

INKED BY THE

*It's a horror*



WENDI GOGGH

INKED BY THE

*It's a girl*



WENDI GOGH



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# *PRONUNCIATION GUIDE*



Ithaqua: ith-ah-kuh

Ilian: ill-ee-en

Zhuliya: Julia

Ulu: oo-lou

stoyuk: stow-yuck

Aisyth: eye-sith

tugan: too-gun

Dairfyn: dare-fin

Ulyen: ool-yen

Ekana: eh-con-ah

# PROLOGUE



## ILIAN

I SMELL HER BEFORE I see her—floral, earthy, *delicious*.

My mouth waters, saliva pooling around my tongue as I swallow it back and focus on the client before me.

Their appointment should've ended half an hour ago, long enough for me to grab a quick bite to eat before my seven o'clock showed up, but life happened and now I work hangry.

A knock sounds on the door, and my apprentice pokes his head in. "Ilian, the winner of the Inked magazine contest is here."

I grunt in acknowledgment, never looking up or stopping the steady flow of the needle as it etches the final strokes into the man's bicep before me.

When I finish, I lean back to admire my handwork. It depicts a beautiful unicorn with flowing rainbow hair, a surprising touch for the sour-faced Qilin who requested it.

“What do you think?”

The Qilin casts a critical eye over his arm. “Nice. I like how you made the tail curl around to my elbow. My daughter will love it.”

*Ah, a tat for his little girl, the rainbow hair now makes sense.*

“Great. Let’s get you wrapped up so you can go. You know the protocol for fresh ink, but I’m going to go over it again.”

He sighs but listens as I repeat my safety care speech. It doesn’t matter if he’s heard it before or that this is his twentieth tattoo from me, I take my business seriously.

Infections are no joke, although monsters are less susceptible than humans.

“Thanks again, Ilian. See you next year,” he mumbles as he gets up to leave.

I blink, recalling the new year is nearly upon us. “Right, next year. How long’s the wait now?”

The Qilin shrugs. “Not too bad. Yuri managed to squeeze me in for the end of May.”

Six months for a previous client isn’t bad when I consider new clients are on a three year waitlist, but this is what happens when everyone votes you the world’s best tattoo artist.

*According to Inked’s poll.*

As soon as the results were published, my popularity exploded. It doesn’t matter that my studio is located in the coldest part of the globe, people still flock here like it’s a tropical holiday destination.

To clarify, it’s not. Berdsk is a suburb of the biggest city in the Novosibirsk oblast, but the booming mecca of humans and

monsters doesn't make it any warmer, especially this time of year.

The frosted window that overlooks the street rattles as great gusts of snowy wind blow by outside.

In summer, faces press against the glass to catch a glimpse of me in action, but even the appeal of my art doesn't draw anyone out on days like these.

I wave goodbye to the Qilin as I step out of the room and inhale deeply. Fuck, the scent is even worse out here.

An illogical part of me wants to hunt it down, bottle it up, and keep it hidden from the rest of the world where only I can savor it, but I ignore the animalistic instinct.

It's scary the things I already know just by the smell alone—female, human, and unclaimed by any of my kind.

*Not that it would matter.*

I scowl at the trajectory of my thoughts derailing like a rogue train and make a sharp right in the hallway away from the lobby—away from *her*—and quickly enter another room.

Yuri, my apprentice, will clean up the one I was just in. With a sigh, I ease onto a bench and pull out a candy bar from my pocket.

The chocolatey goodness coats my tongue, and for a moment, I can breathe again. The sugary treat doesn't assuage my hunger, but it helps mask the scent that clings to the insides of my nostrils.

My fingers tremble around the wrapper, and I stare in wonder. One of the things I'm most renowned for is my steady hand—how I can work tirelessly for hours without a single twitch.

The vibrations of the needle along with the curled position of the fingers around the irons cause most people's hands to become catatonic after a time, but never mine.

I attribute this to my Ithaquan blood as my kind has excellent circulation. Before humans and monsters interacted together in the modern world, Ithaqua would weather the

frigid blizzards that whipped across the tundra without moving.

Anything else would die, but my kind can simply huddle down because our circulation is so efficient, it keeps us warm—and alive.

Just as I finish my snack, Yuri knocks. “Ready for your next appointment?”

*No.*

“Yep, send them in.”

The shaking in my hands grows worse with every passing second because I know—I know—who is about to walk through the door.

Her.

*The intoxicating smell.*

Sure enough, she waltzes in, an absolute vision to pair with her bewitching aroma. Long black hair cascades down her back in waves, swept off her face by a purple headband.

She’s wearing black shorts and a fitted white t-shirt—a very strange choice considering the weather is currently below zero *without* the wind chill.

A smile wreaths her gorgeous face, and it nearly stops my heart. Her lips are full and painted a vivid red, but it’s her dark brown eyes that draw me in, there’s a sparkle of mischief in their depths.

Over her left brow is an arcade piercing that complements the beauty mark directly under her eye and when she opens her mouth to greet me, I spy the silver ball on her tongue.

My gut clenches, and to my dismay, my stoyuk stirs. Grunting, I turn to the side a bit to cover my reaction.

“Hi! I’m Zhuliya. I can’t tell you how excited I am to finally meet you.”

Her Russian is perfect, and hearing her voice does nothing to help my body calm down. It’s all smoke and sex—just as delicious as her scent.

I want to gobble this woman up in one bite, but the government here has made it very clear to monsters that human women are, for the most part, off-limits.

Both parties need a special permit and must be registered with their oblast to pursue even something casual.

This far east, things are rarely enforced, but it would be foolish to try anything since I'm a well-known name in a fairly large city.

Not to mention, even I know it's not appropriate to take a woman and spread her out on the floor so I can lick her until she comes.

But I want to—*oh, great Ulu, how I want to.*

“Congratulations on winning the contest.” My voice is a raspy echo of what it normally is, but I can barely breathe, let alone talk. “I assume it's your drawing that I'll be using?”

Zhuliya is the winner of Inked Magazine's yearly contest, where candidates pick one of the five themes and draw a tattoo in that category.

This gorgeous creature picked death, and her depiction still stirs something within me. Dark, evocative, sensual, even—like there's a side of death she has seen that nobody else knows about and it calls to her in unholy ways.

*Much like she calls to me.*

The second and third place winners of the contest got a cash prize, but the first place winner won a tat by me, including all the expenses to travel to my studio.

Berdsk isn't much to see in summer, but it's downright miserable this time of year, and I can't fathom why Zhuliya picked to come now.

She shakes her pretty head, drawing my attention. “Actually, no. I've thought about this a great deal, and as much as I loved the piece that I made for the contest, I want you to draw me something instead. It's a birthday gift to myself, and I know you will do something perfect.”

Zhuliya steps forward, ghosting a finger over the ink on my chest. I stifle a hiss at the near contact, and I know I'm fucked.

Thankfully, the enormity of her trust silences some of the lust raging throughout me. What she's tasked me with isn't something new.

More often than not, clients ask me to make them something—I think that's part of my appeal that I immerse myself into my art until I etch a piece of me into the ink.

Before this moment, it's never been an issue. I've never experienced a block to my creativity, but now I fret, wracked with worry that I won't make something good enough for *her*.

As if sensing my unease, Zhuliya gives me a smile of reassurance. "I know whatever you do, I'm going to love."

For the first time, I let my gaze roll over her body, drinking in her numerous tattoos, trying to discern what she might like.

The mermaid on her thigh wears the same cheeky grin as she does. The flowers that peek out from her shirt's collar are delicate and feminine, as is the snake that winds around her right forearm.

On her left, is a half-sleeve of constellations that seem to twinkle against her skin, and two skulls nestle in the bed of flowers above the stars.

But it's the bones on her fingers that I love the most—they remind me of the piece she did for the contest—inked to appear as if she were part skeleton.

It's as if Zhuliya is a woman who's played with death and enjoyed it. Or maybe she just has a fetish for bones...

*This time, there's no denying my body's reaction.*

I indicate for her to sit down as I quickly turn and pretend to sort my supplies. I blindly pick out the pigments, my mind a chaotic jumble.

When I pivot back, Zhuliya is pressed into the chair, her shirt already off, the creamy expanse of her back on display.

Blood pounds in my skull, a throbbing tempo in sync with my pulsing stoyuk. My throat closes, strangling me, as waves of need crash through my body.

“Will you excuse me for a moment, please?” I croak.

Before Zhuliya can reply, I’m out the door, sealing it shut as if it can ward off what’s happening to me.

*And then I crumble.*



Yuri peeks into the hall at the sound of me sinking to the floor. He’s wearing his coat, almost ready to leave, but one look in my direction and my apprentice scowls.

“Go eat—now. I’ll sit with Zhuliya.”

A growl wells up inside of me. The only thing I want to eat is *her*. Worse, I want to rip out Yuri’s tongue for the familiarity in which he uses Zhuliya’s name.

It’s ridiculous to be this possessive of a woman I literally met not five minutes ago—a human no less.

My fame as an artist has catapulted my name to the top, but I know that’s the only likable thing about me.

Even among monsters, my kind is feared. Ithaqua are the shadows of death, forever going forward in the barrenness of winter.

Over time, I’ve curtailed the wildness inside of me, tamping it back with a gentle voice and even gentler touch.

The work that I do in my studio is my life, and I can’t jeopardize it by succumbing to the barbaric instincts ingrained inside of me.

By taming my more volatile urges, my clients have come to trust me. Instead of running from me as most people do when

they see an Ithaqua, they greet me with genuine warmth.

*If they only knew about the beast that lurks beneath the surface.*

With a nod to Yuri, I dash into my office, slamming the door shut and locking it. Desire flares inside of me brighter and hotter than a thousand suns.

My knees buckle, and I lean back against the door, hoping the wooden frame can hold my weight.

I war with myself for all of two seconds before I unlace the tops of my pants and fist my stoyuk.

The dark length is a stark contrast to the bone-white tip, tapered like an arrowhead. It's the same color as my skull, but the rest of my stoyuk is shaded like my horns, going from gray to black.

Underneath the angled curve of the ivory head, deep, slashing grooves carve into the light gray before ironing out.

An inch before the base, charcoal spikes jut out, the same as the bone spurs that run down my back, on my horns, and along my jawline.

Unlike my other spurs, the tips of these are blunt, meant to induce pleasure instead of pain as they rub against my mate.

My brain snags on the word 'mate', instantly conjuring an image of Zhuliya naked, spread before me.

She's dripping wet, smells divine, and I can't help but wonder if her pussy is as pink and pretty as the rest of her.

Just the thought of my slick tip pushing through her soft, rosy folds as I split her open undoes me. With a strangled howl, I explode, and cum splatters into a puddle at my feet.

I tingle from head to toe and sag even further down the door. My horns scratch the lacquered surface, but I can't find the will to care.

Everything around me is in a haze, as if I'm in genuine shock over what just happened. Never in my life have I come so hard—and by a ten second fantasy, no less.

Trying to pull myself together, I stare down at the mess I made, baffled at the electric reaction this woman has on me.

After another few moments, I finally compose myself. Rushing to clean up the floor, I set everything to rights, including my pants, before hurrying back to the room that Yuri and Zhuliya are waiting in.

She's—thankfully—putting back on her shirt and is talking with my apprentice like they are old friends, her Russian too fluid for it not to be her mother tongue.

I stare for just a moment before going over to the counter lining the wall. Not even ten minutes have passed, but I despise myself for what I did.

It was rude. It was unprofessional, and worst of all, it was weak—and Ithaqua are not weak. It's a trait my kind can't afford to have if we want to survive, even in modern times.

“I apologize—”

Zhuliya raises a hand, cutting me off. “Yuri says you didn't eat! I wish you had told me—I could've waited.”

Yuri smirks as the tiny female gives me a piece of her mind. Her nose scrunches and her lips pucker in a gorgeous pout that makes me groan under my breath.

“Right, well, I have....sated myself. I should be okay now. Thank you, Yuri. I'll see you tomorrow.”

The logical part of my brain screams at me to ask my apprentice to stay—he's probably the only thing that's going to keep me from ravaging this woman.

But Yuri has been here since just after sunrise and often puts in longer hours than I do. I can't ask more of him than the man has already given me.

He says a few more words to Zhuliya—again, too familiar for my liking—and then departs. When I hear the front door jingle shut, I can't help but wonder if I've made the right decision.

I turn back to the task of picking out my ink when I hear Zhuliya take off her shirt once more. My pulse skyrockets but

I school my features as I wrangle back my lust.

Since when do human women interest me?

Before this moment, I've never really viewed them as sexually pleasing. They are simply too small and fragile-looking to be attractive.

*And yet, here I stand, aching because of one.*

"You're Russian?" I ask just to take my mind off the thought of her bare back.

"No, but I am, technically, a citizen, although I live in the USA and have citizenship there, too."

Her answer momentarily redirects my brain cells from fucking, thank Ulu. "Are you married to a Russian?"

My understanding of human politics isn't the best, but I know this is one way a person might have dual citizenship—and it enrages me.

Something dangerous and possessive rears its head inside of me at the thought of her being beholden to another, even in something as trivial as human matrimony.

The verbal vows humans say to one another can never compare to the process of imprinting a piece of your soul onto your mate, as Ithaqua do.

"No, I'm not married."

Relief courses through me. "Then how are you Russian but not?"

"I imagine I'm much like you. Do you consider yourself Russian?"

Her question throws me. "No, I'm an Ithaqua. I merely reside in Russia."

"Exactly, and I'm a Tatar Jew. My father was a Siberian Tatar, and my mother was a Jewish Tatar. She moved to America, where I was born, but her family lived in Kazan. Both my parents spoke Russian, but I learned a little Sybyr, the Siberian Tatar language."

“So you speak English, too?”

“Yep. How about you?”

“Russian and Ithaquan.”

Zhuliya hums, and I finally turn back to her, carrying various items that I didn’t consciously choose.

“Will you say something in Ithaquan?”

Her request takes me by surprise, but not as much as the words that come tumbling out of my mouth. “Min ere sangarabyn ulakhan makhtal.”

The ancient mating vow flows from me with more fluidity than rain pouring through an unclogged gutter. I stare at Zhuliya’s bare back in horror.

“How lovely sounding. What did you say?”

“Uh, congratulations on winning the contest,” I lie, still partially in shock.

“How do I say, ‘thank you’?”

Again, my mouth speaks without permission. “Mi’ere sin.”

“Mi’ere sin,” she repeats, and my hands tremble.

*I’m yours.*

Fuck, I never should’ve let Yuri leave. In less than five minutes alone with this woman, I’ve taken the first steps in solidifying an Ithaqua mating bond—my vow and her agreement.

It doesn’t matter that Zhuliya is clueless, or I wasn’t thinking. Once the words are spoken, it sets the wheel in motion.

With every fiber of my being, I meant what I said. This unsuspecting, gorgeous creature who showed up in my life by pure chance is mine, whether she realizes it or not.

*And I am hers.*



“Everything alright?”

Zhuliya’s request snaps me back to the reality that I emphatically *cannot* mate with this woman.

*Not without her knowledge, not at all.*

She’s not my type, doesn’t even live on this side of the world, is a fraction of my size, and likely isn’t even attracted to monsters with skulls for faces.

Is any human woman?

“Yep, just...getting in the right headspace.”

I rub at my brow. Everything inside my brain right now is fucked six ways to Sunday. I couldn’t get in the right mindset if I tried, but I have to.

Zhuliya is a client and this is her birthday gift to herself, not to mention a prize she won for her own amazing talent.

She wants something special—*deserves something special*—and I’m going to give it to her.

Blocking out my thoughts and emotions is like trying to stave off a blizzard with my two hands, but I force myself to focus.

Her back is small compared to the other monstrous forms I’ve inked over the years. The delicate knots of her spine bump up as she leans forward, getting more comfortable in the chair.

Only the tops of her shoulders have ink from her sleeves, but the rest of her skin is bare and unblemished.

Her flesh is light-colored, but not nearly as light as my fur, making her appear tanned in comparison. My own skin, though, is many shades darker and gray, like my horns.

Where my coloring is cool, Zhuliya's is warm, and I marvel at the contrast as I run a claw down the curve of her spine.

A shudder wracks her body, and my stoyuk twitches. I'm worried that I might not actually be able to perform—for work, obviously, as I'm more than up for the task sexually—when an idea takes root in my mind.

I have no clue where it comes from, but the creative vision grips me with its beauty and intricacies, much like the woman before me.

After I prep Zhuliya's back, I grab my irons and get to work. The tiny female doesn't even so much as flinch when the needle starts tapping over her skin.

For all my fear of not being able to do this, I'm instantly lost in my craft. I've set aside all the colored tattoo pigments, choosing to do blackwork instead.

Time flies by, and I'm so immersed that it takes me a moment to register that Zhuliya cries out a little now and again.

Shaking out of my stupor a bit, I ask if she's ok. Humans are more susceptible to pain than most of my other clients, and the bones of the spine are a sensitive area.

"Da," she says in a low voice laced with an emotion that I can't interpret.

Afraid that I might lose the vision sparking through my mind, I dive back in while making a conscious effort to ensure she's comfortable.

Not once does she wiggle or fidget, like so many of my other clients—tested by the needle and for staying still for so long—but I do notice her hands clasped together, the knuckles white with strain.

"Are you sure—"

"I'm fine. Please continue."

I'm about to stop when suddenly, another idea sparks like a firework inside of me. Reassuring myself that Zhuliya is an adult and has many tats, I chase my vision in earnest.

My hands swoop and arc, as if I'm really painting on canvas. The faster I work, the more I pour myself into the ink.

Every second brings me closer to my creation. I've never felt so alive, every part of me consumed by the urge to gift this woman with something amazing.

Beneath my touch, Zhuliya's whimpers turn into moans. A forgotten part of my brain reminds me to check on her, to make sure that she's alright, but I ignore it.

Instinctively, I know she's fine. Never in a million years would—could—I hurt this precious creature.

Faster and faster I go, closer and closer until I finish the last swirl. The needle kisses Zhuliya's skin for the last time, completing my masterpiece.

Just then, an ember of light flashes before my eyes, and I swear a piece of me detaches from my consciousness, embedding itself in the dark chaos of the inked flesh below me.

The tiny female screams, her entire body contorting as I pull away in horror. Her back ripples, showcasing the artwork I'm only now recognizing.

It's the symbol of Aisyth, the fertility Goddess of my people, who blesses each and every mating bond with a unique branding.

Usually this is etched into the male Ithaqua's horns by an Ithaquan priestess of Aisyth, but it would seem the Goddess decided to give me the vision instead.

All but the last part of the mating bond is complete, and panic crushes the air from my lungs until I remind myself that I won't cross that last line.

*Never.*

Except...

I sniff, a heady scent clogging my nostrils, making me aware of my surroundings, of the human before me.

Zhuliya shakes like a leaf trying to ward off the coming winter. Sweat dots the back of her neck, and my own body quivers in answer.

“Are...are you...” I trail off, unable to finish the inane question.

Of course, she’s not fine—neither of us are. I just mated with a woman *without* her consent, and she just came from it. In doing so, she completed the bond.

Her pleasure ensured that she accepted the bond when I imprinted myself upon her, through her freshly drying ink.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

The situation has escalated from bad to worse case scenario. I have no idea what to do—what to think.

If anyone finds out, I’m in deep shit. What just happened is beyond illegal—as it should be. It’s one thing to keep humans and monsters apart, but another for a monster to take a mate without consent.

Humans don’t understand the concept of ‘fated’. It doesn’t matter that everything that happened was unintentional and unconscious.

*It still happened.*

I inhale, and instantly regret it, as Zhuliya’s arousal filters back into my senses and clouds my thinking.

Almost mechanically, I start spouting off my aftercare lecture, rubbing a thin layer of antibiotic ointment over her back.

She still hasn’t said anything, and my stomach bubbles in distress. Imprinting upon her literally means I’m physically attached to Zhuliya.

Where she goes, I must.

An Ithaqua can never leave their mate. An invisible tether binds the two together for all eternity. To not be near her would be a fate worse than death—an agony beyond comprehension.

The thought is almost as terrible as the one of me following her around. Humans might like my art, but I doubt it's good enough to make stalking an acceptable practice.

But I'm fairly certain that mating bonds are irreversible. It's impossible to get back the piece of me embedded into Zhuliya, not to mention supremely offensive to the Goddess.

If, in her infinite wisdom, she sanctioned our bonding, who am I to question this union?

Except, I doubt Aisyth concerns herself with earthly affairs and knows anything about human laws—or cares.

Which makes me...*utterly screwed.*

I clear my throat after my speech and quickly step away from the tiny woman. She pulls away from the chair, turning towards me, a dazed expression on her face.

So dazed, Zhuliya doesn't even seem to realize she's showing me a whole lot of tit—glorious, ample, and tipped with dusky nipples the same shade as her cheeks.

My mouth drops open, and I stumble back with all the finesse of a newborn reindeer. We both stare at one another in shock.

*Fuck, does she know what happened—what I did?*

“Let me—”

“I should—”

We both speak at the same time, and I freeze, allowing her to finish. “I should go.”

The thought of her leaving guts me. “No!”

Zhuliya's eyes widen at my growled refusal, and I know I sound like a crazy man. Shit, I can't think straight.

Everything around me blurs as need slams into me, a reminder to seal the mating bond with the union of our bodies.

“Will...you...excuse me?” I spit the words out between pants, skirting around the lovely female until I'm at the door.

Not once does Zhuliya try to cover herself, clearly still too shocked at what's transpired, and I slip out of the room and dash back down to my office.

For a second time tonight, I fist my stoyuk and jerk myself into a dissatisfying orgasm until another fountain of cum erupts onto the floor.

Only Zhuliya can give me what I crave, but if I don't take the edge off, I'm afraid of what I might do.

My heart races as I clean the mess and wonder what the hell I'm going to say to Zhuliya this time, but when I return, she's gone.

I slump to the floor, a forlorn howl ripping past my lips to echo into the night before I curl into a ball.

The ache I feel leaves me breathless, but underneath it, I sense a pulse, a throbbing reminder of my connection to my mate.

With it, I can find her anywhere, and I need to explain myself—for both our sakes—but what I will say, I have no idea. The last time I spoke from the heart, I fucking imprinted on her.

But I have to try.

*For better or worse, Zhuliya is my mate.*

# CHAPTER ONE



## ZHULIYA

THE ARCTIC AIR DOES nothing to relieve the heat scorching across my cheeks and through my body as I run into the frigid darkness of the Siberian night.

Even the whipping wind can't rip me from my thoughts, although it tries its best to tumble me down the snow and ice-encrusted sidewalk.

I came from a tattoo—I had a tat-gasm.

*Is that even a thing?!*

Apparently, for me, it is.

Elohim Adirim, how embarrassing. I'll never be able to show my face in front of Ilian Yaniqu again, not that I'll likely

ever see him—a small consolation when I consider that I creamed all over his leather seat.

Hopefully, there's nothing to clean...

Another wave of humiliation washes over me as I try to figure out my reaction to both the ink and the man.

Tall, pierced, and muscled, Ilian is a bone daddy but an absolute sweetheart. There's something about terrifying monsters who are actually gentle giants that melts my insides.

Then again, Ilian was nothing but professional. The few times we spoke really didn't allude to his true nature.

*Maybe he's really a brute...and why does that excite me even more?*

It's official—I need to get laid. I would say I need a boyfriend, but that level of commitment is a testimony of my current mental state and how unstable it is.

Boyfriends equal misery.

Love equals misery.

Any form of attachment equals misery.

Logically, I acknowledge this isn't true, I'm just a product of my past, refusing to move on to a different future.

I lost my mother when I was young, and over a decade ago, my father—ata—died, too. As an adult, everyone expects us to handle things better than children.

But not me—I crumbled faster than a cookie baked with too much butter.

Without my ata, I had no one. Both my parents left their families to explore new opportunities with each other.

My ata's tribe, even if I knew where to find them, wouldn't welcome me. He had turned his back on the old ways, marrying my mother when he was promised to another.

Their love story alone is enough to ward me away from romance. The prejudices my ima—mother—faced forced her to flee her homeland.

She found no refuge in Europe and eventually made her way to the Americas. It would be years before my ata could join her.

The first time I met him, I was already three, but never have I loved a man as much as my ata.

Both my parents went above and beyond to make me feel accepted in a world that seemingly had shunned them.

And now they are gone, and I'm back in the country I promised never to visit, but no one turns away a *free* tattoo from Ilian Yaniqu, along with transportation and lodging.

Besides, a small part of me wanted to see the wild and unforgiving land my ata called home, even if Berdsk isn't where he lived.

And now I can check it off my bucket list, along with a tat-gasm, although that was never on it to begin with.

*Happy thirtieth birthday to me.*

Somehow, I manage to stumble back to the Corona Hotel and Spa where I'm staying. The warm glow of twinkling lights and multiple fireplaces instantly thaw my numb limbs.

I put on my oversized snowsuit before I left Ilian's studio, but Siberian winters are nothing to mess with.

Even wrapped in the protective layers of fabric, I nearly froze on my way back to the hotel. As heat seeps back into me, it reminds me of the dampness between my legs.

*What the hell happened?*

I admit I've been fantasizing about Ilian Yaniqu for a while. Not only is his art to die for, but he's gorgeous—my roommate, Sakura, even agreed, and she never checks out guys with me.

When I entered Inked's contest, I didn't think I was going to win. Drawing is just an outlet for me, and I love tattoos.

Sakura thinks I missed my calling in life as a tattoo artist, but the work she and I do together is far more important.

We help immigrants coming to America reunite with their families. Even in today's world with all its technology, so many people become separated.

Children without parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, aunts or uncles. It tears at my heart because I know what it's like to wait for someone.

But in my free time, I love to travel the States and visit tattoo parlors. Only the best of the best have left their ink on me.

When I first heard about Ilian, I knew I wanted his art on me, too. It wasn't until I saw him that I started having *very* inappropriate thoughts about his cock.

Long story short, there's nothing on the internet that shows or tells what it looks like, meaning my imagination was left to fill in the gaps—a rather dangerous pastime.

None of it mattered until Inked reached out to me to announce I was the first prize winner.

I was so excited at first—I never win anything—but then I freaked out because I had spent the last however many months masturbating to this man.

The honor of having my art showcased in the biggest tat magazine was already a rush, and then I learned Ilian lives in Russia, my parent's birth land.

An inexplicable sense of longing filled me. I knew I had no ties there, but I was—am—so lonely.

Sakura is the closest thing I have to a family. She's like a sister to me, but she spends much of her time back in Japan to be with her parents.

For so long, I hated even the mention of Russia, the country that kept my ata from me, but I wouldn't turn away a free vacation.

Unfortunately, between work and Sakura's own trips back to Japan, the only time I could go in the foreseeable future was near the new year.

*Winter in Siberia.*

Inked was shocked when I booked the trip, trying to persuade me to come another time, but I wasn't worried—in Elsa's infamous words, the cold never bothered me anyway.

The only thing bothering me now is Ilian, and it's more *hot and bothered*. I swore I wouldn't embarrass myself in front of him, and I did so well at first.

*Until I came all over his chair.*

There's a chance Ilian doesn't realize what happened, but it doesn't negate the fact that I had an orgasm from him inking my back.

The concierge waves, giving me a bright smile that pulls me from my thoughts. I wave back before trekking across the lobby to the elevator, leaving a wet trail behind me.

*From my snowsuit and not the mess between my legs.*

The second I enter my room, I strip out of everything and shiver against the door. Pulling the purple headband from my hair, I start towards the bathroom and then freeze.

In front of me is an opulent, full-length mirror framed in gold. It reaches the ceiling, showcasing the entirety of the bedroom Inked booked for me.

It's gorgeous, but it's the ink on my back that stops me. It puts the mirror and everything around me to shame.

*In a word, it's breathtaking.*

Even through the wrapping, I can see how amazing the tat is. Ilian used all blackwork, etching a 3D pattern into my back that's reminiscent of M.C. Escher's work.

The abstract form is almost floral in nature, with swirls for petals, and I gasp when I realize why it's so familiar to me.

When I was, ahem, researching Ithaqua, not much came up except about their gods and goddesses.

One goddess in particular had a design very similar to the one on my back. I grab my phone, sifting through my search history until I find what I'm looking for.

Aisyth, Ithaqua goddess of fertility and mating bonds.

*Mating bonds?*

The article is brief, like everything about Ilian's kind, and I give up to snap a pic of my back in the mirror so I can examine it closer.

It's different from Aisyth's symbol, more intricate, as if Ilian took it and evolved it into something unique for me.

I snort at my delusional thoughts. I'm not anyone special, just another customer. In truth, I'm even less than that since this was a prize, and I didn't pay for it.

None of it matters. In another day, I'll be flying back to the States, and I'll never see Ilian again.

Snapping a quick pic of the ink, I sigh. All I want is a shower—or just anything to distract me. With my arms flung out, I flop down on the bed, burrowing my face in the pillows.

A knock sounds at my door, and I groan. I scoot off the bed on my stomach so as not to touch my new ink and stomp over to peek through the peephole.

When I spy Ilian's hulking form on the other side, I gasp. Never in a million years did I expect him to show up at my door. Which is why I open it, forgetting one crucial thing.

*I'm still naked.*

## CHAPTER TWO



### ILIAN

IT TAKES ME ALL of thirty seconds to decide that I'm going after Zhuliya. It doesn't matter that it's not for the noble reasons I tell myself.

*All that matters is I need to be with her again.*

Even though her scent is strong, when I open the door of my studio, the howling wind blasts by me, bouncing off the darkened windows of the surrounding buildings and scattering my mate's unique aroma.

It would have been easier to track her if I had her scent as well, but the invisible tether that binds us together will have to be enough.

I step out into the frigid night and center myself until I can feel another heartbeat along with my own—*Zhuliya's*.

With a decisive nod, I turn right and then weave through the city with no discernible destination except to find my mate.

After nearly fifteen minutes, I end up in front of the Corona Hotel. It never occurred to me to even look up anything about Zhuliya and the prize that she won.

In fact, I bet Yuri has all the information back at the studio, and I could've looked it up instead of wandering around.

Regardless, I'm pleased with the results. It proves to me that my imprint is strong, and Zhuliya can't hide from me.

As I approach the front door, an old crone sits outside, one eye screwed shut and the other staring up at me, unblinking.

She's wearing tattered rags, her shriveled skin chapped by the merciless wind. If I were human, I'd have a coat and I could give her one.

All I have is money, and I hope it's enough. I slip her twenty thousand rubles before pulling her up and guiding her into the hotel.

When the concierge spies me, she gives me a bright smile. I'm a well-known name in Berdsk, but when she sees the crone, the grin withers away.

I give her a firm look. "I'd like to book a room for this lady for the evening as well as tomorrow." Sliding the concierge my credit card, I give her my information. "Whatever she would like, too, please include. Any room service and food, please send her way." The old woman's eyes twinkle with tears. "You are a good man," she whispers in broken Russian, making me wonder if it's not her first language.

Her words are sweet and nearly break my heart because there's nothing good about me. I'm an animal with only the veneer of civility because that's what's demanded of me.

Underneath, I'm nothing but a rabid beast—*imprinting upon Zhuliya is evidence enough*.

The concierge gives me the key, and I guide the crone to her room. It's tucked far away, as if the concierge didn't want any other customers seeing her.

But I don't care as long as the dear old woman is somewhere safe and warm for the night with a full belly. I order her some food before she decides to take a bath, and I excuse myself.

Outside her door, I close my eyes once more, focusing on the beacon that binds me to Zhuliya.

It's stronger with her this close, and in no time, I reach the top floor that only has two sets of doors.

I'm lucky the Corona Hotel is old and doesn't require a keycard to access this level as many other places do.

For a moment, I stand in front of Zhuliya's door, wondering what I'm going to say to her. "I'm sorry I imprinted on you, and we're now mated" seems really lackluster.

For the hundredth time tonight, I decide to just go with my gut—a very bad decision, considering everything else that's happened.

Raising my fist, I pound on the door. Muffled sounds come from within, and after a beat, it eases open to reveal Zhuliya... stark naked.

All reason flies out of my head. There's only my mate, her exquisite body, and this moment.

*And just like that, the beast is unleashed.*

With a feral growl, I shove into Zhuliya's room, slamming the door shut behind me. Her velvety gaze is wide as she backs away.

Every step brings her closer to the bed until Zhuliya's knees hit it, and she sprawls backwards on top of the cream-colored blanket.

Although her skin is fair, it's much darker than the soft fabric she's lying upon, but nowhere near as dark as her hair, which flairs out around her like a silken halo.

Her breasts are the same perfection as before, and with Zhuliya's leg bent at an angle, it spreads her thighs far enough to spy the pink between them.

An eerie howl rends the air and I realize it's me, but Zhuliya doesn't even blink. She's transfixed on the monster before her.

"Run," I snarl.

At first, she doesn't do anything, and the very small part of my brain that's still functioning wants to shake the foolish woman.

"Why aren't you listening to me—I said run!" My mouth struggles to form the Russian words.

A sly smirk curls her lips. "Ok, try and catch me."

*What?!*

"That's not—"

Zhuliya is off the bed before I can react and through another set of doors. I chase after her instinctively and realize there isn't another suite on this floor. This is the only one.

The other doors I saw before lead into a large sitting area whereas the ones I knocked on lead directly into the large bedroom.

I barely register the decor, only the layout as Zhuliya speeds to the other side of the room. The area is open, broken up only by the set of stairs in the center that leads to a circle of couches.

Beyond them, a grand piano sits near some French doors that can open to a balcony overlooking the Ob River.

Behind the glossy veneer of the piano, Zhuliya crouches, her back pressed against the inlaid bookshelf behind her.

Instead of cutting through the center of the room, I skirt around the edges to where my mate "hides".

It gives her enough time to sprint away, jumping onto the couches and bounding back to the other side exactly where I just was.

I snarl in a mixture of frustration and exhilaration. “Get over here!”

“But I thought you told me to run?” The way she sings this tells me the minx is taunting me.

“You better hope I don’t get my claws on you...”

“Or else what?”

Instead of answering, I lunge forward, this time doing what I should’ve before and cutting through the middle.

Unfortunately, the couches are not meant for someone my size to jump upon, and one breaks under my weight.

I crash to the ground with a thud loud enough to be heard in the next oblast. Zhuliya stares, a hand clamped over her mouth as she tries to stifle her giggle.

And fails.

Peals of laughter spill from behind her hand, the gorgeous sound a balm to my wounded vanity.

Suddenly, there’s a knock on the sitting room doors. Zhuliya jerks to attention while I narrow my eyes.

“I’ll answer it. Stay back.”

She glares as if she might argue but under no circumstance is anyone else seeing her naked but me.

Forcing myself to be calm and civil—no easy task—I open the door just a sliver and spy a man in a suit with a worried expression.

“Sir, is everything alright?”

“Ah, yes. I sat down on the couch and broke it. I will, of course, pay for it. I’m so sorry.”

The man gasps. “It is I who should be apologizing. Our furniture is meant for everyone. I will have this fixed immediately.”

“Tomorrow is fine.”

I’m speaking for Zhuliya, taking far too many liberties, but the plans I have in my mind for her aren’t conducive for

anyone coming to fix the couch tonight.

“Of course. I will ring first. Again, I apologize and thank you for choosing Corona Hotel and Spa.”

Nodding, I simply shut the door and exhale. Thankfully, the interaction gave me enough time to get my bearings.

I can't ravage Zhuliya—*what in the great Ulu was I thinking?*

Turning to apologize, something soft smacks into my face. Once, twice, and nearly a third time until I bat it away.

It's a pillow from the broken couch, wielded by a mischievous looking Zhuliya, who's still naked.

“Are you going to catch me or what?” My mind blanks, only her words linger. My mate wants to play.

*Who am I to deny her?*

## CHAPTER THREE



### ZHULIYA

*I HAVE NO IDEA what I'm doing.*

At first, I thought it was all just a dream. There's no way Ilian Yaniqu is at my hotel door. I'm asleep, living out one of the most lucid fantasies I've ever had.

And if that's the case...*I'm going to enjoy myself.*

"Run!" he growls, sending a chill down my spine so real that I feel it.

Still, I can't help but bait him. "Ok, try and catch me."

If Ilian thinks I'm easy prey, he's mistaken.

Sprinting to the connecting doors, I throw them open and dash into the adjoining room. It's twice the size of the master

bedroom, which is already larger than the apartment I share with Sakura.

Along the far side of the wall are built-in bookshelves and a grand piano. I run behind it, hiding like in all my fantasies while Ilian chases after me.

But tonight, I'm not going to give in as quickly as I usually do—I'm going to make him work for this.

The monstrous man skirts around the room, almost to the piano, but as he closes in, I crawl out and sprint away.

I cut through the center of the room, bouncing on the couches with wild abandon. Pillows go flying, and I end up exactly where Ilian was seconds before.

The look of consternation on his face is comical, even though all of this is imaginary. The man can't believe I somehow bested him.

Another snarl echoes through the room as Ilian takes off, bounding through the middle just as I had, but when he jumps on the couch, it collapses with a giant crash.

The sound explodes into my brain, ringing in my ears until I realize this might not be a dream...

Ilian and I stare at one another for a small eternity until there's a knock on the door. He opens it, turning away from me and speaking lowly to someone on the other side as I try to figure out what's real and what isn't.

Still uncertain, I make my way back to the center of the room where I pick up a velvety red pillow, an idea slashing through my discombobulated thoughts.

Sneaking behind the hulking giant, I wait until Ilian shuts the door. Then, I rear back with all my might, slamming the fluffy piece of decor onto his horned head all while taunting him.

“Are you going to catch me or what?”

He whips around with inhuman speed, staring at me in shock before a feral smile takes over his face.

“So you wanna play?”

A thrill runs through me as I make up my mind—*definitely a dream.*

I toss the pillow aside, walking backward until I’m in the bedroom, knowing there’s nowhere for me to run—as much as I enjoy the chase, my favorite part is when Ilian captures me.

He stalks toward me slowly, a predator with its prey in its sights. Between my legs, my pussy throbs, demanding I end the game so he could give us both what we want.

Once more, my knees brush the bed, and I fall, barely catching myself on my elbows as I hold my breath.

When Ilian is mere inches from me, he sinks gracefully to his knees. Even then, his horned head rises above me.

“What do you want?” he asks, his gaze wild but his touch gentle as he traces a claw along my naked thighs.

“You.”

It’s a simple answer, but it’s the truth. Ilian groans, pushing me back onto the bed before spreading my legs wider.

I know this perfect moment could never be real because Ilian Yaniqu would never let my back touch the bed after a tattoo.

The hard bone of his face is warm to the touch as he nuzzles between my thighs. I hear him inhale deeply, a purring sound coming from his chest before his tongue flicks out.

Even without seeing it, I know it’s extraordinarily long. It rasps over my pussy with a finesse that only exists in dreams, and my eyes roll back in my head.

Ilian coils that clever tongue around my clit, pulsing there with expertise before dipping back inside to taste me.

Instinctively, I clamp my legs together and reach forward to pull him closer. My hands find purchase around his horns.

They’re like smooth handlebars, and I grip them to jerk him forward. Ilian grunts as I thrust his tongue deeper inside of me.

“Be still, my mate.”

His growl is a whispered command against my core, but since this is a dream, I do as he says.

My mind stumbles a bit when Ilian swirls his tongue just right, and I stop worrying that I’m becoming too attached to a fantasy.

*Right now, there’s nothing but him, me, and this moment.*

He snarls as he fucks me harder with his tongue, curling it in a way so that part just outside of me curves upward to hit my clit at the same time.

The way he rolls it sends pleasure coursing through my veins, and I thrash my head from side to side.

“Please, I’m so close.”

To my eternal relief, Ilian doesn’t stop. His tongue works faster, his claws digging into my thighs with the perfect pinch of pain to tip me over the edge.

I arch my back as ripples of ecstasy radiate from my pussy, my clit throbbing with every luxurious pulse.

Instead of gently helping me ride out the waves, Ilian hums, the sound vibrating his tongue both inside and outside of me.

Whether it’s an echo of his contentment or his intent, I’m not sure. Either way, I squirm at the motion, my sensitive clit twinging at the overstimulation.

The man must think I’m begging for more because he vibrates his tongue even harder, and my body locks up.

For a frightening second, I can’t move a muscle. Even my lungs are seized up in my chest as Ilian pins me in place and mercilessly works my clit.

It’s nothing like I’ve ever felt before—painful but not. It’s too much sensation, but I can’t get my mouth to function to tell him to stop.

My body grows more rigid, and then, I explode. A silent scream tears from my overtaxed lungs, and only the rush of air escaping my lips can be heard.

I come so hard my mind blanks, and when I finally come back to myself, I'm twitching on top of the bed like I've been electrocuted.

The monstrous man who's stunted my brain function sits back on his haunches, a smile of satisfaction curling up his bony visage.

Collapsing back on the bed, I marvel at how tangible everything feels. No waking orgasm has ever been like *that*.

Maybe I should just surrender my sexual needs to my subconscious—*it seems to know exactly what it's doing*.

In the dimness of the room, Ilian's eyes glow even brighter, and I push myself to sit back up. My limbs feel like gelatin, but I manage to slip onto the floor before him without turning into a puddle.

He stares at me, his jaw going slack. I tilt my head to the side as I decide what I want to do, completely ignoring his apparent surprise.

After a moment, I push him onto his back, crawling up between his legs to rub my naked body against his massive frame.

His fur is soft and warm against my skin, and for a moment, I just bask in the feel of his heat enveloping me.

"Mmmmm."

*Is this what being a cat feels like?*

I lean up, peeking into his eyes before placing a kiss right at the base of his throat where the bone of his skull gives way to the velvety gray flesh of his chest.

Fur wraps around his neck, creating a cape-like effect as I continue to place small pecks here and there.

Eventually, I make my way to his lips. I've kissed him a thousand times in my fantasies, but this one feels like the first.

His lips are only a thin, hard line ridged with rows of sharp teeth, but Ilian is endlessly gentle with me.

He cups the back of my head and puckers his mouth as best he can. The kiss is sweet and tender, and I love it—but I want something more.

I snake my tongue out, pressing against one sharp tooth until Ilian opens his mouth. I stroke my tongue inside, shuddering as I trace the coarse bumps on his tongue.

Ilian growls, shifting underneath me, but doesn't attempt to take over. He lets me explore his mouth, and I love every second of it.

Arousal pools within me, my body having recovered from the previous mind-blowing orgasm. I spread my legs, letting my feet drop on either side of his large frame while I straddle the monster.

“I want to taste you,” I pant.

“You are tasting me.”

An unladylike snort escapes me. “I meant your cock.” Ilian's whole body jerks, and I grin. “Is that a ‘yes’?”

He doesn't answer, just nods his head. I shimmy back down the length of his length, knowing we'll both enjoy the friction, until I'm staring at the top of his maroon sweats.

With quick efficiency, I open them up to reveal another patch of light gray fur that vees together from his sides.

It's thick and matted, and Ilian reaches in to help me, pulling out his cock from underneath the hirsute pelt, but all I can do is stare.

For months and months, I've tried to imagine and visualize what Ilian Yaniqu's cock looks like since my research turned up nothing.

It's always been good enough, but whatever the hell my subconscious is tripping on tonight has knocked it out of the park.

The dark length is appallingly huge—apparently, my subconscious is a size queen—but the coloring is what captivates me.

It's the same dark gray of his horns, melting into black at the very base where it disappears into his fur—but the tip is stark white, seemingly made of the same bone as his face.

Beneath the tapered tip are deep ridges that smooth out the further down his cock you go, but at the base, large spikes jut out that I eye with equal parts interest and worry.

But then I remember this is a dream. Ilian can't hurt me—won't hurt me—and I can simply let myself enjoy the moment.

I smile in pure joy at this, catching Ilian's pink gaze. With a wink, I wrap both hands around his length, enjoying his groan.

*My turn.*

## CHAPTER FOUR



### ILIAN

MY MATE'S MOUTH DESCENDS upon my stoyuk, and I'm lost. Her tongue encircles the bone tip before dipping to lick the grooves just underneath it.

My eyes shutter closed as I go limp. My previous sexual encounters were brief and with other monsters. None of them were human, and none ever touched me as Zhuliya is now.

Exquisite doesn't even begin to describe how her lips feel. I could bask in the haven of her silken mouth forever.

Of course, no sooner than I think this, Zhuliya pops off with a delicious smack of her lips. Her dark brown gaze roams over my face, drinking in my expression of pure bliss.

"I love your cock. I've dreamed about it for months."

*She's dreamt of me for months?*

“Stoyuk,” I mumble, barely able to string together a coherent thought.

“Stoyuk?”

“It's the Ithaquan word for ‘cock’.”

“Hmm, I wonder if I search that word...”

Zhuliya trails off, leaving me baffled by her meaning. Her mouth resumes its exploration, and my hips lift from the floor of their own accord.

“Be still, my mate,” she teases, echoing my words from before.

Hearing Zhuliya call me her ‘mate’ sends me into a frenzy. I yank her atop of me so she can touch her tongue to mine like before.

Her pussy pins my stoyuk between our bodies, and I shudder when she slides up and down the length of it.

I can still taste her, and I inhale sharply at the memory as Zhuliya's scent inflames me even more.

She's just as pink as I imagined but a thousand times softer, and I wonder how she'll feel wrapped around—

“Ilian, I need you inside of me.”

*Fuck, how can I deny her when she says things like that?*

Deep down, I know this is wrong. It doesn't matter that Zhuliya consents—she didn't say ‘yes’ to me imprinting upon her and she deserves to know the facts to make an informed choice.

But I can't stop. No matter how much I run from my execrable past, I can't escape. Living among humans doesn't make me one of them.

I'm not civilized—I'm a monster—and this is my mate.

The only thing I can see beyond the vision of the woman on top of me is the golden thread connecting my heart to hers.

An unbreakable bond that can only be shattered by the goddess herself; one that grows brighter and stronger with every touch.

I've been alone for so long that even if the force of my imprint wasn't compelling me to mark my mate with my seed, I would still seek out Zhuliya's warmth.

*In the heat of the moment, it's almost like I can pretend that someone actually loves me.*

Zhuliya wiggles against me, becoming impatient, and I lift her until her pretty pink center rests just above my stoyuk.

She's so small compared to me, and I lower Zhuliya with care. The sight of my white tip piercing her perfect folds rips a possessive snarl from my lips.

*Mine.*

My mate gasps at the contact, her gaze never leaving mine. She clutches my arms to brace herself but gives everything to me. There's no resistance, and her trust humbles me.

There's no doubt it's going to be the tightest fit of my life—if Zhuliya can even take all of me. She's dripping, but I want my stoyuk drenched in her arousal before I fuck her.

“You need to come again—you're not wet enough for me.”

Zhuliya's eyes widen. “I-I'm not?”

“No. Touch yourself while I hold you in place. Show me how you make yourself come.”

That fabulous streak of scarlet I adore tints her cheeks. “I don't know if I can.”

“Have you never made yourself come before?”

She snorts. “You know I have.”

I cock my head.

*Why would I know that?*

“Then show me, soyam.”

The Ithaquan term of endearment flows from me without thought, but I won't—can't—take it back.

*Zhuliya is my cherished one.*

With a tentative nod, she traces a line from her collarbone and down her body, stopping at the hidden nub just above where we're joined.

My breath catches when she circles it, and I memorize the pattern her fingers make that brings her pleasure.

She uses her right hand—the one with the bones along the fingers—and I'm enthralled by the sight of her long, glossy black nails working her sensitive flesh.

It pleases me that my mate unconsciously mimics my claws, even though it was unlikely ever her intention.

And seeing Zhuliya touch herself with them makes me even harder. I thrust upward in an imperceptible move, my mate's pussy swallowing almost all of the white of my stoyuk.

She mewls, now using two fingers to press firmly against her flesh, rubbing quickly as her breath hitches.

Zhuliya's head falls back as she abandons herself to the moment. I could live like this forever, the two of us connected, my mate forever etched in ecstasy.

"Ilian, growl at me!"

Her command surprises me, but I don't hesitate to do as she requests because I know she's going to come from it—*because of me*.

A feral snarl tears from my throat, reverberating between the two of us. It's the keening cry of a man on the edge of his sanity.

It's desperate, possessive, and needy, exactly how this woman makes me feel, but it does the trick, and Zhuliya screams as she explodes around me.

Great Ulu, even the smallest measure of her pussy around my stoyuk clutches like a vice, spasming as my mate rides out her pleasure.

Her beautiful face is painted in shades of elation, and it takes everything inside of me not to join my mate.

I grind my teeth against the sensation of her coming and focus on lowering her a bit more down my length.

She slips down with ease, taking in almost all the ridges on the underside of my stoyuk. That's not even halfway down me, but I'm still impressed.

From my angle, it literally looks like I'm cleaving my mate in two, and like the fucking degenerate I am, I love it.

“Again.”

Zhuliya stares at me, still in a daze. “Again? You want me to come again?”

Her voice is husky and goes straight to my stoyuk. “Yes.”

“Ilian, I don't—”

Hearing my name on her lips yanks another growl from me and a moan from her. “Come screaming my name.”

I bounce her lightly up and down my stoyuk while testing a theory. Zhuliya isn't touching herself anymore, but nor am I.

The weight of her body rests in my hands, and I can't properly rub her like I want. Instead, I purr, the rumbling sound vibrating from me into her.

She gasps, and I fuck her harder, never stopping the rumbling coming from my chest. Zhuliya starts chanting my name, but it's not enough.

“Scream it!”

“Fuck, Ilian, please!”

“That's a good soyam.”

Her mouth forms an O of shock and her body shakes as she comes again. I'm unsure whether it's from my purring, my words, or a combination of the two, but I catalog her every reaction.

It doesn't matter that this can never happen again—pleasing my mate is my number one priority at the moment.

Zhuliya collapses forward in my arms, the movement forcing her body downward, and she inadvertently seats

herself nearly on the entirety of my stoyuk.

A hoarse cry escapes me, but I push aside the tsunami of emotion threatening to pull me under to check on my mate.

“Soyam, stop moving. You’re going to hurt yourself. I’m too big—”

Instead of listening to me, Zhuliya squirms. “More.”

“I’m not sure—”

“More!”

The logical part of my brain disconnects, and I slam Zhuliya down the remainder of my length. Instantly, all her emotions flood through me. To my relief, none of them is pain—only joy.

I exult in her happiness, marveling at how perfectly we came together despite our differences. I try to catch her eye, but Zhuliya is staring down at the dark gray spikes.

They’re meant to pleasure an Ithaquan female, but to my delight, I note that when Zhuliya rides me, one of them rubs against where she touched herself.

She twists on my stoyuk until the spike hits exactly where she wants, and then she goes boneless in my arms, letting me take control once more.

I desperately want to make our first—and only—time mating together memorable, but then Zhuliya starts begging me to go faster.

*Harder.*

As with anything she asks, I can’t deny her. When her pussy tightens like a vice, I know she’s close, and I purr in satisfaction when she comes around my stoyuk.

Zhuliya chokes out my name, and I’m lost. With a roar, I slam into her small frame, grinding us together as I fill my mate.

My seed leaks out of her pussy, dribbling onto my fur, and Zhuliya runs a finger through it before bringing it to her mouth.

I mutter a prayer to the goddess when my stoyuk jerks to attention again. Zhuliya needs to rest, but my body wants nothing more than to breed my mate.

As does my bond—*the one she never asked for.*

The moment is perfect, my arms wrapped around my mate, but it's shattered when her eyelids flutter shut and she whispers something.

My heart lurches as she drifts between consciousness, and I shake her back awake. "What did you say?"

I already know, but I need confirmation.

Zhuliya's brow furrows. "I said...best dream ever."

Her brown gaze widens, as if she's only now realizing she's *not* asleep. I groan, tossing my head back on the mountain of pillows, my horns no doubt shredding the silky covering.

"It wasn't a dream."

Raising my head, I peer at Zhuliya. If possible, her eyes grow even larger, and guilt churns inside of me. It was wrong to go after her and give in to my urges—but I let myself become the beast I swear to everyone I'm not.

*Fuck...how do I even fix this mess I've made?*

## CHAPTER FIVE



## ZHULIYA

THE ONCE SCORCHING TEMPERATURE of the room plummets as I stare at Ilian. Unease envelops us in its dark embrace, and my hands tremble with the realization that I'm wide awake.

“N-n-not a dream?”

Ilian shakes his massive head.

*Oh fuck, what have I done?*

Images of the last few hours whip through my head at breakneck speed, all too embarrassing to look at closely—everything is too raw right now—but I gasp at one memory in particular.

“My back!”

Immediately, Ilian picks me up from where I’m cuddled into his side, maneuvering me like I weigh nothing.

This stokes the dying embers of my arousal, and I silently curse the needy flesh sack that I call a body.

*Isn’t it enough that I have to feed and water it constantly—now it’s lusting after a monster?!*

I scowl as Ilian turns me in his arms, positioning my body until I’m straddling the entirety of his right arm.

My bent legs hang off either side, and my stomach trembles against the fur tickling me there. Surprisingly, it’s rather comfortable—minus the fact that my bare pussy rests on his hairy bicep.

Ilian smooths his hand down my back, his claws lightly prodding the surface, and goosebumps break out over my skin.

Shit, I need to think of something—anything—else except this man and the crazy reactions he pulls from my body.

*New Year’s resolutions!*

Closing my eyes, I ponder what useless pledge I’ll make to myself this time. It’s hard to focus with the monstrous man’s heat seeping into me or the fact that my ass is glued to his torso, but I try.

*Oh, bingo—I promise I won’t grind anymore on Ilian Yaniqu.*

It’s probably the most sensible resolution I’ve ever made, much better than my paltry promises to lose weight.

“Zhuliya—”

“I’m going to lose weight!”

My stupid brain fritzes when Ilian whispers my name, and I blurt out the mortifying words. I close my eyes and pray this isn’t real.

*Too late for that.*

“Zhuliya? Zhuliya!”

“What?” I croak.

The giant Ithaqua curls his arm until I’m sitting up straight, my back nearly plastered to his chest.

“You do *not* need to lose weight.”

He doesn’t ask me why I said it or what I was thinking. No, he just utters this single sentence laced with absolute conviction.

“I don’t?”

Ilian scowls when I twist my head to the side to catch his eye. “Who told you that?”

A bubble of laughter builds inside of me. “Oh, every doctor, magazine, and scale I’ve stepped on.”

His fuchsia gaze burns brighter. “Get a new doctor, fuck those magazines, and stop stepping on scales. They sound like land mines for your mental health. You’re *perfect*.”

He punctuates the words with sexy, little growls that send my actual New Year’s resolution into oblivion.

*How do I not grind on the man when he makes sounds like that?*

“Is my back ruined?”

Ilian tilts his head. “Ruined? Oh—no, it’s not. It’s...healed.”

“Healed? Already? How?!”

“Zhuliya, I’m not sure how to tell you this, but I imprinted upon you.”

“Um, what’s imprinting?”

He shifts, jostling my entire body which is still draped across his arm. “It’s where an Ithaquan male imparts a piece of his soul into his mate.”

*Piece of soul.*

*Into mate.*

“Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no!”

The horned man cringes, running a claw down my back. I'm unsure if it's a gesture of reassurance, but it soothes me all the same—which is bad.

Very bad.

“I'm so sorry, Zhuliya. I promise I'll fix this.”

“How? I know nothing about mates or imprinting, but ‘imparting a piece of your soul’ seems pretty freaking permanent!”

Ilian winces. “It was an accident.”

He sounds so defeated, and I feel like a bitch. I'm letting my mouth speak without permission, but in my defense, I'm confused—and a little hurt.

I'm not Ilian's choice, just an accident, per his words.

“Right, sorry.”

Ilian groans. “Great Ulu, please don't apologize to me! It's all *my* fault. I...I couldn't help myself.”

“You couldn't?”

“No. I swear I fought against my instincts, but your scent—gods, your scent. Never have I smelled anything so divine.”

This more than mollifies the ache in the pit of my stomach, and I remind myself that I don't want to be mated to a stranger, so I have no right to feel upset about it being an accident.

“Erm, thank you. So how do you take away an imprint?” A thought comes to mind, and I pout. “I'm going to have to remove my new ink, aren't I?”

Ilian nods. “Yes, but it's not that simple.”

At this, I snort. For a tattoo artist to call ink removal ‘simple’ is laughable, and perhaps a bit terrifying.

“Go on.”

He sighs. “Aisyth must be the one to dissolve our bond as well as the tat.”

“The goddess?!”

“You know Aisyth?”

A scorching blush suffuses my cheeks, running down my very naked body. “Kind of...I should get dressed.”

When I don’t explain more and try to get up, Ilian presses a hand onto my spine, flattening me back down. I wheeze as the air whooshes out of my lungs.

“How do you know Aisyth?”

I tense at the suspicious note in his voice. “I don’t! I just, um, read about her briefly when I was looking up my tattoo.”

There’s no way in this frigid hell I’m confessing that I researched the man and Ithaqua months ago in an attempt to find out what his cock might look like.

Except...I maybe did in the throes of carnal monster bliss—  
*please don’t let Ilian remember that!*

“And you feel guilty about this?”

My heart stumbles over its normal rhythm. “Guilty? What do you mean?”

Ilian scrapes his claws through the patch of fur between his horns. “The tattoo connects us—bonds us—and I can sense your emotions, especially the stronger that they are.”

*Elohim Adirim, does this mean he feels what I feel, specifically when I’m—*

“Soyam, I beg of you, please stop squirming. Yes, let’s get you dressed so we can talk. I can’t think around your worry and arous—”

He cuts off, but I know what Ilian meant. Lovely, the man obviously knows what a horny mess I am *and* the nervous wreck my brain is about him realizing this.

Rolling to the right, I drop partially on the bed but mostly on the floor in an inelegant attempt to create space between the two of us.

*Cue another anxiety spike.*

Again, the sweet monster tries to soothe me, but I dash into the bathroom with a handful of clothes that I hope contains everything I need to cover my body appropriately.

Once I'm decent, I crack open the door to find the bedroom empty. I wonder if Ilian's left when a sharp tug in my chest has me whipping around toward the connecting room.

Ilian is sitting on the broken couch, his back to me. His head is bent, cradled in his hands, and a pang of unease slithers down my neck.

An invisible weight crushes my lungs as I try to inhale, and I whimper at the overwhelming sensations crashing through me.

Suddenly, Ilian is in front of me, on his knees once more. He tips my head upward to meet his glowing stare.

"I can't breathe!"

"Easy, soyam, you can breathe. Follow my lead. In...and out. That's a good girl."

The abrupt panic attack dissipates as quickly as it came, and now I'm more concerned that I might melt into a puddle at his feet for calling me a 'good girl'.

"Th-thank you. That was strange."

"Again, that was my fault. Just as I sense your emotions, you can sense mine. I let myself wallow in the misery of hurting you with what's happened, and in doing so...well, I just hurt you more."

I raise a brow, giving him a soft smile. "I guess I'm not the only one feeling guilty."

Ilian grimaces. "The worst you are culpable of is coming to my studio for a tattoo, but I...I have done much more. We-I-I mean, we slept together without your consent."

His confession comes out of nowhere, and I understand my panic attack a little better. No wonder Ilian feels overwhelmed if he thinks this is what really happened.

“You didn’t do anything without my consent. I admit, I thought it was a dream because it seemed too amazing to be real. The truth is, I wanted it then.”

What I don’t add is that I still want it—and him—when I know I should be getting away as fast as possible.

But my words seem to ease some of the tension riding Ilian. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

He nods, sensing the sincerity through our bond, and some of the pressure on my chest lifts. “Ok. I will take your word. So you really don’t know Aisyth—you’ve never met her by accident?”

My brow furrows. “Met? She’s an actual person?”

Now the gorgeous Ithaqua before me scratches his bony brow. “Aren’t your gods and goddesses real?”

“It’s complicated. My God doesn’t live on Earth.”

“Ah, I see. Ithaquan deities still live here, though they travel around the world and only show themselves very rarely.”

“That doesn’t sound very promising if we need your Goddess to erase the ink and break our bond.”

Ilian drops his head, careful not to hit me with his horns. “I know. It won’t be easy, but I vow to you that we—I—will fix this.”

“Ok, what’s the first step? How do we find Aisyth?”

“We look to the ink. She always leaves a map hidden in the depths of the artwork that she inspires. This is how her followers can search out their muse and worship Aisyth... closer.”

“Closer?” My voice lifts at the end, not quite a screech, but still too high.

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of worshiping my goddess in such a manner. That’s only reserved for my mate.”

A lightbulb goes off in my head—I’m his mate.

“You want to worship me?”

Ilian lifts his head, his bright magenta gaze boring into me.  
“With every fiber of my being.”

My breath hitches at his sincerity.

*And why do I want that so badly when all of this is just a mistake?*

## CHAPTER SIX



### ILIAN

ONE SECOND, ZHULIYA SEEMS to revel in our mating bond, and the next, she's drowning in fear of a commitment she didn't even make.

The whiplash of emotions drains me, not that I deserve a reprieve. I meant it when I said it was my fault we're in this, and it's my fault her emotions are going haywire.

I tamp back the guilt. The last time I let it consume me, my mate had a panic attack, and I'm still mentally kicking myself over the confusion and terror that spread across her beautiful face.

She's taking the news well enough—maybe humans handle stress better than the media has led me to believe.

It's probably just Zhuliya. In a world of red roses, she's a white lily, standing out in stark contrast that calls to my soul.

"Ilian?"

Her lilting voice yanks me out of my poetic reflection. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked if you wanted to look at the tattoo with me to see if we can figure anything out." Right, her ink—*across her bare, fully healed back*... "I took a picture of it."

Relief courses through me, and with it, the echo of Zhuliya's hurt. It takes me a moment to sort through our combined emotions to figure out why she's upset.

"I'm not rejecting you," I whisper quietly, still on my knees before her. "I'm not, but please understand that I want you like nothing in my life and seeing your naked back makes it... worse."

"Oh, I—of course. Let me get my phone."

Zhuliya disappears into the bedroom before coming back out, a frown marring her brow. "I don't know how this can be a map."

She's squinting at the tiny screen, and I chuckle at her expression. "It's not obvious, trust me. Come here."

I tug her to the broken couch, seating her next to me. She laughs when she slides into my side since the furniture slants toward the floor where I accidentally shattered the legs.

"It's not funny."

Zhuliya presses a hand to her mouth, but it does nothing to stop her giggles. "I can't believe you broke the couch! That's even more ridiculous than me coming from your—"

Her tiny frame freezes, her face caught in a comical 'oh shit' expression. "Go on."

Another gorgeous blush tints her cheeks. "Nothing."

"Doesn't feel like nothing."

She scowls. "Can't you block my emotions?"

“No. That’s not how Ithaquan mating bonds work. Now you were saying.”

“You aren’t going to let this go, are you?”

“Not on your life.”

“You already know I came from... from your tat.”

“Yeah, I already knew. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

She swats my arm playfully. “Pretty proud of yourself, huh?”

I duck my head. “Not proud, just happy that my imprint pleased you.”

“It definitely did—almost the best orgasm of my life.”

Jealousy swirls inside of me. “Almost?” I try to make my voice light but fail.

Zhuliya gives me a brilliant smile. “Almost, but my most recent ones top it.”

It takes a second for her meaning to click, but when it does, triumph sweeps through me. I might have created this disaster of a situation, but at least I gave my mate something to remember.

“So I’m my own competition?”

She bites her lip. “Guess you’ll just have to work harder next time.”

Next time—*is that an invitation?*

Clearing my throat, I study the image of the tattoo, zooming in on the intricate details. The swirling, floral pattern captivates me, but there’s more to it than meets the eye.

Zhuliya looks on in silence, her expression growing more and more disgruntled. “I don’t see anything that looks like a map.”

“Aisyth cleverly disguises it. To be in a goddess’ presence—even one who lives on Earth—is a privilege. Finding her will be no easy feat.”

“Well, two heads are better than one.”

I grunt in agreement, my eyes scanning every curve and petal of the floral design as I lose myself in the moment.

It's almost like when I go into my trances when I'm doing ink. Everything around me disappears but the vision before me.

Along the top right of the tattoo, there's a subtle shift in the pattern that forms a cluster of delicate blossoms near the edge of the tattoo.

Tapping a claw on them, I draw Zhuliya's attention. "These flowers are different. See the way the petals form a distinctive shape?"

Zhuliya leans in, her warm breath puffing the fur on my arm as she examines the picture. "I do! They're sort of like... islands?"

"And not just any islands, but those in the archipelago between Russia and Japan—the *Kuril Islands*."

My mate scrunches her nose. "The Kuril Islands? Why is that so familiar? Are those the islands of the northernmost point of Japan?"

"Yes. They're the barrier between the Pacific Ocean and the Sea Of Okhotsk."

"Sakura—my roommate who's from Japan—has mentioned them before. She says a lot of monsters live there since the islands are largely uninhabited by humans. They're remote and usually cold all year round."

"The perfect place for an Ithaquan goddess to be."

Zhuliya claps. "So much for it being difficult!"

I chuckle. "I'll admit we found this first clue rather quickly but getting to the Kuril Islands will take over a week if we're lucky."

"We can't fly to an airport nearby?"

"Firstly, these islands are remote and nearly inaccessible. I'm not sure where the closest airport would be. The quickest route would be to use the Transsib."

“The what?”

“The Trans-Siberian Railway. We can get on at Novosibirsk and ride it to the coast. From there, we’ll need to cross the Sea of Okhotsk.

For that, we’ll need permission from the Kueeng of Dagon, but if granted, it’ll cut weeks off our travel as well as save us from the awful weather that far north.

If we’re forced to go around the Kamchatka Peninsula, we might not reach the islands until it’s nearly spring.”

Zhuliya’s mouth flaps open. “I can’t just travel all the way across Russia for days on end! I have a home, kinda, and a job, kinda, and—”

She stumbles over her Russian, reverting back to English. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down. My English is terrible, I’m sorry. What do you mean ‘kinda’?”

Her shoulders slump. “It’s actually ‘kind of’ slurred together.”

“How do you ‘kind of’ have a house and a job?” I click my claw against the spike jutting from my jaw, my foot bouncing with the same agitation.

My mate is homeless—*unacceptable!*

“Well, I live in an apartment with my roommate, Sakura, but she’s gone a lot visiting her family in Japan. As for our jobs, she and I are both like freelancers.

We only get paid if we actively scout out people who need our help. If we stopped putting ourselves out there, then no one would think to utilize our services.”

“What do you do?”

“We reunite families.”

Even though I don’t understand *how* she does this, her words send a pang through me. “That sounds like important work.”

“It is! So many families that immigrate to the States get separated. Sakura and I network to bring everyone back

together, especially children with their loved ones.”

“How did you come into this job?”

Zhuliya glances away. “My parents lost touch for a while when my ima—mother—moved away from Russia.

My ata—father—couldn’t get a visa, and his family shunned him for choosing my ima. It was nearly four years before he could leave.

By some miracle, my ima managed to remain in contact—very difficult as cell phones and the internet were not big yet, especially where my ata was in Russia.

I didn’t meet my ata until I was three, but I’ll never forget what it was like seeing my parents reunited. It’s a memory that will forever live in my heart.”

My chest constricts. “I can see why you do such noble work. It’s very personal to you.”

She nods. “Very. How about you—how did you become a tattoo artist?”

Now it’s my turn to look away. “Like you, I was separated from my family at a young age, but it was my whole clan... and I never was reunited.

Ithaqua are nomads and rarely stay in the same place. We prefer to roam the northernmost part of the Siberian tundra.

My kind generally isn’t welcomed like other monsters. We’re known for our...bestly manners, you could say. We’re not really meant for polite society.”

Zhuliya frowns. “I’m sure that’s not true—you’re an absolute gentleman!”

I laugh. “No, I’m not. I imprinted upon you without permission and broke this couch—polite people do *not* do that.”

“Both were an accident.”

“Regardless, I’m living proof of why monsters and humans shouldn’t mix.” Before she can argue, I continue. “A tribe of Mulen took me in and raised me, but I didn’t really fit in.”

“Mulen?”

“Another monster that lives in northern Siberia. I was lucky they came across me as I was too young to know how to fend for myself.”

“How old were you?”

“I’m not sure. Ithaqua don’t keep time like humans.”

“So you’ve never found your real family?”

“No, and I’ve tried. You asked why I became a tattoo artist. An Ithaquan custom is for a priestess of Aisyth to tattoo the mating bonds onto the horns of males.

My only memory of my family is of my mother, who I remember was a priestess. It’s like her skill and passion were passed down to me, and I’ve used it to make a living in the human world.

It’s surprisingly one of the few places I do feel like I fit in. Funny when you consider most humans run at the sight of my kind.”

Zhuliya doesn’t even crack a smile. Her gaze is large and solemn. “Ilian, do you still want to find them?”

“You mean my family?”

“Yes.”

“I...yeah, I do.”

“Then I’ll help you.”

She places a hand on my arm, and the conviction in her voice fills my body with warmth. I give her a tender smile, hoping my heart isn’t in my eyes.

*Because when I look at her, I’ve found my family.*

# CHAPTER SEVEN



## ZHULIYA

THE RHYTHMIC CLATTER OF the wheels on tracks signals the arrival of the Transsib. I inhale as the old railcars stop in front of Ilian and me.

*Is this really happening?*

A day ago, I was fulfilling one of my dreams of getting a tattoo by Ilian Yaniqu, and the next, I'm mated to the man, going on the journey of a lifetime to undo it.

Ilian, ever the gentleman, helps me up the steps and down the narrow hall to our cabin. How the man can even fit is a mystery.

His broad shoulders and towering horns make it so he has to nearly crawl with his head down to avoid bumping into

anything.

We get situated just as the train leaves. Sitting by the window, I watch the Siberian landscape unfold like a vast, untouched canvas.

Across from me, Ilian stares out, too, and the silence stretches between us but it's not uncomfortable. In truth, his presence is a comforting anchor that grounds me.

Last night, he insisted on sleeping on the broken couch in the sitting room while I took refuge in my room.

As I drifted into sleep, I couldn't help but feel bereft at the thought of him just beyond the door—for some insane reason, I wanted him by my side.

I feel safe when Ilian's with me—calm, even—like I've been missing something inside of me my entire life and he's the lost puzzle piece that completes the emptiness.

And that terrifies me because I don't know if this is how I genuinely feel or if it's the effects of the bond—what if I'm trying to dissolve the greatest thing that's ever happened to me?

*More importantly, what the heck happened to my fear of relationships?!*

I shift in my seat, wishing I knew what was real and what wasn't with my emotions. No easy feat considering how I can also feel Ilian through the bond.

His lust, his admiration, *his guilt*.

Even without him saying so, I know he thinks he's a monster. I feel it in my bones how he hates what he's done to me.

*If only he could see himself through my eyes.*

Just this morning, when we checked out of the hotel, an elderly woman approached Ilian, pulling him in for a strong hug that belied her air of weathered frailty.

She didn't say anything, just patted his bony cheek and hobbled away to sit in front of the lobby fire.

Ilian stared after her for a long moment before quietly requesting to book her room for the rest of the week.

I pretended not to hear, but how can this man think he's anything less than an absolute sweetheart?

The incident left me reflecting on the stark contrast between Ilian's perceived monstrosity and the kindness he effortlessly extends.

In his eyes, society brands Ithaqua as senseless beasts, but the reality he showed me painted a different picture.

*And a tiny part of me already loves him for it.*

Shaking myself from my thoughts, I break the silence between us. "When was the last time you rode the Transsib?"

Ilian grins, the curl of his bony lips almost sheepish. "Actually, this is my first time. Ithaqua—and Mulens—prefer to walk the vast expanses of the Siberian tundra.

The idea of a structured journey is foreign to us as we tend to roam in a nomadic fashion from one place to another depending on the seasons.

And even though I live in human society, I rarely use human transportation. It's not exactly made for monsters, especially ones my size."

"Oh, I didn't realize! Are you uncomfortable?"

He shrugs. "No. I'm happy to be wherever you are."

*Be still, my stupid heart.*

"Who are the Mulens? I'm afraid I've never heard of them before."

"Some call them the Siberian Bigfoot, but they're their own monster species."

"How do you know so much about the Ithaqua if you were separated at birth?"

"Ithaquan traditions aren't written down, but passed in utero to Ithaquan tungan—younglings. From it, I also have vague memories of my mother, but none of my father."

I rub my chest, the familiar constriction making it hard to breathe. Whenever I fail to reunite families, I get awful pains right around my heart.

Sakura thinks I need to see a doctor, but I know it's just an expression of the agony I'm feeling at not succeeding.

Even though I was young, I know what it's like to have no memories of my ata—but at least we met and I grew up having both my parents.

“Do you see your Mulen family?”

“Only about once a year. Although I care for them deeply, the Mulen clan that took me in only did so because they knew I could help with hunting and gathering. It wasn't out of love, per se.”

I scowl. “Who doesn't love a child?!”

Ilian reaches forward to cup my face in his clawed hand. “You are much too kind, my mate.”

My lips twist even more, but the tightness in my chest loosens. I'm fairly certain it's because he's touching me, and I try to tamp back the nervous butterflies at the thought.

*Stop getting attached!*

“You're stressing about something,” Ilian hints without remorse.

“No, I'm not.”

“Little liar, tell me what's wrong.”

I shake my head. It's bad enough he can sense everything I'm feeling. He doesn't need to know what I'm thinking, too.

The giant Ithaqua sighs. “Ok, you asked for it.”

In a flash, I'm in his lap as he tickles me through the layers of fabric I'm dressed in to stave off the harsh cold that seeps in through the window.

My shrieks of laughter echo around us, and I hope these cabins are marginally sound-proof, or else someone is going to complain.

“Are you going to tell me?”

“You can’t do this!”

“Obviously, I can,” he smirks like the very devil he is.

“It’s not fair! You’re bigger than me! I can’t retaliate!”

Ilian chuckles. “Trust me, soyam, you have all the power.”

His words don’t make any sense, but I can barely think as he runs his hands up and down my sides, his claws digging in gently enough to not hurt me, but hard enough to make me laugh.

“You win!” My voice is a breathless whisper, but Ilian stops.

“Go on.”

He settles me in his lap, and suddenly, the cabin is far too hot. I peel off a sweater while trying not to think about all the naughty things this man can do with his tongue.

*And cock.*

The Ithaqua groans. “You’re going to be the death of me, I swear.”

“What—why? What did I do?”

Ilian eyes me critically. “Never mind. What were you worrying about earlier?”

*Ugh, he doesn’t miss anything.*

“I guess I’m just anxious about finding Aisyth—what if we don’t?”

“We will. I promise.”

Through our bond, I sense the guarantee of his vow as well as his hurt. He might hate himself for creating this bond, but he also wants it, too.

*And I don’t know what to do with that because I can barely figure out my own emotions.*

A week ago, the thought of being in a committed relationship with someone would’ve caused heart palpitations,

so theoretically, a mating bond should kill me—except, I’ve never felt more alive.

“You’re upset again.”

“More...confused. I don’t know how to feel, and that’s overwhelming in itself.”

“I understand. Again, I’m so sorry for dragging you into this mess.”

“Please stop apologizing! I promise, it’s ok. As you said, we’ll figure it out. Hopefully soon. I do want to go back home, and I’m sure you have clients.”

“Ironically, I already planned on taking the next two weeks off. I sometimes go and visit the Mulens this time of year and bring them things. The young ones love human gadgets.

I called Yuri to tell him that I didn’t get to clean up properly last night. He’ll take care of the studio while I’m gone.”

“You’re lucky to have Yuri.”

His bright pink gaze narrows. “You seemed close with him.”

It takes me a second to place what I’m sensing from him. “If you turn green, you’ll be the epitome of jealousy.”

“What?”

“In English, we have a saying. When someone’s jealous, we call it the ‘little green monster’.”

“Firstly, I’m not little. Secondly, Ithaqua are possessive of their mates.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, I’m in *your* lap, not Yuri’s.”

Ilian squeezes my ass and grunts. “Good. This is where you belong.”

We stare at one another, the moment stretching as something combustible builds between us. A smart woman would back away—this *isn’t* what I want.

Instead, I lean forward, licking along his smooth jaw, his groan reverberating through my body before settling inside of me.

“Fuck,” Ilian mutters.

“Fuck it,” I agree, twisting his words.

Later, I can berate myself for lighting the match and throwing it on the kindling of our arousal, but right now, I just want to drown in this man.

*If this bond kills me, at least I'll die in a cloud of post-orgasmic bliss.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT



### ILIAN

I FREEZE, HEARING THE need—the plea—in Zhuliya’s voice. I try to resist, I really do, but the bond between us flares to life, demanding that we get closer.

It’ll continue to inflame our senses until we fully submit to it. With every stolen touch, we just make it worse.

“Soyam, we must stop.”

Zhuliya pulls back to stare at me, her expression torn. She wants this, but she also knows it’s just the bond. Her will to fight it is getting weaker, though.

“Please.”

*Oh Ulu, anything but this.*

“It’s dangerous—this is illegal.”

This catches her attention. “We can draw the curtains and lock the door. There’s still a bit before our next stop. We’ll just have to be quiet.”

I snort. My mate is anything but quiet when I’m touching her, but it’s one of the things that I love most about her.

“You misunderstand. I’m not talking about it being illegal to have sex in public, I’m talking about you having any relation with a monster, public or otherwise.

In Russia, it’s illegal for you to be with me. If anyone asks, we’re friends. I’m not overly concerned about what they could do to me, but I worry for you—especially since you have citizenship here.”

“Why can’t we be in a relationship?”

I shrug. “Monster-human relations are strictly forbidden. The punishment is worse for the monsters, but I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

Zhuliya scowls, her luscious red lips twisting. “How ridiculous! It’s nobody’s business who I’m in a relationship with.

I’ll never understand why the governing bodies of countries think they have a say in the private matters of their citizens’ love lives!”

“I couldn’t agree more, but now you understand why we must be cautious.”

“Maybe we should shut the curtains, just in case someone walks by and gets the wrong idea.”

Her expression is innocent, but what I feel through the bond is *not*. “Soyam,” I warn as Zhuliya leans over in my lap to whip the crimson fabric together, shutting us off from the world.

“Yes?”

“You’re up to something.”

“Just being cautious, like you said.”

“Ah, but you forget that I can sense your emotions. What are you thinking?”

She fidgets, her plump ass grinding into my already hard stoyuk. “Nothing.”

I give her a stern look—she rolls her hips.

*My mate will be the death of me.*

“Didn’t you hear a word I said?”

This deflates her a bit. “I did, but Ilian, I need...”

Zhuliya trails off, helpless against the force of our bond and the arousal it sparks inside of her.

“I know, soyam, I promise I do, but this will only make it worse. Have you tried...taking care of it yourself?”

The memory of my mate rubbing her hidden jewel and coming on my stoyuk fills my mind, and I inhale sharply, dispelling the thought.

*Not now.*

“I tried this morning in the shower, actually.”

She looks me in the eye when she confesses, but her cheeks tint a lovely, rosy shade that reminds me of her pussy.

“It didn’t help?”

“I couldn’t...I’ve never struggled before, but no matter how aroused I became, I couldn’t come. It’s almost painful, this *need*.”

My guilt reaches new echelons. “The bond makes you crave me. It works to keep us codependent.”

“That sounds unhealthy.”

I chuckle. “You must remember that my kind evolved in the bitterness of northern Siberia, near the Arctic circle.

Our survival demanded what you consider an unhealthy relationship. Mating bonds ensure that Ithaquan couples can sense one another and their basic needs, such as if they’re in danger or hungry.

These are key to enduring the harsh landscape, and by making us need one another, it also guarantees the propagation of future Ithaqua.”

“So the overwhelming desire I feel for you is really just Aisyth’s sick way of continuing your species?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that—and I can’t say for sure what my goddess was thinking in sanctioning our bond. To be honest, I don’t think we can procreate.”

“Something else to ask her if we find her.”

“We will,” I promise for the thousandth time.

My mind races as I think of ways to comfort Zhuliya, but I know there’s only one. With a sigh, I shift her in my lap.

“I want you to try and make yourself come again.”

She blushes. “I told you, I can’t.”

“But you did last night.”

The pink of her cheeks deepens. “Because I was riding you!”

*Crap, that’s too valid of a point.*

“Maybe me holding you will be enough.”

We both know it won’t be, but neither of us wants to address what’s inevitably going to happen.

I twist Zhuliya so that her back is pressed against me while spreading her legs wide over the side of my lap.

Her breath hitches when I take her hand and glide it over her pants. The soft material appears stretchy and built for warmth.

When I reach the apex of her thighs, I move away, but my mate protests. “Please, keep your hand on top of mine.”

It’s a bad idea, but again, I can’t seem to deny her when I’m already putting her through much physically and emotionally.

“As you wish, soyam.”

She relaxes a little at this, and I feel her fingers work small circles over her center. Her hips buck, and my left hand pushes

down on her hip to anchor her in place.

Faster and faster her fingers fly, her pleasure building, but then she lets out a groan of defeat—not bliss.

“I was so close,” she whimpers.

“Maybe try inside your pants.”

Zhuliya nods, but when I try to pull back, she yanks my hand with hers down the front of her lacy underwear.

“You said you would help me.”

Sighing in defeat, I follow her lead. It’s different without the fabric barrier, and the satin smoothness of her slick center drives me wild.

I shift to get more comfortable, but it only makes things worse. The front of my pants strain against the push of my stoyuk, and I long to replace both our hands with it.

Once more, Zhuliya gets close to climax but nothing seems to push her over the edge. Through our bond, I sense her frustration.

“What do you need, soyam?”

“I need you in me.”

The words are both music to my ears and a blade to my heart. It’s irresponsible to take her where anyone could stumble upon us, regardless of the locked door and closed curtains.

I couldn’t bear it if Zhuliya were to get in trouble with Russian officials, especially since I created this mess, but I also struggle against my natural instincts to soothe my mate and give her what she desires.

*And right now, she needs me.*

“Just this once.”

Zhuliya nods eagerly as I dip a claw into her drenched pussy. I’m careful not to cut her while I curl it deep inside, watching her expression.

When I hit a certain spot, my mate moans all the while touching the sensitive nub above my hand.

“Yes, there!”

Together, we work in tandem until Zhuliya spasms around my finger, her hoarse cry signaling her release that I muffle with my other hand.

“Better?” I ask after we’ve both caught our breaths.

“No.”

My chest tightens in worry, even though I don’t feel any distress from her through our bond—only contentment.

“Then what—”

Zhuliya cuts off my words when she wordlessly slips off my lap onto her knees and then twists to face me.

“I won’t be happy until you’ve come, too.”

The pressure inside of me tightens. “Soyam, we shouldn’t —”

“If I was aching, then so are you. Please? I’ll be a good girl and keep my hands to myself if you want.”

*No.*

What I want is to push Zhuliya back and fuck her until my cum paints every square centimeter of my mate’s gorgeous body, inside and out, while she caresses my fur.

But what I want isn’t smart nor prudent, so keeping her hands to herself she will—it’ll be hard enough to control myself without Zhuliya touching me.

“Will you come on my face, please?”

My mate’s question snaps me back to attention, and I groan. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

She shrugs, giving me a sinful grin that nearly cracks my resolve before kissing the seam of my pants.

Her tongue darts out, licking at my hard length, and even through the fabric, I feel the heat of her desire.

*It threatens to consume every good intention I have.*

With trembling hands, I undo the laces at the top of my pants and pull out my stoyuk. Zhuliya's ravenous expression fuels my own hunger, and I pump my fist up and down.

My mate stares in fascination, and I groan, unable to keep still as my hips buck in an attempt to bring us closer.

The bony head of my stoyuk hovers mere centimeters from her lips, and before I can comprehend what's happening, Zhuliya leans forward and presses a kiss to the tip.

I explode all over her face like she asked, my stoyuk jerking as hot cum splashes against her cheeks and pretty mouth.

When she wipes herself clean with her hand and then sucks my seed off her fingertips, another spurt erupts from me.

Zhuliya leans in to hug me, pinning my still hard—and throbbing—length between us. “Thank you.”

My stomach twists. “Please don't thank me...I enjoyed this far more than I should have.”

She frowns, biting her full, bottom lip. The glossy red color I've come to associate with Zhuliya looks even better when covered with my cum.

“You're supposed to enjoy it.”

I shake my head, wishing I could articulate everything inside of me. Although Zhuliya can sense my emotions, I'm sure they're a chaotic mess as well.

Abruptly, I stand. “I'm going to find the food cart. You need to eat.”

Before she can say anything, I unlock the door and rush out of our cabin. As I escape, I feel her hurt and bewilderment at both of us, and I sigh.

Zhuliya needs me physically because of the bond, but even before we touched one another, I knew it was a bad idea. Now she's even more confused.

With every passing second, things become more and more complicated between the two of us, and sex will only make it

worse.

*And so, this can never happen again.*

## CHAPTER NINE



### ZHULIYA

THE NEXT FEW DAYS pass uncomfortably. Through our bond, I feel Ilian's guilt for imprinting on me against my will and then complicating things by having rough, dirty, perfect sex.

In return, *I* feel guilty, which then only feeds into Ilian's emotions more, creating a vicious cycle that ultimately makes me want to scream.

Preferably from coming, but Ilian refuses to take the hint—or maybe he's purposefully ignoring my attempts to seduce him.

With what I can sense from the guy, he likely assumes my insatiable hunger is caused by the bond, which he considers

his fault.

Ilian has no idea that I've been touching myself to fantasies of him for months, and he never will because that's one secret that can die with me.

As the food cart approaches, I ask Ilian to get me some grub before I slip out to use the restroom. The train is nice, albeit a little chilly. Of course, Ilian thinks it's too warm, but I imagine with all his fur, he overheats easily.

*Definitely made for Siberian winters.*

Normally, the cold doesn't bother me, but it seems ever since I got my tattoo, I'm more susceptible to it.

Maybe I should ask Ilian—

I bump into someone because I'm so lost in my thoughts. It's an older woman, wearing the familiar kamzul that my ima dressed in.

My basic Tatar is rusty, but I attempt an apology. The woman grins broadly, her teeth a startling white against her tanned and wrinkled face.

She rattles off something I have no prayer of understanding, and I switch to Russian, explaining myself and my background.

“Ah, I see, my sweet child. Have you ever been to Kazan?”

“No, but my ima spoke of it fondly.”

“You must go. It is your homeland just as much as this is.” She sweeps a hand at the swiftly passing terrain.

“I'll think about it. It's hard with my parents both being gone. I wish...I wish we could've seen it together.”

“They are still with you, here.”

She takes my hand and presses it to my heart. We stand there, swaying with the lull of the train while I try not to cry.

Too much has happened in such a short time, and this woman's kind words nearly undo me. They're a reminder that no matter what, I always have my ata and ima with me.

I give her a tremulous smile, but the moment is broken when someone yells, “Hey!”

We both whip around at the harsh voice to find a train conductor stomping toward us. “Your kind isn’t welcome here!”

I gasp at his words, spit so venomously at the sweet, old lady. “Excuse me?! She has every right to be here! Just because she’s Jewish—”

The conductor glares. “She’s a stowaway with no ticket to show me! I don’t care that she’s Jewish, but I do mind that she didn’t pay!”

“Oh.” All the righteous anger flows out, leaving me a bit deflated. I reach into my handbag to grab my wallet. “Here, is this enough to cover her ride?”

I purposely hand him twice the amount of the cost of my ticket in American bills instead of rubles.

The glare melts off the conductor’s face as he takes the blatant bribe. With a tip of his hat, he strides away without another word.

“Thank you, dear. That was very kind of you.”

“It was nothing, truly. Kindness is free, so people don’t have a reason not to practice it.”

“Perhaps, but the money you gave him means it wasn’t free, and I appreciate it. I’m off to visit family but am low on funds. I snuck on the train.”

She doesn’t look an ounce repentant, and I can’t help but chuckle at her honesty. “Would you like to come back to my cabin and eat with me and my...friend?”

“Oh no, I don’t want to impose. It’s alright, but I appreciate the offer. Another passenger on their way to where I’m going has been keeping me company as well as sharing his bread.”

“Are you sure? I can give you some money—”

“You’ve done more than enough. May the Gods bless you, child.”

With this, she ambles away, and I stand there for a moment, forgetting I was on my way to use the restroom.

*Why would a Jewish woman invoke more than one God?*



“Is everything alright?”

I’m not even seated across from Ilian when he asks, concern etched into his features.

“Yes, I’m just overthinking things—not about us.” I add this last bit in a rush lest Ilian adds more guilt to the already heaping pile he’s built.

He eyes me skeptically, but I ignore him, shivering a bit as I dig out another sweater. The Ithaqua cocks his massive skull.

“Cold?”

“Freezing! I don’t get it. I’m usually never really bothered by the chill, but every day, it seems to grow worse. I can’t figure it out since the weather is actually a bit warmer today.”

Ilian frowns, and I marvel at how expressive his face is given that it’s literally carved from bone.

“It’s the bond,” he finally grumbles after a moment. I just raise a brow, waiting for him to continue. “It’s trying to find new ways to throw us together since...”

“Since what?”

“Since I resolved not to touch you anymore.”

A scowl crimps my lips—I suspected as much. “Well, clearly, the bond is going to go out of its way to keep us together, maybe we should give it what it wants in small doses to appease it.”

Ilian looks skeptical. “I doubt small doses would appease either of us.”

*Fair.*

“Then we need something to distract ourselves.”

“What do you propose?”

“We could...I dunno...oh, we could draw!”

I pull out some papers and a few pens from my bag, handing one over to Ilian, who stares down at me in confusion.

“Don’t you ever just draw?”

“Not really, unless you count all the ink I do for people.”

“You never sketch out your ideas on paper first?”

“No. If a client comes to me like you, the piece is inspired in the moment, from Aisyth. Otherwise, I work with what clients give me to use, such as their own drawings or pictures.

In fact, I was certain you would use your piece that you entered for the contest as your tat—I was a little disappointed that you didn’t.”

His comment takes me aback. “What—why?”

“Because it was nearly the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. I would’ve been honored to ink your art.”

“What’s the most beautiful ink you’ve ever seen then?”

“I said ‘thing’—not ink.”

I quirk a brow. “Alright, what’s the most beautiful *thing* you’ve ever seen?”

“Your smile.”

Through our bond, I sense his sincerity. “Ilian, you can’t say things like *that* to me, and then expect me to keep my hands to myself.”

“You’re right. Apologies, soyam. It’s hard to not cross the line where you’re concerned, but I promise I’m not trying to make anything more difficult for you.”

*But he is, whether he wants it or not.*

With every passing hour, the bond cinches down upon me, a chokehold that won’t release until I go to the source of the air I

need to breathe.

If Ilian feels a fraction of what I do, then the man is a damned saint. The Ithaqua will barely look me in the eye.

Then again, guilt is a powerful emotion that can snuff out the light inside of a person. We need to find a way to fix this problem before it consumes Ilian.

“So sketching,” he prompts, no doubt sensing the swirl of anxiety that rips through me like a tornado.

“Right. I love to draw. I doodle on nearly everything. It’s a good stress reliever and helps distract me from my thoughts.”

“And what do you draw?”

“Whatever comes to mind, really.”

“Interesting. When you did the piece for the Inked contest, what ‘came to your mind’?”

*Uh oh.*

“Erm...”

Ilian stares at me, his bright gaze intensifying. “You’re panicking again.”

“Trying to make a decision.”

“About what?”

“Whether to tell you the truth.”

Ilian leans back, assessing me. Through our bond, I know I’ve offended him as the Ithaqua values honesty.

“I would prefer that you do.”

“It’s not what you think—I wasn’t going to lie to you by any means, but rather, it’s a bit embarrassing for me. The truth, that is.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me, soyam. Why would you be embarrassed to tell me what you were thinking when you drew your contest piece? Are you ashamed of death?”

I wrinkle my nose. “Death?”

“Is that not what your piece is about?”

At this, I laugh. “Not at all...it’s about *you*.”

The man gapes like I’ve coshed him upside the skull. “Me? But why?”

I squirm, not really wanting to tell him the rest, but I also sense that he won’t let this go. “I’ve been fantasizing about you for months. The piece is about death, but ‘la petite mort’—you know, the ones I have thinking about *you*.”

Ilian growls, the low rumble making me jump.

“Get out!”

The words shock me, and all I can do is blink at Ilian. He’s practically vibrating in his seat, his light gray fur standing on end.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

“Hurry, soyam, before I lose control!”

Something feral slashes across his features, a dark hungry look that boils my blood and sends heat straight to my core.

“No. I’m not going anywhere.”

Ilian glares, but I refuse to budge because even though this bond isn’t my choosing, I can’t help but need this man with every fiber of my being.

*And I want him to lose control.*

## CHAPTER TEN



### ILIAN

ONCE UPON A TIME, I thought Zhuliya's contest submission was about the crossing over from one life into another.

*Now, I know differently and can barely wrap my head around it.*

The beautiful, evocative piece depicts death, but nothing like I thought. 'La petite mort'—the little death—alludes to a person's orgasmic experiences.

What Zhuliya suggests is that she loses herself when she comes...*thinking of me.*

Any restraint I thought I had evaporates into thin air. My mate needs to run from me now before I take her like the

animal I swear I won't be.

*But am.*

“Get out!”

I force the words to form because I have to warn her, but instead of running, Zhuliya stares at me with concern.

“Wh-what's wrong?”

“Hurry, soyam, before I lose control!”

Gods, why doesn't she run?

She continues to look at me, not moving—not even flinching—when I choke on a garbled howl of desire.

“No. I'm not going anywhere.”

The challenge is blatant in her tone, and the wild beast inside of me growls with sick delight.

“Do you want me to hurt you?”

She shrugs like it's not a real worry. “Maybe.”

Her blasé attitude takes me off guard, calming some of the sexual frenzy riding my back. “Come here.”

It's literally the opposite of what I just told her to do, but I can't help myself. Everything inside of me is a jumbled mess of need.

Now Zhuliya moves, but it's not where I want. Instead, she rips open the curtains of our cabin and unlocks the door before turning.

She crosses her arms over her chest and smirks. “*Make me.*”

Then, before I can process her smartass remark, Zhuliya flings open the door and sprints down the narrow walkway of the train car before disappearing into the next one.

I sit there for a moment, hard as stone, confused at what just happened—and then it clicks.

*That little brat.*

My mate wants to play like back at the hotel. It takes me all of thirty seconds to make a decision.

Fuck it—if she wishes me to chase her, then I’ll hunt her down.

I shove out of my seat and burst into the hall. Luckily, no one is around to block my path as I barrel into the next rail car.

Inhaling deeply, I follow her scent, not needing to use the link in our bond. Zhuliya’s aroma is floral, spiked with her arousal, and I hiss when another male sticks his snout out to sniff.

“Mine,” I snap.

The Arctic werewolf snarls at me in challenge, and I unhinge my jaw, prepared to swallow the beast whole if he thinks he can go after my mate.

He scrambles back when I advance, muttering under his breath that he didn’t mean anything by it.

I shove him into his cabin and slam the door shut before taking off as fast as I can in the narrow passageway. Who knows how many monsters are on this train, smelling my mate.

The Transsib only recently became available for monsters, not even a whole decade ago. I can’t be the reason we’re all banned because I couldn’t control myself.

Dashing through five more cars, I finally come to one full of luggage. Zhuliya’s unique fragrance is strongest here, but I don’t see my mate.

The whole railcar is thick with her need, nearly suffocating, and I start knocking down stacks of bags to find her.

As one small mountain topples over, I hear a muffled shriek before Zhuliya tries to sneak back the way she came.

I lunge forward and wrap an arm around her midsection, taking my mate down to her knees until she’s on all fours.

She’s unable to crawl away because of my hold, and I yank the soft material of her pants down until her pretty pussy glistens at me through the lace of her underwear.

Over the flimsy material, I scrape my tongue up the seam of her pink lips, pushing hard to squeeze out the drops of her arousal into my mouth.

Zhuliya cries out at the contact, and through our bond, I feel her desire spike. It slams through me, feeding into my frenzy of lust.

“You’re a naughty, little thing, aren’t you?” I growl into the heat of her pussy.

She mumbles something, and I swat at the rounded globe of one ass cheek. Wetness drips from her core and down the insides of her thighs, confirming how very naughty she is, indeed.

“Do you like it when I spank you?”

I smack her ass again, not needing an answer. Everything is rhetorical, meant to heighten her pleasure as well as mine.

My stoyuk throbs in the confines of my pants, and I pull it out, gripping the base tightly so I don’t come all over my mate’s luscious body.

“Do you like it when I lose control and act like an animal?”

I reach forward to yank her head back with her long rope of black hair until our gazes collide.

My question is, again, declamatory, but I can’t help but shake her gently in the hopes she’ll realize her folly.

“Yes! I love it when you’re rough and throw caution to the wind!”

“Foolish human, don’t you know I can hurt you if I do that?!”

Zhuliya’s head slams down, despite my hold, and I immediately let go so I don’t do the very thing I just warned her against.

She laughs uncontrollably, and I struggle to see just what’s so damn humorous about anything that’s happening.

“Ilian, for the last time, you could *never* hurt me. We’re connected, right? My pain *is* your pain.

You know what I'm enjoying and what I'm not. I like it when you don't handle me like a piece of glass. Yes, you're big, but I know you're not going to break me, so please... *please.*"

"Please what?"

*"Use me."*

With this, I let the beast inside of me take over. A feral snarl thunders from my chest as I shred my mate's panties into tiny scraps.

Then I plunge my tongue deep into her pussy, curling it just how I know she likes while Zhuliya writhes in ecstasy.

I undulate up and down so that the bumps on my tongue graze against her delicate walls while reaching around the front of her and circling her hidden spot with the top of my claw.

The tip of my bony snout wedges in the crevice of her ass, and she wiggles as she wants me to go deeper, and a thought occurs to me.

Twisting my tongue savagely, I wrench an orgasm from my mate that she didn't even realize was waiting.

Her scream is loud enough to be heard across the Siberian tundra, and I hope the sound of the train muffles it.

Zhuliya rests on her elbows, panting, but I give her no reprieve. Slapping her ass, I lift her back up with another tug on her hair.

"Touch yourself how we both like—I want to try something."

She bites her rosy bottom lip before slipping a hand back, the bones of her ink disappearing into her pussy as she fingers herself.

"Fuck," I mutter, wondering if I'll get used to the sight of my mate doing this.

Barely hanging on, I push the white, hard tip of my stoyuk into the dainty, puckered hole of her ass.

Zhuliya gasps, arching her head back to look at me.

“Is this alright?”

“Yes, yes! Please don’t stop.”

It’s all the permission I need to keep pressing forward. I love some of the slick moisture from between her legs around my stoyuk, helping me to ease into her.

By now, Zhuliya’s fingers are a sloppy mess of movements as she chases another release. Just as she comes again, I pop the entirety of my bony head into her ass.

My stoyuk cleaving her in two nearly sends me spilling my seed, but I grit my teeth and power through Zhuliya’s wave of pleasure until she goes limp beneath me.

“Good girl,” I praise, scooping up her collapsed form and pulling out of her ass with a pop. “Now you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” she rasps in a hoarse voice.

“This.”

I plunge my stoyuk into her sopping pussy. It’s stretched enough from my tongue and her come, that I make it halfway inside.

We both groan, and I arch back to slam back in, going deeper with each stroke until I’m completely seated inside of her.

Once she’s comfortable, I notch the bone spur at the base, on top, of my stoyuk against her ass.

Usually, it hits the hidden nub when she’s riding me, or I’m on top, but in this position, it aligns perfectly with her sweet, little hole.

“May I?”

“Please stop asking permission and make me come again!”

I chuckle, holding still to taunt her some more. Leaning forward, I tuck my larger form over hers and lick at the soft shell of her ear.

“Soyam, I will never stop asking permission.”

Zhuliya turns her head to kiss me. “And I will never stop granting it.”

For a moment, I forget we’re not really mates—that all of this is a mistake and a very bad idea.

My hips snap forward, pushing the spur into her ass as I drive my stoyuk back and forth through the tight grip of her pussy.

Her heat envelopes me, as does her scent, and I rut into her like a savage. But Zhuliya only whimpers harder, her pussy fluttering around me as she comes again.

*And again.*

Until I can no longer hold back and flood her pink perfection with violent spurts as I explode.

This time when Zhuliya’s legs give out, I follow, crashing to the floor while still connected to my mate.

Later, I’ll fix her pants before we drift off to sleep, but for now, I bask in the perfection of our union.

“Do you always come so much?” I tease sleepily.

“Only for you.”

Her answer makes my chest swell with pride, and I realize something.

*Zhuliya likes my beast.*

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



## ZHULIYA

“OI! WHAT ARE YOU two doin’ in here?”

I bolt upright, squinting against the bright light bouncing off the white expanse of snow. It takes my watery gaze a moment to clear, as well as my brain, but when they do, I gasp.

Ilian and I are still in the luggage car, except we’ve stopped and the train conductor from before is now glaring at us along with another man.

How I didn’t freeze is a miracle, but the Ithaqua is a regular furnace that doubles as a blanket when he curls himself around me.

“N-nothing!” I manage to stammer when my brain finally functions again.

The train conductor rolls his eyes while the other man cackles. “Don’t smell like nothing.”

A growl from the now awake Ilian shuts the guy up. His eyes widen as he inches behind the conductor.

“What did you say?” the Ithaqua demands.

“N-nothing!” he squeaks.

“Didn’t sound like nothing,” Ilian taunts, and I elbow him in the side.

“Stop it! You’re scaring him.”

“Good. He should be scared because if he tells anyone—”

“Enough!” The conductor slashes his hand through the air, cutting him off. “He won’t tell anyone. We don’t care, and there’s no one this far East who does, either. Just get out.”

Ilian stares for a moment before nodding and capturing my hand to tug me out of the car. Without a backward glance, we walk back to where our cabin is and grab our bags.

“I can’t believe I slept until morning. I apologize for jeopardizing you like that.”

His guilt comes roaring back, barreling through the bond until I nearly choke on it. My whimper gets Ilian’s attention, and he takes a deep breath.

“Forgive me, soyam. It seems every time I try to do something right, I mess something else up.”

“You know it’s ok to make mistakes, right?”

“Not where you’re concerned.”

“Why?”

“Because...because you’re too precious for me to fuck up. I mean, I already did, but then I keep making it worse.”

His words are both sweet and tragic. They tear at my heart, knowing the weight he feels because he imprinted on me.

I squeeze his hand. “We’ll just have to agree to disagree.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think you’re making anything worse. I can’t say the situation we’re in is something I would’ve picked, but for what it’s worth, I’ve enjoyed every second of it.”

Ilian relaxes, tucking me under his arm and out of the howling wind. It fills my mouth with briny spray, and I know we’re close to the sea.

“You’re too good for me, soyam.”

Although he doesn’t say it, I hear the unspoken sentiment of him not deserving me, and it saddens me more.

How can I make Ilian understand that he’s more than worthy of love—especially when we’re on a mission to break our accidental mating bond.

“I taste the ocean.”

“Me, too. This way. We’re meeting a friend of mine who will speak to the Kueeng of Dagoes for us.”

With a nod, we depart the train station and head to the port. The Strait of Tartary stretches before us, the water choppy with frothy waves.

We board a ferry to Sakhalin Island, and the grueling trip takes almost twenty hours. We don’t arrive until the next morning, but I’ve never been so thankful to step back on land.

I spent the entire day and night seasick while Ilian rubbed my back and held my hair back as my stomach attempted to empty everything inside of my body into a small bucket.

Unfortunately, the Sakhalin-8 only has one toilet, and I wasn’t the only one feeling the effects of the waves.

Weak morning light greets me as Ilian carries my prone form off the ship. I’m too tired to put up a fight and appreciate the gesture as I’m sure my legs would give out.

The city of Kholmsk is just as white and cold as the rest of Russia, and I allow myself to drift off on the two-hour ride to the other side of the island.

When we arrive, Ilian gently wakes me, directing me to a hotel that looks more like a series of cabins—*not that I’m*

*complaining.*

While Ilian goes off to find food and get in contact with his Dagon friend, I take a hot bath, heated by a multi-headed zmei.

My Ithaqua returns sooner than expected, his arms laden with bags that he sets down on the table while beckoning me closer.

“Come, eat, soyam. You must replenish your strength. I’ve never seen anyone expel so much.”

I laugh. “Gee, thanks.”

His bright pink gaze flares. “Don’t be embarrassed. I would’ve been sick, too, if not for my Ithaquan blood.

It makes my kind able to withstand almost anything given where we live, but even I don’t know how those men and women run that ship day in and day out without nausea.”

“Well, I’m glad you weren’t sick—can you imagine if we had to share that bucket?!”

Ilian laughs. “I would’ve just hung my head off the side of the boat and chummed the water.”

I shudder at the thought. “Speaking of water, as much as I hope to never get in it again, were you able to contact your Dagon friend?”

“Yes, and they have procured an audience with the Kueeng. When you are ready, we will meet them at the port.”

My stomach pitches, and I bet my face turns green. “So soon?”

“Don’t worry, soyam. We’re not traversing above the waves but below them.”

I scrunch up my nose. “What?”

“You’ll see. Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

The second the word is out my mouth, I know it’s true—I trust Ilian with my life. A smile lights up his bony visage, as if

I've made his day.

“Thank you. It's a lot to ask for given the circumstances—”

I roll my eyes. “I don't blame you for imprinting on me! Time and time again, you've proven you're only care is for *me*. How could I *not* trust you?”

Ilian ducks his head. “Still, it means a lot to me.”

We stare at one another until the silence stretches too thin and our pulses begin to race. The ever-present heat between my legs roars to life, and I know Ilian can smell it.

“I'm ready.”

His fuchsia gaze nearly blinds me. “Ready for what?”

*For you to fuck me.*

“To go see your friend.”

He groans, knowing it's not what I was thinking, but bundles up our bags and directs me out of the cabin.

“This way.”

The walk to the port isn't long, but the wind chaps my cheeks. Ilian shields me once more, obscuring my view so I don't spy the monster waiting for us.

“Greetings, my friend,” calls a mellifluous voice.

I yank free from the warmth of Ilian's fur to whip around. There, standing in the freezing cold water, is a monster I've never seen before.

They are tall, with four arms, and colored similarly to a koi fish—pale blue with orange splotches.

Long, translucent fins sweep off their elbows and the top of their head, as well as along their tail that reminds me almost of a mermaid's.

“Hello again, Dairfyn, please meet Zhuliya.”

Dairfyn clasps my right hand with their lower one. “A pleasure to meet you. I'm pleased to be able to help you in your mission.”

Their grin is all sharp teeth, much like a shark, and I swear a mischievous glint twinkles in their turquoise gaze.

They sound sincere, but I'm not certain this lovely creature isn't up to no good. I shoot Ilian an apprehensive glance, but he runs a clawed hand down my back.

"Dairfyn will take us to the palace. He will create a bubble of sorts around us so that we're able to get to kueengdom's main city at the bottom of the Sea of Okhotsk."

"A b-bubble? Out of what?"

"My saliva," Dairfyn supplies unhelpfully.

I blanch. "Um, no. This monster is going to spit on us and take us to *the bottom of the sea*? Are you crazy?"

"You said you trusted me."

"This is going a little bit further than trust!"

Dairfyn grunts. "Ilian is a prince among paupers. You will never find anyone more trustworthy than him.

In fact, I owe this Ithaqua my very life, and it's only because of this that you are being allowed into the Dagon kueengdom. No other human has ever set foot in one of our cities."

My mouth flaps open. "You saved his life—how?"

Ilian frowns. "They're overexaggerating."

The Dagon snorts. "Am not. Shall we?"

Both monsters turn to me, and I stare at Ilian. I said I trusted him, and now's the time to prove myself.

I nod, and Dairfyn leans back on their tail until it lifts them out of the water and above our heads—even Ilian's.

The sheer strength it takes to do such a thing is mind-boggling, and I can only gape as the Dagon shapes a bubble around us from out of their mouth.

It doesn't look like spit—thank the Heavens—but I have no idea how it's going to hold both me and a giant Ithaqua.

*Turns out that Dagon drool is stronger than their tails.*

## CHAPTER TWELVE



### ILIAN

DAIRFYN LEADS US INTO the dark, cold waters of the Sea of Okhotsk by a rope of spittle attached to the bubble.

Their salivary secretions buffer most of the freezing temperatures, as well as stabilize the pressure of descending into the depths, but I still wrap myself around Zhuliya to keep her calm.

With every passing second, her body trembles harder. I taste her fear through our bond, and I send soothing reassurance back at her.

It goes against human nature to descend into the black depths of the ocean, and I know she worries Dairfyn's bubble will burst and kill us both.

*But I know what Dagon's are truly capable of.*

They are amazing monsters who are one of the few species still cut off from the human world since their kueengdom resides far beneath the surface.

When I was still a tungan on the hunt with my Mullen pack on the Kamchatka Peninsula, we tracked a polar bear into the Sea of Okhotsk.

My brethren and I dove into the water after the animal when we came across a strange creature frozen in a block of ice.

With our meal long gone, my Mullen pack left to return to land, but I couldn't let whoever was in the ice die.

I nearly drowned trying to keep afloat and help the monster escape. Luckily, my claws easily carved into the frosty chunk, and out popped Dairfyn.

Not much older than me, the Dagon had snuck into the royal cellar and stolen a case of *kurunnum*, intoxicating enough to kill a human in one sip.

*And they drank all of it before passing out on top of a broken sheet of ice.*

While unconscious, a winter storm formed ice around the Dagon, sealing them inside so much so that they couldn't move.

To this day, I'm unsure of what the Kueeng knows, only that Dairfyn swore me to secrecy about everything that transpired as well as who they are.

*Either way, I'm one of the few non-Dagons to be welcomed into the kueengdom.*

"Ilian?"

"Yes, soyam?"

"I'm scared."

My chest constricts. "I know, but I promise we're safe. We'll be at the palace soon."

“You’re friends with royalty—that’s amazing. How is your Dagon friend connected to the Kueeng?”

“Dairfyn is the ambassador for their people.”

“That’s quite the job.”

“Indeed. They also have a tattoo by me.”

“Really? I didn’t see.”

“It’s along their back in white ink. It nearly blends in, but it’s what they wanted.”

“You didn’t almost imprint on them, too, did you?” she teases me.

“It was a close call, but don’t tell them that.”

Dairfyn looks over their shoulder and smirks, proving they can hear every word beyond the bubble.

When Zhuliya rested at the hotel and I went to call upon Dairfyn, I told them everything about what had happened.

The Dagon was kind enough to convince the Kueeng to see us. Of course, this doesn’t mean we’ll be given access to use their transportation, but I can hope.

It’ll take at least half a week or more aboard another ship to get to the Kuril Islands in this weather, but the Dagon has tunnel systems with a type of crystal train that can travel quickly.

*As in seconds.*

If humans got their hands on such an invention, they wouldn’t know what to do with themselves.

I’m nearly certain the Kueeng will grant us access once I present my case, but I’ll do anything to keep my mate off another boat.

Watching her be sick was soul-crushing. Never in my life have I hated myself so much for putting her in such a position to begin with.

Suddenly, Zhuliya shifts. “Ilian, is it getting...lighter?”

“Yes, we’re approaching the main city of Kueengdom where the palace is.”

“Oh, that was fast.”

“Dagons are extremely swift in water—don’t ever let one trick you into a race.”

She laughs. “I won’t.”

“Speed is important to the Dagons. They pride themselves on it. You’ll see.”

But my mate isn’t listening to me anymore. She’s moved out from my arms to lean forward as the Dagon city comes into view.

The entirety of it is encased in various bubbles just like the one we’re currently in. Everything inside is dry and made of glass and twinkling lights.

*It truly is an empire of wonder.*

And there in the center sits the Dagon Kueeng’s palace. It towers over the rest of the crystalline buildings, complete with golden spires and sparkling turrets.

Much time has passed since I last saw it, but everything looks the same—clean and glittering with brilliance.

“Ilian, look! It’s...it’s...miraculous! Have you ever seen anything so marvelous?”

I turn to stare at Zhuliya, her dark curls piled atop her head to showcase the perfection of her face.

Her full red lips form an O of amazement, and all I can do is drink in my mate because I have seen something so marvelous.

*It’s her.*

“I’ve been here once, long ago.”

“When you saved Dairfyn’s life?”

“Something like that.”

For a moment, Zhuliya just looks at me, so much emotion flowing into me through our bond, and I realize it’s nearly the same awe I have for her.

*Does she think I'm...special?*

As if reading my mind, Zhuliya reaches up to cup my face. “I’ll say it again—Ilian Yaniqu, you’re beyond amazing, and I wish you saw yourself in the same light.”

Dairfyn snorts, glancing over their shoulder to nod in agreement with my mate, and I shift under the weight of their stares.

“I suppose we all have different opinions of ourselves that others don’t hold.”

“And they usually aren’t the best, sadly. Even I can admit to not holding myself in the best esteem—”

“But you should!”

She chuckles. “As should you. Perhaps it’s something we can work on together.”

*Together.*

The word sends my pulse racing before I remind myself our time is ticking and that Zhuliya isn’t really my forever.

Soon our moments together will end because that’s the ultimate goal—to *undo the bond I accidentally forged*.

Dairfyn jerks our bubble through one of the main ones surrounding the city. Instead of popping, the larger bubble absorbs our personal one, spitting Zhuliya and me out the other side.

My mate stumbles, and I catch her elbow to keep her from falling to the sandy ground. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, sorry, I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Apologies, lovely human,” Dairfyn says with a wink. “I forget your kind is not as agile as mine. Are you ready to meet the Kueeng?”

“Do we need to change?” she worries.

“No, no. Their Majesty isn’t concerned with that. Come. This way.”

We follow the Dagon to the first building. The doors sweep open automatically, much like some human ones, although I know the technology is vastly different.

I hold onto Zhuliya's hand, tugging her along as her attention is everywhere but where we're walking.

All the buildings in the kueengdom connect, much like the Dagon underwater tunnel system.

Eventually, we make our way to the palace entrance. Two Dagon guards stand at attention, deadly spears tipped with poison at the ready.

Dairfyn mutters something, and they part, allowing us to pass. The swish of the Dagon's silky black pants echoes around us as we follow.

Finally, we come to a set of golden double doors that our Dagon escort pushes open to reveal the throne room.

“Our Ithaquan friend and his mate, welcome!”

The Kueeng's booming voice sounds twice as loud in the cavernous room as Dairfyn presents us with a bow.

“My liege, may I present to you Ilian, who you know, and Zhuliya, his lovely mate.”

The Kueeng smiles at me regally, but their attention is focused on the woman beside me.

“What do you think, human? You are the first to enter my kueengdom.”

“I have no words, Your Majesty. It's more fantastical than anything I could've ever imagined, like a Walt Disney dream come true!”

The Kueeng's dark brow furrows. “Who is this Walt Disney?”

“Oh, he's another human who builds castles.”

“Ah, a king, then?”

Zhuliya laughs. “Not quite, but he created magnificent worlds, too—not nearly as breathtaking as yours, though.”

The Dagon leader strokes their long whiskers, so like a catfish's, coming down from the side of their mouth.

"It is breathtaking. I like you, human. Perhaps I've been wrong about your kind."

My mate wrinkles her nose. "No, most of my people are idiotic jerks, and I'm convinced that online shopping has a direct correlation to the decrease in grocery store violence."

Dairfyn chuckles. "I see why she is your mate, my friend. I think I need one, too."

Something feral snaps inside of me, and I pull Zhuliya into my arms while glaring at the Dagon Ambassador.

*"Mine!"*

Guards around the room shift their positions, pointing their spears in my direction, but the Kueeng merely waves a hand. "Possessive, I see. Dair, you will need to find another human to be your mate. Ilian is quite taken with this one even though he seeks to dissolve their union."

Both Dagon smirks at me, and I run a hand between my horns. "I apologize to everyone. That just...burst from me." I turn to Zhuliya. "Please forgive me. You're not a possession."

"But you do feel covetous, eh?" Dairfyn prods, and I scowl.

"Of course. Zhuliya is special."

She stares up at me with her big, dark gaze, and I'm lost for a moment in the beauty that is all my mate.

The Kueeng raises their voice, reminding me of where I am. "Special things are rare. It isn't wise to waste them."

I can't tell if they're talking to me or Zhuliya—*perhaps both of us*.

Before either she or I can respond, a Dagon in a simple dress bursts through the doors, bowing before the Kueeng. "Your Majesty, Duri is missing!"

Dairfyn and I share a look.

*Not again.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



### ZHULIYA

“WHO’S DURI?” I WHISPER to Ilian as the throne room erupts into activity.

“She’s the Kueeng’s youngest child—gets into more trouble than even Dairfyn.”

“I heard that!” The Dagon shouts as they sprint out of the room.

“Come on.” Ilian tugs my hand. “We’ll help look.”

We follow Dairfyn for a bit before the Ithaqua weaves us down another corridor.

“What does Duri look like?”

“All orange with light pink fins.”

“And I take it that her disappearance is a common occurrence?”

Ilian chuckles. “Yes. She’ll be wearing something blue like her caretaker—the Dagon who announced that the youngling was missing.”

“How do you know she’ll be wearing blue?”

“Because her caretaker matches the colors of her charge’s clothes. Dagon is intersex. Those who wear black, yellow, gold, or red use the pronouns they and them. Those who wear blue, green, and orange use she and her. And those who wear pink, white, and gray use he and him—but most are genderfluid and wear the whole rainbow.”

“Oh, that’s very interesting—”

“Wait, this way!”

I spot a spec of orange through the glass panels, and Ilian takes off in that direction with me hot on his heels. Just as we reach the young Dagon, Dairfyn sprints from the other side.

“There you are, little scamp! You’re in trouble now.”

The pretty Dagon pokes out her bottom lip at them. “I can’t find my friend.”

“What friend?”

“The one playing hide and seek with me.”

By this point, the Kueeng and Duri’s caretaker have caught up and share a look.

“What did your friend look like?” Dairfyn demands.

“He’s white and in a gray dress.”

As soon as the little one says this, something flashes in my peripheral vision—*the other Dagon child*.

They’re running just outside the palace walls, being chased by a fearsome-looking creature.

“Um, is that him?”

Duri gasps. “Oh, no! The tishpak is chasing him! Moddy, save them!”

The Kueeng bellows for their guards, but the tishpak—some strange monstrous creature crossed between a bulldog and a shark that I assume is a pet—will soon catch up to the small Dagon.

Before me is a window of sorts, and I dash forward to throw it open. Ilian yells at me to stop, but I'm through it before he can grab me. Everyone else is far too large to fit.

My feet hit the sandy ground, and I sprint forward, intent on grabbing the little one, but instead crash into the tishpak, who whimpers at the collision.

The Dagon child looks back only to trip, somehow catapulting himself out of the safety of the bubble.

Without a second thought, I grab hold of some long kelp growing decoratively nearby and launch out after the little one.

Of all the stupid things I've done in my life, this probably tops it, but my instincts just take over.

The water is so cold, I'm certain I'm going to freeze instantly. It sucks all the thought and function right out of me.

Luckily, the force in which I jumped out of the Dagon bubble sends me crashing directly into the child.

I wrap my arms around him just as my kelpy lifeline snaps. Salt water stings my eyes as I try to move, and panic sets in because I *can't*.

*Fuck, I need to save the little Dagon!*

Suddenly, something furry folds around my body and tugs me back toward the bubble. One second I'm in the frigid ocean, and the next, I'm warm again.

Blinking my eyes open, I attempt to understand what's happening. Both Ilian and Dairfyn hover over me. Their lips move, but I can't hear them.

The Kueeng steps into view, pushing Dairfyn aside and placing a claw against my ear, massaging it until the pressure inside pops.

Sound comes rushing back, along with a headache the size of Mount Everest. I groan, wondering how my body feels so warm.

“Soyam, can you hear me?” I nod as Ilian gathers me back into his arms. “That was very foolish—brave—but foolish.”

“I didn’t think. I just acted.”

Ilian helps me to sit up, and I glance around at the dozens of Dagon surrounding us. In front of me is the palace window I crawled through...except, it’s gone.

Shards of sparkling glass lie scattered in the sand and a monstrous-sized hole now exposes the interior of the Kueeng’s home.

“Um, what happened?”

“Your mate broke through a wall to get to you,” Dairfyn answers, looking delighted that Ilian destroyed the palace—even the Kueeng looks pleased.

“I will pay for that, of course.”

The Dagon royal shakes their head at him. “Do not worry about it, Ithaqua. Your mate saved one of my own, and you saved her. You are both always welcome in my court.”

“Th-thank you, Your Majesty,” I stammer. “But...how did I survive the cold water?”

“My kind has a special elixir that we use to cover our bodies to keep us warm. I gave some to Ilian to run over you.”

“I told you Dagon inventions are one-of-a-kind,” Ilian whispers.

“You weren’t lying.” *Even my clothes are dry.* “Thank you, all, for saving me.”

Leaning up, I peck my Ithaquan hero on the cheek. Dairfyn bends down to accept my kiss, too, but Ilian covers my face with his hands.

“Get your own mate.”

“But yours is so wonderful.”

“My best friend is better,” I interject.

“Who is this spectacular human you speak of?”

“Her name is Sakura. She’s in Japan right now. That’s where her family lives.”

“Japan,” the Kueeng murmurs. “Their Prime Minister wants to create an alliance. I’ve ignored his previous emissaries, but if you vouch for this human, I might entertain the idea.”

“Sakura isn’t an ambassador—”

“Leave it to me,” Dairfyn cuts in, that mischievous glint back in their turquoise gaze, and I wonder if I should be worried for my roommate.

“Do you wish to stay the night or carry on with your mission?” the Kueeng asks us, making my head spin with how quickly everything is moving.

Ilian glances down at me. “I would prefer that you rest, soyam.”

“I don’t feel tired.”

It’s the truth. Whether it’s still the adrenaline from my rescue, or whatever the Dagon put on my body to warm me up, I’ve never felt more alive.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, let’s find Aisyth.”

*And get back on land—above water.*

“Alright, if you’re sure. Thank you for your generosity, Your Majesty.”

The Kueeng tips their head regally. “Of course. Which island do you wish to go to?”

“I’m not sure. Let me show you the map.”

Ilian pulls my phone from my purse, and I’m so thankful it wasn’t in my pocket when I rushed after the Dagon child.

He shows Dairfyn and the Kueeng my tattoo, both marveling over its beauty. Ilian points out the pattern of

islands at the top but the Dagon ambassador spots another clue that narrows the focus to one particularly shaped island.

“Atlasov.”

My Ithaqua nods. “You’re right, old friend. We’ll find Aisyth there.”

The Kueeng claps their hands. Instantly, a troop of Dagon appear with plates of food. “Please, eat first. The ukuri is waiting for you when you’re ready.”

“The ukuri?”

“Their crystal train-like transportation I spoke of,” Ilian clarifies as his massive hands grab strange-looking snacks.

He pops one in his mouth and hands me another. It’s like a sandwich made of kelp, but it tastes delicious.

“Good, yeah?” Dairfyn smirks, grabbing at one with their top right hand, but the Kueeng slaps it away.

“They are for our guests!”

I laugh as Dairfyn makes a face. When Ilian and I are full, the Kueeng claps their hands, and the plate are removed. They turn to their ambassador.

“Now escort them to the ukuri.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

The Kueeng takes my hand. “You are always welcome in my kueengdom. I will have Dairfyn speak to this lovely friend of yours that you vouch for.

You will go down in Dagon history as the reason my kind finally communicates with yours.”

I blush. “Thank you, Your Majesty. With your permission, I hope to visit again someday. It’s most beautiful here, and I wish to explore more.”

“Always! Bring Ilian with you. You won’t be mates any longer, but I hope you will remain friends.”

Their words sadden me for some reason. Without a doubt, I want Ilian to be my friend...but I’m starting to wonder if

maybe I don't want him to be something more.

"Thank you again."

The Kueeng waves goodbye. Once more, Ilian takes my hand, and we follow Dairfyn away from the palace and into the magnificent city.

They take us to a glass tube that houses a series of golden carts. Dairfyn taps the crystalline cylinder, and it opens even though I can't see any seam to indicate a door.

"Please get in. I will program it to take you to Atlasov."

Ilian helps me into one of the carts, seating himself next to me. It's a tight fit, and I drape a leg over his to give us both a little more room.

Dairfyn notices and waggles their white eyebrows. Ilian shoves him back with a chuckle.

"Knock it off. You're making my mate uncomfortable."

"Looks like she's pretty comfortable to me."

My Ithaqua mock swipes at the Dagon, but Dairfyn dances back. "Good luck on your mission. Zhuliya, how can I find your friend?"

"Erm, do you have a cell phone?"

"Nope."

"Oh, um, I'm not sure—"

"Do you have a piece of her clothing?"

I raise a brow at the question, unsure of where they're going with this. "Actually, I have one of her scarves."

"May I borrow it?"

Digging in my bag, I find it, passing it to the Dagon, who takes it and inhales deeply before handing it back to me.

"Perfect, thank you. Until we meet again."

With this, the glass reseals around the tube. Dairfyn waves and then everything blurs. I scream as Ilian wraps his arms securely around me.

We're going so fast that the skin on my face folds back. I'm concerned that neither of us is wearing seatbelts, but the speed at which we're moving suctioned me down.

*I couldn't move if I tried.*

Everything is pitch black as we move away from the Dagon city. One second, we're moving what feels like a million miles per hour, and then we're stopped.

It's still dark, and the only thing visible to me is the glow of Ilian's pink gaze. Scooping me up, he steps out of the cart and walks through the obscurity.

His feet crunch like he's stepping on rocks, and I can't figure out what's going on. Eventually, a spec of light appears on the horizon, getting bigger and brighter as Ilian carries me.

It's an opening, and when I glance back, I realize we're in a cave. It opens to the surface of what I assume is the island of Atlasov.

The sun is setting, but I'm thankful for the light. As my eyes adjust, I see a figure in the distance turn and glide toward us.

They're similar in appearance to Ilian, except without horns. Their fur is white and their eyes are a golden glow.

Their flowing purple robes flutter in the wind, and a strange magnetism seems to illuminate them.

“Welcome, my children. Have you come to worship me?”

My breath catches as I realize who she is.

*We found Aisyth.*

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



## ILIAN

“MY GODDESS, YOU HUMBLE us with your presence. Thank you for allowing us to find you—although I’m concerned it was too easy.”

Next to me, Zhuliya hisses. “Ilian! You’re going to offend her.”

Aisyth laughs, the tinkling sound echoing in the vastness around us. “He doesn’t offend me, dear one. He’s worried, mostly for you.”

“For me? What do you mean?”

“Ilian thinks because it was easy to find me that something terrible will now happen. What he doesn’t realize is that I already set challenges on the course of your journey to me.”

“Us trying not to touch one another?” my mate blurts.

The Ithaquan goddess claps in delight. “Oh no no no, but wasn’t it wonderful when you did?”

Zhuliya and I share a look, and I answer Aisyth cautiously. “Yes, but what other challenges did we face?”

“Aside from crossing over the Siberian tundra together, you helped an old crone who needed food and shelter.

Likewise, your mate was kind to another woman on the train as well as saved a Dagon child, thus creating ties between her people and the Kueeng.”

Aisyth waves her hand, at once becoming the crone I saw back in the hotel at Berdsk. Then the Jewish savta from the train, and lastly, shrinking into the white splendor of a small Dagon.

“It was you!” I exclaim in wonder.

The goddess transforms back into herself. “But of course! Those who seek me out must prove themselves worthy first, and you two are more than worthy. Feel free to begin your worship.”

I clear my throat. “It’s not that we don’t wish to worship you, but rather, we have...a favor to ask.”

“Hmm, well, I am quite magnanimous, but what you seek is an affront to the very gift I’ve bestowed upon you both.”

*Crap, she knows.*

“Please, my goddess, your gift is amazing, but it’s not one that Zhuliya picked consciously. It’s not fair to her to be mated to me when she didn’t expressly give her consent.”

Aisyth runs a hand along her bony jaw, stroking one of the spikes jutting out. “In this, you are right.

It’s not fair to take her free will. Zhuliya The Brave, do you wish to dissolve your bond with my Ithaqua?”

I hold my breath, already knowing the answer, but still hoping she might say something else. The silence stretches on for an eternity before she answers.

“Yes, if it’s what Ilian wants.”

A scowl twists my lips, and I hate that she’s left the choice to me when we both know it’s hers to make.

“Ilian?” Aisyth prompts.

“I want what you want.”

The goddess sighs. “You two are exhausting. Make up your minds, my time is precious!”

“Yes! Dissolve the bond.”

Agony rips through me, but whether it’s from Zhuliya or myself, I can’t tell. We’re both miserable in this moment, and I wonder if we’re making a mistake.

“Very well, but you must complete two tasks first.”

Inwardly, I groan. I knew this wasn’t going to be easy, but Zhuliya is tired and I want nothing more than to put this behind us both.

“What tasks?” Zhuliya asks.

“Just two very simple ones. Get a lock of Ulyen’s fur and a tear from Ekana. These are needed to create the potion to dissolve the inked imprint on your back.”

I stare, unsure if Aisyth was being facetious or not when she suggested either of these tasks is ‘simple’.

“How do we, ah, get these things?” my mate wonders.

“You ask for them, of course. Nothing is free, but both these gods feed off certain emotions. If you provide ones powerful enough, they will give you something in exchange.”

Zhuliya looks at me, her brow furrowed. “Do you know these gods?”

“Yes. Ulyen is the god of prurience, and Ekana is the goddess of memories.”

“Are we going to have to go on another trip halfway around the world to find them?”

“No, my dear. I will open the portal between the realms when you are ready to call for them. Ilian will know what to

do. Who do you wish to draw out first?”

I inhale, hating this more than anything. Both gods will take a toll on my mate, but none so much as Ekana.

“Ulyen,” I finally decide.

Aisyth sweeps her hand, sending an electric shock wave that blasts through us and into the distance. Zhuliya wobbles on her feet, but I keep her steady.

“It is done. I will call upon you in the morning. Do not fear the night, your mate will be kept warm.”

*And then my goddess disappears.*

“Um, what’s going on?”

I turn to Zhuliya. “We have until dawn to get in contact with Ulyen and get his fur.”

“How are we going to do that—and what did Aisyth mean I’ll be warm?”

“She’s charmed the island so you won’t freeze in the arctic night—I can sense her magic.”

“Huh, now that you mention it, I don’t feel chilled, but I assumed it was all the layers I’m wearing.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re comfortable...” I trail off, feeling anything but.

Zhuliya narrows her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“We have to summon Ulyen now that Aisyth has opened a link to him.”

“Again, how do we do that?”

“Throughsexmagic.”

“Come again? You’re mumbling.”

“Through sex magic.”

My mate’s dark brows raise up her forehead. “Excuse me?”

“Prurience means carnal desires, as in the god of fleshly cravings. The way we call out to Ulyen is through...sex.”

“We have to-to *fuck* to meet him?!”

I cough. “Y-yes, I’m sorry. The more depraved, the better. Ulyen is a bit twisted—most gods are.”

Zhuliya’s jaw drops before she snaps it shut and grinds her teeth. “Ok, we can do this. We’ve done it before. How...how nasty are we talking?”

“The freakiest we can get.”

Her cheeks pale before blooming the gorgeous pink that I love. “Do you have, um, any suggestions?”

Despite her discomfort, I can’t help but smirk. “You tell me—you’re the one who’s been fantasizing about me.”

She smacks my arm playfully. “Stop! Besides, it was hard, not knowing what your cock—I mean, stoyuk—looked like.”

“But you tried to envision it?” Zhuliya nods. “Did it live up to your expectations?”

“More so.”

“And have you had any new fantasies?”

Zhuliya’s blush intensifies. “Maybe.”

I give my mate a wicked grin. “Come now, don’t be shy. We both know whatever you’re thinking in that gorgeous head of yours is going to make me hard.”

She bites her lip. “You don’t know that. Maybe it’s something you don’t like...or-or are disgusted by.”

Cupping her chin, I stare deep into her dark brown eyes. “Soyam, it’s not those things you fear but rather my judgment of them—and of you—but I promise this is not the case.

There’s nothing you could tell me that would repulse me from you. Furthermore, I can’t hide how I feel from you, so you’ll know I’m speaking the truth.

If there’s something I’m not interested in, then I will be honest, as I hope you will be, but I think we’re both adventurous enough to try things once.”

Zhuliya's shoulders relax. "Thank you, Ilian. You're right that I'm scared to share some of my fantasies—worried you might think they're wrong."

"Shame has no place between us. Honor your sexual urges."

"O-ok...have you ever licked yourself?"

I cock my head, pondering her words. "You mean tongued my stoyuk?"

"Mhmm."

"The idea never occurred to me. My tongue is certainly long enough to where I would merely need to lean forward."

My mate's gaze grows heavy-lidded. "Would you do that for me?"

Already I can smell her arousal and know how much the thought turns her on. "Yes, but only if you join me."

Zhuliya shifts, rubbing her thighs together. "I have another fantasy."

"Tell me."

"We can't do it here—it requires, erm, equipment."

I roll my eyes. "Soyam, I can smell how wet you are from just us talking. It doesn't matter if we can do it or not, at this point, everything is just verbal foreplay."

She laughs. "Touché. Alright then, have you ever been pegged?"

It takes me a second to place the term. "No. Ithaqua are terrifying, dominant creatures. We're much too feared for anyone to propose such a thing."

"Suppose I proposed such a thing?"

"As I said, I'm willing to try anything once."

The woman looks far too delighted, as if I've made her entire lifetime by simply agreeing to explore this particular fantasy, but then her expression drops.

"But we can't."

“Why not?”

“Do you carry a spare strap-on in your bag because I don’t.”

“Nope, I left mine at home,” I deadpan, and Zhuliya shakes her head while mock glaring at me. “But I might have an alternative.”

*This catches her attention.*

“What?”

“You have a belt in your bag, right?”

“Yeeeeees.”

“Then leave it to me.”

With this, I reach up and break a chunk off of my right horn. Zhuliya screams, her tiny hands flying to cover her mouth as the sound echoes into the now descending night.

“ILIAN! Are you ok?! What are you doing?”

“Making you a present.”

She just gapes, and I wink.

*Poor Ulyen isn’t going to know what’s hit him.*

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



## ZHULIYA

*I'M PANICKING.*

Ilian freaking Yaniqu just ripped off a piece of his horn like it's no big deal and is circling it around his claws, over and over.

He sits down, continuing to fiddle with it, and I rush over to inspect his head. There's no bleeding, but I'm concerned he's maybe in shock.

"How could you do something so idiotic—we're literally in the middle of nowhere!"

"Soyam, we're connected."

"What does that have to do with anything?!"

“Because if I felt the kind of life-altering pain you’re imagining that I’m experiencing, you would feel it, too.”

*Oh.*

“Well, that still doesn’t mean you should yank off body parts all willy-nilly!”

“Be calm, my mate, it’ll grow back.”

I plop down next to him, grumbling the entire time. “What are you doing then?”

“It’s a surprise. Have you ever seen the northern lights?”

His question takes me off guard. “Erm, no, why?”

“Look up.”

I realize it’s fully night. There’s no moon and what seems like a million stars—more than I’ve seen in a lifetime of living in the city.

And right above the two of us, ribbons of green, yellow, and pink dance through the sky like a celestial ballet.

“Ilian, it’s beautiful!”

“They’re not as bright as near the Arctic Circle but they’re still stunning. Ithaqua use the lights to navigate—or so I recall through my mother’s memories.”

We lapse back into silence as I stare, lulled by the sound of Ilian scraping his claws along his broken horn.

After a moment, my Ithaqua grunts. “Finished. Now we can summon Ulyen.”

I sit up as he hands me his horn, shocked at its transformation into something decidedly *phallic*.

“Did you make me—”

“A strap-on. I added some holes on either side to weave your belt through to cinch around your waist.

“Hold the phone—are you saying that you want me to peg you...with your *own* horn?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, and I did say the freakier, the better. Oh, and look, I broke it off so there was a spur sticking out.

I rounded the tip and added those ridges along the length so that part fits inside of you like my stoyuk.”

His make-shift strap-on is a marvel considering the material and the circumstances. Ilian even etched grooves into the main beam where my clit will rub when I push into him.

My thighs clench and the waning desire from before comes rushing back in a flood of need.

Biting my lip, I glance up into Ilian’s fiery pink gaze. “Shall we summon ourselves a dirty deity?”

He smirks, reaching to cup my face. Our lips meet—his, bony yet pliant while mine are soft and demanding.

I’m ravenous for his touch, and quickly forget that we’re only doing this to appease a goddess so that our mating bond can be broken.

Ilian pulls me into his lap as he curls his tongue around mine, and I moan when the bumps caress me.

With his other hand, he scoops under where I grind my hips and frees his hard length from his pants.

“Do you want me to come all over your beautiful face again while we both lick my stoyuk?”

My body flushes, and all I can do is nod as I shimmy down the front of his body until his cock bumps under my chin.

I tuck it to my chest, running my lips over the rigid tip of his stoyuk. Even though the smooth head is made of bone, Ilian must feel every touch by the way he twitches and groans.

For a moment, I lose myself in the taste and touch of his cock, exploring all the dips and curves that make those fantasy toys seem sad in contrast.

*They could never compare to the reality—the perfection—of the man beneath me.*

Ilian grabs a fistful of my hair, halting my oral study of him as he sits up. The muscles of his abs bunch up the closer he leans forward, and my eyes widen at how far he can bend.

Without breaking eye contact, Ilian sticks out his tongue, and gravity yanks the heavy, textured length of it down to his cock.

I've felt it inside my pussy, but seeing the dexterous appendage wrap completely around the tip of his stoyuk takes my imagination to new heights.

In rapt fascination, I watch Ilian lap at the underside, where the deepest grooves sit before smoothing out near the base.

Unable to sit still anymore, I join him, my own tongue testing the sharpness of the bony spikes that jut out near the bottom of his cock.

Together, we work in tandem until the long tip of his tongue touches against mine. I jolt at the connection, staring up at Ilian in wonder.

He gives me a small grin and then begins to stroke his stoyuk as if he were using his hand.

The sight mesmerizes me, and I adjust my position to lave at his bone-white head before taking him in my mouth.

His tongue brushes the underside of my chin when I go down and he comes up, heightening both our senses.

My whole body buzzes, and I grow restless with need. Faster and faster I move, Ilian matching my speed until his body tenses.

*And then he explodes.*

He coats my face and his tongue in thick ropes of cum that I lap up and swallow while he shakes.

After a moment, Ilian unclenches from his hunched position, his tongue going lax as he leans back.

A whimper escapes me when he tastes himself and growls. He smacks his lips together, savoring the flavor that lingers in my own mouth.

“Tastes good, hmm?”

Ilian shrugs. “Not as good as you taste.”

For some reason, his words make me think of him coming deep inside my pussy and then scooping it out for me to try, both of our essences mixing together.

“Come here, you.”

The Ithaqua tugs me back up over his body until I’m draped across him like a blanket. He kisses me again, cupping my ass as I shift to rub against him.

“Take off your clothes, soyam. I want to see your gorgeous body.”

I sit up, stretching my arms above my head as I peel off the many layers I have to keep me warm.

When I’m topless, I pause, and Ilian stares, his glowing gaze all but sparking with electricity at the nude expanse of skin before him.

He palms one breast and then another, his claw carefully flicking the tight bud of my nipples as need ripples through me.

“Remove everything else before I destroy your pants.”

Laughing, I push off him to stand, shucking off the rest of my clothes until I’m finally completely naked.

Ilian runs a finger between my legs—a ghost of a promise of what’s to come—before popping it in his mouth.

“Sit down.” I attempt to straddle his stomach, but he stops me, pointing at his face. “No, *here*.”

*Um, yes, sir!*

In my excitement, I launch myself a little too fast at the man and trip over my own feet. Instead of a mouthful of pussy, Ilian gets a faceful of boob, but that doesn’t deter him.

He sucks and licks at the sensitive mounds until I wiggle away to move until my center hovers over his skull.

“Like this?”

Instead of answering me, Ilian grips my hips and yanks me down at the same time he thrusts his tongue upward.

I scream, the thick length of him pushing me to the brink. Over and over, Ilian takes me to the edge, my pussy clenching around his tongue, but he doesn't let me come.

"Ilian!" I whine, my hands blindly reaching out to grip his horns.

It reminds me that one is broken, fashioned into a strap-on that's waiting to be used—and then I detonate.

The Ithaqua makes a muffled sound of approval, rolling his tongue inside of me as I ride out the waves of ecstasy.

Panting, I collapse onto his bony face, and Ilian lifts me off to reposition me at his side. He runs a hand up and down my back as the last of my pleasure drifts away.

"I'm going to miss this," he murmurs.

"The sex is off the charts."

He smirks. "It is, but I was talking about holding you—funny how perfectly you fit despite being so small."

My breath catches, and tears prick my eyes at his poignancy. All I can do is nod because I'll miss it, too.

"Don't cry, soyam. I didn't mean to make you sad."

"It's ok."

"Let me make it up to you."

"How?"

"With more orgasms."

My body tingles in remembrance of all the past pleasure he's brought me. "How can I turn down *that*—but wasn't I promised living out one of my fantasies first?"

Ilian strokes the spike that angles out of his jaw.

"I don't see why the two shouldn't be mutually exclusive."

*Fuck, how am I going to say goodbye to this man when all this is said and done?*

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN



## ILIAN

ZHULIYA TREMBLES WITH EXCITEMENT, the scent of it nearly overwhelming me, as I cinch the belt around her waist.

I adjust my horn so that the spur slips between her legs and then step back to admire my handwork.

*My mate looks pretty with a stoyuk.*

She looks down, assessing the toy before frowning. Through our bond, some of her enthusiasm wanes and worry creeps in.

“Are you alright, soyam?” Instead of answering, she pinches at the flesh pushed up by the belt in disgust. “Is it too tight? Does it hurt?”

“No, but it’s kinda hard to feel sexy with a strap-on muffin top.”

“Do you want to know what I was just thinking?”

“What?”

“How absolutely breathtaking you are with my horn stoyuk. I’m quite certain you would still be stunning if you were covered in warts.”

“But—”

I sigh. “Soyam, your beauty for me is not based on the size of your body, but the size of your heart.

Never have I met a more gorgeous creature than you. I promise you’re perfect to me, inside and out.”

Sensing her hesitation, I send all my admiration, lust, and sincerity through our bond. The self-loathing melts from her features, and her expression softens.

“You know, it’s funny that you don’t think you’re good enough for me because when you say things like that, I don’t feel good enough *for you*.”

I cup her face, peering into the dark brown depths of her gaze. “Maybe that’s why Aisyth let me imprint on you—so we could prove to one another our worth.”

She beams, a glittering showcase of her white teeth. “I think you might be right, Ilian. I’ve never felt more alive than in the short time I’ve spent with you.”

“Good, but I’m not stopping until you know that you’re a queen.”

*My queen.*

Zhuliya kisses me again. “And I’m not stopping until you realize that ‘monster’ is just a word and not who you are. Besides, I love when you get wild and rough with me.”

“As do I, but tonight, it’s your turn.” I gesture at my horn. “Will you fuck me until we both come?”

She blushes, biting her lip in that way that drives me crazy, and nods. “I’m a little nervous. I’ve never done something like that. We don’t have any lube—what if I hurt you?”

“You’re wet enough I can use that.” Her cheeks burn brighter. “And don’t worry about hurting me. As long as we communicate, we’ll be fine. Now, come closer and spread your legs.”

Zhuliya immediately complies, and her obedience makes me all the harder. Ducking under the horned strap-on, I lick at the moisture pooling between her thighs, scooping it up with my tongue.

When I have enough, I scrape it over the length of my horn until it’s glistening with both my mate’s arousal and my saliva.

“There. I’m going to lie on my back and help direct you since my fur covers your view—all fours might be difficult because you’re so much smaller than me.

This way, I can reach up and grab your hips to help you fuck me as well as watch your expression, too.”

She whimpers again, and I tamp back the beast my mate swears she doesn’t mind. Lying down once more, I slip off my pants completely.

From the waist down, I’m covered in pale gray fur, except at my feet, which are bare, like my chest.

Spreading my legs and bending my knees, I beckon Zhuliya forward while arching off the ground.

My mate takes the hand I offer, and I tug her down until the strap-on aligns with my ass. I wait while she gets her bearings, and then I guide her to my entrance.

The sensation is like nothing I’ve ever felt before. A foreign pressure that overwhelms me a bit as she surges forward.

I grunt, staying her hips, and she rushes to apologize. “It’s ok, soyam, I’m getting used to the feeling.”

“Are you sure—”

“Yes. Go a little deeper.”

She does. Centimeter by centimeter until her smooth stomach brushes against my fur and her breasts hover over my stoyuk.

When she bottoms out, Zhuliya groans, the loud sound echoing into the night. I realize my bone spur has fully penetrated her as well.

“Oh god—”

“Ulyen, his name is Ulyen.”

“I’m not calling for *him!*”

I laugh. “But you should be!”

Zhuliya growls, the sexy little sound an attempt to mimic me. “Help me move!”

She doesn’t have to ask me twice, and I wrap my claws over the belt wrapped around my mate’s waist.

My stomach muscles burn as I lean forward as far as I can go and slam Zhuliya into me. She cries out, thrusting her hips forward and grinding her clit against the grooves I carved for this very reason.

“More,” she begs, bracing a hand on either side of my stoyuk before dipping her head down to graze her tongue over the tip.

*Fuck, this woman undoes me.*

I set a drilling pace that leaves us both breathless as Zhuliya fucks me with my own horn. Each thrust into my ass sends a fissure of pleasure dancing along my spine.

With my hands doing most of the work for her, my mate teases my stoyuk with every thrust. Her lovely fingers, inked with bones, capture my hard length and stroke it in time with our movements.

Dots dance before my eyes as my vision narrows. My horn touches a place deep inside of me I never knew existed.

It makes my stoyuk pulse like nothing else, and I know that I’m going to come soon—and hard.

*But first my mate.*

Zhuliya's thighs shake under my hold, and I reach further around to cup the cheeks of her rounded bottom.

Slipping a claw into the crevice, I tease her the way I know she likes as well as drive my one spur deeper into her pussy.

She rubs her clit against the grooves, jerking my stoyuk up and down, racing me to the finish line.

In the end, we come together. My release barrels from the base of my skull straight into my throbbing stoyuk. All the while, my ass clenches as volcanic waves of bliss wash over me.

My mate sobs as she comes, pushing into me as far as possible. For a small eternity, we remained locked together until she collapses onto me, wriggling in the mess I made across my stomach.

With slightly trembling digits, I loosen the belt and toss my debauched horn to the side so that I can properly cuddle the woman, but she eludes my hold to lick up my seed.

“Soyam, how many times do you want me to come this night?”

“Two is not that many.”

“I refuse to spend again until you have.” Picking her up, I hold Zhuliya until her pussy rests just above my still hard length. “Again?”

“Again—I mean, we have to until Ulyen arrives, right?”

A dry chuckle escapes my lips. “Indeed, but tell me if you're too sore.”

Zhuliya wrinkles her nose. “I'm fine. Less talk, more orgasms.”

For this, I smack her ass, and she moans as I notch the head of my stoyuk between her pink lips.

“More?”

“Stop teasing me, Ilian!”

“I love the sound of my name on your tongue.”

“What else do you love on my tongue?”

She eases down further with my help, taking me past my ridges. “My cum.”

“Fuck,” she whimpers, tossing back her head, and I shove her further down with quick, staccato thrusts.

When she’s nearly seated, I twist her around so that her back faces me while I continue to recline on the ground.

Then I reach over to grab my horn that was once inside us both and angle the spur Zhuliya used to fuck herself to now pleasure her ass as she did mine.

My mate begs me to go harder and faster, her words becoming too jumbled to understand until all I can make out is her chanting one phrase—*oh god*.

Once more, Zhuliya comes with a roar, her pussy clenching like a hot glove around my stoyuk, and I can’t help but follow her.

“Oh god, oh god!”

Her cries reach a crescendo before she crumples, spent from our exertions. Sweaty and winded, I wonder how much more either of us can take when a voice calls out.

“You summoned?”

The blazing red gaze of Ulyen looks upon my mate with interest, and the swirling possessiveness inside of me rears its ugly head.

I roll Zhuliya over to cover her naked body while she recovers. Grabbing at her clothes, I help her dress before pulling on my own pants.

“Great god, we need some of your fur, please,” I ask without preamble.

Ulyen still doesn’t glance at me.

“Please, it’s for Aisyth to help Ilian and me,” Zhuliya adds, and Ulyen winks at her.

“How can I deny such a lovely creature when she screams so prettily for me?”

My head drops down, and I remind myself that not only do we need Ulyen’s favor, but stabbing a god with my horned strap-on won’t kill him, just piss him off.

“Is that a yes or a no?” My tone isn’t as reverent as it should be, but I’m growing impatient.

“Yes...if she takes it from me.”

*And that’s why I said, ‘fuck it’ and plotted the murder of my people’s beloved deity.*

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



### ZHULIYA

BESIDE ME, ILIAN TWITCHES like he's being electrocuted, and I grow concerned as something akin to murderous rage siphons into me through our bond.

“Can you excuse us for a moment, please?”

I'm not sure if my request is polite enough for the god, or if one can even ask them such a thing, but I tug Ilian a short distance away.

“Are you alright?”

“Absolutely.”

“Ilian—I can feel you through our link.”

“And?”

“And I know something’s wrong...*very* wrong.”

“I don’t like the way Ulyen looks at you.”

At this, I roll my eyes. “He’s your god of sex, of course he’s going to be lewd and undress me with his gaze. Who cares? I’m not interested. Red eyes are not my thing.”

“They aren’t?”

“Nope, I prefer pink.”

Ilian grins down at me, tucking a strand behind my ear. “Sometimes, when you talk that, everything feels...”

He trails off, not finishing, but I know what he meant. It feels *real*, but we both know the bond is devious and will do anything to obscure the veracity of true emotions.

“Right, well, sorry about that. I’m not normally a violent person, but Ithaqua often fight for their mates. It’s another right of passage to prove ourselves worthy.”

“I promise you have nothing to prove to me. Remember, I already find you worthy?”

Ilian nods, and the rage he once felt is replaced with a nearly unbearable sadness because I can almost hear him thinking.

*If I find him worthy, why can't I stay his mate?*

There’s no way to explain to Ilian that it’s me who’s broken, not him. My parents loved one another deeply, but that love was rife with so many hardships.

In truth, I’m not sure they got to really enjoy the fruits of their labor. Everything in their life seemed to constantly test their commitment to one another.

Being with Ilian will be the same way—hell, the Russian government doesn’t even allow human-monster relationships!

I can’t ask Ilian to uproot his life to move to America because it’s my home and where we can be together.

No, breaking the bond is the right thing to do. It doesn’t matter how perfectly we seem to fit together, I can’t be the reason Ilian throws away everything he has in Berdsk.

The Ithaqua takes my hand and leads me back to Ulyen. I ignore his stare and walk over to stand before him.

“I don’t have any scissors, so I’m unsure of how you want me to take your fur. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Ulyen glances at Ilian. “What a strange, kind mate you have. Dear human, I’m a god. You can’t hurt me with something as paltry as pulling out some of my fur. Didn’t your dear mate break his own horn off for you without even a wince?”

My stomach twists at the memory. “Please don’t remind me. Can I be honest? I...I don’t think I can rip your fur, sorry.”

The Ithaquan god sighs, as if genuinely put out that I won’t do such a ridiculous thing. “Very well.”

I shriek when he grabs a handful of the ink black pelt and yanks it free. He presents it to me like it’s the most valuable treasure in the world—and considering what Ilian and I need done, it might be.

“Th-thank you,” I croak, still unsettled.

“Sure thing.” Ulyen scratches between his horns, glancing between Ilian and me. “Did you two wanna have an orgy?”

Ilian snarls, the violent intent returning through our link, and I rush to decline. “No, no! We’re good, thanks.”

Ulyen shrugs. “Your loss. I’m just going to take this—”

He leans down to pick up the strap-on Ilian made from his horn. The dark-furred Ithaquan lifts it to his skull and sniffs before sighing.

“Mmm, I’m going to see if a Verdilak wants to watch me fuck myself with this. Good luck, you two.”

With this, Ulyen saunters off into the darkness, disappearing altogether. There’s a beat of silence between Ilian and me as I try to figure out what the heck just happened.

“That man needs serious help.”

Ilian snorts. “That’s an understatement.”

He appears a little frazzled, and I walk over to give my mate a hug. “You ok?”

“Not really. The mental images of Ulyen fucking his ass with *my* horn—that was in my ass and *yours*—might make me sick.”

“They’re definitely making me sick. I think I would rather get back on a boat than envision that.”

My Ithaqua chuckles. “Aisyth won’t come until the morning. Let’s get some rest while we can.”

Ilian beds down a bit away from where we summoned Ulyen. We don’t have anything to sleep on but the ground, but thanks to Aisyth, it’s not cold.

It even feels like there’s a bit of cushion, and I point this out to Ilian.

“At least one of the Ithaquan gods isn’t a disgusting tool.”

He snorts. “I told you, all gods are devious. Give it enough time. Aisyth will show her true colors. She’s just as twisted as Ulyen.”

“Do you think that’s why she sanctioned your imprint in my ink?”

Ilian falls silent, adjusting me in the crook of his arm so that I’m plastered to his side, his fur like a soft gray blanket of security.

“I don’t know why she did it. I think it was a mistake, but goddesses don’t admit to those. The fact that she’s even considering dissolving our bond proves it to me.”

“Oh.”

Even the Ithaquan goddess thinks it’s a mistake—*how do I even rationalize my feelings for this man when everything in the universe seems to be pointing away from him?*

All my life I’ve avoided love for fear of being hurt, and then I go and fall for the least suitable person on the face of the Earth.

We can't be together legally, and I can't seem to wrap my head around the fact that maybe any of what Ilian and I are feeling is real.

As actively as I avoid men, deep down, I want someone to hold me—like Ilian does—and care for me—like Ilian does.

For one second, I wish I could turn off our bond and really assess my emotions. Then again, I might be scared at what I find.

There's an emptiness inside of me, made more hollow with the loss of my parents. Men have never appealed to me as a filler for this hole.

*But Ilian is different.*

At first, I was obsessed with his art, his talent, his passion. Later, it became about him as a man as he starred in all my fantasies, but when I met the Ithaqua, everything changed.

Before he even imprinted on me, I felt a tug in the center of my chest, as if there was already an invisible cord connecting us.

Something as silly as fate isn't real, but when I met Ilian's bright pink gaze for the first time, I had a sense of destiny.

Maybe we both felt the pull—*but how and why?* Did Aisyth already plan to throw the two of us together?

If so, then can one really believe in true love, or is everything out of our hands, left to the whims of some very questionable gods?

My temple throbs with my incessant overthinking. Like a vicious circle, my logic keeps going round and round.

It comes back to the same question of what's real and what's not—are we all but pawns to the gods I didn't even know existed, but if that's true, then is there even any point in fighting fate?

I can't help but wonder if by breaking this bond and erasing Ilian's ink, I'm also erasing the greatest thing that's ever happened to me.

As I drift off to sleep, I'm torn between my desperate need to be loved and my even more desperate need to run, hoping someone—anyone—will give me a sign.

My eyes start to close as something streaks across the sky, gone before I can blink, and I realize it's a shooting star.

A small smile curls my lips at the memory of my ima telling me that shooting stars aren't made to make wishes on, but rather, signify that your wish is coming true.

Ilian and I both want to remove his imprint, but at the same time, neither of us will really admit that we don't.

*So which wish is coming true?*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



### ILIAN

MY MATE SLUMBERS LIKE the dead, and since Aisyth hasn't shown up, I decide to hunt for Zhuliya and me.

Ithaqua can eat raw meat, but I know I'll need to make a fire to cook food for my tiny human.

Scenting the air, I catch the aroma of a wild cat north of the island. I leave Zhuliya behind reluctantly but know she'll be safe in Aisyth's sphere.

Not even Ulyen will dare touch her without permission.

I kick at a rock as I pass on my way to dive into the ocean. The arctic blast of frigid water does nothing to cool my irritation at the thought of the god making advances on my mate.

*Then again, I'm fairly certain he made an advance on me, too, but I'm packing that away.*

Swimming to the next island, I sniff, no longer smelling the cat but another predator far larger—a polar bear.

Normally, Muleen only hunt them in packs, but that's when I was a tungan and much smaller.

A fully grown Ithaqua matches a polar bear in nearly every way, down to our claws and sharp teeth, and I know my kind can take them down.

Still, it's a lot of meat neither Zhuliya nor I will get to eat, and I don't kill for the sport of it.

I weigh my options when the breeze shifts, and I realize the bear is moving south from the way I just came.

With haste, I dive back into the sea, my arms swinging in a frenzy of movement as I paddle back to the island where Zhuliya sleeps.

Despite my speed, the polar bear beats me, pulling onto the sandy shore with its snout in the air.

Splashing loudly, I grab the creature's attention only for it to trot off. It knows I'm not a meal and doesn't wish to face off—nor share what it smells.

But I'll be damned if this magnificent beast lays a paw on my mate. I push out of the water and chase after the bear.

It rounds one of the caves, getting closer, and I leap on top of the craggy rock formation so that I'm above it, and then I jump down.

My body weight slams the polar bear to the ground, and it hits with a growl and a thud, swiping a massive, white paw at my head.

The bear might not have wanted to start a fight, but it won't back away from one, either. It twists under my hold, roaring loud enough to shake the trees.

Scared Zhuliya might come running and distract me, I rake my claws over the underside of the bear's belly.

The sharp tips easily pierce through the fat and muscles, spilling the mammal's intestines in a bloody heap.

It jerks in my hold, too shocked to do much else, and I drag another claw over the polar bear's throat.

By the time I'm finished, my light gray fur is matted with red blood brighter than Ulyen's eyes.

I stare down at my hands, coated with another's life essence, and it's in this moment that Zhuliya comes into view.

Her gaze reflects the horror I sense pouring through our bond, and I back away slowly from the crime scene of my misdeeds.

Instead of trying to explain, I run as fast as I can away from her. I jump into the ocean, trying to wash away the stain that spreads across my soul.

I tried to tell Zhuliya—I'm nothing but a heartless, mindless monster, made worse by the blinding need to protect her.

Just last night, I was contemplating murdering one of my gods. Now, I downed an animal out of fear for my mate.

Of course, this is the Ithaquan way, but Zhuliya isn't an Ithaqua. She's a human, and by those standards, I'm nothing but a monster.

It doesn't matter if I want this bond like I need air to breathe, keeping Zhuliya tethered to me is *wrong*.

She deserves a normal human man who isn't twice her size and a fucking obsessive brute, but just the thought of another male touching her enrages me.

Even with my imprint removed, I fear the piece of my soul latched inside of Zhuliya will never come back to me.

*I was hers before I even inked her back, and nothing will ever change that.*

Growling, I capture some fish for breakfast and swim around the island, wondering how to approach my mate.

A streak of light blue with orange splotches catches my eye, and I realize Dairfyn is waving to me from a beach on the

opposite side of where Zhuliya and I slept.

Sluicing through the water, I stomp back into shore and shake the other monster's hand, glad that I'm no longer covered in blood.

"Things not going well?"

"They could be better. Did you find Zhuliya's roommate?"

Dairfyn gives me a toothy grin. "Indeed. A lovely creature, your mate's friend. A bit too serious, but nothing I can't fix."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not certain your parents will approve of you mating with a human."

They shrug. "If I bring good relations to the Dagon, I'm not sure they will care. Prestige and honor are more important to us than a person's blood."

My stomach rolls at the use of the word, and all I can see is Zhuliya's terrified face. "And what if this female just thinks you're a monster?"

The Dagon gives me a strange look. "I'm not sure how to answer that, my friend. If someone—anyone—judges me solely for the fact that I'm a monster, that's on them. I'm not going to go out of my way to change their perceived connotation of the word."

"Not even for your mate?"

"Listen, I admit humans can be skittish, but they don't all just label us as heinous creatures. They understand that, like them, some of us are good and some of us are bad.

You're always going to find someone, no matter their species, who has a problem with you for one reason or another.

To that, I say 'who cares'. The people who really care for you will see beyond your monstrous appearance to the heart of gold that you hide inside. I know Zhuliya does."

"How do you know this?"

"Because she looks at you like you've hung the moon and stars...you know, the way you stare at her?"

“Yeah, but I told you, this whole this was an accident—”

“Bullshit. You’ve spent too much time in the human world. You know better than to question fate.

That’s how you get cursed by the gods. Quite frankly, I’m impressed you even have the balls to approach your goddess with your request.”

“We met her—Aisyth—she’s going to grant Zhuliya’s wish as long as we can procure a couple things.”

“Is it really Zhuliya’s wish?”

I scoff. “Of course it is! She doesn’t want to be mated to a stranger that imprinted on her!”

“Because she said those words exactly?”

“No, but it’s pretty obvious!”

“Ilian, nothing’s ever obvious, even when someone says something. People are complex creatures who think things will work out if they don’t communicate properly—despite evidence showing the contrary every time.

If you want real answers, then you need to ask her the real questions that count. I get that you’re scared, but girls like Zhuliya are once in a lifetime.

And you, my friend, are her once-in-a-lifetime monster. No one else can make her smile like you do, I guarantee it.”

“So you think I should go to her and lay my heart out while pouring everything I feel into the open?”

“It can’t hurt.” They raise a hand before I can argue. “I get that you’re scared of her rejection, but at least if you’re honest and talk openly, then you’ll have an answer.

If you don’t ask, you’ll spend the rest of your lonely, miserable years wondering how Zhuliya really felt.”

“You’re right—”

“I know.”

“—I need to speak plainly. Thank you, Dairfyn.”

They bow. “At your service. Is there anything else I can help with? I’m giving Sakura—Zhuliya’s friend—a bit of space until I decide to badger her again.”

“Yes, that sounds like a delightful courting tactic. Why did I even ask you for your advice?”

Dairfyn waves a hand. “Because sometimes you need an outside view to see what’s right before your nose. Also, I wanted to tell you some potentially good news.

The Japanese Prime Minister alerted the Russian President about the Kueeng’s interest in creating a trading treaty.

But because of Russia’s rather hostile take on monsters, the Kueeng has decreed they won’t work alongside the President until there’s civil equality for all.”

I frown. The current political system in my country isn’t really geared toward the fairness of others, even including humans who are of different ethnicities.

But I can dare to hope—not for myself, but for the other monsters and humans who find love together.

“Thank you for telling me. I’m curious to see if this sways the President or not. Either way, it sounds like Japan is willing to be a partner.”

“Indeed. Now, go find your mate and *talk* to her. I mean it, Ilian, you’re going to regret letting her slip through your fingers.”

With this, Dairfyn jogs into the ocean and swims away, leaving me alone to confront Zhuliya and ask the truths she holds in her heart.

*Just please don’t let them break mine.*

# CHAPTER NINETEEN



## ZHULIYA

ONE SECOND, ILIAN IS there, and the next, he's gone. My head still spins with the memory of him covered head to toe in blood.

My tummy bunches at the thought, but it's the anguish that was etched into his expression that really guts me. Through our bond, I felt his sorrow.

The early morning air hangs heavy with the scent of salt and damp earth as I wait for Ilian to return.

Before me, the sunrise paints the sky in hues of pink and orange, but I can't enjoy its splendor.

Everything inside of me coils, tightened to the breaking point as I try to figure out what I want.

In the tempest of my thoughts, I find myself adrift on a tumultuous sea, the waves of confusion crashing over me relentlessly.

The very fabric of reality feels frayed, as if I'm navigating through the haze of an uncertain dream.

The question echoes in the caverns of my mind, its weight intensifying with each passing moment.

Every emotion—every connection—I've forged with Ilian threatens to overwhelm me with doubt.

How much of our profound bond is a manifestation of genuine emotions, and how much of it is a beguiling illusion?

I grapple with the elusive boundary between reality and enchantment, desperately seeking clarity in the chaos that swirls within me.

Out of nowhere, the haunting memory of my own parents' love rises, taunting me with its purity.

Their love, marked by sacrifices and trials, casts a looming silhouette that now colors my perception.

Will I ever really have anything as profound as that—*do I even want it?*

I'm scared of not having someone, but deep down, I'm petrified of losing them. Of pouring everything I have into a love that will ultimately break my heart.

Can love withstand the inevitable trials that life thrusts upon it, or is it destined to eventually crumble under the weight of its own intensity?

Am I strong enough to withstand the fall when the world crashes at my feet?

Tears course down my cheeks, and I jolt when someone touches my shoulder. Whirling around from the rock I'm perched on, I expect to find Ilian.

Instead, it's an Ithaqua I've never seen before. She's similar in appearance to Aisyth, but unlike the vibrant glowing gazes I've grown used to, this Ithaqua's eyes are vacant.

No color—just a pit of black that burrows endlessly into her skull.

I stutter in shock, scrambling back only to trip. The Ithaqua doesn't say anything, merely holds her hand out for me to take to help me up.

“Wh-who are you?”

“They call me Ekana.”

*The goddess of memories!*

She leads me forward, her pace slow and steady as she links her arm around mine. Her fur is the same light gray as Ilian's, and for the hundredth time, I wonder where he's gone.

“You worry for him.”

“Do you read minds?”

“In a way. Every thought becomes a memory. Some linger, but most fade away. The more intense the emotion connected to the thought, the stronger it embeds into our psyche.”

“I don't know what's real.”

The dark abyss of Ekana's gaze bore into mine. “Yes, you do.”

Her words, spoken so succinctly, unnerve me. “How can a love shaped by forces outside of my understanding be genuine?”

“Oh my child of the mortal realm, love is a tapestry woven with threads of authenticity *and* divine intervention. Has your heart not called out to your own god, praying for love?”

It is the most divine connection one person can share with another, a gift passed down from the gods themselves, and will always carry undertones of destiny for all love is woven into the fabric of the universe.”

The goddess extends her palm, and a radiant orb of silvery light coalesces amidst her claws.

I stare at its beauty, mesmerized as the sphere of light shifts inside like a fortune teller's crystal ball.

“Look into the essence of your bond with Ilian, sweet Zhuliya, peer through the layers of memory that form it.

The answers you seek are already inside of you, but sometimes the eyes must see to believe.”

As I focus on the luminous globe, scenes from Ilian’s and my journey unfold—a kaleidoscope of moments that I realize are my memories pulled from my mind.

“Your bond is a vibrant mosaic of undisputable moments of realness that even the cosmic dance of those kismet cannot saturate.

The threads of this reality intertwine with these mystical forces to give depth to the rainbow of love that colors your fate.

Embrace this complexity, for it is within these intricacies that the beauty of your connection resides.”

Inside the ball of light, Ilian smiles, and my heart clenches. He looks at me with such adoration, it’s hard to believe that he doesn’t *not* love me.

“I’m scared,” I confess in a small voice.

“Love is scary. It means opening yourself for the chance to be hurt, but remember that the other person is just as vulnerable. Real love doesn’t seek to wound—it heals. Are you ready to repair the ache in your soul?”

“I want to so badly—”

“Only you can shed the yoke of your fear. If you don’t, it will drown you in a sea of doubt.”

My shoulders sag because I know Ekana is right. I’m letting fear rule over my emotions instead of taking a chance on something that could be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever experienced.

“What if I don’t choose Ilian?”

Ekana smiles. “Fate has a way of bringing people together who are truly meant to be—why fight what will eventually happen?”

No one escapes their destiny. All they can do is shape the path to it, so you decide. Do you want the route to be smooth or bumpy?”

I snort. *This Ithaqua makes it sound so easy.* She laughs, the tinkling sound ringing into the air like bells.

“My child, I never said it would be *easy*—life rarely is—but I think we can both agree that most people make decisions that complicate matters much more than they need to be. Why fight the flow of the river when you can use it?”

“So you’re saying I’m trying to swim upstream when I should go downstream?”

“Something like that.”

“Is Ilian alright?”

“That’s for you to ask him and learn.”

“I don’t know where—”

“He’s returning now. Before I go to give you space to talk, I’m going to gift you with what Aisyth tasked you with.”

Her words don’t make any sense until she conjures a vial out of thin air and squeezes a tear inside from the depths of her shadowed gaze.

“Why are you giving me this?”

“Because you still have a choice to make, and one of them requires my tear.”

“Ilian made it sound like summoning you would be difficult.”

“Emotionally, yes. Your memories of your past are what called to me. Would you not agree that every time you think of them, they take a toll on your heart?”

“So your tear is for my memories of my parents?”

Ekana smiles sadly. “No. It’s for the love that might have been.”

With this, she vanishes in a swirl of mist, leaving me bereft of her wisdom. I still seek answers, but Ekana made it clear

that they're already inside of me.

Heavy footsteps sound, and I turn to see Ilian lumbering toward me. His fur is clean and there's a wariness pouring through our bond from him, but his shoulders still curl forward.

I grip the vial with Ekana's tear as I replay her words in my mind. Deep down, I know what's real and what's not. I just have to follow my heart.

Clarity bursts like a firework inside my head, and I get what she meant about her gift. Ekana didn't cry from my past memories.

*But the future one of losing Ilian if I choose to dissolve our bond.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY



### ILIAN

“SOYAM, WE NEED TO talk.”

“I met Ekana—she gave me her tear.”

This announcement sets me off-kilter. I came to apologize and express how I feel about my mate, but I didn’t expect Zhuliya to say that.

“You summoned her?”

“My memories did.”

I close my eyes, my chest tightening. “I’m so very sorry. Only the most powerful of memories call to Ekana—but only the saddest make her cry. It’s why I wanted to save her for last.”

Zhuliya hums. “She was very kind. She helped me understand something I’ve been struggling with.”

“And what’s that?”

“It’s hard for me to reconcile my emotions with our bond—what is real and what’s not—but she pointed out that I already knew the answer, and that fate isn’t the driver of my life.

Rather, it’s the directions on the road to my destiny. I can choose to follow them or ignore them, but only to my detriment.”

A laugh wells up inside of me. “That does sound like something Ekana would say. She’s revered among the Ithaqua for her wisdom. I suppose you’ve made your decision.”

I indicate to the vial in her hand with Ekana’s tear. Zhuliya gives me a soft smile, and I second guess everything I planned to say to her.

*What does it matter when she’s already decided to remove my ink?*

“Shall we call Aisyth, then?”

“No, not until we talk first.”

“What is there to say? The sooner we remove our bond, the sooner you can be free.”

“And is this what you want?”

“I want what you want.”

“Ilian! Please, just answer me plainly. Do you want to dissolve this bond, regardless of what you think I want?”

Staring into her dark brown eyes, I click my claws together, knowing I have the choice to be honest or not.

“No.”

Zhuliya steps closer, so that her breasts rub against my stomach, and I stifle a groan at the sweet, torturous contact.

“Why?”

“Because I love you, soyam.”

Her breath catches. “How do you know you love me?”

I chuckle. “Because I need you more than I need air. You’re constantly in my thoughts, and your happiness is the only thing I want—even if it makes me miserable.”

“Is that why you’re working so hard to erase our bond, because you think I’m miserable?”

“Aren’t you, soyam?”

“Miserable? No. Confused, very. I struggle to sift through what’s the bond and what’s me.”

“Which never would’ve happened if not for me—I imprinted on you.”

“Actually, according to Ekana, it wasn’t you. That’s the part of our fate that’s out of both our hands. Destiny will always keep conspiring to get us together.

Imprinting upon me via your ink was simply the quickest, strongest way because to remove it would take an astronomical feat on both our parts.

As Ekana said, we can’t escape fate, but we can choose how we receive it. This entire time, we’ve been fighting it...and I’m sick of struggling against the current.”

“What current?”

“Sorry, it’s part of the metaphor your goddess gave me—that life’s like a river.”

“Right, so are we fish in this scenario?”

“Um, I would rather be a mermaid.”

“Have you met one? They’re mean.”

Zhuliya giggles. “Ilian! Ugh, why is this so difficult? Listen, I’m afraid to love you—afraid of *love*. It’s been so much easier to keep to myself and help others, but I’m lonely.

No matter how much I fight against it, I want someone to see me as something special, like how my ata felt about my ima.

In a world that didn't accept them, they found each other. Both sacrificed the love of their family for something unknown and new.

It worked out for them, but everything seemed like an uphill battle for my parents as they fled Russia to a country that knew nothing of their customs and culture.”

“Do you think love is easy?”

Her lush red lips dip into a pout. “It should be.”

“Anything as transcendent as love shouldn't come without trial, and love—real love—is tested by those challenges because those that weather it have found their truth together.

I understand why you're scared, but your parents chose one another *despite* the hardships. Love is a choice, Zhuliya.

It's choosing to be with someone, even when it seems like everyone is against you, because you need them more than anything else in the world.”

“But love isn't just about needing, Ilian. Passion burns up, and if there's not a foundation after the smoke clears away, everything between us will crumble.”

“I know you know there's something more than just the flames of our desire. What do you think is stoking the fire—why do you think our mating is so intense? It's rooted in love.

What if, just for a moment, you allow yourself to believe in us? What if we explore this connection without the weight of doubt?

There's no expiration on when we can remove the bond if you decide later that it's not working out. We can always keep Ulyen's fur and Ekana's tear.”

“Yeah, but will Aisyth wait for us here?”

“No, but we know how to find her. What's some more ink on your lovely body in exchange for another map—in exchange for giving *us* a chance?”

Zhuliya bites her lip, a habit I've grown to adore. “When you reason like that. I mean, I did fly halfway across the world

to get a tat by you. I certainly wouldn't turn down another.”

“Even if it means I imprint on you again?”

“I don't think you can imprint any more...can you?”

“There's always more of me waiting to make a home in your heart.”

“When you first explained what happened, you said a piece of your soul embedded into my tattoo—into me. In English, there's a saying called ‘soul mates’. Basically, it alludes to human couples who were meant to be together.

We don't necessarily believe that our gods are the direct reason behind this, like Ithaquan mates, but it does remind me that maybe even humans already have preordained fates we can't escape. Do you think you're my soul mate, Ilian?”

I swallow. “Yes. You are the other half of my heart. Something was missing inside of me before you. Soyam, you complete the picture that makes up my existence. I love you—truly.”

She wraps her arms around me, burying her face against the warmth of my torso.

“There's not a shadow of a doubt in my mind that you believe that, and a day ago, I would've questioned whether it was the bond or how you genuinely feel, but now I understand they are one and the same.”

“Aisyth never would've sanctioned our union if she didn't know we weren't meant to be.”

“Which is why I'm done warring with myself. It's not fair to either of us. I need to give us an honest chance, or else I might spend the rest of my life regretting it.

An idea occurs to me. “We have the ingredients—we can always ask Aisyth to remove your ink and try dating as humans do.”

“Thank you for offering that, but I don't think I actually want that. When I'm not fighting against it, I love the bond. It heightens everything between us to perfection and makes our interactions even more special.

Besides, there's no guarantee Aisyth would reinstate if once removed, regardless of our destinies being intertwined.

You once told me that mating bonds are a boon from the goddess—well, let's not look at our divine gift horse in the mouth.”

“A very wise decision.” Zhuliya jumps at the sound of Aisyth's voice. “I hope this journey together has taught you two something.”

“That I hate boats,” my mate mutters, and Aisyth smirks.

“And?”

“And that Ilian is an amazing man who deserves love.”

I rub at the tattoo over my heart—a death moth to signify the loss of so much in my life. “Soyam, you deserve love, too.”

“Then we all agree you two should be together?”

My goddess taps her foot, waiting when we don't immediately respond, and I turn to Zhuliya.

“From the moment I smelled you, I knew you were mine, but the time we've spent together since then has deepened my feelings for you. I'll never find another woman who makes my heart sing the way you do, Zhuliya. Please stay my mate.”

She pulls my face down to peck my lips. “Be gentle with my heart, Ilian Yaniqu. I'm giving it over into your care.”

“Do you know what this means?”

“That I get free tattoos from you whenever I want?”

I snort. “Obviously but no—I'm going to have to move to the Americas and set up a studio there. Inked will be over the moon to hear that I'm setting up headquarters in their country.”

“But what about everything you have in Berdsk?”

“I will give it to Yuri. He is ready. Besides, you have your work back across the ocean—it's too important to not do—and

we don't know when or if Russia will ever lift their ban on monster-human relationships.”

“Are you sure—”

“Soyam, wherever you go, I go. I have no ties to this land. My family is long gone and my worship of my gods and goddesses travels wherever I do.”

“Ilian knows he can always find me if necessary,” Aisyth adds.

“Home does sound nice...”

There's a wistful tone to my mate's voice that tells me I've made the right choice. “We'll get everything sorted, but until then, how about we go to Japan and see your friend?”

She smiles in delight. “I love that idea!”

“Aisyth, do you think you could help?”

The Ithaquan goddess nods but Zhuliya steps forward to tug her arm. “Just give me one second.”

She pulls Aisyth aside, and they speak in hushed tones. The excitement pouring from my mate through our bond worries me.

*What is she up to?*

But when the two rejoin me, neither says anything. Instead, Zhuliya hugs Aisyth, thanking her profusely.

“Until we meet again, my children.”

With this, she evaporates into ether, leaving us alone.

“Crap. She didn't say how she was going to help us get to Japan.”

Just then, Dairfyn pops into view, trudging up the hill. “Did someone say, ‘help’?”

Zhuliya groans. “Not another spit bubble.”

The Dagon laughs. “Nah. We'll use a time warp.”

“A what?”

“A time warp, you know something that allows you to jump from one place to another,” Dairfyn explains to my mate.

“Wouldn’t that be a space warp?”

“Aren’t they both one and the same?”

Zhuliya rubs her temple. “I suppose, but if we pop out at the time of dinosaurs, I’m wrangling a herd of raptors to come and eat you.”

The Dagon winks. “You’ve just got to trust me.”

“I don’t...but I trust Ilian, and he trusts you.”

“And why do you trust Ilian?”

My mate takes a deep breath and looks deep into my gaze. “Because I love him.”

*And just like that, everything is right in my world.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



### ZHULIYA

TO MY RELIEF, DAIRFYN'S demon portal doesn't spit me out at the feet of a Tyrannosaurus Rex but worse.

*At Sakura's feet.*

She's wearing a plain yukata with a red haori over it as well as crimson slippers and a scowl.

“What are *you* doing back here?”

It takes me a second to realize she's not talking to me, but rather to the smirking Dagon who doesn't seem to know their life's in danger.

“I brought your friend.”

“Zhuliya? Are you alright? What’s happened? How did you get here? Are you acquainted with this—this menace?”

She waves a hand at Dairfyn, and they blow her a kiss. Sakura stomps forward, her cheeks reddening with every step.

Ilian quickly intervenes. “It’s my fault. I introduced her to them after a little mating accident.”

Sakura freezes, leveling her black gaze on me. “You’re mated to this *baka*?”

“That’s Japanese for ‘charmer’,” Dairfyn stage whispers.

My friend snorts. “No. It means ‘asshole’.”

I choke, shocked at Sakura’s vehemence and choice of words—she *never* swears. “Actually, I’m not mated to Dairfyn, but to Ilian.”

She continues to stare, shaking her head. “You want me to believe that you’re mated to this man when you won’t even go on a date?”

“...there’s a lot to unpack.”

“Clearly. Can I invite you in for tea?”

“That sounds delightfu—”

“Not you, Dagon, Zhuliya and...her mate.”

“Ah, but your parents will be most displeased if you don’t show me the proper hospitality—and we know how much you aim to please them.”

Sakura grips her hands together until they turn white, and I grab her elbow before she either combusts or murders Dairfyn.

Pulling her to the side, I hiss, “What’s going on between you two?!”

“What? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! The bigger question is what’s going on with *you*!”

“I’ll spill when you do.”

She sighs. “Everything was nice and quiet until he popped up out of nowhere—with the Prime Minister—demanding I be the ambassador for Japan. As if I’m even qualified!”

“What did your parents say?”

“They’re ecstatic. It’s the highest honor ever bestowed on our family. To refuse would be a direct insult to both my country and my ancestors, but I don’t trust that Dagon. He’s up to something.”

I wince, and Sakura pounces. “Ah-ha! I saw that face. What do you know?”

“Oh no no no, you’re not putting me between you two. I have enough problems. You won’t even believe what’s happened to me.”

“Nothing tea and a bathhouse can’t fix.”

We share a smile. It’s been a few years since I’ve been to Okayama, but I adore Sakura’s home so much. Her parents are a bit overbearing, but they love their daughter and only want what’s best for her—according to them.

*Makes me wonder what my parents would think of Ilian.*

I glance over at my Ithaqua, and my heart stumbles over a beat. He looks up swiftly, sensing the rush of emotion through our bond, his gaze seeking mine for reassurance.

With a smile, I wave him over. “Sakura is going to let us use the bathhouse.”

Ilian bows to my friend. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome to stay, as well.” Dairfyn clears their throat, and Sakura wilts but is too polite to not extend the invitation to them.

“Lovely. Shall we go see my little cherry blossom’s parents?”

“Please don’t call me that.”

My mate pulls me back as Sakura and Dairfyn head inside. “Your friend doesn’t seem too keen about mine.”

“Sakura is very straight-laced. Dairfyn’s personality is probably too much for her, but it might be a good thing. If anyone needs to find love more than me, it’s her.”

Ilian's lips curl into a big smile. "You're just a regular little cupid now that you've embraced our bond, aren't you?"

"I guess I just want Sakura to be as happy as I am."

"It's my hope that you're always happy and that we grow old together."

"Will you still love me when my hair is gray?"

My Ithaqua rolls his eyes. "I don't see why not—you seem to accept my gray fur just fine." His expression grows serious.

"What?"

"You know it won't always be perfect, though, right? I mean, I'll work every day to make you happy, but—"

I reach on my tiptoes to kiss him. "Ilian, I know our relationship isn't going to be rainbows and sunshine all the time.

Even my parents argued, but their love was anchored into their souls like ours—I mean, not exactly how ours is—but you get it. True love can weather the storms."

Ilian cups my face, inching his skull closer to mine just as Sakura calls out for us to hurry up.

A pathetic sound escapes me, and Ilian laughs. "Don't worry, soyam, we'll find somewhere private to continue this later.

Let's go get cleaned up and then we can meet with Sakura's parents and the Prime Minister."

"Two weeks ago, I was a nobody, and now I'm rubbing elbows with goddesses and foreign leaders."

"Don't forget about gods," Ilian reminds.

"Ugh, I want to erase Ulyen from my memory more than I want to get back on a boat."

"Is that what you asked Aisyth when you two were whispering?"

I grin. "Don't worry about it. Will you teach me to do tattoos?"

My question takes the Ithaqua off guard. “Yes, if that’s your wish.”

“You know I love ink, especially yours.”

“Then it will be my honor. We can sketch designs out together and work on them.”

“I thought you didn’t draw?”

“Ah, but you do. Couples should have hobbies together.”

The courtyard behind the house where we were transported rings with my laughter. “Look at us, already on our way to becoming an old married couple.”

Sakura reappears. “Come on, you two! You’re worse than an old married couple, fawning over one another.”

Ilian and I share a glance, both of us amused by Sakura’s remark. With a teasing smile, my Ithaqua places a hand over his heart.

“We’re a couple very much in love—can you blame us for being a little wrapped up in each other?”

My friend just shakes her head, leading the way into her parents’ home. The traditional architecture is gorgeous, and I know the house has been in Sakura’s family for generations.

As we step inside, the scent of incense and the warm embrace of familiarity greet us. Although reserved, Sakura’s mom and dad have always embraced me as their daughter’s friend.

Sakura takes us down a hall and through a panel of sliding doors that leads outside to the bathhouse. She leaves us towels before going to check on Dairfyn.

Although my friend might complain about them, I can see her interest. Something about the Dagon has piqued Sakura’s attention—and that’s a first.

The warm waters soothe away the tension of the past week as Ilian and I sink into the large, wooden soaking tub.

Steam swirls around us, and we enjoy a moment of tranquility that’s interrupted by hushed tones bickering not too

far away.

Sighing, I get out and put on the robe Sakura left. “One second.”

I round the corner to put an end to whatever is going on between my friend and Ilian’s only to freeze in my tracks.

Dairfyn and Sakura are locked together in a passionate embrace. Their top hands fist Sakura’s thick, black hair, and she’s bent over their bottom arm as they ravage her mouth.

She whimpers, and I quickly retreat, rushing back to Ilian. He’s standing in the water, reaching for his towel.

“I sense your distress...and arousal.”

A scorching blush sears my cheeks. “It’s nothing. Let’s get back in.”

Hanging back up my robe, I ease into the tub only to have Ilian pull me forward and into his lap.

“Soyam, what is going on?”

“Dairfyn and Sakura are kissing.”

Ilian chuckles. “They work fast.”

“Indeed, they do. I feel guilty for letting you unleash them on my friend.”

“She can handle her own from what I’ve seen. Either the two will be mated by the spring or one of them will be dead.”

“My money’s on Sakura.”

“Obviously, but the Kueeng will be upset. Dairfyn is one of his favorites. So they were kissing, huh? Do you get off to watching others when you shouldn’t?”

His question makes me squirm. “No! It was more the unbridled hunger in their touch that caught me off guard and aroused me a little.”

“And what should we do about this?”

I gasp when his cock rises from under his fur. It’s so long that the white tip bobs out of the water between us.

“There’s no hanky-panky in the Yamamoto’s bathhouse!”

Ilian quirks a brow. “Did Sakura tell you that—because she’s breaking the rule right now, so I don’t see why we shouldn’t.”

With wicked intent, he grips my hips, lifting me until his cock pushes against the entrance of my pussy. He teases me, keeping me aloft while I try to wiggle out of his hold.

“This looks like fun.”

I scream, and Ilian drops me into the water with a big splash as a familiar, unwanted red gaze lands on us.

*Elohim Adirim, he came back.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



### ILIAN

ALL I CAN DO is gape at Ulyen.

Zhuliya ducks under my arm so that I cover most of the body, and even though I'm sure the Ithaquan god has already gotten an eyeful, my temper begins to boil.

“What are you doing here?”

“Is that how you talk to a beloved deity?”

His tone is teasing, but there's a warning in his words, and I bite my tongue to keep from saying something that might rouse his own anger.

“Forgive me, but I'm having a private moment with my mate.”

“Yes, and that’s why you called to me.”

Zhuliya’s nose scrunches up. “We didn’t summon you.”

I take a deep breath. “Didn’t Aisyth close the connection?”

“She did, but once you summon a god, we’re always tied. The stronger the sexual emotion, the more likely it is to bring me.”

“Great, this clown is going to pop up every time one of us comes,” Zhuliya mutters bitterly.

“Well, aren’t we rude—and after I shared my fur. Besides, I was only coming back to return your horn.”

He conjures it with a flick of his wrist, and bile rises up my throat. Next to me, my mate gags.

“It’s fine. A new one will grow back soon.”

“I cleaned it if you’re worried.”

“There’s not enough bleach in the world.”

“Hmm, I just licked it. Ithaqua don’t use this bleach. Is that a human thing?”

“It’s a sanitation thing,” Zhuliya rejoins.

“Ithaquan saliva is a healing agent as well as very hygienic.”

A strange expression comes across my mate’s face, and her lips twist in a curious way—like she’s torn between crying and laughing.

“Right, well, is there any way to *not* summon you, especially when Ilian and I are being private together?”

“You mean when you’re fucking?”

She glares at the red-eyed god. “Obviously!”

“Depends. What will you give me in exchange.”

“There’s a Dagon and a very reluctant human making out around the corner. Go bug them.”

Ulyen vanishes. Seconds later, Sakura’s scream rends the air.

“That was rather evil of you.”

“I know, and I feel terrible, but I needed him gone to try something.”

“What?”

She doesn’t answer me, closing her eyes instead. Instantly, intense emotions swamp me, and I reach for Zhuliya.

I’m so intent on comforting my mate that I miss the other Ithaquan standing outside of the soaking tub.

“Hello again, my dear.”

“It worked! Hi, Ekana. Sorry to bother you, but I have a favor to ask.”

“Of course. I see you didn’t need my tear after all.”

“I’m deeply indebted for the wisdom you imparted to me. Thank you for helping me sort through my thoughts to find my truth.”

“You two both have grown much on your journey together. Imagine how much stronger your bond will be over time. Now, how can I help?”

“It’s Ulyen. Ilian and I were being intimate—”

“Very important for mates. Apologies for interrupting. Please continue.”

“And Ulyen showed up because he said we’re linked from summoning him before. I wanted to test the theory and thought of those memories that brought you to me the first time.”

“Mmm, yes, very powerful memories, but so sad. Do you want me to remove them?”

“No! They are sad, but I cherish them. They’re all I have left of my parents. The favor I wish to ask is if there’s a way to keep Ulyen from appearing every time Ilian and I touch.”

“Yes, I can see how that might impede your blossoming union. I will fix this.”

“Thank you! Do we—do you want something?”

Ekana shakes her head. “No, but thank you for your offer, my child. I haven’t visited the Earthly realm in some time. Perhaps I will go visit the lusty Oni that lives in the mountains nearby.

Ulyen can join us, and I’ll ask the Oni to swallow his stoyuk and only return it when the rascal promises to behave.”

She gives us a serene smile and walks away. Zhuliya’s eyes remain the size of saucers, even after my goddess is gone.

“Wow...she’s kinda scary.”

“That was clever of you to call her. Ekana likes you.”

“She’s just happy I made the right choice about us.”

“As am I. Now, where were we? Oh, yes.”

I pluck Zhuliya back up, lifting her parallel to the tub until I’ve angled our lips to meet. We kiss, her body raining down drops of water over me.

The scent of my mate’s arousal drives me insane. I tip back my head and run my muzzle along Zhuliya’s cheek.

She yanks on my good horn, the breath shuddering from her lungs, and I laugh. My claws tease between her legs, and Zhuliya bucks in my hold.

Her hips tip forward in a sensuous dance, and I kiss her, sealing my lips over hers. She moans my name, calling me her mate, and something sparks within me.

*The urge to rut her, to mark her, to claim her anew now that she’s agreed to be mine.*

I spin her so that she’s still above the water but with her back to me. Gripping the sides of her hips while spreading her cheeks, I spear my tongue deep into her pussy.

Zhuliya cries out, and I pull back to shush her before diving back in. My poor mate tries to be quiet, but I work her into a frenzy of need—I want her to feel as frantic for my touch as I do hers.

When she comes, I lick up the wet mess, savoring the tangy flavor almost as much as the tremors racking her body.

This time when I spin her around and align my stoyuk with her slick heat, no one interrupts us.

Zhuliya's gaze connects with mine, and there's a storm of emotions whirling in the gorgeous brown depths.

I see her passion, her lust, her awe, but most importantly, her love. Even though this isn't the first time we've mated, it's the first time since we've accepted the bond fully.

Lust is a potent force, but love is even stronger and both are riding us as I work my mate down my hard length.

The moment I bottom out, my stoyuk splitting her pink pussy in two, I stop to give Zhuliya a moment to adjust.

*And then I fuck her like I know she wants to be fucked.*

"Yes, Ilian, harder!"

With a growl, I oblige. Zhuliya moans as I slam into her body, water splashing everywhere with each savage thrust.

Her legs wrap around my waist, squeezing like a vise as her pussy clamps around my aching stoyuk.

*Mine.*

"Don't stop—please, don't stop!"

Zhuliya sobs against my throat, smothering her screams of pleasure as I rut into her. Her nails dig through my fur, the sharp points biting into me.

*Marking me, making me hers.*

I lean back to look down at where our bodies join, my stoyuk slamming to her at a punishing pace.

Her tan skin lightens at the juncture of her legs, and I love seeing my dark length disappear inside her warmth.

"Look at me," I command gruffly.

Zhuliya lifts up with my aid until we're eye to eye. Not once does she flinch from the intensity of my bright gaze.

"Good girl. I want to watch your eyes glaze over when you unravel, and I fill your pussy with my cum."

Her mouth goes slack and her eyes become hooded. That alone nearly has me exploding into her tightness.

Watching her face, I reach a hand down to toy with her clit. Zhuliya's teeth work her lower lip as she clings to me harder, and the sight drives me wild.

She's a feast for the senses—the feel of her soft skin, the sound of her breathy rasps, the taste of her sweet lips, the scent of her arousal, and the sight of her taking me all in.

I could stay like this forever, lost in her body, but the tingle inside of me grows—*I'm close*.

Quickening my pace, I rub a claw roughly against her nub, eliciting a cry from her lips. With a feral howl, I pinch the little nub just as I slam deeply inside of her one last time.

Zhuliya's eyes widen as her pussy spasms around my stoyuk, shocked by the unexpected ecstasy I'm wringing from her body with my claw.

The wonder etched onto her face combined with her fluttering pussy tumbles me over the edge, and I roar my completion as I work my hips faster into her wet heaven.

Her pussy continues to milk me long after my own pleasure abates, but I don't pull out.

Instead, I rest my head atop of hers, holding us together and thanking all the gods that she's finally mine.

*Just as she was always meant to be.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



### ZHULIYA

ILIAN AND I CHECK into a hotel because I'm too embarrassed to look Sakura's parents in the eye.

*Let alone the Japanese Prime Minister that I forgot was visiting.*

I'm fairly certain that my Ithaqua and I are banned from the Yamamoto bathhouse for life. Hopefully, Sakura can forgive me for making an awkward situation worse.

The fact that Dairfyn won't leave until she's agreed to be the ambassador for her country isn't helping at all.

"Stop fretting," Ilian growls, scooping me up and tossing me on top of the bed.

He dives in after me, and I squeal like the girl that I am.

“Knock it off! You’re going to break the furniture here, too!”

“Right. We should bring the bed covers down here and sleep on the floor. We don’t need another Berdsk incident—although I did love chasing you.”

I blush. “You know I thought it was a dream.”

Ilian shakes his head, his lips curling into a satisfied grin. “I still can’t believe you spent months fantasizing about *me*.”

“And I can’t believe you still think you’re a monster.”

His expression grows shuttered. “I’m working on that. Ever since you’ve accepted me as your mate, I feel like maybe the memories passed down to me through my mother aren’t accurate anymore.”

“Why didn’t you ask Aisyth where your kind is? I think it would help if you spoke to another Ithaqua—that’s not a god or goddess—for some closure.”

He shrugs. “I was too preoccupied to think to ask it.”

“We could always try summoning her. Are we connected like we were to Ulyen and Ekana?”

“I’m not sure, but I doubt she would come. Aisyth doesn’t create maps so you can summon her, but so you can seek her out.”

“If there are many maps that she’s inspired for her followers, how does she know where to be in case one of them does seek her out?”

“All the locations she chooses are sacred to my goddess. She feels the pull of anyone approaching and knows to come.”

“It was one heck of an adventure, going after her. We never would’ve gotten so close if we didn’t go to find Aisyth. It’s funny how the very thing we were aspiring to break only got stronger.”

“Indeed it has. Every time you think about your love for me, I feel it through the bond, solidifying our connection even

more. Eventually, we'll be able to read each other's minds."

"What?!"

"Kidding!" Ilian tickles my sides until I'm breathless. "As time goes on, we'll be able to more astutely pinpoint the reason for the emotions we're feeling from one another.

But it will never replace the most important element in our relationship—one we ignore for far too long."

"And what's that?"

"Communication. It's hard to express the words when we're worried about the reaction of the other person."

"It's true. We never want to hurt anyone and end up hurting ourselves in the process. I think that's why so many people are unhappy, but most of us weren't raised to speak plainly."

"But we've learned our lesson, right?"

I stare into his vibrant pink gaze. "Probably not."

His booming laugh fills the hotel room. "Soyam, I knew you were trouble the moment you walked into my studio."

"All I wanted was some ink from the infamous Ilian Yaniqu—you're the one who imprinted on me and gave me a tat-gasm!"

Ilian snorts. "Fuck, it was torture not claiming you as mine then and there. I had to stroke my stoyuk for the second time that night, and when I came back, you were gone."

"I was embarrassed—I had just come all over your chair! I didn't realize it was *your imprint* that did it. I figured my months of fantasizing about you made me more susceptible to..."

"Orgasming from me inking your back?"

"Pretty much." I grin at him, tracing a finger around the spikes that decorate his face. "Do you think that would happen every time you have me a tat?"

"No. An Ithaqua only imprints on their mate once."

My lips pucker into a pout. "Damn."

“But we still have all those other fantasies of yours to try out.”

This perks me up. “Most of them were just primal play.”

“You do love it when I chase you. It was a revelation to know that you enjoyed the beastly monster I’d spent so long trying to tamp back. Ithaqua generally repulse humans.”

I scowl. “Well, I adore you. Your true nature doesn’t repel me because while you can be monstrous in bed, you’re always a sweetheart outside of it.”

Ilian smiles, running his claws between his horns. “Maybe I’m an anomaly.”

“My anomaly.”

This earns me a fierce kiss that curls my toes. “My mate.”

We lay together like that until we both fall asleep. It reminds me of the night we summoned Ulyen and how tenderly Ilian held me.

I stared up at the stars that night, spying a shooting star and wondering about my wishes. At the time, I didn’t know which one would come true.

*But I’m glad it’s the one I’m living now.*



### *One Month Later*

Ilian squeezes my hand as we walk over the threshold into our new home. It’s the first time I’ve ever lived in a house.

Growing up in the city, my parents rented an apartment which I continued to lease after their deaths.

As of right now, it’s Sakura’s, but I’m not sure she’s coming back anytime soon. It makes me sad not being close to my friend, but she’s starting a new chapter in her life, as am I.

She ultimately accepted the position of being the official Japanese ambassador to the Dagon. I'm convinced the only reason she said 'yes' was to get closer to Dairfyn.

*To kill him.*

I figure there'll either be a funeral or a wedding in their future depending on how things go.

Ilian offered to marry me, but I declined. If my ima and ata were still around, I might, but I have no one to celebrate the occasion with, nor does Ilian.

Besides, the mating bond we have together transcends any human ceremony, and we can focus on starting our own family—something the two of us want more than anything.

The house is large, but Ilian's adamant that it will be full one day. I'm excited at the prospect of us having children, but for right now, I'm content with it just being him and me.

*I still have plans and fantasies to live out.*

“What do you think of your office?”

Ilian drags me into the large room decorated in bright colors, the walls covered in my doodles.

“It's perfect. I'm so excited to get working.”

When Ilian came back to America with me, he helped me form an LLC and establish a name for my job—*Found Family*.

With his help, as well as the generous donations he refused to let *me* refuse, my freelance work transformed into a flourishing company.

Found Family now has ten employees and has reunited over thirty families who lost loved ones in moving to the States.

“And what do you think of your studio?”

We step into the room next to my office which has floor-to-ceiling windows. The lighting is perfect for Ilian to do custom ink work away from his downtown shop.

In fact, he's even been teaching me a little bit. I won't be ready to do my first tat for many months, but under his skilled

supervision, I can finally indulge in my passion.

He's since added three more tats at my request—a skull like his with one broken horn, a matching death moth like the one on his chest, and a shooting star.

*To always remind me that dreams do come true.*

As predicted by Ilian, no tat-gasms resulted as he already imprinted on me back in Berdsk, but a girl can wish.

“Do you want to throw a house party? We can invite some of my clients, the editor from Inked, and Yuri, Sakura, and Dairfyn might come.”

“I don't know if I've ever properly thrown a party. It could be fun. Do you think Sakura's parents will want an invite?”

We chuckle, and Ilian shakes his head. “Not a chance. We can host the party in the spring when the weather's better.”

“It'll have to be early spring. We have our trip coming up.”

Ilian and I are going inking, a term I've coined for traveling around the country and getting tats from certain artists.

Anymore, Ilian's is the only ink I want on me, but we both will enjoy meeting all the owners and seeing their work.

I sigh, really drinking in the moment. “Thank you,” I whisper into Ilian's fur as I wrap my arms around him as best as I can.

“For what?”

“For giving me a home, for spoiling me, for loving me.”

“Soyam, I told you, my money is yours. And have you not given me the very same things? You are my home, and you spoil me with your love.”

“We're a regular match made in heaven—or in our case, a tattoo parlor.”

“Indeed. Now what do you say about consecrating our new home?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Sex in every room?”

“Sex on every surface?” I counter.

“Both?”

“Both,” we chime together.

He pushes me roughly against the wall, his skull diving into my neck while he nips at the sensitive flesh.

Over his shoulder, I spy the framed picture of my drawing that I entered for the Inked contest—the very one that started this whole thing. It’s the perfect reminder of our story.

*And I can’t wait to see how our happily ever after ends.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



### ILIAN

*One Year Later*

“NERVOUS?”

“Nope.”

I smirk down at Zhuliya, knowing that she’s lying—I can feel her anxiety through our bond.

“Breathe, soyam. You’ve got this.”

With steady hands, Zhuliya brings the irons to the patch of skin exposed on my upper thigh where I shaved away the fur.

The longer she works, the surer my mate becomes, and I watch in fascination as Zhuliya loses herself to the art blossoming onto my flesh.

Her eyes glaze over, and I note she's going into a trance similar to what happens to me. I'm enthralled by the serene expression that softens her features.

A small smile curls her lips as she works, and I swear there are stars in her eyes. Zhuliya says she falls in love with me every time she watches me work.

*And now I get it.*

For over an hour, my mate labors until her hands cramp up and pull her back to the present. She jolts, blinking up at me until her gaze refocuses.

Zhuliya bends forward to inspect her art, careful not to disrupt the new ink. "Oh my gosh, Ilian, I think...I think it worked!"

"Of course it did, soyam. You've been taught by the best. I had no doubt you would be able to do it."

"No, I mean, Aisyth gave me a map!"

Now it's my turn to blink. I look from Zhuliya's excited expression down to my tight. Sure enough, the swirling patterns bear the signature of my goddess.

Unease slithers through me, and I choose my words carefully. "Why did you want a map?"

Sensing my upset, Zhuliya quickly grabs my hand and kisses the tip of one claw. "It's *not* what you think. I promise it's not a map to her to sever our bond. It's just something I asked her long ago."

My mind goes back to that moment on the island when Zhuliya pulled Aisyth aside to talk to the goddess. Neither said anything about what Zhuliya wanted, and I had put it from my mind.

"What did you ask her?"

"For her help."

"About?" I growl.

"I told her I wanted to learn to do tattoos like you and asked if she would give me directions to something special."

Glancing at the ink on my thigh, I try to discern what my mate can possibly be talking about, but the beautiful white swoops reveal nothing.

“You’re purposely not answering me!”

Zhuliya shrugs.

“I enjoy driving you crazy.”

A laugh bursts from me. “Congratulations, you’ve succeeded. Now tell me, mate, what is this a map to?”

She stares deep into my gaze, her brown one misting with tears. “Ilian, it’s a cartogram to your people.”

For a moment, my mind blanks. Then, with a giant whoop, I pick up Zhuliya and twirl her around.

“Put me down, you beast, before you ruin your ink!”

I set her down, and she scowls at me primly while dressing the fresh tat. My stoyuk stirs at the sexy way Zhuliya silently reprimands me.

With shaking hands, I cup her face, pulling her away from her task. “Thank you. This is the greatest gift anyone’s ever given me—aside from when you agreed to stay my mate.”

“So are you up for another adventure?”

“Do you even have to ask? What do you think the tat was of?”

“My first impression—the Arctic Circle.”

“It would make sense for Ithaqua to move as far north as possible to avoid humans, but soyam, it will be far too cold for you.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Stop speaking in riddles, wench. What do you know that I don’t?”

“Aisyth told me to keep Ulyen’s fur and Ekana’s tear if we weren’t going to dissolve the bond. She said to combine the two to keep me warm for our next journey.”

“And what does that mean?”

“No idea. Wait here.”

Zhuliya sprints out of the room and into her office. A few seconds later, she returns with the two items.

Pulling the stopper on the vial, my mate tips Ekana’s tear over Ulyen’s fur. Instantly, her body is covered in a thick, black pelt.

She shrieks, tugging on it, but the fur doesn’t budge. “Ugh, Ilian, I think I just became part Ithaqua.”

“If it makes you feel better, I think you look stunning. It blends with your hair perfectly, even if it’s the shade of my depraved god.”

“Erm, thank you, but how do I remove it?”

“Aisyth will know. We’ll just have to ask her when we find my tribe.”

Excitement bubbles within me at the prospect.

“I’m going to be a fur queen until we find your family?!”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get it fixed. Let’s do some research on the ink and plan our journey.”

“Fine...but you better hope Aisyth fixes this.”

“She will, my mate.”

“Ugh, and what will the other Ithaqua think when they see me?”

“That I’m the luckiest monster in the world because you’re *my* mate.”

I tip her face up and kiss her deeply. She squirms under my touch when I snake my tongue out to dance with hers.

“Ilian, your ink—”

“It’ll be fine.”

“But what about researching—”

“It can wait until after.”

From this point on, we stop talking. I caress the lovely, black fur now covering her limbs, marveling how silky it feels.

I know human women shave—and I adore my mate’s satiny skin—but I also love seeing Zhuliya in an Ithaquan pelt.

For some reason, it makes me think of what our children might look like, and I want to breed her until my mate is full of my seed.

Letting Zhuliya go, I snarl, “*Run.*”

She stares up at me, her velvety gaze twinkling with mischief. “Make me.”

The little minx is helping me recreate the first time we mated, and I chase after her through the house.

“Don’t you dare break any of the furniture!” Zhuliya bellows, dashing down a hall and away from me.

“Brat! Get back here!”

Her merry laughter filters back to me until I finally catch her just outside of our bedroom. She pouts, her cherry red lips driving me crazy.

“Boo, you caught me.”

“You wanted me to.”

“What are you going to do with me now?”

“Teach you a lesson.”

“Ooooo,” she taunts.

I smack her ass through her jeans shorts before cupping her pussy. Even through the denim, her heat scorches my hand.

Popping the bottom and pulling down the zipper, I yank her shorts off and bury my face between her legs.

She yelps as I drive her back into the bed, her legs hooking around my horns. The broken one is now fully healed and gives Zhuliya something to anchor herself to as I make her come over and over.

Finally, my mate begs for mercy, and I flip her into her stomach, thrusting into her sopping pussy. My spur pushes into her ass, and Zhuliya convulses as another orgasm builds.

The beautiful expanse of her back is covered with fur, and I run a hand up and down it, wishing I could see her ink—the very thing that bonds us together.

“Do.” *Thrust.* “You.” *Thrust.* “Know.” *Thrust.* “Howfuckingperfectyouare?”

My words are a jumbled slur as pleasure washes over me. I’m so close, but not until my mate comes again.

Zhuliya holds back, and I growl. It’s a game we play where I get her off as many times as possible before finding my own release.

Being the little brat that she is, my mate works twice as hard to tip me over the edge first. We both have our own tricks for making the other person come, and I snarl filthy things into Zhuliya’s ear as I jackhammer deep into her pussy.

She whimpers, and I smile triumphantly until she reaches back with a hand to hold mine. Her head twists to the side so Zhuliya can look me in the eye.

“Breed me, mark me, claim me—I’m yours.”

Her words send the primal, possessive part of my brain into hyperdrive, and I howl as my stoyuk jerks, filling my mate’s pussy just like she told me to do.

But my orgasm triggers her own, and together we cry out before collapsing on the very sturdy bed we share.

“I think I won that round technically.”

“Are you still keeping score?” I pant, barely able to catch my breath.

“Absolutely I am!”

“And?”

“You’re beating me by like a dozen orgasms.”

I smirk. “Don’t worry. I’ll let you make it up to me.”

Zhuliya swats my arm playfully. “Research time?”

“After a nap. I’ve waited my whole life to find my people, but I swear I’ve waited longer to hold you in my arms. I love

you, soyam.”

“And I love you, my Ithaquan beast.”

With a sigh, I wrap my body around my mate, placing a kiss atop her head. In Ithaquan lore, those who pass join Ulu in the Great Afterlife, but I think I’m in it now.

*Because Gan Eden—as Zhuliya calls it—is with her in my arms.*

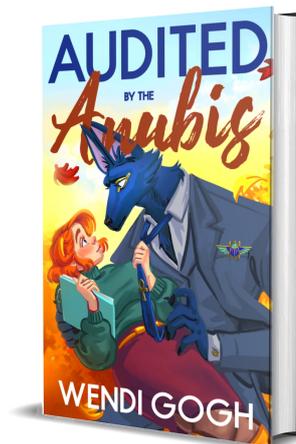
## THE END



Ready for another book in the series?

Then check out [MONSTROUS MEET CUTES©](#) or keep reading for a sneak peek at Audited By The Anubis!

(Please note Dairfyn and Sakura have their story in letter D, Dared By The Dagon.)



# SNEAK PEEK CHAPTER ONE



FERN

*Hell's bells—someone's at the door.*

No one ever comes to visit me, especially on a Thursday afternoon. It's two o'clock, and Seraphina is at the bakery so that I can have the day off.

Thus far, I've spent it eating an absurd amount of Irish potato cookies and binge watching Bridgerton.

*Why can't I have any wealthy men vying for my hand in marriage?*

I remind myself that I'm not interested in said wealthy men because one marriage was enough for me.

The knocking on the door persists, and I groan. Unlike my phone, I can't silence my visitor. Another five minutes pass, and the person is still at my door.

Huffing, I unwind from my tangle of blankets and shuffle across my living room floor. My fleece socks crackle with the contact, my short red hair ballooning around my head.

Fairly certain I have enough electricity to power an off-grid community, I kick my rain boots as I pass them, hoping the rubber disperses the charge.

Peeping through the thin stained glass that decorates the sides of the front door of my Victorian house, I nearly fall over when I spy who's on my porch.

Tall, dark, and handsome?

Nuh uh.

More like tall, dark, and *deadly*.

A seven-foot monster stands there, waiting patiently for me to open the door that I have no plan of answering.

The black fur covering his face and snout is smooth and shiny, a contrast to his tail, which appears very bushy.

His large, soulful eyes are lined with gold, and there's a small hoop earring through one of his ears.

The navy suit he sports appears more indigo than blue when he steps back into the sunlight, and I spy the infamous ankh on his tie, along with a scarab beetle holding the sun of Ra.

Legend has it that the Anubis are descended from a literal god of death, but picking out truth and myth from monster origins is just about as tricky as doing it for humans.

But in this moment, with my breath fogging the stained glass as I stare at the magnificent creature on the other side of my door, I believe it.

This Anubis definitely looks like a god—or the descendant of one.

He clears his throat, one sharp, long, black claw tapping on his briefcase impatiently. Finally, he sighs.

“Ma’am, are you going to let me in?”

I squeak, tumbling back and crashing to the floor.

“N-nobody’s home!” I stammer like an idiot.

Another sigh.

“Listen, I promise that you have nothing to fear. I come in peace.”

*Peace?*

Maybe he’s just an ardent follower of his God and trying to spread the good word. Either way, I can’t very well go on pretending I’m not home and ignoring him.

With a wince, I climb to my feet, my ankle tender where I rolled and sat on it. I unbolt the locks and open the door a crack.

“Miss Fern Mabon?”

“That’s me.”

“I’m Ahnou Napa with the IRS—I’d like to talk to you about your taxes.”

Letting the door fall open, I stare at the man in shock. Of all the things I expected him to say, this isn’t it.

“Is everything all right?”

“Your EIN was flagged for auditing.”

A shudder shakes my shoulders and rolls its way down my spine.

*Audited—a business owner’s worst nightmare.*

Gulping, I step aside. “Um, please come in.”

The Anubis has to duck underneath my door frame to get through, and when he straightens back up, his muscular form fills the tiny foyer.

*Guy’s larger than life.*

My fingers grip my oversized sweater, twisting the fabric around the painted tips of my fingernails.

I’m in no way prepared to be audited—or for the presence this man brings.

“Can I get you some tea?”

“Thank you. How kind of you—” He pauses, his snout lifting straight into the air as he sniffs, the corded muscles in

his neck going taut. “Are those cookies I smell?”

A wretched blush crawls up from my throat to my cheeks—the curse of being a redhead. “I...I ate them all.”

I wait for him to say something snide, or at least snort while looking me up and down. It’s patently obvious I’m thicker than I should be, even in my oversized shirt and pants.

Girls like me probably shouldn’t plop down and eat a dozen cookies in one sitting—something my ex constantly berated me for.

But the Anubis only gives me a lopsided grin, baring the sharp whites of his canines. “If they were half as delicious as they smell, I can see why you ate them all.”

My mind tries to piece together what he said, but it can’t.

For the past five years, it’s endured every cruel remark under the sun, but this one man’s comment has scrambled my thinking abilities into mush.

*He’s just being polite*, I hiss mentally.

Turning on my heel, I march into the living room, hoping he follows me. He does, and I gesture at my orange couch for him to sit down.

“I’ll be right back with the tea.”

A million thoughts buzz in my head like an angry hive of bees while I enter my kitchen and get what I need.

My hands shake as I place a cup and saucer on a fancy, silver tray—I tell myself it’s nerves because I’m being audited, but deep down, I know it’s more than that.

I’m drawn to this monstrously handsome being.

*It’s just because he didn’t call you a fat cow.*

With this depressing thought, I return to the living room. “Here we are, Mr. Napa.” I set the tray down on the coffee table before him.

“Please, call me Ahnou.”

The blush returns, and I want to smack myself in the face. He's clearly trying to put me at ease, *not* coming onto me.

"Ok, only if you'll call me Fern."

His black lips purse together. "Perhaps...if it's just the two of us."

My heart races.

*Why did he make that sound so intimate?*

"Am I in trouble?" I blurt out.

Maybe he wants me to use his first name to soften me up before he breaks the news that I'm going to tax jail.

Ahnou shakes his head, taking a sip of tea, but before he answers, his eyes flutter close. "This is *amazing*. What flavor is it?"

"Oh, it's a specialty—from my café. It's Orange Blossom Jasmine."

"It tastes like magic in a cup."

His words send my pulse into hyperdrive.

"Are you just saying that to butter me up before you tell me the bad news?"

The tea cup pauses mid-air between the saucer and his mouth. "What bad news?"

"That I'm in tax trouble."

"Ah. I should clarify that an audit is a routine procedure that the IRS does every year. People are randomly selected to ensure that taxes are being filed properly."

Relief crashes over me like a tidal wave. "Oh, I thought that the IRS only audited somebody when they were in trouble with their taxes."

"Sometimes, but not all the time."

"So this is only a routine checkup?"

Ahnou winces. "Miss Mabon—Fern—have you received any letters from the IRS?"

My face falls blank as I try to school my features into something that makes me appear semi-competent.

“Yes, of course, I received them.”

“Did you read them?”

My stomach heaves as I fight the urge to throw up.

“If I can be frank, my mother handles my taxes.”

*Along with other things.*

The giant man frowns before opening up his briefcase. He pulls out a pair of gold-rimmed glasses from his pocket that he perches in the middle of his long snout as he reads something.

They look so adorably perfect on him that I can’t stifle the giggle that escapes past my lips. His head jerks up with an inhuman sharpness.

“Is something amusing?”

“N-no,” I stammer. “It’s just that your glasses make you look very studious—they’re cute.”

I clamp my mouth shut, my lips twisting into a grimace.

*Shut up, Fern!*

The Anubis only shoots me another lopsided grin that makes my heart flutter...along with other regions further south.

“I look like an old man with them on,” he grouses, and I clap a hand over my mouth to stifle another laugh because *nothing* could be further from the truth.

He looks like a nerdy sex god sent from above to taunt me—or maybe it’s from below.

“Fern, has your mother always done your taxes?” I nod, and he continues. “In previous years, it doesn’t say that they were prepared by anyone but you.”

“Oh, um, I mean my mom is my business manager, and she’s always filed them for me. Like on my behalf...so it was me but not. Wow. I sound like an idiot.”

I mutter this last part under my breath, glancing down at the floor as abject embarrassment consumes me.

Ahnou leans forward, one of his sharp black claws tipping my chin upward. “You’re *not* an idiot.

Owning a business is no small task, and there are many rules and stipulations that can be overlooked or forgotten.

The IRS understands this and adjusts for it. I’m sure it never occurred to either you or your mother for her to say she prepared your taxes since she is not a legal tax preparation company.”

I swallow, my body tingling in awareness at his touch. “O-okay, good.”

It’s the best I can manage under the circumstances. Finally, he breaks contact, and I sag back into the couch, relieved yet bereft.

“So is that the only thing you needed to check up on?”

My voice raises up at the end, betraying my inner anxiety worse than the blush that scorches my face.

“I’m afraid not. The real reason that you were flagged for an audit is because your taxes haven’t been filed in over two years.”

A chuckle that sounds more like a hysterical cackle bursts free of me and echoes around us.

“That’s not possible!”

Ahnou takes off his glasses and shoots me a sympathetic look. “I promise you, I’m not lying to you.”

This time when my stomach revolts, I know there’s no holding it back.

“Please excuse me while I go make a phone call.”

*And by phone call, I mean puke.*

## SNEAK PEEK CHAPTER TWO



AHNOU

*Welcome to Cedar Peak Heights!*

The sign elicits a chuckle from me. This far east in Virginia, the tallest peak around was likely an anthill anyone could piss over.

But humans were oddly territorial as they were sentimental. If one part of Virginia boasted mountain tops and panoramic views, then the whole state would.

Clearly the folks of Cedar Peak Heights decided to go big with the town's name since they had nothing else to compete with the state's western topography.

Which is a shame because the deciduous trees here might be some of the most gorgeous fall foliage I've ever seen.

For a town of just under five thousand residents, it has plenty of stores and restaurants. One in particular stands out—Sugar and Spice café, owned by my current auditee.

From the outside, it looks warm and inviting, the window bedecked with autumn decor in vibrant reds, yellows, and oranges.

In less than five minutes, I'm pulling into Miss Mabon's driveway, and I wish my job was only moments away from where I lived.

Even though I'm a homebody, I spend over half the months in the year away doing audits. How I long for my own bed and kitchen—eating out gets old after a few weeks.

*But I still have three more audits to finish this year before I can return to my house.*

I contemplate the stately house while collecting myself. As an introvert, doing these yearly audits almost makes me want to quit my job.

One would think working for the IRS would be spent sitting in a cubicle, pouring over tax forms for hours.

It's not—something I learned the hard way.

Not all IRS employees perform in-person audits, but the government thought with me being a monster, I would be a good representative to knock on *other* monsters' doors.

Except in the five years that I've been doing this, I've only audited two monsters—all the rest were human.

Whether the IRS doesn't realize that the combination of being audited and by a monster is a disaster in the making, or they just don't care, I don't know.

*But it certainly doesn't make my job any easier.*

One woman thought I was actually there to mummify her. I jokingly told her that I left my Canopic jars at home...

She slammed the door in my face, locked it, and refused to open it again. The IRS had to send someone else to audit her.

At this point, you think the government would've wised up, but they didn't. And here I sit, ready to traumatize some other poor soul.

It takes me a moment to unfold myself from my tiny electric car. I love that I'm helping cut down on Earth's carbon footprint, but wish they made these things bigger.

Even for a monster, I'm fairly large.

Straightening my suit jacket and tie, I step onto the porch. The wood groans under my weight, but holds, and I hope the structure is sturdier than it looks.

*Because the only thing worse than being audited by a monster is one that breaks your house.*

With a deep inhale. I rap on the door and wait. My keen hearing picks up on the sound of a television set, but that doesn't necessarily mean that someone's home.

People leave their TVs on all the time for their pets.

I knock again, and this time I hear a distinctive feminine murmur. The pitch and lack of echo tells me it is not the TV—someone's here.

After waiting another moment, I knock again. And again. Until whoever's inside creeps out towards the door.

Through the small frame of stained glass above it, I spy a redheaded woman. The glass distorts her features, but I can sense her apprehension from a mile away.

Even though she wasn't given a specific date or time, the IRS does alert people when they're going to be audited.

When it becomes obvious she's not going to open the door, I sigh. "Ma'am, are you going to let me in?"

She squeaks and crashes to the floor, and I wince in sympathy as her ankle twists underneath her.

"N-nobody's home!" she attempts, and I hang my head.

*We're off to a great start.*

"Listen, I promise that you have nothing to fear. I come in peace."

The woman clambers to her feet, muttering some more, and finally opens the door. I have my non-threatening smile pasted to my face, but it falls away as I drink in the vision before me.

Short red hair threaded with bands of gold frame the woman's heart-shaped face. Her large, hazel eyes are tinted both brown and green with flecks of yellow.

She's tall for a woman, but still would likely only come to my shoulders. Her form is thick and curvaceous, and my mouth waters.

*In a word, the woman is stunning.*

"Miss Fern Mabon?" I manage to ask past the lust hammering my body.

"Yes?"

"I'm Ahnou Napa with the IRS. I'd like to talk to you about your taxes."

From her dumbstruck expression, I can only surmise she had no clue that I was coming, or she had forgotten.

Miss Mabon blinks rapidly, as if in a daze, before asking me to join her. Then, the redheaded woman turns on her heel, leaving me no choice but to follow her inside.

The view of her ass covered in what looks like pajama bottoms does *nothing* to help the heat spreading through my limbs.

I remind myself that IRS employees don't check out the very rounded bottoms of their auditees as Miss Mabon walks into what I assume is her living room.

With a flick of her wrist, she gestures for me to sit down on an orange couch that's a few shades lighter and yellower than her hair.

The air feels charged with an inexplicable tension as our eyes lock. Fern's gaze holds a mixture of uncertainty and curiosity, her lips slightly parted as if she's about to say something.

I can't help but feel the pull between us, a magnetic force that defies explanation. The simple act of being in her presence stirs something within me, something that I've long kept buried.

The gorgeous woman tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, her fingers brushing against her skin in a gesture that's both unconscious and mesmerizing.

“You know, I never imagined that an IRS auditor would be, um, like *you*.”

I lean in slightly, my voice a low hum. “And how did you imagine an IRS auditor to be?”

She meets my gaze, hers searching mine for something I’m not sure I can name. “Not as good looking.”

A relieved smile tugs at my lips as red spreads across her face, but I’m glad she isn’t put out by the fact that I’m a monster—and that she finds me attractive.

“Thank you. I don’t think anyone has ever complimented me before when I’ve come to audit them.”

“About that, Mr. Napa—”

“Please, call me Ahnou.”

The request slips past my lips, and the tension in the room becomes palpable, almost suffocating in its intensity.

It’s as if we’re tiptoeing on the edge of a precipice, unsure of whether to take the plunge or step back, but whether she’s experiencing the same emotions as me, I can’t say.

“Then please call me Fern.”

“Perhaps...if we’re alone.”

The words are out before I can take them back, but the lovely female doesn’t blink. Instead, her eyes dilate and the scent of her arousal perfumes the air.

*Down boy*, I caution my body, which thrums with awareness.

Fern’s fingers clench the fabric against her thigh, a nervous habit that I find oddly endearing. “So, um, *Ahnou*, what happens next?”

I lean in just a fraction closer, my voice a husky whisper. “Well, Miss Mabon, I’ll review the information you’ve provided and ensure that everything is in order.”

Her breath hitches, and I can see the effect my proximity is having on her. She’s not the only one affected—my own heart

is pounding a rhythm that matches the rapid beat of hers.

Before I can fully process the moment, Fern speaks again, her voice slightly shaky. “And you’re *sure* my taxes haven’t been filed recently?”

“I’m sure.”

She twitches as if electrocuted. “Excuse me. I need to make a phone call. Please, enjoy your tea.”

I grimace, but nod. A little distance between the two of us can’t hurt considering I want to tackle her to the ground and cover the woman in my scent.

Whatever I’m feeling, I need to get it under control—now. Under no circumstances should I be experiencing such powerful lust for a human.

*But if I didn’t know any better, I would swear I’m going into rut.*

*THANK YOU*



THANK YOU FOR READING *Inked By The Ithaqua*, letter I in my Monstrous Meet Cute© series.

You can find the whole series [here](#), which focuses on inclusive, diverse love.

There is explicit language meant only for readers 18+ and monstrously graphic sex.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



WENDI GOGH IS A twenty-something free spirit who writes to the beat of the Monster Mash. She loves feisty FMCs, sweet but dominant MCs, and of course, happily ever afters. When she's not writing, Wendi likes to read Mary Shelley (her favorite monster author) and watch *The Office*.

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