



# SEMINAL

A SMUTTY REVERSE HAREM ALIEN ROMANCE

FOR THE LOVE OF ALIENS

*C.M. Stunich's **seminal** book  
on the mating habits of  
sexy AF aliens.*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# C.M. STUNICH

I don't play the role of the kidnapped princess very well.

And I really hate the fated mates trope.  
Hello again, I'm Eve Wakefield, and I refuse to accept that I'm in love with an intergalactic moth prince.

No.

I don't care how handsome he is, I don't want to marry him.

I don't care if his parents have a sentient spaceship capable of *eating* entire planets.

Love is earned, not swindled by pheromones.

I'm now trapped on a ship with an adorable cyborg bodyguard, a golden toilet, and relationship issues. There's the prince I'm supposed to marry, the forest beast I fell in love with, and the never-wears-clothes police officer with tentacles. I've also got a mother-in-law who looks like a giant millipede, more macarons than I can eat, and plenty of red lace lingerie made from alien moth blood.

I'm living in luxury, but I will do *anything* to see Abraxas again.

Even if that means giving in and becoming a princess

in a gilded cage.

There's so much more to all of this than I first thought,  
and I should've known better than to judge a man  
whose gaze is enough to knock me to my knees.

Damn.

I might be wrong. I might be in love with more than  
one alien. I might also be dying.

And there's only one person who can fix this: *I need to  
be with Abraxas.*

After that, I'll worry about the possibility of becoming  
the next queen of the universe.

But let's be honest here: I don't miss being a caterer;  
being an alien queen is way more interesting.

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**C.M. STUNICH**  
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## **Seminal**

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The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, businesses, or locales is coincidental and is not intended by the author.



*this book is dedicated to all of the **Alien Smut Sluts** out there.  
you know who you are (if you want to fuck an alien, you are one).  
carry those **A.S.S.** cards proudly.*



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### ***Author's Note (Contains Minor Spoilers):***

Welcome to the second book in my universe, the Noctuida.

If you haven't read the first book in this series—*Pheromone*—then I recommend doing so before continuing. The story won't make a whole lot of sense unless you catch up. Besides, you don't want to miss all of those alien dragon mating scenes, do you?

In this volume, we'll continue to follow Eve as she finds herself falling in love anew, reaffirming her original love, and testing the waters (pun intended) of a third relationship. Remember: fast-burn/slow-build. There are plenty of naughty scenes, but we're building our reverse harem/why choose scenario over time.

Tell me: have you looked up the word *coremata* online yet? If not, I recommend it. The term 'hair-pencils' works, too. Or go for *creatonotos gangis* for a real treat.

The Noctuida—this lovely book universe—has so many untold stories waiting to be shared. So, take a seat by the fire and allow us to begin.

#### ***Love you fierce, C.M. Stunich***

This book is 100% human written (all of my books are); it contains \*NO\* AI written material, ideas, or inspiration. No ghostwriting was used in the creation of this book.

**seminal** - *adjective*

1

an extremely important, often creative and unique, early stage influence that has a profound effect on the things that follow after

2

relating to, or made up of ... cum (literally)  
as in seminal fluid, aka semen, aka jizz, aka hot alien baby batter



There's a gold toilet in my prison's en suite bathroom.

"What the ...?" I don't even have the brain space to curse properly. On the outside, I seem okay. I'm making disparaging quips about *The Korol's* decor, about the outfit choices, about my cyborg bodyguard, Zero. But on the inside? I've gone numb. Every breath I take—every breath that *he* feels as I take it—makes my chest hurt.

*I'm trapped on a planet-nuking spaceship without Abraxas, with a moth man who claims to be my soulmate, with a nice toilet but no freedom. Few choices. A broken heart.*

"When the prince made inquiries about, um, human waste products, I took a chance to see if it'd work and ... well, it worked." Avril, my lady-in-waiting, gestures at the glittering throne—literally, it has diamonds embedded in it—and grins. "He got you a gold toilet, just like I asked. Take a quick shower. It's a long process to get into these dresses."

She exits through the automatic door and leaves me standing in the most ostentatious bathroom I have ever seen in my life. And believe me: I have seen some shit. My eldest sister's husband rented the fanciest suite at the Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco for her bachelorette party. I spent a lot of time puking in that bathroom, and it was *nice*. This is better. This is absurd.

The bathroom has dome-like walls on two sides, revealing yet more stars and planets and some distant, painfully bright spot that must be a sun. *Gross*.

*So fucking gross.* I don't allow myself to look too hard at it. My fear of space has hit an all-time high, and just seeing it makes me dizzy.

Peeing with the cosmos in view is not my idea of a good time. There I am, naked and staring out at a shooting star while I perform the most basic, humbling human experience there is. Lovely.

"Oh, a bidet." I take advantage of that and then start the shower. The water is not only instantaneously hot, but it has a built-in computer system with information about my med bay scan from yesterday. The water is, apparently, set to an ideal temperature for my physiology. Huh. I crank up the heat and close my eyes, fantasizing that I'm back at the hot springs with Abraxas, balancing on a floating rock and then tumbling into his arms.

The fantasy doesn't last. It pops like a bubble and leaves me feeling ice-cold in the middle of a steaming shower. *I can't have Rurik's child. What the hell is this place? Some throwback to Victorian England?*

"Don't worry, my lord," I schmooze aloud, washing my hair with a honey-scented soap that makes me want to scream. I am goddamn sick of cardamom and honey both. I never, ever want to smell those scents again. I don't want to hear those words. I certainly don't want to use the bath bombs in the jar next to the in-floor bathtub. I haven't turned it on yet, but I think it's like an infinity pool sort of deal where the water flows between the edge of the basin and the glass wall. "I'll produce an heir for you. Couldn't possibly continue our great dynasty without the assistance of breeding chattel."

The red vein shit—I think Rurik called it blood lace—pulses strangely, as if the prince finds me amusing. I know he can see me. I'm *sure* that he's perving on me. If so, I'm going to put on a show. I lather up my breasts, sneak a washcloth between my thighs, drag my teeth lasciviously over my lip. *You like that, Princey?* I'll bet he does.

I turn the shower off and grab a fluffy towel, drying myself and then slipping into another fancy robe.

*What if ... what if the Vestalis lay eggs? Like, what if I have to lay eggs? Even worse: what if the baby is a caterpillar? I could give birth to a caterpillar!*

I shut that thought down. I'm already at my maximum limit for stress and shitty revelations. I just ... I need a second to pretend that everything is going to be okay.

"Whoa." I've just stepped out of the bathroom to find Avril and Zero

waiting with my dress.

I want to hate it, but ... I don't.

"Beautiful, right?" Avril agrees, smoothing her hand over the skirts. The dress itself is a pristine white ball gown, reminiscent of a wedding dress. It has a red lace overlay that reminds me yet again of Rurik's blood lace on the walls and ceiling. It's paired with a red metallic corset that goes over the top, one that shimmers like it's been painted with crushed rubies. A heavy white, hooded cloak with black designs hangs on the mannequin. Best part? The shoes are practical: a pair of red boots. The only thing I *don't* like is the massive expanse of the skirts. Too much fluff and flounce for my taste. "And this is just your casual wear. Wait until you see what the prince has in store for the wedding."

My stomach sours, and the expression on my face drops.

*I wish I were naked and lounging on a pile of furs with Abraxas.* I almost had a completely different life, didn't I? I was *right* fucking there. Somehow, all of this stuff around me—the gold toilet and the endless hot water in the shower and the beautiful dress—it becomes hideous. I don't want any of it.

Except for maybe the macarons.

Zero walks by with another plate of them, and I snatch one up. It glitters which is a little weird, but I eat it anyway, and it tastes like freshly fallen snow and childhood dreams. Kid you not. *God, I hate it here.*

"Don't you have a job to do?" I grumble through a bite of cookie as I drop my robe and Avril offers me my undergarments. When I say undergarments, what I mean is *a pair of slutty, lacy panties*. My mouth purses, and I shove the remainder of the cookie in before I say something I might regret. "Avril."

She pretends not to notice that my attention is on the underwear in my hand.

"You should hurry and slip those on, so we can get going." She fusses with the gown as I creep closer to her and lean in so that she has no choice but to look at me. "What? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Because for an entire Earth month, you've been helping the prince prepare for my arrival. He doesn't know humans like toilets or hot showers or canopy beds or red wine. He also wouldn't think to purchase lace teddies and thongs. *Someone* suggested it to him. *Someone* seems to ship Eve and Rurik. *Someone* is not going to see that ship sail."

Avril spins to face me, her own lips pursed, a look of true apology in her



sapphire eyes.

“Listen, Eve.” She reaches out and puts her hands on my upper arms. It’s a little awkward to have a conversation since I’m buck naked, but it is what it is. “I’m sorry, but I really do need to make sure that you and Rurik work out. You know why? Because if you don’t, I’m going to be executed alongside you. The royal servants are considered an extension of their masters. You die, I die. And if you don’t get with Rurik, we *all* die.”

“You have an unfortunate body shape,” Zero remarks, and I literally just close my eyes and wait. Sure enough, she ends up on the floor with a mechanical malfunction, shooting sparks. I open my eyes and look back without sympathy, macarons scattered across the floor around her.

“You just couldn’t help yourself, could ya?” I ask, and then I turn back to Avril. “Nice deflection technique by the way. I notice you didn’t once deny the accusation that *you* were the one who encouraged the prince to purchase my underwear from Fredericks of Hollywood.”

“Actually, there’s an entire team of tailors on staff to assist you and the prince. I just made some sketches, handed them over, and voilà.” She shrugs and then removes the metal corset from the mannequin, setting it aside so that she can take the dress down.

“You designed all of this?” I ask, looking back at the dress and the shoes and the cloak. “It’s beautiful.” If I sound like I’m in awe, it’s because I am. This gown might be one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen.

Avril smirks at me as she helps me into the dress.

“Only the lingerie and some of the loungewear.” She puts her mouth way too close to my ear to whisper this next part. “It was the *prince* who designed the rest.”



He’s waiting for me when I step into the foyer. Antechamber? I’ve been over and over this in my head, and I realize that I don’t know shit about architecture or layouts. What I do know is that since arriving in this bedroom yesterday, I haven’t left.

The thought of venturing out of this private area is daunting.

Rurik turns around to look at me. Our eyes meet again. My lips throb where his blood lace entered me, and my neck *aches* for his mouth. It's a physical pain, the strange want of his tongue. I fist my hands in the skirts of the dress to keep them still.

His red-stained lips are slightly parted, wicked teeth on display, those demon eyes peering into my soul. His wings ruffle and his antennae swivel purposefully away from me as he turns his head. I notice that his chest expands and contracts with visible effort. *He can smell me as much as I can smell him, can't he?*

The thought makes me smirk, but then ... "*You exude pheromones; they work well on me.*"

Abraxas.

Shit.

"Does it matter that I fucking hate you?" I ask Rurik, and Avril chokes on a gasp behind me. Zero doesn't react which is probably a good thing. The way the prince's shoulders tense ...

"No." He lies right to my face, turning to meet my eyes again.

"You want me to like you, don't you?" I prod, unable to resist taunting him.

"Nothing would please me more." He says it so dryly, but I know it's true. Unfortunately, this unexpected blurt of honesty makes harassing him way less fun. "My princess." He holds out his arm, and I stare at it. "Best face forward if you wish to see your Aspis male." He sneers those last two words at me.

I step forward and accept his arm, and off we go.

The door opens automatically for us, releasing the four of us into the hallway before it closes. I notice the disgusting growths on the wall right away, and find myself immensely relieved that Rurik's don't look like that. They're so ... eerie and unpleasant.

"We will head straight to the throne room," he says, and if he were human, I imagine he'd reach up just now and start tugging at the collar of his jacket. Those pitch-dark eyes of his drop to my face, and I hurriedly look away. Not interested in being starstruck right now. "On this ship, that room serves multiple purposes: it is the court of our country, the control room for this vessel, and it is also my parents' personal bedroom. Please keep all of these

things in mind while we are there.”

“Their bedroom?” I ask, glancing over my shoulder at Avril and Zero. *Are they going to follow me around all the time? Like everyday, all day?* I’m somebody who can appreciate a moment of solitude if you know what I mean. “Why would it be their bedroom?”

I turn back to Rurik, but I make sure to focus on his mouth and not his depthful gaze. He opens it, but no words come out. Instead, he smiles and inclines his chin. I turn to see another Vestalis man striding toward us. This guy? He’s not nearly as charming as the prince. The black markings on his face aren’t like Rurik’s sharp, sleek ‘V’ between the eyes. They look a bit like a unibrow. That, and he’s got another patch on his chin that Rurik doesn’t have, like a goatee. Personally, I find him to be ... ugly.

Could also be because he’s scowling viciously at *me* in particular.

“Ah, My Imperial Princess.” The prince turns to me and holds out a gloved hand to indicate the man in front of us. “I’d like you to meet my favorite brother, Brot.”

“Nice to—” I start, unsure of the proper way to greet another Vestalis. Doesn’t seem to matter here. Seems like a lot of emphasis is placed on the female mates instead. I figure a good ol’ fashioned American greeting will be just fine. Brot interrupts my polite hello and outstretched hand with a sneer.

“I should’ve assumed you would find an ugly, useless mate. Only the timing was right.” Brot scoffs and straightens out his black jacket. Rurik stiffens, and his lips part on words I don’t let him say.

“Fuck you, you ugly bastard,” I blurt, raising my chin and reminding myself of what Avril told me this morning. These moth dudes *love* hierarchy and authority, and they’re very strict about it. The king is on top, the queen is just below him, then the prince, then ... me. I might not want to be here, but I’ll be damned if I don’t use that power to protect myself.

“How dare you!” Brot rears back and spreads his off-white wings behind him. His mouth is more of a thin gray-pink as opposed to Rurik’s luscious powder pink lips. It’s quite clear to me who’s the more attractive of the two. “I am an Imperial Prince!”

“And I’m *the* Imperial Princess!” I shout back at him. If he can raise his voice, then so can I. “Get wrecked, you salty sore loser son of a bitch.”

Brot’s eyes widen to comically large proportions. Since they’re already about twice as large as human eyes, it’s extra funny to me. I bite back a snort,

but Rurik isn't so lucky. He turns his head and feigns a cough, covering his mouth with his hand.

Brot and I stare one another down, and I understand implicitly now what the prince was talking about. I see nothing but murder in this man's black eyes. Doesn't last. He's not dominant enough to handle me. Or not stupid enough to challenge his people's hierarchical rules.

"My apologies, Imperial Princess." Brot sweeps rudely past us, taking off down the hallway as I sigh with relief.

"Are all of your brothers so unpleasant?" I turn to Rurik, wondering how bad the rest of his siblings might be if *that* guy is his favorite brother.

"Some are worse," he replies, turning to me. He can't seem to fight back the expression of pleasure on his face.

"I didn't do that for you." I make sure that he knows that. "I was defending myself."

"Yes, my princess."

I look down at the runner on the floor.

"I didn't ... that wasn't crossing any boundaries, was it? Like, I didn't just fuck up royally did I?" Fear rushes through me in an icy wave. What if I just fucked up my chances of seeing Abraxas by retaliating like that? Ugh. Me and my big mouth.

"You are the Imperial Princess," Rurik reassures me as we continue down the hallway. It looks exactly the same as the hallway from yesterday with one incredible improvement: there are no windows. Instead, there are paintings. Most of them are landscapes, but not the sort of landscapes you might see on Earth. Strange, fantastical colors and designs grace the artwork. "You were well within your rights."

"Good to know."

A short time later, we come across another Vestalis. He's not as ugly as Brot (he'll be a hard one to beat), but he's plain enough that I doubt I'd recognize him again later.

"Imperial Princess, I'd like you to meet my favorite brother, Yvat." Rurik introduces him with a flourish of his hand. His brother bows but doesn't meet my gaze, staring blankly at the floor.

"It is my greatest pleasure and infinite privilege to make your acquaintance, Imperial Princess." He drops to his knee, touches a finger to his lips, and draws a bead of blood. When he rises to his feet, he takes off like

the hallway's on fire.

Huh.

By the third brother, I'm starting to see a pattern.

"My mate, I would be remiss not to introduce you to Veda, my most favorite of all my brothers."

I barely pay attention to the guy, waiting for him to leave before I turn to Rurik with a raised brow. Our eyes meet again, and I have to swallow past my sudden and inexplicable love for him. It's so goddamn gross. If I could will it away, I would, but it doesn't appear I have any control over it.

"I see now. So they're *all* your favorite brothers, eh?"

Rurik's lips twitch into a beautiful smile, and I remind myself to ask about that, about why he appears so incredibly human in his expressions.

"Only when they're alone," he explains, and unbidden laughter bursts out of me. I slap my hand over my mouth. *No. Fuck this guy. I hate him.* I almost wish Abraxas had eaten him that day in the market, when the two of them came face-to-face at the brothel.

The next time we encounter one of his brothers, the greeting changes.

"Imperial Princess, this is my least favorite brother, Lyubim." Rurik and his brother bow at one another before his brother drops to his knee and offers me what I'm guessing is a fairly standard greeting.

"It is my greatest pleasure and infinite privilege to meet my little brother's mate." He stands back up, and I see that his face is nearly all black. The only white to be seen is on his mouth. His lips are as white as snow.

"You must be his *real* favorite brother then?" I ask, and Lyubim laughs. It's not quite as human as Rurik's laugh, but still fairly convincing. Huh.

"That I do not know, but it has always been a wish of mine."

"Lyubim is the only one my brothers that I trust," Rurik tells me, and I'm immediately on guard. This could be, like, really bad foreshadowing or something. I'll have to keep an eye on this dude. Someone as blatant as Brot probably isn't a threat. It's either the quiet ones—like Yvat or Veda—or the one with the kind eyes.

"Well, I *don't* trust him. Just so you know. I'll be keeping my eyes on you."

Lyubim seems to find that statement hilarious, inclining his head at me.

"I will have to earn your trust then, Imperial Princess." He gives Rurik a look. "You have found yourself a very interesting mate. I look forward to

seeing the kingdom you build together.”

Rurik returns his brother’s words with a smile, one that doesn’t last. As soon as Lyubim is out of sight, he frowns. I notice the exact second that his gaze lands on those thick veins creeping up the walls. He shakes himself out and reaches up to run a hand over the fur at his throat.

“That’s real, isn’t it?” I’m secretly wondering what the prince looks like naked. Just out of simple curiosity. *Liar*. I tamp down on those pesky hormones. “The red fur?”

The prince turns to me, and our eyes meet *again*. It’s like we’re magnetized to one another. It’s annoying as fuck. We stop walking and he turns so that he’s facing me.

“Would you like to touch it?” he asks, and ... God help me, but I do.

*I should, seeing as I’m going to have to sleep with this guy*. The thought makes me sick. I am not a cheater. My ex, Mack, he was a cheater. I shake my hands out and exhale, fighting back another urge of helplessness. I’ve been fighting that feeling from the very beginning. Abraxas ... I won’t blame him if he doesn’t want me after this.

I lift my fingers, hovering them over that brilliant red fur. It looks like the clasp of a white cloak. Only, it’s not. When I stand on my tiptoes and peer more closely at it, I can see that it’s connected to his throat. My lip tucks under my teeth, and I reach a tentative finger—

Somebody trips me from behind, sending me flying into the prince’s arms.

“Oh, My Imperial Princess, I’m so sorry!”

*I am going to kill Avril later. Mark my words.*

I wind up with my body pressed to his, Rurik’s arms and wings both wrapped around me. My hands are now buried in that fur, and it’s the softest thing I’ve ever felt in my life. Absently, I stroke my fingers over it and he shudders like I’ve just licked the tip of his dick. A whispering sigh falls from his lips, and the sound is oddly soothing to me.

“What is it?” I ask him. I’m already here, so I may as well satisfy that itching curiosity.

“It serves to keep the throat warm,” he explains, pausing briefly before locking our gazes and adding an unnecessary bit of information. “We also believe that sexual selection plays a strong role. Many females find our neck adornments attractive.”

I dig my fingers into it, and he swallows hard, hands tightening on my

elbows. Rurik's arms wrap my waist, and he lowers his head, putting his mouth right up against mine. I might have to fuck the guy to survive, but I don't have to kiss him. *Which I already did once this morning. What is wrong with me?* My lips tingle as he closes the space between us, and I find myself fantasizing about that ... that blood lace stuff ... *digging into my tongue, my throat, grabbing onto my heart.*

"I'm so shy, Rurik," I grit out between clenched teeth, slapping at him playfully. "Not in the hallway where everyone can see."

I almost gag on the sickly sweet coo of my own voice. *Shit, I'm overacting! Was that too much? It was too much, huh? Typical Eve. Swing from being a bitch to being a baby-talking goo-goo doll.* But I can't outright reject him when others could be watching. Definitely won't be winning any awards for that performance though.

"My apologies, my princess." Rurik releases me and offers his arm again.

I think about the least sexy things I can while we walk. Mothballs (hah!). Tapioca pudding. Bong water. Stale beer breath. Waterparks with pee in the pools. It helps quench the fire between my thighs, but it doesn't get rid of it entirely.

We head down a beautiful spiral staircase, my dress trailing behind me. On the prince's left, there's another stupid glass wall showcasing the stars. I get the idea that maybe these windows are luxury items. Like, there's no way that most of the rooms on this ship have a view. Aren't we lucky?

"If you feel dizzy, just hold onto me," he whispers, and I hate that he's likable. Rude sometimes. Abrupt. But likable. It's annoying. It'd be easier to feel animosity toward him if he were as vile as his brother, Brot.

I haven't seen guards this entire time, but they reappear at the bottom of the stairs, guarding a pair of massive doors. They're at least three stories high. I crane my head back to stare up at them, mouth gaping open. The entire surface is webbed in pulsing veins. They're big and thick and creepy as hell.

"This is the antechamber," Rurik tells me as the doors open outward. He turns a severe look over his shoulder. "You two are to wait outside unless summoned. Do you understand? You do not *ever* enter the king's antechamber or throne room without express permission."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty." Both Avril and Zero answer at the same time, bending horizontally at the waist. Rurik sniffs and turns back to face the

lavishly appointed room ahead of us.

If it weren't for the space window wall and the blood lace, I'd like it. A red chandelier hangs from the center of the room, dripping with crystals, and the floor is patterned with a pair of massive moth wings, each of them decorated with more of that lace-like pattern that more closely resembles Rurik's style than his father's.

"May the Stars guide us." Rurik tilts his head back, closing his eyes briefly. I swallow a strange lump in my throat. It feels like ... guilt. Just as I did with Abraxas, I feel like I screwed up this guy's life by being the wrong mate. How stupid is that? I might've made the choice with Abraxas, but I did *not* choose to be here.

The prince strides forward at a rapid clip, and I struggle to keep up, nearly tripping on my skirts.

A round door in the wall rolls to the side revealing ...

I stop walking and then it's his turn to trip. Rurik catches himself quickly, still managing to hold onto my arm as he looks back at me in silent pleading. *Walk*, his eyes scream, but I'm rooted to the spot.

The room in front of us is a huge dome, dark and damp and *covered* in blood lace. It's everywhere. And it's meaty. And there's a *gigantic* fucking moth dude sitting on a throne. He looks like he's tied to the throne by his own blood lace. Also ... also ... also ...

I have the good grace not to scream.

I want to. Believe me. I am freaked all the fucking way out.

There's a huge centipede or millipede or— *Oh, it's definitely a millipede. It has all of the legs. All of them. Too many.* Dizziness sweeps me, and I cling onto Rurik for dear life.

"My daughter-in-law!" the creature trills, and even if it's the shiny pearly rainbow color of a unicorn horn, it looks like something out of a sci-fi horror film. I'm getting flashbacks to my dad's favorite movie of all time: *Starship Troopers*. What's the famous quote from that movie? The only good bug is a dead bug?

*Fuck! Oh God no. Anything but this. I'll take on another female Aspis. I just ... I cannot deal with this.* I scream inside my head because I can't scream out loud. Once again, I prove to myself that I do, in fact, have pretty good survival instincts. I snatch onto Rurik and practically bury myself in his side. He puts his arm around my waist as the *thing*—oh crap, it's my literal



mother-in-law!—slithers toward us.

Her body twists around the pair of us in a coil, and I bite the inside of my cheek so hard that blood rushes into my mouth. I'm practically choking on it, and I can *feel* the way Rurik reacts to that. The millipede alien monster gives us a *hug* before retreating back into the nightmare of a room.

Another pop culture reference hits me and strikes. My brother Nate is super into these *Little Nightmares* games. The second one in particular gave me nightmares for a month. There are a lot of flickering TVs, and mind-shatteringly disgusting creatures in it. This is that. This is a level on that fucked-up game.

I see a whole wall of screens intertwined with blood lace, flickering through various images. It paints the massive man on the throne in dim white light as he leans forward to peer through the doorway at me. He does not get up, and I wonder ... if he's actually able to get up at all? He's tethered to that chair with bloody, meaty growths.

*What the hell is this?* I wonder as Rurik gently encourages me to step into the room. The door slides shut behind us, and I jump. Both of the massive creatures laugh. The translator makes it sound like a laugh anyway, but I see spiked mouthparts quivering on the millipede, and feelers swiveling on the head of the man that must be the king.

These ... these are Rurik's parents? I don't understand. How?

The urge to flee is so strong that I don't even care if I'm being rude. I have to close my eyes to regroup. I'm panicking here. I can feel Rurik moving beside me, and then his mouth is on mine. Those strange threads of his—the blood lace—travel from his tongue into mine, capturing my mouth, diving into my flesh and blood. His thoughts fill my brain, pushing some of that primal fear back.

*He will always keep his mate safe. He didn't want me, but I'm here now. He will take responsibility for licking my blood. His parents have always loved him. He is afraid of them, too, but not like I am. If we do as they ask, they will not retaliate.*

I crack my eyes to see that his are open, too. We're kissing in an alien monster den and staring at one another. And I don't hate it. I ... don't. Rurik draws back from me, leaving the faintest whisper of wet lace on my tongue and teeth and lips. I reach my hand up to wipe it away, staining my skin with a blush of blood.

“Thanks.” The word falls relatively flat in the empty space as Rurik leads me further into the ... throne room? It looks like a creepy monster den, a horrific Lovecraftian sci-fi nightmare. Heh. “It’s a pleasure and a privilege to meet you both.”

I drop to one knee, my skirts pooling around me. Mostly, I am *this* close to having a panic attack and my knees feel weak. I touch my bloodied lips with a single finger.

“Ah! Your mate is quite quick to adopt Vestalis propriety.” The big man laughs, and my translator picks it up as jolly giant laughter. That helps a little. When Rurik offers out a hand, I take it and climb back to my feet. The king leans down to stare at me, and one of his eyes is about half the size of my head.

I force my quivering lips to smile.

“What a beautiful mate, my son,” his mother trills, her mouthparts vibrating. I can’t look away from her round head and oversized, fractured eyes. They’re as shiny as an oil slick, and they dance with all of the same colors. I have the sense that were I not mated to her son, that she would eat me. *I am so sick of being prey*, I think, but what can a soft-skinned human girl do? She gets *right* up in my face, and then curls around me, offering another hug. Could just be my imagination, but it feels like this squeeze is just a *tad* tighter than it should be. I grunt as she curls around me and peers into my face. I have the sense that she wants to say something, but won’t do it in front of Rurik.

*What if she summons me here by myself?!* The thought’s almost too much for me to handle. I want Abraxas here. Now. He could eat both the king and queen, and still have room left for dessert. *Although, that’s probably not true, is it?* It’d be a bloody battle to the final breath.

The queen uncurls from around me and slithers back to the king, her tiny legs skittering over the floor. Each is adorned with a metal band of some sort and sparkles with gemstones. I notice that she has a pattern on her back, one that mimics the bizarre and seemingly random designs of the king’s blood lace. It pulses in time with the veins on the walls.

*I want to go home. I don’t care if they have gold toilets and infinity bathtubs here. This is the most alien thing I have ever seen, and I don’t like it. I hate it. I don’t like Rurik’s parents—especially his mother.*

I don’t have to hear it to know that it’s true: she doesn’t like me either.

“You must be quite proud,” his father continues, smiling beatifically at me. I can’t help but wonder why he’s so goddamn huge. Will Rurik grow to be this big, too? If so, what does that all mean for me? I look around and I try to imagine living my life here. It’s an endlessly disturbing thought. “Being mated to the prince means that you will soon become queen of the entire Noctuida.”

“Surely, I am the one who is proud,” Rurik interjects, taking my arm again. “My mate survived an abduction. She survived the wilds of Jungryuk.” He smiles prettily, and I’m struck yet again by the fact that these hideous things are his parents. “She reprimanded Brot in the halls just now.” Rurik’s smile flickers at the edges. “Though I am certain you already knew that.”

His parents both seem to find that hilarious, each of them vibrating with their own version of laughter. The translator does its best, but ... apples to oranges. One of these things is not like the other. I fist my free hand in the lace-covered skirt and keep my arm firmly wedged with the prince’s.

“Are you sure we cannot begin the wedding tomorrow?” the queen asks, looking to Rurik and not me. It’s as if I don’t even exist. “The people are restless to cement you as the heir. Your brothers grumble and bicker. They are entertaining females day and night in a hope to supersede you.”

“We will wait.” Rurik speaks up before I can even process her words. “Four days you have given us, and four days we must take.”

*Four days. Four fucking days.*

“Of course, son.” The king reaches out with a massive hand and uses his thumb to touch the side of my face. “Rest, daughter-in-law. We will see you both at the mating ceremony.” His smile seems genuine enough. But the queen? I can’t bring myself to look her way again. “We will have plenty of time to get to know each other. After all, we are family now.”

“Family,” I whisper.

I see my mom in the kitchen of our family home, watching a shitty Lifetime movie on her iPad while my father secretly reads pirate-themed romance novels on his phone. My little brother Nate pads out to grab a snack from the cabinet, and my mom swats his hand with a spatula like a 1950s housewife with a temper.

I wait until we’re back in the prince’s private rooms to have a fit.

As soon as the door to our suite closes, I jerk away from Rurik and shove the heel of my hand into my chest. I’m hyperventilating as I struggle to catch

my breath.

“Eve,” Avril begins, but I slap her hand away when she tries to touch me. I whirl on her, face flushing with anger. She looks surprised, taking a step back, like she might actually be afraid of me.

“You might’ve told me that my fucking mother-in-law was a galactic *millipede!*” I scream, voice echoing around the antechamber. Rurik doesn’t seem to know what to do, narrowing his eyes on me as his antennae clap together behind his head, like a pair of swiveling rabbit ears. He’s adorable, I admit it. He’s attractive and male and regal, but *what the hell is wrong with his parents?!*

“I—” Avril begins as I step up to her, grabbing her by the front of her dress.

“It’s your *job* to explain these things to me,” I grind out, tears of frustration pricking my eyes. “Not because you’re a lady-in-waiting, but because you are *human.*”

Zero opens her mouth, but I toss such a nasty look her way that she actually reconsiders.

“My princess,” Rurik begins, but I am done for the day.

“Bring me something to eat and leave me the fuck alone.” I step into my bedroom, frustrated that I can’t slam the door behind me. It just closes on its own, and I miss my life on Earth so much that I actually feel sick. Or ... maybe I just feel sick in general?

I barely make it to the toilet before I’m throwing up.

It’s too early to have anything to do with a possible pregnancy. I’m sure it’s just nerves.

Part of me feels bad for Rurik, but the rest of me ... I cannot stay here. I can’t. I need to do what I need to do in order to get Abraxas, and then we have to leave this place. I don’t care how we do it, but we’re breaking out of here, and we’re running until the prince is dead and the Vestalis no longer have an interest in me.

I tell myself that’s possible, that I can pull all that off. The bold part of me truly believes I could, that I can finagle some clever way to escape. The rest of me knows that I would never be able to let Rurik go. Not those beautiful eyes. Not the pain of his teeth in my neck. Not the lace of his blood in my veins.

I end up falling asleep on the bathroom floor. When Rurik arrives to pick

me up, tucking me carefully into my bed, I pretend not to wake back up.

He leaves the room, and I wake the next morning with my palm pressed to the wall, a fine web of red lace teasing over my skin.



Rurik doesn't bother me the next morning. He leaves me to sulk in my room with Avril and Zero for company. Today's breakfast consists of purple pancakes and eggs with yolks the size of my fist. I appreciate the effort, and the taste isn't bad, but it makes me miss home even more.

*It makes me miss Abraxas the most.*

I'm sitting on one of the sofas in another of Avril's ridiculous designs: a red push-up bra, lacy boyshorts, and a white robe that pools on the floor when I walk. It's very pretty. It makes me feel very lonely. I've been doing a lot of thinking, and it isn't leading me anywhere good. Thinking about Earth and my family makes me sick. Thinking about Abraxas makes me sicker. I've already gouged a second line into the table, and I'm wondering how long until I die of a broken heart.

I force my thoughts back to Rurik. He's the easiest thing to think about right now. I know that I'm being harsh, judging him because his parents freak me out. If I judged Abraxas because a female of his species swallowed me alive, I never would've experienced the true joy I felt when I was his mate—however temporary that might've been.

Jane's mother is in jail for drunk driving; she killed a bride on her wedding day after a dozen cocktails. I've never judged Jane for that. Nobody—alien or human—deserves to be judged because they're related to someone cruel or stupid or ... a giant millipede. A pearly rainbow millipede with mean eyes

and creepy mouthparts and about four-hundred-billion legs.

I sigh and Avril looks up from the tablet in her hand. There's internet here. Movies. Books. Porn. Lots and lots of alien porn. Avril doesn't seem to mind that I'm staring at her as strange moans and trills and chirps emanate from the tablet. She bites into another macaron—this is a thing now, apparently—and smiles softly at me.

“Look, I'm really sorry for yesterday,” she says as the moaning on her device crescendos into some alien orgasm that makes me cringe. Avril presses pause and sets the tablet aside. All of the media here features aliens and weird languages and while the translator works well enough, the plots are hard to identify with. I'm not sure why sending your mate a silk cocoon is a social faux pas. She claims that Rurik has ordered his people to start sourcing human material for us, but it's gonna be a while, I'm sure. “I should've told you about the queen. She's what nightmares are made of.” Avril pauses. “Candy-coated glittering nightmares, but still.”

“Right. And you didn't tell me because you were afraid that I'd freak out and get you killed. Well, guess what? I almost freaked out and got us all killed anyway.” I lean my head back against the couch and stare up at the ceiling. The blood lace flares with color before fading to a rich velvety crimson.

Rurik said he only needs to feed once or twice a month, right? I shouldn't have to see him until the day of the wedding. Until the day of the ... mating ceremony? Whatever that means.

“You're right. Fuck. I'm so sorry, Eve. I'm ... this is all weird to me, too.”

“No.” Zero's voice quavers from where she's sitting at the table. Both Avril and I turn to look at her. She stands up, knocking the chair over, her eyes wide, her entire body trembling. For a cyborg, she's awfully expressive. “No. No, no, no!” She screams this last part, picking up a decorative glass *thing* from the table and lifting her arm like she might throw it. She doesn't make it that far, collapsing to the ground and twitching in a sea of bright white sparks.

I shove up from the couch and move over to kneel beside her, Avril at my heels.

“Are you okay?” I ask, disturbed by my own empathetic response. What is wrong with me? Why am I always trying to help people who don't deserve my help? Like Zero. Like Tabbi Kat. Like the Vestalis prince.

“No,” Zero whispers as soon as the twitching stops. Her red eyes stare up at the ceiling, unblinking, and the blood lace choker at her throat throbs. She lifts her hands up to cover her face and rolls onto her side, curling into a ball. When she starts to sob, I know something is really, really wrong.

I stand up and grab her abandoned tablet from the table. I don’t understand any of the alien language that’s written on it, but the stupid contacts that were installed in my eyes while I was passed out—*synchronicity contacts*—translate the words for me as I stare at them. It’s as if the text is wobbling, shifting, melting into English. Trippy. I shake my head and blink through the distortion to see that I’m looking at a news article of some sort.

*What is the Noctuida Without the Cartians: the Universe Suffers a Terrible Tragedy*

That’s the title.

When I scroll down, I find a picture of people in bubblegum pink space suits. When I say ‘people’, I use the term very loosely. They’re aliens that are vaguely human-shaped with brightly colored, flowing hair, horns, and slitted eyes. They’re standing beside the body of what I’m guessing is a sleeping Aspis, the forests of Jungryuk behind them.

“What is this?” I ask, looking down at Zero. She isn’t moving. “Zero?” A long pause. “Raina?”

She begins to sob, sitting up suddenly and revealing that ... eww, oh shit. She’s crying *blood tears*. I guess ‘blood-powered cyborg’ was a very real statement. I wasn’t aware that it went *that* deep.

“My people,” she whispers, staring blankly at my legs, like she doesn’t even see them. “My people are gone. The Cartians are gone. They’re gone. They’re fucking gone.”

“What does that even mean?” I’m wondering if this is even the right time to pry, but ... yeah, curiosity got the cat but satisfaction brought it back. That whole bit.

“They faded from existence like a dying star.” Zero grits her teeth and shoves up to her feet, turning to look at me. “Your Imperial Princess, may I have permission to explore the World Station on my own tomorrow?”

“The World Station?” I have no idea what she’s talking about.

Avril gently lays her fingers on my arm, and I glance her way.

“Tomorrow, we’re briefly docking at the World Station. It’s like ... an airport for spaceships. It’s *the* airport. It’s the main hub of the Noctuida.” At



my blank look, she continues. “The Noctuida is the name of this ... country, for lack of a better word. It consists of several galaxies, including the one where Earth is located. There are other countries, but the Noctuida is one of the more powerful ones. It’s ruled by the Vestalis, but tempered by the Falopex.”

*The Falopex.* Huh.

I turn back to Zero, trying to imagine how I’d feel if Earth was no longer a thing. If humanity was no longer a thing.

“Yeah, sure. Take some time off. Go pound some alien dick.”

It’s meant to be a joke, but she nods, like that’s exactly what she was planning on doing.

Zero rights the chair at the table, steals the tablet from my hands, and sits back down to hate-scroll. I’d tell her it wasn’t a good idea, but who among us has never engaged in a good, lengthy hate-scroll of social media?

Avril hands her tablet over to me even though I didn’t ask for it.

“Go take a bath. Watch some alien smut.” She grins at me, flashing a saucy wink that I feel she’s used liberally on many an unsuspecting victim. “It’ll make you feel better. You deserve it.”

I narrow my eyes at her, but I do as she suggested, letting the bathwater run and watching as it spills over the edge of the basin and trails down the glass wall. Outside, there’s a cluster of blue-green planets with dozens of silver moons in orbit. It’s stupid pretty, even if I hate to admit it.

With a sigh, I drop in a shimmery red bath bomb and then curse myself for picking that color.

“I didn’t choose that for you,” I tell the blood lace, and it throbs in either laughter or agreement, I’m not sure. Or, you know what, maybe I’m reading too much into this and Rurik isn’t watching me take my clothes off and climb into a steaming hot bath?

*Oh, wow, that’s ergonomic.* I groan and decide I don’t blame Avril *too* much for withholding information about the millipede queen. Honestly, nothing she could’ve said or shown me would’ve prepared me for that. It wasn’t just the *ick* factor of the queen being a giant bug, it was the intent in her eyes. She doesn’t like me. I hear that most people have trouble with their mother-in-laws, but this is a whole different ball game. Most people don’t have MILs who could swallow them whole.

My mind drifts back to that moment, the moment of being literally

swallowed. To those chains and the sight of the Tusk Man's slimy wormlike penis cluster with the teeth. To being dragged into a spaceship against my will and losing the male that I'm certain is my soulmate.

I didn't believe in that crap before—I'm cringing even bringing it up—but I feel it now.

I snag the tablet off the floor next to the tub and tap my finger against the screen. There's an orgy happening. I mean, I *think* it's an orgy. I turn the device this way and that, but however aliens get freaky, I'm not getting it. Like, there's no way I could get off to this; I don't even know what's going on regarding physics here.

"Huh." I tap what appears to be a back-button and find myself on a list of words. If I had to make a comparison, I'd say the written version of this language most closely resembles Old Hungarian script. Just fucking kidding. How the hell should I know something like that? Even though I'm aware that Rurik might be watching, I pick one of the words before my contacts can translate it, and I click on it.

The screen fills with a naked Falopex.

Oh.

Wow.

Seeing Officer Hyt in person didn't prepare me for what was underneath that scrap of loincloth. I mean, the male on the screen certainly is *not* Officer Hyt, but ... he's a Falopex of a similar height and shape, green instead of blue or pink.

His cock is a paler version of the skin on his upper body, the head of it circular and gently indented at the center. It's short, but incredibly thick. As he reaches down to stroke himself, a narrow white rod extends from the green base. And when I say narrow, I mean *barely* narrower than the soda can circumference at the base. The male in the video thumbs the flared head of it, the shape reminiscent of a stingray. As he does, green petals unfurl from the base, nine small tentacles to match his tails. As he continues to jerk himself off, one single sucker appears on the very tip. Just the one, like at the tips of his tails.

Oh. Damn.

I feel my entire body heat with need. It's an involuntary reaction, like breathing or eating and it makes me unbelievably sad. The one and only man I want isn't here. And if I don't fuck somebody else, I'll never see him again.

It's so unfair, and the fact that I'm not totally repulsed by Rurik makes it bullshit. I'd probably like to fuck him. And that's not okay. If I'm being forced at gunpoint into it, I want to hate it.

*What if your positions were reversed, Eve? What if he had to fuck an Aspis female or a human or a Falopex in order to see you again? I'd want him to do it, if it was the literal only choice. But I'd be hurt. I'd be jealous. I'd be angry.*

I can't think about Abraxas right now and satisfy this urge. I definitely won't think of Rurik. So how about I just get off to this?

I slip my hand beneath the water, closing my eyes and telling myself I don't care that the prince is watching. That it means nothing. That he's just going to have to deal with seeing what he sees because this is my life, and I'm going to do what I want, and ... I open my eyes back up to watch the Falopex on the tablet, and as I pet and stroke my clit underwater, I think about Officer Hyt.

His finger sliding along the edge of his hat. His crooked, sharp-toothed smile. Those triple irises. The fact that he was clearly fucking around with me somehow. He's either a skilled wordsmith or he's a liar. *But isn't his blue color supposed to be the truth?* I feel like that's a lie, too. I imagine that he turned pink when he said things like *'you're not my problem'* and he meant the exact opposite.

Biting my lip, I dip a single finger inside my pussy, wishing Officer Hyt were here. I'd let him take that sucker at the tip of his cock, seal the hot slick surface over my clit, pop it off. Another moan breaks loose from my lying lips as I tell myself I don't hear footsteps, that adding a second finger in is solely due to the result of my fantasy and not the prince's pheromones.

Rurik drops heavily down to one knee beside the bath and snatches the tablet from me, throwing it across the room where it shatters on the floor. The loss of my Falopex smut doesn't change a thing. I'm groaning and writhing, and I can *feel* him gritting his teeth beside me.

"This is ..." He huffs out a breath, tugging off his gloves by the finger. "This is not appropriate."

"Oh?" I murmur lazily, fucking myself as I stare at him. He looks up, striking me with those brilliant eyes. As always, I'm completely lost in him. I want him. He feels like he should belong to me. "It feels *awfully* appropriate to me."

I do not expect him to climb into the bathtub with me, taking my hand in his naked grip and pressing his hot mouth to mine. Fire arcs through me, and I moan, my own cunt clamping down around my fingers in response. Rurik brackets my head and dives into my mouth, blood lace and tongue both. His thoughts pummel me in a hot wave.

*Desire. Desperation. Loneliness. Joy. Disappointment. Loneliness. Despair. Desire. Desire. Desire.*

I do my best to break the kiss so that I can talk, thin strands of lace on my tongue, connecting me to Rurik in the most bizarre but somehow beautiful way.

“Fuck me,” I say it and feel like a traitor. I say it and hate myself for it. I say it, and I want to cry. But if it’s going to happen anyway, I want it to be in private first. Avril told me earlier today that the mating ritual—the first act of a seven-part wedding—is done in view of the king and queen.

I can’t even imagine that. I don’t *want* to imagine that. It’s horrifying.

But this doesn’t have to be. Pheromones and a trick of biology it might be, but when I’m around the prince, he feels like my soulmate and literal reason for being. When I’m not around him, I mourn the loss of my sense of self and of Abraxas and the life we were supposed to have. The life I was willing to give up everything for.

“I cannot,” Rurik growls out, turning his head sharply. He grits his teeth so hard that I can hear the scrape of enamel. Or ivory. Or bone. Or whatever his alien vampire teeth are made out of. “Not until the first day of the wedding.”

“*Please*,” I beg, grabbing his hand and shoving it between my legs. While his middle and pointer finger are graced with long claws, he has other fingers with blunt tips. And his fingers? They’re much longer than my own.

Our eyes are locked as I push his ring and pinky finger into me, marveling at how familiar the shape of his hand is. He has five fingers like a man, but his skin is so oddly soft. Doesn’t bother me. I *like* it.

He exhales strangely as he looks down, blinking rapidly as his fingers disappear to the knuckle.

He takes my throat gently in his other hand and lowers his mouth to it, biting me and causing me to cry out. My hips arch, back bows, pussy squeezes. His lace digs into me, finding my heart, my brain, my soul, knowing and absorbing everything there is to know about me. *My blood, singing. It’s singing to him and revealing all my secrets.*

The orgasm is almost painful. I think I cry. And not just because it's good, but because it's sad, too. I'm still panting and shaking and fluttering prettily between my thighs when I grab him by the hair and yank him off of my neck. Blood drips down his face and mixes with the glittery red water from the bath bomb.

He is *mad*. Furious in a way that I've never seen.

"Get out," I tell him, and he snaps his teeth together so hard that the clack reverberates in the dome-shaped room. I left all the lights off, relying only on the dim silver glow from a nearby star. It bathes his face in shades of arrogance, possession, and blinding despair.

"You cannot keep using me and tossing me aside when it suits you. I will *not* allow that."

I splash him in the face, but he doesn't let go. His hand is on the side of my neck, his other is buried inside of me.

"You took me away from my mate," I grind out, feeling so horrifyingly hypocritical.

"No." He fucks me hard with his hand, and my eyes roll back into my head. He stops again to whisper against my neck. "*You* took me away from my mate when you ran from me. Not once or twice but many times now. *Stop running, princess.*" He bites me again, and I come for a second time, writhing and thrusting against his fingers like a wild woman.

He kisses my throat and laps the last of the blood up with his long, curled red tongue. *Like a butterfly*. No. No. *Like a moth*.

Rurik doesn't say anything else. He slips his fingers out of me, climbs from the tub, and snatches his gloves on the way. He leaves the bathroom via a door in the wall that I've never tried before, and disappears.

I'm still trembling when I climb out, snag another robe, and fall into bed.

"What the—" Avril says when she peers into the room and sees the shattered tablet. I catch the briefest glimpse of raised brows and a knowing half-smile before I turn away, squeeze my eyes shut, and will myself to sleep.



When I wake up, I lie there with my eyes wide, staring at the ceiling and praying that I imagined all of that. Surely that was a vivid sex fantasy and not real life. I wouldn't possibly have ... and then ... I sit up suddenly and see that my bare breasts are exposed. I'm wearing a robe and nothing else. Between my thighs, it's slick and hot and tight and *wanting*.

“Good morning, Imperial Princess.” Avril is standing by my bed with a mug in her hand, a smirk on her face. She has her hip pushed out, arm cock-eyed to allow the mug to dangle enticingly. “Do you know what this is?”

*I won't allow myself to believe. I won't. It isn't true. The prince and I did not ... whatever that was last night.*

“Is it coffee?” I ask hopefully, perking up considerably at the smell emanating from said mug. I squint my eyes at the cup. It reads *Blow Me! I'm Hot!* I struggle to figure out where this mug may have come from when Avril supplies an explanation.

“From the black market. I asked Rurik to buy it for you as a gift from me. He lent me the half-coin that I had to pay for it. So ... really, I'd say it was a gift from him.”

“Can you imagine the human being who must've owned this mug?” I say, standing up and taking the cup from Avril. “Either the person was a complete genius or a complete idiot, and I can't decide which it is.” I blow on the beverage before taking a sip.

“Don’t get too excited,” she tells me with a quirked brow. “It’s *Dunkin’ Donuts Decaf*. Also, there’s only one bag, so this is sort of a special treat. The prince says his botanists might be able to clone a coffee plant.”

I wave her away and take a sip. She’s right: it’s basically dishwasher. But it smells and looks enough like coffee that my sense memory warms and it feels like a proper morning. Oh, and not sure when I got totally used to prancing around nude in front of other people. Even other women. I’m just standing here with it all hanging out, and I don’t even care.

Probably ... somewhere around the ‘being eaten alive and fighting off shadow monsters with a torch’ bit. Yep. Right about there.

I *do* seem to care when the prince walks into the room, fully dressed and tugging at his gloves again. He pauses near the doorway and goes completely still, his eyes slicing down the curves of my body, cutting me from afar, making me bleed. *It really happened last night. Oh God.*

“Your Imperial Highness.” I take my time handing my coffee to Avril, and then I very slowly, very purposely close the robe and tie it shut. Rurik has plenty of leisure to look. He doesn’t. He turns away to face the wall, and I frown. *What the hell? No. I’m the one messing around with you.*

“Once you are dressed, we’ll board the World Station together.” He stays where he is, gaze fixed on nothing. When he does finally turn a look over his shoulder, it’s empty. Completely and utterly empty. I can’t get anything from his stare. When I look into his eyes, nothing looks back. I cross the room and put my fingers on his arm; he’s hot, and his left antennae flicks back at me like I’ve offended him. But otherwise, he doesn’t react.

He was serious last night when he told me to stop running.

*I know what we are. I know we’re like ... like fucking soulmates, but I can’t accept that. Because Abraxas is my soulmate, and I’m sure of it.*

“Okay then.” I drop my arm and exhale. This is probably for the better. If he runs, and I don’t give chase, then I can ... I can run away one day and leave him to die, and I won’t even give a flying fuck. *Eve, stop lying to yourself.* “Please leave.” I cinch the robe even tighter and yank the lacy edges at the top closed, blocking my cleavage.

Rurik looks back at me, face a dark mask of fury, and then he uses his vampire teeth to pull his glove off. He sucks his pinky and ring finger into his mouth and then *smiles* at me.

“I will see you in the antechamber when you are ready. Do hurry. I don’t

wish to disappoint my parents by being the last ones off the ship.” He takes off for the door, and leaves me there shaking in fury.

“I hate him,” I growl out, turning and smiling prettily at Avril. “Coffee please?”

She hands it over to me obediently. I take it into the bathroom, grit my teeth as the door slides shut behind me, and then down every last drop like it’s whiskey. *This motherfucker. I’ll show him.*

I end up in the antechamber just five minutes later, dressed in a skintight black dress with an entire back made of red lace, short velvety gloves with more of that same lace trim, a furred half-cape, and a hat with a veil. It’s so pretty I almost didn’t want to touch it.

“I take it you designed this,” I tell him drolly, and he glances over his shoulder as if he’s bored.

“Yes, well.” He offers me his arm and says nothing else. It’s fine since I have my own shit planned.

“I’m so looking forward to seeing my old friend here,” I say, and he resists the bait for all of two seconds. His eyes descend to mine, and I almost forget the con. “You know, the Falopex cop we met in the market. Tall, handsome, single. Officer Hyt?” I lift a brow in question and then laugh. “You know that’s why I was watching a Falopex get himself off last night, don’t you?”

The prince’s nostril slits flare, and his antennae snap together behind him. He bares his teeth and runs his palm down the front of his jacket as he takes off out the door and down the hallway at a pace so rapid that I have to jog to keep up.

“Slow down,” I grumble, but I’m wearing these padded velvet booties, and I’m beyond comfortable with a light jog.

We descend the spiral staircase again, but instead of proceeding forward into the king’s antechamber and throne room, we turn left and step through some sort of air-lock door. I see glass walls on either side of me, and I get the idea that maybe we’re ... in a tunnel of some sort between two ships.

Or ... between the ship and the space station.

*There’s nothing beneath my feet but a thin sheet of metal. There’s a star nearby, and its light is shining on me, and Avril told me they have to have special glass because of all the strong UVA and UVB rays and—* My head spins, and I collapse halfway to the ground.

The prince catches me as he always does, and our eyes meet.



He can't hide it for long. His eyes drop to my lips before rising back up. I'm not sure what I plan on doing—pulling him closer or pushing him away—when the doors swish open. Avril looks back at us guiltily, having stepped too close and activated them.

Officer Hyt is standing in a hallway on the other side, tentacle tails swaying, hat tipped low, belt tipped *way lower*, with a small scrap of leather hiding his cock. Now that I know what it looks like, I can't help but drop my gaze to stare. It's easy to do it from the angle I'm at, dipped halfway to the floor in the prince's arms. *Oh my God, Hyt's actually here. What the fuck?*

I was just being a shithead in order to rile the prince up. I didn't think ... I had no idea ...

"Eve!" Hyt says, planting his hands on his narrow hips. His gaze sweeps me, and he grins a little wider, that purple tongue firmly planted at the corner of his mouth. "My oldest and dearest friend."

"Officer Hyt," I greet, smiling prettily as Rurik sets me on my feet. The expression on his face is what I'm going to call a *planet nuking glare*. I'm sure I'll get used to the threats soon enough.

"I should've asked my father to set the lasers on your oceans so that they'd boil."

"What a thing for the next Imperial King of the Noctuida to say." Hyt whistles and his pink pet flutters up in the air, spinning around me in a sea of bubbles and happy chatter. I smile and hold out a hand for it to land on. The way those two men *stare* is odd, but I ignore them. I'm sure I'm committing some sort of massive social snafu here, but I have no way of knowing what it is. I recall the Vestalis drama that Avril was watching, with the silk cocoon fiasco. That's where I'm at. "Is it wise for you to make threats you can't keep?"

We step out of the elevator and the pink octopus swirls back to its master. Hyt holds out his arms for me, like he's offering to give me a hug or something. He narrows one eye at me in a half-wink.

"I know all humans love a good hug." He grins brightly at me, his tentacle tails fluttering. I smell a half-truth in that statement, like maybe he knows that *all* humans don't love good hugs. But many do. Hmm. I step forward and return his embrace with the express intent of pissing Rurik off.

Something weird happens when Hyt draws me in for that hug. A fluttering in my belly. A tightening in my core. Hyt puts his lips near my ear to

whisper, tiny bubbles tickling my skin along with his words.

“The Falopex are renowned all throughout the Noctuida; I don’t blame you for lookin’ at my cock. It’s my best asset.” He flashes pink, and then he laughs at me as he stands up straight. I narrow my eyes on him. Funny. Another man lying about the prowess of his dick. What a shocker. He lifts the edge of one eye, like he’s quirking a brow. He doesn’t have one, just those fins that slant across either side of his forehead like eyebrows. He returns his mouth to my ear, and I feel a small flick at the edge of my lobe. “I would *love* to speak to you in private.” He stays pink. His hand rubs my lower back in a circle.

I find myself exhaling all of my stress and leaning into him.

“I assume there’s some truth in that lie?” I ask, thinking that I’ve got him all figured out. “When?”

“Now.” Hyt stands up straight, pausing when the prince storms up to stand behind me. Rurik’s got that headpiece on with the little screen over his left eye. He reaches up to touch his fingers absently to the ear piece. I equate it to like an alien smartwatch or something, but really, I have no clue what it is. “Can I help you, Oh Great Imperial Majesty?”

“One day, your arrogance is going to walk you right off a ship and into the endless night.”

The threat almost makes me dizzy in and of itself, but I blink it back. Rurik isn’t serious. I don’t know how I know that. I just ... I know.

Zero strides by us like she’s in the middle of an important mission.

“Where in the Stars is that goddamn cyborg going?” Rurik turns her around with little more than an absent thought, but I reach out and put my hand on his arm.

“I gave her the day off, dude. Relax.”

The prince blinks at me like I’m crazy.

“You did what?” he asks, and I turn fully to face him, curling my lip in irritation.

“She’s going through some shit, okay?”

“Going through ...” Rurik trails off like he has no idea what I’m talking about. “You cannot give your primary security officer time off for *personal* reasons.” He throws an arm out to indicate Zero. She hasn’t moved from her spot in the hallway, facing us and waiting for a release from Rurik’s complete control. I don’t envy her at all. I feel *sorry* for her. “She’s a *cyborg* with a

borrowed body. She walks only because I give her my blood.”

“And you live only because I give you mine.” My words are sharp-edged and final. “Either I’m free or I’m a prisoner. *I gave her the day off.*”

Rurik reaches up to the device on his face, and then tears it off like it’s on fire. I see blood lace on the side of his head. Not his blood lace, all beautiful and delicate, but his *father’s* blood lace. It rips as he yanks on it, spilling blood down his ghost-white skin.

The prince chucks the device on the floor and crushes it with his boot, leaving yet another smear of conspicuous red on the sterile space station floor. He looks up at me. *Endless love. Together forever. One life after another. No distance is too far.* I gasp and force my attention away from him.

“I need you to trust me, princess; I am doing the best I can.” He grinds this all out through a clenched jaw.

“I feel like I slipped into something personal here,” Hyt inserts, stealing my attention by taking my wrist and rubbing his thumb in a circle against my pulse. He taps his finger a few times, like he’s trying to signal me. He wants to tell me something, and he can’t do it in front of the prince.

“Zero, go.” I don’t even look at her, and I just assume that Rurik will let her go. Not because I told him he has to but because he’ll see that it’s the right thing to do. He can’t tell me I have freedom and then cut me off at every turn if he wants to prove himself, especially not over something like this. I turn to Hyt and cross my arms. “You said we needed to talk? Let’s go find somewhere private.”

I ignore Rurik entirely. But oh, I can *feel* him. His pheromones tell me in no uncertain terms that he is *livid*. I’m probably committing some other alien social faux pas, but you know what? This isn’t an 1800s Victorian court. If I want to be alone with another guy without a chaperone, guess what? I’m my own person. Also, I’m American. Heh. These aliens have no idea how to deal with my red, white, and blue blood.

“Whatever you say, Imperial Princess; I am yours to command.” Hyt affects a dramatic bow as his skin shifts from pink to blue, tipping his red cowboy hat at me. He spins it off his head, along his shoulders, snatches it with one of his tentacles, and then places it back on his head again. He swipes the tip of one tentacle along the brim. “Right this way.” He offers out his arm which I take, and off we go.

I can feel Rurik trailing along behind us, but I don’t let his presence sway

me from my task. Avril keeps up with the pair of us, sticking close to my right side.

“You’re not supposed to touch other males,” she whispers, voice low and nervous. She reaches up to rub at her face, smearing her fancy makeup. “Both you and the prince could get in big trouble for this.”

“I don’t care.” That’s not entirely true. I *do* care. I’m a teensy, weensy, little bit, sort of, almost afraid of Rurik’s parents. But if Officer Hyt has something to tell me in private, it probably has to do with Jane. Or maybe Connor. Either way, I want to hear it. Either way, I want to see if he can’t get me out of this mess.

“Avril, the medic,” Hyt says, his strange eyes swinging her way. “It’s nice to see you alive and well.”

She peers at him, her blue eyes dropping to his chest and abs. I mean, it’s all *right there* and on full display for the universe to see. I keep my eyes on him, too, but just so I don’t have to see the wall of windows on our left. Why are there windows everywhere?! Back on Earth, I loved windows. Always had mine thrown open to enjoy a cool night breeze. But here? I could do without. I squeeze my eyes shut for a few brief seconds.

“Who are you?” she asks him, but not unkindly, like she’d genuinely *love* to know more. *Don’t think about the porn you watched. Don’t think about Rurik’s fingers inside of you. Don’t, don’t, don’t.* My brain is my literal worst enemy. Err. Well, it *was* my worst enemy. Then I met Rurik’s parents and saw the way my space millipede MIL looked at me, and now I’ve changed my mind.

“Pardon me, little human girl.” Hyt releases my arm and then sweeps another dramatic bow, the water sloshing over the tops of his see-through cowboy boots with the rhinestones on the top. Kid you not. Rhinestones. I don’t even ... I have no words. “Allow me to introduce myself.” He stands up straight and smirks playfully at her. “I’m what you might call an intergalactic police officer.”

“His name is Hyt,” I supply, and his face shifts slightly.

“I should never have given you that name,” he murmurs, flashing to bright pink with a curse.

“A Falopex, right?” Avril continues, and then her gaze drops to his chunky belt with the myriad weapons on it, his matching red loincloth, his strong thighs and shapely calves. His tails sway prettily as he smiles back at her, the

expression at odds with the massive assault rifle on his back.

“Aye. A Falopex. I assume you’ve seen some porn? That’s what most humans do when they get here. They seek out the X-rated stuff.”

I almost choke to death on my own spit, face turning bright red as Hyt’s eyes swing to mine. I notice that he stays pink which means he’s lying. About what, I’m not sure, but it doesn’t matter. He’s so full of shit, I imagine that he’s lying when he tells the truth, and telling the truth when he’s lying. It’s not all that hard. If I were him, I’d look someone in the face and say simple things like, “*Oh? My age? Yeah, I’m twenty-six.*” I’m a few months shy, so technically I’d be lying, but it’s also sort of the truth, too.

“Did you, Princess?” he asks, his tails drifting forward like he might touch me with them. His gaze shifts over to Rurik, standing several feet behind us and panting so heavily that he looks like he might have a heart attack. I ignore him.

“So what if I did? It was an accident. Avril was watching it, and she handed me the tablet—”

“Eve, I was watching a multi-species orgy which definitely didn’t include any Falopex.” She gives me a look, and I just *stare* at her.

“You are the *worst* wingwoman on the”—can’t say planet—“in the whole of the Noctuida.” That seems to be a phrase that people around here like to use liberally.

Hyt is laughing now, hands on his gorgeous hips. He knows what he looks like, and he deals maximum damage with that charm, looking up at me from under the brim of his hat.

“Princess, my, my. Were you thinking about me?” He smiles crookedly, rows of sharp teeth catching the light. “If it helps you feel better, I was thinking about you, too.” He wiggles his ... well, again, not his brows, but he moves his face in such a way that the effect is similar. His fox ears flatten back against the brim of his hat. “And I mean that in exactly the way it sounds.”

*Except that you’re still pink.*

“Girl, what is *wrong* with your pheromones,” Avril whispers to me. “You’re pretty popular with the alien guys, huh?”

I figure it makes sense because I was never super popular with dudes back on Earth. I must be built differently than the rest.

“Alright. Fine. I watched a few minutes of Falopex porn. So what?”

Hyt cannot resist the taunt, not even with Rurik standing right fucking there. I tell myself I don't owe him anything because he kidnapped me, that Abraxas is my only concern and that harmless flirting with this cop guy means nothing. That's how I rationalize my bullshit.

"So what? You're telling me you don't wonder what that single sucker on the end does for a human woman's clit?"

"You know what a clit is?" I'm shocked. Avril seems to feel the same as she glances my way. "A lot of human men don't even know what a clit is." She and I stare at each other.

"Are you okay if I go for this guy?" she whispers behind her hand, but even though I should simply tell her to rock on, I can't. My mouth won't move.

Fingers clamp down on my arm and there's Rurik, teeth gritted, chest rising and falling with carefully controlled breaths.

"Enough, Princess. I can handle many slights and insults, but I will *not* stand here and listen to my bride discuss human female anatomy with a *Falopex*." He may as well have said *garbage dump* for the way he pronounces the word. Hyt bares his sexy little teeth at the Vestalis prince, but Rurik lifts his lip in much the same way and flashes his pretty vampire fangs. Yikes. There's no love lost between the two men.

"You know what a clit is, too?" I ask, and Rurik *glares* at me like he wants me to shut up. I worry that there's more to his look than simple jealousy. We're on the World Station now, so there's none of his father's blood lace on the walls or ceiling, but that doesn't mean nobody's watching. Maybe I should be more careful? "If you did then you should've shown me last night," I whisper, and he shudders all over, releasing my arm like it's on fire.

Avril looks between the two of us, and then back to Hyt again. He's not looking at her. He's staring at me and the prince with a dark frown on his handsome face.

Now I'm breathing hard, too, and I wish the stupid prince would move back so I could think more clearly.

"Shall we talk?" Hyt asks, his voice an envious shade of green. I snap my head up to catch his gaze, those triple pupils in either of his blue eyes narrowing to slits. He forces a smile. "It's not important, so it won't take long." His body changes back to blue.

"I'll be right back." I move away from Rurik and hurry down the hall. It's

much more sterile in here than it is on the Vestalis ship. No red-flame sconces or fancy carpets or chandeliers. The hall is a narrow, metal space that curves slightly as we walk down it. We don't encounter anyone else which I suppose is a good thing for my psyche. If Rurik's mother is any indication—not to mention my day at the Jungryuk market—then surely, there are some creepy, ugly bastards on this ship.

“You do know that we're in a protected section of the station, right? Only high-ranking Vestalis or Falopex are allowed in here.” Hyt remains blue. I try to sniff out the half-truths as I narrow my eyes. *The first part of that phrasing was in question form. A question is neither a truth nor a lie.* Damn it, but I want to solve this puzzle. “Are you tense because you're afraid, Princess?”

I give him a dark look as Avril struggles to keep up with us and Hyt throws a thumb over his shoulder.

“Shall I take her with me when I leave? She's not mated, and Tabbi Kat could probably use a companion.” He makes a face that I recognize all too well. He might be an alien tentacle fox thing, but he's been condemned to spending time with Tabitha. There are few things in existence worse than that which I can now confirm with utmost certainty. I was abducted from Earth. I was eaten alive. I was nearly raped by a creature with tiny worm dicks. Still, Tabbi's presence ... leaves something to be desired.

“Excuse me, but I do have a voice of my own.” Avril squeezes between us, and the look she throws me says that we are so going to have a talk when we get back to our room. *She can see me crushing on the stupid Falopex cop. Fantastic.* Apparently I have a thing for alien dick. Jane has *always* had a thing for alien dick. She orders these massive dildos from a site called *Bad Dragon*. It's ... it's a vibe for sure. “What do you mean by ‘take her with me’? I'm not going anywhere.”

Hyt stops walking, looking back to see that Rurik is still following us. The longer my interaction with the Falopex goes, the angrier the prince looks. *Maybe he'll take some of that anger out on me in the bathtub again?* I crush the thought and kick it into the dark recesses of space where it belongs.

“You're not?” Hyt asks her as his pink pet swirls around him, tiny tentacles fluttering. When I hold out my hand, it lands on my palm, and he frowns again. He forces his attention back to Avril, and I find myself pleased that he'd rather look at me. *Oh, Eve, you thirsty ass bitch.* I love Abraxas. He's my goddamn soulmate. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'd still choose

him. Over these guys. Over going back to Earth. “You want to stay with the Vestalis?”

“They have medical technology that we could only dream about back on Earth.” Avril seems as perplexed by his question as he was by her statement. “How could I go back to such a small life when I’ve seen what else is out there? You want me to downgrade from Imperial Princess’ handmaiden to a paramedic who gets paid forty-K a year? Nope.”

Hyt scratches at the back of his head, ruffling up his pretty blue hair. *Or is it hair at all? I’m not sure.* He tilts his hat forward and then tips it back, showing off more of his handsome face. It’s hard to look there though when his abs just scream *look at me; there are eight of us beauties on display!* I squint. Oh. Wait. Nope. There are ten. He has a ten-pack. Huh.

“We could die,” I whisper to her, but she just shrugs.

“We could, but we’re not going to because you’re in love with the prince.” She gives me another look, and I swear that I miss Jane so much that it hurts. My bestie would never do me wrong like this. “You slept with Rurik last night, didn’t you? Maybe not full P-in-V stuff, but something. You’ll be just fine. We’re not going to be executed for treason.”

My eyes flick to Hyt’s to find his narrowed, his mouth in another pretty frown.

“If you want to stay, Miss Avril, well, I suppose I can’t force you to go.” He sighs like he’s exhausted, and I wish fervently that I could read his mind. I would *love* to know what this guy is thinking. “Taking the Imperial Princess’ lady-in-waiting doesn’t sound like such a great idea anyway, does it?” He pauses to look over at Rurik. “Are you sure you don’t want another human servant for your lady? I’d gladly give you the one in my possession.”

“Well, I suppose—” Rurik begins, but I cut him off.

“Nope. We’re good. All good.” I gesture randomly around the sterile hallway. “So, where can we have this chat?”

Hyt strides forward in his low-slung belt and boots, leaning past me and putting his palm flat on the wall. I can feel a door slide open behind me as he smirks, the blue skin around his eyes tightening. One of his webbed ears flattens against his hat, the handy little cutouts on the brim allowing them to peek out.

“After you, Princess.” He gestures with his left hand, his right remaining against the wall. We’re standing *way* too close, but at least he doesn’t have an



overpowering and mind-numbing scent like Abraxas or Rurik. I spin away from him and slip into the room.

He follows me, hitting a button to close the door. It very nearly cuts Rurik and Avril in half.

“Best if this is a private conversation.” Hyt turns pink again, and he curses so fiercely that bubbles drift from his lips. His pet chirps and lifts into the air, spinning and twirling like it’s performing a dance for me. He snatches it in his hand, uses one of his tentacle tails to lift his hat, and shoves it under there. He replaces the hat, and I raise an eyebrow as I hear it chittering in frustration.

“Best if this *isn’t* a private conversation?” I query, seeing as what he just said was a lie. “You’re a hard man to figure out, you know that?”

“You’re an equally difficult little human,” he retorts, leaning toward me with his hands on his hips. He uses the tip of one tentacle to flick me in the forehead, and I slap him away. “What the fuck are you doing? All goo-goo eyed over the *prince*? I thought you were mated to the *Aspis*?” His eyes drift down to the hem of my dress, like he’s trying to see my pussy through the fabric. I take it that he, too, has seen a lot of porn and knows that I’m glowing downstairs.

I slap him, and he rears back, pressing a palm to his cheek.

“What a violent, ugly little primate,” he breathes, flashing back to blue again. I smirk.

“Don’t stare at my cunt, and I won’t have to do that again.”

“Don’t stare at my dick, and I won’t feel like I have an express invitation to do so.” He flashes pink, curses again, pulls down on both sides of his hat and covers his eyes with the brim. He lifts up one side, exposing a single eye and three beautiful rose-colored irises. “You have a strange effect on me. I’ll have you know that I don’t often change colors.” *Another lie.*

My eyes drift to the door. I can feel Rurik on the other side of it, and my body aches at the separation between us. I ignore the emotion. It isn’t mine. It isn’t real.

“Damn, I’d almost forgotten how obsessive a Vestalis mate could be.” Hyt sighs and adjusts his hat again. “You sure have changed, little human girl.”

His words strike me like a hammer to the chest, despite the fact that I know them to be a lie. He’s still pink, after all. But ... I haven’t changed. Fuck this guy.

“It’s been three days!” I’m shouting, and I don’t know why. Panic. It’s pure panic.

“They say three seconds is enough.” Hyt smirks at me, but there’s a sadness to his expression. “Guess they’re right.” He frowns. “Or maybe they’re exaggerating? I doubt it took you that long to fall for him.”

“Who is ‘they’ anyway?” I snap, feeling my temper get the better of me. I yank the velvet gloves off and shove them into the pocket on my dress. That’s how thorough Rurik is with his designs: he puts pockets on my dresses. *I hate him.*

“My parents.” Hyt looks dead serious though he’s still pink. He quirks a half-smile. “Did you think I meant a proverbial ‘they’? Wrong.”

I figure my best bet here is to change the subject.

“You must be pretty important if you can walk right up to the prince and insult him?” It’s a question, one that I don’t expect him to answer truthfully.

“My father is the Chief of Police.” He says that like it’s much, much bigger than a similar position on Earth. “The Falopex are the only ones willing to stand up to the Vestalis. It makes us likable.” He winks at me, but even though I know it’s supposed to be cut-and-dried—pink for lies, blue for truths—I feel like he’s playing word games with me.

“Stand up to the Vestalis?” Now he’s piqued my interest.

He crosses his big arms over his chest and leans back, fully aware of the picture he paints. It hurts to tear my eyes away from all those muscles, but I figure I should at least look around the room. There are two bench seats, one on either side, and literally nothing else.

“What is this?” I ask, and Hyt laughs, leaning toward me so that the tip of his nose brushes up against mine.

“Hold on tight, sweetheart.” He smirks. “Me or the wall, it doesn’t matter.”

I only have a split-second but ... I choose him.



Hyt slaps a screen on the wall, and then ... *Oh God.* My stomach threatens to come out of my throat as the room we’re in shoots off like a horizontal

elevator. *In space. Flying through the air. Endless blackness. Suffocation. Silence. Cold.*

I throw my body against Hyt's, wrapping my arms around his midsection, my cheek pressed to his impressive abdominal muscles, my eyes squinched shut. *Oh, damn, he's nice and warm. But I still think I might throw up. Or pass out. Or—*

Those pretty tentacle tails wrap around me, lifting me completely off the floor.

"You're alright, little human girl." One of his tentacles strokes my back, another pets my hair, the others keep me lifted and pressed tightly against him. *I'm such a big baby.* But this astrophobia shit is real. I can't think too hard about it or it's lights-out for me.

The alien elevator glides to a smooth stop, but the door doesn't open.

Hyt sets me down and then his tails retreat in a rush. I was so disturbed by my sense of vertigo that I didn't appreciate how silky his skin was until it was gone. I slap at my cheeks to clear away the images of last night's porn. I definitely do not wonder if his dick skin is as soft as his tentacles. That's the only part of it that I'd want soft ... I slap my cheeks again and drop my arms by my sides.

Sexy Officer Hyt over there looks disturbingly amused.

"Sorry. I have astrophobia. Fear of space."

He chuckles at me, flashing cute little teeth.

"It's pretty common. You're certainly not the only planet-dweller to panic on a ship or a station." He walks right up to me, leans in, his eyes on my lips. "Nice mouth, by the way. I've always loved the shape of human mouths." His finger flicks the screen on the wall behind us, and the door slides open.

I turn slowly around to see where—

I get so dizzy that I actually stumble and Hyt catches me with his tails.

"Do you want me to close the window?" he asks, but I shake my head, forcing my shuttered eyes back open.

I'm staring at a massive fucking planet. It takes up nearly the entire wall, and that's saying something since it stretches clear from one side of this gargantuan room to the other. The ceiling is so high that it's nearly obscured in shadow. The planet itself isn't just close by—this beautiful swirl of blue-green and turquoise, of sapphire and cerulean—we're *connected* to it. The World Station has its arms literally buried in the waters of that planet,

anchored to it. It sweeps up in graceful gold curves, taking up as much space as the planet itself. We're on one of the lower arms. When I try to complete the design in my mind, it looks like an armillary sphere (basically a globe, but for the solar system). If it were an armillary sphere, the space station would consist of the rings up top while the planet serves as its base. It also matches the burn scar on Hyt's chest.

"Holy shit." My astrophobia disappears in the breadth of my awe.

"You like this, little human girl?" he asks, like it's a line he's used a million times before. There's a long pause before he exhales and bubbles come pouring out. "Sorry, human woman. You're certainly not a little girl." He clucks his purple tongue and strides past me, snapping his fingers to activate the lights. The dim room—lit only by the blue-green glow of the planet—brightens a bit.

I tear my gaze away from the view to look around.

We're in an office of some sort. There are round tables with padded benches, a few desks, and plenty of fish tanks. Some are occupied by brightly colored creatures while the rest remain empty. I see small staircases leading up to the glass edge at the top. None of the tanks are covered.

"Where are we?" I'm already wondering if Rurik is upset that I've left. I'm already missing him. My throat goes dry as I imagine the distance between us, and I have to slap myself in the face again to gather my common sense. That pheromone shit is no joke. I'm a prisoner to it. I'm a slave to my body's desires. I don't like that. I fucking *hate* it. Maybe ... it's not *him* that I hate, but the unwanted feelings.

"This is the World Station." Hyt is facing away from me, so I've got a pretty good view of his ass beneath his nine tentacle tails. I'm relieved he only has one sucker on the tip of each. Usually the sight of tentacles creeps me out. "That's my home planet, Yaoh." He pronounces it like *yah-oh*. "And this is the Central Office. It's a holiday today, so I doubt we'll see any of the other officers."

He remains pink the entire time he's telling me this shit. What am I supposed to believe? Is pink his lie or his truth color? Wait. I know how to solve this riddle!

I march right up to him to see that he's ... getting us glasses of ice water?

Hyt turns to look at me, tilting his head slightly. The motion reminds me of Abraxas, and I have to bite back a wave of anguish. It was so simple and

peaceful and relaxing being on Jungryuk with him. If I'm being totally honest with myself, I stayed for him, but I wasn't as upset about it as I might've been. I was truly free there in a way I've never been before and might never be again. No responsibilities, no laws, no social structure, no expectations. It was ... I'm going to miss that.

"You look so sad, Princess. I wish I could help you out with that." One of his tentacles traces down the edge of my jaw, and that's what snaps me back to the present. He's still pink.

I smile wickedly back at him, and he doesn't seem to know what to do with the expression.

"Are you pink when you lie?" I ask.

He goes perfectly still.

See, here's how it works. He's pink right now. He claims this color marks his dishonesty. I don't know if I believe that. My theory here is that he's actually *blue* when he lies, and he's *pink* when he tells the truth.

He throws his head back in laughter.

"Oh, Princess." With his head still tilted back, he turns his face toward me. "Are you trying to catch me in a liar's paradox? Sweetheart, the Falopex excel in truths and lies." He turns blue and hands me the glass of water. "Why not just ask me if I'm lying, full stop?"

Shit.

This is a logic puzzle that I can't seem to solve. *This fucking guy.*

"I'm going to just run off the assumption that every word that leaves your mouth is total shit."

He bends at the waist, he's laughing so hard. I narrow my eyes and take a sip of the water. Tastes ... freakishly normal.

"Okay, fair enough." He stands back up and grabs his own water glass, tossing it down like it's whiskey. He slams the glass back on the small table in front of him. "Can't blame you for that."

He's still blue.

"What did you mean when you said the Falopex stand up to the Vestalis?" I want to gather as much information as I can while I'm here. I have no doubt that Rurik will be hot on our heels.

Hyt pours himself another glass of water using his tentacle tails instead of his hands.

"How much time do you have?" He looks my way again, and something

about the expression on my face must dig at him a little. “I have a little sister, you know?” Another question. Neither truth nor lie. “I’m a liar.” He turns pink, and I blink through my confusion. “See? You won’t figure it out so don’t try.” He pats me on the head, and I slap his hand away. “My little sister is adopted; she’s human. I know a lot about humans because of that.”

“Good for you.” I still can’t decide if he’s lying or not which I guess is the whole point. The color changing is not a dead giveaway like I thought it would be.

“But you? You don’t know anything about anything. Which is why humans belong on Earth, ignorant and unaware. The fact that you’re about to be married to a Vestalis prince, and you don’t even understand the basics of Falopex and Vestalis relations ... that upsets me.”

“So tell me.” I thrust my glass back at him, and he refills it with the pitcher, tentacle wrapped around the handle. I can feel the pulsing glow of the planet behind me, but as beautiful as it was, I need a break from looking at it.

“Not sure if you can tell, but the Vestalis are bullies.” He sighs and sets the pitcher down, wandering over to the massive window and staring down at his planet with those strange eyes of his. It’s one of the weirdest sights I’ve ever seen, this cowboy-hat wearing semi-nude alien guy with an assault rifle drinkin’ a glass of water and gazing out the window of a space station.

*Who even am I anymore?* I’m certainly not Eve, the caterer. I was hoping I’d be Eve, Abraxas’ mate. I don’t know what to think right now. In just a few short days, that stupid moth has scrambled my brain.

“They rule the Noctuida with fear.” He glances my way, still pink. He could be lying—maybe the Vestalis rule the Noctuida with fear *and* weapons or fear *and* respect—or maybe they don’t rule with fear at all. But he could also be telling me the bare honest truth. I’m leaning toward the latter, and I don’t know why. “What do you think happened to the Cartians?” he asks, referencing Zero’s species. He can’t know that’s what she is, so he must be bringing her race up for another reason. There’s something about his expression that tells me to take this seriously. “They had the audacity to stand up for themselves and now they’re just”—he snaps his fingers—“space dust.”

“What do you mean by that exactly?” I hedge, wishing I wasn’t hearing all of this. None of this is my problem. I don’t care. I don’t. I don’t give a fuck. I want to live on Jungryuk with Abraxas and have him take care of me and fuck me and cuddle me, and fine. Fine. I’ll admit it. I wanted an Aspis baby. I

wanted a daughter with ebony scales and horns and a tail, just like he told me. So what?

Hyt continues on, staring out the window at his own planet. He doesn't stop to answer my question directly, and I get the idea that these are all things he's been desperate to say to someone, anyone, but hasn't had a chance to.

"The Vestalis *claim* they're perfectly egalitarian because their mates could be from any species; they have no bias or favoritism." He snorts a laugh, more bubbles escape his lips. With another sigh, he lifts his hat and lets his pet out. It immediately lands on my shoulder, and he shakes his head at it. "They don't have a planet of their own. Instead, they nuke other planets and eat 'em with nary a thought." He shrugs his shoulders like it's nothing, but ... that's a pretty big fucking something. "That ship that you're on, it's big enough and powerful enough to eradicate entire planets from existence."

"I ..." I'm suddenly thinking about Jungryuk. About Earth. About this planet right next to me. I'm thinking about how kind Rurik is, how I'm his princess, and how we could be king and queen. If we were, nobody would get blown up. We wouldn't destroy planets. We'd ... *are you trying to liberate the entire galaxy?!*

Since when did I turn into this person? A person who cares about crap like this? I'm not. I just want to live my life and be left alone. I don't want responsibilities like this. It's too much. I didn't ask for this. I was just trying to cater a vegan pop star's fundraiser.

"The Vestalis are parasites." Hyt's face softens as he turns to me, collecting my empty water glass. I hadn't even noticed I was drinking from it, but now that it's gone, my throat feels dry. He sets the glasses on a small table, and then steps close to me, putting his hands on my shoulders. A little flicker hits my belly that I don't want, so I ignore it. I don't need any other men in my life. All I need is Abraxas. "Eve, if you mate with the prince, he will take control of your eggs."

I try to pull back from Hyt's grip, but he won't let me go.

"My ... eggs?" I'm not quite sure what he means.

"Yes. Your eggs ... or ova, yes? Is that what they're called?" Hyt licks his lips and drops his head, trying to figure out how to explain while still telling a lie or ... telling the truth or ... whatever. I'm going off of vibes here. "Human females have ovaries, don't they? You are born with your eggs, and you only have so many?"

I nod as he looks up. That's all true. He wasn't kidding when he said he knew a lot about humans. Also, every single thing he just said was a question. I can't use simple facts to confirm whether pink or blue is his truth color. *Nice move, Falopex.*

"Vestalis males are designed so that the first time they mate with a female, they take over her reproductive system. All of your eggs, your ova, will be injected with his DNA." He lifts up a single finger, both eyes and all six pupils fixated on my face to gauge my reaction. "Even if you manage to get away from him later, even if you're intimate with someone else, any child you conceive will be his. Yours too, obviously, but his." He releases me and stands up straight. "Every child you conceive will be a Vestalis male. Period. No deviations. No exceptions."

I'm having a hard time keeping my feet. I turn away and stumble over to a bench seat, sitting down on it so hard that I feel the impact in my bones.

*I ... I could never have Abraxas' child? I could never have a daughter? I ...* I think I'm going to be sick. And it's not the astrophobia this time. I close my eyes and grip the cushion with tense fingers.

Hyt sits down beside me, murmuring under his breath.

"This is why humans shouldn't be out here," he repeats. "You guys can't play life-or-death games when you don't know the rules."

We sit there in silence for a while.

"Rurik hasn't found us yet?" I ask eventually. I'm beyond devastated. Frankly, I feel sick. I resist the urge to press a hand to my stomach. Rurik was at least honest about taking over any eggs that Abraxas might've fertilized. But ... shit. Shit, shit, shit. This is so much worse than I thought.

And I cannot for the life of me think of a way out of this.

"Have you found Connor yet?" I ask, trying to steer us to a less terrifying subject. If I think too hard about all the things that Hyt's just told me, I won't be able to get out of bed. "The male medic," I add, in case he was unsure who I was talking about.

"It's not quite that easy," Hyt says with a dry laugh. "He's been sold from one slaver to the next. I'm doing my best to keep up."

"You're pretty terrible at your job, aren't you?" I snap, but not because I'm actually angry with him. I'm upset. I'm sad. I just discovered that mating with Rurik isn't solely a necessary evil, it's a permanent alteration of my entire biology. *I wanted a daughter. I wanted—eventually—to have a baby*



*with Abraxas.*

I can feel cold fury rolling off of Hyt as he turns to look at me. His face is dead. There is *none* of that playful humor left in his expression. I'm reminded all over again that he's an alien, and I'm a human, and I am entirely at his mercy in here. If he wanted to snap my neck with his tentacle tails, I couldn't stop him.

He chooses not to respond to my statement. *I've fucked it up with this guy. He's pissed.*

"Why did you agree to follow me here?" he asks as his pet lifts up from my shoulder and takes off. It flutters away, and dips itself into one of the open water tanks. The mood shifts. My attention moves back to Hyt as he leans in toward me, his right arm along the back of the bench beside me. "You're engaged to the Vestalis prince. You know that I can't help you." He waits, tapping his fingers against the cushion. "Though I'm *shocked* that you haven't mated him already."

"How would you even know if I had?" I quip back, but I'm not so clever as I think. Hyt leans in toward me, twining his tentacles in my hair.

"You'd be marked by him. He'd be marked by you." He taps a finger on my shoulder for emphasis as he places a few suckers against my skin. My calves, my arm, my *neck*. He removes them all with a pop. "Your back. His wings. I haven't seen your back yet, but I saw his wings."

"Yet?" I ask, and then he's dragging me onto his lap, knocking the loincloth loose. I look down and I can see it trapped between us.

There's his dick.

It's just like the one in the video I watched last night. There's a thick pale pink base with hot pink petals wrapped around it, about the size of a soda can. My fingers twitch. I can't say why I do it. Curiosity, maybe. Perversion, I guess. Desperation.

I'm frustrated. I feel weird. I'm depressed. I want Abraxas, and I know I can't have him. Even if Rurik is telling the truth about bringing Abraxas to the ship, he can't live there. He's a wild thing, meant to roam, to be free. I can't condemn him to life on a hostile alien ship while I'm married to and breeding with another guy. *But that stupid moth couldn't stop me from fucking the cop guy, could he?* There are no pheromones here controlling my actions. I think Officer Hyt is hot, and I like his personality. That's on me. Nobody is making me do this.

I am free. I make my own choices. I can do whatever I want.

My hand reaches between us and my fingers curl around him.

Hyt exhales, using his tentacles to tuck me more closely against him. His dick is essentially pinned between his body and mine. I play my fingers across him, trying to tease one of those petals loose. It does what I ask, and there's a small tentacle wrapping around my finger. The rest of them unfold, caressing my hand as I do the same to him.

*This is crazy.* I should be terrified right now. I should run. This is *weird*. But I can't stop.

I use my fist to pump him a few times, watching his expression for guidance. He looks so absurdly pleased, a cat-got-the-cream-smile. That stupid hat ... I grab it with my other hand and toss it onto the bench beside us, putting one of my hands on his ear. It's fox-like and sits on the top of his head, covered in scales. There are frilled fins on the exterior side. My palm slides across the skin of his neck, grabbing his long braid and giving it a sharp tug. Oh, and he *likes* that. Loves it.

My eyes drop back down to his cock, and we both end up watching as that second part emerges, hard and slick and wanting. It's fascinating—and strangely erotic—to see his secondary shaft swell from the base, pale white and tipped with a single sucker on the underside. I thumb it, and he throws his head back, our skin sticking together. I draw my hand away and it comes loose with another pop.

When I slide my fingers under the thick base of him, I can feel his swollen balls tucked close. I'm dragging my teeth against my lower lip again, wondering if I should try to kiss him.

An inner voice inside of me screams that I'm in a coma, that I'm hallucinating. *Don't get too close to anyone here. It's not real. It's not happening. You're lying in a bed somewhere, imagining all of this.* I tell myself that there are too many odd coincidences. Rurik is a moth, and I dated an entomologist? Hyt is a cowboy, and I went through a *Lonesome Dove* obsession in high school? Abraxas is ... so perfect as to be an impossible reality? Surely I'm just processing memories and desires in an unconscious mind.

But then Hyt shoves my dress up, revealing a pair of crimson lace panties with a garter belt.

"Did you put this on for him?" he asks, but like he's really, really mad

about it. He looks back up at me, waiting for an answer. My thumb continues to rub a lazy circle on the head of his cock while my other hand teases his balls. I turn my attention downward and see that there's ... another part of him. A third part. It emerged from the tip of him, another cluster of small tentacles. There are nine there, too, I think. Nine big tail tentacles, nine small tentacles at the base of his cock, nine more at the apex of his crown.

He grabs my ass and lifts me up to my knees. His tentacle tails come around and bury themselves in the panties, tearing the fabric apart and tossing it aside. Hyt takes my face in one of his tentacles and then brings my mouth toward his. The motion off-balances me slightly, and I slam into his chest, skimming the wetness of my cunt over the tip of him and then down the front of his length. He's buried between my ass cheeks now, but still not *technically* fucking me.

I'm hot all over, nipples desperate for touch, pussy impossibly swollen and needy. It's frustrating knowing that he's so close, but not where I want him to be. The tentacle on my chin drags me closer, and my hips shift, ass tilting up. I realize then that he's got tentacles all over me, putting me exactly where he wants me to go. I start to move my hips, and his dick gets caught between my folds. I rub on him, slicking him up as he leans down to kiss me. Our mouths hover, and then he's taking me gently by the back of the neck with his hand. I snatch his hat back up from where it fell on the seat and put it back on, the brim overshadowing both of our gazes.

"Wicked little human. What a wild wife you'd make." He takes my mouth before I can truly understand what he just said. *Doesn't matter. It's just a turn of phrase.* I'm moving at the perfect pace, getting my clit with each arc of my pelvis, wetness dripping down my thighs. Some of that liquid is mine, but some of it is decidedly not.

I want Hyt to put it inside, but even if he doesn't, it doesn't matter.

I'm about to come, panting hard as he kisses me with a possessiveness I didn't think he had. His tails sweep and pet and brush over me before those sucker tips at the end each offer up an effervescent bubble that twirls up and around me. It isn't until they pop, and I smell it that I realize.

*Pheromones. Again. Fuck.*

A powerful wave rolls over me, and I feel that climax hitting me. It's right there, right there, right—

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Hyt picks me up with his tentacles, pulling my body

away from his. I'm suddenly cold between the thighs, and my stimulation is completely gone. I'm red-faced and panting and totally confused. "Okay, I *really* want to do this, and I know you want to do this, too."

"I do. I want it. What are you doing?" I'm so completely disoriented. Dazed. Nothing else matters except for satisfying the deep, biological ache between my thighs. "Hyt, what the fuck?"

He grits his teeth, looks me over like he isn't sure he's not making a mistake, and then sets me aside on the bench next to him. I'm all sweaty, wrapping my arms around myself, wondering what I'm supposed to be doing right now. I'm so embarrassed all of a sudden. And ashamed, too.

"I can't mate with you unless I give you this first." He moves over to a metal box on a nearby table, tapping in a code on a pin pad. The box opens, and then ... *Abraxas*.

The smell of musk and male, of mate and home and safety.

I stand up suddenly, shoving my dress back into place, and I throw myself on the item in Hyt's hand. It's a small, white fur covered in Abraxas' scent. I put it to my face like a crazy person, close my eyes, and breathe him in. *What am I doing here? I'm letting these assholes mess with me. Abraxas is my mate. He's the only one I need. I'm here against my will, and I'm making stupid stress-based mistakes.*

I let Rurik finger me last night. I rubbed shamelessly on Hyt.

I can't look at him.

That's how it goes. One instant, we're hot for each other. Now? It just hit me that I almost fucked a random alien cop while my royal fiancé searches for me and my soulmate and I are banned from seeing one another.

"Where is he?" I ask, trying not to freak out. Now that I've smelled Abraxas, it's hit me all over again. I love him. I'm his mate. I was kidnapped. Rurik's going to steal my eggs. I'm dead if I don't let him steal my eggs. This is all so messed-up.

"He's alright," Hyt promises me, fixing his belt and ensuring that the fabric covering his cock is back in place. When he reaches up to adjust his hat, he smiles at me, like nothing happened. "He's been staying with that friend of mine, the DTF space pirate." It takes me a second, but then I remember. Right. Wait.

"Abraxas is with Jane?!" I'm yelling now, but I don't care.

"Here." Hyt pulls a tablet from inside the metal box, taps his finger on the

screen a few times, and hands it out to me. I take it with one hand, unwilling to let go of the fur with the other. I see a video waiting—with Jane’s face on it.

She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

I hit play.

“Eve.” She’s crying, but that’s normal. Jane isn’t weak, but she has hyperactive emotions. It makes her fun to be around. “I’ve been searching for you since day one. Are you okay? I know you can’t answer me, but I need you to be okay. Honey, we’ve got this.” There’s a long pause there where guilt takes over her pretty features. Her brown eyes shift to one side, and I know what’s coming. “I’m so sorry that I asked you to cater that party as a favor to me. You’d been working nonstop, and it was your only day off, and your mother *begged* me to leave you alone so you could sleep ... I ...” She looks back up at the camera, stricken. “This is my fault, Eve, and I’ll give my life to make sure you have one.”

“Don’t you dare do something stupid,” I growl at her, even though I know this is a recording and she can’t hear me. Hyt tries to give me some privacy, tucking his thumbs into his belt and whistling a low tune as he looks away. Bubbles drift from his lips in time with the sound.

“For now, sit tight, and we’ll figure this out. We won’t leave you there with that stupid Vestalis prince. They’re parasites, Eve. Did you know that? They pick a female and then replicate the perfect chemical scent to mimic her ideal male’s biological signature. He’s tricking you.” She raises both brows, like she’s waiting for a response.

She knows me too well.

*Rurik is mimicking a scent?* I think, but as soon as the thought crosses my mind, it feels wrong. It ... that can’t possibly explain the way I feel when I look into his eyes. In my heart, I know it’s more than that.

“And by ‘we’, of course, I mean myself, Captain Kidd”—she spits the name out like the guy is pure trash—“Officer Hyt, and ...” She wiggles her eyebrows and leans in toward the screen. “Did I mention that I met your new man?” She flashes me her perfectly straight teeth, courtesy of Invisalign while I rocked braces in junior high. *This bitch*. “I just want to say that he ...” She slams her palms down on the table in front of her and gets close and personal with the screen, a lewdness shifting her features into something comical. I laugh nervously, wishing Hyt would go away so he won’t hear

whatever it is that she's about to say. "He is stacked, and he's a provider, and he's a *keeper*. I am so proud of you for dumping Mack and marrying an alien dragon. You did well, my friend." Jane hesitates, and I can tell that something bad is coming, something serious. "You did well ... except I think you should've left Tabbi in the slaver's wagon. She's here with me now, and ... I like her even less than I did on Earth."

Jane sits back in her chair and reaches up to adjust her hat. It's taken me this entire time to realize that she's wearing a tricorne hat. As in, a pirate hat. A literal fucking pirate hat. Except ... it's yellow and it's vaguely luminescent. Err.

"Also, I met someone ..." Jane is hedging, and I'm not there to pinch her ear so I doubt I'll get the full truth right about now. But also? I knew this girl would get freaky with some aliens! God help us both. "Do you know what a copulatory plug is?"

The recording abruptly cuts off and Hyt collects the tablet, his fingers brushing mine in the exchange. I don't even notice. I'm squeezing the fur against me, and it smells about a million times stronger than the one I stole from the den. *He marked this with a message. This is his letter of love and dedication to me, and I'm an idiot because I cheated on him. Twice. Once in the bathtub. Because I might have to fuck the prince to seal our marriage deal, but I didn't have to do that. And again, just now.*

"Goddamn it, Kidd." Hyt's grumbling as he deletes the message and then smashes the tablet on the floor in a non-aggressive and entirely intentional way, like it simply needed to be gotten rid of. He notices me staring as his pet lifts out of the water tank, screaming at us both in its cute little chirps. It swirls bubbles around me and him both, and I swear that it's drawing the shape of a heart.

We both ignore it.

"*Goddamn it, Kidd*, what?" I ask, lifting a brow. "What's a copulatory plug?"

"I don't ..." Hyt looks at me then, really looks at me clutching that fur, and he knows our very brief, very strange fling is over. He toys with his hat, flattens his ears, swirls his tentacle tails around in a pink wave. "A copulatory plug, don't you have those on Earth?" Another question to avoid making a definitive statement. "Not in humans but in other animals? A male leaves a literal plug inside of a female so other males can't—" He doesn't finish his

sentence, so it's neither a truth nor a lie.

*Inside of a female.*

We stare at each other, and he curses under his breath.

“Ah, *fuck*. I need a goddamn drink.”

It takes me a second to process all of that.

“Wait, are you saying that Jane is ... is Jane mated?!” I'm shouting again, and Hyt cringes, likely wondering why he got involved with me in the first place. He's said as much. Numerous times. If he follows the stupid dumb-dumb laws of the Noctuida then he needn't ever see me again. I'm not his problem, as he *loves* to reiterate.

Despair and elation slam together inside of me, triggering another dizzy spell. I'm selfishly thrilled that Jane might be staying here with me. And by 'here', I mean not on Earth. With Abraxas. In this alien universe. But I'm also sad for her because if she's mated, she can't go back. Neither of us can go back.

*Unless you become queen and change the laws. Rurik more-or-less said you could do that. But do you trust him?*

“If *she* is the one with the copulatory plug then ...” Hyt trails off and shrugs his gorgeous shoulders. “I dunno, little human woman.” We're back to that now. Nice. As it should be. I should tell Avril to date him. “If she is, then she's mated. Yes.”

“You're planning to help me?” I ask, wondering why we can't just go now. Hyt has this box of goodies, so he's got access to Jane and Abraxas somehow. “Let's leave. Right this very second.”

“Would if I could. Can't so I won't.” He smiles at me. It's not patronizing. It's a little sad actually. “If I try to take you now, *The Korol*—that is, the giant ship you've been on for the last few days—will beam us up, take you by force, and torture me to death.”

Um. Yeah. I guess that sounds like a pretty shitty plan.

“The World Station is not a spot that Captain Kidd can land. He's ... how should I say this ... ‘wanted’?” Hyt makes quotes with his fingers, and I'm glad I know some backstory. If he has a human girl as an adopted sister, he could easily have picked up all of these phrases and hand gestures from her.

“You're friends with a wanted space pirate? But you're a cop.” I blink at him, and he grins nice and wide. I don't think about the fact that he's got my slick on his cock, or that my thighs are wet with a mixture of his arousal and

mine. That I almost went all the way with him. That I'm so glad I didn't.

"Let's not worry about that." Hyt reaches out to ruffle my hair with his hand, and I frown. *The hell is this?* It's platonic, damn near patronizing. I slap him away, and his smile wilts at the edges. "When you arrive in Dome, for your honeymoon. That's when we'll do this. Hop on Kidd's ship. Take you back to Earth. He can go there freely; I don't have that luxury."

"I don't *want* to go back to Earth," I tell him, and he lets his head hang back, eyes closing in frustration. "I thought that since I was mated, I can't go back?"

"I thought you could tell that I'm not a huge fan of rules?" he tells me as he drops his chin back down. He's still pink. I don't know what that means. I can't trust him either. I can't trust anyone but Jane and Abraxas.

"I want to live somewhere with Abraxas." I shake the fur for emphasis and Hyt sighs heavily.

"Then ... we'll have to find a way to hide you until Rurik starves to death. Once he's dead, his parents might not waste the energy to seek you out. They might just wait for the next prince to find his mate. By the way, take that *might* very seriously. Because there's also a chance they'll hunt you for the rest of your life."

It's so callous, so cold and cruel, and ... fuck, I hate it. I hate all my choices, and I hate the decisions that I have to make. Because nobody is going to make them for me. I have to do this.

"I'm assuming that Dome is another space station?" I ask, and Hyt shakes his head.

"It's a planet. It's like ... the Vestalis version of Venice. Or Paris. Think old-world European city. Meet me in the Cosmic Chapel. You'll know it when you see it, and you should have free access to come and go from there without the prince as an escort. No guards either."

"You know *way* more than just a little about humans, huh?" I narrow my eyes on him, and he shrugs.

"Spend a lot of time rescuing them, even more time listening to my sister, and the rest of the time fantasizing about sex with human women like you." Bam. There it is. His six irises lock onto me, and I clutch that fur even harder, digging my fingernails into it. "You'll arrive at Dome in four days." He brings four tentacles forward for emphasis. "I'll find you on the last day of the wedding, and get you on a transport. *The Korol* will be in orbit, so we'll



just jet off in a different direction. It's a powerful ship, but it's big, and it moves slow."

I absorb that information. In a few short days, I'll be married to Rurik. I'll have mated with Rurik. My eggs ... even if one is already fertilized ... they'll ... they ...

"What am I supposed to do about the wedding?" I plead, and Hyt looks on with a sympathy and understanding that I've only seen thus far from Abraxas. He knows how hard this is. "About the *mating*. I don't want to have my eggs corrupted." Since Hyt's expression is not one of hopefulness, I forge on. I need him to hear this. I look him dead in the eyes. "No matter what happens, I need someone to come for me. I *will* be there. No-holds-barred. I would rather *die* than live the rest of my life as a glorified prisoner on that ship. If I'm not there, I'm captive or dead."

"Understood." Hyt exhales as his pet lands on the top of my head. "I—" He stops talking and glances over his shoulder in time to see one of the elevator doors open.

And there's Rurik. He's in a *fury*. His wings are spread, his lips are curled back from his teeth, and he strides across that space station floor like he's going to kill Officer Hyt.

I do the only thing I know to do and rub the fur quickly all over my body. My face, my arms, my belly. I coat myself in Abraxas' scent, and I make a stand. If I'm smelling Abraxas then I'm not smelling Rurik, and he can't ensorcell me with pheromones.

Rurik comes right up to me, but Hyt steps between us, and I can't decide if that's a very good idea or a very bad idea. It's nothing in-between.

"*Move, Falopex,*" the prince snarls, and I can hear his real words underneath, the hiss and whisper of a moth. "This female is my mate. My intended wife. The future queen of the Noctuida."

"This woman is an innocent. Manipulated by the black market trade. Manipulated by you. She belongs on *Earth*." Hyt gets right up in Rurik's face, his tentacle tails sweeping the floor to collect my discarded underwear. My garter belt and thigh-high tights remain in place. The prince sees, his nostrils flare, his gaze moves back to Hyt's face.

"You *dare* lay your filthy Sucker Tails on my mate?" Rurik is *pissed*. For a second there, I feel bad, like I betrayed him. Then I remember that he kidnapped me against my will, and I owe him *nothing*. But ... but ... I'm so

confused. “I could kill you right now and be well within my rights. My parents would laud the move. They’d celebrate your death. They may very well blow Yaoh to smithereens.”

Not an empty threat. Holy shit. That’s *not* an empty fucking threat.

“Yeah? Then try me.” Hyt smirks as I step up beside him. “I’d welcome the challenge. Then, I can kill you in self-defense. And you know what? *Everyone* would celebrate because *everyone* thinks the Vestalis are filthy parasites. You’re expendable, Your Majesty. Your parents don’t give a fuck if you or one of your other hundred-plus brothers takes the throne. It’s all the same to them.”

The violence in that room escalates. I can feel it in the twitch of Rurik’s gloved hands, in the wave of Hyt’s tails. I step between them and they both pause to look down at me.

“Thank you for stopping,” I tell Officer Hyt, my voice soft and genuine. Not my usual style. It honestly makes me gag. But I’m serious. I want him to know that, so I can’t be a snarky bitch for two seconds here. “And for this.” I hold up the fur for emphasis. “Knowing that he’s okay, that’s important to me.”

Hyt opens his mouth, but only bubbles come out. He tucks my underwear under his belt, leaving a bit of crimson lace to hang over the edge and brush against his skin. The prince *stares* at it, but he says nothing about it.

Yet.

“I have something else to tell you.” Hyt looks guilty as hell, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck and cursing under his breath. Each curse is accompanied by yet more bubbles. His pet lifts up off my head and flits over to him, chirping in frustration. “My friend—the DTF guy—he dropped off some *very* precious cargo with another guy, a more legitimate guy. They’re on their way here ...”

“DTF?” Rurik does his best to puzzle out the word in his translator and ends up shaking his head. He doesn’t understand which is probably for the best. He catches my gaze even though I try to resist, and ugh. It’s like getting hit with a sledgehammer on the forehead. Guilt drowns me, and I force myself to look away. *I just cheated on my soulmate*. That’s what it feels like. It’s true, too, but ... not this soulmate. Rurik *isn’t* my soulmate. “What does this delivery have to do with the future queen?”

“Because ...” Hyt turns fully to look at me, hands still on his hips. I wish

he wouldn't do that. When he puts his hands there, it draws my eyes to the low dip of his belt and the muscles of his lower abdomen. *Nice and flat. Hot pink and blush-white.* The color takes some getting used to, but it'd be hard for anything to distract from such perfection. He snaps his fingers, and my eyes flit up to his face. There's a smile on his mouth that's a little too playful for comfort. "I'm expecting the delivery to arrive tomorrow night. Let me just check the cargo manifest ... Ah! One pissed-off Aspis male."

My knees buckle, but it isn't Hyt who catches me. It's Rurik. He steps around his rival and catches me easily in one arm. I still can't look at him. I don't want to face the music for what I've done. *Screw him! I don't owe him anything!* But no matter how much I tell myself that, it doesn't ring true.

Not even after what Jane said. Or what Hyt said. Somehow, none of that matters. *Isn't that more proof that the guy is full of shit?* It should be. But again, it's not.

Rurik gets me on my feet as Hyt waits beside us, an ice-cold frown on his mouth that reminds me of the one I saw when I told him he was bad at his job.

"Abraxas is coming *here*?" I ask, unable to believe what I'm hearing. But ... my mate is a—what did Hyt call me? a planet-dweller?—so how can he be here? Aspis don't do space travel. They're wild and free and aggressive and *huge*.

"Yep." Hyt sounds frustrated, but he just lifts up a hand so that his pet can settle into his palm. "An unfortunate fact for those of us who would rather not die." He laughs at that, but there's a bitterness in the sound that I refuse to acknowledge.

"He cannot come here." Rurik looks like he's about to have a heart attack. Does he even have a heart? I'm not asking because of his personality, but more out of simple curiosity. He's a fuckin' alien prince. "If my parents discover that your former mate is onboard the World Station—"

"He is *not* my former mate." I scowl at Rurik. "He's my *only* mate."

Rurik spins to me, grabbing me by my upper arms in his gloved hands. The way he stares at me, it's nothing less than desperately imploring.

"Why can't you trust me, princess? *Look at me.*" I do. I'm swallowed whole by his gaze. All I want to do is curl up in his arms. I grit my teeth. "I promised that I would bring the Aspis male for you. Did I not thoroughly explain the danger we are all in?"

“First off, I don’t trust you because I don’t know you!” I’m yelling. Again. Can’t seem to stop. I yank myself from Rurik’s grip, still clutching the pungent fur. “Trust is built on actions. What have you done for me so far? You came to my den. You held me down. Put me to sleep. Kidnapped me. Looked inside my vagina while I was passed out and treated me like a lab experiment. Threatened me. Bossed me around. *You* tell me why I should trust you.”

Rurik’s wings ruffle in distress, and while I truly don’t believe it’s intentional, he drenches the air with his scent. It’s heavy and thick and male and delicious. I force my body’s cravings aside.

“Besides, I didn’t know Abraxas was coming until just now.” I sigh and close my eyes. I’m so fucking excited to see him, but I’m terrified, too. I know this is a bad idea. I don’t want my mate to get hurt. I don’t want him to risk his life just to see me. I already know that even if he’s coming here, I can’t leave with him.

When *The Korol* leaves the World Station, I have to be on it.

I believe Rurik when he says that Abraxas can’t go anywhere near that ship until he’s king. Even then, I ... Well, one step at a time. Maybe I won’t ever have to see him become king because I’ll run away, and he’ll be dead, and I’ll be free ... I look into his eyes on purpose this time. He stares back at me.

*I want to trust you*, I think, wondering if he can hear my thoughts. It almost feels like he should be able to. *But I can’t. But I want to. But ... I can’t let you die, can I?* I know then that I won’t be able to do that to him. My heart clenches, and I turn away to look at the Falopex officer that I nearly slept with.

“I didn’t know he was coming until about five minutes ago,” Hyt grumbles from behind the prince. “My DTF friend didn’t inform me of this until *after* the Aspis male bullied him into it. He’s on some random cargo ship.” He gestures at the broken tablet on the floor, like that’s where he saw the communication. “What do you want to do? I’m assuming you’d like to see him?”

If I were anyone else, I could hop on that transport ship with Abraxas and run.

But I’m not.

I’m the prince’s mate.

Rurik removes his glove and places his bare hand on the side of my neck.

“Look at me.”

“I *am* looking at you,” I whisper, but I know what he means. I relax under his touch. I *like* his touch.

“I will do this for you.” He curls his lip in frustration. “Even though I know that you hate me, that you will never love me, but I want to show you that I trust *you*.” He leans down and puts his mouth near to mine. “We *cannot* bring him on the ship while my father is king or he will be dead in an instant. He will not even make it past the first doorway. You will die. I will die. Officer Hyt will die.”

I hear Hyt groaning from behind him, but my eyes are all for Rurik right now.

“You’ve said as much,” I mumble, but I’m still listening.

“If he is seen here, our fate is much the same. We must keep this secret. I will give you one night to say goodbye to him.” My eyes fill with tears that Rurik gently sweeps away with his thumbs, one gloved, one bare. “When you are my queen, you will want for nothing.” He doesn’t kiss me even though it feels like he should. *Even though I want him to*. He stands up straight instead, studying my expression. “But you *must* do all of the rituals. You *must* mate me. And you must participate until I am king.” He blinks at me, his antennae swinging back until they clack together with the snap of bone, like folded rabbit ears again. “Please promise that you will.”

“I promise.” I don’t even have to think about it. And I’m serious.

The way Hyt is looking at me, a bit of regret mixed with gentle understanding, I know he can tell.

I’m telling the truth.

“We will stay in the Embassy tonight. Tomorrow, you will send for me, and we will make arrangements for Her Imperial Majesty.” Rurik is issuing orders like he’s already king, staring at Hyt like he expects to be obeyed.

Hyt reaches up to adjust his hat with both hands, tentacle tails pulled back, my underwear hanging conspicuously from his belt. The red lace looks absolutely obscene against his muscular belly. He smiles wickedly, eyes crinkling with wry amusement.

“I’m off to the brothel for some fun.” He flashes blue, his grin growing even wider.

I just stare back at him.

*Is he ... lying about going to the brothel? Is he telling the truth?*

I tell myself it's a bullet dodged; I would *never* fall for a man who'd visit a brothel.

"But if I have some free time tomorrow, I'll see what I can do." Hyt turns and takes off with his pet whizzing along behind him, a trail of bubbles in their wake. He whistles as he goes. The tune cuts off with the elevator door and then he's gone.

I'm alone with Rurik.

"Can I—" I begin, but he cuts me off by lifting his gloved palm in my direction.

"No sooner have I had time to process what happened between us in the bathtub than you have replaced the memory with another man. I will not see you again tonight." He looks back at me with disgust. "Come with me."

"Do you need to eat?" I ask him, and he knows exactly what I mean. But he doesn't respond. He ignores me, even when we're in the elevator. Even when I cling to him in sheer terror over the view outside. Even when the doors open and I'm struck dumb by the lavishly appointed room ahead of me. Octagonal, rich wood paneling, red crystal chandeliers. And windows.

There are windows on the floor, on the ceiling, on all of the rounded walls. I realize suddenly that we're in the center of the space station. Dead center. Middle of everything. I turn to my right, and I see the mass of Yaoh glowing, gasses swirling through the atmosphere.

I'm mesmerized by its beauty, and then I'm suddenly lying in a bed.

I catch a brief glimpse of the prince's wings swirling behind him as he exits the room and the door slams shut behind him.



## *Hyt*

“Shit, I can’t believe I did that.” I’m growling as I storm down the hallway, tearing my hat off my head with one hand and ruffling my hair with one of my tentacles. My companion flits around me, chattering wildly about that ridiculous human girl. I don’t need her. Sure, I’m attracted to humans, but couldn’t I easily find another girl to sidle up to? *My mating tentacles came out. I didn’t even want them out. They just fuckin’ did it. May the Dead Kings watch over my stupid ass. All these years of blind dates and awkward family set-ups, and my body wanted her?* “Would you stop?”

I whirl on my companion, but he’s determined to get in my face. I swat him away, ignoring the nonsensical sounds that escape his beak. No translator ever created has been able to understand a companion. Doesn’t matter. I know what he means regardless. I know what he wants. See why I nicknamed him Shithead?

“There isn’t a worse potential mate in all of the Noctuida.” I’m incensed now, on my own behalf. My body betrayed me by releasing a part of my cock that should only emerge for my future wife. Falopex aren’t like Vestalis; we don’t fall madly in love after staring at someone for three seconds. But we can only pick one person to mate with. Just one. Once we’re mated, we share our very life force with that person. *I was kissing her, too. What if I’d given*

*her my pearl by accident?*

Fuck.

I have to choose carefully.

Combining my life force with a girl who's already mated to an Aspis? Madly in love with an Aspis apparently. A girl who's all set to be the next queen. *I'm a moron. I am stupid as sand. My cock is going to get me killed.*

"Oh, enough of your shit." I wave my companion away and turn, tucking my hat back on my head. I slap my palm on a screen beside another door and walk through without stopping, exiting the classified area I was in for one of the main thoroughfares on the World Station.

Innumerable species stream by me, some of them palatable, others ... not. Everyone looks at me, even if it's just in passing. Not only are the Falopex the Noctuidan police force, but we're usually naked or close to it. Believe it or not, I'm the *modest* one in the family.

"Alright. Back to it." I lift my hat and then wave it around my head. Mostly, I'm sure they're staring at me because Falopex are popular in porn. Everybody loves a good Falopex fuck. *Except for that human.* The thought hits me like a punch to the stomach, and I frown.

That's what finally gets the crowd moving again, flowing in and out of various shops along either side of the hallway. Clothing shops. Snack carts. Pheromone shops for, well, they're wearable scents. Hard liquor. A matchmaking office.

A brothel.

I smile because that's exactly where I'm headed.

*That human ... she thanked me for stopping us at the crucial moment.* I hit my face with my tentacles on either cheek, pulling my suckers off with a pop. This is what Eve did when she was upset, slapped herself. I love mimicking humans. I find them to be bright, empathetic, and daring creatures. They've intrigued me for as long as I can remember.

*But oh boy, what my mother would do if I brought a human home as a wife*

...

I sweep up to the entrance, a soothing sea blue, a sweet smile on my face, and I knock several times. An attendant answers the door, and I nearly choke when I see that it's another Falopex. She's a pale, sweet pink color, nine-tailed as always, grinning back at me with sharp teeth. Her pheromone bubbles explode around her, and she giggles.



*Ah, Dead Kings, anything but a Falopex female.*

“Officer, what brings you this way?” One of her tentacles reaches for one of mine, and I draw back before remembering what I came here for. *Damn it, that Eve girl has screwed up my entire day. Not only is she off-limits, she insulted me.* Hah. As if she knows what it’s like to be a Falopex who saves creatures that nobody else cares about. What a fuckin’ thankless job.

I lean in, one arm propped on the doorframe, my other hand reaching out, knuckles skimming the female’s jaw.

*Whelp. I made a huge mistake today.* Whether that mistake was letting an engaged, mated human captive rub her slickness all over my cock or ... stopping her from impaling herself on it, I have no idea. *If I’d given her my pearl while we were kissing, that would’ve been the end of it. I would’ve had myself a little Earthling as a wife.* And with my mating tentacles all riled up? I was about *this* close.

I almost choke.

If I wanted, I could fuck a girl—any adult female from any compatible species—and we wouldn’t bond. But I can’t kiss girls. Because my kiss could come with my pearl; it’s a risk I can’t take. That pearl holds my life force inside of it. If I give it to the wrong female, and she doesn’t give it back, it’s ... I just fuckin’ can’t with myself.

I could’ve found myself with a wife today ... or ended up dead if Eve chose to steal my pearl.

“Well, little lady,” I drawl, letting sex and sugar drip from my lips. Falopex are just built for sex. What can I say? I don’t make the rules. “I was just wonderin’ if I might join you for the evening. I do understand that this is your personal residence. I do understand that you are a valuable citizen of the Noctuida and a faithful follower of the Imperial Court.” I let out a husky laugh, using my tentacles to pull my hat off my head and tuck it against my chest. This is where I smirk and lean back in with a wink. “I would like you to know that I’m interested in paying you for mating privileges.”

“Oh, yes, Officer Hieronymus,” she schmoozes, the fins on either side of her ears perking up with excitement. “I’ve always prayed to the Dead Kings that you might come and see me.” She steps out of the way, dressed in a silken robe with nothing underneath. Not unusual, that. Most Falopex prefer to be naked, and this one’s a workin’ girl. I’m surprised she even has the robe on.

She thinks I'm telling the truth because that's what Falopex do. We let everyone know our truth color, and we stick to it. We never lie. Liars are *executed* on my home planet. So this girl? She believes every stupid, idiotic thing to come out of my mouth. Why wouldn't she? As I said, Falopex never lie.

Except me.

I am a consummate liar.

I'm lying right now.

I lie when I'm pink; I lie when I'm blue.

That cute little human girl will never be able to figure out whatever logic puzzles she's playing at in her head. I'm a liar and a disappointment, someone cast off to the most worthless, useless post in the whole of the Noctuida, forced to waste my life away on butt-fuck-nowhere Jungryuk. By my own dad. Imagine the bitterness and the resentment that might build up.

The thought is enough to make me laugh as I swing the assault rifle over my shoulder with a flick of one tentacle. The others grab onto the arsenal that I strapped to my back after I left Eve and the prince. Nine tails holding nine pistols.

"Alright, you stupid fucks. Where is he?"

A dozen different species of male dart up from the tables, knocking over drinks and games and hookers. When I start shooting people, I know exactly which targets to hit. Gunpowder fills the air as I resist the urge to use my assault rifle. I don't need that much firepower just now, and I'd rather not set off any of the World Station alarms. This isn't exactly police-sanctioned business.

When the males all lie bleeding on the floor, I lower my tails and my weapons. I look first from the Falopex female that answered the door, and then over to the others as they stand up from the floor where they'd tumbled.

"Get out." I use the assault rifle to gesture, and that startles them all enough that they take off running. When my sister was only thirteen, she was stolen from Earth and trafficked to a brothel just like this.

I do not patronize brothels; I do not spare johns.

I *do* rescue human beings. Not only is my sister one, but she's helped me appreciate the minds and hearts of humans. What I discovered long after that, when I hit sexual maturity, was that the human women I was rescuing were attractive to me. But I've never felt right approaching one. They're scared,

traumatized. Most just want to return to Earth.

But ... Eve is different.

She doesn't feel like a victim.

She feels like a *challenge*.

I walk through puddles of blood in my boots, whistling a song. It's one that my father taught me when I was little. I can't remember the words that go with it.

I squat down at the side of a large glass tube, sloppily covered with a cloth that's soaking wet with spilled liquor and blood. I lift the edge of it to peer underneath. There's a human man suspended in a thick hot pink goo. *Ah. Okay. A black market Cartian medical transport.* This is the same device that cyborg girl—Zero—would've had her brain strapped into. My father wanted me to look into that issue—since there are virtually zero Cartians left—but I told him all looked well.

That was a lie.

I just thought the Cartian girl would make a good bodyguard for Eve.

"Ahh, there you are." I smile as I reach out with a tentacle and tap on the glass. The man turns his head toward me, eyes wide behind the translucent goo. He's wearing glasses, hands cupped over his bare genitals. Nothin' I haven't seen before.

Males don't interest me, but you know what does? Checking out human males to see if I could compete. I always can. I grin a little wider as I stand up, turning away from the oversized tube and using my tails to heft it up off the ground.

*This is the last of 'em.* The last of the kidnapped humans in this batch. I'm sure there's already another group down at that sleazy stall with those sleazy twins. *Next time I see 'em, they're both dead.* I will keep on killing those fuckers until I get it right.

Humans ... pets, meat, or mates.

What a shitstorm.

I carry the tube with me into the hall, leaving bloody prints as I head back in the direction of the restricted area. Within a minute or two, other Falopex will swarm the area, but at that point, I'll be long gone, they'll investigate, and they'll realize that even if I'm a liar, they have no reason to pursue me.

Might not be sanctioned work, but it's a job well-done.

I take the human back to my ship and prepare myself for a long night of

trying to figure out how to open this tube. Cartesian tech is great, but it can be weird as hell.

“No worries, little human male.” I pat the glass wall of the tube. “I’ll get you out of there.” I frown. “Eventually.” The man is clawing at the glass and mouthing words I can’t hear.

*Trust me, my friend, the sooner I get you out of there the better.*

I’d love another session in my room with my tentacle wrapped around my dick, my mind wrapped around Eve. *I’d love it even more if she was the one wrapped around me.*

“Ah, shit.” I take my hat off and sit down hard on the length of the glass tube. Shouda figured before I sat down that the poor human male is getting a face full of my ass. *One day I might actually wear pants. Wouldn’t that set my mother into a frenzy?* “I’m still into that stupid girl, and for what?” I scoot a bit to the side so I can look down at poor Connor. He just stares blankly back at me. “For a broken heart, that’s what.”

*I will quench this weird obsession.*

I might be willing to rescue her, but I don’t want that girl for anything beyond that. She’s too dangerous. She’s taken. She’s not worth it.

Told ya I’m a liar.



## *Eve*

*Where am I?* My eyelids feel heavy as I force them open, and my entire body is sluggish and heavy. I assume it has something to do with the World Station and my aversion to space in general. Getting up is a chore, but ... my room certainly isn't.

Small but cozy, my digs are outfitted with a fireplace sporting red flames, thick fabric panels on the walls that cover up the exterior windows, a double-sized bed with a carved headboard. The image depicted is of ... a Vestalis male railin' a female Falopex? Oh come on.

I storm over to one of the doors in the room—there are two—but it doesn't open. I try the other door, righteous fury rolling over me. This door opens, letting me into ... a rainforest? I'm standing in a hot, humid room filled with plants. Large green leaves brush against my face as I stumble into it, realizing that there are white tiles on the floor, square pools filled with water and ... Rurik.

He's entirely nude, collecting dew off the surface of a large leaf and using his hands to reach up and rub at his horns. Antennae. Gah. I know that's what they are, but they look like horns and horns are so much sexier than *antennae* that I ... He's got his head thrown back, eyes closed, hands rapidly jerking those horn-antennae and ruffling the black filaments on the undersides.

*That looks sexual.*

It must be, too, because he's moaning unashamedly. I hear the sound of a man in ecstasy, but I also hear the alien things, too. I hear sultry, husky whispers spilling over his plush mouth. He bites his lower lip hard enough to make it bleed, and when he lets go, swiping his tongue across it, he leaves a smear of bloody lace.

My body reacts to what I'm seeing, and his body ... reacts to mine.

He notices me, muscles tensing, wings shifting.

I can't see his front—damn it—but his wings are spread enough that I can see his perfect ass. Looks pretty human to me. Good deal seeing as I'm an 'ass girl'. Just above those sculpted alabaster cheeks, there's a design. It's situated at the base of his spine, this pretty red fan of blood lace that pulses and throbs like a heartbeat.

I drop my attention to his feet to see that he has no toes. His feet are shaped like a human's, but they come to more of a point where a big toe would be. A single claw adorns the tip, red and shiny and sharp.

Also, he's covered in markings. Beautiful black markings on his pale skin that look a bit like tattoos. They swirl up from his calves to his thighs, skip over that beautiful ass, and then decorate the skin of his back around his wings. At least I can finally see where they attach. There are two sets, one set connected between his shoulder blades, the other in the dead center of his back. *I'd love to take a look at his jackets, see how he gets them on with his wings.*

"You put me in a room with a Falopex on the headboard," I say this like it's an accusation. Really, I deserve that. I deserve more than that. I ... Officer Hyt is ... I don't even know what to think.

"It was not intentional, my princess." Rurik turns away from me, dropping his hands from his feelers. *He doesn't want me to see what he's doing. He doesn't want me to know he's touching himself.* "It was an unfortunate coincidence that the source of your infidelity adorned the embassy's guest suite."

"Are they caterpillars?" I can't resist asking any longer. I know that it sounds like the question comes out of left field, but it's been bothering me since yesterday. "Vestalis young. Are they caterpillars?"

I almost throw up waiting for the answer, standing there in that hot room with sweat dripping down my spine, wearing a lace-trimmed 1940s dress,

thigh-highs, and no underwear. Rurik sighs and moves over to a nearby bench, collecting a robe with slits down the back. He tosses the red silk over his shoulders and the slits fall around his wings. He belts the robe in the front, but as he moves to turn around, I catch glimpses of pearly white ass cheeks in the fabric slits.

He walks right up to me and pauses, holding onto the belt at his waist, gaze imperious and distant.

It doesn't last.

Because we're so hot for each other that he can't help himself. He takes another step forward and I take one back. I hit the edge of another bench and end up sitting down hard. Rurik stays where he is, standing above me, staring down.

"What did that miserable Falopex tell you?" he demands, dark eyes sweeping my body and rejecting it in one fell swoop. Ouch.

"That all Vestalis are male, that I'll never get to have a daughter, that I'll only ever have sons." Saying it out loud right now makes it so real. *All* of my future children will be Vestalis. Vestalis males, to be precise. I don't want that. I almost touch a hand to my stomach, but I resist. "But he didn't tell me if they were fucking caterpillars or something."

I think about moths back on earth, and I shudder.

"Why would they be caterpillars?" he asks, genuinely confused by my question. "They are Vestalis infants." He narrows his eyes at me, feelers flattening against the sides of his head. After studying me for a moment longer, he sighs. "Come. I will show you."

He leads me back into the room, snatches a tablet off the desk, and powers it on. Ten seconds or less and he's got a series of images pulled up. He hands the tablet to me, and I see photos of babies. Not human babies, but babies.

They have big, dark eyes, pink pouty mouths, and small feelers. They also look a tad ... fuzzy? More than that. Big fuzzy around the neck and shoulders, and lightly furred the rest of the way. Well. Could be worse, I guess. I don't see any wings on the babies either.

I look up and hand the tablet back.

He takes it and tosses it onto the desk like he's angry.

He's very pretty though, with that red silk robe trailing on the floor, white wings tucked close behind him, dark eyes on the fireplace and not my face. It's his turn to avoid looking at me, and it annoys me when it's the other way

around.

“Your handmaiden was supposed to tell you all of this.” He puts his hands on his hips, and it’s oh-so-human. Until his antennae lift straight up in frustration before flaring out to either side of his head in their ‘horn shape’. He ruffles his wings, spreading the top set just enough that he’s framed in virginal white. “I should not have to explain it.” He’s gritting his teeth now. “I will send that girl to a distant moon and blow it up.”

I look at him, and even if I know what his parents are capable of, I’m already certain that Rurik isn’t the same. *This guy can’t die. He’d be so much better for the Noctuida. Sure, he’s a bit of a pompous dick, but he has a kind heart or ... a kind ... alien organ.* I don’t think about his other alien organ, the one I haven’t seen yet. I’d like to at least *look* at it before the wedding night.

My stomach churns and I swallow. Avril assured me that his penis would meld to the shape of my body, that it’d be literally perfect. Sounds like another dumb-dumb alien romance plot to me, but ... I hope it’s true. No matter what route I take, I can’t get out of having sex with this guy.

*Losing all my eggs to him. All of my eggs. Having only Vestalis male babies.*

The next question just pops out of me.

“Do they make cocoons?” I clarify, and he lifts his lip in a scowl, sweeping past me and heading for the door that wouldn’t open before. It opens now, and I follow him out. “It’s a legitimate question!”

Rurik stops walking at my shout and glances over his shoulder with his lip curled. I look around to see that I’m in a large sitting room of some sort with leather couches, another fireplace, and plush rugs on the floor. It’s very ... human. Which makes me suspicious.

“Vestalis are not insects.” He grits his teeth as he turns around to face me. “We are not parasites.”

There’s that word again. I’ve thrown it around myself. Jane said. Hyt said. Rurik sounds salty about it.

“You and I are destined. Foretold by the Stars.” He states this as fact and while I’d love to roll my eyes, I can’t. Because it feels true.

“You’re just mimicking my ... bio signatures.” I think that was the right word.

Rurik simply stares at me.



“Get out.” He lifts a hand and points back in the direction of the bedroom. “*Leave.*” He grinds this last part out between his vampire teeth, and what choice do I have? His temper dictates that I move *now*.

Only ... I don't want to.

I cross my arms in defiance and lift my chin.

“We should probably sit down and have a rational—” I squeal like a bitch when he strides forward and snatches me up, tossing me over his shoulder like a sack. My cheek slams into his wing, and holy hell, it's so soft and fuzzy. I want to pet it. I want to drape it over my body like a weighted blanket. I want to cuddle it and breathe in cardamom and honey and cinnamon and allspice.

My cute little dress rides up as Rurik marches back in the direction of the bedroom ... and pauses.

I'm not wearing panties, just thigh-highs and a garter belt. My bare cunt is exposed and framed with lace. Plump and hot and ready to be fucked by a moth prince. *Can he smell my arousal the way Abraxas can? I bet he's able to. I bet—*

I gasp as one of Rurik's feelers swings forward, brushing over my pussy and my butt cheeks. He exhales sharply, and then he reaches up a hand and he *spansks* me. It's a nice, hard crack that leaves me shivering and wriggling. And then I get another, right over my wet, swollen pussy.

“Rurik ...” I start, my voice a pitiful sound. I hate that he can obliterate my rational brain with his smell, his gaze. All I want is to be present and conscious in the choices I make. I don't understand the fated mates stuff or the insta-love stuff. I ... I want to like him for who he is, not for *what* he is.

“No. I will not be used in this manner. If you had not run into the arms of another male, I might've given you what you wanted. Not now.”

He continues walking, tossing my aching body onto the bed, and then he turns and leaves like the room is on fire.

The door slides shut behind him, and I realize that I've just made everything worse.

I'm pacing a rut in the carpet when the bedroom door opens again and Avril and Zero enter the room. The door whooshes shut behind them, even faster than usual. Just before it snaps closed, I catch a glimpse of Rurik with his hand on a wall panel, glaring at me.

Crap.

“He hates me now,” I declare as Avril takes in my clothes with confusion coloring her expression. I look down and remember that I’m wearing the same dress as yesterday. With my thigh-highs still on. At least she can’t tell that I’m not wearing panties.

“What ... happened yesterday?” She has that full face of makeup on again, glittering red lipstick, black-and-white face paint, like she’s on her way to a vampire cosplay masquerade ball. The black dress with the red lace she’s wearing doesn’t detract from the aesthetic. “If you’re still wearing that dress, it can’t be anything good. I gave you bright red underwear for a reason. The prince was supposed to see it.”

I turn away and pretend to fiddle with a book on the shelf. There are *actual* physical books in here. But when I open the cover, there’s glowing red ink on the pages in a foreign language. I snap it shut and put it right back where it came from.

*Right. The prince was supposed to see it, but Officer Hyt saw it instead. Then he hung it off his belt like a taunt or a trophy and told me he was going to a brothel of all places? How dare that man call himself a cop. He has humans to rescue, and he’s out philandering? Where the fuck is Connor?*

But he’s one of the reasons that Abraxas is coming here.

Tonight.

My pulse quickens, and I fist a hand in the front of my dress.

I have *never* wanted anything the way I want to see Abraxas. Not even to go home. Not even to see Jane. It’s a new, tender type of longing that I’ve never experienced before. *Ugh. I am lovesick and gross right now. I can’t let anyone else know.*

“Your facial expression indicates romantic interest, but it does not indicate which man you are interested in.” Zero walks right up to me and smirks. “The Aspis male? The Vestalis prince? Or the handsome Falopex officer? Falopex are renowned for their skills in bed. They are highly sexual and absurdly desired by many.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Avril holds up two hands, palms out. “You fucked the *Falopex*?” She’s staring at me like I’m insane. I am. I know. Now that the moment’s passed, I can hardly understand how or why I did it. Cheated on Abraxas. Cheated on ... is it possible to cheat on someone that’s forcing me into a relationship that I didn’t ask for? I don’t even know. “Are you crazy?! I told Officer Hyt that I didn’t want to go home! My *life* is on the line here.”

She's practically snarling at me as Zero delicately holds a hand over her rosebud mouth and chuckles. I notice that she's still not wearing shoes. Her toenails are painted a bright pink, same as her fingernails.

I ignore Avril. There's no excuse. Truly, I have nothing to say.

"You got a mani-pedi yesterday?" I ask Zero, completely baffled. "You were supposed to pound some alien cock."

"I did pound alien cock," she replies, entirely deadpan. Her smirk edges up on one side, and I almost like her for about three seconds there. "But apparently not as much as you did."

"We didn't *actually* have sex." It sounds like a dumb-dumb excuse even to me. Rubbing my naked, wet pussy along a guy's shaft is about as sex as sex gets.

"What does that even mean? God, I can't believe I put my eggs in your basket." Avril points an accusing finger at me, but she's just said a new trigger word of mine, and I'm furious, too. "How dare you ride a Falopex's cock when our majestic Imperial Prince is salivating after you!"

My mouth drops open as Zero chuckles cutely in the corner. But then she stops suddenly, red eyes flashing, and her head turns sharply and inhumanly to one side, like she's on the lookout for threats.

"I didn't ride his cock!" I yell back at Avril. "I just rubbed against it a little!"

The door opens again and Rurik appears, mouth curled in fury. Officer Hyt is right behind him, pushing his hat over his eyes while smirking from beneath the brim. I see that my underwear are still attached to his belt. My mouth twitches, and I have to hold back a hysterical laugh.

Avril notices right away and whips a glare at me. It lands; I cringe.

"Your paramour is here." Rurik manages to school his expression into one of cavalier apathy. He tucks his red silk robe more tightly around himself and exits the bedroom for the bathroom.

Hyt tugs on the back side of his hat, causing the front to lift up so he can look at me with his strangely beautiful eyes. My body rebels against my brain at the sight of him. His black belt hanging low, dripping with weapons and leather pouches. The burn scar on his chest does nothing to detract from the wide, muscular perfection of it.

"Mornin' ladies. Or afternoon. Evening if you're from Earth. Night if you're from my hometown on Yaoh." He winks at me and then drops his hat

back into place. His tentacles tuck in as he passes through the doorway, stepping aside and holding out a hand to gesture someone else into the room.

It's Connor.

"Oh my fucking fuck!" Avril races across the room and leaps into his arms. The two of them embrace like old friends, not lovers. "I can't believe you're still alive."

"What about you?" he asks as he holds her back at arm's-length. I notice that he's wearing ... a belt with a loincloth attached and a pair of clear cowboy boots. No water in them this time though. Huh. He doesn't quite pull the look off the way that Hyt does. Poor Connor is thin, but a bit soft and oh-so very pale. I'm shocked to see that he still has his glasses on. "Are you okay?" He looks up before Avril can answer and spots me standing there. "Oh, wow. I did not expect you to live through an arterial bleed like that. Good work."

Avril punches him in the arm playfully.

"Told you I was a field medic for years. You didn't think I could handle something like that?"

"You found him," I whisper when Hyt saunters over to stand beside me, thumbs tucked under his belt. He glances over at me, but I try not to look back. I would *love* to know why he's still wearing my underwear like a trophy, but I refuse to ask. "I thought you were off to the brothel last night." It's almost an accusation.

"Oh-ho," he says, poking me in the shoulder with a tentacle. His sucker sticks and releases with a sharp smacking sound. "Were you jealous, Earthling? I'm not the one who's engaged. And mated. At the same time, no less."

I turn to him finally, eyes narrowed as Avril and Connor chatter happily behind me. I hear snippets of conversation—*trapped in hot pink goo for days* stands out as a highlight to my half-listening ears.

"A Cartian medical transport?" Zero lunges forward and latches onto Connor's arm. "Tell me more!"

She might be a bitch, but I feel sorry for her. I can't even imagine how horrible it would be to survive for so long with nobody and nothing only to find out that your entire planet, your entire species, is gone. I refocus on Hyt to see that he's studying me. Especially my mouth. My dress. The thigh-highs I haven't taken off. Can he tell just by looking that my ass is still stinging

from Rurik's little spank?

I exhale as one of his tentacles comes up to tease a loose strand of my hair.

"I found your friend here in a brothel. I don't go to brothels to fuck." He leans in toward me, lifting up a hand to his mouth to whisper. "Got no need to. Look at me. I'm what we in the Noctuida like to call *intergalactic hot*. Everybody and everything wants to fuck me." He crosses two of his tentacle tails over his chest, rather than his arms. He uses one of his hands to pinch my cheek, and I slap him away.

"You have my underwear hanging off your belt," I hiss and he looks down like he didn't realize. He did. The belt he's wearing is different than yesterday's. *What a fucking ham*. That's what he is. A goddamn ham.

"Sorry, darlin', but finders keepers. These are my underwear now." He pats them with a tentacle and then looks up at me with another smirk building on his lips. "If you want them back, you'll have to give me something else in return."

His hat lifts up of its own accord and his pet comes swirling out, dancing around me with its tiny tentacles fluttering. It chirps happily, gives me a tiny-beak kiss on the cheek, and then sits on my head.

"Does he do this with everybody?" I ask, pointing at the creature as Hyt scowls.

"No, he doesn't. You're being rude right now, Shithead." He points at the creature, and it screams back at him. Doesn't move either. It has no intention of leaving apparently. "*Get over here*," Hyt growls, but the creature just flits up and dances mockingly around me, leaving a trail of bubbles.

I pause to look over at the three confused people staring back at me.

Zero lifts a finger to point at me.

"It's chosen you," she whispers, and then her face brightens with cruel delight. "Oh, this is priceless! You're triple-mated."

"Triple-what?" I ask, blinking rapidly back at her. "What the fuck are you talking about? I have one mate! One. Just one." I hold up a finger for emphasis and the tiny octopus floats down to kiss my fingertip.

"Chosen her?" Avril asks in alarm, looking past Connor to the cyborg bitch with the chip on her shoulder. I need to stop feeling sorry for people who don't have my best interests at heart. "What does that even mean?"

"It means," Connor begins, adjusting his glasses with a sharp sniff. "That the Falopex male wants to marry the human girl and make her his wife."

Hyt offers a strangled laugh at that and then points a hand back at Connor. Now Zero and Hyt both are pointing across the room.

“You shut your silly human mouth, you ungrateful shit. I risked my life to save your ass!”

“Am I wrong?” Connor asks with a slight smirk. Ah. So he isn’t as nice as he looks. “I just spent weeks and weeks with various Falopex. From what I’m to understand, you’re gifted a companion from birth. And the companion’s job is to keep you on a straight and narrow path. If the companion likes someone, they’re a strong competitor for a future husband or wife.”

Err.

Crap.

“What is wrong with you stupid aliens?” I grumble, swatting Hyt’s mini-octopus away from me. “Can’t you just fuck and cheat and marry and date randomly? Why is it always some sort of fate-intervention perma-mating deal?”

“Human woman, don’t you flatter yourself,” Hyt snaps, trying to catch his pet in his hat. He has to resort to using one of his tentacles to lift the hat up, snagging the tiny creature and then using two more tentacles to yank the hat back onto his head, trapping it. “You were a dalliance and nothing more. I’m not about to get caught up between an Aspis and a Vestalis. Only a crazy male would ever get himself involved in something so stupid.” He growls at me as he leans in, nose to nose with me. “What happened in my office is *never* going to happen again. You hear me?”

“And yet, you specifically came to the Vestalis embassy to give an unmated human man to her as a gift.” Rurik strides out of the bathroom dressed in a red military jacket, black pants, black boots. His expression is one of imperturbability.

*You can’t hide from me*, I think as I catch his attention, and we stare at each other again. I rub my thighs together without meaning to, finding myself slick and unsatisfied from yesterday. I just can’t decide if it was Rurik or Hyt or thoughts of Abraxas that got me this way. *I know you’re pissed, Rurik. Oh, you’re boiling mad, aren’t ya?*

“I ...” Hyt doesn’t even know what to say. He throws up his hands and his tentacles both, letting his head fall back. “Just ... meet me at my cruiser tonight. I’m docked at the office.” He holds up a finger and looks me right in the eye. “Do *not* be late. If my precious cargo decides it wants off my ship to

look for you, we're in big trouble. Aspis and space stations don't mix. He'll scramble all the computers and the AI, and everyone will know he's here."

Hyt takes off quickly, but he doesn't remove the underwear from his belt. On his way past Rurik, the prince reaches out and snags them with his fingers. One of Hyt's tentacles slaps over his wrist and squeezes. The two of them don't look at each other as they struggle in silence for dominance.

"Look what you've done," Avril groans, dragging her hands down her face and smearing her makeup. "Do you *want* to start an intergalactic war, huh? Because that's what'll happen if you don't put a stop to this shit." She turns me, expression deadly serious. "If you were anybody else, I'd probably find this funny. Date a bunch of alien males. Have some fun. But *you cannot do that*. You are the Imperial Princess. There is no other. There will never be another for Rurik. The chances of his brothers finding their mates in the next day? Nil. Not going to happen. The Imperial King and Queen will follow you wherever you go with the Armada. I don't know what you're doing with that Aspis tonight, but keep it discreet and then get your head in the game."

She waltzes right up to Hyt and gets in front of him.

He looks down at her in surprise.

"Give him the underwear." She snaps her fingers near his chest. "Come on now. Give them over. This girl is the Imperial Princess. I'm sorry that you like her. I'm sorry that you're attracted to her. But that's too bad. She isn't yours and she will never be yours."

Hyt smirks, yanks on the lace fabric so that it tears in half, and tucks the scrap back into his belt.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I best be on my way."

He leaves Rurik standing there with half a pair of red lace panties in his grip.

"Get the Imperial Princess dressed. I will take her on a date today." Rurik follows after Hyt and the bedroom door shuts behind him.

"What the hell is going on here?" Connor whispers in confusion, looking at me and then Avril, back to Zero who's laughing so hard that she's clutching her belly. I purse my lips.

"The girl whose life we saved wants us all to die." Avril turns a glare on me that I can't even refute. She isn't wrong. "But she's an intelligent, wonderful woman who knows that as queen of the Noctuida she would have the power to change *everything*." Avril's expression softens, and she tries on

a smile for me. “Do the right thing, Eve. I know you’ve got it in you.”

She orders Connor out of the room, so that I can get dressed.

I sit down hard on the edge of the bed as she gathers my things. Someone has had my clothing sent from the ship to this room. Everything I need is here. Because everything I need is Abraxas. That’s it.

*Just one day, one date, and you’re there. You’re there. You’ve got this, Eve.*

I slap Avril away when she tries to dress me like the bratty girl child in my mother’s favorite movie, *The Secret Garden*.

“I can dress myself.”

“Can you though?” Avril asks, hefting up a length of wide, stretchy ribbon. “Have you ever worn one of these?” She cocks a smirk, one to match the expression on Zero’s face.

Whatever this dress is, I’m not going to like it, am I?





Rurik is facing away from me when I exit the suite to find him waiting in the hallway beside the door. He's purposely avoiding my gaze. Instead of acknowledging me, he's scrolling on a thin tablet that he hands over to another Vestalis male. While Rurik doesn't look at me, the other man does. The guy drops down on one knee and pricks his finger on one of his fangs.

*Doesn't that get painful as shit to do that all day?* I raise a brow.

"It is my greatest pleasure and infinite privilege to serve you, Imperial Princess."

I nod in response, unsure of what I'm supposed to say to this dude.

"Uh, thanks guy."

The man rises to his feet, bows, and retreats down the hall with the tablet.

My royal betrothed glances over at me like he can hardly believe what I just said.

"*Uh, thanks guy?*" he repeats in such a way that I can tell the translator did a good job getting my meaning across. It probably sounded more like *click-click-whisper-hiss* in the Vestalis language. "I know you are unfamiliar with Vestalis customs, but could you not have chosen a more polite greeting? In human culture, a bow would suffice. A handshake. A smile and a *how do you do?* These are not unreasonable suggestions that align with your culture."

I can tell he's angry at me because he's being a dick. He's acting like he doesn't look into my face, spring a painful hard-on, fall madly in love, and

wish we were fucking instead of arguing the inevitable.

I grin at him, and it throws him off course completely.

“How do you do?” I ask, meaning to be sarcastic, to question what decade he got his greetings from. *Thanks guy* works perfectly well where I’m from in the Pacific Northwest. I’m from fucking Portland, Oregon. Pretty much anything goes there.

“I am fine, thank you for asking,” Rurik replies. He seems pleased. Or else ... the edge of his lip quirks up in an arrogant smirk. “If you behave politely for the rest of the day, you might find that you enjoy my company.” He turns fully around to look at me now, his antennae drawn back as far away from me as they can get. That annoys me. Isn’t he supposed to, like, bathe my hair with them? I’ve finally figured out why my hair smells so amazing lately. He’s *depositing* something on me when he sweeps his feelers over my head. And I like it. The smell makes me smile and sleep well. I haven’t had any nightmares about being abducted and waking up in that tent. Or about the brothel. Or about being eaten alive. “Regardless, you *will* go on this date or I will be unable to save you. My parents will find you and hold you captive until the Aspis male comes to rescue you. They’ll make you watch as they eject him into space to die the horrific, lonely death you so fear when you look out the windows.”

Rurik offers a tight, resigned smile to punctuate that threat, and my blood goes cold.

I’m not smiling anymore.

I’m terrified.

When he walks, I follow along behind him.

*I ... may have made a mistake when evaluating this guy.* I was starting to think of him as a pushover and now I’m worried.

I stop walking.

I go to fist my hands in my skirts—a habit of mine—but there are no skirts. I’m wrapped up in a black ribbon that’s essentially a bodycon dress with a giant *bow* on the back of it. *Fucking Avril, that bitch.* She proudly explained to me that she’d given Rurik this design, telling him it was my favorite, that I was wearing something similar the day we met on the rooftop of Tabbi Kat’s apartment building.

“Can I have a new lady-in-waiting?” I ask his strong, wide back. His wings flick slightly, and he stops walking, turning to look over his shoulder at me.

“You hate her as well?” he asks, sounding absurdly relieved. “Yes. I will grant that request. We will have Avril jetted into the nearest sun—under anesthesia of course, so as not to alarm her.”

“Are you making a *joke*?” I ask, jogging to catch up to him. We don’t quite fit side by side in the hallway, but I squeeze past his wing to make it work, crushed up against him. He shudders at my nearness, bites his own lip, and sucks on the blood to calm himself. “After threatening me?”

He stops again. I stop. He turns to me.

*Was this hallway always so narrow?*

“That was not a threat. It is reality.” He reaches up a hand to cup the side of my face, stroking a gloved thumb along the seam of my lips. I want to feel his bare fingertips again, touch his naked skin. I reach a hand up and curl my fingers around his wrist. Between his jacket and his glove, there’s free space.

*Damn.* His skin is the softest thing I’ve ever felt in my life. It isn’t fair. It’s silky and delicious, and I just want to swipe my thumb over it. So I do. I do and he lets me, looking into my eyes.

“You are very sweet, and for that I am immensely grateful, but I *fear* for you. You do not understand the rules, and you play games. We cannot play games anymore, my princess. If you decide you do not trust me, you will pay for it. You are brave and humorous and interesting, but you are not a match for the Vestalis armada. You will not come out on top with your ...”

“Pluckiness?” I supply, my stomach souring slightly.

“Naivety,” he corrects, dropping my chin and then releasing me. He turns away again, removing a glove and touching his hand to a pad beside the door. It opens and dumps us back into that horrible room again, the one with three-hundred-and-sixty-degree views.

I don’t remember anything for several minutes.

When I come to, I’m in Rurik’s arms and he’s striding down a large hallway. Perhaps the *same* hallway that we were in yesterday.

For whatever reason, he takes me right back to Hyt’s office.

“Ah, shit—” Hyt starts, but then he sees me in Rurik’s arms and steps aside, allowing us into the room. I’m still disoriented; I have literally no idea what’s going on. “What happened?” All the playful drawl in his voice is gone. He’s ice-cold again, but I can’t even process the strange shift in his emotions because I’m dizzy and tired and confused.

*That ... didn’t happen because of the windows and my very rational fear of*

*space. This is something else.* I don't know how to explain it, but I feel like shit. Haven't been feeling great for a few days, but I *really* feel like crap now. *How long has it been since Abraxas and I were separated? He's an intelligent man, far smarter than I give him credit for. Why would he repeatedly tell me that we'd die of broken hearts if we weren't together?*

It's been four days since we were separated. I've been getting dizzy, sure, and I woke up feeling tired and groggy, but ... this is bad. Again, it's way too early in a possible-maybe-not-happening pregnancy to blame it on that.

"Something is wrong with my princess, and I do not know what it is." Rurik sets me down on the edge of a cushioned bench and turns to look at Officer Hyt. "I am afraid to take her to a med clinic or—Stars forbid—onto the ship where my parents or brothers may see her. If *anyone* finds out that she is weak, we may die. Worse even, if my siblings suspect she might be pregnant."

"Pregnant?" Officer Hyt's shocked expression somehow makes me feel ashamed. I don't know why, but it does, and I fucking hate that. I'm not ashamed of Abraxas or any of the things we did together. "How?"

Rurik grits his teeth, nostrils flaring, hands squeezing into tight fists. He closes his eyes and drops his chin, breathing deep until he's collected his calm.

"With Abraxas," I explain for him, cutting him off before he can speak. "But I'm telling you, that's not it. On the very, very slim chance that I'm carrying his kid, *this isn't that*. Something else is making me sick."

Hyt groans and plays with his hat, using a tentacle to push it forward and then over the top half of his face so that his eyes are obscured. All I can see is his mouth. And his pecs. Abs. The 'V' of his hips. *Imagine his cock, unfolding like a telescope.* I dig my fingers into the bench seat on either side of me.

"You brought her here because I'm an amateur medic, and I won't tell shit to anybody. That it?" Hyt pulls his hat back into place with a tail. "I know I'm right. Don't bother answering." He waltzes over to a closed door and, as soon as he turns away from me, I see his ass. His entire ass. Naked and bare, no loincloth on the back half today.

Why do I have to be an ass girl? Why can't any of these aliens have ugly asses? Then I wouldn't have to look. I purposely turn my head away from taut, sapphire scaled cheeks. Now I'm looking at Rurik and he's staring back

at me in frustration. Or fear. Probably both things.

“You cannot be sick,” he whispers, more to himself than to me. “If you are sick, my brothers will come for us.”

“I’m feeling better already,” I tell him, and it’s true. Now that I’ve had a minute to sit down, I feel fine. A little tired. Maybe a tad dizzy when I think of the giant window at my back and the massive planet that takes up most of the view. But fine. I’m fine.

“This’ll only take a second.” Hyt returns with a small device that looks like a ballpoint pen. He wiggles his fingers for me, and I hold out a hand. “Let me numb that up for you,” he says and, before waiting for a response, he sticks the sucker at the end of his tail onto my palm. There’s a tiny sting, and then the whole surface goes pleasantly numb. Huh. He pricks my skin with the pen, and then picks up a tablet off the nearby table. Data appears on the screen in an instant.

Hyt frowns.

“What is it?” Rurik asks, sounding tired. I feel like he already knows.

“Data is scrambled. Makes no sense. If she had any of these values, she’d be a dead woman right about now.” He looks up from the tablet to my face. “Nobody knows shit about Aspiss mating habits, you know? We don’t understand how it works or what the repercussions are. The only people willing to capture and research Aspiss were the Cartians, and they’re *long gone*.” Hyt gives Rurik a pointed look that he ignores.

“Maybe instead of capturing them, they could’ve had a conversation with one?” I blurt out, but then I think about how Abraxas behaves toward strangers, how the female ate me alive, and I decide that the Cartians weren’t so out of line thinking they needed to drug the Aspiss to study them. “What do Aspiss mating habits have to do with how I’m feeling?” I continue, and Hyt purses his lips. He sets both the ballpoint pen thing and the tablet down before squatting in front of me. He puts one hand on my knee, and Rurik slaps it off. Nine tentacles move forward to stick to the bare skin of my legs, and the prince lets out a sound that I wasn’t even sure he could make.

Nine suckers pop pleasantly off my skin as Hyt smiles gently.

“Whenever I start to think a human can survive here, I’m reminded of what a terrible idea that is.” He sighs and stares down at the floor before looking back to my face again. His companion floats in a nearby water tank—with a lid on it. The poor thing gazes at me with big, round black eyes, and I feel

instant pity toward it. “Aspis scramble tech. You’ve heard that, I’m sure. Well, mating with one is scrambling your medical data.”

I have no idea how to respond to that.

Hyt’s eyes shift past my crossed legs to the dress I’m wearing, and his mouth twists up into a sinful smirk, one that’s full of lies and promises both. I want to be simultaneously blessed and cursed by this man, and I don’t know why.

“Wherever did you get this dress?” he asks before he stands up and shakes his head. He rubs at his chin before shifting his two eyes and six pupils over to Rurik. “I’m glad you agreed to meet the Aspis tonight. I’d say we need to have a discussion with him, maybe take some of his blood, run some tests on *him*.”

“Only Cartian tech works with the Aspis,” Rurik admits with another tired sigh. “There’s little of it still around, but I will see what I can do.”

“The translators work,” I remind them, tapping at my ear. I think about the hideous bright pink and lime green translators I had before. Those were both Cartian tech. But the one that was forced into my skin while I was helplessly sleeping? That one works, too. Or the ones that Rurik and Hyt wore did. They spoke to Abraxas just fine.

“The software they left behind has been helpful,” Rurik admits as Hyt retrieves a glass of water and a strange fruit from a nearby table. He brings them over and holds them out to me. The fruit looks like a kumquat with dalmatian skin, and it’s fuzzy like a peach.

“Don’t eat the pit,” Hyt warns as I accept the items with a grateful sigh. My stomach rumbles, and I realize just how hungry I actually am. I finish the drink in two swallows, and the fruit in three bites. It tastes like a day at the beach somehow, like sunshine and laughter. Hyt accepts the pit when I hand it back. “Has she eaten today?” he asks, like it’s more than just a standard question. “Have *you* eaten?” He’s talking to Rurik now and not me. Meaning the blood. Ah.

Rurik turns to me, looking me over and meeting my gaze. *I am sorry, my princess*. I can hear it even if he hasn’t said it.

“You missed a meal last night as well as this morning. This is my fault.” Rurik holds out a hand toward me, his pretty lips turned down into a frown. “Come. I will rectify and not repeat that mistake.”

“Humans need extra food if they’re giving blood,” Hyt tells him, putting

his hands back on his hips. When he does that, every muscle in his body pops. I can't stand it. "Don't force her to skip meals because you're pissed off."

Rurik ignores him, but he at least has the common decency to cringe.

I accept the prince's outstretched hand and get to my feet. The heels that Avril put me in are hellish, but she claimed that she'd forgotten all my other shoes on the ship. I'd love to grab a different pair, but I doubt there's a human shoe available anywhere on the World Station. I may just have to walk around barefoot like Zero does.

Speaking of ... Avril and Zero didn't accompany us. They've accompanied us everywhere else, so why not today? *Because you're going on a date, duh.* A date with an alien moth prince. I'll add a line to my bucket list, and then cross it right off. I've got a few other good ones, too, like *fucked an alien dragon, almost fucked an alien tentacle cowboy, got eaten alive, etc.*

"Come see me again sometime," Hyt calls out before the elevator door shuts. I turn just in time to see him with his purple tongue sweeping over his lip, his thumb sliding along the top of his belt as he pushes it down. "And get something in that mouth of yours!" The view gets cut off, but I pretend like I wasn't staring. *Was that ... innuendo or concern? Both?*

Rurik is clearly furious with himself, thinking I've missed two meals. I have, but Avril offered to feed me earlier. I wasn't hungry then, so I declined. It's not a big deal. I don't think the fainting spells have anything to do with that. Then again, I'm not used to giving blood so frequently, and I have a tendency to get dizzy after a routine draw anyway.

"We're going on a date today?" I ask, because he's the one who mentioned it before. He looks at me, hands clasped together behind his back, but beneath his wings. He has to shift them up and down to affect the pose, but he does it anyway. Must feel properly pompous to be worth that extra effort.

"After we eat, where would you like to go?" he asks, and my brain swirls with possibilities. I have no idea what a space station is like, but I'm always down to explore. Might as well, right? I'm here.

"Are there any bookstores?" I ask, because if I ever needed to find Jane in a vast and endless universe, it would be there. If she were ever to stop by the World Station, and she knew there was a bookstore, she'd go straight to it.

"Bookstores?" Rurik repeats the word and then thinks heavily on it. I love the way he scowls as his mind works, curling his lip over his teeth and

teasing them with his tongue. *I want to be covered in that blood lace shit.* I don't know where the thought comes from, but once it hits, I can't shake it. "Yes, I believe there is one. It may not have any books in any human language—let alone in the English tongue."

"Can you put the blood lace on my body?" I blurt randomly, and he goes still.

The mood in the elevator changes drastically, and he looks at me with infinitely dark eyes, the eyes of a fucking demon, and his mouth is the shape of one too. Wicked. Unforgiving. Possessive. It's been there, but he's been trying to hide it. He doesn't want to scare me off, but that's a mistake.

I'm way too attracted to danger.

"Can I?" he echoes with a laugh. "I can, but I will not." He offers me his arm, and I frown. I accept the gesture, and we walk down the hall together when the door opens again. "Perhaps if you behave like my princess, I will treat you like one and consider it."

"What does 'behaving like a princess' even mean?" I ask as he tugs off his glove, activates a biometrics screen on the wall, and waits for another door to open.

"I said *my* princess, not *a* princess." Rurik ignores the surprised expression on my face, pulling me forward and into a crowded hallway. I'm so fixated on him and what he's just said that it takes me a second to—

"Holy shit fuck." I clap a hand over my mouth as people—*aliens*—turn en masse to stare at us.

And I thought I was experiencing culture shock at the black market? This is ... there are more species in this hallway than I know what to do with. My brain feels like it's on overload as my gaze flicks from one face to another to ... is that even a face? *How many eyes does that thing have?!* I choke on my own saliva when I see a slug thing on the opposite side of the hall. It looks *exactly* like the one that ate the lawyer.

Nobody moves except to make way for us. Nobody talks. We're given a wide berth and plenty of groveling, supplication, and abasement. What I mean to say is: we're fucking *worshipped* as we walk.

"It is our greatest pleasure and infinite privilege to serve you!" someone calls out, and the cry ripples down the hallway in a wave. There's so much going on around me that it takes some time for me to realize that there are Vestalis guards surrounding us. They must've been waiting just outside the



door. At least a dozen on either side, some of them carting massive guns, others with spears.

“Why do we have guards here and not on the ship?” I ask, and Rurik offers a wry smile that fades just as quickly. His lips are an icy pink color, like he scrubbed them to within an inch of their life. *I wish he'd stain that beautiful mouth with my blood.* The thought springs up out of nowhere, but it doesn't matter. Whether I *want* Rurik to bite me or not, he has to do it in order to eat.

“The ship is controlled by my father. Every room. Every cranny. Every transport. There is no need for guards on *The Korol*.” Rurik exhales, like he's carrying around a heavy burden that he can't share with anyone else. I want to ask him about it. I want to know. But I don't think we're at a point in our relationship where he'd tell me.

Not ... that we're going to have any sort of relationship.

I'm already second-guessing every decision I've made thus far.

I'm so distracted by my thoughts that I forget to look around. When I do, it's like blinking through a haze. There are shops along the left side of the hallway, but more than half of them are entirely unrecognizable to me. One of them seems to sell brightly colored goo in jars? Another sells exotic plants, including those purple Venus flytraps that bit me on my first day on Jungryuk. A different shop is stuffed full of Tusk Men, and I shudder, looking away from them and doing my best not to think about their weird, gross dicks.

“Hey,” I whisper to Rurik, pressed as close to him as I can get. He has creepy fucking parents, and he makes glowing lace out of veins that spring from his tongue. But ... he doesn't freak me out the way everything and everyone else here does. I feel *safe* with him which makes no sense. “Can I see your dick?”

Rurik stops walking so suddenly that I trip and only manage to stay upright by my grip on his arm.

His dark eyes are narrowed to slits, a flash of red hiding underneath all of that beautiful black.

“I assume you are asking because I will be fucking you tomorrow?”

He just says it out loud like that, right there in the middle of the hallway. My mouth hangs open as I stare back at him. Then again, I'm the one that started it. But *I* was whispering. *I* was trying to be discreet.

“I ... well, yeah.” I reach up and scratch at the back of my head with my

free hand. My hair is loose, tumbling around my shoulders in big, bouncy waves that Avril put in for me. I told her that I didn't look anything like a Vestalis princess, and she told me that each Vestalis male is perfectly attracted to his mate. So, the more human I look, the better. I look like a feral club rat, but whatever. Not necessarily a bad aesthetic. I'm just usually more of the 'wearing my work clothes all day until I collapse in bed still wearing my work clothes while complaining about hustle culture' type person. "Don't I have a right to see what it looks like before we do the deed?"

I give him a hip bump that's meant to be a joke, but definitely does not land that way.

Rurik turns his regal face over to look at me, and he appears both incredibly alien and incredibly familiar in the same breath. *Uh-oh, here we go again.* Our gazes clash, my breathing stills for several seconds, my body lights up on the inside like it's filled with gunpowder.

"I am going to kill your lady-in-waiting," he tells me, and then he keeps walking and we break through the crowd without any resistance. He's scowling again, but he looks extra pretty when he does it, so I don't complain. "She is supposed to educate you. What in the Stars does she even do?"

"Mostly she eats my macarons and tells me that I should let myself fall in love with you."

Rurik almost stops walking again, but he manages to gather himself together. One would think he was unaffected by my statement. But that's not true. His antennae are spread wide, one of them hovering over me like maybe he wishes he'd touched my hair earlier. His wings are slightly spread, and he keeps clenching his right hand into a fist before releasing it.

"We are here." He doesn't respond to my previous statement or answer my question. Instead, he gestures to a black door in the wall. Just the one door. No other indication of what the location is supposed to be. No signage. Nothing. The door opens automatically and Rurik allows several of the guards in before he puts a comforting hand on my lower back and pushes me through.

We head up a set of stairs and find ourselves in a black-on-black lounge with pops of red on the ceiling. The room smells like blood and sweet-scented smoke, and dozens of faces turn our way. Vestalis males fill the room, all of them with a partner at their sides. Not a single one of the females

is the same species as any other. Definitely no humans to be seen. But ... maybe some dudes? Yep, there are Vestalis males that are dating guys. Interesting.

Even more interesting: one of the females is like a chimera or something? *Thank you, Nate, for all the useless fairy-tale knowledge.* I hold back a strange tightness in my throat.

“Right this way, Princess.” Rurik leads me into a private room with red velvet on the walls, a single table in the center with a pair of chairs. There’s a wall of glass opposite the door that showcases a lush greenhouse filled with plants. A portion of the glass has been opened like a window, letting in a gentle fragrance and the vaguest hint of dirt.

The sight and smell make me feel better immediately.

The prince pulls my chair out for me, leaving the guards outside the room.

“I like the plants,” I admit as I tuck my dress under my thighs and take a seat. He pushes me into the table and leans down, putting his mouth right up against the side of my neck. It takes everything I have in me not to shiver. I dig my nails into my legs so he won’t see how much of an effect he has on me.

“Such a planet-dweller.” And then he bites my ear. Literally bites it. There’s no pain though, just violent pleasure that breaks free that gasp I was trying to hold back. Rurik draws away and moves casually over to his side of the table.

He sits back in his chair, legs crossed, hands folded in his lap. His wings rest in the handy notch in the chair’s backrest, and he looks at me like he wants to tear my clothes off. How do I react to that?

I’m supposed to sleep with this guy tomorrow; I’m mated to Abraxas.

I’m going to be *seeing* Abraxas tonight. Yet, after Abraxas leaves, it’s me and Rurik.

This doesn’t have to be *completely* unpleasant, does it?

“What is this place?” I ask, looking around. There’s nothing but this table, those plants, the velvet walls.

Him, poisoning the room with his spice and honey pheromones. Sultry. Thick. Impossible to ignore. Every breath I take feels like it’s going to kill me. *How does nobody else smell this when he’s around? This is fucking intense.* Rurik adjusts himself, reaching up to undo the top few buttons on his coat.

“This is a restaurant,” he tells me, and this time, a smile manages to break out on his porn star mouth. It’s not fair for an alien male to have a mouth that pretty. It’s full and plump, and when he pulls it back to reveal his teeth, I forget my own name. “You will eat food, and I will eat you.”

Uhhh.

Startled laughter escapes my lips.

“You don’t eat food?” I want to know more about him. Feels like I should already know the answers to such simple questions. Also, damn, I know it’s been said more than enough times but ... Avril *really* is a shitty handmaiden.

The way Rurik’s feelers come together at the back of his head, I can tell he’s thinking the same thing.

“I can eat whatever you can eat. If it is safe for you, it is safe for me. I will be able to taste it, to enjoy it, but it’s an unnecessary pleasure. To survive, I need only your blood.”

A screen prompt appears in the middle of the table. I mean, like, just floating in the air in the center of the tabletop, maybe two feet above it. Glowing red alien text, hanging out in space like it’s nothing. Rurik blinks and the prompt disappears.

“What the *fuck* is that?” If I sound crazed, it’s because I am. Nate would’ve loved this stuff. Nate would’ve been so goddamn happy to be here. Any person in my family would trade a limb for an experience like this. I know they’d all be happy for me because ... I’m having *fun*, but I know they’re suffering and I miss them.

“I was letting the serving staff know that they are allowed to enter the room.”

I put my hand up to my throat, and I realize that I’m shaking all over. I don’t know when that happened. And it’s not related to the dizzy thing. This is something new. *I’m finally having a panic attack*. It hits me so hard that I *wish* I’d passed out. It truly feels like I’m going to die, like I’ll never take another breath.

Rurik leans down in front of me, one palm on the table’s surface, and he presses his mouth against mine. The blood lace catches on my tongue, searching fingers digging into my soul, sifting through every part of me.

*I like it here. I miss my family. I like you. I feel alone. I like somebody else. I like you.*

All of these things flit in and out of me faster than I can comprehend, and

then Rurik is drawing back, and his lips are red with blood again. I'm not shaking anymore.

"When you are queen, you will be able to get a permit to see your home." He smiles tightly, putting one hand on the side of my head. "You may visit once a year. Perhaps twice."

It's not a lot, but it's ... something.

*Yeah, that plan I hatched with Hyt? It's not happening. I can't run. I just can't.*

And for so many different reasons.

"I can visit Earth?" I ask, trying to imagine what the hell that would be like. I don't even know what I'd do if I got sent home. It'd certainly be difficult catering parties when I know about aliens. When I fucked a dragon. When I became a princess. I stare into Rurik's eyes, catching the faintest hint of red lace behind the obsidian shimmer. *He's not a bad guy. He's not.* "You know that if I put my trust in you, and you fuck it up, it'll ruin everything good about me?"

"I do know that; you know that I know that."

Somehow, that's all true. I shove him back.

"Get away from me, guy. Your pheromones are breaking my brain."

Rurik says nothing, but he does retreat to his side of the table. No sooner has his (perfect) ass hit the chair than he looks up and realizes that there's someone in the doorway, staring at us. Rurik yanks a handkerchief from his pocket and rapidly mops up the blood on his lips.

The look on his face makes me wonder if we didn't technically just get caught with our pants down. It might not have been a traditionally sexual moment, but it was an intimacy nonetheless.

"Your Imperial Prince."

I look over my shoulder to see a Vestalis waiter with white wings. Now that Hyt's mentioned it, I did see markings on Rurik's mother's back. On several of the males, but not all of them. Everyone in the front room was mated; this male is not.

Rurik is not. Because his wings are white. I wonder if this is all incredibly embarrassing for him?

He looks *mad*. I'm starting to see that for what it is: a completely empty defense mechanism.

"Bring the food and *leave*," he growls out, and the man looks properly

kowtowed. Terrified even. The reaction of the employees is making me question his temper. Several trays with lids are set on the table in front of me before the staff disappears and the door closes once more.

Rurik is rubbing his temple.

“Why are you so ... human?” I ask. The food smells good, and I’m starving, but I feel like I can’t eat until I know the answer to this.

“Why?” he asks with another laugh. “Because you are my mate, and I imprint on you immediately. I pick up your body language, your moods, your expressions immediately. I am—quite unfortunately for both of us—*made* for you.” Rurik turns away from me and stares at the wall. “To be rejected by my own mate. And to be king.” He laughs at that, but he isn’t amused.

“Am I making a mockery out of us at court?” I’m terrified that this is true even as I tell myself that I don’t care. I do. I care. Goddamn it. “Because we haven’t mated? Because I rejected you?”

“It does not matter now; the wedding begins tomorrow. We will mate. Every day for seven days.” He looks back at me with an apologetic expression on his face. “The first time will not be particularly pleasant. I will do what I can for you, but there are biological reactions that I cannot control.”

I don’t flinch. I just listen.

“It hurts?” I ask, and he nods. “How badly?”

“Females of every species are different, but my mother says that it was the worst pain of her life.” He doesn’t sugarcoat it for me, just tells it like it is. “But after that, my body will adjust to yours, and you should find it pleasurable. Whatever you need to be satisfied, that I will give you.”

My cheeks heat because he’s staring directly at me, almost apologetically. I don’t understand the expression.

“Let’s strap Avril to a rocket and send her into a blackhole.” I grumble the words, but I’m honestly fucking serious about them.

His expression shifts slightly, darkens the mood in the room—in a good way.

“I will have her thrown into the carnivorous plants facility tomorrow. You will not have to see her again.”

“Thank the Stars for small miracles.” I don’t know why I say that. Because he says it alot? Rurik just stares at me, so I busy myself with lifting the lids on the food.

Underneath the first one, there’s a plate of smoked salmon canapés.

Oh.

Tray two holds a quiche. For tray three, it's ratatouille. Next we've got a cheese plate followed by ... a pile of macarons. I narrow one eye. Just the one. Telling myself that I will *not* literally strangle Avril the next time I see her. More macarons. A French menu. A date. I smell her all over this.

"Are you getting your dating advice from *Avril*?" I blurt the question out as I investigate the drinks that've been served. A glass of wine. A cup of coffee with some cream. Ice water. It's all here, no stone left unturned. I refocus on the smoked salmon canapés, popping one into my mouth.

Smoked salmon, dill, and ... instead of cream cheese, it's plain yogurt, but hey, an effort was made.

I can't help myself.

"On Earth, I'm a caterer," I explain because even if Rurik is my one-true, destined, fate-prescribed soulmate, that doesn't mean he knows who I am. "A caterer is someone who serves food at parties."

Rurik lifts his feelers up and to the sides, like he's amused. He taps at his ear with two fingers.

"I know what a caterer is. Continue."

"These canapés are all wrong." I eat another anyway. Now that I've started eating, I realize how hungry I truly am. "This should be cream cheese, not yogurt."

"I will inform the kitchen staff."

I eat half of them and then pass the tray his way, gesturing at him.

"Eating is way less fun when done alone. Dig in. Tell me that wouldn't be better if the white stuff was thicker and creamier." *Shit. What the hell, Eve?! Why did I say that?* Rurik doesn't react to the statement itself. There's a chance that the Vestalis don't orgasm like human men. Or maybe something different comes out. Maybe it's a different color. Who knows?

*I should've watched Vestalis porn instead.*

"You are aroused," Rurik says mildly, his voice lordly and smooth. *Arrogant ass.* "Why is that?"

"Eat your half of all this." I drag the quiche over. "There's no way I can finish it by myself."

"I can smell everything you feel; there's no sense in lying to me. I am the only person you cannot truly lie to. I will always know."

"Why don't you get fucked?" I tell him, defense mechanism switching into

place. I might have to trust what he says about his parents and the wedding and what needs to be done, but I don't have to pretend like his weird insta-love crap is endearing. It's terrifying, if anything. Loss of my free will and personal agency.

"I would like to get fucked, but my intended mate has rejected me."

I slam a lid down on one of the plates and give him a look.

"You *kidnapped* me." I'm aghast that he thinks he deserves my immediate love and dedication in return. It has to be *earned*. Abraxas earned it. Rurik has not. "I will not feel guilty for not finding myself instantly in love with you. I see that we have to work together, and we will. But if you want me, romance me."

"Thus the date." He digs his fingernails into the armrests of the chair. "The only Vestalis male in the history of our great species to have to work for his mate's affection. You know that I will die for you?"

"Sure. I believe that." I put a hand on my chest. "Because I feel it, too. I do. But that doesn't mean it's real, Rurik. I'm feeling all of that same shit! But love is important to me. Real love. *Actual* love and not well-matched chemistry." I pause. "Though that helps. It helps a lot. It puts you way up in the ranking, but it's not a gold medal."

Rurik looks away, and he doesn't eat.

But I do. I take my time, eat as much as I damn well please, and then slump back in my chair with my coffee. More *Dunkin' Donuts* decaf, but c'est la vie. The ribbon dress I'm wearing feels like a torture device, but that's not how Rurik looks at it. When he thinks I'm fixated on the liquid in my mug, he rakes his gaze over me and shudders, eyes closing as he rubs a single finger over his parted lips. When he opens his eyes, we're staring at each other again.

"Can I please see your dick now?" It's time that he shows it to me. I should be able to see it. "By the way, how does that mating ritual thing work? We go into a room, do the deed, come out and show off our markings?"

"No, you may not see it now." He sighs deeply and then uses one hand to rub up along the length of his feeler. I *think* it's a stress tic, but the way he looks at me ensures that it comes across like a come-on. My breath hitches. I take a bite of a mint macaron. "I will *kill* your lady-in-waiting, and I am sorry to inform you that we will be mating in front of the entire court, including my parents."



I ... there are no words.

I find myself struggling to adjust to this.

“You’re telling me that it *hurts*? That it happens in front of the Imperial Court? In front of your *parents*? Rurik, what the fuck?” I stand up and turn toward the door, looking for a handle when there isn’t one. The stupid thing whizzes open and I dart past it.

I know he said the deal in this restaurant was a ‘you eat so I can eat’ sort of thing, but I don’t want him touching me for a second. I know it’s not his fault, but I’m having trouble holding still. I was nervous about this wedding shit. Now I want to die. If this situation happened on *Earth*, I’d be mortified. But here? His creepy mom and dad? *His super fucking creepy millipede mom. My mother-in-law. Moth babies.*

“Where’s the bookstore?” I whisper, turning to face Rurik as he follows me out into the hall. Guards surround us which I can’t stand. What even is my life?

“Right here, my princess.” Rurik takes a bow and holds out his hand to indicate a shop that’s just a few doors down. I turn and walk as fast as I can in the horrible heels, pausing just outside the store to yank them off my feet. I consider throwing them away, but change my mind. They look expensive, and I’m concerned these may be the last pair of human made high heels I ever see. I turn to one of the random guards.

“Ensure these items are taken to my quarters,” I declare, standing there barefoot and wearing a bodycon dress with a bow. It’d be funny if it weren’t so terribly tragic.

“Yes, My Imperial Princess.” The man affects a horizontal bow and then takes off. I just stare after him.

Huh. Wow. Obedient.

Does it make me a bad person that I like that?

“Are your shoes not satisfactory?” Rurik asks, nostrils flaring. He looks homicidal. “Avril was the one who suggested I purchase them.”

“Let’s never talk about her again.”

My annoyance fades as soon as I look over and find the most charming shop in the entire World Station. Well, I suppose that could be debatable, but I’m not in the market for jars of rainbow-colored goo, so this is better for me personally.

I know Jane isn’t here—Officer Hyt already told me that—but being here

makes me feel closer to her. Closer to Earth. It makes me feel sane and in control. The shop next door sells alien dildos—I kid you not—and I try really hard not to notice that there’s a Falopex model in the front window. No, the bookstore is a much better place for me to be.

I break away from Rurik and wander in, but the effect is the same whether he’s standing beside me or not. Word must spread quickly here in the Noctuida, and everybody seems to know that I’m the Imperial Princess.

“May your reign be fertile and long,” a creature with long dark hair whispers, backing up as our guards force the crowds aside. She’s wearing a robe, hunched over with bony hands showing beneath the sleeves. Pretty sure I saw more of her kind—*lots* of her kind—in the market. I ignore her. I give her a wide berth. I almost run.

The bookstore has shelves that reach up to such gargantuan heights that there are several of those weird platform elevator things that I used on Rurik’s ship, when I went up to look inside Abraxas’ stolen den. They zip up and down the shelves, carting customers to the balconies up above. Just ahead of us is another massive window looking down at the beautiful sapphire and emerald gem that is Yaoh. It doesn’t creep me out as much as the endless night I usually see out the windows, and I don’t pass out this time when I stare at it. All is good.

A hand brushes against my hip, a hard body molds to mine from behind.

“Shall I show you where the human section is?” Rurik breathes, sliding his palm over my belly. He tucks me even harder against him, feelers sweeping down the sides of my head and arms. “You do not have to love me to relax or to allow me to make you feel good. You will be participating regardless. It does not have to be an unpleasant experience for you.”

He says what I was thinking out loud.

“Yes, please.”

Rurik slips around me, taking me by the hand and guiding me around the edge of a bookshelf to reveal a dizzying expanse of alien literature. The bookstore has a narrow entrance, but at the back, it’s much wider, seemingly running along the windowed side of the station for some ways on either side. There are dozens and dozens and dozens of aisles bordered by tall shelves.

The space is relatively quiet, Rurik’s boots echoing as he drags me down a ways, hooks a sharp right, and then eventually a left. We’re in a small, quiet corner at the ass-end of the bookstore. It’s cold over here, too, bits of ice

forming on the interior wall. *Is that normal?*

“Is this a regular—” I lift my finger to point at the icicles when Rurik covers me with his body, pinning me against the shelf at my back with an arm on either side of me. He’s nipping and licking and tasting my neck, teasing me with further connection but holding back. I want that stupid blood lace stuff again. I want Rurik to dig into my soul and sift through me, see me, look at me completely bare and without pretense. I’m too embarrassed to ask for that, so I don’t.

His hands roam my curves, fingers slipping under the ribbon-like edges of the dress to press against my bare skin.

“Take your gloves off.” I’m yanking on them already, pulling one off and then examining the sharp-tipped nails on his middle and pointer finger. He put me to sleep with a prick from one of these. Oh well. I shove his hand against my naked skin, and my entire body bows with the intensity.

I nip his lip, and he bares his teeth at me, using one hand to yank my head to the side. He bites down on my throat at the same moment he shoves his hand into my panties, keeping his clawed fingers curled back and using his smooth-tipped ones.

He shows me that he knows exactly where my clit is, gently squeezing it between two knuckles.

Blood lace pours into my neck, digging into my veins and arteries, my heart, my soul.

*You are the only good thing that has ever come to me. There is no one else. I am sorry that you are cursed to be my mate. If only I’d never gone to Jungryuk. We would never have met. I would have been able to keep my hopes and dreams and my freedom.*

Those thoughts absolutely *pummel* me, and my heart aches for the prince.

Rurik pulls back, red smeared across his mouth, and watches me through those dark eyes as he works me right up to the edge of an orgasm. Doesn’t happen. His fingers withdraw suddenly, and he releases me, taking a small step back. I’m proud of myself for staying upright, staring at him as the coldness of this strange, dark corner kicks in. Rurik steps to my side and uses his wing to cover me like it’s a cloak.

“These are the only human texts in the store.” He points to a shelf in front of him as I just stand there, barefoot and dazed, my dress rucked up over my hips. Wondering if I should kill him. *This stupid arrogant fucking moth.*

My attention falls to the row of books, but only the first five are in recognizable languages. Then another section starts, filled with alien shit. I reach up and grab a hand-bound book. There's a string and a white label stuck to it. *Joseon Dynasty, 1735. National Museum of Korea, Seoul.* I open it, and I can't read a thing.

I'll just put that one back.

"Did you just bring me all the way to orgasm and then *leave me there?*" I grind out, snatching the next volume. It's in ... I think the language is Czech? Alright, scratch that off the list. There are two copies of *Twilight* in English for whatever reason, and a 1968 novel titled *Ammie, Come Home* about a ghost.

That's it. That's my entire reading selection. *Jane is going to flip all the way out.*

"Yes, I showed you what I was capable of, and then I held back." Rurik looks down at me, still tucked behind his wing with him, nice and warm but still barefoot and turned-on. *I hate him.* "I will personally source more human material for your reading pleasure. For now, this is all there is."

I grab *Ammie, Come Home* off the shelf to take with me.

"How am I supposed to read my alien porn then?" I give him a look, referencing the Falopex. He knows it, too. "Oops. I mean alien *romance*. They're *romances*, not porns."

"Come."

Rurik escorts me back the way we came and then down another hallway into a space that's not only warm, but lit with one of those red flame fireplaces.

"What is this?" I pick up a book, but the language is meaningless to me. I don't even recognize it in a vague way, like *oh, that's Japanese* or anything like that. It's completely foreign. As I stare at it, the synchronicity contacts kick in and a translation appears. *The Pleasures of a Molluscan Mate* is the title. I have no clue what that even means.

"Vestalis experience intimacy with a wide variety of mates. Each one of these books is bound to be a profoundly different romantic and sexual experience. Why don't you pick one in my language, and I will read it to you?"

"Why don't we take them all home? I'm the princess, aren't I?" I'm breathing hard, clutching the most readable human book on the ship against

my chest.

“I am sorry.” Rurik reaches down and tucks some hair behind my ear. “As the Imperial Princess on *The Korol*, you cannot have a large library.” He turns me around and gently pushes me into one of the high-backed chairs with the wing notches. His hands reach for his pants. “You may have a small library now, and then you may have a large one when you are queen.”

“We’re in a public place ...” I don’t even finish talking. What am I saying? From what I can tell, the Imperial Court has absolute power. People don’t argue or complain. Vestalis ships nuke entire *planets*. Who would dare talk back?

We’re alone in the space, and I don’t see or hear anyone else.

“Of all the species you might be compatible with, my princess.” He flicks his button, and my toes curl into the carpet that covers the metal spacestation floors. “The Vestalis are the best, and I’ll show you why.”

He pushes his pants down to reveal an alabaster cock spiraled in red. When he reaches down a hand and fists the massive girth, I see that even his long fingers can’t touch. *It’s way too big for me. It’s bigger than the biggest form of Abraxas’ that I can handle.*

Rurik keeps his eyes on mine, his breathing as unsteady as my own. I toss *Ammie, Come Home* onto the ground so that my hands are free to grip the armrests of the chair. His fingers tease those red spirals, brush over the pointed obsidian tip at the head of his shaft, and encourage the stripes to unfold. Two red appendages unwrap from around Rurik’s dick, falling to either side of his hips. The black pointed tips become claws, one each at the end of ... claspers? I guess that’s what they are, a pair of them to ...

I imagine them grabbing me by the hips and holding me close, keeping me still. A sharp breath rushes out of me, almost a laugh. I should be panicking, but I’m not. *I’m totally turned on by aliens.* I am. I’m already looking forward to feeling the sharp tips at the end of the claspers dig into my skin. As for his shaft now, it’s long and curved and wide, but a much more reasonable size. There’s a patch of bright red fur around the base, and two bulges halfway down the length of his shaft that I imagine are his testicles. The head of his penis is thick and swollen, dusky red and dripping. On the underside there’s a ridge that he strokes with his thumb.

“The very second I tasted your blood, my body altered itself into a state that will work with your anatomy.” He grips the length of himself, just above

the swollen bumps of his testes. *They'd probably go all the way inside, wouldn't they?* I'm just sitting here imagining the sensation as my cunt gets slick, as it swells, as it makes sitting with my legs crossed an impossibility. "Once I have been inside of you, no other male will be satisfactory."

He lets his red-stained lips twist to the side in a half-smile, and then his claspers spiral back around his shaft, nearly obscuring it from view. He uses a special strap inside his slacks to keep the appendage tucked against his thigh, and then he buttons himself back up.

"That's it?" I'm whispering now as he comes over to me, kneeling just in front of the chair and putting his hands on my lap. He reaches up and tucks my hair back again, like he can't resist the frequent urges he has to touch me.

"Tomorrow, we will mate. Tonight you must make peace with what is to come."



Rurik takes me into the market and buys me some shoes that are modified for my feet on-site, these beautiful leather boots that are smaller versions of the ones on his own feet.

“I must return to the Embassy to address some concerns, but you are not required to join me.” He hesitates, and I sense a wealth of secrets that need to be shared. I almost put my hands on his chest, kiss his chin, and ask him to tell me. But not today. Tomorrow, I’ll be that girl. Today, I see Abraxas.

My heart aches so fiercely that I press the heel of my hand against my sternum. Rurik notices and says nothing.

“Feel free to explore at your leisure. As I have said before, you are not a prisoner, princess.” Rurik touches the side of my face and then turns to leave. Zero, Connor, and Avril slip past him to join me. The first thing the latter does is look down at my shoes.

“You better not have dumped those heels; they were the only ones in the entire market. *And* they were the right size for you. That’s a miracle in and of itself.”

I turn to look at her as Zero scans the crowd for disturbances and Connor looks like he’s trying not to have a violent panic attack. Zero’s creepy as hell. If I were planning to assassinate the Imperial Princess, I’d think twice when I saw the disturbed young woman with the red eyes and the bow-shaped antennae.

“You know that you’re the *worst* lady-in-waiting in the history of life, right?” I ask Avril, and she sighs with relief.

“So you guys are finally talking? That’s great. Are you in love with him yet? I hear it happens instantly for basically every other Vestalis couple. You’re *literally* the only one who’s ever resisted that celestial magic.” She sounds a little jealous. A lot jealous. Green with envy.

“What? Did you want to be the princess? I’d gladly switch places.” I’m looking around now for a place to get a drink. There should be plenty of bars around here, right?

“If only I were so lucky. Who doesn’t dream of unquenchable passion?” Avril follows my gaze and notices him at the same time that I do. “Oh, hell no.” She grabs my arm and tries to drag me away, but Officer Hyt has already spotted us.

He waltzes right through the crowd, people skirting out of his way but turning to graze him with hungry looks. And when I say ‘people’, I mean creatures with six arms, four-legged beasts, and plenty of those green hulking people like Trevor and his twin.

“Howdy there, ladies.” Hyt tips his hat as Avril steps between us, batting her hand at his companion as it tries to fly forward to greet me. He frowns at her and uses his tentacles to snag his pet. “Got a problem there, human medic woman?”

“Yeah, I do have a problem.” She points back at me as Connor sidles up to us, looking pale. “This girl is betrothed, and you are a serious creep.”

Hyt lifts a brow and looks past her to me.

“I’m a creep?” he asks me, like we weren’t both there yesterday, equal participants. “Well, I’ll be damned. First I’m hearing of that. I’m on patrol. I have every right to walk around this station. More than that, it’s my *job*.” He shoves Avril gently out of the way and then looks over at Connor. “Are you alright, human male? You don’t look so good.”

“That ...” Connor points in the direction of a slug monster and ... Well, it’s not just *a* slug monster this time. It’s *the* slug monster, with the lawyer’s leg sticking out of its mouth. I recognize the atrocious pattern of the ugly Gucci loafers he spent half the fundraiser bragging about.

“Shit.” Hyt uses one of his tentacles to snag a six-shooter pistol from a strap on his back. He lifts his weapon above the crowd and everyone freezes. I jump when he fires, hitting the slug creature in the head. Or what I think is



its head. Whatever it is, the monster slumps to the floor of the hallway and people resume their business like they didn't just see something get shot. Hyt blows the smoke from his pistol—no joke—and tucks it away. “Takes the Mollusca months to properly digest. Looks like it was having trouble with the clothing.”

Hyt waltzes over to the body, tails swaying, ass on display.

Avril chokes and blushes before turning away. Zero stares and licks her lips. Connor is the only intelligent one amongst us who pays more attention to the dead slug and the corpse that Hyt tugs out of its mouth. The lawyer's leg is intact, complete with shoe. But that's about it. No great loss, but it's still humbling to see what's left of a fellow human being.

Officer Hyt looks particularly distraught as he stares at the remains.

I push back the others and move over to stand beside him.

“If it makes you feel better, he was dead within minutes of us arriving on Jungryuk. I think.” Not sure how long I was passed out before I came to, but it can't have been all that long. “Also, he was a jerk. He grabbed my ass without permission.”

That catches Hyt's attention. He looks over at me, and I feel like he's about to say something private, maybe something about what's going on between us. I look back, but as Avril approaches, all he does is smile.

“Don't forget about that delivery.” He picks up the lawyer's leg in his arms, uses his tails to collect the slug thing's body, and heads down the hallway.

“That was very nearly one of us,” Avril whispers, and Connor exhales harshly.

“Should we get a drink?” I look over at them, and they both nod. “Yep. Thought so.”



It takes over an hour to find a bar that serves alcohol that humans can consume. And we only know that's the case because a Vestalis ambassador actually shows up from the embassy to help us locate one.

When we get there ... it's full of humans. Packed with them. There are easily *dozens*.

My mouth drops open.

"Oh thank God." Avril rushes into the room and taps the first person she sees on the shoulder. They turn around and hug her like they've known her forever. The crowd realizes that a new face has shown up in their bar and all eyes turn in her direction before making their way over to me and Connor.

*I wonder how many of them have fucked aliens?* I think, and then I figure I can just ask. We've been abducted, all of us here, against our will. One day, we were normal people doing normal things living normal lives and then ... this. An alien bar on a space station that's connected to a water-covered planet full of pornographic tentacle foxes. There's no such thing as propriety anymore.

"Eve, come here and listen to this." Avril puts her arm around me and starts pointing at people. "Portland, Tualatin, McMinnville, Albany, Ashland, Eugene, Marcola, Grants Pass."

"Interesting names," I remark, but I'm being an ass. I see what she's saying. All of these people are from Oregon. Specifically, all of these people are from the I-5 corridor in Oregon. That's ... unique. Perhaps it's that extra-special dash of Pacific Northwest strangeness that attracts alien kidnappers.

Avril gives me an annoyed look. In fact, she looks at me the way I look at Tabbi Kat. That's a sobering thought.

"There are three clusters in here: Western Oregon, Paris, and Singapore." Avril gestures with her hand at the group. She's certainly discovered plenty of information in a very quick time period. "I'm going to mingle and see how much gossip I can gather while I'm here." She slips into the crowd, Connor tagging along, and leaves me alone by a table full of men. Looking around, I actually see far more men in the room than women.

Zero hovers close enough to be a proper bodyguard, but doesn't talk to or pay attention to anyone else.

"Have a seat," a guy says, patting the chair between him and his buddy. "The food here is the best on the station. It's the only stuff I can eat without getting sick."

"Thanks." I take the chair and realize that not a single man at the table is wearing a shirt. "What happened to your clothes?" I ask, and one of them laughs. He gives me a little wink as he leans in, putting his elbows on the

table.

“We all dance for the same club; you might call these our uniforms.” He gestures at the low-slung pants each man has on. They’re all incredibly ripped, tall, handsome, probably the cream of the crop when it comes to alien aesthetics. I bet the rest were eaten.

“You should come by sometime,” says another, leaning over and smiling at me with beautiful blue eyes, dimples, and soft blond hair. I look back at him and realize that he’s one of the most beautiful human beings I have ever seen in my life.

I’m not attracted to him. And he’s exactly my type. I’m surrounded by *Magic Mike* dancers, and I don’t feel a thing. Nothing. *My brain and body are broken for alien peen.* My heart is broken for a dragon alien batwing monster thing. *Oh, Abraxas.*

I spend a couple of hours chatting with the guys, getting to know them, but only because it feels good to talk to other humans. There’s nothing there for me, no interest, not even when I’m asked by Blondie if I’d like to come to his ‘apartment’ (whatever that means here) to hang out later. *Guess he isn’t aware that I’m the next queen, eh?* It’s not like the humans haven’t noticed the Vestalis guards chilling in the hallway, they just haven’t made the connection to me, and I haven’t offered an explanation.

I politely excuse myself, wandering out of the bar to find Hyt waiting for me beside the entrance. He’s leaning back against the wall, hat tipped forward over his head, tentacle tails dancing gently against the floor around his legs. Zero follows at a distance, ever vigilant.

“Is that medic girl distracted?” Hyt moves his hat off of one eye to stare at me. My gaze drifts down to the sleek, exaggerated expanse of muscle and skin stretched out before me. His flesh is blue and white right now with fine, soft scales whose edges aren’t quite visible unless the light hits them just right. A tiny piece of loincloth over a very fascinating part of him. His companion chirps at me, but doesn’t land on me this time, looking properly shamed and maybe a little resentful, too. I feel bad for the tiny pink octopus.

I look back to find its master wearing a bemused half-smirk.

One tentacle slings forward, popping out a single bubble from its sucker. It pops near my face, and I jump. The smell hits me right away, and I feel soothed. Clearheaded. Calm. *Aroused.*

“You liked that, didn’t you?” Hyt seems genuinely curious, but then he

shakes his head suddenly. “No. Shit. Where’s the medic? Your cargo came in early, and I need you there *now*.” He gives me a telling look, and the entire world goes still.

*Abraxas.*

“Let’s go.” I snag his arm and start walking before he reaches out with his tails, lifts me off the floor, and turns me to face the opposite direction.

“This way, Eve.” He calls me by name which is nice, snatching my wrist and taking me back to the restricted sector. Zero follows, but he turns to her at the doorway and blocks her entrance. “I’ll take it from here. The prince will agree to it.”

A pregnant pause follows before Zero’s eyes flash red and she gives a single, decisive nod that doesn’t quite match up with her usual mannerisms. Not that I’ve known her very long, but ... that nod *feels* like it belongs to Rurik and, whether I like it or not, the prince is someone that I understand perfectly.

The door slams shut, and Hyt turns away, gliding down the hall in his boots faster than I can keep up.

“Is there a reason that we’re—”

The smell hits me then. *His smell*. I would know it anywhere, that wild twist of apex predator and male, of dark scales and demon tongues and violet venom.

I don’t have to ask why we’re running.

I run faster.

Rurik appears in the hallway, but I dart past him in my haste to get to the source of that smell.

If I don’t go to Abraxas, he’ll come to me and he won’t care how he gets there, who he kills, or what trouble he gets himself into on the way.

I’m panting as I skid to a stop outside another doorway. I don’t have to know where I am in the station itself to know that I’m in the right place.

Hyt sweeps up beside me with Rurik following behind, slamming his palm onto a screen beside the door and whispering in my ear.

“We’ll wait in the cruiser for now.” He steps back as the first door hisses open, and then he guides me to a second one, letting me into a large hallway and then leaving me there by myself.

I can feel Abraxas coming like a storm.

There’s a pressure change. My skin gets hot. My entire body aches so

badly that I stumble and fall to my knees outside his door. I'm alone now, and he knows it, and the door should be opening soon, and—

It begins to slide open, and I see him. His wing-hand darts out, clawed digits curling around the edge of the door, and he crumples the metal like paper to one side. I hear Hyt groaning from the other room.

*“Female.”*

Abraxas is on me in a second, pinning me to the floor underneath him, using his wing-hands to shove up the ribbon-like bands of my dress. He props himself on a palm, using his other hand to push my underwear aside. He doesn't even take the time to rip them.

My back arches as I groan, pressing my breasts up and into him. All around me, there's his scent. *Wild. Woods. Musk. Male. Fertility. Sex.* His pleasure rod is thick and swollen and so slick that it slips right in, all the way to the base. His taut, heavy sack slams against my butt as his second dick—the mating one—rubs between my cheeks and strokes my rear opening.

A gasp barely has time to leave my lips before he's shoving his tongue down my throat, almost literally. His spine is arched, tail thrashing, tongue ravishing my lips, jaw, throat. Then he's back to sliding it against my own tongue.

Energy arcs through me, a rush of relief and vitality that makes me feel damn near invincible. He growls at me as he fucks, snarls and hisses, and I realize that I can't understand a word he's saying. Well. Just the one. *Female.*

Guess this fancy-pants translator sucks ass, too.

I miss the pink one.

“Harder, more,” I groan, clawing at him, dragging him against me, gasping with pleasure when he uses his wing-hands to shred what little there is of this stupid dress. “More, more, more.”

He can't understand me either, and that's what makes it so delicious.

What reason do we even have to talk right now?

His teeth sink into my shoulder, but it isn't an illicit invitation to come play like it is with Rurik. It isn't a spreading warmth and some celestial understanding, it's a possession. Abraxas owns me as he fucks me, and I realize that that is a fact that will never change. No matter where we are in the universe, we belong to one another.

Abraxas does not take his time with me. He slams me into the metal floor of Hyt's ship so hard that my ass cheeks are bruised. He comes with a world-

ending sound, something feared by anything lesser than him in the food chain. *Which is everything. Everyone and everything should be scared of that sound.*

Except for me.

He is mine, and that's that.

We lie there panting for the full fifteen or so minutes it takes to separate. I can feel the blood vessels between his body and mine, transferring fluids, connecting us together again. We can't talk because neither of us can understand each other, but he rises up to look down at me, his eyes like amethyst crystals in a face made of shadows.

For a minute there, his lips are closed and he's more darkness than not.

He grins, and his mouth splits his face entirely in half, flashing all of those dagger-sized teeth.

There's a sharp pinch as he switches his pleasure rod out for his mating rod. We start all over again, his wing-hands on my tits, his right hand roaming the skin on my waist, finding those pesky panties and rending them to shreds.

As he fucks, his pleasure rod thickens and swells yet again, bumping my clit as he slides it between my folds. All over me, his sticky pheromones transfer to my bare skin. My belly. My breasts. My ass cheeks as his ball sack slaps me like a hard spank.

*Fuck.*

The orgasm is wicked, almost painful. I'm screaming, for sure. Used to being able to make whatever sounds I want in the jungle. Hopefully, Officer Hyt's police cruiser spaceship thing is soundproof.

My body rebels against my brain, and I short-circuit, nails clawing at Abraxas' ebony skin until I'm completely spent and turning into a puddle beneath him. When I blink through the white stars in my vision, I realize that he's orgasmed again, too. His balls are pumping seed into me as I lie on my back naked, legs spread, completely and utterly at peace, drowning in bliss. We're knotted together now, stuck like this, and I couldn't be more thrilled.

"Abraxas ... I missed you, too."

He snarls at me, nuzzling my neck and stroking the outside of my leg with his tail. When he's finished seeding me, he pulls out and licks the side of my face. Cleans the sweat from my tits. Tries to move between my legs to—

"Wait, wait." I cover my swollen, happily fucked cunt with my hands.

“Not yet. I’ll literally die.”

“*Stubborn*,” he growls out in English, and then he draws his cocks back into his body, hefts me up with his tail, straps me to his back, and rises to two feet. When he approaches the door leading into the front of the ship, Hyt very quickly opens it and puts up two hands.

“Don’t you dare crumple another door in my cruiser. How the fuck am I supposed to explain that damage?”

Abraxas ducks to pass through the door and then squats down in front of him. He’s at his smallest size right now (probably for ease of transport or lack of vaults to bathe in), but *small* is a relative term. He’s taller than both of the other males in the room with us.

My dragon alien mate drops his horned head, violet light pulsing brightly, and then taps at the side of his head where his earhole is. His lips ripple open on a snarl.

“Why not?” Hyt asks, like he actually understands what Abraxas is saying. Hyt then turns to Rurik and gives him a look. “Did you purposely leave the Aspis language off of her translator?”

“My parents will know if I install that language, and since they already know she is an Aspis’ *former* mate, I cannot install it and risk our lives.” He reaches into a pocket on his jacket and produces a pair of small, slim translators in pastel pink.

My eye twitches. More Cartian tech, eh?

Rurik attempts to pass the translator over, but Hyt snatches it with a tentacle tail and closes the distance between Abraxas and the prince without taking a step forward.

I grab both translators, put one on Abraxas, and then slip the other onto my own head.

“Which one of these dickless males should I eat first?” he snarls, and even his translated voice is barely human, more rolling growls and biting snarls than I even thought possible. He sounds like a demon with a double voice. It’s layers of pure vocal hell. “Or does it matter?” His clawed hands reach out, but I grab onto the base of his wings and whisper in his ear.

“Don’t touch them. If you do, we’re fucked.”

Abraxas grins and draws his wings back, creating a comfortable cocoon on either side of me. I relax my nude body against his.

“Yes, I know. But I have no greater desire—save mating you—than to kill

them, to see their blood spattered on these walls, to watch them squirm and writhe until they take their last, gasping breaths.”

Ah. Erm. No wonder Hyt was nervous to be around this guy.

Pride swells my chest.

Until Rurik looks at me and we do the whole star-crossed lover thing again.

“Please don’t kill them,” I whisper, shame coloring my voice. My happy hormones are going wild right now, and I feel the best I’ve felt in days, but ... I’m confused, too. “More than just *we’re fucked*, I don’t want them dead.”

My mate considers this and then sighs, looking at the two other males in the room with a deep regret.

“I will not kill you—for now. But I can smell that the both of you have tried to mate with my female. That is an unforgivable sin and not one that I will forget in the future.”

Rurik has the balls to narrow his eyes and step forward, antennae flared out to either side of his head in a match to Abraxas’ horns.

“You *knew* she was my mate when you took her from the market. This entire situation is a problem that you have brought on yourself.”

“*You test your fate*,” Abraxas’ words echo, that strange double voice as his growls twist into the sounds from the translator. He laughs then, his mouth wide, teeth flashing. “Such bravery in such a cowardly race. I will eat you quickly to spare you the pain of it.”

“Let me just put this out there: I am on y’all’s sides.” Hyt sighs, the sound of a man that knows he’s gotten himself into trouble, that he should and could dig himself out of it, but knows that he’s not going to. He puts a hand on his chest, right over that burn scar. Now that I’m really looking at it, I can see the World Station in its shape. Two circles, one shaded like the planet Yaoh, and the other a mess of curves and lines like an armillary sphere. “We all care what happens to the human woman, don’t we? Let’s not start a fight in my cruiser that ends with all four of us dead.” Hyt pauses and plants his hands on his hips. “Though I did fucking warn you against coming here—on multiple occasions.”

His companion escapes the safety of his hat and dives right for me.

“Abraxas, *don’t*.” I practically growl the words out as the little pet chirps angrily at him, spreading bubbles.

“You’re fucking embarrassing, you know that?” Hyt snarls, snatching the



creature up in one of his tails. He tucks it behind his back and out of sight, likely catching the look on Abraxas' face. I can't see it exactly, but I can tell even from behind him that his monster mouth is split in half in a terrifying scowl.

"This female makes her own choices," Abraxas says, finally putting me down on the ground with his tail around my waist. It's only once my feet hit the floor that I'm reminded how naked I am.

Both Rurik and Hyt look at me in such a way that it's impossible to forget.

I'm wearing my new leather boots, mussed sex hair, and Abraxas' wetness between my legs. He uses one of his wings to block my body from view, keeping his attention on the other two males.

"Choice is sometimes an illusion, perhaps a luxury." Rurik doesn't give the Aspiss any space, not even when Abraxas lowers his head down like he's considering the price he'd pay for biting the Imperial Prince's off. I don't think about my experience with the Aspiss female. Nope. No time for another panic attack. "You cannot take her and run away to live happily ever after." Rurik ruffles his wings, adding his spicy scent to Abraxas' muskiness. *Please Officer Hyt, no pheromone bubbles just now.*

Hyt takes a step back, crossing his arms and purposely averting those strange but beautiful eyes of his. His jaw, though, is clenched tight. I can see his wild teeth from here.

"I am aware of this," Abraxas states, sitting back on his haunches. He tucks me in close against him, and I feel my eyes close on instinct. There's nowhere I'd rather be. When Rurik quite literally beamed me and the den up into his ship, I was *certain* that I'd never see Abraxas again.

*And I'm only seeing him now because Officer Hyt and Prince Rurik are genuinely good people. Aliens. Genuinely good aliens.* I force myself to open my eyes and look at them both.

"If I could release Eve from her duties, I would." Rurik returns my stare, and even cuddled up against my mate, I feel the pull between us. "If you kill me now, my parents will hunt you to the edges of the Noctuida and beyond. They will destroy Earth. They will destroy Jungryuk. They will destroy Yaoh."

Hyt curses and rubs at his face with a tentacle, like he's tired and overburdened. I feel immediately sorry for getting him involved in my intergalactic space drama shit.

“I understand that.” Abraxas is angry—*roiling* with fury more like—but he doesn’t move to attack or kill either man. I know that his instincts demand he do it, but he’s smarter than basic instinct. Anytime he’d wanted, he could’ve mated me. He could’ve forced himself on me to save his own life. He didn’t. That takes massive self-control, to give up one’s life out of respect and love for someone else’s wishes. He’s an incredible man. Male. Dragon thing. “But you will have ultimate power when you are king. You will bring me to your ship to be with my female.”

“You’ll hate it there,” I whisper, but Abraxas offers me a warning look that tells me how full of shit I really am. I know what he’s going through because I’ve been there. I didn’t want to live the rest of my life in the jungles of Jungryuk, as freeing and wonderful as that experience was. I wanted to see my family again, to go home. But I chose him over all of that, and I know he’d do the same for me.

In the whole of the universe, where we most belong is with each other.

“I have already made that promise. Again and again and again.” Rurik closes his eyes and looks away, his wings shrouding him from behind like a beautiful white cloak. “The princess need but see me to the throne, and keep me fed, and I will move entire star systems for her happiness.” His lips curve up in an angry scowl, and I wonder if he’s thinking how different everything would’ve been if he’d picked me up from the market first.

I’d probably be in love with him by now.

Instead, he’s an unwilling villain, a man without the luxury of choice.

“Get out.” Abraxas uses his head and horns to indicate the door. “Do not dream of returning here until tomorrow.”

“Uh, this is my fuckin’ ship,” Hyt says, and then Abraxas turns to look at him, and he sighs, holding up all nine tentacle tails, suckers facing out in supplication to the angry dragon on his ship. “Goddamn it, I am regretting signing myself up for this mess.” He’s cursing under his breath as he takes off, yanking his screeching companion along behind him in a mess of pearly bubbles.

One pops and fills the room with his scent, and I almost choke on it.

The doors open and then slam shut.

Rurik hesitates.

“I will see you at the first solar hour.” He holds up a hand to indicate a screen on the wall, one that’s filled with a mess of numbers and symbols and

letters that I can't understand. "When the round face on that clock reaches the topmost line."

I see what he's referring to, squinting my eyes at the device. I have no idea how much time that means I have with Abraxas. However much it's going to be, it won't be enough.

"That gives you approximately twelve Earth hours, or a quarter of a Jungyrukian day." Rurik meets my eyes one last time before he turns and leaves the ship.

He doesn't have to do this, give me time with Abraxas. He has all of the power now, the way that Abraxas once did, and yet he isn't forcing me into anything more than he has to. Already, I've embarrassed him in front of his parents. His court. His people. Every sentient being in the whole of the Noctuida. *Ugh.*

I turn to Abraxas, and all of those thoughts flee my head.

If it weren't for Abraxas, Rurik and I would have a very different relationship.

"I didn't want to like him ..." I start, guilt swamping me. Abraxas reaches out with a wing-hand and strokes his knuckles down the side of my face before burying them in my hair. He lowers his head and tugs me against him, so that my forehead is pressed against his, just beneath his horns.

"I am not angry with you, tiny female."

"I let him put his fingers inside of me." I feel like my ex, Mack, confessing to fucking the girl he took home from his creative writing class. They screwed one another and read each other's half-baked sci-fi stories for an entire night. And he told me after that it was *just a quickie fling*. Please. I'm never dating another guy in a master's program ever again—especially not a guy studying creative writing. *I guess I'm never dating another guy again, period.* I'm an alien smut slut now, just like Jane.

Wait. Alien ... smut ... slut. A.S.S. My acronym is A.S.S. I am an A.S.S.

*She's going to tease me mercilessly for this.*

"I am not angry with you, tiny female," he repeats, a growl creeping into his voice.

"Not just once, but twice. Earlier today even." I'm breathing hard, waiting for a reaction, but all I get is another snarled repeat of the same sentence.

"I am *not* angry with you, tiny female." He draws back, luminescing prettily across the steel walls and sterile furniture. Abraxas is a wild thing that

doesn't belong in space. Somehow, we're going to have to make this work. "A Vestalis mate bond is notoriously strong."

I throw my arms around him, and he wraps both his wings and his arms around me in return. I've never been so relieved or happy to see another person in my whole life. This is where I'm meant to be.

"And the Sucker Tail?" His grumble shakes my whole body, down to the bones, and I cringe. But I don't stop hugging him.

"I wasn't thinking clearly. Rurik—the Vestalis prince—was pissing me off, telling me what to do, saying I needed a chaperone and all this other stupid shit. I just ..." I trail off, but it feels like I'm being dishonest, so I keep going. Even I don't fully understand my actions with Officer Hyt. "He's attractive, and he's nice, and he never wears clothes ..."

"You did not believe we would see each other again; you were afraid." Abraxas' voice is surprisingly soft. For somebody who's just found out that his mate has cheated on him, he's remarkably calm, too. "I failed to protect you when it mattered most."

"You were out hunting," I tell him, pulling back so that I can see his face. His mouth has disappeared into the darkness of his expression. He blames *himself* for what happened. "The Vestalis have a planet-destroying megaship and an armada. What could you have possibly done?"

"I could have kept my female by my side that day, knowing that he was searching for you. It was an oversight on my part, leaving you alone in the den." Abraxas' expression kindles into something fierce, and then I'm on my back again with him caging my body against the floor. I notice that he uses the mating rod again this time, but I'm not complaining. It's my favorite of his cocks, but only by a hair.

"If you'd been in the den with me, it wouldn't have changed a thing," I tell him when we lay together afterward. He's curled on his side, and I'm tucked up in a ball against him, burrowing into his hot skin and the chuffing sounds he makes as he sniffs my hair. *Can he smell Rurik's pheromones?* He said as much already, but I'm still embarrassed and ashamed.

Neither of those emotions come easily or frequently to me. I once broke up with a guy two minutes before we jumped out of an airplane on our very first skydiving lesson. I don't get shy, and I don't feel guilty.

Until now.

Maybe I never cared enough about anyone I dated before?

I sure as hell care now.

“Actually, if you’d been in the den, you might be dead. It was better this way.”

“Being separated from my mate is its own sort of death.” He takes me by the shoulders with his wing-hands and moves me so that he can look into my eyes again. The spikes down his back and tail lift in agitation, dripping venom to the floor. He grasps my face with his other hands, holding me tightly as he peers into my eyes. “You do not trust me enough, female.”

“I trust you more than I trust myself,” I blurt, but he lifts the edge of his lip in a warning growl.

“If we are separated, we will *die*. You do not have to believe the legend that our deaths will be caused by broken hearts, but it is true nonetheless. It is without fail. Never once.” He shudders all over, eyes closing briefly. “Tell me you have not felt the effects.”

He waits in silence, eyes closed, and my mind ... goes back to my dizziness. Feeling sluggish. Tired.

“I passed out today ...” I hedge, and those eyes of his, purple and blue and gold, open to stare at me. His pupils dilate as he waits for me to elaborate. It takes me three tries to find the words. “You’re right. I’ve felt like shit, the last two days especially.”

I haven’t been on Rurik’s ship to gouge lines into my table, but I think we’re on day four of being separated.

“While it is different for every mated pair, I have seen deaths as early as seven Jungrukian days.” Abraxas exhales and sits up, more like a dragon and less like a man, tail tucked around the pair of us, keeping me close. “We cannot wait for that pompous fool to take the throne. You will die first, and I will follow shortly.” He cocks his head, and I fidget with my hands under the intensity of that stare. “My spirit will trail yours through the dirt, and we will inhabit new bodies. But I do not wish to seek and find you again. It was difficult enough to woo you in this life.”

My entire face is bright red and hot to the touch, but I pretend like I’ve got *some* chill left in me.

“In a week, Officer Hyt can arrange for us to see each other again. I was ...” I trail off because the plan I made isn’t feasible, and I know that. There are too many reasons not to go through with it. Not the least of which is because I don’t want Rurik to die. “I was going to run away, find you, and we

were going to hide until the prince starved to death. But ... what if he's right? What if his parents chase us down and kill way more people than just you and me?" I don't let myself feel the grief that's waiting on the horizon for me. I'm not wasting my time missing Abraxas while I'm still with him. "We'll have to meet up then and ..." I look him over, and he offers me a terribly naughty smirk in response. "It's the mating, isn't it? When we fuck, we're like, refreshed or something?"

"It is the mating," he agrees in a purr, dragging me to him again. We're going to spend all night having sex, I know that. But first, we should probably get through this conversation.

"We meet up in seven days, and then we plan our next rendezvous." I never thought to ask Rurik how long it'll be before he takes the throne, but that seems like pretty damn useful information right now. *Fucking Avril. I bet she was supposed to teach me that shit, too.*

"Seven days is too risky; it must be sooner."

"But the wedding is tomorrow, and we'll be back on the ship." I give Abraxas a look. "You have no idea how creepy that place is. There are veins and, like, *meat* all over the walls. The king can see everything that happens on the ship. He can *control* everything that happens. Oh, and his wife is a gigantic millipede monster."

Abraxas waits for my words to process in his translator.

"A millipede?" he asks, and it takes a minute for the information to register properly. "Ah, yes. The queen." His lip curls again in disgust. "She comes from a violent, war-hungry species. It is said that the king of the Noctuida is only as good as his mate. It is her heart that guides the direction the court will take."

That ... doesn't bode well. I don't think I have an exceptional heart. I have a very, very human heart. Fickle. Prone to conflicting emotions. Selfish. I can be extremely selfish.

That makes me nervous.

*But surely you can't be any worse than a war-hungry millipede, right Eve? Give yourself some credit.*

"We won't be able to see each other until we get to the rendezvous spot." I can hold out for seven days, can't I? But something about that timeline makes me very, very nervous.

Abraxas considers that while another issue prods guiltily at my heart, one

that's much more selfish but also one that I can't control.

"He's going ... when I mate with him ..." I can barely finish as Abraxas refocuses his attention on me. "I can't get out of mating with him, Abraxas. There's no way for me to avoid it."

"I am aware," he replies, his entire body prickling with violence. His scales ruffle like the hair of an angry cat, and the claws in his knuckles emerge to scrape across the floor, drawing metal ribbons up. I slap him away from doing that. Poor Officer Hyt. He already has a ruined door to worry about. He doesn't need gouges in the floor of his ship. It's probably going to smell like alien dragon sex for a while in here, and I'm sorry-not-sorry about that.

"When we mate, all of my eggs"—I gesture at my belly—"they'll have his DNA. Like, I won't ever be able to have a baby that isn't related to Rurik." The thought isn't as horrifying as it was yesterday, but I'm still frustrated. "Even if ... you're right and somehow, you got me pregnant, he'll take over the fertilized embryo, too."

"He will *not*," Abraxas snarls, mouth rippling, teeth flashing. He snatches my face again and brings me close. "Do not fear. I have seeded you, and my child will remain my child."

"I only get to have sons," I add, because I'm pretty salty about that. I always wanted a daughter.

"If the child was to be female, she will remain female. He cannot change that." Abraxas makes this horrible groaning sound that has me worried for his health, snatching me up in his tail and dragging me down the hallway to the room he was in when I first arrived.

The room is small, and I think there might've once been a bed—Officer Hyt's bed—taking up the majority of the space. It's been blanketed with furs and hides, evening the small room into one, big, cushy nest. Abraxas takes me in there and holds me close to him, licking my cheek to clean a stray tear off. I hadn't even realized that one had fallen.

"I have evaluated the issues facing us quite extensively," he growls. "While I was in the pirate's ship with your sister-human, Jane." *Aww. He remembers that I called Jane my sister?* I honestly don't believe I could love anybody more than I love Abraxas. I need to tell him that. Tonight is about making sure he understands that implicitly. "On the voyage to get here. Right now. My desire is to slaughter the prince and eat him, but I know the outcome will be poor. If we wish to continue on in this life, and we wish to

meet our child, we must make sacrifices.”

“Nothing in this life is free or easy. To get something worthwhile, one must give something up in return.” I’m quoting Abraxas’ words back to him, and he knows it. He offers me what amounts to the Aspis version of a smile.

“I do not wish to waste my brief time with you. We do not ever know when our time with the one we love will be cut short. This moment here is the most precious of all, and we should treasure it.”

I’ve got full-on tears now, but I’m not crying. I swear.

Abraxas leans down, sweeping that long, sinuous tongue of his over my mouth.

A sound, like rain, hits the glass window on the opposite wall, and I jump. Fear fills my throat and chokes the words out of me, but Abraxas—as inexperienced in space travel as I am—simply glances back to look. Tiny meteors, like gold sparks, hit the window and tumble down the glass. They patter on the roof of the space cruiser, and my vision blurs.

*This ship isn’t inside the station; it’s just stuck to it. The doorways are connected, but there’s nothing around us but space, space, and more space. What if it detaches? What if—*

“Come here, my female.” He lets out a rolling growl that sounds like a chuckle through the translator. “It is a harmless meteor shower; you needn’t be afraid.” He draws me in again, curling his body around mine. I press my cheek to his scaled chest and close my eyes, stroking my fingers down his hard belly.

There’s so much more we could talk about, so much more that needs to be said. But for now, I’m content to hold him, to appreciate him, to imagine that we’re in the den in the rain, that it’s just him and me, forever.

The air around us heats and the tension between our bodies stretches and tugs, pulls on our heartstrings and encourages more intimate acts than a simple hug. I gently pull away and encourage Abraxas to lean back against the wall, wings spread out and curled around the edges of the room. There’s not enough space in here for him. He dominates it effortlessly. Consumes it.

I get down on my knees, sliding my fingers over the smooth, flatness of his groin. He watches me, the purple spirals on his horns, on his hands, on his chest and belly, warming an otherwise dim and unremarkable place with violet light. When my fingertips catch on a loose fold of skin, I probe one inside and find him slick and wet, a hard nub pushing back against me.



*Oh my God.* I haven't had the opportunity to explore his body like this, and I'm not about to miss the chance. When I withdraw my hand, he snarls at me, snatching my wrist with his tail. I don't move, waiting for him to release me. It takes a couple of minutes of us staring one another down before he relents and gives in.

"You wish to take charge of this encounter?" he asks me, like he's truly baffled. "I was under the impression that my female liked to be *fucked*."

I swallow hard at his words—he's not wrong—but I want a chance to play, too.

"I do like to be fucked," I admit with another annoying blush staining my cheeks. "But I also want to make you feel good."

"I promise you, female, that I feel quite good when I'm rutting you against the ground, when my seed is pumping into your womb, when you are slicking your hot channels over my cocks." He reaches out for me, but I give him a warning look.

My fingers dip between my legs, gathering my own wetness—and plenty of his, too—and I make myself slippery before I touch him again. My fingertips glide over his black scaled body, finding that opening in his skin and dipping inside.

Abraxas groans, the sound so primal and so male that it doesn't come through the translator at all but for static. It's too pure a sound, too basic in the best possible way. I've only been on the ship and the station for a handful of days, but God, I missed this. I missed the basic, easy, primal way in which Abraxas lives his life. Sex and hot food and sleep and warm water in a quiet hot spring pool. That's all he needs to be happy.

My fingertip strokes the head of his shaft until it pushes back at me hard enough that it unfurls from inside of him, splitting his dark skin open with the tip. I fist him as best I can with my left hand, using my right to tease his mating rod in a similar fashion.

"I bet an Aspis female can't do this," I whisper smugly, and he snarls in agreement. One of his wing-hands fists in my hair and puts a firm but painless pressure on my scalp.

"Do not ever worry that your human nature is not enough for me. It drew me in, and it holds me. Female, you are the one I waited my entire life to meet. I did not choose hastily or in desperation; I chose you because you were right."

A moan escapes my own lips this time, accompanied by the almost violent protrusion of his mating rod from inside his body. My fingers continue to probe inside of him, cupping his sack in my palm and drawing it out to hang, half-emptied but rapidly plumping as I watch. *Damn.* Abraxas is virile as fuck. Maybe there's truth to his idea that I'm already pregnant, that somehow *his* seed is impervious to a hostile Vestalis takeover?

The meteor shower continues on, hot embers tumbling over the glass and turning the endless darkness a brilliant, blazing gold.

Everything is sticky now. His sack and its purple luminescence. My fingers. His shafts.

I snag one cock in each hand and then lean down, putting my lips near the bead of liquid at the tip of his mating rod.

"Female." He grabs my hair harder, and I lift my eyes to look up at him. "What is this?" He sounds suspicious which is funny as hell to me.

"It's a human thing. It's called a blow job. Trust me: you'll like it." I pause and then correct myself. "You'll *love* it."

Abraxas doesn't appear convinced.

"These rods are for mating, not for eating," he tells me with all due seriousness, and I snort a laugh. "I would never consider allowing an Aspis female to put her mouth anywhere near my rods. They would be bitten off and swallowed."

"Good thing I'm not an Aspis female then, huh? Besides, you did it to me." I slick my tongue over the head of his mating rod, and he releases a snarl that shakes the entire ship. The sound is wild, completely primal, and it knots my insides with a nervous flutter. My cunt pulses and squeezes on emptiness, wishing that he'd fill me. Praying that he does. Knowing I'm going to at least give this blow job thing a go first.

I'm not an oral sex girl; I don't like to give it. That's more Jane's deal. I think she even *prefers* giving over receiving. But not me.

This is the first time I have ever wanted to go down on a guy, and he just so happens to be a gigantic alien dragon with two penises. Go figure.

With my right hand, I stroke and pet and squeeze his upper cock while my left hand takes over the lower one. I've never jerked off or sucked a guy with two dicks, so this is a learning experience for me, too.

"Explain to me why I should not just shove you over and take you in both holes?" Abraxas isn't threatening me or being an ass: he's serious. Well, he

wants an answer? I'll give it to him.

I don't know that I can fit him in my mouth, so I don't bother trying. Instead, I use my tongue as a tool, exploring the unfamiliar shape of his cock, pausing only to blow gentle puffs of air against the slickness.

His entire body goes still.

Using my right thumb, I brush up against his head, offering delicate, finessed strokes. The *less* like an Aspis I can behave right now, the better. I want to show him what a human being is capable of. My tongue might not be as long as his, but it's soft and warm and wet. I slick it liberally up and down the length of him, pausing with my mouth pressed against his body to lay a kiss beside his shaft. On his belly. On the tip of his pleasure rod.

Abraxas purrs at me, relaxing his body, clawed wing-hand digging into my hair. He massages my scalp as I move my mouth from one shaft to the other, teasing and licking and tasting until he's dripping. Liquid pools on the length of both rods, hot and sweet and musky. I like the taste. It's like a drug, making my muscles quiver, budding my nipples until they hurt, drawing my breath in and out in ragged, dirty bursts.

When I try to steal a hand away to touch myself, Abraxas catches my wrist with his tail and puts it back.

"I will take care of you, female." His tail slips between my legs, spines flattened so as not to hurt me. The tip of it dips into my folds but doesn't enter me, stroking me up to hiccuping gasps that I release against his shafts as I kiss and nibble, scraping his skin with my teeth.

"Shit." I'm fumbling now, finding it harder and harder to pleasure him as he pets me into submission with his tail between my legs. Looking up, I find his gaze firmly locked on me, pupils blown wide, horns glowing. *He doesn't have the upper hand just yet.*

I know something else that an Aspis female cannot do.

Using both hands, I grab my breasts and I capture his lower cock between them. His mouth splits his face in half, and he jerks my head back with a wing-hand, diving his tongue between my lips. There's plenty of lube for me to slide my breasts up and down his shaft, working him up to a frenzy. His sack pulses with bright light, taut and swollen and ready to spill inside of me again.

His tail retreats and wraps my waist, pulling me up suddenly and bringing us face-to-face.

“Delicious, little human.” He pushes me onto his mating rod, using his tail to lift me up and down, sliding himself all the way in before pulling all the way out. He teases me with the tip against my folds before bringing me down on his hardness again. Again. Again. The next time he lifts me up, he brings my breasts close to his face, swirling his tongue around them, squeezing them with the strength in it, gliding the appendage along my nipples like a hot, wet ribbon. His pleasure rod is dripping between us, nice and hard, offering perfect friction for my clit.

He keeps this position going long enough that I feel my body tense up on the verge of a climax.

“I’m .. I’m coming,” I pant out, and he growls at me in response. Abraxas grabs hold of my waist with his hands, replacing his tail, and tucks me up against him. The move causes his dick to slip out of me, and I gasp in surprise. I have no idea what he’s doing until—

His tail thrusts into my pussy as I dig my nails into his skin, a scream breaking out of me that echoes around the silent ship. My sounds mix with my mate’s, blend in with the meteor shower outside the window. Sweaty. Gold and purple light. *So many stars.*

And just when I think it can’t get any weirder or more alien, he lifts his spines, slowly and carefully. It doesn’t hurt, but the rigid rake of them against my insides breaks my entire brain. The orgasm is painful and messy, and I can’t breathe for the duration of it. My blood goes wild, like maybe the venom he’s just injected me with is quickening my every sense. I can see better, smell better, hear better. Adrenaline surges through me, bright and hot.

“Now,” he begins, laying me down on the furs on my back. “I will finish myself inside of you.” He covers me with his massive form—his *smallest* form—hands pinning my wrists while he caresses my curves with his wing-hands. “I will seed you so thoroughly that you will have no worries when you bed the prince.”

His mating rod slips into my pulsing pussy, working the swollen folds with a rapid-fire frenzy that has me writhing. I don’t know how many times it’s possible to come without dying, but I think I’m about to find out.

“Give me a daughter,” I mumble drunkenly, and he laughs, the sound of a beast.

“It’s already been done, *female.*”

Wing-hands on my breasts, pleasure rod against my clit, pheromones

poisoning my skin. It's no wonder that I come one, two, *three* more times. He empties his sack into me first, knots me, and then switches to his other shaft. When he finishes with that one, and our bodies lock together on the inside, I feel his heartbeat through those tiny blood vessels.

"Do not be afraid, female," he murmurs, spine curved, head tucked up against my neck. The shadow he casts on the wall is one of a bow-backed demon with a grudge. A smile tilts my lips. "In the end, it will be you, me, and our child. Everything else is inconsequential."

I want to believe him. I believe that he believes that. But ... I don't know if that's how things are going to turn out. So I say nothing, wrap my arms around him, and enjoy the time we have left together.



I can't find any paper or pens in Officer Hyt's ship—nothing so incredibly prehistoric around here—but I desperately want to get a message back to Jane. I don't dare touch any of the techy gadgets. I'm sure there's something in here that I could use to record a quick video, but what if I bump something and the ship dislodges from the station and we get sucked into Yaoh's gravity field and—

I whirl around to see Abraxas watching me with a predator's eyes. He smiles, but a smile on his face is not the same as it is on other faces. It's an event. It's a deadly chasm. It's a threat and a promise both.

"Your sister-human, Jane, is amusing," he tells me as I plant my hands on my hips and spot a cabinet that I haven't looked in yet. I walk over and open the door, finding a series of belts on a hook. There are like twelve varieties of the belts I've seen Hyt wear, each with varying amounts of loincloth attached to them. Huh. In another cabinet, I find a whole pegboard full of cowboy hats. A third drawer reveals ... My mind goes blank. There's a masturbator and some lube. And when I say 'masturbator', I mean one of those fake vaginas that serves as the dude-version of a dildo. Guys mount the silicone and they—

I close the drawer.

“She didn’t tell you any embarrassing stories about me, did she?” I can already feel my eyebrow twitching. Jane knows all my stories. She knows everything about me. Whatever Abraxas wanted to know, she’ll have told him. It’s not that she’s a bad secret keeper, but she’ll have known after meeting my mate that he’s the one. And since he’s the one, a filter isn’t necessary.

Abraxas comes for me, curling his body around mine. I bite back a gasp, wrapping my hands around his tail. Now that I’ve had it inside of me, felt those venom-tipped spikes teasing my pussy, I want more. I want to experiment all night, see the things we could do to each other. For example, Abraxas has that sort of spiked mane for hair, but it’s nothing like what I’ve got. What if I laid him down and dragged my silky strands along his body?

“She told me many interesting tales, but mostly, she was concerned for you. I assured her that the Vestalis prince would not hurt you. A Vestalis mate-bond is heady, addictive, and parasitic.” He snaps that last word off his tongue, and I feel a little sad.

I feel sad for Rurik because even if the insta-love stuff is overpowering, he didn’t choose it. It’s a part of his biology. As far as I can tell, he’s trying to make things right.

“What’s a copulatory plug?” I’m trying to change the subject here, but I also *really* want to know.

My mate chuckles, unfurling himself and moving like a blur of shadow as he sweeps around me on all fours, circling me. *Hunting me*. And holy hell, I want to be caught.

However ... my sweetly fucked cunt needs a small break.

“A copulatory plug. Ah. Yes, I could smell the sex on them both. Your sister-human has mated the Yaena. When he finds a female that he wishes to breed, he leaves a mess of fluid inside her that prevents other males from mating her.”

Oh dear. I mean, that’s pretty much what Officer Hyt told me, but ... Jane is going to be *pissed*. She’s not a commitment type of girl either. And a *copulatory plug*? What a weird, archaic sounding thing. I know that, like, lemurs and spider monkeys and shit have them. Spiders. Reptiles. Rats. *Ew*.

“What the fuck is a Yaena?” I’m trying to imagine what sort of alien Jane might’ve fucked. Seeing as I’ve gotten down and dirty with a dragon, a moth, and a tentacle fox, I can scarcely imagine. Hopefully it’s not something gross.

I've never been good at pretending to like Jane's boyfriends and vice versa. Seems like she got along well enough with Abraxas though. That's a relief.

"An upright creature with much fur and sharp teeth," Abraxas supplies easily, sitting down on the ground behind me. "If you wish to speak to Jane, tell me your message and I will remember it."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I want to give her a message directly from me, not filtered through my mate. She'd hate that."

We both pause at the sound of a doorbell.

"Knock-knock." The door whooshes open and Hyt appears, half-naked as always and pulling a cart behind him. He turns, flashing me his tight ass, tails wafting around like underwater kelp, and then drags the cart into the ship. The door closes automatically behind him. "A whole star-load of meat, and now I have to figure out some way to explain to my mother that I'm not bringing it home to feed the family."

He releases the cart with a sigh, hands on his hips, and gives Abraxas a dirty look. My mate offers an easy but menacing response.

"Your services would have been appreciated had you not thought to breed my female in my absence."

Both Hyt and I have the common decency to cringe.

"Yeah, well, you're expensive to feed." He clasps both his hands and a pair of tentacles together in prayer. "May the Dead Kings bless me with a future pay raise."

"Hey." I'm wearing one of Hyt's belts that I found in his room, paired with a strap that I think is used to cart guns around but which also manages to cover my breasts. It was the best I could do, and I felt like maybe it'd be nice not to be naked in case something came up. It's only when Hyt turns to look at me directly that he seems to notice the outfit. His gaze fixates on the clothing before lifting reluctantly to my face. Abraxas snarls in warning, but I give him a look. "Do you have any pens or paper lying around that I could use to write a note to Jane? Maybe a phone or a tablet to record a video?"

"Pen and paper?" he repeats, like I've just asked him for use of a gramophone. Hyt uses a tentacle to push his hat down over his eyes for a minute in thought. "Very rare, very expensive items. As far as a video? I don't know that we should get the Imperial Princess on camera wearing a police officer's clothes and smelling like sex with an Aspis."

"Videos don't record smells," I argue, and he tucks his hat firmly back in

place, giving me a look.

“Maybe not on Earth, but here they do.” He waves his tentacles dismissively as my jaw hangs open in shock. Smell-o-vision? Literally. I don’t think that’s doing anybody any favors to be honest. “I’ll track back to the bookstore, see what I can do. Maybe you can write in the margins of somethin’? A pen would be easier to track down than blank sheets of paper.”

“Buy one of the two copies of *Twilight* from the human section. Jane’ll love that.” I’m grinning now, imagining scribbling down a message for my bestie in a young adult vampire novel on a space station while wearing ... a Falopex’s clothes. “Also, I’m really sorry, but I have to admit that I went through your drawers and found your ... *proclivities*.”

Hyt looks down at the drawer that I’m pointing at, and then back to me. I don’t know what a Falopex pussy looks like, but I’m guessing it’s not oh, say, peach-colored like my own skin and darkened with curly black hair. This guy’s into human beings in particular, isn’t he?

His eyes track down to the gouges on his floor, and his mouth flattens into a line. His companion is nowhere to be seen which is probably a good thing. If Hyt *does* have a thing for me, and his pet reacts to that thing, then Abraxas is going to lose his temper. I get the feeling that he’s just *barely* resisting the urge to kill the officer right now.

“You have lingered long enough, and your eyes linger further still,” Abraxas’ voice is a low, but powerful warning.

Hyt points at me, wetting his lips as his eyes drop to my half-covered breasts beneath the leather strap, and then flicker back up to my face.

“Don’t touch anymore of my goddamn stuff. Don’t open my drawers. Don’t look in my cabinets. Humans, holy hell, what nuisances.” He stands up with another whistle and backtracks for the door, giving Abraxas a wide berth. “I’ll be back.”

He exits quickly, cowboy boots loud on the metal floors before the doors slide shut once more.

“He is a strange Sucker Tail,” Abraxas remarks, using his tail to remove the cover on the wagon. It’s full of raw meat. He grins. “But I bid you seek him out in the market because he is soft on humans. All of Jungryuk knows it.” Another pause. “That, and he is the only officer on the entire planet.”

Huh. For a guy whose father is the chief of police, you’d think he’d get a cushier gig. Trying to wrangle the hellhole that is the black market all by



your lonesome? That can't be easy. I feel a small pang for Officer Hyt, and I wish him well in his search for a wife.

I can't be her.

Not even if he likes me that way.

I've already got one more male in my life than I know what to do with.

I turn to Abraxas. There's nothing to make a fire in here, and even if there were, it probably isn't a good idea. I refuse to do anything that might dislodge this ship from its dock.

Fortunately, Hyt returns before Abraxas can force raw sweetbreads down my throat.

"Here." He tosses a copy of *Twilight* onto the floor, digs into a pouch on his belt for a pen, and then drops a paper bag beside it. "Write your letter, leave it on my desk, and eat your damn dinner. It's human-safe food so don't worry."

I just stare up at him from my position against Abraxas' side, cuddled close to my mate while he eats. The cop and I look at each other, and it's not like when I look at Rurik, but it's ... something. Like, maybe we should've been friends in another life. Our personalities mesh so damn well. I have a feeling that we've got similar senses of humor, too.

"Why are you helping me?" I ask, and even Abraxas goes still to listen to his answer.

Hyt's face shutters, takes on that cold cast I saw when I accused him of being a bad cop. Horrible move on my part. Clearly, he already had an idea of where Connor was, and a plan in place to go get him.

"My sister, the human one I told you about. Well." He sighs and wraps his tentacle tails around himself suddenly, like he needs the comfort, a cloud of soft blue wafting in front of his nearly naked body. "She had a little sister—a real sister—that I couldn't save because I was following rules and protocol." Hyt turns a vibrant, neon pink. He makes himself smile at me, but there's no warmth in it. I wonder if he learned to smile from his sister? "So I don't follow rules and protocol very often. And I don't abandon humans, no matter how much of a pain in the ass they are."

He gives Abraxas a look, stares at the crumpled door, the ruined floor, and then he takes his leave.

I check the brown bag he brought me and find ... something. It looks like a giant pink dumpling in a box, big enough that I need two hands to hold it. But

it smells good, and there's a cute Falopex logo on the box lid. I take a bite, finding ground meat mixed with flower petals. It tastes herby, slightly sweet, a bit tangy.

"This is good," I murmur in surprise, looking over to see Abraxas with the edge of his lip lifted.

"I do not like other males feeding my female," he snarls, and my eyes go wide. I hadn't considered Hyt's gesture in that way, but now that Abraxas has mentioned it, that makes sense. I put the dumpling back in the box and then turn to him, pointing at my mouth.

"Alright, go ahead. Shove some raw meat between my lips." I freeze. *Did Abraxas pick up on that innuendo?* He must because his scowl turns into a violent yet arousing smile.

"I did not catch this meat either; there is little recourse for me here unless I wish to hunt creatures in a space station." *He doesn't sound entirely opposed* ... Abraxas uses his tail to gesture at the dumpling. "Eat, my female. This is but a brief blip in a very long life together. One day, we will lie together in our new den and we will look upon this moment with fond farewell."

I exhale, pushing my hair back from my face. Abraxas is bestial, feral, but he's also oddly poetic and introspective. I can't believe I ever questioned that aspect of him. A smile teases my lips when I remember our first meeting, his big shadowy body in my face, lips pulled back and teeth bared, and me screaming the word 'fuck'.

"I wonder what this meat is?" I ask, when let's be honest, I knew better.

"It is lab-grown meat." Abraxas grumbles and shakes his head, turning back to his own meal.

Right. Lab-grown meat. I can't decide if that's a really awesome thing or a really creepy one. Whatever.

The food is good; the company is better.



"You came to the stars for me," I whisper, lying on my back beside Abraxas, naked and freshly fucked. I can see the diamond-studded sky outside the

window, but it doesn't bother me right now. I tell myself it's nighttime, and that our view is simply that of a night sky and not of endless space and freezing cold and no oxygen and blackholes.

"Female, I would go anywhere for you," Abraxas says simply, his body curled around mine protectively, tail entwined with my legs, his arms around me, his wings draped like blankets. It's so easy to relax into him, to pretend like we're back on his planet in his den.

*Tomorrow, I'm marrying Rurik. I'm fucking Rurik. I'm—*

I put a hand over my belly.

"You're that confident about your seed, huh?" I know I've already asked about this, but I can't seem to let it go. Abraxas wants a child; it doesn't seem fair that he should lose the chance. It definitely isn't fair that I'm going to sleep with somebody else. If he were doing the same thing, I wouldn't be so calm about it.

"I am certain," he replies, and when I look over, I see that his eyes are closed. I reach up and run my hand along one of his horns, collecting sticky pheromones on my skin. He lifts the corner of his lip in the Aspis version of a smirk. "The Vestalis have been without a planet for too long, wandering the stars and relying on their gadgets. They will not know what to do with me. They will not know what to do with you. They will not be able to test and scan and monitor our child."

I've heard over and over how Aspis can scramble tech. I wonder how that happened? Like, did they have to evolve that ability to escape the prying eyes of the Vestalis and the Cartians? I don't respond or ask. I just lie there and enjoy his warm body and his smell and the way my cunt fists tight when I lick some of that stickiness off my hands.

Abraxas' eyes are both open now. I can feel his tail twitching, muscles tensing. He's going to mate me again, but we both knew that already.

"I know you have mated other males before me, but I did not think you would mate any males after me." He lifts his head up, using one of his wing-hands for support. "However, even if we were not fated to go to the dirt together"—his terminology for *until death do us part*—"there is no obstacle that could keep us from being together." He leans down and chuffs my hair, and I almost start crying again. Damn it. I *am* sappy when I'm in love. Gross. It's pretty clear to me though that I've never been in love before now. "You are the one I have chosen, Eve."

I turn toward him, loving how easily I melt against his chest, like I was born to fit there, and he was born to hold me.

“There are many reasons for mating,” Abraxas continues, using long fingers to touch my hair. “Power. Offspring. Joining territories. Attraction. But there is only one noble cause that carries through the stars and follows the soul’s journey into the next life.” He leans down toward me and growls the word. “And that is love.”

Uhhhh.

My brain is broken.

“I don’t want to marry Rurik tomorrow,” I whisper, and in that moment, I believe it. In that moment, I’m sad. In that moment, I just want Abraxas and our den and a daughter that splits worlds by sharing our DNA.

“I know, and for that, I am so very sorry.” Abraxas tucks me beneath him, and I spread my legs, desperate to feel him inside of me again. As many times as we can get, I want to meld with him until it’s impossible to see where I end and he begins. “I am an unworthy male who does not deserve the love of such a sweet, small female.”

“If only he hadn’t licked my blood ...” The words fade away, but that’s fate. I went to Tabbi Kat’s because Jane needed a favor. We were abducted. I was bleeding. I’m lucky to be alive. And now that Rurik’s life depends on my own? I can’t abandon him. We have to play the cards we’ve been dealt.

“If.” Abraxas laughs, and the sound shakes the whole ship. “That is a useless word designed by creatures with too much free time on their hands. *If* does not change a thing, and *if* does not propel the future. You need to learn to talk less, my female.” He uses his tail to steal my translator, setting it aside along with his own.

Only when we’ve lost the ability to talk does it feel like we’ve finally found the truest way to communicate with each other. Only then does it feel like I understand him perfectly.



Abraxas wakes before I do, taking great care to mark Officer Hyt's space cruiser. And yeah, by mark, I mean he pisses on some stuff.

"Ah fuck, Dead Kings save me," Hyt is groaning, using his hands to yank down both sides of his cowboy hat. It's a white one today, with a gold band. Very fancy. I watch him from the doorway to his quarters, bleary-eyed and rubbing at my face with a sleepy hand. He spots me there, dressed in that leather strap and belt again, and all six pupils of his rake me up and down in a flash before he gathers his wits. "I arrange an illicit meetup for the pair of you, and this is how you repay me?"

"Next time you consider laying hands on my female, I beg you think of this moment." Abraxas remains unapologetic, moving over to me on all fours. I drop my hand to my side as I look up at him. The moment feels so lighthearted, almost cute in a way, but ... it isn't going to last. "You are going to leak salt drops for me." He grasps my face with his wing-hands, dragging his thumbs under my eyes. I haven't started crying. Yet. I'm not going to.

Not until he's out of sight.

For now, I'm going to hold it together. I'm the one that's going to mate and marry another guy today. The thought rips me in half. There are two Eves: the one who wants Rurik so badly that she'd give her life just to taste him. And there's the Eve who'd kill the universe to run away with Abraxas.

Officer Hyt stares at the two of us, like he's trying to commit something about our interaction to memory.

"We'll see each other again in seven days, right?" I look past Abraxas to Officer Hyt. "I know you don't have to help us, but ..."

"But I'm a dumb fucker who'll do it anyway?" He smiles as he says it, using a tentacle to shove his companion beneath his hat when it tries to escape. "Are you still running or have you gone sweet on the lonely prince?"

That makes me laugh. Because that's exactly what he is. Rurik is the lonely prince trope.

I rake my lip under my teeth and Abraxas catches my chin with his hand, drawing my attention back to him. I look at him, but I address my next question to Officer Hyt.

"How long between our wedding and Rurik taking the throne?"

There's a ring, like a doorbell sounding off. Hyt hits a button, and the door swishes open to reveal Rurik.

I don't look at him, but I can feel him. I can smell him. He's a presence in my soul that I can't seem to shake. I repeat my question.

"How long between our wedding and you becoming king?"

He doesn't have to think long on that, adjusting his gloves and glancing over at Hyt, as if he's an easier person to look at than Abraxas with his hands all over me.

"Not long. After the seventh and final day of the ceremony, perhaps weeks." Another pause, a softer tone. I find myself feeling like maybe I missed the sound of his voice last night. "Perhaps only a few Earthen days."

"That quick, huh?" I ask, and Rurik laughs. It's such a strange, bitter sound that I wonder for a second if maybe the translator fucked it up.

"My parents are eager to retire," he explains simply, and though the words ring true, a strangeness settles in the air. *Rurik's father, sitting on that throne, blood lace on his legs and arms.* I shove the thought down. "You will not have to wait long, my princess."

I gently pull Abraxas' hands down from my face, and he lets me. I look directly at Rurik, but he won't meet my gaze for whatever reason.

"Hyt's going to arrange for me to see Abraxas on the last day of the wedding. Is that possible?"

Rurik's lip curls, flashing vampire teeth. Abraxas growls right back at him.

"It will be difficult, but it can be done." The prince finally turns to look at

me, but now it's my turn to avoid his gaze. I don't need any of that insta-love, soulmate, searched-the-stars for you shit when Abraxas is around. It's not fair. He *earned* my love, and I gave it freely and without coercion. I don't need chemical processes making decisions for me. "Can you not simply wait until I am king?"

"If we are separated, we will die of broken hearts," Abraxas is furious now, his spikes standing on end, his scales raised. He turns to look at Rurik, shadows blurring the edges of his form. The claws in his knuckles extend as he thrashes his tail and knocks some of Hyt's things off a shelf. Hyt groans and mutters curses under his breath, using all nine tentacles to quickly collect and redeposit the items. I wonder if they don't come loose during flight? "She has been fainting, no?"

Rurik looks sharply at Abraxas, yanking on the finger of his glove.

"She has been. Do you know why? Is she pregnant?"

Abraxas' laughter is otherworldly, a sound that I can only describe as that feeling you get when you're walking in the dark and it seems like someone is following just behind and out of sight. I shiver.

"She is seeded, yes. But that is not the cause of her illness. We *must* see one another, and we *must* mate or she will die." His smile fades away as Hyt leans back against the wall, watching me and not the other two males. The way he looks at me, it's with a sad resignation, like maybe we could've had something but never will. I feel the same way. I liked him instantly in a way I've never felt toward anyone else, like I had a friend for life at first greeting. "I am worried that a week will be too long."

Rurik finally just gives in and pulls a glove off so that he can slap it against the palm of his other hand in thought.

"Once we have landed on Dome, you may be able to bring him in." Rurik looks to Officer Hyt. "You will need to dock somewhere that my parents will not see, and come to us over the land. We will remain on *The Korol* for two days before then."

Holy shit. He's just agreeing to this? I expected a fight.

"I accept this arrangement," Abraxas declares, as if *he* is the one who's in charge of all this. The truth of it? I'm not in charge. Officer Hyt isn't in charge. Even Abraxas isn't in charge. It's the prince. This all comes down to the motherfucking prince. *My lonely prince.*

"Do you know why she fades the way she does? If you can explain it,

perhaps we can solve it.”

Abraxas snaps his teeth at Rurik’s words.

“There is no *solution*, you foolish Vestalis star-traveler. We are mated, and this is a condition of our bond to one another. You cannot fix it. You cannot use your magic science machines to whittle it away. What you *will* do is accept that there are some things that can’t be explained or controlled.”

“If we had Cartian tech, we might be able to figure it out,” Hyt murmurs under his breath, and Rurik closes his eyes, like he’s trying to gather his temper together. I don’t blame him. I’m supposed to be his promised once-in-a-lifetime soulmate, and it’s all fucked up.

“You will not want for each other,” Rurik promises with another sigh. He sounds *exhausted*, and that upsets me. This is supposed to be our wedding day, but ... This time, when he lifts his black eyes to mine, I allow myself to fall into them. My heart pounds, my palms sweat, and an ache hits me right in the soul. *Poor Rurik*. He forces a tight smile. “We must go, my princess. Today, of all days, it would not do to arrive late.”

It’s time. It’s happening. I have to go. I have to let Abraxas go. I—

“Female.” He moves in front of me, blocking my view of the other males. He takes my face with his hands, wing-hands on my hips. “There is a phrase that my mother passed down to me. It came from her mother and many mothers before that. *Wherever you be, I am*. Remember that when you are alone or afraid, know that I will always come for you.”

His tongue takes my mouth, dominating my throat and obliterating any murmurs of fear, crushing any protests. Separating from him then is the hardest thing that I have *ever* done.

“I love you; I chose you. Remember that.” I offer him a chaste kiss on the cheek, and then I dart past and into the hallway before I can think better of it. Rurik joins me, lifting his gaze to mine, but I can’t deal with his stare just now. I turn away, heading in the direction that I think we’re supposed to be going.

I must be right because he doesn’t stop me.

I swipe the tears from my face as we stride down the hallway together. *Fuck*. I can’t resist peering over my shoulder, at the closed door of Officer Hyt’s police cruiser. I can’t see Abraxas anymore, but I can smell him. I can feel him. A mournful howl fills the hallways, and my body breaks into goose bumps. *Run. Get back to him. Do whatever it takes*. Primal instincts flare



inside of me that I wasn't even sure I had, but I know better.

I know that I can't go back.

"Truly," Rurik begins, eyes closed as he stands still beside me, waiting for me to overcome the urge. "I am sorry, my princess." His eyes open, and he looks at me, and even though I can hear Abraxas' desperate howling, I'm not sorry to be marrying the Vestalis prince today. I'm only sorry that Abraxas can't be with me, that I won't be seeing him again for another week. That's the only thing I'm sorry about.

I don't respond, and we continue on, returning back to the embassy when I assumed we were headed for the ship.

Zero, Avril, and Connor are in the sitting area, gathered around a small table and learning some game that comes with glowing dice. It's obvious to me right away that Zero is cheating by the smirk on her pretty face.

"I'm not sure that I understand the rules," Connor hedges, pushing his glasses up his nose.

All three of them pause when we enter the room, and all three of them rise to their feet to bow.

There must be something truly tragic on my face because nobody offers up a smart remark.

"The princess and I will not be disturbed. You will wait here for us to return." He takes me by the arm and leads me toward the bedroom as Avril throws me a *what the fuck happened last night?* look that I purposely ignore.

We enter the bedroom, and the door swishes shut behind us.

"Please go bathe yourself," Rurik tells me, stepping up close behind me. He puts both of his hands on my upper arms, his lips near my neck. I shiver all over, but he doesn't pursue the moment any further, releasing my arms and stepping away. He turns to look at me, and his expression is contemplative, somewhat resigned. But in those dark eyes of his? There's a feral excitement that I know must be reflected in my own.

There's no getting out of this.

I was honest with Abraxas.

I want to mate with Rurik.

It's time to roll with the moment.

"Okay."

I don't argue. I head into the bathroom and the door shuts behind me, leaving me alone in a hothouse filled with exotic plants and tubs of steaming

water. I pick one of the tubs at random, strip down, and climb in, soaking myself in the sweet-smelling liquid and closing my eyes.

This is it.

Today's the day.

I just hope his parents don't eat us.

I wash Abraxas' scent off my skin—I'm sure that's what Rurik meant by sending me in here—and though the moment is bittersweet, I hold it together. No way in hell I'm letting the creepy galactic millipede queen know about my mate. This is *my* chance to protect *him*.

When I've finished washing—five times over and I swear that I can still smell musk—I climb out and dry off with a silken drying cloth that's folded and waiting nearby. I wrap the crimson silk around myself and exit the room.

Rurik is sitting on the bed, elbows on his knees, head in his hands, eyes closed. He doesn't react to my presence, but surely he knows I'm standing here? I shift uncomfortably, feeling like I should probably say something. The room we're in is deceptively lovely, wood paneling and dark green walls and a fireplace. It could be in an English manor and not a space station. Well, minus the ugly metal door, the wall panel beside it, and the paper-thin tablet on the desk.

"It's not that I don't like you," I tell him, and he finally lifts his head to look at me. Gazes lock. I drift and spin and fall into his eyes, catching my breath, an ache growing in my chest. "I don't want our feelings to be born out of some stupid chemicals that neither of us can control. How fair is that?" I move into the room and come over to sit beside him on the bed.

Huge mistake.

Heat catches, flares across my skin at a simple look from him. My sore cunt promises she's not so sore anymore, that she wants Rurik as much as she wants Abraxas. I look down at the floor, wiggling my toes against the carpet as I try to get my emotions under control. Rurik follows my attention and makes a small sigh of pleasure.

"I quite like your feet," he tells me, and I remember that his feet don't have toes, just that single claw at the end. "Your digits are appealing and sweet."

"I ..." My voice trails off, but I need to say this so he can understand it. "Doesn't it bother you? Your mannerisms shifted to fit mine. Your body morphed to match my wants. Where are you in all of this? It's not right that you should lose your sense of self because of me."

Rurik keeps his attention on my toes.

“I have entertained these thoughts myself,” he admits, sighing as his feeler drifts down and slides over my hair, like he just can’t help himself. I reach up and grab it, fingers curled around the ivory length, the black hairs underneath tickling my fingers. He grits his teeth at me, hands clenching into fists. “I do not know if my personality will change to your liking. As of now, it remains as it’s always been.”

That makes me smile.

“So you’ve always been a pompous dick?” It’s a silly question, meant more as a joke than anything else. Actually, he’s been accommodating and rather ... *sweet*. I’m the one causing trouble here. “I want us to like each other for who we are, for us to actually get to know and care about each other.”

He shudders as I release his feeler. I look down at my palm, and it’s slightly shimmery, oddly silken, like it’s covered with a fine, invisible powder. I stand up and turn to face Rurik, dropping the silk cloth to the floor. He hisses and then catches himself, turning away to stare at the wall, fingers digging into the blankets on the bed.

“You do not understand how tempting an offer you make,” he warns, but I do. We’re stuck together for life, me and him. I might be with Abraxas, but Rurik needs to eat. He needs to rule the Noctuida in an entirely different way than his father does. Really, it feels like there is some star-crossed fate shit going on because I doubt there’s a more honorable soul in all of the Vestalis. Frankly, it sounds like his species is, overall, sort of ... *shitty*. I can relate: I’m a human being, remember?

Every once in a while, there’s an extraordinary human. That’s what Rurik is, a rare gem in a storm of shit. Most Vestalis—like most people—are probably unremarkable, mildly selfish, but not uncaring. Some are evil. I think his parents are evil. They must be if they blew up a species like the Cartians, an entire planet full of people who gently study living creatures in their natural habitats, craft chunky hot pink headsets and bubblegum colored space suits, who drive glowing bikes and soak in clawfoot bathtubs.

“I can never *not* be Abraxas’ mate. I love him. I chose him first. I’ve always thought monogamy works best when it comes to love, but ... this is where we’re at. I’m willing to try to be your ... princess. Your queen.” I exhale. I know what I was grieving, and it wasn’t Abraxas’ absence. I mean,

it was, but I did believe Rurik when he told me that I'd get to see my mate again.

I was grieving the loss of that possible life on Jungryuk.

But I can't just stand here with the opportunities given to me and do nothing with them. That's how I started my business. It was an accidental thing. I stumbled into it. I rolled with it. I made myself successful, grew from an amateur hobbyist to a business owner.

If the Queen of the Noctuida has the power to fix all of this fucked-up shit, then I'd be an idiot not to take it. Besides, I *like* the idea of it. Who wouldn't want to be queen? It was never about that at all.

Rurik rises to his feet in front of me, reaching out with his bare fingers and smoothing my hair back from my shoulder. He takes note of where Abraxas bit me, and his pretty mouth turns down into an irresistible frown. *I want to kiss him.* But I don't because I want to see what he's planning on doing. I stand up, too, our toes touching, mine bare, his booted.

"Are you ready?" he asks me, still staring at my neck. With his eyes, as dark as they are, one might think it'd be hard to pinpoint where he was looking. But I always know. It's surprisingly easy to tell. "Today is going to be a challenge. Your lady-in-waiting is a useless waste of good oxygen, so there may be aspects as to which you should've been informed but were not." He skims his bare fingers over my arms, and I shiver. Now he's looking at my breasts, and there's a hunger in him that I've only ever seen in Abraxas ... and myself. *And maybe Officer Hyt, but that's neither here nor there.*

"I'm ready." I relax into his touch, and he sighs, that strange nocturnal whisper in his own language. I hear both the translated version, and the real one.

Rurik and I give into each other.

If I'd thought we'd done it before, slipped up here and there, I was wrong.

This time, without my guard up, without his guard up, it's a completely different experience.

A groan slips out of me, and I lean into him, my naked body against his uniform. He's wearing a different one today: long white coat, red buttons in the shape of droplets, a black belt and slacks and boots with gold buckles. I catch sight of epaulets on his shoulders before he drops his lips to my neck, whispering teeth and tongue against my skin.

His bite is hard, fierce, a possessive claiming that morphs easily into wild

pleasure. I let my head fall back, allowing him to mold me to him. What good are these adaptations of his, the ones that are tailor-made for me, if I don't *allow* myself to appreciate them?

The blood lace unfurls from his tongue and dives straight through me, grabbing hold of my heart from the inside. His left arm envelops the slenderest part of my waist while his right hand digs deeply into my hair. His wings ruffle, and the sweet smell of him—cardamom and honey, as always—soaks the room.

*We're ready. Only we can save each other. We have reason to fear. We have reason to rejoice.*

"Fuck me now," I murmur, slurring the words, tightening the tension in the room so that it becomes unbearable. "Do it here. In private. Right now."

Rurik makes a sound of frustration, withdrawing the threads from my neck and pulling back so he can look at me with a bloodied ruby jewel of a mouth. I trace my finger across that ripe fruit, exhaling violently when he bites down on it. A single fang pierces my skin, and dizziness sweeps me. Not the same kind that knocked me on my ass yesterday, but one crafted of desire and impossible longing.

"If that act would not result in physical torture at the hands of my parents, I would grant you your request." He shudders and jerks me tightly against him, holding me in his arms, smearing blood across my ear when he whispers into it. "I will *not* allow you to be hurt. Not by my parents. Not by my own hand. Not even by yours."

He kisses my neck, right over the wound he just made, and then draws his tongue down to my clavicle. As he goes, I see those glowing red strands spread across my skin. Hot veins trace over my body as he licks me, laving my flesh with a ready-made bloodred lace. His hands are warm against my lower back as he works, taking great care to leave no part of my skin untouched.

*Is he ... what is he doing?*

He draws his fervid tongue to my breast, sucking my nipple into his mouth. As he does that, he turns the pair of us so that his back is to the bed. Rurik drops his body onto the edge of the mattress, but leaves me standing between his spread thighs. The blood lace is on my skin, but it's inside of me, too. It burrows itself into my soul, humming and pulsing and throbbing. I can feel Rurik as if we're already having sex, as if he's already in my body and

ravaging it. *You are my only concern. Nothing else matters. I have never had anything else. You are the first person that is mine. You are the first person who has wanted me to be yours.* His thoughts.

An embarrassing groan rips from me as I dig my fingers into his soft hair. I haven't allowed myself to touch much of him before, so it's all new to me. I'm stunned by the silken nature of it, sliding my fingers into the virgin white. His hair is beautiful, falling around the sides of his face, down his back and between his wings. But really, it's not hair at all. It's *fur*. It's like a mane, and I love it. I'm tugging him against my breasts as he licks me all over, dropping his face down to my navel.

He knows me as well as I know him now, like we've been together forever, like we're both made of the same stardust.

*I can't wait to feel you inside of me. I want to know what you look like when you're falling apart, when you're climaxing. I want to know every part of you and how it differs from every part of me. I want to see what you can do with raw, unchecked power.* My thoughts.

Rurik draws me down to the bed, covering me with his body. His tongue never breaks contact with my skin, skirting my cunt and sliding over my legs, drawing back up to my hips, turning me slowly onto my belly so that he can nip the curve of my back. He pays extra special attention to my ass cheeks, kneading and squeezing them as he slides his wet tongue over the pale mounds.

I'm rolled onto my back once more, and it occurs to me that he's ... making a cocoon of me? Bathing me in bloody red lace. It's a strange thought. But then I finally break through my daze and realize that a dress is forming around me.

A dress made of delicate, fine red lace. Warm red lace. Lace that thrums with Rurik's heat and energy.

He looks up at me from the unbroken black of eyes.

And then he drops his mouth to my cunt.

It's just a tease, a firm strike of his tongue to my folds and clit, and he's moving on, but it's enough to bow my back, to curse my hands into claws that dig into the blankets in a scramble. I stare up at the wood-paneled ceiling because I can't bear to look at him and still remember what it means to breathe.

Rurik continues his work, ending with a bloody kiss that should freak me

out but doesn't.

"What did you ...?" I start, trying to sit up. He gently pushes me back, lifting both palms to his lips. I watch in fascination as he licks them, summoning more of those veins from his palms. And then he works with his hands, touching the lace that's on my body and drawing it out, creating a dress with his fingers and my blood, his blood, and a careful attention to detail.

The room is silent but for my own heavy panting.

When he finishes, using his nails to separate the lace from his palms, as if he's cutting silk thread from a spool, I push up to my elbows and find that I've got a high-necked red lace gown that's entirely see-through. My plump pussy is exposed through the fabric. My nipples are visible. But the dress itself? It's beautiful, if not a little strange. It's *connected* to me in places, like the lace itself digs into my skin. I can feel it pulling here and there, but it doesn't hurt.

If anything, it makes me want Rurik all the more.

"This will hide the Aspis' scent from the king and queen," he murmurs, and I notice he doesn't call them his parents this time. I sit up and grab onto his horns. Feelers. Fuck. Whatever they are. He grits his teeth and turns suddenly toward me, pushing me back onto the bed. He kisses me again, hips surging between my legs, and I gasp, a sound that he eats as quickly as it escapes. His hand is hitching up beneath the hot threads of the dress when—

A sound fills the room, like clanging bells, and pure, unfiltered rage flickers over Rurik's face. He narrows his eyes and grits his teeth again, drawing away from me suddenly. But I don't feel cold. I feel like he's all around me. Like he's holding me even though he's not.

He shoves up to his feet and hits the panel beside the door.

"This had better be fucking important," he snaps at Avril, and I almost feel sorry for her when she flinches.

"I know that you're not due back for a few hours yet, but your parents ..."

She trails off and spreads her hands helplessly. Rurik steps back and hits a button, and the door slams shut.

He turns to look at me with a deep resolve in his eyes.

"You are supposed to be nude for the mating ritual, but for now, you must wear this dress until you are fully permeated with my scent. The king and queen cannot ever know that you mated another male or would wish to mate

another male.”

I nod, putting my feet on the floor off the side of the bed. When I stand up and turn toward the tall mirror opposite the armoire, I gasp, hands flying to my mouth. The dress itself is a Gothic dream, high-necked and impossibly delicate. A ruffled collar at the throat, a tight tuck at the waist, a flared skirt that trails on the floor behind me. The entire thing shimmers with heat and energy, gently luminescing in a way that reminds me of Abraxas.

It’s beautiful. It’s strange. It’s—

“See-through,” I say, peering at my very obvious bits showing through the design. “Nothing is left to the imagination.”

Rurik opens the armoire and grabs a beautiful white cloak, stepping up behind me and throwing it over my shoulders. It has a red fur clasp at the neck that mimics his natural form. When he puts his arms around my waist from behind, I find myself looking back at our combined reflection in wonder.

Where my skin is a soft, gentle peach color with a hint of pink, his is the absolute absence of color. He’s as white as oblivion, like fresh milk or saltwater pearls or sculptures in alabaster.

“Did you hear me, princess? You are due to be *naked* for the remainder of the day. This is a good turn for you.” He spins me around, brackets my face, and brings his tongue to my skin again. My hands lock his wrists and my eyes close. When I open them again, I can feel something on my face, but I can’t see it. “I do not wish to share your nakedness with others either, but today, you and I are partners fighting against a fate we cannot stop nor see, but must endure all the same.” He lets me turn around to see his handiwork, and I find myself in a blood lace masquerade mask.

Wow.

Fuck.

“Shoes?” I whisper, secretly hoping, I guess, that he might lavish my feet with attention, too. He grabs a pair of red silken slippers from the armoire and helps me to get them on.

When he stands up suddenly and looks down at me, I’m lost to him completely.

“Throughout this next week, whenever you are scared or confused, angry or in pain, I want you to turn to me. Take solace in me. In all of this, I am your ally and your companion, your lover and your mate.” He presses a bare



hand to my cheek before stepping back and offering his arm.

With one last swallow of apprehension, I reach out and take it.



“Give it to me straight,” I whisper as we walk through the hall in the direction of the ship, a full entourage trailing behind us. “What’s going on?” I look over at Rurik, and he looks right back. The briefest hint of a smile kisses his lips before it falls entirely away.

“Neither of us have returned to the ship since we docked.” He hesitates for a few seconds, but never slows his confident, easy stride. “And I destroyed my face monitor.” He taps two fingers against the side of his head, and I remember that he took that odd face piece with the red screen and smashed it on the floor, leaving a smear of blood. Before I can ask what its purpose was, he fills me in. “My parents can’t see anything that happens on the World Station. The only method with which they have to monitor me is that device. I destroyed it and they will want to know why.”

“What point is there in monitoring you? You’re a grown-ass man,” I tell him, and Rurik swivels one of his feelers in amusement.

“Perhaps, but I am now the Imperial Prince, heir to the throne. It would not do to leave me unwatched.” Rurik stops outside the door to *The Korol*, guards filling the hallway on either side. Avril, Zero, and Connor are behind us with even more guards behind them. Rurik turns to me and exhales, eyes searching my face carefully. “I will handle this; you do not need to be afraid.”

He removes his glove and presses his hand to the scanner. The door slides open revealing that eerie antechamber with the spiral staircase and the

pulsing veins on the ceiling. Meaty growths cover most of the wood-paneled walls, and I give an involuntary shudder. *Get it together, Eve. Once you step on that ship, they can see, hear, and smell you. Maybe they can even see you now?*

I straighten up and pretend like I don't feel the weight of too many combined stares.

As soon as I stepped out of the bedroom earlier, I got a full reaction to the new dress from my 'crew'. Connor blushed and looked away, adjusting his glasses. Avril smiled and clapped her hands together like a proud parent. Zero just barely bit back some bitchy comment about my ass. I mean, I can't *know* that's what she was thinking, but I've got a pretty good idea. The Vestalis don't seem scandalized by the outfit, but the guards at least have been staring at me like some sort of savior from a land far, far away.

I can feel the weight of expectation hanging heavy over my shoulders.

*Deep breath, Eve.* The prince's pheromones fill my lungs, soothing me.

Rurik steps onto the ship, and I follow him. The blue veins wrapped around the staircase banister dim and then flare with a bright glow as we head for the first set of doors, entering the room with the bloodred chandelier.

Nobody else follows us in, and the large door behind us glides shut.

*You've got this. You can do this. Don't freak out.*

The round door to the throne room opens, revealing that strange dim light, the numerous flickering screens, the millipede queen. She doesn't greet us the way she did last time, like we were old friends. Well, more like frenemies or some shit. This time, she doesn't make any move to come toward us, waiting by the king's side as we enter the room.

Rurik drops into a bow, and I follow him, the diaphanous lace of my dress settling around me.

"Rise." The king is *furios*. Gone is the jolly giant laughter, and the fond looks. I follow along when Rurik stands, keeping my head down, doing my best to keep the very real fear at bay. I have the feeling that his parents wouldn't hesitate to kill us both if it would suit them better to see us dead. "Did you enjoy your time aboard the World Station?" he asks.

It's a loaded question; I wouldn't know how to answer it.

"Very much so, My Imperial King. My mate and I spent many long hours in one another's arms, learning of the other's culture, anticipating a long and fruitful reign." Rurik sounds so calm, so composed. You'd never know that I

abandoned him to almost-fuck a cop and then super-fuck a dragon. *He deserves better than that, doesn't he?* “My mate is shy and tender with her affections, so I felt it best to—”

A throbbing red artery peels off the wall and lashes out toward Rurik, cutting him across the cheek and drawing blood. He pulls his lips back in a snarl, but says nothing. The red strand rubs over his cheek, absorbing the dripping blood before retreating back to its place.

My mouth gapes open as I finally lift my head to stare the two royals down.

“Don't you fucking touch him!”

I know my mouth gets me into trouble. My mouth has *always* gotten me into trouble. For example, shouting at the Tusk Man that was dragging me by the hair got me properly punched in the face, didn't it? And now, here? I'm *asking* to be hurt. I actually *step in front* of Rurik without thinking.

Yep. TSTL (too stupid to live). That's me.

“What did he do wrong? He did what I asked him to do, something to make me feel comfortable, and now you're *punishing* him for it?” I keep going because ... well, I don't know. I guess it just sucks seeing Rurik dressed down because I made choices without regard to anyone but myself, and he's the one who has to pay for it. That's not fair.

His mother makes a strange buzzing sound that translates as laughter in my ear. Her mandibles clack together as she slithers over the floor toward us, thousands of pearly legs skittering. She's the color of soap bubbles or mother-of-pearl, a scintillating soft rainbow. Unfortunately, the color does absolutely nothing to make her less creepy.

She goes to wrap me up in her coils when Rurik grabs me and pulls me against him, tucking me close.

“Mother, I beg of you. My mate is new to the Noctuida. She is not like other mates. Until recently, she believed her people to be alone in the universe. You cannot fault her for her mistakes.” He holds me like he'd give his life for mine. I believe it, too.

I can't wait to get to know him as a person.

“I do admire your devotion to one another,” the queen says, curling her body over the pair of us so that she can look at me with an upside down face. Ugh. She's like ... creepy cute? Like, she should be cute with those big, round eyes and that pretty skin, but really, all she makes me want to do is

turn all the lights on and hide under the covers.

It's so dimly lit in here, and it's musty and humid and hot. It feels desperate and sad and not like a place I'd want to spend my time. *What happens when Rurik takes the throne? Will he ...* I don't go there in my head. Not yet.

"But we had feared you were going to flee your duties. A deserter is better off dead, Rurik." His mother keeps her eyes on me, but I never allow that stare to break. I hold it in challenge. I will *not* be intimidated. If I'm the next queen—and it seems like I'll be taking her place soon enough—then I don't have to take crap from her or anyone else. Never have, not about to start doing it now.

"You know I agree with you wholeheartedly mother, but I—" Rurik stops talking when I lift my thumb up, brushing it across the wound on his cheek. It's bleeding again. I have the urge to lick it. *Fuck it.* I'm on a sentient alien spaceship in a throne room covered in meat with a rainbow millipede queen MIL glaring daggers at me. Why the hell not?

I lift up on my tiptoes and press my lips to the cut, flicking my tongue out to gather Rurik's blood. His thoughts flood into my brain.

*Ah, my mate. The one I've been waiting for. Your affections fill me with something I have never experienced before. When I fuck you, I will be tender. When I fuck you, you will know me, and I will know you.*

Rurik blinks at me in surprise when I pull back, and then his hands are in my hair, and our mouths are pressed together. His tongue invades me, and my dress pulses hot, the threads connected directly to my skin, my heart, my nipples. *Fuck, that feels good.* His parents don't interrupt us, and I quite literally forget that they're there.

That's how you know, you know? Like, you've got the right guy when his kiss can make you forget the oversized moth king, the not-so-thinly veiled threats, and the many-legged monster who hates you.

It's only when Rurik's hand hitches up my dress, gloved fingers on my naked thigh, that his father clears his throat. The sound echoes loudly from the big man's throne, and the pair of us draw back from one another, both of us blinking like we're in a daze.

"It is both their wedding and their first mating today," the king says gently, holding out a hand for his own mate. The millipede queen retreats back to his side and curls around both him and the throne that it maybe, sort of, almost

seems like he's *attached* to. Is that what's happening? Is Rurik's dad fucking sealed to this ship?

Panic hits me, but I crush it down. One step at a time.

"Yes," his mother allows on the end of a long sigh, "but understand that it will not be appreciated if you attempt to hide your activities from us again. Next time, you will receive a punishment that I guarantee you will not like. I dare say that you will *hate* it."

"You are dismissed," his father allows, waving a large hand in our direction.

Rurik offers a horizontal bow at the waist, and I follow suit, allowing him to take my arm to lead me from the room. I can tell we're both ready to breathe a sigh of relief once we get out of there and the door is closed behind us, but we can't. Not here. His parents can as easily see us now as they did when we were inside the throne room.

"Where is the ..." I can't even make myself say it. *Where is it that I'm supposed to fuck you? I want it to be in private, but it won't be. People will be watching. Your horrible parents will be watching.*

Rurik turns to me and takes my face in his hands again, gazing down at me with an expression of such undeserved gratefulness that my stomach turns. He can't look at me like that when I've done nothing at all to help him, when I've only humiliated him, when I'm mated to another guy.

"Not once in the whole of my life has anyone stood up for me," he breathes, and then he takes my lips with such tenderness that I once again forget where I'm standing and what's going on. "You are a treasure, my princess."

My cheeks turn pink, and he smiles at that, but I pretend not to notice.

"Not that I can back my shit up," I hedge, fidgeting slightly. Rurik releases me, but the heat of my gown keeps me warm in his absence.

"Not now perhaps," he tells me with another half-smile. "But all you need do is exist, and I will give you all the power you need." He weaves his fingers into my hair and sighs heavily. "It is time."

His voice cracks on the words, and the translator stutters with static.

"Now, let us be wed." His face darkens, feelers pressing tight against the sides of his heads, wings ruffling. "Stars, mate, it is *time*."



“I can’t make the wedding happen any faster, Your Imperial Majesty,” Avril is mumbling as we walk down the hall in the direction of the royal suites. Hmm. Yeah, so. Think both Rurik and I said and did some things we wouldn’t have if we’d known we were going to have to spend time *alone* together before the wedding.

“*Stars, mate, it is time.*”

I chuckle as my eyes flick to Rurik’s face. He ignores Avril’s response to his crankiness. We both know why he’s cranky: he’s embarrassed.

Vestalis don’t blush—they’re always as white as a dead ghost’s fucking skeleton—but I *swear* some color pinked in his cheeks earlier. He got all throaty and sexy and said, “*Stars, mate, it is time,*” and ... and then it wasn’t because his parents called us in hours ahead of schedule.

“You said you’re taking on my traits, right?” I ask him, trying not to grin mischievously. But oh hell, this is *great*. He doesn’t seem so pompous or lordly when he’s flushing pink. “Is it possible you developed a blush?” I lean in toward him, hands twisted together behind my back.

Rurik offers me a discomfited expression in response.

“If you would give me time to consider the matter, my princess,” he breathes quietly, tugging at the fingers of his gloves. I’m striding cheerfully beside him in a gown that’s *hot*, like physically, it’s really fucking warm. I can *feel* my fiancé’s heart through the threads, and he talks like a grotesquely wealthy duke in a historical romance novel. My mood is surprisingly chipper despite the circumstances.

“My dad is into that kind of stuff,” I tell him, looking back down at the floor and somehow not caring how naked I really am right now. I feel pretty badass in the dress, so ... there’s that. “Sorry, my mouth is moving faster than my brain. I meant historical romance novels, my dad likes them. You remind me of the dukes in his favorite books.” I shrug my shoulders and gift Rurik with another coy look.

We have to get past the flirty new-relationship stage *fast*.

He's staring strangely at me again, but his antennae keep twitching in annoyance as the others engage in a very loud, very rude conversation ahead of us.

"Your father sounds like an interesting human. I like him already."

"I like you," I retort and he narrows his eyes at me. "And I like when guys blush, so I'm just curious if it's possible for an alien to blush?"

The look Rurik communicates to me says there's no chance in the whole of the Noctuida that he's going to answer me. Not the second part anyway.

"I like you as well, Eve. If you are brave enough to reject me, then I know you are being honest when you say such things. It is appreciated." Okay. Not as embarrassing as the stars-mate thing, but close to it. I clear my throat, and Rurik smiles knowingly.

"What about you?" I ask, looking between him and the others. He follows the direction of my gaze and scowls when Connor stares back at the pair of us like he's deciding whether to patronize or pity us. The newest member of our crew chuckles condescendingly before turning forward again. "Anything you're curious about?"

"I am curious if it is possible for a human male to be quiet." Rurik grits his teeth when he says it, but though I can tell he's imperiously annoyed, it's not with me. It's Connor. He's ... well, *worse* than Avril if you can believe it.

"It's incredible, the complexity of their society. They have all of this technology, but is it much more advanced than what we use on Earth? I'll tell you the answer to that: not really. It's not much different here, is it?" Connor adds wild gestures along with his words, like he's trying to win a debate.

Avril appears skeptical.

"Connor, they're giant *moths* with meat ships. They've got our asses kicked. And didn't you just spend three full Earth days in a tube of hot pink goop?"

"Despite all of this"—Connor gestures around with a finger—"they allow themselves to be literally *ruled* by some mythology about fated mates. This is nothing more than adaptable biology—"

"I will tell you something, *human male*," Rurik snarls, moving just a little faster so that he can walk directly between the two medics. "Soon enough, I will wed my female and you will *see* what is so different about a Vestalis mating. You will cry and beg for your soulmate and wish that your pathetic species was capable of such an intense and star-felt love." Rurik smirks while



I blush like crazy, and then he tosses me a sly look over his shoulder. *You're flirty, aren't you, Moth Guy?*

Connor scoffs, which only draws Rurik's attention again.

The prince drops his lips next to the man's ear, but speaks loudly enough that we can all hear.

"Not enough for you?" Rurik tsks his tongue. "Then let me add to my argument. We must travel to the planet Dome tomorrow, so that the rest of the wedding celebrations can commence. This ship will soon make a tricky maneuver in order to accomplish that. It is what us primitive extraterrestrial life refer to only as a reverent whisper. That is, a *star-jump*. It allows us to cross vast distances in mere *minutes*. We will go inside of one star and come out of another. It is painful and makes you question your very existence. After we have completed the star-jump, I will again ask if you find the human race superior to the Vestalis."

Connor turns away, completely unconvinced. I take that star-jump bit as a joke. Because if it's not ... I start to sweat and use a single finger to tug at the lace collar of my dress.

"Well, I guess if that happens, you can ask me again." Connor, this pale, skinny-ass guy, has the audacity to *smirk* at my prince. He's defying his character stereotype and it's pissing me off. *Who the fuck does this guy think he is to smirk at the Imperial Prince?* "But the soulmate thing? You, a reasonable enough man, should be able to admit that—"

Connor runs right into someone that's frantically coming around the corner.

It's Rurik's brother, Brot. I remember the guy since he's the one I told to fuck off.

"Filthy Earthen breeder—" The grumbling man stops short as Connor looks up. Something happens, like a flicker in the corner of my vision. It's heat, searing over my skin, a chemical reaction akin to throwing a match into a room filled with gasoline vapor. Hmm. "No."

Brot flattens his dark antennae against the sides of his head.

Connor falls to his knees.

"Conn, are you okay?" Avril is snapping her fingers in front of his face, but he slaps her hand away. He scrambles up to a standing position, mouth gaping open.

"It's true," he whispers, and then he looks back at me suddenly. His

expression reads *I'm so fucking sorry that I judged you*. Connor very slowly returns his attention to the other Vestalis prince. "You know me, don't you?" he asks slowly, and Brot makes a run for it.

He literally shoves Connor out of the way and keeps walking, as if there wasn't some strange, creepy moment between them like ten seconds ago.

"Are they mates?" I ask, because I feel like I've just seen something private and intimate that shouldn't have occurred in such a random way in a crowded hallway.

"I ... do not know." Rurik looks down at me as I catch up to him, his face softening. He brushes a bit of auburn hair back from my forehead. "I did not mean to sidestep your earlier question, my princess. I was merely caught up in embarrassment, and I did not know what to say, so I deflected."

Oh. Wow. He's ... honest. I like it.

"It's fine," I start, more concerned with Connor and the possibility that he might have a Vestalis soulmate, too. I'd like that, I guess. Having someone to talk to. I'll admit: I'm hoping for it. Rurik continues, putting a hand to the side of my face.

"It is entirely possible ... No, it is *probable* that I will develop a shame-activated skin discoloration like you have." He doesn't seem at all concerned with Connor. Not in the slightest. Nor his most favoritest brother Brot.

"Why did he leave me here?" Connor is asking, looking back down the hallway like a person who's been kicked repeatedly in the nuts. He turns to me, as if I might be able to help him. "Why did he leave me, Your Majesty?"

Yep. This is *actually* happening.

"Connor, I have no idea." I start to feel less silly all of a sudden, until I'm just sick to my stomach instead. Connor is staring at me not like he thinks this is a curse, but like it's a *gift*. My breath catches, and I look away, fisting a hand in the lace at the front of my dress.

"How long until the wedding?" I ask again, because I suddenly can't wait any longer. I want to follow this feeling and see where it goes. My eyes shift to Rurik's, and I know he's been feeling this way for *weeks* now. Since he licked my blood in the market tent.

I should've gone to him then.

If I'd called out to him, his eyes would've widened, and he would've shoved past Avril to get to me, scooped me up in his arms, brought me to the royal suites. He'd have healed me and fed me and made love to me. I

could've *waited* for an explanation if I'd just shown up here first. Because I wouldn't have even cared or needed it.

I don't regret Abraxas at all—I'm glad it happened the way it did—but that was another choice I could've made back then. I could tell something was off with Moth Guy from three seconds in. *And Officer Hyt is right: they do exaggerate. It only takes two.* Two seconds to fall in love.

"He left me," Connor whispers, and his voice is an absolute landslide of devastation. He looks up suddenly and draws Rurik's cavalier attention. "Please let me go see him. Please give me express permission to traverse this ship, to demand my mate's attention, and to force him to listen to me talk for at least thirty minutes. I won't even touch him."

"I easily have the power to do that and more," Rurik admits, a frown blooming on bloodstained lips. "But you insulted the Vestalis as well as myself. Most importantly, you insulted my mate. I do not know if I wish to grant these boons to someone who does not believe in the mate bond."

"It's okay, Connor." I wave my hand at him. "You have permission for all of that. You also have permission to kick Brot in the balls if you want."

Connor grins at me.

"Might need them, so I'll kick something else." He fixes his glasses and says softly, "thanks boss." He disappears down the hallway as Zero glances my way with something akin to pride in her expression. It fades quicker than it arrived, a flicker that I'll doubt ever happened by tomorrow.

"You truly believe the brat deserves such favors?" Rurik asks me, but he doesn't challenge my authority. I like that. "As Brot is my favorite of all my brothers, I will bestow upon him a long honeymoon that gets both him and Connor off my ship."

I freeze where I am, just stop walking in the middle of the hallway. *Off my ship. His ship. Our ship.*

"Will this cause some sort of trouble with the throne?" I ask, imagining all of human history and every bloody ascension story I've ever heard. "Like, because I delayed our mating for so long, Brot has a mate now—"

Rurik shushes me with a finger to my lips.

"Brot is mated with a male; they cannot bear heirs. It will be an easy choice that I should be promoted over him. Otherwise, he will forever sit the throne without a successor and my other brothers will proceed to fight with one another. If any finds their mate, they will set themselves up as the true

heirs and a civil war will ensue. This is ... simpler for everyone involved. We ascend; I give you an heir immediately.”

*Not simpler for us*, I think. I’m glad to be queen, but ... we also don’t have a choice. I’m not comfortable when I don’t have choices. Just look at the Rurik thing. The insta-love made me feel like I didn’t have a choice. But I realize I do. It just isn’t the choice I thought it was.

“We *really* need to have sex quickly, don’t we?” I clarify, wondering what nightmares might ensue if another brother showed up with a mate. We have—what did Avril say earlier—three Earth hours until the wedding? Anything could happen. If something does, I feel like people might die. I definitely don’t want those people to be us.

I glance over my shoulder to see that Connor is entirely gone from sight.

“Did he just ... are they *mates*? Where the fuck is my star-destined chosen alien soulmate?” Avril is murmuring in bewildered frustration as Zero shakes her head in shame.

“It is unfortunate that my people are no longer around. We sought only to discover the truth of the science behind the mate bonds, and we were *punished* for it.” She grits her teeth, but Rurik doesn’t send her to the floor in a mechanical malfunction. He just lets her say it. “There *is* a science behind it; I believe it is real. We only wanted to find out why.”

Rurik exhales. Is that why the Vestalis nuked the Cartians? Damn, that’s savage.

“My parents are quite old-fashioned; they believe some things should stay magic.” He looks at me, and I look at him, and ... I can feel it. *Magic*. And I know that it’s not. I get that it probably has to do with pheromones and chemistry and biology, but it doesn’t matter because it *feels* like magic. And what is magic if not for something real that’s simply unexplainable at the current moment? “And you’d best remember that I am *only* giving you a pass for your insolence because it is my wedding day, and I do not wish to search for a new bodyguard.”

Rurik gives Zero a *very* strong look of warning, and my heart warms toward him.

He knows his parents could be listening, and he doesn’t want her to get herself into trouble that he can’t get her out of. I love him for that.

Um. I mean ... I love that *about* him.

We are so not there yet. *Stupid insta-love pheromones*.

“Connor has a mate, and I’m a *handmaiden*.” Avril growls and rakes her fingers through her hair, taking off ahead of us. Zero follows and ... I cannot be left standing here alone with Rurik, so I chase after.

Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it. I’m thinking about it. “*Stars mate, it is time.*” Wow. Damn it. Wow.

We continue down the hall together toward the royal suites, but the energy is tense. It’s worse once we’re inside and my only two companions retreat immediately into my bedroom, the door swishing shut behind them. *You’re both terrible wingwomen!* I think-scream at them, but I can’t scream-scream it because he’s ... he’s there. I’m here. The room is hot and thick with unsaid truths. Jane was right: it’s the sex thing. Again.

It’s just me and Rurik in the foyer with an empty honeymoon suite behind him, door open, bed just *right there* and waiting to be dirtied with a human-alien tangle of naked limbs and ... *His cock with those red claspers and all the weirdness that comes with them.*

My whole body itches.

Something is happening with my dress.

Without moving, without even touching me, Rurik steals threads from the bottom of the dress, redirecting the lace to slither upward, over my thighs, unfurl across my sensitive cunt. I gasp and bite my bottom lip, drawing blood. He sighs from his spot across the room, like he can smell it. He finishes rearranging my blood lace, leaving my dress a little shorter and gifting me panties that squeeze and nurture a violent ache between the thighs.

Rurik is basically *fucking me* with his blood lace.

“I ...” I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything. I just stand there as he winds the threads more tightly around me, grinding hot rough lace against my folds and clit. I put a hand out on the wall to keep my feet. My cheeks heat up, and I close my eyes. I can hear him shifting his wings, a soft shush that makes me shiver.

Pheromones hit me in a wave, and I come that easily. An orgasm strikes me right in the lower belly, and my eyes roll back, bones going limp, heat sweeping through me in a cleansing blaze.

I almost hit the floor, but Rurik manages to catch me before I fall.

“What are you—” I start as he presses me against the wall, kissing me into silence.

*He’s been waiting for me to accept him all along. I’ve accepted him. This*

*is ... my reward.*

I'm in absolute bliss as he kisses me. Have, in fact, wanted him to kiss me for weeks. Thought about him randomly but often. Related any important event back to him. When Abraxas was dying, and I wondered how to go about getting someone to help me save him, who did I immediately conjure up?

Rurik.

I wanted to go find Rurik to save the love of my life. I *trusted* that he would do it. He'll do it now. He fucking wants me, and he isn't afraid to let himself just love me. It's a gift to him, too, and he *likes* it. Like Connor, he *also* thinks we're very lucky, no matter the negatives that come along with the mate bond.

Because it's worth it.

It's worth it, no matter what. Anything.

He leans his face down to mine, pressing our foreheads together. My peach skin against the triangle of black between his eyes. My hands find his hair, dig into it, hold him there.

"Three hours?" I whisper, and then I groan. "I don't want to wait three hours."

"What are three more?" Rurik murmurs as he turns his face into my neck. I can *feel* him smiling. He's so goddamn human right now, it's crazy. It makes no difference to me then *what* he is. He's an adult. He's sentient. He's mine. That's it.

"Can you just hold me here?" I ask, putting my hands over the epaulets on his shoulders. "Against the wall like this?"

"I appreciate you thinking you had a choice," he teases. "Now that you have given me permission, it will be impermissible for you to walk away from this."

I can't even respond to that. We actually do just stay as we are, for so long that Avril and Zero open up the bedroom door to find us posed in a compromising position.

"Oh." Avril snickers, and I want to punch her in the face so badly that it's a physical ache, almost as intense as the one throbbing between my legs.

I am fucking my king today. My pussy will *make* him king. Literally. Fucked to the throne. By me. That's *insane*, but isn't that the basic truth of it?

"Never in our research could we find a female of any species who would

decline a Vestalis mate. We even had scientists leave our field after running into their own mates.” Zero gives me a disappointed look and now I *know* that I imagined that flicker of pride earlier. “You are by far the longest holdout recorded in our entire history—nearly five hundred years’ worth—of Vestalis study by the Cartian race.”

“Th...anks?” It feels like that was a compliment actually. My palm drags down the front of Rurik’s jacket, fingers curling underneath his belt and giving it a gentle tug.

“However long we were intended to wait for the wedding,” Rurik growls, turning a mean look over his shoulder. “Go and tell the king and queen that it is *now*.”

“Y-yes, Your Imperial Majesty.” Avril throws a hasty but not disrespectful bow, and takes off like a bat out of hell. Rurik looks back to me and smiles, like he’s had a lick of power and likes it.

And me? I appreciate the taste of pure and violent authority on his lips.

“Stars, mate, it’s time?” I repeat, and he bites me in the lower lip, causing my body to spasm like I might very well come again. There’s nothing but wildflower honey and fresh cardamom in my lungs. It’s making me slightly dizzy with the smell of it. He whispers roughly against my ear.

“*I will fuck you so hard that you will forget that Abraxas exists.*” He sucks the blood from my lip and then licks it. “*And I am not a liar. You know I am telling the truth.*”

I laugh at that.

He’s right: I *can* tell what he’s feeling right now. I know *he* believes that to be the truth. It has yet to be seen. When I was with Abraxas, I forgot *Rurik*, and that doesn’t seem like something that will ever be possible again.

“Prove it.”



Rurik and I wait in our room's antechamber, side-by-side. I'm so nervous that I'm sweating, fully aware of my bits on display. Only, nobody has looked at me sexually except for ... the prince. And oh, the way he looks at me. I could die in his gaze. His stare is a touch. His arm in mine is a promise. His gaze is a tantalizing threat.

"I can't wait any longer," I whisper, and this time, Rurik doesn't try to hide the way his gaze rakes my mostly naked form. His attention lingers on the swells of my breasts, the dark spots of my nipples, the small patch of hair between my thighs. He returns his attention to my eyes, sucking me into them, dropping me into endless night. "But I'm also terrified of this whole ritual. Wedding. Whatever."

"Do not be," he breathes, and I feel myself relaxing at his words. Now that I'm not fighting the insta-love happy chemicals, they're rather soothing. I feel like I've downed an entire bottle of my favorite pinot noir—oh God, those Willamette Valley vintages, ugh—and my muscles unclench, my breathing slows, my racing pulse relaxes to a steady trot. "This first time will be challenging, but I will take care of you." He turns his face fully over to mine. "The second time, I will show you that there is a heaven beyond the stars."

Err.

Um.

I turn away from him and stare at the door, waiting for ... my wedding?



I'm getting married? It hits me all of a sudden, how much I miss my mom and her words of encouragement accompanied by her incredible cooking, my dad and his lame jokes and his obsession with hand-washing his car, my baby brother Nate and his dedication to all things fantasy, my older sister, Jenna, and her lack of personality beyond law or marrying well, my middle sister, Kari, and her weird Etsy store that sells knitted dicks, and my other sister, Maribel, that I rarely see because she lives in France but sends me really nice soaps for Christmas.

They should be here.

I miss them.

I grab Rurik's hand and squeeze hard. He doesn't seem to mind. Actually, he squeezes me right back.

The doors open.

*I can't breathe.*

Avril is waiting off to one side, dressed in another stiff cloak, full makeup, a beautiful red dress. Zero waits beside her, wearing a similar outfit. They've both changed, and Connor is with them again, also dressed prettily for the occasion, but in black slacks and a red jacket. I figure at this point that he's also my handmaiden or ... handman ... handdude ... handyman? Anyway, I think I own his ass—quite literally. *Officer Hyt is not going to be pleased that another one of the illegally abducted humans has found a mate.*

“Any luck, Connor?” I whisper as we stand there in silence, waiting for some sort of cue.

“He hates me,” Connor whispers back, eyes filling with tears as he drags his jacket sleeve over his face, forgetting about his glasses and knocking them messily askew. “I don't even like guys, and I got paired up with one, and he doesn't *want* me?”

Now I'm pretty sure that he's talking to himself. I decide to let it be. We can chitchat later.

The blood lace—it's easy to see why Rurik's is called blood lace, but it's a *huge* stretch to call his father's ugly pattern anything less than meaty gore—on the walls and ceilings dims. Moths flutter down the hallway, hundreds of them. Thousands.

“What the hell?” I start, but Rurik leans down to whisper to me.

“These are drones, to film the occasion so that the whole of the Noctuida may participate in watching us be mated.”

The moths flutter around our doorway in a cloud. One lands on my shoulder, and I resist the urge to brush it off. It's cute—a little fuzzy vestal tiger moth—but knowing that it's *filming* me right now? That thousands or millions or *more* creatures might be watching?

I feel a bit dizzy.

Rurik waits for the blood lace in the room to brighten back up, and then we exit our open doorway together. He takes us down a long, wide hallway with our small entourage trailing behind, moths fluttering prettily around us.

It's dead silent for several minutes there.

Dead fucking silent.

We approach another set of doors, and they slide open to reveal—

My mind empties.

There's an entire *jungle* on this ship, a hothouse of plants and streams and decorative benches with wing-notches cut from the backrests. There are windows on either side of the large, domed room, the left one showing off a beautiful (if terrifying) vista of the World Station and the planet it's attached to.

Also, the room is *full* of Vestalis and their mates. There are easily thousands of Vestalis males with an assortment of companions that range from Falopex to Mollusca (eww, slugs) to galactic millipedes. There are those shrouded bony-handed creatures with the beaks, a woman with dragonfly wings and insect eyes, a girl with a striped lemur tail, someone that looks vaguely like a swan with an uncomfortably long neck.

I stop walking. Rurik stops walking.

It's silent in here, too, but for the soothing trickle of a manufactured stream, a dripping of condensation from car-sized leaves overhead, and the gentle whisper of moth-drone wings.

Another panic attack rests in my chest, crouched there and waiting to leap out at the most inopportune moment. *I've already embarrassed Rurik enough. I've fucking got this.* He turns to me as if to comfort me, but I lift my chin and take a step forward without his help.

I catch a brief smile on his lips before we're moving again, walking a meandering stone path through the greenery, past brightly colored flowers with waxy petals, past small waterfalls that make me miss Abraxas, but mostly past the prying eyes of way too many people.

"These are the gentry," he murmurs, low and throaty. I feel like Rurik is

holding back somehow, but I can't explain why I think that. Not on his words, but ... something. There's a gentle, tender strain in his face, like a guy with an erection in his pants that he doesn't want anyone to know about.

Oh. Maybe not *like* a guy with an erection, but ... maybe he *is* a guy with an erection.

"The gentry," I repeat, wishing I really could shoot Avril into the nearest dying star. "Like, the nobles?"

"Mated Vestalis are elevated in status over their unmated counterparts," Rurik continues in low tones, and I just assume it must be okay for him to talk about this stuff even while being filmed and in public. He knows what he's doing better than I do.

"I see."

I'm trembling now.

But not just because there are too many eyes on me.

Because I want him.

And I feel like if I can't have him here, now, today, this very second, that I'm going to die. How I *ever* resisted him in the first place is beyond me. My blood pulses, *pushes* at my skin. Itches. *Hurts*. I rub at my own arms, and Rurik notices, exhaling violently.

He takes my hand again and we run.

We run right off the curving path and through the dirt. Splash through another stream. Duck under a thick cluster of woody vines. Dart past a giant tulip with teeth. *Oh my*. The crowd splits easily for us, and we stumble out another set of doors on the other side ... into a neighborhood.

I come to a halt, forcing Rurik to stop along with me. The moth drones swarm around us, as beautiful as they are invasive.

The hallway here is as big as a street back home, houses lining the glass walls on either side. *Houses*. They're all made of white metal, but they have windows and front porches, and there are trees. Yards. Gardens. The ceiling above us is made entirely of glass, too, starlight filtering prettily over the red, white, and black of the alien crowd.

I stare down the length of the hall to see that the entire space is packed shoulder to shoulder. Men and boys—all Vestalis, obviously—fill it. But the thoroughfare down the middle? It's empty.

It's disconcerting. And alien. And *strange*.

But I don't care.

Rurik is mine, and I'm his. He cares little about his own people right now. I don't think he cares about them at *all*. Everything he's doing is for me. Becoming king. Taking the throne. *The throne*.

He's caressing my knuckles and looking back at me, waiting for me to follow him.

I think about him sitting down in that horrible throne room and finding himself alone in the dark with a bunch of flickering screens. Feeling and seeing everything but never experiencing life himself.

*No wonder his parents want to force the throne onto him.*

My lips purse. I vow to myself that I will *not* allow that to happen to him. I don't care what I have to do. If I have to blow up this entire ship to keep him from that fate, I'll do it.

Zero, Avril, and Connor have just now caught up to us. The former by Rurik's choice (he can control how fast she runs), and the other two because they're out of shape. All three are panting. I don't blame them. I'm out of shape, too. Only ... there's something I'm running toward that I really, *really* want.

To bond with my mate.

"Your Majesties, wait, please," Avril gasps out, but I just grin.

"No, I don't think we will." I smile at them, and then I turn and run faster. Rurik easily keeps up with my pace, the cloud of moth drones sweeping along at our heels.

The street feels like it'll never end, branching out in four-way intersections every so often. The view from every angle is of space, space, and more space. So they're *like* streets, but they are nothing like streets. Whatever. I don't care right now. I can let the heavy weight of astrophobia hit me later. My skin feels like a cocoon ready to burst—pun intended—and all I want to do is fuck Rurik.

I truly and honestly consider grabbing him and dragging him into a flower-filled alien spaceship yard. I'd let him throw me against the glass wall at the rear of one of the properties. He could fuck me with my ass cheeks on the stars, and it wouldn't even bother me.

That's where I'm at.

We leave the neighborhood through another set of doors and there's a much narrower hallway, like the one that connects our rooms to the throne room. There are people on either side, all of them in uniform, all of them with

mates. They seem important.

Rurik ignores them.

*How big is this fucking ship?* It must be huge, to be able to blow planets up. I don't even care.

Another set of doors. A hallway. Doors. Hallway. Another greenhouse. Doors. Hallway.

Platform.

We're in a room with four doors leading off of it. All of them are closed. In the center of the small space, there's a platform, like the ones at the bookstore. Rurik steps onto it and then tugs me into his arms. We bump together chest to chest, and then his hands are all over me.

He kisses me as we rise up a glass elevator shaft, stars on all sides of us. The moth drones disappear briefly before reappearing on the exterior of the tunnel, chasing us up. I don't even consider how they got outside the ship so quickly. They're far less important to me than the taste of Rurik's lips, so I ignore them.

"I do not care that you are going to ruin me," he breathes, taking my face between his hands. I reach up and pry his fingers away, yanking his gloves off. I need bare skin, not fabric. I run both of my palms over the fur at the base of his throat, his pale, graceful neck surrounded by white and red.

"I'm going to *save* you," I assure him, and he groans, like I've just fisted his cock or something. I haven't even touched it. *Yet. Yet.*

When I reach for his belt, he takes over, jerking it off and dropping it to the floor with the clack of metal on metal. I move my own hands to my dress before I remember what it is and what it's made of.

"I don't want everyone to see me naked," I whisper, and Rurik gives me the most beautiful frown before curling the edge of his lip up in a sneer. His anger isn't directed at me. It's on my behalf, and I find the heat of it intoxicating. He wraps his white wings around me, filling the glass space and blocking me from view.

"Yes, my princess." Rurik takes my hands in his own and kisses my knuckles as we continue to rise, higher and higher. The platform is slow, intentionally so, and I know the moths are filming just outside of it, but I feel good now. When he releases me and begins to free himself from his clothing, I feel better and better and better.

I'm trembling so hard, wanting so hard. Wanting *him* so hard.

Rurik utilizes the convenient slits in his jacket to slide it off without disturbing his wings. He leaves them where they are, keeping us covered, and then kicks his boots and slacks off together. When he stands up, he is entirely naked. When he taps a finger to my dress, it drifts to the floor and then reverts back to what it is: blood.

We are fairly much standing in a *puddle* of it. Doesn't last. It's absorbed—by Rurik, I can tell—and then it's gone. It's dry. The dress is gone. He just ... he did that.

“What *are* you?” I ask, but I don't just mean him. I mean the Vestalis in general. They're so *weird*.

“Your mate,” he replies easily, and then he smiles at me and it does exactly what his biology meant it to do. It makes me feel better. He feels human. I feel safe.

And then I look down and I realize how delusional that all is.

He is *not* a human, and he has the dick to prove it. Those red spirals on his cock unfurl, and then curve into the shape of claspers at his hips. Bloodred. Black thorns at either end. He steps forward and he *grabs* me with them, tugging my body into his. I'd thought the thorns were going to hurt. They don't. But they certainly dig into my skin. They make me bleed.

“It will be quick at first, but it will solve the problem of our audience.” He leans down and licks the side of my neck, turning my knees to liquid again. Doesn't matter. If I fell, he could hold me up with the effort of his claspers alone. I can feel the strength in them.

The platform comes to a stop as Rurik teases me with his teeth, running the sharp points against my skin without biting down. I want him to. Oh God. So bad. I lift my arms up, trying to pull his head toward me, but he walks me backward into the room. It's not as awkward as I might've thought. Just four steps and I hit the end of the bed. Rurik catches me with an arm around my waist and lowers me down, crawling forward as he does so that we find ourselves at the center of a perfectly round bed. White linens. Red pillows.

The room we're in has the shape of a glass bell jar. All the walls and ceiling are seamless glass. It looks like we're floating on a platform in the middle of space. My breath catches as I look up past Rurik's face. The sea of moth drones settles on the exterior glass in a wave, their legs creating a gentle whooshing sound.

*This sex is ... kind of a big deal.* And I wish it weren't. I wish we were

alone in a private space together, that nobody would know if or when we had sex unless we chose to tell them.

“I don’t want them to watch,” I breathe, knowing that I’m asking for a lot here.

Rurik stares down at me, his face on fire.

“Yes, my princess.”

He drives his hips into me, and I scream. I wish that I didn’t. But I do. The sound echoes all around us as I stare up at our joined bodies on the glass ceiling, watching as bloodred markings stain themselves into the reflection of Rurik’s pristine white wings. It looks like *lace*. I can feel it in my back, too, a hot color marking itself like a tattoo.

Matching patterns.

Rurik bites me *hard*, and I gasp, hips bucking up and into his. That’s as much as his claspers allow me to move, locking down on my pelvis and *grabbing* me. We’re pressed as tightly together as we can get, and he’s right: he hurts, but only a little. Just a bit of a stretch, but I know that if I breathe through it, it’ll be good. I run my hands over his smooth shoulders and back, to that fur at the tops of his wings. And then I remember something interesting.

Those red markings that I saw when he was in the shower that day, the ones at the base of his spine, I find them with my fingers.

They’re swelling against my hand, but I almost don’t realize it at first because Rurik pulls back and licks the wound on my neck *hard*. Blood lace flows off the bed in a wave, over the walls, climbing higher until all of the interior surfaces in the glass room are covered. *A red lace cocoon to protect us.*

If I can’t see the stars, then I don’t think anyone else can see in. Above us, a beautiful lace canopy hangs, giving the impression that we’re inside of a large tent.

The room goes still, both of us turning to look at each other.

There’s no hiding then. Everything is open and bare.

Rurik sits up, but his claspers keep me right where they want me. He uses two hands under my ass to help pull me along with them. As I stare up at him, four red tendrils bloom around his body, like I’m watching a plant grow in fast-forward. There are two tendrils on either side of him, four in total, like red tails. Fine hairs line them, giving the impression of feathers.

There's Rurik with this fan of red between him and his wings, like a male peacock. He ruffles them now, those beautiful wings, and I can smell it again. His pheromones. Honey, dripping and hot, sliding over skin, being licked off. The sweet-and-spicy burn of cardamom on the tongue during a kiss. They hit me so hard that I orgasm. That easily. I'm knocked completely off-base by the suddenness of it.

As I pant on my back, sweating and halfway to uncontrollable tears, I know for a *fact* that Rurik truly gave me a choice in the matter. If he'd wanted to force me from the beginning, all he would need to do is unfold those tails and waft these pheromones at me. That's it.

I'm helpless to deny him anything now.

He drops back down over me, a palm on either side of us, and he's panting, too. His dark eyes are closed, bloody lips parted gently.

"This next part you will not like," he sounds sorry about it, too. I believe him. He cracks those gorgeous eyes again and watches me. "It will hurt, my princess. And there will be some things I will do that are out of my control." His face softens. "They are biological functions that even we do not fully understand."

These space-dwelling planet-destroyers don't understand something? I can hardly believe it.

And then the pain hits.

*Oh my fucking God.*

It hurts so badly that my back bows, and I unconsciously try to squirm away. Those claspers lock down even harder and slam our pelvises back together. Rurik drops his face to the side of my neck, kissing me instead of biting me.

I wrap my arms around him and try to breathe through it. The tears are a different story now, from pleasure to pain. But as I blink through them, the sharpness of it begins to fade. There's an ache against my lower back, like a really awful menstrual cramp.

I exhale.

I know what he's doing.

*The eggs. His DNA. Just like Officer Hyt told me.*

Shit.

Knowing what's happening is doing two things to me simultaneously. One half of me is disturbed and upset and worried—despite Abraxas' assurance—



that Rurik will take control of whatever baby my dragon mate and I might've had between us. The rest of me is ... impressed. The ultimate act.

One fuck. All his babies. How very ... male of him.

That's a biological godsend to a species.

I exhale and use a hand in his hair to drag his face to mine.

"I am sorry," he tells me again. He means it, too. He means it, but he *likes* it. A sensual twist to the edge of his mouth, his half-lidded eyes, the way he drops his lips to my hair and kisses my head. He holds me right there while it happens. Ten minutes, maybe. Or fifteen.

By then, I'm aching for other reasons. My hips wiggle in Rurik's claspers, and he lets out a sharp, surprised sound.

"You are not in pain?" he asks, like he expected this part of the process to last much, much longer. He never did specify, and I forgot to ask. *I hate Avril.*

"Not anymore," I admit, and then he drops his mouth down to mine. He's so much taller that he has to bow his back, wings shifting over us like fabric on either side. I throw my own head back so that I can strain upwards for that kiss.

And then our lips part and he's looking down at me while he starts to fuck. His claspers do the work of keeping me tight to him, his cock slipping in and out of my swollen pussy. It's slick with nectar, dripping down my ass and onto the perfect white blankets beneath us.

They're already stained.

I put my palms against his flat chest, and it doesn't even matter that he's different, that he has no nipples, that he wears fur at his neck or has wings on his back or ... My hand reaches out and grabs onto one of the four red tails behind him. I fist it and give a jerk to the fine hairs that decorate it.

He drops lower and drives harder into me once, twice, three times. He finishes hard with an allover shudder, hips pumping every so often until it feels like whatever he needed to do to take my eggs, it's done.

Any child I ever have will be his child.

*Unless Abraxas*— But it's too fucked-up for me to think about him right now, so I don't.

"What is this?" I whisper, stroking Rurik's tail-things as he turns to look me in the face. His body is more or less collapsed on top of me now, but I like the weight of it. I like the way his wings drape over us, adding to the

illusion that this is a private, cozy moment.

In reality, I've just fucked a man to kingdom.

Glowing pussy, check. Kingmaking pussy, check.

I have the most badass genitals, don't I?

"Coremata," Rurik whispers, and he gives another shudder, leaning down to press his lips to my temple. "Those are my coremata, princess."

I think on that for a minute, and then it hits me.

The moth guy I dated ... I mean, not *this* moth guy, but the human man who raised moths. He showed me something amazing. Some male moths have body parts called coremata that they use to spread sex pheromones, so that they can attract females. On *Earth*. This happens on Earth.

It's hard for a moth in the seemingly endless night, to know if there's another like him out there. So he does his best to find someone, unfurling these appendages and dusting leaves and flowers with a scent trail that promises a mate if only a female will follow it. If she likes his scent, she does, and they find each other. Even with the world as big as it is, as lonely as it can feel sometimes, they discover a partner.

And Rurik and I, it's as if we've traveled through time and space for the same reason.

He puts a hand under my ass and jerks me back to him again.

"This will go on for many hours," he tells me softly, and I swallow back both nervousness and excitement. "I will be *fucking* you for hours. Once my body is emptied entirely, we will be able to separate. But not until then." He kisses the side of my face, along my jaw, my neck. Tongues the wound he left there with his teeth.

Blood lace unfurls into my body, taking over every single part of me.

*Harder. Faster. More.*

I have no idea at first if those are his thoughts or mine, but then I realize that they belong to us *both*.

He fucks harder, driving me into the mattress, my nipples rubbing against his muscular body. I reach out and grab another of his coremata, and the pheromones surge through me like a drug. I let them. I let them bring me to orgasm *again*, climaxing on Rurik's cock as he grips the bed with those few sharp-nailed fingers he has.

"Yes, my princess," he breathes, admirably managing to hold back his own climax while mine flutters and squeezes and milks him. "Again."

He doesn't give me a lot of space to recover, pounding wildly into me, the room silent but for his frantic breathing and mine, and the slick rub of our pelvises. That's it. Nothing else. He exhales against my hair, stirring it. There's a tenderness in the touch of his hands that isn't present in the movement of his hips. One side of him is romantic and gentle while the other side is needy and base.

He rocks into my heat as I drag my nails down his back, making him bleed. He *loves* that, pumping harder, deeper. Coming again as his claspers desperately gather me to him.

"Stay with me," he murmurs, and somehow, he's already going again, and he's rough, and he's trying to kiss me while his body fucks. I can see which half of him he's in control of right now. The softness of his lips, the gentleness of his breaths. But not his cock. He drives fierce and ragged with it, and that ache in my lower back returns. *Rough, so rough. Good, so good. Both things at once.*

Whatever is going on inside of me right now, whatever is going on between us, it's as strange as Abraxas' markings inside of me. *Am I glowing right now? Does Rurik care?* Doubtful. Because I don't. I don't care about anything except finding his gaze and looking into his eyes, finally feeling the completeness of our bond.

Until just now, we had *nothing*.

This is the start of it.

"Slow, slow, slow," I tell him, swallowing hard.

"Yes, my princess." He manages to slow down, but then his thrusts are twice as powerful. Deeper somehow. Burying him all the way to the hilt. Now that my body is getting more used to him, I can feel his testes *inside* of me, those two firm round shapes on either side of his shaft. It's the strangest sensation, like he's expanding to fill every part of me.

The fur at the base of his cock teases my folds, my ass, rubs silkily over my skin. And the ridge on his underside? It rakes and stokes like a fire poker in hot embers. It's almost too much, so I writhe against it as it mercilessly plows across my already swollen insides.

"Rurik ..." I don't think I have the energy or the headspace to say anything else, and he knows it.

He fucks me greedily into the mattress, again and again. His climax. Mine. His. His. Ours. His. Mine.

I'm panting and shoving at his shoulders now, but he doesn't snatch me with his claspers this time. He lets me fight him and then waits until I've calmed down and relaxed, his fingers stroking my arm.

"Are you alright, my princess?" he asks me, and I nod. Can't talk right now. Tongue is swollen from kissing. Blood lace inside my neck, lingering and teasing the frazzled outline of my soul. Pussy shimmering with heat and pleasure, sated but desperate, ready to be done but somehow finding it impossible to stop. Me, covered in sweat with peaked nipples.

I push Rurik's hand onto my breast, and we both groan. He kneads the flesh *hard*, possessively, like he owns me. Which is fine. I own him and he owns me. This is the contract that we've just entered into together.

There's a sound, a strange whooshing, and Rurik goes very still, tucking his wings more tightly against his sides.

"Your Majesty," a male Vestalis murmurs, depositing a tray beside our bed. He leaves it right on the floor, bows, and then turns away.

Rurik and I both look down to see a pair of wet washcloths, a bottle of what I think is lotion, some food and drink, a drying cloth.

Huh.

With a murmured scoff, Rurik glances over his shoulder and waits for the servant to leave.

"What was that?" I whisper, my body still wrapped around his. When I move like I'm trying to separate us, his claspers yank me back of their own accord, and I feel this strange sensation, like there's a grappling hook slung from the end of his cock, snagging my ovaries. I have no idea what's going on, but that's what it feels like.

I force myself to relax as he turns to me again.

"My parents ... a servant." He groans and drops his face against my hair, holding me close and stroking me with his fingers as his lips murmur kisses on my hot, tender skin. "They will try to come again."

"How long do we have to stay here before we can go back to our room?"

That's what I really want. I want the joy of seeing him smile under starlight in our private room, me on top, his hands on my hips. His claspers can lock my thighs as I ride him into oblivion. Oh, and his mouth on my pussy. Biting my smooth inner thigh with vampire teeth. Letting me play with and tease his coremata. Roll around in his pheromones. Learn every inch of him.

I exhale.

“Eight ... or nine ... Earth hours.” He seems reluctant to admit that. I close my eyes against the revelation.

“Eight or nine *hours*?”

I really think about that.

We’re going to be stuck together for an *entire* night.

I imagine the moth drones whisper-walking across the glass on the outside of the window.

But, even with all of this forced pomp and circumstance from his parents and his people, he granted my wishes not once but twice. For them all not to see me naked. Not to see me fuck. Nobody is watching us just now.

Rurik reaches down for one of the washcloths, draping its coolness over my sweaty forehead. He dabs my skin off, swiping it over my breasts, my belly, anything he can reach. It stays ice-cold the whole time, and pleasantly damp. I only realize as he sets it back on the tray that it’s a thick cluster of moss and not a washcloth at all.

“Water?” he asks, lifting the glass and then looking from it to me. He’s propped up by one hand, the water held in the other. I do my best to sit up on my elbows and he tilts it to my lips, flooding my tongue with moisture. Our eyes stay locked the entire time, and so do our hips. When I adjust myself again, his claspers greedily snatch my pelvis. Rurik grits his teeth and drops the water glass onto the floor, uncaring that it shatters.

He’s moving against me again, inside of me, thumbing my nipple with gentle strokes of his smooth fingertip. It’s enough to drag me into another cycle of fucking, breathing, fucking again. We rest. We rut.

I’m on my back with my arms spread now, panting hard and trying to remember what it is that I’m doing here. Right. Mating this guy so he can become king. So that he can control the Noctuida. So I can see Abraxas again. And Jane. So I can send a message to my parents. So that *his* parents don’t blow up my entire planet as retribution.

All of that stuff is hard to remember with our bodies joined the way we are.

Another servant comes in to drop more food off, and to clean up the glass that’s all over the narrow strip of floor beside the bed. Beyond that, there’s nothing but lace and stars and tiny blots of red and white moth against the glass. I hear their legs clicking across it even if I can’t see them at the moment. *Tap, tap, tap.*

“*Get out,*” Rurik snarls, and the sound of his voice has an immense effect

on both me and the servant. He's terrified; I'm turned-on. I try to soothe my mate by petting him with my fingers, lifting up to kiss him on the chin.

"It's okay, Rurik. Really. I'm starving."

He glares at the servant until the male finally leaves, and then he looks back down at me. If I'm going to eat, he's going to have to feed me, and he knows it.

At first, it's okay. Because the ardor between us hangs in the air, heavy and wet and humid. As primal as anything I ever experienced with Abraxas. It makes me miss him and miss Rurik both, at the same time. I don't understand it at all.

And then he starts to feed me, pieces of fresh fruit that I can't identify. He places cool sweetness on my tongue, watches as I swallow, kisses the taste off me, cleans my lips with a hot sweep of his own tongue. This goes on for some time before I'm full, and he relaxes.

Then we're just lying there.

It hits me suddenly that I have no idea who this guy is.

None.

I don't know his favorite color, and I'm afraid to ask because what if it's an alien color that I can't see? Like what if he sees things in a completely different spectrum? I can't ask what his favorite movie is because even if he told me, I wouldn't know it. I can't make really bad pop culture references because he won't understand me.

"Your heart is thundering, my princess," he tells me, head turned away, a red pillow tucked up by my own head that he just so happens to be using. He doesn't look directly at me which makes this a bit easier. Maybe. *Or it's the most awkward moment I have ever experienced in all of my life.*

I'm glad we did this, don't get me wrong. I just ... I'd like to get up and shower. Or have an ice-cold Coke while I sit in a chair with my knees pulled up, so that I can call Jane and tell her about the experience between sips. I want to kiss Rurik goodnight, leave for home with a smile on my face, and flop into bed to dream about seeing him tomorrow.

All that normal first-time shit.

Instead, our pelvises are pretty much glued together. He's locked onto my ovaries. His claspers won't let me shift more than a few inches.

"Tell me something about yourself." I'm not trying to be hokey here. I'm serious. When I said that I couldn't wait to get to know him, I meant it. As

awkward as this is, as strange as it is, that hasn't changed.

Silence falls between us as I look up at his coremata. I can't resist brushing one with my fingers, gasping at the rush of need that slingshots through me. Clutching onto Rurik as he mates me again.

My next climax turns me into mush, and I just lie there, clinging to him, waiting to see if he'll belatedly answer my question or if he's going to fuck me again first.

"When I was a child, I always dreamed of finding my mate last, after all of my brothers." He takes a few moments to breathe, and I can feel him clenching his jaw, grinding his teeth. I know he can't help the amount of times that he, um, goes tonight, but he's sorry for it anyway. "We wouldn't have to be king and queen. I wouldn't even have to play the part of a duke. We could just be ..." There's another long silence here where his entire body relaxes, like he's forced it to against its will. *Sexy*. He's in control now. For a minute anyway. "We could just be free."

I don't know what to say to that, so I move onto a different subject. As I talk, I stroke my fingers up and down his back. I study the coremata. I stare at the canopied ceiling. There are dim lights in here, pale ones set into the circle of floor that sweeps around the bed. It casts the oddest shadows of me and Rurik onto the lacy walls.

"Can you come to Earth to meet my family?" I might be crazy to ask a question like that. But I'm serious. I am dead fucking serious.

"A permitted individual may visit Earth up to twice a year." That's how he answers me. I don't like that. It's evasive. "Eve, I am ... I am sorry, my princess."

His hips begin to move again, and I grab hard to the coremata, drugging myself with pheromones.

It's hours and hours and hours of this.

Hours of feeding me, washing me, rubbing lotion into my aching skin, mating me, breeding me, claiming me.

And yet somehow, when he finally slips out of me with a sigh and rolls onto his back beside me, when his claspers aren't making me bleed, and his mouth isn't latched onto my throat, I miss him instantly.

I press a hand over my stomach.

Now that he's moved, *everything* is sore down there.

"Come, my princess," he whispers, forcing himself to his feet. He accepts a

pair of robes from another servant and helps me into one, puts a pair of slippers onto me, looks up from his kneeling position beside the bed. Gazes lock. Hearts pound. He snatches my chin and shoves his mouth against mine, pausing only to breathe soft words against my lips. “Let us go back to our rooms.”

Rurik takes my hand and gets me up off the bed and moving, leading us onto the platform, holding me tightly as it drifts back down to the floor we came in on. He guides me off and the moth drones rejoin us, trailing us on a long, slow walk back to our suites.

Either all of the people have gone to bed, or they’re not allowed to be out anymore. Maybe this moment is just for us?

So, hand in hand, we take our time. Outside the ship’s window, I can see a distant sun come into view, and it’s almost like a sunrise.

“What’s next?” I ask him after a while, but he doesn’t answer. He keeps our bare hands together and looks down at me with an expression that promises he’ll tell me when he can.

Avri, Zero, and Connor wait at the beginning of the last hallway, silent as they take up their positions behind us.

“Stay in the servants’ quarters until we call for you.” Rurik pulls me into our foyer, and the door slides shut behind us.

He looks at me again, and then he’s yanking the tie from my robe, dropping his onto the floor.

He lifts me against the wall, drives into me, and makes love to me in private for the first time.

It’s all the sweeter with nobody watching.





There's a warm chest under my cheek, and I nuzzle into it, enjoying the feel of a strong arm wrapped around my middle. I love the sensation so much that I decide I don't want to lose it, forcing myself to stay still and ride those first strange, sweet moments of being awake.

*I got married yesterday. By having sex in public.*

That snaps my eyes open, and I sit up to find that Rurik is already staring at me.

*How long has this been going on?*

I tuck some hair behind my ears and then cross my arms over my chest to cover my nipples. Rurik notices, looks down at them, looks back up at my face. I can't resist staring back at him.

"Hi." It's my go-to word when nothing else feels like it will suffice. This awkwardness makes the morning after with Abraxas seem like a breeze. *Sure, I fucked my first alien and got a glowing vagina, but this guy is like my fated mate. Who I rejected. I rejected him.* Not saying this is more important, only that it's weirder. Abraxas doesn't let things get weird between us.

"Hello, my princess." Rurik is frowning now, shifting his gaze from mine, like he's worried I'm going to reject him all over again.

The room falls silent.

Someone rings the doorbell to the honeymoon suite, but we both ignore it.

I glance around, realizing that the entire room is bathed in what looks like

beautiful morning light. It kisses everything with a pale honey color, accentuating the tastefulness of the decor. Homey amber-colored brocade, luxe chocolate browns, and the red of my blood on Rurik's lips. The matching color of his alien cum on my thighs—

Nope.

I shut that thought down and look behind the bed to find some sort of weird cover on the windows, diffusing the light of ... something just outside. It's like a sun or ... a star? Is a sun a star? Either way, we're getting a bit close to it for my liking.

*The star-jump thing cannot be real. It can't. I refuse to believe it.*

The doorbell rings again.

"I will put her in a transport, and then I will drop that transport on a planet made entirely of ice." Rurik sighs and rubs at his forehead with clawed fingers. Ah, Avril. Probably here to gloat about the Rurik/Eve ship officially spreading its sails. "What is it?" he snaps, and I just assume there's some way for Avril to hear him if he wants her to. "Yes, fine. Now *leave*."

"How are you communicating with her?" I ask, watching him recline on his elbows, chest and stomach exposed, wings pooled beneath us both, a feeler swinging in my direction. It slides over my hair, and I flush, pushing it away from me. He turns to look at me and cocks his head, like he doesn't know what I'm doing.

"Through the lace," he says simply, lifting a hand, palm up to indicate all of his beautiful patterns on the ceiling. I can barely stand looking at it. It's elegant and canopied and Gothic and lovely. "My parents wish to see us again, which is quite expected." He sounds put out by the way. Put out and ... softly furious. "But they can wait."

Silence.

He's still staring at me.

"What?" I make myself look back at him, like everything is perfectly normal. It felt that way last night, but some of the pheromones in the air have cleared, and while I'm still glad it happened, I ... My eyes widen. "Can I see your wings?"

Rurik gently slides his right wing out from under my body before turning and putting his feet on the floor—obviously still naked. With his back to me, he spreads his wings slowly, as if he's putting on a show. My hands lift to my mouth as I see the pattern there. Red ink spills across the vast surface, a

swath of fine threads over a stark white canvas. *Does my own back ...?*

I get up off the bed and find a mirror on the armoire, ignoring my nakedness—mostly ignoring the way Rurik looks at my nakedness—and turning my back to it. When I glance over my shoulder, I can see my reflection.

There.

Like I'm wearing that lace teddy again. Only, the lace is *etched* into my skin in the shape of moth wings. It really is like a tattoo, and it stretches from the back of my neck to just above my ass cheeks. *Glowing vagina. Permanent slutty lingerie. I am an alien smut slut.*

I immediately recall using that line before on myself and thinking it had the acronym of A.S.S.

*I am an A.S.S.*

I fucked guy number two and now I'm perma-mate-bonded to two different alien races that don't particularly get along. I can't leave Rurik or he'll die. I can't leave Abraxas because, apparently, we'll both die (maybe). And if we die, Rurik dies. Which means ... Rurik's life is dependent on Abraxas.

Intergalactic soap opera alien drama.

I groan and rub at my face for a second. I'm a bit sore, and I'd like it if Rurik weren't staring at me the way he is, like he thinks I'm going to run. He knows that I'm not going to.

"Stop that, and pay attention to what I'm *actually* thinking," I grumble, wondering if this is a common thing for Vestalis newlyweds. He can sense my emotions. I can sense his. I know he wants to touch me, but is afraid he'll fuck all day the way he fucked all night. He knows I need a break, but he doesn't want to give me one because then we'll go to see his mother and she's likely frighten us both off of a good, long fuck—

I shake my head.

He sighs and then holds out a hand, waiting to see if I'll take it.

He knows I'm reluctant to do it. I'm nervous. He smiles. He tucks his antennae back. He waits.

He smirks.

Then I go to him and we end up reclined on the bed beside one another, just absorbing our new bond.

"I am truly in shock," he admits, and I rustle slightly, rolling onto my side to stare at his cock. It's hard, and it's impossible not to look at. It's massive,

red and white striped with the claspers swirled around it, a sharp black thorn at the tip.

It looks sticky.

I want to touch it.

My hand extends, and Rurik catches my wrist—*hard*.

“I am in shock that you agreed to the mating, even knowing all of the things that you did.”

“I don’t think you’d have let me do it without telling me first.” I’m talking about the permanence of it. The deal with the eggs—even fertilized ones. The back tattoo. The eyes of his parents. Everything. I still chose to do this. We both know he’d have helped me run off with Officer Hyt if that’s what I’d wanted. He’d have done everything in his power to keep his parents away from me.

Even kill himself to see if they might back off then. After all, if he died, I could leave. Without me, he will literally die. But it doesn’t work the other way around. I mean, not on a purely biological level. But I think if he died, I wouldn’t ... I don’t know if I could ...

I exhale.

“You’d let me run away even now, wouldn’t you?” I ask. He doesn’t have to answer: I can feel it. His thoughts fill me in an intimate rush.

*If you want to run, I’ll figure something out. I will. I’ll give you a few weeks to be sure, and then I’ll end it. If I am gone, my parents may not waste resources coming after you. It is your best and only real choice to flee.*

He would do that for me, but I would never let him.

A lovers’ paradox.

That makes me smile.

“Can you roll onto your stomach?” I’m not half done with the sentence before I replace my sweet smile with a sly grin. “I want to see something.”

Rurik knows immediately what I’m talking about and makes a strange sound, something between a man’s low chuckle and a monster’s toothy whisper.

“Princess.” It’s a warning that I ignore.

He gets on his stomach as I asked, body tense and muscles in sharp relief. Carefully, I take hold of his wings and I spread them open myself, just the way I want them. They drape the mattress on either side of his body, and I wince as I dig my knee into one of them.

“Does that hurt you?” I try to push his wings open wider, but he won’t let me, tucking them close, encouraging me to put my bodyweight on them.

“Not at all. I prefer as much of you to touch as much of me as possible.”

Ah.

I spot that patch of red at the base of his spine again. My fingers itch to touch that spot, so I do, gliding fingertips across the roughness of his skin there. My lip catches under my teeth, and then I’m straddling his naked cheeks.

*Perfect, taut cheeks, but with a layer of padding for shape. White as marble. All mine.*

I grin wider, rub my pussy against his ass, and then he *really* makes a snarling sound at me.

“You need to rest and eat something,” he snaps. I ignore that, too. I stroke and pet and rub the coremata, and then I watch as they unfold. So slowly that it feels like it isn’t happening at all, but quick enough that within a minute, all four tendrils are fleshed out and softened with red hairs. They seem to be ... eversible? Is that the word? Like, they were inside out and they just unfolded from his skin, got erect and swollen like a cock. Dripped pheromones.

I press my naked body along the back of his, trapping two of his coremata between us. He starts to thrust, and his claspers dig hard into the bed, shredding the fabric.

“That’s my king,” I murmur against the side of his neck, sitting up and rubbing my wet cunt against his ass, whipping my already swollen body into a frenzy. My hands find my breasts, my knees dig into his wings, and my hair tickles my naked back as I stare up at the lacy ceiling then down at him again. His *patterns* are sexy to me. I’m seeing lace and it’s enough to get me all hot and bothered. Why? Because he’s got some scalloped shapes? Crisscrossed diamonds? Floral themes?

*It’s his finesse. He makes literal arteries into delicate art. His father can’t even manage to control his abilities enough to keep his growths small. Rurik’s are unimposing, nuanced, and blended with the decor. His dad’s look like something out of a horror movie.*

“You’re going to be a *wonderful* king,” I breathe, prideful of him and briefly forgetting my theory about that scary ass throne room.

“A better lover,” he promises, rolling over and catching me by surprise. He drags me down to the mattress, mounts me, and makes me scream. Doesn’t

matter now. We're all alone in this room.

When Rurik and I are finished, he's able to roll right off of me. We, apparently, only get stuck together once. Not like— Yeah. Eventually we'll need to have the Abraxas conversation. Now that I'm thinking back on his words inside the cruiser, I wonder if Abraxas already knew that he'd have to share me from that point forward? Question is: does Rurik understand that? He says he does, but ... who knows?

The doorbell rings again.

"I hate Avril," I whisper, and he laughs at me. The sound is satisfied and happy and unburdened. It's the first time I've ever heard Rurik like that. Except ... I've only known him for maybe an Earth month? When I say 'known', I'm literally talking about our first meeting under the *Humans ... pets, meat, or mates* sign. About our brief encounter after I drove the Cartian motorcycle to the market. Weeks of nothing. A kidnapping. A wedding.

"I shall send her as an ambassador to a hostile planet, a place where the creatures are more likely to eat her than speak with her." He pauses. "Then we will blow it up."

"Let her get torn apart by alien carnivores and then sizzled to bits by this spaceship? You're hardcore."

There's an awkward pause.

The doorbell goes off repeatedly, and Rurik sighs.

"We should rise and greet my parents," he says, but not like he means it. Like he's also sensing the awkwardness. There's a learning curve to becoming fated mates.

"Sounds good."

I sit up as he heads for the door, snagging his robe along the way. He tosses it over his shoulders, belts it, and then hits the panel beside the door, allowing Avril to stumble in. She curses, trying to balance a breakfast tray on one hand and a dress slung over her other arm.

I tuck the covers close around me, warm sunlight or starlight or space radiation or *something* on my back, and wait for her to approach the bed.

"Right here is good." I tap the mattress as she glares at me, dropping the silver tray down and sloshing coffee everywhere. Probably more of that decaf shit. Doesn't matter. Coffee in space is a luxury.

"It's Keurig coffee this time," she sniffs, doing her best to dash my enjoyment of the smell and sight of it. Giving up my eighty-hour-a-week job

wasn't hard, but giving up coffee? Kill me now. "But I'm still jealous." Avril gestures at me. "You're a literal space princess, and I'm your servant. Does that seem fair? And I could handle all that if I was gifted a mate, too. But you and Connor? I saved your *life*."

She did. That's fair. I hand her the coffee, but she waves it off. I lift one of the lids on my tray to find ... macarons. Goddamn it. I eat one anyway.

"You *want* a fated mate?" I ask her, and she pauses to stare at me. Under the other lids, I find thickly sliced meat that could be ham if not for the, uh, well ... the skin on the edges is striped like a zebra. Crispy though. *Lab grown*? Hmm. I put the lid back on and continue searching. A scone. Some clotted cream and jam. Normal-ish looking eggs (the yolks are red). Glass of water. Glass of some mysterious blue-green fruit juice with a straw.

"You're asking me that as you sit on a luxurious bed in a room of suites with a massive wardrobe—have you even *looked* at your goddamn closet yet?—with a guy who fucks you so hard that your cum face gets plastered all over the Noctuidan network."

She stops talking as I choke on the macaron—it tastes like smiles and lazy bees over buttercup flowers—and gape up at her.

"Show me," I whisper, chugging the coffee and then throwing on a robe. My eyes dart to the bathroom door, as if I'm already waiting for Rurik to come back. It's true. I am. I admit it.

Avril hands me a tablet, queued up with a zoomed-in photo of yours truly.

My face. Eyes closed. Mouth open. In ecstasy.

I've gone viral. My orgasm face has gone viral. And not Earth viral. Universe viral.

"You should thank the prince," Avril is telling me as she paces beside my bed. "He *technically* wasn't supposed to cover you up. Not on the walk from here to the mating room. Not in the elevator shaft. Definitely not in the room itself. But at least he waited until after his markings appeared, and everyone could confirm you guys were legit mates. If not, he'd have been in some serious trouble with his entire court."

*Rurik. Damn it.*

I pick up the juice next, but it only looks an odd shade. It tastes like blueberries and kiwis.

"So, there's a one second shot of my face and that's enough to go viral? Just that *one* second?"

Avril stops and turns to look at me, dressed in a loose red cotton shift dress, like that's maybe her nightgown or something.

"Yeah, but it's everywhere," she replies easily. "It's all anyone can talk about."

My face shuts down, and I look at her with what I hope she can tell is a serious expression.

"Make an announcement. The next person caught looking at or distributing *any* part of that video other than a cropped shot of Rurik's wings changing color, will have a digit removed." I lift and wiggle my pinky finger. "Any digit of my choice. *Anything*." She just stands there and stares at me until Rurik appears, scrubbing at his mouth to clean off last night's blood.

"Do what your princess tells you *when* she tells you to do it." He snaps his fingers and Avril takes off, fleeing the room like it's on fire. The door shuts. Rurik looks my way, his mouth half red, half ice pink. He doesn't like to be seen in public with it stained although it seems to happen constantly against his will and better judgment.

I smile.

Sensing his feelings is weirdly natural.

"Anything special you want me to wear today?" For all I know, there's a different uniform and ritual for each day of this supposed seven-day wedding.

"Please explore your closet and the wardrobe that I created for you," he says, gently enough. But there's a growl under there, something rolling and waiting and creeping toward me. Rurik gestures with a hand, and I shove up to my feet, taking the juice with me.

I follow him to the far side of the room where he approaches one of two doors. It opens immediately and ... I'm dumbstruck.

There's a space that's roughly the size of my parents' living room, kitchen, and dining room combined. It's three stories tall, with dresses on forms against the walls on either side. The forms don't stand still however. Headless as they are, they dance and twirl and spin, curtsy and fluff their skirts. *Headless blood-controlled cyborgs wearing my clothes*. I ... I've seen it all now, I think. Rurik snaps his fingers and they all go still, settling into demure positions against the walls.

Better even than that? Behind them, library shelves climb, studded with books.

"Where ... what did you do?" I whisper, looking over at him. He smirks



and flicks his fingers in the direction of the space.

“As I said, you may have a small library as a princess and a large one as a queen. Don’t be spoilt.” He gives me a look before turning and walking past, pausing with our shoulders just *barely* touching. “If you act spoilt, you will have to be spanked again.” He takes his gloves from the pocket of his robe, and snaps them at my ass.

*I’m ... Yeah. If I were Jane, I’d be head over heels. But I’m Eve, so I’m only mildly impressed. You fucking liar.* I’d be in heaven if the whole universe hadn’t seen my orgasm face.

I select a white dress made of lace, one that flares at the hips but molds tight over my waist and breasts. It has cap sleeves, a heart-shaped neckline, and matching white flats with red fur trim. Every outfit is human in design, but tailored to match Rurik and his white, red, and black features. We’ll ... figure out a way to fix that long-term. If I want a purple sweater and some blue jeans, isn’t that my right?

When I emerge from the closet/library, the prince is waiting for me in another military uniform made of stars.

Rurik takes my arm, and I try not to think about his coremata. Happens anyway. I’m obsessed with them.

“Do they ever ... unfurl against your will?” I cringe, and he glares down at me. He must know what I’m talking about because he doesn’t ask for clarification. Side effect of being able to read one another, I guess.

“Of course not,” he huffs, but I get the idea that that isn’t true.

“Are they unfurling now?”

Rurik lifts the corner of his lip at me and then drags me through the door and into the foyer.

“Good morning, Your Majesty,” Connor greets as both he and Avril take their bows. Zero is actively yawning and patting lazily at her mouth. I don’t think cyborgs need to yawn, so ... it’s performative. Her eyes widen when she sees Rurik staring at her, and she, too, drops into a bow.

*What a bitch.*

We stride past and into the hall, heading down a sadly familiar path to the throne room.

His parents are waiting for us. What else are they going to do? They’re stuck here. *Trapped.* My fears from last night come roaring back to me.

“Ah, my son!” His mother glides over to us, her voice gentle but loving

through the buzz of my translator. “You have done so well.” She coils around us both, but doesn’t squeeze too hard. Her face does, however, level strangely with us. She *stares* at him. “But you did play fast and loose with the rules.”

“My mate’s comfort and safety were my priorities. Rules are not relevant if they cause her to come to harm.” He says all of this without flinching, completely deadpan, arm in mine and staring straight ahead.

His mother unfurls and retreats as his father nods approvingly.

“You understand what it means to have a mate, Rurik. Your mother and I are pleased.” The big man leans down to peer into my face with a smile. The expression stutters strangely, and I see a horrifying sight. I see his mouth stretched weirdly with a pair of white mandibles on either side, vibrating. I blink, and it’s gone, but the trauma is there. “Please prepare your new bride for the day.”

Rurik offers a bow, and we leave as quickly as we came.

“Prepare for the day?” I ask, and then I remember the mandible thing. I look at Rurik, and I wonder not for the first time if the ‘synchronicity contacts’ hide his real face from me. *Does he have creepy mouthparts, too?* I think as I study his perfect lips. He pauses to stare down at me, flicking a feeler in confusion.

“Yes?” he asks, waiting patiently.

“Does your ... I thought I saw, like, mandibles on your dad? I don’t know how else to ask the question.”

He smiles *beautifully* at me, reaching a hand out to tease a strand of my hair. He even curls it around his finger and gives it a gentle tug.

“Are you worried that perhaps I have hidden mandibles as well?”

He can dig into my thoughts and feelings with zero effort at this point, so why bother trying to hide anything?

“It wouldn’t be particularly sexy if you did,” I admit, with a hint of shame in my words. He’s my mate, regardless, but I like his mouth. I want his mouth to be real.

“My father requires mandibles in order to mate with my mother, so he has developed them.” His smile turns into something of a seductive smirk as he leans down toward me, breath ruffling my hair. “My mate requires a soft tender mouth to match her own, and so mine has not changed much at all.”

“This is the mouth you were born with?” I ask, and then I realize right away that all of the unmated Vestalis I’ve seen have human-shaped mouths

as well.

“Yes, my princess.” He’s so smugly amused that I have to do something to even the odds. My hand slides up under his jacket and my fingers stroke his coremata. Pheromones hit me like a truck, and I think the startled look on his face is reflected back on my own.

We stare at each other.

“Leave us.” Rurik waves his hand at Zero, Avril, Connor, and the handful of random people in the hallway nearby. Not a soul dares to dodder, footsteps moving quickly down the hall in either direction. His hands are at his slacks, undoing them as quickly as he’s able. He snatches me around the waist, claspers digging into my skin beneath the full lace skirt of my dress, and ... “Where are your undergarments?” Rurik whispers reverently, the tip of him poised to enter me, rubbing slickness between us as he rocks me into the wall.

“I figured we ... that today ...” I don’t finish my sentence. He pushes his cock into me, and my body short-circuits. He promised it’d be better today and ... oh, it’s better. I’m sore, but this is too delicious. I can’t stop. He fits perfectly, made for me. Literally fucking made for me. But his personality? The arrogant curl of his mouth, his odd mix of stubborn asshole and naive princeling. That’s all him, but it’s still perfect somehow anyway.

Rurik spreads his wings wide, likely trying to shield us from the rest of the hallway. I know it’s fruitless to expect privacy here—his father’s blood lace owns the entirety of *The Korol*—but ... I don’t care. This man is a fire in my veins, and an itch I can’t scratch. He’s the person I’ve always been looking for but never knew I needed. He’s fucking *everything*, and I can’t get enough.

“More, more, more,” I moan, my lips sloppy against his. It’s so hard to kiss when you’re getting fucked proper, like the effort to move your mouth with any semblance of control is not a thing. My lips are parted in a half-moan, half-scream, and he slips his hot tongue inside to take over. Threads of lace explode from him and dig into me, spiraling down and curling through me as he siphons whatever blood he needs—whatever he *wants*—from my body.

His coremata are out now, brushing against my bare legs and my arms. A delicate slipper falls off of my foot, and I can’t decide if this cute, little white lace dress is the antithesis of something a girl should be fucked in or ... if it’s perfect. *I hope it stains.*

“Ah, princess,” Rurik breathes, licking my neck, savoring me like a morsel

and a tight fuck and a wife and a friend, all at the same time. “My princess ...”

He makes me come first, shuddering and shivering against him as I yank his coremata to me, brushing them over my face and lips. It’s such a weird body part to have, but I’m obsessed with them. They’re so very strange and so very *male* and they smell so good.

I suck the tip of one in my mouth as I’m orgasming, and it sends Rurik into a spiral.

I’m against the wall, and then I’m on the floor, and he’s taking me as hard and as rough as he did last night. Harder. Rougher. My head falls back. I see stars. And then he’s filling me with hot, sticky seed that’s as red as blood. I know because it was all over my thighs and ass cheeks last night. Staining the bed we left behind in the glass bell jar tower. All over me now.

Rurik sits up and his cock slides out, claspers winding around it as he relaxes onto his haunches. I sit up, and I see his spend all over my folds and dripping down to the floor.

“Holy shit.” I’m speechless. I don’t even know where to go from here. *What are we supposed to be doing today? Something important?*

“Holy,” he repeats, closing his dark eyes and lifting his face to the ceiling. “You are a Star-sent goddess with thighs of moonlit cream and a mouth that is too sensual for polite company.”

Okay, *now* I’m speechless.

“You ... *you*.” That’s all I get out as Rurik tucks his cock into his slacks, using that strange thigh strap to keep it down. His coremata fold back in and disappear under his jacket, but when he shakes his wings out reflexively, I’m dusted with invisible but silky, shimmery powder. *Ah*. I breathe it in and close my eyes.

His hands tug my dress back down, the white lace dirtied and in need of a good wash. *Not my problem to scrub stains out of clothes anymore. No more fighting impossible stains like barbeque sauce on my white button-down. No more chocolate sauce on my apron. None of that.*

I relax onto my back on the floor, and Rurik picks me up in his arms the way that I knew he would if I went limp. I don’t even open my eyes as he carries me down the hall toward our rooms.

“Your ...” It takes me three tries to form a sentence, and I crack my eyes to find him staring down at me with nothing but affection in his night owl gaze.

“Your parents said to prepare me for the day. Care to explain?”

The door to our suite slides open, and Rurik finally sets me on my feet in the foyer.

His face, when I look back at him, is now tense.

“The star-jump.” He gives me that pretty, signature scowl before his features soften again. He removes a glove and presses his palm against my cheek, teasing my skin with one of his sharp nails. “You will not like it. Most do not. Vestalis children are put to sleep beforehand.” Rurik taps his nail against my pulse, and I lift my chin, arching my neck into his touch. “I could prick you now and send you into a peaceful sleep, or we could ride it out together as some mates do.”

I reach up to take his hand in both of mine. I’d almost forgotten that he’d put me to sleep with the poke of his nail into my skin.

“Didn’t you prick me plenty last night?” I tease, and then add, “and this morning.”

My thighs are wet and sticky, and I really need a shower. Alien dudes come way harder than human dudes. There’s a hell of a lot of seminal fluid in and around my person.

“Your Majesties—” Avril doesn’t finish her sentence, and when I look back at her, I see that she’s staring at the red stains on my legs.

“Vestalis semen is red,” I mutter quickly, lest she get some different idea. Like, say, if she thought it was blood. It’s definitely not. The texture and the smell and the viscosity, all very different.

“Yeah, I know,” she replies simply, and it takes effort on my part not to throat punch her. My eyebrow twitches.

“A fact you might’ve relayed to me *before* the wedding,” I say dryly, but she ignores me.

“Your Majesties,” she repeats, bowing low. “May I have permission to sleep through the star-jump?”

“Permission granted.” Rurik reaches out and pokes her beside the ear with his nail, watching dispassionately as she slumps to the floor. He looks up at me like *what?* and I grin back at him.

“Fierce. I like it.” I point at her crumpled form with an accusing finger. “If anything, she should thank us.”

“Avril?” Connor appears, dropping to his knees beside her and rolling her onto her back. “Oh my God, what happened?”

“Take her to her bed and leave her there,” Rurik continues, straightening out his jacket with a small sigh. “If you wish to sleep during the star-jump, your request is denied. You will suffer through it, so that I may prove to you the superiority of the Vestalis.”

“No, man. I was way wrong.” Connor struggles to pick Avril up off the floor, moving aside when Zero appears and does it for him. She hefts the other woman up with no effort whatsoever, slings her over one shoulder, and takes off for the servants’ bedroom. I think it has a second entrance besides the one in my room, but I’m not sure. Connor brushes his fancy red suit off. “You were right all along. As soon as I saw my mate, I knew.” He pauses, and then jerks his head away sharply, eyes closing. “But he doesn’t want me so ... I guess I’ll experience both heaven and hell in equal measures.”

Pretty sure I even see a *tear* on the man’s cheek.

“Brot will come around soon enough,” Rurik hedges, as if he’s regretting offering comfort to Connor but can’t help himself. If anything, Rurik might be too nice. Like, maybe he’s not ruthless enough to be king. That worries me. A lot of things worry me.

Namely, the idea of something called a ‘star-jump’ worries me a fuck of a lot. I can see a literal star coming closer and closer outside the windows of the ship. Aren’t we going to burn up if we get any closer? Aren’t stars just balls of like flaming gas or something?

*Star-jump.* Dizziness sweeps me, and I squeeze my eyes shut to avoid passing out. Rurik’s warm arms sliding around me help. A lot. I cling to him and nestle my cheek against his chest. It feels damn good to be held like this.

“How could anyone reject their mate?” Connor continues, and I will him to shut up without my having to throat punch him, too. “It’s the most basic, fundamental concept in the universe. Once you know, you know. It can’t be *unknown*. Walking away from it is the very definition of stupidity—”

I move away from Rurik, and I kick Connor in the shin. He curses before he notices the ... all the red on my legs.

“Oh. Excuse me, Princess.” He turns away suddenly, adjusting his glasses with his middle finger. His eyes spark with contrived mischief. “I forgot that today was the Day of Wearing.”

“Huh?” I ask as Rurik grits his teeth, and then we all pause at the sound of our doorbell.

“It is Brot,” Rurik says immediately, likely spotting his brother through the

blood lace on the front of our door. “Go and greet him.” He turns to Connor, but the medic is frozen in place, eyes wide, all traces of smirking wiped clean from his lips. “Stars help me.”

Rurik waves his hand and the door opens on its own.

By the way, I’m still standing there with a red-stained dress and evidence of, um ... but though Rurik looks pityingly at me, he doesn’t move to cover me. I start to get the idea that this is yet another Vestalis tradition that I should’ve been warned about sooner. *The Day of Wearing, eh?*

“Pardon me, My Imperial Majesties,” Brot grinds out, his tongue sliding against one of his vampire teeth. He doesn’t look at Connor, but Connor trembles nonetheless. *Eww. I don’t actually look like that when I’m around Rurik, do I?* If so ... yikes. Jane will never let me hear the end of it. “I am here to collect the human, Connor, in preparation for the star-jump.”

“Very well.” Rurik waves his hand, expecting Connor to leave with his brother.

Neither man moves.

It gets very awkward, very fast.

“Human male, *go*,” Rurik hisses, shoving at Connor’s shoulder. He stumbles, but Brot catches him. Their eyes meet, but Brot doesn’t allow the eye contact to last long. He turns away and takes off down the hallway, assuming, I guess, that Connor will follow.

He does, and the door slides shut.

“What the hell was all that?” I mutter, and Rurik sighs, looking back to me.

“I can’t say that I know for certain, but likely Brot is cursing his fate. A human mate is a strange thing indeed, and even more so that he is male. Perhaps he is lamenting the loss of the throne?” Rurik sounds like he couldn’t imagine why anyone would be bothered by such a thing. My suspicions coil, but I push the worry back in favor of more pressing matters.

“The Day of Wearing ...?” I pause and wait, knowing that the prince’s sharp cringe is indicative that I’m not going to like this.

“It is customary for the Imperial Princess to wear ... proof of her mate’s affections.” Rurik at least has the common decency to look ashamed. “A stained white garment is preferable.”

“It’s ... it’s part of the wedding ritual to wear *cum stains*?” I’m choking on the words now. In the end, I just throw my hands up, turn, and head into our bedroom. Rurik catches up to me, sliding an arm around my waist from

behind.

“You may clean yourself off and wear only the dress,” he offers, but is that much better? I glare at him over my shoulder, but then I look up toward the window with its strange mesh covering, and I see that the star is *right fucking there*.

“How ... how long until the star-jump?” I whisper, terror clinging icily to my insides.

“Thirty Earth minutes,” he whispers against my ear. “Unfortunately, it is the only way for us to reach the planet Dome without spending years in transit. But first, I have a wedding present to give to you.”

I spin around in his arms, and he stares down at me with an expression of true helplessness. He’s powerless to resist the pull between us, and I wonder as I look back at him how I ever resisted in the first place.

“Present?” My voice is scratchy and weird.

“Now that I am officially crowned as the next heir, I have more power to grant you what you want.” He takes me by the hand and guides me to the edge of the bed. I wait patiently as Rurik gathers the tablet I discarded this morning, tapping his finger on the screen before he turns it around and hands it out.

I accept it with eyes narrowed in mild suspicion. And then I see that a call is being made.

It’s Jane that answers.

It’s ... it’s *Jane*.

“Oh my fucking God!” I scream, surging up off the bed at the same moment that she yells out, “Sweet baby Jesus, it’s my girl!”

We’re both crying this time. Me, through laughter. Her, literally sobbing. Like I said, Jane feels emotions a hundred times harder than anyone else I’ve ever met.

Now we’re both trying to talk over each other. I decide to let her go first because, well, this is Jane. There’s no way I can outtalk my bestie. She is the queen of loquacity.

“Um, I don’t even ... I know you got my video message ... but I ...” Jane snorts, and then lifts up an embroidered handkerchief to swab at her nose. Her dark hair is tucked up under the tricorne hat atop her head, the pale yellow one with the stars around the brim, the one that glows prettily. I like the black corset and ruffled white top she’s got on underneath it. Very pirate.



Rawr. “I’m so sorry, Eve. I am so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so—”

I look up to find Rurik watching me curiously, like he’s enjoying seeing me in my natural habitat. That is, buried under Jane’s constant stream of gossip and babble, that’s my natural habitat. I feel it now, like I’m home all of a sudden. I don’t need to be on Earth to feel that way.

“So sorry!” she finishes, finally sucking back the last of her tears. She leans in and narrows one eye on the screen, like she’s trying to peer into my soul. “Or ... do you owe me a thank you instead?”

“Excuse me?” I blurt, even though I’d sort of been entertaining a similar idea. “I don’t owe you shit! You got me abducted by aliens!”

“Yeah, but ...” Jane trails off and then makes a show of looking around. She taps her nails on the wooden table in front of her. I can’t see much of the ship behind her, but it kind of looks like the inside of a boat? I know she’s in space, too, so why is she both dressed as a pirate and also riding in a goddamn boat? “I saw your broadcast from last night. I mean, up to the moment when your *second* man used your *blood to make a curtain of lace*.” She sits back smugly and crosses her arms over her corset.

*Shit, she saw my cum-face.* Wouldn’t be the first time. Jane has accidentally walked in on me before. I’d hoped never to repeat that mistake, but this is honestly time number three. We might have a problem here.

“So you think I should thank you for dragging me to cater Tabbi’s party now?” I start, and then—God help us all—the bitch appears as if summoned. I *knew* better than to say her name aloud.

“What the hell? Is that Evelyn?” Tabbi asks, leaning down to peer into the screen. She frowns as soon as she sees me. A smirk curves itself onto my face.

“Hello Tabitha Katherine,” I reply prettily. This chick is used to being pop star royalty on Earth. But out here? Where it really counts? Where Earth is nothing but a nature preserve at the mercy of the Vestalis and their planet-destroying ship, *I am the boss*. “I think you should curtsy nicely for me and say *greetings, My Imperial Princess*.”

“Why don’t you get fucked?” Tabbi retorts, storming off camera. My mouth gapes open, but she’s back in short-order, hands up and walking backwards. Officer Hyt is right there in front of her, hands on his hips, tentacle tails wafting. He flicks the brim of his hat up to peer at her.

“Your princess gave you an order, Citizen of the Noctuida.” He turns from

blue to pink. “As an officer of the law, I am obligated to make sure that you follow it.” Back to blue again. Hyt smiles, and my heart skips weirdly. *If ... Hyt is on that ship then ... Abraxas ...*

I swallow hard, looking up past the screen to see Rurik staring at me again.

Heat slicks across my skin, a mixture of shame and arousal. I can’t hide anything from him now. He’ll know what I’m thinking about. Maybe not my exact thoughts—we can’t read each other’s minds unless we’re sharing blood—but the direction of them.

“Don’t make me pull out my pistol again,” Hyt warns, gesturing for Tabbi to turn toward the screen again. Jane scoots her chair out of the way so that I have a proper view of the action.

Cheeks flaming with red, Tabbi drops into a surprisingly pretty curtsy.

“Greetings, My Imperial Princess.” She practically spits the words out, teeth gritted in barely suppressed aggression. Tabbi turns on her heel and disappears as Hyt chuckles. Jane looks back at him, then over at me. Peers at me. *Stares* at me.

She communicates in the language of longtime female friends.

Her lip twitches. Translation: *are you into this guy, too?*

Blink. Blink. That’s my response. It means *erm, I don’t know*.

Jane sighs heavily and looks at Hyt again.

“Hey guy, could we have a minute to talk alone? It’d be much appreciated.”

Hyt waltzes over to the desk, putting one hand flat on the surface as he leans down to look at me, his tails swaying prettily, his hat tilted back to reveal his eyes, his body naked and slick and beautiful with only a brown leather belt and loin cloth to cover his bits.

“Good to see you again so soon, Imperial Princess. Congratulations on your nuptials.” He slaps his hand on the desk and then stands up straight. The move puts his abs and chest on display which I guess is the whole point? “Tell the prince that I said hi.”

Rurik grits his teeth, but doesn’t move from his spot in the middle of the floor. My gaze drifts ever so slightly to the left, to the window and the overwhelming brightness and heat of the star we’re approaching.

I look back to Jane again as Hyt turns, flashing ass cheeks, and disappears from view.

“Are you alone?” Jane asks desperately, peering around like she’s trying to

see past the edges of the tablet on the desk in front of her. “Is your new husband there? I quite like your other husband, so I’m a bit surprised you added a second.” She holds up her hands, palms out. “Not judging, just saying. You told me once that you’d rather be dipped in a vat of boiling acid than get married and now you’re married twice over?”

“I never said that,” I grit out, but I’m pretty sure that I did. Lots of other, similar sentiments, too. I once compared being married to being locked in a medieval dungeon without sunlight, food, a toilet, or sex. I compared it to waterboarding. I insinuated it was like being burned alive. I say a lot of things after a few bottles of wine. Bottles, not glasses. A few *bottles*. My hand slides unconsciously over my belly. *Am I really pregnant? If I am, would it be Abraxas’ child or did Rurik take over the fertilized embryo last night?* I’m afraid to tell Jane about all of that. “You knew I wanted to get married someday. I’ve said as much.”

“You said—and I quote—*if I try to get married before I turn thirty, have me committed.*” Jane stares at me as I narrow my eyes on her. “What? You did say that.”

“Thank you for the reminder,” I reply with an affectionate sigh. God, I’ve missed this girl. “I’m relieved that you’re okay. When I woke up in the tent and you were gone, I ... I thought you’d been eaten. Or you’d be forced into marriage. Trapped in a brothel.”

“Humans,” Jane whispers softly, “pets, meat, or mates.”

We both shudder.

“Do you want to meet my husband?” I ask as brightly as I can. I want to talk to Jane, but I also *really* want to see Abraxas. I ... I’m also scared to see Abraxas. He knew this was coming, but did he know that I’d jump into my new relationship with as much gusto as I have? *I miss him. I miss him so damn bad.*

“Of course I do!” Jane sits up straighter, adjusting her hat and waiting as I gesture at Rurik to come sit beside me on the bed. He does as I ask, settling down with the length of his thigh pressed against mine. “Oh. Wow. He’s ... *pretty.*”

I look over to see that he’s watching me and not Jane, and I feel that strange sense of otherworldly wonder that we found each other. Like two moths in the dark of night, searching for our soulmates. With great effort, I tear my gaze from his to look back at Jane.

“Jane, this is Rurik. Rurik, this is Jane.” I gesture between the screen and my new man, and Jane grins brightly.

“I cannot *wait* to spend some quality time with you, Rurik. I know everything there is to know about your new wife. I know stories that would have you *howling* and possibly also considering divorce. Pretty sure we should start with the piñata story. Nobody ever believes me when I tell the piñata story.”

“I am looking forward to it,” Rurik replies stiffly, like he doesn’t quite know what to do with Jane. That’s okay. Nobody ever quite knows what to do with Jane. Except for maybe ...

“We don’t have a lot of time,” I admit, thinking of the impending ‘star-jump’ and whatever it entails. “But I would be remiss if I let you go without asking ...” My mouth turns into a sharp and somewhat evil grin, teeth flashing. “What is this copulatory plug of which you speak?”

I left her a little note in the *Twilight* book that Hyt bought for me. All it said was: *LOL, you got a mate, too? Love ya, your bestie Eve.* She knew this was coming.

Jane chokes on her own spit, yanking her pirate hat off her head and covering her face with it. She’s laughing, too, but the sound is high and strange, and I just know that whatever this story is, it’s going to beat the one about the time I got trapped inside a piñata filled with candy—that was subsequently beaten with sticks by various children. I’d rather Rurik not hear that one, but Jane is going to tell him anyway, so I may as well embarrass her now.

“Shall I give you privacy, my princess?” Rurik whispers softly, his hand on my bare knee. I almost die from that small, brief contact. The need to fuck him hits me like the sticks of those wild children against the sides of the piñata. It’s a wonder that I didn’t die that day.

“No, no,” I assure him, half-croaking the words as I struggle with my overactive libido. “Jane has been telling Abraxas all my embarrassing secrets, I’m sure. She can share this one with the both of us.”

She drops her hat to her lap and *glares* at me.

That’s when I know: this guy, this ‘Captain Kidd’, he’s a special one for sure.

“It was supposed to be a onetime thing,” she pleads, as if she’s begging me to do something about her copulatory plug. What the fuck am I supposed to

do? I have a glowing vagina. “I didn’t know that my cunt was so powerful that it’d draw his ... his ... *mating fluid* out of him? Isn’t that the whole point?” She’s practically yelling now, maybe unaware that someone has entered the room behind her.

It’s not Tabbi Kat. Or Hyt. It’s ... something else.

A guy with a mohawk that trails from his head down his neck and back. A guy wearing a black pirate hat. A guy with his hands on his hips and a glare in his amber eyes. Breeches. Boots. A sword. Sharp teeth. He looks a bit like a hyena if I’m being honest. A pirate spliced with a hyena.

This must be Captain Kidd.

“We’ll soon be entering our own star-jump. Your transmission will cut off here any minute.” He growls this all out, like he’s trying to be informative, but is secretly holding back the need to be a colossal asshole.

Ahhhh. This guy is *exactly* Jane’s type. She likes to love ‘em and leave ‘em, but ... guess she can’t do that with a literal plug in her vagina, now can she?

“You and your dumb-dumb alien romance plots!” I’m howling now because she’s the one that likes to read that shit. I don’t have much time to read, what with the demands of my business. When I do, it’s usually some cheesy young adult romance with way too much of the characters staring at each other’s lips when they should just be fucking. “This is amazing! Is this your guy?”

Hyt returns to the room, pulling his hat off to shield his lips as he whispers something in Captain Kidd’s fuzzy round hyena ear. Hyt drops the hat down to his side and the two of them exchange a long look. I refuse to focus too much on Officer Hyt. He ... there’s something about him that I don’t understand. I don’t want to understand it. I have enough to deal with as it is.

“I am not her guy,” Captain Kidd declares, scowling as he turns and storms off. Didn’t even wait to be properly introduced. Yeah. This guy is Jane’s type to a T.

“I can’t have sex with anyone else,” she whispers, eyes tearing up a bit. “I don’t know what happened. I don’t know how to fix it.”

“We’ll figure something out,” I promise her, but then I happen to look over and catch Rurik’s expression. He’s frowning when he looks back at me, and then he shakes his head gently. I’m getting the impression that there’s nothing he knows of that can help Jane.

“He will never be able to get an erection again without her pheromones present. She will never have a clear mating channel without his pheromones present.” Rurik presents the news in a calm, even tone, but perhaps there’s a bit of sympathy missing there.

Jane gapes at him.

“I have a glowing vagina,” I offer gently, hoping that’ll help. It doesn’t. She just glares at me.

“A glowing vagina that clearly isn’t plugged up. I can’t even *masturbate*.”

“You can touch your clit.” I’m trying to make her feel better, but it doesn’t seem to be working.

A dark shadow slips into the room behind her, blurring the edges of reality.

I am struck dumb.

I can’t think straight.

He’s ... he’s right there.

Abraxas slinks behind Jane, standing on all fours with his tail thrashing gently.

“My female,” he growls out, and I slap a hand over my mouth. My eyes slam shut. I can’t breathe. “I have missed you.”

I can’t talk. Not yet. But I force my eyes back open so that I can meet his jeweled gaze.

Rurik is stiff beside me, breathing heavily, but he doesn’t turn away. He stares right back at Abraxas, but my dragon mate doesn’t deign to look at him. He has eyes only for me.

“I have hope that your inferior male was not an unpleasant creature to mate,” Abraxas says softly, but with no small amount of intended derision. He chuffs and leans in, splitting his mouth wide and sliding his tongue up the glass of the tablet.

My body reacts like I’ve been sucker-punched, and I’m forced to look away.

I’m sweating.

My pussy throbs painfully, clenches on emptiness when it *should* rightfully be clenching around Abraxas’ dicks. I turn back to see him watching me. Jane has scooted her chair to the side, but makes absolutely no move to get up and leave. If I ask for privacy, she’ll just sit there longer so I say nothing.

“I miss you, too,” I whisper, suddenly resentful of my connection to Rurik. He can feel what I’m going through right now. I can see it in the tight set of

his jaw, in the glint of red in his dark eyes, in the flatness of his beautiful pink mouth. There's a stain of red on his lower lip from when he bit me in the hallway. "I ... I'm sorry."

Those last two words, they drift like autumn leaves, swirling and dancing in an icy breeze.

"Female." The strong, sharp sound of Abraxas' voice jerks my entire soul back into focus.

Rurik and I might be destined, but what greater freedom is there than choice?

Abraxas and I *chose* each other.

*They're both mine now.* It's a strange, tender thought. It's something that I can't even control. I'm bound to both of them in irreversible ways. Which means ... Rurik is absolutely telling me the truth about bringing Abraxas aboard this ship to stay. Now that I've seen some of the natural areas, I guess it's possible that he could be given a den to stay in, one that I could share with him. But ... he won't be happy permanently living on *The Korol*. We'll have to take trips to Jungryuk or wherever else.

I shake thoughts of the future loose. One step at a time. Rurik and I are mated. We need to complete the rest of the ridiculous Vestalis wedding rituals. And then we can figure this all out. Together. It'll have to be done together.

My connections with the pair of them ... might be ... equal?

"Yes, male?" I reply, and Abraxas offers me that horrifying Cheshire cat grin that gets my heart all twisted up with happy hormones.

"A Vestalis mate bond would be a trying difficulty for any mated pair, but you and I can and will overcome any obstacle. Even and especially this." He tilts his head, horns shimmering with violet light, and Jane whistles under her breath.

"Damn, this is hot," she whispers, but I ignore her. She's the most important person in the whole of the Noctuida—even more so than my parents or my siblings or any of my other friends—but there are exceptions now. Abraxas. Rurik.

I look back to the latter to gauge his reaction. He isn't staring Abraxas down anymore. Instead, his focus is on the floor.

*Overwhelming grief. Impossible hope. Jealousy. Relief. Love.*

He snaps his gaze back to mine and narrows his eyes.

I force my stare away from his and then end up caught on Abraxas again.

“This changes nothing between us,” I promise him. “I love you.” I swallow, knowing that Jane is going to make fun of me for my vulnerability later, but unable to help myself. “And I’m counting down the days until we see each other again.”

“Ah, my tiny, sweet female,” he growls, and then the transmission cuts off abruptly.

That terrifies me, strikes a primal fear into my heart that I have trouble breathing around. I whip my gaze over to Rurik, but he’s already stripped both gloves so that he can take my face between his warm hands.

“Do not be afraid. They are nearing the star-jump as are we. It was inevitable that we would soon lose contact.”

“Won’t your parents find out about this?” I ask, but then I hear something strange, a quieting. I don’t know how else to describe it but for that. The ship slows down, and all the ambient noise ceases. All of the lights shut off. We’re lit only by the persistent glow of the star outside, but it’s more than enough to see by.

“They will not, not with a star-jump on the horizon. Come.” Rurik sets the tablet aside on the nightstand and then pulls me into the bed with him.

We lie on our sides, legs tangled. His right wing is underneath both him and me, like a silk blanket.

“Look at me,” he whispers, and I do. I stay still, and I stare, and I don’t let myself think about Abraxas or Jane or anything else. My breath releases. My body softens toward Rurik’s. He keeps me where I am when I try to wriggle closer, locking our gazes. “Tell me something about yourself, my princess. I must know everything.”

I understand that he’s trying to distract me from whatever is about to happen, but I’m too scared not to fall for it. I hate space. I hate spaceships. I hate stars.

Mostly, I hate the thought of losing all this.

I can’t die just yet.

“I once dated a guy who bred moths,” I whisper back, Rurik’s left hand on my shoulder to keep me still, his right arm curved under my body. I wish his claspers were out, pinning my hips and holding me in place. I loved the feeling of it, this basic biological urge to keep me close that he had no power to deny. “He studied them as an entomologist.”



“You mated with his human male?” Rurik asks with a pretty scowl forming on his lips. I smile at that.

“What? Like you were a virgin before last night?” I already know that he was. Seems pretty clear that the Vestalis can only mate with one female in their whole lives. That they’d only *want* to mate with one.

“I remained untouched, as you well know,” he growls right back, giving up and jerking me closer, running his lips over the pulse in my neck. My eyes close and I tilt my head slightly back to see if I can’t spot the star. Its light is an impossible blaze now, searing my eyes and tainting my vision an endless white. *I wonder if that’s what the weird screen over the windows is for? To protect our vision, our skin.* I know Rurik wouldn’t let me look if my eyesight was in jeopardy. “This human male, you mated him?” he asks again, and I drop my head.

Rurik is now propped over me, a knee and a hand on either side of my body, staring intently. Waiting.

*Don’t think about the star. Don’t think about the light. Don’t think about the dead and silent ship as it floats through nothingness.*

I exhale and concentrate on Rurik.

“He was terrible at sex. I mean, *god-awful*.” I pause there to wet my lips, still staring at my soulmate. “I think that I always liked the moths better than I did him.”

Rurik smiles with guile on his lips, but he never breaks our gaze. He surges up suddenly, grinding his hardness between my hips. He snatches my chin and peers into my eyes.

“Princess, I am *not* a moth.”

My heart stops.

The world stops.

Everything is still and frozen and quiet.

And then my soul is torn screaming and wailing past my parted lips.



*This is what it feels like to die.*

I remember clearly now, the sharpness of the female Aspis' teeth, the convulsion of her throat, the wetness of her stomach. Bleeding everywhere. Burning up. When that happened, I thought of my mom and sisters.

This time, I think about Abraxas, how he showed me what it felt like to be free, all of the things that I learned about choice and integrity. I think about Rurik and his patience and ... the choice he gave me, too. Because he could've forced me to fall for him whenever he wanted; I would not have been able to resist. He didn't, and he let me choose.

Jane's laughing face fills my vision next, and I wonder if she isn't going to end up with this Captain Kidd guy. I wonder how he and Officer Hyt know each other. They seemed to have pretty strong bromance vibes for the three seconds that I saw them together. What did Hyt call his friend again? Oh, that's right: the DTF guy. I should've mentioned that to his face.

Officer Hyt.

I don't know why I think about him. He's a stranger that I've spent a grand total of like, two hours with. My mind conjures up the image of his naked body, his cock that I had in my fucking hand—that I had between my folds—his sharp grin and his sexy cowboy hat.

All of this to distract me from what's really happening.

The star-jump.

I thought I was screaming when the sensation of being ripped in half started. My soul is being *torn* out of me. Who wouldn't scream? But I realize absently that I'm not making any sound at all. I don't have access to my body, so I'm trapped inside my head.

This is *definitely* what dying feels like.

I keep waiting for it to end, but it doesn't. It goes on and on and on.

And then I'm snapped right back into my body with Rurik between my legs.

I choke on a gasping sob as his hands cradle my face, and he kisses me all over. Kisses my tears off as I pant. Kisses my cheeks. Kisses my forehead. Kisses my neck.

"What ..." Nothing else comes out.

The ship surges back to life around us, ambient noises returning, lights flickering on.

"It is why our people refer to it only in a reverent whisper, my princess." Rurik presses his lips to my forehead and holds himself there, just breathing. "Do you now agree that perhaps the term 'star-jump' is a bloody stupid way to refer to the sensation of true death?"

"I felt like I was about ten seconds out from being reborn," I mumble, and then I shut my thoughts down because I don't want to think about it anymore. It's over. I'm here. I feel rubbery and sluggish and disoriented, but I'm here. "Maybe I need some coremata to relax me?" I tease.

He doesn't take it as a tease.

Rurik sits up and uses the slits in his jacket to take it right off. The bright red coremata unfurl quickly, and he wafts his wings, stirring his pheromones into the room. I pull in a deep breath, and his scent settles in my lungs, relaxing me.

I melt into the bed.

"I want you to fuck me," I whisper as he takes my mouth, kissing me and smearing hot, sticky pheromones over my tongue.

"If only." Rurik presses his forehead to mine and then sits back up, taking his warmth away from me. "My mother will be waiting to see us in her drawing room."

"The millipede has a drawing room?" I blurt before I can think better of it. I just insulted my new husband's mother. Not a great way to start off our marriage. Doesn't seem to bother Rurik. He's known how afraid I am of his

mother since the first moment he introduced us. “Didn’t we just see her?”

“She will want to send us off on our honeymoon properly. Since my father cannot—” He stops talking, and we stare at each other.

“No.” I feel nauseous. I don’t want to hear this. I don’t want to accept it.

“I have to be king, my princess, or you will be in some trouble.” Rurik frowns, still straddling me, his knees digging into the mattress, his cock tight against the inside of his breeches. I see now why he ties it down. It’s taken up all the available extra space in his pant leg. “My father has already marked your planet as our next refueling station.”

“Excuse me?” I choke, and Rurik simply shakes his head gently, as if he knows I’m going to panic about this. Why he waited until just after the star-jump to tell me, I don’t know. I’m still not fully back to myself.

“Because you are my mate, and because we are the first mated amongst my brothers, that means you are the Imperial Princess. The Imperial Princess cannot be both royalty and an endangered, protected species at the same time.”

“What do you mean by that?” The words scrape past my throat. I’m getting it. I understand. I just ... don’t want to.

“Earth is under my father’s protection only for so long as it will take us to arrive there. Then, he will use our imminent ascension to the throne as an excuse to consume your planet. Its energy will fuel our reign for the entirety of our natural lifespans.” Rurik’s coremata curl back into him, and the tightness of his cock diminishes. He’s frowning now, staring at me in apology. “He thinks I will not have the courage to refuel after I take over, that I will allow my softheartedness to kill the entirety of my people.”

Neither of us remarks that maybe it’d be better if that happened. Rurik knows as well as I do that ... the Vestalis *are* parasitic. Not because of their mate bonds. But because they have no planet, they travel in a ship as large as a planet, and use its capabilities to intimidate and control others.

He’s right: he *has* to be king.

Tears hit me hard as I reach up to snatch at his arms. He sits there stoically as I claw up his skin, dragging my nails down his pale flesh.

“What are we going to do?” I whisper, still not wanting to put words to it. Rurik leans down again and presses another kiss to my forehead.

“I have to be king,” he repeats, lips on my skin. “The act of ascending will trap me in that throne room.” He pauses, and a sob escapes me as I clutch

him against me. “It is a miserable, horrible existence.” I’m holding him tight enough to hurt now, but he doesn’t stop me or try to pull away. “Why do you think my parents are so desperate to be rid of it?” He laughs dryly at the truth of it. “I will not condemn you to that, my princess.” He draws back then and looks pleadingly at me. “You will explore the *stars*,” he adds, but I shove him back from me and crawl out from underneath him, wearing a red-stained white dress and glaring daggers.

Rurik remains on the bed.

“Stop that,” I hiss through gritted teeth. “This isn’t funny. Is this like the comet thing you teased me about? The room with no gravity?”

He simply stares.

“You will have your great love”—his voice breaks on that one—“and you will only have to come and feed me. I will protect you with the power of the Imperial Court and the full force of the Noctuida. I will dedicate my life to seeing that you are kept happy and safe.”

“Shut up.” I’m tempted to put my hands over my ears so I don’t have to hear this crap.

Rurik looks away from me, out the window and toward a beautiful blue and green and brown planet that looks oddly similar to earth. But it’s not. The shapes of the continents are all wrong.

“You will only have to come to the throne room to feed me.” He stands up from the bed and grabs his jacket, slipping it back on. I stay away from him, away from his pheromones and his bullshit.

“I’m not letting you do this,” I tell him. I’m not. We’re mates now. I won’t allow for this shit. “This is crap, Rurik. You know it. I know it. Come on, guy, do better.”

He smiles softly at that, but he doesn’t look at me as he buttons himself up.

“How am I to save your planet if I cannot choose another for this hungry ship to eat? Much less send you to Earth to visit.” He looks up, still smiling. It’s a sad fucking smile. “How am I to ensure that you can be with your Aspis mate if any other ruler would see you killed for the penalty of adultery? How am I to clear Jungryuk of slavers and poachers? How am I to save the humans that are suffering throughout the Noctuida?” He waits for me to reply.

I glare at him.

“I *will* protect you.” My voice is hard. Flat. “There’s a way out of this, I’ll bet.”

Rurik looks toward our bedroom door with a sigh.

“All I ask is that you come to me and tell me of the adventures you have.” He laughs gently, sadly. “The people you have met, and the things you have done.”

Rurik strides to the door and then through it as it opens.

I turn away from him and head into the bathroom to clean myself up. Vestalis perversion ... I mean Vestalis *propriety* might dictate that I wear a cum-stained dress, but I can wash my body, can't I?

I start the water in my always-hot shower with a view of the approaching planet. I scrub my skin with the ferocity of desperate determination.

Last night, when I promised Rurik that I would save him?

I *meant* it.



“I don't want to talk to you,” I mumble when I find the prince waiting in the foyer. He looks up at me with a sly half-smile that doesn't reflect in his eyes. He's devastated about his soon-to-be fate—trapped in one room for the rest of his life, alone—but he won't let on again.

I got what I'm going to get out of him, and that's it.

We *really* need to get to know each other better. And quick. I have a feeling our lives depend on our ability to fall deeply, madly in love. Don't know why. It's just what it feels like. Don't the Vestalis worship at the altar of romance? What better way to deal with this than to live up to their ideal?

“It's a shame you would deny me conversation for my final few days outside of this ship.”

I purse my lips tight. *Whatever it takes*. Surely, I didn't come all the way out here, into the middle of a vast and unknown universe, to lose my anchor. Rurik is my anchor. My soul stretched as far as it had to in order to find him.

“Please tell me that I'm not in a coma and imagining you.” I exhale as he steps over to me, feelers brushing over my hair. I reach up on either side and snatch them like horns, grabbing complete control over his head. He just looks at me. “If I am, can I imagine you *not* taking the throne?”

His smile is a ghost.

“If you were in a coma, we would not know because you made the rare and very odd choice of mating with an Aspis. It scrambles the tech.”

I think it’s meant to be a joke. If it’s not then I’m laughing my ass off for nothing. I release his antennae and slap him in the shoulder. He blinks down at the contact in confusion before looking up at me.

“Why strike me?” he inquires, genuinely curious.

“Aren’t your biological processes supposed to teach you that I’m fucking around?” I retort, crossing my arms and refusing to let him pull me in. I’m still upset. Truthfully? I want to roll up in a ball on the carpet and die, but I’m much, *much* more stubborn than that.

I will never stop trying to prevent this from happening. If it happens, I will never stop trying to undo it. But I can’t let Rurik suffer all the while. We have to live, too. We have to keep moving.

“Aren’t your biological processes supposed to warn you away from a beast monster with a venomous tail?” He’s definitely teasing me now, stepping close and causing me to back up and bump against the wall. He puts a hand beside my head. “You should’ve come to me in the tent and saved us both the trouble of one another’s company. Abraxas and myself, I mean.”

“You’ll never be able to hold a conversation with him.” I’m just being honest. “He’s too blunt, and you’re too ... you ... so it won’t work. He thought you were a pompous weirdo from moment one. He *warned* me to stay away from you.” I laugh at the recent memory. It’s been, like, a week since then. Hah. It feels like an entire *century*. “Said you were parasitic. A world-eater.”

Rurik curls his lip at me, ever the pretty princeling.

“I would have him loaded into a transport and jetted into the boiling oceans of a distant moon.”

I grin.

“He says he’d enjoy eating you, likewise,” I put my hands on the fur adorning either of Rurik’s shoulders, and I press my mouth into his, tasting him. He exhales against me as I draw back, sending my heart racing.

“If they interrupt us now, I will have them all sent to a distant, fading sun and leave them there to experience its inevitable collapse.”

They. He means Zero, Avril, and Connor for sure.

We start to kiss again, my hands digging into his hair. Or ... it’s like fur, I

guess. I don't know. I don't care. It's soft and ghost-scare-white, and it looks good on him. With the horns and the eyes and the teeth, he has a decidedly demonic charm. The coremata though ... those are moth-y.

"Moths have choremata," I whisper, and he glowers at me, the fangs on the left side of his mouth exposed in disgust.

"Moths ... I believe the Vestalis are more closely related to human beings than any sort of Earthen moth."

"That's not possible." I shove at him, but he grabs me by the wrists, giving me a harsh look.

"All life-forms in the Noctuida originated from a single place. We are related, and so it is of little surprise—"

My bedroom door opens and there's Avril with dark circles under her eyes, tearstains, the shakes. She looks absurdly pallid, unsteady, nauseous.

"We will be docking soon, Your Imperial Majesties. The queen would ... like to see you before then." Avril turns and just barely catches herself on the edge of the doorjamb. Zero looks perfectly fine when she walks past Avril, heading straight for a full pile of macarons.

"Do you have those made in my name?" I ask, grinning at Avril's disheveled state. I'm under the impression that having a mate (or being a cyborg) keeps the effects of the star-jump mild. Not having one ... sucks. "I mean, do you tell the kitchens here that the princess is ordering macarons? I barely like them."

"I have to have a reason to get up in the morning," Avril snaps, and my bedroom door closes behind her.

Ouch. Maybe I need to lay off with the teasing? The poor girl is going through some shit, and she *did* save my life. I feel a bit guilty.

Rurik is rubbing at his face, at the dark triangle between his eyes.

"One might fall under the false impression that *she* was the royal mate." He stands up straight and looks me over, his face softening again as he takes in the stains on the dress. "I have always found this ritual vulgar and absurd and so terribly old-fashioned."

"Yeah, um, let's abolish it when ..." I don't finish that sentence, but he smiles at me anyway.

"Come. This will be unpleasant. Let us get it done with as quickly as possible." Rurik takes me into the hallway, turning us right and past wall after wall after wall of ugly meat growths. *When Rurik runs the ship, will all*



*of this turn to blood lace? An entire spaceship decorated with his beautiful designs.* Knowing him, he'd amp it up over time. Build canopied beds out of lace. Fashion gowns. Fashion entire houses built of lace for people to live in.

We're thinking in sync right now, and it's weird as fuck.

I look down to see that his nail has pricked my arm, that a drop of blood swells from me and beads against his skin. It's very quickly absorbed. I shiver, but I don't stop walking.

The queen's drawing room—what the hell is a drawing room?—isn't a long way from our suite. Getting there—with Zero trailing absently behind us—takes less than five minutes.

The room itself is big and wide with an arched doorway paneled in wood. It's an odd demarcation, between the science fiction hallways and the cozy personal spaces. Is this truly Vestalis style? It looks similar to something I might be able to see back home on a historic house tour. *With windows filled by views of stars and planets. And a ship that jumps space and time to make you feel like you're dying. Maybe it actually kills you? Maybe I died and came back to life?*

"How did you enjoy ..." The queen does not finish her question, ending in a long and drawn out hiss. *Her version of a reverent whisper.* "I find it enlightening each time."

I just stand there, staring.

The room looks Victorian-ish. There are gold wall sconces with red flames, and a fireplace to go along with them. There are paintings on the wall of ... things. Creatures. Female creatures. *Queens.* I will be the only human being in a long, long line of monstrous aliens.

The queen herself looks tame in comparison to some of them.

She coils in a glass tank in the center of the room, watching us as we approach. The tank is filled with dark, moist soil. O...kay.

"Are you confused, dear human?" she asks me mockingly, watching as I stand there on her nice carpet and try not to panic at the sight of my mother-in-law and her billions of legs and her thousand-yard stare.

Rurik moves to step in front of me, but I put out a hand to stop him.

I stare right back.

"Why would I be confused?" I challenge. *I'm the princess. We're about to ascend. His parents want us to ascend and suffer in their place.* I will be as rude as I want to be. I wish suddenly that I'd changed my dress and refused to

participate in the Day of Wearing. Fuck them and their traditions. “The decor in this ship has changed to suit my tastes.”

I mean, they’re *not* my tastes, but it’s human-themed.

It’s all human-*themed*.

I swallow hard.

Said it before, and I’ll say it again.

I love Rurik; he’s my mate; he’s my other half.

The Vestalis? They’re creepy. They are so goddamn fucking creepy.

I want to leave this ship so badly that my entire body breaks out in chills. I *itch* to get off. I’d plead and shamelessly beg Rurik if we weren’t already scheduled to do so. *Fucking hell*.

The queen slithers out of her tank, scattering dirt across the floor, and then she heads over to visit her son. She runs her mandibles over his hair, and I reach out to slap her.

I *slap* her.

I slap an intergalactic millipede queen with the power to nuke my home planet.

*What the hell is wrong with me?!*

There’s never been a character in any of Jane’s novels as stupid as I am. Not once.

“Don’t you put your scent on my mate,” I growl at her. I’d blame the weird pheromones between me and Rurik for my behavior, but ... it’s not. This is just me. I’m a whole lot of dumb sometimes. I prefer to call it bravado and pluckiness.

The queen hisses and rears at me, but Rurik steps between us. Blood lace flows from the floor and tethers her, pulling her back and away from us before it melts onto the ground and is absorbed by the ship. *Eww. Gross. This place is insane!*

Something about mating with Rurik made me literally forget there for a second.

The queen—if she has a name, I don’t care to know it—settles on the length of a chaise lounge, her monstrous hulking form spilling off the sides in a wave of pearlescent shimmer and legs. Too many legs. I just cannot get over that bit.

“We have arrived at Dome,” she says proudly, fondly. “I remember when your father and I spent our last days off the ship together.” She turns her

round head in the direction of the window as we drift down toward the planet's atmosphere.

The ship is so large that it leaves a *shadow* on the planet far before we ever get close to landing.

"We will surely enjoy our time together," Rurik says woodenly, holding back frustration. He doesn't like the way his mother is picking at me, taunting me. Us. She's taunting *us*. "But I do not know why you have to needle us. We are both aware of our fate. Why is this being brought up again and again? I am of the mind to take control of *The Korol* early." He smiles faintly. "The people will support me."

"By all means, we shall see about a rapid ascension." The queen relaxes into her seat as the ship drifts lower and lower. Cities reveal themselves. Towns. Trees. We come to a gentle stop, despite how rapidly we must've been falling.

I didn't even notice. There was no jostling. No jerky movements. No vertigo.

The entire ship hisses now, settling, and then all the windows open. Every single one in the room and elsewhere. I can hear it. Can feel the breeze.

*A breeze.*

My skin aches and tugs, and I just *need* to get off of this ship.

"If you don't mind, mother." Rurik affects a dramatic bow, but he doesn't seem to care that I don't offer the same. His mother's strange laughter follows us out of the room and into the hallway.

I put a hand up to my chest, right over the frantic jump of my heart. *The ship ... adapts to the king's mate. It's adapting to me. The most human parts of all this could very well be a lie.*

"Where did you live before moving to the royal suites with me?" I turn to Rurik, but he's already looking at me, the faintest hint of a smile on his mouth.

"I am sorry. I am having trouble concentrating on your question. Did you truly slap the Imperial Queen?"

My cheeks heat, but I'm not sorry about it. Wish I could've done worse.

"She was putting her pheromones on you, marking you. Was I supposed to just stand there and take that?" It's a rhetorical question. Of course I wasn't going to take that shit. I give my new husband a look, like the answer should be obvious. "As you said: all I need do is exist, and you'll take care of the

raw power and brute strength bits.”

Rurik’s smile isn’t faint anymore. He steps forward and puts his hands on either side of my neck, leaning down to kiss me again. His palm brushes over the bite he left earlier, and gets me squirming.

A throat clears from behind me, and I glance over to see that Avril and Connor have joined Zero at our backs. More than that ... there are like *hundreds* of Vestalis filling the halls, each of them with a mate at his side.

“It is the Day of Wearing; they will want to see us leave the ship together,” Rurik explains absently as I frown and pretend like I totally noticed the giant crowd that formed during our few minute conversation with the queen.

I look down at the beautiful white skirt of the dress, marred with red. What a *weird* fucking tradition. But oh, when on a planet-destroying ship, do as the planet-destroying aliens do. The low-cut back of the dress is accentuated by the breeze. I can feel cool, moist air on my bare skin, teasing the lacy moth wings etched into my flesh.

“Is this blood lace?” I whisper quietly, taking Rurik’s arm again so that he can show me to the exit. I know that’s where we’re going because there’s no way he could be my soulmate and not know how desperately I need to get off this ship. “On my back, I mean.”

“It is,” he replies easily, looking down at me. “But I will not use it to monitor you unless there is a pressing need. You will always be entitled to your privacy. I will *ensure* that you have privacy when you need it.” He sounds mad now, mouth flat, but he walks like he owns the Noctuida. If you really think about it, he sort of does.

Or ... he will soon.

And he’ll pay a hefty, hefty price for it.

My own expression tightens.

*No wonder he was so devastated to have found me when he did. If only we were the second couple out of all his brothers to find each other. Why does my mate have to spend the next however many years attached to a sentient spaceship?*

“Now, where did you live before you moved to the royal suites?” I repeat. I’m trying to figure out exactly how much *The Korol* has changed since I was dragged onto it. Like, was the whole place decorated to please the creepy space millipede queen?

“I was rarely on the ship,” Rurik offers softly, looking down at me with

such deep empathy in his eyes that I want to scream. He's truly resigned himself to this fate, hasn't he? It's why he didn't make such a big deal of my actions on the World Station. He doesn't want to burden me by turning me into his mother. And I don't mean a space millipede, I mean a captive of that throne room. "Once I hit maturity, I traveled extensively."

"Looking for me?" I ask with a teasing smile that doesn't land. We're both thinking about this ship and that throne and being trapped here for—how many years did he say that his parents had ruled? Sixty? Oh God, it was sixty. And ... and even if ... if we tried to ride it out ...

I realize that any children we might have would be subjected to the same fate. Well, one of them anyway. I couldn't do that to my kid, raise them knowing that a hellish existence awaited them in adulthood. Damn.

"Purposely *not* looking for you," Rurik admits as the moth drones sweep down the hallway toward us. *Great*. An entourage for our honeymoon. I mean, besides Avril, Zero, and ... Connor is smiling softly, touching two fingers to his lips in awe. It's gross. I ignore him. "Last to mate, remember? That was my goal."

"Why were you on Jungryuk?" I'm super curious about that actually. "You weren't there to hit up a Tusk Man brothel, were you?"

You'd think I'd slapped the guy. He rears back and gives me an imperious look from obsidian eyes.

"I went there because I assumed it was the least likely place in the universe that I would ever find my mate." There's a wry twist to his lips. "Also, I admit, I had always wanted to see an Aspis in person."

"How was that going to turn out as anything less than your untimely death?" I snort at the idea of Rurik, heading to Jungryuk for a royal safari trip, only to be ripped apart by an Aspis. Then again, he *did* stand up to Abraxas that day at the brothel, like he was prepared to fight him. And Abraxas, he didn't press it, like maybe he thought the Vestalis male stood a chance.

"I can handle myself against an Aspis, my princess." Rurik and I pass by heavy crowds, from one hallway to the next, keeping a slow and leisurely pace. He turns to me. "Did you remember to bring a book with you?" His feelers swing back like rabbit ears, tucked together behind his head. "I did promise that I would read to you."

I grin and turn to Avril, who still looks like hell. I make sure to tell her

that. Consider it karma. She didn't tell me any of the shit that she was supposed to tell me, so I'm going to tell her all of the shit she doesn't want to hear. Although I did promise myself I'd try to tease her less ...

I can't resist.

"You look like crap."

"Thank you, Imperial Princess," she croaks, likely aware that clapping back at me in a hallway full of loyal Vestalin citizens is a bad idea.

"Can you go back to my room and choose a couple of books from my closet? The ones with the sluttiest covers." I smile at her. "Thanks, girl."

She groans, but she has little choice but to do what I've said.

Avril peels off, leaving a lovestruck Connor and an—as usual—apathetic Zero.

"Hey." I wave Connor over, and he obeys, practically skipping. I give him a look. "Did you get fucked by Brot?" I ask, and then I grab his shoulder and turn him away from me so that I can lift his jacket and look at his back. Other Vestalis (and their mates) gasp as I manhandle my male servant, and Rurik makes a sound like maybe this isn't the ideal way for a princess to behave.

That is, until I realize that he's struggling to contain a laugh from behind me.

I see no marks on Connor's skin. He slaps me away and adjusts his glasses with his middle finger again, clearly no accident there.

"What the hell are you doing? My body is only for the pleasure of my mate." He's grinning, like he thinks that's funny, but I sort of want to punch him. I liked both Connor and Avril a lot more when they were shoving the lawyer into the slug monster's throat. They're both annoying, nowhere near bestie material like Jane Baker is. "He didn't fuck me, but we kissed." Connor ruffles up his black hair with long fingers. "He helped me through the ..." He exhales, and that's all he says. We both know that 'star-jump' is a terrible oversimplification of a very weird process. "And he showed me his coremata." His face is bright when he says it. "I've never been with a guy before—strictly speaking, I'm a ladies' man—but after that display? I'm looking forward to it."

"Did you know that coremata means 'feather duster' in Greek?" I say randomly. Another weird fact that I obtained by dating a moth-breeding entomologist. Lepidopterist, more specifically.

"Does it now?" Connor asks absently, but like he couldn't care less. He

puts his hands over his chest and gazes up at the ceiling like he's completely and totally dick-drunk. I vow never to allow myself to look that ridiculous in public. "Who cares what they're called? They're amazing." He's not wrong there. But maybe you have to really *see* it to get it. Like, I might find the coremata creepy or gross on anyone other than Rurik. "As soon as I felt the full force of my mate's pheromones, I just ..." Connor doesn't finish his sentence which is probably a good thing.

I ignore him and turn back to see Rurik frowning prettily, one feeler swiveling my way.

"Greek for 'feather duster' he repeats?" And I can see that something about that sentence is off for him. The translator could be struggling with it, I guess. "Greek is ... a breed of human?"

I snort at that.

"Pretty much. My breed is American." I touch fingers to my chest and grin. "Which is why I'm such a spitfire shithead. Anyway, yeah, coremata means 'feather duster' in a human language that's different from mine."

"Feather duster." Rurik repeats the words with a frown. He pauses to draw a small item from his pocket, about as thick as a credit card and entirely see through. As he taps some things out on the screen, I take it that this is, like, his phone? I've never seen it before, and I'm curious. I peer over as the search results pop up, revealing a few museum photos of feather dusters. Like, they're displayed under lights with signage and everything. My eyes narrow to slits. "A cleaning device?" He sounds offended. "The coremata are ... *sacred*."

I pretend not to hear that.

Alien men are still men. Of *course* he thinks that his male parts are sacred.

Rurik tucks the phone away and then pauses beside a servant waiting at the end of the hallway. The unmated Vestalis male passes over another of those face devices, the ones with the little red screens that go over the eye. Rurik puts it on grudgingly, cringing as his father's blood lace slithers from the metal portion of the device and into his ear, connecting it to him.

I ... don't like that. Not at all.

We continue walking, entering a large room bordered on one side by those elevator platform things. A wall of windows looks over a heavily wooded area and, in the distance, there's what appears to be a *castle*.

Brot is waiting nearby, looking purposely away from Connor. Right.

“Have you come to claim your mate?” Rurik asks, forcing a smile. “You know that you are, of course, my most favorite of all our brothers. I bid you sincere congratulations.” My husband affects a half-bow that’s not entirely disingenuous. My heart warms.

Brot turns a mean look over to his sibling, but it doesn’t last long. He can’t seem to resist peering past me at Connor.

“I ... have only come to see you off,” Brot sniffs, and I can *feel* Connor falling apart behind me. I look back to see Zero offering him a dispassionate pat on the back.

“There, there now,” she says with a cruel and amused smirk on her lips. “You poor thing.”

“Well.” Rurik smooths a hand down the front of his jacket as the crowd whispers and stirs around us. I try not to look too closely at them. Some of the females are ... Well. Yeah. Some are too alien for my brain to comprehend. Others are just plain creepy. I catch sight of one of those bony aliens, the ones that are always slinking around in hooded cloaks. Now that I can see its beaked, skeletal face, I understand why. I look away. “You cannot remove him from the princess’ entourage until you have mated him. You know the rules.”

“I understand that implicitly,” Brot growls out, and then he slowly drops to his knee in a bow, and the rest of the room follows suit.

Rurik gives his brother a searching look, shrugs, and then pulls me onto one of the platforms.

“When can I change out of this dress?” I whisper as we descend, but Rurik just smiles at me.

“At the end of the day,” he says, which really, is no answer at all. The end of what day? An Earth day? A day on this planet? How long is that going to last? My sense of time is totally warped at this point. I’m not even trying to make it make sense. *How long have I been away from Earth? A month? Two months?*

I’m considering all of these boring and nonsensical things as we descend. The ship disappears around us, leaving a three-hundred-and-sixty degree view of the world. We’re way high up, skyscraper high, and falling rapidly. There are rails on the platform, but the bottom is relatively see through. It’s almost like we’re floating downward.

I squash a minor fear of the ground below us and take my time to properly



look around.

The trees are vaguely pine-ish. I say *ish* because they certainly *aren't* pine trees. Their trunks twist and bend in fantastic shapes, curving to one side or the other, twisting around each other, spiraling like corkscrews. The branches are heavy and thick with long silver and green needles, and cat-like creatures with too many eyes creep along the heavy boughs.

Below us, a cobbled street awaits with a bridge just ahead, its white length spanning a red river. *A river of blood?*

"You will love it here," Rurik assures me, reaching up to touch the side of my face. I love that, how much he's touching me, how each brush of his fingers should be casual but instead comes across like an eternal promise. "Especially since you're a dirt-footed planet-dweller." He smirks at me as I narrow my eyes.

*The cool, wet breeze. The smell of damp earth. The mildly familiar pine-ish scent. Ish. Just ish.*

I'm so happy to be out of space. Right here, right now, this could very well be one of the happiest moments of my entire life. *Surely that means it'll be short-lived.*

Fate is such a fickle bitch.

"*Dirt-footed?* Is that an insult? I'm starting to figure out that *planet-dweller* is an insult, too."

"Only in jest, my princess," Rurik tells me, accepting a red wool coat from a Vestalis male once we reach the ground. He slips it over my shoulders and helps me to get my arms into it. I'm even offered a pair of smooth leather gloves for my hands. Our crew joins us shortly after, taking another of the platforms down to ground level.

I turn to take in the size of the ship and ... find that it's not really something that can be *seen* from a point this close up. It's like trying to look at the whole of Mount Everest when you're standing at the base. You just can't see the whole thing.

"How big is this goddamn ship?" I whisper, and it's Avril who answers, like she actually cares about her job.

"It has a usable landmass roughly the size of the United States," she tells me, bowing as she delivers the news. Connor is standing there with a tight jaw and clenched teeth, likely thinking about Brot. But Zero? Her white hair blows in the wind as she stares into the distance, like she senses something

we don't.

"Trouble incoming, Your Majesties," she tells us, and then she takes off, sprinting barefoot across the cobblestones, leaping onto the railing of the bridge, sprinting over that like it's not a narrow, treacherous span. Zero hops off on the other side and intercepts a pair of Vestalis with a large crowd around them.

Rurik is watching, his hair and wings billowing gently in the breeze. Above us, the sky is decorated with violet clouds that I'd be concerned about if anybody else seemed to notice or care about them. One of the many-eyed cats slinks from the woods and starts to rub on my legs. Also, it has two tails. Also, this one has two *heads*. And it's pink, too.

Uh-huh.

I reach down to pet it anyway. One head seems to like me, purring vigorously, while the other hisses. *Typical cat*. And then my thoughts slingshot back home, to my own cat, Annabelle. I wonder if I could bring her with me on the ship? Also, I forgot that I was allergic to cats. My hand blooms with an itchy rash almost immediately, and I sigh.

"Hey, do you guys have some advanced alien cure for allergies?" I ask Rurik, but he's not looking at me. He's standing there with pursed lips, and a bit of color in his cheeks, the faintest dusting of red. "Rurik?"

He drags his gaze away from Zero and the crowd that's now following her back to where we stand, and he looks so grave that I know immediately something is wrong.

"What is it?" I whisper, but he just pulls me into his arms and kisses the top of my head.

"I will handle this; do not be afraid."

"That's not an answer to my question," I tell him, pausing to look over my shoulder.

A Vestalis male is approaching with a female at his side. This male looks much like the others except his fur ruff is *huge*, as big as a lion's mane. It swallows his head and neck and makes him look a bit overloaded at the top. His eyes are larger than Rurik's which gives him more of a bug-like look that I don't particularly find attractive.

And his female? Where should I start?

She's a millipede, just like the queen, only much, much smaller. This particular intergalactic millipede monster has delicate feelers, like a pair of

gentle reeds on her head. Her mandibles are narrow and somehow demure. I can't even explain how a bug could be feminine, submissive, and demure, but she is. She is all of those things.

*So ... literally the opposite of me?*

Although, I must say, in this dress, my waist is *snatched*, and I feel like my kingmaking pussy—my *lifesaving* pussy—is pretty spectacular. So, feminine I might be, but the other two things are a hard no.

The millipede lady in front of me has skin the color of watermelon tourmaline—my favorite stone—and it's as shiny as the queen's. Thankfully, she has way fewer legs. Her massive black eyes stare into mine, and I get the impression once again that I look more like an easy meal than I do the imperial princess.

Rurik sighs and holds out a hand.

"My princess, I would like to introduce to you my most favorite of all my brothers, Ranet." Rurik smiles, but it's not a very nice smile. *Maybe he isn't too nice after all.* He looks quietly furious. "Ranet, allow me to introduce your Imperial princess and future queen."

"As pleased as I am to make your acquaintance," his brother sniffs rather rudely, "I don't believe it is as simple as all that."

"Pardon?" Rurik retorts politely, but the word is a warning that I would heed if I were this guy. "Explain why you have not taken a knee." He looks derisively in the direction of his brother's ... mate? But ... I thought we were the only ones mated (other than Connor and Brot who have yet to consummate their deal). When did this happen? "Your mate as well. On your knees, the both of you."

"I believe that once we have conversed with mother and father, it will be *you* and your mate on your knees," Ranet says, looking over at his lady. They gaze at one another before turning back to us. "I found my female before you. Improper as it may be, we mated at first sight. Nearly fourteen solar days ago."

Uh.

I feel like such a stupid asshole right now. This is bad. I know this is bad. This is really, *really* fucking bad.

I look at Rurik, but he doesn't seem concerned anymore. Now he just looks pissed the hell off.

"I do not like to repeat myself, Ranet. You well-know this. We are from

the same litter.” Rurik’s words cut like a knife. More importantly: they’re a final warning. *Note to self: ask about the litter thing later.* I’m guessing it’s because Rurik’s mom is a giant millipede creature. If she has a hundred-and-three sons, she must have massive litters. I put my hand on my belly and Ranet notices. “Bend your knees in honor of the Imperial Princess.”

“I cannot in good conscience allow this charade to continue,” Ranet blusters, puffing up his already puffed up chest and shoulders. “We *will* speak to mother and father about correcting this oversight. My mate and I were paired *first*.”

Rurik tugs me close, and then he bites my neck. Blood lace spills out of the wound and over my shoulders, an entire *wave* of it. The bright red threads wrap both Ranet and his mate, dragging them to the ground so that they lay humiliated and trapped, pinned to the cobblestones on their bellies. Rurik gently licks my wound, kisses it, and then lifts his head back up as I turn around to gape.

“Next time I give you an order that you do not follow, I will kill you both.” He waits there for a moment, reaching up to press his fingers against the device on his head. “Yes mother. Yes father. We will be right up.”

The blood lace sweeps back in another wave, pooling at our feet and melting into liquid. Rurik absorbs it back into his body, and then he’s hitting a button and up we go again.

Back to the goddamn ship.



The king leans down from his throne, peering at the new couple with narrowed black eyes.

“Why did you not send a transmission immediately?” he asks, studying his son and his son’s new mate. They’ve both got the markings on their wings and backs. I’m pleased to see that Ranet’s blood lace looks like the tangled bundles of my mother’s yarn that Annabelle gets into. Messy. Purposeless. Boring. While it’s not as meaty as the king’s, it’s also entirely unimpressive.

“I’d be so furious if I had that ugly pattern etched into my back,” I whisper to Rurik, and he actually manages to give me a smile even if he doesn’t look at me. The smile fades quick as it came, back to a dark and troubled frown. I want to talk to him in private, ask him if this might be a good thing. If Rurik doesn’t become king, he won’t get trapped on the throne. His words come back to me like an icy punch to the gut.

*“How am I to save your planet if I cannot choose another for this hungry ship to eat? Much less send you to Earth to visit. How am I to ensure that you can be with your Aspis mate if any other ruler would see you killed for the penalty of adultery?”*

Yikes.

Maybe not.

Rurik’s brother continues to blather on, using terms I’m not familiar with.

“As you know, I encountered severe trouble after I landed on Nolaegi. We

lost all communication with *The Korol*, and I was forced to bring my mate to Dome via a slaver's ship." Ranet's face twists strangely, and as I blink, I swear that my synchronicity contacts are malfunctioning again because I see the grotesque mandibles on either side of his mouth. I shudder. "I could not dock with nor communicate with you while I was on that vile creature's ship." He hesitates and then feels the need to add, "I had the criminal executed as soon as we landed."

The king sits back in his throne as the queen slithers around the new couple, feelers sliding over the female's hair, over her son's hair. Neither of them protests the way I did. They wait, polite and decorous, for the examination to finish.

"You mated your female in private, away from the eyes of the court. Away from my eyes. How am I to verify the legitimacy of your claim when I did not watch the markings ink your back the way I did with your brother?" The king points at me and Rurik as we stand off to the side in silence. He turns to us, and I can see that we're not entirely out of trouble. "If you had gone ahead with the wedding immediately as we'd asked, we would not be in this difficult position."

"Yes, father." Rurik inclines his head, but I see that his bloodstained mouth is twisted into a vicious scowl. He's furious, but not with me. Even though one could argue that this is partially my fault. Or all my fault. That, too.

The queen clacks her mandibles together in frustration and slithers over to Brot who just so happens to be standing near the wall of screens with Connor open-mouthed and wide-eyed beside him.

"How old are you boys now?" she asks, looking to Brot before swiveling the top half of her body around like an owl to stare at Rurik. "Nearly fifteen solar years, is it?"

"Rurik and Ranet are fifteen solar years old, mother," Brot replies with as much piss and vinegar as he used on me. Good to know that he's just an asshole all around and not toward me specifically. "I am nearly twenty."

I blink through those statements, and then I very, very slowly turn my head over to look at Rurik.

"Please explain to me what *fifteen solar years* is in Earth time?" My voice cracks. The idea that my new husband might be a *teenager* freaks me all the way out. It never even occurred to me to ask. *For that matter, I wonder how old Abraxas is?* "Quickly, Rurik."

“Do not fret, my princess. In Earth years, I believe I am around thirty-five.”

I exhale sharply in relief, drawing too much attention back to us.

“All this time and you’ve all found your mates now?” the queen continues, turning back to Brot. “You are not in line for the throne. I find it strange that you have found your mate yet have left him in the princess’ entourage. Explain.”

“Mother, I—” Brot begins, holding his hands out, palms up in pleading. He doesn’t seem to know what to say to that.

“Your mother and I are very disappointed in you,” the king continues, voice rumbling. “We have been lenient for an entire day, but you have failed your mate terribly. You will remove the humiliation of leaving him as a servant when he is, in fact, a princeling. Correct this mistake. *Now.*” The king’s voice booms as he points at the doorway. It slides open, letting in blessed light. “Do you all see what impropriety leads to? Confusion and disorder. Go before I lose my temper.”

Poor Brot. If I use a rough and probably bad number conversion in my head to guess his age, he’s over forty in human years. And he’s getting dressed down by his parents. Poor sucker.

He doesn’t have to be told twice. He snatches Connor by the wrist and drags him from the room. Connor and I take the time to wave at one another before the door slams shut. I hope he enjoys himself. First time with his mate. First time with a dude. First time with an alien. Should be interesting.

I refocus back on the problem at hand as the queen paces, her thousands of tiny legs skittering. I can barely stand to look at her.

“We have differing claims, but there is only one case in which the evidence is definitive.” She gives Ranet a look that I think conveys disappointment, but then, she’s a space millipede so I have no fucking clue. “Your brother was mated properly in front of the entire Noctuida.” Why she has to emphasize our lack of privacy, I have no idea. Again, maybe because she’s a space millipede, my MIL, and a total bitch. “Whereas you come crawling in like a trollop.”

“Mother,” Ranet offers calmly, inclining his head in a bow. “You do know who my mate is, do you not?” He waits for the queen to supply an answer. When she doesn’t, he starts to get nervous. I can’t blame him. She’s got her thousand-yard stare locked onto her son.

All the while, Rurik remains quiet and stoic. I find myself staring at his profile, at the beauty of his mouth, at the intensity in his eyes. As if he can sense me, he turns back to meet my gaze. My breathing quickens. I fist my hands in my stained skirt, and he smiles softly at me.

“No matter how this is decided, we will work through our problems together,” he tells me, voice achingly gentle.

“From now on, always together,” I promise, and I mean it. Even if I have to physically leave him in that throne room while I hunt for rare plants or something on a distant planet, I *will* find a cure to free him from this hideous throne. He can rule and *not* be attached to the damn ship, can’t he?

“My mate is of Nolaegi royal blood,” Ranet adds, but a bit hesitantly, like he can’t understand why his mother didn’t immediately bring that up. “She was involved in the current civil dispute on your home planet. I believe we should get involved and bring an end to that nonsense.”

The queen chitters and slinks away, curling around the king’s shoulders like a stole.

“I am Vestalis now, son. Whatever happens on Nolaegi is not my concern. So what if they are having a civil war? What do I care about any of that?”

Ranet seems speechless. His mate is dead silent. I wonder, can she even talk?

“Leave us,” the king groans, putting a massive hand up to his forehead. *Is that something I’m only seeing on the synchronicity contacts, or is he truly affecting such a human gesture?* I’ll have to ask. I may never run out of questions for the rest of my life. I don’t think I’d understand the Noctuida if I studied it every day for a century. “Rurik, continue on as you have been while your mother and I discuss this development. There is no sense in disrupting your honeymoon or the remaining days of the wedding.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.” Rurik sweeps a horizontal bow, and I do the same, hoping that I’m getting this right.

We rise together before linking our arms.

“Ranet, you and your mate will stay on *The Korol* tonight. And you *will* observe the rituals that keep our society orderly and neat. The next time you greet your brother and the princess, I truly hope that you heed the warning he gave you. I would not have afforded you even that.” The king waves his massive hand, a very clear message to GTFO.

We do as asked, and Rurik affects a quick stride down the hallway. I’m



struggling to keep up.

“I am sorry, princess, but I am attempting to put distance between us and them.”

It doesn't work, and Ranet eventually catches up, walking alongside of us with his mate in tow.

She *glares* at me like I've stolen her crown when I didn't even want it in the first place.

“Do not say something that will fill us all with deep regret.” Rurik doesn't even look at his brother. I realize that maybe he was trying to get off the ship before his brother overstepped and forced his hand.

“I am simply here to remind you that the decision is not yet final. Once a determination is made, our relationship dynamics will shift dramatically. Respect is in order, Rurik.”

“Yes, it is.” Rurik pauses and turns to his sibling. “The next time you address me, it will be as *My Great Majesty* or perhaps as the Imperial Prince. Royal addresses are different than taking a knee, so it is now on two separate accounts that you have failed me. Respect is absolutely *vital*.”

Rurik takes my hand and we repeat the same route as before, leaving the ship on one of the platforms to find the girls waiting for us. Guess Connor won't be around as much which is a bummer. I sort of liked having a male handmaiden.

“You were badass,” I tell my husband, and he gives me a strange look. “If that doesn't translate right ... how about this?” I suck in a deep breath. *It's insta-love. This is insta-love. You're married to him, but you don't actually feel the way you think you do.* I tell myself all of that, and still I can't get my heart to believe it. “I love you.”

It goes dead silent there on the cobblestone street. The guards and servants gathered around stop their whispering and gossiping. Avril snorts and murmurs something like, *I told you so* as Zero stares blankly at me and then shakes her head.

“The Vestalis mate bond never fails. Not once in history. Not once ...” Zero's voice trails off strangely, like she's both impressed by the Vestalis and also loathes them and wishes they'd all die. it's complicated for her, I think.

I ignore her. I ignore Avril. I ignore the guards and the servants. I even ignore the crowd of well-dressed Vestalis waiting on the other side of the bridge in a genteel cloud.

“My mate,” Rurik says with a throaty voice, putting his hands on either of my arms as he leans down to kiss me. “I have always loved you, and I will always love you still. That is what it means to be chosen by the stars.”

He wraps me in his arms as he kisses me again, and the only thing that’s missing to make this a perfect moment ... is Abraxas.



Officer Hyt told me that I’d know the Cosmic Chapel when I saw it.

He was right.

We pass by it on our way to the embassy—the massive white stone castle that I spotted from the platform—and I’m awestruck by its spires. They ascend at different levels, a dozen towers with spiral swirls of color at the peaks. Some of the spires are so tall that they disappear into the gloomy purple sky, the one that’s very quickly fading to an atmospheric but not unpleasant darkness.

Lanterns are strung throughout the village (it really does have a medieval look to it), but I see that they’re electric, not gas or flame. So much for keeping the ambience going. The glass in each lantern is mosaiced, casting rainbows of color on the white bridges and the strange bloodred waters of the canals. Boats float past—literally float, hover, what have you—lit up from lights of their own and steered via mechanical means. There are no oars, just couples sitting hunched together on the benches.

“It never reaches full daylight in Dome,” Rurik tells me as we take our time enjoying the walk. I can tell that he wants to dismiss the guards and the servants, but now that we’re no longer on the ship and under his father’s protection, he can’t do that. “It is twilight then it is dusk and then it is night and then it is twilight. The cycle begins anew.”

I don’t tell him how very moth-like that sounds.

The walk itself would be pretty fucking magical if it weren’t for the *hordes* of people gathered around, watching us from balconies or storefronts or lining the sides of the streets, staring up from boats in the canal. Whispering, gossiping, snapping photos with those small glass tablets that serve as their

phones. Above and around us, the moth drones flutter, ethereal but intrusive.

*Are we going to have zero privacy for the rest of the week?*

The thought makes me feel immeasurably sad.

“I want to be alone with you,” I murmur under my breath and Rurik pauses, looking down at me like his happiness lies in granting my every wish. I don’t want life to be quite that shallow for him; I want him to have his own shit going on, too. But we can start with this.

“It’s the Day of Wearing,” Avril reminds us from a few feet back. “One of the most important rituals of all during the wedding week. You need to parade your love in front of the Noctuida.”

“And I do that by walking around with red cum stains on my dress?” I ask dryly, but she looks at me like I better not mess this up.

“There’s a rival couple trying to steal the throne from you. Do you think if they’re granted the power in your place that any of us will live to see another birthday?” Avril stares at me pleadingly. “*Please* go through with the rituals as intended. I do *not* want to be executed as a nameless servant. Most importantly, I don’t want to be executed while single.”

“Fair enough.” I look back to find Rurik watching me, and the urge to shove him into an alley and tear all his clothes off, it’s damn near impossible to resist. “But when we get to our room tonight, I want you naked.”

“I didn’t even see the need to state it out loud.” He grabs me with an arm around the waist and tugs me against him, lips by my ear. “It was *implicitly* understood by us both. Don’t lie and pretend you did not know that you will be spending the night on your back or your knees. Preferably both.”

It’s a wonder I don’t spontaneously combust right then and there.

Instead, I allow him to take my hand and walk me through the town. It has a name, but it was in ‘moth’ so I can’t remember what it is just now. Apparently, this is the sleepy, wealthy countryside part of the planet. Two hours electro-train ride (whatever that is) from here, there’s a city full of interconnected skyscrapers.

This is better. I like it here. If it weren’t for the horde of red, white, and black moth guys, their bizarre collection of mates, and the creepy alien cats, one couldn’t be blamed for mistaking this place for Earth. Well, there’s also the bloodred water. And the screens embedded into the sides of the stone buildings. And the dessert cart with the floating food. I have no idea how they do it, but there’s an entire display of desserts floating in midair and

gently spinning. If you take away all of *that* then maybe it could be Earth. Ish. Just *ish* again.

Once we've finished what's considered a proper stroll, shown off my gloriously cum-stained dress to the local yokels, we're allowed to retire to the castle. My legs are basically jelly at this point, but Rurik anticipates my need before it becomes a problem, swinging me up and into his arms.

The crowd cheers which ... I guess he *is* absurdly charming and our being lovey-dovey with each other is sort of the whole point.

"Your species is *the* weirdest species in the whole of the Noctuida," I tell him, and he laughs generously and loudly for me. I love it. I don't think I could ever get enough of that sound.

"I agree wholeheartedly, princess." He carries me across another large bridge lit with lanterns, past a *mechanical* peacock with glowing feathers, and up a staircase as wide as my parents' house. The inside boasts a magnificent foyer with a chandelier that looks like a convenient murder plot device. The crystals are as red as the ones on the ship.

The heavy wooden doors shut behind Avril, Zero, and a handful of guards. Everyone else stays outside. A Vestalis male and his mate (she looks like a fairy-tale creature, some slim-waisted, blush-pink-skinned nymph) greet us with a knee and then rise to their feet.

"Princess, this is the Duke of Dome and his mate," Rurik says, but not like he particularly cares. Actually, he's staring at my mouth.

"Majesties, you must be exhausted," the duke guy says with a knowing smile that makes me want to slap his teeth out of his face. "We'll show you to your rooms, and I will *personally* ensure that you are left alone to mate to your heart's content."

I lean in and put my lips near Rurik's ear.

"First thing I'm going to do as queen, I'm going to strap this guy onto an intergalactic rocket and send him on a suicide mission to my least favorite moon."

Rurik laughs again, and I feel pleased with myself.

He carries me to a massive spiral staircase, but just when I'm about to tell him that I can walk on my own, the stairs begin to move upward like an escalator. Well. Not the weirdest shit I've seen, but a spiral escalator with red carpeting is among the coolest.

It goes up ... up ... up. We pass by windows where I can see the town and

its colorful lanterns, the darkness of the woods at the outskirts, and then the distant bright blotch of a city and a single golden tower that juts up toward the stars.

Just not nearly as high as the Cosmic Chapel.

The gold skyscraper has a top that I can vaguely make out, even though it's taller than literally everything else. Tall enough to see from all the way over here. But the chapel? Even from the highest window, I see that there are spires that disappear into the gloomy night sky.

"This place is *amazing*," I whisper as Rurik follows our hosts down a long hallway.

"It is," he says, but there's a hesitation to his words that I don't fully understand. "Beautiful, fertile, and populated by small, simple creatures. The Vestalis took this world and built on it, and nobody else is allowed to land here or visit."

"Those cats, are they native?" I ask, and he nods. Ah. So the dominant species here was a ten-pound kitty with two heads or two tails or too many eyes. Easy enough to conquer, I suppose. "What about the Falopex?"

I don't know why I ask that.

Rurik's face shudders, lip curls, jaw sets.

"We do not stop them from patrolling—they are the peacekeepers of the Noctuida—but they will not vacation here out of protest. They don't believe we should ever have settled here nor that we should continue to do so."

I think about that as he carries me, but I don't remark on it. Not tonight anyway. Maybe on a different day.

Tonight, I've got other plans.

A set of double doors is opened at the end of the hall, and the duke steps back. Rurik waits for Zero to inspect the room first, canting his head at me.

"Take it off," he whispers, and I know he means the device on his face, the one he uses to communicate with his parents. I reach up to remove it with shaking fingers, gently brushing his hair aside so that I can see his ear. I haven't properly looked at his ears before; they're always hidden by his fur/hair/mane. *Oh, shit, I like this.* Rurik's ears are human-ish, but longer, pointed. Elf-like, I guess.

I tug on the face device, cringing when I see his father's blood lace connected to his ear canal. It pulls and stretches, red arteries digging into his skin until I snap them and a bit of blood runs down the side of his face. I toss

the stupid thing onto a nearby decorative table. *Good riddance.*

“I have completed my assessment of the room, and I have deemed it safe for you to enter.” Zero bows at the waist before retreating to stand just outside the doors. Only once she’s given us the all clear do we enter.

“If there’s anything else I can get your Majesties—” the duke schmoozes, but Rurik ignores him, striding past and pausing only to glance over his shoulder at Avril.

“Close the door and then find your way to the servants’ quarters.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Avril drops into a deep bow as Rurik hooks a sharp left and carries me into the bedroom. He heels the door shut behind us and then sets me ceremoniously on my feet.

“Finally,” he whispers, and then his hands are in my hair, and we’re kissing again. I don’t even know what the room looks like. All the lights are off, the curtains closed. It’s pitch-dark in here. *Private.* The moth drones are gone, and it’s just the pair of us.

“Finally,” I agree, but I can barely get the word out because my new husband has vicious lips. He eats me alive with that pretty mouth, shivering when I purposely run my tongue against the sharpness of his fangs. I make myself bleed, and then I groan wildly when he draws me in and sucks it off.

“Ah, the way you taste ...” He sighs, and I feel a stirring whisper in my hair. I think he said something in his own language that managed to defy translation.

“I want my coremata,” I mumble against his lips. “Now.”

“Yes, my princess.” We both fumble with the buttons on his jacket, and I let out an excited little exhale when I hear the fabric hit the floor. I can’t see anything, but I have a feeling that he can see *everything*.

“You can see in the dark, can’t you?” I whisper, and Rurik lets out a low, rolling chuckle that has the fine hairs on my arms standing on end. What did I say? Those little hairs have good instincts. They know when we’re being stalked.

I feel him circle me once. Twice.

I don’t need to see to know when his coremata are out. There’s the rustle of his wings, and then it hits me. *Spicy-sweet. Cardamom-honey. Male-mine.* I reach out for him, but he dances out of my way.

“Stop that.” I try to find him in the gloom, but it really, truly is dark in here. Countryside dark. Cave dark. My hands are out, searching, while my

body burns up from the inside. My thighs are dripping. I want *out* of this cum-stained dress. “Rurik,” I groan, hand bumping into what I think is part of the bed. A four-poster bed maybe, and this is one of the posts?

“Yes, my princess?” He’s suddenly right behind me, his hips pinning me to the end of the bed. I think. It must be a bed, right? “Tell me you want me. I want to hear you say it.”

“You know that I want you,” I grumble in annoyance. “We can hardly keep our hands off each other.”

There’s a long silence there, but it’s okay because he puts his hands to the ribbons that lace up the back of my dress, and his nimble fingers begin to untie them. He’s extra about it, too, dragging the satin out and teasing my bare skin with the length of it, brushing the ribbon along my spine.

“If anything happens to me, I want you to run.” That comes out of left field. I don’t like what he’s saying. I whirl around on him to glare, but I can’t see him, and all the move does is tangle me up in a long length of ribbon. With an exhale, Rurik gives the ribbons a yank, squeezing the ends around my waist. Somehow, that move slicks my skin with sweat and makes my nipples ache. “Find Officer Hyt and ask for help.”

“What are you even saying?” I’m pissed off now, but I’m still turned-on. Neither of those emotions seems able to win out over the other, so I hold onto them both right now. “We said *together* earlier. Even if we’re not in the same room, we should always be working together.”

“If I am killed, I mean. I would never leave you intentionally, princess.” There’s a *but* hanging in the air at the end of that sentence. I don’t want to hear it just now.

I put my hands on his face and kiss him again, sliding my fingers into his hair, and then snatching his feelers up. I grip them like cocks and give them each a hard jerk that makes him curl his lip and growl against my mouth.

“You have no idea how sensitive those are, do you?” he queries, but he’s wrong. I do know. I’m doing it on purpose. I stroke them more gently with my fingertips, spreading silky pheromone dust all over my hands. When I don’t answer, Rurik punishes me by wafting more of his scent with a flick of his wings.

His coremata brush against my bare arms, and then something happens between us. A lit match. An explosion. Rurik rends the dress from me with his hands, ripping it right down the middle.

“Oh. You’re strong.”

That’s as much as I get out before he’s lifting me up and onto the bed, his mouth on my neck. He bites me as I buck my hips up against him, wishing he were naked. I want him naked. I was *promised* naked.

“No clothes.” I slap at his back, but it’s the frantic, useless flailing of a sex-drunk person. His bite isn’t just a bite. It’s an invasion. I decide to open myself up completely, to accept it like an invitation instead.

*You and I. A million lifetimes ago. A million lifetimes more. The very definition of infinite.*

Red pulses against the canopy above me, and I realize that it’s his wings. Or rather, the blood lace pattern on them. It’s throbbing. I turn my head slightly to the side, and I see a faint glow on the blanket underneath me. *My back is glowing.* That head turn I just did, well, it pulls on my skin and makes Rurik snarl. He pushes his blood lace deeper into my body, harder, consuming every inch of me.

And I let him.

I don’t know how he does it, but he gets his pants undone, and I gasp with happy pleasure when I feel his claspers lock onto my hips. I’m whimpering as he pushes the tip of himself into me, nice and slow. Screaming when he gives up on such a useless exercise and thrusts deep. His claspers are extra greedy today, tucking me in close, pinning me there as I writhe against him, desperate for friction.

“Rurik ...” I manage to choke his name out, but that’s it. He lifts his mouth from my neck and then kisses me with the taste of my own blood on his lips. Doesn’t last. As he’s kissing over my cheeks and forehead, my clavicle, my shoulder, he’s absorbing the blood he smears. When I wake up tomorrow, the only red stains in this bed will be from his seminal fluid, his cum.

“Yes, princess?” he murmurs, nuzzling me as he rocks his pelvis against mine.

“If it comes down to it,” I tell him, voice shaky. “I’d blow the ship up to keep it from trapping you.”

“I know you would.” The bed rocks slightly as he sits up, putting a palm on either side of my head. I wish I could see his face, but I settle for grabbing the drifting tendrils of his coremata. I rake my palms mercilessly over them, spilling pheromones into the air and not caring how drunk I get off of them. And then, when I’m dizzy and drifting on a cloud of perfume and sex, I



snatch his wings and rub my thumbs along the edges, trailing my fingers to the fur at his throat.

As I do that, he plays with me, too, learns the curves and swells of my body starting with my breasts. My nipples. Slipping his hand between us to find my clit. I'd make a joke about him knowing where it is, but I can't because he's touching me and using our combined arousal for lube. His thrusts slow as he concentrates on that nub, making my toes curl, keeping me from bucking or squirming away with his claspers.

"The silken flutter of your insides, Eve. I can't get enough." Rurik calls me Eve, and it's over for me. I'm climaxing around him, squeezing the plump shapes of his testes inside of me, encouraging him to fuck harder, faster, convincing him that it's in his best interest to come, too.

He finishes with a long, low sound that mixes with my own frantic, panting breaths.

"I have been told that human males find pleasure by placing their mouths over their mate's genitals. Is that correct?" His voice is rough as he asks me the question, and I decide that maybe Avril isn't so useless after all. "I was told a human female can't possibly be satisfied sexually without this."

"All true," I pant, missing his cock even before he pulls it out. When he finally does, I feel empty, and I want more. He slides down my belly, kissing my stomach, my navel, the sensitive skin above the dark patch of hair. His fingers trail over it gently, testing and learning and marveling at the differences between us. "Do you, um, like it?" I ask gently. There's a lot of vulnerability in my voice that I can't control, but I'm willing to put myself out there for him.

"Like *it*?" he repeats back curiously, like he isn't sure what I mean. "Your female parts?" He's responding softly now, too. Tenderly. "My princess, I could not have dreamed of a more beautiful mating. Not all Vestalis females like to mate, so sometimes it is perfunctory. Sometimes it is utilitarian. Sometimes it is even painful or dreadful. You and I, we have the ability to show each other how much we're in love by use of our bodies alone. I do not simply *like* our arrangement; I am in awe."

"Oh God, *please*." I grab his antennae and yank his head between my thighs. He was already most of the way there anyway, and I can't wait a second longer. Rurik grabs my hips with his hands—*hard*. Like since his claspers aren't involved, he needs to hold me still with something.

That kills me.

I thrust up against his mouth and he darts back, just out of reach. And then he *laughs* at me.

“Look at my human,” he purrs, licking my thigh. A line of fire blazes across the sensitive skin there. He dabbles in licking that hollow spot between thigh and pelvis. Brushing his face over my soft curls. He breathes me in like I’m something to be enjoyed. “Because you rejected me at first, this is even sweeter.” He bites me, and I jump. It’s a quick sharpness though, and it fades to a molten pleasure as his blood lace enters me and ... oh, he’s all around me, tasting and touching everything. *There’s glitter in my veins.* That’s what it feels like.

Rurik tastes his time with that, drawing however much blood he wants. I trust implicitly that he knows what he’s doing. When he withdraws, he kisses his way from the bite to my folds. Light explodes behind my eyes as my fingers dig into the blankets, wrinkling them. Not a problem, I don’t think. I can hear Rurik’s claspers shredding the fabric. Without my hips to grab onto, he’s just snatching sheets at this point.

I love that. I love that he can’t control that part of him. I know that he’s basically cursed by his DNA to appeal to my better nature, but I don’t care. It’s *amazing*.

“I must tell you something,” he breathes with his mouth against me.

“W-what?” I ask, blinking myself out of a violet haze. I barely know where I am or what’s going on let alone have the willpower to listen to something important that he needs to say. “Later, later.”

“Yes, my princess.” He dives down and that’s it. My brain is beyond broken. I’m sighing softly, head tilting back, body relaxing into his touch. Hot but soft. *Hot softness. So soft. So slick.* I want to know how he’s so good at what he’s doing. Pheromones? Did someone—Avril—tell him what to do? Does he watch porn?

Not about to ask in that moment, but I’m sure it’ll come up later.

My lips mouth soundlessly, saying words that don’t come out right. It’s almost like a prayer, like Rurik is holy and something to be worshipped. My fingers keep hold of his feelers, sliding over the rounded tips. It actually does feel a bit like bone when I rub it, but with a fine layer of silk over the top. I know he likes it, too, because he’s grinding away into the bed, in the place where I should be.

I let him take me there with his mouth first, and then, as soon as the contractions hit, I yank on him *hard*. I'm still in the midst of an orgasm when he enters me again. The thorns on his claspers pierce my skin and lock me down. There is absolutely zero give when our hips slam together.

I'm still silent, pushed beyond a scream, palms on his chest now. His coremata dance over my skin, these strange male organs that should be weird to me, but seem so beautiful and natural somehow.

*Yep, I'm an A.S.S. An alien smut slut.*

Rurik rolls his beautiful body into me, his wings hanging like heavy fabric on either side of us. The design on them throbs brightly enough that I can finally see his face, those dark eyes, his stained red mouth and teeth. He lifts his wings and opens them wide, fully and completely. The bed is large enough, the canopy high enough, that he has no trouble with it.

*Wow.*

I'm not often speechless, but to see my prince of a husband glowing red in the dark, wings spread, eyes like the open galaxy, what is there to say? He has a mouth wet with my blood and arousal, claspers pinning my hips, and hot hands on my wrists. His expression softens, but only briefly. He gazes at me with affection before his mouth twists into something of a pretty frown.

A small gasp escapes me as he slips his cock out, grabs my hips, and turns me onto my knees. His hand snatches my hair, and he pulls back so that I'm arched with my ass on display. And then he *spanks* it.

*"Oh, shit yes."*

*"You are beautiful, my princess."* He drives into me again, claspers keeping my hips in place while he tucks my back to his chest. I slip my hand between my legs to find my clit as his sinful tongue caresses the side of my neck, teasing my thrumming pulse.

I don't think it's going to happen again today, but I guess these alien fuckers are multiorgasmic miracles because it does. It hits me *again*, and it's almost painful this time. I'm completely boneless and manipulated only by Rurik for the next several minutes. All I do is gasp and flutter and sigh in satisfaction.

*Yeah, I am sure of it now. I am in the hospital, and none of this is real. How could any of this possibly be real?*

What I fail to realize is this: the universe is *infinite*. Anything a person might think of could exist, theoretically. It could happen. It might happen.

It's *happening*.

No. Fuck that coma shit. I know where I am and what's going on.

Rurik finishes, and I savor the feel of his balls emptying from *inside* of me.

He sighs happily and lays me gently down on the bed, cuddling next to me with his arm around my waist. We're spooning now. *I'm spooning an alien moth prince*. Weird, but equally amazing.

"I do hope I'm not a disappointment," is what he says.

I reach back and slap him in the chest. He laughs, again. I somehow find that to be a particularly easy task, getting him to laugh.

"You're not getting stuck to that throne," I mumble sleepily, and he sighs against my hair, stroking strands back from my face.

"Yes, my princess."

I fall into a beautiful sleep.



Faint light glows around the edges of the curtains, but not enough to be daylight. *Did we sleep away the whole day? Or has the sun just not come up?* Then I remember what Rurik said, that this planet only goes through twilight, dusk, and night before cycling back around.

Interesting.

“Hey.” I roll over to look at him, finding him asleep beside me. He truly is stunning. I reach out and trace the odd shape of his face, the slits of his nostrils, barely visible to the naked eye, the dark pattern between his eyes, the slope of his ... well, it’s not a nose, but the way his skin slopes down between his eyes. The massive white and black horns resting in the pillows. The wings, like blankets tucked up underneath us both.

He cracks his lids, and I bite back a little gasp at the sight of those deep black orbs. He stares at me, blinking like he’s coming out of a trance. I love seeing him sleep. I wonder if this is adapted to my being human? His sleep patterns, I mean.

“You’re beautiful, too,” I tell him, piggybacking on last night’s compliment. I smile and trace his mouth with my finger, and he shudders all over. I’m considering whether I should ride him or try to have some semblance of a conversation first when I notice that the double-headed cat with the pink fur from yesterday has followed me. It’s in the room with us. “Rurik ...” I trail off, but he just barely lifts his head to see what I’m staring

at.

“Ah, the Dehvas,” he says softly. “They are free to roam here. No efforts are made to keep them out or tell them what to do.” He lays back down, and I wonder maybe if the Vestalis aren’t so bad. They could’ve exterminated the cat creatures. Trapped them. Locked them out of their posh royal suites.

“I’m allergic to cats and, also, apparently whatever these are.” I point at the cat as one head yawns, and the other hisses at me. Again. “Seeing as you’re from an advanced race capable of complex space travel, I just assume you have some way to cure me of my allergy? If so, then I’d like that, please.”

Rurik chuckles at me as he sits up in bed, looking like a god of blood and sex. He is way too pretty for his own good. He stops laughing and then smiles, wickedly.

“We do indeed have the capabilities to reverse your allergy.” He turns toward the door with a frown, like he expects one of our crew members to come bursting in. It happens pretty much every time we get intimate or frisky. This time, nobody shows up and I breathe a sigh of relief. Rurik looks at me again. “We will administer it when we visit the med bay.”

“Why would we visit the med bay?” I ask as I wrinkle my nose. “No way, dude. I’m not going on that ship any sooner than I have to.”

“Which is now,” he tells me, and I try to slap him. He catches my wrist and then licks it. Bites it gently. Pulls back and brushes his lips over it. “Med bay. Today or perhaps tomorrow.”

“Why?” I repeat, but I have a weird feeling. Rurik, like, looks right through me when he’s drinking my blood. If ... well ... he might already know something. “I’m pregnant?”

“You are.” He sits up with a bit of a sigh. “Which means you were pregnant *before* we mated.” He sounds more annoyed than anything else. “But which also means that I have deposited my own DNA into the egg; it is now my child.”

“Huh.” I prop up on my elbows and grin at him. “Abraxas thinks it’s an impervious girl child. Shall we take bets?”

Rurik is unamused, and then I feel bad. And then I feel bad for feeling bad. Who am I supposed to be loyal to now? Abraxas or Rurik? What if I can’t pick? We’re all sort of stuck together anyway, right? Rurik needs me to live; I get sick without Abraxas around.

Speaking of ... I’m just a little bit dizzy. My grin turns into a frown. I feel

worse than I did last time.

“You are not feeling well?” Rurik clarifies, and I nod as I close my eyes. “Thus, the med bay. *Today.*”

I sigh in anguish—getting back on the ship might be worse than dying, it’s possible—and fall back into the pillows. Then I look over and see that Rurik is still wearing his pants.

“I told you to get naked last night,” I warn him, and he gives me a hot look in response.

“I will have to correct that.” He takes his clothes off and covers me with his body.

We don’t leave that room until the next day.



“You might’ve told me that day three of the wedding was called the Day of Knowing. That everyone *knew* we’d be holed up in there and fucking. I might’ve—”

“Not fucked?” Rurik retorts, playing with his gloves. “No, I don’t believe that’s true. You would have behaved the exact same way.”

He’s right, and it’s pissing me off.

Also because we’re striding down the dusky street toward the med bay. It’s cold out today, so I’ve got gloves on, too. I don’t fidget with mine nearly as much as he does. He’s got such restless hands, but such a calm mind. I’m the opposite. I don’t fidget, and I’m all over the place with my thoughts.

“Your doctor guy couldn’t scan me before—which you did while I was unconscious, I might add.” Rurik cringes but he does it with a royal sneer on his lips. “So why would he be able to scan me now?”

“He has uncovered some Cartian technology on the black market. Presumably, he will try to use some of it.”

I hear Zero’s sharp inhale behind me. I bet she’d love to get her hands on that stuff. Maybe I can gift her some once I’m queen?

Also, also ... pregnant.

I’m a bit stuck on that word. I’m not sure if I should be freaked out or

excited or if it's okay to be both things at the same time. *Please let it be a girl.* I exhale and my breath frosts, and it's the most glorious thing I've ever seen. I want to stay here forever.

Or go back to Jungryuk.

Or ... visit Earth.

Fuck, I do still want to visit Earth. Especially now. It'll have been ... months? ... since I was abducted. What are my parents doing? Are they still looking for me? Are they grieving? They probably think I'm dead. They might be cleaning out my room. My little brother, Nate, might be using my car to go on dates, and maybe he doesn't even think of me at all.

"Having an heir is ... good?" I ask, and Rurik pauses in the center of a bridge, waving his arm and causing his wings to flow like a rippling white and red cloak. Our entourage backs off on either side of the bridge, the red river snaking beneath us, boats drifting by. I want to ride one. When do we get to do that?

He takes my face in his hands and steps forward, tilting my chin and arching my neck. When he takes my mouth, he curls over me protectively, wraps me in his arms, warms me.

"Stop that." I slap at him, breathing hard from the contact.

"Having an heir means we'll take the throne sooner," he tells me, and there are so many unsaid things in his words. We can't talk openly out here, but I understand what he's trying to say. *I'm happy to have a child with you. I do not want the throne. We must take the throne.* Right. "Come. We must complete our visit before the test administered by my parents."

"And what test, exactly, would that be ...?" I trail off and turn to stare at Avril. It takes her several seconds to figure out that I'm annoyed with her. She flinches. I look back at my husband.

"The Day of Counsel," he explains, and I just stare. "We will receive a summons from my parents at some point today; they will impart the wisdom of their long and fruitful rule upon us."

"You're ... literally kidding, right? *More* time spent on the ship?" I ask, but he only laughs at me again, taking the back of my head in his hand so that he can kiss my forehead. Rurik turns away and keeps walking, so I jog after him. My head spins, and I gasp, knees buckling right out from under me.

He catches me in his arms, but he isn't smiling this time.

"Fuck." Rurik hefts me up and holds me against his chest, walking faster



down the cobbled street.

“I’m okay,” I tell him, but I’m really not. How long have I been separated from Abraxas this time? Four days? Well, this is the morning of the fourth day. That’s ... quick. This is bad. *Come on Officer Hyt. You’ve got this. If anyone were going to pull this off, getting me and Abraxas together, it’d be him.*

I exhale and relax, allowing Rurik to carry me into the ship and straight to the med bay.

“Ah, Rurik,” the doctor says, turning to smile at the pair of us. Zero and Avril follow us in, and the door shuts. “Have a seat.” The Vestalis man returns to whatever it is that he’s doing on the counter. I see something pink. Plastic-y. Chunky. It looks like a Barbie toy. “I’ve just got this Cartian wand figured out. Shall we give it a try?”

Zero makes a sharp sound that I can’t quite deal with right now. I’m still pretty dizzy.

“Will this discover why she’s fainting?” Rurik demands, and I know he knows that his dad is listening. His mom. This is dangerous, isn’t it?

“It may,” the doctor admits, and the two of them share a long look before Rurik nods and sets me down on the exam table. “Hello there, Imperial Princess.” The medic inclines his chin at me, and I see that he has furred white ears on his head. I wonder what his mate looks like? “My name is Vrach, and it will be my pleasure to serve you.”

“Thanks?” I reply, but that must be good enough because he nods again and holds out the wand. I appreciate that he’s asking this time, but I still want to punch him in the nuts. I make myself resist the urge as I relax. “Go for it.”

He runs the wand over me, and a warm, tingly feeling passes over my skin.

The screen on the wand lights up, and the doctor studies it. He frowns as he turns it toward him, and then shakes his head gently.

“I do not read advanced Cartian, and the synchronicity contacts were never updated with a language that is now somewhat lost to history. I can only begin to guess at what this says.” He passes the wand over to Zero, but she frowns at it. Her gaze snaps to mine.

“Majesty, may I have permission to review these results?” She isn’t asking Rurik even though he’s the one that controls her. She’s asking *me*.

“You may.”

Zero nods and holds the wand with both hands, staring down at it with a

frown.

“It’ll take me some time to figure it out,” she tells me gently, “but I will work as quickly as I can.”

The medic guy runs some more tests, administers a shot that will supposedly cure me of my cat/alien cat allergy, and sends us on our way. Just before we pass through the door, he calls out to Rurik, voice oddly low and subdued.

“Perhaps the vitamins?” he suggests, and Rurik changes color. So he *can* blush. His moon pale skin has color for a few seconds there before he wills it away with a neutral pout and a brusque bow.

“What vitamins?” I ask as he takes me by the arm, hurrying me along down the corridor.

Rurik stops short and sighs heavily. He reaches up to touch two fingers to his headpiece.

“Yes, mother. Yes, father. We will be there right away.” He looks over at me, and his expression says it all. *If they find out that you’re sick, and that it’s because you need to be with Abraxas, we are all dead.* I believe him. I also feel like the medic, Vrach, and Zero are both full of shit. They know what that wand says, but they’re not going to state it on *The Korol* where Rurik’s parents might hear. “We must head to the throne room, my princess.”

He looks ... not nervous, but determined? Like he already thinks something bad is going to happen and is determined to spare me from it.

“Yes, of course,” I tell him. If ... if they execute us here, now, then I accept it. I don’t regret Abraxas, and I don’t regret Rurik, so if that’s what it comes down to ... Well. Fuck.

We head that direction, only to find that his brother, Ranet, and his mate are in the throne room already.

Oh. So that’s what this is about.

I breathe a huge sigh of relief, but Rurik doesn’t relax at all.

“Son, do you have something to tell us?” the queen asks him, slithering across the room on her creepy ass legs. *Why am I always in this hellish room? Why can’t we escape? Why can’t we just be left alone?*

“Mother, it is none of your—”

“I’m pregnant.” I step in front of him which is ... again, it’s TSTL, but there it is. I figure the queen won’t kill her future grandchild. Maybe. I don’t know.

She makes a sound that I can't decide what to do with. A laugh? A snort? A growl? I don't speak millipede.

"Well, aren't you relieved, human? Instead of birthing the bastard child of a slaver, my son has imprinted your child with his superior DNA."

I ... I'm speechless.

*Bastard child of a slaver?* I'm guessing this is the story Rurik fed them about me, after all that time I spent on Jungryuk.

"You *will* retract your statement," Rurik growls, taking me and pushing me back. I think the only reason he allowed me to step in front of him at all is because I surprised him. "You will *not* shame my child or my mate."

The queen chitters as the king sighs, but she's already slithering back over to Ranet and his mate. The king speaks for them both.

"My first sons were born of a prior pregnancy; I have seen firsthand the power of the Vestalis." The king sounds genial enough, but his words are so beyond creepy that I shudder. "Your mother means nothing by that. We are, of course, overjoyed."

"My mate is pregnant as well," Ranet says, and my jaw drops. The fuck?! How? "You yourself heard Vrach confirm it. You did not, however, hear him confirm that Rurik's mate is pregnant. I beseech you to make a decision now, so that we do not descend into civil war. Already, there is talk."

"Do you think he's telling the truth?" I whisper, but Rurik doesn't move. He stays right where he is in front of me.

"Your father and I have decided to perform a simple test," the queen says, curling her lower half into a coil while her upper half remains upright. She may very well be the creepiest thing I have *ever* seen. "We will perform a mate bond test."

There's silence in the room.

I'm guessing neither of the Vestalis princes know what that is any better than I do.

"We will cut the blood lace from your mates' backs," the king continues, looking from one of his sons to the other. "It will be quite painful, but this will tell us who is truly mated and who is not."

Painful? I step up next to Rurik, but he holds an arm out to keep me from moving forward.

"Yes, of course, Your Imperial Majesties," Ranet says, bowing low. His mate does the same, and he gestures for her to step forward, which she does.

“Rurik?” his father asks, leaning down from his giant throne, the veins and meaty swathes of his blood lace snapping and dripping blood as he moves. It’s ... it’s awful. It’s so awful. I want to run again.

“You will not touch my mate,” Rurik tells his parents, his voice hard. He yanks me over to him and then bites down on my neck, drawing blood from me and creating a cage made out of red lace around us. “Do not push me any further than simple defense.” He’s speaking with his lips against my neck and, despite my fear, it’s all I can do not to writhe against him.

Instead, I hold very, very still.

The room is taut with threads of unsnapped violence.

“Well,” Ranet says, brushing at his jacket. “I suppose we know who the true prince—”

He doesn’t finish his sentence. One of the king’s blood lace veins separates from the wall and slices right through Ranet’s neck, as well as the neck of his mate. There’s a strange moment of stillness, and then both their bodies slump and blood sprays everywhere.

I have the good sense to snap my mouth shut before it splatters over me and Rurik, but I needn’t have worried. The cage he made around us deflects the blood, and I watch as it oozes down the sides and effectively cuts off our view of the room.

“What ... how ...?” I hear the door wrench open from behind us, and then the sound of a tired sigh.

“I did not wish to kill him, but we cannot have civil war,” the king says, and Rurik unfolds the lace from around us like he’s unwrapping an invisible gift. He doesn’t take it all the way, only shifts the cage of blood lace enough that the wetness comes off so we can see out.

Zero has wrenched the door open behind us and stands there now, panting heavily, waiting for an order.

“Pardon?” Rurik asks gently enough, but he’s coiled and ready to fight. I wonder how far we’d get if he went all-out in here? *How far would we get with Abraxas fighting at our sides?*

“Congratulations son,” his mother says, chattering happily. “You have passed the test.” She cocks her round head at us, black eyes flashing. I shudder. “A Vestalis prince who would not protect his mate would bring ruin to the people.” She returns to the king’s side as he smiles beatifically at us.

“You are free to go, Rurik. Enjoy your honeymoon.”

The persistent plop of blood on the floor makes my head ring.

“Yes, of course, father,” Rurik replies, as if we just stopped in for breakfast. This is what serves as a meeting with my in-laws. Suffice it to say that I have it a bit worse than some. “Thank you, as always, for your wise counsel and judgment.”

Rurik moves as if he might drop the blood lace cage and walk us out of there, but something seems to stop him at the last minute, and he throws it back up before taking a single step. One of his father’s veins snaps off the wall and smashes into the cage.

I can feel the impact through my bones. My teeth clack together, and my head explodes white with the force of it against my own blood, against my mate’s abilities. It hurts. It hurts us both.

Rurik and I drop to the floor together, him holding me but both of us on our knees.

“Again,” he whispers, and I squeeze my eyes shut so that I can breathe. Of all the days, why did it have to be today that they decided to put us through a test? Yesterday, I was much stronger. Although ... what am I going to look like tomorrow? “Hold on, my princess.”

Another growth comes off the wall like a whip.

*Crash.*

It hits us and shakes the entire ship. But still, the cage of blood lace does not go down. Rurik exhales heavily as I sag in his arms, struggling to catch my breath. I look up at him, and I don’t know if I can take a third hit. He stares right back at me and then leans in to kiss my forehead.

“You will always carry me with you,” he breathes, and then he stands up and shoves me out of the cage and into Zero’s arms. She picks me up and runs as the door to the throne room disappears under bars of blood lace.

Pretty sure I’m screaming then, but I can’t tell because I’m trying so hard to get back to Rurik.

“Stop it, my princess,” Zero whispers, but it isn’t her voice that’s speaking to me. It’s *his*. “Calm yourself.”

The cyborg girl books it down the hallway and off the ship before any of the growths along the walls and ceiling can grab us. She hops out and hits the ground in a cloud of broken cobblestone dust. We’re deep into the trees before Zero relaxes into a walk, even longer before she sets me down.

She stares back at me with her own eyes.

“Where is Rurik?” I ask her, and she shrugs. I immediately take off back in the direction of the ship.

And run right into him.

He catches me as I bounce off his chest, and I look up with eyes suddenly filled with tears.

“What the fuck?!” I yell, and he exhales, stepping in quick and taking my mouth before I can curse him out. He’s kissing me so deeply that I forget what it means to breathe. “What ... what was all that?” I whisper, struggling to believe how it is that he’s standing in front of me. “Why did you throw me out like that?”

“I was protecting you,” he tells me, and I slap him. And then I kiss him. I slap him again, and he catches my wrist, pressing a kiss into my palm. “It is possible for me to die and for you to live. It is not possible the other way around.”

“You don’t know that,” I growl out, putting my arms around his waist. He stays where he is and holds me close until a soft, wet mist begins to fall. I hear night creatures moving around as twilight fades to dusk again. “Which wedding ritual was this?” Because at least part of that display must’ve been a ritual.

“The Day of Counsel,” he murmurs into my hair, voice slightly haunted. “I have taken control of part of the ship.” He swallows hard, and I step back so that I can look at him.

Zero waits patiently off to the side, leaned back against the trunk of a tree.

“Your brother ...” I can’t even make myself say it. Rurik looks grave, but not like Ranet was actually his favorite brother if you catch my drift.

“Yes. My parents have chosen us as the next rulers of the Noctuida. It is quite the honor.” If his parents are still listening, I hope they can’t pick up on the note of disdain in his voice. Or, if they do, I hope that they don’t care. They’re as aware as we are that this is a position that comes with power, but also with a life confined to a single room. To a single chair. I wonder if the king, buried behind rooms within rooms, can even feel the breeze from the open windows? “We are free to do what we want for the rest of the day.”

I nod.

Sex is not an option right now. I’m *exhausted*. And dizzy. Rurik doesn’t look too steady on his feet either.

“Food and sleep?” I ask, and then pause. “And you did promise to read to

me.”

“Yes, my princess.” He scoops me into his arms to walk, and even though he trembles slightly, I don’t complain. I let him carry me back to our room and slam the door behind us.



### *Abraxas*

“There is something on this ship that should not be here,” I tell Captain Kidd, pausing in the doorway to his quarters, my tail swaying lazily behind me. I am tired of repeating myself. I have sensed an additional entity since we left my home planet. I do not recognize the scent of the thing nor can I see it, but make no mistake: there is something here.

The captain sighs and puts his elbow on the desk, turning to look at me with the creak of his strange chair. It has lights on it and seems unnecessarily complicated for an item meant only to sit on. The Aspis do not intentionally complicate their lives with useless gadgets as other races do. I find myself unamused, my thoughts stalking back to my mate as they always do.

There is no purpose in my life but for Eve.

I will see both her and my child returned to me. That is the only possible end to this story.

“So you’ve been saying,” Kidd complains with a growling sigh. He dislikes me. He also fears me. But he has little choice but to satisfy my whims or else I will eat him and he well knows this. “But I can’t find the creature. My crew can’t find the creature. And if there really is something”—my lip curls at his derisive *if*—“then you haven’t been able to sniff it out either. What do you want me to do? Nothing is showing up on the scans.”



“The Noctuida is too dependent on technology that does not always work,” I snarl, and the computers in the room crackle with static. The entire ship shudders and Kidd scrambles to press many buttons on his large desk.

“Would you *stop* that?” he snaps at me. “I’d love to not crash my ship today.”

I snap my teeth at him, and he recoils, but while I find the Yaena male to be annoying, he is competent in managing this star-traveling vessel. I leave him alive. For now.

*Tear his throat out*, my hunger tells me as I pad back in the direction of the stairs and the safety of the shadows below deck. *Feast on his bloodied innards*. But I cannot. If I do, I will never see Eve again, and that is not an acceptable outcome.

“Hey, big guy,” Jane says, greeting me before I get the chance to escape. We are standing on the wood deck of something Eve’s sister-human refers to as a *pirate ship*. All around us, the stars glitter and a distant planet shines like one of Jungryuk’s suns. There is a glass dome above our heads that keeps us safe from succumbing to the frigid emptiness of space.

*This is not natural*, my instincts scream as I resist the urge to look up. *Living creatures are not intended to exist in such a strange and hostile environment*. I ignore my unease. There is nothing I can do, and dwelling on things one cannot change is a futile exercise and a waste of good resources.

“What is it, sister-human?” I growl out, doing my best to maintain a pleasant facade. My mate is not around, but my body behaves as if she is. I can feel both my pleasure rod and my mating rod fighting to escape their protective pouch. As I have been doing, I will find a quiet spot in the shadows to handle the problem.

“Do you think the creature you’re looking for could be ...?” Jane’s voice drops away to nothing and she does not finish her sentence. She does, however, turn to look at the other human, the one I simply refer to as the screechy female. Nobody seems to enjoy the screechy female’s company, not even the small furry Earth animal she drags around with her.

Jane and I study the useless female as she sits with her back to the wood wall at the edge of the ship, smiling at nothing and holding her hand out, a single finger pointed forward. I watch as the tip of that finger is indented by something pressing back.

My nostril slits flare, but I can only pick up the barest hint of a smell.

Screechy Female notices us watching and jerks her hand back, turning so that she's facing the corner of the ship.

Hmm.

*Find the invisible monster. Eat it.* I ignore my own advice and let my lips ripple in a low growl. Whatever this alien is, I can see that it has eyes only for Screechy Female. It can keep her, with my condolences.

"She's been talking to herself for *hours*," Jane murmurs as the crew moves around her, tending to various star-vessel tasks. I do not pretend to understand what they are doing. I have no *wish* to understand. My mind is occupied with better things. *Such as my tiny female.* "Either she's lost her mind or there's an invisible something or other that she's hanging out with. I find it weird that both things are equally possible."

"I mentioned this disturbance to the captain again, but he has denied the possibility of an extra passenger. There is nothing more that I will do provided the creature keeps to its own."

I turn away from Jane, prowling down the steps and into darkness. They cling to me, those shadows, welcoming me, recognizing me as one of their own. I snatch an alien viewing device from a nearby crate with my tail and take it with me into the makeshift den I have created.

The captain was not pleased that I stole the blankets from his quarters.

No matter where we are in this universe, it would be best if both of us were to admit to the rules of men. *I* am the alpha here. I have claimed this entire ship with my urine. The blankets were mine to begin with and Captain Kidd is, at best, a beta male despite his differing opinions on the matter. A bemused snort escapes me as I slip behind the curtains demarcating my den.

My body—even at its smallest size—barely fits into the corner, but I am as cozy here as I will ever be when my four feet are not in connection with Jungryuk. Perhaps another planet would suit me, but the stars do not. I *despise* it out here. If my mate were by my side, the situation might be very different; I could acclimate with her sweetness to calm my ire.

Sheathing my claws, I use my finger to manipulate the device as instructed by Jane. It was not hard to understand. The *Aspis* choose not to use technology; we are not stupid. We are quick to learn and easy to adapt.

With a snarl, I navigate to the short video that Jane saved to this device.

I do not believe she knew I intended to use it in this manner.

My mate's face fills the glass rectangle, and I fight back a wave of pure

violence. I am gazing upon her in mid-coitus with another male, how could I maintain decorum of any kind? No being could manage such a feat.

*Rip the prince's limbs off. Watch him suffer. Watch him bleed. Swallow him while he screams.*

But I cannot do that. Eve cares for the Vestalis prince, and her heart would be painfully rended in two if he were to die. I must accept him, even if I do not like him.

I watch her expression as he fills her, as he claims her as his own when already, she is claimed by me. Inside of her, she wears my marks. As this male fucks her, he fucks against the proof of our joining. So, no, I am not pleased. If I were a lesser male, I would have torn this ship to pieces in my rage upon the first viewing of my mate's new joining.

This evening—for I can sense that it is evening on Jungryuk—I am watching for another reason.

A strange white box appears in front of my mate's face and I snarl, flicking my tail hard and lobbing purple venom against the wall. *What is this nonsense?* I think as the alien device implanted on my eyes translates the symbols into something that I can understand.

*"Your device has detected a problem. The content you are attempting to access is not allowable to be viewed by any citizens of the Noctuida, as per the law of the Imperial Princess. Individuals caught with this footage in their possession are subject to severe punishment, up to and including execution. You are viewing this content at your own risk."*

A laugh slithers out of me that echoes back from the walls, like the sound of shadows screaming. That is just like my mate, to protect her beautiful mating face. I agree wholeheartedly with this decree, as her sex face is something none should see but for me.

"The princess will forgive me my trespass," I growl aloud with a snarl, tapping on the device until Eve's face is in full view of my animalistic gaze.

*I must slake this violent thirst.* My right hand slides down the scales of my stomach, searching for the protective pouch that houses my cocks, my heavy sack. It is swollen for Eve, waiting to grant her near-obsessive desire for seed. I had not planned on giving her a child so quickly in our relationship, but her channel *demand*ed that I relinquish my cum.

I could not resist.

Sounds escape me unbidden, twisting with the shadows, warming the dark.

I find the slit in my scales and push two fingers in, the crown of my mating rod jerking eagerly as I stroke it.

“Ah, Eve,” I grumble, watching the recording over and over. The way her head is thrown back, her lips parted, the ecstasy etched into her visage. I do not like that another male has given that to her, but I must make peace with that reality.

More so, my body has given up the mating marks and so expects me to fuck and fuck and fuck. For the rest of our lives, that is what I will do to Eve: I will *fuck* her. Mate her. Breed her. Most Aspis have few children, two or three at best, but I will give her as many as she wants. Considering her behavior thus far, it may be a lot.

*It will help to have more than one male to rear our numerous offspring.*

That is the last I think of the Vestalis male. He is a nuisance because his family is a nuisance, because his position is a nuisance. Otherwise, he is simply a forgettable inconvenience.

My fingers wrap around the shaft of my mating rod, and I yank fiercely on it, jerking it from my pouch and spattering my hard abdominal muscles with slick. Even without my female around, my body readies for her, weeps at the tip and along the sides in preparation for our joining. I thumb the head of my breedable dick, admiring the excess fluid. *Yes, this female makes me ready for procreation in a way I did not expect.*

My eyes track the desire on her face as I switch out my hand for my tail, yanking and tugging on my mating rod before I dip my fingers back into my body. My hand finds my pleasure rod first, fisting it and dragging it from the heated confines of my groin. It does not last long, twitching and spurting bonding fluid onto my chest. I release it in favor of removing my sack. It is so swollen and plump for Eve that it aches to keep it tucked away like this. It is far too full of seed to stay inside of me for long periods. I will need to regularly empty it, just as I’m doing now.

I roll my testes in my hand, my gaze fixed on the screen, my body screaming that this is not enough. *I must find my mate and reestablish our bond. It is that or death.* She and I love one another so fiercely that it seems we only have a handful of my planet’s days before the dirt claims us.

It is imperative that we mate.

Though I know it serves no purpose, my body demands to be satisfied *now*.

“Oh my mate,” I purr in my native language. The sound of it reflects back

at me from the wood planks lining the metal walls, a rippling of my vocal cords as I toss the viewing device aside. It shatters on the floor, but I do not care. I see her in my mind's eye. I see her beneath me, sweaty and writhing. I feel her flesh between my teeth. I feel both of my cocks, buried inside her sweet, hungry body.

*More, more, more,* I think frantically, curving my spine and unfurling my tongue from my mouth. I wrap that strong, wet muscle around my mating rod, using my tail on my pleasure rod, my hands on my testicles. And all the while, I imagine that it's Eve, tasting my woodsy spend, milking my slick shafts, drawing a sound of triumph and aggression that spills from my lips in a torrent of violent promise.

I lick my cock to climax, squirting mating fluid all over myself and then rolling so that I can fuck the floor with frantic gyrations of my hips. I find another orgasm in my pleasure rod and then yet another in my mating rod, until I am boneless and lying with my arms folded beneath my head, tail swaying, wings tucked tightly to my back.

As I drift toward sleep, I think of Eve and the birthing den that I have been preparing. I started it a long time ago, in the hopes of one day finding a mate, and then chose not to return for some time when I wasn't sure that I would ever find a worthy partner. I began work anew on it after choosing Eve, but there is still much to be done.

*I will deliver our daughter there with my own hands.* I fall into a dream of my mate and the future we will have together, but it does not last.

Something shakes the ship.

Something wakes me up.

May the wild earth protect one who disturbs the sleep of an unsatisfied monster.



I creep up the stairs to find Eve's sister-human standing with her mouth agape, blunt human teeth on display as she stares in surprise at the new star-traveling vessel that has maneuvered next to our ship.

“Man the e-cannons!” Captain Kidd shouts, pounding across the deck to grab onto the end of a large, silver weapon. Its tip protrudes through the wall of the glass dome surrounding us, aimed directly at the new vessel. His crew scrambles to obey his orders in a way I can appreciate but will not emulate. *I take orders from no one.* “Who the hell ...?” he mutters, crouching beside the weapon, and then jerking his finger against a small trigger. The motion unleashes a wave of fire from the end of the device, red and orange light reflecting off the black of my scales.

“You’re shooting cannons at it when you don’t even know what it is?” Jane asks, her voice wild with bewilderment. The Screechy Female does nothing, standing idly by as if she does not care. Perhaps her new friend will assist; I will not go out of my way to protect her. I must keep my attention on the captain, so that our vessel will reach its destination safely. And Jane, of course. For Eve. Anything for Eve.

“Listen, woman, any ship that cloaks itself and reappears with *grappling e-hooks* is no friend of ours.” Kidd takes aim with his weapon and sends another flame-coated ball in the direction of the other ship. They have fired at us as well, glowing metal hooks that embed themselves into the glass dome above our heads. The other ship moves closer, until the pair of vessels are side-by-side.

Who *dares* interrupt my voyage to my female?

I cannot wait to meet the fools stupid enough to try.

There is a sound from down below, a creaking, a clash of metal on metal. *The door perhaps?*

With a curse in his native language, Captain Kidd takes off for the stairs and Jane attempts to follow.

“No, you hide in the captain’s quarters,” I tell her, pushing her back with a wing-hand. “Eve will not forgive me if I allow you to perish in this fight.”

I do not have the time to ensure her compliance, but I hope she is smart enough to take good advice when given. It is a virtue to accept the advice of one who has nothing to gain when offering it.

When I descend into the shadows, they are no longer shadows. There is light from the second ship, and I see that there is no difference between ours and theirs. They have connected the two vessels, and creatures are pouring out of their hold and into ours. I am not sure what these aliens are, but I do not care.

It makes little difference.

I use my tail to knock Captain Kidd aside, likely saving his life. He has weapons of his own in hand, but there are too many of the invaders and his crew is too small. I will take care of this situation on my own.

The invaders are not of any species I have seen before, small and toothy and wild. The four-limbed aliens scuttle from one star-vessel to the other, and I split my lips in a grin.

*Slaughter them. Paint the walls red.*

And so I shall.

I give into the hunger and let it ride me until I am consumed with nothing but violence and the need for bloodshed. Oh, and I am *starving*. I eat the lab-grown meat that I am given, but it is not enough.

I snatch the first of the creatures, lifting it to my mouth and wishing that I were of a larger size. The only purpose I have for staying small is so that I can penetrate my mate. Otherwise, bigger is most often better. My teeth sever the alien's furred head from its body, and I swallow it whole before tossing what's left of the corpse aside for later.

"Fucking hell," Kidd curses, backing away from the pool of blood forming at my feet. With both of my wing-hands, I gather up two more of the creatures, bringing their bodies together with a satisfying crunch before discarding them, too. "You really are a killing machine, aren't you?" he murmurs, but not like he is actually talking to me, more like he is nervous.

*He should be.*

With another snarl, I dive into the horde, flinging small bodies this way and that, ignoring them when they bite down hard on my hide. They have the look of sulfur dogs, the furred creatures that hunt near the thermal vents on Jungryuk. Unlike the timid sulfur dogs, these aliens are aggressive and wild, surging into the ship and up the stairs.

I collect Kidd in the tight coil of my tail—he *must* be kept safe at all costs—and follow after, finding Jane still standing on the deck in the way of all stubborn human females. She has a weapon and is attempting to defend herself when we both know that her fragile skin tears like paper, and she has useless teeth and blunt-tipped fingers.

A roar of fury escapes me as I skitter across the deck, raking curls of wood from the planks beneath my claws. The alien dogs are fixed on the crew and the silver weapons lining the edge of the ship. If we lose too many of these

crew members, our voyage will not continue, and Eve will perish without use of my pleasure rod.

My mouth splits wide as I lunge on the back of another alien, severing its spine and using a bit of glistening white bone to crush the skull of another. They are all over me now, these invaders, but I am in a blind rage and I feel *nothing*. When the battle is over, I can lick my wounds. For now, killing is my only priority.

A scream splits my attention, the sound so like Eve that I cannot resist turning toward it.

Jane's arm is in the mouth of one of the creatures, and her blood runs hot across the surface of the deck. I barrel through more of the monsters, tossing their small, lithe forms aside, thrilling at the sound of breaking bones and pained yelps. They have many eyes, these creatures, including a large one on the back of their skull. It's a useful adaptation that allows the beast to see me coming before I'm able to grab it with a wing-hand. It releases Jane, and she stumbles back, slamming into the exterior wall of the captain's quarters before I reach out for its neck.

It lunges at me first, teeth sinking into the purple vessels on the edge of my wing. Soon enough, my venom will have the creature writhing in the throes of death. I ignore it and refocus on another, seizing it in mid-jump as it leaps toward one of the crew members.

"Put me down!" Captain Kidd howls, and I oblige him, tossing him to the ground beside his mated female. He has refused to accept the fate of his joining, but it will come in time. He and Jane are marked for one another whether they like it or not. *Just as my precious female was fated for the Vestalis prince.*

Fury rides hot in my veins, causing my purple vessels to glow. They are faint, much fainter than I would like, but I cannot return to Jungryuk to refresh them. Blood will have to suffice in the absence of a thermal vent. I roll around in a hot, red puddle of it, shaking my body out and ruffling my scales, spattering the ship with crimson. It does not allow me to grow larger, but it *invigorates*.

I impale another alien in the throat with the spikes on my tail, and then snap the neck of one that's bitten down on my leg. I keep the monsters at bay by marking a half-circle around Captain Kidd and Jane.

The screechy one is not so lucky, shouting and cursing as she's dragged



down the staircase to the hold by her leg. I would save her, if only out of compassion, but I am busy. There are lives I must prioritize in order to reach Eve.

The beast holding onto the female is split in half, but not by me. By the invisible entity that I have been sensing.

“What in the fucking Stars is that?” Kidd breathes, but I do not have time for his ignorance. He was warned about the stowaway passenger many times and chose not to listen. *Seems that I was right, that this creature is fond of the screechy one.*

“Madonna!” Jane yells as the tiny gray and white Earth creature escapes the pocket of the screechy one’s clothing and scrabbles helplessly across the wood deck. I snag it gently with my tail and pass it over to Jane before she throws herself into the melee in her attempt to grab it.

The other human female has disappeared and, with her, the rest of the alien dogs.

I slither after them, slaughtering as many as I can on my way, and find several male aliens of a different species hauling the screeching female into the other ship. Once they are inside their own vessel, the door closes and with it, so does ours, as if the two were magnetized together.

A hissing sound fills the room, and I am left with stragglers and few answers.

It does not matter. I do not need them.

I finish off the last of the alien dogs, swallow a few down, and then rejoin the captain upstairs.

“The Collector,” he’s snarling as he faces his bloodied deck, examining the damage done to the row of silver weapons, using his foot to turn over the bodies of his dead crew. “Motherfucker, son of a bitch, cocksucking Vestalis scum!”

“The Collector?” Jane repeats, but Kidd doesn’t answer her. He’s barking—literally, that is the sound of the Yaena—orders to his remaining crew, and thumbing over the screen of a viewing device.

“Miraculously, we didn’t take any damage,” one of the crew members tells him. “They just took that human female and left. Since when does the Collector leave anyone alive? They should’ve sunk us, shouldn’t they?”

“Should have, but they couldn’t risk the cannon fire,” Kidd mumbles, giving me a long look. Something has changed in his expression toward me.

The fear is still there, but respect has crept in alongside it. “You may have just saved our asses,” he tells me as I sit down and lift a wing, inspecting the damage from the bites. I am bleeding quite heavily, but at least I have plenty of food to fuel the healing process. My tongue slips from my mouth, and I swipe it over the worst of my injuries.

“I do not need your vocal platitudes. Prove to me your thankfulness by returning me to my mate.”

Kidd scoffs and adjusts his black head covering, rolling his amber eyes as he does.

“Right. Set up your second fuck-session with your female. Right away, *sir*.” The captain takes off to command his ship, pausing beside Jane like he wishes to speak with her in private. She stands before him, trembling, frightened, but stubborn as many human females seem to be. In her arms, she holds the displaced possum. “Are you okay?” he asks, feigning a reluctant nonchalance that makes me sigh.

Both of the lovestruck idiots flinch at the sound.

“I’m fine,” Jane replies hesitantly, her gaze flicking past the captain to watch me as I groom away the wounds on my body. After I am done, I will eat the rest of the corpses, and then I will rearrange my den for another self-mating. The violence on this ship has stirred my blood again, and my sack is heavy and tight. Kidd lifts his hand, as if he may touch Jane, but then drops it by his side in a cowardly maneuver. “Not that you care.”

“I certainly fucking don’t,” Kidd lies, growling under his breath as he clenches his hands into fists and heads belowdecks.

“It is not wise to deny reality,” I warn Jane, bemused by her color-changing cheeks that remind me of my own mate. She opens her mouth many times, but no sound comes out. Only the possum makes a noise, hissing at me in warning. I ignore it and, since Kidd is in my den now, I take his.

When he returns hours later, he finds his bed wet with blood and bonding fluid and seed. And myself, curled up on the top of it. I snap my teeth at him, and he retreats with a curse, allowing the mechanical door to slam shut and seal me into my new sanctuary.

A laugh escapes my throat, a harrowing sound.

As I said: I am the boss of this ship, and the captain is my beta.

When he returns later that night, I snarl at him, but he ignores me, tossing another viewing device onto the table beside the bed.

“Just take it, and don’t bite my damn head off, okay?”

“What is this?” I inquire, grabbing it before he can explain. I touch the screen until the frozen image begins to move.

I see Eve in the Vestalis throne room with the prince at her side.

I see heads decapitated and blood spilled.

I see that my female is in trouble, that she needs me.

And then I let out a scream that rends a blackhole into the center of my own heart.



*Aaaand, It's My Turn (Eve)*

“Good morning!” Connor bounces into the suite early as I sit there and munch despondently on an apple-ish fruit. Only ish. Just *ish*. It has a bright purple pit, so ... definitely not an actual apple. “Look what I’ve got.” Connor takes his unbuttoned jacket off and spins around, revealing his back with a grin.

“We haven’t seen you in two days,” Avril says as she works on my hair. I have to wear a super complicated outfit today. It’s, uh. *The Day of Tasseography*. Which I guess means that we’re having our tea leaves read? I don’t know. Apparently, part of the ritual includes sampling various flower nectars and honey. I don’t bother telling Rurik how ‘moth-like’ that is. “Where have you been?”

“Getting to know my new mate,” Connor replies coyly, pointing at his back. He’s not wearing glasses anymore. I wonder if the Vestalis have the medical capabilities to restore perfect vision to a person’s eyes. That shot yesterday took care of my allergies; I’m holding the two-headed cat in my lap. It’s only bitten me twice now. Well, the one head anyway. I quite like the other head. “I’m actually only here to visit as a *princeling*.” He grins as he takes a seat and selects one of the macarons. I hope it’s not the one that tastes like smiling bees and summer days; that’s my favorite.

“Where is Brot?” Rurik demands, sweeping out of our room in a red silk robe that drags on the floor. It’s undone and hangs loose on his shoulders, revealing his pale midsection. His silk pants are too low, and I struggle not to stare.

“He’s waiting in the hallway.” Connor gestures in that direction. “We couldn’t stand to be separated from each other, but I really wanted to see you guys, so I convinced him to come over here. He said that coming into the room would be too much like giving into Rurik, and he didn’t want to do that.”

I snort, and Rurik sighs.

He sweeps magnificently over to the door and flings it open, putting a hand on the doorjamb and staring at his stubborn idiot of a brother.

“What in Stars are you doing? Come in.” There’s a long pause there, and then my husband’s voice lowers to a cold command. “That is an order, Brot. After all, you are my most favorite of all my brothers.”

Brot stalks into the room, but refuses to sit down. His black chin marking seriously looks like a goatee, and I feel sort of sorry for Connor until I see him checking his mate out. Well, better him than me then. I don’t find Brot attractive at all.

Both of the cat’s heads hiss now, and I chuckle. Brot hesitates a moment before speaking.

“What happened with Ranet?” he asks as Rurik gestures at a chair by the table.

“Sit down. Eat. Those are orders as well.”

Brot does as he’s told without argument. Maybe that display with his brother’s beheading changed his attitude a little? I’d hope so. It was *broadcast* across the entire Noctuida. Which means Abraxas might’ve seen. Officer Hyt might’ve seen.

*Only a few days left*, I tell myself, but that doesn’t make today’s dizziness any better.

“Why did mother and father kill Ranet?” Brot demands, but not like he’s actually discussing the subject of his parents slaughtering his brother. He doesn’t sound like he’s devastated or anything, just demanding and curious. I guess with a hundred-and-two siblings, it’d be hard to get to know them all much less like them all.

“I am the future king of the Noctuida, and he was threatening insurrection.

Mother and Father acted in the only way he allowed them to act. Tea?” Rurik gestures at the pot, but Brot ignores him.

Brot notices me studying the pattern on his wings, and fluffs them, like he *wants* the world to see. His pattern isn’t bad; it consists of repeating diamond shapes, like a patchwork quilt. Huh.

“No, I will pass. Thank you.” Brot sniffs imperiously, and Rurik smiles slightly. Maybe he really does like this brother? Certainly he isn’t all that upset about Ranet. I asked him about it in bed, when we were alone, and all he told me was that it was fortunate his parents hadn’t come after us.

My head spins, and I struggle to stay sitting in the chair. Avril grabs my shoulder at the last second, and I snap to. The cat darts off my lap, and I drop the apple-ish thing from my hand.

“Are you alright?” Avril whispers, and I nod, not wanting to alert Brot to anything being amiss.

“Just hungry.” I snag another piece of fruit, but I can feel Rurik’s gaze on my back. “Did you have fun over the last few days?” I ask Connor with a snicker, and he grins right back. He leans in and puts an elbow on the tabletop.

“The coremata,” he whispers, and I laugh. I take another huge bite of fruit as Brot bristles.

“Our private life should remain private.” He chastises his mate, but otherwise does nothing to stop him. I have a feeling that I know who’s going to be in control of this relationship, and it isn’t Brot.

“Everyone talks about how good the Falopex are in bed. It’s just constant, constant chatter about how skilled they are, but you know what? I think the Vestalis are highly *underrated*.” Connor doesn’t seem to notice how annoyed Rurik is, how annoyed Avril is, how annoyed his own mate is. I’m the only one who seems to be amused by his rambling. “Those claspers—”

“Enough, Connor,” Avril breathes, setting the brush down on the table. “You’re done for now. I don’t want to put all the fancy twists in until right before we leave or you’ll end up knocking them loose.”

“Thank you,” I tell her honestly. I do feel bad that she’s a servant with no mate. I’m a princess and now Connor is a princeling. It must be shitty to be left out.

“Are you mad at me?” Connor asks her, and even though I haven’t heard much about their past together, I’m guessing they’ve known each other for a

long time. “We broke up *months* before this ever happened,” he adds, and I’m like ... oh. Oooh.

“I’m aware, Connor.” Avril narrows her eyes on him. “It’s not *you* that I’m jealous over. I’m just jealous in general. I was kidnapped by aliens, too. I was forced into this against my will, too. But I don’t have power or any say in anything that happens. I’m just along for the ride.”

“When I’m queen, I’ll set you free,” I tell her, and she just stares at me. “You can go off and find a mate. I’ll give you money, too.” I don’t even have to look at Rurik to know that I’ll be allowed to do all that. It’ll be easy. It’ll be well within the scope of my power.

“Are you serious?” she asks, blinking at me like she can’t understand why I’d ever do a thing like that.

“I’m not about keeping someone as a slave, Avril,” I tell her, taking another bite of the apple. She smiles at me, genuinely, for what might very well be the first time since we met back up after the initial abduction.

“I’m glad we were able to save you,” she tells me, and I smile, too.

“The two of you ...” Brot doesn’t finish his sentence. He stares at his mate, takes Avril in with narrowed eyes, and then looks back to Connor. “You *mated* her?”

“Way back when, sure,” Connor replies, eating another macaron.

Rurik and I exchange a look.

“Come, my princess. I will help you get dressed.” He takes my hand and draws me away from the breakfast table before the drama gets good.

“I wanted to see that,” I grumble, but I know how it’ll end anyway. If Avril and Connor ever had something, it’s long since over, and Brot is Connor’s mate now. Avril doesn’t stand a chance. *Unless ... he loved her the way I love Abraxas.* But I don’t think so.

“If you want romantic strife, I will read to you again later,” Rurik tells me, and then he paces halfway across the room, wings softly closing and then opening again. The robe he’s wearing—like all of his jackets—has long slits down the back so that he can easily slip it on or off. The openings in the robe reveal the black silk pants underneath and the faintest hint of his furled coremata.

He turns back to look at me, and I can tell there’s something he wants to say, but isn’t sure how to go about approaching it.

“Yes, my dear?” I tease, but the quip does nothing to relax him.

“It’s the venom,” he tells me, mouth pursed.

“What?” I know he’s talking about Abraxas’ venom, but I’m not sure what he means.

“According to the results of the Cartian tech, that is the reason you are ill.”

I just stare.

After he found me in the woods last night, we came back here, he read to me, we made love, we slept. That’s it. I forgot all about the Cartian medical wand, and the odd expressions on both the medic’s and Zero’s faces. Saw my brother-in-law and his pregnant mate get beheaded, so I can’t be blamed for letting it slip my mind.

“Your blood contains lethal levels of Aspis venom.” Rurik sighs and looks down at the floor, like he’s trying to figure out how to break the news. “Your ... the markings inside of you. They are venomous.”

“My ... glowing vagina is venomous?” I ask cautiously, and then alarm spikes in me. “But you drink my blood. You fuck my—”

“I do not know why, but I am not affected by it,” he tells me, gently, empathetically. “But you are. This is why you are not feeling well.”

I have to really think about that for a minute.

“If those markings are venomous, how am I still alive?” I’ve seen Abraxas use his venom on animals. I’ve seen it used on him. Within *hours* of being attacked by the female, he was at death’s door, and he’s far bigger and stronger than I am. It’s been days since I last saw him, and I’m still standing here.

“It stands to reason that mating with the Aspis male activates ... something. Perhaps antivenom of some sort that protects you both. There is no way to know for certain. But I do believe that you need to mate him regularly to maintain your health—much as I wish I could blow his planet to smithereens.” A pause. “With him on it.”

I sit down heavily on the edge of the bed.

Venom? I’m being poisoned by our mate markings? I think that over, really think on that for a second.

“Abraxas was envenomated by a female Aspis once,” I say, staring at my bare toes and taking another bite of my apple-ish fruit. “He was dying. It’s what initially encouraged me to mate with him. He said I could save his life if I did. I ...”

*“When Aspis mates are separated, they die. It is without fail. It cannot be*



*undone.*” I can hear that deep, grumbling voice in my head, and I shiver despite the circumstances. Stars, I miss my alien dragon mate.

Rurik waits for me to keep talking, his hands curling into fists at his sides before he forces them to relax.

“When we mate, our bodies connect.” I touch a hand to my belly, savoring the memory of it. *Five days ago, Eve, you saw him. It’s not like it’s been a million years.* Feels like it though, especially now that I’m sitting here and talking about him. Fuck. “Little, like, blood vessels or something. I can feel his heartbeat. We exchange fluids.” I give Rurik a look. “What if it has something to do with that? When we mate, we’re like ... cured of the venom? But also ... maybe I get a dose of it at the same time?”

“It’s a theory,” he responds tightly, but also like he’s leaning toward the markings themselves as the culprit. “When Vrach first examined you, he assured me the marks were not harming you.” Rurik curls the edge of that pretty mouth in a scowl and then fidgets with his robe the way he usually fidgets with his gloves. “I will drop him and his mate both onto a planet with a toxic atmosphere.”

He’s joking, but his voice is tight with a worry he can’t hide.

“Can’t blame the poor guy,” I tell him, digging my fingers into the flesh of the apple-ish. “The Aspis are a mysterious bunch, aren’t they? Even with the blood lace, you can’t sense his venom, can you?”

Rurik shakes his head. Damn. He can read my thoughts, can tell that I’m pregnant, but Abraxas’ venom is invisible. I almost smile at that.

“I have no way to contact Officer Hyt or Captain Kidd,” he tells me gravely. “No communications can be sent without my parents knowing. We must administer whatever treatments we can while we wait.”

He doesn’t add what I know he’s thinking: *we must find other treatments in case they don’t show up.*

But they will. I trust Officer Hyt. Even if I didn’t, I trust Abraxas.

I glance over at the bedroom door and Rurik’s blood lace pattern as it pulses hot and red against it. He licked that into place the morning after we first arrived on Dome. Well, not *morning* but the sort of early twilight that serves as morning.

Rurik comes over to kneel in front of me.

“I have an offer that you might find strange, but also one that will bolster your health.” He reaches up and puts a hand to my forehead. Avril taught him

how to check my temperature that way. It's cute, but I push his wrist aside and lift a brow.

"Let's hear this strange offer then. Do you have access to some advanced alien medicine shit? Or is this some freaky alien shit?" He hesitates for long enough that I know it's going to be freaky. I take another bite of the apple-ish fruit and wait. I'm not going to prod. I want to hear him say this.

The prince puffs himself up, shoulders back, chest out. He looks so goddamn beautiful in that red robe and silk pants, barefoot in our gorgeous honeymoon suite. I'd swoon if that swoon might not send me straight to the floor with dizziness. My chest aches, like my heart is fighting harder than it should to keep beating steadily.

*He said we'd die of broken hearts if we were separated. God, it sure as hell feels like he was right. Literally. My chest is so damn tight. My blood feels sluggish. All I want to do is sleep.*

"When a Vestalis male scents that his female is with child, he creates a ..." Rurik spreads his hands and wings both, like he's struggling to find an explanation. He keeps his eyes on mine though. Never once looks away as he feeds me this ridiculous story. "A packet of vitamins, of nutrition."

"Uh-huh." I take another bite of the apple-ish. Might be my new favorite food, this apple-ish. "Continue."

"Because the Vestalis breed with untold different species, there may be occasions when a male is unable to procure proper food for his mate." Rurik steps closer to me, accepting the pit of the apple-ish and then pausing beside what appears to be a small basket. The lid opens automatically, and I spot a metal chute inside. A garbage chute, I guess? The pit disappears and the lid slams shut. Rurik turns back to me. "I can deliver these to you. It should ... I imagine your symptoms would be relieved for a short period."

"A vitamin/nutrition packet?" I ask wryly, because I see where this is going.

It's a dumb-dumb alien romance plot; I know it is.

"Yes." Rurik stands stone-still, staring back at me. The two-headed cat slips in through a cat door embedded in the wall that I've only just now noticed. It glares at me with bright green eyes on one head, and studies a dangling bit of tassel from the bedspread with the other. In the end, it sits down right where it is and simultaneously licks its shoulder and yawns. Mean head and nice head working in unison for the perfect cat moment.

“How does one go about delivering a vitamin packet?” I inquire as he steps up to the bed and my legs part of their own accord. My breath rushes out in a wild exhale. Rurik puts his hands on my shoulders and leans in, his mouth near my ear. It’s still stained red from all the bloodletting last night, and I wish he wouldn’t get so vigorous about scrubbing it clean. When it’s red, it looks like a ruby. I want to kiss the shine of that jewel right off of his face.

“For you to consume it, it must go into your mouth,” he says, which is a pretty obvious statement. Nutrition. Vitamins. Mouth. Swallow. I’m guessing the way in which it’s delivered is a bit unorthodox. “For me to give it, I must ejaculate.”

I snort, but then he’s kissing me, and my hands find the fur around his neck. The bright red part in the front is my favorite, so I’m not shy about focusing my attention there. I dig my fingers under the edges, finding the spots where the soft fur morphs into silken skin.

“You want me to suck you off and swallow?” I clarify, thinking of how Doctor Vrach called out a gentle suggestion yesterday, and the way Rurik turned pink for the briefest of seconds. “If you wanted me to return the favor from last night, all you had to do was ask. What is this vitamin nonsense?”

I’m teasing him, of course. I’m sure he’s serious about what he’s saying. He probably *can* deliver vitamins and nutrition through his dick. This is the Noctuida. Jane has a copulatory plug. I have a glowing vagina, lacy moth wings on my back, and a husband who can squirt vitamins into my mouth through his dick.

Yeah. Well.

“Yes, my princess.” That’s his hushed, breathy response to my cheeky question.

“Let’s do this thing then.” I slide forward, offering an enticing grind of my hips against his pelvis that has him gritting his teeth. “Did Avril teach you to offer me a pillow for my knees first?” I ask with a frantic batting of my eyelashes.

You wouldn’t think such a cheap flirtation would work, but the guy is an alien. His body has literally imprinted on mine. He *loves* it. His breath catches, and his feelers slide over my hair, sprinkling pheromones over me in a gentle scent shower.

“Your comfort is of utmost concern to me,” he snarls, snagging my lower lip with his teeth and drawing a bit of blood. He licks it off with slow, lavish

strokes and then shudders. “Allow me.” Rurik draws away, grabbing some of the pillows from near the headboard, and sets me up a nice cushy spot in a pool of twilight.

The curtains are open, but the sheers are closed, and I sure as hell hope that nobody can peep in here. There’s just enough light to see by, giving the room a cozy, intimate atmosphere, bordering on erotic.

I get onto my knees, conscious of all the work that Avril’s put into my hair thus far. *At least I’ll be swallowing, so that takes care of the mess.*

Rurik steps close, but I reach out and snag the waist of his silken pants, dragging him even closer. I yank the fabric down suddenly, and he makes this beautiful sound, somewhere between a whisper and a growl. It’s not translatable and for that, I’m grateful. I don’t need that translated to know that he likes this.

His cock looks massive, the claspers still swirled around it in red. I touch my finger to the sharp thorn-like tip, and Rurik hisses through his teeth.

“You like that?” I ask, and then I lean forward and lick it. I press my tongue against it just hard enough to draw a drop of blood, and he groans, digging his fingers into my hair. He uses his nails to gently scrape my scalp, his hips bucking toward my face involuntarily.

I watch in awe as his claspers unfurl, reaching out for me. *This should be interesting.* I slide my mouth over the tip of him, and his claspers grab onto my head, curling around my skull, the thorns clacking together as they close behind me. I’m pushed forward, drawing him in about halfway, right up to the base of his testes. It should be weird that they’re part of his shaft, these two plump shapes halfway up his dick, but it’s not. It feels normal, natural.

I scrape my tongue along the ridge on his underside, and flick my eyes up to watch his reaction. His head falls back, the design on his wings glowing fiercely, bathing the room in more of that sensual red light. I use my fingers to play with the red fur around his base, stroking and petting it as he moans and thrusts, fingers tightening ever so slightly in my hair.

I use my other hand to grab the base of him in a tight grip, jerking his pale skin up toward his testes and feeling them tighten as my lips meet them from the other side. The craziest part of it all? He tastes like he *smells*. Like some sort of artisanal honey spice tea.

*Pheromones.*

I try to draw back, but his claspers won’t let me, pinning me in place here

as effectively as they do when they're on my hips. Doesn't matter. The things I was looking for—that is, his coremata—are unfurling at the edges of my vision. The way they inflate, it's almost like watching four balloons being blown up. But that metaphor, it doesn't do them fucking justice.

I groan around Rurik's cock, tightening the grip of my hand around the base, working my mouth up and down, faster and faster. His claspers pull me in, push his testes hard against my lips. If I could, I'd take them into my mouth, but they're far too plump and swollen.

"Squeeze them," he growls out, digging into my thoughts with little effort.

That's our new reality: mating with Rurik has changed *everything*.

I do as he asks, using both hands to massage and fondle him.

That spicy-sweet taste hits the back of my tongue as Rurik bucks his pelvis into me, claspers snatching my head and pulling me taut against his testes, the head of his cock bumping into my throat. He's as far as he can go and orgasming wildly in my mouth. His wings ruffle, showering me with pheromones. His coremata touch my skin, and my hand drops suddenly between my legs, rubbing my aching, unsatisfied body with my fingers.

I swallow several times to take it all down, and ... *holy shit*. My entire body lights up like I've just downed a really nice cocktail or taken a faceful of laughing gas at the dentist. I'm dizzy, but in a different way than before, like there's too much energy inside of me and no place for it to go.

Rurik reaches down and uses his hands to pry his own claspers apart, drawing his hips away from my face, his cock out of my mouth. He picks me up while I'm still going through it, my body perking up, waking as if from a groggy sleep.

"Oh." That's all I can think to say. He told me I'd feel better if I ate his cum, and ... well, I *do* feel better. So much better. "Can you go again?" I ask as he lays me down on the bed, and I grab at him, trying to pull him down on top of me. "How soon?"

He buries his face against my neck and chuckles.

"I see that the vitamins are working," he whispers against my neck. He kisses my skin and settles between my legs, letting his hungry claspers snatch my hips up. We kiss and hold each other, rubbing and grinding together until he's ready again. Doesn't take long. Less than five minutes, maybe less than three.

He drives into me, and my back arches, hands grasping at the smooth

expanse of his back.

“Just a few more days, my love, and you will get to see your love. Be strong.”

“You *are* my love,” I tell him, and his breath hitches before he kisses me again, and starts to fuck.

We’re *this* close to missing the entire tea ceremony.



My attire for the Day of Tasseography—a super fancy name for *reading tea leaves*—is atrocious. A sniff-necked cloak, a massive ball gown, a face covered in thick makeup. Rurik, too, is attired in a similar outfit. Rather than a dress, he wears a red robe belted with fur at the waist, and since he has wings and doesn’t need a cloak, he gets an ugly collar to strap around his neck instead.

Today’s wedding ritual consists of us sitting across from one another, on the floor with cushions underneath us, and a table between us covered in various flowers. Each flower is situated like a cup, its center filled with honey or nectar or tea. We start with the latter, draining our cups and then sitting there and staring at one another as an older Vestalis male with a beard of white fur peers into them and then reads us our fortunes.

“A long and fruitful rule awaits the future Imperial King Rurik and his beautiful queen—” I tune it out after the first few drawling lines.

Instead, Rurik and I sit there and stare at each other, each of us fighting back a smile.

As soon as the, err, old tea leaf reading guy leaves, it’s just us and an opulent room decorated in silver walls and numerous filigree mirrors. It’d be peaceful if we were truly alone—it feels like we are—but I heard from Avril that this is being broadcast to the whole of the Noctuida. There are moth drones all over the place. I flip one off as it floats lazily past the table.

Lovely.

“So you drank this stuff for sustenance until recently?” I ask, sniffing at a purple flower filled with viscous sugar water. I mean, that’s what it tastes like

to me. Apparently, these are some of the finest nectars and honies in—here’s that phrase yet again—*the whole of the Noctuida*. I dutifully take a sip and then snort.

“Young Vestalis drink nectar and honey,” he explains, “while mature Vestalis are expected to consume blood. Of course, only a mated Vestalis can consume blood, so therein lies the conundrum.”

I take a sip of a golden honey inside of a bright pink flower, and find that it’s oddly fizzy against my tongue. I notice that whatever I drink, Rurik drinks, too. I wonder if he can taste more nuance than I can? Other than the bubbles of that last honey, they all taste more or less the same to me.

I lean in and lower my voice to a whisper, aware that no matter what I say or how quietly I try to say it, it’s going to be broadcast far and wide.

“Rurik, it all tastes the same to me,” I whisper, and he smiles so beautifully that I can’t help myself. I crawl around the table to kiss him, and he puts his arms around me, pulling me into his lap. Even when I know everyone is watching, I can’t help myself.

I sit on him, fingers curled together behind his neck, just kissing and tasting and savoring him.

*I won’t let you get stuck on that throne. I fucking swear it.*

Can’t say that aloud, obviously, because I know that his parents are listening to us, monitoring us. And after yesterday? I’ve seen how ruthless they can be. Rurik’s warnings are no longer empty words without context.

His brother, Ranet, and his mate were pregnant. And yet, they killed them anyway. I don’t want to think too hard about that or I’ll start to falter. We might be the next in line to the throne, but we are not safe.

We won’t be safe until Rurik is king and then ...

That thought sticks inside my brain, and it won’t go away. Not for the rest of the tea ceremony. Not for the long walk back along twisting cobblestone streets, bridges decorated with mosaic lanterns, and cheering crowds. Definitely not after we step into the dark of our bedroom and start to shed our heavy clothes.

“I do not know if I have said this properly,” Rurik tells me as soon as he’s shed the collar from his neck, and I’ve left my cloak in a stiff heap on the floor near the double-headed cat. “But thank you.”

“Thank you?” I echo, brimming with newfound energy from the, uh, vitamin packet, and wishing we could go out and do something as a couple

without any eyes on us. I just want to practice being with him, learning his habits, learning his world. “For what?”

Rurik steps close to me, putting his hands on my shoulders and staring down at me in the starlit gloom.

“For joining me. Accepting me. For ... taking on all of the burdens that come with my position.”

“A position that’s at least partially my fault,” I add. “I mean, it’s not either of our faults. Just bad timing. Or ... well, we found each other in the vastness of the universe so maybe it’s good timing, but ... Yeah.” I pause, eyes flicking toward the window. “Do you think, if we waited a little bit, that we might be able to sneak out?”

I look back to Rurik, finding him with a melancholy half-smile followed quickly by a bemused frown. If that makes any sense. Sad and happy. Wry amusement and distaste. It’s easy to understand why. With each day that passes, our time ticks down. We could be forced onto the throne as early as the day after the wedding. As for the wedding itself ... I do a quick count in my head ... *Day of Mating, Day of Wearing, Day of Knowing, Day of Counsel, Day of Tasseography*. Shit.

There are only two days left.

Two days for Rurik to be able to leave the ship. Two days before he’s trapped permanently in the throne room. I try to imagine that. Me, living with Abraxas on some planet (probably Jungryuk), exploring new places and doing new things. Raising a baby together? I don’t even know what to do with that thought ... But I do know that Rurik would not force his child to grow up in a single room. He’d ...

I sway on my feet and Rurik grabs me by the elbows.

“The vitamins did not work.” He sounds so grave. I can’t help but lighten up what I know is likely a very serious moment. His parents *slaughtered* his brother and his brother’s pregnant mate right in front of me. We are only one misstep away from expendable and dead. I make the joke anyway.

“Don’t look so down. All men think their semen is special. You’re no different.”

“Eve.” Rurik’s voice is hard, and I cringe slightly. He slides his hands down my forearms, circles my wrists with his thumbs, tugs me a little closer. “You feel unwell already?”

“I was thinking about you being stuck on that ship. How often does it even



land on a planet? That must take a lot of energy.”

Rurik closes his eyes for a minute and then opens them slowly to stare at me.

“My father thinks we will refuel soon—on Earth. So he does not care to withhold the extra energy for frivolities. We could as easily have taken a small transport down here.” Rurik curls his lip in a frustrated scowl. “It would have taken a fraction of the fuel.”

My heart was already racing—I can’t tell Rurik that just now—so when it picks up from stress, I go lightheaded again. I refuse to let it show on my face this time. Rurik being worried about me won’t help either of us. Officer Hyt and Captain Kidd, they can’t get Abraxas here any sooner. All I can do is wait and hope that Hyt shows up at the chapel the way he promised he would.

“Where else can we refuel?” I ask, looking up to meet Rurik’s gaze.

It all feels so sadly fucking grave in here right now. Us, in our fancy clothes, standing in the dark with starlight, his hands hot on my wrists, and we have to consider the consequences of two awful things.

Take the throne as soon as possible and trap Rurik as soon as possible or ... fail to do it in time and watch my entire family die. It’s one thing for me to miss them. It’s a whole other thing if they were eaten by *The Korol*—which I would then have to live on forever *anyway*.

“Jungryuk,” Rurik tells me, and I give him a look. “If I cannot get my father to move from the throne then I will have to convince him of a secondary target. That is the only other option he would consider.” He inhales and then holds the breath for some time before exhaling gently. “As it is, there are no good choices for refueling even if I were to go out of my way to be as conservative with our power as possible.” He thinks for a minute, and those fine hairs of mine stand up in warning.

“Don’t you *dare* consider crashing that ship on purpose.” I’m staring at him with wide eyes because I feel like I might’ve figured out one of his secrets. He at least has the decency to look ashamed. “You *were*. You were considering letting *The Korol* lose fuel on purpose.”

“If I were to intentionally draw the entire fleet into a fatal situation, that would be the end of the problem. No planet would need to be used for refueling. You could live your life with Abraxas. It was not an option that I should’ve stripped away from you.” He sighs as he runs his fingers down the side of my face. I haven’t said a word. Can’t force my lips to speak. I’m

shell-shocked right now. “I should not have taken you from the woods. I ... If only my parents had not found out about you, then I could have at least given you a choice.”

“I know it doesn’t feel this way, but I would’ve chosen to save you. Then dealt with the consequences later, like we’re doing now. When Abraxas and I were getting ready to flee our den, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. In the end, I knew you would come for me.”

He cups my face in both hands and kisses me again.

“There must be somewhere else that we can refuel,” I breathe against his mouth, but Rurik only sighs in response. Earth isn’t an option for me. Neither is Jungryuk. How could I condemn Abraxas’ entire family, his entire species, to be eaten by a sentient spaceship?

“I am pursuing other avenues, but I cannot guarantee they will bear results. I would rather not die, of course. I would like to meet my child and spend as much time as is physically possible with you. It would not behoove either of us if I were to perish.” He smiles slightly, but it’s genuine. “If necessary, we *will* drain Jungryuk, but it will not matter because Abraxas will not be on it.”

*Oh. Abraxas. Fuck.* I can’t wait to see him; he’ll help me figure this out. If I want the Vestalis prince to live, he’ll go out of his way to help me with that. It’s insane that I trust someone *that* much.

“If we evacuated my family, I’d ... rather destroy Earth than lose you.” The words are said very quietly, but I mean them.

“Yes, the mate bond will cause you to think things like that. It is not true. You would be devastated, my princess.” Rurik walks right past me and over to the window, peeling apart the curtains to look out. “The guards are mostly for show. I do not need them to keep us safe, and my parents well know that.” He smiles, and the starlight strikes him strangely. He looks so alien in that moment that I’m touched by dizziness all over again. “Change your clothes, and I will take you somewhere.”



It's misting outside, but it doesn't matter because I'm *outside* and I'm not on a spaceship and there are no other people and no drones. It's a wet cobblestone street. It's a forest. I'm running on dirt. It's almost like I'm back on Earth. If it weren't for the weird cats everywhere, I could be convinced that it were.

Rurik stops running, but he isn't panting. Not at all.

Me, I'm doubled over, lifting up a finger as I try to form words. None will come. I literally cannot breathe.

"Perhaps this was a poor idea," he says, looking at me in concern, but I force my tired body up and shake my head, throwing a grin on for good measure.

"Are you fucking kidding me? This is amazing. We're in the woods by ourselves. Nobody knows we're here. It's the best wedding present in the whole of the Noctuida." I snort and wipe my hands on my new pants. They're *leather*, did I mention that? I'm wearing tight leather pants and a red blood lace crop top, and I feel cool as fuck. "I look like an urban fantasy character." I gesture at the outfit. "Is this one of Avril's designs?"

"No, my princess." Rurik's smile shifts like a sin. "It is mine."

He takes a step toward me, and I take one back. He puts his palm on the tree trunk above my head.

"If we were like Brot and Connor, mated but free, where would you go?"

he asks me earnestly. “In the whole of the universe, Eve, where would you go?”

I’m trembling now, just from that. All he has to do is talk to me like, well, the prince of a planet-destroying hostile alien race, and it’s over for me. I scrape my teeth against my lip in thought.

“Home,” I admit, and that feeling is still there. “I want you to meet my mom. She’d love you. My dad ... I think you guys would butt heads and I’d like to see it. Also, my little brother ... I just think it’d be fun if we could visit together.”

“If I were Brot,” Rurik tells me, taking my hand with his free one. “Then I would apply for a permit to visit Earth. I would buy one of those beautiful human holograms they sell at the black market in Jungryuk, and I would wear it to visit your family. They would perceive me as human; you could share your culture with me. And then we would leave together for a new adventure at the end of the week.”

That’s almost enough to make me cry, but I’m determined not to. I am *not* wasting this time we have together.

“What would you do if we were free?” I ask him as he steps back from the tree to give me some space. I don’t want space. All I want is him and Abraxas and a life spent together. Although, I must say, the view is *choice*.

Rurik’s pants are also black leather, tight and sexy and modern. The red dress shirt is appropriately frilly, and the boots look like they were stolen from the set of *Bridgerton*, but the pants? Rurik is hardcore.

“I would show you the beauty of the stars,” he tells me seriously, and then he takes my hands and tugs me through the thick foliage into the shadows. It gets darker and darker as we tromp into the woods. The ground is springy and mossy, and the cats’ eyes glint as they stare back at us from tree limbs or the bushes bordering the game trail we’re walking on.

As for what sort of game trail it might be, I have no idea.

Rurik seems to know where he’s going, so I follow, trusting that he can keep us safe out here. I don’t worry about anything. I just look around and take it all in. The odd shapes of the tree trunks. The multicolored fireflies flitting through the shadows. The break in both the canopy and the clouds that shows off a pair of moons.

We emerge from the trees entirely a minute later, and I’m left with my heart in my throat.

“Holy shit.”

There’s a clearing filled with oversized flowers and *moths*. Giant moths. As big as eagles.

“*These* are moths,” Rurik tells me, and I have to resist stomping on his foot. I turn back to watch as they swoop down in the moonlight and collect nectar from the flowers. Everything in the clearing is gargantuan and a bit jarring to stare directly at. Their colors are muted in the dim light, but I see purple and pink and blue. They’re all fuzzy, too. If Rurik can’t see the resemblance well, then, it’s an act of true denial at this point.

“Thank you for showing me this,” I tell him, and then I narrow my eyes. “And thanks for that little snide comment about the moths. It’s noted.”

He smiles again and tugs me forward, across the clearing, and into the shadows of the woods on the other side. The moths pay us no attention whatsoever.

“How is it that you know where we’re going?” My voice sounds loud in the darkness.

“I have stayed in the castle here as a guest many times,” he tells me, and my heart breaks. He’s showing me all his favorite things here before he’s not able to visit them anymore. I hate that and love it at the same time.

“Have you ever been to the city?” I ask as he pulls me along behind him until we’re standing outside of a small cave.

“I have not,” he admits, running his thumb across my knuckles as he turns to look at me over his shoulder. “I had planned to travel there at a later date.”

Rurik doesn’t have to be specific with what he means. We both know. *I thought I had more time to travel.*

I let him lead me into the darkness of the cave, crouching to accommodate the low roof. He steers me through the shadows until we reach a spot where we have to crawl. I don’t really expect the prince to drop to his knees and put his leather-clad ass in my face.

He does.

Remember what I said? I’m not only an A.S.S., I’m also an ass girl. And holy Stars does my new man have an ass worth staring at. I worry about his wings brushing against the cave walls, but he doesn’t seem bothered by the scrape of wet rock.

It only takes a few minutes before we emerge into a larger room, and the claustrophobia that was starting to set in dissipates slightly.

“You’re one of only two people I’d ever follow into a cramped cave system, you know that?” I murmur as he pauses on the chamber’s sandy soil bottom and turns around, reclining with one leg stretched out, one knee propped up, a hand extended. Oh so very dukely. I blush. *Maybe I am a blusher, but I just hadn’t met the right guy to bring out the trait? Guys. Plural.*

I have two.

I am perma-mated to *two* aliens.

I reach out and gasp when Rurik’s hot fingers curl around my wrist, dragging me close. He pulls me to him and then reclines on his back, tucking me up against his side.

“Is Abraxas the other?” he asks me, but there’s no sense of shame or anger in his voice now, just simple curiosity. “Or is it Officer Hyt?”

“Har-har, you’re a funny guy, you know that?” I respond dryly, snuggling into his side and forgetting for a brief second that he must’ve brought me here for a reason. “Yes, the only other person is Abraxas. I trust Jane, but I definitely do *not* trust her to lead me into an unknown cave system. She’d pick one at random like in that movie *The Descent* and end up getting us killed.”

Rurik doesn’t get the reference, and I realize that’s my new reality out here. Jokes about old cereal commercials or viral videos or TikTok trends, they don’t apply anymore. Human songs, movies, pop culture, it’s not a part of the Noctuida.

I expect to feel upset by that the way I did when I first arrived on Jungryuk, but ... I don’t. Not anymore. It’s actually freeing, in a way.

“It’s an Earth movie where everyone dies via some crazed cave monsters,” I explain, and Rurik turns his head to give me a look.

“No monsters in here, princess,” he assures me, gently tilting my chin so that I’ll look up. “Just moths.”

I roll onto my back so I can see what he’s looking at. Should’ve occurred to me that it isn’t as dark as it could be. Caves are dark in a way most people have never experienced, the true absence of any light. But there’s an ethereal silver glow in here, softening Rurik’s features and giving him the look of some wild fae thing.

The light emanates from the ceiling, from the stalactites just above us. The chamber’s roof is made of damp, uneven stone, dotted with moss, maybe five

feet overhead. I squint and sit up on my elbows for a better look.

Not stalactites, but chrysalis...es. Chrysalises? Chrysalides? Whatever the plural of *chrysalis* is.

“These are not moths,” I tell Rurik with a grin, relaxing back into the sand and turning my face to look at him. “Moths spin cocoons out of silk; butterflies use chrysalises. You know how you make blood lace come out of your tongue, and how you’re fuzzy, like a cute little silk moth—”

He reaches over and presses a warm hand over my lips to shush me.

“I am *not* a moth,” he growls at me again, and I shiver all over. He carefully removes his hand, waiting to see what I’m going to spout off next. “But you seem to like them, so I thought of this place. I do not know the difference between Earth moths and Earth butterflies. All I know is that lovely winged things hatch from these to make their way into the world. I was told that tonight is a good night to view such a process.”

“Who told you that?” I ask, wondering if Rurik has any friends. If so, he hasn’t mentioned any. Maybe he doesn’t need any, what with having one-hundred-and-two brothers and all. Err, one-hundred-and-one now, I guess.

“Lyubim,” he answers, and it takes me a whole minute to remember who we’re talking about. Ah. The brother he actually likes, the one I’ve decided not to trust because he was too nice. “Tonight is the beginning of a special moon phase on Dome; they should hatch soon.”

I reach up and put my hands on either side of Rurik’s face, sliding my fingers into the white fur that serves as his hair, through it, curving my grip over his horn-like antennae. He lifts the corner of his lip at me, baring teeth.

“Another date, huh?” I tease, completely and utterly charmed by this man.

By my *husband*.

I exhale sharply, and Rurik covers my mouth, stealing my breath, punishing my aching lips with a kiss. I strain toward him, hoping for the blood lace and instead finding myself bewildered when he pulls back.

“If you behave, perhaps we will take a boat ride as well?” he teases, and then he rolls off of me so that he can look up at the domed surface of the ceiling. “There, princess.” Rurik points at one of the silver casings above us, and we both fall silent, waiting.

A crack appears, limned in silver light, and then two black legs emerge. Here I am still thinking by Earth standards and assuming there’ll be six legs or, based on what I’ve seen in the Noctuida thus far, maybe two-thousand or

so, like the queen. Instead, it's just four legs followed by a black abdomen and then a silver thorax in the shape of a teardrop. Shimmery wings unfurl, the source of the silver light. It's not the chrysalis itself that's glowing but the creatures inside.

The clear shell falls away, and I choke on a gasp as the animal shivers and shakes itself out, revealing a tiny person-like head and silver hair.

It's a fairy, is what that is.

Well, it's a fairy with a human-ish head, human-ish arms, but butterfly legs and wings and abdomen. It yawns, flashing sharp teeth, and then it walks upside-down across the roof to the next chrysalis, nibbling on the exterior and helping another of the tiny beasts break free.

Within minutes, the cave is filled with yawning butterfly people.

"Holy shit," I choke out, unable to keep the words back.

The sound startles the tiny things with their long antennae and their compound eyes, and they take flight, zipping back the way we came and exiting the cave, leaving Rurik and me in the dark.

But not for long.

He turns toward me then. I can't see him, but I can feel him. And then his wings pulse with red light, and the design on my back throbs in turn.

"Definitely not moths," I whisper as he smiles, situating his body between my thighs. "Not those things, and not you."

"Ah, I see you have found logic and reason, my star-destined mate." Rurik nips my lower lip with his teeth, brushes my hair from my neck, and bites me.

The red light in the room cuts abruptly, plunging us into a sensory-free space where there is nothing but him and me. I'm shoving at my pants even as my mind and heart and soul are consumed by the blood lace firing through my veins, snaking beneath my skin, uncovering all my secrets.

*Even if you have to live in the throne room, I'll make life good for you. I won't abandon you, Rurik. I couldn't. I wouldn't. I'll travel briefly, but only so I can bring treasures back to you. I'll sit with our child in your lap and tell you stories. I'll fuck you on that throne when we're alone and craving one another so terribly that it becomes an obsession.*

*And in the end, when you can't bear to put such a heavy burden on our child, I'll take a final ride with you into a very hot sun or a blackhole or whatever it takes to end The Korol for good. No more world eating. No more*



*sacrifices for the throne.*

Rurik's cock presses against me, but something about the tip feels unfamiliar. Sticky, hard, unforgiving. *The talons at the end of his claspers.*

He pulls his lips away from my neck, and I can feel the blood lace clinging to him and me both, chaining us together at the mouth.

"I have learned a trick to keep the claspers furred," he breathes, pressing against me as I arch my back. I'm not even sure when or how my leather pants came off, only that I was fumbling with them, and then they were gone. His pants and shirt, too.

We're both naked, and I can't shy away from what I want.

I need him inside of me, now. I don't care how it happens.

"Also from Lyubim?" I tease, but Rurik laughs, the blood lace tangling until he wills it to melt hot down his chin, down my neck, the designs on both our backs flaring so that I can see his bloody vampire face.

"He has no mate; I taught myself while you slept these last few nights."

And then he surges forward, and I gasp, spreading my legs wide to take the extra girth. If there was any doubt on whether or not the thorn at the tip of his cock would hurt, that's dispelled as soon as he enters me. I can feel the gently ridged skin of his claspers inside, the persistent but pleasurable stretch of my cunt around him, and a warm heat at the end of me.

With his claspers unfurled, Rurik is a perfect fit. With them wrapped around his shaft, he taps the edge of what I can take without going overboard. I'm full with him, with the heat of his balls tucked inside of me, with his wings draped on either side of us, with his heart beating against mine. He most definitely has one. Now, whether he got that by imprinting on me or if he had one beforehand, I don't know. I don't care either.

I wrap my arms around his furred neck, my legs around his pale body, and I rub my locked ankles against his coremata. They bloom for me, glowing as brightly as the blood lace on his wings. The small room is saturated with the smell of his pheromones.

Rurik holds me against him while I catch my breath, showering my face with gentle kisses.

"When you are ready, I will move," he tells me, his right hand sliding up the smoothness of my belly to cup my breast. He leans down, unfurling his long tongue and flicking it hard against one taut, pink nipple. My skin ripples with pleasure, and I writhe underneath him, lifting my hips in protest.

“I’m ready, Rurik. Fuck, I am so ready.”

He rolls his body against mine, watching my reaction, the blood on his face absorbing into his pale skin.

My channel tightens around him, a hard contraction that draws us even closer together. Rurik is bottomed-out, the red fur at the base of him teasing and stroking me with each thrust. With his left hand, he props himself up, but with his right, he digs his fingers into my hair and grips *tight*.

A gasp escapes me, and I see where the prince and I might have some fun playing games with one another. We don’t need that here, tonight, with the extra girth and length, with the setting, with the false impression of freedom.

This is what it would be like—could be like—if Rurik was as free as Abraxas.

Our bodies grind and thrust, a primitive mating with sounds that echo strangely in the enclosed space.

I drop my hands from his neck, fingers digging into the dirt on either side of me. My ass is buried in it, and there’s a decent possibility that I’ll be uncomfortable later, but I don’t care.

“You will make such a beautiful and inspiring queen,” he breathes, and it feels as if he’s expanding inside of me, his shaft swelling and stretching. I assume he’s about to come, but that’s not it. It’s his *claspers*, fighting to get free, to escape my cunt so that they can snatch my hips and do what their DNA is programmed to do.

With a curse, Rurik draws his hips back and slips out of me. I can feel the claspers unfurling before he’s fully free, a twisting spiral inside my pussy that knocks me over the edge. My fingers snatch one of the coremata, yanking the tentacle-like appendage between my legs and pushing it against my clit. I’m injected with pheromones on my most sensitive spot. Not only that, but those silky red hairs along the length of each corema (that’s the singular form), they pet and stroke that sensitive nub with every rough twitch of my fingertips.

Rurik’s claspers jerk apart, spattering me with the wetness of our joining. They aggressively gather my pelvis to him, lifting my hips completely off the ground. My back is still resting on the dirt, but my ass is now suspended in midair. His naked shaft is forced right back into my dripping cunt by the claspers’ possessive grip.

I stare up at Rurik, wide-eyed and shaking.

“Your Majesty,” I tease, voice cracking on pretend scandal. “You’re quite the rake, aren’t you?”

“You haven’t the faintest idea, my princess,” he purrs, lifting a hand to my ass, using it to help brace me so that he can rock himself into my throbbing channel. His wet claspers cling to me, refusing to give us any space for in-and-out thrusts. It’s just grinding friction at this point, but it’s not enough.

Rurik drops us down to the floor, crushing me into the sand with his heavy body, trapping my hand between us and rubbing his corema’s soft hairs against my clit. Everything is sticky. The room reeks of flowers and honey and dirt.

“I haven’t?” I whisper back as he looks down at me. The blood lace patterns hidden in the depths of his eyes are so plainly obvious now that I wonder how it is that I can’t always see them. With my only free hand, I reach up to grab hold of one antennae. “I know you like to give a little spank now and again. Don’t act like such a hero.”

His smile is faintly devious, as silken as the brush of his pheromone powder on my slick skin.

“My biology gives me the opportunity to be your perfect mate, but it is my ornery personality that will make you my pet.” He reaches down and grabs his claspers with both hands, prying them off of my hips and then pushing with all his might until the tips dig into the dirt on either side of my body.

We are chest to chest, pelvis to pelvis. Most importantly, we are face-to-face.

“Humans,” I whisper, my lips pressed against his. “Pets, check. Meat—since you drink my blood—check. Mates, check. You’ve done it all, Rurik. Congratulations. Pet, meat, *and* mate.”

His tongue dives into my mouth, blood lace exploding like wildflowers between our lips, on our skin, over the walls of the cave.

We make love under a cocoon of shadows and red lace, our romance guiding the fate of the entire Noctuida.



I drift into a light sleep. I dream. I snuggle into Rurik. I wake up to his soft laughter.

“Stars, mate, you are *exquisite*,” he tells me teasingly, and I laugh, sitting up so that he can help me back into my clothes.

“Likewise?” I retort, but it shouldn’t be a joke. I’m serious. “Likewise,” I repeat, cringing a bit as I lean back against the stone wall. I’m a bit sore between my thighs, reaching down a hand to give my plump pussy a squeeze.

“Are you hurt?” Rurik asks, lovingly enough that I know it’s a serious inquiry. It’s dark in here, the designs on his back glowing only faintly enough for me to catch the shine of his eyes in the blackness. “If so, there is a special chair I can procure for you. It will help ease the ache of a hard fuck.”

Okay, now he’s messing with me, right?

“Don’t even offer up your dumb-dumb alien shit to me right now,” I grumble as he moves around under a cloak of shadows. I feel him slip my panties over my feet, and I take over by wiggling into them. There’s something building in my chest that needs to be said, that I’ve waited too long to say. “Rurik, thank you,” I tell him as he eases one of my shaky legs into the leather of my pants. He pauses but doesn’t speak, caressing my foot and playing with my toes. He has none, so I get it. They’re a weird alien feature of mine that he’s into. Rurik might also be an official card-carrying A.S.S. “For everything. For forgiving me for what happened with Officer Hyt. For letting me see Abraxas. For proving that our insta-love mate bond is *nothing* compared to the actions you’re willing to take on my behalf.”

He looks up at me, the marks on his wings flare bright, and our gazes catch fire.

He doesn’t respond, helping me get my pants on properly and then leading me out of the cave and into the beautiful starlit night. Rurik squeezes my hand as we meander lazily through the trees together, and I can feel his response through our shared emotions, our tangled thoughts.

*Thank you for being mine, princess. Thank you for letting me be yours.*

We walk in silence back to the cobblestone streets, and couples wave at us as we pass, bow to us, call out greetings from across the canal. It’s nice. It’s normal in a way I wasn’t sure I’d ever feel again. Not the bloodred water or the alien company or the floating boats, but the feeling of belonging.

Wherever Rurik is, I belong.

He helps me into one of the boats, and I spend the rest of the night tucked

up under his wing and against his side. I don't know how we're going to make this work, but I can't give up on him or the life I want us to have together.

Somehow, somehow, I swear to myself that my pluckiness *will* save the day.

Then again, maybe I'm just as big a liar as Officer Hyt.



My eyes crack open to find ... well, Rurik's crack.

He's naked and standing by the window, looking out. I don't even remember walking back here last night; he must've carried me. The two-headed cat lays at the end of the bed. One head is asleep while the other watches me with unnerving interest.

"We're sure these cats are just cats, right?" I ask, trying not to take the creature's green-eyed glare too seriously. "I mean, the Dehvas, they're just animals, right? They don't actually follow what's going on with the Vestalis or anything?"

"Not that I am aware," Rurik says with a frown, turning unashamedly toward me. His pearly white skin catches the edge of a golden glow from beyond the sheer curtains, and I notice with a surge of heat that his penis is hooked under that thigh strap, obscene against the paleness of his leg. He notices me looking and gifts me with the barest specter of a smile. "How are you feeling this morning?" he inquires, but I don't want to tell him.

Because it's bad.

It's really fucking bad.

The vitamin packet he gave me yesterday did *something* for me, but it didn't fix everything. I'm dizzy and nauseous, and I have a pounding headache. I do my best to skirt the question.

"So, uh, what's today all about? Do I have to wear another cum-stained

dress or ...?” I lean back in the pillows, as if I’m just relaxing. Rurik frowns at me because he already knows me better than I know myself.

“Eve, you must—” he starts, but I wave him off.

“Look, we both know that I’m not doing well. So what? All we can do is wait for Officer Hyt to show up.” I ignore the sweat droplets beading on my forehead. Ugh. Am I even going to make it until tomorrow? If there’s a delay of any kind, I’m screwed.

We are screwed.

Because this illness, this threatens more than just my life.

If I die, Rurik dies. If I die, Abraxas might die. If it’s the venom thing, maybe he won’t, but somehow, when he says he would die of a broken heart without me, I believe him.

“You are certain he will show up?” Rurik asks, moving over to stand beside the bed.

Two-Face (that’s what I’m calling the cat) seems to think sex might be on the horizon. The creature curls both sets of lips at us, hisses with two mouths, and then takes off for the kitty door.

“I’m sure,” I reply, and somehow I know that Hyt will do whatever it takes to bring Abraxas here. Not sure why I implicitly trust a man who’s clearly a liar, but ... I do. “He ... well, he was going to rescue me from you, but you know about that already.”

We might’ve talked this over, but that doesn’t make it any less embarrassing. Even though I knew as soon as I made the plan to run from Rurik—to starve him out—that I couldn’t go through with it. Pretending even for a few seconds that I might was not acceptable. I feel like I betrayed my mate somehow.

He reaches out to take my chin in his bare hand, stroking a single fingertip over my lips.

“Yes, I know.” Rurik smiles grimly before dropping his hand to his side. When his claspers stage a coup and try to unwind from his cock, they get caught in his thigh strap and he reaches down to push them back into place. *Oh my.* “And I would’ve agreed to it. I would agree to it still. If you wish to run from me, I will not stop you.”

“Of course I don’t want to run anymore,” I snap back at him, trying to keep my eyes on his. The A.S.S. part of me wants to stare at his junk, but I’m not sure I have the energy to fuck right now. There’s a will, but I’m not sure

there's a way. I rub at my forehead as Rurik frowns again, reaching out to push my hand away so that he can feel my temperature.

"I will get you some of the frigid moss," he tells me, and I just assume he's talking about the same stuff we had on *The Korol*, the stuff the servants brought for us when we were in that room shaped like a glass bell jar. The prince moves away from the bed as I recline even further into the pillows, closing my eyes against another wave of lightheadedness.

*Rurik is not a parasite. Never was. His love is truly selfless; he actually cares about me.*

If he didn't, he wouldn't be harboring all these stupid secret plans to hurt himself.

"Here." A cool balm is applied to my sweaty forehead, and I crack my lids to realize that I was out there for a minute. Rurik is mopping my skin with the moss, sitting nude on the edge of the bed beside me. "When it is time for you to visit the chapel, I will have to stay here."

"Wait, what?" I ask, trying and failing to sit up. Mostly, I just flail around a bit and then slump back into the bed. "Why can't you go with me?"

I know that once I'm with Abraxas, we'll need alone time, but I can't imagine heading over there to see him without Rurik by my side.

"I would not be the first prince to take his mate and flee," he says, gently dabbing the moss over my temples, my cheeks, my jaw. My mouth. His touch lingers there, and my eyelids flutter closed. "Not trying to run is the exception, not the rule." Rurik drags the moss over my clavicle, plunges its cooling touch between my breasts, down my belly toward my navel, and then — He stops. He lifts the moss back to my shoulders and uses its icy softness to swab the sweat from my upper chest. "I have an idea to escape my parents' all-seeing eyes."

I'd laugh, but ... that's not a joke.

"Didn't we escape them last night?" I tease, but Rurik gives me a look.

"They allowed us to have a dalliance together, but make no mistake: we were being watched. Not inside the cave, but everything before and after." He sets the moss aside and takes my face between his hands. His fingers are unbearably cool from having held it for so long. That, or my skin is just really, really hot today. Maybe both. "Mates cannot stand to be separated," he whispers, voice catching. "I will exit the royal suite, and make nice with the Duke of Dome. My parents will see me and know you are nearby. Zero will



escort you to the chapel. When”—and here he has to pause to close his eyes, to catch his breath—“you are finished mating Abraxas, you will return here, and we will await further instruction from my parents.”

Fuck.

Why does this have to be so heavy?

I’m bound to two hot-as-fuck aliens for life and yet, here I am, wondering if it’s even going to be a life worth living. *Stupid meaty spaceship. Stupid galactic millipede. Stupid oversized moth king.*

“We could be on the throne as soon as the day after tomorrow, huh?” I ask, even though I don’t need to pose the question. We both know the answer to that is yes.

“Hopefully,” Rurik says, and it’s a sad state of affairs that he’d actually wish for such a thing. “If so, then I will be able to avoid refueling for the time being. We will remain here on Dome, and you will be free to stay in these very rooms with Abraxas. I will continue negotiations with the Atrata, and if we agree to one another’s demands, we will have found ourselves an alternative meal for *The Korol*.”

“The Atrata?” I ask, just before our doorbell rings.

Rurik and I exchange a look of shared annoyance.

“Chuck her in one of the bloody canals and watch her drown?” I tease, throwing the blankets back and climbing out of bed before Rurik can stop me. I toss a robe over my shoulders and hit the panel beside the door to open it. As I do, I bump a button on the screen and the wallpaper changes color from a burgundy floral pattern to silver and black diamonds.

Um.

The door swishes open and Avril notices that I’m just standing there, gaping.

“You okay, boss?” she asks me, peering around the edge of the doorjamb to see what it is that I’m staring at. I touch the button a few more times, and all the walls in the room change. Blue and silver. Black and green. Wallpaper. Solid color. Wood paneling that looks unbelievably realistic. “Oh. You’re just now realizing the walls are dynamic? It’s all digital; you can change them daily if you want.”

“I see that,” I murmur, shaking my head as Rurik strides forward, also dressed in one of the oversized robes. “What are our plans for today?” I ask them both, still sweating, still shaky on my feet, refusing to fully admit to

myself how sickly I truly am. I play with the wallpaper until I find something I like—a pale butter yellow with white, red, and black flowers—and then exit the bedroom to find Connor and Brot waiting with Zero.

“It’s the Day of Resting,” Rurik offers before Avril has the chance. “It is intended that we should rest and relax in preparation for tomorrow.” He doesn’t sound excited about any of that. He’s worried. Terrified.

“Sounds great,” I offer back cheerfully, moving over to the table to see that we’re not having macarons today, but *doughnuts*. Doughnuts that float above the tray they’re situated on. Unconventional, but eh. I pick one up, take a bite, and sigh at the slightly crispy exterior and fluffy cloud interior. The purple frosting tastes like my sixteenth birthday party, but I don’t really know how to explain it other than that. It just does. I take another bite, examining Connor and Brot as they sit snuggled up in their chairs. “I could use a day off.”

“Hey Eve,” Connor says, gazing into Brot’s eyes. He’s barely able to pull himself away. “When you look at Rurik, do you get swept away? I mean, does his gaze just obliterate your brain?”

“Um, yeah,” I reply, trying to act as if I don’t have double vision or sweat-slicked skin or the sudden urge to throw up the bite of doughnut I’ve just taken. “That’s sort of standard fated mates type shit, right?” I set my food aside on a plate, and it still floats. Explain that shit to me. How does that even work? I reach out to grab the edge of the plate, just to peek underneath and see if there’s like a magnet or something, but I can’t seem to hold onto it.

The dish falls and Rurik catches it in midair, pausing beside me with a severe frown.

“Princess,” he warns as I slump into one of the chairs with a groan, elbows on the table, fingers buried in my hair as I try to control the uneasiness in me. Since the day I got abducted, I’ve tried to stay positive. I have. May not have seemed like it at times, but I swear that was me putting my best foot forward. But this? I could die before Abraxas gets here. I could die tonight in my sleep tonight. I could die now.

“Are you okay?” Connor asks, alarm spiking his voice. “Avril, she looks *terrible*.”

“Like death warmed over,” the other medic agrees, and the next thing I know, I’m laid out on the bed and both of them are there, touching me, drawing blood, talking to someone else in the room that I don’t recognize at

first.

“Shh, my love,” Rurik whispers, reclining beside me in his robe and looking regal and handsome and perfectly insouciant as he brushes hair away from my sweaty face. “I have asked Vrach to take a look at you.”

Ah. Right. The Vestalis doctor dude.

“Wasn’t I just at the breakfast table?” I ask, trying and failing to sit up.

“That was over an hour ago,” Connor says, glancing over his shoulder at me. He has that same look he wore in the tent that first day, like he doesn’t think I’m going to make it. He turns around, Avril at his side, Vrach studying the Cartian medical wand behind them both.

Two-Face sits on the window seat, glaring at me while Zero strokes the cat’s fuzzy pink fur.

“Shall I return to the chapel again, Your Majesty?” she asks, rising to her feet.

“With all due discretion,” Rurik replies without much thought, as if he’s given this order numerous times today. I assume they’re checking to see if Hyt has arrived. He said he’d be here by the last day of the wedding, but that he’d try to come earlier if possible. Doesn’t seem like that’s going to happen. I can only hope for an on-time arrival.

“Any news about the handsome, young officer?” I tease, and I’m terrified to hear how weak my voice sounds, how strange and wet my gasping breaths are.

“His ship has landed, according to Dome’s flight manifest,” Rurik tells me, face set in as neutral an expression as possible. He doesn’t want me to know how afraid he is. “I assume he is making his way here, but we cannot rely on his timely arrival. We must make other plans.”

“Other plans?” I whisper as Avril comes over to sit beside me, and Zero excuses herself from the room.

“We need alternative treatments,” Avril begins, looking past me to Rurik. He nods, as if willing her to continue. Her sapphire eyes find mine, and there’s nothing but truth in that strong gaze. “We could try to surgically remove the markings,” she begins, but before I can protest, she continues. “That won’t mitigate the venom in your blood, but maybe if we do that, we can treat the symptoms until your body burns through it.”

“*If* her body burns through it,” Vrach says, putting the Cartian wand in his lap. He looks more upset by the situation than I imagine he should. “I am

sorry, Imperial Princess, that I misdiagnosed you during your first examination. If we had surgically removed the marks then—”

“Remove them?” I croak, horrified by the very idea. “I’m not removing them. Hyt *will* come through for me. *Abraxas* will come through for me. What are you even talking about?”

“Our surgical techniques are quite advanced. You would not suffer from any loss of function,” Vrach promises as Rurik strokes his fingers down my back, expression contemplative.

I’m reeling here. Remove my mate marks? No fucking way. I *would* suffer loss of function. I wouldn’t be able to connect with *Abraxas* and share fluids anymore. If our theories are correct, I also wouldn’t benefit from antibodies during mating, and then I might not be able to fuck him *at all*.

“I’m not doing it,” I snarl, wasting the last of my strength on such a vehement action. I roll toward Rurik and bury myself against his side. “Please don’t. Just ... wait until tomorrow. Give them until the last possible second to get here before we do anything that drastic.”

If it’s the only way for me to live, and in turn keep Rurik alive, I ... I’ll do it.

But I don’t want to.

Rurik draws away from me, putting his fingers on my chin to lift my gaze to his. I have never seen him look more kingly or in control of a situation. His dark eyes hold an ironclad resolve.

“There is a risk that you are too weak to survive the surgery. I will not attempt it unless we have run out of options.” He snaps his fingers and Avril scrambles to retrieve several small bottles from a nearby tray. She passes the first one to Rurik, and he collects it with two fingers clenched around the neck. “Open up, my princess. You will take all of the medicine, all of the supplements, given to you. And you will *not* attempt to rise from this bed again, do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” I whisper, relief flowing through me at his words. He’s just given me permission to relax. So I do. The urge to get up, to pace, to put on a show for everyone else, that fades away. I take the medicine as he feeds it to me, helping me drink down a hot cup of tea to top it all off. I’m given a dozen injections by Connor and Vrach, and another half-dozen pills from Avril.

It helps. But only a little. Like the vitamins from yesterday, I can tell this is

the equivalent of that bandage on my bleeding femoral artery way back when. And like last time, it's up to Abraxas to make it all better.



Midway through the night, I'm woken by Rurik.

"Princess, he is here," he hisses, climbing out of bed and scooping me from the mattress before I've even fully registered what it is that he's just said. "You must go to the chapel *now*."

"Now?" I slur the word and Rurik pauses to look down at me, the light from a table lamp casting his strange face in shadow. I force my tongue to remain steady. "Thank the Stars. Yes, now."

My husband carries me into the sitting room, waking the others in the adjoining bedrooms.

"Oh, shit," Connor says, stumbling out of bed and simultaneously yanking a pair of pants on. Brot is right behind him, somehow fully dressed. Does the guy just sleep in his clothes? I can see him being that level of uptight. "We should hurry."

"Yes, please do," Rurik growls out, leaning down to press his forehead to mine. He sweeps his antennae over me, bathing me in pheromones that help soothe my racing heart. *I'm actively dying right now, aren't I?* "I would send you off with a long goodbye, the sweet touch of flesh-on-flesh, but I fear we are out of time and I must settle for the truth and a kiss." He presses his lips to mine, gently, as if we may be saying goodbye to one another for the last time. "You are my mate, the one I have waited an entire lifetime for. If the time we had was all the time we get, then I will cherish it through to the next life. Without you, there is nothing for me, blood be damned."

I kiss him back, hands trembling as I lift them up to brush my fingers against either side of his face.

"Rurik, I love you," I tell him simply, absorbing his expression, allowing myself to fall into the blood lace and black of his eyes. "I'm always on your side, okay? Always."

"Always," he returns, studying me as Avril opens the servants' door and

my cyborg bodyguard steps into the room.

“We have precious few moments to move unseen,” Zero tells the prince, offering a gentle incline of her head.

Slowly, and with great pain in his face, Rurik hands me over to the Cartian girl.

“If anything happens to my mate,” he says softly, but they all know.

Their lives depend on my life.

“We must provide a distraction,” Brot growls, but Connor gives him a look that steals the fire right out from underneath him. He sighs and turns to his brother. “Allow me to request a meeting with the duke; it will draw the attention of the king and queen.”

Rurik nods, reaching up to yank on one of his antennae in frustration.

I don’t know if there’s a specific time that I need to be back by, but I’m sure sooner rather than later would be ideal. Explaining my absence to his parents would not go well for Rurik.

“Take her,” he growls, waving a hand at us. “And hurry.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” All three—Avril, Zero, and Connor—say it together, and then I’m watching as my mate slips out the door with his brother following closely behind him.

“God, my chest hurts,” Connor mumbles, but although I know what he’s going through, I can’t seem to find the strength to respond.

With each step we take out the side door, down the servants’ staircase, and into the woods, I’m finding it harder and harder to breathe.

How long until that moment comes where it’s not just difficult, it’s impossible?

“Mine, too,” I gasp, tasting the first hint of blood and venom on my lips. Uh-oh. The next breath I take is wet and wheezy, and I realize with a start that we have, quite literally, pushed this moment as far as it will go.

It’s now or, as Abraxas might say, I go to the dirt and I take everyone I love down with me.



The Cosmic Chapel looms in the distance, but I'm having trouble concentrating on it. My heart is beating so fast that I can barely hear my own thoughts over the sound of it. My fingers clutch at the front of Zero's dress, already missing Rurik. Wishing Rurik were here. Fighting the urge to scream for Rurik.

*You'll see him again soon enough. This is just a brief visit. Just a few hours of stolen night.*

I know that as soon as I see Abraxas, the tides will change, and it'll be him that I'm crying about leaving again. I guess this is what it's like to be in love with two people. It's not easy. Not at all.

"Wait here." Avril takes Connor up the steps to see if there's anybody around, hiding behind columns or bushes. If anyone gets video footage of this and somehow shows it to the king and queen, we could end up like Ranet and his mate. "Come on up," she calls down to us, and Zero wastes no time in clearing the steps.

The stairs and the floor inside are made of a beautiful white stone with threads of true silver and gold. The interior is filled with small benches for kneeling, and the walls are painted a royal blue. Above us, there is no ceiling that I can see. I only see space and stars.

I drag my gaze away from that.

I'm far too dizzy to be contemplating something as crazy as this.

Officer Hyt stands at the front of the room in his cowboy hat, studying the glowing ball of light on the altar. Avril and Connor take up outside the door to watch for worshippers while Zero walks us in to stand on Hyt's left.

"Beautiful, isn't it ..." Hyt trails off as he glances over at me, and his quirky expression falls. "... Princess." He finishes with a slight curl of his lip, like he's seen something terrifying and doesn't know what to do with it. Me. I'm that terrifying thing. "Oh, Dead Kings. This is bad, isn't it?" He takes me from Zero, and holds me against his chest. I'm not sure why, but he does.

"I can probably stand," I say, but my words are a slur all of a sudden. Doesn't matter. I push at Hyt's shoulder, and he begrudgingly sets me down. I crumple almost immediately, and he picks me back up. His face is cold and grave, like it was when I told him that he was a bad cop. "Guess not. Shall we go?"

I have no idea what the plan is here. Is Abraxas on Hyt's ship waiting for

me again? Is Hyt going to take me somewhere else to meet up with him? Is Jane here, too, or just Abraxas? I need to see him first, but then ... Jane. I've missed her so much.

My head lolls and Hyt grabs my chin in gentle fingers to stabilize it.

"Oh, little human woman," he whispers, looking down at my limp body in his arms. "What are we going to do?" He sounds genuinely upset, almost as if I'm already dead. He's looking at me the same way, too. The truth is written starkly in his eyes. Hyt hefts me more tightly against his chest, his tentacles sliding over my legs, my arms, digging through my hair. He seems to do it absently, like it's a subconscious thing.

His gaze is on Zero.

"Make sure nobody comes in here," he tells her, and she nods, taking off down the aisle as Hyt turns back to the glowing light thing on the altar. Whatever it is, it looks like a small star trapped in a glass box. "Do you know that they worship this thing?" he asks me in a low whisper. His expression says he isn't impressed by the Vestalis. "They worship this. It's the smallest star in the known universe. Don't know why they worship it. They know what a star is. But ..." He trails off as the door slams shut and we're alone in the twilight-shrouded star chapel.

"You're stalling for time," I slur, and Hyt looks down at me with that cold frown on his face again. He didn't want Zero—and through her, Rurik—to know how bad our situation is. "Tell me. I'm half-dead already, Hyt."

"We have a small problem, Eve. Our ... cargo didn't show up where it was supposed to." Hyt looks pleadingly at me to understand. I do. I study his triple irises, like sapphires in a pretty face. My head lolls again, and he sticks the sucker at the end of one tentacle against my forehead, giving it a pop. "Wake up, Earthling."

I open my mouth to respond to him, but nothing comes out. I close my eyes for a few seconds while I get myself together. When I open them again, I see that Hyt's head has fallen back, and his eyes are closed, too.

"I only get one of these," he groans, his voice a pained sound. "Just one."

I cough and spatter Hyt's neck with blood. He drops his chin down, and we're both caught staring at the dark red liquid dripping down his chest.

"If ... if I die, they die," I whisper, tasting copper on my mouth. I grab Hyt's face. I think about the medical transfer tube that Connor was found in, the Cartian-made one. Or even ... if I have to ... the device that held Zero's



brain all this time, until she could get a new body. I could be transplanted into a cyborg like Zero, couldn't I? "Don't ...". More red spills past my lips, and I think about Abraxas at the very end there, when he was dying by venom like I am now. I saved him that night only to kill us today. "Officer Hyt."

That's all that comes out.

My head drops back, and my eyes close. I can feel Hyt touch a sucker to my forehead, popping it again. He touches my cheeks, shakes me gently, tries to get me up by whispering words into my ear.

"Little human ..." he says softly, and I realize that there's nothing he can do right this very second. And right this very second is all that I have. My heart thuds painfully in my ribs, and I can tell it's going to be one of the last times it'll ever beat. I can *feel* it. "I'm gonna regret this. Mark my words."

Hyt adjusts me in his arms, and my eyes flash open in time to see him leaning down toward me.

He pauses and his purple tongue curls out to reveal ... a pearl. It sits on the tip of his tongue before he rolls it back and clacks his teeth around it. One of his tentacles slips his cowboy hat from his head and brings it around to block our kiss from view. Even if someone walks in, they won't see us.

In the twilit romanticism of the chapel, Officer Hyt kisses me and makes me his bride.



*Rurik*

The twilight of early morning has cracked the night sky with gold and violet clouds.

Still, the princess has not returned.

Although Brot's mate, Connor, has. Him, and Avril, and Zero.

"I do not understand," I murmur, trying to control the urges making my fingers twitch. I have never had a taste for violence, but this moment is making me question everything. I want nothing more than to find someone to punish, but a man who is about to take the throne should not allow for tyrannical urges. "Explain this to me again."

"We cannot locate the princess," Zero says, voice smooth and even. In the few brief moments that I could not attend to her complete control, she made a mistake worthy of death. I should rightfully tear her cerebral system from her skull and throw it into one of the canals. "I was outside for mere solar minutes before I returned to check on them. She is presumably safe with Officer Hyt, but it is impossible to say for certain."

I exhale and my breath frosts the glass in front of me.

I swipe the fog aside as I turn, framed in the window with a velvety dawn behind my back, my robe sagging down my shoulders on either side. There must be something in my expression that warns of the impending loss of my

Careful temper because even Brot is on his knee now, head down in careful deference.

*You told Eve that she could run,* I whisper to myself, but I dismiss the idea immediately. She would have told me if she were going to leave. That is the person my mate is. She is honest and kind, even if she attempts to hide those traits by acting like a brat.

I bite down on the right side of my lower lip, piercing the skin and licking the blood from the wound to calm myself. I spread my wings slightly, the scent of my pheromones shifted away from the sweetness I make for Eve. This time, when I waft my wings, the room is covered in dust that makes the others cough, their hair powdered, their nostrils flaring with the copper tang of the scent.

“If the princess needed to leave with Officer Hyt, I would’ve liked to know *why*,” I snap, stalking across the room to stand directly in front of the others. “If she is dead, I will make sure to torture you before my parents slaughter us all.”

I sweep past them and in the direction of the bathroom.

Regardless of Eve’s presence, today is the final day of the wedding.

It is the Day of Claiming.

The bathroom door locks behind me with a snap of my fingers, and I pause in front of the washbasin, hands on the counter, feelers slicked back on either side of my head. I press them tightly against my skull for comfort, eyes closed, claspers twitching beneath my robe.

When I first found Eve, I expected I was getting myself into a situation where our bond would never feel real, where she would continue to reject me, and so it was pointless to allow myself to truly consider her as a bride. If she did not want me, I could not celebrate that.

But then she changed her mind.

For six days, we have carried out the wedding traditions with love and compassion.

Now, I am alone.

I tap my long nails against the counter, the clacking sound echoing off the walls.

There’s a knock at the door that I wish to ignore, but that I cannot resist.

“What is it?” I snap, putting my arms up on either side of the jamb. The robe has fallen all the way down to my waist now, and is threatening to drop

away entirely. I reach down with a hand to snatch the fabric, refusing to show my cock to anyone but my wife. It is no small thing for others to see.

Brot is waiting, arms crossed over his chest, eyes averted. The others have left, but the room still stings with the pheromones I threw into their faces. I am angry, yes, but that display of dominance has served a purpose. When my parents inevitably call us to the throne room, they will not be able to smell even a hint of Falopex.

If they do, it will mean a long and horrid end to our lives. They will be so furious, they will not dispatch us quickly the way they did Ranet and his mate. Planets will be destroyed. Not just the one needed to refuel but many of them.

“You allowed your anger to rule you, like father does,” Brot tells me, and I cringe, putting my forehead up against my arm. He is right, and I am sick for it. *Eve, you are alive. That much I know. I would feel your death from the opposite end of the Noctuida. But where are you? Why did you flee?* I lift my head up to view Brot again. “And you did not allow your servants to finish their story: there was no sign of the Aspis near the chapel. Eve was coughing up blood, and they were all quite convinced she would die. If she left with the Falopex to recover herself elsewhere, then we must find them quickly. They will not be able to contact us nor return here on their own.”

He’s right.

But I cannot go yet. If I attend the Day of Claiming on my own—the day I begin to take over parts of *The Korol* in preparation for my ascension—then my parents will not know that Eve is missing until perhaps tomorrow. That will buy us time to form a plan, and to do our research.

“You will help me prepare for the Day of Claiming, and you will attend alongside me to prove to mother and father that humans are indeed the oddest of mates. Do you understand?”

Brot cringes at the idea of being separated from his mate, but he nods. He will make that sacrifice for me. Other than Lyubim, he may truly be my most favorite of all my brothers.

“Yes, My Imperial Princess,” he says, and I know that he will make a reliable and trustworthy advisor to the crown.

He helps me into my clothing for the ceremony, and then escorts me to the ship in Eve’s place.



The throne creaks as my father leans down to peer at me. He is frowning in such a way that my synchronicity contacts falter and reveal the aggressive spread of his mandibles. I can see all of his teeth, the skin on his cheeks pulled back to reveal his gums, the stretch of his tongue, the depths of his terrifying throat.

I am glad that Eve is not here for the briefest moment.

“These humans are able to resist the mate bond? I do not know if I believe that.” He sits back in his chair and turns to Mother. She has not liked my mate from the very first moment. I do not know why. Perhaps because she knows how free-spirited Eve is, and there is nothing the queen appreciates more than perfect obedience. Having her successor mouth off to her would not endear her to Eve in any way.

“I do not understand. They are hibernating?” Mother struggles to make sense of the reasons Brot and I have given them. We have simply made something up. My parents know nothing about humans and their habits, and there is little research in our ship’s computer about them. They will not be able to parse the truth from the lies. “You have brought your brother to your wedding instead of your own female? Perhaps we should have killed you and your mate instead of Ranet and his.”

The queen slithers across the floor, coiling around me tightly enough that I question whether or not I will escape her clutches today. If I have to, I will fight for my life, but I cannot risk trying before I have control of some portion of *The Korol*. I remain placid and still, waiting for her to release me.

She does, and I collapse to my knee, struggling to regain the oxygen in my blood. Brot moves closer to me but does not dare touch me. He is too involved now. If I die, he will follow me to the Stars. He does not wish to lose his mate anymore than I do.

“Remember this, Rurik. You are important only until you are not. If another one of your brothers arrives with his mate, you will be removed from the throne.”

I force myself to my feet and sweep a bow for the queen.

*But you also do not wish to kill me, for you fear that you will never escape the hell that is the throne.*

With great effort, I recall my fondest childhood memory and pray to the Stars that the smile on my face looks genuine enough to please them both.

“Shall we commence with the ceremony?” I ask, walking over to the wall. Without waiting for a response, I prove my commitment, prove that I am not planning to run from them. I bite my tongue with my teeth, fill my mouth with blood, and then press my palms to the wall. My tongue smears bloody red lace across the surface, but I push deeper, straight into the heart of *The Korol*.

This ship was created by an ancestor of mine, this strange and unnatural mix of metal and marrow, of organic matter and artificial intelligence. For my father is only *partially* in control of his actions. The ship dictates others on its own.

*Do you wish to have me sit your throne?* I ask through the lace, in the same way that I communicate with my mate. It makes me sick to speak to another this way, but it is the only method with which to take control.

*Hello, Rurik,* a warm voice replies, *I have been watching you, and I am thrilled for you to become the next king.*

The ship latches onto the blood lace in my tongue and drags as much out of me as it can unwind, leaving me to slump on the floor with crimson running down my chin. I look up to see that the ceiling of the throne room is free of muscular twists of sinew and flesh. Instead, an elegant lace canopy hangs.

“Good boy, Rurik,” my father says with a groan, snapping the strands of blood lace that have bound his body to the throne for decades. Just a few strands, not enough for him to leave the room for the first time in sixty Earth years, but enough for him to stand up. He stretches his arms above his head with a moan of pleasure and a hunger in his eyes that he directs to me. “Bring your bride tomorrow, and continue with the ascension. Your mother and I have ruled for long enough.”

I am as thrilled by his offer as I am terrified by it.

For I must take the throne, but I need to find Eve first.

One day is not enough time to do that.

“Yes, Your Imperial Highnesses,” I murmur as Brot assists me in finding my feet. I sweep a bow before exiting the room with quick strides that carry

me the length of the ship, to the platforms, back to the castle.

I do not allow myself to collapse until we are safely ensconced in my rooms.

“We will work on our story *now* and pray we survive the day tomorrow,” I say as Connor and Brot embrace beside me, and I can do nothing but watch as the relief of finding one another again fills their faces.

I am jealous.

I am close to another fit of rage.

“We will say she has been abducted,” I tell Avril and Zero as the latter assists me to stand. “You will tell them it was when you took her to pray at the chapel during my meeting with the duke. I did not know you were going to do so or I would’ve put a stop to such a foolish practice.”

“You’re going to throw us under the bus?” Avril chokes out, sitting down hard on one of the chairs. “Your Majesty, please. They’ll execute us on the spot.”

“I will not allow that,” I tell them, shaking off Zero’s assistance as I look to Connor and Brot next. “If I am to have credibility, I *cannot* be culpable. Is that understood?” It takes a moment, but one by one, they agree. If my parents discover that I sent Eve to the chapel, and why I sent her there in the first place, we lose.

I am weak from using so much of the lace without a mate to feed on, overwhelmed with the many factors at play. And still, I cannot stop. I have to look for Eve.

“Were you able to contact Officer Hyt?” I ask, but Zero shakes her head. I don’t particularly want to contact him, as my parents will know immediately and start to suspect things, but there are few good routes to follow for us to find her. “Captain Kidd?”

“I am sorry, my Imperial Prince.” Zero sweeps another bow, white hair pooling on the floor beside her bare feet. “We were not able to contact either of them, but we have received reports that Captain Kidd has been spotted making a star-jump. It seems *The Korol* has taken note of his position and begun tracking him.”

That is not good. Not at all. I frown and shake my head, moving up to the table to stare down at the rainbow spread of cookies left here for a princess who has fled the planet. I push the plate aside and pour myself a glass of water. Vestalis need it like any other species. We are not so different as it

first appears.

Perhaps Kidd's position is important. Perhaps he has already given the Aspis male over to Officer Hyt. I do not know, but I will keep watch.

"Find me information on Officer Hyt's family," I tell them, already planning my next move. If I cannot find their son, I will ask his parents. His family. His friends. I *will* find him, and if anything has happened to Eve, I will kill him regardless of his relationship with the Chief of Police.

"Yes, Imperial Prince," the others spout off as I take a seat and make myself comfortable.

None of us will sleep tonight.



"Where is the Imperial Princess?" My father tears a strip of his own blood lace from the walls, swinging it in the direction of Eve's lady-in-waiting. Avril curls into a ball around her knee, awaiting the end. Her head would've been served clean from her shoulders had I not stepped in.

My own blood lace has uncurled from the ceiling, stopping the king in place.

The look he turns on me is frantic, desperate, *enraged*. He does not want to stay in this place a moment longer. He wants me to take control of the ship, and then he and my mother will run as far away from here as they can get.

"You would go to war with your own parents over a slave?" my mother chitters, her pearlescent body curled across the back of the throne, thousands of sharp-tipped legs digging into her mate's seat. My father no longer sits there, his atrophied legs encased in blood lace to keep him standing. But he cannot move from his current location. Standing is his only luxury.

"The princess is very protective of her servants," I breathe, dropping the shield I have created for Avril.

When my father moves to strike again, I step forward, resisting his second attempt to take a life. He goes for Zero this time, and so it continues. He swings and I deflect, until I am dripping sweat and banished to a single knee on the floor.



“Yes, it is difficult to keep up when one’s mate is not around,” my father says with a sigh, finally sitting back down on his prison’s throne. “You are tired, aren’t you, Rurik?”

My mother slithers forward, examining me before turning to look at Brot.

“There are few who could land on this planet let alone leave without our detecting it.” The queen turns and lunges at Avril, expecting, I believe, to take the girl’s head between her mandibles. I throw an arm up between them, gritting my teeth against the pain as my bone cracks between my mother’s strong jaws.

My mind goes blank under the force of the agony, but Vrach is a talented medic. He will heal me, and I will be no worse for wear but for the memory.

“Explain,” the queen adds, and then she spins and attempts to snatch Connor in her coils. Since Brot and Connor are not a breeding pair, my parents might be willing to slaughter them in order to teach me a lesson. I don’t allow that, leaping inside the rings of her tight coils and forcing her to either crush me alongside Connor or relinquish us both. She flips around, retreating toward the throne while she waits to hear what I might say next.

I stand there panting, dripping blood, fragments of bone protruding from my ruined arm. Behind me, the wall of monitors flickers with static, casting my parents in the gray shadows of unstable technology.

“We believe the Collector was involved,” I whisper, undisturbed at having implicated a Vestalis male who is innocent in this crime. He is guilty of so many others, and I planned to punish him once I took the throne anyway. But if today is his day, then so be it.

“The Collector?” The queen is perplexed, but not disbelieving. She clacks her mandibles together in a reminder of my pain, and I take a step back. Her attention turns to Zero, but when she attempts to snatch the android’s head from her shoulders, I take control and deflect her. With me controlling the Cartian girl’s actions, she cannot be blamed for them.

I don’t fight back, crouching into a ball and allowing my mother to damage the model’s exterior instead of her head. We can make repairs to the body, but we cannot save the organic tissue that houses the spirit of Raina, one of the only Cartian females in the entire Noctuida.

My mother relents a final time, stretching across the back of my father’s chair as I release Zero from my control and struggle against my own weakness. Without my mate, I cannot draw blood. My resources and energy

are not infinite, and already, I am running low.

“We will bring him here,” mother says, but father is already shaking his head. My mother has a tendency to be selfish while my father is always at the mercy of *The Korol* and the best course of action for our species as a whole.

“We cannot allow anyone to know of the princess’ disappearance or the entire universe will be on the hunt. Have the Falopex arrest the Collector and extradite him to Yaoh.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I sweep a deep bow. I was hoping this is the direction today’s meeting would take.

“Find her Rurik. We will give you a short window in which to work, and then your mother and I will resume the search ourselves.” He leans down toward me and puts his massive mouth up next to my ear. I drop my feelers down and to the sides in feigned deference. “If we are the ones to find her, you will not enjoy watching what we will do to her.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I agree, anger and resentment hot and heavy inside my chest.

“Leave,” my father snaps at me, and then with his own mandibles, the ones I can no longer see because of my contacts, he bites one of my antennae off at the skull, soaking my hair with blood.

By the end of the day, the feeler has regrown, my arm has been repaired in the med bay, and I am this much closer to finding Eve.

I prepare a transport, and then I head for the Stars.



### *Eve ... Miraculously Survives*

I've been abducted by aliens more times than I can count. Of all my abductions, this one begins the most pleasantly of them all.

I'm flat on my back in a large, comfortable bed. Across the room, there's a window looking out over a grassy field with a forest behind it and a beach in front. A deck separates the house from the field, and I realize as I blink my way back to reality, that I can hear the sloshing of waves.

*Where was I? Where am I now? Why can't I remember the last ... however many hours?*

I sit up on my elbows and force my blurry eyes to focus on the figure at the end of bed.

"It's been about twelve Earth hours since you passed out," he says. It's Officer Hyt. I recognize his voice right away and breathe a sigh of relief.

That's right.

I was in the cosmic chapel with him when I passed out. I feel great now, but ... I'm here. Wherever here is. I don't sense either Rurik or Abraxas in the building with us. I know it sounds weird, but I actually *can* sense the both of them. Let's just blame pheromones again. It's probably that.

Hyt is sitting on a stool at the end of the bed, bent over with his elbows on his knees. His chin is propped up by his fists, and his tentacles are dancing a

jig of their own all around him. One folds a stack of clothes while another wipes the window clean. A third tentacle tail sweeps the floor with a small broom and the closest tail to it helps out with a dustpan. All nine of Hyt's tails are doing something different right now.

He appears calm, even if they're not.

He smiles at me.

I scoot back a few inches in the bed.

"Good morning, Eve," he says, and he has the oddest expression that I've ever seen on a man's face. I swallow, and his smile widens. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"I ..." I look around as I sit up, and then I turn and get on my knees to peep out the curtains of the window above the headboard. Hyt makes a sharp hissing sound that I ignore as I part the fabric, finding myself faced with an endless, glistening sea.

The sun—just one of them so far as I can tell—sparkles prettily on the small white-capped swells. In the distance I spot a few islands, but no buildings to be seen on any of them. I look back around to see Hyt watching me with his strange eyes. They're the most alien part about him. That's saying a lot, seeing as the guy has nine sucker-tipped tentacle tails that change color when he lies.

I look over my shoulder to see my own ass, prominently displayed by the way I'm sitting, on my knees and all that. Err. I'm wearing a white ribbed tank top and a *thong*. A red one.

"They were the only human clothes I had on me," Hyt tells me, leaning back and lifting both hands up, palms out, in surrender. He can't resist the way the corner of his lip quirks up a bit in amusement.

"You undressed me?" I choke, tired of this whole 'passing out and being violated' bit. Really, it's not fucking cool. I snatch a pillow up and chuck it at him—*hard*. He catches it with a tentacle and then curls the appendage around it, squishing the pillow into an hourglass shape.

"I averted my eyes," he assures me, and I throw another pillow. This, too, he catches, as I scowl at him. I turn around and then stand up, putting my hands on my hips. I'm torn on what to ask next. I am *dying* to know why he has a woman's tank top and a red thong on his person, but we don't have that sort of relationship. My eyes shift back over to the unmade bed. The sheets are vaguely damp. I don't like that at all. "I was a gentleman," he tells me,

and then he turns pink. He was blue when he made the first statement.

“Only one of your statements is true, but which one?” I ask with a groan, sitting down hard on the bed with my head in my hands. “The last thing I remember was you holding me in the chapel and then ...” My mind blurs a bit as I try to recall what happened last night. “A pearl? Did you kiss me with a pearl in your mouth?”

“Ah.” That’s all Hyt says, waiting for me to drop my hands from my face. “Only one of my statements is true because I couldn’t avert my eyes, Earthling.” He smiles, like that’s meant to be a cute nickname and nothing at all derogatory. How could it be? This guy goes out of his way to save humans, even if it’s a whole hell of a lot of skin off his back to do it. I trust him, and I don’t know why. Maybe because both Abraxas and Rurik told me to seek Officer Hyt out if shit hit the fan. Is that why I’m here? “You were burning up with fever, and I learned from my sister a long time ago that humans and hot temperatures don’t mix.”

His face shifts then, a very human expression. I think that’s why he appears so human to me. It’s not his appearance. He has fox ears with fins for fuck’s sake. Nine tails, scaled skin, too many abs (literally), and six irises. He is not human, but his emotions are relatable. His reactions are relatable.

“You’re still pink,” I tell him, and then I walk right up to him as he uses his tentacles to toss the pillows back onto the bed. “Say something definitive. Like, *I’m a Falopex.*”

Hyt grins at me and sits back with his arms crossed over his hard, slick chest. I try my very best not to look at it, but it’s like *right* there, and this male radiates sex and self-confidence in spades. If things hadn’t gone the way they’d gone, I might’ve fallen for him. Hard.

“You don’t want me to say *I’m a liar?*” he asks, and then chuckles as my cheeks go red. “Alright then, I’m a Falopex.” He stays pink as I narrow my eyes.

“You tell everyone that your truth color is blue and then spend most of your time lying, is that it?”

“Hell of a lot harder to sleuth out where a brothel owner is keeping his illegal, underage human girls if you tell him that’s what you’re after.” Hyt pauses and exhales. The expression on his face is harried, and it matches the frantic, anxious movements of his tails. He’s making the bed with one of them, straightening a picture on the wall with another, and touching the side

of my leg with a third. I should slap him away, but I just stand there and wait instead.

I'm ... wherever this place is. With Officer Hyt. Rurik isn't here. Abraxas isn't here. I'm not sick.

Something happened, and I was passed out for the duration. *Fuck, that's annoying.* I vow to myself that I won't black out again for some time, but hey, I guess that's a deal that even a stubborn bitch like myself can't control.

"Easy to convince him to tell you if he thinks all Falopex tell the truth—because they do—and the one right in front of him never changes color."

"Wouldn't word start to spread after a while?" I ask, cocking a brow. It's nice and warm in here, and I can feel a breeze from the back door. I'm tempted to go outside and rest my arms on the railing, look out over the water.

"Not if you clean up the witnesses afterward," Hyt tells me dangerously. He stands up at the same time, and then he's looking down at me, and his face is cold again. I should probably be scared, but I'm TSTL, remember? I just look right back up at him. He smiles wryly and uses a tentacle to adjust his hat. It's a brown one today, a worn leather one with a gold band around it. Looks good on him. "But who cares about all that. You and I." He points between us with a tentacle, his hands planted on his naked hips. He's got the loincloth on, but ... we both know it's a split second between him being covered and me touching it. We've been there, done that before. "We have things to talk about."

"Abraxas and Rurik aren't here," I say and Hyt nods.

"Nope. Sure aren't." He cringes again and turns away, gesturing at the open bedroom door with his tails. "You want a drink, little human woman?" He gives a humorless laugh before walking out, not bothering to wait for an answer. "Once you know what's up, you'll want one."

He disappears from sight, and I only hesitate a few seconds before following.

There's a hallway with a wall on one side, an open railing on the other. The railing itself looks like coral, but it's clear and catches the light like glass. The staircase is even stranger, crafted from stone that's rough against my bare feet, a bit sparkly. I see veins of blue and gold as I walk down.

Also, the steps are wet.

When I get to the next floor, where Hyt is waiting, I see that everything is

wet. There's a window directly in front of me that looks into the water. As in, we're under it. Of course we are. We were right at water level upstairs, and now we've come down.

A school of brightly-colored ... *some things* swim by. Frogs? I have no idea, but they had legs.

"Sorry about all the damp." Hyt gestures with a finger to indicate the space. "I lowered the water level for you, but it takes a bit of time to dry."

"The ... water level?" I ask as he walks into what's recognizably a kitchen area, even if I don't recognize anything else about it at all. The countertops are made of the same stone as the stairs, and the cabinets underneath are sleek and white, absurdly modern in appearance. There's a tank in the corner with creatures swimming in it and—

An excited chirp draws my attention to another tank, and I see Hyt's companion lifting up out of the water. The little pink octopus swirls over to me and settles on my bare shoulder, its tiny tentacles sticking to my skin with quiet pops. It trills happily at me, and I feel like I'm on the *verge* of sort-of-almost understanding what it's trying to say.

Hyt gives the creature an adorably exasperated look and then shakes his head, opening a cabinet to reveal an icebox of some sort. I wouldn't take the liberty of calling it a fridge, but it appears to be a metal locker with icicles hanging from the roof. Hyt extracts a tray of ice cubes and sets them out before collecting a bottle of golden liquid and a pair of glasses.

He tosses a few of the cubes in either glass, pours a dash of liquor into each, and turns around to hand me one. It's almost a shame that he turns around at all because, as usual, his ass cheeks are on full display for all the Noctuida to see.

"Here," he says, holding the glass out with one of his tentacles. "It's just whiskey." He smiles at me again, flashing sharp teeth. "Nothing fancy. I don't get a lot of choices when it comes to human liquor. Whatever the slavers steal, I confiscate."

"And put to good use, I see," I tell him, accepting the glass, accepting the strange tiny octopus as it burbles on my shoulder, accepting that the walls and ceiling of Officer Hyt's house are dripping water. I'm an old hat at this whole abduction thing by now. I'm not feeling panicked. What I am though is unsettled, nervous. If I'm here, then something must've happened. "Please tell me that Rurik and Abraxas and Jane are okay."

I don't mean for my voice to break on the words, but it does anyway. I can't help it. Hyt softens up a little—although I think he was already soft enough. He's looking at me in a way that I'm not sure he *should* be looking at me. Like ... well, like he looked at me in his office, I guess.

He knocks his drink back and pours another before answering, his back turned to me. My eyes drift to his perfect ass, and I curse myself out in my head, looking down at the drink in my hand with a barely withheld sigh. For some reason, I don't feel like telling Hyt that I'm pregnant. The information is too raw, too weird, too intimate. *Although we weren't sure at the time, Rurik outed me that day on the World Station; Hyt was told.* I'm just hoping he's forgotten by now.

I just hold onto the drink with both hands and hope he thinks I'm simply too nervous to drink it.

"Well?" I ask as he turns back around. His eyes drift past me to the water outside.

"Close the second floor blinds," he says, and down they go. I guess he has, like, a Google Home setup or an Alexa or the alien equivalent of that shit. "Sorry. I don't like shutting myself off from the views, but ... we can't be seen together just yet."

"Hyt." I stare him down, and he stares right back. "What happened?"

"Captain Kidd's ship was set on by ..." He laughs strangely then, and I see him grit his teeth, jaw clenched in frustration as he stares down at his drink. "Well, you wouldn't know the guy that attacked him, but I do. I've been after this motherfucker's ass for *years*, but he's Vestalis nobility and gets what he wants most of the time. Anyway, I guess what he wants this time is your friend."

I choke on a gasp, and the drink falls from my hand. Hyt catches it with one of his tails before it hits the floor. He tries to pass it back to me, but I don't take it. I wouldn't even if I could drink it. I'm shaking too badly now. I can handle a lot. Clearly, I've handled abduction after abduction. Glowing vaginas. Giant millipede queens. But losing one of the people I love? I ... that's another matter entirely.

"Just fucking say it," I whisper, reaching up an unconscious hand to stroke Hyt's companion. He watches me do that with an odd expression on his face, and then he uses his tail to bring my drink to his lips. He swallows that in one go, and uses that same tail to set the cup on the counter behind him without



even looking.

“The attack was ... well, they got the pop star girl. Tabitha?” Hyt tries the name out, like it’s something foreign and hard to remember. “Anyway, this man—he’s ... a businessman, I guess you’d call him—managed to take Tabitha, but nobody else was harmed.”

I sag against the wall behind me, uncaring that my tank top soaks up a whole lot of seawater in the process. I put a hand to my chest to still the frantic beating of my heart.

“Just to clarify for future reference: Tabbi Kat is not my friend. She’s a person that I know—against my will and better judgment—and while I do feel somewhat sorry she was kidnapped, I’m not about to lose my shit over it.”

Hyt grins at me, crooked and sexy and playful, but it doesn’t last. He frowns again, sighs, finishes his other drink.

“If it weren’t for Abraxas, the others would be dead. Your friend, Jane. Captain Kidd. Abraxas himself. He defended the ship. I thought you might like to know that.”

I do. It makes me smile, but it also makes my heart ache for him. Last I knew, I was dying without him. I was meeting with Hyt to ensure that I could meet with Abraxas. And now ...

“We’re not on Dome anymore, are we?” I ask, and Hyt laughs.

“Yaoh, actually. My home planet.”

I look back toward the closed blinds. Guess that explains all the water. But ... how did we get here? More importantly, *why* are we here? I turn back to see Hyt studying me carefully. He’s still pink. Telling the truth. He uses another tentacle tail to put his empty glass on the counter, and then he crosses his arms and stares at me.

“The attack not only delayed Kidd’s ship, but it attracted the attention of the Vestalis armada. First chance they get, they’ll blow my friend—and your friends, your mate—right out of the sky. So they hooked it through another star-jump and, well, it’s going to be at *least* a week until they get here.”

I just stand there. What else can I do? My mouth opens. Snaps shut. My brain flickers wildly through different theories before discarding them all.

“I feel a lot better today, so that’s good ...” I hedge, and Hyt laughs. Bitterly. The sound gives me pause, and I find myself just staring at him, wishing he’d spill whatever secret it is that he seems to be dancing around.

“Where is Rurik?”

“Rurik is, presumably, still on Dome?” he says with a little lift of his brow. Again, he has fins instead of eyebrows but they *look* like eyebrows. That’s what matters, right? “The Vestalis haven’t moved out of position, and there’s been no news about the Imperial Princess having gone missing, so I guess he’s buying us time. I wouldn’t know. I haven’t talked to him. Didn’t get a chance to.”

Now my jaw is hanging loose, and I’m *staring* at Officer Hyt in disbelief.

“Rurik doesn’t ... he doesn’t know where I am?” My voice is loud and screechy, a bit like Tabbi Kat when she’s in one of her moods. I make a quick course correction, unwilling to adopt a single feature that aligns with any of hers. Godspeed, Tabitha. Hope your new jailer is your destined mate or something, the way my last kidnapper was. “Real quick: you *are* going to save Tabbi Kat, right?”

Hyt smiles without humor as his pet chirps in my ear. I pat its head with two fingers, and it purrs back at me.

“Aww, and I thought you didn’t care?” He pushes up off the counter with his tails and comes to stand too close to me. A bubble escapes the end of one tail and pops near my face, causing my breath to rush in on a sharp gasp. *Damn it.* I’m instantly aware of my near-nakedness, of his beautiful body and his fascinating cock and his pretty, flirty smile. “I will. Eventually. I can only handle one thing at a time, and I chose to prioritize you.” He exhales, and that cold frown is back. “I don’t know what it is about you, Eve. I’ve known a lot of humans in my day, have watched many of them die while I stood by, helpless to do a damn thing to save them. But ...” He lifts up a hand like he might touch my face, but I shy away from the touch.

Not because I want to. Because I *don’t* want to. I don’t want to shy away, and that’s a problem.

I already betrayed Abraxas with Rurik. I can’t betray them both with Officer Hyt. I’m not that sort of person. Loyalty means a lot to me. Caring about somebody else’s feelings, that goes a long way. I doubt either of them would be thrilled if I had a fling with a sexy Falopex.

Hyt sighs and steps back again, opening one of the cabinets with his tail. He doesn’t even look as he sets about gathering a carafe of water from the icebox. He pours me a glass with his tails and then, again, passes it over with a tentacle instead of a hand.

“His Imperial Majesty does not know where you are, no.”

I freeze with the glass halfway to my lips. That’s ... that’s not good. Already, I can feel a tightness in my chest. Now, I not only miss Jane like crazy, I miss Abraxas, and I miss Rurik, too. Ugh. I finish the water off in one swallow and hand it back for more. Hyt uses his hands this time and pours me another glass.

“You kidnapped me.” It’s just a statement of fact at this point. “Why?”

Hyt looks me over, working his jaw just a little.

A bell goes off somewhere in the house, and he curses, stalking over to a table and snatching up a glass tablet. He turns the screen on and looks at the notification waiting for him. With another curse, he tosses it back onto the tabletop and turns around.

“Let me just lay this all out for you,” he says, but not unkindly. “I had a choice to make when you came to me in the chapel. Let’s say that, theoretically, you had a choice to live or die, but the living part came with certain ... complications. Which would you choose?”

“Asking weird theoretical questions is not ‘laying it all out’. Stop talking in circles. Of course I’d choose to live. Wouldn’t most”—I almost say *people*—“living things?” I knew I was dying there in the chapel as he held me. I could *feel* it, but ... here I am. I feel great. Better than ever, actually. Plucky. “What happened? What was that pearl? What did you do to me?”

Hyt exhales, using his tails to lift his hat off his head. He spins it around on one of them, absently, like he just needs something to occupy his appendages while his mind works.

“Fuck it,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. He looks me dead in the eyes. “I gave you my pearl, so that I could save your life.”

“Uh-huh. Okay. I guess that explains why you kissed a dying woman.” I wait for a further explanation as Hyt’s companion flits up from my shoulder, dancing around us and drawing another bubble design that looks like a heart. I pretend not to notice. My own heart is thumping like crazy.

I have a vague recollection of—

I pause as the double-headed cat trots down the stairs and yawns. Well, one head yawns. The other hisses at me. Yep. Definitely the same cat.

I point at the thing as it proceeds to scratch its nails on Officer Hyt’s wall. Nails *screech* against metal until he makes a frustrated clicking sound with his teeth that somehow attracts the cat to rubbing on his legs. He stares down

at it with a long sigh.

“As if I don’t have enough shit to worry about,” he mumbles, noticing the direction of my stare. “It wandered onto my cruiser and, well, I was in a bit of a hurry.”

“How’s that?” I ask, walking up to him and setting my water glass on the table. We’re maybe two feet apart now. Not sure why I feel the need to stand so close to a literal stranger. An *alien* stranger, at that.

“Well,” he hedges, all six pupils in both eyes turned to the side and not looking at my face. “The pearl I gave you, it splits my lifeforce.” He finally drags his attention back to me, gaze serious. “You and me, we’re sharing the same lifeforce. As in, if I die, you die. If you die, I die. Does that make sense?”

I don’t respond right away. I have no idea what to say.

“You gave me half of your lifeforce to save me?” I ask, my voice surprisingly low and soft. Not a normal tone for Eve Wakefield, I’ll give you that.

“Abraxas won’t get here for another *week*,” he repeats, lifting both hands and all his tentacles palm—or suction cup—up toward the ceiling. “And even then, he would never have been able to land on Dome after the incident with Tabbi Kat. I had to bring you here. The Vestalis don’t mess around with Yaoh, and Kidd knows how to land here without being seen.”

“You’re a lying cop who’s friends with a space pirate.” I’m just stating facts. Hyt smiles, but it’s not a particularly nice smile.

“And also one who saves pretty girls when he should rightfully let them die.”

I cringe at that. He has a point. I wasn’t trying to be critical this time, but I can see how my statement might’ve been taken that way.

“We share a lifeforce,” I repeat, and he waits for me to come to terms with that. “For how long?”

“Forever.” Hyt stays pink. Either he’s telling the truth or ... well, how could he not be telling the truth? He said he was a Falopex which he is, so ... “Until one of us dies, is what I mean to say. Then it’s lights out for us both.”

“Say some other true things,” I assert suddenly, staring him right in the face. “Tell me that I’m a human. Tell me that I’m female. Say that you’re male.” Those are the only facts I can think of at the moment. As soon as I say them, I regret it. The mood has changed.

*The sex thing.*

Shit.

I started it, and I don't know how to finish it. There is no finishing it. I take several steps back, still curious as to why Hyt has human women's clothing in his house.

"Took that outfit out of a dead girl's backpack," he explains, as if he can read my mind the way Rurik can. I cringe at the thought and the statement both. "It felt wrong to strip the clothes off of her, but I take what I can for my little sister, Kayla. You'll meet her here in a minute." He glances back over at the tablet, and his face looks decidedly grave. "Sooner than that, really. We don't have a lot of time."

My mind conjures dozens of awful scenarios, most of them ending up with me in the throne room on that ship, watching Rurik's head come off his shoulders, watching blood spray. I can't leave him to that fate. I *have* to get back to him before his parents kill him out of spite. Look what they did to his brother. They're capable of it, no doubt.

"Why don't we have a lot of time?" I ask carefully, fear turning my empty stomach sour. I'm thinking all sorts of things, but definitely not the one he says.

"Because we're having dinner at my parents' house." Hyt cringes again, curses, shoves his hat back on his head, and yanks both sides down with his tentacles.

"How old are you?"

He's mentioned his parents a half-dozen times before, and we've barely spent two hours in one another's company.

"Twenty-five," he says, and then flashes a cheeky grin. "In Earth years, that is. Yaoh moves rather slowly in orbit. One year is like ... ten back where you come from."

Fantastic. More useless space facts that I won't remember.

"I ... do you know what day it is on Earth?" I know I'm detracting from a pretty serious conversation, but I can't resist. Hyt seems to know a lot about humans and Earth, and I'd just really like to know how long Jane and I have been gone.

"September sixteenth," he responds easily, just like I knew he would. "Kayla keeps human calendars on all of the family's devices." He points at his own tablet.

September sixteenth. Jane and I went missing on ... I think it was July twenty-third. Fucking hell. We've been living with aliens for nearly two months. It almost feels ... dare I say *normal*, at this point.

"My birthday is in exactly two weeks," I whisper, and Hyt's smile hitches strangely.

"Two Earth weeks?" he says, and then shakes his head. "Mine, too." We both stand there in awkward silence until he adds, "that's a coincidence, by the way. It doesn't ... well, that particular coincidence doesn't mean anything."

"Right." I don't even know what to say to that. His companion seems to find it amusing, spinning in circles around us, and staying well-away from the stalking cat. I doubt the two-headed feline could ever catch the tiny octopus; one of its heads always seems to be in disagreement with the other. "Explain to me why we would have dinner with your parents. You do realize that you kidnapped the Vestalis princess?"

Hyt just looks at me like he wishes this moment were long over and past. For someone as confident and flirty as he is, I can only imagine how bad our situation truly is.

"Because we need to act like absolutely nothing is wrong. Because if the Vestalis find out that you're here, they will start by nuking Earth, and then they'll turn their lasers on us."

My heart pounds, and I end up pulling out a chair, cringing at the squish of the cold, wet cushion as I sit down. I still don't quite know what he meant by 'adjusting the water level' in the house, but I can take a wild guess. He's a water-dwelling creature, isn't he? So ... it would stand that maybe his house is usually flooded with water.

"Until I get a chance to see Abraxas, I have to stay here," I offer carefully as Hyt leans over, curling his fingers around the back of another chair.

"Pretty much. I gave you my pearl, but I bet we have ten days tops before we're both dead. My entire life hinges on whether or not you fuck an Aspis." He laughs dryly at that, but he sounds more resigned than he does upset. "I have no way to send Rurik a message without the king and queen finding out, but he's a smart cookie—for a Vestalis prince, that is. He'll figure out a way to contact us, and you can explain the situation."

*If he lives that long*, I think with a violent stab of fear. I just hope like hell that none of his other brothers show up with their mate. I have a feeling that

the next time his parents call a son to their throne room for murder, it'll be Rurik on the chopping block.

“And until then, we have to, what, convince your family and the other Falopex that I'm some rando human? Won't they recognize me from all the wedding footage?”

Hyt exhales and then takes the chair out so that he can sit down kitty-corner to me. He puts his elbows on his knees again, head in his hands.

“Yeah, well. The whole of the Noct might watch those broadcasts, but not the Falopex.” I like the way he said that, *the whole of the Noct*. “Even if they did, I ... my people can be ... a bit racist. You're a human. All humans look the same to them. They won't even think to check.”

“Your pearl ... you only have one, don't you?” I'm remembering snippets of things he said in the chapel—*I only get one of these, just one*—and I realize what a big deal this was for him. He hitched his wagon to mine. If I die, he dies. That's a lot of faith and trust to put in another being.

“Just one.” His voice is gravelly now, and he's sitting up, his gaze so intense that I want to squirm underneath its heat. “There's more, and you're not going to like it.”

“Try me.” It's my attempt at being quippy, but it doesn't come out that way. A strange warmth settles between us as Hyt scoots his chair a little closer.

“Fuck, I've thought about this moment all my life, but I had no idea that this is the way it would go.” He looks at his companion as the creature lands in my hair, chirping and releasing pearlescent bubbles. Hyt returns his attention to me, and I shift restlessly, waiting. *Here it comes. The big reveal.* “If you don't give me the pearl back, I'll die.”

“Huh?” I'm confused now. That wasn't what I was expecting to hear. Not sure what I was expecting, but that wasn't it. Hyt crosses two tentacles over his chest, like they're arms. His actual hands are parked on his hips again, like he's purposely trying to draw attention to his narrow waist and his hips and the low sling of his heavy belt ... Ugh. “So, how do I give it back? Kiss you again?”

The thought makes me feel a little twitchy, especially when I remember the way he rolled that pearl across his purple tongue and clacked his sharp teeth around it before he tongued me into oblivion. But I mean, I can't not kiss him and let him die. As messed up as kissing him might be, with Abraxas and

Rurik both worried about me, I can't not do it.

"No." He smiles grimly. "You have to fuck me." A pause. "Or, more preferably, let me fuck you."

I cling to the sides of the chair, the red thong burning against my hips, my nipples dark and obvious through the fabric of the white tank top. Hyt notices, despite not having nipples himself, and he looks at them appreciatively until I cross my arms and cover them up. He lifts his gaze back to mine.

"You don't have to do it. I certainly won't make you. But ... please don't let me die."

There's a gentle earnestness to his statement that makes me fidgety.

"I ... you're fucking with me, aren't you?" I ask.

"I'm fucking with you," he says, and he turns blue. "I'm a human woman. You're a Falopex male. I find you to be hideously unattractive." He remains blue through all of the lies, still smiling strangely back at me. I see now why he had that expression when I first woke up. "If we don't sleep together, I've got"—he glances at the tablet curiously and then back to me—"about twelve hours left. I'll die. In all fairness, I should tell you that you won't. We only share a lifeforce if you give the pearl back. As of right now, all I've done is given you mine." He sounds so unbelievably sad when he says that, and I realize that I've done it again. Also, he turns pink. "But I don't want to pressure you." Blue again. Meaning he *does* want to pressure me, but he's not going to.

I've stolen the spot of someone's fated mate. Or something. Like I did with Abraxas, when I took his markings and became his mate and was still planning to leave. This is much the same as that, except it's Officer Hyt who's brought me back from the brink of death. In saving me, he's also saved Rurik and Abraxas both.

God.

I rub at my face with my hands.

"I don't ... you're serious, aren't you?"

"What's that phrase that Kayla likes?" He puzzles over that for a minute and then snaps one of his tentacle tips like he's snapping his fingers. I think he does it by suctioning his own sucker cup against his skin and peeling it off, but I'm not sure. "Right. Serious as a heart attack." He stays blue, and I narrow my eyes. He seems to notice. "Blue as a wild sea anemone. Pink as a



scuttling spider crab. Orange as blood.”

None of what he’s just said makes any sense to me. Hyt sighs and removes his hat, setting it on the table next to his tablet.

“Wild sea anemones are pink.” He turns pink, as if to corroborate the statement. “Scuttling spider crabs are blue.” Hyt remains pink. “Blood is red, little human. Whether Falopex or Vestalis, it’s *red*. You should know that by now. Saying something like *serious as a heart attack* is neither a lie nor a truth. It’s how I get away with all my bullshit. All one need do is figure out a way around the rules, and voila. You can be a truth-telling liar or a lying truth-teller.” Hyt waits for me to respond. When I don’t, he continues. “If we don’t have sex, you’ll keep my pearl. I’m guessing you’ll live another three weeks thereabouts if you don’t find Abraxas before then. You’ll have an awfully hard time finding him without me, but that isn’t a threat. It’s just a fact. I need to bring Kidd’s ship into the dock, and keep the other Falopex away from him.”

“Can I go upstairs and look around?” I ask suddenly, and Hyt sits back in his chair, blinking in surprise.

“Uh, I ... yeah, fuck, sure. Why not?” He uses his tails to tuck his hat onto his head and then stands up, gesturing at the staircase for me to lead the way.

I do, and his companion follows along with us. The double-headed darts up between my legs and nearly knocks me down the stairs. If Hyt didn’t catch me with a soft fluff of tentacle tails against my back, I’d have broken my neck.

I right myself with a hmph and continue on like his touch does nothing to me.

*Why does this keep happening to me?* I think, and then I decide to just talk out loud. Why not?

“The Noct”—I use Hyt’s cooler sounding nickname, and I swear that I feel him grin behind me—“it’s a bit weird, isn’t it?”

“Definitely weird,” he says as we head back into what I’m guessing is his bedroom. I don’t think about that. I walk out onto the deck, feeling the sun-warmed boards beneath my bare feet. The deck itself is connected between the house and the island with the gentle, grassy slope. To either side of us, there’s a bit of beach and some sand but it all fades pretty quickly to grass.

All around us, there’s the sea.

I turn and spot a ladder on the side of the house, so I climb up, cursing a bit

at the hot metal rungs under my hands and feet. When I get to the top, I find a nice rooftop deck with no railing. There's a pair of lounge chairs, a small table, and a large umbrella offering up some welcome shade. The sun here looks like a pallid simmer compared to Jungryuk, but a hot roof on bare feet is never fun.

I take a seat in one of the chairs, knees splayed to either side, elbows resting on my thighs, and look out at the water.

"It might seem remote, but we can be at my parents' house in twenty minutes." Hyt pauses beside me, putting his nearly naked body far too close to my face for comfort. I swallow and look away, studying the scenery and trying not to like it as much as I do.

But goddamn, it feels good to see the ocean—any ocean at all—after so long on the ship.

"Everything is so fucked up," I whisper as Hyt takes the chair beside me. I should be thanking him. I should be so utterly grateful that I tear this thong off and leap into his bed. The sad part? I *want* to. He's basically walking sex on a stick, and I've been completely enthralled with him since moment one.

But it's not right.

I'm in the same space I was when I found out that I had to marry and mate Rurik. *Poor Abraxas. I should never have ... Well, I tried not to mate with him. I tried to resist even though I wanted him. He doesn't deserve this. I'm a terrible mate.* I need to see him; he'll know what to do. He'll know how to fix all of this.

"Hey." Hyt reaches out to put a hand on my knee, and his touch is so warm and gentle that I close my eyes. Once again, here I am with someone whose life is on the line, and they're giving me a *choice*. Hyt could rape me and take his pearl back, save his own life. He's not going to do that. He's asking. I'm obviously going to do it, but I need to get my head around it first. "This doesn't have to mean anything, okay? We can ... I mean, I'll make it good for you." He's grinning when I look back at him, but the expression is so unbelievably shallow. He feels bad, too. Either for himself or me or both, I'm not sure. "But I'm not asking you to commit to me for life or anything. We just ..." He hesitates here. "We need to make it believable to my parents. My family. The community. Falopex are ... social. And obsessive. And suspicious of everyone and everything, especially me. If there is *any* doubt in their minds that you're anyone other than my new human mate, my father

will clock us. He'd be the first one to turn us into the king and queen." Hyt snorts. "If he found out what was going on, he'd bundle us both up on a transport and deliver us personally."

Hyt tries to keep his tone lighthearted, but there's a heaviness to his words. He's begging me to understand so that he doesn't have to keep repeating himself. This is dangerous, and it's not just dangerous for him or me but for Rurik and Abraxas and Jane and Avril and Zero and Connor and Brot. For my family. For *Earth*. Like, this is all a huge fucking deal.

"I'm just some random chick," I whisper, staring at the water again, trying to make sense of it all. "I'm not the chosen one. I'm not a hero. I'm just a person. An unlucky person who got abducted by some random aliens at a pop star's house party." I run the fingers of one hand through my hair, pausing as a distant shape exits the water, arches through the air, and then crashes back down again. I'd say it was a dolphin, but it had legs. I decide not to dwell on alien animal species. After all, there's a two-headed cat licking its butthole on the opposite side of the roof. "How is this even real?"

"Life is random. Sometimes, that randomness drags unsuspecting people into incredible circumstances." I look back to see Hyt playing with the brim of his hat again. He drags a finger across it, studying my face and trying to gauge my reaction. "Because of that randomness, I got sent to Jungryuk with my father and a whole team of seasoned officers. I watched them follow rules and procedure and tell truths for so long that they lost half of the humans they were sent to save before the end of the first week. All dead. By the end of the next week, another one was dead and the remaining four wished they were dead." I cringe, but he's not done talking. It's like, he's been waiting a really long fucking time to say this to somebody and, considering our strange circumstances, feels like I'm a good bet for keeping this all to myself. "Of the last four humans, three had their memories wiped and were sent back to Earth. It's not a pleasant process. Sometimes, it comes undone and people start talking. I hear that chatter about aliens causes other humans to look on a person strangely."

"Pretty much," I agree, because I feel like I need to say something.

"Right, so." Hyt turns to look at the water, too, but with a different edge to his expression. Whatever he sees, it isn't the pleasant emptiness of a seaside retreat, but something else entirely. "Anyway, one of the four remaining humans had been mated." He grits his teeth so hard that I worry he might

break off one of the sharp points. His eyes *blaze*. “And the law says that mated humans cannot go back to Earth. She ... Kayla ...” Hyt swallows and exhales, forcing his body to relax. “Kayla had spent time in the brothel, so she wasn’t allowed to go home. My father took pity on her and brought her here when she was only thirteen. My parents raised her. I learned to be sympathetic toward humans, so much so that I would give my pearl to a woman that I don’t know much about at all.” He sighs again and forces a smile, one that’s just a little sharper than it should be. “If that’s not random, I don’t know what is. All of those strange circumstances, and we’ve arrived right here, at this point in time.”

“Your pearl ... it’s for your mate, isn’t it?” I ask softly, my voice nearly swallowed up as the breeze quickens and the water sloshes up against the side of the house. A bit of spray gets on my bare leg, but it feels good. I wonder if I couldn’t go for a little swim?

Hyt keeps his gaze on mine.

“The pearl is my lifeforce. It connects me forever to the one who swallows it. And when the one who swallows it gives it back—because you *could* keep it and double your own lifespan—that’s an act of love and kindness. In the eyes of the Falopex, we’ll be married. And I ... won’t be able to marry anyone else.”

Fuck.

“That’s so unfair,” I hiss at him, and he shrugs.

“You didn’t ask for the pearl, and I didn’t ask you if you wanted it, so as far as I’m concerned, this was my choice. I—”

I shove up from my chair and throw my arms around his neck before I can talk myself out of it.

*I need to tell Abraxas and Rurik before I do this, just like I spoke with Abraxas before I mated with Rurik. That’s the right thing to do. But how can I do that when we can’t communicate with them? When Hyt only has twelve hours to live?*

It doesn’t have to mean anything, he said.

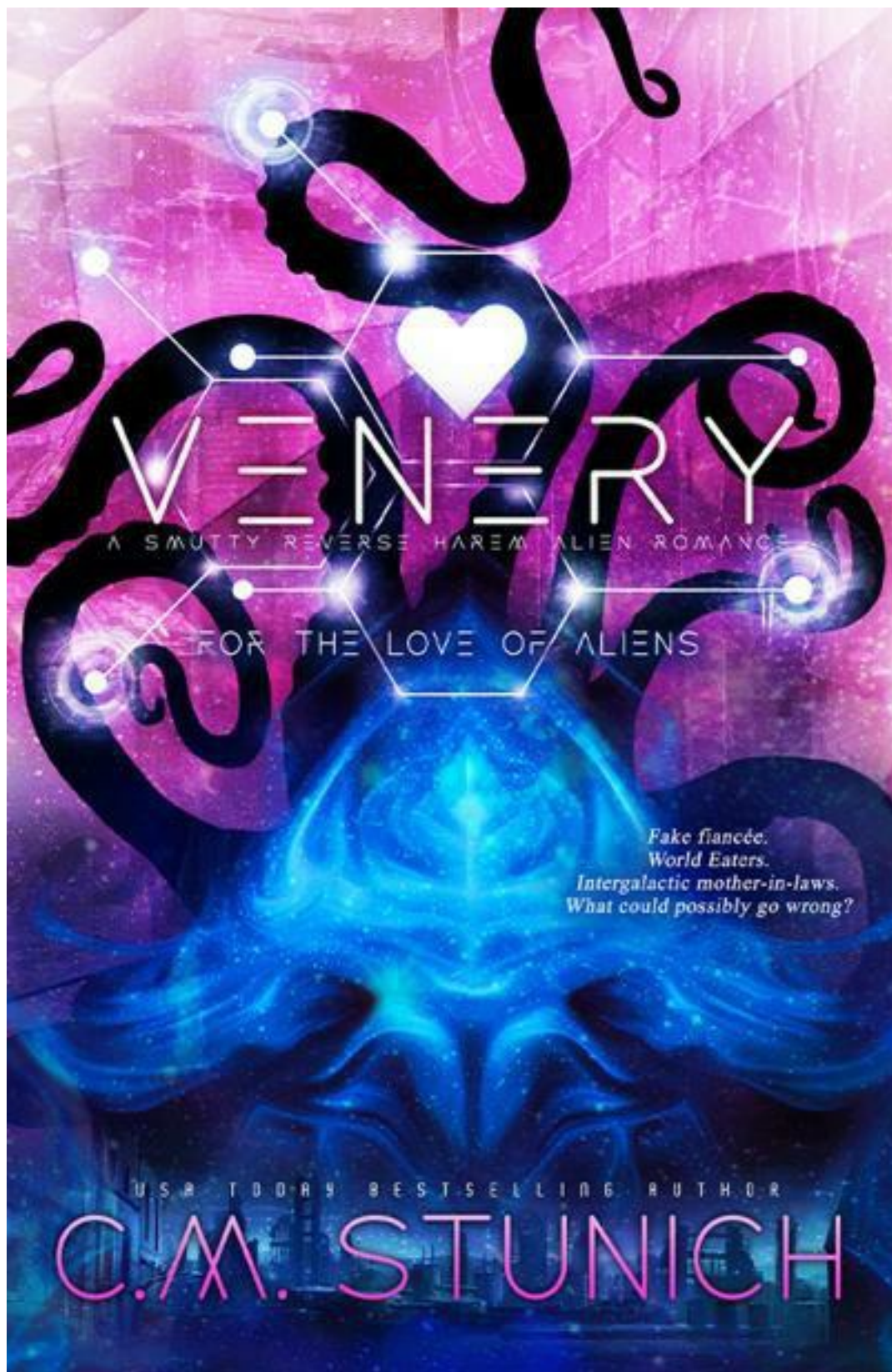
No matter what happens, I can’t let him die.

So even though it’s wrong, even though I’m wracked with guilt, I kiss him with everything I have.

Hyt curls his tails around me, hefts me up with my legs around his waist, and carries me down to the bedroom.

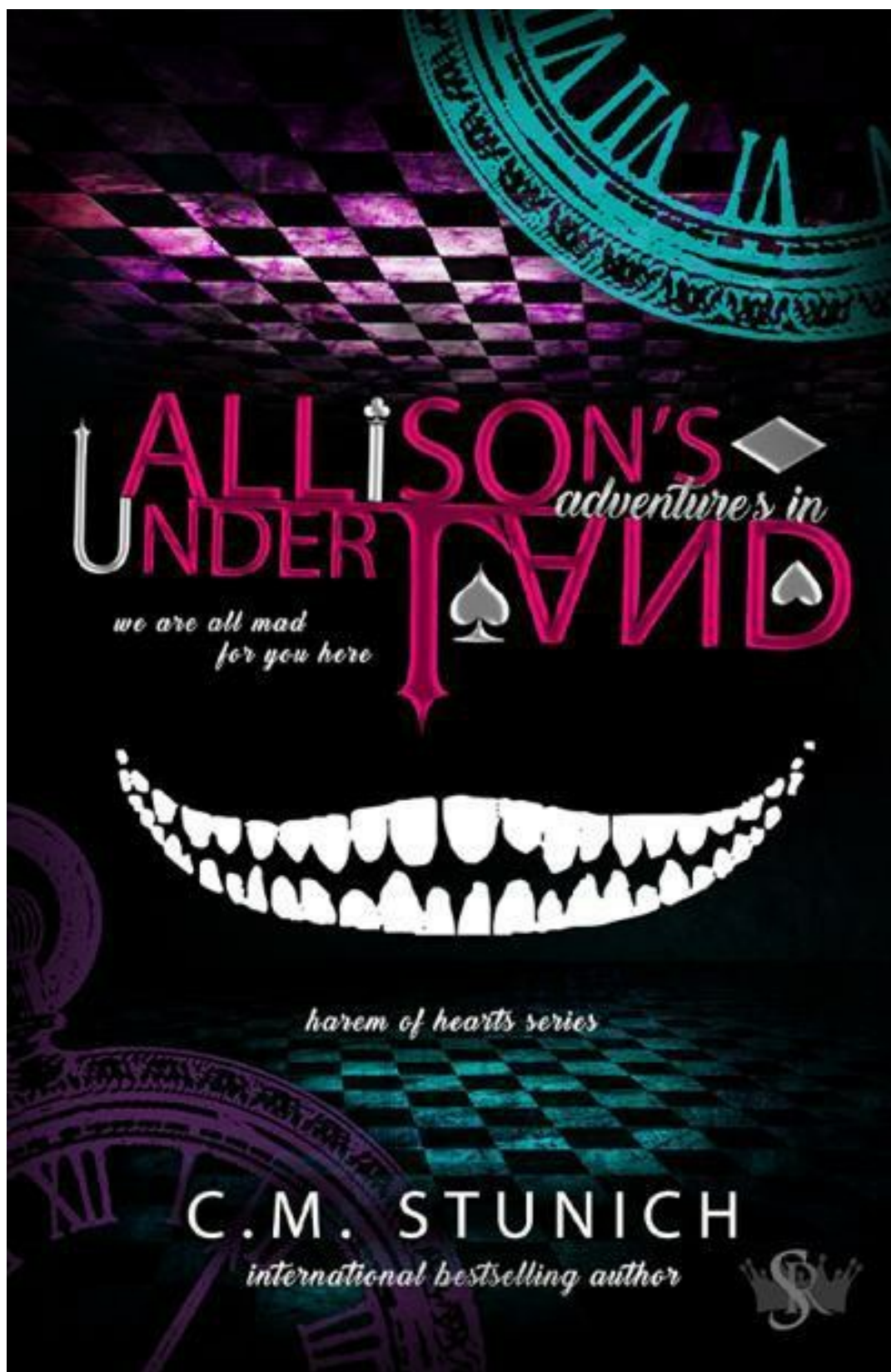
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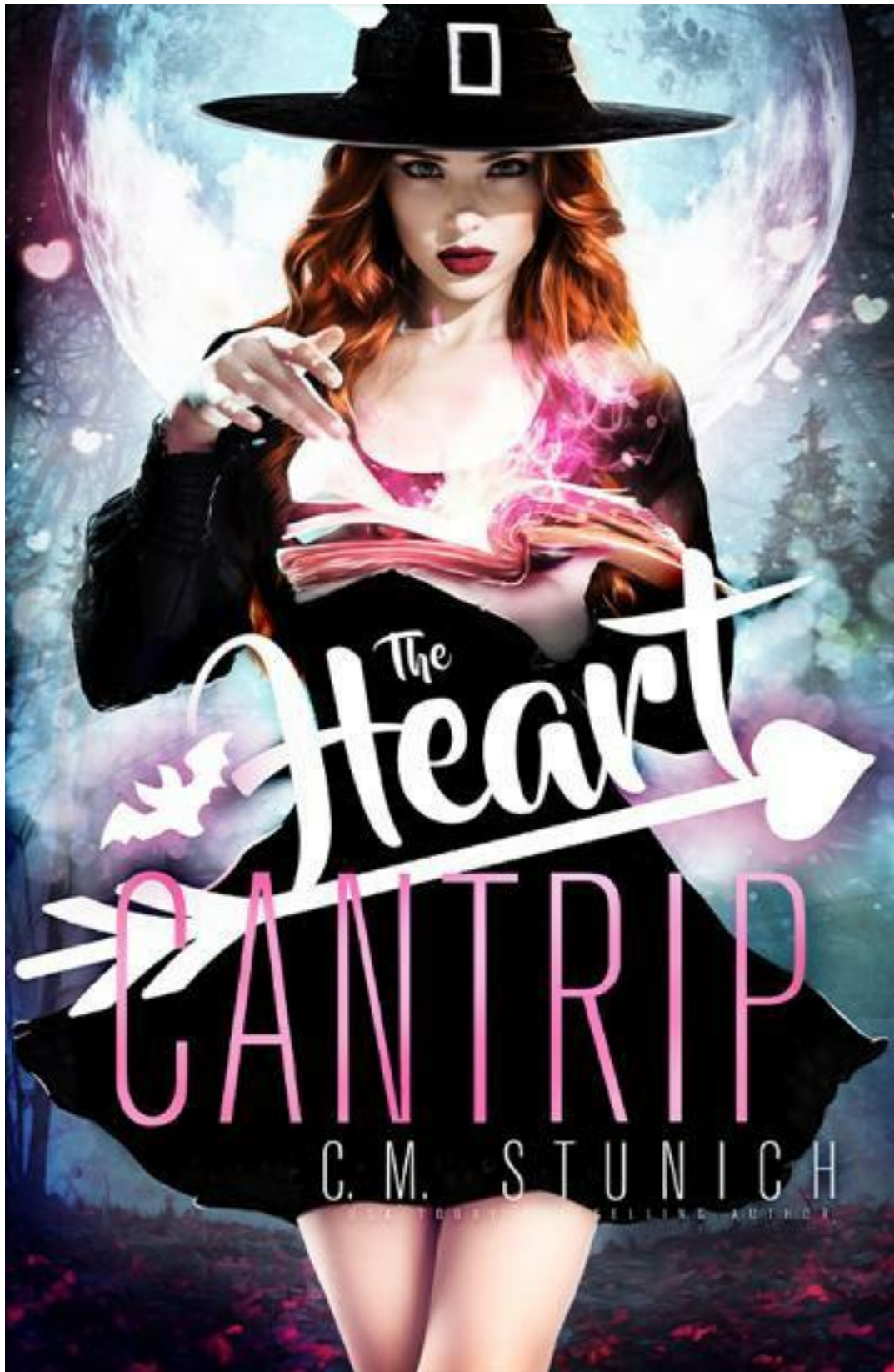
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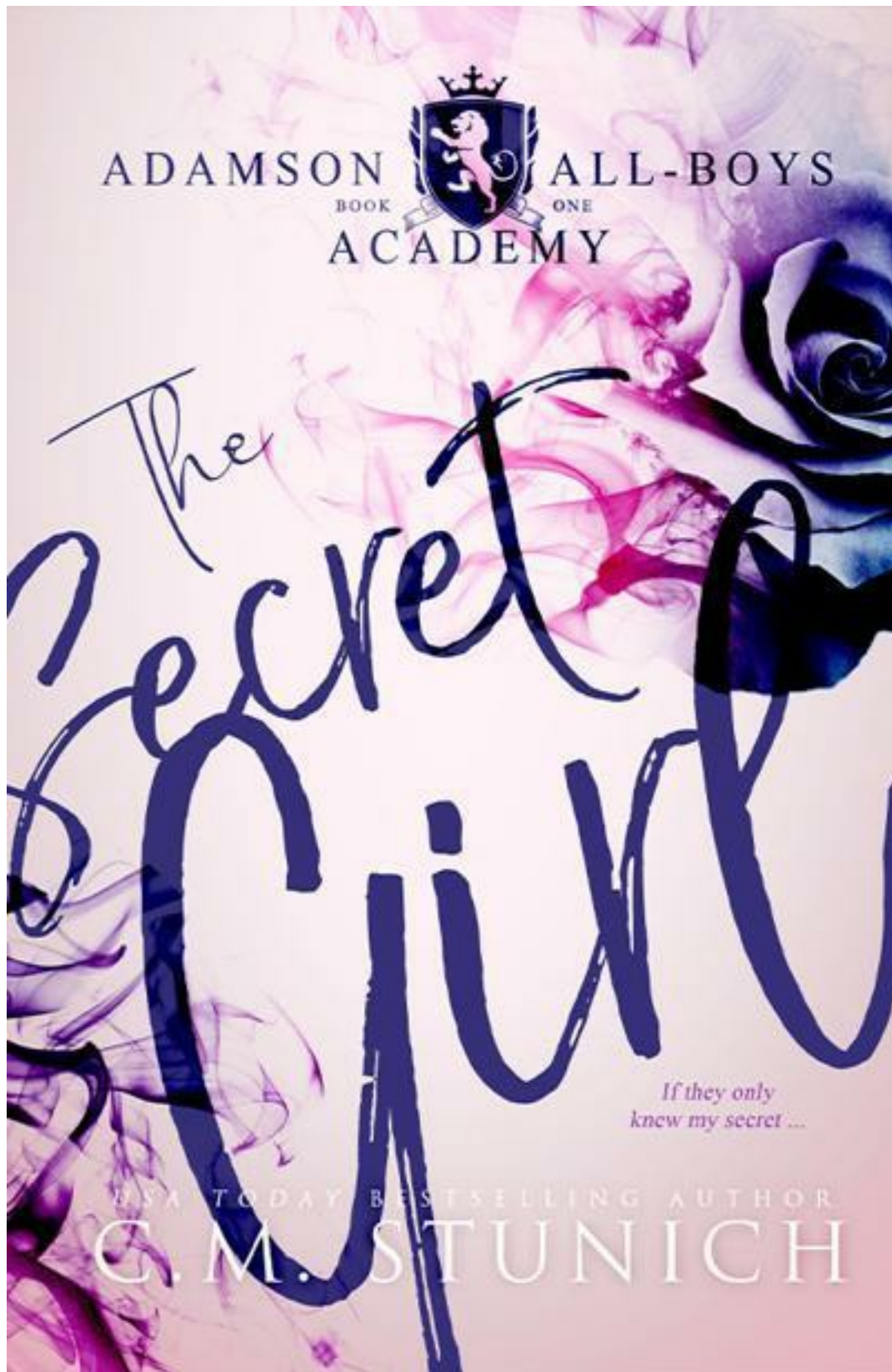
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## ***About the Author***

*C.M. Stunich is a self-admitted bibliophile with a love for exotic teas and a whole host of characters who live full time inside the strange, swirling vortex of her thoughts. Some folks might call this crazy, but Caitlin Morgan doesn't mind - especially considering she has to write biographies in the third person. Oh, and half the host of characters in her head are searing hot bad boys with dirty mouths and skillful hands (among other things). If being crazy means hanging out with them everyday, C.M. has decided to have herself committed.*

*She hates tapioca pudding, loves to binge on cheesy horror movies, and is a slave to many cats. When she's not vacuuming fur off of her couch, C.M. can be found with her nose buried in a book or her eyes glued to a computer screen. She's the author of over a hundred novels - romance, new adult, fantasy, and young adult included. Please, come and join her inside her*



*crazy. There's a heck of a lot to do there.*

*Oh, and Caitlin loves to chat (incessantly), so feel free to e-mail her, send her a Facebook message, or put up smoke signals. She's already looking forward to it.*