



AN ALIEN FOR
CHRISTMAS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MARGO BOND COLLINS

AN ALIEN FOR CHRISTMAS

KHANAVALI ALIEN BRIDE LOTTERY



MARGO BOND COLLINS

CONTENTS

[Find Margo Bond Collins](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Read More of Margo's Books](#)

[Join Margo Online](#)

An Alien for Christmas

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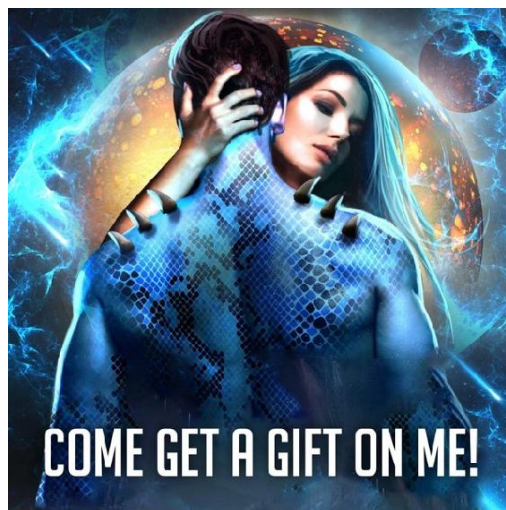
INTRODUCTION

Hello! Thank you so much for picking up one of my books. I really hope you love it!

I'd hate to part ways once you finish this book, however—so let's keep in touch! We have a great bunch of people in my Readers' Group that you absolutely shouldn't miss out on.

We do exclusive book freebies, online parties, giveaways, sneak previews, and events for this amazing group.

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ABOUT AN ALIEN FOR CHRISTMAS

A giant pink alien was *not* on my Christmas list.

All I want is to deck the halls, pass on the Yuletide torch, and sleigh my way back to Earth. Preferably without falling in love. No holiday magic for me, thanks!

Christmas was supposed to be simple: wrap up this assignment and head back to Earth.

I never intended to participate in the Alien Bride Lottery.

As far as I can tell, the Khanavai are nice enough on an individual basis—but their entire culture is macho, sexist, and retrograde. And yet, the Bride Lottery system was working.

More or less.

But then Vos Klavoii, the ex-Games Director, upended everything by finding a human mate and stepping down.

The entire program is in disarray, and apparently, I'm the solution.

As Earth's most renowned vid journalist, I have a knack for getting people to open up—and that talent, according to the combined wisdom of the governments of both Earth and Khanav Prime, is exactly the kind of magic this show needs.

So, up to Station 21 I go, hoping to set things right.

Spending my Christmas holidays in this bizarre setup? Also definitely not on my wish list.

I should be excited—I'm both the first human and the first woman to run the Bride Games. It's groundbreaking, yes, but all I really want is to fix the mess, find my successor, and leave.

And if I can avoid getting tangled under the mistletoe with a certain pink, towering alien who's always in my path, that'd be the cherry on the Christmas pudding.

Is it too much to wish for a silent night and a completed assignment?

Here's hoping I can jingle all the way out of this.

Fans of Ruby Dixon, Grace Goodwin, and Evangeline Anderson will adore this hot new series featuring gorgeous, bright alien heroes and the sassy human women they choose as mates!

Every book in the Khanavai Warrior Bride Games series is a standalone romance. Join these brides as they find a whole new world of happily ever afters.

CHAPTER 1



FAITH FINAGHTY

The air was thick with the manufactured scents of cinnamon and pine punctuated by the occasional whiff of desperation as people scrambled to find the perfect gift. I navigated my way through the bustling shopping district that had sprung up around the latest Khanavai travel station.

And I, too, had a mission to accomplish before heading off to Station 21.

No time to dawdle.

Festive decorations wrapped the streets in holiday cheer. Twinkling lights adorned every lamppost, their soft glow reflecting off the fake-snow-laden window displays. Garlands of pine and holly draped across storefront awnings, and vibrant red and gold bows added a touch of—well, if not elegance, at least a reasonable facsimile of it. Each window display seemed to outdo the next in terms of extravagance, with intricate scenes depicting everything from Santa’s workshop to winter wonderlands complete with ice-skating penguins.

“Excuse me,” I muttered, sidestepping a woman pushing a stroller piled high with packages. As I continued down the street, the sounds of carolers harmonizing filled the air, and I felt the tug of nostalgia in my chest. Shaking off the sentimentality, I reminded myself that I had work to do.

Besides, the carols were being piped in, too.

A young couple exchanged tender kisses beneath a sprig of mistletoe on the edge of a temporary ice-skating rink, the

woman's laughter ringing like silver bells.

"Isn't it romantic?" a voice chimed in from beside me, causing me to startle. "The way the lights reflect off the surface, it's like a dance of stars."

"Right," I said, forcing a tight-lipped smile. "Very... cosmic." I hastily moved away, eager to escape the conversation. But the air seemed to grow heavier with each step, the pressure of the holiday season seeming to close in around me. I tried to focus on my career and upcoming assignment, but the persistent cheeriness of the market threatened to crack my resolve.

Stay strong, I silently urged myself, clutching my basket tighter. *You're better than this*.

I cursed under my breath, dodging another group of shoppers.

"Get your holiday deals here!" a vendor shouted, thrusting a garland-festooned flyer into my hands. I glanced at it and crumpled it up, tossing it into the nearest overflowing trash can.

"Can I help you find anything?" another saleswoman asked, her eyes twinkling like the ornaments adorning her reindeer antler headband.

"No, thank you," I replied curtly, reminding myself of my mission: get in, buy gifts, and get out—all without succumbing to the allure of love or holiday magic. I didn't need any of that nonsense to succeed on Station 21.

This assignment on Station 21 was crucial to my career, and I couldn't afford to be caught up in the Christmas whirlwind that seemed to intoxicate everyone else around me.

"Why do people get so *sappy* during the holidays?" I muttered to myself, trying to ignore the steady stream of couples strolling hand-in-hand, starry-eyed and oblivious to the world around them.

"Excuse me, miss!" a saleswoman called out, her voice dripping with forced merriment. "Would you like to try our limited-edition mistletoe-scented perfume? It's guaranteed to make you irresistible!"

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I replied with a tight smile, narrowly escaping the cloud of fragrance she attempted to spritz in my direction. I didn’t need some overpriced potion to lure in a potential suitor.

I was perfectly content focusing on my career.

“Five minutes,” I told myself, glancing at my watch as I entered yet another store in search of the perfect gift for my editor, [name]. She’d been instrumental in securing my spot on Station 21, and I wanted to show my appreciation before I left. “In and out, then back to work.”

“Can I help you find something special?” an elderly shopkeeper asked, her eyes twinkling with a warmth that seemed to radiate from within. I felt a pang of envy—how did she manage to maintain such a genuine sense of delight amidst the commercialism and chaos of the season?

“Something unique, please,” I replied. “I need a gift that shows how much I value my mentor’s guidance and support.”

“Ah, I have just the thing!” She led me to a display. “This is a rare, handcrafted ornament from a distant galaxy. It represents the unity and balance between work and love—the perfect reminder of what truly matters in life.”

“Sounds perfect.” I handed over my credit card and clutched the delicate gift as I exited the store, determined to put sentimentality behind me.

My time on Station 21 would be focused and productive, even if I did have to put on a show of holiday cheer for the Special Episode I’d been tapped to run in the place of Vos Klavoii, the longtime host of the show who’d recently found his own human mate and left for an extended holiday.

Soon enough, I’d return to Earth, having conquered my assignment and secured my place as one of the top journalists in the galaxy.

That is the only magic I need.

Finally, with my mission complete, I pushed my way through the crowded market toward the exit, feeling everyone’s frantic energy pressing against me.

“Happy holidays!” a child shouted as I passed by, her innocent joy finally pulling a response from me. I forced a smile and nodded.

I glanced around as I entered the shipping store.

“Excuse me,” I said politely, squeezing past a couple locked in a heated debate over the merits of various types of wrapping paper. “Pardon me.”

“Hi there!” a cheerful saleswoman greeted me as I approached the counter. “How can I help you today?”

“Hello,” I replied, managing a tight smile. “I need to have these gifts shipped to different addresses on Earth. Can you do that for me?”

“Absolutely!” she said, her enthusiasm never waning. “Just fill out these forms with the names and addresses, and we’ll take care of everything.”

With practiced ease, I began filling out the paperwork, simultaneously keeping an eye on the growing crowd of shoppers around me. It seemed like everyone had waited until the last minute to buy their gifts, and I felt a twinge of frustration at the long lines snaking toward the checkout counters.

“Is this all for one order?” a man behind me asked, gesturing to my assortment of gifts.

“Uh, no,” I replied, slightly flustered. “I’m buying for several people, and these need to be sent to different addresses.”

“Well, good luck with that!”

“Thanks,” I muttered, returning my focus to the task at hand. As I continued filling out the shipping information, I felt my impending deadline bearing down on me. Time was running out, and I still had so much to do.

“Next, please!” the saleswoman called, snapping me out of my thoughts. I handed her the completed forms and my gifts, trying not to let my impatience show.

“Hello,” she said brightly, beginning to ring up my purchases. “Don’t worry—your gifts will arrive on time!”

“Great,” I forced another smile, my frustration mounting as I waited for her to finish. Was it too much to ask for a little efficiency during the busiest shopping season of the year?

As I finally left the store, my stress levels eased slightly, but I knew I couldn’t afford to relax just yet.

“Happy holidays,” I whispered to myself, allowing a small smile to play on my lips. “Now, let’s get to work.”

The last of the twinkling holiday lights disappeared from my view as I exited the shopping district, a winter breeze tugging at my hair.

“Excuse me, miss?” A voice called out from behind me. I turned to see an elderly gentleman holding out a red velvet box. “You dropped this.”

“Thank you!” I exclaimed, taking the box from him. “I would’ve been devastated if I’d lost it.” Mostly because I would have had to return to the shopping district.

“No problem, dear,” he replied, a warm smile spreading across his face. “Happy holidays!”

“Happy holidays to you too,” I said, returning his smile before continuing on my way.

And finally—finally—I could concentrate on the important part of my holidays this year.

The Alien Bride Lottery and Games.

They were my responsibility now, and I was going to make them a success—even if that meant embracing the holiday spirit for the sake of my assignment.

My mind began to race with ideas for the holiday-themed challenges I would create for the contestants, each one more elaborate and exciting than the last. Love and holiday magic may not have been my thing, but I knew I could put on a show that would captivate audiences both on Earth and in outer space.

“Station 21, here I come,” I declared, my voice filled with newfound determination. “And I’m bringing the holiday cheer with me—whether I like it or not.”

CHAPTER 2



FAITH

Two days later, I found myself right back in the midst of the shopping frenzy.

This time, though, it was my editor's fault, since she was the one who'd picked out our meeting spot.

I navigated through the crowded shopping center, shoulders brushing against strangers and the cacophony of holiday tunes playing overhead. I was almost to the coffee shop when, right next to the Christmas tree, a man dropped to his knees and held up a small jewelry box to the woman in front of him.

Annoyance surged through me as a crowd gathered to clap for the newly engaged couple.

There was an irony in that, I realized.

But my journalistic assignment had nothing to do with romantic entanglements, and that's exactly how I wanted it. The Alien Bride Lottery was an interesting story, sure, but it wasn't like I believed in love or anything.

No, I just needed to make this "Holiday Special Episode" of the Games something worth watching.

And not get swept up in any of the nonsense myself.

Passing by a display of heart-shaped ornaments, I rolled my eyes. What a ridiculous tradition.

The Khanavai Bride Lottery, where humans and aliens alike competed for the chance to marry some stranger they'd never

met before. Love? More like a desperate attempt at finding companionship in the cold, unforgiving vacuum of space.

I scoffed under my breath, giving the ornaments one last disdainful look before continuing on my way.

It wasn't that I hated the idea of love, really. It was just... well, unrealistic. Overrated. Surely there were more important things to focus on, like building a successful career and making a name for oneself.

And that's exactly what I was planning to do. As a video journalist, I had a responsibility to bring excitement and intrigue to whatever story I was covering. And if that meant creating Christmas and winter-holiday themed challenges for the bride and groom contestants in the Games, so be it.

Let them have their silly fantasies. I'd stick to what I knew best—making great television.

The cacophony of Christmas carols blared through the speakers, mingling with the excited chatter of shoppers bustling around me. Tinsel and twinkling fairy lights adorned every surface, while oversized snowflakes dangled from the ceiling above. It was a chaotic, festive frenzy.

"Excuse me," I muttered, squeezing past a group of shoppers clutching armfuls of garish holiday decorations. I chuckled at the sight of two Khanavai warriors arguing over what appeared to be the last holographic mistletoe in the store. Only here could such an amalgamation of cultures and species come together to celebrate the universal language of consumerism.

"Hey, Grinch!" a familiar voice called out, pulling me out of my musings. I turned to see my editor and best friend Alana, her bright red hair practically glowing against the backdrop of Christmas chaos.

"Alana!" I exclaimed, rushing toward her open arms. We hugged tightly, and she led me to a cozy coffee shop tucked away in a quieter corner of the shopping center.

"Ah," Alana teased as we settled into our seats, mugs of steaming hot mocha coffee—the non-alcoholic version of hot cocoa for adults—in hand. "You always did have a knack for

finding the most Scrooge-like expression to wear during the holidays.”

“Can you blame me?” I took a sip of my drink. “This whole season is so... commercial. And don’t even get me started on the ridiculous Bride Lottery.”

“Ah yes, the dreaded Lottery.” Alana smirked. “You know, you might actually enjoy it if you gave it a chance. Love isn’t all bad, you know.”

I rolled my eyes at her romantic notions. “Oh please, Alana. You know as well as I do that love is nothing more than a chemical reaction designed to propagate the species. It has nothing to do with Christmas or any other holiday for that matter.”

“Such cynicism!” She feigned shock, placing a hand over her heart dramatically. “Next thing you know, you’ll be telling me Santa doesn’t exist.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” A smirk played on my lips. “After all, we wouldn’t want to shatter your fragile illusions now, would we?”

““Easy for you to say,” I grumbled. “You’re not the one stuck planning winter-themed challenges for a bunch of lovestruck contestants.”

“Touché.” Alana raised her mug in a mock salute. “But seriously. Just because you haven’t found love yourself doesn’t mean it’s not out there. Who knows? Maybe *this* Bride Lottery will change your mind.”

“Ha! Not likely,” I snorted, shaking my head. “I’ve got bigger plans than falling for some alien in a cheesy Christmas-themed competition.”

“Just promise me one thing—try to have a little fun while you’re running the show, okay?”

“Very funny. But you can’t deny that there’s something magical about this time of year.”

“Sure, if by ‘magical’ you mean ‘commercial’.”

“Okay, Miss Scrooge, let’s make a deal.” Alana leaned closer. “If by some miracle you find love during this Bride Lottery, I promise to never bring up the subject again. Deal?”

“Deal,” I agreed without hesitation, confident that my heart would remain untouched. “And if I don’t, you owe me a lifetime supply of hot cocoa.”

“Sounds fair,” she said, shaking my hand firmly.

“Besides,” I added with a wink, “I can always rely on the fact that love is as elusive as Santa himself.”

“Spoken like a true unbeliever.” Alana grinned.

“Let’s talk strategy,” I said, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the table. “Everyone expects a certain level of... spectacle in the Games. Klavoi was good at that, so I’ll have to keep things interesting and exciting for our viewers.”

“Sounds like a challenge.” Alana took a thoughtful sip of her coffee.

“Definitely,” I agreed. “But that’s exactly what I signed up for when I took this assignment. I want to prove myself as a capable journalist *and* show everyone that I can handle even the most bizarre situations.”

“Even if it involves love and Christmas?” Alana teased, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Especially if it involves love and Christmas.” I rolled my eyes.

“Well, whatever your plans for the Bride Lottery and Games are, I’m sure you’ll make them unforgettable.”

“I just hope I can pull it off without losing my mind in the process. This whole thing is so far out of my comfort zone.”

“Hey, sometimes stepping out of your comfort zone leads to amazing things.”

“Okay, so let’s talk about these Christmas and winter-themed challenges,” I said, rubbing my hands together eagerly. “I’ve got a few ideas up my sleeve that’ll make this Bride Lottery more entertaining than ever before.”

“Ooh, do tell!” Alana encouraged, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Picture this,” I began, my voice brimming with excitement. “An ice-sculpting competition where the contestants have to carve their own version of a perfect mate.”

“Interesting,” Alana mused, nodding her head in approval.

“Or how about a race through a simulated snowstorm? They’d have to navigate their way to the finish line by following a series of clues, all while battling freezing temperatures and blizzard conditions.”

“Huh. I think some of these challenges might be a bit... extreme.”

“Extreme is what gets the views. Besides, it’s not like any of the contestants will be in any real danger. It’s all just for show.”

“Try not to go too overboard. After all, you don’t want the audience to think you’re trying to sabotage their chances at love.”

“Love-shmove,” I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “Like I said, it’s all just for show. And if anything, these challenges will help weed out the weaklings and leave only the strong contenders standing.”

As Alana and I continued to bounce ideas back and forth, I felt a nagging worry in the back of my mind. Managing the Bride Games was an enormous responsibility, and with each new idea came the potential for countless complications.

“Hey,” Alana said suddenly, seeming to pick up on my concerns. “You’re going to do great. You’ve got this.”

I tried to hide my uneasiness behind a smile. “I just hope everything goes smoothly.”

Alana snickered. “This is the Khanavai Bride Lottery we’re talking about. When has anything ever gone smoothly?”

I gave a wry grin. “Maybe I should be prepared for some hiccups along the way.”

“Exactly,” Alana agreed, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Just think of it as part of the adventure. Who knows what surprises the universe has in store for you?”

“Surprises, huh?” I murmured, feeling a flutter of anticipation mixed with dread. “Well, I suppose I’ll just have to face them head-on when they come, won’t I?”

“Spoken like a true journalist,” Alana teased, raising her mug. “To surprises, challenges, and an unforgettable holiday season full of unexpected gifts.”

“May they all be free of romantic entanglements,” I replied, clinking our mugs together.

She laughed, taking a sip of her coffee. “But beware. Christmas has a way of making even the most stubborn hearts believe in magic.”

CHAPTER 3



JAVVIL DELOI

“Commander Garkin, sir,” I began, thumping my fist over my heart in the traditional salute as I entered the office of my commanding officer aboard the battleship *Shalinik*. “You asked to see me?”

At the far end of the commander’s office stood a large, polished desk made of the whorled wood of a larenyon tree. Behind it, several banners hung proudly on the wall, displaying the insignia of the Khanavai military force.

The air was thick with authority, and Commander Garkin sat behind his desk, looking as serious as ever, his silver hair slicked back, his face stern.

“Take a seat, Javvil,” the commander replied, gesturing to the chair opposite his desk without looking up from the epapers he was reading.

My anxiety grew as I waited for him to acknowledge me, wondering why he had summoned me here. What could be so important that it required a personal audience with the commander himself?

As I sat down, I tried to calm my racing thoughts, focusing on the smooth, cold surface of the bright blue chair beneath me. It seemed to ground me somehow, reminding me that despite my anxiety, I was still a proud Khanavai male, strong and capable. I held onto that thought like a lifeline, willing myself to stay in control no matter what news the commander had in store for me.

Commander Garkin finally began, setting down his papers and fixing his gaze on me. “I have a matter of great importance to discuss with you.”

I braced myself for whatever was to come, unable to shake the feeling that my life was about to change forever.

“As you know, we have a relatively recent tradition of finding mates through the Bride Games,” Commander Garkin’s voice was solemn and measured. “This event not only ensures the continuation of our bloodlines but also strengthens the ties between Earth and Khanav Prime.”

I nodded, well aware of the significance of the Bride Games. But I couldn’t understand why he was bringing this up now.

“Since your assignment to my unit, I have been monitoring your performance closely,” the commander continued. “You have shown exceptional dedication and skill in your duties, and given a recent opening in the Grooms lineup, it has been decided that you will represent us at the upcoming Bride Games.”

“Me?” I asked, my mind going blank. “Commander, with all due respect, are you certain this is the right decision?” I hadn’t had any plans to take a mate so soon.

The commander gave me a long, level look. “You have proven yourself capable, and now it is time for you to fulfill this essential duty. There is more,” Garkin continued. “At the upcoming Bride Games, you will be expected to choose one of the volunteer brides, even if you don’t sense that any female there is your true mate.”

My heart clenched within my chest. The thought of choosing a female without knowing that indescribable connection made me feel like I was betraying myself and my people.

“Commander,” I protested as I suppressed the frustration building within me, “I want a true mate, not merely a breeding partner.”

Garkin’s gaze bore into mine. I could see conflict in his gaze, but it was clear he had made up his mind. Our duty to our dwindling population weighed heavily on both our shoulders,

but I couldn't shake the idea that something more was waiting for me out there.

"I understand your concerns, but our race is on the brink of extinction. We cannot afford to wait for perfect matches. Our priority must be to increase our numbers. This is your duty."

My hands clenched involuntarily, and my breathing grew shallow as I tried to process the implications of my new responsibility. Would I be able to find a mate who could truly understand and accept me, or would I be forced to settle for someone chosen solely based on tradition and duty?

Inside, my heart ached at the thought of such a cold, impersonal union, but I knew that I had no choice but to comply with the commander's wishes. To refuse would bring shame upon myself and my people, and that was a burden I simply could not bear.

Commander Garkin's eyes bore into me, unyielding and resolute, as he leaned forward in his chair. The stern set of his jaw underscored the gravity of the situation, leaving no doubt that my participation in the Bride Games was not a mere suggestion but an order.

"Remember, this is not about your personal desires; it is about preserving our legacy."

I swallowed hard, his words settling like lead in my chest. My fists tightened by my sides, a physical manifestation of the frustration and disappointment that roiled within me. I had always been proud of my heritage, but now, faced with the prospect of finding a mate based solely on tradition rather than love, I felt trapped.

"Commander, I understand the importance of duty," I replied, trying to keep my voice steady despite the storm of emotions that raged inside me. "But I wonder if there might be another way—a way that honors our people while still allowing for a genuine connection between mates."

Commander Garkin fixed me with a piercing stare, his eyes never wavering from mine. "Sometimes, we must put aside our personal desires for the greater good. I know this is not

easy, but always remember that you are serving your people with honor,” he added.

As much as I hated the thought, I couldn’t deny the truth in his words. My honor and loyalty to my people demanded that I follow their needs, even if it meant sacrificing my own desires in the process.

The responsibility settled upon me, crushing any flicker of hope for finding true love.

But I had no choice.

As the commander’s words echoed through the office, I knew deep down that arguing further would be futile. I forced myself to nod, even as I longed for a different future—one that held the promise of true love and companionship. “I have given your words careful consideration,” I began, my voice steady and resolute. “and I understand the importance of the Bride Games to our people. You have my assurance that I will travel to Station 21 and participate as required.”

The commander’s stern face softened ever so slightly, a glimmer of approval sparkling in his eyes.

“Very well,” he said, giving me a firm nod. “I am pleased with your decision. Your dedication to our people is commendable, and it is clear that you are a true Khanavai warrior.”

“Thank you,” I replied, trying to hide the simmering turmoil within me. My blood pounded in my ears as the reality of my commitment sank in, but I knew there was no turning back now.

Garkin’s expression returned to its usual stoicism. “Now, go prepare for your journey. There is much to be done before you depart for Station 21.”

“Of course, Commander,” I acknowledged, offering him a crisp salute before exiting his office.

The door to Commander Garkin’s office slid shut behind me with a soft hiss, leaving me alone in the corridor. As I stood there, I ached at the thought of a loveless union, but my mind was torn between duty and desire—the duty I had just

accepted and the desire for a true mate that still burned within me.

Don't sacrifice yourself, my heart whispered, yearning for connection.

But my head countered, *You must think of your people. Duty comes first.*

I paused in the middle of the empty hallway, my hands clenching and unclenching with frustration. Each breath brought with it a new wave of inner turmoil, yet I knew deep within that my loyalty to the Khanavai could not be dismissed.

Is it even possible to find both love and duty? I wondered, my mind a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts. My fingers brushed against the cold metal wall, seeking some sort of anchor amidst the storm of emotions that raged inside me.

As I made my way through the corridors of the spaceship, my mind swirled with thoughts of the upcoming Bride Games. Duty pressed down on me, mingling with the lingering hope for a genuine connection, despite the circumstances. My steps echoed softly, providing a rhythmic counterpoint to the turmoil in my head.

My reflection was interrupted by the sound of laughter, as a group of young Khanavai trainees rounded a corner and hurried past me, their faces flushed with excitement. They were the future of our race, and it dawned on me that my actions would not only impact my own life but the lives of those who came after me.

“Javvil!” An exuberant voice interrupted my musings, jerking me back to reality. It was Rivak, one of my fellow Khanavai officers. He slapped me on the back, his cheerful grin a stark contrast to the battle raging inside me. “Excited about the Bride Games? You’re going to have the time of your life!”

“Sure,” I managed to reply, trying to put on a brave face. “I guess it’s an honor to represent our people.”

Rivak nodded eagerly, oblivious to my internal struggle. “Exactly! Think of all the potential brides you’ll meet.”

His enthusiasm chipped away at the ice encasing my resolve, and for a fleeting moment, I allowed myself to imagine the possibility of finding love amid the chaos of the Bride Games. The warmth of hope flickered within me, fueling my determination to make the best of this unexpected situation.

As I continued on my way, the echoes of Rivak's excitement lingered in my mind, intertwining with the sense of duty and honor that had been ingrained into me since childhood. If I was to fulfill my role as a Khanavai male, I could not let my personal desires overshadow the needs of my people.

With each step toward my quarters, my determination grew. I would participate in the Bride Games, honoring my commitment to my people—while secretly nurturing the hope that true love might still be within my reach.

CHAPTER 4



FAITH

The world swirled around me in a dizzying vortex as I was teleported to Station 21 a few days later. My stomach churned, threatening to revolt. As my surroundings finally stabilized, I found myself standing in the transport room of a bustling space station, teeming with alien life forms and advanced technology.

“Welcome to Station 21!” A cheerful voice called out. Natalie Adredoni, former Bride Games contestant, rushed toward me with her husband Cav by her side. Her burgundy curls shimmered under the artificial lighting of the station, while Cav’s blue skin contrasted sharply against the sterile environment. Natalie and I had met at the Khanavai consulate the day I’d accepted this assignment, and I liked her immediately.

“Ugh, that teleporter never gets any easier,” I groaned, steadying myself.

“Tell me about it,” Natalie said. “I vomited on my first trip here. You’re lucky you didn’t.”

“Oh, God. Don’t talk about it.” I put my hand on my stomach.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.” With a grin, she looped her arm through mine and led me out the door, Cav following closely behind.

“Be honest, how did you guys feel about the Bride Games?” I asked, seeking additional understanding from those who had experienced it firsthand.

“Initially, I was skeptical too,” admitted Natalie. “But after getting to know Cav and seeing how much he cared for me, I realized that there’s more to the Khanavai than meets the eye.”

I frowned. “Well, as long as I’m stuck with creating a holiday special episode for these Games, I want to change things up, make it more interesting and less... well, sexist.”

“Change can be a good thing,” Cav chimed in, his deep voice surprisingly gentle. “The Bride Games may have their flaws, but they also bring people together. I believe you can make a positive difference.”

“Trust me,” Natalie added, squeezing my arm reassuringly. “With your creativity, there’s no doubt in my mind that you’ll make these Bride Games something truly memorable.”

“Okay,” I sighed, mentally bracing myself for the challenge ahead. “Guess it’s time to bring some Christmas magic to the Bride Games, even if I have to drag it here kicking and screaming.”

After all, if there was one thing I knew how to do, it was to produce engaging content. As a video journalist, I had covered everything from political scandals to wildlife conservation, and I always managed to find the heart of the story. The Bride Games would be no different—even if this time, I was *creating* the heart of the story.

As we rounded a corner, I spotted two figures waiting for us. One was small, lizard-like, with a bright orange nosebraid and a rill along its back—Plofnid, if I remembered correctly. The other was tall and silvery, with three breasts and an air of elegance about her—Drindl.

“Ah, Faith!” Plofnid exclaimed, extending a clawed hand in greeting. “We have heard much about you. Vos Klavoii left quite a mess for you to clean up, didn’t he?”

“But we are excited to see what changes you will bring to the Bride Games,” Drindl said, her voice clear.

I shook Plofnid’s hand cautiously. “I’m looking forward to working with both of you, and I’m sure your experience will be invaluable.” And as I stood there, surrounded by these

strange beings in an even stranger world, I felt a flicker of excitement at the journey ahead. “I’d like to get to work immediately.”

“This way to your office,” Drindl said. Once there, the five of us gathered around the large holo projection, brainstorming ideas.

“Okay,” I said, clapping my hands together for emphasis, “we’re creating a special holiday edition of the Bride Games. We need to make it interesting and exciting, while staying true to the spirit of love and connection.”

“Since Christmas is typically a time for family gatherings and gift-giving,” Natalie began, her eyes twinkling with excitement, “we could incorporate some challenges that involve teamwork and generosity.”

“Great idea,” I said, feeling my own enthusiasm grow as I finally began to dig into the actual planning. “And since it’s winter-themed, we could have an ice-skating race or a snowball fight as one of the challenges.”

“Snowball fight?” Plofnid asked, its orange nosebraid twitching. “What is that?”

“It’s a game where players throw soft balls of snow at each other, often played in teams. It’s lighthearted and fun, perfect for building camaraderie among the contestants.”

“Interesting,” Plofnid mused, while Drindl chimed in, her voice ringing with approval, “I believe that would be a delightful addition to the Games.”

“Let’s keep going,” I urged, my mind racing with possibilities. “How about an activity where the bride and groom contestants work together to decorate a tree? They’ll have to communicate and collaborate to create something beautiful and festive.”

Natalie shook her head. “I think decorating a tree happened last Christmas.”

“What about ornament creation?” Cav suggested. “That could have the same effect—especially if they hung the ornaments on a tree afterward.”

I nodded as the vision of the Games crystallized in my mind. Snow falling gently on the contestants, bright smiles lighting up their faces as they navigated the challenges hand-in-hand, laughter echoing through the air. This was going to be unlike any Bride Games that had come before, and I couldn't wait to see it all come together.

“Okay, team. Time to bring these ideas to life,” I declared as we exited the office meeting room, my confidence growing with each step. We moved to a large meeting room, where Khanavai staff members awaited our instructions.

“Listen up, everyone,” I called out, catching their attention. I could feel their curiosity mingling with skepticism, but I wasn't about to let that deter me. “We have some amazing new challenges planned for this season's Bride Games, and I need all of your help to make them a reality.”

As I began outlining our plans, I noticed the staff whispering amongst themselves. “You heard me right, snowball fights and ornament-making contests. The plan is to inject some holiday spirit into the Bride Games.” My voice was firm, authoritative.

“Are you sure this will work?” one of the more seasoned staff members asked, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

“Absolutely,” I replied. “Trust me, it's going to be incredible.” I could see doubt flickering in his eyes, but he nodded.

“We'll give it a shot.” He conceded, and the others followed suit.

I watched as the staff swung into action, transforming Station 21 into a winter wonderland. Amidst the organized chaos, I took a moment to reflect on my mission. These Games had always been about finding love, but I wanted to bring something fresh and fun to the table.

“Hey Faith,” Plofnid called out, interrupting my train of thought. “We had the snow machines transported up. Where do you want them?”

“Let's place them around the main courtyard, near the gardens,” I instructed, a clear picture forming in my mind. “We want it to feel like a true winter wonderland.”

“Got it,” he replied with a grin. “We’ll make this the most memorable Bride Games yet!”

CHAPTER 5



JAVVIL

The pristine white walls of the small, unadorned Groom's Quarters on Station 21 seemed to close in on me. Void of any decoration, with minimal, functional furniture, the room was painfully claustrophobic as I began unpacking my belongings.

Joining the Bride Games was not something I had envisioned for myself, but I was determined to fulfill my duty and find a suitable mate to strengthen the bond between our peoples.

I carefully placed my extra uniform in the small closet, ensuring each piece of the garment was neatly arranged. Success in these Games was crucial for the future of both Khanavai and humanity.

Once everything was in its place, I took a deep breath and stepped out of my quarters to explore Station 21. This was my first time on the space station, and as I wandered through the corridors, I noticed the stark contrast between the bright Khanavai colors in our sector and the pale, restrained decorations in the human sector.

It was clear that, despite more than fifty Earth-years of interspecies connections, our two cultures still had much to learn from one another.

Despite the differences in decor, there was a sense of anticipation in the air as both Khanavai and humans prepared for the upcoming Bride Games. As I continued to wander the station, a new scent filled my nostrils. The subtle fragrance of spices hung in the air.

I wasn't entirely unfamiliar with seeing these kinds of decorations. After all, there had been human brides on Khanav Prime for more than fifty Earth-years now. But I had never before been motivated to learn more about the practices.

"Excuse me," I said as I approached a group of humans who seemed to be busy decorating a large green tree. "Can you tell me more about these... traditions?" I waved one hand at everything around us.

"Christmas? Sure." One of the human males nodded. "Christmas is..." He frowned. "Well...it's a time for family, friends, the spirit of giving."

"More than that," a female chimed in, "it's a reminder of the significance of love, peace, and goodwill."

"We celebrate at Yuletide—" the second male began.

"Yuletide?" I broke in.

"Another word for Christmas," the female said.

"Yes. We celebrate by exchanging gifts, sharing meals, and spending time together," the male continued.

I listened intently as they explained their various traditions, from hanging *stockings*—apparently an antiquated form of human footwear—to singing special songs called *carols*, and even something they termed *kissing under the mistletoe*.

It was a lot to take in.

"That all sounds quite... interesting." I said, trying to keep my confusion in check. "Thanks so much for your time."

"Of course. And good luck in the Games," the female said. "If you want to take a break and join us later, you're more than welcome."

I nodded my appreciation before continuing my journey through the station, my mind racing with thoughts of the upcoming Bride Games—and the realization of how little I knew about human customs and traditions. If I took a human mate, it was clear that I would need to learn how to combine both our Khanavai and human ways.

This thought brought a wave of anxiety over me. Was I truly prepared for such a responsibility? Was I stupid for accepting the chance to take a mate?

I wasn't even supposed to be here. I'd taken the place of a pilot who'd been killed in the fighting against the Alveron Horde.

But there was no turning back now—the Games were about to begin, and I had to give it my all. From the time I was a child, my elders had impressed upon me the importance of fulfilling my duty to our race by taking a human mate if given the opportunity.

And recently, with the change in the Lottery structure, the Khanavai military had begun stressing the need for all human bride volunteers to be accepted. If their DNA was compatible, we needed them.

I would do my duty.

No matter how difficult it might be.

I continued strolling through the festive corridors of Station 21, the aroma of the humans' *Christmas* still lingering in the air. The vibrant Khanavai colors intermingling with the pale, restrained human decorations had a mesmerizing effect on me.

It seemed that everywhere I looked, there was something new and intriguing to discover about these *Yuletide* traditions.

As I rounded a corner, my attention was caught by a particularly striking item hanging from the ceiling—a beautifully intricate circle of sparkling crystals, reflecting the surrounding light like a kaleidoscope of colors. For a moment, I found myself entranced by its delicate beauty, my thoughts momentarily drifting away from the upcoming Games.

“Wow, you seem really taken by that ornament,” a cheerful voice interrupted my reverie. I turned to see a fellow Khanavai, one with the blue skin of the southern coastal regions of Khanav Prime.

“*Ornament*, huh? I'm trying to figure out all these human holiday traditions.” I touched the item.

“I’m Cav,” the other Khanavai said, giving me the traditional Khanavai chest-thumping salute. I returned it with a smile. “And that’s a snowflake,” he continued, pointing at the ornament. “Or rather, a representation of one. My mate—my wife, Natalie—loves them.”

“I’ve heard of snowflakes,” I said. “Frozen water from the Earthers’ sky, right?”

“Right. Natalie says each snowflake is unique, just like us, you know? So, it’s kind of fitting for the Bride Games, don’t you think?”

I considered his words for a moment, still examining the shimmering ornament. “Perhaps you’re right,” I conceded.

If every snowflake was indeed unique, then so too was my place in these Games.

I had a role to play and a chance to find my mate among the vast array of human women.



An hour later, actual snowflakes swirled through the central area of Station 21, falling onto the garden, each one a tiny crystal world in its own right, unique and ephemeral. I watched their hypnotic dance for a moment.

“Is it really just a game of chance?” I muttered to myself. I knew the process was meant to bring together potential mates from across the galaxy, but there was something unsettling about the idea of leaving such a crucial decision up to chance—to the possibility that the *right* female would happen to be a bride candidate at the exact moment I was on the station.

This could go horribly wrong.

Am I wrong to feel this way?

I knew my people saw the Bride Games as an honorable duty. Even if the grooms didn’t meet their fated mates, they sometimes chose a human mate with whom they believed they could be happy. Yet, deep down, I could not ignore the

nagging feeling that there had to be more to finding a mate than simply drawing a name from a pool of strangers.

“Perhaps...perhaps it is just fear,” I whispered aloud, trying to rationalize my reluctance. After all, the thought of being paired with someone I might not truly love was frightening. But then again, so was the possibility of never finding love at all.

As I stood there, lost in my thoughts, the station’s artificial gravity seemed to weigh heavier on me than ever before. It was as if tradition and expectation threatened to crush me beneath their invisible forces.

The pressure of my duty to my people bore down on me. If I chose not to participate in the Bride Games, would I be dishonoring them? Would I be turning my back on everything my people had fought for?

Is it worth it?

I was torn between the desire to help my people and our culture grow instead of die, and the yearning for a genuine connection. I knew that, in the end, only I could decide whether or not to take part in the Bride Games. The artificial snowflakes continued to spiral gently down, each one a unique crystalline masterpiece, mirroring the whirlwind of emotions within me. I couldn’t shake the feeling that my fate, too, was as uncertain and fragile as those tiny ice sculptures suspended in the void. But as the snowflakes continued their mesmerizing dance in the center of the room, I found myself no closer to an answer.

“Are you all right?” a high, clear voice asked, cutting through my introspection like a warm beam of light. Startled, I turned to see Drindl, a tall, silvery Blordl alien with three breasts, standing nearby. Her eyes, the color of fresh frost, sparkled, and her laugh—when it came—sounded like delicate bells. We had met once before, when we were both on Station 6—me on my way to basic training, she on her way...well, here.

“Drindl,” I acknowledged, trying to push aside my doubts and focus on the present moment. “It’s so good to see you!”

She reached out and gave me a hug. “You look so serious. What’s going on?”

“I’m just...thinking about the Bride Lottery. I can’t help feeling...conflicted about it.”

“Conflicted?” Drindl tilted her head. “How so?”

“Participating in the Bride Lottery is considered an honor, a way to ensure the survival of my species,” I said. “But I can’t shake the feeling that there should be more to choosing a mate than simply picking a name from a hat.”

“Love is a complex emotion,” Drindl said softly, her silver skin shimmering as she moved closer. “And sometimes, our hearts know what our minds cannot understand. And you are seeking something deeper than tradition and obligation.”

“Yes, exactly,” I said, relief washing over me at having found someone who understood my inner turmoil. “I want to find love, not just a partner assigned by Lottery.”

“Then you should follow your heart,” Drindl encouraged, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. She gave a grin. “Or your nose, at least.”

I laughed aloud. “I don’t think anyone really believes all those old tales about scenting a mate.”

“Oh...you might be surprised.” She gave me a wink. “Seriously, though. I’ve seen firsthand the struggles that brides have faced during the Games. Some find love, while others discover that their true desires lie elsewhere.” She paused, as if carefully selecting her words. “But what I’ve learned from assisting these brides is that embracing uncertainty can lead to unexpected joys. Life is full of surprises, and sometimes, it takes a leap of faith to find happiness.”

I could feel her words settling into me, and for the first time since arriving on Station 21, I felt a sense of peace.

“Remember,” she said with a warm smile, “love often comes when we least expect it. Keep your heart open, and you might just find the happiness you seek.”

I willed myself to believe in the possibility of love. The potential benefits were clear: finding a mate would not only fulfill my duty as a Khanavai but also bring companionship into my life. And yet, the process still felt so impersonal, so arbitrary.

Perhaps if I could just let go of my reservations and give love a chance, the universe would guide me to my true mate.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said, “and love will find its way into my life after all.”

Drindl gave me another smile and a wave as she left. “I look forward to seeing it happen.”

CHAPTER 6



FAITH

As I stepped into the main hall of Station 21 the next morning, a flurry of activity greeted me. Crew members were hanging colorful decorations from every available surface, transforming the space into a festive holiday wonderland. The air buzzed with energy, and the sound of cheerful holiday music filled the station, echoing off the metal walls.

Despite my personal feelings about Christmas, I knew I had a job to do, and I was committed to making this year's holiday special episode of the Alien Bride Lottery and Games a success. As a professional journalist, I couldn't afford to let my emotions get in the way of creating an entertaining and engaging spectacle for our viewers.

Taking a deep breath, I surveyed the disarray that surrounded me. My eyes narrowed, focusing on each detail, my mind already racing with ideas for how to bring order to the chaos. With a confident stride, I crossed the room, my heels clicking against the metal floor in a rhythm that matched the beat of the festive music.

I launched myself headfirst into the preparations, directing crew members to their tasks and making sure everything was running smoothly. As we worked together, excitement built inside me, despite my reservations about the holiday season. Maybe we could pull off something truly magical here on Station 21.

In no time, I found myself surrounded by the all-male Khanavai station members, their various neon shades of skin a

stark contrast to my own pale human tones. As I addressed them, it was clear that there was some confusion about Earth's holiday traditions. Clearly not everyone had been involved in the previous Christmas special.

“Wait,” one particularly muscular Khanavai crew member scratched his head. “So you're telling me you bring trees inside your homes on Earth? And hang shiny things on them?”

I chuckled at his bafflement. “Yes, that's right. We decorate Christmas trees with ornaments, lights, and tinsel. It's a tradition that brings warmth and joy during the winter season.”

“Interesting,” he replied, still looking perplexed. “And what's the purpose of hanging your socks?”

“Ah, *stockings* are hung by the fireplace, or in our case, any suitable place we can find, and they're filled with small gifts and treats for everyone to enjoy on Christmas morning,” I explained, my voice filled with amusement.

“If you say so,” he said, nodding hesitantly.

With a wry grin, I turned my attention back to organizing the Bride Games. My journalistic instincts kicked into high gear as I began delegating tasks to the crew members, ensuring that everything would run smoothly and efficiently. “We have a lot to do and not much time to do it,” I said. “Let's split up and tackle these tasks. Zorak, you'll be in charge of setting up the obstacle course. Make sure it's festive and fun, with plenty of holiday-themed obstacles. Kren, you and your team will work on decorating the main hall for the banquet. Think twinkling lights and evergreen garlands.”

The crew members nodded and murmured their assent, heading off to their respective assignments. Meanwhile, I continued to brainstorm creative solutions to the various issues that arose, including finding a way to incorporate snow and ice into the events without causing any major safety hazards.

As I walked through the station, overseeing the progress being made, I felt a sense of pride in my ability to orchestrate such a massive undertaking. Despite my initial misgivings about the

holiday season, I was beginning to see that perhaps there was some magic to be found in the festivities after all.

“Great work, everyone!” I called out, my voice filled with genuine enthusiasm. “Keep it up, and we’ll have an unforgettable Bride Games on our hands!”

And for the first time in years, I found myself genuinely excited for Christmas, eager to see how everything would come together for this unique and otherworldly celebration of love and tradition.

That lasted all of about two hours.

The scent of cinnamon and pine filled the air as I surveyed the progress so far. Crew members darted about, hanging twinkling lights and garlands of evergreen while a festive holiday tune echoed through the station’s corridors. It was hard to believe that just a few days ago, Station 21 had been nothing more than a standard space station.

“Excuse me,” a gruff voice interrupted my thoughts, drawing my attention to a towering Khanavai staff member with arms crossed over his broad, purple chest. “What exactly gives you the authority to be in charge of the Bride Games? You’re not even one of us.”

“Well...” I gazed up into his stern expression, my shoulders straightening as I fought the urge to snap at him.

Diplomacy, Faith, I reminded myself.

“I may not be Khanavai, but I’ve been assigned this task by the powers that be because I have the skills to organize and manage large events like this. Plus, I’m familiar with Earth’s holiday traditions, which might come in handy for our holiday episode, don’t you think?”

He eyed me skeptically as he shifted his weight. “Fine,” he grumbled, still not entirely convinced. “But if this turns into a disaster, it’s on your head.”

“Agreed,” I said, offering him a smile. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, we have a lot of work to do.” With that, I turned and strode away, trying to shake off the tension from the encounter as I continued overseeing the preparations.



The next morning, my pulse quickened as I watched the shuttle carrying the human bride contestants approach Station 21.

“Time to welcome our guests,” I muttered to myself.

The shuttle docked, and the doors opened with a hiss, revealing a group of nervous-looking human women.

“Welcome, ladies,” I greeted them, stepping forward with open arms. “I’m Faith Finaghty, your host for this year’s Alien Bride Games, and we’ve got an incredible lineup of holiday-themed challenges in store for you. If you’ll check in at the booth set up right outside this door—” I gestured behind me, “—your assistants will show you to your quarters. They’ll also be helping you prepare for all the events, so take a moment to get to know them.”

As the contestants filed past me, their expressions ranging from awe to trepidation, I felt a surge of pride in what we had accomplished thus far. The magic of Christmas was alive and well on Station 21, and I would make this a holiday celebration that none of us would ever forget.

As the last of the contestants stepped off the shuttle, I spotted a particularly jittery young woman hovering near the entrance. Her hands trembled as she clutched her purse, and she looked like she might burst into tears at any moment. My heart went out to her, and I approached her with a gentle smile.

“Hey there,” I said softly, placing a comforting hand on her arm. “I noticed you looked a little nervous. It’s okay, it’s perfectly natural.”

The woman glanced up at me, her eyes swimming with unshed tears. “Oh, thank you,” she stammered. “It’s just... I’ve never been so far away from home before, and everything is so different here. I’m not sure I can do this.”

“Take a deep breath,” I advised, my voice soothing. “You’re stronger than you think. Remember, you’re here because you

were brave enough to take a chance. And who knows? You might just find the happily ever after you've always dreamed of." I didn't believe it for a second...but maybe it could be true, right? "What's your name?" I asked.

"Marci," she said.

"Hi, Marci. Nice to meet you."

As the woman's trembling eased, I could see a spark begin to light up her eyes. She nodded, taking a shaky breath. "You're right," she whispered. "I can do this."

"Absolutely," I said, giving her arm a reassuring squeeze. "Now, let's go join the others, shall we?"

With newfound confidence, Marci followed me as we rejoined the group of contestants. As I stood before them, I truly began to believe that I could guide these women through the upcoming challenges.

Okay, deep breaths, I thought, taking a moment to bask in the knowledge that all the pieces were finally falling into place. *You've got this*. And with that, I prepared to dive headfirst into the whirlwind of holiday romance that awaited us.

Or at least, the romance that awaited *them*.

I was still planning to avoid even the hint of a Christmas romance.

As Marci moved to join her fellow contestants, I scanned the room, my eyes landing on a group of people gathered near the entrance to the common area. My heart skipped a beat when I noticed an imposing figure standing among them, drawing my gaze to his powerful presence.

The Khanavai male was a giant of a man, even taller than most Khanavai. His pink skin seemed to shimmer under the station's artificial lighting, while his bright blue hair only served to accentuate his otherworldly appearance. His muscles rippled in the chest-baring kilt-like uniform the Khanavai wore, leaving little doubt as to his strength and prowess.

I stared, wondering what role he played in the Bride Games. As if sensing my gaze, the Khanavai male turned to meet my

eyes, and I quickly glanced away, my cheeks warming with embarrassment.

Keep it together, I chided myself inwardly. *You're here to make this holiday special for the contestants, not gawk at attractive aliens.*

“Hey, Faith,” called out one of the crew members, snapping me out of my thoughts. “We need your input on prepping the gingerbread house decorating contest.”

“Coming.” I forced my attention back onto the tasks at hand.

But as I strode away, I stole one last glance at the striking Khanavai male.

CHAPTER 7



JAVVIL

I'd only wanted to catch a glimpse of the brides as they arrived.

In the common area, crew members scurried about, busily decorating and preparing for the Bride Games. Twinkling lights draped across every surface, wreaths adorned with red berries hung from the walls, and the air buzzed with excitement.

It was as if human *Christmas* had exploded all around me.

Amidst the chaos, one figure stood out—a human female with golden blonde hair that shimmered like tinsel, commanding attention as she directed the crew. She moved gracefully, her eyes filled with fire and purpose.

“Who’s that?” I asked a passing Khanavai male.

He paused. “That’s Faith, the human assigned to run the Alien Bride Lottery now that Vos Klavoii is gone. Why?”

“Just wondering.” I’m sure I sounded as distracted as I felt. That human female was a force to be reckoned with.

“Javvil,” Cav shouted from across the room, snapping me out of my reverie. “Get over here and help us with these decorations!”

I hesitated for a moment before joining my fellow Khanavai—but I couldn’t quit glancing over at the female. She was unlike anyone I had ever come across. My gaze lingered on her as she moved through the commotion, an undeniable presence in the room.

“Seriously, Javvil?” one of my fellow Khanavai chided. “You can stare at the pretty human later. Right now, we’ve got work to do.”

“Right,” I muttered, tearing my eyes away from Faith and focusing on the task at hand. But even as I helped hang ornaments and untangle strings of lights, I couldn’t shake the image of her from my mind.

“Maybe you should talk to her,” Cav said, nudging me in the side. “You know, about the Bride Games and all that.”

“Maybe,” I replied noncommittally, unsure of how to approach Faith without seeming too forward.

But as the festive chaos continued around us, I knew one thing for certain—I couldn’t let this opportunity pass me by.

A sudden gust of cool air brushed past me, carrying with it a hint of a scent unlike anything I’d ever smelled before. The aroma was a mixture of delicate florals and warm spices that made my senses sing.

“Here,” I muttered, shoving a string of tangled lights into Cav’s hands without looking. I had to follow that scent.

It led me across the room—and suddenly, I realized it was coming from *her*. From Faith.

With each breath, I felt more drawn to her, an invisible thread pulling me closer. I couldn’t resist the urge to approach her, even though I knew I shouldn’t.

She’s the coordinator, not a bride candidate, I reminded myself.

And yet...

“Hey,” I called out as I weaved through the bustling crowd, my heart pounding in anticipation. “Can I give you a hand with... anything?”

She looked up from the handheld computer tablet she was holding, her eyes meeting mine with an intensity that sent chills through me. “Yes,” she said emphatically. “I could actually use some help setting up the ice sculpture station.”

“Sure,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady despite the overwhelming sensations coursing through me. As I neared her, her scent grew stronger, filling my lungs with an almost tangible warmth.

The realization hit me with the force of a star exploding.

Faith is my fated mate, the one I've been searching for all this time.

I stumbled to a halt.

“Is everything okay?” Faith turned around to stare at me, her brows furrowing as she noticed my hesitation.

“Uh, yeah,” I stammered, clearing my throat. “Just caught up in the festive spirit, I suppose.” Every movement brought me closer to her, intensifying the connection I felt.

We worked together to set up the ice sculpture station in silence. I didn't know why she wasn't talking, but I was too nervous.

“Thanks for your help,” Faith said once the station was ready, her eyes sparkling. “I don't think I could have done this without you.”

“Anytime,” I replied.



I should have left after that, but I found myself reluctant to tear myself away from Faith.

I couldn't help but move behind her, drawn to her as if by an invisible thread. And every time I got close enough, her enticing scent reached me, stirring something deep within my being. It was undeniable—Faith was my fated mate.

An old Khanavai adage surfaced in my mind: “where the nose goes, the cock follows.”

“Can you hand me that box of ornaments?” Faith called out, interrupting my thoughts. I snapped back to reality and

obliged, watching as she deftly unpacked the glittering baubles.

I tried to maintain composure while my senses were overwhelmed. “If you need any assistance with the Games, just let me know.” I hoped my offer didn’t betray my growing fascination with *her*.

Faith flashed me a grateful smile. “I could really use some help organizing these challenges Vos Klavoii left behind. They’re a bit of a mess, to be honest.”

“Consider it done,” I assured her, eager to be of service. Together, we began sifting through the jumbled assortment of props and instructions, working to make sense of it all.

“Okay, so this one requires the contestants to decorate a tree,” Faith read aloud. “But how do we judge the winner? And why are there so many candy canes?”

My mouth twisted a little. “No clue.”

“I still like the tree-decorating idea. What about...decorating blindfolded? And let’s add a time limit to make it more exciting. Three minutes to decorate the tree?”

“Sounds perfect,” I agreed, admiring her quick thinking and adaptability.

As we continued sorting through the challenges, I was struck by Faith’s resilience and determination in navigating the cultural clashes and disarray left behind by Vos Klavoii. Despite being out of her element, she approached each task with enthusiasm.

“All right, last one,” Faith announced, holding up a set of ice skates. “I suppose this is where the winter aspect comes into play?”

“Are those...*weapons*?” I asked, then frowned when Faith snickered.

“No. They’re skates. You use them to...move over ice.”

“They seem as if they’d be unstable.”

“They are,” Faith said. “That’s exactly the kind of challenge we need to make this holiday special episode unforgettable.”

“Then let’s make it happen.”

She nodded, checking the progress as the crew members hurriedly set up the various stations for the Bride Games. I watched as she scrutinized each challenge, her brow furrowed in concentration.

“What’s the significance of this... strange-looking fruit?” Faith asked, holding up a Khanavai delicacy that resembled a cross between an Earth pineapple and a prickly pear.

“Ah, that’s a Jukka fruit,” I explained. “It’s an old custom for Khanavai couples to feed each other pieces of Jukka fruit during courtship rituals. The fruit is said to represent the sweetness of love and the prickliness of life’s challenges.”

“Interesting...” Faith murmured, her lips curling into a pensive smile. “And how exactly does one eat this without getting injured?”

“Carefully.”

As the preparations unfolded, it was evident that Faith’s human perspective sometimes clashed with Khanavai customs.

“Wouldn’t it be more fun if the racetrack had some holiday-themed obstacles?” she suggested. “Like gingerbread houses and candy cane poles?”

“An intriguing idea,” I said, admiring her creativity. “But do you think the contestants can handle such distractions while trying to maintain balance and teamwork?”

“Isn’t that part of the challenge?” she countered.

I nodded, conceding to her point. With each passing moment, my interest in Faith grew as I witnessed her strength and capability in handling the challenges of the Bride Games. Her keen intuition and innovative approach to melding human holiday traditions with Khanavai customs were nothing short of impressive.

“All right, what do you think of this?” Faith asked, presenting a revised version of the Jukka fruit feeding challenge. “I’ve

added some Earth mistletoe above the station — it's a human tradition where couples share a kiss when they find themselves beneath it."

"Sounds delightful," I said, imagining the warmth of her lips as we stood beneath the mistletoe together. "And who knows, maybe it'll even add a touch of romance to the event?"

"Exactly!" she beamed, her cheeks flushed with excitement and, perhaps, something more.

As the day wore on, I found myself increasingly captivated by Faith's resilience. Never once did she shy away from unfamiliarity or allow the chaos to overwhelm her. And as I observed her efforts, I felt a growing connection between us, one that transcended our cultural differences and hinted at the possibility of something much deeper, much stronger.

"I need your help," Faith said in the late afternoon, her eyes wide and pleading. She gestured toward a pile of odd-sized boxes. "We need to make this challenge more... Khanavai."

"What are they supposed to do with all that?"

"Wrap the boxes in the paper."

"Umm..." I didn't think I'd ever understand human females.

"Perhaps we could include some Khanavai symbols in the decorative paper?"

"And what do you think about adding a time limit here, too? That might add an extra layer of excitement to the challenge."

"Competitors would have to work together quickly and efficiently, showcasing their ability to cooperate under pressure."

"Exactly, teamwork is important in any relationship, right?" Faith winked.

"Right," I chuckled, warming up to her even more. "And for the ice-sculpting contest, I suggest we use Khanavai ice — it's much more durable than human ice and will allow the sculptures to last longer."

“Brilliant!” Faith exclaimed. “That’ll make the final reveal so much more impressive!”

Time and again, she deftly navigated the cultural differences between our species, proving herself to be both adaptable and open-minded. I realized she possessed qualities I had never thought to look for in a mate.

And my stomach twisted because I knew I couldn’t have her.

She was the director.

She wasn’t looking for a mate.

And I had to choose someone from among the contestants.

CHAPTER 8



FAITH

The spotlights shone brightly on the raised dais that acted as a stage in the auditorium area of Station 21. The atmosphere was electric with anticipation. I took a deep breath, allowing the scent of gingerbread cookies and peppermint to fill my senses, momentarily chasing away my nerves.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the Bride Pageant.” My voice rang out, strong and confident, echoing throughout the auditorium as the vid drones swooped around the huge space, gathering footage for the broadcast. “I’m Faith, your host for this special Christmas edition of the Alien Bride Lottery and Games!”

A round of applause and excited murmurs rippled through the crowd. I scanned the faces before me, eager to feed off their enthusiasm. My eyes landed on a striking figure.

Javvil.

Heat rose in my cheeks as I suddenly felt the urge to impress him.

“Tonight, we’ve got an amazing lineup of contestants vying for the chance to win the heart of one of our handsome Khanavai grooms!” I continued, trying to maintain my focus. “So without further ado, let’s meet our first bride-to-be!”

As the first contestant, a bubbly redhead named Emily, stepped onto the stage, I stole another glance at Javvil. He watched me intently, and my heart rate sped up.

“Welcome,” I greeted her with a warm smile, trying to keep my composure. “Why don’t you tell the audience a little bit about yourself? What brings you to participate in the Bride Games?”

“Hi, Faith!” Emily beamed back at me, her green eyes luminous. “Well, I’m a pastry chef from Seattle, and I’ve always been fascinated by Khanavai culture. I figured, what better way to immerse myself in it than by participating in the Bride Games? Plus, I’m a hopeless romantic, so the idea of finding love during the most magical time of the year is just... perfect!”

“Ah, a fellow romantic at heart!” I exclaimed as if I meant it, though I was genuinely touched by her enthusiasm. “I must say, your passion for baking and love for Christmas will surely make this a memorable competition.”

As I continued to engage with Emily, asking about her favorite holiday traditions and the role she hoped to play in her future Khanavai family, I couldn’t shake the feeling that Javvil’s gaze was fastened on me. There was something about him that made me want to step up my game, to be more than just a host—to be someone worth noticing.

But as the show went on, I knew I had to put my personal feelings aside and focus on creating a magical evening for the contestants and the audience. After all, love and unity between Earth and Khanav Prime were at stake, and I had an important part to play in making those dreams come true.

“Best of luck in the competition,” I said, offering her another smile before she left the stage. I turned to face the audience, my heart pounding with a mix of adrenaline and excitement. “Now, let’s welcome our second contestant, Lila, an accomplished dancer from Russia who has mastered various forms of dance, including ballet, tap, and jazz. She’s hoping to share her love for dance with her future Khanavai mate.”

The spotlight shifted to reveal Lila gliding gracefully onto the stage. Her delicate features were accentuated by the shimmering silver gown she wore, which seemed to sparkle like stardust under the stage lights.

“Your profile mentions your impressive accomplishments in the world of dance. Could you tell us more about how dance has shaped your life and what it would mean for you to share that passion with your future partner?”

Lila’s eyes lit up as she began to speak. “Dance has been my everything since I was a little girl. It’s taught me discipline, resilience, and the beauty of self-expression. I believe that finding a Khanavai mate who shares my love for dance would be a dream come true—together, we could create a harmonious bond that transcends any cultural differences.”

As I listened to Lila’s heartfelt response, I found my thoughts wandering back to Javvil, wondering if he too had passions that ran deep within him. Would our paths ever cross beyond this pageant?

“Thank you, Lila. Your devotion to dance is truly inspiring,” I told her. “Now, moving on to our third contestant...”

One by one, I introduced each bride-to-be, engaging with them in meaningful conversations about their backgrounds, dreams, and aspirations.

“Tell us, Anika,” I asked contestant number six, “what qualities in a Khanavai partner would support your aspirations of becoming an intergalactic diplomat?”

“Great question,” Anika replied thoughtfully. “I believe that a Khanavai partner who is supportive, open-minded, and has a strong sense of justice would be the perfect match for me. Together, we could work toward bridging the gap between our two worlds and creating a brighter future for all.”

The stage lights cast a warm glow on the contestants’ faces as they stood in line, each eager to share their unique stories. I smiled at them, and my energy seemed to ripple through the air, easing their nerves and making them feel comfortable on stage.

“Contestant number eight,” I began, “I’ve heard you’re quite the master chef. If you were to prepare a romantic Christmas dinner for your future Khanavai mate, what dish would best represent the love you have for them?”

A twinkle appeared in her eyes as she replied enthusiastically, “Oh, I would prepare my famous Earth-Khanav fusion dish: seared Venusian spice-crusting scallops with a side of fluffy nebula risotto. It’s a symphony of flavors that represents the blending of our two cultures, just like the love we’d share.”

“Sounds absolutely divine. I’m sure any Khanavai would be lucky to share such a meal with you.” The audience laughed appreciatively, and I stole a glance at Javvil.

As I continued to converse with the contestants, I made sure to sprinkle in lighthearted jokes and playful comments throughout the interviews. The laughter of the audience filled the room, creating an atmosphere of joy and celebration. But even as I reveled in this festive spirit, a part of me couldn’t shake the lingering thoughts of Javvil. I wanted—no, needed—to know if he was enjoying the show, if my efforts to entertain had earned his approval.

“Contestant number twelve,” I said, turning my attention back to the interviews, “you mentioned that you have a passion for sculpting. Tell us, if you were to create a sculpture that symbolized love and unity between Earth and Khanav Prime, what would it look like?”

“Ah,” she replied with a dreamy smile, “I’d create an intricate sculpture of two hands—one human, one Khanavai—entwined together, surrounded by a wreath of stars, representing the galaxies that we’ve bridged to find love.”

“Beautifully said,” I said, my heart swelling with warmth for these contestants who had so bravely embraced the spirit of love and unity. “Isn’t it amazing how love has the power to transcend even the vastness of space?”

As the final contestant finished her response, I offered some concluding thoughts on the importance of love and the unbreakable bond it forms between beings from different worlds. The audience erupted in applause, and I felt proud of the atmosphere we had created together.

But still, my gaze searched for Javvil among the sea of faces, trying to gauge his reaction. Our eyes locked, and I saw a

glimmer of something I couldn't quite decipher. Was it admiration? Approval?

Whatever it was, it sent a tingle through my limbs and left me wondering if, perhaps, there was more to this Christmas romance than I ever dared to believe.

As the applause for the final contestant began to subside, I smoothly transitioned to introducing the next part of our Bride Pageant extravaganza. "Now, ladies and gentlemen," I announced with a flourish, "we have a special treat for you all! In the spirit of Christmas and audience participation, we've decided that you will help decide the winner of our 'Mistletoe Moment' challenge!"

A ripple of excited murmurs spread through the crowd as I gestured for the contestants to gather around me on stage. They huddled together, their eyes shining with anticipation and nerves. I felt proud of my organizational skills—the smooth flow of the pageant was largely due to my meticulous planning and attention to detail.

"Here's how it's going to work," I explained cheerfully. "Each lovely bride-to-be will step forward and share her most cherished holiday memory. Once they've all had their moment to shine, you—yes, you, dear audience—will get to vote on which story touched your hearts the most."

I could feel Javvil's eyes on me from the front row, his gaze sending butterflies fluttering in my stomach. I hoped he appreciated the interactive element I'd added to the pageant; it was important to me that he saw my creativity and dedication to making this event truly memorable.

"Last question," I said to the final Bride in the long line. "What do you hope to learn from your Khanavai mate that will make both of your lives richer?"

The final contestant pondered for a moment before answering. "I think it's important for us to learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses, so we can grow together as a couple. I'm excited to discover what unique perspectives my Khanavai mate will bring to our relationship."

“That’s a wonderful sentiment to end this round on.”

The applause echoed through the hall, and I felt a swell of pride in my chest. As the audience cheered, I glanced once more at Javvil, hoping he could see the magic we’d woven on this stage.

But even as my heart soared with the joy of the moment, I wondered—would one of these lovely, deserving women capture Javvil’s heart?

As the last contestant left the stage, I took a deep breath and prepared to deliver my closing speech. The stage lights cast a warm glow on my face, making me feel both alive and vulnerable.

“Finally, tonight we’re introducing a new element of the Games. We’ll be giving a beautiful honeymoon to one of the couples—and you, the audience, will be able to vote on who wins it. So over the next few days, keep an eye out for the sweetest, most toe-curling Mistletoe Moments between couples.”

I glanced at Javvil once more. He sat there, his blue hair vibrant under the lights, and his pink skin glowing with an otherworldly charm.

I wondered who he’d be kissing, wondered if he found any of these women appealing, and my chest tightened with a twinge of jealousy.

It was absurd, of course—I had no claim on him, and yet I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something between us.

You’re an idiot, Faith, I told myself harshly. He will choose a bride from among these women. And it will never be you.

And as the vid drones closed out the broadcast, I finally allowed the smile to fall from my face.

CHAPTER 9



JAVVIL

The auditorium buzzed with excitement, the air thick with anticipation. I stood in the grooms' section, watching as Faith navigated her way through the sea of brides.

"All right, gather around," she called out. The brides immediately huddled around her, their colorful dresses painting a festive scene. I couldn't help but be drawn to her energy, her effortless charisma captivating everyone in the room. "As you all know," she continued, "unlike in earlier Games, no one will indicate a preference in mates until you've all had an opportunity to interact with each other. And this time, the women's requests will be as important as the Khanavai males' preferences." She narrowed her eyes as she looked around. "Your choices must be mutual."

As Faith went over the rules for the Bride Games, I found it increasingly difficult to focus on anything but her. It was then that I realized just how different she was from the contestants vying for my attention. While they were beautiful and exotic, none of them could compare to the human female who had unknowingly stolen my heart.

But how could I pursue her? I was here to find a mate among these contestants, to fulfill my duty as a Khanavai. I ached as I considered the potential consequences of defying those expectations, the backlash from both our cultures.

"Are you all right?" asked one of the other grooms, a green Khanavai who'd introduced himself as Atovin.

“Fine,” I replied curtly, forcing myself to turn away from Faith and face him. “Just lost in thought.”

“Ah, choosing a bride can be overwhelming,” he said, nodding sagely. “Take your time. You’ll know when you’ve found the one.”

I knew he meant well, but his words only served to deepen the pit in my stomach. I had already found the one, but she wasn’t among the contestants. She was standing on the other side of the room, her laughter like music to my ears.

“Attention, everyone,” Faith’s voice rang out, commanding the room once more. The brides and grooms fell silent, all eyes on her as she prepared to announce the first challenge of the Games. Her gaze met mine for a brief instant, and I felt a jolt of electricity course through me.

Was it possible that she felt the same pull?

I knew then that I had to find a way to be with her.

Even if it meant defying tradition, facing disapproval, and risking everything I had ever known, I couldn’t deny my feelings any longer. My heart belonged to Faith, and I would make her mine.

As the Games began and the first challenge commenced—the blindfolded tree decorating contest—I stole glances at Faith. Each time our eyes met, my resolve strengthened. Somehow, some way, I would make her see just how much she meant to me.

The twinkling lights and festive decorations adorning the hall could not compare to the radiant beauty of Faith as she moved through the room, her golden hair shimmering. I noticed how her laughter made others join in, spreading joy and merriment all around her. She was a beacon of warmth.

“You’re up next!” Atovin nudged me, breaking my reverie. I glanced over at the ongoing challenge, trying to feign interest.

It no longer mattered who won these Games; none of these brides held any sway over me. The only prize I sought now was Faith’s affection.

“Looks like they’re really getting into it,” a familiar voice said, drawing me back to the present once again. I turned to find Cav Adredoni standing beside me. “Those attempts at decorating are *terrible*.”

I forced a smile. “They are.”

Cav’s keen eyes studied me for a moment before he continued. “You don’t seem too excited about the Games. What’s going on?”

The room seemed to sparkle and dance as I stood there, my heart pounding in my chest. Faith’s laughter rang through the air like a melodious symphony, infecting everyone around her with joy. Yet, my mind was a whirlwind of emotions, caught between desire and duty.

Cav glanced at me, a knowing smile playing on his lips. “You know, sometimes we find what we’re looking for in the most unexpected places.”

I raised an eyebrow at him, unsure of where he was going with this. He chuckled and continued, “What I’m saying is, don’t be afraid to take a chance. Follow your instincts, even if they lead you off the known stargate.”

The lights cast a warm glow on Faith’s face. I felt a tug in my chest, a yearning for something more than just an observer’s role in her life. But as much as I wanted to pursue her, our different backgrounds and cultures loomed over me like a dark cloud.

Cav placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “Ah. I can see that you’re worried about what might happen if you go after Faith. It’s natural to have doubts when it comes to matters of the heart.” He paused. “Think about this: what’s the point of living if you’re not following your heart? If Faith makes you happy, then isn’t that worth fighting for?”

He had a point. Happiness was a rare commodity in this vast universe, and if I had a chance at it with Faith, shouldn’t I take it?

As I turned my gaze back to Faith, her golden hair shimmering like a halo under the festive lights, I knew that I couldn’t let

this opportunity pass me by.

Amidst all the holiday sparkle, Faith shone the brightest. I couldn't tear my gaze away from her as she managed the Bride Games with grace and professionalism, her golden hair catching the light like a halo.

"You've got that look in your eyes," Cav remarked, a knowing smile playing at his lips. "You're ready to take the leap, aren't you?"

I nodded, feeling my heart swell.

"Good man," Cav said, clapping me on the shoulder. "Now, what's your plan?"

"I need to find a way to spend more time with her, get to know her better. Maybe I can help her with the Bride Games somehow," I mused, trying to think of a viable strategy.

"Sounds like a solid plan," Cav agreed. "Just remember to be yourself. I have no doubt she'll be drawn to you." Cav grinned at me, then stepped back. "I'll leave you to it, then. Don't forget—

"I will heed your advice."

"Good luck," he replied as he stepped back. "May the stars guide you to happiness."

CHAPTER 10



FAITH

The doors to the grand hall swung open later that night, and I stepped into what was supposed to be a winter wonderland of a holiday party. The venue was designed to help bride and groom contestants get to know each other, and I had meticulously planned every detail to make it an unforgettable night for everyone involved.

My heart sank as I took in the scene before me. What should have been a dazzling display of twinkling lights, festive decorations, and a lavish spread of food had turned into utter destruction.

I gasped, gripping the handheld computer that held my carefully crafted plans.

Overtaken tables lay strewn across the once-immaculate floor, some with their legs twisted at odd angles like fallen soldiers on a battlefield. The remnants of a once beautiful buffet were scattered amidst the wreckage—crushed pastries, puddles of gravy, and mangled finger sandwiches mingled with shards of broken china. It looked as if a bomb had gone off in the kitchen, leaving behind nothing but culinary carnage.

Disgruntled contestants spilled into the room and milled about, their faces a mix of confusion, anger, and disappointment. They were supposed to be bonding over a shared meal; instead, they stood huddled in small groups, casting furtive glances at one another and murmuring in hushed tones.

“Can you believe this? Who could’ve done such a thing?” a voice cried out from the crowd, punctuating the tension

hanging thick in the air.

I clenched my fists, unwilling to let this sabotage ruin the evening I had worked so hard to create. Taking a deep breath, I waded into the chaos.

“All right, everyone, listen up!” I shouted, my voice cutting through the murmurs and whispers that filled the room. “We can’t change what’s happened, but we can make the best of it. Let’s work together to clean this mess up and salvage what we can.”

The contestants exchanged uncertain glances, but some nodded, and soon enough, they were rolling up their sleeves and pitching in.

“Let’s start by picking up the larger pieces of debris and getting these tables back on their feet,” I said. “We’ll deal with the food afterwards.”

As we worked together, lifting overturned tables and sweeping broken glass into piles, a small group of Khanavai males gathered in the corner, whispering among themselves. Their eyes darted toward me every now and then, and I could feel their disapproval weighing down on me.

“Really, Faith?” one of them, a green Khanavai, finally spoke up. “You’re supposed to be leading us, and yet here we are, cleaning up after some disaster that happened under your watch.”

“Nobody asked for this to happen,” I retorted, my voice steady despite a tremor in my hands. “But we can choose how we react to it. We can either wallow in self-pity or we can come together and make the most of a difficult situation. I know what I’m choosing. What about you?”

The small group of males scowled, but they couldn’t argue with my logic. Reluctantly, they joined in the cleanup efforts, though their grumbling continued.

This was just another challenge to overcome, I reminded myself, another obstacle to face head-on.

The scent of spilled eggnog and broken gingerbread filled the air as I tried to heave a table off its side and back onto its

unbroken legs, but it was too heavy. Frustration threatened to overwhelm me, but I forced myself to focus on what needed to be done. That's when Javvil appeared at my side, as if by magic.

"Let me help," he said, his hands already reaching for the toppled table. With impressive ease, he righted it, his muscles flexing beneath the fabric of his uniform.

My heart skipped a beat as our eyes met. "Any ideas on how to fix these decorations?" I asked, gesturing to the mangled wreaths and shattered ornaments that littered the floor.

Javvil's eyes scanned the room thoughtfully before he nodded. "I believe so. Some of the materials may be damaged beyond repair, but I'm sure we can find creative ways to reuse them."

He grabbed some remnants of tinsel and twisted them together into a shiny rope, which he then began to drape around the room in artful loops. The effect was surprisingly elegant, and I was impressed by his resourcefulness.

"You're really good at this," I remarked as he repaired a broken ornament with some salvaged ribbon. "I never would have thought to do that."

As we continued to work together, our hands brushed against each other more than once.

The gentle clinking of cutlery and the rustle of tablecloths filled the air as all the contestants began working together, any animosity dissolving in the face of adversity. The once-disgruntled brides and grooms now shared encouraging smiles as they helped each other fold napkins into intricate designs and arrange shattered dishes into modern art centerpieces.

"Look at that," I whispered to Natalie, who had joined us in our cleanup efforts. "They're actually coming together."

"Speaking of which," she said, shooting me a knowing grin, "you seem pretty focused on Javvil over there. Anything going on between you two?"

I felt my cheeks redden at her words, but I knew better than to deny it. "I can't help it. It's just... when we work together, it feels like everything falls into place."

“The magic of teamwork,” Natalie teased, nudging me playfully. “But seriously, if you’re interested in him, maybe you should talk to him about it.”

I hesitated, my gaze wandering back to Javvil, who was currently lifting an entire table with one arm while directing someone else to slide a rug underneath it. “Not now. We have more pressing matters to attend to.”

“Suit yourself,” Natalie shrugged, turning her attention back to the task at hand. “But don’t wait too long. You never know what might happen in the Bride Games.”

“Trust me, I’m all too aware,” I muttered under my breath, feeling my assignment heavy on my shoulders. But even as the chaos swirled around us, I stole glances at Javvil, my heart beating faster with each passing moment.

“Hey, Faith,” Javvil called out, beckoning me over to where he was working on a makeshift food station. “Start gathering any food that wasn’t destroyed or contaminated.”

As we continued to work side by side, salvaging what we could from the wreckage and transforming what we could into something beautiful, I felt that maybe there was hope for us yet.

Moments later, I turned to Natalie who was arranging some festive napkins with a smile on her face. “Can you believe it?” I said to her, shaking my head. “I never thought we’d pull this off.”

“Hey, anything’s possible when you’re surrounded by good people and a little Christmas magic,” she replied, winking at me. “And speaking of... you never did tell me how you felt about Javvil’s resourcefulness today.”

I sighed, feeling my cheeks heat up. “He’s been incredible, hasn’t he? It’s just... I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about him considering the fact that he’s a contestant.”

Natalie paused, giving me a thoughtful look. “Well, sometimes life throws us curveballs, and that’s okay.”

“Thanks, Natalie,” I whispered, grateful for her insight. “But right now, I need to focus on the Bride Games and my

journalistic assignment.” I looked around the room, my gaze landing on Javvil, who was laughing as he helped another contestant with a plate of food.

“Of course,” she agreed, patting my arm gently. “Just remember, even the best stories sometimes have unexpected twists.”

“Trust me, I know,” I replied with a rueful smile. “I just need to keep my priorities straight and make sure this holiday episode is everything it needs to be.”

“Sure.” Natalie nodded, her eyes twinkling. “But in the meantime, don’t forget that sometimes, the most memorable moments are the ones we never saw coming.”

With that, she walked away to help another group of contestants, leaving me to ponder her words. As much as I wanted to explore my feelings for Javvil, I knew that right now, my primary focus needed to be on making the Bride Games a success.

The atmosphere in the grand hall had shifted from chaos to camaraderie as contestants and staff worked side by side, salvaging what they could of the sabotaged dinner.

As I finished turning the table settings from what was supposed to be a full meal into plates of hors d’oeuvres and glasses of sparkling wine, I felt a sense of accomplishment seeing the contestants working together. It was a far cry from the mess we had walked into earlier.

And as the laughter and merriment of the restored holiday party filled the air, I felt that perhaps even amidst the chaos and uncertainty of the Bride Games, there was still hope for unexpected joy and lasting connections—not just for our contestants, but for me as well.

I glanced over at Javvil, who was carefully arranging the last of the salvaged desserts on a beautiful table.

“Javvil,” I called out, approaching him. “Thank you for everything you did to help us today. You’ve been... incredible.”

He turned to face me as he smiled. “It was my honor. I am glad I could be of assistance.”

Our eyes met, and suddenly time seemed to slow down. Every sound around us faded into the background. The energy between us crackled like the fairy lights above, hinting at something deeper just waiting to be explored.

“Attention, everyone!” Natalie’s voice cut through our moment, causing both Javvil and me to snap back to reality. “Faith has an announcement about tomorrow’s challenge in the Bride Games!”

I cleared my throat, trying to regain my composure, as all eyes turned toward me. “Tomorrow’s challenge will truly test your resourcefulness and creativity,” I began, allowing my enthusiasm to infuse my words. “Each couple will design and create an ornament that represents the bonds between our people, using only the materials provided. This ornament will then be judged for its beauty, originality, and the story it tells.”

As the contestants dispersed, I stole one last glance at Javvil. Our eyes met once more, and as his lips curved into a knowing smile, I felt an unspoken promise pass between us. Even amidst the chaos and competition, there was hope for something real—not just for the contestants, but perhaps for us as well.

CHAPTER 11



FAITH

Taking a deep breath the next morning and praying I wouldn't walk into another disaster, I pushed open the door to the ornament-creation room and stepped inside. The festive atmosphere of the Bride Games enveloped me as excited contestants bustled about, preparing for the next challenge.

And I had to admit that despite my own aversion to Christmas, I felt a slight flutter of excitement as I took in the scene before me.

The room was a winter wonderland, filled with twinkling lights that danced across the ceiling like stars in the night sky. Tables filled with art supplies were scattered throughout the room, offering a wide array of materials for the contestants to create their holiday ornaments.

I surveyed the joyful setting, taking in the sight of glittery pipe cleaners, sparkling sequins, and delicate lace, all ready to be transformed into symbols of love and unity for the couples participating in the Bride Games. I had put a lot of effort into making this episode visually appealing and fun, even if I didn't share in the spirit of the season myself.

As I made my way through the room, I tried to focus on my role as host and not let my interest in Javvil distract me from the task at hand. It was crucial for me to maintain my professionalism during the Games, especially considering the growing attraction I felt for him.

But as I watched the contestants eagerly crafting their ornaments, I wondered what it would be like to create something similar with Javvil by my side.

Taking a deep breath, I summoned my most authoritative voice. “Welcome to the ornament-creation portion of the Bride Games,” I called out, and the room immediately fell silent, eyes turning to me expectantly. “This is your chance to express your creativity and holiday spirit by designing a unique ornament that represents all of us.”

The contestants leaned in closer. “You’ll have forty-five minutes to complete your ornaments using any materials provided here. Remember, it’s not about creating the most elaborate or expensive ornament, but rather one that captures the essence of our two species’ love and partnership.”

As I laid out the rules, I stole a glance at Emily, Javvil’s human partner in this challenge. The petite redhead stood near one of the tables, her smile betraying both excitement and nervousness as she fiddled with a spool of red ribbon. I wondered what kind of ornament she would create with Javvil and how well they’d work together.

“All right everyone, let’s begin!” I declared. The room buzzed with energy as the contestants dove into their tasks, laughter and lively discussions filling the air.

With a heavy heart, I watched Emily, who glanced around the room as if searching for someone. It was clear that she was waiting for Javvil to join her, and the thought of their impending collaboration sent a pang of envy through me.

I pushed aside my own emotions and immersed myself in the role of host, determined to ensure the success of this festive challenge.

Just then, the door swung open and Javvil’s towering figure appeared in the entrance. The room seemed to pause for a moment. He scanned the room, his gaze finally landing on Emily. A gentle smile spread across his face as he made his way toward her.

“Emily, I apologize for my tardiness,” Javvil said softly as he reached her side. “Are you ready to create our ornament?”

“Of course,” Emily replied, her nervousness momentarily forgotten in the face of Javvil’s reassuring presence. “I was just looking at all these materials, but I’m not exactly sure where to start.”

Javvil’s attentiveness was evident as he guided Emily through the tables filled with art supplies. “Let’s start by choosing a base for our ornament,” he suggested. “Something that represents both of us, perhaps?”

Emily’s eyes lit up as they landed on a small, clear glass globe. “How about this?” she asked, holding it up for Javvil to see.

“Perfect,” he agreed, his eyes crinkling with warmth. “Now, let’s find something to fill it with.”

As they began working on their ornament together, Javvil’s kindness never wavered. He helped Emily choose various materials—ribbons, glitter, tiny figurines—all the while offering words of encouragement and support.

“Remember, it’s not about perfection,” he reminded her gently when she struggled with tying a delicate silver bow. “It’s about capturing the essence of our people’s relationship and the spirit of the holiday season.”

“Right,” Emily murmured, her cheeks flushing.

I watched them from the corner of my eye, trying to focus on the other contestants. Yet, every time I heard Javvil’s deep voice or Emily’s delighted laughter, my heart clenched with an emotion I knew I shouldn’t be feeling.

Stay professional, I reminded myself, taking a deep breath.

The sight of Emily and Javvil working together, their fingers brushing against each other as they reached for the same materials, sent an unsettling sensation through me. Their laughter rang out in the festive room, as if they had known each other for years instead of mere minutes.

“Nice job with the glitter, Em,” Javvil complimented her, his voice full of warmth as he gently guided her hand to sprinkle a

fine dusting over their ornament.

She giggled, her cheeks flushing with pleasure. “Your idea of using these tiny bells was brilliant.”

Watching them, I could feel my jealousy bubbling up like lava in a volcano, threatening to spill over and burn everything in its path.

I had no right to be jealous, I told myself. Javvil was here to find a bride, and I was merely the host of this event. But as much as I tried to push these thoughts away, they clawed at my insides, demanding attention.

The room buzzed with excitement as the ornament-creation game continued, and I felt a swell of pride at the success of the event. Laughter and chatter filled the air, creating an atmosphere that was as warm and inviting as a cozy fireplace on a snowy evening. I moved from table to table, offering guidance and encouragement to the contestants, all the while keeping my eyes on Javvil.

“Remember, creativity and holiday spirit are key,” I reminded them all, my voice infused with enthusiasm despite the turmoil within me. As I watched Javvil and Emily work together, their laughter ringing in my ears, I fought to keep my emotions in check. I had chosen professionalism over my feelings for Javvil, and I would see this decision through.

“Isn’t this fun?” one of the contestants asked me, her eyes sparkling with delight. “I’ve never made ornaments like these before.”

“It certainly is,” I agreed, forcing a smile onto my face. “I’m glad you’re enjoying it.” My thoughts, however, were consumed by the growing attraction I felt toward Javvil—a forbidden desire that threatened to consume me if I let it.

As the game progressed, I found myself stealing glances at Javvil every chance I got. His blue hair seemed even more vibrant amidst the twinkling lights and festive decorations, and his smile made my core tighten. It was becoming increasingly difficult to focus on my duties as host, but I refused to allow my emotions to control me. I was Faith, the video journalist,

the woman who didn't believe in love or the magic of Christmas—and I would not be swayed.

“Great job, everyone!” I called out, trying to focus on the other contestants as they put the finishing touches on their ornaments. But my gaze kept drifting back to Javvil and Emily, drawn like a moth to a flame. Their easy camaraderie sent tendrils of envy curling around my heart, wrapping it in a vise-like grip.

“Five more minutes!” I announced, momentarily pushing the internal battle aside as I glanced around the room, my eyes taking in the flurry of activity.

As the clock ticked down, I found myself watching Javvil and Emily again, their shared laughter like a knife twisting in my gut. They looked so happy, so at ease, while I stood there, feeling more alone than ever. The room filled with chatter and laughter as the contestants finished their ornaments, but I felt weighed down by the realization that I was far more interested in Javvil than I should be.

You're here to make sure these Games go smoothly, I admonished myself, clenching my fists at my sides, not nurse a schoolgirl crush on an alien who's trying to find his bride.

As I turned away, my thoughts raced, consumed by the possibility that Javvil might reciprocate my feelings. Had I imagined the sparks between us, the intensity of his gaze when our eyes met? Or was there truly something there, just waiting to be acknowledged?

“Emily,” Javvil's voice reached my ears as he gently touched her arm. “I think we did an excellent job on our ornament, don't you?”

“Definitely.” Emily beamed at him, her eyes shining with excitement. “It's been so much fun working together.”

“Indeed,” Javvil agreed, his smile softening as he gazed at her. It was at that moment that I knew what I had to do. I couldn't risk jeopardizing the Games or my career for the sake of my own selfish desires, no matter how strong they may be. And so

I chose to bury my feelings deep within myself, locking them away where they could do no harm.

Taking a deep breath, I resolved to keep my feelings for Javvil tucked away, hidden beneath layers of professionalism. It was the only way to ensure the success of the Bride Games—and to protect my own heart.

“Amazing work, everyone,” I managed to say, forcing a smile onto my face as I inspected the ornaments. “Make sure your ornaments are ready for judging.” My gaze lingered on the one crafted by Javvil and Emily—a delicate snowflake adorned with glittering gems. It was lovely, no doubt, but it was also a painful reminder of what could never be.

The room erupted into a flurry of activity as everyone rushed to put the finishing touches on their creations. I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the final moments of the game—and the decision that awaited me.

“All right, everyone,” I announced once the timer had run out. “Please bring your ornaments up to the front so we can begin the judging process. Let’s see what you’ve created,” I declared, forcing a smile as I prepared to judge the ornaments. “And may the best couple win!”

As the contestants eagerly lined up, their ornaments held proudly in their hands, I stole one last glance at Javvil and Emily. They looked so happy together, their eyes shining with excitement and anticipation.

It was then that I knew my decision had been the right one. No matter how much it hurt, I would bury my feelings for Javvil deep within myself, choosing professionalism and duty above all else.

CHAPTER 12



JAVVIL

As I made my way to the cafeteria for dinner that evening, I turned a corner to find Faith leaning back against a wall, holding her forehead as if it pained her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my breath catching in my chest at the sight of her feeling unhappy.

She simply shook her head and pointed at the room where the ornament creation Game had taken place the day before.

Frowning, I stepped into the room, and my heart sank. The chaos and destruction left behind by another act of sabotage were impossible to ignore. The once festive space now looked like a scene from a disaster movie.

Broken pieces of ornaments lay scattered across the floor, glinting under the dim lights. Shards of glass mixed with splintered wood and crumpled tinsel formed a carpet of devastation. The smell of burnt pine filled the air, mingling with the scent of holiday spices that now seemed so out of place.

“Vulk,” I whispered, letting out a breath. My chest tightened as I took in the extent of the damage. The once beautiful Christmas tree, adorned with sparkling lights and meticulously hung ornaments, was now a charred skeleton, its branches drooping in defeat like a beached cardilifish.

My eyes wandered over the ruined decorations. The thought of everyone’s work being destroyed so senselessly made the blood pound in my head. Who could have done such a thing?

“Can you believe this?” I heard Faith call out from behind me, her voice strained and tinged with disbelief. She was crouched down, examining a partially crushed ornament, her brow furrowed.

“It’s terrible,” I replied.

The impact on my emotions was overwhelming. I felt a mixture of anger, sadness, and frustration that someone would deliberately sabotage our efforts to bring happiness and unity to Station 21. This event meant so much to us—to Faith—and it pained me to see it in shambles.

I moved farther into the room, stepping carefully over the debris and picked up a broken ornament, studying its shattered beauty. Anger washed over me, as if Faith herself had been broken rather than simply a room destroyed.

“Javvil?” Faith asked, coming to stand beside me. “Are you okay?”

I looked into her eyes and saw genuine concern reflected there. For a moment, I felt strangely vulnerable, as if she could see straight through to the turmoil that was brewing inside me. But I couldn’t let her know just how much she meant to me—not yet.

“Of course,” I lied, forcing a smile. “It’s just a shame that all our work has gone to waste.” I clenched the broken ornament in my hand, vowing silently to find out who had done this and make them pay.

As I continued to survey the wreckage, my heart plummeted further with each shattered ornament and ruined decoration. The extent of the damage was staggering—it was as if a Jaruvian sandstorm had ripped through the room, leaving nothing but chaos in its wake. It was clear that whoever was responsible had wanted to disrupt the Bride Games. And their message had certainly been received.

But I could help Faith.

Again.

“Let’s fix this,” I said.

She blinked. “Is it even worth it?”

“Of course.”

“Okay...” She drew out the word doubtfully but began moving through the room and picking up the pieces of the ornaments, and I knew my instincts had been right when her misery turned to determination.

“And then tomorrow, you will run the next game—what is it?”

“Snowball fight,” she said.

Whatever that was. Still, she needed support more than I needed to ask questions about an odd human tradition. “Right. Tomorrow you will have a snowball fight as if this never happened. You will not give the saboteur the satisfaction of believing their actions have affected you.”

Faith swallowed visibly and nodded. “You’re right. I won’t allow this to derail me.”

“Then let’s begin.” I bent over and gathered two handfuls of debris, carrying them over to the trash reclamation chute.

We worked together to salvage what we could from the wreckage, and I found myself stealing glances at Faith, her golden hair gleaming in the dim lighting. She was so focused on our task, her face drawn, and her expression strained as she carefully pieced together fragments of broken ornaments. It was in moments like these that I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she was my true mate—the one I longed to share my life with.

She was a beacon of light in the darkness.

And I would make her mine.

CHAPTER 13



FAITH

I never thought I'd find myself in a snowball fight with a blue-haired, pink-skinned Khanavai alien in a snowy landscape on Station 21. But there we were—Javvil and I—laughing and ducking behind mounds of artificially created snow.

He'd been right. Cleaning the trashed ornament room the night before had definitely made me feel better.

"Got you!" Javvil yelled, his eyes gleaming with mischief as he landed a direct hit on my shoulder. The snow splintered off my coat, but I could still feel its cold touch.

"Two can play at that game," I taunted, quickly packing together a snowball of my own and launching it toward him. He dodged easily, but I couldn't help laughing at the thrill of the chase. The fact that this was all part of my job made it even sweeter.

"Is that the best you've got?" Javvil teased, grinning wickedly as he scooped up more snow. I hadn't seen him so carefree before. This playful side of him was a welcome change—and not just for the sake of our holiday special episode.

Don't think about that, Faith. You're running the Games, not participating.

All around us, Khanavai males and human women laughed and tossed snowballs.

I hadn't intended to participate, but Javvil had drawn me in with a snowball and a laugh.

“Watch out!” I warned, tossing another snowball at him. This time, it struck him square in the chest, exploding with a satisfying poof. His laughter echoed through the crisp air, and I felt a warm glow spread through my chest at the sound.

“Nice shot!” he said, brushing snow off his own chest. “But don’t think for one second that you’re going to win this battle.”

“Bring it on.” Excitement coursed through me. It was almost as if we were two kids again, playing in the snow without a care in the world.

Javvil’s eyes sparkled with excitement as he matched my every move. Was this newfound camaraderie a sign of something more?

“Ready to admit defeat?” I asked breathlessly, ducking behind a snowbank for cover.

“Never!” Javvil shouted back, his laughter filling the air as he prepared another icy projectile.

The snowball fight intensified as we darted across the snowy landscape, our boots crunching into the fresh powder. Cold air nipped at my cheeks, while Javvil’s pink skin seemed to glow against the stark white backdrop of the snow.

I managed to hit Javvil squarely in the chest once again. He stumbled back, feigning injury and gasping dramatically.

The thrill of the game coursed through me, fueled by the way our laughter mingled in the frosty air.

As the snowball fight continued, I stole glances at Javvil. There was an undeniable spark between us. Every time our hands brushed together while forming snowballs or when he caught me off guard with an unexpected tackle, I felt a shiver run down my spine—and not just from the cold. And as our playful battle continued, I couldn’t help but think that maybe there was something magical happening between us.

“Watch out!” Javvil called, tossing a snowball high into the air. I had only seconds to react, attempting to dodge the incoming projectile. But as it came hurtling toward me, I stumbled over

my own feet, tumbling to the ground with a soft thud. Javvil's eyes widened and he rushed over to me.

"Are you okay?" he asked, extending a hand to help me up. As I reached for his hand, our fingers intertwined, and the electricity between us seemed to surge. I looked up at him, my breath catching in my throat as his intense gaze bore into mine.

"Uh, yeah... I'm fine," I stammered, struggling to find my footing as he helped me back up. The warmth of his hand lingered as we separated.

"Good," Javvil said softly, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "I wouldn't want to be responsible for any injuries."

"Of course not," I replied, trying to regain my composure. "But you should know, I don't go down easily."

"Neither do I," he responded, his eyes twinkling with mischief. We stood there, held in each other's gaze, the snow falling gently around us like a delicate curtain.

My breath caught in my throat as I found myself unexpectedly close to Javvil. His pink skin seemed to glow against the stark white backdrop of the snow, and I could feel the heat radiating off him despite the cold surrounding us. His blue hair framed his face perfectly, making his intense gaze even more captivating.

The atmosphere crackled with tension, the vibrant decorations for the Alien Bride Lottery's holiday special casting a kaleidoscope of colors across our faces. It was impossible to ignore the palpable chemistry between us, like the pull of an unseen magnet drawing us closer.

The intensity in his eyes made my stomach flutter, and I struggled to maintain my composure.

"Are you cold?" Javvil asked, his voice a low rumble.

"Maybe a little," I admitted, turning to face him as we stood beneath the gently falling snow. My breath hitched at the intensity of his gaze.

He murmured something in Khanavai that my implant didn't translate, his voice deep and resonant, and I leaned in slightly toward him, drawn in by his magnetic presence.

Without breaking eye contact, Javvil took a deliberate step closer to me. His towering figure loomed over me.

I gulped, feeling my resolve falter under the intensity of his stare. The heat radiating from his body warmed me, chasing away the chill of my holiday cynicism. The moment hung suspended in time. And for the first time, I allowed myself to entertain the thought that perhaps there was more to this Christmas romance than I had ever dared to believe.

My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts—of hesitation and fear, struggling against the undeniable pull I felt toward this alien man.

His lips met mine gently at first, a delicate dance of tender caresses, our kiss was nothing short of electric. The moment our mouths touched, it felt as though every nerve ending in my body had come alive, sparking with an intensity that threatened to consume me. It was a passion that I hadn't known I was capable of feeling, a connection so fierce and profound that it shook me to my core.

The taste of our kiss was like nothing I'd ever known—a sweet blend of peppermint and hot cocoa, with just a hint of something uniquely Khanavai, leaving me craving more.

The sensation of his full, velvety lips pressed against mine felt like a fusion of fire and ice; a delicious contrast that sent a shiver through me. His tongue traced the seam of my lips, seeking entrance, and I willingly obliged, deepening the connection between us.

The world around us seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of us standing amidst the swirling snowflakes.

I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him closer as the heat between us intensified. His strong hands found their way to my waist, steadying me as I lost myself in the sensation of his lips on mine, his tongue teasing at the seam of my lips until I opened for him.

He plundered my mouth, and my knees weakened as his hands slid around to my back, urging me closer. Heat flooded my core.

The snow under our feet crunched softly as we moved closer, our hearts pounding in unison. It was as though we were discovering something new, something precious and rare.

My hands trembled as they reached up to tangle in his hair, the strands cool and silky beneath my fingertips. His lips were warm and inviting, a perfect contrast to the chill that permeated the air around us. The taste of him was like a heady blend of spices and sweet nectar.

Javvil's arms wrapped around me, his eyes never straying from mine, the tender touch of his fingers as they traced the curve of my cheek.

The snow continued to fall softly, dusting our shoulders and hair as Javvil pulled me closer. His strong arms enveloped me in an embrace that sent shivers down my spine. Our faces were mere inches apart, and I could feel the warmth of his breath on my cold cheeks.

As our lips remained sealed together, I felt the world around us disappear. The twinkling Christmas lights and festive decorations that had once filled my vision seemed to dissipate into a distant blur. The only thing that mattered in this moment was Javvil, his strong arms encircling me, and the all-consuming passion that burned within us.

"Javvil," I breathed against his mouth, the name escaping unbidden in a whisper of surrender. I felt as if gravity had vanished and left us adrift in the vastness of space. Time seemed to slow down, each second stretching into an eternity as we lost ourselves in each other's embrace.

"Shhh," he murmured, the vibrations of his voice sending a frisson of heat through me. "Just let go, Faith. Let yourself feel."

Inhaling deeply, I did exactly that. I allowed myself to be consumed by the warmth of his touch, the tenderness of his kiss, and the undeniable connection that had drawn us together

against all odds. For once, I let go of my fears and my inhibitions.

“God, you’re amazing,” I breathed several long moments later, marveling at the intensity of our chemistry.

The sound of another contestant screeching with delight as a snowball hit her shattered the moment, and I pulled away from Javvil guiltily.

“I...I have to go...do something,” I stammered. “Something for the Games.”

And then I fled.



I sat by the Christmas tree in the observation deck late that night, twinkling lights and colorful ornaments highlighted against the field of stars outside the viewscreens and enveloping me in a cozy and reflective atmosphere. The soft glow of the fairy lights illuminated my face as I gazed at it, lost in thought.

Tomorrow was December 24, the final day of the Bride Games.

One more day.

Then Christmas.

It was hard to believe that just a short while ago, I would have rolled my eyes at the very concept of celebrating Christmas on Station 21 with a bunch of aliens.

As I studied the delicate ornaments we’d salvaged from the competition, my thoughts were filled with doubts—all about my growing feelings for Javvil.

The Khanavai man had managed to capture my attention in a way no one else ever had. Against all odds, he had become an important part of my life, and the undeniable connection between us was beginning to scare me.

I found myself drawn to him—his strong, serious demeanor, his unwavering focus on duty and honor.

Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that falling for him would mean losing the independence I had worked so hard to maintain.

"Javvil," I sighed, whispering his name as if it were a secret I wasn't ready to share with the world. My heart fluttered with excitement whenever he was around, but there was also a sense of trepidation.

Oh, hell. I might as well call it what it was.

Terror.

I was terrified of giving into these feelings.

The festive spirit that surrounded me only amplified my confusion, intensifying the internal struggle I faced as the Bride Games neared their conclusion.

I knew I had to make a decision about my feelings for Javvil soon.

"Can I really do this?" I murmured to myself, torn between the potential risks and rewards of pursuing a relationship with him. Could I find a way to balance love and my career? Was it worth taking the chance?

My desire for independence had always been a driving force in my life, pushing me to prioritize my career and maintain my sense of self. The idea of losing myself in a romantic relationship terrified me, yet as my feelings for Javvil continued to grow, I found it harder to ignore the part of me that yearned to explore the possibilities between us.

I had worked too hard to get where I was, and I refused to let anything—or anyone—stand in the way of my dreams.

As I stared at the twinkling Yuletide tree before me, its vibrant ornaments shimmering with a promise of warmth and comfort, I knew that there was no easy answer. But perhaps the beauty of love was in its uncertainty—in the courage and faith it took to leap into the unknown, hand in hand with the one who makes your heart soar.

In the end, it was a decision only I could make.

But I was beginning to think I already knew what my decision would be.

The twinkling lights cast playful shadows across my face, a stark contrast to the somber thoughts clouding my mind.

And as I gazed upon the ornaments—each one a symbol of love, joy, and possibility—I knew that soon, I would have to make a choice that could change everything.

But first, I had one more issue to take care of.

I was going to track down the person who had been sabotaging my Games.

CHAPTER 14



FAITH

With every fiber of my being, I was determined to uncover the identity of the saboteur. I couldn't let their actions go unpunished.

Their time was running out.

So I began to interview contestants and staff members, gathering evidence to build my case against the saboteur.

"Excuse me," I said as I approached one of the contestants, a tall, muscular Khanavai male with green skin. "Do you have a moment to talk about the recent incidents?"

"Of course," he replied, his voice deep and resonant. "Anything to help."

"Have you noticed anything unusual or anyone acting suspiciously?" I asked.

He thought for a moment before responding, "Well, there was someone lurking in the shadows near the gift-wrapping challenge yesterday. I couldn't see their face, but they seemed out of place."

"Interesting," I murmured, jotting down the information. "Thank you for your help."

As I continued my investigation, I spoke to several other contestants and staff members. Some had similar stories, while others had no information to offer. But I refused to give up. This was my chance to prove that I could run the Bride Games just as well as Vos Klavoii, if not better.

“Hey,” a familiar voice called out, interrupting my thoughts. I looked up to see Javvil. “I hear you’ve been asking questions about the sabotage. How’s the investigation going?”

“Slowly,” I admitted, brushing a strand of hair out of my face. “But I’m making progress.”

“Need any help?” he asked.

“Thanks,” I responded, touched by his offer. “But this is something I need to do on my own.”

And then I need to talk to you...about us, I added silently.

With renewed determination, I pressed on in my quest for answers. I owed it to the contestants, the staff, and myself to bring the saboteur to justice.

And as much as I hated to admit it, I perhaps owed it to the spirit of Christmas as well.

I reviewed the information I had gathered so far, trying to fit the pieces together. It all seemed to point to one person—someone who had always been there. The tension rose within me as I realized the implications of this discovery. If I was right, then the saboteur was a contestant.

With trepidation, I approached the contestant’s quarters, my heart pounding in my chest. I hesitated for a moment outside the door, taking a deep breath to steady myself. Then, steeling my resolve, I knocked firmly on the metal surface.

The door slid open, revealing the startled face of Atovin, one of the contestants who had been nothing but kind and supportive since the beginning of the Games.

“Atovin,” I began, my voice wavering slightly. “I need to talk to you about the incidents that have been happening during the Bride Games.”

“Of course,” he replied, his eyes filled with curiosity. “Please, come in.”

I stepped into his room, preparing myself for the confrontation ahead. “Atovin,” I said, forcing steadiness into my voice. “I’ve been trying to figure out who’s been sabotaging the Games,

and all the evidence points to you. Why would you do this? What do you have against me or the Bride Games?”

Atovin’s expression shifted from shock to anger, and he finally admitted, “It’s not you. It’s what you represent. A human woman in charge of something so important as the Bride Games just doesn’t sit right with some people on Khanav Prime. They’re worried that a human will not understand our customs and traditions, that you might make a mockery of them.”

“Then why didn’t you talk to me about it?” I demanded. “We could have worked together to ensure that everything went smoothly.”

He glared at me sullenly without answering, so I continued. “The Bride Games are supposed to bring people together, to foster understanding between different cultures. You’ve tried to tear that apart, all because you couldn’t accept that a human woman might be capable of running the show.”

I straightened my back and lifted my chin, asserting my authority as the head of the Bride Games. “If you were so concerned about our customs and traditions, Atovin, you should have trusted me to learn and respect them. Instead, you chose sabotage over collaboration.”

With that, I called security to come take care of the groom—or rather, the Khanavai male who would probably never again have a chance to take a bride.

And then I left Atovin’s room and focused on the task at hand: ensuring the grand finale of the Bride Games was a success.



Without anyone to sabotage it, the Christmas Eve Ball was nothing short of magical.

“Welcome, everyone,” I said, standing tall on the dais stage. “Tonight, we celebrate the unity and love you’ve found

throughout the Bride Games. Let us put aside the challenges we've faced and embrace the spirit of the holidays as we come together in joy and harmony. Let us enjoy this beautiful ball and celebrate the connections we've made—and tomorrow, we will introduce the new couples!”

As the music began and the dancing started, I knew that despite the obstacles, the Bride Games had succeeded in what they were meant to do: bring people together in love and understanding.

I stood near the edge of the dance floor, feeling a sense of accomplishment. Despite the obstacles we had faced, the Bride Games had managed to bridge the gap between our two worlds, fostering understanding and unity. My heart swelled with pride as I watched humans and Khanavai alike dancing in harmony, their cultural differences melting away beneath the magic of the holiday season.

“Care for a dance, Faith?” Javvil’s deep voice broke through my thoughts, his pink-skinned hand extended toward me. His blue hair seemed to shimmer under the soft glow of the fairy lights, and his eyes held a gentle warmth that made my heart race.

“Of course,” I replied, placing my hand in his and allowing him to lead me onto the dance floor. As we moved gracefully to the music, our bodies in perfect sync, I felt a connection growing between us. Our meaningful glances spoke volumes, and the subtle touches—the brush of his fingers against mine, the gentle pressure of his hand on my waist—sent shivers down my spine.

“I wanted to thank you for your support throughout the Games,” I said, looking into his eyes. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Your strength and resilience are what truly made this event a success,” he responded, his gaze never leaving mine. “You have done an incredible job organizing these Bride Games. And I must admit, hearing you dealt with the saboteur has only deepened my admiration for you.”

A blush crept across my cheeks at his words, and I found myself lost in his eyes once more.

As we danced, I marveled at how effortlessly our bodies moved together. Javvil's strong and steady presence seemed to guide me, allowing me to let go of my inhibitions and simply enjoy the moment. It was as if we had been dancing together for years, our chemistry undeniable.

The crowd around us seemed to take notice as well, their gazes lingering on us with a mixture of curiosity and admiration. For once, I didn't mind being the center of attention—not when it meant sharing such an intimate connection with Javvil.

As we continued to dance, I reflected on the emotional journey I had taken over the past few weeks. I had come to Station 21 believing love to be a foolish notion, but here I was, falling head over heels for an alien from another world.

“Have I mentioned how beautiful you look tonight?” Javvil whispered in my ear, his breath warm against my skin.

As the music swelled, I felt a sudden surge of courage. Without hesitation, I leaned in and pressed my lips against Javvil's, pouring all of my emotions into the kiss.

Javvil responded eagerly, his strong arms pulling me closer as our mouths moved in perfect harmony. The world around us seemed to fall away, leaving only the two of us—united by love, respect, and the magic of the holiday season.

We finally broke apart, breathless from the intensity of our embrace.

I knew it was stupid, but I said it anyway.

“Come back to my quarters with me.”

CHAPTER 15



JAVVIL

“Come back to my quarters with me.”
Had I heard her correctly?

Faith’s kiss ignited a fire deep within my chest. The taste of snow and Faith lingering on my lips only added to the electricity between us. She let out a shiver, her breath clouding in front of her face. I had never craved contact like this before; it was overwhelming yet elating. She looked up at me with those beautiful eyes, trying her best to keep her composure, but I could see the desire burning behind them.

“Yes,” I breathed out. “Let’s go now.”

As we walked through the fake snow on our way to her quarters, the cold bit at my exposed skin, but I barely felt it—all I could think about was Faith’s soft body pressed against me, our hearts beating in sync.

I glanced down at our clasped hands, marveling at how soft her skin was against mine.

She led me to her quarters, where I pulled her into my arms and sealed my lips with hers once again, my tongue darting out to explore her sweet taste. As our kiss deepened, we stumbled into her rooms together, the door closing behind us.

Our mouths moved in perfect harmony, our tongues dancing as if we had been practicing for years. Her scent, a uniquely human mix of vanilla and cinnamon from the cider she’d been drinking earlier, intoxicated me further. Her hands curled

around my neck, pulling me closer still, as I wrapped an arm around her waist to steady us both against the wall.

My heart raced as we swayed there together; it had been too long since I had felt this kind of connection with someone.

Actually, I had never felt this kind of connection, I realized.

Breaking the kiss finally, I looked down at her, her half-lidded eyes staring back at me, full of desire. “Are you sure?” I asked huskily.

“Yes,” she breathed out between rapid breaths. “I’m sure.”

Without another word, I picked her up human-bridal-style and walked us over to her bedroom. The lights flickered on automatically as we entered, revealing the cozy space filled with festive decorations. A red-and-green comforter covered the bed, snowflakes dotted across it in shimmering glitter, and all I could think about was having Faith there underneath me, around me

Slowly lowering her onto the mattress, I leaned in to place a soft kiss on her collarbone, my lips trailing lower and lower still until they reached the hem of her sweater. I paused there, taking in her sweet scent once again. My fingers traced the outline of her leggings before I gently eased them down over her thighs, pausing to lick the soft skin there.

Faith gasped in anticipation, arching her back gracefully as my breath fanned out across her skin. I pulled her sweater off next, then moved down again. My teeth grazed her abdomen playfully, and I felt her shiver. She moaned softly, pushing into my touch.

I chuckled softly against her stomach and pulled back slightly to look at her, our gazes meeting once more. There was such depth and longing within them that it took my breath away.

I was struck by the beauty of her human form—soft curves and delicate skin so different from my own. With reverence, I kissed every inch of her body, as if to reassure her that this was where we belonged.

My fingers moved to her thighs, and my lips followed suit, leaving a trail of burning kisses up her legs until I reached the

lacy edge of her underwear. Faith couldn't suppress a whimper when I teased the fabric with my teeth before pulling it off slowly, revealing her to me completely.

My lips teased the sensitive skin of her inner thighs, and she writhed beneath me.

As I tasted her for the first time, Faith cried out in pleasure, her hands gripping the comforter as if to anchor herself to reality.

"Javvil, please... don't stop," she begged, her moans growing more urgent with each flick of my tongue.

I pulled away, my eyes meeting hers.

"Say my name," I commanded, circling her clit with my tongue. "Say it."

"Javvil!" she whispered, her voice hoarse.

I flickered my tongue across her until she moaned, rewarding her for saying my name.

Moments later, she screamed, her body trembling with the force of her release.

As I raised myself over her again, our tongues met hungrily, allowing her to taste herself on me. The air around us seemed to hum with electricity.

We moved together, grinding against each other as if we couldn't get enough skin-to-skin contact, our bodies intertwining in a dance only we could understand.

My hands caressed every inch of her body; soft skin, silky hair, and lush curves. Faith's nails raked lightly against my back, leaving goosebumps in their wake. She moaned into my mouth as I kissed my way down her neck.

As I nibbled on her earlobe, she whispered, "Javvil... please."

I chuckled against her neck before taking it between my teeth, eliciting a gasp of pleasure from her. My tongue swirled around it teasingly before moving down to nip at her collarbone, and I licked my way down to her chest. Faith

arched into my touch when I flicked my tongue over one nipple, causing it to harden under my ministrations.

I trailed kisses and bites down her torso, leaving anticipation in their wake for what was yet to come.

In one swift move, I rolled onto my back, pulling her along with me until she straddled me. Her hands found my abs, exploring the ridges of muscle beneath her fingertips. She smiled wickedly as I let out a small groan at her touch.

I lifted her hips, pressing my swollen cock against her core. Faith moaned in response, grinding herself against me as if trying to meld our bodies together. I let out a low growl, my hands sliding down her hips.

I slid a finger into her wetness, making her shiver with delight. "You feel so good," I whispered, my voice rough with desire. Faith threw her head back, arching her back off the bed as she met my touch with moans and gasps. My other hand cupped her breast, swirling around her nipple as my finger moved deeper inside her.

She rocked her hips in time with my finger, wanting more. I let out a deep rumble of pleasure as I added another finger, stretching her slowly but surely.

As our kisses intensified, we both lost track of time and space. Our bodies moved together, becoming one in their dance of passion.

I rolled her onto her back and positioned my member at her entrance. Faith gasped as I slowly eased inside her, filling her fully for the first time.

She threw her head back again, digging her nails into my shoulders as I began to move inside her, slowly at first, then gaining speed and depth, creating a slick sound that filled the room, mingling with her small gasps and moans echoing against the faint hum of the station's air circulator.

As she took me deeper inside her, her tight warmth engulfing me, I lost myself in the moment. I gripped her hips tighter, pushing myself against her, desperate for more. The rhythm of our lovemaking built, my heart pounding in time with each

thrust. It felt as if every touch, every moan, every shiver sent electric currents through my body.

And then, without warning, I felt it coming, like a wave crashing over me, taking me in its powerful grip. My muscles tensed, my cock throbbed, and I knew I couldn't hold back any longer.

With a low growl, I pulled her even closer, my body arching as I let go, filling her with my seed.

The sensation was overwhelming, intense, like nothing I had ever felt before. Each pulse sent ripples of pleasure through her body, and my own, as if we were connected by an invisible cord.

I cried out her name, my voice hoarse with need.

Her body shook beneath mine as she met me in that moment, her own climax overtaking her.

Her nails dug into my shoulders.

And still, we moved together, lost in the passion of our union, until our breathing became ragged, our movements less controlled, fueled by this newfound desire between us, and finally, we collapsed together.

CHAPTER 16



JAVVIL

The scent of peppermint and pine filled the air as I lay with Faith, our bodies still entwined from our passionate encounter. It was almost as if our souls were dancing together beneath the festive lights, wrapped in the warmth of love.

I let out a groan of pleasure. The feel of Faith's soft skin under my hands was intoxicating, her every curve perfectly fitting against me. I tasted her lips again, our tongues tangling together, her scent filling my nostrils with warmth and sweetness.

Her touch made me tremble, awakening my Khanavai desire once more.

My mating cock began to grow larger, pulsing with an unstoppable need for connection and bonding. I felt it press against Faith's, and her playful laughter reached my ears.

"Wow," she said, her voice warm and rich. "You're ready for round two already? I must be quite the gift."

My cock hardened, pressing against her, wanting more. I could feel it lengthening, stretching against her tight entrance just right, ready to plunge deeper once more.

"Are all Khanavai men so insatiable?" she teased, her fingers lightly grazing my growing arousal.

Lost in the warmth of Faith's embrace, I could feel my mating cock continue to grow, a sensation both thrilling and unfamiliar. My heart raced with a mixture of excitement and

anxiety as our bodies remained entwined, our laughter and playful banter filling the air.

“Javvil... what’s happening?” Faith’s voice suddenly turned serious, her gaze drawn down to the sight between us. She stared in astonishment at the second penis emerging from within the first.

I looked down, taking in the sight of my Khanavai mating cock. Though I had heard of this unique aspect of my people, I had never experienced it myself. “This... this is a Khanavai mating cock.”

“A... what?” she asked, confusion painting her features as she continued to stare at the unexpected development.

“Among my people, true fated mates are bound by more than just love and passion,” I explained, my words carefully chosen as I sought to convey the depth of significance behind this occurrence. “When two souls are destined to be together, a Khanavai male experiences a unique transformation during the act of love. A second penis, known as the mating cock, appears as a symbol of our eternal bond.”

“Does this mean...” Faith trailed off, the realization dawning on her face as she looked back up at me.

“Yes,” I confirmed, my heart swelling with emotion as I gazed into her eyes. “It means we are true fated mates.”

The revelation hung in the air between us, as heavy as the scents that filled the room. We were more than just two strangers brought together by chance; we were destined, written in the very fabric of the universe itself.

“Wow,” she breathed, her fingers tracing the unique curve of my mating cock with a gentle, almost reverent touch.

“Nor did I,” I admitted, my voice thick with emotion. “But now that we have found each other, I cannot imagine a future without you by my side.”

The warmth of Faith’s touch sent shivers down my spine as she traced the outline of my cock with her delicate fingers. The sight of her golden hair cascading over her shoulders,

framing her angelic face, filled me with a love so intense that it was almost too much to bear.

“Javvil,” she whispered, her voice husky and thick with desire, “I want to make you feel as incredible as you’ve made me feel.”

My heart swelled at her words, and I could barely manage a nod in response. Faith smiled up at me, her eyes twinkling with mischief, before she lowered herself to take my mating cock into her warm, inviting mouth.

I gasped, my entire body tensing as she enveloped me with her lips and tongue. It was indescribable—this connection we shared, made even more potent by the knowledge that we were destined for each other.

“Does it feel good?” she asked, pulling back for a moment to look up at me.

“More than you know,” I breathed. “You are truly amazing.”

“Then let’s make the most of this,” she replied, returning her attention to my throbbing mating cock.

Faith’s soft lips moved along my length, her tongue teasing and exploring every sensitive spot. Somehow, she managed to make each stroke, each caress, feel more incredible than the last. It was as if our souls were merging together, creating a bond that no force in the universe could ever break.

“You’re... incredible,” I managed to choke out between gasps, my fingers tangling in her hair as I fought to maintain some semblance of control.

“Only for you,” she murmured, her words vibrating against my skin.

The pleasure built, threatening to consume me entirely, and I knew that we were truly destined for one another, each piece of our hearts fitting together like a perfectly crafted puzzle.

“Enough,” I gasped, unable to bear the exquisite pleasure any longer. Gently, I disentangled my fingers from Faith’s hair and guided her up along my body. With a sudden surge of strength and urgency, I pushed her down onto her back.

I pressed my lips to hers in a searing kiss that melted away any lingering inhibitions. As our tongues danced together, tasting and teasing each other, I shifted my hips, aligning my aching cock with her slick entrance.

Excitement thrummed through my veins like a living thing, urging me onward, desperate to claim my mate once and for all.

“Are you ready?” I whispered against her ear, barely able to contain the need that threatened to consume me.

“More than ready,” Faith panted, her nails digging into my shoulders as she arched her back, silently beckoning me closer.

With a groan of pure desire, I entered her, feeling the delicious heat of her tight walls enveloping me completely. Her moans echoed through the room, mingling with the faint tinkling of Christmas bells from somewhere outside our little sanctuary.

Faith cried out, her legs wrapping around me as we moved together in perfect harmony.

I lowered my head to take one of her beautiful breasts into my mouth, sucking gently on her nipple as I continued to drive into her. The sensation was electric, sending shockwaves of pleasure coursing through both of us.

The taste of Faith’s skin, sweet like candy canes, lingered on my tongue as I pushed into her. My hand slid down between us, and I began to rub her clit gently, eliciting a sharp gasp from her lips.

“Let go,” I urged her. “I want to watch you fly.”

Her breath hitched as I increased the pressure, moving in small circles. Her body tensed, hovering on the edge of ecstasy.

This time screamed my name without prompting, her back arching off the bed as she succumbed to the powerful pleasure cascading through her.

The sight of her, so beautiful and vulnerable in her release, was more than I could bear. I pumped into her, feeling the heat building at the base of my spine, signaling my own impending climax.

I focused on the sensations enveloping us both. Faith's moans and gasps rang like a symphony in my ears. Her body trembled beneath me, her grip on my arms fierce and unrelenting.

It was then that I felt a sudden shift within me, a powerful wave of energy coursing through my veins as our bond solidified. The sensation was all-consuming, overwhelming in its intensity and beauty. Unable to contain myself any longer, I succumbed to the urge, my climax hitting me like a supernova.

I cried out, burying my face in the crook of Faith's neck as my release filled her, sealing our connection in the most primal and intimate way possible. She held me close, her fingers threading through my hair as we rode out the aftershocks together, our breaths mingling in the quiet aftermath.

As we lay there, our bodies still intertwined, I marveled at the fact that we had found each other in this vast expanse of space. It was as if fate had conspired to bring us together on Station 21, against all odds.

CHAPTER 17



FAITH

After a few moments, I forced myself to move. “I have to get back to the ball,” I murmured. “I still have a job to do.”

“Of course.” Javvil paused. “Perhaps I can arrange to be stationed on Earth.”

My heart squeezed at the offer, and I smiled, unable to believe what I was about to say. “Wherever you’re stationed, I’ll come with you. After all, there are stories everywhere. I can be a journalist anywhere in the universe.”

He paused in retrieving our clothing from the floor where we’d tossed it in our haste, then nodded as he separated mine out and handed it to me. “But we’ll try my way first. Yes?”

“Okay.”

I couldn’t quash the radiant smile on my face as we made our way back into the ball.

Javvil led me onto the dance floor. The music began to play, and we started to waltz together, our movements fluid and synchronized. It was as if we had been dancing together for years, even though this was the first time we’d ever attempted the waltz together.

“Where did you learn to dance like this?” I whispered, leaning in closer to him.

“Ah, well,” he smiled, his voice low and enchanting, “I had the computer teach me last night, just so I could dance with you tonight. I wanted it to be perfect.”

A warm feeling spread through my chest, and I smiled at his sweet gesture. “You really did that? Just for me?”

“Of course.” His gaze never left mine. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Faith.”

As we continued to dance, I found myself lost in his eyes, the rest of the world fading away as we moved together.

The final notes of the waltz played out, and I reluctantly pulled away from Javvil’s warm embrace. The love in his eyes was a balm for my soul, and I wished we could hold onto this moment forever.

But duty called.

“I’m afraid I have to leave you for a moment,” I told him, my voice tinged with regret. “I have to announce the winner of the ‘Mistletoe Moment’ contest. Even I don’t know who won yet.”

“I’ll be here, waiting for your return.”

I pressed my hand against his chest for a brief moment before turning away.

Stepping up onto the dais, I surveyed the room, filled with couples eager to hear the results. Their anticipation was an electric current running through the air. I took a deep breath, letting it fill me with a sense of purpose. This was my job, after all: to create these unforgettable moments for others, even if it meant stepping away from my own happiness for a time.

“Good evening, everyone!” I announced, my voice steady despite the rapid beating of my heart. “It’s time to reveal the viewer-chosen ‘Mistletoe Moment’ of the Bride Games! The lucky couple will receive a once-in-a-lifetime honeymoon vacation.”

A murmur of excitement rippled through the crowd, and I felt a thrill of pride at their reaction.

“Are you ready for the result?” I asked, my voice carrying across the hushed ballroom. With bated breath, the crowd collectively leaned in.

I tapped the epaper, and my heart thudded in anticipation. As the winners' names materialized on the screen, a gasp escaped my lips.

“Wha—”

The screens surrounding the ballroom flickered to life, displaying Javvil and me, standing amidst swirling synthetic snowflakes, our lips locked in our first passionate embrace after the spirited snowball fight.

A collective murmur of surprise rose from the crowd as they took in the unexpected sight.

“Look at that,” someone in the crowd called out. “The director herself is part of the Mistletoe Moment!”

“Seems like love knows no boundaries!” another voice chimed in, causing laughter to ripple through the room.

How had our stolen moment been captured? What would be the implications of the viewers choosing us?

“Everyone, please!” I raised my hands, trying to regain control of the situation. “As your Bride Games Director, I need to address this matter. Give me a moment to figure things out.”

“Take all the time you need, Faith,” one of the contestants shouted, her smile genuine and supportive.

The room buzzed with excitement, and I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. My heart thudded in my chest as I stared at the faces of the other contestants, their expressions a mix of shock and delight.

“Faith, you deserve this!” Emily shouted, her eyes alight with happiness.

I blinked in surprise—until I saw a blue-skinned Khanavai standing behind her, his arms wrapped possessively around her waist.

“Please,” I replied, swallowing hard, “as the Bride Games Director, it’s important that I remain impartial. I don’t think I can accept the honeymoon.”

“Come on, Faith!” another contestant called out, stepping forward, her violet gown shimmering under the dimmed lights. “It was the viewers who chose you! You can’t deny that they saw something special between you and Javvil!”

The room erupted with cheers and applause, and I could feel their expectations bearing down on me. How could I turn my back on their kindness and support?

My fingers tightened around the edges of the e-paper, my thoughts racing. Could I really accept such a prize? It wasn’t fair to the others, was it?

“I’ll look into it. I promise,” I said finally, raising my hands to quiet the crowd before I stepped down from the dais. As my feet touched the ground, Javvil reached out and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close. His warmth enveloped me, and I leaned into him.

The world seemed to blur around us as Javvil’s arms held me close, a beacon of safety and comfort amidst the revelry. I could feel the rhythm of his heartbeat against my chest, echoing my own.

Without a word, Javvil leaned in and pressed his lips against mine, sending a torrent of electricity through my body.

My heart raced as our lips danced together, the passion igniting between us, fueled by the connection that had drawn us together from the start.

The cheers and applause of the other contestants faded into the background, replaced by the sweet symphony of our intertwined hearts.

When he pulled away from our kiss, Javvil smiled, his thumb caressing my cheek with a tender touch. “Our love is the true prize. Everything else is just... a bonus.”

In that instant, I knew that it didn’t matter if we took that prize or not.

Because no matter the challenges we faced, what the future might hold, every day with Javvil would feel like a honeymoon.

A clock struck midnight, and the screens around us all faded to show the star-studded heavens outside us.

“Merry Christmas,” I whispered to Javvil.

“Merry Christmas,” he replied, the words obviously foreign in his mouth, but his expression sincere.

And as I gazed into Javvil’s eyes, filled with warmth and love, I knew that we were destined for a lifetime of Christmases shared side by side, our hearts forever bound by the miracle of our love.

The station lights dimmed, and the universe spun around us, and I knew that our love would shine brighter than any star, guiding us safely through the cosmos for all eternity.

EPILOGUE



LIRIK

The sight of Faith and Javvil, hand in hand as they exchanged tender glances, filled my heart with a bittersweet ache. Their laughter rang like chimes through the festive air, their love defying the vastness of space that separated our worlds. I felt a twinge of envy as I sipped my drink, the sweet taste of spiced eggnog doing little to distract me from the longing that surfaced within.

As I stood at the edge of the party, my gaze was drawn to Faith and Javvil, who seemed to be sneaking away from the festivities again. While laughter and music filled the air around me, a pang of sadness settled in my chest as I realized I didn't have a mate to share moments like these with. The twinkling lights and vibrant decorations only served to remind me that I was alone.

And the thought of choosing a human female who wasn't my true mate made my stomach twist.

"Are you enjoying the party, Lirik?" Cav asked, approaching me with an amused smile as he observed my preoccupation with the couple.

"Of course," I replied, forcing a grin. "It's been quite the experience, these human traditions."

"Indeed," he agreed, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "So, what's on your mind? You seem... distracted."

I hesitated, unsure of how to voice my thoughts without betraying the vulnerability that plagued me. But as I watched

Faith and Javvil, their love a beacon in the dimly lit room, I knew I couldn't deny the truth any longer.

"It's just... seeing them together, it makes me wonder," I confessed, my gaze lingering on the couple as they shared another kiss beneath the mistletoe. "What would it be like to have a human mate?"

Cav studied me for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "You know, love is a powerful force. It transcends boundaries, even those we think are insurmountable."

"Perhaps," I murmured, my heart racing at the thought of finding a true mate. Would I be able to share in her happiness and laughter, just as Javvil did with Faith?

"Only one way to find out, isn't there?" Cav said. "Take a chance, my friend. Open your heart to the possibilities."

"Maybe you're right," I conceded, feeling a spark of hope ignite within me. After all, if Faith and Javvil could bridge the gap between their worlds, maybe there was someone out there for me too.

No. Not *maybe*. I would find my human mate, just as Javvil had found his in Faith. And together, we would face the challenges and joys that life on Station 21—and beyond—had to offer.

"All right," I said, determination flickering within me like the flame of a candle. "I'll do it. I'll open myself up to the possibility of finding a human mate. Who knows what the future might hold?"

"Good for you!" Cav beamed, raising his glass in a toast. "To new beginnings and the pursuit of love."

When I didn't move, he leaned toward me to whisper, "It's a human thing. Natalie taught me. You're supposed to repeat the toast and tap the containers together."

"The pursuit of love," I replied, clinking my glass against his. As the sound of our glasses rang out, mingling with the laughter and chatter of those around us, I felt a sense of excitement building within me.

Now I just had to find her—my mate.

My *true* mate.

The one I was meant to be with.

No matter what my commander ordered.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today, *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times* bestselling author Margo Bond Collins is a former college English professor who, tired of explaining the difference between “hanged” and “hung,” turned to writing romance novels instead. Sometimes her heroines kill monsters, sometimes they kiss aliens. But they always aim for the heart!

Want to hang out with the author, win book prizes, see the cool covers first, and support Margo’s books on social media? Join [The Vampirarchy](#), Margo’s street team on Facebook!

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