other side of the clearing, and then one stepped forward.

“Endark and I have met before. My name is Seren.”

The Vultor was an older male, with a calm dignity that Gilmat hadn’t expected.

“Why are you here, Seren?” Endark demanded.

“You told me I could come, remember?”

“I meant alone.”

“I know, but I was not sure of my reception.”

“We do not seek trouble,” Artek said. “Although we are prepared to meet it.”

“I assumed as much, especially since I warned Endark that trouble might occur. That is the reason I am here.”

“As a warning?” Endark growled.

“Actually, as a reassurance. There was some... difficulty when I returned, but the former alpha’s followers have been disciplined. No one intends to seek revenge.”

“Who is the new alpha?” Artek asked.

“Somewhat to my surprise, I am. I did not seek it out, but the alternatives were less than satisfactory.”

One of the younger Vultor behind Seren grinned, then quickly resumed a stern expression.

“And now that I have accomplished my mission, we will leave you.”

Endark and Artek exchanged a quick glance, then Endark spoke.

“Would you care to share a meal before you return?”

“We have excellent food,” Benjar said earnestly, and Seren’s face lightened.

“I’m sure you do. We would be please to share your—”

Danger!

The forest cried out in his head, the warning seeming to come from all directions at once.

Julie is in danger!

A rage he’d never felt before ripped through him. Vines descended from the forest, reaching an impossible distance to grab the Vultor and haul them high in the air, holding them suspended. Julie’s frightened face sprang into his mind, backed against a tree as a Vultor in full beast form prowled towards her. He raced towards her, trees and bushes parting in front of him as his vision turned red, only one thought in his mind.

Protect!

CHAPTER 16



“*I* don’t like this,” Julie muttered as she paced around the living room of the ranch house.

“None of us do,” Becky agreed. “It’s terrible just to have to sit and wait.”

“It’s not just that. I should have gone with him.”

“Are you crazy? They’re trained warriors. I’ve never even hit anyone. Have you?”

“Of course not. And I’m not stupid enough to think I can fight. It’s just that...”

“Just what?” Becky asked, shooting a quick glance over her shoulder at where Frantor, Callum, and Danny were watching the monitor. Then she tugged Julie out onto the balcony. “Now tell me.”

Julie shivered as a cold wind rushed past them. The balcony was perched high above the river and inaccessible from below. It was safe enough, and the urge to follow Gilmat was even stronger here.

“Gilmat has... skills with plants. Amazing skills.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but he can’t always access them. I can help him.”

“How?”

Her cheeks were burning, but she lifted her chin.

“By touching him. Even though I’m not Gremin, the feeling between us amplifies his skills.”

“You can hardly touch him in the middle of a battle. If it comes to a battle, that is,” Becky added hastily.

“How can you be so calm about this?”

“I’m not calm. I’m just as worried as you. But I’ve also seen Endark fight and I know how fierce he can be. I guess that helps.”

“But Gilmat isn’t fierce. He needs me.”

“You know this is irrational, right?”

“My brain does. My heart doesn’t agree. It’s like he’s calling me.” Something tugged at her hand, and she looked down to see a tendril from one of the planters on the balcony pulling gently on her hand. “You see?”

Becky’s mouth dropped open.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going after him,” she decided, and immediately felt a rush of relief. “Don’t worry, I won’t do anything foolish. I’ll stay way back, but at least I’ll be close if he needs me.”

Becky sighed. “I really don’t think this is a good idea, but come with me first. Act casual.”

She doubted their act would have fooled anyone who looked at them, but the males were still focused on the monitor and the other women were in the kitchen. Becky led her down the corridor on the other end of the house and into a spacious bedroom. She dug through a drawer as Julie tried not to tap her foot impatiently, then triumphantly pulled out a gun.

Julie’s mouth dropped open. “That’s a gun.”

“I know it is.”

“Why do you have a gun?”

“Technically, it’s Endark’s. He’s been giving Danny shooting lessons—which I do not approve of—because he thinks it

would be good for him to be able to defend himself. Take it with you.”

“But I don’t know how to use it.”

“You point it at the largest part of whatever is coming towards you and you pull this trigger.”

“I’m not sure I could do that.”

“Hopefully, you won’t have to. But at least it’s something.”

Becky was right. She finally nodded and took the gun, gingerly placing it in the pocket of the cloak her friend handed her.

“There’s another door down at the end of the corridor. Are you really sure about this?”

No. But she couldn’t help remembering the tendril tugging on her hand.

“I have to go.”

Becky sighed, but gave her a quick hug.

“All right. If anyone asks, I’ll say you’re resting. Now be careful.”

“I will,” she promised, and slipped out through the door.

From listening to Callum and Frantor, she knew that Gilmat and the others had headed down along the river. That seemed simple enough, and once she passed the converted mill, she spotted their footprints in the snow. Trudging through the snow quickly grew old, but the surrounding vegetation seemed to be encouraging her. A bush would draw back a fraction from the path or a vine lightly pat her shoulder. Gilmat must be guiding them.

Then the forest went quiet. Even the breeze died away as she heard the snow crunch behind her. Closing her hand around the gun, she turned.

A Vultur was behind her. He was in shifted form, fur thick along his shoulders and fangs gleaming.

“Human,” he snarled, his voice barely intelligible.

She did her best to channel her mother and gave him a haughty look.

“Yes. What are you doing here?”

Her voice sounded remarkably calm even though her hands were shaking.

“Reclaiming what is ours. What the others are too weak to take.”

“It’s not yours.”

He growled and stalked towards her. She raised her gun.

“Don’t come any closer.”

“You do not belong here. Do you think that toy will stop me?”

She closed her eyes and pulled the trigger. He yelped, and her eyes flew open. Blood spotted the snow—she’d actually hit him. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to have done much damage and he kept coming. She backed up a step, two steps, then her back collided with a tree trunk.

Her hands clutched desperately at the bark.

Gilmat! I need you!

Was that a vibration against her hands? They were shaking so hard it was impossible to tell.

“I will make you suffer for that,” the Vultor snarled, raising a clawed hand.

A vine reached down from above and grabbed his wrist, and a second seized his other arm as more vines curled around his ankles, lifting him high into the air as Gilmat appeared. Rage poured off of him like steam as he snatched her into his arms, frantically running his hands over her body.

“Are you injured?”

“No,” she gasped, clinging to him.

He didn’t even seem to hear her, clutching her to his chest as he spotted the Vultor suspended in midair.

“You dared to touch my female?” he roared and flung his arm wide.

The vines snapped apart, still fastened around the Vultor's limbs. There was a sickening crack followed by complete silence as the vines disappeared back into the tree canopy, leaving nothing behind except the blood splattered across the snow.

"Gilmat?" she whispered, but again he didn't seem to hear her, lifting her into his arms as he stalked back through the forest.

Endark came running towards them.

"What happened?" he demanded.

Gilmat ignored him, and she had a terrible feeling he was about to cause more damage.

"I was attacked by a Vultor. Gilmat saved me."

"Protect," Gilmat growled.

"He was a rogue who'd been exiled from the pack," Endark said quickly. "Seren caught his scent when you lifted him into the air. They didn't know he'd followed them."

They emerged in a clearing next to the river, and she saw more Vultor suspended in the air by vines. Gilmat started to raise his arm again.

"No!" she cried, trying to hold his arm down.

Her efforts didn't make the slightest difference, so she did the only other thing she could think of and kissed him.

CHAPTER 17



The red haze still covered Gilmat's vision, but Julie's mouth was pressed against his and he couldn't resist tasting her. *There is something I need to do.* But despite that sense of urgency, he lost himself in her sweetness. She kissed him back as his sap rose and he tried to remove her cloak.

I didn't create this for her.

And that thought snapped him back. He was back in the clearing, Julie staring up at him, her eyes wet with tears, and the Vultor delegation was hanging from his vines.

"What happened?"

"You protected me," she whispered.

The memory—memories—swept over him and he staggered. Endark grabbed his arm and helped him collapse against the nearest trunk as his knees weakened.

"Gilmat. It is time to release the Vultor," Artek said firmly.

"Protect." His voice sounded odd in his own ears.

"You protected your mate. These males are not a threat."

Julie squeezed his hand with an encouraging smile, and he waved his arm. The vines descended, returning the Vultor to their previous positions. It was... effortless.

"That was awesome," Benjar said, as irrepressible as ever and that made him smile, even though it felt strange on his face. Everything felt strange and distant except his female, warm and soft in his arms.

Artek sighed.

“Benjar, come with me. We will escort our guests to the house—that is, if you are still willing to come?”

Seren hesitated, eying Gilmat warily, then nodded.

“I will remain with Gilmat,” Endark said. “Please tell Becky I will be back soon.”

That broke through his distance.

“You don’t have to stay.”

“Yes, I do. Just as you stayed with me all those times when I was on the verge of going feral.” Endark sat down next to them. “What happened?”

“I heard Julie calling for me, and I saw that she was in danger.”

Endark frowned. “You saw?”

“Through the plants,” Julie said softly.

“I can sense them now,” he said, sending a flowering vine down to brush gently against her cheek. “All around us.”

“This is what they wanted from you, isn’t it?” His friend smiled at him. “I guess they shouldn’t have thrown you out.”

“I’m not sure it would have changed as long as I remained on Valleyant.” He stroked Julie’s arm, relishing the delicate softness. “It took love to make me remember.”

“Remember what?”

“I told you that I didn’t remember my earliest years. That I didn’t understand why I was never able to access the skills I should have had.” He rubbed his hip absently. “It happened before.”

“What did?” Endark demanded.

“My... parents took me offworld to gather plants. I don’t know where it was, but there was a jungle. I wandered away from them—and something attacked me.” He shuddered. “I’d never even seen an animal before, but it came roaring out of the jungle. I just... reacted, and the vines tore it apart.”

He'd been so terrified, so shocked by what had happened, that he'd buried it deep inside, along with the skills that had made it happen.

Julie jerked upright, her pretty face angry.

“And no one ever told you? Never gave you any help?”

“It is not their way.” He shrugged and let it go, feeling the years of frustration fall away. “And it doesn't matter now. I have you. I have my brothers.”

“And your very impressive skills,” Endark said dryly as he rose to his feet. “Shall we return to the house now?”

He shook his head. “I need to go home.”

“Would you like me to accompany you?”

“No, but thank you.” He rose as well, Julie still safely in his arms, and clasped Endark's arm. His brother returned the grip, then grinned and hurried back along the riverside.

“Are you sure you're all right?” Julie asked as they followed at a slower pace.

“I think so. Tired, but a good kind of tired.”

“It's been an eventful day,” she agreed.

Eventful? His arms tightened around her as he thought again of how close he had come to losing her. He didn't have the heart to scold her, but...

“Why were you here, Julie?”

“Actually, I have a theory about that, but let's wait until we get home.”

He nodded and settled her more firmly against his chest as he walked. The world was strangely clear, almost vibrating around him, and as they approached their home, he could feel his plants welcoming him.

“Do you want something to eat?” she asked once they were safely inside and he reluctantly put her down. “Or a bath?”

“I just want to hold you.”

“That's easy enough.”

She discarded her cloak, then took his hand and led him to their bed. She was wearing one of the dresses he'd created, and he waved it away as he pulled her against him.

“Now,” he said. “Tell me your theory.”

Her pretty lips tightened. “I don't think you're going to like it. And I'm afraid you're going to blame yourself.”

“Blame myself? Why?”

“As soon as you left, I kept feeling this... pull to go after you. That you needed me. Becky and I were talking on the balcony and a vine shot up and tugged at me. And even when I was walking, it was as if the plants around me were encouraging me.”

“I don't understand. Why would they do that?”

She sighed and climbed on top of him, wrapping her arms and legs around him.

“Do you remember when I first came? How you were worried about your unconscious desires affecting me?”

“Like the vines bringing us together.” Horror washed over him as he suddenly understood her point. He would have climbed to his feet if she hadn't been clinging to him so tightly. “You don't think that I...”

“Not consciously, but yes, I think you were calling me.”

How could he have done such a thing? Put her in such danger?

Her mouth brushed against his, interrupting the flow of guilt.

“Listen to me. I know you didn't do it on purpose.”

“But what if it happens again?”

“I don't really expect murderous Vultor to make a regular appearance, do you?” She shook her head when he didn't smile. “And I'm not sure it's a problem anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Let's try an experiment.”

In spite of himself, his cock began to stiffen at the words, and she wiggled against him.

“Not that kind of experiment, silly, at least not yet. Think about how much you want me, how you want me close to you.”

“Always.”

He kissed her and then realized that vines had curled over her back, holding her against him. He stared at them in dismay.

“It happened again.”

“Yes, but now release them.”

It only took a second to find the connection and the vines fell away.

“You see? You can control it now.”

She was right. Now that he could feel those connections, he could control them. Triumph filled him as he grinned down at her.

“My brilliant bride.”

“Thank you.” Her hand came up to tangle in his hair. “Just don’t break all the connections between us.”

“That would not be possible. You are bound to every part of me. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Then she smiled and her hips rocked against him, just a little. “Perhaps now it’s time for the other type of experiment. If you aren’t too tired.”

“I am never too tired for you, little blossom,” he growled as his stamen slipped between her folds, stroking the delicate flesh.

And as he bent his head and kissed her, he spared a brief prayer of gratitude for his exile—an exile that had allowed him to find his true home at last.

CHAPTER 18



The next summer...

“THE SNOW IS ALMOST GONE,” ENDARK GROWLED.

Gilmat sighed and nodded.

“We knew this day would come.”

“It’s not just the snow,” Drakkar announced as he landed on the balcony and joined the other males. Despite the number of tasks to be accomplished at this time of year, they had been meeting almost daily once the deep snow blocking the pass finally began to melt. “A delegation has just left town, led by some ridiculous female in a purple gown.”

Gilmat had no doubt the female was Julie’s mother.

“I could erect a hedge of thorns,” he grumbled.

“Or I could drop more snow from the higher peaks,” Endark offered.

Artek rubbed the base of his horns and looked over at Callum.

“As tempted as I am to agree, it rather defeats the purpose of filling the warehouse with goods to be traded.”

“We could arrange to have them taken to one of the larger cities,” Callum suggested. “Although the route would still pass through Wainwright.”

“I know Florie is excited about her plans to offer some of them for sale in her old restaurant,” Frantor said reluctantly.

“We don’t even know what they want,” Benjar protested.
“They might be coming to make friends.”

“Or they might be coming to try and take our brides.” Endark scowled and smacked Benjar’s shoulder. Benjar grinned fiercely, his mane flaring, and started to shove him back.

“Stop it,” he said, stepping between his brothers.

“We should meet with them,” Artek said. “While I do not believe they are here to ‘make friends,’ it would be just as well to find out their purpose before making any further decisions.”

“They’re not taking my bride,” Endark growled again, and Gilmat put a soothing hand on his brother’s shoulder.

“They are not taking any of our brides,” he said firmly.

“Perhaps it would be best not to mention this to our females until we have spoken to them,” Drakkar said. “I do not wish to worry my mate.”

“Perhaps...” Artek began.

“Are you seriously considering blocking the pass?”

Nelly stalked out on the balcony followed by the other women, and Artek started to laugh.

“I should have known there was no possibility of keeping a secret from you.”

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

“You’re not supposed to try, remember?”

He sobered immediately.

“I do, sweetness, and I apologize. We have only just discovered that there is a delegation approaching the ranch.”

“If you block the pass, what about my father? I want him to meet Clemmie.” Nelly demanded, and Artek winced.

“Again, I was not proposing that we block the pass, just that we be cautious in approaching the townspeople. I know you want your father to meet our daughter.”

Julie sighed as she came over to join him.

“My mother, I suppose?”

“Drakkar said there was a... well-dressed female in a carriage.”

He tried to soften the other male’s original description, but she just shook her head.

“Overdressed, I’m sure.”

“If she is going to upset you, I have no objection to blocking the pass.”

“I’m not the only one involved,” she said softly.

He followed her gaze over to where Nelly, Pearl, and Florie were confronting their mates, arguing about the value of their trade goods. Kitty was nestled against Drakkar’s side, a worried expression on her face as she cradled their daughter. Becky was giving her brother a thoughtful look, while Benjar and Ruby were simply enjoying the argument.

“And while I don’t doubt she’s going to upset me, I’m going to have to face her sooner or later. She is the baby’s grandmother.”

She put her hand on her stomach, and he bit back his immediate protest. When they had discovered that she was not pregnant, they had discussed it at great length and eventually decided to wait. But then one night in the spring she had taken his hand and led him out into the orchard behind the greenhouses. She’d spread a quilt on the ground beneath the trees—the same quilt that had been wrapped around her when she arrived—then slipped the dress he’d made for her down to her feet.

“Make love to me, Gilmat. I want a baby.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” she whispered and reached for him.

The entire orchard burst into bloom that night and, not surprisingly, his seed took root.

They had yet to tell anyone else, although he suspected that Drakkar had guessed. But if his pregnant bride wanted to see

her mother, he would make it happen.

“We should vote,” he announced, his deep voice cutting through the arguments. “Our brides have an equal say.”

“I vote no,” Endark growled, but then Becky elbowed him and he sighed. “Fine. I vote yes.”

Gilmat suspected that Frantor would also have voted against the idea, but he too was won over by his bride. In the end, only Drakkar and Kitty voted against it.

Kitty nodded, even though her mouth trembled.

“I understand. We can’t hide forever. And all of you have worked so hard.”

“I will keep you safe, treasure,” Drakkar promised, even as he gathered her and their daughter into his arms. “I am taking them to my lair. I will return.”

Pearl gave the threesome a worried look as Drakkar took flight.

“I hope we’re doing the right thing.”

Artek sighed.

“I hope we are as well. But while I have been... convinced to meet with the townspeople, I will not allow any of them to cause harm. Gilmat, can you guide them as you did the Vultor?”

“But no vines this time,” Julie said quickly.

“I can guide them. And I will work with Frantor’s drones to make sure that none of them stray.”

“The females will remain here at the house with Callum to protect them,” Artek continued.

“No, Artek, we won’t.” Nelly shook her head. “None of you are the least bit equipped to be diplomatic. Including you, Benjar,” she added as his mouth opened. “Besides, they’re here because of us. They will want to see us and know that we are safe and happy.”

“Just like in your history,” Benjar said cheerfully.

“It’s not history,” all of the women said simultaneously, but it lightened the mood. Even Artek smiled.

“Very well, my little commander. How do you propose we arrange this meeting—without compromising your safety?”

“Gilmat can create a barrier,” Julie suggested. “A hedge, about chest high. Low enough to see over, but too thick to just push through.”

“What if they come armed?” Endark protested.

Gilmat exchanged a look with Frantor and the other male nodded.

“We’ll know and adjust accordingly.”

Endark growled but didn’t make any further objections. Artek nodded.

“Then let’s get to work. We don’t have much time.”

A FEW HOURS LATER, GILMAT STOOD ON THE EDGE OF THE tree line that rose behind their warehouse, his hand on the nearest trunk as he listened to the surrounding plants. The party from Wainwright was approaching the top of the pass—a carriage accompanied by a small group of males.

The rest of his brothers were in the clearing they had decided to use as a meeting place, all except Drakkar who had been keeping watch from the air, along with Frantor’s drones. As if Gilmat’s thoughts had conjured him, Drakkar swooped down to land in front of him, his coppery skin gleaming in the sunlight.

“My mate is afraid,” he said abruptly.

“I thought she was safe in your lair?”

“Yes, but she cannot remain there forever and it is the free passage to town which concerns her.” Drakkar paused, unusually hesitant. “I have a request.”

“How can I help you?”

“One of the men arriving with the townspeople is the one who hurt my mate.” The air around them began to heat. “He is the source of her fear. I will not permit him to live.”

Gilmat didn't try to argue. He knew enough about Kitty's history to know that if anyone had hurt Julie the same way... The branches on the tree next to him began to thrash, and he took a deep breath.

“I understand, but I know you do not need my help to confront a single human male.”

“Of course not,” Drakkar replied, sounding more like his usual self. His eyes burned. “I would take great delight in repeating your actions, only I would do it in front of all of these humans to make sure they understand that no one will ever harm our females.”

He had no grounds to object to the plan. However...

“If you did that, all hope of establishing peace with the town would be gone,” he said quietly.

“I know. It is the only thing which has prevented me from returning to town and eliminating him already. I might even have let it go if he hadn't had the temerity to enter *our* territory, to accompany the humans demanding the return of *our* females.”

The branches thrashed again.

“That will not happen,” he growled.

“No. But whatever happens with the other humans, it is time I removed this male. I believe I have an acceptable alternative. I want you to lead him away from the rest of their party.”

“I'm not sure I can isolate a single human without the others noticing.”

“He is at the rear of the group.” Drakkar grinned fiercely. “He still limps due to the injury I inflicted last time we met. Will you assist me?”

“Of course. You are my brother. Just let me know how to identify him.”

It turned out to be easier than he expected. The man was lagging behind the others, scowling down at the ground as he muttered something about ungrateful bitches, and it was a simple matter to use thickened bushes to lead him off to one side. As soon as the man was out of sight of the others, Drakkar swooped down. He allowed the man one terrified look before he sliced his claws across the man's neck and took off with the body.

A short time later, he landed at Gilmat's side.

"I have ensured that he will never be found."

"Good."

"I would rather have made him suffer, but perhaps this way was best." Drakkar hesitated. "Thank you."

"I'm glad it went well. No one appears to have noticed."

He pointed at the approaching party as they began to descend the pass. The woman in the carriage was complaining about the heat and the lack of speed in addition to a number of generic complaints. The men in the party had moved as far away as they could—which wasn't far considering the narrow passage he had permitted between the hedges.

"I thought you said the ranch was on this side of the pass," she snapped at the unfortunate male riding with her.

"It is, Mrs. Watson, but I believe the main ranch house is a good deal further down the valley." The man frowned at the hedges. "I don't remember this much vegetation. It's difficult to get one's bearings."

"Nonsense, Mr. Madison. I expect you to take me directly to my poor daughter."

Artek signaled from further down the slope, and as planned, Gilmat lifted a row of bushes in front of the party, forcing them to come to a halt.

"Where the hell did those come from?" one of the men muttered, his hand dropping the gun holstered at his side.

He sent a vine slithering towards the holster, quickly removing it, as well as all of the other weapons Frantor's drones had

detected. The men looked shocked, backing nervously against the carriage, although Mrs. Watson didn't seem to notice.

"Now what's wrong?" she demanded.

"The path is blocked," Mr. Madison said nervously, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"Then cut it down."

"I would not suggest that," Artek said calmly as Gilmat lowered the hedge enough to reveal him to the humans.

"Then bring me my daughter," Mrs. Watson demanded.

"And mine." A stout, red-faced male pushed forward, glaring at Artek. "She promised to visit me. What have you done to her?"

"Nothing. She is perfectly fine." Artek held out his hand and Nelly came to join him.

"I'm fine, Pa. We just haven't been able to get across the pass until now." Her eyes were bright with tears. "It's wonderful to see you."

Her father sniffed and started towards her, then scowled.

"Then why can't I get past this confounded hedge?"

"If you promise you mean no harm, we will lower it," Artek said.

There was an uneasy silence and the man who had reached for his gun stepped forward. He was big for a human, and might have been considered handsome by a female.

"Now see here. I'm the law in these parts, and I demand you return our women."

"*Your* women?" Drakkar asked mockingly as he appeared at Artek's side. Shock rippled through the crowd at the sight of the big winged figure. "As far as I know, none of you have any claims on our brides."

The man's face reddened.

"They ain't your brides. They belong to us humans."

At Artek's signal, Gilmat dropped the barrier the rest of the way although he kept a long, thick root just beneath the surface. All of the women were visible, each of them with their respective mates. Ruby was the first to speak, glaring at the lawman.

"We sure as hell don't belong to you, Thomas Cole. None of us would marry you if you were the last man on this planet."

Benjar growled an agreement, and the man took a hasty step back. Before he could say anything else, Mrs. Watson screeched as she finally noticed Julie standing quietly at his side.

"Julia! Oh, thank God. You come over here right this minute."

"No, Mother. I'm staying right here with my husband."

"Your husband? That's impossible. Mr. Madison, tell her it's impossible."

He coughed nervously. "She is an adult. I can't, uh, force her to return to you."

"Well, do something. I demand that one of you act like a real man and bring my daughter to me."

The men looked at him, and even the one who claimed to be the law backed away.

"Do something," Mrs. Watson demanded.

And then a baby's cry echoed through the clearing.

CHAPTER 19



Julie's mother swayed when Clemmie cried, and even most of the men looked shocked. Julie bit her lip to keep from grinning. What had they expected? If they truly thought that the males on the ranch had abducted the women for nefarious purposes, surely they must have realized there would be consequences.

"Was... was that a baby?" her mother whispered.

An idea sprang into her head, and she stole a quick glance at Artek and Nelly. Danny was concealed in the bushes, watching over Clemmie, as well as Kitty's daughter Lola. She could see the tension in Nelly's body and knew it wouldn't be long before she went to check on her daughter. This had to be quick.

"Yes, that was a baby," she agreed calmly.

"But..."

Her mother actually looked ready to faint. Apparently, Mr. Madison thought so as well because he took a cautious step away from her. Why had her mother brought the town clerk along?

"Whose baby is it?" her mother demanded.

"Mine," she said calmly, then shot a quick glance at the other women.

They did not disappoint her.

"Mine," echoed all the other women, even the ones who were clearly pregnant.

“Babies? Out of wedlock?”

Gilmat stepped up next to her, his hand warm and reassuring on her back.

“We have all been bound—wedded—to our chosen brides by our own customs.”

“Is that legal?” her mother asked frantically.

Mr. Madison shifted uncomfortably.

“It is difficult to know. It would be best if the marriages were recorded in the town’s records.”

“Then register them,” her mother demanded.

She started to object, then thought better of it. She didn’t need anyone sanctifying her relationship with Gilmat, but she rather liked the idea of making it official, of letting everyone know that he was her husband.

“I think that sounds like an excellent idea,” she said, ignoring her mother’s startled look. “What do you need for the ceremony, Mr. Madison?”

“Just your names.” The clerk fumbled in his pocket for a pad and pencil, then licked the tip of the pencil. “Julie Watson and...”

“Gilmat,” he rumbled in his deep voice. “Just Gilmat.”

“Florie and Frantor,” Florie said calmly, walking over to join them.

The clerk flinched as he looked up at the big scarred male, and Julie saw Frantor’s fist clench. But Florie put her hand over his and Mr. Madison wrote down their names without comment.

“Ruby and Benjar.”

Ruby’s pretty face was flushed with excitement and Benjar had a huge grin on his face—a grin that showed off his rather large fangs. The clerk flinched again, but wrote their names anyway.

“Ruby Bennett!” her mother exclaimed. “So this is where you’ve been all this time? Does your sister know you’re here?”

“Yes, I do,” Pearl said calmly. “Hello, Emma. Mr. Madison, please add Pearl and Callum to your list.”

Her mother’s scandalized gaze dropped to Pearl’s very pregnant stomach and her mouth opened—but then she looked up at Callum’s stern face and it snapped shut again. Julie hid her smile. Maybe her mother was finally beginning to understand that she was outmatched.

“Rebecca and Endark.”

Her friend was the next to appear. Mr. Madison took one look at Endark and moaned under his breath, but once again wrote down the names.

“Kitty and Drakkar,” Drakkar announced.

“Drakkar, we don’t have to do this,” Kitty whispered, her pretty face flushed.

“Yes, we do, treasure. I am proud to claim you as mine.”

Her mother really was struck silent now, staring up at the huge winged male. Mr. Madison mopped his face with an orange silk handkerchief and cleared his throat nervously.

“If that’s everyone, please form a line in front of me.”

“Since my marriage is already official, I’m just going to set out some food to celebrate,” Nelly said quickly. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

They had brought food with them as a hospitable gesture if the meeting went well, but Julie knew Nelly was more concerned about checking on Clemmie. She disappeared into the bushes, Artek behind her, while the rest of them arranged themselves as Mr. Madison asked. Julie looked down the line of couples and had an idea.

“We should have a wedding arch, with flowers,” she whispered to Gilmat. “Can you do that?”

“Of course.”

A thick vine sprang out of the ground next to her, its branches arching overhead until they intertwined with a similar vine growing from the other end of the line. More branches appeared, then buds sprouted into huge clusters of small purple flowers, dripping down from the arch and filling the air with their scent. More blooms dropped down over her head, crowning her with flowers.

Her mother paled again and several of the men took a step back, but Mr. Madison only pushed his spectacles up his nose and cleared his throat.

“Since I have your names for the records and there are so many of you, I will dispense with the individual names. If that’s all right,” he added, peering at Gilmat.

“It is acceptable. We know who we are.”

“Err, yes. Now each of you face your partners and repeat after me.”

Perhaps it was just as well she already knew the words of the ceremony. She barely heard Mr. Madison speak, or the murmur of the other couples. All she could hear was Gilmat’s deep voice and all she could see was his beautiful green eyes, focused so intently on her face. Love filled her so completely she felt as if she were glowing.

“I now pronounce you, err, male and wife. You may kiss your brides.”

She reached for him and he lifted her into arms, kissing her with a tenderness that soon turned to passion. She’d almost forgotten their onlookers when she heard her mother’s scandalized voice.

“Julia Watson, you stop that right now. Have you already forgotten how to act like a respectable young lady?”

With a last brush of her mouth across Gilmat’s, she turned to her mother.

“I’m not sure I ever knew. And I’m not Julia Watson anymore. I’m just Julie.”

Before her mother could respond, there was a muffled yell from the far side of the clearing. Julie looked over in time to see Benjar punch Thomas Cole square in the face, breaking his nose. Benjar immediately stepped back as Thomas crumpled to the ground, raising his hands and grinning at the shocked men.

“Don’t worry, he deserved that.”

“He certainly did,” Ruby said fiercely, then grinned up at her husband. “My hero.”

He purred and reached for her, but Pearl stepped between them.

“Wedding lunch first.”

Benjar actually looked torn, but then he shrugged.

“As long as it’s a quick lunch.”

There were some more muttered comments from the men, but there were also some quickly hidden smiles. Julie didn’t even try to hide her own smile. She had never liked Thomas, and apparently she wasn’t the only one.

“Where’s your baby, Nelly?” her father asked as Nelly reappeared, carrying a basket.

“Right here, Pa.” Nelly pulled the blanket back from the basket. “This is your granddaughter. Her name is Clementine.”

The man stared down at the tiny blue-skinned baby and then his eyes filled with tears.

“You named her after your ma?” He swiped at his eyes, then blew his nose on a big red-spotted handkerchief and reached for the baby. “She’s just as beautiful as she was. Now let me hold her.”

Julie saw Artek’s fists clench, but Nelly only smiled and handed the baby to her father. He immediately started talking nonsense to the baby, and Artek gradually relaxed.

“Where’s your baby?” her mother demanded. “I want to see my grandchild.”

“Here.”

She placed her hand over the slight swell of her stomach, and her mother's eyes narrowed.

"You mean you haven't given birth yet? Why didn't you tell me? We could have simply taken you back to Wainwright and married you to a nice respectable man."

"First of all, I'm not sure that any "nice, respectable man" would be thrilled at the idea of raising a child who might well look exactly like her father."

Her mother paled as she looked over at Gilmat's giant form.

"But second—and far more importantly—I love Gilmat. I already considered myself married to him, and I'm not going to leave him."

"But... but what about your schooling?"

"The schooling you were so opposed to?" she asked dryly. "We actually have a plan for that, although I doubt that's really what concerns you."

Her mother ignored the comment.

"At least move back to Wainwright. If you don't want to live in the house, I could convert the carriage house. Or build you a new house on the back of my property. Yes, that would be a better—"

"No, Mother. We're happy here."

She watched in shock as her mother's mouth suddenly trembled. It was the first time she'd ever seen a crack in her formidable armor.

"But if you stay here on the ranch with him, I'll never see you or my grandchild again," she wailed.

"Why not? You're here now, aren't you?"

"You mean I can visit?"

Julie reached out and squeezed her hand.

"Of course you can. You're my mother, and I love you. I want you to be part of my life and our child's life. But you have to

be polite and respectful to everyone on the ranch, especially Gilmat.”

“I’m always polite,” her mother sniffed, the momentary weakness vanishing.

“And respectful,” she said firmly. “Everyone here is equal.”

“But...” Julie could see the protests struggling to emerge, but her mother finally nodded.

“Oh, very well.”

“Good. Now come and meet my husband.”

The meeting went better than she’d expected. Her mother was stiffly formal, but she wasn’t rude. Gilmat was equally stiff and said little. She was still relieved when Nelly reappeared to let them know the wedding lunch was ready and they all headed for the area in front of the warehouse where Nelly had set up the food.

“Are you all right, my blossom?” Gilmat murmured as her mother moved away to speak to Pearl.

“I’m fine. Just tired. Being diplomatic is exhausting.”

He immediately lifted her into her arms. She laughed but didn’t object, snuggling against him. Her mother cast a horrified look in her direction, then deliberately turned away to continue her conversation as the party moved on.

“My poor mother. It must be killing her to keep her mouth shut.”

“I am surprised that she is silent.”

She patted her stomach and grinned at him.

“I have a secret weapon. I never realized how much she wanted a grandchild. I told her that if she wanted to be part of our child’s life she would have to behave.”

He couldn’t quite hide his appalled look.

“Don’t worry. It’s not as if she’s going to live here, but I do want her to visit. I may even want to visit her.”

He immediately stiffened. “Not without me.”

“Of course not. I don’t want to go anywhere without you.”

His expression turned thoughtful as he looked back at her mother.

“Just how well behaved do you think she can be?”

“Why?”

“Because my pregnant bride is obviously exhausted. I should carry her back to our house and tend to her... needs.”

One of the strands of her gown slipped free and curled over her hip, probing gently between her thighs. She gasped as it stroked across her clit, her body immediately responding.

“We’re surrounded by people,” he reminded her. “You should remain quiet.”

His face was solemn, but his eyes gleamed as the strand stroked her again. Her nipples were so hard they ached, and she desperately wanted to rub them against him.

“Rest,” she said quickly. “I need to rest.”

“Benjar,” he called, and the big male bounded over, grinning cheerfully.

“Did you want to thank me again for the success of my plan?”

“I will always be grateful for that,” Gilmat said sincerely. “However, I also have a job for you. As soon as we leave, please inform Julie’s mother that she is resting. We will rejoin her... eventually.”

She managed to nod, even though most of her attention was on that devastating tendril teasing her clit.

“Me?” The obvious dismay on Benjar’s face would have amused her under other circumstances. “Why me?”

“As you said, it was your plan. It’s only fair that you should reap all the rewards.”

“Oh, all right.”

“I’m sure you’ll win her over with your charm,” Gilmat said.

“Do you think so? Maybe you’re right.”

Benjar grinned again and left. As soon as he did, Gilmat faded back into the woods, drawing a curtain of greenery between them and the others.

“That would almost be worth staying to watch,” she giggled, then moaned as the tendril tightened around her clit.

“Is that what you want, blossom?”

“No,” she gasped. “I want this.”

He backed her up against a tree, and vines descended. They curled around her arms and legs, supporting her even as they pulled her legs apart. Her gown disappeared, leaving her naked in front of her green giant, and she shivered with excitement.

“Can you be quiet?” he asked, as his own clothing disappeared and he put a big hand around that even bigger cock.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, even though she could still hear the sound of voices.

A vine slid across her mouth.

“Use that if you need to,” he ordered.

The vines lifted her a little more as his hands closed over her ass and he pulled her down onto his cock in one hard stroke. She bit down on the vine as her body arched, struggling to adjust. He rocked into her as more tendrils erupted, circling her sensitive nipples and teasing the swollen bud of her clit. Her body quivered as he rocked again, those marvelous veins stroking her channel.

“My blossom,” he growled as his pace increased.

“Yes.”

“My love.”

“God, yes.”

“My bride.”

“Yes!”

With a triumphant roar he buried himself to the root, hot liquid filling her as her own climax washed over her, her body convulsing helplessly around him as stars danced in front of

her eyes. She clung to him, vines gently stroking her back as she waited for her racing pulse to calm. The vine in her mouth slipped free, but the tendrils remained in place against her sensitive flesh.

“You weren’t very quiet,” she said when she finally recovered enough to speak.

He didn’t appear the least bit repentant as he grinned down at her.

“And you almost bit my vine in half.”

“I didn’t hurt it, did I?”

“No, blossom.” He stroked a big thumb across her lips. “It was honored to have your mouth on it.”

“I can’t decide if that’s sweet or creepy.”

“Definitely sweet. As sweet as you.” He dipped his finger between their still joined bodies, then raised it to his lips. “Mmm. I need more of this sweet nectar.”

She could feel her body responding to his touch, but her eyes were growing heavy.

“You can feast as much as you want,” she promised. “But take me home first.”

“If I do, we will never rejoin your mother.”

“Then we’d better hope that Benjar succeeds in charming my mother,” she murmured.

He was still laughing when she fell asleep.

EPILOGUE



*F*ive years later...

“ANOTHER REASON TO CELEBRATE!” JULIE COULDN’T HELP grinning as she showed Gilmat the message she’d just received. “They approved my dissertation, which means I now officially have a doctorate in botany.”

“My brilliant bride,” he said, his eyes glowing with approval.

It hadn’t been easy juggling the demands of her schooling, the ranch, and a very precocious daughter—not to mention a deliciously demanding husband—but with his help she had managed. They made a yearly trip to Port Cantor to meet with her professors, but she completed most of her coursework online, utilizing part of the workroom for her own research.

“They want to publish the dissertation,” she added.

She had based it on the hardy strain of wheat they had developed, although Gilmat’s skills were not mentioned.

“Excellent.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all. If your work can benefit others, then it should be shared.”

“*Our* work,” she said firmly. “I wish you’d let me credit you.”

He shrugged those big shoulders.

“It’s not important. And I see no reason to possibly arouse the curiosity of other Gremin.”

His eyes flicked towards their daughter’s room and she shivered. Although he’d assured her that his people had no claim on Kori, even the thought of their precious daughter being subjected to what had happened to him horrified her.

“I guess you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.”

He leaned over her, one side of her gown parting obediently to reveal her breast. She shivered for an entirely different reason as the air washed over her already stiffening nipple. A tendril curled around it, plucking at the taut bud.

“Now that you’re a doctor, do you have any experiments you wish to conduct?” he murmured, tightening the tendril enough to create a delicious sting.

“You seem to be doing just fine,” she said breathlessly. “And you know Kori won’t sleep much longer.”

“She should, considering she was too excited about today to fall asleep until long past her bedtime.”

He opened the other side of her gown, working that nipple with his big fingers, and the contrasting sensations made her clit pulse with excitement.

“Well, maybe if you’re quick...”

Her gown began to dissolve completely as he bent his head to kiss her. She was responding eagerly when he sighed and raised his head. Her gown flowed back around her just as Kori came flying into the room, half-running and half-being carried by the vines. Except for the fact that her golden curls were composed of tendrils rather than hair, her daughter looked as human as Julie, but she was every bit as talented with plants as her father.

“Is it time yet?” she demanded, flinging herself into Julie’s arms.

“Not yet, sweetheart. But as soon as we’ve eaten breakfast we’ll go down and start helping Nelly.”

She wasn't entirely surprised when the vines started bringing in fruit from the greenhouse and placing it on the table. Gilmat beamed proudly, and she shook her head. Precocious indeed.

"I get the hint. Go wash up and we'll eat."

Kori hopped away, and she moved to the table, preparing the fruit with the ease of long practice. Gilmat followed her, but she noticed that his smile had faded.

"Are you worried about today?" she asked softly.

Nelly had decided to host a harvest festival, just like the one that had started the whole thing, and she had invited a good portion of the town.

"Not really. We've worked with enough people over the years that most of the town accepts us, at least to a certain extent. And I think those who don't will not be foolish enough to attend. But I will be watching."

"I know you will."

While she wished he could just relax and enjoy himself, his protective instincts were far too strong. And it did make her feel safer. There had been a few incidents, especially in the early years, but the brothers had handled them with ruthless efficiency and their life had settled into a peaceful routine.

"Did I tell you my mother is coming?"

He sighed. "No, but I'm not surprised. That woman can't stay away from here."

"Be nice. You know it won't be that long until the pass closes."

"I do enjoy our winters."

"So do I, but winter will be here soon enough. For today, at least pretend to enjoy socializing."

"As long as you are there, blossom, I will enjoy it," he said as he bent his head to kiss her.

THE CELEBRATION WAS TAKING PLACE IN THE SAME AREA where the group marriage had occurred, and the memory always made Julie smile. The location was convenient for anyone coming from town and far enough from the main ranch buildings for privacy. Over the years they had added a second warehouse, along with a large three-sided shelter with a kitchen for this type of gathering. Tables were scattered across the grass in front of the shelter, and a level area to one side was already full of toys and children.

Nelly and Florie were hard at work and she went to join them, Gilmat following her with the two huge baskets of fruit they'd brought. Kori had already darted away to join Mazan. Somewhat surprisingly, Pearl's quiet son was her volatile daughter's "bestest, bestest" friend. Pearl was talking to Ruby as they watched over the children and she waved at Julie as Kori bounced over and threw her arms around Mazan.

"That fruit looks so delicious," Nelly said. "Can you arrange it at the end of the buffet line? There should be—" She broke off to yell across the shelter. "Benjar, if you don't stay away from those cookies I'll castrate you with a blunt knife!"

"It's for the children," he protested, handing two cookies to his son. Benji was an exact replica of his father in every way from looks to personality to endless appetite, but Julie saw him carefully hand one of the cookies to his little sister before devouring his own. She also saw Benjar slip two more cookies in his own pocket while he tried to look innocent.

"I don't think he's ever going to change," Nelly sighed. "Ruby certainly hasn't settled him down."

Julie laughed. "No, I think she's almost as wild as he is, but she seems so much happier now than she ever did in town. The ranch has been good for her. For all of us."

"Yes." Nelly looked over at Artek, talking politely to her father as both of them watched Clemmie and her younger brother play. "But for our husbands most of all. I wonder how many others suffered through that terrible war and weren't lucky enough to find a place like this."

“Or brides like ours,” Gilmat added. He was standing quietly behind her, still patiently holding the baskets. “The ranch helped, as did our brotherhood, but you made the most difference. You brought us love.”

His eyes were focused on her as he spoke, and she had the sudden urge to cry. How different her own life would have been without Gilmat.

“Maybe we could open up the ranch to other warriors that need help,” Nelly said thoughtfully. “Not that we could offer them brides,” she added with a laugh. “But I think I’ll talk to Artek about it tonight. Right now I need to get back to my cooking.”

Julie smiled. “I suspect Florie has it well in hand.”

Their friend looked as serene as always as she moved from one pot to another, despite her obviously pregnant stomach. Frantor lurked in the shadows behind her, holding their daughter. He no longer hid himself away, but he still tended to remain in the background. But even as she thought that, their son Ermek called to him from where the children were playing, and he didn’t hesitate to emerge into the sunshine and join him.

“I know,” Nelly said ruefully. “She always makes it look so easy. But I promised to help.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Just arrange the fruit, please.”

She set to work, then smiled up at Gilmat.

“Why don’t you go and check with Callum? I know he’s as obsessive about security as you are.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all. After I finish this, I want to talk to Becky about some new clothes for Kori.” She held up her hand. “I know you can make all the clothes she needs, but she’s a little too fond of making them disappear.”

“Like mother, like daughter,” he laughed, but his eyes gleamed.

“Yes, but I know to save it for when we’re alone. Now go on. I’ll find you later.”

He kissed her, and she watched as he walked away. Even after all this time, that huge muscular body still made her heart skip a beat—and her nipples tighten. Just as well she’d made plans for later.

Once the fruit was arranged, she went to find Becky. Her friend was sitting with Kitty at one of the tables that had been set up, fanning her face against the unseasonal warmth.

“How much longer now?” Julie asked.

Becky patted her very pregnant stomach. “Drakkar says two weeks, but I would be delighted if it was sooner.”

“Drakkar is never wrong,” Kitty said serenely.

“This is the second time he’s been wrong about how to provide birth control that’s effective against what he calls Endark’s ‘determined’ sperm,” Becky said crossly, then sighed. “Don’t mind me. I’m just hot and grouchy. We were already planning to have another baby.”

Danny came up and handed Becky a glass of lemonade. She took it with a grateful sigh as he bounced Becky’s daughter, Zaira, on his hip. The pretty little girl with dark hair and pointed ears stared at them, her big green eyes just like her father’s.

“Here you go, sis. If you don’t need anything else, I’m going to take the squirt over to play with the other kids and then go find Benjar.”

“I’m fine, thanks. But stay out of trouble!”

He grinned and took off as Becky shook her head.

“He’s growing up so fast.”

“Is he still planning on going away to college?” she asked.

“One day he says he is, and the next he starts talking about doing it remotely. He loves it here on the ranch, but he’s restless.” She shook her head again and smiled at Julie. “Did you want to talk about Kori’s clothes?”

“Only if you’re up to it. There’s no rush.”

“I’ll work on them when I can,” Becky promised. “I love making clothes for little girls.”

They discussed a few options, then Becky struggled to her feet to make a trip to the bathroom, waving off their assistance.

“I get enough of that from Endark. If Seren hadn’t distracted him, he’d probably be over here now, insisting on carrying me. Let me enjoy a little walk under my own power for once.”

Julie laughed and turned to Kitty.

“I heard that Drakkar is working on a new medical treatise. How’s it going?”

“Slowly. He prefers spending time with me and the children.” She pointed to where Drakkar stood watching his son and daughter play, a little away from the other adults. “He never had a real childhood, and he’s determined not to miss a moment of theirs.”

“Are you moving down from the mountain for the winter?”

“I suspect we’ll be going back and forth. I love being up there, but I think Pearl’s right that we need to bring the children together to learn as well as play.”

Pearl had converted a big room on the lower level of the main house into a play school area and planned to hold regular sessions through the winter.

“I agree. I’m planning on bringing Kori as well.”

“Poor Nelly. A house full of children—and their overprotective fathers.”

“I’m sure she’ll take it in stride. And probably put them all to work,” she added, and Kitty laughed.

They were still talking when one of the women from town approached them. Several years older, she was neatly dressed in a simple dress, her brown hair braided back from a plain, pleasant face.

“I just wanted to say... I’m sorry,” she said quietly to Kitty, her hands twisting in her skirts.

“Sorry? Sorry for what?”

The woman took a deep breath and nodded at where the children were playing.

“That’s my daughter, Sarah.”

Julie saw Kitty pale, but it took her a moment to understand. An older girl was playing with Lola—a girl who could have been the little girl’s sister.

“You don’t have—” Kitty began, but the other woman didn’t let her finish.

“I knew. I knew what would happen as soon as I heard that there was a pretty new barmaid. And I knew when I heard that you were pregnant, but I tried to pretend that I didn’t. I should have confronted him, but...” Her hand drifted up to touch her cheek. “It never went well when I stood up to him.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kitty said, but the woman shook her head.

“Don’t be. I know what it’s like to be lonely and desperate.”

Kitty bit her lip. “About your husband—”

Once again, the woman interrupted her. “He ran off the day everyone came to the ranch. I saw him leave.”

“But—”

“He left,” the woman repeated firmly. “That’s what I reported, and the authorities agreed. I received the dissolution of my marriage this summer.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she suddenly looked younger and prettier.

“I’m getting married again in the spring. You’d be welcome, if you’d care to come.”

“Congratulations. Who’s the lucky man?”

“His name’s Ferdie. That’s him over there.”

The woman nodded at a man lifting her daughter into the air, and it took Julie a moment to recognize him as the former gangly youth who used to follow her around.

“He’s changed since the last time I saw him.”

“I reckon so. I know he’s younger than me, but he’s a good man. He started coming around after Sam left, just to help out. Never asked for nothing, just did what he could. He’s never laid a finger on me, or the kids, and they adore him.”

“I hope you will be very happy,” Kitty said.

The woman gave her a shy smile and moved away.

“What was that about?”

“Her husband Sam? He was Lola’s father.” Kitty shuddered.

“*Was?*”

“He came here with that first group of people from town, but Drakkar made sure he couldn’t hurt us. Ever,” Kitty said quietly. “Do you think she knows that he’s really gone?”

“I do. And I think she’s glad.”

“Good. I’m happy she found someone decent this time.”

“And Ferdie, of all people.”

They both laughed and went to join their husbands.

Gilmat was talking to Endark and Seren. The Vultor had become a regular visitor over the years, and he no longer frightened her or reminded her of the attack. They chatted for a few minutes before the two males went off to find Becky.

“You all looked very serious when I walked up,” she said as Gilmat tucked her against his side.

“We were sympathizing with Seren. He wants a mate, but he has yet to find one.”

“Isn’t that dangerous? Especially at his age?”

The Vultor usually found their mates at an early age, but Seren was already in his forties.

“Apparently he has been able to remain in control of his beast.”

“Hmm. I heard Florie’s assistant Susan complaining earlier about the lack of good men in town and wishing that there were some unattached males on the ranch.”

“No matchmaking,” he said firmly.

“Of course not. Although I could mention it to Benjar...”

At that exact moment Benjar raced by, a child on each shoulder, both screaming happily as he made spaceship noises.

“Or perhaps not,” she laughed.

“Speaking of children, where is our daughter?”

“With my mother.”

He groaned, but she ignored him. Despite his complaints, the two had come to an understanding over the years, drawn together by their mutual love for Kori.

“Perhaps I should go and rescue Kori,” he grumbled.

“Or you could let her stay and have a slumber party at the main house with my mother, and the other children.”

“Slumber party?”

“That means that they’ll stay there all night.”

“But—”

“Which means that we will be completely alone.”

His eyes heated as he pulled her closer.

“Are you contemplating another experiment, blossom?”

“I am. I have my degree and I have several projects lined up—but none of them are due to start for another nine months.” He looked adorably confused, and she snuggled closer. “Which means that if you can get me pregnant as easily as you did the last time, this would be the perfect time to have another child.”

He snatched her up in his arms and set off at a run. She blushed and hid her face in his neck as she heard their friends and family laughing and cheering, but she smiled all the way home. She had every confidence that her husband would make this wish come true, just as he had so many others.

He did.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Gilmat*! I had a lot of fun telling the story of my big, gentle (and occasionally not so gentle!) giant and his smart, determined heroine. It's always bittersweet to end a series, but I love the homestead worlds and who knows? We may be back!

Whether you enjoyed the story or not, it would mean the world to me if you left an honest review on Amazon – reviews are one of the best ways to help other readers find my books!

As usual, I have to thank my readers for coming on these adventures with me - I couldn't do it without you!

And, as always, a special thanks to my beta team – Janet S, Nancy V, and Kitty S. Your thoughts and comments are incredibly helpful!



Coming next!

I'm very excited to be returning to the Alien Invasion universe this year! First up is *Alien Castaway*!

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A Gift for the Alien Warrior

A Treasure for the Alien Warrior

Horned Holidays

Krampus and the Crone

A Gift for Nicholas

A Kiss of Frost

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Honey Phillips writes steamy science fiction stories about hot alien warriors and the human women they can't resist. From abductions to invasions, the ride might be rough, but the end always satisfies.

Honey wrote and illustrated her first book at the tender age of five. Her writing has improved since then. Her drawing skills, unfortunately, have not. She loves writing, reading, traveling, cooking, and drinking champagne - not necessarily in that order.

Honey loves to hear from her wonderful readers! You can stalk her at any of the following locations...

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