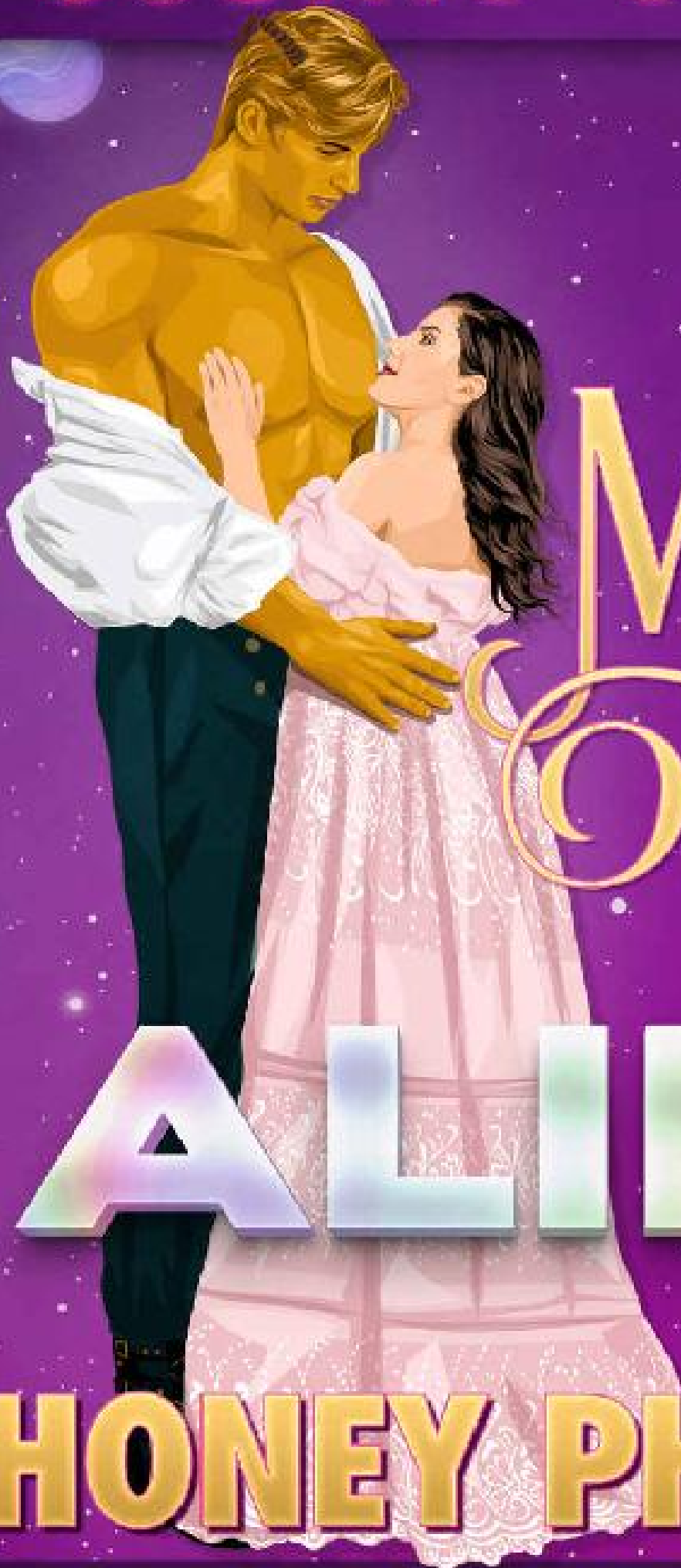


COSMIC CINEMA



MY
OF
FAIR
ALIEN

HONEY PHILLIPS

MY FAIR ALIEN

COSMIC CINEMA



HONEY PHILLIPS

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CHAPTER 1



*P*rofessor Harak H'gin was, for lack of a better term, bored. He had no reason for this state. He has sufficient wealth to satisfy all of his needs and most of his indulgences. He was respected as a scholar and could devote his time to study and experimentation. His family name was well-known and respected, and although he had few friends, he had many acquaintances. He would not lack for company if he chose to attend any of the numerous social events that filled the calendar of a well-bred Plumerian.

But as he watched the array of delicately colored lights dance artfully across the stage, accompanied by a perfectly synchronized melody and a sequence of subtle, harmonious fragrances, he was not as enthralled by the performance as he should have been. To be sure it was an excellent exhibition of Plumerian skill and sophistication, but he would rather have been at home in his study. Unfortunately, that underlying boredom had led him to the mistake of accepting this invitation.

“Stop scowling, Harak,” his mother murmured, cracking the fan that was this year’s favored accessory across his knuckles. “Anyone would think you didn’t want to be here.”

“I don’t.”

“Then you shouldn’t have agreed to accompany me. A gentleman is always interested in whatever his companion enjoys.”

“I don’t think that includes mothers.”

“It most certainly does.” She wielded her fan on his knuckles again and he winced. Despite its delicate appearance, the fan’s glow thread lace was supported by a slender metallic structure that stung when applied with force. “Now sit there and look fascinated until the concert is over.”

He sighed and did his best to obey, trying to force his face into the appropriate expression as he let his mind wander back to his latest experiment. He’d been working on reproducing the sounds of the Denai language but it was far too predictable to be truly interesting. He needed a new challenge.

The concert wound to an end at last and he did his best to shepherd his mother quickly through the crowd and away from her various acquaintances only to discover that it had begun to rain. He sighed and unfolded his cloak to offer to his mother. Her clothing would adapt to the climatic conditions but the rain would still have some effect on her carefully styled hair and makeup.

“Thank you, Harak. It’s always a pleasure to see you support the character of a gentleman. A rare pleasure,” she added tartly as she stroked the dark fabric and turned it to a shimmering green that matched her gown. “Now find us a hover cab, please.”

He sighed again. The portico outside the concert hall was already full of gentlemen calling for their own vehicles or trying to arrange transportation and he regarded the confusion with distaste. He definitely should have stayed home.

“Buy some flowers, sir? Pretty flowers for your pretty lady?”

As his mother turned away to greet yet another acquaintance, the voice distracted him. While the tone was pleasant enough, the rhythm of the words was completely wrong and the pronunciation mangled. He wasn’t familiar with the accent and he tilted his head, looking for the owner. Ah, a small female was moving through the crowd, human if he was not mistaken, offering small bouquets of sassia for sale. He was aware that Plumeria had agreed to accommodate some of the desperate refugees from the dying planet but he had never encountered one before.

She was almost pathetically small - her head would barely reach his chest - and she was dressed in a pitiful replica of Plumerian clothing. The pleats were arranged incorrectly, the sash misplaced, and worst of all, the garment was soaking wet because it was made of some cheap fabric that did not repel moisture. Her dark tangle of hair was equally wet, falling down around her face from a no doubt unsuccessful attempt to arrange it correctly.

Despite her wretched appearance, he felt the first spark of interest he'd managed all evening. An unfamiliar accent was always fascinating. He moved closer, activating the voice recorder in his wrist band to capture every sorry note as she tried to ply her wares. Of course she was ignored and she fairly stomped her foot on the ground as yet another male dismissed her.

“Damn Plumerians. Too good to even spend a single credit on a bunch of flowers from a human.”

She whirled around so quickly that she slammed into him. His clothing automatically adjusted, but not before he had the brief, unpleasant experience of a wet female pressed against his chest. Her eyes widened as she looked up at him, startlingly blue and ringed by long, dark lashes. Her skin was far too pale, but it had an appealing smoothness and her features were pleasantly arranged.

Now that his clothing had adjusted, he became aware that the body pressed against his was soft and yielding, her figure far more lush than that of a Plumerian female. He hastily took a step back.

“Your failure to sell your flowers is not due to prejudice. No one will buy sassia flowers after dark,” he said briskly, ignoring his unwanted reaction.

She lifted her chin and looked at him with undaunted belligerence.

“Why not?”

“Their fragrance is quite potent but it does not last and will have faded by morning. Surely you knew that.”

“No, I didn’t,” she snapped, although a hint of vulnerability flitted across her face. “How the hell would I know something like that?”

“Because it is obvious.” He frowned at her. “You should not be attempting to sell anything. You are inappropriately attired and you look like a beggar rather than a respectable seller.”

The chin went up again, her blue eyes snapping. “It’s a damn sight better than what I usually wear.”

He frowned even harder. “In addition to your accent, your grammar is deficient. Weren’t you taught Plumerian?”

“Yes I was, even if you don’t think it’s good enough,” she hissed at him, and then, apparently realizing that she was the focus of a crowd of disapproving gazes, she spun away from him.

He watched in astonishment as she pushed her way through the crowd and out into the rain. For the first time this evening he felt amusement as he watched her struggle with her ill-fitting skirt, and he wished there was some way to record her progress as she started off down the street.

Unfortunately, her path led her directly towards one of the large decorative pools that dotted the city center. As he watched, she sat down on the wide rim surrounding the pool and buried her head in her hands. Her wretched sash threatened to trail down into the water.

“Watch out,” he called, starting after her. “That pool contains a very delicate species of fish. Do not disturb them.”

He expected her to obey him, but instead she leaned over to peer into the water. Had she not heard him over the sound of the rain? Just as he reached her, the jets surrounding the pool erupted and sent a large stream of the water into her face. She jumped up, spluttering in dismay as she tried to back away, and started to lose her balance. She threw her arms out to compensate but only succeeded in waving them around in an absurd fashion, reminding him of one of the birds in his garden back home.

Unable to stand her gyrations, he strode forward to take her arm and steady her.

“Stop flailing around. It is most undignified.”

“What the fuck?” she gasped, trying to yank her hand away, her face creased with panic. “Let me go, damn you.”

He tightened his grip and forced her to a stop.

“I warned you to move away from the pond.”

“I was just looking.”

So she had heard him. He frowned at her.

“I told you to move away, not to look.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him, and he couldn't help noticing that the position only drew attention to her rather overdeveloped breasts. Was that common for humans?

Pushing aside the distracting thought, he glanced back at his mother, who had followed him outside but remained under the portico. She raised an eyebrow at the sight of the two of them, clearly noticing the young female's unkempt appearance, but she appeared amused rather than disgusted. Or perhaps she was already considering adding the girl to one of her charity projects.

But she remained where she was so he took a deep breath and turned his attention back to the small female. The sassia scent clung to her, almost strong enough to drown out the rainy night. Almost. He inhaled again. The combination of the sassia and her own natural fragrance was oddly appealing.

“Why didn't you obey me?”

“I told you that I was just looking. What else was I going to do?”

This time he detected a faint thread of desperation behind her words and he realized that she was shivering. He was not surprised. Her inadequate clothing did not block any of the rain, and the fall evenings were growing cooler. Didn't she have the sense to find shelter?

“There is no point in arguing. You should leave now.”

She stamped her foot again and her scent became more intense. His nostrils flared.

“I don’t need your permission to be here. Your government promised that humans had equal rights.”

He sniffed again, trying to identify that subtle scent, light floral notes underlaid with something rich and exotic. Curious, he leaned closer.

“What is that fragrance? Is it a perfume or perhaps an oil?”

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

“Are you sniffing me?”

Her question startled him out of his focus on her scent and he straightened.

“Do not be ridiculous. I was simply trying to determine which species of sassia you were selling.”

Her lips trembled as she looked down and realized that she had knocked her pitiful basket of flowers into the pool when she had jumped away from the jets. Fortunately, they would not harm the fish.

“I’m not selling any of them now, although I guess I wasn’t going to anyway. I should have known there was something wrong when they were so cheap.”

“A foolish mistake,” he agreed.

“Because I didn’t know.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

He sighed, torn between annoyance and reluctant amusement. “Information about our botany is included in the orientation training. Your lack of knowledge is hardly our fault.”

“Damn smug Plumerian. I know the orientation didn’t cover sassia flowers, but you expect me to know it anyway, just like you expect me to know all the details of your etiquette. How am I supposed to know?”

She had a point. The refugees had been taught their language and the basic rules of their society, but he suspected very little time had been spent on the nuances of correct behavior.

Whoever had taught her to speak certainly hadn't bothered to make sure that her accent and phrasing were correct.

Despite her anger, he saw the flash of despair in her eyes. The blue irises darkened to almost black, the tiny beads of moisture on her eyelashes glinting like tears.

"Do you have somewhere to go tonight?" he asked before he could stop himself, and she gave him an offended look.

"Of course I do. I'm not homeless."

"Where?"

"The human ghetto," she said sarcastically. "Where else?"

The resettlement buildings were small but perfectly adequate - and located at the far edge of the city. He glanced at his wrist com. Damn. The shuttles would already have stopped running for the evening and he doubted she had the fare for a hover cab. Before he could decide what to do, his mother called from the portico.

"Harak, have you arranged for transportation yet?"

He was curiously reluctant to leave the mysterious and provocative little female behind, but he did have an obligation to his mother.

"Wait here," he ordered.

Her jaw dropped at his command and then snapped closed as her expression turned mutinous. He didn't wait to find out if she intended to obey and strode back towards the portico. As he joined his mother, she looked past him to where the girl was still standing by the pool and lowered her voice.

"The young female appears to be in need of some assistance."

He nodded, his throat suddenly tight.

"Can you give her a room for the night?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, dear, but cousin Mildra and her daughters are staying with me. I don't have a spare room available. Not that I wouldn't rather have your little female stay with me, but they are family." She raised an eyebrow. "You should have an empty room in that big house of yours."

“I suppose,” he said reluctantly. “And she’s not my female.”

“No, of course not.” She patted his arm. “Now go fetch her so that we can leave. She seems to be attracting an unfortunate amount of attention.”

He didn’t need to be reminded. Most of the remaining crowd were watching her - some with amusement, but far more with disdain at her bedraggled state as her dark hair had become even more disheveled in the increasing wind.

As soon as he summoned the cab, he returned to the female, somewhat surprised that she had obeyed his order and remained by the pool.

“You will come with me,” he told her as he rejoined her.

Her eyes widened, shock mixed with what might have been fear, before she glared at him.

“Get fucked.”

“I beg your pardon?” He stared at her. Was she offering him sexual favors? His body was unexpectedly ready to accept, even as he acknowledged that her tone did not suggest seduction.

She huffed at him. “Go away.”

He drew himself up, his temper rising.

“The shuttles are no longer running. You are cold and wet and need shelter. You may occupy a room in my house for one night. Now, you will come with me this instant or I will have you arrested for causing a public disturbance.”

She drew back at his threat, her defiance vanishing as her lower lip trembled.

“But I don’t even know who you are.”

“I am Professor Harak H’gin of the University of Plumeria,” he said.

She bit her lip, then gave a resigned sigh.

“A professor? I should have known. I’m Liza Domar.”

“Then come with me, Liza,” he said, and held out his hand.

CHAPTER 2



Liza gave a wary glance at the Plumerian extending his hand. As much as she hated to admit it, they were an attractive race - tall and slender with golden skin - and, despite his arrogance, he was one of the more attractive ones. His burnished golden hair was only a few shades darker than his skin, cut short enough to reveal small, unadorned horns. Despite his contempt for her attire, she knew enough about Plumerian customs to recognize that he was dressed unusually plainly for a formal evening.

There were other differences as well. He was unusually muscular for a Plumerian, broad shoulders stretching the shoulders of his formal coat and strong thighs accentuated by tight evening pants that also showcased the rather impressive bulge between them...

She hastily snatched her gaze away, praying that she wasn't blushing.

"How do I know you won't try something?" she asked suspiciously.

"Try something?" he repeated, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"You know." She waved from his body to hers. Damn, now she knew she was blushing. "You know. Man woman stuff."

He looked positively appalled before he drew himself up and peered down that long elegant nose at her.

"I am not a human male," he said stiffly. "But I assure you I have no interest in a..."

She narrowed her eyes, her anger flaring again at his tone.

“In a what? A human? Do you think you’re too good for us?”

“I was going to say, in a person in your condition,” he said even more stiffly, gesturing at her wet clothes.

She still suspected that he was offended by her species rather than her physical state, then wondered why she was arguing with him. The less interested he was, the better. And it was true that she heard of very few human Plumerian relationships amongst the refugees.

She sighed and fingered her wet dress. It would be nice not to have to spend the night on a bench at the transit station. She usually wasn’t so careless about missing the time of the last shuttle, but she’d made very few sales that day and she’d stayed longer than she intended, hoping to eke out a few more credits.

When the rain began, she’d ducked into an open doorway to take shelter. By chance she’d picked the doorway to a florist shop. Although the store was closed, she was entranced by the wide variety of flowers and plants and became preoccupied by seeing how many she could identify. But it was too late for regrets now.

“I suppose I’ll come with you,” she said at last.

She knew she sounded ungracious, but she didn’t feel gracious. She was just so tired of the Plumerians’ begrudging acceptance. She knew she should be grateful that they were one of the planets that had agreed to take in refugees fleeing from the disaster that was facing Earth, but providing refuge was not the same as truly welcoming them into their society.

He sighed, already looking as if he regretted the offer.

“The correct way to express your thanks would be to say thank you for your gracious hospitality, Professor H’gin.”

She understood the words, but the intonation was completely different.

“Thank you for your kind hospitality, Professor H’gin,” she said but he only winced, and she gave him an exasperated

look.

“What? I said it.”

“You attempted to say it, but I suppose that was all I could hope for. Now come. I do not wish to keep my mother waiting any longer.”

His mother? The annoying, if attractive, male was attending a concert with his mother? She relaxed a little, suddenly more comfortable about accompanying him. She followed him over to the portico which was by now almost completely devoid of people except for an attractive Plumerian female. The female was beautifully dressed in dark blue silk, her horns adorned with small jeweled rings, and her hair arranged in an elegant updo studded with more small gems. She also looked far too young to be Harak’s mother, and she gave him another suspicious look.

“She’s not old enough to be your mother.”

The female laughed, the sound like tiny bells chiming.

“Thank you, my dear, but I assure you it’s quite true. I am Lady Xalia.”

For the first time she noticed that both Harak and his mother had a pleasant lilting accent quite different from her own speech.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” she said, returning Lady Xalia’s smile, but Harak shook his head.

“The correct expression is I am delighted to make your acquaintance, honored lady.”

“It means the same thing,” she said impatiently.

“No, it doesn’t. Proper forms of address are crucial for navigating Plumerian social hierarchies. You should also have performed a deep curtsy but I do not ask for miracles.”

She glared at the arrogant asshole, on the verge of walking away despite the rain, but his mother quickly took her arm.

“I believe the hover cab is here. Shall we go?” Lady Xalia smiled at her. “While my son is perhaps too blunt, he is correct

that the appropriate social gestures are an important part of our culture.”

Liza couldn't argue. She'd had more than one potential customer offended by something she said or did - or something she didn't say or do. She had tried to observe and mimic their behavior, but the intricacies of Plumerian etiquette eluded her.

“Come along,” Harak ordered impatiently, then turned and stalked off towards the cab.

“Jerk,” she muttered under her breath, but his mother laughed.

“I'm not sure that word translates, but I believe I understand the intent. But despite his rudeness, I would prefer to be out of the night air.”

“Yes, of course, honored lady.”

“That was excellent, my dear.”

Liza found herself blushing again as she meekly followed Lady Xalia to the cab, but this time it was from pleasure at the praise.

The hover cab resembled a floating bubble with a curved metal bottom and a clear domed top with a slight iridescent gleam. Harak helped his mother to take a seat on the comfortably padded bench on one side of the cab, then somewhat reluctantly offered her his hand. She took it equally reluctantly and sat down on the other side, watching in dismay as the water from her wet dress soaked into the upholstery.

“Oh no, I'm getting the seat wet.”

Harak took a seat next to his mother and typed something into the control pad, then frowned at her as the cab lifted into the air and began moving.

“The cabs are self-cleaning, which includes unwelcome liquids. Didn't you know that?”

He was correct - the wetness was already beginning to disappear - but she shook her head.

“Why would I? It's not as if I've ever been in one before.”

The cabs that danced so prettily along the streets were too expensive for most humans.

His frown deepened, but before he could speak, his mother started a light commentary about the concert and the people who had attended. Neither Harak nor Liza responded, but she didn't seem bothered by their silence and continued her lilting monologue until the cab came to a halt in front of a tall townhouse of gleaming white stone.

Harak rose to assist his mother out of the cab, but she lingered in the open door smiling at Liza.

"It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my dear. I hope we shall meet again."

Liza gave her an uncertain look.

"Harak doesn't live with you?"

"Good heavens, no. I love my son but I would find his constant presence quite unbearable."

"You're too kind, Mother," he murmured, but his lips quirked.

"Not at all. And I'm sure you would find my presence equally unpleasant."

He laughed and bent down and kissed her cheek.

"I shall come for tea - after Cousin Mildra leaves."

His mother shuddered.

"That's probably for the best. Goodnight, my dear," she added, smiling at Liza again before stepping gracefully down from the cab and leaving her alone with Harak.

CHAPTER 3



As Lady Xalia moved away from the cab, Harak tapped the control panel again and the cab lifted into the air. Liza was uneasily aware that she was alone with a large Plumerian male, his presence even more imposing now that it was just the two of them. Her fingers twisted nervously in her wet gown as she hoped she wasn't making a mistake. The silence between them grew thicker and heavier and she jumped when he finally spoke.

"Mother is correct, you know."

She wasn't sure what she had expected him to say, but it wasn't to bring up his mother.

"Right about what?"

"The correct etiquette is critical to our society. If you want to be treated with respect, you must also respect our ways."

She wanted to argue, but he was speaking the truth. She sank back against the bench and sighed.

"I'm never going to be accepted here, am I?"

"It depends on what you mean by being accepted," he said slowly.

"Let's see - what do I mean? Oh, that's right. Being allowed to have a life. Not being treated like some poor, ignorant alien. Not being forced into menial jobs that no one else wants to do."

She knew she sounded bitter, but she didn't care. Her attempts to move out of the refugee camp had been met with frustration

and humiliation at every turn. She had thought she had a reasonable grasp of the language, but she was apparently not only mispronouncing words, she was failing to grasp the subtleties of the complex hierarchy of polite phrases and mannerisms.

He frowned, but he didn't disagree with her.

"It is unfortunate that you were not better taught. I have some contacts in government circles - I will mention the matter to them."

She didn't hold out much hope, but she didn't bother arguing as the cab pulled up in front of another tall townhouse. This one was built from a rich dark stone that was both impressive and forbidding - rather like its owner. He climbed out then offered her his hand. She took it automatically but the warmth of his fingers closing around hers sent an unexpected rush of heat through her body.

The sensation startled her so much that she forgot to let go. Instead she clung to his hand, staring up at him and trying to make sense of the warmth curling through her veins. She might not like him, but she couldn't deny that there was something very appealing about his tall, strong frame. He cleared his throat, staring down at their clasped hands, and she realized that she had been clutching his hand for far too long. She dropped it with a muttered apology and stepped back.

"This way."

He walked away without waiting for her and she trailed behind him as he pressed his hand to a panel on the fence enclosing the small front garden of the townhouse. There was a soft beep and a wave of glowing color swept out from his palm. A moment later, a section of the fence swung open and he headed for a discreet doorway on the ground floor.

She looked at it, then up at the grand stairs leading up to the impressive entrance on the first floor, and scowled at him.

"Humans aren't good enough for the front door?"

"This has nothing to do with your status. We are entering on this level because you are still trailing water and because I

need to have my housekeeper arrange a room for you.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks heated again.

“Not every gesture is intended as an offense.”

Despite the admonishment, his eyes were not unsympathetic as he turned away to press his palm to the door. Another wave of color and the door swung open to reveal a wide, dim corridor. He gestured for her to enter, and she took a deep breath and stepped inside.

He led the way as she trailed behind him, uneasily conscious that her wet dress was dragging on the smoothly polished stone floor. Although the hallway was quite plain, everything was beautifully finished from the intricate stonework beneath her feet to the gleam of the wooden panels covering the walls. Twice they passed a niche containing an elegant flower arrangement that sent a gentle fragrance into the air.

He finally stopped in front of a plain wooden door and knocked softly. Despite the late hour, it opened almost immediately to reveal an older Plumerian female. Her neatly arranged hair was a pale shade of copper streaked with white, but she carried herself with the upright bearing of a much younger female. Based on the crisp, plain gown she was wearing, Liza assumed she was the housekeeper Harak had mentioned.

“Master Harak. Is there something you need?”

Her eyes swept past him to take in Liza. Her expression flickered for a second before she returned her attention to Harak.

“I see you have brought home a... companion.”

“Just a temporary guest. Mara, this is Liza Domar. Liza, this is Madam K’vara, my housekeeper.”

“Hello,” she said, suddenly aware that she had no idea of the correct way to address the woman.

The housekeeper regarded her critically and remembering Harak’s previous instructions, she did her best to give a quick curtsy. It was awkward at best and both of them winced.

“Miss Liza was... unable to catch the last shuttle. She needs a hot bath, something hot to eat, and a room for the night.”

Madam K'vara gave her another careful look. “Yes, of course. Come this way, Miss Liza.”

As the housekeeper turned away, Harak frowned down at her.

“You should have said, ‘It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Madam K'vara.’”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Madam K'vara,” she repeated dutifully.

“Better. I will speak to you in the morning before you leave.”

He nodded briskly and turned away, leaving her feeling unexpectedly bereft - especially in light of Madam K'vara's disapproving look.

“I'm sorry,” she murmured. “I don't know how to speak to housekeepers.”

“Then let us consider this an opportunity to learn. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Liza. Now, follow me. Bath first, I think.”

She obediently followed the housekeeper deeper into the house as the other female tapped at her wrist device. By the time Madam K'vara paused in front of a wide wooden door, a younger female came hurrying up to meet them. Although the newcomer was dressed with the same impeccable neatness as Madam K'vara, she had the unmistakable look of someone who had just woken up and Liza winced.

“Kirsta, this is Miss Liza.”

“Yes, Madam K'vara. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Liza.”

Both the girl's words and her quickly bowed curtsy were considerably more polished than Liza's own attempts and she bit back a sigh as Madam K'vara opened the doors to reveal a large bathing room.

There was a bathing room in her building in the refugee settlement, but it was nothing like this. The walls were also

covered with wood paneling, this time in a darker, richer shade. Small glowing lanterns separated the shower area from the large round heated pool. A rectangular pool of cooler water extended along the far side of the room, surrounded by planters filled with graceful long-stemmed plants.

“This is beautiful.”

“I’m so glad you approve,” Madam K’vara said dryly. “Now take off your clothes.”

“What? No!” She was not about to take her clothes off in front of strangers, especially Plumerian strangers.

“Lord Harak said you were to have a hot bath and a hot bath you will have.”

“I’m not taking my clothes off in front of you - either of you.”

“Oh yes you are.”

As Kirsta stepped between her and the door, Madam K’vara rolled up her sleeves and advanced on Liza, a determined look on her face.

CHAPTER 4



I must be insane, Harak thought as he went up the stairs to the first floor. *Why am I allowing a human female to spend the night in my residence?* But despite his doubts, he had no intention of sending her back out into the rainy night. The fact that he found her surprisingly attractive had nothing to do with his decision, of course. It was all his mother's fault.

Ignoring the impulse to return and check on Liza, he retreated to his study. The large, two-story room was his sanctuary, full of his books and artifacts and scholarly works, but even here, he was haunted by the thought of the female in the bathing room below. She would be wet again, and this time there would be nothing to cover her surprisingly tempting body.

At the thought, he felt another one of those unwelcome stirrings in his body. He immediately did his best to dismiss it and picked up a favorite book - a diary about the events at the Emperor's court over five hundred years ago. Even though all the ancient works had long since been converted to digital records, the physical books were one of his few indulgences. He enjoyed the feel of the actual volumes with their elaborate covers and smooth, heavy pages.

Just as he opened the book, there was a screech from downstairs, and his fists clenched. *Liza*. Was she in danger? His muscles automatically tensed and his claws emerged, shocking him out of an instinctive need to protect her. He stared at the sharp white points in dismay - a civilized Plumerian would never unsheathe his claws.

Still fighting the urge to go downstairs, he retracted his claws and checked the security system. The external barriers were undisturbed. It appeared that Liza was simply not enjoying her bath - yet another indication of her failure to understand their culture. He should be disgusted by her uncivilized behavior. Instead he found himself wishing he could be the one to introduce her to the pleasures of the bath.

He forced himself to sit back down and pick up his book, noting regretfully that his claws had torn one of the pages. He quickly turned to another section, but unfortunately, the elegant language and elaborate descriptions failed to engage him as they usually did. He found himself listening for any future cries or sounds of distress, but there were none, and it remained quiet until Mara knocked on the door to his study.

“Come in.”

The housekeeper entered, and he fought back a sudden urge to laugh at the wet patch on her dress and the loose strands in her usually impeccable hairdo.

“I take it the bath was not successful?” he asked dryly.

She drew herself up to her full height, the wrinkle between her brows the equivalent of a glare from any other female.

“Miss Liza does not appear to understand the correct bathing process. She... resisted.”

“Did you persist?” He kept his voice cool, although he had a sudden vision of a wet, slippery Liza writhing in his arms.

“Of course, Master Harak,” Mara replied. “I have placed her in the Blue bedroom and provided her with soup, bread, and tea, although I did not wait to see if she was sensible enough to actually take advantage of the food.” She hesitated. “What do you wish me to do about her clothing? I removed it in order to have it cleaned and dried, but it is really most unsuitable.”

“Yes, I agree. Can you arrange a new outfit for her before the morning?”

“Of course, Master Harak.”

“Very well. Please take care of it.”

“Yes, Master Harak. Is there anything else this evening, or should I say, this morning?”

She gave the chronometer display a meaningful look.

“No, that will be all, thank you. I apologize for disturbing your rest.”

“You know I never rest until you have returned. It is my duty,” she added sternly, in an attempt to avoid any appearance of softness but he wasn’t fooled.

Mara had been his nurse since he was a child and had taken over the role of housekeeper when he set up his own household. She never allowed any familiarity, but he knew she cared as much about him as his own mother.

“I still appreciate it.”

She nodded, curtsied to precisely the correct degree, and departed. That was what the humans needed - someone like Mara to teach and enforce correct behavior. That is, if it could even be done. Could someone from a more primitive culture be taught the intricacies of Plumerian language and social interactions in order to be accepted by Plumerian society?

It was a fascinating question, and he found himself putting aside the courtier’s diary and opening his digital screen to see if any such experiments had ever been conducted. He was not surprised to find that very few studies even hinted at such a possibility. The Plumerians were notoriously reluctant to accept outsiders.

The one study he did find, performed on a group of older Atallan males, had not been a success. He reviewed the parameters and concluded that the experiment had not been handled well. In addition, the subjects did not appear to have any motivation to succeed. He would structure such an experiment quite differently.

While he considered the matter, the chronometer gave a soft chime, and he looked up, startled by the lateness of the hour. Sighing, he closed his screens and climbed the spiral stairs to the second level of the study. A concealed door opened to the hallway leading to his bedroom and as he passed the blue

bedroom, he found himself pausing, thinking of his unexpected visitor.

Was she sleeping peacefully? *What was she wearing?* The thought suddenly popped into his mind as he remembered Mara stating that she had taken her clothing. The thought triggered another unwelcome response in his body. He frowned and stalked down the hallway to his bedroom, determined not to think about her again.

Despite his resolution, he slept restlessly and woke in the morning still thinking of his unexpected guest. *It is merely curiosity*, he assured himself. He had never been around any of the human refugees before. It was not due to any particular distaste for the primitive species - he had voted to approve the resolution for Plumeria to take in some of the humans when their planet was on the verge of destruction. He had simply never been exposed to one before.

Once more, he resolved to put her out of his mind and went to his training room to perform his usual morning exercises. At one time, every well-bred male would have maintained a similar routine, but the custom had fallen out of fashion as their society became more civilized.

After he had finished, showered, and dressed, he headed back downstairs to his study. When he was alone he usually had breakfast at the small table in the window bay, but this morning, the table was set for two. Was Liza joining him? He had expected her to depart immediately, but he had no objection to her staying. In fact, he found himself anticipating it - merely as an opportunity for further study, of course.

But when the door opened, Elder T'var appeared instead of the female he expected. Ignoring the unwelcome pang of disappointment, he rose to meet his mentor and friend.

“Greetings, Elder T'var. Your presence graces my household.”

Age had turned T'var's hair to silver, but he still maintained the upright stature and elegant movements of a much younger male and he returned the bow gracefully.

“Greetings, Lord Harak. I am honored by your hospitality.”

Etiquette satisfied, T'var gave him a warm smile.

“It’s been far too long, my dear boy. I apologize for the lack of notice, but Madam K’vara assured me that your schedule was free this morning. In fact, I had the distinct impression that she wished me to join you.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. I had an unexpected visitor last night.”

He gestured for T’var to join him at the table as he began preparing the tea.

“A visitor? It’s not like you to open your house to guests.”

“I blame my mother,” he said grimly. “In a moment of weakness, I agreed to accompany her to the concert last night. While we were inside it began to rain. You know what that means – everyone crowded together on the portico waiting for transportation, scared that a drop of moisture might touch them.”

He poured the tea, then paused to take the ritual first sip before continuing. “A human female decided to take advantage of the crowd by attempting to sell sassia flowers.”

“Sassia flowers? At that time of night? That’s quite unusual.”

“Indeed. Ridiculous, even. Although I suppose she is to be commended for trying to improve her situation. I began recording her accent to be added to my collection of primitive accents.”

T’var carved his toast into the requisite triangles and began spreading them with a thick layer of boret jam as he nodded thoughtfully.

“An excellent idea. I’m convinced that you could do some groundbreaking work in that area.”

“Do you really think so?” he asked, considering the research he had done the previous night. “There have been very few efforts to teach them anything more than a basic knowledge of the common language.”

T’var raised an eyebrow. “I only meant for comparison, not actually trying to modify their culture. Are you considering

such a project?”

“No, not really. It just occurred to me that it might be an interesting experiment to see if a primitive species could be taught the subtleties of Plumerian language and culture well enough to be accepted by our society. To date, only a few other species have managed it and they all came from highly advanced societies.”

“I see. And did you have a subject in mind for this experiment?” T’var shot him an unreadable look over the rim of his tea cup. “Perhaps the unfortunate female you encountered?”

“It occurred to me that she might be suited for it,” he admitted reluctantly. “Although I doubt she’s interested.”

“Perhaps it is just as well. I’m not sure it could be accomplished, even by someone with your skills.”

He frowned. “What do you mean, it can’t be done? I’m sure it’s entirely possible under the right conditions.”

T’var shrugged. “Oh, it might be possible to achieve a certain level of sophistication, perhaps that of an office worker, but I doubt it could be more than that. Certainly not to the level of being accepted at a true society event.”

“What do you consider a society event? The embassy ball, perhaps?”

The embassy ball was one of the highlights of the Plumerian social season, invariably attended by several members of the royal house. His title permitted him to attend, but he had successfully avoided it for the past ten years, despite his mother’s best efforts.

Could Liza be groomed for such an event? It would require extensive training and, remembering the study he’d found, enthusiastic cooperation on her part. Still, was it really an experiment he wished to conduct? Did he want such an intrusion into his life?

T’var nodded. “That is the type of event I had in mind.”

“Yes, I believe it is possible.”

“Do you believe it enough that you are willing to make the attempt?”

He frowned. “It would cause considerable disruption to my household.”

“Are you sure that’s not just an excuse to avoid failure?” T’var asked lightly, but the dark eyes fastened on his held a distinct challenge.

His back stiffened in response. “I am quite capable of performing such a feat.”

“Perhaps. Why don’t we place a small bet on the outcome? If your human makes a successful appearance at the embassy ball, I will present you with my collection of Lady K’naj’s diaries.”

The original works were both rare and historically significant, and T’var knew how much he had coveted them, but...

“And if I lose?”

“You will teach two sections of beginning linguistics for me in the spring.”

He winced. As much as he enjoyed the scholarly aspects of being associated with the university, he intensely disliked active teaching, especially to beginning students who did not take their studies seriously. He had taken a research position and resigned from all teaching duties for just that reason, despite their efforts to get him to return.

“Having doubts?” T’var asked, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“Of course not. However, the female will have to be agreeable.”

“Of course.”

“And I expect you to participate when needed.”

“I would be delighted to observe some of the lessons.”

He hesitated, still not entirely convinced that he should proceed, then nodded.

“Very well. That is, if we can find her. She may have left already.”

The door opened just as he finished speaking and Liza entered. Instead of the pitiful, bedraggled creature of the previous night, she was now wearing a simple and perfectly appropriate morning dress in a soft shade of blue. Her sash had been tied correctly, and her dark curls had been neatly arranged and accented with a small blossom appropriate for the autumn season.

Despite her diminutive stature, the dress fell in graceful folds. However, it could not disguise the soft curves of her body and the arrangement of the sash drew attention to those remarkably tempting breasts. Once again, his body responded and he had the sudden uneasy feeling that this experiment might prove more complicated than he had anticipated.

CHAPTER 5



Liza had woken that morning in the most comfortable bed she had ever slept in, the mattress responding to her movements to cradle her perfectly. The silky sheets were the perfect temperature and she had to force herself to sit up, once again surprised by the luxurious room she had been given.

Like everything else she had seen in Harak's house, it had a deceptively simple elegance. Instead of the plain grey walls so common in the refugee settlement, the walls were a pale blue with a subtle pattern. Her bed was on a raised dais at one end of the room, while two graceful chairs faced each other in front of a fireplace at the other end. The fireplace was covered with cream-colored handmade tiles, each one slightly different, and with a touch of a button it could be programmed to provide different styles and colors of flames accompanied by a variety of sound effects.

Blue silk curtains covered all the windows, the center ones opening onto a small balcony overlooking the manicured garden she had glimpsed the previous night. Now sunlight crept around the edges of the curtains, indicating that it was time to go. Assuming she could find some clothing of course.

She frowned down at the heavy silk robe which was now her only piece of clothing. After forcing her to undress, that wretched female had taken her dress and under things. At least she'd finally given up on the idea of washing her and let Liza wash herself before enjoying a long soak in the heated pool. Her muscles ached from a long day roaming the streets in a vain attempt to sell her flowers and the hot water was such a

welcome relief that she was half-asleep as the housekeeper and her assistant bustled around. So relaxed that she didn't even notice her clothes had disappeared until she finally climbed reluctantly out of the pool.

Kirsta immediately rushed to her side with a towel, clearly intending to dry her off, but she quickly grabbed the towel out of her hand.

“Thank you, but I can do this myself.”

The girl was obviously distressed by her refusal, but she didn't argue. When Madam K'vara returned and found Liza wrapping herself in the towel, she shook her head but simply held out a heavy silk embroidered robe. Liza took it doubtfully. The fabric was soft and beautiful but the robe had been designed for a Plumerian female which meant that it puddled at her feet and didn't want to close over her breasts. She sighed and tried to hand it back.

“This really doesn't fit. I'd better just put my dress back on.” That was when she noticed her clothing was gone. “Where's my dress?”

“I have disposed of it,” Madam K'vara said firmly. “I'll provide you with clothing in the morning.”

“I don't want you to provide me with clothing. I want my own dress.”

“It is inappropriate, poorly constructed, and coming apart.”

“Maybe so, but it was all I had,” she said, trying not to panic.

It was difficult enough to find clothing that was both designed to fit a human and meet Plumerian expectations, let alone anything she could afford. Was there a flash of sympathy on the housekeeper's stern face? She couldn't be sure.

“But now you will have a new dress.”

“It's not going to fit. Just like this doesn't fit.”

Once again she tried to tug the robe together over her cleavage.

“It will fit,” Madam K'vara assured her. “Now, time for bed.”

Frustrated, she crossed her arms and glared at the woman.

“I’m not ready to go to bed.”

Madam K’vara raised an eyebrow.

“It’s after midnight. Did you have other plans?”

Of course she didn’t have plans. She never had other plans. Most evenings she would have been asleep long ago, exhausted from trying to eke out her meager living. On the rare occasions when she would have been awake, she would have been worrying about her prospects for the future.

She desperately wanted to move out of the refugee settlement and have a true place of her own, away from the unpleasant memories that haunted her. But unless she could find a job that paid a reasonable salary, she didn’t hold out much hope. On her more troubled nights, she imagined herself growing old, still trapped in that tiny room.

Depressed by the thought, she stopped arguing and meekly followed Madam K’vara as she led her upstairs to a bedroom. She had expected some small room suitable for a servant, not the level of luxury that had awaited her. The housekeeper showed her where everything was located and left, returning a short time later with a tray to find Liza staring down at the formal gardens, mesmerized by the small dancing lights that highlighted different aspects of the darkened garden.

“Is something wrong, Miss Liza?”

“No, I was just admiring the view,” she said, as she joined Madam K’vara at the small table. “I’ve never been in a room like this before.”

“That does not surprise me. Please, sit down and have something to eat. You will need a good night’s sleep. We begin the day early.”

Liza gave her a skeptical look. She had to work long hours in the hope of making a few extra credits. She doubted that Harak had ever really worked a day in his life.

“Why? Because the professor might miss a class?” she asked sarcastically, and Madam K’vara drew herself up.

“Lord Harak is very dedicated to his research.”

“*Lord Harak?*” she asked. No wonder he was so arrogant.

“That is his correct title, although he prefers professor. And as I said, he works very hard.”

“I’ll bet,” she muttered.

“If it hadn’t been for that research, you would be out on the street tonight so I suggest you refrain from such comments.”

A wave of guilt washed over her and she blushed. As much as she hated to admit it, the housekeeper was right. This was far, far better than spending the night on a bench in the transit station.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so prickly - it’s just hard to believe that someone who owns all this has to work for anything.”

Madam K’vara’s face relaxed a little as she lifted the lid off the tray.

“You should never judge by appearances,” she said sternly, and Liza had the uncomfortable feeling that the housekeeper wasn’t just talking about Harak.

Letting the subject drop, she focused on the tray. A fragile porcelain bowl contained a golden broth with delicately arranged garnishes while a cloth-lined rustic basket held small reddish rolls. The two items should not have gone together but they made a pleasing picture on the dark wood tray, accompanied by an oddly shaped spoon and a napkin folded in the shape of a leaf. Next to them, a carved metal teapot emitted a delicious fragrance.

“This is beautiful. You shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble.”

“A first lesson. The proper aesthetics enhance any experience.” Despite Madam K’vara’s sternness, she seemed pleased by Liza’s compliment. “I will leave you to eat and rest. I will take care of your clothing and return in the morning.”

“Thank you.”

After the housekeeper nodded and left, Liza had eaten - the food tasted as delicious as it looked - then climbed wearily into bed. The bed was enormous - designed for someone of Harak's size, maybe even Harak and another person. Did he have a female in his life, she wondered. It seemed unlikely if he was attending a concert with his mother but perhaps, despite his gruff ways, he was simply a dutiful son.

What would it be like to share a bed with someone so big and strong and regrettably handsome? A tingle of warmth spread through her body at the thought and even in the darkness she knew she was blushing. Alone in the elegant room, she had let herself dream about the idea for a few minutes, but the bed had been so comfortable and she had been so tired that she had fallen asleep within minutes.

But now it was time to go. Time to return to her own humble existence instead of this far more pleasant one. She tugged at the neckline of the robe again, wondering if she should go in search of the housekeeper. Before she could decide, there was a discreet knock at the door, followed almost immediately by Madam K'vara's entrance.

"Good. You are awake," Madam K'vara said briskly. "I have come to dress you."

Liza eyed her - and the armful of blue fabric she was carrying - suspiciously.

"I don't need any help dressing. And where's my dress?"

"Gone. You will wear this instead. And if that appalling outfit you were wearing last night is any indication, you do not know how to wear it properly. How many pleats should you have in a morning dress? What knot should you use to tie the sash?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters if you wish to present a proper appearance. Remove the robe and I will show you."

Liza glared at her rebelliously for a moment - which did not appear to have the slightest effect on Madam K'vara's determination - then sighed and let the robe slip down. She did

know that there were various subtleties to Plumerian dress, but no one had ever explained them to her.

“It probably won’t fit anyway,” she muttered as Madam K’vara dropped the fabric over her head.

She was wrong. Other than being a fraction too tight across her breasts, the dress fit perfectly.

“How did you do that?” she asked in amazement as she stared at the reflection in the mirror.

The deep blue silk highlighted her eyes and contrasted beautifully with her pale skin and dark hair. The high waistline flattered her figure, and despite her doubts, the intricate arrangement of the sash was as elegant as it was flattering.

Madam K’vara permitted herself a small smile. “I Have been in service for a very long time. Even though I was primarily responsible for Master Harak, I frequently assisted Lady Xalia. Now for your hair.”

She obediently sat still as Madam K’vara arranged her hair into an elegant knot without once tugging painfully on the long strands.

“All right,” she admitted when it was finished. “I look... acceptable.”

More than acceptable - she looked like one of the fine ladies who occasionally purchased her flowers. Would they be more likely to buy from her if she was dressed like this? Or would she stand a chance of obtaining a job in a flower shop like the one she had seen last night?

“You look very satisfactory, but acceptable dress is only the start. You must also learn the correct etiquette.”

She bit back a sigh and nodded. The housekeeper was right - dress alone would not be enough.

“Now it is time for you to join Master Harak for breakfast,” Madam K’vara continued.

“Breakfast? Isn’t it time for me to leave?”

“Did you intend to leave without thanking him?”

“Well, no.” And she didn’t object to seeing him again. Remembering her thoughts of the previous night, she blushed again but managed to keep her voice level. “I suppose that would be the polite thing to do.”

“Precisely.”

The housekeeper led the way back downstairs, pausing in front of a set of double doors with a subtle design carved into the wood.

“His lordship is in his study. Go and join him and I will arrange for your breakfast.”

Madam K’vara gave a brisk nod and whisked herself away, leaving Liza staring after her in dismay. Then she took a deep breath and entered the room. She had a brief impression of a gracious two-story space but her attention was immediately drawn to Harak. He was seated at a small table by the window, sunlight gilding his golden hair and skin and glimmering on his horns. The formal dress of the previous evening had been replaced by dark pants and a matching tunic, the front fastened with an intricate knot that revealed a hint of that impressive chest.

As their eyes met, something glittered in that golden gaze, and she felt oddly breathless. Then he rose smoothly, his expression once more as remote and cool as it had been the previous night, and inclined his head in a formal greeting.

“That’s better. You look less like a ragamuffin today.”

Her breathless reaction disappeared in an instant and she glared at him. “Ragamuffin? It was your fault I was so wet.”

“My fault?” His brows drew together. “You were the one who dashed out into the rain.”

“Because you frightened me.”

“Nonsense. You panicked unnecessarily.”

“Allow me to interrupt this... discussion long enough to introduce myself to this charming young lady,” a voice interrupted and she gave a guilty look at the third occupant of

the room. She'd noticed him when she entered, but she'd been too focused on Harak to pay much attention.

"I am Scholar T'var," the stranger continued calmly.

An older male with white hair and a kind face, T'var smiled at her and bowed.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, honored sir." She had no idea of his rank, but she gave a deep, awkward curtsy.

"You see?" Harak muttered. "It will be quite a challenge."

"What will be a challenge?"

Before he could respond, Madam K'vara entered with another tray. She swiftly set a place for Liza and arranged the food. She departed just as quickly after the briefest glance at T'var, but something about that quick glance caught Liza's attention.

Harak hesitated, then pulled the chair back.

"Will you be seated?"

Despite her irritation at his arrogance, she was also hungry so she nodded ungraciously and took her seat. As he pushed it back to the table, his fingers brushed against her shoulder and the same unexpected wave of heat that had occurred when she took his hand emanated from that brief contact. He was close enough for her to catch his faint spicy scent and her lustful thoughts of the previous evening came rushing back.

The heat rose to her cheeks, but she forced herself to ignore it and concentrate on breakfast instead - a task that was more complicated than she had realized. Instead of the simple spoon from the previous evening, there were three utensils in front of her and she had no idea which one to use.

She put a tentative finger on the inner one and looked up in time to see T'var shake his head almost imperceptibly. When she reached for the outer one instead, he smiled and picked up his own utensil and used it to carve delicate slices from the red fruit in front of him. She followed his example, then almost groaned with pleasure as the slice of fruit melted on her tongue in a delicious combination of sweet and tart.

She looked up to find Harak studying her, an expression she couldn't read on his face.

“I have a proposition for you,” he said abruptly, and her heart sank. Apparently Plumerian males were just like human men after all.

CHAPTER 6



*H*arak saw Liza stiffen as the pleasure faded from her face. What was the matter with her? Why did she look so suspicious? He quickly reviewed his words and didn't see anything that should have upset her, but before he could continue, she leaned forward, her chin raised in a belligerent manner.

“What exactly do you have in mind, Lord Harass?”

He blinked at her, the deliberate mispronunciation of his name taking him by surprise, and she raised a brow.

“Am I allowed to decline this... proposition of yours?”

“Yes, of course. I would never force you to accept,” he added as she scowled at him. “But perhaps you should at least listen to my proposal before rejecting it.”

“Go ahead,” she said, but she crossed her arms, emphasizing the soft, full curve of her breasts.

He quickly transferred his gaze to the top of her head and cleared his throat.

“I propose to teach you the nuances of our language and behavior so that you will be equipped to act appropriately at any level of our society.”

Her lips parted and he suddenly realized that he was leaning towards her. He hastily straightened back up as she frowned at him.

“Why?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why do you want to teach me?”

He hesitated, trying to decide how to frame his answer.

“Most newcomers to our world have not been fully accepted because they do not understand our ways. I am interested in the possibility of changing that.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, staring down at the remnants of the fruit on her plate, and he wondered what she was thinking.

“What exactly do you have in mind?” she asked at last.

“I will teach you what you need to know - language, dress, etiquette. The ultimate goal would be for you to attend the embassy ball with me and make an appropriate - and positive - impression on everyone.”

She suddenly jumped to her feet, her eyes flashing at him. “Now you’re mocking me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Why would I be mocking you?”

She spun away from him, and he started to rise and follow her, but T’var placed a hand on his arm.

“Give her a moment,” T’var murmured.

Ignoring them both, Liza stormed out of the room. He had to fight back the instinct to go after her. Annoying female.

“Why did she react that way?” he demanded.

T’var calmly took a sip of his tea.

“You began your conversation with her by calling her a ragamuffin. Now you’re proposing that she accompany you to the embassy ball. It is rather a leap.”

“Then why did you stop me from going after her?”

“An angry female - of any species - is a dangerous creature. Give her time to consider. You did tell me that the experiment would be more successful if the subject was willing.”

He subsided, giving T’var a disgruntled look.

“Are you sure you’re not just trying to get out of our bet?”

“Not at all.” His mentor’s eyes twinkled. “In fact, I find the whole idea very intriguing.”

T’var was enjoying the situation far too much for his taste, but he took a moody sip of his own tea and did his best to wait patiently. Time passed with incredible slowness until the door finally opened again and Liza reappeared.

“Well?” he demanded, ignoring the triumphant look on T’var’s face as he rose to meet her.

“All you want to do is teach me? For your... research?”

“Yes. I wish you would get over this ridiculous idea that I am interested in you physically.”

Despite his denial, he knew he wasn’t being entirely truthful. He was definitely aware of her surprisingly delightful body. That did not mean, however, that he had any intention of pursuing a physical relationship with her.

She relaxed slightly at his words.

“How would it work? Do you want me to come here in the evenings?”

“That will not allow us enough time to prepare. It would be better if you lived here for the duration of the experiment.”

“Here? But how am I going to earn a living if I stay here?”

“You do not need to earn a living while you are here. I will provide you with housing, food, and clothing.”

“But I’m trying to save my credits for... I’m trying to save.”

He sighed. “Very well. I will put aside the amount you would have earned each day. When the experiment is concluded, you will receive that as a lump sum. If you have been a good girl and studied hard, I will double it. If your appearance at the ball is a success, I will triple it.”

“And I get to keep the clothes?”

“Of course. I have no use for them.”

She studied him for another moment, then nodded.

“All right. It’s a deal.”

He was sure that the triumph that roared through him was entirely due to his ability to test his theories - he refused to admit that it had anything to do with the knowledge that she would be in his possession for the next few weeks.

“Very well. Now return to the table and we will begin by correcting your atrocious table manners.”

Blue eyes gave him a defiant look.

“My table manners are not atrocious.”

“Atrocious,” he repeated firmly, and put his hand on her back to guide her back to the table where T’var was watching with an all too pleased look on his face.

He sternly ignored the fact that the softness of her body beneath his hand stirred the desire he had so vehemently denied.

“This is an excellent idea,” T’var said brightly as she reluctantly sat down. “I look forward to observing the progress of your experiment.”

“You’re not going to stay and finish breakfast?” he asked with a frown.

“I only have a modest appetite these days. Besides, I think my presence might be an impediment to your success.”

“That’s nonsense. And you did agree to help.”

T’var looked over at Liza. “Do you have any objections?”

She smiled at his mentor far too warmly for Harak’s liking.

“Not at all. I’m glad you’re here.”

“In that case I will return later today. Unfortunately, I have a committee meeting this morning and if I’m late they will assume I have joined my ancestors. I suspect some of them would enjoy that prospect far too much.” T’var rose and bowed to Liza - a bow given to an equal. “I look forward to observing your progress. And remember, my dear, he is not trying to change you, merely to equip you with the correct knowledge and skills to function in our society.”

Liza's smile vanished, and she nodded silently. As Harak walked T'var to the door, his mentor leaned in close and murmured,

"Be patient with her."

He opened his mouth to ask what the devil the other male meant, then thought better of it and ushered him out. But T'var's words echoed in his head as he returned to the study and joined Liza at the table.

She gave him a tentative smile as she picked up her fruit knife, but he sighed. Best to begin immediately.

"Take note of the position of your hands and shoulders and the direction of your knife as you cut your fruit. Also, when you cut the fruit, it is most elegant to make angled cuts."

Her smile vanished.

"I don't suppose you realize how condescending that sounds? Why can't I just cut the damned fruit the way I like?"

"Because that is not how things are done here." He hesitated, then decided a little background might help her to understand. "We were not always the peaceful race we are now. The rules prescribing correct behavior were originally designed to place boundaries around our interactions and promote peace."

"Slicing fruit at a specific angle led to peace?" she asked dryly, and he couldn't help smiling.

"Perhaps not directly. But as we placed more emphasis on etiquette, on an appreciation for beauty and refinement, those customs became more... elaborate."

"Which led to a knife specifically for fruit and a correct way to cut it." She sighed. "Do you know how I would eat this?"

"How?"

She grinned at him, picked up the rest of the jimar and took a big bite directly into the plump flesh. Juice exploded from the fruit, coating her lips and dripping down onto the tempting swell of her breasts. As she laughed and reached for a napkin to wipe it away, he could all too clearly envision himself licking the juice from her skin instead. Once again his body

responded to the image, his shaft stiffening despite his best attempts to control it.

“Perhaps we should forgo the fruit and move on to the toast,” he said as casually as possible as he handed her the correct knife.

As she applied herself to the bread, he told himself that his sexual interest was to be expected. He had been concentrating on his work for so long that he had ignored the demands of his own body. Liza’s sudden appearance in his home, looking delectably soft and feminine, had almost inevitably caused an arousal that would surely pass in time.

While he was reassuring himself, she successfully cut the bread into perfect triangles, and he nodded approvingly.

“Very good. It is important to have the correct shape but not be so heavy-handed as to crush the crust.”

She eyed the other items on the tray - a selection of small bowls of various shapes and sizes holding different types of jam.

“Now what? These all look the same to me.”

“On the contrary, you must observe the subtle differences in color and texture. There is a specific order in which they are to be eaten in order to enhance the flavors.”

She looked mutinous for a moment, then sighed. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“Begin with the boret jam. Observe.”

He dipped his spoon into one of the bowls and placed a careful dollop on his own toast. She watched him closely as he brought it to his mouth, but then her cheeks turned pink and she glanced away. Interesting. Was she experiencing the same unwanted arousal?

Resisting the temptation to find out, he continued with the meal, demonstrating the correct behavior for each item. Fortunately, she was a quick learner and had no problem mimicking the required behavior, but her cheeks remained flushed. He found himself watching her mouth, noticing the

way her small tongue swept across those pretty pink lips. How had he never realized before how intimate a meal could be?

He was both disappointed and relieved when the meal came to an end. Perhaps now he could get his unruly body under control.

“I think it would be helpful if you studied some Plumerian history,” he announced and she scowled at him.

“Why?”

“So you can understand more about how our culture developed. I only touched on it briefly.”

“I suppose.”

He frowned at her, wondering why she seemed so unenthusiastic before a terrible thought struck him.

“You do know how to read Plumerian don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” she said indignantly. “I just never found history very interesting.”

“This will be interesting - and you agreed to follow my instructions.”

She rolled her eyes but nodded.

“Fine. Where’s the book?”

“This way.” He rose and went to the steps leading to the second floor balcony, not surprised when she hesitated. “Well? Aren’t you coming?”

She looked up at him for a moment, then gave him a surprisingly seductive smile that sent blood flowing straight to his cock. He clenched his jaw, refusing to acknowledge his reaction as she preceded him up the steps but the way her buttocks moved beneath the soft fabric of her gown only made him harder.

Somehow he managed to keep his voice and his face composed as he found the book he wanted and settled her on the cushioned window seat at the edge of the balcony which overlooked the garden. Then he made a quick excuse and fled the study.

CHAPTER 7



A week later, Liza scowled at the small silver device in front of her.

“I did pronounce garrpur correctly,” she muttered.

“That is not correct. Please repeat garrpur.” The machine’s voice was endlessly patient and kind but somehow that only made it worse.

Behind her, T’var and Harak were chuckling over some incident at the university as they enjoyed their tea. Harak had told her she couldn’t join them until she said the word correctly - yet another example of his annoyingly bossy ways.

If I’d known what I was getting into I never would have agreed to this, she thought rebelliously, but deep down she knew it wasn’t true. The beautiful room and delicious food were such a pleasant change from her usual life, even if she did have to constantly think about her utensils and follow the rigid Plumerian protocol around meals. T’var had proven to be both kind and thoughtful and even Madam K’vara had unbent - a little - and would answer her questions and occasionally drop an intriguing nugget about Harak’s past.

And then there was Harak. He was just as arrogant and just as annoying as when she’d met him - and just as attractive. She had accidentally bumped into him one morning as he was returning from his workout, his chest bare and his golden skin gleaming. For the briefest moment she’d been pressed against all that hard, warm flesh. His hands had gone to her shoulders to steady her and it almost seemed as if they wanted to linger.

She was positive she'd felt his enormous shaft begin to harden before he stepped back with a quick reprimand to watch where she was going.

But it was more than just the physical attraction between them. He was a strict taskmaster and demanded the best from her, but warmth always filled her when she earned one of his quick words of praise. She had rapidly become familiar with his routine and his preferences, but she hadn't realized he was equally familiar with hers until the previous evening when he'd wordlessly removed the larran berries she detested and replaced them with her favorite fruit.

"You're not concentrating, Liza," he warned now, even though she could have sworn he was focused on T'var rather than her.

"That's because your stupid machine doesn't think I'm saying it properly when I am."

"The machine is correct. You are not saying it properly."

She glared at him, and T'var laughed and rose to his feet.

"I believe I will leave two of you to argue this out. I'll see you both tomorrow."

"You're not joining us for dinner?"

The scholar frequently joined them and just as frequently spent the night but today he shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, my dear. There is a social event at the university that I must attend - which means poor wine and too much political wrangling," he added gloomily and she smiled at him.

"We'll miss you."

Harak made an odd noise and she looked over to find him frowning.

"Now what?"

"Nothing. Return to your practice," he barked before accompanying T'var out of the room.

She huffed at his impatient tone and reluctantly picked up the microphone.

“Garrpur.”

“That is incorrect.”

Dammit. She threw the microphone down and rose, glaring at Harak as he returned.

“I’m telling you this machine is wrong.”

“It is not.” He crossed to her side and put his hand on her throat. “When you pronounce the first syllable you should feel it here in your throat.”

The warmth of that big hand on her throat made her heart skip a beat and her nipples peaked beneath the thin cloth of the afternoon gown.

“Garr,” she managed to repeat obediently and his fingers flexed on her throat in an oddly arousing massage.

“Again.”

“Garr.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper, but he smiled approvingly.

“Good girl. Now bring your lips together for the second syllable.” His hand moved up to her face, clasp ing her chin as he gently squeezed her cheeks between his thumb and first finger. “Try it.”

Did he realize he had her mouth pursed as if expecting a kiss? She ran a nervous tongue across her lips and his eyes darkened as he tracked the movement. His fingers tightened a fraction, the power in his grip making her dizzy. His strength should have made her aware of her own vulnerability, instead it had excitement fizzing through her veins like sparkling wine.

“P-pur.”

“Pur.”

He pronounced it with such clarity and such absolute conviction that she automatically repeated it, and then time he nodded.

“Now both syllables together.”

His big thumb caressed her cheekbone as she gazed up at him and wet her lips again.

“Garr-pur.”

“Excellent.” His fingers lingered, making her entire body hum, and she swallowed nervously. “That was very nice.”

“Are you certain that I’m pronouncing garrpur correctly?”

Her voice was a husky whisper, and his nostrils flared.

“That is correct,” the machine responded and she smiled against his fingers.

His eyes darkened again and with a muttered curse, he bent his head. The faint citrus and spice of his scent filled her head as his lips brushed hers, their touch firm and confident. She gasped against his mouth as a bolt of sensation shot through her, and he growled low in his throat. Then his other arm circled her waist, drawing her closer to his powerful body and pressing his hardness against her stomach. Her clit throbbed as a wave of heat swept through her.

Her arms wrapped around his neck of their own volition, her only thought to get closer to him. One hand slid up through the heavy silk of his hair to stroke his horns and his hips bucked, dragging a moan from her throat. His hand grasped her breast, his long fingers cupping its generous weight. Her nipple, already a hard bead, grew tighter still as his palm rubbed it, and her knees trembled.

“Harak,” she whispered against his lips, and he suddenly froze.

He swore harshly and lifted his head, stepping back. She stared up at him in confusion, her body feeling cold and vulnerable. What had happened?

“I am sorry,” he said hoarsely. “I forgot myself.”

“You regret kissing me.” Her chest ached.

“Regret? I do not believe that is the correct word.” He hesitated, then shook his head. “I apologize.”

“It was just a kiss,” she said stiffly, forcing the words out of her dry throat.

“I did not offer to instruct you in such matters.”

He sounded equally stiff and she would have laughed if her chest didn't ache so much. History seemed to be repeating itself.

“No, of course not. I think I'll just continue practicing in my room. Excuse me.”

She grabbed the linguistic device and marched out of the room, up the stairs, and into her own room. Somehow she managed to close the door behind her before she collapsed into a chair, the device falling to the floor.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, she berated herself. How could she have been such a fool? A tiny part of her insisted that she really wasn't to blame since he had been the one to initiate the kiss but the rest of her was simply mortified by her response. She had completely misread the situation, just as she had once before. On the long trip to Plumeria from Earth she had fallen for an older boy from one of the upper class sections of the ship. She'd thought Gordon was interested in her but he was only amusing himself. At least Harak had stopped at a kiss.

A kiss she had responded to with shocking eagerness. She still felt shaky from the combination of his touch and his scent and the sheer masculine power of his body. Her breasts ached, her nipples throbbing peaks, and she pressed her arms against them in a vain attempt to relieve the ache.

Worst of all, he'd apologized for the kiss - something Gordon had never done - but the fact that he so clearly considered it a mistake was almost as humiliating. *Maybe it's just as well*, she thought bleakly.

Maybe now she knew how he felt about her, she could dismiss the foolish fantasies that came to her at night. After all, it wasn't as if there was a future for them. A Plumerian would never choose a human female as a life-mate, especially not one as highly ranked as Harak. The most she could have hoped for was a few stolen moments of passion. Ignoring the

enthusiastic pulse of excitement from her body at the thought, she sighed and picked up the device to resume her lessons.

CHAPTER 8



*H*arak swore as the door closed behind Liza, fighting the impulse to go after her. His cock was a throbbing ache in his pants and he was more aroused than he had ever been in his life. It was foolish, ridiculous, impossible - but he could still feel the soft press of her body against his and the heavy weight of her breast in his hand. He'd been on the verge of ripping her dress so he could feel that impossibly soft human skin against his when he came to his senses. He frowned down at his hand and forced his still present claws to retract.

Annoying female. Twice now she had caused him to lose control over his body. Perhaps these humans were more dangerous than he realized.

Mara entered to clear away the tea tray and gave him a puzzled frown.

“Where is everyone?”

“T’var had to return to the university. He won’t be back until tomorrow.”

“I see.”

His housekeeper’s voice was as calm as always, but there was something about it that distracted him from his own concerns and he shot her a quick glance. Did she look disappointed?

“And Miss Liza?” she continued.

“She, err, decided to study in her room. Please send her a tea tray,” he added, remembering guiltily that he hadn’t let her eat

until after she pronounced the word correctly.

Which she had, with his hand guiding her. Would she be as responsive to his control in other matters? His cock jerked at the thought but he absolutely refused to acknowledge it.

“Very well. Will she be joining you for dinner?”

This time Mara’s voice was clearly disapproving and he was glad he did not have Liza’s human skin to broadcast his embarrassment.

“I hope so, but I suspect you should ask her.”

“Yes, Master Harak.”

Mara dipped a curtsy and left. He sighed and went to his desk to review the results of the previous week’s work with Liza. She had made remarkable progress, due not only to his teaching but her own sharp mind and willingness to learn. She was not as ignorant as he had originally assumed, merely uneducated, and although he did not encourage them, her frank observations about Plumerian customs frequently amused him.

He had many of the same opinions, but he had the wealth and the heritage - and the lack of desire to participate in society - to allow him to ignore them. As a member of a different race being introduced to their society, she did not have the same option.

Trying to push thoughts of the troublesome female out of his mind, he switched to the paper he was writing on Linnaean dialects. Unfortunately, his mind was not so easily distracted. He kept looking at the big chair by the window that was her favorite perch. His usual pleasure in the quiet of his sanctuary had vanished.

Annoyed by his reaction and his still lingering arousal from the kiss, he didn’t even bother to change for dinner. He strode into the dining room and stopped short when he saw Liza sitting in her usual place, the picture of a Plumerian lady.

“Good evening, professor. May I pour you a glass of wine?” she asked coolly. Her accent was equally perfect.

“No you may not. And what the devil do you mean by calling me professor?”

“You quite correctly pointed out that our relationship is only professional. I would not want to forget that again.”

“I have no intention of forgetting,” he growled.

“Good. Madam K’vara has prepared a delicious roast for us this evening. Shall I carve? That is if you trust a poor, ignorant human with such a delicate task.”

He put his hand on the back of her chair and bent down over her. Her gaze remained calm but he could see a pulse fluttering at the base of her neck and her delectable breasts quivered as her breathing sped up.

“Don’t push me, ishka. Every male has his limits.”

That tantalizing little tongue that had danced so sweetly with his swept across her lower lip and it took every bit of control he had not to repeat his earlier mistake. Instead, he forced himself to straighten and stalk to his place at the table.

“You may carve the roast.”

She took a deep breath, her breasts threatening to spill over the low neckline of her evening dress, and obeyed.

Her obedience satisfied his darker instincts and he relaxed enough to reach for the decanter. She raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment as she carved the roast with elegant precision.

“Well?” she asked as she arranged the slices correctly on the platter and gave him a challenging look.

“Perfectly satisfactory.” He hesitated, then sighed. “Perhaps we should talk about this afternoon.”

“No, thank you. You made your position clear. I should have known that someone of your status would have no interest in someone of my class, especially since it wasn’t the first time I’ve made that mistake.”

“Class has nothing to do with it.” Annoyance sharpened his voice. “And what do you mean it wasn’t the first time?”

“I had a brief... relationship with the son of one of the wealthy families on the refugee ship. He subsequently made it quite clear that there was no future for us.”

“I don’t understand. I thought all refugees were treated equally.”

She gave an unamused laugh.

“Not if you had the money to arrange for better conditions.”

He frowned. “Human money would be of no value to any planet in the Galactic Federation.”

“Maybe not, but money could buy gems and precious metals and other items that are valuable. And such things buy privileges - like believing his word over mine.”

Fuck. His claws were threatening to emerge again.

“He mistreated you?”

“He didn’t think so. And I was remarkably naive.”

“Did you not have anyone to stand for you?”

“If I recall correctly, my father was in the brig at the time. He spent a good bit of the voyage there,” she added, but she seemed more resigned than upset.

“Would you like me to find him and teach him the error of his ways?”

“Who? Gordon?” She gave him a startled look, then laughed. “No, thank you. That’s all in the past.”

Was it though? She had let enough information about her life slip out that he knew that she lived alone, that she seemed to have few friends, and no male interests. And he had no doubt just added to her suspicions about males. An unusual feeling of guilt swept over him and he vowed not to make the same mistake again.

“Nevertheless, I wish to apologize for taking advantage of you this afternoon. It won’t happen again.”

“Stop apologizing,” she said crossly. “It only makes it worse.”

“Then what do you want me to do?” he snapped.

“Just shut up about it. And don’t kiss me again.”

She passed the platter of meat to him with a defiant expression, and he almost smiled. Despite the flawless manners, his *ishka* had a spark of spirit he found utterly charming. *No*. He was not charmed. Or intrigued. Or aroused. Ignoring the throbbing ache of his cock, he picked up his fork and changed the subject.

“I thought that after dinner we could review the changes wrought by the Second Empire.”

She stared at him, then shook her head.

“I’m going to bed early tonight. It’s been a long day.”

Her words immediately conjured up an image of her flushed and sleepy in his bed. *Fuck*. A single taste of her sweetness had left him hungry for more. His cock grew even harder as he imagined the satin slide of her skin beneath his hand, the way that lush body would melt under his. The way she would yield to him and...

He swore violently and she jumped.

“What’s wrong? We can talk about the Second Empire tomorrow.”

If he hadn’t been so frustrated, he would have laughed. Didn’t the troublesome female have any idea what she did to him?

“It is not the delay in studying the Second Empire that upset me,” he said gruffly, rising to his feet. “It is the presence of a particularly tempting female that is driving me to distraction.”

Liza’s eyes widened and her mouth opened, but no words emerged. He didn’t wait for her to speak. Turning, he left the room, slamming the door behind him in a way no well-bred Plumerian would ever allow.

CHAPTER 9



“*Y*ou look tired,” Harak said accusingly, and Liza sighed.

“I had a difficult night.”

Her dreams had been full of a certain Plumerian professor - visions of him looming over her as he ripped her clothes away, of his hands on her skin, strong and demanding. She’d come down to breakfast in a restless mood and he’d been equally short-tempered. T’var had clearly been aware of the tension between them but after studying them both, he simply concentrated on his breakfast. The scholar had excused himself after the meal and that was when Harak had started.

“Are you sick?” he demanded as she rose from the table, and she scowled at him.

“Do I look sick? Don’t answer that,” she added hastily. It was bad enough that he thought she looked tired. She didn’t want to know if there was anything else about her appearance he didn’t like.

“I’m trying to decide if you should be in bed or if I should summon a physician. Tell me what your symptoms are.”

Aching breasts and far too much awareness of Harak’s powerful body and enticing scent? She shook her head.

“My symptoms? Oh, I don’t think you really want to know.”

He looked at her sharply but she ignored him and turned her attention to the book she’d chosen.

“What are you reading?”

“A treatise on the Second Empire - as you were so eager to discuss last night,” she said sweetly.

“Liza,” he started as T’var returned, a broad smile on his face.

“I have made arrangements for us to occupy my cousin’s enclosure at the upcoming drone races. I thought it would be a good way for Liza to witness Plumerian society in a more informal setting.”

“Informal? You know how many members of the royal house attend the races.”

Harak looked skeptical and her heart skipped a beat.

“I’m not sure I’m ready for that,” she said quickly

“Nonsense, my dear.” T’var smiled at her. “Your intonation is perfect and your understanding of our customs is quite adequate. This will be a good way to test your knowledge.”

She gave Harak a desperate look, but he finally nodded.

“I believe you are correct, T’var. Besides, she needs to observe our behavior in a variety of situations.”

“That’s what I was thinking. I will arrange for our transport.”

T’var nodded and smiled at Liza before disappearing again. She tried to take a calming breath, but it didn’t work.

“Don’t worry, Liza. T’var is right. We can do this.”

“*We?* I’m the one being tested.”

“Based on my teachings.” He gave her a coaxing smile. “And you’ll be able to wear one of your new dresses.”

Despite her anxiety, a smile tugged at her lips. Another set of beautiful dresses had arrived the previous day.

“I thought you disapproved of the amount of flesh they reveal.”

“That does not mean I do not appreciate the overall effect.”

He smiled down at her, and the tense knot inside her loosened slightly.

“What are the races like?”

“Entertaining. A wide spectrum of society attends and many of them are passionately devoted to a specific team. The track is constantly being modified to provide ever more challenging races.”

“That does sound interesting,” she admitted.

“Yes, and I think it will give you a better idea of the... foibles of our culture. But I think we should continue with your language skills this morning.”

She sighed but nodded. If she was going to attend her first social event, she needed every bit of practice she could get.

THREE DAYS LATER SHE SWIRLED HER FINGER TO ROTATE HER reflection in the high tech mirror so she could study every angle. The subtle cream-colored fabric of her formal afternoon dress draped in soft folds across her upper chest, drawing attention to the delicate line of her collarbone. Nothing could completely disguise the very un-Plumerian size of her breasts, but neither did it draw attention to them. The neckline draped much lower in the back, falling to the three intertwined sashes in the correct shades for autumn that circled her waist

“Are you sure this is appropriate?” she asked Madam K’vara nervously. “The three sashes suggest a much higher rank.”

“A rank suitable for his lordship’s... companion. Don’t worry, Liza, you look quite charming.”

The praise helped her relax a little - she was quite sure that Madam K’vara wouldn’t hesitate to tell her if something was wrong.

“Now the clips,” Madam K’vara continued briskly.

The housekeeper had arranged her hair in an artful series of curls and now she carefully added small sparkling gems that by some miracle of alien technology hovered just above her hair. The overall effect was as if tiny colorful butterflies fluttered about her head and Madam K’vara gave a pleased nod.

“Excellent. I will accompany you downstairs.”

Liza gave her a quick, grateful smile.

“I wish you were coming with us.”

She knew that T’var had asked Madam K’vara and that the older woman had turned him down.

“It is not my place to attend such a function.”

“I’m not sure it’s my place either,” she said dryly. “And at least you’re Plumerian.”

“You’re his lordship’s guest.”

“And you would have been T’var’s.”

“It’s not the same.” A flash of despair crossed the other woman’s face. “I am neither young nor attractive and I was brought up in this society. I know that it would be frowned upon.”

She wanted to argue with her, but she didn’t want to add to Madam K’vara’s distress. Instead, she gave her a sudden, impulsive hug. After a startled moment, Madam K’vara returned the hug, then stepped back.

“I’ll tell you all about it,” Liza promised. “Assuming I don’t disgrace myself and get kicked out.”

“Just remember what we have taught you and if in doubt, always assume someone is of a higher rank. Very few people are insulted by such an assumption.”

Despite the butterflies in her stomach, she laughed and followed Madam K’vara downstairs.

T’var and Harak were waiting for her. She saw T’var give Madam K’vara a quick despondent look before turning to her and smiling.

“A perfect selection, my dear. You look very nice.”

“Thank you, honored teacher.”

She curtsied and his smile widened.

“Excellent.”

Biting her lip, she turned to Harak.

“What do you think?”

Harak had also adorned formal attire and was wearing tight breeches that clung to his muscular legs, an open-necked shirt that revealed a hint of golden skin, and a long-tailed coat in a slightly darker shade of cream than her dress. He looked impossibly handsome as he gave her a brooding look.

“Mara, I believe I owe you a gift.”

The housekeeper thanked him before slipping away, and T’var watched her go, his face troubled.

She gave Harak a tentative smile, trying not to show how much his approval mattered to her, and his stern expression softened slightly.

“You look lovely, Liza.”

“Thank you.”

She took the arm he offered and tried not to enjoy the feel of the hard muscles beneath his clothing. As they followed T’var outside to the waiting hover cab, she wished that she could cling to his arm the entire time. Instead she tried not to panic as he assisted her into the vehicle and took the seat next to her.

“I know you were not expecting to attend a public event so soon,” T’var said as he took the seat opposite them and the hover cab lifted into the air. “But I truly believe you are ready.”

She managed to nod and give him a somewhat shaky smile. In an obvious attempt to distract her, he kept up a gentle flow of conversation during the journey. Harak was oddly silent and when she snuck a peek at him from under her lashes, he was frowning. Did that mean he was worried? That he didn’t think she was ready?

Her anxiety started to spike again, but then he reached over and covered her hand where she was picking nervously at her skirt.

“Stop that. Everything will be fine.”

“Easy for you to say,” she muttered, but the firm statement helped to calm her.

It also helped that he left his hand resting over hers, warm and reassuring. Looking down at the golden hand on her thigh also sent her thoughts in an entirely different direction. What would it feel like to have that big hand gliding higher over her naked skin? She shivered, aware that her nipples had stiffened beneath the heavy silk, and did her best to concentrate on T'var's comments.

"The racing complex was built by the emperor's great grandfather in the classical style. He enjoyed the sport very much." T'var glanced down at Harak's hand, but didn't comment. "It was designed to allow both nobles and commoners to mingle and enjoy the races - as you will see from the architecture," he continued.

Between trying to absorb T'var's remarks and not respond to Harak's touch, the rest of the journey passed remarkably quickly. The cab joined a line of vehicles depositing their passengers in front of a pair of beautifully carved metal gates. The gates stood open to admit the stream of people entering and despite T'var's words, there was a clear distinction between the entrance for the higher ranking individuals versus the commoners.

They alighted from the cab onto a deep green woven carpet, joining the throng of richly dressed nobles, while the rest of the crowd flowed across the intricate stone paving. Harak tucked her hand through his arm again as they followed the carpet to an archway where T'var passed his wrist device over a sensor.

"Keep your head high," he murmured softly, and she did her best to obey as they followed the stream of people up a long winding ramp.

Constructed from gleaming white stone, the architecture of the building had the same flowing lines as the gates. Sinuous arches led off the ramp at each level as it climbed high into the sky in a graceful curve. Elegant trees with long, flowing branches echoed the curved lines.

Several times Harak paused to speak to someone. She was aware of the curious glances cast her way, but no one looked

appalled or horrified and that helped buoy her confidence. By the time T'var led them to a private shaded balcony overlooking the gleaming line of the track she was almost at ease - an ease that vanished when she saw Harak's mother was waiting for them.

"Mother," Harak said grimly.

From his expression, he hadn't expected to find her there either but his mother ignored his forbidding tone.

"As charming as ever, I see." She shook her head and turned to Liza. "I'm delighted to see you again, my dear. That outfit is simply perfect."

"Thank you, my lady."

She swept a deep, formal curtsy and Lady Xalia's smile widened.

"Very pretty. Would you care for some refreshment?"

Without waiting for an answer, Lady Xalia summoned a waiter accompanied by a hovering tray of drinks. She handed Liza a goblet containing a sparkling liquid that emitted a cloud of pink smoke and turned to her son.

"Harak?"

"No, thank you," he bit out, still obviously annoyed. "What are you doing here?"

"You know I always attend the fall races. Since Scholar T'var was kind enough to invite me, I thought it would be an excellent opportunity to meet Liza again."

Harak turned his glare on T'var but the older male met his gaze calmly as he chose his own drink.

"You cannot doubt that your mother is an excellent judge of social niceties."

"I suppose," he admitted reluctantly.

"Of course I am." Lady Xalia nodded briskly and smiled at Liza. "Please have a seat, my dear, and I'll fill you in on all the latest gossip. Oh, and I invited my friend Lady Caran and her

son, Lord Feduria. They're both very sweet, and I believe that Lord Feduria is about your age."

Harak's face hardened again, but before he could say anything, Lady Xalia's guests arrived.

Liza was surprised to realize that she knew immediately that Lady Caran was overdressed for the occasion, but she swept her a formal curtsy and the older female beamed at her.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my dear. This is my son, Feduria."

Unlike his mother, his dress was impeccable but he was staring at her with open-mouthed astonishment.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, bristling.

"Oh no. I've just never met a human before. I had no idea that you - they - would be so attractive. It is my very great pleasure to meet you, Miss Liza."

He bowed deeply and after a brief hesitation, she responded. He was a young male, his slender frame almost child-like next to Harak's muscular build, but he had a pleasant smile and his compliment seemed genuine.

"May I get you a drink? Or another one?" he added, wincing as he realized she was holding a glass.

She laughed just as Harak muttered something under his breath.

"Perhaps later. Shall we sit?" she asked and Feduria nodded eagerly.

He carefully escorted her to one of the chairs lining the balcony wall as Harak retreated to the back of the space with T'var. He did not look pleased, glaring at Feduria even while he spoke to T'var. Was it possible that he was jealous? She gave an even warmer smile to the young Plumerian and prepared to enjoy herself.

CHAPTER 10



Harak very carefully did not slam the door behind him as they returned to his house after the races. Mara came hurrying out to meet them.

“How did it go?” she asked before Liza brushed past her, fleeing up the stairs, and he growled.

“Not well.”

“Why not?”

“Because Liza has discovered that she can bewitch all Plumerian males - with the exception of Harak, of course.” T’var gave him a reproachful look.

“I was referring to her loss of control during the race,” he said stiffly.

Liza had behaved perfectly up that point, although in his opinion she was far too familiar with that impudent young lord. He did not like to see her laughing and talking to the young male and when the male had actually dared to put his arm across the back of her chair, his claws had threatened to emerge. Perhaps fortunately, T’var had distracted him and when he turned back, Feduria had removed his arm.

He had intended to explain the races to her, anticipating her enthusiasm, but Feduria took over that role as well, explaining how the colorful drones had to follow the ever-changing line of the track. A successful team combined the finest of drone engineering with a skilled controller and the drones were a delight to behold as they swooped and dipped along the curves of the course. She was as thrilled as he had expected but he

was forced to watch from the back of the balcony as she followed each race.

Unfortunately, her enthusiasm was also her downfall. She was so enthralled by the antics of a small blue drone that darted around its larger competitors that she forgot herself completely and let out a triumphant cry when it won. Lady Caran had looked shocked and his mother amused, even though she shook her head. The young lord only looked even more besotted. When Liza noticed the shocked silence, her eyes widened and her lip trembled. Feduria bent over her solicitously and that was when he'd decided he'd had enough.

"We're leaving," he announced, and stepped between Liza and Feduria.

Only the fact that she so quickly and willingly took his arm helped to relieve his temper as he marched out of the box. T'var muttered a quick apology and followed them. The ride home had been a silent one, Liza once more clenching her fingers in her skirts, but this time he had not stopped her. He was afraid that if he touched her, he would be unable to resist pulling her into his arms and showing her he was the only male who deserved her attention.

"It was not that significant of a mistake," T'var said soothingly. "The rest of her behavior was exemplary."

"Perhaps not significant under these circumstances," he admitted. "But if she made such a slip at the embassy ball? She would be humiliated."

"And you would lose your bet."

T'var raised a challenging eyebrow and he gave him an impatient look.

"I'm not concerned about the blasted bet. I'm concerned about Liza."

His words rang unexpectedly emphatically through the entry hall, but neither T'var nor Mara looked surprised.

"Perhaps I should go to her," Mara suggested.

“No, I’ll go. I’ll let T’var fill you in on the details,” he added, ignoring her shocked gasp as he headed for the stairs.

The first time he knocked on Liza’s door, there was no response. He frowned and knocked again.

“Go away.”

The distress in the muffled voice overcame his scruples and he stalked into her room.

“I have no intention of -”

She was standing by the window, her face tear-stained, and his annoyance disappeared. Crossing the room in three strides, he drew her into his arms.

“Don’t cry, ishka. Everything will be fine.”

She tensed, and he half expected her to turn away from him, but instead she buried her head against his chest. He automatically put his arms around her and found his hands on the bare skin above the low back of her dress. He groaned silently as his body reacted but he was unable to resist stroking the silky skin.

“It will not be fine,” she muttered against his chest. “I made a stupid mistake and embarrassed you. And T’var.”

That was her primary concern?

“You did not embarrass either of us,” he said firmly. “It was unfortunate, but not catastrophic. I should have prepared you better.”

She raised her head and looked up at him, tears still pooling in those big, blue eyes.

“Really? I didn’t embarrass you? You looked so angry.”

“I was angry at that pathetic young male pawing at you.”

Her eyes widened, and then a hint of a smile curved her lips.

“He’s not pathetic. I think he’s rather sweet.”

“That young fool has no idea how to treat a female,” he growled.

“No? What should he have done?”

The provocative look on her face destroyed the last thread of his restraint.

“This.”

His head descended and his lips captured hers. She melted against him as his tongue plundered her mouth, no trace of resistance in her body, and he growled as his hand caressed that fragile naked back. Her arms came up around his neck as she moaned into his mouth. The thin fabric of her gown did nothing to disguise the ripe roundness of her breasts as she pressed against him, the stiff little peaks of her nipples branding his chest.

He cupped the generous flesh with his other hand, teasing her nipple as he devoured her mouth, but even the thin silk between them was too much of a barrier. He shoved impatiently at the neckline, ignoring the sound of ripping fabric as it finally slid down and the lush mound filled his hand, the skin impossibly soft. His cock jerked and she moaned again, writhing against the rigid bar of his erection as he tugged on the taut bud.

“Is this what you want, ishka?” he growled against her mouth.

“Yes,” she gasped, and tugged impatiently on his horns, sending another pulse of arousal rocketing through him.

He lifted her into his arms as he finally released her lips and dragged his mouth down to the swollen peak. She cried out as he laved her nipple with his tongue and drew as much of her delectable breast into his mouth as possible. Her hips rocked helplessly against him as he switched from one breast to the other. Her passion aroused him as much as her taste, her need for him echoing his own desire.

Reluctantly releasing her breast, he carried her to the bed and placed her gently in the center. Her tempting breasts quivered above her ruined dress, marked by his kisses, and he had to force himself to step away long enough to strip off his clothing, casting it carelessly aside in his hurry.

Her eyes widened as she took in his naked body, and his cock jerked at her avid gaze, leaking fluid from the swollen head.

“You’re so much bigger than any human,” she gasped.

“And you are so much smaller than a Plumerian female,” he said as he knelt over her, then froze.

His desire had stripped away his control, his manners, his consideration for her human sensibilities. But she just reached for him, her eyes shining, and he drew her back into his arms. The feel of her soft human skin against his was more delicious than anything he’d ever known, but it wasn’t enough. He wanted all of her.

He returned to her lips and kissed her hungrily as his hand slid beneath the tattered hem of her dress. She moaned into his mouth as he slid it up her leg until he reached the sweet, damp heat between her thighs. Her hips bucked as his fingers caressed her delicate lower lips, and he carefully parted them to explore her entrance. She whimpered, and he gently thrust a long finger into her tight channel, stretching her. Fuck She was so hot and slick and small. How the devil was he supposed to fit inside her?

She was panting, her eyes closed, but the combination of bliss and need on her face inflamed him even further. He wanted to see her like this forever. His cock throbbed in agreement as he used his thumb to locate the hard nub nestled amongst her folds.

“Harak,” she gasped, and her body shuddered.

“Come for me, ishka,” he urged her, pressing a little harder on the tight knot of nerves as he added a second finger, and she exploded, her body spasming as she coated his hand with her release.

Her walls convulsed around his fingers as he stroked her, extending her orgasm. Only when she opened her eyes and gazed up at him did he release her. He lifted his hand to his mouth, licking the honey from his fingers. So sweet.

He moved between her legs, eager for more, and she blinked down at him.

“You’re not going to-”

She broke off in a wordless squeal as he licked her still quivering flesh, exploring her folds, then concentrated on the hard nub of her clit. She bucked against his face but he continued his relentless pursuit, plunging his fingers into her core until she came again and her juices flooded his mouth. He licked her again and again, gathering every drop, until he finally lifted his head and shifted to his knees between her thighs. He grasped his throbbing cock and positioned it at the entrance to her wet heat, shuddering at the first touch of her flesh against his.

“Harak,” she whispered, her voice breathy and unsure, and he stilled.

“Do you want me to stop?” he grated out, hoping she’d say no.

His cock was throbbing so hard that he was afraid to move. He was surprised that he’d lasted this long - the thrill of pleasuring her had almost overwhelmed him. He closed his eyes and tried to regain a fraction of his self-control.

“What if it doesn’t work?” she asked hesitantly. “I mean, I’m human.”

“It will work.”

His balls tightened as he studied the flush on her cheeks and the soft lips he’d tasted, those luscious breasts, so much fuller and softer than a Plumerian females, and the delicate pink folds glistening with excitement. *Fuck*. It wasn’t helping. He took a deep breath as she finally nodded.

“I want to try.”

Thank the gods.

“We will go very slowly,” he promised, reminding himself as well as her.

She bit her lip and nodded again. Then he very slowly pushed forward. His entire body trembled with the effort of controlling his speed as he stretched her. She gasped as the swollen head finally breached the narrow opening, the tight ring of her entrance closing around him. The sensation was exquisite, and he waited until she relaxed a fraction, her body accepting the invasion, before continuing.

He swore as her body welcomed another inch of his cock, her wet heat gripping him like a glove, and she tensed.

“Are you all right, ishka?”

“Y-yes. You’re so big...”

The hint of wonder in her voice was incredibly arousing and he fought against the instinctive desire to plunge deeper.

“Take as much of me as you can,” he coaxed.

She gave a quick, obedient nod, and he slid in another inch, pausing as she gasped again.

“Too much?”

“I... I don’t know.” She wiggled experimentally, and the tight leash he had over himself almost snapped.

“If you continue doing that,” he warned. “I won’t be able to control myself.”

“Oh.”

She stopped moving and he struggled to regain his composure as she reached for him.

“Can you... can you touch me?”

The tremor in her voice called to something primal inside him. He stroked her sides, her hips, in long soothing strokes and felt her soften a fraction.

“Better?” he asked, fighting for control.

“Yes.”

She smiled up at him and deliberately wiggled her hips. His restraint vanished. Taking a firm grip on her hip, he drove his way into her depths. She cried out and he froze again. She was so tight he could barely breathe but he forced the words out.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she gasped. “You were right. It worked.”

Even though she was clearly overwhelmed, there was a hint of mischief in her voice and he let out a laugh. She looked up at him, her face flushed, her big blue eyes trusting, and he

couldn't resist leaning down to capture her lips again. He began to rock gently, taking his time, savoring every ripple of her pussy around him.

She was still so tight that it was almost painful, but her body gradually relaxed and he felt the change when she surrendered to him, allowing him to control the pace. Her hands rose to cling to his shoulders as her soft cries grew louder. He could feel her excitement building and he increased his pace, wanting to share her pleasure.

"Yes," she gasped, her hips lifting to meet him, and he slid a hand between their bodies to find her clit.

She exploded instantly, her body milking his cock with urgent pulses, and he couldn't hold back. With a roar, he poured himself into her. His climax went on and on, draining him completely until he at last he collapsed across her, desperately trying to keep his weight off her fragile human body. He was breathing so hard he thought his heart would burst and it was a few minutes before he could even contemplate moving.

Liza sighed and he rolled to his side, cradling her against him as he basked in the afterglow of their mating. The sweet smell of her skin and her arousal intoxicated him, the soft curve of her ass against his cock reminding him that he could easily be aroused again.

"That was incredible," she whispered and he pressed a kiss to her shoulder.

"It was."

"Is it like this with everyone?" she asked a few minutes later, and his arms tightened involuntarily.

"Never."

"You've had a lot of experience, haven't you?"

He could hear the uncertainty in her voice, and it made his chest ache.

"No, ishka."

He'd always been a little too different, too hard to categorize. No other noble would have dreamed of becoming a scholar,

and most scholars avoided the upper classes. Both groups were equally strict with their boundaries and the females in each group were the same way.

“I was engaged once.” The words popped out before he could stop them and he immediately regretted it. She waited quietly, her hands lightly stroking his arms. “She did not believe it was proper for someone of my background to indulge in scholarly pursuits.”

At that, she twisted around in his arms.

“Then she was a fool,” she said fiercely, and he smiled, her anger on his behalf soothing that long ago memory.

“It is our way,” he admitted. “Our customs, our rituals, our social rules were put in place to free us from the constant strife of our ancestors, but somewhere along the way they hardened into rigid bars controlling our lives.”

“What happened to her?”

“She married Lord V’radia and had a very elegant son. We remain cordial to one another.”

“You’re not sad that you didn’t marry her?”

“No.” He tried not to make his amusement too obvious, but it was difficult.

She gave him a suspicious look.

“Did you love her?”

“No. But you don’t have to love your wife,” he added quickly as her expression started to cloud. “You should be able to trust her, and respect her, but that’s all that’s required. “

“I think that sounds terrible.”

“It’s a very practical arrangement.”

“I suppose,” she said doubtfully, then gave him a considering look. “What about your mother? Why hasn’t she remarried?”

“Why should she? She is wealthy in her own right. She has friends. She leads an active social life. What else could she possibly need?”

“Love? Someone to be with? Isn’t that better than being alone?”

“It depends on the person, I suspect. My mother likes her independence and her freedom.”

He saw the question in her eyes but thankfully, she didn’t ask. Until these past few weeks, he would have felt the same way, but now that Liza had entered his life, his freedom no longer seemed as important.

At least for now, he told himself. No doubt he would want to be alone again, eventually. And it was unlikely that she would be willing to put up with his eccentricities for too long.

CHAPTER 11



Liza watched from the bed as the sky began to lighten. Despite her lack of sleep, she had a foolish smile on her face. Last night had been wonderful, so much better than she had ever expected. After her unfortunate experience with Gordon, she'd never quite trusted another man enough to enter into a relationship. It didn't help that her father was equally untrustworthy. While he could be charming and she didn't believe that he truly intended any harm, she'd learned at a very early age not to rely on anything he said.

It hadn't mattered as much when her mother was alive but for a twelve year old girl thrust onto an alien ship taking her away from everything she had ever known, it had been terrifying. He hadn't even lasted a month before being tossed in the brig for attempting to sell illegal alcohol and she'd been left alone in the cabin. She cried herself to sleep every night for the month of his sentence, and he'd returned full of apologies and promises. That time he'd lasted two months before getting caught in another ill-judged scheme.

She learned to adapt. There were communal dining rooms so she never had to worry about going hungry. While she was too shy to make many friends, she eventually found a small group of other kids to hang out with. She also found odd jobs to do around the ship to earn a few credits of her own so that she never needed to depend on him again. The fact that he would forget her for hours or even days at a time was just one more painful reminder that no one could be counted on.

But somehow, despite her history and her determination to never fall prey to that trap again, she'd been lulled by Harak's brusque exterior, the intriguing combination of arrogance and unexpected kindness. It wasn't like she wanted someone to take care of her, she told herself, but it was nice to know that someone was looking out for her. The fact that he aroused her so easily only made it better.

The heat rose in her face as she remembered the feel of his hands on her skin, the way his big body had loomed over her, the sense of strength and power as he moved between her legs. The way he'd watched her as he sank into her body, his golden skin gleaming in the moonlight, his horns glittering.

Last night had been perfect, she thought happily, rolling over and burying her face in her pillow. And the only thing that could have made it better would have been if he'd stayed in her bed. She'd been half asleep when he rose from her bed, watching sleepily as he dressed and admiring his magnificent body. Although she wanted to ask him to stay, what had happened between them still felt too new, too fragile, and she'd remained silent.

He'd bent down to kiss her and despite her exhaustion, her arousal had immediately flared. His hand cupped her breast before he groaned and straightened, told her goodnight, and left. She'd woken twice in the night, half expecting to feel his warm body next to her and each time, she was disappointed to discover she was alone.

A knock at the door startled her and she pulled the sheet up to her chin as Madam K'vara poked her head in the door. She hadn't seen the other woman since she fled up the stairs the previous evening, and now she wondered if Madam K'vara knew what had happened between her and Harak. She could feel the heat rising to her cheeks but she did her best to ignore it and the other woman didn't comment. She seemed different this morning, her face softer and more relaxed than usual.

"What would you like to wear this morning? I thought perhaps the gold brocade."

"Isn't that rather formal for a morning at home?"

Madam K'vara avoided her gaze. "I just thought it would look nice."

"Okay," she agreed doubtfully, but she had to admit she liked the prospect of dressing up for Harak.

She slipped out from under the covers, doing her best to act normally. The Plumerians had a remarkably casual view of nudity considering their numerous rules governing correct behavior, and she had adjusted to it over the past week. She only hoped that the signs of Harak's possession were not as visible as she feared.

But Madam K'vara didn't comment as she assisted her to dress and she relaxed, admiring the golden sheen of the heavy material as Madam K'vara arranged her sash. Once dressed, she followed her down to the dining room only to find Harak and T'var already at the table. Neither of them were eating, and her step slowed as Madam K'vara gave a muttered excuse and left her.

She swallowed and did her best to hide her sudden nervousness as she sat down, sneaking a glance at Harak from under her lashes. He was staring down at his plate, his face unreadable, and her heart started to pound. Did he regret what had happened between them?

T'var beamed at her, seemingly unaware of any tension in the room.

"You look very nice, my dear."

She turned gratefully to him, unable to bear Harak's silence.

"Thank you. And thank you for being so understanding yesterday."

"I'm only sorry that I pushed you into something you weren't quite ready to do."

"Don't be ridiculous." Harak's sudden bark made them both jump. "She did very well - other than that one mistake."

Despite his words, he didn't sound as if he were praising her.

"Thank you. I think," she said a little tartly, and he gave her an exasperated look.

“What more do you want?”

“For you to tell me what’s going on with you? I can’t read your mind.”

She threw the words at him, frustrated by his behavior, and T’var made a vague apologetic noise and rose to his feet.

“If you will excuse me?”

“Of course.” Harak didn’t bother to look at his friend, still frowning at her as T’var left.

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Liza.”

“You certainly made it sound that way.”

“I apologize.”

His expression was still far too solemn, and she frowned.

“What’s this really about?”

He shook his head, then cleared his throat.

“There is a matter we need to discuss.”

Her heart sank. Was he going to apologize again, the way he had after their kiss? To tell her that any relationship between them was impossible? In her heart, she knew it was true, but she had hoped for more time with him.

“Well?” she demanded, and he sighed.

“I did not take any... precautions last night, and there is a slight possibility that you could be pregnant. It is unforgivable that I should not have discussed the matter with you.”

“That’s why you’re acting so weirdly this morning?”

A wave of relief rushed over her as she realized the source of his behavior.

“I am not acting weirdly,” he said stiffly, and she smiled at him.

“No, you’re acting like a male. But you don’t need to worry. I can’t get pregnant.”

“You can’t?” Was that disappointment on his face when she shook her head?

“No. All of the women on the refugee ship were given a sterility injection in order to control the number of passengers.” The procedure had terrified her at the time but after her encounter with Gordon, she’d been very grateful for it. “They said it could be reversed when we arrived but I had no reason to do so. “

He frowned and she gave him a thoughtful look.

“Aren’t you relieved?”

“Yes,” he said after the slightest hesitation. “But do you know if it was only designed to prevent human pregnancy?”

Her heart thudded at the unexpected answer.

“Why would you say that?” she demanded.

“Although our races are similar, there are biological differences. I will make an appointment with my physician this morning, and inform him of the situation.”

“Are you sure you want to tell anyone?”

He hesitated again, amber eyes studying her face.

“I wanted to return to your room last night.”

“And that’s why you didn’t? Because you didn’t want me to get pregnant?”

“I also wished to give you time to... recover,” he said stiffly.

“I could have recovered, as you put it, in your arms.”

“My control only extends so far.”

She looked down at his lap and the heavy ridge of his cock straining at his pants, and a slow smile of satisfaction curved her lips. He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

“You know there are alternatives.”

His cock jerked, despite the tight fabric encasing it.

“Human females do such things?”

“If we want to. Plumerian females don’t?”

He shrugged. “I suspect they do, but it is never discussed in public.”

Hmm. In her experience, women often discussed such matters amongst themselves, but perhaps that was not considered public. She leaned over and traced a finger along that massive ridge.

“We don’t need to talk about it.”

He grabbed her hand, and the glimmer of humor disappeared from his eyes, replaced by a predatory gleam.

“Ishka, as much as I would like to explore your... alternatives, I don’t consider the dining room a suitable venue.”

“Why not?” she teased. “The table is at a very convenient height.”

This time she felt his cock respond, but he firmly removed her hand although he kept it clasped in his.

“Physician first. And I thought perhaps we could take the rest of the day away from your studies and I could show you some of my favorite areas of the city. It would give you an opportunity to practice what you have learned.”

She gave him a shy smile, delighted at the prospect.

“That sounds nice. Will T’var be accompanying us?”

“I did not intend to ask him.” He suddenly looked amused. “I believe he will be content to remain here. I suspect that he and Mara reached an understanding last night.”

“Really? That must be why she looked so happy this morning.”

“The timing was also fortuitous - otherwise I suspect she might have come looking for you at an inappropriate moment.”

She laughed and blushed, and despite his earlier warning about the possibility of being interrupted, he leaned over and kissed her.

“Now eat your breakfast while I arrange our outing.”

“Yes, sir.”

She gave him an exaggerated curtsy and he shook his head, but he watched her with a possessive hunger as she began to carve her fruit.

CHAPTER 12



*H*arak walked out of his physician's office and frowned. Doctor P'heri had assured him that the birth control shot Liza received would be effective even with a Plumerian male - and that it could be easily reversed.

Why did I ask about the reversal? Even though the thought of her ripe with his child sent a spike of arousal directly to his cock, it was an impossible dream. He was too old and too set in his ways for her. The fact that he hovered between two worlds, not fully part of either, did not bother him, but he was afraid that in time it would come to bother her.

She would be better off with someone like Lord Feduria. He might be young and ignorant, but his family had wealth and status - enough status to protect Liza if she should face prejudice because she was human. Despite his logic, his fingertips tingled as his claws threatened to emerge at the thought of his female with the young lord.

Not my female, he reminded himself. He might have given into temptation once - and had every intention of doing so again as soon as possible - but this could be no more than a... pleasant interlude. Ignoring the ache in his chest at the thought, he returned to his house to find Liza waiting, her face alight with excitement.

"Is it really all right for us to go out together?"

"I don't see why not. As long as you are wearing proper attire and behave correctly, you shouldn't attract too much attention."

She frowned.

“I think that I would prefer to avoid attracting any attention,” she said a little dryly.

He took a deep breath and resisted the urge to pull her into his arms and carry her back upstairs. The knowledge that he could see her, taste her, pleasure her again, had his cock stiffening, but he forced himself to ignore it. He had promised her an excursion and he intended to fulfill his promise.

“You are always going to stand out, ishka. But that does not mean that you will be shunned.” For all the faults of his society, they were surprisingly tolerant - once someone could meet their rigid social expectations. “Now, shall we go?”

She smiled and took his arm.

Outside the sun was shining, providing a pleasant warmth despite the lateness of the season and she agreed with his suggestion that they set out on foot. As they walked down his street, she eagerly observed the architecture of the various townhouses, surprising him by recognizing several of the classical styles.

“How did you know that house was Third Empire?” he asked curiously and she rolled her eyes at him.

“You’ve had me reading history books for the past few weeks.”

“About political and social changes.”

She shrugged. “I know, but I was curious about some of the other aspects of your history. It gave me a new appreciation for the city.”

“How long have you lived on Plumeria?”

“Almost five years.” A shadow crossed her expressive little face. “We were moved twice in the first year, and it was all so strange. Then we spent another year learning the language and culture - but not sufficiently, as you know. During that time, the people who had brought wealth with them began to organize various types of trade and small businesses. So by the time we were officially released -”

She stopped and took a deep breath. “I shouldn’t say that. We weren’t in prison. We were always free to come and go, although it was... discouraged.”

He placed his hand over hers where it rested on his arm and she looked up at him and gave him a wry smile.

“Anyway, by the end of the first two years, they had created a sort of mini-Earth and most of us had grown comfortable there.”

“But not you?”

“No.” The shadow was back.

“Why not?”

“Oh, several reasons,” she answered evasively, then sighed. “I suppose you’re going to find out anyway. My father is a not very successful conman. He’s always involved in some scheme or other - always an illegal one and never a successful one. People don’t want to associate with the daughter of a man like that. And then there was Gordon -”

She stopped abruptly and his claws tingled as he recognized the name.

“The male who took advantage of you? What about him?”

“As I said, his family was wealthy and they were - are - influential in our community. They always blamed me for his transgressions so they made life... difficult. That’s when I decided to try making a living outside of the refugee settlement - not very successfully. I’m not truly part of either world,” she added, echoing his earlier thoughts.

“Why sell flowers?”

“Because I don’t have to answer to anyone else, or depend on them. And I love plants and flowers. Most of the vegetation on Earth was dying from the solar flares as the sun began to destruct. I love that this city is so lush and green, and I’ve been trying to learn everything I can about the various plants.”

“Such as?”

They came to a halt in front of the small park at the end of his street.

“That’s a kamora tree.” she pointed to the tree with long drooping branches, laden with small, bright pink fruit. “It will drop all its fruit in one night as soon as the temperature drops below freezing. Those blue bushes are tragon bushes and they remain that color year round. The small white flowers beneath them are -”

He laughed and put a gentle finger over her lips to stem her enthusiastic recital.

“I can see you do know a lot.”

“But not enough. I didn’t know about the sassia flowers or why no one would buy orange gramee flowers in the summer. Biological knowledge is one thing - understanding their place in your culture is another.” She gave him a quick smile and squeezed his arm. “But you have changed that. The more I know, the better equipped I am to...”

To leave him and return to her world? The question hung in the air between them, but she didn’t complete her thought and he didn’t ask.

“I think I know the perfect destination for today,” he said, and led her away from his neighborhood and into the busier part of the city.

It wasn’t long before the open squares and streets of the residential district gave way to more crowded, twisting paths and it was impossible to avoid other pedestrians. Liza’s head swiveled rapidly from side to side, taking in the different vendors and shopkeepers, the bustling traffic and the towering buildings.

“You never came here?” he asked as she stared wide-eyed at a nearby food cart, one of many carts with gaily stepped awnings that nestled against the base of a nearby office tower. Other stalls showcased artisans selling everything from vibrant textiles to carved woodwork to sweet fruit wines.

“No. I usually stuck to the places I knew. I never came into this part of the city.”

“Then you must try a padana.”

He purchased two of the fried pastries from the food cart and handed her one. She took a tentative bite, and her eyes widened.

“It’s delicious!”

He nodded as he took a bite of his own pastry, the flakey exterior giving way to a sweet, spicy filling. The padanas had been one of his favorites from childhood, but how long had it been since he’d had one?

More memories awoke as they wandered on, pausing to taste a new tea or catch a whiff of an exotic spice while she ran her fingers over hand-woven textiles. He had been here many times, first with Mara and later with some of his fellow students, but seeing it through Liza’s eyes made it all seem new again.

At last he led down a winding side street, leaving the market’s commotion behind. Ahead, a carved archway peeked through vines and flowering bushes and they passed through it to find a serene garden. Hidden dampers muffled the sounds of the city, adding to the feeling that they had left the world behind.

She gasped in delight as she looked around. Flowers in every hue surrounded them, bathing the air in sweet fragrance. Delicate trees filtered dappled sunlight, and a burbling fountain created a soothing backdrop for an astonishing variety of blooms - blossoms like stars, lilies as big as her hand, and flowering vines cascading in rivers of color.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed, and he agreed even though he was more entranced by the pleasure on her face.

They meandered along the quiet paths for a long time, admiring the botanical wonders, and he stopped to pluck a vibrant bloom.

“For you,” he said, tucking it behind Liza’s ear, and she smiled, cheeks flushing.

He wanted to kiss her, but this was not the time or the place. Instead he tucked her hand back in his arm and continued on. At the back of the garden, he guided her towards an

unassuming door set into a rocky wall. Inside, light from ornate metal lanterns flickered over exposed stone and a mismatched collection of wooden tables, all of them full. The host came rushing over to meet them, a smile wreathing his face.

“Lord H’gin. It’s been far too long.”

“Yes it has, Sartan. I’m delighted to be back.”

Liza looked around eagerly as Sartan led them to a secluded alcove with low cushioned benches set around an ancient wooden table, illuminated by a haphazard collection of candles.

“What is this place?” she whispered.

“A restaurant.”

“In a cave? Did they dig all this out?”

He laughed. “No, there was always a cave here. Sartan’s family merely expanded and enhanced it. I used to come here when I was a student. It’s not far from the university.”

He was telling her about his student days when the first course arrived - tiny steamed dumplings in a fragrant broth. She followed his example and popped one in her mouth, then her eyes widened as she chewed and swallowed.

“This is so good,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything quite like it.”

“Zantherian spices are quite unique. I thought you might enjoy it.”

The other dishes were equally complex - tender roasted meat glazed in a sweet and savory sauce, vibrant roasted vegetables tossed in oil and exotic herbs, and fluffy grain cakes served with tart fruit compotes. They were served Zantherian fashion, in a far more relaxed presentation than a typical Plumerian meal, and he found himself relaxing, smiling at Liza as she savored the food and revealed a few more hints about her past.

Here it was easy not to worry about the past or the future, but simply to relax and enjoy the cozy atmosphere, the excellent food, and Liza. She looked so beautiful, so happy - and so

desirable. He found himself watching her mouth as she took a bite of food and moaned in delight. She had moaned the same way when he stroked his tongue across her clit. His mouth watered at the memory, already hungry for another taste, and his shaft stiffened.

He shifted uncomfortably and she noticed.

“Is something wrong?”

“You are too far away from me.”

She laughed and blushed and slid across the bench to nestle at his side as they finished their meal. The soft curves pressed against him did nothing to relieve his erection, but he was content just to have her there. For the moment.

After the last crumb had been devoured, they went back outside to find that dusk had fallen, the garden now dark and mysterious except for the tiny lights revealing the paths twisting amongst the plants. The scent of some night-blooming flower filled the air as they walked silently back to the entrance.

“Are you ready to go home?”

“Mmm,” she agreed, leaning against him.

She sounded tired so he called a hover cab and let it whisk them back to his house. They entered to find the house empty with a brief note from T’var that he and Mara had gone to attend a show.

“That means we’re all alone.”

Her voice sounded breathless and he could see the stiff peaks of her nipples pressing against her gown.

“Yes. Which means you’re all mine.”

CHAPTER 13



*M*ine. The word echoed in Liza's head as Harak's big body closed the distance between them. What would it be like to truly belong to someone - someone she could trust?

But then he pressed her up against the wall, and her questions disappeared.

"I wanted to do this all afternoon," he murmured against her lips, then his mouth captured hers.

His lips were hot and firm, but there was something different about his kiss, almost a desperation as he claimed her lips, his tongue tangling with hers. Her body melted against his as his hand slid beneath the neckline of her dress, cupping her breast. His thumb flicked across her nipple and her pussy clenched, aching for him.

He lifted his head to gaze down at her, and the raw hunger on his face stole her breath.

"I want you, Liza. Now."

She was wet and throbbing, but she couldn't help teasing him.

"Is that an order, my lord?"

His lips quirked up into a smile and he pinched her nipple, sending another shock of need through her body.

"No, ishka. You always have a choice."

"Then I choose you," she said with a shaky laugh.

"Good."

Golden sparks glittered in his eyes as he scooped her into his arms and began walking towards the stairs. To her surprise, he didn't climb them but carried her down to the lower level.

“Where are you going?”

“To the bathing room. Social bathing is also a part of our culture.”

“Social?” She reached up and stroked his horns, and he shuddered. “I thought you had a little more in mind.”

“Oh, I do,” he said, his voice a low growl and her nipple tightened even further at the heat in that golden gaze.

He carried her into the large, steamy room. Only a few flickering lights illuminated the room, the dimness adding to the intimacy. He set her down by the steps leading down into the water and tugged on her sash.

“Take off your clothes.”

His voice was harsh with need, and she hurried to comply, her own body on fire. She loved the way he looked at her, almost as if he were starving for the sight of her body, but when she finally stood naked before him, he stepped back and made no move to touch her.

“Look at me, Liza. Look at what you do to me.”

His cock strained at his pants, the length of his erection clearly visible beneath the dark cloth. She licked her lips at the sight, and he groaned, but he still didn't move.

“Undress me.”

His hands clenched as she fumbled with the fastening of his shirt. When she couldn't figure it out, he opened it himself, tossing his shirt aside and pulling his boots off with impatient movements. She started to reach for his pants, but he shook his head.

“Kneel.”

He spoke so softly she could barely hear him, but she sank obediently to her knees, and he rewarded her with a fierce look of approval.

“You said there were alternatives. I want your mouth on me.”

She freed his erection and it sprang towards her, the tip already pearled with moisture. He looked even bigger than she remembered and she shivered at the memory of that thick shaft slowly, inexorably, stretching her open. This close she could see the slight differences between human and Plumerian anatomy. In addition to his size, a ridge with a slightly roughened surface ran along the top of his shaft. That must have been why it felt as if he were massaging her clit inside and out. She stroked her hand along the ridge and he shuddered.

“You should know I don’t have any actual experience with this,” she whispered, her thumb gliding across the tip of his shaft. “So you may have to... help me a bit.”

“I’ll help,” he promised huskily. “I’ll help you take all of me.”

She smiled as she bent her head and tentatively touched the swollen head with her tongue. He hissed with pleasure, his hand reaching for her head and stroking her hair. Emboldened by his response, she licked the warm, silky skin. He groaned, his hand tightening, and she opened her mouth wider as she stroked along his length with her tongue. She took a few more inches in her mouth and sucked gently.

“You’re doing so well,” he grated. “Don’t stop.”

His voice was so thick with desire she would have smiled if her mouth hadn’t been full. Instead she lifted her eyes to meet his and took in a bit more of his cock, fighting against the reflexive tightening of her throat. He was hot and salty and smelled delicious, and she experimented, licking and sucking and gauging his response. His breathing grew increasingly ragged until she discovered that the roughened ridge on the top of his cock was particularly sensitive. He growled and then began to guide her motions, controlling the depth of his penetration.

He groaned again as she stroked her tongue along the underside of his shaft, and she knew he was getting closer. The thought of taking him over the edge excited her and she

opened her mouth as wide as she could, already anticipating the flood of his release, but he abruptly pulled away.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. But I didn’t want to finish in your mouth.” He stroked her cheek. “I want to be inside you again.”

“Oh,” she breathed, and his eyes blazed as he caught her hands and lifted her into his arms. He carried her down the first two steps of the pool, then set her on her feet.

“Bend over.”

Her pulse started to race at the command in his voice and she leaned forward, resting her forearms on the edge of the pool. He moved in behind her and caressed her ass, then spread her cheeks to expose her folds.

“You’re so wet, ishka. Is it from taking my cock in your pretty little mouth? From the taste of my cock on your tongue? “

His words sent a shudder through her and she gasped as he smacked her lightly on one buttock.

“Tell me, ishka.”

Her cheeks flamed, but she nodded. “Y-yes.”

He slapped the other cheek, a little harder, then gently soothed the sting with his hand.

“Are you sore? Can you take me again?”

“Yes,” she gasped.

She was so aroused she ached, her body desperately seeking release. He positioned his cock at her opening, and she waited in breathless anticipation. Instead of slamming into her, he began a slow, steady thrust, feeding her his cock one inch at a time. She cried out at the sensation of being stretched around his thick length and he stilled.

“Don’t stop,” she said, pushing her hips back. “Please don’t stop.”

“You feel so fucking good,” he growled, his fingers digging into her hips as he buried himself the rest of the way.

For a moment they both remained still, and she reveled in the sensation of his cock filling her, almost too much for her to take. He began to move, short, quick thrusts that nudged against something deep inside her. She could feel herself building to climax and she pushed back against him, trying to get more. He responded by moving faster, then he reached between her legs and found her clit, hot and swollen.

“Come for me, ishka.”

It only took a single stroke before she shattered, her entire body trembling as wave after wave of pleasure consumed her. Harak roared as he thrust deep, his cock jerking inside her as his own climax overtook him.

Long moments later, she found herself cradled in his arms on the bench inside the pool. He held her for a long time as the water lapped at them. Her body hummed with contentment, every muscle in her body relaxed.

“I can see why social bathing is so popular,” she murmured at last and he laughed, stroking his hand over her head.

“I don’t believe I would classify that as social bathing.”

“Whatever it was, it was wonderful.”

“You were wonderful. And I’m glad that I was your first. I will be the only man to take your mouth,” he growled, then shook his head. “You arouse all my most primitive instincts, ishka - the ones we created our social codes to control.”

She raised her head and smiled up at him, but he looked surprisingly grim.

“I want to take you again. Now. But I don’t know that I can be gentle.”

Her clit pulsed with excitement as she reached up to tease his horns.

“Maybe I don’t want you to be.”

“Ishka,” he groaned, then he lifted her out of the bath, snatched up a towel, and wrapped it around her before sweeping her up in his arms.

He strode out of the bathing room, straight up the stairs to her bedroom and dropped her onto the bed. He began to peel the towel away from her body but stopped, his gaze fixed on her face.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with you, Liza.”

She reached up and cupped his face.

“I don’t want you to do anything but make love to me right now.”

She didn’t miss the flash of emotion across his face, but she was too overwhelmed to figure out what it meant. He grabbed her wrists in one big hand and pinned them above her head, his body looming over her. He kept them pinned there as he kissed her, a deep claiming kiss, then began working his way down her body.

She sighed with pleasure as he lingered over her breasts, alternating teasing kisses with tiny nips, before continuing down her body, kissing and tasting every bit of her skin. All she could do was lay there, luxuriating in the feel of his big, hard body against her skin, in the contrast of soft kisses and sharp teeth.

But he didn’t stop there. His body pressed her legs apart and he kissed the top of her mound, then traced a line down to her clit. He teased it with his tongue, sucking the little bundle of nerves into his mouth before slipping down and lapping at the arousal gathered at her entrance.

“I like the taste of us together on your skin.”

His voice was deep and raspy, and her hips lifted in helpless reaction. He pushed her legs open and up, spreading her even wider as he dove back between her legs.

“So pretty,” he purred as he looked down at her slick, exposed flesh, and then he put his mouth on her and her back arched at the intensity of the sensation.

He teased and tormented her, his tongue flicking and his teeth nipping, but always coming back to her clit. It swelled and throbbed, her body straining for release, but he wouldn’t relent. Again and again, he brought her to the edge, only to

deny her. She twisted and whimpered and pleaded with him, but he ignored her.

“Don’t come until I give you permission.”

The command in his voice only added to her arousal. As her climax retreated once more, she glared at him in frustration, and he laughed.

“You want to come, ishka?”

“Yes.” She heard the sulky note in her voice, but she didn’t care. “I can’t take any more.”

“Can you take this?” he asked, then drove two of his long fingers deep into her channel.

Her body exploded, and he immediately smacked her clit lightly with his other hand. The sharp sting was followed by a pleasure so intense her whole body convulsed against him. He kept pumping his fingers in and out of her body, driving her higher and higher before withdrawing.

“No,” she cried out, reaching for him.

He sat up and yanked her onto his lap, thrusting her down over his cock. He was just as thick as he had been before and he stretched her open once more. She whimpered with the pleasurable ache of it, as her body responded, fresh arousal coating his cock as she took the rest of him.

“That’s it,” he urged, his voice dark and commanding. “Take my cock. Ride it.”

Her shaking limbs barely obeyed, but he kept a firm grip on her hips, supporting her as she slowly rose and fell on his cock. She could feel him, deeper than before, and her inner walls clenched tightly around him. He groaned, then began to drive her up and down with increased speed, forcing her to take more and more of his cock until their bodies met.

“What a good girl to take all of my cock. Come for me, ishka. Now.”

She was on the verge of orgasm already and his words pushed her over the edge. She cried out his name as her body convulsed, pleasure so intense it was almost painful washing

over her. His big body shuddered and she felt the hot flood of his release as his cock jerked inside her in long helpless spasms.

When her body softened, he eased her back down on the bed, spooning his body against her back as he drew the covers up and wrapped her in his arms. He brushed her hair back from her face, his breath warm against her skin, and she sighed and snuggled back against him, not quite willing to allow the connection between them to end.

“Harak?”

“Yes, ishka?”

She hesitated, uncertain if she really wanted to know the answer.

“Are you sorry this happened between us?”

She felt him tense behind her and her heart sank, but then he relaxed and she felt him press a kiss against her hair.

“I will never be sorry for that.”

The words made her happy, but his voice sounded almost sad. She wanted to ask why, but his arm was heavy around her waist, and his regular breathing told her that he had already fallen asleep.

CHAPTER 14



*H*arak left the house before Liza awakened the next morning. He had woken early, holding her in his arms for a long time as he stared into the darkness. He could easily imagine waking up like this every morning, but he knew it was impossible. That didn't stop the thought of the life they could have together taunting him. He should bring an end to this physical relationship before the connection between them grew any stronger, but he didn't think he could live in the same house with her and not want her.

He argued the problem back and forth in his head and finally slipped quietly out of bed. He went to his training room, working out until his muscles were trembling with fatigue but it made no difference. The primitive instinct to possess her continued to gnaw at him.

He thought again of Lord Feduria and the worshipful looks he had given Liza. The thought of anyone else looking at his female that way made him want to roar, but the young noble had not hesitated to show his admiration.

She's not your female, he reminded himself, but the thought gave him no pleasure. Still restless, he left the house and headed aimlessly down the street. He considered going to the university, but instead purchased a cup of tea from a street vendor and took it to the small garden they had passed the day before.

"Lord H'gin. Fancy finding you here."

He looked up to find the Lord Feduria approaching, a smile on his young face.

“What the devil are you doing here, Feduria?”

“Why don’t you call me Fezu?” the noble asked hopefully.

“What the devil are you doing here, Fezu?”

“My mother informed me that you lived on this street. I thought I might perhaps encounter Miss Domar.”

Apparently the boy’s worship went further than he’d imagined, and his fingertips quivered with the need to warn him away with his claws.

“Then why didn’t you just come to the house?” he forced himself to ask. As much as he disliked the idea of another male pursuing his female, Lord Feduria was a very eligible male who could provide for Liza.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to intrude. No, I’m quite happy out here. Hoping.”

He gave an impatient snort.

“And if you do encounter her? What do you intend to do with her?” he asked bluntly.

“Beg for the privilege of visiting her.” Fezu sighed dreamily. “Or even just to watch her from afar.”

He would never be content with such a choice, especially now that he had touched her, kissed her, buried himself inside her...

“Did you just growl?” Fezu asked, giving him a puzzled look.

“I was clearing my throat.” He rose to his feet, crowding just close enough to the boy to make him take a step back. “I must go. I will tell Liza that you are out here in the street waiting for her.”

“Thank you! Please tell her that I am always thinking of her,” Fezu said eagerly, and Harak could tell that he was assuming Harak would be his intermediary.

That would never happen, he vowed silently, and stalked away down the street.

He returned to the house to find Mara rather absently following one of the little robot cleaners, a distant look on her face.

“Mara. Is there something wrong?”

She jumped, then quickly shook her head.

“Oh no, sir, not at all.”

He wasn't entirely sure he believed her, but he didn't pursue it.

“Has Miss Liza come down yet?”

“No, sir. When I looked in on her she was still sleeping.” Mara's gaze sharpened, focusing on him. “I hope she doesn't have any... troubles keeping her awake.”

Was that a warning? He never would have expected his housekeeper to ally herself with a human rather than with him, but he appreciated her protective attitude towards his female.

“I'm sure no trouble is intended,” he said evenly. “Please send tea to my study. I'll wait to eat breakfast with Liza.”

She opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again and bobbed a quick curtsy. They were both leaving the foyer when the doorbell chimed. Frowning, he pulled up the monitor. Had Lord Feduria gathered enough courage to approach the house after all? But instead of the young lord, a strange male stood on the doorstep. A strange human male. Had he come for his female?

His claws popped out before he could control them, and he forced himself to take a deep breath. He retracted his claws and stalked towards the door, waving Mara aside.

The blue eyes that met his were all too familiar, and he didn't need an introduction to know that this was Liza's father.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“An excellent question. A winning ticket on the drone race? A silent wife? Ordinary Earth food? I want all of them, but right now, I want my daughter.”

“Your daughter?”

“Yes. I heard she was staying with some wealthy gent and I came to save her from a fate worse than death.”

“Is it a fate worse than death to be comfortably housed, fed, and looked after?”

“Now, now, that’s not what I meant and you know it. We are both men of the world after all.” The male grinned, an unexpectedly charming smile. “Of course, if you should want to keep her a little longer, I’m sure we could come to some arrangement.”

“Liza may leave any time she wishes,” he said coolly. “I am not keeping her here against her will.”

There was a gasp from behind him and they both turned to see Liza coming down the stairs. She looked delicious and every inch a lady in a dress of his favorite pale blue, but her face had turned pale.

“What are you doing here, Dad?”

Her father hurried over to the foot of the stairs, and he had to fight back the urge to intercept him.

“I’ve come to get you, Liza.”

His heart suddenly skipped a beat. Even though he had so confidently assured the man Liza was free to leave, would she want to do so now that her father was here?

Instead, she put her hands on her hips and glared at her father. “Why?”

“Because you’re my daughter,” he said sanctimoniously. “I worry.”

“You didn’t seem too worried when you took off for the southern region six months ago. I haven’t seen you since then.”

“You wouldn’t have wanted me to miss out on such a great opportunity would you?” the man protested.

“If it was such a great opportunity, why are you back here?”

“To save you, of course.” Her father swept his arm around in a dramatic gesture. “To protect you from this house of sin and

this male who so clearly wants to take advantage of your innocence.”

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

“With those fine clothes and that fancy way of speaking, it’s obvious that you’ve become the... paramour of this no doubt wealthy Plumerian,” her father said with a sniff. “And now you’ve lost your virtue, the least he can do is compensate me - you - for the loss of your innocence.”

His claws threatened to emerge, but Liza’s anger surpassed his own.

“First of all, I lost my innocence, as you put it, a long time ago - on the ship while you were in brig for the hundredth time. You weren’t so anxious to protect me then.”

“But -”

She ignored his attempt to interrupt.

“Second of all, I am here as Professor H’gin’s guest because he is trying to teach me how to better myself - something you have no interest in. And finally, whatever happens or doesn’t happen between us is of no concern to you.”

The man opened his mouth, looked from Liza’s furious face to his, then shrugged and grinned.

“Oh well, can’t blame a man for trying.”

“Actually, we can,” T’var interrupted from the door to the study. “Attempted blackmail is a criminal offense.”

“Blackmail?” The man put his hand over his heart. “It was just a misguided attempt on the part of father trying to protect his daughter.”

Relieved by Liza’s response, he suddenly found himself amused by the man’s sheer effrontery.

“Do you want him charged, Liza?” he asked, but she sighed and shook her head as her anger faded.

“No. It wouldn’t do any good.”

“Very well. In that case it is time for you to leave, Mr. Domar.”

“If you insist. I don’t suppose you could spare a few credits for a cab? It’s a long way back to the human settlement for an old man.”

“Dad!”

Ignoring Liza’s outrage, he held out a hundred credit chit.

“To be perfectly clear, this is the only amount you will ever receive from me. Unless you are expressly invited to return, the next time you appear I will summon the civil guardians and have you arrested.”

The man held up his hands in an ineffectual attempt to appear innocent.

“I know when I’m not welcome. But you can visit your old dad any time, Liza,” he added as he grabbed the credit chit. “I should be in the city for a while.”

Her father made a surprisingly graceful bow and departed, whistling cheerfully. Liza sank down on the stairs and put her head in her hands.

“Don’t worry, my dear,” T’var said softly. “We won’t let him bother you again.”

She didn’t respond and he jerked his head at his friend, sending him back to the study. T’var studied his face, then nodded and disappeared as he sat down on the steps next to Liza.

He ran his hand soothingly over her back, once more revealed by her gown, and felt her shudder.

“How can you think I’m worth teaching with a father like that?” she mumbled into her hands, her voice despairing.

He hesitated, then decided it was his house and he could do what he wanted, and picked her up and lifted her onto his lap. The move shocked her into staring up at him, although he was pleased to see that she made no attempt to get away.

“What are you doing, Harak? Anyone could walk through here.”

He shrugged. "Let them. This is my house and if I want to hold you, then I will do so."

"Oh." A tentative smile curved her lips. "You were more concerned about it yesterday."

"Yesterday, I was about to bend you over the dining table and bury myself inside your sweet little body - and even in my house, I have no intention of letting anyone else see you like that."

Her eyes widened and she licked her lips, her nipples beading beneath her gown. Despite his statement, he couldn't resist toying with the taut peak.

"I missed you this morning," she whispered as she arched into his touch.

"I went for a walk." He tugged a little harder on her nipple and she gasped. "I wanted to give you time to recover from last night."

"I'm sure I've recovered," she said hopefully, reaching up to caress his horns.

He had a thousand things to do - his research paper was overdue and there was still much to teach her before the embassy ball - but right now, with her warm and willing in his arms, none of them seemed important. He rose to his feet, bringing her with him.

"That sounds like a hypothesis which needs testing, ishka," he growled, and carried her up the stairs to his bed.

CHAPTER 15



Liza woke when Harak kissed her, and she opened her eyes to find him bending over her. She was still naked in his bed, but he had dressed again and there was something curiously erotic about the contrast. She smiled at him and stretched lazily.

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

His lips curved.

“It was rather disconcerting. One moment you were demanding more - and more and more - and then you were fast asleep. I thought I had completely worn you out.”

“No,” she said through a yawn. “I was just resting my eyes for a minute.”

He laughed. “It was somewhat longer than a minute. I’m afraid I must finish that blasted paper.”

“I’ll come down with you.”

She started to sit up and the sheet slipped down over her breasts. His eyes glittered and a big, warm hand cupped one of the lush mounds. She automatically arched into his touch and his hand tightened for a moment before he sighed and removed it.

“You are far too tempting, ishka. I won’t have a shred of scholarly reputation left. Why don’t you go back to sleep and join us later?”

He didn’t seem to notice her lack of response as he brushed another quick kiss across her mouth and left.

His scholarly reputation? Over the past weeks, she had come to realize how important that was to him. Working with her was supposed to be a test, a demonstration of his theories and abilities. Would their... relationship cast doubt on those efforts?

Too worried to go back to sleep, she climbed out of bed and wrapped herself in the shirt he'd been wearing earlier. His citrus and spice scent surrounded her as if she were wrapped in his arms. She didn't want to give that up, not before she had to, but she also didn't want to damage his reputation.

Lost in thought, she wandered over to the window. Like her room, his overlooked the formal gardens below. They were beautifully landscaped, but she didn't think the gardens took full advantage of the space. Perhaps she should suggest that they add one of those multi-colored flowering vines to that arbor or plant some of the small star shaped flowers beneath that line of bushes. Their scent would perfume the air if they were seated on the terrace...

Her thoughts stuttered to a halt. She was acting as if she would be here to enjoy the blossoms, but Harak had not asked her to stay. Both of them had very carefully avoided discussing anything further away than the embassy ball. A lump formed in her throat and she quickly turned her back on the garden, trying to distract herself by looking around his room. When he'd carried her here earlier, he was all she had seen.

The room was very similar to hers, with the bed on a raised dais and a seating area in front of the fireplace, but everything was on a much larger scale. Although the colors and fabrics were as subtle and elegant as the rest of the house, his personality shone through the serene decor. A pile of books rested next to the bed, a discarded slipper peaked out from beneath a chair, and the shelves next to the fireplace were filled with the same wild collection of books and artworks and knickknacks as the ones in his study.

She smiled at the sight. Despite Madam K'vara's best efforts, there was nothing tidy about him. The book and papers spilled out of his desk downstairs, the items on his bookshelves were stacked in a haphazard fashion, and the bed where she had

slept so blissfully this afternoon was rumpled. That chaotic side was as much a part of him as the cool, powerful elegance he could assume so easily.

“I will be the only man to take your mouth.”

He had repeated the possessive declaration earlier when he'd put her on her knees. She shivered as she remembered the feel of his big hands guiding her as she pleased him, his cock stretching her lips, and his powerful body shuddering as he came in her mouth. And then he'd carried her to the bed and used his mouth on her until her body was on fire before plunging into her in one hard, powerful stroke. She'd come so hard that white sparks had danced in front of her eyes, and then he was on top of her, his face harsh with passion, his horns gleaming in the sunlight, and his hands clasped around her wrists as he pounded into her.

Damn. Her nipples stiffened beneath her shirt and her clit throbbed eagerly at the memory. Despite the urgency of their previous lovemaking, she was already eager for more. Work, she reminded herself. If she was concerned about his reputation, the least she could do was make sure she was letter perfect.

She sighed and bent over to pick up her discarded dress just as the door opened and Madam K'vara appeared. The housekeeper looked from her state of undress to the rumpled bed and raised an eyebrow.

“Well, well.”

“I - I -”

“I see things have progressed further than I'd realized.” Despite her comment, Madam K'vara didn't seem surprised. “I had wondered, of course. It's been a long time since I've seen his lordship smile like that.”

“Really?” she asked hopefully.

Madam K'vara gave a quick nod.

“Oh yes. I'm glad he finally decided to act on the attraction between you.” The other woman hesitated. “Have you discussed the future?”

She shook her head, and Madam K'vara gave her a sympathetic look.

"A month ago I would have gently tried to warn you not to hope for a future with him. Now, I don't know."

"Because of what's happened between you and T'var?"

Plumerians didn't blush but she could tell that Mara was flustered by the question.

"In part," she finally admitted. "But also because he is... different around you."

"Different in a good way?"

"I think so; whether our society agrees is a different matter." She smiled at Liza as she reached for the dress. "But then again, he's never really cared about what society thinks. Now you go take a shower while I shake the wrinkles out of this fabric. And next time, try and slow down long enough to place your gown neatly to one side."

She blushed, laughed, and fled into the bathroom, but the other woman's words only added to her concern. Perhaps Harak did not care - now. Would he come to care in the future?

The question continued to haunt her as she returned downstairs, once again the epitome of a Plumerian lady. *Except I'm not*, she thought despairingly. But when T'var gave her a warm smile and Harak's eyes rested on her with undoubted approval, it was easy to forget.

A WEEK LATER, MADAM K'VARA WAS ONCE AGAIN HELPING her dress - this time in preparation for the ball. Liza stood like a doll, watching in the mirror as Madam K'vara fussed around making last minute adjustments. The floor length gown shimmered in an array of iridescent hues, shifting colors from the softest lavender to the most intense sapphire at any hint of movement. The triple sash echoed the colors as it flowed from beneath her breasts to mingle with the folds of the skirt.

The combination of high waistline and low neckline meant that the dress revealed a considerable amount of cleavage - a

subject that Madam K'vara and Harak had discussed with embarrassing frankness. Madam K'vara had suggested the possibility of binding her breasts, although the low back of the dress would make it difficult, but Harak eventually shook his head.

“No. It will not fool anyone into thinking she is Plumerian and she is beautiful exactly the way she is.”

He smiled down at her and when Madam K'vara turned her back, ran a teasing finger along the edge of the neckline, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

“And I enjoy it very much,” he added softly.

She blushed and leaned into him, but he stepped away when Madam K'vara returned, leaving her aroused and frustrated. But he'd certainly made up for it later that night, she thought with a reminiscent smile.

Madam K'vara adjusted the last of the hovering clips to her hair and stepped back to study the result. Tonight the sparkling gems formed miniature flowers and encircled her head like a crown. Her hair had been dusted with tiny blue crystals that twinkled when they caught the light, and a shimmering powder had been used to subtly enhance her cheekbones, her décolletage, and her wrists.

“You look charming, my dear.” Madam K'vara gave a satisfied nod. “Time to go.”

Making sure she used the correct hand position, she picked up the train of the dress and followed the housekeeper downstairs. They had been working towards tonight for such a long time, but now that it was here, everything felt oddly distant and unreal. But then she met Harak's eyes where he waited for her and everything suddenly snapped back into place.

“Beautiful,” he said softly, giving her a deep formal bow.

She curtsied to the same depth.

“You look beautiful too.”

He did. The severe black and white formal dress suited his tall, muscular figure and the sash around his waist matched the

colors of her gown perfectly.

“And so do you,” she added, turning to T’var.

He had chosen to wear scholar’s robes instead of evening dress but the shimmering midnight blue fabric was equally formal.

“Thank you, my dear. You are very kind to an old man.”

Madam K’vara snorted and T’var looked at her, his smile fading.

“I wish you had decided to accompany us.”

“I’m not ready for that. Not yet,” Madam K’vara said softly and Liza felt a pang of sympathy. Although Madam K’vara and T’var were clearly happy together, the older woman still struggled with the difference in their status.

“I almost forgot,” Harak said, stepping up behind her. “I want you to wear this.”

She watched in the mirror as he fastened a slender choker around her neck. Tiny, flower-shaped clusters of diamonds hovered just above the necklace, mimicking the ones in her hair.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, and his eyes met hers in the mirror.

“Nowhere near as beautiful as you. Shall we go?”

He offered his arm. She took a deep breath and placed her hand on his arm, taking comfort from the firm muscles beneath her fingertips as they departed for the ball.

CHAPTER 16



*H*arak leaned against the wall of the ballroom, doing his best not to scowl as he watched his female being whirled around the dance floor by that blasted Lord Feduria. The ballroom was a splendid example of Third Empire architecture, impossibly slender columns curving up gracefully to support an iridescent roof whose subtle, ever-changing colors reflected the music being performed by the orchestra. Tiny light bubbles floated around the room and the space between the columns was filled with elaborate displays of scented flowers, but his only interest was the couple on the dance floor.

“It’s your own fault,” T’var murmured. “You told her you did not wish to dance. Did you expect her to remain meekly at your side instead of enjoying her first ball?”

Yes.

“Of course not,” he snapped.

His friend shook his head.

“In which case you have no business glowering at her. She’s doing splendidly.”

He reluctantly agreed. Not only were her speech and manners impeccable, but she had relaxed enough to let hints of her personality emerge and had subsequently charmed everyone she met. Her lovely smile and sparking eyes had drawn people to her. Including the damned Fezu, he thought bitterly. The younger male had made his fascination with her quite obvious - which had unfortunately not lessened his own jealousy.

“I have a very strong impulse to show him why he should have studied our traditional warrior training.”

T’var’s laugh attracted the attention of a few nearby guests, and he hastily converted the sound to a cough.

“No, you don’t,” his friend said reprovably. “You’re not the jealous sort, Harak, and your self control has always been outstanding.”

That was before I met Liza, he thought as the music finally came to an end. The young lord clearly attempted to interest her in another dance, but she shook her head. He watched as she made her way across the room, aware that many of the other males were also watching her. Another young lord attempted to intercept her, then stopped when he fixed him with a glare. Liza remained oblivious as she joined them, her face slightly flushed, and her eyes bright.

“Oh, please tell me you’re ready to leave. My feet hurt,” she whispered and he was the only one close enough to hear her.

“Aren’t you having fun, ishka?”

“I am, but my feet are killing me.” She gave him a rueful smile. “These shoes may look lovely, but they are painful to wear.”

Another male approached, but also retreated under the impact of Harak’s glare.

“You cannot intimidate them all,” T’var murmured, but he ignored his friend.

Liza had turned away to watch the dance floor as the orchestra began another tune, swaying slightly to the beat, her body moving with unconscious sensuality. Perhaps he should dance with her after all, even if he did make a fool of himself. He reached her side just as two officers in full uniform marched into the room. The music immediately came to a halt.

“Please form a receiving line,” one of the officers ordered.

Liza looked up at him, clearly unsure what to do, and he cursed under his breath.

“Come with me,” he ordered, taking her hand. “Quickly.”

She looked up at him, confusion in her eyes, as he led her across the floor. They took their places at the edge of the dance floor, and then he leaned down and whispered against her ear.

“You are going to be presented to the Emperor.”

Her eyes widened. “Now?”

“Yes. When they call out your name, you will curtsy to him and keep your head lowered. If he addresses you, you may look up.”

“If he addresses me? What should I say?”

He swore again. They had covered basic royal etiquette, but not in any great detail because he had made the foolish mistake of assuming that the Emperor would not be present at the ball. He took a deep breath and did his best to give her a reassuring smile.

“Just remember your manners and be your usual charming self.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” he said firmly, reminding himself to have faith in her.

“Introducing his Majesty, Emperor H’joss. Accompanied by Empress M’rsl and Princess R’jan.”

The announcement was greeted by enthusiastic applause, and the musicians played a triumphal march. Then the orchestra faded, leaving only a single flute to play a slow, regal melody as the royal party emerged from a private chamber.

The king was a large male, but the years had stooped his shoulders and left his belly overflowing his sash. His wife was much younger, but from everything he had ever heard, she was devoted to her husband. The princess was unquestionably their daughter, a charming echo of her mother. The royal family began to move down the line of guests, occasionally stopping to exchange a word with someone.

“Miss Liza Domar.”

The royal announcer called out her name, and he felt her flinch. For a moment, he was sure that she would look up, but then she quickly bent her knee in a perfect curtsy, just as he had instructed. His hands flexed anxiously as the Emperor paused, then spoke.

“Welcome to our world, Miss Domar,” the Emperor said formally. “May your visit be an auspicious one.”

She slowly raised her head, and her soft blue eyes met the Emperor’s. The room was eerily quiet as the rest of the crowd focused on them.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” she said, her voice a little husky but her accent perfect. “I have found Plumeria to be a most delightful and hospitable planet.”

“I am pleased you have found it so.”

The Emperor nodded and extended his arm to the Empress. She accepted it with a smile, and they continued their journey around the perimeter of the floor. He started breathing again, but he was not the only one. A buzz of excited conversation broke out around them as the royal family reached the end of the line and the musicians resumed playing.

“Well done,” he whispered against her hair, and she turned her face into his chest.

“Thank you. That was terrifying.”

“You were perfect,” he assured her. “I’m proud of you.”

“I want to go home now, Harak.”

The request was so unexpected that he simply stared down at her.

“Why?”

“I -” She hesitated, then sighed. “It’s all just too much. Can we go?”

“Of course. I think you have more than satisfied the goal of my experiment.”

She returned his smile as they headed back to T’var. They had almost reached them when the Empress intercepted them. She

bowed her head ever so slightly and Liza dropped into an instant curtsy as he bowed.

“You performed beautifully, my dear, although you have quite caused a sensation.”

“Sensation?” Liza looked horrified, and his own heart plummeted. “I’m so sorry. I did my very best.”

The Empress gave a low, musical laugh. “My dear, it is not a negative sensation. In fact, I have received several inquiries about you. If you are interested in finding an eligible match, I can assure you that your search will not be a long one.”

“You want to find me a husband?” Liza repeated, her eyes widening.

“Indeed. I think it would be an excellent idea.” The Empress smiled a little ruefully. “I believe that our society can benefit from new blood. We have become somewhat... rigid in our thinking.”

“That is very kind of you, your Majesty, but... I’m not sure I’m ready to take such a step.”

He exhaled softly in relief while he did his best to keep his face composed.

“I understand,” the Empress said sympathetically. “But my offer will remain open if you change your mind.”

“Thank you, your Majesty.”

Liza swept another perfect curtsy, and the Empress nodded and moved away. He was aware of the speculative looks in their direction but he ignored them as they finally reached T’var.

“That was interesting,” his friend said, looking at their faces. “What did the Empress say?”

“I’ll tell you on the way,” he promised as they headed for the exit.

While Liza went to fetch her wrap, he quickly recounted what had happened, and T’var nodded thoughtfully.

“It was very kind of the Empress to offer to find her a husband.”

His fingertips tingled, his claws threatening to emerge at the thought of his female married to another male.

“That is not going to happen,” he snapped.

“My poor friend, you really are quite besotted,” his friend murmured, ignoring Harak’s temper.

He drew a deep breath and retracted his claws.

“It is a rather positive outcome, however,” T’var said.

“Positive?”

“The fact that the Empress was so impressed with her? You clearly won our bet.”

“Bet?” Liza whispered, the color draining from her face as she joined them.

CHAPTER 17



A bet? That was all this had been?

Liza huddled in the corner of the hired hover car, staring unseeingly at the passing streets. Harak had tried to talk to her but she was too numb to listen. T'var had finally said something to him and he'd stopped trying. Instead, he sat there, his expression a mixture of worry and regret as he watched her from his seat on the other side of the car.

Regret? Was he upset that she had discovered his deception, or merely that she was ruining his triumphant moment? By the time they reached the house, she had recovered enough to maintain a semblance of composure as she attempted to bid Harak and T'var a cold goodnight and escape to her room.

"Oh no, you don't" Harak said grimly, just as Madam K'vara came bustling out to join them.

The housekeeper's smile disappeared as she took in Harak's frown and Liza's stiff posture.

"What happened? Did it not go well?"

"It went perfectly," Liza snapped. "I performed as perfectly as any trained animal, and Harak won his stupid bet."

"Bet? What bet?"

Madam K'vara turned her gaze on T'var and he winced.

"It was merely a harmless method of encouraging Harak to teach Liza."

“Harmless?” she asked bitterly. “I understood it was an experiment. I was even stupid enough to be concerned about Harak’s professional reputation. Instead it was just a game for the two of you.”

“It was an experiment,” Harak ground out from between clenched teeth. “I wanted to use my skills and experience to transform a -”

“Transform a what? A ragamuffin into a lady? I hope you’re satisfied.”

“I am - or at least I was. I proved that my methods are successful.”

“Did it ever occur to you that your methods wouldn’t have been useless without my efforts? I was the one who worked and studied and practiced while the two of you sat around drinking tea and laughing at my foolishness.”

“We never laughed at you,” T’var said quickly. “Perhaps it would be better to discuss this in the morning when your tempers have cooled -”

“No!” she and Harak said simultaneously.

T’var sighed and took Madam K’vara’s arm.

“Perhaps we should leave them to work this out.”

“Fine. You have some explaining to do yourself,” Madam K’vara snapped, but she let him lead her out of the entry hall.

Harak attempted to take her arm, but she snatched it away from him.

“Don’t you touch me.”

“I refuse to stand out here and argue with you. At least come into the blasted study.”

She didn’t want to agree to anything he suggested, but it did seem ridiculous to be standing in the hall yelling at each other. She sniffed defiantly but followed him into the study.

“I should have known this was just a game to you,” she snapped, focusing on her anger to avoid the pain that was threatening to crash down over her.

He was no better than Gordon, using her to amuse his friends. No wonder he'd never mentioned the future. He was always planning to abandon her.

"It was not a game," he growled. "And stop acting as if you were mistreated. You were well fed, well clothed, well taught -"

"And well fucked?" she asked bitterly and his eyes flamed.

"That had nothing to do with your lessons. I thought you enjoyed it as much as I did."

She refused to respond as the reality of her situation began to set in. She would have to leave - and where would she go? Back to her tiny room in the settlement? And then what? While she was sure it was now possible for her to get that job in the flower shop that had been the sum of her ambitions, the prospect no longer excited her. She sank down into the nearest chair.

"You have no idea what you've done, do you? You may have taught me to act like a lady, but I have no place in this world."

"Of course you have a place."

"Do I? Where?"

"Here."

"I have no intention of remaining in this house."

She half-hoped he would argue with her, but he only glared at her.

"Then find yourself another house. Let the Empress marry you off to one of her sycophants."

"Maybe I will. Or maybe I'll marry Feduria."

He growled, clenching his fist on the back of a chair and to her shock, gleaming white claws sprang from his fingertips.

"Fine. Marry that ignorant boy. Pack your bags and go to him tonight if that's what you want."

"I don't have any bags to pack. Don't you need my clothes for your next helpless female?"

“If you leave them, I’ll burn them myself.” He stalked over to the door, flexing those terrifying claws. “I refuse to continue this pointless discussion tonight.”

He slammed the door behind him before she had a choice to respond. In a fit of frustration, she picked up a vase from the side table and threw it at the door. It smashed into it with a satisfactory crash, but she didn’t feel any better. Her anger began to ebb, replaced by despair. She had to get out of here. Tonight.

Her first instinct was to simply walk out the door, but she was not exactly dressed for walking the streets. She sighed, and wearily climbed the stairs to her room. She stripped off her clothes, her fingers trembling as she removed the necklace he had placed so gently around her neck.

Choosing the plainest gown in her wardrobe, she dressed again, then hesitated. It would be a shame for her clothes to be burned if he actually intended to carry out his threat. She pulled out two of the cases that had been used to deliver her clothes and quickly packed a few of her favorite outfits. After one last look around the room where she had been so happy, she turned off the light and left.

She shivered as she slipped out the front door into the night. It has turned cooler, a thick mist beginning to creep along the street. As she paused to consider her destination, a figure emerged from the mist, hurrying across the street to join her. Her heart skipped a beat, but then she recognized him.

“Fezu? What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I often stop by here on my way home. I find it... comforting.”

She would have said creepy, but his face was so open and guileless that she didn’t have the heart to chide him.

“I heard what the Empress said,” he added eagerly. “But you don’t need her to find you a husband. You know I would be honored.”

She believed him - and it would be a way out of her problems - but she didn’t love him.

“That’s very sweet of you, but I don’t plan on marrying anybody.” He nodded, a resigned look on his face and she smiled at him. “But would you mind accompanying me on an errand?”

“I would be delighted. Let me summon a hover cab.”

After they were seated in the vehicle, she asked him to direct it to the human settlement.

“Are you returning there?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.” Although she still didn’t know where she was going to go. “I just want to take a look.”

The cluttered chaos of the settlement was a stunning contrast to the rest of the city, but it was full of life and activity, even at this hour. A group of men were huddled over a dice game and she looked closer, half-expecting to see her father, but she didn’t recognize any of them. Two girls walked down the sidewalk, laughing together, while an old woman rocked on her porch, watching the neighborhood. A younger woman came out to join her, cradling her baby on her shoulder. Familiar sights that no longer felt familiar

She briefly considered stopping by her room, but there was nothing there for her either.

“All right. Let’s go.”

He looked visibly relieved.

“Good. Where would you like to go now?”

She looked around again, then smiled as inspiration hit her.

“I know the perfect place.”

CHAPTER 18



*H*arak did not sleep. He spent the entire night fighting the urge to go and apologize to his troublesome female. The fact that she'd completely misunderstood the situation no longer seemed as important with the threat of her leaving.

I don't want her to go.

He paced back and forth in his bedroom. He had never met anyone like her before. After a mere month in his household, he had come to rely on her company, on the way she made him laugh and challenged him. The thought of returning to his empty house, his solitary work, his endless round of meaningless obligations...

He would make it up to her somehow. But first he needed to know that she wasn't planning to walk out of his life forever.

He forced himself to wait until morning, but the sun had barely cleared the horizon before he strode down the hallway to her room. He knocked softly, but there was no answer. Was she sleeping or avoiding him? He tried the door handle but it was unlocked and he quietly opened it. The room was empty, the bed untouched. His heart started to pound.

"Mara?" he demanded, meeting the housekeeper as she came up from the kitchen. "Where is Liza?"

"I don't know. Didn't the two of you make up last night?"

"No," he said shortly, uncomfortable under her sharp gaze.

"I'm surprised. I know that you aren't an idiot."

He almost smiled. "I may not be an idiot, but you know my temper. And she has one that matches mine."

Now that he was no longer angry, he could even admire her fierce refusal to back down and the way her eyes flashed as she confronted him. "I just want to apologize to her."

"And she isn't in her room?"

"No. Where the devil is she?"

Mara frowned and walked past him into Liza's room. He followed her hopefully, as if could somehow conjure his female out of nowhere. Still frowning, she opened the wardrobe, then shook her head.

"She appears to have left. Some of her clothes are missing."

"Left?" he asked blankly, and the housekeeper gave him a sharp look.

"Yes. I don't understand why she would have left without letting me know? Unless..."

She eyed him suspiciously and he couldn't blame her.

"Why didn't you make up with her last night?"

"I wanted her to come to me," he said stubbornly.

"Which probably means that she was still furious when she left. But where would she have gone?"

He had been so convinced that she would be here that he hadn't stopped to think about where she might be. His first reaction was a wave of anger. How dare she leave him? But his anger was quickly replaced by despair. He couldn't stand the thought of letting her go, especially under these circumstances.

"I'll find her," he said grimly. But how? "Is T'var still here?"

"Yes. He should be in the study."

"Good. I need to consult him."

He hurried downstairs, intent on only one thing - finding Liza.

By noon he was beginning to panic. There was absolutely no sign of her anywhere. T'var had called in a favor with a friend

of his with the civil guardians and they were on the alert, but they hadn't found her either. He'd even made a trip to the humane settlement personally, only to be greeted by blank stares and a denial of any knowledge.

"What now?" he demanded, looking across the room at Mara and T'var. They both looked equally worried.

"I don't know." T'var frowned down at the fireplace. "You don't suppose she returned to the palace, do you?"

"I don't think she would have gone visiting royalty at that time of night. But perhaps she visited someone else..." He swore as another thought occurred to him. "Do you know where that blasted boy lives?"

"Which blasted boy?" T'var asked patiently.

"Lord Feduria. She threatened to marry him last night."

"It could be an advantageous match."

"Over my dead body," he growled.

"That would be an interesting ceremony," T'var said dryly. "But to answer your question, I don't know where he lives."

"Mother," he decided. "She's friends with his mother so she should know. It was her damn fault that Liza even met the boy."

He stalked over to the desk to pick up his communicator, then hesitated. He knew his mother too well to believe that she would simply pass on the information without demanding an explanation. Perhaps it would be best to see her in person.

"Will you wait here? In case she returns?"

"Of course." T'var gently touched his shoulder. "I'm sure we'll find her."

"We'd better," he said grimly as he strode out of the room. *Or I'll never forgive myself.*

He found his mother reclining on a chaise in her garden room, the very picture of a lady of leisure - if one didn't know that the pile of papers next to her chaise was for the charity organization she ran.

“I need Lord Feduria’s address,” he demanded, and she raised an eyebrow,

“Why?”

“Because Liza is missing. I think perhaps she may have gone to him.”

Instead of reacting with the shock he expected, she stared at him placidly.

“Now why would she have done a thing like that?”

“Because I told her she should marry him.”

Both eyebrows went up this time.

“And why would you do that?”

“I was angry,” he admitted. “And she said she was leaving me.”

She took a sip of tea from the cup floating at her elbow, regarding him calmly.

“And you didn’t want that, did you?”

“Of course not. I never wanted her to leave.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“No.”

To his relief, she didn’t press him for his reasons, merely shook her head.

“You know, Harak, for such an intelligent male, you can be extremely stupid.”

“Can we discuss my faults another day? I need that address.”

“No, you don’t.” She reached over and pressed a button on the control panel.

“What do you mean I don’t need it? The more I think about it, the more I’m convinced that’s where she is. Where else would she have gone?”

“I came here,” a quiet voice said from behind him and he whirled around to find Liza standing there, her face pale but as beautiful as ever.

“Thank the gods,” he muttered, stalking over to her, but when he reached for her, she drew back.

“Are you frightened of me, ishka? Is it because of my claws?”

He had seen her face pale when they emerged.

“You revealed your claws? My, my, Harak. I never thought I’d see the day when your emotions overrode your intellect.” His mother shook her head again as she rose. “I have a committee meeting to attend so I will leave the two of you to talk. And for god’s sake, Harak, tell the poor girl how you feel. And Liza, my dear, a Plumerian male only loses control of his claws under highly emotional conditions.”

His mother smiled at both of them and drifted away.

“Is that true?” Liza asked softly. “That your claws only emerge when your emotions are involved?”

“Yes. And I have never lost control of them - until you arrived in my life.”

“Oh.” Her lashes fluttered down to conceal her eyes, but he saw the corner of her mouth curve upwards.

“You have disturbed my house, my life, and everything I thought I knew about myself, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“You told me to leave.”

“No, ishka. You told me you were leaving and I was too hurt and angry to think about what I was saying. I’m truly sorry if you ever thought I didn’t want you.”

“I know why I was angry, but why were you?”

He sighed. “Can we sit down?”

She shot him another glance from under her lashes, then nodded. She didn’t resist when he reached for her hand, and when he gently tugged her down next to him on the couch, she didn’t move away. Having her back where she belonged drained away the last of his anger.

“I suppose it started with jealousy,” he said slowly. “Every male at that ball wanted you.”

“I don’t think that’s true, but even if it was, I didn’t want any of them.”

“Not even Fezu?”

Her lips curved again as she shook her head.

“Not even him. Did you know he was outside the house last night?” When he growled, she put her hand on his arm. “Stop that. I know it’s kind of weird, but I honestly think he was happier mooning around in the dark than actually being with me. He prefers his dream Liza to the real one.”

“Then he is a fool.”

“But a kind fool.”

“Perhaps.” He shrugged. “So I was already jealous, I was annoyed that I had not prepared you to encounter the Emperor, even though you handled it beautifully, and I suppose I felt some level of guilt. Don’t misunderstand,” he added hastily. “You were never a game, to either one of us. T’var did challenge me to transform you, but I only accepted because I genuinely wanted to see if it could be done. I never really thought about it again.”

She looked down at her hands.

“I believe you, but you’ve met my father. One of his many, many flaws is an addiction to gambling. He gambled away most of our possessions at one time or another. That’s partially why it hurt so much.”

“I’m so sorry, Liza.”

He very cautiously put his arm around her shoulders. She stiffened for a moment, then sighed and leaned into him.

“What did you win?” she asked a moment later.

“I would have won a set of diaries from the First Empire, but of course, I told T’var the bet was off.”

“Those actually sound kind of interesting. I think you should hold him to it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. What would he have received if he won?”

“My agreement to teach two sections next term,” he said, shuddering.

She had heard him complain about teaching often enough and she stared at him for a moment, then burst into laughter. She looked so pretty, so happy, so much like his Liza that he couldn't resist. He bent his head and kissed her. She didn't respond at first and he was about to draw back, but then she sighed again and melted against him.

Desire roared through him as he tugged her onto his lap, desperate to have her closer. Somehow, he managed to retain enough control to confine it to a kiss, despite the sweet torment of her ass pressed against his rigid erection.

When they finally parted, she smiled up at him, her face flushed and glowing.

“Now what?” she asked softly.

“Now we go home, ishka, and you never leave me again,” he said firmly.

“Why Harak? Why should I do that?”

Remembering his mother's advice, he took a deep breath and told her the truth,

“Because I love you, Liza.”

CHAPTER 19



Liza's heart pounded as Harak finally said what she had so longed to hear.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because my mother is right and I am a fool?" He sighed. "That is not the only reason. You have shared my life for the last month - you know that I am not truly part of the world of the scholars, nor of the nobility. Even someone like the deplorable Feduria is more at home there than I am. From that aspect - and only that aspect - he has more to offer you."

Did he really think she cared?

"Don't you remember that my original goal was simply to work in a flower shop? I was never interested in joining the nobility. The ball was pretty, but it was also nerve-wracking and uncomfortable. A life like that would never make me happy."

"What will make you happy, ishka?" His golden eyes glittered as he studied her face.

"You make me happy, Harak - because I love you too."

He snatched her back into his arms, his mouth forcing her lips apart, devouring her, taking everything that she so willingly gave him. His hand came up to cover her breast, tugging on her nipple as she gasped into his mouth and his fingers were pushing impatiently at the neckline when he suddenly raised his head, his expression pained.

"Not here. Not in my mother's conservatory."

‘Probably not,’ she agreed and giggled. ‘Let’s go home.’

‘At once.’

He lifted her into his arms and she didn’t bother protesting. It wasn’t proper behavior and she didn’t care. Even though they’d only been apart for a short time, she’d missed him desperately. Being in his arms already felt like coming home. He carried her past his mother’s startled manservant.

‘Tell my mother I will speak to her later. Much, much later.’

He didn’t let go of her while they were in the hover cab either, although he didn’t kiss her again.

‘If I do, I will have you naked on this bench in thirty seconds,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘Well...’

‘No, ishka. Stop trying to tempt me.’

He carried her into the house, past a startled Madam K’vara and a beaming T’var.

‘I found her and she’s never leaving again,’ he announced but he didn’t stop.

He continued down the hall and then out into the garden.

‘What are you doing?’

‘You’ll see.’

He carried her to the rear of the garden, to a sunny, secluded spot that would be invisible from the house. A greenhouse stood in the center of the space - an airy, fanciful building constructed of ultra-thin supports covered by a clear, gleaming membrane. Inside, the front of the building was lined with empty counters and shelves, but the rear had a small sitting area with a long, low couch and an assortment of side tables and rugs and lanterns.

‘What is this place?’

‘It’s your greenhouse.’

‘Mine?’

“Yes. Since you’re so fascinated with our plants, I thought this would give you a chance to grow some of your own,” he said as he placed her on her feet, watching her face anxiously.

“I can’t believe you built me a greenhouse. When were you going to tell me?”

“Today, after the ball. If the ball did not go well, I thought it might console you and if it did go well, it would be a reward of sorts. Do you like it?”

She blinked back the tears that threatened to descend. It wasn’t just the beautiful building; it was the fact that he had paid attention to what she liked.

“Like it? I love it! It’s the nicest thing that anyone has ever done for me. I love you, Harak.”

He lifted her back into his arms and kissed her again, and this time he didn’t stop, not even as he carried her over to the couch. As soon as he put her down, he ripped off her dress, pushing the fabric away as his mouth roamed across her breasts, his tongue tracing the line of her cleavage before fastening on one swollen bud. She moaned and clutched his head to her as his mouth tortured one nipple and his hand attended to the other, sending sparks of fire shooting straight from her breasts to her throbbing clit.

“Harak,” she pleaded, her hands tugging at his jacket.

He finally drew back long enough to toss his clothing away, then returned to the task of driving her mad with pleasure. She squirmed against the sensual assault, but his broad shoulders spread her legs apart, opening her for the clever probing of his tongue.

He pushed two thick fingers deep inside her, and she cried out as her climax caught her unprepared. He kept stroking her, working her pulsing pussy with his hand and his wicked mouth until she finally collapsed back against the cushions, gasping for breath.

“Oh god, Harak. That’s amazing.”

“I’m just getting started, ishka.”

He surged forward, sinking his cock deep into her, his golden eyes burning down at her. His shoulders flexed as he braced his hands on the arm of the couch above her head and he began to drive into her with slow, powerful strokes.

“More,” she moaned, lifting her legs to wrap around his waist.

“My greedy female.”

“Yours. Only yours, Harak.”

His eyes blazed with emotion as he picked up the pace, pounding into her with all his strength, and she was suddenly so close.

“I love you,” he groaned, his shaft swelling inside her as she went flying over the edge again, her ecstasy intensified by the feeling of his hot seed erupting deep inside.

They stayed locked together until the shudders of his orgasm finally faded and his weight slowly came to rest on top of her. He started to move away, but she clung to him.

“No, don’t. I love you this way.”

He chuckled.

“I don’t think my weight is the best thing for your lungs.”

“Oh, yes, it is,” she insisted, burying her nose against his shoulder and inhaling deeply. “You smell wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

She stroked her hand over his chest and then further down his stomach as she felt him begin to harden. He sucked in a breath, but made no attempt to stop her.

“More?” he asked

“Oh yes.”

“Your wish is my command, ishka.”

Their kisses grew increasingly passionate as she ran her hand over every inch of his muscular body, but this time there was no urgency, only the gentle exploration of his warm skin and the delightful taste of his lips. Her pussy was still swollen from the ferocity of their earlier coupling, but when he reached

between her legs she was slick and ready. She writhed against his touch, urging him on with soft cries.

“My demanding little female,” he growled, but his eyes gleamed with desire and she felt his shaft pulse beneath her hand.

He captured her hands, bringing them to his lips and kissing the palms of each one. Then he lowered his head to nip at her nipples, sending another spark of arousal to her aching pussy.

“Harak, please.”

“As you wish,” he murmured, moving over her again and she sighed happily.

His thick length pressed slowly into her swollen channel, and she wrapped her legs around him, eager for him to fill her. As he thrust steadily deeper, he brushed against her clit and even that slight touch to her overstimulated body sent her flying again, her inner muscles clenching and rippling around his impaling cock.

“Fuck.”

His groan vibrated against her skin as his thrusts increased, her hips rising to meet him as he filled her again and again. She quivered with each powerful stroke, the friction on her tender flesh creating a sensation so intense that her pussy fluttered helplessly around him.

He let out a strangled cry and then he was coming, his hot seed filling her as the exquisite intensity of his cock pulsing inside her sent her over the edge again. She clung to him as their bodies finally relaxed and he rewarded her with soft, lazy kisses.

“This is going to be my new favorite place,” she whispered finally, and he laughed.

“Not our bedroom?”

“Perhaps we should test it and compare.”

He sat up, pulling her with him as he slid to his feet and she sighed when she saw the ripped remnants of her gown on the floor.

“Madam K’vara is not going to be happy about that - and I have nothing to wear back to the house.”

“I’m sure she’ll overlook it just this once,” he said dryly, as he dropped his shirt over her head and pulled on his pants.

He picked her up and settled her comfortably in his arms and she grinned at him.

“You don’t really need to carry me everywhere.”

“I enjoy it. And when I’m carrying you, I know exactly where you are.”

She rolled her eyes but snuggled her head against his shoulder.

“Why did you go to my mother?” he asked suddenly as he carried her back towards the house.

“For two reasons I suppose.”

“Which were?”

“After I made that mistake at the races, she tried to comfort me. I thought you were going to give up on me, and she told me if I ever needed help to come to her.”

His arms tightened.

“I am never going to give up on you.”

“I believe that now,” she said softly.

“What was the other reason?”

She smiled up at him. “I hoped that you would find me there.”

“Thank the gods that I did.”

He gazed down at her with so much love in that golden gaze that her breath caught in her throat.

“I can’t believe you’re really mine,” she whispered.

“Always, ishka,” he promised, and then he kissed her.

EPILOGUE



Three months later...

“LIZA,” HARAK CALLED IMPATIENTLY AS SOON AS HE ENTERED their home.

There was no response and he shook his head, already knowing where he would find his beautiful wife. Sure enough she was on her knees in front of one of the beds she had added to the garden, carefully transporting the seedlings she had raised in the greenhouse he had built for her.

“You know we do have a gardener,” he said, and she jumped and gave him a guilty look.

“I know, but I enjoy -” She broke off as his shoulders started to shake. “What is it?”

“I believe I called you a ragamuffin once before, but you definitely fit the picture now.”

She had a smudge of dirt on her cheek and another on her brow and something green was caught in the curls that had fallen down around her face in a wild tangle. She was wearing one of his cast-off shirts that she had insisted on keeping and the high tech fabric had not prevented it from being ripped and stained by her endeavors.

She looked down at herself, then laughed.

“Gardening is a messy business. I can’t be a proper Plumerian lady all the time.”

As long as she was his lady, he didn't care in the slightest.

"But I suppose this means you'll need to give me a long, thorough bath tonight," she added, trailing her fingers down the open neckline of her shirt as she gave him a seductive look.

His cock immediately began to stiffen. The bathhouse was one of their favorite places to play.

"I would be delighted, but not until later. We are having dinner at the university."

He smiled as she rolled her eyes.

"Are Mara and T'var coming?"

Mara had still not agreed to marry the scholar, but she had begun to accompany him to some social events.

"They are. Don't you even want to know why we're dining there?"

Her eyes suddenly lit up.

"They approved the program?"

He had proposed to the university that they set up a program designed to help the human refugees integrate into Plumerian society. They had somewhat reluctantly recognized that the existing language instruction was too minimal and now they were going to set up an ongoing set of classes for any humans who wished to participate.

"They did."

"That's wonderful."

She threw her arms around his neck in one of her impulsive gestures and as always, he delighted in the soft press of her body against his. He didn't even care that she was grinding soil into his shirt.

"We should celebrate."

"I believe that is the intention of the dinner," he said dryly and she wrinkled her nose.

"That's not exactly what I had in mind."

“What if we have our own private celebration later?”

“That sounds perfect. In fact...”

She broke off, looking thoughtful.

“In fact what?”

“Later,” she said, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Do you think we have time for a bath before dinner?”

His cock pulsed again but he checked his wrist comm and reluctantly shook his head.

“I’m afraid not. And although I don’t usually care if we’re late, I don’t want to be late tonight.”

She pouted for a moment, then smiled.

“All the more to anticipate later then.”

But she still stroked a teasing hand across his cock as she danced off to get ready, and he resolved to make an early departure.

THEY ENDED UP STAYING MUCH LATER AT THE DINNER THAN he’d intended, but the evening had been surprisingly enjoyable. Liza was radiant, and even the dourest old scholar couldn’t resist her smile. Despite the initial resistance, the university now seemed committed to the program and he spent a good deal of time talking to the future head. They had offered him the position, but he’d firmly turned it down. He was far more interested in his own studies and his beautiful wife.

Despite her gaiety during the dinner, she was unusually quiet on the way home, staring out at the darkened streets.

“Tired, ishka?”

“A little,” she said absently.

“We can postpone our celebration.”

That brought her head around, her expression lightening.

“Nonsense. I have something planned for you.”

He began to harden just from the teasing note in her voice, and reached for her. She brushed her lips against his, then danced away shaking her head.

“The last time you started kissing me in a hover cab, we were almost arrested.”

Perhaps fortunately, he had been pleasuring her with his hand and the guardian had only glimpsed her ecstatic face before stopping the cab. Equally fortunately, the male had been amused and let them go with a stern warning to mind their behavior in public.

“You know I can’t resist you,” he admitted.

“Good. But hold on a little longer.”

Perhaps it wasn’t actually that long but it seemed like an eternity. As soon as they arrived home, she told him to wait for her in their bedroom and disappeared. He stripped and waited for her on the bed, gripping his cock in a vain attempt to ease the throbbing ache.

He almost lost control when she finally joined him, wearing a gown similar to the one she’d worn to the embassy ball. But this gown was composed of one sheer layer of fabric, the changing colors highlighting and concealing her delightful body.

“What do you think?”

“I think I want to rip it off you,” he growled and she laughed as she glided towards him.

“Before you start ripping, there’s something I want to discuss.”

“Discuss? Now?”

“Yes.” She held up a small hypo spray. “This is the dose to reverse the sterility injection. I thought perhaps it was time.”

“Time?” he echoed hoarsely, his throat dry.

“To consider having a child.”

“That is what you want?” he asked carefully as precum began to leak from his swollen cock

“Well, yes. Your mother mentioned grandchildren again and I... I realized I want a child. With you. That is, if you’re ready?”

She gave him a hopeful look, and he lost the battle to control himself. He pounced on her, his claws ripping away the fragile fabric as he devoured her mouth, his hands moving frantically over her body and thanking the gods when he found her slick and ready. He slammed into her soft, delicious body, his climax already overtaking him, and he shuddered as his seed erupted inside that hot, perfect channel, dropping down over her as his knees gave way.

She stroked his back, waiting for his breath to slow before she smiled up at him.

“I guess you’re ready.”

He managed a rueful smile, his body still shuddering.

“What gave me away?”

“You know you didn’t give me a chance to use the injector?”

“Good. You can use it now and I should have enough control to make it perfect for you.”

She reached up and stroked his face.

“It’s always perfect.”

He let her go long enough to take the injection, then drew her back into his arms and if he didn’t last quite as long as he’d hoped, it was in fact, perfect.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *My Fair Alien*! I loved twisting this story into a science fiction romance - with the appropriate happy ending! I hope you enjoyed it just as much!

Whether you enjoyed the story or not, it would mean the world to me if you left an honest review on Amazon – reviews are one of the best ways to help other readers find my books!

Thank you all for supporting these books - I couldn't do it without you!

And, as always, a special thanks to my beta team – Janet S, Nancy V, and Kitty S. Your thoughts and comments are incredibly helpful!

Coming up next - *Skruj*!

He's wealthy, he's mean... and he's about to meet his match!

Bobbi is desperate to create a magical holiday for her fragile younger brother Tim - even if it means accompanying the most hated man in the city to three different social events.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Honey Phillips writes steamy science fiction stories about hot alien warriors and the human women they can't resist. From abductions to invasions, the ride might be rough, but the end always satisfies.

Honey wrote and illustrated her first book at the tender age of five. Her writing has improved since then. Her drawing skills, unfortunately, have not. She loves writing, reading, traveling, cooking, and drinking champagne - not necessarily in that order.

Honey loves to hear from her wonderful readers! You can stalk her at any of the following locations...

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