



TAMMY AND THE TRAITOR

ALIEN ABDUCTION BOOK 20

HONEY PHILLIPS

TAMMY AND THE TRAITOR

A SCIFI ALIEN ROMANCE
(ALIEN ABDUCTION BOOK 20)

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Other Titles](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER ONE

T ammy's phone lit up with another text. Alex. She shook her head and swiped it off the screen without reading it. *How could I have been so wrong about him?* She had been so sure he was a nice guy. He was a vegan who only ate organic food and used biodegradable soap. He organized food drives. He even ran the local pet rescue shelter.

But none of those things prevented him from being a despicable lying cheat. A cheat who apparently used the pet rescue as a way to pick up women—no matter what their age.

“Don't say that, baby,” he begged when she called him that after walking in on him with his hand up the skirt of one of the teenage volunteers.

“She's sixteen, Alex. Sixteen! Go home, Sierra,” she told the girl who was standing there, biting her lip nervously. “I'll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Yes, Miss Garland,” Sierra whispered and fled.

“Aww, come on. It was just a little fun, baby,” Alex said, his too-long hair falling down over his pale face as he gave her the lopsided smile she had originally found so endearing.

“No, Alex, it wasn't. You're ten years older than she is!”

“But I didn't know that. She came prancing in here in that short little skirt, and well... one thing just led to another. It won't happen again.”

She gave him a disgusted look.

“No, it won’t. Because even if she doesn’t press charges, I’m going to make sure that everyone in town is aware that you’re a predator.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I can and I will.”

She’d turned around and marched out, head high, but once she was safely home, the tears threatened. She thought about calling one of her friends, but while Rita would be sweetly sympathetic and Sara would be ready to cut his balls off, she was afraid that they would both be wondering why she kept making the same mistake.

I wish I knew. As a school counselor she had heard too many horrifying stories to ever be considered naïve, but the same optimism that led her to believe that every student could be helped didn’t work as well when it came to the men she dated.

The phone lit up again, but this time she buried it under a cushion, turned off the lights, and headed upstairs to her bedroom. She trailed her hand over the smooth wooden banister as she went, remembering when she’d envisioned children sliding down it, just as she’d envisioned laughter echoing through the rooms, and innocent faces playing hide and seek in all the nooks and crannies that made up the old house.

The big Victorian was far too large for her, but when she’d used the inheritance from her grandparents to buy it, she’d pictured it filled with children—with a family.

A future that seemed even further away tonight. How could she have been with Alex for over six months and not realized what a despicable human being he really was? *No.* She was not going to spend the rest of the night thinking about him.

Thank goodness it was spring break and she and Sara were heading to the beach tomorrow for a few days. She just wished Rita were coming too. Even though she knew their friend was looking forward to working on her own house, it just seemed wrong to go off and leave her.

“Maybe I’ll stop by and try talking to her in the morning,” she told her reflection after she brushed her teeth.

Instead of focusing on Alex, she concentrated on assembling a list of arguments to convince Rita to come with them and eventually fell into a restless sleep.

But when she went to see Rita the next morning, her friend had disappeared and her elderly neighbor was frantic with worry. Tammy hurried to tell Sara, who immediately insisted on going to the police, but despite her friend’s forceful personality and striking good looks, nothing came of it.

“We’ll search the park ourselves,” Sara said, scowling.

“They did a search and didn’t find anything indicating foul play. Do you really think we’re going to find anything they missed?”

“I don’t know.” Sara paced restlessly. “But I have to do something.”

Tammy understood—it was terrible feeling so helpless—so she accompanied Sara as the two of them made a fruitless search of the park where Rita had been walking her neighbor’s dog the previous night. Dusk crept up on them, the park turning eerily quiet as a light mist started rising up between the trees. They had just agreed to go home when Sara’s face suddenly turned white. She opened her mouth just as a cruel hand clamped down on Tammy’s arm and a searing pain stabbed her neck.

The last thing she saw before she collapsed was Sara reaching for her.

WHEN SHE WOKE UP, SHE WAS IN A CAGE. HER MOUTH FELT like the inside of a desert, her head throbbed, and her stomach churned. Her whole body felt bruised and achy, and her clothes had been replaced by a thin white gown that concealed almost nothing.

Sara was in the cage next to her, watching her anxiously, and wearing the same skimpy outfit.

“S... Sara? What happened?” she whispered as she sat up, dizziness rushing over her.

“I think we found out what happened to Rita. Apparently we ran into some aliens out hunting for humans.”

She tried to force her aching brain to think.

“Aliens? Hunting for humans? But why?”

Sara bit her lip, then suggested that perhaps they were destined for a zoo, gesturing down the corridor in front of them. Both sides were lined with the other cages, many of them filled with exotic creatures quite unlike anything she had ever seen on Earth. That more than anything brought home the reality of their situation. But a zoo?

As much as her heart ached for the poor animals surrounding them, she suspected a different fate awaited her and Sara. And Rita. Although Sara told her she hadn't seen any sign of their friend, they both agreed that it was a little too much of a coincidence to believe she hadn't been taken by the same group of aliens.

A brutish-looking male came down the corridor, and her heart started to pound.

“Don't respond to him,” Sara said quickly. “They implanted some type of translator so we can understand each other, but anything you say will only make him angry.”

Sara was right. When the male came to a halt beside her cage, she understood every disgusting thing he said, but she kept her head down and refused to respond. A repulsive smell emanated from him and it triggered another memory—of being strapped to a table under a bright white light. Unable to move as she was examined by cruel hands. Her stomach churned, and as soon as the male got tired of trying to get a reaction and moved on, she was violently sick in the trough of liquid that flowed along the back wall of the cage.

Her misery didn't end there. The only food they were given was a type of dry brown biscuit, and everything from the smell to the texture made her feel ill. She did her best to choke them

down, knowing she needed to keep up her strength, but it grew harder and harder.

Only two things gave her comfort as the days wore on. The first, of course, was Sara. She faced their captivity with the same fierce spirit with which she faced everything, proposing outrageous escape schemes and grizzly deaths for their captors. But even on the days when neither one of them could pretend not to be terrified, simply having each other was a great solace.

The other comfort was Aqbar. He was a small creature with fluffy white fur and feline features, rather like a cat except he also had wings. He was in the cell on the other side of Sara, and the two of them had become friends. She loved watching him and envied Sara for being next to him. The cage next to hers held a large slug-like creature, and while that might not have deterred her, the only thing it did was slurp up some kind of greenish slime twice a day and then curl up in a misshapen ball.

She discovered that if she crumbled up the biscuits, mixed them with water, and left them to dry, she could create slightly lumpy balls. After she slipped the balls to Sara, her friend would use them to entertain Aqbar. He liked chasing them, batting them back and forth before pouncing on them and crunching them up in his sharp little teeth.

He had just finished the last one and she was about to make another when Sara suddenly tensed.

“Watch out. Crot’s coming.”

Although they had no way of really tracking time, she thought they’d been on the ship for about four weeks at that point—long enough for fear to dribble down her spine at the announcement. Their guards varied. Most of them liked to taunt them and make obscene gestures but never went beyond that. One of them, Patra, was actually pretty decent. He’d even brought her some more edible food a few times.

Crot was the worst. He always carried a shock stick, and she’d seen him use it viciously on the occupants of some of the other cages. He made the most disgusting comments and tried to

provoke them. Even without Sara's warning, she wouldn't have responded to him. As much as she liked to believe there was good in everyone, there was none in Crot.

Sara had heard him arguing with some of the other guards a few days before, and he was clearly still furious when he stopped outside her cell and started berating her for not eating the food in her bowl. She tried to tell him it upset her stomach, but he didn't listen.

"I don't fucking care. Eat it or you won't get any more."

She did her best, but she only managed to choke down a few bites before he grew impatient. He reached through the bars and snatched her hair, yanking her closer to the bars.

"I said eat."

"I—"

As soon as she opened her mouth, he shoved a handful in her mouth, choking her with the horrible taste and dry texture, and she couldn't control her roiling stomach. The small amount she'd managed to eat came rushing back up, splashing all over him and he roared and raised his shock stick.

Sara cried a protest, and he jabbed the stick at her friend instead. It sizzled as it made contact, and Sara turned white, but she pressed her lips together, refusing to scream. Crot grinned, then pressed a control on his belt.

She watched in horror as the bars to her cage began to rise into the air. He taunted Sara as he started unfastening the front of his coveralls, but he was watching her. *Oh, God.* Every part of her body was shaking, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of begging. She was so focused on him that she didn't realize the significance of the growing clamor from the other cages or the vibration coming from the floor until the biggest male she'd ever seen grabbed the back of Crot's coveralls, snatched him out of the cage, and sent him flying down the corridor.

The stranger had red skin and short-cropped dark hair, too short to conceal the dark horns curling up from his temples. He had a hard face, rugged rather than handsome, and a

vicious scar on his neck that disappeared beneath the black uniform shirt he was wearing, but his dark eyes were kind. The cage was too short for him so he crouched down, keeping his eyes on her as he slowly extended his hand.

“Easy now, little one. You’re safe now.”

The deep, growling voice was oddly soothing, and she found herself reaching for his hand.

“Who the hell are you?”

The sound of Sara’s voice shocked her out of her dazed state, and she looked up to see they were surrounded by what looked like dozens of the big red-skinned males, all wearing that same black uniform. Her head started to spin, and she knew she was going to hit the floor. The last thing she felt as the floor rushed towards her was a pair of warm, hard arms catching her.

CHAPTER TWO

Vorkan swore as the human female swayed and started to fall. Somehow he managed to catch her, despite his awkward crouched position. Ithyian cages were not designed for someone of his size. He backed out of the cage, keeping her cradled against his chest. She was so pretty and so fragile, almost impossibly light.

“What are you doing? Put her down at once,” the other female demanded.

Despite the commanding tone, he could see the trepidation in her eyes as the rest of his squad surrounded them.

“I cannot put her down because she has lost consciousness.”

“Oh, no. Tammy,” she whispered, reaching for her friend’s hand.

To his shock, he almost growled and pulled the little female out of her reach. He forced his face into a neutral expression as the other female gently took her hand.

“Her name is Tammy?”

“Yes. And I’m Sara. Who are you? All of you?”

The demanding tone had returned, but her grip on her friend’s hand was still gentle so he allowed it.

“I am Officer Vorkan of the Kaisarian Royal Fleet. Did you know that you were on board an illegal trading ship?”

“Not by choice.” Her eyes narrowed. “Now what happens?”

“Now that we have rescued you, you will accompany us aboard our ship.”

She clearly wasn't convinced, but after another look at the female in his arms, she nodded.

“Do you have a doctor on board?”

“Of course.”

“Fine. I guess we'll come,” she muttered, and a few of his males exchanged a quick smile.

But although they were correct that she would not have had a choice, he was grateful that he wouldn't have to subdue her. One unconscious female was enough. He gave his female another worried glance, then ordered one of his males to collect the unconscious Ithyian he had thrown down the corridor. He would take great pleasure in dealing with him later.

The other female—Sara—turned to accompany them, then came to a halt.

“What about Aqbar?”

He followed her gesture to the cage next to her and the Orosz prowling restlessly from side to side, its eyes fixed on them.

“All of the animals will be transferred to our ship until we can determine their point of origin.”

“You mean you're just going to leave him in that cage?” she asked indignantly.

“Yes,” he said firmly. He had no intention of letting a dangerous animal loose near the helpless female in his arms.

He thought she would object, but at the moment Tammy whimpered softly. He automatically tucked her closer as Sara gave her an anxious look.

“Fine,” she snapped. “But as soon as Tammy is taken care of, I want to speak to whoever is in charge.”

He almost smiled. Lord Tanaca, unofficially known as the Spymaster, was Senior Advisor to Emperor Karthajin, and Vorkan had never encountered a more ruthless male. He would

love to see this fiery female confronting that icy bastard, but right now, he was far more concerned about the female he was carrying.

As soon as they were back on board the *Triumph*, he started to head for the medical bay, but they were intercepted by another officer.

“Officer Vorkan, I have been ordered to take the females to the second interview room,” Officer Bargal announced, brimming with self-important fervor.

Bargal was an officious little twit who owed his position to family connections rather than merit, and Vorkan despised him. Despite that, he usually managed to keep his feelings hidden. Today he didn’t have the patience.

“No,” he growled. “Tammy—this female—requires medical assistance. I am taking her to the medical bay.”

“No!” A small hand clutched his shirt desperately. “Please don’t take me there.”

She was awake, but her face was pale and terrified. Her fear infuriated him. He would happily tear the Ithyian responsible limb from limb.

Bargal scowled.

“It is not your place to question orders, Vorkan. Hand her over and return to your station. I will see to the interrogation of the females and ensure that they receive the necessary medical attention—if required.”

She made a terrified little sound and clutched his shirt again. He had no intention of allowing her anywhere near Bargal.

“Interrogation?” Sara demanded. “I thought this was supposed to be a rescue.”

He ignored both of them, focusing on his female.

“You fainted,” he said gently. “You need medical attention.”

“No! I just need some food. I don’t need to see a doctor.”

Her small fingers trembled as she clutched his shirt, her big eyes pleading with him. He sighed, then looked at Bargal.

“Very well. We will both accompany the females to the interview room.”

Ignoring the other male, he turned and headed towards the interview room, aware of the rest of his squad following closely. Sara clearly didn't like it, but she stayed at his side. Bargal started to protest, then realized he was being ignored and hurried to catch up.

“This is most irregular,” the other male hissed.

He shrugged. “My orders were to retrieve the females. I am simply complying with those orders.”

Bargal sputtered another protest, but he didn't have any authority over Vorkan so he ignored him.

“Interview room, my ass.” Sara scowled as she followed him into the compact room. “Looks like another cell to me.”

She wasn't entirely wrong. The metal table was bolted to the floor and the reflective panel on the far wall was designed for observation, but the room was clean and white. Unlike the cells he had been taken to in his youth, no blood stained the wall or floor and no officer with a sadistic grin and a whip awaited them. There was even a pitcher of water and a tray of sandwiches on the table.

He carefully, and reluctantly, lowered Tammy to a waiting chair but instead of reaching for the food, she slumped forward. He bent over her anxiously, then heard a muffled grunt from behind him. When he whirled around, Sara had Bargal's weapon jammed against the idiot's side. *Fuck.*

He immediately stepped in front of Tammy. Although he was sure Sara would never shoot her friend on purpose, he didn't trust the uneasy way she was holding the weapon. For a moment he considered taking it away from her, but while he didn't doubt his ability to do so, he didn't want to hurt her in the process. He suspected Tammy would not approve.

When Sara demanded to see the person in charge, he decided to remain in place and await events. Despite his resolution, Tammy was growing increasingly pale. If someone didn't arrive soon, he would have no choice but to take the weapon

away from Sara and carry Tammy to the medical bay, no matter how much she objected.

Then the door swished open and Tanaca appeared.

CHAPTER THREE

T ammy did her best to follow the conversation between Sara and the new arrival, but the room kept threatening to spin. With his blue skin and platinum hair, the new male could have been some kind of frost elf from a children's book—albeit a very large and imposing one. Not that Sara seemed intimidated. Tammy recognized the gleam in her friend's eye and knew she was intrigued. Under other circumstances she might even have been amused, but right now she was too busy struggling to stay conscious.

The blue alien introduced himself as Senior Advisor Tanaca. He told them again that they had been rescued, but she wasn't sure that she believed it any more than Sara did. Especially when he told them that Rita hadn't been on board the Ithyian ship. A sob escaped before she could prevent it, and the huge red-skinned male—Vorkan—put his hand on her shoulder. His hand was so large that his fingertips brushed the upper swell of her breast, but the warmth of his hand was undeniably comforting and she felt a faint pang of regret when he removed it and snapped back to attention.

After everything that had happened, it seemed almost impossible that she could find comfort in the touch of an alien, and yet...

He'd been holding her when she regained consciousness, still dizzy and disoriented, cradling her in those big, powerful arms, and the warmth of his body and his faint spicy scent had made her feel... safe. When he spoke, even the sound of his

deep, rumbling voice soothed her—until she realized he was talking about taking her to a doctor.

The memory of white lights and invasive hands flashed through her mind and she panicked. Vorkan had been scowling fiercely, but when he looked down at her, his eyes were still kind—and he had listened to her. Perhaps she wasn't being foolish in finding comfort in his touch. When they arrived at the interview room, she'd been almost disappointed when he put her down.

Words floated over her head as Sara and Tanaca continued their discussion—something about a sanctuary planet—but dizziness still kept washing over her. Then Tanaca picked up one of the waiting sandwiches and all of her attention focused on him. Her mouth watered as Tanaca bit into the sandwich, and then ordered Vorkan to prove the rest of the food hadn't been drugged. He immediately kneeled in front of her, still so much larger than her, and broke a sandwich in two. He took a small bite from each half with his very white, very sharp teeth, then passed them to her.

“Eat, little one,” he urged softly.

The delicious smell was impossible to resist, and she took a tentative bite. It wasn't exactly a sandwich—the bread melted on her tongue, and the inside was a creamy, fruity paste—but it was as delicious as it smelled. She managed to eat part of one half before her stomach threatened to rebel and she pushed the rest away.

“I can't eat anymore.”

He nodded understandingly.

“When you have been without food for a long time, it is best not to rush it.”

How did he know? Looking at that huge body, it was hard to believe he'd ever gone hungry, but there was something about the look in his eyes that made her think he was speaking from experience.

Sara and Tanaca had apparently come to an agreement while she was eating because the blue alien left with the other guard,

and Sara joined her at the table, her eyes dancing.

“He promised to find us a room. An actual room and not a cell.”

“And you believed him?”

Sara was usually the last person to take anyone’s word for anything. The faintest touch of color tinted her friend’s cheeks.

“Yes. He promised me.” Before Tammy could respond, she took a big bite of one of the sandwiches, then moaned appreciatively. “Damn, this is good.”

As Sara continued eating, her moans and sighs of pleasure were so sensual, that Tammy expected to find Vorkan watching her. Instead, he was still focused on her. He remained kneeling next to her until a device on his belt pinged. He read the message, then nodded and rose.

“Your quarters have been assigned. Can you walk, little one?”

“I think so.”

He reached out a big hand and helped her stand, and while she was shaky, she stayed on her feet. Even that small amount of food had helped.

“Come. I will escort you to your quarters.”

“You mean we’re still under guard?” Sara asked suspiciously.

“Not at all. I assumed you needed a guide. But perhaps you have been on this ship before and already know the way?”

A muffled giggle escaped her when her friend rolled her eyes, and the sound shocked her. She hadn’t laughed since she’d been taken.

Vorkan escorted them through a maze of corridors, up several levels in a lift, and then through another set of corridors. The area outside the interview room had been strictly utilitarian—metal walls and dark floors interrupted only by plain rectangular doors. When they emerged from the lift, they found wide corridors with what looked like wood-paneled walls and a plush carpet under their feet. But despite the opulent surroundings, her legs were beginning to tremble.

Vorkan quietly tucked her hand in his arm.

“Would you like me to carry you?”

God, yes. She bit back her response and shook her head, but she left her hand on his arm, leaning more and more heavily against him as the journey never seemed to end. She was on the verge of giving in and asking him to carry her when he came to a halt outside a wooden door with an intricate pattern. Behind the door was a pretty living room with walls paneled in golden wood and a deep blue carpet.

“There are bedrooms to either side,” Vorkan said in his deep voice as Sara danced off to explore.

They were standing very close, her hand still tucked in his arm, and she gave him a tremulous smile.

“Thank you.”

“This is Lord Tanaca’s doing, not mine.” He hesitated. “But you belong in a place like this.”

“Do I?”

The beautiful, luxurious room didn’t seem real. She half-expected to wake up back in the cage again. The thought made her shiver, and he very slowly put his other hand on her shoulder. It wasn’t quite a hug, but it comforted her nonetheless.

“You’re safe now, Tammy. I will look after you.”

The words sounded like a vow. She wanted so desperately to believe him, but before she could respond, Sara reappeared and he stepped back. After promising to arrange for food, he left. She immediately missed his comforting presence, but it wasn’t as if he could always be with her, was it?

Sara was clearly thrilled with their new surroundings—and just as clearly interested in Tanaca—but Tammy only had enough energy to smile and return her hug before fleeing for her new room. It wasn’t until she stripped off that horrible white shift and stepped under the welcome stream of hot water that the tears finally came.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vorkan stood outside the door to Tammy's room, fighting the urge to return. Leaving her alone and unprotected went against every instinct he had, even though he had duties to perform. He glanced up and down the empty corridor, then adjusted his position to make sure his next actions would be undetectable on the security monitors. The device he pulled out of his belt was smaller than his thumbnail and easy to slip unobtrusively over the door frame. It was an experimental model, one he'd been working on in his spare time, but it would serve to alert him if anyone attempted to enter her quarters.

As he left, he was uneasily aware that for the first time in the fifteen years since he'd joined the Royal Fleet he was reverting to the illegal practices of his youth. He'd been an orphan, growing up in the slums of Kaisar that the rich and influential people who inhabited the majority of the planet chose to ignore. He'd spent most of his childhood fighting for survival, but it turned out he had a gift for anything mechanical—a gift that had been ruthlessly abused by the gang that had “adopted” him.

At first he hadn't cared, just grateful for food and a bed—and acceptance. But as the years wore on, the casual brutality, the narrow escapes, and the constant trouble with the law had grown more and more disturbing. He'd finally been caught hijacking a rich official's ship. He'd known he was facing a long jail term, but the official had been unexpectedly impressed by his skills and offered him a way out—a new life

in the Royal Fleet. He hadn't looked back since, yet now he was planting an illicit device on a Fleet ship.

It's not technically forbidden, he reminded himself. Since no one knew it existed, there couldn't be any rules forbidding its use. The argument did little to soothe his conscience, but at the same time, he was well aware that even the limited protection it provided would only last while Tammy was on the ship.

Tanaca planned to take both females to a sanctuary planet. It was the standard practice when they discovered people stolen from primitive, pre-flight planets, but the thought did not sit well with him. She was so small and defenseless, and fragile. She needed someone to take care of her, to provide her with food, and shelter. Someone like... a mate.

Mate.

He'd never considered the idea before. The shadows of his previous life haunted him, and he'd found out the hard way that even the type of female who was willing to look past his size and his scars because of his position in the Fleet were disgusted by his past. He'd vowed to focus on his career instead, and yet the idea of establishing a new life with his little female, of protecting her, suddenly seemed more satisfying. Unless... would she despise him too? Or would someone from another world be more forgiving?

Don't be ridiculous. Her planet must have criminals as well. He couldn't stand the thought of that sweet, shy smile turning to disapproval, or even fear. He'd simply have to come up with another way to protect her. Despite his resolution, the thought of claiming her continued to occupy him as he prepared his report on the interception of the Ithyian vessel.

An alternative struck him as he finished the report. What if he offered to claim her as his mate in name only? As hard as it would be to resist touching that soft, tempting body, he would do it if it would allow him to protect her and provide for her. And perhaps after she got to know him, he could reveal the truth and she would understand. Perhaps she would even be willing to make it a true mating...

Decision made, he went to speak to Lord Tanaca.

Vorkan was not a male who was easily intimidated, but as he waited in front of Tanaca's desk while those cold silver eyes studied him, uneasiness washed over him. The other male's expression revealed nothing of his thoughts, and he suddenly found himself apologizing for Bargal's behavior.

"It wasn't your weapon," Tanaca pointed out.

"No, but I should have been more aware of the situation."

"I have already dealt with Officer Bargal. That is the end of the matter."

The expression on Tanaca's face made him hide a shudder, but he wasn't going to back down now.

"Was there something else?" Tanaca asked.

"It's about the human females..." He struggled to find the right words as Tanaca's expression turned even colder. "You said you planned to take them to a sanctuary planet."

"That is correct."

"It's just... Who will protect her—they? How will they find shelter? Even a sanctuary planet has its dangers."

"They will be provided with assistance."

Tanaca clearly dismissed his concerns, but he refused to back down. He took a deep breath.

"I will take her as my mate."

An unexpected fury flashed across Tanaca's face before he could conceal it, and Vorkan found himself tensing for a fight.

"Unacceptable," Tanaca snapped.

Although he tried to explain that he could provide for Tammy, Tanaca refused to listen. The other male maintained that claiming her would make it appear that the Empire approved of taking the human females. Only the discipline he'd learned over his years in the Fleet prevented him from continuing the argument, preferably with his fists. He forced himself to salute and leave.

He was tempted to return to Tammy and ask her anyway, but the activity monitor showed that she was sleeping and he would not disturb her. Unable to face the noisy mess hall, he returned to his quarters. He tried to sleep, but he was haunted by thoughts of Tammy and the sadistic male who had attacked her. At least that was one threat he could resolve, he decided grimly.

In the early hours of the morning after the shift change, he went to visit the brig. The officer in charge owed him a favor. No one liked the Ithyians, and he suspected that no one would look too closely if the male had a fatal accident in his cell.

“Vorkan,” Pamilo greeted him, looking bored. “Can’t sleep?”

“Nah. I hate having those bastards on our ship.”

Pamilo grinned. “One less now.”

“What do you mean?”

“The spymaster was here earlier. Now there’s one less Ithyian.” Pamilo’s expression changed. “He’s a fucking ruthless bastard, isn’t he? And damn good with those knives of his. Hate to be on his bad side.”

“He killed one of them? Which one?”

“Aren’t they all alike?” Despite the question, his friend flicked through his screens. “This one. Name of Crot.”

He instantly recognized the Ithyian as the one who had attacked his female. Although he hadn’t had the satisfaction of killing Crot himself, at least he was dead. And he suspected the bastard had suffered a lot more at Tanaca’s hands than he would have done at his.

“I wonder why Tanaca killed him.”

“Don’t know. Don’t really care. Since you’re here, how about a game?”

Since he didn’t think he’d be getting any more sleep that night, he shrugged and sat down.

“Why not?”

They played until the shift change, which left Pamilo a considerable number of credits shorter.

“I should have known better,” his friend muttered when they parted ways.

Because he had an exceptional memory and a talent for seeing patterns, he’d always been an excellent card player—a fact that the gang that recruited him hadn’t hesitated to exploit. He could have taken Pamilo for significantly more so he only shook his head sadly.

“You just need me to remind you occasionally.”

When he went to freshen up, he found a message waiting for him from Tanaca, ordering him to provide food to Tammy once she was awake. Was it some pitiable attempt to compensate for the other male’s refusal to let him claim her? Not that it mattered. At some point during the long, sleepless night he had decided that he was going to claim her anyway.

After a fruitless attempt to make himself look like anything other than the big, ugly bastard he was, he went to find his female.

CHAPTER FIVE

T ammy stared up at the ceiling of her room, doing her best not to think. She hadn't slept well, haunted by dreams of their time on the ship, and of Crot coming towards her. When she woke up, she'd taken another long, hot shower and pulled on a dress she had found in the wardrobe, but she had no idea what to do next. The thought of leaving her room made her stomach twist.

Sara seemed to think they were safe. Her friend even seemed willing to trust Tanaca which, considering that Sara didn't tend to trust anyone, was a point in his favor. And there was Vorkan. The memory of being cradled in those big powerful arms almost made her smile. She didn't doubt for a second that he was capable of protecting her.

But even if they were safe for the moment, they were still on an alien ship heading for an unknown destination.

She was still staring at the ceiling when a gentle chime sounded in the living area. She expected Sara to answer it, but a minute later it rang again. Her heart started to pound, and she debated whether to answer it, but curiosity eventually won out. Her knees shook as she made her way to the door and she opened it to find Vorkan waiting for her.

He towered over her, his big, broad body almost blocking out the light. That hard face could never be called handsome, but his eyes still held that same warmth. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Good morning, little one.”

She flushed at the nickname.

“Why do you keep calling me that? I’m not that little. Sara is taller than me, but I’m average for a human woman.”

Everything about her was average. She didn’t have Sara’s slender elegance or Rita’s voluptuous curves, or their dramatic coloring.

“You are very small compared to me.” His voice deepened. “And I assure you, you are far from average.”

Her cheeks heated at the appreciation in his gaze as a tiny, and completely unexpected, hint of arousal suddenly quickened her pulse. She immediately shoved the feeling away.

“I’m not used to males as... as large as you. Why are you here?” she blurted out.

“Lord Tanaca instructed me to bring you breakfast.” He nodded at a covered tray on a stand next to the door. “But I... I also wanted to make sure you were well after everything that had happened.”

That warm, deep voice made her long to curl up against his big body again, but instead she wrapped her arms around her waist and nodded.

“I’m fine,” she lied, leading the way back to the seating area.

She sat down on one of the couches, and then wondered if she’d made a mistake. He placed the tray on the coffee table and settled down next to her, the heat from his body surrounding her. She tensed, expecting the memory of cruel hands to overwhelm her, but it never came.

His mouth twisted slightly as he noticed her reaction.

“Would you like me to move?”

“No,” she said quickly. “I mean, it’s all right.”

She gave him a shy smile and he returned it, the expression softening that hard face. His eyes dipped to her mouth and the flutter of arousal reappeared before he suddenly coughed and looked away.

Removing the cover from the tray, he revealed a selection of dishes, all of them containing food that looked completely

unfamiliar to her. A bowl filled with a pale brown paste, a plate of what looked like doughnut holes except in an odd mix of colors, and a stack of some type of fruit, each slice a different shade.

She gave him a questioning look, and he pointed to the various dishes.

“The bowl contains cooked grains sweetened with berries. The small cakes are made from a variety of ingredients, including the flour of the grains, dried and roasted fruits, nuts, and sweet spices. We call the fruit rainbow fruit because of the colors.”

He served her a portion of each on a smaller plate and handed it to her. She hadn't been especially hungry, but the smells wafting up from the food were enticing and she took a tentative bite of one of the balls. The taste exploded on her tongue, more intense than anything she'd tasted in weeks. She swallowed, then licked her lips.

“That's amazing.”

His eyes dropped to her mouth again as she licked her lips, then he nodded abruptly and looked away again. As she nibbled on the rest of the cake, she tried to think of something to say but her mind had gone blank. She couldn't stop herself from watching him, but it wasn't from fear. He made her think of a panther—all muscle and grace despite the scars. Just watching the way he moved sent heat flashing through her veins.

What is wrong with me? It hadn't surprised her that Sara was interested in Tanaca, but she'd always been more hesitant when it came to men. She certainly wasn't going to jump on Vorkan just because he'd carried her away from that terrible ship.

He stretched out his big legs, his thighs as thick as tree trunks, and her mouth suddenly went dry. *No*. How could she possibly be reacting to him after everything that had happened? She had to get a grip. She focused on the bowl of grain and tried to put the disturbing arousal out of her head, but she only managed a few bites before she put it down again. He frowned, clearly concerned.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t eat anymore. It’s very good,” she added, hoping to reassure him.

He rose, and she suppressed a sigh. No doubt he had more important duties to attend to than watching a woman eat. But instead of leaving, he carried the tray to the small kitchen area and returned with a glass filled with a brightly colored liquid.

“This contains a rejuvenation mix.”

“It’s a drug?”

He frowned slightly.

“Not at all. The mixture simply helps replenish your body after illness or injury.”

“I’m not ill. I’m just tired,” she muttered. As much as she appreciated his concern, she didn’t want him thinking she was an invalid.

“It should help with that as well.”

She sniffed cautiously at the glass he handed her. It smelled fresh and fruity, and she sipped cautiously, then made a face when she felt the first bitter tingle on her tongue.

“I don’t like it.”

“Drink it slowly,” he advised. “The flavor will become more pleasant with time.”

She reluctantly took another sip and gagged. A tear trickled down her cheek

“I can’t drink this.”

“Then you don’t have to drink it. Please don’t cry.” He sat next to her again and gently stroked her cheek. “I understand that you are still frightened and upset, but I promise you, the Fleet does not abuse or mistreat the females it rescues. You are safe here. And you should know—the male who tried to abuse you is dead.”

Another tear followed the first, and then she was crying. He swore, hesitated, then lifted her onto his lap, stroking her back in long, slow caresses.

“Hush now, little one. I’ve got you. Nothing is going to hurt you.”

His voice was so kind and reassuring that she buried her face in his shirt. The solid wall of muscle underneath her made her feel safe and protected, and she cried until her eyes were sore and her head ached. He never stopped stroking her back and murmuring in her ear. Eventually the storm subsided, and she drew back. His eyes were filled with concern as he searched her face.

“Better now?”

“I think so. Is... is Crot really dead?”

“Yes. Lord Tanaca eliminated him.”

Thank God. She supposed she should feel sad at the loss of a life, but for once she couldn’t find any of her usual compassion. She didn’t believe that there had been anything in him worth saving. The knowledge that he was dead also released a tension she hadn’t realized she was feeling. Her breath emerged in a long sigh, and she gave Vorkan a shaky smile.

“I’m sorry I cried all over you.”

“I’m not. I enjoy holding you.”

For a moment she imagined seeing small red flames dancing in his eyes. Heat rushed to her cheeks again as she quickly looked away. Her eyes fell on the untouched glass.

“Do you really think I should drink it?”

“I believe it will help.”

The gentleness in his tone didn’t stop her from feeling like a small child as she sighed and reached for the glass.

“It will be worth it,” he promised.

She highly doubted it, but she did as he said, gulping it down as quickly as she could. A satisfied smile crossed his face as she finished, and she couldn’t help pouting.

“You really aren’t going to like it when I throw up all over you.”

His lips twitched. "I'll risk it."

Her mood lightened a little, despite her discomfort, and she leaned back against him. His hold tightened and she tensed, but the remembered pain and terror didn't hit her. She took a deep, shaky breath and relaxed into his embrace. She felt... safe.

Not just safe, she realized. Her body was reacting to the strength of those powerful thighs beneath her and the warmth of those big, strong arms. It didn't make any sense. Her previous boyfriends had tended to be lean, even skinny, but there was no doubt her body was responding to his powerful physique.

She found herself snuggling closer as she realized how badly she needed the contact. He shifted so he could wrap his other arm around her waist, and her breath caught when he gently pulled her closer. Those warm, hard muscles surrounded her, and she shivered.

"Are you cold, little one?"

"No. I'm—"

When she raised her head, the rest of her words vanished, lost as his eyes met hers. They were flames, she realized. Sparks of red fire in that dark gaze. He slowly lowered his head.

"Vorkan—"

His lips brushed against hers, and a shock of sensation shot through her. The simple touch was far more erotic than it should have been, and she sighed against his mouth. Perhaps he took it for an invitation. Perhaps she had meant it that way. Whatever the reason, he took advantage of her parted lips. His tongue swept into her mouth, wide and hot and delicious as he explored her. Slowly. Thoroughly.

Her nipples throbbed, hard, aching points, and she turned in his arms to rub them against that big powerful chest. As she did, a long, thick bar pulsed beneath her ass, and she suddenly realized that he was massively erect. A shiver shuddered through her body. It was not entirely from fear, but he immediately froze and raised his head.

“I am a fool. I should not have touched you. Would you like me to leave?”

“No. I mean, yes. I mean—”

She pushed back and scrambled off of his lap, trying to organize her jumbled thoughts. He didn't attempt to stop her, simply watching her with that dark gaze, flames no longer burning in his eyes.

“I apologize for kissing you,” he said quietly.

“I liked it,” she admitted. “But I shouldn't. We shouldn't. I don't know you.”

An odd expression flickered across his face before he dipped his head.

“Perhaps we could spend more time together?” he suggested after a brief hesitation.

“I... I'd like that.” She twisted her hands together nervously as she looked away. “Sara's been sleeping for a long time. I'd better check on her.”

He frowned. “She's not sleeping. She is with Lord Tanaca.”

“What's he doing to her?”

“I do not know. I was simply informed that she had gone to see him.”

“Oh.” A smile suddenly twisted her lips. “In that case, maybe I should have asked what she's doing to him.”

“Would you like me to check on her?”

She didn't want him to leave, but maybe it was for the best. She nodded slowly.

“I would appreciate it.”

He rose to his feet, once more towering over her, and she couldn't help sneaking a quick glance down his body. Yep. Still erect. So very, very erect. Another tremor of fear and desire shivered over her and she knew her nipples had stiffened again, but she did her best to ignore them as she accompanied him to the door.

“Thank you for the food. And... everything.”

“I am yours to command.”

The words sounded oddly formal, and her mouth went dry. She licked her lips nervously, and he groaned.

“Little one, you are far too tempting.”

He bent his head and, when she didn't draw back, placed a gentle kiss on her mouth. Before she could decide whether or not to respond, he straightened back up.

“I will return with food later today.”

He left and she found herself staring after him as a slow smile curved her lips. The smile was followed by a yawn as a wave of exhaustion washed over her. Since she didn't know how long it would be before Sara came back, she decided to lie down again.

She was back to staring at the ceiling when Sara returned.

CHAPTER SIX

Sara was looking far too pleased with herself, Tammy decided as she sat up and her friend came over to join her on the bed. Despite her initial protestations, she had obviously enjoyed her time in Tanaca's company and she finally confessed that he had kissed her—or rather she had kissed him.

“It was just an innocent little peck, but then he really kissed me.” Sara fanned the air with her hand. “And he may be an arrogant bastard, but he's the best kisser I ever met.”

For a moment she considered telling Sara about her own kiss, but it still felt too new, too confusing. Her attempt to change the subject didn't stop her friend from teasing her about Vorkan, and she sighed.

“He makes me feel safe, which I know is crazy. He could probably kill me with his little finger if he wanted to.” That part at least she was willing to confess.

“But he doesn't want to. Right now he seems determined to feed you,” Sara said dryly, and she laughed.

Sara teased her some more, but she was clearly still thinking about Tanaca.

“You like him, don't you?” she asked finally.

“Kind of,” Sara muttered.

“So to sum up, you like him and he likes you, but neither one of you want to admit it?”

“Do you really think he likes me?” Sara asked, then threw her hand over her face. “Never mind, don’t answer that. I feel like I’m back in high school.”

“If we had a notebook, you could write S+T on the cover and draw a heart around it,” she teased, and Sara pushed her over on the bed.

For a moment it all seemed so normal—joking about men with her friend. Except they weren’t men and nothing about their situation was normal. She reached for Sara’s hand.

“What’s going to happen to us, Sara?” she asked softly.

“Tanaca said he’s taking us to a planet called Sherae. He said it had a nice climate and lots of little islands, so we might get our beach vacation after all.”

Sara was trying to sound positive, but Tammy knew her too well. She wasn’t any more enthusiastic about the idea of creating a whole new life than Tammy was, especially on an unknown planet surrounded by strangers. A planet that wouldn’t have a big red alien standing between her and those strangers. Her pulse started to race.

“But they’re just going to leave us there, aren’t they?”

“It sounds like it, but at least we’ll still be together. And Tanaca said he would try and find Rita too.”

Oh, God. In the chaos of the past few days, she’d forgotten that their friend was still out there. Before she could ask, the door alarm chimed again and she couldn’t stop herself from flinching. *Maybe it’s Vorkan again*, she thought, but Sara was already hurrying to the door.

She followed more slowly, just in time to see a bleeding crew member thrust Aqbar towards Sara. The small creature flew into Sara’s arms, and her friend burst into tears. The crew member looked even more appalled and hastily departed.

The sight of her friend’s tears immediately galvanized her into action, and she hurried over and put an arm around Sara’s shoulders.

“It’s all right, sweetie. Everything is fine now. Come and sit down.”

She gently guided Sara over to the couch, then sat down next to her, running a soothing hand over Aqbar’s soft fur when he wiggled.

“I don’t think he likes the fact that you’re getting him all wet.”

Sara gave a watery laugh. “Probably not, but I just can’t help it. I asked Tanaca to send him to me, and he did.”

“He’s definitely proving to be worthy of that heart,” she teased and Sara laughed again.

The laughter faded when Aqbar hopped down on the floor and started sniffing around, exploring his new home.

“He’s going to have to make a new life too,” Sara sighed. “Tanaca said they can’t always go home.”

“At least he has us. Just like we have each other.”

“Yes. We have each other.”

Sara gripped her hand tightly as Aqbar extended his wings and flew a little awkwardly across the room to perch on top of a cabinet. He purred loudly, then settled down, his furry head tucked beneath his wing.

“I guess he’s tired too,” Sara murmured, and she nodded.

“Poor little guy.”

They sat quietly for a minute, watching him, then Sara shot her a quick glance.

“What?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“I know better than that. What are you thinking?”

“I just thought maybe it would be nice if I went and told Tanaca thank you. For sending Aqbar to us.”

“Mmhmm. And give him some more innocent little thank you kisses?”

Her friend actually blushed, and Tammy laughed.

“Go on. You know you want to.”

“I don’t mind staying here with you.”

“I’m fine. I’m probably going to follow Aqbar’s example and take a nap.”

Sara frowned at her.

“Are you all right? You did eat, didn’t you?”

“I did. I’m just fine,” she said firmly. “You go play with your sexy alien elf, and I’ll retire in maidenly splendor.”

Unless a certain big red alien dropped by again.

“If you’re sure you don’t mind?”

“I’m positive.”

Sara jumped to her feet, then bent down and hugged her.

“I know everything is going to work out. You’ll see.”

“I’m sure it will.”

She did her best to sound confident, and it must have fooled her friend because she giggled as she straightened up.

“I just have to change first.”

“Why?”

Sara was wearing a pretty pale green vest and pants embroidered with flowers, but she waved an airy hand.

“Oh, Tanaca is very fussy about clothes.”

“Really?”

Her friend’s eyes sparkled.

“Yes. And I intend to use that to my advantage.”

When Sara danced off a few minutes later, Tammy shook her head. Tanaca wasn’t going to know what hit him.

She returned to her bedroom, but every time she closed her eyes, she saw the cages and Crot’s leering face. Finally she sighed and got back up again, wandering restlessly from room to room, before ending up back in her bedroom. Remembering

Sara's point about Tanaca's interest in what she was wearing, she opened her wardrobe again.

When she'd dressed previously, she'd just grabbed the first thing she found. Now she studied the selection more closely. Several more dresses, ranging from casual to formal, some pants and vests similar to what Sara had been wearing, and several sweaters. There were even a few nightgowns, and as she fingered a pretty pink silk nightie she found herself wondering if Vorkan would approve.

What would it feel like to have his big hands running over her body with only the thin silk between them? When she looked at herself in the mirror, she was blushing, and she sighed.

"Talk about school girl crushes."

Remembering their earlier conversation, she gave in to a sudden impulse. After breathing on the mirror, she sketched T+V on the glass and surrounded it with a heart. Then she made a face at herself in the mirror and swiped it away, but she was still smiling when she returned to the living room.

She settled back down on the couch, and a moment later Aqbar flew over to join her with a plaintive mew.

"Are you hungry, sweetie?"

Retrieving the tray with the remnants of her earlier meal, she offered the various items to him. He wasn't interested in the porridge, but he devoured the last of the small cakes before sitting back on his haunches with a piece of fruit. She noticed for the first time that his front paws were more like a bird's feet and he could easily hold the fruit and bring it to his mouth.

She tried her own piece of fruit, but her stomach wasn't happy about it. How long was it going to take for her to get over her reaction to Ithyian food? The nasty drink Vorkan had given her earlier didn't seem to have helped. She sighed and handed the rest of the slice to Aqbar.

He ate it eagerly, then curled up in her lap as she stroked his soft white fur. His purring was a soothing vibration against her uneasy stomach, and she finally managed to doze off. She

woke just as Sara returned, her eyes alight with excitement. Before Tammy could ask her what was going on, Vorkan came to the door with the evening meal. She couldn't help wishing that her friend had taken a little longer to return, then blushed again.

"Are you well?" he asked quietly after he put the tray down.

"I'm fine." The last thing she needed was more of that drink.

"You do not look well."

"I said, I'm fine."

He gave her a skeptical look, and Sara rolled her eyes.

"Stop hovering. She's fine. Go away."

He frowned, but he didn't argue. Instead, he leaned close enough to whisper in Tammy's ear.

"If you need me, activate the comm in your room and I will come immediately."

As he straightened, Sara winked at her and she knew she was blushing again.

"Thank you, Vorkan."

He nodded, looked from her to Sara, then left the room.

"I'm sorry, I know you probably wanted him to stay." Sara ignored her shy protest and hurried on, "but I have the most exciting news!"

"What is it? Are we going back to Earth?"

"What? No. Tanaca says it's impossible." Sara grabbed her hand. "I'm really sorry, Tammy. I know you have a lot more... connections back there. I'm sure you miss Alex."

She hadn't told Sara what had happened, not even during their time in the cages. Everything was already so miserable that she hadn't wanted to give Sara—or herself—more reason to be angry and upset. Now, she took a deep breath.

"I broke up with Alex."

"What? When?"

“Right before we were taken. I caught him with his hand up Sierra Martin’s skirt.”

Sara’s eyes widened. “Sierra? How old is she now?”

“Sixteen.”

“That slimy bastard. You should nail him to the—” Sara sighed. “I suppose it’s too late for that now. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I was angry and embarrassed to have made such a stupid mistake. I don’t seem to be a very good judge of character, do I?”

Her friend immediately shook her head.

“I don’t believe that. My guess is you knew all along that Alex was a slime ball—you just wanted to believe that his good traits would win out.”

Was Sara right? She pushed the thought aside to consider later.

“What is this big news?”

“Tanaca is going to a meeting of the Galactic Trade Alliance— isn’t that a mouthful?—and I’m going with him. As his slave!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Vorkan frowned as he finished reviewing the shuttle's safety check. He had been informed the previous evening that they were making a detour to Ratoria for a diplomatic mission. While he was grateful that he would have more time with Tammy, the change of plans made him uneasy. It didn't help that because of his additional duties he'd been unable to take the morning meal to Tammy himself.

She'd looked far too pale and fragile when he'd taken the evening meal to her cabin. The next time he brought food, he would remain and make sure she actually ate, whatever her friend's objections. But for now, he had to concentrate on his current duties.

The vast hangar contained a number of different vessels. The shuttles were sleek, silver ships designed primarily for short-term voyages. Two sets of engines nestled beneath attenuated wings on each side, and a ramp extended from the circular hatch to the ground below. Inside, a central seating and lounge area was located between the cockpit at the front of the craft, and a small bedroom, galley, and sanitary facility at the rear.

While the format of each shuttle was the same, the one chosen for this mission had been designated especially for diplomatic visits and was outfitted in the finest materials. The expensive paneling and luxurious fabrics reminded him uneasily of the vessel he had once stolen—the vessel that had set him on this path. He shoved aside the memory and went to join his squad as Tanaca approached in a swirl of dark robes, as icy and elegant as ever.

A quickly covered exclamation from one of his males made him realize that Tanaca was not alone. Sara was accompanying him—accompanying him in the type of provocative outfit worn by a pleasure slave, clearly visible beneath the open cloak she was wearing. When she saw him look at her, she bowed her head and stepped back a pace behind Tanaca, looking meeker and more submissive than he'd ever seen her.

What the fuck?

The arrogant bastard had refused to let him honorably claim Tammy as his mate while lecturing him on avoiding any perception that the Empire approved of stealing human females, and then he had taken one as his own slave? His vision turned red as he fought to get his anger under control. There had to be an explanation. He couldn't imagine Tanaca exhibiting such a flagrant disregard for Imperial law.

"Lord Tanaca," he greeted him politely, doing his best to hide his fury.

"Vorkan. Is the ship ready for launch?"

"Yes, sir. All systems are fully operational, and the pilot has plotted the course to the surface."

"Very well."

"And Mistress Sara is accompanying you?" he added as Sara entered the shuttle and Tanaca started to turn away.

The other male's face grew even colder.

"As you see."

"But—"

"My mission is of no concern to you, Officer Vorkan."

Tanaca entered the shuttle before he could register any further protest, and he fought off another wave of anger. There was nothing he could do to prevent them from leaving since Tanaca was the highest-ranking person on this ship. But he had every intention of finding out what that bastard was up to.

As soon as the shuttle door closed, he dismissed the rest of his squad and ordered the area cleared. He waited outside until the

ship departed, watching its track with narrowed eyes. Once it was out of visual range, he returned to the hangar.

The compact office in one corner of the vast space was rarely used any more, but it would be perfect for his purposes. He slipped inside and pulled up the old-fashioned terminal. Arrivals and departures were primarily monitored by the main communication center, but he set up a small monitor to track the shuttle to the surface.

One of the advantages of the older style terminal was that it was easy to mask its activities from the main ship's network. As soon as he had done so, he began evaluating Tanaca's movements over the past few months. Was the interception of the Ithyian ship the fortuitous circumstance it had appeared? Or was there a more devious motive at work?

Several hours later, he had yet to reach any definitive conclusions. Tanaca was more than capable of concealing his movements, but everything Vorkan could find indicated that he had been present on *Kaisar* for the majority of the previous six months. The interception of the Ithyian ship really did seem to be a coincidence. However, as he expanded the scope of his search, he noticed some anomalies in the behavior of certain Fleet ships—including the *Triumph*. He frowned at the terminal, then noticed the time. He needed to take Tammy some food and make sure that she ate.

As he turned off the screen and rose, he heard the distant swish of the heavy door panels and realized someone was entering the hangar. He certainly did not want to discuss his activities with anyone, especially without any concrete evidence, so he faded into the shadows along the wall with the familiarity of long practice. There had been a time when his survival depended on his ability to disappear, and he'd never lost that skill.

"He's arrived? What do you think—do we need to be worried?"

The voice belonged to Erulo, one of the senior communication officers. Why was he here? Unless he wanted to make sure his conversation wasn't monitored. The thick blast walls

surrounding the hangar would prevent any internal equipment from picking up the communication.

“His slave? Tanaca?” Erulo laughed. “I heard some mumblings when he left with her, but I didn’t think that cold bastard was interested in females, not even a little human fucktoy.”

His fists clenched, but he forced himself to remain silent and listen.

“I agree. Having him as part of our network would be a huge advantage. I’ll wait to hear back.”

Network? This was even worse than he’d feared. Just how deep did this rot go?

He was still frowning over the implications when he realized that Erulo hadn’t left. He was prowling around one of the transport ships, and his path would bring him directly past Vorkan’s hiding place. Rather than be discovered trying to conceal himself, he slipped back into the main area and walked briskly towards another shuttle, making no attempt to conceal his presence.

Erulo gave him a suspicious frown as he appeared.

“Vorkan? What are you doing here?”

He raised his eyebrow.

“It is part of my role to make sure that all vessels are properly maintained. When Lord Tanaca left, I noticed a stain beneath one of the shuttles and I came to inspect it. I might ask the same of you?”

“Some of the crew were considering having a quiet game of dice tonight, and I came to scout out the hangar.” Erulo gave him a big smile, but his eyes were still wary. “You interested?”

“No. And you’d better find somewhere else for your game. Looks like some of my males will be pulling a late shift tonight doing repairs.”

“Suit yourself.”

Erulo shrugged and headed for the doors as Vorkan followed him, his mind still churning. Tanaca was an icy bastard, and from everything Vorkan had ever heard, he was ruthless about gaining his objectives. But no one had ever suggested that those objectives weren't in support of the Empire. So why would he be taking a slave to a trade meeting?

Like Erulo, he'd never heard of Tanaca showing much interest in females. But perhaps, given his controlling nature, he would prefer taking a slave—someone whose actions he could dictate.

If that were true and Tanaca had decided to take Sara as his slave, what would prevent him from choosing a similar fate for Tammy? It was still possible that there was another explanation, but could he gamble Tammy's fate on it?

Tammy. He closed his eyes for a minute and imagined her pale, frightened face and sweet, tentative smile. She was so innocent, so vulnerable, and the thought of someone hurting her made anger haze his vision. She'd been held prisoner on the Ithyian ship for weeks. Was she in danger again now?

No. He would protect her no matter what it took—even if it meant sacrificing his career. For the past fifteen years he had dedicated his life to the Empire, but protecting her was more important.

Now all he had to do was figure out how he was going to do it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“**S**he’s mad. Absolutely mad,” Tammy muttered to herself as she paced the living room.

Sara had followed her announcement by explaining that she would only be playacting the role of a slave in order to help Tanaca. He was trying to discover whether or not the trade organization was involved in stealing human females. The explanation hadn’t made her feel any better.

“What if it’s just an excuse to really make you his slave?” she demanded, and Sara sighed.

“Why would he need an excuse? We’re already on his ship under his control. He doesn’t need to pretend.”

They’d spent most of the evening arguing about it, but it hadn’t done any good. Nor had it made any difference when she’d tried one last time this morning.

“Are you sure about this, Sara?” she asked again.

“Of course I am. I think it’s going to be fun.”

Sara refused to admit that it might be dangerous—or maybe the possibility only added to her excitement. Her friend had always been a risk taker. The fact that she insisted that Tammy remain on the ship because it was safe, didn’t help.

“Please just stay here where you’re safe. And watch over Aqbar for me,” Sara added, stroking his nose.

“I will,” she promised. “I just don’t like being separated from you—I keep thinking I’m never going to see you again.”

“Nonsense. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Sara hugged her and left, clearly still thrilled about the whole excursion. Tammy could even understand her excitement about leaving the ship, but it didn’t stop her from spending the morning worrying about her friend. Her restless movements even drove Aqbar into taking refuge in her bedroom, curling up on her pillows with his wing over his head.

The fact that she had nothing else to occupy her time only made it worse. She even briefly considered going to explore more of the ship, but the thought made her stomach twist.

Maybe I can ask Vorkan to take me.

As if in response to her thought, the door alarm chimed. It must be lunchtime. She went to answer the door, a smile already beginning to curve her lips. The prospect of seeing Vorkan immediately made her feel better. He hadn’t brought their breakfast, and she’d been surprised by how much she’d missed him.

But instead of the familiar large red male, a stranger waited outside. Tall and lean with opalescent lavender skin, he had long dark purple hair pulled back in a tight braid, both his hair and skin shimmering in the lights from the corridor.

Her heart started to pound, her fingers clenching on the door panel.

Who was he? Vorkan had promised her she would be safe—but he wasn’t here.

“What do you want?”

Her voice came out a lot shakier than she’d intended, and a fleeting look of comprehension crossed his face. He immediately stepped back and bowed his head.

“I am Quincit, the ship’s medic. I did not mean to alarm you.”

Medic? That was even worse. She shivered as she remembered the bright light in her eyes, the invasive hands, the sound of laughter...

“I don’t need a doctor,” she said quickly, reaching for the control to close the door.

“Do human females not seek medical assistance in your circumstances?”

Her mouth went dry.

“My circumstances?” she whispered.

His voice was calm, soothing, but his eyes were intent on her face as he nodded.

“Did you not know that you were with child?”

The room started to spin. She heard a muttered oath before cool hands closed over her shoulders, holding her upright as he guided her into the room and down onto the couch. He gently urged her head down towards her knees.

“Breathe,” he ordered in a calm, reassuring voice.

She obeyed, taking a few deep breaths until the world stopped spinning. Quincit was holding her wrist in his hand, cool fingers resting over her pulse, but it felt too much like a restraint and she snatched her arm away.

He didn't try to stop her, even moving away a little, although he remained on the couch studying her face. His eyes were purple too, she realized, not the black she had originally assumed.

“Did you know?” he asked again.

She darted a glance at the door, not sure if she was more terrified that it was closed or reassured that no one else could overhear their conversation. As long as it was just a conversation...

Edging a little farther away, she shook her head.

“No.” Her sickness on the Ithyian ship, her uneasy stomach, her exhaustion—the pieces fell into place with a horrifying finality. “How did you know?”

“It is routine procedure to scan all new arrivals on the ship. When I did the initial scan, I noticed that you appeared undernourished, more so than your companion.”

“The Ithyians gave us these biscuit-type things to eat, but I couldn't keep them down. It just didn't occur to me that...”

She bit her lip. “That’s how you found out?”

“The scan is mainly used to check on the overall health of a... guest, as well as check for any possible diseases.” He sighed. “I am ashamed to admit that I did not examine it more thoroughly until Lord Tanaca raised the issue.”

“He knows?”

She did her best to fight back the feeling of panic. Despite Sara’s trust in Tanaca, his cold face and icy demeanor made her nervous—not to mention this new scheme with her friend as his “slave.”

Quincit quickly shook his head.

“No. His... concerns were of a different nature, but I decided to go over the scans to look for additional information. That is when I realized that you were with child.”

With child. Her eyes closed in despair. What the hell was she going to do now?

“I would like to perform a more thorough examination—to check on your health and the health of the child.”

Those fragments of memory flashed through her head again, and she fought down another rush of panic. He might be a medic, but she didn’t know anything about him. She certainly didn’t trust him, despite his calm voice and soothing manner.

“I’m sorry. I... I can’t do this. Not now.”

As hard as it was, she knew she would have to get over her fear. She just didn’t think she could do it so quickly, not while she was still reeling from his news.

He hesitated, then nodded.

“I will return tomorrow. Unless you would prefer to come to the medical unit?”

“No!” She took a deep breath, trying to control her panic. “I mean, I’d rather not.”

“I could bring a portable scanner,” he suggested. “It would not be as comprehensive as a physical examination, but it would provide more detailed results than the initial scan.”

“It’s just a machine? You wouldn’t need to... to touch me?”

“No.” His eyes were far too discerning.

“I think I could do that.”

And maybe she could get Vorkan to stay with her. *Vorkan!* How would he react once he heard the news? Would all that warmth and concern disappear? *No.* She refused to believe that his caring attitude was just an act. *You’ve been wrong before,* her inner voice whispered, but she ignored it.

“Very well. I will return tomorrow afternoon. Do you have any questions in the meantime?”

“I’m still having a hard time eating, even though I know I need to eat.”

Quincit nodded thoughtfully.

“Nausea is common in the early stages of pregnancy. I can give you something that will help.”

“It isn’t that terrible rejuvenating mixture Vorkan gave me, is it? Because that didn’t help at all.”

He looked amused, but he shook his head as he rose to his feet.

“It’s just a tablet. I will have it sent over to you.” He hesitated.

“I can see that my presence alarms you, but I assure you, Mistress Tammy, that I am here to assist you however I can.”

“Thank you.”

She managed to force a smile to her lips as she followed him to the door, but as soon as the panel closed behind him, the tears started to come. She stumbled back to the couch as Aqbar gave a distressed hiss and flew down to join her. She clutched him to her chest as she tried to regain control. She was pregnant. *Pregnant.* It didn’t seem possible.

It must have been that last time with Alex. But how? They were always so careful—or at least she was. She shook her head. The *how* really wasn’t important. The future was what mattered now.

She pressed her hand against her stomach, trying to imagine a baby inside her. The tears started all over again, and she knew

they weren't all for herself. Under any other circumstances she would have been overjoyed, but what kind of life would her child have? She was going to have to find a way to support them both on an alien planet.

“What am I going to do, Aqbar?”

His blue eyes glowed as he nuzzled against her, then licked her cheek. Despite her tears, she managed to laugh.

“It's okay. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cry all over you too. I'm just a little overwhelmed.”

Overwhelmed? She was absolutely terrified. Her thoughts tumbled over each other, and she was still staring blankly at the wall when the door alarm chimed again.

CHAPTER NINE

Vorkan knew something was wrong as soon as he entered Tammy's rooms. If anything, she looked even paler than the previous day. Was she aware of Sara's fate? He hadn't intended to discuss it with her because he didn't want to upset her, but if she already knew...

"What's wrong, little one?" he asked gently.

She opened her mouth, then shook her head. A tear rolled down her pale cheek and he gave in to temptation. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her over to the couch. To his relief, she didn't resist, simply snuggling against his chest, her head on his shoulder. He felt the dampness on his shirt from her tears, but she slowly regained control of herself.

"I seem to keep ending up crying in your arms," she murmured against his chest.

"I told you that I do not mind. But why are you crying?"

She sighed, then lifted her head to look at him, and he saw that she was twisting her fingers together nervously.

"Nothing."

She wouldn't look at him, and he knew she was lying.

"Are you worried about Sara?"

"Sara?" She tensed for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't know. I mean I know it's her choice, and I know she thinks it's an adventure, but..."

Her choice? Was that possible? Imperial law did allow for limited-term slave contracts, but it was hard to believe that Tammy's impetuous friend would have made such a decision. Would she have had any idea of what it would involve?

His anger over Tanaca's behavior flared again. At least he'd had every intention of claiming Tammy honorably, as his mate, not his slave—a course he still intended to pursue as soon as possible. How to pursue it was another matter, but he pushed that worry aside temporarily to focus on his female.

"If you were not crying because of Sara, why were you crying?"

"You don't think I have reason to cry?"

It was a reasonable response, but he still thought she was being evasive. Before he could pursue it, she changed the subject.

"How long until we reach the sanctuary planet?"

"I'm not sure. Lord Tanaca ordered this latest detour and I don't know how long his business will take."

She didn't seem surprised at his statement, only nodding thoughtfully.

"And what will this planet—Sherae—be like? Sara said that's where we were going."

Another of Tanaca's lies. Sherai wasn't an official sanctuary planet. He also found it unlikely that Tanaca would be willing to take Sara there since they offered alternatives to slavery. But how could he tell Tammy about the lies without causing her unnecessary distress? She felt so fragile in his arms.

"I have never been there," he said truthfully, and immediately changed the subject. "Would you like something to eat now?"

"Not really, but I suppose I have to eat."

He reluctantly lifted her off his lap, then retrieved the tray he'd brought and carried it over to her. He'd ordered several of the sandwiches she'd received the first day, and he was pleased to see that she at least attempted to eat one, although it took her several minutes to finish it.

“I don’t think I can eat any more,” she said apologetically, and he fought back an urge to insist.

“You really need to eat more if you wish to regain your strength. Are you sure you don’t wish to see the medic?”

He braced himself for the same panic she’d exhibited before, but although she twisted her fingers together again, she didn’t immediately object.

“Maybe.” She looked down at her hands, then back up at him. “Would you, umm, accompany me?”

“Of course.”

He had a sudden rush of entirely inappropriate arousal at the thought of her delicate naked body stretched out and waiting to be examined, immediately followed by a flare of possessive jealousy. No other male should see her in that position.

“There are no female medics on this ship.”

His voice dropped to a throaty growl and she gave him a surprised look.

“That’s okay. I mean, male doctors are very common on Earth too. But you will be there, right?”

“Definitely.” He still didn’t like the idea of another male that close to his female, but knowing that he would be present helped soothe his primitive instincts. “Shall I make arrangements for us to go to the medical bay later today?”

“No!” She sounded panicked again, but then she took a deep breath and managed a shaky smile. “I need some more time before I’m ready to... talk about it.”

“Very well,” he agreed.

“Do you ever get off the ship?” she asked suddenly.

“Of course. Why?”

“I’m tired of staring at the same four walls.”

“Would you like to accompany me on a walk around the ship? There is a small garden on the upper deck that contains plants from various planets.”

He felt her shudder, even though she tried to hide it.

“That’s not what I meant. I want fresh air and space to move around. I suppose that this sanctuary planet will at least allow me to have that. Won’t it?”

“Is that what you want, little one?” he asked gently. “To be back on the surface?”

“God, yes.”

Her obvious eagerness inspired him. That was the answer—get her off the ship and out of Tanaca’s—out of the Empire’s hands. There were hundreds of planets where they could disappear. All he had to do was determine the safest place for her.

“I will make sure it happens,” he told her, and she smiled up at him.

“You’re very sweet.”

“That is not a term commonly used to describe me,” he said gruffly, glad that his skin did not reveal his emotions as hers did.

“It should be.”

She hesitated for a second, then leaned forward and placed her mouth tentatively against his. He froze, clenching his fists to stop himself from pulling her into his arms. She drew back, giving him an uncertain look.

“I’m sorry. I thought you wouldn’t mind me kissing you.”

“Mind?” He groaned. “I can think of nothing I would like more, but you said you needed more time.”

She bit her lip, then gave him an enchantingly shy, provocative smile.

“That was yesterday. More time has passed.”

This time he kissed her, taking her mouth in a slow, sensual kiss that allowed him to enjoy her soft lips as he explored the delicious taste of her mouth. He moved his lips back and forth, then nudged the seam of her lips with his tongue, asking for entrance. With a tiny gasp, her lips parted. He delved deeper,

tasting her, savoring her, until he reluctantly pulled back, breathing heavily.

She looked up at him, her eyes dazed and her lips pink and swollen, and his horns pulsed with arousal.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered.

He cupped her face, kissing her again as he used his free hand to stroke down over her body. His cock throbbed in the same rhythm as his horns as her nipples stiffened into perfect little points. She arched up with a small whimper as he brushed his thumb across one. He slid his hand into the neck of her gown, groaning again at the feel of her silky skin beneath his rough palm. She gasped, then moaned softly, and he growled with approval. The sound of her pleasure drove him wild, making him desperate for more.

He pushed the fabric aside to reveal her luscious little breast, shockingly pale against the deep red of his skin—pale except for the rosy peak of her nipple. He gripped the tempting bud between two fingers and tugged. She gave a small, shocked cry and he eased her back against his arm, cradling her as his hand continued to stroke her sweet curves. His hand drifted down to her hip, still temptingly round and soft despite her fragility, and she suddenly tensed. He immediately started to draw back, but she put her hand over his, clamping it against her side.

“No. Don’t stop.”

His erection jerked against her ass, and despite her plea, her body tightened even more.

“I think perhaps you need more time, little one.”

“I don’t want more time. I just want to forget!”

Her plaintive cry broke through his haze of desire, bringing up a flood of unpleasant memories.

“Forget what? Forget that you are with me?”

Anger had hardened his voice, and her eyes widened.

“What? No. Of course not.” She pushed against his arm and sat up, tugging her gown back across those perfect little

breasts. “Why would you say that?”

“I know that most females find my appearance distasteful. I was never a handsome male, and the life I have led has left its marks.”

He gestured at his scars, but he was fully aware that they were only the surface indications of his previous life. He should never have let it go this far between them without telling her about his past.

“I knew who I was with,” she said quietly. “That’s why I felt safe enough to try and forget for a little while. Not you, but everything else that has happened.”

He sighed, then gently lifted her off his lap, ignoring the persistent, throbbing ache in his cock.

“I am honored by your trust, but there are things you do not know.” Color flooded her cheeks, and she dropped her eyes as he continued, “You were right yesterday. We need more time.”

Time he intended to make sure they had—but not here.

“I suppose so. But Vorkan...” She traced a delicate, and surprisingly erotic finger down the scars on his neck. “I have never found your appearance distasteful.”

Fuck. Why did he suddenly feel as if he were the fragile one? He forced himself to nod rather than pull her back into his arms.

“I am...” grateful, overwhelmed, thrilled, “glad.”

He rose reluctantly to his feet.

“I have duties to attend to this afternoon. But if you will permit me, I will bring you the evening meal and we can... talk.”

CHAPTER TEN

Why did those words always sound so ominous, Tammy wondered after Vorkan left. It wasn't that she didn't want to know more about him, but she wasn't sure if she was ready to reveal her own secret. She put her hand over her stomach. A baby. For the first time she felt a spark of joy at the thought, despite the terrible timing and the uncertainties of the future. She'd always wanted children, wanted a family, and now that dream was coming true.

Aqbar wandered out of the bedroom, yawning, and she shook her finger at him.

"There you are. Not much of a chaperone, are you? Where were you when I was on the verge of ravishing Vorkan?"

Aqbar's stare was as disdainful as that of any Earth cat before he climbed up on the couch, settled on her lap, and started purring loudly. She stroked his soft fur as her thoughts returned to Vorkan. Had she actually been about to let him make love to her? It had felt so good to be touched, to have his arms around her. For a few minutes, she'd actually forgotten the terror of the Ithyian ship, and her uncertainties about Quincit's revelation. But trying to ignore it didn't change anything.

What would Vorkan do when he learned she was pregnant? He had gone out of his way to take care of her, and he had been so gentle and patient—except when he was kissing her so hard she could barely breathe. She shivered at the memory, arousal still humming through her veins, and Aqbar opened one eye to look at her before closing it again.

“I know, I know. I have more important things to think about right now.”

Like how she was going to support herself and the baby. At least Sara would be part of their family as well. Unfortunately, neither of them had skills that would translate to this new life. *Do we?*

Maybe she was being too pessimistic. Sara had had a high-powered career before she turned to drama. Even if there wasn't anything similar, there was no reason to suppose that aliens didn't have theaters. Maybe Sara's dramatic skills could be useful, especially if she could learn their written language. Of course, it wasn't a particularly profitable occupation, at least not on Earth, but it would be something.

As for herself... She sighed. Her psychology degree wouldn't be much use—or would it? She'd always believed that humans were fundamentally the same, no matter how rich or poor or where they came from. Were the aliens she had met really so different?

The thought startled her into sitting up, and Aqbar gave a protesting mewl.

“Sorry, sweetie.”

She gave him a soothing pat as she considered the idea. If she had met Tanaca on Earth, what would she have thought of him? That rigid control suggested an unhappy childhood, with distant or uncaring parents—a childhood he had overcome with his intelligence and discipline.

I'd love to work with children again, she thought wistfully.

And what of Vorkan? He was more of a contradiction with his gentle patience and his fierce exterior. She remembered how quick he had been to dismiss himself and assume she was repulsed by his appearance. A woman who had treated him badly perhaps? Or was there more to his past?

Would she even have time to discover it? The question made her chest ache. *I'm really going to miss him,* she realized. At least they would be able to spend time together until they reached their destination. And maybe, just maybe, he would

come and visit her? Assuming that the knowledge of her pregnancy didn't make him run for the hills. Her instincts told her to trust him, but what if she were wrong?

The door chimed, and she rose, placing Aqbar on the floor.

Even though he hadn't been gone for long, she expected to see Vorkan. Instead, a young crew member bowed his head.

"I beg your pardon, Mistress Tammy, but I was asked to deliver this medication."

Her hand went to her stomach almost instinctively as he offered her a small container.

"Thank you."

He handed it over and immediately retreated. She closed the door panel and opened the container to find a single, unmarked tablet. Aqbar gave her a curious look as he flew up and perched on the back of the couch. She took a deep breath and went to the bathroom. After a moment's hesitation, she swallowed the tablet with a gulp of water.

She returned to the couch to try and come up with ways to use her counseling skills on the sanctuary planet, but either the tablet or her pregnancy made her sleepy. Aqbar was warm and cozy on her lap, and it would be nice to drift off for a few minutes. Just a few...

When she woke, Vorkan was beside her. The sight of his face made her heart skip a beat, and she smiled up at him. He returned her smile, but he seemed oddly tense.

"I apologize for entering without permission, but I was concerned when you did not answer the door."

She nodded sleepily, then frowned as the realization of what he'd said penetrated.

"Wait a minute. You can do that? Can anyone else just come walking in on me?"

"I can do it because I have certain... skills. No one else on board has those skills. Although I suspect Lord Tanaca probably had overrides for all of the locks on the ship," he added, frowning.

She breathed a sigh of relief and smiled at him again.

“That’s all right then, especially since Tanaca isn’t even here. I’m just shocked I slept through the door chime.”

“As am I.” He gave her a worried look. “Are you ill?”

“I’m fine.” The memory of Quincit’s visit churned in her stomach, but she made herself give him a reassuring smile. “As a matter of face, the medic sent me some medication for nausea.”

He growled, his body tensing.

“I thought I was going to accompany you when he examined you.”

“He didn’t examine me,” she said quickly. “I want you to be there when he does.”

Would he still want to come when he found out why she needed to be examined?

He relaxed visibly and nodded.

“Good. Let me get our meal, and then we will talk.”

He had brought an enormous amount of food this time, and she gave him a puzzled frown as Aqbar started nosing around for treats.

“I thought we would eat together tonight,” he said, looking oddly embarrassed. “If that is acceptable?”

“Of course. It’s kind of like our first date.” The words popped out before she thought about them, and she immediately blushed.

“A date?”

“You know, when a man and a woman spend time together. Sometimes they go somewhere together, and sometimes they just talk or...”

Her cheeks were definitely burning now, but the flames were beginning to burn in his eyes again.

“Ah. A courtship ritual. To establish a mating bond.”

“It’s not always that serious,” she said quickly. “Sometimes it’s just for fun.”

He regarded her for a moment, his expression unreadable, then leaned forward.

“But sometimes it is more.”

His warm breath feathered across her ear, sending a pleasant shiver down her spine, and then he drew back and began uncovering their meal.

“Now, little one, you must eat.”

The medication had definitely helped. She still couldn’t manage a large portion, but she ate more than she had in weeks and it rested easily in her stomach. He looked pleased as he consumed his own much larger meal. Even though he clearly wanted her to eat more, he removed the plates, then poured two drinks and rejoined her on the couch.

“Tell me about these dates of yours, little one. Do you have any particular rituals?”

She smiled and shook her head.

“Not really. Mostly it’s just kind of awkward and uncomfortable until you get to know someone. Or think you know them.”

A look she couldn’t read flashed across his face.

“Everyone has secrets,” he said quietly, and her heart skipped a beat. Did he know?

Her pulse raced as she waited for him to continue, but he only took a sip of his drink.

“Tell me about your life on Earth,” he said finally.

“I am—I was—a school counselor, working with children. I love—loved—my job.” She fought back the impulse to cry again, and made herself smile. “That’s why I know Sara. She teaches drama in the same school system. We just hit it off the first time we met, and we’ve been best friends ever since. As much as I hate the fact that she’s here too, I’m also really grateful. We think our other friend Rita was also taken by the

Ithyians, but she was by herself. At least neither of us are alone.”

“You would never voluntarily leave her, would you?”

“Of course not.”

Once again she couldn’t read the expression on his face before he nodded slowly, then reached down and handed her the other glass.

“You aren’t drinking.”

She reached for it, then hesitated.

“Is it alcoholic?”

“Only mildly.”

“I still think I’d better pass. I don’t want to risk upsetting my stomach again.”

“Is there something you would prefer?”

“Is there an alien version of hot chocolate? Something hot and sweet?”

He went to the kitchen area and returned a moment later, presenting her with a steaming mug. She took a cautious sip, then sighed in bliss. It wasn’t hot chocolate, but it was warm and creamy, and the warmth traveled down her throat and settled comfortably in her stomach.

“This is perfect,” she said happily.

“I am happy to hear it.”

He sat next to her again and took a sip of his own drink, regarding her over the rim. She flushed under his heated gaze and shifted a little, crossing her legs, then realized that she had exposed even more leg as her gown rode up. His eyes drifted down, watching as she quickly tucked it back into place.

“You were telling me about your life,” he reminded her, and she nodded.

He was clearly interested in her past, but he skillfully avoided answering any questions about his own. Her only clue came when she was telling him about a few of her more difficult

cases. His questions about the children's backgrounds were surprisingly insightful—too insightful for someone who had never experienced the same type of trauma. Just how bad had his childhood been?

As if he sensed the direction of her thoughts, he set aside his empty glass and took her hand. He raised it to his mouth and nibbled at her fingers. Sparks of pleasure shot through her, radiating up her arm to her chest, and she shivered.

“Tell me, little one. What else do you do on these dates?”

His eyes were dark and intent as they fixed on her face, and she trembled again.

“After we talk about our lives, we try to decide if we want to see each other again, and whether or not we think we might be compatible.”

“And then what?” he prompted when she didn't go on.

“And then... it depends.”

“On what?”

She could feel the flush spreading up her cheeks, but she managed to shrug casually.

“On what we both want. Maybe just a goodnight kiss. Maybe more.”

“I would like to kiss you again. Just a kiss,” he added, as if reminding himself.

“I'd like that too.”

She tried to reach for him, but her arm suddenly felt strangely heavy. He leaned over and picked her up, cradling her against his chest. As he did she looked down and saw Aqbar in a limp heap on the ground.

“Vorkan? What—” Her tongue didn't seem to be working properly, and her eyes started to drift shut. “What's happening?”

“You're fine, little one. Just rest now.”

He leaned forward and brushed his mouth across her forehead, his voice low and urgent in her ears.

“You’ll be safe now, Tammy. Trust me.”

Before she could reply, the world went away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Vorkan cradled Tammy's limp body against his chest as guilt swept over him. He had considered simply telling her that they needed to leave the ship, but he'd suspected that she would insist on waiting for Sara—and she had confirmed his suspicion. He'd given her the smallest possible dose of the sedative, but that didn't ease his guilt.

He stroked his thumb gently across her cheek, but she didn't respond and her pulse was slow and even. Placing her carefully on the couch, he rose to continue his preparations, then noticed the Orosz sprawled on the floor. The position struck him as unusual, and when he bent down over him, he caught the faint sweetness of the sedative. Aqbar must have sampled some of Tammy's drink without either of them noticing. Perhaps that was why it had taken so long to affect her.

He would take him along, he decided. She was attached to the small creature and he would be safer with Tammy than on the ship. He tucked Aqbar next to her, then went to get a pillow case to carry him in. He was returning to the living area when he caught sight of the wardrobe. *Fuck*. He hadn't considered clothing.

He opened the door and swore again. What type of clothing did a female need? Sighing, he grabbed a few silky gowns, plus a couple of soft outer garments in case she felt cold. He added them to the pillowcase, then checked his comm as he returned to her. Good. The shift change had already taken place. The majority of the crew would be sleeping, and the

crew members now on duty would be settling in for a quiet night.

He went to work, quickly jamming the security cameras along their route. If anyone noticed, it would appear to be a temporary interference. He carefully settled Aqbar in with the clothing, then lifted Tammy and placed her gently over his left shoulder so that his weapon hand was free.

Picking up the pillowcase, he quietly opened the door panel, relieved to find the corridor beyond still empty. The disadvantage of disabling the monitors along their route was that he was also blind to anyone traveling the same way. Fortunately, his luck held and he made the journey to the hangar without encountering anyone. The hangar monitors had been set on a loop so there was even less chance that anyone would notice them, but he carried Tammy straight to the waiting shuttle.

He'd deliberately chosen one of the smaller, older vessels for the same reason he had chosen to use the older terminal—it was easier to disable the tracking device and disconnect the communication to the main ship. This shuttle didn't have a full bedroom, but he pulled down the large bunk at the rear of the vessel and carefully placed her on it, then freed Aqbar and placed him next to her.

Once she was settled, he hurried to the cockpit. The most dangerous part of their escape was next. He had disabled the alarms that would alert the bridge to the opening of any of the hangar doors, but it was possible that he had missed a connection. It was also remotely possible that a sharp-eyed crew member would physically spot the shuttle leaving. He muttered a quick prayer, then raised one of the smaller doors.

No alarms sounded, but he didn't hesitate, launching the shuttle as quickly as he dared. As soon as they were through, he sent the command to close the door again, then angled swiftly away from the ship. There was no sign of pursuit and the *Triumph* continued in its peaceful orbit around Ratoria.

He breathed a sigh of relief, set a monitor to watch for any activity in their vicinity, then began plotting their course. He

had decided to take Tammy to Maskah, a backwater planet a considerable distance from the central sectors. He'd heard of it during his less... legitimate activities, but it seemed like a viable option. It had an active spaceport, so he would be able to find work, but it received only minimal Imperial oversight, which meant they should be able to avoid detection.

However, they needed supplies before the journey—and he needed to discuss his suspicions about the Fleet with someone. He sighed and set a course for the third moon of Endoran, then went to check on Tammy. She was still sleeping, her pretty face soft and innocent, and guilt washed over him again. Would she forgive him for having taken her? The worry that she might not weighed heavily on his mind, but at least she was safe under his protection now. He had to accept the possibility that he might have ruined any chance for anything more.

Exhaustion suddenly washed over him. He hadn't slept the previous night and he'd spent the day preparing for their escape. He dimmed the lights, toed off his boots, and climbed in behind her, carefully wrapping his arm around her waist. His cock immediately started to stiffen, but he ignored it. He would do nothing more until they'd had a chance to talk, but for now he let himself take comfort in her presence.

CHAPTER TWELVE

T ammy woke with the nagging sense that something was wrong even though she felt surprisingly comfortable. Aqbar was nestled against her stomach and warmth radiated from behind her. She started to stretch—and a big hand slid from her waist to her hip. Startled, she opened her eyes and immediately froze. Where the hell was she? Despite the dimness, she was quite sure she wasn't in her room on the *Triumph*.

Moving as little as possible, she peered cautiously back over her shoulder. There was just enough light for her to make out Vorkan's face. They weren't touching anywhere except his hand on her hip, and he didn't move, his breathing slow and even. Her immediate rush of relief was replaced by more questions. How had she ended up here, wherever *here* was, and why was Vorkan with her?

The events of the previous evening began drifting back and she suddenly remembered that strange, heavy tiredness. Had he drugged her?

She started to slip away from him and—

“How long have you been awake?”

His voice made her jump, and she turned back to see that his eyes were open.

“Long enough to realize that you kidnapped me. Didn't you?”

“Kidnapped?” He had the nerve to sound appalled at the accusation, but then he sighed heavily. “I did not think of it in

those terms. I had to get you away from the ship, and I knew you wouldn't willingly leave without Sara."

"Damn right I wouldn't."

Pain swept over her, along with the aching weight of betrayal. Once again she'd made the stupid mistake of believing in someone who wasn't worthy of that trust, and this hurt much, much more than Alex's betrayal.

"I trusted you," she whispered. "How could you do this?"

"Because you weren't safe on that ship, little one."

"Don't call me that!"

She shook off his hand and tried to stand, dislodging Aqbar in the process. He mewled a protest and she gathered him up in her arms, burying her face in his soft fur as she took a few shaky breaths, trying to compose herself.

When she looked up, Vorkan was sitting on the edge of the bed watching her. The sorrow on his face tugged at her heart but she resolutely pushed it aside. He had betrayed her.

"Why did you do this? Why did you take me away from Sara, especially after I told you how much it meant to me that we were together?"

Her voice started rising as she spoke, and Aqbar hissed, picking up on her mood. She released him, and he flew back to the bed, glaring at Vorkan as he answered her.

"I took you because I can't stand to think of you ending up like her—as a slave."

His words shocked her into silence for a moment, then she gave a hollow laugh.

"A slave? She isn't a slave. It's just some ridiculous plan she and Tanaca came up with."

"Are you sure?" he asked slowly, and her heart skipped a beat.

"What do you mean, am I sure? Of course I am. She told me herself."

“I believe it is possible that she doesn’t know the extent of Tanaca’s plans for her.”

“And you do?” She tried to sound skeptical, but her voice shook.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I overheard one of the communication officers talking to a contact on the planet. He certainly implied that Tanaca had claimed Sara as his slave. And it’s not just that. I have uncovered some anomalies in the flight patterns of Imperial ships—anomalies that could indicate that they are protecting slavers. Who better than someone like Lord Tanaca to oversee such traffic?”

She listened in growing horror, her stomach churning.

“Sara...” she whispered, then gave him a frantic look. “We have to go back, right now. We have to get her out of there!”

“No, not until you are safe.”

His eyes were sympathetic, but his expression was absolutely implacable. She pressed her hand to her mouth as her stomach roiled again, and he quickly rose and opened a concealed door to reveal a small bathroom. She made it just in time to be suddenly, violently sick.

He’d followed her in, and he stroked her back as he murmured soothingly. For a second she wanted to lean into the comfort he offered, but then she shrugged him off.

“Leave me alone. I don’t want you touching me.”

“Very well, little... Tammy.”

His voice was heavy and sad, but she refused to turn around, and a second later the door slid closed. She rose to her feet and washed her face and mouth, trying desperately to think of a plan, any plan. Her stomach churned again, and she pressed a hand to it, then froze. The baby. What if something happened to the baby?

She walked back out of the bathroom like a zombie. He had turned up the lights and she noted distantly that they were in some type of small ship, but it wasn’t important.

“Did you drug me?” Her lips felt numb.

“Only with a very mild sedative.”

She swayed, and he immediately reached for her.

“Don’t touch me,” she hissed.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

She opened her mouth to tell him, then pressed her lips together again. He’d already betrayed her—she wasn’t going to trust him again, especially with such precious news.

“What’s wrong is that you drugged me.” Her voice threatened to break but she kept going. “You kidnapped me. You took me away from the only friend I have in this world. You refuse to take me back to her.”

“I have to make sure you’re safe,” he said, his voice desperate.

She would have laughed at the irony if she hadn’t been so close to hysterics.

“You may have destroyed me instead.”

There was nowhere to go in the small cabin, so she returned to the bed, huddling in the corner and refusing to look at him. Aqbar settled at her back, and she heard him hiss as Vorkan approached.

“Tammy, please...”

She didn’t look around, and a few minutes later she heard him move away. *Good*, she told herself fiercely, ignoring the fact that in spite of everything that had happened, part of her still longed for the comfort of his arms.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Fuck. Vorkan swore as he went to the cockpit, determined to allow Tammy what little privacy he could in the small ship. That could not possibly have gone any worse. He had expected her to be upset. He hadn't expected her to be quite so hurt, or to look as if all the spirit had been drained from her.

Unable to stay away, he returned to check on her a short time later and found her sleeping, her face pale and tear-stained. Aqbar hissed warningly as he approached, but he had no intention of trying to touch her. He was grateful to think that she might find some escape in her sleep.

She slept for several more hours, but when he heard her stir he returned to her side.

"There is food available if you will eat."

"I don't want your—" she began fiercely, then stopped and put a hand over her stomach. "I suppose I should try."

He had stocked the shuttle with the foods she had preferred and quickly brought her a selection. She didn't seem enthusiastic about any of it, but he was pleased to see that she ate a reasonable amount.

"You are no longer nauseated?"

"No. No thanks to you," she snapped, then bit her lip. For the first time since she'd woken she actually looked at him.

"Where are we going?"

"Right now we are headed to Franar, the third moon of Endoran. I have an... acquaintance there with whom I wish to

confer. I also need to stock the shuttle for our final destination of Maskah.”

“Would it do any good to tell you I don’t want to go to Franar, let alone Maskah?”

“You will be safe there.”

“Maybe. But even if I am, I will be safe and alone,” she said bitterly.

He wanted to assure her that he would be with her, but he suspected it was not the right moment.

“I will provide for you.”

“Are you going to provide Sara for me?”

“If I can. That is one of the reasons I wish to stop at Franar—to see if there is a way to get her away from Lord Tanaca.”

Her expression lightened for the first time.

“Really?”

“If the information I have uncovered is as useful as I believe, he may be willing to let her go in exchange.” Or if it was as dangerous. “But I cannot guarantee that he will negotiate,” he added reluctantly.

“At least it’s a chance. Thank you.” She hesitated, then gave him a tentative look. “Is there a medic on Franar?”

Alarm immediately raced through him.

“Why? What’s wrong? Has the nausea returned? I should have asked Quincit for more of that medication as well.”

She leaned towards him, her expression curiously urgent.

“What do you mean, as well?”

“I meant that when I asked him for the tranquilizer I should have asked for the anti-nausea medication also.”

“The tranquilizer—did he know it was for me?”

He frowned at her.

“Of course. How else could he judge the dosage? I told him that you were having trouble sleeping.”

“When? When did you ask him?” she asked urgently.

“Right before our evening meal. Why?”

Her eyes closed as she gave a long sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank God. That means he knew.”

“Knew? Knew what, little one?” he demanded.

A variety of expressions played across her pretty face as she looked at him, but she finally shook her head.

“I just meant that since he knew it was for me, it was safe.”

He was quite sure that she wasn't telling him everything, but even though it hurt, he couldn't blame her under the circumstances. As much as he wanted to assure her that she could trust him, he knew it would take time for her to believe in him again.

“Apparently it was even safe enough for Aqbar,” he said instead.

“Aqbar? You drugged him too?”

“I believe it is more accurate to say he drugged himself.” He nodded at where Aqbar was sneaking a piece of fruit off her plate. “He must have stolen some of your drink.”

“Is that why you brought him?”

“I brought him because I thought you would find comfort in his company.”

Comfort she was no longer willing to take from him.

“I'm not sure that thank you is appropriate, but I'm glad he's here. But now Sara has no one. Except Tanaca,” she added with a sigh. “I really hope you're wrong about him. Sara likes him. A lot. Of course, it wouldn't be the first time a woman has been fooled by a man.”

He winced, guilt stabbing at his chest again.

“I'm willing to consider the possibility that I am mistaken.”

“But not willing enough to take me back?”

“No,” he said firmly, steeling his resolve. “Your safety comes first.”

“And if you find out you’re wrong?”

He hesitated, not sure how to answer her. He had never intended to return, although he had recognized that she would want her friend to join her. But if he was wrong and Sara was safe with Tanaca, a high-ranking government official could provide more for Tammy than he would be able to give her. He sighed.

“As long as I am sure you will be protected, I will take you back and face the consequences.”

Her small brows drew together.

“What consequences?”

For disrupting the ship’s security system, absconding with a shuttle, and stealing a human female? He shuddered to think, but he only shrugged.

“I’m not sure.”

It was her turn to sigh.

“Look, what you did was wrong—very wrong—but I’m willing to concede that you thought you were acting in my best interests. Surely they will understand that.”

He was equally sure that they would not, but he didn’t contradict her.

“Does that mean you forgive me?” he asked instead.

“I don’t know that I would go that far.”

Despite the discouraging words, her face was softer than it had been so far and he allowed himself to hope.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Vorkan's hope increased as the day passed. There was very little to occupy their time on board, and she eventually softened enough to ask him some questions.

"Where were you born?"

He didn't really want to talk about his past, but he supposed he owed her that much. And if he still wanted any chance of claiming her as his mate, he needed to tell her the truth.

"I was born on Kaisar."

"Kaisar? As in the Kaisarian Empire Kaisar?"

"Yes. It is the center of the Empire. The Emperor resides there and many of the nobles have estates. The majority of the planet is devoted to the government and the bureaucracy surrounding it." He couldn't prevent a bitter laugh. "But there is a lot of rot beneath the surface."

"I don't believe you were part of that rot."

"You're wrong."

He hesitated for a long moment, then decided that the time had come. He didn't want any more secrets between them.

"I grew up in the slums—slums most of the nobles refuse to admit even exist. I don't know who my father was. My mother was a prostitute. She was never around much, but she disappeared for good when I was about eight."

He had waited and waited in their tiny room for her to return before hunger had finally driven him out on the streets. He'd

ended up scavenging through garbage for food and when he tried to return, the landlord had chased him away.

“Oh, Vorkan. I’m so sorry.”

Her eyes were sympathetic, but not surprised. Had she already guessed about his childhood? He made himself shrug.

“I ended up with a gang of other street kids. No one paid much attention to us, but some of the older kids would give us jobs now and then. Then they discovered I had a talent for anything mechanical. I suppose you could say they recruited me.”

He took a deep breath, then removed his shirt. He heard her gasp, but ignored it.

“This is the result of that time.”

“The tattoos are gang markings?” she asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“And the scars?”

“It was a brutal existence. Most of them are from that time.”

Others were older, inflicted by his drunken mother or one of her customers. There were even a few from his time in the Fleet. His entire life, etched on his skin.

“You were just a kid. I can’t believe no one tried to help you. How did you end up in the Fleet?”

“I stole a ship—a personal flyer belonging to a member of the Royal House. I was caught, but the owner was very impressed that I’d bypassed both the security system of his estate and that of the flyer without anyone detecting it. He convinced the judge to offer me a term of military service rather than a jail sentence. I took it and never looked back.”

Until now. He was once more on the wrong side of the law, and this time there was no one to be impressed by his skills or swayed by his youth. If it saved Tammy from a life of slavery, he had no regrets. And if he had been wrong, then he would face the consequences.

“If you have to take me back, you aren’t going to get any leniency, are you?” she asked, her thoughts clearly following

similar lines.

“It’s not relevant.”

“Of course it’s relevant. Damn you, Vorkan. Why didn’t you just talk to me?”

Her frustration was quite obvious, but he was still convinced that he’d made the right decision.

“Because your safety was more important than your approval,” he growled. “Can you honestly tell me that you would have agreed to come with me?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again and shook her head.

“No. I wouldn’t have left without Sara.”

“Exactly.”

He stalked off to perform some unnecessary checks in the cockpit. When he eventually returned, she didn’t raise the subject again, although she did tell him more about her own life. She was telling him about the trip she and Sara had planned when she sighed and looked around.

“I’m beginning to think I’ll never see anything other than four walls again.”

“I told you I would make sure you did. I still intend to keep that promise.”

She sighed again.

“I know—although this wasn’t the way to go about it. I think I’m just more restless because I’m feeling better.”

A very vivid image of how he could alleviate that restlessness flashed through his mind, and his horns pulsed in response, but he forced himself to offer a different solution.

“Do you like card games?”

She proved to be an apt pupil, and the rest of the day passed pleasantly enough. He could still sense her reserve, but her initial anger seemed to have disappeared. Eventually he prepared another meal and was pleased to see that she ate well.

When she yawned, he suggested she go to bed. Aqbar had already curled up on the back of the pilot's chair with his head beneath his wing.

"We will arrive on Franar tomorrow. You should get some rest."

She looked at him, then around at the cabin, then sighed.

"All right. And I suppose since there isn't anywhere else to sleep, you might as well join me."

"Are you sure? I know you don't trust me."

"I'm still struggling," she admitted. "But at least I trust you not to force yourself on me."

"I would never—"

"I know." She gave him a shaky smile. "Will Franar have someplace to get clothes? I'm going to need some after sleeping in the same dress for two days."

"I forgot. I did bring some of your clothes."

He retrieved the bag and handed it to her. She took it eagerly, then gave him an odd look.

"These are the things you thought would be suitable?"

"I'm not very familiar with female clothing. Is it wrong?"

"Not exactly. But this is a nightgown, not a dress."

She held up a wisp of blue silk, and he swallowed hard. He hadn't realized it was quite so thin and delicate.

"I just liked the color and thought it would suit you."

She shook her head, but she looked amused rather than annoyed.

"I suppose that's why you brought nightgowns rather than dresses. At least it gives me something to sleep in."

When she returned a few minutes later, she gave him a quick, shy smile before slipping under the covers, but even that brief glimpse had left him rock hard. The blue silk skimmed her over her body, revealing tantalizing hints of what was beneath the thin material. The unmistakable thrust of her nipples

against the cloth made him ache at the memory of playing with the impudent nubs. The hem floated over her thighs, making him shockingly aware of how easy it would be to run his hand beneath the hem and explore the hidden delights between them.

His cock and his horns pulsed at the thought, and he bit back a groan. He had known this would be difficult, but he hadn't been prepared for how difficult.

She peeped at him over the edge of the blanket, her eyes wide and a little nervous.

“Are you going to join me?”

“Are you sure you want me to?”

After hesitating for so long that he was about to turn away, she nodded.

“Yes.”

Control, he reminded himself as he dimmed the light and joined her. *Remain in control.*

The reminder didn't help. He was all too aware of her sweet body only inches away, covered only by the thin cloth. Her sweet fragrance filled his head and his cock throbbed beneath his uniform pants. He had chosen not to remove them in order to help himself remain in control, but his cock felt hard enough to thrust through the fabric.

He did his best to remain still, but she didn't fall asleep as quickly as he expected, the small movement of her body an endless torment.

“Vorkan?” Her voice was a mere whisper in the dim cabin.

“Yes, little one?”

“Do you remember earlier? Or maybe it was yesterday. I'm not really sure of time anymore.”

He allowed himself to put a reassuring hand on her hip, and she didn't pull away.

“I remember every moment that I have spent with you.”

“I told you I wanted to forget. I really need that right now—just to forget for a little while. To quiet all these doubts and worries in my head.”

As he struggled to come up with a response, she rolled over so that her soft breasts rested against his chest, separated only by the scrap of silk.

“Kiss me. Make me forget.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A confusing rush of arousal hummed through Tammy's veins. She had been so upset when she woke up—and that hurt still lingered—but the day had been a revelation in many ways. Once she realized that Quincit had supplied the sedative, easing her worries about the baby, she'd been able to listen to Vorkan's explanation with a more open mind. He genuinely believed that he was protecting her—and she wasn't naïve enough not to realize that he had thrown his military career away in the process. For her.

The brief account he had given her of his past had been enough for her to see how much it had meant to him to have had that chance to escape from his terrible childhood. And yet he'd cast it aside.

She prayed his reasoning was flawed—that Sara was safe with Tanaca and that they would be reunited soon—but what was that going to mean for him? As much as she wanted to see Sara again, she didn't want to leave Vorkan.

She stroked her hand slowly across his chest and felt him shudder. The scars and the harsh black tattoos bothered her because of the pain they represented, but they didn't repulse her. The sight of those impressive muscles and the small trail of dark hair disappearing beneath his pants had incited a completely different reaction.

All of those conflicting emotions and thoughts had been whirling around in her head before she turned to him. She'd asked him to help her forget, but in truth, she didn't want to

forget him—just the circumstances in which they found themselves.

I never want to forget him.

Her fingers trailed lower, finding the soft line of hair.

“Little one, you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I do,” she insisted, but he captured her hand, holding it lightly.

Even in the darkness she could see the flames dancing in his eyes, but he didn’t release her hand.

“I don’t want you to do something you might regret.”

“Just kiss me,” she whispered, sliding up far enough to brush her lips against his.

He growled, and then his tongue licked across her mouth, and she opened eagerly. The kiss was tentative at first, gentle, but she welcomed him with a surge of hunger that surprised her. His mouth grew more demanding, and she felt the impressive thickness of his cock flexing against her stomach. Her hands slid up to grip his horns, and they pulsed beneath her fingers as he growled again.

A big hand cupped her breast, shockingly hot through the thin silk before he pushed the cloth aside and caught her nipple between his fingers. He rolled the tight little peak, and she moaned. She’d never considered her breasts particularly sensitive, but she was on the verge of climax just from that delicious pressure.

The intensity of her need shocked her, and she pulled back a little, but he followed her, his mouth never leaving hers. The hand on her breast squeezed a little harder, and she moaned again as heat shot through her, racing through her stomach to settle in her pussy. Her clit throbbed insistently, and she rubbed against his thigh, seeking relief from the persistent ache.

He lifted his head, his breathing heavy and his voice a rough rasp in her ear.

“Do you want me to help you, little one?”

“Yes,” she gasped as his fingers tightened.

He rolled her over onto her back, and then his mouth replaced his fingers, hot and wet and wonderful as it pulled insistently at her nipple. His hand slid down over her hip and under the short hem of her nightgown, probing gently between her thighs. God, his hands were so big. She cried out as a thick finger stroked the length of her slit, sliding easily through her arousal.

He hummed approvingly against her breast as he moved to the other nipple, tugging harder this time and scraping his teeth delicately across the swollen bud. His finger continued to explore her slick folds, circling her throbbing clit until she moaned, and then pushing slowly inside her.

“So hot and tight,” he growled as his thumb started working her clit, stroking relentlessly across the little pearl as he buried a second thick finger inside her.

Pleasure streaked through her and she clutched at his horns as she began to come, her body convulsing in helpless spasms that rolled on and on. When they finally died, he gently eased his fingers free, leaving her limp and sated. He settled back and tucked her against his chest. Weariness tugged at her, but she was still aware of that massive erection behind her.

“What about you?” she murmured sleepily.

“I will wait until you trust me enough to give yourself to me completely.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she did trust him—but she wasn’t ready to tell him about the baby yet.

“I’m sorry.”

“I have only myself to blame. Go to sleep, little one.”

His voice was so deep and reassuring that she had the oddest urge to cry. Instead, she snuggled against his chest and let exhaustion carry her away.

THE NEXT MORNING—AT LEAST SHE ASSUMED IT WAS MORNING—she woke up in his arms again. This time she was facing

him, his big chest rising and falling beneath her cheek and his erection pressed against her stomach. Despite the intensity of her climax the previous night, she felt flushed and needy.

Without a conscious decision on her part, her hand traveled down his stomach, relishing the sensation of all that hard muscle, before cupping the enormous bulge straining the fabric of his pants. He jerked at the contact, growling, and his arm tightened around her, crushing her against him. The tight contact only added to her excitement, and she slid her hand up the length of his shaft as his eyes snapped open.

“You shouldn’t be doing this,” he rasped, but he made no effort to push her away.

“You got to touch me. It’s only fair that I get to touch you.”

She squeezed his cock as she spoke, and he groaned.

“You need to stop, little one.”

She hesitated, but the flames were burning in his eyes again. She stroked the length of his cock, then frowned. He felt... different than a human man. Thicker, yes, but rather than a solid column, intriguing bulges undulated along his shaft. She wrapped her fingers as tightly as she could around his cock and he grunted, his hips bucking into her hand.

“Gods,” he moaned.

She ran her fingers along his shaft again and discovered that the wide tip was pushing up from beneath his waistband. As her thumb stroked over the slick surface, it unfurled into four petals that then closed back around her thumb and sucked with a deliciously erotic pressure.

“Oh my God.”

What would that feel like inside her? She wanted to crawl on top of him, straddle his big body, and guide that fascinating cock into her—but she couldn’t, not until she was ready to tell him about the baby.

His hips bucked again as she pulled her thumb free. She shifted down and licked across the tip as it opened once more, sucking on her tongue as she swept it around the hot, wet

interior. He tasted rich and sweet, and she moaned with pleasure as she lapped at him.

His hands went to her shoulders as his whole body shuddered, but he didn't push her away. She swirled her tongue again, and he came with a hoarse cry, sweetness flooding her mouth and sliding down her throat as she swallowed him down. She couldn't capture it all, and it dripped down onto her breasts as she gave him one last lick and sat up.

The feel of his seed on her skin excited her, but it was nothing compared to the hungry look on his face. Flames burned in his eyes as he yanked her back against him and kissed her hard. She could feel the tension in that big body as he strained for control, and she half-feared, half-hoped he would lose the battle.

He finally released her, his breath coming in harsh pants.

“Do you know what it does to me to taste myself on you, little one?”

A shiver of desire rushed down her spine at his hoarse question.

“Tell me.”

He bent forward and flicked his tongue over each erect nipple, cleaning the drops of his seed from her skin. Her own breathing was suddenly just as ragged.

“It makes me want to drag you on top of me so I can watch you ride my cock, your sweet breasts bouncing with every movement. I want to hear you cry out my name as you come, as I fill you with my seed.”

She shivered again at the blunt words and erotic image, on the verge of agreeing. But first...

“There's something I need to—”

An alarm sounded, and her heart pounded as he swore.

“What happened? Have they tracked us?”

“No, little one.” He gave her a quick kiss, then set her gently to one side as he climbed out of bed. “That means we have

reached Franar.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As much as Vorkan hated leaving Tammy in his bed, perhaps it was just as well the alarm had sounded. His control was teetering on a knife-edge. The way she responded to him only encouraged him to seek more, but he didn't want to take advantage of her vulnerable state, no matter how much he wanted her.

Especially since I am partially to blame for her vulnerability, he acknowledged as he dressed and headed for the cockpit.

Not long after he switched to manual controls, she came to join him. She'd changed into another of the thin gowns, but at least this one was longer and she'd added a lacy sweater. Not that either did much to conceal her beauty, and his horns pulsed at the sight of her.

"How long are we going to be here?" she asked quietly as she looked out the view screen at the rapidly approaching moon.

"I'm not sure. As I said, I want to confer with Catron. Once I've talked to him, I'll be in a better position to let you know what we're going to do next."

"Don't you mean to *ask me* what I want to do next?" she asked, a dangerous sweetness in her voice.

Even though he knew she was angry, he couldn't help appreciating that fiery gaze. She no longer seemed as broken as she had been when he first encountered her.

"I will discuss our options with you," he promised. "But I will not agree to any course of action that puts you in danger."

She started to argue, then abruptly shut her mouth, an expression he couldn't read on her face.

“Did you say there would be a medic here?”

He fought back a quick wave of panic. She was eating again, and he could already tell it was making a difference.

“Are you ill?” he asked as cautiously as possible.

“No. I just want to see a medic.”

After her obvious fear of them previously? Another alarm sounded in his mind.

“I promised to go with you last time. I will do so again.”

“I... Maybe.”

Although he had absolutely no intention of letting her visit a medic by herself, he would rather she ask him to accompany her so he decided not to press the issue. *Yet*. For that matter he wasn't sure if there actually was a medic in the ramshackle town that had grown up around Catron's business.

“Who is Catron?” she asked, clearly changing the subject.

“I served with him for a while. He's quite a bit older, but we had a similar background. He never had a choice about serving, and he hated it. He spent most of his time in the Fleet gaining a rank, and then doing something stupid to lose it again.” He shook his head, remembering some of the escapades that had led to those demotions. “He was—is—the kind of person who can get you anything for a price. The crew loved him. The officers hated him.”

“You're an officer. Did you hate him?”

“I'm not that kind of officer,” he said dryly. “But no, I never hated him. I did find his ethics... questionable.”

“You mean he did things like kidnapping women?” she asked innocently.

He shot her a horrified glance, then saw her mouth twitch. If things had improved to the point where she was teasing him, perhaps there was hope for him after all.

“Point taken. I was referring to things like certain objects vanishing from an officer’s cabin and Catron suddenly in possession of a case of expensive liquor. To be fair, he would share some of it.”

“And the rest?”

“Was sold at highly inflated prices.”

She laughed.

“He sounds like quite a character.”

He made a noncommittal noise and pointed to the approaching moon, a rather nondescript globe streaked with gold and brown.

“This is Franar.”

He only hoped he’d done the right thing in bringing her here.

Franar had initially been claimed by the Empire as a potential mining site. The atmosphere had been thinner than desired, but the moon had proven to be rich in mineral deposits and valuable ores. Unfortunately, the ores had also been highly unstable, making them unsuitable for use in many sectors of the Empire. It had also become apparent that the mine itself was likely too dangerous to be profitable.

As a result, the project had been abandoned, the workers left behind and the settlement reduced to a handful of buildings on the outskirts of the crater that had housed the mines. The same unstable ores that made it unsafe to mine were also extremely tempting to pirates, and the settlement became a frequent target for raids.

The residents of the moon had either fled or formed a tight community, determined to withstand the assaults. He respected their stubborn determination, but he was not thrilled to be landing on a world so frequently raided, even though the raids had died down over the past few years.

When they entered Franar’s airspace, he contacted the small tower and was given permission to land. He brought the shuttle down outside the largest building, the one Catron had converted from the original storehouse when he opened his

business. Vorkan suspected that many of the transactions that occurred there were questionable, if not outright illegal, but the moon had little else to offer.

A handful of buildings, none of them more than a couple of stories tall, were scattered around the storehouse, most of them constructed of metal sheets crudely welded together. Despite the rough materials, the number of buildings had increased and the small port looked more organized than on his last visit. In the distance, he could see small diggers moving back and forth along narrow trenches carved into the crater's surface. It appeared that Franar's citizens were now actively harvesting some of the ores.

The door to the storehouse slid open as soon as he touched down.

"Is that a good sign?" she asked quietly.

"I assume it means he wants to talk. I intend to take advantage of the invitation."

He returned to the main cabin, then stripped off his uniform shirt and replaced it with a sleeveless vest. Even though anyone who looked closely would know they had arrived in an Imperial shuttle, there was no point in flaunting his status—his former status. His scars and the tattoos on his arms would serve him better. He turned towards the door and found Tammy glaring at him. Aqbar was perched on her shoulder, looking equally hostile.

"What's wrong, little one?"

"Are you seriously intending to leave me here on the shuttle? Alone?"

He had no reason to expect problems from Catron, but...

"You will be safe here."

"Will I?"

She bit her lip, then came and put her hand on his arm and gave him a pleading look.

"I feel safe when I'm with you. It seems like every time I'm parted from someone I... care about, something bad happens."

She cared for him? That knowledge, combined with the appeal in those big brown eyes, made him sigh and nod.

“Very well.”

“And Aqbar?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. He could be dangerous if he perceived someone as a threat to you. Until we know what we will encounter, it would be best if he remained here.”

After preparing food and water for the Orosz, they walked cautiously down the ramp and through the open door into the storeroom. Inside they found a spacious entry hall and two individuals waiting for them, a large male and a slender female. Both of them were Kaisarian mixed with other races and both were dressed in simple garments in shades of tan, grey, and brown, colors that would blend into the surrounding landscape.

They stood calmly, hands visible, and the female smiled encouragingly as Tammy stepped closer to him.

“You are Vorkan?” the male asked.

“I am.”

“Welcome to Franar.” He bowed slightly. “My name is Teklan. My mate, Navaa. Our master has sent us to offer you his hospitality. If you will follow me?”

“You work for Catron?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Very well.”

As soon as he nodded, Navaa hurried to Tammy’s side, offering her a welcoming smile.

“Come, honored guest. We have food and refreshment inside.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly, but she remained close to him as the pair led them deeper into the building.

They entered a smaller room with wide wooden benches built against the metal walls. The floor was bare concrete, but colorful cushions covered the benches. A large, roughly hewn

table dominated the center of the room, its surface scarred and worn, and the chairs surrounding it were equally plain.

A green-scaled Xaravian lounged on one of the benches, puffing on a water pipe, his eyes glazed with dream smoke. Two other males were seated at the center table, one Tsanan and one Kaisarian. They were drinking out of metal tankards and discussing a set of papers in front of them. Their eyes darted towards him, but their conversation didn't pause.

"Honored guest." Teklan indicated one of the empty benches. "Please be seated. Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"No thank you," he said firmly. He trusted Catron—to a point—but he wasn't taking any chances before he had spoken to him. "I would like to speak to your master."

Teklan exchanged an amused glance with his mate before nodding.

"We will inform him of your request."

They disappeared through a side door, and he lowered himself onto a bench. Tammy took the cushion next to him, fidgeting nervously. He reached over to cover her hand with his, and she gave him a shaky smile.

"Are we really safe here?"

"I believe so. And with any luck, we'll get the information we need."

"I hope—"

Her words cut off as a figure entered the room—a Kaisarian male with the heavy build of someone accustomed to hard work. Unlike his servants, he was dressed in a dark red tunic and dark brown pants, his feet encased in sturdy boots. His horns were worn, indicating his age, but there was nothing old about the way he moved. He grinned at them, and Vorkan rose to his feet.

"Catron. It's been a long time."

"Indeed it has, my friend. What brings you to my humble establishment?"

“It’s somewhat less humble than I expected,” he said dryly.

“Business has been good.” Catron bowed to Tammy, who was standing beside him, her hand gripping his forearm. “And who is this pretty female?”

“This is my mate, Tammy.”

Her hand tightened on his arm, but she didn’t contradict him.

“Your mate?” Catron shot him a penetrating glance. “How interesting. Welcome to my home, my dear. I hope that Vorkan is treating you well.”

“Of course.”

“Excellent. Now, if you’ll just come with—”

“Excuse me, Mayor.” One of the males who had been seated at the table hurried over. “There’s an issue with this contract. Muktuk has adjusted the purity percentages on the Slinian ore.”

“Has he?” Catron’s face went cold. “Correct it, then reduce his profit margin to twenty percent and return it to him. If he balks at signing it, tell him he’s lucky that I’ve become more civilized in my old age. If he’d tried that a few years ago, I’d have nailed his cheating balls to the wall.”

“Yes, sir.”

The male hurried away, and Catron turned back to them, once more the urbane host.

“As I was saying, please follow me.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

T ammy kept a firm grip on Vorkan's arm as they followed Catron down a long hallway. He'd abandoned his uniform in favor of a sleeveless vest, and the hard muscles beneath her hand helped reassure her. *He still makes me feel safe*, she realized, fighting back a sudden lump in her throat.

Their host stopped at the end of the hall and placed his palm against a smooth metal plate. The door slid open, and he gestured to them to enter. Unlike the previous rooms, this one was as crisp and modern as any room on the *Triumph* with a big desk, comfortable chairs, and a bank of monitors on one wall. Catron grinned at her, a surprisingly charming grin.

"My home has many surprises. It is in our best interest to keep most of them concealed."

"Are you still having trouble with raiders?" Vorkan asked, and she shot him a horrified look.

"There is no need to alarm your mate like that." Catron said reproachfully. "I have arranged for some very effective surface to air weaponry. Plus I have some... friends who can provide additional air support if needed."

Vorkan's body tensed. "Friends in the Fleet?"

"Let's just say I still have connections." Catron waved them towards the chairs and sat down behind the desk. "Now what is it you came for? Because I'm fairly certain you didn't simply come to introduce your mate to an old friend."

"What do you know about the taking of human females?" Vorkan asked, tugging her down next to him on a small couch.

“You mean besides the fact that they are considered highly desirable? And very profitable.”

She stiffened at his words, her eyes darting to Vorkan, but he looked just as calm as before.

“Who’s involved?” he asked.

“Now that is a very interesting question.” Catron frowned thoughtfully. “The Ithyians, of course, although they are primarily transporters. I have heard of another race fulfilling smaller, more specialized requests, but no real details.”

“Is there an organization behind it?”

“I would say almost certainly. Quite possibly more than one,” Catron said calmly.

“Is the Fleet involved?”

“An even more interesting question.”

Their host rose and walked over to a cabinet against the wall. He poured himself a drink, then raised an eyebrow at Vorkan. Vorkan hesitated, then nodded. Neither of them asked her, but under the circumstances, that was probably just as well.

Catron handed Vorkan a drink, then returned to his desk, swirling the liquid in his glass.

“I suspect there is some involvement,” he said finally. “In my opinion, it isn’t organized. My guess is that it’s more likely to be a few corrupt officers here and there. If I were running a similar organization, I’d be looking for mid-range candidates—those with the right job or the right connections to be useful, but no one of really senior rank. I also suspect their participation is more along the lines of providing location information or ignoring certain activities.”

“Fuck.” Vorkan sighed and took a swig of his drink. “I was really hoping you’d shoot me down.”

“Not everyone has your sense of honor.” The words were lightly mocking, but there was a clear undercurrent of affection in the other male’s voice. “Which is just as well or I’d never have been able to retire and set up this business.”

“What do you do?” she asked.

Catron laughed.

“Oh, many things. I mainly buy and sell—objects, information, anything for which there is a demand. I also grow vegetables and brew a very fine ale.”

The answer was a little too vague for her liking.

“Do you buy and sell people?” she demanded.

“No, my dear. I have spent too much of my life in chains to wish it on anyone else.”

Of course he could be lying, but his comment about a life in chains held a ring of truth and she relaxed a little more.

“You didn’t add mayor to your list of accomplishments,” Vorkan said dryly.

“I hate to brag,” Catron said sanctimoniously, then grinned. “I suppose you could say it was thrust upon me. These people needed organization against the raiders. I provided it.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“To an extent—although it has given me a surprising degree of sympathy for all those officers I used to hate.”

Vorkan looked at her, then took a deep breath.

“Have you heard anything that indicates the slavery issues extend to high government officials?”

“How high?”

“Senior Advisor Tanaca.”

“That high?” Catron whistled softly. “I have not heard anything to indicate that, no.”

She gave Vorkan a triumphant glance, but then Catron continued.

“Of course, he has informants everywhere. I suppose it’s possible. Do you have any additional information?”

“No, just that a human female accompanied him to a meeting of the Galactic Trade Alliance. We know she was acting as his

slave. What we don't know is whether it was truly an act or if he is involved in the trade.”

Catron finished his drink and sighed. “I will have to investigate. Meanwhile, you might as well stay for dinner. I'll have Navaa show you to a room.”

“That's not—” Vorkan began, but she cut him off before he could refuse.

“That's very kind, Catron. Thank you.”

Vorkan gave her a puzzled look but didn't contradict her.

She almost asked about a medic as well, but decided Navaa might be a better option. She hoped the other female would be willing to help her, but she was prepared to beg if necessary. She really wanted to check on the baby.

After excusing themselves from the office, they followed Navaa along a different corridor, then into a large lift that descended for several seconds before opening into another large room similar to the reception room above. She smiled at their confused faces.

“Much of the settlement has been rebuilt here.”

“Where are we?” Vorkan asked.

“At the base of the exterior wall of the crater. Originally we gathered down here in order to shield ourselves from the raiders, but over time it has become our home. There is still a good deal of activity around the port, of course, but most of us prefer to live here.”

She led them along another corridor, before opening a door painted a soft shade of blue.

“We hope you will find these accommodations acceptable. Will you join us in the dining area an hour after sunset?” she asked politely.

“That would be perfect. Thank you,” Vorkan said as he guided her through the door into a large room.

This room was also a mixture of styles. The walls were rough-hewn wood boards, but the bed was huge and comfortable

looking. What appeared to be a hand-woven rug covered the floor and colorful fabrics covered the small seating area, but her eyes were drawn to the huge window on the outer wall. Mesmerized by the view, she went straight to the window.

Outside the sun was setting in a blaze of orange and gold over a wide expanse of low, rolling hills. The hills that had looked like mounds of dirt from the air were actually covered with long grasses, tinged with gold in the light of the setting sun. A small landscaped area ran along the area in front of the room, but beyond it, there was nothing but hill and sky.

She could hear Vorkan talking to Navaa in a low voice as she stared out at the sunset but before she could drag herself away from the view, he dismissed the servant and closed the door.

“Why did you do that? I wanted to talk to her.”

“She’ll be back shortly.” He gave her a curious look as he joined her. “Why did you accept his offer?”

“I told you I was tired of being surrounded by four walls. I’m also not going anywhere until I talk to a medic.”

He sighed and put his arms around her from behind.

“Very well. I did promise you some time on the surface, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.”

Giving in to temptation, she leaned back against his big, warm body.

“I didn’t expect such a beautiful sunset.”

“It’s all the toxic chemicals in the air.”

“What?” She whipped around to find him smiling down at her.

“Are you teasing me?”

“A little. The spectacular sunsets are the result of the mining, but the air is not toxic.” His expression turned serious. “Now tell me why you’re so insistent on seeing a medic.”

I should tell him. I want to tell him.

Gathering her courage, she took a deep breath, but before she could get the words out, there was a knock on the door. Navaa entered carrying a tray of fruit, bread, and cheese along with a pitcher of water. She was accompanied by a little girl who was clearly her daughter, holding a colorful woven bag.

Navaa placed the tray on a low table, then retrieved the bag from the little girl.

“This is my daughter, Ayla,” Navaa said. “And these are for you. Your mate asked me to provide more... suitable clothing.”

“Thank you very much.” She darted a quick glance at Vorkan before giving Navaa a pleading look. This wasn’t the way she wanted him to find out. “Can I talk to you for a moment? Female to female.”

“Of course. Ayla, wait here.”

Navaa tugged her into the adjoining bathroom before Vorkan had a chance to protest. The mixture of styles continued here as well. Handmade tiles covered the wall and floor, but the fixtures were undeniably modern.

“I apologize for bringing you in here,” Navaa said softly. “But I didn’t think your mate would be happy if we left the room.”

“Probably not,” she agreed ruefully.

“Now what can I do for you?”

“I’m pregnant,” she blurted out. “I only just found out, and it’s been a horrible few days, well, weeks, and I really need to know if the baby is all right.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Vorkan gave the closed bathroom door a frustrated glance.

He didn't like Tammy being out of his sight, even if she were with another female. He took a half-step towards the door and found Ayla in front of him, regarding him with big dark eyes.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"What?" He realized she was pointing at the scars on his arms.

"Yes, but it was a long time ago. They don't hurt anymore."

"I hurt my knee. See?"

She tried to lift one leg to show him and tottered on the other one. Alarmed, he scooped her up before she fell, then realized belatedly she might be even more alarmed at him holding her. Instead, she put an arm around his neck and settled herself more comfortably against him. She was impossibly small, but she didn't seem the least bit afraid as she peered at his horns.

"Yours are bigger than mine."

"That's because I'm an adult."

She considered his answer, then gave him a skeptical look.

"Mama's aren't that big."

"Everyone is different, sweetheart."

This time, she nodded solemnly.

"That's what Mama says."

“Then your mother is a very wise woman. Is she going to help my mate?” he couldn’t help asking.

“Mama fix,” she said confidently.

But fix what? He sighed and did his best to push aside the impulse to barge into the bathroom and demand to know what was happening.

“Take me to the window,” Ayla said, then gave him an irresistible smile. “Please.”

He obeyed, and she began telling him about the animals who lived in the hills—none of them visible in the gathering dusk. Nonetheless he was charmed by her enthusiastic recital and did his best to let her distract him from whatever was happening behind that fucking closed door.

The two females emerged a moment later. Tammy was smiling, but when she looked at him and Ayla, her mouth suddenly wobbled.

“What’s wrong, little one?” he demanded.

“Your mate has had a very stressful time,” Navaa said severely, no longer the meek, submissive servant of earlier. “You should be caring for her, not shouting questions at her.”

“I wasn’t shouting.”

“Yes, you was,” Ayla said.

“Were,” he corrected absently, then sighed.

He suspected that he had no chance of winning against all three females. He carefully set Ayla back on her feet. She grinned, hugged his neck, then raced back to her mother. Navaa gave him another stern look, then squeezed Tammy’s hand.

“I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Thank you,” Tammy said quietly.

Navaa and her daughter left, and he found himself at a loss for words. He really wanted to know what was happening, but Navaa was right—Tammy had been through a lot.

“Are you well, my mate?” he asked carefully.

The words slipped out without conscious intention, and she gave him a startled look.

“Why did you tell Catron that I was your mate? And what does it mean? Is it like a wife? Or a girlfriend?”

“I am not entirely sure those words translate correctly, but perhaps the first one is closer. It is a permanent bond between two people.” She regarded him thoughtfully, but didn’t comment. “As for why I said it...”

Other than the fact that he wanted nothing more...

“In less... civilized areas, an unattached female is a desirable prize. Males might fight over you, or try and take you away from me.” Not that he would ever permit that to occur. “I apologize for not warning you. It didn’t occur to me until Catron greeted us.”

“So that’s why you said it? To mark your claim on me?”

Her voice was absolutely neutral, and he couldn’t read her expression.

“Partially.”

“What’s the other part?”

He sighed. “Because I have wanted nothing else since the moment I took you in my arms on the Ithyian ship. I even asked Tanaca if I could claim you as my mate, but he said I could not. He said it would set a bad example—which is somewhat ironic considering he dressed Sara up as his slave two days later.”

He knew he was rambling, but he was afraid to stop talking and hear her response, especially since he couldn’t read her face.

“Sara designed that outfit.”

Her unexpected response threw him off guard.

“What?”

“He didn’t dress her up. She dressed herself up.”

“She likes dressing provocatively?”

“You should see her at the beach,” she said dryly as she came over to the window to join him.

“I don’t want to see her,” he growled. “I only want to see you.”

“I only want to see you too. But before we go any further with this mating talk, there is something you should know.”

“What is it?”

Her face was so pale it was almost translucent, but she met his eyes steadily.

“I’m pregnant.”

He actually swayed on his feet before his gaze turned red with anger.

“That fucking Ithyian bastard,” he roared. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“No! Oh, God, no.” She shuddered. “You did stop that in time. I’m afraid that the father was a plain old Earth bastard.”

His anger refused to abate.

“He hurt you?” he growled.

“Emotionally yes, but physically no. We were in a relationship until I found him cheating on me.”

“Would you like me to return to your planet and kill him?” he asked, already turning over ways it could be done.

“You would do that? I mean, no. I don’t want him dead. I’m never going to see him again.”

“Good. Such an unworthy male does not deserve such a precious gift.” He frowned as a thought struck him. “Wait. If you were pregnant when you left Earth, why didn’t you tell me until now?”

“I didn’t know until Quincit told me.”

“He examined you? When?”

She sighed. “He didn’t examine me. He noticed it on the automated scan they do on visitors and came to tell me. That’s why I wanted you to be with me the next day so he could do a real scan. But you took me before—”

“Oh, gods, the tranquilizer.”

He swayed again as horror swept over him, and she put her arm around his waist.

“It’s fine. I’m sure it’s fine. That’s why I asked when you got it. Quincit already knew, and I’m sure he wouldn’t have given you anything harmful.”

“No wonder you were so upset,” he muttered as she led him over to the bed and made him sit.

“It wasn’t the only reason,” she said dryly as she sat down next to him. “But that was a huge part of it.”

“You need a medic.”

He started to stand, but she refused to let go of his arm and he was afraid of hurting her. How could he possibly have been so careless with her safety?

“In case you’ve forgotten, that’s what I’ve been saying. I’m sure everything is fine, but I’d like to check anyway.”

“Of course. Where is he?”

“Navaa says they don’t have a full-time medic, but she has some training and apparently they have some excellent equipment. She’s going to do a detailed scan after the meal.”

“She should do it now.”

“She’ll do it afterwards,” she said firmly, then bit her lip. “Now that you know, does it change what you said before? You wouldn’t just be getting me. You’d be getting me and a child.”

He slipped off the bed, going to his knees in front of her.

“I am not worthy of such an honor.”

Tears sparkled on her lashes.

“How can you say that? I know you’ve done everything you could to protect me—aside from that little kidnapping thing. But what’s a little kidnapping between mates?”

“Are you sure, little one?”

More tears gathered, but her smile was radiant as she nodded her head.

“Very sure.”

“Thank the gods,” he groaned and snatched her into his arms.

His lips crashed down on hers. She tasted even sweeter than ever, her soft body melting against him as her hands curled around his horns. He ran his hands down her back, over the silky fabric, and then beneath, cupping her ass and pulling her against his aching cock.

She kissed him back, writhing against him as his hand closed over her breast. He rolled the tight little point between his fingers, and she moaned into his mouth. Her hands tightened on the sensitive base of his horns, and sparks of pleasure shot through him.

He was on the point of ripping off her gown when remorse shot through him. What was he doing? She was in a delicate condition—she needed to be cherished, not ravished like a wild animal.

He lifted his head, refusing to give in when she tugged impatiently on his horns, even though his cock was at the point of exploding.

“What’s wrong?”

“We should wait,” he said as firmly as he could.

“Wait for what?”

“Until after the scan.” At least that would give him time to get himself under control.

“Fine. If that will make you feel better.” She started to stand, and he lifted her to her feet. “We can wait until then.”

He hadn’t expected her to give in so easily and frowned down at her. She gave him an impish grin.

“After which I expect you to fuck me all night long.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

T ammy fought back a satisfied smile at the stunned look on Vorkan's face.

"I'll just get ready for dinner now."

She sashayed away from him, letting her hips sway provocatively, but she only made it three steps before he stopped her. Strong hands grasped her waist, carefully spinning her around before lifting her up against his chest. She laughed and poked his chest.

"Put me down!"

"I intend to," he said, the low rumble vibrating through her as he carried her towards the bed.

He set her down gently, then pulled her into his arms. She looked up at him, expecting to be kissed, but instead he stroked her cheek.

"You are so lovely, little one."

Her heart started beating faster as he gently ran his fingers through her hair. She wrapped her arms around his neck, closing her eyes with pleasure as his big hand cupped her face, and he brushed kisses over her eyelids.

"I still intend to wait until after the scan before fucking you," he murmured as he dropped tiny kisses down her cheeks, then further down her neck.

"Okay," she whispered as the kisses continued down across her chest, brief teasing little nibbles at her sensitive breasts.

“But first I intend to have an early dinner.”

“What? Ohhh.”

Her question disappeared in a moan of pleasure as he flipped up her dress and fastened his mouth directly over her clit. She arched her back, hips rocking towards him as he sucked gently, his tongue flicking over the swollen bundle of nerves. Each lap sent shockwaves racing through her body, and she grabbed hold of his horns, wanting more. Wanting everything.

“So fucking sweet,” he growled against her, the vibration adding to the pleasure flooding her system.

His mouth left her, and she cried out a protest, but then his mouth was replaced by something else. She just had time to realize it was the head of his cock, the petals enclosing her clit in the most perfect, wet, wonderful suction, before her climax hit. The intensity of the sensation stole her breath as she shattered, the force of her orgasm rolling over her in long, endless waves before she went limp.

She heard a low chuckle as he slid back up the bed and kissed her. She could taste herself on his lips, and the sheer eroticism of the act sent another spark of excitement through her exhausted body.

“You have the most amazing cock ever,” she said seriously when he finally stopped kissing her. “What do you call that?”

“My oris?” He gave her a look of pure male satisfaction. “I am glad that it pleases you. You will be spending a lot of time with it fastened around your sweet little clit, or your pretty little nipples, or deep inside your tight little cunt.”

“I’m not objecting,” she assured him fervently.

He laughed, then kissed her again, a short, hard kiss this time, before he rose to his feet.

“There will be plenty of time for that, little one, but we need to get ready for dinner first.”

“Party pooper,” she muttered as she sat up and let him pull her to her feet, then smiled at his confused look. “Never mind.”

She grabbed the bag of clothing that Navaa had brought her and hurried into the bathroom to get ready. Her clit was still swollen and sensitive, heat washing over her just from the touch of the cleansing cloth. She could hardly wait until they were alone again. His size did make her a tiny bit nervous, but she knew Vorkan would never hurt her.

“I trust him,” she whispered to herself in the mirror, and smiled.

The dress she chose from the options Navaa had brought was a long sleeveless garment that fell in soft folds to her feet. It was a rich shade of blue with embroidered trim around the low neckline and edging the slits up each side. The color complemented her complexion, and it fit perfectly. She braided her hair into a long loose plait over one shoulder, made a face at herself in the mirror, and decided she was ready.

Vorkan was waiting, the dark sleeveless vest revealing powerful, corded arms and creating a striking contrast to his deep red skin. His eyes burned with appreciation as he saw her, and he crossed the room in two quick strides, stopping just in front of her.

“You look beautiful, little one,” he murmured as he ran a finger over the embroidery trimming the neckline. “I wish I did not have to share you with anyone else.”

“It’s just for dinner.”

“I know, but I am not hungry for food.” He put his arms around her as she swayed towards him, pulling her against his body, then sighed. “I think perhaps I should refrain from kissing you, or we will certainly miss dinner.”

As delightful as that sounded, she was determined to meet with Navaa - and she was curious to learn more about the settlement.

“Hopefully it will be a quick meal.”

“And I can feast again later.” His arms tightened for a moment, then he took her hand and led her to the door.

The dining hall was deep within the complex—a large, open room with the same rough wooden walls as their bedroom. More colorful cushions adorned the simple rustic furniture, but the packed buffet table along one wall had glowing heat lamps over the serving platters. In addition to a long center table, small individual tables were scattered around the space. One wall was open to the outside, revealing a torchlit garden lush with plants, and children ran freely in and out, darting between the adults.

The occupants of the hall, both adults and children, varied widely. Many of them had some hint of Kaisarian coloring, but they clearly had other genes as well. A few of them were very different, ranging from a large grey male with wings—wings!—who was eating in solitary splendor to a green-scaled female in a very skimpy outfit surrounded by adoring males.

The clothing varied as well, from brightly colored dresses like her own to the mote muted garments Navaa and Teklan had worn when they greeted them. She could see indications of wear, but there were no signs of poverty. At first glance it appeared to be a peaceful, prosperous little community, but when she looked closer, she realized that many of the males—and some of the females—were clearly warriors, strong and battle-scarred.

Distracted by the thought, she stopped moving, and an adorable little girl with pretty lavender skin bumped into her. The girl flashed her a gap-toothed smile, apologized, and raced off again, followed by three other children. A lump suddenly appeared in her throat as she watched them. She hadn't realized until this moment how much she had missed being around children.

The sight of them playing so happily raised a new question. She had no doubt about her feelings for Vorkan, or her desire to have a future with him, but where? Once they figured out how to rescue Sara—if she actually needed saving—where were they going to go?

“What is it, little one?” Vorkan asked quietly.

“I was just thinking that this is a real community. I want that too. For all of us.”

She brought his hand to her stomach as she spoke and saw the understanding flare in his eyes.

“It is not something I have ever truly had, but I too would like that for our child.”

Our child. Her heart melted at his choice of words, but before she could respond, Catron hailed them. He was seated at the long table, already packed with people, but he’d reserved two chairs next to him.

“The seats of honor,” he announced as they joined him, and Vorkan shook his head.

“I never thought I’d see the day.” He turned back to her. “What would you like—”

“Don’t worry about that,” Navaa interrupted. “I have your plates right here. Nothing too spicy for you,” she added quietly as she placed a heavily laden trencher in front of Tammy.

Her mouth watered at the delicious-smelling stew and the homemade bread slathered in butter.

“This looks delicious.”

The food tasted as good as it looked, and she ate hungrily with no sign of the nausea that had previously troubled her. Vorkan and Catron swapped war stories and discussed mutual acquaintances, but she was content just to listen. Despite the conversation, Vorkan kept an eye on her—refilling her water glass and snagging more bread for her. When she sat back with a satisfied sigh, he draped an arm around the back of her chair.

“Come play with us.” Ayla tugged demandingly on her dress.

She laughed and started to rise, then gave Vorkan an inquisitive look. He scanned the room, then nodded.

“Thank you,” she whispered as she pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, then followed Ayla.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“So you’ve finally taken a mate,” Catron said. “I must say I didn’t expect that.”

Vorkan dragged his gaze back from watching Tammy playing with the children to frown at his friend.

“Why not?”

“You never seemed to have a life outside the Fleet.”

He shrugged.

“I certainly didn’t want to go back to the life I had before I joined the Fleet.”

“Then what are you going to do now?” Catron’s eyes were as perceptive as ever. “I noticed you didn’t volunteer anything about your own circumstances while you were questioning me, but considering you’re here on your own with what I suspect is a human slave, I can’t help but assume you won’t be returning to the Fleet.”

“Tammy is not a slave,” he said fiercely. “The *Triumph* rescued her.”

“And she chose to leave a mighty warship to accompany you to a backwater moon?”

Catron’s voice was lightly mocking, and once again Vorkan was glad that his skin did not reveal his emotions.

“Not exactly, but she has chosen to remain with me.”

“And are you planning to start a new life with her on a stolen Imperial shuttle?”

Catron sounded even more amused, and he glared at him.

“Of course not. I intend to take her to Maskah, but I need to determine Lord Tanaca’s role first. Tammy’s friend Sara is with him.”

Catron gave him a shocked look, then started to laugh.

“That’s even more surprising than your news. How the mighty have fallen. Tanaca mated to a human female.”

“Sara isn’t his mate,” he said automatically, then frowned. *Was she?*

Tanaca had been the one who eliminated Crot, an act that had seemed unusually impulsive. Had he been driven by the same fury that had led Vorkan to the cells? He’d also arranged for the females to have Aqbar, a gesture that didn’t appear to benefit him. Even taking Sara to the trade meeting—had that been for political reasons, or because he didn’t wish to be parted from her?

If Catron’s suggestion were true, it threw a different light on that last event, especially in view of Tammy’s belief that Sara had chosen the outrageous outfit. However, it still didn’t explain the conversation he’d overheard. He couldn’t be sure, and he owed it to his mate to be certain that her friend was safe.

“I suppose it’s a possibility, but until we have more information, I would like to remain here.”

“You are welcome to stay as long as you wish. Although I may put you to work.”

“Doing what?”

Catron met his suspicious gaze with a look of limpid innocence.

“Just a few repairs. Nothing illegal.”

He considered the matter. Working would be better than worrying about the information that Catron might uncover. As long as Tammy was comfortable with the idea, he found it surprisingly appealing.

“I’ll talk to my mate,” he said noncommittally, then changed the subject. “I noticed you were mining again. I thought it was too dangerous because the ores were unstable?”

“They can be, but we have discovered that as long as they are mined in small quantities, as well as stored and shipped that way, they are not volatile.” Catron’s smile was a little too smug. “It’s a surprisingly effective self-regulating system—if someone gets greedy, boom!”

He couldn’t help laughing, even though he shook his head. Catron turned away to speak to someone else, and Vorkan immediately looked for his mate. She was no longer with the group of children. Alarmed, he started to rise, then spotted her crouched down at the far side of the garden, talking quietly to a Kiaret child in torn, dirty clothes. Her face was soft, sympathetic, and he remembered what she had said about her occupation on her planet.

“Who is that child with my mate?” he asked when Catron turned back, and his friend sighed.

“Kevi. He’s one of the ones left behind.”

“Left behind?”

“Abandoned. There are several of them here—some because their parents died in an explosion or a raid. Some simply left behind when a parent moved on.” They both watched as the boy jumped up and hurried away, and Catron sighed again. “We do what we can, but they are feral creatures. They don’t trust adults. I’m surprised he got that close to your mate.”

He wasn’t. He had been just such a feral child, but even then he wouldn’t have been able to resist her.

Tammy rejoined them a few minutes later. He expected her to be distressed, but she appeared more thoughtful than upset.

“I see you met Kevi,” Catron said. “I was just telling your mate that he usually avoids adults.”

“Of course he does. He has no reason to trust them.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “He knows a lot about the animals here. I wonder if he would be interested in Aqbar.”

“Aqbar?”

“He’s an Orosz,” he explained. “He’s bonded with Tammy, but we left him on the shuttle until—”

“Until you knew whether or not your old friend could be trusted? I’m hurt, deeply hurt.”

Was there a hint of truth to the mocking words? Tammy immediately reached over and patted Catron’s hand.

“That’s not it at all. I was just worried about him flying away.” She bit her lip and looked at him. “But perhaps we should go back to the shuttle. You know, afterwards. I hate to think of him all by himself.”

He saw the flicker of interest on his friend’s face when Tammy said *afterwards*, but Catron didn’t ask any questions. Instead, he smiled at Tammy.

“If you can find a way to tether him, you can bring him to your room. We take all kinds here—orphans, animals, even runaway officers.”

He laughed and rose to his feet.

“And on that note, we will take our leave. But my mate wishes to speak to Navaa first. Where can we find her?”

The inquisitive look returned, but Catron only pointed to an arch on the far side of the room.

“She and Teklan have an office through there. If she’s not in the office, their quarters are further along that corridor. You can’t miss them—Ayla painted flowers on the door.”

“Thank you, and thank you for dinner.”

Catron nodded. “Come see me tomorrow. I have a couple of people you should meet.”

“Very well.”

Tammy thanked Catron with her sweet smile, but as they headed for the arch he could feel her hand trembling.

“Are you all right, little one?”

“Just a little nervous.”

He put his hand over hers and squeezed it.

“Everything will be fine.”

He did his best to sound calm for her sake, despite the anxiety knotting his guts. He would never forgive himself if he had caused harm to her child, no matter how inadvertently.

Navaa stepped out of the office just as they reached the doorway and gestured for them to enter. Shelves of miscellaneous items covered every bare inch of wall space, but they were all neatly arranged and labeled. She followed his startled glance and laughed.

“We have a type of lending library. Those are all salvaged items that people can borrow when needed.”

“Did you organize this?” Tammy asked.

“Partially. It was Catron’s idea, but I handled the details.” Navaa laughed. “He’s better at ideas than execution.”

“So I remember,” he said dryly, and Navaa laughed again.

“You seem very different than when we met you,” Tammy said curiously.

Navaa shrugged.

“The meek, submissive act throws visitors off guard. We are welcoming and friendly—unless we discover there are reasons for that to change.”

He nodded approvingly at the edge of steel in Navaa’s smile, already feeling better about bringing his mate here.

“Now then. Just through here.”

A door at the back of the office led into a small infirmary with white walls, an examination table, and two beds. It was neat as the outer office but much less cluttered and surprisingly well equipped. Navaa answered his unspoken question.

“We have been using a portion of the proceeds from the sale of the ore to improve our facilities. When Teklan and I arrived, there was almost nothing.”

“Another one of Catron’s ideas?”

“Yes. He’s been very good for the settlement,” Navaa said quietly, then turned to Tammy. “Now if you’ll just hop up on this table, we’ll get started.”

“I... I can’t.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper, and when he looked down her face was white and terrified.

“What’s wrong, little one?”

“The lights... the table... It’s too much like...”

“Too much like what?” he asked gently, even though rage was beginning to burn through his system.

“When we were... taken.” Her voice quivered so much he could barely understand the words. “I... I woke up too soon. They were ex...examining...”

Godsdamned Ithyian bastards. He fought back his anger as he tucked her against his chest. Navaa gave him a horrified look and he gestured to the door. She nodded and left, closing it quietly behind her.

“Look at me, Tammy.” When she didn’t respond, he gently raised her face to his. “I know you’re frightened, little one, but I’m here. You’re safe.”

“Part of me knows that,” she whispered. “But I keep having these flashes.”

“Do you want to leave?”

He could see her struggle with the decision, but she finally shook her head.

“No. I need to know.”

“Brave little one. How can we make it easier for you?”

“Can we turn off the lights?”

She shivered as she asked, but her voice was a little stronger. He turned on a single lamp between the beds then turned off the overhead lights. Her breathing slowed, and he carefully lifted her onto the table, keeping his arms around her.

“That’s better. Do you want a blanket?”

She shook her head. "I want you."

"You have me," he assured her as he sat next to her on the table, then placed her on his lap.

"Does that help?"

"It does," she said, relaxing a little more against him "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. You're being very brave."

"That's better," Navaa told him approvingly as she rejoined them. "Are you ready to continue, Tammy?"

"I'm ready."

He heard the faint quiver in her voice, but Navaa gave her a warm smile.

"Good. All I'm going to do this time is run the scanner over your stomach."

Navaa wheeled the machine over, then ran the attached wand back and forth over Tammy's stomach, watching the monitor on the machine.

Tammy began to tremble in his arms as tears gathered on her lashes.

"Is something wrong?" she asked anxiously.

"On the contrary. Everything appears perfectly normal."

Relief swept through him as she burst into tears. He wrapped his arms around her and smiled at Navaa.

"Thank you."

"You are most welcome." She hesitated. "I would recommend an internal exam in the near future."

Tammy flinched, and he tightened his grip.

"We can discuss that another time," he said firmly.

"Very well. Let me know if I can help."

She left the room, and he rocked Tammy in his arms until her tears dried and she smiled up at him.

“I’m so relieved. Can we go back to our room now?”

“Of course, little one. Whatever you want.”

“I want you,” she said softly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Vorkan's horns pulsed as the blood rushed to his cock so quickly he felt dizzy. But as much as he wanted to claim his mate...

"Perhaps it would be best to wait a little longer."

Her mouth trembled as she tried to pull away from him.

"You don't want me? Now that you know I'm really pregnant?"

"What? Gods, no. I want you as much—more—than ever. I never dreamed I'd be blessed with a mate and a child. But it's been a very emotional time for you. I didn't realize how hard this was going to be."

"I should have said something. It's just—I never used to be such a coward."

"You are not a coward, little one. You have faced everything that has happened to you with grace and courage."

"It doesn't feel that way."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No, but maybe it would help." She sighed. "That's what I always tell my students. But not here, all right?"

"Of course not. Let's go back to our room."

The meal was over, but a few people were still gathered in the dining hall, talking comfortably over a last drink. They slipped past them and returned to their room without speaking to anyone. He closed the door and did his best to wait patiently as

she wandered over to the window. He left the lights off, but the starlight illuminated her face as she stared up at the sky.

He wanted her to talk, he wanted to comfort her—and he wanted to strip the clothes off her pretty little body and bury his cock in her tight little cunt.

“Stars,” she said softly. “You can see the stars. We were in space for so long, and I never saw the stars.”

“You should have told me.” He joined her at the window, sliding his arms around her from behind. “I could have opened a viewscreen long before we reached Franar.”

“I wish I had. But I don’t know if it would have been like this.”

The night sky over the hills was a deep midnight blue, sprinkled with the tiny lights of thousands upon thousands of stars, arching over the dark hills in an endless expanse.

“No, it’s different when you are amongst them, but I still remember the first time I stood on the bridge of a ship and saw them.”

After the brutality of his youth, it had seemed as if anything were possible.

“You hadn’t seen them before?”

“There is a climate control dome over Kaisar. It blocked the sky at night.”

“I’m glad we’re seeing these together,” she whispered, turning to look up at him, her eyes as brilliant as those stars.

He wanted to kiss her, to carry her to the bed and make her forget, but first...

“Tell me,” he said gently.

“There really isn’t much to tell. I don’t even think I was awake for very long. But there was this bright light in my eyes and I couldn’t move and they were laughing and... touching me.”

She shuddered, and it took every iota of self-control he had to continue stroking her back with a slow, gentle hand.

“Did they...”

He couldn't force the word out, but she understood and shook her head quickly.

“No. Not while I was awake, and there were no signs when I woke up in the cage.”

“They still abused you, my poor little one. Thank you for having the courage to tell me.” He brushed a kiss across the top of her head and silently ordered his unruly cock to behave. “I think you should rest now.”

“What? No.” She took a deep breath, her breasts moving tantalizingly against his chest, and smiled. “I'm putting it in the past where it belongs. Tonight is about us. Make me your mate, Vorkan.”

“Are you sure?”

“Do I have to get naked to prove it?”

Before he could stop her—not that he wanted to stop her—she pushed her gown down over her shoulders and let it fall to the floor, leaving her beautifully, perfectly naked in the starlight.

“Take off your clothes,” she whispered, and he obeyed, moving so quickly that he stumbled against the wall.

She giggled as he kicked off his pants, then picked her up and carried her to the bed. Her laughter died as she looked up at him.

“I think I'm in love with you, Vorkan.”

“I know that I love you, Tammy.”

“Good. Now make love to me.”

“My bossy little one.”

She opened her mouth to answer him and he kissed her. Fuck, she was sweet. Sweet and hot and so responsive that he could have lost himself in her mouth. He forced himself to lift his head. She blinked up at him, looking so adorably bewildered that he couldn't resist another kiss, shorter this time, before he started trailing kisses down her body.

Her nipples had hardened into tight buds, and he flicked them with his tongue, then fastened his mouth over each one, sucking each of them into his mouth in turn. She cried out, her back arching and he grinned against her creamy skin.

As he concentrated on the tempting little buds, his hand drifted down to her thighs, deliberately avoiding her tempting little cunt. Her thighs parted at his touch, and he rewarded her by skimming his hand lightly over the delicate folds.

“Please...”

“Patience, little one,” he murmured. “We have plenty of time.”

“I don’t want to be patient. I want to feel you touching me, exploring me.”

His erection throbbed to the same pulse as his horns, but she was so small and delicate. He had to make sure she was ready. He ran his finger down the line of her slit, already flushed and glistening, before gently circling around her swollen little bud.

She arched her hips, trying to lift into his hand, and he stroked a little harder. She started to tremble, her hands fisting in the sheets as she pushed herself up against him.

“Is that good, little one?”

“So good,” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

He teased her for a few more strokes, then slid his hand down to her tiny opening before slowly working a finger into her tight sheath, groaning as she rippled around him.

“Vorkan!”

Her shocked cry almost undid him, but he was determined to drive her higher. He added a second finger, then resumed caressing her clit as he pumped in and out with his fingers. When he curved them up towards her stomach, her whole body arched towards him. He leaned down and clamped his mouth around her nipple, and she cried out his name again as her cunt tightened around his fingers in long, rippling waves.

Fuck. She was so hot, so wet, so beautiful, and her pleasure filled the room. He couldn’t wait any longer.

He pulled his fingers free and fisted his cock, rubbing her slickness along his shaft. Her eyes widened as she watched him, but she didn't look away as he positioned his still furled oris at her entrance.

“Are you sure about this, little one?”

“I'm very sure.”

He pushed. There was a brief resistance, and then his oris slid into the tight, silky channel.

She made a soft sound, more of surprise than protest, but when he looked at her questioningly, she nodded, her eyes clear and determined. He thrust slowly deeper, savoring the impossibly tight grip, and gritted his teeth, fighting back the impulse to slam home, to fuck her hard and fast until he exploded inside her.

His oris began to open, the petals unfurling inside her, and her sweet little cunt fluttered wildly around him as she gasped. He bent down to kiss her, and she gripped the base of his horns, sending shockwaves of pleasure surging back and forth between his horns and his cock. His hips snapped forward in an involuntary thrust, and then he was fully sheathed inside her perfect little body.

“Are you all right?” he managed to ask, his voice strained.

“F... full. So full.” She gasped again as his oris swirled inside her, expanding as it savored her essence.

The sensation was so intense that his vision blurred, but he forced himself to remain still. After a moment, the gripping pressure eased as her channel adjusted, and she rocked experimentally against him. The movement sent sparks dancing over his skin, and the petals of his oris flared wider as it prepared to release its seed.

He slowly withdrew, his oris stroking along her inner walls, then began driving into her with deep, even thrusts. He raised his head so he could watch her, her eyes blind with pleasure. They widened as he hit a new spot inside her, and she gave a startled cry as she exploded, her passage clenching around him and milking his shaft with a hot, silken fist. He couldn't hold

back any longer, his climax washing him in wave after wave of heat as he filled her with his seed. Marking her. Claiming her. His perfect mate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A loud mewl penetrated Tammy's sleep, and she opened her eyes just in time to see a furry white body flying towards her.

"Aqbar!" He was purring so loudly that his whole body vibrated as he wound himself frantically around her neck and shoulders. "My poor baby. Are you all right? I knew we should have gone and gotten you last night."

She had suggested it, but Vorkan had firmly refused, and she had been so sleepy and sated that she hadn't argued.

"There's nothing wrong with him. He still had plenty of food and water. He's just fine. I can't say the same for the shuttle," Vorkan added dryly.

She winced. "What did he do?"

"Let's just say he forcibly expressed his displeasure at being left alone."

"Were you a bad kitty?"

Big blue eyes looked up at her so innocently that she laughed and hugged him. "Never mind. We won't leave you alone again. Thank you for bringing him to me."

Vorkan sat down next to her on the bed, ignoring Aqbar's outraged huff.

"I will do my best to bring you whatever you desire, my mate. How are you feeling?"

"Wonderful," she assured him.

Not only had it been the best sex ever, there had been an intimacy, a trust, that she'd never felt before. Tears had slipped from her eyes at one point, alarming him, but she'd simply been too overwhelmed with happiness to express it any other way.

He kissed her, his mouth lingering against hers until Aqbar huffed again and he sighed and raised his head.

“While I’m gone, you should tell your chaperone that he can always be returned to the shuttle.”

Her heart skipped a beat.

“While you’re gone?”

“Catron wants to meet with me this morning. He has some jobs I can do while I’m here. Do you mind?”

She thought about it, then shook her head.

“No, I feel safe here. That is—you aren’t going to tell me to stay in this room, are you?”

“I won’t do that, but I would ask you to stay in the settlement and not come up to the port alone.”

It wasn’t an unreasonable request, and she nodded. She didn’t have any desire to see any more of the crude metal buildings that made up the port.

“Is that where you’ll be?” she asked.

“Probably. I expect Catron has some use for my mechanical skills.”

“You don’t mind?”

“I enjoy using my hands.” The little flames danced in his eyes as he pushed the sheet down over her breasts. “And while I would prefer using them on you, I suspect you need a little time to recover.”

She shivered as he ran a delicate fingertip over a still red and swollen nipple, sending a spark of arousal through her sensitized body.

“Maybe,” she admitted. “But not too much time.”

“Good. Because I’m not sure that I can stay away from you for long, little one.”

He kissed her again, then left, and she flopped back against the pillows with Aqbar on her chest.

“Now what are we going to do?” she asked him.

She was tempted to go back to sleep but her stomach was reminding her that it was time to eat. She had just decided to get dressed and go in search of breakfast when someone knocked on the door. Her pulse raced, but she took a deep breath. *We’re safe here*, she reminded herself as she wrapped the sheet around her and headed for the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Navaa.”

She breathed a sigh of relief and opened the door to find Navaa smiling at her.

“I brought you some food.”

“Oh, thank you. That was very thoughtful of you.”

“You need to keep up your strength. Plus I thought you might need it after last night.”

She knew she was blushing, but Navaa only laughed and carried the tray over to the table. In addition to a cooked grain mixture that looked similar to what she’d had on the ship, the tray contained fruit, bread, and a pot of tea with two cups. A delicious scent rose from the pot, and she sighed with pleasure.

“I haven’t had tea in so long,” she said happily as she sat down across from Navaa. Aqbar immediately came to join them, sniffing around the tray, and she handed him a piece of fruit.

“I hope you like it. It’s my favorite.” Navaa poured two cups, then added milk to both of them and handed one to her. “How are you feeling this morning?”

She blew on the steaming cup, thinking.

“Happy. Content. A little sore.” She blushed again but smiled at Navaa. “Is it that obvious?”

“That you are newly mated? Yes.” The other female hesitated for a moment. “I know you have some trauma associated with medical exams.”

“Yes.” She grimaced. “I don’t think I could have done it without Vorkan.”

“He is welcome to accompany you every time.” When she didn’t respond, Navaa put down her cup and reached across the table to take her hand. “I will do everything I can to help you feel safe and comfortable, but for your baby’s sake as well as your own, please let me monitor you.”

She shuddered, but she knew Navaa was right—and the conversation with Vorkan the previous night had helped, at least a little.

“I’ll do my best,” she promised, and Navaa let it drop, talking about the upcoming harvest as she started on her breakfast.

“Do you have a school here?” she asked curiously after the other female finished describing the roles everyone would play.

“Of course, although a somewhat unstructured one. We take turns teaching the children in our various areas of knowledge, and they also have sessions working alongside us to gain practical skills.”

“Does Kevi attend?”

Navaa sighed and shook her head. “I think he’s afraid of being trapped. One of the previous mine workers had him working like a slave. It took me forever to even convince him that it was all right to come and get food.”

“What a shame. He struck me as very bright. And he knows a lot about the native animals,” she said thoughtfully.

“I saw him talking to you last night. That’s more than most people have achieved.”

“I thought I’d take Aqbar to see him. Do you know where he might be?”

“Up in the port. He sleeps up there and occasionally runs errands for the passing traders.”

Damn. She had promised Vorkan she wouldn't go up there alone.

"He sometimes comes and grabs some food around midday. Maybe you can catch him then," Navaa suggested, then grinned. "Although I think you'd better get dressed first."

A few hours later, showered and dressed, she sat at the edge of the garden and watched people filing in and out of the dining hall. Navaa had explained that some of the larger housing units built along the crater wall contained individual kitchens, but most people preferred the convenience and camaraderie of the communal meals.

She'd grabbed a large plate of sandwiches, hopefully to entice Kevi, but despite the big breakfast Navaa had brought her, her stomach was demanding food again. She was nibbling on one of the sandwiches when Kevi crouched next to her, appearing as silently as a ghost.

This morning she could see more clearly the muted tones of his skin, a swirling pattern of greys and blues. He wasn't an attractive child, all gangly arms and legs, his dark green eyes too big for his small face, but he tugged at her heartstrings. Those eyes were far too old for a child.

Barely avoiding a startled squeak at his sudden appearance, she smiled at him.

"Hello again. Would you like a sandwich?"

"Yeah." He took one, stuffing an enormous bite in his mouth, but his eyes were fixed on Aqbar. Aqbar returned his gaze with equal curiosity, although Tammy suspected it was as much to do with the food as the boy. "You do have one."

"I told you I did."

"He's not chained."

The first sandwich was gone, and he started on a second. She sighed.

"I thought about putting a harness on him because I'm not sure if he's ever been out in the wild on his own, but if he wants to

leave, I'm not going to stop him." She hesitated, then added, "But I think he'll stay. He'd be lonely without me."

Kevi stared at her, and she held out another sandwich. He snatched it and gobbled it down without blinking. He grabbed another, then hesitated and looked at her.

"Thank you," he muttered.

She nodded, her throat tight, and he disappeared as silently as he had arrived.

A short time later, she spotted him again, squatting under a tree and watching her intently. She smiled at him and held out the plate again. After a long moment, he darted forward, grabbed the last two sandwiches, and scurried away. She sighed and settled back against the rock, hoping that she'd made a start.

She must have dozed off in the sunshine because the next thing she knew, Vorkan was crouched down in front of her with a worried look on his face.

"Little one, are you all right?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

She looked around and realized that the sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows across the grass. Aqbar was still curled up at her side, and someone had placed a ragged blanket over her legs. She fingered the worn fibers and smiled.

"Kevi."

"Kevi?"

"We had lunch together. Well, I offered him food and he took it. I guess I got sleepy after that. He must have covered me up."

"You've been out here alone all afternoon?"

"I wanted to stay here, in case he came back." She smiled up at his worried face. "It was fine. I had a nice nap in the fresh air. How was your day?"

"Lovely," he said dryly. "Nothing like crawling through ducts to make you appreciate your mate."

Despite the comment, she seemed to have enjoyed himself. He looked more relaxed and content than he'd ever been before. Of course, they weren't currently fleeing from an Imperial warship.

"I don't like the idea of you out here alone." He sighed and pulled her to her feet. "Come, little one. Let's return to our room."

She knew he'd been worried, but she couldn't help giggling as he practically carried her back to their room, scolding her the entire way.

"I'm not a child, Vorkan."

"I'm well aware of that." His eyes heated as they drifted down over her body.

"Then why don't we spend our time on more... adult activities?"

She raised her hand to tease at his horns. He growled and tugged her closer as Aqbar gave a disgusted squawk and flew away to curl up on the couch.

"An excellent idea."

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

"Let's see what kind of adult activities you prefer, little one."

All of them, as it turned out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Well?” Vorkan demanded a week later, glaring at Catron.

He'd spent the time working on the mining equipment, as well as some of the vessels that arrived in the port. Although he was aware that they were most probably not legal traders, he found the manual tasks oddly satisfying. He also enjoyed spending time with Catron. He'd forgotten how much easier it was to be around someone with a shared background, despite the difference in their ages.

Having his mate at his side—and in his bed—was the most satisfying of all. Tammy had rapidly found a place in the small community and her contentment fueled his own. Only two things disturbed her serenity. Although she had made some progress with Kevi, the child still refused to spend much time in the settlement and she worried about him. She also continued to worry about Sara, which was the reason he was currently glaring at Catron.

His friend sighed.

“I told you. There is a pattern to the suspicious activities in the Fleet that you discovered, but absolutely nothing that ties it back to Tanaca. And I told you what happened on Ratoria.”

“Two mysterious deaths and an Imperial investigation,” he muttered. “But we still don't know if that's genuine or simply an attempt to cover his tracks.”

“Contact him,” Catron suggested. “I know you have the skills to conceal our location, and you can use the information

you've gathered as a bargaining tool. Offer it to him in exchange for your mate's friend."

He considered the idea. Even though he had confidence in his skills, it was still a risk—and he knew better than to underestimate Tanaca. Still at least they might be able to gain more information. He nodded reluctantly.

"I suppose you're right."

"Good. What do you need to set up a secure link?"

They went through the equipment list, then Vorkan decided to go and have lunch with his mate. He was halfway down the corridor when Kevi came flying towards him, a curiously limp Aqbar clutched in his arms. The boy's eyes were even larger than usual, a tear trickling down his dirty cheek.

"He's taken her!"

"Calm down, Kevi," he ordered. "Who's been taken?"

"Mistress Tammy. The male in black took her before I could stop him!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

T ammy glared at the male bending over the ship's controls, doing her best to direct her fear into anger.

"Let me go at once."

"Sorry, sweetheart," he said absently as he tugged on a wire. "I am being paid very well to return you."

"Return me? To where? Not... not the Ithyians?"

Her voice trembled enough on the last word that he looked up. Her kidnapper appeared to be of the same race as Quincit. He had the same opalescent skin and deep purple hair, but he was much, much larger and his hard face was a far cry from the medic's quiet concern.

"I wouldn't do anything for those bastards, no matter how much they offered."

Relief filled her as she continued to tug surreptitiously at the bands holding her in the chair. They were made of some soft material that wrapped around her legs and arms in an apparently seamless strip. The bands weren't painful, but they were absolutely inescapable.

"Then who?"

He considered her for a moment through unreadable purple eyes, then shrugged.

"I don't usually discuss my clients, but since you'll be meeting him soon enough, I don't suppose it matters. Lord Tanaca has requested your return."

“But why?”

“Don’t know, don’t care.” He looked at her, his gaze appraising rather than lustful. “You’re a pretty little thing, but Tanaca never struck me as the type foolish enough to succumb to a female.”

He bent back over the control panel.

“Look, I’m sure this is just a misunderstanding.” She hoped. “Couldn’t we contact him and check?”

“No.”

His voice wasn’t unkind, but he clearly had no intention of changing his mind, and she sagged against her restraints. The lack of any reference to Sara didn’t make her feel any better, but why else would Tanaca be so determined to find her? If—when—Vorkan came for her, maybe he could get this stranger to reveal more information.

Assuming he’s not too busy yelling at me, she thought and sighed.

She hadn’t actually disobeyed him—she hadn’t been alone when she came up to the port—but she suspected that Kevi wasn’t who he had in mind when he insisted that someone accompany her. Unfortunately, she hadn’t been able to refuse Kevi’s request.

The boy had joined her for lunch almost every day, staying long enough to eat the sandwiches she brought him before disappearing again. He was fascinated by Aqbar, and her pet seemed equally interested—and not just because Kevi fed him bits of sandwich. She’d wanted to tell him he needed the food more than the Orosz, but she kept her mouth shut and simply brought more food from then on.

Kevi was willing to talk about animals, but any time she tentatively approached the subject of his current living situation, let alone his past, he clammed up. Then this morning he’d hunkered down on the ground a few feet away, his arms wrapped tightly around his knobby knees, and slanted a look at her from under his brows.

“Wanna show you something.”

“All right. Where is it?”

“Topside. In the port.”

Her brief impression of the port had not been particularly favorable, and Vorkan had warned her against going alone, but when she hesitated, she saw the flicker of disappointment on Kevi’s face.

“I’ll come with you,” she said quickly.

He grinned and darted to his feet. She followed him up a steep, narrow trail towards the crater rim. He skipped ahead like a mountain goat but as she panted her way up the dusty trail, she decided next time they were taking the elevator. Assuming there was a next time. They emerged at the rim of the crater farthest away from the spaceport.

The wind gave a lonely moan as it whistled through the remnants of the abandoned buildings, and Kevi led her to one close to the edge of the crater. The walls looked like they were falling down, but once inside she discovered he’d created a snug little hideaway. The walls were lined with makeshift shelves piled high with odd pieces of equipment, and it reminded her oddly of Navaa’s office. Some roughly carved animal figurines were tucked along the shelves, and the pile of tattered blankets and the small stove made her heart ache.

“What’s this say?” he asked as he handed her a small device with an indecipherable label.

“I don’t know. I can’t read very much of your language yet.”

Navaa had provided her with a learning tablet, and she was working on it, but it was slow going.

“Figures. But look.”

He held up a rectangular object about six inches long and a couple of inches thick. It was made of some sort of light grey material, and he stroked it lovingly with his fingers as he talked.

“I’m pretty sure this is a transmitter. I hooked up the solar cell, but it’s still not working.” He hesitated, then blurted out, “I

thought I could bring it to you and you could help me figure it out.”

She stroked his tangled hair back from his face.

“I wish I could, but I don’t know a lot about machines. Would you be willing to let my mate take a look?”

She could see him struggling with the decision, but she waited patiently. Kevi had appeared at dinner a few times, and she’d seen him watching her and Vorkan. When she’d asked him to join them, he’d shaken his head and darted away.

“You can trust him, Kevi,” she said quietly.

“Maybe. Maybe I could show him. But not here,” he added quickly.

“We can meet wherever you’d like.”

He suddenly grinned, his face happier than she’d ever seen it.

“You gonna bring sandwiches?”

She laughed. “If that’s what you’d like.”

He nodded enthusiastically, then carefully tucked his treasures away. As they left Kevi’s shelter, Aqbar suddenly hissed, his fur standing on end. Confused, she followed the direction of his gaze and saw a male standing in the shadows of a nearby ruined building. He was dressed all in black, and she wouldn’t even have noticed that he was there if Aqbar hadn’t reacted to him.

As soon as she spotted him, the male strode forward, then stopped when Aqbar launched himself off her shoulder, spitting and clawing.

“Aqbar, no!”

The little Orosz flew straight for the male’s face, his claws extended, and the male grabbed him. He drew a bottle out of his pocket and puffed something in Aqbar’s face. Her pet immediately went limp and collapsed on the ground.

“No!”

Kevi's outraged cry matched her own, and he charged at the stranger.

"Kevi, wait!"

The boy ignored her, hurling himself at the male, who casually reached out and picked him up. Kevi kicked and twisted, but the male held him easily before puffing the same spray in Kevi's face. He also went limp, and the stranger lowered him to the ground as she fought to get herself under control

"What did you do to him?" she whispered.

"I simply put him to sleep. Both of them." He shrugged.
"They'll be fine."

"Who are you? What do you want with us?"

He ignored the questions as he strolled towards her, moving with a speed that belied the casual posture. She started to back away, but she was too late. He grabbed her arm and pulled her close against him before she could escape. Her heart hammering in her chest, she started to scream, and he clamped one hand over her mouth.

"Now, now, none of that." He frowned at her. "If you try and scream again, I'll put you to sleep too. Do you understand?"

Shuddering, she nodded and he removed his hand. She almost screamed anyway, but she was terrified that whatever was in the gas might hurt the baby. He waited a moment, then nodded.

"Good. Now are you going to struggle?"

"Of course I am!" she snapped. "Let me go."

Despite her anger, she'd never felt so helpless. He wasn't hurting her, but she was all too aware of the strength in his grip. He felt as strong as Vorkan. Oh, God, what was Vorkan going to do if she went missing again? *He'll find me.*

"Interesting. I've heard human females are quite fragile."

"That doesn't mean I'm not going to fight you. Let me go, dammit!"

She tried to stomp on his foot, but he easily evaded the move. He tilted his head as he studied her, a slight smile twisting his mouth.

“So spirited. You’re going to keep my employer busy.”

“Who’s your employer?”

He ignored the question, clasping her hands together behind her back as he urged her forward. She cast a despairing glance over her shoulder at Kevi and Aqbar, but had no choice except to keep walking. He’d carefully circled the edge of the port before taking her onto a small ship, even smaller than the shuttle in which they’d arrived, and tying her to this chair.

The only reason they were still on the ground was because the engine had refused to start - which was why he was now bent over the controls and ignoring her questions.

“What’s your name?” she tried.

“I don’t have one.” His voice was muffled as he kneeled beneath the console.

“Everyone has a name.”

He looked at her as he climbed back out, his eyes cold and hard.

“No, they don’t.” Then he shrugged, resuming his previous casual insouciance. “You can call me Wraith.”

“I’m Tammy,” she said automatically.

“Yes, I know.” He had the nerve to look amused. “I was looking for you, remember?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to call Tanaca and save a wasted trip?” she asked desperately.

“I never break a contract. And I suspect you’re going to be a very entertaining companion.”

He pressed a button, and this time there was a low hum from the engine. She couldn’t stop a tear from trickling down her cheek as despair filled her. Oh, God, it was too late.

“A dead male doesn’t require a companion,” a voice growled from the door, and then Vorkan was there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

V orkan had spent years hiding his emotions.

Years of suppressing the rage and pain that burned inside him. Years of pushing aside his feelings. But as he stared at his mate tied to the chair, tears streaking her beautiful face, he couldn't suppress the storm of emotion that tore through him. He wanted to destroy something—someone—but his first priority was freeing her and the bastard was between them.

“Release her,” he snarled at the Autan male, not recognizing his own voice.

His horns pulsed with hot fury as the male studied him with a faintly amused expression. Despite the rage clouding his vision, he recognized the alertness behind the casual look. This was no ordinary trader simply grabbing a valuable female.

“Now why would I do that?”

“Because if you don't, I will kill you.”

“Better males than you have tried,” the male said pleasantly.

“They have all failed.”

“Please, Wraith, just let me go,” Tammy cried, her face horrified. “Just tell Tanaca you couldn't find me.”

Tanaca? The name penetrated his rage, even as Wraith shook his head.

“I told you. I never break a contract.”

“Why does Tanaca want her?” he demanded, and the other male sighed.

“I already told your mate. I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

“I have information he wants,” he said quickly. “I believe he’d be willing to make a deal.”

Wraith raised an eyebrow.

“But then he’d have no use for my services.”

“I will make sure you’re paid no matter what.”

The other male stared at him as he readied himself. If Wraith refused, he would have no choice except to fight, no matter how dangerous it might be. He wouldn’t let him leave the planet with Tammy.

“Very well. I will send one message. One. If he responds, I will open a communication channel. If he does not...” Wraith gave him a slow, deadly smile. “Then you will leave my ship.”

“No. I am not leaving without my mate.”

Their eyes locked, and Wraith tensed. Tammy looked frantically between them.

“Please...”

At her whispered plea, the other male gave him a deadly smile and finally looked away.

“I hope for your sake that Tanaca wants to speak to you.”

Wraith bent over the control panel and touched a single button before turning back. His eyes flicked from Tammy back to him.

“What message do you want me to send?”

“Tell him I want my mate’s friend released. If he does so, I will deliver all of the information I have about the Fleet’s involvement in the trafficking of human slaves.”

The other male raised an eyebrow, then sent the message. A deadly silence filled the cabin and Tammy began to shake. *Fuck this.* He crossed the short distance to her side, ignoring the fact that Wraith’s hand went to his knife.

“I’m not going to take her away.” *Yet.* “But I’m releasing my mate. She is with child,” he added, looking directly at the

other male.

Wraith's hand dropped away from his knife as he swiftly cut Tammy free. She collapsed against him, her shoulders shaking with her sobs as he gathered her close.

"Hush, little one. You're safe now."

Her fingers trembled as she clutched at his shirt, but she did her best to smile up at him.

"Kevi?" she whispered.

"He's fine. He and Aqbar."

"Oh, thank God."

The large monitor behind Wraith suddenly clicked on to reveal Tanaca, his face a frozen mask except for the silver eyes burning with rage.

"What is the meaning of this?" he snapped. "You dare to try and blackmail me into releasing Sara?"

He rose, tucking Tammy behind him as Wraith opened the channel.

"Your message implied that Tammy is your mate," Tanaca continued before he could answer.

"Yes."

Tanaca's face froze again, but only for a moment. "She is well? Your mate?"

He frowned at the unexpected question, but Tammy slipped around in front of him.

"I am," she said, her voice quiet but firm.

"And you are unharmed?" Tanaca asked.

"Yes, other than your errand boy trying to take me away from my mate. Where's Sara?"

Tanaca didn't answer her question, still studying her face.

"You chose to become Vorkan's mate?"

"Of course I did. Now where's Sara?"

“I’m here, dammit. Let me talk.” Sara pushed in front of Tanaca, and his icy face softened into a look of amused frustration. “Oh my God, you look so much better—so happy.”

“Because I am happy.” She squeezed his hand as she beamed at her friend. “And you’re all right? Not a slave?”

“I’m a slave to his every whim,” Sara said dramatically, then grinned when Tanaca gave a long-suffering sigh.

Wraith shot him a look over Tammy’s head, and he suspected both of them were thinking the same thing—Tanaca had met his match.

“Honestly, I’m wonderful,” Sara continued. “And I spoke to Rita. She’s fine too and mated to this huge warrior who must be twice her size. He’s even bigger than your male. Can you imagine tiny little Rita with a male that big? Of course, bigger —”

“I believe you can continue this discussion at another time,” Tanaca interrupted.

Sara sighed. “I suppose. When are you coming back? We’re going to Kaisar. Tanaca has a huge palace, and there will be plenty of room for all of us. We can get dressed up and go to parties and have a wonderful time.”

He did his best to hide an involuntary shudder. The last place he ever wanted to go was Kaisar. His heart sank as his mate gave her friend a thoughtful look.

“Is Rita going to be there too?”

“Well, no. Her mate didn’t exactly part ways with the Fleet on the best terms.” Sara giggled. “He’s a bad boy. Can you imagine?”

“If you wish to return, Officer Vorkan, that will not be an issue,” Tanaca said quietly.

“Thank you, Lord Tanaca, but—”

He hesitated, and Tammy squeezed his hand again.

“Thank you,” she echoed, “but we don’t want to go to Kaisar. Can Vorkan just... retire instead?”

Tanaca looked amused, but he nodded even as Sara made a face at her friend.

“Why not?”

“Because I—*we*—are happy here. It may not look like much, but I think they need us. And we need them.”

Sara gave a dramatic sigh. “Still trying to save the world?”

“There’s a lot more world than I realized,” she said dryly. “But maybe one little corner of it.”

“As delightful as your altruistic little plan sounds,” Wraith interrupted. “I have a far more pressing question. Do you consider that I fulfilled the terms of the contract, Lord Tanaca?”

“I do.”

“Excellent. Then you can transfer the credits to my account and you two can leave my ship so I can get away from this planet before I start singing lullabies.”

He suspected both Tanaca and Sara caught the reference, but Tanaca spoke before Sara could.

“There is one additional piece of business. Or was that just a ploy on your part?”

“The information about the Fleet? I’m afraid not, although I believe it is a few corrupt individuals rather than an overarching conspiracy. I’ll send you the information, and we can discuss it further once you’ve reviewed it. Tomorrow.”

Tanaca frowned, clearly unhappy with the delay, but Sara leaned back and whispered something in his ear. His eyes blazed with undisguised hunger for a brief second before his usual controlled expression returned.

“Very well.”

“And while you two are talking, I’ll set up another call for me and Tammy, and hopefully Rita.” Sara’s eyes sparkled. “That way we can discuss our mates’ finer qualities, like size and—”

The transmission ended.

Tammy laughed, then swayed, and he immediately lifted her into his arms.

“Leaving all ready?” Wraith asked mockingly. “Such a shame.”

“Stay the hell away from this planet,” he growled, and Tammy sighed.

“Stop it. He didn’t hurt me, and he listened to you when you wanted him to contact Tanaca. He didn’t even drug me. I’ve been kidnapped by worse.”

She smiled at his outraged expression and waved to Wraith.

“Goodbye. And thank you.”

“My pleasure, Mistress Tammy. I wish all—”

Vorkan didn’t wait to hear the rest, stomping off the ship.

“I can’t believe you thanked your kidnapper,” he growled.

“I only thanked *that* kidnapper verbally.” She smiled again as she reached up and circled the sensitive base of his horns. “I have more... physical ways of thanking my other kidnapper.”

Fuck, she was perfect.

“I will hold you to that, little one,” he rasped.

She just laughed and clung to him as his pace quickened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

T ammy breathed a sigh of relief as the door to their quarters closed behind them. In spite of Vorkan's eagerness to get her alone, they'd both wanted to check on Kevi and Aqbar. The boy had been the one to actually lead him to Wraith's flyer. He'd spotted it because it had been parked amongst the ruins, some distance from the spaceport. The flyer also turned out to be the source of the transmitter that Kevi had been so eager to show her. The missing transmitter had been the reason why the takeoff was delayed.

Once Kevi had shown Vorkan the location of the flyer, her mate had ordered him to go and get Catron. They'd encountered both of them, along with a group of Catron's males as they made their way back to the settlement. Kevi had been so relieved to see her that he'd not only let her hug him, he'd agreed to spend the night in the settlement in the room next to theirs. Aqbar was in there with him, still a little wobbly but otherwise no worse for the experience.

Which meant she was now alone with her mate. His harsh, beloved face was still etched with concern as she smiled up at him.

"Thank you for coming for me."

"I will always come for you, little one."

"I know."

She smiled and rose up on her tiptoes to kiss him. For a fraction of a second he froze, and then he growled low in his throat and picked her up, pinning her against the door as he

claimed her mouth. The kiss was hot and fierce and dominant, everything that she needed, and she clung to him, wrapping her legs around his waist.

His body was hot against her, and his scent surrounded her. His massive ridge of his cock rubbed against her in a way that made her squirm wildly, seeking more. He groaned, breaking away from her mouth.

“Stop wiggling,” he demanded, then his mouth went lower, catching one of her nipples through the thin fabric of her dress.

She moaned, and he ripped the fabric aside with effortless ease. Heat flooded her body as his mouth clamped down over her bare flesh, tugging on her nipple as he cupped her breasts in his big hands.

“So fucking sweet,” he muttered before turning his attention to her other breast.

She was gasping and desperate by the time he put her back on her feet, his lips leaving a trail of fire across her jaw and down her throat. He ripped the rest of her dress away and it drifted to the ground, leaving her naked and exposed in front of his still clothed body.

The flames danced in his eyes as he looked at her. Her mouth went dry as he freed his erection, impossibly huge and red and swollen. She grabbed at his horns as he licked her nipples again, but instead of lingering there, he lifted her back up against the door.

He brought her down over his cock, not entering her but sliding the thick ridge back and forth between her swollen folds until she was panting. His oris unfurled, surrounding her aching clit in hot, wet suction. The urgent pull sent shivers up and down her spine, waves of sensation pulsing through her as she bucked helplessly in his embrace. His fingers dug into her hips, holding her securely as he drove her higher and higher.

Just before her climax swept over her, he pulled away. Before she could object, he drove his cock into her in one long, hard stroke, stretching her to capacity and beyond. He fucked her

hard and deep, his cock pounding into her as his petals stroked every sensitive spot inside her body.

Her climax hit her like a rocket, lighting up her nervous system in an endless spiral of bliss, but he didn't stop, prolonging her orgasm with his demanding strokes until she finally went limp. He eased her back onto her feet, holding her as his cock slid free and she gave him a startled look.

"But what about you?"

"Oh, don't worry, little one. I'm just getting started."

He scooped her up in his arms again and carried her over to their bed. She watched as he stripped off the rest of his clothes, revealing the thick muscles that covered his massive body. He was so big—so perfect. The scars and the dark, harsh lines of his tattoos only emphasized his powerful masculinity. She almost purred with contentment when he joined her, covering her body with his. His cock rubbed against her, teasing her folds, but he didn't enter her again. Instead he propped his chin on his hand and studied her intently.

"It was foolish to go to the port without an escort."

The gentle reminder made her flush but she met his eyes steadily.

"I know, but Kevi wanted me to go with him and I didn't want to disappoint him."

He sighed.

"I love that you care so much, little one, but I can't stand the thought of you putting yourself in danger."

"I know." She traced a finger up over his face to his horns. "But we don't have to worry any more, do we? Now that the Fleet isn't after us?"

"The port is still a dangerous place. Perhaps staying here isn't the answer after all."

"What? No, we can't leave. I want to be here, and I think you do too."

"I want you safe."

She sighed, stroking down his horns.

“I’ll be fine. And I’ll even promise not to go up the port again without an escort—an adult escort.” She gave him a speculative look. “Of course, it would be easier if Kevi lived down here with us...”

His eyes narrowed.

“Are you trying to bargain with me, little one?”

“Maybe,” she said with a hopeful smile.

“I don’t know that it’s a wise idea to reward you for disobedience.”

His body shifted against hers, and she shivered at the heated look in his eyes.

“It wasn’t exactly disobedience—I wasn’t alone. Although I am very grateful to you for rescuing me.”

She wrapped her arms around him and stroked his horns again, lightly this time. His oris pulsed over her clit, sending little bolts of pleasure through her body, but she kept her gaze on his.

“Would you like me to show you?”

“Show me what?”

“How very grateful I am.”

She sat up, nudging him onto his back with her hands on his broad chest. His eyes darkened and his breath came in harsh pants as she wriggled down his body, kneeling between his muscular thighs. She admired the masculine perfection of his abs as she ran her fingers over them, tracing the tattoos, then moved her attention to the hard length of his shaft.

The delicate petals of his oris were still spread wide, gleaming with their combined essence, and the combination was irresistible. She leaned forward and licked delicately along one edge of a petal. He growled and surged upwards, but she flattened her hands against his chest and pushed, urging him back down.

His eyes widened in surprise and something else, something heated and primal that made her quiver, but he lay back. She kept her gaze on his as she licked him again.

“Fuck,” he hissed, and his hips flexed up again, but he remained in place.

“Not yet,” she whispered and went back to exploring.

His petals were hot and silky, but firm against her tongue. They fluttered and danced under her touch, and she lost herself in the feel of it, the feel of him. His body was rigid with strain when she finally lifted her head.

“Come here,” he growled.

She gave him a teasing smile as she slowly climbed up over him, straddling that huge perfect body.

“Is this where you want me?”

“Fuck.”

He put his hands on her hips and pulled her up towards his cock, then dragged her back over it. She moaned as the thick shaft rubbed against her slick, swollen folds. Her clit throbbed, her empty pussy ached, and it took all her self-control not to immediately sink down on him.

His eyes never left her face as she ground herself against the hard ridge of his cock before finally positioning herself over him and lowering her body. The exquisite stretch had her on the verge of climax as she slowly took more and more of his enormous cock. His muscles were so taut with strain that she could see each corded vein as she slid down over him.

When she had taken his entire length, she sat there, gasping and trembling, and he growled.

“Move, little one.”

She started to ride him, rolling her hips forward. She loved the feel of him filling her, stretching her, pushing her higher and higher. And then he took control, driving up into her with a breathtaking intensity that sent her soaring into an overwhelming climax, her channel convulsing helplessly around that huge shaft. He roared as his oris expanded and his

own release shuddered through that big body, his seed pumping into her in long, hot pulses.

His arms locked around her, holding her close as she collapsed onto his chest. He stroked her back and her hair, whispering words she couldn't make out. She didn't care, sighing in contentment as she burrowed against him.

“Little one?”

“Mmm?”

“I love you.”

Happiness filled her as she looked up at him.

“I love you too.”

She was a million miles away from where she had started, but she was right where she belonged, home at last in the arms of the male she loved.

EPILOGUE

*S*even months later...

“SHE’S SO BEAUTIFUL,” VORKAN WHISPERED AS HE RAN A gentle finger down their daughter’s cheek. “She looks just like you.”

Tammy smiled tiredly, nestled in the curve of his arm as they watched the baby sleeping in her arms. It had been a long labor, but she and Navaa had been remarkably calm throughout. Thank the gods he’d been able to help her overcome her fears of medical treatment. He was the one who had been frustrated and afraid at the sight of his mate struggling.

“I don’t know about that, but she is perfect,” she agreed. “Why don’t you let Kevi and Aqbar come and meet her?”

He nodded and gently placed her back against the pillows before he went to the door. Tammy’s wish had come true and Kevi had come to live with them—only occasionally at first, but now he was as much a part of their family as their new daughter. He’d built a new home large enough for everyone. The whole community had turned out to help, and he’d realized again how right his mate had been to insist that they stay on Franar.

Aqbar flew into the room, purring loudly as he nuzzled his head against Tammy. Kevi was on his heels, staring down at the baby before shooting him a hesitant look.

“Can I hold her?”

“Of course.”

The baby barely stirred as he placed her in Kevi’s arms. The boy’s face glowed, and his eyes were as bright as the stars as he held her.

“Hello, L’ari. Welcome home.”

SIX MONTHS LATER...

TAMMY SMILED AS SHE WATCHED THEIR DAUGHTER ROCK BACK and forth on her hands and knees.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” she murmured to Vorkan, and he frowned.

“What does it mean?”

“That she’s about to start crawling, and I have a feeling that once she starts going she’s not going to stop.”

“Crawling?” He gave her a horrified look. “She’s far too young.”

“No, she isn’t. They grow up so fast, don’t they?”

“Too fast. She’s only just started sleeping through the night.” He sighed. “I miss those late-night cuddles.”

She poked him gently.

“Most people are grateful to get more sleep.”

“I am not most people.”

“Look at it this way—some people are grateful to have more time with their mate for sexy night time games.”

The little flames burned in his eyes as he leaned towards her.

“Now that is a reason I can embrace.”

Not that it’s going to last long, she thought and winced. She needed to tell him, but she knew as soon as she did he would switch into overprotective mode and she was damned if she

was going to miss her get together with Sara and Rita. They had frequent video conferences, but it wasn't the same as being together in person.

“How much longer until we're ready to leave?”

“Not long. I just have to go and check on Kevi. Last time I checked, he had three pairs of pants, no shirts, and half of L'ari's clothes.”

She laughed.

“Well, go and check. I can't wait to get there.”

THREE DAYS LATER, THEY ARRIVED ON SHERAE. TANACA HAD purchased a private island to build a second home for Sara away from Kaiser, and Vorkan landed the shuttle on the small field at one end of the island. She stepped out onto the landing ramp and sighed with pleasure. Sherae was as beautiful as Sara had claimed with a turquoise sea surrounding a pink sand beach and lush vegetation filling the center of the island. The breeze from the sea cooled the warm air to the perfect temperature.

Then she forgot all about the setting as Rita came racing towards her. Her friend glowed with happiness, her pretty face flushed with excitement. Her huge mate might have intimidated Tammy under other circumstances, but it was hard to be afraid of a male cradling his tiny son protectively against his massive shoulder.

She threw her arms around her friend as they hugged and laughed and wept. Kevi rolled his eyes while Worvak and Vorkan exchanged amused glances. While the three women usually talked privately, there was enough interaction that all of the males knew each other.

“Where's Sara?” she demanded.

“Just on the other side of that spit of land. Tanaca wanted both of us to show up at the same time to make it a better surprise.”

“Then let's go.”

Rita grinned and grabbed her hand, and they took off. Vorkan followed, carrying their daughter. Kevi remained at his side with Aqbar on his shoulder, both of them keeping a watchful eye on L'ari.

As promised, the house was in the cove on the other side of the small peninsula. Sara was standing on the terrace laughing up at Tanaca, as beautiful as ever. Her mouth fell open as she saw them, then she threw her arms around Tanaca's neck before hurrying towards them as fast as her extremely pregnant stomach would allow.

More hugs, kisses, and laughter followed, ending with the three of them collapsing in a joyful heap on the beach.

"I can't believe we're actually all together again," Sara said, wiping at her eyes. "Dammit, this whole pregnancy thing is making me weepy."

"I remember that," Rita agreed. "I was always crying for no reason. When I wasn't eating," she added with a smile.

"Oh my God, yes. I'm so hungry. And horny. I can't keep my hands off Tanaca. Not that I could before," Sara added with a wicked smile.

Tanaca had his back to them as he talked to their mates, but Tammy was quite sure his back stiffened. Sara leaned in closer and giggled.

"I think tonight's going to be especially fun."

"No doubt," Tanaca said without turning around. "So you should make sure you eat well. You will need your strength."

Sara laughed so hard she fell over, then gave them a comical look.

"Do you know how hard it is to get up when you're seven months pregnant?"

"Yes," they both agreed as Tanaca joined them, lifting Sara easily into his arms.

"Chair," he said firmly. "And then we will begin the meal."

For once Sara didn't argue, simply smiling and nestling against him.

"They look so happy," Rita said with a dreamy smile as Tanaca carried Sara away.

"I know. And so do you and Worvak."

"I am. You know back when the two of you were trying to get me to date, I would have run a mile from a big, scary man, even if he wasn't an alien, but he's absolutely perfect for me."

She laughed as she looked over at her own big, scarred warrior.

"I know what you mean. I was wasting my time on all those emo types when all I really needed was Vorkan. He makes me so happy."

Tears suddenly sprang to her eyes, and Rita gave her a thoughtful look before she reached over and hugged her.

"And the three of us are together. How much better could it be? Now let's go eat. I bet you're hungry."

There was the slightest hint of a question in her last sentence, and Tammy grinned at her.

"Starving."

TANACA HAD ORDERED THE TABLE SET UP ON THE TERRACE overlooking the sea, and they ate and drank and laughed until long after the sun sank below the horizon. Kevi wandered over to lean against her chair as she fed L'ari and sighed.

"I wish she was big enough to play with."

"She will be soon. And Atali too. But you'll always be the big brother, so you'll have to wait for them."

"I guess."

"Go see your dad. He and Tanaca have a surprise for you."

A few minutes later, she heard the sound of his excited laughter and smiled. Tanaca had brought a three-dimensional version of a train set, with spaceships instead of trains, and

soon all three males had joined her son as he raced the ships around the course.

Sara shook her head as she stroked Aqbar's fur. He was curled up in her lap, purring contentedly.

"This is good practice for Tanaca," she said softly. "He never had a father."

"Neither did Vorkan, but he's been wonderful."

One of the servants offered her a glass of wine, but she shook her head. Sara frowned at her, then a knowing smile curved her lips. Damn. Her friend always was just a little bit too perceptive. Sara opened her mouth, but she quickly shook her head, and Sara sat back. So now both of her friends knew, or at least suspected, but there was one more to go.

"SHE'S ASLEEP," VORKAN ANNOUNCED AS HE SLID UNDER THE covers and pulled her into his arms. "And Kevi is dead to the world. Aqbar is watching over both of them."

"I want to do this more often," she said. "Sara and Rita are part of my family, and I want our children to grow up knowing their children."

"Would you rather live here, little one?"

"No. I love our life on Franar, but I would like to visit often."

"Perhaps we could get a home here. A much smaller home," he added dryly as he looked around at the huge, luxurious room and the long wall of windows opening onto the darkened patio and the endless sea beyond.

"I've never minded small."

"I think I'll talk to Worvak. I suspect he may be thinking along the same lines. Would you mind sharing?"

"Not at all." She took a deep breath. "But even if it's small, we'll need a lot of places for people to sleep."

"Eventually."

"Maybe sooner than you think," she muttered, and he frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“I always thought you couldn’t get pregnant while you were nursing, and either that’s not true or you have exceptionally potent sperm because it happened,” she blurted out in a rush.

It took a second for him to sort through her words, and then his eyes heated as he rolled her under him.

“You are with child?”

“Yes. Again.”

He frowned. “Are you unhappy about it, little one?”

“Oh, no. I love our son and daughter, and I always wanted a big family so I’m thrilled, but we didn’t talk about it and I wasn’t sure how you—”

He cut her off by kissing her until she was too breathless to talk.

“I’m very happy,” he said firmly. “I love our children and I want as many more as you are willing to give me. I’m thrilled that we are going to have another one soon. And I love how your body changes when you are with child, becoming round and soft and even more delicious.”

His hand slid down to cup her breast, tugging at her nipple with the perfect amount of pressure to make her arch against him.

“I love the sweet taste of your milk and the way your breasts overflow my hands. I love the fact that your desire for me only grows during these times and that I can make you come over and over again.”

“Well okay then,” she whispered, her hips shifting restlessly against him. “Let’s find out how many times.”

He laughed and kissed her, and soon her cries of pleasure mingled with the soft roar of the waves as she lost herself in the wonder of her mate.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading *Tammy and the Traitor*! I love a super protective hero and a heroine who is much stronger than she seems - and I hope you enjoyed them too!

I'm taking a break from this series for a little while, but don't worry, it will be back - and yes, I'm going all the way to Z! You might even see some previous characters show up again along the way...

Whether you loved the book or not, it would mean the world to me if you left an honest review on Amazon. Word of mouth is incredibly helpful for authors and I'd love to know your thoughts!

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. I appreciate you so much!

Would you like to know more about how Vorkan helped Tammy overcome her fear of medical examinations?

[Click here to download an extra spicy scene!](#)

For more stories set in the Kaisarian universe, check out Folsom Planet Blues - beginning with ***Alien Most Wanted: Caged Beast!***

One minute Amanda is crying over a Hallmark movie and binging chocolate. The next she is being offered as a prize to the winner of a brutal contest in an alien prison. And the biggest, scariest alien of them all just won her...

[Alien Most Wanted: Caged Beast is available on Amazon!](#)

If you're in the mood for something sweeter, did you know I also write cozy (and spicy!) monster romance? Check out my Fairhaven Falls series, beginning with ***Cupcakes for My Orc Enemy!***

Elara's grumpy orc neighbor has the best buns in town - and his baked goods aren't bad either!

But is the heat brewing between them more than just a little accidental arson?

[Cupcakes for My Orc Enemy is available on Amazon!](#)

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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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