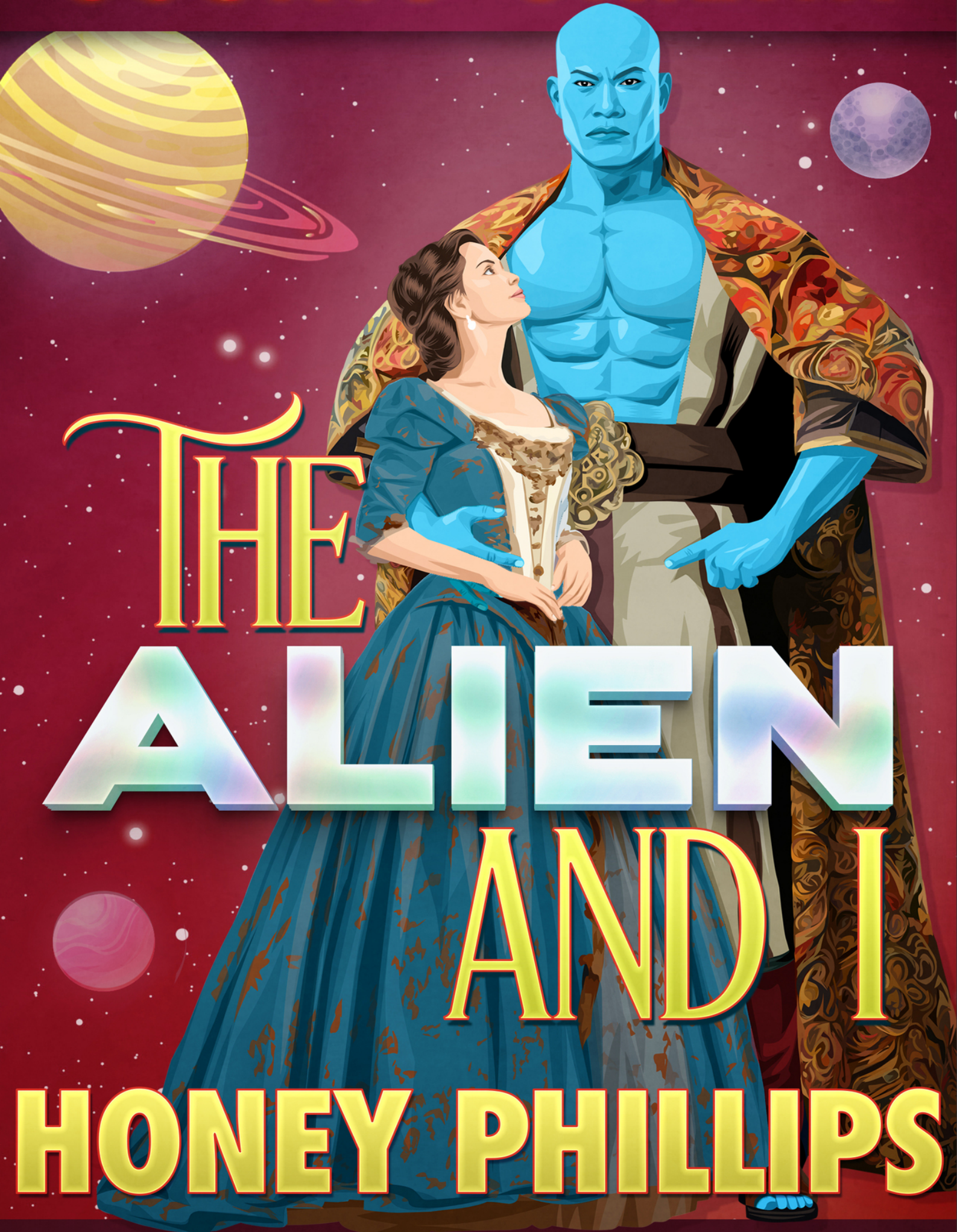


COSMIC CINEMA



THE
ALIEN
AND I

HONEY PHILLIPS

THE ALIEN AND I

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HONEY PHILLIPS

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CHAPTER 1



Anna Lennox clutched her satchel tightly under her arm as she worked her way through the busy streets of Rygan, the capital city of Samar Prime. Night had long since fallen, but it was never truly dark in Rygan. Brightly lit retail stores flashed specials across their windows while colorful floating advertisements illuminated the faces around her in a constantly changing display, overlaying already alien features with random bursts of color. Personal flyers whizzed by overhead, their distinctive high-pitched sound adding to the cacophony of the crowded city.

As she paused at a crosswalk to wait for the flow of hovercars to stop, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in a nearby shop window. She barely recognized herself. The harsh lime green from a juice advertisement only emphasized her pale, tired face and the strands of dark hair escaping from her sensible braid gave her a frazzled look. Glancing away from the depressing sight, she checked her com device, then sighed. Once again she would be arriving home far too late.

After the light changed and she hurried across the street with a crowd of other pedestrians, she passed a group of Samaran street performers, their wild music clashing with the noises of the city. They were young and, she suspected, talented, but the music ricocheted inside her head, aggravating the headache she'd had since mid-afternoon and she couldn't manage more than a weak smile for their efforts.

God, she missed silence. The huge transport ship that had brought a desperate band of human refugees to Samar had not

been an ideal living environment, but their cabin, small as it was, had been soundproof. She'd been able to read and study and think in silence - at least once Louisa was asleep.

"Excuse me," she murmured, sidestepping a hurried pedestrian whose gaze was locked on a holo-screen floating in front of him but he neither looked up nor responded and her stomach tightened. She didn't think she'd ever felt as isolated as she did as part of this nameless, faceless crowd of people.

When she finally reached the lobby of her residential complex, she exhaled the sigh that had been building within her since she'd stepped onto the crowded transit platform that morning. The relative quiet washed over her like a balm.

Home at last, she thought, but it didn't feel true. Even after two years, the massive complex didn't feel like home. She sighed again and headed for the bank of anti-grav lifts that would carry her fifty stories upward in the blink of an eye. Once on her floor, she hurried through the maze of corridors to her door, waving the key card over the sensor until it opened with a soft hiss.

The small foyer was dimly lit, the only illumination coming from the living room beyond. She walked silently into the room, smiling when she saw Mrs. B'mart asleep in the big chair, her needlework in her lap. Louisa's babysitter was a Gallian, a furry race with a distinct resemblance to Earth bears, but Mrs. B. had a kind heart and an endless amount of patience for Anna's erratic schedule.

"Mrs. B," she said quietly, and the babysitter's eyes immediately flew open, fumbling for her glasses.

"Oh, there you are, dear. I must have fallen asleep. What's the time?"

"Late," she said, fighting back another pang of guilt. "The committee meeting ran long - again. How was Louisa today?"

"She's fine." There was the slightest hesitation before the older female continued. "She received an outstanding rating on her art project and she wanted to tell you about it."

Damn, damn, damn.

“I wish I’d been here.”

“We both know you’d be here if you could,” Mrs. B. said gently, but it didn’t relieve Anna’s guilt.

On one hand she knew how lucky she’d been to have been accepted into the university faculty. Although she had her PhD in Educational Psychology, she’d been afraid it was too esoteric for a technologically advanced planet. But they had hired her and the generous salary provided for her apartment and Louisa’s schooling and Mrs. B.’s services. Many of the human refugees had not been so lucky.

But she’d paid a stiff price for her position. In addition to her teaching and her research, she was expected to participate in a never-ending round of conferences and committee meetings. As a result, she spent far too many late nights away from home.

“I’m afraid knowing is not the same as understanding. At least I have a late class tomorrow so I can eat breakfast with her and take her to school.”

Mrs. B. nodded briskly, gathering up her needlework and adding it to the oversized tote bag that held an endless array of surprises.

“Then I’ll pick her up after school. I thought we might go to the park.”

She nodded agreeably, even though she knew that the so-called park was only a small, rigidly controlled patch of green surrounded by buildings. At least it offered a chance for Louisa to play outside.

“Maybe I could join-”

No. The chair of her department had called a meeting to discuss the curriculum for the next semester.

“I’ll try not to be late,” she said instead.

“I know you will, dear. Now I’ll just be off home. There’s a casserole in the warming oven if you’re hungry.”

“You’re an angel, Mrs. B.”

She bent down and kissed the other woman's soft cheek before escorting her to the door, closing it behind her with a tired sigh. She wandered slowly back through the living room to peep into Louisa's room. The soft glow of tiny nightlights in the shape of a constellation illuminated her daughter's sleeping face and, as always, warmth filled her as she looked at her precious child.

If it hadn't been for an unfortunate, short-lived affair with a visiting faculty member, she might never have had a child at all. She'd only realized she was pregnant two days before the government began broadcasting the stunning news that Earth was on the brink of destruction and the even more stunning news that a collection of planets called the Galactic Federation was prepared to offer transportation and homes to any humans who wanted to leave Earth behind.

She hadn't hesitated to accept the offer, especially with a new life to care for. Louisa's father had refused, full of conspiracy theories about alien masters. He certainly hadn't been interested enough in the prospect of fatherhood to change his mind. In fact, he found the whole subject distasteful. Since her attraction to him was long gone, she was more relieved than disappointed.

Another pang of guilt tightened her chest as she tip-toed closer and gently pulled up the star-covered blanket. She had missed another bedtime story, another chance to hear about a school project and whatever Louisa's curious little mind had discovered that day.

"Goodnight, sweetheart," she whispered, pressing a gentle kiss to her daughter's forehead.

As she turned to leave, she saw the art project proudly displayed on the dresser. Small pieces of paper had been arranged to create a bright yellow sun high in a blue sky over a grove of flowering trees. *Earth*. How ironic that Louisa had constructed such an image considering that she'd never even been there. She'd been born on the ship and spent the first four years of her life traveling through space.

She brushed a gentle finger over it, then retreated to the living area. As she collapsed onto the couch, too tired even for Mrs. B.'s no doubt delicious casserole, she looked out through the windows to the luminescent skyline. There was no sign of the stars, of course, just the huge pulsating bubble of the city. She shuddered and used the remote to close the curtains before retrieving her personal computer from her satchel. Just as she was about to start reviewing papers a brightly colored banner ran across the top of the screen.

“New opportunities await you!”

Curiosity aroused, she scrolled through the job listings, each position more demanding and entrenched in the urban sprawl than the last—until one caught her eye.

“Teaching position available on Thaima,” she read slowly. A tiny holographic image beside the text showed a beach with crystal pink waters, fringed by lush greenery that swayed to an unseen breeze as the waves washed slowly in and out. Thaima. Intrigued, she read the description. The Thaiman Royal House was looking for someone to introduce the children of the household to the Federation and to discuss different educational techniques.

Her heart skipped a beat. In many ways it sounded ideal. How nice would it be to wake up to the sound of waves instead of traffic, for Louisa to be able to play freely in such a beautiful place. Teaching children would be a pleasant change as well. Could this be the answer she was looking for?

With her daughter's steady breathing as a soundtrack, she opened the employment app and started filling out the extensive application form. When she was finished her finger hovered over the submit button for a long moment. Up until that point she'd been pretending that it was just an exercise, but the exercise had suddenly become real.

Could she uproot herself and her daughter, change their life once again, she wondered, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. She thought about the postage stamp park and its restrictions, about Louisa and her project. As she did, lights

flashed outside her window, bright enough to seep round the edge of the curtains, followed by the piercing sound of siren.

Yes, I can.

Taking a deep breath, she clicked the submit button. The screen immediately confirmed that her application had been received. Feeling cautiously hopeful, she yawned and rose from the couch as her exhaustion finally caught up with her.

Walking back into her daughter's room, she imagined Louisa running barefoot along that pretty beach, her laughter competing with nothing but the sound of the waves and the wind. For the first time in what felt like ages, she felt a wave of excitement about the future.

She gently brushed a lock of hair away from her daughter's peaceful face.

"We're going to have a new life, sweetheart," she whispered.
"One where we can be together all the time."

CHAPTER 2



Mongat, Supreme Ruler of Thaima, Son of Hysan, Beloved of Zylortha, and Guardian of the Fading Isles, paced restlessly back and forth across his study. Since it - like every other room in the palace - was a large, high-ceilinged room, there was adequate room to pace, even for someone with his long stride. He was aware that the two attendants kneeling by the door were exchanging anxious looks but he ignored them.

There was no service they could perform which would cure his restlessness, but in order to avoid distressing them further, he stalked out through the tall open doors to the adjoining terrace overlooking the ocean. Usually the sight and sound of the gentle pink waves soothed him, a reminder of his marine heritage, but today he found no comfort in the beauty of the water or the soothing scents of the artfully draped flowering vines surrounding the terrace.

There is no reason for concern. The Galactic Federation should be honored to admit a planet with Thaima's wealth, heritage, and resources.

Despite his attempt to reassure himself, he strode aimlessly around the terrace. Thaima's admittance to the Federation was the next step in his plans for an even more prosperous future. Not only did it mean greater access to the advanced technology of the Federation but a larger influx of credits as the planet was opened to increased commerce and travel. Their admittance would allow them to move forward instead of stagnating. It should have been a straightforward process.

Yet the Federation had insisted on a thorough investigation, prying into matters that were none of their concern, and even sending multiple teams to study the planet. That had not been part of his plan - he did not like for his people to know that their culture, that their ruler, was being questioned. Some members of the royal house had already taken offense and were making noises about rejecting the entire proposal. He could, and would, overrule them but he would prefer to have their cooperation.

But even if he could not convince this generation, he intended to make sure that the next generation was prepared for a more expansive future - a future that extended beyond their own planet. That, however, was easier said than done. He sighed and returned to his desk, pulling up the latest set of applicants for the position he intended to create as tutor for the royal household.

His steward Krala had marked five of the applications as the most promising, and he began reviewing their recorded presentations. The first was too pompous, his air of superiority both annoying and unjustified. Thaima had many things of which to be proud. The second was knowledgeable but as dry as dust. The third...

He had not considered a female, but this one caught his attention. Her presentation was knowledgeable, but also lively and enthusiastic. Her appearance was not... displeasing, he thought as he replayed the holo, and she moved gracefully. Her skin was a pleasant creamy shade and her eyes as blue as the sky overhead. He didn't even find the dark hair pulled back from her face unpleasant even though the Thaiman did not have body hair.

Turning back to the accompanying information, he reviewed her credentials. An impressive degree, although from a primitive planet. Perhaps that was even an advantage - she would appreciate Thaima's superiority. She'd also had sufficient experience on Samar Prime, one of the Federation's most important planets, to become familiar with the Federation and hopefully alleviate her more primitive background.

Yes, he decided, she would do.

TWO MONTHS LATER, KRALA ENTERED THE ROOM AND BOWED politely.

“Your chosen candidate for the teaching position has arrived, your royal highness.”

Mongat looked up from the document he’d been studying, the announcement a welcome distraction from his review of the new agricultural tax.

“She was the choice of the scholar’s committee, Krala.”

“Yes, sire. However, I believe they found your... presentation of the candidate quite convincing,” his steward said with a discreet cough.

The presentation had consisted of him marching into the meeting chamber and handing them the documentation for his chosen candidate.

“This one,” he’d announced and left again.

He permitted himself a slight shrug.

“It seemed expedient.”

Left to themselves, the scholars could debate endlessly. Although his father had taught him that allowing his subjects a certain amount of freedom created a more harmonious environment, he was impatient to begin his new program, especially as the Federation’s investigation showed no sign of ending in the near future.

“Yes, sire. Would you like me to make any particular accommodations for her arrival other than what we have already discussed?”

He considered the matter. He had reviewed the application several times during the intervening months - just to confirm his opinion of her suitability, of course - and he found himself intrigued at the thought of meeting the fascinating female in person. No doubt she would be honored by his condescension.

“Bring her to the small reception room by the inner courtyard.”

Small was somewhat of a relative term, but he didn't want her to overwhelm her with the magnificence of his palace.

"Very good, sire. I believe she is currently undergoing the security check. Perhaps I should take her to her quarters for an hour or two to recover from the journey first?"

"Nonsense. I see no reason to wait. Have her escorted there as soon as the examination is complete."

Krala hesitated for a fraction of a second, then bowed his head meekly.

"Yes, sire."

He tried to return to the agricultural tax proposal but found himself distracted. By the thought of meeting this alien female? *Impossible*. He was sure it was simply due to the advancement of his plans. Rather than give into any unseemly haste, he waited a full quarter of an hour after Krala told him that she was in the reception room before leaving.

As two guards fell into step behind him, he strode quickly towards the meeting room before remembering to proceed at a more dignified pace. When he reached the reception room, he nodded for the guard to open the doors and introduce him. As the doors opened, he heard an indignant female voice.

"Just how long do you expect me to wait? Louisa is hot, tired, and hungry and so am I. Can't we just reschedule this for tomorrow?"

Despite her clear frustration, her voice was low and pleasant, speaking Galactic with only the faintest trace of an accent. Once again, he restrained himself and waited for the guard to provide a proper introduction.

"His Royal Highness, King Mongat, Supreme Ruler of Thaima, Son of Hysan, Beloved of Zylortha, and Guardian of the Fading Isles."

He entered the room, then came to a sudden halt as the female whirled around. This was Anna? She was much smaller than he'd anticipated, her head not even reaching his shoulder, but it wasn't the only difference. In the holographic presentation she'd been wearing standard inner planet garments - a long

loose tunic over wide-legged pants, both in a soft shade of blue.

She was still wearing blue but that was the only similarity. Her upper half was covered by some soft knitted material that couldn't disguise her extremely generous breasts and her tight-fitting pants clung to her lush hips. An untidy cloud of dark hair surrounded a flushed, pretty face as those startlingly blue eyes met his. Yes, this was his Anna.

CHAPTER 3



Anna breathed a sigh of relief as she turned to face the king. The last few months had been exhausting and the voyage has done little to relieve it. The accommodation had been nice enough but it was a Gallian ship and they'd kept the temperature several degrees too cool for humans since they were not covered with a layer of fur. Similarly the food was edible but it consisted primarily of meat dishes and she found herself longing for a piece of fruit or even a vegetable.

Louisa too had not been her usual sweet-natured self. Despite Anna's attempts to convince her of the advantages of the move, she'd been scared about another change to their lives and extremely unhappy about leaving Mrs. B. behind. Between trying to reassure her daughter, dealing with her own doubts, and trying to cope with the environment, she'd barely had a moment to rest.

The last thing she'd wanted after the lengthy entrance interview was to be politely but firmly told that she was to meet the king. They had been marched rapidly down endless stone corridors that opened onto exquisite gardens she didn't have time to admire, only to be kept waiting for an eternity. They had ended up in a large impressive room without a scrap of furniture except for a carved wooden chair inlaid with elaborate metal carvings and mounted on a dais.

She'd been tired enough to eye it longingly, but not quite tired enough to sit in what appeared to be a throne, especially under the watchful eye of the two silent guards. It didn't help that she and Louisa were both wearing the long pants and sweaters

they'd grown accustomed to wearing on the ship. Under other circumstances she would have enjoyed the warm air redolent with the scent of flowers and the faint tang of the sea that swept in through the long open colonnade to one side of the room. Now she was just hot and miserable.

Another male had come to join them, introducing himself as Krala, the king's personal steward. He seemed nice enough, and even though he hadn't apologized for the delay, he did seem uncomfortable about the wait, especially when Louisa sank down against one of the columns in a miserable little ball. She'd been addressing her plea to him when the king appeared at last, a magnificent figure in gold silk.

She'd researched Thaima, of course, and seen images of the king but pictures couldn't capture the impact of his presence. It was partially his size - he was at least a foot taller than her, if not more, with a broad, well-muscled chest covered with gleaming blue skin. That impressive chest was clearly visible since his elaborately embroidered robe was open from his shoulders to his knees, and the only thing he was wearing beneath it was a pair of short, draped pants confined at his waist with a wide matching sash.

He had strong features, handsome in a very alien way, with a long, narrow nose, high, wide cheekbones, and a surprisingly full mouth beneath a smooth, well-shaped skull. His eyes were black, focusing on her with an intensity that was both unnerving and oddly exciting.

"You are Professor Anna Lennox?"

He had a deep, powerful voice, with the slightest trace of an accent.

"I am. And you are King Mongat?"

It was a stupid question, given that he'd just been announced, but she did her best to smile pleasantly as he looked at her expectantly. He was clearly waiting for something, but she had no idea what.

"You are supposed to bow," Krala said quietly from just behind her.

Bow? Oh, for goodness sake. She did her best not to roll her eyes as she politely bowed her head.

“I’m pleased to meet you, your highness. Your royal highness,” she amended at Krala’s prompt.

The king did not look impressed but he waved an arrogant hand as he headed for the throne.

“Very well. You may tell me about your plans for the curriculum.”

“Now? Look, I’m sorry your highness - your royal highness - but this really isn’t a good time. I’m hot, tired, and hungry and-”

“You are dressed most inappropriately.”

His eyes traveled down over her body as he spoke, his gaze nowhere near as disparaging as his words. She gritted her teeth.

“I am quite aware of that, but we had to wear these clothes on the ship because they kept the temperature so low and we haven’t had a chance to change since-”

“We?” His tone sharpened as he interrupted her again. “You are not alone?”

“Of course not. Weren’t you informed that my daughter was accompanying me?”

He waved his hand again, dismissively this time.

“Has the child not been taken to your quarters?”

“No.” Her teeth were clenched even harder now. “We don’t know where our luggage is, let alone our quarters, so I could hardly-”

“I’m sure your luggage was merely taken to your rooms. We are not barbarians.”

You could have fooled me. Fortunately, before she could respond, Louisa came to join her, leaning against her leg.

“I’m hungry, Mama.”

“I know, sweetheart.”

“The child has not been fed?”

To his credit, the king actually looked appalled.

“No, I haven’t.” Louisa’s lips trembled as she looked up at him. “And my tummy hurts.”

“This is unacceptable. Bring refreshment to the white garden,” Mongat ordered Krala.

Then, to her complete and utter astonishment, he bent down and picked up Louisa. She opened her mouth to protest but Louisa was giving him a hopeful smile.

“I like sweets.”

“Not on an empty stomach,” she said firmly, turning to Krala. “Perhaps some fruit?”

The steward didn’t seem as surprised as she would have expected by the king’s behavior, and he simply nodded at her request.

“Yes, mistress. I will arrange for a selection.”

“And arrange for more suitable clothing,” Mongat ordered.

Krala bowed and left as she gave the king an exasperated look.

“We just need to get our luggage and-”

“The child is hot,” he interrupted.

As much as his interruptions annoyed her, at least this time it appeared to be out of concern for her daughter. That didn’t entirely temper her irritation since he was also giving her a disapproving look.

“I am quite aware of that. And her name is Louisa, not ‘the child.’”

“Louisa,” he repeated, and her daughter gave him a sunny smile.

“That’s me. What’s your name?”

He hesitated for a long moment, looking at her daughter’s face, before giving an abrupt nod.

“You may call me Mongat.”

“You’re the king.”

“You are perceptive for one so young.”

“I’m six years old,” Louisa said indignantly, and he smiled.

“Ah. No doubt that explains your wisdom.” He looked over at her. “Come.”

He didn’t seem put off by Louisa’s chatter as he left the room and headed down another long open hallway. His guards fell into place behind her as she hurried after him, hoping desperately that she hadn’t made a mistake. She had suspected a king might be arrogant, but he seemed to be carrying it to an extreme. He had a right to be confident, of course, but his manners were abysmal and his attitude insulting.

Although he had been both rude and demanding, his reaction to Louisa had thrown her off balance. Not just the fact that he had immediately considered her needs, but that he had chosen to carry her and that he was answering her questions.

“What’s a sire?” Louisa was asking now.

“It is a term of respect. It is also another word for a father.”

Anna held her breath waiting for Louisa’s response. Since she’d started school, she’d become significantly more curious about a father’s role. To her relief, her daughter just nodded cheerfully.

“I don’t have one of those. Are you a father?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I have no mate.”

There was an odd note in his voice which made her give him a curious look. Some of the more... informal sources she’d found in her investigation had speculated quite widely about the lack of a queen. Louisa wrinkled her nose.

“What’s a mate? Like a wife?”

He shrugged slightly.

“That is an inadequate term.”

Interesting. She couldn't help wondering about the difference - she had certainly assumed they were equivalent when she encountered the term.

"Is there going to be food soon?" Louisa asked, losing interest in the topic.

"Very soon."

He stopped abruptly, and she almost ran into his broad back.

"Here."

They had come to an intersection in the hallway, and a servant opened a door on the opposite wall. As she followed the king inside, she sighed with relief.

The room was blessedly cool, a pleasant ocean breeze ruffling the gauzy curtains framing another long, open colonnade. The scent of the ocean was stronger here, and she could hear the soft lap of the waves on the shore below. On the other side of the columns, a wide stone terrace shaded by a pergola covered in flowering vines ended in low stone steps that led down to a stunningly beautiful garden.

Tall, graceful trees lined the edges, their leaves swaying gently in the breeze, the familiar green of Earth's vegetation mingled with various shades of purple. Flowers were everywhere, spilling from large raised stone planters and filling the gracefully curved beds that lined the path winding down through the space towards the sea, all of them in shades of white and cream. She was so intent on the scene that it took her a moment to realize that the king had set Louisa down and she'd scampered off into the garden to explore.

"Don't go too far, Louisa," she called, turning back to the king. "This is beautiful."

"Yes." He clearly accepted the praise as his due, then hesitated briefly. "This is part of the private area of the palace. Only family and intimate friends are usually allowed to enter, but I have chosen to bring you here as my guest."

Once again he seemed to be waiting for a response, but she had no idea what she was supposed to say.

“Oh.”

He made an impatient noise and strode out onto the terrace. *Impossible male*, she thought as she trailed after him. Although she had to admit that he was a very good-looking one. Her mouth went dry as he shrugged off his embroidered robe and went to stand at the edge of the terrace, his powerful upper body gleaming in the sunlight. An intricate tattoo covered his entire back and she had a sudden, entirely inappropriate impulse to trace it with her fingers.

“What does your tattoo represent?” she asked instead as she went to join him, immediately regretting it as the heat of the sun reached her.

“Our history.” He frowned down at her. “Your face is becoming quite pink and I do not believe that is your natural color. Are you overheated?”

“Yes.” Her teeth clenched again. “Because I do not know where my luggage is and I have not had a chance to change.”

“As I said, this is the private part of the palace - you could follow your daughter’s example.”

She followed his amused gaze and sighed. Louisa had taken advantage of her distraction to shed her outer clothing and was now wandering around happily in her pink flowered underthings, barefoot. Then the rest of his words penetrated and she glared up at him.

“And no, I’m not stripping down to my underwear.”

“Then I fear you will be most uncomfortable,” he said, a gleam in those intense black eyes.

She narrowed her eyes at him, then looked back at Louisa. Her daughter looked so much more comfortable that she didn’t have the heart to tell her to get dressed again. Instead she went to find a seat under the pergola and escape the king’s disturbing presence. The chair was too big for her, the ornate wooden back rising above her head, but it was wonderfully shaded and comfortable. A concealed fan overhead circulated air that felt delightfully cool on her hot skin.

The king joined her, sinking gracefully down onto a nearby bench, his eyes still amused. A small table next to the chair held a decanter and two glasses and he waved a hand at it.

“You may drink.”

Repressing her annoyance at his dismissive tone, she poured herself a glass of the liquid. Although it looked like water, a cautious sip revealed a rich fruity flavor and she took a bigger drink. She'd almost finished the glass when Krala appeared, directing two servants with heavily laden trays and a third who carried an armful of wooden pieces that she quickly assembled into a low table. The food was carefully arranged, and all three servants knelt gracefully next to the table as Krala handed her a package wrapped in an attractive printed fabric.

“What's this?”

“Alternate clothing, mistress, per the king's request.”

Despite Mongat's high-handed manner, the thought of changing into something cooler was extremely appealing.

“Is there somewhere I can change?”

“Such unnecessary modesty,” the king murmured provocatively, but she ignored him.

Krala said something in Thaiman to the servants and two of them rose. A moment later a temporary fabric screen had been erected in one corner of the inner room. Not exactly what she'd meant, but she supposed it would work. A quick check showed Louisa still happily playing in the garden so she picked up the package and carried it back behind the screen.

Perhaps foolishly, she had expected the package to contain actual clothing. Instead, it contained the lengths of fabric used to create a traditional Thaiman garment. Since she'd researched their clothing, she knew - in theory - how the pieces should be worn and decided to give it a try. Removing her sweater and jeans left her feeling ridiculously exposed but it was so much cooler that she breathed an immediate sigh of relief before pulling out two lengths of colorful silk.

The narrower cloth was used to form a top called a sabai. The silk was wrapped twice around her chest before being thrown

over her right shoulder and secured with a decorative pin that has been included. It was not designed to accommodate undergarments but since she had no intention of removing her bra, she simply pulled down the straps and tucked them under the cloth instead.

The skirt was more difficult to create - the fabric had to be wrapped around her waist and tied before the overlap was pleated and pulled through the tied fabric. The number and arrangement of the pleats was important and she had to redo them twice before she decided they were acceptable.

She also took a few moments to finger comb her hair and rebraid it, choosing not to think too closely about why she was worrying about her appearance. Then she took a deep breath and went to rejoin her daughter and the king.

CHAPTER 4



Mongat watched the screen behind which Anna had disappeared, surprisingly intrigued at the thought of the body beneath those inappropriate clothes. He even toyed with the idea of simply walking over and removing the screen, but while no one would dream of stopping him - and no Thaiman woman would have objected - he suspected Anna would be far less receptive.

Nonetheless the thought amused him and he was smiling at the screen when a small hand tugged demandingly on his arm. The guards by the door tensed, but he frowned at them. This child was certainly not going to harm him.

“I’m hungry,” she said expectantly, not the slightest bit hesitant about asking a king to fulfill her demands.

She was quite justified - he would never allow a child to go hungry - but he heard the tiniest gasp from his newest and least well-trained servant. He paid no attention. Krala would arrange to have the error corrected.

“Then we will feed you. But first we must remove the portion of my garden which you are currently wearing.”

He glanced over at Krala as he spoke and his steward bowed. The child inspected a pair of very dirty hands, then giggled.

“I don’t usually get dirty.”

That struck him as odd. Even though his training as a ruler had begun in his childhood, he’d still been allowed to play and if he recalled correctly, it had often been a messy business.

“Dirt can always be removed,” he assured her as he lifted her onto his lap, the movement coming as easily as if he had done it countless times before.

A moment later a servant appeared with a tray containing warm, scented water, cleansing lotion, and soft towels, then gave him a hesitant look.

“If I may, your royal highness?”

“Yes, yes,” he said impatiently, then realized the issue. The servant was concerned about reaching over his lap - an action that could be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. He adjusted Louisa’s position on his lap so that her hands were extended in front of him, and the servant knelt, quickly and efficiently washing her hands.

“Thank you,” she said cheerfully when he was finished, and raised her hands to her small nose. “They smell good too. Can I have something to eat now? Please.”

“Of course. Tell Umanda what you would like.”

She hopped down just as Anna stepped out from behind the screen, now wearing traditional Thaiman clothing - not that it made her look even remotely Thaiman. Although she’d done her best to wrap the garments in the proper fashion, she hadn’t quite succeeded. One end of the sash was twisted and the hem of her skirt was uneven.

He should have found such flaws unappealing. Instead he found himself focusing on the lush curve of her breasts beneath the thin silk and the gentle sway of her generous hips as she came to join them. *Ridiculous*. He had no time for females, let alone annoying human females.

“You appear cooler.” He did his best to keep his face and his tone impassive as he spoke, but her cheeks flushed once again.

“I suppose it is more comfortable. Thank you,” she added belatedly, and he hid a smile. His prickly little teacher did not like feeling beholden to him.

“Your thanks are not necessary.”

He didn't want her gratitude, especially over a few mere articles of clothing.

"It is the polite thing to say," she said firmly, her chin tilting in a way he was rapidly becoming familiar with.

"Mama, you look beautiful," Louisa said, her voice awed.

Anna looked over at her daughter and started to laugh, rendering her even more attractive. This time he couldn't hide his smile as he followed her gaze. While he had been distracted by Anna, Louisa had acquired an overflowing plate and already had damsa jam smeared from one side of her face to the other.

"I see you're enjoying your food, but perhaps a little less enthusiasm is in order."

Anna removed the plate from her daughter's hands before it tipped over, then sank down gracefully on the pillows next to the low table. Because of the way her skirt had been tied, the movement revealed a flash of pale, curvy leg - which he certainly did not find enticing.

"May I offer you something, Mistress Anna?" Umada asked.

"I think Louisa took more than enough for both of us, but could you explain these dishes to me, please?"

After a quick glance at Krala for approval, Umada began describing the various dishes. Anna listened intently, asking additional questions that revealed both a quick, curious mind and an obvious knowledge of Thaiman agriculture. *My teacher has done her homework*, he thought, smiling to himself as he sipped his tea and watched her and her daughter.

He never ate in public other than a few ceremonial bites at a formal banquet - a habit he'd established after his brother's death - but he found himself oddly tempted to join them. Of course he refrained and a moment later, his wrist com buzzed to remind him of an upcoming meeting. The com unit was disguised in a wide gold wrist cuff and while he usually enjoyed the combination of technology and traditional artistry, today he simply found the reminder irritating.

However he could not ignore his duties, certainly not simply to watch two females enjoying the food he had provided, and he rose to his feet.

“I have a meeting to attend. Please take your time and enjoy your meal and the garden. Krala will escort you to your rooms whenever you are ready.”

Anna nodded politely.

“Thank you, your royal highness.”

“You may call me Mongat.”

The words escaped before he could stop them, but he could not deny a certain... pleasure when she gave him a tentative smile.

“Thank you, Mongat.”

He inclined his head, then gestured for Krala to follow him into the corridor.

“Placed them in the Blue Suite. I have decided that it would be a more appropriate residence.”

Krala hesitated for just a second before he bowed.

“Yes, sire. But you are aware that the contract did specify -”

“The Blue Suite,” he said firmly, and left without waiting for an additional response knowing that Krala would obey.

The contract had specified an individual residence, but no doubt she would be pleased at being assigned the spacious suite of rooms in the private area of the palace. The rooms were located close to his as well - merely as a sign of respect, he assured himself.

His mother had occupied the suite when he was young, and both the space and the gardens had been carefully maintained. Her chambers were somewhat less formal than the stark luxury of the state apartments, but he suspected Anna and Louisa would find them more welcoming. It was, however, an unusual concession on his part, and he would have to ensure that it was not taken for granted.

He was still considering the matter when he entered the meeting room, the assembled councilors falling silent.

“Report,” he said curtly.

As each one gave his report, his thoughts strayed back to his guests. He had not anticipated how charming he would find the female’s daughter, nor what a refreshing change it would be to spend time with a child who had not already been trained in the strict protocol of the court. He had certainly not expected her mother to be so appealing. Not only did he find her appearance... pleasant, he appreciated her quick mind and the fact that she had clearly done her research. He’d known that his choice was a sound one, but her intelligence made him even more convinced.

However, he would have to take care not to become overly involved with his new teacher. He did not have time for such distractions, especially with the upcoming arrival of the delegates from the Federation. But the thought of her soft, feminine scent, and the curve of her hips in the traditional clothing did not fade from his mind.

He was still thinking of her an hour later after his meeting had concluded and he’d returned to his study. She was so much on his mind that he almost thought he’d conjured her up when the doors of the study were flung open and she appeared, her breasts heaving rather delightfully as she scowled at him across his guards’ crossed spears.

“How dare you?”

CHAPTER 5



Anna looked around appreciatively as Krala escorted them through the palace at a much more reasonable pace than her previous trip. Louisa skipped along happily next to her, now dressed in an outfit very similar to Anna's except the larger piece of fabric had been tied then rolled together and pulled back between her legs to form the same type of loosely draped pants that Mongat had worn. Umada had helped her with the tricky fastening and Louisa had been thrilled with the result.

All of the walls and floors in the palace were made from a warm golden stone, carved in intricate geometric designs and inlaid with mosaics made of colored stones. Despite the massive amounts of stone, everything was surprisingly light and airy. In addition to the high ceilings, the rooms were interspersed with courtyards and gardens that were more like additional rooms than separate spaces and there were few barriers between the interior and exterior.

"I understand that most of the palace was reconstructed by the present king's great-grandfather?"

"Yes, mistress. The ceremonial rooms are much older, of course, but once we began to trade with the Federation and more advanced technology became available, he was able to take full advantage of the location."

"Building technology or defense technology?" she asked.

He gave her a quick surprised look, but answered readily enough.

“Both, although the latter was perhaps a bigger factor. Thaima has been at peace for many generations now but our history was troubled and our young males are still trained in warrior skills.”

“Even the king?”

He had to have done something to have developed that big, powerful body. This time Krala’s face showed a hint of amusement as he nodded.

“Of course. King Mongat proved exceptionally skillful at such things, even at a young age.”

She was not the least bit surprised.

“Does he have brothers and sisters?”

“No, mistress.” He hesitated. “He had a younger brother but he died seven years ago, not long after his parents were killed in an unfortunate accident.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, not sure what else to say.

“Thank you, mistress. It was a difficult time.” He came to a halt in front of a pair of tall, intricately carved doors. “These are your rooms. You will note that we are still within the private area of the palace - it is a great honor.”

“But -”

Before she could continue, he threw open the doors to reveal a tall, spacious room with a large balcony that looked out over the sea. The floor mosaic was composed of stones in multiple shades of blue, a striking contrast to the golden stone, and much of the low, comfortable furniture was also upholstered in shades of blue. Louisa, who had been skipping along merrily next to her, gave an audible gasp.

“It’s so pretty, Mama. Where’s my room?”

Anna sighed as her daughter dashed off, then turned to Krala.

“As Louisa said, it’s a beautiful room, but we were to have a separate residence.”

She thought she saw a hint of guilt in his eyes as he answered her, but his tone didn’t change.

“King Mongat wished to honor you by providing you with living quarters within the private area of the palace.”

“You already mentioned that. I’m sure it’s very nice of him, but it’s not a separate residence.”

“Nowhere in the palace is truly separate.” He cleared his throat. “Perhaps you would care to inspect the rooms?”

She debated for a moment, then gave a reluctant nod. Although she intended to make sure the contract was honored, she should at least take a look. The suite was undoubtedly impressive. In addition to the main living room, it also included a small dining room opening onto a sunny garden. A kitchen area included cooling units already stocked with a variety of food and beverages. Double doors on one side of the living room led into a spacious study, the shelves already filled with books.

“Those belonged to his majesty’s late mother,” Krala murmured when she gave them a curious look.

“His mother? His parents did not share rooms?”

“No. That would have been most... unusual.”

As far as she recalled, many of the royal families on Earth had practiced similar arrangements, but she still found it odd, especially since Krala’s face had gone suspiciously blank. A second later, she realized the implication. These had been his mother’s rooms? The queen’s rooms?

“Why did he put us here?”

“You are the king’s guests. He wishes you to be comfortable.”

He was not telling her something.

“I have plenty of experience being uncomfortable, Krala. Why does King Mongat want us to live here?”

“Because the king wishes it.”

His expression remained politely blank, and she decided she would get nothing more out of him.

“I see.”

The question continued to bother her as he showed her the rest of the rooms. Her room was equally magnificent with a tall, carved bed and another balcony overlooking the sea. The bathroom was even more palatial with a pool filled with heated water in a raised niche in front of an enclosed garden filled with scented flowers.

On the other side of the living room was a second large bedroom and bath, along with a smaller set of rooms, another kitchen area, and a playroom that also opened to a garden - this one with a large central lawn. Louisa was bouncing back and forth from the garden to the playroom to the bedroom. The bedroom had another carved bed, although on a much smaller scale, and was draped in white lace.

“I love it so much, Mama.” Louisa threw her arms around Anna with a beatific smile. “I wanna stay here forever and ever and ever.”

“I’m not sure this is where we’re supposed to be. And even if it is, my contract only lasts for two years,” she said gently as Louisa’s face fell.

“I don’t wanna move again. I bet Mongat would let you stay if you asked him,” her daughter added hopefully.

“Why don’t we just take it one day at a time?”

As much as she hated to disappoint Louisa, she also didn’t want her to become accustomed to these rooms, and she pulled Krala aside as Louisa raced back outside.

“It is a very nice suite, but it is not the residence specified in the contract. Please inform the king I wish to speak to him.”

He hesitated, then bowed his head.

“Yes, mistress. In the meantime, I have asked Umanda to move into the nursemaid’s quarters.”

“I don’t need -” She stopped and sighed. Even though she had taken this position precisely so she could spend more time with her daughter, it would be foolish to assume that she could be with her at all times. “Does she have experience with children?”

“Oh yes, mistress. She has three children of her own, although they are all grown now, and she also worked in the nursery when the king and his brother were younger.”

“All right. But I’d still like to see the king.”

“Yes, mistress.”

She suspected it was more of an acknowledgement than a promise, but she let it go as he bowed and departed. When she went to find her daughter, Louisa was back in the playroom, inspecting a board game with an unfamiliar arrangement of colored squares.

“How do you play this, Mama?”

“I’m not sure, but I bet Umanda will know. She’s going to help take care of you.”

“You mean like Mrs. B.?” Louisa sighed and abandoned the game to come and lean against her side. “I miss her.”

“I know you do, sweetheart. Why don’t you draw her a picture of the palace and we can send it to her tomorrow?”

Her suggestion was enthusiastically received and Anna retrieved a set of markers - noting as she did that her luggage had already been unpacked and put away. They would just have to be repacked with equal efficiency once they moved to their house, she thought defiantly.

Louisa started off enthusiastically but soon began yawning. When her head bobbed down so far she almost planted her face on her markers, Anna laughed and picked her up.

“Come on sleepyhead. I think you need a nap.”

“I’m too big for naps.” Despite the protest, Louisa climbed into bed readily enough, still yawning. “Tell me a story.”

She’d barely started the story before Louisa was sound asleep. As she covered her with a light sheet and rose, Umanda appeared, putting her hand to her chest and bowing.

“Good afternoon, mistress. Master Krala has informed me that I am to care for the child.”

“Only if you would like to,” she said hastily, but the other woman smiled.

“I would be delighted. My little ones are no longer little and I miss that age. She seems like a sweet child.”

“She is, but she can also be a mischievous one.” She hesitated. “She hasn’t had as much opportunity to play outside as I would have liked. The freedom may go to her head.”

“You do not need to worry, mistress. I will make sure she comes to no harm.”

They smiled at each other, then Anna sighed.

“I suppose I’d better go and review the plans for my classes.”

“Of course, mistress. I will keep watch.” Umada hesitated. “There is a great deal of... interest in your classes.”

“Good interest or bad interest?”

The questions surprised the older woman into a quick smile.

“Perhaps some of both. The king has many plans to introduce new ways to Thaima.”

She suspected it was a tactful way of indicating that there were some doubts about those plans, but she didn’t press Umada. Instead she smiled and retreated to her study, not surprised to find that her computer and all of her materials had been placed neatly in a cabinet next to the desk. She began her review but quickly found herself distracted by the warm ocean breeze.

Enjoying life applies to me as well, she thought as she pushed back from the desk and wandered out onto the main balcony. Directly below her, stone pavers meandered artfully through a pretty garden, but she could see the sea beyond it. Most of the coastline was visible from this point - a series of small sandy coves separated by rocky promontories lush with greenery.

A conical island rested just off shore, and she recognized it from her reading as the Holy Isle where the gods Hysan and Zylortha had come together to give birth to Thaima. The island was only accessible at low tide, but it was a constant reminder of their history and traditions.

As she was contemplating those traditions, two Thaiman females strolled casually into view. Based on the richly embroidered fabric of their clothing and the intricate designs covering their heads, they were members of the nobility. She leaned forward curiously as they came within earshot.

“Have you seen the new teacher? Is she attractive?”

“Teacher?” The second female snorted. “Do you really think the king would be so interested in a teacher? I suspect she’s his mistress.”

Mistress? Why the hell did they think that?

The first speaker squealed in outrage.

“His mistress? When he has refused my - I mean any advances for years now?”

“Perhaps he thinks that an affair with an offworlder would be less complicated,” the second female said dryly.

A defiant sniff. “I understand that she is from a primitive planet. No doubt he will tire of her quickly.”

Primitive? Her teeth snapped together so hard she was surprised the two of them didn’t hear her.

“Perhaps.” The second voice was thoughtful. “Although why would he house her in the queen’s suite if he expects to tire of her so rapidly?”

Dammit. She’d known there was something odd about the arrangement. Her indignation only grew as the first speaker answered.

“Because he thinks he can visit her without anyone knowing his dirty little secret? As if everyone doesn’t already know those suites are connected. I have no intention of letting her lord it over us, mistress or not. She will have to be taught her place.”

The second female murmured soothingly as they continued down the path while Anna drew back into the shadows of the balcony, so angry her hands were shaking. Mongat expected her to be his mistress? Did he think she was just going to fall into his bed no matter how rude and condescending he’d been?

Or perhaps he'd realized he'd made a mistake and his kindness to Louisa had simply been intended to soften her opinion of him. To hell with that.

She marched back through Louisa's bedroom and found Umanda sitting on the window seat in the playroom, embroidering a length of cloth.

"Tell me how to find the king."

"I'm not really familiar with his schedule, although I know it's very busy. Krala would know where to find him."

And would no doubt put her off.

"Does he have an office of some kind?"

"He has a study," Umanda said doubtfully. "But I don't know if he'll be there."

"Just tell me how to find it. I'll wait if I have to."

Despite her obvious reluctance, Umanda complied, then promised to remain with Louisa until she returned. Anna marched off in a state of high dudgeon all the way to his study, only stopping when the two royal guards blocked her way with crossed spears.

"How dare you?" she snapped when the king looked up..

CHAPTER 6



Mongat raised an eyebrow at Anna's vehement question. Despite his amusement - and appreciation - for her flushed face and heaving bosom, there was only so much he was willing to allow, especially since his guards were not nearly as appreciative. The younger of the two actually twitched slightly.

"Let her enter," he ordered, and they raised their spears. She stormed in, and after another look at her flushed face, he added, "And wait outside the room."

Once again, the younger guard threatened to show an inappropriate reaction before he followed the older guard's example and bowed.

"Yes, your majesty."

They wheeled and marched out of the room, closing the door behind them, but their reluctance only increased his amusement. Did they think him incapable of handling a small human female?

"Is there a problem?" he asked calmly.

"You know damn well there is. Why did you put me in your mother's rooms?"

"Because I thought they were most appropriate."

"Appropriate? Because you were planning on... visiting me secretly?"

Ah. He finally understood her anger - although she should have been flattered by the prospect of his attention.

“I had not considered such a prospect,” he said truthfully, his voice cold. “It was a rare enough occurrence even in my father’s time.”

That actually caught her attention, curiosity sparking in those big blue eyes.

“It was? Most married couples spend time together.”

“Their marriage was arranged. Once my brother and I were born, they led separate lives outside of state functions.” Although both of them seemed satisfied with the arrangement, it was one of the reasons he had rejected such a marriage. That and the fact that his brother had been in love with his arranged mate. Annoyed at the reminder, he frowned at her. “Not that it is any of your concern.”

“It damn well is my concern. Apparently half the palace already considers me your mistress.”

He found the prospect more appealing than he expected, his body responding to the thought with undeniable enthusiasm.

“Indeed? And what is the basis for this rather extreme statement?”

This time she flushed at his raised eyebrow.

“I overheard some ladies of the court discussing it.”

“Surely even on your planet you are aware that gossip is widespread and rarely accurate?”

“That doesn’t mean that it can’t be damaging.”

He shrugged.

“It does not concern me.”

She put her hands on her hips and gave him an exasperated look.

“Well it concerns me. How can I expect my students to respect me if their parents think I’m merely your bed partner? Children pick up on their parents’ feelings, you know.”

His attention was focused a little too closely on the way her posture drew attention to the lush curve of her hips. Would

they feel as soft and welcoming beneath his hands as they appeared? His body responded to that thought as well, his shaft stiffening. Forcing his mind back to the subject, he frowned at her.

“You are mistaken. If anyone does assume you are my bed partner, they will treat you with greater respect. It is considered an honor.”

One that he had not permitted for several years. Dealing with the constant bids for his attention, as well as the emotional demands and petty jealousies, had simply not been worth the effort.

Unfortunately Anna did not appear to be reassured by his statement. She muttered something he could not entirely make out but he was sure he caught the word arrogant.

“It is not arrogance to speak the truth.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. Was she assuming these positions specifically to entice him? This posture caused her generous breasts to swell above the neckline of her top. If he had been previously if such a display would appeal to him, he would have firmly refuted it, but he couldn't deny the effects. Perhaps his look was a little too appreciative because her color deepened as she dropped her arms again.

“I don't think the truth is as clear cut as you make out. The females I overheard showed no indications of respect for such a person.”

“Who dared to be so insolent?” he demanded.

“I certainly wouldn't tell you that, even if I knew. Which I don't.”

Her defiance should have enraged him. Instead it only added to his arousal. Surely there were better uses for such passion.

“Such statements must simply have been the result of jealousy. Why are you so upset about this issue?”

“Because I am a teacher, not a... a mistress.”

“The two are not mutually exclusive. You could be both a teacher and my mistress.”

“I’m not your anything,” she said furiously. “And I still don’t believe I can be successful as a teacher if my students are thinking of me like that.”

“How quick you are to dismiss me.” He’d been leaning back in his chair as they talked, but now he rose and circled his desk, pausing in front of her. “You should be pleased that I might find you... enticing.”

Her eyes widened as her tongue came out to lick nervously at those pretty pink lips.

“You find me enticing?”

“I believe I only said that I might.”

He leaned down towards her, breathing in the sweetness of her scent but not actually touching her. When he straightened, he noted with some satisfaction that her nipples had peaked beneath the thin silk of the sabai. So she was not as unaffected as she pretended.

“Good,” she said breathlessly, her tone not as convincing as the words. “I don’t wish to be... involved with you either.”

“How unfortunate.” He brushed a fingertip along the delicate line of her collarbone, smiling at her swift intake of breath but also entranced by the softness of her skin. “And yet, I wonder...”

“Wonder what?”

“Are you quite sure that is how you feel?”

She licked her lips again and he couldn’t resist. This time he bent down and kissed her. He had meant it as little more than a teasing gesture, a way of proving that she was attracted to him despite her denial. It was a severe miscalculation. Her lips opened beneath his like a night-blooming flower opening beneath the moon, and her sweetness flooded his mouth.

His tongue swept in to taste her, seeking more of that delicious sweetness, and her body melted against his, those delicious curves as soft as he had imagined. One hand dropped to those tantalizing hips, holding her close as the kiss went on and on

in an endless feast of pleasure. When he finally ended the kiss, his pulse was actually pounding, his shaft so hard it ached.

“Now you know the truth, my little teacher,” he whispered against her mouth.

Her eyes had been closed, her body still soft and relaxed, but at his words her eyes flew open again. They sparkled indignantly as she drew a quick breath, her breasts moving delightfully against him as a result.

“What truth?”

“That you are not as uninterested as you maintain.”

She pushed against his chest, and while he could have easily kept her restrained, he let her go. He watched in amusement as she took a few quick steps away, then back again.

“A mere physical reaction doesn’t prove anything. Our bodies respond to stimuli.”

“Indeed they respond most delightfully.”

She gave an exasperated huff, pacing away and back again.

“I have no intention of becoming your mistress.”

“I did not ask you,” he pointed out, but that only seemed to incense her further.

“You implied.”

“I did not.” He brushed a finger across a swollen lower lip, disturbingly pleased by the evidence of his kiss. “You were the one who broached the matter. I certainly was not aware of the gossip until you informed me.”

He hesitated. He was not in the habit of explaining himself, but perhaps it would be appropriate under the circumstances.

“I chose the Blue Suite for you and Louisa because I believed that you would both enjoy them. And yes, they were my mother’s rooms but I only thought of that as a source of happy memories. As I said, she and my father led very separate lives by the time I was old enough to consider their relationship.”

“You wanted us to like them?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. That’s actually... very nice of you,” she said doubtfully.
“But it is not the separate residence I was promised.”

By Hysan. The stubborn female had an argument for every occasion.

“They are the only quarters available,” he snapped.

“But the door between them-”

“Locks on both sides. So unless you choose to unlock it, you are quite safe from those improper advances you say you do not want.”

She flushed but lifted her chin.

“A locked door will not keep the court from speculating.”

“They will talk regardless. You are new and... different. If I were merely to stroll with you in the gardens, I am sure they would create a story before we turned down the first path.”

From the expression on her pretty face, he was quite sure she acknowledged the truth of his argument but did not want to admit it. Despite his still aching cock, his former amusement returned.

“Stop worrying about it, little teacher.” He pushed a loose curl behind her ear, noting that her hair was as soft as everything else about her. Everything except her determination, that was. “I will ensure that you are judged on nothing but your teaching. And now you must excuse me,” he added as his wrist com buzzed. “I have another meeting to attend.”

He put his hand on her back and guided her firmly towards the door.

“Of course, if you wish to continue our... discussion later, you can always unlock your door.”

“I will do nothing of the kind.”

He hid a smile at her indignant retort as he opened the door. No matter what she chose to tell herself, her response to his kiss had revealed the truth. Not that he expected her to unlock the door, unfortunately.

“Please escort Mistress Anna back to the Blue Suite,” he ordered the older guard. He didn’t trust the younger one with his tempting little female.

“Yes, sire.”

“I don’t need an escort.”

Both he and the guard ignored her.

“Good afternoon, Anna.”

She sighed, but inclined her head. “Good afternoon, Mongat. Enjoy your meeting.”

An unlikely prospect, he thought as he closed the door, leaving the guard outside. He would much rather have discovered the extent of the passion concealed behind that soft little exterior. Ridiculous. He should be concentrating on the upcoming video meeting with the Federation delegate rather than letting himself be distracted - no matter how delightfully - by a female from another world.

He needed to stay as far away as possible from her. Ignoring his discomfort with that decision, he sighed and went back to work.

CHAPTER 7



A week later, Anna wearily shut down her computer and glanced around her almost empty classroom. Like everywhere she had seen so far on Thaima, it was a beautiful space. Another high-ceilinged room that opened onto an enclosed garden with a central fountain, it had originally contained neat rows of desks. She had quickly rearranged them into small groups to promote interaction and had just as quickly faced her first disapproving stare.

She had known she would be teaching a small group of children from the royal household. She had not known that most of their mothers would accompany them to their lessons. They had arranged themselves on cushions around the edge of the room and although at least they had not interrupted the lessons, she was constantly aware that she was being watched - and judged.

The children were far less challenging. There were twenty of them, including Louisa, ranging in age from five to ten. The age range was also larger than she'd expected, but she'd put it to use, setting aside time each day for the older children to work with the younger ones. The arrangement helped ensure that the older children understood the material and encouraged the younger children, but it too had been regarded with suspicion.

A few of the older children had been somewhat stiff at the beginning of the week, but she was pleased at how they had opened up to her over the last few days. Even Tagret, she thought with a smile as Louisa dragged the boy over to her. He

was nine, tall for his age, and approached his studies with the utmost seriousness. Despite that, he and Louisa had immediately hit it off. Her daughter could always coax a smile from that solemn little face and he treated her with a protective kindness that was oddly touching.

“Me and Tagret want to go to the beach, Mama.”

“Tagret and I,” she corrected, then looked at Umanda, waiting to collect Louisa as she did every afternoon, and the older woman nodded cheerfully. “All right, sweetheart, but you are not to go in the water without Umanda.”

The Thaiman had marine ancestry and enough of that remained that they were almost as at home in the water as they were on land. Her daughter was not yet so adept but she had a tendency to forget in her excitement.

“Yes, Mama.”

“I will not let her come to any harm,” Tagret said quietly, and she believed him, even though he was only a child as well.

“Thank you, Tagret.”

“Come on,” Louisa said impatiently, tugging on the boy’s hand. He smiled down at her, an attractive smile that suddenly struck Anna as oddly familiar before the two raced off.

“I’ll make sure Lady Thiana knows he’s with us,” Umanda said before hurrying after the children.

Lady Thiana was one of the few mothers who had never come to the lessons and Anna had often wondered why. Then again, perhaps an absent mother was better than one of the ones who disapproved of everything she did.

“He’s a fine young male,” Lady Maelin said as she came to join Anna. The young noblewoman had volunteered to assist her and although Anna had been doubtful at first, she’d quickly proven herself invaluable. “He will make a fine king one day.”

“King?” Her heart skipped a beat. This was the first she’d heard of Mongat having a child. Was there also a wife in the background? “He is Mongat’s son?”

“Oh no. Tagret is his nephew.” Maelin lowered her voice, even though they were the only two left in the classroom. “Although since I arrived I have heard rumors that the king was once in love with his mother.”

Mongat had been in love with his brother’s wife? Was he still? Was that why she hadn’t seen the annoying male since that devastating kiss in his study? *Not that I want to see him*, she assured herself. Despite that, she was decidedly curious about these rumors.

“Would you care to come and have tea in our rooms?” she asked impulsively, and Maelin immediately nodded.

“I would enjoy that very much.”

They returned to the Blue Suite, then settled down under a shaded awning on the balcony where Anna could keep an eye on the cove below. As much as she trusted Umanda - and Tagret - she preferred being able to keep an eye on Louisa.

“You said since you arrived. Are you not from Bangka?” she asked as she poured cups of the fragrant floral tea.

“Oh no. I am from Burmak.”

“Isn’t that an island off the western continent?”

Most of Thaima’s land was composed of islands, and even the two continents were really only larger islands.

“That’s right, but my father has connections at court. That is why he sent me here to be married.”

“*Sent* you to be married? You mean he thought you would meet someone here?”

It made sense - Maelin was very pretty, with a slender elegance that Anna envied. Her skin was a delicate pale blue and her eyes an unusual shade of deep green. No doubt her father thought she would meet an eligible suitor at court. But the girl shook her head.

“No, it was already arranged. We are to be wed in the new year.”

Maelin sounded resigned rather than happy about the prospect, and Anna choked on a too hasty sip of tea.

“He arranged your marriage? Did you have a choice?”

The girl hesitated for a fraction of a second before bowing her head.

“It is my duty to submit to my father’s will.”

“Not when it comes to getting married! Have you even spent any time with this male?”

“We have shared a meal on several occasions.” Maelin was looking down at her tea cup rather than at Anna. “He is quite busy.”

Too busy for his own fiancée? Anna didn’t like the sound that one bit, but since the girl was clearly uncomfortable, she changed the subject, vowing to ask Umanda for more information later.

“You said that Mongat was in love with Tagret’s mother?”

“That is what I heard, yes. But it was also an arranged marriage and of course, he could refuse it. Which is what he did when his brother wished to marry Lady Thiana.”

Interesting. Had it been a sacrifice? Or had he been relieved to be free of the arrangement?

“But after his brother died, he didn’t... pursue her?”

“No, but by then she’d already taken to her bed. Lady Thiana enjoys poor health.”

The faintly acerbic note in Maelin’s usually soft voice made Anna give her an inquiring look and the girl shrugged gracefully.

“It is the kind of ill health which prevents her from doing anything she does not wish to do - like look after her son - but allows her to attend any balls or social events she wishes.”

“I see.”

Maelin didn’t paint a very attractive portrait of Lady Thiana, but if Mongat had truly been in love with her, she must have

been different once. *Perhaps he prefers the helpless type*, she thought crossly, then gave herself a mental smack. The type of women the king preferred was not her concern. She looked up to see Maelin studying her thoughtfully from across the small table.

“I hope you will not be offended when I tell you that there are rumors about you and the king as well.”

She sighed.

“Not offended and not surprised. I told him that it would happen after I found out that these rooms belonged to the previous queen. He dismissed my concerns.”

The girl’s eyes widened. “You told him?”

“Of course. Why?”

“One does not correct the king. One accepts his commands. And it was a mark of great favor to give you these rooms.”

“A favor I didn’t ask for. Louisa and I were supposed to have a separate residence.”

Even as she spoke she heard a shriek of childish laughter from the beach below and saw Louisa and Tagret playing some type of complicated running game. Admittedly, it was hard to imagine anywhere more pleasant.

Maelin lowered her voice and leaned forward. “Is it true that these rooms are directly connected to the king’s private rooms?”

“I’m afraid so, but the doors are locked. On both sides.”

At least it was on hers. After her previous encounter with Mongat, she had returned and searched for the connecting door, only to discover eventually that it was concealed behind one of the wall panels in her bedroom. The fact that it opened directly into her bedroom had been oddly exciting, and she’d had more than one fantasy about him appearing in her room in the middle of the night. *It’s just a harmless fantasy*, she told herself, despite its inevitable effect on her libido.

A libido that had been sadly neglected for a long time. She’d had neither the time nor the inclination on the transport ship.

She had tried dating a few times when she first arrived on Samar Prime, before her work load became so demanding, but she hadn't met anyone who had interested her even one tenth as much as the king.

Maelin was still watching her, and she blushed as she took a hasty sip of tea.

"I'm sure he's not interested in me anyway."

She'd barely finished speaking when there was a sharp, peremptory knock on her door. Before she could respond, the door was flung open and Mongat marched in. Maelin immediately gave him a deep bow, but Anna refused to look away from that dark, burning gaze. Although she wasn't sure why he had come, she was sure that it wasn't with any amorous intention.

"Your majesty," Maelin said nervously.

He didn't even look at her, his eyes still fixed on Anna.

"Leave us."

"Yes, your majesty."

Maelin gave her a quick, sympathetic look and fled. Anna crossed her arms and glared at Mongat.

"How dare you tell her to leave? We were having a very pleasant tea."

He put his hands on the table and leaned down. It should have been intimidating. Instead, a not-unpleasant excitement thrummed through her veins.

"You are to stop interfering with the children's understanding of Thaiman history," he said grimly.

"Interfering?" she gasped.

"There have also been reports that your methods are not... Thaiman."

So the watching mothers had escalated from mere disapproval to going directly to the king. She raised her chin and returned his glare defiantly.

“Perhaps if your people would consider listening and learning, instead of judging, they would find them to be effective.”

“Do not presume to criticize the ways of Thaima. You are not to veer from the chosen texts and you will use accepted methods of teaching.”

“But-”

“That is my final decision. And if I hear of you disobeying my orders, you will find yourself regretting the consequences.”

The imperious tone only added to her anger.

“How dare you? You supposedly brought me here to introduce the children to the possibilities of the Federation and to consider alternative educational practices, but at the first rumor of change you order me to stop.”

His eyes narrowed, his hands flexing against the table top.

“You have misinterpreted my intentions. Your job is to teach, not to make political statements.”

“My job is to educate the children,” she corrected furiously.

“Your job is whatever I decide. I am the king.”

“I don’t care,” she yelled.

His eyes flared as they glared at each other, and the next instant his mouth crashed down on hers.

CHAPTER 8



*F*uck. This was not what Mongat had intended when he came to see Anna - at least not consciously. He'd been genuinely angry at the reports of her denigrating Thaima, but as soon as they kissed his anger began to fade. He groaned and pulled her up into his arms. His little teacher did not simply yield, she met him with equal hunger, her luscious curves pressing against him as her lips parted. A growl rumbled up from his chest as he swept inside that tempting little mouth, his tongue tangling with hers, tasting her sweetness.

Despite his anger, his cock had stiffened the moment he'd seen her again, and now his shaft was throbbing and trying to reach her. She moaned into his mouth, her breasts rubbing against him, the peaks so hard he could feel them through the fabric of his shirt. He slid one hand down her back to the curve of her ass, squeezing and kneading that deliciously soft flesh.

Just as he was on the verge of lifting her into his arms, the sound of laughter penetrated his awareness and he forced himself to release her, taking a hasty step back.

"That was not what I intended."

She pressed a hand to pink, swollen lips, then gathered her composure.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better or worse?"

"Neither," he snapped, her response irritating him. "It is simply the truth."

“You mean you just came here to yell at me without asking for my side of the story?”

He reluctantly conceded that she had a point. His anger had been fueled partially by frustration. Although he'd done his best to put her out of his mind and concentrate on his work, he'd found himself thinking about her at odd moments throughout the week. Thinking about that kiss.

“Perhaps I should have asked,” he admitted grudgingly. “Tell me what you have been teaching.”

Her eyes narrowed and for a moment he thought she would refuse, but then she nodded as well.

“Why don't you sit down?”

He did not want to sit across a tea table from her. Instead, he guided her to the low padded bench on the other side of the balcony. As they sat, he heard laughter again and this time he had enough control to look for the source. To his surprise, Louisa was dancing in and out of the waves with... Tagret?

“My nephew is playing with your daughter?”

“Yes. Wasn't that reported to you as well? How the human child is corrupting the future king?”

“Don't be ridiculous,” he said impatiently, still watching the children. He couldn't remember the last time he'd ever seen his nephew look so happy. “I am delighted that he has found a friend.”

As he spoke, a slightly larger wave swirled around Louisa's knees and she stumbled. Tagret was immediately at her side, steadying her as the wave retreated, and the little girl gave him a trusting smile. His nephew returned the smile, making sure she had found her footing before releasing her.

“He seems quite taken with your daughter.”

“Believe me the feeling is mutual. Louisa adores him.” She snuck a look at him from under her lashes. “I haven't had the opportunity to meet his mother yet, although he has spent a lot of time with us this week.”

There was an obvious question behind the comment and he bit back a sigh.

“Lady Thaina is... not well.”

More accurately she was both spoiled and selfish, but his loyalty to his brother’s memory prevented him from admitting it. He sometimes wondered how he could ever have believed himself in love with her. Although he’d sacrificed those feelings in order to make his brother happy, he was well aware now that he’d had a narrow escape. He shuddered to think what his life would have been like if he’d been married to her. But his brother had remained blind to her faults until his death so Mongat had decided that he must truly have loved her.

Anna made a non-committal sound, drawing him back to the present. She didn’t seem any more impressed by Thaina’s illnesses than he was - not unjustified given her lack of attention to the boy. He tried to spend as much time as possible with his nephew, but over the past year the application process for the Federation had eaten into that time.

“I need to spend more time with him,” he said, more to himself than her, but she nodded.

“He seems quite isolated. Even in class, he is usually alone - unless he can be with Louisa.”

That reminded him of one of the complaints he’d received.

“Is it true that you are using the older children to teach the younger children so you can avoid your duties?”

Those fascinating blue eyes sparkled indignantly.

“Of course not. I do have times during the day when they work together but it is for specific lessons and in a specific context.”

She explained her reasoning, and he found himself agreeing. When they were younger, he had discovered that attempting to teach his brother something had forced him to master the material first.

“I agree with your reasoning. Is there also an argument for the chaotic arrangement of the desks?”

She sighed. "It is not chaotic. The desks are arranged in clusters to encourage interaction. My studies have shown that such interaction is a far more effective way of learning than a teacher standing in front of a row of desks and lecturing the students. You should also know that it is considerably more work to teach this way - simply lecturing the students is far easier."

He leaned back against the bench and stretched his arm along the back. He wasn't touching her, but her smooth bare shoulder was temptingly close.

"You did hire me because of my expertise in education," she reminded him, but her voice had turned husky and he knew she was equally aware of the position of his hand.

"True. I am willing to test your methods and judge by the results. But there is another matter." The most serious one from his perspective. "Have you been insulting Thaima's history and traditions?"

"No. However, we have been discussing the history and traditions of other cultures within the Federation. On the whole they are neither better nor worse, simply different, although there are some things which are unacceptable in a civilized society, such as slavery, for instance."

"I see." He was still not entirely satisfied - the Thaiman had a right to be proud of their heritage - but he did believe that additional knowledge was generally helpful. "It occurs to me that we never completed our discussion of your planned curriculum."

"Perhaps because you've been ignoring me for the past week."

Hmm. So his little teacher had missed him as well? He allowed his hand to drop enough that he could feather his thumb lightly across her shoulder. She quivered beneath his touch but she didn't object, nor did she attempt to move away. That single point of contact had him more aroused than he'd been for years.

"I've been busy," he said softly. "And it appears that your lessons are progressing appropriately without my oversight,

despite what I was led to believe.”

“They are. But perhaps it would be helpful to continue discussing my planned curriculum. To make sure there are no more... misunderstandings.”

Her tone was almost normal, but he noted that she leaned slightly into his touch. He stroked further along her shoulder, teasing the sensitive curve of her neck, and her breath caught. Her nipples had stiffened, the tempting little peaks begging for his touch, but he forced his attention back to their discussion.

“We should meet more frequently. Perhaps a brief discussion at the end of each day?”

“Perhaps,” she agreed demurely, her eyes downcast.

Before he could respond, both children raced out onto the balcony, wet, sandy, and laughing. Tagret came to an abrupt halt at the sight of him, but Louisa gave him a sunny smile and held out two sandy hands full of shells.

“Do you wanna see what we found?”

“I’d be delighted. Tagret, did you find treasures as well?”

“No, sire.”

“Not sire, silly. He’s your uncle, remember? And he didn’t find any ‘cause he was helping me but he could find as many as he wanted.”

Hiding a smile at her quick defense of his nephew, he nodded solemnly.

“I’m sure he could. Now why don’t you show us what you have?”

She obeyed eagerly, telling him about each of the shells and the two pieces of beach glass they’d found. Even Tagret relaxed enough to contribute as Anna asked questions. It didn’t occur to him until after the last treasure was arranged on the low table that she’d also been using the moment as a teaching opportunity. The fact that she’d incorporated it so seamlessly further relieved any concerns that remained about her teaching skills.

“Are you staying for dinner?” Louisa asked, leaning against his leg.

He looked over at Anna, who smiled and nodded, as he ran through his planned schedule. There was another banquet planned for that night with the merchant’s associations - a long tedious affair during which he would not eat and would be forced to listen politely.

“I’ll speak to Krala. Please excuse me.”

He knew his steward was shocked by his decision, although he did his best to conceal it.

“Should I reschedule, sire?”

“No. I think you should just go ahead with the dinner as planned. You will go in my place to answer any questions or alleviate any concerns.”

“Me, sire?”

He could hear the shock in Krala’s voice, but the decision was only logical.

“Of course. You are as familiar with the trade agreements as I am. I doubt anyone will be concerned by my absence.” Nor did he care if they were.

“Yes, sire.”

He disconnected and returned to the balcony feeling oddly giddy. How long had it been since he’d actually enjoyed a simple family meal? Probably not since his mother died. His father had preferred elaborate formal banquets. Tagret had turned serious again, announcing that he should leave. Louisa immediately protested and he echoed her.

“Nonsense. You will stay and eat with us and I will return you to your mother afterwards.”

“Yes, sire,” his nephew said meekly, but he couldn’t quite hide his smile.

Anna shot him a quick look when he mentioned Thaina and he suspected someone had told her about their history, but this was not the time to discuss his family’s issues. He settled back

down as Anna went to discuss dinner with Umanda. Louisa climbed up on his lap and demanded a story, and even Tagret drew closer as he spun a tale about adventurers searching for lost gold.

When Anna returned and joined him on the bench, an unfamiliar feeling of contentment washed over him. The demands of his leadership and the issues with the Federation remained, but for this brief period he could lay them aside and simply enjoy this time. *Like a family*, he thought. He knew it was an illusion, but it was an illusion he was in no hurry to destroy.

CHAPTER 9



As the second school week came to a close, Anna felt considerably more satisfied with her progress. She didn't know if Mongat had said something to the mothers, but they no longer seemed so disapproving. Several of them had even begun to pay attention to the lessons, especially when she discussed other planets within the Federation.

She had met with Mongat every day, although their discussions usually extended far beyond schoolwork. He had told her more about what he hoped admittance into the Federation would mean for his planet. He'd even dropped a few more details about his family, although she still found his parents' relationship odd. Both of his parents had clearly loved him, but they did not appear to have loved each other. Their lives had rarely touched despite their marriage.

"Was it an arranged marriage?" she asked once, thinking of Maelin.

"Yes." He shrugged. "It is our way."

"It doesn't seem very... satisfactory."

"Perhaps that is why I have never chosen it."

He spoke lightly, but a shadow crossed his face. Was it due to whatever had happened with Thaina? Thanks to Louisa who had heard it from Tagret, she knew Mongat had spoken to Thaina the night he took Tagret home but she didn't know what had been said. Nothing appeared to have changed and she still hadn't met the female.

They occasionally met in her suite but more frequently in his office, especially as the Federation visit grew closer and there were even more demands on his time. As soon as she finished straightening the classroom, she sent Louisa and Tagret off with Umada, bid goodbye to Maelin, and headed for his office, a pleasant flutter of anticipation in her stomach. They hadn't kissed again, but he was constantly finding small ways to touch her and she was coming to crave those touches.

As usual, his guards were on duty outside his door but although they wore their usual stoic expressions, something seemed off and they didn't immediately open the door for her.

"Is there a problem?"

Something flashed between them before the older guard bowed and opened the door for her.

"No, mistress."

He closed it behind her before she had a chance to realize that Mongat was not alone. A very beautiful Thaiman female had her hand on his arm, giving him a pleading look, and Anna's heart skipped a beat.

"But why not, Mongat? My doctor has recommended a complete change of scenery, and don't you remember how much we enjoyed our previous visit?" Long fingers trailed gracefully up his arm to flirt with the collar of his open robe. "You could even come with me."

She suddenly remembered his previous claim that any female would be honored by his attention. Feeling sick, she fumbled for the door handle behind her. She was not going to stand there and watch this... this female pawing at him. But her movement attracted his gaze and he turned, his hard expression softening as he saw her.

"Anna. I was just telling Lady Thaina that I do not have time to accompany her to Burmak."

Lady Thaina? This was Tagret's mother? And he'd said that he didn't have time, not that he didn't want to go. Her stomach churned but she refused to show her distress.

“I understand,” she said quickly, her fingers still fumbling with the door.

“No, you don’t,” he snapped. “I have no interest in accompanying her on a romantic holiday - or any other holiday for that matter. She didn’t even mention Tagret. She has no interest in anything but her own entertainment.”

The other woman’s face flushed a furious purple and she stamped her foot, her supposed fragility disappearing.

“How dare you, Mongat? No one speaks to me like that.”

“No one speaks to the king like that,” he growled. “You are dismissed.”

Thaina looked for a moment as if she might argue but finally dropped her hands and stalked past him, her chin held high. She swept out, not looking at either of them. The older guard closed the door behind her with obvious relief.

Mongat rubbed his forehead, looking tired, and her flash of jealousy disappeared completely. She went to stand behind him, making gentle circles on his temples as he leaned into her touch.

“I can’t believe she is so oblivious that she thought now would be a good time for me to leave the palace.”

“She wanted you to go with her?” she asked, her voice carefully neutral.

“She simply wanted someone to pay for the trip and handle all the details.”

Remembering the way the other woman had touched him, she wasn’t quite as sure, but she didn’t press the matter.

“She didn’t intend to include Tagret?”

“No.” He made a disgusted noise. “I told her she should pay more attention to him, but I was only wasting my breath.”

He sighed, then reached for her and pulled her down into his lap, nuzzling his face against her hair. He seemed quite fascinated by it and she had started wearing it down simply so he could run his fingers through the long strands.

“What happened between the two of you?” she asked softly.

“I thought I was in love with her and my father arranged a marriage. But my brother also loved her and I wanted him to be happy.” He shrugged. “I have the throne. It seemed only fair that he should have the female he wanted.”

“You sacrificed your happiness for his?”

“Not as much of a sacrifice as I once believed,” he said dryly. “But even then, I cared more for him than I did for her.”

She believed him, but she also believed that it had been a sacrifice - and now he was alone without any family other than Tagret. She snuggled a little closer, and his arms tightened around her.

“How was your day?”

“Good. I would like to start a module on plant germination. Do you think one of the gardeners could provide some seeds?”

“Of course. I’ll have Krala arrange a meeting.” He stroked her arm slowly, his hand coming teasingly close to her breast. “Is there anything else you wish to discuss?”

“I was going to ask you about the progress with the Federation,” she said breathlessly.

“You were not.”

Her breath caught as he cupped one of her breasts, brushing his thumb across the taut peak, and desire swirled through her. A distant part of her mind thought she should object, but instead she leaned into his touch.

“Maybe not,” she conceded, and he gave her a slow, wicked smile.

“Good. I do not wish to discuss the Federation today.”

“What would you rather discuss?”

“I am not interested in discussion at all.”

He bent her back over his arm, and then his lips covered hers. She moaned and melted against him, the heat of his body branding her. This time there was nothing gentle or teasing in

his kiss, his tongue claimed her mouth, and she surrendered, letting him taste and tease as she trembled in his arms. Her nipples ached for his touch, the need building with every brush of his hand, and heat curled low in her stomach. She shifted restlessly on his lap, rubbing against the hard ridge beneath her and he groaned, deepening the kiss.

“You are driving me mad, my Anna.”

“Good.”

Her breathless response only caused him to chuckle, and then his hands slid down her body to cup her ass. He picked her up, his lips still on hers, and carried her back around his desk to the low couch beneath the window. The late afternoon sunlight slanted across the cushions as he laid her down on them and followed her down, his mouth returning to hers.

He kissed her until she was moaning against his lips, her hips rising and falling restlessly beneath his. Her thighs parted eagerly as his cock pressed against her, long and thick and hard. His hands returned to her breasts, cupping their heavy weight and stroking the swollen tips until she arched up. She tugged impatiently at her sabai, and he pulled away long enough to help her remove the garment. He groaned as her breasts were bared to him.

“So pretty.”

He bent to take one into his mouth, his mouth shockingly hot and wet. He tugged harder, his hand teasing her other nipple until her hips were moving frantically, her hands clutching his shoulders as she urged him on. An odd vibration against her ribs made him pause then swear savagely.

“We will continue this later,” he promised.

Her body throbbed demandingly as she gave him a startled look.

“Later? What do you mean?”

“I’m afraid I have to return to work.” That dark gaze burned as he looked down at her, his thumb stroking across her aching nipple one last time. “I wish...”

“But-”

He pressed a last kiss to her bare shoulder, then helped her sit up.

“But-”

“Later, Anna,” he said firmly.

With a frustrated huff, she sat up and wrapped her sabai back into place. Despite his insistence that he had to work, he lingered long enough to watch her cover herself and her cheeks heated under his gaze.

“Then I’ll go back to my suite,” she said with as much dignity as possible.

“I will-” he began, then shook his head. “I am afraid that I will not be free again this evening. Tomorrow?”

The warning voice had returned, reminding her that he was a king and she was simply a human here for a limited time. The sensible thing to do would be to tell him that they had no future and avoid any further physical contact. Instead she nodded shyly.

“I promised Louisa, and Tagret, of course,” she added with a smile, “That we could explore along the coast tomorrow. Can you join us?”

“I can think of nothing I would like more, but the delegation arrives the following day. I hope I can join you for a short time later in the day.”

“Are you worried about this visit?”

“Why should I be concerned? Thaima is clearly a superior candidate.”

Although he spoke with his usual arrogance, she didn’t believe him. She knew he was worried but she let the subject drop as she rose to her feet.

“Then I hope I will see you tomorrow.”

“I will find the time,” he promised as he pulled her back down for one last brief, hungry kiss.

CHAPTER 10



Anna's heart was still pounding as she slipped out of Mongat's study and returned to her suite, already anticipating the following day. But that promise was not enough to satisfy her lingering arousal although she did her best to put it out of her mind.

She had dinner on the balcony with Louisa and Tagret as the sun set over the water, enjoying their cheerful conversation. Although she had intended to ask Umanda to return him to his mother, the older woman pulled her aside after dinner.

"I spoke to Lady Thaina's maid earlier to let her know he was with us." Anna had insisted that they continue to inform the boy's mother of his whereabouts even though she had shown no concern about his absence so far. "She told me that Lady Thaina is attending a ball tonight and will not be back until very late. She also gave the maid a free evening."

"You mean he will be alone?"

"Yes, mistress."

Perhaps after seeing Thaina with Mongat, she shouldn't have been surprised, but she was still disgusted by the other woman's behavior.

"I am not sending him home alone. He can stay with us."

When she'd suggested as much to Tagret, he'd bowed politely but she'd seen the flash of relief on his face. Louisa, of course, was overjoyed and made numerous plans for the evening but the long energetic day overcame her and she was asleep before Anna finished the second bedtime story.

Tagret remained awake, studying her with those dark eyes so like his uncle's, a troubled look on his young face.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

He started to nod, then hesitated.

"You would not leave Louisa alone, would you?"

"No I wouldn't. She's too young - as are you," she added. "Even though I know you are both brave and intelligent, you are still a child."

His small face twisted as he looked down at her daughter.

"I was much younger than Louisa the first time I woke up and my mother was gone." Her fists clenched but her anger wouldn't help him and she remained silent as he continued. "I'm glad you wouldn't leave her."

"I won't," she promised. "And Tagret, you are always welcome here. If you find yourself alone again, come to us."

That surprisingly sweet, attractive smile crossed his face before he bowed his head as regally as Mongat would have done.

"Thank you."

She hesitated, then gave him a quick, fierce hug, delighted when he returned it just as fiercely.

"Now go to sleep, sweetheart."

He nodded and when she checked a short time later both children were asleep, Tagret's arm curled protectively around Louisa.

"Thaina does not deserve him," she muttered to Umanda as they sat on the balcony sharing a glass of wine.

"She was always selfish, even as a child," the older female agreed. "But her mother was much the same. I believe she encouraged Thaina to pursue both princes. If the king had not stepped aside for his brother, there could have been serious trouble."

"At least she hasn't taught Tagret to play the same games."

She wandered over to the edge of the balcony, watching the moon shimmer on the pink sea, deep and mysterious in the soft light as the waves whispered against the shore.

“For all her beauty, she is not an intelligent female,” Umada said tartly. “I doubt it has even occurred to her that males can also use their... charms to get what they want from a female. Fortunately, Tagret inherited both his father’s intelligence and his morals.”

Was Mongat using his charm to get what he wanted, she wondered, then shook her head. No, despite his arrogance, he had the same streak of honor as his nephew. But the thought of him reawakened that lingering arousal and made her restless.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go for a walk.”

Umada gave her an amused look.

“I have no other plans for the evening. There aren’t any secret lovers waiting in the garden for me.”

Anna wasn’t sure if there was an additional meaning behind the other female’s words, but she still found herself blushing.

“Or me either. I’m only going for a walk. Along the beach.”

“Of course, mistress.”

Ignoring the older woman’s amusement, she hurried down the stairs and out into the garden. It was still early and the scent of the flowers seemed even stronger in the warm evening air. A breeze blew in from the sea, tugging gently at her hair and teasing across her bare shoulders, and the sand beneath her bare feet was cool and damp.

She didn’t have any particular destination in mind and walked slowly along the shore. The moon appeared even bigger now, turning the ocean into a silvery mirror, and a few of the phosphorescent fish that lived among the coral drifted past. The distant sound of music attracted her attention and she followed it until she found herself on the beach below a large open pavilion, separated from the shore by an immaculately landscaped garden. A group of Thaiman musicians were on a raised dais at one end of the pavilion, playing a haunting

melody as the Thaiman nobles danced, their brightly colored silks shimmering in the light of a thousand tiny lanterns.

Was this why Mongat had not been free this evening? Was he up there now as part of that glittering throng, dancing with the most beautiful females in the court, perhaps even with Lady Thaina? The thought made her stomach clench and she turned away. But even as she turned her back on the colorful assembly, a large figure strolled down one of the garden paths and moved toward her. Her heart skipped a beat, recognizing him even before he spoke.

“Anna?”

“Mongat.”

Why was he here? Did he think she’d come here looking for him?

“What are you doing here?” he asked, the question echoing her thoughts.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize there was a party. I just wanted to go for a walk. I’ll leave now.”

She took a step away and he caught her arm.

“There’s no need to hurry.”

His voice had softened and she shivered as his fingers lingered on her skin.

“Why are you here? Weren’t you enjoying yourself?”

“Not particularly. I am expected to attend so many social events that they lost their appeal long ago. And especially tonight. I would much rather have been with you.”

Her breath caught and her breasts suddenly seemed overly sensitive, her nipples tingling.

“I wanted to be with you too,” she whispered.

The music floated down around them as he looked at her and her heart skipped a beat.

“I would have enjoyed the dance if you were there.” He held out his hand. “Shall we dance?”

“I don’t know the steps.”

“I will show you.”

He put his arm around her waist and began twirling her across the sand, slowly at first, then gradually increasing his speed until they were moving in time to the music. He moved with a sure-footed grace and she let him sweep her away, the stars wheeling overhead and the rhythm of the waves a soft counterpoint to the music from the pavilion. Time seemed to stop as she floated across the sand in his arms until the song finally ended and she looked up at him, dazed and happy.

He smiled down at her and then his grip tightened and he pulled her closer, bending down to nuzzle against her neck.

“Why do you do that?” she asked breathlessly, tilting her head to allow him greater access.

“Your scent calls to me. I want to fill my lungs with it, to bathe in your sweetness. To taste it. You drive me mad, my Anna.”

“Good,” she whispered, and he growled.

He lifted his head, and then his mouth covered hers, hot and demanding. She melted into the kiss, her arms sliding up to wrap around his neck, and his arms tightened, pulling her even closer. He was hard everywhere, his muscular frame surrounding her, protecting her, and her body ached, already wet and swollen.

“Anna,” he groaned as he raised his head. He took a quick look along the empty beach and then back up at the pavilion. “Not here. Come with me.”

He led her a short way back along the beach, then onto a small path that she hadn’t noticed previously. It was darker under the trees, the scent of flowers heavier in the still air, but he guided her easily along the path and through a gate into a small garden enclosed by a high wall. A fountain gurgled merrily in the middle of the garden and flowering vines tumbled down over the walls, framing an alcove occupied by a wide cushioned bench.

“It’s so beautiful.”

“Yes,” he agreed, but his eyes were on her. “And very private.”

His lips came down on hers again, hard and demanding, and she responded with equal hunger, her hands clutching desperately at his shoulders.

“I will never tire of kissing you,” he growled when he finally raised his head, and she shivered at the raw need in his voice.

“Then don’t stop.”

He obliged, his mouth gentler this time, his tongue teasing hers even as his hand slipped inside her sabai to caress her breasts. His thumb stroked across her aching nipples and then the silk fluttered free, leaving her bare for him once more.

“So pretty,” he murmured as he picked her up and carried her over to the bench, then bent down to pull a nipple into his mouth.

His hand moving down her body, his fingers slipping beneath her skirt to find her core, already wet and swollen. Her hips rocking helplessly towards him as he found her clit, teasing it until she was actually shaking with the need to climax.

“Don’t stop,” she cried when he started to pull back.

His laugh was almost a groan as he kissed her again, his fingers returning to her slick folds. When he slid one thick finger into her wet passage, she cried out, but once again he pulled back. Before she could object, he parted her thighs and buried his head between her legs. The feel of his tongue, longer and smoother than a human man’s, licking and sucking and flicking across her clit, was almost too much, and she clutched at his head, her nails raking across his scalp.

She cried out his name as her release crashed down over her, but he didn’t stop, his fingers and tongue pushing her even higher, until the pleasure was almost painful.

“I can’t.”

“You can,” he growled. “Again, Anna. Come for me again.”

Her entire body stiffened, and then she shattered, her cries lost in the sounds of the water as her body convulsed in long, helpless waves. He gradually softened his caresses, then pulled

her into his arms with a satisfied murmur. She rested her head on his chest, and her hands moved down to his hard, heavy shaft. It was... not human, the shaft undulating rather than a smooth column, and the wide head responded to her touch as if it were another mouth, sucking on her hand in an oddly erotic sensation.

“I still want you,” she admitted.

“Anna.”

He groaned, his cock throbbing beneath her touch, and she sank down to her knees, taking him in her mouth. The taste of him was exotic and strangely addictive, and she swirled her tongue around the wide rim. His shaft responded, closing around her tongue as she sucked him deeper into her mouth. His hand tangled in her hair, not directing her but simply holding her as he growled. His shaft thickened and she felt the first pulse of his seed in the back of her throat. She swallowed and kept swallowing, determined not to miss a drop.

When his body finally stopped shaking, he pulled her up against his chest, a satisfied expression on his face.

“Thank you, my Anna. That was... perfect.”

She smiled at him then nestled closer as she listened to the trickle of the fountain mingling with the soft susurrus of the waves and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

“I am afraid I must return to the ball,” he said at last.

Her heart ached, but she nodded and let him help her to her feet, wrapping her sabai back in place and adjusting her skirt. He pressed a final kiss to her forehead, then wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they returned to the beach.

“I must go.”

Despite his words, he lingered, running his fingers through her hair before he finally sighed, bowed, and headed back to the pavilion. She watched him go, then headed back down the beach, a small, contented smile on her face.

CHAPTER 11



Mongat could not believe how badly the day had gone. The delegates from the Federation had arrived on schedule and they had spent the morning going over the proposed terms. But despite his carefully planned and prepared presentation, the mood of the meeting had turned decidedly negative. The Federation leader was a pompous old male, swollen with his own self-importance, and Mongat had not responded well to his condescending attitude.

“The Federation will not tolerate slavery in any form,” he’d declared.

“Thaima does not have slaves,” Mongat growled.

“A matter of wording only. Many of your contracts are simply a way of enforcing control.”

“No one is ever forced to sign a contract. It is always the employee’s decision.”

“But if they have no alternatives, they have no choice,” the other male sneered.

“Not only do they have a choice, a contract employee is also provided with food, housing, and medical care,” Mongat argued, but the leader had dismissed his words with a wave of his hand.

“Irrelevant. All beings are entitled to freedom.”

“I thought we were here to discuss trade,” one of the other members, a purple-skinned female who seemed much more sympathetic, interjected.

“We will not trade with any planet that does not share our principles,” the leader said coldly.

“I don’t remember seeing those ‘principles’ when we applied,” Mongat snarled.

“You should have been aware of them,” the leader insisted.

“We did not agree to a change of principles. Only to trade.”

“Perhaps we should adjourn and revisit this in the morning,” the female suggested, and the others reluctantly agreed.

Now he was on his way to see Anna, hoping her presence would soothe his temper. She had not attended the meeting, but he had found himself wishing she was there, not just because he found her presence soothing but because her perspective would have been useful.

The sight of her waiting on the beach eased some of his tension and he hurried to her side. The wind had come up, the waves crashing higher on the beach, and her long dark hair blew around her like a banner. So strange and yet so attractive, he thought as he captured the silky strands, drawing them back from her face.

“What are you looking at?”

“The sea,” she said, her eyes on the horizon. “The waves are beautiful, and I’ve never seen the sky so dark, almost purple.”

“There is a storm coming. You should go inside.”

“I’d like to watch the storm. I haven’t seen one since I left Earth. The weather on Samar Prime was controlled to the extent that it was never more than rain.”

He shuddered at the thought. As much as he wanted to take advantage of Federation technology, he hoped his people would never lose their connection to the natural world.

They made their way to her balcony. A covered area with a low couch and table at one end of the balcony would be sheltered from the rain - a perfect place to watch the approaching storm. Umanda brought out a pitcher of fruit juice and a plate of tiny savory cakes. He thanked her, then poured a glass for Anna and one for himself. The cool sweet liquid

refreshed him, but not as much as the sight of her in the fading light. She had pulled off her sandals and her bare toes peeked out from under the hem of her skirt. Were human toes sensitive, he wondered, suddenly struck by the urge to find out. He thought he would enjoy nibbling his way from those tiny toes all the way to her delicious little cunt.

“What are you thinking?”

She looked at him suspiciously and he realized he’d been staring at her toes. He grinned, knowing he shouldn’t share his thoughts.

“I was admiring the way your skin glows in the sunset.”

“Really?” She gave him a suspicious look

“Perhaps I will tell you later,” he teased, and she laughed.

“Perhaps you will.”

He reached out to cup her face and she leaned into his touch. How quickly he had become accustomed to the pleasure of her company, of her smile, of the heat and passion that flared between them. He had enjoyed sex before, but this... this was something different.

“You are very serious this evening.”

“Our Federation visitors are not quite what I had hoped.”

“You mean they don’t approve of Thaima?”

He nodded, wondering how much he should tell her.

“They are not convinced of our commitment to their... ideals.”

“What do you mean? What did they say?”

He was not sure why he didn’t want to admit the truth, but he still hesitated.

“They accused us of slavery, but Thaima does not practice slavery. We have indentured servants.”

“Are they free to leave?”

“Their indenture ends once the agreed upon term has been completed,” he said stiffly. “Their living conditions are

excellent. They have food, housing, and medical care. The Federation is making a ridiculous fuss about nothing.”

“Are they?”

She rose and went to the edge of the balcony, her shoulders rigid, and he followed her.

“Yes, they are,” he said more gently. “No one is ever forced to sign such a contract.”

“But do they really have a choice?” she asked, echoing the delegate’s question.

He opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again. Was she correct? Had he failed to recognize the true issue because the Federation’s leader had so irritated him?

“Perhaps I have not studied the situation sufficiently. Especially if Thaima’s membership in the Federation is at risk as a result.”

“If your servants are not treated properly, what does it say about the rest of the population? I can understand why the Federation might question it.”

He shook his head, remembering the look of contempt on the leader’s face.

“Perhaps. But perhaps there is no alternative.”

“There is always an alternative. I’m sure you just have to find the right solution.”

“You sound like the Federation,” he grumbled, and she smiled at him.

“I believe it’s the truth. I’m sure once you consider it, you will determine the best course of action.”

He scowled, knowing she was correct, but hating the idea that he might have been wrong.

“Will you help me?”

“Of course I will. Do you want to start now?”

“No. This requires a more thorough discussion.”

Lightning flashed, arcing from the sky to the ocean in a brilliant streak of purple and she gasped, her eyes widening.

“I’d forgotten how dramatic the sky can be during a storm.”

“The story is that Hysan sends the lightning, illuminating the sky as he searches for Zylortha.”

“Why does he have to search for her?”

“They had an argument and she ran from him. It is never wise to run from a god.”

“Even if one is a goddess?”

“Even then.”

Another crack of lightning streaked the sky, revealing the churning waves below as the rain began. The rain couldn’t reach them but a fine mist began to fill the air. She shivered, and he put his arm around her and drew her close.

“Did he find her?” she asked eventually.

“Yes, after a long search while the world slumbered.”

The lights came on in the living area behind them and they both looked back as Lady Maelin rushed in, accompanied by Louisa and Tagret, all three of them drenched and shivering. Anna immediately jumped up and he followed her, calling for Umanda.

“I’m so sorry, Mistress Anna. We were coming back from the lake when the storm caught us. We ran as fast as we could but we couldn’t make it to shelter in time.”

The girl was clearly distressed, the wetness on her cheeks due to tears as much as rain.

“It’s not your fault,” Anna said quickly. “It came up very quickly. Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you into a hot bath.”

Unconcerned that she was soaking her own dress in the process, she picked up an unusually silent Louisa, carrying her towards the children’s wing as Umanda hurried out with an armload of towels. Tagret took a towel and followed Anna, his young face distressed.

“What happened?” he asked gently.

“Louisa was scared of the storm but we had to keep going.”

“Of course you did.” He wrapped the towel around his nephew and kept his arms around the boy’s thin shoulders. “The best thing you could do was to get back here as quickly as possible.”

“Please forgive me, your majesty,” Maelin whispered as she also took a towel.

“Nonsense. There is nothing to forgive.”

Anna was already running Louisa a bath so he took Tagret into the other bathroom, despite his reluctance, and made him take a hot shower. Umada had a dry set of clothes waiting when he was finished.

“He spends so much time here we decided to keep some additional clothing on hand,” the older female said dryly.

As soon as he was dressed, Tagret dashed back to Louisa’s room. She was already in bed, her small face flushed and Anna gave him an anxious look.

“She’s running a fever.”

Maelin gave a quiet sob. She was huddled in the corner of the room, still wearing her wet clothes. He jerked his head at Umada and she gently but firmly led the young female out of the room. Tagret grabbed his hand, his face anxious.

“Is Louisa going to be all right?”

“I’m sure she will,” he said firmly, “But I’ll ask the doctor to come and check on her.”

He issued a quick command through his wrist com, then went to join Anna at the bedside, putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder even though the sight of the unusually quiet child troubled him deeply.

“I can’t believe she got sick so quickly,” she said. “She was fine this morning.”

“Based on what you said, she isn’t used to this type of weather, and the temperature dropped significantly with the

arrival of a storm.”

She nodded, her fingers gently stroking Louisa’s face. The girl whimpered, her small body trembling.

“Can you bring me another blanket?”

“Of course,” he said, and went to fetch one.

When he returned, the doctor was with them, scanning Louisa with a small device, and Tagret was leaning against Anna’s side, his head resting on her shoulder. Despite her concern for her daughter, she was trying to comfort the boy as well.

The doctor, a young but competent male, finally nodded and handed Anna a small bottle.

“This will ease her fever, although it may not work immediately. Give it to her every hour until the fever breaks. Once it breaks, she will be weak and need to rest. Have her drink as much as possible.”

“Thank you,” Anna said.

He waited until the doctor left, then helped her sit Louisa up and administer the medicine. The girl protested feebly, trying to bat away the spoon, but Anna persisted. As soon as Louisa swallowed, she lay back down and curled into a ball, her thumb in her mouth, and his heart clenched.

“Poor baby,” Anna murmured.

“What can we do for her?”

“Not much except wait for the fever to break, I’m afraid. Sleep is the best thing for her.”

She leaned over and pressed a kiss to Louisa’s cheek, and he did the same, trying to ignore the pain in his chest.

“What is it, Mongat?” she asked, her eyes suddenly anxious.

“Nothing.”

He paced to the other side of the room, his jaw tight, and she followed him.

“It is not nothing,” she insisted. “What’s wrong?”

“It is simply that the child is ill.”

“And you cannot control her illness,” she said shrewdly, and he gave her a worried look.

“I have never had the care of a sick child.”

“We just need to have faith that the medicine will work and keep her as comfortable as possible. Let’s see if we can get her to drink.”

She poured a glass of juice and returned to Louisa’s side as the little girl’s eyes fluttered open. He helped her lift the child into a sitting position and encouraged her to drink, even though she tried to push the glass away. He wasn’t sure he would have had the heart to insist but Anna persisted until half the glass had disappeared

“It will help,” she promised.

“Will she be all right?” Tagret asked, his voice low and worried, and Anna smiled at him.

“Of course she will. It’s perfectly normal for children to get sick sometimes.”

“Not here,” he muttered.

“Well, on Earth it is.” She gently stroked Louisa’s hair away from her face. “She just needs to sleep.”

“Should we go?” he asked, but Tagret immediately shook his head.

“I’m staying.”

“You can’t stay here,” he said gently. “What would your mother say?”

“Mother never notices when I am gone,” Tagret muttered and Mongat gave him a worried look. Did Thaina have no concern for the boy?

Tagret turned to Anna. “Please can I stay?”

“Of course you can. I would appreciate the company.”

He hesitated, thinking of the delegation and what promised to be a long day tomorrow, then nodded.

“I will stay as well.”

Umanda returned a short time later and told them that Maelin was asleep on the couch in her room.

“You should get some rest as well so you can take over in the morning,” Anna said.

The older female hesitated, then nodded.

“Very well, but come and get me if I’m needed.”

Anna thanked her and he echoed it, suddenly thinking of their earlier discussion. Umanda was a loyal and trusted servant. Did she think of herself that way, or did she feel tied to her place by outdated laws? He decided to discuss the matter with her once Louisa had recovered.

The night wore on. Tagret eventually fell asleep, despite his best efforts to stay awake, and Mongat placed him on the window seat, covering him with a blanket. Asleep he looked so much like his brother had as a child that his heart ached.

He and Anna remained awake, watching over Louisa as she tossed and turned restlessly. They continued giving her the medicine and urging her to drink but she didn’t seem to be getting any better. Anna remained calm although her face grew increasingly pale, but his frustration only grew, aware of his own powerlessness. Why could he not simply order her to be well? He knew it was irrational and did his best to keep himself in check, despite his fear.

Umanda padded in twice during the night, bringing fresh juice and cool cloths. He knew she was worried as well but like Anna she remained calm. Where did these females get such strength?

It wasn’t until dawn that Louisa’s fever finally broke, her eyes fluttering open, heavy with exhaustion but coherent once more.

“Mama,” she whispered before her eyes went to him. “Daddy. Where’s Tagret?”

“I’m here,” the boy said immediately. “Do you feel better now?”

“Mmmhmm.” Her eyes were already starting to flutter closed but she held out an imperious hand.

Tagret glanced at Anna and when she nodded, he took the child’s hand and climbed into bed with her. Mongat was still too stunned to move. *Daddy*. He’d never thought to hear the term and his shock was mingled with an even stronger sense of satisfaction. Had Anna heard? He darted a quick look at her, but she was smiling down at the children.

He opened his mouth and his wrist com buzzed, a reminder from Krala that the day’s meetings were due to start shortly. He swore under his breath, then touched Anna’s shoulder.

“I’m afraid I have to leave.”

“I understand. Thank you for staying with me.”

Her hand came up to cover his as she smiled up at him.

“I don’t want your gratitude,” he said gruffly, then shook his head when she gave him a puzzled look. “We will talk later.”

“All right. Come back when you can, even if it’s late. I’ll leave the door between our rooms unlocked.”

He nodded abruptly, unable to respond, and hurried away while he could still force himself to leave.

CHAPTER 12



Despite her exhaustion, Anna smiled as she watched Maelin and Dr. Lunta. The doctor had returned to check on Louisa and this time Maelin had been present. Something had sparked between them as soon as their eyes met, and she found herself remembering the first time she'd met Mongat. Even though he'd infuriated her with his arrogance and high-handed manner, she had felt an indefinable connection as well.

Would he come to her tonight? Her few lingering doubts had been erased by his actions the previous evening. He had been as loving and caring towards Louisa as any father and it hadn't surprised her when Louisa called him that. The word had sounded so right on her daughter's lips. And he has been a quiet source of support for her as well, remaining at her side throughout the long, terrifying night.

She didn't know if there was any possibility of a future between them but it no longer mattered. Or more truthfully, it mattered less than taking advantage of their time together. Her main concern was to make sure that Louisa was not hurt.

Dr. Lunta gave Louisa a final pat on the head, then left with Maelin. Tagret had reluctantly left a short time ago, promising to return, and Anna smiled as Louisa started to drift off, her small hand clutching a stuffed toy

"Mama."

"Yes, sweetheart."

"Daddy likes you, doesn't he?"

Her daughter's eyes were sleepy but they still managed to pin her down.

"I think he likes all of us."

"No. I mean he really likes you. Like Dr. Lunta likes Miss Maelin."

"Oh." She hesitated. "Why do you think that?"

"I just know."

Louisa's eyes finally started to close and she tucked her daughter in, smoothing the covers around her.

"I can tell," she mumbled, already half asleep.

She kissed her forehead, then sat back and watched as her daughter slept, smiling a little. Could Louisa tell that she... liked Mongat just as much?

The day passed quietly, all of them tired from the previous night. There was no sign of Mongat, although Krala called twice on his behalf to make sure that Louisa was still doing well.

Not long after sunset, she put Louisa back in bed and only lingered for a quick chat with Umanda before she followed her. As she opened the shutters to the now quiet sea, she glanced at the panel concealing the door to his quarters. Would he come to her tonight?

She took a long bath in the deep pool in her bathroom, then rubbed a sweetly scented lotion over every inch of her body before pulling on a sheer, silky nightgown. It had been an impulsive purchase not long after she arrived on Samar Prime, before she'd realized she would have little time to date - and even fewer desirable candidates. But she'd kept the nightgown and now she twirled in front of the mirror, pleased with the way it floated out from her body, alternately concealing and revealing her curves. It wasn't remotely similar to a Thaiman garment, but she was sure Mongat would approve.

Although she was determined to stay up for him, she fell asleep almost as soon as she climbed into bed. The sound of a door opening jerked out of a vividly erotic dream about

Mongat to find him standing over her. He smiled down at her but the light she'd left burning showed the strain on his face.

"You look tired," she said softly,

He immediately started to deny it, then shrugged. "Perhaps a little."

She pulled back the sheet, wordlessly inviting him to join her. His eyes heated as he saw the nightgown, his face no longer quite so exhausted. He stripped off his own clothes, huge and magnificent in the lamplight, blue skin gleaming over taut muscles and his cock already rising to meet her. He slid into bed beside her and she went willingly into his arms, wrapping her hands around his cock and stroking him gently.

"This is how I want to be greeted every night," he growled as he cupped her breasts, tugging at her nipples.

"So demanding," she laughed, but the heat in her stomach was building.

"Only with you."

Her fingers danced along the head of his cock, teasing at the sensitive rim, and it began to pulse against her hand. He groaned, his shaft continuing to swell and lengthen. As much as she wanted him, she hesitated, studying his face.

"Do you want me, Mongat?"

His hand covered her where she stroked his cock.

"Isn't that obvious?"

"And is it just this?" she asked quietly. "Or do you want more?"

"More," he said immediately, that intense gaze fixed on her face. "I tried to fight it, my Anna, but it was hopeless from the first moment I saw you. You were meant for me."

She sighed and pressed her head against his chest, the steady beat of his heart comforting.

"Do you mean it, Mongat?"

"You know I do, my Anna."

His hand moved down her body, cupping her mound, and she gasped.

“What do you want, Anna?”

“You. I want you.”

“How?” he growled.

“I want all of you. I want you inside me, Mongat.”

“Are you sure, Anna?”

“Oh yes.”

He kissed her again, his cock hard and heavy against her belly, and her need continued to climb. His hand slid down her side, cupping her breast, and a moment later his lips fastened on her nipple. Pleasure swamped her senses and she gasped, her back arching to press the aching peak further into his mouth.

“Oh yes. That feels so good.”

“Yes,” he growled, sucking her harder.

He lavished the same attention on the other breast, his free hand roaming across her body, sending tremors of need through her, until she was writhing under him, desperate for more.

“Please, Mongat.”

“Soon.”

He worked his way down her body, nuzzling her belly, her hips, then parting her thighs to expose her sex. His mouth was hot and eager against her folds, and her hips lifted, pushing eagerly against his tongue. He made a pleased sound, lapping at her slick flesh, his tongue flicking over the throbbing knot of her clit. She gasped, her hands clinging to his shoulders as the pleasure rose, threatening to consume her.

“More.”

“Like this?” He blew gently against her clit.

“Yesssss.”

He blew again and she rocked towards him, desperate for more stimulation.

“You are very wet, little teacher.”

His tongue stroked over her folds, exploring, tasting, and she shuddered.

“I want you inside me,” she demanded, and he growled.

“Soon.”

He continued to tease her, his tongue circling her clit but not touching, as she moved helplessly beneath him. When she was on the verge of pleading, he finally relented, his tongue flicking firmly against her swollen nub. Her whole body convulsed as pleasure rushed through her, a low moan escaping.

He moved back up her body, his heavy cock settling between her legs. He stroked it through her slick folds before the head settled over her clit, closing around the still swollen nub and sucking on it with an erotic, insistent pressure that had her clinging desperately to his shoulders.

Her climax coiled tightly in her belly hovering just out of reach before he shifted again and his thick shaft finally nudged against her entrance. She arched her back, trying to pull him deeper, but he shook his head and slowly eased himself into her with a fiery stretch that sent streaks of pleasure through her sensitized body.

“My Anna,” he growled.

“Yours.”

Her hands tightened on his back as he slowly buried himself deep inside, her body clenching around him as she tried to adjust, and then his cock moved deep inside her, building her pleasure even higher.

“I’ve never felt anything so sweet, so perfect.”

“Yes,” she gasped. “You feel so good.”

He withdrew slowly, her sex clenching helplessly, then plunged in again, filling her, his shaft swirling across her swollen tissues. She writhed helplessly, the pleasure almost unbearable.

“Too much.”

“It’s never too much,” he promised.

He kept thrusting, each stroke bringing her higher, his body hard and hot above her. His face was hard and strained, every muscle rigid with control.

“Look at me, Anna. I want to see your eyes when I take you.”

His dark, burning gaze mesmerized her as she surrendered to the pleasure, and his cock swelled, pulsing inside her, and a wave of heat washed over her, her entire body shaking. The world exploded around her as the orgasm crashed through her, and then he threw back his head and roared his own release. The pulse of his cock seemed to go on forever, her pussy still rippling with tiny aftershocks even as the pressure eased.

She murmured a protest when he withdrew, but he pulled her up into his arms, gently stroking her hair. She sighed happily and curled against his chest.

“Sleep, my Anna,” he murmured.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she promised.

“Not if I can help it.”

She smiled, but her eyes were already drifting shut, and she fell asleep listening to the sound of his heartbeat. He woke her once more during the night, this time using that amazing cock to tug on her nipples and build her desire to an impossible height before finally entering her in one hard satisfying stroke. She shuddered helplessly as her climax washed over her and he thrust into her with an almost desperate urgency until he cried out her name, his seed filling her with long heated pulses.

After their lack of sleep the previous night, she’d expected him to sleep longer but the sky had barely begun to lighten when she opened her eyes and found him dressing.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“That’s all right. But do you have to leave?”

“I’m afraid so.” His face looked tired and strained again. “Yesterday did not go well. Carlan seems convinced that we are little more than barbarians.”

“Carlan?” She frowned as she tried to remember where she’d heard that name before. “Is he a heavy-set Madric male? I think I met him once at a diplomatic function.”

“Was he a pompous, arrogant bore then as well?”

“I think so, although he was nice enough to me.”

“Hmm.” He gave her a speculative look. “There is an informal tea scheduled for this afternoon and I would like you to join us. You could talk about the changes you have made to the curriculum. Perhaps he will even listen to you.”

She’d only attended a few diplomatic events but they hadn’t struck her as any worse than some of her faculty meetings - and at least diplomats cloaked their insults in the nicest possible language.

“All right. If you think it will help. Should I wear Thaiman garments or standard Federation dress?”

“Thaiman, I think. To show that you have accepted our culture.”

“Some of it with a great deal of enthusiasm,” she murmured provocatively, reaching for him.

He permitted one tantalizing stroke before reluctantly pulling away.

“Later, my Anna. I do not wish to make a bad situation worse by being late to our meeting.”

“Fine. But tonight I get to touch you all I want.”

“An excellent plan,” he agreed, bending down for a last quick kiss before disappearing back through the connecting doors..

She smiled after him but despite the early hour she was no longer sleepy and climbed out of bed. Louisa was still asleep and she shook her head when she saw that Tagret had joined her. She hoped it was because of his concern for her daughter and not because his mother had left him alone again.

After making a pot of tea, she carried it out onto the balcony, enjoying the quiet stillness of the early hour until she heard a knock on the door. Had Mongat returned? It was unlike him to knock, but she hurried to the door anyway and found Maelin outside, tears trickling down her cheeks.

“Oh my goodness, Maelin, what’s wrong?”

“Everything.”

A comprehensive if not helpful answer, she thought dryly as she urged the girl inside and made her a cup of tea.

“Can you be a little more specific?” she asked gently as Maelin sipped her tea.

“It’s Lunta. I love him.”

“That was fast.” Although not really surprising given the way they’d looked at each other.

“We both just knew. But it’s impossible.”

“I don’t understand. Why is it impossible?”

“Because my marriage is already arranged.”

“You’ll just have to tell him you can’t go through with it. I know it will be hard but-”

“It won’t make any difference. The marriage agreement is a legally binding contract. I could be jailed for breaking it.”

Anna stared at her in shock. When Mongat had mentioned the Federation’s objections to their laws, it had been in the context of work contracts. She hadn’t realized that they extended to personal relationships as well.

“Neither one of you can break the agreement?”

“He can, but he won’t. He paid my father a great deal of money in exchange.”

“Your father sold you?”

This was just getting worse and worse. Maelin twisted her hands together nervously.

“It’s considered an honor to assist one’s family.”

“Right. And I’m sure that male members of the family would also be honored to be sold to the highest bidder,” she snapped, pacing along the balcony in her agitation.

How could she have missed this type of behavior in her studies of Thaima? And how could Mongat permit such things?

“I truly wouldn’t have minded if I hadn’t met Lunta. But now...”

The tears started to flow again, and she sighed, patting the girl’s hand soothingly.

“I’ll talk to Mongat,” she promised.

“Oh no. He’ll be so angry.”

“I don’t think he will be.” *I hope.* “But this isn’t the best time. We should wait until after the delegation leaves.”

Maelin nodded, but she looked just as hopeless. She clearly didn’t believe that anything would change.

“Just be patient, Maelin.”

Hoping to distract the girl, she changed the subject to the appropriate clothing for an afternoon tea. It seemed to work. Maelin had several suggestions which Umanda added to when she joined them. In addition to her clothing, they reviewed the finer points of Thaiman etiquette with her.

By the time she left after lunch, she felt as ready as it was possible to be. Mongat had sent one of his guards to escort her to the shaded garden where the event was being held. Small tables were scattered about the space, lush with native flowers and overflowing with Thaiman delicacies.

The guard announced her in a deep, sonorous voice and she saw Mongat start towards her. Before he could reach her, a pair of big furry arms wrapped around her enthusiastically.

“Anna! What a delightful surprise.”

“Edwar,” she said faintly.

Her brief excursion into diplomatic circles had been as Edwar’s date. Over his shoulder she saw Mongat stalking towards them, his face as dark as the sky during that terrible

storm and just as threatening. This was not going to be pleasant.

CHAPTER 13



One of the annoying males from the delegation had his hands on Mongat's female? *Unacceptable.*

As soon as he reached them, he snatched Anna back against his side.

"She is mine," he snarled.

He felt Anna stiffen even as the male raised an eyebrow.

"She doesn't belong to anyone."

"She belongs to me," he repeated even though Anna had not echoed the sentiment, which only annoyed him more.

They were also receiving a good deal of attention from his own people but he didn't care. They would have to know sooner or later - why not now?

"She doesn't appear to be in agreement," the other male said slowly. "Why don't you let her go?"

"You dare to come into my kingdom and tell me what to do?"

"You have applied to become a member of the Federation and under our rules, you cannot hold someone captive against her will."

"I'm not restraining her against her will, am I?"

When he looked down, she was staring up at him, her face unusually pale.

"Anna? Are you all right?"

“No. I want to speak to you. In private,” she added when the irritating male started to speak.

Ignoring him, he immediately guided her to one of the small cabanas that were arranged around the edge of the garden, closing the curtains to shield them from view.

“What is the matter, my Anna?”

“The matter is that I have no interest in being claimed by anyone,” she hissed, and his stomach dropped. “Especially not someone who has no respect for the women of his planet.”

“Why would you say such a thing?” he demanded. “Have I ever treated you with less than respect?”

“Maybe not,” she conceded. “But I was referring to those awful marriage contracts. How can you permit them to continue?”

He winced, suddenly understanding her anger. The contracts were a long-standing tradition that had developed as a way of bringing warring tribes together through marriage.

“They are part of our culture - and equally binding on both parties.”

“But it’s barbaric. Maelin is supposed to marry someone because her father was paid? And her betrothed won’t even let her break the contract? That’s... that’s... archaic.”

He frowned at her.

“She does not wish to marry her chosen mate? Lord Martal is a good male.”

“He may be, but she loves the doctor.”

“They have only just met.”

Despite his protest, his uneasiness increased.

“Sometimes it happens that way. You just know.” She shot a quick glance at him, but continued before he could respond. “Do you have any idea how hard this is for her? To be bound to a contract that will separate her from the male she loves? What’s the point of all the technology the Federation offers if your society is still tied to the past?”

“You may be correct,” he admitted. “It may be time that we changed some of our more outdated practices.”

She took a deep breath, the worst of the tension easing from her face at his agreement. However, despite that agreement, he was well aware that changing the laws would be a difficult task. The marriage contracts were a long-standing tradition which had been codified into law precisely because they had been so important in bringing their society together.

But he had guests and such discussions would have to wait for another day.

“Are you ready to return to the others now?”

“Yes.” She crossed her arms and glared at him. “As long as you’re not going to start acting like a caveman and claiming me again.”

“You did not object last night.”

“That was different. It was a private moment between the two of us.”

His back stiffened.

“And you did not mean it?”

“Of course, I meant it but there is a difference between thinking you belong with someone and thinking that you own someone.”

He sighed and took her hands. “I don’t think I own you, but if another male challenges me for your attention, my instincts will always demand that I claim you.”

“Edwar wasn’t challenging you. We were just previously acquainted.”

“How well acquainted?”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Since it was in the past, I’m not sure that’s any of your business. Have I demanded details about all of your previous lovers?”

“You mean you were lovers?”

“No,” she snapped, then gave him an exasperated look. “We dated briefly not long after I first came to Samar Prime. He frequently needed a guest for a diplomatic function and I found the functions interesting. But we were never more than friends. Not that you really needed to know all that.”

“You are very attractive when you are angry,” he murmured, his anger replaced by relief. “Your eyes sparkle and your breasts move most temptingly beneath this very pretty sabai.”

She shook her head, her cheeks flushing, but her nipples beaded beneath the silk and he couldn't resist tugging at them gently.

“This is not the time or place,” she said severely but the reprimand was lessened by the fact that she leaned into his touch as she spoke.

“I don't know. That bench looks very sturdy.”

Her eyes widened.

“But we're surrounded by people.”

He shrugged. “If you could manage to restrain those delightful little noises you make, no one would have any reason to suspect what was happening. And even if they did, no one would dare to interrupt the king.”

She gave an outraged gasp, but she didn't pull away, searching his face intently.

“You're teasing me. Aren't you?”

“Perhaps.”

He wasn't entirely sure. It had started that way but after her previous rejection, there was something undeniably appealing about reestablishing his claim on her, even if they were surrounded by people. Unfortunately, his duties had to take precedence.

“I suppose we'd better not,” he conceded. “Shall we rejoin our guests?”

He saw her give him a questioning look at his words, but she merely nodded and let him escort her back into the courtyard,

giving Edwar a small smile. The male's eyebrows rose but he inclined his head politely, and Mongat did his best not to react, more restrained now that Anna's hand was tucked safely in his arm.

He even managed not to snarl when the male suggested that he and Anna meet and catch up. She gave Edwar a polite but non-committal answer and they moved on. Despite the initial disruption, the rest of the tea progressed smoothly. As he had hoped, her intelligence and humor charmed everyone she met. The Federation leader actually thanked him when it was over.

"The young woman was a most informative and gracious hostess," Carlan said, somewhat begrudgingly. "She is a member of your household?"

"Yes."

He didn't provide any further details and Carlan didn't ask any additional questions.

They even received less speculative glances from his own people than he'd expected. Perhaps she'd been right, he thought, remembering her claim that everyone would assume they were involved because he'd put her and Louisa in his mother's rooms. Or should he move them into his own quarters now? The thought pleased him immensely, but he decided it might be better to wait until after the negotiations were over.

After the tea, they walked back to her suite together.

"People are watching us," she murmured quietly.

"People are always watching me."

"Yes, but now they're watching me too!"

"Unless you wish to be - what was it you said? Ah yes, a dirty little secret - then you will have to get used to it."

She gave him a disgruntled look.

"You're very arrogant, you know."

He shrugged.

“It goes with the territory. My people expect to see a confident king.”

They’d reached the door to her rooms, but he paused. “Do you have any plans for dinner?”

“Not really. Do you need me for something?”

“I always need you, my Anna, but I was thinking we might enjoy a quiet meal here with Louisa and Tagret.”

“You don’t have an official dinner you have to attend?”

“There is an official dinner, but I don’t believe I need to attend. I would rather have dinner here and watch the sunset with you. And after the children have gone to bed, I will show you the stars.”

“Oh.”

He watched her eyes widen, then darken with heat.

“Yes. Yes, I would like that. Very much.”

“Then I shall see you at sunset.”

“I can’t wait.”

She stood on her toes to press a kiss against his lips, her hand caressing his chest before she slipped inside, leaving him impatient for the sun to set.

He spent the remainder of the afternoon working, reviewing the reports on the new farming equipment, and making the final arrangements for tomorrow’s meetings with the Federation delegation. But when his wrist com buzzed, he gladly abandoned his work and went to have dinner with his family.

CHAPTER 14



Anna cast a nervous look over her shoulder as she hurried down the corridor.

I'm not doing anything wrong, she assured herself but she knew Mongat wouldn't approve. However, she also knew how worried he was about the delegation and this seemed like an ideal opportunity to gather additional information. Since Umada already knew where the delegation was housed, it had been a simple process to locate Edwar.

She knocked tentatively on his door, but it opened almost immediately and he grinned at her, revealing a set of impressive fangs. Like Mrs. B., he was Gallian, his body covered with short dense fur, but despite his fearsome appearance, he had a kind heart and a great sense of humor. She liked him a lot - just not romantically.

"Have you escaped?"

"It's not like that and you know it."

His expression turned serious.

"Are you sure? Because if you need help, I will make sure you and Louisa get safely off the planet."

"I'm sure, but it's sweet of you to offer. Aren't you going to invite me in?" she added with another look down the corridor.

"Of course. Come in."

Edwar and the rest of the delegation were housed in the state apartments. He had an impressive suite, but it didn't feel as comfortable or as welcoming as her rooms.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked politely.

“Yes, please.”

She fiddled nervously with the gilt fringe on a cushion as she waited and when he placed the tea in front of her, he gave her a discerning look.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re really here? I doubt it’s to reminisce about old times.”

“You’re right, although I really would like to catch up. I want to know how the evaluation is going,” she burst out.

He didn’t seem surprised, taking a sip of his tea and regarding her thoughtfully over the rim.

“I’m not really supposed to discuss it, but I don’t think your security clearance was ever revoked.”

Because their dates involved diplomatic events, she’d had to be evaluated as a potential risk. She wasn’t actually sure if her clearance was still active but if Edwar wasn’t going to question it, neither was she.

“To answer your question, it’s a very close call. Of the seven members of the delegation, two are firmly opposed and two are in favor. I would have added Carlan to those who were opposed, but apparently you impressed him.”

“And where do you stand?”

He hesitated, looking down at his cup.

“I’m undecided. I see the potential, of course, but a hereditary monarchy? It’s not my preferred form of government, although that is ultimately up to the people of Thaima. I also have concerns about some of their laws.”

“I understand that, but this is an ideal time to make some changes and I believe Mongat wants to make them. It’s just better to... guide him rather than make demands and expect him to obey.”

“AND YOU WANT MY HELP IN THAT GUIDANCE?”

She blushed, then nodded.

“Yes. He - they - are a proud people. I’m trying to determine the best way of assisting him - them - without causing offense.”

“Very wise,” he agreed. “But you understand I am not permitted to give any direct assistance.”

“I don’t want you to do that. I just want enough information so I suggest some... appropriate actions. I’m afraid Mongat is used to being in charge and it can be difficult to convince him that there is more than one solution to a problem.”

“It’s not uncommon when someone has this much responsibility, especially if they care about their people,” Edwar agreed. “I’m sure you’re right that he can be guided. He seems quite taken with you,” he added, his eyes twinkling.

She blushed again, cursing the pale skin that showed her emotions so clearly.

“It’s complicated - for both of us - but we... like each other a lot. That’s why I’m trying to find a solution. He really wants Thaima to become part of the Federation.”

“What sort of solutions are you looking for?”

“It’s the contracts,” she burst out. “Mongat has made it clear that he is willing to modify them, but Thaima isn’t ready for that type of change yet. It will take time.”

“I have heard the same thing,” Edwar said thoughtfully. “Perhaps there is a way of doing it in stages. A grace period, perhaps.”

“Do you think that would work?”

“It might. The technology that the Federation can provide might also be an incentive. We do understand that change does not happen overnight - it is most important that a planet be open to those changes. And to follow through on them,” he added, a faint note of warning in his voice.

“I understand. And Mongat does as well. I just wish the delegation could see that.”

“It would be helpful if he could show some indication that he is open to change.” He tapped his claws against the table for a

moment. “He has done an excellent job of showcasing Thaiman culture. Do you think he could also demonstrate his appreciation for Federation culture?”

“What about another social event? One based more on Federation standards?”

“That might work. At least it would show the delegation that he is open to change and they might be willing to allow more latitude on how those changes can be implemented.”

“Thank you for the suggestion,” she said sincerely.

“Just remember that I am not guaranteeing it will be successful.”

“I understand, but it’s still worth a try.”

“Good.” He rose to escort her to the door as she put down her cup. “And perhaps next time we can have a less... serious discussion?”

She laughed.

“I hope so. Goodbye, Edwar, and thanks again.”

As she hurried back to her rooms, she started considering options - as well as the best way to make the suggestion to Mongat. The opportunity came sooner than she expected.

After they finished dinner, they played a board game with the children. The pieces were small brightly colored models of the ships that had traversed Thaiman waters. It was one of the children’s favorite games, although it had taken her a while to understand the rules. Tagret was the first to bring his ship safely to port, smiling happily as he claimed the win.

“I bet I could have arrived even faster with a spaceship,” he said excitedly, his eyes still shining, and she saw Mongat give him a thoughtful look.

Despite the children’s protests, they eventually got them calmed down and into bed. Since Lady Thaina had gone to Burmak - without Mongat - Tagret was officially staying with her. As soon as they were alone, Mongat drew her into his arms and kissed her. She went willingly, sighing happily as his arms closed around her.

“I missed you today,” she murmured. “The children did too.”

“I missed you too. I’m glad that the children seem to have recovered well.”

“It’s amazing how quickly they bounce back. Thank you for staying with us last night.”

“It was where I belonged.”

She rewarded him with a kiss, and he smiled down at her.

“How was your afternoon?”

“It was very productive,” she said, trying to sound casual, and his eyes narrowed.

“Is there something you wish to tell me, my Anna?”

“Well, since you mention it, I did have a chat with Edwar this afternoon.”

His eyes went black and a low growl rumbled from his throat.

“You spoke with him?”

“I was only there for a few minutes,” she said quickly.

“Did you have a reason for seeing him or did you just miss the sight of his face?”

She rolled her eyes.

“You are being ridiculous.”

He pulled away, offense in every line of his body.

“I disagree.”

“I went to see him because I wanted to know what the delegation thinks.”

“You could have asked me,” he snapped.

“No, I couldn’t. You’re far too biased. But the good news is that Edwar said he is undecided, and several of the other delegates are as well. There will have to be changes to the law,” she said gently, “But he thinks the Federation would be willing to allow those to take place over time as long as they see some indication that Thaima is open to change.”

Although he was still clearly annoyed, he didn't immediately reject her argument.

"What type of indication?"

"He thought that you might impress them by having an event based more on Federation customs."

"And what exactly is a Federation-style event?"

"We could incorporate Federation music and dress, and perhaps arrange for the children to give a presentation."

He frowned. "And they would not see it as a weakness?"

"No, because they have already seen Thaiman culture. It is an opportunity to show that you - we - are open to change."

"If I agree, I would put you in charge of the event," he said slowly. "It would require a considerable amount of work, although my resources would be at your disposal. And there wouldn't be much time. The delegation is scheduled to leave in another ten days."

Her stomach fluttered nervously, but she nodded.

"Then a week from tomorrow would be an excellent time."

"Indeed. Are you sure about this, my Anna?"

"I can't guarantee it will make any difference," she said honestly, echoing Edwar's warning. "But I think it's worth trying."

"Very well. You may make the arrangements."

"Thank you."

She threw her arms around his neck and he smiled down at her.

"You're welcome, although I'm not entirely happy about it. And I still don't like the idea of you speaking to Edwar alone."

She gave him an exasperated look, but his arms tightened around her.

"However," he growled, his eyes suddenly gleaming. "You have pleased your king, and a king should always reward his people. Especially the ones who are closest to him."

His lips captured hers in a kiss that sent all of her rational thoughts fleeing. When he finally lifted his head, his eyes were dark and possessive.

“I believe it is time for bed, my Anna.”

“I am rather tired,” she teased, but her voice was too breathless to be convincing..

He laughed and swept her up in his arms. He carried her into the bedroom but instead of stopping there, he continued through the connecting doors and into his bedroom. Not unexpectedly, it was a magnificent room. The front wall was a long curved colonnade that opened onto a flower-decked balcony overlooking the sea. An enormous bed dominated the back wall, draped with colorful silk curtains, heavily embroidered with a rich display of Thaiman plants and flowers.

She expected him to carry her directly to the bed, but instead he set her back down on her feet, then buried his fingers in her hair, holding her in place for his kiss. Her fingers tightened on his shoulders, trying to keep her balance as he ravished her mouth. When he finally raised his head, she was breathless and trembling, her body aching for more.

“I want to watch you,” he murmured, stepping back.

“Watch me?”

“Remove your clothes. I like the pretty things you wear, my Anna, but I like you naked better.”

He sprawled lazily on a nearby couch in regal splendor, but his eyes dark with passion.

“Aren’t you going to undress?” she protested, and he gave her a slow wicked smile.

“After you.”

Her cheeks heated, but the game appealed to her. Her fingers trembled slightly as she slowly unwrapped the sabai to reveal her breasts, her nipples tightening under the intensity of her his gaz.

“I love your breasts,” he growled. “So soft and full and perfect. Now the skirt.”

She obeyed, unwrapping the skirt and letting it flutter to the ground so she stood naked before him. His gaze trailed over her, so heated that it was almost palpable. Her nipples hardened even more and a low pulse of desire started between her legs.

“Touch yourself, Anna. Make yourself ready for me.”

She swallowed hard and parted her legs, reaching down to stroke through her slick folds. As she touched her swollen clit, she gasped, and he gripped his cock, echoing her movements.

“Now those pretty nipples. Imagine my mouth there.”

Her other hand moved to her breast, rolling and tugging on her nipples until they were throbbing with need.

“Now slide a finger inside that sweet little cunt.”

She shuddered as she obeyed, her fingers sliding through her wetness before her channel tightened desperately around her fingers.

“Now add another.”

His eyes never left her, his breath growing increasingly heavy as she added another finger, gasping at the increased stretch.

“Good. Now taste your sweetness.”

His voice was rough, his eyes fixed on her hand. She licked her fingers and a small sound of approval rumbled from his chest.

“I think you’re ready. Come here.”

She went eagerly, standing in front of him and waiting as he unwrapped his pants, letting his erection spring free, looking even larger than she remembered.

“Straddle me.”

She swung a leg awkwardly across his thighs, and he groaned as she brushed against his cock.

“Put your hands on the couch.”

She did, bracing herself as his big hands closed around her waist and lifted her easily. He lowered her slowly onto his thick shaft, his cock stretching her, the tip swirling inside her and adding to her excitement. His hands easily supported her, that dark intense gaze watching her until their bodies finally touched and she was so full she could barely breathe.

“Mongat!”

“Ride me, Anna. Take your pleasure.”

She did, moving slowly at first and then more rapidly. She was so close, her orgasm coiling tighter and tighter inside her. His cock thickened, his fingers digging into her waist as he thrust up against her, the motion driving her towards release.

“Come for me, my Anna. Show me how much you like my cock inside you.”

“Oh god, oh god, oh god.”

Her words were a chant, her breath coming in ragged pants as the pleasure spiraled higher and higher.

“Now Anna. I want to feel your tight cunt milking my seed.”

With a final desperate cry, her climax crashed over her, the room spinning dizzily in the wash of sensation. His cock pulsed inside her, adding to her pleasure as she clung to him until her body finally relaxed. He cradled her against him, the beat of his heart gradually slowing beneath her ear, and she smiled.

“That was wonderful.”

“It was,” he agreed, kissing her forehead as she yawned.

She murmured a sleepy protest as he gently lifted her free, then carried her to his bed at last.

“Will you be here when I wake up?”

“I will,” he promised. “I will see if I can find the best way to wake you.”

“I’m sure you can think of something.”

“I’m certain of it.”

“Good,” she sighed, already half asleep and he laughed.

“Sweet dreams, my Anna.”

“You too.”

It was the last thing she remembered.

CHAPTER 15



A week later, Mongat stood outside the entrance to the ballroom, tugging at his collar. His outfit was a carefully chosen combination of Thaiman and Federation formal dress, but he still found it confining and annoying. His annoyance wasn't helped by the fact that it had been a difficult week. The delegation had been somewhat more receptive during their meetings, but it was a constant struggle to negotiate the line between their demands and the concessions he was willing to make.

It also hadn't helped that Anna had been just as busy working on the ball any time she wasn't teaching. He hadn't been able to spend as much time with her and the children as he would have liked. At least she was in his bed every night. And every morning, he thought, his lips curving as he remembered the creative passion she'd used to awaken him that day.

He also wished she were with him now, but he'd reluctantly agreed to enter alone.

"Everyone is assembled, your majesty," Krala announced, and he gestured for the guards to open the doors to the ballroom.

The room had been transformed - the open columns along the edge draped with long gold silk curtains that fluttered gently in the soft breeze from the ocean. The elegant flower arrangements on the pillars in front of each column were also in shades of gold and white, while small lights glittered overhead, arranged to mimic the constellations surrounding Samar Prime.

“Mongat, Supreme Ruler of Thaima, Son of Hysan, Beloved of Zylortha, and Guardian of the Fading Isles.”

His steward’s voice echoed through the vast ballroom as the assembled company turned and bowed. Their clothes were unfamiliar, but their faces were not and he moved through the room with the ease of long experience, greeting as many of his guests as possible. As he exchanged polite greetings, he searched for Anna amongst the crowd.

He found her at last, wearing a long blue silk brocade dress ornamented with gold lace. He preferred her in the simple - and easily removed - Thaiman clothing but he couldn’t deny it was a flattering ensemble, highlighting her lush curves. His appreciative smile turned to a frown as he realized she was standing next to the Gallian male.

Edwar had proven to somewhat of an unexpected ally over the past week, frequently stepping in when the conversation became tense, but Mongat still didn’t like seeing him so close to his female and he made his way towards them with somewhat more haste than was strictly seemly.

“Your highness.” The Gallian male bowed to precisely the correct degree.

“Edwar. Thank you for coming,” he said coolly before turning to Anna.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

“You look stunning, my Anna.”

“I’m glad you like it.” She smoothed her hand down over the heavy skirt. “It’s Thaiman silk of course, embroidered with the Royal Crest.”

“It is almost as beautiful as its wearer.”

She blushed and gave him a quick, shy smile as the musicians began to play and he held out his hand.

“Shall we dance?”

She bit her lip, then nodded and took his hand as he led her out on the dance floor. No one else would dance until he began

and everyone was watching as he placed his hand on her waist and the music began.

“Just pretend we are back on the beach,” he said quietly and felt her body soften beneath his hand before he swept her into the dance.

He was vaguely aware of the watching eyes and the distant murmur of the crowd, but the only thing that mattered was the female in his arms. She moved with him, dancing as easily as if they had been together their entire lives, as if they were parts of the same whole, incomplete without each other.

The music changed and more couples began to fill the dance floor but he ignored them, continuing through two more dances before finally, reluctantly, escorting her off the floor. Her cheeks were flushed, her breath coming rapidly, but he didn't believe it was from the exertion of dancing. His Anna was aroused and he wanted nothing more than to sweep her away from the crowd and worship her sweet body until she cried out her pleasure.

Instead they went to greet Carlan, who gave Anna a beaming smile.

“Quite delightful, my dear. You are an excellent dancer.”

He couldn't decide whether to be amused or annoyed that the other male had completely ignored his participation.

“I trust you will honor me with a dance as well,” the male continued.

Anna squeezed his arm gently when he tensed - she had already warned him that she would be dancing with others although that didn't make the thought any more palatable.

“Of course, your excellency. I would be honored.”

He reluctantly released her as the pompous bore took her hand, continuing his round of greetings while doing his best to also keep an eye on the dance floor. His mood didn't improve as she went from Carlan to another partner and then another. It was almost a relief when Krala stepped into his path.

“I apologize for interrupting, sire, but there is a matter requiring your attention.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” he murmured to the noble he’d been speaking with, then followed Krala to a quiet corner.

“What is it?”

“I have discovered a discrepancy in the records. I believe you should review them.”

“Very well.”

He’d been hoping to get away with spending the rest of the evening with Anna but he knew that Krala wouldn’t have interrupted him if it wasn’t important. The steward handed him a holo tablet and his breath caught when he saw the first entry.

“Are you certain this is accurate?”

“I am. I have already spoken to the guards involved, and they are prepared to swear an oath to that effect.”

He scrolled down the screen, his temper rising.

“Why did you not speak to me about this before?”

“I wished to be certain that I had all the facts before bringing it to your attention. But now, in light of the Federation’s concerns, I thought you should be informed immediately.”

He couldn’t fault the logic, even though his temper continued to simmer.

“Thank you, Krala. Please continue your investigation and report to me in the morning.”

“Yes, sire.”

The male bowed and left and he went to find Anna.

She was still surrounded by admiring males, and his temper flared even hotter at their eager gazes, even though she smiled at him as he approached.

“Do you want to dance again?”

“No. Come with me,” he said harshly, and she stared at him.

Fortunately for his temper, she didn't argue with him. She only excused herself politely and tucked her hand in his arm as he led her away.

"Where are we going?"

"My study."

"But -"

"We will return to the ball in a few minutes. But there is something I need to show you."

The guards snapped to attention as they passed and he waited until the door had closed behind them before he spoke.

"There is a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"Krala has just discovered some disturbing information."

He handed her the tablet and watched her face pale as she read it.

"You didn't know?" he confirmed, breathing an internal sigh of relief when she immediately shook her head.

"Of course not. I would never betray you. Never! But I don't understand. Why would someone be bribing the guards in the private wing?"

She paced angrily in front of the desk as he watched her.

"And you're certain you knew nothing about it?"

"You can't really believe that."

She looked devastated, her voice wobbling, and the last of his anger dissipated.

"I did not wish to, but the timing is... unfortunate." The incidents had not occurred until after she'd arrived. "But Krala is continuing to investigate."

"I hope he finds him."

"Or her," he said, and she scowled.

"I doubt it. No woman would do this."

“You would be surprised, my Anna. Some of the most dangerous assassins are female. But no matter who is behind this, we will put an end to it. Now, let’s go and enjoy the rest of the ball.”

Her face cleared and she took his hand, giving him a mischievous smile.

“But I suppose I could give you a reward for telling me about it.”

“What type of reward?”

“Wouldn’t you like to be surprised?”

He didn’t like surprises. But the idea of being rewarded was intriguing, especially if it involved his Anna.

“Very well.”

He escorted her back to the ballroom and did his best to put the discovery behind him. Fortunately, she was by his side most of the evening. He was proud to see the admiring looks she received, the way the other males were drawn to her, but no one attempted to monopolize her attention and the only person who touched her was him.

When the celebration came to an end, he carried her back to his bedroom and she showed him exactly how much she appreciated his faith in her.

CHAPTER 16



The following morning Anna huddled in the garden below her rooms, pressing her hand to her mouth as she fought back the sobs. Other than the disturbing news about the bribery, the evening had progressed even better than she'd hoped. How could things have changed so quickly?

Mongat had left before daybreak with a quick kiss and a promise to see her later. His voice had been warm, loving, and she'd smiled as she drifted back to sleep.

But then not long after she'd had breakfast with Louisa, two guards had appeared to escort her to Mongat. They'd been polite but implacable and she'd given them a startled glance as she said goodbye to her daughter.

"Is everything all right, Mama?" Louisa whispered as she looked at the stern-faced guards.

"I'm sure it is, sweetheart. I'll be back soon."

An uneasy feeling crept down her spine as they escorted her to Mongat's study, but she started to relax at the sight of his familiar figure behind the big desk. Then he raised his head and her heart sank. His eyes were glittering like black diamonds, angrier than she'd ever seen him.

"I trusted you," he hissed.

"Why wouldn't you?" she asked cautiously.

"Because of this."

He spun the monitor around to face her, and she watched in shock as Maelin and Lunta, crept out through a concealed door

in the palace wall that ran from the private wing down to the beach.

“I don’t understand. Where are they going?”

“Don’t play innocent with me. I know you’re responsible for this.”

“What? How can you even think that?”

“Because Krala found out this morning that it was a female who bribed the guards - and specifically for this purpose.” His anger started to fade, replaced by pain and exhaustion. “But it will make no difference. They will be found. And now that Maelin has openly violated the law, she will be arrested.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I can and I will. Whatever you think of our laws, they are still our laws and I cannot allow them to be violated with impunity.” His voice hardened. “You should have thought of that before agreeing to help her.”

“But I didn’t do anything of the kind. I told her to be patient and wait.”

For a moment she thought he would listen to her, but then he shook his head.

“Who else could it have been? She has few other acquaintances in the palace and certainly no close friends. You are the one who has been pleading her case and telling me that the law was wrong. You didn’t even have enough faith in me to allow me time to try and make changes. And now I will have no choice but to act.”

“Please, Mongat. There has to be another solution.”

“No, there isn’t.” He looked down at his hands, his face masked. “I can only hope that when this is over, you will realize the seriousness of your actions.”

She stared at him.

“Over? What do you mean?”

“Your services are no longer required. I am closing down this foolish attempt to modify our educational program. There will

be no further need for a teacher.”

Her heart shattered.

“Don’t do this. Don’t send me away.”

“You are lucky I am not having you arrested.” Despite the harsh words, he looked as devastated as she felt. “You will be escorted back to your suite and confined until I can make arrangements for your departure.”

Despite her aching heart, she gathered her pride around her and raised her chin.

“That won’t be necessary. Louisa and I will leave with the Federation team.”

His eyes turned cold again.

“Of course. I can’t say that I’m surprised. You should know that they will be leaving soon. The negotiations are over.”

“Why?”

“Because they will not accept what I must do. They will leave and we will survive, just as we always have. Perhaps in time Thaima will be ready and Tagret or Tagret’s son will be successful in joining the Federation.”

“You’re wrong,” she said fiercely. “With you as the king, Thaima can be ready. Don’t give up on that.”

“I see no other choice.”

His face had closed and she knew he wouldn’t listen to her.

“Very well,” she said quietly. “Will you say goodbye to Louisa?”

He closed his eyes as he shook his head, the pain on his face reflecting her own, but she had to make him understand what he was doing to all of them.

“You owe her that.”

“I... Yes,” he said at last. “I will come to her before you... leave.”

“Is there anything I can do to fix this?”

“And how would you propose to do that? With more lies?”

“I have never lied to you and I won’t start now. Let me try.”

She swallowed hard and forced herself to meet his eyes. He searched her face for a long time, then sighed.

“Very well. Although I do not see what you can do. I cannot allow either Maelin or Lunta to escape justice.”

“I understand.”

He gave her a short nod, then called for the guards..

“Escort Mistress Anna back to her suite. She is to remain there.”

“Yes, sire,” one of the guards said, his expression carefully neutral.

They marched her silently back to her rooms as she tried to keep her legs from trembling. She wanted nothing more than to give into tears when they took up positions on either side of the door before closing it behind her, but Louisa was waiting, her face anxious.

“Is something wrong, Mama?”

She forced a smile, blinking back the tears.

“Everything is fine, sweetheart. In fact we may be going back to Samar for a visit. Won’t it be nice to see Mrs. B. again?”

Louisa nodded enthusiastically, then suddenly looked uncertain.

“What about Tagret? Is he coming too?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Her daughter scowled, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Then I don’t want to go either.”

“I know you’ll miss him, but you belong with me, sweetheart.”

“And with Tagret,” Louisa said stubbornly. “And Mongat. I’m not going.”

Her daughter stomped her foot and ran out of the room. Anna knew she should go after her, but she also knew she was too

weary and heartsick to convince her daughter that everything was fine. She wandered out on to the balcony, wincing when she caught sight of an unobtrusive movement at the side of the garden. Guards, even here.

She tried to focus on the ocean, to let the gentle rhythm of the waves soothe her aching heart, but it didn't help. Everywhere she looked simply reminded her of Mongat. A tear slipped down her cheek, then another, and she could no longer keep them back.

Afraid that Louisa would find her like that, she hurried blindly down the stairs and collapsed onto a bench partially hidden between two large bushes as sobs shook her body.

The sobs eventually died away, but she couldn't bring herself to move until a gentle hand rested on her shoulder.

"Anna? Are you all right?"

She jerked upright and found Edwar looking down at her worriedly.

"Edwar? What are you doing here?"

"Are you hurt?" he asked urgently, taking her hands and helping her to her feet.

"No."

"What happened?"

"Maelin ran away and Mongat blames me."

"Ah, that explains it. We received a very curt message a short time ago stating that there was no point in further negotiations. That's why I came to see you. To see if you knew what had happened - and also to offer you transport again."

"Thank you," she whispered. "I'm afraid I will have to accept your offer. Mongat has ordered me to leave."

"Foolish male." Edwar frowned at her "But he is clearly under a great deal of pressure. Perhaps in time he will see reason."

She gave him a faint smile.

“I appreciate your concern, but I don’t think Mongat is ever going to change his mind. Not this time.”

He shook his head.

“What a shame. Based on the meeting of the delegates this morning, I believe Thaima would have been approved.”

She would have laughed at the irony if she hadn’t been too sad to do anything but shake her head.

“Who is Maelin and why does he blame you that she ran away?” he asked as they climbed up the stairs to her rooms.

“Maelin is a friend of mine. Her father arranged a marriage for her, but then she fell in love with someone else.”

“But it’s forbidden to break a marriage contract.”

“Exactly. I told her to wait and see if there was anything we could do, but she foolishly decided to run away instead.”

“I agree that it sounds foolish, but I still don’t understand why Mongat blames you.”

She gave him a weary smile.

“Because a female bribed the guards and he assumed it must have been me. It wasn’t but I have to admit I can see why he thought that. I have no idea who else it might have been.”

The living room was still empty with no sign of her daughter and she sighed before looking over at Edwar.

“Do you have a few minutes? I’d like you to meet Louisa again.”

Maybe seeing Edwar would remind her of Mrs. B. and help reconcile her to the trip.

“Of course.”

“I’ll go and get her.”

But her daughter wasn’t in her bedroom or the playroom or Umanda’s room. She was looking under the bed when Umanda returned through the back door.

“It’s Louisa. I can’t find her,” she said desperately. “Where could she be?”

“Tagret.”

They both spoke at the same time. Of course. That had to be it.

“Can you go and check?” she pleaded. “I’m confined to the suite.”

“I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

Umanda gave her a determined nod and disappeared and Anna returned to the living room to find a concerned Edwar.

“What’s wrong?”

“Louisa ran away. She wasn’t happy about the news we were leaving.”

“Is there anything I can do? Organize a search party?”

She hesitated, then shook her head.

“Not yet. I’m pretty sure that she bent to see her best friend.”

Edwar remained with her as she waited for Umanda to return. She couldn’t think if anyone else Louisa would turn to but she still found herself pacing back and forth for what felt like an eternity before Umanda returned, pale and out of breath.

“She wasn’t there. Neither one of them were there.”

Her legs threatened to give out and Edwar reached out to steady her, but she shook him off, heading for the door.

“Take me to the king. Now,” she demanded.

They exchanged a startled look, but she didn’t have time to waste.

“I’m going to see him,” she said fiercely. “You can either come with me or put one of those spears through me because it’s the only way you’re going to stop me.”

“We will accompany you,” the older guard said.

“Good,” she said, and started to run.

CHAPTER 17



Mongat stared unseeingly at his desk. He had work to do, the same unending work, even harder now without the technological support of the Federation, but for the first time since he was a child, he couldn't bring himself to care. All he wanted to do was to go after Anna, to wipe the tears from her beautiful face, and made her promise never to leave him.

How can I send her away?

But how could he live with someone who had betrayed him? He'd found it painful when Thaina had pursued his brother while professing her love for him, but that pain was like pinprick compared to the deep aching wound that threatened to tear him in half.

When Krala had first told him the results of his investigation, he had refused to believe it, but all three of the guards had the same story. They had been approached by a female who had offered them a significant amount of credits if they would avoid specific areas at specific times. She'd been heavily cloaked and they hadn't seen her face but they were all sure of two things - she was female and she was not Thaiman.

"I know it seems impossible, but I don't see who else it could be," Krala said grimly. "Other females may visit Thaima, perhaps even Bangka, but they do not visit the palace."

In the end, he'd had no choice but to believe it, no matter how much his heart insisted that it couldn't be true.

He kept replaying the look on her face at his accusation. She'd seemed so genuinely shocked. He raised his head as a sound disturbed his reverie and stared in disbelief as Anna came flying in, both guards on her heels.

"What are you-"

"Louisa is gone," she snapped, her face desperate. "See if those stupid monitors can be useful for once. Maybe she showed up on one of them."

The thought of that precious child alone and scared made fear race through his veins.

"Check them," he ordered the guards. "Put as many people on it as possible. And tell Krala to start organizing a search party."

"And check for Tagret too," she added. "I think they're together."

Another band of ice crept around his heart, but if anyone could keep Louisa safe it was his nephew.

"I don't understand. Why did she run away?"

"Because I told her we were leaving and she didn't want to go. She didn't want to leave Tagret. Or you," she added bitterly.

"She didn't want to leave me?" he repeated, his voice sounding oddly muffled in his own ears.

"Of course not," she snapped. "She loves you, just like I love you. You're just too stupid and arrogant to accept our love."

"If you love me, then why did you betray me?"

"I didn't!" She stamped her foot, but then her mouth trembled. "But you won't believe me and I have no way of proving it."

He met her eyes, sparkling with indignation as they had the first time they met, and he was suddenly sure.

"You're right. You have no way of proving it, but it doesn't matter. I believe you."

"You do?" she whispered.

“Yes. My heart insisted all along that you would never betray me but because I am as much of a fool as you said and I didn’t listen. I love you - you and Louisa. Can you ever forgive me?”

She choked back a sob and threw herself at him. He gathered her close, the tight band around his heart easing for the first time, despite his fear for their child.

“We have to find Louisa,” she whispered, echoing his thoughts.

“We will.”

He could not consider any other possibility. Perhaps his conviction reached her because she managed a shaky nod, just as one of his guards hurried back in.

“Your majesty, we found something. The image is difficult to see but we have enhanced it as much as possible.”

“Where?” he demanded, as the guard pulled up an image on the monitor.

“There.”

His heart raced as he realized what he was seeing.

“Where is she?”

“There,” he said grimly, pointing to a small group of rocks rising out of the ocean, Louisa and Tagret perched on top. They marked the path to the Holy Isle but the incoming tide would cover them before long.

Her face turned pale and terrified.

“Louisa can’t swim.”

“We’ll reach her first,” he promised, racing for the door. The way to the island was too rocky for a boat to reach the rock until after the tide rose and by then it would be too late. He would have to swim for it.

Anna was far behind by the time he reached the water but he couldn’t wait for her. He cast off his robe and dives into the surf. Thank Hysan, the water was calm today, but even so he could feel the pull of the current as he struck out for the group of rocks still visible above the surface. He was a fast swimmer

but it still seemed to take an eternity before he reached the rocks.

Louisa was perched on the tiny patch of rock that remained above the water, with Tagret in the water beside her.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” his nephew said as Mongat surfaced. “All you have to do is to hold on to me.”

The boy’s voice was calm and confident and Louisa gave a tiny nod even though her lips were trembling.

“I’m scared, Tagret.”

“I know, but I’m here. You trust me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she whispered, managing a shaky smile.

“Good girl,” he said, and both children jerked around and saw him. “Will you trust me as well?”

Water splashed over her knees but those blue eyes, so like her mother’s, studied him.

“The guard said you didn’t want us anymore.”

“He was wrong.” And he would pay for that mistake. “I want you very much - you and your mother. Will you let me take you back to shore before Tagret gets all water-logged?”

That won a quick smile, and to his relief, she nodded.

“Okay.”

“That’s my brave girl. Now just climb on my back and hold on, all right?”

“You’ll be there too?” she asked Tagret.

“I told you I wouldn’t leave you. I’ll be right next to you the whole way.”

And he was, even though Mongat would tell his strength was flagging. He kept his pace slow and steady, a watchful eye on his nephew as Louisa clung to his back. Anna was waiting, pacing anxiously back and forth. As soon as the water was shallow enough for him to stand, she rushed into the water to meet him, snatching Louisa into her arms with a sob.

“Don’t you ever do that to me again,” she sobbed, even as she hugged her daughter.

“I won’t, Mama. I’m sorry,” Louisa whispered.

He helped Tagret stand, even though the boy’s legs shook, and put his arm around his shoulders. Anna did the same from his other side and the four of them walked out of the water together.

LATER THAT EVENING, ANNA CAME OUT OF LOUISA’S BEDROOM after checking on Louisa for the third time in an hour and gave him an apologetic smile.

“I know it’s silly, but I still can’t quite shake the fear that she’s going to disappear again.”

He understood. He’d checked twice himself.

“How is she?” he asked.

“Sleeping. They both are.”

They had been when he checked as well, curled together with Tagret’s arm protectively around Louisa’s shoulders.

He was sitting in the big chair by the window and she came to join him, curling against him with a tired sigh as he put his arm around her.

“Louisa said Tagret refused to leave her.”

“I know. He was telling her he would take her back to shore when I arrived and she believed him.”

“Would they have made it?” she asked.

He hesitated, then shook his head.

“I don’t think so. Despite Tagret’s bravery and determination, he’s still a child. But I know he would have tried for as long as he possibly could and he might have made it.”

She shuddered and snuggled closer.

“There is something we need to discuss,” he said slowly.

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that.”

She leaned back far enough to see his face and he smiled down at her, then took a deep breath.

“You know Tagret is my heir, the next in line for the throne?”

“Of course.”

“And that’s not going to change.”

“Okay?”

He took a deep breath and then covered her stomach with his hand.

“That means even if we are blessed with a child - another child - he won’t be king.”

“Another child?” she whispered, her heart pounding wildly.
“Is that what you want?”

“If you are willing, I would like that very much. And as long as you are not concerned that he would not be the heir.”

“Of course, I’m not concerned. I know Tagret has a mother, but he still feels like our son. He will be a wonderful king. He’s smart, brave, determined -”

“And more intelligent than his uncle?” he asked dryly.

“Maybe a little less arrogant,” she teased, then put her hand over his. “Do you really want a child with me?”

“Very much. And that’s not all I want.”

“No?”

“No, my Anna. I love you. I want you in my life for as long as we both live and, the gods willing, for the rest of eternity. Will you marry me? Will you be my mate?”

She nodded frantically, despite the tears in her eyes.

“Yes! I love you so much.”

He kissed her, a kiss that quickly turned hungry and demanding, and she met it just as eagerly.

“I need you,” she whispered and his cock surged in response.

His hand was already under her sabai, teasing a taut nipple, but he hesitated, glancing over at the children’s bedroom. He rose

to his feet with her in his arms but instead of carrying her into the bedroom, he took her out onto the balcony, to the secluded corner when they had watched the storm approach.

“Hold on to the wall,” he ordered as he placed her back on her feet and she obeyed, looking back over her shoulder at him.

“Why - oh!”

She clutched the wall as stripped away her skirt to reveal her plump, delicious ass. He ran his hands over the silky skin and then between her legs, growling his approval when he found her wet and ready.

“I can’t wait, my Anna. I must have you now.”

“Yes, please. Now,” she moaned, arching her back to lift her ass invitingly.

His cock surged free and he gripped her hips, driving into her wet, silken channel with one powerful stroke, and shuddering as his cock swirled inside her. She cried out, her sweet little cunt clenching around him, and he began to thrust into her, his hands gripping her soft flesh to hold her firmly in place. He plunged harder, faster, and she matched him thrust for thrust, pushing back eagerly to take his cock even deeper.

“Come for me, Anna. I want to feel your tight little cunt squeezing my cock.”

His words sent her over the edge, squeezing him deliciously as he let himself follow, his cock gripping her cervix as he pumped his seed deep inside her and she shuddered in his arms

When the last ripples faded, he wrapped his arms around her, resting his chin on her shoulder and breathing in her sweet scent.

“I love you, my Anna.”

“I love you, too,” she whispered back.

“And you will marry me.”

It was a demand rather than a question and she smiled as she turned to face him.

“Yes, my arrogant love. I will marry you.”

He laughed and reluctantly slipped free, then picked her up and carried her to the bedroom where he proceeded to demonstrate how much he loved her all over again.

CHAPTER 18



The sun on Anna's face woke her and she stretched lazily. A big hand pulled her closer and then Mongat rolled over her, his skin gleaming blue in the morning light.

“Good morning, my Anna.”

“You're still here.”

He shrugged.

“Now that I no longer have to worry about meeting with the delegation, I will have a little more time. Only a little,” he added as he bent down to nuzzle her neck. “But It's important to take advantage of these opportunities.”

“Very important,” she agreed breathlessly as he sucked lightly on the sensitive curve.

His heavy cock moved against her stomach as her body started to respond and she tugged him closer for a kiss. Just as they lips touched someone knocked on the outer door and he sighed.

“A very brief opportunity.”

She watched appreciatively as he climbed out of bed and wrapped his pants back in place. He stalked out into the other room, and after a brief hesitation, she got up as well. Now that she was awake she wanted to check on the children again. She pulled on a robe and followed him into the living room, coming to a halt when she saw Edwar and a female she

recognized as one of the other delegates standing just inside the door. What were they doing here?

Every muscle in Mongat's back had tensed, and she hurried over to put a soothing hand on his back.

"Is something wrong?"

"Tell her," Mongat demanded.

Edward gave her an apologetic look as he nudged the female next him, an older female with pale lavender skin and darker purple hair streaked with white.

"I bribed the guards," she said defiantly, and Anna stared at her.

"I don't understand. Why?"

"Because that girl deserved a chance - they all do. No one should be forced to marry."

"She had a choice," Mongat said, his teeth clenched. "Right up until the time she signed the marriage contract."

"Wait a minute. She didn't have to sign it?"

Maelin had left that part out.

"Of course no. We are not barbarians, no matter what anyone seems to think. But once she signed, it became a binding contract."

"Not anymore." The female cackled. "They're off the planet and out of your reach now."

She couldn't help a sigh of relief, even though she knew very well how difficult it was to leave everything you know behind.

Edwar cleared his throat.

"I have discussed this matter with the rest of the delegates and under the circumstances, and considering that we had already agreed that Thaima should be admitted to the Federation, we are willing to proceed. If that is still what you wish?"

He raised an eyebrow at Mongat who had frozen in place. She hoped desperately he would be able to overcome his wounded

pride and agree. She held her breath until he finally gave a short abrupt nod.

“I agree. There were mistakes on both sides.”

His arm slid around her waist and she leaned against him with a sigh of relief, then smiled at Edwar.

“Are you leaving right away? Perhaps you can return for the wedding in -”

She stopped as she realized they had never actually discussed a date.

“Which will be a week from now,” Mongat decreed. “You may attend if you wish.”

Edwar grinned at the somewhat begrudging invitation and nodded.

“I would be delighted. And a week will give me time to turn Jeeva over to the appropriate authorities. Come along, Jeeva.”

The female glared at him, but obeyed.

As soon as the door closed behind them, she rounded on Mongat.

“A week? How can we plan a wedding in a week?”

“You planned a ball in the same amount of time, and this will be considerably easier.”

“I doubt it’s as simple as you make out,” she said impatiently. “I don’t even have a dress.”

His eyes glittered as he reached out and teased a suddenly erect nipple.

“Then wear nothing at all. I have no objections.”

“Somehow I doubt that’s true,” she muttered, but she started to sway towards him.

He laughed and pulled her closer but before he could do more than touch his lips to hers, Louisa came racing into the room with Tagret on her heels.

“Mama,” she demanded anxiously. “We’re not leaving now, are we?”

“No, sweetheart, we’re not.”

“See?” Louisa said triumphantly as she turned to Tagret. “I knew we weren’t leaving.”

The boy returned her smile.

“Good. I didn’t want to leave. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.” Louisa grabbed Tagret’s hand, but Mongat put a hand on his nephew’s arm.

“Just a minute.” He kneeled down in front of Louisa, his face solemn. “Your mama and I want to get married. What do you think?”

“Does that mean we’ll be a real family? And you’ll really be my daddy?”

“Yes, sweetheart.”

“I think it’s great.”

Louisa flung her small arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely as he gently wrapped his arms around her, and Anna had to blink back the tears. When Louisa pulled back, she shot Anna a quick speculative look.

“Does that mean I get a new dress?”

“I think we can manage that.”

“Yay! Now I’m really hungry.” She tugged on Tagret’s hand again and this time Mongat let them go.

Anna smiled after them, then looked up at her soon to be husband.

“Did you hear what Tagret said? About not wanting to leave? It almost sounded like...”

“It sounded like if you and Louisa had left, he would have tried to follow you. Thank the gods you didn’t.”

“He’s only nine. Doesn’t it worry you that he’s so... attached?”

He shrugged.

“They are both children. It may change. If it doesn’t, I only hope that he is as happy with his mate as I am.”

He started to pull her close again but she danced away.

“No time for that. I have a wedding to plan.”

“And I suppose I have to prepare for Thaima to become part of the Federation.”

“I’m sure we’ll be much too busy for anything else,” she teased.

“Not even a few minutes for a kiss?” he growled, stalking towards her.

“I suppose I can spare a few minutes for a kiss.”

“I will take whatever you can give me, my Anna,” he said solemnly, and gathered her into his arms for a kiss that lasted much longer than a few minutes.

A WEEK LATER, ANNA STOOD BAREFOOT ON THE DAMP SAND, nervously clutching a bouquet of flowers. As impossible as it seemed, with a lot of help from Umanda and a surprising number of other royal females, she’d managed to get everything completed for the wedding.

Mongat’s only request was that the wedding take place on the Holy Isle - the place where kings had been married for as long as anyone could remember. The sun was setting and a long line of torches led out across the sand before curling up the island to the altar at the top. It was a long walk, but the knowledge that he would be waiting for her was all the incentive she needed.

Her clothes whispered in the evening breeze, floating around her. She had chosen a traditional Thaiman dress, much like the ones she wore every day, but both the sabai and the skirt were composed of multiple layers of almost translucent white silk each one slightly different. Louisa’s outfit was similar, except they’d limited it to only two layers, both in her favorite pink.

“It’s a long way, Mama,” Louisa said nervously. “The water won’t come will it?”

“No, sweetheart.”

“And I’ll be with you,” Tagret said, emerging from the gathering darkness to take Louisa’s hand. She smiled happily at him, her fears vanishing.

If only Anna’s nerves could dissipate so rapidly.

“And I’ll be with you,” Mongat said, appearing next to her.

He too was dressed in white embroidered with gold, and he looked so magnificent that her heart skipped a beat.

“But you’re supposed to be up there.”

She pointed to the summit of the Holy Isle and he shrugged.

“I will be. I just choose to reach it with you at my side. Are you ready, my Anna?”

She took a deep breath, then took his hand, and smiled up at him.

‘I’m ready.’”

And together they followed the line of torches into the promise of the future.

EPILOGUE



As soon as the doors to his quarters closed behind him, Mongat allowed himself a tired sigh. It had been a long and frustrating day, but he was slowly and surely continuing to drag Thaima into the modern world. Not for the first time he wistfully considered how much easier it would be just to order his subjects to comply. But Anna had been right, part of that modern world was allowing them some autonomy.

As Edwar had also said, he thought with a reluctant smile. Although he had come to value the other male's advice - perhaps even to consider him something of a friend - Edwar still irritated him. No doubt because he'd had the temerity to pursue Anna's affections.

Without success, he reminded himself as he went to find his mate. Not surprisingly, she was on her favorite perch on the balcony overlooking the sea. He walked up behind her and slid his arms around the swollen mound of her stomach as he bent down to nuzzle her neck and breathe in her scent. She hummed her approval, tilting her head to allow him greater access.

"How was your day, love?" she asked.

"It would have been better if you were at my side. But I stand by my decision," he added when she started to respond. He had insisted that she limit her official duties as much as possible as she approached the last months of her pregnancy, and now that she was in her last month, her teaching had also been restricted to no more than supervisory - at least in theory. She still had an unfortunate tendency to become too involved

in the children's activities. She hadn't liked the restrictions, but she'd been forced to admit that she tired much more easily these days.

"As much as I enjoy your presence, I am happier knowing that you and our child are safe. And speaking of our children, where is Louisa?"

"Where do you think?"

She smiled at him over her shoulder just as Tagret raced into sight on the beach below, closely followed by Louisa. He was clearly tempering his speed to keep just out of reach and Mongat smiled as he watched the children. Then Louisa stumbled, dropping to one knee with a startled cry. Before he could vault over the low wall and go to his daughter, Tagret immediately turned back, bending down over her until her trembling lips curved into a smile.

Anna laughed at his disgruntled look as his nephew helped Louisa to her feet and the two of them wandered down to the edge of the water, hand in hand.

"Don't worry. You haven't been replaced yet. She still needs her daddy."

"Of course I have not been replaced."

Despite his automatic response, he found comfort in her words. No matter how close Louisa was to Tagret, she was still his daughter.

And Tagret had become his son. Thaina had decided to move to Burmak on a permanent basis and he had officially adopted Tagret. He'd wondered if that would change things between the children, but if anything it had made them even closer.

The two children stood hand in hand at the edge of the water, talking and laughing, and he couldn't help smiling.

"I can't believe how close they are," Anna murmured.

"Perhaps the gods intended it to be this way."

"Do you think the gods intended us to be together as well?"

“I have absolutely no doubt that they did.” He shrugged.
“Unfortunately, they just took a little longer with us. But we found each other at last.”

He kissed her, his arms tightening around her waist, and she leaned back against him with a soft sigh.

“I am very glad for us. And for them. And soon we’ll have a son to share our happiness as well.”

“Our son? How do you know it’s not a daughter?”

It was a familiar game and she grinned up at him.

“Because I know what it feels like to be pregnant with a girl.”

“Last week you thought it was a girl,” he reminded her, but waved a dismissive hand.

“A temporary mistake. But now, all I want is for our son to be healthy and happy.”

“As do I. And I hope he has your sweet nature and beautiful face.”

“I’m not sure that would be the best thing for a boy,” she said dryly, but she smiled.

He kissed her neck again as he skated his hand up over her stomach to her breast, the generous mounds now overflowing even his large hand. He plucked gently at a swollen nipple, smiling when she gasped and a damp spot appeared on the silk.

“So sensitive.”

“Mongat,” she moaned as he pinched her other nipple.

“We should move this to the bed. Your back must be aching.”

She gave him an indignant look, but there was a gleam of desire in her eyes.

“My back is fine and that’s much too far.”

“Are you sure?”

He rubbed his cock against her, letting her feel how eager he was.

“Yes, please. Right now.”

As if he could deny her anything. Since the children were still on the beach, he pulled her back into the covered corner of the balcony. He quickly released his cock, then helped her on top of him as he leaned back against the bench. She shuddered with relief as he thrust up into her, her channel even hotter and wetter now.

“God that feels good.”

“Perfect,” he growled, leaning forward to pull one of her big nipples into his mouth.

She arched against him, the movement pushing her even farther down his cock, and he groaned. Being inside her was still the most exquisite sensation he had ever felt.

“So full,” she whimpered, her hips moving restlessly. “Help me, Mongat.”

He moved her up and down on his cock, keeping his movement slow and gentle, despite her efforts to move faster.

“More,” she demanded.

“Trust me, my Anna.”

He slid his hand between their bodies so that each stroke pressed his thumb against her clit, gliding across the stiff little nub, then returned to her nipple pulling on it with the same easy rhythm. She finally surrendered to the easy pace, swaying gracefully over him as her sweet little cunt started to flutter around him, the quick little pulses driving him to the edge.

“I’m so close,” she whispered

“Then come for me.”

He pressed harder on her clit and her head fell back, the movement arching her breasts towards him and he took advantage, sucking even harder. As he drew her deeper into his mouth, her channel closed around him in an impossibly tight fist and then he was coming, his cock swelling as he pumped his seed deep inside her. She kept pulsing around him, drawing his orgasm out until they were both shuddering and panting.

She collapsed against him and he wrapped his arms around her, resting his head on top of hers.

“I love you, Anna,” he murmured, and she sighed with pleasure.

“I love you, too. I bet that will do it.”

“Do what?”

He carefully lifted her off of him, groaning at the sudden sense of loss, and helped her curl against him.

“Put me in labor.”

She gave him a satisfied smile, then yawned.

“What are you talking about?”

“I heard back on Earth that making love could send you into labor, especially when you’re close.”

“What?” He jerked upright, and she muttered an indignant protest. “You were just trying to start your labor?”

“Oh no. I really, really needed that orgasm. But it’s time for our daughter to be born.”

“I thought it was a son,” he said automatically, then sighed.

“It would be nice if you shared these little details with me. In advance.”

She gave him an innocent look.

“Why? Would you have refused me? Left your poor wife all wet and aching?”

She teased her nipple through the wet silk of the sabai as she spoke, her eyes heavy with pleasure, and even though he’d thought he was completely drained, his cock began to stir.

“You know I would not.” He slid his hand under her skirt, tracing the damp swollen folds. “Are you still achy, my Anna?”

“Very,” she gasped as he found her clit again.

“And do you still need me?”

“Always.”

“Then perhaps we should make twice as sure. Or even three times.”

“Three times sounds wonderful.”

Her fingers twined in his hair as he bent down to taste his mate, her sweet flavor bursting on his tongue as he set to work, determined to provide his mate with everything she needed.

He succeeded so well that their daughter was born in the early hours of the morning.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *The Alien and I* I'm having so much fun giving these classic musicals a sci-fi touch and the appropriate happy ever after! I hope you're enjoying them as well!

Whether you enjoyed the story or not, it would mean the world to me if you left an honest review on Amazon – reviews are one of the best ways to help other readers find my books!

As usual, I have to thank my readers for coming on these adventures with me - I couldn't do it without you!

And, as always, a special thanks to my beta team – Janet S, Nancy V, and Kitty S. Your thoughts and comments are incredibly helpful!

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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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