

# HORNED HOLIDAYS

BOOKS 1-3

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# HONEY PHILLIPS

HORNED HOLIDAYS  
THE FIRST COLLECTION



HONEY PHILLIPS

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Cover by The Book Brander

Edited by Lindsay York at LY Publishing Services

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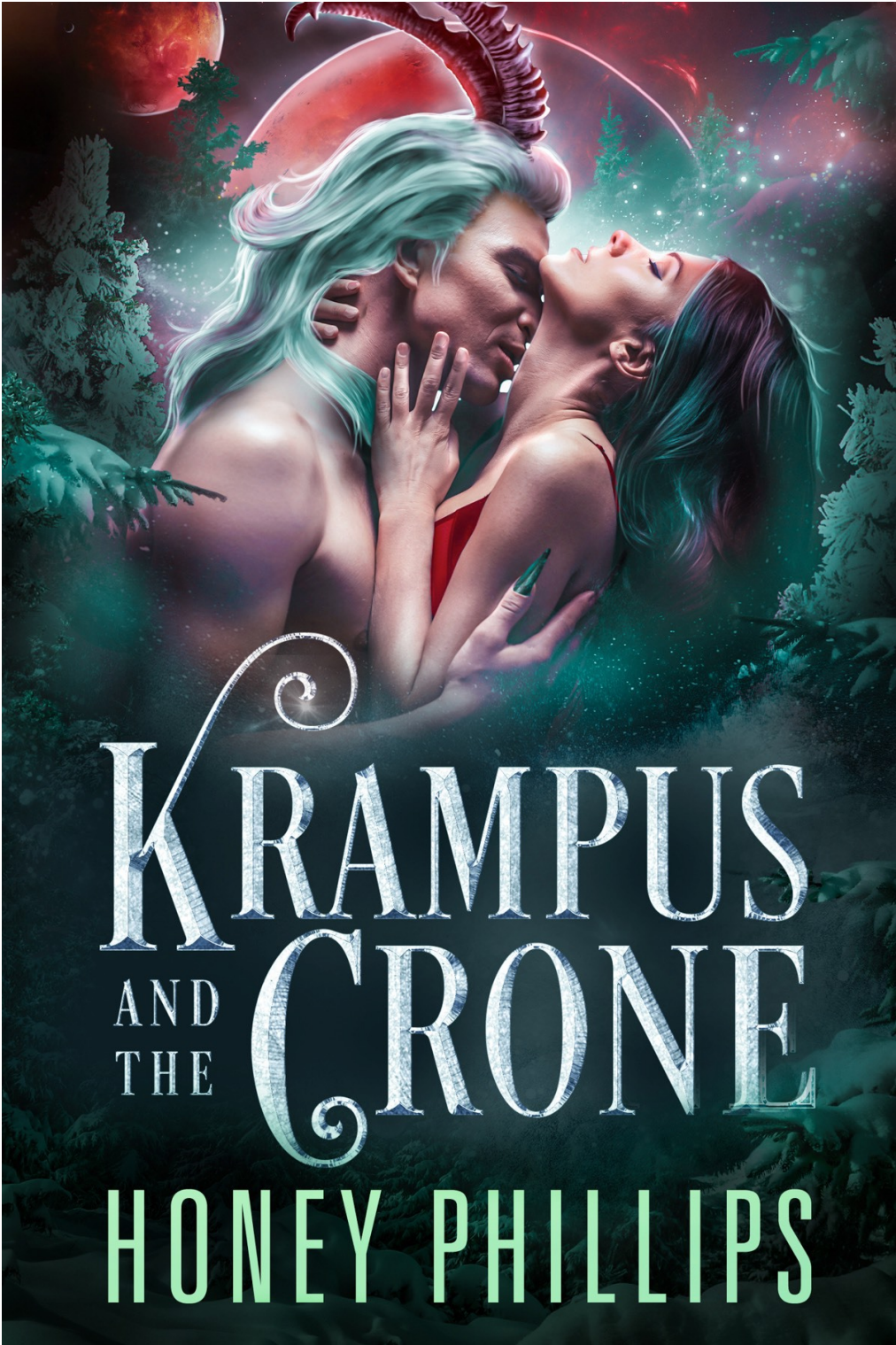
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## CHAPTER 1



Commander Krampasarian D'Marchandar stepped outside of his wrecked ship and sighed. A cold, wet substance was falling from the sky. Was there no end to the unpleasant surprises this primitive planet produced? He had already been horrified to discover that water dripped from the sky at random intervals, but this new substance was thicker. And colder. He shivered and returned to his ship to investigate.

After a quick search through his data files, he identified the new substance as *snow* - a phenomenon that would never have been permitted on Tandrok, the climate-controlled planet of his birth. Based on the information provided to him, the presence of snow could indicate the beginning of a cold season where it would appear with increasing frequency, covering the ground and leading to such terrible phenomena as ice storms and avalanches. Horrified at the prospect, he went to check on the progress of the microscopic nanites that were steadily, but very slowly, repairing the damaged sections of his ship.

Unfortunately, watching them work did not increase the speed with which they progressed, and eventually boredom drove him back to the bridge. Telling himself that it was his duty as a Tandroki commander to record the lifeforms he discovered, he turned on the feed from his drones. However, the eagerness with which he bent over the images was not entirely due to his scholarly inclinations. Would *she* appear today or would this disgusting snow keep her inside?

When his ship had first crash landed on K.R.S. Three, he had been too appalled to consider the possibility that the planet

might be inhabited. The first few days had passed in a daze of horror, compounded by rage when he had discovered the distinct signs of sabotage. No doubt Commander Nicholsarian, his chief rival for the coveted position of Ambassador to Perchten, had been behind the disruption that had rendered his navigation systems useless before finally causing the explosion that had forced him to the surface of this primitive planet.

Once he had set the repair process in place - and realized how long it would take - he had turned his attention to the planet. His ship had crashed into a group of deplorably large and irregular landforms. Fortunately, the crash had half-buried his ship in the dirt of a small, flat area near the peak of one of the landforms, rather than plunging to the valley floor. Unfortunately, that meant that at some point he would most likely have to dig away some of the dirt. By hand.

He shuddered at the thought and returned to the contemplation of his surroundings. Only primitive, lower-level life forms existed in the vicinity of his ship, but as his boredom had increased, he had extended his survey and found additional life. Although still clearly primitive, they appeared to have some rudimentary level of intelligence. They constructed crude dwellings out of the materials surrounding them, engaged in trade, and exhibited communication skills.

Using drones disguised as native flying creatures, he began watching the small village at the base of his mountain. On the whole, he was not impressed. Their living conditions were primitive, and they relied on crude methods to cook, clean, and control their environment. What's more, they frequently argued amongst themselves and did not treat each other with any level of respect.

Of course, he had thought bitterly, while the Tandroki culture placed a great deal of emphasis on respect and manners, behind that polite surface just as much conflict existed. Given the fact that such a conflict had most likely led to his present predicament, he found a certain measure of appreciation for the openness of the villagers.



That did not, however, stop him from regarding them with some disdain. But since he had very little else to occupy his time, he began to spend a portion of each day watching the villagers. He grew interested enough that he prioritized fixing his translation system, downgrading some of the other repairs, simply so he could understand their primitive speech. Once that was accomplished, he was even more fascinated - and appalled - by their lifestyle.

And then, *she* appeared.

At first, he did not even realize that the newcomer was female, but the presence of a stranger in the marketplace had drawn his attention. The unfamiliar person was heavily cloaked, with a stooped posture, and seemed reliant on a wooden cane. As she moved amongst the stalls, his drones picked up whispers from the villagers.

“Witch.”

“Interfering old crone.”

“Stay away from her.”

This last was said by one of the males operating a stall to his bonded female – such a primitive concept – and she nodded her head obediently. But as he had already observed, the appearance of consent by a female meant very little. As soon as her male’s back was turned, she slipped away and went searching for the stranger.

The newcomer had seated herself on a small bench next to the tavern, tucked away from the majority of the marketplace, and set out a small array of pouches on a colorful cloth. The stall keeper’s wife edged up to her, casting a nervous eye over her shoulder to make sure that her husband was not watching.

“I need the potion, Jaelle,” she muttered.

“Aye? Still won’t leave you alone, eh?” the stranger said softly.

“No. Not even when I’m most likely to be fertile. I know it’s my duty to let him have his way, but I don’t need a fifth child right now.”

Jaelle quickly sorted through the pouches and handed one to the stall keeper's wife. "You know the routine. A pinch in your tea every morning, then a week off once a month."

The other woman pressed a small coin into her hand with a quick word of thanks and then disappeared back into the crowd. The so-called witch lifted her head to watch her departure, and for the first time, his drone could relay a picture of her face.

A tattered fringe of gray hair surrounded a heavily lined countenance, but he paid little attention to her features. All he could see were her eyes. Blue – as blue as the skies that covered this planet. But it was more than the arresting color that caught his attention. Intelligence sparked in those blue depths and he saw both compassion and sorrow in her gaze as she watched the stall-keeper's wife disappear. After a quick, assessing survey of her surroundings, she dipped her head once more. He wanted to demand that she look back up. That she look at *him*.

As he watched in fascination, more people, mainly women, made their way to her bench. They stopped only briefly, usually after a nervous look around, then hurried away. Very few of them engaged in conversation with her. One exception was a stooped, old man, who hobbled over leaning on a cane, and procured some sort of cream. He then proceeded to settle down to chat. Was he trying to secure Jaelle's interest?

Krampasarian found himself frowning. The elderly male was obviously unsuited for this female. He was relieved when she gently urged the old man on his way.

Within an hour, the cloth was empty, and Jaelle folded it up and placed it back in her basket. A basket that was now full of a variety of other items since many of her customers had offered trade goods instead of coins. As far as he could tell, she never set a price or disagreed with the offered payment and his Tandroki pride was offended by her failure to recognize the worth of her goods.

With her own sales complete, she proceeded to hobble around the marketplace and make some additional purchases of her

own. Once she was in public view, her interactions were even briefer and occasionally accompanied by a sneer or a muttered insult. In a shocking reversion to his race's own primitive background, Krampasarian's claws threatened to emerge at the disparaging treatment. After he stared at his tingling fingertips in horror, he looked back at the screen and realized that she was gone. Where was she?

His drones searched uselessly until he finally thought to look outside the village and caught a glimpse of a faded red cloak taking a path up the mountain. Up his mountain. He immediately abandoned the village and sent the drones after her. As soon as she was out of sight of the buildings below, she straightened, rubbing her back and stretching, before resuming her journey with a brisk pace completely unlike her previous tottering steps. *Fascinating.*

She climbed for some time on the narrow path before coming to a halt in front of a small, well-kept cottage surrounded by a flourishing garden. A well was located in the front courtyard, and she stopped there to draw a bucket of water. As he watched, she scrubbed her face, then threw back the hood of her cloak and ran damp fingers through her hair, the gray disappearing to be replaced by shining dark waves. He sent a drone closer just as she stretched again and he could see her face once more.

No longer lined with age, her complexion was smooth and radiant. The rather coarse features of the villagers had been refined in her. She had high cheekbones, a straight nose, a pointed little chin, and a lush, red mouth that made him think of things he had not considered since his first coming-of-age. His sex actually stirred, a reaction as unwanted as it was unexpected. But he still couldn't drag his eyes away from her. He was so wrapped up in his observations that he didn't realize that she was approaching his drone.

"Hello there, little bird," she whispered in a low husky voice that seemed to feather softly over his skin. "I haven't seen you here before."

By the Horns of Moroz, he should have realized that she would be observant. His drones had assumed the form of

native flying creatures, but she was correct. They were rarely seen at this altitude.

“Did you lose your way? Are you hungry?”

While he hesitated, unsure if he should send the drone flying away, she ventured into her garden and retrieved a handful of seeds from a large flower and scattered them in front of the small creature. The drone did not, of course, need to eat, but he felt obligated to respond to her hospitality. He had the drone pick up several of the seeds before he remembered that it would not be judicious to have her approach and examine it closely. Despite his reluctance, he sent it flying into the trees. She laughed, a sultry note that sent a thrill of pleasure through his body, and lifted a hand in farewell. Still sitting on his ship’s bridge, he actually started to raise his own hand in response before he came to his senses.

*Skef.* What was the matter with him? He could not afford to be distracted by a female, especially not a primitive female, no matter how attractive she might be or how many intriguing questions were hidden behind that beautiful face. In fact, he should stop watching the village entirely and focus only on his own ship. Resolving to stay away from her, he returned to his work.

## CHAPTER 2



“Good morning, Robin,” Jaelle said cheerfully to the small red bird perched on the top of the well. It was not a robin, of course, or even exactly a bird for that matter, but it bore a close enough resemblance that she’d named him after the Earth creature. Although the red birds were not usually seen this high in the mountains, this one had appeared every day since her trip to the marketplace. She had caught glimpses of other red birds flitting through the trees, but this one seemed to be the boldest.

“Do you think it’s going to snow today?” she asked him as she studied the sky.

Dark clouds were rolling across the valley below and the top of the mountain was already shrouded in fog. The scent of snow was in the air and she sighed. While she could get by without them if necessary, she was running low on flour and salt. If she wanted to bake bread before the storm hit, she would need to make another journey to the village today to get additional supplies.

As always, she had mixed feelings about the trip. Even though she appreciated the serenity of her cottage and her quiet life, she did get lonely. The interaction with the villagers, however brief, made her feel less isolated. But while the interaction with her patients was usually polite, if not overly friendly, the rest of the villagers were a different story. She was regarded with the same suspicion and distrust as her mother and her grandmother before her.

But that was never going to change, and with a sigh, she went to apply her makeup. That too was another source of mixed feelings. As her grandmother had pointed out, it made her less threatening and helped her to avoid unwanted attention from the men of the village. But the fact that a string of seemingly ageless old women had been coming down the mountain for generations only added to the suspicion with which she was regarded.

Her grandmother had found it amusing and joked about it when she first taught Jaelle how to disguise herself. The familiar pang washed over her. She still missed the wise, funny older woman. Unfortunately, no matter how skilled her family was in the healing arts, age eventually overtook everyone.

As she left the cottage in the familiar disguise, she blew a kiss at the small stone that marked her grandmother's passing, snugly settled next to Jaelle's mother, and her great-grandmother and all the women in her family back to the first ill-fated ancestor to land on this planet.

Since she was too far from the village to be observed, she could walk freely, enjoying the trip down through the evergreen trees that dominated this part of the mountain. But as the trees began to thin and the bare branches of the deciduous trees took over, she slowed her pace and bent over her cane. The posture was as familiar to her now as her real gait.

Robin had accompanied her down the mountain, flitting in and out amongst the trees and making odd little chirping noises. There was something about his call that didn't sound quite like the other birds, and she sometimes wondered if he'd suffered some sort of accident. But it was nice to have him along as a companion on her trip.

As the village came in sight below her, she stopped to study it. The collection of sturdy wood and stone buildings climbing up from the river looked peaceful and prosperous. The new house that the miller was building was almost complete. Based on the rumors from her last visit, he would be asking for Nyssa's hand in marriage as soon as it was finished. Since Nyssa was

the daughter of the mayor of their small village – a man who regarded himself of high importance – Jelle wondered if the miller's suit would be successful. She followed the village courtships with great interest, knowing that no man would ever come courting her.

When the time came to have a child, she would have a quick, discreet encounter with a carefully selected villager. As soon as she knew she was pregnant, she would administer a drink that would make him think the whole thing a dream. Another family tradition that she didn't intend to change, although she did spare a wistful thought for Lars. After her grandmother died, she had checked the carefully kept records and realized that the big, gentle woodcutter was her father. It might have been nice to have grown up as his daughter...

But the separation was necessary and she shook her head and returned to contemplation of the village. There were other signs of growth as well and she was glad to see them. From the history her family had passed down, it had taken several generations of struggle before the settlers had been able to flourish and expand.

They would be expanding even more rapidly if men like Knut had their way, she thought grimly as she resumed her journey. They didn't seem to understand the toll childbirth took on a woman in these primitive conditions. But at least Jelle could use her family's wisdom to help those women who didn't want to have a child every year. Although the birth control mixture was her most requested product, she was happy when the villagers would take any of her healing potions. The village did claim a self-professed doctor but his methods were untrained and dangerous.

As she entered the village, she noticed that most of the houses were decked out with green boughs around the windows and clusters of red berries on the doors. Of course, it was the holiday season. A mixture of heritages from the original ship and generations of isolation had resulted in a hodgepodge of holiday traditions centered around the winter solstice. Good spirits, evil spirits, and the birth of the new year came together in the weeks leading up to the Longest Night celebration.

The marketplace stalls also sported the holiday decorations, and a sense of suppressed excitement filled the air as people laughed and chatted. Fragrant spices perfumed the air from the hot punch being sold by a dozen vendors. She gave it a longing glance as she passed, but her small reserve of coins was needed for supplies, not frivolity.

Business was brisk after she assumed her usual position in the corner behind the tavern. Perhaps emboldened by the festive season, several of her customers even lingered to chat. But as the afternoon wore on, the conversations ceased. Instead, they cast frequent glances at the heavy clouds looming over the town and hurried about their business.

“Snow’s a-comin’,” old Christoph muttered to her when he stopped by to pick up some cream to help with his rheumatism.

“Looks like it,” she agreed. “Do you have enough firewood to keep you warm if you get snowed in?”

“Aye, don’t you worry about me.” He peered at her through rheumy eyes. “What about you? I worry about you up on that mountain by yourself.”

“I’m fine. I have everything I need up there.”

“You should be living here in town.”

It was a familiar argument and she smiled at him. “You know you’re the only one who thinks that.”

“Nonsense. You got a lot of friends here.”

Even though he’d said it many times before, it always made her heart ache a little. She knew it wasn’t true. The most she could hope for from the villagers was to be tolerated. But this was the path that her family had chosen and there was no point feeling sorry for herself. She forced a smile.

“I like my mountain. Besides, I have a new friend up there.” She pointed at Robin who was perched on the overhanging eave of the tavern. “He’s been keeping me company lately.”

Christoph frowned up at the bird. “Thought they were all gone for the season.”



“He seems to have decided to stick around. And I’ve seen a few others as well. Maybe they don’t migrate as much as we thought, or maybe it’s going to be a mild winter.”

As if in rebuttal to her words, an icy wind swirled around them.

“Doesn’t feel that mild to me.” Christoph shook his head. “But if you insist on staying by yourself, you better get going before the storm hits.”

“I will, I promise.” She smiled at him, for once not hiding her true smile, and he very reluctantly smiled back before he hobbled off. She was fairly sure that he knew her secret but she trusted him never to reveal it to anyone else.

Despite her agreement with his warning to be on her way, it took her longer than she had expected to purchase her supplies and the early winter sunlight was already fading as she headed for the edge of the village.

“Hey, you.”

The rough voice accosting her made her look around and her heart sank. It was Knut and from the way he was staggering towards her, he had spent the afternoon drinking.

“What is it, Knut?” she asked, keeping her voice cool.

“It’s your fault, isn’t it?”

“What’s my fault?”

“The reason that no good wife of mine can’t get pregnant.”

The belligerence in his voice set off warning bells and she took a quick look around. Her pulse raced when she realized that they were alone. The combination of the early darkness and increasing cold had sent people scurrying home. Knut took a step closer, looming over her as the fumes of stale beer assaulted her senses. She shifted her grip on her cane.

“It hasn’t even been a year since she had little Hans,” she said soothingly. “Sometimes it just takes a while.”

“Shouldn’t take this long. It’s your fault,” he repeated stubbornly. “You stay away from her.”

“Just give her time-”

“She’s had time. I want another son.”

“More than you want a healthy wife?” She couldn’t keep the sharp note out of her voice and his heavy brows lowered.

“Ain’t none of your business. She’s my wife and I want her bred.”

A flare of anger overruled her common sense and she stepped closer. “She’s not a farm animal. Let her decide when she’s ready.”

He swore and raised a meaty fist. She lifted her cane to intercept the blow but although she managed to stop it from landing, he moved more quickly than she had expected given his drunken condition and grabbed hold of the cane.

“Don’t you raise your hand to me, woman. About time somebody taught you a lesson.”

He tried to pull the cane away from her and she clung to it desperately, afraid of what he would do if he managed to seize control. Her grip started to slip and he grinned triumphantly. But before he could pull it away completely, there was an outraged squawk and then Robin flew at his face. Knut swore and let go of the cane in his haste to bat him away.

“Don’t hurt him!” she cried as a big hand came dangerously close to the small bird.

Knut paid no attention to her as he tried again to grab Robin. Determined to stop him, she swung the cane, striking him behind the knee and throwing him off balance. His leg gave out and he fell to the ground. He roared again and reached for her but she danced back away from him. Maintaining her disguise was less important than escaping.

Before he could struggle to his feet, she grabbed her discarded basket and took off at a run, Robin flying ahead of her. Two other birds joined them as she dashed out of the village and raced for the tree line. She didn’t hear any sound of pursuit but she didn’t stop running until she was out of breath. As she bent over, gasping, she noticed the new birds circling, almost as if they were checking the path behind her. She cast an anxious

look back over her shoulder but the woods were silent and no one appeared on the trail.

As she resumed the trip up the mountains, she realized her hands were shaking. The villagers might treat her with suspicion, but no one had ever physically threatened her before. She had promised her grandmother that she would continue to help them, but what would be the cost?

## CHAPTER 3



*K*rampasarian roared with frustration. His fingertips tingled as his claws emerged and this time he didn't feel shame. He only wished that he was in the village so that he could slash them across the neck of the imbecilic primitive male who had attempted to lay his hands on Krampasarian's female.

*His female?*

The thought interrupted his rage. When had he developed such a possessive instinct towards her? Yes, he watched her each day but that was only because he was conducting a scientific inquiry into the life forms on this planet. But that excuse rang hollow in his own ears.

Putting the uncomfortable question aside to consider later, he verified that thanks to his intervention, the female was unhurt. As soon as she was safely back in her cottage, he considered the problem in greater detail. The male needed to be taught a lesson. If they were back on Tandrok, there would be a number of subtle, but effective, ways he could discourage the male without outright confrontation. As his temper cooled, he discarded his original, embarrassingly primitive desire to cause physical harm to the male. But perhaps there were other ways to make him pay...

He waited until most of the lights in the village had disappeared, then set out on his journey. This time he was prepared, although no less disapproving, for the scattering of snowflakes drifting down from the sky. His dark thermal suit kept him dry and warm as he made his way down the

mountain. His path led him past Jaelle's cottage. A small light still flickered in one of her windows. Was she awake? Should he stop and introduce himself? Explain that he was taking action on her behalf?

He had a sudden, intoxicating vision of her smiling at him, her tantalizing pink lips curling up as she placed her hand on his. His body stirred at the image, taking it further, imagining that he was touching her, pulling her body against his, ripping away the dull gown that concealed her from him so that he could explore –

By Moroz's horns, what was he thinking? His people had long abandoned such primitive mating rituals. Physical contact was to be avoided. Alliances were arranged for mutual benefit, and if a child was desired, a carefully selected egg would be quickly and efficiently fertilized.

He forced himself to turn away from the lure of the cottage and resume his trip. The village lay in silence as he slipped past the first buildings, but as he made his way into town, he realized that a few small lights still shone here and there. In his impatience, he had failed to wait until everyone was asleep. No matter. The suit would conceal him. And if it did not? His claws tingled again.

As he reached Knut's dwelling, he heard a raised voice from a small building at the rear and recognized the obnoxious blustering. He silently approached the outbuilding.

"Goddamnit, boy! Do I have to do everything myself?" The sharp crack of flesh against flesh sounded. "I am paying you to make my life easier!"

The muttered reply was too quiet for him to make out most of the words but he heard a fragment.

"... bad man..."

"You'll see how bad I am if you don't get those harnesses cleaned. Now get back to work - and do it right this time."

Krampasarian faded back into the shadows as the male came striding past. He was tempted to carry out his original impulse and force a physical confrontation, but really such primitive

methods were beneath him. Instead an idea - a wonderful, terrible idea - had come to him as he listened to the male rant. Whoever was in the shed made the male's life easier. Therefore, he would remove him.

The fragments of the tales he had overheard came back to him. This was the time of year when one's actions were judged. The male would understand that this was a punishment inflicted on him for his offenses.

Mind made up, he peered around the open door. The only occupant was a young male, his shoulders shaking as he bent over a cleaning instrument. This was the object of the male's rage? His own anger threatened to reappear, and for a moment, he wished he had given into his primitive instincts. But no, this would be better. The male would suffer the child's loss and Krampasarian would make sure that the boy was protected.

Approaching on silent feet, he puffed a small dose of a sleeping potion into the air in front of the boy, catching him as he sagged to the ground. The slight body weighed almost nothing, but he needed to keep his hands free in case he encountered anyone on the return journey. He pulled a utility sack from his belt and carefully placed the child inside. Made from the same material as his suit, it would keep him dry and warm as they went up the mountain.

With the sack over his shoulder, he slipped back through town and began to climb.

When he reached Jaelle's cottage, the light had been extinguished. Giving in to temptation, he strode silently through the garden to the window that opened to her bedroom, well aware of its location due to his frequent observations. The curtains were ajar and enough moonlight made its way through the clouds that he could see her.

She was curled in a small bed, dark hair in a glorious disarray across her pillow. As he watched, she tossed restlessly, her covers slipping down to reveal a thin, white gown that revealed a tantalizing glimpse of the upper swell of her breasts. A desperate desire to see more consumed him, but even as he stared, her eyes opened, midnight blue and

mysterious in the moonlight, as she looked back at him, unafraid. Then a warm smile curved those tempting pink lips before her eyes fluttered closed once more.

She had seen him, he was sure of it. And she hadn't screamed or cowered. Perhaps his earlier, wishful thoughts weren't so impossible after all.

But then a slight shift in the body tucked against his back reminded him of his mission. He would consider the possibility of an introduction another time. Right now, he had a child for whom he was responsible.

The rest of the trip was accomplished without difficulty, but he breathed a sigh of relief when he was safe aboard his ship once more. The episode had been entirely too stimulating. As soon as he took care of the child, he would practice some calming meditations.

As he removed the child from the sack and placed him carefully on a small bunk, it occurred to him that he might have made a mistake. Now that he had him, what was he going to do with him? He was almost tempted to keep the child unconscious, but he couldn't quite convince his conscience that it would be for the best. With a sigh, he puffed the antidote into the boy's face.

It worked immediately. The child's eyes opened, then widened, and he scrabbled back across the bunk until he hit the wall. Krampasarian spread his empty hands wide in what he hoped was a universal indication that he meant no harm.

"What the fuck are you?" the boy asked, his eyes still wide.

Krampasarian frowned. "Aren't you too young to be using such vulgarities?"

"You've got horns!"

"Yes, I do." He nodded complacently, pleased with the boy's observation. Carefully oiled and trimmed, his horns were a source of great pride. He had the largest set in his squad.

The child did not appear to be listening. Instead, he was scanning the cabin, his gaze coming to rest on the door behind Krampasarian. "Where am I? Why'd you bring me here?"

That was rather a difficult question. In the light of day and now that his anger had cooled, he rather regretted his impulsive decision.

“I wished to punish your... employer. Your legend speaks of a dark spirit that takes valuable things away from those of evil intent.”

“Dark spirit? You mean Krampus?” The child snorted, his disgust overcoming his fear. “Well, you got it all wrong. Knut doesn’t value me.”

“But you work for him.”

“Not hard enough, according to him.” A calculating look came into the boy’s eyes. “But maybe if I’m not there, he’ll realize what he’s missing.” He hopped down from the bunk. “You got anything to eat around here?”

Taken aback, Krampasarian stared at the boy until the child made an impatient noise.

“You understand food, right? If you’re gonna kidnap someone, you gotta feed them.”

Shaking off his shock, he nodded. The bonds of hospitality did require the offering of food. “Of course. Come this way.”

AN HOUR LATER, HE WAS BEGINNING TO WONDER IF HIS FOOD replicator could keep up. The boy, after identifying himself as Whit, had consumed three full-sized portions, the remnants of which now covered his face and hands as he grinned cheerfully at Krampasarian.

“It might’ve looked funny but that sure tasted good.”

“You are full now?”

Whit rubbed his stomach thoughtfully, then nodded. “Yeah, I guess so. I could always have a snack later, right?”

“If you wish.” He studied the boy and tried to hide his disapproval. Whit was far too thin, his clothes were little more than rags, and he was in desperate need of a bathing facility. His caretakers were not doing an adequate job. “Who looks after you?”



“I take care of myself,” Whit said belligerently.

“You are not doing an adequate job.”

“I’m doing the best I can. Knut don’t pay nothing, and I have to give old Linnea most of it to take care of-”

“Take care of?” he asked, when the boy came to an abrupt halt.

“Nothin’.” Whit averted his gaze, obviously lying, but Krampasarian decided not to press the matter. “Now what?”

“Now, you will take a bath.”

“No, hell, I won’t.”

“Yes, hell, you will.” Krampasarian grabbed Whit as the boy tried to dart past him and lifted him into the air, his claws twisted in the boy’s shirt to hold him at arm’s length as he kicked wildly. “Bath. Now.”

By the time the bath was accomplished, he was as wet as his young victim. Wrapped in a large towel, Whit glared at him as he programmed his replicator to produce clothing for the child. Even clean, he was not a particularly attractive child. His ears were too large, his face was too thin, and he was covered with odd little specks of pigment. But there was something appealing about his brave defiance and his engaging grin. A grin that was sadly missing at the moment.

“I do not believe the experience was as unpleasant as you maintain,” Krampasarian said firmly.

“A little dirt is good for you. Protects the skin.”

“That wasn’t a little dirt. It was a lot of dirt.” Thank goodness the filtration system hadn’t been damaged in the crash. “And clothing is used to protect the skin. Here.”

“What’s that?”

“A thermal suit.” He kept his hand extended, but Whit only scowled suspiciously at the garment.

“That ain’t clothing. Where’s my pants and shirt?”

“In the disposal unit.”

“Well, get ‘em back.”

“It’s too late. They were filthy.” And inhabited by small insects. He shuddered at the memory.

“You got no right to take my clothes!”

“This is much better. It will protect you from both heat and cold, and it resists dirt.”

“Looks like some kinda underwear,” the boy muttered, but he finally took the suit.

“I assume you can dress yourself?” Taking the outraged glare as assent, he continued, “Once you are dressed, you can continue your studies. I have... observations to make.”

The sun had risen during the bathing struggle, and he wished to check on Jaelle and make sure she had recovered from the previous day’s experiences. He was halfway out the door before Whit responded.

“What studies?”

With a sigh, he turned back around. “You have no set course of learning?”

“Don’t need it. I already got a job, don’t I?”

“Don’t you want an education?” From the lack of response, apparently not. “Or a better job?”

Whit shrugged, but Krampasarian saw a flash of eagerness cross his face. “That might be okay. If I made a little more, I could get Cinna some nicer things.”

“Cinna?”

The boy’s face closed down and for a moment, Krampasarian thought he would refuse to answer.

“My sister,” Whit said finally. “She lives with old lady Linnea. She’s nice enough and she treats Cinna good, but she ain’t got much money.” He hummed thoughtfully. “If I could figure better, maybe I could get a job helping out Magnus. He’s got that big shop on the main street.”

“Once you are dressed, come find me on the bridge. Straight up the corridor. I will prepare your lessons.” His plans would have to wait until the boy was settled.

“Yeah, okay,” Whit agreed, then called after him as he turned to the door once more. “Hey, wait a minute. You never told me your name.”

“I am Commander Krampasarian D’Marchandar of the House of Stogar,” he said proudly.

Whit’s eyes widened. “You mean you really are Krampus?”

“Of course not. The names simply bear a very slight similarity.”

Whit ignored him. “Huh. Kidnapped by Krampus. Cinna is never going to believe this.”

## CHAPTER 4



As soon as Jaelle opened her eyes, her gaze flicked to the window. She'd had the strangest dream last night that a man was standing there. No, not a man. Even though he'd been covered in a dark, tight suit that accentuated broad shoulders and a muscular chest. Even though he had long, white hair that curled down around his shoulders in silken waves. Even though dark, compelling eyes had looked back at her from a stunningly handsome face. But the two large horns that had spiraled up from his head had most definitely not been human.

Yet she hadn't been afraid. In her dream, she had looked across at the window, the curtain parted just as it was right now, and their eyes had met, and all she had wanted was to go to him.

*Don't be ridiculous*, she scolded herself. Perhaps she had been alone too long. Perhaps she should consider picking a village man to give her a child...

The thought held even less appeal than usual with the memory of her strange visitor still fresh in her mind. Perhaps he had been the dark spirit that the villagers said haunted them at this time of year, judging the unworthy. The thought made her smile - a smile that broadened when she caught a flash of red at the window and saw Robin peeking through that same gap in the curtains.

Throwing back the covers, she padded over to the window and opened the curtains completely to allow the pale winter sunshine to flood the room.

“Good morning,” she said to the bird as she pushed the window open a crack, shivering as the icy air came rushing in. “I don’t suppose I can tempt you to any breakfast this morning?”

It hadn’t escaped her notice that no matter what she tried to feed Robin, he only took a few small bites, almost as if he was trying to be polite. He chirped in response and hopped back a few steps.

She laughed. “No, I didn’t think so.”

Peering past him at the sky, she noticed the looming clouds on the horizon and frowned. How she longed for the weather forecasting skills of her ancestors but that technology had long since stopped working. All she had to go on was the information recorded in her family’s journals and a lifetime of experience.

“What do you think, Robin? Is there a storm coming?”

He bobbed his head in agreement, and this time, he hopped closer, almost as if he wanted to come inside. She hesitated, then opened the window a little further. Under other circumstances, she wouldn’t even have considered letting a wild creature into her cottage, but somehow, she wasn’t worried that he would cause any damage, either to the cottage or himself. And after her experience yesterday, she rather liked the idea of company. To her delight, Robin hopped across the sill, then tilted his head and surveyed the room with his bright, dark gaze.

“Not very impressive, is it?” she asked as she followed his eyes, but despite her words, she loved her room.

The single bed was covered with a quilt her grandmother had made and heaped with pillows. Shelves along the other wall held her childhood treasures, plus those of her mother and grandmother before her, and she had spent many hours curled in the worn reading chair. Although she had cleaned out the larger bedroom after her grandmother died, she could never bring herself to leave the small, cozy room where she’d grown up.

Pushing aside the memories, she smiled at Robin, now perched on one of her shelves, almost as if he was reading the titles of the few precious books that had been handed down to her.

“I’ll leave that window cracked so you can find your way back out.” She shivered as an icy breeze whistled through the opening. “But I’m going to take my bath in the other room in front of the fire.”

Robin seemed to freeze for a moment, but when she walked into the main room, he followed her.

EVEN THOUGH KRAMPASARIAN KNEW IT WAS BEHAVING irrationally, as soon as he had Whit settled, he sent his drone flying after Jaelle. He should be content. He had seen her flushed and sleepy, her body clad only in a long white gown, and even that had been far, far better than the bulky garments she usually wore. But when she said that she was about to bathe...

He had been examining the contents of her shelves, storing the image of her book titles for later translation, but just as something odd caught his eye, she had spoken and his curiosity had been replaced by sudden, unreasoning lust. Perching the drone on the top of a large cupboard, he watched eagerly as she went about her preparations.

The main room of the cottage was centered around a large fireplace with a stove insert for cooking. Several padded chairs were positioned to one side of the fireplace while on the other side, a table and chairs sat in front of one of the windows.

Jaelle took hot water from a reservoir on the stove and began filling a large metal object, supplementing it with water from the primitive pump in the kitchen area. Her living conditions really were appalling. If he only had her here on his ship, he could show her the wonders of unlimited hot water at the press of a button and -

She removed her sleeping gown and all thoughts of water were abandoned. He had seen enough of her to know that she was not the aged crone she appeared to be when she visited the village. He had expected that she would be young and healthy.

He had not expected the vision of perfection that met his hungry gaze as she stepped into her primitive bath.

Her body was not dissimilar to that of a Tandroki female. Smaller of course, and to the best of his knowledge, no Tandroki female possessed those lush, tempting curves. His race valued tall, slender females, not oversized breasts that would be too large even for his hands or equally lush hips that made a male think of nothing but burying himself between them.

Raising her arms, she poured water over her body, letting it cascade down over taut, pink nipples and catch in a small patch of dark curls between her legs. Her actions were completely natural, unaware that she was watched, and he knew that he should turn away. Instead, his hand dropped to his hardened cock, pushing insistently against the tight cloth of his flight suit. He gripped his errant flesh, trying to remind himself that he was Tandroki and far above the primitive pleasures of the flesh, but then she picked up a small bar of soap and began rubbing it across her breasts and he gave up the fight.

Freeing his cock, he gave it a long, hard stroke as she circled her nipples, plucking gently at the rosy buds, her expression dreamy and far away. His grip tightened as her hand dropped down her body, parting those dark curls to reveal glistening pink folds. She worked the swollen pearl of flesh at the top of her sex, her movements faster now, and he matched his pace to hers, imagining that it was his hand, his cock, wringing those small cries of pleasure from her lips. Her back arched as she gave a louder cry, her body shivering with ecstasy, and he felt a corresponding streak of fire down his spine as he too cried out and a hot rush of seed covered his hand.

He collapsed back in his chair, still shuddering with pleasure, a pleasure that was quickly replaced by embarrassment. He had not touched himself in such a way since he was a young cadet, exploring the forbidden pleasures of the flesh before he fully understood the need to rise above such primitive instincts. But despite his embarrassment, he couldn't stop watching Jaelle as she finished her bath, her movements efficient now rather than

sensual. Even when she covered that tempting body with more of her voluminous clothing, it didn't help. Now he knew the delights beneath.

A noise from the corridor interrupted his wayward thoughts, and he hastily tucked himself away before Whit came bouncing into the room.

"Are you finished with your lessons?" he asked.

"Mostly."

When Krampasarian frowned at him, the boy shrugged and gave him that curiously endearing smile.

"I wanted to talk to you. Man to... Krampus."

A feeling of foreboding settled over him. "Why?"

Instead of responding, the boy wandered around the bridge, inspecting the various instrument panels curiously but, fortunately, not touching anything.

"You know," Whit said finally, looking at him from under his lashes. "You got a pretty good thing going up here."

"A good thing?" he asked incredulously. "I have a ruined ship in desperate need of repairs and I'm a very long way from my station."

"Ship? I seen pictures of ships and this don't look like none of them."

"It's a special kind," he said quickly, cursing his lack of discretion. The knowledge of space flight should never be shared with lower races.

Whit gave him a skeptical look but returned to his main theme. "You got plenty of food and the roof don't leak. You even got clothes. Sorta."

The last statement was accompanied by a scowl at the thermal suit, but Krampasarian realized the boy had a point. Even on the crippled ship, his life was considerably better than that of the villagers.

"I suppose I do," he agreed.



“And since you have all this, you could share it.”

His mind immediately went to Jaelle. Yes, he could see her here on the ship. He could take care of her here, make sure she was adequately fed and let her experience the bathing room, so superior to that primitive tub. Although, that tub did have some advantages...

His body started to respond to the erotic memory until Whit's voice brought him back to the present. The boy had asked him a question but he'd missed it.

“Yes?”

“That's great! I knew you weren't such a bad guy, Krampus!” Whit grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically.

“That is not my name. And of course, I'm not a 'bad guy.'”

“She won't be any trouble,” Whit said enthusiastically and Krampasarian barely managed to refrain himself from snorting.

Of course she would be trouble. Females were always trouble. But it would be worth it to have her near him, where he could see her, possibly even touch her...

“And she doesn't take up much room.” Whit continued, “She can share my bed.”

*What?* Jaelle would be in his bed, not the child's, but why would Whit even think... A sinking feeling filled his chest.

“Whit, what are you talking about?”

“Cinna, of course. You said she could come and stay with us.”

“I said your sister could stay here?” he repeated disbelievingly.

“Course you did! When can we go get her?” Whit beamed up at him.

## CHAPTER 5



*R*ampasarian muttered to himself as he strode back down the mountain path that night. How had he let the child talk him into this? He certainly didn't need another person on his ship. But Whit had sworn that if he was not there to take care of his sister, she might starve to death. How could he, in good conscience, allow that to happen? And letting Whit go so quickly would not serve to teach the cruel male a lesson.

His footsteps hesitated as he passed Jaelle's cottage, but he did not want to delay his mission. Would she bathe again before retiring? Perhaps if he were quick, he could watch her once more.

He was earlier tonight when he reached the village - more windows still glowed with light and he heard conversations coming from the houses. He slowed as he passed them, catching glimpses of a male talking to his female as they sat close together, of a parent carrying a child to bed, a group of young people gathered around a fire and laughing. They didn't seem to mind the primitive conditions or the lack of common conveniences, and he found himself curiously envious. If he had been at home on Tandrok, he would have been alone in his perfectly maintained house as he meditated before retiring. Or perhaps he would have been at an elegant social gathering, where polite words and elaborate courtesies disguised malicious intentions.

Foolishness. He shook his head and increased his pace, following Whit's directions to a small building on the outskirts

of the village, close to the nearby river. “Old lady Linnea,” as Whit had called her, was a widow who took in laundry and sewing from the wealthier townspeople. She had three children of her own, all girls. As he passed the lighted front window, he could see the female bent over a small garment, her fingers flying busily as she chatted with two older children.

The room was small, the furniture shabby, but everything was spotlessly clean. Neat piles of clothes filled several baskets. Nodding approvingly, he slipped around the back of the cottage to the room where Whit had said his sister slept. He peeped through the window, then swore silently.

The tiny room had a bed against each wall, both of them containing a child. How would he know which one was Whit’s sister? Even more unfortunately, he was far too large to climb through the small window. He would have to wait until the female finished her work and retired to bed, then enter through the front door. Casting a disdainful glance at his surroundings, he tried to decide between the doubtful pleasures of perching on a snow-covered rock or leaning against the equally cold stone wall of the cottage.

A small sound interrupted his musing, and he looked down to see a pair of wide blue eyes staring up at him through the window. He braced himself for the child’s scream as he searched hastily for his sleeping potion. Despite his immediate instinct to withdraw, he had promised Whit that he would return with his sister.

To his shock, the girl didn’t scream. All she did was stare up at him, and as he stared back, he realized that although her features were smaller and more delicate, the resemblance was unmistakable. He had no doubt this was Whit’s sister. He was even more shocked when, after a moment of silent contemplation, she opened the window.

“Hello.” Her voice sounded like tiny bells, completely unafraid.

He had never been at such a loss for words. It took a full thirty seconds before he recovered enough to return her greeting. “Hello. Are you Cinna?”

“Yes.” She gave him a trusting smile. “Did you come to take me away?”

“No, of course not - well, yes, I did. Your brother sent me.”

“I thought so. Penny said the bad man took him and I was next.” Her small face wrinkled as she scowled over her shoulder at the child sleeping in the other bed. “I told her I wanted to be with Whit.” Turning back to him, she lifted her arms. “I’m ready.”

Still dumbfounded, he bent through the open window and carefully picked her up. Two tiny arms wound around his neck as she smiled up at him. His chest ached at the look of utter trust in her eyes. Had anyone ever looked at him like that before?

Determined to honor that trust, he gently adjusted her in his arms. By the Horns of Moroz, she felt impossibly frail, and he cast a worried look at the sky. An occasional flake of snow had begun to fall, and she was clad only in a thin sleeping garment. He had the sack, of course, but it seemed wrong to place her in it when she looked at him so trustingly.

In the end, he compromised and simply wrapped it around her small body. She snuggled against him and her eyes drifted close. She was asleep before he reached the other side of the village. Focused on his precious burden, he didn’t even pause as he passed Jaelle’s cottage, although he did spare it a regretful glance.

THE LIGHT TAP ON HER DOOR MADE JAELE FREEZE. SHE HAD spent the previous day trying to decide the best way to protect herself from Knut when she returned to the village, but she had never expected him to follow her all the way here. But the quiet knock hadn’t sounded threatening - and what if someone needed her?

She cautiously opened the door to find a woman leaning against the wall and panting.

“Do you really have to live so far up the mountain?” she said breathlessly as Jaelle stared at her.

“Melissa? What are you doing here?”

The plump tavern keeper surveyed her from head to foot, then snorted. “Always suspected there was more to you than you let on.”

Jaelle blushed and put a hand to her tangled curls as she realized she had forgotten to assume her usual disguise. “I...”

The other woman shook her head. “You don’t need to explain. Probably sensible not to let those horny bastards see the real you.”

“That’s what my grandmother said.”

“She was a wise woman, was Elise.” Melissa’s brows drew together. “But I’m not here about your secrets. Whit disappeared two nights ago. Now the girl’s gone too.”

“Cinna? Are you sure?”

“Linnea told me when she brought the washing. She said Cinna’s bed was empty and there was no sign of her. No one in the village has seen her. Linnea has to work, so I told her I would come see you.” Melissa peered over Jaelle’s shoulder into the front room of the cottage. “We were hoping maybe they were here?”

“Why would you think that?”

The other woman snorted. “I’ve seen you with them. You care about them and they adore you. I thought maybe Whit had enough of Knut’s bullying and ran away. But then I found this on the way up here.” The woman held out a scrap of pink. Jaelle’s heart skipped a beat as she recognized the ribbon she had given Cinna on a previous visit.

“We should organize a search party.”

“I’ve spread the word in the village, but no one’s very enthusiastic about climbing the haunted mountain. Knut has been going around saying it’s just some kind of trick the boy’s playing.”

“That bastard.”

“I know. But it’s easy to believe when it means you can stay in your nice warm house. And you know it’s not the first time Whit’s played a trick like that.”

“No, but he would never put Cinna in danger.” She cast a worried look over Melissa’s shoulder at the heavy clouds. Based on the way they were moving, the storm that had been threatening for the past few days was almost here.

Melissa frowned up at the sky as well. “Do you want me to help you look?”

Jaelle shook her head. “I know you have to get back to the village. You didn’t see any other sign of her on the way up, did you?”

“I’m afraid not.” Melissa hesitated. “Has anyone else been up here?”

“As you pointed out, no one is particularly enthusiastic about visiting a haunted mountain,” she said dryly. “Why?”

“It’s hard to tell because there isn’t much snow, I thought maybe I saw footprints.”

Jaelle’s heart skipped a beat. Could someone have taken the children? But why would they have done such a thing? And why would they have brought them up her mountain – unless it was a twisted attempt to punish her. “You’re sure Knut is still in the village?”

“I’m sure. I can understand why you think he might be behind this, but Kara told me he passed out early last night and I believe her.”

Damn. She cast another worried glance at the sky. “I’ll see if I can find them.”

“Look, Jaelle. I know you worry, but as much as I hate to admit it, Knut could be right.”

“Even if he is right, it looks like Cinna was here.” She nodded at the ribbon in Melissa’s hand. “Why would they come up here? Unless...” Her stomach clenched as she remembered. “Whit and I were talking about caves on my last visit.”

“Are there any caves around here?”

“A few, higher up the mountain.” Surely the boy wouldn’t have headed there. But the more she thought about it, the more she couldn’t escape the sinking feeling that something was

wrong. She had to at least take a look. “I’m going to go check them out.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you?” Melissa was undoubtedly sincere, but Jelle could see the worry in her eyes.

“No, really. The cave isn’t that far from here and you have a long trip back down the mountain.”

“All right. If the storm holds off, I’ll be back tomorrow. If you can’t find them, we’ll just have to get a larger group to search with.” The other woman must have read the doubt on Jelle’s face because she gave her a quick smile. “Trust me, if I close down the tavern until they’re found, I’ll get a search party together.”

“Thank you, Melissa,” she said sincerely.

The tavern keeper gave her a quick smile, then hurried back down the path. Jelle grabbed her cane and her heaviest cloak, then set off in the other direction. Robin fluttered around her head with a scolding chirp, but she ignored him.

As she reached the edge of her clearing, she paused to inspect the ground. As Melissa had said, there wasn’t much snow, but what was there was scuffed as if someone large had passed this way. The memory of her encounter with Knut made her palms dampen, but if the children needed her... She took a firm grip on her cane and set off.

## CHAPTER 6



The woods surrounding Jaelle were oddly still, and within a few steps, the snow began to fall. At first it was almost pleasant, big white flakes drifting lazily down from the sky, but it accumulated with astonishing speed. The flakes came faster and faster and before long she was trudging through an ankle-deep layer of snow. She kept switching her cane from hand to hand, burying the free hand deep in the pocket of her cloak, but despite that, her fingers were beginning to go numb. Her face was also tingling from the cold as she peered ahead through the swirling white. The cave she and Whit had discussed shouldn't be much further.

A branch concealed beneath the snow made her stumble, wrenching her ankle in the process. Robin chirped anxiously, but Jaelle managed to keep her feet. Even with the numbing effects of the snow, each step was increasingly painful. She leaned more and more heavily on her cane, and she was almost at the point of giving up, when she caught a glimpse of a darker patch ahead. The cave!

"Whit! Cinna!" she cried, stumbling towards the opening. As she did, she caught a glimpse of movement inside the cave and gave a sob of relief. They were here!

"What were you thinking?" she asked as she took another step in that direction. But instead of a child's high-pitched voice, a low growl answered her. She froze as a huge animal came padding out of the cave entrance.

The settlers called them dire wolves, although their only resemblance to the Earth creatures was their size and the claws



that extended from their massive paws. Her heart pounded against her chest so rapidly that she felt sick, but she couldn't take her eyes off the enormous blue-furred creature studying her.

The dire wolves were rarely seen in these parts, but the villagers had encountered them during hunting expeditions. She'd heard enough of those stories to know how dangerous they were. She took a cautious step back, then another, as it watched her from gleaming yellow eyes. With the third step, disaster struck when her injured ankle crumpled. As she fell back into the snow, her head struck a hidden rock and dizziness washed over her. She watched in horror as the wolf prowled towards her.

Robin squawked and dove at the wolf's head. It snapped at the bird, but he kept coming, still making those outraged noises, until the wolf caught him with a massive paw, sending him flying.

She tried desperately to focus on the dire wolf and saw it gather itself, saw it prepare to pounce. She fumbled for her cane, knowing that it would do little to stop the creature but determined to die fighting.

The dire wolf sprang, but before it could reach her, there was an even louder roar and a man came flying out of the snow, crashing against the animal's body and sending it sprawling to the ground. As he followed it down, her dazed mind took in the broad shoulders and the white hair and suddenly recognized the man from her dreams. No, not a man, not with those horns. How could he be real?

But even as she struggled to believe what she was seeing, the two intertwined bodies rolled closer and she saw her rescuer grip the wolf's neck with long black claws, penetrating the thick fur as the animal thrashed beneath him. A sudden gush of blood and it finally lay still. Without even sparing it a second glance, the stranger turned to her, his eyes glowing.

"Now you are mine."

She tried to scramble backwards, but she put too much weight on her injured ankle and pain washed over her. Black spots

danced in her vision, and the last thing she saw before darkness overtook her was the stranger reaching for her.

KRAMPASARIAN SWORE AS JAELE'S EYES FLUTTERED CLOSED. This was not how he had intended their first meeting to occur. He had seen the fear in her eyes. Fear of him, no doubt due to the savagery of his attack.

He had been too late. Distracted by the children, he had not realized that she had left her cottage until she was already on the path. A path that would lead to the top of the mountain and close to where his ship had crashed. If he did nothing to prevent it, they would meet in person at last.

The prospect had left him unexpectedly nervous, as nervous as he had been the day he took his final exams at officer training school. She hadn't flinched from him when she had seen him at the window, but had she thought she was dreaming? It wasn't until he had polished his horns for the second time that he realized that he – a Commander of the Tandroki Fleet – was primping for a member of a primitive race. *Ridiculous*. He resolutely strode back to the viewing screen, and that was when he had realized that she was in trouble.

The snow had grown increasingly heavy, and he could tell that she was struggling with each footstep, but she still continued up the mountain. Her determination was to be valued no matter how foolhardy, but watching her struggle made his chest ache. He also realized that she had gone astray. She was no longer heading for his ship, but rather towards the caves to one side of the peak. Caves that were inhabited by –

Shouting a quick warning to Whit to close up the ship, he took off at a run. During his initial studies of his surroundings, he had seen the inhabitant of those caves - a large, primitive beast equipped with far more deadly, natural weapons than those possessed by the villagers.

He dashed through the snowy woods, moving more quickly than he had since his last training run with Nicholsarian. The obnoxious snow was falling even more heavily now, but his thermal suit kept him warm and he ignored it. He reached the

clearing just in time to see his female stumble and fall as the beast leapt for her.

A thousand years of civilization and a lifetime of training disappeared. He forgot about the blaster holstered to his right hip and the ceremonial sword on his left and attacked in the same way his primitive ancestors would have attacked - with his horns and his claws. The roar that erupted from his mouth was an ancient battle cry, echoing through the clearing as he intercepted the beast before it could hurt his female.

The animal fought viciously, but there was never any doubt in Krampasarian's mind that he would win. The deathblow filled him with satisfaction as he turned to claim his female. He had fought for her and he had won.

"Now you are mine," he proclaimed triumphantly.

But her eyes were wide, scared, and she tried to scramble away from him. He saw her wince and sway, her face turning the color of the snow, and automatically reached for her. Her eyes fluttered close as he lifted her into his arms, but he had seen the fear in those deep blue eyes. And when he looked down, he saw the blood staining his claws. What had he done?

Remorse washed over him as he carefully carried her back to the ship. How could he have abandoned his civilized ways and how could he expect her to understand?

Even now, his instincts demanded that he claim her. The feel of her soft curves against him had his cock stiff and aching, even though he would never press his attentions on an injured female. He would never press his attentions on *any* female.

Whit was standing at the open door at the top of the landing ramp, but Krampasarian didn't have the heart to chastise him. The boy's eyes widened as he saw who Krampasarian was carrying.

"You stole a lady too?"

"I didn't steal her." Although he hadn't exactly asked for permission to bring her on board. He soothed his conscience with the knowledge that she needed medical assistance. "She's wounded."

Whit closed the door behind them and accompanied him to the medical lab, still shooting worried glances at the female in his arms.

“Who is she?”

“You know who she is,” he said shortly as he placed her on the exam table.

“No I don’t. And she’s pretty. That means someone is gonna come looking for her. You need to get rid of her.” The boy crossed his arms and scowled at Krampasarian.

“You would have me send an injured female out into the storm?”

“Well no, I guess not. But as soon as the storm lets up. We don’t need her.”

Krampasarian was running a scanner over Jaelle’s head when her eyes suddenly flickered open. Rather than focusing on him, she looked to the boy, and a smile crossed her face.

“Safe...” she whispered, and then her eyes closed again.

“That’s Jaelle!” Whit rushed over and took her hand. “I don’t understand. She looks so young.”

“She is young. She disguises herself when she goes into the village,” he said absently, studying the results of the scan. The damage to her head would be painful but it was not life-threatening. Her ankle was in worse shape, and he tried to use the medical bed to heal it. Unfortunately, its systems had also been damaged in the crash, and in the end, he was forced to attend to the injury himself as the medic machine provided instruction. She would recover, but it would not be as swiftly as he would have preferred.

“Is she going to be all right?” Whit asked anxiously.

“She will be fine.” Anything else was unacceptable.

He hesitated for a second, glancing around the small medical bay, but he didn’t like the idea of leaving her in here surrounded by these machines. Bending over, he lifted her back in his arms. By the Horns of Moroz, she felt so right there.

“Where are you taking her?” Whit bobbed anxiously next to him. “Do you want our bed? I can sleep on the floor, but do you think she would mind sharing with Cinna?”

The question brought him up short. He had automatically been heading for his cabin – that was of course where she belonged – but perhaps she would prefer a room of her own. Unfortunately, his cabin and the small crew quarters occupied by Whit and Cinna were the only sleeping accommodations on the ship.

“Thank you for offering, Whit, but I’ll put her in my bed.”

The boy scowled again, his speckled nose wrinkling. “That ain’t proper.”

“I do not believe there is anyone here to object,” he said dryly. “But do not be concerned for her honor. I will sleep in my chair.”

“I reckon that’s okay.”

“Thank you.” Despite the sardonic note, he found himself appreciative of the boy’s determination to protect Jaelle’s honor. Whit was quite right. Krampasarian’s own people did not believe that a male and female should share the same bedroom. But he had observed enough of the villagers’ behavior to realize that the same prohibition did not exist here, at least not for permanently bonded couples. A month ago he would have dismissed the idea as ridiculous, but it no longer seemed so unpleasant. He could actually imagine bonding with Jaelle, sharing a room with her...

What was he thinking? He was not remaining on this planet, and once he was back amongst his own people, he would be negotiating for a suitable mate to help advance his career. No matter how little the idea appealed to him.

Whit followed him into his cabin and watched critically as Krampasarian carefully placed Jaelle in his bed and then covered her with a blanket. Her eyes were still closed, but her breathing was deep and even, and the medic machine had indicated that she would sleep. He would watch over her until she awoke.

## CHAPTER 7



The sound of hushed voices, accompanied by a tiny giggle, penetrated Jaelle's sleep. Was someone in the cottage with her? Her eyes snapped open, and the first thing she saw was Whit and Cinna grinning at her.

"You're all right! Where have you been? How did you get... here?" Her eager questions came to a halt as she took in her surroundings. This was not her cottage.

Impossibly smooth walls in a deep shade of red outlined a space that was far larger than her small living room. An elegant seating area was precisely arranged in front of a large window panel that displayed the snow swirling around outside. A window that was far beyond the capability of their current technology. She was lying in an impossibly soft bed – a bed? – on a raised dais at the other end of the room, and the children were standing next to her, their expressions eager.

"I told you not to wake her," a deep voice said sternly as a door panel slid to one side.

Her eyes flew to the man – no, she reminded herself, not a man – standing in the opening. It was the stranger. The one she had seen in her dream and the one she had seen so terrifyingly in the snow. But it was hard to reconcile the elegant figure in the doorway with the snarling warrior who had attacked the dire wolf. Neatly clad in what appeared to be some type of uniform - the dark blue fabric accented with an intimidating variety of insignia - with his silvery blonde hair pulled back in a tight knot, the only resemblance to that frightening figure was the impressive ivory horns spiraling back from his brow.

She shot a look at his hands, but the long dark claws had disappeared, leaving short dark nails no longer than a human man's.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"I am Commander Krampasarian D'Marchandar, of the Tandroki Fleet. At your service." The words were accompanied by a graceful bow.

"Damn, Krampus. What are you all dressed up for?" Whit piped up.

Did a touch of pink stain the smooth ivory skin covering his cheekbones? Before she could decide, Cinna skipped over to him and took his hand.

"You look very nice."

"Thank you, little one." The stern features softened as he reached down and lifted the little girl into his arms.

"I don't understand." The whole situation had an unreal quality that made her wonder if she was still dreaming, but the pain in her head and her ankle argued otherwise. "You were missing, both of you, and I came looking and then there was the dire wolf..."

"Krampus took us," Whit said proudly.

"I don't understand," she repeated, rubbing her head.

"Does your head trouble you?" the commander asked immediately. "The scan said that it would heal, but it did not indicate how long it would take."

He strode over to the bed and placed Cinna carefully on her feet before he pressed long, cool fingers to her temple. She still remembered those vicious claws covered with blood, and his touch should have terrified her, but she had the oddest urge to lean into that soothing touch. Instead, she forced herself to pull away.

"What scan? Who are you?" She waved an impatient hand when his mouth opened. "And don't tell me you're Commander what's his name again. You obviously aren't human. Is this your planet?"

The briefest hint of shock crossed his face before the stern mask reappeared. “I am a... traveler. I’m performing some repairs before resuming my journey.”

“By yourself?”

“I have some... machinery that is assisting me.”

She had the impression that he was choosing his words very carefully, but right now she was more concerned about the children – and herself.

“Do you mean us any harm?”

This time his shocked expression was easy to read. “Of course not.”

“Then why did you take the children?”

Not that they seemed particularly bothered by their abduction. Cinna was leaning against the commander’s leg, her eyes heavy, while Whit was following the conversation avidly. Neither of the children seemed the least bit afraid of the horned male.

Once again, that faint touch of pink crossed his high cheekbones. “It is a long story. Perhaps it would be best to wait until you have recovered. Would you care for something to eat?”

Her stomach rumbled in response, and she realized they had been a long time since her meager breakfast. Could she trust his food, she wondered suspiciously.

“It’s really good,” Whit said enthusiastically.

“I believe that I could feed you coal dust and you would not object,” Krampasarian said dryly and the boy grinned.

“I suppose I am a little hungry,” she admitted.

“Then we will return with food at once. Come, Whit.”

She might have bristled at the demanding note in Krampus’s voice, but the boy didn’t object, simply hopping down from his perch on the far side of the bed. Hopping...

“Oh no! What happened to Robin?”



“Robin?”

“The little red bird who’s been keeping me company for the past month. He tried to stop the wolf.”

“Are you sure? I was not –”

“You were not what?” she asked impatiently. “Of course I’m sure.”

“This is of importance to you?”

“Yes, of course. It may be too late, but what if he’s only wounded, and he’s out there by himself in the snow?”

He hesitated, his expression distant, then gave a quick nod. “As soon as you have eaten, I will go look for him.”

“I can wait.”

“As soon as you have eaten,” he repeated, his voice just as authoritative as it had been with Whit.

Ignoring her glare, he turned to the door. If he wasn’t going to help her, she’d do it by herself. She swung a leg over the side of the bed, but as soon as her foot hit the ground, a flash of pain shot up her leg and she couldn’t prevent a small cry.

He immediately returned to her side, positioning her back in the bed with those cool, strong hands. “You have not yet recovered. You will remain in this bed.”

Every part of her wanted to argue with him, but the throbbing in her ankle couldn’t be ignored.

“Fine.” She subsided back against the pillows. “But if I had my medicines, it wouldn’t take long to heal.”

“You can heal this injury?”

This time, the heat rushed to her own cheeks. She did have medicines which would aid in healing, but if her ankle was sprained as badly as she suspected, only time would fully resolve the problem.

“It would help, but no, it wouldn’t heal it completely,” she admitted.

“If it will help you, then I will return and procure whatever you need.” Despite his overly formal phrasing, he looked genuinely concerned.

“Go and look for Robin first,” she said firmly, then nodded. “But I do have a few things that might help.”

“You will prepare a list while I prepare your meal.”

She arched a brow. “Do you read English as well as you speak it?”

For the first time, a smile crossed his face – a devastatingly attractive smile. She suddenly remembered her dream and the way she had pleased herself afterwards to the memory of him. Her nipples tightened beneath her gown, and she was grateful that it wouldn’t be apparent through the thick cloth. But his eyes heated, as if he knew what she was thinking. Their gazes locked, and she didn’t know who would have looked away first if Whit hadn’t piped up.

“I’m hungry.”

“You are always hungry.” Krampus frowned at the boy, but she could see no sign of annoyance on his face and Whit only grinned. “We will feed the females first.”

“And then us,” Whit added, glancing back at Cinna. “You stay here.”

“Okay,” Cinna said sleepily.

She had been leaning against the bed the whole time, and now Jaelle patted the spot next to her. “Hop up here with me, sweetie.”

Cinna took her literally, climbing up onto the bed as Krampus and Whit left and snuggling up against Jaelle’s side.

“I was worried about you,” Jaelle said softly.

“I’m fine.” Cinna yawned. “The bad man took Whit and then came back to get me.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “The bad man?”

Cinna nodded. “That’s what Penny called him. But I don’t think he is. I likes it here.”

Jaelle couldn't find it in herself to argue. She knew that Linnea worked hard and did her best to look after Cinna, along with her own girls, but money was short. She had thought of offering to have Cinna live with her, but she knew that if she did, the girl would be ostracized from the village, and she didn't want that fate visited on the child.

But Krampasarian had said that his presence here was only temporary. What would happen when he left? And where was he from? He had been evasive when she had asked him if this was his planet. Was he from another world? Her heart began to pound as she considered the obvious level of technology surrounding her. Was there a way off this planet at last?

"Tell me a story," Cinna whispered.

Pushing her hopes aside for the moment, Jaelle gathered the girl close and began to spin her a tale.

## CHAPTER 8



“Why are you all dressed up?” Whit asked Krampasarian as soon as they left the cabin.

“It seemed appropriate since we had a female visitor,” he said as calmly as possible, even though he suspected the boy knew that it was not the entire truth.

Once he was sure that Jaelle was sleeping soundly, he had asked Whit and Cinna to watch over her while he went to change. He was determined to erase every sign of his primitive reactions, scrubbing the blood from his claws and polishing his horns until they shone. After securing his hair in a formal knot and donning his dress uniform, he had surveyed himself in the mirror. Once more, he appeared to be the legendary Commander of the Tandroki Fleet, but now he knew that there was another side to him.

The primal savagery with which he had defeated the animal threatening his female, the urge to claim her, the overwhelming primitive need to join their bodies together in ways long abandoned by his race – he was no longer the male that he had been when he landed on this accursed planet. That knowledge had only strengthened when he returned to his cabin and saw her looking at him from his bed. His primitive side roared with approval. This was where she belonged. In his bed, in his arms, in his life...

Why did that thought keep resurfacing? But really, was it so far-fetched? Did she belong on this primitive planet with a group of people who obviously did not appreciate her? What if he took her with him when he left?

He was so lost in thought that Whit had to tug twice on his sleeve before he realized that the boy was speaking. “Don’t you think that’s enough?”

Looking down, he realized that he had filled two entire trays with a variety of delicacies, unsure what would appeal to his female. “I did not know what she would like.”

“I like all of it.”

“So I have observed. But females can be more discriminating. You will let Jaelle and Cinna choose first.”

“Okay.” Whit sighed and looked up at him with big soulful eyes. “Can I have something now? I’m starving.”

Krampasarian laughed and handed the boy two of his favorite wafer bars. “I trust this will alleviate immediate starvation.”

“Tank you,” Whit said thickly, half of one bar already filling his mouth.

“I hope you never encounter my etiquette teacher,” Krampasarian muttered as he picked up the trays.

But as he walked down the corridor, he reconsidered his words. If he was going to remove Jaelle from this planet, why not take the children as well? They had no ties here, no one to care for them. The idea pleased him and he was smiling when he reentered his cabin.

The sight that greeted him only reinforced the idea. Jaelle was holding Cinna close, telling her some type of fanciful tale, and the sight of the two of them made him long for something he had never had.

A family.

True, he had parents – a stern father and a socialite mother – but he had been brought up in accordance with Tandroki tradition, paraded out on special occasions, neatly dressed in an appropriate outfit, and ordered to behave politely and correctly. Unlike Whit, who had somehow managed to tear the sleeve of his thermal suit and acquire a smudge across his face. But the boy didn’t care, charging across the room and jumping up on the bed with a whoop of pleasure.

Krampasarian would never have dared. In fact, to the best of his recollection, he had never entered the bedroom of either his father or his mother. He firmly pushed the wistful thought aside. It would be good for the child to learn some discipline.

“I have brought sustenance,” he announced. When Jaelle frowned at him, he realized how stern he sounded and attempted a smile. “I hope there is something you will enjoy.”

“I’m sure there is, but...” Jaelle bit her lip and looked over at the seating area. “Could we eat over there? I’d rather not get crumbs in the bed.”

He nodded abruptly and placed the trays on the low table, turning to see her gingerly swinging her injured leg to the ground again. Crossing the room in two quick strides, he huffed with exasperation as he lifted her into his arms. “I told you not to put any weight on your ankle.”

“I can hobble over to the chair,” she said defiantly, but he ignored her.

Once more, she was in his arms, and she felt as right there as she had before. But this time, she was awake, her face only inches from his as she glared at him, her succulent mouth tempting him. Her breath caught, and a small pink tongue flicked across her plump lower lip. His cock sprang immediately to attention, pressing painfully against his tight uniform pants as he imagined her tasting him. Her eyes widened, but she did not look afraid, and he could scent her arousal. And as he bent his head towards her, she did not pull away...

“Put her down so she can choose,” Whit said impatiently, interrupting the moment.

Jaelle’s cheeks flushed as she looked away from him, and he had to bite back an impatient snarl. Instead, he carefully placed her in the most comfortable chair, arranged a pillow at her back, and pulled the table closer.

“Please, help yourself. There is plenty more.”

“That’s not what you tell me,” Whit muttered.

“That is because you would eat your way through the entire supply and blow up like a mapallo if I let you.”

“What’s a mapallo?” Cinna asked. She had curled up on the floor at Jaelle’s feet and was nibbling daintily at a sweet biscuit.

“A very large, round animal that bumps across the plains, consuming everything it finds,” he said lightly. He didn’t mention that it was actually an aggressive pest that had been hunted almost to oblivion in the quest to protect their crops.

Both children giggled and Jaelle smiled, but he saw her give him a speculative glance. How much could he tell her – how much should he tell her? Would she believe any of it? He felt quite sure that the majority of the villagers would instantly reject the notion that he came from another planet, but he was not as sure about Jaelle. And he could hardly expect her to go with him if he didn’t tell her where they were going. Before he could consider the idea further, Whit began asking him about other strange animals.

The meal passed pleasantly, both children amused by his anecdotes. He saw Jaelle relax and suspected she had decided that he was spinning tales for the children’s amusement. To a certain extent he was - softening the more vicious characteristics and highlighting the more amusing aspects of some of the animals he had encountered - but they were all based in reality.

As soon as they were finished eating, he saw Jaelle cast an anxious glance at the viewport. The early winter day was fading and the snow was still falling.

“I will leave now,” he assured her.

“Thank you, but are you sure?”

“Do you not want the medicines from your cottage and to know the fate of your... bird?”

“Yes, of course. But it’s getting dark, and what if there are more dire wolves?”

“They will not trouble me,” he said firmly and patted the holster on his hip. There would be no more regression to a

primitive state.

Her eyes flicked from the gun to his hands and then up to his face. He saw the question in her eyes, but she did not voice it aloud, and he chose to ignore it.

“Whit, you and Cinna prepare for bed. That includes washing yourself from head to foot,” he added as the boy’s face drooped.

“I washed this morning.”

“And you will wash again tonight.”

Whit sighed but didn’t make any further protest.

“I will not be gone long,” he promised, then ducked into the adjoining dressing room to replace his uniform with the thermal suit.

When he emerged, Jaelle’s eyes widened, and he saw her scan his body, her gaze drifting down over his chest and lingering between his legs for a fraction of the second before she blushed and looked away. For the first time, he realized just how closely the thermal suit clung to his body. He recited a calming mantra in a desperate attempt to keep his cock from responding to the appreciation in her eyes. Now was not the time.

“I will be back,” he said firmly, leaving the room with more haste than dignity.

The wind roared around him, still thick with snow, as he left the ship. He paused on the landing ramp long enough to lock the door this time. While he didn’t imagine that any living thing would be foolish enough to be out on a night like this, he wasn’t about to take any chances with the safety of the ship’s inhabitants. The snow came almost to his knees as he stepped off the landing ramp, and he gave it a disgusted glance. Really, these conditions were most appalling. Jaelle and the children would be much better off in the more controlled environments of the Tandroki system.

He started down the mountain path, then realized he would have to detour to check on the drone. Not that it was strictly necessary, of course. He had several more of the drones, and



he could easily substitute another one, but this particular one intrigued him. Even though he had not been monitoring the drone in his mad dash to the caves, it had still attempted to defend Jaelle. Was there something different about this machine?

With a sigh, he took the longer route towards the caves. The snow had continued to fall and there was no sign of the small red drone, but he had brought along a tracker, and he quickly located it, half-buried beneath a large tree. When he retrieved it, the small wings fluttered and a faint mechanical whirring reached his ears as the drone tilted its head anxiously.

“Don’t worry, she’s fine,” he said, then immediately wondered at the foolishness of addressing the mechanical device. But the drone settled down, nestling into his hand. He placed it carefully into a pocket of his thermal suit where it would be dry and warm and turned to leave.

A low whimper sounded, barely audible over the swirling wind. It had sounded like a child and he quickly checked the clearing. Had one of the children followed him? He couldn’t see anything and deciding that the wind was playing tricks on him, once more turned to go down the mountain.

This time the small cry was unmistakable and he followed it back to the mouth of the cave. A dire wolf cub stood there on uncertain legs. When it saw Krampasarian, it froze, then gave a joyful yelp and started to scramble towards him. It immediately disappeared into the deep snow and whimpered again as it frantically tried to dig its way free.

By the Horns of Moroz, what was he going to do now? A quick end, he decided grimly. It would be better for the cub than letting it starve to death. He grabbed it by the nape of its neck and lifted it out of the snow, bringing it up to face level. He expected it to snarl or fight. Instead, it yipped again and tried to lick his face. *Skef*. He couldn’t do it.

If the one he’d killed earlier had been its mother, he was responsible for this cub. He would have to bring it with him. Unfortunately, it was too large to fit in one of his pockets, and with a sigh, he unfastened his suit and tucked it against his

chest. Tiny, sharp nails dug into his skin as it wiggled around, then it settled down against his stomach. He refastened his suit as best he could and hurried down the mountain to finish his errands.

The door to the cottage was unlocked, and he frowned when he realized that it had little more than a small latch to secure it. Completely unacceptable. He forced himself to concentrate on his mission instead and began gathering the supplies she had requested. Before he left, he found himself drawn to her small bedroom. Her sweet fragrance permeated the small room, and he could still envision her nestled in the bed. The knowledge that tonight she would be in his bed filled him with satisfaction.

As he was about to leave, he noticed the small bookshelf and remembered her telling Cinna a story. Perhaps she would enjoy having her books with her? As he began placing them in his sack, he came to an abrupt halt. Amongst the collection of paper books was an electronic device of obviously superior technology. It was no longer functioning, but where had it come from? Pushing the question aside to consider later, he finished gathering her belongings and headed for the door.

By the time he was on his way back to the ship, he was regretting his compassionate impulse to rescue the cub. It awoke on the trip back and, based on the way it was whining and licking his skin, he could only assume it was hungry. The crowning indignity was when he felt a warm flood of liquid against his stomach and realized that the creature had urinated on him. But despite his frustration, he still couldn't bring himself to put the animal out of its misery. Or his.

## CHAPTER 9



The door was still safely locked and Krampasarian slipped inside, hoping that he could clean up before anyone saw him. His hopes were quickly dashed when Whit appeared, his damp hair sticking straight up.

“You were gone a long time. Cinna was worried. Not me. But she was –” Whit broke off and wrinkled his nose. “What’s that smell?”

He sighed and pulled the cub out of his thermal suit. “It is this.”

Whit jumped back. “Is that a –?”

“A dire wolf cub? Yes, it is. Its mother attacked Jaelle.”

The cub dangled from his fingers, looking around with wide, interested eyes, then yawned, revealing a mouthful of small, sharp teeth.

“Why did you bring it here?” Whit scowled.

He sighed again. “Because I could not leave it there to starve.”

“You’d better not let Cinna see it –” Whit started, but it was too late.

Cinna came skipping down the hallway towards them, then came to a halt when she saw the cub in his arms. Her mouth opened wide as he hastily tried to tuck the cub back in his suit so that it wouldn’t scare her. Too late, he realized that Whit had not been concerned about his sister being afraid. The little girl came rushing over, reaching eagerly for the cub.

“Oh, you have a puppy. Is he yours? Can I hold him?” She reached up and gently brushed the cub’s soft fur with a coo of delight.

“Puppy?” he asked Whit over her head.

“It’s from a book our mother used to read to her before she...” The boy’s face shut down, then he shook his head. “She’s wanted one ever since.”

“Did this ‘puppy’ look like this?”

“It was furry, but that’s about all. Cinna, it’s not a puppy.”

“Yes it is.” Big blue eyes filled with tears and her lip trembled.

“It is a puppy. Krampus brought him for me, didn’t you?”

*Double skef.* How could he destroy the child’s faith in him?

“Only for a little while, I’m afraid. Just until he gets big enough to take care of himself,” he said gently, but he had a feeling he might as well have saved his breath.

Cinna’s eyes lit up and she held up both hands. “Please let me hold him.”

“Not until after he’s had a bath.” Which gave him an idea. Only the bathing facility in his quarters had a tub. Perhaps Jelle would know how to respond to the child better than he had. “Is Jelle asleep?”

“I don’t think so. She was still awake when we heard you come back.”

“Then let’s show her the... puppy.”

The three of them headed for his cabin, Cinna watching anxiously to make sure that he was carrying the cub carefully. Jelle was still in her chair, and he realized he should have returned her to the bed before he left, but someone had placed a pillow on the table in front of her, and she had her foot elevated. She smiled when he entered, then her eyes widened as she realized what he was holding.

“Is that a dire wolf cub?”

“I am afraid so.”

“He’s my puppy,” Cinna said cheerfully and Jaelle shot her a horrified glance.

“I told her it was just until he was old enough to take care of himself,” he said firmly but he saw Jaelle study the little girl’s face before giving him a skeptical look. He sighed as he handed Whit the bag with Jaelle’s belongings. “Right now he needs a bath.”

“Is that what smells?” she asked, her nose wrinkling.

“He urinated on me.”

All three of them looked at him, then Whit burst into laughter, Cinna giggled, and Jaelle ducked her head but not before he saw her grin as well.

“I’m glad you all find it amusing,” he said as he stalked to the bathing room, but as more laughter emerged from behind him, a smile crossed his own face.

By the time he emerged with a clean, damp, unhappy cub, Jaelle had directed Whit to prepare a bowl of food which the cub descended on in a flurry of eager grunts and tiny growls.

“What are you feeding him?” he asked.

“It’s supposed to be a combination of cereals and chopped protein and broth,” she said doubtfully. “Whit didn’t seem entirely sure about the workings of your kitchen.”

“Whatever he prepared seems to be a success. He is a very intelligent child.”

“Yes, he is. It’s a pity not everyone sees that,” she said thoughtfully, and he looked over to find her watching him. “Why did you take him?” she added softly.

“We can discuss that after the children are in bed,” he promised.

“I suppose that after finding the cub, you didn’t get a chance to look for Robin, did you?”

“Oh, I forgot. Hold on.” He had removed the unpleasant smelling thermal suit while he bathed the cub. The only replacement that had been available was a pair of lounge pants

that left his chest bare. He had seen Jaelle cast a quick, appreciative glance at him before they discussed the cub. At least, he hoped it was appreciative. Tandroki were not that different from the native males, although much larger and with a better developed musculature.

When he returned from retrieving the small drone, her eyes flicked across his chest again and this time he was sure that they were appreciative. She was quickly distracted by the small limp figure in his hand.

“Oh no. He was so brave.”

At the sound of her voice, the drone’s head tilted towards her and she gasped. “He’s all right?”

“He needs repairing but I believe he is fundamentally undamaged.” Now she had him referring to the drone as if it had a personality.

“Repaired? Don’t you mean healed?”

He hesitated, all of the prohibitions about revealing advanced technology to primitive races echoing through his mind, but in the end, he couldn’t bear to disappoint her.

“He’s not exactly alive.” Before she could ask any further questions he retrieved a small toolkit from the storage unit and bent over the drone. She gasped when the drone’s chest opened to reveal its biomechanical circuitry, but he ignored her and concentrated on repairing the disrupted circuits. The damage was less than he had assumed and within a few minutes he was able to close the chest. As soon as he did, the drone whirred softly and hopped up in his palm.

“He looks as good as new,” she said wonderingly.

At the sound of her voice, the drone’s head turned in her direction, then it hopped out of his hand to flutter over to her. She stroked his head with a delicate finger.

“He seems so real.”

“I programmed them to assume the characteristics of this form.” But even though he spoke the truth, he too wondered at

the drone's actions. It almost seemed as if it had bonded with her. But before he could consider it further, Whit yelled.

"I think he's going to pee again."

With a muffled curse, Krampasarian raced for the cub and carried it into the bathing room. He didn't quite make it but only a trickle reached him this time. With a sigh, he washed and changed again as the cub urinated happily into a pile of discarded towels. He really should have known better than to rescue it. But when he carried the cub back out into the bedroom and the three of them smiled at him, he couldn't regret saving the little creature.

JAELE WATCHED APPROVINGLY AS KRAMPASARIAN WAS DRAWN into a game with the children and the dire wolf cub, now known as Puppy. He was quite a contradiction. One moment he behaved with a formal reserve, and the next he was crawling around on the floor with Cinna on his back. His behavior was just as mercurial towards her, flipping from dictatorial to distant to hungry with dizzying speed. And she couldn't forget the way he had come to her rescue. As fierce, as primitive, as that battle had been, some primal part of her responded to the way he had fought for her and won.

Although, she did feel guilty about the cub. Perhaps the mother wolf had only been trying to defend it? But then again, she remembered the way it had sprung at her and she had no doubt it would have killed her if Krampasarian hadn't prevented it.

Puppy had tired of the game and settled down in Cinna's lap. She was stroking his fur and whispering to him, but Jaelle could see her eyelids were drooping also.

"I think it's time for bed."

As she spoke, Krampasarian lifted his head and their eyes met. There was that fire again. A fire to which some part of her instinctively responded. She had felt an occasional mild flash of attraction before, but only in passing. Why was she reacting now? And why to him? For all she knew, he could be part of an advance party sent to capture the human invaders on their

world. But as she watched him bend over and gently lift Cinna and Puppy in his arms, she couldn't believe it.

"Come along, Whit. It's been a long day for all of us."

The boy scuffed his feet but he didn't protest overmuch. She suspected that an early bedtime and a warm, safe bed were unexpected luxuries for him.

But where did that leave her, she wondered as Krampasarian and the children departed. She had no doubt that she was in his bedroom and she gave the large bed a suspicious look. Did he expect them to sleep together? Or perhaps he was giving her this room and he was sleeping elsewhere?

Thanks to the medicine he had retrieved for her, her head no longer throbbed, and her ankle didn't bother her as long as she didn't put any weight on it. If she only had a stick, perhaps she could hobble out of the room and find another place to sleep. Nothing she could use as a crutch was immediately obvious, but perhaps she could make her way over to the storage unit and see what was there. Placing her good foot on the ground, she tried to maneuver herself into a standing position. Robin chirped scoldingly in her ear, but it was all too obvious that she was not capable of walking and she slumped back with a sigh. As much as she hated to admit it, she would have to wait until Krampasarian returned.

He was gone longer than she had expected and she was just beginning to wonder if he had deserted her when the door slid open. *Oh my.* No longer obscured by children or animals, every inch of his upper torso was visible. Smooth alabaster skin covered a broad chest and a heavily muscled abdomen leading down to the low-slung waistband of the casual pants he was wearing. Once again, her gaze was drawn to the massive bulge beneath the thin fabric. Not that she had any experience in these matters, but surely human men were not so well endowed. Heat rushed to her cheeks as she hastily looked away.

"You were gone a long time," she said, wishing her voice didn't sound quite so breathless.



“I apologize for the delay. Cinna insisted on Puppy sleeping with them so I took him out for another opportunity to relieve himself.”

“You went out in the snow? Dressed like that?” For the first time she noticed that his hair was damp and curling around his shoulders, no longer confined. Were those silvery locks as soft as they looked?

He shrugged. “It seemed better than the alternative. But I am running through my clothes at an alarming rate. I must cleanse them tomorrow.” His eyes swept over her, leaving a trail of heat behind. “Would you prefer something else to wear for sleeping?”

“You just said you were running out of clothes.” She tried to keep her voice light but it still sounded disturbingly husky.

“You are welcome to anything that I have.” The words dropped into the quiet room with unexpected intensity.

“I must admit it would be nice to get out of the dress,” she conceded.

He immediately walked over to his storage unit and returned with a selection of tunic length tops. Or at least they would be tunic length on him. She suspected they would come down to her knees. She reached for one in a deep shade of blue, then realized the problem.

“I, um, need some help getting out of this dress.”

“Of course. What would you like me to do?”

“Could you find me something to act as a crutch? To support my bad leg?”

“I will support you.”

Before she could protest, he lifted her easily to her feet, keeping an arm around her waist so that only the tip of her good foot touched the ground. When she fumbled at her buttons, he took over, supporting her against his chest as he opened each one.

Mmm. His skin felt warm and silky beneath her cheek as she leaned against him and he smelled so good. She had the oddest

desire to lick him. His fingers traced lightly down the open back of her dress.

“You have another layer of clothing.”

“Yes, my shift. But it only ties –”

She might as well have saved her breath. He had it unfastened before she finished speaking and started to slide both her dress and her petticoat down over her shoulders.

“Wait a minute. I’m not going to get undressed in front of you.” She looked up in time to see that tinge of pink on his cheekbones again. Did the idea of her naked body make him uncomfortable?

“You cannot stand long enough to remove your clothing,” he pointed out, his voice stiff.

He was right but she wasn’t prepared to completely abandon her modesty. “What if I free my arms and you put the tunic over my head? Then I can just let the dress drop to the ground.”

It was an awkward maneuver and she had the uneasy suspicion that he had seen more of her body than she had intended, but he made no comment. He also was successful in preventing her from putting any weight on her injured ankle, and she smiled up at him once she was safely dressed in his shirt.

“Mission accomplished. Do you mind helping me to your bathroom?”

Instead of responding, he simply lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bathroom. It was larger than she had expected with both a shower and an enormous tub, as well as a sink and a toilet that looked fortunately familiar. After a brief argument, he deposited her on it and left the room, muttering unhappily. She took care of business and then managed to hobble over to the sink to wash before she called him back. As much as she would have liked to return on her own, even that brief period on her feet had tired her out.

He came as soon as she called, frowning disapprovingly when he found her on her feet and leaning against the sink.

“I would have attended to you.”

“I managed just fine.”

He snorted as he lifted her into his arms and carried her back into the bedroom, starting to place her back in the big bed.

“I don’t have to sleep here,” she said quickly. “I’ll be just fine in another room.”

“There is no other bedroom except the one the children are in. And you are not sleeping there,” he added firmly.

“What about you? Where are you going to sleep?”

“If you do not object, I will sleep in the chair.” He nodded at the chair she had been sitting in earlier. “If you do object, I will spend the night in the command chair, but I think it would be better if I stayed closer in case you needed me.”

She bit her lip, then nodded. Perhaps it was foolish to trust him but nothing about him aroused her suspicions. Despite his foreign appearance, he had treated her better than she suspected many of the men in the village would have done. But then her attention was distracted by his choice of words.

“Command chair? What are you commanding?”

## CHAPTER 10



*K*rampasarian froze at the question but he knew it had been inevitable. She was too intelligent not to pursue her questions.

“You said we would talk later,” she reminded him. “It’s later.”

“Very well.”

He started to put her down again but she shook her head. “I think I would prefer to be sitting upright for this conversation.”

Picking up a blanket, he carried her back to the chair, then hesitated. He didn’t want to let her out of his arms. Instead he took her to the padded bench beneath the window. It was large enough for two people - barely - but she didn’t protest when he arranged her at one end with the blanket around her shoulders. Despite the fact that it violated all rules of social protocol, he then sat next to her. He placed her injured ankle gently across his lap and did his best to ignore the fact that she was soft and warm and completely naked beneath his tunic.

“I told you that I am Commander Krampasarian D’Marchandar, of the Tandroki Fleet,” he said carefully, forcing himself to concentrate.

“You did. You did not, however, tell me where Tandroki-”

“Tandrok.”

“-Tandrok is located or what type of fleet you command.”

He hesitated, considering the best way to frame the answer. “If I told you I came from the stars, would you believe me?”

She gave him a considering look, then nodded. "Yes."

He should have known she would surprise him.

"I do not think that most of your people would believe me."

"They have forgotten - they have chosen to forget. But a woman in my family flew a ship amongst those stars." Her eyes turned sad and distant. "The ship went off course and crashed on this planet. It was carrying a load of settlers, making their way to a new world. They were... sleeping during the flight. Do you understand that?"

Some type of stasis? Yes, he understood the concept.

At his nod, she continued. "She was the only member of the crew to survive the crash. When she realized that the ship was beyond repair, she made the decision to wake the settlers. They had expected to wake up somewhere else, somewhere more prepared for their arrival, and they were... angry. They blamed her and banished her from their settlement."

She pulled the blanket tighter, staring out at whirling snow. "But it was more than that. She blamed herself and agreed to the banishment as her way of atonement."

"You live your life in isolation because your ancestor may have made a mistake?"

"Not just for that reason. She wanted to preserve the knowledge we once had. Keeping a distance helped, especially after..."

"After what?" he prompted.

"The settlers did their best to destroy what was left of the ship. Within two generations they had convinced themselves that they had always lived here."

"Why? Why would anyone choose ignorance?"

"Maybe it's easier to put your faith in the things you can see and touch." She absently stroked the blanket and he had a sudden vision of those soft fingers caressing him the same way. "And the knowledge would have disappeared - is disappearing - anyway. Most of the technology she preserved no longer works. We - *I* - have to rely on what my ancestors

have written down. At this point it's little more than some healing skills and a few historical records."

"Are there other survivors?" he asked. "Besides your village?"

"Oh yes. Groups broke off several times. There is a settlement down by the great sea, another on the central plains. Twice a year a merchant caravan comes through." She shook her head. "The villagers don't really trust the merchants either, but they trade with them, just as they trade with me."

"And your family stayed here?"

"Yes. It is quiet on our mountain - or at least it was until you arrived." Her melancholy seemed to vanish as she smiled at him. "And they needed us the most. The other settlements have grown and prospered."

The village did not deserve her. The knowledge only renewed his determination to remove her and the children from this primitive place. He considered broaching the subject, then realized that her eyes were drooping and her body had slumped lower against the wall.

"I should not have asked you so many questions," he apologized as he stood and gathered her up in his arms. "You are injured and exhausted."

"I was supposed to be asking you questions." Her soft, sleepy smile made his chest ache.

"You can ask as many as you like. But perhaps, tomorrow?"

He didn't want to put her down. When he placed her gently in the bed, and she smiled up at him again, he had to force himself to step back. He wanted to join her in the soft sheets, to curl around her even softer body. The intensity of his own desire shocked him. The Tandroki had put the urges of the flesh behind them so many years ago. And yet, her people did not seem to have him the same restrictions. Perhaps...

"I wish to kiss you." His voice was stiff, and he waited for her to react with shock or even worse, horror.

Instead, she only looked up at him, the deep blue of her eyes mysterious and enchanting as she considered his request.

“Why?” she asked at last.

“It is not an act in which the Tandroki engage.”

“And you’re curious?”

Her voice was absolutely neutral but he thought he detected an underlying note of disapproval. He rushed to explain.

“No, that is not it. Well, perhaps it is a portion, but only a small portion,” he added hastily. Greatly daring, he reached out and traced his finger across the silky smoothness of her lower lip. “I have never entertained the idea before. The thought of performing such an act with anyone else...” He shuddered. “But with you... I suspect I would find great pleasure.”

Her face had softened while he talked and now she put her hand over his. “I don’t know that I can promise great pleasure, but I’m willing to try.”

She kissed his exploratory finger and the soft, wet brush of her mouth sent a spike of excitement down his spine as his cock jerked in response.

“Just a kiss,” she whispered as he lowered his head.

Her lips were still half parted as he pressed his mouth against hers and some hidden primal urge had him forcing them wider, opening her to the possession of his tongue. He had thought it would be pleasurable? By the Horns, he’d had no idea of the raw exquisite ecstasy of a kiss. He explored her mouth eagerly, frantically. Soft and wet and delicious.

He growled against her lips, his whole body on fire with longing and desire. His hand clenched in the silken waves of her hair, holding her in place for his desperate need. She met him just as eagerly, the fragile claws on one hand digging into his shoulder while her other hand clasped the base of his horns. He groaned as her grip tightened on the sensitive area. Dampness covered the head of his cock and he knew he was seconds away from exploding. Only the shame of that thought finally penetrated his urgency and he forced himself to lift his head. But he could not bring himself to move more than a breath away from the heady delights of her mouth.

“Oh my,” she whispered, her sweet breath tantalizing his lips. “You’re sure you’ve never done that before?”

More shame swept over him at the reminder of how quickly he had forgotten generations of Tandroki training. He started to sit up but her hands were still clinging to his shoulder and his horn, and he couldn’t bring himself to break that grip.

“I told you. It is forbidden.”

“That’s not exactly what you said,” she said, her look of dreamy pleasure beginning to fade. “Why is it forbidden?”

“We were once a very violent people. We fought many wars. Moroz was one of our ancient kings. He was skilled in battle and won many, but he came to realize that his path could only lead to further destruction. He came up with a list of guidelines to lead us away from that fate.” He couldn’t resist stroking his finger across her damp swollen lower lip again. “One of those guidelines was to abjure the pleasures of the flesh because they lead to possessiveness and violence.”

Her eyes widened. “You mean you don’t even have sex?”

“It is no longer necessary. We have artificial ways of reproducing now.”

She frowned thoughtfully. “Do you think Moroz intended for it to go that far?”

Her question startled him. He had always accepted the Tandroki ways without questioning. “Perhaps not,” he said finally. “They say he had a very beautiful queen who he kept locked away.”

“Maybe he just didn’t want anyone else thinking about her that way.” She shook her head and smiled at him. “Male logic can’t be trusted. That’s why my family has only ever had daughters.”

He wanted to protest, but he couldn’t deny that the thought of locking Jaelle away so that only he could experience the pleasure of her company was surprisingly appealing. But then he remembered her with the children, even with the villagers as she did her best to help them. She would not be happy locked away and he would never ask that of her.



“I should let you rest now.” Despite his words, he didn’t move. She was still looking up at him, her eyes dark and mysterious once more.

“Probably. But maybe... One more kiss?”

His mouth was over hers before she completed the last syllable. The kiss was even better this time, now that he knew what to expect. He explored her even more hungrily and she rose to meet him, her tiny little tongue dancing along his, soft, sweet, and unbearably tempting. Her body rubbed against him, the soft lushness of her breasts cushioning his hard muscles. The memory of her naked in her bath swept over him and he wanted more, to truly feel what he had seen.

His hand curved over her breast, soft and full, the hard peak of her nipple an intriguing contrast. He explored the taut nub, rolling it between his thumb and finger, and she gasped in his mouth. He pressed it more firmly and her whole body shuddered. The sweet scent of her arousal filled his head and his hips thrust forward instinctively as his cock jerked in response.

When she had pleased herself, her hand had moved from her breast to between her legs and he mimicked her action, impatiently tearing away the cloth so he could reach the deliciously wet, swollen folds. She cried out as he touched a small hardened pearl of flesh and he remembered that she had lingered there. He circled it carefully and heard her whisper his name, both hands on his shoulders now, the tiny sting of her claws driving him on. Her body tensed as he pressed more firmly, and then he felt her explode, felt the convulsions sweeping through her as liquid flooded his hand. His own body responded helplessly, instinctively, as desire roared through him and he too erupted, his seed leaving him in pulse after quivering pulse.

He collapsed against her, drained, satisfied, and... horrified as the realization of what he had done swept over him. She had only asked for a kiss but he had done far more and disgraced himself in the process.

“I apologize,” he said as he drew himself hastily to his feet. “I must... clean up.”

Afraid to look at her and see the condemnation on her face, he headed for the bathroom without another word.

## CHAPTER 11



Jaelle stared after Krampasarian, too shocked by both his abrupt departure and the intensity of the orgasm that had swept over her to speak. She had touched herself before, of course, but she had never come close to the pleasure of this experience. The closest had been when she had been remembering the stranger in her dreams.

Of course. It hadn't been a dream. It had been him. She shook her head. No wonder she had experienced so little desire towards the men of the village. It turned out her ideal man – male – was a massive alien with ivory horns and a ridiculously long and agile tongue. A quiver went through her still sensitive body at the thought of what that tongue could do to other parts of her anatomy.

But it was more than just his physical appeal. When he looked at her, she felt as if he really saw her. There could be no future between them but perhaps, just for now, she could have someone who she truly wanted. Someone who would remember her.

Unfortunately, he seemed to have some fairly restrictive ideas about sex. The way he had leapt out of bed indicated that her reaction had made him uncomfortable. She sighed and reached down to pull his tunic back into place. As she did, her fingers encountered a small, hot pool of liquid where he had been lying. *Oh*. Perhaps there was another reason for his hasty departure.

He didn't look at her when he returned, simply turning off the lights as he headed for one of the living area chairs. His face

was set in a stern mask but she saw the flush of color on his cheekbones before he plunged the room into darkness.

“Why did you say that you were sorry?” she asked softly as silence filled the room.

“You asked for a kiss. I went too far.” His voice was strained.

“No you didn’t. What you did felt wonderful.”

“But you didn’t ask me to touch you like that.”

Despite his denial, she heard a note of hope in his words.

“Maybe not verbally, but my body was certainly saying yes.” When he didn’t respond, she added, “I didn’t ask you to stop, Krampasarian.”

“Then I am glad that you enjoyed our encounter.”

His voice was still stiff but she was beginning to suspect that it was as much from embarrassment as anything else.

“Didn’t you enjoy yourself?”

“By the Horns of Moroz, I never dreamed that a physical sensation could be so overwhelming,” he burst out. “But I disgraced myself.”

“I don’t think it’s disgraceful,” she said firmly. “It’s... flattering that you want me that much.”

“Truly?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“What?”

He sounded so horrified that she had to bite back a laugh. “It’s just an expression. It means I swear that it’s true.”

The whirling snow outside had paused momentarily and enough light reflected off of the fallen snow that she could make out his figure as he shifted uncomfortably in the chair. Even though it was a comfortable chair, it was clearly not designed for sleeping.

“Do you want to sleep in the bed with me?” she asked impulsively and saw his body freeze. “Just to sleep,” she added.

As much as he tempted her, she needed to think about what she was doing. And if she did choose to succumb to her attraction, she needed to make sure that there would be no consequences. A momentary vision of a baby with Krampasarian's silvery blonde hair flashed through her mind and her heart ached, even as she firmly pushed it aside. The village was hard enough on its fellow humans. They would never accept a half alien child.

"You are sure?" he asked. "Whit told me that it is not acceptable behavior."

Ah yes. The village morality had devolved to that of their medieval lifestyle. Not that it stopped them from indulging in either premarital or extramarital activities, but they did their best to keep them hidden.

"We aren't in the village," she said lightly. "But if you would rather not –"

He was across the room and settling down next to her before she finished speaking.

"I guess you would rather," she laughed.

"I always want to be close to you."

There was no laughter in his voice and her heart skipped a beat. She could think of nothing to say but she reached across the space between them and put her hand in his. She fell asleep still holding on to him.

KRAMPASARIAN AWOKE TO AN ARM FULL OF SOFT FRAGRANT woman and a cock that was so hard it felt like a metal bar. It was wedged between the lush curves of her ass and he couldn't resist a small thrust of his hips. Just the tiniest motion really. *Skef*. Sliding between that lush warm flesh was an irresistible temptation. He rocked his hips again, a little harder this time, and almost groaned as the pleasure swept over him.

"Is this your version of a wake-up call?" Jelle said sleepily as she rolled over to face him.

He wanted to protest the loss of her flesh surrounding him, but looking down at her smiling face more than made up for it.

“I apologize. I did not mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t wake me. That large and demanding appendage between your legs did.”

“Large?” He couldn’t resist a proud smile and she laughed.

“Don’t Tandroki boys compare themselves?”

“We compare the size of our horns. Mine were the largest in my squad.”

“Maybe large horns mean a large cock,” she whispered, and he felt her fingers skate across him. “Very large.”

Her voice was breathless as she drew her hand away and he – or rather his demanding appendage – was about to pull it back when a disapproving voice interrupted.

“You said you were gonna sleep in the chair.” Whit scowled at him from the doorway, his hair sticking up in ten different directions.

Cinna was at her side, her eyes still heavy with sleep, but she didn’t seem to have any objections to the fact that they were sharing a bed. She drifted across the room and climbed up next to him, nestling down with a contented sigh.

“It ain’t proper. You’re gonna have to marry her now.” Whit said belligerently. “I heard the mayor tell Nyssa that she would have to marry the miller now because of something about a bed.”

Marriage? Longing rushed through him so quickly he felt dizzy. What an impossible, delightful thought. But was it impossible?

“Krampasarian was just staying close by in case I needed him,” Jelle said soothingly. She gave him a rueful look. “It doesn’t count when one person is injured.”

Whit still looked suspicious but he gave a reluctant nod.

“What are you doing up so early anyway?” Krampasarian asked.

“Puppy wants to go out,” Cinna said, her eyes wide and innocent.

At the thought of what the cub could be doing to his ship, he jumped hastily out of bed. Fortunately the conversation had softened his rampant cock. As he raced through the door, Whit turned to join him.

“I woulda taken him but the door’s locked.” The boy scowled up at him, obviously still annoyed. “Why did you lock us in?”

“I was not locking you in. I was locking the rest of this planet out. It is for your protection.”

Unfortunately it had backfired where the cub was concerned. By the time he had let it out, cleaned up its mess, cleaned himself, and returned to his cabin, his earlier encounter with Jaelle was only a tantalizing memory.

He frowned when he found her sitting on the window bench once more, Cinna curled on her lap and his drone perched on her shoulder as they all looked out at the wintry woods. “You should not be walking.”

“Cinna brought me my cane.” She shrugged a little wryly. “I never expected to be using it for real but it definitely helped. I could probably make my way down the mountain...”

He looked out the window as well and saw, to his relief, that the snow was falling heavily once more. “You should not attempt it in the storm.”

“All right,” she said, smiling at him. He smiled back at her and it took longer than it should have before he realized that Whit was tugging on his sleeve.

“Isn’t it time for breakfast? I’m hungry.” The boy shrugged when they all laughed, his own grin flickering across his face at last. “Well I am.”

After breakfast, Jaelle sorted through the bag of belongings that he had brought her, smiling happily when she encountered the books. “Thank you for bringing these. And this.” She held up the electronic device. “It doesn’t work anymore but it belongs to that first ancestor I was telling you about.”

“I cannot promise but I may be able to get it working.”

“Really? That would be wonderful.” She pulled out the smaller bag containing her medicines and gave him an odd look. “Do you have a laboratory? Or at least some type of measuring instruments?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I wanted to mix up an additional potion,” she said lightly but he had the uneasy feeling she was not telling him the entire truth. Still, he could refuse her nothing, especially if it kept her happy and close at hand.

Rather than have her walk to his small science lab, he brought her the measuring instruments she requested, and watched in fascination as she carefully measured and combined three types of powdered leaves.

“How did you learn to do this?”

“From my grandmother. She learned from her mother and her mother before her. My family knew that the medicines we had brought with us would not last forever. They used an... analyzer to study the chemical composition of the native plants and come up with substitutes.”

“That is very clever,” he said sincerely. How much effort her family had put into saving the settlers who, in his estimation, showed little sign of deserving their efforts. Well, perhaps not all of them, he amended as Cinna climbed up on his lap. The children deserved everything, and he longed to give them more than what this limited planet could provide.

“I think someone is getting sleepy,” Jaelle said. “Why don’t we have lunch and then I’ll read Cinna a story before her nap.”

“I ain’t taking a nap.” Whit scowled at them from the rug where he had been wrestling with Puppy.

“Did I suggest one for you?” Jaelle raised an eyebrow at the boy and he gave her a reluctant grin.

Despite Whit’s protests, when Krampasarian carried a sleepy Cinna back to their cabin, the boy accompanied him. Jaelle had given him one of her books and he had decided to look at it while he kept his sister company. By the time Krampasarian



returned Puppy after another outdoor excursion, both children were sound asleep.

“You are a devious female,” he said when he returned to Jaelle. “You knew he would fall asleep.”

“I didn’t know, but I hoped he would. That horrible man works him so hard and he never has time to rest.”

“He is an intelligent child. Why does he put up with it?”

“To care for his sister. There are not many opportunities in the village and he thinks he is responsible for her.”

“Where is his male parent?”

“His father died not long after he was born.”

“*His* father? He and Cinna do not have the same parent?”

She shook her head, looking out the window. “Her father was one of the merchants who come through the village twice a year. I doubt he even knew that Kara was pregnant when he left. And he never returned. We heard he had gotten married and stopped traveling.”

“He abandoned the child?” The idea horrified him. The Tandroki system of reproduction had its disadvantages but no male would fail to provide for his offspring.

“Like I said, I doubt that he knew - but I doubt that he would’ve done anything about it if he had known.” Her fingers traced the cover of the book she was holding. “There always seems to be a rash of babies nine months after a caravan comes through. I even considered...”

“Considered what?” He did his best to keep his voice calm even though his fingertips were tingling.

She gave him a level look. “Considered having a child by one of the merchants. Eventually I will have to have a daughter to continue our work.”

He growled, the sound shockingly loud in the quiet room, as his claws sprang free. Jaelle looks startled but not afraid.

“It is our way,” she said quietly.

“I do not like it.”

“I can see that. Sometimes I’m not sure that I like it either, but it is my duty.”

The words stopped any further protest. He knew what it meant to sacrifice your desires for duty. He would be doing the same when he left. With an abrupt nod, he went back to working on her electronic device.

Despite the lingering threat of the future, the rest of the afternoon passed pleasantly. When the children awoke, they were obviously restless. The weather was still too harsh to take them outside so instead they played an energetic game that Whit called hide and seek. It primarily involved hiding in small spaces and jumping out on an unsuspecting pursuant.

By the time he herded the exhausted children and the happily panting Puppy back to Jaelle, he couldn’t control his smile.

“You missed a most enjoyable game,” he informed her.

“That’s all right. I was quite happy sitting here with my book. Did you have fun?”

*Fun?* It was an unfamiliar concept but he found himself nodding. “Yes. Most unexpected.”

“What kind of games did you play when you were a child?”

“I did not play games,” he told her truthfully. The memory of his rigid, disciplined childhood threatened to remove his joy in the occasion. He had not behaved like a Tandroki warrior. But then he looked at Cinna, happily cuddling Puppy, and Whit excitedly telling Jaelle how he had surprised Krampasarian, and he regretted nothing.

## CHAPTER 12



What a terrible childhood he must have had, Jaelle thought as Krampasarian went to prepare the evening meal. Perhaps it was not surprising that he seemed so conflicted about giving and receiving pleasure.

Was it foolish to think that they could come together, even for a short time?

*No*, she decided. He could relax with the children and if he didn't exactly relax around her, he was gentle and passionate enough to make up for it. While the three of them had been playing, she had taken a dose of the birth control medicine she had assembled that morning. She had no intention of trying to get him to do anything he was uncomfortable with, but if he wanted to take it further tonight, she was prepared. A pleasant shiver trickled down her spine and her nipples tightened. She saw him give them a hungry look when he returned with their dinner.

After they ate, he showed all of them how to play a rather complicated board game. She and Cinna teamed up against Krampasarian and Whit. She suspected that he was cheating his team in order to let them win, and she was pretty sure that Whit realized as well, but the boy didn't protest. He smiled happily when his sister declared the girls' team the winner.

After more stories and hugs and kisses, the children went off to bed. Krampasarian rejoined her after his nightly trip outside with Puppy. She was back in the window seat, Robin perched on her hand as she gently stroked his feathers. Of course now

she knew they weren't actually feathers, but they were remarkably realistic.

"You have some amazing technology," she told him.

"We do." He sat down next to her, his big body warm against her side, and gently lifted her legs into his lap. "But now I realize how much we paid for it."

"What do you mean?"

"All this." He waved his hand around the room. The chairs were no longer in a neat formal arrangement, books and blankets were scattered around, and there was a suspicious stain underneath the table. "It would never have been allowed. My family home was always perfect, and I was expected to maintain that perfection."

"It sounds very cold."

"Perhaps." He leaned his head back against the wall, the tips of his horns scraping softly against the metal. "I did not know what I was missing."

"So you were happy?"

"I was not unhappy. I had achieved considerable success and I was in line to become Ambassador to Perchten. It is a very prestigious position."

"I see." She had to swallow around the lump in her throat. For all her musing about his barren life, he appeared to have been successful and probably even content. "How did you end up here?"

"First my navigation system, and then my engine, were damaged by a rival." He put a big warm hand on her calf as he gave her a rueful grin. "We may not be as violent as we were in Moroz's time, but our rivalries are just as intense. Nicholsarian and I have been butting horns since we were at the academy together."

"How long ago was that?"

"I was younger than Whit when I entered." He stroked her leg thoughtfully, his eyes looking off into the distance. "It was a very different life."

“But you can repair your ship?” She found herself holding her breath as she waited for his reply.

“Oh yes. It is not a rapid process but it is quite feasible.”

The lump appeared in her throat again. He had confirmed her suspicions. Their time together would be limited. And yet, was it really so different than an encounter she would have had in order to carry a child? At least this time, she would be doing it for no other reason than because she wanted to be with him.

“I think it’s time for bed.” Her voice was shockingly low and husky, and his fingers tightened around her leg.

“Do you wish me to accompany you?”

“Oh yes.”

He seemed to swoop at her, lifting her into his arms in one powerful movement. Robin squawked and fluttered away.

“I think you scared him,” she said breathlessly.

“He is not needed.” He lowered her onto the bed, then glanced at the door. “And tonight I am locking the door.”

As she watched him, she remembered what Whit had said that morning. “Did you lock the ship as well?”

“Of course.”

“Could I unlock it if I wanted to?”

“You wish to leave?”

He looked so hurt that she gave him a reassuring smile. “Not at all, but the idea of not being able to get out makes me uncomfortable.”

“Ah.” He went to his storage area and returned with a small flat device. “Put your hand here.”

She obeyed and watched in fascination as the outline of her fingers appeared. He pressed a few buttons, then smiled at her. “Now you have complete access to my ship.”

“I don’t need that,” she protested. “I only want to be able to open the door.”

“Complete access,” he said firmly. “I have nothing to hide from you.”

Her pulse increased and she lifted her hand to the fastening of his tunic. “In that case, I have nothing to hide from you.”

His eyes heated as he watched the first sliver of bare skin appear, but he didn’t join her on the bed. She patted the spot next to her invitingly. “Sit down.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. We did spend last night together, remember.”

He finally sat down next to her. “I know and I enjoyed it immensely. It is just... my people do not believe in becoming overly familiar.”

“Not even when they’re attracted to someone?”

“Especially not then. As I told you, our history has taught us that correct behavior helps to overcome our primitive instincts.”

“You mean instincts like attacking a dire Wolf with your bare hands?”

He ducked his head. “That is an accurate example.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“You were in danger and all I could think about was protecting you. I didn’t even stop to consider using my weapon.”

“Why me?”

“Since the first moment I saw you, you have intrigued me. You are not like the other villagers.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I have watched you.”

Her fingers twisted in the bed covers. “I didn’t dream you, did I? It was you at my window that night.”

“Yes. I wanted to talk to you but it was not the right time.”

“What did you want to say?” Her voice had dropped to a low, sultry note that she barely recognized.

“I wanted to tell you that I was attracted to you. That you were brave and intelligent and beautiful.”

Unexpected tears filled her eyes. It wasn't even the compliment as much as the fact that no one had looked at her so intently since her grandmother had died.

“I did not mean to upset you.”

“You didn't upset me. Thank you for saying that.”

“I speak only the truth.” He very carefully reached over and ran a finger down her cheek. “Is this permitted?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

His finger drifted down her neck, awakening the sensitive nerve endings, and lingered at the very top of her breast. “And this?”

“Do your people allow such a touch?”

His hand drifted even lower, to where a taut nipple pressed against the thin cloth, and she had to bite back a moan of pleasure as he gently circled the small bud.

“No,” he said finally and it took her dazed mind a moment to realize that he was answering her question. The light glimmered on his horns as he continued. “Sexual pleasure leads to possessiveness and possessiveness leads to the emergence of all those instincts we have tried to suppress.”

He wasn't looking at her face any longer. Instead he was focused on where both his hands were manipulating her breasts, harder now, tugging at her nipples with a firm pressure that made her want to arch into his touch. He gave a hoarse groan, then she saw a quick flash of claw and a moment later the tunic fluttered open over her breasts.

“So beautiful,” he muttered as his hands returned to her now naked flesh, his claws no longer in sight.

Startled, she started to pull back, but then he made another lightning fast move and his mouth closed over one of her nipples, shockingly hot and wet. Had anything ever felt so good? Her body hummed with pleasure as he licked and tugged at the small bud with that amazingly agile tongue. Her

hands went to his head and even she wasn't sure she wanted to push him away or pull him closer, but when her fingers brushed across his horns, he growled. With another burst of speed he sliced open the rest of her tunic, then paused to look at her.

Color rushed to her cheeks. She felt exposed, vulnerable, but also more excited than she had ever been in her life. She thought she had been prepared, that she had made a rational decision, but her careful plans were a far cry from actually lying naked beneath his hungry gaze. She could put an end to this, a small voice inside her insisted, but she didn't want it to end. She wanted him looking at her so hungrily, she wanted the pleasure of his touch. She didn't want to be alone any longer.

The caution that had been ingrained in her since childhood vanished and she reached for him. "Kiss me," she whispered.

Fire danced his eyes as he started to lower his head, but then he hesitated.

"You must tell me if I do something you do not like. I have no experience with this."

"Neither do I," she admitted. "But we will find out together."



## CHAPTER 13



*K*ampasarian stared down at his female in shock, even as a completely unexpected primal feeling of satisfaction roared through him. “You have never experienced the pleasures of the flesh before?”

“No.” Her cheeks flushed under his scrutiny and she started to pull the sides of her tunic together again. “Remember that I have spent most of my time around other people disguised as an old woman.”

“Your disguise did not stop me from wanting you,” he admitted. “As soon as I saw your eyes, I was fascinated.”

“Oh.” Her face relaxed and she gave him a teasing grin. “You mean you’re not interested in my more... youthful parts?”

“I am interested in every part of you.” He stroked his thumb across her damp nipple, watching it furl into a tight bud at his touch. “But you asked for a kiss.”

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

He bent his head and obeyed. Her mouth was as intoxicating, as delicious, as he remembered, and he could have lingered there for hours, days, but her body moved restlessly against him and his cock ached with need.

Remembering the previous night, he slid his hand between her legs and she immediately arched into his touch. He played with the small pearl until he felt her climax but this time, he managed to control his own reaction. He raised his head so he could watch her face as he traveled lower, to the small entrance to her sex.

Her eyes opened as he touched her there, gradually pressing inside the heated clasp of her body. By the Horns! He had never experienced anything so tight and wet and enticing.

“This gives you pleasure?” he asked as she bit her lip.

“Oh yes. It’s just...different.” Her channel tightened around his finger, then softened as she smiled up at him. “Don’t stop.”

He obeyed, thrusting deeper into the silken fist of her body as his cock throbbed impatiently. He reached down and freed his aching erection, already so sensitive that even the brush of the sheets had him on the verge of exploding.

“Are you ready?” he growled, urgency overcoming his determination to let her lead the way.

Her teeth fastened on her lip again but she nodded. He could wait no longer. He notched his cock at that tiny opening, the damp kiss of her flesh almost shattering what was left of his control. His hips thrust forward involuntarily. For the briefest instant her body resisted, and then she opened to him and hot, silky flesh surrounded him. She gasped and he tore his eyes away from the erotic picture of their bodies coming together to find her watching him, her eyes wide with shocked pleasure.

The sight was too much for him. A climax roared through him so quickly that his vision actually darkened. A Tandroki warrior, the victor of a hundred battles, brought to his knees by the touch of this female. Perhaps he should have been ashamed but the knowledge that he had planted his seed inside her, that he had *claimed* her, filled him with immense satisfaction.

As his senses returned, he felt her hands stroking his shoulders and looked up to find her smiling at him.

“I did not know,” he gasped.

“Neither did I. But we aren’t finished yet.”

The head of his cock was still lodged inside her and as she spoke, she lifted her hips. He slid deeper, the silken fist of her sex enclosing more of him. His cock returned to full, aching life.

“More?”

“Oh yes.” She arched again and he growled and took over.

Her body was still tight, resisting his advances, but the remnants of his seed helped to ease the way, and he worked his way deep inside the small passage until he was buried completely. Instinct urged him to move, to thrust, but she was biting her lip again.

“Are you all right?”

“Just full, so full.”

Her channel fluttered as her body tried to adjust, and he remembered the way it softened with her climax. He found the pearl of her pleasure, completely exposed to his touch by the pressure of his body inside hers, and gave it a gentle stroke. A quiver ran through her and he stroked again. She gave a wild cry and convulsed around him, milking his cock in long, rolling waves.

His restraint vanished. He thrust wildly, lost to everything but the need to fill her, to claim her again and again, to show her that she belonged to him. Her soft cries urged him on as her hands came up to grip his horns, the added stimulation only increasing his urgency. His body tightened as fire licked down his spine, and then he was exploding again, his seed leaving him in wave after wave of heated pleasure until he was limp and drained.

He collapsed to the bed, pulling her tighter against him, unwilling to allow any space between their bodies. He had just violated every principle that he'd been taught but he had absolutely no regrets. How was he ever going to let her go?

She pushed lightly at his shoulders, and he very reluctantly slipped free of her body. When he raised his head, he realized that her eyes glittered with unshed tears.

“What is wrong?”

“Nothing. That was amazing. I just don't know...”

“Know what?” His heart thudded against his chest. Did she feel the same way?

“I... Nothing.” She blinked and gave him a watery smile. “I suppose everyone is emotional after their first time.”

Was that the reason he felt this way? *No*. There was much more between them than sharing a new experience. But if she didn't feel the same...

His heart aching, he rose to his feet.

“I will cleanse you.”

JAELE BIT BACK A PROTEST AS KRAMPASARIAN STOOD. SHE didn't want him to leave her; she wanted to stay wrapped in his arms. Her emotional response to their lovemaking had taken her by surprise - yet another thing for which she had not been prepared. How could anyone else ever compare to him?

*No*. She was not going to think about a future without him. Instead, she watched as he rose and stretched. His body gleamed in the moonlight reflecting off the snow, all smooth, pale ivory. He was perfect, she thought wistfully, her gaze traveling down across wide muscled shoulder to a ridged abdomen to that long, thick cock, impressive even in its softened state.

It twitched as she stared at it and she heard him give a low, satisfied laugh. Startled, she looked up to find him watching her.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I will forget my task.”

“I wouldn't want you to do that.” Actually, part of her did want him to forget and just come back to her, but she waved him on his way.

He returned almost immediately, and the warm, damp cloth soothed her swollen flesh. She sighed happily as he discarded it and drew her into his arms.

“You don't mind being improper and sleeping with me?” she asked hopefully as she nestled closer.

“There is nowhere else I would rather be.”

Refusing to think about the future, she let the sincerity of his words accompany her into sleep.

SHE AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING TO FIND HIM WATCHING HER. Although she could tell it was daytime, the light was still dim. She glanced at the window to see the snow falling heavily once more.

“Looks like the storm hasn’t passed after all,” she said, smiling up at him.

“Good.” He was still studying her face.

“Good?”

“It means there is no possibility of you leaving me.”

“I...”

Words failed her, but perhaps it didn’t matter. He bent his head and kissed her and she poured all of her unspoken emotion into their kiss. His response was as passionate as she could have hoped for, but just as she began to writhe beneath him, a sharp, determined knock sounded on the door.

“Why is this door locked now?” Whit yelled. “Puppy has to go out.”

“Back to reality,” she whispered.

He flashed her a smile, dropped a last kiss on her lips, and went to take care of their... family. Longing swept over her but she forced it aside.

But it was hard to keep it buried as the day progressed. They passed the time much as they had the previous day and watching him with the children, having Cinna snuggle against her for a story, and listening to Whit tell her about a wild scheme he’d just concocted, made it all too easy to forget that this was just a moment out of time. An artificial slice of happiness created by a legend and a snowstorm.

That night, he didn’t hesitate. As soon as the children were in bed, he picked her up and carried her to the bed, his mouth hungry and demanding.

The feeling that time was running out haunted her, and she didn’t want to waste time sleeping. After the first round of lovemaking, she took him in her mouth, and his shocked cries of pleasure were so loud she was afraid he would wake the

children. Fortunately, they remained undisturbed and he insisted on reciprocating. Despite his lack of experience, he proved to be a fast learner, his long, agile tongue drawing climax after climax from her quivering body until she finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

The next morning the snow stopped.

## CHAPTER 14



Jaelle spent the morning peering anxiously out of the window but despite her muttered prayers, the storm did not return. The clouds covering the mountain dissipated and the sky turned a clear, sparkling blue. At last she sighed and went looking for Krampasarian.

She found him sitting in his command chair, staring thoughtfully at the bank of instruments. Her courage almost failed her, and she was about to depart silently when he looked up and saw her. That devastatingly attractive smile crossed his face as he reached out his hand to her.

“You are walking well,” he observed as she crossed the room.

“I can manage well enough with the cane.”

When she reached him, he pulled her down into his lap and kissed her with unexpected fierceness. She was breathless by the time he raised his head.

“What was that for?”

“Because you helped me solve my problem.”

When he didn't continue, she poked his side with an impatient finger. “Well go on. What problem?”

“You remember what you told me about your ancestor? That the ship went off course?”

The familiar wave of sadness washed over her. “Yes I remember. She never forgave herself.”

“I do not think that she was to blame.”

“That’s sweet of you, but how can you tell after all this time?”

He held up her old electronic device. “I managed to get this working.”

“That’s wonderful. Thank you!”

“You are very welcome. But in the process of repairing it, I read the first few entries. The experience she described is exactly what happened to me. My navigation system became useless also. I assumed that it was the result of sabotage, especially given the destruction in the engine compartment.” His dark eyes glittered with excitement. “But I no longer think that is the explanation. While the other damage was definitely due to sabotage, I believe there is something in this sector of the galaxy that affects navigation. It happened to me just as it happened to your ancestor.”

A story flitted through her mind. Some ancient legend that her grandmother had told her. “There was a place on Earth that was supposed to be like that,” she said slowly. “A place where ships – ships that went on water – lost their way. But my grandmother said it was just a fanciful tale.”

“Perhaps not.” He tugged her more closely against his chest as he stared out of the window. “This area is not well known and our ships tend to avoid it. But I was impatient to reach my destination, and it appeared to be the fastest route.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the snow fall, and she considered his theory. Was it possible that her many times great-grandmother’s guilt had been misplaced all these years? That her family’s need to atone was based on nothing more than natural phenomena?

She expected to feel anger, but instead, she felt only sadness. And oddly enough, a sense of pride. Whatever their motivations, her family had done their best to keep the darkness of ignorance at bay and she was proud to have had even a small part in that.

“Do you realize what this means?”

She was so lost in her thoughts that Krampasarian’s voice made her jump.



“No, what does it mean?”

“It means that there is much less work to be done than I had anticipated. The physical repairs are completed. I had assumed that it would require an equal amount of time to repair the navigation system, but as the navigation system is not broken, then the ship can leave almost immediately.” He smiled triumphantly.

“Leave?” The thought of losing him made her heart ache but pride made her force a smile. “We will... miss you.”

“Miss me? Why would you miss me? You are all coming with me.”

He spoke with complete certainty and for a moment she wanted to believe him, to believe that she and the children could accompany him and be a family. But...

“You know that’s impossible,” she said as she tried to climb to her feet.

He refused to let her go. “Of course it’s possible. The ship will be quite safe. Are you worried that I will lose the way again? Do not be. I am sure that I can retrace my path based on the ship’s records.”

“And then what?” She reached up and brushed her fingers through the silky waves of his hair. “Will your society accept an alien female and two alien children?”

He had told her enough about the Tandroki that she already knew the answer. She saw the moment that he came to the same conclusion.

“I am Commander Krampasarian D’Marchandar. Of course they will accept you,” he said firmly, but she could see the hint of doubt beneath the arrogance.

“No, my love. They will not. And even if by some slim chance they did, that way of life would not make me happy or make the children happy.”

“But you would have everything – a suitable house, suitable clothes, a suitable education for the children. You would never have to worry about things like snow.”

“I don’t think we could afford the price of those ‘suitable’ things.” She forced another smile and attempted to stand up again. This time he let her go. “And I... I like the snow. It will always remind me of you.”

Her voice trembled on the last words, and she turned and fled. She didn’t want him to see her cry.

KRAMPASARIAN STARED AFTER JAELLE, ANGER RAPIDLY replacing his sorrow. She refused to accompany him? She would rather remain on this primitive planet than leave with him? There was so much that he wanted to show her, so much that would delight her, and yet she had turned him down. And the children too – they would have so many more opportunities in his world.

But would they? The specter of doubt crept past his anger. It was true that Tandroki society was insular and resistant to outsiders. They, of course, negotiated with other races and arranged for trade deals and mutual protection, but those relationships maintained an even more stringent formality than they practiced amongst themselves.

*But this would be different*, he argued with himself. He had an impeccable background and an unblemished reputation. Of course they would accept his family.

*Family.*

The word brought his racing thoughts to a halt. It meant something very different in his society. It meant connections and heritage, not love and affection. She was right, he realized. When he returned to his world, he would have to give up everything that he had found here. He couldn’t ask them to give it up as well.

The ache in his chest felt like a physical wound. He rubbed the spot but found no comfort. Outside the sun reflecting off the snow made a mockery of the darkness sweeping over him.

But perhaps the brightness was deceptive. Perhaps another storm was on the way or the path too clogged with snow. Even though he knew that additional time together would not

remove the agony of parting, he sent his drones out to investigate, hoping to find a reason for them to stay.

Whit came to join him just as he was bending over the screens. “Whatcha doing?”

“I sent the drones - the birds - out to see what conditions are like outside.”

“Wow. It’s like you can see through their eyes. There’s Jaelle’s cottage and the village and - look!” The boy leaned closer, his eyes widening. “Look at all the people coming up the mountain. Do you think they’re coming to find us?”

“Yes.” His eyes closed in despair. He should not allow the villagers to find the ship, to find him. It would only raise questions they had put aside long ago.

“I gotta tell Jaelle!”

Whit rushed away, and Krampasarian forced himself to stand. He felt like the old man he had seen in the market as he walked slowly through the ship. Jaelle was already gathering her belongings while the boy chattered excitedly. Her smile wavered as she looked at him.

“Whit tells me that there’s a search party. We should probably go and meet them before they make it all the way up here.”

*No!* His mind shouted the rebuttal but he forced himself to nod instead.

Everyone was dressed and at the door before Cinna suddenly seemed to realize that he wasn’t joining them. She looked up at him, her lip trembling. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

“No, little one. I don’t belong down there.” He was afraid he no longer belonged anywhere.

“Then I wanna stay with you.”

“We have to go, sweetheart,” Jaelle said gently. “Everyone is looking for us. You don’t want Linnea to be worried, do you?”

“I ‘spose not.” The little girl nodded, but then she flung her arms around his legs. “I love you, Krampus.”

The lump in his throat made it almost impossible to speak as he dropped his hand to her soft curls. “I love you too, little one.”

She squeezed his legs again, then turned and buried her face in Jaelle’s skirts. Jaelle’s eyes were bright with tears, but she didn’t speak. Whit sniffed, then extended his hand the way the males in the village did when they greeted each other.

“Bye, Krampus. Thanks for taking us.”

His fingers tightened on the boy’s hand, before he reluctantly let him go. “It has been a pleasure having you here.”

The boy sniffed again, then turned and stepped into the snow. A small blue bundle of fur darted after him, yipping happily. At least one of them was happy. Cinna finally released Jaelle’s skirts and followed Puppy.

Jaelle turned to him. “I meant what I said. I will think of you whenever it snows.”

And he would think of her always.

“Thank you,” she whispered, and then she too was gone.

He couldn’t stand to watch them walk away. Returning to the bridge of his ship, he tried to take comfort in the smooth efficiency of the now working equipment, but all he felt was cold and empty. An inquisitive chirp sounded and he looked up to see her drone perched on the instrument panel, watching him with what looked like curiosity.

“She is gone. They are all gone,” he found himself saying, his voice shockingly dead.

The drone seemed to droop in response and Krampasarian had an idea. He couldn’t stay himself but the drone was made to resemble the native creatures of this planet. Perhaps...

“Do you want to stay with her, Robin?”

The small creature hopped up and down in seeming excitement.

“Then go. The outer door is open.”

Without hesitating, the drone took off and he watched it fly away with a wistful smile. He knew she would appreciate the small creature and the technology that supported it would last many generations. It would be here to see Jaelle live out her life, to see the children grow, to see...

Unable to resist, he turned on Robin's visual feed, watching as it winged swiftly through the woods. He rubbed his chest as Jaelle and the children appeared on the monitor, still walking away from him down the mountain. He would send Robin ahead, he decided, so that he would be waiting for them at Jaelle's cottage.

But as the drone flew through the trees, it suddenly turned to one side. He frowned at the controls, trying to decide why it wasn't responding, and then he noticed the picture on the monitor. The male who had attacked Jaelle was sitting in a small clearing, drinking, and his family was headed straight for him.

He ran for the door.

## CHAPTER 15



Jaelle stumbled through the woods, fighting the urge to return with every step. The only thing that kept her moving was the two small figures accompanying her. Cinna and Whit were staying with her from now on, she decided. She would do whatever she could to make sure that they were accepted by the village, but the love they shared was more important than any narrow-minded prejudice.

But even that decision didn't heal her aching heart. She was so wrapped in her misery that she didn't realize they were not alone until she heard the familiar, unpleasant voice.

"I knew you weren't lost, you worthless little bastards," Knut growled. "That damn woman didn't have to close the tavern so everyone would search for you."

She froze in place, automatically reaching for the children. They had reached a small clearing, barely more than a wider space between the trees, and Knut was perched on a boulder on the far side taking a swig from a brown bottle. He drained it and cast it aside, wiping a hand across thick lips that began to smile unpleasantly as he took in her appearance.

"And who are you?" He leered at her, his gaze traveling over her body with undisguised lust.

"She's Jaelle, of course. Anybody could see that," Whit said contemptuously. The boy stepped in front of her before she could stop him, his hands on his hips as he glared at the big man.

“Don’t you smart mouth me, you little bastard. Left me to do all the work, you did.” Knut advanced across the open space, licking his lips. “So you’re the real Jaelle. Tired of hiding behind those ugly clothes, are you? Looking for a real man?”

“I already have a real man.” *Had*, her aching heart reminded her. “Now please move aside. I want to tell everyone that the children are safe.”

“Not so fast.” A big hand clamped down on her wrist with disturbing strength. “You owe me, you know.”

Even though her heart was beating wildly, she lifted her chin. “I don’t owe you anything.”

“Oh yes you do. That no good wife of mine finally confessed that you’ve been giving her something to stop me breeding her. You owe me a child.” He licked his lips again as he reached for the neckline of her dress. “Be a nice change from that useless bitch.”

“No! Don’t you touch her!” Whit grabbed Knut’s arm, but the big man slung him aside with contemptuous ease.

The boy’s small body went flying, and the crack echoed through the woods as his head hit a tree. Cinna gave a high-pitched scream while Puppy growled and bit ineffectually Knut’s boots. Knut snarled and turned to Cinna with his hand raised.

“No!” Jaelle grabbed his fist. “Run, Cinna. Get help.”

The girl hesitated for a fraction of an instant, then took off, a small blue streak following along behind her. For a moment Jaelle thought she saw a familiar red bird circling Whit’s head, but then Knut snatched her attention back to him as he laughed cruelly.

“Who do you think is going to help you? You’re just an old witch.”

His breath stank of alcohol as he pulled her closer, despite her struggles. “Let me go. I have to help Whit.”

“He’s just a useless fucking orphan. No one cares about him, just like no one cares about you.”

“I care.”

The harsh voice reverberated across the clearing, and she looked up to see Krampasarian stalking towards them. His face was etched with rage, his claws extended, a terrifyingly alien sight. She had never been so glad to see someone.

“What the fuck are you?”

She could hear the note of fear behind Kurt’s usual bluster and took advantage of the moment to renew her struggles. His grip tightened and Krampasarian snarled.

“I am Krampus. I have come to render judgment on the unworthy.”

Knut’s fingers finally loosened and she wrenched herself away, flying across the clearing to Whit’s side. He sprawled limply in the snow but when she gathered him in her arms, she could feel his pulse beating steadily. Robin perched on her shoulder, chittering anxiously.

Krampasarian had been watching her, but when she nodded, grateful tears streaming down her cheeks, he turned back to Knut.

“And I find you unworthy.”

Without another word, he flew at him. Knut was a big man and for a moment, she was frightened that he would prove a challenge for Krampasarian, but it was no contest. The big man was on the ground within seconds, and then a spurt of red sprayed across the snow. Krampasarian roared triumphantly and rose to his feet, blood dripping from his claws. He took a step towards her just as Cinna raced back into the clearing, a crowd of villagers behind her.

“He hurt him,” she sobbed. “He hurt my brother!”

“That demon?” The mayor stared at Krampasarian and stepped protectively in front of the others.

“No!” Cinna and Jelle spoke simultaneously.

“The bad man,” the girl continued. “The one in the snow.”



Whit moaned in her arms and Melissa appeared at her side. “What happened?”

“He was trying to defend me.” Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Knut attacked me.”

“Who are you?” the mayor demanded.

“Jaelle, of course.” The weak voice came from her lap and she looked down to find Whit’s eyes open.

“Whit! How do you feel? How’s your head?”

“Aching,” he muttered, but he pushed himself upright with a hint of his usual grin. “What happened?”

“Krampasarian came and rescued us. Again.” Her voice shook as she looked across the clearing to where he was standing.

But he was gone.

KRAMPASARIAN FORCED HIMSELF UP THE MOUNTAIN, AWAY from his mate, away from his family. When he had defeated the male who would have preyed on her, for one moment he thought he had won them back. But then the villagers had appeared. He had seen the shock and horror on their faces, seen the way they had gathered protectively around Jaelle and the children. There was no place for him here.

And even though he suspected there was no longer a place for him amongst the Tandroki, he would return. He would fulfill his responsibilities and live out a meaningless, empty life of tradition and duty. His chest ached as if he had been physically wounded, but he ignored it as he began the pre-flight checks. He wouldn’t even allow himself to turn on the monitor for a last look.

As he pressed the ignition controls, he remembered the dirt that had been packed around the back half of the ship. He half-hoped, half-dreaded, the possibility that it would prevent him from leaving, that it would force him to stay longer and clear it away. Instead, the ship trembled for a brief moment, then lifted easily into the air.

He should have headed immediately for the upper atmosphere, but he couldn’t do it. Bringing the ship around in a long circle,

he turned back to face the mountain. Their mountain. His hands hesitated over the controls, still unwilling to take that final step, and he saw it.

A white plume of snow rose into the air, slowly, almost poetically, but already beginning to gather speed. An avalanche!

His heart pounding, he studied its path and realized that it was headed straight for the village. Jaelle's village. The one her ancestors had tried so hard to help. The one that in the end had gathered around her. He couldn't let it be destroyed.

Even before he made a conscious decision, he was already steering the ship to intercept the mass of snow and rock tumbling down the mountainside. He couldn't stop it, but he thought he could divert it enough that it wouldn't take the village. White clouds of snow covered the view port but his hands were steady on the controls. Jaelle's face appeared in his mind, smiling at him, smiling down at the children. He couldn't be with them but at least he wouldn't have to leave them behind.

He was smiling when the ship crashed into the mountain.

## CHAPTER 16



Jaelle and the rescue party were almost to the clearing overlooking the village when she heard the roar. To her shock, the villagers had insisted that the three of them return to the village to recover. Ingrid, Knut's wife, had been amongst the searchers, and Jaelle had braced herself for her recriminations. Instead, she had given Knut's body a cursory glance, then turned away without a word. As she did, Jaelle saw the massive bruise discoloring the other woman's cheek.

Whit had insisted on walking, and excitedly described their adventures on the ship to the curious villagers while she did her best to keep her face composed despite the pain in her chest.

Small, cold fingers slipped into hers. Cinna looked up at her, blue eyes shining hopefully. "He'll come back. The story says he comes every winter."

Her heart cracked again. How was she going to explain to the little girl that he wasn't returning? Before she could respond, she heard a low rumble that grew rapidly louder.

"Avalanche," the mayor yelled, urging everyone back towards the tree line.

The first flurry of loose snow tumbled past them and she watched in horror as it streaked downhill towards the village.

Melissa started to dart past her and Jaelle grabbed her arm.

The other woman struggled wildly. "My children are there!"

“You can’t help them if you get caught up in it.” Her voice sounded strangely calm despite the way her heart was pounding. “Maybe it will pass by the village.”

Melissa sobbed and clung to her hand. She suspected the other woman knew as well as she did that the chances were very slim.

And then there was a bright flash against the sky. Krampasarian’s ship appeared, heading directly towards them. Surely he didn’t think he could rescue them again? But then the angle of the ship changed slightly, and she realized where he was heading.

“No!” she screamed, even as she pulled Cinna’s face against her skirts.

The ship’s path never varied and she watched in horror as it headed straight into the mass of falling snow. The roar increased, deafening her, and then silence descended around them as the mass of snow finally came to a halt.

A vast, empty field of white spread out in front of her, only a few last puffs of snow floating in the air. The village appeared almost untouched, the majority of the fall further up the valley.

She searched the expanse of white desperately, looking for any indication of where the ship might be. Tears kept threatening to obscure her vision and she dashed them away impatiently. There! The faint silvery line breaking the surface was the only indication of where the ship had gone, but it was enough. It had to be enough.

She thrust Cinna into Whit’s arms and took off. The thick snow made for treacherous footing and it seemed to take forever before she reached that distant line, but she reached it at last. The icy metal burned her fingers but she followed it along the surface as far as she could, then started to dig. The soft snow was easy to sling aside but it was also heavy and her arms soon began to ache. She didn’t care.

“Here.” The gruff voice startled her and she looked up to see the mayor handing her a bucket. “This will be faster.”

More voices sounded and she watched in shock as more of the villagers appeared, equipped with shovels and buckets, and began to dig.

“I... I don’t understand.”

“We all saw it. He deliberately crashed that flying machine of his to stop the avalanche.” The mayor dropped a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll get him out.”

He turned away to direct the digging, and she shook off her shock to resume her own efforts.

It was slow, cold work. Her arms ached and her hands burned, but she refused to give up until Melissa forced her to pause long enough to drink some hot soup.

“But I...”

“You need to take a break. You won’t do him, or anyone else any good, if you’re half dead from exhaustion.” Melissa pointed at the tree line where several of the women were preparing more soup over a blazing fire. “Don’t you at least want to get warm?”

“I can’t. I have to get to him.”

Melissa studied her face, then nodded. “All right. But at least take the soup first.”

She gulped it down impatiently, but the warmth and the nourishment helped, and she turned back to her task with renewed urgency. They had cleared enough of the snow that she could see the front end of the ship crumpled against the mountainside. The bridge had been destroyed. If he had been sitting there...

*No.* She refused to consider the possibility. He was alive. She knew he was.

As she bent back to her task, she saw two small determined hands next to hers and looked over to find Whit digging just as fiercely. His face was pale with exhaustion, but he did his best to smile at her.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get him out.”

“Yes we will. Where is Cinna?”

“Linnea is watching her. She wanted to dig, but I told her she had to look after Puppy. That Krampus would want her to do that.”

Tears threatened once again, but she managed a watery smile. “That was smart thinking.”

He sniffed defiantly and turned back to the snow.

A short time later, a shout went up. They had reached the door. As much as she wanted to be the one to dig, she reluctantly agreed to let a few of the larger villagers concentrate on that area. The snow flew as they all gathered around, and Whit’s hand clenched in hers.

“I don’t know how to open it.” a man yelled as they finally uncovered the entire door.

“I can do it.” *I hope.*

Willing hands lifted her down into the cleared area, and she pressed her hand against the lock, praying that it worked. With an agonizing creak, the door started to open but it only made it part way before freezing into place.

Too impatient to wait while they dug out more snow, she forced her way through the narrow opening. The ship was in almost complete darkness. Only a small line of emergency lights flickered at the base of the walls, walls tilted to an angle that made them more like floors. She made her way along the twisted corridor, metal creaking with every step. Everything looked oddly compressed - as if a giant hand had squeezed the ship. The corridor grew narrower, tighter, and her heart thudded against her chest as she approached what was left of the bridge.

Even the lights were damaged here, and she was in almost complete darkness, but she kept going on her hands and knees, feeling her way. And then silky strands of hair met her outstretched fingers.

“Krampasarian,” she whispered, her hand shaking as she explored further. She felt the familiar ridges of his horns and

then his head, wet beneath her fingers. It took a moment before her shocked mind realized that it must be blood.

“Please be all right. Please.” She found his face, his features so familiar to her touch. “I love you.”

“Then it is just as well that I decided to return.” His voice was shaky, weak, but somehow he managed to retain a hint of that familiar arrogance.

“Oh thank God.” She burst into tears.

By the time more of the villagers made their way onto the ship, he had passed out, but his heart beat steadily beneath her hand. Somehow they managed to maneuver him down the twisted corridor and out of the broken ship. More villagers waited to lift him onto a blanket, and she heard the muttered exclamations as they took in his appearance in the full light of day.

She didn’t care. He was alive and he was hers and no one was going to keep them apart. She knelt down next to him to examine his injuries. To her great relief, the only serious injury was the gash on his head and although it was bleeding profusely, it appeared to be only a surface wound.

When Whit flung himself down next to her, she was able to give him a reassuring smile. “He’s going to be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” She put her arm around his thin shoulders and hugged him. He buried his head against her for a moment before he pushed away, swiping impatiently at his nose.

“Here.” Melissa handed her a damp cloth, and she carefully cleaned the wound.

Fortunately, she had wiped away most of the blood before a small blonde figure threw herself at him. Cinna’s shoulders shook with her sobs and Jelle reached for her, but before she could pull the girl into her arms, a big hand came up and gently patted her back.

“Do not cry, little one.”

“You’re all right!” Cinna cried.

“I am now. Now that I am back with my family.” Dark eyes studied her face as he extended his other hand to her.

Smiling through her tears, she took his hand and drew Whit with her. “*Our* family.”

More murmurs came from the villagers and she looked up defiantly, but she didn’t see the hostility that she expected. Several of the men looked suspicious, but most of the women were smiling. Perhaps she had more friends here than she realized.

But these three were the ones who really mattered, she thought, looking back down at Krampasarian, Cinna still clinging to his neck and Whit tight against her side. Then Puppy came tumbling over, Robin flying past him to land on her shoulder. A mismatched family to be sure, but one she was never letting go.



## EPILOGUE



*One year later...*

ANAKARIAN D'MARCHANDAR STARED UP AT JAELE FROM BIG, blue eyes as he nursed hungrily. He had his father's silvery blond hair and tiny, adorable nubs where his horns would grow, but his eyes were all hers.

A son. After generations of an uninterrupted female line, she had finally broken the tradition and allowed nature to dictate the sex of her child. Krampasarian had been delighted, but considering the attention he lavished on Cinna, she was sure he would have been just as delighted with a daughter. Perhaps next time...

Just the idea that there could be a next time filled her with delight. Her son would never need to be alone. Of course, he might not appreciate that fact she thought wryly as Whit came rushing in. Puppy, who was almost as big as Whit now, bounded after him. Despite his size and a fearsome array of teeth, he had maintained his sweet, playful nature.

"Mama!" Whit yelled.

Anak shot a suspicious glance in Whit's direction and suckled harder.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"Papa is going to teach me how to fight."

"What?"

She frowned at Krampasarian, who had followed Whit into the room. Despite her frown, her heart still skipped a beat, just as it did every time she saw her tall, handsome husband.

Cinna grinned from her position perched on his arm. “Me, too!”

“Don’t you think we should have discussed this first?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I am just going to teach them some simple self-defense moves,” he said soothingly. “It will discipline their minds as well as their bodies.”

“Let’s go practice,” Whit shouted with his usual exuberance and Cinna nodded enthusiastically, demanding to be let down.

The children and Puppy scampered off and Krampasarian came to join her, dropping a brief kiss between the nubs of Anak’s horns before pressing a much longer kiss to her lips.

“Don’t try and distract me,” she scolded him when he finally raised his head, even though her body hummed with pleasure.

“Would I do such a thing?”

“Absolutely. You were trained from birth to be manipulative.”

“I would never attempt to manipulate you, my love,” he said earnestly.

“I know you wouldn’t.” He did, of course, but only ever with the intention of making her happy. And his knack for diplomatic maneuvering meant that the village had accepted him with surprising ease. “But I’m still not sure about this fighting thing.”

“Do you not want our children to be able to defend themselves? In case someone else like Knut appears in our lives?”

“You’d never let him hurt us.” She put a finger over his lips when he started to respond. “But I understand your point. I’ll withdraw my objection.”

“Thank you, my love.”

Anak's suckling had finally slowed to an occasional lazy pucker and his eyes were closed. She pried his mouth away and Krampus took him, burped him, and carried him to his crib. He turned back as she began buttoning her top.

"You do not need to cover yourself on my behalf." The hunger in his eyes sent an answering thrill of desire through her body as he prowled back over to her. He circled a distended nipple with a careful finger. "I very much enjoy the sight of your body lush from motherhood."

"I think you've made that clear," she said breathlessly, arching into his hand. His passion for her had never diminished.

"Perhaps we should take a nap while our son naps," he whispered, clamping down on the sensitive bud just enough to send a streak of pleasure straight to her aching clit.

She swayed towards him, but as she did, a shout came from outside. They both froze, then she sighed as she heard Whit yelling instructions at Cinna. "As much as I would love to take you up on that, you know we'd be interrupted."

"Not if I am fast enough."

"Those are not words that thrill a woman's heart."

"I am sure I could prove differently."

She was quite sure that he could, but she laughed and shook her head. "I know. But tonight you can take as much time as you want. After the celebration."

"Are you really going to make me wear that ridiculous costume?"

Despite his protests, she knew that he was looking forward to the evening. After the events of the previous year, the legend of Krampus had been modified, transforming him from a dark spirit to a generous one, and tonight they would celebrate.

"After the celebration," she repeated, just as the door swung open and Whit appeared.

"I'm hungry," he announced and she laughed.

WHEN HER HUSBAND APPEARED IN COSTUME THAT EVENING, her heart swelled with pride - and more than a little lust. A tight-fitting red thermal suit showed off his broad shoulders and wide chest and clung lovingly to thick muscled thighs. The fringe of white fur around his neck mingled with his silvery curls while his horns reared tall and proud over his head. Over his shoulder he carried the same dark bag that had brought Whit and Cinna into their lives, but now it was filled with small gifts for the children of the village.

“Oh my,” she murmured.

“Does that mean you approve?”

“Very much so.” She gathered up the children and herded them towards the door as she lifted Anak into his carrier. As she moved past him, she added softly. “I have a costume too. I hope you will approve of it.”

His eyes heated, but she whisked past him before he could ask any questions.

Although they still spent time at her grandmother’s cottage, they had decided to move closer to the village for the sake of the children. Krampasarian had arranged for them to take over an abandoned house and they had been gradually restoring it.

They left Puppy at home for the short walk into the village, but Robin perched on her shoulder for the entire trip, observing everything through bright little eyes.

Once again the houses were decorated for the season, and this time she could partake of the hot punch as she wandered through the streets with her family. They ended up at the village hall, enjoying a shared feast before her husband distributed presents to squeals of delight. Even the more suspicious villagers seemed to relax tonight. Perhaps it was easier to think of him as a legendary spirit than as an alien.

She sighed with contentment as they walked home afterwards.

“Happy?” he asked.

“Very. But I am a little tired. I’m not sure how much longer I can stay awake.” She yawned deliberately. “Do you think you could put the children to bed?”

“Of course,” he said immediately. “Do you want me to carry you?”

“I said I was tired, not incapable of walking.”

“I enjoy carrying you,” he grumbled.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She did her best to hide her smile.

As soon as they arrived home, she kissed the children and hurried off.

Their bedroom was the last room they were renovating, and it contained little besides the big bed. But it was bright and spacious and she didn’t need anything else. She rummaged through the box that was serving as a temporary wardrobe and drew out her surprise.

Despite the severity of the crash, a surprising amount of technology on Krampasarian’s ship had survived, and he had managed to repair much of it. The ship would never fly again but it offered other benefits. She had been working with the replicator and finally managed to produce the right fabric. She grinned as she went to change.

THE CHILDREN WERE STILL GIDDY WITH EXCITEMENT, BUT Krampasarian finally managed to settle them into bed. Whit was still talking when his eyes finally closed and he stopped in mid-sentence. Cinna gave him her usual sweet smile as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Night, Papa.”

“Good night, little one.”

He gave Puppy an admonishing look as he left the room. “And you stay on the floor.”

The door had barely closed behind him when he heard the betraying creak as the wolf climbed into bed with his daughter. He grinned and shook his head. He wasn’t going to fight that battle tonight.

Anak was sound asleep with Robin perched on the head of his crib.

“Watch over him,” he said softly, wondering as always how much the drone really understood.

But that was a question for another day. He was concerned about his wife. She rarely admitted to being tired. Had the celebration been too much for her?

He slipped quietly into the bedroom, unwilling to disturb her if she had fallen asleep.

A lamp was still on but the warm glow only illuminated an empty bed. A slight noise made him turn, and he saw her standing in the entrance to the bathroom.

She was wearing a slip of thin red silk, so sheer he could see the soft curves of her body beneath the fabric, and she glowed in the dim light like a vision of lush perfection.

All of the blood in his body raced straight to his cock.

“Do you like it?” she purred, sauntering towards him. “I told you I had a costume.”

“That is a costume?” He couldn’t take his eyes off of her.

“Of course. I’m Mrs. Krampus.”

He wanted to roar with pride but experience - and three children - had trained him to control himself. Instead, he reached out and stroked a finger across her nipple, watching as it hardened beneath the thin cloth. The fabric was cool and silky beneath his touch but alluring as it was, it only stood between them.

“Take it off,” he growled.

“You don’t like it?” She made a disappointed face but he saw the gleam of satisfaction in those deep blue eyes.

“It is beautiful. Now take it off before I tear it off of you.”

Both nipples were hard now and he saw her shiver with excitement. She pushed the thin straps off her shoulders and the gown fluttered to the floor.

“Better,” he said as he lifted her into his arms and felt her soft bare skin against him.

“I guess you ended up carrying me after all,” she whispered before she started pressing eager little kisses along his jaw.

“Because this is exactly where you belong. In my arms,” he said as he carried her to their bed.

A VERY LONG TIME LATER, KRAMPASARIAN SMILED UP AT THE ceiling. Jaelle was snuggled against his side and deep silence filled their house. It was similar to the type of silence that had once filled his life, but this silence wouldn't last. It would be filled with the sounds of children and animals, with the sounds of love and even occasional arguments, with the sounds of family.

He gave a silent prayer of thankfulness for Nicholsarian and his sabotage. That single act had transformed his life from empty to complete, and he would never be alone with the silence again.





## CHAPTER 1



The child was watching him again. As usual, Ambassador Nicholsarian D'Jelosvenn pretended not to notice her as he continued the process of clearing away the trees destroyed when his spaceship had landed... unexpectedly on this backwater planet. He refused to refer to it as a crash, but it was undeniable that the landing had not been as controlled as he would have preferred. He had been aiming for the shoreline and had ended up amongst the trees on the hill overlooking the beach instead.

*Only a minor miscalculation*, he assured himself, as he took his axe - such a primitive instrument - to another fallen tree. At least clearing away the debris provided him with a way to maintain his strength while the nanobots repaired the damage to his ship. Even though he had always maintained the disciplined exercise regimen of a trained warrior, the physical labor had proven surprisingly challenging. It did not, however, provide much mental stimulation and he found himself wondering about his observer once more.

He had little experience, or interest, in children, and yet, he found himself intrigued. The child was surprisingly stealthy - not as skilled as a Tandroki, of course - but it had taken him longer than it should have done to realize he was under observation. When he had first stumbled out of his ship after the incident, he had thought he had seen signs of another presence. He had been on high alert for the first few days, but then he had relaxed his scrutiny - only to discover a week later that he was being watched.

Once he had realized that he was under observation, his first intention had been to eliminate the intruder, but then he had gotten a good look at his visitor and his concerns had disappeared. The child had no horns and no fangs. Its teeth were small and blunt, and even if it had retracted its claws as he did his, they would be far too tiny to cause any damage. Despite that, he knew that the young of other species could be dangerous. His second thought had been to trap the child and examine it in more detail.

He had gone as far as starting to create a pit trap in the woods – a laborious, manual process he did not remotely enjoy – when the child had done something completely unexpected. Arriving at the site while Nicholsarian was in the woods, the child had darted into the clearing and placed two objects on a slab of tree trunk he had been using as an unsatisfactory table. Intrigued, he went to investigate as soon as the child left. A piece of fabric enclosed two round brown objects with an oddly enticing aroma, while a small bottle held an unfamiliar white liquid.

He stared at them for a long, thoughtful moment. Was this some crude attempt to poison him? Surely whoever sent the child did not expect him to be so easily trapped? The very idea insulted him. Scooping up the unwelcome objects, he quickly disposed of them. His first reaction was to return the gesture with the much more subtle poisons he had at his disposal, but in the end, he discarded the idea. He had to make allowances for this primitive culture. No doubt they had never seen a true warrior before and were intimidated by his obvious prowess.

He proceeded to dismiss the matter, but a few days later, the child repeated the offering. Really, this was most annoying. Had he not already shown that he was too clever for their efforts? After he discarded the second attempt, he discovered a few crumbs from the brown objects clinging to his fingers. They really did smell most enticing, and he decided to perform an analysis. Perhaps even here under these primitive conditions, he could discover an additional weapon to add to his arsenal.

The analyzer hummed and whirred, then spat out the results. He stared at them in shock – the ingredients were nothing more than harmless materials frequently used in producing food. Why would the child have brought him food? Did it think him frail or unhealthy? Had this journey and the disturbance in his normal routine affected his physique? He quickly stripped off his red thermal suit and went to examine himself in the mirror. No, his muscles were still toned and strong, his horns gleamed from careful polishing, and his hair was still thick and lustrous.

Frowning, he pulled his clothes back on and went to double check the results of the analyzer. The second scan produced an identical report. A small trace of the substance remained and he cautiously lifted it to his nose. It still smelled just as enticing, and with the recklessness he had so sternly suppressed over the years, he placed it on his tongue. The flavor exploded in his mouth – rich and sweet and delicious, like nothing he had ever tasted before. And he had destroyed the rest of it! By the Horns of Moroz, his suspicion had led to him missing out on more of the delicious treat.

His interest in his observer became decidedly less casual. The next time he detected the presence of the child in the woods, he immediately abandoned his campsite. However, this time he concealed himself amongst the bushes and watched. The child peeked into the clearing to make sure that no one was present, then approached the table. Despite its initial caution, it showed no fear as it placed its offerings on the table. Instead, it lingered, looking curiously around the site.

Not it, he decided, *she*. Even in miniature, the child's features were clearly feminine - big blue eyes set in a pale, defenseless face. The dark curls tumbling down from under a crude knitted hat made his fingers twitch with the urge to restore order and groom her properly. She approached the line of reactor panels he had disassembled for cleaning, and he almost revealed himself. The panels were fragile – one false touch could render them worthless. And... they could damage the child in return.

Before he could intervene, she moved away, and a few seconds later disappeared back into the woods. He waited

cautiously to make sure that she had indeed left and was not observing from her favorite hiding place. As soon as he was sure she had departed, he went to investigate the day's offering.

To his disappointment, the objects in the cloth were golden this time, rather than brown. But when he lifted them to his nose, the smell was equally delightful. He should perform another analysis, but for the first time in a very long time, he let his impulses overrule his caution and simply took a bite. He groaned in appreciation as the object crumbled deliciously in his mouth.

After a childhood of infrequent, scavenged meals, the plain but plentiful rations served at his training school had been a welcome change. Unlike the other cadets, he had never objected to the meals. Even after he graduated and his rank rapidly increased, he continued to favor a simple, basic approach to nutrition. But this – this was a revelation. Food not intended as fuel but simply as delight.

The sweetness still thick in his mouth, he turned to the bottle of white liquid. Could this be where the poison was hidden? Was the trap more subtle than he had anticipated? Was someone trying to lure him with the feast, and then take him unawares? But he remembered the child's innocent face, and with the same reckless abandon, took a drink. Not as sweet as the golden objects, but cool and smooth and a perfect complement. He drank thirstily, and for the first time since he had crashed on this godsforsaken planet, he smiled.

It wasn't until he had consumed the offering that his doubts resurfaced. Was it possible that the seemingly defenseless creature had been sent to spy on him and report back to the primitive beings who inhabited this planet? After considering the matter, he decided to send a drone to spy on the child. His plan had been successful. The child had immediately adopted the drone, disguised as a small, furry creature native to this planet, and always kept it at her side. This had allowed him to learn more about her primitive society. They were, of course, far inferior to his own people, the Tandroki, but he grudgingly

admitted that they had shown some ingenuity in adapting to the primitive conditions on K.R.S. Three.

And then there was Jenna...

Jenna was the child's biological parent – a small, curvy female with hair as dark as the moonless nights of Tandrok and eyes as blue as the uncontrolled skies of this planet. The first time he had seen her, his body had reacted in a most inappropriate way for a Tandroki male of his age and stature. The rush of desire had reminded him uneasily of his long-ago childhood. He had been an orphan, abandoned on the streets of Veleki without any recollection of his parents. He had used every ounce of his strength and intelligence to remove himself from those slums, eventually scheming his way into a training school for the Tandroki military where he ruthlessly proceeded to eliminate every trace of his ignoble background.

His efforts had been successful, but every time he encountered his chief rival, Krampasarian D'Marchandar, a privileged child of wealth and lineage, he had been conscious of his deficiencies. That sense of inferiority had continued to follow him as they both pursued a career in the Tandroki military. When they were picked as the two top candidates for the position of ambassador, he had been determined to come out on top. He had arranged for a small... accident to occur on Krampasarian's ship. The damage would not be fatal, but it would be sufficient to make sure that Krampasarian could not participate in the preliminary rounds of interviews and social mingling.

He had been triumphant when his plans succeeded and he had successfully wooed the appropriate government and military officials and received the ambassadorship. But as the months wore on and Krampasarian did not reappear, a conscience he would have sworn he did not possess started to nag at him. Eventually it had grown strong enough to force him to leave the social season on Perchten and go in search of his rival.

That search had led him to K.R.S. Three, only to find his own ship in distress and forced to land on this primitive planet. As his ship hurtled through the atmosphere, he had caught a brief signal that might have come from Krampasarian's ship, but he

had been too focused on making sure that he – and his ship – survived the landing to concentrate on it. Once the nanobots currently repairing the damage to his ship reached the monitoring system, he hoped he would be able to recover the signal.

Unfortunately the repairs were a long and laborious process. He began to look forward to his daily visitor – only as a break in his routine, he assured himself. His interest in the child's mother was not so easily dismissed. He wanted her with an unexpected intensity. With the same intensity he had felt as a child, fighting for scraps, and looking up to see a soldier in a crisp navy uniform strolling across the market square and buying any food he fancied. Or the first time he had seen a ship climbing into the sky as a young cadet. He wanted her the same way he had wanted them. But he had learned to hide those primitive, possessive instincts behind the veils of civilized Tandroki behavior.

He would not allow her - or anyone - to threaten what it had taken him so long to achieve. Discipline and self-restraint ruled his life, and with that in mind, he continued his work. He refused to leave the clearing until long after the child had disappeared from her hiding place. There would be no treats today, nothing to distract him.

*It is for the best*, he assured himself as he swung his axe again.

## CHAPTER 2



“*I* think Santa likes the cookies,” Lottie said cheerfully as she rushed in from outside. Her daughter’s cheeks were flushed from the cold, but she was smiling happily. Jenna tried to hide her relief as she hugged her. It had been a very difficult year. Her mother – Lottie’s grandmother – had died the previous spring. They had both felt the loss, but Jenna could bury her sorrow in the constant struggle to support the two of them. Lottie didn’t have the same option. In spite of everything that Jenna had tried to do, her daughter had been a pale shadow of her former self until about a month ago. For the first time, Lottie’s former curiosity had reappeared, questioning Jenna endlessly about the legend of Santa.

Many generations had passed since their ancestors had crashed on this planet, and an odd mixture of legend and history had evolved over the years. The original settlers had separated into different colonies and in some of the smaller groups, they no longer even remembered their origins. But Jenna lived in Bayport, one of a series of coastal villages formed by a larger colony, and they knew that they had come from a planet called Earth to settle amongst the stars. Despite that, after all these years, she suspected that most of the townspeople thought of Earth as simply another legend. Santa – the mythical red robed hero who distributed presents on the Longest Night of the year – was another such legend.

Whether it too held some kernel of truth, she didn’t know, but if hearing the tale brought a smile to her daughter’s face, she was happy to accommodate her. Since then her daughter had

often gone off to play with her imaginary Santa. Last year it had been fairies, Jenna remembered fondly.

“He was busy today so we ate them. But Nutty is hungry,” Lottie added as she picked up her pet and gave Jenna a hopeful look.

The squirrel her daughter had adopted - or who had adopted her daughter - had also contributed to the rise in her daughter’s spirits. He was not really a squirrel, of course, but the settlers had chosen familiar Earth names for the animals on their new planet - often based on very little resemblance to their namesakes. The so-called squirrels lived in the trees, gathered nuts, and were covered with fur. However, based on an old textbook Jenna had found in the town library, their silky white fur and huge lavender eyes, not to mention the small antlers between their oversized ears, were quite unlike the original.

“Does that mean you’re hungry too?”

At Lottie’s eager nod, Jenna laughed.

“Then go and wash up while I get your supper. And don’t let Nutty up on the table,” she added as she crossed the stone paved floor of the big kitchen to the waiting stove.

Like much of the original technology the settlers had brought with them, the machine to cut those level, uniform blocks had long ago ceased to work but she still appreciated the smooth surface. Newer houses had to rely on roughly cast bricks or even hard-packed soil. Not for the first time she wondered whether the village’s brick making skills would eventually improve, or if they would gradually slip further back into more primitive ways.

Unfortunately, the latter seemed more likely, she thought grimly as she stirred the thick vegetable soup. The village had been experiencing hard times. Even though she had been as diligent as possible about storing and preserving the produce from the kitchen garden and the small patch of fields she could manage by herself, it was going to be a lean winter.

But for tonight, they had plenty to eat, the kitchen was warm and bright despite the early winter darkness, and her daughter



was smiling. Even if Nutty did end up on the table once again, watching everything with those big, curious eyes, she let herself enjoy the moment.

An enjoyment which lasted until she sent Lottie off to get ready for bed.

“Mama! There’s water in the hallway again!”

“I’ll be right there.”

She sighed as she went to collect the mop and bucket. When her mother had married Jenna’s stepfather Thomas after working as his housekeeper for many years, there had been a number of unkind whispers in the village about her marrying him for his wealth. What most of the villagers didn’t know was that despite the large house and surrounding acreage, Thomas had no other assets. The past few years had been a constant struggle to keep the forest from reclaiming the land and to keep the house from falling down around their ears. Now that both Thomas and her mother were gone and she was on her own, she knew she was losing that battle. She had retreated to the small annex originally designed for the servants, but she had difficulty even keeping up with that much maintenance.

As she went to mop up the water and check for the source of the leak, her previous concerns resurfaced. Not for the first time she wondered if she should sell the property and move into the village. That is, if she could find anyone who could offer even half of what the place was worth. The blight had affected everyone.

But even more than that, it would mean removing Lottie from the only home she’d ever known, she thought, as she walked into Lottie’s bedroom. The mural her mother had so carefully painted still brightened the walls, and the stars the three of them had embroidered hung from the ceiling, carefully arranged to mimic the night sky. *No*, she decided once again. Her daughter was happy here and as long as she could find a way to manage, they would remain.

“Tell me the Santa story again, Mama,” Lottie demanded as Jenna perched on the edge of her bed. “The part where you

give him cookies and milk, and he brings you what you really want.”

“It’s not a bribe, Lottie. It’s just a way to say thank you.”

Nutty lifted his head from where he was curled at Lottie’s side, looking at her with those curious purple eyes.

“What’s a bribe?”

“A kind of payment - to make someone do what you want them to do.”

“But that’s what I want.”

“It doesn’t work like that. Santa brings presents to good little girls and boys because they deserve it, not because they leave him milk and cookies.”

She could almost see the wheels turning in Lottie’s head, but to her surprise, Lottie only nodded.

“Okay. But can I keep taking him cookies?”

Jenna suspected that the cookies actually found their way into Lottie’s mouth, but looking down at her hopeful little face, she didn’t have the heart to refuse.

“All right. But no more than two a day.”

Nutty gave a disappointed chitter, and she laughed. Maybe it was more like one for her daughter and one for him.

As she returned to the kitchen, she remembered Lottie’s insistence on the cookies. When she checked the cookie jar, they were almost gone, and she sighed. That meant another jar of her precious honey not offered for sale. She removed a jar of the thick pink liquid from her basket, frowning at the diminishing contents.

She sold - or more frequently bartered - her honey and the wax candles she created from her hives in order to purchase the things she couldn’t produce herself. Of course, just as Nutty wasn’t really a squirrel, her bees were not really bees. Instead of tiny creatures with yellow and black stripes, her bees were about the size of her fist and covered with creamy fur. But they pollinated the flowers and gathered their nectar and created

hives of a substance very similar to beeswax. They were docile creatures who would gather around her when she approached and hummed contentedly as they went about their business, but many in the village were afraid of them. Yet another reason to continue living at the manor.

The next day tested her determination again. The rain that had started as a gentle sprinkle the previous night had turned into a full on downpour, an icy cold deluge that hovered on the edge of snow but simply turned everything wet and miserable. Two more leaks had appeared, one of them right over the foot of her bed and she had awoken to cold, wet feet. The latest batch of honey had burned when she processed it and as much as she wanted to save it, she was afraid she couldn't eliminate the lingering bitterness. Her normally good-natured daughter threw a small tantrum when Jenna firmly told her that she couldn't go into the woods to play in the rain.

Her own temper started to fray, so she sent Lottie to her room for an early nap while she tried to recover some of the burnt honey. The afternoon passed quickly as she tried various filtering options. It wasn't until she noticed that the light in the kitchen was beginning to dim that she realized that Lottie had not reappeared. Her daughter must have fallen asleep after all. Jenna was tempted to let her sleep, but if she slept too long now, it would be impossible to get her to bed at a reasonable time. After putting the kettle on, she went to wake Lottie.

As soon as she opened the door to the bedroom, she knew something was wrong. A cool breeze brushed across her cheek as her gaze flew to the window – the open window. Her heart pounding uncontrollably against her ribs, she rushed to the open window. Flowers normally grew outside the window, but the bed had been cleared for wintertime and two small footprints were clearly visible in the wet soil. *Oh no.*

The trees on the far side of their land looked dark and menacing in the misty rain, but remembering Lottie's earlier complaints about not being allowed to play outside, Jenna had no doubt that was where her daughter had headed. Racing back through the house, she barely remembered to turn off the stove before grabbing her cloak and Lottie's much smaller

one. Horror filled her a second time as she realized that her daughter was only wearing the thin clothes she'd had on earlier.

The rain was still falling as she headed for the tree line, not as heavily now, but the temperature was dropping rapidly. As she brushed aside a branch, she realized that what looked like water drops were in fact drops of ice. Why had Lottie insisted on coming outside? What was so important that she braved these conditions?

The path was already growing slippery, forcing her to move much more slowly than she would have liked, but despite her growing fear, falling and breaking her leg wouldn't help her daughter. An occasional small footprint reassured her that she was on the right path, and it wasn't until she reached the clearing overlooking the ocean that she really started to panic. This was their favorite spot. She had brought Lottie here many times and they often picnicked here during the summer. Lottie liked to look out across the water while Jenna told her extremely idealized stories of her father and his ship. She had assumed all along that this was Lottie's destination, but the clearing was empty.

Her heart beating so rapidly she felt sick, she scanned the surroundings looking for any sign of her daughter. What if she'd been wrong about where Lottie was heading? If she had to search the woods, she was going to need help. Retracing her steps and then going into the village for help would take at least half an hour and by then it would be dark. An icy gust blew across her wet cloak, and she shivered.

"Lottie!" she called, even as the wind tried to tear the words from her mouth.

The woods on the other side of the clearing led down towards a small cove. Lottie should know better than to go to the beach by herself, but then Jenna had thought she knew better than to sneak out of the house as well. What if she had gone down to the water? The sight of the roiling gray waves terrified her, but the roar of the surf would prevent Lottie from hearing her. She should just have time to make it to the beach before darkness fell. After a frantic debate with herself, she headed in that

direction. If Lottie wasn't there, she would have no choice but to go for help.

The rain started to pick up again, but now it included little stinging drops of ice that gathered in her hair as well as on the branches of the trees. The fallen leaves began to crunch beneath her feet as ice coated them. When she finally emerged on the beach, it too was empty, only the waves crashing endlessly onto the sand.

"Lottie!" she cried again, even though she could barely hear herself over the pounding of the surf.

She'd wasted too much time – she had to get to the village and get help. Choking back the tears that threatened to blind her, she turned to follow the path back up the hillside and spotted a flash of white. Her heart pounding faster – from hope this time – she took a few steps in that direction. *Yes!* Nutty was peering at her from beneath a bush. The two were normally inseparable. Where was Lottie?

"Here, Nutty," she called softly.

The little animal sat back on its hind legs and tilted his head, regarding her from those oddly intelligent purple eyes.

"Where's Lottie?" she asked, too desperate to care that she was asking an animal for help.

Nutty crouched back down on all fours, skipped a few steps into the woods, and then turned to look back at her. She started towards him, and as soon as she started moving, Nutty scampered a little further along... a trail?

She knew that it was easy to get turned around the woods, especially in the dim light. What looked like a trail might be nothing more than a game path, but she followed Nutty anyway, praying with all her might that the animal was going to lead her to her daughter.

It was growing darker by the minute, and Nutty's white fur began to mingle with the snow that was gradually replacing the icy sleet. But whenever she was afraid she had lost sight of the little animal, he always reappeared and waited for her. Despite the increasing cold and the wet heavy misery of her

cloak, hope burned in her veins. She was so intent on keeping her eyes on Nutty, that it took her a moment to realize that she had entered another clearing. This one was much larger, with a long line of fallen trees along one side. It almost looked as if something large had slammed into them, and she followed the path of the destruction across the clearing to a large metal object. Even in the encroaching darkness, she could see metal gleaming, but it took her startled mind several moments to process the fact that she was looking at a spaceship.

Nutty chattered excitedly from next to her feet, and a whole new feeling of dread swept across her. Why had he brought her here? And where was Lottie? She wanted to call her daughter's name again, but there was something so silent and ominous about the ship she kept quiet instead. If her daughter was on board, she was going to get her back, but it might be better not to raise the alarm.

After a quick search for a sturdy branch to use as a makeshift weapon, she began creeping quietly across the clearing. Nutty accompanied her, moving just as quietly now. They were halfway there when a panel in the side of the ship opened and light shone out into the clearing. Not candlelight, but the clear steady glow of the artificial lighting that was increasingly rare. It glistened on the still falling sleet mingling with the snowflakes, almost obscuring the figure striding down the ramp towards her.

A massive figure with horns topping his head...

*Alien!*

Terror turned Jenna's knees to water as she put together the strange figure and the spaceship, but she refused to run. What if Lottie was on that ship? She took a firmer grip on her branch and tried to hide her fear as he approached, covering the distance between them in a few quick powerful steps. Even without the horns he towered over her.

"It is about time you arrived," he said impatiently. "Your daughter is not well and I do not know how to fix her."

She hadn't expected to understand him, let alone that he would have a voice as deep and smooth as velvet, but what he'd said

was far more important.

“What’s wrong with her?”

Without waiting for an answer, she headed for the landing ramp.

“I just told you that I do not know. But she is asking for you.”

“For me?”

“You are her biological parent, are you not?”

By this time they were through the door. She had another moment of panic as the panel closed behind them, but the alien was already headed down a brightly lit white corridor and she was too concerned about Lottie to hesitate. He paused in front of a door, pressed a button and another panel slid aside.

She had a brief impression of a minimal bedroom, but she was more concerned about the small dark-haired figure in the middle of a huge bed. Lottie.

With a sob of thankfulness, she rushed to her daughter’s side.

## CHAPTER 3



Nicholsarian was not sure exactly what emotion he was feeling as he watched Jenna bend over her daughter, but he did not like it.

When the child had appeared earlier that afternoon, he had not at first realized that anything was amiss. He had simply waited impatiently for his tribute. But then he started to notice the difference in her behavior. She had not looked around, checking to make sure that he was not present. Instead, she had headed directly for the table, her steps unusually slow and hesitant. And once she had deposited her offering, she did not immediately turn and leave. She lingered there for several moments, then when she finally turned, her small body had simply collapsed to the ground.

Even then, he had hesitated, unsure if this was some new trick to catch him unawares. He remembered that the Totmas race would play a similar game, pretending to be injured in order to lure their unsuspecting prey closer to them. But the child simply remained in a huddled heap on the ground while his drone hopped around her in what appeared to be increasing agitation.

Waving aside the caution bred into him by experience, he gave into his instincts and hurried to her side. Her small face was alarmingly pale, and when he cautiously touched her shoulder, he was horrified to find her clothing completely drenched. Did this primitive culture not even have clothing to shield them properly from the elements? Not only was she wet, she felt cold to the touch and without pausing to consider the matter



further, he gathered her into his arms. She made a tiny sound, and seemed to nestle closer. A sensation he could not identify washed over him, and he instinctively closed his arms protectively around the small figure. He was halfway to his ship before he remembered that it was inadvisable to reveal advanced technology to lower beings, but he dismissed the idea impatiently. She was only a child.

He removed her wet clothing, then placed her beneath his bed coverings, and increased the temperature in his room. Although he was unsure how to deal with her when she awakened, he waited impatiently for her eyes to open. Nothing happened. He tried demanding that she awaken, but her eyes remained firmly closed. The pallor on her cheeks was replaced by a hectic flush as her small body trembled. At that point, he was seized by a completely unexpected panic. He had no idea how to help her.

Where was the child's parent? He briefly considered going to retrieve her, especially when the child started to call for her, but he found himself unwilling to leave the child alone. It wasn't until his drone, who had been curled up next to her, raised his head that he realized he might have an alternate way of summoning her. Unfortunately, it took longer than he had hoped for the drone to intercept Jenna and to lead her back to the ship. Even to his inexperienced eye, the child seemed to be growing worse.

He was desperate enough that when Jenna finally entered the clearing, he didn't even consider leaving her outside. Now he watched anxiously as she placed a hand on her daughter's head. The child's restless movements slowed, but she didn't open her eyes.

"Well?" he demanded. "Can you fix her?"

"Yes," she said immediately, but he could hear the thread of uncertainty in her voice. "The first thing is to get her fever down. You obviously have advanced technology – I don't suppose that includes medicine which is compatible with human anatomy?"

He fleetingly noticed that she seemed unfazed by the concept of advanced technology, but he pushed it aside to consider at a later point.

“There is a medical facility on the ship, but it was damaged in the crash. I did not prioritize the repair because I was not injured.”

He had been rendered unconscious for some unknown period of time, but once he regained consciousness, the only lingering effect had been a massive headache and repairing the unit had not been a priority. When he realized that the child was ill, he had ordered the nanobots to begin repairs immediately.

“I have directed repairs to the unit now, but it will take some time,” he added stiffly.

“And I’m not leaving her long enough to go to the village for help. We’ll start with the basics.”

She stripped back the bed coverings until only a light blanket remained, and he frowned at her.

“The child was cold.”

“Her name is Lottie, not ‘the child,’” she snapped, then sighed. “I’m sorry. I know you were trying to help. I’m Jenna, by the way.”

“I am Nicholsarian.” His title didn’t seem relevant under the circumstances.

She nodded absently, still focused on the child. “I want to get her temperature down. Do you have a cloth? And some cool water?”

*Of course.* Did she think his ship was as primitive as her own dwelling? But he was concerned enough about the child - about Lottie - not to remonstrate with her. Instead he silently fetched the items she requested.

The night passed with agonizing slowness. Jenna bathed Lottie with the cool water, and managed to get her to take small sips of liquid, but she was still clearly unwell. He wanted to demand that Jenna cure her immediately, but he could see the strain on her face, even though her voice was always calm and

reassuring as she spoke to her child. Instead, he remained silent and brought her whatever she requested.

Just before dawn, he went to check on the status of the medical unit. When he returned, tears were streaming down Jenna's cheeks. A corresponding pain pierced his heart, and he wanted to roar his anger at the gods. But then she gave him a shaky smile, and he saw that Lottie was no longer tossing restlessly. She appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

"The fever broke. I think she'll be all right now."

His knees felt alarmingly weak, and he sat down abruptly on the bed next to her.

"Thank the gods."

"Thank you for helping."

She put her hand on his arm, and the touch seared through him like an electric shock.

Up until this point he had been too concerned about Lottie to spare any thought for his overwhelming and inappropriate desire for Jenna. At her touch, it all came rushing back. His body responded in a manner completely inappropriate for a warrior of his control. The combination of relief and embarrassment made him stiffen, and he rose to his feet.

"You should not have let her leave your residence while she was so inappropriately dressed."

The smile she had been giving him disappeared and anger flashed across her face.

"And you should not have been encouraging her to bring you cookies."

"I did not encourage her."

And yet, he had not discouraged her either. The knowledge that he might have contributed to Lottie's illness horrified him, and made him even angrier. At the same time, he had the strangest urge to pull Jenna into his arms and kiss away her anger.

He wanted to demand that both females remove their disturbing presence from his ship, but even in his anger, he would not take any chances with the child's health. He paced across the room and back, trying to recover his usual calm demeanor, then finally remembered what he had meant to tell her when he returned.

"The medical unit is almost repaired," he said stiffly, holding out the scanner. "I brought the remote unit in order to feed the child's information to it."

Her anger seemed to disappear, and she bit her lip as she turned to look at the small figure in his bed.

"I'm sure the fever has broken, but it would be good to know if anything else is wrong. Does your unit understand human anatomy?"

"There are obviously some commonalities between our species despite your more..." He managed to bite back the word *primitive* before it escaped. "Despite our differences. I thought perhaps I could scan you also and provide the unit with information about a healthy person as well."

She had started to frown at his hesitation, then now she was nodding. "That's a good idea. Will it understand the difference between an adult and a child?"

"Of course."

He returned to the bed and began running the scanner slowly over Lottie's body. The machine was not responding as rapidly as normal, but he took his time and made sure that it registered each part before moving onto the next.

"I would like to take a blood sample as well," he added as he finished the scan.

"Wait a minute. You didn't say anything about that. I don't want you to hurt her."

"Of course I will not hurt her." The thought appalled him.

"How do you know?" She crossed her arms and glared at him. "You already said that you weren't familiar with human anatomy."

“Would you prefer to go first?”

She hesitated, then looked down at Lottie, and sighed.

“I suppose that makes sense. Here.”

She extended her arm towards him, and he frowned.

“What are you doing?”

“Isn’t that where you take the sample?”

“No.”

Deciding it would be easier to show her than to explain it, he stepped up next to her and put his hand on her shoulder. Her bones felt impossibly fragile beneath his hand, and his thumb rested on the warm, silky skin between her neck and the collar of her garment. Once again that shockwave of excitement raced through his body, enhanced by her deliciously sweet fragrance. His cock responded, his shaft hardening as it had not done since he was an uncontrolled adolescent.

Her eyes widened as she looked up at him, and her lips parted. He had the oddest desire to cover them with his own.

“Remain still,” he ordered, his voice a low growl in the quiet room.

“Yes.”

A small hiss of air and he had the sample, but he didn’t move away.

“It is done.”

“I didn’t even feel it.”

“I told you that you would not.”

A soft huff of laughter escaped. “I frequently find that people are not entirely truthful.”

“I would not lie to you, Jenna.” Although, neither had he told her the entire truth.

“Are you going to get a sample from Lottie as well?”

“Yes.” And yet, he still did not want to release Jenna. He wanted to drag the shoulder of her shirt aside to feel more of

that deliciously soft skin. Perhaps even push it down far enough that he could see the lush curves beneath her garment. That thought snapped him back to reality. The Tandroki did not indulge in that type of relationship, at least not ones in the class to which he had raised himself. He took a hasty step back, forcing his fingers not to linger.

Hoping that he had retained enough of his training not to reveal his discomfort, he bent down over the child and took the sample.

“I will have this analyzed.”

Then he fled the room with a haste that was due entirely to his desire to help the child, and most assuredly not because of his desire for this human female.

## CHAPTER 4



Jenna stared after Nicholsarian as he left the room, moving with what seemed to be his characteristic grace despite the speed of his departure. Had he detected the fact that for the first time since Lottie was born she had actually felt a flicker of arousal? When he had touched her neck, she had wanted to lean into that firm grip.

*Don't be ridiculous*, she told herself as she returned to the bed. If she had felt anything like that, it was no doubt due to a combination of exhaustion and relief. And perhaps a little because he was big and strong and he had remained at her side, unlike Lottie's father.

She ignored the fact that her traitorous nipples were still hard and throbbing beneath her blouse.

"Mama?"

The soft whisper distracted her from her wayward thoughts.

"Yes, sweetheart. I'm here."

"Where's here?"

Lottie looked around, her eyelids still heavy, and Jenna followed her gaze. She had been too focused on Lottie's illness to pay much attention to her surroundings before.

Everything was very... white. And stark. The big bed looked as though it had folded down from the wall, and other than the size and the softness of the bed coverings, there was nothing remarkable about it. The rest of the room was the same – a

large but utilitarian desk, a heavy, square armchair, and one shelf which held three objects.

“This is Nicholsarian’s room,” she explained.

Her daughter must have seen the spaceship if she had been coming here during the daylight, but Jenna decided that additional explanations could wait.

“Who?”

Lottie still seemed confused, but then Nicholsarian reentered the room and her small face lit up with happiness.

“Santa!”

His pale, handsome face softened and she could have sworn that he looked relieved.

“Lottie,” he said gravely.

“Santa?” Lottie’s obsession with the story suddenly fell into place. “Why do you think he’s Santa, sweetheart?”

“He has white hair and a beard.”

That was true enough, although the thick, silky locks pulled back into a neat braid and the carefully trimmed goatee were not the image she remembered from childhood stories.

“And he’s wearing a red suit,” Lottie continued triumphantly. “Although he’s not very fat.”

No, he certainly was not. The form fitting red uniform clung to every inch of a lean, muscular body.

He frowned at Lottie. “Were the cookies to make me fatter?”

“No, they were a br –” Lottie shot a quick glance at her. “To say thank you for my present.”

“But I have not given you anything.”

“It’s not the Longest Night yet.”

Jenna couldn’t stand the look of hopeful expectation on her daughter’s face.

“Sweetheart, he isn’t Santa. His name is Nicholsarian.”



Lottie only smiled triumphantly. “That’s Santa’s other name - Nicholas.”

She gave him a somewhat helpless look.

“You may call me Santa,” he said immediately. “Or Nicholas. I do not mind.”

She looked from Lottie’s beaming smile to his calm face and gave up the fight. There was a much more important subject to discuss.

“You shouldn’t have left without letting me know, Lottie. I was very scared when I couldn’t find you.”

Her voice trembled, and Lottie’s eyes filled with tears.

“I’m sorry. But it was important.”

Why was it so important? Was Lottie’s life so lacking that she had turned to a mythological figure to give her what she wanted? She wanted to demand more answers, but her daughter was still weak and she was exhausted.

“We’ll talk about it more later. When you’re all the way better.” Turning to Nicholas, she forced a smile. “Thank you for your help, but it would be better to get Lottie home.”

“I do not think that will be possible.”

Her heart skipped a beat. Did he plan on keeping them here? But before she could formulate a protest, he pressed another button and a panel slid aside to reveal a window looking out into the clearing. The very snowy clearing. The snow must have kept falling throughout the night, and now everything was covered in a thick layer of white even as it continued to fall. The thought of trudging through the snow, carrying Lottie, horrified her.

“I believe it would be best to wait until the child is completely recovered.” Nicholas held up a small vial. “This will assist.”

“What is that?”

“A remedy produced by my medical unit.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea –”

He sighed and held it out to her. “Do you want to try it as well? It may make you sleepy, but I assure you it has no other side effects.”

It wasn't that she didn't trust him – exactly – but could she trust his strange technology? He closed the few steps between them, big and warm and as oddly comforting as he had been all night.

“It will prevent a relapse,” he said softly.

*Damn.* How could she take the chance of Lottie getting sick again? She reached for the vial, and took a small sip, then shuddered. The medicine tasted horrible, but she didn't feel any immediate side effects other than a growing lethargy.

“I suppose,” she agreed reluctantly. “Lottie, this is medicine. It doesn't taste very good but I need you to drink it all down. Can you do that for me?”

Lottie's lip trembled. “Can I get a cookie afterward?”

“I'm sorry, sweetheart, but –”

“One moment,” Nicholas interjected, and disappeared out of the room.

He returned almost immediately carrying a small scrap of cloth that she recognized as one of her disappearing hoard of napkins.

“These are from your last offering. They are somewhat damp, but I do not believe the taste has been affected.”

If anything, Lottie looked even more distressed.

“But the cookies are for you.”

“And you have given them to me. You carried out the spirit of our agreement.” When Lottie still looked uncertain, he added gently. “I will eat one and I will give the other one to you. No bargaining is required.”

His words struck her as odd, but Lottie nodded. She took the vial from Jenna and swallowed it down, her small face wrinkling in disgust. Nicholas immediately handed her the rather soggy cookie and she took it eagerly. By the time only

crumbs remained, her eyelids were drooping and she sagged back on the pillow.

“Tell me a –” Her daughter gave a huge yawn, and was asleep before she finished her sentence.

“You’re sure that’s supposed to happen?” Jenna asked.

He nodded. “Sleep will allow her body to rest and the medicine to work properly. It will work the same way on you.”

“But I’m not sick.”

“Then you will simply sleep and awaken refreshed.”

His words seemed to come from further and further away as waves of exhaustion rolled over her. She was vaguely aware that he was lifting her into the bed beside Lottie, and she tried to protest.

“Sleep, Jenna,” he ordered. “I will watch over both of you.”

WHEN SHE AWOKE, NICHOLAS WAS SITTING IN THE BIG SQUARE chair by the window, but his eyes were on her. He rose immediately and after a brief hesitation, sat down next to her.

“How do you feel?”

“I feel wonderful.” It was true. She felt as relaxed and refreshed as if she had slept for months, even though she could still see the snow falling outside the windows. Even the small burn on her finger from rescuing the honey had disappeared.

When she looked over at Lottie, her daughter was still sound asleep but her face looked pink and healthy.

“How long will she sleep?”

“I am not sure exactly. Until the medicine has completed its work.”

She shook her head as she started to sit up. He quickly helped her into a sitting position, his hands big and warm on her waist for a brief moment. She almost wanted to keep them there, but instead, she smiled ruefully.

“We’ve lost so many things since the original colony ship crashed, but I’m not sure that even then our medicine was that

advanced.”

“Crashed?”

“That’s what I was told, but it was many generations ago.” She remembered the destruction outside in the clearing. “Is that what happened to you also? Your ship crashed here?”

“I did not crash. There was a minor miscalculation during the landing.”

He had assumed that annoying arrogance again, but this time she thought she could see a hint of doubt in those dark eyes. Was it so important to him that he not make a mistake?

“Perhaps I should be glad you miscalculated. But then again if you hadn’t been in the woods, neither would Lottie.”

“I did not encourage her,” he said stiffly, but that shadow of vulnerability increased.

“I believe you.” She patted his hand, even if she took another look at her sleeping daughter. “I just wish I knew why this is so important to her.”

“Have you asked her? Just because she is a child does not mean that her needs are not important.”

“Of course her needs are important. I just thought she was playing an imaginary game until now. Didn’t you have an imaginary friend when you were little?”

“No.” The word came out in a harsh growl. “I was too busy trying to survive.”

His face had locked up again, but he couldn’t hide the pain in his words. What had happened to him, she wondered, trying to imagine him as a vulnerable child. Driven by an unexpected rush of compassion, she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. His entire body went rigid and she caught a glimpse of his hand clenching into a fist. Before she could ask if she had offended him, a small voice piped up.

“Mama, why are you kissing Santa?”

## CHAPTER 5



Nicholsarian fled his bedroom, his body shaking. He could feel blood dripping from his hand where he had dug his claws into his palms in an attempt to retain control. When Jenna had touched him, willingly, he had wanted to roar with triumph. Even more than that, he had wanted to forget his control, his training, and every ounce of discipline drilled in him since his first days of school, and take her in his arms.

Tandroki society had long ago renounced the dangerous pleasures of the flesh. In order to prevent the destruction of their society, they had learned to practice control and discipline. It had never troubled him before. After the chaos and uncertainty of the streets in his early years, he had welcomed those precepts. But perhaps that was why he had never felt quite at home amongst the other Tandroki warriors. This fierce, overwhelming need must have been hidden within him all the time.

He strode to the entrance of his ship and lowered the ramp, welcoming the rush of freezing cold. Despite the conditions, he was tempted to pick up his axe and get to work – to sublimate his desires and physical exhaustion. But Moroz had taught that a true Tandroki warrior did not require distraction. He overcame his impulses for the good of his society.

*A society that was a long way from this planet*, a traitorous voice reminded him. No, location was unimportant. And he had a responsibility to the two females in his quarters. He hoped that his hasty departure had not alarmed them.

As he made his way back down along the corridor, he noticed the drops of blood and decided to return to the medical unit and heal the wound first. Females should not be exposed to the sight of blood.

By the time he tidied his clothing and returned to his room, he was sure that he once again looked like a worthy Tandroki warrior. But then he opened the door. Two identical pairs of blue eyes looked over at him, and both females smiled at him. They looked at home in his rooms, and he couldn't prevent the impossible desire to keep them there.

"I'm hungry," Lottie said cheerfully. "Do you have any food?"

Jenna gave him an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. I know you may be low on supplies since your... miscalculation."

"No, of course not. I should have realized that you would both be hungry."

The knowledge of his failure covered him with shame. How could he even think of keeping them when he was already failing in his efforts to take care of them?

"I will return."

It wasn't until he was on his way back to the cabin that he realized he had automatically produced his usual basic rations. They would provide nutrition, but their taste was not appealing. He might be able to program more interesting variations into the replicator, but it would take time.

"I'm afraid this is not what you are used to," he announced as he returned to the room.

"I'm sure we'll be fine. We're not fussy, are we, Lottie?"

He saw Jenna nudge Lottie as she spoke and the little girl nodded dutifully, if a little doubtfully. He started to approach the bed, then hesitated.

"Are you well enough to sit at a table?"

"Sure." Jenna looked around and frowned. "Do you have a dining room?"

“No.” He had deliberately chosen a ship that did not allow space for entertaining. He liked having his personal space. “But I am not completely uncivilized.”

He went to the control panel and selected dining. A table slid out from beneath the window with two benches on either side. He would have preferred a single bench, but the unit came equipped with two and for once, he saw the benefit.

“That’s handy,” Jenna murmured as she stood and stretched.

The movement caused her clothing to outline the curves of her body. He quickly looked away just as Lottie raised her arms to him.

“Carry me, Santa.”

He obeyed immediately, even though Jenna started to object. Lottie gave him a warm smile and snuggled closer. She felt as right in his arms as she had done before, but even better now that she was no longer sick. He carried her over to the bench, then sat down with her still on his lap. Jenna sighed as she followed them over.

“I thought you were feeling better, Lottie?”

“I am. Santa makes me feel better.”

The little girl smiled up at him again, and he had another one of those impossible impulses – the impulse to assure her that he would always make her feel better.

“You still need to eat your breakfast – or lunch?” Jenna looked out at the falling snow and laughed. “I have no idea of the time.”

“It is just past midday. This is the midday meal.”

Both of them gave the tray of food an uncertain look.

“The cups contain a heated nutrient broth. The wafers provide protein, and the cubes provide supplemental vitamins.”

Jenna picked up a cup and sniffed it cautiously, then took a sip. She smiled at him.

“This tastes much better than it looks. It’s rather like a very mild vegetable broth. Try it, Lottie.”

He assisted the little girl with her mug, worried that she would burn herself, but after the first suspicious sip, she drank readily enough. Neither of the females ate more than a small portion of the protein wafers, but they both seemed to enjoy the supplement cubes.

“I will try and program a more appealing repast for the evening meal,” he assured them.

“Unless the snow stops before them,” Jenna said firmly, and he had to force himself not to object.

“If I understand the weather patterns correctly, it will continue into the next day.”

“I see.”

Despite her previous words, she did not seem overly upset, and she smiled at him.

“In that case, maybe I should help you with dinner. That is, how do you program it?”

“It takes verbal commands, but it has a limited range.”

“Can it make cookies?” Lottie asked.

“I’m afraid not, little one.”

She started to frown, then yawned instead.

“I believe you require additional rest,” he said firmly.

“But I’m not sleepy.”

A second yawn followed, and he and Jenna both laughed. He carried Lottie back over to the bed and tucked her firmly under the covers.

“Tell the Santa story, Mama.”

“Maybe Nicholas doesn’t want to hear it.”

“On the contrary. I enjoy – would enjoy – hearing it.”

He had heard it before, of course, through the drone’s ears, but he was suddenly reluctant to reveal that he had been listening.

A tiny frown wrinkled Jenna’s brow, but then she turned back to Lottie and began the tale. It was different, he realized,



listening to her talk when she was so close to him, when he could catch every nuance of her words and every shadow of emotion on her expressive face.

No one had ever told him stories, and a pang of longing made his chest ache again.

JENNA LET HER VOICE TRAIL OFF AS LOTTIE FELL ASLEEP. SHE looked up to find Nicholas watching her from the other side of the bed, that odd vulnerability back on his face.

“Is something wrong?” she asked softly.

“No.” He spoke abruptly, but he couldn’t entirely mask his expression. He rose to his feet, then hesitated. “I would like to hear more about you, and your world. If you wish to share.”

The change from demand to request in his final words made her nod. “If you’d like, although I don’t think I’m very interesting.”

“On the contrary. You’re the most fascinating creature I have ever met.”

Their eyes met, and the temperature in the room suddenly seemed to increase. She forced herself to look away.

“Can we talk here? I don’t want to leave Lottie.”

“Of course.” He hesitated, then returned to their luncheon table. More buttons were pushed, and then the table disappeared, replaced by a single long bench beneath the window. “Would you be comfortable here?”

She nodded a little reluctantly. His bed was extremely comfortable, but they would be less likely to wake Lottie if they were on the far side of the room. She followed him over to the bench, then realized to her delight that not only was it softer than it appeared, but no chill penetrated the window despite the snow falling outside.

“This is perfect. I used to love the window seat in my old bedroom, but it was far too cold in the winter time.”

“Your old bedroom?”

She tried to shrug casually, sure that her cheeks were burning. “I moved to a room behind the kitchen that is smaller and easier to keep warm.”

“I see. Warmth is important.”

He sounded sincere, and she shot him a curious glance.

“Is it cold on your planet?”

“The climate has been controlled for many years, but that control is more effective in some areas than others. The area where I... grew up always seemed to be too hot or too cold.”

The mask was back, but she found herself wondering once again what type of childhood he had had. They sat in silence for a moment, and then he spoke abruptly.

“Where is the child’s father?”

“He was a captain too – of a sailing ship. Jimmy was a trader - he sailed up and down the coast between the various villages. He swept me off my feet the first time I met him. So I married him, even though my mother said I was too young.”

“Were you?”

“Probably. But at first it was fine. I liked traveling with him and he liked showing off his pretty young wife. But then two things happened. I got pregnant, and even worse, I got seasick.” She smiled ruefully. “The worst possible weakness to a sailor. So he brought me back here to stay with my mother. He promised that he was saving money for a house of our own, but he visited less and less frequently. Apparently, a pretty young wife was one thing, a pregnant wife was nowhere near as appealing.”

“But he was the father. You were ripe with his child.”

Nicholas looked genuinely appalled, but it hadn’t seemed to matter much to Jimmy.

“He did promise to be back in time for the birth, but he didn’t make it. Instead, he showed up a month later, took one look at me and Lottie, and was gone again the next day.”

“What a despicable male. He does not deserve to be called a father.”

“To be fair, we weren’t at our best. She was colicky and cried all the time and I was exhausted.”

His posture was absolutely rigid. “All the more reason why he should have remained to assist you.”

“He certainly didn’t see it that way. I don’t know - I like to think perhaps he might have changed his mind, but he never got the chance. There was a storm at sea and his ship was lost.”

“Did you regret that?”

“If you mean did I regret his death, of course I did. A life taken too soon is always a source of regret.” From the expression on his face, he didn’t agree.

“But if you mean did I regret that he was no longer part of our lives...” She shook her head. “It’s hard to continue caring for someone who makes it very obvious that they have no real interest in your welfare. Or more importantly, in their child’s welfare.”

“I am sorry that he did not treat you as you deserve to be treated.”

“I’m sorry that it ended the way it did, but I can’t really regret it – because of him, I have Lottie.”

Rather to her surprise, he let the subject drop and instead began to ask her about cooking. He seemed particularly fascinated by her cookies.

They talked for several hours, and she found herself telling him a lot more than she had originally intended. He told her very little about his circumstances, just enough for her to realize that he must be an important male in his own world. Important, but lonely, she decided, with an unexpected wave of compassion, and she did her best to encourage him to talk about his own life.

## CHAPTER 6



Jenna was still trying to coax more of his history out of Nicholas when Lottie woke full of energy and came bouncing over to join them. Nutty seemed equally energetic and, after some hesitation, Nicholas took down one of the objects on his shelf. It turned out to be an automated ball that rolled around on its own, small lights twinkling on the surface. Both Lottie and Nutty happily chased it around the room.

“Where did that come from?”

He had been smiling as he watched the two play, but his face closed down again at her question.

“I have had it since I was quite young.”

She didn't pursue the matter. After Lottie and her pet finally collapsed in a laughing heap, all of them trooped off to the small galley. As Nicholas had said, the replicator was somewhat limited as far as what it could produce, but after a few disastrous efforts, she managed to create a relatively tasty soup, along with something that could pass for bread.

Nicholas ate enthusiastically, and once again she found herself wondering about his life. With all this technology at his service, why did he restrict himself so severely?

After dinner, Lottie demanded another story. Determined to distract her from her obsession with Santa, Jenna told her fanciful tale about a mysterious captain with ship named *Nautilus* that ailed beneath the sea instead of on the surface.

Then Nicholas went to get another dose of medicine, but Lottie put up more of a fight this time.

“Is this being a good girl?” Jenna asked in exasperation when her daughter stubbornly shook her head.

A startled look crossed Lottie’s face, then she bit her lip as she looked up at Nicholas.

“I’m sorry. I really am a good girl.”

“I know you are, little one,” he said gently as he handed her the small vial.

She drank it down obediently, then looked shocked. “It doesn’t taste as bad this time.”

Was that a hint of pink on his alabaster cheeks?

“I tried to improve the taste.”

Lottie gave him a blinding smile, and held up her arms. “Kiss,” she demanded.

He gave Jenna an uncertain look, but when she nodded, he bent down and kissed her daughter’s forehead. Lottie reached for her next, and her heart swelled with happiness of the strength in her daughter’s arms as she hugged her.

“Good night, sweetheart.”

Nicholas dimmed the lights and Lottie fell asleep almost immediately, Nutty curled up next to her head.

Jenna sighed as she headed back to the window seat. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Said what?” Nicholas hesitated, then sat down on the other end of the seat.

“I shouldn’t have told her to be a good girl. That’s part of the story, remember? If you’re a good little girl or boy, Santa will bring you what you want.” She bit her lip. “I don’t even know what she wants. I just don’t want her to be disappointed. She’s been so much happier recently.”

“If it is within my power, then I will provide whatever she desires.”

He sounded so sincere. If only Lottie's father had been half as interested in providing for his daughter. Of course, like Jimmy, Nicholas would soon be leaving them behind.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I believe you mean it. But I suspect you will not be here much longer, will you?"

An odd look crossed his face. "I am not sure. The repairs have been time-consuming."

"I think we will both be sorry to see you leave."

"Will you?"

This time she was sure she could see vulnerability on his face.

"Yes."

"I wish to kiss you."

The words seemed to escape without his control, and he looked almost horrified that he had said them out loud.

"Are you sure?" The breathless question didn't sound like her either.

"Oh yes."

"Then yes."

His hands closed around her waist and he was lifting her onto his lap almost before she finished speaking. He bent his head towards her, his horns silhouetted against the still falling snow. There was an almost dreamlike quality to the moment as his lips brushed lightly against her mouth. But then his hands tightened and his mouth hardened against hers, and the kiss became shockingly, arousingly, real.

He kissed her as if he was dying of thirst, of thirst for her, and as his mouth devoured her, he yanked her tighter against his body. She could feel the iron hardness of his muscles and the enormous ridge of his cock. It had been so long – and she had never felt anything like the tidal wave of desire roaring over her.

She reached for him in return, her hands sliding across broad shoulders and up through his silky hair to the base of his horns. He groaned into her mouth as she clamped her fingers

around his horns, the sound inordinately loud in the quiet room, and she suddenly came to her senses.

What was she doing? She had been about to climb him like a tree while her daughter slept only a short distance away. She pulled back, and for a moment, he didn't release her. Then she heard him sigh, and his hands loosened.

"I apologize –"

"Don't apologize," she said fiercely. "I wanted that just as much. But Lottie..."

"I understand." He dipped his head so that their foreheads touched in an oddly sweet gesture. "I should not have forgotten. It is just that I have never..."

"Never what?" She remembered how shocked he'd been when she had kissed him earlier. "Do the Tandroki not kiss?"

"No. We no longer engage in any direct physical interaction between male and female."

Her mind stuttered over his words. "You mean you don't have sex? How do you show love and affection?"

"They are dangerous emotions which lead to possessiveness and jealousy. We prefer more logical unions based on mutual advantage."

No wonder he seemed so lonely.

"That sounds horrible. And how do you have children?"

"There are artificial methods of reproduction."

"No one has babies as a result of intercourse?"

He shrugged, and that vulnerable look reappeared. "It happens, of course, but it is a source of great shame. I suspect that is why I..."

He didn't continue, but she had a sudden horrible suspicion as to why he seemed so reluctant to discuss his childhood. Had he been one of those shameful children?

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, and kissed him again.

He returned her kiss just as hungrily, but she could feel the tension in his muscles and knew how much he was restraining himself. She wished the situation was different – she wanted him to release all of that locked up passion. And she wanted to give him her own loneliness. It wouldn't last, of course, but just for tonight...

She drew back, just a little, their mouths almost touching.

“Can your technology monitor this room if we leave?”

“Of course. And the drone –” He shook his head. “Yes.”

She let her fingers curve around the base of his horns again.

“Do you have another bed? Or a bench? Maybe even a chair?”

When he shivered at her touch, she felt delightfully, wickedly seductive.

“Yes,” he growled and rose with her in his arms.

He strode quickly to the door, his muscles flexing easily, and it was her turn to shiver. She had the sudden feeling that she had summoned a hurricane, and she was about to get carried away by its fury. But after he carried her down the corridor and through another door into a dimly lit room, he hesitated.

“Are you sure?”

“We can see Lottie if she needs us?”

He nodded and pointed to a small monitor. The angle was a little strange, but she could see her daughter sleeping peacefully in the big bed. There were other monitors on the wall as well, and a large desk in the center of the room. An office, some part of her recognized, but she was distracted by the feel of his body against hers as he slowly lowered her to her feet. Her body hummed with arousal.

“Then I'm sure.”

Given the hunger of his kiss, she half expected him to rip her clothes away immediately. Instead, he proceeded to remove them with almost agonizing slowness. He flicked open the buttons on her blouse one at a time, his gaze focused on each inch of flesh he revealed. Her skirt followed, leaving her clad only in her thin cotton shift, and he traced a careful finger



along the upper curve of her breasts revealed by the low neckline.

“You are very beautiful.”

She gasped as a long black claw suddenly appeared in place of his thumbnail, but all he did was brush it delicately back and forth over the thin cloth covering her hardened nipples. The sensation went straight to her swollen clit, and she had to cling to his arms as her knees weakened.

He growled and lifted her into the air, and then she was lying on the desk, the smooth surface cool against her back. Very slowly, he lifted the shift up over her thighs and then her hips until her pussy was naked and vulnerable to his avid gaze. The slickness between her thighs increased as excitement raced through her.

“Your turn,” she whispered.

His eyes still fastened on her, he flicked a catch at the neck of his jumpsuit, and the material slithered away. *Oh my.*

Chiseled muscles covered by perfect alabaster skin, like some ancient marble statue. Her gaze traveled down over his body to his cock, and her mouth went dry. A long, thick column, a pearl of liquid already gleaming on the swollen head.

“Are you sure?” he asked again.

“Yes,” she whispered, and reached for him.

## CHAPTER 7



Despite the need filling his body, Nicholsarian forced himself under control. Not only did he not want to frighten Jenna with his urgency, but he also wanted to appreciate every moment of their time together. He wished he could see every detail of her exquisite body, but the dim light in the office created an unexpected intimacy that he was reluctant to disturb. He could see well enough, he decided, as he studied the dark shadows at the tip of each breast, still concealed beneath her garment. Fascinated, he stroked his claw over the taut little peaks again.

“I didn’t realize you had claws,” she whispered, but he saw no sign of fear on her face. If anything, the sweet scent of her arousal increased.

“Yes. I am afraid we were once a very violent race. Do not worry – I am in control.”

He flexed his hand and his claws retracted, leaving only short dark nails.

“Are you always in control?”

“I... try. It is required of a Tandroki warrior.”

He dismissed the knowledge that he was not behaving as a warrior should right now. How could his people ever have decided to give up this joining between a male and a female?

Suddenly reluctant to have any barriers between them, he let his claws emerge again and sliced a line down the center of her garment. The thin cloth fluttered away as she gave a soft cry, and her body arched towards him.

*Yes, this is better.* His mouth watered at the sight of the two rosy buds topping the creamy mounds of her breasts.

“Is it acceptable to kiss you? In places other than your mouth?” He could hear the strain in his voice, but she nodded.

“And this would please you?”

“Yes.” A seductive smile crossed her face as she cupped her breasts, offering them to him. “This would be a good place to start.”

He didn't wait for a second suggestion. His mouth descended over the tempting little peaks, groaning in pleasure at the sweet taste of her skin. Her body responded, her nipples swelling and hardening as he licked and sucked the tender flesh, using her soft cries to guide his actions. Her hand closed over his and she slid it between her legs, to where she was hot and slick and impossibly tempting.

His cock throbbed in painful anticipation. He knew the way two bodies joined, of course, but he had never expected to experience it personally. As he explored, finding the small, tight entrance to her cunt, he brushed against another nub of flesh and she cried out. He drew back at once.

“Did I hurt you?”

“Oh no. I am very sensitive there.” Her voice dropped and even in the dim light, he could see her cheeks color. “It is another place you can kiss.”

He obeyed immediately, her delicious essence exploding in his mouth in a burst of sweetness. By the Horns of Moroz, this was even better than her cookies. When he found the swollen nub with his mouth, she cried out again, and then her body was shaking in his arms as more of her sweetness washed over his tongue.

This time, he had no concern that he was hurting her.

His aching cock could no longer be denied. He placed it at the entrance to her cunt, the heated kiss of her flesh almost destroying his control, then pushed. For a horrifying moment her body resisted, and he was terrified that she was too small

to take him, but then her body flowered open around him and he entered her.

Never had he experienced such sheer, physical pleasure. The base of his spine tingled and he could feel his seed gathering, but he fought to retain control as he slowly pressed deeper and deeper, the heated grip of her flesh only adding to his ecstasy. By the time he had embedded himself completely, he was shaking, tiny tremors skating across his skin as he fought for control.

He looked up to find her watching him, her eyes huge and dark in the dimness.

“I did not know.”

“I didn’t either.”

She reached up and brushed aside a strand of his hair, an oddly tender gesture that threatened his restraint.

“And now it’s time to lose control.” Her fingers closed around the base of his horns and she squeezed them.

He roared and lost himself completely. Mindless to everything but the need to bury himself over and over in the hot, wet haven of her body. He heard her call his name, felt her rise to meet him, but his need drove him on, until the tidal wave swept over him. His body erupted in long, pulsing bursts of heat that seemed to come from his very soul, until at last he collapsed down over her. Limp, drained, and more at peace than he had ever been.

Her arms and legs tightened around him, holding him securely in her embrace as she murmured meaningless words and caressed his back in long, soothing strokes.

She was half asleep when he reluctantly pulled free and went to fetch a cleansing cloth. Her lips curved in a sleepy smile as he tended to her. He frowned at the pile of discarded clothing and left again to retrieve one of his shirts for her to sleep in, along with a pair of loose pants for himself. Then he carried her back to his bed and placed her next to Lottie. Her hand seemed to cling to his, even as her eyes closed.

After a brief hesitation, he climbed in next to her, smiling when she snuggled back against him. He hadn't slept with anyone since the long-ago days of his childhood when he and the other abandoned children had huddled together for warmth and protection. He hadn't realized until he arrived at the training school that most Tandroki slept alone.

This was different from his childhood in every way that counted, but there was a familiarity to it - a familiarity and a comfort. He wrapped her in his arms and fell peacefully asleep.

## CHAPTER 8



Jenna woke up filled with a lazy satisfaction, her body still humming pleasantly. Nicholas had his arm around her waist, his big body warm and firm behind her, and she liked the way he felt there. Lottie was still asleep next to her, but her lips were moving and Jenna suspected it wouldn't be much longer until she woke up. Nutty's eyes were already open and she smiled fondly at the two of them, then frowned as a memory from the previous night reappeared. There was something oddly familiar about this angle, and she suddenly recalled the monitor Nicholas had pointed out.

The camera had been focused on Lottie's face, from much the same position she was in now - or more accurately, from Nutty's position. And he had not been part of the picture. Had Nicholas been watching Lottie through Nutty's eyes? It didn't seem possible, but hadn't he said something about a drone? She reached for the small animal as she tried to recall the details, and Nicholas's arm immediately tightened around her waist.

She rolled over to find him smiling at her - a smile that faded as he saw the expression on her face.

"What is wrong?" he asked quietly. "Do you regret our encounter?"

Did she? *No*, she decided, but the feeling of satisfaction had disappeared. This was a new day and as wonderful as the previous evening had been, it was time to return to her normal life. A decision that would be much easier if he had behaved as she suspected.

“That isn’t what’s bothering me.” She put a restraining hand on his chest when he relaxed and started to pull her closer. “Last night you said something about a drone. Did you mean Nutty?”

An expression she couldn’t read flickered across his face, and then he nodded. An aching feeling of betrayal swept over her as she remembered all of the times she had looked up and seen Nutty watching them intently.

“You mean you’ve been spying on us all this time?”

“Not exactly - but that was my original intention.”

She pushed impatiently at his chest, trying to remember to keep her voice low.

“Let me up.”

He opened his mouth, then shook his head and stood. She climbed out of bed as well, pacing to the window and back. He watched her but remained silent.

“Why?” she demanded finally.

“My... background has not encouraged me to trust others. When Lottie started watching me, I was suspicious of her intentions.”

“Suspicious? Of a child?”

“Children can do terrible things.” He hesitated, then pointed to the tarnished golden ball. “I found that as a child. It was the most precious thing I had - the only thing that was truly mine. An older child tried to take it from me.” He ran his finger across a long, thin scar on his abdomen. “We fought, but I won. I keep it to remind myself that you have to fight for what you want.”

Her heart ached for the desperate child he had been, but she couldn’t entirely forget her anger.

“You must have realized that Lottie wasn’t like that. That I wasn’t like that.”

“I suspected that you were not.”

“Then why did you keep watching us?”

He looked back over at the bed. Nutty was sitting up, his eyes following them. “The drone was... resistant to leaving the child. And I - I enjoyed watching you.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“No.” For once he made no attempt to hide his sorrow. “I have never been a truly honorable Tandroki warrior.”

Before she could demand more of an explanation, Lottie’s head popped up, her eyes widening as she looked at Jenna.

“Mama, why are you wearing Santa’s jammies?”

The question took her by surprise, and she blushed as she looked down at the silky red shirt she was wearing. She had been vaguely aware of him pulling a garment over her head the previous night, but she’d been too sleepy - and satisfied - to question it at the time.

“Half of his jammies,” Lottie added thoughtfully, looking over at Nicholas.

She had noticed that he wasn’t wearing a shirt, but now she realized that he was wearing a matching pair of red silk pants. They hung low on his hips, and she blushed again as she remembered what lay beneath the thin cloth.

“I wanted your mother to be comfortable,” Nicholas said calmly, his face smooth once more.

Lottie’s bottom lip quivered. “I want to be comfortable too.”

“I will see what I can do. Are you ready for breakfast?”

The question distracted Lottie and she bounced up eagerly. “Can we have pancakes?”

“I do not know. Do you think you can instruct the replicator, Jenna?”

“Maybe?” She sighed, and did her best to let go of the remnants of her anger. “I can try anyway.”

The pancakes were not in fact very successful, and the tension from their discussion lingered between them. Even Lottie seemed to pick up on it, glancing uneasily between them.



He disappeared after their meal, returning only long enough to hand her her clothes. She found herself surprisingly reluctant to take off his shirt. All the more reason to do so, she told herself as she slipped back into her ordinary clothes. The red silk had been a pleasant change, but it was time to return to her real life - one that didn't involve a big, sexy alien who would break her heart if she let him.

He reappeared while Lottie and Nutty were playing with the ball again. She was watching them, remembering the look on his face when he'd talked about the ball.

"The snow will be ending this afternoon," he said softly as he came to join her on the window seat.

Her chest ached, but she forced herself to nod. "I see. We will leave as soon as it does."

"You do not have to leave."

"Yes. Yes, I think we do. This is not our life - and it's not yours. We just came together briefly."

He opened his mouth, then sighed and shook his head. "Perhaps you are right. Will you allow Lottie to return?"

"I don't know. I don't want her to be hurt when you leave." Her daughter laughed triumphantly as she pounced on the ball. "Although I suspect it's already too late."

*Just as it's too late for me.*

"Perhaps it will help that she thinks of me as this legend of yours."

"Maybe."

"Will you let her keep Nutty?"

"So you can spy on us?"

"No. I will not watch you in the future. I means so that she will have a companion."

"What will happen to him when you leave?"

"Nothing. He is not dependent on my presence."

"Then I guess he can stay."

Lottie was whispering intently to the little creature - to the drone - and Jenna suddenly understood the temptation to listen in and find out what her daughter was confiding to him.

“Thank you,” Nicholas said solemnly, and disappeared again.

When he returned, the snow had just stopped falling and she was wearily thinking about the cold walk home.

“I have brought presents,” he announced.

“But it’s not the Longest Night.” Lottie looked almost panicked. “You can’t.”

“These are different. They are going home presents.” He handed Lottie a small red package.

Jenna could see curiosity and concern vying for dominance on her daughter’s face, but in the end, curiosity won out. Lottie opened the package, then grinned happily as she held up a small red outfit.

“It’s Santa jammies!”

“They are not just for sleeping. They will protect you from the weather.” He handed Jenna a slightly larger package. “And you also.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The material is impervious to cold and rain. It will protect you when I am... not around.”

A lump appeared in her throat, but she did her best to smile.

“Thank you.”

“You are very welcome.”

Once again he seemed on the verge of speaking, but he didn’t add anything else.

They both donned their new clothes - although she put her regular clothes on top of the extremely form fitting garment - then headed for the landing ramp. It wasn’t until they reached it that Lottie finally seemed to realize that they were leaving.

“Where are we going, Mama?”

“Back home, sweetheart.”

“But, Santa...” Her lips started to tremble as she looked up at Nicholas.

“Santa has to stay here.”

“But...”

He knelt down next to her. “I have to stay here, little one. This is my... workshop.”

A lump appeared in her throat as she realized he was using her Santa story to try and help Lottie understand.

“Can I still come and bring you cookies?”

He looked up at her instead of answering.

“We’ll have to see, Lottie. Especially now that the weather is getting colder.”

“But I have my Santa suit.”

“We’ll see,” she repeated, and Lottie gave a reluctant nod before throwing her arms around Nicholas’s neck.

“I love you, Santa,” Lottie whispered.

The expression of shock on his face only made her heart ache more. She was quite sure no one had ever told him that before.

“Let’s go, sweetheart.”

Lottie sniffed and let go, then called for Nutty. The small creature scampered eagerly after her, and Jenna bit her lip. Somehow the fact that he was a drone seemed far less important than the thought of taking anything else away from her daughter.

“I will not watch,” he said quietly.

“Thank you.”

“Goodbye, Jenna. I am... glad you came.”

The lump in her throat was too big to permit her to speak. She managed a quick nod, then headed after her daughter. When she reached the edge of the clearing, she chanced a look back at the tall, lonely figure watching them. Tears blinded her as she took Lottie’s hand and headed home.

## CHAPTER 9



“Mama. Mama!” Lottie’s insistent voice finally penetrated Jenna’s exhausted sleep. She had tossed and turned for what seemed like hours the previous night, missing the comfort of the big bed on the ship. *Missing Nicholas*. No matter how often she tried to tell herself that she had done the right thing, she kept remembering him standing there alone.

Lottie had been equally subdued, her small body drooping, but now she sounded like her usual self as she tugged impatiently on the blanket.

“Wake up, Mama.”

“What is it, sweetheart? Why are you up so early?”

“There’s a clatter!”

“A clatter? What do you mean?” Her sleep fogged mind was having a hard time keeping up.

“A clatter on the roof. Do you think it’s Santa?”

A sudden wild flare of hope made her eyes spring open, even though she knew it was ridiculous. Why would he have followed them here?

“Listen,” Lottie insisted.

This time she heard it – a low scraping noise on the roof over the passageway which always leaked. Jumping up, she wrapped her robe around her shoulders and headed for the window. Dawn was only just breaking, the dim gray light barely enough to distinguish the trees from the surrounding

fields, but everything looked normal. No tall, red clad figure was standing in the clearing.

The scraping noise occurred a second time, and she threw open the window, craning her neck to try and see the roof but it was impossible from this angle. Lottie and Nutty followed enthusiastically as she made her way to the side door and then out onto the snow-covered grass.

He was there, his big body crouched on the rooftop, his horns silhouetted against the gradually paling sky. As she watched, he pulled a wooden shake out of a big bag and slid it into place on the roof. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Nicholas. What are you doing up there?”

He paused long enough to look back over his shoulder at her. She couldn't quite make out his expression, but his voice was as cool and arrogant as always.

“I am mending your roof, of course.”

“Yes, I can see that. But why?”

There was the slightest hesitation. “Because I do not want the child to become ill again.”

Without waiting for a response, he bent back over his task. He hadn't exactly answered her question, but it seemed silly to continue yelling up at him while he was on the roof. She looked down at Lottie, who was smiling happily as she watched Nicholas, and sighed.

“Come inside for breakfast when you're finished.”

It wasn't until he dipped his head in a brief assent that she realized how much she had wanted him to agree. *This is a bad idea*, she thought, but as she headed inside to begin the meal, she smiled.

*I AM AN IDIOT*, NICHOLAS DECIDED AS HE WATCHED JENNA AND Lottie disappear back into their residence. Ever since they had left the previous day, he had been restless and out of sorts. The ship had seemed unusually silent without Lottie's laughter, and he kept remembering additional subjects he wished to discuss with Jenna. Additional ways in which to explore her delicious

body. He had attempted to sleep but the bed seemed cold and empty without her. Eventually he had given up the attempt and ended up re-watching the feeds from his drone. He had promised not to continue to watch them, but he had said nothing about the recordings he had already made.

As he watched, some of the things he had paid little attention to before took on new significance. How had he not realized that their shelter was in such disrepair? Water actually came through the roof. What if Lottie became wet and chilled once again? He shuddered at the memory of her small body so silent and still. An honorable male could not stand by and allow that to happen. He spent the rest of the night creating wooden shakes to repair the damaged roof. And if his desire to begin the repairs led him to their home as soon as the sky began to lighten, it was only because it was prudent to begin work as early as possible, not because he was impatient to see them.

By the time he had used up his supply of shingles, the sun was well above the horizon. Now that his task was accomplished, he should go, but Jenna had invited him for a meal and it would be inhospitable to refuse. Lottie was chasing Nutty when he entered the big kitchen. The drone swerved to avoid him but the little girl almost collided with his leg. When he caught her in mid collision, she smiled up at him, and he had that strange aching sensation in his chest again. He looked over to find Jenna watching them. Her face was flushed and she was smiling, but when their eyes met, he could see a question in their depths. But it was not one that he could answer.

“Your meal smells most enticing,” he said instead.

“I’m making pancakes with honey syrup. Since you like my cookies so much, I suspect you will enjoy these.”

She was quite right. The pancakes were soft, light, and delicious, made even better by the syrup she poured over the top. It wasn’t until he devoured the first plate that he looked up to find both females watching him with identical looks of amusement.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked stiffly.

“Not at all. I’m glad you enjoy my cooking.” Jenna took his plate and went to refill it while Lottie grinned at him.

“I like pancakes too. But Mama usually only makes them on special occasions.”

“Is this a special occasion?”

“Course it is. Because you’re here.”

Jenna returned before he could respond, but that didn’t stop the pleasant warmth from filling his chest. He managed to restrain his appetite and eat more slowly this time as Lottie chattered away about everything that had happened in the short time since they had left him. Jenna said little but he was overwhelmingly conscious of her sitting across the table from him. So close that he could easily reach out and lift her into his lap. The memory of their time on the ship flashed through his mind, and his cock inevitably responded. He didn’t realize he was staring at her until she blushed and looked away.

“I didn’t hear any hammering,” she said, still avoiding his glance. “What are you using for nails?”

“I am not using nails. I am using an adhesive. It will hold the shingles in place despite any changes in the weather and it will not permit water to enter.”

He did not mention that it had taken most of his remaining supply of lubricant to create the substance.

“That’s amazing. I don’t think we had anything like that even when the replicators were working.”

“You had replicators?”

Her delicate brows drew together. “We had a variety of machines on the colony ship. Some of them were destroyed in the original crash, some of them eventually needed repairs we could not perform, and some of them simply required materials we didn’t have. They were not intended to last forever without additional supplies.”

“And you do not know how you ended up here?”

She shook her head. “The story I grew up believing was that the pilot had made some type of error. But this past fall when

the caravan came through, I heard a new story. Something about an anomaly in this section of the stars.”

Could that be it? Could that be why Krampasarian had never returned? And why he too had ended up on this planet? His original mission to find his rival had been almost forgotten as he strove to repair his ship, but it resurfaced now.

“Do you know where the new story originated?”

“I’m not entirely sure. It might’ve been in one of the smaller mountain villages. The caravan comes twice a year. You could ask –”

She stopped abruptly and he could see the realization across her face. “I wasn’t thinking. Of course you will be gone by then.”

Lottie tugged urgently on his sleeve. “But you’ll be back, won’t you? Santa comes back every year.”

The beseeching look in those big blue eyes made his chest ache again, and he couldn’t think of a reply. Jenna came to the rescue.

“But you can’t always see Santa, remember?”

Lottie’s lip trembled, and she edged closer to him on the bench.

“Why don’t you show Nicholas the picture you drew last night?” Jenna suggested gently.

Lottie nodded reluctantly and climbed down. “Wait here.”

“I will await your return.”

Jenna sighed as her daughter left the room. “I think deep down she knows that you’re not Santa, but it seems very important to her to believe that you are.”

“I do not wish to disappoint her.”

When Lottie returned, he dutifully admired her drawing, then reluctantly departed. The further away from them he got, the more he felt as if he was leaving something precious behind. If he felt like this now, how was he going to feel when he actually left the planet?



He returned to his clearing, but was unable to settle on a task. The nanobots were still busily repairing his ship, the majority of the downed trees had been chopped into lumber, and the maintenance schedule he had established seemed unimportant. Once again he found himself reviewing the drone footage. Instead of lingering over Jenna's smiles or Lottie's happy laughter, he concentrated on their surroundings. There was so much work to be done.

*I cannot leave them like this*, he decided. The least he could do was to make sure that he had done everything in his power to provide for them before the repairs to his ship were completed. He discarded his original maintenance schedule, and began a new list.

## CHAPTER 10



Two weeks later, Jenna looked around in disbelief. Despite her attempts to protest, Nicholas had shown up every day, and every day he had repaired or updated some part of their home. The crumbling stucco that covered the larger portion of the house had been replaced with a smooth new coat. The fields behind the house had been cleared and made ready for the winter. The encroaching trees had been cut back and used to fill the wood shed - although that had been a subject of some debate

Nicholas did not approve of wood fired heat, and he had wanted to replace her stove with a heating unit similar to the one he had on his ship. She had eventually won that argument by pointing out that if the technology failed, she would have no alternative source of heat. She suspected that mentioning that the food he enjoyed so much was produced on a wood stove had been a significant factor as well. However, that had been one of the few arguments she had won.

When it became obvious that he intended to keep appearing and helping her, she had attempted to dissuade him. He had simply given her one of his arrogant looks and proceeded to do just as he had originally intended. And it was hard to argue with the results. The work did need to be done and she had no way of doing it. If only she wasn't afraid that relying on him was going to make life that much harder once he was gone - or that she would miss him even more.

She worried about Lottie as well. Lottie was thrilled at his daily visits and happily followed him around, helping him. He

never objected, and it made her chest ache to see them together – the small dark head and the large horned one bent together over some task. How patient he was with her daughter. What was Lottie going to do when he left?

For that matter, how was she going to cope? Repairs aside, she liked having him here. Liked when they shared a smile over something that Lottie had said. Liked looking up from her work table and seeing him in the fields outside. And even though they had not succumbed to temptation again, her body seemed to exist in a constant low hum of arousal. She found herself dreaming of him, and waking up with a needy ache between her legs, his name on her lips.

Usually he left before the early winter evening enclosed in, but he had been working on a special project today and he was still working when the sun went down. Curious to see what he was doing, she went to join him and Lottie in the entrance hall of the manor house.

A soft glow filled the room when she entered, and she looked up to find a lighted globe hovering over her head. She laughed.

“Perhaps it’s just as well we don’t have that technology any longer or I would be out of business. What are you –”

The words died in her mouth as she saw the results of his labor.

“Look, Mama.” Lottie came dancing over with Nutty perched on her shoulder. “Santa made a window.”

“I can see that.” She stared at the smooth, clear pane as he finished fitting it in place. The window next to the entry had been broken for several years but the glass to replace it was rare and expensive. And nowhere near this quality, she thought as she inspected it.

“This is amazing. How did you do it?”

He looked pleased, even though he shrugged dismissively. “I reconfigured the material replicator. The sand on the beach has the right properties to make glass. The most difficult part was constructing the frame so that the replacement would be the appropriate size.”

“You know how rare this is?” She stroked her fingers over the perfectly smooth surface. “Most of the villages have gone back to using hand blown panes. This would be worth a fortune.”

He tilted his head, his horns gleaming in the soft glow of the artificial light.

“If I constructed more, could you sell them?”

It was a tempting idea, but...

“I don’t know. I doubt anyone in Bayport has the funds these days, and transportation to another village would be difficult and expensive.”

“Which would require you to charge more,” he agreed. “Are there others who could afford to pay for that?”

“Perhaps, but none that we could find before you leave.”

The words hung between them in the silence of the entry hall, and she saw Lottie’s lip quiver.

“Let’s not worry about that right now,” she said quickly. “It looks beautiful. Why don’t you come and have some supper?”

“I should return to the ship.”

But despite his words, he followed her readily into the kitchen. Tonight they were having roast “pig.” The small native animals were frequently domesticated, but Nicholas had hunted for this one. He and Lottie both ate eagerly, but even though the meat was delicious, she only picked her plate.

“Is something wrong, Jenna?” he asked quietly.

She looked at Lottie, then shook her head and went to fetch their dessert. As always, Nicholas consumed the sweet eagerly, and she smiled.

“You have such a sweet tooth.”

“I am not used to such deliciousness.” He gestured at his plate, but his eyes were on her mouth. She shivered as she remembered him describing her that way.

He did not rush off after dinner, but stayed and helped her clean the kitchen. Then the three of them played a game until Lottie's eyelids began to droop. Her daughter insisted that both of them accompany her to bed and asked Nicholas to tell her a story. He looked shocked, and Jenna was just about to intervene and rescue him when he started telling the tale of a magical prince who had everything he had ever wanted and the little boy who wanted to be that prince.

Where had that story come from, Jenna wondered. She could hear the loneliness and envy in his voice as he described the little prince.

After Lottie fell asleep, he accompanied her silently back to the kitchen. The candles had burned low and they stood staring at each other in the flickering glow.

"I should leave." His voice sounded strained.

"Yes."

"I do not want to go."

Even knowing that it would be much harder when he left the planet, she didn't want him to leave either.

"Then stay," she whispered.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

The word was barely out of her mouth before he seemed to swoop at her. And then his mouth was on hers and she forgot everything in the frantic urgency of his kiss. God, she had missed this. Her body molded against his, her breasts swollen and aching as they rubbed against that broad, hard chest. One of his hands cupped her ass, kneading the supple flesh, while the other held her head in place for his kiss. The heated bar of his cock pressed against her stomach and she tried to grind her needy clit against the thick shaft. He groaned and helped her move against him as he started to lower her to the kitchen table. It wasn't until she felt the wood against her back that she regained some sense.

"No," she gasped

He drew back immediately, and she saw the flash of hurt that crossed his face before his normal arrogant mask snapped back into place.

“I did not mean to –”

“No! I mean, I didn’t mean no. Just not here. My bedroom is –”

She didn’t get a chance to finish. His mouth covered hers again as he lifted her back in his arms and carried her into her small room behind the kitchen. They landed on the bed and she heard fabric rip before a big warm hand slid up her thigh. He growled when he found her slick and ready, and then his thick cock was at her entrance. He thrust inside with one hard, wonderful stroke, filling her completely and sending her soaring into a shattering climax. He didn’t stop, thrusting frantically into her quivering body until he too exploded in a wave of heat. She felt his muscles relax as he pulled her more tightly into his arms and gave a shuddering sigh.

“I have missed that very much.”

“Me too.”

He lifted his head and even though no candles had been lit in the bedroom, she could see his eyes gleaming at her.

“I want to stay with you.”

Her heart skipped a beat, but she was afraid to hope.

“You mean until you leave?” she asked cautiously.

His eyes closed for a fraction of a second, and then he nodded.

“Yes.”

*I’m not disappointed*, she told herself.

“I want you to stay as well, but I have to think about Lottie.”

“Do you not think that she would like me to stay?”

Her lips twisted. “Oh, I know she would love for you to stay. But that’s the problem. It was hard enough just leaving your ship. I don’t want her to think you’re going to stay with us permanently.”

“I would not do anything to hurt her.” He hesitated. “I will leave before she awakens, but perhaps I can stay a little longer tonight?”

“I would like that.”

She snuggled closer, then smiled when she realized that his horns were against the wall and his feet were hanging over the edge of the bed.

“This bed doesn’t fit you very well.”

“As long as you are in it, it fits me perfectly.” Another pause. “But why did you choose this room? There are larger rooms – and larger beds – in the other part of the house.”

“This is small and easy to heat.” She sighed. “You’ve seen the condition of the rest of the house. I’m afraid I just gave up on everything except Lottie’s room.”

“There was prosperity here once. What happened?”

“About five years ago, the fish started to disappear. Because Bayport is a fishing village, it has been declining ever since. My stepfather Thomas did his best to help out, but he depleted his own resources in the process.” She ran her fingers absently over his chest as she thought about the future. “As much as I appreciate everything you’ve done, I’m not sure how long we will be able to stay here.”

“I see. Where would you go?”

“To a village further down the coast, perhaps. But I don’t want to leave – I love it here and so does Lottie. And who knows? Maybe the fish will come back.”

He didn’t say anything, and she didn’t want to spend the rest of their time together worrying about an uncertain future. She let her fingers trail down across the ridges of his abdomen to skate lightly across his cock. He responded immediately to her touch, and she pushed aside her worries about the future to concentrate on the present.

## CHAPTER 11



Nicholas slipped reluctantly out of Jenna's bed just before dawn. She watched him leave, her eyes wide and solemn, but she didn't protest. He knew she was right about not raising Lottie's hopes, but it didn't make leaving her any easier. As he made his way back to his ship, he replayed the conversation of the previous night in his mind.

Were all his efforts in vain? He had assured himself that he was taking care of them by restoring their residence. But what good would that do if the village was abandoned and they had to leave?

*If they had to leave...*

He stopped dead in his tracks. If they were going to leave anyway, why couldn't they come with him? The more he considered the idea, the more he liked it. If they were with him, he would be assured of their welfare. He had both the funds and the position to give them everything they deserved. Assuming he still had his position, of course. Given the length of his disappearance, it was quite possible that he had been replaced as ambassador.

He shrugged as he resumed walking. No matter. He still had the funds he had been so carefully saving over the years, and the position that had once seemed so important no longer seemed as significant. Jenna and Lottie did not care where he had come from or how wretched his childhood had been, and being with them was far more rewarding than any title. The more he thought about the idea, the more it delighted him and



he could hardly wait to return and inform Jenna of his decision.

He grabbed the materials for his latest project, and waited impatiently for the sun to rise so that he could return. Lottie came dancing out to meet him, his drone perched on her shoulder. When she held up her arms for a hug, he almost told her that they would be together from now on. At the last second, he decided that perhaps Jenna should be the first to know.

When he entered the kitchen, she gave him a shy smile, her cheeks flushing pink. She looked even more beautiful this morning and once again, he had to fight back the impulse to tell her immediately. He would wait until they were alone, he decided, and she could thank him appropriately.

After breakfast he began work on his latest project – a small, glass enclosed house to raise winter vegetables. It was perhaps pointless if they were to be leaving soon, but there was still more work to be done on the ship, and he knew that it would delight Jenna. By the time night fell, he had constructed the frame with Lottie's assistance. Tomorrow he would begin creating the glass panes.

But tonight, there was dinner with his females, and games, and a bedtime story, and then he was finally alone with Jenna. She gave him a sleepy smile as she poured him the sweet drink she called hot chocolate.

“For some reason, I feel tired today.”

“I apologize. I should have let you sleep.”

She laughed as she came over and sat down on his lap. “I wasn't complaining. Last night was definitely worth the loss of sleep.”

“Would you like more nights like that?”

“Of course.” A shadow crossed her face, almost too quickly for him to detect. “While you're here.”

“They do not have to end,” he blurted out.

“I don't understand.”

He had planned a speech, but his careful words deserted him now.

“You should come with me. You and Lottie. When I leave, I mean.”

“Come with you?”

She looked shocked rather than thrilled. Had he misunderstood the attachment between them?

“I thought you wished to be with me. I am an important male – I have a good position and more than adequate funds to care for you and Lottie.”

“I’m not interested in your money or your position.” She sprang up from his lap and began pacing back and forth across the kitchen. “Don’t you realize what you’re asking?”

“I am giving you the opportunity for a better life.”

“Are you?” She stopped pacing and returned to his side. “You told me that Tandroki children leave home at an early age to attend school.”

“That is correct. The appropriate school is the start of a path to a successful life.”

“And you would put Lottie in such a school?”

*No.* The thought of Lottie in the cold, barren surroundings of his training school appalled him. And yet, it was the Tandroki way.

“I do not know,” he admitted.

“Do you have a house with a garden and room for her to play in the fresh air?”

“The ambassador’s residence on Perchten has very finely landscaped gardens.”

“Somehow I suspect that finely landscaped gardens are not compatible with a child playing.” She took his hand, her small fingers lacing with his. “And that’s only part of it. Will your people accept a human female and a child?”

Would they? Tandroki society was rigidly stratified. He'd had a hard enough time escaping his background, and he was Tandroki. As much as he wanted to assure her that they would be accepted, he suspected that she was correct.

"I accept you. Is that not enough?"

"It is when the three of us are alone, but we won't always be alone. Lottie will want to go to school and have friends and get married one day. I have friends here in the village, people I grew up with. I don't want to lose that."

The ache in his chest continued to grow. "I see."

"Do you? I lo – care for you very much, as does Lottie. We don't want to lose you, but I don't know if we could be happy in your world."

Despite everything he had worked for, it was not enough. *He* was not enough.

"Very well."

He could hear the stiffness in his voice, and he suspected Jenna could as well.

"Do you still want to stay tonight?" she asked softly.

"I... I do not know."

"I want to be close to you, while I can, but only if you want that as well."

How could he refuse? Despite his lingering sense of hurt, he didn't want to let his pride prevent their time together.

When he nodded, she took his hand and led him into her room. He still felt stiff, awkward, and for once, he let her take the initiative.

She unfastened his thermal suit and let it fall to the ground, then pressed a kiss to his chest. Her small mouth on his chest should not be so arousing, but as she continued to kiss a line down across his stomach, his desire grew. By the time her mouth reached the base of his cock, he was fully, achingly erect.

“Jenna,” he gasped as her cheek brushed against his rigid shaft. “What are you doing?”

“I’m kissing you.” Her warm breath whispered across his flesh.

“But...”

“Remember when you asked me what places were pleasurable to kiss? This is one of them.”

The hot, wet heat of her mouth closed around the head of his cock, and he exploded, the unexpected pleasure sweeping through his system as his fingers tangled in her hair. She swallowed eagerly, then smiled up at him when his shudders finally stopped.

She looked so beautiful, so pleased to have given him pleasure, that he wanted to roar with frustration. How could she not see that they belonged together?

But he had no more words, no other arguments to convince her to come with him. All he could do was pick her up and show her with his body how much he worshipped her.

NICHOLAS WAS UNUSUALLY SUBDUED OVER THE NEXT FEW days, his face locked in that arrogant mask that Jenna knew concealed his hurt. He continued to come to the manor, continued his efforts to make their life easier. The greenhouse he constructed was a delicate marvel of wood and glass and a lump appeared in her throat every time she looked at it.

And he stayed with her each evening, making love to her with a fierce, silent intensity. She felt the same urgency. She could feel the days ticking away and the knowledge that he would be leaving soon hung over them like a shadow.

They were lying together on the fourth night after his offer, both of them awake. She was staring through the window at the big red moon high overhead and wondering what the moon on his world looked like.

“I have been considering your problem,” he said suddenly.

“What problem?”

“The village. And the disappearing fish.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You said there were other villages along the coast, correct? And they have not experienced the same issue?”

“No. It seems to be confined to us.”

“Then there must be a reason specific to this area. I intend to investigate.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“Remember the story you told Lottie? About the ship that went beneath the water? I have a small flyer on board the ship. It is resistant to the atmosphere so it will also function under the water, as long as I do not go too deep.”

“You’re going to fly under the water?” The prospect was both thrilling and slightly terrifying. “Is that safe?”

“Of course. As I said, the flyer is equipped to handle it.”

“What are you going to look for?”

“I am not entirely certain,” he admitted. “I suspect it is some kind of environmental change. I thought I would start by investigating the temperature of the water to see if it remains consistent.”

“It could also be a change in the underwater vegetation,” she said thoughtfully.

“I’m not sure if I would recognize that. Would you?”

“I don’t know. I know the signs of an unhealthy plant in my gardens, but I don’t know if that applies underwater.”

“Would you like to accompany me?”

The part of her that had once recklessly followed a sailor to sea gave an enthusiastic assent, but she was older and wiser now. Still, it would be a chance to see something that no one else on this planet had seen. And possibly a way to help the village.

“Yes, I think I would. But I will need to find someone to stay with Lottie while we’re gone.”

“Then we will go as soon as you have made the arrangements.”

## CHAPTER 12



Two days later, Jenna hurried down the path to the beach. She hadn't been this way since her desperate search for Lottie the night of the storm, and she shivered as she remembered. At least today she knew her daughter was safe. Lottie was staying in town with Jenna's friend Rianna, who had a daughter Lottie's age.

Unlike that terrifying night, the water was calm today, the waves washing gently in and out of the cove. Nicholas was waiting at the far end of the beach, and her heart skipped a beat as she headed for him. He looked so big and imposing, his horns gleaming in the pale winter sunlight, but his smile filled her with warmth.

"Are you ready, Jenna?"

"I think so."

She gave the waiting flyer a somewhat doubtful look. It was a sleek, triangular vessel, not much larger than the miller's cart. The upper half was clear glass and when he pressed a hidden catch, it lifted silently into the air to reveal a small seating area.

She hesitated, and he smiled at her again.

"Do not worry. I will not let anything happen to you."

She returned the smile and climbed aboard, hoping that he couldn't see her knees tremble. He took the seat in front of her and then the glass top settled back into place.

The flyer lifted quietly into the air, so quietly that she didn't even realize at first that they were moving until the sand beneath them was replaced by water.

"I am going to go out to the headland." He pointed at the rocky promontory that made up one side of the cove. "Then we will go underwater."

She nodded and tried not to clench the armrests too tightly as they skimmed across the water. As soon as they left the cove, she could feel the wind buffeting the small craft, and it was almost a relief when they slipped beneath the surface.

Dark blue water surrounded them, but enough sunlight penetrated the surface that their surroundings were clearly visible. Even though she could see the froth of white bubbles where the waves crashed against the rocks above, it was peaceful within their small vessel.

"I thought we would follow the shoreline for a short distance, then head out into deeper water."

"That sounds like a good idea." She reached into her bag and pulled out a book. "I... removed this from the library when I took Lottie into the village this morning."

"What is it?"

"It's a textbook about ocean life back on Earth. I know it's not exactly the same, but I thought it might be helpful."

She tried to suppress her feeling of guilt. Their few precious books were not actually supposed to leave the library, but then again, if they didn't find a way to save the village, the library wouldn't survive either.

"What should we be looking for?"

"Areas of dying vegetation. Places where the color of the rocks or the water have changed."

He nodded, and they continued silently along the coast. Nothing seemed to fit the description in the book, and yet she couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

"There aren't any fish." She wasn't quite sure why she was whispering, but she was growing increasingly uneasy.



“You are correct.” He responded just as quietly. “And I do not see any sign of crustaceans along the rocks. It is almost as if they have been scraped clean.”

“What could do that? Would a storm have that effect?”

“I do not know.” He bent over the instrument panel. “The water is warmer here than it was closer to the cove. It is possible that is a factor.”

“Why would the water be warmer? We’re going further north.”

“The closer we get to that cave, the warmer it gets.” He pointed to a huge dark opening in the rocks ahead, frowning thoughtfully. “Perhaps some kind of seismic disturbance?”

The sight of the dark cave made her even more nervous, but she nodded reluctantly. “We should probably take a look.”

Her anxiety must have been obvious because he shot her a quick glance. “I could take you back to the beach and return on my own.”

Wait on the beach by herself, knowing that he was going into that mysterious cave?

“No,” she said immediately. “Let’s take a look together.”

The opening was more like a huge tunnel, climbing slightly upwards and around a corner, but once they were inside, it wasn’t quite as dark as she had expected. When they came around the last curve, the water brightened even more.

“There must be an opening above,” he said quietly. “And look, the water doesn’t fill it completely.”

He brought the flyer to the surface of the water, heading for the ledge of rock he’d pointed out. The walls of the cave gleamed dark and mysterious, and the light no longer seemed as reassuring.

“Maybe we should leave -”

The wall of the cave moved, and a huge shape came out of the darkness, catching the flyer and sending it smashing into the rock. The roof popped open as the flyer crashed, but they

landed above the waterline and the ocean didn't come rushing in.

"Nicholas," she whispered, trying not to panic. "What was that?"

"I think I know where the fish have gone," he said grimly, his eyes focused on the far wall. She could still see it moving but she couldn't make out any specific shapes. "Stay here, and try to keep out of its sight."

And then he was gone, climbing quickly up the ledge until he was about halfway up the wall. As she watched in horror, the opposite wall seemed to come closer and closer until she could finally see that it wasn't rock - it was a huge, nightmarish creature. Almost as large as her house, the monster was a horrible combination of the sea creatures in her book. Multiple arms, all tipped with enormous claws, surrounded a wide gaping mouth, while numerous small, yellow eyes gleamed against the black, rock-like body.

Nicholas looked impossibly small next to the monster, but he waited calmly until another one of those enormous arms swiped at him. She bit back a cry when it looked as if it would strike him, but he jumped free - and straight out onto the arm, running rapidly along it and towards the main body of the creature. What the hell was he doing?

She almost lost sight of him against the dark shell, but then there was a muffled roar that shook the cave and one of the yellow eyes blinked out. The water churned as the creature started to thrash, and a wave washed over her, leaving her gasping and trying desperately to blink the water from her eyes. She couldn't find Nicholas, but there was another roar, and the water churned again. The creature reared up, almost blocking the light from overhead, but she could see its arms waving wildly. He must be too close for it to reach, she decided, her heart pounding furiously as she tried to see what was happening.

Another one of those enormous arms came flying in her direction, crashing into the cave wall just above her head. More liquid drenched her, but it was blood this time, and she

shuddered in horror. There was another roar and the creature seemed to lift even higher, towering over her before slowly collapsing back down, its huge body slumping down into the water and sending another wave cascading over her.

The cave went silent, but there was no sign of a gleaming white head or ivory horns rising from the water.

“Nicholas!” she screamed, desperately blinking the tears from her eyes.

And then he was there, wrapping his arms around her as she cried.

NICHOLSARIAN CLUTCHED JENNA TO HIS CHEST, THANKING THE gods that she was unharmed. His heart had almost stopped when he'd seen the creature's arm slam into the wall above her head in its death throes.

“You're all right,” she whispered frantically.

“Yes, love. I am fine.” He rocked back and forth, making soothing noises, until she finally quieted.

“What was that thing?”

“I do not know, but I do not believe it belonged here. Perhaps it became lost.”

She shuddered and clung to him more tightly. Her skin felt cold beneath his hands, and her body trembled. He needed to get her out of this place as soon as possible. A quick glance revealed that the damage to the flyer could be fixed, but not quickly and not without tools.

“We are going to have to swim out of here,” he said gently.

Her hands tightened on his clothing as she looked down at the dark water. He hoped that her vision wasn't good enough to see the creature's body lurking in the darkness.

“How? The tunnel is underwater.”

“Only for a short distance. Just hold on to me and we will be through it before you know it. Are you ready?”

She nodded slowly.

“Good. Now take a few deep breaths. Fill your lungs with oxygen.”

As soon as she obeyed, he pulled her against him and dove. The water was darker now, tainted by the creature’s blood, and its limbs partially blocked the tunnel, but he swam with all his strength. By the time he made it through and reached the surface, she was gasping for breath. At least they were out of the cave and back in the sunlight. Unfortunately, the sunlight did little to warm the icy water and she was shivering helplessly by the time they reached the beach.

He lifted her into his arms and raced for his ship.

## CHAPTER 13



Nicholas watched anxiously as Jenna's eyes finally opened. He had removed her clothing and given her a dose of medicine as soon as they were onboard and she had fallen asleep immediately. Now she looked dazed for a moment, then smiled up at him.

"Thank god, you're all right. I had the most terrible dream about a sea monster -" She broke off abruptly as she looked around. "I'm back on your ship."

"Yes. It was closest to the beach so I brought you here to warm up."

She shuddered. "It wasn't a dream, was it?"

"I am afraid not."

"I was so scared. I thought you were going to die."

To his horror, she burst into tears.

"Please, love, don't cry."

He pressed a gentle kiss against her lips in an attempt to comfort her, but she returned the kiss with an unexpected urgency. His body responded immediately, but he was concerned about whether or not she had fully recovered.

"Jenna, wait..."

"No," she said fiercely. "I thought I lost you. I need this."

She tugged him down again, and this time he didn't resist. He had been just as worried about her, and she was right. He needed her too. The reality of their mouths pressing together,

of their bodies joining in the ancient dance, of the soft cry from her lips as her climax swept over her - all of it reaffirmed that they were alive and together.

He made love to her until she was limp and smiling, until her tears had disappeared, until they curled together in contented silence.

“Now that it’s gone, do you think everything will return to normal?” Jenna finally asked.

He hesitated, then told her the truth. “Eventually, yes, but that creature not only consumed the fish, it decimated their environment. I suspect it will take some time to remedy that.”

“So you put yourself in danger for nothing?”

“It needed to be destroyed.”

She sighed. “I know. But I hate to think that we still might need to leave the village.”

“Perhaps you can persuade the others to stay - to give the ocean time to recover.”

“Maybe. If they believe me.”

The thought that they might doubt his female offended him. “I would be happy to corroborate your information.”

A choked laugh escaped her lips. “I think they’d be much too shocked at the sight of you to listen.”

“Shocked?”

“They are used to other humans. I’m not sure how they would react to aliens.”

He turned the thought over in his mind. “Is that why you have not asked me to stay?”

“Stay?” She sat up abruptly, staring down at him. “Would you do that?”

“I do not know,” he admitted. “I worked very hard to achieve success in my society.”

“To become an important male with a good position?”

“Yes.”

“Were you happy?”

*No.* The answer was quite obvious, but...

“Happiness was not one of my goals.”

“I see.” She sighed and returned to his arms. “I’m afraid this planet doesn’t have much to offer in the way of important positions.”

*Only her. And Lottie.*

The thought of the child reminded him of their responsibilities.

“You will need to go and collect Lottie soon. And I wonder - could I have dinner with you tonight?”

“Of course.” She sat up, and he watched regretfully as she started to dress.

“I would also like to be the one to put her to bed.”

“That’s fine, but why?”

“I need to know what she wants from Santa. It is less than a week until the Longest Night.” He hesitated, but he didn’t want any secrets between them. “The ship will be ready by then.”

“I see.” He heard the tremor in her voice despite her efforts, and she quickly looked away from him. Her fingers trembled as she tied her cloak around her neck. “We’ll see you at dinner.”

Then she fled, leaving him alone in the empty quiet of his ship.

HE ARRIVED FOR THE EVENING MEAL TO FIND JENNA STILL subdued. Lottie, on the other hand, was bouncing with excitement. She proudly presented him with the cookies she had made with her friend, and described all of the other preparations they had been making for the Longest Night.

“We need decorations too, Mama.”

“You’re right, sweetheart. This has been a mixed up kind of year.” Her voice trembled again, but she smiled brightly at Lottie.

Lottie was full of plans over dinner, and she kept looking at him, seeking to include him in those plans. He could not find it within himself to deny her.

When it was time for bed, she went with him happily enough, still coming up with ideas about how to celebrate.

“You know, Lottie,” he said gently, when she finally started to wind down. “We are making all these plans to celebrate Longest Night, but you have not yet told me your wish.”

Her eyes darted away from him. “Don’t you know?”

“I do not. Remember that in your mother’s story, the children write to Santa.”

“But I can’t write well enough.”

“You could tell me instead. Just whisper it into my ear.”

She studied his face, then nodded solemnly. “All right.”

Her small fingers wrapped themselves in his beard as she tugged his head down.

“Can you bring me anything I want?” she asked.

“I am afraid not. Even Santa has his limits. But I will do the best I can.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath, then leaned up and whispered in his ear.

“I want a daddy.”

SOMETHING WAS OBVIOUSLY BOTHERING NICHOLAS WHEN HE returned from putting Lottie to bed, but when she asked he only shook his head.

“It is a secret between us.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“No!” he growled, then sighed. “Perhaps. After I am gone.”

His words filled her with dread, but she nodded. “I’ll do what I can.”

Despite her agreement, her answer didn’t seem to please him. He growled and swept her off to the bedroom, where he



proceeded to make love to her with a fierce, possessive intensity.

After the events of the day, it was perhaps not surprising that they both overslept. He was still with her when Lottie came bouncing into her bedroom the next morning. Her eyes widened, then she giggled and took a flying leap at the bed, landing between them.

“Good morning,” she said cheerfully. “I think Mama should make pancakes this morning.”

“Is it a special occasion?” he asked, his voice strained.

“Yes. Today we decorate.”

Jenna couldn't help thinking that she had missed something, but her daughter was smiling and they had so little time left with Nicholas.

“Pancakes, it is.”

The week flew by. All pretense of Nicholas leaving was abandoned. He spent every night in her bed, and Lottie cheerfully accepted it. During the day, they decorated the house from top to bottom. Nicholas and Lottie huddled together frequently, growing silent whenever she approached, but she didn't ask any questions. Despite all the outward festivity, her heart ached almost continuously but she did her best to hide it.

Until finally, they reached the Longest Night.

## CHAPTER 14



The sense of doom hung over Jenna all day, and although she tried to hide it, she didn't think she was entirely successful. Lottie was oddly subdued as well after the week of excited preparation. When Jenna suggested that they go into the village for the traditional feast, she shook her head decisively.

"Can't we stay here, Mama?"

"Of course. We can have our own feast."

Nicholas hunted down another pig, while she prepared stuffing with the last of her fresh vegetables. She baked two pies and a seemingly endless supply of cookies, all of which Lottie decorated, her small face screwed up in concentration.

The feast was more successful than she had anticipated and all of them seemed to relax. Afterwards, they sipped cocoa and ate cookies while Jenna read to them from a book she had borrowed - legally this time - from the village library.

As soon as she was done, Lottie hopped up.

"Time for bed."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "You can stay up a little later tonight since it's a special occasion."

"Uh-uh." Lottie shook her head, dark curls flying. "Santa comes tonight. I have to be asleep."

Her throat closed, but she managed to nod. Nicholas looked equally distraught, but they both went to Lottie's room with her and tucked her in. She didn't even want a story.

Jenna only managed to make it back downstairs before she burst into tears.

Nicholas immediately put his arms around her, rocking her soothingly, but that only made her want to cry more. He wouldn't be around to comfort her after tomorrow. She finally managed to stop crying, wipe her cheeks, and give him a shaky smile.

"Sorry. This is an emotional time of the year."

"Yes." He hesitated, then took her hand. "Come with me."

He led her back into the main part of the manor house and up the stairs into the bedroom that had once been hers. The last time she had seen it, the paint had been crumbling from the walls and the wind had whistled through a broken window pane.

Now the walls were smoothly coated with her favorite shade of pale green. The window had been repaired and the seat below it piled with cushions - white cushions mixed with a few in his favorite red. The bed had also been repaired, and a soft white blanket covered the mattress. The traditional Longest Night garland adorned the mantel.

"I don't understand. Why did you do all this?"

"Lottie and I decided that you should return to your room." He pointed to a small metal object in the fireplace. "That unit will keep the room warm, now that I have repaired the window. But the fireplace is still operational as well, if you prefer a fire."

She hadn't realized until this moment how much she had missed her room. Tears threatened again as she smiled up at him.

"Thank you."

"I will like to think of you here." Before she could think of a response, he continued. "She wants to surprise you with it in the morning, but I will not be here."

"Why not? Can't you stay and celebrate with us?"

“No. Lottie wants something I cannot provide for her, and I cannot bear to see her disappointment. As I suspected all along, I am unworthy to be a Tandroki warrior.”

“Don’t you dare say that,” she said fiercely. “I can’t imagine anyone more worthy. You are kind and brave and thoughtful and... and the best thing that has ever happened to us. We will miss you.”

She reached for him, but for the first time since they had met, he backed away from her.

“Nicholas?” she whispered.

“I cannot. I am afraid that if I touch you, I will not be able to let you go. I will carry you and Lottie back to the stars with me.” He bowed, a sweeping formal gesture. “Be well, Jenna. I will never forget.”

And then he was gone.

She felt oddly numb, too numb even to cry, although she suspected that was coming. Instead she wandered around her room - her beautiful, lonely room - running her fingers over the smooth glass and touching the soft fabric covering the cushions. She was sitting on the window seat, staring vacantly out the window when Lottie found her.

“Mama? What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine. Why aren’t you in bed?”

“I couldn’t sleep. Santa is supposed to come tonight, but what if he’s not my Santa?”

How could she tell her daughter that *her* Santa was never coming back?

Lottie climbed up next to her, followed by Nutty, and she automatically put her arms around them.

“Was my Santa real, Mama?”

“Yes, sweetheart. Very real.”

“Do you like your room?”

“I do, very much. Nicholas -” Her throat threatened to close. “Nicholas told me you wanted to show it to me tomorrow.”

“But he’s not gonna be here, is he?” Enormous blue eyes looked up at her with an unchildlike wisdom. “He isn’t coming back, is he?”

“No.” She could almost hear the sound of both their hearts breaking. “No,” she repeated more firmly. “But maybe there’s another way.”

NICHOLAS RETURNED TO HIS SHIP IN A FROZEN DAZE. DESPITE the thermal suit, every part of him felt cold. Even his ship felt cold and empty. The repairs had been completed. Everything worked correctly - everything except him. He was no longer the male who had landed on this planet.

*Was that a bad thing*, he wondered as he roamed aimlessly around the ship, repeating routine checks that did not need to be performed. Was that male any better, despite his title and his wealth? Closer to the Tandroki ideal perhaps, but that no longer seemed such an important goal. He preferred the male he had become - the one that Jenna thought was kind and thoughtful and the best thing that had ever happened to them. How could he turn his back on that male?

“I am an idiot,” he said aloud into the silent ship, but there was no time to dwell on his stupidity. He had plans to make. For the first time since he had returned, he felt a spark of warmth.

The sun was barely above the horizon by the time he had finished, but he was too impatient to wait any longer. As he started for the path to Jenna’s house, two figures walked out of the woods towards him – Jenna and Lottie, wearing the thermal suits he had created for them beneath their cloaks, with Nutty scampering eagerly around their feet. As soon as Lottie saw him, she flung herself at him and he caught her automatically.

“My Santa,” she whispered as she snuggled into his arms.

“Always,” he agreed as he hugged her, but he looked at Jenna. “I do not understand why you are here.”

Jenna smiled at him, her eyes suspiciously bright.

“We talked about it last night and we decided. We want to go with you.”

“But what about the fresh air? And the other humans?”

“We will just have to find a way to make sure she has everything she needs, but I’m not worried about it anymore. She will have the most important thing of all - she will have a family who loves her.”

He was still staring at her in shock when she glanced behind him and her eyes widened.

“Where’s the ship?”

“At the bottom of the ocean. It will send out a signal to encourage the fish to return, but it will also work on restoring the environment so that signal is no longer needed. Then it will return to me.”

“How long will that take?”

“The fish should return within a few months.” He shrugged. “As for the rest - five years, perhaps ten. Possibly even twenty. It does not matter.”

“But that means you can’t leave.”

“I know. I too thought about this last night and I reached the same conclusion.” He reached out and cupped her cheek. “It does not matter where I am, it matters who I am with. I wish to be with you and with Lottie. To be a... family.”

“Does that mean you’re Santa daddy now?” Lottie asked, her eyes wide.

“No, little one. Just Daddy. Your Daddy.”

“I knew it! I knew you’d make my wish come true!” She flung her small arms around his neck, and happiness filled him.

Jenna still looked shocked.

“But what about your career? All of the things that you worked for?”

“They do not matter. I was a fool to think that they did. What matters is that I love you, both of you.”

“You do?” Her eyes were even brighter now, a single tear trailing down her cheek.

“With everything I am.”

“I love you too.”

A second surge of happiness filled him as he bent down and brushed his mouth against hers - just the briefest touch, but it held the promise of so much more.

“Let us go home, love.”

“And have cookies!” Lottie declared.

He laughed, and led his family back through the woods to the warmth of their home.

## EPILOGUE



*One year later...*

“MAMA, MAMA! DADDY HAS A SURPRISE.”

Jenna looked up from her sleeping son as Lottie burst into the nursery, Nicholas following her. Her heart still skipped a beat every time she saw him.

“Another surprise?” she asked, raising her eyebrow.

The baby had been a surprise - a delightful surprise - to both of them.

“Perhaps not quite as exciting as a child.” He bent down and kissed her, then stroked a finger across Nicky’s cheek.

“Yes, it is. Tell her,” Lottie demanded, and he laughed.

“I repaired the flyer.”

“I see.”

She wasn’t really surprised. Even without most of the equipment on the ship, Nicholas was endlessly resourceful. And he had not come to her completely empty-handed. He had kept the replicator and had set up a small but profitable business providing custom glass.

He had also kept the medical unit. While she had still been worrying about how to introduce him slowly to the village, he had walked into the market square with his customary arrogance and placed the machine on a pedestal. He then announced that he would render what medical assistance he



could provide to the villagers - without charge. Perhaps not surprisingly, they had slowly but surely welcomed him into their midst. By the time their son was born, no one even blinked an eye at the small nubs of his horns.

Since Lottie continued to refer to him frequently as Santa, she sometimes suspected that many of the villagers half-believed he was the embodiment of the legend. He did nothing to discourage their belief. Last night had been the Longest Night and with Lottie's encouragement, he had dressed in his red thermal suit and visited the village. Every house that placed an offering of cookies and milk on the doorstep had received a small present, and he had returned home smiling.

Now she gave him a thoughtful frown.

"Why did you repair the flyer? I hope you don't have any more underwater trips planned?"

He gave an exaggerated shudder. "No. The last one was more than enough. I was thinking about the journey to the mountains we discussed."

They had sent out cautious inquiries with both the spring and fall caravans, and he was convinced that his former rival had ended up in a small mountain village. Unfortunately, given her pregnancy, he hadn't wanted to risk the long journey. But with the flyer, it wouldn't take more than a few hours.

"When did you want to go?"

"Whenever you are ready to accompany me."

"Me too," Lottie said immediately.

"Of course, little one. We are a family - we stay together."

Jenna studied his face. "And you're still sure you want to do this?"

"Yes. I have to apologize."

"All right. Then, if the weather holds, let's go tomorrow."

THE NEXT DAY, NICHOLAS BROUGHT THE FLYER IN FOR A landing just outside their destination. If his information was correct, his former rival lived in the small nearby village with

his mate and children. The fact that Krampasarian also seemed to have formed a family bond had helped convince him to take this step.

“Now what?” Jenna asked quietly.

“Now we wait and see if he decides to approach us.” He pointed to a small red avian perched on a nearby branch. “I suspect that the drone is surveying us.”

“That’s a drone?” She shook her head. “I’ll never get used to that.”

Nutty chattered softly from his position on Lottie’s lap.

A few minutes later, Krampasarian appeared at the edge of the trees. He was as elegant and imposing as ever, and Nicholas felt his body tighten. Jenna squeezed his hand, and then he forced himself to climb out of the flyer and lean casually against the vehicle.

“Commander Krampasarian.”

“Ambassador Nicholsarian. At least, I assume it is ambassador now?”

He had almost forgotten the title, even though it had seemed so important in his previous life.

“Yes, I was the ambassador, although I am sure that I have been replaced by now. Jackasarian was always eager to follow in my footsteps.”

“Indeed.”

Silence fell between them until he straightened and took a deep breath.

“I came to apologize. I am responsible for the damage to your ship. I only intended to cause a delay, but it is my fault you crashed.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Yes. I came looking for you and I... crashed also.”

Krampasarian raised an eyebrow. “You came looking for me?”

“I was concerned.”

“I must say I did not expect that.”

Even now, the other male clearly thought little of him. Keeping his face impassive, he nodded.

“I understand. I will not trouble you any longer, but again, my sincere apologies.”

As he turned back to the flyer, Lottie’s head suddenly popped up. His family had agreed to wait in the vehicle while he talked to the other male, but apparently her impatience had gotten the better of her.

“Where’s his family, Daddy?”

Before he could decide how to explain to her that they were not welcome, he heard Krampasarian start to laugh. He turned back in time to see the other male pointing at the woods. Two small figures were clearly visible amongst the trees.

“It appears that our children are equally curious. You had better come to the house.”

“You are inviting me to your residence?”

“Of course. I do not like to disappoint my children and - I thank you for coming.”

To his astonishment, Krampasarian extended his hand in the human gesture of friendship. He grasped it in return and the nagging ache that had haunted him for so long finally subsided.

LATER THAT EVENING, HE AND KRAMPASARIAN SAT ON THE porch, watching the children play in the enclosed courtyard. Jaelle, Krampasarian’s mate, had insisted that they spend the night and she and Jenna were inside with the babies. They had decided to give the older children a chance to burn off some of their excess energy before bedtime.

“You were alone on your ship?” Krampasarian asked suddenly, breaking the surprisingly comfortable silence.

“Of course. Why?”

“It is probably nothing - I am sure you have discovered by now that the communication methods on this planet can be...

challenging. It's just that I heard rumors of a horned warrior last winter, but I thought they came from the North, not down by the coast." Krampasarian shrugged. "As I said, communication can be difficult."

A peal of childish laughter rang out and they looked up to see the children, plus Robin and Nutty, begin a complicated game of chase. Lottie stumbled, and he immediately started to climb to his feet, but before he could leave his chair, Whit had helped her regain her footing. She beamed up at him, then darted off again with Whit close behind.

"Your son seems very fascinated by my daughter," he observed, not entirely sure he approved.

"I suspect it is mutual." Krampasarian's eyes followed the children. "He is a good child - he will not allow anything to happen to her. Are you aware of his background?"

"I assumed he belonged to your mate."

"No. He and his sister were orphans."

His body tensed automatically, but he did his best to keep his face impassive as the other male continued.

"I am very proud of him. He worked hard and did whatever was necessary to provide for his sister." His former rival turned to look at him directly. "Just as I suspect you did."

"I did not have a sister."

"No, but you had to support yourself without assistance from those who should have cared for you." Krampasarian sighed. "I do not think I fully appreciated that while we were at school."

"You did not treat me poorly," he admitted for the first time. "I was just very conscious that I did not come from the same background."

"You may find this difficult to believe, but although I never lacked for material things, it was not a happy childhood. Jaelle and the children have taught me what really matters."

"Just as Jenna and Lottie taught me. Do you think Tandroki society will ever change?"

“Perhaps, but I am not Moroz. I have no burning passion to make them see the errors of their ways. I am happy here.”

“Just as well,” Jaelle said cheerfully as she appeared and handed Krampasarian a very sticky infant. “Because your son discovered the honey Jenna was nice enough to bring us and now he needs another bath.”

Krampasarian smiled up at his mate. “I am sure Puppy would be happy to lick him clean.” The huge dire wolf was close behind the child.

“I’m sure he would, but no. Bath, and then bed. For all of them.” Jaelle looked over at him as Jenna appeared, their sleepy son snuggled in her arms. “We’ve put a bed for Lottie in Cinna’s room and we thought we’d put Nicky in with Anak.”

Which meant he would be alone with his mate for the first time since the baby was born. He shot a glance at Jenna and she smiled, a slow, seductive smile.

“Definitely time for bed,” he agreed, rising to his feet. “Can I assist?”

EVEN WITH FOUR ADULTS TO HELP, IT TOOK A LONG TIME TO settle the excited children, but at last the house was quiet and he was alone with his mate. Jaelle had apologized for the size of their guest room, but as long as Jenna was in his arms, he didn’t care.

“Do you think he’ll make it through the night?” Jenna whispered as she snuggled into his arms.

“I think it extremely unlikely.”

“Then we’d better take advantage of our time until then.” Her fingers skated down his stomach, leaving a trail of fire behind.

“Definitely,” he agreed as he bent to kiss her.

By the time he lifted his head, she was arching her body impatiently against him.

“We have been so busy that I have not had a chance to tell you about Lottie’s letter to Santa this year,” he said solemnly.

“That’s what you want to talk about? Now?” She tried to tug him back down, but he resisted.

“I think it’s relevant.”

She sighed. “If you insist. What did she want?”

“A baby sister,” he whispered.

Her body froze, and he waited anxiously.

“And what does Santa think of that idea?” she asked finally.

“He thinks it would be a perfect present.”

Her hands came up to circle the sensitive base of his horns.

“Then Santa had better get to work.”

Happiness filled him as he obeyed - and nine months later, Lottie’s wish came true.



## CHAPTER 1



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

which seemed entirely possible—at least he would be doing it on his own terms. He slipped into the trees.

## CHAPTER 2



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where you going, girl?”

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

"I'm fine."

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

"I... My sister..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He backhanded her.

“I said it’s too dangerous.”

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

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

“Ghosts? You can’t be serious.”

The old woman shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

“Time to go,” she whispered.

## CHAPTER 3



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

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

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

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

“Father has decided to marry me off.”

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

“No. He wasn’t a nice man.”

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

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

“Who was it?”

“Guyten.”

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

*That bastard.* She gave her sister a quick hug.

“I’m very glad you didn’t take it.”

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

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

“So where are we going?”

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

“Do you believe her?”

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

Merry bit her lip, then squeezed her hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## CHAPTER 4



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I will call you Keffi,” he announced.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER 5



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

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

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

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

hurt, her back ached, and the cold wind was giving her a headache.

She came to a sudden stop, fisting her hands on her hips as she glared at her sister.

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

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

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

Katerina sighed and put her arms around her sister.

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

Merry tightened her arms around Katerina’s waist.

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

“Neither do I.”

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

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

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

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

Her sister nodded eagerly.

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

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

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

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

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

A glacier, she decided, awed at the power that had ripped away the side of the mountains and formed that smooth sheet of ice. A small collection of stone buildings huddled at the base of the glacier, partially ruined, but surprisingly intact considering their obvious age. The sight of them teased her memory, but it took her a moment before she realized why they look so familiar. She was more accustomed to wooden or



even stucco buildings, and on a much smaller scale, but there was no doubt. This had been a trading post.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I suppose.”

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

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

“I’ll come with you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right. Show me the way.”

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

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

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

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

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

Katerina burst into tears.

## CHAPTER 6



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The two females clung together.

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

*Katerina.*

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

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

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

Katerina sighed and patted her sister's arm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But how did you get here?"

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

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

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

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

He turned back, his young face anguished.

"He had them locked up in his wagon."

One of the twins whimpered.

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

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

"You thayed with uth."

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

"Ghost Valley?" Merry asked.

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

Johnny shook his head.

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



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

Katerina bit her lip, looking around at the children.

"What about food?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'll help you," Merry volunteered.

Katerina opened her mouth, but Johnny beat her to it.

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

Merry glared at him, but Katerina laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you want to wash?” she asked.

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

“Good night, sweetheart.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He smiled, and then the world went dark.

## CHAPTER 7



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and came over to tug at her pants as it had done the previous night.

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

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

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

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

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

“You,” she whispered.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Will you help me get him there?”

“I guess.”

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

“He’s so handsome. Who is he?”

Johnny scowled at her.

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

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

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

Johnny stopped glaring at Merry, and nodded.

“Yeah, this way.”

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

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

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

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

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

He was unconscious again, but she managed to swing his legs up on the bed before covering him with another fur. She wished she knew what she could do to help him, but he looked strangely peaceful, more like he was sleeping than

unconscious, and his breathing was steady enough. Maybe all she could do was wait. She reluctantly left the room, and Johnny immediately started to close the door.

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER 8



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

*Katerina.*

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

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

“Hello. I’m Lorna. Who are you?”

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

Her eyes widened

“Jack Froth? Did you bring the winter?”

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

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

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

“I hath to tell Theethee.”

She dashed back to the doorway.

“He’th awake. Jack Froth ith awake.”

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

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

A Tandroki warrior never admitted weakness.

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

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

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

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

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

“Of course he’s not faking it.”

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

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

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

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

Her eyes widened, and then she smiled at him.

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

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

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

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

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

“That would be acceptable.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Here’s the water.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

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

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

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

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

“I can—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## CHAPTER 9



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is it really almost the Longest Night?”

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

“Yes, I think so. In another week.”

Cecelia looked even more distressed.

“But how will Santa find us?”

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

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

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

“Really?”

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

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

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

“It will when he doesn’t show up.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You do not wish to raise my head?”

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

“Do you need help?”

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

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

“You look a little better.”

“The Tandroki heal swiftly.”

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

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

“And where is Tandrok?”

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

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

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

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

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

It was his turn to study her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He gave that stiff, painful nod again.

“Have you been stalking us?”

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

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

“But you still hid from us.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I already did that.”

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

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

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

“Go ahead and eat.”

“Thank you, zersetta.”

“What did you call me?”

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

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

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

“Oh, yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

She shuddered.

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

“I believe it is far from basic.”

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

“Is that all right? Are you cold?”

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

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

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

“Why is that strange?”

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

“Perhaps they intended to return.”

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

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

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

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

“Never underestimate a Tandroki warrior.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

"I can do that."

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

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

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

## CHAPTER 10



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That wath a great thory,” Lorna said.

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

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

Cecelia's small hand touched his arm. "You can tell that one again."

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

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

"But we hugged him loth," Lorna protested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I would not lie to you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I suppose you could say that. It's my father."

"You are fleeing your male parent?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I... I...”

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

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

## CHAPTER 11



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

“Why are you blushing?”

“I’m not blushing. The stove is hot.”

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

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

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

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

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

Merry nodded eagerly.



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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, sweetheart. Do you mind?”

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

Two dolls, she decided immediately.

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

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

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

The two had been fighting ever since they arrived.

“I don’t know. He just annoys me.”

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

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

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

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

Oops. Merry scowled at her.

“I could do that.”

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

“Maybe.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your sister says you need my help.”

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

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

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

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

He immediately scowled and crossed his arms.

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

“I understand that.”

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

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

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

“A cave?”

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

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

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

He flushed and looked away, kicking at the floor.

“Don’t know. Can’t read.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But it's the holidays.”

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

“You don't have our school stuff.”

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

“Really?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Great Houses?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He tilted his head, considering.

“She’s an attractive child and will no doubt become an attractive adult. But you, zereetta, have a far rarer and more exquisite allure.”

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

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

Warmth heated her cheeks.

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

“I do not need to, but I want to.”

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

“What is this?”

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

“You made this? For me? But how?”

“Keffi retrieved my bag for me.”

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

“And this was in there?”

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

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

“That’s amazing. Can I see?”

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

and her breath caught in astonishment.

“You really are Jack Frost.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But you are still leaving me.”

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

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

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

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



## CHAPTER 12



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

“No. Who are you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh yeah? What do you usually do?”

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

“What kind of training?”

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

“Warrior training.”

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

“That sounds kind of cool.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How did you sleep?"

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

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

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

"I am well."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I want to kiss you,” he interrupted.

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

“I want to kiss you too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Umm, maybe just the top part.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you not enjoying—”

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

“So close to what?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It usually means only our mouths meeting.”

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

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

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

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

And that night he didn’t dream at all.

## CHAPTER 13



“*T* here you are.”

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

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

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

“Not yet,” Jack said from behind her.

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

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

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

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

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

“Why didn’t you just let me get up?”

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

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

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

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

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

His amusement vanished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

He laughed and threw up his hands.

"You are correct as always, zereetta."

Oh, Lord, the children.

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

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

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

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

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

"Your blouse is buttoned wrong."

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

"And your hair is a mess."

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

“I started the oatmeal,” Merry volunteered.

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

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

“Ain’t hungry.”

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

“Whath the matter with Johnny?”

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

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

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

Lorna beamed up at him with her gap-toothed smile.

“Are you all better, Jack Froth?”

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

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

Dammit, the annoying heat was back in her cheeks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You're hurt. What happened?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I would also enjoy something special."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I see you do have some technology.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That has been my experience as well.”

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

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

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

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

“What do you mean?”

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

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

“And your mother?”

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

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

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

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

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

“There are additional supplies over here.”

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

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

“I am at your service.”

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

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



## CHAPTER 14



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

“We will have to remain here.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boy scoffed, his face pale with anguish.

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

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

“No!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you going to keep training me?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He will be perfectly fine.”

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

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

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

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

“You? Why?”

“So I would have received your kiss.”

Her cheeks turned pink as she shook her head.

“You had lots of kisses last night.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I think there is another cave back there.”

“That's nice,” she said doubtfully.

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

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

“I will make sure of it.”

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

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

“Perhaps.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you going to join me?”

“Yes.”

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

“Remove the shirt,” he growled.

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

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

“Oh my.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I am no longer interested in bathing.”

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

“I want everything.”

“So do I. Make love to me, Jack.”

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

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

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

"Are you having second thoughts?"

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

"Good. Because I don't want you to stop." Her lips curved again. "Or maybe I do want you to stop thinking and just kiss me."

He pushed all of his worries about the future aside and bent down and kissed her. She accepted him willingly, her small, perfect tongue stroking his. But although his urgency had not vanished, neither had his desire to appreciate every moment. He lingered over the kiss until she was writhing restlessly beneath him, and then he cupped her breast, tugging at the taut, rosy peak.

"You are very sensitive here," he murmured as he trailed his lips down her throat and across to the tempting bud.

"I guess so," she whispered, and then cried out as he wrapped his tongue around her nipple and tugged.

*Very sensitive.* He lingered over her breasts as well, but his urgency was building and he ran his hand across the slight swell of her stomach and down, delighting in the soft damp curls that clung to his fingers. His hand slid lower, through the heated, delicate folds, seeking the entrance to her body. Small, so small, and yet it accepted his finger eagerly, the wet kiss of her flesh surrounding him in a teasing promise of what was to come.

He found the spot he had discovered the previous night, a swollen pearl of flesh that quivered beneath his touch. He felt her body stiffen, and then her back arched, drawing more of

his finger into her delectable cunt, pulsing around it in rhythmic waves.

She cried out as her body shook, and either by accident or design, her hands came up to clutch at the base of his horns. Desire roared through him, and his desire to take his time disappeared. He rose over her, his cock notched at that small entrance as he looked down at her. Even in the dimness, he could tell her cheeks were flushed, but she smiled at him and brought her legs up to circle his waist, pulling him closer.

With a helpless thrust, he obeyed, sinking into the hottest, tightest, silkiest haven he had ever dared to imagine. Her body resisted, but even if he could have found the strength to withdraw, those long legs tightened, urging him on as he sank deeper and deeper until their bodies touched.

He shuddered, his whole body urging him to move, but he could feel her channel fluttering around him, trying to adjust, and he forced himself to remain still. Her eyes were bright—too bright, he suspected—but her smile was even brighter.

“You are well?” he managed to ask between gritted teeth.

“I’ve never been better.”

Her body tightened around his cock in a long, deliberate pulse, and all possibility of restraint vanished. He roared, the way his primitive ancestors would have roared, and thrust. He pulled her hips closer, lost in the ancient, primal need to claim his mate, plunging harder and harder into her welcoming body. He heard her cry out, felt the pulsing wave surrounding him again, and it only spurred him on. He buried his face in her neck, the sweet taste of her skin adding to his arousal. As lightning streaked down his spine and his cock exploded in wave after wave of liquid heat, he buried his teeth in her neck.

Marking her.

Claiming her.

Mating her.



## CHAPTER 15



Katerina gasped as Jack's teeth sank into her neck, the fiery spike of pain immediately followed by a pleasure so intense that she found herself climaxing yet again, their bodies pulsing together. He collapsed down over her as the waves gradually faded, his limp weight warm and comforting, and she put her arms around his neck, holding him tightly.

She had never known, never had any idea that a sexual encounter could be so overwhelming—and perhaps it couldn't have been with anyone else. She ran her fingers through the thick silk of his hair as his breathing slowly steadied. His mouth moved against her neck in a curiously ticklish motion before he suddenly raised his head, his face appalled.

"I bit you. I marked you."

"I did notice." The stern mask began to cross his face, and she tugged lightly on his hair. "It's fine. I didn't mind at all. In fact, it was kind of exciting."

She shivered in remembered pleasure, and the movement reverberated through their still joined bodies. His eyes heated, going back to the bite mark.

"It requires tending."

"I suppose so."

She assumed he meant that the wound would need washing, but instead he bent his head and began licking the mark. An unexpected streak of desire speared through her. It almost felt as if he were licking her clit instead of simply her neck, and

she found herself tightening around him. He groaned, and she felt his cock flex and begin to harden. He lifted his head, an odd look on his face.

“I have heard of such things, but I did not believe them to be true.”

“What things?”

He hesitated, then slipped free of her body and rolled to his back, pulling her against his side.

“The Tandroki have a turbulent history. We were always fierce fighters, too fierce, but the Prophet Moroz taught us the value of restraint and control. This type of mark is from those earlier times, but Moroz argued against it and it is no longer practiced.”

“What does it mean?” she whispered.

He hesitated for a long moment, and she could feel the tension in his body.

“It is a mating mark,” he said at last, his voice absolutely neutral.

Did he sound like that because he regretted what he had done? Or because he was afraid she would reject him? The thought that he had claimed her warmed her heart, but her practical side still wondered if there was any future for them. Knowing that she was being cowardly, she chose not to respond to his comment. Instead, she sat up and smiled at him.

“I believe you promised me a bath.”

The stern look vanished, and he smiled back.

“I did indeed.”

He rose to his feet with that shockingly fluid grace, lifted her into his arms, and then jumped into the pool with her. Her head went beneath the water and she popped back up, laughing and spluttering.

“That wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

“You said you wished to bathe. I was simply ensuring that you were completely wet,” he said innocently.

“I suppose I can’t argue with that.”

The pool was not quite as deep as it first seemed, and Jack found a rocky outcropping at the right height for a bench, then pulled her down onto his lap. She went willingly, snuggling against his chest. They sat in silence as the water trickled down around them.

“You know, you never told me what you’re doing here in this valley,” she murmured at last.

He sighed.

“I told you that the ship on which I arrived crashed, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Afterwards, I searched for any signs of technology. There were a number of small signals, but they were very—”

“Let me guess—primitive?”

He tried to suppress his laugh, but she could feel it reverberating in his chest.

“As you say, primitive. Or at least not sufficient to leave the planet.”

Her heart skipped a beat as she waited for him to continue.

“But there was another signal, a much stronger signal. I suspect it could have been made by another ship.”

“Another wreck, you mean?” she asked hopefully.

“Probably. But it was possible that I could repair it using the nanites.”

“You couldn’t repair your own ship?”

He stiffened again, but she waited patiently.

“It was not my ship,” he said at last. “It belongs to Ambassador Nicholsarian. I have no doubt that he will repair it and leave this planet with all due haste.”

“Without you? Why?”

“I was not invited on board,” he blurted out. “I told you that I was not a proper Tandroki warrior.”

“You mean you were a stowaway? In hiding?”

“I am afraid so. I know that such behavior is unacceptable. I should have told you sooner, and I will understand if you wish to leave me.”

His voice was cold and formal once more, but she knew him well enough now to hear that note of desolation beneath the formality.

“First of all, I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to because of the storm. But I don’t want to, Jack. It wouldn’t have made any difference to me earlier and it makes no difference to me now. I’m not concerned about the past. All that matters to me is the way you are with me and with the children. As far as I’m concerned you are the finest example of a Tandroki warrior.”

His breath caught, and then he was kissing her, urgently, frantically, his amazingly talented tongue reawakening her arousal. Their bodies slid together beneath the water, and he made an impatient noise then carried her back out of the pool and laid her down on the moss once more. His mouth moved to her neck, licking and sucking at the still swollen bite mark and sending flames of desire straight to her aching clit.

He moved to her breasts and this was no gentle, thorough exploration. His mouth was hot and hard and demanding, sucking and tugging until her nipples were swollen and distended before moving between her legs and impatiently pushing her thighs apart. He growled, and then his mouth descended over her clit, his tongue wrapping around the aching bud, and the world sheeted white as she came in wave after helpless wave of pleasure.

He sent her flying straight into another climax before thrusting his tongue inside her, eagerly lapping at the signs of her arousal and stroking the sensitive insides of her channel. A third climax hovered just out of reach, and then he was gone.

She cried out in protest, and he returned, spearing her with his cock in one long, powerful thrust. His face hovered over her, handsome, alien, and beloved, the gleam of the plants reflecting on those towering horns as he drove into her

helpless body. All she could do was cling to him as he drew yet another climax from her before his own overtook him.

Once again, he buried his face in her neck, not to bite, but to lick slowly and sensually at the mark he had left. Her lips curved in an unexpected rush of happiness as she hugged him against her.

“Now I need another bath,” she murmured teasingly, and he raised his head and smiled down at her.

“Then you shall have it.”

He carried her back to the pool, entering more circumspectly this time, and they snuggled together in the warm swirling water. There was no soap, of course, but one of the plants had a pleasant herbal smell and a slippery sap that left her skin feeling cool and refreshed as they finally returned to the bed of moss.

She expected to fall asleep immediately, but found her mind returning to the children. Despite sending Keffi with their message, she couldn't help but worry about them.

“How long do you think the storm will last?” she asked.

“I don't know, but I suspect that means you wish me to check.”

“Would you mind? If it wasn't for the children, I would be perfectly happy to remain here, but I can't help being concerned.”

“I understand. I will return shortly.”

She watched regretfully as he pulled his white garment back on, kissed her, and disappeared out of the cave. He was as good as his word, returning almost immediately.

“Night has fallen, but the storm has passed. Shall we go home?”

*Home.* She smiled up at him.

“Yes, please.”

“Very well.”

He pulled at her feet and insisted on helping her dress, thereby lengthening the process considerably since he insisted on kissing each part of her body before covering it with clothing. When she was finally fully dressed, and decidedly aroused, he grinned down at her.

“I’m giving you fair warning. I am telling the children that you are very tired and that you will be sleeping with me tonight.”

She suspected she should object, but she only smiled at him. However much time they had left together, she meant to enjoy every minute.

## CHAPTER 16



Katerina could hear Merry and Johnny arguing before they even opened the door.

“I don’t care!” Merry said, and Katerina was quite sure she stomped her foot. “If you won’t go after them, I will.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Johnny said firmly. “You read your sister’s note. She said they were safe and were going to wait in the cave until the storm passed.”

“But the storm stopped ages ago.” Merry’s voice trembled. “What if she’s hurt?”

She winced. They probably should have checked the weather earlier.

“It hasn’t been very long,” Johnny said. “I’m sure they’re all right.”

There was a muffled sob, and she quickly opened the door to find Merry sobbing in Johnny’s arms. He gave her a helpless look as she rushed over and pulled her sister into her own arms.

“It’s all right, Merry. Everything’s all right.”

“Oh, thank goodness. I was so worried. I tried to keep busy by cooking supper, but even that didn’t work,” Merry ended on a wail.

Based on the rather burnt looking remnants in the pan, she couldn’t argue, but she hugged her sister again.

“Never mind. We brought lots of things back with us.”

The other children were already clustered around Jack as he hauled the sled in through the door.

“Wow,” Lorna whispered, her eyes wide. “What did you get?”

“All kinds of things. We’ll have a special dinner tomorrow night for Longest Night, and then a real feast the next day.” She looked around at the hopeful faces, including Jack’s, and laughed. “But for tonight, how about some hot chocolate?”

The children only looked confused, and she realized they’d probably never had it, but Merry gave them an encouraging smile.

“You’ll like it. It’s so good.”

As she picked out the ingredients and set the water on to boil, she saw Jack murmur a few words to Johnny. The boy’s shoulders straightened, and he beamed proudly. She was happy to see that they seem to have reached an understanding. She finished making the hot chocolate, and handed it out in their collection of mismatched mugs. Lorna took a cautious sip, then beamed at her.

“Thith ith very good.”

The twins were too busy drinking to say anything, but their wide chocolate-ringed grins signified their approval. Johnny gave her a complimentary nod, while Jack smiled at her. After washing the twins’ faces, she settled them into their bunk, her heart aching as each of them in turn put their arms around her neck and hugged her.

“Night, Mama Kat,” Cece whispered, her eyes already closing. Lorna soon followed the twins, but Merry was too excited to sleep, chattering cheerfully for a long time before she finally wound down.

“Go to bed, sweetheart. We have a lot to do tomorrow.”

“But no lessons, right? Not on the Longest Night?”

“I suppose not. They can wait a few days.”

Merry cheered, hugged her, threw her arms around Jack’s waist, then headed up the ladder to the loft.



“I don’t mind doing lessons,” Johnny muttered.

“Good, then we’ll spend some time on that in the morning. I just hope your example will rub off on Merry.”

He blushed, looking absurdly young, then nodded.

“I’ll do what I can.”

“I know you will.”

“Time for bed,” Jack said and held out his hand to her.

She didn’t hesitate to take it, but Johnny frowned at their joined hands. He bit his lip, then looked up at her.

“Jack said it was your choice, but is it truly?”

“Yes, Johnny,” she said softly. “But thank you for checking.”

She suspected he would not appreciate it, but she bent down and gently kissed his cheek. “Good night, sweetheart.”

The astonishment on his face nearly broke her heart, but she did her best not to let it show as she followed Jack into his room. *Our room*. The thought gave her a warm glow, even as she continued to worry about Johnny.

“You think he’ll be all right?”

He didn’t pretend to misunderstand.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “He is already an honorable male. He simply requires guidance to make sure that he remains on the right path.”

“Guidance from someone like you,” she said softly.

“I am not sure that I am worthy.”

“Nonsense. I don’t think he could have a finer mentor.” She bit her lip, then blurted out, “Can you stay? I know not forever, but maybe for the winter? We have everything we need here, and I can take care of the children and you can help Johnny and—”

“I will stay as long as you need me,” he said, interrupting the wild rush of words.

He had not said forever, but then neither had she, and she didn't quite have the courage to ask.

And perhaps it didn't matter. The winter months stretched out in front of them, and they would be together—together as a family. She slowly removed her clothes, and despite the arousal tingling through her body, it already felt familiar, even comfortable to climb into bed with him and nestle against his side. He kissed her, and then made love to her with a slow, gentle persistence that finally rocked her into a shattering climax. She snuggled against him, content to know that they were together and they would remain together through the long cold winter months.

When she woke up in the morning, he was gone.

Despite her disappointment at waking up alone, she wasn't particularly concerned. *It would be just like him to let me sleep late*, she thought with a smile as she climbed out of bed and pulled on her clothes. Shuddering at the thought of the cold water in the bathroom, she walked out into the main room only to find it silent. Everyone was still asleep except for Johnny. He was bent over her book, his mouth moving as he attempted to sound out the letters.

“Good morning,” she whispered. “Have you seen Jack?”

He shook his head.

“He wasn't here when I woke up.”

That was odd. It seemed so unlike him to leave without a word to anyone. Perhaps he'd gone to check on the weather. Or maybe he'd decided to return to the cavern for additional supplies, but no, the sled was still next to the door.

Having discovered a cache of tea bags in the supply cavern, she put some water on to boil, then began on breakfast. By the time it was ready and all the children were awake, Jack still had not returned.

“Whereth Jack Froth, Mama Kat?” Lorna asked, frowning.

“I don't know, sweetheart. Maybe he's training.”

But although her answer seemed to appease the little girl, Katerina found herself too agitated to eat. She went to the door for the third time that morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, but the snow remained smooth and undisturbed. Where the hell was he? Had he been lying to her all this time and now that he'd gotten what he wanted, he'd taken off? *No*. She refused to believe that. She remembered the reverence with which he touched her, the combination of gentleness and passion in his kiss, and shook her head.

She was about to close the door again when Keffi came skittering around the corner and raced towards her. He clung to her leg, chirping anxiously as he tugged on the fabric. He was acting the same way he had when he'd wanted her to follow him to find Merry.

"What is it?" she asked, bending down. "Do you know where Jack is?"

He squeaked, tugging on her leg again, and her heart skipped a beat. There was no message tied to his fur, but something had to be seriously wrong.

"I need to get ready," she told him and hurried back inside with him following anxiously.

"I have to go and find Jack," she whispered to Johnny, pulling him aside. "I don't know what happened, but something is wrong."

"I'll go," he said immediately.

"No, I'd much rather you stay here with the children. I'm sorry to have to ask again so soon after last night—"

"Don't be silly," he said impatiently. "Of course I'll take care of everyone." He hesitated, then pressed his knife into her hand. "Take this with you. Just in case."

"What if you need it?"

"We'll stay inside, with the door barred. We'll be fine."

She was tempted to argue, but the knife did make her feel better and she had the sudden feeling she was running out of time. She went to her sister next.

“Merry, I have to go after Jack. I want you to stay here and help Johnny take care of the children. Can you do that for me?”

For a moment, Merry’s lip trembled, but then her expression turned serious and Katerina had a brief glimpse of the woman her sister would grow into as she nodded.

“We’ll look after them. But please hurry back. And bring Jack with you.”

“I have every intention of doing so.”

She gave her sister an all too brief hug, wrapped her cloak around her shoulders, picked up the clearly anxious Keffi, and slipped out the door.

As soon as they were outside, she put Keffi down and he immediately took off. At first, she thought he was heading in the direction of the supply cavern and all kinds of dreadful scenarios raced through her head. Had Jack slipped, fallen? Had one of those racks fallen on him? The vision of him bleeding on the cavern floor haunted her as she did her best to increase her pace.

But instead of heading for the cavern, Keffi continued to the base of the glacier, climbing nimbly up through the assortment of rock and ice that had formed where it reached the valley floor.

What on Earth would Jack have been doing up there? But despite the questions filling her head, she didn’t hesitate to follow the pika. She was nowhere near as nimble as he was, but she managed to make her way over the mound of debris at the base of the glacier. Once she was on the slope above it, the path was smoother. Twice she thought she saw footprints, but she couldn’t be entirely sure. Life in the caravan had not required her to learn tracking skills, and she was forced to place all her faith in Keffi.

She bit her lips as they approached the wall of ice, wondering how she could climb over it, but it was not as solid as it appeared and Keffi led her behind the ice. The atmosphere immediately changed. She had grown used to the unusual

silence of the valley, but here the silence seemed to carry an almost physical weight, pressing against her as she followed Keffi. The path began to climb, even smoother now and obviously not natural.

Had the original colonists done this? Had they created this secret passageway into the heart of the glacier? But then they came around a massive pillar of ice and she knew that no human could ever have created what awaited her. A towering castle of ice with strange, angular walls filled the space behind the glacier. It fitted so seamlessly with the surrounding ice that it could almost have been a natural phenomenon except for the straight lines and rigid angles.

Keffi chirped impatiently, perched in what was all too clearly a massive doorway that reared far over his head. He looked like the little boy in the fairytale, about to enter the giant's castle. Had Jack entered it? He must have done, but why?

"It's just an empty castle," she whispered to herself, but the silence seemed to swallow her words.

Gritting her teeth, she thought of Jack, and she passed through the doorway.

The ice palace was divided into smaller rooms, or at least chambers. All of them were empty, only the tall, perfectly smooth walls of ice defining the spaces, but she held onto the hope that Jack was somewhere in the vast maze of ice. Keffi led her through the passages, climbing steadily higher and higher. *We must be at least halfway up the mountainside by now*, she thought, although the deceptive sameness of the endless rooms and long passageways made it difficult to be sure. But then Keffi chirped and increased his speed. She followed him, her heart thudding painfully against her chest as he led her into another room, and this one was not empty.

The room was oddly like the one of which she had dreamed, with tall gleaming walls of blue ice and in the center of the room a raised dais heaped with white furs. Jack was sprawled on his back in the middle of the furs, his body unmoving except for an occasional shudder that rippled over him. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling overhead, unseeing.

She knew it might be a trap, but she didn't care, sliding across the ice in her haste to get to him.

"Jack. Jack!" she cried desperately. "Look at me!"

He didn't respond, and she grabbed his shoulders. His skin was as firm and smooth as ever but horribly cold beneath her fingers. Ignoring the chill, she shook him frantically. Keffi jumped up on the bed, chirping at him, but he didn't respond to either of them.

"Jack," she sobbed. "What's wrong? Who did this to you?"

She kissed him, but he did not respond to that either, his mouth cold and still beneath hers. Tears dripped down her cheeks as she bent over him.

"Please come back to me. I love you."

More tears fell, and one of them splashed into those blind, unseeing eyes. He shuddered again, and then his eyes came alive, immediately focusing on her face.

"I love you too."

## CHAPTER 17



Jack searched for Katerina. He could hear her calling him, knew that she needed him, but he was surrounded by a thick white fog and couldn't reach her. He tried, over and over again, growing increasingly more frantic, but then there was a break in the fog, a spot that glowed with a warm golden light, and he raced towards it. As he reached it, he fell, tumbling over and over, and then he landed, back in his own body with his female bending over him, tears on her beautiful face as she whispered that she loved him.

"I love you too."

His voice sounded odd, as strained as if he'd gone for days without food or drink, but she didn't seem to care. She gave a joyous cry, and then she was kissing him, her mouth sweet and delicious against his. But despite that, it took all of his strength to respond to her. He couldn't even lift his arms to hold her against him.

She drew back, her face worried.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I feel weak," he admitted.

Despite the worry he could see in her eyes, she smiled at him.

"At least that's a change from well, although not in the right direction. Do you think you can sit up?"

He tried flexing his hand, and to his relief it responded. His arms took longer, but eventually they too moved, and with her

help he managed to sit upright. His head spun dizzily, but it was much better than lying helplessly on the... bed?

“Where am I?”

“In an ice palace behind the glacier.”

“How did I get here? How do you get here?”

“I’m here because Keffi brought me.” She hugged the small creature fiercely. “Thank goodness. He showed up wanting me to follow him. But I have no idea how you got here. What do you remember?”

“I’m not sure.”

He frowned, trying to remember. At first, the only thing he could remember was the white fog, but before that... yes, before that he’d been dreaming. Dreaming about Katerina. She’d called to him, saying that she needed him and he had been helpless to resist. He’d followed her, although he had no idea where he had gone, only aware that she was just out of reach.

“I dreamed that you were calling for me,” he said slowly. “But even in my dream, something about it felt wrong.”

He shuddered as another memory resurfaced. Of being here on this bed with the female who looked like Katerina but was not. She tried to kiss him, and he pushed her away. She laughed, revealing a mouthful of decidedly nonhuman teeth, and shrugged.

“If you prefer it that way, Tandroki.”

The strange female laughed again and disappeared, leaving him lying on the bed of furs. He was fully dressed, but he felt as if hundreds of cold mouths were pressed against his skin, sucking the energy from him until the white fog took him.

“There’s someone else here, isn’t there?” she whispered. “This place isn’t empty.”

“No, it is not. And whoever is here is not from this world. She knew that I was a Tandroki warrior.”

They stared at each other, and then she nodded slowly.



“Remember what we were saying about the planet being unlucky? My ancestor’s ship crashed. Your ambassador’s ship crashed. Maybe someone else did as well.”

“I believe you are correct.”

“But who could it be?”

He searched his memory, even though his mind too seemed oddly lethargic. He was sure he had heard of a similar situation.

“The Fereg,” he said finally. “They are a parasitic race who exist on the energy of others. According to the information I received, they did not always kill those from whom they fed, but I suspect that here that may have changed.”

Her face was pale, but she nodded. “That makes sense, especially with almost no one using this pass anymore. We need to get out of here.”

“Yes,” he said immediately. “You should go.”

“What do you mean *I* should go? What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to confront the Fereg. I cannot allow it to continue to drain your people.”

“You can’t. You can barely stand. And what if it’s not alone?”

“They travel alone, otherwise they would try to feed off each other.”

She shuddered, then gave him a brave smile.

“I understand why you need to do something, but why not wait until you’re stronger?”

“It has to be now. We are already deep inside her lair. And my strength is returning rapidly.”

That was true enough, although he was still a long way from peak condition. He also did not share his other concern. The Fereg had reached him in his sleep, calling to him when he was most vulnerable. If she had done it once, what was there to prevent her from doing it again? No, he couldn’t take the chance.

“All right then. I’m going with you.”

“Zeretta, you’re very brave, but you are not a warrior.”

“I know that, and I promise to stay out of your way if there’s a... battle.” Her voice broke on the last word, but she hurried on. “But I thought I lost you. I can’t go through that again, not knowing where you are or what’s happening. I’m coming with you.”

Even though he was concerned for her safety, he found he was equally reluctant to lose sight of her, afraid he’d end up back in the fog searching for her.

“Very well.”

He rose to his feet, but although he managed to stand, his legs immediately threatened to give out on him. Katerina wedged herself under his arm just as she had done in the bedroom what felt like a lifetime ago.

“Just as well I’m coming,” she muttered. “You can’t even stand properly yet.”

He deliberately tightened his arm around her shoulders. “Perhaps we should see what else I can do.”

She laughed, just as he had intended, and some of the concern left her expression. “It certainly sounds like you’re on your way to recovery.”

“I am well,” he assured her, and she rolled her eyes before looking over at Keffi.

“Maybe we should send him home?”

He looked at the drone, and the drone stared back at him. Theoretically, he should have been able to send Keffi back to the shelter, but somehow he suspected his order would not be successful.

“I suspect that he will not leave.”

“I think you’re right.” She sighed. “So where do we find this Fereg?”

“On her ship, of course. Her nest will be there.”

“Her ship? You think there’s a ship in here somewhere?”

“I am sure of it,” he said, taking a few tentative steps towards the doorway. To his delight, although his legs shook, they obeyed. “I suspect this was the signal I was receiving all along.”

She had moved with him, continuing to provide support, and she gave him a curious glance.

“If she lives on her ship, then why this palace?”

“Perhaps she intended to fill it with slaves from whom she could feed. Or it might simply be part of her nature to build such a dwelling.”

“Like a bird making a nest, only on a really big scale.”

He tilted his head, considering the matter.

“I believe an insect building a web would be a more accurate analogy.”

“I assure you, I didn’t need to know that.” She shuddered and inched a tiny bit closer.

“You’re sure you do not wish to leave?”

“No, so stop trying to get rid of me.”

“I would never do such a thing.”

“I know. Then let’s get going so we can get back to the rest of our family.”

“Our family,” he agreed, loving the sound of the words on his lips.

How strange that he should have had to come to this isolated planet to find what he had never found on his own.

They started walking, Keffi following at their heels, usually silent. Katerina also had nothing to say, simply clinging to his hand as they walked. Since he suspected the ship would be at the apex of the castle, they moved steadily upwards, and with each step a portion of his strength returned.

As they moved down a long passageway, something about the walls attracted his attention. They were no longer as smooth

and clear as they had been. He paused for a moment to inspect them, but as soon as he realized what they contained, he tried to hurry Katerina away. He was too late, and she stared at the walls in horror.

“Are those... bones embedded in the ice?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“First insect aliens and then bones in the walls—could this place get any creepier?” she muttered as she finally let him lead her away.

As it turned out, it could.

They climbed the last ramp and found themselves at the top of a tower. A ship rested in the exact center of the tower, a Fereg ship, just as he had suspected. A thick layer of ice covered the metal surface, and it clearly wasn’t going anywhere, but the landing ramp was down. He gave her a quick look.

“Why don’t you wait for me here?”

“Nope. I’m coming with you. But here, take this.”

She held out her hand to give him Johnny’s knife. Such a small weapon, but he took it gratefully.

“Thank you. When I tell you to get behind me, promise me that you will listen.”

“I will. I’m not stupid. I know I’m not a fighter.”

“Only with that fierce heart of yours,” he said, hugging her.

They climbed to the top of the ramp in silence, the metal seeming to absorb the sound of their footsteps. Did the ship dampen all surrounding sound, he wondered, feeling the weight of the silence. No one appeared to be on board, but the ship still had power. Lights flickered as they made their way up onto the bridge.

More ice filled the space, creating an ornate structure with a single figure reclining in the center of the network.

“Welcome, Jackasarian,” she said, rising and coming towards him.

For a terrible moment, he saw Katerina walking towards him, but then he recognized the illusion, the small differences that separated the artificial from the genuine. He heard his mate gasp, but when he let go of her hand and waved her back, she obeyed.

“Why are you here, Fereg? This is not your world.”

For the briefest fraction of a second, the illusion flickered, but then the false Katerina smiled.

“Why, I’m here to serve you, Jackasarian. To give you anything that you desire.”

The voice was close, but the words were entirely wrong. His fierce mate would never speak so subserviently, and he had no wish for her to do so.

The Fereg drifted closer, and he tensed, trying to remember what weaponry lay behind the illusion. Long limbs—thin, strong, and clawed. The Fereg did not tend to favor weapons, preferring to rely on the power of illusion and their own natural abilities, which might give him an advantage.

His hand trembled on the hilt of the knife. A hand that had not trembled since the day his first training master had him hold a sword at attention for an entire day. But the Fereg bore his female’s face and even though it was only a pale imitation, he could not bring himself to strike her. The horrible facsimile smiled.

“Afraid, Tandroki?”

Keffi chittered beneath him but he was afraid to look down, afraid to take his eyes off the Fereg. She suddenly screeched, a grating, high-pitched cry and the illusion faded, replaced by her true form—a bony skeletal frame and writhing tentacles surrounding a gaping sharp-toothed mouth. His grip tightened, and he slashed the blade across her neck. Her body collapsed, and the ship shuddered.

His female raced over and clutched his arm.

“Are you all right? Is she really dead?”

“Yes, thank Moroz.”

He pulled her into his arms, his hands shaking again, from relief this time.

“I almost failed you. I knew it was only an illusion, but I could not bring myself to strike.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I’m glad Keffi was here.”

“Keffi?” he asked, remembering the noises he’d heard.

She gave a choked giggle. “He bit her. That’s when the illusion faded.”

He looked down to find the drone at his feet, purple blood still staining the white fur around his mouth. Somehow, he was not surprised. Drones were not supposed to act autonomously, but Keffi had surprised him time and time again.

“You are a very worthy warrior,” he told the pika solemnly, and he was quite sure Keffi understood.

“I can’t believe this ship has been here all this time, buried in the ice.”

“I am not sure it was buried in the ice. At least not originally. I think the Fereg caused the ice to form in order to hide the ship,” he said, looking around. Despite its age, the ship appeared remarkably intact.

“And she’s been feeding off of people this whole time?”

“Yes. I suspect she was feeding off of me even before she called me here. That is why I had those bouts of weakness. I think she’s been trying with Johnny as well, but he wasn’t quite old enough to fall into her trap.”

She shuddered and tightened her arms around his waist.

“So many wasted lives.”

“Yes, and I would have been one of them if I had not been blessed with such a courageous and intelligent mate.”

“And a very intelligent pika,” she added, smiling down at Keffi. But then she bit her lip and looked up at him, her eyes uncertain.

“This is what you’ve been looking for, isn’t it? A ship to take you home.”

*Home.* No, Tandrok had never been home.

“I—”

“Is it too badly damaged?” she interrupted. “I mean, will it take a long time to repair?”

“It is old, but I do not see any structural damage. I have no doubt that the nanites could repair it if I chose to make the attempt.”

“*If?* Does that mean you’re not going to try?”

He smiled tenderly down at her worried face.

“Of course not. My home is here with you and the children. It is the only home I have ever had and the only home I could ever want.”

“Are you sure? This is a primitive planet.”

“Of course I am sure. You are my mate. I love you. And I will never leave you.”

A tear slid down her cheek, but her smile blinded him. He bent his head to kiss her, but as he did the ship shuddered again and Keffi squeaked.

“I think our celebrations had best wait. I suspect that without the Fereg’s presence, the barriers she constructed will begin to disintegrate.”

He was right. No sooner had they left the ship than a great sheet of ice collapsed behind them, burying the ship in icy shards. It would be almost impossible to reach, but he was unconcerned. He had no interest in it. His only concern at the moment was escaping from the ice.

Grabbing Katerina’s hand, he raced back down through the network of passageways. Twice they had to reverse course because fallen ice blocked their path. She did her best to keep up with him, uncomplaining despite the exhaustion he could see on her face, but she just wasn’t fast enough. He paused long enough to bend down.

“Climb on my back. It will be faster.”

Thank Moroz, she didn't argue, but climbed up, bringing Keffi with her.

“Hold on,” he warned, and he ran.

More ice crumbled behind them, jarring crashes that made the ground beneath his feet tremble. The shattering walls sent clouds of frozen crystals swirling into the air, half-obscuring his vision, but he blinked and kept going, ever downwards. They were almost at the entrance when a great roar sounded behind them and the ground rolled beneath his feet. He pulled her around to his front, wrapping his arms around her and Keffi, just as the ground gave way and they were caught in a tumbling rush of ice and snow that burst free of the glacier and slid down the mountainside to land at its base.

His ears rang with the roar, and his whole body felt sore and bruised, but Katerina was still tucked safely in his arms. He rolled them over, searching her face anxiously.

“Are you unharmed?” he asked desperately.

Her lips curved, and then her eyes opened, sparkling up at him.

“I am well,” she said solemnly.

His laugh rang out through the crystal clear air, and then he was kissing her and nothing else mattered. He was still kissing her when the children came running up and piled on top of them in a great snowy pile of love and laughter and family.



## CHAPTER 18



As Jack pulled Katerina to her feet and she tried to dust the snow off her clothing, she looked up at the sky, shocked to realize that it was barely midday. The time in the ice palace had seemed to last forever, but it had only been a few hours.

And something else was different.

“Look,” she whispered, pointing overhead as a flock of the bird-like creatures native to the planet flew by high overhead. It was the first time she’d seen any kind of animal life since they’d arrived in the pass. “Do you think they came back because the ship was destroyed?”

“I think it is entirely possible. More animals may follow.”

“That would be wonderful. As much as I love Keffi, it would be nice to see some other animals occasionally.”

A small hand tugged anxiously on her cloak.

“Mama Kat, ith it thill the Longeth Night today?”

“Well, yes. I suppose it is. We should get ready.”

Lorna cheered and raced off to tell the others while Jack gave her a worried look.

“Are you sure? It has been a strenuous morning.”

“Well you slept through most of it,” she teased, then shook her head. “Right now, I’m too happy to feel tired. And we’ve gone to a lot of trouble to try and make this special for the children. I don’t want them to miss out on that.”

“I do not want to disappoint them either.”

“Good, then that’s settled.”

Hand in hand, they followed the children back home. Johnny led the way with Merry at his side, talking excitedly as usual.

“You think Johnny will put on some weight now?” she asked, and he laughed.

“It’s possible, but you must remember that he is in his growth phase. I do not believe you will be able to fatten him up.” He smiled down at her. “Of course if you wish to make the attempt with me...”

“You are a very greedy male,” she said with mock severity.

“Indeed. But there are other things that are far more appealing than food. Perhaps we should have our own celebration after the children are asleep?”

Her breath caught at the hunger in his gaze and she nodded.

“I like that idea.” She hesitated. “But it’ll be a long time until then and there’s something I want to make sure you understand. I meant what I said. I love you.”

The glow in his eyes intensified, his hand tightening around hers.

“I love you too. I am only sorry that I waited so long to tell you.”

“I didn’t tell you because I thought you were going to leave me.”

“And I thought that you would leave.”

She lifted his hand to her lips and pressed a quick kiss against his knuckles.

“We obviously need to work on our communication skills. We should probably begin by deciding what we’re going to do next.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do we need to do anything?”

“You mean, just stay here?”

“Why not? You were already prepared to spend the winter here. We have an adequate shelter, which I can make even more suitable. It is peaceful and quiet, and we have access to a ready supply of stores. And I think the children are happy here.”

They reached the house as he finished speaking, and he gave her a quick smile.

“Think about it, and we can discuss it later.”

His lips brushed against hers for the merest second, but it was a promise of what was to come.

She thought about his suggestion as they prepared the house for the Longest Night. As they baked cookies with her new ingredients—cookies that the children decorated and that filled the room with the smell of spices. Instead of stockings, she had made small bags from some of the extra fabric and hung them on the ledge over the stove. She had little to go in the bags except a few treats she had discovered in the supply cavern, but Johnny had carved a small animal figure for each of the children and Jack had used his nanites to create small sparkly bouncing balls.

After the meal, they all piled onto Jack’s bed and she told them all the holiday stories she could recall—everything from Krampus to Santa to Old Man Winter and, of course, Jack Frost. After the younger children fell asleep, they carried them to their beds. Merry scurried up the ladder to the loft while even Johnny settled into his bed—and then they were alone.

She found herself feeling oddly bashful. It had been one thing to talk of love and plans for the future after such an eventful day, but now they were back to their regular life, did he still feel the same way? She snuck a glance at him from under her lashes and her breath caught at the warmth in his eyes. Her fears vanished like frost touched by the sun.

“I think I do like the idea of staying here,” she said as she started removing her clothing. “It feels sturdy and comfortable, the way home should feel. I’ve always wanted a real home.”

“You have never had one?”

She shook her head.

“My father always preferred to be on the road. Most of the traders choose to return to the same place each winter, and many of them create homes there. He wasn’t interested. There were quite a few winters when he didn’t even take a break. Instead, he’d take a smaller group down to the coast and trade there during the cold season.”

She slipped off the rest of her clothing as she spoke, and although his eyes were fixed on her body, he was obviously still listening.

“Would you be satisfied with this as a home?”

“Yes, I think I would. Like I said, it feels right, but it’s more than that. We’ve already started making memories here.”

“Like kissing in our bed?” he suggested, and she laughed.

“Yes, that’s one of them. But also things like preparing for the celebration and decorating cookies. And even the simple things like having lessons at the table or making breakfast. Those kinds of memories are the things that truly make a home.”

He nodded. “I understand that. The only place I remember with any fondness from our residence on Tandrok is the swing in the courtyard behind the house. That is where my mother used to tell me stories.”

“I’m glad you have that memory. We could even put up a swing here, in honor of her.”

“I like that idea.” Then his expression changed and he held out his hand, his eyes gleaming. “But right now I would like to make more memories with you.”

“I agree.”

She walked over to where he was sitting on the edge of the bed, but when he reached for her she kneeled in front of him instead.

“What are you doing? The floor is cold and hard.”

“That’s all right. I don’t mind,” she whispered as she put her hand around his gloriously erect cock and felt it pulse against her fingers.

“Are you... are you going to put your mouth on me?” he growled.

“It had occurred to me.”

She nuzzled her face against him, breathing in his cool, minty scent, even stronger here.

“Is that a Tandroki custom?” she asked.

“Absolutely not.”

She took a long, delicious lick of his cock, treating it like a huge candy cane, but then what he said penetrated and she looked up at him.

“If it is not a Tandroki custom, how did you know what I was going to do?”

“I... watched. There was a couple in the woods and they were pleasing each other. That is what gave me ideas on how to please you.”

“You mean you’ve never been with a woman—I mean, a female, before?”

“No. As I said, it is not our custom. There are exceptions, of course, but I never met anyone with whom I wanted to make such arrangements.”

“In that case, you’re certainly a very fast learner.”

He smiled down at her. “May I have another lesson?”

“In a minute. Right now, your lesson is to learn how to enjoy this,” she said as she circled her tongue around his shaft.

“There is no doubt of that,” he gasped and from the way his claws dug into the furs, she believed him.

She swirled her tongue around his shaft again, then took his head in her mouth. He was far from small and she had to stretch around him, but it was worth the effort as she heard him gasp and begin muttering in his own language. She wasn’t

quite sure if he was praying or cursing, but he was clearly pleased and she took him deeper, determined to make his first time memorable. He filled her mouth to overflowing, and when his head brushed her throat, she swallowed around him. He gave a hoarse cry, and then he exploded in her mouth, tasting exactly like liquid candy cane as she swallowed greedily. His cock had barely finished pulsing in her mouth before he reached for her, lifting her up over his body before pulling her down on his still rigid cock.

“Now it’s time for my lesson,” he growled.

He learned it so well that she barely had the strength to pull on a nightgown before curling up in his arms.

“I do not like anything between us,” he grumbled.

“Neither do I, but I suspect the children will be in here very early. You should get dressed too,” she said, yawning. He grumbled again but obeyed, and she was asleep within minutes once he returned.

Her prediction proved correct. It was still dark when Lorna came racing into the room, followed almost immediately by Cecil and Cecelia. To the children’s delight, Jack pretended to be asleep and they took turns giggling and poking him trying to wake him up. The sound of their laughter drew Merry and Johnny as well, and she smiled at all of them.

“I suppose now that we’re all up, we might as well go and see if Santa brought anything.”

The children cheered and raced back into the other room, and after a not entirely quick kiss, they followed. It was a modest holiday by most standards, but the children were thrilled by everything. Lorna hugged her doll fiercely to her chest, too overcome to speak. Merry was delighted with the dress that Katerina had made her, but she seemed even more pleased by her own doll, her eyes filling with tears as she reached over and hugged her.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I know I’m really too old for dolls, but it means a lot to me.”

Johnny was equally thrilled by the wooden training sword that Jack had created for him. She looked around the cozy room and the children exclaiming over their presents, and then over at Jack, sitting with Cecil on his lap as the little boy showed him the wonders of his wagon. He looked up and smiled as their eyes met.

Yes, this was home. And she'd never been happier.

## EPILOGUE



*S*ix months later...

“NOW TRY,” JACK SAID AND SHE FLIPPED THE SWITCH. THE new light fixture hanging over the table glowed to life, and they all cheered. The light was the latest in his home improvements. He delighted in surprising all of them with a variety of small ways of improving their lives. And he had already succeeded in transforming their home, she thought, looking around with a smile.

Once they had agreed to remain at the trading post, he decided that they needed more room and had broken through the wall into the adjoining dwelling. As a result, Merry now had her own bedroom as did Lorna and the twins.

They had converted the attic space into a room for Johnny, although he spent little time there. He preferred to be with Jack, and the two of them had formed an inseparable bond. In addition to the bedrooms, he had expanded the bathroom, adding a tub and an endless supply of hot water. Although the bathroom had been a present for her, he enjoyed it just as much as she did and they’d spent many hours together in the big tub.

The decision to remain at the trading post had proved positive in more than one way. Now that the Fereg was no longer perched on the mountainside, birds and animals returned to the valley—and so did the people. The first small caravan had passed through only a few weeks after the snow cleared. It contained three families, intent on moving south. After



spending a few days at the outpost, and some extended discussions with Jack, two of the families had decided to remain and set up shop. One was a potter and the other a weaver, and their skills had been very welcome.

Others had joined them since then. Somewhat surprisingly, once the initial shock had passed, none of them seemed to have any issues with Jack. Perhaps it was because he smiled more easily these days, or perhaps it was because it was difficult to be intimidated by an alien who had no hesitation about carrying Lorna around on his shoulders while she used his horns to steer him like a draft animal. His love for the children—and their love for him—was apparent in everything he did.

As was his love for her, although perhaps he demonstrated that best when they were alone in their small room. She felt the familiar pulse of arousal as she remembered the previous night. He had taken a casual comment from her as a challenge and proceeded to prove to her that she could indeed have six climaxes in a row. She had suspected she would never walk again, but she'd already recovered enough to wonder if seven was out of reach.

As if he heard what she was thinking, he looked over at her and grinned. She knew she was blushing as she smiled back and bent over the stove. She was experimenting with a collection of sweet treats to be offered for sale in the new bakeshop that had opened. Most of the stalls around the front courtyard were now populated, some with temporary merchants who would stay for a few weeks or months before moving on, and others like the first two families who had decided to remain permanently.

“Kat! Kat!” Merry came bursting into the room, her face white, Johnny right behind her. When he was not accompanying Jack, he was always watching over Merry. “He’s here, he’s here.”

“Calm down. Who’s here?”

“Father! I saw the caravan.”

Merry burst into tears, and she automatically put her arms around her sister, murmuring soothingly as she looked over at Jack. His smile disappeared, and he was once more the stern Tandroki warrior. She had no doubt that he could protect them, but she still dreaded the inevitable confrontation.

“I need to go and talk to him. You stay here with Johnny.”

Her sister clutched her hands.

“No, don’t go. He’ll take you away from us.”

Lorna’s lip trembled, and Cece began to cry.

“Don’t go, Mama,” Lorna pleaded.

“No one is going to take me anywhere. You know Daddy would never let that happen.”

“Never,” Jack growled, but his harsh voice helped settle the children.

She swiped the flour off her hands and did her best to look confident as she went to the door, Jack right behind her.

“Bar the door,” she whispered to Johnny as he followed them. “Just in case he tries something tricky.”

He nodded, and she squeezed his hand. He smiled, no longer as uncomfortable with casual affection as he had been.

“I will keep them safe.”

“I know you will.”

In spite of that, and in spite of Jack’s intimidating presence, her stomach churned as they made their way back to the main courtyard. The caravan was just reaching them, and her stomach flipped as she recognized her father’s wagon, her own small wagon still fastened behind it.

*Never. I am never going back there.*

“Never,” Jack agreed, and she realized she must have spoken out loud.

They reached the entry to the courtyard, and she stopped, determined to make him come to her for once. But it was not her father who climbed down from the lead wagon.

“Stan?” she asked as she recognized the man walking towards them.

Stan was a wiry older man, her father’s second-in-command. She had never cared for him, but he was neither as cruel nor as hot-tempered as her father.

He gave a quick, wary glance at Jack as he joined them.

“Got news for you.”

“What is it?” she asked cautiously.

“Don’t suppose there’s any reason to sugarcoat it. Your pa’s dead.”

“Dead?” The ground seemed to move beneath her feet. As much as she despised him, he had always been so full of life. It was almost impossible to imagine that life snuffed out. “What happened?”

“After you and the girl ran off,” Stan said, his voice carefully neutral, “your pa and Guyten got into a big fight. Guyten accused him of hiding you, and your pa accused Guyten of stealing you both.”

He gave her a quick look, but she was still too shocked to respond.

“It seemed like they patched up their differences, and they both went off to look for you. But then the storm came and only Guyten came back. He said your pa froze to death, but I reckon it was Guyten’s knife. He was going to claim our caravan too, but he’d been out in the cold too long. He didn’t make it.”

“Dead? They’re both dead?” she whispered, still stunned.

“Aye. You fixing to make a claim on the caravan?” he asked, studying her face.

“Me? No. I’m not interested.”

A look of what might have been relief crossed his face, even though he couldn’t seriously have thought she’d challenge him for the role of caravan master.

“Your things are still in the small wagon. Haven’t touched them. Reckon the least I can do is leave it with you.”

“I’d appreciate that,” she said with genuine gratitude. “And you’re welcome to stay and trade.”

“Nah. Not this time. Too soon. We’ll water the animals and move on. But we might be back in the fall if it’s okay with you.”

“We’ll be here.”

He nodded and moved away, yelling at a couple of his men to unhitch her wagon.

“I can’t believe my father’s gone,” she murmured to Jack.

“Are you upset?”

“I suppose I should be, but no. All I feel is relief.”

“Good. He does not deserve your tears. I will ask the men to help with the transfer of the wagon so we can tell Merry. Do you think she will be upset?”

“No, I don’t think so.” She recovered enough to give him a teasing grin. “And if she is, I’m sure Johnny will comfort her.”

They returned to their home, and Merry was just as relieved as she had predicted. Work was abandoned for the rest of the afternoon, and Jack took them off into the fields behind the outpost for a picnic, although she suspected it was also to give the caravan time to leave.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked as they climbed into bed that night.

“I really am. I always knew he was a terrible father, but it’s even more obvious now after seeing how wonderful you are with all of the children.” She bit her lip, trying to decide on the best way to approach her question. “In fact, I was thinking…”

“It is always dangerous when you begin a sentence with those words,” he said, but his eyes sparkled with laughter.

“All right then, I was wondering if perhaps you might consider expanding your fatherly duties.” She took a deep breath. “I

was wondering if we should have a baby—that is, if it's possible.”

His eyes blazed blue fire, happiness in every line of his face.

“I can think of nothing that I would like more. And I will do everything in my power to make it happen. Beginning tonight.”

He kissed her, his tongue twining with hers in the way that never failed to build her arousal, and then he moved to her mating mark, nipping lightly at the sensitive flesh, and she smiled. A home, a husband, a family, and hopefully a baby. She had everything she'd ever wanted.

*THE NEXT SUMMER...*

“I AM NOT AT ALL SURE THAT THIS IS A GOOD IDEA,” JACK said, pacing impatiently from one side of the room to the other.

“It's been almost two years,” his mate said. “You don't honestly think he'd still be angry?”

“The amount of time is irrelevant. Nicholsarian never forgets anything. Or forgives.”

“What is there to forgive?” she asked calmly. “You know that the crash wasn't your fault. There's something about this planet, or at least this area, that affects ships.”

“But I was not supposed to be on his ship.”

“True. But does it really matter? Jelle says he's happily mated to a human now.”

It was Katerina's friendship with Jelle which had eventually led to the knowledge that Ambassador Nicholsarian had remained on K.R.S Three. She had written to the other female to let her know that she had found safety, and the two of them had struck up a correspondence. Jelle had mentioned her healing skills, and as Katerina's time grew near, he'd grown increasingly nervous about the birth. At his suggestion, Katerina had written to ask if Jelle could be present.

Jelle had agreed, but when she arrived at the outpost, she was accompanied not only by two children, a baby, a dire wolf, and a drone in the form of a bird, but by another Tandroki warrior

—the legendary Commander Krampasarian. He was not directly acquainted with the other male, but he was more than aware of the commander’s reputation, and his competition with Nicholsarian for the position of ambassador to Perchten—a competition that Nicholsarian had won after Krampasarian disappeared.

Under the circumstances, the fact that he had worked for the ambassador did not seem promising. And Krampasarian’s first icy glance only compounded that suspicion. But then the other warrior turned to talk to his bride, tenderness replacing his previous arrogance, and Jack found himself relaxing a little.

Krampasarian eventually softened enough to help ease Jack’s fears about the birth. He would not go as far as to say they had become friends, but since their mates had become close, he suspected they would be seeing more of each other over the years. He found the prospect surprisingly agreeable. It wasn’t until the night before they were due to leave that he thought to ask about Nicholsarian, wondering if Krampasarian had heard anything.

The other male only looked amused.

“I believe I will leave you to discover that for yourself.”

He’d dismissed the comment at the time, but a few weeks later he had received a message from the ambassador.

“‘I’m coming to town.’ What kind of message is that?” he asked, not for the first time, resuming his pacing.

“Jack, stop. You’re making me dizzy.”

Katerina gently removed Varak from her breast as she spoke. Their son. He still couldn’t believe that he had a son. He was a perfect mixture of Tandroki and human, with pale golden hair curling around the small, dark nubs of his horns.

“Here, why don’t you take Varak? If you insist on pacing back and forth, you might as well carry him with you.”

He gladly took his son, cradling him against his chest, but he did not immediately resume his pacing, studying his female instead.

“You look tired, zereetta.”

“Having a baby is tiring.” She gave him a rueful smile. “And I think I’m missing Merry’s help.”

Merry had been delighted by the baby and eager to assist Katerina. She and the other children were visiting friends for the day—under Johnny’s watchful eye. He did not want them present for the meeting in case Nicholsarian proved... unpleasant.

“I think Merry is already growing up,” he said wistfully. “At least it will be a long time before Varak is an adult.”

“Not that long. It’s surprising how quickly children change.”

She was right. He could already see the changes in all of them.

“Then we should just keep having babies so we remember what it’s like when they are young.”

“*We* don’t have babies. You may start the process, but *I* actually have the baby, so let me assure you I do not intend to become a baby making machine.”

“Of course not, zereetta.” He smiled at her. “Although that does not mean we can’t practice.”

“I’m all in favor of practice, but only practice,” she added with mock severity as her hand drifted down over his cock. “Perhaps we can practice again tonight. Assuming your son decides to sleep for at least a few hours.”

His shaft stiffened as it always did at her touch, but just as he bent his head to kiss her someone knocked firmly on the door. Nicholsarian.

“I will answer it,” he said, handing the baby back just in case Nicholsarian immediately went on the offensive.

At first glance, the ambassador did not look any different, as icily perfect as ever, but then a small curly head appeared next to his leg.

“Hi. I’m Lottie. Do you have any cookies?”

He saw Nicholsarian give a resigned sigh, and he couldn’t help smiling. Perhaps it was going to be all right after all. An hour

later, he was almost sure of it. Nicholsarian also had a human wife, a human daughter, and a new baby. They had taken Lottie—along with a tray of cookies—to play with the other children while their mates became acquainted. Jenna and Katerina were chatting comfortably, rocking the babies, when Nicholsarian rose.

“Let us go for a walk.”

His earlier trepidation returned, but he gave his mate a reassuring smile as he rose to join the ambassador. They emerged into the warm evening. In silent accord, they turned towards the back of the trading post and away from the activity in the public areas. Neither one of them spoke until they reached the fields behind the outpost.

“I apologize for hiding on your ship,” he said finally.

“It was not correct Tandroki behavior.” Nicholsarian’s voice was absolutely neutral.

“No, it was not. But then I have never been a very satisfactory Tandroki warrior, as you were quick to point out.”

“Did I? I do not remember making any such statement.”

“You were constantly correcting me.”

“Indeed, because I believed you had potential. If I did not, I would not have bothered.”

He came to an abrupt halt, and Nicholsarian took another step before turning to face him.

“You thought I had potential? You didn’t believe that I was unworthy because of my heritage?”

The other male sighed. “Jackasarian, are you familiar with my lineage?”

Now that he thought about it, he’d never heard anyone mention it and he slowly shook his head.

“I was a child of the streets. What right did I have to judge lineage? What I did have was the right to judge behavior.”

The year in which he had served as Nicholsarian’s attaché suddenly took on a whole new perspective.



“I thought you were going to dismiss me,” he admitted.

“Not at all. My only intention was to turn you into a perfect Tandroki warrior.” Nicholsarian looked back at the lights of the trading post and smiled. “I do not believe that either of us fits that description anymore.”

“Do you regret that?”

“Never. This life can be challenging, and even painful, but I would not have missed one second of it.”

He thought of his mate and his children, of their cozy home and his ongoing plans to make it better, and the peaceful, unconstrained valley that surrounded them.

“I have no regrets either.”

“Then it appears that everything has worked out for the best. Shall we return to our families?”

“I can think of nothing I would like better,” he said sincerely, and together they made their way back through the gentle warmth of the summer evening to his home.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading the Horned Holidays collection! I originally wrote the first story in this series - *Krampus and the Crone* - as a standalone, and yet here we are on book three! I have so much fun with the stern alien warriors and their feisty heroines, and with the kids and the pets and the holiday theme, that I love returning to this world!

Whether you enjoyed the story or not, it would mean the world to me if you left an honest review on Amazon – reviews are one of the best ways to help other readers find my books!

As always, I have to thank my readers for joining me on these adventures! Your support and encouragement make it possible for me to keep writing these books.

And, as always, a special thanks to my beta team – Janet S, Nancy V, and Kitty S. Your thoughts and comments are incredibly helpful!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Honey Phillips writes steamy science fiction stories about hot alien warriors and the human women they can't resist. From abductions to invasions, the ride might be rough, but the end always satisfies.

Honey wrote and illustrated her first book at the tender age of five. Her writing has improved since then. Her drawing skills, unfortunately, have not. She loves writing, reading, traveling, cooking, and drinking champagne - not necessarily in that order.

Honey loves to hear from her wonderful readers! You can stalk her at any of the following locations...

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