

Chapter One

Emmy could hear the commotion long before he burst through the doors of the euphemistically named "clinic" portion of what she fervently hoped would eventually become a hospital. He had possession—held horizontally at his waist by a large arm around hers—of a squirming, writhing individual who was wearing one of those awful outfits he'd always bundled her into—and if it hadn't been for the pitch of the muffled screams, she wouldn't have been able to tell that it was a female. The sight was reminding her uncomfortably of herself from not too long ago.

"What are you doing here, woman?" he scowled fiercely. "I thought I told you to stay in our room? I do not want you to be working in your condition—it might harm the babe!"

The others in the room were cringing away from him at the sound of his voice—all but the woman who was still hanging from his arm, she noted—and her.

She merely smiled up at him, patting her already much larger than to be expected belly. "You know perfectly well that I would do nothing that would endanger our child, Vaudt."

Noting that both his presence—as well as the disruption his baggage was creating—was making everyone in the clinic uneasy, she crooked her finger at him to follow her, leading them both into one of the few private examination rooms.

As soon as they were behind closed doors, Emmy said, "Put her down please."

He didn't move to obey her, not that that was unusual in the least, saying, "I would rather not. I would not risk your safety."

Emmy glared at him. "Please. She's barely as big as I am."

"Yes, but she is quite the little warrior." He edged a bit closer to her, although he still kept his burden well away from her. "She is Omega, my Emmy." His words were breathed in a manner that was close to a vow and were personally acquainted with the fact that Omega females were now considered to be the Holy Grail. "As such, I found her surrounded by men who were supposed to be raiding, but instead, had been caught by the scent of her. She killed two of my soldiers and her vicious bite avulsed the back of my second-in-command's hand. You will see him shortly, but I wanted to bring her here for you to examine, eventually, when I could bring you here and be assured of your safety, although, because you are here—*when you are not supposed to be*—I am now rethinking my decision."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, I can't do so when she's in that position, and I won't do so unless she consents to it."

There were some things he'd learned from her that were good and that she had wanted him to know. He could now dress a wound while maintaining a reasonably sterile field, and he had learned to treat her as more of an equal and less of a possession, although he didn't always get that one right; it was a work in progress. He was also learning to read, although, with the way the world had turned out, there was much less of a need for him to do so, and she knew that he thought it was a bit of a waste of his time. But she and Hinda, his mother, both encouraged him to do it, and so he was, however grudgingly. But him learning how to roll his eyes was something she could have done without.

"Put her down, please," she repeated softly. Manners were also something they were working on, so she always tried to remember to use hers with him.

He was nowhere near that scrupulous with her, being used to having his orders followed without such niceties by those who were terrified that they were going to be his next victim.

Vaudt sighed and remained still, as she did the same, one eyebrow raised at him challengingly.

Since he had successfully bred her, he had been in a quandary in a lot of ways, one of the biggest of which was that he felt that he could no longer chastise her as he had in the past, and, as soon as she had realized that, she had become terribly bold. He had told her, though, early on, when she had first begun to flaunt his rules, that there would be a reckoning, and that he was keeping a mental list of her infractions, with which he would deal, once she had recovered from the birth.

She didn't seem anywhere near as fazed by that prospect as he thought she should have been, which told him that he had become entirely too easy on her before she got caught—although having her tell him that she loved him might have had something to do with that—not that it was a good excuse; it wasn't. But that shortcoming was something else he intended to rectify as soon as it was medically possible for him to do so.

After he'd had his fill of her, of course—which, granted, was likely to be a very long time in coming, he had to admit, because he'd also sworn off fucking her, no matter that the breeding doctors had assured him that vigorous mating—as if there was any other kind between them—would actually be good for her.

He *had* allowed them to pleasure each other in the other ways that she had shown him, which was better than nothing, he guessed. But it fell far short of the utter and complete satisfaction of sinking himself into her in every way possible, feeling her envelope him in her warmth, tugging a taut nipple into his mouth as he nudged himself as far into her as he could then back just slightly to catch her right there, feeling her jerk—hearing that slight whimper—at the painful sensation before the ecstasy he—and it—brought her helplessly overtook her.

Emmy stood there, watching him work through things in his mind, having no doubt where he ended up, either. She'd managed to tame him a bit, but Vaudt was still quite brutal and brutish—his rough edges were still razor sharp in most ways, although she had to give him credit. He did learn, reluctantly, in a lot of cases, and sometimes it took longer than it ought, considering that he was naturally quite intelligent. But he did, eventually, usually, come to see reason. Except when he didn't.

"How about this? You tell me what, in this room, you think she might be able to use as a weapon, and I'll remove it. Would that help you feel better about putting the poor little thing down?"

Vaudt disliked her tone, as if she was saying that he was afraid to put her down because of his own safety, when she well knew that she was the one he was concerned about, not himself. Still, he did not rise to her bait and simply loose the termagant. Instead, he started telling her to take things out of the room, and by the time he was done, there was little left beyond cotton balls and the exam table. He'd even made her remove the stethoscope that had hung around her neck.

When she returned to the bare room, Emmy looked at him again. "Better?"

"I suppose," he answered grudgingly.

"Then, put her down."

He did as she said—another miracle—and Emmy stepped closer to her patient, who stood shaking before her, which tugged at her heart. She found she simply could not suppress the urge

to hug her, although she could hear his warning growl growing louder and louder until she let the girl loose.

As unhappy as she knew she had made the big man, Emily felt she had to do it because she well understood how the girl felt as she pushed the hood back, revealing a very young girl who couldn't have been much more than eighteen at the most, although she knew first hand from her time as a nurse here that malnutrition had stunted most people's growth—Vaudt and his kind not withstanding—and someone who looked nine was likely to be fifteen, someone who was fifteen could be twenty or even twenty-five.

She was horrified to see that the girl had a thick, crude strip of leather in her mouth, as well as one over it.

"What is this?" she asked, her eyes darting to his with obvious disapproval.

"I had to muzzle her. Did you not hear me say she bit Kosh's hand to the point that—"

"I don't care. I assume she's bound, too? Remove those as well, please," she interrupted.

Vaudt growled again, deep in his throat, his eyes on his recalcitrant mate. His charge jumped at the sound, but Emmy did not.

He drew himself up to his full size, looking down at her sternly. "I will remove the muzzle, but not the bonds," he said, suiting actions to words.

She frowned. "Then I'll have to cut the robe off and I'd bet that she's naked under there. Do we have something else for her to wear?" She knew how horrible it was to be nude all the time in front of people you didn't know.

"Woman!" he almost—but not quite—roared. "Get on with it or I will have her taken away now!"

The young woman began whimpering and sobbing, and she could hardly blame her.

She addressed the poor girl, "I am Emmy—this is my mate, Vaudt."

"Lord Vaudt, Tarq of the Known County," he corrected, although he knew that Emmy remained unimpressed by his hard-won titles.

"What's your name? Can you speak?"

Her mouth opened, as if she was trying to answer Emmy, but nothing came out.

"Speak, girl!" Vaudt encouraged loudly, which, of course, only made things worse.

Emmy put her hand on the girl's shoulder and turned the both of them away from him, deliberately positioning them so that she couldn't see the enormous man as he stood behind her, making it feel—almost—as if it was just the two of them in the room together.

She grasped the girl's biceps, squeezing gently. When she spoke, her voice was calm and soothing. "You are safe. Do you understand me? Just nod, if you do. You don't have to speak if you don't want to or can't."

The girl nodded.

Emmy smiled. She had found that, somewhere along the hard road the human species was now following, smiling was rare for everyone, and she was trying to bring it back single handedly.

"That's good. You are safe. No one will hurt you. My mate here will see to that."

"The hell he will!" she spat out with unexpected fury. "He just stood by while that awful soldier beat me! Lift my robes and you will see the evidence—I am not lying!"

She was going to disrobe her anyway, during the course of the examination, so Emmy put her hand out to Vaudt expectantly.

"What?" he asked, and she couldn't really determine if he was being deliberately obtuse or just dumb.

"Knife."

"Like hell," was his only response. Instead, he cut the material off her himself, expertly slitting up the side seams and doing a much better job of it than she would have. The material would be saved and the robe reconstructed. Nothing in this world would—could—go to waste.

To Emmy's surprise, he'd also cut her bonds, which she had not expected him to do.

Now naked, the girl's sobs increased as she tried to use her hands to shield herself from their eyes.

Emmy took a quick look at the girl's behind and there was no mistaking the angry red signs of the kiss of the belt that had been left there by someone, although there were other marks marring the beauty of her skin, too, that looked like they had been of a much more serious nature than the stripes across her bottom. When she came around to stand in front of her, she said, "I will put something on that for you."

"No, you will not," Vaudt countermanded.

Emily glared up at him. "Why not?"

"I will not have you dull the sting of the well earned punishment that Kosh administered after she sank her teeth into him and held on, Emmy," he ordered, lowering his chin as he regarded her. "Do you understand me?"

She automatically winced at that tone, having become entirely too familiar with being on the receiving end of it. Once, it would have made her shiver and shake as the younger woman was, but not so much now, although she would have to think about whether or not she was going to disobey him. She knew he would not punish her physically; he had devised a few things in their stead that were nearly as bad.

Unfortunately, Vaudt had realized that simple boredom was a somewhat effective tool against her misbehaviors. He would occasionally take away her books, and if she didn't get in line, he'd then restrict her from working, which was horrible on several levels, because, then, not only did she have to stay in that room with nothing to do, but—much worse than that—people were also not getting the treatment they needed.

As she conducted the examination, she explained everything she was doing, in hopes of helping alleviate some of the girl's fears, but she also tried to draw her out some.

"I'm just going to touch your head a bit and look at your eyes and into your nose and mouth. None of that will hurt, I promise. Can you tell me your name?"

She was understandably wary, and Emmy did not push her in any way, but did finally answer hesitantly, "Tura."

Emmy smiled. "It's very nice to meet you, Tura. We'll—I'll—get you all checked out, and then you'll be taken somewhere safe."

"You'll be given to Kosh, who is your rightful mate," Vaudt again corrected, as if what he said should have given neither of the women any cause for upset.

Tura cringed away from her immediately, backing up against the enormous man behind her then whirling violently away from him. "No! I won't go with him!" Then she literally threw herself at Emmy's feet, hugging her legs and kissing them and pleading pitifully as she looked up at the older woman with a tear soaked face. "Please don't let him take me to that man! I beg you, please, please, please!"

While Emmy tried to extricate herself from Tura's hold, Vaudt reached down and plucked her off the floor and held her aloft for a long moment as she dangled above him. "You will not do that again. She may touch you, not the other way around. If you disobey, you will find that my second's belt isn't the only one you'll feel today."

He missed the deep frown that descended on his mate's face at his words, and not for the reason he might have thought, either. She herself wasn't quite sure why she felt as she did. Emily only knew that feelings of violent jealousy roared to the forefront within her when she thought of Vaudt disciplining another woman.

She fought the feelings back and completed her examination, asking the girl questions to keep both of their minds occupied. "Do you have parents, Tura?" She felt the girl's collarbones, then down her arms, looking for abnormalities, although she saw none beyond more of the scars she'd already noticed.

"They're dead—my mother died a few months ago. She tried to keep me safe once...once I came into my first heat and she realized what I was. She died trying to protect me."

Emily ground her teeth together at that description of her first menses, although she tried to let go of her annoyance at the same time and choose her battles.

Tura's breasts were quite developed for such a small, skinny girl, nipples tight in the cool air, and Emily ignored them as she lay her head on the girl's chest, listening to her heart, which sounded quite strong.

"How long since you've last eaten?"

"I'm not sure. Days, maybe a week."

"How old are you; do you know?"

Emmy then palpated her abdomen as best she could, avoiding the dusky hair of her mons to awkwardly bend down and inspect her legs and feet.

"I-I have eighteen summers."

Then she moved behind her, noting that—although they were frightfully thin, her shoulders were the same level, and there didn't seem to be any spinal deformity at all, which she had seen quite a bit of lately in both the men and the few women that were around.

"Have you always lived where you were found?" It was probably a stupid question, but she asked it anyway. It wasn't as if people still did a lot of traveling—things had reverted much more to the way they had been before the advent of the car, where one could be born, live and die without having ever left one small town.

"No. We lived in a much better place for a long time, but my mother's Alpha moved us away from there to D'Shu. He died trying to protect my mother."

That was where she was captured by Vaudt's men, Emily surmised. And that Alpha wasn't trying to protect Tura—just his mate—so she would bet that he was not the girl's father.

Emmy sighed, feeling her dissatisfaction with how she found the world now settling heavily over her. She couldn't really even practice her pseudo-medicine well. It was a cursory examination at best, but probably all she was going to be allowed to do, and there was nothing overt—no reason that she could find—that she thought Vaudt would accept—that would prevent the girl from being bred, unfortunately.

Any remnants of the overwhelming jealousy she had felt towards Tura fled and her empathy for the girl returned full force—easily defeating the green-eyed monster—when there was a knock on the door, at which the two of them flinched. Vaudt, of course, did not, opening the door to reveal the specter of Kosh.

At the sight of him, they all heard Tura's sharply indrawn breath, which sounded much more like a moan of ultimate pleasure than an exclamation of fear or loathing.

He might have been second in command, rather than first, but he was Vaudt's equal in every other way—in fact, he might well have been just the slightest bit taller and broader, and he was actually about three years older. The two men were brought up together in the Spartan fashion

of his father's devising, becoming much closer—and much truer brothers, it had turned out in the end—than he and Racide had been.

Kosh was his right hand man, and he was more than capable of stepping into Vaudt's shoes, should the need arise. It hadn't yet, and—although mutinies had certainly happened within the ranks, which had to be put down ruthlessly and viciously—Kosh had never once given any indication that he would ever be on the wrong side of something like that. What's more, Vaudt had never once detected even the slightest bit of resentment or anger about his slightly lesser position.

As a result, that position was rock solid. His portion of the spoils from raids was nearly as large as his commander's and his quarters were only slightly smaller. When Kosh had pulled Vaudt aside and mentioned that he wanted the Omega they had found—that he felt that she was his—he did so with pretty certain knowledge that she was going to *be* his. In truth, he felt in his fevered blood as if she already was.

Of course, the proprieties had to be observed, regardless, so he'd had to fight for her, taking on every man who refused to back down to his claim. They'd lost more good men to him in that endeavor than they had to the raid itself, but paying homage to the ritual meant that the men would recognize it as a valid match. They would have their chance to take her from him.

Only no one could. Unfortunately, some men had to die to realize that.

The only person alive on the planet who probably could have beaten him already had his mate, and thus, was no threat. Thankfully.

Kosh couldn't imagine how horrible it would have been to have had to kill his commander—his friend. Of course, he knew that Vaudt would have thought the same thing about him. The difference was that he was right.

Despite the animalistic groan she had emitted when Kosh had appeared, Tura still attempted to hide behind Emmy, plastering herself up against the other woman and wrapping her arms around her waist—although that wasn't an easy task to accomplish, considering her heavy tummy.

Vaudt saw what she was doing and lunged for her, but Emmy put her hand up to stop him. He backed down, but only a little, and very reluctantly.

"She's not hurting me; I promise you."

Vaudt could see the truth of her words in her eyes, but he could also see the tears that had gathered there, and he knew that the reality of this situation was going to be very hard on her. He stood where he was—within arm's reach of them, if it became necessary—his body still tensed and poised to act in a split second.

But it was Kosh that stepped up and began to forcefully remove the girl's hands from around Emily's stomach.

"Please, stop," Emily asked, knowing she had no right to ask it of the other man. "Let me talk to her, please?"

Kosh stopped what he was doing, not looking at his leader's woman, but rather at his leader in regards to how best to proceed.

Vaudt nodded with a short sigh. "I would consider it a personal favor if you would indulge her. She's pregnant."

There weren't many advantages for a woman—especially an Omega—in this harsh world, but being pregnant meant she could get away with an awful lot that she probably wouldn't have been able to normally.

Kosh took a step back, crossing his enormous arms over his chest and looking down at them skeptically.

It took some effort on her part, but Emily managed to turn within the tight embrace of the girl's arms, knowing that what she was about to do was probably one of the hardest things she'd ever done in her life, but she saw absolutely no alternative. Since she barely knew him, she had no idea if what she was saying was true, but she certainly hoped, for the girl's sake, that it was.

"Tura? Have you met Kosh? He's Lord Vaudt's second in command, which is a very honorable and coveted position. He is a very good fighter and a very good man. Kosh, this is Tura. She's an orphan, and she's only just come to know that she's Omega, so she's feeling very vulnerable right now."

Then she turned back to the younger woman and drew a deep breath. "I know that this is going to be hard to accept—"

"No!" Tura screamed, shaking her head, wishing she wasn't having to fight all of them as well as herself. She wasn't used to her body reacting like this to a man, but the one they wanted to give her to made her lower body ache in a horribly uncomfortable way that made her body leak in a manner that meant she was practically leaving a puddle of wetness wherever she stood. She was constantly having to resist the urge to rub up against him lewdly, or at the very least, cross her legs against the disturbingly pleasant pressure that was building up between them.

"Because I've been there myself. But you *must* go with Kosh. He will be your Alpha." She lifted her head and met the second's eyes with a fierce look. "He will feed you, protect you and treat you well, and help you..." she wasn't at all sure how to approach the inevitable sexual aspects of their relationship, "...feel better, in ways you don't understand at the moment, won't he?"

Kosh had the grace to blush a bit at her direct glare. "Yes."

At first, Emily couldn't think of anything else to say, and Kosh stepped forward to forcibly remove Tura's hands from around her waist.

"Kosh is going to want to touch you, and that's all right, Tura. You must let him. It's a bit different and embarrassing, at first, but I promise you that he will make sure it's wonderful for you—eventually—right, Kosh?"

The second was no longer paying her much attention, but was instead trying to claim his woman, preferably without inflicting any kind of injury to his commander's pregnant mate, but Tura wasn't making it easy for him to do so.

So, he began to swat her behind, which was presented quite prominently because of Emily's belly. Tura was unprepared for the assault. She automatically reached back to try to defend herself from the stinging smacks and found her hands trapped there behind her. He used a strap from his own uniform to bind them there while she sobbed as if she was going to be put in front of a firing squad, begging Emily—who seemed, if not a friend, exactly, but someone who had at least a small understanding of how she felt—not to let him do this to her.

Emily took a step towards the girl but then felt her mate's hand curl gently but firmly around her bicep to hold her in place. "No," was all Vaudt said as he pulled her back against him, leaning down to wrap his own arms around her tummy possessively. "She is his," he whispered into her ear. "Just as you are mine. She needs to find her own way with him, just as you did with me."

"But—"

"That is an end to it, Emily," he said sternly. "I will not tolerate any further interference from you, in regards to them." She backed down at the look in his eyes, not wanting to press her immunity too far, and watching with great consternation as Kosh replaced Tura's muzzle, then put another robe over her, controlling her easily as she struggled constantly to get away from him.

When he had turned to open the door and escort her out, Emily noticed his bandage. "Wait! I didn't get a chance to look at your hand."

Kosh didn't so much as miss a step as he led Tura away from them as she pulled and tugged against his hold, until he finally stopped short and simply picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder like a sack of meal.

"But—"

"He will be fine. You can see to him later, little girl."

It wasn't necessarily Kosh that she was concerned for, but she didn't bother to correct him.

"For now, it is time for you to come home with me."

"But I just got here," she protested, knowing it was a losing battle as he ignored her objections—as usual—tucked her into her own robe and, unable to help himself, carried her out of what had once been a school building and was now the clinic—makeshift though it was at the moment, until he could secure the necessary building materials that he had promised her.