



Episode Nine
The Forgotten:

Discovery

By

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Chapter Eighteen

Danielle thought Kiel's goal was the bunk, but she demanded to be put down before he reached it and stripped off her flight suit and undies. When she looked up at him, she saw he'd watched the entire process. He met her gaze and reached for the tie of his loincloth.

He truly was a magnificent creature, she thought, watching the play of his muscles as he removed his clothing, feeling her body stir to life, and then stepping closer and lightly exploring his skin and muscle from hip to chest. She leaned closer when she'd examined the hard muscles of his belly and chest, rubbing her cheek against his skin and inhaling deeply the clean, wonderful scent of him. He reached for her, digging his fingers into the flesh at her waist.

She grasped his hands and turned away, tugging him toward the bunk in invitation and then releasing her hold to climb onto the soft surface and lie down.

He followed her, settling on his side beside her and propping his head on one hand. For a long moment, he met her gaze and then he blazed a path downward, lightly examining her flesh with his fingers. Goosebumps rose along her skin in the wake of his touch and increased sensation sprang to life with them. He settled his palm at last when he reached her belly, spreading his fingers wide as if measuring the space between her hip bones and then cupping the soft flesh.

She caught his wrist before he could trace a return path, guiding his hand down between her legs to explore her cleft. He sent a sharp glance at her face, as if surprised by the invitation, and then rolled onto his knees and caught her legs. Amusement flickered through her and then discomfort, but she allowed him to part her thighs and examine her with his gaze and his fingertips.

He seemed content to explore a while, shifting lower on the bed and lightly caressing the petals of flesh that surrounded her sex. It was disconcerting, but it also reminded her of the first time she'd met him and both warmth and amusement flickered through her at the memory.

It was a lot more disconcerting when he moved closer. "You don't have to be that close to look," she murmured with an uncomfortable chuckle.

He frowned and flicked a look at her. "I want to taste."

Her throat closed and her belly clenched. "You sure about that?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes," he said huskily, flicking his tongue out and licking a path from her sex to her clit before she'd even had the chance to brace herself.

She sucked in a sharp breath at the heat of his mouth, the faint roughness of his tongue, clutching his shoulders and digging her fingers into his hard flesh. He lifted his head to study her face.

"This feels ... good?"

She wasn't sure she wanted him to kiss her there. It did feel good, but did she really want him to know her *that* well? It was far more intimate to her mind than penetration. "I don't want to come like that," she said finally.

He looked surprised, but he clearly saw it for what it was—capitulation to whatever he wanted to do. Settling more comfortably, he began to explore her more thoroughly with his tongue, almost tentatively at first but with rapidly growing enthusiasm that was hard to ignore.

She stared at the ceiling, trying to focus her mind away from what he was doing. She thought, at first, that it was going to work, that she could close her mind to the quivering muscles in her belly, the warmth inside her that grew to heat, the prickling of her skin that increased her sensitivity all over so that her nipples stood erect and then began to pound in concert to her escalating pulse.

A fever claimed her, mind and body, so that she couldn't hold still, lost focus of everything except the feel of his tongue as it teased her swollen flesh. She gasped, panted for breath, gripping his head mindlessly. She wanted to escape the torment and have more at the same time. Her legs seemed to spread wider of their own accord, her hips rise to meet the strokes of his tongue. He caught her swollen clit with his lips, sucking on it, and she lost control completely, gave it up gladly, groaning with the convulsion that pelted her and then crying out hoarsely when he continued and the spasms grew harder.

She went limp when he lifted his head at last and ceased to torment her, feeling as if she'd melted. She could feel his gaze on her, sensed that he was watching her, but she couldn't find the energy to lift her head. Her belly quivered spasmodically when he nibbled at it with his lips. She stroked his head gratefully when he nuzzled her belly, struggling with the mild sense of disappointment that he'd made her come when she'd wanted him inside of her.

He stirred after a moment, nibbling and sucking tiny kisses across her belly and then upward. She gritted her teeth. Her skin was so sensitive the kisses were almost more torture than pleasure, but fair play was fair play. He'd pleased her. He hadn't gotten his release as she had.

It was harder to keep that in mind when he reached her breasts and began to suckle them with the same enthusiasm that he'd tugged at her clit. She gritted her teeth and groaned with a mixture of anticipation and reluctance when he moved from one breast to the other.

Relief flooded her when he finally ceased to torment her breasts and traced a path up her throat. He lifted his head to study her face. Compelled by his focus, she opened her eyes with an effort and met his heated gaze. Her belly clenched.

He lowered his lips to hers as he slipped between her thighs. She lifted to meet him eagerly, curled her hips in invitation, parted her lips for his. Her own scent mingled with his. Briefly disconcerted, relieved that her scent wasn't unpleasant, she pushed it from her mind and kissed him back in demand that he take what he'd so generously given. To her surprise, she felt the heat rising inside her again, felt her kegel's clapping together in demand.

He broke the kiss after only a moment, shifting upward abruptly to impale her on his hard flesh. She sucked in a sharp breath, arching upward to help him, trying to engulf the silky slick rod of steel. He slipped his hands beneath her, cupping her buttocks to hold her tightly for his initial foray, pumping shallowly until her moisture coated his cock and allowed him to delve deeper.

Her sense of anticipation grew as she felt her flesh straining to engulf his, felt him stroking her inner flesh nearer and nearer her g-spot. He paused, shifting his grip from her hips to her shoulders. Impatience had begun to get the upper hand. She planted her feet on the mattress and lifted to meet his next thrust, feeling her heart pound a little harder as he finally lay claim to her entirely.

The slow rhythm he set brought impatience to the surface again, but each stroke of his flesh along her channel sent out ripples of pleasure and quickly drew her focus. Feeling herself climbing toward climax again, she began to urge him to move faster, tugging at him, surging against him eagerly each time he withdrew instead of waiting for his next thrust. He caught her

impatience and began to pump into her faster. She gasped, clutched at him mindlessly, straining to reach her goal with a sense of growing desperation when it seemed as if it would elude her. Her climax burst upon her unexpectedly, rapture exploding through her in a hot, white flash of intense sensation that sucked the breath from her lungs. Her mind reeled with it so that she almost missed his culmination. She clutched at him more tightly, though, when she felt him shuddering with his release, stroking his back soothingly when he finally went still, relishing their deep connection almost as much as she'd enjoyed the climax.

She tightened her grip on him when she felt him gathering himself to move. He hesitated and finally rolled to his side, carrying her with him. Smiling inwardly, she curled one leg around his hips and snuggled closer to his warmth, drifting lazily, rubbing her cheek against his chest from time to time in gratitude.

He stroked a hand lightly along her back. "I do not think I will ever understand you," he finally said, his voice still husky.

Questions flickered through her mind, but they were too disjointed to grasp and she dismissed them. "Probably not," she murmured sleepily.

"I must go back to the bridge," he said after a few minutes had passed.

Danielle frowned at the intrusion of the real world, reluctant to let go of the moment, but finally eased her grip on him in capitulation. Dragging in a ragged breath, he pulled out of her and then climbed over her.

Cold the moment he left her, she debated whether to cover up and snuggle into the warmth of the bed to doze or get up and dress. Kiel flicked a glance over her when she turned to watch him dress. "Stay."

She frowned. A mixture of irritation, amusement, and hopefulness went through her, though, and she decided to let the command slide. Dragging the covers from beneath her, she covered up and rolled over to put her back to him—just to let him know that, even though she was willing to wait for him to come back, she wasn't particularly pleased about the way he'd said it.

She was drifting toward sleep when she heard the door open again and the light tread of his feet toward the bunk. Still vaguely miffed, she decided against turning to welcome him.

It was well she did. When he settled behind her and caught her shoulder to press her onto her back, she discovered it was Baen—not Kiel.

An unpleasant jolt went through her. Before it had time to fully settle inside her that Kiel had told her to wait for Baen—not for his return—Baen settled his mouth over hers and kissed her with a hunger that drove everything else from her mind.

Except the fact that she was thoroughly satisfied and reluctant to be aroused again.

She discovered she couldn't hold on to her reluctance. His fervor was enough to stoke the ashes of spent passion and then some, and it was still a near miss. Almost the moment Baen drove into her, he began to race to reach completion and she had to run to catch up.

It was a wild, frantic ride to the top of the mountain. As Baen drove deeply and began to jerk with the strength of his body's convulsions, though, it sent her flying over the edge. She felt like she'd slammed into the next peak over. Her own climax seemed to knock the breath from her and it was a struggle to regain it.

He tightened his arms around her briefly when he'd caught his breath. "I cannot linger," he muttered a little drunkenly.

"Umm?" she managed to get out as he levered himself off of her and bounded from the bunk.

She struggled to lift her head to watch him but gave up the effort. She was trying to decide whether she felt well fucked or just plain fucked when Jalen popped into her room. She watched him drop his loincloth and bound toward the bed like an exuberant puppy with a mixture of resentment and as much reluctance as she could muster.

Instead of zeroing in for a preliminary kiss, though, he caught her waist and burrowed his face against her belly.

“Not there,” she groaned drunkenly. “It’s a mess.”

He lifted his head and looked up at her quizzically but apparently the complaint went over his head. He nuzzled her belly again—and began talking to it in Danu.

Well! There was no doubt in her mind where his affection lay, she thought irritably! “What?”

He lifted his head and she saw his face darken. “It is I ... your” He broke off the translation, thinking. “Father.”

Danielle stared at him blankly. Grinning sheepishly, he cupped her belly. A dizzying wave of disorientation swept over her abruptly as the significance of his actions and his words finally sank in. Hard on the heels of that was the realization that he couldn’t possibly have fathered any baby. He’d fucked her in the ass!

Abruptly, she recalled what Gertrude had said. She hadn’t fully assimilated it at the time—any of it. Gertrude had said that each of the three had its father’s DNA!

That was just plain insane, though! She must have heard her wrong!

Granted, it was hard to digest that something had happened to her birth control device at all. They were specifically designed so that the body *couldn’t* absorb them! Even if she could concede the possibility that it had failed, though, and Kiel’s and Baen’s determined little squiggles had made it past and she’d beaten astronomical odds and produced two eggs—it just stretched the limits of belief that Jalen’s little puppies had made it from her rectum to her damned ovaries! Sure they were designed to find the goal, but they shouldn’t even have been able to catch the scent of her eggs from that point or origin!

Despite her disbelief, or maybe because of it and because he seemed so ... ecstatic to think he’d fathered a child, she discovered she couldn’t bring herself to disappoint him—not now!

If the Nubiens caught up with them, and that seemed almost a foregone conclusion, he would never have to know.

Her throat closed at the thought. Impulsively, she reached down to stroke his dark hair. He lifted his head and smiled at her and she felt her heart trip over itself. Shifting upward, he nuzzled his face against her breasts. “How long do you think it will take?”

Danielle swallowed a little convulsively. Probably a lot longer than they had. “I don’t know. I’ve never had a baby before—months.” She’d never even *thought* of having a baby before and she felt an odd sense of loss swallow her at the realization that she might not get the chance. Was that how they felt, she wondered abruptly? Had they thought for years and years about having the chance to have a baby and then begun to realize that they wouldn’t have that chance after all? Was that the desperation she’d sensed in them when she’d thought it was only lust?

She was inclined to dismiss it. That was a woman’s thing—the desire to reproduce, certainly thoughts of nurturing and cuddling a baby. Men didn’t think like that, did they?

Some did, she realized abruptly. She remembered the look of anticipation in her brother’s eyes when he would watch some woman playing with her baby, remembered him

chuckling and telling her that he was going to have a half a dozen one day. She'd laughed, too, certain he was joking. He'd always been willing, even eager, to scoop up any child that came up to him, though, bouncing it, making faces to make it laugh, or tickling it.

That had been before the Nubiens had come to wipe out their colony, though. The light in his eyes had died that day and hate had taken its place.

What about Kiel and Baen, she wondered abruptly? Were they as filled with hope and expectation as Jalen was? Did it mean the same to them as it appeared to mean to him?

She realized she couldn't doubt Jalen's sincerity when he lifted his head and smiled down at her. "We thought you might be angry." He frowned. "You seemed angry."

She thought she still was, but she discovered she couldn't find the anger when she searched for it, just a growing sense of loss that she was struggling to keep at bay. She lifted her head and lightly kissed his lips. He returned the favor, nibbling almost playfully at her lips.

"You want sex?" he asked a little doubtfully.

"You don't?"

He grinned wryly and reached down to grasp his hard cock and thump her thigh with it. "He is always ready and eager," he said wryly. "I have been trying to convince him for years that it is a waste of time to stand up and look around when there were no warm, dark holes for him to explore, but he has a mind of his own."

Danielle chuckled. "I just happen to have a warm, dark hole. Isn't that convenient?"

He wagged his brows at her. "Do you?" he said in a purring murmur, settling his hand on her belly and delving a finger between her legs. "Is it here?"

Danielle wiggled. "A little lower."

"Here?"

"That feels like the place alright."

"Can I look at it?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Not at the moment. Why don't you slide that big fellow in and see how well he fits?"

He looked vaguely disappointed, but he obligingly moved between her thighs as she opened them for him, nudging the mouth of her sex. To her surprise, she discovered it was no easy fit despite the sense that her 'cup overfloweth'. She watched his face as he pumped slowly in and out, gaining a little ground each time until her flesh reluctantly admitted him fully. He squeezed his eyes tightly, pausing, panting slightly. "Gods! This feels so good, Danielle. Does it feel as good to you?"

Her belly clenched with the pleasure of feeling him deeply inside of her and his words of praise. She didn't know, but it felt damned good to her. "It feels ... like you're part of me and that feels wonderful."

His expression twisted. He let out a pained breath, shuddering all over. Abruptly, he began to move, long, slow strokes at first and then with faster, shallow pumps of his hips with his cock deeply inside of her. Her body rose to the challenge, fire igniting at her core and building to a blaze.

She forgot that she'd instigated sex simply to please him as she felt her own pleasure rising, climbing, felt her body gathering to take the leap. As bountiful as her bliss was when she came, though, it was almost more pleasure to feel him come inside of her.

"You have a magical cock," she murmured with a mixture of pleasure and teasing praise.

He looked confused, but he chuckled dutifully. "This is good, yes?"

She managed a tired chuckle. "Yes. I guess you'll be dashing off now?"

He withdrew and settled beside her, grimacing. “Baen informed me that he had thoroughly pleased you and that you would have no need. He will come to see why I have stayed so long.”

He seemed in no great hurry to leave, though, and Danielle took the time to cuddle him appreciatively. “Did he?” she murmured with a weary spark of irritation she found almost as difficult to summon as it was to maintain.

“I thought Kiel would punch him in the face, but he merely scowled at him and told him he would kick his ass when there was time for it.”

Smiling inwardly, she kissed Jalen’s chest lightly. “This is a strange thing to me,” she murmured.

He tensed. “What is strange?”

She shook her head and yawned. “All of it. I haven’t figured it out yet.”

He almost seemed to shrug. “We have not figured out your ways either,” he said after a moment. “At least I have not. Mayhap Kiel grasps it better, but he is primary and I suppose that is understandable.”

“Primary?”

“Leader of the quad.”

“Quad?”

He shifted away to look at her curiously. “The mating quad.”

He said it as if she ought to understand. She didn’t, but she didn’t particularly feel like examining it at the moment.

“I am not even certain how it is that Kiel understands it, but it feels ... right. I think, mayhap, it is something one only understands when it happens.”

That was more than she could say. “You mean ... like instincts kicking in?”

“Yes, that is it! All this time we had wondered and worried that we would not know because we had not been taught, and then we discovered that our instincts were there to guide us.”

“Well, as long as that’s settled,” she murmured with disinterest. “Stay and take a nap with me?”

He seemed to wrestle with something and finally relaxed against her. “I will stay until you sleep. I like this.”

“Cuddling? It’s almost my favorite part, too.”

He was as good as his word. He held her until oblivion claimed her. She stirred toward consciousness, though, when she felt him move away. After debating briefly whether to get up and follow him back to the bridge, she decided against it. She couldn’t prevent the Nubiens from catching up by watching them and she was pretty convinced that Kiel was pushing the ship to its limits in speed.

It flickered through her mind to wonder why they hadn’t exactly rushed to their home world if it was so important to them, but it didn’t take a lot of searching to figure that out—they were stalling for time until they could convince her to have sex with them.

She frowned. Or waiting for the nanos to do their little trick?

That seemed more likely.

She tried to decide if she was still pissed off about it and discovered she couldn’t summon a lot of anger. Not that she wasn’t still angry! She just wasn’t *as* angry and ... well, it wasn’t the time to dwell on it.

It was almost romantic she decided. Well, she didn't suppose every woman would agree with that, but it seemed romantic to her that they'd been so determined to claim her and there was no doubt in her mind that they figured they'd made a conquest.

They'd conquered her ovaries, anyway, if she accepted what Gertrude had told her.

She realized she hadn't adequately considered that there could be a lot she still didn't know or understand about the Danu. She supposed she should have expected the unexpected, but the plain fact of the matter was that she'd decided she'd already discovered the full extent of their 'strangeness'.

Given what she had discovered, was it possible Jalen actually *had* managed to nail one of her eggs? With nanos involved, was there really any doubt? There didn't seem to be much they couldn't do.

She didn't want to think about having nanos. She would've been pissed off about that, too, except apparently they'd been there a while and she hadn't noticed the difference. It still made her uneasy. It was like having a ... disease of some kind floating around inside of her, even if their job was to prevent disease.

Shaking the thoughts off, she got up and headed into her bath, only to discover that she'd already used her quota. "Damn it!"

Releasing an angry huff, she considered it for a moment and finally stalked from her cabin to the bridge. "Who hasn't used their bath water quota yet?"

Kiel, Baen, and Jalen all turned to stare at her blankly.

She made a sweeping gesture with one hand toward her sex. "My cup runneth over here, damn it!"

"I have not," Baen said after a long, long moment.

"Thanks! I'll take yours. Which cabin?"

He got up and led the way. She knew she was in for it when he dropped his loincloth, but she decided to pretend she had no idea what he had in mind. Maybe if she ignored him he'd go away?

No such luck. The moment she stepped under the water to wet herself down, he joined her, planting a ham sized hand on either breast and spearing his cock between the cheeks of her ass. She turned the water off, grabbed the soap and slathered it all over herself, focusing mostly on the cleft between her legs.

Before she could turn the water on again to rinse off, he turned her, pressed her back against the wall and covered her mouth in a heated kiss. It actually felt very interesting to feel his skin slipping along her soapy flesh.

She lost interest, though, when he grabbed her and pushed her up the wall to mount her on his hood ornament. She was slippery enough he nearly dropped her. She flung her arms and legs around him to keep from getting dumped on the floor, but she was so soapy she was having problems 'sticking'. "My coochie is going to be sore," she muttered the moment he released her mouth from captivity.

He jerked his head back to stare at her. Confusion flickered in his eyes and then disappointment as he apparently made the connection. He studied her face a moment and finally released a heavy breath and loosened his grip.

Danielle sighed. Was it her fault he was disappointed? No! So why did she feel guilty about it? "It's ok."

He frowned. "It is not ok if it will hurt."

"I'll get over it."

He shook his head, but he offered her a reluctant grin as he settled her on her feet. "I will help you bathe."

And she was sure she'd be really, really clean when he was done! More likely he'd give her a fresh load of semen to squish between her legs the minute she washed off the previous deposits!

He surprised her. He did pay special attention to her breasts and her sex, but he helped her get all of the soap off. "How do you clean here?" he asked with interest, shoving his finger in the hole that they all found so fascinating.

"With great difficulty," she said wryly, then added hurriedly when he seemed determined to 'help', "just water. Soap is *not* good for that particular area."

He looked surprised, but, thankfully, he didn't try to fill it with soap and he was gentle in using his finger. She doubted it helped a lot, but it seemed to pacify him so she didn't complain.

"May I look at it?" he asked when he shut off the water and turned on the blow dryer.

She felt her face heat. "No!"

He frowned. "You allowed Kiel to look," he said a little petulantly. "You kicked me when I tried to look."

She studied him suspiciously, wondering if his reference to Kiel looking was from that first examination or the one just a short while before. Deciding finally that that was what he must mean since he'd also pointed out that she kicked him, she relaxed fractionally. "Fine. I don't know why you want to," she said testily.

He knelt down immediately and pushed her legs apart to study it. Rolling her eyes heavenward, Danielle let him examine her sex, resolutely closing her mind to the warmth that flickered through her at his light touches. He was fully aroused when he straightened again. The erection was a dead giveaway, of course, but his taut expression, the fevered look in his eyes and his labored breaths had a far more profound effect on her own libido. He met her gaze.

"You should stay on the bridge with us. We are nearing the wormhole."

Nothing could've more quickly doused her arousal. It didn't seem to have much effect on him, but that was his problem. At least, she tried to tell herself that there was no reason at all she should feel any guilt, any sense of loss, and certainly no uneasiness about leaving him in that state.

Chapter Nineteen

When she'd dressed and reached the bridge, Danielle discovered that she didn't need to see the blips on the radar to locate the Nubiens. They'd gained on their craft enough that she could see the ships in the rear viewer. Even as she settled in the jump seat and fastened her harness, she saw several bright flashes of light erupt from the lead craft.

"Shields!" she commanded Gertrude in automatic response.

Kiel flicked a glance at her. "They are still out of range. There is no sense in diverting power to the shields."

Danielle wasn't convinced. "Why are they firing then?"

Kiel shrugged. "Desperation? It seems logical to assume from their behavior that you were correct and we stumbled upon their home world—or at least a base they consider critical to them. They will have been monitoring our transmissions and no doubt believe if they can destroy the ship before we enter the wormhole that they can still preserve their secret location."

Danielle barely registered what he'd said. She was too focused on the photon missiles coming toward them. It wasn't until they exploded a short distance from the ship that she could focus on anything else. "How soon before they'll be in range, Gertrude?"

"Calculate twenty four minutes nine seconds at the current rate of speed of both crafts following the current course."

"Can they go faster?"

"Capabilities unknown," Gertrude responded.

"Unlikely," Kiel answered. "If they could have, they would have caught up with us before now, or at least closed the distance enough to bring us within range."

Danielle swallowed a little convulsively. "Can we go faster?"

"We cannot," Baen answered.

"We have already pushed the ship beyond estimated capabilities," Kiel said. "We cannot maintain this speed much longer without risk."

Danielle's heart lurched and adrenaline shot through her in a dizzying wave. "What are we going to do?"

Kiel flicked a questioning glance at Baen.

"We will reach the wormhole in nineteen minutes 30 seconds."

Danielle stared at Baen. "We've only got a couple of minutes lead time?" she asked faintly, trying to ignore the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. Despite the danger she'd known they were in, she realized she'd managed to convince herself that they could rendezvous with Federation ships before the Nubiens caught up to them. She didn't know whether they'd received any of the transmissions she'd had Gertrude send out, though. Even if they had, what were the odds that there would be any ships close enough to get to them in time?

"Two minutes seventeen seconds," Jalen corrected her in a soothing voice.

She glanced at him sharply, but she didn't find it the least bit comforting that they had a whole seventeen seconds more than she'd thought!

He shrugged. "Unless they gain on us before we enter the wormhole."

They wouldn't be able to close that gap once they were both inside the wormhole, but that wasn't much comfort either. If they could maintain their speed, they would leave the wormhole far enough ahead of the Nubiens that they might be able to gain a little distance, but even if they did, it wouldn't be by much.

The chances were slim that they could keep out of range long enough for anyone at all to arrive even if they were coming.

As insane as it seemed in some respects, she was abruptly fiercely glad that she'd spent what might well come to be some of her last moments of life making love with Kiel and Baen and Jalen. She'd been seeking comfort and distraction more than anything else. Pure animal lust would have been sufficient, but she realized it hadn't felt like that. They had made her feel important to them, not merely a vessel for their lust.

Her throat closed at the thought. The urge to tell them how she felt about it surged through her, but she was still struggling for words when she felt the ship abruptly begin to spin. Gripping the arms of her chair, she clenched her eyes tightly shut and focused on trying to stabilize her internal equilibrium. After a few moments, the dizziness gave way to a vague sense of nausea despite her struggle. Before it reached a point of true distress, however, the swirling sensation began to slow.

A burst of static from the speakers made her eyelids pop open reflexively, banishing the last of the sense of disorientation.

"... Dubois! This is Captain Etienne Dubois, serial number 500922, aboard the Federation fighter Sunbird Foxtrot 6 niner, niner! We're at the rendezvous. Where the hell are you, Danny?"

Danielle felt her chest swell with an explosive sense of excitement. Tearing off her harness, she raced to Jalen's communications console. "Etienne! We've got a pack of Nubiens on our tail! Thirty two warships. Please tell me you aren't alone!"

"I brought a few friends," he responded. "What's your ETA the rendezvous? We'll get a reception party ready."

Danielle glanced at Jalen questioning. "One minute"

"I have you on my scope!" Etienne interrupted before he could finish. "Coming to you, baby sister!"

Danielle felt her throat close. How long since she'd heard him call her that?

"Shields!" Kiel bellowed abruptly. "Get in your seat and get your harnesses on, Danielle!"

Danielle lifted her head to gape at him for a split second before her mind registered the urgency in his voice. Her body responded, however, before her mind caught up, and she scrambled toward her seat. She nearly missed it. A concussion wave struck the ship even as she turned to seat herself. Her tailbone came into painful contact with the arm instead of seat and then she tipped into it. "Leave the channels open!" she gasped, struggling to fasten the harness with the ship bucking from the blast.

"They have our range now. Laser! Short blasts!"

Danielle scanned the viewers for their attackers and discovered Kiel had executed a 180 degree and their ship was now facing the oncoming Nubiens. As she finally pinpointed them, a bright blast of light shot from their own ship. It blew up a missile coming straight toward them from the lead Nubien vessel and then impacted with the hull of the Nubien vessel. Their shields lit up, changed colors and then, abruptly, the Nubien ship disintegrated.

Danielle gaped at the ball of smoke and fire and the burning debris that scattered like fireflies from the center of the mass.

“Holy shit!”

She heard Etienne’s voice over the speakers echoing her sentiment. “Fuck! What the hell was that?”

Whipping her gaze from the oncoming enemy, she searched for the Federation vessels. Her heart nearly failed her when she saw there was only a half dozen fighters ranged on their side—not a squadron and not a single warship in sight.

Had they not picked up the transmissions after all? Why were so few fighters waiting? She couldn’t make any sense of it. She’d sent intel suggesting they’d found the home base of the Nubiens. Every ship the Federation could muster should’ve been waiting!

Had they simply dismissed her report?

They might never have the answer to that. They might not live that long, she thought fearfully, gasping in pure terror when she saw one of the fighters darting around them abruptly explode as a photon penetrated their defenses.

“Fuck!” Etienne exclaimed. “Marcos! Did he eject? Did anybody see?”

“Negative on that.”

“Negative you didn’t see or negative he didn’t have time to eject?”

Danielle didn’t stay to hear. Relieved that it hadn’t been Etienne, her mind leapt away almost instantly to the fact that none of them were suited up. If they took a hit, they didn’t have a chance in hell of surviving. It was doubtful they would anyway, but she didn’t see taking unnecessary risks. Throwing off her harness, she bounded out of her seat and raced down the corridor to collect full suits for the men and grab her own gauntlets and helm.

“Get in your suits!” she bellowed when she returned. “We may need them!”

Kiel, Baen, and Jalen all flicked frowning glances at her but none of them moved.

“Stay in your seat, gods damn it!” Kiel growled.

“Put on the damned suits!” Danielle yelled back at him. “It’s the only chance you have if the ship takes a hit!”

“Sit down and strap in!” Baen bellowed at her.

“Not until you put on the damned suits!” Danielle growled at him.

“Sit down and we will put them on,” Jalen said angrily, throwing his harness off and grabbing up one of the suits.

Relieved, Danielle complied. That time she didn’t make it to the seat, however. The ship took another hit that made it buck wildly, throwing her to the floor. Jalen snatched her off the floor and plunked her in her seat, grabbing the harness and securing it jerkily.

“Jesus!” Etienne exclaimed. “Where the fuck did *they* come from?”

Terror closed her throat even as Danielle whipped a look around to see the new threat. She stared at the ships flying up behind the fighters at an incredible rate, too stunned for several moments to recognize them.

“It’s the Danu!” she exclaimed abruptly. “Etienne! They’re friendlies!”

She might as well have saved her breath. By the time she managed to recognize them, they’d passed the fighters almost as if they were standing still and began firing on the Nubiens. She heard a ragged cheer go up from the men in the fighters as the two in the lead took out four of the Nubien ships in a matter of moments. In the space of a few heart beats, the Federation fighters and the dozen Danu ships that had joined them were engaged in a fierce space dogfight.

To her dismay, Kiel turned the ship they were in and drew back behind the lines.

“What are you doing?” she demanded in disbelief.

Kiel’s face tightened. “Removing our mate from harm’s way.”

Danielle gaped at him, blankly, unable to assimilate his reasoning. “Your ...? But we’re still outnumbered!”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he pulled their vessel beyond range of the fight and turned to watch the battle.

“Kiel!” Danielle exclaimed.

“I will not risk your life unnecessarily,” Kiel said in a steely voice.

Anger washed over her. “But ... everybody’s life is at risk, damn it! Mine isn’t any more important than theirs is!”

“It is to us,” Baen said tightly.

Danielle felt a flutter in her belly. It brought her mind abruptly to the babies Gertrude had told her were there—the babies she hadn’t consciously acknowledged could possibly be there. How safe were they, though, when the Nubiens were a threat to all human life—and evidently the Danu, as well?

A voice broke in to her thoughts. “I have more incoming on my scan!”

“Friend or foe?” Etienne asked sharply.

“Unknown It’s a Federation fleet!”

“Hallelujah!” Danielle exclaimed. “Better late than never!”

“Woohoo!”

“Take that you reptilian bastards!”

“You can run but you can’t hide anymore, motherfuckers!”

Danielle found herself grinning like an idiot as she listened to the men with Etienne. Her heart swelled with pride when she saw the Federation vessels coming toward them. A half dozen of the Nubien ships, she discovered, had broken off the battle and were racing back toward the wormhole as fast they could. The combined forces of Federation fighters with Etienne and the Danu who’d joined the battle, finished off the ships they were fighting and took off after them. They’d already disappeared from her sight with the Federation fleet trailing before the Nubiens reached the wormhole and vanished. Watching the screen in front of Baen, she saw the chase ships blink off the scanner one by one as they, too, disappeared into the wormhole.

“You and I are going to have a heart-to-heart when I get back, Danny!” Etienne growled.

Dismay flickered through Danielle at the ‘promise’. Obviously, it wasn’t going to be a pleasant reunion! She shook the thought off. “What do you mean ‘when you get back?’ We’re coming, too!”

“You are not,” Kiel said grimly. “We will take you to Marchet and then we will join the fight.”

“Now wait just a damned minute!” Danielle snapped. “I’m a soldier, too! And this is *my* fight!”

“It is our fight,” Kiel growled. “They threatened our mate!”

Danielle gaped at him with a mixture of disbelief and outrage.

“Listen to the man!” Etienne said tightly. “Mind your mate!”

“Mind my ... Mind your own damned business, Etienne! You’re my big brother, not my father!”

She didn’t know if he heard her or not. He didn’t respond and the last light on the scanner blinked out. Fuming when she realized that Kiel had accelerated the ship toward the

wormhole that led to Marchet, Danielle barely had time to brace herself for the trip through before they were in the grips of it.

They met up with a half dozen more Danu ships as they emerged, but Danielle was too furious to stay to listen to the communications between them even if she'd understood the Danu language. In any case, she didn't need to. She had a fair idea of what the discussion entailed—battle communications and she was excluded from the fight!

Throwing off her harness, she stalked to her cabin to sulk. She didn't realize she'd been hoping at least one of them would follow her so that she could have a rousing good fight and vent until she felt the damned ship landing and realized they weren't going to give her a fight. Baen appeared in her door while the sound of the engines was still loud in her ears. She didn't realize they'd landed until he'd escorted her to the airlock and lowered the gangplank.

It hit her abruptly that she hadn't even told them goodbye! "Wait!" she exclaimed. "I have to tell Kiel and Jalen goodbye!"

Baen hauled her up and headed down the gangplank without a word.

"Damn it, Baen! I wanted to talk to them!"

"You may speak with them when they return."

That caught her attention. She stopped struggling and reared up to look at him. "When they get back?" she echoed blankly.

"It is my honor and duty as your mate to stay and protect you."

"Oh, well shit! Don't stay on my account! There's no sense in you missing the battle, too!"

"Your safety is more important."

"Damn it, Baen! We're on Marchet! I think I'll be safe enough!"

His lips twisted in a wry smile. "My name is not 'damn it Baen'."

Danielle gaped at him and then scowled. "This no time for humor, damn it! We've got a chance to defeat the damned Nubiens once and for all! Everybody needs to be there!"

"We will defeat the Nubiens," Baen responded, all signs of humor vanishing.

"But *we* won't know it until it's all over with!" Danielle wailed, watching forlornly as the ship that had brought them to Marchet lifted off and quickly vanished from sight. "I want to be there! I want to help defeat them!"

"I would not want you at the midst of the battle if you were not carrying my seed, Danny," Baen said almost gently.

It was more than his tone that finally penetrated Danielle's distress, more than what he'd said. It was the fact that he'd used the affectionate name her brother called her by that caught her attention. "I won't know if they're safe! I'll go out of my mind worrying."

"They will be far safer if they are easy in their minds that you are safe."

The fight went out of her then. When she ceased to struggle, Baen lifted her and cradled her in his arms, against his chest. She released a heavy sigh. "I can walk, you know."

"Yes, but that would not give me the pleasure of carrying you."

She looped her arms around his neck and settled her head against his shoulder. "I must say this is a lot more comfortable."

"I will remember that the next time I must remove you from a place," he murmured, his expression lightening. "I will not promise that I can manage it if you insist upon wiggling and struggling, but I will try."

Danielle released an irritated huff. "As if it does any good at all to struggle!"

"Does that mean that you will acknowledge there is no point in fighting?"

“No.”

“I did not think so. I believe I would be disappointed if you did not.”

Danielle lifted her head from his shoulder and frowned at him. “Why?”

He shrugged. “You are rarely logical or reasonable, but I admire your ... tenacity.”

Danielle considered whether that was an insult or not and finally decided it was a compliment. She was still trying to think of a response when they entered the city and she realized Baen hadn’t headed toward the habitat where she’d stayed before. “Where are we going?”

“We are a quad now. We will take one of the habitats that was designed for a quad.”

“What *is* a quad anyway?”

He sent her a startled look. “A mating group.”

Her belly went weightless. Despite the fact that they’d been pretty damned vocal about their so called claims, *she* didn’t recall agreeing to any pact. Bring it up now? Or wait until all parties were present?

She actually didn’t care for the thought of waiting when it meant she was going to be outnumbered. On the other hand, it didn’t really appeal to her to fight three battles.

Truthfully, she didn’t feel up to *any* battle at the moment! She’d been thrilled almost speechless to discover Etienne had rushed to her rescue ... until it had been brought home that he had thrown his life into the breach! She knew she shouldn’t consider him more valuable than the lives of any of her fellow soldiers, but the fact remained that he was far more important to her.

It didn’t bear thinking on that he was out there, fighting for his life! Or that Kiel and Jalen were rushing to join the fight even now!

It was completely absurd to feel like they would be safer if she was there to protect them, but she couldn’t help that she felt that way either.

The habitat Baen took her to was a welcome distraction—not much of one, but something to focus on to help her try to control her emotions. It was a good deal bigger than the one she’d lived in before but beyond that it wasn’t very different. The layout of the ground floor was a mirror on the first, just larger. Upstairs, she discovered the main difference. It was divided into two huge rooms and had two full baths.

“Well, there’s lots of room,” she said, trying to infuse some enthusiasm into her voice for Baen’s sake.

He frowned, looking the place over. “The nursery is here ... for privacy.”

Danielle gulped, but merely nodded.

His frowned deepened. “It does not please you?”

“I didn’t say that!”

Something flickered in his eyes. “I see no pleasure in your eyes, no ... enthusiasm. You are ‘out of your mind’ with worry? Or the place does not suit?”

Danielle managed a faint smile. “They won’t have had time to catch up with the fleet yet. I’ll worry more when they *have* had time.” She hesitated. Why say anything at all when she wasn’t planning on staying?

The thought made her belly execute an odd little cramp. It spread to her chest, made it tight. A sense of loss followed it that was hard to ignore. *Was* she planning on staying?

“It doesn’t really look like a home,” she said finally.

Confusion flickered in his eyes. “This is a habitat.”

Danielle sighed. “A home is different.”

“How is it different?”

Danielle stared at him for a long moment and finally looked around again. "It's hard to explain. It's filled with" She stopped, frowning, trying to pin down exactly what was missing ... besides Kiel and Jalen. Abruptly, she felt like crying. She wasn't even sure why she felt like crying until it coalesced in her mind that the only thing missing *was* Kiel and Jalen. "Sounds."

He looked thoroughly puzzled.

Her heart seemed to turn over in her chest. Impulsively, she moved to him and cupped his face in her hands. "Never mind. I can make it into a home."

* * * *

"I believe that she is ... nesting," Baen responded a little doubtfully in response to Kaydn's questioning look.

"They are evolved from bird-like creatures?" Kaydn asked, more confused instead of less. "She does remind me of one, now that you mention it—very small but very quick."

Baen frowned, trying to decide if that was insulting to his mate or not and finally decided it was not, particularly when he had suggested it to begin with. "I do not know. Mayhap. I only meant that she is bent upon preparing for our young."

Kaydn looked envious but pleased. "How long do you think it will be before we will have our first off-spring?"

Baen definitely did not care for the note of possessiveness but he could not fight the entire Danu colony and they had decided that his quad's off-spring was more than merely a triumph for the Danu in general. They *belonged* to all. Shrugging it off with the reflection that they were bound to feel less possessive once they had found mates of their own and procreated, he focused on the question. "Manuta did not have that data. Logically, since they are complex organisms, we must assume that it will take many months of gestation. She does not know for she has not borne young before and, in any case, it is not likely that it will be the same as it would be if we were the same as she."

Kaydn nodded. "This is true. I am not certain that it would even help to know what is typical of the Danu when we are only half Danu."

Baen scowled at him. "We are *all* Danu!" he said pointedly. "It is immaterial that we are also cyborg. That part has nothing to do with the natural process of procreation."

Kaydn frowned at him for a moment and finally shrugged. "In a sense, you are correct, but we have nanos and natural born Danu do not."

"They will not interfere with the natural process," Baen said a little doubtfully.

Kaydn looked skeptical. "They have already interfered with the natural process in making your mate compatible so that you might each reproduce. I must say that this is a relief to know. I had planned to take a human female, as well. There would be no peace within the quad if only one might procreate at the time!"

Uneasiness slithered through Baen. He had been at pains to block it from his thoughts, and he could not say that it had disturbed him before that his human mate was so tiny. In truth, he had found her apparent delicacy very appealing, particularly when he had decided that it was merely her appearance. She was surprisingly strong and resilient for her size, he thought, unless of course it was her ferocity that made her seem so.

It was the niggling doubt that he was wrong and size did matter in this instance that worried him. He had found it so disturbing trying to imagine their three babes growing in her little belly, in fact, that he had worked hard to put it from his mind altogether.

She did not seem to be anxious and that comforted him some, but she had admitted that she had not borne a babe before—as if it was typical for them to bear only one! And he was not certain that he should feel comforted when it seemed obvious that it was only ignorance that gave her confidence.

Shaking it off when he saw that Danielle had decided that she was too impatient to wait for the server bots to carry her paint to the habitat, he surged forward to meet her and took the heavy container she was trying to carry. “I’ve got it!”

“I will carry it,” he said tightly. She smiled at him and the suspicion washed over him that she had fully expected him to do just as he had. “What color is this?”

“Pink. I’ve decided to paint the nursery pink.”

Baen frowned. “You already painted it yellow.”

Danielle waved her hands in the air. “Yes, but that’s just ... undecided, you know? It might be girls.”

Baen puzzled over that, trying to decide what the color had to do with it, but he could not find any logic in her reasoning. “Girls?”

“Females?” Danielle said a little impatiently.

Baen felt perfectly blank for a moment. Abruptly a sense of headiness swept over him. “They will be women?”

Danielle chuckled. “Not until they grow up.”

“We are having females?”

Danielle shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know yet. You know that.”

He frowned. “I am lost.”

Danielle grinned up at him. He felt his belly tighten—actually, his cock, as well, but that stayed hard most of the time. He was growing accustomed to it.

“When they finally get Manuta going again, I’ll get scanned and then we’ll know for sure ... If I’m far enough along by then to tell, anyway.”

Bemused, Baen merely stared at her for a long moment, trying to collect his thoughts. They had almost reached their habitat—home—when a sound above them caught their attention. Baen looked up as a ship pierced the clouds above them and then another until he could see a dozen. When he glanced around for Danielle, he discovered she’d taken off at a run toward the gate of the city.

Setting the bucket he was carrying down abruptly, he launched himself into a run to catch her. “Gods damn it, Danielle! Stop!”

She ignored him. Around them, everyone else had paused at their tasks to watch the approaching ships, as well. A man near the gate made a dive to catch her, however, and missed.

Baen leapt his prone form, landing almost on her heels. He managed to grab a fistful of her suit before she could elude him. She whirled on him, trying to pry his grip loose. “Baen! They’re back! Let go!”

He did, intending to get a better grip. A wave of cold swept over him when she eluded him and took off at a run again. He managed to hook an arm around her waist and snatch her off her feet the second time. He saw as he threw a glance at the ships settling toward the ground, however, that Danielle had correctly assessed the situation. The closest ship was Danielle’s modified craft.

He gripped her indecisively, wondering whether it would be better to take her back to safety anyway until they were certain of who was aboard.

“Baen! It’s them!”

“We do not know that!” Baen said tightly.

Danielle ceased struggling immediately and stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment before she glanced at the craft again. The gangplank was extended as she returned her attention to the ship. The hatch opened and a man with hair much the same color as Danielle’s stepped out.

“Etienne!” Danielle gasped and then screamed his name, wrestling Baen to get loose.

Reluctantly, he released her, jogging behind her as she ran toward the man. The man she had called Etienne opened his arms to her and she launched herself from the ground as she neared him and slammed against him.

“Etienne!” Danielle grasped, clutching him frantically. “God! I never thought I’d see you again!” She drew back, grinned at him and then kissed him all over his face.

Etienne chuckled, squeezed her tightly and then swung her in an exuberant circle before he set her on her feet. “Crazy! You nearly knocked me off my feet!”

Danielle laughed. “I think I might have broke something!” She noticed that Kiel and Jalen had come down the gangplank behind him just then, however, and pulled free of Etienne and rushed them, flinging her arms tightly around Kiel’s waist. “Kiel!”

He enveloped her in a tight embrace, lifting her up to nuzzle his face against her neck. She savored the feel of being held in his arms when she’d begun to fear he wouldn’t come back, but it wasn’t nearly enough. She turned her head against his in search of his mouth and felt a tidal wave of pure bliss roll through her when he covered her mouth with his own and kissed her deeply.

She would’ve been content to enjoy it longer if it hadn’t abruptly occurred to her that she hadn’t welcomed Jalen. Breaking the kiss, she smiled at Kiel and wiggled until he set her on her feet. Jalen, she discovered, was grinning at her a little shyly. “Come here, you!”

He chuckled, opening his arms to her as Etienne had and she hugged and kissed him as she had Kiel.

Etienne was watching her with an expression of disapproval when she finally pulled away. She stared at him for a moment and finally lifted her chin, narrowing her eyes at him.

“I didn’t realize things were quite this friendly,” he said coolly.

Danielle’s lips tightened. “Don’t start, Etienne!”

“I feel like beating your ass!” he growled, surging toward her abruptly.

Kiel blocked him. “I will not allow that,” he said in a low, threatening growl.

Uh oh! Man trouble! Despite her irritation with her brother, Danielle quickly moved around Kiel and stood between him and her brother. “We need to talk.”

“You’ve got a lot of explaining to do, baby sister,” Etienne said tightly, glaring up at Kiel.

“Don’t be a pain in the ass, big brother!” Danielle snapped. “They’re my quad, damn it!”

He sent her a shocked look ... as well he should! “Run that by me again?”

“Not here. When we get home,” she said with determined patience when she realized that they not only had the audience of the Danu already on the ground, but those returning and a number of humans who seemed to have accompanied them. She glanced up at Kiel and turned to slip an arm around his waist. “You’re going to love what I’ve done with the habitat.”

His expression was bemused but after glaring at Etienne again, he allowed her to draw him toward the city. Danielle looked back at Jalen, and held out a hand. Looking pleased, he hurried to catch up and grasped her hand in his.

“God! I’ve been going out of my mind with worry! You couldn’t have sent a message just to let me know you were alright?”

“She has been driving me out of my mind,” Baen said dryly. “She lost hers a while back.”

Danielle sent him a reproving look but chuckled.

Kiel glanced at Baen speculatively. “We sent many messages of assurance and also monitored your welfare.”

Danielle glanced from one to the other in confusion. “I didn’t get any messages.”

Irritation flickered in Baen’s eyes. “I told you that they were alright.”

“Yes, but ... that isn’t the same thing! I didn’t get any messages!”

“You did not because you cannot communicate as we can,” Kiel said gently. “You are human, not Danu, even if we are quad mates.”

“What the hell is a damned quad?” Etienne demanded.

“A mating group,” Danielle responded absently, leading the way inside their habitat as they reached it, grateful for the possibility of a little privacy at last.

Etienne, Kiel, and Jalen all halted as abruptly as if they had hit an invisible wall when they stepped inside. Etienne seemed to recover fastest. “My god! This place is huge!”

“We are large,” Baen said pointedly.

Etienne looked him up and down. “No shit? Not that I’d noticed,” he said dryly. “Who are you, anyway?”

Baen nodded politely. “I am Baen.” He hesitated. “Danielle’s second.”

“Second what?” Etienne demanded suspiciously.

“Etienne, please!” Danielle said irritably. “I know this is a shock, but”

“A shock?” Etienne said angrily. “Me and my buddies have been AWOL a solid month looking for you! I tried to talk them out of following me. I knew there wasn’t much chance that you were still alive, but they were hell bent and determined to come along if I was determined to go. I think I’ve got a right to be pissed off! And I think I’ve a right to know just what the fuck you’ve gotten yourself into here!”

Danielle studied him for several moments and felt her anger wane. “You aren’t glad that I’m alive?”

Etienne looked like she’d hit him. “How can you ask me that?”

Danielle moved to him and embraced him. “Well, stop yelling at me, then, alright?”

He tensed for a moment and finally hugged her back. His eyes were glassy with unshed tears when he finally pulled away and caught her face between his hands. “You’re all I have left! I thought I’d lost you!”

Danielle smiled up at him mistily. “I should’ve known you’d come running to rescue me.”

He grimaced, flicking a look at the men around them. “Do you need to be rescued?”

It took Danielle a moment to grasp the underlying threat. “I don’t,” she said firmly. “If you’d asked me that a month or so ago, I would probably have said yes, but I’m right where I want to be.” She grinned at him abruptly. “You’re going to be an uncle.”

He looked perfectly blank. A look of revulsion flickered across his features. “Danny”

“Don’t! Don’t say it! Don’t even think it! I want these babies, Etienne. I ... I need you, too. Don’t make me choose between you and my ... family.”

Anger suffused his cheeks with color. He sent a hard look at Kiel, Baen, and Jalen. “You aren’t just saying that ...?”

“I’m saying it because I care about them.” She looked at Kiel. “I love them.” She smiled at Baen and Jalen. “All of them.”

“They’re ... aliens,” Etienne said in a harsh undertone. “Not that I don’t appreciate what they’ve done for the Federation! Or for me! I’d be dead now if it weren’t for them. The god damned Nubiens shot my ship out from under me and they pulled me in. Gratitude only goes so far, though, Danny!”

“You’re wrong if you think this is just gratitude! You think I can’t tell the difference?”

“Can you? They rescued you ... kept you here. Captives have a way of indentifying with their captors when their life depends on it.”

Danielle studied his face and finally moved away from him to settle on the closest couch. She’d had a second made as well as several comfortable chairs. Etienne followed her, glancing at Kiel, Baen, and Jalen as they settled on the opposite couch, and then planting his butt on the low table between them, effectively blocking her view of them. “I think you need some time away from here to think this over.”

“It isn’t going to change the way I feel, Etienne.”

“So there’s no harm in it, right?”

Kiel jolted to his feet. “She is breeding.”

“Yeah? But what is she breeding?” Etienne growled.

Danielle punched him in the shoulder. “These are my babies, damn it! Don’t you dare say things like that about them!”

“Ouch!” Etienne rubbed his arm. “Damn it, Danny!”

“We aren’t going to get along at all if you won’t at least *try* to be reasonable about this!”

Chapter Twenty

Danielle was more than a little horrified when she discovered she'd been so caught up in her personal concerns that she didn't find out that the general in command of the Federation forces had accompanied the Danu that had returned until the following day. Not that the return of the conquering heroes hadn't been a mixed blessing all the way around. As thrilled as she'd been to see all of them and examine them to be sure they were strong and healthy and hadn't come to any lasting harm from their adventures—she'd *really* given Kiel, Baen, and Jalen a thorough examination and it had been just as delightful as she remembered!—Etienne's less than enthusiastic reception to her news had made her unhappy.

Even her personal problems paled beside the news about the general, though, and she was quaking in her boots when she presented herself to him.

He'd been assigned to one of the soldier's habitats, which should have made the meeting seem more informal and less intimidating but didn't. When she'd been admitted by his adjutant, she discovered that the general himself was every bit as intimidating as his rank. An older man, the hair near his temples was graying, but he was tall, broad shouldered, hard faced, and looked about as yielding as a stone statue.

"At ease, soldier," he commanded abruptly when she'd saluted.

She assumed the correct posture, feeling uneasiness slither through her under his piercing gaze. "You'll need to be debriefed, of course, Captain Dubois, but I'd like to hear the story directly from you."

Danielle didn't actually like the fact that he'd referred to her experiences as her 'story'. It seemed to imply that he expected a pack of lies, but she composed her thoughts and gave him as concise an account as she could.

He said nothing for several moments after she'd finished. "Was it your idea to ally the Danu with us? Or theirs?"

Danielle sent him a sharp glance, debated briefly and decided to be as honest as possible. He didn't look like the sort of man who would have trouble detecting lies. "I suggested it, Sir."

"Purely out of curiosity—what prompted the idea?"

Danielle looked at him uncomfortably. "Initially it was prompted by a desire to get home, Sir. My ship was ... gone. They'd taken it apart to study it after I crashed. After living among them for a time, I came to understand that they could be motivated to aid us in our cause with the right incentive."

The general frowned. "It did not occur to you that it could seriously jeopardize the safety of the Federation of planets?"

Danielle felt the blood leave her face. "It did, Sir."

"And yet you still decided to play politics?"

The blood surged back with a vengeance. "I'm only one person! I couldn't stop them from doing anything they set out to do, Sir! I thought it best to make friends, particularly when Manuta ordered them to take me back to my people ... Sir!"

"You could have refused to lead them back!"

Danielle's lips tightened. "I didn't offer to lead them back to start with, Sir! As I said, they disassembled my craft. They had all the information they needed to reach the Federation with or without my help."

"They would not have been able to retrieve classified information from your craft's computer, soldier, if you had not landed it in their midst!"

Danielle flinched. The truth was she'd done her best to land it, but she'd thought the place was inhabited by primitives! How was she to have guessed they were so advanced? "I crashed, Sir. I had no reason to believe that they were advanced enough to breach my ship's security, but that's beside the point. I crashed. Under any other circumstances the security would have been protected by that alone."

"You may be certain that this matter will be thoroughly investigated, Soldier."

"Yes, Sir!" Despite the fact that the interview had been even worse than she'd expected, Danielle relaxed fractionally, certain she would be dismissed.

"I understand that you have formed some sort of partnership with these aliens. You know of course that this is also against regulations and grounds for discharge if not a court martial given the fact that it took place while we were at war?"

Were? "We aren't at war anymore?" she asked without thinking.

"That wasn't the question."

"No, Sir. Yes, Sir! I understand." She hesitated. "I might as well admit, now, that I'm unfit for duty."

He frowned. "Unfit?"

"Pregnant," she said baldly.

He looked as appalled as Etienne had and she felt anger surge to life for the first time. "By an alien?"

Her lips tightened. "My Danu partners ... Sir."

He was silent for so long it took all she could do to maintain her posture and not shift with the uneasiness she felt.

"Were you raped?"

Danielle felt her face turn fiery red. "No, Sir."

He mulled that over. "You were aware they had removed your birth control device and you still ... indulged?"

"They didn't remove the device," Danielle corrected him, but she wasn't about to tell him what *had* happened. "It failed."

"I'm going to be frank, I don't want to air our dirty laundry here, in front of our new allies, but it's very likely that both you and your brother will be facing charges once we return to headquarters. At the very least, you will be discharged."

Danielle felt the blood leave her face. "Yes, Sir!"

"Dismissed!"

Saluting, Danielle turned and left. She had reason to be grateful for her training. She wasn't certain she could've maintained her dignity otherwise. She'd thought that she would have time to compose herself before she reached the habitat again. She might have, but she didn't get the chance. Kiel, Baen, Jalen, and Etienne were all laying in wait when she emerged.

"That bad, huh?" Etienne said as soon he saw her face.

Danielle flicked a quick look at her quad. "We can discuss it back at the habitat."

She thought for several unnerving minutes that they were going to charge inside and She didn't want to think what they had in mind. The moment she struck off toward the habitat, though, they fell into step around her.

"We are in so much trouble!" she exclaimed as soon as they'd entered the habitat. "My god, Etienne! I didn't know you were serious when you said you'd gone AWOL! What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking my little sister needed me and they refused to extend the damned search!" She shook her head at him sadly. "He's talking court martial—for both of us."

"What is this court martial?" Kiel demanded immediately.

Danielle winced. The general had made it clear he didn't want to 'air their dirty laundry'. Well, she decided, he could kiss her ass! It wasn't a military secret and they were her family!

"Jail time," Etienne said morosely. "Jesus! This is a fucking mess—not but what I expected it myself, but I'm damned if I can figure out what they mean to charge you with!"

Danielle sent him a significant look.

"You dumb ass! Don't tell me you told them about the triplets?"

Danielle's lips tightened. "He'd already heard it. I didn't deny it."

"Well, hell, Danny! Did you tell them about the buns, too?"

Danielle shrugged irritably. "It isn't like I could've kept it secret, damn it! Anyway, I was planning on using it to request a discharge."

"Except now they know and they might demand an abortion! You should've kept your mouth shut until it was too late for them to consider that!"

Danielle suddenly felt faint. Apparently it was obvious. Kiel scooped her up and carried her to the couch. "What is abortion?"

She winced. She didn't want to tell him, not when they were already so obsessed about the babies. There was no telling what they might do!

"Remove them," Etienne said helpfully.

"Etienne!" Danielle gasped, horrified.

"Is this true?" Baen demanded.

Danielle stared at him unhappily. "I told you I couldn't consider finding a mate or having a baby!" she said crossly.

"You did not say that they would put you in jail or that they would remove the babies!" Kiel growled angrily.

"Because I didn't expect it to happen, damn it!" Danielle snapped and then burst into tears.

"I will kill him," Jalen said, turning abruptly and stalking toward the door.

"I am primary!" Kiel informed him. "I will kill him."

"Oh god!" Danielle exclaimed, leaping up from her seat and rushing to beat them to the door and bar it. "You can't do that! It would ruin the alliance!"

Kiel studied her a long moment. "We will kill all of them and say they died in battle," he said decisively.

"That's not a solution!" Etienne shouted angrily. "He's the head of the entire Federation forces! That'll just make a bigger mess than we've already got!"

Kiel, Baen, and Jalen turned to look at him.

"I am the leader of the Danu," Kiel said coldly. "I will not make an alliance under these circumstances. I will make war."

“But I don’t want you warring with my people!” Danielle said plaintively. “That’s why I talked you in to making an alliance to start with!”

Kiel looked at her curiously. “I thought that you suggested it so that we would take you to your home world.”

Danielle stared at him unhappily. “That was part of it,” she admitted. “But I care about my people! I wouldn’t have joined the service if I hadn’t!”

“You know, he has a very good point,” Etienne said thoughtfully.

“What point?” Danielle demanded angrily.

“They’re powerful allies. The president will want to form an alliance. He could speak to him about a pardon for us when he goes to the meeting.”

“What is a pardon?” Kiel demanded.

Etienne stared at him blankly.

“They haven’t learned anything about us except what they found in Gertrude’s data banks,” Danielle said a little defensively and then turned to Kiel. “What he’s saying is that, even if we’re tried in a court and found guilty, the president can issue a pardon ... and they’d let us go.”

Kiel frowned. “But they would put you in a jail until then?”

“Probably,” Danielle said glumly, then added hurriedly. “I’d be fine, though. They just lock you up in a small cell and feed you awful food and make you wear ugly jumpsuits.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Etienne said dryly. “It’s hell, but she can handle it. Me and my buddies will be there, too. We can take care of her—make sure she doesn’t get hurt.”

“We are her quad mates,” Baen said tightly. “It is our duty and honor to protect her.”

Etienne gaped at him blankly for a moment before anger hardened his features. “Well, I’m her big brother, god damn it! And it’s *my* place to take care of my little sister!”

“Don’t start that, Etienne!” Danielle snapped. “We’re mates and he’s right and you know it! You wouldn’t appreciate it if some other man thought he could take better care of your woman, would you?”

Etienne subsided, but he was still pissed off. “I’m not ‘some’ other man. I’m your brother—your blood,” he muttered.

“And I love you.” She smiled coaxingly. “You’re my favorite brother.”

A reluctant smile curled his lips. “I’m your only brother.”

“It’s a good plan,” Danielle offered.

Kiel nodded. “I will go and speak to your general.”

Relieved, Danielle hugged him tightly. “Just don’t set his back up!”

He looked blank.

“Make him angry.”

His lips curled but it looked more feral than friendly and it made Danielle uneasy.

* * * *

Kiel studied the man they referred to as the general when he was escorted into his presence and introduced. The man smiled with his lips, but not his eyes. His eyes were sharp and assessing as he extended a hand. Kiel examined the hand held out to him. The palm was broad, the hand strong, but the skin was soft. He was a man who had not used his hands in combat for a long time even if his bearing and his build suggested that he was still a strong soldier.

Realizing after a moment that the hand had been extended in some sort of gesture that was their custom, he extended his own and grasped the man's hand. The hand that curled around his was indeed strong, warm, and the general tightened it very deliberately to apply pressure.

A show of strength, Kiel deduced, tightening his own hand in return, just enough to convince the man that *he* had not grown soft, not enough to crush the bones. The man winced, released his hand, and surveyed him speculatively.

"Kiel of Manu?" he murmured, as if to himself. "Captain Kiel?"

"Yes."

The man frowned, as if turning the name over in his mind and finally sent him another look. "Curious that you don't seem to have an echelon of military leaders—only captains and, I suppose, privates. You're the leader of the ... uh ... Danu?"

The question was meant to imply he was of lesser status than the general. His tone and attitude made the anger Kiel was holding inside that much harder to control, but he had no intention of giving away his feelings on the matter. He kept his expression carefully neutral. "I am first captain of first platoon of the first colony."

The general frowned. "So that's a rank of sorts superior to the others?"

"To be first of the first of the first—yes—for many years now I have held that place. We prove our place among our people by strength, agility, cunning, intelligence, and leadership."

The general reddened slightly at the intentional insult, proving he wasn't too vain and filled with self-importance to also be stupid. His lips tightened, but he nodded, keeping his own expression as carefully neutral as Kiel had. "I haven't had the chance before but, on behalf of the Federation, I wish to extend our profound thanks for your aid in the late conflict with the Nubiens. We are very grateful and hope that a friendship begun on such auspicious terms can continue. You will come with us when we leave to discuss an alliance between your people and ours with our leader, President Monroe?"

"That was my intention when I invited your people here as guests of the Danu."

The general's brows rose. He chose his words with great care. "I'm afraid that I'm no politician. I'm a military man and always have been. Our cultures are very different and it's almost inevitable that there will be minor misunderstandings. If any of the men have offended in some way ...?"

"You spoke with my mate, Captain Danielle."

Surprise flickered in his eyes and then his face reddened in anger. "Captain Dubois? She's a citizen of the Federation and a soldier. I'm afraid discipline issues within our military will have to remain under my purview. You do understand? You will expect to continue to discipline your own people even with the alliance."

"My people are disciplined. They require no punishment."

That comment took the general completely off guard and for a split second Kiel saw his true feelings—hate and fear and contempt. He forced a chuckle. "Well, that is unprecedented! And most fortunate for the Danu! Unfortunately, as well trained as my soldiers are they tend to step out of line from time to time. There are rules for a reason and they are well aware of it. It isn't as if Captain Dubois was unaware that she had breached protocol—not that that's an excuse. Ignorance of military policies only means a contempt for them and no attempt made to memorize, or follow, the rules."

"Captain Danielle is my mate. She is no longer a soldier of your militia or a citizen of your people. She is a citizen of Marchet of the Danu and she is carrying my off-spring. I will take it as an insult to both me and my people if you persist in punishing her for becoming my

mate and the mother of my off-spring. I will also take it as an unfriendly act on your part if you persist in punishing her brother and his buddies for searching for her as her protection is of the utmost importance to me.”

The general looked enraged for several moments but to his credit he managed to contain his temper. It made Kiel’s anger rise another notch as it occurred to him to wonder if the general’s temper was not the reason Danielle had looked so shaken after she had spoken to him, to wonder if it was more than the threat of punishment by jail. “That is plain speaking indeed!” the general said, pacing away from him and turning once more to study him.

Kiel allowed his lips to curl slightly in a false smile. The man felt threatened and he wanted to put more distance between them. It was clear enough that the general had no idea he had given that much away, but had reacted instinctively. “It is our way to speak plainly and truthfully.”

And not the way of Danielle’s people. Everything the general had said, every gesture, was either empty or a lie. He was not friendly. He was not grateful. He was resentful that the Danu had helped them to defeat the Nubiens when he had not managed it without their help. If he was a representative of her race, then they could expect to be hated and feared but never accepted by them, he realized.

Even Danielle’s brother But he realized that Etienne had been honest. He had not tried to hide his concern over his sister, his possessiveness, or his fear for her. When they had pulled him in to their ship after his own had been destroyed, he had been grateful, wary, but open to friendliness.

And Danielle—she could not hide the way she felt. It was not in her nature to be deceptive. Even when she tried, she failed, because everything that she thought and felt shown through her expressions and in her eyes.

Mayhap he was wrong after all and they would find friends among the humans?

The general smiled abruptly, a toothy baring of teeth that was as false as the respect and friendliness he had tried to convey. “This is irregular, but I will speak to the president about your concerns. I’m sure something could be worked out.”

Distrust instantly rose within him, but Kiel relaxed fractionally and nodded. The general did not want to make any concessions, but he would because he was afraid and he knew their leader would not want the Danu as enemies. They would have an uneasy alliance, at best, with the humans—at least those in power—but he thought, if Etienne and Danielle were anything to go by, there was a very good chance that they would also find friends and mates. “Thank you.”

* * * *

As Kiel had guessed, the human president of the Federation, Monroe, had been no more pleased at Kiel’s demands regarding Danielle, her brother, and his friends, who had helped Etienne search for her, than the general had been. By the time they had settled to discuss an alliance, however, the war against the Nubiens was truly ended and they both knew that the victory was due to the help of Danu. Reluctant or not, Monroe had ordered all charges dropped and that all involved be issued a discharge from service.

Kiel had had mixed feelings about that, particularly when he realized that the discharge itself was apparently insulting to Danielle and the others, but no one, including him, had seen any point in belaboring the issue. They were released from both obligation and charges and it seemed the best any of them had hoped for even though Kiel felt that they deserved commendations for their part in helping to defeat the Nubiens in the last major battle.

Etienne and his friends had decided a 'vacation' was in order while they considered what they would do as civilians and had accompanied the delegation of Danu back to Marchet, which had pleased Danielle immensely and, therefore, had also pleased him.

He was watching Etienne and his human friends exhibition of hand-to-hand combat several months later when a strange feeling swept over him, almost like weakness. Fear and pain exploded through him behind it and he jerked his head up abruptly, meeting Baen's gaze. He saw the same fear in Baen's eyes. "Danielle!" he said abruptly, thrusting the men surrounding him out of his way and beginning to run from the practice field toward the city.

Baen and Jalen raced to catch up with him.

"What is it?" Etienne bellowed, staring after them in puzzlement and growing alarm.

"Danielle!" Jalen called back to him without pausing.

Etienne turned to look at the men around him blankly and then abruptly took off after them. As long as his legs were, he trailed them all the way without making any appreciable gain on them. It occurred to him to wonder how they knew something was wrong with Danielle, but he finally decided they must have heard something he hadn't. They seemed in a blind panic and there wasn't much that shook them—in fact, it was the first time he'd ever seen them fazed by anything.

That realization sent a sharp stab of fear and adrenaline through him that boosted his flagging strength. They'd disappeared when he raced through the city gates, but he didn't waste time looking for them. He knew they'd headed straight for the habitat.

He skidded to a halt when he burst inside. Danielle was curled up on the floor and Kiel, Baen, and Jalen were all frozen, looking as if someone had switched them off.

"What is it?"

There were tears on Danielle's face. "They're coming!"

A wave of cold washed over Etienne. "So soon?"

Danielle burst into tears as if he'd confirmed her worst fears. "It's too soon, isn't it?"

"Shit! Fuck! Damn!" Etienne exclaimed in a panicked, mindless litany, trying to recall the term of gestation. "I don't know! Let's get you up!"

Even as he surged toward her, Kiel dropped to a crouch and very carefully placed one arm beneath her shoulders and one beneath her hips. She cried out when he lifted her from the floor and he nearly dropped her. "Oh! It hurts! Oh god! It hurts!"

Kiel sent Etienne a look of horror as if he had no idea what to do with her once he'd picked her up.

"Upstairs. Let's get her into a bed where she'll be more comfortable," Etienne said, trying to gather his wits.

Kiel had already set one foot on the lowest stair before it occurred to him that taking her upstairs might not be the best idea. "Wait!"

Kiel froze and turned to look at him. Etienne surveyed his white face and the blind panic on Baen and Jalen's faces and realized he was on his own. "Doctor?"

Kiel blinked and looked at the others for an answer.

"Medic?"

Something flickered in their eyes. "Tech?"

Etienne gaped at Baen when he made the suggestion. "Are you out of your fucking mind? She needs medical attention, god damn it!"

"To bear the off-spring?" Jalen asked blankly, then added hesitantly. "Is it not ... natural?"

“They will come out when they are ready, yes?” Baen asked, hope threading his voice.

Etienne ground his teeth together but after one look at Danielle’s face decided not to inform the fucking idiots that ‘nature’ usually required assistance and babies didn’t always wait until they were ready. “Never mind! Upstairs!”

Baen and Jalen nearly knocked him down as they stampeded up the stairs so closely on Kiel’s heels that they nearly tripped him up. Kiel whipped his head around and snarled at them when he managed to regain his balance. Even in his own state of panic the growl unnerved him, sounded more like a beast than a man. “Cut it out!” he snapped. “You’ll scare the piss out of her.”

“She has already pissed,” Jalen said.

“That’s her water, stupid!” Etienne snapped. Didn’t they know anything about babies?

“I said that it was her water,” Jalen responded indignantly.

“The water the babies Never mind! Just get her on the bed.”

He jolted to a halt when he saw the bed. “Good fucking god! What the hell? Never mind! Don’t tell me! I don’t want to know.”

Kiel set Danielle gently on the bed, swiveled at the waist and punched Jalen in the face. “It is the water the babies float in, stupid!” he snarled.

Danielle sat up. “Don’t hit him!”

“Behave or get out!” Etienne snarled before he thought better of it. Kiel, Baen, and Jalen instantly raced for the door and began to fight over who was leaving first. “Get back here, god damn it! I’m not doing this by myself!”

The three men halted, turned to look at him and then at Danielle.

“It cannot take more than two. I will wait downstairs,” Baen volunteered.

“Me also,” Jalen seconded him.

“Cowards!” Kiel snarled.

Baen narrowed his eyes at him. “You are primary, motherfucker! It is your duty and honor”

Kiel punched him hard enough he flew backwards through the door. Etienne heard the dull thuds as he rolled down the first couple of stairs. Fully expecting him to charge back in as soon as he picked himself up, he strode to the door, caught Jalen’s arm, shoved him out, and slammed the door. “It’ll be quieter anyway,” he muttered.

Danielle had curled into a fetal position holding her stomach and groaning when he reached the bed again and looked down at her helplessly. Feeling a little faint, he crouched down and brushed her hair from her cheek. “How long has it been, baby?” he asked soothingly.

Danielle opened her eyes and looked at him fearfully. “Six months. That isn’t long enough, is it?”

He didn’t think so, but he didn’t want to tell her. Kiel crouched beside him and settled his hand on her belly, frowning. “They are ready,” he said after a moment.

Danielle looked at him so hopefully and trustingly that Etienne didn’t have the heart to contradict him. “Obviously. They wouldn’t be coming now if they weren’t ready,” he said bracingly. He hoped to hell they were ready because as little as he knew about the process, it seemed obvious that she couldn’t carry them when her water had broken. That could only mean that the protective sack that surrounded the babies had ruptured. He hoped it didn’t mean anything bad that there was blood mixed with the water.

He should’ve considered, before, that he hadn’t seen a damned doctor or medic since he’d arrived, but it wasn’t something he thought about until he needed one!

Glancing at Kiel, he jerked his head and then straightened and moved to the door. When Kiel joined him he glared up at the man. “You stupid son-of-a-bitch! Why the fuck didn’t you tell me you didn’t have any doctors? I would’ve sent for one or gone and got one! If she dies”

Kiel paled. He lifted his head and stared at Danielle for a long moment. “She will not die,” he said tightly and moved away from Etienne.

To Etienne’s consternation, he climbed onto the bed behind her and wrapped his arms around her. Slowly stroking her stomach with one hand, he lifted the other and placed his splayed hand along the side of her head. It seemed to calm her or Etienne would have dragged the bastard away from her.

“The pain stopped,” Danielle said after a moment, surprise and anxiety mingling in her voice. “At least—not entirely, but it isn’t so bad now.”

Etienne’s heart nearly stopped. Lifting a shaking hand, he placed it on the huge mound of her stomach. Relief went through him when he felt the muscles contract and her belly turn as hard as stone. He flicked a look of surprise at Kiel. “You’re an amazing man, Kiel of Manu,” he said appreciatively. “How did you ...? Never mind!” He straightened. “You need to help her get undressed. The bed’s ... uh ... wet. Where I can I find more sheets?”

Relieved to have something to do that felt useful, he left Kiel to help her undress and bellowed down the stairs for sterile water. Jalen arrived with a glass of water just about the time he finally found the sheets he was looking for. “What the fuck is that for?”

“You asked for water,” Jalen said stiffly.

“Sterile water, god damn it! Not something to drink.”

Jalen looked blank. “What do you need sterile water for?”

“How the fuck would I know? They always use it, though, to make sure everything is clean. We’ll need something to cut the umbilical,” he added abruptly as the thought dawned on him. “And something to pinch the chord until we can tie a knot in it!”

Thankfully, Kiel had helped her undress and covered her with a blanket by the time he returned. She was shivering, her teeth chattering uncontrollably. It scared the hell out of him. He was sweating himself, but he finally decided he was over-warm from nerves and running around. “Holy shit!” he exclaimed when he leaned over her to slide the dry pad he’d made of the sheet under her hips. “I see a head!”

Kiel sat up instantly, shoved him out of the way and put his head between her legs. “It is mine!”

Etienne glared at him, but he could see it was a wasted effort. Kiel’s expression made it clear his mind was elsewhere. “Stop breathing on him!”

Kiel focused on his face and glared back at him. “He will know my scent!” he said indignantly. “It is to soothe him!”

“Ok, now that’s just god damned weird! I think you’re supposed to push or something,” he instructed Danielle.

She held her breath, rising upward as she pushed and the baby slipped out of her and onto the sheet. He stared at the tiny, wiggling, bloody thing struggling with a rising sense of panic.

“It isn’t crying,” Danielle gasped.

Kiel reached toward the baby, stroking his index finger along its chest and the infant sucked in a breath, coughed, and then its tiny nostrils quivered as if it was sniffing the air. It sneezed and a reluctant smile curled his lips.

A jolt went through Etienne as it turned its head toward Kiel. It wasn't near the shock he got, however, when the baby began wiggling and flailing its arms as if trying to roll onto its belly.

Kiel chuckled. "He is eager to explore," he murmured, gently rolling the baby onto its back again. "Be still, little one."

"Is it alright?" Danielle gasped fearfully.

"Uh ... it seems to be," Etienne said doubtfully. It looked damned little to him. Granted, he wasn't used to looking at newborns, but it looked really, really tiny, especially considering the size of its father.

Fear clouded Danielle's eyes when he met her gaze.

"It is strong and healthy," Kiel murmured, stroking the baby's tiny head with his fingertips.

"It isn't crying," Danielle said doubtfully.

"Because he knows me," Kiel said in a rumbling voice. "He knows that he is safe."

Baen and Jalen poked their heads in through the door. "We have gathered the things you asked for," Baen volunteered.

Spotting the baby, Jalen pushed Baen out of the way and moved to the foot of the bed. Kiel lifted his hand in demand, studied the knife and clamp with annoyance for a moment and finally used them to cut the baby's umbilical. Etienne felt a little queasy and more than a little uneasy about Kiel's ministrations, but it either didn't bother the baby or he was too weak to cry. He wasn't certain which.

When he'd knotted the umbilical close to the baby's belly, he scooped it up into his hands and carried it to his chest. Danielle watched him worriedly, but Jalen brought them back to the birthing process still in progress. "There is a head ... I think. It is hairy."

Etienne sent him a sour look. "Of course it's the head!"

It was smaller than the first but more agile. It began rotating its hips to roll over the moment it fully emerged. Lifting its bobbing head, it flared its nostrils. Jalen moved closer. The tiny nose wrinkled and it began making the same coughing sound the first baby had.

Etienne frowned. It didn't actually sound entirely like a cough.

Baen surged forward, shoving Jalen out of the way and leaning close to the baby. A broad grin lit his features. "It is mine."

Dumbfounded, feeling a bizarre sense of unreality, Etienne gaped at him. "You are shit ...?"

As Kiel had, Baen waited until the afterbirth was delivered and tied its cord and then lifted it to his chest.

It was eerie and damned weird as far as Etienne was concerned, but he couldn't see that either of the babies looked as if it was in distress. Their color was good and they seemed damned lively for newborns.

"Mine is coming now!" Jalen said excitedly. His smile fell as he studied the top of the head. "It has no hair."

Etienne elbowed him in the ribs. "It's beautiful."

Jalen beamed at him. "It is? I cannot see the face," he added, frowning.

Etienne rolled his eyes and shot a significant look at Danielle.

Jalen stared at him blankly for several moments. "Oh! It is for her."

"Jesus! Sometimes you are dumb as dirt, Jay!"

Jalen glared at him but he was clearly too interested in watching his son delivered to take issue. As the other two had, this baby seemed to be sniffing and the moment Jalen touched it, it began to make the same coughing sound. “You are right! He is beautiful!” Jalen said with pride when he had tied his own son’s umbilical.

Kiel and Baen lifted their doting faces from their sons and glared at him, but Kiel dismissed his claim first and moved around the bed to present his son to Danielle. She looked heavy eyed with exhaustion, but she reached for the baby eagerly and carried him to her breast, studying his face and then his hands and feet. She grinned. “He’s so perfect!”

“And hungry,” Etienne agreed wryly, watching the baby as he nuzzled his way across Danielle’s neck and then down, searching frantically.

Chuckling, Danielle rolled onto her side as Baen brought his son to her, settling it on the bed. It rotated its hips immediately and rolled onto its belly.

Danielle gasped. “Did you see that?”

“I see it,” Etienne said neutrally, watching the baby ‘swim’ toward her, scooting on its belly and using its hands and feet to push itself close enough to latch onto the nipple the other baby hadn’t already laid claim to.

“I’ll be damned.”

Jalen carefully placed his infant next to the others. It immediately began to snuffle and search for a breast, reminding Etienne uneasily of newborn pups. He kept that to himself, however.

“They’re so tiny,” Danielle murmured worriedly, stroking the babies. “You sure they’re alright?”

Kiel crouched beside the bed. “They are better than alright. They are perfect.”

Danielle smiled back at him and then looked down at the babies again. “They need a bath ... and so do I.”

“I’m going to leave that to the doting fathers,” Etienne said hurriedly. Turning, he embraced each of the men, pounding their backs enthusiastically. “Congratulations! I don’t know how the fuck you did it, but I guess I’ll take your word for it that you’re all fathers.”

Danielle hid a smile at the look on her quad’s faces as Etienne hugged them. They all looked shocked, uncomfortable, and then vaguely pleased. They pounded his back as enthusiastically as he had theirs. Etienne winced, rolling his shoulders. “I think I’ll just go cough up blood now,” he said jokingly.

Danielle chuckled. Kiel, Baen, and Jalen all looked puzzled, but it was clear their minds were firmly on the newborns. Baen and Jalen beat him to the door and disappeared. Danielle settled her head on the pillow, watching the babies fight over her breasts and smiling at them. She looked up to see that Kiel was smiling at her. “What?”

He shook his head. “It feels ... strange. I do not know how I feel beyond I am ... happy.”

Danielle lifted a hand and stroked his cheek. “I love you.”

He sucked in a deep breath, expanding his broad chest. “Is that what I am feeling?”

Danielle chuckled. “I don’t know. You have to tell me. What does it feel like?”

He shook his head, frowning. “Many things together—excitement, fear, gladness. My chest feels ... tight. My heart ... it cannot decide whether to beat very fast or slow and it does both, kicking into my ribs painfully and then beating oddly.”

“I feel the same way whenever you’re around me.”

He swallowed convulsively. “This is what love feels like?”

“It feels like that and more—like ... everything is wonderful and life is grand and ... I would move heaven and earth and fight to the death to keep you and protect you and my sons.”

His eyes gleamed. “I loved you the very first moment that I found your phallus receptive.”

Danielle stared at him blankly for a moment, trying to decide whether to clobber him or kiss him. “You are such an ass!”

“But I love you,” he said, chuckling.

Jalen and Baen returned with cloths and a basin of water in time to hear him.

“I love her more,” Baen said, scowling at Kiel.

“I love her most!” Jalen snapped challengingly.

Kiel rolled his eyes. “Give me the water and take the fight outside.”

“But ... I must bathe my son!” Jalen objected.

“Mine first,” Kiel growled, prying his son from Danielle’s breast. The baby instantly let out an indignant wail and then sucked in a sharp breath and complained in a high pitched scream when Kiel plunked him into the water.

“Careful!” Danielle exclaimed. “My goodness he’s strong! Good lungs, too!”

“Yes,” Kiel said proudly. “He will be prime one day!”

Jalen and Baen exchanged a speaking look. Apparently deciding to ignore the provocation, they knelt beside the bed to admire their own sons. “My son is not as big and he is stronger,” Baen said.

Jalen slanted a narrow look at him. “He has hair like a sousa,” he muttered under his breath.

“Watch it!” Danielle said militantly. “That’s *my* son you’re talking about!”

Jalen sent her a look that was a mixture of apology and resentment.

“They’re *all* beautiful.”

Jalen grinned at her. “But mine is the most beautiful.”

“I love you, Jalen,” Danielle said with a chuckle.

“And me also,” Baen reminded her.

She sat up and kissed the tip of Baen’s nose. “And you, also.” She sighed blissfully when she settled against the pillows again. “Just so you know, you aren’t going to plunk me into a basin of water. I want a shower.”

“I will carry you,” Kiel said as he returned to the bed, wrapped his son carefully in one of the cloths Baen had brought and placed in the center. When he’d built a wall of pillows around the infant, he carefully lifted her from the bed.

All three infants were wailing indignantly by that time, demanding the breasts! Danielle sighed. “I guess we’ll have to repaint the nursery blue. Pink just doesn’t seem right.”

“They cannot see until their eyes are open,” Kiel informed her. “There is time. I do not see why we must paint it again, however. I like the color.”

The End