



 **Stargazer**
SERIES

UJHONI

ALIEN ADOPTION AGENCY

TASHA BLACK

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JHON

ALIEN ADOPTION AGENCY #13

TASHA BLACK

13TH STORY PRESS

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Tasha Black Starter Library.

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ABOUT JHON

Will this steely dragon warrior choose duty over love?

Ella is overwhelmed with a joy that melts her heart from the moment she meets her tiny new alien son. But she doesn't expect her pulse to race every time the baby's muscle-bound dragon warrior guard comes close.

Jhon was taken from his family at a young age to become a member of the elite Invicta dragon force. Since that time, he has lived with one purpose, putting his duty to his brothers-in-arms before anything. And now he's out on the tundra, contending with strange predators, mammoths, and islands that float in the sky. The last thing he has time for is love.

But the feelings Bo's adoptive mother awakens in his dragon threaten to topple his duty, his self-control, and the very foundation of his sanity. How can such a scrawny little Terran cause so much trouble? And how is it that in spite of his unwanted lust and her bullheadedness, he still feels a begrudging respect for her determination to be a good mother to baby Bo, and somehow still provide for her siblings back home?

When lives are at stake, will Jhon choose his orders over love? Or will the big dragon learn that sacrificing for the ones he loves was his real duty all along?

JHON

ELLA

Ella's heart pounded, and she found herself seriously reconsidering her life choices as the rickety little spacecraft groaned and creaked all around her.

Glimpses of the sky and the moss-green, crumbly surface of the moon they approached flashed at her through the floor and ceiling of the craft, which were made of a transparent material she suspected was as brittle as glass from the unhappy sounds it was making.

The rest of the puddle jumper looked like something out of the myths of Old. Twisted arms of dark metal cradled the groaning globes of glass, giving it the appearance of some deep-sea beast.

Yet in spite of the heavy-looking metal, the fuel must have been biological. It smelled like the flower monger's wagon back home, amplified about a hundred times.

The thick scent of flowers and the stifling heat, along with the pouch-like, furry seat she was strapped into combined to make her stomach churn.

She glanced to the side, studiously avoiding looking at the glass above, and especially below, for fear that she would throw up into her pouch.

To her left, her friend Jade stared straight forward with a clenched jaw.

Jade was blonde-haired and blue-eyed with delicate features, like an ingenue out of the holo-films. But unlike

those starlets, she was anything but soft-spoken. Jade had a quick wit and a tough streak that never failed to impress Ella.

In spite of the extreme heat inside the craft, Jade still had not removed the long arm-warmers she'd worn since the day Ella met her in the training program. Ella often wondered what Jade could be hiding under them. But that was her own business.

"You okay, Jade?" Ella asked.

"Just trying not to hurl into my seat," Jade said dryly. "I feel like a possum in a laundry tumbler."

A giggle came from Ella's right, and she turned to see their other friend, Kinsley, smiling, actually *smiling*, in her pouch. Somehow, she looked as fresh as a flower.

"Sorry," Kinsley said, trying not to laugh. "I was picturing us as possums. We were adorable. These pouches kind of grow on you, don't they? Makes you feel less like you're about to fall through the floor."

"Kinsley," Ella moaned. She had been trying not to think about exactly that.

"She's not wrong," Jade said. "In combat, if someone shot out the glass, technically we could survive it. If the atmosphere didn't kill us."

Combat? Would something below try to attack them? These frontier moons were supposed to be harsh places.

Ella forced her eyes to Kinsley, hoping to distract herself from that unwelcome thought. Kinsley looked like she was still trying not to laugh. Her dark eyes sparkled, and dimples appeared on her cheeks. For all her straightforward good humor, Kinsley was definitely the wild card of the group.

While Ella knew the reason she had joined the program, and Jade certainly seemed to have a past, Kinsley's soft curves and shining hair spoke of a previous life in which she was well-fed and wanted for nothing. Plus, there was her beauty, her easy sense of humor, and her sweet disposition, which all made it clear that Kinsley had choices the other two didn't.

So why choose this?

Being hurled across the cosmos in a glorified soup jar wasn't something Ella had specifically chosen. But it was the direct result of what they had all done when they applied to the Alien Adoption Agency to care for a child, alone, on a far-flung frontier moon.

For Ella, the coveted opportunity to adopt was a matter of life and death. And not just for her.

"You okay, Ella?" Kinsley's bell-like voice distracted her from those thoughts. She looked genuinely worried.

"I'm fine," Ella said, smiling tightly.

If Kinsley wasn't already terrified over the airworthiness of this jalopy, it seemed kindest not to get her started now.

Kinsley smiled back, the warmth in her eyes like a hug. She was such a kind person. It would be easy to be a little jealous of her, but it was even easier to love her, which Ella did wholeheartedly.

All three had become close during their training, and now she looked on these women as her sisters. It was impossible to believe they would be sent their separate ways once they landed.

"There's no cloud cover," Jade said suddenly.

"Interesting," Ella replied without looking.

"What do you make of it?" Jade asked.

"Honestly, I've been trying really hard not to look down," Ella admitted. "Or up. Or side to side."

"I don't like it," Jade said, her mouth forming a straight line.

Ella opened her own mouth to ask her why, but never got to voice the question.

Without warning, they began to drop out of the sky, the sudden descent putting Ella's heart in her throat, and stifling any thought of conversation.

Her eyes moved to the top of the craft, where the two pilots, of a race she had never seen before, were yelling and gesticulating with their short tentacles.

They didn't, or maybe just wouldn't, speak Universal, so whether they were screaming in excitement or panic, or this was just the natural pitch and delivery of their language, Ella didn't know.

Meanwhile, it felt like she was being turned inside-out as they plummeted toward the ground.

She closed her eyes and pictured her littlest sister, Taria. Taria's dark hair and large blue eyes made her like a tiny copy of Ella. She envisioned Taria with a full plate of warm food in front of her, a smile on her sweet face, the pink back in her thin cheeks.

Whatever happens to me, it's worth it.

The agency had already begrudgingly sent half of her first month's stipend back home to Terra-13 for her. The woman in Accounting didn't like it, but the contract didn't technically state that Ella had to use all of that money for herself and her new baby.

And how could she put the well-being of a baby she had never met in front of the little sister she had dropped out of school to raise?

I would have sent for her, for all of them, she thought to herself as she hurtled toward certain death.

The sound of the crash and the impact jarred her senses to the point that she couldn't even scream. They bumped along for a moment or two, then the whole contraption came to a rest.

In the ensuing silence, she became aware of the pilots' voices. They sounded no more or less agitated than before.

She opened her eyes and saw that the glass was all intact.

Was that how this thing was supposed to land?

It is time to de-board, a voice in her chip announced.

“No decontamination protocol,” Jade said. “I don’t like it.”

“What would that mean?” Kinsley asked. “Why would there be a decontamination protocol?”

“It would mean that there was something on this moon worth protecting,” Jade said flatly.

The pouches released all at once, dropping them to the floor as Jade’s foreboding words still echoed in the air.

One of the glassy panels opened with a hiss, letting in a blast of frigid air. A ramp extended out onto the moon, and the pilots gestured emphatically for them to leave.

Normally, Jade was the bravest of the three, but since Ella was closest to the ramp, she ventured down first.

The pilots screamed at her again, using their tentacles to indicate something hanging on the wall.

Three pairs of fur-lined boots and three fur cloaks hung from magnetic hooks.

She slipped out of her shoes and pulled on the boots, then the cloak.

An oubliette opened beside her, and she gladly dropped her old shoes in. Why the agency had dressed a trio of women headed to a frontier moon in low-cut lavender gowns and velvet slippers, she would never understand. At least the boots and cloak would keep them warm.

Already, the cold outside was sinking into her bones, making her forget she had just been flushed and overheated. She wondered if she would ever take the fur lined boots off again

“Cute,” Kinsley said, breaking the tension as she approached the ramp. “You look like one of the snow people in the book about Old Earth.”

“Well, don’t be jealous,” Ella told her. “You’ve got boots and a cloak of your own.”

The pilots started hollering again, and the ship engine restarted, sending the whole thing quaking.

Ella stumbled and fell the rest of the way down the ramp, mercifully catching herself on her palms before her face hit the hard frozen soil of her new home.

The ground was so cold that it felt like her palms were burning from the contact with it.

She stood quickly, gazing around in awe.

The land was fairly flat, and seemed to go on forever, with some sort of low ground cover giving it a pale green hue in spite of the frost on top.

But it was the massive islands floating through the air that made her feel like she was somewhere truly alien and terrifying. The rocky underbellies of the giants cast huge shadows over the ground beneath them.

Were they *moving*?

Ella squinted up, feeling tiny and exposed, like the only small, soft thing on a moon of hard surfaces and immeasurable mass.

JHON

Jhon stood very still at the bridge of the ship, looking across the tundra at a small figure wrapped in furs.

Something inside him tugged at the sight.

It was like a memory, but deeper. He had never mixed with Terrans, and had little knowledge of them other than what was in the intergalactic history books. So, he had no idea what had sparked the feeling that was somehow both new and intimately familiar.

He tried his best to place it, but a tiny hand reached up to tug at his beard, distracting him.

“Now what?” he asked the whelp irritably, though he knew it could not reply.

It made a squeaky sound and its eyes twinkled. Then it tugged on his beard again.

Something about its fearless impertinence in the presence of a dangerous dragon warrior gave Jhon the unwanted urge to smile, but that would only make the situation worse.

The little whelp wasn't a pet, though it seemed to think it might be. There was no need for him to indulge in its delusion.

It was bad enough that the creature couldn't speak a single word, or relieve itself without him cleaning it up. A dragonet of its age would be able to take care of its own feeding and eliminating, and would communicate well enough to be understood.

His mind went back almost half a cycle to the day his superior officers had called him in. Jhon was a great warrior, so he expected he was being advanced and given a post befitting his illustrious record in battle.

Instead, they had informed him that he was among the elite few of his brothers, chosen to watch over a single Imberian soul until it came of age.

Jhon knew the legacy. Generations ago, in a tragic military error, his Invicta ancestors had destroyed the entire population of the planet Imber. Though the planet itself, and its rich mineral veins remained intact, the gentle people of Imber were gone.

There was a rumor of an old woman who claimed to be the crown princess of Imber, rescued by soldiers and living on Omega 7-T, but most people doubted it was true. And Jhon certainly did not believe it.

The Intergalactic Council had recently granted the Invicta dragon warriors what they had begged for since the tragedy occurred - the right to bring back Imberians using DNA harvested from the planet.

Each Imberian baby would be grown in a gestation pod, adopted by a mother from a nurturing race, and returned to Imber to claim its birthright and share of the rich mineral deposits that belonged to its people.

And from the moment of its birth until it arrived on Imber, it would be watched over by an Invicta guard.

Because performing this duty was seen as righting a wrong, and a step toward redeeming the Invicta name, guarding an Imberian child was considered the very highest honor and privilege that could be bestowed upon a dragon warrior.

Never mind that it would take that brave soldier off the battlefield for twenty standard years, and land him on a boring moon in the middle of nowhere.

Of course, Jhon's superiors had expected him to be elated when they shared the news.

The best he could manage was to control his temper and indicate his acceptance without showing the bitter resentment he felt at being sidelined for a generation.

He'd made all the necessary arrangements, and they had summoned him the moment his whelp was ready to come out of its gestation pod. He had not been without it since.

In the beginning, the tiny Imberian needed near constant feedings and changing, and it was vulnerable to any change in its surroundings, making horrible squawking sounds whenever it was uncomfortable.

Now it made those same sounds, but much, much louder, whenever Jhon was out of its sight, even for an instant.

"Whoa," his brother Rafe intoned, looking at the ship, as usual.

Rafe had been a hotshot pilot. Jhon strongly suspected he had annoyed the wrong person with his massive ego and had been given the "honor" of guarding an Imberian whelp just to get him out of the way.

Rafe hadn't taken it personally, though. As playful as a youngling, the rebellious dragon managed to find the fun in every situation.

"I can't believe that thing is still in the air," Rafe remarked, eyeing it with great interest.

"It isn't anymore," Jhon pointed out.

"Yeah, they have a rough-landing set-up," Rafe laughed. "But I'll bet they can get it up again, watch. It'll jump again when they give it more fuel."

In Rafe's arms, his whelp chattered, too. It was slightly older than the others, and always smiling and trying to speak in nonsense syllables. Rafe tousled its curls and smiled back, as if he approved of its off-key gibberish.

On the ground below, another female figure joined the first, followed by a third. All three were tiny, practically lost in their furs. Jhon could really only make out the tops of their heads. While the first had hair the color of tree bark, the

second's head was covered in pale yellow curls, and the third had an inky black mane that lifted slightly in the wind.

Kian, the third dragon warrior in their group, grunted disapprovingly.

Kian was a mountain of a man with a deep voice he almost never used.

Somehow, the silent giant had been matched with the tiniest of the whelps. It was also the youngest, and female. And most disgraceful of all, Kian appeared to have *bonded* with it.

They were brothers in arms, so Jhon could only button his lip and keep his judgement to himself every time he saw the terrifying hand-to-hand combat champion of all the Invicta *nuzzling* a creature so tiny and so unremarkable it was practically a blob of meat, no more sentient than a vaca-steak.

At least his little Bo had a personality.

No, Jhon's inner soldier warned him instantly. We do not call him by a name, and we do not compare him to the other whelps. We keep him quiet and out of danger. Guarding him is the only mission.

The truth was, that in spite of its many shortcomings, the little whelp was starting to grow on him. It was getting harder not to enjoy the weight of its warm form in his arms, or the happy sounds it made when it was eating or being held.

You're about to hand him off to a stranger, he reminded himself, and tried not to notice the pang he felt at the idea.

“Oh wow, look at that,” Rafe said appreciatively.

The women had turned to them, and the wind was whipping in their cloaks, revealing impractical, low-cut gowns underneath.

His eyes were drawn to the slender frame of the brown-haired Terran. She was as plain as could be, and unappealingly scrawny. But somehow, it almost hurt to look at her. He found he had no interest in the blonde or the curvy one.

The feeling that had come over him before returned, even stronger now. It was like every cell in his body was being pulled toward that tiny, brown-haired girl.

“What are they wearing?” he scoffed, to cover the strange emotion he still couldn’t identify. “Are they here to adopt a baby on the frontier, or host a garden party on Upper Arkadia?”

“I don’t mind what they’re wearing,” Rafe said with a wolfish smile.

“Maybe they want to look soft and comforting,” Kian retorted, his deep voice sounding almost rusty from disuse.

Jhon turned to him in surprise.

Rafe laughed, letting his head fall back as he howled like a hyena in delight. His whelp also lifted its tiny chin and made a high-pitched laughing sound.

Thoroughly disgusted with all of them, Jhon activated the slide-ramp and headed down it into the swirl of frigid air.

The whelp snuggled into his neck.

Jhon picked up his pace, enjoying the sensation of stretching his legs after the long flight.

The wind buffeting at his back shifted, bringing the scents of the newcomers to him, and the dragon awoke in his chest all at once, flooding into him so that he stopped in his tracks, reeling.

Mine.

The dragon’s roar echoed in his head. But Jhon couldn’t understand it.

He was too distracted by the exquisite scent tugging at him, drawing him toward the brown-haired female with a ravenous desperation.

Mine, the dragon groaned again, showing him an image in his mind of the girl under him, that dark hair tangled from the throes of their coupling.

No, Jhon screamed back inwardly at the dragon, trying to unsee that delicious image.

He was a career soldier, assigned to guard duty for the next twenty years. He couldn't be fighting against his base urges that whole time. It would be torture.

Calling on all his will, he strode to the bottom of the slide-ramp and turned on his heel to find the droid in charge of transport. With any luck, one of his brothers would have the girl's whelp, and he would never have to exchange a single word with her.

Sure enough, the transport droid was already programming sleighs on the side of the ship. Three massive lichen-deer snuffled beside the sleighs, their breath pluming in the frozen air.

"First pick of transport, sir," the droid said politely.

Jhon inspected the three sleighs and chose the one with the most secure sides for his wiggly whelp, knowing Rafe would want the fastest and Kian would need the largest.

"Excellent," the droid said. "The lichen-deer with the matching harness will pull."

"Just the one?" Jhon asked.

"Indeed, sir," the droid told him. "Each deer is more than capable of pulling the sleigh on its own."

"I don't doubt it," Jhon said. "But this is not regulation. Proper animal transport requires at least two animals."

"Each deer is more than capable of pulling the sleigh on its own," the droid repeated.

"Yes," Jhon said impatiently. "But what happens when it gets sick or breaks a leg and we're stranded in the middle of the tundra?"

"If you would like, you can requisition a second animal," the droid said briskly.

That was more like it.

“Yes, obviously,” Jhon said. “How fast can you get it here?”

“It will be available to you immediately,” the droid said, “once the lichen-deer on your brother-in-arms’ farm are bred, and the resulting babies reach adulthood and are trained to the harness.”

Jhon drew in a deep breath and turned away to stop himself from dismantling the thing with his bare hands.

But the gods were frowning on him.

The girl was approaching, the wind lifting her cloak again, and molding the purple satin against her meager curves.

Instantly, he forgot why he was angry.

He drank in her scent and the unexpected blue of her wide eyes. With the dragon’s enhanced senses, he could hear the pounding of her heart, its rhythm bewitching him.

The dragon inside him roared and clawed at his bounds, begging Jhon to claim her, before someone else did.

His body surged with primal need as he stood frozen before her in a tornado of unwanted emotion and sensation, holding himself back by a thread as the feelings finally began to make sense.

This was more than just an urge. Much more.

And much worse.

This was a mate bond.

ELLA

Ella reached the other ship and gazed up at the baby.

He was tiny, with bright eyes and beautiful, lavender skin. If he were a Terran baby, she would guess he was about five or six months old.

“Hello,” she said softly, giving him a gentle smile. “Are you my son?”

The little face lit up and he squeaked at her, wiggling his fingers and toes as if he couldn’t wait to hug his new mama.

Her heart constricted painfully, and she found herself fighting back tears.

She had come here to save her family. She had considered the difficulty of a new life away from everything she knew, and the hardship of raising an alien baby. She had known she would be enduring a harsh climate and the abject prejudices Terrans suffered throughout the galaxy.

Never once had she allowed herself to picture the happiness of this moment - the intense longing to hold her perfect son, and kiss his soft cheeks.

She had never imagined herself drowning in an instant and powerful love.

She held out her arms to him and he swam in place, chubby legs kicking.

Only then did she look up to see who was holding him.

A massive and wildly gorgeous soldier, wearing straps of leather armor over his otherwise bare chest, frowned down at her suspiciously.

She blinked up at him, and had to fight the instinct to step back.

His skin was the same beautiful lavender as the baby's. But his expression could not have been more different. His dark eyes flashed with impatience, and his jaw was clenched in what she could only imagine was fury.

"The agency sent you," he growled.

Her eyes shot back up to his and she felt ashamed that she had let them drop to admire his thickly muscled body without meaning to.

"Yes," she replied, feeling her cheeks heat.

He extended his arms at last, letting the baby dangle between them. He looked even more tiny in comparison to the soldier's impressive bulk.

Ella took the baby quickly, cradling him against her chest and instinctively turning away from the wind to shelter him.

"*Ah-la-la-la-la-la-muh,*" the little fellow said merrily as he tried to catch her hair in his chubby fist.

The wind kept carrying it just out of reach, which made him chuckle as he grabbed for it again and again, his little chin tilting up and showing off his chubby cheeks.

He smelled as sweet as fresh-baked cookies. It was impossible to resist pressing her lips to the soft wispy hair on his little head and drinking him in.

She could hear the soldier who had brought the baby talking with a droid, but she had eyes only for her son.

"Are you ready to begin the journey," a deep voice asked suddenly.

She looked up into the handsome face of the soldier.

"Yes," she told him.

He gestured behind her, and she turned to see a massive deer of some sort pulling a glossy green sleigh. It looked like something out of a picture book.

“Seriously?” she chuckled.

Between the big, bearded warrior and the deer-drawn sleigh, it felt like he was practically daring her to compare him to a young version of Old Earth’s Saint Nicholas legend.

“What?” he demanded, his eyes flinty.

“Nothing,” she said meekly, scurrying past the massive deer to get to the side of the sleigh.

He probably hadn’t heard the Saint Nicholas legend. And even if he had, she didn’t think he would be amused by the comparison. Besides, there had never been a version of the jolly old fellow with abs like the ones this baby’s escort had.

There was a step and a handle to aid in boarding the sleigh, but both were up higher than she could easily reach.

She looked down at her cloak and gown. She could probably scramble up, but she hated to take any chances with the baby in her arms.

“I’ll help,” the big warrior grunted, offering her his hand.

“Thank you so much...” she began.

But as soon as his hand wrapped around hers, her words seemed to evaporate from her mouth, as a hot shiver of awareness moved through her body like wildfire.

She glanced up at the big warrior only to find that his eyes were flashing with undisguised lust.

Desire warmed her in an instant, making her feel languid. It would be so easy just to flow into his arms, press her body to his...

Suddenly, she remembered that she was holding a baby in her arms.

Horried, she pulled her hand away, and tore her eyes from his.

What was happening to her?

“I-I’m fine,” she stammered, reaching for the handle on her own.

But his big hands wrapped around her hips from behind, lifting her.

She gritted her teeth against the surge of need she felt at his touch, and tried to focus on getting into the sleigh as quickly as possible so he could take his hands off her.

At last, she was perched on the luxuriously padded bench of the sleigh. It was covered in a thick, intricately embroidered fabric, with a pile of furs pooled on the floor in the front of it.

The scent of fresh hay was rich in the air. There must have been provisions for the deer stored someplace in the sleigh.

Nervously, she checked out the harness and rein system. She had never driven a sleigh before, and certainly not with an infant in her arms.

But it was all part of her adventurous new life. And she wasn’t doing it on an empty belly, like she had done most things back home. That would make it easier.

“*May you all enjoy a safe and scenic journey,*” the transport droid said politely from the ground below. “*Bring luck on Sigg-3.*”

“Thank you,” Ella replied.

“We’ll need Sigg-3 to bring luck on us,” the soldier growled at the same time. “Thanks to you.”

“*My apologies,*” the droid said. “*Rest assured, the livestock you requisitioned will arrive in due course.*”

“Livestock?” Ella echoed.

“Never mind,” he growled back.

She watched as he jumped effortlessly into the sleigh beside her, sliding to the end of the bench as if he wanted to avoid any more physical contact.

Well, so do I, she told herself.

But she wasn't really sure she didn't *want* it. It was more that she knew she shouldn't have it.

"You're accompanying us?" she asked him, realizing too late that her voice was a little too much like a frightened child's.

"Yes, of course," he said.

She felt herself practically collapse with relief. Even if he was only going to drive them a short distance, she could pay attention to how he handled the conveyance and communicated with the stag.

He gave a low whistle and tapped the reins lightly and the beautiful creature chuffed and then began to pull.

The sleigh moved with surprising smoothness against the hard, uneven terrain of the frozen soil. She wondered if there was some technological component to the sleigh she couldn't see, or if it was just a very strong deer.

"Use the furs," the soldier growled.

She almost jumped out of her seat, then realized he was offering a chance for her to warm up.

Well, he didn't have to offer twice. She grabbed a massive fur and pulled it up around herself and the little one, who was already nodding off on her shoulder.

"Better?" he asked.

"Much," she said, shivering with pleasure at the warmth of it.

He nodded, keeping his eyes ahead of them, though why he would need to do that when there was nothing but flat tundra on every side, she had no idea.

"What kind of animal did this come from?" she joked weakly. "It's massive."

"Probably a mammoth," he shrugged, eyes still on the tundra.

A mammoth?

Ella shut her mouth, sorry she had asked. The idea of running into a mammoth out on all this flat ground with nowhere to hide was terrifying.

Or more than one mammoth.

Did mammoths run in packs? Maybe if she had finished secondary science, she would know.

They kept moving, the only landmarks the floating islands above, which were so large that they never seemed to make any progress.

With the baby in her arms and the warm fur around her, Ella found it harder and harder to stay awake. It had been a very exciting day, and she was exhausted.

“How far do we need to go?” she asked him as one side of the sky began to dim.

“There’s an inn a couple of hours from here,” he told her. “It’s a way station on the road to your homestead. We’ll stay there for the night.”

Road? She didn’t see a road at all.

“It’s going to take more than one day to get there?” she asked him, feeling a little defeated.

“Today and part of tomorrow,” he replied.

“And you’re coming with us the whole way?” she asked.

He turned away from the tundra for the first time since they had started moving and she was startled all over again by the masculine beauty of his face.

“Yes, of course I’m coming with you,” he said.

He studied her, as if he were looking for something.

She wasn’t sure if he had found it or if he had given up when he turned back to the darkening plains with a sigh.

“You can curl up on the floor,” he said, moment later. “If you want to sleep.”

“Thank you,” she told him with real gratitude, scrambling to the floor of the sleigh right away. It would be easy to make

a nest for her son among the furs.

“Hate to see you fall asleep and drop him out of the sleigh after you came all this way,” the soldier said dryly.

Was that *a joke*?

She snapped her head up to look at his face, but he was still staring stoically at the frozen ground ahead of him.

Maybe it was her imagination, but the corners of the right side of his mouth might have been curved up very, very slightly.

Too tired to think about it, she sank into the furs, curling her body around the baby in his little nest.

JHON

Jhon clucked to the lichen-deer as it pulled the sleigh right up to the doors of the inn, like it had been there before.

Which it probably had.

With few trained animals on the moon and only the one place to spend the night on this part of the tundra, it was likely the creature had slept here many times.

And its good-natured chuffing told him it was well-treated at the inn.

“Time to get up,” he said gruffly, nudging the pile of furs on the floor of the sleigh with his foot.

A moment later, a sleepy face popped up, framed by a tangled mop of brown hair.

“We’re here,” he told her.

Her scent was even more intense than before. Maybe the furs had dampened it, or the winds had been kind until now.

In any case, he leapt out of the sleigh and moved to her side, ostensibly to help her out, but more to get a breath of fresh air and convince himself and the dragon not to do anything stupid.

Claim her now, the dragon begged.

But that he would not do.

“Think you can get our room key?” he asked her. “It’s under the name of your agency.”

“Yes,” she said, “but...”

“But what?” he snapped.

“But I, uh, don’t have any money,” she said, looking down. “I mean, no local currency.”

Classic helpless Terran. She could have changed her Terran money at any outpost before flying here.

“Not to worry,” he told her. “It’s paid for already.”

“Oh,” she said, looking deeply relieved. “That’s good.”

She held the baby close to her chest as she swung down using the handle and dropped to the ground in a crouch, without taking his outstretched hand.

“I’ll just see to the stag,” he told her.

She nodded and headed inside, and he watched her go.

The deer nosed his back.

“Can you blame me?” he asked it as he turned back, knowing it couldn’t answer.

“*Did you call for me, sir?*” a stable droid asked, rolling over to him on its thick treads.

He hadn’t, but he was glad to see the droid.

“The stag has been pulling all afternoon and evening,” he told it. “I’d like for him to have the works - a snack, a nice brushing, and dinner with as much water as he likes.”

“*Very good, sir,*” the droid replied.

Jhon flipped a credit to it.

The droid caught the chip out of the air with an arm that slid out of a hidden compartment in his chest, then pulled it back inside and made a slight bowing motion.

“*Thank you, sir,*” he said.

“There will be another in the morning if he appears as well rested as I’d like him to be,” Jhon said.

“*Not a worry, sir,*” the droid said. “*I’ll see to him myself.*”

Feeling reasonably sure he had done right by the animal, Jhon gave it a pat on the rump as he headed back to the front of the inn.

Delicious smells emanated from the door, making his belly rumble. He was looking forward to a good meal after the day's work. And a bit of food in his belly might help him resist the siren song of the woman who *could not* be his mate.

Inside, he could hear the proprietor reading someone the riot act.

"...folks like you think it's a lark to come to a frontier like this one and post it on your feeds," a reedy male voice was yelling. "But it's not all fun and games, and 'amazing' shots of mammoths and floating islands. It's dangerous here. And your kind makes it more dangerous for the rest of us when you're out there making all kinds of noise and riling up the wildlife."

Jhon came around the corner to find the night manager yelling at the girl, who held a very frightened-looking Bo in her arms.

Fury rose inside him, and it took his years of soldier's discipline to keep it in check.

"Seems to me the only one making all kinds of noise around here is you," Jhon said with a practiced laziness.

"S-sir," the night manager stammered, suddenly turning away from the girl and straightening up. "H-how may I help you?"

"You can start by showing a little respect to my traveling companions," Jhon said.

"My apologies, sir," the man said. "I didn't know they were with you."

"I'm guessing you didn't give them a chance to say who they were," Jhon told them. "If you had, they would have told you they're immigrants, here to start a new life, same as you."

He let the last three words hang in the air, in a way that unmistakably implied he knew the night manager wouldn't

have needed to start a new life if he'd been living his old one right.

“How lovely,” the man said quickly. “And how may I be of service to you all tonight?”

“We would like to check into our rooms and freshen up,” Jhon said smoothly. “Then dinner, and plenty of it. Reservation is under the Alien Adoption Agency.”

The man scurried off for keys, and handed over an old-fashioned metal ring.

“Best rooms we have,” he said, giving a little bow. “Supper is in twenty minutes, but we can hold your plates in the warmer, if you need more time.”

Jhon didn't answer, he only gestured to the hall, and the girl headed down it quickly, as if she was afraid the manager would change his mind.

He tried to hide his smile, though there was no one to see it. For all her beautiful gown and soft hands, she wasn't trying to put on airs and hide that she was eager for her dinner. And Jhon liked a woman with an appetite.

What other appetites might she have?

He pushed the thoughts aside before they had a chance to take root.

When they reached the room at the end of the hall, she stepped aside so that Jhon could open it. The room was hardly bigger than the sleigh they had ridden in on. A massive bed stretched nearly from wall to wall.

“It's enormous,” she breathed.

“No need for sarcasm, princess,” he said, striding in. “You're on the frontier now. We make do with what we have, and this is very livable.”

“I... wasn't being sarcastic,” she said softly.

“Hm,” he growled eyeing her suspiciously. “Want the refresher first? I can hold the whelp.”

“Thank you, but...” she trailed off, looking up at him.

“But what?” he asked.

The room suddenly seemed too small, her scent too sweet, his head was spinning. She felt the mating pull, too. There was no doubt. She was going to ask him about it, and he would have no choice but to answer.

“What was that?” she asked. “Back there, with the manager. Why did he start acting so weird the minute he saw you?”

He blinked back his surprise. This wasn't the conversation he had been expecting.

“Well, because of who I am,” he told her. “Or more precisely, what I am.”

“What you are?” she echoed.

Is she joking? Is this more sarcasm?

“I'm an Invicta warrior,” he said slowly.

“You are?” she asked, eyes widening. “But I thought the Invicta were dragons.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “We are.”

“Oh,” she said, taking a step back and practically hitting the wall. “I see.”

“We're not dragons all the time,” he told her gently, trying not to laugh. “We can shift our forms.”

She nodded, mouth buttoned closed, like she was scared, or at least overwhelmed.

“Go on,” he told her. “Use the refresher. I'll watch over Bo until you return.”

“Bo,” she breathed, her eyes lighting up as if she had just remembered the baby. “He has a name.”

“He does not,” Jhon said briskly, cursing himself inwardly for speaking the nickname he'd been using for the boy in front of her. “It will be your job to name him. I just used that sound as a placeholder.”

“Bo,” she said, smiling down at the little one like she was trying the name on for size. “It’s perfect.”

She handed the sleeping baby over and disappeared into the refresher before Jhon could even respond. He was left standing in the tiny room, trying to understand why tears were prickling his eyes as he cradled the whelp tight to his chest once more.

ELLA

Ella stood in the refresher, wondering where the shower could be.

Everything else was just where it belonged. She had used the facilities and found toothpaste and paper products.

But the little box she swore should be the shower had no plumbing at all, just a button with the word *chemical* in Universal above it. She figured that had to be for industrial cleaning of the refresher between guests.

There was a vial of soap powder and a small jug of clear water by the faucet-less sink. After a long day of travel, she was desperate enough to put them to use.

After giving herself a quick sink bath, she felt much better.

She pulled on a fresh dress and wondered if the dragon warrior would even recognize her in a simple shift instead of a gown.

Dragon warrior.

She had known the baby would have to be delivered to her somehow, but why was he accompanied by an Invicta soldier? It was like needing a drop of salt water and getting an ocean - an overkill of the most epic proportions.

Not that she was complaining.

The memory of his touch shivered through her senses again.

She studied her own face in the mirror, wondering what he saw when he looked at her.

He sees a bedraggled street rat, of course, she told herself sternly. Focus on the baby. He's your family now.

Eager to get back to her son, she turned away from the mirror and grabbed the empty water container before heading back into the tiny room.

She tried not to think about the fact that there was only one bed. It was big enough that she wouldn't have to be anywhere near him, and that was probably a good thing.

"I guess we should ask for more water," she said, holding up the container. "There isn't a faucet in there."

"Rings of Odysseron," the warrior said furiously. "You used it *all*?"

"It was only a small container," she said, feeling completely confused. "And like I said, there was no water to bathe with."

"There's a perfectly good chemical shower," he told her. "Now we'll have no water to drink tonight, or clean our teeth."

"Chemical shower," she breathed, realizing her mistake.

"Yes, I know it's not the same as indulging in a massive bubble bath," he said. "But it's the only responsible thing to do on a dry moon. You're part of something bigger than yourself here, princess."

"Stop calling me that," she said.

"What should I call you?" he retorted.

Taken aback, she realized she hadn't even introduced herself.

"I'm Ella," she said holding out her hand. "Ella Lawrence."

After a moment, he clasped her arm at the elbow.

"Jhon," he said, his deep voice rough.

Waves of need moved through her, worse than the last time he had touched her. She let go as soon as they had shaken once, eager to break the contact, but somehow also sad at its loss.

“So, you’re really an Invicta warrior?” she asked, looking away and trying to catch her breath.

“I am,” he said.

“Why is an Invicta warrior accompanying this little baby?” she asked, indicating Bo, who was sleeping soundly in Jhon’s arms. “Is he in some sort of trouble?”

“What kind of trouble could he be in?” Jhon scoffed. “He can’t even feed himself.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she told him. “I mean is he in some kind of danger? Why would they send a dragon warrior instead of an adoption counselor?”

“You really don’t know a thing about intergalactic history, do you?” he said, shaking his head and then giving her the short version. “The Invicta destroyed a population in error, long ago. This is our attempt to begin to make it right. The babies your agency is helping us adopt out were all grown in pods using Imberian DNA. When they are grown, they will inherit their planet.”

“I knew that part about Imber, and the pods,” she said, her jaw clenched in fury at him for laughing at her lack of education. “I just didn’t know it was the Invicta who had destroyed the people of Imber.”

“Well, now you know,” he said gruffly. “That’s why I’m here.”

There was a knock at the door, and he turned to answer it, one hand on the sword he wore at his side.

“Yes,” he shouted.

“Dinner is served, sir,” a droid told him from the other side of the door.

Jhon stepped back and opened the door, looking around like a spy in a holo-film before gesturing for Ella to step into

the hallway.

She found herself stepping out cautiously, as if his wild suspicion had rubbed off on her.

“You weren’t that cautious when we got here,” she whispered to him.

“When we first arrived, word hadn’t gotten around yet,” he told her. “Now, every idiot with something to prove could be waiting in ambush.”

“But... you’re Invicta,” she said, unable to believe he could really be afraid of a hotel guest.

“Sure,” he said. “But I still don’t want the hassle, or to pay for damages to a place like this after a tussle. Besides, every once in a while, there’s another kind of threat.”

She thought that was nonsense, but she kept her opinion to herself. Whatever was for supper, it smelled amazing, and she didn’t want any more delays getting to it.

She tried to remind herself that she was far from home, and that what smelled good might look unfamiliar or intimidating on the plate. It might even disgust her.

I won’t care, she reassured herself.

The agency had given them a light breakfast before the flight, but that was almost a day ago now, and she was ravenous.

A butler droid rolled along ahead of them once they reached the lobby, leading them back to a dining room with a long wooden table, where several other guests were already seated.

The table itself was practically groaning under the weight of a spread of food like nothing Ella had ever seen before. Her mouth began watering immediately, and it was all she could do to move gracefully toward the nearest chair.

The others at the table made friendly noises. There was a man with soft tentacles on his head, a big furry being whose gender she couldn’t identify, and a man who was mostly Terran-shaped, but had green skin and horns.

Jhon placed his hand on the back of her chair as she pulled it out.

Back home, that would have meant he was staking some sort of claim, but maybe here it didn't mean that.

Her cheeks heated anyway, and she sat quickly.

The furry being handed her a plate, and she scooped up the ladle from the closest dish, a tureen of what looked like some kind of stew, and filled her plate.

The chunks of meat looked tender, and there were cubes of things that reminded her of the starchy root vegetables they could only grow in the dry season back home. But most of all, it smelled heavenly.

The man with the tentacles passed a coil of warm rolls and she took one before handing it off to Jhon.

Closing her eyes for a brief moment, she thanked the gods for this bounty and wished that the rest of her family could be sitting at this table.

JHON

Jhon watched over the girl as she closed her eyes.

It was hard to tell if she was praying, or just inhaling the scent of the simple soup appetizer. She had served herself enough for a battalion, and he doubted she'd even have room for the main course.

Greedy, he thought to himself. And wasteful.

She certainly wouldn't eat it all, not with that raw-boned figure of hers. Was being rail-thin the fashion among wealthy Terrans these days?

It was odd, all he knew of Terrans suggested that the vast majority were desperately poor.

But seeing her hoard and waste resources in this way told him she was certainly a spoiled little rich girl.

He served himself, and accepted the flagon of ale the butler droid offered, taking a refreshing pull before he even set it down.

He was just slicing his venison when he heard the Bergalian gasp softly and looked up to see her cover her mouth with a furry hand.

Glancing over, he saw that Ella was eating her soup with a ravenous intensity.

Using her roll like a plow, she pushed huge chunks of meat onto her spoon without stopping to cut them, and leaned far

over the table to devour each bite so that the resulting drips went right back onto her plate.

He had never seen anyone eat so quickly. Something about it was familiar.

He realized with a start that her movements were reminding him of the way the bomb-sniffing canids had bolted down their dinner on the fields back when he was on active duty. Those dogs had been half-feral, and always afraid someone would try to take their meals before they could finish.

Everyone at the table was openly staring, and she didn't even notice.

For a spoiled little princess, she certainly had the table manners of a street urchin. Was that the way the upper crust Terrans comported themselves, like they didn't care?

Within minutes, her plate was clean. She had even devoured the soaked roll. She sat back in her chair and rested her arm over her belly, looking like she was about to go to sleep.

“Long day?” the Bergalian asked her kindly.

“Yes,” Ella said with a gentle smile. “I've been going since oh-five-hundred. First, I traveled by ship to Sigg-3, and then by sleigh to get here.”

“Terran?” the Maltaffian grunted, his green face showing his repugnance.

“Yes,” she agreed. “But Sigg-3 is my home now.”

“Your baby is very sweet,” the Bergalian said, taking a polite sip of her soup. “How did you and your husband choose Sigg-3?”

Jhon had just taken a swig of ale. He nearly spit it out.

“Oh, h-he's not my husband,” Ella said quickly. “I'm adopting the baby, and he's accompanying us to our new home.”

“If you’re not the father, why’s he look like you?” the Maltaffian demanded, his eyes fixed on Jhon.

In Jhon’s experience, Maltaffians thought they were pretty tough. They all had to complete guard training, and those who chose it as a profession were the most sought-after personal bodyguards in the sector.

But they weren’t dragons.

Jhon fixed the Maltaffian in his gaze until the other man looked away.

“Imprinting,” Jhon said lightly, a moment later.

“Imprinting?” Ella echoed, sounding surprised. “Like a duck?”

“I have no idea what a duck is,” Jhon admitted.

“It’s a bird, but it spends most of its time swimming,” Ella told him eagerly. “When it’s on land, it waddles around on big orange feet, and the babies imprint on their mother. That’s why they always follow behind her, all in a row. It’s really cute.”

“I see,” Jhon said. “Bo imprinted on me when I took custody of him after he was born from his pod. That is why he has taken on my coloration. Imberians are chameleon-like.”

“Lovely,” the Bergalian said, spooning a little fruit onto her plate. “It’s wonderful to have the evidence right in front of you that you’re doing a good job caring for him.”

That gave Jhon an unexpected pang of gladness. He cleared his throat to cover it and took another swig of ale.

“Would you like me to hold him so you can eat?” Ella asked, holding her arms out.

“You’re finished?” he asked, not wanting the baby to be between her and the food if her relentless hunger resurfaced.

“I’m completely full,” she said, her voice soft and her eyes wide. “And it’s a shame. Just look at this feast.”

Jhon looked around the table as the others did the same.

Sure, the table had a good amount of food, but it was all simple, rustic fare - the soup, some imported fruit, a roast, several platters of vegetables, and a coil of bread rolls.

He turned his eyes back to her, trying to figure her out.

But she was holding her arms out for her son.

Jhon handed him over, begrudgingly approving of the way she instantly pulled the boy close and wrapped her arms around him.

Bo often fussed if things were changed when he was resting. But it was as if she had him hypnotized with her soft whispers and warm embraces.

The little whelp nuzzled into the place where her shoulder met her neck and she closed her eyes, as if she were soaking him in.

The sight of the two of them together like that made him feel like his heart had been twisted in an unseen fist.

Ours, the dragon whispered to him.

And for the first time, he realized it didn't just mean the girl.

While Jhon looked at the two of them and saw responsibility, the dragon looked at them and saw *family*.



AN HOUR LATER, they were headed back to their room. The Bergalian had turned out to be good company. While she and Jhon traded battle stories, Ella had cuddled the boy. And when the butler droid offered her a fruit juice, she took it, but sipped politely instead of wolfing it down.

“So, when the manager said *rooms*...?” Ella asked.

“He meant that our suite has a bedroom and a refresher,” Jhon told her, figuring she already knew. “I can sleep out in the sleigh if you don't feel comfortable sharing a room.”

Her brilliant blue eyes met his, and for a moment he wondered if she was going to say it - that she felt something between them, something wild and chaotic and delicious.

His heart pounded, and he wasn't sure if he was desperate for her to acknowledge it, or desperate for her to hold it in.

But she merely pinned him in her gaze for a moment, then nodded slowly.

“You're fine,” she said, looking away. “We can share the bed.”

The dragon moaned with need, the sound of it reverberating in his chest.

But Jhon merely nodded and kept his eyes on the corridor in front of them.

Too soon, Bo was tucked into his floating cradle and Ella was slipping out of the refresher, wearing an even smaller, thinner shift than the one she had worn to dinner.

Dragging his eyes from her slender form, he headed into the refresher himself, taking a chem shower and staring himself down in the mirror.

You are here on a mission, he told himself. Focus.

But the dragon was alive inside him, boiling with need.

He closed his eyes, calling on the meditation techniques the leaders had taught him when he was still an adolescent dragonet, learning to control his shift. Slowly, his heart rate steadied, and the tension in his muscled form relaxed slightly.

He pictured his hands and then his limbs and then the rest of himself, exactly as it was.

Bit by bit, the dragon ebbed away. It did not leave him entirely. It couldn't, nor should he want it to. But its influence leached away with every set of breaths, like the tide going out.

When he finally felt fully in control of himself, he turned the knob to the refresher door, ready to face the woman who absolutely could not be his mate.

He pushed the door open and ready to fight off the dragon, the girl, and his own pent-up passion, only to find that she was already in bed, fast asleep.

He sighed, uncertain whether it was from relief or disappointment, and stepped closer.

She lay on her side, her tiny form curled like a tundra-fox.

He allowed his eyes to caress the curve of her hip, the way her dark hair flowed over her shoulder and the pillow, and her plush lips, slightly parted as she slept.

Then he tore his gaze away and crawled into the bed beside her, sliding his thumb along the light sensor on the way.

There was plenty of space - more than enough for him to lie comfortably without touching her, especially with her curled up like that.

But even as his eyes adjusted to the light, her scent wafted toward him, beckoning him and calling to the dragon, who could sense her heat beside him.

No, he told the dragon. *Sleep*.

But it was no use. The dragon snarled and threw itself against the bars that held it inside.

Even the man felt an unfamiliar ache.

Sleep would not come this night to man or beast. From now until morning both would only find exquisite torture.

ELLA

Ella awoke to the softest, sweetest sound.

She opened her eyes, letting everything come back to her at once.

Pale morning light drifted through the window, allowing her to see that the sound she'd heard was Bo, reaching for his own feet and chattering contentedly to himself in his cradle.

She had slept through the whole night, which she hoped meant Bo had as well. Not one of her baby brothers or sisters would have done the same at his age. Yet he appeared to be content.

It was nice and warm in the room, unlike their place at home. But surely that wasn't enough to explain such an extreme difference.

He's not Terran, she reminded herself. Maybe Imberian babies sleep more and go longer between feedings.

She would have to ask Jhon. He'd been caring for Bo for a while now, and probably had a good handle on the little guy's schedule.

The thought of the big alien warrior had her rolling over carefully to check on him.

She was shocked to find his sword lay on the bed between them, shimmering in the morning light.

Was he afraid she would roll over and try to... No. She wasn't going to think about that. Besides, he had told her

himself that he was ever-vigilant or whatever. He was probably just afraid they would be attacked in the night. The sword in the bed was the absolute symbol of his high-strung nature.

But the man himself slept with total abandon.

One beefy arm was thrown behind his head, the other hand was spread on the sheet, near his sword. His face was even more beautiful in this gentle slumber than when he was awake and scowling at her.

What felt like miles of pale purple muscle and sinew stretched the full length of the bed, so that his feet were practically hanging off the end.

Checking his face again first to be sure he was asleep, she let her eyes slide down to the huge mountains that were his pecs, down the intriguing ridges of his abs, and further still, to where something pressed against the breeches, which were the only thing he was wearing.

She felt a jolt of heat between her legs and barely kept herself from gasping.

Fascinated, she tried to see the shape of it through the soft-worn leather. But it was impossible to know what it looked like without unlacing the breeches, which she knew would wake him.

You're a foolish girl, a little voice in the back of her head scolded her. *Even if you saw it, you wouldn't know what to do with it.*

The voice was right.

Ella had grown up in a one-room house that was practically bursting at the seams with younger siblings. Even if she had been able to make time for dating, which she hadn't, any boy she liked probably would have had a similar living arrangement. There wasn't much privacy on Terra-13 and therefore, not many opportunities for a nice girl to gain experience pleasing a man.

A shiver of awareness tingled down her spine and she looked up to find Jhon was awake, his dark eyes flashing with

want.

“Good morrow,” she heard herself chirp as she launched herself out of bed. “Bo slept well last night. I think I’ll just freshen up quickly and then we can make his breakfast.”

She had closed herself safely in the refresher by the time she stopped talking.

Breathing deeply, she leaned her back against the door in relief, closing her eyes to thank the gods for getting her out of there before she could embarrass herself further, or do something stupid.

A moment later, she heard a sound - a strange sound that couldn’t possibly be what she thought it was.

She pressed her ear to the door, trying to figure out what it could be, and realized it was Jhon, and the sound was exactly what she had thought it was.

The fierce, humorless warrior was *chuckling*.

JHON

Jhon dressed and got Bo ready for his day. He changed and fed the boy and washed his little face with a flagon of water he kept in his wrap.

And the whole time, he was half-smiling to himself over the girl.

Waking up to find her studying that part of him so intently was as gratifying as it was funny.

He had expected to wake up angry and frustrated after a night of tossing and turning as the dragon yearned to claim its mate.

Instead, he felt light-hearted and calm.

And maybe a little impatient. How long was the woman going to spend in the refresher?

He was nearly ready to give up and go to breakfast when the girl finally emerged.

“Good morrow,” he told her, remembering at the last minute to wipe the silly smile off his face.

“Good morrow,” she mumbled. “You got Bo all ready? I’ll just feed him.”

“He’s fed,” Jhon told her.

She came right up to him to take the baby.

Bo instantly began wiggling to go to her.

If Jhon had been attached to the whelp, it might have hurt his feelings. But of course, he wasn't. He was a professional soldier, attending his mission, and nothing more.

Are you sure about that? the dragon teased, using his senses to demonstrate how good the woman's silky hair smelled, how the whelp's heart rate slowed as she held and cuddled him.

"I need breakfast," Jhon said, more loudly than he meant to.

She blinked up at him.

"Sure," she said, after a moment. "Of course. I didn't mean to hold you up. Bo and I will get out of your hair. We'll save you a seat."

He wanted to ask her to stay, but he buttoned his lips until his jaw was tight with tension and nodded once instead.

When she was gone, he quickly saw to his own needs as the dragon fretted and moaned in his head about allowing the woman and child out of their sight.

He was only a few minutes behind them, but by the time he reached the dining room, Ella had already finished her breakfast. It shouldn't have surprised him, given how quickly she had bolted down dinner, but it did.

He found himself feeling a begrudging admiration. They had some ground to cover today, and it was good not to have to wait for a woman to delicately pick at her food.

"The coffee is good," she said by way of greeting. "I mean, I don't know if you drink coffee."

"It's your kind's best contribution to universal culture," he growled, grabbing a mug and filling it with the steaming brew.

"It's our only contribution," she laughed. "But I'm glad you like it. And I'm *really* glad they have it on Sigg-3."

"May I bring you a plate, sir?" the butler droid asked him.

"Can you wrap me up something for the road?" Jhon asked. "Meat, cheese, cati-gua, if you have it, all in bread so I

can eat with one hand.”

“*On the double, sir,*” the butler droid told him, rolling away at a speed Jhon was pretty sure was not approved for indoor service.

Clearly, the droids had compared notes, and this one was hoping he tipped as well in the dining room as he did in the stables.

He reached into his pocket and dug around for a nice credit chip. He wouldn't have much else to spend it on for a while, out in the middle of nowhere trying to set up a homestead.

Ella got up and joined him in the doorway.

“You need to go pack up?” he asked her.

“I, uh, travel light,” she said, indicating a pack so small he would have thought a princess like her would tuck it under her arm at the celestial-opera house.

“Girl after my own heart,” he heard himself tell her.

Her cheeks instantly went pink.

The dragon moaned in his chest, desperate for him to take her.

“*Your sandwich, sir,*” the butler droid said, rolling in at breakneck speed and carrying a basket big enough for at least twenty sandwiches. “*I also took the liberty of packing a little fruit and some refreshments for later in your journey.*”

“Good thinking,” Jhon told it, flipping the credit to him.

The droid caught the chip and tucked it away so fast the appendage was a blur.

“Can you ask your friend in the stables to bring the sleigh around?” Jhon asked.

“Already done, sir,” the butler droid told him. “They're out front, and if I may say so, the deer appears tremendously well-rested.”

“Thanks,” Jhon said, smiling to himself. “Good morrow.”

“*Good morrow, sir,*” the droid replied.

Jhon gestured for the lobby door, and Ella headed out immediately.

The day manager called out salutations, which they returned on the way out the door. That was the best part of pre-paid lodgings, as far as Jhon was concerned, an easy escape without a lot of small talk while credits changed hands.

“Jhon,” Ella said softly. “Would you hold Bo while I put on my cloak?”

“Of course,” he told her, feeling very pleased to take the little one into his arms again.

So long as they didn’t mix with too many other people, he might just get some time with the whelp after all, if only as his babysitter.

Bo squeaked with joy and grabbed at Jhon’s beard with his chubby hands.

Something squeezed his heart, and he closed his eyes against it.

You can’t love him. You’re here on a mission.

“He’s so nice to hold, isn’t he?” Ella asked.

She was watching him with a knowing smile. The cloak was fastened around her shoulders, but she made no move to take the whelp.

“He enjoys being held,” Jhon said, nodding and wondering if she would notice the slight change in what she was implying.

“Sure does,” Ella said. “So, we’ll be home later today?”

“Sooner we start, the sooner we get there,” he told her.

“I was thinking,” she said. “Why don’t you just turn into a dragon and fly us there?”

Again, he thought she must be joking, but then remembered that she really didn’t know much about his kind.

“It doesn’t work like that,” he explained. “An Invicta warrior can only shift to protect his homeland. Any misuse of

our dragon forms is a very serious transgression. It can lead to dismissal from service.”

“Oh,” she said simply.

She took the boy, and they headed out into a bright and frigid day.

As a dragon, he didn't really feel the cold, and the babies from Imber were very adaptable to almost any climate. But he couldn't help noticing the woman shivering, in spite of her cloak. He was eager to get her into the sleigh where she could sink into the furs again.

“Here you are, sir,” the stable droid told him. *“He ate well, enjoyed his grooming, and then slept in a fresh stall before eating and being groomed again.”*

The lichen-stag looked *very* content. His dusky, brown-gray fur was velvety soft from grooming, and his belly was full.

“I also took the liberty of cleaning your sleigh,” the droid added.

Sure enough, the sleigh was shining, polished so thoroughly that it almost looked like it had had a fresh coat of paint. The blades gleamed with a fresh coat of lubricant. That would definitely shorten their journey.

Jhon handed the droid a couple of paper credits, which it snatched up with what he would have described as glee, if it had been a biological creature.

He couldn't imagine the droid had much use for money, since it didn't eat or drink, and couldn't technically own anything. But he knew that most systems allowed droids to use earned gratuities for upgrades and non-essential maintenance, like oil baths and fashionable cover plates, which seemed to please them, as far as such a thing was possible.

“My greatest thanks, sir,” the droid said. *“It was an honor and a privilege to care for your beloved animal and conveyance.”*

“You went above and beyond,” Jhon told it. “They’re lucky to have you here.”

The droid turned and rushed back into the stables, as if its programming weren’t equal to the gratitude it felt.

Jhon offered Ella his hand and she took it this time.

He braced himself, but touching her still sent his senses racing with pleasure.

She swung herself into the sleigh and let go of him immediately, her speed telling him in no uncertain terms that she felt it too.

“So, you tip droids?” she asked casually as she pulled a big fur around herself and the baby.

She closed her eyes and luxuriated for a moment, and he was transfixed at the sight.

“Uh, yeah,” he told her. “When I need something special, or when they do a good job.”

She nodded, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“What?” he asked. “You think it’s a waste?”

“Not at all,” she told him. “Droids work hard. I was just thinking that maybe this is why you treat me the way you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he retorted.

She was probably going to say all the things the women he had tried to date told him:

You’re emotionally unavailable.

You’re a grump.

You’re always staring into the distance like you don’t even want to be with me.

“You treat me like I matter,” she said simply.

He blinked in surprise.

“You can’t actually be surprised by that,” she laughed. “Surely, you know the way Terrans are viewed in this system.”

It's much more common to be treated the way the night manager at the inn did than to be treated like a full being."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," he told her honestly. "I had no idea it was as bad as that."

He glanced over to see her eyeing him dubiously.

"Well, I mean I had some idea," he admitted. "But I don't put any stock in that stuff. How is it your fault that your people were late to space travel?"

"Well, it's not my *fault*," she said. "But a lot of people would still think I'm a weak Terran, genetically inferior compared to the more advanced races."

"That's their loss," he told her. "Terrans bring plenty to the table."

"I know, I know," she laughed. "Coffee."

"Other things, too," he told her, flicking the reins.

The deer cantered into the tundra enthusiastically, no doubt eager to burn off the energy from a big breakfast.

"Like what?" she asked.

"Seems to me that your people bring a sense of wonder and humility that was sorely lacking before you got here," he told her.

"We got here before you were born," she said.

"Read the history books," he told her. "You'll see what I mean. Your people may not be physically strong, but you're not afraid to take risks and make mistakes. And you're not afraid to celebrate your wins, however small."

She laughed, but it was a gentle sound of recognition.

He found himself smiling.

They rode on in companionable silence for a time, watching the glow of morning light intensify until the top layer of frost began to melt.

ELLA

Ella felt strangely at home in the sleigh. Bo was snuggled into her chest, and the pile of furs kept them cozy while the cold air swirled all around.

They could have been traveling for moments or hours. It was hard to say when she had entered a state of relaxation like this. She looked over her shoulder and was stunned to find that the inn was no longer in sight.

“Hard to keep track of distance on the tundra, isn’t it?” Jhon asked.

“Very,” she agreed.

“You come up with new landmarks,” he told her. “When your old ones don’t work anymore.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“The light, for one,” he told her. “As the afternoon comes on, 0-dette starts casting shadows. Those can help you estimate time.”

“Is that why it wasn’t fully dark last night?” Ella asked.

“You noticed?” he asked her.

“Not much,” she admitted. “I was still half-asleep when we headed in. But those creepy shadows were very strange.”

“0-dette is an ice moon,” Jhon explained. “Sol’s light continues to reflect in it, even after we’ve rotated enough to be in a darkness cycle.”

She nodded. That made sense.

“And for distance, the best landmarks are the floating islands,” he told her.

She looked up and shuddered at the sight of one of the massive things floating far ahead. It felt too large, too foreboding.

“How do they float?” she heard herself ask, wondering if she would even be able to understand the answer.

“Do you want the long version, or the layman’s version?” Jhon asked.

“Short version please,” she told him. “My education is... lacking in some areas.”

He frowned, but to his credit, didn’t ask her any follow-up questions.

“You’re familiar with magnetism?” he asked her.

“Sure, like two materials are drawn to each other,” she offered, thinking about how she seemed to be drawn to the burly warrior. “Or they push apart from each other.”

“Exactly,” he told her. “Do you know why?”

“Something about poles?” she ventured.

“Right again,” he said. “Opposite poles attract, and like poles repel.”

“Okay,” she said, wondering what that could possibly have to do with floating islands.

“Sigg-3 has veins of minerals that you could think of as magnetic,” he told her. “So magnetic, that when enough of the mineral is grouped together, and the poles line up, they can react with deeper deposits and propel each other enough to send an island of land into the sky and make it hover.”

“*That* used to be *there*?” she asked, pointing to the nearest island and the unbroken tundra below.

“A long time ago, yes,” he told her.

“What changed?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You said this happened a long time ago,” she said. “Why can’t it happen now?”

“Oh, it can happen now,” he told her. “Pieces of land can still break free and start floating. That’s why I keep my eye on the ground as we drive. A cavern in the ground like that can spook the deer.”

“The ground we’re on *right now* could just *float away*?” she asked.

“You make it sound like magic or something,” Jhon said. “But I just explained the science in simple terms.”

“The science *does not* make it any less scary,” she told him firmly.

“Are you starting to regret your grand adventure?” he asked with a wicked half smile.

“Grand adventure,” she laughed bitterly.

“You won’t suffer from boredom here,” he told her. “It’s not glamorous, but there’s plenty to keep you on your toes.”

“The cold alone is dangerous,” she said, trying not to let herself worry about fuel costs.

But there were no real trees here to burn. Whatever they used for heat could cost a fortune to import.

But Jhon wasn’t even wearing a cloak. Plenty of his bare skin was exposed to the elements.

“Dragons don’t get cold?” she asked him thoughtfully.

“No,” he said. “We can self-regulate our temperature. And we tend to run hot anyway.”

“And you said Bo is a chameleon-like race?” she asked.

“Only as far as what he looks like,” Jhon replied. “Imberians are very adaptable. He’s better suited than you, but he can still get cold. You’ve got to keep him well-bundled.”

“Oh,” she said, disappointment landing hard on her.

She fought back the tears that threatened.

“Hey,” Jhon said.

She looked up at him, willing herself not to cry.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I was just wondering how we would heat the house,” she admitted. “There are no trees, and it probably costs a fortune to ship in fuel.”

Jhon gave her a strange look.

“What?” she asked.

“There are solar cells,” he told her, pointing to the sky, where Sol shone brightly, uninterrupted by trees or clouds.

“Really?” she asked.

“Of course,” he told her. “Why would you burn wood or fuel when you can use starlight for free?”

“Solar cells are expensive,” she muttered, suddenly feeling ashamed of her poverty, though it wasn’t her fault.

“It’s an investment,” Jhon said, clearly not understanding. “But over a short time, they pay for themselves. Besides, your adoption agency wouldn’t want you and the whelp to use up finite natural resources, and create smoke and exhaust. I mean no offense, but didn’t those things add to the suffering on your home planet?”

She nodded, fixing her eyes on the sky islands again, and hoping he would change the subject.

She knew all the reasons solar cells were better, obviously. But there were plenty of beings in the system who couldn’t afford them. That didn’t make them bad or wasteful. It just meant they didn’t have those options.

“The islands are actually kind of beautiful, once you get used to them,” he told her as they drove on. “The privately owned ones are tethered, of course. But some the ones that haven’t been claimed can float freely. They generally don’t go anywhere, but when they sway in the winds, some say it’s like they’re dancing.”

She repressed a shudder at the thought of something that massive *dancing in the wind*.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said without looking at her. “All of it. It’s different from what you know, but you’ll adapt. And it will make you a stronger person.”

She smiled at that thought, trying to picture a version of herself that had spent ten years on this moon.

When she closed her eyes, she could see a woman standing on the tundra, legs shoulder width apart, arms akimbo, letting the freezing wind play in her hair and lift her cloak from her shoulders, her face a study in joy and confidence.

By her side stood a big, healthy boy with beautiful, pale-purple skin, hands on his hips and a cocky smile on his face.

Bo.

She smiled in the present now, ready to picture the best possible outcome of her decision to come here.

What could it hurt?

ELLA

A few hours later, Ella noticed the ground in the distance darkening slightly. As they drew closer, she saw that it wasn't the shadow of a floating island, or a cavern of missing land.

Instead, thousands of tiny lavender flowers dotted the pale green lichen, turning the vast tundra into a blanket of colorful beauty. As they approached, the wind changed directions slightly, carrying a delicate, sweet aroma.

“Ohhhh,” she sighed happily. “It’s lovely.”

“It’s called Hera’s mantle,” Jhon said. “The flowers are beautiful, but also nutritious to the local wildlife.”

“What kind of wildlife?” she asked nervously.

“I think you might call them rabbits,” he said. “Though they aren’t exactly that. Very fluffy though.”

“Where?” she asked, looking around eagerly. “What color are they?”

“Oh, they won’t come out with the sleigh moving,” he told her. “They can feel the vibrations in the ground.”

She nodded, feeling disappointed. But there would be other opportunities to explore. Right now, they needed to get to her homestead.

It was just that she wasn’t looking forward to exploring without Jhon. He knew so much about Sigg-3, and he was... good company.

“Hey,” he said. “We’re close, but we have another hour of travel, and I’m getting hungry. Want to stop and eat?”

She knew he might have just seen the disappointment on her face, and he might only be throwing her a bone. But she couldn’t bring herself to care. The idea of food, and one last meal with him, and seeing fluffy moon bunnies, was all just too seductive.

“Yes,” she told him happily. “I’d love to.”

He chuckled and tapped the reins.

The deer drew up and stopped the sleigh.

“How can you secure him?” Ella asked, realizing there wasn’t a tree or a post.

“I’ll put a wedge on the sleigh,” Jhon said. “But he won’t go anywhere anyway. He knows he can’t find enough to eat or drink out here without us.”

Ella shivered at the thought. She wouldn’t be able to find enough food or water without help either. Hopefully, there would be good enough instruction at her homestead for her to keep Bo in food and water.

Jhon hopped down and held his hand out to her.

She took it, relishing the surge of wanting, since it would be one of the last.

It was odd to feel this sudden desire for a man when she was about to be alone on the tundra with a child for years. But she supposed she hadn’t had time to develop those feelings back home, where she was always scrambling to care for her siblings and find odd jobs in her off times.

I didn’t need a man then, and I don’t need one now, she reminded herself.

Besides, soon enough, she hoped to find a way to get her big family here with her, and that would mean a return to the bustling lifestyle that had kept her out of trouble in the first place.

“What are you thinking about?” Jhon asked her, looking up from where he had been laying a blanket on the ground.

“Oh,” she said, realizing she was smiling. “I was just thinking about my family.”

He looked a little surprised.

“Do you miss them?” he asked, after a moment.

“Of course,” she told him. “I’ve never really been away from them before. Do you miss yours?”

“Oh wow,” he said. “It’s been a long time since I was homesick. The Invicta came for me when I was a boy.”

“Why?” she asked, watching him spread out the contents of the picnic basket the droid had given him on the blanket.

“Dragonets must be trained to harness their shift while they are very young,” he told her. “Every day is crucial when it comes to turning a feral young shifter into a trained warrior.”

“Feral?” she echoed.

“As a boy, no,” he told her. “My parents tended to my manners, and I was good-natured enough. All of my people have dragon in their blood, but it only comes to the surface for a rare few. So, no one was prepared when my dragon emerged. Least of all me. It was unfettered. I had no idea how to control it, or what to do with it. So, my parents contacted the Invicta immediately, and within a week, I was packed up and on a training ship.”

“That sounds terrible,” Ella said, her heart breaking for him. “You must have been so scared and so sad.”

“You know, no one ever says that,” he said, looking down at the blanket. “They all say I was lucky to become an Invicta, and I was. But, yeah, of course I was homesick at the time. Anyway, it was necessary. It probably saved my life, and my parents’ too.”

“You were that dangerous?” she breathed.

“Of course,” he told her, nodding. “You can’t imagine how enormous true dragons are until you see one. The size alone

could bring down a building, not to mention the claws, the teeth and of course, the fire.”

She nodded, trying and failing to picture the man in front of her turning into something so dangerous.

“Some families try to hide the child when the signs appear,” he said quietly. “Those times are when the most horrible tragedies strike. My parents did the right thing calling it in when they did. I don’t have any tragedies on my conscience.”

“Except the one,” she said, indicating Bo, who was happily waving his arms and legs at the lichen-deer.

“Yes, our collective tragedy,” Jhon agreed immediately. “We all have that on our conscience.”

“But if you weren’t involved personally, I don’t understand,” Ella said. “How can you dedicate yourself to making amends for something you didn’t do.”

“My people did it,” he said simply. “Whether I was personally involved or not, I am personally responsible to set things right, or as right as we can make them.”

She nodded slowly. She knew of the Invicta only marginally, but all she knew of them spoke of their extreme integrity and noble intentions.

Jhon carefully prepared Bo’s cell of milk, while Ella watched.

“It’s that easy?” she asked him, amazed.

“The prepared cells make it easy,” he told her. “When we get to the homestead, I can show you how to do it from scratch if you’re ever in a pinch.”

“Thank you,” she told him.

He held out the cell and she got Bo snuggled in the crook of her arm, then took it.

The baby tucked into his meal with great enthusiasm.

“He loves to eat,” she said fondly, watching him.

“Just like his mama,” Jhon said.

She glanced up to see that he was smiling.

“I *do* like to eat,” she told him. “As my dad used to say, *If you’re lucky enough to have food in front of you, dig in.*”

“How did he make his fortune?” Jhon asked, loading up a plate from the bounty on the blanket in front of them.

“Wow,” Ella laughed, thinking what a polite turn of phrase he had used. “He’s in rubbish and recycling.”

“An honest business,” Jhon said, handing her the plate.

“I guess that’s true,” she agreed. Though there was something terrible about seeing her father come home at night, filthy and physically exhausted.

But on the Terras, most people took what work they could get. At least her parents had work, even if it wasn’t really enough to feed them all.

The thought of her siblings at home with rumbling bellies while she choked down this plate of rich delicacies made her feel almost sick.

They have half my first month’s stipend, she reminded herself. It won’t all be gone yet. They’ll have enough to eat today.

“Look,” Jhon said softly.

She looked where he was pointing, but she didn’t see anything.

Then there was movement among the flowers. A soft gray, furry creature was snuffling around. It wasn’t exactly a rabbit, but she could see the easy comparison.

“She has babies,” Jhon breathed. “If we’re still, they’ll come closer. Our food smells good to them.”

Sure enough, the fuzzy, gray creature hopped forward, ears flopping. And behind her, Ella could just make out three tiny balls of fluff, two gray and one white.

“Oh,” she sighed quietly.

They were close enough now that she could see their noses quivering as they snuffled among the fragrant blossoms.

One of the babies looked up at her, tilting its head curiously to the side, and blinked its enormous eyes.

“*Bah,*” Bo squeaked at it, thrusting out his arms and wiggling his fingers in ecstatic welcome.

She glanced up to see if Jhon had noticed this adorable sight.

The big warrior’s cool facade melted into the most beautiful smile before her eyes.

Something tugged at her heart as she watched the fierce dragon and the sweet babies under a wide blue sky, with fragrant flowers stretching out as far as the eye could see.

For the first time since she’d landed, Ella felt like she might be home.

ELLA

After a wonderful, relaxing lunch, Ella must have drifted off soon after they got back in the sleigh.

Before she knew it, Jhon was rousing her.

“We’re here,” he told her in his husky voice.

She blinked up at his handsome face, feeling her whole body shiver back to life under his gaze.

He cleared his throat and straightened up.

Bo nuzzled her neck from his place on her chest and she kissed the top of his sweet head.

“We’re home, baby,” she whispered to him.

She hoisted herself up to the bench of the sleigh and looked around.

“Wow, it’ll be like living under the sword of Damocles, huh?” she joked weakly, looking up at the massive island that floated overhead.

Jhon didn’t laugh.

She scanned the open tundra around them.

Gorgeous, flowered lichen covered the ground in every direction.

But there wasn’t a single structure.

“Where’s the house?” she asked him tightly, trying not to panic.

Did they expect her to build a house? With nothing but lichen and the sick sense of despair rising in her chest?

His eyes slid up to the island hovering above them.

“No,” she breathed, realizing what was happening. “No, please, I can’t.”

“In a place like Sigg-3, the highest ground is always the safest,” Jhon told her calmly.

“I had my eyes shut on the shuttle most of the way here,” she moaned. “I couldn’t even *look*. And now I’m supposed to *live* up there?”

“Just think of it like an apartment in a tall city building,” Jhon suggested.

“Terra-13 doesn’t have tall city buildings,” she told him, the tone of her voice rising.

“There’s no need to panic,” Jhon told her, fishing a rope out of the sleigh, along with a three-pronged metal hook.

Was he serious?

“How can you tell me not to panic, when you’re clearly planning to use a grappling hook and a *rope* to get up there?” she yelled.

Bo began whimpering quietly in his sleep.

She snuggled him closer, feeling fresh tears prickle her eyes.

“Look,” Jhon said. “I’m going to climb up there on my own. And then I’ll power up the chute so you can come up that way.”

“What chute?” she asked.

He pointed, and she saw that in the shadow of the island, she had missed a large platform, big enough for the whole sleigh.

“Does the deer come up with us?” she asked.

“Of course,” he told her. “There’s room for the whole sleigh, deer included. But you’ll have to take his harness and

lead him on, and then make sure nothing is hanging off any of the sides.”

She eyed the deer suspiciously.

He looked tame enough, but he was awfully big. And the antlers were enormous.

“You’ll have a bit of time while I’m climbing and getting the chute powered up,” Jhon said lightly.

She sensed something in his tone that implied it was time for her to learn to do something for herself.

And if this was where she was going to live, she needed to be able to load and unload the chute properly.

Never mind that she had never ridden on a chute before, and definitely pictured it having safety rails.

She nodded to him with a confidence she didn’t feel, and watched as he threw his hook higher than she would have thought possible, and ensured it held firmly, before he began to pull his body up, arm over arm.

The bare muscles of his arms and torso rippled with the exertion, and she found it hard to look away. But there was a nearly impossible task at hand, and no time like the present to attack it.

“Okay,” she said briskly to the deer, hoping it would fall in line if she showed a little confidence. “Let’s get onto that chute platform.”

Grabbing the harness, she started marching off and nearly fell over when the deer didn’t move.

“Come on, let’s go,” she told it.

It only blinked at her with its large, beautiful eyes.

“*Whistle to it,*” Jhon shouted from what seemed like a dizzying height above.

She gave a little whistle, and the deer immediately began to move in the direction of the chute.

Their first attempt was mostly a failure. The deer followed along obediently enough, but they wound up with the right half of the sleigh and deer on the platform and the left half off.

“You didn’t think about your own legs?” she asked the deer.

It blinked at her, then gave a loud snuffle that almost made her jump out of her shoes.

It did not seem to want to go backwards, so she had to lead it off the platform and then in a large circle to approach the target again.

This time was better than the first, but still not good enough. They were about six inches off the platform.

“One more time,” she told the deer enthusiastically. “We’ve got this.”

It was actually kind of fun learning how to work with the animal and the sleigh. They had just about reached the far outer loop of the circle when she heard thunder.

“Wow, I could practically feel that,” she told the deer.

But it had frozen in its tracks, those lovely, limpid eyes so wide with fear that she could see the whites.

Then it hit her.

The tundra was dry, like a desert. There were no thunderstorms here.

Her heart began to pound, and she could hear Jhon screaming to her from above, but she couldn’t make out the words.

“We need to move,” she decided. “Come on.”

But the terrified lichen-deer wouldn’t budge.

She felt the ground reverberating now, sending a ticklish sensation through her calves.

Think.

The deer was afraid of the sound. So what could she do?

She placed her hands over its ears, and it blinked at her, clearly feeling better.

But she couldn't get it onto the platform with her hands over its ears.

Thinking quickly, she opened her cloak and plucked Bo out of the sling that held him close to her chest.

She shrugged the cloak off and placed it on the ground with the baby on top.

“Sorry, my love,” she murmured to him as she hurriedly used the sling to wrap around the deer's ears.

But by the time she had the baby in her arms again, the earth was rumbling more markedly, and the deer still looked frightened.

With no options left to her, Ella began to sing loudly, hoping to overwhelm the creature's senses with something that wouldn't frighten it.

In spite of the fact that she *knew* she couldn't carry a tune, the deer seemed to calm.

With Bo held tight to her chest in the cloak in one arm, and the harness firmly fixed in the opposite hand, Ella sang the Terra-3 coffee jingle they played endlessly on the wire-box back home at the top of her lungs.

“*Just drink up your morning BREW,*” she sang for all she was worth as she somehow led the deer toward the platform once more.

The creature followed docilely enough, but Ella could feel the rumble growing closer.

“*Early as the morning DEW,*” she sang on. “*Good for every morning ACHE. Makes you glad to be AWAKE.*”

By some miracle, both deer and sleigh wound up completely on the platform this time.

But when she tapped the activator with her foot, nothing happened.

“Rich and dark and it makes you SAY,” she sang on desperately, not wanting the deer to spook if she stopped. *“Give me coffee every DAY.”*

She looked up to the horizon.

Her stomach clenched as she saw what looked like the whole tundra moving toward her.

JHON

Jhon rushed to use the hand pump on the generator. There was no time to wait for it to recharge. The manual pump was designed for two people to operate it, but he did it himself, one side in each hand, muscles burning with the effort to jumpstart the generator quickly.

At last, it sprung to life under his arms.

Jhon flung himself across the utility cage and slammed down the joystick that powered the chute.

A reassuring hiss confirmed that it was done.

He ran back toward the edge of the island, where the chute should be rising.

Already he could see the herd, a massive river of mammoths, charging across the tundra. A fist seemed to close around his heart, and for a moment he couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

He felt the dragon surging forward, yearning to take control and protect his mate, then he heard a frightened voice shouting out a strangely familiar tune.

“Good for every morning ACHE. Makes you glad to be AWAKE...”

Jhon took one calming breath, resetting himself and getting control of his protective instincts.

“Ella,” he shouted, reaching the edge of the island just as the chute sailed up into view.

Ella stood on the platform with Bo in her arms and her other arm around the neck of the deer, who had something tied around his eyes. She was singing for all she was worth.

“Is that... the Universal Coffee Company jingle?” he heard himself ask.

She closed her mouth and opened it again.

Then she was laughing so hard she almost doubled over. Little Bo clung to her chest, his face melting into a smile of his own.

“Are you okay?” Jhon asked, wondering if she had gone mad. Terrans were delicate creatures, physically. Maybe their minds were more susceptible to trauma as well.

“I’m so sorry,” she gasped. “I don’t know why I’m laughing. We almost died down there.”

“Yes,” he agreed, feeling more concerned than ever.

“But we were saved,” she said, her eyes dancing with mirth. “By a *commercial jingle*.”

“But why were you singing it?” he asked.

“The deer was spooked,” she told him. “I put the baby’s sling around his ears, but it wasn’t enough. So, I just started singing the first thing I could think of.”

Jhon stared down at her, thunderstruck.

“What?” she asked.

“That was very, very quick thinking under pressure,” he told her. “I’ve had plenty of cadets under me who wouldn’t have thought of that.”

“Thanks,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said with a smile. “I guess I should be proud to be a dumb Terran who can be as quick on her feet as a baby dragon.”

“Quicker,” he told her.

That made her laugh again, and this time Bo joined her, their laughter weaving together and making the floating island seem less ethereal and more like the bustling lichen farm he hoped it would one day be.

Jhon couldn't help but smile.

“So, what's that building?” she asked, indicating the house.

He wondered if she was joking, but her expression was serious.

“That's your house,” he told her.

“That giant thing?” she asked him, looking amazed.

He glanced back at the house again. It wasn't anything spectacular.

“You've had a long day,” he told her. “Let's just go in and check it out.”

“What about the deer?” she asked.

“We'll bring him to the stables,” he told her, feeling inwardly pleased that she was concerned about the animal's needs.

She respects all beasts, the dragon whispered in his ear.

They walked the deer to the stables in silence as Ella's eyes swept the island.

“I can't believe we have Hera's mantle on the island,” she said. “It will always smell so good.”

“The buds close at night,” Jhon told her as he rubbed the deer down. “So, in the morning when they open, you'll notice the scent all over again.”

“Amazing,” she said.

“The agency chose this island and the land below because of the vegetation,” he went on. “If you baby it, you can harvest twice each year. There's a special market for this lichen because of the scent.”

“I'm going to be a lichen farmer?” she asked, looking like she was about to laugh again.

“Yes, of course,” he told her.

“But it’s already growing here,” she said. “It hardly seems fair to call that farming.”

“Well, you’re in the tundra,” he retorted. “What else are you going to grow?”

“I... hadn’t thought about that,” she admitted, with a cute frown.

He longed to pull her into his arms and kiss that pouty lip.

With an effort, he turned back to the deer, raking fresh straw into a stall and giving him feed and water.

“Come on,” he told her when he was finished. “Let’s go see the house.”

They trooped off together through the fragrant lichen.

He tried not to invade Ella’s privacy, after all, this was the beginning of her new life, a very personal thing.

But it was impossible not to notice the way she took it all in, and the joy in her eyes when they were close enough to see the comfortable rocking chairs out on the open front porch.

“Oh wow,” she said, jogging up the steps to fling herself into one of the chairs and rock herself and Bo back and forth. “Just like in the holo-films.”

Again, he couldn’t really tell if she was joking or not.

“Nice for relaxing,” Jhon said lightly, pressing his palm to the sensor beside the front door.

It swung open, and he went in and turned on a few lights.

A moment later, he heard soft footsteps and then a gasp.

He turned back to see Ella’s face go slack with wonder and then crumble into tears.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

He suspected he knew the answer already. The house was rustic - a large open room that served as the living space, and four small bedrooms in the back. It was a no-nonsense farmhouse, of course his little princess didn’t like it.

But her lip was wobbling, and she put her hand over her mouth like she couldn't speak.

"Listen, I know this might not be what you pictured," he told her. "It's a farmhouse, plain and simple, and..."

But the rest of his speech was cut off when she flung herself into his arms, baby and all, sobbing as if her heart was broken.

He sighed, cursing his traitorous body for responding to her nearness, and trying not to hold her back.

"I thought," she sobbed. "I thought... I never thought it would be so beautiful."

"What?" he asked her.

"I know it's silly to cry over it," she gasped. "But there are cabinets for dishes, and machines for cooking, and the floors are nice and smooth, so the baby will be safe. My whole family back home lives in a room smaller than that beautiful porch..."

Her own tears cut her off again.

He wrapped his body around hers, sympathy surging through him, along with another emotion that was harder to understand.

After a moment, her sobs quieted, and she pulled back. He let her go right away, though every instinct told him to hold on tight.

"Ella," he said carefully. "I saw how much water you used back at the inn. I assumed you grew up in a privileged environment. It just seemed so... wasteful."

She blinked at him through her dewy eyelashes for a moment.

Then that sunny smile appeared on her face.

"So, you *really* thought I was a spoiled brat because of that jug of water?" she asked, eyes twinkling.

"Of course," he said.

“Well, it’s true that most Terras are short on water, but it’s not true of my home world,” she told him. “Most of it is swampland - water is basically the *one* thing we never went without.”

He’d clearly gotten the wrong impression. There was so much he wanted to ask her.

But before he had a chance, Bo began to whimper.

“Oh dear,” she said. “I’ll bet it’s time for a nappy change and a little something to eat, isn’t it?”

The whelp looked up at her with adoring eyes, and Jhon watched as she tended to the little one’s needs right there on the floor, with a swift confidence he hadn’t expected from one so newly a mother.

“We can put him in his room for a nap,” he suggested.

“There are more rooms?” Ella asked.

This time, he knew she wasn’t being sarcastic or disingenuous. She really wanted to know.

“Yes,” he told her gently. “There’s a bedroom for him and another for you. And two more to use however you’d like.”

She nodded, her lips buttoned, and walked with him to the hallway where he showed her the two empty rooms and then the room intended for Bo.

A soft green carpet covered the floor, and matching curtains hung from the windows. A simple wooden crib, a changing table with drawers for clothing, and a wooden bookshelf with a few titles and toys on display were all that adorned the room.

“Incredible,” Ella whispered.

Her gaze landed on each item, and suddenly he was seeing it through her eyes - the softness of the crib blanket, the colorful books, the simple beauty of the field of lichen and azure sky out the window.

“You’re the luckiest boy in the world,” she murmured to the already sleeping baby as she laid him down.

She stood in front of his crib for a long moment, gazing down at Bo with such love that it wrenched Jhon's heart.

When she turned, he found himself trying to blink away the expression of tenderness he was certain he wore.

"I'll show you yours next," he told her gruffly.

Jhon led Ella back to the hall and into her own room, tapping the light sensor on the way in.

He turned to watch her take it in, thinking he was prepared for her reaction.

"Look at that bed," she exclaimed. "And those windows, and it has its own refresher! And, oh... a fireplace..."

She trailed off, and somehow, she didn't seem as happy as before.

She's tired. It's been a long day.

"Let me show you how to use the chemical refresher," he offered.

"Thank you," she told him, smiling. "Cleaning up sounds good."

He led her into the refresher and walked her through the steps, showing her the various choices for scent and heat sensation.

"There isn't a way to like... hurt myself with this, is there?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Are the chemicals harsh?" she asked.

"They are designed and prepared to clean the most delicate biological skins and pelts without irritation," he told her. "Terrans are sturdier than many. You'll be just fine."

"Thank you," she told him with feeling.

He nodded and headed back out of her suite into the hallway, feeling like he was leaving his heart behind him.

She cannot be my mate, he reminded himself.

But inside, the dragon only chuckled.

JHON

Jhon stayed in the hallway for what felt like forever.

He was supposed to be listening for Bo, watching over him.

But the truth of the matter was that with his heightened senses, he would have ample warning of any danger.

He was really listening for Ella, and watching over her.

The look in her eyes when he offered the refresher concerned him.

She is ours and we are hers, the dragon whispered. Claim her, so that we may comfort her.

He ignored it, and kept watch over the door to her rooms.

At last, the sound of the refresher stopped, and he could sense her padding out of that space and into the bedroom.

After a moment, small sounds of sadness wafted to his ears. Sounds so small that without the dragon's help, he wouldn't have heard them. The sounds of someone trying hard not to make a sound.

"Ella?" he called to her softly.

But she didn't answer.

A thousand fears crowded his mind in an instant. Was she hurt? Had a hawkmouse slipped into the house and bitten her? They were tiny, but their venom was among the most painful in the system to endure.

“Ella, I’m coming in,” he announced, knocking one more time.

“Come in—” she began.

But he had already opened the door.

She sat on the edge of the bed wearing a thin robe, and looking completely dejected.

“Ella,” he said softly, coming to kneel in front of her and trying to ignore the slight translucence of the robe and the delicious scent of warm, clean woman that clung to her. “What’s wrong?”

“It doesn’t feel fair,” she said quietly.

“Fair to who?” he asked, completely confused.

“Back home, our town was basically a swamp,” she said, lifting her head, but still looking down at her hands. “I’m the oldest of nine kids in the family. And there’s never enough - never enough to eat, never enough fuel to warm ourselves. My parents work themselves to the bone, but it’s hard there, especially with so many mouths to feed. A person like me doesn’t deserve all this.”

His heart constricted as he watched her look helplessly around the room.

“What do you mean *a person like me*?” he asked.

“When the local creche flooded, I left school to stay home with my baby sister,” she told him, looking down at her hands. “I don’t even have the basic educational certificate.”

“I’m sorry you left school,” Jhon said, feeling out of his depth.

“I’m not,” she said, her eyes flashing fiercely to his. “Taria is my world. I came here to save her. And if I could give her this luxurious life, and I could go back to the tenements in her place, I would.”

She meant it. He could see the fierce light of love in her eyes. It was almost blinding.

“You must miss her so much,” he heard himself say.

“I miss them all,” she said. “But now, I’m going to be alone on this island.”

“Well, not exactly alone,” Jhon said.

“I’ll have Bo,” she said, nodding. “But he won’t be much company for a couple of years.”

“I know you want your family,” he said. “But I’ll be here to help you, and to keep you company if you want.”

She blinked up at him looking completely confused.

“What do you mean?” she asked, after a moment.

“I mean, I’ll be here,” he told her. “I don’t have to stay in the house if you don’t want me to. But it is my duty to watch over Bo until he is of age.”

“Of age?” she echoed.

“Twenty standard years,” he told her, nodding. “Then I’m free to return to active duty with the Invicta, or retire honorably.”

She nodded slowly.

“You don’t really want my company?” he asked gently.

It would hurt if it was true, but it would be better to know.

“I’m sure you don’t want to be trapped with me in the middle of nowhere. But selfishly, I’m so glad you’ll be here, for me and for Bo,” her voice broke slightly on the boy’s name.

“For Bo?” he echoed.

“It’s not right for him to lose his father,” she said.

Jhon stared at her, unable to process the words, even as the dragon hummed with satisfaction in his chest.

“You do know he was grown in a pod, using Imberian DNA,” he said.

“Of course,” she replied. “And you’re his father. You feed him, and protect him, and make sure he’s warm and comfortable. You clean up after him, and comfort him. You

love him. And he loves you. That makes you his father, Jhon, no genetics necessary.”

Something seemed to crack in his chest as he thought about the tiny whelp sleeping in the next room.

“They told me I was here to adopt him,” she said thoughtfully. “They said he was an orphan, but it’s not true. He was your son long before I got here. And if you left, you would both be devastated.”

He nodded, swallowing over the lump in his throat.

“I know because Taria *felt like* my child,” she went on, her voice softening as she spoke of the little sister she adored. “Because I took care of her.”

“Of course,” he said without thinking. “You dedicated yourself to her needs from the time she was an infant. You have sacrificed your own future for her, twice now.

“But it’s not the same,” Ella said, wiping her eyes and straightening up. “She had parents already. I just stepped up for a while. But Bo had no one and nothing. You are his whole world.”

“We will both be his world,” Jhon told her.

Maybe it was just the starlight from the window, playing in her hair and making her blue eyes sparkle. But to Jhon, it felt as if the universe had a spotlight on her, showing him the way.

Even as he fought back the dragon, he leaned toward the little Terran, watching her face for some sign that she wanted him to stop.

When he cupped her soft cheek in his hand, she seemed to press her face into his touch, her eyes closing for a moment, before they opened again, pupils dilated, to meet his. Then they drifted down to his lips.

It was too much.

He slanted his mouth down to claim hers.

She was sweet as honey, and the taste of her made him groan.

She shivered in his arms and then *melted* against him, one small hand sliding up his chest to cling to his shoulder, as if she might drown in her desire without him to anchor her.

The dragon roared in his chest, incandescent with the knowledge that they were about to claim their mate.

Every cell in his body seemed to fill with unbridled pleasure. He clasped her close to him, reveling in the feel of her softness against his rigid heat.

Ella whimpered, molding herself to him as he plundered her mouth.

He lifted her in his arms and straightened in one fluid motion, laying her on the bed as gently as he could bear.

She pulled in a shuddering breath beneath him that made the dragon frantic.

“Don’t be frightened,” Jhon told her, his voice husky with need. “I will never hurt you.”

“I... I...” she gasped.

“What is it?” he asked, pulling back with herculean effort.

“I’ve never... done this before,” she murmured, her eyes cast downward, cheeks darkening with shame.

In his chest, the dragon screamed with satisfaction.

Mine. Only mine.

Ella ventured to look up at him again as Jhon struggled to compose his features.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered miserably.

“There is nothing to be sorry for,” he told her gently, the right words seeming to bubble out of him without effort. “I didn’t mean for this to happen. We can stop...”

But she was reaching for him again, and he was helpless to do anything but take her in his arms.

The dragon sang a song of victory in his mind, even as Jhon fought with himself, determined to do the right thing.

Ours, the dragon screamed, when it realized what he was doing.

I will not claim her when she doesn't know it is a claiming, he told it firmly. I will not claim her if she doesn't know what it means.

But his hips were already bucking against her.

And, in her innocence, she was rocking into him, the place between her legs fragrant and so needy that he could feel her heat through his breeches.

It's the mating frenzy surfacing in her. Claim her.

Madness threatened to seize him, and he froze in place, willing himself to regain control.

ELLA

Ella clung to Jhon, her body pounding with a need like nothing she had ever felt.

There were cute boys back home that she would bump into once in a while at the shops, even after leaving school. She had experienced a tingle or two when they smiled at her.

But this was a pull so deep that it felt like she would die if Jhon didn't kiss her again.

In the back of her mind, her inner critic tried to argue.

You hardly know him. You're a good girl.

But though she had spent a lifetime letting that voice guide her and keep her from trouble, the rush of blood in her ears drowned it out now, so that her world shrank down to nothing but Jhon's big, hard body and the pull inside her that felt like it would turn her inside out if he didn't help her somehow.

But he was holding himself so still, his jaw clenched, the effort of it making him shake.

"Jhon," she whimpered. "I need you."

His flashing eyes melted at that, and he gazed down at her tenderly, as if she were the most precious thing.

"Hush, my love. I'll help you," he crooned, his voice deep and husky with wanting. "Lie still for me, and let me help you."

She blinked in assent, afraid that if she opened her mouth she would moan with relief and fear.

As he bent to press his lips to hers again, she felt the hot thickness of his pulse against her hip.

She feared him, even as she shivered with helpless lust. How could such a thing fit inside her?

But when he abandoned her mouth to nuzzle her neck and nip at her earlobes the fear evaporated. Every part of her seemed to crave his touch and awaken at the slightest touch of his lips.

He kissed his way across her collarbone, stopping to lick at the base of her throat. She whimpered and arched her back, needing to feel the pressure of his hard chest against her aching breasts.

“Patience, my angel,” he murmured, his breath dancing on her sensitive skin.

But when he slid a thick finger down her chest to open her silken robe, she let out a little cry of need.

The muscles of his jaws rippled as he gazed down at her.

Ella had no idea if her body was pleasing to look at. She had nothing to compare it to, and no one else had ever examined her without coverings. She might have shrunk away from his careful observation, if not for the insistent throb of desperate need, pounding in her veins.

But there was no doubt in his eyes. Jhon looked at her like she was a piece of art.

“Gods, but you’re beautiful,” he breathed, lowering himself to kiss her forehead, her eyelids, her cheeks, and her mouth once more.

His bare chest pressed against hers, the friction of his leather armor abrading her sensitive nipples in a way that increased the unfamiliar agony between her legs.

She moaned against his mouth, feeling her hips tilt up to him of their own accord.

He growled and pulled away, kneeling over her with clenched fists.

“I-I’m s-sorry,” she panted, wanting to cry. Had she offended him? Was it over?

“It’s only that I want you so much,” he told her, his expression softening.

He lowered himself to her and kissed her again, slowly and deeply.

Her heart was thundering now, but she willed herself to be still.

Please don’t stop. Please don’t stop...

Jhon began kissing his way down her neck again. She held her breath as he nuzzled her breasts, then flicked out his tongue to lash at one pebbled nipple.

“*Ohhh,*” she moaned, in spite of herself.

The sound seemed to make him lose control. He licked her again, sucking the whole nipple into his mouth as he swirled his tongue, sending her into a dizzying despair as she arched her back, desperate for more.

He pinched the nipple between his thumb and forefinger as he moved to her other breast, gently teasing the nipple until it was stiff and throbbing before he sucked it into his hot mouth.

The pleasure shot through her, and she slid her hands through his hair, pulling him closer to her breasts.

But too soon, he was nuzzling his way down her belly, licking her navel, and then nudging her thighs apart, his rough jaw sending tingles of awareness through her.

“Jhon,” she whimpered.

His eyes flashed up to hers.

“Please,” he practically purred. “Let me help you.”

She might have tried to demure, but the waves of desire carried her along like a raging river.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Before she could really take in what was happening, he was lowering his face to her sex and running his tongue along

her opening.

Ella gasped, the sensation electric. She could feel herself swelling and relaxing for him.

Jhon groaned and slid his hand up to hold her open as he slowly licked her folds, his tongue firm and thorough.

Ella lost track of her sounds. Hips quivering with the effort not to grind into his mouth, she clenched the sheets as she watched her pleasure fly higher and higher on his wicked tongue.

On and on he teased and prodded her, humming with pleasure as if he couldn't get enough of the taste of her. Tension began to build in Ella, until she felt like a string pulled taut, about to snap.

"Please," she begged, uncertain what she was begging for.

Instantly, he shifted his attention slightly upward, flicking and sucking against a tiny bead at the top of her sex that exploded with fresh pleasure at every touch.

She felt herself being launched into the current of the pleasure until she was flying and frantic.

At last, it broke in an explosion of white ecstasy, flooding her entire body with every wrenching throb, as Jhon continued to tease and toy with her gently until she was spent.

She collapsed back against the bed, loose-limbed and still floating in a haze of pleasure.

Jhon crawled up to her, and she held her arms out to him, though they felt like heavy weights.

But he stretched out beside her instead.

Did he want her to do to him what he had done to her?

She had no clue what she was doing, but the idea of giving him pleasure in that way had tingles of excitement going down her spine.

She rolled to her side to face him, sliding one hand down his cobbled abs to explore the thick rod that strained and pulsed into her hand through his breeches.

“Gods, Ella, stop,” Jhon groaned, catching her wrist in his hand and dragging it away from himself.

“You don’t want me to?” she asked, hearing the plaintive note in her own voice.

“Not yet,” he told her. “For now, you need rest.”

There was something like pain in his voice, but when he pulled her close to his warm chest and stroked between her shoulder blades, she couldn’t help closing her eyes, just for a moment.

ELLA

Ella awoke with the sun, feeling incredible.

Unlike any normal morning, instead of shivering and clutching for the covers, she was cocooned in the most delicious warmth.

Opening her eyes, she took in the room, and everything came flashing back to her - the journey, the sweetness of her infant son, the incredible house, and Jhon...

Her cheeks heated as she remembered her shamelessness.

Even now, she was warm because his body was wrapped around her naked form.

She slid out of his hold as slowly and carefully as she could, praying he would sleep until she was cleaned up and dressed.

When she was safely on the floor, she turned to look at Jhon.

The burly warrior looked even bigger than usual, lying across the bed. His handsome face was relaxed in sleep, and she realized he might be younger than she had thought. Older than she was, surely, but not by so much.

His race might age more slowly than Terrans do, a voice in the back of her head reminded her. He could be hundreds of years old. Without information about the Invicta, you'll never know.

There was plenty she didn't know yet. And while it should have made her cautious, she found that she felt happy and excited instead.

After all, he was kind and gentle, and he treated her respectfully in spite of her being Terran.

And apparently, she had twenty years to learn more.

The baby hadn't made a peep yet, and a glance at her bracelet on the side table told her it was early.

She decided to slip into the refresher for another chem shower.

Hurrying, even though she would have loved to soak in the cleansing, fragrant mist, she managed to be dressed in her other shift and back in the bedroom while both her boys still slept.

Once she made it to the hallway, she paused.

If Bo was still sleeping, she hated to wake him.

On the other hand, that was a lot of sleep, at least by Terran standards. It would be best to check on him.

She opened his door and slipped quietly inside.

Soft light filled the room, and it looked even more inviting and magical than it had the night before. The bright colors of the books and clothing on the shelves made her smile.

She moved close to the crib, and saw that Bo was still sleeping peacefully. His cheeks looked so soft that she longed to kiss them. But she knew he needed his rest, so she gazed down at him instead, soaking him in with only her eyes.

While she was watching, he slowly awoke, chubby fists opening like starfish, little feet twitching. It was almost like he'd sensed her nearby.

When his eyes opened at last and he saw her, his sweet face broke into the sunniest smile.

"*Bah*," he said, kicking his legs out straight and tucking his chin down so that his cheeks looked even chubbier.

“Well, good morning to you too, Bo,” she said, sliding her hands under him and lifting him up.

He snuggled right into her neck, little hands clinging to her as if he never wanted to let her go.

“You are the best little snuggler in the whole world,” she told him as she carried him over to the changing table. “Let’s see what you’ve got in that nappy.”

Once he was wiped down and changed, she brought him to the kitchen for a nice bottle.

When he had it in his hands and was happily feasting away, she wrapped him in his sling on her chest, and decided to look around the kitchen a bit.

She was grateful to find that it was fully stocked, with plenty of ingredients to make almost anything she could think of.

The fruits and vegetables were preserved in jars. Given that they would have to be imported, it made perfect sense. It was a relief to know they wouldn’t lack on nourishment just because they didn’t have a garden going yet.

She wondered if she could make a little green house and heat it somehow. If they made enough selling lichen, she might be able to have parts shipped in. It would be fun to learn to garden, and then they could have fresh veggies.

Having found egg and milk powders, as well as packets of wheat flour and sugar, she decided to make johnnycakes.

There was a box on the counter that looked like it might be for playing the feeds. She didn’t dare imagine that it could pick up the feed from all the way out here, but she turned it on for fun anyway.

The latest pop hit from Stallta-fon Byzonnt began playing immediately.

“Yes,” Ella laughed, unable to believe her luck.

She began dancing around the kitchen a bit as she whisked the johnnycake mix.

Bo tapped her shoulder with his little hand almost in time to the music, a big grin on his sweet face.

“You like dancing, huh?” she asked him.

He laughed at her, and she danced him over to the window and back to the counter, using more elaborate steps.

The sound of heavy footsteps alerted her to Jhon’s presence.

She turned to him, proud to be able to offer him a homemade breakfast.

The look on his face stopped her in her tracks.

“We need to talk,” he said, his voice gruff.

He wasn’t even looking at her.

“Okay,” she said. “Let me just turn off the stove.”

He waited, motionless, while she pulled the pan off the burner, and quickly cleaned everything up.

The johnnycakes might get cold, but whatever was happening with Jhon was clearly more important. Her heart pounded hard as she worked, and she was on the verge of tears by the time she walked over to him.

“Sit,” he said, indicating the little table by the window.

She sat, glad for the reassuring warmth of Bo, who was leaning against her chest now.

Whether his excitement was dissipating because she had stopped dancing and he was sleepy after his milk, or if he was actually reading the mood of his mother and father, she had no idea. But the two of them held each other and waited for Jhon to speak.

“As an Invicta soldier, I have dedicated my life to my duty,” Jhon said flatly. “And my duty here is to guard the boy, nothing more. What happened last night cannot happen again. Ever.”

She stared at him for a moment, wondering what happened to the passionate, romantic man who had warmed her bed.

Had she imagined him?

“Do you understand?” he asked slowly, but with an undercurrent of impatience.

“I understand,” she said crisply. “I need to get back to my johnnycakes though. If you’re finished?”

A flash of something that almost looked like hurt went across his face so fast she wasn’t sure she had seen it at all.

Then he was out of his seat and heading for the door.

“I’m going to patrol,” he told her over his shoulder.

The door closed behind him.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, willing herself not to cry. She hadn’t had a boyfriend this time yesterday. Why should she be sad about not having one now?

After all, she had a beautiful home, a purpose in her life, and the most beautiful son in the world. What did she need with a man?

She marched back to the stove and began flipping johnnycakes again, still feeling a little tender, but determined not to let it stop her from enjoying her day.

She had slid the last cake out of the pan when the doorbell rang.

“Wow,” she said to Bo. “He thinks he has to ring the bell to come in now?”

But when she opened the door, Jhon wasn’t on the other side.

“Welcome to Sigg-3,” a woman cried, throwing out her arms with happiness. The delicate tentacles on her head were also moving gracefully, as if they were underwater.

The man beside her nodded to Ella. He had the same tentacled head, and wore a thick green shirt with overalls on top.

Behind them stood a Bergalian couple and a man who looked almost Terran, except that he was a little too tall and

his smile too perfect.

“I’m Ree-lah and this is Manx,” the lady said. “And that’s Charl and Abbra, and Rikkors.”

“Nice to meet you all,” Ella said, and introduced herself.

“And who is this little fellow?” Ree-lah asked.

“This is Bo,” Ella replied, feeling delighted. “Please come in. I just made a big batch of johnnycakes.”

“Johnnycakes?” Manx asked with a delighted and curious expression.

“They’re like cakes without frosting and you eat them in the morning,” Ella explained.

“You won’t have to tell him twice,” Ree-lah laughed. “Manx loves his sweets.”

Ella stepped back and the five of them trooped in, wiping their feet carefully on the mat by the door as they entered.

“We brought some canned pit-fruit from our last trip home to Bergalia,” Abbra said, holding out something in her furry hand.

A lush, peach-colored fruit floated in the glass jar in what looked like thick syrup.

“This looks delicious,” Ella moaned appreciatively.

“You’re going to love it,” Charl told her with a smile. “To us, it tastes like home. To you, it will taste like the sweetness of an orchard, I think.”

“Amazing,” Ella said. “I think I’d like to open it this morning, so we can share it together, if that’s okay. Johnnycakes are always better with fruit.”

“Yes,” Charl said happily. “By all means.”

“I knew we were going to like her,” Abbra told him, giving Ella a smile.

“What a lovely home,” Ree-lah said approvingly. “You have so many windows, it’s really nice to see so much of your island at once.”

Suddenly Ella felt a surge of happiness. She *did* have a lovely home to live in. And plenty of food - enough for a houseful of guests.

“I’m so glad you came,” she told Ree-lah warmly.

The other woman patted her arm.

“Now, let me know how I can help,” Ree-lah said, leading the way to the kitchen. “I can’t wait to see these johnnycakes.”

And Ella thought that maybe she wasn’t so alone after all.

JHON

Jhon walked the perimeter of the Bergalians' island, trying to keep his fury in check.

It was bad enough that the convoy of neighbors had arrived and demanded he send down the chute for them right after he'd had the most difficult conversation of his life with Ella.

But the fact that the very same night she was determined to go to a party on one of their islands without giving him time to do a preliminary sweep or a background check on the hosts was maddening.

Charl and Abbra's lichen farm was obviously mature and thriving. He had to grudgingly concede that they had gone above and beyond the usual tiered lines for cultivation and created a farm that was practically a work of art.

Wicker sculptures in the shapes of people, animals, game pieces, and even starships practically covered the island, with lichen growing over them. Their house, which was a study in exposed tresses and deep roof overhangs, cultivated thick swathes of lichen. There was even a lichen-covered hedge maze.

He had overheard Ella waxing poetic to Abbra about how much she loved the whimsical beauty of their farm.

But all Jhon could see was undue risk.

Anyone or anything could be lurking behind any of those sculptures. The maze could be full of kidnappers, small

predators, or both.

And even his dragon senses were not enough to convince him he would be able to adequately identify and ward off danger when there were so many distracting figures on the lawn.

He stalked past a trio of the statues that were clearly supposed to be three muses, and headed around toward a lichen-covered replica of the Wreck of the Hessionette.

Ella's sparkling laughter caught his attention.

He tried to look over without making it obvious that he was curious.

She stood with a steaming mug of something in her hand, the fur cloak swirling around her, with Bo snuggled inside in his sling. Her head tilted back as she laughed.

Across from her stood the Arborealyte, *Rikkers*, with his annoyingly Terran-shaped-but-taller form and too-perfect rake's smile.

Mine, the dragon roared in Jhon's head.

With an effort, he turned on his heel and continued his patrol around the island, trying not to think about the fact that *Rikkers* was clearly flirting with Ella.

She's not my mate, he tried to tell the dragon. *And I told her this morning we could not let that happen again. She's free to do whatever she wants. Including flirt with an Arborealyte with a dumb name.*

"Got it bad, eh?" Abbra asked him, as she stepped out from the hedge maze. He couldn't help but notice that she favored one leg.

"I'm running a patrol," he said, pretending not to understand.

"I get it, man," she replied, running a hand through the thick fur on her head. "If you don't want to talk about it, we don't have to. But I know you don't have a lot of people to spill your story to here. And besides, I finished my own patrol five minutes ago."

“You served?” he asked, forgetting that he was planning to ignore her.

“Sure,” she replied. “That’s how I got the limp. Even saw some action on Arvite-4, back in the day with a crew of Invicta. It’s how I know about the mate bond.”

“That obvious?” he asked her.

“More for me,” she said, shrugging. “Since I know what you are. When will you claim her?”

“I won’t,” he said firmly.

“That seems... unrealistic,” she said after a moment.

“My mission is to watch over the boy,” he said. “Period. Claiming the mother would be a dereliction of duty.”

“You sure that’s the only reason you don’t want it?” she asked.

“It makes any other reasoning irrelevant,” he said. “Mission is mission. And mine is the whelp.”

“Very noble,” Abbra said, nodding. “It’s quite the sacrifice.”

She didn’t know the half of it. He felt like he was dying.

“She’s not Invicta though,” she said thoughtfully.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“Just that you making sacrifices in the name of duty to the Invicta makes sense, I guess,” Abbra said. “But why should she suffer?”

“She doesn’t seem to be suffering,” Jhon said wryly, looking over his shoulder at where Ella stood beside a sculpture of a heart, Rikkors standing so close they could have heard each other breathing.

“She’s probably just feeling eager for attention, since you’re denying her,” Abbra said.

That thought sent his desperate dragon into white fury.

Jhon stopped in his tracks, closing his eyes and willing it to stay inside.

“Or maybe she’s trying to make you jealous,” Abbra went on thoughtfully. “At any rate, what’s happening over there is your fault. She obviously prefers you, and you’ve pushed her away. I saw the way she was looking at you this morning.”

He glanced over at the Bergalian woman.

She gave him a wry smile. She was telling him the truth, or at least thought she was.

“Come on, soldier,” she told him. “Let’s find a hot brew. You can only patrol a floating island in the middle of nowhere so many times without looking paranoid.”

He chuckled in spite of himself and let her lead him into the party.

If he was honest with himself, he had been thinking it looked like fun the whole time. Who wouldn’t want a mug of mulled wine on a cold afternoon, and a chance to wander the gardens?

“Did your husband serve as well?” he asked Abbra.

“Charl?” she laughed. “That’s a funny idea. No, he’s got the soul of an artist. When we fell in love, I knew it was time to hang up my stripes.”

“The sculptures are incredible,” Jhon said, taking a real look.

“Not great when you’re the one running patrols though, right?” Abbra confided quietly. “Everything looks like a target.”

He laughed a belly laugh.

“We’re going to be great friends,” Abbra predicted.

“What are you two laughing about?” Ree-lah asked from her perch on a stone bench.

“This fellow hasn’t had a bite to eat,” Manx said, in a tone that was half-scandalized. “And look at the size of him. I’ll bring you a plate, man.”

A few minutes later, Jhon found himself seated among the neighbors. Even Ella and Rikkors had drifted over to join the

chat as everyone feasted on meat off the spit and canned pit-fruit, with steaming mugs of wine.

“Now, you want to be careful with Westixx,” Manx was saying. “It’s not that he’s a crook, exactly, at least not every time—”

“Oh, Manx,” Ree-lah said. “You’ll scare them off.”

“We want to hear,” Ella said immediately. “Are his scales inaccurate?”

“Ninety percent of the time, no,” Manx said. “But if he senses you’re not paying attention, he’ll make a *weighing error*. Don’t let him get the best of you.”

“But also, don’t insult him,” Charl put in, raising a furry arm. “I made that mistake once, accused him of weighing my load wrong on purpose. If Abbra hadn’t sweet-talked him, he might have refused to ship our goods.”

“He’s got leeway,” Abbra said. “He can claim a certain load, or even a whole farm, has sub-par product and pay you under market, or nothing.”

“Too much power for one petty underboss,” Jhon mused.

“You just got here, soldier,” Abbra teased. “Watch first, then try to figure out if there’s a way to crack it.”

“Right,” he said, surprised to find himself smiling at her instead of getting defensive.

“More important advice than that is to steer clear of the mammoths,” Rikkers said in a deep, foreboding voice. “They’re incredibly dangerous, especially the nursing mothers.”

Jhon tried to hide his smile. The man was right, the mammoth were dangerous, but the way he described it made him sound like an ignorant coward. Of course, any mother animal would be dangerous when defending her child.

But Ella only gazed up at the Arborealyte, nodding with a solemn expression.

“When we arrived, there was a stampede,” she told him, her eyes wide. “They almost got to us before Jhon could get the chute working.”

“Chute maintenance is the difference between life and death out here,” Rikkers told her importantly. “It’s irresponsible not to have a chute ready to go at all times.”

Jhon had some choice words for the little snout, but he chose to swallow them back. There was no point honoring the prick with acknowledgement.

“Jhon and I had just arrived on moon,” Ella said. “I imagine it would have been difficult to keep the chute maintained from his ship.”

Jhon hid his smile, but not before Ella had glanced over and seen it.

He felt warmth spread through his chest at the simple contact between them, which highlighted the bond more than ever.

See, the dragon purred. She is ours, and we are hers.

A signal rang out and Ree-lah sprang to her feet.

“That’ll be the kids,” she said happily. “Our nanny droid was set to bring them over when they finished napping.”

A moment later, the chute arrived with two little Vystian children on it. They scampered across the lawn to their parents, followed by a stout nanny droid on thick treads.

“Were you good for Nanny Six?” Ree-lah asked them.

“Yes,” the boy said.

“Mostly,” the tiny girl said at the same time.

“Oh dear,” Ree-lah said, shaking her head. “These are our new friends, Ella, Jhon and baby Bo. And I’d like you to say hello to everyone else, too, before you take off.”

The children shared greetings all around, much to the delight of the guests. Even Jhon had to admit they were cute, bowing and addressing everyone by the proper honorifics. They introduced themselves as Rex and Roo.

“Auntie Abbra, may we play in the maze now?” Roo squeaked hopefully.

“Yes, you may, my angel,” Abbra replied with a smile.

“And can Rikkors come with us?” Rex asked, turning to the Arborealyte.

“Sure,” Rikkors smiled, hopping up to join them. “*Last one to the maze is spoiled mammoth milk.*”

The children took off, squealing with pleasure.

“They’re lovely,” Ella said to Ree-lah and Manx.

“They keep us busy,” Manx laughed.

“Do you have children as well?” she asked Abbra.

Abbra’s smile turned wistful.

“We were never blessed with babies,” Abbra said gently. “When we came here, we thought it might ease the ache to be away from everyone.”

Charl nodded, placing a furry hand on his wife’s shoulder, as if in support.

“Then these four moved to the island next to ours,” Abbra went on, with a smile. “Turns out, being auntie and uncle to Ree-lah and Manx’s little ones has been a balm to us.”

“It’s like being a grandpa,” Charl boomed affectionately. “We get all the fun, but we don’t have to clean up after them.”

Abbra laughed, but Ree-lah shook her head.

“That is just inherently untrue,” Ree-lah said. “Remember all the cleanup you did when Manx and I were down with the flu? And the time when the vaca got out?”

The four of them laughed and Jhon figured those memories must have been moments when their friendship had grown closer. He wondered what bonds Ella might forge with them in the coming years.

“It means everything to us that the kids have all four of us,” Manx said, his voice deep with emotion. “We were lucky the day the gods saw fit to give us this opportunity.”

“So sentimental,” Abbra teased, though she was misty-eyed. “I think he’s angling for dessert. What do you think, Ella?”

The party went on from there with laughter and many, many stories. Jhon was pretty sure the others were just happy to have someone new to share their tales with.

And Ella appeared to be eating it up. She took obvious pleasure in hearing their tales, and accepting the occasional compliments about Bo.

Jhon watched her, wishing she could be his.

It wasn’t that she needed him, completely the opposite, as it turned out. She was doing just fine.

He wanted her to be his because he was proud of her easy smile, even among beings she might never have seen the likes of before today. He was proud of the confident way she cared for her new son.

And he was especially proud that when Rikkers came back and invited her to take a stroll around the perimeter alone, she declined.

Maybe next time, she told him, leaving him with a thoughtful smile as she headed over to see what the children were doing.

“Time to head home,” Ree-lah called to them.

“It’s so early,” Ella said.

“Best to get home before sunset,” Manx explained. “We all have plenty of work to do in the morning, and it’s not safe on the ground after dark. Always be sure to be on your island with plenty of time to spare.”

Jhon followed her as she thanked their hosts and then headed over to the chute.

It was only when she tapped the sensor that he remembered that they were going to be alone all night again tonight.

Don't think about it, he advised himself darkly, knowing it was no use.

ELLA

Ella lay alone in bed that night, unable to sleep.

Her bed was as soft as a cloud, and the fireplace filled the room with warmth and a cheerful crackling sound. The view of the starry sky out the window was so beautiful that it almost didn't seem real.

Bo had enjoyed his evening meal, and had gone to sleep contentedly hours ago. And presumably Jhon was having the time of his life patrolling her empty island.

Ella knew that him falling for her would have been too much to ask of the universe. And there was definitely something to his argument that he wasn't supposed to do anything more than guard the child.

It was just that she longed for the version of Jhon she had seen last night - the tender, patient, selfless man who had made her body come alive in ways she hadn't known were possible.

That version of him seemed so much more nuanced and real than the stern and stoic guard who would hardly look at her today.

And the way he had broken things off was so cold and so quick...

Of course, her mother had warned her against letting boys touch her.

A moment of fun and then what? her mom had asked, gesturing vaguely at the forest of children that filled their

living room. *The majority are only in it for the bit of pleasure. Wait for a man who wants it all.*

They had both looked over fondly at her harried but smiling father, who was raising one of the girls over his head so she could pretend to be a spacecraft.

It was true. Compared to her father, most men were probably selfish pleasure seekers.

But Jhon hadn't even taken a bit of pleasure for himself, as far as Ella could tell. She was no expert in these matters, but she had felt the evidence of his frustrated desire through his breeches.

Which naturally left just one question.

Is it me?

Surely, if he really wanted to be with her, he would have spoken with her more kindly about his duty.

So, what had she done wrong?

She could think about it all night, but that way lay madness, and she had a farm to learn about and a son to raise. Besides, if she wanted a partner, there was another man available already who was perfectly willing to state his intentions.

She thought back to this afternoon, and her impression of her only single neighbor.

Rikkens was kind and polite, he was already invested in lichen farming, and he was undoubtedly very handsome. Not to mention that Terrans and Arborealytes were highly compatible.

Yes, Rikkens would be an excellent match, and she was sure to be pumping out adorable little future farmers in no time if she accepted his suit. All her fears of loneliness would disappear in a heartbeat.

But when he had mentioned his intentions this afternoon, her knee-jerk reaction had been to put him off with a polite mention of wanting to get her farm off the ground before making any other important arrangements.

Of course, it was always a good idea to tread slowly in these matters, especially when there were only a few neighbors.

But that wasn't why she had put him off.

If she was honest with herself, she had to admit that a certain gigantic purple dragon warrior had the honor of being the reason she was sleepless right now, instead of dreaming of tall, smiling Rikkers.

And it wasn't just because of last night.

The truth was that she had felt an electric current drawing her straight to Jhon from the moment she laid eyes on him. She had never experienced anything like it before. It was as if she was attuned to him, whether he wanted her to be or not.

What's wrong with me?

The sound of a baby's cry roused her from her worries.

She slid out of bed and slipped a robe on before padding down the hallway to Bo's room. It would be good to hold and comfort him, and remember why she was really here.

But when she opened his door, she saw that he was sleeping peacefully. She listened for a moment, and heard the baby's cry again, but not from Bo.

She jogged down the hallway to the living room and slipped on her fur boots before heading out the front door.

It was bitterly cold outside. The wind whipped right through her robe, but she could hear the cries coming from below the island.

She ventured closer to the edge, and then glanced back at the house.

It would probably be best to tell Jhon where she was going. But if an infant had been abandoned under the island, every minute counted in this cold.

Besides, the neighbors had said it wasn't safe out after dark. She had to get to the little one as quickly as possible.

She ran to the chute and tapped the sensor, closing her eyes and wrapping her arms around herself as the thing dropped to the ground, causing the frigid air to swirl in her hair.

She stepped off the platform immediately, but it took her eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness under the island, where the starlight couldn't battle the strange shadows of O-dette.

After a moment, she could see the shape of something. Her eyes and brain couldn't identify it immediately, but her feet were still moving.

In the darkness, a pair of yellow eyes opened and fixed on hers.

That yellow gaze seemed to communicate directly with her mind, sending her body into a sort of haze, and telling her that she was doing something *very* important.

I'm saving a baby, she said to herself stupidly.

Though it was clear that what hunched in the dark below the island was not of any race she knew.

And it definitely wasn't a baby.

Some instinct deep inside her finally screamed for her to run.

But by then it was too late. Her body no longer obeyed her. It was under the thrall of the thing that watched her with a mixture of disinterest and amusement.

She was not the rescuer. She was the prey. This thing, whatever it was, was going to eat her eventually. But Ella strongly suspected it was planning to toy with her first.

She desperately called on her body to move.

Take two steps back onto the chute. Tap the sensor.

But it was hopeless. She might as well have been shouting to some idiot in a holo-film who was about to walk right into the killer's arms.

The thing moved in the shadows, and she had the impression of something large and sinewy, circling her to get

the lay of the land.

She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

The creature moved closer, as if in slow motion, and she could see its enormous mouth slowly opening, wider and wider, until its jaw unhinged.

“*Don’t look at it,*” Jhon shouted from somewhere far, far above.

How had he known she was out here and in trouble?

Her heart leapt at the sound of his voice. But it was too late. She had already looked. And the chute platform was down here with her. There was no way he could get to her in time.

A second later, she heard something thump to the ground behind her and was certain it was a second monster. Between them, they would tear her apart.

She let out another silent scream.

Then warm, strong arms were wrapping around her, pulling her onto the platform.

Jhon.

How had he gotten down here so fast?

The monster in front of her hissed.

Jhon let out a thunderous roar that would have made her jump out of her skin, if control of her body hadn’t belonged to the monster in the shadows.

The thing hissed again, but its yellow eyes blinked shut.

Immediately, she felt its hold on her receding.

“We’re going up,” Jhon murmured into her hair.

She heard him tap the sensor with his foot and then they were flying through the air, back up to the place she realized she already thought of as *home*.

When the chute stopped, Jhon stepped off, half lifting her in his arms to get her onto the frozen ground with him.

She let herself collapse in relief against his chest.

“What were you *thinking?*” he demanded. “I told you it’s dangerous after dark. The neighbors even told you. One more minute, and you would have been *killed.*”

“I-I heard a baby crying,” she managed to say, pulling back slightly as she regained control of her body.

“That’s what they do,” he retorted furiously. “They make a noise like a baby to lure you in, and then they hypnotize you, and then they eat you.”

“Well, maybe you should have been more specific when you warned me not to go out at night,” she spat back. “I thought there was a baby in danger.”

“You could have *died,*” he threw back accusingly.

“What do you care?” she asked.

The words hung in the air a moment.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“You dismissed me this morning like I was nothing,” she said. “And you wouldn’t even look at me all day. I kept asking myself what I did wrong. But I’m starting to think *you*’re the problem. You’re heartless and cold, and it probably would have simplified your life if you had just let that thing eat me.” She punctuated the last few words poking her finger into his chest.

The next thing she knew, he was grabbing her wrist, wrenching her hand from his chest and pulling her so close she was sure he could feel her heart pounding.

She tilted her head up to look at him.

He wrapped a big hand around her cheek.

Need flooded through her, and she forgot that she was furious with him, forgot everything but the hunger in his eyes.

He leaned downward, eyes on her mouth, and she almost moaned out loud with impatience. She needed his mouth on her, his hands, all of him...

But when his lips were only an inch from hers, he let out a growl and pulled away, backing up as if she were some kind of poison, a grief-stricken expression on his handsome face.

Her mind swirled with confusion, even as her body called out to his.

JHON

Jhon faced Ella, panting and furious.

I'm an Invicta. I can withstand unspeakable forms of torture if I have to. Why can't I resist this woman?

"I can't do this," he murmured, turning on his heel and heading back to the house.

Each step took him farther away from her, increasing his pain exponentially.

He longed for her to call him back, dress him down for being a coward, demand that he throw off his duty in favor of the bond neither of them could deny.

But for once, the insufferable woman bit her tongue.

He was stuck marching off to the far end of the island to begin another night patrol in which he would have to constantly wrench his thoughts away from the taste of her and back to his duty.

I can't do it.

But there was no choice. To refuse meant to turn his back on his brothers, the Invicta, and the boy he was only beginning to fully realize was truly his son.

Frost-covered lichen crunched beneath his feet as he walked, and the dragon wailed in his chest.

He had not felt this bereft when the Invicta took him from his childhood home. It made no sense. She was just a girl.

But he knew that wasn't true, not really.

Even without the pull of the mate bond, he knew she was more than that. The bravery she had shown coming here, and the compassion she extended to every other being they encountered, in spite of the harshness of her own circumstances spoke volumes about the kind of person she was.

Ella was here, mourning the loss of the sister she had raised, yet she had opened her heart to Bo so fully.

And to me.

The thought hurt his heart as well as his body. It hurt the man in ways the dragon couldn't fathom.

Claim her, the dragon demanded. All this can be solved if you claim her now.

He gazed out over the island and the land beyond. Other than a few hills in the background where the solar cells and wind turbines stood, the world was all a plain, flat moss-green.

Even the cold wind lacked scent. There was no ocean to add layers of salt and sea creatures.

And practically speaking, there was no saloon, and no house of pleasures to take the dangerous edge off his hunger, not even another bachelor to commiserate with, and be a friend.

Except for the man who would surely claim Ella's hand, if Jhon did nothing.

Claim her before he can, the dragon shrieked, sending Jhon's head pounding.

But that was not the answer, it could not be. It was not his duty.

He walked on, searching for an answer that would not come.



WHEN THE FIRST rays of morning light began to glow, and the harsh shadows cast by 0-dette faded over the horizon, he finally knew what had to be done.

Pain lashed at his heart, and the only thing keeping him going was the knowledge that there was no other option.

He sensed that his mate had awoken, so he slipped onto the porch, tapping once on the front door before entering, so as not to startle her.

Perhaps it was because of his decision that he could see her beauty with perfect clarity now.

As she looked up at him from where she prepared the morning coffee, he could clearly see that what he had thought of as plain brown hair was lustrous. Her delicate frame told the tale of a woman who had gone without, so that her siblings could eat. And a world of hope illuminated her eyes, so that they were as bright and blue as a pair of glittering high-mass stars.

“Jhon,” she said softly, standing.

Bo slept on her shoulder, his chubby face so relaxed and happy. And who could blame the boy? Was there a sweeter place in the whole sector than in her arms?

“I have to go,” he told her, clenching his jaw against the pain of it.

“Why?” she asked him simply.

“I can’t keep my hands off you for twenty years,” he told her honestly. “It is torture to do it for a day. And even if I succeed somehow, I can’t watch you be claimed by another.”

“I don’t want him,” she said softly. “I want you.”

Her words cut him open inside.

“I cannot be yours,” he told her, his voice breaking. “I am going back to the town to send a message to my commander. Another guard will come for Bo, one who will not be distracted from his duty, as I have been.”

“You’re his father,” she said, slamming her hand down on the counter. “You can’t abandon him.”

Bo whimpered in his sleep.

“I am not his father,” Jhon said, the words bitter in his mouth. “That was only a pretty dream you spun for me. And me listening is more evidence that I don’t have the discipline to stay impartial.”

He turned, heading for the door.

“If you leave, you’ll never forgive yourself,” she told him, the words launched like a missile at his back.

“It’s true,” he told her, without turning back. “But what I will surely do if I stay would never be forgiven by anyone. Bring luck on Sigg-3, Ella Lawrence.”

He managed to get outside the house before tears burned in his eyes and choked his throat. He swallowed them down, knowing he had one more stop to make before he could go.

ELLA

Ella stood in the kitchen holding a sleeping Bo. Jhon was gone. She didn't know for how long. Only the slight movement of the sol told her time was passing.

Whether she was exhausted, heartbroken, in shock, or all three, she couldn't have said. It felt like her chest was under a boulder and she couldn't breathe.

A sudden knock on the front door brought her back to her senses.

Jhon, her heart sang.

She ran to the door, almost dizzy with relief.

But when she opened it, Jhon wasn't there.

Abbra stood in the threshold, a worried look in her dark eyes. She shook her head slightly in answer to the questioning look Ella must have been giving her without realizing it.

And when the first hot tear slid down Ella's cheek, Abbra pulled her right into her big furry body for the warmest hug Ella had ever experienced.

"You're going to be okay," Abbra whispered to her, still holding her close. "But it's going to hurt. It's best to let it out."

Ella let the tears come then. Abbra knew. And if Jhon had gone to her to explain his departure, then it was really over.

Abbra led her to the sofa, wrapped a fur blanket around her shoulders, and began banging around in the kitchen, preparing tea and small, soft, round cookies.

When Ella's sobs finally stopped, she felt hollowed out inside.

Abbra wiped her tear-stained face with a warm cloth, then handed her a cup of tea, and put a plate of cookies beside her.

"You drink that and eat those," she said firmly. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

Ella meant to say she couldn't possibly eat or drink at a time like this.

But she found that the tea smelled heavenly, and the heat of it felt good going down. And the little cookies were so soft and so light that she ate half the plate without realizing.

"He came to me because I'm former military," Abbra said, untying the apron she had borrowed from Ella's kitchen. "He asked me to watch over you two until the Invicta could send another guard."

"But why did he leave?" Ella asked. "He kept saying he couldn't be with me. But I wasn't trying to force him."

Abbra gave her a stern look.

Then her eyebrows lifted.

"He didn't tell you?" she asked.

"Tell me what?" Ella asked.

"Fracking noble Invicta," Abbra muttered, shaking her head. "Leaving me to do his dirty work."

"What are you talking about?" Ella asked.

"How much do you know about dragons?" Abbra asked.

"I... um, didn't finish school," Ella said, looking down at her hands in shame.

"Neither did Charl," Abbra confided. "And he's one of the smartest people I know, so don't you dare be ashamed. Anyway, one of the least known but most interesting facts about dragons is that they form mate bonds."

"Like they're monogamous?" Ella guessed.

“Kind of like that,” Abbra said. “But they’re also obsessed with their mates, possessive over them, and will kill or even die to protect them. They only choose a single mate, and if a dragon’s mate should die, he will mourn her all his life.”

“So, he has a mate?” Ella asked. “Or he’s waiting to find one?”

“He does have a mate,” Abbra said. “And it’s you. Or at least it will be if he claims you. Claiming is a full physical coupling. And if he never does, it will still always be you. He will never form this bond with another.”

He was her mate. Or at least he was supposed to be.

This was why she felt an unearthly pull toward him. This was why she had instinctively shared her body with him, without shame or fear.

And it was also why he was gone.

“He left me because I’m his mate?” Ella asked, needing to be sure.

“*An Invicta warrior would never shirk his duty to fulfill his own needs*, is what he said,” Abbra explained, then placed a furry hand on Ella’s knee. “He thinks he’s doing the right thing. But he’ll regret this.”

But Jhon’s future regret would never comfort Ella.

Furious and heartsick as she was now, she couldn’t bring herself to crave his suffering. She still only wanted him to be happy.

And that was part of the mate bond too. She was sure of it.

“So, it was inevitable,” she said, realizing it slowly. “This whole time, it’s been like I was reading off a script, and I didn’t even know it. I’ll spend my whole life pining for him whether I want to or not.”

“The world is not a fair place,” Abbra said carefully. “But you can choose how to take this loss. You can accept it with as much feigned grace and dignity as you can, for your son’s sake, and hope you really feel that forgiveness over time. Or

you can let this turn you into a bitter woman that I know you don't want to be.”

Tears threatened again. Ella bit her lip, fighting them back.

“Don't you dare hold those tears back,” Abbra told her fiercely. “Go ahead and let it hurt a while.”



LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Ella sat on Abbra's front porch, rocking herself in one of the pretty painted chairs that Charl had made by hand.

She was still feeling wrung out inside, but calmer now. One day, she would accept this as something that had happened in her past. One day, she would be proud of the way she pulled herself together for her son.

But that day wasn't today.

Abbra sat on the rocker beside her, talking softly with Bo, who was living it up and chuckling at nearly everything she said, a pair of dimples appearing in his chubby, lilac cheeks.

Ree-lah and Manx were gathering cuttings of lichen from the island, while their two kids played in the maze. The plan was to teach Ella about cultivation of species tonight over dinner.

If she felt up to it.

“My, but he's lovely,” Abbra said wistfully, smiling down at Bo.

“I'm sorry,” Ella said, blinking out of her self-absorbed haze. “Is this hard for you?”

“You mean because I was never able to have children of my own?” Abbra asked, looking a little surprised at the question.

“Well...yes,” Ella admitted.

“No,” Abbra said, smiling warmly at her. “If anything, it makes it all the sweeter to have a baby to love on, even if it's

only for a short time.”

“Was it hard?” Ella asked. “Trying and hoping for all those years?”

“Of course,” Abbra said. “But over time, we accepted it. And of course, it gave us a dose of patience, and appreciation for each other.”

Ella nodded, looking out across the tundra, past the islands to the hills, where Charl hung from a leather harness, doing maintenance on one of the wind turbines that provided power to the community.

“By now, our children would be all grown anyway,” Abbra said. “But I still have my sweet husband. You know, some women say they were born to be mothers. But loving Charl is what *I* was born to do. He’s my whole world. I’d start from the beginning and do it all over again and again just to be with him.”

Ella smiled through her tears.

I will never have that. The man who was meant to be mine is putting himself a world away so that it can't happen.

Movement in the sky beside them caught her eye.

A dark shadow was sliding across the lawn, though it was still afternoon.

“*Rings of Odysseron,*” Abbra breathed. “One of the islands has come untethered.”

Ella looked up and saw the massive cone of granite moving through the sky like a huge leviathan drifting through the sea.

It didn’t take her long to realize that it was headed straight for the wind turbines.

ELLA

Everything seemed to slip into slow motion for Ella.

Manx and Ree-lah were already running in from the field, shouting and waving to Abbra.

And Abbra was shouting and waving to Charl, to no avail.

Charl worked away at the turbine, wearing full protective headgear, and using a welding wand. There was no way he was going to hear any of them trying to warn him, and it was unlikely that he would be roused by a shadow, since the wand was creating a mini-sol around the section he was welding.

Abbra moved toward the chute, Bo still in her arms. Her intention to go to her husband was clear.

I was born to love Charl.

“Your leg,” Ella said, grabbing Abbra’s arm. “Keep Bo safe. I’m a good runner.”

There was no way the wounded soldier could outrun the island.

“Really?” Abbra asked, looking at her dubiously.

“I set a record for my school,” Ella told her, taking off before Abbra could ask any follow-up questions.

She was at the chute in no time, and heard Manx yelling about grappling the island to stop it before it knocked the turbines into the solar cells.

The chute dropped just as her stomach tied itself in knots at the idea of being out here without any power at all.

But there was no time to worry. She was leaping off and sprinting before the platform had even hit the ground.

She hadn't been kidding when she told Abbra she had broken a school record. It was just that it wasn't some fancy running competition like they probably had back on Abbra's home world.

At Ella's school, there had been what the faculty called a *Rush for Glory*, and what the kids called a *Bum's Rush* every winter holiday. The prize was a huge basket absolutely stuffed with food and grocery items.

With sector schools closed for the Hearth Day holidays, she and her siblings didn't get free lunches. Ella would have run any distance, swum the deepest ocean, done whatever she needed to do to keep them all eating for the three dark and awful weeks before they could go back to school where there was always electricity, running water, and a solid meal in the middle of each day.

And for once, Ella's long legs and a scrawny body were an advantage. She was fast, and she didn't run out of gas. She didn't even mind being made fun of by the other girls in class. Ella won that basket for her family every single year. And the last year before she dropped out, the gymnasium teacher told her she had broken a record.

Now, pumping her legs until they burned and pushing herself hard, she wished more than anything that Jhon were here.

Even if she made it to Charl, and got his attention, she wasn't sure there would be time for him to get down.

Surely, an Invicta warrior could bring strategy to the problem, instead of just raw speed.

After what felt like a lifetime, she reached the bottom of the turbine Charl was working on. She waved and screamed from below, but the sparks were still flying, and he didn't notice her.

She turned back to see that the others had managed to get grappling hooks into the island, but they were being dragged along without managing to slow it down. It would take a herd of mammoths to change its course.

When she looked up at Charl again, she noticed slight indentations that acted as a ladder up the turbine.

“Oh, gods, please no,” she whispered, even as she grabbed the first one and pulled herself up.

Though she was only a few feet off the ground, she was already dizzy. The world seemed to loom in and out, and her stomach was cramping horribly.

But the shadow of the island was nipping at her heels. There was no time to be paralyzed with fear.

She pulled herself up, rung over rung, clinging to the shallow divots.

Her arms screamed with pain, and her breath came in ragged gasps, but she kept pushing herself to move as quickly as she could.

But what was the use?

She might make it up in time to warn Charl, but they would never be able to make it back down.

Abbra’s words echoed in her head, driving her on.

Loving Charl is what I was born to do...

Ella was not about to let her new friend lose her soul mate.

“Not on my watch,” she muttered to herself.

She dragged herself onto a tiny platform at the top of the ladder and waved her hands again. Charl was only ten feet away, but he was working with dangerous equipment.

By the grace of the rings, he saw her this time.

She pointed toward the island, which was only seconds away from hitting them.

Charl’s face sank, and his eyes went wide with horror.

She gestured for him, and he ran to her.

But they could both see there was no time to descend the ladder-like pole. And they were far, far too high in the air to jump.

The island drifted close enough that she could see the individual tendrils of lichen.

The big Bergalian wrapped one furry arm around her in solidarity.

Ella closed her eyes and prepared herself for impact, praying to all the gods to look over Bo for her. It was a comfort to know that Abbra would care for him until Jhon could return.

There will be another adoptive mother. One who won't sway him from his mission. He won't lose his son after all.

The thunderous crack of a massive collision rent the air.

But the turbine beneath them didn't move.

Ella opened her eyes to see that the sound wasn't the island hitting the turbine.

It was something hitting the island.

JHON

Jhon had nearly hit the midway point in the journey back to the launch field, and he felt no better than he had the moment he turned his back on Ella.

Will it get easier?

But he knew the answer. Of course it wouldn't.

She was his true mate, and he had turned his back on her in the name of duty. He would yearn for her all his days.

Focus on getting to the field and sending the comms, he told himself.

In his chest, the dragon howled in pain.

There was nothing on this godforsaken tundra to distract it. Only the endless crunch of his boots on the frozen lichen, and the flavorless wind whistling through the rocky hills.

He walked on, feeling his heart pull taut with every step he moved away from his mate.

Despite being on foot instead of in the deer-drawn sleigh, he was making better time than they had on the way in. The woman and child had slowed him down.

But the merest thought of Bo had his throat sore and his eyes blinking back tears, so he focused his eyes on the horizon and prayed for strength.

Suddenly, he had a feeling of terror so strong it stopped him in his tracks.

A vision of Ella's face flashed through his mind, frightened and tear-streaked as she ran, screaming into the wind.

The mate bond. I'm feeling this through the mate bond.

There was a single instant when he remembered his duty and the rule of the Invicta.

A dragon only shifts to protect his homeland.

But in this moment of crisis, one thing became painfully clear to him.

Ella was his homeland. And if the Invicta dismissed him, he would live his life in service to her and Bo.

The Invicta could find another soldier. But he could search the universe and never find another Ella.

Closing his eyes, he called to the dragon, letting down the wall that stood between them.

Instantly, he felt the dragon burst through, his senses expanding even as he was pushed into the background and the dragon took control.

Go, he begged, from the back of his mind. Save our mate.

The dragon stretched its massive body, shaking out its wings until the air was filled with the sound of the leathery flapping.

He inhaled deeply as his man-form screamed impatiently in the background.

The dragon shared his desperation, but getting high enough to reach a current on this moon was no easy feat.

When his lungs were full, he took a mighty leap on the exhale, flapping until he caught an air current strong enough for his big body to glide. Exhilaration shot through his veins, and he would have swooped and soared, stretching and testing his limbs, if not for the danger that surrounded his mate.

Instead, he flapped for all he was worth, and then drew his wings in close, moving as much like a bullet as a mountain-sized dragon could.

The tundra melted away beneath him as he shot through the air, covering the distance so much faster than the man ever could.

Before long, he scented his mate and the softer scent of his whelp, and his heart grew light. No matter what trouble there was, it was best to face it together.

But the man was frantic now. With his guidance, the dragon could see the trouble.

An untethered island was floating toward the turbines, and would soon smash into them, sending them crashing into the solar cells.

And his mate stood on the turbine that would be hit first. Charl stood beside her with an arm around her shoulders. The two of them had their eyes closed, as if they were bracing for impact.

There was no time to drag the island off course, and a blast from his fiery breath would kill the people on the tower.

As the man screamed in his chest, the dragon made the only decision that would make a difference.

With a powerful flap of his mighty wings to gain one final burst of speed, he curved through the air toward the island. Ducking his head at the last moment, he took the impact on his left shoulder.

There was a huge crash and a sickening crunch in his shoulder that traveled down his wing and rib cage at once.

He tried flapping his other wing, but it was no use.

As he fell to the ground, he took one last look up and was rewarded with a happy sight.

The island was gliding away from the turbines.

He had bumped it off course, and it was all he could ask. Ella was his mate, and he would die for her again and again. It was a privilege to give his life for hers.

He closed his eyes before impact.

Pain exploded through his body, and he drifted away from himself into the darkness.



JHON WAS DRIFTING through dark caverns, when the most exquisite scent called to him.

My mate...

Here, in his dreams, he was safe from the pain. But the joy of being with her was worth whatever he had to endure to come back.

Let go, the man told him. We mustn't frighten her.

But her cool hands were on his rough scales before he could shift and for a moment, the dragon soaked in the gentle touch of their mate.

Through the haze, one word reached him, pulling him back into the world.

“Please.”

ELLA

Ella knelt on the frozen ground, stroking the shimmering scales of the dragon who was somehow also the man she loved.

He had hurt her heart, denied their mate bond, and even walked away from the son they shared, all in the name of duty.

And then he had sacrificed himself to save her.

He'd told her that shifting, other than to protect the homeland, was prohibited by the Invicta. Because he had rescued her, he might never be part of the brotherhood of dragons again.

But that was probably a moot point after the hit he had taken, and the fall to the ground.

His glittering belly was moving up and down, so she knew he was still alive, but for how much longer? And how hurt was he?

Ella had no idea how to care for a wounded dragon, and she doubted anyone on this far-flung moon did.

“Jhon,” she murmured. “Please come back to us.”

She watched his face, but there was no response.

“*Please,*” she whispered, tears sliding down her cheeks.

Then the huge eyelids slid open to reveal dark eyes the size of rover tires.

“Jhon,” she cried happily, bending to press her lips to one of the cool scales.

The dragon made a sound like a purr in the back of his throat.

She leapt to her feet and backed up slightly so she could look into both of his eyes at once.

“What you did was very brave,” she told him. “And also *very, very* stupid. You could have been killed.”

The dragon blinked in surprise.

“Don’t you dare pretend to be surprised,” she exploded. “You could have died up there. And then what would...”

She trailed off as the dragon began shrinking down like a giant parade balloon with a hole in it.

Was he dying?

No...

No, he was shifting.

Suddenly Jhon stood before her, laughing his head off and pulling her close.

“Don’t laugh at me,” she retorted, even as she held him back, wishing she could touch every part of him at once to reassure herself that he was real.

“I’m laughing *with* you,” he told her. “Remember when I yelled at you for endangering yourself by going down the chute in the night? Now you know just how I felt. And I know how you felt.”

“You okay, solider?” Abbra yelled as she and the others jogged toward them.

“Knocked my shoulder out, but I’ll be fine,” Jhon said, frowning. “Dragons have a healing ability.”

“I meant your pride, man,” Abbra laughed. “I never saw a woman light into a full-sized dragon like that. Good thing you’re fireproof, or that might have burned you to a crisp.”

You're going to have your hands full with this one. She's fearless."

She winked at Ella, who suddenly started giggling.

Bo, who was tucked into Abbra's furry arms, began to chuckle at the sight of his mother and father laughing.

"*Bo*," Jhon said, and it was all clear in his voice - the love, and the relief of knowing he was home with his family.

Ella squeezed him tighter.

Then there was a streak of furry limbs as Charl ran for his wife, wrapping his arms around her, Bo and all, as the two of them cried with the happiness of being together again.

"We tried to get your attention," Abbra told him, her furry hand wrapped around his face.

"Woman, I was welding," he said. "Get distracted when you're welding and that's the end of all this long, luxurious hair. Nothing like the sight of a bald Bergailian."

"All's well that ends well," Ree-lah offered, smiling at her kids, who were already running around the field, pretending to be dragons.

"Yes, it is," Abbra said, smiling up at her husband, then turning to Ella and Jhon. "I assume you're back to stay?"

Jhon nodded and pressed his lips to the top of Ella's head.

She closed her eyes and soaked the feeling in.

"Well then, I suppose Charl and I should officially offer to mind your boy for a week or so," Abbra said, nodding approvingly.

"Thank you," Jhon said.

"*What?*" Ella asked at the same time.

"I told her about the mate bond," Abbra told Jhon sternly. "But *you* can tell her about the frenzy."

Jhon laughed, while Ella looked between the two, trying to figure out what in the world was happening.

“Go on and laugh,” Abbra teased. “But when this boy is bigger, don’t expect me to tell him about the birds and the bees for you either.”

That only made Jhon laugh harder, and Ella couldn’t hold back a smile of her own.

“What’s the frenzy?” she asked him.

He looked up at her, and his expression darkened.

“Let’s walk and talk,” he suggested, grabbing her hand and marching off so fast she barely had time to wave goodbye to the others over her shoulder.

“The frenzy happens when a dragon finally claims his mate,” Jhon told her through a clenched jaw. “It goes on for days, sometimes even a week.”

“What goes on?” she asked, trying to keep up.

He stopped in his tracks and turned to her, pulling her close.

She felt a wave of attraction, as if he were a planet and she was his moon.

When he bent to kiss her, the ache intensified so that she suddenly knew exactly what she craved, what they both needed so desperately.

JHON

Jhon pulled back from the kiss, growling with frustration, but determined that he would not take her here on the frozen ground in front of all their neighbors.

Ella might be moaning against his mouth like she didn't care right now, but he was pretty sure she would care a lot a few days from now when she realized what she had done.

Besides, the dragon was too jealous over his mate to allow her to be revealed in front of the other males, even if they were already mated.

Mine, the dragon screamed.

Yes, he told it. Just let me get her to shelter.

Ella whined and tried to pull his head back down to hers.

“Easy, love,” he murmured to her. “Let's get home first so nothing can interrupt us.”

He lifted her in his arms and ran with her to the chute platform.

Lust clouded his mind, but it was love that made his heart pound. He was envisioning her under him, but he could also see half a dozen children at the table of their farmhouse, parties out in the fields with their friends, playing musical instruments and cooking jam empanadas over a roaring fire.

Ella. My mate.

Flashes of her flew through his mind. Ella the way she was now, young and sweet and doting on Bo, Ella filled out and

pink-cheeked after a few more months of hearty meals and enthusiastically working the farm with his help, and even a tired-looking, but joyful Ella with her feet propped up, little Bo curled up cozily to her side as she read to him because her belly was so swollen with a little sibling he could barely fit on her lap.

Somewhere in his periphery, he was aware of the neighbors cheering and whistling him on, but he didn't care.

His only need was to get his mate to their bed and claim her *now*. He needed those visions to come true, needed them more than he had ever needed anything in his life.

The chute seemed to rise in slow motion, but at last, he was sprinting across the lichen field toward home.

He slammed his palm against the sensor as Ella pressed her lips to his neck.

Waves of desire crashed over him, and he nearly dropped to his knees to take her on the porch.

But the door swung open, and he forced himself to secure it behind them before flying down the hall to the bedroom.

“Jhon,” Ella whimpered as he lowered her to the floor.

“We're here,” he told her. “Let's get these clothes off you.”

She slid the cloak off her shoulders and they both removed her shift. When she stood before him in her underthings, he thought he would go wild with lust.

He knelt before her, and unfastened her silken bra with shaking hands, then peeled down her panties and helped her step out of them.

The sight of her would have driven him out of his mind even without the frenzy. But now it was as if their bodies did not belong to themselves, only to the bond.

Afraid to lose control, he slowly leaned forward and nuzzled her small breasts.

She moaned lightly and arched her back as if to try to get more of herself into his mouth.

He shuddered with need as he licked and sucked each perfect nipple, teasing and readying her even as his own body threatened to combust at every touch.

When she began to cry out and tangle her hands in his hair, he kissed his way down her belly.

ELLA

Ella shivered and moaned as Jhon licked his way down her belly and nuzzled the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

The need was bigger than her, threatening to swallow her whole.

“Lie down,” Jhon growled in a voice too deep to be fully his own.

Is that the dragon, speaking through him?

She crawled onto the bed, her whole body throbbing with want.

Then he was shrugging off his leather armor, dropping his sword and boots to the ground, and crawling in after her. His big body was so beautiful. It glistened with sweat, making him shimmer as if he were made of amethyst and lust.

Grabbing her ankles, he spread her legs apart and lowered himself between them, his mouth just inches from her needy sex.

“Jhon,” she whimpered helplessly.

Then he was on her, licking and suckling her folds, sliding a rough finger against her tender opening.

Ella writhed beneath him, squirming to get his tongue on the one place she needed it.

He placed a massive arm over her hips to hold her still, and continued to lash her with his tongue, easing his finger in

slowly and driving her toward madness by avoiding the stiff little pearl that throbbed desperately for him.

Ella closed her eyes, trying to hold onto a thread of herself under the deluge of pleasure and despair she felt. When his finger was fully inside her, he began to move it slowly in and out.

She moaned, hips quivering.

“Please,” she begged.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he panted.

“You’re my mate,” she told him. “You can’t hurt me.”

But he buried his face in her again, until her sex was clenching at his finger, and she was sinking her fingernails into his shoulders, screaming for more.

At last, he crawled up to her. His lips were glistening with her moisture, and she kissed him anyway, surprised to find that she didn’t mind the taste of her own unsatisfied pleasure.

“Ella,” he rasped, pulling back to look into her eyes. “Will you accept me as your mate?”

“Yes,” she told him.

“This is forever,” he told her, his dark eyes so serious.

“I want forever,” she said simply, pulling him close again.

He kissed her with all the pent-up passion of a lifetime, taking his rigid cock in his hand and dragging it against her opening.

She gasped at the delicious heat of it, and the size.

“I’ll go slowly, my love,” he crooned. “Relax for me.”

But how could she relax when she was turning inside out from desire?

She tilted her hips to him, and felt him inch slightly inside.

“*Gods*,” he groaned, letting his head fall back. His arms were shaking, as if from the effort of going so slowly.

He pressed in farther. Ella felt a pinching stretch.

“More?” he groaned.

“Please,” she whispered back, preparing herself. “I need you, all of you.”

This time, he kept going, slowly stretching her out, until the entire throbbing length of him was inside her.

The pain lasted only a moment. Then she was desperate to move.

“Oh, Ella,” Jhon bit out.

She jugged her hips slightly, so desperate for more she forgot the words. Then he was cursing under his breath and sliding out and back in again.

A rainbow of pleasurable sensations washed over her.

She clung to him as he gave her another long, slow stroke, and then another. But the tension was too much. She was coiled and ready, needing to explode, but lacking the spark.

“Please,” she moaned.

Jhon slid a hand between them and traced soft circles right on her stiff little pearl as he rocked into her again and again.

Ella wailed and felt herself detonate, pleasure flying through her so that she was certain even the hairs on her head were vibrating with rapture.

The waves of her release seemed to go on and on, until she finally let her head fall back onto the pillows, feeling weak with ecstasy.

Jhon roared and let go of the iron control she knew he had been holding over himself.

She clung to him as he pounded into her with a wild desperation.

When he shouted out his own climax, she could feel him pulse, jetting rope after rope of his essence inside her, sending shivers down her spine.

At last, he collapsed beside her and pulled her onto his chest.

“Wow,” she whispered.

“Wow,” he echoed, chuckling.

“What?” she asked.

“You’re such a Terran,” he said. “So full of wonder.”

But he was smiling so warmly when he said it that she knew it was a loving observation.

“You seemed sort of overwhelmed yourself there, soldier,” she teased right back.

His eyes lit up and he rolled on top of her, pinning her beneath his muscular frame.

“Are you saying I need more practice?” he asked her, leaning in so that his lips nearly brushed hers.

“Well, if you want me to be less *awed* then I guess *I* need more practice,” she whispered.

He kissed her, and she was shocked to find that she was suddenly as desperate for him as before, maybe more so.

The rigid pulsing at her hip told her that he felt the same.

“Already?” she breathed when he pulled back.

“For days,” he told her, his eyes hazy with need. “Remember?”

“The frenzy,” she murmured against his lips.

But the world was already fading away as she lost herself in his embrace.

ELLA

Ella looked out proudly over the lichen farm.

More than six months had passed since she had arrived on Sigg-3, and she was amazed at all that she and Jhon had accomplished.

She had arrived here hungry, homesick, and desperate, with no idea what lay in store.

Now, she was the owner of a beautiful and productive farm, a mother, a mate, and a friend. Each day brought her more to be grateful for.

The Invicta had received Jhon's comm, letting them know he was mated to his whelp's mother. His commanders had surprised Jhon by telling him that his comm was noted and that they expected him to continue with his duties while he enjoyed mated life.

Jhon celebrated the happy news, but explained to Ella that he could also keep helping her improve the farm. After all, as Abbra said, patrolling a floating island in the middle of nowhere was not exactly a full-time job.

Charl had taught them to weave wicker from the thick, dry grasses on the hills. And while she and Jhon couldn't make intricate sculptures like Charl did, they had created rolling mounds and deep valleys for their lichen - giving the flat tundra of their island the appearance of an Old Terran countryside.

Morning meant the tiny lavender flowers on the lichen were opening up, releasing their sweet scent.

Ella breathed it in, feeling incredibly lucky.

The only thing that pained her was knowing that her family was still suffering back home. She had been sending most of her monthly stipend to them. She and Jhon traded labor for food fairly often with their neighbors to keep costs down. There was plenty of work, since Abbra and Charl were getting older, and Ree-lah was busy with the children's schooling.

Ella knew she and Jhon would be faced with the same challenge for Bo in years to come. But for now, the little one was happy to accompany her when she popped over to Ree-lah's to cook or clean or tend to the lichen. So long as Ella carried him in his beloved sling, and sang to him while she worked, he never complained.

It was bittersweet that he was beginning to pull himself up and walk. She loved carrying him in her arms, but he was getting nice and heavy.

Ella had put on some much-needed weight herself. Having plenty to eat all the time was something she would *never* take for granted. She hadn't woken in the night with a grumbling, aching belly in half a year now. Letting out her dresses was a small price to pay for that.

She heard the door open behind her and turned to see Jhon coming out with a sleepy Bo on his hip.

"You two are up early," she teased.

"I think he knew there would be a big delivery today," Jhon said, wrapping an arm around her from behind and pressing his lips to the top of her head.

A shiver of want went through her.

They had spent nearly a week in the mating frenzy before they were able to reclaim Bo. And even then, it was all they could do to wait for the little one to go to sleep at night before they were all over each other again.

Even now, Jhon's slightest touch was enough to awaken her appetite. She wondered if that would ever fade.

"What are you thinking about, little mate?" he whispered teasingly in her ear, knowing full well what she was thinking about.

"I was wondering what you meant by a big delivery," she lied. "Are we getting more wicker twine from Zar-sol?"

"Maybe," Jhon said noncommittally.

"Charl's on recall today?" she asked.

"He sure is," Jhon said with a smile. "I think he likes going to town to shoot the breeze."

"I wish it were easier to do," Ella said, nodding.

"You get lonely up here?" Jhon asked her.

"I'm fine," she assured him. "I have you and Bo and the neighbors. But it would be nice to have more people around, especially as Bo gets older."

"Maybe we'll have more immigrants one day," Jhon said. "There are a couple of nice islands close by."

Ella didn't like to say so, but life on Sigg-3 was hard. It was also beautiful and rewarding, but those things didn't become apparent until you were on your feet. She couldn't imagine choosing to migrate here. If you had enough money for migration, that meant you probably had other, easier options. After all, wasn't that why all those islands were empty to begin with?

"Morning, kids," Charl called out from the chute platform as it rose. "You've got *a lot* of packages today."

It reached the top and there were Charl and Abbra along with a nice stack of packages, no bigger than usual.

"What do you mean?" Ella called back, heading over to the chute to say hello.

But Charl and Abbra were hard at work unloading the packages.

Before Ella reached them. Charl tapped the sensor with his walking stick, and it dropped down, empty.

Which was odd. Why send the chute back down, unless there was more to bring up? But if there was another trip to be made, there was no one down there to load the goods on.

She froze when she heard the sound of the chute flying upward again.

What in the stars?

She turned back to Jhon, but he was smiling.

“Ella?” a familiar voice called to her.

It can't be...

She spun back to see a large group of people stepping off the chute, looking exhausted and dirty, but smiling so hard...

“Ma,” she cried, running for her family, tears already burning in her eyes.

“Ella,” her mother murmured into her hair as they embraced. “We missed you so much. I can't believe we're all together again.”

“Ella,” a small voice said, as a little hand tugged at her dress.

“Taria,” Ella breathed, letting go of her mother to lift her littlest sister in her arms and spin with her.

Taria's laughter rang out, sweet and soft like the tiny birds that sang over the lichen fields at night. She was almost five now, but hardly heavier than Bo, and Ella held her close, breathing her in.

By the time she looked up from her sister, the others were talking with Jhon, Charl, and Abbra, and exclaiming over little Bo.

“I missed you,” Taria said accusingly. “You left.”

“I'm sorry I had to leave,” Ella told her. “We talked about it though, right?”

“You had to go so we could have food,” Taria said flatly.

“That’s right,” Ella said. “And did you have food after I left?”

Taria nodded.

“I’m glad,” Ella told her sincerely. “Then it was worth it for you to be able to grow.”

“You have a new baby,” Taria suddenly said. Her tone was the tiniest bit plaintive.

She was used to being her big sister’s only baby.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Ella whispered to her with a mischievous smile. “But *you* will always be my first one.”

“I will?” Taria asked, eyes widening.

“Of course you will,” Ella told her. “You were the first baby I got to take care of and love. And you always will be.”

“Okay,” Taria said, looking pleased.

“And now you get to be Bo’s aunt,” Ella said lightly.

“I’m his aunt?” Taria asked, sounding fascinated.

“Oh yes,” Ella told her. “You’re his mother’s sister, so you’re very important to him.”

“I’ll have a look at him,” Taria decided.

“Okay,” Ella said, trying to hide her smile. “Make way, important aunt coming through.”

Taria wiggled out of Ella’s arms to get to her nephew.

The others made a path straight to the baby for her.

Her expression lit up when Bo reached for her with his chubby fists and crowed out a string of happy nonsense.

Ella sensed Jhon’s eyes on her and turned to find him standing back a bit from the group, watching.

“How did you do this?” she asked him, moving to his side.

“It was easy,” he said, shrugging.

“Getting ten people passage from Terra-13 to Sigg-3 is *not* easy,” she retorted. “And it’s not cheap either.”

“Surprisingly, that wasn’t the expensive part,” Jhon said. “It took some doing, but I used the trade chain. We took their passage in lieu of payment on our last load of lichen. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind?” she echoed, shaking her head. “I can’t believe it. I’m so grateful.”

“I’m glad,” he told her, pulling her in for an embrace.

“Which part was expensive?” she asked him.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Enjoy your family, everything is going to be just fine now.”

“You really don’t mind sharing the house?” she asked him. “There are so many of us.”

It hit her that she and Jhon might never have a moment alone again, and she felt guilty that it was her first thought. Of course, she would rather have her family here and safe. That was the most important thing.

“Okay, I was going to wait, but I bought them one of the abandoned islands,” he told her. “That was the expensive part.”

“A whole island?” she asked him. “How?”

“When I was on active duty, I saved most of what I earned,” he said, shrugging. “Food and lodging were part of the job. I knew I wanted a farm one day. And that’s exactly what I spent the money on, just not for me.”

“We’re going to pay him rent though,” Ella’s dad said, striding up to her. “Don’t worry.”

“Nonsense,” Jhon said. “It all worked out the way it was supposed to. I don’t need your rent. Ella and I have a farm of our own.”

Her father opened his mouth to protest, but Jhon cut him off.

“Actually,” Jhon said. “I do have something to ask of you. And your wife. Something that would be worth much more than the island.”

“Anything, Jhon,” Ella’s mom said, striding over with Bo on her hip. Taria walked alongside, holding onto one of his chubby feet.

“I wanted you here because you’re Ella’s family,” he said gruffly, as if he were giving a speech he had planned. “And I wanted you here so that I could ask your blessing. And if you say yes, I want you here because of course her family has to be here if there’s going to be a wedding.”

“A wedding,” Ella murmured.

“Of course you have our blessing,” her mother told Jhon, her voice breaking with emotion.

Her father nodded to him, as if he were too moved to speak.

“Ella,” Jhon said, dropping to one knee. “You accepted me as your mate. Now I hope you will accept me as your husband in the Terran way. As you honored my kind, I wish to honor yours.”

He held out something small and shimmering, but her eyes were already too wet with tears to make out the details.

“Yes,” she sobbed.

He slid the ring onto her finger, and then he was standing, pulling her close, and kissing her like he would never stop.

Somewhere in the background, she could hear Charl and Abbra, kindly distracting everyone for them.

“Now, Charl and I cooked us all up a feast in the event that she said yes,” Abbra was announcing. “So, we hope you all don’t mind coming right over for an engagement party, and to try out some Sigg-3 frontier cooking.”

“We’ve got a full barbecue going and I think Abbra’s hoping the children might help to frost the cakes,” Charl added.

“*Cakes,*” the children all chorused.

“These two lovebirds will meet us in a moment, I think,” Abbra said with a smile in her voice.

When they had all gone, and it was just the two of them, Jhon gazed down at her.

“What?” she asked.

“I was just thinking we should probably go be with your family, even though all I want to do is carry you back in that house with me,” he chuckled.

“Maybe just this one time,” she admitted, trying to fight off her hunger for him. “We don’t want them judging us for our romantic life until they’ve seen how responsible we are in the rest of our life. But I’m glad to have a moment alone with you. Jhon, no one has ever done anything like this for me before... I... I...”

She didn’t have the words.

“Ella, you’ve done everything for me,” he said simply. “You opened my eyes, and showed me what was right in front of me - my son, my life, my love for you. I was an empty shell before. But you filled me, Ella Lawrence. And I’ll love you forever for it, always would have, even if you hadn’t agreed to a mate bond or a marriage.”

He hugged her close and she closed her eyes, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

There would be ups and downs from here on in. The life of a frontier farmer was never an easy one.

But they were together now, all of them.

And that would make all the difference.

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Tasha Black lives in a big old Victorian in a tiny college town. She loves reading anything she can get her hands on, writing paranormal romance, and sipping pumpkin spice lattes.

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