



Married to the Beast (Beasts of the Kindred #10)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Bound by duty. Consumed by desire....

On Karpasian Prime, women have no rights—and Aleena has nothing. When her mother falls deathly ill, Aleena is forced into a brutal bargain: marry the terrifying Kindred Ambassador or let her mother die.

Ambassador Bearick has sworn never to love again after losing his wife. But his new bride—curvy, kind, and courageous—gets under his skin fast. Aleena is so beautiful and so brave but what about his vow to never Bond another bride to him?

As passion ignites, jealous enemies close in. Can Aleena and Bear survive the danger—and dare to Bond?

Find out in *Married to the Beast*!

Total Pages (Source): 45

ALEENA

Aleena stood outside the richly carved beezle wood door and tried to compose herself. She had been dreading this visit for months, but it could no longer be put off. The payment for her mother's medical care was past due and she would be unable to receive any more treatment until the balance was paid.

Aleena hated to come to this vast house—which had been her childhood home—to beg for help, but there was nowhere left to turn and she couldn't let her mother die. They had already sold or pawned everything of value they owned—her mother had parted with the last piece of jewelry Aleena's father had given her long ago. Aleena had even sold the beautiful party dress she had worn to her sixteenth nameday celebration, though she had shed bitter tears before taking it to the pawn shop. It represented a happier time in her life—a time of abundance and prosperity she was certain was never going to return.

And it wasn't just payment for the medical treatment she and her mother needed—their cupboard was bare and the tiny refrigeration unit in the corner of their kitchen held nothing but chilled water. Her mother needed to eat something to keep up her strength—she was already a faint shadow of the smiling, healthy woman she used to be—and Aleena had nothing to give her. Her own stomach growled as well, but she did her best to ignore it. She was young and strong and could go without for a long time—it was her mother she worried about.

In desperation, she had gone out looking for a job. But females weren't supposed to

work outside the home on Karpisian Sigma and the very few jobs that were open to women—mostly serving at a tea house or waiting on female customers as a shop girl—were given to the wives and daughters of the males who owned those businesses. There was no room for an outsider—even one willing to work for less than half of what such jobs usually paid. Aleena knew, because she had been out begging for work for the past two weeks.

The only other job open for a young female was to sell herself as a woman of the night—to let a stranger change the color of her eyes and turn them black as soot. But that was a last resort—Aleena honestly thought her mother would die of shame if she had to procure money in that way.

And so she was reduced to this—begging at the house which had once been her home. She hated it so much she could taste bile at the back of her throat, but she swallowed it down and knocked on the blue beezele wood door, praying a servant would answer.

Her prayers went unheeded by the Goddess of Mercy, however—instead of one of the parlor maids, it was Faleesha, Aleena's younger half-sister, who answered the door. Her brows drew low over her gorgeous pale blue eyes as she stared down her aristocratic nose at Aleena.

“What are you doing here? I thought my mother made it clear you're not welcome in this house,” she exclaimed, crossing her arms over her breasts, which were covered in a fine-link silver net, set with semi-precious stones.

Alleena's own breast net was made of a very poor alloy which was rusted and patched in places. It barely covered her too-large breasts, leaving the sides of her curving, creamy mounds bare. To her shame, her nipples stuck out as well through the large, crudely made links, which made her a target for men passing on the street.

The men whistled rudely and called to her, asking the price to change the color of her eyes, making Allena blush helplessly. She wished often that she could cover herself, but only married females on Karpasian Sigma were allowed a modicum of privacy. Unmarried ones must show themselves so that males might appraise them and see if they were worthy to become wives.

Of course, none of the men who whistled and called to her was thinking of marrying her and even if they were, Aleena had no dowry. It had been taken from her when her father had disavowed her mother and they had both been thrown out of the house.

The reason her father had given for the disavowment was the fact that Aleena's mother had been unable to bear him any sons. And yet, the woman he took as his next wife—Faleesha's mother—hadn't born any either. She had only given him Faleesha, who he doted on as he had once used to dote on Aleena.

But once out of a man's house and far from his eyes, a woman is also far from his heart, as the old saying goes. Aleena's father had given her mother a generous settlement to start with, and even an allowance she could live on and raise her daughter on. But in the past several years he had seemed to forget all about his cast-off wife and daughter. The credit stopped coming and they had to start selling valuables. For the past three years, he hadn't even sent Aleena a name-day present.

Aleena had a suspicion that this neglect had much to do with the influence of her stepmother. Grindelia wanted all of her husband's time, attention, and money directed at herself and her daughter and she did her best to keep Aleena from ever seeing her father. She also let her scorn for Aleena be known and her daughter had picked it up early on—which was probably why she was looking at her half sister as though Aleena was scum she'd scraped off the bottom of her dainty silver slipper.

Well, I knew this wasn't going to be easy, Aleena told herself. She lifted her chin and frowned at her half-sister.

“I must see my father at once—it’s an urgent matter,” she said.

“I don’t think so.” Faleesha sniffed loudly, as though she smelled something bad. “We don’t let commoners like you in our home—mother says not to and the man of the house agrees with her.”

“I don’t care what your mother says, the man of the house is still my father and I will see him.”

Brushing past her half-sister, Aleena stepped across the threshold and went straight up the curving staircase to where her father’s study was located on the second floor. He was almost always there and she hoped to catch him before her stepmother intervened.

Behind her she could hear Faleesha draw in a shocked and aggrieved gasp. Her half-sister had a flair for the dramatic—no doubt she would act as though Aleena had assaulted her and forced her way into the house.

All the more reason to get to Father quickly! she told herself as she raced up the curving staircase.

Her father’s study door was in sight and she was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when an imposing figure came into view, blocking her path.

“And just what do you think you’re doing?” a familiar voice demanded.

It was Grindelia, her stepmother, resplendent in a long crimson split skirt and a breast net made of golden links so fine they didn’t show even a hint of flesh beneath.

The price of that one item of clothing alone could pay her own mother’s entire medical debt, Aleena thought bitterly as she came to a halt, just a few steps from the

top landing. Yet her stepmother wore it as part of her everyday outfit, casually flaunting the wealth she demanded from Aleena's father as her wifely due.

Her stepmother's brows were drawn down, her normally lovely face twisted into an ugly sneer as she stared contemptuously at Aleena.

"I said, what do you think you're doing?" she demanded again. "You know you're not allowed in this house! You and your ragged beggar of a mother have both been disavowed—we can't be seen letting your kind in here. The man of the house is a Statesman now—he's been inducted into the Ruling Council."

This was news to Aleena—but she didn't really care one way or another. She only knew that she had to speak to her father.

"I need to see—" she began but just then Faleesha came running up the stairs behind her.

"Faleesha—there you are! Whyever did you let this ragged creature into the house?" Grindelia demanded.

"Oh, Mother—I tried not to let her but she pushed me over and shoved her way inside!" Faleesha's pale blue eyes filled with easy tears—she had always been able to cry at the drop of a hat. "I'm quite certain I shall have bruises where she shoved me!"

"Why, you little beast!" Grindelia exclaimed, glaring down at Aleena. She had always been quick to defend her child and she always took Faleesha's side, even when she was in the wrong.

"I never shoved her," Aleena said steadily, lifting her chin. "My sleeve brushed hers as I was coming in the door—that's all."

“Liar!” Faleesha’s voice rose to a shrill pitch that seemed to drill into Aleena’s ears. “Liar, you pushed me down! I’m going to have bruises all up and down my side!”

“Here now, here now—what’s all this racket?” a deep voice demanded and the door to the study opened, revealing Aleena’s father at last.

“Oh, Father!” she exclaimed, feeling relieved. “Please—I need to speak to you but these two are trying to stop me.”

Aleena’s father looked distinctly uncomfortable. She was sure he still harbored some affection for her and some guilt over the disavowment of her mother, but he also didn’t like to upset his current wife.

“Well, now...” He sighed deeply, looking conflicted.

“Please, Father—it’s a matter of life or death!” Aleena hoped her words would convince him and it wasn’t like she was lying. If her mother couldn’t continue to get treatment, she would certainly die.

“All right.” He sighed again. “Come up—but only for a moment, child. We’re all busy here.”

“Greggor, I really must protest!” Aleena’s stepmother began. “You disavowed this little beggar along with her mother!”

“You disavow wives, Grindelia—not children,” her father corrected gently. “Come, child,” he added, speaking to Aleena. “I can give you but a moment of my time.”

Feeling marginally relieved, Aleena made her way up the stairs past her stepmother, who gave way with extremely poor grace. She followed her father into his study and got ready to state her case. However, any hope of privacy she might have had was

dashed, for Grindelia and Faleesha followed them in. The two of them seated themselves on the plush purra leather couch with its fat brown cushions and gleaming golden buttons, leaving Aleena no choice but to stand.

Well, she hadn't wanted to sit anyway, she told herself. She was too nervous to sit.

"Now what is it you want, child?" her father asked, going to sit behind his vast tikka wood desk which had been polished until its dark blue wood gleamed. "As I said, we're all quite busy at the moment."

Aleena took a deep breath—there was no delicate way to say this.

"I need fifty thousand credits to pay for my mother's medical treatments," she said bluntly, not trying to sugar coat it. "She has a rare blood disease, as you know. If she isn't able to continue treatment, she'll die."

Behind her, she could hear her stepmother sucking in a shocked gasp of air.

"Did you say fifty thousand credits!" she exclaimed, before Aleena's father could say anything at all. "You think we'll just hand you that kind of money, you little beggar?"

"It would just be a loan—I'll find a way to pay you back," Aleena said desperately, still speaking to her father. She knew he had the money—her stepmother's breast net alone had probably cost in the neighborhood of fifty thousand credits. If he could afford to let her deck herself in such splendor on a daily basis, he must have the money to save the life of his disavowed wife.

But her father frowned and sucked his teeth. Clearly he didn't want to make his current wife angry—not even to save the life of his disavowed wife.

"Please, Father—she'll die !" Aleena hated to beg, but this was her last chance. It was

either get the money for her mother's treatment here or sell herself on the streets and let a stranger change the color of her eyes.

"Lies!" her stepmother snarled. "I'm sure she's not that sick!"

"She is!" Aleena rounded on her. "If she doesn't get her next treatment, the sickness in her blood will spread to the rest of her body! She's barely hanging on as it is!"

"Why should we care?" Grindelia demanded, her pale blue eyes flashing. "A disavowed wife is nobody's concern—especially not the man who disavowed her!"

"My father only disavowed my mother because you lured him away!" Aleena cried, forgetting her plan to be calm and even-tempered. "She'd be safe and well and have as much treatment as she needed if it wasn't for you!"

"How dare you? Get out of my house at once!" Grindelia pointed at the study door, her arm stiff and her eyes cold.

"No! I came to talk to my father—not you!" Aleena turned to face her father again. "Father, please—I'll find a way to pay you back—I swear it!"

"And how do you plan to do that?" Faleesha sniffed. "Are you going to parade up and down the street and sell yourself to strangers?"

"Faleesha!" Grindelia sounded shocked. "You're not supposed to know about such things!"

"No—it's a fair question. Would you prefer that I sell myself?" Aleena demanded, still looking steadily at her father. "Would you like it if I went down to the Public Square and let some stranger change the color of my eyes to earn the money for mother's treatment? I could always tell them I'm your daughter—perhaps I'd make

more if they knew my father is a Statesman in the Ruling Council.”

“That will be just about enough of that!” Grindelia rose from the couch and grabbed Aleena by the upper arm, her cold fingers pinching through the ragged linen sleeve. “How dare you try to blackmail us in such a shameless fashion, you filthy girl?”

“I’m not filthy—I’m still pure and you know it. The color of my eyes attests to that.” Aleena looked at her stepmother challengingly. Her eyes were still the pure, pale purple of a polished amethyst—a rare color that she’d inherited from her mother. Some said her eyes were like jewels and she considered them her best feature. It broke her heart to think of letting strangers use her body and turn them dark as soot but she loved her mother—she would do whatever she had to in order to save her. And her eyes would tell her story.

If she lost her virginity to just one man, they would only go a shade darker. But if many men had the use of her, then her eyes would be coal-black by the time they finished. Disgraced women could always be told by the color of their eyes.

“Please, Father,” she said again. “I know you can afford it! I don’t know why you stopped loving mother and me, but the least you can do after casting us both out on the street is to pay a little money to help save her life.”

“A little money? A ‘little money’ she says?” her stepmother scoffed. “How dare you come here begging when we’ve barely enough to keep body and soul together as it is?”

Aleena’s father cleared his throat.

“Your stepmother is right, child,” he said regretfully. “We’ve little enough as it is—we’re putting every spare credit towards your little sister’s Joining Ceremony.”

“Faleesha’s getting Joined?” Aleena felt stunned. Traditionally on Karpsian Sigma, a younger sister never got married before the older one did. Apparently they were going to just ignore her entire existence and pretend she wasn’t related to her father at all!

“Well, yes...” Her father cleared his throat uncomfortably. “She’s getting married to the Kindred Ambassador—it’s quite an honor, you know. And so I’m afraid I don’t have any credit to spare right now. Between the cost of the flowers and renting the hall, and the dress, not to mention Faleesha’s dowry?—”

“Wait!” Grindelia held up a hand and he stopped at once.

“Yes, my dear one?”

“I’ve just had a thought.”

Grindelia started pacing, her golden slippers swishing through the thick brown burna fur carpet. Aleena’s father waited respectfully as she knit her eyebrows in thought. At last she turned to Aleena.

“All right—we’ll give you the credit,” she said decisively.

Aleena’s heart jumped, but not very high—there must be a catch.

“Why would you do that?” she asked flatly.

“Let me finish.” Grindelia waved a finger at her. “We’ll give you the money if you marry the Kindred Ambassador in Faleesha’s place.”

“Mummy! You can’t do that!” Faleesha whined. “That’s supposed to be my Joining!”

Grindelia turned to her.

“Faleesha my sweet, you know I don’t want you marrying that alien ambassador,” she began. “The Kindred are enormous males—and I’ve heard they’re very rough with their females. If we let Aleena marry him instead, we can find you a nice Karpasian husband who won’t hurt you when he changes the color of your eyes. And he won’t take you away from me to live in the sky somewhere.”

“I don’t know if it will work, my dear,” Aleena’s father objected, frowning. “You know the reason they inducted me into the Ruling Council was because I had a daughter of marriageable age to Join with the Kindred Ambassador.”

“So? Aleena is your daughter too and she’s of marriageable age, even if she is getting a bit old for Joining.” Aleena’s stepmother sniffed. “And if she marries the Ambassador, we won’t have to pay so much for the hall or the dress. Also, you won’t have to pay nearly as much dowry for the daughter of a disavowed wife! Her worth isn’t even a fourth of what my darling Faleesha’s is.”

Aleena wished she could protest this unfair evaluation but she knew in the eyes of the law it was true—as the daughter of a disavowed wife, she was basically worthless. But not so worthless that she wanted to give herself to a monster!

“The Kindred are so huge!” she protested, thinking of the wild tales she’d heard of the people from beyond the stars that wanted to establish trade with Karpasian Sigma.

“They’re absolute brutes,” Grindelia agreed, her pale eyes sparking maliciously. “But think of it this way—would you rather let one brutal man change the color of your eyes, or let a lot of strangers do the changing?”

Aleena worried her lower lip with her teeth—a habit she had when she was feeling nervous. Her spiteful stepmother had a point, she supposed. Either way she looked at

it, she was going to have to sell herself—there was simply no other way to save her mother. And one man—even a really big, mean, rough one—must be better than a parade of strangers.

“If I do this,” she said at last, looking at her stepmother—since she was clearly the one holding the purse strings. “If I do this, you have to swear to pay off all of my mother’s medical debt. I want the fifty thousand credits sent to the House of Healing right away so she can keep up her treatments.”

“Yes, of course. That’s the deal,” Grindelia snapped. “Take it or leave it. Will you Join with the Kindred Ambassador or not?”

Aleena took a deep breath. Oh Goddess of Mercy, she really hoped she wasn’t making a huge mistake!

“All right,” she said at last. “I’ll Join with him.”

She just hoped she wouldn’t regret it.

BEAR

“I’m very sorry about the Karpasian customs forcing you into an unwanted Joining, Commander Bearick,” Commander Sylvan apologized, leaning across his desk. “I know that after losing your beloved mate years ago, you made an oath never to Bond with another bride. If you want to back out of this assignment, I’ll understand completely. The Council can appoint a different Ambassador to visit Karpasian Sigma.”

Bearick—Bear to his friends—frowned and shook his head. Some said he looked like the Earth animal his name implied. He was a Beast Kindred and had the golden eyes and thick black hair to prove it. However, he also had some R’sk DNA, which made his skin olive green instead of tan and gave him a pair of short, sharp horns that grew from either side of his forehead. So he also looked a little like the Earth animal called a “bull.”

He did his best to control the hot temper his kind of Kindred usually displayed—diplomacy was his life’s work and it wouldn’t do to let his personal feelings get in the way of an assignment.

“Unnecessary, Commander,” he said shortly. “It’s true the Karpasians demand that any foreign dignitary who wants to do business with them must take a bride of their people, but I’ve been studying their customs—they have a system in place for ending unwanted or impractical Joinings.”

“They do?” Commander Sylvan raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Please explain.”

“It’s called a ‘disavowment’,” Bear told him. “It’s sort of like what the humans call a ‘no fault divorce.’ Meaning that the Joining can be dissolved for any reason at any time. So I’ll simply get Joined to the Karpasian female they have chosen for me and end the Joining when I’m finished conducting the trade negotiations and the wormhole passage treaty.”

Sylvan frowned.

“But are you sure the Karpasians won’t find that offensive? Leaving the bride they picked for you behind after our business is concluded?”

Bear shook his head.

“I’ve already been in contact with Statesmen Greggor Phew, whose daughter I am to Join with. He assures me that a temporary Joining followed by a disavowment is completely fine with him.”

“Well...as long as no one is offended, I suppose it shouldn’t be a problem.” Sylvan nodded thoughtfully. He was a Blood Kindred and the overhead glows shone on his pale blond hair and blue eyes.

His kind of Kindred were more reserved and cold blooded than the Beast Kindred. After Bear had lost his beloved mate, Zelia, that was how he had tried to act. To be cool and calm and dispassionate as a Blood Kindred—that was his goal.

For the most part, he was able to achieve it quite well. Though at first he had thought the grief of losing his mate would tear him apart, he had been able to bury his emotions and throw himself into his work—which was why he was eager to go on this mission now.

“I’m ready to go to Karpasian Sigma at once,” he told his commanding officer. “I’ve been studying their customs and the treaty and agreements. I’m prepared to negotiate the best deal possible for the Kindred of the Mother Ship.”

“I know you are—you’re a consummate professional. One of the best Ambassadors we have.” Sylvan nodded. “Very well, then—please get ready to go.”

“I’m already packed,” Bear informed him. “My long-range shuttle is prepped. I can go at once if need be.”

Sylvan blinked—the only indication of his surprise at this excessive level of readiness.

“Are they ready to receive you?” he asked. “I mean, don’t they need time to put together the Joining ceremony?”

“It’s my understanding that the ceremony will be brief and perfunctory,” Bearick said. “Which is just as well, since the Joining will be dissolved after negotiations are concluded.”

“Very well then.” Sylvan rose from behind his desk and held out his arm for a warrior’s clasp. “May the Goddess go with you and bless your efforts.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

Bear rose and took the offered arm, holding the other male’s forearm in a firm grip. Then he nodded and left the office, striding briskly down the hall towards the Docking Bay where his long-range shuttle was parked.

As he went, he mentally reviewed everything he knew about the inhabitants of Karpasian Sigma. They were a patriarchal society—not the kind of people the Kindred

usually dealt with, since they didn't treat their females very well. Unfortunately, they also had the only access to a special wormhole which led to a different universe.

There were a few other ways to travel to parallel universes, of course, but the wormhole just outside the orbit of Karpsian Sigma was the only reliable way to access this particular universe at all times. It was a place where silium could be mined—the rare mineral was vital in the Mother Ship's ability to fold space, which was getting harder and harder to find in their own universe. So making a trade agreement and negotiating for the use of the wormhole on a regular basis was extremely important.

Bear was certain he could make the deal—though he had only been a diplomat for the past five years, he was extremely skilled at it. Prior to his current career, he had been a physician on Rageron, the Beast Kindred home world. But then his beloved Zelia had fallen ill with a rare disease. Bear had done everything he could for her and then, when his own treatments failed, he had taken her to specialists all over the galaxy. But none of them had been able to help.

He had been forced to watch his beloved mate waste away before his eyes and there was nothing he could do to stop the progress of her disease. The process was a slow and agonizing one—it had taken several years for Zelia to finally succumb to her illness. And after she died, Bearick was all alone. They had been a childless couple which was probably just as well, he thought grimly—he'd been in no shape to care for a child after he lost his wife. Not when he was half out of his mind with grief.

After Zelia's passing, he couldn't bear to go on practicing medicine. What good was he as a physician when he couldn't even save his own mate's life? He'd needed something to distract himself from the emptiness and pain of her loss and it just so happened that there was a territorial disagreement between two of the Clans on his home world of Rageron.

Bear had stepped in and offered to lead the negotiations. Since he was a neutral party, both Clans had agreed. To his surprise and satisfaction, he had been able to bring about a deal that kept the bloodshed of the notoriously hot-tempered Beast Kindred at bay. It seemed he had found a new talent—something he was good at that didn't remind him of his awful loss. So he had thrown himself into it with all of what remained of his heart and before he knew it, his reputation as a negotiator grew.

Now, five years later, he found himself as one of the Kindred's leading Ambassadors. He was known to be able to strike a deal with even the most fractious and warlike of peoples and he was proud of his reputation.

But it wasn't pride that kept him coming back to the negotiating table time and time again—it was the fact that while he was negotiating his entire mental force was focused on the deal at hand. He had no time to think about missing his dead mate or feeling guilty that he'd failed to save her when he was trying to get two warring factions to agree to a peace treaty or making the best possible trade agreement with another planet for the Kindred of the Mother Ship.

His new profession consumed him completely and that was exactly the way Bear liked it.

He had no idea that there was someone waiting for him on Karpisian Sigma who would break his focus and cause him to question the vow he had made to never again call a bride...

ALEENA

“Are you ready, child? The Kindred Ambassador will be here at any moment.” Aleena’s father looked at her anxiously, taking in the Joining Day dress she was wearing with a critical eye.

It wasn’t new or fancy—it was just a rental that would have to be returned the next day. But it was much nicer than Aleena’s regular clothing—she hadn’t had anything new to wear in the past three years.

The breast net of the rental dress was made of a cheap golden alloy and it almost fit her, showing just a hint of the curves of her breasts. It sparkled in the noonday sun, which helped it look a little like real gold. (Rather than renting an expensive Joining Hall, her father had decided to have the ceremony in the gardens of the Public Parklands, which were free to use.)

The net was split in the middle, to facilitate the part of the ceremony where her new husband would claim her as his property. That was the part of the ceremony that Aleena was dreading. Her nipples were large and extremely sensitive—she hoped she wouldn’t cry or make any noise when her new Kindred husband claimed her. He would probably be rough, so she would have to steel herself for the pain he would no doubt give her.

Other than that, the rest of the rental outfit was standard. It had a long pale purple skirt split up the middle and dark purple panties to match. The flowing sleeves

attached to the breast net were white, signifying her purity, though of course her jewel-toned amethyst eyes proclaimed that more eloquently than any article of clothing could.

After tonight you'll no longer have such pale eyes, whispered a little voice in her head. They'll be a darker shade once your new husband is done using you.

That was another thing Aleena wasn't looking forward to—her Joining night. She wondered uneasily how rough her new Kindred husband would be. Rumor had it that the alien warriors were huge—much larger than a Karpisian male. Some were even said to have a kind of knot at the base of their shaft that they used to hold a woman in place so that they could breed her for hours.

Of course, as a pure and untouched virgin, she wasn't supposed to know such things. But people talked and women gossiped. Aleena knew what to expect on her Joining night and none of it was going to be pleasant, she was sure.

Still, she was determined to go through with the ceremony. Not just because her father had gathered all the local dignitaries and the other members of the Ruling Council but because it was the only way her mother could get her next medical treatment.

Speaking of her mother, she had wanted so badly to come to the ceremony, but as a disavowed wife, she wasn't allowed to attend an event her former husband was hosting. Of course Aleena's father could have made an exception to the rule, but her stepmother forbade it. So her mother could only kiss her goodbye and wish her luck on her Joining with tears in her eyes.

"I'll come see you soon," Aleena had promised—she was crying herself as she hugged her mother goodbye. "Hopefully my new husband will allow me to visit you after our Joining night."

“Don’t risk angering him!” Her mother’s purple eyes—a shade darker than Aleena’s—went wide with fright. “Obey him in all things. If he restricts you to the house, you must stay there. I don’t want you to be beaten!”

“I won’t be,” Aleena had said, though of course she could promise no such thing. After the Joining ceremony she would be the property of her husband and he could do anything he wished with her—including beat her if the mood struck him.

“I used to think your father was kind because he rarely beat me,” her mother said sadly. “But that was before your stepmother got such a hold on him and he disavowed me to Join with her instead.” She had sighed sadly. “How I wish I could come and see you be Joined, my dear! I used to dream of your Joining Ceremony when you were little—I had it all planned out. It was to be such a grand affair.”

Well, her mother would be disappointed if she saw what was happening now, Aleena thought. This Joining would be far from the “grand affair” she had dreamed of. There was no Holy Hall and no big reception afterwards either. This ceremony was going to be as bare as the branches of a tree in the cold season.

Still, the outdoor venue wasn’t all bad. The weather was fine and not too hot and the sun was shining on the billum blossoms, making their vivid colors even more beautiful. The birds were singing softly in the trees, which almost made up for the fact that her stepmother had refused to hire a chorus or even a single musician, though music was traditional for a Joining.

Her father had persuaded a leading dignitary to perform the ceremony itself and a local bakery had agreed to provide the Joining Bread for free, as long as they told everyone where it had come from. All in all, her father was getting off very cheaply for this Joining, Aleena thought. Especially since the dowry he had agreed to give, because he was sponsoring the ceremony, was going to be less than a fourth of what he would have given for Faleesha.

She only hoped that the credit he was saving was being put towards her mother's medical bills. She had yet to get a call from the House of Healing saying that the balance had been settled but when she'd asked her father about it, he had waved her off, saying the matter was "being taken care of." Aleena hoped that it was—her mother's next treatment was coming up and they would refuse to give it to her if the money wasn't paid. They?—

Just then a hush fell over the assembled crowd and her father whispered,

"He's here! Be on your best behavior, child!"

Then he rushed over to the edge of the clearing where the ceremony was being held and began bowing and talking rapidly to someone Aleena couldn't see because of the large bilberry bush in the way.

Soon enough, however, the stranger came into view. Aleena caught her breath when she saw him.

The Kindred Ambassador was absolutely huge. He was so tall that she estimated the top of her head would barely come up past his elbow. And he looked strong too—he was wearing a scarlet, long sleeved shirt that draped over his broad chest and showed the muscles of his arms under its satiny fabric. He also had on tight black trousers and high black boots, which emphasized his long legs.

He had short, sharp horns on either side of his head—horns! Just like a beast in a fairy story, she thought uneasily. But her eyes were also drawn to his thick black hair gathered neatly at the back of his neck—an unusual color on Karpasian Sigma, where most people had either gold or silver or copper colored hair. His skin was olive green—a shade or two lighter than Aleena's own bronze coloring—and his eyes...

His eyes look like melted gold!

Aleena couldn't help staring. They were beautiful and so unusual. Most males on Karpisian Sigma had dark colored eyes. Unlike a female, their eyes didn't start out light and then change when they had intimate relations, so no one knew or cared how many females they had bedded. However, once a female's eye color was changed and darkened, her value was gone—it was a double standard, but there were many such rules on Aleena's home world.

Her father led the Kindred Ambassador past the rows of spectators to the front of the clearing where Aleena and the official who would be performing the ceremony were already standing.

“Er, I hope I'm not late,” the Ambassador said in a voice that was a low rumble in Aleena's ears. “I was getting my new residence in order—I was under the impression that the ceremony would be starting a few standard hours from now.”

“No need to explain or apologize! Please, you are our valued guest!” Aleena's father exclaimed. “We're very happy to have you, Ambassador Bearick.”

“Thank you, Sir Greggor. And this must be your lovely daughter whom I am to Join with today? Faleesha, is it?” The Ambassador turned to Aleena, his golden eyes taking her in as he waited for an introduction.

Aleena felt her heart pounding in her chest as he looked her up and down. She hoped the Kindred Ambassador would find her attractive and pleasing—if he did he might be less likely to beat or punish her. He was so big that even one blow from his massive fist might kill her!

“Actually, this is Aleena, my oldest daughter,” her father said quickly. “We have a custom here—the oldest daughter gets Joined before the younger. I hope that isn't a problem?”

“No, not at all.” The Kindred Ambassador shook his head politely.

“Ah, good.” Aleena’s father looked extremely relieved. “Well then—this is my daughter. Please use her in whatever way pleases you—she is yours now and if she doesn’t obey, you have my full permission to beat her.”

This was a standard part of the Joining ceremony—the part where the father gave his daughter to her new owner and husband. But the huge Kindred Ambassador looked taken aback.

“Beat her?” he growled. “Surely you can’t be serious!”

“Oh, well...” Aleena’s father looked flustered, as though he wasn’t sure what to say.

“Excuse me, Ambassador,” the official who was performing the ceremony murmured, leaning closer to the big Kindred and standing on tiptoes to make himself heard. “But the correct response is, ‘I will take your daughter and use her however I see fit. I trust you have trained her well so that I will not have to beat her often.’”

“I’m not going to beat her at all,” the Ambassador growled. His face was like a thundercloud now with his thick black eyebrows drawn low over his golden eyes, which were blazing as though he was offended at the very idea of lifting a hand to Aleena.

“That’s very kind of you, but the ceremony has begun,” explained the official. “I’m telling you what you must say in response to Sir Greggor’s offering of his daughter to you.”

“Oh, well...” The big Kindred cleared his throat and looked around at the assembled crowd, many of whom were beginning to whisper behind their hands and look at him uncertainly.

Aleena wasn't certain what to think either. It was unheard of for a man to declare he wouldn't beat his wife! All her life she'd been taught that a woman had to be punished often and well in order to keep her in her place. For her new husband to say outright that he would not do his husbandly duty and correct her was very strange.

Not that she believed his words— all men hit their wives on occasion—it was simply the way things were. Even her father, who had a very mild temper, had beaten her mother on occasion before he disavowed her—mostly when she burned his dinner or didn't get his clothing washed and pressed exactly as he wanted it.

“Just say the line,” the official murmured urgently to the big Kindred. “The ceremony cannot continue until you do.”

The big Kindred didn't look happy about it, but at last he said,

“I will take your daughter and use her. I trust you have trained her well, so I will not have to beat her.”

“Excellent!” Aleena's father looked vastly relieved. He clasped his hands together under his chin and made a bow to the Ambassador before backing into the crowd of spectators and taking his place by her stepmother and Faleesha.

“Very good!” The official looked relieved as well. “And now, Ambassador Bearick, look upon this woman. Is she the one you wish to Join with?”

The big Kindred looked down at Aleena and she forced herself to look up, meeting his eyes. This, too, was part of the ceremony. He must be given a chance to examine her and see if he liked her enough to go ahead with the ceremony.

His golden eyes swept over her body and then returned to her face and their gazes met. For some reason, Aleena's heart started pounding even harder. What was this

look in his eyes? She had expected a cold appraisal but there was warmth in those golden depths—even heat. Could it be that the Ambassador found her pleasing?

“Yes,” he said at last. “I’ll Join with Aleena. If she wants to Join with me, that is,” he added.

There was more scandalized murmuring from the crowd at their backs.

“Her wishes do not enter into it,” the official said stiffly. “If you find her pleasing, that is enough for the ceremony to continue.”

The big Kindred looked like he wanted to protest for some reason but at last he simply nodded his head.

“All right. I find her pleasing. Are we supposed to exchange vows now?”

“Yes, of course.” The official nodded. “Kindly lift your bride’s breast net and take her breasts into your hands.”

“What?” His golden eyes widened in apparent surprise. “What did you ask me to do?”

“I said, you may lift her breast netting and hold her breasts in your hands,” the official repeated patiently.

The big Kindred still looked like he couldn’t understand what he was meant to do. To help him, Aleena reached up and twitched at the corner of her rented breast net, showing the bottom curve of her left breast. She kept her back turned to the crowd of spectators so it wouldn’t be obvious what she was doing.

She didn’t know why she was so willing to help the Ambassador with the part of the

ceremony she had most been dreading. Maybe it was because of his refusal to beat her—though she still didn't really believe it. Or perhaps it was the warmth she saw in his melted gold eyes. For whatever reason, she wanted to help him get through the ceremony, so she showed him what to do.

Slowly, as though he still wasn't sure he was doing the right thing, the Ambassador reached for the bottom of her breast net and pulled it up. Because it was split in the middle, the two sides of the metal netting came up easily and he was able to lay them over her shoulders, baring her breasts completely.

“Good—very good,” the official said encouragingly. “And now you must take your bride's breasts into your hands.”

He looked at Aleena again and she almost got the feeling that he was silently asking for permission. She gave a short, barely perceptible nod of her head and stood a little straighter, thrusting her bare breasts out at him. Of course she had no nipple bands yet—he would have to place them himself—so there was nothing but her naked breasts for him to look at and to hold.

The big Kindred reached out and cupped her breasts in his big warm hands—hands that were so big, in fact, that for once she didn't feel like her chest was too large. She'd always been told she was too curvy and too top-heavy but though her breasts filled his hands, they didn't overflow them.

There were approving murmurs from the crowd as people watched—the fact that her husband's hands were big enough to contain her breasts was considered a lucky sign. It meant that he would be strong enough to contain and rule her as a man ought to rule his wife.

“Very good,” the official said. “Now, please repeat after me: I hold your body in my hands and claim you as my property.”

The big Kindred frowned, but looked down at Aleena and repeated the words.

“I hold your body in my hands and claim you as my property,” he rumbled in that impossibly deep voice of his.

“I hold your life in my hands to do with as I wish,” the official continued.

The big Kindred repeated the words, though the look on his face said they left a sour taste in his mouth for some reason. Was the ceremony making him mad, Aleena wondered anxiously?

But if it was, he didn’t show any other signs of his anger. He didn’t pinch or twist her nipples or grip her breasts harder in his big hands. In fact, if anything he seemed to be going out of his way to cup her gently and not hurt her.

But that’s only because we haven’t gotten to the placement of the nipple bands yet, she thought apprehensively. That was the part of the ceremony where a man could assert his dominance over his new wife—some men twisted their bride’s nipples until they shrieked in pain, just to show they could do anything they wanted to her now that she had been claimed.

“I will keep you by my side as long as you bring me pleasure,” the official went on. “If you cease to bring me pleasure or fail in your wifely duties in any way, I will disavow you and cast you aside to find another woman who pleases me more.”

The Kindred Ambassador’s face darkened into a scowl and Aleena had to fight the urge to back away from him. For some reason the official’s words had made him angry—surely now he would take his rage out on her!

But though his face looked like a thunderstorm about to break, the big hands holding her breasts didn’t squeeze or pinch or hurt her in any way. Instead her new husband

rumbled in a voice so low she could barely hear it,

“I don’t want to say that.”

“Excuse me?” The official frowned up at the huge Kindred uncertainly.

“I said, I don’t want to say that. Surely there must be something else I can say instead.”

“But, well...these are the words of the ceremony!” the official protested. He was also speaking in a low voice, so as not to alarm the guests. “There are no other words to say!”

The big Kindred scowled.

“Very well. But it seems fucking cruel.”

“How is it cruel?” the official sounded genuinely confused. “If you disavow your bride to find another, what of it? That is a male’s prerogative.”

“Not in my culture,” Ambassador Bearick growled. However, he lifted his chin, took a deep breath, and said quickly, “I will keep you by my side as long as you bring me pleasure. If you cease to bring me pleasure or fail in your wifely duties in any way, I will disavow you and cast you aside to find another woman who...who pleases me more.”

He seemed to have trouble getting the last words out, but he did finally manage, much to Aleena’s relief. She’d been afraid for a moment that the words of the ceremony had so offended him that he would refuse to go on with the Joining. In which case, the bargain she had made with her stepmother would be off and she would never get the money for her mother’s treatment.

“Very good.” The official seemed relieved as well. “And now for the placing of the bands.” Reaching into the pocket of his long, black robe he withdrew a small blue box. Opening it, he displayed two adjustable nipple bands.

They were silver washed with gold—the cheapest bands that could be bought which still looked somewhat expensive. Aleena knew this because she had heard her stepmother saying so—she was extremely proud of preserving the appearance of giving Aleena a nice Joining ceremony while actually doing the bare minimum for the least amount of credit possible.

“Er...what am I supposed to do with these?” Ambassador Bearick rumbled, looking confused.

“Why—you put them on your bride, of course,” the official said, frowning.

“Yes, but where?” The big Kindred looked perplexed. “They’re too small to fit on a finger. Do they go in her earlobes somehow? I don’t see any piercings,” he added, ducking down to examine Aleena’s ears.

“No, no!” the official hissed, apparently running out of patience. “You must put them around her nipples! They are a sign of your ownership of her—so that all other men will know she has been claimed and she is private property!”

A look of dawning comprehension came into his golden eyes.

“Ah—I see. All right then—do I just wrap them around?” He plucked one of the gold-washed silver bands from the box as he spoke and Aleena found that her breast, which had been formerly cupped in his warm hand, was suddenly cold.

“Yes, but first you must make certain her nipples are stiff enough to use the bands,” the official explained, frowning. “Many men also use this time to assert their

dominance. Grasp her nipple and twist it as hard as you like before placing the band.”

Aleena bit her lower lip, trying to steel herself for this treatment. Ambassador Bearick looked extremely strong—she just hoped he didn’t make her bleed!

But to her surprise, instead of twisting her nipple or even pinching it hard, her new husband cupped her bare breast again and began to rub his thumb lightly over the tip of her delicate peak.

“Oh!” Aleena’s eyes widened and a soft moan escaped her lips. The way he was touching her didn’t hurt at all. In fact, it felt... good. Sparks of pleasure radiated from the tender tip of her sensitive nipple and seemed to travel all through her body.

The official looked on with a disapproving expression on his dour face. Clearly he didn’t approve of the big Kindred giving his new bride pleasure instead of pain. But the crowd behind them couldn’t see exactly what he was doing and Aleena’s small cry and the moan that followed brought approving murmurs, since they assumed her exclamation had been made out of pain.

“Now I put the band on?” The big Kindred looked from the small gold-washed band to her tight nipple and back again, appearing confused.

“You must put it in your mouth first,” the official instructed. “This will allow the metal to expand so that it will fit on her nipple.”

“Ah...all right.” He slipped the ring into his mouth for a moment and Aleena saw a look of surprise on his face—maybe he could feel the nipple band expanding on his tongue? At any rate, when he withdrew the band, it was big enough to slip over her tight peak.

It was warm at first from the heat of the big Kindred’s mouth but a moment later it

cooled and she felt it tighten around the stem of her nipple. It wasn't so tight that it cut off circulation, but it made her nipple stick out more, exposing the tender tip and making it even more sensitive.

“And now the other band,” the official said.

Ambassador Bearick plucked the other nipple band from the box and repeated the performance—first teasing her nipple gently with his thumb and then placing the second band after first holding it in his mouth for a moment.

“Very good!” The official looked very relieved when the second band was placed. He raised his voice. “This woman is yours now, Ambassador Bearick—you own her and can do anything you wish with her. On behalf of her father and of all the males here assembled, I wish you much pleasure in the use of her ripe young body. Please breed her long and hard when you change the color of her eyes and do your best to plant your heir in her belly.”

The Ambassador didn't seem to know what to say to that. But at that point the ceremony was over. And since there was no formal reception, there was nothing to do now but mingle with the Joining guests, drink some of the Joining punch and of course, taste the sweet Joining Loaf to symbolize their union together.

Aleena tried not to think of what would come after, once they left the ceremony together. It was better to concentrate on the present, she told herself. She ought to try and get to know her new husband and see what pleased him.

That way, maybe he wouldn't hurt her too much when he changed the color of her eyes that night.

BEAR

Bear was glad the ceremony was over. It was one of the strangest and most off-putting customs he'd ever been part of, and that was saying something since he'd once brokered a trade agreement with the snail people of Borka Four in which he had to stand shoulders deep in a pit of "holy slime" in order to make the deal.

He felt slimy in a whole different way after the Karpsian Joining ceremony he'd just been through. He'd hated saying such misogynistic things to the sweet little female who was now his bride.

Your temporary bride—don't forget, this Joining isn't supposed to last, whispered a little voice in his head. Bear winced at the thought of that. When he'd been speaking over the viewscreen to the girl's father, Sir Greggor had made the idea of disavowment sound simple and easy.

Well, it probably is simple and easy for the males on this planet, he thought. But for the females, it seemed to be a whole other proposition.

The very fact that they had a clause for instant divorce if the male found another female he wanted more than his wife built right into their Joining ceremony told Bear all he needed to know about what kind of people the Karpsians were. If they hadn't needed access to the wormhole so badly, the Kindred would never have agreed to deal with them.

His people believed that every female had a spark of the divine in her—they were all molded after the image of the Goddess, after all. The Mother of All Life who had created the Kindred people and still watched over them held a special place in her heart for her daughters and the Kindred—who were ninety-five percent male due to a genetic anomaly—revered females as a consequence.

In contrast, it was clear the Karprians didn't value their females at all. They felt free to toss their mates aside at the least provocation, like used tissues. Bear felt scorn for any people so misguided. How could they not see the value of their females?

Hadn't you better "get down off your high horse" as the humans say? whispered that same little voice in his head. Have you forgotten that you're going to abandon and discard your new bride as soon as your business here is concluded?

Bear felt a flush of unease pass through him. Well, yes that was true, but he had made a vow never to call and keep another bride after his beloved Zelia had died. He couldn't break a solemn oath which he had taken in the Sacred Grove before the Goddess herself—could he? He would just have to be certain that his new wife was well cared for after he disavowed her. There was nothing else he could do...was there?

"Come, my husband." The soft, sweet voice drifted up to his ears, breaking into the guilt and confusion he'd been feeling. He looked down to see his new bride—what was her name again? Oh yes, Aleena . He looked down to see Aleena looking up at him and tugging tentatively at his sleeve.

He couldn't help noticing, now that the ceremony was over, that his new bride was uncommonly pretty. She had lovely, smooth bronze skin and long wavy hair that was the rose-gold color of pure copper. The color shouldn't have worked with her gorgeous pale purple eyes, which sparkled like jewels, but somehow it did.

In addition to her lovely face and bewitching eyes, she was also what the Kindred called an “Elite”—a female that the Goddess has blessed with extra full curves. Gods, she almost made him wish he hadn’t taken his vow!

He pushed the thought aside guiltily. He shouldn’t be thinking such things about a girl he didn’t even know.

“We must go,” she said, tugging on his sleeve again.

“Er...where are we going?” Bear asked her, frowning.

“We must be the first to sample the Joining Loaf,” she explained, nodding in the direction of the other end of the clearing. “And we must let the guests congratulate us on our Joining.”

Bear noticed that the fine-link metal netting that she wore was still pulled up and thrown over her shoulders, which meant her full, ripe breasts were still bare. He didn’t like that for some reason—didn’t like the idea of her exposing herself when there were so many other males here who might see her. A wave of protective possessiveness passed over him and he remembered guiltily how full and firm those lovely breasts had felt in his hands.

“Shouldn’t you put down your, er, breast net?” he asked, nodding at the golden links.

She looked down modestly.

“It is not for me to say if my breast net should be worn up or down, my Lord Husband—only you may determine that.”

“Put it down then,” Bear growled, frowning. “I don’t want the other males to see your breasts. It isn’t right.”

Aleena seemed surprised, if her wide eyes were any indication, but she obeyed them at once, pulling the two golden chain-link panels of the netting back down to cover her full breasts again.

“Is that better, my Lord Husband?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Much.” Bear nodded. “Come on—show me the Joining Loaf.”

She led him across the clearing but it was slow going since every guest there had to congratulate him on his new bride. And of course, this included his new “father-in-law,” Sir Greggor, and what he assumed were the other members of his bride’s family.

“We’re so happy that you agreed to accept Aleena as your bride,” Sir Greggor said, smiling genially. “I know she wasn’t your first choice, but I hope that you’ll be very happy using her body for your pleasure.”

Bear opened his mouth to protest this statement but the older woman standing next to Sir Greggor chimed in. She had brassy gold hair and was wearing an elaborate golden breast net set with precious stones that flashed in the sunlight coming through the branches of the trees.

“Yes, we apologize—we know Aleena’s not nearly as lovely as her little sister, Faleesha,” she said, nodding to the young woman at her side, who had a spoiled, petulant look on her pretty face. She was not an Elite, being nearly as skinny as a rail and her breast netting was silver and also flashed with gem stones. It covered much smaller breasts than Aleena’s, Bear noted.

But he couldn’t stand by and listen to his new bride being maligned like this. Of course, he planned to end the Joining before he left, but while he was her mate, he was going to protect and defend her, he told himself.

“Actually, I think Aleena is beautiful,” he said firmly, frowning at the older woman. “I’m very pleased to have her as my bride.”

“Well!” The older woman frowned. “You have to admit she’s rather on the plump side. Still, at least with her broad hips, she should have no problem bearing your heir once you plant your seed in her belly.”

The younger woman, who must be Faleesha—the girl he was originally supposed to Join with—tittered unkindly and gave Aleena a withering look.

Bear felt another wave of protectiveness flow over him quickly followed by a spike of irritation. Was it normal for a girl’s own family to insult her on her Joining day here?

“Aleena is what my people call an ‘Elite’,” he said stiffly. “That is—a female whom the Goddess has blessed with extra generous curves. Such females are sought after and much prized among the Kindred.”

“Is that so? How fascinating!” Sir Greggor said quickly. Clearly he wanted the conversation to be over before anyone took offense. But Faleesha obviously didn’t get her father’s hint.

“What—are you saying the Kindred actually like fat women?” she demanded rudely.

“We adore curvy females,” Bear said, trying not to let his words come out in a growl. He hadn’t even known Aleena’s younger sister ten minutes and already he disliked her intensely. Thank the Goddess the plans had changed at the last minute and he’d been Joined to Aleena instead of this little snake!

Both the mother and the younger sister looked surprised at his words. But Bear wasn’t done—he wanted to give them even more to chew on.

“I feel blessed by the Goddess to have an Elite as my new bride,” he said to them. “Clearly she knows that I don’t care for skinny women and chose to bring Aleena into my life because of her generous curves and beautiful smile.”

“Well!” Faleesha exclaimed, her pale blue eyes flashing. She had brassy golden hair like her mother and it was coiled on top of her head in an elaborate up-do, making her skinny face look even thinner.

Bear looked down at Aleena to see how she had taken his words. He found her staring up at him, her gorgeous eyes wide and her lush mouth a little “O” of surprise. Had no one ever told her how beautiful she was? It seemed not—at least from her reaction.

“Well, it was nice chatting with you, but my new bride tells me we have to go taste the Joining Loaf. Isn’t that what you said?” he asked Aleena.

“Oh, er...yes. Yes, indeed. Thank you, Father and Stepmother for your well wishes,” she said, nodding formally to Sir Greggor and his wife. “But I must go with my new husband now and attend to his desires.”

“Of course you must, my dear. I’m just glad that he’s so happy with you,” Sir Greggor said heartily. His wife and his other daughter agreed, though not very enthusiastically. They had identical sour expressions on their faces, like they’d been eating unripe bilba fruit, Bear thought, with satisfaction. Clearly his words had hit home.

He nodded again and then let Aleena lead him across the clearing to where a simple white stone pedestal covered in a white cloth was standing. On it was a large, puffy pastry coated in some kind of shiny, sticky glaze. It was twice the size of Bear’s head and he estimated that it ought to feed all the Joining guests with no problem.

A woman was standing near the enormous Joining Loaf and waving it anxiously with a folding paper fan to keep flying insects away. She seemed to have been successful since Bear didn't see any of them near the pastry.

"Oh, the happy couple!" she exclaimed, breaking into a smile when they approached. "My goodness—I do believe congratulations are in order! And don't you make a handsome pair!"

This was more the kind of compliment that Bear was used to. He nodded, and thanked the woman, accepting her kind words which seemed to be genuinely meant—unlike the saccharine-sweet, backhanded compliments Aleena's stepmother had given them.

"And now you'll be wanting to have a slice of the Joining Loaf! Just let me get the ceremonial knife." The woman fluttered excitedly as she reached under the table covering and pulled out a long, serrated knife and a plate.

Bear took the knife but then handed it to Aleena. She held it hesitantly in one hand, looking up at him.

"Now, my dears—you must cut into it together for the best luck," the woman told them. "Don't be shy—guide your bride's hand," she added, speaking to Bear.

Since Aleena didn't object to this order, Bear pulled her gently around until she was standing right in front of him with her back to his chest. Then he reached around her and gripped her much smaller hand in his so that they were holding the knife together. This close to her, he couldn't help noticing her sweet, feminine scent. It seemed to do strange things to him, but he tried to ignore it and get on with the task at hand.

"Where are we supposed to cut it at?" he murmured in her ear, because he really had

no idea.

“Oh—wherever we want to. What about right in the middle?” she suggested, looking up at him shyly.

“Sounds good to me.” Bear let her move the knife to where she wanted to cut and then, together, they sawed into the massive sticky pastry.

“Get yourselves a nice big slice!” the woman who had been watching over the Joining Loaf told them. “After all, my dear —this is like to be the only Joining Loaf you’ll ever have,” she added, speaking to Aleena.

Meaning, Bear supposed, that he himself might have another Joining Loaf if he decided to cast his bride aside and get himself another female, but apparently that option wasn’t open to Aleena.

The idea felt wrong to him. Kindred formed a Soul Bond with their mates that only death could break. The idea of casting aside a beloved wife to get a different one was a blasphemy in the eyes of the Goddess—not to mention an impossibility once the Soul Bond was formed. But clearly the Karprians formed no bonds with their brides.

Once they had a large, gooey piece of the flaky pastry loaded onto a plate, Bear gave back the knife.

“Now what?” he asked Aleena. “Do we each take a bite?”

“We’re supposed to feed each other a bite, my Lord Husband,” she said, looking up at him shyly again. “If it pleases you.”

Bear wanted to tell her she didn’t have to address him so formally but he didn’t want to offend her, so he decided to keep that conversation for later.

“All right,” he said instead. Tearing off a piece of the flaky, sticky pastry, he held it up to Aleena’s mouth.

She parted her lush lips—which were the same color as her nipples, he couldn’t help remembering—and allowed him to place the piece in her mouth.

“Mmm, delicious!” she exclaimed, after chewing and swallowing. “May I feed you a piece as well, my Lord Husband?”

“Of course.” Bear opened his mouth and leaned down—she was so much shorter than him and he didn’t want her to have to reach too far.

Aleena popped a piece of the pastry into his mouth and he started to chew—only to bite down on something hard and metallic.

“Ow!” he mumbled and did his best to swallow the lump of pastry without also swallowing the foreign object he’d bitten into.

When he pulled it out of his mouth, he saw that it was a tiny silver baby, about as big as the last joint of his thumb.

“Oh!” Aleena’s hands flew to her mouth. “The luck baby! You found the luck baby!”

“The what?” Bear frowned down at the shiny baby cupped in the palm of his hand.

“They always bake it into the Joining Loaf,” Aleena explained. “And whoever finds it is supposed to have luck for a whole year!”

“And what your new bride is probably too shy to tell you, is that when the groom finds the luck baby, it means his new bride will certainly conceive the moment he changes the color of her eyes,” the pastry woman added, grinning broadly. “Truly

your Joining has been blessed by the Goddess of Mercy!”

“I suppose you must be right.” Bear held out the little silver baby to Aleena. “Would you like it?”

Her eyes shone as she looked up at him.

“Truly? You would give your luck to me?”

“Why not?” Bear said. He smiled at her, trying not to feel guilty when he thought of how soon their Joining was going to end. “You’re the bride—you should have everything you want on your Joining day.”

The idea of the Joining day being special for the bride was a belief the Kindred shared with the humans, whose planet they were currently guarding. And after having met her family, Bear thought that his new mate could certainly use some luck.

“Thank you, my Lord Husband.” Aleena took the luck baby carefully from his palm and hid it somewhere in the folds of her long, split skirt. She smiled up at him shyly.

Looking down into her sparkling pale purple eyes, Bear couldn’t help thinking again how beautiful she was. It was strange—he had never noticed any female since his Zelia had died. It didn’t matter how beautiful a woman was—none of them made any impression on him. But now it seemed he couldn’t stop noticing Aleena’s beauty.

You’d better stop noticing quickly, the little voice in his head muttered. Remember, this Joining isn’t going to last. It doesn’t matter how pretty she is, you can’t keep her!

Which was absolutely true. After his business was concluded, he would have to disavow Aleena and leave her behind while he went back to the Mother Ship alone.

Bear wondered why the idea bothered him so much when he didn't even really know his new bride. But it didn't matter—facts were facts and this Joining wasn't meant to last.

ALEENA

The Joining Ceremony reception—such as it was—had gone remarkably well, Aleena couldn't help thinking. She was still surprised at the way her new husband had spoken to Grindelia and Faleesha. The looks on her stepmother's and half-sister's faces were enough to make her want to laugh! But she'd been almost too shocked to see the humor in the situation.

Was it true? Did the Kindred really like 'curvy women,' as Ambassador Bearick had phrased it? She dared to look up at her new husband and study him for a moment, since he was currently looking away. She couldn't help remembering the way he'd looked at her and the way he'd touched her so gently during the ceremony. He seemed like a kind man—maybe he really wasn't going to beat her when he got angry.

It seemed too good to be true and Aleena decided to reserve judgment.

Just wait and see what happens the first time you displease him, whispered a little voice in her head. See how he reacts if you bring his dinner to the table late or fold his clothes the wrong way. Then you'll know what he's really like.

Of course, she would find out even sooner than that, since tonight was their Joining night and he would surely change the color of her eyes. Aleena couldn't help feeling frightened when she thought of that. Her new Kindred husband was so huge. And a glance down between his legs at the crotch of his tight black trousers let her know

that he was huge everywhere.

Dear Goddess, I hope I'll be able to handle all that, she thought nervously as she looked down at the large ridge in his trousers that seemed to extend almost all the way down to his right knee. Karpsian females didn't have any maiden barriers to contend with, but like any virgin who has never been with a man before, she was tight and unused. In fact, she'd never had anything bigger than a finger inside her before—and that was her own finger—not one the size of her new husband's long digits. (Though of course, it was forbidden for a female to explore her private parts, she had dared once or twice, before guilt made her stop.)

I'll think about the Joining night later, Aleena told herself firmly. There's no point in ruining a good time worrying about the future.

So she tried to put it out of her head and just concentrate on making small talk with the guests while they all came to get a piece of the Joining Loaf and a sip of the spicy pink Joining punch which was being served a few feet over.

Soon enough, however, the reception was over. Guests started making their goodbyes and drifting away, leaving the park. At last there was nothing to do but admit it was time to go home.

Aleena went to get her bag which held all of her clothing and a few small possessions. It wasn't very big, because she didn't have much. She had pushed it to the side under some bushes before the ceremony, knowing she probably wouldn't be allowed to go back to her mother's home after the Joining for some time. Now she gripped the handle firmly and went back to her new husband, who had just finished talking to one of the last guests.

"My Lord Husband, I think we may go now—if you wish," she said, looking up at the big Kindred.

“Can we? I wasn’t sure if we were supposed to stay until all the guests left or not,” he rumbled, looking down at her.

“No, that is not required,” she told him. “Er...did you rent a hovercoach to bring us to your abode?”

“Actually, I did. I know at least that much of your customs—even if the rest of the ceremony caught me by surprise.” He smiled at her and the expression lightened his dark face. He had facial hair—a neatly trimmed beard and mustache—which most Karpasian men didn’t, and it made him look foreboding and brooding when he wasn’t smiling, Aleena thought.

“Oh, good. Then we may go. If you are ready, of course,” she added quickly. It wouldn’t do for him to think she was trying to have her own way—especially so soon after their Joining.

“Sure. We can leave whenever you want.” He shrugged, his impossibly broad shoulders moving under his crimson shirt. Aleena estimated that they must be twice as broad as her own. “Would you like me to carry that for you?” he added, nodding down at her bag.

“Oh no—you need not trouble yourself, my Lord Husband,” Aleena said quickly—she was ashamed of how shabby the bag was and didn’t want him to get a good look at it. “And it is not for me to say when we go—I merely wanted to let you know that we can leave whenever you are ready.”

“Well, I’m ready now,” he said, taking her hand. “Er, do we need to say goodbye to your family?”

“Only if you wish to,” Aleena told him. “And they are not really my family,” she added. “I mean, my father is still my father, of course, but since he disavowed my

mother, I am not welcome in their home.”

Then she closed her mouth quickly. Why had she admitted such a thing to her new husband? Now he would think she was speaking ill of her father and speaking ill of any man was a beating offense!

But Ambassador Bearick only frowned thoughtfully.

“So you’re not on the best of terms with your stepmother and your half-sister, I’m guessing?”

“Well...no,” Aleena admitted cautiously. “They do not allow me or my mother to visit my father very often.”

“Hmm,” was his response. “Well then, I think we can leave without saying goodbye to them. Let’s go—I left the hovercoach over there.”

He took her hand and started to lead her out of the clearing. Aleena followed, feeling relieved. She didn’t want to have to talk to her awful stepmother or half-sister again!

But just as it seemed they were about to make their escape, Grindelia suddenly stepped in front of them and Faleesha was right beside her.

“Now, I hope you’re not leaving without saying goodbye, Ambassador,” Aleena’s stepmother said, smiling up at the big Kindred.

“They’re probably trying to get away so he can breed her!” Faleesha laughed coarsely. “Have fun getting the color of your eyes changed tonight, Aleena! I dare say you’re in for a wild ride.” And she looked pointedly at Ambassador Bearick’s crotch.

Aleena felt herself blushing scarlet with mortification. For her half-sister to speak of

such things right in front of her new husband was scandalous! It couldn't be more obvious that she was flirting with him—letting him know that she knew about the ways of a man with a woman in such a shameless way.

“I want to show Aleena the residence I've rented, where we'll be staying together,” Aleena's new husband said stiffly, speaking to Grindelia and not acknowledging Faleesha's crude remark. “But thank you very much for the beautiful Joining ceremony and reception.”

“You're very welcome. We spared no expense to make it a special day!” said Grindelia, which Aleena knew was a lie.

“It's just too bad the bride didn't match the ceremony,” Faleesha said snidely. “I'm sorry you had to end up with Aleena instead of me , Ambassador.”

Ambassador Bearick's jaw tightened.

“I'm extremely happy with my new bride,” he said evenly and Aleena had the feeling he was holding himself back from saying something else.

“Well, we're glad you found Aleena acceptable,” Grindelia said. She looked at Aleena. “Now mind you return your Joining outfit to the rental place on time! I'm not paying the late fee if you don't.”

“I'll be sure to return it,” Aleena said, nodding dutifully. She tugged lightly on her new husband's sleeve. “May we go now, my Lord Husband? I find myself much fatigued by the excitement of the day.” Which was a polite way of saying she wanted to get out of there!

Ambassador Bearick seemed to share her feelings.

“I’m tired as well. Thank you again and please thank Sir Greggor for me and let him know I’ll take good care of his daughter,” he said politely to Aleena’s stepmother.

“I’m sure you will.” Faleesha remarked and laughed nastily. “Have a good Joining night, dear sister,” she added, speaking to Aleena. “We’ll see how much your new husband likes your ‘curvy’ body once he sees you bare!”

“Faleesha!” Grindelia frowned at her daughter. “As an un-Joined female, you must not speak of such things!”

“Well, it’s true,” Faleesha pouted. “Aleena’s too fat to be pretty— you always say so!”

“I never—” Aleena’s stepmother began.

“Anyway, it’s probably a good thing she’s fat,” Faleesha went on spitefully. “At least her new husband won’t break her in two when he takes her for the first time!” She gave Aleena a nasty smile. “I bet you’ll be walking funny for a week— if you can walk at all once he’s done with you! He’s so big. ” And she gave Ambassador Bearick a flirtatious look from under her lashes and giggled.

“What we do on our Joining night isn’t your business,” Aleena said quietly, though she wanted to shout at her half-sister for being so lewd in front of her new husband. It was a shame and a disgrace for an un-Joined female to speak so openly of the things a man and woman did together in private! The Ambassador would think she came from a low family.

“Forgive my daughter—she’s just high spirited,” Aleena’s stepmother said quickly. “This was supposed to be her Joining, after all, until Aleena stepped in and demanded to be Joined first, since she is the eldest.”

Aleena couldn't believe the outright lies her stepmother was telling! Acting like she had complained until she got to Join with the Kindred Ambassador instead of her little sister! It wasn't right!

"As I said before, I believe the Goddess had her hand on the situation—she made certain I was joined to the right female," Ambassador Bearick answered. "And now if you'll excuse us, we need to go."

He took Aleena firmly by the arm and pulled her out of the clearing, leaving Aleena's stepmother and half-sister standing there with sour expressions on their faces. As they left, Aleena could plainly hear Faleesha complaining.

"It's not fair, Mummy! You never told me he was so handsome. It's not right that Aleena got him instead of me!"

"Hush now—he'll tire of her soon enough and he knows where to find you once he does, my sweet," Aleena's stepmother answered clearly.

Aleena felt like she might melt from pure mortification! They must know that their voices carried and she and her new husband could hear them. Why must they be so shameless and awful?

Ambassador Bearick said nothing, however. He kept her arm hooked through his and walked so rapidly Aleena had to almost trot to keep up. They had gotten out of the clearing where the ceremony had been held and halfway to the parking area before he suddenly burst out,

"Is that normal around here? I mean, is it normal for a bride's own family to say such rude things to her? Especially on her Joining day?"

"I'm sorry about that," Aleena said quickly. She was blushing miserably and feeling

hot all over with shame. “No, it’s not normal. Faleesha shouldn’t have said such shameful things to you but I believe she was flirting. Letting you know that she’s available in case you decide you don’t like being Joined to me,” she explained.

“Well, I damn sure wouldn’t want to be Joined to her,” he growled. “I mean, I know she’s your sister, but if she wasn’t a female, I’d have made her sorry for those things she was saying about you!”

Aleena felt surprised. So he was angry because Faleesha had insulted her? She’d thought he was just upset that her half-sister had been speaking so crudely in a way that was unbecoming of an un-Joined female.

“Faleesha is probably just jealous,” she said, hoping to calm him down. “She didn’t know what a handsome male you are or she never would have given you up to me.”

He looked down at her and smiled—it was like the sun breaking through thunderclouds, Aleena thought, feeling slightly dazed. Faleesha hadn’t been lying—the Kindred Ambassador really was very handsome.

“Well, I’m glad you insisted on Joining with me instead of letting her do it,” he rumbled. “I definitely got the right sister.”

Aleena bit her lip. How could she explain now that her stepmother had been lying—that she hadn’t actually demanded to be the one joined to the Kindred Ambassador? If she told him the truth—that she’d made a bargain to Join with him in exchange for the money to pay her mother’s medical bills, he might be mad!

So though she hated lying to him, she smiled and nodded.

“Thank you, my Lord Husband,” she murmured. “I’m so glad you’re pleased with me.”

“I am—very pleased.” He nodded firmly, but then looked troubled for some reason.
“Come on—let’s get home.”

Aleena wondered why he looked worried and upset but the next minute his furrowed brow smoothed out and he gave her another smile. She must have imagined the expression, she thought—or misinterpreted it.

At any rate, her new husband said he was pleased with her and that was all that mattered.

BEAR

As the luxury hovercoach he'd rented for the ceremony drove them soundlessly through the city, Bear wondered when would be a good time to tell his new bride he was going to disavow her and end the Joining after his business on Karpsian Sigma was concluded. It seemed cruel to tell her right now, after the ceremony was barely over—but it also seemed cruel to wait and let her think that he was going to keep her with him always.

He wished that he would have checked more closely into the customs and culture of Karpsian Sigma before agreeing to this Joining. But he'd been too busy pouring over the details of the trade agreement, which he had considered to be the most important part of his trip here. The short-lived Joining was supposed to take a backseat to the business he had to conduct.

But the more he got to know Aleena, the more she felt important to him. He felt especially protective of her after seeing the way her own family treated her. Her father seemed nice enough—well, except for giving him permission to beat her which was unthinkable. But her stepmother and the half-sister were awful. The less he saw of them, the better, Bear thought.

Well, he wouldn't be on Karpsian Sigma for long, he reminded himself. So he didn't really have to worry about his in-laws. And he would just have to be certain that Aleena was well taken care of when he left.

That shouldn't be a problem since Commander Sylvan had given him an almost unlimited line of credit. He could buy the house he had rented and put it in her name and make sure she had some kind of allowance to live on. He would make certain she was independently wealthy and didn't have to rely on her awful family after he went away, Bear promised himself.

In the meantime, he decided to keep the news that he was planning to end their Joining to himself. It seemed cruel to bring it up now, right after the ceremony had just taken place. He would find a better time to talk about it later.

He just hoped Aleena wouldn't be too upset when he told her he planned to disavow her.

BEAR

“Well this is it—I hope you like it,” Bear said, as they stepped into the palatial mansion he had rented to live in. It was probably bigger than what they needed, but he had wanted to make a statement about how the Kindred could afford to deal with the Karpasian Sigma government even in the highest capacity.

Aleena looked around, her pale purple eyes growing wider and wider. As they had been driving in the hovercoach, she had mentioned that they were getting into the richer and more exclusive part of the city but she seemed surprised that she was actually going to live here.

“This area is even nicer than the neighborhood where my father’s house is located,” she’d remarked. “Much nicer.”

“Is it?” Bear asked. “What about the place you live now? Or where you lived before we got Joined, anyway,” he added. He was curious about her and wanted to know her situation.

“Oh, I lived with my mother,” she explained. “She’s in a very modest dwelling that my father bought her after he disavowed her.”

“So men do that...they buy their wife a house after they disavow them?” Bear asked, feeling slightly relieved since that was what he was planning to do for Aleena.

She shook her head.

“Not always. Everyone always said that my father was too kind to my mother. After disavowing her, a husband has no further obligation to his wife. But he even sent her a monthly allowance for a time.”

“For a time?” Bear frowned. “You mean he doesn’t anymore?”

She shook her head and looked away.

“Not for some years now. Things have been...difficult at home. I wanted to get a job but there aren’t many occupations a female can do and...and still remain respectable, if you know what I mean.”

She looked up at him quickly and then away again, biting her lower lip.

“I think I know,” Bear murmured. Karpasian Sigma clearly was one of those places where women were expected to stay home and care for the house and have children. The problem with such a society was that a female had almost no way to make a living if their husband died or left them—or simply stopped supporting them, as seemed to be the case with Aleena and her mother.

Sir Greggor must have paid the equivalent of child and spousal support after he disavowed Aleena’s mother but he had stopped that, leaving them little to nothing to live on, Bear guessed.

“Why did your father stop sending you money?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I think maybe my stepmother found out that he was sending it. It wasn’t that much—just enough to get by. But she gets angry when my father doesn’t concentrate all his wealth and attention on her and my half-sister.”

Then she seemed to think she had said the wrong thing because she quickly changed the subject.

“You know, this neighborhood is so exclusive I’ve only been here once before?” she said, gesturing out the tinted window of the hovercoach at the grand houses passing by. “It was a long time ago when I was little. One of the girls in my class was very rich and she invited me to her nameday party. It was so exciting!”

“I hope you’ll like the house I picked out,” Bear had said, truly meaning it.

And now, watching her as they stepped into the mansion and looked around, it seemed that she did like it very much. The thought gave him a warm glow of satisfaction.

“It’s lovely,” Aleena breathed, looking around her at the dark blue inlaid floors and the vast spiral staircase that swooped upwards to the top of the house. “Can we explore it?” she asked, looking up at Bear hopefully. “I mean, unless you have other things you, er, want to do,” she added, looking suddenly apprehensive.

“Other things?” He frowned, uncertain of what she meant.

“I mean if...if you’re going to change the color of my eyes right away,” she said, almost in a whisper and her eyes darted nervously to the crotch of his uniform trousers and then away again.

There was that peculiar phrase again about changing the color of her eyes. It must be some kind of euphemism for deflowering, Bear thought. He realized that the poor girl thought he was going to throw her down and have his way with her right that minute! As if any Kindred would treat a female in that way.

The very thought made him angry—he didn’t want her to be frightened of him.

“For now let’s just explore the house together,” he said, holding out a hand to her. “I didn’t get a chance to look at it much when I rented it. I was in a hurry to get to our ceremony.”

“All right.” She gave him a relieved smile and slipped her much smaller hand into his. Bear felt his heart squeeze at the trusting gesture. He wanted to assure her that he wouldn’t hurt her or take what she wasn’t ready to give, but he thought it might be better to get to know each other first and exploring the house together seemed a good way to do that.

Hand-in-hand, they wandered from one luxurious room to another. The mansion had come already furnished though Bear wasn’t sure that most of the furniture would hold him. It was built for the Karprians, which were much smaller people than the Kindred.

Aleena’s favorite room seemed to be the Sun Room—an enormous, two-story area with a domed glass ceiling that let in the reddish-orange rays of the Karprian sun. It was like a solarium—carpeted in soft purple moss with trees and flowers growing around the perimeter. Before entering the room, they had to take off their shoes—or in Bear’s case boots—so as not to damage the delicate flora. It reminded him of the Sacred Grove where he and his mate, Zelia had been wed.

He couldn’t help wondering if his mate would think he was breaking his vow if she could see him now. But he hadn’t sealed the Joining with sex and he didn’t intend to. The fact that the Karprians felt so strongly that a woman’s purity was tied to her worth was reason enough not to take the only thing of value that Aleena had. Not to mention it would definitely be breaking his vow.

“This is so beautiful—like having a park right inside the house.” Aleena sighed, drawing his attention back to the present and away from the guilt he was feeling.

Bear looked up to see that she was standing in the center of the room. The rays of the Karpasian Sigma sun were bathing her in radiance, picking up the lovely copper color of her hair and making her eyes sparkle like jewels. Truly, her beauty took his breath away!

He felt his heart stop in his chest for a moment before it resumed beating. Goddess damn it—he wished she wasn’t so fucking gorgeous! It almost might have been easier if he had joined with her half-sister instead. He wouldn’t have felt bad about disavowing a female as awful as Faleesha, who he also found extremely unattractive—not just because she was skinny but because of her terrible attitude and personality.

“You look like a goddess,” he said, when he finally found his voice. “Standing there with the sun’s rays falling on you—you’re beautiful, Aleena.”

“Oh!” She put a hand to her mouth and her bronze cheeks went red, as though he’d embarrassed her. “That’s so kind of you, my Lord Husband,” she murmured, looking up at him from under her thick lashes.

“You don’t have to call me that, you know,” Bear told her.

Aleena looked instantly contrite.

“I’m so sorry! Would you rather that I call you by your title, Ambassador Bearick?” she asked quickly.

“No, of course not. Just call me ‘Bear,’” he told her.

Her eyes went wide.

“You want me to call you by your name? But...that’s very disrespectful!”

Bear frowned. Did the Karprians really believe that a married woman couldn't call her husband by his name?

"I don't like being called 'my Lord' all the time, though," he objected. "It makes it sound like you're worshipping me—or that I own you."

"But you do own me. You took possession of me body and soul when you placed the bands upon my nipples," she reminded him. "And a wife must worship her husband—he is the authority over her as the Goddess of Mercy is the authority over him."

Bear shook his head, trying not to think of how much he had enjoyed that part of the ceremony. Holding her full, firm breasts in his hands and teasing her ripe nipples had been a pleasure.

"That's not the way it is in my culture," he told her. "We Kindred believe that males and females are equals."

"Equals?" She looked half scandalized and half intrigued. "But...how do you decide what to do and where to go and how to spend the household budget?"

Bear shrugged.

"We decide together. And if we can't agree on something, we compromise."

Aleena shook her head.

"Forgive me, but that sounds very strange to me. For us there is no compromise—the man of the house makes the decisions and the woman abides by them."

"But how is that fair for the female?" Bear objected. "If she has no say in anything?"

There should always be a middle ground—a compromise.”

She shook her head again.

“I’m sorry but I’m not even sure what a compromise between a man and a woman would look like.”

Bear had an idea.

“I tell you what—how about we make a compromise right now?” he asked. “You can call me ‘my Lord Husband’ when we’re out in public together but when we’re in private—just the two of us—you can call me ‘Bear’ like my friends do.”

Aleena gave him a tentative smile.

“I think I like that. Bearrr...” She rolled the R at the end, making it sound exotic. “Does it mean anything?” she asked. “My name, Aleena, means ‘one who is longed for’ because my mother tried for over a year to conceive me.”

“My full name, ‘Bearick’ means ‘strong’ in my native language but the shortened version, Bear, is also the name of a large, predatory animal that lives on Earth, which is the planet the Kindred of the Mother Ship are currently protecting,” he explained. “Some of my friends have said I look a little like a black bear—because I’m big and my hair gets shaggy when I don’t have it combed down.” He pointed at his hair—which could get rather out of hand when it wasn’t tied back neatly as it was now.

“I will help you tame it—if you like,” Aleena offered shyly. “I’m very good with hair—my mother taught me.”

“That would be very kind of you,” Bear murmured, trying not to imagine those soft

little fingers running through his hair. But probably she was just offering to be nice and nothing would come of it.

“Come—we should go have a look at the cooking area.” She came to him and held out her hand trustingly. “Do I need to go to the market and shop for food, or is there something I can use tonight to make you dinner, my Lord...I mean, Bear ,” she corrected herself quickly.

“I think the agent I dealt with said they would stock a few things for us, but I don’t know much about your cuisine,” Bear said, enfolding her small hand in his again.

He found that he liked holding her hand. He had always been a tactile male—he enjoyed touching his partner, holding and caressing her. The past five years since Zelia’s passing, it was as though that part of himself had gone through a drought. Now, just feeling Aleena’s small fingers entwining with his was like rain on a field of thirsty crops.

Stop thinking like that, he warned himself. She’s not yours to keep and you know it!

But he didn’t let go of her hand. Instead, he pulled her gently with him as they left the lovely Sun Room and headed for the food prep area.

ALEENA

The cooking area was bigger than any kitchen Aleena had ever been in. It was a vast room with many different appliances lined up along the walls—some of which she barely even recognized. Clearly the former owner of the house had insisted on gourmet meals every night. She hoped apprehensively that Bear—it seemed so odd to call him that!—wouldn't demand fine dining all the time. All the cooking she'd learned to do on the little stove in her mother's house was simple fare.

“Wow—this is big,” her new husband rumbled, as they looked around. “Don't think I've ever seen a food prep area this large.”

“Neither have I,” Aleena admitted. She went over to the shiny silver range and oven combo. Sliding open the drawer where the food was put for cooking, she examined the heat jets—there were so many of them! Unlike her mother's oven at home which had only two, this oven had eight nozzles for heat—two on the top, two on the bottom, and two on either side. Aleena supposed that must be for even roasting.

“Can you manage in here?” Bear asked, looking over her shoulder. “It looks complicated.”

“Oh, yes—of course I can!” Aleena said at once, though to be honest, she wasn't sure.

But she couldn't let her new husband think she couldn't perform in the kitchen! The

only place more important when it came to keeping a husband happy was the bedchamber and of course, she had no experience there at all. The kitchen would have to be her forte until he changed the color of her eyes and she learned what he liked best in bed.

“All right then. Let’s look in the cold storage unit and see what they left us,” Bear rumbled.

He strolled to the other side of the kitchen and opened the biggest refrigeration unit that Aleena had ever seen—and it was full of food! Going over, she ducked easily under his arm to examine its contents.

“Ohhhh!” she breathed when she saw what the fridge held. There were prandle tongues in creamy mousse and pickled pilipig eggs, jellied cloven clodder hooves, pring tails in brine, and many other gourmet ingredients she had never even heard of.

“Well, it looks like they left us plenty to eat,” Bear remarked from behind her. “Uh, do you know how to make this kind of food?” he asked Aleena. “I’m new here so I don’t know anything about Karpsian cuisine.”

“Oh yes, I can cook it! I know all about it,” Aleena said quickly.

Though to be honest, she wasn’t quite sure how to use the exotic ingredients. She was certain if she’d had more time in her father’s house growing up, she would have a better idea. Her stepmother and half-sister ate delicacies like pickled pilipig tails every day. But she felt she couldn’t let her new husband find out that she didn’t know much about fancy cooking—he might disavow her on the spot if he thought she couldn’t manage a woman’s most basic task!

I’ll figure it out, she told herself. I’m sure I can manage. Such fine ingredients probably don’t need much done to them because they’re already so good.

At least, that was what she hoped.

“Well,” Bear said, shutting the refrigeration unit door. “I think we’ve seen most of the bottom part of the house. Should we go look upstairs?”

Aleena’s heart was suddenly in her mouth. Oh Goddess of Mercy, was he going to change the color of her eyes now? She was getting more comfortable with her new husband—she was even cautiously beginning to like him—but she still didn’t feel ready for that yet.

It doesn’t matter if you’re ready or not, she told herself sternly. He is your husband—he’ll take you when he wants you and you’ll just have to submit.

Feeling nervous, she nodded up at him.

“Of course, my Lord Husband—I mean, Bear. I would love to tour the upstairs with you.”

“All right. Come on then.” And he held out his massive hand for her again.

Aleena took it and he entwined their fingers and pulled her back to the enormous spiral staircase in the center of the house. Before they started climbing, though, she had a thought.

“Maybe I’d better bring my bag,” she said, looking up at him. “I mean, I have a...a special outfit I’m supposed to wear.”

“You do?” The big Kindred frowned, clearly not understanding her. Aleena felt too shy to explain that the “special outfit” was for their Joining night.

“I’ll just get it,” she said instead. Running to get her shabby leather bag which held

all her clothing—including the one special outfit—she came back with it in her hand and held out the other to her new husband.

“Do you want me to carry that for you?” he asked, looking at her bag. It was the second time he had offered to do a menial chore for her, which was surprising. In Karpasian culture, a male never offered to carry or lift anything for a woman—it was beneath him—women’s work. In fact, if a woman was privileged to go on a trip with her husband, she had to manage all the luggage for both of them because a man would never lift even the smallest bag.

But it seemed the big Kindred really wanted to help.

“I suppose,” she said hesitantly. “Er...if you don’t think it’s beneath you?”

“Why would carrying your bag be beneath me?” He sounded genuinely confused as he held out a hand for the bag. “Is that some kind of belief your people have? That a male should never help a female with anything?”

“Well...no, he shouldn’t,” she said, even as she handed over the bag. “But I mean, if you really want to...”

“Of course I do. In my culture, a male always offers to carry heavy things for his female,” Bear explained. He lifted her bag. “Not that this is very heavy. What’s in it?”

“Oh, just my clothing,” Aleena said quickly. “This Joining Day outfit I’m wearing is a rental,” she added, feeling her cheeks get hot with the admission. “I have to bring it back soon and I don’t dare mess it up or let it get crumpled or dirty.”

“All right.” Bear shrugged. “Well come on—let’s go see the upstairs.”

“Yes, let’s.” Aleena tried to keep her voice bright and fixed a smile on her face but inside she was extremely nervous.

Was he leading her up to the bedchamber because he was ready to change the color of her eyes right now? Would he give her a chance to change into her Joining night outfit first? She’d tried to give him a hint that she needed to change before they did anything intimate.

She’d heard stories of new husbands being so eager to get to their bride’s body that they ripped her Joining Day outfit right off of her. But if Bear did that to the outfit she was wearing, it would cost her hundreds of credits which she didn’t have! She?—

“Here we are—this is the master sleeping area, I believe,” Bear’s deep voice rumbled in her ears and she realized they were standing in the doorway of an absolutely massive bed chamber.

In the center of the room, on a raised dais, was an enormous bed. It had four carved wooden pillars at its corners and the mattress looked incredibly thick and plush.

It was a far cry from the thin pallet on the floor Aleena was used to sleeping on. The nice carved wooden beds which had come with their home were some of the first things she and her mother had sold when her father stopped sending them a monthly allowance.

But no matter how beautiful the bed chamber was, all she could think of was how her new husband was going to take her there, in the middle of the huge bed. He was so much bigger than her—how would his male equipment fit inside her? And did he really have one of those swellings at the base of his shaft that she’d heard about?

She found she was biting her lip—almost gnawing on it—in apprehension and she made herself stop. There was no point in being afraid—every woman had to go

through this, she told herself. It was like taking an injection at the physician's office—she would just have to deal with it. She?—

“Well, it looks like there's plenty of room to spread out and the bed seems sturdy enough which is good,” Bear rumbled, breaking into her nervous stream of thought. “Half of this furniture looks like it might break the minute I sit on it.”

“Oh, surely not my Lord...I mean, Bear,” she said quickly. “Er...are we going to use the bed now?” she added timidly.

He frowned.

“Are you sleepy?”

“Oh, no! I just thought...” Aleena trailed off, feeling her face get hot with a blush.

A look of comprehension came over his face.

“Look, Aleena...” he murmured. Turning her to face him, he lifted her chin with one finger until their eyes met. “I can see you're very nervous about the idea of me, er, ‘changing the color of your eyes.’ Is that right?”

“Well...yes,” Aleena admitted. “It's just that you...you're so big , my Lord Husband. I'm not sure how...how we could, er, fit together.”

“We're not going to fit together,” he said firmly. “I want you to stop worrying about that.”

“I...I'll try,” Aleena whispered. This close to him, she could smell a dark, spicy fragrance that seemed to tug at her somehow. Was that some kind of cologne he was wearing? If so, it was the best she'd ever smelled.

“Look, I know I’m a lot bigger than you, sweetheart,” he murmured, stroking her cheek lightly. “But I promise you right now, Aleena—I’m not going to hurt you. All right?”

Aleena nodded.

“All right,” she whispered. She knew what he meant—he thought he had some technique that would enable him to fit himself inside her without pain. But that seemed impossible, given their extreme size difference. Still, she couldn’t say outright she didn’t believe him, so she simply nodded again, agreeing with him.

“Do we understand each other?” Bear asked her.

“Yes, my Lord—I mean, Bear.”

She understood him completely—he wouldn’t hurt her right this minute but later he would expect to change the color of her eyes and she would have to let him—it was her wifely duty.

“Good.” He nodded in satisfaction and left her bag on the bed where the shabby leather looked completely incongruous against the rich embroidery of the bedspread. “Now let’s go see the rest of the upstairs,” he told Aleena. “I think you’ll like it.”

BEAR

“Well, this is probably the room I’ll spend the most time in,” Bear said, as they surveyed the massive study located next to the master suite. “To be honest, this was the only room in the house I really looked at before I decided to rent it,” he added, speaking to Aleena, who was looking with awe at the rows and rows of leather-bound books that filled the many shelves.

They were mostly Karpasian law practices and treaty agreements—which Bear thought would be extremely useful in his negotiations—but there were also some cookbooks and some popular novels as well. These had been sequestered in a single bookcase, as though they might infect the more important books with their frivolity.

“Oh—there’s a woman’s shelf!” Aleena exclaimed, going to the case full of novels and cookbooks. “And look—there’s a whole collection of Salana novels!”

“Salana? Is that an author you like?” Bear asked, going to look over her shoulder.

“Oh no—it’s the main character of the books. Salana has wild adventures—she goes places on her own and travels all over the place—without a man!” Aleena’s eyes were shining with excitement. “In one of them, she even goes to a foreign land and gets mistaken for a visiting ruler and has a man act as her servant and wait on her!”

“That sounds exciting,” Bear remarked, smiling. Salana’s adventures sounded extremely tame to him, but he supposed in such a repressive society the idea of a

male waiting on a female would be a novel concept.

“Some people say the adventures of Salana are too exciting.” She gave him an anxious look. “Many of the books have been banned from the booksellers’ stalls and libraries. But there seems to be a complete collection here.” She ran one finger lovingly over the spines of the books.

“Well then, you can catch up on the series—maybe there are some you haven’t read,” he remarked.

“Really?” Her eyes widened. “I mean...you don’t mind me reading them?”

“Why should I?” Bear shrugged. “To be honest, I’ll be spending a lot of my time studying and working on the trade agreement I came here to make with the Karpisian Sigma government for wormhole rights. So why would I mind if you read to pass the time?”

“You’re not afraid the Salana books will give me...wrong ideas?” she asked, still looking at him wide-eyed.

“What? The idea that a female can live her own life and travel without a male companion?” Bear frowned. “I don’t think those are wrong or bad ideas at all. In my culture, females are given as much independence as males.”

Aleena shook her head in wonderment.

“What an amazing place you must live,” she remarked. “But...there are other ideas in the Salana books. I mean, they include adventures Salana has where she is...is sometimes intimate with a man. I mean—she kisses men who she is not Joined with, if you know what I mean.” Her bronze cheeks went dark with a blush as though she was admitting something shameful.

Bear tried not to laugh at her innocence because it was clear she was serious. He had seen some of the books the human females read back on the Mother Ship—the idea of a woman kissing someone she wasn't joined to was extremely tame compared to those.

“That’s fine,” he said seriously, since Aleena was clearly asking for his permission to read the books. “I know females like to read about romance—I’m sure that’s part of the story.”

Aleena looked relieved and excited at the same time.

“Oh, I can’t wait to start reading some of the ones I’ve missed in the series!” she exclaimed, running her finger over the spines of the books again. “You know there’s a rumor that the author of the Salana books is actually a woman ?” she added in a hushed tone.

Bear frowned.

“Would that really be so strange? A female writing books for other females?”

“Oh, but here women are not allowed to write books. It’s only been in the past hundred solar years or so that we’ve even been allowed to read them!” Aleena explained.

Bear’s frown deepened—he no longer found this a laughing matter. Any society who kept their females in ignorance and intellectual poverty on purpose was contemptible and wrong.

“You should be allowed to read and write anything you want,” he told Aleena fiercely. “My people—the Kindred—believe that females should be elevated, not denigrated.”

She looked surprised all over again.

“Your people sound very strange to me, my Lord Husband,” she said, forgetting to use his name. “Strange...but nice,” she added, with a tentative smile.

“It shouldn’t be considered strange to treat your mate as your equal,” Bear growled. “As long as we’re together, I want you to remember that—and to feel free to read and write or do whatever makes you happy.”

Aleena’s pale purple eyes were so large they seemed in danger of taking over her face.

“You’re very kind,” she murmured at last. “But...you would even let me write?”

“Of course! Write whatever you want.” He threw out a hand towards the bookshelf. “Maybe you’d like to write your own romance novel.”

“Maybe I would...” Aleena nibbled her lush lower lip. “I...I kept a journal for a time,” she admitted in a low voice, as though confessing to a crime. “It was only supposed to be a record of my day and the recipes I liked but then I started writing little stories—just about the people I met and the things I thought they might do.”

“Journaling is a good way to clear your head,” Bear remarked. “I used to keep a journal myself. What happened to yours?”

Aleena looked down at her hands.

“My father found it. It was during one of the rare times he visited us and inspected our living quarters,” she said in a low voice.

“Was he upset that you’d been writing?” Bear asked.

“It was...one of the only times he beat me.” She looked up and he saw the hurt in her eyes. “He’s usually a very kind man but he said...he said he had to beat the will to write out of me. He told me no man would ever want me for a wife if he found out I’d been writing stories.”

Bear felt a wave of protective anger sweep over him. How dare that idiot, Sir Greggor, beat his daughter just for writing? Creativity should be encouraged and nourished—not punished in that way. He had a feeling if Aleena’s father was there in front of him, he wouldn’t have been able to stop himself from punching him in the face!

The intensity of his emotions surprised him. Yes, it was unpleasant to be working with a people who were so backwards when it came to the way they treated their females, but he hadn’t expected to have such a visceral reaction to the tales of their cruelty.

“Your father was wrong,” he said at last, trying to keep his temper in check. Aleena didn’t know him well enough to know that his anger wasn’t directed at her. “I do value a female who can read and write. Some of my favorite authors in my own culture are female.”

“Really? You have female authors? I mean, everyone knows they write? They don’t have to use a man’s name?” Aleena asked eagerly.

Bear smiled.

“We do have female authors and no, they don’t have to write under a male name. And you can write too—as much as you want. I’ll even give you what you need to do it. Do you want another journal to write in or would you prefer to type?”

“Oh, I don’t know how to type, but a journal would be wonderful!”

“We’ll get you one then,” Bear promised her, smiling at her excitement.

He liked the idea of nourishing her creativity—of giving her room to grow. His new bride was like a flower that had been raised in a small, cramped corner that was dark most of the time, he thought. He wanted to get her out into the sunlight and give her a place to bloom. He wanted to see her fulfill her potential.

It didn’t occur to him that he was thinking of her as his bride or that he was picturing their relationship as a long-term affair. He only knew he wanted to see Aleena happy and watch that beautiful smile spread across her lovely face again and again.

10

ALEENA

After the tour of the study which had an entire women's shelf and her new husband's promise that she could read and write as much as she wanted to, Aleena didn't think she could be any happier. But then he showed her to a bathing room that was absolutely huge.

It had a vast marble soaking tub as well as a large shower stall and a steam unit. There was even a whole row of bathing products all lined up at the edge of the tub for her to try.

I can soak in the tub and read any one of the Salana books I want to! she thought as she surveyed the room with excitement. Or I can take a book down to the Sun Room and lay on the moss and read it there. And maybe if her new husband really did get her a journal, she could write stories in the Sun Room as well.

Just the thought that the big Kindred didn't mind if she wrote made her feel almost giddy. She'd always had stories swirling around in her head, from the time she was a little girl. Setting them down on paper would be such a joy.

Truly she must be the luckiest girl in the world!

We'll see how lucky you feel once he finally gets around to changing the color of your eyes, murmured a little voice in her head.

Aleena pushed it away—she didn't want to waste any time feeling frightened or uneasy. So far her new husband had been extremely kind to her and he had promised not to hurt her. She decided she would take him at his word.

It was getting closer to evening by the time they finished touring the home where they would live together and Aleena's stomach was beginning to growl. She'd been too nervous to eat breakfast so she'd only had a bite of the Joining Loaf and a sip of the Joining punch all day. It suddenly occurred to her that one way to thank Bear for being so kind would be to make him a magnificent feast with some of the gourmet ingredients downstairs.

"My Lord Hus—I mean, Bear—are you hungry?" she asked, looking up at him.

He nodded.

"I could eat. We didn't have much at the Joining ceremony."

Aleena felt a flash of shame.

"I'm sorry about that," she apologized. "A true Joining ceremony ought to have a big feast afterwards, but my stepmother wanted to, er, keep expenses down."

Bear arched one dark eyebrow.

"Mmm-hmm, I understand. But don't worry about it. What would you like to eat? Should we go get something? Or do they have delivery here?"

"Go get something?" she asked, confused.

"Sure." He shrugged. "Don't they have restaurants here?"

“Well...yes. But they are only for special occasions. Generally, a wife is supposed to make dinner for her husband every night. And any other meal he wants too,” she added.

Bear frowned.

“Do you like to cook?”

“I do!” She nodded quickly. “I was thinking I might make something really good from the fancy ingredients that were left for us in the refrigeration unit.”

“Well...if you actually want to cook—” Bear began sounding doubtful. “I mean, I don’t want you to think that all the domestic chores are on you.”

Aleena was already nodding her head.

“Yes, of course! I would love to make a meal for you, my...Bear,” she said quickly.

The big Kindred smiled.

“I think I like that...’my Bear,’” he rumbled.

Aleena felt herself blushing. She’d slipped up and almost called him “my Lord Husband” again but had changed to his name at the last minute. But it did sound rather nice, she thought.

“I would love to make dinner for you, my Bear,” she said softly. “If that would please you?”

“If it would please you, it would please me,” he said firmly. “Have some fun in the fancy food prep area and I’ll be up here studying. Unless you want me to come help

do the chopping or act as your sous chef?” he added, lifting his brows.

“Do the chopping? A male helping in the kitchen?” Aleena shook her head, trying not to laugh at the ridiculous idea. Everyone knew that males couldn’t cook!

“Sure,” he said mildly. “I don’t mind. I used to...” But he trailed off, a frown on his face.

Aleena wondered if he was going to admit that he used to cook the same way she had admitted to writing stories in a journal, but he didn’t say anything else.

“I can manage. You just study and do your manly work,” she told him. “I’ll call you when dinner is ready.”

“All right, thank you,” he said nodding. “And I’m sure whatever you make will be delicious.”

“It will be perfect!” Aleena promised him.

She just hoped she could make something good to eat out of all the fancy ingredients in the refrigeration unit—most of which she’d never used before.

ALEENA

The first thing she had to do before cooking was to change her clothing, Aleena told herself. As much as she'd enjoyed wearing the pretty Joining Day outfit, she couldn't risk cooking in it. Reluctantly, she went back to the bed chamber and dug in her shabby leather bag for the nicest outfit she had.

It wasn't very nice at all, unfortunately. Though she and her mother had done their best to patch the ragged parts, it was clear to see where the sleeves and split skirt had been mended. And the breast net was the only one she had—the one made of a cheap alloy with the too-large links that showed her nipples.

Aleena hated to wear the cheap, worn-out clothing in the gorgeous mansion where she was going to be living with her new husband. It made her feel like a scullery maid living in a castle—like the old fairy stories her mother used to tell her. But there was no help for it—these were the nicest clothes she owned and she couldn't exactly go around naked!

But once she got down to the kitchen, she was able to put her worries about her clothing behind her. It was time to concentrate on making the most amazing dinner anyone had ever seen, she told herself!

Recklessly, she began pulling ingredients out of the cupboards and the fridge. She wasn't sure what she was going to make until, far in the back of the unit, she found a haunch of dweezle. The tender, delectable meat came from an exotic animal that only

the richest people could afford to buy.

Aleena had only tasted it once herself, at a fancy party when she was much younger, but she remembered the way the meat had melted in her mouth. If she could make a roast like that one, her new Kindred husband would surely be impressed!

Carefully she unwrapped the haunch of dark green meat and found a roasting platter big enough to hold it. It still had the bone in it—sticking out of one end like a white stick with a knob on the end.

Aleena slathered the richly marbled meat with a mixture of spices, using the limpa cream she found in the door of the fridge as a binding agent. When she was finished, she popped it into the oven and then wondered what temperature to cook it on.

Back home in her mother's small oven, they'd cooked everything on the highest setting because they only had two heat jets. This oven had eight jets, Aleena reminded herself. So perhaps she ought to set it on low? But then, how long would the haunch—which was a large cut of meat—take to get done?

She decided to compromise and set the oven around the medium-high mark. That should roast the dweezle haunch nicely without taking too long, she thought.

Once she had the dark green haunch in the oven, she started on the vegetables. There were long blue leafy strumba stalks that she needed to clean and steam and also some goofroo root that would taste good mashed, though she'd have to peel and boil it first. The other gourmet ingredients could serve as garnishes, she decided.

Aleena got to work on the vegetables. There was a lot of peeling and chopping to be done and of course, she had to go through the kitchen and find the correct pots and pans and utensils to use. Anyone who has ever tried to make a fancy dinner in an unfamiliar kitchen knows how difficult it can be to find everything you need, but

somehow she managed.

Eventually, everything was cooking nicely—the strumba stalks were steaming and the goofroo root was chopped into big purple chunks and boiling away on the state-of-the-art cooktop. Aleena was beginning to feel quite proud of herself. It was true that she hadn't used a lot of these ingredients before, but she knew what she was doing in the kitchen. Why, she bet this would be the best meal her new husband had ever tasted! He would like it so much he would never want to disavow her. He...

Her nose wrinkled and she frowned. What was that smell? It was faint but acrid and the scent stung her nostrils.

“Something's not right,” she whispered to herself, looking around for the source of the odor. “What is it? What is it?”

She followed her nose and—to her horror—it led her right to the oven. Feeling terrible apprehension coiling in her belly, Aleena pulled open the cook drawer to reveal...a mass of flames!

“Oh, no!” she gasped, staring into the oven. The eight heat jets were much stronger than the two in her oven back home and all of them were blasting the dweezle haunch with flame!

Quickly, Aleena turned off all the knobs, shutting off the flaming jets. Without thinking, she reached into the oven with her right hand to try and snatch the scorched roast out of the cooking tray.

“Ouch!” she gasped, yanking her burned fingers away almost as soon as they made contact with the roasting pan. “What is wrong with you, Aleena? Where is your head?” she scolded herself under her breath as she found some oven pads and finally retrieved the heavy haunch.

It was clear the minute she got it out of the oven that there was no saving the roast. Aleena carved into it anyway—or tried to—but it was burned to a crisp. She'd been hoping that maybe it was only done on the outside and raw underneath. That way she could have peeled back the first layer and tried roasting it again.

But no—it was a total loss. The incredibly strong heat jets had charred it almost to a lump of charcoal—even the formerly white bone was blackened with soot.

Aleena felt like crying and not just because of her burned hand—which was hurting more by the minute. She would have to admit to her new husband what she had done. The dweeple haunch had been an extremely expensive cut of meat—the cost of it would have fed herself and her mother for a full two months. And she had ruined it in less than an hour.

There was no hiding such incompetence. He would know when he came downstairs and smelled the acrid smoke still drifting from the ruined haunch. She would have to come clean and he would probably disavow her at once. Not that Aleena would blame him—how could she have ruined the beautiful meal she had planned so badly?

With tears in her eyes, she turned off the other vegetables steaming and boiling on the cooktop and trudged up the stairs.

It was better to admit her fault and get it over with, she told herself as she went. At least she would probably be back in her mother's house by nightfall, though she didn't know how the disavowment would affect the deal she'd made with her stepmother. Probably Grindelia would refuse to let her father pay for her mother's treatment now and she would end up on the street letting strangers change the color of her eyes after all.

The thoughts of her dismal future were so depressing that by the time she reached the study door, she could barely bring herself to knock. But this had to be done—it

couldn't be put off.

Fighting back tears, she knocked on the door with her unburned hand and waited to learn her fate.

12

BEAR

Bear almost didn't hear the tentative knocking. It was so faint that at first he thought it must be his imagination. But after a moment he realized that it must be his new bride trying to get his attention. Probably Last Meal was ready and she wanted him to come eat.

That suited Bear fine—he was getting quite hungry by now and his stomach had growled several times, interrupting his studies. He put aside the thick volume of Karpasian Treaty Law which he'd pulled from the bookcase and went to answer the door.

What he saw outside surprised and concerned him. Aleena was standing there, all right, but her pretty face was a mask of tragic woe. Also, she had one hand clutched to her stomach, as though she was in pain somehow.

“Aleena? What's wrong?” he asked, worried at the look on her face.

She shook her head, as though she could barely summon the words at first. Then, finally, she looked up at him and blurted,

“Oh my Lord Husband, I burned your dinner!”

“What? How? Are you all right?” Bear demanded all in the same breath. The tragic expression on her face troubled him— she looked like she was about to tell him that

someone she loved had died—not that she’d simply burned something.

“It was the oven—it has so many heat jets and I’m not used to that many,” she said quickly. “But I know that’s no excuse! I burned the dweezle haunch and I know how expensive such a cut of meat is. I never meant to—I’m so, so sorry!”

Then she fell to her knees and started to weep.

Bewildered at her sudden grief, Bear did the only thing he could think to do—he gathered her up into his arms and carried her to the bed chamber. Then he sat on the side of the bed, holding her in his lap, and waited until she stopped sobbing.

“All right now,” he said at last, when she was no longer crying so hard. “Tell me what this is all about? Why are you so upset just because you burned something?”

“Just because I burned something?” She looked up at him through wet lashes, her purple eyes like jewels. “That dweezle haunch was so expensive! And I know you’ll want to disavow me now—of course you will. What man would keep a wife who can’t even...can’t even cook?”

She started crying again and he noticed that she was clutching the same hand she’d been favoring earlier to her chest.

Frowning, he tugged gently at her wrist.

“Let me see your hand—did you do something to it?” he asked.

Without speaking, she uncurled her fingers, showing swollen and badly blistered skin.

Bear sucked in a breath at the sight and the doctor part of his brain—the part that had

been sleeping for the past five years since his wife had died—suddenly came back to life and started shouting orders.

Second degree burns! She needs immediate treatment. Cold water first and then some cooling ointment and some skin-saver—you have some in your bag.

His bag, filled with instruments and tools and treatments—he'd always carried it with him everywhere when he was practicing medicine. But for the past five years, it had lived in a small compartment of his long-range shuttle—locked away along with the painful memories of his lost Zelia.

Luckily, his shuttle was parked in the mansion's circular driveway, alongside the rented hovercoach. He only needed a moment to go retrieve it, but first he needed to get some cold water on Aleena's burns.

"Come on, baby," he said, lifting her in his arms again as he rose from the bed.

"Where are we going? Are...are you going to throw me out right now?" she asked in a choked voice.

Bear wanted to reassure her, but he wanted to treat her burns too.

"No, baby—of course not," he said, trying to make his voice low and soothing. "I need to get some medicine for your hand but first we need to get it under some cold water. That will help the swelling and ease some of the pain you must be feeling."

"It...it really does hurt," she admitted in a small voice. "But it's no more than I deserve after ruining such and expensive cut of meat."

"Don't fucking talk like that," Bear said roughly, frowning down at her. "You're much more important than any piece of meat! Who cares if you burned it?"

Her eyes went wide with uncertainty.

“You mean...you don’t...”

“Look, let’s get your hand fixed first,” Bear interrupted her.

He carried her into the fresher—what she had called “the bathing chamber” earlier—and sat her down on the side of the vast marble soaking tub. After experimenting for a moment, he found out how to make the cold water come out of the unfamiliar taps.

“All right, good,” he said decisively. “Now hold your hand under there until I can go get my kit.”

“Your kit?” She frowned uncertainly but Bear didn’t have time to explain.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised her and left in a hurry.

Luckily, his medical kit was still where he had left it. He’d been half afraid that he’d taken it out and put it somewhere else on the Mother Ship. But it was there and a quick look inside showed that he had everything he needed to treat her burn.

He could smell the burned roast as he came back through the house and bounded up the stairs. It wasn’t very appetizing, but he still couldn’t understand why it had caused Aleena to cry so hard. Maybe her tears were due to the pain in her hand—those were some serious burns, he thought anxiously, taking the stairs two at a time.

When he got back to the fresher, she was still sitting on the side of the tub with her hand under the cold water. Bear knelt in front of her and turned off the water. Then he motioned for her to hold out her hand.

“All right, let’s see now,” he murmured. Taking some absorbent gauze out of his bag, he first dried her hand and then began applying a cooling ointment.

Aleena sighed with relief as he spread the pale blue gel over her burns.

“Oh—that feels so much better! It was really hurting me,” she admitted in a soft voice.

“How did you do it? Reaching for the roast you had in the cooking unit?” he asked, frowning down at her. He was so much bigger than her that even kneeling, he was still taller.

Biting her lower lip, she nodded.

“I know it was foolish. I wasn’t thinking—I was just trying to save the dweezle haunch. It was so expensive!”

Bear was beginning to see that the cost of things was very important to her. Was that because she’d had a hard time financially after her father had stopped sending her mother money for living expenses? Whatever the reason, he wanted to put a stop to this kind of thinking right now.

“Now, listen to me, Aleena,” he said sternly. “I don’t care how much the damn roast cost— you are more important. I don’t want you hurting yourself like this again.” He nodded down at her burned hand, which was looking considerably better.

Now that the cooling ointment had mostly dried, he took out a spray can and began applying a layer of new-skin. It would adhere to the burned flesh and act as an artificial skin until her epidermis could heal itself. When that happened, it would fall away naturally.

“So...you’re not going to disavow me?” Aleena asked in a small voice.

Bear looked up from her hand and saw hope and fear in her eyes, which were still wet with tears. An impulse he couldn’t explain took over him and he put down the can of new-skin and cupped her face in his hands.

“No, baby,” he murmured, looking into her eyes. “No, I’m not going to disavow you. So please stop worrying about that—all right?”

Then, very gently, he kissed her flushed cheeks and eyelids, kissing away the tears because he couldn’t stand to see her so upset.

What are you saying? demanded a little voice inside his head. Your whole plan was to disavow her after the wormhole treaty is finished! How can you promise you won’t? If you keep her as your mate, you’ll be breaking your vow!

But Bear couldn’t help himself—seeing his new bride so upset made his heart fist in his chest. He could understand why Aleena was so worried—her own father had disavowed her mother and all but abandoned her. Doubtless she had attachment issues and feared being left the same way her mother had been left. He had to reassure her that he wasn’t going to do that to her.

Except you are going to do that, the little voice in his head pointed out. How are you going to explain leaving her when the treaty is over and done with and you’re ready to go back to the Mother Ship?

Bear didn’t know, so he pushed the little voice aside. For now, he just wanted to comfort his new bride. He pulled back to look at her and saw an expression of wide-eyed wonder on her lovely face.

“My Bear,” she whispered. “Truly, you are too kind to me.”

“I think you can use a little kindness, baby,” he murmured, stroking her cheek. Her tears were salty-sweet on his lips and her eyes were shining like stars. He had the sudden urge to kiss her somewhere else—to taste her sweet lips—but he held himself back. He couldn’t go too far with her, he reminded himself. He needed to draw the line somewhere.

Still, he couldn’t make himself get up yet. He remained kneeling before her as she sat on the side of the tub, both of them looking into each other’s eyes.

“My hand is much better now,” she said at last. “I’ll go downstairs and see if I can find something else to cook for your dinner.”

“No—forget about that for now,” Bear said. He stood at last and took her by her unhurt hand to pull her up. “We’re going out to eat.”

“Out to a restaurant?” Her eyes got even bigger, if that was possible. “But...but I’ve done nothing to deserve such a treat! If anything, I should be punished—beaten for burning your dinner.”

Bear frowned down at her.

“Listen to me, Aleena—I don’t care what I had to say in that fucked-up ceremony, I’m not ever going to beat you. No matter what you were raised to believe, a male hitting a female is wrong and I’m not going to do it.”

“But...but sometimes a woman does something inexcusable and then her husband must beat her to correct her wicked ways!” she protested.

Bear shook his head.

“You have to stop thinking like that. My people—the Kindred—believe there’s never

any excuse for a male to hit or hurt a female. The Goddess made us bigger and stronger to protect the women we love and cherish—not to hit or hurt them.”

He saw a look of relief pass over her face.

“Thank you, my Bear,” she said sincerely. “I must confess, I was worried when I first saw you. You’re so big and strong, I was afraid that a beating from you might kill me!”

The thought that she’d been worried about such things during their ceremony made Bear’s heart fist in his chest. Gods—to think she’d been raised to expect getting beaten! Being a Kindred, hitting a female was unthinkable for him and the idea that the Karprians did it regularly made him furious. But he tried to swallow his anger—he needed to make Aleena understand how he felt.

“Look at me, baby,” he murmured. Taking her unhurt hand, he brought it to his chest and put it over his heart.

“Yes?” She looked up at him uncertainly.

“I’m going to make you a promise,” Bear told her, looking into her eyes. “My strength will only ever be used to defend and protect you— never to beat or punish you. You never have to worry about me hitting or hurting you—I swear it by the Goddess.”

For a moment, it seemed Aleena didn’t know what to say. Then she whispered,

“Thank you, my Bear. That’s very kind of you.”

“You’re welcome, baby.”

Once again, the endearment just slipped out. She was so little and sweet—his first wife had been a rare Beast Kindred female. She'd been much taller and more sturdily built. Aleena was so petite—at least compared to him—that she seemed almost like a child he wanted to protect, though she had womanly curves to prove otherwise.

Bear put an arm around her shoulders and nodded at the fresher door.

“Come on—let's get out of here and go eat.”

He would worry about the disavowment problem later, he told himself. For now, he just wanted to go get something to eat and spend some time with his new bride.

ALEENA

Aleena could scarcely believe the turn her life had taken. Here she was, sitting in the back of the hovercoach with her new husband on their way to a restaurant and she had done nothing to earn it! In fact, she had done things that other men would certainly disavow or beat their wives for. Instead, Bear had decided to take her out for a treat! And he had promised never to beat her.

Could such a man really exist? Aleena looked up at him uncertainly. She was leaning against his side because, when they had gotten into the back of the hovercoach, he had pulled her close to him. She was snuggled up against his big, muscular body and it all felt perfectly natural even though she'd never seen him before the Joining ceremony. He just felt right to her somehow and the warm, spicy scent he seemed to carry with him made her feel even more attracted to the big Kindred.

Bear saw her looking at him and flashed her a smile, which lightened up his brooding features. Aleena wondered if she could really trust his kindness—she certainly wanted to, but a husband who never hit or hurt and wasn't even angry when she burned up an expensive dinner seemed almost too good to be true.

Sure enough, as she watched him, Bear's eyes flickered over her face and then lower...and he frowned.

"Hey," he remarked. "What's that you're wearing?"

“Oh, um...” Aleena looked down at her much-mended skirt and sleeves and her cheap breast net. She was instantly ashamed of the tarnished, rusty metal and the way the links were so large her nipples could be clearly seen through the netting.

“I didn’t notice before, but why are you wearing something that shows your...uh...everything?” he asked, frowning.

“I’m very sorry, my Lord Husband,” Aleena said humbly. “Unfortunately, these are the best clothes I own. I apologize that I was not able to afford a new outfit to wear.”

His frown deepened.

“Look, baby—I don’t like taking you out in public looking like that! I don’t want other men to be able to see my wife’s breasts!”

Aleena felt her heart drop down to her shoes. She wanted to cover her breasts, but she was afraid that might anger him more.

“Forgive me,” she whispered. “I understand if you would rather return to the house. I can make you something else for dinner there—I promise I won’t burn it this time!”

“No, I don’t mean I want to go back,” he growled. “I’m really hungry and I’m sure you are too, baby. But before we go anywhere, we need to take you shopping.”

“Shopping?” Aleena asked.

“Yes, shopping. For something that will cover you. Where do you buy these, uh, breast covers?” he asked, motioning to her chest again.

“Oh—women’s apparel can be purchased in the garment district,” Aleena told him. “Which is also close to the place where many restaurants are.”

She knew this because her stepmother and half-sister were always going on shopping trips and then out to lunch. They talked about it whenever she saw them and Aleena had always wished she and her mother could do such things together. But there was no money for such frivolous trips—no money for anything at all.

But now Bear was saying he would take her shopping and out to eat—it seemed too good to be true!

“All right,” he rumbled. Then he raised his voice and addressed the self-driving hovercoach. “Coach—take us to the garment district.”

“Understood,” the hovercoach replied in a robotic voice and the vehicle abruptly turned and headed in a new direction.

Aleena couldn’t believe it—for the first time in years, since before her father had disavowed her mother—she was actually going shopping for new clothes instead of getting her clothing from secondhand shops.

Once again, she couldn’t help thinking that it was all too good to be true!

ALEENA

It all seemed like a beautiful dream. Bear took her to several nice shops and let her buy whatever she wanted. He even suggested things for her that were much more expensive than Aleena would have chosen for herself.

He got her three new breast nets—a silver one for everyday wear, a silver and gold one for slightly nicer occasions, (she had put that one on to wear to the restaurant,) and a golden one encrusted with jewels that was even nicer than the one her stepmother, Grindelia owned, to wear to fancy formal events. (Bear assured her they would be attending several galas, since he was dealing with the Karpasian government in an official capacity.)

He also got her many new skirts and sleeves, which were joined in the back with a panel of cloth to keep them together, so she wouldn't always be having to pull them up. He even bought her new underpants and slippers to wear, because in his words, she needed "new everything."

When they finally finished shopping, Aleena was dressed as nicely as any of the high-class women she saw strolling arm-in-arm with their husbands down the street and the back of the hovercoach was crammed with boxes and bags.

They ate at a cozy little restaurant that specialized in small plates and Aleena was able to show her new husband many types of Karpasian cuisine. Bear had an enormous appetite and he ordered almost everything on the menu and encouraged Aleena to try

anything she wanted.

She was surprised and touched by her new husband's generosity—in her culture, for a man to offer a woman some of his food meant that he truly loved her. She didn't know if Bear knew that or if he was just being generous, but either way, every time he held out a bite of some delicacy for her to try, she felt her heart flutter in her chest.

After eating, they stopped at a public trash receptacle so that she could throw away her old clothes and breast netting. When Aleena saw them disappear down the chute, she looked up at her new husband and smiled gratefully.

"You've been so good to me, my Bear," she said, really meaning it. "Thank you so much, but you shouldn't have spent so much on me!"

"What else should I spend my money on?" He grinned down at her and put an arm around her shoulders to pull her close. "Besides, you look gorgeous in that new breast cover—and it keeps other males from looking at my wife," he added with a possessive look at her chest.

Aleena felt her cheeks heat with a blush.

"I always was embarrassed to wear that old breast net out in public," she admitted in a low voice. "So many men would shout and call at me, asking me awful questions—like what price it would be to change the color of my eyes." She blushed harder as she spoke, dropping her gaze.

"Bastards!" There was a low growl in her new husband's voice. "Why couldn't you just wear a scarf or something to cover up?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that!" Aleena protested, looking up at him. "An unmarried female is never allowed to hide her assets. All males must be able to see her, to judge if she

would make a good wife or not.”

Bear growled again.

“Fucking ridiculous!” He seemed angry but Aleena didn’t think his anger was directed at her.

“I don’t have to worry about it anymore, though,” she pointed out. “Now that I’m a married woman, I can hide my breasts behind the beautiful new nets you bought me.” She smiled up at him. “Thank you again, my Bear. You’re more than generous.”

“I just want you to look decent when we go out in public,” he grumbled, but Aleena saw an expression in his golden eyes that seemed to say he liked the way she looked in her new breast net and the other new clothing he had purchased for her.

That look sent a tingle through her entire body and for the first time, she wondered what it would be like to have him change the color of her eyes without a twinge of fear.

I suppose I’ll find out once we get home, she thought. It had been a long day and the shadows outside the hovercoach were growing long. Surely when they got home her new husband would want to take her and make her his completely.

Aleena just hoped she could please the big Kindred and that taking him into her body wouldn’t hurt too much. He was, after all, so very large. But she would do her best to accommodate him, she told herself.

She wanted him to never want to leave her and to love her as she was already beginning to love him.

ALEENA

Aleena had expected her new husband to want to change the color of her eyes as soon as they got home. But to her surprise, after carrying all the bags and boxes up to the sleeping chamber for her, he told her he was going to work in his study a little while longer.

After cleaning the kitchen and getting rid of the ruined roast, she went to check on him—only to find him still working. So she selected a Salana book and took a long soak in the tub while she read it.

The book turned out to be a spicy one with lots of kissing. Reading the scenes made Aleena feel hot all over and her nipples throbbed.

Looking down at her naked body, she noticed her new nipple bands and she wondered when her new husband would decide to take them off. The special gold and silver alloy they were made of was specially designed to react only to a woman's husband—she couldn't take them off herself and she didn't want to wear them all night. Maybe she ought to go ask Bear about it and see what he said.

That gave her a new idea—maybe he was waiting for her to ask him about removing the nipple bands and about changing the color of her eyes. That wasn't the way things were done here on Karpasian Sigma, but maybe it was the way of things with his people. She already knew the Kindred didn't believe in punishing their wives—maybe they also waited for the woman to initiate intimate relations?

The thought grew in her mind and she began to feel restless and worried. What if Bear was sitting in his study right now, wondering why she hadn't come to offer herself to him yet? Might he be waiting for her and all the while, she was lounging in the tub and reading a naughty novel? That would be inexcusable behavior!

She got out and wrapped herself in a towel. She'd been half afraid he might already be waiting for her in the bed chamber, but it was empty when she went in.

Aleena dug through her bag once more, feeling glad she wouldn't have to wear most of what it contained. All of these old clothes could be thrown away now that she had the lovely new outfits Bear had bought her. But there was one special garment that she still needed—her Joining night outfit.

It was something she had scrimped and saved to buy back when they still had money. She had hoped that one day she would get Joined, and she wanted to be ready. And now, years after she had bought it, she would finally get to wear it.

Aleena pulled it out and held it up to admire the scrap of fabric in the soft, golden luminescence of the wall glows. It was a short little dress that barely reached her thighs and it was made of white, nearly transparent lace. Thin straps at the shoulders held it in place and there was a deep V neck-line that tied at the throat with a silk string. Once untied, it would fall open, revealing her bare breasts completely to her husband.

She had a tiny pair of lace panties that barely covered her pussy to go with the little lace dress and she slipped them on, feeling naughty when she saw how little they covered. Why, the soft mound of copper curls and the top of her slit were visible above the little triangle of lace! She wondered with a shiver that was half fear/half anticipation if that would tempt her new husband to take her.

Well, there was only one way to find out. Taking a deep breath, she left the

bedchamber and went to knock on the study door.

16

BEAR

Bear was about to give up work for the night. The start of the negotiations was tomorrow, but he truly felt that he had familiarized himself with as much of the Karprians' laws as he could absorb. Plus, he reminded himself uneasily, Aleena was probably waiting and wondering where he was. This was supposed to be their Joining night, after all—she would be expecting him to “change the color of her eyes.”

He wondered how he was going to handle that. He wasn't going to take her virginity from her—that much he had already decided. But how could he explain that he wasn't going to do what she expected him to do? How could he?—?

A light knocking came at the door and a soft voice said,

“Excuse me, but may I come in?”

Bear took a deep breath. He would just have to put her off—that was all, he told himself. Anything else would be wrong. He knew he couldn't take her with him when he went back to the Mother Ship. It would be better just to let her know that nothing was going to happen between them.

He turned off his work lamp and rose from the comfortable office chair to go stand in front of the fireplace, where a low flame was flickering. It sent a golden glow through the room, bathing the rows of leather-bound books as well as the comfortable and sturdy, leather padded couch across from it in warmth.

“Come in,” Bear called in a low voice. He was determined to tell his new bride immediately that they were just going to go to bed and sleep beside each other without doing anything else. He wasn’t going to be swayed by her beauty. He wasn’t?—

And then the door opened and he sucked in a breath.

Aleena was standing there, dressed in a thin, lacy little scrap of nothing. The white fabric hugged her full curves and stretched over her ripe breasts and wide hips. When she turned a little to the side, he saw her luscious, full bottom as well. Her long hair was loose in long, copper waves around her lovely face and her eyes were fearful and hopeful at the same time.

“My Lord Husband?” she asked softly. “I hope you don’t mind but I thought maybe you might be...might be waiting for me.”

Bear cleared his throat, trying to think what to say. To be honest, it felt like his brain wasn’t working at the moment—probably because all of the blood in his body had rushed to his shaft, which was suddenly aching hard.

It seemed strange to be so intensely aroused. For the past five years he’d had no sexual inclinations at all. He knew human males still longed for sex, even after losing a spouse, but it wasn’t so for Kindred. For them, the loss of a beloved mate often left them sexless—simply because they couldn’t even imagine making love with anyone but their lost beloved.

But Bear was certainly imagining it now. He was thinking of how soft and silky his new bride’s skin was, remembering how it had felt to hold her bare breasts in his hands during the ceremony. The soft moans of pleasure she’d made when he teased her nipples until they grew tight were still ringing in his ears.

“Waiting for you?” he finally got out.

“Well...yes.”

Aleena stepped into the room and came over to stand by him, in front of the fireplace. The flickering flames gilded her bronze skin and the firelight seemed to shine through her skimpy little garment, making it almost see-through.

“You see,” she said, putting a hand on Bear’s arm. “I thought maybe since you hadn’t come to me that I should go to you . I thought perhaps it was the custom of your people—of the Kindred—for a bride to offer herself to her husband on their Joining night. And so, here I am—offering myself.” She spread her hands and the movement made her large breasts jiggle slightly under the thin garment she wore.

Bear nearly groaned at her innocent invitation. She had no idea of what it meant to rouse the hunger of a Beast Kindred! Everything in him longed to take her and Bond her—to sink his shaft deep in her wet, willing pussy and fill her with his knot to tie them together for hours of breeding and Bonding! But somehow he had to stop himself from taking her.

“Aleena, baby,” he said, his voice coming out hoarse in his own ears. “Let’s talk.”

He sat on the leather couch and patted the spot beside him.

“Talk about what?” Rather than sitting, she knelt on the couch, facing him with her ripe breasts thrust out. The tight points of her nipples were tenting the thin, lacy fabric and the thin silk ribbon that tied the top part of her little dress together seemed dangerously close to coming loose.

“I don’t think that we should...that I should change the color of your eyes tonight,” Bear began, trying to keep his gaze on her lovely eyes instead of her ripe, beautiful

breasts.

“You don’t?” She bit her lip. “But...but then, does that mean you don’t want me?”

“No, baby—no, that’s not true at all. Of course I want you—you’re fucking beautiful!” Bear protested. He ran a hand through his hair and nearly cursed. His shaft was aching with need—the Bonding Knot at its base was swelling with desire. Hell yes, he wanted her! But he couldn’t have her.

“But...if you want me, then why don’t you take me?” Aleena asked innocently. “You are my husband now—it is your right to do whatever you wish with my body.”

Bear felt his shaft throb against the tight confines of his black trousers. Gods, this was killing him!

“Look, this is just...not the way we Kindred do things,” he said, reaching for some explanation of his behavior. “We don’t take our brides on the first night we’re with them. We have a time of getting to know each other first—we call it ‘The Claiming Period.’”

“The Claiming Period?” She looked at him uncertainly. “What is that? What does it mean?”

“I’ll try to explain.” Bear was relieved that he’d found some sort of explanation that might satisfy her. Also, it was true that most Kindred warriors went through the Claiming Period with their brides before they took them. It was a time-honored tradition which was meant to let a warrior’s bride get to know him before she gave herself completely. That way both parties were certain when the Soul Bond was formed that they wanted to be together for life.

“It’s like this,” he said to Aleena. “The Claiming Period has four parts—the holding

time, the bathing time, the tasting time, and the bonding time. And during each of those periods, the Kindred warrior and his new bride do...different things together.”

“What kinds of things?” Aleena asked, her eyes wide. She leaned closer to him so that her full breasts were brushing his arm. Bear had to fight the urge to grab her and kiss her and then to do more... much more.

Forcing himself to focus, he tried to explain.

“During the holding time, a Kindred only holds his mate. He can touch her over her garments, but not under them.”

“Oh...do you mean like this?” And lifting his hand from his knee, she put it on her breast.

Bear knew he ought to draw his hand away, but somehow he couldn’t stop himself from cupping her full globe and teasing the tight nipple gently with his thumb.

“Yes...like that,” he growled softly.

“ Mmmm ...” Aleena leaned closer, pushing her breast more firmly into his palm. “Tell me more, please my Lord Husband.”

Bear didn’t bother to correct her or ask her to call him by his name. He was too busy teasing her ripe nipple and watching her moan.

“Maybe it’s better if I show you,” he growled. “Here, come sit in my lap, baby.”

He pulled Aleena into his lap, so that she was straddling him with her knees on either side of his hips. This had the effect of making the tiny little nightdress she had on ride up, which showed her panties—what little there was of them, Bear thought. Gods, he

could see her soft mound of curls and the top of her pussy slit!

The sight made his mouth water—he longed with a sudden fierce intensity to spread her deliciously thick thighs and taste her creamy pussy, but he knew he couldn't do that. He needed to try and slow things down, not speed them up.

If you're trying to slow things down, what are you doing having her straddle you? demanded a critical voice in his head, but Bear pushed it aside.

“Oh, my Lord Husband!” Aleena gasped, panting a little. “Are you going to show me more about the holding time?”

“Yes, I am,” Bear growled. He was cupping both her breasts now, teasing the tips of her nipples with his thumbs to watch her squirm. It seemed clear to him that her tight peaks were extremely sensitive, so he was careful just to brush them lightly—which seemed to have a big effect on Aleena.

“Oh...oh, Bear!” she moaned and he found he liked hearing his name from her lips. “That feels so...so good. Even though you're touching me with my clothes on, it makes me feels so...so...I don't know!”

Bear thought he knew exactly how she was feeling. The fear he'd seen earlier in her eyes had been replaced by desire and the scent of her feminine need was rising to tease his nose. Gods, was there any fragrance better than the scent of an aroused female? He didn't fucking think so!

“Tell me more about the touching time!” Aleena begged. “Would...would you be allowed to touch my...to touch me anywhere else?”

“You mean here?” Releasing one of her breasts, Bear slid his hand down her curving waist to cup the soft mound of her pussy. He could feel her springy curls against the

heel of his palm and his fingers curled possessively around the outer lips of her sweet little sex.

“Oh! Yes, my...my Bear!” Aleena moaned and shifted her hips.

“Mmm, well yes I would, baby,” he murmured. He pressed inward with his middle finger and felt the outer lips of her pussy part beneath the thin, barely there panties. He slid the tip of his finger up and down her slit until he found the little bump of her Goddess pearl. Then he rubbed gently, sliding around and around—massaging her intimately, even though he was still technically touching her over the little lace panties.

“Oh! Oh, my Lord Husband!” Aleena’s eyes grew wide and her hips jerked.

“Does it feel good?” he growled softly, looking into her eyes. “Do you like it when I touch you this way, baby?”

“Y-yes!” she stammered. “No one has ever touched me there before,” she added in a breathless voice.

“Not even you?” Bear raised an eyebrow at her. “Haven’t you ever petted your sweet little pussy, baby?”

Her cheeks flushed.

“Once or twice,” she admitted in a low voice. “I...I tried putting my finger inside myself, but I felt too guilty to continue.”

The thought of her fingering her soft little pussy—exploring herself—made Bear so hard he ached.

“Gods, baby,” he groaned. “You’re making it awfully damn hard not to take you.”

“But you can have me if you want me,” Aleena insisted softly. “I am yours , my Lord Husband.”

“I know, but I can’t take you,” Bear nearly groaned in frustration.

“Because of the Claiming period?” Aleena asked.

He nodded, reluctantly.

“Yeah, baby. Because of the Claiming period,” he said, knowing it was a lie.

“But what comes after the holding time?” she asked, her eyes wide. “You told me but I forgot. What’s next?”

“After the holding time, comes the bathing and touching time,” Bear growled.

“Oh...would we take a bath together then?” Aleena asked.

He nodded.

“That’s right, baby. And I’d be allowed to touch you naked—traditionally a Kindred warrior massages his bride with exotic oils during that time.”

“I...I see...” Aleena was panting—maybe because he was continuing to rub her soft little pussy, caressing her clit through her panties. “And then what?” she asked.

“Well then comes the tasting week,” Bear told her. “That’s when I’m allowed to suck your sweet nipples and spread your legs to taste your hot little pussy.”

“Oh!” Aleena’s eyes grew wide with surprise. “You...you would want to do that? To put your mouth there?” She looked down between her legs.

“Hell yes, I want to put my mouth there,” Bear growled. “There’s nothing better than spreading your female’s legs and lapping her soft little pussy while she moans and gasps and pulls your hair!”

“But...but don’t you think it’s beneath you?” Aleena asked. “The men of my people think it’s debasing to put their face anywhere near a woman’s secret areas.”

“The men of your people are fucking idiots,” Bear growled. “Sorry if that sounds insulting but it’s true! They hit and hurt their females and discard them whenever they want, and now you tell me they won’t even taste their brides? What in the Seven Hells is wrong with them?”

“I don’t know.” Aleena shook her head. “I’ve never been with any man before—I only know what I’ve heard other women whispering about. And no Karpisian man will put his mouth on his wife there.” She bit her lip. “Although, they will put their mouth on their bride’s breasts—they have to.”

“They have to? Why?” Bear was mystified. Was this some kind of custom he didn’t know about?

“Well...because it’s the only way to make the nipple bands release each night,” Aleena told him. Reaching up, she tugged at the thin silk ribbon that held the top part of her night dress closed. The moment it came loose, the two halves of the top parted and folded back, revealing her full, naked breasts completely.

Bear had to bite back a groan. Gods, she had such luscious, full breasts! His hands itched to cup them again as he had during their Joining ceremony. Then what Aleena had told him finally came home.

“Wait—are you telling me that the only way for you to remove the nipple bands is for me to suck your nipples?” he asked her.

Looking a bit apprehensive, she nodded.

“When you put the bands in your mouth at the ceremony, they reacted to your body chemistry. And only that same chemistry can remove the bands each night. It’s not good to leave them on too long,” she added. “But...maybe you feel that you can’t do it, since we are not yet in our tasting time?”

Bear frowned. Goddess, how was he supposed to deal with this level of temptation? He really shouldn’t suck her nipples...and yet, he had to. She couldn’t keep the damn bands on all night—surely it would be bad for her circulation!

“I guess in this case we’ll have to make an exception,” he told her. “Come here baby—let me suck your nipples for you.”

Aleena did as he asked, leaning closer to offer her full, naked breasts. With a low groan, Bear cupped one full globe in his hand and gave in to temptation.

She moaned softly as he sucked and licked her tight peak. He still had one hand between her thighs and he could feel how hot and wet she was getting, even through the lace panties. It was clear she was enjoying what he was doing—which only made him fucking hotter!

At last the first band slipped off and Bear laid it to one side, on the small table beside the couch. He knew he ought to go to work on the other nipple but he captured the first one again, sucking it fully into his mouth and drawing deep to make Aleena moan and squirm as he petted her pussy.

“Oh...oh my Lord Husband!” she cried softly. “I have never felt anything like this

before! It feels so good!”

Knowing how innocent she was made Bear even hotter. He suddenly wanted to teach her everything—but he knew he shouldn’t.

At last he released the first nipple. It was tight and it had turned an even darker bronze from the way he’d been sucking so hard.

“Oh...” Aleena was still panting. “Why...why does it feel so good?” she asked him. “And why do I feel it down there—between my legs—when you suck my nipples?”

“That’s because everything is connected, baby,” he murmured hoarsely. “When I touch you and taste you, it gets your body ready to make love—do you understand?”

“You mean, ready for you to change the color of my eyes?”

“Mmm-hmm.” He nodded. “And ready to be bred.”

“So that you could plant a baby in my belly?” Her eyes got even wider.

Bear nodded again.

“Exactly. But sex doesn’t always have to be about breeding, you know. It can just be about pleasure, too.”

“Just pleasure? But isn’t that wrong?” she asked uncertainly. “I mean, I thought that, you know, sex was just so a man could change the color of a woman’s eyes and plant a baby in her belly.”

“It’s not wrong to just have pleasure,” Bear told her, frowning. “In fact, you don’t even need a male to touch you to give you pleasure—you can give pleasure to

yourself.”

“Oh but...I shouldn’t.” Her cheeks flushed.

“Sure you should,” Bear told her. “Look—show me how you did it before. Show me how you touched yourself before you felt guilty and stopped.”

Aleena nibbled her lower lip—which seemed to be a nervous habit.

“It’s okay, baby,” Bear reassured her. “You can touch yourself. I’m your husband and I’m telling you to,” he added, thinking that might relieve some of her guilt and hesitation.

It turned out he was right. The worry cleared from her lovely face and she nodded.

“All right, my Lord Husband. Would...would you like me to take off my panties so you can see?”

Bear felt his cock throb again. Gods! How was he going to get through this night without breaking his vow? He would just have to hold himself back and let her bring herself pleasure, he told himself.

“Yes, baby—let’s take off those little panties,” he growled softly. “Wait...let me do it.”

Hooking his thumbs through the thin lace sides of the panties, he pulled them down and off her legs. A few moments later, Aleena was settled in his lap, straddling him again, but this time her pussy was completely bare.

The position caused the outer lips of her pussy, which were swollen with desire, to part on their own, giving him a glimpse of her slippery inner folds and the hot little

button of her clit.

“Gods!” he groaned. “So fucking beautiful, baby! Go on now—show me how you touched yourself.”

Hesitantly, Aleena slid one hand down and cupped her mound. She moaned softly as her small fingers invaded her sex, slipping inward to caress herself.

“That’s right, baby,” Bear encouraged her. “Pet your sweet little clit—my people call that your ‘Goddess pearl’, you know,” he added.

“Ohhhh!” Aleena’s eyes went half-lidded as she obeyed him and circled her tight little button with her fingertip. “Oh my Bear—why does it feel so good?” she moaned.

“Because the Goddess made that part of you just for pleasure,” he told her. “So it’s all right to touch yourself there, baby—it’s all right to make yourself feel good.”

“I...I never did this before—when...when I tried touching myself,” she panted. “I just...just put my finger inside.”

“Do you want to show me how you did it?” Bear murmured, thumbing her nipple. “Let me see, baby.”

Aleena did as he asked. Moving her hand down, she slid her middle finger deep in her pussy.

“Good girl,” Bear encouraged her. “Does that feel good? Are you nice and tight?”

“Really tight.” She nodded. “I...I confess I was worried, you know. I was wondering how...how you could fit inside me.” She looked down at the sizeable lump in his

trousers and Bear understood. No doubt his size scared her, but he didn't want her to be afraid.

"You don't have to worry about that, baby," he reassured her. "I'm not going to do that to you tonight."

"Because we haven't reached the right time?" she asked. "But even when we do, I'm afraid I'll be too tight for you to fit inside me."

Bear shook his head.

"No, baby. You see, my body makes special compounds that will help you open up for me. So you don't have to be afraid, all right?"

"Really. No matter how tight I am?" She still looked doubtful and Bear wanted to reassure her.

"No matter how tight," he promised.

"But, well...I just don't see how." She bit her lip. "Maybe...maybe you should feel inside me and see if you think I'm too tight for it to work."

Bear frowned.

"I shouldn't," he pointed out. "We're not in our bathing and touching time yet."

"No, but we're not in our tasting time and yet you sucked my nipple for me," Aleena pointed out. "Please, Bear—it would make me feel so much better if you felt inside me and let me know if you think I'll be able to...to take you when the time comes," she begged softly.

At that point, Bear didn't feel like he could say no to her anymore. Besides, he wanted to touch her soft little pussy with nothing between them. He wanted to bring her pleasure—to watch her come, possibly for the first time in her life, since she'd never been allowed to touch herself.

The temptation was simply too much. He slipped his hand between her spread legs and cupped her naked pussy in his hand.

“All right, baby,” he growled softly. “Just open your pussy like a good girl and let me fill you up.”

ALEENA

Aleena moaned as she felt her new husband's warm palm make contact with her bare pussy. She had never felt anything like this before—the sensations inside her kept building and building. It was a kind of tension that made her feel all tight and wound up—like a spring about to snap. And yet, she wanted it to snap somehow.

“Open your pussy for your husband like a good girl,” Bear growled again and Aleena spread her thighs a little wider, eager to feel him touching her. For such a huge, muscular man, he was extremely gentle. She had no fear in opening herself to him like this because she knew he wouldn't hurt her.

“Yes, my Lord Husband,” she moaned softly. “Please touch me. Fill me and tell me if you think I'm too tight for your shaft.”

The shaft in question was an absolutely huge bulge in the crotch of his trousers. Aleena found the sight both frightening and fascinating.

“Going to fill you, baby,” Bear told her. “But first I want to pet that sweet little clit some more, now that you have your panties off.”

As he spoke, he slipped one long finger into her open folds and began to circle the sensitive little bud as he had before. This time, however, Aleena was bare and the feeling of his fingers against such a tender area made her moan with pure pleasure.

“Oh...oh my Bear!” she cried softly, digging her fingernails into his broad shoulders.
“Oh please don’t stop!”

“I won’t, baby,” he growled softly. His eyes were fixed on her face—he seemed to like to watch her writhe on his lap and moan for some reason. Aleena wondered hazily if he got pleasure from giving her pleasure. That was certainly how it seemed, anyway.

Bear continued to stroke around and around her clit and all the while the spring in her belly wound tighter and tighter. Aleena kept feeling like something was going to happen—something she would never forget.

“Please, my Lord Husband!” she panted, her hips jerking as he continued to caress her. “I feel like...like something is going to happen to me. Like...I don’t know what, but the pleasure is getting so intense!”

“You’re going to come in a minute, baby,” he growled softly. “That’s all—you’re going to have a sexual release.”

“A...a release?” Aleena panted. “I don’t underst— aaaaah!” Her last word ended in a moan as the spring in her belly finally snapped and intense pleasure poured over her like a warm wave. “Oh! Oh, my Bear!” she cried, her hips thrusting helplessly as the inner walls of her pussy spasmed. “Oh please—it feels so...so...”

But she couldn’t finish the sentence because the pleasure was too intense. Her back arched and her toes curled as she kept thrusting her hips to rub against his hand.

“Good girl,” Bear murmured, continuing to stroke her pussy. “Good girl, Aleena—let yourself come—come for your husband. Come nice and hard.”

Aleena did exactly as he said—she didn’t fight the pleasure—she rode it and let it

ride her. It felt so good—so right—to give herself to her new husband this way. She gave herself to him in the only way she could.

“Ohhh!” she sighed at last as the pleasure ebbed a bit. “Oh Bear—that was so...so...”

Again, words failed her. Panting for breath, Aleena rested her head on the big Kindred’s broad shoulder as she tried to regain her composure.

“Mmm, did that feel good, baby?” he rumbled in her ear. “Did you like it when I made you come?”

“Yes, I did—a lot!” Aleena admitted.

“Good—because now I’m going to do it again. But more slowly this time,” he told her.

“Again?” Aleena looked up at him, still panting. “You mean, that...that can happen more than once?”

Bear rumbled with laughter, the corners of his golden eyes crinkling in amusement.

“Sure it can, baby. But first, let me see how tight you are.”

Aleena had almost forgotten that was why he was touching her in the first place. Pulling back a little, she watched curiously as he slid his long middle finger down to the mouth of her pussy...and then thrust slowly inside.

“Gods, baby—you’re so hot and wet!” he growled softly, thrusting his finger deeper and then pulling it out to thrust in again.

“ Mmmm —my Lord Husband, that feels good,” she whispered. “So much better than

when I touched myself!”

“Well, you just now had your very first orgasm, baby,” Bear pointed out. “Of course it’s going to feel better when you’re already having pleasure. Here, let me show you...”

And keeping his long finger buried in her pussy, he began to rub slow circles around the tight button of her clit again, this time with the pad of his thumb.

At first Aleena thought she was too sensitive, but soon she felt the pleasure building again. She moaned and twitched her hips but she wanted even more, somehow.

“My...my Lord Husband,” she panted, looking into Bear’s melted gold eyes. “Please—you have not yet removed my other nipple band.”

“Mmm, that’s right, I haven’t,” he agreed in a low growl. “Do you want me to suck your sweet nipples while I finger your soft little pussy, baby? Is that what you’re asking me to do?”

Aleena felt her cheeks get hot with a blush, but she had to be truthful. She nodded shyly.

“Yes, please my Bear. That would feel so good.”

“Well, I love to make my pretty little bride feel good,” he murmured. “Come here, baby—give me your sweet nipples to suck.”

Aleena fed the nipple that was still banded into his mouth and, his eyes never leaving hers, the big Kindred began to suck hard on her tender tip even as he continued to slide his finger deep in her pussy well and circle her clit with his thumb.

“Oh... Ohhhh!” Aleena moaned softly. She found that her hips were working in a kind of rhythm and she couldn’t tear her eyes away from Bear’s. Somehow holding eye contact while her new husband pleased her made everything even more intense. Before she knew it, the wire in her belly was tightening again and then it snapped for the second time, pouring pleasure through her entire body in a warm waterfall of sensation.

“Bear!” she cried, digging her fingernails into his broad shoulders again as she writhed on his lap. “Oh yes, my Lord Husband—that feels so good!”

Bear seemed to love to watch her come. He let her nipple slip from his lips and removed the band as he did.

“Good girl,” he growled as he pumped his finger deep in her pussy. “Such a good girl, Aleena, to give it up for your husband. Good girl to come so hard for me!”

His words of praise only intensified her pleasure and this time Aleena felt a series of shorter shocks of sensation come after the main one. They were so intense that for a moment she lost her breath. She collapsed against Bear’s broad chest and had to rest her head on his shoulder again.

“Oh, my Lord Husband,” she whispered. “That was even better than the first time! How can you make me feels so good?”

“Just by knowing how to touch you, baby,” he rumbled in her ear. “But you can learn to touch yourself too, you know.”

“Maybe later.” Aleena felt all wrung out. “I’m so...so tired now,” she admitted in a low voice.

He rumbled laughter and she felt him withdraw his long finger from her inner pussy.

“Of course you are, sweetheart—it’s been a long day. What do you say we go to bed now?”

“All right,” Aleena agreed sleepily. “Whatever you say, my Bear.”

He gathered her into his arms and carried her from the study into the bed chamber as though she were a sleepy child.

“Good girl,” he murmured again, as he tucked her between the silky sheets and covers. “Just relax now.”

“But wait—aren’t you coming to bed with me?” Aleena looked up at him with sleepy but pleading eyes.

“In just a moment, baby,” he promised. “Just need to go to the fresher first.”

“Well...all right. But don’t be long, my Bear,” she murmured.

“I won’t, baby,” he promised. “You just relax—I’ll be back soon.”

And then he left her, already drifting into sleep with a smile on her face.

Her new husband might not have changed the color of her eyes, but he had certainly given her a night to remember.

18

BEAR

Bear barely made it to the fresher before he was popping open the magno tabs on his trousers to release his aching shaft. Gods, he'd been so tempted to take her! To spread her thighs and shove his aching cock deep in that wet, tight, willing little pussy!

Somehow he had resisted the temptation but now he couldn't wait any longer—he had to have a release.

Gripping his shaft in his left hand, he brought his right to his nose and mouth. He inhaled deeply, drawing Aleena's sweet, feminine fragrance into his lungs and then he slipped his middle finger—the one he'd had deep in her pussy—into his mouth.

Her salty-sweet flavor exploded across his tongue and he pumped his shaft rapidly with his other hand. Gods, he couldn't help wishing he was pumping in her pussy right now—filling her sweet little cunt with his cum! Just the thought of that—of knotting her and breeding her—brought on his own orgasm.

With a low roar, he fisted his shaft tightly and felt it swell and throb in his hand. A moment later he was shooting jet after jet of creamy cum, his balls aching from the force of his ejaculation.

Bear leaned his forearm against the wall and laid his head against his arm. He felt almost dizzy from the orgasm, which was the first he'd had in over five years.

He groaned to himself unhappily. Gods, how he wanted the little female lying in his bed just a few rooms away! And yet he knew he could never have her! This was as close as he could get to taking her—and it was already a lot closer than he should have gotten, he reminded himself grimly.

You need to keep a tighter rein on yourself, Bearick! a little voice in his head lectured. You nearly gave in and took her tonight. You need to avoid this kind of situation in the future—the kind where you’re tempted to take her and break your vow!

Right—that was what he would do—he would avoid being intimate with her again. In fact, he wasn’t even going to sleep in the same bed with her tonight, Bear told himself firmly as he cleaned up and tucked his shaft back into his trousers. Surely she was asleep by now and she wouldn’t even notice.

He would slip into the sleep chamber and change into his sleep bottoms very quietly and then he would spend the night in another one of the huge bedrooms the mansion offered. In the morning, he would make some excuse about having gotten up to work before Aleena woke and she would never be the wiser.

Yes—that was the plan. Feeling determined to carry it out and sleep by himself, Bear left the fresher and made his way quietly back into the sleep chamber.

Everything was going well—Aleena appeared to be sleeping soundly on her side. She had kicked off the covers and was lying in the middle of the bed, bathed in moonlight.

Bear tried not to look at her. He slipped out of his clothing noiselessly and put on the long, silky loose trousers he always slept in. He was just about to sneak out of the room again and find someplace else to sleep when his new bride rolled over and her eyes opened.

“Bear? My Lord Husband?” she murmured sleepily and held out a hand to him. “Come to bed.”

Bear froze in his tracks. He’d been just about to slip out the door but he couldn’t leave now—he had no good reason why he wanted to sleep away from her.

“Please?” Aleena said again, reaching for him. She looked so beautiful in the light of Karpasian Sigma’s two moons, which were shining through the window and making her bronze skin look silver. Her long hair was a tousle of loose waves spread across the pillow in silky profusion and her full curves were hugged by the tiny night dress she still wore. Her large breasts were spilling out the top, since she hadn’t bothered to retie it and her round, juicy bottom was bare. Both parts of her anatomy almost seemed to be begging for his hands to touch and squeeze and caress.

Bear groaned to himself—Gods, she was lovely! Why couldn’t she have kept sleeping so he could sneak out?

“I...I should do some more work,” he said in a low, hoarse voice.

“No work tonight!” Aleena’s voice came out sleepy and imperious—clearly she had lost some of her shyness with him after the things they’d done together. “This is our Joining night—it’s bad luck if we don’t sleep in each other’s arms!”

Bear gave a deep sigh. Well...maybe he could lay down with her until she fell asleep and then he could get up and go sleep elsewhere.

It was the only solution he could think of, so he nodded and said,

“Of course, baby. I’m coming to bed.”

He slipped into the large sleeping platform beside Aleena and rearranged the covers.

He told himself he wasn't going to touch her, but she obviously had other ideas. She flowed into his arms, plastering herself against his side and pillowing her head on his chest.

It was just the way his mate, Zelia, used to sleep with him and Bear felt a twinge of guilt...followed by a rush of tenderness. Aleena was so small and so perfect in his arms. The way she laid her head on his chest so trustingly made his heart squeeze tight in his chest.

“ Mmm , my Bear,” she murmured drowsily, snuggling closer. “You're so big and strong...feels so good to be close to you....”

Bear sighed and put an arm around her. If he was being honest, he had to admit it felt good to hold her in his arms. He had missed this—having a female to hold and cuddle with at night. For the past five years his bed had been empty...lonely...cold... And now Aleena was here, warming his side and pressing her sweet, soft body against him.

It was a wonderful feeling. It was like the curvy little Elite had woken a part of his heart that had died—or at least, that had been deeply asleep.

But it wasn't just his heart that had woken, Bear admitted to himself. His body responded to her as well. Despite the intense orgasm he'd had just a few minutes before, his shaft was hard all over again as he felt the soft curves of her breasts pressing against his side.

Ignore it! he told himself sternly. Just wait until she goes to sleep and then slip out of bed.

Doing his best to take his own advice, he closed his eyes and tried to relax and ignore his throbbing cock.

He hadn't had a hard-on in years before today, other than morning wood. But now his shaft seemed determined to make up for it by being as hard as stone and making it nearly impossible to rest!

Bear gritted his teeth and made up his mind to ignore it. He wasn't going to do anything else with Aleena and he wasn't going to think about the things they had just done together either. He wasn't going to remember sucking her tight nipples or fingering her wet little pussy or watching her come so hard for him while she writhed in his lap...

Gods, this is torture!

But there was nothing he could do about it. He just had to lay there and hope that Aleena went to sleep soon so he could leave.

It was a long and restless night.

ALEENA

Aleena woke feeling extremely rested and refreshed and most of all comfortable . She stretched without opening her eyes, wondering why she felt so good. And why the bed under her felt so thick and puffy.

Usually when she woke in the morning her bones hurt from lying on the thin pallet on the cold, hard floor. But this morning, it felt like she had spent the night sleeping on a cloud.

Her eyes fluttered open and she saw the reason—she wasn't in her usual pallet on the floor—she was in an enormous bed with a thick mattress and puffy pillow. But she hadn't rested her head on any pillow last night—she had been curled up against her new husband with her head on his broad chest.

Bear was still sleeping beside her and she was still curled against him—which explained why she was warm even though she'd kicked the covers off. His big, muscular body gave off heat like a furnace, which was really nice since mornings were chilly during this season of the year.

The night before he'd been dressed in his red shirt and black trousers. But now he was shirtless and just wearing a pair of heavy, silky sleep trousers, Aleena saw. This gave her a chance to see his broad, bare chest for the first time—though she had felt it under her cheek the night before.

He was extremely muscular and between the two flat disks of his nipples, he had a patch of wiry black curls which led down his corded abdomen and into the waistband of his sleep trousers.

Aleena traced the line with her eyes...and then bit back a gasp at the bulge she saw tenting the silky fabric. Her new husband's equipment must be even bigger than she'd thought! But how big was it exactly?

She wondered if she dared to find out. Bear seemed to be sleeping extremely soundly, so maybe he wouldn't even notice if she took a peek. Aleena decided to try.

Carefully, she reached down and unfastened the button at the top of the trousers. This enabled her to open a flap which basically showed everything.

Aleena bit back a gasp as she looked at the long, thick shaft with its broad head. It was enormous and it almost seemed to be asking her to touch it.

Hesitantly, she wrapped her fingers around his thickness—and found they wouldn't fit all the way. His flesh was hot and hard, seeming almost to pulse in her hand. And yet the skin that covered it was as soft as flower petals. His scent was stronger here, too—a warm, spicy, entirely masculine aroma that seemed to call to her.

Aleena could tell because somehow she was no longer reaching down to touch him—instead, she was leaning over her new husband, examining him closely.

How could something so huge fit inside her, she wondered? Last night, just having one of his long fingers inside her had made her feel extremely full. Down near the bottom of the long, thick shaft she noticed a swelling that was bigger than her fist! That must be the “knot” she'd heard it whispered, that some Kindred had. Surely something as big as that couldn't fit in her small pussy...could it?

Then she remembered that Bear had told her that his body produced chemical compounds that would help her open up for him. But where would these compounds come from?

The answer seemed to come on its own. As she gently stroked the long, thick shaft, a droplet of clear liquid formed at its tip, just where she could see a tiny slit. Could that be the compounds Bear had told her about? And if so, how did it work?

Maybe I need to swallow it—like a kind of medicine, Aleena thought.

Experimentally, she put out her tongue and lapped at the broad head. To her surprise, the little droplet tasted good—salty and sweet and a little bit spicy, like her favorite tinga-fruit drink.

Mmm—that’s actually really good! I wonder if I can get more?

Slowly, she caressed and stroked the long, thick shaft and watched as another little droplet of liquid formed on its tip. Aleena licked that away as well and this time, she tried taking the whole head in her mouth. It was extremely large, but she managed and soon she found that if she kept stroking the shaft and sucking and licking the broad crown, she could get a steady flow of the delicious, spicy stuff.

It tasted wonderful but it also gave her a naughty little tingle to suck and lick her new husband’s shaft. She had heard whispers from other girls—friends who had already gotten married—about how their husbands required them to do this almost every night. It was considered a wifely duty and one that Aleena hadn’t been expecting to enjoy. However, this was quite pleasant—she felt warm and tingly and naughty as she continued to stroke the thick shaft and suck the broad head, sometimes running her tongue around and around it before she went back to sucking.

“If you don’t be careful, baby, you’re going to get a lot more than you bargained for.”

The deep voice startled Aleena so much that she gasped and pulled her mouth quickly away. Looking up, she saw that Bear was awake. Her new husband was lying there, watching her, with an unreadable expression on his face.

“Oh, my Lord Husband!” she exclaimed. “Please, don’t be mad at me! I just wanted to see how big your shaft was, so I would know what to expect when you finally change the color of my eyes!”

Much to her relief, he gave a rumble of laughter.

“Curious little virgin, aren’t you? But you could have taken a look without also taking a taste, you know.”

“I know,” Aleena said quickly. “But I thought maybe this clear liquid your shaft is making was the compounds you told me your body would produce for me to help my...my pussy stretch to take you.”

“Gods, baby...” Bear murmured. “As a matter of fact, yes, that’s one place my body makes those compounds. But I also make them in my saliva. That’s why the tasting time comes before the Bonding time.”

“Oh...” Aleena bit her lip. “I thought it was like medicine that I had to take.”

“Which is why you were so intent on sucking it out of me?” he growled softly, his eyes going half-lidded.

“At first,” Aleena admitted. “And then I realized that it tasted really good—sweet and spicy and salty—a little like my favorite drink.”

Bear nodded.

“It’s true that a Kindred’s precum and seed often taste good to his intended mate.”

“Precum?” Aleena asked, frowning.

“The clear liquid you were sucking out of me,” he clarified. “My seed—or my cream or my cum, whatever you want to call it—would soon follow if you kept on sucking.”

“Oh—the same seed a man plants in a woman’s belly to make her pregnant?” Aleena asked.

He nodded.

“The same. And Kindred tend to produce a lot of seed. Which you’re going to find out if you keep on sucking and stroking me like that.”

“Oh!” Aleena bit her lip again. “Can I...could I see you shoot your seed, my Lord Husband? Just so I know how...how it will be when you change the color of my eyes?”

Bear gave a low groan and his eyes were suddenly half-lidded.

“Do you want me to make myself shoot, baby? Or did you want to make me shoot?”

“Can I try it?” Aleena had been afraid of the big Kindred when she first saw him at the ceremony, but now despite his immense size and strength, he seemed much more approachable. Also, she wanted to get to know his body and give him pleasure the way he had given her pleasure the night before.

“You can if you want to,” Bear growled softly. “I shouldn’t let you but I can’t seem to say no to you, baby.”

Aleena liked it when he called her the sweet nickname. And she liked it that he wasn't angry with her for touching him.

"Thank you, my Bear," she said. "Shall I use my mouth on you some more? I have heard other women say that their husbands enjoy this kind of pleasure greatly."

"Of course you can use your soft little mouth on me if you want to," Bear murmured. "I'll let you know when I'm about to come—you'll probably want to pull off."

"Maybe," Aleena acknowledged. But she also wanted to feel the massive shaft in her hands spurting in her mouth.

Bending lower, she began to stroke and suck again, wanting to give her new husband pleasure.

BEAR

Bear couldn't believe he was letting her do this. What had happened to the idea of leaving her in the middle of the night to sleep somewhere else? Apparently he had fallen asleep himself before he could move. And then he'd woken up to the sight of his new bride exploring between his legs. Lying there, watching her stroke and suck his cock was incredibly sensuous—she had the softest little hands and her mouth was so warm and wet.

He also loved the erotic sight of her bending over him with her lips wrapped around his shaft. Her breasts were still spilling out the top of her little white lace nightdress, the dusky bronze nipples rubbing against his thigh as she sucked and licked him.

Shouldn't do this—shouldn't let her, whispered the guilty little voice in the back of his head. What about your vow?

But his vow had been never to Bond another bride to him, Bear told himself. And they weren't Bonding—she was just exploring his body, the way he had explored hers the night before. She really was a curious little virgin.

And her curiosity was getting the best of him. He could feel the pent-up sexual tension as his balls got tighter, getting ready to shoot.

“Gods, baby—you'd better pull off if you don't want a mouthful of my cream,” he groaned, reaching down to stroke her hair. “Gonna come really soon.”

But instead of pulling away, she ducked lower, taking him more deeply into her sweet, hot mouth. Bear stroked her silky hair—he couldn't hold back any longer!

With a low groan, he felt the first spurt of cream leave the tip of his cock. Aleena jerked a little and her eyes widened in apparent surprise, but she still didn't pull off. She kept sucking and her slender throat worked as she swallowed, taking everything he had to give her eagerly, in a way that made Bear even hotter as he watched her.

Gods, she was so fucking beautiful! So sweet and eager, his curvy little bride. He stroked her hair as she sucked and swallowed, sucked and swallowed over and over as he shot his cream down her throat.

At last he finished coming and, after a moment, Aleena stopped sucking. She looked up at him, licking her lips.

“That was delicious, my Bear,” she murmured. “It tastes even more like my favorite drink. I don't understand how that's possible.”

“Like I said, baby—Kindred brides often find they like the taste of their husband's seed,” he growled softly. “It has to do with the way our bodies react to each other.”

And apparently his body was reacting to her in a way it hadn't reacted to anyone since his first wife. He wondered if his Bonding Scent was affecting her too. That might be the reason she'd been so eager to suck him in the first place.

“I see.” Aleena nodded and bent to lap a last stray droplet of cream from the tip of his cock in a way that made him want to groan again. In that moment he wanted nothing more than to Bond her to him. He could have done it too—despite the fact that he had just come, his shaft hadn't gone soft. Male Kindred were multi-orgasmic and Beast Kindred especially could make love for hours.

His state of continued arousal seemed to trouble Aleena.

“My Bear,” she said tentatively. “I do not understand...why are you still hard? I have heard from other girls who have husbands, that once a man shoots his seed, his shaft wilts like a day-old stalk of coolom root.”

Bear rumbled laughter and stroked her hair some more. He couldn’t help loving her innocence.

“That might be true of your people, but it’s different for mine. Kindred can stay hard and come over and over again,” he explained. “That’s why Bonding Sex takes so long with us.”

“Bonding Sex?” she frowned, her eyebrows drawing together and her forehead wrinkling prettily. “What’s that?”

“It’s a special kind of intimacy that a Kindred warrior has with his bride,” Bear explained. It’s different for every kind of Kindred. For my kind, in order to Bond the woman we love to us, she must open up enough to take not just our shaft but our Bonding Knot as well.” He nodded down to the swelling at the base of his cock. “Once that happens, the Knot swells inside her, tying the Beast Kindred and his bride together for a long, slow session of love-making that produces a mental and emotional Soul Bond between the two of them.”

Her lovely pale purple eyes had been getting wider and wider as he spoke.

“So...are you going to do that to me when you change the color of my eyes? Will...will you put your Knot inside me?”

Bear mentally cursed himself for an idiot. He shouldn’t have explained the whole Bonding Sex process to her—now she would expect him to Bond her to him which

would mean breaking his vow.

“No, baby—not right away,” he said at last. “I want to take things slowly with you. You’re so little—I wouldn’t want to hurt you.”

Aleena lifted her chin, her purple eyes flashing.

“I can take whatever you wish to give me, my husband,” she said fiercely. “I am not afraid!”

The uncertainty in her big eyes belied her statement, but Bear found himself touched by her courage.

“Of course you’re not, baby,” he murmured, stroking her cheek. “You’re incredibly courageous, agreeing to Join with a male you’d never even met before. But I still want to take things slow.”

“Well...all right.” She nibbled her lower lip. “But I want you to know I’m ready, my Bear. When you want to change the color of my eyes, I won’t try to run away. I...I’ll spread my thighs for you, my husband, and welcome you in. No matter how big your shaft is, I’ll take you deep into myself. Into my pussy.”

Her cheeks went dark with a blush as she spoke but she kept her head high and he could hear the determination in her tone. Her words made his cock surge all over again as he pictured her lying open on the bed for him, her thighs spread as she welcomed him in.

Gods, if he didn’t stop this, he was going to want to stay in bed with her all day and he couldn’t do that, he reminded himself. Aside from the ever-present temptation to break his sacred vow, he would also miss the negotiations which were beginning today.

“You’re incredibly sweet and brave, Aleena.” Sitting up, he pulled her close and gave her a long, slow kiss on the mouth.

She kissed him back eagerly and looked disappointed when he finally drew away and started to get out of bed.

“Must you leave, my husband?” she asked.

“I wish I could stay in bed with you all day,” Bear said truthfully. “But I have some important negotiations to attend, so I’m afraid I can’t, baby.”

“Oh, of course! How foolish of me.” Her cheeks flushed again with embarrassment. “Forgive me, my Bear. I was thinking only of my own pleasure in being with you.”

“It’s a pleasure to be with you, too, baby.” He stroked her cheek again. “But I have to get going. Do you have enough to keep you busy around here? You’ve got plenty of books to read—right?”

“I do but...” She nibbled her lower lip uncertainly and Bear sensed she had something she wanted to ask.

“Yes, sweetheart? What is it?” he asked.

“It’s just that...today is the day of my mother’s medical treatment. She’s very ill, you know,” Aleena said quickly. “And I know we are just now Joined and I ought to stay in the house, but I would so love to be with her in the Healing House. She is very dear to me and the treatments are so painful...”

“Of course you can go visit her,” Bear said, seeing where this was going. “But I’ll need to take the hovercoach. What if I leave you some money so you can call your own coach to take you to the Healing House?”

Her eyes went wide.

“You would give me credit of my own to spend?”

“Of course—you’re my wife, aren’t you?” Bear went to the dresser and began looking through his wallet. He pulled out some of the triangular metallic credit chips that were used for currency and showed them to her. “Will this be enough?”

Aleena’s eyes went even wider.

“More than enough!” she assured him. “Thank you, my husband! I swear I won’t waste a single credit on anything frivolous. I’ll just go straight to the Healing House and back again.”

“Don’t be silly—get yourself some lunch or a treat,” Bear told her. “I’m not demanding that you scrimp and save—there’s plenty where this came from so buy yourself whatever you want.”

Her pale purple eyes surely couldn’t get any wider.

“Oh my Bear,” she breathed. “You are so kind to me! Even kinder than my father was to my mother before he disavowed her!”

The talk of disavowing made Bear uneasy.

“I just want you to be happy, baby,” he told her. “Now, I’d better get dressed or I’m going to be late.”

“Of course! I’ll make you something quick to eat for breakfast,” she promised, hopping off the bed. “And this time, I promise not to burn it.”

“Speaking of burns, let me look at your hand,” Bear said. He should have thought of that earlier, but she’d distracted him with that sweet little mouth of hers.

Obediently, Aleena held out her palm to him. Bear took her hand and examined it before nodding in satisfaction. The quick-healing ointment he’d applied the night before had done its job nicely and soon the protective false-skin he’d sprayed on the burns would start peeling off.

“Good,” he said nodding. “You’re healing well.” Impulsively, he leaned down and placed a soft kiss in the center of her palm. When he looked up again, Aleena was staring at him with an unreadable look. “Everything okay?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Truly the Goddess of Mercy was smiling on me when she led me to be your bride,” she said softly. “I have never met a kinder man.”

“I’m just treating you the way a husband ought to treat his wife,” Bear told her. He smiled and leaned down to kiss her forehead. “Now I really do have to get dressed.”

“All right! I’ll go make you something.” Aleena flashed him a beautiful smile and scampered out of the bedroom and down the stairs. And though he knew he needed to start getting ready, Bear couldn’t help watching her go. What a beautiful, sweet, curvy little bride she was.

It made him sick to think that as soon as the negotiations were done, he would have to break her heart.

ALEENA

Aleena was all ready to go with a rental hovercoach waiting in the driveway of her grand new house when her personal communications device buzzed discretely.

Quickly, Aleena answered. She was thinking that it might be either Bear or her mother. Before he had left for his negotiations, her new husband had exchanged contact information with her. Of course she would never bother him in the middle of his important meeting. A wife did not interrupt her husband's work—such a thing was unthinkable. But it was nice he cared enough to want to be able to call her if he decided to.

Her other thought was that the call might be from her mother. Sometimes her treatments were so painful and if they had started early before Aleena was there to hold her hand, she might be in distress.

“Hello?” she said, hoping everything was all right.

“Hello? Is this the daughter of the woman Leelah who was formerly the wife of Sir Greggor?” an unfamiliar male voice asked.

“Yes, this is Aleena, her daughter,” Aleena said. “Who is this?”

“I’m calling from the Healing House,” the man said, without bothering to answer her question. “I must inform you that your mother is here but the balance of her bill has

not been paid, so it will be impossible to give her a treatment today.”

“What? But I made arrangements—it was supposed to be paid in full!” Aleena protested.

“Well, it hasn’t been. Not a single credit has been paid since her last visit,” he said bluntly. “So we’re going to send her home.”

“No, please!” Aleena begged. “This is all just a big misunderstanding. Please give me some time to call and straighten things out—don’t send my mother away. She needs her treatment or the disease will spread!”

“You can have a few hours—I’ll put her out in the hallway while I deal with other patients.” The male on the other side of the call sounded grumpy and put out. “But if you don’t show up soon or pay the balance, I’ll have to send her away.”

“I’ll get it fixed and you’ll have the funds soon—I promise!” Aleena said quickly. “Just let her stay there until I can get this figured out, please .”

He made a noncommittal noise and hung up, leaving Aleena to stare at her device. She’d been afraid of this—her stepmother wasn’t holding up her end of the bargain!

Desperately, she punched in her father’s number. He didn’t often answer her calls, but she hoped that this time he might make an exception.

The device buzzed in her ear several times and she began to be afraid that he was just going to ignore her again. But finally there was a click as the call was answered.

“Father please, you have to help me!” she began, only to be cut off by a cold, familiar voice.

“If you’re calling to complain about your new life as the wife of that gigantic Kindred you can keep your whining to yourself,” her stepmother said. “Nobody cares how much it hurt when he changed the color of your eyes. It’s part of your wifely duty to spread your legs for him so don’t think for a minute?—”

“That’s not why I’m calling!” Aleena exclaimed. “I’m calling because you didn’t keep your end of the bargain—the Healing House called and said not one single credit of my mother’s bill has been paid!”

“And it’s not going to get paid either,” Grindelia’s voice was cold. “Why would I waste money on a woman my husband disavowed years ago?”

“What?” Aleena was so shaken she had to sit down. “You can’t be serious! We made a bargain—I married the Kindred Ambassador in Faleesha’s place and you were supposed to pay my mother’s debt!”

“Well, I’ve decided I don’t like that deal,” her stepmother said coolly. “So you can forget about it. Your new husband is rich enough—ask him to pay your mother’s debt.”

“You know I can’t do that!” Aleena was shocked at the suggestion. A husband never paid for anything to do with his wife’s family. Even to ask such a thing was a grave offense that was likely to get the wife in question immediately disavowed.

“Well then, I guess your mother will die.” Grindelia’s voice had never sounded more cold. “Good riddance, I say. Once a woman has been disavowed and has no husband to serve, she has no reason for living anyway.”

Then she hung up the phone with a final click that echoed in Aleena’s ears.

ALEENA

For a moment Aleena just sat there, feeling sick. What was she going to do? Her mother needed her treatments—without them the sickness in her blood would spread to the rest of her body and she would surely die! But now that her heartless stepmother had refused to live up to her end of the bargain, there was nothing she could do.

She couldn't ask her new husband for money—it was strictly prohibited and though Bear seemed very kind, she didn't think he would be happy about her asking for fifty thousand credits only a day into their marriage. No, she had to think of a way to raise the money herself—but how?

Immediately the image of her new breast shield popped into her mind. The gold one with jewels that Bear had bought her might cover the costs. Of course, it was wrong to sell such an expensive garment that her husband had bought for her and doing it might get her disavowed, but Aleena couldn't think of anything else to do. She was beginning to really like and care for her new husband, but she still hadn't known him very long. She would rather be disavowed than watch her mother die.

She went to get the new breast shield—it was still in the bag the saleslady had put it in along with the receipt of purchase. That was good—maybe she could just return it for the full amount, Aleena thought hopefully.

She took the bag and hurried out to the waiting hovercoach before she could change

her mind. This was certainly going to get her into trouble with her new Kindred husband, but it was worth it to save the life of her beloved mother. And at least it should be a quick and easy transaction—she hadn't even worn the breast shield once and it was still in its original bag. She ought to be able to get the credit for it and go straight to the Healing House so her mother could get her treatment.

At least that was what she thought . But the minute she tried to return the breast shield, there was a problem.

“I’m sorry,” the manager of the shop said, looking disdainfully at the bag containing the golden breast shield. “But we cannot possibly take this back.”

“What? But I only bought it last night!” Aleena protested. “It’s never been worn once—look, it’s still in the same bag from your shop and here’s the receipt.”

“So you bought it?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “Or did your husband buy it for you?”

“Well, he...I mean, he let me pick it out,” Aleena faltered.

“Exactly. It was your husband who bought it and only he can return it,” the manager said. “If we let you return it you might take the credit and use it to run from him. Believe me, we’ve had that happen more than once and I refuse to let it happen again.”

“I’m not trying to run from my husband—I just want...something different. Something else that’s not this ,” Aleena protested.

“Well then, if you’d like to make an exchange?—”

“No, never mind.” She took the bag back, feeling both frustrated and worried. What

was she going to do now?

The only answer that came to mind was trying to pawn the golden breast shield. Of course, she probably wouldn't get nearly what it was worth, but even if she could get half, she was sure she could convince the Healing House to give her mother another treatment.

With a resigned sigh, she took the bag with the breast shield in it and got back into the waiting hovercoach. She gave it directions for the pawn shop she and her mother had used in the past, when they gradually sold everything and anything of value in their tiny, cramped living area to pay for food and heat. It wasn't in a very good part of the city, but she didn't know of anywhere else that would deal with a woman who had no man at her side.

She felt nervous as she descended from the hovercoach in front of the shop and her anxiety wasn't helped any when the mechanical voice of the coach announced that it was leaving.

"This area is suboptimal for my safety standards," it said. "I must go."

"But this errand will only take a few minutes!" Aleena protested. "Please don't go—I need you to take me to the Healing House."

"I will return if you call for me, but I cannot stay in this area," the hovercoach said in its mechanical voice. "Goodbye."

"All right—I'll call you later," Aleena said but it was already whizzing off down the street, leaving her alone in an extremely shady neighborhood.

Aleena had never liked going to the Lucky Leaf pawn shop by herself. Usually her mother was with her, which helped—two women together, especially if one was

older, didn't draw too much attention. But as a young woman alone, she would no doubt get more male eyes on her than she wanted.

She felt especially alone and vulnerable as she walked down the street, clutching the bag with the breast shield to her chest. She tried to tell herself that at least she had on new clothes and she wasn't wearing the old shield which had allowed her nipples to poke through but still she?—

A sudden thought nearly stopped her in her tracks. Bear had forgotten to replace the nipple bands that he'd taken off her last night. Which meant that she had no way to prove that she was married and had male protection!

That realization made her feel even more anxious and alone. She almost called for a hovercoach immediately but the thought of her mother's plight stopped her. She couldn't just give up—she had to get the credit for her mother's treatment!

Walking quickly, she finally got to the front door of the Lucky Leaf—it had a golden frizla leaf with five points painted in faded gold on the front—and let herself in.

Inside the shop was crowded with all kinds of junk—used multi-dusters and dented fast-cookers along with other second and third-hand appliances took up one whole wall. Another was filled with scratched and dented entertainment cubes and gaming headbands. Yet another held miscellaneous items—antiques and furniture that had been pawned after their owners died, no doubt Aleena thought with a shiver.

She walked up to the front counter. Under the scratched plasti-glass she could see necklaces and earrings, toe rings and nipple rings—all pawned in moments of desperation by their respective owners.

Behind her the bell at the door jingled and she turned her head to see a scruffy looking man in dirty clothes standing just inside the doorway. Seeing him there made

Aleena nervous, but he appeared to be staring at the entertainment cubes, so she turned her head again, being careful not to meet his shifty-eyed gaze.

“Yes? How can I help you?” a familiar voice asked.

Aleena felt a small spark of relief. It was Mr. Tanz, the Lucky Leaf’s owner, just coming out of the back of the shop. She had dealt with him before, when she and her mother had pawned things.

Mr. Tanz was a tall man with rounded shoulders and long silver hair that had gone white over the years. He was rather deaf but he was also fair—he offered women who sold to him exactly half of what he would have given a man pawning the same item. In most shops, a woman was lucky to get a third, so this was considered a good deal by most of the women Aleena knew.

“Eh—now who might you be, young lady? You look awfully familiar!” he bellowed, misjudging the sound of his own voice, as people who are hard of hearing often do.

“Hello, Mr. Tanz,” Aleena said loudly. “It’s me—Aleena. I have something I’d like to pawn, please.”

“Aleena—that’s right! I haven’t seen you here in ages . And where’s your mother?” he bellowed.

“She’s sick, I’m afraid—at the House of Healing,” Aleena shouted back. “That’s why I’m here to pawn something—I need to pay for her treatment!”

“Oh, that’s sad! Sad indeed!” He nodded, the light winking off his ancient gold-rimmed oculars. “Sorry to hear it, my dear.”

“Thank you!” Aleena said loudly. “Here—this is brand new,” she added and drew out

the golden breast shield.

Mr. Tanz took one look at the shield and whistled through his scattered teeth.

“Whew! And where did you get such a thing, young lady?” he demanded.

“I...my father gave it to me. As a nameday present.” Aleena felt bad lying to the old man, but she was afraid if she told him the breast shield was a present from her husband he wouldn’t let her pawn it for the same reason the manager of the shop hadn’t let her return it.

“This is some nameday present, my dear!” Mr. Tanz declared. He held up the shield and turned it this way and that. The fine golden links shimmered and the jewels picked up the light streaming in the front window and sent rainbows bouncing all around the shabby little shop.

Aleena wished that he wouldn’t show off the breast shield quite so obviously. It made her nervous that the two of them weren’t the only ones in the room. However, a quick glance over her shoulder showed that the man who had come in after her appeared to be completely engrossed in the entertainment cubes.

She turned back to Mr. Tanz and looked at him hopefully.

“What can you give me for it? It’s brand new. See? Here’s the receipt.”

She showed him the sales slip and he whistled again and shook his head.

“Well, I can’t give you that price, I’m sorry young lady,” he said. “What I can do is give you half.”

“Only half?” Aleena protested. “But that’s not nearly what it’s worth.”

“No, but it’s what I can pay,” he said firmly. “How much credit do you think I keep on hand? I’d only give a man two thirds of the price so I’m actually doing you a favor,” he added.

Aleena’s heart sank but she knew she had no choice but to accept. It was getting late and she still needed to get to the Medical Center to pay at least part of her mother’s debt and sit with her during her treatment.

“All right,” she said heavily. “I’ll take half.”

“Good girl!” Mr. Tanz broke into a snaggletooth smile and nodded. “Now just you wait here and I’ll get you the cred chips.”

He disappeared for a moment and then returned with a small velvet bag that clinked musically when he shook it.

“Here it is—I’ll count it out for you!”

“Er, that’s all right, I trust you,” Aleena said nervously, glancing behind her at the strange man again. Now he was looking at a broken fast-cooker—what would a man want with that? Men never cooked for themselves.

“Nonsense! Got to be sure the deal is fair. Now look here...” And he spilled the metallic cred chips out onto the scratched plasti-glass counter and began loudly to count.

“...twenty-five thousand credits!” he finished, some time later and then scooped the chips back into the velvet bag. “There you go, young lady! That should keep you comfortable for some time!”

Aleena started to explain again that the credit wasn’t to “keep her comfortable” but to

pay for her mother's medical debt, but it wasn't worth trying to make the deaf old man understand. So she simply nodded and thanked Mr. Tanz.

"I'm going to call a hovercoach—can I stay in here until it comes?" she shouted.

"Oh—why of course, my dear! You stay right here. I just have to do something in the back," he told her.

As he disappeared into the crowded back of the pawn shop again, Aleena shoved the velvet bag into an inner pocket of her skirt and nervously punched in the number of the hovercoach company that she'd been using earlier that day.

But though she'd gotten a quick response when she'd called for a coach at her palatial new home that morning, now the company was slow to respond. It took forever to even get an acknowledgement that they had received her request and even longer for them to dispatch a coach to her location.

Aleena waited nervously, watching the strange man in the shop from the corner of her eye. He still looked like he was browsing the assorted items on display, but he was slowly getting closer and closer to her. She couldn't be sure if that was on purpose or not, but she didn't like it a bit.

At last a hovercoach hummed up to the sidewalk outside the pawnshop. Aleena breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't nearly as nice as the one that had brought her here in the first place—the coach's paint was scratched and its windows were dirty—but she didn't care. At this point, she just wanted to get out of this shop and go to the Healing House as fast as possible.

She darted out of the shop and ran for the coach. She heard the bell over the door jingle again and from the corner of her eye she saw that the shabby man with the sharp looking eyes was right behind.

Feeling like her heart was in her throat, Aleena reached for the door latch of the coach...only to see it hover away at the last moment.

“Suspicious presence detected—you called for a single rider, not two,” it declared as it hovered away down the street. “This ride has been terminated.”

“No, wait!” Aleena exclaimed, running after it. But though she chased it down the street, it kept accelerating faster and faster until it disappeared around the corner and out of sight.

“Hey, pretty lady—what’s your hurry?” a man’s voice asked behind her. “Why don’t you slow down and we can talk a while?”

23

BEAR

Bear began to get a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach about halfway through the negotiations. He tried to ignore it at first—the talks were going well. The Karprians seemed very willing to deal with him and eager to bargain with the Kindred.

But the feeling grew and grew until he couldn't ignore it anymore.

“Gentlemen, please excuse me,” he said, at the next pause in the conversation. “But I fear I must take a short break.”

There was a moment of surprised silence—Bear knew from studying their culture that the Karprians considered interruptions to official proceedings to be extremely rude. But he just couldn't shake the feeling that something was very, very wrong.

He excused himself from the large oval table he was sitting at with the Karprian diplomats and stepped outside of the richly appointed conference room they'd been holding the negotiations in. He still had no idea what was going on but just then the communications device the Karprians had provided him with gave a low, warning chime.

Bear pulled it out of his pocket and frowned at it. He was still learning to use it, though he had managed to put Aleena's number into it that morning before they had parted for the day.

The minute he thought of his new wife, he became convinced that the feeling of wrongness had something to do with her. He looked at the device and saw that the screen at the front which displayed numbers had turned into a kind of grid. No—it was a map, he realized. And it had a small red dot in the center of it.

“Here, you—can you tell me what this means?” he asked, going over to one of the Karpisian guards who was standing at attention at the side of the conference room door.

The guard looked surprised at being asked but he glanced down at the device in Bear’s hand obligingly.

“Hmm—it looks like an alert that a female who is under your control is out in a dangerous part of the city,” he said after a moment.

“What? Are you serious?” Bear demanded. “Are you saying my wife might be in danger? But how would my device know that?”

“I’m afraid so.” The guard nodded. “Once you put a dependant female’s number into your device, an automatic alarm system is set up which warns you if she starts getting into mischief.” He frowned at the map on the device again. “That’s a pretty dicey part of the city—do you know what she might be doing there?”

“No—she was supposed to go to the Healing House!” Bear was beginning to get an even worse feeling in the pit of his stomach. He couldn’t help imagining Aleena alone in a bad part of the city, being stalked—maybe even attacked. The Karpisians were horrible to their women. She wouldn’t be safe anywhere!

“Well, that’s not very far from the Healing House, but it’s not exactly close either,” the guard said, still looking at the screen. “If you’re worried about her, you might want to check on her.” He shrugged. “Or if you plan to disavow her, just leave her

there and don't bother."

"Leave her there? Of course I'm not going to leave her there!" Bear growled. "The fuck is wrong with you, man? I'm going to get her!"

"But Ambassador—the negotiations—" the guard started to protest.

"Fuck the negotiations—my wife is in danger!"

The moment he said it, Bear knew it was true. The twisting sensation in the pit of his stomach let him know it. He had been a doctor long enough to trust his instincts implicitly—he'd had that same sensation when his first wife, Zelia, was first diagnosed with her deadly illness. And he had it now when he thought about Aleena and pictured her all alone in the big city.

Or maybe not alone, he thought and fear sliced into his guts like an icy blade. He had to go to her—get to her before it was too late!

He just prayed to the Goddess he could make it on time.

ALEENA

“Why don’t you stay and we’ll talk a while?” the scruffy man said again. He grinned at Aleena, showing teeth that were nothing but rotten black stubs.

“I have nothing to say to you, Sir. Excuse me.”

Aleena tried to push past him, but he grabbed her by the arm.

“I don’t think so—I said I wanted to talk, so we’re going to talk , girly,” he snarled.

“Let me go!” Aleena wrenched her arm away painfully and began running down the street again. Unfortunately he was between her and The Lucky Leaf pawn shop, so she couldn’t go back. Not that old Mr. Tanz would probably have been much help, but at least he could have called the authorities, she thought desperately.

The man was running right behind her. She could feel his grasping fingers as he yanked at her hair, pulling out several long strands with a painful jerk.

“Ow!” she gasped and ran harder. She wished she wasn’t wearing such long skirts and that the silver breast plate she had on wasn’t so heavy. She’d chosen the clothes she was wearing now for the way they looked—she’d never expected to have to outrun an assailant in them!

“Come back here you little cock-tease!” the man behind her snarled. “You know you

can't get far—you'll be sorry you ran from me!"

Aleena was certain she'd be more sorry if she didn't run but she couldn't keep up this pace for long. Her breath was tearing like hot paper in her throat and there was a painful stitch starting in her right side.

"Stop, you little bitch!" the man shouted and grabbed for her hair again.

This time he got more than a few strands and Aleena cried out in pain as he ripped a hank out of the back of her head. That really hurt!

Seeing an opening to the right, she took it, dashing blindly down the narrow alley that ran between two crumbling buildings.

Unfortunately, her would-be assailant was still on her heels and he was definitely gaining. Then the end of the alley suddenly came into sight and Aleena's heart sank—it was a dead end! There was nothing but a brick wall with a crooked line of waste bins.

Oh Goddess of Mercy! she thought as horror filled her. No—please!

Behind her, the shabby man must have seen the same thing because a nasty wheeze of laughter came from his throat.

"Well, well—ran yourself into a blind alley, did you, girly?" he sneered and Aleena realized he barely even sounded out of breath. Could it be that he had chased her in here on purpose?

The thought made her feel sick to her stomach. She was faced with the awful realization that she couldn't run any further.

She was going to have to stand and fight for her life and she had no idea how to do that.

25

BEAR

As his hovercoach navigated the streets of the city, Bear felt more and more impatient.

“Faster!” he growled, pounding on the steering deck of the coach. It was moving down ever-narrowing roads in what was obviously a poorer part of the city. “Can’t you go any faster?”

“The maximum safe speed has already been achieved,” the maddening mechanical voice of the coach informed him. “To go faster would be breaking the local speeding laws.”

“I don’t give a damn about the laws—go faster! I authorize more speed as a Kindred Ambassador to the Karpasian government!” he exclaimed desperately.

At last he seemed to have said something that helped.

“You are requesting government override of speeding laws?” the coach inquired.

“Yes, yes!” Bear growled. “You have my credentials—they’re in my communications device. Now go faster, you stupid fuck!”

“Profanity is not necessary,” the coach informed him primly. “Override granted.”

And finally it began to speed up. But as he watched the red dot on the screen of his device move erratically from place to place, Bear feared it wouldn't be enough to get him to Aleena in time...

26

ALEENA

“So, backed yourself into a corner, didn’t you?” the shabby man with the rotten teeth sneered.

“Leave me alone!”

Aleena looked around for a weapon—anything at all she could use against him. She saw what looked like a length of board sticking out of one of the trash bins and grabbed for it. It felt heavy and unwieldy in her hands and was hard to lift, but fear gave her strength. She heaved it out of the bin and held it in front of her like a weapon.

“I said leave...me...alone!” she panted, swinging it in what she hoped was a menacing way. She wished the board wasn’t so heavy but it was better than being completely unarmed.

The man jumped backwards and laughed at her, his rotten stump-teeth on display.

“Don’t think so, girly. See, you have something that belongs to me.”

“I do not!” Aleena exclaimed.

“Yes, you do. You have twenty-five thousand in cred chips. Now why don’t you hand them over?” And he held out a dirty palm as though he expected Aleena to just give

him the money!

A fresh surge of anger bolstered her courage.

“That credit is for my mother’s medical treatment, you lowlife scum!” she snapped and swung the heavy board again.

This time she caught her assailant right in the midsection. The board splintered and cracked in half with the force of the blow.

“Oof!” he gasped and doubled over.

Seeing her chance, Aleena tried to dodge around him. But just as she was sure she was going to get by, she felt a heavy hand twist itself in her skirt and jerk.

“Oh!” she gasped as she was yanked to the ground. She tried to get up again but suddenly the man was on top of her, his face a twisted mask of rage.

“You little bitch! You’re gonna give me what’s mine!” he snarled. “How dare you hit a man?”

“Let me go! Let me go!” Aleena cried, but there was no one in the blind alley to hear her or to care. Even if there had been someone, they probably would have passed on by. Women got assaulted all the time in the city—everyone knew it was their own fault for being out instead of staying home where they belonged. At least, that was what Aleena had heard ever since she was old enough to understand what was going on in the world.

“Not letting you go until I get this!” He reached under her skirt and grabbed for the velvet bag filled with cred chips. But instead of the bag, his seeking fingers found the lace of her new panties, which Bear had bought her the day before.

“Ah-ha—what have we here?” His face took on a hungry, leering look as he ripped the lacy fabric off her.

“No! No, get off me!” Aleena gasped. She watched in horror as her assailant brought the torn fabric to his nose and inhaled deeply.

“Such a sweet little cunt . A virgin cunt,” he snarled, leaning closer to look at her eyes. “How about we do a deal, girly—you pay me the twenty-five thousand credits and I’ll change the color of your eyes for you. How would that be?”

“No!” Aleena fishtailed wildly under him, trying desperately to buck him off. “No—get off me! Get off!”

“I don’t think so—I haven’t even really gotten on you yet—or should I say ‘ in you ?” The man was fumbling between her legs now, pushing up her skirts.

“My husband!” Aleena gasped desperately. “He...he’s huge! He’ll kill you!”

“Husband, huh?” He flipped up her silver breast shield with one dirty hand, revealing her bare breasts. “You’re not wearing any nipple bands, girly—you ain’t got no husband!”

“Yes, she fucking does!” a low, rumbling voice growled.

Suddenly the man on top of her was yanked up and away and Aleena was aware that there were two red eyes glowing in the dimness of the alley above her.

“You fucker!” The voice was more like a roar now and she saw that the eyes belonged to Bear. But her husband had golden eyes—she was sure of it! So how had his eyes turned red?

But there could be no doubt that it was him—no mistaking his huge, muscular form. He was holding the shabby man by the throat and shaking him as though he weighed no more than a small animal—which was certainly not the case. He was actually quite heavy—Aleena could attest to that since he'd just been on top of her, pinning her down.

“You son of a bitch, how dare you touch my wife!” Bear’s big hand tightened around the assailant’s throat.

“I...didn’t...know,” the man choked. His eyes were bulging from their sockets and he was clearly having a hard time breathing now. His face was getting darker and darker as Bear choked him.

Aleena couldn’t say anything—she couldn’t even get up or make a move to cover herself though both her breast shield and her skirts were flipped up, exposing her. She felt frozen to the dirty ground of the alley watching in horror as her new husband seemed to swell and grow to the size of a monster as he choked the life out of the man who had attacked her.

“You’ll pay for what you did to her. You’ll die for what you did!” he roared.

There was a cracking sound and suddenly the man’s head was lolling limply to one side and the life had left his eyes. Aleena felt cold all over as she realized what had happened.

Bear had broken the assailant’s neck with one hand and now he was standing over her with a menacing growl still rumbling in his deep chest.

The huge Kindred tossed the attacker aside. The body landed in the alley like a bundle of rags and just lay there, not moving. Then the red eyes turned towards Aleena and she felt her stomach fill with ice.

Her husband was out for vengeance. He had found her in the act of cheating on him—even though she didn't want to cheat and let another man change the color of her eyes, it didn't matter. By Karpasian law, rape was still considered cheating, even if it was against the woman's will. Bear had punished the man she'd been with and she was no doubt next!

Aleena was certain she was going to die.

BEAR

Aleena started scrambling away, her eyes wide with fear. After a moment, some of the red haze began to clear from his vision and Bear realized it was him she was afraid of.

He had gone into Rage when he saw her being attacked—it was a berserker-like fury that all Kindred warriors felt when they saw that the woman they loved was in danger. It made a Kindred look even more fierce and frightening than usual—he must have scared her when he'd killed the attacker who had been on top of her.

“Aleena—” he began, reaching for her, but she shrank away.

“I’m sorry, my Lord Husband!” she gasped, huddling in a corner. Her face had gone pale in the dim light of the alley and she was shaking with fear. “Please,” she begged. “Please, don’t kill me!”

“Kill you?” Bear said, frowning. “Why would I kill you, baby? I came here to save you!”

But his words seemed to have no effect.

“I’m sorry!” Aleena was crying now. “He didn’t change the color of my eyes, even though he tried—please, my Lord Husband—don’t hurt me!”

Bear realized that she was too upset to understand that he truly wasn't mad at her. Settling beside her on the dirty pavement, he scooped her trembling body into his arms.

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry," she kept repeating.

"It's okay...it's all right, baby. Everything is going to be all right." Bear cradled her soft little body close to his chest and stroked her long coppery hair.

At last, she quieted against him and stopped apologizing but he could still hear her crying. The sound tore at his heart.

"Aleena, sweetheart, please don't cry," he begged softly. "I promise I'm not mad at you and I swear I would never hurt you."

"You...you'd feel d-different if you knew what I d-did," she whispered brokenly.

"Come on," he said, standing up with her still in his arms. "Let's get out of this stinking alley so we can talk and you can tell me all about it."

He carried her back to the waiting hovercoach and put her inside. Then he got in beside her and ordered the coach to take them home.

On the way there, Aleena was quiet and withdrawn. She looked down at her hands with red-rimmed eyes and didn't say a word. Her skirt was torn and her hair was a mess. There was dirt smudged on her pretty face—she was probably in shock, Bear thought. The attack he had witnessed had been brutal—he wondered if he had gotten to her in time. He would have to examine her once they got home, to see if she needed treatment.

He tried not to remember the sight he'd seen—the attacker on top of Aleena and her

clothing all in disarray, exposing her. The thought of that son-of-a-bitch hurting his wife made Bear so angry he was in danger of going into Rage again!

But he knew that seeing him in Rage frightened Aleena, so he took deep breaths and did his best to control the protective fury inside him. He just wished that he'd killed the bastard more slowly—he deserved prolonged agony for what he'd done to sweet, innocent Aleena!

Still struggling with his anger, Bear let his wife be for a little while. He hadn't felt this protective of a woman in years. He told himself he had to regain control and tried to turn his mind to other things as the hovercoach took them home.

He took the opportunity to call and let the Karspsian officials know that he would have to resume the negotiations tomorrow, since he'd had a family emergency. He hoped they wouldn't be too offended, but right now, his wife came first for him—he had to be sure she was all right before he could even think of going back to the bargaining table.

It didn't occur to him that he was thinking of her so possessively and putting her above his mission—he only knew that he wanted to help and heal her and keep her safe.

It never crossed his mind that he might be falling in love.

ALEENA

Aleena was silent all the way home—there was nothing she could say to mitigate the situation and she was certain talking would only make it worse. She sent her mother a message apologizing and telling her she couldn't get the money today but maybe they could do the treatment tomorrow. That was, if she was allowed to keep the twenty-five thousand credits she'd gotten from the Lucky Leaf, which she still had—by some miracle—in a pocket of her skirt.

More than likely, though, her husband would take the credits and turn her out with nothing. He would be well within his rights—she had broken so many rules it seemed impossible that he would do anything else.

For his part, Bear was silent as well. He had attempted to reassure her earlier, but Aleena was certain once he knew the whole story he would be angry and probably want to disavow her on the spot. By the time the hovercoach pulled up to the front door of their stylish new house, neither of them had said a word to each other.

Aleena started to get down but Bear came around to her side and lifted her into his arms.

“Please, my Lord Husband—I can walk,” she protested in a low voice. “I...do not deserve to be carried in your arms.”

“That's bullshit,” he growled, tightening his grip on her. “You're my wife—I'll carry

you if I want to.”

“Yes, my Lord Husband,” she murmured and looked down at her hands, not daring to protest any further.

Bear carried her inside and straight up the stairs. Aleena was surprised when he took her into the huge master bathroom and started running a bath in the marble tub. Then he turned to her and started to undress her.

“What...what are you doing, my Lord Husband?” she asked faintly, as he withdrew her breast shield and started working on the fastenings of her skirt.

“I’m going to examine you and then I’m going to bathe you, baby,” he rumbled.

At least his eyes were no longer that scary red color and he seemed much calmer than he had when he’d killed her attacker, she thought. But still—how much angrier would he get when he found out what she’d been doing?

Once she was naked, Bear made her spread her arms and legs. He looked her over carefully, to be sure she wasn’t wounded anywhere.

“Did he hurt you, baby?” he asked softly, looking into her eyes. “Tell me the truth—I’m a doctor too, you know. Not just a diplomat. If he hurt you, I need to know.”

“He didn’t...didn’t change the color of my eyes,” Aleena told him again. “Though he said...” A sob caught in her throat. “Said he was going to right before you...you pulled him off me. But please, my Lord Husband—I didn’t want him to do that to me! I swear I didn’t!”

“Of course, you didn’t—nobody wants to get raped!” Bear shook his head. “But

you're sure he didn't hurt you?"

Aleena shook her head.

"Other than pulling out some of my hair when he was chasing me, no." She touched the top of her head and winced—her scalp was still tender.

"All right." Bear nodded. "Then let's get you in the bath so you can relax and calm down while you tell me what happened and why you were in that part of town to start with."

Aleena started shivering again—she couldn't help it! She was cold and naked and filled with fear.

"Please, my Lord Husband, I don't...don't think I can be calm while I tell you," she said in a shaky voice. "I'm afraid you'll be angry again."

Bear took a deep breath and ran a hand through his shaggy black hair.

"Look baby—I know what you saw in the alley was pretty frightening. But you have to understand, it's just part of my Kindred nature. When we see that the woman we care for is in danger, we go into this state called 'Rage.' It's a physiological response—our bodies become flooded with adrenaline and we just want to kill the person who's hurting the woman we love."

Aleena looked at him with wide eyes. Was he saying that he loved her? Or just talking about Kindred in general? Probably the latter, she thought.

"So...you couldn't get mad like that at me? I mean, so angry you get bigger and your eyes go red?" she asked carefully.

Bear shook his head firmly.

“No—that’s only for males who are trying to hurt my woman. I could never go into Rage against you—only against a male who was hurting you.”

“Oh...all right.” Aleena felt a little better—but not much. He still hadn’t heard what she’d done—he was going to be very upset when he did. But she didn’t try to resist anymore and allowed him to help her into the tub. She sank down slowly into the steaming water and once it was up to her chin, she did relax...a little.

“Good girl,” Bear rumbled approvingly as he saw her lean back against the tub. “Now why don’t you start at the top and tell me everything that happened. Start from the beginning and I promise I won’t get mad.”

Aleena didn’t believe that for a moment, but she knew it was time to come clean. She couldn’t hold back any longer—she had to admit her sins.

“I was in the bad part of town so I could pawn my breast shield—the really nice golden one you got for me,” she admitted softly.

“Pawn it? Why?” He didn’t sound angry—only confused.

“To pay for my mother’s medical treatments,” Aleena said. “You see, I made a deal with my father. Well, really with his wife, my stepmother. She was supposed to pay for the treatments and in return, I was to marry you in Faleesha’s place.” She darted a look at his face. “Only...she didn’t pay.”

A look of understanding passed over Bear’s strong features.

“So that’s why I wound up with you instead of your sister at the Joining ceremony.”

“Yes.” Aleena was ashamed to admit she’d married him for money—he would surely think she was an opportunistic, greedy woman. But he had asked for the truth and she found herself unable to lie to him.

“And you say your stepmother didn’t pay for your mother’s treatments?” he asked.

Aleena shook her head.

“No, even though she swore that she would if I married you. She was afraid that you would hurt Faleesha—because all the Kindred are so big and they both were certain you’d be cruel to your wife, whoever it was. So I agreed to take my sister’s place and marry you. Only she didn’t keep her end of the bargain. So I had to find a way to pay for the treatments and that’s why I pawned the shield. I’m sorry, my Lord Husband,” she added quickly. “Please believe me—I never meant you any disrespect!”

“I didn’t think you did,” Bear rumbled, frowning. “This certainly explains a lot. So you needed money for your mother and you sacrificed yourself—even thinking that I would be cruel to you if you Joined with me?”

Aleena shrugged helplessly, the water lapping around her.

“I didn’t want her to die. But now she will anyway.” She felt tears start in her eyes again and tried to blink them away. “If she misses too many treatments, the disease in her blood will spread to her body and then it will be too late...I’ll lose her.”

This time she couldn’t stop the tears from coming. The idea of losing her mother, who she loved so dearly, was nearly unbearable. Her eyes burned and her chest hitched as the sobs overtook her. Goddess of Mercy, what was she going to do?

“Hey, baby, no...it’s all right. Everything is going to be all right.” Bear’s deep voice was soothing and his hand on her cheek as he turned her to face him was gentle.

“Nothing’s all right!” Aleena protested through her sobs. “My mother is going...going to die and you’ll probably dis...disavow me for pawning your gift! And for lying and saying I wanted...wanted to marry you when actually I was...was just trying to get...to get money for her treatments!”

“No, baby, I told you, I’m not going to do that,” he insisted. “And I’m not mad at you.”

Aleena could barely believe her ears.

“You...you’re not?” Her breath hitched in her chest and she looked up at him through watery eyes.

“No, not a bit,” he said firmly. He sounded so certain that she dared to study his face.

“Even though I married you for money?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“No. I just hope that in time you’ll come to like me for more than that.”

“I already have!” Aleena assured him quickly. “You’ve been so kind and gentle with me—our Joining night was nothing at all like what my stepmother said would happen.”

“Right—I’m not surprised,” he said dryly. “I’m happy to disappoint your expectations on that front, anyway.”

“So...you’re sure you’re not even angry that I got...got attacked? That man—he tried...tried to change the color of my eyes.”

Bear looked confused, his brows pulled low and his forehead wrinkled.

“Why would I be angry at you for something that lowlife bastard tried to do to you, baby?”

“Well, because...” Aleena sniffed and swiped at her wet cheek with an equally wet hand. “It’s a woman’s fault when she gets attacked. Everyone knows that.”

“What?” This time he looked outraged. “Is that what they teach you on this benighted planet?”

“Well...yes.” Aleena nodded. “It’s her fault for being out instead of staying home and tending the house, as she ought to.”

Bear looked like he still couldn’t quite believe what she was saying.

“So if this case was to go to court, they would blame you just for being out of the house?”

“And for going out as a married woman without my nipple rings on,” Aleena admitted softly. “I, er, forgot to ask you to replace them this morning, my husband. And so no man who looked at my breasts would know that I was protected and owned by another man. In such a case, the courts would have sided with the man attacking me.”

“What a sick world!” Bear looked genuinely disgusted.

“Is that not how things go where you’re from?” Aleena asked him.

He shook his head.

“No—that’s called ‘blaming the victim’ where I’m from. The Kindred believe that there is never any excuse to attack or rape a woman. It goes against everything we believe—everything we are.”

Aleena was surprised, but also cautiously hopeful.

“So...you’re not mad at me at all? Not for marrying you under false pretenses or for pawning your gift or for being attacked? You’re not angry about any of it?”

“Not at you, baby.” Bear stroked a strand of hair out of her face and looked down into her eyes. “None of this is your fault. Though I wish you would have asked me for the money for your mother’s treatment—I nearly had a heart attack trying to get to you on time. And when I saw that fucker on top of you...” His eyes flashed red briefly and he took a deep breath, as though to calm himself.

“Oh, but I couldn’t ask you for money for my family! That’s forbidden!” Aleena protested. “A man can disavow his wife for such a thing.”

“I told you, that’s not going to happen,” he said, frowning. “Why can’t a wife ask for money for her family—no, never mind. It doesn’t matter why. What does matter is that I want you to ask me if you need something.”

Aleena nibbled her bottom lip. Did he really mean that?

“Then...you won’t be angry if I use the money I got from pawning your present to get my mother her treatment?” she asked tentatively. “I only got half of what I needed, but I think I can convince them to treat her with that much.”

“I’ll do better than that—I’m going to examine your mother myself,” Bear said firmly. “Blood disorders are a specialty of mine. I studied them when my...”

He trailed off and Aleena frowned.

“When what?”

“Never mind.” He shook his head. “The point is, I’ll go see her and examine her after the negotiations tomorrow. Will that be all right?”

“That would be more than all right,” Aleena agreed, giving him a tentative smile. “If you truly want to meet my mother. She is a disavowed woman, you know,” she added. “It won’t be good for your status if you’re seen visiting her.”

“Fuck my status,” he said roughly. “She’s your mother and she means a lot to you...just like you mean a lot to me,” he added, and stroked her cheek again. “So I’m going to examine her and see if maybe Kindred medicine can help. We have some very advanced techniques aboard the Mother Ship,” he added.

“Oh, I don’t think we can pay for advanced techniques!” Aleena protested.

He shook his head.

“No charge, baby. Now...” He cupped her cheek and looked into her eyes. “Do you feel better?”

Aleena nodded shyly.

“I was so sure you’d be angry with me, my Bear. Please forgive me for doubting your kindness.”

He smiled.

“I’m glad to hear you call me ‘my Bear’ again instead of ‘my Lord Husband.’”

Aleena felt her cheeks getting hot with a blush as she met his eyes.

“You’re so sweet to me. I fear I don’t deserve you.”

“The feeling is mutual, baby.” Leaning down, he placed a soft kiss on her lips. “Have you soaked long enough? Would you like to come out now so I can dry you off?”

“Yes, my Bear.”

Aleena nodded. Now that she was certain he wasn’t angry with her and he had promised to help her mother, she felt much less anxious and upset. In fact, she felt the urge to be close to her big, protective Kindred husband.

She let him help her out of the bath and stood obediently as he dried her with a big, fluffy towel. Then he wrapped her in a soft bathrobe and carried her into their bedroom.

So much had happened that day, that Aleena felt completely worn out. When Bear sat on the side of the bed, still holding her, she snuggled against his broad chest and breathed in his warm, spicy, comforting scent.

“Oh my Bear,” she whispered. “Thank you for bathing me and making me feel so much better. Is this what happens during the bathing time in the Claiming period you told me about?”

“Something like this...though if we really were doing the bathing time, I’d be massaging you all over with scented oils now,” Bear rumbled.

“ Mmm , that sounds nice,” Aleena admitted. “You know, I think I saw a bottle of massage oil in the bathing accoutrements.”

“Hmm...and would you like me to treat you like it’s our Bathing week?” he asked. Aleena saw the light in his eyes—which were golden once more—and heard the eagerness in his deep voice.

She was feeling eager herself, to be honest. She liked the idea of her new husband’s big hands rubbing all over her naked body.

“Yes, my Bear. If...if you want to,” she admitted breathlessly.

“Mmm, I more than want to, baby,” he assured her. “Let me just get things ready.”

And he put her on the bed and went into the other room, leaving Aleena to anticipate what was to come.

BEAR

Bear found the massage oil easily—it had a light, floral scent which was nice but not overpowering. He brought it into the bedchamber and then lowered the overhead lights till there was only a dim, golden glow to light the room. Aleena lay there, looking up at him with her big eyes filled with trust.

It touched him that she was allowing him to do this. It meant a lot to him that she was trusting him, especially after being brutally attacked. It made him angry to think that the Karprians actually blamed the woman who was attacked in such a situation. What the fuck was wrong with these people, treating their women so badly?

He pushed the thought aside—it would only make him angry and he didn't want to bring any Rage energy into this massage. Instead, he wanted it to be healing—a warm and loving time to let his new wife know how much he cared for her.

You're caring a little too much, don't you think? whispered a little voice in his head. What about your plans to disavow her once the negotiations are over? What about your vow?

Bear pushed the thought away. He wasn't breaking his vow—he wasn't going to Bond her to him—he was just going to massage her and make her feel good.

“Lay on your stomach, baby but you'd better take off your robe first,” he told her. “It'll only get in the way.”

“Yes, my Bear.” Aleena slipped off the robe, revealing her smooth bronze skin and full curves. The lovely sight made Bear’s cock swell, but he tried not to notice that. This was all about her pleasure—he wanted to make her feel good and safe and comforted.

And he was willing to do anything to make that happen.

He started with her shoulders, massaging firmly but carefully. He didn’t use all his strength—not even half of it. She was delicate and he didn’t want to hurt her.

By the way Aleena was acting, he was doing a good job. She moaned happily and relaxed against the bed as he smoothed the oil over her skin and massaged it in carefully. He worked on the muscles of her shoulders and back—they were all knotted with tension. Before long he had her purring like a kitten as she melted completely under his touch.

“Oh, my Bear,” she moaned. “How are you so good at this? I’ve never felt anything like it!”

“Just want to help you relax, baby,” he murmured, moving lower. “Do you mind if I massage you here?” He stroked a hand over her behind and she gave a little twitch.

“I don’t mind, my Bear. You are my husband—you can touch me anywhere . My body is yours to do with as you wish,” she said, sounding slightly breathless.

Bear frowned.

“I don’t want to touch you just because I can—I want to touch you because you want me to. You have the right to tell me no—I won’t be upset if you do.”

“But I don’t want to tell you no.” Aleena turned her head to look over her shoulder at

him. “I want to tell you yes —I want you to keep touching me. It feels so good!”

As she spoke, she arched her back and spread her thighs a little—just enough to show him a hint of her soft little pussy nestled between her legs.

Bear nearly groaned at the sight. Gods, he couldn’t help remembering how wet and tight she was. And it almost seemed like she was offering herself to him. His shaft was so hard it hurt but he tried to ignore it.

“All right then, baby,” he growled. “I’ll keep going.”

He began by massaging her legs and then moved back up to her ass. As he rubbed her sweet cheeks—she had what the humans called a “bubble butt”—she moaned softly and spread her thighs even wider.

“Oh, my Bear,” she whispered. “That feels so good! I almost wish you could massage me deeper.”

“You mean like this?” Sliding his hands between her thighs, he placed his thumbs on the outer lips of her pussy and began to rub gently but firmly, stimulating her Goddess pearl.

“Ohhhh!” Aleena bucked her hips and arched her back again. She was almost on her hands and knees at that point in her effort to spread wider and give him better access.

The sounds of her pleasure and her sweet feminine scent teasing his nose made Bear so hard he felt like he could fuck a hole through a plasti-steel wall. Only reminding himself of his vow stopped him from taking her then and there. But Aleena’s next words didn’t help his self-control any.

“My Bear, please!” she gasped, moving her hips eagerly. “Tell me again...what

comes after the Bathing time in your people's Claiming period?"

Bear felt a low growl of desire rising in his throat and swallowed it down with difficulty.

"That would be the Tasting time, baby," he told her and couldn't help adding, "Would you like me to show you how it works?"

"Oh, would you?" Aleena looked over her shoulder again. Her pale amethyst eyes were half-lidded with need and her pussy was wet and warm in his hands. "Would you really do that for me, my Bear? Would you...taste me?"

She didn't have to ask him twice. Bear had been longing to taste her sweet little pussy almost from the moment of their Joining.

"Gods, yes!" he growled.

Kneeling behind her, he wrapped his arms around her thighs to split her even wider. Then he pressed his face to her pussy and began to lap at her sweet cunt honey, which was already wetting her thighs.

Her flavor burst across his tongue—salty and sweet and perfect—and he knew there was no going back. He was going to taste his new wife until she came for him...came all over his face.

ALEENA

Aleena couldn't believe what was happening. She'd fully expected to be disavowed or at least severely punished for her actions and the attack that had followed. Instead, her Kindred husband had given her a soothing bath and a delicious massage. And now he was behind her with his face pressed between her thighs, lapping her pussy.

She moaned and tried to spread her legs wider, wanting to give him access to the forbidden spot inside that felt so good. He seemed to find it on his own because his tongue curled around it, sending shivers of pleasure through her whole body.

"Oh... ahhh !" Aleena moaned, bucking her hips and arching her back. She had never felt so helpless and yet it made her incredibly hot to be held open and licked from behind like this—even if the position was a little awkward.

Bear seemed to think the same thing—or else he was having trouble reaching her the way he wanted to. With no warning, he flipped her over onto her back and shoved a pillow under her hips.

"Oh, my husband!" Aleena exclaimed. But before she could say more, he was between her thighs again, this time licking her from the front. His long arms wrapped around her thighs and split her wide, opening her pussy completely for his tongue.

Aleena cried out as he sucked her tight little bud into his mouth and began to tease it mercilessly. Goddess, she'd hardly dared to touch this part of herself before she had

been Joined—it was forbidden for non-married women to pleasure themselves. And forbidden for married women as well, for that matter. It was thought that a woman's body was only for her husband's pleasure.

But it seemed that Bear's greatest pleasure was giving her pleasure so how could she refuse it? Aleena didn't even try, though it was still difficult to believe she was in this position, spread out naked on the huge bed with her massive Kindred husband between her legs, licking and sucking her most sensitive areas like he was a starving man and she was his feast.

Somehow her fingers found their way to his thick, black horns and she found she was tugging on them as she bucked her hips up to meet him. She could feel her need growing, just as it had the night before. Was she going to “come” again, as Bear called it? It seemed that was what he wanted her to do—why else would he be so intent on giving her pleasure?

Aleena didn't try to fight it. She tightened her grip on her husband's horns and opened herself completely for him. He was giving her what she needed to get over the edge, so she concentrated on letting the sensations build and build and build...

“Oh Bear!” she moaned as she rose higher and higher on the crest of gathering pleasure. “Oh, I feel so close...I'm almost there!”

He never stopped licking her but Aleena suddenly felt two long fingers slip into her virgin channel and begin to rub.

“Oh!” she gasped and jerked her hips in surprise.

Somehow Bear had found a spot inside her that felt almost as good as her forbidden button! He was rubbing it steadily in time with his licking and it made the sensations inside her jump to a whole other level.

“Oh my husband! My Bear!” She moaned his name like a prayer as the pleasure suddenly crashed over her like a wave. It was so intense she felt like she was drowning at first, but she wasn’t afraid—Bear was holding onto her, he wouldn’t let her go. She wouldn’t be carried out to sea as long as he had her...

It was a strange thought but the next minute she was overcome completely with sensation. Crying and gasping, she clutched his horns even tighter, bucking her hips to meet him as he went on tasting her.

Her back arched and her toes curled and there were bright flashes of light on the insides of her eyelids when she closed them. Someone was calling Bear’s name and moaning and begging him to never stop because it felt so good...so good. Aleena was dimly aware that it must be her, but she was so far gone it was hard to tell.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her—it seemed she would climb one crest and then dip for a moment and then climb again and all the while Bear was still licking her and giving her that deep, intimate massage that was making everything so intense. It must have happened five or six times but at last, Aleena couldn’t take anymore.

She collapsed on the bed, panting and moaning after the fifth or sixth wave had finally ebbed and for a moment she could barely catch her breath.

“Oh...oh, please,” she almost whispered—her throat was sore from shouting and moaning. “Can’t...can’t take anymore. Please...”

At last Bear looked up from between her legs. His golden eyes were half-lidded with desire and his mouth and chin were wet and shiny with her juices. When he saw how exhausted Aleena looked, an expression of concern passed over his face.

“You okay, sweetheart?” he growled hoarsely. “Sorry if I got a little carried away.

I've just never been with a woman who's multi-orgasmic before."

"Multi-what?" Aleena panted, frowning.

"Multi-orgasmic. Means you can come more than once—most women can, you know but I've never been with one who could do it over and over and over again like that. How many times did you come?"

"I...don't know." Aleena shook her head tiredly. "Five? Six? It just kept happening because you found that spot inside me. Is that what makes me multi...whatever it was you said?"

He shook his head.

"No, baby—that's just your G-spot. What we Kindred call your 'inner Goddess pearl.' Every woman has one—yours just seems to be extra sensitive." He withdrew his fingers and licked them clean with apparent enjoyment. "Gods, your honey is so sweet, baby. Love to taste your pussy."

"I never...ever imagined my husband would want to do such a thing," Aleena admitted. "Thank you, my Bear—it felt so good."

"Love to make you feel good, baby," he growled. He pulled her into his arms and held her close. "Do you feel more relaxed now?"

"Mmm, much more relaxed," Aleena purred. Then she happened to glance down at his trousers and what she saw made her frown. "But it seems you are not so relaxed as I am, husband," she said, pointing at the hard bulge of his shaft which was straining against the black fabric.

"Don't worry about that." He shifted his hips and winced slightly. "Tonight is about

you , baby—making you feel good.”

“Why can’t it be about making you feel good, too?” Aleena protested. She was remembering the delicious taste of his cream and the low, sexual groans that had come from his throat when she’d sucked him the night before. Reaching down, she began unfastening his trousers.

“But you don’t have to...Gods!” Bear groaned as she pulled his thick shaft out and began stroking it.

“I want to,” Aleena told him. And leaning down, she took him in her mouth and began to suck.

BEAR

Later, Bear wasn't sure how long they went on for. He had been sexless for so long after his first wife had died, he hadn't realized how much pent-up tension he'd been storing. Now that he finally was with a woman he cared about—and who ignited his passion again—he couldn't get enough of her.

And Aleena was able to match him. She sucked him eagerly, taking as much of his shaft as she could in her mouth and stroking him until he came down her throat again and again.

Then it was Bear's turn to taste her once more. This time he got her to sit astride him and press her soft, sweet pussy directly to his mouth. This kind of “face-sitting” was popular with the Kindred, who loved to taste their women and in fact, had a biological need to give their mates oral pleasure.

Bear enjoyed it thoroughly—he loved feeling surrounded by his wife...loved the feeling of her deliciously thick thighs on either side of his head as she rode his tongue to ecstasy again and again. Her honey flowed freely and he licked it up eagerly, loving that he was enveloped in her scent and taste.

And all the while she tugged on his hair and moaned his name or called him “my husband” and “my Bear” as she came for him over and over. Then he was hard all over again and it was her turn to lick and suck him once more...

It was a wild night and Bear was tempted to take her then and there and fill her with his cock and Bond her to him. But somehow he managed to remember his vow—it was a binding vow taken before the Goddess herself in the Sacred Grove, he reminded himself. He couldn't break it—he would be dishonoring his wife's memory. So he kept himself in check...but just barely.

“Oh, my Bear,” Aleena sighed happily as she cuddled naked in the crook of his arm when they had finally sated themselves. “I never dreamed that married life could be like this! I was always told that it would be painful and that my husband would beat me.”

“Nobody's going to lay a fucking finger on you, baby,” Bear growled. “You're so sweet and soft—how could anyone think of hitting you?”

“I don't know...it's just what husbands do to wives here.” She shrugged and laid her head on his shoulder, her hair spilling over his chest like a brightly colored shawl. “I'm so glad you're not like I was told to expect. I'm so glad you're sweet and kind instead of cruel.”

“Of course, baby.” Bear stroked her hair and wrapped his arms around her protectively. Goddess, he hadn't felt this close to anyone since Zelia!

The thought of his dead wife's name sent a stab of guilt through him. He might not be breaking his vow totally but he was at least bending it quite a lot.

But the next minute Aleena snuggled closer and placed a soft kiss on his cheek and he was able to push the thought aside. How could he help caring for his sweet, curvy little wife? How could he not give her pleasure and release when she'd had such a traumatic time tonight? He had to heal her—to make her feel better, he told himself.

What was so wrong with that? Nothing at all—right?

But still the guilt gnawed at him and had a hard time pushing it away...

ALEENA

Aleena couldn't believe how sweet and kind her Kindred husband was. She had never heard of a husband who wanted to give his wife pleasure. Nearly every married woman she knew seemed to view the sexual relationship with their husband as just another chore that had to be done—like mopping the floor or making dinner.

But Bear's kindness to her wasn't limited to the bedroom.

The next day after his negotiations, the two of them took a hovercoach to her mother's domicile. Her mother was too ill to leave her bed—missing a treatment always made her weak because it allowed the disease in her blood to gain a new foothold on her body.

But Bear didn't seem to mind that the tiny hovel wasn't as neat as it could have been if her mother had been able to clean. His full attention was consumed with the examination he conducted.

After taking a few blood samples and using equipment in his bag to test them, he nodded thoughtfully.

"It's what I thought—you could be cured completely with the right medication—one tailored exclusively to your DNA."

"I could?" Aleena's mother looked up at him uncertainly. She clearly didn't know

what to make of a man who treated her kindly and as an equal instead of being impatient with her illness.

“Yes, definitely,” he said, nodding. “I’ll send some of these samples to the Mother Ship so they can synthesize the right compound. In the meantime, I’ll give you an injection that will mitigate the symptoms you’re having now and slow down the disease until we can get the cure.”

Aleena could barely contain her excitement.

“You can cure her?” she asked, looking up at her new husband hopefully. “For good? Truly?”

“Truly.” He nodded and gave her a smile. “There’s no reason your mother shouldn’t live to a ripe old age once we get her the right medicine.”

“Oh, thank you, my Bear!” Aleena threw her arms around his neck impulsively and her mother cried out in alarm.

“Child, be careful what you do! Your husband may not wish you to hang on him so!” she exclaimed, giving Bear a worried look. “You must apologize at once or you may earn yourself a beating.”

“It’s all right, Mother,” Aleena said, giving her a reassuring smile. “Bear is a Kindred and they think differently of such things. He has promised never to beat or hit me.”

“It’s true,” Bear agreed, backing her up. “We Kindred believe that all women have a spark of the divine in them. To hit or hurt a beloved wife—or any woman at all—is unthinkable to us.”

Aleena’s mother stared at her new son-in-law with wide, uncertain eyes.

“That is most kind of you, my Lord Ambassador,” she said at last.

“Not to my way of thinking,” Bear said firmly. “My people believe that men and women are equal. I treat my wife the way I want her to treat me—with decency and respect.”

This made Aleena’s mother look even more surprised. If her eyes got any bigger, they would swallow her face, Aleena thought. She thanked Bear again as he gave her the shot that would help “mitigate her symptoms” as he had put it.

“You’re welcome, Mother of my Mate,” he said formally.

“You are beyond kind, my Lord Ambassador...er, my Lord Doctor.” Her mother made a helpless gesture with her hands. “Forgive me—I’m not certain how to call you.”

He smiled.

“You don’t have to call me ‘My Lord’ anything. Just ‘Bear’ will do. Or if you want to be more formal, you can call me, ‘Mate of my daughter’—that’s how we Kindred refer to our in-laws.”

“Thank you, Mate of my daughter,” Aleena’s mother said, nodding. “Truly, from the bottom of my heart I thank you. Not just for treating me, but for caring for Aleena so tenderly.”

Bear shot Aleena an affectionate look.

“Well, she’s extremely easy to care for. You’ve raised a lovely young woman. I’m proud to call her my bride.”

At this, Aleena's mother got tears in her eyes and it seemed that she could barely get out her thanks without crying, though it was clear she was trying not to.

"It's all right, Mother." Aleena moved to sit on the bed beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. "Bear doesn't mind if you cry. He's not angered or disgusted by women's tears." Her father had been both those things—he never liked it when his wife or daughter cried in front of him.

Bear squeezed her mother's arm gently.

"I'll leave the two of you alone," he murmured. "Take your time, sweetheart," he added to Aleena. "I need to get these samples ready to send to the Mother Ship."

Then he left the tiny bedchamber, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Oh my child!" Aleena's mother finally got out. "He is...so much more than I ever hoped or dreamed for you. But can it be true? Can such a man really exist?"

Aleena laughed.

"It's true, Mother—he really is kind and thoughtful and everything I could wish for in a husband," she said. "He is also most forgiving. Why, he didn't even get mad at me when I burned an expensive dweezle roast our first night together! In fact, he insisted on taking me out to eat afterwards."

She didn't tell her mother about the attack the night before—it was an even bigger act of forgiveness on her Kindred husband's part, but she didn't want to worry the other woman.

"What a wonderful man," her mother breathed. "Surely the Goddess of Mercy put him in your path, my child."

“I think you must be right,” Aleena agreed, smiling. “Of course, Faleesha was jealous right away once she saw how handsome he is. But do you know he told her he doesn’t like skinny women! He said I’m what the Kindred call an ‘Elite’—a woman blessed by the Goddess with extra full curves—and he says that’s the kind of woman he loves.”

“Oh my!” Her mother’s eyes went wide again as Aleena recounted the Joining ceremony and all that had happened afterwards.

“He sounds like a wonderful man,” her mother said at last. “But...” She frowned at Aleena. “Your eyes...their color has not changed.”

Aleena felt her cheeks get hot.

“He says he wants to take things slowly with me,” she explained. “Because he’s so big and I’m so small compared to him. But he’s been very kind in that area. Very...understanding.”

She didn’t want to say any more—it was too embarrassing. Luckily, her mother seemed to understand.

“Of course, my child,” she said, nodding. “But please remember, until he changes the color of your eyes, your marriage is not truly consummated. I advise you to fix that as soon as possible—it’s much easier for a man to disavow you if he hasn’t had the pleasure of your bed.”

“Bear won’t disavow me—he promised he wouldn’t!” Aleena said quickly. But her mother’s words had made an impact. Despite all the pleasure they had shared, their marriage was incomplete and she still wished to be Bear’s wife in every sense of the word.

Maybe I can change his mind, she thought as a plan began forming in her head.

BEAR

Bear was glad to see how happy Aleena was as they left her mother's house. It was more of a hovel, actually in a run-down section of the city that might once have been nice but now was going to ruin. He thought about finding a new place for her mother right away...but she could always just move in with Aleena once he had gone back to the Mother Ship. He fully intended to buy the house outright they were renting and leave it in her name along with plenty of money so she could live in style.

But the thought of leaving his curvy little wife made a knot form in the pit of his stomach. He couldn't help picturing her face from the night before when she was so upset—her big eyes filled with tears. He didn't want to see that look on her face again—and he most certainly didn't want to be responsible for making her cry.

Can't be helped, a little voice whispered in his head. You know you can't keep her—you can't break your vow. You'll have to leave her here, no matter how much you want her.

He pushed the thought aside, but it was getting harder and harder to put such ideas to the back of his head. The negotiations were complicated but they couldn't last forever. Eventually he was going to have to face the truth...and face Aleena when he admitted that he wanted to disavow her after all...

"My Bear, are you well?" Aleena asked anxiously, drawing him away from his unhappy future and back to the present. They were sitting at the dinner table, having

finished a delicious meal that she'd cooked just for him after their visit to her mother.

"Er...yes, of course, sweetheart." He tried to smile at her. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you went quiet and your face looks like a thundercloud about to rain," she said. Reaching out, she placed one hand on his. "Is there any way I can cheer you up? Perhaps tonight, I can give you a bath as you gave me one the night before."

Bear felt his shaft begin to harden at once. Gods, she was such an alluring, curvy little Elite!

"What if we take a bath together and wash each other?" he growled. "I think the tub is big enough if we're careful."

Her cheeks went dark with a blush and she looked up at him from under her long lashes.

"I think that sounds perfect. Let me just clear the table and we'll go."

"We'll clear the table together. Or better yet, I'll clear it and you go run the bath," Bear told her.

Her eyes went wide.

"But you are a man! You shouldn't do women's work!"

"You cooked the meal, so I'll clean up," Bear said firmly. "It's not women's work—it's everyone's work. We both live here and eat here—we both need to clean."

It took a moment to convince Aleena of this but finally she went up the grand staircase to the master bathing suite to draw them a bath.

Bear cleared the table, anticipating being naked with her again...and trying not to think of their inevitable parting in the future.

ALEENA

Aleena loved bathing with her big, Kindred husband. He was so huge and muscular he took up most of the tub...and yet she found out a secret about him—he was ticklish.

It happened when she was scrubbing the muscular length of his side. As she rubbed his olive green skin with a soapy sponge, he snorted and jerked and then let loose a surprised gasp of laughter as he clamped his arm to his side to protect his sensitive flank.

Aleena took immediate advantage! She wormed her fingers under his arm, teasing the sensitive spots along his ribs and he roared with laughter. Then he caught her in his big hands and tickled her too, finding the spots that made her giggle uncontrollably until she begged him to stop. They both laughed until they cried.

It was the most fun Aleena could remember having in a long time—she'd never dreamed she might find a husband she could laugh with. Everything she'd been taught since childhood was about obeying and being subservient to the man you married—there was nothing about having a good time with your husband because to most women on her planet, marriage was most definitely not a good time.

But with Bear, it seemed like everything was pleasure. He laughed and joked with her and treated her like an equal whose opinion really mattered. Aleena had never been treated like that by a man before but she found that she liked it a lot.

After they finished tickling each other and laughing, Bear grew serious and decided it was time to wash her.

“I don’t think we need a cloth or a sponge...I’ll just use my hands,” he growled softly as he rubbed the liquid soap solution between his big hands to make a mound of bubbles. “Come straddle me, baby so I can reach you,” he told her.

Aleena was eager to do as he said. She threw a leg over his hips and faced him, heedless of the water sloshing over the side of the tub. She bit her lip as he cupped both her breasts in his big hands, just as he had during their Joining ceremony and began to massage her full globes.

“Hmm, how does that feel? Do you like it when I wash you, baby?” he rumbled, his golden eyes half-lidded with lust.

“Y-yes,” Aleena panted and thrust her breasts out even more, offering herself. “Your hands on me feel so good, my Bear.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he murmured, his thumbs sliding over the tips of her nipples. Aleena moaned as sparks of pleasure shot through her whole body, straight down to her pussy. She was wearing her nipple rings again today which meant the tips of her nipples were extra sensitive.

Under the water, she could feel her pussy getting hot and wet. And Bear’s shaft was hard and ready—it kept brushing against her outer lips in a teasing way.

Feeling her husband so hard and ready gave her the courage to do what she’d been dreaming of. Spreading her legs a little wider, she lowered herself down until she could feel the broad head of his shaft rubbing against her inner folds. Then, slowly, she began to lower herself down.

The head of his shaft was extremely large—but she was slippery with desire and she could feel it beginning to breach her entrance and enter her pussy.

Bear had been in the act of washing her breasts, but he suddenly froze and frowned at her.

“Aleena? What are you doing?”

“Only sitting in your lap, my Bear,” she said innocently.

“You’re doing more than that—I can feel the mouth of your sweet little pussy sucking on the head of my cock,” he growled.

Aleena opened her eyes even wider.

“Is it? Perhaps your shaft has a mind of its own and found its way inside me,” she said, giving him a teasing little smile.

But Bear didn’t seem amused.

“I love the feel of you against me, baby, but we need to be careful,” he told her, frowning. “You’re so small—you really could hurt yourself on me. Especially if you tried to take my whole shaft, including the knot.”

“But I want to take you!” Aleena protested. “I mean, I want you to take me , my Bear. You still haven’t changed the color of my eyes. Until you do, our Joining is incomplete.”

“Well, we can’t go that far—especially not here in the tub,” he told her. “I haven’t even gotten you ready yet.”

“Gotten me ready?” Aleena shook her head. “How?”

“By licking you—the way I did last night,” he told her. “There are compounds in my saliva and my precum that can help you open to take me.”

“But your precum is flowing into me now—I can feel it,” Aleena protested. Indeed, she did feel an extra heat where the tip of his cock was lodged in the mouth of her pussy. “I’m sure it’s helping me open up for you.”

To prove her point, she settled a little lower and felt the first thick inch of his shaft breach her entrance. There was a stretching sensation—her Kindred husband really was huge— but it didn’t hurt. In fact, it felt good to be opened so intimately by the man she was beginning to love dearly.

Bear groaned, his hands resting on her hips as though he wasn’t sure he wanted to push her off him...or pull her down so that he was fully inside her.

“We can’t do this, baby! You’re not ready.”

“Yes, I am!” Aleena protested. “Please, my Bear—let me just feel what it’s like to have you inside me, just once. You don’t have to fully take me or change the color of my eyes, but I want to feel you in me!”

“Well...” He was weakening, she could tell. “Just a little then,” he said at last. “I won’t thrust inside you but you can come down on me to feel what it’s like to be filled with my shaft. But you must not try to take my Bonding Knot in your soft little pussy,” he added sternly. “I would need to prepare you by licking you a long time so you could take it without hurting yourself.”

“Yes, my Bear,” Aleena said meekly. She wished he would agree to change the color of her eyes, but at least they were moving in the right direction. And she really did

want to feel what it was like to have him inside her.

Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she lowered herself even more, letting more of the thick shaft slip into her tightly stretched pussy. She could feel her inner walls opening to take him in a way that was almost but not quite painful. The sensation was so intense that she had to stop and rest, panting a few times, until she could go on.

“Don’t hurt yourself, sweetheart!” Bear said anxiously. “Take it slowly—and you can stop if you need to.”

“No, I want you in me,” Aleena said stubbornly. Gripping his shoulders, she lowered herself again until at last she felt him bottom out inside her with the broad head of his cock kissing the mouth of her womb.

“Gods!” Bear growled softly as they clung together in the tub. The water had gone from hot to barely warm as Aleena worked to get him in her, but she barely noticed.

“Oh, my Bear!” she moaned, wiggling her hips to try and get used to being so filled. “You’re so big inside me! I don’t see how any woman could take your knot!”

“That’s where licking you and getting you ready comes into play, sweetheart,” he told her. Under the water, his big hand found where they were joined and began to press lightly against the sensitive button he called a “goddess pearl” or a “clit.”

“Ohhh!” Aleena wiggled again. “That feels so good, husband!”

“Feels pretty damn good to me, too, sweetheart,” Bear growled. “But now that you’ve felt me inside you, I should pull out.”

“Why?” Aleena pouted. “I like having you in me. And I haven’t felt what it’s like to have your big shaft breeding my pussy yet.”

“And you’re not going to—I told you, I won’t thrust inside you,” he said sternly. “Now, it’s time to stop before I lose control and shoot my cream deep in your tight little pussy.”

Aleena liked the sound of that. It was having a man’s cream deep inside her, shooting into the mouth of her womb, that changed the color of a woman’s eyes.

Using her hands on his broad shoulders to help push herself up, she slid up a little until the thick shaft was only halfway in her and then lowered herself again, feeling it press hard against the end of her channel. That was where she needed to feel his hot seed filling her.

“ Ahhh ,” she moaned at the deep sensation. “Oh, that feels so good. Please my Bear, I want to feel your cream in me! I want you to change the color of my eyes!”

But Bear was unmovable.

“No, I won’t do that to you. Not tonight,” he growled. And taking her by the hips, he raised her off his shaft and pushed her gently but firmly away.

Aleena was hurt but she knew better than to disobey her husband. She dried herself off silently and got into a nightgown that Bear had bought her—a lacy see-through light green one that brought out the color of her eyes.

She went to bed and curled under the covers and kept to her side when Bear did the same. Even when he turned out the overhead glows, leaving the room shrouded in shadows, she didn’t say a word.

If he didn’t want her, she wasn’t going to offer herself again. It hurt too much being rejected.

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BEAR

Bear felt horrible for hurting his new bride's feelings...but he knew he would feel even worse if he changed the color of her eyes as she had asked him to. The negotiations were moving much faster than he had expected they would and he would be leaving soon—maybe even within the week.

Since female virginity was an integral part of marriage and Joining here, he knew he couldn't take Aleena's from her without lowering her value in the opinion of the men around her. If he took what made her worthwhile and virtuous in the eyes of her society, he would be ruining her life. He wouldn't do that just for a few hours of pleasure. And besides, he would be breaking his vow which he absolutely could not do.

But he hated to feel so isolated from Aleena—he wanted to hold her in his arms and love her.

“Baby, please—come here,” he murmured, putting a hand on her back.

Aleena flinched away.

“Why? So you can reject me again?”

“I'm not rejecting you!” Bear felt a surge of frustration. “I'm protecting you. I don't want you to get hurt.”

“I’m not afraid of you!” She turned over to look at him. Her eyes were luminous in the light of the double moons, spilling through the window shades. “I’m not afraid of anything you might do to me, Bear. I just want to know that you want me.”

“I do want you. So much! I’m just not ready to change the color of your eyes. You’re too small...too fragile.” He pulled her into his arms and this time she came willingly.

“But you swear that you care for me?” she asked softly. “My mother said that if a Joining isn’t consummated it’s much easier for a woman to be disavowed.”

Bear felt like she’d reached into his chest and was holding his beating heart in her soft little hand. For a moment he wanted to admit everything—to tell her about his vow and how he’d never meant to let things get this far. Theirs was meant to be a Joining of convenience—he’d never expected to actually fall in love with her!

Wait...do I love her? Is that what I’m feeling or is it just lust because she’s the first woman I’ve noticed since Zelia died?

He had no answers. He only knew that he wanted to hold her in his arms and keep her safe...and right now the only way he felt he could do that was to keep their eventual ending from her. If he told her he was going to eventually disavow her, it would only bring her pain. He wanted to avoid that as long as possible.

I’ll tell her when the time is right, he promised himself as he cuddled her close and assured her that he cared for her. I’ll be sure to let her know I’m going to provide for her, even after I leave, so she can find another husband if she wants to.

But the idea of Aleena with another man made him feel the stirrings of Rage—a red-eyed possessive jealousy that brought a growl to his lips. Well, at least she and her mother would be able to live comfortably together, he comforted himself as he tried to push the emotion aside.

Bear held Aleena close as she drifted off to sleep, planning how exactly he would explain the situation to her and tell her he was leaving when the time came.

He had no idea that the decision of how and when to tell his bride he was leaving her was about to be taken out of his hands completely ...

ALEENA

It was the night of the big ball and Aleena couldn't have been more excited. She had a gorgeous new outfit that Bear had bought her for the occasion with the most beautiful breast shield she'd ever seen. It was pure platinum with diamonds and amethysts sewn into the fine links of the pattern. There was a pale purple skirt to go with it made of a fine, gauzy silk that floated around her legs in delicate layers. Bear had also gotten her an amethyst necklace and earrings to match as well as some delicate silver and purple dancing slippers that fit her perfectly.

The cost of this outrageously expensive outfit had been as much as a house—Aleena's eyes had nearly popped out of her head when she saw the price tags. But Bear insisted that the lavish gifts were her due and that the pale purple color of the precious stones brought out her eyes.

That was the only drawback, Aleena thought, as she got dressed for the night's festivities. Though they had been Joined for almost a month now, her Kindred husband had yet to change the color of her eyes and so their Joining was still unconsummated.

Of course, they did many deliciously naughty activities together in the bedchamber, but he still wouldn't take her all the way. Aleena had given up begging him—her mother had counseled her not to nag her new husband. Bear would take her when he was ready and, in the meantime, she had a ball to get ready for, she told herself firmly.

The ball itself was being held in honor of the completed negotiations between the Kindred and her own people. In fact, Bear's superior officer—a warrior by the name of Commander Sylvan—was folding space from the Mother Ship in order to attend the festivities.

Aleena was nervous to meet her husband's boss. She hoped she would reflect well on Bear and bring him honor with his commanding officer. She was going to be on her very best behavior and try to be charming and gracious all night. She was?—

“Ah, there you are. Goddess, you look stunning , baby.”

Aleena turned at the sound of her husband's deep voice, flushing with pleasure to see the admiration in his golden eyes.

“Do you like it?” She did a little twirl so that her long gauzy skirt fanned out around her.

“Like it? I fucking love it,” he growled. “You'll be the most beautiful woman there tonight!”

“Thank you, my Bear.” She came to him and stood on tiptoes to kiss him on the mouth. “I want to bring you honor and make you proud of taking me as your wife,” she whispered when the kiss broke.

“You do make me proud,” he murmured, kissing her back. Then he sighed deeply, as though something was troubling him.

Aleena frowned.

“Is something the matter? Has your Commanding officer been delayed?”

“No, he’s going to be right on time. He’ll meet us at the ball,” he said, which didn’t really answer her question. “Come on...” He took her by the arm. “We don’t want to be late.”

“Of course not.” Trying to put the worry she felt out of her mind, Aleena allowed him to lead him from her dressing chamber down the grand staircase of their home.

On the way to the ball, she tried to still her nerves. Her whole family was going to be there—well, excluding her mother. She had taken the cure that Bear had gotten the scientists aboard the Kindred Mother Ship to prepare for her and she was still recovering her strength in the nice new cottage that he had bought for her.

But Aleena’s father and stepmother and her half sister, Faleesha would all be present. In her splendid new outfit, Aleena felt like a princess and she wanted to show them that she had made an excellent match despite the fact that they had initially forced her joining with Bear upon her.

The ride to the ball was silent with Bear evidently lost in thought, though he held her hand and stroked her fingers absently with his thumb. His horns had been polished to a high shine and his bushy black hair was brushed neatly and held in place in a club at the back of his neck. His uniform buttons gleamed gold and his tall black boots were shiny and sleek. Aleena felt proud to be seen with him—she couldn’t wait to dance with her husband and let everyone see how handsome he was.

When the hovercoach drew up at the entrance of The Plaza—the huge arena where the largest affairs of state were held—Aleena’s eyes got wide. There were so many people here! All the diplomats and couriers and politicians and their wives were present, dressed in elegant luxury. And around the roped off areas, crowds of regular people were gathered, all there to gawk at the rich and powerful.

Aleena remembered coming to watch a similar event when she was much younger.

Then she had been part of the common crowd. Now she was alighting from a luxury hovercoach on the arm of her famous and important Ambassador husband.

And to think, just last month mother and I were living in the shabbiest part of town, unsure of where our next meal would come from, she thought wonderingly. Her swift reversal of fortune nearly took her breath away.

She sent a silent prayer of gratitude to the Goddess of Mercy as Bear helped her out of the coach and she took his arm. All around her people were staring in wonder at her gorgeous outfit. She was glad she'd taken time to go get her hair done in a stylish up-do of swooping curls that drooped elegantly down from the crown of her head. Two little ringlets framed her face and she smiled brightly as she turned her face to the recording devices.

“Looks like everyone in the whole planet is here,” Bear growled softly as he put an arm around her and drew her protectively close to his side. “Come on, baby—let’s get inside.”

Inside, The Plaza had been decorated with greenery and fresh vines of c’lowthcant. The clusters of tiny, vivid red and orange flowers released a slightly spicy fragrance into the air that made Aleena’s nose tingle.

In the center of the huge area many couples were swirling around and around to the sound of the orchestra that was seated to the right playing their zitherhorns and frombolins . They were playing a lively tune that made Aleena’s foot tap to the music. She hoped she and Bear could dance soon.

“Ah, there you are,” a deep male voice said and she turned her attention from the dancing and saw another huge Kindred coming towards them. This must be Commander Sylvan, she thought. He had spiky, light blond hair and pale blue eyes and he was wearing a Kindred uniform, though his shirt was blue instead of red like

Bear's.

"Commander Sylvan! It's good to see you again."

Bear held out his arm and the other male took it, squeezing firmly as they clasped.

"And this must be your lovely bride?" Commander Sylvan asked, nodding at Aleena.

"Yes, this is Aleena." There was pride in Bear's voice as he slipped an arm around her waist and brought her forward.

Aleena smiled up at the big blond Kindred and gave him a ladylike nod as she held out her hand.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," she said. "Bear has told me so many good things about you."

"Thank you so much! That's good to hear." Commander Sylvan smiled at her. "Your husband is the best negotiator we Kindred have. I was proud to send him here but I'm even more proud of what he's accomplished. Tonight we celebrate the successful conclusion of the peaceful and prosperous negotiations between our two peoples. We?—"

"Well, well— hello there, big sister. Aren't you looking different tonight?"

Aleena, who had been leaning forward to hear what Commander Sylvan was saying, felt like someone had dumped ice water down her spine. Turning, she saw that her younger half-sister, Faleesha, had come up to see them along with her stepmother, Grindelia.

Both women were dressed in their finest attire—but neither had outfits nearly as nice

as Aleena's. Still, having them here so near her husband's superior when she was trying to make a good impression made her nervous.

"Hello, stepmother...Faleesha," she said stiffly. "May I present to you Commander Sylvan of the Kindred Mother Ship. He is my husband's superior officer," she added, hoping they would take the hint and behave themselves in front of the important Kindred.

Commander Sylvan held out his hand politely to both of the women in turn.

"It's very nice to meet you. And the two of you are...?"

"These are my wife's relatives," Bear said, frowning as he spoke. It was clear he still retained his dislike of her stepmother and stepsister, though they hadn't seen either of them since their Joining ceremony. "Grindelia is Aleena's second mother—'stepmother' as they say here. And Faleesha is her half-sister—they share a father. Where is Sir Greggor, anyway?" he added, directing his question to Grindelia.

"Oh, off doing business no doubt." Aleena's stepmother waved one hand airily. "Faleesha and I saw our dear little Aleena here and decided we just had to say hello. Though I guess she's not really exactly little, is she?" she added and tittered unkindly behind the elegant blue velveteen fan she held in one hand.

Aleena felt her cheeks getting hot but she did her best to keep her composure. She was about to ask a question to move the conversation in another direction, when Faleesha spoke up.

"I was the one that Ambassador Bear was supposed to Join with, you know," she said to Commander Sylvan, who looked surprised to hear this news. "At the last minute though, Aleena demanded to take my place because she's older than me. So poor Ambassador Bearick got stuck with her instead of his first choice. Me. "

She preened as though she'd just won some kind of beauty contest, tossing her hair over one shoulder and giggling as she looked up at Bear through her lashes.

Aleena wanted to protest that none of what Faleesha said was true, but before she could get anything out, her stepmother chimed in.

“Yes, well I’m afraid my stepdaughter only agreed to marry Ambassador Bearick for money,” she said, sneering at Aleena from behind her fan. “Such a mercenary girl! But then, she was like that when I married her father and I’m afraid I was never able to train it out of her.” She shrugged and waved her fan with an elegant flip of her wrist.

Aleena wanted to sink through the floor and die from embarrassment! How could they be so horrible? And in front of Bear’s commanding officer too!

“I assure you, I have been made aware of the reasons Aleena Joined with me,” Bear said blandly. “I know that you promised to pay for her true mother’s medical bills if she agreed to take her sister’s place as my wife. I also know that you reneged on the deal and would have left her mother to die of her illness because you refused to pay like you promised.”

He directed these words to Grindelia, whose poison green eyes got wider and wider behind her fan.

“Why...you...how—?” she began.

“But please don’t worry,” Bear continued smoothly. “Aleena’s mother has been taken care of. I administered the cure for her illness myself just a few days ago and she’s healing nicely.”

“You...she...” Grindelia still seemed to be at a loss for words and Commander

Sylvan looked surprised as well. Aleena was casting around desperately for something— anything— to say to get things back on track when Faleesha spoke up again.

“So you already knew about Aleena Joining you for money?” she said, looking spitefully up at Bear. “But after all, it’s not like you’ll be Joined for long, right? Father told me that you’re planning on disavowing her as soon as the negotiations are finished. So I guess you’ll be making a formal announcement tonight?”

“What?” Aleena felt like all the blood in her face had suddenly drained away, leaving her pale and cold as a statue. Surely her spiteful little sister was lying! She looked up at Bear. “My husband?” she asked faintly. “This cannot be true...can it?”

To her horror, Bear didn’t at once refute the awful words.

“Well...” He cleared his throat. “Aleena, sweetheart, you have to understand?—”

“Oh my Goddess!” Aleena took a step away from him. “So that was why you refused to change the color of my eyes! You’ve been planning to disavow me all this time—even though you promised not to!”

“Baby, please...” His voice took on a pleading tone. “If you’ll just let me explain?—”

Aleena held up a hand to stop him.

“Have you been planning to disavow me or not?” she demanded. “Just tell me, right now. I need to know!”

“Well...” Bear’s face twisted as though in agony. “Yes, but?—”

“Thank you. That’s all I need to know.” Aleena nodded stiffly at him. “Since you no

longer want me, I'll be leaving now."

As she fled blindly through the crowd, her skirts flying out behind her, she could hear her stepmother talking.

"Of course, no one could blame you for wanting to disavow Aleena—she's so ugly and fat! But if you're still interested in taking a wife among our people, Faleesha is free. Sir Greggor and I will be happy to let you have her as soon as you get rid of Aleena."

Then, mercifully, the noise of the music and the crowd drowned her stepmother out and Aleena could hear no more. She ran, dodging through the dancing couples, heedless of the spectacle she was making of herself.

Bear didn't love her—he had never loved her. He had been planning to disavow her all this time—from the very beginning of their relationship! Even before their Joining he had already decided he would get rid of her as soon as he could!

Hot tears stung her eyes and made her vision blurry. She didn't see her sister following her through the crowded dance floor or notice Faleesha nodding at two rough-looking guards standing near one of The Plaza's many exits.

So she was taken completely by surprise when someone grabbed her by the arm and marched her away from the crowd.

"What...who...?" She looked around and saw a tall, grim-faced man holding her right arm. "Let me go!" she exclaimed, trying to pull away.

"I don't think so." He tightened his grip. "It's time to leave the party now."

"I'm not leaving with you! Who are you?" Aleena exclaimed. She was still overcome

with grief as tears streamed down her cheeks, but fear was beginning to make its way into the mix too.

The man didn't answer but just then another man took her other arm. Between the two of them, they started steering her towards the nearest exit.

Aleena felt a rush of fear and began to fight them in earnest.

"Help! Help me!" she shouted. But the music was too loud and everyone was looking at the dancers. Only a few heads turned and before they could say anything, Aleena had been whisked through the darkened exit door and out of The Plaza, into the night.

She had no idea what fate waited for her, but she was desperately afraid it was a dark one.

BEAR

“I’ve searched everywhere—I can’t find her!” Bear dragged a hand through his hair, which had long since come loose from its club at the nape of his neck. If it was possible to feel both panicked and lower than dirt, then he felt both. How could he have led Aleena on so thoughtlessly? And where had she run to? Was she safe?

“Could she have gone to be with her mother?” Sylvan asked. He had been helping to search the crowd too. Between the two of them, they’d covered the entire Plaza several times but no trace of Aleena could be found.

“I called her mother’s communications device just now and she said she hadn’t heard from her and she wasn’t there.” Bear felt like punching something—or someone. If Aleena’s sister hadn’t been a woman...

But no—he couldn’t blame the sister, though she was a cruel little bitch. He was the one at fault here. He should have told Aleena his true intentions from the start. He should have explained about his vow. He should have done so many things differently but now he had lost her...

“I think it’s clear she’s not in The Plaza anymore,” Sylvan said, breaking into his guilty train of thought. “Why don’t we take my ship and scour the city. Maybe she went back to the home the two of you share.”

“If she did, she’s not there yet—the sensors on the door would have let me know if

anyone went in or out,” Bear said, nodding at his communications device.

“Well, maybe she’s on the way. Come on—let’s go look for her,” Sylvan urged.

Bear didn’t have any better ideas, so he nodded and the two males left together. But though he scanned the crowded room one last time before he left, Bear still didn’t see his bride.

Once in the long-range shuttle that Sylvan had flown to Karpasian Sigma, Bear slumped in the passenger seat. They took the route he thought Aleena might have taken if she had decided to walk home, but she wasn’t anywhere along the way and once they got to his house, she wasn’t there either. There was nothing but the ghost of her perfume, still floating in the air of her dressing room.

Smelling her sweet scent made Bear feel like his heart was being ripped from his chest! He groaned aloud in frustration and fear as he fell to his knees in the middle of the room.

“Aleena, where are you? I’m so fucking sorry! I should have told you!”

“So she didn’t know you planned to disavow her?” Sylvan asked. He was standing in the doorway, a sympathetic look on his face.

Bear shook his head.

“I kept meaning to tell her—to explain about my vow—but somehow I just couldn’t bring it up. She was so sweet—so eager to please me. And her father disavowed her mother—it made her fear that I would disavow her and I couldn’t bear to tell her that I was planning to do exactly that.” He shook his head. “Where could she be?”

Sylvan gave him a sympathetic look.

“You love her, don’t you?” he asked softly.

“Love her?” Bear looked up at him. “Yes, I love her! She brought me back to life—I was dead inside after I lost Zelia. I thought my heart was buried. But Aleena...she healed me. She fucking resurrected me! And look how I repaid her.” He shook his head. “But what else could I do? I can’t break my vow!”

“I made a similar vow, you know,” Sylvan said quietly. “After I was rejected by the one I was meant to Join with on Tranq Prime, I swore before the Goddess that I would never call a bride. I almost let that vow keep me from loving again. Until my sweet Sophia came into my life, I didn’t think I could love again.”

“But you and Sophia have been Joined for years now—how did you get out of your vow?” Bear asked blankly.

“I begged to be released from it and my prayer was heard and answered,” Sylvan told him. “The Goddess is merciful, Bearick. She wants her children to be happy. I’d go so far as to say she probably brought Aleena into your life to give you a second chance at love.”

“And I fucked it up!” Bear groaned. He lifted his face, looking up at the blank white ceiling. “Goddess—I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! ”

With no warning the air was suddenly thick with a presence. It settled on Bear like a heavy, almost suffocating coat. He felt as though he was suddenly miles under the sea with the incredible weight and pressure of thousands of gallons of water surrounding him and pressing down on him.

“Warrior,” a stern, feminine voice said. “I have heard your cry. You are right to beg forgiveness—the betrayal you committed was grave indeed.”

“Goddess?” Bear could hardly believe it. He struggled to lift his head and look around in the crushing pressure that surrounded him, but it was an effort that took nearly all his strength and besides, there was nothing to see. The Goddess was invisible—though most definitely there with them. He could feel her displeasure.

“I sent you a new bride—a second chance for love and happiness—but you never took it seriously. You planned to thrust the woman I sent you aside right from the start.” The Goddess’s voice was harsh and accusing.

“But the vow I took in the Sacred Grove—I swore to never Bond another woman to me!” Bear protested.

“Do not fool yourself, Warrior. You did not take that vow out of reverence to me or even to the memory of your first wife. You took it to keep yourself from ever getting hurt or feeling the pain of lost love again,” the Goddess told him. “You swore to never love again to protect your heart.”

Bear knew it was true.

“Yes,” he admitted brokenly. “Yes, Goddess—you’re right. I see that now. Forgive me—I’m sorry . I was a fool!”

“Because you are truly contrite, I will give you another chance,” she said. “Whether your bride will give you another chance, however, I do not know. Her fear of being disavowed runs deep and finding out that you planned to betray her may have locked her heart against you for good.”

Bear felt sick, but he couldn’t waste time feeling sorry for himself. Right now he needed to find Aleena!

“I will beg her forgiveness on my knees if you’ll only tell me where to find her!” he

said. “Please, Goddess—I’m worried about her! She left the party wearing a king’s ransom in jewels. I’m afraid it might make her a target.”

He couldn’t help thinking of the last time he’d had a bad feeling and had found her being attacked in a dark alley. What if something like that was happening right now but this time he wasn’t there to stop it and protect her?

“Your instincts are correct—she is in danger,” the Goddess said.

Bear felt like his blood had turned to ice water.

“Please—tell me where she is! I’ll give my life to save her if I have to!” he begged.

“She is being held in the home of her father. You must hurry if you wish to rescue her before permanent damage is done,” the Goddess told him. “Now go and do not waste this second chance I have given you!”

The crushing pressure of her presence was abruptly gone. Bear gasped in a breath. He felt light-headed from the intense encounter—like a diver coming up from the depths after almost drowning.

Sylvan was still standing in the doorway, his eyes wide. He hadn’t spoken the whole time but it was clear he had observed and understood the entire encounter.

“Do you know where Aleena’s father’s house is?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Bear nodded.

“I had to go there once during our negotiations to get some paperwork. I know exactly where it is—come on!”

He was on his feet and running for the door with Sylvan right behind him. He didn't know what kind of danger Aleena might be in—she ought to be safe in her father's house. But he didn't dare disbelieve the Goddess or ignore her warning. Indeed, everything inside him was urging him to hurry...hurry... hurry!

He just prayed that he would get to her in time.

38

ALEENA

“Say it! Renounce him! Renounce your husband!” Faleesha shoved the recording device in Aleena’s face. “Say you don’t want Ambassador Bear as your husband anymore!”

“No!” Aleena whispered and turned her head away.

“Horrible girl! Hit her again!” she heard her stepmother demand.

One of the men who had dragged her out of The Plaza moved and a heavy hand struck her face.

Aleena cried out as her lip split and her mouth filled with the coppery taste of blood. How long had this been going on? How long had she been tied up in this dark, dank space with the two of them shouting in her face and demanding she renounce Bear?

She didn’t know but her body and face ached and her wrists and ankles were chafed from the harsh ropes they had tied her with.

“You know he’s going to disavow you anyway,” Faleesha snapped, shoving her face into Aleena’s. “So you might as well renounce him first! That way he can marry me right away!”

“Never!” Aleena spat out blood and had the minimal satisfaction of watching it

splatter her half-sister's pristine white gown. Bear might not love her, but that didn't mean she didn't love him anymore.

Though the big Kindred had wounded her deeply, she refused to renounce him just so Faleesha didn't have to wait the customary three-month post-disavowment period to Join with him.

Never, she thought. If Faleesha is going to steal my husband, so be it but I won't make it easier for her!

"Wretched, ungrateful girl! After everything we've done for you, how can you still refuse to do this one small thing for your sister?" her stepmother demanded, cutting into her thoughts. "Why can't you show her even a tiny bit of consideration?"

"You mean the way you showed me consideration?" Aleena demanded, stung into speaking up at last. "The way you swore to pay my mother's medical bills and then went back on the deal? Or the way you stole my father away and sent my mother and me to live in poverty? Or maybe I should be grateful for all the nasty things you said to me after my Joining Ceremony right in front of my husband!"

"He's not your husband—or he won't be for long!" Faleesha snapped. "It's me he wants! Not you."

Aleena laughed through her cracked and bleeding lips.

"Bear doesn't like skinny women," she informed her half-sister. "And he especially doesn't like you. He says you're spoiled and nasty and cruel and he's right."

Faleesha's face grew red with fury and she slapped Aleena across the face. But since she wasn't nearly as strong as the two goons she and Grindelia had hired to kidnap Aleena in the first place, it wasn't a very painful blow—at least not compared to

theirs.

“Enough of this!” her stepmother exclaimed. “I think we need stronger methods—the girl is absolutely intractable!” She looked at the two men standing on either side of where Aleena was bound to the wooden beams. “You know what to do! Change the color of her eyes—and don’t be gentle about it!”

Aleena sucked in a breath—this was her greatest fear! But there was nothing she could do about it—she was bound and helpless with her arms and legs spread wide and no way to stop her attackers.

But to her surprise, Faleesha stepped between her and the men.

“Wait!” she exclaimed imperiously. “Before you ruin her, I want her jewelry! It would look much better on me than her.”

Reaching up, she snatched the amethyst necklace off Aleena’s neck and tore the earrings painfully out of her ears.

“Ouch!” Aleena gasped and writhed in her bonds.

“Take that breast shield too,” her stepmother ordered. “It’s too big for you since your sister is so fat but it will fetch a pretty price for your dowry, my sweet.”

The two of them yanked off Aleena’s breast shield, leaving her bare from the waist up and she cried out in pain and shame.

“Don’t! Don’t do this to me!” she begged.

“Are you ready to renounce him yet?” Faleesha demanded, shoving the recording device, which was whirring as it took in the scene, into her face once more.

Aleena gritted her teeth. No matter what, she wasn't going to give in!

"No!" she said, trying to make her voice strong. "I refuse to renounce my husband. If he wants to disavow me, so be it. But I will not renounce him. I love him!"

"Too bad he doesn't love you, then!" Faleesha sneered. "As if he'll ever want you again after your eyes are the color of soot from having more than one man go at you!"

"Your sister is right—you'll regret your decision very soon," Grindelia snapped. Then she put an arm around her daughter. "Come, my dear—it's better that innocent eyes don't see what's about to happen."

"But I want to see her suffer!" Faleesha whined. "She deserves it—she's keeping me from my husband!"

"I know, but you don't need to see such things. Come."

And the two women headed for the door of the tiny back room where they had bound Aleena, leaving the two hulking males they'd hired to close in on her...

39

BEAR

“Where is she? Where is my wife?” Bear burst into Sir Greggor’s residence and found the man standing in his own richly appointed living area.

“What?” Sir Greggor looked startled as he glanced up. His eyes widened when he took in Bear’s state.

Bear was right on the edge of Rage—he could feel the fury coursing through his system and a crimson curtain kept trying to drop over his eyes and color everything he saw in shades of bloody red. He was holding it back by force of will, knowing that going into a berserker fury wouldn’t help him to find Aleena. But he was very close to letting it rush over him as he strode forward and took Sir Greggor by the throat.

“Where’s Aleena?” he roared in the other man’s face. “I know she’s here— where the fuck is she?”

Sir Greggor’s eyes went wide and he seemed to lose the power of speech. With a trembling finger, he pointed towards the back of the house.

“B-b-back room,” he finally managed to get out. “At the end of...of the hall.”

Bear didn’t need to hear any more. He shoved the other male aside and ran through the house, heedlessly passing through rooms full of tapestries and paintings and all the trappings of idle luxury. He didn’t care about anything but finding Aleena.

And then he smelled it—her scent! There was a lingering trace of her perfume but also the aroma of her skin and hair, which was sweet on its own. But then he caught another smell in the air—a coppery tang that could mean only one thing.

Blood.

His fury doubled and the Rage pressed against his mind like a beast eager to escape its cage. He rushed forward, following the scent of his beloved and found himself in a long, narrow hallway. There was a door at the end and just then, it opened and Grindelia and Faleesha stepped out. Grindelia was holding the platinum breast shield he'd bought his bride and Faleesha had the amethyst jewelry clutched in her greedy hands.

Both women looked up in surprise as they saw Bear charging towards them. Faleesha gave a squeal and pressed herself flat against the wall but Grindelia tried to stop him.

“You can’t go in there!” she declared. “You can’t?—”

Bear rushed past her, knocking her roughly to the ground with one shoulder as he went.

“Oh! How dare you?” she squalled indignantly, but he had no time to waste with her. He pushed through the door and saw a sight that nearly stopped his heart.

In the middle of the dark room, lit only but a few corner glows, Aleena was bound to a kind of rough wooden cross in the shape of a large X. Her breasts were bare and two strange men were in the act of ripping off her long flowing skirt. There could be no doubt about their intentions—one of them was palming her breast roughly and the other already had his naked shaft out in his hand.

The Rage took Bear fully then—a fury so intense he lost all cognitive function and

became nothing but a beast. His only thought was to kill the ones hurting his mate—to completely obliterate them so they could never hurt her again!

Lowering his head, he charged forward, goring the male who was fondling his wife's breast. The male howled in surprise and pain as one of Bear's horns took him in the kidney. He staggered back and Bear gripped the hand that had been on Aleena's breast. Twisting ruthlessly, he broke the male's wrist with a crunching of bones.

"Ow! Son of a bitch!" The male fell crying to his knees, one hand dangling limply as the other reached for the hole in his side which was pouring blood. Bear didn't spare him any more attention—he turned to the other man who had been ripping Aleena's skirt.

This attacker still had his shaft in one hand but it had gone as limp as a wet lepta noodle. He put up his free hand, his eyes going wide, as he started to back away.

"We didn't touch her!" he whined as Bear advanced on him. "I swear we didn't! And anyway, we were ordered to do it by her stepmother!"

If Bear had been in his right mind, he would have demanded to know if the other male always took orders to beat and rape women. And if he and his friend hadn't touched Aleena, then why was her lovely face bruised and bloody?

But the Rage still pulsed through him, robbing him of all words but one?—

"MINE!" he roared and lunged forward.

Taking the male's head between his hands, he wrenched it to one side. There was a horrible crack and suddenly the male went limp, his body nothing but deadweight.

Bear dropped him and kicked the body furiously—how dare this fucker touch what

was his? How dare he hurt the woman Bear loved? How...fucking... dare he?

“Bear...my Bear!”

A soft, broken voice somehow penetrated the Rage that had enveloped him. The red haze cleared somewhat and he blinked and saw that Aleena was still bound to the wooden cross.

“My Bear,” she said brokenly. “He...he’s dead. You can stop—you killed him.”

Bear looked down at the male at his feet and saw that his eyes were rolled up and his head was tilted at an unnatural angle.

As for the other male, he had scooted himself into a corner of the small, dark room where he was mewling in pain and clutching at his still bleeding side.

The immediate threat was over. Now it was time to take his bride and see to her wounds.

ALEENA

Aleena had never seen such a terrifying display—not even when the shabby man had attacked her in the alley. Bear’s face had become a twisted mask of rage and he’d killed one man and mortally wounded another in the space of less than three minutes.

Yet when she called his name, it seemed that her voice penetrated the Rage and his eyes went slowly back from bloody red to golden.

“My Bear,” she called again and he blinked and looked up from the carnage he had created to focus on her.

“A-leena?” He said it like her name was a word in a foreign tongue. But every second he was looking more like himself. “Aleena—sweetheart!” He came striding forward.

“My Bear—you came for me!” Aleena might have been shamed to be half-naked in front of him after what the males had tried to do to her, but she was too grateful to see him to care about her partial nudity.

“Did they hurt you?” He cupped her face gently in his big hands, turning it from side to side to see the extent of her injuries. “Gods, I can see that they hit you. But did they...”

“They didn’t change the color of my eyes.” She looked up at him, letting him see that her pale purple eyes remained unchanged. “Though Grindelia told them to.”

“That bitch!” Bear said thickly. He was already working on the ropes that bound her ankles and wrists to the wooden beams. He sucked in a breath when he saw the bruises and raw, red marks on her skin where the rough fibers had scratched her and bitten into her flesh.

“I’ll punish them all!” he growled, more to himself than her. “Nobody hurts my wife and gets away with it!”

“I’m cold ,” Aleena whispered. The skin of her bare breasts and chest had broken into gooseflesh. She tried to cover herself with her newly freed arms but she couldn’t hide her shame completely.

“Here, baby.” Rapidly Bear unbuttoned his dress uniform shirt. Pulling it off, he bared his broad chest and draped it around her. The satiny fabric was warm from his body heat and smelled of his spicy, comforting scent. Aleena drew it close around her as he finished unfastening her ankles. Then he lifted her into his arms, cradling her to his broad chest protectively.

Though she was warming up, Aleena was beginning to feel faint for some reason. It was as if now that the worst was over and she was safe in Bear’s arms, she could finally relax and her body had decided to check out for a little while. She could feel consciousness leaving her. But there was something she needed to tell her husband before she was completely lost.

“They wanted me to renounce you,” she whispered to Bear as he held her close and looked anxiously down into her face. “But I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t...do it. I swear it, my Bear—I never renounced you.”

And then darkness ate the world around her and she knew no more.

BEAR

“You cannot do this! You simply cannot burst into another man’s house and take his daughter!” Sir Greggor blustered as Bear carried Aleena’s limp form through the living area where Sir Greggor and his wife and daughter were standing together.

“She’s my wife and you were holding her captive and torturing her! ” Bear growled. He looked anxiously down at Aleena. She was still breathing—she just seemed to have fainted from the shock. He didn’t blame her but he wanted to get her someplace safe so he could examine her.

“Torturing her? What are you talking about?” Sir Greggor demanded.

“What I said. When I went into your back room, Aleena was tied up, half-naked, and two men were about to fucking assault her!” Bear snarled.

Even now, the memory of seeing the woman he loved tied and helpless, about to be raped, made the Rage start to come over him again. He fought it off grimly—he needed to get Aleena out of here, not give in to the berserker fury that wanted to consume him.

“You’re lying!” Sir Greggor said shortly.

“Go look for yourself,” Bear snapped. “There are two men that your wife hired back there—one’s dead and one will be soon unless he gets medical attention. They were

in the act of pulling off her skirt and—” But he couldn’t go on. He would go into Rage again if he did—he was sure of it.

“Grindelia, is this true?” Sir Greggor demanded, turning to his wife, who had a stubborn, mulish look on her face.

“Aleena needed to renounce Ambassador Bearick so Faleesha could Join with him instead,” she said, lifting her chin. “I was doing what I had to in order to make that happen.”

“What the fuck makes you think I’d want to Join with your disgusting, spoiled brat of a daughter?” Bear growled at her. “I hadn’t been on this planet a whole hour before I knew she was the last female I’d ever want to be with!”

“Well!” Grindelia looked extremely offended and Faleesha actually began to cry.

Big, fake tears—what the humans called “crocodile tears”—began rolling down her cheeks.

“Pappa, make him Join with me!” she sobbed, pointing at Bear. “I’m the one who should have been the Ambassador’s wife! It’s not fair that Aleena gets to be his wife instead!”

“Hush, child—we don’t want anything to do with such a nasty, conniving man,” her mother said, putting an arm around her shaking shoulders.

Faleesha threw her mother’s arm off with a petulant gesture.

“I want him! I want to be the Ambassador’s wife and have all the jewels and the big house and the important position so that everyone is jealous of me when we go to The Plaza! It’s not fair that Aleena gets all that instead of me! It’s not fair!” she cried

stamping her foot.

Faced with his favorite daughter having a full-blown tantrum, Sir Greggor looked uncertainly at Bear.

“Now, Ambassador Bearick, since you’re going to disavow Aleena anyway—” he began.

“The answer is ‘no,’” Bear said flatly. “I’m not disavowing Aleena. I’m taking her with me to the Mother Ship so I can treat her injuries. Wounds that the men your fucking wife hired inflicted on her. And when I come back to Karpasian Prime, it will be to drag you and your family to court to prosecute you for how you kidnapped and abused my wife!”

“How dare you say such a thing to me?” Sir Greggor’s eyes narrowed in anger. “And anyway, no one will believe you!”

“They might...if they see a recording of the event. Which I believe this little device might have.”

Commander Sylvan was suddenly there, plucking a small device from Faleesha’s fingers.

“Hey!” She made a snatch for it but he held it easily out of reach. “That’s my holo-recorder!”

“Not anymore—now it’s evidence,” the Blood Kindred said coolly. Bear wondered how long he’d been listening, staying out of sight in the shadows of the hallway. For quite some time apparently.

“Take the breast shield and the jewelry too,” he told Sylvan. “Those are Aleena’s—I

bought them for her and these two thieves stole them right off her body.”

Before Faleesha and her mother could object, Sylvan took the items out of their hands.

“And now I think we’d better go,” he said to Bear. “It seems that your mate might need medical treatment.”

“Yes, she does,” Bear agreed grimly. “She fainted—I think from shock.”

He turned to leave the living area and headed for the front door of the house with Aleena still in his arms.

“Just wait one minute!” Sir Greggor exclaimed. Puffing his chest out importantly, he placed himself squarely in Bear’s path. “You don’t dare insult me like this! I’ll tell the whole Council what you’ve done and the deal between our people will be off—the negotiations will be completely nullified!”

“Your people stand to benefit immensely from our trade deal and the worm hole agreement Ambassador Bearick negotiated,” Commander Sylvan said, raising an eyebrow at him. “Do you really think they’ll call off the entire thing just on your word?”

For a moment, Sir Greggor seemed at a loss for words.

“I...they...my opinion carries great weight with the Council,” he said at last.

“Fine—then tell them whatever you want,” Bear growled. “But right now I’m taking my wife and leaving this fucked-up planet!”

He pushed past Sir Greggor, who was still protesting, and carried Aleena out the door

and towards the long-range shuttle, which Sylvan had parked on the front lawn. He was done with their bullshit.

Right now he just wanted to tend to his wife and when she woke up, beg her forgiveness and pray to the Goddess she would take him back.

42

BEAR

Aleena regained consciousness briefly in the shuttle on the way back to the Mother Ship but then sank back into a faint, which had Bear more worried than he wanted to admit.

Luckily, the Mother Ship folded space for them at once so almost before he knew it, he was carrying her into the Med Center for a full diagnostic. He and Sylvan, who was also a physician, examined her carefully from head to toe and Bear was relieved to find nothing permanently wrong with her—just some cuts and bruises that would heal quickly with their advanced treatment.

At last, he carried her into a private room at the far end of the Med Center to wait until she woke again. Sylvan went with him, a look of sympathy on his face.

“She’ll be fine,” he said, as Bear laid Aleena carefully on the med-bed and pulled a crisp linen sheet up to her chin. “Her mind just isn’t ready to come back to her body yet. But it will soon.”

“I pray to the Goddess you’re right,” Bear said. Leaning over his wife, he stroked a strand of her long, coppery hair away from her bruised face. Seeing the marks on her high cheekbone and her swollen, cut lip made his heart twist in his chest.

“I am right,” Sylvan assured him. “Here—I’ll leave her things with you.” And he placed the pile he’d been carrying, including the breast shield, the jewelry, and the

small recording device he'd taken from Faleesha, at the end of the bed.

"Thanks." Bear nodded at him. "For everything—I couldn't have gotten home so quickly without you. And thank you for having my back, even when Sir Greggor threatened to renege on the deal we made with the Karpsians."

Sylvan frowned.

"Of course I backed you up—a male's mate must always come first. And it leaves a sour taste in my mouth to deal with a people that treat their women so badly and disrespectfully. If they cancel the deal, we'll find what we need elsewhere."

"Thank you." Bear was immensely grateful. It wasn't every superior officer who understood what was truly important and put his priorities in order like Sylvan did.

"Although, if the younger daughter really did record what was happening, we might have enough evidence to show the Karpsian Council what actually happened," Sylvan added. He nodded at the holo-recorder. "Why don't you see if you can find anything worth showing them while we're waiting for Aleena to wake up?"

Bear looked apprehensively at the small, handheld device. He didn't know what he might find on there, but he was almost sure it would be bad—really bad. Still, if it could save the trade deal and keep peace between the Kindred and the Karpsians, he knew he should view its contents.

"I'll look at it," he told Sylvan. "And I'll bring you anything I find."

"Good. Thank you." Sylvan put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed briefly. "Everything is all right now—you have your mate safe aboard the Mother Ship where no one else can harm her."

Bear wanted to say that she'd already been harmed—that he hadn't been in time to save her from the trauma she'd suffered. But he only nodded and thanked his Commanding Officer again.

When Sylvan stepped outside, he drew a chair up to Aleena's bedside and picked up the small holo-recorder. He didn't want to look at it but he made himself press the "view contents" button anyway.

The first few minutes were just the two males he'd fought dragging Aleena inside the dark room and tying her to the wooden X-shaped cross. Then the slapping and shouting began.

Over and over, Aleena's stepmother and sister demanded that she renounce her husband and say she didn't love him anymore. A lump formed in Bear's throat as he watched his brave, curvy little wife refuse again and again. He winced and balled his hands into fists as he watched one of the goons Grindelia had hired hit Aleena full in the face, bursting her lip as she cried out and tried to turn away.

Then came the part that tore at his heart so deeply he could barely stand it. After beating and slapping her, after tearing off her clothes and jewelry and threatening her with rape, the two women offered Aleena one last chance to renounce him. Bear's heart twisted as he watched the hologram of his wife, tied to the cross, beaten and bruised, and heard her response.

"I refuse to renounce my husband," she said in a low, clear voice. "If he wants to disavow me, so be it. But I will not renounce him. I love him!"

At that point, guilt and shame overcame him and Bear couldn't stand to watch anymore. Putting down the holo recorder, he buried his face in his hands and wept.

He wept for all the pain and torture his sweet wife had gone through...for her

incredible courage in refusing to renounce him, even though she thought he didn't love her...he wept for the pain he'd caused her and the danger he'd exposed her to and the fact that he didn't deserve her beauty and loyalty and trust anymore.

He wept because he didn't know if he could face her again and he wondered if he even had the courage to try.

And he swore to himself that if, by the grace of the Goddess, Aleena agreed to forgive him, he would never, ever betray her again and he would spend the rest of his life keeping her safe and making her feel loved, valued and cherished.

If only she would give him one more chance he swore he wouldn't waste it.

ALEENA

Aleena woke to a strange sight. She was in some kind of white, sterile room—it looked like a room from the Healing House which she had visited so often with her mother, only the equipment was much more sleek and advanced-looking.

But it wasn't the room that struck her as strange—it was the sight of her husband, sitting on a chair beside the bed she was in, with his face buried in his hands. His broad shoulders were shaking and a muffled sound of misery was coming from his deep chest.

“Bear? Husband?” she asked tentatively. “Are you unwell?”

He looked up at last and she saw that his eyes were red—not from Rage but from weeping. Had he been crying for her? Was she seriously hurt then? Maybe she was dying!

“Aleena? Sweetheart—how do you feel?” His voice was hoarse with emotion.

“I don't know,” she said apprehensively. “Am I wounded? Will I die?”

“Die?” He looked surprised and worried. “No, you won't die—not if I have anything to do with it!”

“Then why are you crying?” Aleena asked uncertainly. “I thought maybe there was

something really wrong with me.”

Bear swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, looking like he was trying to regain his composure. He was shirtless and his broad chest was bare. Which made sense, because she was still wearing his uniform shirt, she saw. The golden buttons gleamed in light from the pale overhead glows.

“Nothing’s wrong with you—it’s me that’s all fucked up, baby,” he said hoarsely. “I’m to blame for everything that happened to you tonight and I’m so fucking sorry.”

Aleena shook her head.

“It wasn’t your fault that Faleesha planned to kidnap me. She must have known that I’d run from you when she revealed...” She cleared her throat, which was suddenly dry. “When she revealed your plan to disavow me.”

“I’m not going to do that—I swear it!” Bear leaned forward, taking her hand in his own. “I never wanted to—I thought I had to. I swear it, baby.”

Aleena frowned, not understanding.

“What do you mean you thought you had to disavow me?”

Bear dragged his free hand over his face wearily.

“It has to do with a vow I made,” he said in a low voice. “A sacred vow that I took after my first wife died...”

Aleena’s eyes widened as she listened to his story. How he had met his wife when both of them were just younglings, how he had loved her desperately and dearly...and how devastated he’d been when she was diagnosed with a rare and

incurable disease.

“That must be how you learned so much about blood disorders and were able to cure my mother,” she said softly, when he paused for a moment. “You studied them to try and cure your wife.”

He nodded, looking utterly defeated.

“Yes. Much fucking good that it did me. Zelia died anyway, despite all that I could do. So I gave up practicing medicine and took a vow to never Bond a woman to me again. Then when I was called to broker the worm hole deal and the trade agreements between your people and mine, I was told I’d have to take a Karpasian wife. But your father told me that whoever I married, I could simply divorce her—or disavow her—at the end of the negotiations.”

“So...you hadn’t even met me yet when you decided you would disavow your Karpasian bride?” Aleena asked. She was beginning to get a better idea of what was going on now.

Bear nodded.

“I thought it would be easy—a short marriage of convenience just to satisfy Karpasian social convention.” He took both her hands in his and looked at her intently. “I never dreamed I’d fall in love.”

Aleena’s heart skipped a beat and she took in a shocked breath.

“Oh Bear...do you mean that?”

“Yes, baby—I do.” He nodded earnestly. “I started falling in love with you the minute I saw you. And then when I got to know you, I started falling deeper and

deeper. But all the time, I knew I couldn't Bond you to me, because of the vow I had taken to never Bond another bride."

"So that's the real reason you never wanted to change the color of my eyes," Aleena said, as understanding burst over her.

Bear nodded.

"Exactly. I felt like such an asshole, lying to you. I never should have—I should have told the truth and explained why I couldn't Bond you from the very first. But you seemed so frightened about being disavowed—I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

Aleena looked down at her hands.

"So...I guess you still have to disavow me. Because of the vow you took?"

"No, baby—the Goddess released me from my vow." He lifted her chin to look into her eyes. "I'm free to Bond you to me—we can spend the rest of our lives together. If..."

"If what?" Aleena's heart was racing.

"If you can forgive me," Bear rumbled. "For lying to you and deceiving you...for not getting to you in time."

"But you did get to me in time," Aleena protested. "They didn't change the color of my eyes."

"No, but they hurt you, baby!" The pain in his eyes made her heart flutter. He cared about her—deeply and truly, she could tell.

“I’ll heal,” she said gently, putting a hand over his. “I’m not angry with you, my Bear—now that I know the truth of why you thought you had to disavow me, I understand. Though I wish you would have told me from the first,” she added.

“I should have,” he said earnestly. “And I’ll tell you everything from now on. In fact, I won’t be able to hide anything from you, even if I wanted to—which I don’t—if only you’ll let me Bond you to me.”

Aleena frowned.

“I don’t understand. Does Bonding make a person more truthful or forthcoming?”

“When a Kindred Bonds his bride to him, it creates a kind of mental link—a Soul Bond—between them,” Bear explained. “They can send each other thoughts and feel each other’s feelings. It’s a truly intimate and life-changing thing which makes lying or withholding almost impossible.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Aleena said softly. She liked the idea of being so tightly bound to the man she loved.

“So will you let me Bond you to me?” Bear asked anxiously. “Will you forgive me for the pain I caused you and give me another chance?”

Aleena felt her heart swell with love. Yes, he had hurt her in the past but she had never been one to hold a grudge. Now, looking into her husband’s golden eyes, she could see how much he loved her and she wanted to return that love a hundred—no, a thousand fold.

“I will,” she said, smiling at him. “If you’ll let me stay here with you. I don’t want to go back to my home world and have to deal with the stares and the whispering that I’m sure the trouble with my family will cause.”

“We’ll live together here, aboard the Kindred Mother Ship,” Bear promised. “You’ll love it here—women are respected and admired and treated as equals among my people.”

“That would be a nice change,” Aleena admitted. “But...can my mother come to live here too? I mean, she doesn’t have to live with us but if we could find her a domicile not far from ours?—”

“Of course she can come.” Bear nodded. “In fact, I’m going to bring her back here as soon as possible so she can be a witness at our Joining Ceremony.”

Aleena frowned.

“What? But my husband, we’re already Joined.”

“The first ceremony was one of convenience—one I meant to break because I didn’t believe anything real or lasting could come from it,” he said firmly. “I want to have a new ceremony with you—one to symbolize our lasting love and the fact that we’re never going to be parted.”

Aleena felt like her heart was melting.

“Oh, my Bear—what a wonderful idea,” she murmured. “When will we hold it?”

“After you get out of here—the Med Center,” he clarified. “They’ll probably want to hold you at least a little while for observation. I’ll set up an appointment for tomorrow with the woman who helps plan events—Kat is her name, I believe—and we can hammer out the details.”

“But when will you Bond me to you and change the color of my eyes?” Aleena asked anxiously.

“After you’re healed and we have the ceremony,” he said firmly. “That will give us time to plan everything out.”

“But I don’t want to wait!” Aleena protested. “I want to be with you now— tonight .”

“But baby, you’re still hurt.” He cupped her bruised cheek gently. “Don’t you want time to heal?”

“No—I want to be with you now ,” Aleena said stubbornly. She nuzzled her cheek into his big, warm hand. “Please, my Bear, if you truly want to prove your love for me, change the color of my eyes and Bond me to you so that I know you’ll never leave me.”

“If that’s really what you want, I’ll do it,” he murmured, stroking her cheek. “Just give me an hour to get a few things ready, baby and then I’ll come back for you. That will give the quick-healing gel we used on your face and lip some time to work. Is that okay?”

“That sounds fine.” Aleena smiled at him. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

“All right. I’ll be back soon.” He kissed her tenderly on the forehead and rose to go. “Just relax and take a little nap, baby.”

Aleena nodded and, after he left, she tried to do as he said but the events of the night kept playing out in her mind. Her time with her stepmother and half-sister had been horrible, but she was already putting it to the back of her mind as well as she could. Instead, she concentrated on the wonderful knowledge that she and the man she loved were going to be together forever.

44

ALEENA

She did drift off eventually and it seemed like only a few minutes later before Bear was coming back into the room.

“Oh, are you back already, my Bear?” Aleena sat up, blinking.

“Yes, baby.” He came over to the side of the bed. “Are you sure you want to do this tonight?”

“Absolutely positive,” Aleena said firmly.

“All right then, come on.”

He lifted her out of bed and when Aleena protested that she could walk, he shook his head.

“No, baby—I want to carry you. You’re mine and I’m not letting you go.”

Aleena relented and leaned her head against his broad chest. She had a blurred impression of the huge ship as he carried her through it. The Kindred Mother Ship was like a city in space with so many things to see and do. Aleena was certain she would love living there but for now, she just wanted to get back to the place she would be calling “home.”

Bear brought her to a well-appointed suite—as the silver door slid open she saw that it was small but spacious and tastefully decorated with large, overstuffed furniture that was just the right size for her big Kindred husband.

The living area had a fire wall where the blue and gold flames danced and flickered. Sitting in front of the flames was a strange looking chair but Aleena barely had time to look at it before Bear carried her into another room.

This one had a large round tub set into the floor and the water inside was steaming and fragrant.

“What’s this?” Aleena asked, looking at it with interest.

“This is the bathing pool, baby. I thought we could take a bath together first. You know, take things slowly,” Bear rumbled.

Aleena liked the idea of being naked and wet with her husband.

“That sounds wonderful, my Bear,” she murmured. “I’d like that.”

“Let’s get undressed then.”

He finally put her down and the two of them stripped, leaving their clothes by the side of the steaming pool. Bear got in first and then held out his arms for her. Aleena joined him and settled against his broad chest with a happy sigh.

Bear washed her gently, using his hands and a foaming sponge that made mounds of pink, sweet-smelling lather. He paid special attention to her face and mentioned that her bruises were healing nicely.

“Your lip is almost healed too,” he remarked and leaned down to give her a very

gentle kiss on the mouth.

Aleena kissed him back carefully, happy that the sharp pain was gone. Truly, Kindred medical technology was wonderful. It amazed her that her injuries had been healed so quickly!

After being in the bathing pool for some time, though, she was ready to go on with their night. Her muscles felt loose and relaxed and she wanted to feel Bear inside her.

“My Bear,” she said to him, giving him another kiss. “Please—are we done bathing yet? I want you to change the color of my eyes now.”

His eyes went heavy-lidded with lust but he shook his head.

“In a minute, baby. I have to get you ready first.”

“How?” Aleena frowned, trying not to be impatient.

“You’ll see.” Going to the edge of the pool, he grabbed for one of the large, fluffy towels that were stacked there. He unfolded it and laid it out beside the pool, then he beckoned for Aleena. “Come here, sweetheart.”

Mystified as to what he was doing, Aleena came to him. She gave a little gasp when he lifted her by the waist, out of the pool, and laid her on the towel. However, she wasn’t completely out—her lower legs were still dangling down into the warm water and she was laying on her back with her thighs slightly spread.

“Oh my Bear—what are you doing?” she asked breathlessly.

“Getting you ready, baby.” A hungry light was in his golden eyes and he was already moving between her legs. Since he was still in the pool, he only had to duck down a

little to place a soft kiss on the top of her mound.

Aleena shivered with anticipation. She had been getting rather overheated in the pool, so lying out on the towel felt cool and refreshing. Also, seeing her husband get into position between her thighs made her heart pound.

“My husband, are you going to taste me?” she asked softly.

“Mmm, what do you think, baby?” His voice had dropped to a low growl and he had that hungry, lustful look he always got when he licked and tasted her pussy. It always surprised Aleena how much he liked to do this, especially since no man on her own planet would even consider it because they thought it was beneath them. But the Kindred apparently didn’t feel that way.

“Good girl—spread nice and wide for me.” As he spoke, Bear ran his big hands up and down her inner thighs, opening her even wider for him.

“Yes, my Bear,” Aleena whispered breathlessly. “I’ll try to be open for your tongue.”

“That’s right,” he rumbled. “Now watch while I eat your sweet little pussy—eat you until you come all over my face .”

Then, locking his eyes with hers, he ducked his head and began licking her slowly, starting at the mouth of her pussy and dragging his tongue up and over her throbbing button to the very top of her slit.

“Oh... ohhh!” Aleena reached instinctively for his horns. She loved having something to hold on to while he tasted her. And Bear seemed to like it when she held onto them and pulled him forward.

She bucked her hips up eagerly and tugged him down. His response was a low, lustful

growl and then he wrapped his long, muscular arms around her thighs and began to absolutely devour her.

“Oh...oh my Goddess!” Aleena nearly wailed as he sucked her sensitive clit into his mouth and teased it relentlessly with his tongue. “Oh my Bear, that feels so good! There—right there!”

A low, hungry growl was her reply and he continued just what he was doing, teasing and licking until she felt her orgasm building to a peak. It amazed her that until she’d met him, she’d never allowed herself to feel such intense pleasure before. Truly her Kindred husband had woken her up to a whole new world.

And then the waves were crashing around her as she moaned his name and her hips bucked on their own. Her hands tightened on his horns until she was certain she’d have marks on her palms, but she didn’t care. It felt so good to let go and allow the pleasure to overwhelm her as he lapped and tasted her pussy.

“Oh my husband,” she moaned softly, when at last the deep sensation ebbed and she was panting with the aftermath. “That was...was wonderful .”

“You taste fucking delicious, baby.” Bear licked his lips and looked up at her, his golden eyes blazing. “Do you feel ready to have my cock in your soft little pussy now? Do you think you can spread wide and take me nice and deep so I can change the color of your eyes?”

Aleena’s heart seemed to skip a beat.

“Yes, my Bear,” she murmured eagerly. “That’s exactly what I want—I’m ready.”

“Good. Let me get out and we’ll go in the other room,” he told her.

He climbed out of the tub and dried off quickly before lifting Aleena into his arms again.

“Are you never going to let me walk on my own again?” she asked, half laughing.

Bear shook his head.

“No, you’re mine and I want you in my arms, baby. Besides, I have something special planned for your first time.”

He carried her back into the living area where she had seen the strange chair sitting in front of the fire wall earlier. Now as she examined it, it looked even stranger. It appeared to be a kind of rocking or gliding chair with a hinge in the back of the seat. When the chair glided backwards, the seat tilted down and when it glided forwards, the seat tilted up. Also it had footrests but not in front—on either side of the chair. Which made no sense.

Aleena stared at it uncertainly as Bear held her.

“My Bear, what is that chair for?” she asked him.

“This, baby, is a breeding chair,” he rumbled. “It’s for long, slow, gentle lovemaking and Bonding, which is exactly what we’re going to do tonight.”

Aleena felt her stomach flutter with excitement and her pussy was suddenly wet all over again.

“Tell me how it works,” she begged.

“With pleasure, baby. I sit in it and then you sit in my lap, facing me,” Bear explained. Your soft little pussy gets filled with my cock and then we rock

together—the motion of the chair does all the work and you can just relax against me. How does that sound?”

“It sounds magical, my Bear,” Aleena murmured. She liked the idea of fast, hot, passionate sex too, but Bear was right—for her very first time this was perfect.

Bear settled in the chair and positioned her in his lap with the head of his shaft just brushing against her outer pussy lips. Now Aleena saw that the backwards footrests on either side of the chair made sense. She used them to support herself as she lifted slightly and took him in one hand.

“That’s right, baby,” Bear growled, watching her actions with lazy lust. “Put my cock inside your soft little pussy. But take your time—we’re going at your pace tonight.”

Aleena liked it that he wasn’t rushing her. She rubbed the broad head over her slippery folds several times, moaning as she felt the tingling pleasure when he slipped over her clit. Then, finally, she fit the crown of his cock to the mouth of her pussy and began to lower herself down onto him.

“Easy, baby—take it slow,” Bear growled, holding onto her hips and guiding her down.

Aleena moaned softly as she felt her inner walls stretching to the limit to take his thickness. He was so big inside her and yet she wanted more—wanted to feel all of him opening her—even his knot. Especially his knot.

So when she got to the thick bulge at the base of his shaft, she started to lower herself onto that as well, but bear stopped her.

“Let’s rock some first,” he told her, stroking her cheek. “Take it nice and slow. If I come in you at least once, it will help you take my knot, baby.”

“When I do take your knot, does that mean you’ll be breeding me?” Aleena panted as he set the Breeding Chair in action and it began to glide. She could feel the thick shaft sliding in and out of her tightly stretched pussy, the broad head lightly kissing the mouth of her womb with every stroke.

“Yes, baby. Is that what you want?” His voice was a low growl and his eyes were glowing with lust again. “Want to feel me breeding your soft little pussy and shooting my cream deep inside you? Because once I knot you, I can get you pregnant. You know that, right?”

Aleena bit her lip. Did she want to get pregnant?

“As long as you’ll help me raise it, then yes, I want to be pregnant with your baby, my Bear,” she said softly.

“Of course, I’ll help raise it,” he said, frowning. “I think you’ll find that we Kindred are very good fathers.” He kissed her gently. “And I know you’ll be a good mother.”

“Then do it—come in me and fill me with your cream,” Aleena begged. She was feeling the pleasure slowly building inside herself, but she knew she didn’t want to come until she felt her husband’s knot swelling inside her to tie the two of them together.

Her words seemed to free something in Bear because he gripped her hips tightly and groaned as he pressed his shaft deep inside her. At the same time, Aleena felt hot, wet spurts bathing the mouth of her womb which responded by opening to welcome the broad head of his cock.

“Oh! Ohhhhh,” Aleena moaned as she felt her husband’s shaft sink even more deeply into her pussy. At the same time, she could feel the thick knot at the base of his shaft slowly sliding into her entrance. Goddess, he was huge! How could she possibly take

all of him?

But it seemed that Bear was right—the compounds in his cream helped her take him in— all of him. And all the time he was encouraging her.

“That’s right—that’s my good girl,” he growled. “Gods, look at you take it—look at you taking my cock so deep...taking my knot. You’re such a good girl, opening yourself for me like this, Aleena!”

“I...I want to be open for you, my Bear!” she moaned. “I want to feel you all the way inside me!”

At last his knot was fully lodged inside her and she moaned as it began to swell, tying the two of them together. Oh—it was getting so much bigger! And yet her body still stretched to take it.

“Feel that, baby?” Bear growled in her ear. “Do you feel me knotting you? Feel me filling you completely?”

“Yes, oh my Bear!” she moaned. Gripping his broad shoulders, she pressed against him. “Oh please—I feel so close!”

Indeed, it felt like his knot was pressing on the special, secret spot inside her—her inner Goddess pearl. As it rubbed against her, the pleasure was growing once more.

“Mmm, baby, you’re such a good girl to take me so deep—to take my knot inside your tight little pussy and let me breed you.”

Aleena loved his dirty talk—it made her feel so naughty and hot and vulnerable. And she loved feeling so full—her inner walls were stretched to the limit and she had never felt so opened and so owned...or so in love.

“Please, my Bear!” she panted. “I’m close...so close...”

“Let me help you along, sweetheart.”

Bear slipped one large hand between them and his thumb found the sensitive button of her clit and began to slide back and forth lightly. At the same time, he kept up a kind of grinding motion inside her so that his knot kept on massaging her inner spot. The two pleasures mixed together until Aleena was sure she was going to explode!

“Oh!” she wailed, her fingers tightening on his shoulders. “Oh my Bear, I think...think I’m coming .”

“That’s right—come for me, baby,” he growled, gripping her hips tighter. “Come for me—come all over my cock while I fill you with my cream! Come for me while I breed you!”

His hot words and the feeling of new spurts of cream filling her pussy finally pushed Aleena over the edge. With a low moan, she felt her inner walls spasming around her husband’s thick shaft, sucking his cream as deep into her pussy as possible.

Oh Goddess—it feels so good! I can’t believe he finally changed the color of my eyes, she thought.

“Yes, I did and they’re beautiful. I’ve never seen such a gorgeous, velvety purple.”

Bear was looking into her eyes and Aleena realized that she was hearing his voice but not from his lips...the deep, rumbling tones were coming from inside her own head. Which must mean that...

“We’re Bonded! This is what you meant by sharing thoughts, isn’t it?” she sent through their new link as she looked up into his face.

He nodded.

“Yes, baby—we’re Bonded. And that means we’ll never be apart again. My sweet, courageous, curvy little bride,” he continued, stroking her cheek. “Truly the Goddess has blessed me richly. I swear to spend the rest of my life cherishing you and making you happy.”

Aleena felt a rush of pleasure and happiness that seemed to overflow because her heart just couldn’t contain all of it. She thought of the fear and apprehension she’d felt when she’d first agreed to their marriage but she was so glad she’d gone through with it. If she hadn’t, she never would have found the man she could love forever.

And it was all because she’d agreed to be... Married to the Beast.

EPILOGUE

ALEENA

“What a beautiful ceremony! The two of you look perfect together.”

Aleena smiled at the kind words and thanked Sophia, who was Commander Sylvan’s wife. She had been watching from the front row of chairs set up in the Sacred Grove along with Aleena’s mother, who was overcome with joy to see her daughter getting Joined.

It made Aleena glad all over again that Bear had made the suggestion of a second Joining Ceremony. For of course, her mother hadn’t been allowed to attend their first one, though she had always longed to see her daughter’s special day.

Also, the second ceremony had been so much happier than the first. No expense had been spared and Kat, the woman who had helped plan the ceremony, had set up an elegant reception for after the wedding. There was a snowy white tent spread over the verdant parkland beside the Grove and inside there were many small tables and one large one, all of them decorated with beautiful flowers. She had also been invited and she was beaming at Aleena and Bear as they accepted the well-wishes of the guests.

“The two of you are going to be truly happy—I can tell,” Commander Sylvan said, smiling as he took his wife’s arm.

“Sylvan told me your story and how you fell in love,” Sophia said to Aleena. “But there’s one thing I’m still wondering about—whatever happened to your awful

stepmother and sister?”

“I’m afraid they didn’t come to a very good end,” Aleena told her. “None of my family did—other than my dear mother who moved here with me, of course.”

“Would you mind telling her, my Bear?” she sent through their mental link. “I don’t like to talk about it.”

“Of course, baby.”

“I went back to Karpsian Prime to speak to their Council and explain what had happened,” Bear told Sophia. “At first Sir Greggor and his wife and daughter tried to dispute my claims, but we had holographic evidence of what they had done to my bride.”

His arm tightened protectively around Aleena’s shoulders and she leaned against him, glad to have the comfort of his big body so close to hers.

“You did? So what happened—if you don’t mind me asking,” Sophia said.

Aleena shook her head.

“I don’t mind. But Bear tells it better.”

“Sir Greggor lost his spot in the Ruling Council and was stripped of his rank,” Bear said. “He disavowed his wife and daughter—the two of them are living on their own now.”

“They’re in the same place my mother and I used to live,” Aleena said. She wondered if the two women were enjoying the hovel which was drafty in the winter and sweltering in the summer. It had never been a very nice place, but it was better than being out on the street.

“Also, because of their egregious actions, both Grindelia—Aleena’s stepmother, and Faleesha—her sister, were put on a permanent Disavowment List,” Bear went on. “Which means that neither of them can ever marry again. From now on they’ll have to work for a living and get by the best they can.”

There was no mistaking the satisfaction in his voice. Justice had been served. As a Kindred, he would never harm a woman physically, but Aleena knew he was glad her awful stepmother and sister had been properly punished.

“Wow!” Sophia’s eyes went wide. “So they pretty much got what they deserved.”

“They did,” Bear agreed and Aleena nodded. She was still dealing with the trauma her stepmother and sister had put her through, but it felt good to know that neither of them was in a position to ever do something so heinous again.

“And the best part is, the contract that Bearick negotiated still stands,” Commander Sylvan said heartily. “They also said that Bearick and his bride are welcome to come back anytime—they even offered to make him a permanent part of their Council.”

“Oh, are you going to accept?” Sophia asked.

Bear shook his head.

“No, we’ll go back for visits sometimes, if Aleena gets homesick, but she prefers to live here on the Mother Ship.”

“It’s so nice here—and everyone has been so welcoming,” Aleena said, smiling. “I’m really enjoying exploring—the Mother Ship is huge! And I can write here. I’ve always wanted to put the stories I make in my head down on paper. On my home planet, I wasn’t allowed but here I have freedom.”

“Well, let me know if you want some girlfriends to hang around with.” Sophia gave

her a friendly smile. “Kat and Liv and I would love to have you come over sometime. We’re thinking of starting a book club. That’s where we all read the same book and then give our opinions of it,” she added.

“That sounds like fun.” Aleena nodded. Thanks to the shot of Translation Bacteria she’d been given, she could read an alien language as well as she could read her own and she liked the idea of making more friends.

“Oh, we love meeting new people from other worlds—besides, you’re one of us now—one of the Kindred brides,” Sophia said with a smile.

She and Sylvan moved off and another couple who were friends of Bear’s came to congratulate them. Aleena nodded and smiled but inside she was thinking how lucky and blessed she was. As Sophia had said, she was now one of the brides of the Kindred and she and Bear would never be parted again.